CATASTROPHE or CONTINUITY

THE CASE OF ANGLO-SAXON ENGLAND

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Continuity or Cataclysm? was the question posed in the first chapter of Professor H.P.R.Finberg's *Lucerna*, a study of 'some problems of the early history of England' which was published in 1964; and the answer he gave was that the continuities were much more important than we had been led to believe hitherto. This essay asks 'the Finberg question' again. It is worth considering, if only because of the enormous advances made in archaeology in the last few decades and the more recent discoveries made by genetic science. We have a much greater quantity of data than we had half a century ago; but there is still much that is debate. It seems best to start by reference to the old literary sources, and then look at the contribution (if any) made by modern science. [1]

The Conventional Wisdom

There are really only two home-grown literary sources for the earliest period of English history. These are the British monk Gildas (most commonly thought to have lived in the mid 6th century), and the Anglo-Saxon monk Bede (who certainly wrote in the early 8th century). Accordingly, it is only Gildas who was truly a contemporary writer; but Bede's account is generally recognised as being of superior quality, and he did bring his account down to his own day. We therefore know that the Anglo-Saxon conquest of what is now England (if it was truly a conquest!) was not accomplished in a year (as the Norman Conquest was) or even in a few decades (like the Roman). It took centuries. Another important feature is that the Anglo-Saxons created numerous petty kingdoms, and a united English kingdom did not emerge for some 400 years. One question which arises, therefore, is whether the process was the same.

But is it right to call it a conquest? At one time, most historians agreed portrayed the Anglo-Saxon settlement in terms of the catastrophe they read about in Gildas. His *Liber Querulus De Excidio Britannia* ('A Book of Complaints about the

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Destruction of Britain') is a dismal tale, of how the Romano-British population has been punished by God for its sins. Britain first suffered all the evils of bad government, following the departure of the Roman legions. The sub-Roman British king Vortigern hired Germanic barbarian mercenaries to help keep the peace; but they rebelled, decided to settle down, and invited more of their kinsmen to join them. Eventually, the newcomers killed, chased away, and/or enslaved the indigenous peoples.

Gildas does not pull his punches, and uses language of the most vivid kind, to describe what he saw as a kind of Armageddon.

> Then all the councillors, together with that proud tyrant Gurthrigern [Vortigern], the British king, were so blinded, that, as a protection to their country, they sealed its doom by inviting in among them like wolves into the sheep-fold), the fierce and impious Saxons, a race hateful both to God and men, to repel the invasions of the northern nations. Nothing was ever so pernicious to our country, nothing was ever so unlucky.

> [The Saxons] complain that their monthly supplies are not furnished in sufficient abundance, and they industriously aggravate each occasion of quarrel, saying that unless more liberality is shown them, they will break the treaty and plunder the whole island. In a short time, they follow up their threats with deeds. For the fire of vengeance, justly kindled by former crimes, spread from sea to sea, fed by the hands of our foes in the east, and did not cease, until, destroying the neighbouring towns and lands, it reached the other side of the island, and dipped its red and savage tongue in the western ocean. In these assaults, therefore, not unlike that of the Assyrian upon Judea, was fulfilled in our case.

> Their mother-land [Germany], finding her first brood thus successful, sends forth a larger company of her wolfish offspring, which sailing over, join themselves to their bastard-born comrades. From that time the germ of iniquity and the root of contention planted their poison amongst us, as we deserved, and shot forth into leaves and branches.

The Venerable Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation* is equally catastrophic. Bede starts with the Romans, and was in no doubt about the benefits which their civilisation had conferred on Britain. He refers to the province as 'formerly embellished with 28 noble cities, besides innumerable castles, which were all strongly secured with walls, towers, gates and locks'; and later to their huge fortifications, cities, temples, bridges and paved roads, many of which apparently still stood in his day. His narrative tells us that, after the departure of the legions, the Roman Province of Britannia was attacked by Picts (from Scotland) and Scots (from Ireland), to such an extent that the inhabitants had to appeal to the Romans for protection. He tells us about the building of the Antonine and Hadrianic Walls. He

also refers to what we call the forts of the Saxon shore as 'towers on the sea-coast to the southward.' The history is confused and the dates are hopelessly wrong; but there is no doubt as to the nature and scale of the catastrophe.

