

Lesson 4 Christian Culture in Britain to c750AD

1. Background: The Ancient (or Celtic) Britons

When **Julius Caesar** arrived in Britain in 55BC, the people he found here were not united in one group. Instead, they lived in many separate groups which sometimes worked together but more often fought one another. These people did, however, share a common Celtic language and culture, not only with one another but with the groups they had left behind when they migrated to Britain (mainly in Northern Europe, especially Gaul - modern day France). We usually refer to these people as the Ancient or Celtic Britons. Here is a contemporary description of them:

*'Their aspect is terrifying...They are very tall in stature, with rippling muscles under clear white skin. Their hair is blond, but not naturally so: they bleach it, artificially, washing it in lime and combing it back from their foreheads. They look like wood-demons, their hair thick and shaggy like a horse's mane. Some of them are clean shaven, but others - especially those of high rank, shave their cheeks but leave a moustache that covers the whole mouth and, when they eat and drink, acts like a sieve, trapping particles of food...' The way they dress is astonishing: they wear brightly coloured and embroidered shirts, with trousers called bracae and cloaks fastened at the shoulder with a brooch, heavy in winter, light in summer. These cloaks are striped or checkered in design. They wear bronze helmets with figures picked out on them, even horns, which made them look even taller than they already are...while others cover themselves with breast-armour made out of chains. But most content themselves with the weapons nature gave them: they go naked into battle...'All the Britons dye themselves with **woad**, which produces a blue colour, and as a result their appearance in battle is all the more daunting.'*

A great deal of what we know about the Ancient Britons comes from the writing of Julius Caesar, who talks about their religion (**Druidism**) and their ferocity in battle. We know from archaeology that the Celts were highly skilled craftsmen, fond of ornaments, gold bracelets, rings, pins, and brooches, and of beads of amber, glass, and jet. Their shields were the same round target style which were still used by the Highland clans at the battle of Culloden in 1745! Their war-chariots, which held several people at a time, were made of wicker and drawn either by two or four horses. Only two of their horned helmets have ever been found in Britain (one at Waterloo Bridge in London). They lived in round houses with conical thatched roofs of straw or heather, and defended their settlements with hillforts and natural earthworks. Around the year 40AD, the leader of one of the tribes (the Atrabates, based near Reading), was threatened by the expansion of another tribe, the Catuvellauni. This leader, **Verica**, fled to Rome to ask for help. Thus the Roman invasion of Britain began in the year **41AD** when the **Emperor Claudius** sent a force of 40,000 troops to defeat **Caractacus**, the leader of the Catuvellauni. The Britons resisted: famously, Queen **Boudicca** of the Iceni

raised a vast rebel army drawn from several tribes, uniting them in a last ditch attempt to drive the Romans out. After destroying the Roman capital, Colchester, along with Londinium (London) and Verulamium (St Albans), the Britons were finally, decisively defeated. Those Britons who still refused to submit to Roman rule fled Westwards towards Wales and Cornwall. These areas remained strongly Celtic in character for centuries to come, and would later have a significant influence on the Christian culture of the British Isles.

Remember, also, that the Romans never successfully conquered the north of Britain (present day Scotland), which was dominated by two Celtic tribes, the **Picts and the Scoti**. The Picts came from Scandinavia to Ireland but found the Scoti already living there. Rather than fight, the Scoti suggested that the Picts move on to Scotland, taking Scoti wives with them and choosing their king from the female line. Later, the Scoti also migrated to Scotland (hence the name) and the country was divided with Picts in the North East and Scoti in the North West. These two groups also played an important role in Britain's later history

Map of some of the Celtic tribes of Britain around 40AD



2. Roman Britain

Britain became one of the Northernmost outposts of the Roman Empire and her people adjusted to a Roman way of life, with forts, villas, roads and improved trading links with the rest of Europe. The Celts who did not flee became the **Romano-British**; they retained some distinctive features of their own Celtic culture and blended these with the new Roman ways.

With the Romans came Christianity, initially through some of the Roman soldiers and slaves. In the year 156AD a Romano British king called **Lucius** wrote to the Pope to ask if he might

receive instruction in the faith and be baptised. The great Catholic theologians Tertullian and Origen, writing around this time, also talk about Christianity in Britain. The notorious persecution of Diocletian also reached our island, resulting in the martyrdom of **Saint Alban**, Aaron and Julius amongst many others. After the Edict of Milan, when the Church enjoyed a period of peace, Britain sent bishops to the great councils held all over Europe, and several important Roman governors converted too. Archaeologists have found evidence at Roman villas of Christian worship, such as the famous mosaic in Dorset which features a portrait of Christ and a Chi Rho (this can be seen in the British Museum).

This way of life continued until **410AD**, when the Roman legions were withdrawn from Britain to help defend Rome from attack, leaving only the Romanised native Britons and a number of retired soldiers who had settled here. Almost immediately, those groups who had always harassed the borders of the country, now attacked in force. From the North, the Picts and the Scoti invaded in large numbers, slaughtering and pillaging as they moved down the country. At the same time, from the south, raids by Saxon/Germanic pirates increased in intensity. Defences such as Hadrian's Wall in the North and the Saxon Shore forts in the south were much less effective without the might of the legions to man them. At the same time, some of the old Celtic tribal divisions began to reassert themselves as various leaders jostled for power in the vacuum left by Rome's withdrawal.

