

Roman Britain and the Anglo-Saxon Settlements

I

History, as the recorded annals of civilized man, began in England in the year 55 B.C., when Julius Caesar's troops waded ashore on the beaches north of Dover.¹ Caesar was a man of remarkable military ability and boundless confidence. He was an astute opportunist who rose to power amidst the violent political turmoil of the late Roman Republic and a great creative statesman who laid the groundwork for Rome's transformation from republic to empire. It was this man, this military adventurer and political genius, who first brought England into the orbit of civilization.

Caesar's invasion of Britain was almost an afterthought to his campaigns against the Gauls. Between 58 and 50 B.C., prior to his rise to supreme power in Rome, he undertook the conquest of an extensive territory known as Gaul, which corresponds very roughly to modern France and was then inhabited by semicivilized Celts. Although Caesar could not realize it, the conquest of Gaul was to have an incalculable influence on the development of Western civilization in later centuries. For Gaul extended far to the north of the Mediterranean Basin, and Caesar's victories brought Roman government and culture into the Western European heartland. The Romanization of Gaul proved to be a crucial factor in providing medieval and modern Europe with its enduring classical heritage.

¹ Several good general accounts of Roman Britain are available: R. G. Collingwood and J. N. L. Myres, *Roman Britain and the English Settlements* (2nd ed., Oxford, 1937), J. A. Richmond, *Roman Britain* (Baltimore, 1955), Peter Hunter Blair, *Roman Britain and Early England, 55 B.C.-A.D. 871* (New York, 1963), and Sheppard Frere, *Brittania: A History of Roman Britain* (London, 1967).

The First Invasions

In the course of his campaigns, Caesar discovered that the Celts in Gaul were receiving support from their fellow Celts on the remote island of Britain. Desiring to teach them to respect the might of Rome, he undertook two military forays into Britain, the first in 55 B.C., the second a year later. Caesar's first raid was inconclusive, but in 54 B.C. he marched across Kent, forded the Thames River, and won a notable victory over a Celtic coalition. He demanded hostages from the defeated Britons, secured a promise of regular tribute payments, and then withdrew across the Channel. But the Britons never paid the promised tribute, and Caesar was too preoccupied with the consolidation of his Gallic conquest and the advancement of his political fortunes in Rome to return to Britain in force. The first encounter between classical Mediterranean civilization and the distant Celtic island was not followed up for nearly a century.

Nonetheless, Caesar's raids had succeeded in bringing Britain to Rome's attention, and, with the organization of Celtic Gaul into Roman provinces, the Britons began to feel the impact of Roman civilization. The close relations between Gaul and Britain continued much as before; the two lands remained tightly linked by bonds of commerce and kinship. A group of Celtic inhabitants of Yorkshire called the *Parisi*, for example, was related to a group in Gaul that gave its name to the future capital of France. The Romans, having subdued the Celts of Gaul, were almost bound to undertake the conquest of the Celts of Britain.

In A.D. 43 the conquest began in earnest: the emperor Claudius sent four Roman legions across the Channel into Kent with the intention of bringing Britain under the authority of Rome. The Claudian invasion marks the real beginning of Roman Britain. Thenceforth the primitive culture of the British Celts was penetrated and transformed by the conquering legions of a huge cosmopolitan state and by the administrators and entrepreneurs who followed them.

Rome, by the time of Claudius' invasion, had achieved a high degree of imperial stability. It had weathered the stormy decades of the late republic and had submitted to the rule of an emperor. In doing so the Romans abandoned a tradition of self-determination for a new, authoritarian regime that promised order and political coherence. With the coming of imperial government, the interior districts of the empire entered a prolonged, unprecedented epoch of security and peace. The empire that Claudius ruled was a prosperous, intelligently governed state embracing the ancient lands along the Mediterranean and extending northward across Gaul to the English Channel. Within its vast frontiers, guarded by well-trained legions, the cultures of Greece, Italy, and the ancient Near East were drawn together into one immense political and economic unit, unencumbered by national boundaries or tariff barriers, and spanned by a superb road system and by the protected seaways of the Mediterranean. Imperial unity brought to the

upper classes of the ancient world a degree of prosperity hitherto unknown, though great masses of peasants and urban dwellers remained, as they always had, in a state of hopeless impoverishment.

The Roman economy, like almost all economies prior to the industrial revolution, was fundamentally agrarian, but the city was the nexus of Roman politics and civilization. The city, with an extensive agrarian district surrounding it, was the essential unit of local government, and it was on the cities that the Romans lavished most of their considerable architectural and engineering talents. Administrators, poets, scholars, even great landowners, made their homes in the cities. As half-civilized districts such as Gaul fell under Roman control, old tribal centers were transformed into cities, and new cities were built where none had existed before. And each city sought to adorn itself with impressive temples, baths, and public buildings on the model of Rome itself. Hence the paradox that the Roman Empire was economically rural yet culturally urban.

These cities, scattered across the empire, were centers of cultural synthesis, where the various traditions of the Mediterranean world spread and intermingled. But it was above all the Latin culture of Rome itself that inspired the architecture and literature of the European cities and dominated the curricula of their schools. Great Latin authors and poets such as Lucretius and Cicero, Virgil and Horace, set the canons of style for a Latin literary tradition that spread across the West. United politically by the Roman legions, the Roman Empire was united culturally—at least in its western provinces—by the power and magnetism of Roman literature and art.

The empire was united legally by Roman jurisprudence. It may well be that Rome made its most creative and enduring contribution in the field of law. As Rome won its empire, the narrow law code of the early republic evolved gradually into a broad, humane system of legal precedents and principles—a product of centuries of practical experience—designed to deal justly with conflicts among men of diverse cultures. Although essentially pragmatic in its development, Roman law was influenced by the Greek concept of natural law—the belief in universal and discoverable norms of human conduct, applicable not merely to certain civilized peoples but to all men. A concept of this sort was naturally attractive to Roman jurists, faced as they were with the task of bringing all the peoples of the empire under a single canopy of jurisprudence.

Such, in brief, was the civilization that Rome brought to Britain. The student of English history must never allow his preoccupation with the British Isles to obscure the fact that Claudius' invasion of A.D. 43 constituted an encroachment by a highly civilized empire on a small, remote, and backward land. In Roman times, Britain could never be anything but an outwork—a distant frontier district of an age-old Mediterranean civilization.

Britain's history before the Roman contact is utterly undocumented, but the investigations of archaeologists provide us with at least a general picture of its economic and cultural development. It is a picture of repeated

incursions and invasions from across the Channel, of incessant tribal rivalries, and of gradual technological and economic progress as Britain's inhabitants evolved from the Stone Age to the Bronze Age and finally, beginning in the fifth century B.C., to the Iron Age. The majestic stone trilithons at Stonehenge—a religious center of the early Bronze Age—testify to the engineering skills the island's inhabitants possessed nearly two millennia before the Roman invasion.