> The Britons, forsaking their cities and wall, took to flight and were dispersed. The enemy pursued and the slaughter was greater than on any previous occasion. The wretched natives were torn in pieces by their enemies, as lambs are torn by wild beasts. Thus, being expelled from their dwellings and possessions, they saved themselves from starvation by robbing and plundering one another, adding to the calamities occasioned by foreigners, by their own domestic broils, till the whole country was left destitute of food, except as could be procured in the chase.

Bede's account of the first Anglo-Saxons, under Hengist and Horsa, coincides with Gildas's (and may even be lifted from it, by him or by a later editor). Although they arrived in three ships, these were, according to Bede, followed by many more. He gives us no further clue as to the precise numbers involved; but again we are left in no doubt as to the cataclysmic consequences:

> In the year of our Lord 449 Martian, being made emperor with Valentinian, and the forty-sixth from Augustus, ruled the empire seven years. Then the nation of the Angles, or Saxons, being invited by the aforesaid [Vortigern] arrived in Britain with three long ships, and had a place assigned them to reside in by the same king, in the eastern part of the island, that they might thus appear to be fighting for their country, whilst their real intentions were to enslave it. Accordingly they engaged with the enemy, who were come from the north. to give battle, and obtained the victory; which, being known at home in their own country, as also the fertility of the country, and the cowardice of the Britons, a more considerable fleet was quickly sent over, bringing a still greater number of men, which, being added to the former, made up an invincible army. The newcomers received of the Britons a place to inhabit, upon condition that they should wage war against their enemies for the peace and security of the country, whilst the Britons agreed to furnish them with pay.
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> Those who came over were of the three most powerful nations of Germany - Saxons, Angles, and Jutes. From the Jutes are descended the people of Kent, and of the Isle of Wight, and those also in the province of the West-Saxons who to this day called Jutes, seated opposite to the Isle of Wight. From the Saxons, that is, the country which is now called Old Saxony, came the East-Saxons, the South Saxons, and the West-Saxons. From the Angles, that is, the country which is called Anglia, and which is said, from that time, to remain desert to this day, between the provinces of the Jutes and the Saxons, are descended the East-Angles, the Midland-Angles, Mercians, all the

race of the Northumbrians, that is, of those nations that dwell on the north side of the river Humber, and the other nations of the English.

In a short time, swarms of the aforesaid nations came over into the island, and they began to increase so much, that they became terrible to the natives themselves who had invited them.

Notice at this point that, if Bede is right, the invaders multiplied and spread rapidly, caused widespread destruction, while at the same time maintaining their own internal and tribal divisions.

The barbarous conquerors plundered all the neighbouring cities and country, spread the conflagration from the eastern to the western sea, without any opposition, and covered almost every part of the devoted island. Public as well as private structures were overturned; the priests were everywhere slain before the altars; the prelates and the people, without any respect of persons, were destroyed with fire and sword; nor was there any to bury those who had been thus cruelly slaughtered. Some of the miserable remainder, being taken in the mountains, were butchered in heaps. Others, spent with hunger, came forth and submitted themselves to the enemy for food, being destined to undergo perpetual servitude, if they were not killed even upon the spot. Some, with sorrowful hearts, fled beyond the seas. Others, continuing in their own country, led a miserable life among the woods, rocks, and mountains, with scarcely enough food to support life, and expecting every moment to be their last.

Bede goes on to tell us that, following these first invasions, there was an interlude (of around 50 years?) when the Britons fought back. Perhaps this was the 'Arthurian moment', so familiar from later stories, which saved Wales (and for a time, other parts of the West), though Bede does not mention Arthur? At any rate, the interlude was followed by further Anglo-Saxon advances, and further destruction. In any case, the devastation produced by the first wave of invaders was so great that it permanently poisoned relations between Briton and Saxon.

The [British] kings, priests, private men, and the nobility, still remembering the late calamities and slaughters, in some measure kept within bounds; but when these died, and another generation succeeded, which knew nothing of those times, and was only acquainted with the present peaceable state of things, all the bonds of sincerity and justice were so entirely broken, that there was not only no trace of them remaining, but few persons seemed to be aware that such virtues had ever existed. Among other most wicked actions, not to be expressed, which their own historian, Gildas, mournfully takes

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notice of, they added this - that they never preached the [Christian] faith to the Saxons, or English, who dwelt amongst them.

