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Britain and the Anglo-Saxons in Late Antiquity

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BRITIAN AND THE ANGLO-SAXONS IN LATE ANTIQUITY

by

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THESIS

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Britain and the Anglo-Saxons in Late Antiquity

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Abstract

This thesis concerns the final century of Roman Britain, the continental origins of its medieval Germanic invaders, and the socio-political situation in sub-Roman Britain in the fifth and sixth centuries. Multiple issues are discussed in each of these three broad areas, including the effects of the Diocletian Reforms on Britain, fourth-century urban decay, the first-century origins of the Saxons among the piratical Chauci tribe, and the continued existence of Roman institutions in Britain into the early Middle Ages. Furthermore, the reasons the Anglo-Saxons did not assimilate into Roman culture like their counterparts on the continent, making medieval England an essentially Germanic nation, is discussed. Finally, an original comprehensive narrative of the transitional centuries between antiquity and the early medieval period is presented. Two methodological approaches are employed. First, the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons in Britain is presented as a product of late antiquity and not as a medieval phenomenon and, second, the approach to source materials is synthetic and goes beyond the use of textual evidence into the disciplines of archaeology, ethnography, and linguistics. Presenting the arrival of Germanic peoples into Britain as a sequel rather than a prequel allows us to explore them unconventionally as a Roman product while the use of archaeology permits many historical gaps to be filled.

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Textual Sources	4
Archaeological Sources	8
Historiography	9
1) Roman Britain in the Fourth Century	11
The Province of Britannia in a Late Roman Context	11
Romano-British Towns and “Urban Failure”	13
Rural Britannia	20
Military Developments in Late Roman Britain	22
Historical Events in Late Roman Britain	28
Conclusion	32
2) The Anglo-Saxons in Antiquity: The Continental Origins of the Germanic Settlers of Britain	35
Ethnicity and Identity in Late Antiquity	35
Jutland, Friesland, and Coastal Germany in Late Antiquity	40
Sea Raiding on the North Sea in Late Antiquity	43
The Origins of the Saxons	47
The Origins of the Angles and Jutes	54
Germanic Groups Peripheral to the Anglo-Saxons	57

Conclusion	70
3) Sub-Roman Britain	72
The Dark Earth Stratum in Sub-Roman Towns	72
Gildas	75
Fifth-Century Britain	78
Western Britain in the Later Fifth Century	83
The Arrival of the Anglo-Saxons	90
Conclusion	95
Bibliography	98

Introduction

This thesis was originally intended to specifically address the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons in Britain and the formations of the early kingdoms. The approach revolved completely around these “tribes,” visualizing the mysterious events of the fifth and sixth centuries as a sort of ‘prequel’ to the relatively well-documented seventh century. However, preliminary reading made it quite clear that this was not a one-sided affair; Britain had already recently experienced a dramatic and extended period as a part of the Roman Empire, a block of time where the land was associated with figures such as Julius Caesar and Constantine who would have a far greater impact on world history than any murky and semi-mythical character from the sub-Roman era. Furthermore, there were people already living in Britain at the time of the *adventus Saxonum*, many who were born as Roman citizens and possibly identified as Roman. From this perspective the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons began to look more like ‘sequel’ rather than the ‘origins story’ that was originally planned.

Multiple scholars studying Roman Britain have complained that the sub-Roman period is the exclusive territory of medievalists and lacks specialists with specific backgrounds in the study of the Roman Empire. While this thesis is no different (as the many references to Bede within will confirm), the narrative has been shifted to emphasize the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons in Britain as a *product* of the Roman Empire and not the beginning of the medieval period. This is quite obvious in Chapter One, which specifically discusses fourth-century Roman Britain, particularly noting its position as both a fully integrated Roman province, yet at the same time one that has a different historical experience than the contiguous continental provinces. Britain

prospers in the second century while the rest of the empire suffers numerous calamities, yet it is forced to endure the same draconian “reforms” designed to stabilize problems elsewhere. Hence, the fourth century is a tumultuous time and the province produces a series of usurpers. Roman socio-political organization, the problems of third-century “urban failure,” and the necessity and construction of the Saxon Shore fortifications are also discussed at some length.

Chapter Two examines the origins of the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes (and associated peoples) *before* their arrival in Britain. This chapter leans heavily on Roman sources to construct a rough narrative of these peoples as groups of “barbarians” and “pirates” raiding the edges of the empire. The Saxons are discussed at some length, due to the fact that they were the group who caused the Romans the most complaints. The nature of classical era sea raiding on the North Sea and English Channel is examined, as are the Roman responses. Germanic mercenaries in Britain are traced through inscriptions with some surprising results. Studying the Anglo-Saxons outside of Britain, as people that had been raiding the area for centuries, should make their sudden insular dominance seem far less alien and dramatic to the reader.

The final chapter explores the fifth and sixth centuries in Britain. The emphasis here, of course, is on trying to make sense of an era that is impoverished in both textual and archaeological materials. However, we can detect kingdoms forming in the west of Britain by the late fifth century and discuss their origins and the possible continuance of Roman administrative systems up to the period of Anglo-Saxon dominance. Tintagel, the reoccupation of hillforts, and the evidence for Mediterranean trade are also analyzed. Furthermore, this is the period when Christianity begins to spread and this matter is treated briefly. The work of Gildas, the only sustained “eyewitness” work to be produced in sub-Roman Britain, is approached a bit

differently; his person, rather than his work, is the focus of our interest, as he presents himself as a quite sophisticated man in an ostensibly unsophisticated time and place. Lastly, the actual arrival of the Anglo-Saxons in sub-Roman Britain and their relationship with the native population is discussed.

There are multiple arguments to this thesis, the central one being that the succession of Britannia from Roman Britain, and, by extension, the events that followed, can be traced back to the Diocletian Reforms of the late third century which created a socio-economic atmosphere that manifested in an accelerating number of usurpers and, ultimately, estrangement. Nevertheless, we see a society that is essentially *Roman* in structure into the sixth century. Shadows of this, though not explicit, may be found in both Gildas' writing and the archaeological record. Chapter One investigates the evolution of this situation and social changes that occurred. Chapter Three explores the sub-Roman outcome. Dividing this historical trajectory, Chapter Two explores the origins of the Anglo-Saxons, emphasizing that their piratical reputation extended to at least the first century. We are proposing here that the Chauci and Saxons were basically the same people, divided only by the paucity of sources for the third century, a time when the former name vanishes and the latter appears. Furthermore, after raiding the Channel and North Sea for centuries, this group (and their neighbors) settle an economically devastated Britain, their paganism and social structure generally preventing assimilation with the Romano-Britons.

Textual Sources

For the Roman Empire the first, second, and fourth centuries of the first millennium AD are reasonably well documented. However, the third century was a time of invasions, upheavals, and instability in the west and contemporary sources are sparse. It is also a crucial period in the evolution of the continental Angles and Saxons. Historical material for this century generally comes from later authors, frequently writing at some distance. For instance, our first mention of the Saxons includes them in the Carausius usurpation of the 280s and comes from Orosius, writing well over a century later, far from northern Europe. As our first contemporary mention of the Saxons is by Julian the Apostate in the 350s and puts them in a similar situation as the account of Orosius (allied with the Franks and supporting a usurper), the validity of the latter reference is discussed. Furthermore, much of the history of fourth-century Roman Britain, while relatively well-documented, comes from Orosius, Zosimus, and Ammianus Marcellinus, writing from other parts of the empire, considerably after the events they describe. Even with these fairly direct accounts some caution must be taken. For example, Ammianus Marcellinus describes a dramatic invasion/uprising in Britain in 367 in which a certain Count Theodosius appears in the role of hero and savior. As this figure is the father of Emperor Theodosius, ruler of the Eastern Empire at the time of Ammianus' writing, one must consider whether the event was as desperate as it is made out to be.

Ironically, when it comes to the proto-historic Germanic tribes that would later evolve into the Saxons, Franks, and others, our earlier sources are far more explicit and informative than those of the later and better-known groups. Tacitus, of course, provides the most extended

accounts of the Angles and Jutes within the Germanic cultural continuum beyond the Roman frontier and Ptolemy, writing fifty years later, can be viewed as almost an appendix to the earlier work. Much of the argument in this thesis is based upon the possibility that Ptolemy's seemingly anachronistic mention of the Saxons may be based on a medieval scribal error. Another problem with Ptolemy is that his names are frequently garbled, which adds to the confusion surrounding his supposed reference to Saxons. However, both authors work well in tandem and a suggestion is made here that there are indications within Ptolemy's account that the Angles have risen in power since they were recorded by Tacitus.

Other than citations in Tacitus and Ptolemy, the Angles and Jutes are almost invisible in Roman histories (Procopius mentions the former as residing in Britain in the sixth century). The reasons for this are considered and interpolated into the general argument. As little is written, their origins are approached almost exclusively with archaeological sources. The exception is Strabo's account of the Cimbri, who occupied the territory of the Angles and Jutes in the latter centuries BC. By discussing the Cimbri's semi-mythical journey across Europe, it is implied that either this tribe was somehow ancestral to the Angles and Jutes, or it created a vacuum by migrating out of Jutland which the later tribes filled.

Though the Angles are almost ignored by the Romans and the Saxons have no inarguable presence until the fourth century, one tribe that is documented multiple times is the Chauci. Since an important focus of Chapter Two is that the Chauci were largely ancestral to the Saxons, their numerous references in Roman histories are examined. While they are discussed by both Tacitus and Ptolemy, Pliny the Elder provides a rare and valuable eyewitness account of their lifestyle, though it must be acknowledged that these are the notes of an older man writing about

circumstances of his youth. Dio Cassius notes the Chauci several times and his references are invaluable in that they record the tribe as having a very similar opportunistic relationship with the Romans as the Saxons would later. Dio writes from a fairly contemporary perspective and had been at least as close to the Chauci frontier as Pannonia, so one must assume his knowledge is reasonably accurate. The rather bellicose Chauci described by Dio conflict with the “noble savage” impression given by Tacitus and an explanation for this disagreement is provided.

While the documentary sources for the Roman “Third-Century Crisis” are frustratingly scarce, textual evidence for fifth- and sixth-century Britain are notoriously limited. While Bede gives a sober account of the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons, he was writing considerably after the fact and was relying, as we are today, on the work of Gildas, the only sustained account of the period. This work, *On the Ruin of Britain*, was composed with an obvious and admitted socio-religious agenda which dominates its highly questionable historical narrative. It is, in fact, obviously incorrect in several places, even to a beginning student of Roman Britain. However, Gildas is also extremely valuable in a “between the lines” sense. Writing at some point in the sixth century, he leaves multiple clues as to his personal background and the nature of the society he is living in. The approach here, therefore, is to dispense with his odd version of historical events and concentrate on what he can tell us about his own world. Ostensibly, this world conflicts with the impoverished archaeological material of his time, but the sheer fact that a sophisticated figure such as Gildas exists in sixth-century Britain forces us to consider alternative models.

Bede is, without a doubt, the most iconic figure in early British historiography and is mentioned throughout this thesis. However, due to the overall theme, approaching the arrival of

the Anglo-Saxons from the perspective of antiquity rather than as a precursor to the medieval period, his use as a direct source is limited. A single, controversial passage is examined where he seems to imply a Hunnish presence in early Anglo-Saxon England. Though this seems far-fetched for an author like Bede, this statement is compared with other Bedan works to extrapolate a possible different meaning.

Other source material comes from the military aspects of Britain and the Roman Empire. The *Notitia Dignitatum*, basically a roster of the military and administrative posts in the empire at the turn of the fifth century, is used quite extensively for multiple purposes. Its fortuitous appearance in the middle of the study period makes it valuable in identifying the location of various ethnic troops and determining details of the military presence in the final years of Britannia. Indeed, all we know about the “Saxon Shore,” including the single reference to the name, originates in this document. Furthermore, the Roman Inscriptions in Britain database has been explored for the presence of a pre-Anglo-Saxon Germanic population in Britain and this information has been compared with the *Notitia Dignitatum*.

Overall, each source used presents different problems, the most common being that the author is writing from a considerable distance or at a later date. The dominant issue is, of course, extended periods with few, if any, sources at all. During the entire study period, only Gildas is actually writing from the time and place he is describing. This, naturally, forces the investigator to turn to other disciplines and other methodologies.

Archaeological Sources

Archaeology and history use different types of evidence to approach different types of problems. The former concentrates on trends and processes and rarely has direct bearing on known historical events and personages. Historical evidence is extracted from documents and concentrates mostly on the details of human experience; known events and figures. One discipline complements the other and when dealing with misty and little-known areas like sub-Roman Britain or the Rhine frontier the balanced use of both approaches is crucial. In this thesis archaeological material is used to fill gaps that would otherwise be blank. We see in the first chapter on late Roman Britain that its unusual third-century prosperity was followed by considerable evidence of civic (rather than cultural) decline and shift of expenditure into the private sphere. We also see the rise of a plantation-like economy which, when juxtaposed with the Diocletian Reforms, lies in the background of the historical fourth-century social unrest.

While the majority of the second chapter is extracted from ancient texts, archaeological material is used to illuminate the Jutland peninsula, an area largely ignored by Roman authors. The final chapter on sub-Roman Britain examines material culture extensively due to the paucity of documentation. Although archaeological material in eastern England would suggest the reduction of society to near barbarism, various sites in the west seem to give credence to Gildas' tales of "tyrants" and luxury. The *nature* of archaeological evidence in the east is also examined, particularly the problems of identifying a sub-Roman population within the greater sphere of nondescript sites.

Historiography

Concerning Roman and sub-Roman Britain this thesis builds upon ideas presented by Michael Jones¹ and Ian Wood,² who proposed social upheavals in late Roman Britain, though neither directly suggests this unrest may be traced to Diocletian social reforms and third-century prosperity. The shift from third-century public prosperity to fourth-century private (and rural) expenditure, particularly as illustrated by archaeological material, is explored in depth by Esmonde Cleary,³ though this is not presented as occurring beside peasant unrest. K. R. Dark discusses post-Roman political continuity,⁴ though quite convincing arguments for this are made, by implication, by Michael Lapidge and Paul Schaffner in *Gildas: New Approaches*.⁵ Christopher A. Snyder collates archaeological and historical material (with emphasis on the former) in *An Age of Tyrants*, which again stresses continuity rather than decay, but concentrates on the west of Britain.

Of the discussions of Germanic Europe and the Roman frontier, this thesis has been strongly influenced by several works by Peter Heather, particularly *Empires and Barbarians*,⁶ particularly concerning the profound effect Roman contact had upon the Germanic economy and social structure. The archaeological (and occasionally historical) evidence for the rise of an elite amongst the Chauci in the second and third centuries due to the presence of the Roman Empire

¹ Michael E. Jones, *The End of Roman Britain* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996).

² Ian Wood, "The End of Roman Britain: Continental Evidence and Parallels," in *Gildas: New Approaches*, ed. Michael Lapidge and David Dumville (Dover, NH: Boydell Press, 1984), 1-25.

³ A. S. Esmonde Cleary, *The Ending of Roman Britain* (New York: Routledge, 1989).

⁴ K. R. Dark, *From Civitas to Kingdom: British Political Continuity 300-800* (London: Leicester University Press, 1994).

⁵ Michael Lapidge, "Gildas's Education and the Latin Culture of Sub-Roman Britain," in Lapidge and Dumville, *Gildas: New Approaches*, 27-50; Paul Schaffner, "Britain's *Iudices*," in Lapidge and Dumville, *Gildas*, 151-6.

⁶ Peter Heather, *Empires and Barbarians: The Fall of Rome and the Birth of Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

and its wealth dovetails with Heather's more general observations. John Haywood's influential *Dark Age Naval Power*,⁷ itself based upon the work of Malcolm Todd⁸ exploring Germanic-Roman relations, has been employed here to examine the trajectory from Tacitean tribes to the proto-Kingdoms of Anglo-Saxon England.

Theories concerning early Anglo-Saxon social, political, and religious structure and why they were incompatible with the Christianized Romano-Britons are founded in the *Traditionskern* model of Germanic society, presented most succinctly by Andrew Gillett.⁹ Much of this thesis was written based on the assumption that Germanic tribes were based around a semi-divine nobility that embodied their "core of tradition." While it is only emphasized in the final chapter of this thesis, one *may* interpret some of the archaeological material in Chapter Two as manifesting this "core of tradition" embodied in an evolving ruling class.

⁷ John Haywood, *Dark Age Naval Power: A Reassessment of Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Seafaring Activity* (Hockwold-cum-Wilton, UK: Anglo-Saxon Books, 1999).

⁸ Malcolm Todd, *The Northern Barbarians: 100 BC to AD 300* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987).

⁹ Andrew Gillett, "Introduction: Ethnicity, History, and Methodology," in *On Barbarian Identity: Critical Approaches to Ethnicity in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Andrew Gillett (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2002), 1-18.

Chapter One

Roman Britain in the Fourth Century

The Province of Britannia in a Late Roman Context

Sub-Roman and proto-Anglo-Saxon England cannot have existed in a vacuum. The image of post-Roman Britain reverting into some vague Celtic twilight after roughly four centuries of imperial rule and globalization is simply unrealistic and far too romantic to be taken seriously, regardless of how telegenic Arthurian legends may be. At the other end of the spectrum the discontinuity between the early fifth and the late sixth centuries, where documentary evidence is barely extant and archaeological material provides little explicit compensation, cannot be brushed off as an inconvenient interlude between antiquity and the Middle Ages. Few, if any, scholars specialize in both late Roman and sub-Roman Britain, with the latter tending to attract the attention of medievalists.¹⁰ As the earliest dates for the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons occur a little over a generation after the latest dates for Roman occupation, with many, if not most, of the native population having been born in the Roman Empire, it seems pertinent to examine the final century of imperial rule before assessing possible scenarios for the *adventus Saxonum*.

The Roman Empire in the fourth century was a very different place from its golden age of the first and second. While Britain escaped much of the trauma of the “Third-Century Crisis,” a

¹⁰ K. R. Dark, *From Civitas to Kingdom: British Political Continuity 300-800* (London: Leicester University Press, 1994), 6.

period of invasions, civil war, and profound economic and political instability on the continent, it nevertheless experienced drastic transformations. Some of these reflected general trends in the empire, such as the rise of rural villa culture, and others, like the decommissioning of public buildings for other uses and the withdrawal of troops for redeployment elsewhere, affected Britannia particularly. Britain remained unquestionably a Roman province throughout the century, yet for multiple reasons one cannot help but note that the priorities of the empire lay elsewhere.

Britannia's relationship to the Roman Empire was, to some extent, governed by its geographical position. For one thing, crossing the Channel was dangerous (as Caesar discovered on his initial contact with the island), particularly in winter, making safe access almost seasonal. Britannia was also a *destination* and not a region a traveler would be crossing *in transit* between provinces. Furthermore, while Gaul had to confront various bellicose neighbors from across the Rhine and the Danube frontier had Dacians, Sarmatians, and Goths to the north, Britannia was surrounded on *three* sides by potentially hostile forces: the Caledonii and Maeatae (and later Picts) in modern Scotland, the Irish to the west, and maritime Saxon pirates on the North Sea. While not technically isolated, Britannia was in a rather unique position, being both an economically contributing province of the empire and a detached frontier known for the detention of exiles and the production of usurpers.

The large majority of the inhabitants of Roman Britain were the descendants of regionally diverse Celtic-speaking tribes already under the influence of Mediterranean civilization before being drawn directly into the Roman orbit by the arrival of Julius Caesar in 54 BC and the permanent occupation begun by Claudius in AD 43. It is ironic that our knowledge of

the customs and lifestyles of these tribes is heavily weighted toward the contact period, due, of course, to the writings of Caesar and Tacitus, and grows mistier over time while our knowledge of their Germanic successors begins in nebulous quasi-myth and starts to consolidate only after the arrival of the Roman Catholic Church in 597. After the first century there is little discussion of the native inhabitants of Roman Britain; references that exist are mainly concerned with imperial issues.

