

Teutonic Settlement of Great Britain

by Sir James H Ramsay
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However satisfied we may feel of an extensive survival of Celtic population even in the districts properly called ' England ', we must, nevertheless fully admit that we owe all the dominant elements of our blood, our language, and our institutions to the conquering Teutons; and that in the lands occupied by them the pre-existing races, if not exterminated or expelled, were absorbed and assimilated to a surprising extent. This result must be ascribed to the strength of character, pride of race, and tenacious conservatism of the conquerors. They came as armed settlers with their flocks and herds, their wives and their little ones. They entered at once into the fruits of other men's labours; they found fenced cities that they had not built; roads and bridges that they had not made; fields and meadows that they had not sown.

These invaders belonged to three closely - connected nations : the Jutes, Angles, and Saxons; all sprung from the same Low German or Dutch stock, and all speaking dialects of the same Low German or Dutch tongue.

The Saxons had been known from the time of Ptolemy, who mentions three " islands of the Saxons ", apparently referring to islands at the mouths of the Elbe or Weser. Apart from this indirect notice, the Saxons are first found as settled in modern Hanover and Oldenburg, between the lower Elbe and Frisia, their borders perhaps extending into Holstein. Their piratical ravages had made them the terror of Western Europe as early as AD 287.

Probably the tribes, known in earlier history as the Cherusci, the Marsi, the Dulgebini, and the Chauci may then have passed as Saxons; just as the tribes previously known as the Sigambri, the Salii, and the Ubii came to be classed as Franks. Whist the nations on the lower Rhine were all becoming Franks, those between the Rhine and the Oder were becoming Saxons. By the British Celts the name ' Sassenach ' Saxons, has always been applied to the whole Anglo Saxon kin.

Of the three invading peoples we shall find the Saxons occupying Britain south of the Thames, plus Essex, but minus Kent and the parts of Hampshire taken by the Jutes.

North of the Saxon border lay the home of the Angles, established perhaps in Holstein, certainly in Schleswig, where the name ' Engeln ' still preserves their memory. Aelfred recognised Haithaby, now Schleswig, as the original headquarters of the ' English '. They furnished the largest proportion of the invading hosts, occupying the eastern half of Britain from the Thames to the Esk, if not to the forth, and gave their name to England, ' Engla-land '. The entire nation appears to have come over in the migration; their name disappearing from continental history. In the time of Baeda their original territory was still lying waste and untenanted, between the continental Saxons and the Jutes.

The fatherland of these last, therefore, must be placed still further North, in the peninsula that still bears their name ' Jutland '. They only came over in small numbers, occupying Kent., parts of Hampshire, and the Isle of Wight.

Bands of Frisians and other cognate tribes may also have come over, but of these no definite account can be given.

According to Baeda, our only real authority on this point, the Jutish chiefs Hengist and Horsa landed in Britain the first year of the joint reign of Emperors Marcian and Valentinian III (450 - 451). Tradition had it that three *ceols*, or long galley conveyed their force. They landed at ' Ypwines Fleot ', now Ebbsfleet in Thanet, near Minster on the Stour, which was then a navigable estuary, and a favourite entrance to the Thames from the south. The landing-place was well-chosen, as Thanet being in those days a real island, cut off from the mainland by an arm of the sea, could easily be defended by a moderate force.

Gildas has it that the strangers had been deliberately called in by the ' tyrant ' Guthrigernus, duke of the Britons, to resist Northern enemies, whom the writer supposed to be Picts. Nennius, with more probability, tells us that the strangers were roving ' exiles ' and that the first thing they did was to fortify a camp. It seems hardly necessary to point out that if these men had been imported for service against northern enemies they would not have been quartered in Thanet. It was the habit of Gildas to ascribe everything to British agency : and it may be that he preferred to ascribe a mistaken policy to his countrymen rather than no policy at all : at any rate it is clear that national vanity made a scape-goat of the prince whose name was traditionally associated with the settlement of the English in Kent.

Whatever the circumstances, it would seem that Thanet was yielded without a blow. A footing having been secured, reports of the " goodness " of the land and the " naught-ness " of the inhabitants, induced fresh bands to follow. But five years were needed for the conquest of East Kent. The line of the Medway was not reached till the year 455, when ' Wyrhtgeorne ' was defeated at Aylesford. Horsa was killed in the action; but Hengist apparently thought his position such as to justify the assumption of royal dignity; his son Aesc being associated with him, as if to play the part of Caesar to the Augustus of East Kent.