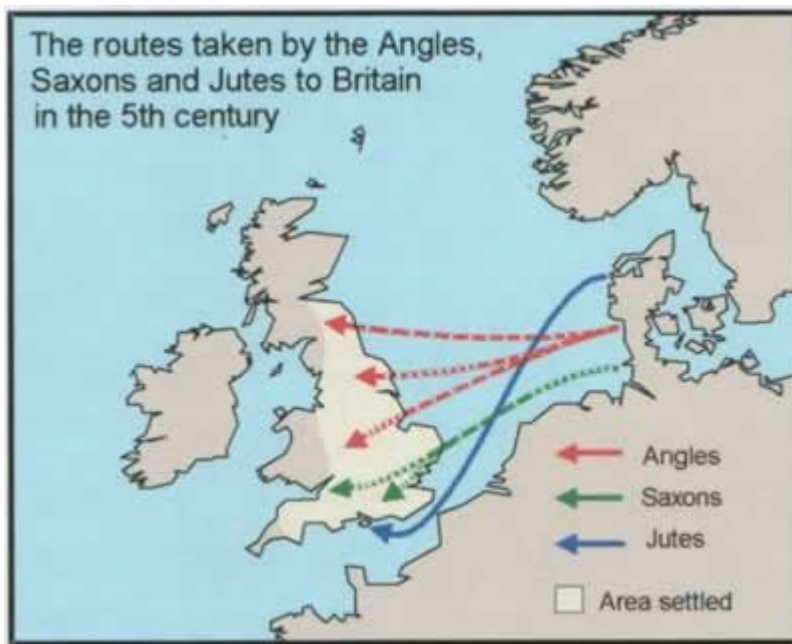
The Roman-British (remember, many of whom were Christian) did try to fight off these pagan invaders, and they had some notable successes; for example, at the Battle of Badon Hill, a British leader called Ambrosius soundly defeated the Saxons. This **Ambrosius** was later identified as 'Artorius', the legendary King Arthur. Around this time, a great heresy sprang up in the Church, and it originated with a British priest called Pelagius. Pelagius claimed that a man could reach heaven by his own efforts, without needing God's grace. The Pope sent a Bishop from Gaul called **Germanus** to help the Christian Britons who were beleaguered by both war and heresy. Germanus preached, converted, performed many miracles and even helped the Britons win another victory (this one is known as the 'Alleluia Victory' because Germanus instructed the army to shout Alleluia repeatedly as loudly as they could until the sound reverberated from all the rocks around: Bede records that the Saxons ran away in terror without even fighting...).

3. Saxon Britain

The year **449** marked a shift to the next phase in Britain's history. One of the British kings, **Vortigern**, seeing how his people suffered famine and slaughter at the hands of the Picts, sent word to the Saxon people for help. The Saxons, already known to the Britons as a tough, warlike people, sent the brothers **Hengist and Horsa** to aid Vortigern. Sure enough, the Saxons did defeat the Picts and drive them back beyond the Wall. However, no sooner had they accomplished this than they turned on the Britons who had sought their aid, subjugating them in turn. Sending word for more of their own people to join them, the Saxons spread further into and around the country. They were soon joined by their near neighbours **the Angles and the Jutes** (all three people came from the area around Germany and Denmark). The Jutes colonised only a small part of the island, mainly around the Isle of Wight; the Angles settled in the North East, Midlands and Lincolnshire, while the

Saxons initially occupied the area around South East England. Once again, the native Britons were faced with a choice: stay and conform to the new culture, or flee to the hills. Wales and the West Country saw a new influx of battle weary defeated Britons seeking refuge. Those who remained and mixed with the new settlers would become the forerunners of the modern English people - **the Anglo Saxons**.

Map of Saxon settlers/invaders in late 400's



The new settlers (or invaders, depending on your point of view) were all pagan, and so Christianity, which had come to Britain with the Romans, was now pushed into those Celtic areas in the West of the country. It was here that **Saint Patrick** was born in **385**, into a Romano-British family which had been Christian for at least three generations. Patrick, having been captured by pirates and taken into slavery in Ireland, later famously returned to that pagan Celtic island and converted it *en masse* to the Catholic faith. It was from Ireland that missionaries were sent first to Scotland (where the most famous missionary, **Saint Columba**, founded a new monastery on the remote island of Iona). Later, from **Iona**, missionaries would be sent to the Angles in Northumbria, where **Saint Aidan** would later (in about 634AD) establish a new monastic centre on the island of Lindisfarne.

Thus, by the end of the 500's, Christianity in the British Isles was essentially Celtic in character and had developed along distinctly different lines from the continental Church in mainland Europe. The Celtic Christians had a different way of running their diocese (they were mainly monastic and the abbot was more powerful than the bishop); their monks wore their clothes and tonsures differently; they even celebrated Easter, the most important feast of the year, on a different date from the rest of the Church. This is important to remember as we follow the story of how the Christian faith developed in Britain.