Romano-British Towns and ‘Urban Failure’

While the nature of native British culture is commonly viewed as being rather singular and some commonalities *were* shared, sheer distance and topographical barriers created a diversity that surfaces in archaeological evidence and linguistic differences. While discussion of these Iron Age peoples is beyond the scope of this thesis, their organization by the Romans into administrative units called *civitates* is pertinent to the local political structures preceding the sub-Roman period. *Civitas* is a confusing term with two meanings. To the Romans it signified a separate people, in this case the conquered British tribes. However, tribes were granted varying degrees of sovereignty focused on a *town*, either a previously existing tribal center or an artificially created administrative settlement. These centers are also known as *civitates*. To further complicate matters, Roman towns were divided into three main levels of status: *coloniae* were occupied principally by Roman citizens, *municipia* contained a more mixed population, and *civitates* were, of course, for the indigenous peoples. Towns, such as London and York, could petition to upgrade their status if they became crucial to imperial political or economic

interests.¹¹ While there are nineteen identifiable *civitates* (in the sense of ‘peoples’) in Britain, the number was almost certainly higher. Furthermore, some *civitates* may have been created more for the convenience of the Romans than reflecting the actual tribal situation (the Regni in Sussex and Carvetii in Cumbria may be artificial creations).¹²

Within the *civitas* bureaucratic and fiscal administration was carried out by a council of the local elite called an *ordo*. The delegation of authority to the indigenous aristocracy held two advantages for the empire: not only did it free their own personnel and finances, but by including the native ruling class in the bureaucracy it assured that they (and, by extension, their underlings) had some investment in Roman culture. Representatives of each *civitas* in the province convened yearly at a provincial council whose main functions involved declarations of loyalty and homage to the emperor cult.¹³

The desirability of these civic positions declined after the third century. While public service had been considered an honor in the early days of the empire, the extension of citizenship to the majority of the population eroded the prestige of the posts.¹⁴ A series of imperial enactments further made curial duties unattractive to the point where Constantine I could use administrative positions as punitive measures. The imperial government intervened by creating the office of *corrector* to oversee the administration of the *civitates*. The ultimate result was a change in priorities among the aristocracy of the Western Empire, including Britannia. Whereas civic duty and public works had once been the elites’ outlet for self-promotion and the focus of

¹¹ David Mattingly, *An Imperial Possession: Britain in the Roman Empire, 54 BC-AD 409* (London: Penguin, 2007), 260-3.

¹² Mike McCarthy, *The Romano-British Peasant: Towards a Study of People, Landscapes and Work during the Roman Occupation of Britain* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2013), 31.

¹³ Michael E. Jones, *The End of Roman Britain* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 147.

¹⁴ Jones, *Roman Britain*, 146.

their financial expenditure, by the fourth century we begin to see resources invested in the private sphere. Many public buildings are either adapted to new uses or abandoned while domestic architecture increases in extravagance; for instance, in Britain this is the heyday of the mosaic.¹⁵ Much of this redirection of funds was spent on rural retreats; the fourth century is particularly notable for the rise of villa culture.

However, the nature and function of British towns in the late Roman period is controversial and, in places, seemingly contradictory. In terms of the volume of collected artifacts and known site types, the fourth century is the best represented historical period in British archaeology before the Norman Conquest.¹⁶ On the other hand, it also has gained a reputation among some archaeologists and historians as an era of ‘urban failure’ in which towns in Britannia declined and were slowly abandoned. Inscriptions, sculpture, and tombstones barely exist in fourth-century British towns. While the balance of power was shifting from paganism to Christianity and pre-Christian cults become less conspicuous in urban centers, this is not balanced by a reciprocal investment in public Christian sites as it is elsewhere in the Empire.¹⁷

There are essentially two extremes in viewing the fourth-century urban failure problem. The first is that towns were basically unchanged from the third century; the crises that affected the continent had bypassed the island and it continued to develop along an uninterrupted trajectory.¹⁸ The second view is that Britannia must have reflected continental trends, e.g. those apparent in Gaul, and towns at the turn of the fourth century were shrinking administrative

¹⁵ A. S. Esmonde Cleary, *The Ending of Roman Britain* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 13.

¹⁶ Cleary, *Roman Britain*, 41-2.

¹⁷ Mattingly, *Imperial Possession*, 235-6.

¹⁸ Sheppard Frere, *Britannia: A History of Roman Britain*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 1987), 245-7.

centers, decaying inside defensive walls.¹⁹ The difficulty in choosing between these obviously irreconcilable extremes lies in how one views the *previous* century; concretely datable and comparable archaeological data is inconsistent (e.g. coinage seems to be plentiful, yet new construction seems to taper off), which inhibits supporting either hypothesis.²⁰ Indeed, interpretations of the socio-economic status of third-century Britannia and the ‘urban failure’ of the fourth tend to rely on a given scholar’s interest and expertise, exacerbating the inconsistencies rather than collating them.

One class of structure that contradicts the vagaries of third-century urban archaeology is the rise of the townhouse toward the end of the century.²¹ Excavations at St. Albans,²² Chichester,²³ Exeter,²⁴ Lincoln,²⁵ and Wroxeter²⁶ all support the argument that the townhouses increased both in size and number in the third century and into the fourth. Additionally, they seem concentrated in the larger towns at the expense of the smaller. Furthermore, while a survey of large and small towns outside their defensive walls shows no evidence for a general decline in construction between the second and fourth centuries, during this period timber structures seem to give way to less densely packed buildings with stone foundations.²⁷ By this evidence, it would seem that *more* expenditure is being invested in towns and their suburbs (assuming the shift from wood to stone represents an upgrade) and this investment is directed toward private projects.

¹⁹ R. M. Reece, “Town and Country: The End of Roman Britain,” *World Archaeology* 12.1 (1987): 77-92.

²⁰ Cleary, *Roman Britain*, 66.

²¹ C. V. Walthew, “The Town House and Villa House in Roman Britain,” *Britannia* 6 (1975): 189-205.

²² Sheppard Frere, *Verulamium Excavations*, vol. 2, Society of Antiquaries Research Report 41 (London, 1983).

²³ Alec Down, *Chichester Excavations*, vol. 3 (Chichester: Phillimore, 1979).

²⁴ Paul T. Bidwell, *Roman Exeter: Fortress and Town* (Exeter: Devon Books, 1980).

²⁵ M. J. Jones, “New Streets for Old: The Topography of Roman Lincoln,” in *Roman Urban Topography in Britain and the Western Empire*, ed. Francis Grew and Brian Hopley, CBA Research Report 59 (London: Humanities Press, 1985), 86-93.

²⁶ D. R. Wilson, “The Plan of Viroconium Cornoviorum,” *Antiquity* 58 (1984): 117-20.

²⁷ Cleary, *Roman Britain*, 68.

This same trend, however, cannot be shown for public structures. While the disinterest in public office in the late Roman Empire, noted above, is commonly used to interpret changes to public architecture, the ultimate fates of these buildings in Roman Britain was quite diverse. The basilica, as a spacious and integral part of the Roman administrative system, is probably the most illustrative. At Silchester the basilica was converted to a bronze-working shop in the late third century, shifting to large-scale iron-working in the fourth century. The lack of internal structural divisions suggests a centralized and official operation.²⁸ A similar occurrence took place at Caerwent, where a semi-demolished basilica had metal-working furnaces installed in the nave and aisle in the last half of the fourth century.²⁹ At Wroxeter the basilica was not rebuilt after a late third-century fire,³⁰ nor was Leicester's rebuilt after a fourth-century disaster.³¹ However the structure at Caistor-by-Norwich suffered the same destruction in the late 200s and *was* restored.³² At Cirencester³³ and Gloucester³⁴ evidence suggests that the basilica remained in use until the end of the Roman period, while at Exeter, there seems to have been remodeling in the late fourth century, though it was demolished soon after and replaced by open metal-working.³⁵ London's

²⁸ Michael Fulford, "Excavations on the Sites of the Amphitheatre and Forum-Basilica at Silchester, Hampshire: An Interim Report," *Antiquaries Journal* 65.1 (1985): 39-81.

²⁹ Mattingly, *Imperial Possession*, 336.

³⁰ Donald Atkinson, "Report on the Excavations at Wroxeter (the Roman city of Viroconium) in the County of Salop, 1923-7," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 33.1-2 (October 2012): 113-15.

³¹ Max Hebditch and Jean Mellor, "The Forum and Basilica of Roman Leicester," *Britannia* 4 (October 1973): 1-83.

³² Shepperd S. Frere, "The Forum and Baths at Caistor-by-Norwich," *Britannia* 2 (November 1971): 1-26.

³³ John S. Wacher, "Cirencester 1961: Second Interim Report," *Antiquaries Journal* 42. 2 (1962): 5-8.

³⁴ Carolyn Heighway and Patrick Garrod, "Excavations at Nos. 1 and 30 Westgate Street, Gloucester: The Roman Levels 1," *Britannia* 11 (1980): 73-114.

³⁵ P. T. Bidwell, *The Legionary Bathhouse and Basilica and Forum at Exeter*, Exeter Archaeological Reports 1 (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1979).

forum-basilica complex seems to have been systematically dismantled around the year 300.³⁶

The timing here, it seems, could possibly be associated with official retaliation for supporting

Carausius' Revolt of the 280s and 290s. While across-the-board abandonment of basilicas obviously did not happen in Britannia it is also not certain that the minority that continued to be occupied had an administrative capacity. Perhaps the strangest factor here is that one third of the basilicas excavated ended their careers connected to the metallurgical industry. While this seems statistically unlikely, there seem to be no theories suggesting it is any more than coincidence, though it may be possible that the use of the Silchester space (apparently the earliest and most extensive) inspired imitations in other towns.

While basilicas shared a number of fates in late Roman Britain, other public works continued in the fourth century. Streets, water, and disposal systems were typically maintained, at least until the latter half of the 300s, implying administrative control over the basic necessities. A public utility that continues in nearly all large Roman towns are the baths,³⁷ indicating that, even in Britannia, these were considered too crucial to Roman culture to allow to decay. The single exception to this is at Wroxeter where pottery in the ash pits of the hypocaust indicates it was shut down ca. 300, though other areas of the structure continued to be used and even remodeled.³⁸ Amphitheaters, generally, seem to survive to the end of the fourth century. At Verulamium (St. Albans), Kathleen Kenyon (better known for her excavations at Jericho)

³⁶ Mattingly, *Imperial Possession*, 336-7.

³⁷ Cleary, *Roman Britain*, 72.

³⁸ Phillip Barker, "Excavations on the Site of the Baths Basilica at Wroxeter 1966-1974: An Interim Report," *Britannia* 6 (November 1975): 106-17.

discovered that the amphitheater spent its final days as a rubbish dump.³⁹ David Mattingly does not consider the use of public buildings as dumps (or the reuse of public buildings, for that matter) in the later empire as a sign of the breakdown of administrative control, but rather as a continuation of municipal organizations with different priorities.⁴⁰ Public structures are not a requirement for administrative and legal activity and the changing religious dimensions of the later empire may have decreased the value of certain aspects of Roman culture (e.g. blood sports, baths, amphitheaters with pagan associations, etc.). Furthermore, a certain amount of social organization and authority is needed simply to concentrate rubbish in discrete locations—such as the amphitheater at St. Albans.

Of course, other scholars contest these interpretations of urban architecture, speaking of a ‘Constantinian renaissance’ at the turn of the century (where we have records of an imperial presence in Britain) and an accelerating decline towards the fifth century. This approach emphasizes a late third-century revival that accompanied the spirit of reform, then notes how public works were almost non-existent by 400. Going hand-in-hand with urban failure is a sharp population decline with 30% of the rooms in excavated houses being unoccupied in 350 and upwards of 90% being empty by 400.⁴¹ Much of the argument concerning the end of Roman town-life centers on a mysterious stratum of dark earth, up to 1.5m thick, that appears to overlap late Roman deposits in many cities of northern Europe, particularly Britain, literally separating antiquity from the Middle Ages. As it contains more implications for sub-Roman activity this ‘dark earth’ stratum will be examined more closely in the third chapter.

³⁹ Kathleen Kenyon, “The Roman Theatre at Verulamium, St. Albans,” *Archaeologia* 84 (1948): 213-61.

⁴⁰ Mattingly, *Imperial Possession*, 141-3.

⁴¹ Neil Faulkner, *The Decline and Fall of Roman Britain* (Charleston: Arcadia, 2000), 123-4.

Rural Britannia

Perhaps no symbol of Roman Britain is as pervasive in the popular mind as the palatial country villa. Illustrations of scruffy Anglo-Saxons looting tile-roofed mansions appear frequently in publications geared toward a wide or juvenile audience and the image is somewhat misleading. While these structures certainly existed, they comprise a tiny minority of Roman rural sites and are vastly outnumbered by small native farmsteads. However, two centuries of archaeological investigations by excavators searching for mosaics and artwork have strongly biased our evidence, not merely toward the more grandiose, plantation-style enterprises, but toward their domestic elements.⁴² Compounded on this, the term ‘villa’ is used differently in the archaeology of Roman Britain than it is regarding the rest of the empire. A ‘villa’ defined in British archaeology encompasses *any* Roman-era rural site exhibiting Mediterranean architectural or agricultural elements. Even with this broad definition, the one to two thousand known Roman villas only account for around 2% of rural sites for the Roman period with the palatial estates only accounting for a total of 20-30 sites across all of Britain.⁴³ Hence, the most characteristic structure of fourth-century southern Britain is actually the rectangular farmstead, a building with local origins slightly preceding Roman occupation, Iron Age round-houses having largely disappeared by the mid-second century.⁴⁴

The fourth century was the heyday of villa construction with structures concentrated around urban areas. During this time many new buildings were erected and older ones expanded. Sometimes renovations and expansions were never completed or used, a circumstance that has

⁴² Cleary, *Roman Britain*, 100.

⁴³ Mattingly, *Imperial Possession*, 369-70.

⁴⁴ McCarthy, *Romano-British Peasant*, 50.

been interpreted as the owners over-spending themselves.⁴⁵ Of course, other stresses from Roman Britain's final century could also be to blame, as we shall see.

To interpret the multiplication of villas in the fourth century as a 'flight to the country' by the Romano-British elite is to assume that residence in either the city or country was a zero-sum game; it was far more likely that the owners of rural estates bore responsibilities or administrative duties in towns and kept both urban and rural residences, as can be seen in Spain.⁴⁶ In a sense, villas, in many cases, may represent absentee landholding. Much as villas in Hispania tended to cluster around cities, in Britannia they also seem to focus on large towns and along main roads. One sees very few in the far north of the province. Comparisons with the manorial system and the early modern country houses are well-known and do exhibit a bit of truth as the Diocletian Reforms froze land tenure and inheritance, thereby creating a proto-feudal system for agricultural workers almost overnight.⁴⁷ The reception hall seems to be a fixture of even modest villas and mosaics and other displays of wealth are more common in rural estates than townhouses (though this may perhaps be attributed to archaeological bias). This leads one to believe that the multiplication of villas in the fourth century was a further symptom of the shift from public to private displays of expenditure that followed universal citizenship and the reforms of the third century. Wealth is still conspicuously displayed, but in a private setting rather than a public arena.

Another theory explaining the expansion of villas in fourth-century Britannia is a third-century shift from investment in Gallic agriculture, due to the instability of the Germanic

⁴⁵ Mattingly, *Imperial Possession*, 371-3.

⁴⁶ Michael Kulikowski, *Late Roman Spain and Its Cities* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 130.

⁴⁷ Dark, *Civitas to Kingdom*, 29.

frontier, to the relative safety of southern Britain. The number of operational villas in Gaul shrinks simultaneously with the increase in the number of British villas. These new enterprises, employing essentially semi-free agricultural labor after the third-century reforms, may have infected Britannia with the social unrest that affected third-century Gaul.⁴⁸

In tandem with villa expansion, the fourth century also saw a radical shift in agricultural practices. Farming in East Anglia and Surrey began to adopt an increasing reliance on stock raising, with some areas nearly transforming to pastoralism. The opposite occurred in the north, where pastoral economies shifted toward cereal production.⁴⁹ Agricultural changes of this sort, particularly when taken in tandem with the rise of villas, may indicate some sort of social upheaval, perhaps analogous to the Highland Clearances or Enclosure Acts. Excessive taxation, in kind rather than currency in post-Diocletian Britannia, put the Romano-British peasantry at the mercy of administrators and rampant inflation, a sorry position exacerbated by a climatic shift towards cooler and wetter weather.⁵⁰ In short, it would seem that the rural lower classes had every reason to be hostile.

Military Developments in Late Roman Britain

Before examining known events in fourth-century Britannia which may have bearing on the sub-Roman era, we should take a look at the changes that occurred in the military in the final years of Roman Britain. Like most other aspects of the empire, the military was quite different

⁴⁸ Jones, *Roman Britain*, 172.

⁴⁹ S. Applebaum, "Roman Britain," in *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, ed. H. P. R. Finberg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 226-49.

⁵⁰ Jones, *Roman Britain*, 173.

than it had been in the second century, largely due to reforms and events on the continent. Initially, the main division within the Roman army was between regular legionary forces and auxiliary units comprised of non-citizens, typically drawn from discreet ethnic groups. Standard practice was to station these ‘foreign’ units away from their homelands, creating unusual situations such as having Eurasian Sarmatian horsemen patrolling Hadrian’s Wall. As an enticement potential recruits were offered full Roman citizenship after twenty-five years of service. These veterans were the core population of the Romano-British *coloniae* towns mentioned above.

Over time the Roman army underwent a gradual ‘barbarization,’ accelerating in the latter half of the fourth century. While there was no standardized template, either distributing conquered or potentially hostile peoples into existing units or removing their young male populations as *auxiliares* to distant locales both diffused possible rebellions and expanded the empire’s military capabilities. While there were multiple classes of these troops, each is not easily defined and some occur too late in time to have affected garrisons in Roman Britain. Perhaps the best known and most applicable were the *foederati*. These units came from beyond the frontier, functioned under their own leaders, and were recruited on a situational basis, returning to their homes after their purpose had been fulfilled. In the later empire they could be hired from groups that had been allowed to settle within its borders. In addition, there were also un-free units supplied by conquered peoples settled within the empire (*laeti*, unknown outside of Gaul and Italy)⁵¹ and, by the fourth century, private armies, *brucellarii*, essentially non-ethnic mercenaries operating under a warlord, were sometimes used.⁵² It must be stressed that while

⁵¹ Pat Southern and Karen Ramsey Dixon, *The Late Roman Army* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 48.

⁵² Southern and Dixon, *Late Roman Army*, 46-51.

there is ample evidence of mercenary troops in Roman Britain, there is *no* specific documentary confirmation that any of these classes existed by name.⁵³ It is simply a strong probability which is reinforced by archaeological data. It should also be noted that much of the intensification of so-called ‘barbarization’ took place at a time when Britain’s garrisons were actually being depleted by various usurpers (or, indeed, after Britannia ceased to exist), making any significant influx of Germanic troops in the century before the sub-Roman period unlikely. The possibilities of Germanic communities surviving into post-Roman times will be discussed in the next chapter.

In the first quarter of the fourth century Constantine reformed the army and separated it into two main divisions with different functions. The *comitatenses* were regional field armies that developed from the emperor’s personal *comitatus*, perhaps beginning to form under Diocletian. The *limitanei*, lower-grade and less-privileged frontier troops, were far less mobile and maintained economic ties to their localities. While the criteria for recruitment into the *comitatenses* were certainly higher, the *limitanei* developed a reputation (probably undeserved) for ineffectualness.⁵⁴ As the Roman frontiers could be spectacularly brutal places it seems that comparing these frontier troops to a standing militia or modern national guard would be unfair. In late Roman Britain, with the threat of Picts and Germanic pirates, this must have been an unenviable deployment.

