
Opening Extract from...

This Sceptred Isle

Written by Christopher Lee

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THIS SCEPTRED ISLE

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For
Charlie, George and Elizabeth

Author's Note

British Isles appears to be a late sixteenth-century phrase, sometimes attributed to John Dee. Please accept the inaccuracy of British Isles when used in the work for periods earlier than the Elizabethans. It is convenient and hopefully offends no one. I have used BC as a personal preference to BCE although some readers may prefer the latter. I have also, with acknowledgement to the Venerable Bede, used Anno Domini.

Acknowledgements

No book writes itself. Even revised versions and updates rely on people who encourage and those who help as a matter of course or because it is something they do every day, even without knowing who the author is or seeing the bigger picture. In these times, we should thank the people who compile and post piles of information on the internet. Yet, I still cannot bring myself to use the World Wide Web as a research tool – one day, I suppose, but not yet. Sitting on a library committee during 2010, I found myself arguing for the purchase of a reference work rather than relying on readers to download. I was surprised by the depth of argument for the internet version. There is something very special about handling paper and turning pages – and anyway, who needs pop-ups and cookies in their lives? Maybe it is generational.

It's not surprising then that this author would say a huge thank you to the always patient staff at the British Library's Rare Books and Music Reading Room. Also, to the Senate Library at the University of London and the Institute for Historical Research. Thanks are ever due to the careful research of Nick Beale. To the many who advised I am in debt and grateful even if I do not mention all of them by name. Some must be known. Hazhir Teimourian encouraged me over his good lunches and said keep going when I wondered if I was doing the right thing. My editor, Andreas Campomar, helped by never rushing me when good Catholic guilt inside me insisted that I was falling behind the run rate. We both tacitly understood that I would be watched over by Howard Watson – an exceptional copy editor with the confidence an author too often needs (well at least this one does). My biggest Thank You letter is to my sometime publisher, now my agent and always my friend, Christopher Sinclair-Stevenson who has never sent nor received an email or made a mobile telephone call, and does not care that Google is a verb.

Introduction

The original edition of *This Sceptred Isle* was generously received at seemingly every level. It set out to explain the story of these, the British islands. Later volumes covered the twentieth century and, most importantly, the origins, growth and end of British colonial and imperial history. Put together, the three books suggested the character of the people who became the modern-day British and to some extent the making of Britishness. However, the three volumes were never intended to define Britishness nor specifically trace its progress. Three separate volumes could not do that to my satisfaction. The task in this single volume therefore is firstly to tell the whole story from the Romans to the twenty-first century, including stronger emphasis from the seventeenth century on colonial and imperial history, and to make all the connections with institutions and changing industrial and social characteristics that produce, in loose terms, that which we call Britishness. I have long believed that Britishness as others would see it is an image created inadvertently by Winston S. Churchill during the Second World War. Consequently, anomalies occur when, for example, we consider that Britishness is not exclusively British. Moreover, British may have a number of definitions; not all those definitions may be compatible with the term's popular, even universal, image. Yet it would appear that it is nonsense to suggest anyone can be British; surely, the first qualification is to be English, Scots or Welsh. The province of Northern Ireland, founded as recently as 1921, is in the United Kingdom but not part of Great Britain; is it then denied a Britishness status? Certainly a large part of its population would not easily embrace membership of the Britishness club.

Yet there is no exclusivity to Britishness. In theory you simply need to adopt the language, the mannerisms and the style – that is the superficial make-up of being British. The Anglo-Saxon connection

between the United States, Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom is an obvious language-based transfer of identity.

If there is a determining factor to identifying Britishness it is the history of the British Isles. It is the tracing of the growth and composition of the peoples of these islands, together with the institutions that influence the character of those peoples and determine the social and political patterns and securities of their lives, that suggest Britishness is an evolving characteristic. Moreover, the British have absorbed and in many cases chosen the influences on the tones of their societies since Saxon times. This fortune (and let us suppose for a moment that this is what it is) is quite unlike the times of those living on Continental Europe; their ancestry has been crisscrossed by armies and migrating populations. Consequently, influences on their national character, including their language and customs, have been imposed rather than chosen.