The pattern of pre-Roman invasions and settlements was governed by the island's geography. Clearly visible from the continent, England's Kentish shore is separated from France by a channel only twenty-one miles wide at its narrowest point. Accordingly, repeated waves of invaders and traders crossed from the continent to southern Britain in prehistoric times. England itself is divided geographically into two major districts: a lowland area—with rich, heavy soil broken by occasional ranges of hills—which covers approximately the southeastern half of England; and a highland zone dominating the northwestern half of the land—a district of mountainous terrain rich in mineral resources but with generally infertile soil. Cornwall and Devon at the southwestern tip of England, Wales in the west, and most of northern England and Scotland are hilly or mountainous, and England's chief mountain range, the Pennine Chain, points southward like a great finger from the northern hill country into the heart of the midland plain.

The earlier prehistoric invaders tended to concentrate in the southeast lowlands zone, but they settled chiefly in the hilly portions of that zone rather than in the lowlands themselves. For the lowlands were thickly wooded, and their heavy soil defied the primitive plows of the early settlers. On the eve of the Roman invasion, however, Britain's Celtic inhabitants had developed plows that were adequate to the task of tilling this rich soil and were beginning the age-long process of clearing the land of woods and brush. By the standards of the time, the Celtic settlement of lowland Britain was quite dense, and grain was being produced in such quantities that it became an important export commodity. A Roman author of the early first century A.D. mentions several other British exports that found regular markets in the empire: cattle, hides, dogs, iron, and slaves. And for centuries, traders of the Mediterranean world had been aware of the rich tin deposits in Cornwall. The considerable prosperity of pre-Roman Britain is illustrated by the fact that a few of the island's chieftains, following the example of neighboring Roman provinces, were beginning to coin money.

As the first century progressed, everything pointed to a Roman invasion of Britain. The independence of the British Celts posed difficulties for the Roman administration of Celtic Gaul. British resources and prosperity suggested to the Romans that from the financial standpoint a conquest of the island would be well worth the effort. Finally, intertribal warfare among the Britons—and appeals by defeated British chieftains for Roman support—indicated that a conquest would not be unduly difficult. The invasion of A.D. 43 was a calculated act of imperial policy undertaken with every expectation of success.

Roman Britain

The British Celts, divided among themselves and distinctly inferior to the Romans in military organization, could offer only temporary resistance to the Claudian invasion. In the years following A.D. 43 the Roman legions repeatedly breached the Celtic defenses, storming hilltop fortresses and occupying first the southeastern lowland zone and finally, after some difficulty, the highland districts of the north and west. The administration of the able Roman governor Agricola (A.D. 78–84) marks the essential completion of the conquest. By then, Roman authority extended over virtually all of modern England, Wales, and southern Scotland.

The Roman conquest of the lowland zone was relatively easy, although it was threatened briefly by a rebellion of several British tribes in A.D. 60 under the leadership of a Celtic queen named Boudicca. Historians of earlier generations romanticized this uprising and pictured Boudicca, quite wrongly, as the first British patriot—a primitive Joan of Arc. The rebels won some initial victories, burned London and other newly established towns, and then fell before an army of well-trained legionaries. Boudicca died, perhaps from poison at her own hand, and the lowlands were tamed. The consolidation of Roman authority in the highland zone was far more difficult, for the savage hill peoples of Wales, the north, and the northeast could be controlled only by the continued presence of large Roman garrisons at strategic points.

Hence, Roman Britain was divided administratively into two districts, corresponding to the island's two great geographic zones: a civil district in the southeast, where Roman civilization flourished in an atmosphere of peace, and a military district in the highland areas where Roman legions remained on guard against uprisings and invasions and where Roman civilization made comparatively little impact. Three legions guarded the military district, each of them consisting of some thirty to forty thousand men. One legion was stationed at Chester, where it was in a position to dominate Wales. Another was stationed at Carlisle to overawe southern Scotland and guard the northern frontier. A third made its base at York and served as a strategic reserve. These three legions were generally successful in upholding Roman authority, but they were never able to rid their districts of rebellion.

Under the emperor Hadrian (117–138) construction began on a great wall, more than seventy miles long, spanning the narrow neck of Britain between Solway Firth and the mouth of the Tyne River. This ambitious fortified line was intended to secure Roman Britain's northern frontier from incursions by savage tribes to the north. Later in the second century the Antonine Wall was erected still farther northward, across the narrows between the Firth of Clyde and the Firth of Forth. The Antonine Wall was an advance position that the Romans were unable to hold for long, and during the third and fourth centuries they were usually content to draw their northern line at the Wall of Hadrian. At times Roman punitive ex-



HADRIAN'S WALL

Built by the Roman emperor to keep out marauding northern tribes, the still-impressive wall stretches across the Northumberland countryside. *British Travel.*

peditions probed far north of Hadrian's Wall, and at other times northern tribesmen broke through the fortifications and carried their devastation far to the south. But during most of the later age of Roman occupation, Hadrian's Wall marked the northern frontier.

The lowlands zone, after Boudicca's revolt, enjoyed unbroken peace and considerable prosperity. Here Roman institutions were gradually imposed upon a Celtic and pre-Celtic substructure, and the Britons came to know not only the high taxes but also the settled life, the thriving economy, and the amenities of upper-class urban living that were customary in the Roman provinces. The military camps and commercial centers of Britain were bound together by a network of Roman roads; Roman law courts brought with them a rational system of justice quite unknown to Britain prior to the Roman conquest. And with the coming of Roman civilization, towns and cities grew and flourished as never before.

In Britain, as elsewhere in the empire, the cities were of three basic

types: (1) the *colonia*, usually a newly established urban center occupied by a colony of retired legionaries and their families, (2) the *municipium*, normally a previously existing town whose inhabitants received from the imperial government a charter conveying certain important privileges, and (3) the *civitas*, an older tribal center that developed urban institutions in imitation of the *colonia* and *municipium*. The inhabitants of *coloniae* and *municipia* were Roman citizens; those of the *civitates* were not. All three, however, enjoyed a degree of local self-government and exerted political control over fairly extensive surrounding lands. All three were governed by local senates comprised of wealthy townsmen, and by annually elected magistrates who supervised finances, public buildings and the courts. And all three sought to adorn themselves with public buildings, temples, and baths built of stone in the Roman style. Still, the *civitates* remained fundamentally Celtic tribal centers and were never so thoroughly Romanized as were the *municipia* and the *coloniae*.

Only four British cities are known to have possessed *colonia* status: Colchester, Gloucester, Lincoln, and York, and there is evidence to suggest only one *municipium*: Verulamium (the later St. Albans). Extant contemporary documents do not state specifically that London was a *colonia* or a *municipium*, but there can be no question that it was the foremost city of Roman Britain. Indeed, it was the Romans who made London a significant center of trade. Whereas most of the chief British cities of the Roman era were between 100 and 200 acres in extent, London occupied some 325 acres. Situated on the Thames at the crucial point where the river was broad enough to accommodate ocean-going ships and yet narrow enough to be bridged,² London assumed in Roman times the dominant commercial position that it was destined to occupy in medieval and modern times. Then, as now, it was the commercial nexus of Britain.