By the fourth century the two main ‘hot-spots’ along Britannia’s frontier were Hadrian’s Wall and the Saxon Shore along the Channel. To the west modern Wales, unruly in the early years of Roman Britain, had long been pacified by a network of connected fortresses that provided greater stability than the narrow avenue into the north. Hadrian’s Wall, garrisoned by

⁵³ Jones, *Roman Britain*, 33.

⁵⁴ Southern and Dixon, *Late Roman Army*, 15, 36-7.

limitanei in its later years, fulfilled a function consistent with late Roman frontier strategies designed to both anticipate trouble and repel invasions. Beyond the wall spies (*arcani* or *areani*) operated and tribal gatherings were monitored. In addition to the psychological deterrent of the wall itself, forts to its south, originally built to oversee tribes in northern Britannia, were maintained as an additional discouragement to northern aggression.⁵⁵ Towards the end of the century a chain of forts was built along the coast on the eastern terminal of the wall, designed as a first response to attacks from the sea. It has been theorized that these were more likely to have been constructed to repulse raids from Scotland rather than across the North Sea.⁵⁶ Furthermore, coinage from the usurpation of Magnus Maximus (see below) and Theodosian emperors imply that *limitanei* were still present in the late 300s.⁵⁷ Excavations at the forts of Housesteads⁵⁸ and Vindolanda⁵⁹ show rubble from collapsed buildings immediately overlaying material from the late fourth century while the installation at Binchester seems to have been utilized into the fifth century, but as a slaughterhouse and facility for metal and bone/antler-working.⁶⁰ Archaeological evidence, therefore, would suggest that Hadrian's Wall continued in its capacity as a military establishment until the turn of the fifth century, but not much beyond. This implies, of course, that maintenance of the Pictish frontier was considered necessary, regardless of conditions in the southern cities and countryside.

⁵⁵ Cleary, *Roman Britain*, 51.

⁵⁶ Steven Johnson, *Roman Forts of the Saxon Shore* (London: Paul Elek, 1976), 149.

⁵⁷ J. C. Mann, "Hadrian's Wall: The Last Phase," in *The End of Roman Britain*, ed. P. J. Casey, BAR British Series 71, (Oxford: Archaeopress, 1976), 144-51.

⁵⁸ Derek A. Welsby, "The Roman Military Defence of the British Provinces in its Later Phases," BAR British Series 101 (Oxford: Archaeopress, 1982), 174-94.

⁵⁹ Paul T. Bidwell, *The Roman Fort at Vindolanda*, Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission for England, Archaeological Report 1 (London: English Heritage, 1985), 76.

⁶⁰ Rob Collins, *Hadrian's Wall and the End of Empire: The Roman Frontier in the Fourth and Fifth Centuries*, . Routledge Studies in Archaeology (New York: Routledge, 2012), 93.

In the late third and fourth centuries the North Sea and Channel, and even the northern areas of Spain, were infested by seaborne Saxon marauders. Marine attacks on coastal areas, obviously, circumvented any frontier obstacles, penetrating into the vulnerable imperial interior. A system of defenses known as the Saxon Shore was created on both sides of the Channel (incorporating many pre-existing military installations). The single ancient reference to this name has been preserved in the *Notitia Dignitatum*, a unique late fourth-century document detailing imperial administrative and military organization, which refers to fortifications of the *Litus Saxonicum*. This is the limit of documentary evidence, making precise definitions difficult. The problems begin with the origins of the name. While it is a natural assumption that these fortifications were named for the enemy threat they intercepted, serious consideration has been given to the possibility that the Romans had either settled Saxons in southern England and East Anglia or accepted their presence by this time. This issue will be explored in far greater detail later, but it must be noted that the main argument in favor of the name *Litus Saxonicum* implying the presence of Saxons in late Britannia is that the Romans simply did not name frontier areas after their enemies. On the other hand, no other area in the Western Empire had come under such a sustained assault by a single tribe.⁶¹

By the early third century, when trade between Britannia and the continent, particularly the Rhine, reached its zenith, we begin to see defenses built in towns in the eastern part of the province.⁶² By the end of the century existing defenses and fortifications (and the inability of

⁶¹ Johnson, *Roman Forts*, 10.

⁶² It should be noted that in the decades after the Boudiccan Revolt in AD 60/61 the majority of southern Britannia was demilitarized as the army was concentrated in the north and west. While this seems counterintuitive, nevertheless, the region was considered adequately pacified.

naval forces to control the problem) were no longer adequate.⁶³ A total of ten southern coastal sites show signs of destruction during this period, indicating barbarian troubles may have begun seventy years or more before they are recorded by Ammianus Marcellinus. Hence, the majority of the Saxon Shore forts were constructed in the later third century.⁶⁴

Comparing the two axes of the fourth-century Britannic defense network is a rather futile endeavor as the iconic Hadrian's Wall has received far more scholarly attention than the vaguely understood Saxon Shore. Dating the presence of Roman troops in the coastal fortifications is also difficult. While the number of coins and their relative frequencies may seem promising, there is no way to concretely associate them with military activity. Evidence is very rare for weapons and armor.⁶⁵ In short, there is little confirmation of the continued garrisoning of the coastal fortresses in the later part of the century. While it may be supposed that, as a frontier system, the bases were manned by *limitanei*, they cannot have had the cultural and social *gravitas* of the far older and more established Hadrian's Wall, making it unlikely that the army had particularly deep relationships with the surrounding area. The single exception occurs at Richborough, where the finds of coins are strongly concentrated toward the very end of the Roman period and there are historical and archaeological indications that the site continued to be occupied well into the fifth century.⁶⁶ Other than this the Saxon Shore network seems to have faded away with other late fourth-century institutions in Britannia.

⁶³ Johnson, *Roman Forts*, 22.

⁶⁴ Johnson, *Roman Forts*, 15-16.

⁶⁵ Johnson, *Roman Forts*, 138, 145.

⁶⁶ Johnson, *Roman Forts*, 150.

Historical Events in Late Roman Britain

While civil wars, invasions, and migrations (though not necessarily the reactions to them) bypassed Britannia in the third century, according to the few documentary sources the island saw more than its share of troubles in the fourth and early fifth. The frequency of usurpations originating in Britain began to accelerate. Britannia had seen the revolt of its governor, Clodius Albinus, as early as the end of the second century⁶⁷ and had been politically separated from the main empire twice during the 200s: as an element of the Gallic Empire (260-273)⁶⁸ and as part of usurper Carausius' *insulae imperium* (286-293).⁶⁹ Additionally, there was a short failed coup by unknown instigators in 276.⁷⁰ Prolific coinage suggests that, nevertheless, Britannia prospered through these periods⁷¹ and we have seen above the rise of the private townhouse. At the beginning of the fourth century Emperor Constantius died while campaigning in Britannia and his son Constantine, also present in the province, was illegally declared *augustus* by the garrison at Eboracum (York).⁷² While it is arguable as to whether Constantine would have achieved the title had he gone through the conventional channels within the Tetrarchic system, technically speaking he was a particularly successful usurper in a long sequence of usurpations originating from Britannia.

⁶⁷ Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, 73.15, 75.6-7, trans. Ernest Cary, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970).

⁶⁸ Evidence of Britannia's participation in the short-lived Gallic Empire comes from several milestones erected in modern Carmarthenshire, Cornwall, and Cardiff during the reign of Postumus, <http://romaninscriptionsofbritain.org>, RIB 2260, 2232, 2255.

⁶⁹ Aurelius Victor, *De Caesaribus*, trans. H. W. Bird, Translated Texts for Historians 17 (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1994), 43-5; Eutropius, *Breviarium ab Urbe Condita*, 9.21, trans. H.W. Bird, Translated Texts for Historians 14 (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1993), 61-2.

⁷⁰ Zosimus, *Historia Nova* 1.66 (London: Green and Chaplin, 1814). http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/zosimus01_book1.htm. Accessed June 21, 2013.

⁷¹ Peter Salway, *A History of Roman Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 276-85.

⁷² Zosimus, *Historia Nova*, 2.15.1.

In 350, after assassinating Constantine's son Constans, one of his commanders, Magnentius, declared himself ruler, only to be killed three years later by the eastern emperor, Constantius. Subsequently, an agent, Paul, was sent to Britannia to arrest a handful of military supporters of the coup; an objective which seems to have escalated into a full-scale provincial witch-hunt that only ceased after the governor himself attempted to murder the inquisitor. Ammianus Marcellinus, who seems sympathetic, attributes the 'widespread slaughter and destruction' to Constantius' paranoid nature.⁷³ While Paul's over-zealousness is stressed (indeed, it is noted that he bore the nickname 'the Chain'), one cannot help but assume that there must have been *some* popular unrest in Britannia which led him to extend his investigations beyond the army. Furthermore, taking into account events in the latter half of the century, one may speculate that such a sudden and oppressive intrusion exacerbated this unrest.

Then, in 383, British commander Magnus Maximus revolted after leading campaigns against the Picti and Scotti, removing a large number of troops from Britannia, killing Emperor Gratian and taking control of much of the Western Empire. Five years later he was overtaken by eastern Emperor Theodosius and western Emperor Valentinian II in Illyria and executed.⁷⁴ Oddly, Maximus, alone, as far as we know, in this sequence of rebels, seems to have left a mark on Welsh mythology where he is named as the founder of several dynasties.

Before discussing the final three usurpers and the very end of Roman Britannia's existence, we should first examine the dramatic events of 367. Ammianus Marcellinus records a

⁷³ Ammianus Marcellinus, *History*, trans. John C. Rolfe, 19.9, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 342-3.

⁷⁴ Zosimus, *Historia Nova*, 4.35-7; Paulus Orosius, *Seven Books of History Against the Pagans*, trans. Irving Woodworth Raymond (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936), 393.

series of events in the 360s requiring the intervention, however brief, of the continental Roman military. Picts and Scots had begun raiding the province, prompting the move of *comitatenses* troops from Gaul into Britain. By 364 they were augmented by the mysterious Attacotti and in 367 they were joined by Franks and Saxons in a supposedly coordinated invasion known as the Great Barbarian Conspiracy.⁷⁵ They were assisted in the north by double agents operating within the Roman military system. The commander of northern Britannia was besieged or attacked in some manner and the Count of the Saxon Shore (lit. *comes maritimae tractus*) was killed. So we see that the two *limitanei* forces had been overrun. After this Roman troops joined in the banditry. After some confusion as to who should be sent to rectify the situation, Emperor Valentinian I sent Count Theodosius with four regiments of *comitatenses*. From his base in London Theodosius pardoned the deserters and expelled the invaders over a two-year period. Ammianus makes it clear that the brigandage had penetrated so far into the province that even the area around London had been pillaged.⁷⁶ Cleary correctly points out that there is no archaeological evidence that can be definitely linked to the Barbarian Conspiracy as this type of destruction is nearly impossible to distinguish from ‘normal’ disasters (e.g. fires). Furthermore, no forts on either Hadrian’s Wall or the Saxon Shore show any signs of attack in this period. Cleary attributes this paradox to the ‘natures of the two types of evidence,’ with archaeological material being better suited for establishing trends and processes than specific events. Ammianus was writing during the reign of Emperor Theodosius I and his father, Count Theodosius, is

⁷⁵ Roger Tomlin, “The Date of the ‘Barbarian Conspiracy,’” *Britannia* 5 (November 1974): 303-9.

⁷⁶ Ammianus Marcellinus, *History*, 26.4, 342-3.

certainly the hero of the events of 367. Hence, in glorifying the emperor's father, there is a large chance the gravity of the situation has been inflated or misinterpreted.⁷⁷

Aside from appearing as almost a portent of the issues that would occupy the sub-Roman Britons in the next century, the Barbarian Conspiracy can tell us several things about the situation immediately before the end of Roman Britannia. Obviously the Romans considered the two frontier commands to be adequate in holding their respective ground, a situation which proved false. With a coordinated attack neither was able to assist the other. This, and the dispatch of four units of *comitatenses* to Britain, would imply that there were either no field troops in the province at the time or so few that desertion would render them useless. As Count Theodosius requested a new governor and general to be sent to Britannia we may speculate that the administration and army in the province were reformed one final time.

In the first decade of the fifth century, the army in Britannia elevated a new usurper, Marcus, a soldier of whom nothing else is known,⁷⁸ killing him soon after and replacing him with Gratian, a member of the British urban aristocracy. After four months Gratian was also killed and replaced with a common soldier fortuitously named Constantine. This Constantine (conventionally known as Constantine III) moved his British forces into Gaul, eventually extending his control into Spain and receiving a grudging recognition from Emperor Honorius. While Zosimus attributes this succession of usurpers to a military fear of a barbarian invasion

⁷⁷ Creary, *Roman Britain*, 45-6.

⁷⁸ Zosimus, *Historia Nova*, 6.2.

the province,⁷⁹ other motivations seem more likely. Archaeological evidence indicates that soldiers in Britannia had not been fully paid in several years, as new coinage ceases in 402, implying that morale in the army (and, by extension, interests that depended on the army) must have been frightfully low.⁸⁰ Constantine III was eventually defeated and executed by Honorius in 411. Rome made no further attempts to regain the province.

Conclusion

Ultimately we must consider what caused the premature decline of Roman Britain. In the third century, when the rest of the empire was collapsing, the Romano-Britons experienced a time of relative prosperity. Then the reform measures, many being quite draconian to modern eyes, intended to stabilize the empire, instead fell upon a healthy province that did need stabilizing, upsetting a social and economic balance that had been forming for over three hundred years. In this sense, the death of the province was caused, not by invasions, civil wars (regardless whether they originated on the island), or economic troubles, but, rather by the responses to them. Michael Jones points out that discontent in Britannia took the form of military revolt and taking local recruitment and the army's long tenure in the province into account, the military cannot be disengaged from the political administration or civilian population.⁸¹ In other words, illegal usurpation, even by Constantine I, signified a revolt by the Britons themselves. To

⁷⁹ Zosimus, *Historia Nova*, 6.3.1.

⁸⁰ Jones, *Roman Britain*, 247.

⁸¹ Jones, *Roman Britain*, 160.

emphasize this interconnectedness, the penultimate usurper promoted by the army, Gratian, was a non-military British aristocrat.

Local networks enabled the wealthy to dodge the greater burden of taxation (they were often the collectors), shifting the financial weight onto the poor who, frozen in their occupations and unable to meet the demands of imperial taxes, would relinquish their lands and labor to the rich in exchange for patronage and financial protection against the state.⁸² While *bagaudic* movements (organized banditry sometimes with political ramifications) occurred in Gaul and Spain there is no record of such groups in Britain. However, the wording used by Ammianus may indicate they were an element in the Barbarian Conspiracy, along with military deserters. After a passage describing ‘predatory bands’ he notes the involvement of *plebs* (mob) and *gentes* (natives) taking captives and extracting tribute, probably from the upper classes.⁸³

Much like the Roman Empire itself, Roman Britain did not simply ‘end.’ If one needs to identify a specific date or event as a finish-line in order to achieve ‘closure’ then there are many options from which to choose. It is obvious that the end of Roman Britain was far from a sudden occurrence but, rather, a long decline with roots in the third century. Social upheavals (including the anarchic combination of invasion and banditry we see during the transition from antiquity to the early medieval period), the dissolution of a militarized society, the disappearance of public spirit, the institutionalization of class divisions, and the decline of urban culture were not caused by the severance of imperial ties, but rather by a process unwittingly instigated by the empire itself. This was the situation on the eve of the sub-Roman era; we shall see that despite the slow

⁸² Jones, *Roman Britain*, 168-9.

⁸³ Jones, *Roman Britain*, 171.

atrophy, in many ways, the political and cultural separation from mainstream Western Europe would have relatively abrupt consequences.

Chapter Two

The Anglo-Saxons in Antiquity: The Continental Origins of the Germanic Settlers of Britain

Ethnicity and Identity in Late Antiquity

We have seen how late Roman Britain slowly began to collapse after the reforms of the third century. Now we shall turn to the antique origins of the invaders of sub-Roman Britain. Continuing with the stated methodological theme of this thesis, approaching the sub-Roman period from a Romanist rather than medievalist perspective, this chapter discusses the origins and formation of the Anglo-Saxons and associated peoples. Classical sources are relied upon quite heavily (with the exception, of course, of Bede) which in many ways presents a rather lopsided picture; the Saxons played the villain role in the later empire and enter the historical record many times, whereas the Angles whose name will evolve into the collective ethnonym for the combined groups discussed here, were hardly noticed by the Romans. Aside from obligatory citations in the Tacitus and Ptolemy surveys they are nearly invisible in antiquity and overshadowed by many long-extinct tribes, even within their own specific continental homeland. In this chapter we shall see how the Germanic invaders of sub-Roman Britain had a centuries-long history of raiding the Channel and North Sea and, indeed, how the Saxons may be traced back to the first century.

The movements of the Anglo-Saxons were part of a far larger pan-Eurasian upheaval that witnessed the displacement, extinction, or coalescence of numerous Germanic, Iranian, Slavic, and Turkic groups during the transitional centuries between antiquity and the Middle Ages. With a few exceptions (e.g. Alans and Huns) most incursions into the Western Roman Empire were made by Germanic peoples. The languages and cultures of these peoples generally were absorbed into local Latin dialects and institutions, many times developing into new political structures, with the notable exception of Britain, where a West Germanic tongue surfaces in the early seventh century out of the darkness, nearly two centuries after the traditional withdrawal of Rome. Hence, we are faced with a relatively large and ostensibly empty window of time bordered at its beginning and end by ethnic, linguistic, and socio-political situations so remarkably different that broader explanations must be considered beyond our pitifully meager textual sources.

This chapter deals with the continental origin of the Germanic component of early medieval England. Theories on ethnicity and identity have undergone drastic overhauls since the late 1940s, particularly concerning participants in the Migration Age. As we are discussing a point in time and space where Latin, Celtic, and Germanic cultures overlap some attention must be paid to this issue. Further elaboration to this end lies in defining the rather fluid terms ‘ethnicity’ and ‘identity.’ To examine all the possible interpretations of these concepts in the sub-Roman and early Anglo-Saxon contexts would require much space and render very little payoff. Therefore, when I discuss ethnicity in relation to the Anglo-Saxons I am speaking in the broad sense of shared identity, both internally and externally, not necessarily attached to genetic relationships. Common descent seems not to have been an “ethnic” requirement in the early

Middle Ages and fictive relationships could exist.⁸⁴ In the later Roman Empire population groups bear little resemblance to those recorded by Tacitus and Ptolemy, though the names may carry on (it is difficult, for instance, to reconcile the Suebi entering Iberia in the early fifth century with the broad religio-political “Suebic” confederacy uniting small first-century groups, including the Angli).

The remainder of this thesis relies on two contemporary approaches on the problems surrounding the ethnicity and identity of Germanic tribes. The first is the ‘culture history’ view on ancient ethnography, according to which a historically attested people should maintain a coherent and definable material culture. Even ethnogenesis should leave some material record. However, this perspective has its limits. For instance, the area in this study possesses a very broad and generic material culture at the dawn of history, impenetrable using Tacitus’ tribal catalogue as a guide. While coastal peoples obviously will have a different life-style than forest peoples, to distinguish beyond this is nearly impossible. This situation is not unusual; prehistoric North American archaeology, for example, is defined by regional culture areas and attempts to relate material to historically attested tribes (except for a few specific cases) is difficult and discouraged.

On the southern shore of the North Sea, in the Lowlands (used here in the sense of coastal Belgium, the Netherlands, and northwest Germany) and the Jutland peninsula, material culture evolves to become more ethnically specific as the region becomes more “Romanized” (or “globalized,” to use Peter Heather’s term). As time elapses we become able, for instance, to

⁸⁴ J. Moreland, “Ethnicity, Power and the English,” in *Social Identity in Early Medieval Britain*, ed. W. O. Frazer and A. Tyrell, (London: Leicester University Press, 2000), 23-52.

distinguish between insular “Angles” or “Jutes” based upon cultural markers (e.g. brooches and other jewelry). We can even track the possible movements of tribes through specific ceramic styles. While this chapter focuses on early historical references to the Angles, Saxons, Jutes, et al., it also covers the window of time in which they become archaeologically visible.

