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A Journey Through the Dark Isles of Britain and Ireland

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Extract

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THE SOUTH-WEST OF BRITAIN: 'THE LAND OF THE BRITISH METAL'

(I) SCILLY ISLES

The traveller who has wisely taken the sea paths to the Dark Isles should expect to arrive there in early summer. And, the sea monsters and squalls of Biscay behind him, he will wake one morning, on board the small vessel that for three months has been his home, to find Britain rearing out of the northern seas, its rocky coasts shrouded in that mist that makes navigation so dangerous there. What can the visitor expect here at the ends of the earth? There are, of course, as many opinions as there are adventurers. But one author has painted with words a most pleasing portrait of our destination, one that we think worth quoting as a provocation: 'Like the bride elect', this author writes,

> hung over with blindingly bright jewellery, Britain is made beautiful by long plains and perfectly matched hills well suited to crops; while its mountains contain different pastures and – like a painting – many different coloured flowers are dotted over these same peaks. To water the island there are crystalline streams full of snowy-white pebbles that are pushed slowly seawards and there are, too, wonderful rivers that murmur in the ear of the traveller and whose flow promises golden dreams to those who lie down on their banks and then there are also lakes full of endlessly fresh, cold, deep water.

We confess to admiring greatly the style of this description, but we can hardly agree with its substance. It would be a foolish and soon-to-be-

dead traveller that lay down to sleep next to a stream in bandit-infested Britain; and, of its glacial mountains, its leprous heaths and bogs, not to mention its dirty, sulphurous puddles and ponds, there seems no end. The truth is that this island marks not only the edge of the world geographically, but also in spirit. Its people are wild and Britain's harsh landscape conspires against any kind of progress in human affairs, stunting those born there. Indeed, even under the civilising, maturing influence of Roman rule – four hundred years of Roman rule no less – Britain's sum contribution to Europe was a heretic, a bad poet and three mutinous generals.[1]

The traveller, however, may wish to reserve judgement until he arrives in the island and that brings us to the crucial question of a hospitable port. For this we strongly recommend Tintagel in the land of the Dumnonians [Cornwall and Devon], the extreme south-western peninsula of the island. Here we follow the advice of the Mediterranean traders to Britain who, crossing Biscay, always carefully navigate for the Dumnonian coastline. Their choice is a wise one for Dumnonia, as the kingdom is called, is the richest and among the least barbarous corners of dark Britain, much accustomed to visitors from the civilised world.

Dumnonia's wealth and its, at least by British standards, civilisation depend on one fact: tin or, as others call it, white lead, that substance on which so many of our Greek industries are based. Alone in the island and, indeed, alone in Europe the kingdom has sufficient quantities of this precious material to justify mining. It is for this reason that we also name tin 'the British metal' and that many of the traders know Dumnonia as 'the land of the British metal'. Certainly nothing but tin or gold could tempt Greek and Egyptian ships so far north. And so – loaded down with cargoes of olives, honey, walnuts, oil, spices and, of course, Italian wine – Mediterranean adventurers gamble their fortunes and their lives on the crossing of Biscay.

1. *Translator's note:* The 'bad poet' referred to here is probably the fourth-century Romano-Briton Silvius Bonus, none of whose work survives, but who was roundly condemned by his contemporaries. The heretic we must suppose was another Briton, Pelagius, whose views on grace led him into conflict with Augustine and, indirectly, Jerome. The rebellious generals, meanwhile, are probably the three – Marcus, Gratian and Constantine III – who led, one after another, the revolt of 407–9 against the Emperor Honorius. They used Britain as their base.