It was only natural, therefore, that London should be the focal point of the Roman road system. Stretching from London far and wide across the land, the Roman roads formed a vast five-thousand-mile system of paved thoroughfares running in nearly straight lines over the countryside, enabling men and supplies to move across the island at speeds unmatched until the nineteenth century.

In Roman Britain, as elsewhere in the empire, farming was the basic economic activity. Historians of former generations used to distinguish between two radically different agricultural communities: the village—pre-Roman in origin and little affected by the Roman occupation—and the villa—a typically Roman institution that consisted of a luxurious home surrounded by extensive fields. Recent research, based on more sophisticated archaeological techniques and on aerial photography, has modified this traditional view. We now realize that the buildings unearthed at a particular site often represent successive levels of development rather than one agrarian com-

² This was precisely analogous to Rome's position on the Tiber.

plex existing at a single moment in time. Consequently, scholars today doubt that the agricultural village played a particularly significant role in either Roman or pre-Roman Britain. Instead, the rudimentary agrarian unit was the small family farm, a few acres in extent, consisting typically of a couple of houses, a number of pits for storing grain, and farmlands laid out in small, squarish fields. Farms of this type abounded in both Celtic and Roman times, and their inhabitants were little influenced by the coming of the Romans.

The older conception of the villa, with its gracious Roman provincial architecture, its mosaics and rich furnishings, glass windows and under-floor heating, also requires modification. Such villas did indeed exist, but they were exceptional. The great majority of the Roman villas were far more modest establishments, and some were actually squalid. Altogether, between 600 and 700 villas have been identified in Britain, most of them concentrated in small areas of the southeastern lowlands. Life in the villas, whether luxurious or impoverished, was distinctly Roman in style and organization, and it is through the villas that Rome made its impact on the British countryside. The typical villa owner was a Roman or a Romanized Briton, who used hired laborers or slaves, sometimes in large numbers, to work his lands. In the later years of the Roman settlement, much villa land, as elsewhere in the empire, was leased to tenant farmers, with the consequence that many of the advantages of large-scale farming were lost.

A sharp distinction still must be made between the Celtic farm and the Roman villa, but it must also be remembered that the laborers on the villa's fields profited no more from Roman civilization than Celtic farmers did. In Britain, as elsewhere in the empire, Rome's impact on the agrarian masses was remarkably slight. Rome had always lagged in agrarian technology, and she contributed little to Celtic farming practices because she had little to offer. Some progress was made during the Roman occupation toward the clearing of forests and draining of swamps, but the bulk of that task was left to the later Anglo-Saxons. And it was the achievements of the pre-Roman Celts that enabled Roman Britain to export agricultural products to the continent.

The Romans did, however, contribute significantly to the development of the British economy in areas other than agriculture. Britain had been exploiting its mines long before the Claudian invasion, but Rome introduced a far more efficient—and more ruthless—mining technology than before. In particular, the Romans developed lead mines in Britain and made lead a major export commodity, along with copper, bronze, and iron.

Perhaps, after all, Rome's greatest gift to Britain was peace. For more than three centuries, the Roman legions shielded lowland Britain from invaders and prevented intertribal warfare. As a frontier province of the Roman Empire, Britain fell under the direct authority of the emperor. But apart from the rare occasions when the emperor actually visited the island, imperial control was exercised by an imperial agent entitled *legatus* who

was, in effect, a provincial governor. His responsibilities included both administration of justice in the civil zone and command of the armies in the military zone. Responsibility for the collection of imperial taxes and the supervision of imperial estates was entrusted to another official, the *procurator*, who was administratively independent of the governor and subject to the emperor alone. It was up to the procurator to see that Britain paid its way and that the occupation was financially worthwhile to Rome.

Such was the administrative structure of Britain in the era following the Claudian invasion. In subsequent centuries, as the empire evolved steadily toward military despotism, Roman administrative organization underwent several major revisions, and the administration of Britain changed accordingly. Early in the third century the island was divided into two separate provinces, which probably approximated its two zones: military and civil. Toward the end of the same century Emperor Diocletian designated Britain as one of the twelve dioceses into which he divided the empire. Britain was now ruled by a *vicarius*, whose headquarters seems to have been at London. The island was further subdivided by Diocletian into four provinces.

Throughout the epoch of the Roman occupation, the key units of local government were the towns—the *coloniae*, *municipia*, and *civitates*—which managed their own local affairs through their senates and magistrates and supervised considerable areas of the surrounding countryside. In the final catastrophic years of Roman Britain it was the towns that took the lead in striving to defend their civilized heritage against the incursions of the barbarians.

Decline and Fall

The Roman age of British history began and ended as a result of forces that transcended Britain itself. The fall of the Roman Empire in the West is a venerable problem for which numerous scholars have proposed numerous solutions, none of them satisfactory.³

Many different factors contributed to the transformation from Roman to medieval Europe. For one thing, the educated classes of the empire underwent a profound change in outlook during the third and fourth centuries, turning from the humanism and rationalism of Greek antiquity and the practical, worldly values of early Rome to the mysticism and quest for eternal salvation that characterized the earlier Middle Ages. This change in mood marked the end of the viewpoint and value system of traditional Greco-Roman civilization. But did the new transcendental spirit destroy the

³ Gibbon's classic, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (many editions), is majestic in style and fearlessly opinionated. Compare Lynn White, Jr., ed., *The Transformation of the Roman World: Gibbon's Problem after Two Centuries* (Berkeley, 1966), and Bryce Lyon, *The Origins of the Middle Ages: Pirenne's Challenge to Gibbon* (New York, 1972).

old humanistic values, or did the failure of these values give rise to the new mysticism?

Much has been written on the political and economic problems that afflicted the Roman Empire. It has been said that the Roman political system never solved the problem of imperial succession, that the Roman economy was inefficient and parasitical, that the Roman bureaucracy was bloated and corrupt. One should be cautious about condemning an empire that endured for five hundred years in the West and another thousand years in the East. Nevertheless, some of these criticisms stand. The economy of the early empire depended too heavily on slave labor and on booty from conquered peoples. When, in the course of the second century, imperial expansion ceased, the economic system in the West began to falter and finally broke down almost completely. Rome experienced no industrial revolution; her cities, particularly those in the West, tended to be military and administrative centers rather than centers of industrial production. Many of them harbored large masses of unemployed paupers and street people; and all of them teemed with soldiers and bureaucrats, who consumed the wealth of the empire. In the end, the largely agrarian imperial economy proved incapable of supporting the bureaucracy, the army, and the unproductive cities.