The second approach in this thesis involves tribal identity. Comparative Germanic ethnography in the last half-century focuses on the “*Traditionskern*” model of ethnogenesis, wherein group identity is less dependent on actual genetic relationships than on a ‘core of tradition’ maintained by a divinely-descended ruling class or family. While this model takes on greater importance later when discussing the fifth-century origins of insular Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, we can see its signs beginning to form before they have left the continent.

Contact with the Roman Empire had the effect of causing smaller population units along its frontier to combine and coalesce into composite groupings and confederacies. This is a fairly common occurrence and can be observed in many times and places when a more politically and technologically sophisticated culture confronts an essentially tribal people. This situation can be observed all along the perimeter of the empire in peripheral areas it affected but did not absorb. In the east various steppe tribes combined to form the Sarmatians and, ultimately (from a European perspective), the Alans. In the west proto-historic tribes evolved into the Franks and Saxons. On the edges of Britannia this phenomenon is particularly observable. Numerous peoples recorded by Ptolemy in modern Scotland combined into the Caledonii and Vitriones and, eventually, united as the Picts. Even Ireland experienced regional political unifications without any known imperial confrontations.

Angles, Jutes, and Frisians have antecedents mentioned in Tacitus' *Germania*, implying pre-contact origins. The Saxons do not appear in *Germania* and strong evidence for their pre-contact existence *under this name* is controversial and improbable. However, there is good evidence that the nucleus of the Saxon Confederacy may be the Chauci, a large tribe first contacted by the Romans over a century before *Germania* was composed in the same area the Saxons will later appear. Aside from social and political upheavals, the appearance of the Roman Empire in Northern Europe also drastically altered the economy, modernizing Germanic agricultural technology leading to a population explosion, and at the same time presenting targets for raiders and pirates. These are the dynamics that turn the 'noble savages' of Tacitus into the Saxon threat of Gildas.

In *De Excidio Britanniae* Gildas only uses the name 'Saxons,' a word he utters with self-conscious reluctance and loathing.⁸⁵ Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*, on the other hand, is where the trinity of Angles, Saxons, and Jutes first surfaces. After identifying their approximate continental origins in Germany, he places the Jutes in Kent, the Isle of Wight, and coastal Hampshire, divides the Saxons into South, East, and West sub-groups, and distributes the Angles amongst Middle and East factions, Mercians, Northumbrians, "and the other English peoples."⁸⁶ Indeed, Bede noted that native Britons still call the Anglo-Saxons by the distorted name 'Garmans' in his own time.⁸⁷ Arguably, far more has been written about how, why, and,

⁸⁵ Gildas, *De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae*, 23.1, in *Gildas: The Ruin of Britain and Other Works*, trans. Michael Winterbottom (London: Phillimore, 1978), 26.

⁸⁶ Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*, 1.15, in *Opera Historica*, vol. 1, trans. J. E. King, Loeb Classical Library 246 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 69-73.

⁸⁷ Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 5.9, in *Opera Historica*, vol. 2, trans. J. E. King, Loeb Classical Library 248 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 235.

particularly, *when* they arrived in Britain than what they were doing in the centuries prior to their appearance in modern England. This thesis should make their origins a bit clearer.

Jutland, Friesland, and Coastal Germany in Antiquity

The main groups to participate in the *adventus Saxonum* came from a relatively limited coastal area that included all of Jutland (modern Denmark and northern Germany) and the Frisian coast stretching from the southern Danish peninsula, past the Rhine delta, through much of the coastal Netherlands. The area is low-lying, with parts being below sea-level, and contains innumerable islands, bogs, and tidal marshes. The region has been home to Indo-European-speaking peoples since the Bronze Age and Germanic-speakers since at least the latter half of the first millennium BC. In the pre-Roman Iron Age groups living in the interior practiced extensive agriculture, fields spread over a large area supporting a small population, without fertilizer or plows. This economic strategy, if it can even be called that, limited the occupation of a given site to a generation or two before the land became infertile, forcing the settlers to move on. While the sophisticated and complex Celtic cultures to the west had a strong influence on their more backward and recent neighbors, for some reason their field systems and agricultural techniques are not seriously adopted beyond the Rhine. Indeed, Germanic fields with scratched surfaces are known to overlie plowed and overturned Celtic fields.⁸⁸ This would all change upon Roman contact leading to a marked population explosion.

The coastal regions and salt marshes had an entirely different, sea-based economy. Artificial mounds known as *terpen* in Old Frisian, meaning ‘village’ (*-thorp* in Old English),

⁸⁸ Peter Heather, *Empires and Barbarians: The Fall of Rome and the Birth of Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 48-9.

were constructed to project above high-tide levels and continued to accumulate debris throughout their occupation. Having a more stable survival strategy than primitive agriculture, some *terpen* could be occupied for centuries.

The Anglo-Saxon homeland is notorious for sending ambiguous signals as to the ethnic and linguistic nature of its prehistoric occupants. The Rhine was known to the Romans as a defined contact point between Celtic and Germanic peoples, though even in antiquity this simplistic picture faded upon closer analysis. Caesar acknowledged Germanic tribes among the Belgae (the *Germani Cisrhenani*)⁸⁹ and some Gaulish-speaking tribes identified as Germanic (e.g. the Treveri). Caesar even classified the Belgae as a separate people from either the Gauls or Germans (they are one of the famous three parts Gaul is divided into) though their proper nouns would indicate they were Celtic-speakers.⁹⁰

In the northern quarter of Jutland, historical home to the Jutes, the iconic Gundestrup Cauldron was found in a peat bog. Though this silver vessel, created in stages over several centuries with heterogeneous multicultural imagery that can be traced as far as India, has graced the covers of many popular books of modern Celtic romanticism, few scholars consider it to be of Celtic, or even northern European, manufacture. One school of thought maintains it arrived in Jutland from across central Europe through a series of raids⁹¹ and another theorizes that it is the cumulative product of the diverse realities of the Roman world and simply happened to end up in a rather backwater part of it.⁹² One might speculate after contemplating the nature of piratical

⁸⁹ Caesar, *The Gallic War*, 2.4, trans. H. J. Edwards, Loeb Classical Library 72 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 93-4.

⁹⁰ Caesar, *The Gallic War*, 1.1, 3.

⁹¹ A. K. Bergquist and T. F. Taylor, "The Origin of the Gundestrup Cauldron," *Antiquity* 61 (1987): 10-24.

⁹² S. Nielsen, J. Andersen, J. Baker, C. Christensen, J. Glastrup, et al., "The Gundestrup Cauldron: New Scientific and Technical Investigations," *Acta Archaeologica* 76 (2005): 1-58.

North Sea peoples that the true answer lies in between and it came to rest in its final provenance as the booty of sea-raiders.

On a related note, the anaerobic conditions of the peat bogs in the Lowlands, coastal Germany, and Jutland peninsula have preserved numerous sacrificed bodies of individuals stabbed, bludgeoned, strangled, or hanged (or any combination of these execution methods) during the Iron Age. These bodies have produced a wealth of literature regarding early pagan Germanic practices and Tacitus himself gives two different accounts of the motivations for the executions. He connects bog bodies, on one hand, with the dispatch of criminals when discussing the generic details of Germanic society⁹³ and with human sacrifice to the Goddess Nerthus when specifically relating the most notable qualities of the Anglii (Angles) and Eudoses (Jutes).⁹⁴ Tacitus implies that the Anglii and Eudoses (along with several other groups) belong collectively to a single unified cult. This will be explored in more detail later in the chapter.

Rome never conquered the homelands of the Angles and Saxons for the simple reason that the price outweighed the gain. For the Romans to successfully absorb a territory three criteria had to be met: there needed to be a fairly centralized authority to press into clientage and be adopted into the Roman political system and there needed to be reasonably advanced agricultural technology to support both the natives *and* their Roman overlords, hopefully with enough surplus to export. Lastly, of course, profit from the new territory had to surpass the cost of occupation. The land beyond the Rhine met none of these criteria (nor did Caledonia and Hibernia, for that matter) and resistance, beginning with the unspeakable disaster in Teutoberg

⁹³ Tacitus, *Germania*, 12, trans. M. Hutton, Loeb Classical Library 35 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), 148-9.

⁹⁴ Tacitus, *Germania*, 40, 194-7.

Forest in AD 9, ultimately led the empire in the second century to accept the Rhine as its northeastern border.

As usual with frontier regions Roman traders entered the Lowlands and Jutland well before the arrival of Julius Caesar in 55 BC. The famous Amber Route had a western branch which reached into modern Denmark and two paths from the Rhine met a track coming from Bohemia in Thuringia and continued toward the Weser and Elbe and ultimately the North Sea. Coastal trade probably also existed, with the Frisii and Chauci functioning as middlemen. While never part of the empire, an astonishingly large number of first- and second-century Roman prestige goods have been unearthed near the North Sea coast and Jutland. It is difficult to imagine what local trade goods, other than slaves and animal products, would have been attractive to the Romans.⁹⁵ Amber, presumably, accounts for a portion of the reciprocal exchange, though its concentration on the Baltic is well-known and the northwest must have been seen as a lesser market. It would seem logical that raiding, for slaves and marketable items, would be encouraged by Roman contact and meet the demand for western prestige items.

Sea Raiding on the North Sea in Antiquity

Roman Britain was ultimately occupied by the very group of sea-raiders that had harassed it for centuries. Indeed, one would not be far off the mark to claim that piracy in various degrees of intensity was a fact of life on the North Sea and Channel from prehistory well into the late Middle Ages. It can easily be demonstrated that events and processes that would culminate

⁹⁵ Malcolm Todd, *The Northern Barbarians 100 BC to AD 300* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 22-3.

in the Anglo-Saxon arrival in modern England began before Britain had even been absorbed into the Roman Empire.

Seafaring in the coastal lowlands of the continent and North Sea stretches back into antiquity and the inhabitants of the lowland coast and Rhine were particularly adept seamen. One famous incident in first-century Roman Britain attests to Germanic expertise in naval matters. A group of Usipi auxiliaries under Agricola seized three Liburnian galleys, a fairly complex vessel, evaded capture, and miraculously circumnavigated Scotland.⁹⁶ Though the deserters were shipwrecked on the coast of Jutland or Germany while heading to their home on the middle Rhine due, according to Tacitus, to their incompetence, it has been interpreted that this was an incredible feat of navigation under the circumstances and probably ended with the sailors losing control of the vessel due to hunger or scurvy.⁹⁷

The Chauci were the most prominent and numerous sea-raiding people of the first and second centuries, dwelling immediately south of the Jutland peninsula, centered on the Weser and Elbe rivers, and directly bordering the territory of the Frisii to the west. In the first century grave goods in this area are uniform and of low quality, indicating that the tribe was neither highly centralized nor stratified.⁹⁸ Pliny the Elder, in a rare eyewitness account written sometime between AD 77 and his death during the eruption of Vesuvius in AD 79, speaks of the Chauci living on raised *terpen* above the tide, keeping no livestock, burning peat, and surviving almost entirely from fishing. They had no nobility and Pliny implies they have somehow been cursed to pursue a lifestyle he considered ‘wretched.’ While the context of the reference is in his book on

⁹⁶ Tacitus, *Agricola*, 28, trans. M. Hutton, Loeb Classical Library 35 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), 77-8.

⁹⁷ John Haywood, *Dark Age Naval Power: A Reassessment of Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Seafaring Activity* (Hockwold-cum-Wilton, Norfolk: Anglo-Saxon Books, 1999), 18-19.

⁹⁸ Todd, *Northern Barbarians*, 44-8.

trees and the accommodations made by peoples living without them, he notes in passing that the Chauci have access to some of the taller forests in the region.⁹⁹ Hence, while the context describes them as impoverished beachcombers, one can read between the lines that they have the facilities for shipbuilding. Tacitus' description of the Chauci, twenty years later, is almost a gushing testimonial to their nobility, integrity, and non-aggression. Other ancient authors' opinions were deeply at odds with this view. Dio Cassius mentions the tribe several times: first when their land was invaded by Drusus in 12 BC (who was saved by the Frisii when his ships were beached by the tide),¹⁰⁰ and second when he reported that Chauci pirates were defeated by the governor of the province of Belgica in AD 41.¹⁰¹ Though he does not mention them by name in his account of the AD 9 Battle of Teutoberg Forest, a devastating Roman loss in which three legions were massacred by a coordinated alliance of Germanic tribes, Dio's description of the Chauci's AD 41 defeat notes the recovery of a Roman standard apparently obtained as a trophy at Teutoberg Forest.¹⁰² The Chauci returned to Belgica in AD 47 under a Canninefate deserter, were defeated by a Roman fleet (which included the young Pliny, who recorded their lifestyle three decades later), and were subject to later reprisal raids by the empire.¹⁰³

The Chauci took part in the Batavian Revolt of Civilis in AD 69-70. What began as a fairly localized rebellion of the Batavi and Canninefates expanded into a general uprising of the northern Germanic tribes, with the Chauci and Frisii joining in later followed by the proto-

⁹⁹ Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, 16.1-2, trans. H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library 385 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1945), 386-91.

¹⁰⁰ Dio Cassius, *Roman Histories*, 54.32, trans. E. Cary, Loeb Classical Library 175 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970),

¹⁰¹ Dio Cassius, *Histories*, 60. 8.7, 389.

¹⁰² Dio Cassius, *Histories*, 60. 8.7, 389.

¹⁰³ Tacitus, *Annales*, 11.18-19, trans. John Jackson, Loeb Classical Library 312 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 276-81.

Frankish Bructeri, Tencteri, and Usipi.¹⁰⁴ Much of the action of the revolt took place on the lower Rhine with the Frisii being particularly active in destroying Roman fleets and garrisons.

Between the Batavian Revolt and the later second century little is heard from the Chauci. Tacitus' 'noble savage' opinion of the tribe may be explained by the fact that he discusses them in *Germania* a generation after the revolt when they were presumably weakened and pacified.¹⁰⁵ A century after the uprising evidence of piracy begins to surface in the Channel and North Sea once again. Coin hoards in Brittany concentrate toward coastal areas and southern Britain experiences the 'Antonine Fires,' a series of burnt villages, mentioned in the last chapter, too numerous to be written off as coincidence. The Chauci are the only pirates known to have been active in this period;¹⁰⁶ in their last recorded reference they are once again repelled by the governor of Belgica in the AD 170s.¹⁰⁷ Archaeological material in the Chauci homeland begins to change dramatically during this time, as well. The late second century saw the appearance of aristocratic cemeteries where previously there had only been uniform and impoverished burials. Settlement sites at this time begin to show evidence of trans-generational dominant families living within discreet and occasionally palisaded compounds. The *terp* settlement of Feddersen Wierde near Bremerhaven, occupied from the first through the fifth centuries, illustrates this new and radical social stratification. In the first century of its existence there is no evidence of social differentiation; dwellings are uniform and unremarkable. After 100 it is clear that one group has taken up residence within a stockade on the edge of the village. Within this enclosed space could

¹⁰⁴Tacitus, *Histories*, 4. 21, 27, 79, 5. 19, trans. Clifford H. Moore, Loeb Classical Library 249 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 40-3, 50-3, 154-7, 206-9.

¹⁰⁵Tacitus, *Germania*, 35, 184-7.

¹⁰⁶ Haywood, *Dark Age*, 29-30.

¹⁰⁷ Aelius Spartianus, "Didius Julianus" 1.7, in *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, trans. David Magie, Loeb Classical Library 139 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 348-53.

be found workshops, farm buildings, storehouses and, tellingly, a large banqueting hall.¹⁰⁸ As the Chauci did not directly border the Roman Empire and had little to trade it stands to reason that the wealth that fueled this new stratification was obtained through raiding.

Piracy increases in the third century for a number of reasons. The Third-Century Crisis had destabilized the Roman government and tribal structures were evolving with confederacies being established that would come to dominate the early Middle Ages.¹⁰⁹ Furthermore, a marine transgression began in the early third century, dramatically raising the sea-level on the North Sea coast over the next hundred years.¹¹⁰ At the mouth of the Rhine the rise reached 14 ft. In the Lowlands the agricultural economy was destroyed followed by massive depopulation.¹¹¹ The Roman reaction to this was to demilitarize the area as there was little to defend. The early Franks, in turn, moved into the vacuum.¹¹² The coastal lands of the Chauci region had undergone reclamation to accommodate an expanding population during the second century (a response to agricultural advances introduced by Roman contact) and after the flooding of the third raiding may have become a survival tactic.¹¹³

The Origins of the Saxons

The name ‘Saxon’ is most commonly thought to have originated from a broad style of knife/short sword common to Germanic peoples in late antiquity and the early medieval period.

¹⁰⁸ Todd, *Northern Barbarians*, 85-8.

¹⁰⁹ Haywood, *Dark Age*, 41-2.

¹¹⁰ H. Porter, “Environmental Change in the Third Century,” in A. King and M. Henig, eds., *The Roman West in the Third Century*, BAR IS 109 (Oxford: 1981), 353-5.

¹¹¹ H. Thoen, “The Third-Century Occupation of Belgium: The Evidence of the Coastal Plain,” in King and Henig. *The Roman West*, 41-2.

¹¹² Haywood, *Dark Age*, 47-8.

¹¹³ Haywood, *Dark Age*, 48.

While one occasionally may see a reference to the Latin *saxum* (stone) in the etymology of the name, knives play a key element in Saxon origin myths in both Britain and Germany and, indeed, may have had connotations equivalent to the modern ‘gunman’ or even ‘terrorist.’

Writing in the mid-tenth century Widukind of Corvey, in *Deeds of the Saxons*, relates two mythological origins for his people, placing their genesis either with the Danes or as lost remnants of Alexander the Great’s Macedonian army. While Widukind is confused as to the actual homeland of the Saxons (he fallaciously claims they are mentioned by Josephus) he is certain that they first appear in Northern Europe as a maritime people landing at Hadeln on the lower Elbe and immediately going to war with the native Thuringians. This war ends in a treacherous ‘Night of the Long Knives’ episode, when the leaders of the Thuringians are dispatched during an ostensibly unarmed peace council in a manner nearly identical to the account of Hengist’s assassination of Vortigern’s leading men in sub-Roman Britain. Widukind speaks at some length concerning the invitation to the Saxons to defend the Britons from the Scots and Picts in an account that contains misinformation very similar to that of Gildas (e.g. both claim Hadrian’s Wall was constructed immediately prior to the Roman evacuation though Widukind alone claims that the *Anglo*-Saxons are so named because Britain lies at an angle to the rest of Europe). Strangely, while he seems to follow other mistaken sources, flatters the continental Saxons with nationalistic praise, and mentions no specific names, the final note to the Anglo-Saxon passage includes a strong recommendation to read a book that can only be a reference to Bede’s *Historia Ecclesiastica*.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁴ Widukind of Corvey, *Deeds of the Saxons*, trans. Bernard Bachrach and David Bachrach, *Medieval Texts in Translation* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2014), 5-12.