This book is an attempt to trace the ancestry of the British within these islands and to see the influence of institutions such as law and church on the creation of what we call Britishness. In doing so, we shall begin to see ourselves as many others see us. In a mirror, image is misleading; that is the first clue to what is, or is not, Britishness.

CHAPTER ONE

700,000 BC–AD 570

The average person may easily have difficulty in remembering what people, tribes and invaders came first to these islands. Danes before the Saxons? Saxons before the Normans? When was Alfred? When was Boudicca or as some prefer, Boadicea? (See the Timeline at the beginning of this book for the answers). What most people do remember is that the Romans came before them all. Perhaps that is why the arrival of the Romans in our islands in 55 BC is often the beginning of British taught history and so ignores the obvious point that the Britons were waiting for them and knew all about Caesar and his ilk as they had fought in the Roman armies. Here then is the simplest reminder that the active and diverse human history of the British Isles began long before the Romans.

The most obvious clue to life before the Romans is that most classrooms once had memorable images of Romans meeting savage Britons painted in blue woad. Caesar wrote. '*Omnes vero se Britanni vitro inficiunt, quod caeruleum efficit colorem*' – 'All the British colour themselves with glass, which produces a blue colour.' There is no original source that the Britons painted themselves with leaf dye from the plant *Isatis tinctoria* but that is the popular story. That dye, still produced today in the British Isles, is the colouring from the same plant grown since the Neolithic period in the Middle East – about 9,000 BC. So someone brought it to these lands long before the Romans came. However, we start our story of this island and the making of its people tens of thousands of years before woad because human beings lived in Britain 700,000 years ago. Flint tools found in Pakefield, Suffolk, and voles' teeth tell us this is so.[1]

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1 Professor Chris Stringer, Department of Palaeontology, Natural History Museum, London, in *Nature*, 2005.

Of course, our human timeline since 700,000 has been broken many times. The gaps were caused by not one but many natural phenomena including uncivilizing depths of cold in the ice ages. Yet, the debris of societies was preserved by those freezing ages. For example, we know that around 30,000 years ago the descendants of the earliest creatures of *Homo sapiens* were here as hunter-gatherers.

During the past one million years there have been at least ten ice ages in the northern hemisphere; they occurred approximately every 100,000 years. These phenomena appear to have been caused by changes in the orbit of the earth around the warming sun.[2] Today we predict catastrophic rises in sea levels as global warming melts the polar ice caps. So it is easy to understand that during the ice ages the opposite happened; there were mountain ranges made of ice. Temperatures gradually dropped and so sea levels ebbed – perhaps by as much as 400 feet – and faces of the earth were carved by advancing glaciers that created much of the land shapes we know today. The last cold period, which we commonly refer to as the Ice Age, started about 70,000 years ago and ended about 10,000 years ago; we say 'about 10,000 years' because it was not a matter of waking one morning to find the snow gone – this was no cold snap. At the same time that the glaciers receded, an important stage of human civilization was occurring in an area of the Middle East that roughly coincides with modern Syria and Iraq. It was here that farming began. People grew and harvested their food rather than nomadically hunting and gathering. When men farm they have to settle to tend the crops. Settlements provide the fundamental stability for a society to emerge as well as cultural comfort. Hence the cradle of civilization was born in the Middle East.

It took another 4,000 to 5,000 years before farming reached these shores and as societies changed from exclusively hunter-gathering to farming some therefore stayed in one area and so gradually created settled tribal regions. Of course, Britain did not overnight turn into a society that stayed put. Some were ever on the move and indeed that is how and why farming spread. Nor must we think in modern terms of change. There was nothing of the trend about the growth of

2 This has been known since the seventeenth century largely due to the work of Johannes Kepler (1571–1630).

farming. The gradual shift of the majority from hunting and gathering to food growing probably took as long as it is now from the growth of Christianity – easily 2,000 years.