The economic breakdown was marked by widespread demoralization. So many artisans, tenant farmers, and civic officials dropped out of their jobs and out of society that the emperors were forced to make laws freezing men in their vocations and making them hereditary. By the early fourth century, a caste system had come into being in the Roman Empire. The economy continued to function after a fashion, but demoralization was growing. The lightly taxed landed aristocracy remained prosperous, but the more productive classes of the empire—the workers in field and town, and the urban middle classes—were becoming dangerously alienated.

Economic breakdown was accompanied by political disintegration. The emperors of the second century tended to be long-lived and dedicated but, as the third century dawned, the army came to exert increasing power in Roman politics. The middle decades of the third century were marked by frequent assassinations, disputed successions, and struggles between army units for control of the throne. In these years, barbarians breached the frontiers repeatedly, and large sections of the empire repudiated the authority of the emperor in Rome. At length, in the later decades of the century, a series of determined emperors succeeded in restoring the frontiers and re-establishing imperial control over the Roman state. The most celebrated of these rulers, the warrior-emperor Diocletian (284–305), pulled the empire together by resorting to a military despotism of the most thoroughgoing sort and enforcing strict controls over economic activity.

Diocletian's policy of law and order through despotism was carried on by Constantine (306–337) and his successors. Constantine's reign is marked by two epoch-making events: (1) the construction of Constantinople

on the Bosphorous—the great city that served as the capital of the Eastern or Byzantine Empire for more than 1,100 years thereafter, and (2) the conversion of Constantine to the Christian religion.

Both these events were responses to age-old trends. The center of gravity of the Roman Empire had been shifting eastward for many decades; the older eastern cities were more productive and more prosperous than those of the west, and the eastward movement symbolized the new political order that abandoned the constitutional traditions of the city of Rome for the absolutism of the east. The great autocrat Diocletian had spent nearly all his reign in the eastern half of the empire, and now Constantine erected his new capital there.

Constantine's conversion may be regarded as a response not only to the growing strength of Christianity within the empire but also to the gradual drawing together of the classical and Christian traditions. The growth of a transcendental spirit in Roman culture made the inhabitants of the empire ever more receptive to the mystical doctrines of the Christian religion; the increasing emptiness and hopelessness of daily life in the empire created a growing need for the doctrines of human dignity before God and personal salvation which Christianity offered. The Christians, for their part, had incorporated into their theology many elements from classical philosophy—particularly the philosophy of Plato—and had adopted numerous administrative ideas from Rome itself. The steadily closing chasm between Church and Empire was bridged by the conversion of Constantine.

By the fourth century, Christianity had spread from its Near Eastern homeland across the entire empire. In Constantine's time it was still a minority religion, but its adherents were among the most vigorous and dedicated inhabitants of the Roman state. Previous emperors had persecuted Christians intermittently for their refusal to worship the official deities, but persecution seemed to encourage the Church to greater efforts. With Constantine's conversion, the persecutions gave way to a policy of toleration and encouragement, and before the fourth century had ended, Christian emperors were persecuting pagan and heterodox sects. Converts now flooded into the Church, and Roman intellectuals such as St. Ambrose, St. Jerome, and St. Augustine of Hippo devoted their lives to its service. The new religion harmonized perfectly with the otherworldly mood of the late empire, and long before the end of imperial rule in the West, Christianity had won the allegiance of the Mediterranean world. By the fifth century, Greco-Roman civilization had virtually fused with the Judeo-Christian religious tradition.

The progress of Christianity in Roman Britain is difficult to trace. Christian archaeological remains from this period are scarce, and written references to the Roman-British Church occur only occasionally. Christian evangelism doubtless came late to remote Britain, but by the third century the process of conversion had begun. Early in the century St. Alban and two fellow Christians were martyred at Verulamium, and three British

bishops, a priest, and a deacon are recorded as being present at an ecclesiastical council in Gaul during Constantine's reign.⁴ Thus, fourth-century Britain possessed an ecclesiastical hierarchy and was active in the affairs of the imperial Church. Toward the end of the fourth century, Britain went so far as to produce a heresy all its own. The British priest Pelagius, who emphasized the importance of free will over divine grace, had the distinction of being attacked by the noted theologian St. Augustine of Hippo. Pelagius left Britain as a young man and seems to have spent most of his life in Rome, but his teachings became popular among the British upper classes. Orthodox continental churchmen are recorded as preaching against Pelagianism in Britain in the fifth century. At about the same time, British evangelists such as St. Patrick (c. 389–461) were spreading the Gospel beyond the Roman frontiers into Ireland and southwestern Scotland.

As it turned out, Christianity was Rome's most enduring legacy in Britain. At a time when Roman civilization was losing its hold on the inhabitants of the empire, Christianity was reaching masses of people and affecting their lives in a way that Greco-Roman culture had failed to do even at its height. In later years, when Roman government was all but forgotten, when Germanic barbarians had occupied the fertile lowland zone and driven its former British inhabitants into the western hills, the British held fast to their Christian faith and built an impressive new culture upon it.

The ebbing of Roman authority in Britain was an inevitable consequence of Roman political and economic disintegration in the West. But because of its isolated location on the periphery of the empire, Britain was spared much of the agony and chaos of the third century, and its cities remained relatively prosperous throughout the fourth.

The history of Roman Britain is punctuated by occasional irruptions of semicivilized peoples from across its frontiers, most frequently the Scots and the Picts. The term "Scot" was used by men of this period to refer to members of the various tribes of Ireland (not Scotland). These Scots undertook periodic attacks against Britain's western shore but met with no permanent success. "Pict" was the common term for the tribes across the northern frontier in what we would now call Scotland. With a few disastrous exceptions, Hadrian's Wall held firm against their incursions.

As the Roman period of British history drew toward its end, signs of increasing insecurity began to appear. An intensification of sea raids by Germanic barbarians is suggested by the appearance of elaborate fortifications along the southeastern coast. In the fourth century these coastal fortresses were placed under the authority of a single military commander known, significantly, as the count of the Saxon Shore. In 367 the British defenses were shattered by a combined attack of Picts from the north, Scots

⁴ At Arles in A.D. 314. The British delegates to the council represented the metropolitan churches of the four provinces into which Britain had been divided since Diocletian's time.

from the west, and Saxons from the south and east. Hadrian's Wall was breached, the count of the Saxon Shore was killed, and London itself was placed under siege. The situation was saved, however, by the timely appearance of a large Roman army from the continent led by Theodosius, a talented general and future emperor. By 370 Britain was secure once again, and its earlier prosperity returned.

As the fourth century closed, Roman Britain remained vigorous and its cities still flourished. But the Roman Empire as a whole was in desperate circumstances. An entire Germanic tribe, the Visigoths, had crossed the empire's Danube frontier in 376, and by the first decade of the fifth century was threatening Rome itself. As Roman troops were ordered southward from Britain and the Rhine frontier to strengthen the defenses of Italy, Gaul and Britain were left exposed. In the winter of 406 a mixed multitude of Germanic tribesmen poured across the frozen Rhine into defenseless Gaul, virtually cutting Britain loose from the empire. In the chaos that followed, an ambitious Roman-Briton general, Constantine III, led what was left of the Roman garrison in Britain southward across the Channel in an abortive attempt to save Gaul for the empire and win an imperial title for himself.