These ships' captains never land on the southern coast of Dumnonia for the people there have a reputation for wrecking and piracy: these would spill any amount of blood for a carafe of alcoholic beverage. The traveller should follow their counsel and, keeping a sensible distance from the treacherous shores, veer, instead, west along the coast till he comes to Sillina [the Scilly Isles], an island off the extreme tip of Britain; from there it is less than a day's good sailing to the stronghold of Tintagel that stands on the northern flank of the peninsula. The Dumnonians claim that this island of Sillina was once connected to the mainland, but was separated from it by a catastrophic flood that drowned a kingdom – divine punishment for a woman's licentiousness, it seems. This sounds to us like one of their famous Celtic fairy tales, but certainly the waters here are wild and the shores of both mainland and island unstable.[1] In Roman times Sillina was a prison island and even today its population is different from that of the mainland. Many speak Spanish Latin, for Iberian heretics – followers of the despicable Priscillian[2] – were sent there to live out their lives in a place where their words and demons could do no harm. Then later these same Priscillianists, forgetting their precepts against carnal knowledge, bred with the locals, perpetuating themselves. We mention this, not to tempt the reader to Sillina, but rather to satisfy his curiosity so that he might avoid landing on the isle entirely. There is no point whatsoever in a visit for this hump of rock has the economy and lawfulness that one would expect of an ex-penitentiary. The traveller is, instead, again advised to continue his journey along the northern coast of the peninsula to celebrated Tintagel. No matter how brackish his water or low his food supplies, he should not consider docking until he reaches its safety.

1. *Translator's note:* The sea was indeed unstable at this date – and becoming more so. In the sixth century 'Scilly' was a single island; then, soon after, the incursions of the ocean made it into the archipelago that we know today. The chief study of the early medieval Scilly Isles is called, significantly, *Exploration of a Drowned Landscape* (Charles Thomas, 1985).

2. *Translator's note:* Priscillian was a Spaniard who introduced gnostic and apocryphal elements into Iberian Christianity as well as insisting on an exceptional ascetic rigour. He was executed for heresy in 385 and some of his supporters exiled to Sillina.

(II) TINTAGEL

Even in the Mediterranean Tintagel's cliffy bulk has a certain fame and the first sight of it, coming in on a sleek trader, clouds rolling off the heights and shouts from the sentries, is a memory that will likely stay with you through all your days. Indeed, one has the impression that Nature was a warrior, so carefully has she sculpted this rock fortress for a warrior's needs – and through much of the year it swarms with soldiers like an ants' nest. It is, in fact, a demi-island that is attached by an umbilical cord to the shore and that is reached by a simple but easily defended neck of land. All around the coast is rugged and inaccessible and the sailor can only dock on Tintagel at one point: the Iron Gate. No wonder that the Dumnonians hold this their chief settlement and that some ignorant sailors call it the 'capital of Britain'.

If Tintagel is a work of Nature's art, then man has, however, botched its decoration. The British Celts who live there are not great builders. And though they have worked on the natural defences admirably, creating huge artificial platforms, they have also thrown up monstrous habitations instead of the palace that this site cries out for. The king's court is a timber shack, something approximating in size and finish to one of our royal stables. And Tintagel's chapel has gaps in its wall so large that the candles are perpetually blown out by salty sea winds, while at its door there is an incorrectly written Latin inscription, left no doubt with the hope of impressing the Mediterranean visitor.

The traders who arrive in Britain have a boast. They say that they have never stepped on British shores unless on Tintagel. And this we have tested many times talking to such voyagers as we have met – indeed, their ignorance of the land they visit is astounding. On Tintagel, the traders say, all is provided for their delight. The tin is hauled there in ingots so their bartering can be done on the spot.[1] And their ships are protected from the Atlantic breakers by Tintagel Bay. Why, they ask, do they need to cross the neck of land into the interior and so risk their lives? They have a point. For 'the Syrians', as the Dumnonians call all traders from the Mediterranean, Tintagel is a kind of Isle of the

1. *Translator's note:* No ingots have yet been found by archaeologists on Tintagel. However, the peninsula is littered with the smashed fragments of Mediterranean carafes from the 'Syrian' ships that traded there.

Blessed. It is a voyage completed, a cargo sold, and a few days of safety before the return to the ocean, where they can enjoy the local speciality, *med* [mead], an alcoholic beverage that is made of honey, but that carries a peculiarly satisfying bitter aftertaste.

The traveller must not be surprised if he does not meet the king of the Dumnonians on Tintagel. We write this for the Dumnonians' kings and, indeed, all the kings of the British Celts, are itinerant, that is to say that they have no fixed residence. They have, instead, a series of courts that they call *lys* and they move from one to another, feasting with their warriors until the local food supplies are all but gone. Tintagel is though the *penlys*, 'the chief court' of the Dumnonians, and it is there that the king spends most of the winter months. Indeed, much trouble is taken to guarantee supply of all the relevant goods through this period, especially drinking water, which is not available in any quantity at the fortress.