Although people lived in these islands before the great freeze, as far as we can tell, no one lived here during that period. So when the ice went, the people who arrived in the islands were not necessarily descendants of those who lived here before. Important? Yes, because it gives us a better idea of all our origins and to even better remember that until about 8,500 years ago (so, after the Ice Age) we were not islanders. What we now call the North Sea was then dry land. By 5,000 BC the water levels had risen to create our islands. Because the British lands were surrounded by water then it followed that development of the islands was likely to be later than that of, for example, eastern Continental Europe. That is a generalization, but not out of place in our story. This period is called Neolithic which can be translated from two Greek words *neos* (new) and *lithos* (stone) – thus Neolithic is New Stone Age. Because of what was going on in settled farming, it is sometimes called the Agricultural Age and is seen as a 'culturally more dramatic threshold than our more recent Agricultural Revolution'.[3] Yet, if we look at the New Stone Age or Agricultural Age in the British Isles, we would probably date it *c*.5,500 BC–*c*.2,500 BC. But the same age in the region where Europe meets Asia started not *c*.5,000 BC but *c*.10,000 BC. The three larger reasons for this late start were the distances from the origins of change in the Middle East; climate; and resettlement that came from two distinct directions. When the migration started, it appears to have been mainly a pincer movement. One migration came along the southern European-Balkan corridors then up the western coast of Europe. The second claw in the migratory pincer was from the near neighbours of north-western Europe.

Agriculture followed by settled farmers (as opposed to herdsmen who would follow the grazing) is in evidence in East Anglia as early as 6,300 years ago. It took hundreds of years for the Agricultural Revolution to spread throughout the islands from the south, the east and the west as far north as the Orkneys.[4] What is not so clear is the answer to the threefold question of the consequence of the introduction

3 Stephen Oppenheimer, *The Origins of the British* (London: Robinson, 2007), 197.

4 The Skara Brae settlement is an exceptional example of preserved Neolithic society.

of the new society: Were the influences of the new cultures spread by the migrants from Continental Europe or by the indigenous population? Did the new farming produce a diet and a less vulnerable lifestyle that preserved the indigenous population? Is the language that we speak today developed from migrations or from what already existed? In very crude terms: did the people who lived in these islands absorb the migrants or did the visitors gradually take over?

There was also in these migration patterns an obvious source of identification: people on the move carry with them the utensils they need to cook and feed. So, from about 3,000 BC there arrived in Britain the simplest utensil: the beaker. It could be used to drink from, eat from and, in some form, to cook in. Beaker history is one of the more fruitful forms of archaeology because beakers had regional characteristics including decoration and many artefacts have survived. Even fragments tell us much about population origins, growths and progression. Beakers were brought from the near northern Continental Europe. The migrations from the Continent into the islands between 3,000 BC and 2,000 BC gave us evidence of a society that took great care in the burial of its dead. Earlier burials were communal affairs but about 3,000 BC the northern European trend for individual graves spread across the Continent and over the seas to the British Isles. With the gradual adoption of single graves came the practice of a more personal morbid liturgy that included provisions for another place. The departed took utensils for the next journey. So, in excavations in Wiltshire-cum-Wessex, the ritual centre of England during the Neolithic and Bronze ages[5] there is good evidence of what have become known as beaker graves including those of travellers from north-west Continental Europe. Others arrived from Iberia, suggesting a quite different migratory passage to the north-west European visitors. For example, according to Professor Barry Cunliffe, Maritime Bell Beaker culture that may have originated in what is now Portugal brought to these shores trading networks, metal working and even language.[6]

Here then we have some idea that the traceable origins of the British are to be found following the big thaw in the Middle Stone Age period after 10,000 BC. The period between, say, 13,000 BC and