Now, of course, Bede could not know everything. He was a monk, who spent his whole life in Northumbria, indeed within the confines of his monastery; and it is notorious that he largely ignores events in Mercia. Nevertheless he seems to have been well-informed and well-read. It is also noteworthy that the story he tells does not differ very much from place to place: the Anglo-Saxons bring warfare and destruction everywhere they go.   For example Ethelfrid, King of the Northumbrians in 603 C.E. was 'a most worthy king' and a glorious one. Why? Because he

ravaged the Britons more than all the great men of the English, insomuch that he might be compared to Saul, once king of the Israelites… For he conquered more territories from the Britons, either making them tributary, or driving the inhabitants clean out, and planting English in their places, than any other king or tribune.

As for Edwin, who was King of Northumbrian Angles in 625, we are told that he converted to Christianity; but this did not have the effect of reconciling his people with the Britons.

This Edwin, as a reward of his receiving the faith, and as an earnest of his share in the heavenly kingdom, received an increase of that which he enjoyed on earth, for he reduced under his dominion all the borders of Britain that were provinces either of the aforesaid nation, or of the Britons, a thing which no British king had ever done before; and he in like manner subjected to the English the Mevanian islands.[2]

In Bede's view, therefore, the Anglo-Saxon conquests were not something that required an apology. If modern scholars are right in arguing for a narrative of early Anglo-Saxon England which involved compromise and co-operation, conciliation and 'acculturation' - rather than the lurid and somewhat Biblical scenes of divine retribution we have been considering, we might have expected to hear at least some echoes of these processes in Bede's narrative; but we hear none.

It is therefore not surprising that Victorian and early 20th century historians adopted the Gildean and Bedean narratives of catastrophe - as a perusal of Dr Myres's *English Settlements* (1936) and Sir Frank Stenton's monumental *Anglo-Saxon England* (1943) will confirm. In particular, the view of Dr J.N.L.Myres (1902-1989) that "the whole structure of rural society was shattered and reformed" by the English conquest", and that "the towns and manors of late Saxon England can claim

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[2] The reference is probably to the Isle of Man and Anglesey: the Journal of Scottish Name Studies, vol.7 www.clanntuirc.co.uk/JSNS/V7/JSNS7.pdf.

no demonstrable connection with the Roman past". The 'catastrophic' view was in turn based on several generations of historical scholarship, including the work of Frederic Seebohm (whose *English Village Community* was published in 1883), and Paul Vinogradoff (whose numerous works included *The Growth of the Manor*, published in 1905).

More recently, Professor James Campbell (1935-2016) took the view that, in view of the paucity of literary sources and the ambiguities of the archaeological record, it would never be possible to find a definitive answer to all our questions about what he called 'the lost centuries' between 400 and 600 C.E.. Nevertheless, he thought that, while all remaining British areas remained Christian

> By the late 6th century the eastern two-thirds of what later became England were in the hands of dynasties of German origin, and to a considerable extent settled by [pagan] German peoples. This is an indication that what happened in eastern Britain was in some sense catastrophic.[3]

There is another strand to the conventional view, which ultimately derives from Tacitus, who described the way of life of the German tribes in his book *Germania* (c.98 C.E.). Although this long pre-dated the Anglo-Saxon settlement in England, Tacitus's treatise has been taken by some as an accurate description of the early settlers, especially because it described a kind of ideal society, where the average peasant was a free man, and the community reached collective decisions, after debate in an assembly. So, Victorian historians liked to trace the history of parliamentary government from its supposed origins 'in the forests of Germany'; and William Stubbs (1825-1901) began his *Constitutional History of England* with the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons. Even the much-admired Frederick William Maitland (author of *Domesday Book and Beyond*, 1897), who was a contrarian, described the Anglo-Saxon countryside as peopled with 'large masses of free peasants…free men who with their own labour tilled their own soil,' as well as forming the backbone of a national army. Fifty years later, Sir Frank Stenton still took much the same view. The point is that, if there was a large mass of free peasants, this points to a mass migration, which in turn implied catastrophe for the Romano-Britons.

