

LITTLE BRITAIN in FRANCE

or

A Very Short History of Brittany

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At one time, Pembrokeshire was known as 'little England beyond Wales' because of the number of English speaking people who lived there. In much the same way, Brittany took its name from the British settlers who emigrated there around 1,500 years ago. This article examines why this emigration took place, and the long-term consequences.

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 a similarly hazardous journey 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, as a means of bolstering the defences of Gaul 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. Integration was never going to be easy.

The most remarkable emigrant from Britain to Brittany may well have been Gildas, known in Britain as the author of *Liber Querulus De Excidio Britannia* ('A Book of Complaints about the Destruction of Britain'). This was written over 200 years before Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation*, though the latter is often thought to be the first history written in these Islands. Although very much shorter than Bede's, and scarcely a work of scholarship, Gildas's account of how his homeland was destroyed formed the basis of all later histories, down to the modern era and the advent of scientific archaeology.

Gildas tells a dismal tale of how Britain suffered all the evils of bad government, following the departure of the Roman legions; how the sub-Roman British king Vortigern hired barbarian mercenaries to help keep the peace; how those mercenaries eventually rebelled, decided to settle down, and then invited more of their kinsmen to join them. Eventually, they were able to drive out the Romano-Britons altogether, setting fire to the country from coast to coast in the process.

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.

Yet [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, 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.

Gildas blamed his sinful fellow Britons, and their leaders, as much as the foreigner, for the downfall of his country. Victorian and early 20th century historians did not follow him down this route; but they did adopt his narrative of catastrophe - as a perusal of Sir Frank Stenton's monumental *Anglo-Saxon England* (first published in 1943) will confirm. More recently, historians and archaeologists have questioned this approach, and proposed that there was a good deal more continuity than Gildas's narrative suggested: see, for example, the Welsh Nationalist MP Gwnfor Evans's *Land of My Fathers* (1974).

But have the moderns 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, Gildas founded a monastery and was made a Saint. He did not spill much ink on the great migration but he does refer to it, in terms 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).

In the 9th century, Brittany became a kingdom within Charlemagne's new version of the Western Roman Empire; but it retained its cultural links with the Celtic world and with Britain. This is shown most remarkably by the Bretons' taste in literature, where they preferred 'the Matter of Britain' to 'the Matter of France'. In other words, they like stories about King Arthur and the Round Table, rather than tales about Charles the Great and his Knights. When Geoffrey of Monmouth wrote his *Historia Regum Britanniae* ('History of the Kings of Britain') in the 12th century, and started a long-lasting craze Arthur, he included many characters and episodes which subsequent generations have linked to places in Brittany, just as they have linked them to Glastonbury, Cornwall and Wales. Even now, the tourist in Brittany is invited to visit the Isle of Avalon, the Lake where the eponymous Lady made her appearance, the forest of Brocéliande, and other places which Merlin, Arthur, and above all Lancelot supposedly frequented.

Meanwhile the Viking attacks and invasions of the 9th and 10th centuries wreaked havoc with the Carolingian Empire as well as with these Islands; but their effects were not as destructive in Brittany as they were elsewhere in the region. Everyone knows that the Danes almost managed to conquer the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms in England in the time of Alfred the Great (849-899) and left only Wessex standing. Fewer people know that other Vikings returned to our shores in the following two centuries, establishing a short-lived Viking kingdom in York, and incorporating the whole of England in the Danish Empire of Knut the Great (990-1035). In Normandy, the Danish Viking Rollo forced the French King Charles the

Simple to cede the Duchy to him in 919, while Norse Vikings established a commanding position in Ireland until they were defeated by Brian Boru in 1014; but in Brittany, this new barbarian menace was contained. Vikings established bases in Cornouailles, Basse-Loire and Nantes, from which they mounted devastating raids across the province, but they were eventually driven out by Breton forces. Meanwhile, however, some aristocrats and monks (including some who carried with them the relics of St Gildas) had taken refuge in neighbouring parts of France, and this brought about closer relations between Brittany and the new Capetian dynasty, especially after some of the Bretons intermarried with the French, and some Breton monasteries were re-populated after the Vikings departed, with monks from French houses.

After 919, the Normans constructed a new society in Normandy. With extraordinary rapidity, they converted to Christianity, learned to speak French, adopted French customs, re-shaped existing institutions, and built numerous large churches, abbeys and castles. It was with the backing of this new vigorous society that William the Bastard was able to conquer the much richer Anglo-Saxon kingdom in 1066, and initiate the penetration of South Wales and the Lowlands of Scotland.

The Dukes of Normandy also established an ascendancy over Brittany, without ever having to conquer it. The Bayeux Tapestry depicts an expedition mounted by Duke William against Conan II, Count of Brittany; but, on the other hand, Alan Rufus of Brittany, who held the fief of Richemont in Normandy, assisted William the Conqueror in the enterprise of England. His men played an important part in the Battle of Hastings and he helped William to suppress the rising in the North of England in 1069. His reward was the Honour of Richmond in Yorkshire - a fief which remained attached to Brittany until the end of the Middle Ages.

Close association with the Normans did not always work to Breton advantage. In 933 the Mont-St-Michel and indeed the western part of the Cotentin peninsula ceased to be part of Little Britain and became forever associated with Normandy; but, as in England, it did assist the adoption of the French language and culture over the next few centuries.