In the attempt to define the reality of Saxon origins one of the most frustrating aspects is the supposed first use of the name in Claudius Ptolemy's mid-second-century *Geography*.¹¹⁵ While Tacitus did not mention Saxons in his AD 98 *Germania*, one Ptolemaic manuscript speaks of Saxones living between the Warnow River in modern Schleswig-Holstein and the lower Elbe River in modern Germany. A single manuscript of the work reporting Saxon presence in this area exists; all other versions of *Geography* make no mention of Saxones and put the *Axones* (sometimes spelled Auxones) in this area.¹¹⁶ Tacitus speaks of this region rather thoroughly, noting the presence of Anglii (proto-Angles), Eudoses (proto-Jutes), Reudigni, Aviones, Varini, Suarines, and Nuitones, but *not* the Saxones.¹¹⁷ It should be noted that Tacitus places the Chauci immediately west of the area, separating these tribes from the Frisii. The difficulty arises in the fact that most modern publications of Ptolemy seem to be based on the single manuscript that refers to the Saxones and continue to note their presence in the area, with most scholarly discussions of Saxon origins taking this at face value, though several very strong arguments indicate it is an anachronism. First, there is no perceptible change in material culture in a fairly homogenous cultural-historical horizon indicating the entrance of outsiders into the area between the Tacitus and Ptolemy accounts. Second, Greeks and Romans considered borders in terms of rivers due to their importance in drier regions. As Germans did not define territory this way it is unlikely that, had the Saxons arrived in the fifty years between *Germania* and *Geography*, they would be strong enough to maintain such well-defined frontiers at the strategic entrance to the Jutland peninsula.

¹¹⁵ Ptolemy, *The Geography of Claudius Ptolemy*, trans. Edward Luther Stevenson (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2011), 163-4.

¹¹⁶ Steven Johnson, "Late Roman Defenses and the *Limes*," in D.E. Johnston ed., *The Saxon Shore*, CBA Research Report 18 (London: Council for British Archaeology, 1977), 67.

¹¹⁷ Tacitus, *Germania*, 40, 195-7.

Perhaps the strongest arguments against a Ptolemaic reference to the Saxons are paleographic and concern the single manuscript mentioning the tribe: it is more likely that a later copyist ‘correcting’ a text would replace an unfamiliar word such as Axones or Auxones with a familiar word like Saxones rather than replacing the familiar with the unfamiliar.¹¹⁸ A far more likely scribal error at the root of the misunderstanding was the simple misspelling of Ptolemy’s probable (and rather typical) garbling of the tribal name Aviones, a people Tacitus places in this very location, as Axiones or Auxiones, an error that was further corrupted by at least one scribe into Saxones but left intact in the majority of the extant manuscripts. Though consecutive scribal errors seem fairly likely, the most robust argument against the Saxons appearing in *Geography* is the singularity of the citation and the sheer improbability of the Saxons being missed by Tacitus, found by Ptolemy, and disappearing again from Roman records for another two entire centuries.¹¹⁹ Hence, when evaluating scholarship placing the Saxons in the context of the early empire, one must take the legitimacy of the ‘earliest source’ into account.

Thus, the Saxons seem to be a product of *late* antiquity. Their name may appear in an index of provinces dated to the first quarter of the fourth century, a list which was revised in the last quarter, by which time other certain references are known. Orosius, writing long after the fact, notes that Saxon and Frankish pirates, while initially hunted down by Carausius, were later

¹¹⁸ This is an example of the paleographic principle of *difficilior lectio potior*, which is the notion that if one or more manuscripts is the more difficult to understand, it is likely to be the correct reading. As scribes could remove, alter, or simplify rare or archaic linguistic forms to fit their own understanding of the text, the more difficult variants would probably remain closer to the original. L. D. Reynolds and N. G. Wilson, *Scribes and Scholars: A Guide to the Transmission of Greek and Latin Texts* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 221.

¹¹⁹ Matthias Springer, “Location in Time and Space,” in *The Continental Saxons from the Migration Period to the Tenth Century: An Ethnographic Perspective*, ed. D. H. Green and F. Siegmund, *Studies in Historical Archaeoethnology* 6 (Dover, NH: Boydell Press, 2003), 12-15.

employed by him in his revolt of the 280s.¹²⁰ Bede later repeats this tale.¹²¹ While the Franks are known from other sources during this time, there is always the uncomfortable possibility that Orosius' use of the Saxon name is an anachronism. The first concrete and uncontroversial mention of the Saxons is in a speech by Julian the Apostate in 356 where they are cited as allies to the usurper Magnentius. The Franks are also mentioned (again) as allies in this context.

Matthias Springer notes a tendency to consider the name of any group in the Migration period and early Middle Ages to be an ethnonym. He observes how groups carrying the name Saxon were too widespread in late antiquity to have stemmed from a common ancestor. Therefore, the original meaning of the word may not have necessarily referred to a "tribe," but possibly a type of raider, particularly sea-raiders.¹²² In this sense, from the fourth century into the middle of the fifth the term may have been more akin to the medieval word 'viking' or the modern term 'terrorist.' As the ethnonyms of Germanic tribes seem to broadly connote locations or qualities of a given people and weapons appear rarely in names, one could speculate that a group named for a *seax* could possibly be meant as 'the Cut-Throats.' The *sicarii* (dagger men), militant assassins in first-century Judea, may suggest how the name originally arose. The evolution of the name 'Norman' is an appropriate, if ironic, analogy for how the term changed: "Northmen" began denoting a Scandinavian sea-raider and developed unquestionable ethnic connotations over time.¹²³

It is very probable that the Chauci formed the nucleus of the Saxons in coastal Germany and the Lowlands for several reasons. Again, we see no change in material culture in the region

¹²⁰ Orosius, *Seven Books of History Against the Pagans: The Apology of Paulus Orosius*, trans. Irving Woodward Raymond (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936), 335.

¹²¹ Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 1.6, 33.

¹²² Springer, "Location in Time," 15-16.

¹²³ Springer, "Location in Time," 16.

when the name first appears (assuming its occurrence in the sole Ptolemy manuscript is a mistake). Tacitus emphasizes that the Chauci were by far the most numerous people in the area at the end of the first century; we last hear of them in the late second century, and the Weser and Elbe rivers were the homeland to both groups with historical references interrupted only by the literary poverty of the Third-Century Crisis.¹²⁴ Furthermore, the two peoples were predominantly known in antiquity for sea-raiding. This is not to say that the Saxons are simply the Chauci renamed, but it stands to reason that the developing aristocracies we see in second-century villages such as Feddersen Wierde would have acquired enough wealth and had access to enough manpower to absorb the smaller groups in the area and transform into a new confederacy with new social structures. Neighboring groups such as the Aviones, Reudigni, and Varini, which disappear from history, are likely candidates for absorption into this confederacy. The Frisii were presumably powerful enough on their own due to their frequent appearance in Roman records and the Anglii and Eudoses were too distant and stable.

If indeed the Chauci were the dominant group within the Saxon confederacy there are some indications they may have retained their identity for some time. In the late 350s, in retaliation against the Frankish and Alamannic incursions across the frontier, Emperor Julian led a massive force beyond the Rhine. Zosimus records that a sub-tribe of the Saxons, for whom he uses the otherwise unknown name Kouadoi, was sent into the empire to avenge this retaliation. The Franks refused to let them cross their territory and exacerbate the situation so the Kouadoi seized an island at the mouth of the Rhine which was technically Roman territory, but occupied by Salian Franks. After the Kouadoi had expelled the Franks, this island was used as a base to

¹²⁴ Haywood, *Dark Age*, 45.

stage hit-and-run sea-raids on Roman territory.¹²⁵ Haywood notes this tactic, raids originating from island strongholds at the mouths of rivers, would later become a favorite of the Saxons and Vikings in the Middle Ages.¹²⁶ While several tribes have been proposed for the Kouadoi, the Chauci make the most sense considering the geography of the situation (the Quadi, for instance, while having a very similar name, were on the Danube at the time). This is a small bit of circumstantial evidence that the nucleus of the Saxons maintained their identity, much like the Salians did within the Frankish confederacy.

The term *litus Saxonicum* attests to the fact that the Saxons were the predominant sea-raiders in the late fourth century. No other Germanic group is recorded as engaging in piracy for the last century of the empire. Considering the large role the Angles and Jutes play in Bede's history along with the Saxons, it is strange that they are never mentioned in antiquity as sea-raiders (Frisians, on the other hand, appear in this role several times). There are two possible reasons for this absence. On one hand, if they did engage in piracy, they may have limited their activities to eastern Britain and operated under the radar of Roman chroniclers, and on the other, the Romans may have simply referred to any raiders from coastal Germany and Jutland as Saxons.¹²⁷ The latter possibility seems more likely as the Romans generally were not known for being accurate when distinguishing between tribal peoples, Tacitus himself frequently using the generic term 'Germans' outside his study of the subject. If the early Angles and Jutes actually were raiding and lumped by the Romans under the generic term "Saxon" it would add weight to the argument that the word originally suggested a sea-raider rather than the residents of northern Germany.

¹²⁵ Zosimus, *Nova Historia*, 3.6.1-4 (London: Green and Chaplin 1814).

¹²⁶ Haywood, *Dark Ages*, 66.

¹²⁷ Haywood, *Dark Ages*, 78.

The Origins of the Angles and Jutes

Examining the origins of the Angles and Jutes is difficult as ancient authors paid little attention to the peoples in Schleswig-Holstein beyond what has already been related and, other than being listed in catalogues along with other tribes destined to vanish soon after, and a single mid-sixth-century reference in Procopius as residing in Britain,¹²⁸ their real history begins with Bede. Discussing the continental Jutes brings one dangerously close to several complex rabbit holes, many involving the identity of the Geats and the homeland of the Goths.

We have already touched on the prehistory of Jutland earlier with some of the more spectacular and well-known aspects of its Iron Age culture. Before the Angles and Jutes inhabited the peninsula the area was known to the classical world to be the home of the Cimbri, Teutones, and Ambrones. According to Strabo, who cautions us that his report is extremely improbable or even incorrect, in the late second century BC these peoples left modern Denmark due to a “tidal flood,” an event which *can* be interpreted as a garbled account of an early marine transgression, though Strabo’s highly skeptical description reads more like an account of a *tsunami*. From here they began an unlikely trek across Europe, from the Balkans to Iberia, warring against several Gaulish tribes before supposedly being annihilated by the Roman Republic.¹²⁹ Over a century after the fact both Tacitus¹³⁰ and Ptolemy¹³¹ locate the Cimbri on the northernmost tip of Jutland, the Teutones, Ambrones, and majority of Cimbri having presumably not survived the migration across Europe. Nearly every aspect of these tribes leads to

¹²⁸ Procopius, *History of the Wars*, 8.20, trans. H. B. Dewing, Loeb Classical Library 217 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1928), 255.

¹²⁹ Strabo, *Geography*, 7.2, trans. Howard Leonard Jones, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), 165-7.

¹³⁰ Tacitus, *Germania*, 37, 186-91.

¹³¹ Ptolemy, *Geography*, 64.

controversy; whether they should be classified as Celts or Germans, if they truly originated in Jutland before the migration, or if it's simply an ancient and confused legend (Strabo notes that some versions of the story drag the Cimbri all the way to the Sea of Azov where some become the Cimmerians and ancestral Scythians). Tacitus is quite specific with details, and even dates, but his description dissolves into a rather nationalistic account of an existential Germanic "threat."

Examining the sources concerning the Cimbric tribes and their fatal brush with the Roman Republic leaves one with the impression that there must be some kernel of truth to the ancient legends and the supposition that their remnants, clinging to the tip of the Danish peninsula, must have been absorbed by or evolved into the Angles, Jutes, or Danes in late antiquity.

Unlike the Saxons and Frisians, the Angles and Jutes made little impression on classical authors. As noted, this is quite likely because they were simply overshadowed by their more rapacious neighbors. While Ptolemy mentions the Angli, no people cited in his *Geography* could conceivably be a corruption of any name associated with the Jutes.¹³² He was either unaware of them or labeled them under an unrecognizable name (he places an otherwise unknown 'Pharodini' in the location in which the Jutes are found in Tacitus).¹³³

Along with the Reudigni, Aviones, Varini, Suarines, Nuitones, and Langobardi, the proto-historic Angles and Jutes belonged to the Suebic Confederacy, a broad tribal association centered around common cultic practices led by the Semnones. Representatives from each tribe met in a sacred grove at some unstated interval to perform a ritual about which Tacitus speaks

¹³² Ptolemy, *Geography*, 67.

¹³³ The Pharodini, a name not known from other sources, is the only group dwelling immediately by the Angli that could possibly be an unknown name for the Jutes.

little except that it involved human sacrifice. As noted in the context of bog bodies, first-century Angles and Jutes belonged to a localized sub-category of the Suebic Confederacy which performed rites specifically to the goddess Nerthus on an unnamed island. While the term ‘Suebi’ or ‘Suevi’ is first used by Julius Caesar in 55 BC in a context quite consistent with that of Tacitus’ image of a large confederacy (though Caesar interprets it as a massive nation),¹³⁴ it is difficult to imagine the Angli and Eudoses participating into the third century, when many tribes were absorbed into the Alamanni and others migrated out of the region. Hairstyles played a significant role in establishing status among the Suebic confederacy; the famous Swabian knot, resembling a Princess Leia side-bun confined to a single side of the head, and more elaborate coifs for chieftains.¹³⁵

Ptolemy refers to the “*Suevi Angli*”, a qualifier he otherwise only bestows on the “Suevi Semnones” and “Suevi Langobardi”, without any explanation.¹³⁶ This may be telling: fifty years earlier Tacitus discussed the Suebic Confederacy in three parts. The entirety of Chapter 39 is devoted to the Semnones as the nucleus of the confederacy. In the following chapter he discusses the Langobardi (who will become the Lombards) as an isolated group then lumps the Angli, Eudoses, Reudigni, Aviones, Varini, Suarines, and Nuitones together as a confederacy-within-a-confederacy. Taking into account that the Aviones may be corrupted into the Axones, the “Suevi Angli” are the only other member of this latter group Ptolemy recognizes, implying that by the mid-second century they have achieved dominance over, or even absorbed, the others. By reducing these groups to simply the Angles (and ignoring the Jutes) Ptolemy has ironically singled out the only group that will survive into the Middle Ages. Comparing Tacitus and

¹³⁴ Caesar, *The Gallic Wars*, 4.1-3, 180-5.

¹³⁵ Tacitus, *Germania*, 38-40, 192-7.

¹³⁶ Ptolemy, *Geography*, 63-4.

Ptolemy in this way is the only indication we have from antiquity that the Angles were a particularly powerful tribe.

From a Bedan perspective the Jutes are different from the Angles and Saxons in several ways. They possess a single kingdom in Britain at the time of the Gregorian Mission in 597, though they probably had previously controlled a defunct territory on the Isle of Wight/coastal Hampshire before being absorbed by the West Saxons and possibly comprised the Hæstingas tribe of Sussex (based upon Germanic Christian burials in pre-conversion contexts).¹³⁷ From an “ethnic” perspective they are in the minority, with several Angle and Saxon kingdoms confining them to Kent. However, when Britain re-enters the historical record they seem to be the most powerful kingdom, with marital connections to the Merovingians, as well as being the main channel by which continental trade items entered the country. They are also the means by which Roman Christianity is introduced to the insular Germanic tribes. As Bede is known for defining the English as a discreet group he seems to devote a very large space to its sole Jutish component.

Germanic Groups Peripheral to the Anglo-Saxons

Frisians

It is quite easy to forget that the movements of the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes were a northern manifestation of Migration Age upheavals that involved dozens of groups moving toward the empire over several centuries, and a general restructuring and reorganization of

¹³⁷ Martin Welch, “Early Anglo-Saxon Sussex,” in *The South Saxons*, ed. Peter Brandon (Chichester: Phillimore, 1978), 33-34.

earlier tribes and confederacies. In addition to the three groups possessing coherent kingdoms by the seventh century, others are possibly mentioned by Bede as having entered Britain during the sub-Roman period. Furthermore, while archaeology may *suggest* the presence of other peoples, the very nature of the discipline cautions against over-interpreting random finds of continental artifacts. For example, there could be many possible explanations for the origin of a hypothetical Frankish brooch recovered in a Kentish context, migration being one of the *least* probable. Nevertheless, there is fairly concrete evidence, both historical and archaeological, that other Germanic groups were in Britain in the sub-Roman period.

Though they maintained no known kingdoms in Britain, the Frisii, who have already been mentioned in this survey multiple times as occupants of the coastal Lowlands west of the Chauci and Saxons, were quite well-known in antiquity, as both raiders and Roman auxiliaries, and are the strongest candidates for providing a substantial contribution to early Anglo-Saxon England. Bede lists several continental tribes in an ambiguous statement toward the end of *Ecclesiastical History*, beginning with the Frisians.¹³⁸ We shall return to this list very shortly as it may imply specific minority populations in early medieval England, depending on how the passage is read. Journeys to Frisia, and Frisians within Britain, are noted several other times in Bede's history, though he never explicitly states they reside in his land. Procopius, writing nearly two centuries before Bede (but from a considerable distance), notes that Britain was inhabited by Britons, Angles, and Frisians.¹³⁹ The Saxons are oddly absent considering they were the most noteworthy group in the North Sea periphery, but this is our main piece of evidence for placing the Angles in sub-Roman Britain. The Old Frisian language is well-known as the closest relative

¹³⁸ Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 5.9, 235.

¹³⁹ Procopius, *History of the Wars*, 255.

to Old English, though this may not be due to reasons dating to antiquity. Indeed, the early English associations with Frisia, the ease of communication, and its proximity to both the southern English coast and the homelands of the Angles and Saxons make some population movement seem very likely.

The Frisii lived slightly closer to the Roman Empire than the proto-Angles, Saxons, and Jutes, which accounts for the reason they appear more frequently in Roman records. They enter history when Tacitus notes them as aiding Drusus in his attack on the Chauci in 12 BC.¹⁴⁰ In another work he divided them into greater and lesser subdivisions and placed them west of the Chauci.¹⁴¹ Ptolemy put them north of the proto-Frankish Bructeri.¹⁴² Pliny cites them as farmers and stock-breeders in contrast to the more maritime Chauci.¹⁴³ While their relationship with Rome began on a positive note it quickly declined. They were involved in several hostile encounters with the Romans in the first century, leading up to their participation in the Batavian Revolt in AD 70.

Despite much speculation concerning the Angles, Saxons, or Jutes residing in Britain as Roman auxiliaries there is no known literary or epigraphic evidence for this. However, we have strong evidence for substantial groups of Frisii in Roman Britain. Emperor Constantius Chlorus (293-306) forced the majority of them to settle as *lati* within the Roman Empire at the very end

¹⁴⁰ Tacitus, *Annals*, 4.72-3, 126-31.

¹⁴¹ Tacitus, *Germania*, 34-35, 182-7.

¹⁴² Ptolemy, *Geography*, 64.

¹⁴³ Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, 16.2, 386.

of the third century.¹⁴⁴ While the location is not specified, notable amounts of a style of earthenware, *Terp Tritzum*, unique to fourth-century Frisia have been found in Belgium and Kent.¹⁴⁵ There is also a controversial entry in the *Notitia Dignitatum* that refers to “Tribunus cohortis primae Frixagorum Vindobala.”¹⁴⁶ This cohort was stationed at the Vindobala fort on Hadrian’s Wall near the present town of Rudchester. It has been claimed that this is a copyist’s misspelling of ‘Frisiavonum.’¹⁴⁷ Identifying this mysterious name may not be as simple as writing it off to scribal error. The Frisiavones are mentioned by Pliny as dwelling on islands near the confluence of the Rhine and North Sea¹⁴⁸ – in the vicinity of the Frisii and possibly representing the tribal division reported by Tacitus. However, Pliny mentions the same tribe *again* as residing in Gallia Belgica. Due to the inarguable similarity of the names and locations one may speculate that the Rhine Frisiavones have a more probable connection to the Frisii than do the Gaulish Frisiavones. Nevertheless, it is strange that the name appears in a late-first-century book in the same general area where Frisian *Terp Tritzum* pottery will appear two centuries later.

While there are no direct literary references to the Frisii in Britain aside from the possible *Notitia Dignitatum* reference, there are *eight* monumental inscriptions referring to the

¹⁴⁴ Anonymous, *The Pangyrici of Constantius*, 8.8-9, in *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors: The Panegyrici Latini*, trans. R. A. B. Mynors, ed. C. E. V. Nixon and Barbara Saylor Rogers (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 120-22.