The New Conventional Wisdom

Herbert Finberg (1900-1974) set out to undermine the cataclysmic view of early English history, because he thought it was fundamentally improbable that a relatively few Anglo-Saxon settlers, arriving in the middle of the 5th century, could have driven out a large indigenous population of Romano-Britons, within a short

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[3] See *The Anglo-Saxons*, p. 22 and figure 50. Campbell also pointed to evidence which showed continuing immigration into England after the initial invasions, from Germany and Scandinavia. See p 36.

period of time.[4]   He was a historian rather than an archaeologist, and he re-examined the very few literary texts we have from the so-called Dark Ages, but he also looked at early charters. He believed that by the time the Anglo-Saxons began to assert themselves as a political force, Britain already contained a strong hybrid element of Romano-Saxon population. He explained this by reference to various theories.

> It would be interesting to know whether some groups of Teutonic origin were brought in for other than military purposes: for example, to provide agricultural labour. There are indications that an acute shortage of man-power was one of the many troubles which beset the province in the last years of imperial rule and for some time afterwards.

Finberg did not believe a word of the conventional narrative, especially the part involving a mass migration of free peasants, from Germany to England in the 5th century. He thought that Anglo-Saxon England was hierarchical, from beginning to end, though the evidence for this was particularly clear in the later centuries. Heand he greatly enjoyed mocking the idea of a mass immigration of free peasants, from Germany, in the 5th century. He pointed out that in the Roman period the large estates were peopled by slaves and *coloni* (settlers), while 'no one denies that the yardlanders of the later manor were serfs'; and he asked rhetorically whether it was plausible to 'sweep away the servile population of the villa-estate and put in its place a "large mass of free peasants", only to finish up with a tenantry as servile as before' in the 11th century.

Another scholar who argued for continuity was Eric John (1922-2000), whose *Orbis Britanniae* was published in 1966) and whose *Reassessing Anglo-Saxon England* was published thirty years later. John thought that a mass migration along the lines of a Continental *Vőlkenwanderung* was simply impossible for a people which travelled by sea rather than by land. He also had ideological as well as practical objections to the idea, since he associated it with certain odious racial theories developed in Victorian times. John argued instead that the Germanic invaders consisted of a warrior elite rather than a large number of rustics with their women.

It is also interesting to consider the view taken by the Welsh Nationalist MP Gwynfor Evans in his *Land of My Fathers* (1974). Evans summed up the conventional wisdom in his way:

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[4] Finberg referred to an ironical couplet from the Italian poet Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*:

Forse era vera, ma non pero credibile

A chi del senso suo fosse signore.

'It may have been true,

but no man in his senses would believe it.'

This refers to a story that a girl had wandered from China to the Pyrenees with the hero Orlando, and 'was still as intact a maiden as when she left her father's house'.

Some historians still give credence to the legend that the English conquered England in a series of bloody attacks of short duration,   pushing the Brythons who were not killed into the West.

Evans thought that this catastrophic version of early English history was absurd. In his view, the forefathers of the Welsh had been living in Wales for thousands of years and had been numerous and strong enough to put up a stout resistance to the Romans. It was simply impossible that they were refugees from the territory which became England, where the pre-Saxon inhabitants were also so numerous and strong. They could not simply have been killed or chased off their land by a few people arriving by boat after the withdrawal of Roman support.

However, it is noticeable that none of these advocates of continuity explained adequately how the richest part of the Roman province of *Britannia* did in fact become English-speaking - when all other parts of the old Western Roman Empire which fell to barbarian attack now speak a Romance language - and why there are so many place names in the South-East of England which have Old English roots, rather than Celtic.

The debate concerning the nature of the Anglo-Saxon settlement in Britain coincided (more or less) with a much wider debate concerning that 'old chestnut', the end of the Roman Empire. In England, Peter Brown (b.1935) published a seminal work *The World of Late Antiquity* (1971), whose title became the rallying-cry for a whole new school, devoted to the idea that the late Roman Empire did not 'decline', and did not even 'fall', at least not within the traditional time-scale. Rather it underwent a series of profound transformations, and morphed into a number of sub-Roman states, between the 3rd and 8th centuries, henceforth to be known as 'late Antiquity' rather than 'the early Middle Ages'. This thesis was built on a tremendously strong base of arcane learning, but was always more accurate with regard to the Eastern Roman Empire (which arguable did not fall until 1453) than it was with regard to the Western half.