Brittany's fortunes took a distinct turn for the worst in the 14th century, when there was a failure in the male line of the ruling dynasty of Dreux, and a war of succession broke out between the houses of Montfort and Blois, which developed into a proxy war between Plantagenet and Valois. The Kings of England and France intervened on behalf of their candidates, in one of the many conflicts now categorised as 'the Hundred Years War' of 1337-1453. With English help, the Monforts succeeded in defeating their rivals at the Battle of Auray in 1364, where Charles of Blois was killed; and it was John de Montfort who prevailed and passed the ducal title down to his descendants; but there was bitter legacy of internal conflict and dissension which took some decades to be forgotten.

The Breton War of Succession also witnessed the early career of one of the most famous knights of medieval times, Bertrand du Guesclin, who was a commoner, indeed a street-fighter, who ultimately became Constable of France

between 1370 and 1380. He is commemorated with a tomb at St Denis near Paris - the burial place of many of the Kings of France - and with a statue in Rennes, which has been blown up on two separate occasions by Breton nationalists, some of whom regard him as a traitor.

In the 15th century, Brittany entered what is regarded by many as its golden age - a period characterised by a remarkable degree of independence, in that it became customary for the Duke of Brittany to have a coronation ceremony; and, whilst he owed allegiance to the King of France, his subjects effectively did not. The Dukes of Brittany even ran their own foreign policy, and during the period when the English occupied Normandy (1419-1451), they negotiated with Henry V and with the ministers of the young Henry VI as if they were an independent power. This made them almost equal in status to the great Dukes of Burgundy.

The Bretons played their cards well, militarily and diplomatically, siding with the English against France when it suited them, and changing sides after the tide of battle turned in France's favour at Orléans in 1429. Accordingly Brittany's status as a largely independent sovereign state was not terminated by war or conquest, but by permanent alliance with the French royal house at the end of the 15th century. When Duke Francis II died without a male heir in 1488, his daughter Anne of Brittany married not one but two Kings of France, while her daughter by one of them married a third. Although she surrendered the Duchy to him in 1522, this was on terms which included the preservation of several important privileges.

The history of Brittany therefore contrasts markedly with that of most of the other Celtic nations which participate in the modern Interceltic Festival, held annually in the town of L'Orient, in the South-East of the province. The Festival recognises seven: Brittany, Cornwall, Ireland, Wales, Scotland, the Isle of Man and Galicia (in Spain). The student of English history scarcely needs to be told that, long before 1522, when Brittany's independence came to an end, these 'countries' (or at least the Celtic parts of them) had almost all been invaded, conquered and crushed by Norman and English soldiers and settlers. This happened in Cornwall before the Norman Conquest of England in 1066. It happened in Ireland in the 12th century; and, although there was a Gaelic Resurgence in the late Middle Ages, Ireland was to be re-conquered repeatedly, by the armies of Elizabeth, Cromwell and William of Orange. Meanwhile North Wales was subdued by Edward I (1277-1307) and, although practically the whole of Wales joined Owain Glyndwr in his revolt of 1400-1415, the rebellion was put down with great ferocity, and the country subjected to a kind of apartheid which only came to an end in 1485. North of the English border, the kingdom of Scotland managed to survive multiple attempts at conquest under Edward I, II and III; but the Gaelic language and culture became largely confined to the Highlands and Islands in the medieval period. Only Brittany survived as a unified and autonomous Celtic nation, down to the age of Columbus, Caxton and Luther.

Using long hindsight, one could argue that the Celts of Wales and the West Country made a wise decision, when they chose to leave for Armorica around 500

C.E., rather than stand and fight the Anglo-Saxon invader. A modern Breton nationalist might reply that Brittany has been oppressed (at least in the cultural sense) by the French since 1522; but a Scots, Welsh or Irish nationalist might conclude that this oppression was mild, compared to the physical suffering endured by Celts in these Islands throughout the medieval centuries, at the hands of generations of English sovereigns and armies.

Appendix: The Breton Language

The Breton language, introduced into Brittany by immigrants from Britain in the 6th century, most closely resembles Cornish, rather than Welsh or Irish. The strangeness of it, and the vast difference between it and French can easily be appreciated when we consider some lines of poetry.

[Breton version]

Goa nep a vezo tifenn,
Ma ne vez e graçç Doe Roen glenn,
Ya a losquo canoliou,
Evit lazaff an tut a armou,
Ha laquat sig oar an kaeriu.
Disquar questel ha thourellou,
Pan crier en Breiz an Breseliou...

[French version]

Malheur à celui qui sera sur la défensive,
Si la grâce de Dieu roi du monde, n'est pas avec lui,
Ils mettront le feu aux canons,
Pour tuer les hommes d'armes,
Et mettre le siège devant les villes.
Renverser chateau et tourelles,
Quand on publiera en Bretagne les guerres...

[English version]

Woe to the defender,
If the grace of God (king of the world) is not on his side,
They will fire up the cannons,
To kill the men at arms,
And lay siege to the towns.

Knocking down castles and towns,
When they announce the coming of war to Brittany...

Further Reading

Toute l'Histoire de Bretagne, des origines à nos jours, éditions Skol Vreizh, Morlaix,
Bretagne, 2012