GB – Earliest times and the Middle Ages

1: From the Earliest Times to the Second Nordic Invasion

History is governed by geography, and Britain is no exception to this rule. From the early ages the British Isles, especially the flat low-lying south and east coastlines, were a temptation to different wandering tribes because of the mild climate and fertile soils that offer perfect agricultural conditions. Apart from its lavish greenery, the island was also famous for its natural resources – there was gold, tin and iron in the ground, big and small game in the forests; the rivers swarmed with fish and provided excellent navigable inlets into the hinterland.

The 1st settlers came to the island about 3000 or 2500 BC. They were dark-haired Iberians from the Iberian Peninsula (Spain) or maybe even the North African coast. **The Iberians** were hunters, and later they became primitive farmers. They were the men of the Bronze Age who raised Stonehenge – a center of religious worship, which was probably built over a period of a thousand years. It was also a capital whose authority extended all over the British Isles, where similar but smaller 'henges' were constructed. Historians know very little about those remote times, and what they know is only through archeological revelations.

From around 700 BC to 500 BC or 300 BC another group of people began to arrive on the island. These were **the Celts** who had come from the territory of today's North- western Germany and the Netherlands. The Celts were men of Iron who could make better weapons and who were more technically advanced than the Iberians. They came in waves, kindred but mutually hostile, and each with a dialect of its own. Erse, Gaelic and Welsh, the languages that they and the Iberians evolved, are still spoken in Great Britain.

The Celts imposed themselves as aristocracy on the conquered Iberian tribes in Britain and in Ireland. Eventually the races mixed but not in the same proportions throughout the island.

The physical formation of the island is in fact the key to understanding the racial make-up of its population and the history of its early settlement. The mountain ranges of Wales, North-west England and Scotland provided a natural obstacle for the early invaders preventing them from overrunning the whole island in just one go. This is why the inhabitants of the so-called **Celtic Britain** (Cornwall, Wales. The Scottish Highlands) are the descendants of the oldest people. They are often called **'the Celtic Fringe'**, but, as a matter of fact, most of them are of pre-Celtic origin – their forefathers were not the fair-haired or red-haired Celts but the dark-haired Iberians.

The Celts, like the Iberians, were tribesmen or clansmen. The basis of their society were family ties. The Celtic people did not develop any territorial organization. The bonds of the tribesmen were not with the land but with other clan members. The clans were perpetually at war with one another.

Thanks to their use of iron technology, the Celts were better farmers than the Iberians. They grew wheat and oats, and they knew how to make mead (grain fermented with honey). They bred pigs for food, sheep for clothing and oxen to pull the plough. They also bred horses, which were the chief means of barter and sources of wealth. The Celts traded not only with one another but also with other tribes on the island and in Europe. Hunting, fishing, herding, beekeeping, weaving, carpentry and metal work were the chief occupations of the Celtic population.

Trade with the continent was important for political and social reasons. The Celts in the South of the island were in close intercourse with their kin in Europe. From them they learnt to use coins instead of iron bars for money.[1] When the Britons[2] (the Celts on the island) found out that Julius Caesar was marching to subdue their relatives on the continent, they sent over ships and warriors to help their relatives in defense, which was one of the reasons why Caesar decided to invade the island as well. The other reason was the island's reputation as an important provider of food, and since **the Romans** needed supplies for their own army fighting the Gauls (the tribes occupying the territory of today's France), the conquest of the island was inevitable.

Therefore the Romans did not come with a view to settling; they came to exploit and to govern by right of the superior civilization. In order to achieve their goals, they put a lot of effort to induce their Celtic subjects to assimilate the Latin language and lifestyle. Every possible encouragement was offered to the Celtic chief to make him Roman at heart and to Latinize him, and on that condition he could remain chief of his tribe. This policy had already been very successful in Spain and France where the Romans were long enough to effectively change the languages and the customs of the people. In Britain this method would have been equally effective had the Romans stayed longer. The 1st Roman expedition came in 55 BC, but it was not until one century later that permanent occupation began (AD 43). In AD 409 Rome pulled its last troops out of Britain, and what was

[1] Already 150 years BC British tribes in the South of the island had their own gold coinage.

[2] The name Britain comes from Greco-Roman word 'Pretani' designating inhabitants of Britain. The Romans mispronounced the word and called the island 'Britannia'.

left behind them were three things of enduring value: Welsh Christianity, good roads and a few cities.

Initially the Romans intended to conquer the whole island. This seemed to be pretty easy because of their superior, highly disciplined army and because the Celtic tribes were continually at one another's throats. The Romans established a permanent occupation across the Southern half of Britain where they developed the Romano-Celtic culture. From there they retained control over the upland areas, which were never developed. The Roman method of conquest was to build military roads, strategically planned for the whole region. Along them the Romans planned forts garrisoned with regular troops. With the use of forts and roads they could keep oversight in some trouble areas like Wales. Unlike other conquerors of the island, they did not usher in a host of immigrant farmers to replace the native population; they also rarely resorted to indiscriminate slaughter and wholesale destruction.