¹⁴⁵ Jantina Helena Looijenga, “History, Archaeology, and Runes,” in “Runes Around the North Sea and on the Continent AD 150-700: Texts and Contexts,” PhD diss. Groningen University, 1996.

¹⁴⁶ *Notitia Dignitatum*, <http://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/source/notitiadignitatum.asp>

¹⁴⁷ Michael G Jarrett, “Non-Legionary Troops in Roman Britain: Part One, the Units,” *Britannia* 25 (1994): 60.

¹⁴⁸ Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, 4.25.15, 393.

Frisiavones, a single one of which has been dated.¹⁴⁹ Perhaps the most interesting of these, in light of the reference to the ostensibly misspelled “Frixagori” at the Vindobala fort on Hadrian’s Wall, was found on an altar by a wellspring in Carrawburgh, dedicated to the local goddess Coventina by a cohort of “Frixivones” sixteen miles from the Vindobala fort.¹⁵⁰ In other words, an epigraphic Frisian reference that replaces the “S” with an “X” was found within a few miles of the location of a documentary Frisian reference that replaces the “S” with an “X.” An altar dedicated by a Batavi unit was found in the same place. It would seem that the strange name on the *Notitia Dignitatum* may not be due to scribal error, but may come from some phenomenon causing the name to be pronounced or written differently in the area. In no other known circumstance or location does this “X-phenomenon” occur. Of the remaining Frisiavones inscriptions, one other, dedicated to Mars and the Emperor, was found near Hadrian’s Wall,¹⁵¹ three were found near Manchester,¹⁵² and the rest are scattered throughout the northern Midlands and Northumberland.

While the sheer number of Frisiavones inscriptions may be encouraging for those arguing in favor of pre-Anglo-Saxon Germanic settlements in Britain, the sole dated item is the tombstone of an individual attached to a Thracian cavalry unit near Cirencester ca. AD 100,¹⁵³ making it unlikely he represented a settled Frisian military community. None of the other inscriptions have been assigned *any* date making them useless for speculation on the presence of Frisians in the fourth century. But if we accept that the Frixagori reference in the *Notitia*

¹⁴⁹ Roman Inscriptions of Britain, <http://romaninscriptionsofbritain.org/inscriptions/search?qv=frisiavones&submit>, RIB 109, RIB 279, RIB 577, RIB 578, RIB 579, RIB 1036, RIB 1523, RIB 1594.

¹⁵⁰ RIB 1523.

¹⁵¹ RIB 1594.

¹⁵² RIB 577, RIB 578, RIB 579.

¹⁵³ RIB 109.

Dignitatum signifies a Frisian unit on Hadrian's Wall we can narrow the window of time considerably further.

The *Notitia Dignitatum* is usually dated to the very early fifth century for the Western Empire, conveniently near the time of the British split with Rome, and depicts the administrative and military structure of the empire at the end of the fourth century. While the focus is on the commands themselves, a sort of bureaucratic roll-call, individual units' names are recorded. Therefore, if the name Frixagori refers to a unit of Frisians (and this leads to the questions of *where* and *when* the unit was mustered, for at this late date Frisia as a discreet nation should no longer exist), Frisians must have been deployed as *limitanei* on Hadrian's Wall into the fifth century. As we saw in Chapter One, the garrisons were still being maintained and frontier troops were generally socially and economically tied to their posts beyond their military functions – a fact which would also explain Germanic soldiers presumably being assimilated enough to erect altars to local British goddesses nearby.

There are almost three centuries between the conventionally accepted last mention of the Frisii and first reference to medieval Frisians. As we've seen, most of the Frisii were repopulated by the Romans, probably in Belgium and Britain. As the marine transgression overwhelmed the Lowlands coast, the land became nearly depopulated by the fifth century. After AD 425 the region began to repopulate, mostly with peoples from Jutland and the area between the Weser and Elbe rivers, i.e. Angles and Saxons. According to one insightful theory the name was revived for the area by the Franks, due to the transient nature of its population during the Migration Period; as the area was, for all practical purposes, vacant from ca. 300 until the Middle Ages, the most convenient way to describe the region was to reference its classical population. By this

reasoning the similarities between Old Frisian and Old English would not be due to the close proximity of the Frisii and Anglii, but to related Migration Age North Sea dialects that had a different evolutionary process than the interior continental block of West Germanic languages.¹⁵⁴

Other Germanic Groups

Other than the possible Frisian cohort, the only other Germanic group placed in Britain by the *Notitia Dignitatum* is a group of Batavians, also on Hadrian's Wall. The Batavi lived near the mouth of the Rhine, directly south of the Frisii, and are best remembered for the Batavian Revolt of AD 69-70, begun by their Roman auxiliary units. As noted, they *also* maintained an altar dedicated to the British goddess Coventina at the wellspring at Carrawburgh, implying a settled military community.¹⁵⁵

Two further altars to Coventina exhibiting Germanic personal names on their inscriptions have been found at Carrawburgh¹⁵⁶ with four more altars or tombstones containing Germanic names elsewhere on Hadrian's Wall.¹⁵⁷ A total of thirteen altars or tombstones of individuals with Germanic personal names have been located in Britain, *all* in the extreme north of modern England or southern Scotland, including yet another dedicated to a local British god, Maponus. While tribal names seem to be rare in inscriptions, it seems safe to argue that there was a

¹⁵⁴ Jos Bezelmans, "The Early-Medieval Use of Ethnic Names from Classical Antiquity. The Case of the Frisians," in *Ethnic Constructs in Antiquity: The Role of Power and Tradition*, ed. Ton Derks and Nico Roymans (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1999), 328-33.

¹⁵⁵ While this thesis is specifically concerned with Migration Age Germanic peoples, it should be noted that the *Notitia Dignitatum* lists several other ethnic *limitanei* units living by Hadrian's Wall, ca. AD 400. These include three units of Asturians, three Belgic units, three units of Britons (Cornovi), two Italian units, and Spanish, Thracian, Illyrian, Gaulish, and Sarmatian units. For lack of contrary evidence, it must be assumed these groups were ultimately absorbed into the local population.

¹⁵⁶ RIB 1525, RIB 1528.

¹⁵⁷ RIB 1420, RIB 1603, RIB 1620, RIB 2063.

significant Germanic presence in the north of Roman Britannia who were assimilated enough to participate in local religion. All of these factors would indicate that the north of Roman Britain must still have been relatively Germanized, if not specifically Anglo-Saxon as we know the term, if indeed tribal and personal names were still being used near the year AD 400.

One of Bede's more controversial statements concerns an Anglo-Saxon mission to convert continental Germanic tribes who still remained pagan in the early eighth century.¹⁵⁸ An English translation can easily be read two ways: that Bede's contemporary Angles and Saxons were originally augmented by Frisians, Rugini, Danes, Huns, Old Saxons, and Boructuari, during the Migration Age, *or* that these were some of the peoples targeted for conversion in the early 700s. Campbell insists that Bede's Latin wording, "a quibus Angli vel Saxones genus et originem duxisse noscuntur," suggests some earlier source lies behind his strange selection of names, as does the fact that, by the early eighth century, half of these entities no longer exist as independent ethnic groups.

The Rugini are mentioned nowhere else by this name. Tacitus describes the rather obscure Rugii as living on the lower Vistula and Baltic coast, and says little else about them.¹⁵⁹ They were an East Germanic-speaking people and seem to have been joined the Ostrogoths under Theodoric the Great, not surviving the Gothic Wars of the mid-sixth century.¹⁶⁰ First, it seems strange that Bede, writing nearly two centuries later, would pick this minor entity to represent 'pagan Germans' over any number of better known contemporary groups, and second, if he did refer to this long extinct people then the passage certainly refers to times long passed and *not* the Anglo-Saxon mission to Germany.

¹⁵⁸ Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 4.9, 235.

¹⁵⁹ Tacitus, *Germania*, 44, 204-7.

¹⁶⁰ Procopius, *History of the Wars*, 6.14, 408-11, 7.2, 167-9.

Perhaps a better identification of the Rugini would be a garbled rendering of the Reudigni, beginning in antiquity with a misunderstanding of the Germanic ‘-ing’ suffix. This equally minor people, mentioned by no one but Tacitus, have been noted several times above as southern neighbors of the proto-Angles and Jutes in *Germania* (as part of the same Suebic Nerthus cult) and were almost certainly absorbed by either the Angles or Saxons before the fifth century. As documentary evidence already associates them with the future settlers of sub-Roman Britain (either absorbed earlier by Angles in the manner noted in our Tacitus-Ptolemy comparison above or later by Saxons due to their geographic position and numerical inferiority to the Chauci), one could easily imagine their memory of a separate ethnic component of either group surviving into Bede’s time. As it seems unlikely a vestigial population managed to survive in Schleswig-Holstein in need of conversion until the eighth century, this interpretation would again imply Bede was speaking about the tribal composition of the insular Anglo-Saxons and not contemporary missionary activity.

Bede’s reference to the Boructuari probably means the Bructeri, a large tribe living south of the Chauci and Frisii, which participated in both the Battle of Teutoberg Forest and the Batavian Revolt in the first century. While it would seem reasonable that some Bructeri may have accompanied their former northern neighbors into sub-Roman Britain, by the fifth century they had moved south and were strongly associated with the Franks, though apparently retaining their separate identity for some time. Gregory of Tours quotes from Sulpicius Alexander’s lost Germanic history that at the end of the fourth century Roman general Arbogast crossed the Rhine to ‘punish’ marauding Franks. His targets were settlements of the Bructeri, Chamavi, Amsiverii,

and Chatti. As Arbogast was himself of Frankish extraction he presumably knew his own people and we may confidently call these tribes “Franks” by this time.¹⁶¹

By the time of the *adventus Saxonum* the Bructeri could certainly be objectively identified as Franks. This leads to the question of whether Bede’s citation of the tribe may be a cleverly concealed reference to a broader early Frankish involvement in Anglo-Saxon England. While Bede mentions the Franks multiple times, usually in positive contexts, that is *much* different from acknowledging that an existing neighboring kingdom had a hand in the founding of one’s own. By reducing the Frankish involvement to the Bructeri, a mere tribal component and probably the one most familiar to the ancient Angles and Saxons, Bede could accurately include them in his history without stumbling into politically incorrect territory.

The association of the Saxons and Franks goes back to their very origins; indeed, in our first two mentions of the name “Saxon” (discounting Ptolemy) it appears in tandem with the Franks. The two confederacies are connected strongly to Carausius in the 280s and support the usurper Magnentius in the 350s. James Campbell envisioned the Franks and Saxons as a continuum and noted how Augustine’s late-sixth-century journey would have taken him up the Rhone, through lands still controlled by the Roman aristocracy, through regions where the Roman church existed without Roman society, and through unquestionably pagan Germanic lands, some with Angles and Saxons forming a minority population. After this the Channel would not have presented a particularly noteworthy obstacle.¹⁶²

Perhaps the strangest name on Bede’s list of continental tribes is the Huns, a name which could cause one to discount the entire passage as unsubstantiated folklore. Yet, there has been

¹⁶¹ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, 2.8-9, trans. O. M. Dalton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927), 51-2.

¹⁶² James Campbell, “The First Century of Christianity in England,” in *Essays in Anglo-Saxon History* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2003), 54.

considerable serious attention paid lately to a possible Hunnic presence in northwestern Europe, mostly inspired by an account of the visit of an Eastern Empire diplomat, Priscus of Panium, to the court of Attila in the mid-fifth century. In a discussion with a Western Empire diplomat Attila's empire, obviously centered in Eurasia, is described as including "the islands of the Ocean," a reference some take to mean Britain. While this phrase *is* used many times in antiquity to connote the British Isles, one might assume that our pitifully few sources that note an Anglo-Saxon presence in fifth-century Britain would likely have been more impressed by the borderline absurdity of a Hunnic invasion. A far more reasonable interpretation of Bede's reference to the Huns would be a typical Western pattern of identifying migrating steppe tribes under broad labels from previous eras. Much as in antiquity steppe peoples were regarded as "Scythian," regardless of their ethnic composition, one could easily see how the same understanding could lead to confusing the Iranian-speaking equestrian Alans with Huns, particularly as they accompanied the Huns from the north Pontic into Europe.¹⁶³ Indeed, Ammianus Marcellinus notes the strong similarities between the Huns and Alans, though he considers the latter to be "less savage."¹⁶⁴ While the Alans split with the Huns soon after entering Europe, they would later associate with the Franks and, particularly, the Vandals. Gregory of Tours tells us, in the same chapter on the Bructeri noted above, that many Alans defected to the Roman commander Arbogast and settled in Gaul.¹⁶⁵ The presence of the Alans in Gaul, of course, would give them quite easy access to Britain, perhaps, again, as nominal Franks.

¹⁶³ They quite probably brought the 'garnet-and-gold' jewelry design with them into Western Europe.

¹⁶⁴ Ammianus Marcellinus, *History*, 31.2.21, trans. John Rolfe, Loeb Classical Library 300 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 392-5.

¹⁶⁵ Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, 2.9, 52-4.

The most likely indication that Bede may have meant the Alans when claiming some Hunnic ancestry for the Anglo-Saxons can be found in his earlier *Chronica Maiora* (Chapter 66 in *On the Reckoning of Time*). Here he conflates the Alans with the Huns (and Goths) as “Scythian peoples” defeated by the Romans.¹⁶⁶ Later, in *Historia Ecclesiastica*, he notes the Alans as allies of the Vandals crossing the Rhine into Gaul.¹⁶⁷ He obviously *knew* the steppe origins of the Alans and their ethnic independence from the Huns, and their subsequent activities in Gaul. It seems probable that Bede envisioned the Alans as a subdivision of the Huns, both being equicentric and of Asiatic origin, and used the latter term, particularly in a work intended for a wide audience.¹⁶⁸

A less likely explanation for Bede’s mention of the Huns could lie in the relatively heavy and exotic presence of Sarmatian cavalry, ancestral to the later Alans, in late Roman Britain, both on Hadrian’s Wall and at the fort at Ribchester. According to Dio Cassius, in 175 Marcus Aurelius defeated the Sarmatian Iazyges tribe during the Marcomannic Wars, shipping 5500 to Britain to serve as mercenaries.¹⁶⁹ Funerary inscriptions dating to the third century are known¹⁷⁰ from Ribchester. It is, of course, possible that a folk memory of these Asiatic horsemen could have been transmitted to Bede’s sources as “Huns.”

¹⁶⁶ Bede, “Chronica Maiora,” Chap. 66 in *The Reckoning of Time*, trans. Faith Wallis, Translated Texts for Historians 29 (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999), 216.

¹⁶⁷ Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 1.11.

¹⁶⁸ By identifying the Huns, Alans, and Goths correctly as originating from “Scythia” Bede shows he is aware of the location of the region. This makes his claim for a Pictish origin in Scythia all the more mysterious; the two locations were quite literally on opposite ends of the known world.

¹⁶⁹ Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, 71.16.2, 27-31.

¹⁷⁰ RIB 593, RIB 594.

Gaulish Saxons

A simple glance at a map will show that the proximity of Britain to Gaul almost guarantees some interaction in any era. Evidence for Anglo-Saxon presence immediately across the Channel in Gaul is a little-known and rarely discussed matter. Some areas of coastal Gaul contained Saxon settlements from the late Roman period or early Merovingian era. In a profound historical irony the Saxons, not Franks, seem to have been the dominant ethnic group in parts of Normandy until the arrival of the Normans. Gregory of Tours makes it clear there are at least two Saxon communities at Bayeux and Bessin¹⁷¹ and ninth-century Frankish administrative texts refer to an *Otlinga Saxonia* district in the region.¹⁷² The contexts of Gregory's citations indicate obviously stable and well-settled communities by Merovingian times. Furthermore, place-names in the Bessin region contain elements similar to Anglo-Saxon names (-tun, -ham, etc.) and jewelry is known that is similar to Kentish finds.¹⁷³ While the *Notitia Dignitatum* records units of Suevi in this very area, and we have noted that Romans were not particularly exact when distinguishing between Germanic peoples, it seems unlikely that this is a mistake on the part of the document's compilers as Saxon units are specifically mentioned elsewhere (in Phoenicia).

Directly across the Channel from Dover, along the coast from Boulogne to Calais, at least forty-two place-names ending in in -tun or -ingtun are known, with other locations containing -ham or -gate elements. Archaeological finds here are more difficult to interpret due to the difficulties of distinguishing between locally produced materials and those imported from

¹⁷¹ Gregory of Tours, 5.26, 200, 10.9, 436-8.

¹⁷² Donald A. White, *Litus Saxonicum: The British Saxon Shore in Scholarship and History*, State Historical Society of Wisconsin (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1961), 108.

¹⁷³ White, *Litus Saxonicum*, 69.

Kent.¹⁷⁴ While the place-name evidence here is intriguing, it is difficult to envision this area as a staging area between the continent and Kent as there seems to be no continuum of names either into the interior of the continent or eastward along the coast. Hence, it may be more likely that these names originate *from* England rather than as a stopping-off point *to* England.

Conclusion

Reviewing the history of the Angles and Saxons in Europe *before* their arrival in Britain via Roman sources and archaeology allows a startlingly different perspective on both sub-Roman events and the peoples that participated in them. Comparisons of early Roman Empire encyclopedic sources such as Tacitus, Ptolemy, and Pliny with later sources more concerned with threats and confrontations allow us to build a relatively coherent, if somewhat frustrating and incomplete, picture of the evolution of several backwater, proto-historic tribes into coherent participants in the early medieval world. We have seen how the North Sea Chauci transform from easily-defeated pirates into the powerful Saxons who will outlast their Roman adversaries by over half a millennium. We have seen how the Angles, what little there is written of them, seem to dominate the Jutland peninsula in the first half of the second century and we have seen the extent to which late Roman Britain was garrisoned by semi-assimilated Germanic troops. We have also seen how a deteriorating environment in late antiquity led to a slow decline in economic survivability and a rise in long-distance raiding. Furthermore, from the perspective of cultural history, we have seen that the material culture of the Lowland tribes was not affected by the unlikely sudden appearance of Saxons between the AD 98 *Germania* and Ptolemy's ca. AD

¹⁷⁴ White, *Litus Saxonicum*, 71.

150 *Geography*, but these tribes *do* seem to develop ruling families (as shown by excavations of the compound at Feddersen Wierde) later in the century.¹⁷⁵ This latter innovation will ultimately evolve into the core of the Anglo-Saxon state.

¹⁷⁵ One might note that the emergence of these new ruling families may reflect the emergence of the “core of tradition” as expressed by Gillett, Pohl, and others.

Chapter Three

Sub-Roman Britain

The experiences of Britain, from being relatively prosperous in the third century to succumbing to chaos and upheavals after the Diocletian reforms, ultimately led to a separation from Rome in the early fifth century. This chapter examines the results of this split. Our argument is that while material culture rapidly decays to a bare minimum of its former prosperity, evidence shows that some Roman institutions survived. Furthermore, the center of cultural gravity shifts to the west, with the Bristol Channel being a conduit to the continent. As the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes arrive their social structure makes them incompatible, at first, with the Romano-Britons.

The Dark Earth Stratum in Sub-Roman Towns

It is a little-known fact that a stratum of loam, up to a meter thick and containing late Roman artifacts, separates late antique horizons from those of the Middle Ages in many northern European cities. This phenomenon is far too common to ascribe to natural pedological processes; for instance, one would not expect to find the same exact sediments in both London and Canterbury as the drainage patterns would be quite different. This implies that the “dark earth,”

as it has come to be called, has its origins in human activity, meaning, of course, that Roman cities were not entirely abandoned.