The embassy of twenty years ago met the king in his hall on Tintagel in the late spring as he was preparing to leave. There is much that we can say of the strange habits of the monarchs of Dumnonia. But the most noted, and the most important for any newcomer to the kingdom, is the story that all Dumnonian kings are descended from a woman who coupled with a donkey. This may seem an unimportant and rather absurd detail, but it has important consequences. The Dumnonians are convinced that their king has donkey ears and, as tradition dictates that the king must wear a heavy crown that hides his ears, the rumour gains ever more strength. We tell this tale here not for its humour, but because it is easy to offend the king by looking too closely at this crown. Indeed, he believes that any who examine his head are searching out proof of his donkey ancestry and men have been thrown from the highest point of Tintagel for far less. For those who do not believe the king's sensitivity on this point we need only report the gaffe of the embassy. Our Emperor had sent to the Dumnonian king some valuable brooches, one of which had, to the mortification of the court, a horse sculpted on it, the design of which – strange to their barbarian eyes – was taken as an ass! For some days the embassy was in disgrace and the king, unsteady with rage, refused to see them.

The name of the king at the time of the embassy was Constantine, a singularly bad-tempered oaf, who drank far too much *med*. We have

since heard, through the traders accustomed to visit these places, that Constantine has died and that another now rules in his place – his name we do not know. However, we recount here too a second incident that took place at the court while the embassy was there and that will be instructive for travellers. A little after the embarrassing donkey episode described above, a holy man pushed his way into the king's hall in a furious tantrum. Rather than come smilingly to the king, on his knees or at least bowing, this lunatic had shouted his way on to the peninsula barging past petrified guards and sentries. We will soon see that the Christianity of the British Celts has strange elements. But it is worth emphasising immediately that one feature of this strangeness is that their holy men are held in such awe that they can get away with almost anything.

This odorous individual – he was a monk from a monastery where evidently there was no running water – caused all the court to flinch with terror and, extraordinary to relate, their king, Constantine, tried to hide from him. An emperor of Byzantium would have had any man who dared to speak out of turn decapitated on the spot, be he bishop or diplomat, commoner or noble. But, though Constantine would have had no fear of another king, he ran like a child from this ecclesiastical thug. Finally cornered, he wept as the holy dervish screamed into his ear all kinds of imprecations. It seems that Constantine had become bored with his wife, putting her away and that he had personally killed some adolescent rivals to the throne on a church altar: the business, in short, of kings in all ages and at all times. But the monk continued with a preacher's voice, saying that Constantine was the 'executioner of his own soul', the carrier 'of the bitter vine of the men of sodom', the eater of 'the filthy food of sin' and much, much more in this vein.

We report this partly so the traveller knows the strange ways of the British Celts – horsewhipping British clerics would be inappropriate, however extreme their actions and however tempting. But we mention it also for a strange sequel that might work to the traveller's advantage, for the embassy here redeemed itself. Our Emperor had sent with his ambassadors the preserved finger of his own personal saint, Ia, as a charm for the journey.[1] But wisely, the leader of the embassy in the

1. *Translator's note:* A sixth-century Byzantine emperor, in fact, built a church for St

middle of the hellish sermons described above offered it to the king and the monk as a gift from the holy city. The effect was immediate and significant. Within three days a church had been dedicated in Ia's name and Constantine, the monk and our embassy were all reconciled. The traveller at Tintagel would do well to mention his own special devotion to Ia for we understand that this Byzantine saint is much revered among the British now. A traveller in an awkward corner on Tintagel might even rustle up some other saints' relics as a gift: 'the fingernails of Matrona' or 'a hair from the head of Donatus' perhaps?