Moreover, the idea of Late Antiquity has itself been criticised in two books published in the same year (2005), which throw light on the Finberg Question, though they were not primarily concerned with Britain. In his 'New History' of the Roman Empire, the historian Peter Heather took a generally 'catastrophic' view, and considered that Gildas's account of the fate of Roman Britain, though a 'moral tale for his own times', was 'credible enough'. At the same time, the archaeologist Bryan Ward-Perkins showed that 'Roman Britain's sophisticated economy disappeared remarkably quickly and remarkably early' under the impact of Anglo-Saxon settlement, by which he meant that coins ceased to circulate, Roman pottery became unavailable, and Roman building techniques were no longer employed. True, the Sutton Hoo ship burial of the 7th century shows sophistication in the production and exchange of certain kinds of goods; but 'only at the very highest levels of society and the highest levels of artefacts'. The richness of the finds does not show that the rank and file enjoyed anything like the same standard of living as the average Romano-

Briton had known (at least in the towns and on the villas of the South-East of England).

There is another important reason why modern continuity theories with regard to Anglo-Saxon England should be viewed with some degree of scepticism. This is that they take little or no account of what was happening on the Continent in the 5th century. Both editions of Colin McEvedy's *Atlas of Medieval History* did. Now, maps can be misleading; but his maps of Europe in the 'lost centuries' do show that there was a dramatic development in the historical geography of Europe, at the very moment when the first Anglo-Saxons arrived in England, according to Bede. This was the movement of the Huns, out of the Steppes and ultimately as far as the Danube and the Rhine, which had the effect of pushing numerous Germanic peoples westwards, out of their ancient ancestral homes.

The Huns were different. They were nomads and pastoralists, with a force of mounted archers which westerners found terrifying, and which western armies found impossible to cope with. Jordanes, who was a Goth writing in Italy in 551, described them as follows:

> They made their foes flee in horror because their swarthy aspect was fearful, and they had, if I may call it so, a sort of shapeless lump, not a head, with pin-holes rather than eyes. Their hardihood is evident in their wild appearance, and they are beings who are cruel to their children on the very day they are born. They are short in stature, alert horsemen, broad-shouldered, ready in the use of bow and arrow, and have firm-set necks which are ever erect in pride. Though they live in the form of men, they have the cruelty of wild beasts.

In 436, the Huns dealt the Burgundians such a crushing blow that the latter abandoned their capital of Worms, and (in McEvedy's graphic expression) 'didn't stop running until they reached Savoy';[5] and the Franks, Goths and Vandals followed suit, each exerting collateral pressure on the others. It is at this point that McEvedy's maps also show the Angles, Jutes, Frisians and Saxons moving from the Continent into Kent and East Anglia. In the case of the other peoples involved, historians have shown little hesitation in using the term *Vőlkenwanderung*, thereby characterising the phenomenon as a mass movement; but many modern English historians are reluctant to describe the movement of the 'Anglo-Saxons' out of Germany in the same way. Why? Surely the Angles and Saxons had as much reason as any, to fear and abhor the Huns, or the other peoples fleeing their advance while the Jutes had to contend with the Danes, who were moving out of what is now Sweden and into Jutland (in modern Denmark) at around the same time.[6]

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[5] McEvedy (1992), 16.

[6] The level of the North Sea around Jutland may also have been rising at this time: see Campbell, pp 30-1 (which include a striking photograph of an abandoned village).

Bryan Ward-Perkins will have no truck with the new conventional wisdom propagated by historians of the Late Antiquity school, for whom 'accommodation' is the way to explain how peoples from outside the Roman Empire came to live and rule within it. He argues that in fact:

> The Germanic invaders of the Western Empire seized or extorted the vast majority of the territories in which settled, without any formal agreement on how to share resources with their new Roman subjects.[7]

Ward-Perkins points out that the paradigm example of 'accommodation' - which is the agreement between Romans and Visigoths to divide land in Aquitaine, between Bordeaux and Toulouse - related to a tiny amount of territory compared to what the Visigoths later seized by force, or under the threat of force. On the other side of the argument, he quotes copiously from ancient writers who tell much the same 'catastrophic' story as Gildas, but in relation to other parts of the Western Roman Empire: to Symmacchus, Victor of Vita, Possidius, Eugippius, Hydatius, Orosius and Pope Leo the Great.