The year 410 marks the essential termination of Roman authority in Britain. In that year the Visigoths entered Rome and pillaged the city for three days. At about the same time Britain, stripped of its legions, was struck hard by barbarian raids. At this point our sources thin out and the sequence of events is clouded. One contemporary writer speaks of a native British uprising against the Roman administration—perhaps against the officials left behind by the usurper Constantine III rather than against Rome herself. A letter of A.D. 410 from Emperor Honorius to the civitates of Britain, evidently in response to their appeal for military help, commands them to see to their own defense. With Visigoths rampaging through Italy, there were no troops to be spared for a remote island outpost. The Roman legions and administrators were gone from Britain for good.

The Germanic Invaders

As the fifth century progressed Britain became, from the standpoint of the civilized districts of the Mediterranean Basin, the "land of legend"—the Isle of the Dead. To the modern historian the post-Roman epoch is almost equally obscure. Aside from a few oblique, secondhand references from continental writers, the historian must depend on a handful of unreliable Celtic sources and a few accounts written long afterwards by descendants of the Germanic invaders. None of these sources is at all satisfactory, but none can be ignored. The most important of them is a history of the conquest of Britain written by a Briton named Gildas sometime in the 540s. Riddled with factual errors, Gildas' account was a bitter, emotional outcry against the shortcomings of contemporary British Christians rather than an objective history. Yet it is the only contemporary narrative of the

invasion epoch to which historians can turn. On the Germanic or "English" side, there is a certain amount of suggestive but ambiguous material in early epics such as *Beowulf*. The opening sections of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, which were first written in their present form in the late ninth century, contain some information drawn from sources much closer to the invasion age and can therefore provide illumination if used with care. The talented and rigorous English historian Bede, writing in the early eighth century, gives an account of the invasions that also seems to rest on earlier evidence, now lost, but there is much that Bede leaves out and much else that can be accepted only with reservations. For Bede, despite his remarkable historical skill, was centuries removed from the invasions themselves.

The few other written sources to which one can turn are fragmentary and still less trustworthy. Archaeological investigations have been helpful in providing additional insights into fifth- and sixth-century Britain, but the archaeologist is handicapped in investigating a society that built not with stone but with wood and other such perishable materials. Finally, patterns of Celtic and Germanic settlement have been investigated with considerable success through the study of place names. Scholars are able to identify particular names—and especially name endings—with particular peoples and thereby trace the advance of Germanic settlements and measure their intensity. A number of towns and settlements, for example, end in *ing* or *ingas*, which in Anglo-Saxon indicates that the original settlers were dependents or followers of a particular leader. Hastings derives its name from a group of early settlers called Haestingas, that is, the followers of a leader named Haesta, and we can conclude tentatively that a Germanic warrior of that name settled with his following in the vicinity of the present town. But place-name studies, valuable though they are, cannot be related to an exact chronological framework. Scholarly investigations of fifth- and sixth-century Britain have been pushed forward with great ingenuity; yet much remains uncertain and much unknown. The epoch has become a battleground of conflicting theories, many of which may never be positively proven or discredited.⁵

Before entering this historical wilderness it will be useful to establish, insofar as possible, the nature of the Germanic peoples as a whole and the significance of their invasions, not only of Britain but of the entire Western Roman Empire. Medieval European civilization was a synthesis of three distinct cultural traditions: the classical or Greco-Roman, the Judeo-Christian, and the Germanic. We have seen how classical culture in the closing centuries of the Roman Empire began to move toward a mystical, other-worldly outlook, thereby drawing closer to the Judeo-Christian tradition.

⁵ On the early Anglo-Saxon period, see Sir Frank Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England* (3rd ed., Oxford, 1971), Peter Hunter Blair, *An Introduction to Anglo-Saxon England* (Cambridge, 1956), and H. R. Loyn, *Anglo-Saxon England and the Norman Conquest* (New York, 1962).

At the same time, Christian theologians were interpreting Christian doctrine in terms of Greek philosophy, and the Christian Church was developing a political and legal organization that drew heavily from Roman administrative and judicial practices. Well before the demise of Roman imperial authority in the West, these tendencies had progressed to the point where classical and Christian cultures had fused. The making of medieval civilization was in essence the product of a prolonged tension, interpenetration, and eventual fusion between the classical-Christian tradition, fostered by the early medieval Church, and the Germanic tradition of the barbarian kingdoms that established themselves on the remains of the western Roman Empire.

Since the early Germanic peoples were illiterate, our knowledge of their culture must be drawn chiefly from the often tendentious testimony of occasional Roman observers. But a critical analysis of these writers provides, in broad outline, a reasonably trustworthy picture of the ancient Germans. They were organized for the most part into tribes, each of which had its own cultural peculiarities. Some tribes were nomadic, others sedentary and agrarian; many were in a process of transition from the first state to the second. Some tribes were far more deeply influenced by Roman civilization than others, and some were converted to Christianity during the course of the fourth century.

Certain broad generalizations apply more or less to all the tribes. To the Romans, the Germanic peoples were scruffy blond giants. Their custom of buttering their hair prompted the fifth-century country gentleman Sidonius Apollinaris to remark, "Happy the nose that cannot smell a barbarian." They devoted themselves chiefly to tending crops or herds, fighting wars, hunting, loafing, gambling, feuding, and drinking beer. They possessed slaves—war prisoners for the most part—but on occasion a free German might gamble himself into slavery. At the time of the invasions their key political unit was the tribe, ruled by a chieftain or king who from time to time sought the advice of a tribal assembly. Ordinarily, a new king was chosen by the assembly from among the sons and other close kinsmen of the former king. Kingship was hereditary but not strictly so, and an able younger son who had proved his skill as a warrior was often chosen over an incompetent elder son. The most honored profession was that of the warrior, and the warlike virtues of loyalty, courage, and military prowess were esteemed above all others.

The chief military unit within the tribe was the war band or *comitatus*, a group of warriors or "companions" bound together by their allegiance to the leader of their band. It was in the *comitatus*, above all, that the military virtues were cherished. The chief of the band was bound to set a high example of fearlessness and military skill, and his followers were obliged, should their leader fall in battle, to fight to the death in order to avenge him. The ethical foundations of the *comitatus*—honor, loyalty, courage—remained the norms of the English and continental warrior aristocracy for centuries thereafter.