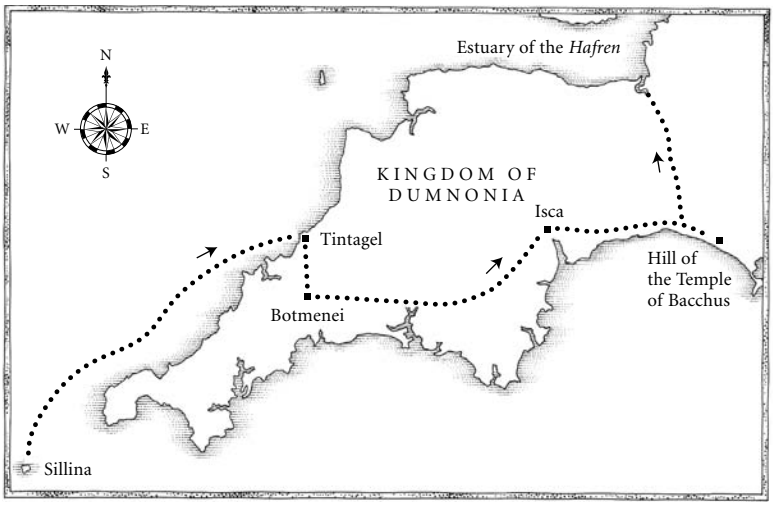
(III) BODMIN

From Tintagel the traveller can pass either inland through heavily wooded valleys[1] to the ancient settlement of Botmenei [Bodmin], or he can follow the old Roman road, naturally in a terrible state of repair, along the coast. On both routes and indeed throughout all Dumnonia, the land, he will find, is divided into a series of *cantref*, each with its own royal court and war bands. And each of these *cantref* has its own king, who is subject to the high king of the Dumnonians, the lord of Tintagel. Wherever the visitor travels, he is strongly advised to visit these local rulers and part with some trifling gift to win their favour. The sub-kings are jealous of their territory and would take it as an insult or a provocation if a traveller crossing their land did not at least drop in and exchange some words with them, especially a traveller from the Mediterranean.

How, it might be asked, should one treat these men – with firm words, sycophancy or charming condescension? We favour a frank bonhomie between equals. After all, it must be remembered that the

Ia at the Golden Gate in Constantinople. Several churches to Ia are also found in west Cornwall, most notably in St Ives – Ives is Ia – but nowhere else in Britain or Ireland.

1. *Translator's note:* 'Heavily wooded valleys' is worth elaborating on. Specialists in Britain's early medieval landscape suggest that in the south and midlands of the island tree-cover was not very much greater in the sixth century than it is today: extensive clearing had taken place in the Roman and pre-Roman period. However, in the north and the west – for example, in Cornwall, Wales, the north of England and Scotland – tree-cover was much heavier than any that we see in the twenty-first century.



British Celts are convinced that they are Roman, a contention that it is best not to argue with. The inhabitants of Tintagel, for example, often talk of their Roman blood and Constantine even had the impudence to speak of our then Emperor as his 'brother Roman king'. But on Tintagel there is, at least, the refuse of the old Roman civilisation of Britain to excuse such comments, and most of the court and clergy do speak Latin (of a sort). By contrast in the interior the Dumnonians are barbaric in manner and dress so these princes or little kings surprise all when they calmly and sincerely claim: 'we are Romans too'. Luckily, it is not the place of the traveller to argue: he must learn, instead, to tolerate these delusions and talk with them as if they really were fellow-descendants of Romulus and Remus.

Unfortunately, despite their claim to be Roman, none but a very few have any Latin so communication proves difficult. Nor do translators necessarily help, for many Dumnonians claim to speak the language as a matter of pride even when they cannot, in fact, muster more than six or seven words of the Roman tongue. (In these circumstances a series of incomprehensible sounds pour out of the speaker's mouth and, if the listener is fortunate, the first line of the *Aeneid*. The traveller should here be warned: such prestige is attached to being a Latin-speaker that the listener must not be seen to fail to understand. It is best in these

circumstances to compliment the speaker on his *bona lingua latina*, nod, smile, bow a little and then walk quickly on.