Their chief difficulty was the problem with the northern frontier. The Romans attempted to conquer Scotland (which they called **'Caledonia'**) for over a century but they failed. The Caledonians, the Pictish, and other partly Celtic tribes residing in the inaccessible mountains put up a stiff resistance. There were also frequent rebellions of the Brigantes in the Roman rears, which made the conquest even more difficult. The final limit to the northern frontier was marked by the wall designed by Emperor **Hadrian** and erected between 122 and 127 AD. No attempt was made to annex Ireland to the Roman territory, and thus the area of Roman occupation corresponds roughly to the territory of modern England and Wales.

In the occupied territories the Roman civilization flourished – the villas were plentiful, the cities were becoming larger, the commerce developed (London was the greatest center of trade). North of Hadrian's Wall, in Dover and Cornwall, tribalism survived in its more primitive form. Again the topography of the island determined the course of history. Owing to the geographical and cultural distinction between the occupied lowlands and unoccupied highlands, when the Roman Empire began to collapse and Roman soldiers started to withdraw, the regions destined to be destroyed by Germanic invaders were the Latin districts, while elsewhere Celtic culture was destined to survive.

The fall of the Roman Empire began in the 2nd half of the 4th century. In Britain it was precipitated by the Celtic revival – Celtic raids on Roman territories, both from Ireland and from Scotland, became more frequent and bolder. In the 1st half of the 5th century the defunct Roman Empire was no longer capable of providing security for most of its citizens, especially in such remote outposts of civilization as Britain. The situation was significantly exacerbated by the renewed Anglo-Saxon raids, which between 350 and 400 were particularly severe.

The pagan people who invaded the island after the Roman troops had left were the Nordic people: **Anglo-Saxon, German and Scandinavian**. They spoke allied languages, had the same religion, the same epic poetry celebrating their gods and heroes (such as Beowulf). They also had common art, different from Greco Roman or Celtic, and they observed the same customs in war and agriculture. Most of them were farmers searching for better lands to plough, but there were also fishermen, seal hunters, whalers, and pirates among them. Their form of government was superior to the Celts – they were not organized in tribes but in almost feudal societies. The kinship, the natural bond among the members of a clan who supported one another, gave way in the Anglo-Saxon commu-

nities to the personal relation of a warrior to his chief, whose personal virtues as well as his noble descent made him the leader. Contrary to the Celts, the Anglo-Saxons had both kingship and aristocracy – their form of government was **autocratic kingship**, which is a transitional stage between tribalism and fully-fledged feudalism. The military organization of the Anglo-Saxons was also based not on kinship but on personal attachment and loyalty of all the warriors to the chief who organized the expedition. The bones of these nameless chiefs are still dug up in the so-called early Anglo-Saxon graveyards.

There are no chronicles of Anglo-Saxon conquest because, unlike the Romanized Celts, they were illiterate. We owe our knowledge of that period to an English monk **Bede** who 300 years later described those remote events in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. The Saxons, Angles and the Jutes certainly wreaked havoc in the orderly Romano-Celtic world. The Latinized Britons were slaughtered or pushed away to the mountainous areas where the primitive Celtic or pre-Celtic tribes had so far resided. The Anglo-Saxons penetrated into the interior of the country through the rivers and the Roman roads, which only hastened the pace of conquest and destruction**. King Arthur**[3] is a half mythical figure that is believed to have led the Celts into battle with the heathen Anglo-Saxons, but in spite of his bravery and impregnable forts and stonewalled cities, the Celts were doomed to be defeated. The reason for that was that the Britons were civilized citizens, not warriors, and once they could no longer depend on the army for protection they were practically helpless when confronted by the fierce Anglo-Saxon warriors.

The early Anglo-Saxons differed from the Britons in many respects. For example, they were not city dwellers like the Britons. They lived in large rural townships in log houses, and they tilled the soil in one common field. They could have taken the Roman villas or they could have settled in the Roman towns as soon as they buried the bodies of their previous inhabitants. Instead they left Roman buildings and towns empty and went on with their way of life. Chester, Bath and Canterbury were re-peopled in the course of time. London,[4] due to its location at the junction of Roman roads, also managed to survive, thus the good work of Rome was not completely wiped out by the Anglo-Saxon savages.

In the course of the 6th century the Anglo-Saxons established a number of kingdoms in the South and East of England whose names still exist in modern names of certain shires (Essex, Sussex, Wessex). These kingdoms were not allies – they were always on the warpath. By the middle of the 7th century three large and powerful kingdoms emerged: Northumbria, Mercia and Wessex.

The Anglo Saxons were wild people whose destructiveness completely obliterated the Christian religion and the Romano-Celtic language. The Britons, forced to seek refuge among the 'uncultured' Celtic tribes in Wales, Cornwall or the Western part of the Northern uplands, in a span of a few generations, forgot why they had despised the illiterate

[3] King Arthur is the hero of a popular legend about how he proved his title to the kingship by withdrawing the Sword **Excalibur** from the rock in which it had been fixed by **Merlin**, the magician who later became his counselor. Arthur's court was called **Camelot** and was famous for its **Round Table**. Other legends connected with Arthur tell about his wife's **Guinevere**'s unfaithfulness (with **Lancelot**) and about the quests to find the **Holy Grail**.