Two years later the invaders entered West Kent, crossing the Darent at Dartford and defeating the Britons at Crayford with great slaughter. We are told that the rout was so complete that the Britons " forsook Kent and retired to London ".

Nennius, the British writer, records four battles in connexion with the struggle in Kent, all apparently given as creditable to his countrymen. In the first, Hengist and his men were driven into Thanet, a most amusing inversion of the apparent fact. The second and third were respectively fought " super flumen Derevent " and " super vadum .. Episford .. et ibi cecidit Horsa ". The two are obviously the actions at Aylesford and Crayford, given in the wrong order. The fourth battle was fought " juxta Lapidem Tituli qui est super ripam Gallici maris ", i. e. Stonar, near Sandwich. At that time it overlooked the sea.

Eight years later we have another great battle in which " twelve Ealdermen " fell, and one English " thane "; from whom that place was named ' Wippedes fleot ', but the site has not been determined.

Hengist continued to press the Britons " like fire ". But Kent, situate in a corner between the Thames on one side and the Forest of Anderid on the other side and bisected by the Medway, was never fated to retain the lead in the affairs of Britain. Hengist at his death could only bequeath Kent and nothing more to his son Aesc (A. D. 488).

But before a fresh attack on the South coast had been made by the Saxons, who, under the leadership of Aelle and his sons Cymen, Wlencing and Cissa, landed in 477 at " Cymene's ora '. This place has not been clearly made out, but the name of Cissa seem to be preserved in that of ' Cissan-cester ', Chichester, the new name given to the Roman town of Regnum. But the land of the *Regni*, cut off from the interior by the Forest of Anderid, extending from Romney Marsh to the borders of our Hampshire, was even less fitted than that of Kent " to serve as the starting-point in any attack on Britain at large". The kingdom of the South Saxons had no future in store for it; and indeed, fourteen years elapsed before Aelle and Cissa were able to reduce the border fastness of Anderedecester, now Pevensey. But the slow progress of the conquest proves that in point of numbers the invaders must have been very weak.

A really promising opening was at last secured when the Jutes and Saxons established themselves on Southampton Water, with an open country before them, and Roman roads to lead east, and North and West into the heart of the interior.

The record of the facts however is dim, and in some respects open to suspicion. We seem to have two traditions strung together by the chronicler of the house of Wessex, and placed to the credit of his master's ancestors. First we are told that the Ealdermen Cerdic and his son Cynric, the undoubted founders of the

dynasty, landed in 495 at a place called 'Cerdices ora', and that day by day they fought the Britons. Then in 501 we have 'Port' landing at 'Portesmutha'. i. e. Portsmouth, a place that bore the name of *Portus* in Roman times. Again in 508 Cerdic and Cynric defeat the Britons in a signal engagement, in which the native king 'Natan-leod', i. e. Prince Nechtan fell. Then six years later we have the entry "Here came the West Saxons to Britain and fought against the Britons", as if that was their first appearance. In 519 Cerdic and Cynric "took the kingdom": in 530 they subdues the Isle of Wight; and captured "Wihtgaresbyrig", Carisbrook; and in 534 Cerdic died. Here we may notice, first, that Cerdic is made to live and fight for nine and thirty years after he landed with a grown up son; and secondly, that nothing is said of the Jutes, whose establishment in Hampshire and the Isle of Wight rests upon the indisputable authority of Bede. As a conjecture we may suggest that the settlements prior to 514 were those of the Jutes; and that the conquest of the Isle of Wight by Cerdic in 530 was the political subjugation of the insulate Jutes or 'Wiht-garas'. The Jutes of the mainland appear to have been known as the 'Meonwaras' whose name is preserved in Stoke Meon, and East and West Meon on the Hamble. As for the followers of Cerdic their proper tribe name appears to have been 'Gewissas', afterwards merged in the larger name of 'West Seaxe'.