Each Dumnonian *cantref* is made up of a number of 'rounds', the classic south-western settlement, a circular embankment some forty or so feet in circumference, with a number of oval huts inside. Typically twenty will live in one of these rounds and a *cantref* has up to a hundred spread across its territory. The turf walls of these communities would not stand up to a serious assault. But they do serve for keeping the cattle safe – any animals are herded in before nightfall – and sentries are on watch at all times to guarantee the community's security or at least to give warning of a hostile presence. These precautions are taken partly to protect livestock and round-members from beasts: wolves and bears are an ever-present danger in the peninsula. However, there is also much rustling and one round sometimes finds itself feuding with another, a situation that is then complicated by occasional wars between different Dumnonian *cantref*. In fact, from what we have learnt of this kingdom, it seems that Dumnonia is in an almost constant state of mild civil war.

The traveller working his way across the kingdom is strongly advised to avoid such hostilities by finding a hospitable round where he can at least sleep safely. Most round-holders will be only too happy to offer a room, that is a stall shared with the cows, for the British Celts pride themselves on their hospitality. What, though, should the traveller look for in selecting his round? One with high walls ought usually to be avoided, because any special defences suggest that a feud is afoot. Likewise a quantity of mutilated, war-wounded young men is a bad sign. Running water and a high position are fundamental: the pestiferous, disease-ridden air of the rounds is proverbial; while, finally, the presence of horses can be taken as a sign of wealth and the chances of the traveller eating decent quantities of food increase dramatically.

An evening at a round usually begins badly. On entering his chosen sleeping-place, the traveller will be immediately shown a selection of decapitated heads nailed to the gate, usually unlucky neighbours, Saxon raiders or – be warned – impolite boarders. It is natural that a civilised visitor will feel revulsion at this point. But it is unfortunately customary to show interest in these prizes and the householder will be shocked and perhaps offended if the visitor walks straight past with an ashen

expression. Instead, the wise traveller will stand gazing keenly at the boiled, preserved faces, always ready to ask for the vital statistics of this or that head and the circumstances in which a particular guest arrived at the round. The Celts, as headhunters everywhere, take a loving pride in all their trophies and will be overjoyed to go through the personal history of each item in the collection.

There are many ways of expressing gratitude on leaving a hospitable round – though marriage proposals should be refused, no matter how tempting. The preferred method is to leave three or four Imperial bronzes. We say this because the Dumnonians use coins for special purchases, but never mint their own. In fact, take a handful of coins from a Dumnonian and you will find a mongrel selection – an ancient Roman piece of three hundred years before, a few Gaulish barbarian coins and a number of Greek ones. This lack of distinction means that the traveller is quite at liberty to bring with him old and valueless currency and smilingly fob it off on the locals as if he were discarding small fortunes. Some traders have even attempted to purchase tin in bulk, bartering with dozens of Egyptian pennies.

If the traveller is in Dumnonia in the spring, and gains his host's affection, he may, before leaving the round, be invited to see one of the notorious Dumnonian plays. The round-dwellers claim to be Christian, but it is unlikely that anyone has ever explained the full significance of our Lord's nativity and resurrection. And so in their heathen ignorance a round and sometimes two or three in unison meet near one of the region's standing stones, the old pagan temples, to celebrate a despicable drama full of devilish characters and terrible endings. The shame of this in no way strikes them and the embassy witnessed one monk – perhaps the cousin of he that remonstrated with Constantine – chase half a village from just such an evil gathering and then proceed, with his own hands no less, to carve a cross on their stone, hoping, we suppose, to exorcise its demons.

This is but one of their many superstitions. Another, and one that the traveller must be acquainted with, is that concerning Arthur. Arthur, or Artorius as he is called in the Latin language, is the greatest of British-Celtic heroes about whom there are many legends, the most insistent of which claims he will come back to save his people from the Saxons: 'he will come again!' the Dumnonians always say. When the embassy

passed through the peninsula, a guide who was with them often pointed out a landmark in connection with Arthur. If he saw a large, circular rock then this guide would say 'Ah! Arthur threw this in anger when "x" did "y": *he will come again!*' If he saw a few trees growing together with a stone at their centre then 'Arthur cooked a meal here: *he will come again!*' or 'this is Arthur's oven: *he will come again!*' Though entertaining at first, if nothing else for proving the extreme credulity of the Dumnonians, it soon becomes tedious to hear every item of the surrounding countryside explained in these terms. The traveller, however, is advised to swallow any annoyance and follow all discourses with care, asking always at least three questions, for, as we will now show, the Dumnonians can become wrathful on account of this Arthur.[1]

There is in the interior a church at the settlement we have previously mentioned named Botmenei [Bodmin], which means in their language 'the house of the monks'. In this settlement the embassy fell into talking with the natives and, as so often happens, these began to speak about their Arthur and to say many blasphemous and wicked things. For example, they said that this Arthur, though slain in battle, was not really dead and would soon come back to life as if he was our Lord himself. They even said, oh infamy, that Arthur was the Virgin's champion!