It may be objected that what distinguished the Anglo-Saxon 'barbarians' from the others was not so much their ferocity but the fact that they came by boat, and their numbers must therefore have been relatively limited; but in my view, the journey across the North Sea was not so long or difficult as to preclude a mass migration, given enough time, and the lack of effective opposition, at least in the East of England, once the Roman legions had left, the Roman forts had been abandoned and the fleet ceased to operate.

Nevertheless, it is important to realise that 'archaeologists [in general] view any extravagant claims for migrations as unwise and prefer to point to the more fashionable option of élite takeover and dominance by small groups of nobles.' In other words, on this view, life (and in particular life on the land) goes on much as before, at least for the common man and woman, despite the catastrophe that invasion of any sort, and on any scale, must have constituted for many of those involved. At any rate, Finberg clearly thought that his views were supported by the archaeology that there was, even in his day; but when we examine his arguments in detail, they are often concerned with 'continuity of site' between Roman and Anglo-Saxon Britain, rather than with archaeology as such; and as he himself admits, 'continuity of settlement does not necessarily imply an exact coincidence between an earlier and later site'. It simply means that the newcomers found it convenient to settle in the same place as those who had come before them.[8]

It has to be admitted that the archaeology is confusing, at least for the layman, and this is so despite the vast increase that there has been in the quantity of archaeological finds (especially since the advent of 'the detectorists'). While it

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[7] Ward-Perkins, 13 and Chapters I and II generally.
[8] Finberg, 15.

remains true that archaeologists (with the notable exception of Ward-Perkins) tend to be advocates of continuity, we read in James Campbell's summary that 'there is almost a total absence of archaeological traces of the Britons'.[9] Meanwhile, in his *Building Anglo-Saxon England* (2018) Professor John Blair tells us that he remains 'as impressed as before by the documentary elusiveness of royal residential or assembly sites within Roman walls between 650 and 850, when our texts should mention them if they had been at all common'. In other words, even Blair (and advocate of continuity) would agree that the Anglo-Saxons did not adopt the Romano-British habit of living in towns. If they did not do this during the middle centuries of the Anglo-Saxon period, what reason is there to think that they did so during the earlier period between 450 and 650?

Finally, we should mention the difficult problem of 'the DNA'. The late 20th century student, confused by the paucity of the literary sources, the multitude of recent archaeological discoveries and plethora of learned opinion regarding the origins of the English language, nation and state, may have hoped to find some relief in the discovery of DNA made by Crick and Watson in 1953, and widely applied in the study of historical problems from around 2000. Surely, one might think, this ought to provide some answers?

Alas, chromosomes are complicated little beasties and not all researchers are looking for the same thing, or sampling in the same way. Moreover, the scientists disagree about the interpretation of the data; and it is difficult for the layman to decide who is right. In particular, it seems that there is a major difference between studies which concentrate on female and male lineages, and identify mitochondrial DNA and Y-chromosome DNA respectively.   In short, the genetic evidence creates new problems of its own; and I understand that there is as yet no new synthesis, which re-writes the history of the 1st millennium in England, taking account of the pre-existing sources and the new science.

Around ten years ago, Sykes and Oppenheimer each concluded that the most archaic maternal mitochondrial lineages in Europe came from a Middle Eastern migration into Europe during the Late Glacial period, between 19 and 12,000 years ago and not during the Neolithic as was previously proposed. They argued that this population originated in a refuge from the last Ice Age, set up on the Anatolian Plateau which spread to further refuges, on the borders of France and Catalonia, in Italy and on the Eastern European Plain, and then throughout Europe. They also thought that this 'ancient matrilineal bedrock' had been overlaid in only two relevant places since, to any substantial extent. The first was in Orkney and Shetland, where there was a large settlement of women from Norway during the Viking period; and the second was in eastern and northern England, in the former Danelaw.

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[9] Campbell, p 27; but it would seem that the evidence Campbell presents at pp 38-42, relating to finds in York, St Albans and above all Bath, require this conclusion to be modified to some extent.

