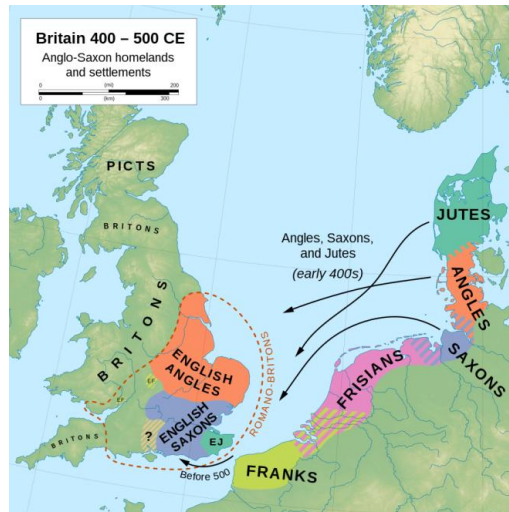


The Ruin and Conquest of Britain

Written by the monk Gildas, around 500 or 550 AD

This is an edited extract



When the rulers of Rome had taken over most of the world, they conquered our island and its people. Meanwhile these islands, stiff with cold and frost, and in a distant region of the world, far away from the visible sun, received the beams of light, that is, the holy teachings of Christianity.

There was a Roman leader in Britain named Maximus. He wanted to be Emperor, so he left Britain to attack Rome. He took many of the best soldiers with him. Left unprotected, the Britons suffered the cruelty of two foreign nations—the Irish from the north-west, and the Picts from the north. Like hungry and ravening wolves, rushing with greedy jaws upon the sheep which are left without a shepherd, they spread slaughter on every side, and like mowers cutting down the ripe corn, they cut up, tread under foot, and overrun the whole country.

From time to time, the Romans would send help, but they could not afford to keep doing this, and finally they left for good, never to return. No sooner were they gone than the Picts and Irish returned, like worms which in the heat of the mid-day come forth from their holes. The hooked weapons of our enemies dragged our wretched countrymen from the wall and dashed them against the ground. Such premature death, however, painful as it was, saved them from seeing the miserable sufferings of their brothers and children.

It has always been a tradition in Britain to be lazy about driving away invaders, but to be energetic and invincible in fighting among each other. Kings were chosen, not according to God's will, but according to who showed themselves more cruel than the rest. If any one of these was nicer or more honest than the rest, he was looked upon as the ruiner of the country, everybody wanted to take him down.

A council was called to settle how to stop the Picts and Scots from attacking again. Then all the British kings were so stupid that they decided to pay the Anglo-Saxons to come and protect Britain. In among them like wolves into the sheep-fold came the pagan Saxons. Nothing was ever as damaging to our country as this was.

They first landed on the eastern side of the island, by the invitation of the king, and there fixed their sharp claws, apparently to fight in favour of the island. But alas! They ended up fighting against it. Soon they turned on us and attacked us. All the pillars were knocked down, all the farmers chased away, together with their bishops, priests, and people, whilst the sword gleamed, and the flames crackled around them on every side. It was tragic to see. In the middle of the streets lay the tops of high towers, tumbled to the ground.

The poor survivors of our nation took arms under Ambrosius Aurelianus, a modest man, the only Roman who was left alive in Britain in this terrible time. His parents had been killed in the wars. After this, there were many battles. Sometimes the Britons won, and sometimes the Anglo-Saxons. This lasted until the year of the siege of Badon Hill, which was nearly the last slaughter of our cruel foes, a large and bloody battle. This was (as I am sure) forty-four years and one month after the landing of the Saxons, and also the time of my own birth.

And yet to this day the cities of our country are mostly empty, not like before, but are abandoned and overthrown. They still lie desolate; our wars with invaders have stopped, but our wars among ourselves keep going on.

Short Questions: choose FOUR of these questions and write down answers.

1. Why did the Romans leave Britain?
2. What did the Picts and the Irish do?
3. Why did the leaders of the Britons invite in the Anglo-Saxons?
4. What did the Anglo-Saxons do to the Britons?
5. Who led the survivors of the Britons?
6. Where was the famous battle?
7. What state are the cities of Britain in?

Longer questions: choose ONE of these questions and write down an answer.

1. Describe Britain in the time Gildas is writing about.
2. What insulting words and phrases does Gildas use to describe the Anglo-Saxons?
3. How does Gildas feel about his own people, the Britons? Give some examples.