5 Oppenheimer, *The Origins of the British*, 272.

6 Barry Cunliffe, *Facing the Ocean: The Atlantic and Its Peoples* (Oxford: OUP, 2004), 218–19.

5,500 BC saw the migrations of hunter-gatherers crossing mainland Europe from the Caucuses, while northwards along the Atlantic coast came the Franco-Iberian travellers still besieged by the ice. As the ice melted, these islands were formed because the sea levels rose and from 5,500 BC the Neolithic or Agricultural Age people who were looking to settle and farm began arriving from as far away as the Middle East, the Balkans, across the Mediterranean and along the Atlantic Iberian coastline; eventually they were followed by the Anglo-Saxons from Germany and the Lowlands and then the Vikings. So by the time the Romans arrived, just a generation or so before the birth of Christ, the society of the Britons was established; hunter-gatherers may have lived here but the general make-up of the Britons suggested that they were farmers, people who would stick to one area and form into groups that became large groups that became communities that became regional tribes of inter-related, settled people. It was also a society that was not isolated and had even fought with the Romans on the Continent.

Julius Caesar (100 BC–44 BC) came to Britain, islands on the very edge of the known world, on 26 August 55 BC. This was not the great invasion that would govern our island society. Caesar had come prepared but not prepared enough. He had 10,000 men when he landed near Deal on the Kent coast and fought off the harassing Britons. But to properly invade, Caesar needed far more men, cavalry and all the logistical people and equipment that sustain an advancing army. Many times, these islands have been protected from invaders by the weather. So it was at the end of that July 55 BC when his cavalry tried to land without understanding tides (tides rarely happen in the Mediterranean). At the end of that month there was a full moon, which produces extreme tides.

The landing was not entirely a failure. Caesar achieved three objectives. He understood that he had the wrong sort of vessels to transport his invasion; he knew what forces he needed to beat the Britons; and his expedition was seen in Rome as a great success. He returned to northern Italy and prepared a new fleet of specially designed warships and transports that could be sailed or pulled with great oars. Caesar had, in effect, designed the first landing craft – vessels that could run right on to the beaches of Britannia and so make it simpler to get stores, men and horses ashore. The obvious

question remained: did he really need to land on these islands? After all, they posed no military threat to this general who had all but conquered Gaul, as France was then called. The answer is that Caesar had to maintain his authority and ambition and so he had to command, to defend and to conquer. Caesar was vulnerable. He had many enemies in Rome who wanted him to return to face charges levied at him years before when he was a consul. Those accusations included debt even though he had paid his creditors with treasure seized when he had sacked Spain. In Rome prosecutions for crimes were rarely pursued against victorious military heroes, thus Caesar remained above the law so long as he continued to conquer. Thus, he had no option but to plot and plan to exploit his reputation and power that came from his undoubted brilliance as a general and as a politician. This was the man who shortly would be the first emperor of Rome and called Pater Patriae (Father of the Country) and the man seen by one of his more famous political enemies, Cicero, as having a 'calm and kind nature; delight in great minds; he listens to right and just requests and doesn't care about the careerist's ones; he is clever and forward-looking . . . I admire his dignity and justice and intelligence'. Here was the man who came, for the second time, to conquer Britain. He would not succeed. It would take another 100 years before the real conquest under the auspice of Claudius in AD 43 would mean the Romanization of Britain. But in 54 BC the invasion under Caesar would be enough to inspire the idea for 2,000 years and more that it was indeed Julius who conquered the Britons.

The Romans would not have understood the people of Britain as the English. The English came very much after the Romans; the people they knew were Celts with a common language: Celtic. Celtic place names were so well established that the Romans simply Romanized them. Also, this was not a land of savages although the people were capable of behaving what we would think of as savagely. By 54 BC many had farms and therefore settled into hamlets and even villages. Hedges and boundaries suggest a form of regular and marked ownership of land and the river valleys were becoming more populated because of this organized agriculture. The beginnings of industrial pottery, a common language and what are now called Gallo-Belgic coins suggest that Caesar was right when he said that the people in the lowland areas, broadly what are now called the South-East and Midlands, were infiltrated by those from the

Continent. At the end of July 54 BC Caesar was also ready to infiltrate from the Continent. Across the narrow seaway, the Britons knew he was coming. These Britons had fought in Gaul alongside Caesar's men. They knew of what he was capable, and what he might do with that capability. Some of the tribes sent envoys to Caesar; they didn't want to fight. Also, many of them were at war with each other so there was much to gain from making peace with the Romans and even promising to

