

Britain before the Germanic Conquest

- The history of the English language begins with the settlement of Britain by Germanic tribes in the middle of the 5th century A.D. Yet, before this happened, the island, inhabited by Celtic peoples for a few centuries, witnessed a number of important political and military events, which finally led to its conquest by Germanic invaders. First of all, Britain was invaded by Rome as early as **55 and 54 B.C.** These two first landings led by **Julius Ceasar** had, however no consequences, as they were not followed by a political occupation.
- It was at the time of **Claudius** in **43 A.D.** that a more systematic conquest of the island began which, after four years of fierce battles, resulted in the establishment of Roman rule over the south of Britain. Soon after 71 A.D. the frontier of the expansion reached the Clyde but the lands north of the Tyne-Solway were never really maintained by the Romans. It was on the Tyne-Solway line that emperor **Hadrian** built the famous wall after **122 A.D.**, in parts well preserved until today, which was to protect the northern boundary of Roman rule in Britain for over two centuries more.
- At the end of the 3rd century the first attacks of **Germanic** tribes had already begun on the eastern coast which forced the Roman rulers to build coastal defences from the Wash to Solent. Throughout their rule in Britain, the Romans were also in danger of an attack from the north by two Celtic tribes, the **Scots** and the **Picts**.
- In **367**, Roman Britain witnessed a great attack of Scots from Ireland, Picts from the north and Saxons from the east, which resulted in a temporary disintegration of the Roman rule, as well as serious economic and cultural losses. Although the official power was soon re-established and the invaders were finally driven out the end of Roman Britain was imminent.
- In **383** most of the legions were recalled to the metropolis and **after 400** the last troops left to defend Rome against the **Vandals**. The Britons, or rather the Romano-Britons, had to defend themselves against repeated attacks from the northern and overseas enemies. In reply to their appeal sent to emperor **Honorius**, the latter informed the citizens of Britain in **409** that they would have to depend on themselves from now on. This date is considered by many historians as **the end of Roman rule in Britain**.
- The military and political conquest resulted in the **Romanization** of the province. The Romans soon constructed roads and built towns and cities, many as extensions of existing ones. The houses and villas had all the luxuries usual for Roman villas: heating, water supply, floor mosaics and painted walls. Baths, large villas, temples and theatres give evidence to a rather high standard of living and well developed cultural life. The Romanization of Britain is also visible in the use of **Latin**. The most conspicuous and permanent trace of Latin is to be found in place names, as e.g., in *Portchester* (L. *portus* and *castra*), *Portsmouth* (L. *portus* and OE *mūþ*), *Foss* (L. *fossa*), *Fosham* (L. *fossa* and OE *hām*), etc. Especially frequent is the occurrence of the element *-chester*, *-caster* (OE *-ceaster*, *-cæster*) in combination both with Celtic elements as in *Gloucester*, *Winchester*, *Colchester*, *Lancaster*, *Doncaster*, and with the Old English ones, as in *Casterton*, *Chesterton* (OE *-tūn*), *Chesterford*, *Chesterfield*, *Silchester*, *Woodchester*, etc.

- After the departure of the Roman legions, the attacks from Germanic peoples in the south and the west, and the Scots and Picts from the north intensified until another large scale invasion, this time from the European Continent, changed the political geography of Britain again. The Continental invaders were, of course, not total newcomers. Germanic expeditions had been harassing Britain for over two centuries prior to the year **449**, which has been traditionally accepted as the year of the **Germanic conquest** of the island.

The Germanic Invasion and Conquest of Britain

- The year **449** as the beginning of the invasion was first mentioned by **Bede** in his *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* written in 731. (Beginning with Bede it was accepted for a long time that the invasion was performed with a concentrated military effort. Recently the tendency has been to antedate the invasion and to stress its gradual nature). Unfortunately, history has not bestowed us with evidence comparable with that concerning the Roman conquest of Britain or the Norman conquest of England. This has given rise to a number of conjectures overshadowing the number of historically verifiable facts and hence so many questions which cannot be answered with certainty but create situations favourable for the existence of further doubts and controversies.