Again the Chronicle tells us that the country up to 'Cerdices ford' was called after Prince Nechtan, 'Neatan leaga' or 'Neatan's lea', and we heard of much fighting at 'Cerdices ford'. Netley is still an existing name on Southampton water, and Cerdices ford has been identified with Charford on the Hampshire River. This river was probably the western boundary of the original kingdom of the Gewissas. Its limits to the north are indicated by the fact that Old Sarum (*Sorbiodunum*, afterwards *Seaxobyrg*) at this time was still in British hands, and was not in fact attacked till AD 552. Thus we may quite accept the view that Hampshire as a whole represents the West Saxon kingdom of the year 520.

To the west and north of this principality we may place the territory of Ambrosius Aurelianus, the one British ruler whose memory Gildas could really honour as a representative of the old Roman virtues: "*viro modesto, qui solus fuit comis, fidelis, fortis, veraxque*". The pause in the Saxon advance clearly traceable in

the Chronicle coincides with the successful resistance ascribed to Ambrosius by Gildas. This name survives in Amesbury, *Ambrosebyrig*; and the date of his great success, the repulse of the invaders from the siege of the *Mons Badonicus*, is placed at the year 516; while the limitation of the Saxon frontier at the Avon gives every probability to the identification of *Mons Badonicus* with the triple Celtic earthworks of Bradbury

Rings in Dorsetshire, between Wimborne and Blandford.

To the memory of Ambrosius a tardy tribute is due as it was his misfortune to have his glory transferred to a hero of romance; apparently a pure myth; certainly one of whom history properly so-called knows nothing. The name of Arthur is not to be found in Gildas, who wrote only forty-four years after the siege of the *Mons Badonicus*. As he gives the names of several native princes it seems clear that there was no leading native of that name known to him. If we search for the oldest historic record of an Arthur we find it among the Gael, in the person of a Dalriad prince, in Latin 'Arturius', son of Aidan, killed in battle by the heathen Picts, AD 591. We also have an Arthur map Petr, and more clearly a Noe, son of Arthur, ruling in Dyfed

(Pembrokeshire), 600 - 660. But neither of these men can serve as the basis for the legendary Arthur. For him we have to skip on 150 years to the pages of Nennius, who wrote in the ninth century, and there we have the Arthurian legend in full bloom. He is presented not as being a British king, or even a Briton at all, but as a heroic personage who fought for them against the Saxons and led their armies. He fights twelve battles - a suspicious number - and apparently wins them all; the last being that '*in monte Badonis*', the victory of the historic Ambrosius.

If we turn to the old bardic poems of Wales, we find in them no allusion to these battles. The name Arthur however does occur in four of the poems, for which a historic character is claimed by Mr. W. F. Skene. But the only one that couples him with a personage that can be identified couples him with Geraint ap Erbin of Dyfnaint; apparently the Geraint who was defeated by the Ine of Wessex in 710, two centuries after the time of the Arthur of Nennius. Another poem talks of fighting on the Wall, "the ancient boundary", and of the "loricated legion"; thus relegating its Arthur to the times of the Roman dominion.

The theory that commends itself to us is that the Arthurian legend is merely a reissue of the Ossianic myths, brought over by the Dalriad Scots, disseminated through the agency of the Columban missionaries (of whom anon) and appropriated and adapted by the Celtic people of Great Britain. This will account for the localisation of the legendary Arthur in North Britain; because the north was the chief scene of the labours of the Irish clergy; and the deficiency of the Arthurian traditions in Wales will be due to the fact that the Irish missionaries gained no foothold there.

To return to the course of West Saxon conquest. Cerdic, as already mentioned, died in 534, with his son Cynric succeeding. For eighteen years Cynric seems to have rested within his borders; but in 552, his hands having been strengthened, probably by fresh arrivals of immigrants in want of land, he attacked the Britons in their stronghold at Old Sarum, wresting it from them, and so making himself master of Salisbury Plain, and the ' mystic circle ' of Stonehenge. The district so acquired became known from its new masters that of the ' Wil-saetas ', or Settlers on the Wil or Wiley, an affluent of the Avon, their chief town being ' Wil-tun ', or Wilton. The name Wilsaetas indicates that the colonists were a mixed population, not a homogeneous ' folk ', with a tribe name of their own.