Caesar returned to Britain with 800 warships of troops, cavalry and supplies. It was a well-structured invasion and occupation force but not without opposition. The Britons, or some of them, had united under a leader called Cassivellaunus, who may have been the King of the Catuvellauni. The Catuvellauni were the strongest of the southern tribes and had settled in what is now Hertfordshire. They were resilient and inventive, especially in the way they deployed their chariots when fighting. Cassivellaunus had many enemies. There were other tribes who hated his tribe; there were other leaders who hated him. It is thought that one of these tribes, the Trinovantes who lived in Essex, entered into a pact with Caesar. Other tribes joined this arrangement and so Cassivellaunus now fought Romans in front of him and treachery behind. Eventually peace was negotiated and Britons were taken hostage. Victory for Caesar? It was never to be as simple as that. Winter was approaching: there was no way in which an invading army could in those times find ready-made shelter and the Romans had no way in which they could resupply the huge cohorts needed to maintain the territory they had taken. Worse still, there was a revolt in Gaul. So Caesar left Britain taking his British prisoners with him. And that was it. Caesar's flirtation with Britain was just that, a flirtation. In ten years he would be murdered, and a century would pass before the Emperor Claudius would once more attempt to subjugate the tribes of Britain.

But the time between Caesar's withdrawal in 54 BC and the Roman return in AD 43 was not a dark age for islanders. From the top of what is now Scotland south to the Kent coast there were more than twenty large tribes. Some of the names became famous: the Iceni in East Anglia, the Catuvellauni in the East Midlands and Essex, the Parisi in Yorkshire, the Silures in Wales and the Brigantes, probably in the Pennines. Strabo, writing in the first-century BC in the fourth of his

seventeen-volume *Geographica*, tells us that the Britons exported cattle, hides, grain, slaves, gold and silver and, apparently, hunting dogs. In return, they imported wine and oil and glass. And most of this trade was with the prosperous South-East. So, even 2,000 years ago, there was a north-south divide in Britain.

Some ninety years after Julius Caesar's departure, the Emperor Claudius was persuaded by an exiled Briton that it would be politically to his advantage to return to Britain. His name was Bericus. This was nearly a century after Caesar's campaigns – seen as triumphs. Yet if ever there were to be an example of how the British Isles were believed to be on the edge of the world and mysteriously dangerous then, at about the time of Christ, the proposed invasion showed this ignorance and fear. Plautius was ordered to prepare and execute the invasion of Britain from his base in Gaul, France. Cassius Dio, in his early third-century AD version of Roman history, describes what happened: 'Plautius undertook this campaign, but had difficulty in inducing his army to advance beyond Gaul, for the soldiers were indignant at the thought of carrying on a campaign outside the limits of the known world and would not yield in obedience.'

Even after 100 years and much trading beyond their shores, these islands were still at the edge of the 'known' world. But the Romans invaded once more and this time they found that the Britons weren't expecting them. Tacitus wrote that although the Britons had many military strengths, they were not a cohesive force:

> Once they owed obedience to kings; now they are distracted between the warring factions of rival chiefs. Indeed nothing has helped us more in fighting against their very powerful nations than their inability to co-operate [with each other]. It is but seldom that two or three states unite to repel a common danger; thus, fighting in separate groups, all are conquered.

But the Britons did fight back in a way that Churchill might have applauded men when another darkest hour had been reached. They had learned there was little point in taking on the Romans at their own game. Instead, they hid in the forests and the swamps. Cassius Dio suggests that the resistance was not long lived.

> Plautius had a great deal of trouble searching them out; but when at last he did find them, he first defeated Caratacus and then Togodumnus . . . After the fight of these kings, he advanced father and came to a river. The barbarians thought that the Romans would not be able to cross it without a bridge and bivouacked in rather careless fashion on the opposite bank; but he [Plautius] sent across a detachment of Germans who were accustomed to swim easily in full armour.

The following year it was safe for the emperor, Claudius to cross the Channel and join the Roman legions on the banks of the Thames and so (with elephants) lead the victory – with all that meant in Rome.