Another, much older subdivision of the tribe was the kinslip group or clan. Members of a clan were duty-bound to protect the welfare of their kinsmen. Should any man be killed or injured, his kinsmen would declare a blood feud against the wrongdoer and his clan. Since murders and maimings were only too common in the violent and honor-ridden atmosphere of the Germanic tribe, blood feuds were a characteristic ingredient of Germanic society. In order to keep their tribes from being torn apart by feuds, most of the Germanic peoples instituted a crude form of tribal justice. Early Germanic law was concerned primarily with *wergelds*—sums of money that wrongdoers might pay to their victims or their victims' kinsmen in order to appease their vengeance and forestall the feud (literally, the term *wergeld* means "man money"). In time, wergeld schedules became highly complex. Various sums of money were assigned for various injuries—so much for a severed finger, more for the loss of a hand, and so on. And murder wergelds varied, too, depending on the social status of the victim. In Anglo-Saxon England, for example, the wergeld of a free peasant was 200 shillings while that of a nobleman was 1,200 shillings.

The wergeld system mitigated the blood feud but by no means eliminated it, for there was no assurance that the alleged murderer would pay the required sum or even admit his guilt. Gradually the tribes developed bodies of customary law which were intended to determine guilt or innocence. Early Germanic law was exceedingly limited in its jurisdiction—many crimes of violence fell outside its scope. Its basic principle was the presumption of guilt. It was up to an accused man to prove his innocence, and he normally did so by submitting to an ordeal. Each of the several ordeals in Germanic law was regarded as an appeal to divine judgment. The accused man, for example, might be obliged to grasp a red-hot iron and carry it a prescribed distance, or to lift a stone from the bottom of a boiling cauldron. Several days thereafter the hand was examined carefully. If it was healing properly, the court concluded that the accused enjoyed divine favor and was innocent. But if the hand was infected, the accused was pronounced guilty. Similarly, the accused might be bound and thrown into a pond. If he floated, he was deemed guilty, for it was assumed that pure water would refuse to "accept" a guilty man. If he sank, he was judged innocent and was fetched from the water (presumably still alive) to enjoy the favorable verdict. It has been suggested that this last ordeal might actually have been effective in determining guilt or innocence. The accused, who believed firmly in the validity of the test, may well have had a subconscious compulsion to float or sink depending on his innocence or guilt, much as a modern defendant might betray himself by increased tension when answering falsely in a lie-detector test.

Germanic laws and institutions were crude indeed when compared with those of the Romans. Yet it was Germanic culture that dominated the barbarian successor kingdoms that arose on the ruins of the western empire. And the Germanic contribution to English history and Western civilization

was by no means entirely negative. The Germanic peoples brought to Western Europe a rough but energetic spirit. Their ideals of loyalty and honor evolved gradually into the medieval notion of chivalry. Their respect for the sanctity of tribal custom, the advisory function of the tribal assembly, and the rough social equality among members of a war band faintly foreshadow later ideas of limited government, the rights of subjects, and the superiority of law over the royal will.

Nonetheless, it would be foolish to argue, as historians once did, that early Germanic institutions were protodemocratic. The sanctity of folk law and the prominence of tribal assemblies are found among many primitive peoples. Far from being politically precocious, the Germanic peoples were simply too crude and ignorant to create efficient despotisms. More than a millennium would pass before those ancient Germanic notions—mutual respect and honor within the comitatus, the inviolability of customary law, and the political role of the assemblies—evolved into anything resembling a coherent doctrine of limited representative government. The process of evolution is itself far more significant than the faint and ambiguous precedents in primitive Germanic custom.

On the continent, as we have seen, the fifth and sixth centuries witnessed the beginnings of a gradual fusion between the Germanic culture of the barbarian kingdoms and the classical-Christian tradition preserved and fostered by the Church. In Britain, on the other hand, the Germanic invaders remained immune to the Christian faith of the indigenous Britons. As British authority receded before the advance of the Germanic barbarians, Christianity receded with it. The failure of the Britons to Christianize their conquerors may perhaps be attributed at least in part to the profound hostility that developed between the two peoples and the consequent unwillingness of British missionaries to evangelize among the hated invaders. A century and a half elapsed between the first conquests and the beginnings of serious missionary work among the heathen Germanic settlers in Britain.

The Anglo-Saxon Conquest

According to the eighth-century historian Bede, three distinct Germanic peoples invaded England: the Angles, the Saxons, and the Jutes. Although repeated by historians and memorized by English schoolboys ever since, Bede's statement oversimplifies the actual situation. It would probably be more accurate to view the invasions as consisting of attacks—or sometimes peaceful settlements—by innumerable small Germanic war bands coming from various points along the long coastline of the North Sea between southern Denmark and the Netherlands. These bands included many warriors from among the Angle and Saxon tribes that had long been settled in northern Europe, but they also included Frisians, Swabians, and other Germanic peoples. On the continent the invaders came in large tribal groups bent on conquest and settlement; in Britain they came primarily as small

marauding bands hungry for booty and land. The organization of the Germanic invaders into larger political units ruled by kings was a product of the decades following the original invasions.

The transition from Roman Britain to Anglo-Saxon England was gradual, complex, and prolonged. Roman Britain had long been subject to Germanic attacks, as the establishment of the Saxon Shore and the disaster of 367 make clear. And Rome had often invited Germanic warrior-mercenaries to settle within the empire—in Britain as elsewhere—to help defend the frontiers. This policy was continued in post-Roman Britain by the Roman-British aristocrat Vortigern⁶ who rose to political leadership in southeastern Britain in about 425 and took upon himself the responsibility of defense against the sea raids of the Picts and Scots. Finding the Britons incapable of defending themselves adequately, Vortigern is said to have invited Germanic warriors to Britain, offering them lands in Kent in return for their military assistance. Gildas calls these warriors "Saxons" whereas Bede describes them as "Jutes" under the leadership of two chieftains named Hengist and Horsa. Many historians have followed Gildas in proclaiming Vortigern's decision an act of folly, but this is scarcely a fair judgment. Vortigern was simply following Roman tradition.

Nevertheless, Vortigern's invitation had disastrous consequences. The Germanic warriors, once settled, invited numerous kinsmen to join them, then rebelled against Vortigern's authority and spread devastation and terror across southeastern Britain.

This rebellion can perhaps be dated to the early 440s. During the next half century Germanic war bands came to Britain in large numbers, settling along the southern and eastern shores and penetrating deep into the interior, chiefly by means of eastern Britain's three great estuaries: the Thames, the Wash, and the Humber. The Britons appealed once again, vainly, to Rome: "The barbarians drive us to the sea; the sea drives us to the barbarians; between these two fatal threats we are either slain or drowned."⁷ The statement is a self-evident exaggeration, but the Britons do seem to have been driven far westward and many emigrated across the Channel to the peninsula of Armorica, known in later years, appropriately, as Brittany.

After about 470, however, the British defense began to stiffen, and around the turn of the century the Britons won a major victory over the invaders at a site called Mount Badon. The inadequacies of our evidence regarding these events are well illustrated by the fact that historians are in complete disagreement as to both the site of this battle and its date. (Estimates range between 486 and 516.) On the authority of a ninth-century Welsh writer named Nennius, the great British victory at Mount Badon is associated with a leader named Arthur, who became the inspiration for the

⁶ "Vortigern" is actually a title, not a name. It means, literally, "high king."