This is not to say that towns continued to function in the same manner they had in the past. Obviously a new depositional environment sealing centuries of fairly consistent and explainable build-up means that something very different is occurring. Aside from London and Southwark, the stratum appears at Canterbury, Gloucester, Lincoln, Cirencester, Exeter, and Winchester implying a similar situation in all these cities. In most cities it overlays structural rubble from the late fourth and early fifth centuries, though in parts of London it dates as far back as the late first century. While late Roman artifacts (pottery, glass, metal, bone, etc.) appear in the layer, structural foundations or surfaces are not known.¹⁷⁶ Analysis shows a poorly-sorted, very dark brown clayey soil with multiple inclusions, particularly the charcoal that gives it its color. Pollen analysis shows plants characteristic of wastelands.¹⁷⁷ In most areas the soil seems to have accumulated gradually, while in others it seems to have been dumped as fill dirt. While it is common for Anglo-Saxon structures and burials to cut into the dark earth, in some places, such as Worcester, late Roman inhumations may cut into it.¹⁷⁸

Numerous theories have been advanced to explain the presence of this earth within an ostensibly urban context and Esmonde Cleary has proposed a reasonable scenario. As the majority of urban houses in Roman Britain during the late fourth century and into the fifth were timber-framed wattle-and-daub structures a cycle of abandonment-dereliction-rebuilding would

¹⁷⁶ A.S. Esmonde Cleary, *The Ending of Roman Britain* (London: Routledge, 1989), 147-8.

¹⁷⁷ Richard MacPhail, "Soil and Botanical Studies of the 'Dark Earth,'" in *The Environment of Man: The Iron Age to the Anglo-Saxon Period*, ed. M. Jones and G. Dimbleby, BAR British Series 87 (Oxford: Archaeopress, 1981), 309-31.

¹⁷⁸ John G. Evans, *Land and Archaeology: Histories of Human Environment in the British Isles* (Charleston, SC: Tempus Publishing, 1999), 127.

create the exact sort of parent materials for the dark earth. The occasional fire would provide the charcoal and coloring and the activities of earthworms would mix the soil. Some of the areas were probably plowed (some older theories suggested dark earth was imported into cities for this specific reason, though this seems an unnecessarily cumbersome waste of energy). The deterioration of timber-framed wattle-and-daub structures may also explain why London's dark earth is found two centuries before it appears in other towns. As London was the major port of entry for Roman Britain, entire densely-packed neighborhoods of these flimsy buildings were constructed to process trade goods – the Roman equivalent of a warehouse district. While London slowly declined as a trading center these areas were abandoned, long before the decline of Roman Britain itself.¹⁷⁹

In the archaeology of the American Southwest “adobe melt” is a common term. Mud structures require continuous maintenance or must be repeatedly abandoned as they literally melt away in the rain. One can see how this process must have been even more rapid with British wattle-and-daub walls than desert pueblos. However, Richard MacPhail, when analyzing micromorphological processes related to the effects of worms and other subterranean creatures on normal building debris (mortar, plaster, slag, etc.), determined that dark earth is the result of normal urban abandonment, noting that it had already begun to form in bombed areas of Berlin and London by the 1970s.¹⁸⁰ MacPhail also notes dark earth formation can be exacerbated by animal penning and urban gardening. The soil began to form, for instance, in Southwark in the second century as wattle-and-daub buildings were abandoned, then the area was subsequently turned over to market gardening in late Roman times, yet dark earth continues to form *through*

¹⁷⁹ Cleary, *Roman Britain*, 147.

¹⁸⁰ MacPhail, “Soil and Botanical Studies,” 309-31.

the medieval period. At Worcester a Roman dump and burned stable melded with dark earth formed under a pasture while in London a burned first-century building was later gardenized. Perhaps the most dramatic formation was in Colchester, where debris from the AD 69 Boudiccan Revolt was turned over to agriculture.¹⁸¹

We can surmise that the sheer diversity of human activity implies that there is no single cause behind the formation of the dark earth stratum and its uniformity across Romano-British towns reflects normal pedological processes accompanying urban decline. This does not mean urban *abandonment* nor the apocalyptic ‘squatter’ imagery appearing from time to time in literature concerning sub-Roman Britain. Describing the stratum as resulting from urban ‘decay,’ particularly in a culture where clay and timber form a substantial percentage of the building materials, is probably the best approach to the problem. Furthermore, as the archaeological adage goes ‘garbage attracts garbage,’ meaning that the rubble from an abandoned or derelict building was likely to attract more rubbish, particularly as the Roman sanitation systems began to collapse, adding to the stratum. Whatever the origins of the dark earth stratum, its mysterious presence, wedged between the remains of Roman Britain and the early Anglo-Saxons and attracting controversy wherever it appears, is a fitting symbol of the sub-Roman period.

Gildas

All intensive approaches to the sub-Roman period of Britain must eventually discuss the figure of Gildas. Writing from an obvious and admitted agenda, his *De Excidio Brittoniae* (*On the Ruin of Britain*) is the single sustained historical work to have survived the post-provincial

¹⁸¹ Evans, *Land and Archaeology*, 128.

era. Other sources, such as the hagiography concerning the visit of St. Germanus of Auxerre to early post-Roman Britain or the *Chronica Gallica* of 452 give small bits of information but are brief and were produced on the continent. *De Excidio* is, however, a relatively lengthy work and produced somewhere within the British Isles. It is a vague, tantalizing, and passionate criticism of British society that seems to operate on the assumption that the reader is already privy to many of the allusions and references he is making. Events and people known from other sources may be distorted and information can be misleading or blatantly incorrect about facts that are common knowledge in the 21st century (for example, “Hadrian’s” wall is apparently assigned to the late fourth century).¹⁸² References to specific dates and time spans are dispensed with and the few identifiable occurrences are so ambiguous as to call into serious question the competency of the author’s historical sequence. Reading Gildas in an attempt to distill clues to sub-Roman British life leaves the reader with the impression the work needs to be “decoded” rather than “interpreted.” Nevertheless, *De Excidio* is our closest text to an eye-witness account of the sub-Roman and early Anglo-Saxon periods and its multiple problems continually force historians, beginning with Bede, to adjust, rewrite, or rearrange his narrative to comply with the state of current knowledge.¹⁸³

To complicate matters further, we have very little reliable information on Gildas himself. The name is obviously a pseudonym, though it does not originate in either Latin or Welsh. It would seem most probable that the name is Old Irish, a location associated with Gildas by later medieval hagiographers. The “Gil-” element is extremely common in names into the present day (“Gilmore,” “Gillian,” etc.) and translates as “servant.” Most of these names are of late medieval

¹⁸² Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, 15.3, in *Gildas: The Ruin of Britain and Other Works*, ed. and trans. Michael Winterbottom (London: Phillimore, 1978), 21.

¹⁸³ Molly Miller, “Bede’s Use of Gildas,” *English Historical Review* 90 (1975): 241.

or early modern origin with the sense of “servant” invariably having religious connotations signifying a commitment to a particular holy figure, e.g. “Gilmore” means “Servant of St. Mary,” “Gillian,” “Servant of St. John.” In the case of “Gildas” one could easily interpret it as “Servant of God,” though “God” would probably be in the dative, rendered in Modern Irish as “*Dia*,” and literally translating as “Servant to/for God.” This does not, however, explain the sibilant at the end of the name, which is absent in genitive and dative case endings in contemporary Irish.

From an archaeological standpoint, how a person we know so little about could produce a sophisticated work such as *De Excidio* in a time and culture that is almost materially sterile makes the very existence of the author arguably as important as the cryptic text he left behind. In short, Gildas’ very existence poses as large a problem as his writings so we shall focus on this matter rather than attempting to decipher his work.

Gildas’ literacy and education are quite obvious. Michael Lapidge makes a very strong case that his education was certainly not monastic, but rather that he had undergone a formal secular Roman education by learning ‘correct’ Latin and literature under a *grammaticus* and later public speaking under a *rhetor*. A religious education would have devalued these “worldly” subjects. There is no direct evidence for public schools existing in Roman Britain, though they almost certainly did, as there are references to the presence of teachers and the oratorical skill of certain British figures (Pelagius, Patrick) imply a Roman education. Furthermore, the last state-supported school closed in Gaul in 474, though private tutors continued to practice until the early sixth century. Sub-Roman Britain must have maintained some sort of mechanism to ensure a classical education into the sixth century; Gildas, Pelagius, and Patrick provide strong evidence.

This has further implications for sub-Roman society as the purpose of educating the upper class was to provide administrators for Roman government posts. Assuming Gildas was born ca. 500 this indicates that a Romanesque bureaucratic system continued to exist into the sixth century.¹⁸⁴

There is nothing in *De Excidio* to indicate Gildas was not a native Latin speaker. While he seems to have a good grasp of British, and even uses an Anglo-Saxon term, he does not make the common mistakes of one speaking a second language, e.g. translating British phrases literally, making grammatical or lexical errors, etc. However, a native Latin speaker would occasionally betray vulgarisms (Patrick does). Gildas does not do this.¹⁸⁵

Gildas' writing style seems to indicate that some form of Roman education and administration still existed while the Anglo-Saxons were present in Britain. And, of course, if Gildas is writing in a particular manner (in Latin) he must have an audience that understands him. It is also probable that the Roman legal system had survived to this late date. Lapidge notes that part of the training of the *rhetor* was to plead cases in court. Gildas' prose is filled with legal terminology.¹⁸⁶ We shall return to the subject of Gildas and law shortly.

Fifth-Century Britain

Aside from the singularity of Gildas, sub-Roman Britain is a particularly challenging interlude in what is otherwise a reasonably well-documented historical narrative. The two or

¹⁸⁴ Michael Lapidge, "Gildas' Education and the Latin Culture of Sub-Roman Britain," in *Gildas; New Approaches*, ed. Michael Lapidge and David Dumville (Dover, NH: Boydell, 1984): 28-9, 49-9. It should be noted that as this thesis was being edited (June 2016) evidence for a first-century school (beeswax writing tablets with scholastic exercises) was unearthed in the anaerobic mud of the subterranean Walbrook River in London. This material has not yet been published. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/jun/01/tablets-unearthed-city-glimpse-roman-london-bloomberg>.

¹⁸⁵ Lapidge, "Gildas's Education," 35-40.

¹⁸⁶ Lapidge, "Gildas Education," 48-9.

three other broadly contemporary sources are of questionable reliability and archaeological evidence before the sixth century is spotty at best. Much of the wealth and social hierarchies that had developed in the third and fourth centuries, manifested in a remarkably diverse range of artifacts and site types, suddenly came to an abrupt halt upon severance with the empire. The Iron Age lay 450 years in the past and to expect a cultural return to it is as absurd as expecting some modern equivalent to revive the Tudor period. There was no gradual decline; material culture and technology simply stopped, attesting to the degree to which all of British society had become Romanized.

As political and economic coherence came to a halt, social systems responded likewise as visible markers of status ceased to exist. We have no evidence that villa owners attempted to maintain their lifestyles in the face of the dramatic changes as they are known to have done in Gaul. This again may be attributed to fallout from Britain's unique experience of the Third-Century Crisis – Gaul had survived barbarian invasions and cultural collapse before and its social institutions developed the resilience and ability to withstand events of the fifth century, while Britannia had a far less traumatic recent past and had little experience with abrupt change.¹⁸⁷

However, there are occasional clues that give a dim picture of life in fifth-century Britain. Pollen studies indicate that forest regeneration did not begin to invade the extensively cultivated Roman field system until the sixth century. In fact, Roman-era deforestation in the northern part

¹⁸⁷ Cleary, *Roman Britain*, 174.

of the province continued into the sub-Roman period.¹⁸⁸ This would imply, of course, that roughly the same amount of land is under cultivation as during the previous century, meaning it is supporting roughly the same population. While one may guess that antique farming implements were maintained (and probably became prized items), how agriculture was organized or the produce distributed is unknown. There is little material evidence for any centralized authority nor signs of differentiation in status until the latter part of the century, and even then it is confined to the west. If, indeed, large-scale agriculture did continue, it has been suggested that the surplus could have been converted to status displays in the form of feasts, which would leave little trace in the archaeological record.¹⁸⁹

A particular site of interest reflecting both fifth-century agriculture and settlement was excavated at Poundbury, Dorchester. Here a small hamlet developed over a large fourth-century Christian cemetery; a complete break in the use of the site within a century. This would indicate some population dislocation as the radically different uses of the site within such a small window of time would imply different groups occupying the area. The rectangular post-framed structures were similar to primitive Roman-era buildings, but not Anglo-Saxon construction. The site contained multiple grain-driers and a threshing floor which were, again, in rudimentary Roman forms but of a type completely absent in early Anglo-Saxon sites. The site also provided

¹⁸⁸ J. Turner, "The Vegetation," in *The Environment of Man: The Iron Age to the Anglo-Saxon Period*, ed. M. Jones and G. Dimbleby, BAR British Series 87 (Oxford: Archaeopress, 1981), 67-73.

¹⁸⁹ Cleary, *Roman Britain*, 175.

evidence for coarse pottery, weaving, and metal-working.¹⁹⁰ Except for its position over a cemetery that had possibly been in use within living memory, the Poundbury site exhibits what we might expect from a fifth-century settlement, very debased Roman construction and agricultural techniques. The ceramics, structures, and technology are crude and extremely localized yet vaguely modelled on earlier forms. Poundbury also illustrates the difficulty in assigning an excavated settlement to the fifth century. Its primitive nature is similar to earlier periods, yet transformed.

Settlements from sub-Roman Britain are, in fact, quite rarely identified, a circumstance which is usually attributed to the remains of timber or wattle-and-daub construction being almost invisible (or unrecognizable without accompanying diagnostic artefactual elements) in the archaeological record. The lack of cemeteries is more difficult to explain, though these may have been overlooked in the past due to the difficulty of recognizing burials without grave goods or identifying features. Technological advances could, of course, change this problem soon, as several large sub-Roman Britannic cemeteries have been identified in the western parts of England, reducing possible confusion with later Anglo-Saxon burials. The most noteworthy of these is at Cannington, Somerset, below Cannington Camp hillfort.¹⁹¹ Though the site has been heavily quarried it was thought to have been in use from the first century to the seventh and once contained several thousand burials, the earliest oriented NW to SE and the most recent east to

¹⁹⁰ C. J. S. Green, *Excavations at Poundbury*, Volume I: *The Settlements*, Dorset Natural History and Archaeological Society Monograph 7, Dorchester (1988), 71-92.

¹⁹¹ Phillip Rahtz, "Late Roman Cemeteries and Beyond," in *Burial in the Roman World*, ed. R. M. Reece, CBA Research Report 2 (1977): 53-64.

west, probably marking the conversion of the area to Christianity. Large cemeteries such as these may indicate use by several villages, implying some organization at a localized level.

Smaller cemeteries are usually treated as isolated inhumations rather than being classed as sub-Roman. Many burials have been found by accident, interred in abandoned Roman era buildings and discovered by archaeologists investigating the previous period,¹⁹² while others, aligned east-to-west and completely lacking in grave goods, have been assumed to be Anglo-Saxon based upon the Christian burial rite.¹⁹³ Generally speaking, small east-west aligned cemeteries containing burials of both sexes and all ages may represent the sub-Roman population, though Cleary feels that burials interred in former Roman sites may possibly represent some sub-group.¹⁹⁴

Aside from Poundbury, there are exceptions to the broad invisibility of the fifth-century population. Buildings at Wroxeter and Verulamium seem to have been replaced by wooden structures in the fifth century.¹⁹⁵ In the former town the late fifth-century tombstone of an Irish individual named “Cunorix” was found outside the Roman walls, written in Latin script, indicating some degree of literacy still existed here.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹² Roger Leech, “Religion and Burials in South Somerset and North Dorset,” in Warwick Rodwell, ed., *Temples, Churches, and Religion in Roman Britain: with a Gazetteer of Romano-Celtic Temples in Continental Europe*, BAR British Series 77 (Oxford: Archaeopress, 1980), 336-50.

¹⁹³ Audrey Meaney, *A Gazetteer of Early Anglo-Saxon Burial Sites* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1964).

¹⁹⁴ Cleary, *Roman Britain*, 185.

¹⁹⁵ Cleary, *Roman Britain*, 178.

¹⁹⁶ R. P. Wright and K. A. Jackson, “A Late Inscription from Wroxeter,” *Antiquaries Journal* 48.2 (1968): 296-300.

Western Britain in the Later Fifth Century

As the fifth century progresses Somerset and the Welsh Marches begin to exhibit a number of noteworthy changes absent in the greater part of the former Roman province. Particularly striking are the reoccupation of several Iron Age hillforts. At Cadbury Castle in Somerset the inner defenses were refurbished along with the construction of a large hall using primitive methods similar to the structures at Poundbury.¹⁹⁷ Other reoccupied fifth-century hillforts, most with simple and primitive structures, include Cadbury Congresbury,¹⁹⁸ also in Somerset, and Coygan Camp¹⁹⁹ and Dinas Powys²⁰⁰ across the Bristol Channel in Wales. The sheer man-hours involved in constructing defenses and buildings, naturally suggests that a local elite has evolved or resurfaced in the southwestern part of Britain. Further emphasizing that these hillforts represent the seats of some type of local power is the surprising fact that imported ceramics sometimes appear on the sites dating to the turn of the fifth and sixth centuries. Mediterranean amphorae shards from Asia Minor along with African Red Slip Ware (with origins in modern Tunisia) have been found at Cadbury Castle and the latter ceramic style has been noted at Dinas Powys along with glass from the Rhineland.²⁰¹

A particularly intriguing aspect of the fifth century is that the darkest part of sub-Roman Britain appears to coincide with the spread of Christianity. As we noted in Chapter One,

¹⁹⁷ Leslie Alcock, "Cadbury Camelot: A Fifteen-Year Perspective," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 58 (1982): 356-88.

¹⁹⁸ Phillip Rahtz and Peter Fowler, "Somerset: AD 400-700," in *Archaeology and the Landscape: Essays for L. V. Grinsell*, ed. Peter Fowler (London: J. Baker, 1972), 187-221.

¹⁹⁹ Geoffrey John Wainwright, *Coygan Camp: A Prehistoric, Romano-British, and Dark Age Settlement in Carmarthenshire* (Cardiff: Cambrian Archaeological Association, 1967).

²⁰⁰ Leslie Alcock, *Dinas Powys: An Iron Age, Dark Age, and Early Medieval Settlement in Glamorgan* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1963).

²⁰¹ Ian Burrow, "Roman Material from Hillforts," in *The End of Roman Britain: Papers Arising from a Conference, Durham, 1978*, P. J. Casey ed. BAR British Series 71 (Oxford: Archaeopress, 1979): 220-24.

relatively few traces of Christianity have been found in Roman Britain and what little has been recovered, such as the mid-fourth-century silver Communion set from Water Newton,²⁰² suggests the religion in the province tended to gravitate toward the wealthy. Yet, by the mid-sixth century Gildas addresses an unquestionably Christianized society. One might surmise that the breakdown of Roman hierarchies, and the presumed social levelling that accompanied it, facilitated the spread of Christianity from the most Romanized elements of society into the general population. As Christian paraphernalia is known from wealthy townhouses and villas, neither of which seem to be generally maintained into the fifth century, it would seem logical that Christianity would be one of the few aspects of late Roman culture that prospered in sub-Roman Britain.

One possible indication that the spread of Christianity coincided with the end of Roman Britain is the demolition of several pagan shrines around the turn of the fourth and fifth centuries and their replacement with new rectangular stone structures. At Brean Down²⁰³ and Lamyatt Beacon²⁰⁴ in Somerset and Uley²⁰⁵ in Gloucestershire former cult sites are demolished and superseded by new buildings, with the latter site actually incorporating a cult statue of Mercury into the new masonry. None of these new structures shows explicit Christian imagery and they may also be interpreted a transformation of older cults matching the social changes occurring in Romano-British society. Yet the replacement of pagan sites with Christian churches or shrines is

²⁰² K. S. Painter, *The Water Newton Early Christian Silver* (London: British Museum Publications, 1977).