> Taking command, and enjoining the barbarians who were gathered at his approach, he defeated them in battle and captured Camulodunum [Colchester], the capital of Cynobellinus. He deprived the conquered of their arms [took the surrender] and handed them to Plautius, bidding him also subjugate the remaining districts. Claudius now hastened back to Rome sending ahead news of his victory. The Senate on hearing of his achievement gave him the title Britannicus and granted him permission to celebrate a triumph.

But back in Britain Caratacus (sometimes Caractacus) resisted and as Tacitus wrote, Caratacus had become a hero and not just among his own people: 'His reputation had gone beyond the islands, had spread over the nearest provinces, and was familiar in Italy itself where the curiosity to see what manner of man it was that had for so many years scorned our power.' He had resisted the might of Roman power for six years, hiding in the Welsh borders and may have succeeded if it had not been for British treachery. He was not defeated by Ostorius (the successor to Plautius) but handed over to him by the queen of the northern tribe, the Brigantes. Also, the Romans saw this man as the fierce warrior from the furthest point in their known world. That alone made him a figure of much curiosity.

> While the king's humble vassals filed past, ornaments and neck rings and prizes won in his foreign wars were borne in parade; next his brothers, wife and daughter were placed on view; finally, he himself. The rest stooped to unworthy entreaties dictated by fear; but on the part of Caratacus not a downcast look nor a word requested pity.

> Arrived at the tribunal, he spoke as follows: 'Had my lineage and my rank been matched by my moderation in success, I should have entered this city rather as a friend than as a captive. My present lot, if to me a degradation, is to you a glory. If I were dragged before you after surrendering without a blow, there would have been little heard either of my fall or your triumph; punishment of me will be followed by oblivion; but save me alive, and I shall be an everlasting memorial to your clemency.'

And so he was. Caratacus was freed. The Romans struck his chains and those of his family but he was not to return to Britain. Caratacus, or so the chronicles tell us, remained in honourable captivity. That was hardly the end of the story of that invasion. The most gruesome slaughter and the conquest were yet to come.

The centre of Roman Britain was Camulodunum (Colchester). The idea was that Britain, or at least part of it, should become a province within the Roman Empire. But this was difficult to achieve. The Britons were warlike and because there were some twenty-three tribal regions, it was impossible to get overall agreement, or even an understanding, with more than a few of them. The south and the east were the most easily controllable. The Romans had large forces there, they had set up their capital at Colchester and there were good trade routes through Essex and Kent. The uplands of Britain presented a bigger problem. In AD 54 Claudius died and his stepson, Nero became emperor. The death of another leader, this one in Britain, left a longer lasting impression upon British history and folklore. Her name was Boudicca and she was the widow of the King of the Iceni in East Anglia. Boudicca had been flogged and abused, as had her daughters, by the Romans. She and her tribe sought terrible revenge for this outrage.

The Romans had no more than 20,000 men in Britain in four legions: two were thirty days' march away on the farther side of Wales, one was not much closer in Gloucester and the last was 120 miles away, at Lincoln. Boudicca led her warriors through East Anglia to the capital at Colchester. They attacked with uncompromising fury and massacred every Roman and every person in the pay or appropriating the style of the Roman occupation. None was spared. Word had been sent to Lincoln where the Roman Ninth Legion was in camp. Their commander, Petilius Cerialis, saddled his

cavalry but could only move south at the pace of his infantry. Boudicca, still covered in blood from her gruesome work at Colchester, set out to meet the Ninth Legion and fell upon the infantry. The Romans were slaughtered. Cerialis escaped with his cavalry. But when the Roman, Suetonius, whose job it was to defend London and its people, heard that Boudicca had cut down the Ninth Legion and Cerialis was in flight and was now heading south to what would one day be Britain's capital, he abandoned London. Boudicca carried on and found London empty of troops and so her warriors butchered anyone they found. They next turned their vengeance on St Albans, then called Verulamium. No quarter was shown. The simplicity of the thirty-five words of Tacitus tells everything: 'They wasted no time in getting down to the bloody business of hanging, burning and crucifying. It was as if they feared that retribution might catch up with them while their vengeance was only half-complete.'