Four years later Cynric made an advance along another of the Roman roads from Winchester, namely that leading NW through Mildenhall (Cunetio) to Cirencester (Corinium). The Britons were defeated at ' Beranbyrg ', identified with Barbury Camp, between Marlborough and Swindon, on the very brink of the Downs, AD 556. This victory made Cynric master not only of North Wilts, but also of the right bank of the Thames from Cricklade to Reading.

On the slope of the Downs, where the stream of the Ock flows down to join the Thames, " the traveller still sees, drawn white against the scanty turf, the gigantic form of a horse which gives the Vale of the White Horse its name, and which tradition looks on as a work of the conquering Gewissas ".

In 560 Cynric was succeeded by Ceawlin, and he carried on the work of reducing the basin of the Thames. In 568 he marched along the North side of the forest of Anderid, and defeated Aethelbirht, the young king of Kent, at ' Wibbandum ', Wimbeldon, and drove him out of modern Surrey " into Kent ". The so-called Caesar's camp at Wimbeldon may be associated with this campaign.

Being lord of the South bank of the Thames, down to the borders of Kent, Ceawlin in 571 sent his brother Cuthwulf to attack the Britons on the North bank. Crossing the river, probably at Wallingford, Cuthwulf drove the enemy as far back as ' Bedcanforda ', Bedford, and captured four towns, namely, Eynsham, Bensington, Aylesbury, and Lenborough " the last of these a small hamlet near the present Buckingham ". The territory acquired may be said to correspond roughly with that of the shires of Oxford, Buckingham, and Bedford. Further advance eastward was probably arrested by the East Anglian Works, drawn across the Ikniel way, between Royston and Newmarket.

The next move towards the North-West, where the lower valley of the Severn offered rich prey within easy reach of Winchester. In 577 a decisive battle was fought at Deorham, identified with Durham, between Gloucester and Bath. According to the Saxon chronicler, three British princes fell; and without doubt three Roman ' castra ' changed hands. The names of the British leaders are given as ' Commail (Commael ?), ' Condidan ' (Kyndylan ?), and ' Farinmail ' or Farinmael : the captured towns were Gloucester, Cirencester, and Bath. The annexed territory would thus include part of Worcestershire, all Gloucestershire, and North Somerset as far as Wells and the river Axe.

By the loss of these towns the Britons of Cornwall, or ' West Wales ', were for ever cut off from their brethren in South Wales. The territory acquired in Gloucestershire and Worcestershire was occupied by a people who appear under the tribe name of ' Hwiccas '. this would suggest that the conquest was effected by a new immigration, fighting under the banner of Ceawlin. As a matter of fact, we shall find them turning against him at the first opportunity.

But the West Saxon advance did not rest even at this point. If Welsh legend is to be trusted, their forays reached across the Severn as far as the Wye : and here when we obtain fuller records we find the ' Magasaetas ' occupying our Herfordshire. Again in 584 we find Ceawlin in the field " taking many towns and untold booty ". In this campaign, doubtless, Wroxeter (Uriconium) fell; and Pengwyrn, now Shrewsbury, was given to the flames. The Welsh bard, Llywarch Hen, laments the burning of the halls of Kyndylan; but the buried ruins of Uriconium tell their own tale of " flight and massacre " .

With the burning of Pengwyrn the West Saxon successes in the Severn Valley came to an end. Still thirsting for conquest, Ceawlin pushed into the borders of modern Cheshire, to be defeated by a Welsh chieftain - Brocmael - at ' Fethan-leag ', a place identified with Faddiley, some three miles to the east of Nantwich. Cutha, brother to Ceawlin, fell in the action. Wrathfully, Ceawlin returned to his own.

But worse things were in store for him. Part of his dominion, probably the new settlements in the Severn Valley, revolted, and made Ceol or Ceolric, son of Cutha, king : a year or so later Ceawlin was driven from the rest of his kingdom after a bloody fight at ' Woddesbeorge ' or ' Wodnesbeorge ', Wamborough, on the Wiltshire Downs, overlooking the Vale of the White Horse. Britons, as well as Saxons, fought against him, and two years later he died (A. D. 593).

The breach between the houses of Ceawlin and Cutha broke the strength of Wessex for more than 200 years.

After a hundred years of fighting the West Saxon conquest of Britannia Prima was still incomplete. The legions of Claudius had reduced the whole within four years. But if the Roman conquests were rapid, their effects had been transitory; the impression made by the Teutonic settlers was indelible.