On the other hand, an article in *Nature* for 18 March 2015, entitled *The fine-scale genetic structure of the British population* contained the results of a study of around 600,000 genetic markers, including genes on both kinds of chromosome, and reached or included somewhat different conclusions. The study was conducted mainly in Oxford but was based on 2,039 samples from rural areas of the British Isles, provided by people whose four grandparents were all born within 50 miles of each other, the idea being that there was no large scale immigration into these Islands in modern times prior to 1900 or so. Writing in *The Guardian* on the same date, Hannah Devlin summarised the findings as follows:

> The analysis shows that the Anglo-Saxons were the only conquering force, around 400-500 AD, to substantially alter the country's genetic makeup, with most white British people now owing almost 30% of their DNA to the ancestors of modern-day Germans. The study [also] found that people's ancestral contributions varied considerably across Britain, with people from areas of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland emerging as separate genetic clusters, providing a scientific basis to the idea of regional identity for the first time.

One might add that the study also showed that there was no detectable Danish DNA in the Danelaw; but this contrasted very markedly with the evidence for Norse DNA in Orkney; and that there was British DNA in the old kingdom of Elmet, straddling North Yorkshire and parts of Lancashire.

However, even if we hope to build on the results of this study alone, the science does not answer the Finberg question. It tells us that the Anglo-Saxons must have settled in England in considerable numbers in historic times, in contrast to the Romans and Normans, and apparently in contrast even with the Danish and Norwegian Vikings; but it does not tell us how or when. In particular, it does not explain whether the Anglo-Saxon migration was a mass phenomenon (as Seebohm, Vinodgradoff and Stentoon all thought), or the migration of a warrior élite which multiplied rapidly after arrival in the new territory by mixing with the locals (as most modern historians think); and it does not explain whether that multiplication was achieved peacefully or violently.[10]

Conclusion

Bede agreed with Gildas that the Anglo-Saxon settlement involved massacres, enslavement, and emigration; and I think they were broadly right. However,   the

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[10] Nor does Bede, though he does mention that, even before Julius Caesar invaded Britain, 'the Picts had no wives, and asked them of the Scots', who agreed to provide some, but with the proviso that 'when any difficulty should arise, they should choose a king from the female royal race, rather than from the male.'

emphasis in recent years has been on the various ways in which the settlement could have been carried out peacefully - by means of alliance, negotiation, compromise, and intermarriage. It seems to me that the problem, for those who take this view, is to provide concrete evidence for it, rather than suggest that the conventional wisdom is improbable.

Is there room for both versions of history, given the length of time it took the Anglo-Saxons to reach the Western borders of 'England' and given the number of different Anglo-Saxon political entities which emerged? After all, there were seven kingdoms in the time of the so-called Heptarchy, but 35 in the Tribal Hideage; and this stands in marked contrast to the experience of Roman Gaul, where Clovis created a single Christian polity (of sorts) in the 5th century. In addition, the archaeology and the DNA seem to show that there was always a considerable East-West divide in Anglo-Saxon England; and it has always been difficult to explain why the early kings of Wessex (starting with Cerdic) had Celtic names, if the conventional wisdom contained the whole truth.

Pointing in particular to the alliance between Penda of Mercia and Cadwallon of Wales in the mid-7th century, Finberg argued that 'the history of the Welsh border during the first half century of English-Welsh contact [was] one of peaceful evolution.[11] James Campbell agreed with Eric John in thinking that the population of Northumbria must have remained largely Celtic, because the conquest of the area by King Aethelfrith (592-616) was too rapid to be explained by means of a folk migration (and we now have genetic evidence that the British kingdom of Elmet always remained racially different from the South-East of England). However, as we have seen, there is little sign in the literary sources of peaceful co-operation in the 5th and 6th centuries; and the improbability of it in that early period still remains.   Is it really likely that the Britons could have come to terms with the Anglo-Saxons in the South-East, when it was clearly the latter's intention to expropriate the former? Why else did the original raiders become settlers?

In this connection, it is interesting that when Finberg wrote about the expansion of Wessex into Devon and Cornwall between the 7th and 10th centuries, when the documentary evidence (in the form of charters) is much better than it is for earlier periods, he compared the process to the one employed much later by American pioneers in the Old West:

> In all probability the first English invaders of West-Wales were colonists in search of new land to cultivate, pioneers resembling the much later backwoodsmen of the North American forest. Their infiltration may well have begun and continued for some time before the first recorded clash of arms.