But for the Romans, and the reputation of Suetonius, all was not lost. Reinforced, he marched to the Midlands where Boudicca had amassed 230,000 troops. Suetonius had 10,000 Romans. That number would be sufficient because at last the Romans were fighting in their own style, not Boudicca's. She had been successful when her tribesmen fought as marauders and terrorists. Now, Boudicca was to fight on Roman terms, which was a foolish mistake. The Romans were at the top of a slope and they enticed the Britons on. When they came, the Romans launched their javelins, then charged with their legionaries and cavalry, then forced the Britons back on their carts and their families who were behind them. They slaughtered the cart horses so there was no escape and then massacred the Britons, the ancients, their women, their children. As for Boudicca, she was finished and could expect no sweet charity and wanted none. She is said to have poisoned herself. Her surviving followers were cut down and Nero sent extra troops across the Channel to terrorize the other tribes. The vengeance of Boudicca had unsettled the Romans so that they now took no chances. Dead Britons were relatively less dangerous. Their grieving kith and kin were philosophical in the aftermath of sword and fire.

Diplomacy took over where military action had not always maintained the peace and the south never again rose against the Romans. There were battles to come, men to die and there were those Britons who preferred death to subjugation. But it was also true that Britain

had embarked upon a civilized way of life that lasted for 350 years. The Romans ruled Britain for nearly 400 years and they gave the Britons their first written historical descriptions. They recorded their versions of what was happening and the names of people who were making it happen. But when the Romans started to leave Britain in AD 410 – recalled to defend Rome – many of those who could write went with them, as did the imperial incentive to keep records, and so there are few contemporary written accounts of what was going on in Britain for many years.

Exactly what followed the Roman exodus is very difficult to verify. There is a long period in the history of these islands that can never be accurately written. Instead we rely on, for example, a sixth-century monk called Gildas the Wise.[7] Most of what he wrote was a religious tract, but in it there is at least a sense of the story of this period. Gildas suggests that the Anglo-Saxons began arriving in the 470s because they were imported as mercenaries and that other mercenaries were bought to defend against them. Gildas tells us it was a time of misery and of the rising of a great tyrant, who was probably Vortigern – although Gildas did not name him. Vortigern was on the side of the Britons. He hired mercenaries to defend the Britons against the Anglo-Saxons who were led by Hengist and Horsa. There was a great victory at a place called Mons Badonicus. Gildas felt this victory was important because it brought peace for perhaps half a century.

> Then all the councillors, together with that proud tyrant Gurthrigern [Vortigern], the British king, were so blinded, that, as a protection to their country, they sealed its doom by inviting in among them the fierce and impious Saxons, a race hateful both to God and men, to repel the invasions of the northern nations . . . What palpable darkness must have enveloped their minds – darkness desperate and cruel! Those very people whom, when absent, they dreaded more than death itself, were invited to reside, as one may say, under the selfsame roof. Foolish are the princes, as it is said, of Thafneos, giving counsel to unwise Pharaoh. A multitude of whelps came forth from the lair of this barbaric lioness, in three cyuls, as they call them, that is, in three

7 Gildas Badonicus, a Celtic monk writing in the 540s to denounce the wickedness of his times.

> ships of war, with their sails wafted by the wind and with omens and prophecies favourable, for it was foretold by a certain soothsayer among them, that they should occupy the country to which they were sailing three hundred years, and half of that time, a hundred and fifty years, should plunder and despoil the same. They first landed on the eastern side of the island, by the invitation of the unlucky king, and there fixed their sharp talons, apparently to fight in favour of the island, but alas! more truly against it. Their motherland, finding her first brood thus successful, sends forth a larger company of her wolfish offspring, which sailing over, join themselves to their bastard-born comrades. From that time the germ of iniquity and the root of contention planted their poison amongst us, as we deserved, and shot forth into leaves and branches.[8]

All England, it would have appeared, was leaves and branches. In this period, the middle of the fifth century, there were great forests almost everywhere. The Weald at that time ran from Kent to Hampshire: 120 miles long and 30 miles deep. Where there wasn't forest, there were often marshlands. There were roads, almost 5,000 miles of them, left by the Romans yet the towns were crumbling. It would be called urban decay today and it had started before the Romans left. The Britons, and the Saxon invaders, were rarely stone masons; they left no record of knowing much about repairing the buildings and cared even less. The great Saxon churches, many surviving today, came much later.