⁷ The so-called "Groans of the Britons," addressed to the Roman *magister militum* Aëtius in about 446.

richly elaborated Arthurian romances of later centuries. Perhaps the original Arthur was indeed a hero of the British resistance against the Anglo-Saxons, but this tempting conclusion is far from assured: Nennius is an untrustworthy authority and wrote a good three centuries after the event. At any rate, Arthur's glittering court at Camelot, with its chivalrous knights who went on romantic quests, was an idealization of courtly society of the later Middle Ages and had nothing to do with the primitive, insecure world of early-sixth-century Britain.

For a half century after the British victory at Mount Badon, so Gildas tells us, the island enjoyed a period of relative peace and prosperity. The Anglo-Saxons were apparently forced to abandon some of the territories they had previously conquered, but they were by no means driven from Britain. The period of peace and British hegemony might be dated tentatively as the half century between 500 and 550. Gildas himself was writing in that period and provides eyewitness testimony to the relative security of the epoch.

The era between about 550 and 600 was far different. The Anglo-Saxons won a series of victories that ultimately drove the Britons into the mountains of Wales, Cumbria, and Devon-Cornwall. Those Britons who remained in the rich lowland zone, now almost completely under Germanic control, were obliged to acknowledge the Anglo-Saxons as their masters.

The details of the Anglo-Saxon invasions are far from certain. Even the broad pattern outlined here is hypothetical. But we do know that, although the Anglo-Saxon conquest was fitful and prolonged, it was, in the end, remarkably thorough. Roman-British culture was almost totally eradicated. Always a remote outpost of Roman civilization, Britain was the least successful of Rome's provinces in preserving vestiges of Roman culture into the Middle Ages. Insofar as any land can lose its past, Britain had lost hers, and the history of Anglo-Saxon England begins with a virtual *tabula rasa*. A new language superseded the old; German heathenism took the place of British Christianity; the square Celtic fields gave way to the long strip fields of the Anglo-Saxons; the Celtic family farm was replaced, for the most part, by the Anglo-Saxon village community; and Roman-British town and villa life vanished altogether. In a word, Britain was transformed into "Angle-Land," or England. And the Anglo-Saxons, who had neither the Roman past to build upon nor the Christian Church to teach them the ways of civilization, were ruder and more barbarous than any other Germanic people in the former empire.

Still, early Anglo-Saxon England began to move almost immediately toward political coherence, at least to a limited degree. As invasions turned into settlements, the warriors who had formerly commanded military bands now assumed the additional responsibility of territorial administration. They became important local aristocrats who, together with their military followers, constituted a warrior nobility sustained by the labor of subject peasants and slaves. English historians of the Victorian era were fond of describing

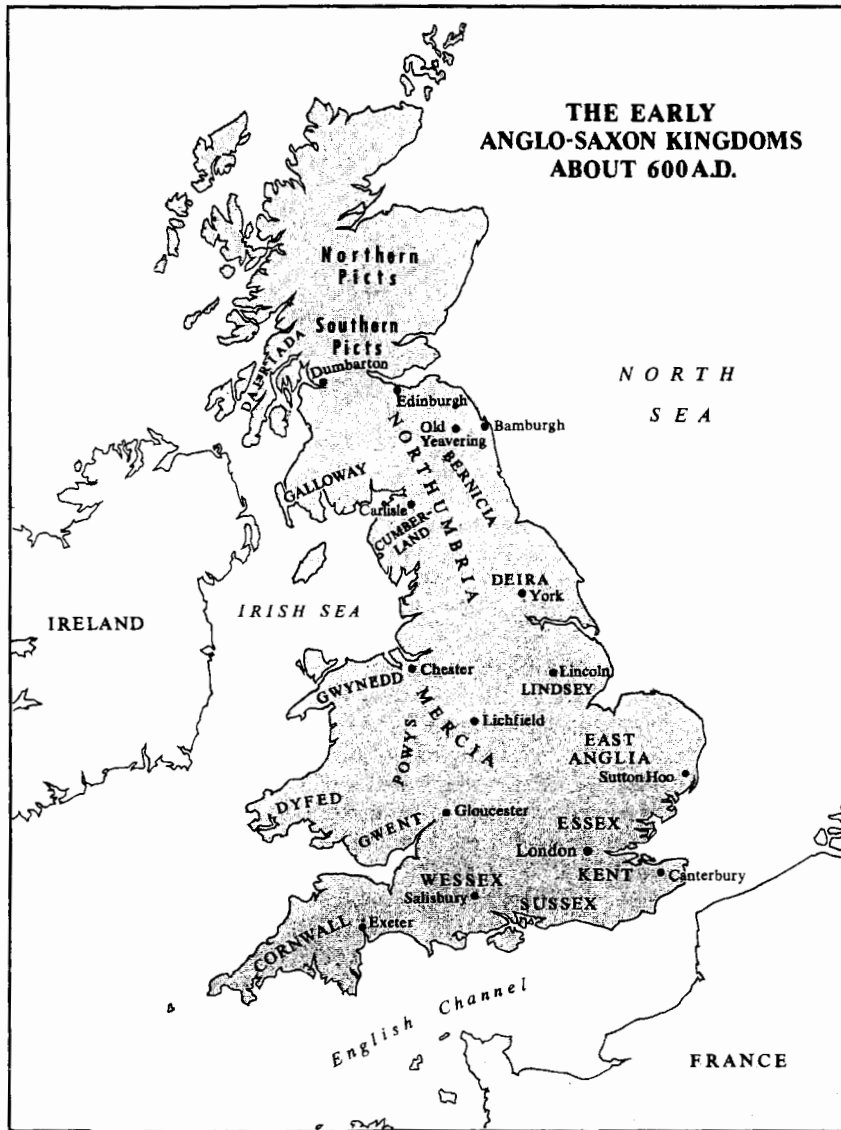
Anglo-Saxon England as a relatively egalitarian society, pregnant with democracy. Today most scholars regard this view as an illusion. Almost from the beginning, Anglo-Saxon society was dominated by an aristocracy of landed wealth and military prowess. And very early in the history of the settlements, war leaders of singular ability or luck began to assert their power over neighboring war bands, thereby beginning a movement toward political consolidation that resulted in the establishment of numerous territorial states ruled by royal dynasties.