²⁰³ A. M. ApSimon, "The Roman Temple at Brean Down, Somerset," in *Proceedings of the University of Bristol Spelaeological Society* 10 (1965): 195-258.

²⁰⁴ Roger Leech, "Religion and Burials," 329-66.

²⁰⁵ A. Ellison, "Natives, Romans, and Christians on West Hill, Uley: An Interim Report of the Excavation of a Ritual Complex of the First Millennium AD," in Warwick Rodwell, ed., *Temples, Churches, and Religion in Roman Britain: with a Gazetteer of Romano-Celtic Temples in Continental Europe*, BAR British Series 77 (Oxford: Archaeopress, 1980): 305-28.

very well-documented in numerous locations elsewhere and these new structures appear at a time when Christian conversion must have been a common event. It might also be noted that these sites are found in the west of England in the area where reoccupied hillforts and occasional imported items would begin to appear before the end of the fifth century.

It seems reasonably clear that by the late fifth century imported pottery is entering Britain almost exclusively through the southwest and not the Anglo-Saxon east. We also see centers of power in this region, clusters of probable Christian burials, and the likely replacement of pagan shrines with churches. Considering that the earliest entry in the *Annales Cambriae* (AD 453) cites the acceptance of the change in calculating Easter from Pope Leo²⁰⁶ and the obvious inference that Gildas is speaking to an unquestionably Christianized audience in the middle of the next century, it would not seem too great of a leap to assume that late fifth-century reconsolidations of power in Wales and along the Bristol Channel led to or resulted from renewed contact with mainstream Western Europe and facilitated widespread conversion to Christianity. The missing element in this equation is determining exactly what goods an artefactually impoverished culture had to trade for the items being imported.

By far the dominant site in sub-Roman western Britain is Tintagel, both in the popular mind and as an archaeological puzzle. More imported ceramics have been uncovered on this Cornish peninsula than at all other locations in Britain and Ireland combined. This, along with the sheltered topography of the “island” would suggest that Tintagel was, relative to its time, a major port-of-trade. Furthermore, it may have been the seat of a major dynasty as it surpasses all

²⁰⁶ *Annales Cambriae*, Text A, http://croniciau.bangor.ac.uk/documents/AC_A_first_edition.pdf, trans. Henry W. Gough-Cooper, 2015. Accessed June 19, 2016.

hillforts, indeed all other sites in sub-Roman Britain, in artifact assemblage and structural evidence.

Cornwall belonged to the Roman *civitas* of the late Iron Age Dumnoni tribe. The region contained no Roman towns west of Exeter, no military installations in the fourth century, and few villas, none of which survived into the fifth century.²⁰⁷ Though Irish colonization has been suggested in the past,²⁰⁸ it would seem more likely that Tintagel was the seat of a Romanized upper class of the Dumnoni as a number of Latin inscriptions dated to the late fifth and sixth centuries are known from the area.²⁰⁹

While Tintagel has produced the great majority of imported ceramics in fifth-century Britain and Ireland (including African Red Slip Ware, generally used for wine and olive oil and Phocaeen Red Slip Ware from Asia Minor) the discovery of a Merovingian ring element prompted K. R. Dark to consider whether the Franks may have served as middle-men for Tintagel trade.²¹⁰ While this may make sense as far as proximity goes, it is commonly accepted that the most probable item Tintagel had to trade was Cornish tin.²¹¹ If, indeed, the Merovingians were the middle-men for sub-Roman British trade it would seem likely they would, by extension, control the tin trade in Western Europe, a circumstance that would certainly have surfaced elsewhere in either archaeological or textual material. *The Life of St. John the Almsgiver* describes a sixth-century Byzantine journey where the ship of the titular figure is blown off

²⁰⁷ K. R. Dark, *Civitas to Kingdom: British Political Continuity 300-800* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1994), 91-2.

²⁰⁸ Charles Thomas, "The Irish Settlements in Post-Roman Britain: A Survey of the Evidence," in *Journal of the Royal Institution of Cornwall* 6 (1972): 251-74.

²⁰⁹ K. R. Dark, "The Plan and Interpretation of Tintagel," in *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 9 (1985): 1-17.

²¹⁰ K. R. Dark, *Discovery by Design: The Identification of Secular Elite Settlements in Western Britain, AD 400-700* BAR British Series 237 (Oxford: Archaeopress, 1994): 80-6.

²¹¹ Charles Thomas, *Tintagel, Arthur, and Archaeology* (London: Batsford/English Heritage, 1993), 94-5.

course to southwestern Britain and takes advantage of a local famine by trading its grain cargo for tin.²¹² While this account comes from a hagiography and the saint's presence in Cornwall was ostensibly accidental, one can speculate that the incident is a reflection of actual Byzantine-Cornish trade and the means by which Phocaean Red Slip pottery arrives in Britain from Asia Minor.

Evidence for Christianity appears early at Tintagel. Cruciform inscriptions have been noted on slate-lined graves from the parish churchyard²¹³ and open fires, interpreted as the remains of funeral feasts, have been dated to the beginning of the sixth century.²¹⁴ African Red Slip Ware appears in the fill of a bank surrounding the cemetery, dating its construction to the later sixth century.²¹⁵

If Tintagel and the southwestern hillforts represent early kingships forming, perhaps fueled by the tin trade, by what means does the transition from Roman civil government to the “tyrant” of Gildas occur? Christopher Snyder proposes that the term *tyrannus* is the key to understanding the political changes between Roman and sub-Roman Britain.²¹⁶ Salvian uses the term *tyranni* to describe the curial class of fifth-century Gaul and notes that they accepted this term with pride.²¹⁷ Gildas notes that the members of a council acted in conjunction with “the

²¹² Leonitius, *The Life of St. John the Almsgiver*, in *Three Byzantine Saints*, trans. Elizabeth Dawes and Norman H. Baynes (London: Mowbrays, 1977).

²¹³ Jaqueline A. Nowakowski and Charles Thomas, *Excavations at Tintagel Parish Churchyard: Interim Report, Spring 1990* (Truro, England: Institute of Cornish Studies, 1990), 2.

²¹⁴ Thomas, *Tintagel*, 103.

²¹⁵ Thomas, *Tintagel*, 105.

²¹⁶ Christopher A. Snyder, *An Age of Tyrants: Britain and the Britons, A.D. 400-600* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), 229-30.

²¹⁷ Salvian, *The Governance of God*, 5.4, in *The Writings of Salvian*, trans. Jeremiah O'Sullivan, Fathers of the Church Patristic Series (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 134.

proud tyrant” to import Saxons into Britain.²¹⁸ A possible interpretation is that this tyrant is of equal status as the others on the council, but particularly arrogant, or that he is the most powerful member of the council. Though Gildas uses no names, this tyrant fits the figure of Vortigern, the British king who invites the Anglo-Saxons into his country, originally to serve as mercenary troops; an act which we have seen many times in this thesis was perfectly normal Roman military policy. After comparing Gildas’ castigation of the tyrant and council with Bede’s account,²¹⁹ it is not difficult to assume that Vortigern was an overlord over lesser rulers, or at least controlled martial matters.²²⁰ Vortigern in Brythonic Celtic would become “*Vortigernos*,” with the “*tigernos*” element being Brythonic for “lord,” with connotations for the level of power, ranging from local lord to king, dependent upon the context. In early medieval Breton charters *tigernos* is equated with the Latin *tyrannus*.²²¹ If Gildas knew this, and it seems he did, by saying the council was acting with the *superbo tyranno* he is making a pun on Vortigern’s name and political position.²²²

It is not difficult to imagine southwestern England being ruled in this manner in the latter half of the fifth century. While this is not to suggest that Vortigern ruled from Tintagel (though it is an attractive idea), the strategic position and sheer artefactual and archaeological complexity of the site would indicate that whoever controlled the position probably was in a position to dominate southern England. The Cadbury-Congresbury region and Dinas Powys could conceivably be interpreted as sub-kingdoms of a main center at Tintagel, their common

²¹⁸ Gildas, *Ruin of Britain*, 23.1-2, 26.

²¹⁹ Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 1.15, in *Opera Historica*, vol. 1, trans. J. E. King, Loeb Classical Library 246 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 69.

²²⁰ David N. Dumville, “Sub-Roman Britain: History and Legend,” in *History* 62 (1977): 173-92.

²²¹ Wendy Davies, *Patterns of Power in Early Medieval Wales* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 12-14.

²²² Snyder, *Age of Tyrants*, 229-30.

denominators being imported Mediterranean ceramics that concentrate in the latter bastion. If Tintagel, indeed, was the central distribution point, it would stand to reason that its occupants' power could envelope Cornwall and extend up the length of the Bristol Channel.

As kingdoms are beginning to coalesce little room would be left for old Roman administrative structures. Higham analyzed Gildas' use of Roman political terminology and concluded that his mental map of Britain was still grounded in the late Roman Empire. Unlike Snyder's focus on the position of *tyranni*, his argument is based upon Gildas' use of the term *rectores* (governors), a word always employed in the text in the plural (except in references to Christ). Unlike other secular authorities, Gildas assumes this office is unconcerned with martial matters, a circumstance which could not occur until the fourth-century separation of Roman civil and military authority in the third century. As he separates *rectores* from *reges* (kings), yet speaks of them in the present tense in the late Roman sense, we are forced to consider that something like the administrative structure of late Roman Britannia still existed when he was writing.²²³

However, in Gildas' moral spectrum the function of the *rectores* and the *reges* cannot overlap. One of his complaints against the 'tyrants' is their ignorance of 'right judgement' in their judicial roles.²²⁴ As Gildas is firmly rooted in Roman culture he must be interpreting this as a perversion of Roman law. If it was the purpose of the *rectores* (a class Gildas has no particular

²²³ N. J. Higham, *The English Conquest: Gildas and Britain in the Fifth Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 151-3.

²²⁴ Gildas, *Ruin of Britain*, 27, 29.

animosity toward) to uphold Roman tradition in sub-Roman Britain, then their jurisdictions cannot have conflicted with those of the tyrants.²²⁵

To this end, it is quite likely that the tyrants and unsavory kingships Gildas referred to were those that began to form in western Britain in the latter half of the fifth century. Indeed, of the very few specific British locations mentioned in the text, Dumnonia (Cornwall) is singled out as a target of his wrath.²²⁶ Gildas' own classical education implies that in his youth, presumably at the turn of the fifth and sixth centuries, both Roman values and the upper class were still relatively stable. Furthermore, his vehemence against the ignorance of the western kings toward "the rules of right judgement" implies a relatively recent collapse of Roman law in areas subject to the western kingdoms. One can easily imagine the region surrounding the Bristol Channel as the stage upon which this is occurring. If we consider Higham's view that at the time of Gildas' writing the *rectores* were officials in the last vestiges of the old Roman administration, functioning in the central and eastern portions of the former province, then we must assume that the Roman political structure at least still existed in theory as the early Anglo-Saxon kingdoms were beginning to form.

The Arrival of the Anglo-Saxons

There are essentially two basic approaches to the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons. The first involves a mass migration into Britain, with variations detailing either the extermination,

²²⁵ Higham, *English Conquest*, 154-5.

²²⁶ Gildas, *Ruin of Britain*, 28, 29.

displacement, or coexistence with the Britons (or any combination of these). The second involves the elite transfer model of migration, wherein a limited population of Anglo-Saxons settled in Britain, accumulated power, and formed an aristocratic elite which culturally absorbed the native population. Of course, a third, and more likely explanation for the dominance of the Germanic invaders would be a mixture of the two extremes as Britain was not ‘Saxonized’ in one standard manner, but the process took a considerable amount of time and involved many local variants. For example, some argue for a stronger hybridization or cultural merging in the west (in the very area of hillforts and tyrants discussed above).²²⁷

However, it is an inescapable conclusion that early medieval England was dominated by a Germanic culture and few inarguable British words entered the English language (though there has been considerable recent study on grammatical and non-lexical influences). It has recently been persuasively suggested that we are approaching the problem of the absence of a substantial British contribution to Anglo-Saxon culture by asking the wrong questions. We should not be as concerned with the invisibility of Britons in Anglo-Saxon England as we should be with determining why the Anglo-Saxons were not more British.²²⁸ Much like Britain had different experiences as a Roman province than did those on the continent, the island *also* had a very different experience of the Germanic Migration Era. Gaul adopts the Frankish name and political leadership but the language, religion, economy, and urban survival are inherited from the Gallo-Romans. In Visigothic Spain the abandonment of the signature Gothic Arianism towards the end

²²⁷ Stephen J. Yates, *The Tribe of Witches: The Religion of the Dobunni and Hwicce* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2008), 1-8.

²²⁸ Bryan Ward-Perkins, “Why Did the Anglo-Saxons Not Become More British?” *English Historical Review* 115 (2000): 513-33.

of the sixth century probably was symptomatic of a broader cultural assimilation. The situation in Langobardic Italy was similar to that of Gaul, though religion played less of a role.

A possible explanation for the disappearance of Roman culture under the Anglo-Saxons is that they did not inherit the structural hierarchy of settlements as did the Germanic invaders on the continent. In Britain no specific power centers appear until the late sixth or seventh centuries, and even then the only distinctions are between royal sites and non-royal towns. In contrast the Merovingian kings took over imperial estates, with tenants, laborers, and administrators intact and continued to receive revenues from *civitates*. The followers of the king, his army, were scattered and his power was maintained by replacing the imperial regime and not by condensed ethnic integrity. The Merovingian system simply replaced the late Roman structure. The part of Gaul that retained Germanic speech, the area between the Rhine and the Somme, was conquered in the first half of the fifth century by Frankish leader Clodio. In the interval between Clodio and the rise of Clovis each *civitas* in this region seems to have had its own king, much like the situation at the dawn of early Anglo-Saxon history.²²⁹

From this perspective it would seem that the lack of centralized authority prevented the Anglo-Saxons from adapting to the Romano-British culture. According to Hildegard Tristram the Britons slowly adopted the English language over a period of 300 years (one might note that the Anglo-Saxons had evolved continually more complex systems of consolidation during this

²²⁹ Alex Woolfe, "Apartheid and Economics in Anglo-Saxon England," in *Britons in Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. Nicholas Higham, 115-29, Publications of the Manchester Centre for Anglo-Saxon Studies (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 2007), 116-19.

period) and ultimately it was the strong unifying ethnic identity of the Anglo-Saxon elite that was the decisive factor in the language shift.²³⁰

Even a passing familiarity with *Beowulf* will leave one with the impression that it is far removed from Roman civilization and conventional Western Christianity. The imagery and setting all occur outside the limits of the Roman Empire, and particularly outside of Britain. If Gildas and his audience identified as Romans or Romano-Britons, then the Anglo-Saxons identified as something utterly different. If we operate under a variation of the elite transfer model to explain the presence, expansion, and consolidation of Anglo-Saxons in sub-Roman Britain then we are observing a situation that fits surprisingly well into the *Traditionskern* theory of Germanic ethnogenesis.

As we have discussed above, Germanic “tribes” were rather fluid entities, a situation exacerbated by disruptions caused by contact with the Roman empire. According to the *Traditionskern* model, the population of a Germanic tribe revolved around its divinely-descended aristocratic elite which replicated group identity over the generations by maintaining a “core of tradition.” This tradition would usually center on a mythic narrative involving tribal origins and the extra-human status of the aristocratic class.²³¹ There are multiple traces of this system brought to England by the early Anglo-Saxons. Being centered around a ruling elite, genealogies were quite important; even after the advent of Christianity these continue to be traced to the Germanic god Woden (with the exceptions of the East Saxons, who traced their lineage to Seaxnot, possibly a form of Tiw). Furthermore, dynasties tend to favor alliterative personal

²³⁰ Hildegard Tristram, “Why Don’t the English Speak Welsh?” in Higham, *Britons in Anglo-Saxon England*, 214.

²³¹ Andrew Gillett, “Introduction: Ethnicity, History, and Methodology,” in *On Barbarian Identity: Critical Approaches to Ethnicity in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Andrew Gillett (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2002), 3.

names, perhaps as a marker of identity. While the origins tale of Hengist and Horsa certainly has roots in historical reality (we have seen how Vortigern seems to have been an actual historical figure and a character with the name of Hengist appears in later Anglo-Saxon literature) it also contains mythic elements; we have noted that the continental Saxons have a nearly identical “Night of the Long Knives” episode.

It would seem that operating under this type of group ideology would make the Anglo-Saxons, living in what amounted to extended warbands in a foreign land, quite insular, but more socially coherent than the impoverished residents of a former Roman province. Before the arrival of Roman Christianity in 597, to assimilate into an early Angle, Saxon, or Jutish group a Briton, raised in Roman (and probably Christian) civilization, would most likely have to accept an utterly alien “core of tradition” with leaders who claimed descent from a god. However, as Anglo-Saxons expanded and became the “normalized” dominant culture, assimilation would have become less of an obstacle.

Conclusion

Approaching the Anglo-Saxon arrival in Britain as a product of late antiquity is an informative exercise that allows one to view this important event with more clarity and understanding. When the structure of the narrative shifts back in time beyond the vague Arthurian twilight of the fifth and sixth centuries the possibility that post-Roman Britain would eventually be occupied by one of the new Germanic groups from beyond the Rhine seems almost inevitable. Hopefully this thesis has shed some light on how the situation in Britain and the northeastern frontier of the Roman Empire was considerably more complex than it is usually pictured.

Roman Britain, despite the trauma of its initial conquest, was a reasonably prosperous province in the third century, though the rest of the empire was suffering political and economic instability and threats from beyond the Rhine. The Diocletian Reforms of the late third century were meant to stabilize the socio-political situation, yet the province of Britannia, which had no real need for stabilization, was suddenly harnessed with an new system of tenure that was, in most respects, proto-feudal. As a result, fourth-century Britain experienced a variety of upheavals and became a breeding-ground for usurpation. At the same time it began to experience Saxon raiding along with substantial urban decay as expenditure shifted from public works into private spheres. Ultimately, of course, this would lead to a complete break with Rome at the beginning of the fifth century.

The North Sea and coastal lowlands of the continent were, arguably, home to sea-raiders since prehistory. The wealth brought into Northern Europe by the globalized Roman Empire

provided easy targets and piracy became a prosperous and lucrative venture. Simultaneously, contact with the Romans, and new options for both subsistence and status, disrupted tribal societies, increased the population, and sparked the formation of new and larger groups, the most historically influential in the study area being the Franks and Saxons. The province of Britannia was accustomed to Germanic mercenaries, there is abundant evidence for Frisians in the northern part of the province, but at the same time the province began to fortify its southern shore against Saxon raiders. Conversely, the Saxons could be found in the employ of Rome, both as allies and as garrison troops. While there is no solid evidence for Saxons in Roman Britain they surely would have been quite familiar with the land.

After Britain ceased to be a Roman province both literary and archaeological evidence comes to an abrupt halt; there is very little material culture at all in this period, generally interpreted as the population using almost entirely organic materials for several generations. However, there is some evidence, mostly from Gildas, that Roman administration, law, and even education continued. Strangely, Christianity seems to have become the dominant religion at this time. Towards the end of the fifth century we begin to see Iron Age hillforts reoccupied in the area around the Bristol Channel and into eastern Wales. Tintagel, in Cornwall, seems to have been the seat of some sort of power and was certainly trading with the Mediterranean. The “tyrants” who so annoyed Gildas begin to appear in this time and place.

Ultimately Anglo-Saxon warbands arrive in Britain, probably at first in multiple concentrated groups. Unlike other migrating Germanic peoples it was *their* culture that came to dominate the former Roman province, rather than assimilating Germanic traditions into Roman structures. The dispersed bands did not superimpose themselves upon Roman cities or centers of

authority, maintaining their continental traditions until they began to evolve centralized authority of their own. Therefore, rather than developing a hybridized Roman culture, the Anglo-Saxons assimilated what was left of the Romano-British culture.

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