The embassy soon tired of Arthur and, outraged by such ungodly banter, began to ask awkward questions: where was this Arthur hiding if he was so great a man? The British Celts replied earnestly, in their poor Latin, that Arthur had conquered the antipodes, the islands beyond Arabia and Africa, and was even now preparing his armies to sail north. This statement was the final straw and set all the embassy laughing – a grave mistake, for even though the Dumnonians and the Byzantine party had at this point entered a church, the locals began to push and punch our men. Indeed, if it had not been for the presence

1. *Translator's note:* The evidence of the embassy is in conflict with the convictions of many modern Arthur enthusiasts – this is Arthur of Round Table fame – who believe that their once and future king lived in precisely the period covered here, the 500s. However, there are indications elsewhere that the historical individual behind the legend, in fact, belonged to an earlier period of British history and that he was already embedded in British-Celtic myth by the sixth century.

of the local king real blood would have been spilt: as it was, only a nose and several fingers were broken before order was restored.

Let this be a lesson to the traveller, one of the most important that he can learn and one that is fundamental in all the lands of the British Celts: never doubt their fanatical faith in Arthur! For 'he will come again' . . . and again . . . and again.

The journey across country can finish in only one destination: Isca Dumnoniorum [Exeter], about six days on foot from Tintagel on the southern coast. Indeed, as the Dumnonians say with touching earnestness – it passes for wisdom among them – 'all roads lead to Isca'. When Rome still controlled Britain, the Dumnonians were ruled by the council of this city. And today, the barbarians still have a kind of sentimental regard for the place. In fact, Isca even at its height was little better than a town hall with a wall around it, a kind of administrative village. And now it is almost entirely abandoned with the exception of some industry and occasional visits from the braver Mediterranean traders, who risk the Saxon pirates of Vectis [the Isle of Wight] and come this far east for their tin. No sign, apart from the city walls, remains that this place was once Roman. The proud forum, for example, has been demolished and where once the basilica stood, furnaces and a clay quarry now blight the urban scene. The tedium of the city in this run-down state is almost too much to bear. For the provincial Dumnonians all roads may lead to Isca, but for the traveller these same roads must lead inexorably away.

(IV) MAIDEN CASTLE

From Isca it is possible either to head east into the richer southern lowlands of Britain or turn back north across the peninsula and pay for passage over the Hafren and its estuary [the Severn and the Bristol Channel]. We strongly advise the latter choice even if it condemns the traveller to many more miles of muddy British roads, for to the east the borders of Dumnonia run with those of the ferocious Saxons. The embassy initially, and against the counsels of the Dumnonians, tried this eastern route, but turned back at the Hill of the Temple of Bacchus

[Maiden Castle]. We quote now directly from their log as a warning to those who are tempted to take a risk:

> On the morning of the third day, the coastal plain narrowing, we realised that we were nearing Saxon territory. We moved on nervous but alert, until we came to a large hill that had been described to us as the site of an ancient temple to Bacchus, a few miles from the border. To our delight we found there a religious building, in a beautiful state of preservation, and a frieze of Bacchus with his leopard above its portal (the leopard admittedly seeming a wolf, sculpted as it was in the style of the British Celts). We were also greeted at the hill's top by several men dressed in the green of Bacchus, all lightly armed. At first we thought we had stumbled on one of the plays loved by the Dumnonians. But these people assured us that they were acolytes of Bacchus and this surprised us for many say that the British Celts are, at least formally, all Christian. When we asked them of the faith of Christ, they were dismissive, but pleasantly so in the manner of the philosophers' academy – their Latin was excellent and one even spoke a Greek of sorts. Afterwards, they led us into the building to meet their high priest, a tall man in his late twenties, who also proved affable, though he had that effeminacy so common among the followers of the ecstatic god.
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> Made comfortable after two days of terrifying journey – food and drink were brought in abundance – our curiosity proved too much for our manners and we began to ask this priest how it was that he and his followers survived so close to the border. He explained that the Saxons, knowing theirs was a holy sanctuary, had feared to venture into its bounds, for they are, it seems, a superstitious people. In fact, the priest and the other Bacchites have had more problems with what they termed 'Christian hoodlums' who have thrice tried to desecrate the temple.
>
> As we were enjoying a light dessert there were yells without and one of the watchmen came in, whispering in the ear of the priest, who then stood and with much authority began to give instructions, sending all the others running. Only afterwards did he turn to us and tell us in Latin that a Saxon raiding party had been sighted and was working its way up from the valley. We could run if we wished, he informed us, but we would be much safer waiting in the bounds of the temple, for the Saxons had turned away on previous occasions faced with what he

called 'the majesty of Bacchus'. As he was speaking, he cast a heavy, ermine coat on to his shoulders and moved out to frighten the barbarians away, imploring his god as he did so with charms.

Our first instinct was to abandon the Bacchites to their fate. But, after some frenzied discussion, we decided that we would be better advised to hide in the precincts with our heavy luggage, for escape with the Emperor's gifts on our backs would surely have been futile, and it was unthinkable to leave these to the Saxons. The minutes passed and, peeking through the statues at the entrance, we saw a column of twenty or so tall, armed men walking rapidly up the shoulder of the hill towards the temple, screaming and chanting in their language as they did so. It was our first glimpse of the hated Saxons, and naturally we were appalled.

The scene now unfolded with a terrible inevitability. Between the temple and approaching raiders stood the high priest and a handful of green-dressed men and, as the Saxons neared, the priest began to intone incantations in a loud voice. Perhaps this trick had worked before. But on this occasion it proved useless and the Saxons broke into a run, determined to cut off the spells as quickly as possible. Seeing this, a couple of the priest's disciples immediately fled, the others, meanwhile, unsheathing their weapons. The combat was lost in a rush of limbs and bodies – they were too far down the hill for us to make out any details. But when the fighting was over – a matter of a minute – we saw the Bacchites had all been laid low except the priest, who was gagged and tied in a standing-up position, his furs on the floor. A single Saxon had also been mortally wounded and he lay shouting to his own gods.

The raiding party at this point divided, some running off to find the escaped Bacchites, others to prepare a grave for this dying comrade. We could in no way escape from the hill, and so we tried as best we could to hide ourselves in the bounds of the temple watching all the while the scene below. Working together, the warriors buried the now dead Saxon and then they turned their attention to the Bacchite priest, whom, while still alive, they scalped and cut with their long knives – the *seax* knives[1] –

1. *Translator's note:* The name Saxon actually comes from their short, stabbing *seax* knives, a kind of early medieval machete. The *seax* used in Britain in this period had a flimsier blade than its Continental equivalent, but a longer handle to allow, unusually in Germanic warfare, a two-handed attack.

and then, when he was entirely dismembered, they took his body parts to be buried higher up the slope. Evidently they feared his powers even when dead.

As they came closer we could see for the first time their features. They shave strips of hair back around their forehead and the result is that their faces seem larger and more luminous than those of other races. Their hair is held back with bands but above all with grease – indeed, the northern barbarians use rancid butter for this purpose. By now our terror was palpable and we could barely look at each other. The warriors stood twenty feet from us and it could only be a matter of time before they approached even closer.

In the end their leader, a hulking wedge of a man, walked with two of his deputies to stare at the temple's gate and the statue of Bacchus. At this point we could study their faces and unsheathed weapons, truly the stuff of a child's nightmare. But they reserved a fear for Bacchus's palace that they had not deigned to give that god's servants and refused to enter, peering only through the door into the shadows: it was strange to see our own fear reflected on their barbarian faces. A moment later, they were walking back to their brother warriors and we thanked God for our salvation, left a little time until we were sure that they had retreated and then turned back towards Dumnonia determined to try the northern route where there would be no Saxons to impede us. Cambria [Wales] now awaits.