If we have doubts about Gildas, we have fewer doubts about the importance of the clues to this period found in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and the *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People* by the Venerable Bede – the first British historian. Here, and among archaeological records, are found the few traces of Saxon heritage and the names that make up the history of these islands: Hengist, Horsa, Penda, Æthelberht slaughtered by Offa, St Augustine, Eric Bloodaxe, Edward the Confessor, his son Harold and, the greatest mystery of all Saxon history, King Arthur and Camelot. If we have an ounce of romantic history then, along with Robin Hood, Arthur is the one we really want to believe in. There was a warrior king, or chieftain, who did

8 J. A. Giles (ed.), *Six Old English Chronicles* (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1848).

great deeds but no one is quite sure who he was. In the fifth century mercenaries came from northern Europe, supposedly to help the Britons. But they started to help themselves to Britain. Later, according to, among others, the ninth-century Welsh scholar Nennius, they were sent packing. And Arthurian hopefuls would say that it may have been Arthur who defeated them. He is found in early bardic literature collectively called *Mabinogion* and developed in the late twelfth-century romances of Chrétien de Troyes – he gave us Lancelot. Writers usually relied upon hearsay. Even if Arthur was a minor king who fought twelve battles that defeated the barbarians, it may not have been so important in sixth-century Britain. In a country which accepted raiding, violence and its dreadful consequences as a matter of course, twelve battles over a couple of years would not have been remarkable.

According to Nennius, who was writing *c*.830 (see the *Historia Brittonium*), Arthur's last battle took place on Mount Badon and although its location remains unknown, by cross-checking other events, including the birthdays and the deaths of chroniclers, it seems that this final – the twelfth – battle took place between 490 and 503. So hopefully for Arthurians, a mighty knight did live and fight towards the end of the fifth century who defeated invaders and was seen as a chivalrous saviour.

The Venerable Bede (673–735), an altogether more reliable chronicler, provides an exact date for another figure of the time, Columba, in his *Historia Ecclesiastica*.

> In the year of our Lord 565, there came into Britain a famous priest and abbot, a monk by habit and life, whose name was Colomba, to preach the word of God to the provinces of the northern Picts; who are separated from the southern parts by steep and rugged mountains.

Bede's steep and rugged mountains are the Grampians and Columba was sent to convert those who lived to the north of them. It seems that the southerners had already been converted by a Briton, Bishop Ninian, who had learned his theology in Rome. Columba's arrival coincided with the beginnings of what became the Ionan community. Bede is quite certain of Columba's origin.

> Columba came into Britain in the ninth year of the reign of Bridus [accession 557 according to Bede],[9] who was the son of Meilochon, and the powerful king of the Pictish nation, and he converted the nation to the faith of Christ, by his preaching and example. It is true they followed uncertain rules in their observance of the great festival [Easter], wherefore they only practised such works as piety and chastity as they could learn from the prophetical, evangelical, and apostolical writings. The manner of keeping Easter continued among them for the space of 150 years, till the year of our Lord's incarnation 715.

So a carefully crafted journal gives us the dates of a Scottish king: Bride (Bridius), the son of Meilochon. Ninian and Columba measured men in their God's image and there were none who could not be saved and Easter, whether or not it was celebrated according to synodical decree, was the most important event in their year and preached forgiveness of sins. Perhaps there was spiritual and temporal fairness abroad in these islands but there was wickedness and violence too. There was also a new conflict that would end, once more, with the defeat of the Britons. This time, the English, who did not come from England, would be the victors.

9 See also *Life of Saint Columba* by Abbot Adomnán (627–704).