England in A.D. 600

By the seventh century Anglo-Saxon England had resolved itself into about seven or eight major kingdoms and a number of less important ones—a political configuration that is traditionally called the Heptarchy. This term can be misleading, since it implies the existence of precisely seven states, all more or less equal in power. In reality the number of kingdoms fluctuated constantly and tended to diminish as political consolidation advanced. Moreover, the kingdoms of the Heptarchy varied in prestige and military might. Even by 600, if we may trust Bede, it was customary to accord one king the honor of pre-eminence among his royal colleagues by designating him *bretwalda*. This title was not permanently attached to a particular kingdom, but shifted from one dynasty to another with the varying fortunes of politics and war. The earliest *bretwaldas* were kings whose military strength enabled them to collect tribute from a few smaller neighboring kingdoms and whose fame had spread over much of England. Other important monarchs held the *bretwalda* in respect, but the degree to which they submitted to his commands is far from certain. Among the more powerful Anglo-Saxon kings his primacy seems to have been largely honorary. In later years, however, the authority of the *bretwaldaship* was destined to increase significantly and to play an important role in the ultimate unification of the realm.

The preeminent kingdom in Anglo-Saxon England around the year 600 was Kent, in the southeast corner of the island. Bede accords the Kentish king at this time the title of *bretwalda*, though it seems that Kent exerted authority only over the two neighboring kingdoms of Essex and East Anglia.

Kent is the one Anglo-Saxon kingdom whose conquest Bede attributes to the Jutes. Historians are still debating the questions of who the Jutes were and where they came from. It is quite true that Kent exhibits a number of peculiar features not found elsewhere in Anglo-Saxon England. Instead of the usual strip fields and agrarian villages, Kentish agriculture is characterized by consolidated fields and individual farms or *hamlets*. In its pottery, jewelry, burial methods, and legal customs, Kent differed from most of the remainder of England. On the other hand, its culture demonstrates marked similarities to that of the Franks, whose kingdom lay just across

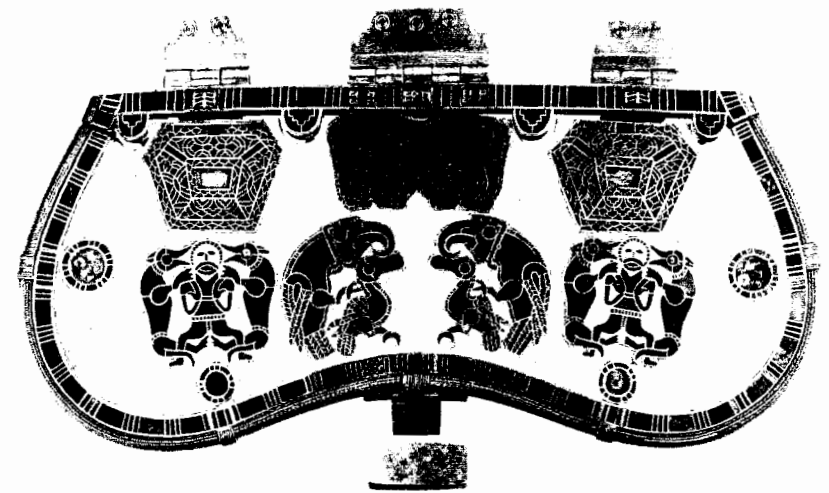


the Channel. It may well be that the Jutes of Kent were actually diverse peoples who achieved cultural unity only after their migration to Britain, and that their evolving culture was strongly influenced by their trade and intercourse with the Franks.

To the west and northwest of Kent lay three kingdoms associated by name with the Saxon migrations: the kingdoms of the South Saxons, the West Saxons, and the East Saxons, known respectively as Sussex, Wessex, and Essex. Of these Saxon states, only Wessex had the potentiality for future expansion westward at British expense, and in the centuries following a.d. 600 Wessex grew to become one of the three leading kingdoms of the land. Ultimately, Wessex became the nucleus of a united England, and the Wessex dynasty evolved into the English monarchy.

To the north of Kent lay the kingdom of East Anglia, whose inhabitants were divided into two separate groups—the North Folk and the South Folk—occupying the territories that would later become the shires of Norfolk and Suffolk. Subject to Kent in a.d. 600, the East Anglian monarchy acquired the *bretwaldaship* in the following generation. The wealth of the East Anglian kings in this epoch is attested dramatically by the richly laden royal burial ship dating from the mid-seventh century that was discovered at Sutton Hoo in 1939. The ship contains an abundance of gold and silver jewelry, plate, coins, and weapons, some of Frankish provenience, others from distant Byzantium. The discovery at Sutton Hoo leaves no doubt that the trappings of a great Anglo-Saxon monarch two centuries after the onset of the conquest could be splendid indeed.

PURSE COVER OF GOLD, ENAMEL, AND GARNET, C. 650
 This piece was one of the many beautifully crafted artifacts discovered in 1939 in the Sutton Hoo Ship Burial in Suffolk. *British Museum.*



The English midlands were dominated by the kingdom of Mercia, which first emerges into the light of history with the accession of its great king, Penda, in 632. Like Wessex, Mercia could expand westward toward Wales at the expense of the Britons (or, as we should by now call them, the Welsh) and, like Wessex also, Mercia was destined to become one of the three dominant kingdoms of England in the centuries to follow. Indeed, throughout most of the eighth century the kings of Mercia were the most powerful monarchs in the land.

The third of these potentially dominant kingdoms was Northumbria—the land north of the Humber River. The kingdom of Northumbria took form shortly after A.D. 600 from the unification of two smaller, older, kingdoms, Deira and Bernicia, under a single dynasty. In the later seventh and early eighth centuries Northumbria became the setting of a splendid intellectual and artistic revival stimulated by a resurgence of Celtic culture and conversion to Christianity. Perhaps the greatest ornament of this Northumbrian renaissance was the historian Bede, whose writings have done so much to illuminate the dark epoch when his own savage forebears were ravaging and subduing Britain.

By the early seventh century the chaos of the invasion age had given way to a more stable regime dominated by reasonably coherent Anglo-Saxon kingdoms such as the seven described above: Kent, Sussex, Wessex, Essex, East Anglia, Mercia, and Northumbria. The splendor of Sutton Hoo demonstrates that the early Anglo-Saxons, even though cut off from the Roman past and isolated from the Church, were not without culture or resources. By A.D. 600, however, this isolation was ending. The new century was dominated by the momentous fact of England's conversion to Christianity. The Church returned to Britain at last, gradually winning the allegiance of the Anglo-Saxons and profoundly shaping their historical development.

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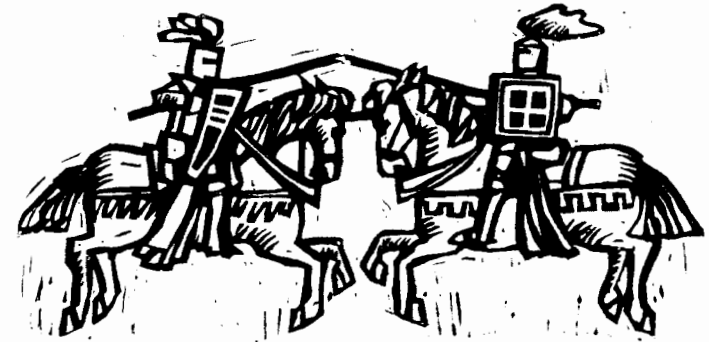
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