Liber querulus de excidio Britanniae, was written **c. 548** and is ascribed to **Gildas** - the earliest writer to attempt a narrative of events in Britain from the latter part of the Roman period until the latter part of the Anglo-Saxon invasion period. His story could be summarized as follows. There is a threat of invasion of the island from the north. A 'proud tyrant' (*superbus tyrannus*), unnamed by Gildas, invites Saxons to help to repel the invasion. Three shiploads of them land somewhere in the eastern part of Britain and are given land there to settle in exchange for providing the defense of the country. These are later followed by further contingents who also settle and perform the same mercenary functions. After some time the Saxons revolt against the British, fight against them and destroy much of the country. After prolonged fighting, the British finally defeat their former defenders at *Mons Badonicus* and establish the period of peace and prosperity which Gildas himself witnessed.



Illustration IOE dialects

- **Bede** (c. 673 - 735) wrote his *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* in **731**. Although it is basically a history of Christianity in England, it also deals with political events. The author has incorporated Gildas' account but modified it by adding exact chronology and location of events. It was Bede who was the first to name *superbus tyrannus* as **Vortigern** (OE *Wyr-tgeorn*) and who mentioned **Hengest** and **Horsa** as the Germanic leaders who came to help Vortigern. Furthermore, he mentioned the fact that Horsa was buried in Kent. According to Bede the first landing of Germanic mercenaries took place in **449**. The invasion of Britain was gradual. First the **Jutes** (according to recent studies with some participation of Franks and possibly Frisians) who originally lived in the northern part of Jutland settled in Kent and on the Isle of Wight

and were followed by the **Saxons** (who came from the Continental area to the south of the Angles, stretching from the Baltic coast to the Weser). They settled west of Kent and south of the Thames, and finally by the **Angles** (who originally inhabited the area south of the Jutes and north-east of Schleswig, the country called *Angulus*) who invaded and took the territory north of the Thames up

to the northern border of today's England.

- There is every reason to believe that the Germanic invasion of Britain and the settlement was a slow process. Before the middle of the 5th century small groups of intruders harassed the British inhabitants of the island. But these forays did not leave any permanent traces. The first stage of the real settlement began with the invitation of troops to defend Britain from the northern barbarians. It may be safely assumed that this must have taken place in the second half of the fifth century. The newcomers were not only soldiers but also farmers. When reinforcements arrived from overseas, the hirelings rebelled against the British and managed to subdue part of the country until they met strong, organized resistance and their advance was checked by the major battle lost at *Mons Badonicus* c. 500. It is quite likely that some accommodation was made and peace was established at least in the south of England and over much of the midland area for approximately the next seventy years. According to the available evidence it is possible that Germanic settlements were established in Kent, Sussex, East Anglia and the east midland before the end of the 5th century.

Anglo-Saxon England

- Until the 10th century there was no English monarchy. The Germanic tribes which conquered Britain founded several small kingdoms. Seven of them are known as the **Anglo-Saxon Heptarchy**, i.e., **Northumbria**, **Mercia**, **East Anglia**, **Kent**, **Sussex**, **Essex** and **Wessex**. At times one or the other was more dominant and some of the kings gained fame for spreading the rule beyond his original borders, over another of the kingdoms, e.g., **Northumbria** had political and cultural supremacy over a number of kingdoms at the beginning of the 7th century, **Kent** under king **Æthelberht** (c. 560-616) dominated part of the political scene, **Mercia** held leadership in the 8th century and Wessex kings claimed to be kings of England throughout the 9th century. Under **Alfred the Great** (871 -- 899) **Wessex** became politically and culturally the leading kingdom of England, paving the way for the future political unification of the country.



Illustration 2 Anglo-Saxon Heptarchy

▪ Christianization

Christianity came to Britain during Roman rule. Although it became the religion of the Celtic inhabitants, with a well-developed hierarchical structure and all its problems, including schisms and loosening ties with the See of Rome, the Germanic invaders were not Christianized by the Celtic Britons. It is also interesting that in the seventh century when English bishoprics were being established, the Celtic ones would not recognize them. The Christianization of the Anglo-Saxons was a slow process and came to Britain from two directions: straight from Rome and from the Irish-Scottish monastery of Iona to the north-west.