4. The Saxons become Christian

In the year 596, Pope Gregory the Great gave his now famous instruction to a monk named Augustine to sail to Britain and convert the pagan Saxons to the faith. Augustine landed at Kent with his companions, because the king of the South Angles (Ethelbert) was married to a Christian wife (Bertha, a Frankish Princess: remember, the Franks had converted under King Clovis a century earlier). It is interesting to note that Augustine did not start building new churches; instead, the king gave him permission to re-establish the original, Roman churches which already existed in the area (such as the Church of St Martin).

Whilst Augustine was busy preaching and having great success with the Southern Angles, he faced another problem. As he tried to establish England with its own diocese and bishops, he met with serious opposition from an unexpected quarter: the Celtic Christians who refused to submit to Augustine's authority. The situation was made more complicated by the fact that some of the Northern kings and their people had been converted by Celtic missionaries and so followed their way of doing things. Although **Edwin**, king of the North Angles, had married the Christian daughter of Bertha and Ethelbert and so converted to the 'Roman way', his people later reverted to paganism until they were reconverted by Celtic missionaries such as Saint Aidan of Lindisfarne. At around the same time, **Saint Chad**, another Celtic Christian, was busy converting the East Saxons. Finally, things came to a head and a meeting was held in the North Eastern town of Whitby, (where **King Oswy** of Northumbria had founded a monastery run by King Edwin's niece, **Saint Hilda** of Hartlepool). This **Synod of Whitby**, held in **664AD** witnessed many arguments from both sides (St Wilfred putting forward the main case for Rome) but in the end, King Oswy decided that all who wished to belong to the Catholic Church must follow the rules set by Rome, since that was the seat of Peter on whom Christ had founded the Church. The leader of the Celtic faction, Colman, refused to submit, and with his followers, returned to Scotland. However, within a hundred years, all English Christians would be celebrating Easter on the same date, and all monks would be wearing their tonsures Roman style.



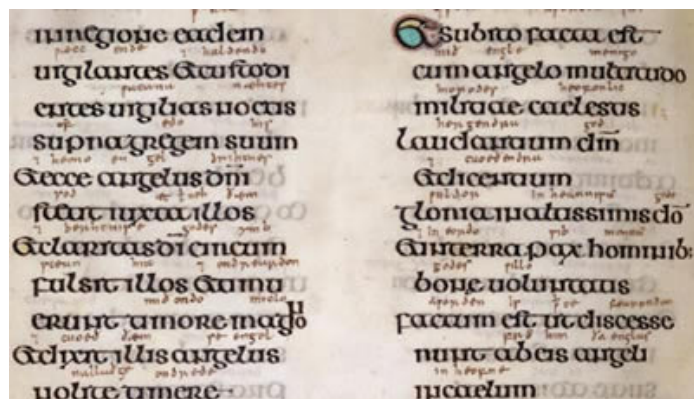
Map of Britain c 700AD

By this time, the divisions between Britons, Saxons, Angles and Jutes have begun to dissolve, and the people of the island become known to history as the **Anglo -Saxons**.

Christian Culture in early Saxon England

How do we know so much about this time in English history? Most of our information is taken from the work of one man - **the Venerable Bede**. Bede was a monk in the North East of England, at Jarrow near Newcastle. He was given to the monastery at the age of seven and spent his whole life there. He was one of the most learned men of his day and wrote the first real history of a whole nation, '**A History of the English Church and People**' which tells the story of Britain from Caesar's invasion in 55BC through to the year 731AD, just before Bede's death. This remarkable book contains letters from Popes, accounts of battles, lives of saints and accounts of many miracles, and earned Bede the title, 'The Father of English History'.

At the same time Bede was writing his history, a very different book was being written not far away on the Island of Lindisfarne. This book, known to us as **the Lindisfarne Gospels**, was a very early version of the illuminated manuscripts for which the Middle Ages became famous. The book is a beautiful, highly decorated, hand written copy of the four Gospels. It is written on calf skin using various hand made inks and a goose feather quill. The style of the writing and decoration is known as '**insular**', a reference to a particular style which is only found in British books of this era (insular comes from the Latin word for island, meaning Britain). The style is very influenced by Celtic art, with many complex spirals and knots, and a type of writing known as '**insular majuscule**'.



The Lindisfarne Gospels are particularly important because in the tenth century a priest called Aldred wrote a note telling us exactly who wrote the book and when. He also wrote a translation of the Latin gospels into the early English (or Anglo Saxon) language (he wrote his translation actually onto the book itself above the Latin words). This is one of our best and earliest sources of Anglo Saxon writing. The Lindisfarne Gospels can still be seen in the British Library in London.

Another famous book from this period is '**The Book of Kells**' which was probably written at least partly in Iona by the monks there before being taken to Kells in Ireland for safe keeping. The book can now be seen in the Library of Trinity College Dublin and is considered Ireland's greatest artistic treasure.