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[11] See Finberg, p 77, although my reading of the Welsh sources would not be the same as his. His quotation from the Life of St Beuno at p 81 seems rather to speak of the 'unrelenting hostility' to which older historians referred, and which was certainly present in Mercia in the 8th century, as even Finberg admits.

The native Britons perhaps looked on at first with sullen acquiescence while bands of Saxon colonists hacked out for themselves new clearings in the densely wooded combes, or occupied low-lying riverside grounds which the Celts had failed to cultivate. But sooner or later the process would give rise to what the jargon of diplomacy today styles 'incidents', and the stronger power would then intervene to protect its colonists.[12]

There is very little sign here of that measure of agreement and co-operation which Finberg urges us to accept was normal, in other places and in earlier times.

Finally, I admit that I have been particularly influenced by a holiday I had in France in August 2018. In ancient times, when the peninsula we now call Brittany was part of the Roman Empire, it was called Armorica. Peopled by the Celts several centuries before the Common Era, it was conquered by Julius Caesar; but its modern name of means 'Little Britain' (in contrast to the larger island of Britain), because the Celtic population was strongly reinforced by immigrants from Wales and above all Devon and Cornwall, who brought their language, as well as many of their traditions and customs with them. It has been estimated that they anything between 30,000 and 50,000 people were involved, who all must have arrived in small boats.

Were these Britons fleeing the Anglo-Saxons, who were making similarly hazardous journeys across the North Sea at around the same time? This was certainly the traditional explanation for the mass movement of peoples given by historians, when I was young. Nowadays we are told that there were in fact two waves of migration, the first being sponsored by the sub-Roman authorities in Gaul, as a means of bolstering their defences against Frankish aggression, the second being a spontaneous reaction to barbarian attacks on Britain. The details of the migration will always remain obscure; but, whatever the motives of the Anglo-Saxons in coming to England, it is clear that they were heathens at the time, whereas the Romano-Britons were both Christian and culturally different. In his original essay *Continuity or Cataclysm*, Finberg made light of the religious conflict between Briton and Saxon in the 5th and 6th centuries, arguing that 'the Anglo-Saxon immigrants were not missionaries' and that King Penda of Mercia 'never obstructed the propagation of Christianity among his fellow Anglians'; but the evidence he relies on seems to point to the contrary.[13]

I wonder whether the moderns in this debate have not thrown the baby out with the bathwater. Gildas was after all an eye-witness; and the most significant fact about his life is perhaps the one that many people ignore, which is that, faced with the advent of the Anglo-Saxons, he chose to emigrate to Brittany, where he gave his name to St Gildas de Rhuys, now a small seaside resort, on the south side of the Gulf of Morbihan. There, he founded a monastery and was made a Saint. He did not spill much ink on the great migration in his book but he does refer to it, in terms

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[12] Finberg, 103.

[13] Finberg, pp 4-5.

which clearly link it to his feelings about the Anglo-Saxon conquest of his native land:

> Some therefore, of the miserable remnant, being taken in the mountains, were murdered in great numbers; others, constrained by famine, came and yielded themselves to be slaves for ever to their foes, running the risk of being instantly slain, which truly was the greatest favour that could be offered them: some others passed beyond the seas.

Gildas tells us nothing more about the foundation of Brittany; but we know that, when he and other Britons from 'Great Britain' arrived in 'Little Britain', they found a people much like themselves, both in terms of race and religion; and there was little difficulty involved in integration. Indeed it is generally considered that the immigrants contributed significantly to the development of Breton civilisation. They gave the names of Cornwall and Devon to parts of the new territory, contributed Saints to the Christian calendar (for example, St Malo), and introduced institutions to be found elsewhere in the Celtic diaspora (e.g. the extended family or clan), laws supporting Christian morality (e.g. severe treatment for concubinage and adultery) and distinctive styles of dress and grooming (e.g. short hair and shaving).

But, why did Gildas and his fellow Britons move at all, or in such numbers, if they really had the choice of staying in their homes and becoming peacefully subsumed into the new Anglo-Saxon order?

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