When Gregory became Pope in **597**, he sent **St. Augustine** with forty monks to convert the heathen Germanic inhabitants of Britain. St. Augustine landed in Kent where he was well received by **Queen Bertha**, who was a Christian Frank. Three months after his arrival her husband **King Ethelberht** was baptized himself. In **601** the Archbishopric of Canterbury was established with St. Augustine as the Archbishop. Before his death in 604 the whole kingdom of Kent had been Christianized.

From Canterbury missionaries went to other kingdoms, achieving complete success everywhere in a relatively short time. The reason for this was that they started with courts after whose conversion the new religion became a state affair and the Christianization could be more or less ordered by the king. Thus, after completing their task in Kent the missionaries went to Essex and East Anglia and in **625 - 627** to York. Wessex became Christian in **635** and Sussex in **681**. The conversion of Northumbria was completed c. **650**, followed by the Christianization of Mercia in **655**.

In **664** the **Synod of Whitby** put a stop to the differentiation between the Roman and the independent Celtic Christianity and recognized Rome as the Holy See.

▪ The Scandinavian Invasions of Britain

The Scandinavian invasions of England exerted a profound influence on almost all walks of life of its English inhabitants at the time, including the English language.

The earliest raids, according to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, took place in **787**. In 793 and 794 the monasteries of **Lindisfarne** and **Jarrow**, the centers of learning and Christendom, were attacked and plundered.

The first attack against southern England, in East Anglia, occurred in **835**. It began a series of raids which took place almost every year for at least thirty years and affected the whole coast from East Anglia to Somerset and Cornwall.

This first stage of **Danish invasions** from **787** to c. **850** was characterized by shallow penetration of the coastal area, usually ten to fifteen miles inland, plundering of towns and monasteries and a relatively quick return to the bases on the English coast or back home. The second stage was marked by the participation of large and well organized forces, whose aim was not only plunder but also the occupation and settlement of the invaded land. The first such an army landed in **East Anglia** in **865**.

Late in **870**, one year before **King Alfred (871 - 899)** came to the throne, the first attacks on the **West Saxon** kingdom began. In January **878** the army under **Guthrum** made a third attempt to conquer **Wessex**. After some initial success the Danes were finally defeated by Alfred. In **879** Alfred and Guthrum signed a **treaty at Wedmore**. The Danes left Wessex. The treaty determined that the line running from London to the Lea near Luton and further to Bedford would be the boundary

between Guthrum's and Alfred's kingdoms. Guthrum was baptized and in **879** moved to East Anglia where his army finally settled. The territory under his rule was to be subject to Danish law, hence became known as the **Danelaw**.

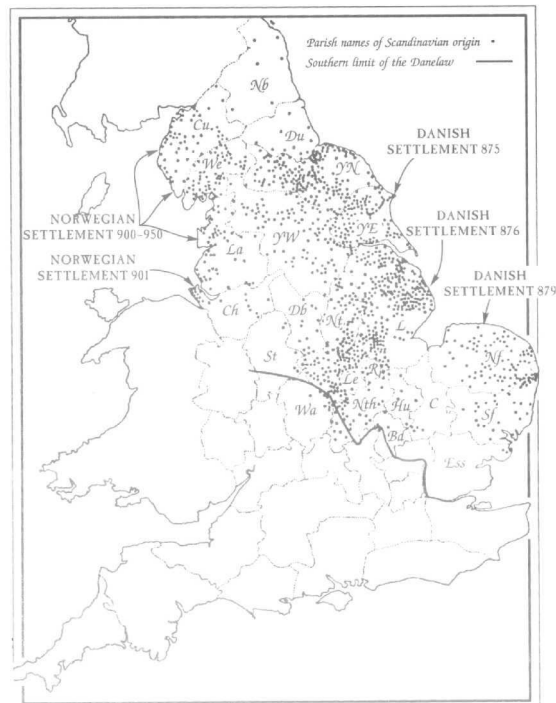


Illustration 3 Scandinavian settlements