[4] London dates back to Roman times even though its name is of Celtic origin. After the Roman conquest it started to play a crucial role as a port and center of commerce. Roman walls enclosed the area corresponding roughly to the city walls in medieval times.

Anglo-Saxon brutes. Yet because the Anglo-Saxons took possession of the richest farming lands in the South and East of England, in the course of time they evolved a civilization which was in many respects superior to the Welsh mountaineers or inhabitants of barren Cornish moors.

The Anglo-Saxon conquest repeated the scheme known from the previous invasions of the island – the race of warriors from the continent settled in the rich lowland area of southern and eastern England decimating its former inhabitants and pushing the survivors into the Cornish peninsula or into the Western or Northern mountains. The Anglo-Saxon conquest proceeded according to the same pattern once again proving that geography can reverse the course of history. The geographical features of the island made the Celts barbarous and the Anglo-Saxon civilized.

The Celts hated the Anglo-Saxons so much that they did not try to convert the conquerors into **Christianity**. The conversion of the island was the accomplishment of foreign missionaries of whom **St. Augustine of Rome,** sent in 597 by Pope Gregory the Great, was the most famous. St. Augustine established his quarters in **Canterbury** in Kent, and in 601 he became **the 1st Archbishop of Canterbury.** From there with the aid of his monks, he successfully converted one by one the ruling families of the English Kingdoms.

The Christian Conquest of the island was, as G.M. Trevelyan puts it, 'the return of the Mediterranean Civilization in a new form.' The Church hierarchy was modeled on the Roman Empire and therefore its forms and policies were particularly suitable for state building. In other words, the political and legal system of the church could be easily transplanted into the secular sphere in order to create the whole machinery of state. The return of the Mediterranean Civilization in Christian guise also meant the return of literacy and learning to the island. The lore that the missionaries and monks brought from Rome also had its roots in Latin Civilization.

Christianity was very popular among the Anglo-Saxon people. Conversions to the new faith were frequent and spontaneous. The main reason was that Christian missionaries gave the Anglo-Saxons a religion that was more sustaining than their own pagan faith. The worship of pagan gods among the Anglo-Saxons before the advent of Christianity had been a warrior's religion whose mythology reflected the most cherished national traits: courage, generosity, honesty, and loyalty to the king and to friends. These are virtues that British schools still try to inculcate in their wards. The Nordic religion had taught people not to be afraid of death, to be bold and heroic by giving them the example of their gods who were also perishable to the forces of chaos. Christianity helped the Anglo-Saxon to make sense of that chaos by giving them a clear cosmology and definite doctrines. So even though Christianity spoke of matters alien to the Nordic mind: charity, humility and submission of the layman to the priest, its allure was irresistible. By AD 660 only Sussex and the Isle of Wight had not accepted the new faith. In the next twenty years English missionaries were instrumental in bringing Christianity to the land of their forebears – Germany.

St. Augustine was primarily interested in establishing the authority of the Church among the ruling families and nobles. He devoted his energies to converting Anglo-Saxon kings and queens. The pattern of conversion was similar in every kingdom: first the king's wife adopted the new faith, and then became an agent to convince her husband whose court followed the king's suit. The ordinary people remained pagan for generations to come.

The Celtic Church did more than the Roman Church to win the hearts of humble people. The Celtic Church had been established by **St. Patrick** who was probably a Romanised Briton who lived in Wales. At the onset of the 5th Century, he must have been captured by the Scots[5] whereby he converted Ireland to Christianity. Afterwards, the Irish monks went to Scotland and Northern England to continue St. Patrick's work. This Church, as a result of the downfall of the Roman Empire and the conquest of France and Italy by barbarous tribes, was cut off from Roman Civilization and developed its own distinctive Celtic spirit based on Celtic tribalism. Contrary to the Roman church, it did not have any hierarchy or organization, and therefore it was 'democratic:' each tribe had its own monastery, which did not recognize any authority. The monks were hermits, scholars, artists, warriors and missionaries. In the times when it seemed that the dark ages in Europe had set in for good, they cherished the knowledge of classical secular literature that had practically vanished in Western Europe, thus saving it for posterity.

The Celtic missionaries started to convert the Anglo-Saxons from the North, going from village to village to bring Christ's teaching to the common folk. Until the middle of the 7th century, the monks of the Celtic church did as much as those from Canterbury to convert the Anglo-Saxon race. They reconverted Northumbria (which used to be under the jurisdiction of the Roman Church); they evangelized Essex and Mercia.

It should therefore come as no surprise that the two churches remained in a state of dispute. The main cause for the mutual antagonism was the rivalry in the territory of Anglo-Saxon England as well as differences in organization. The dissent between the two churches reached a crescendo when the two churches clashed about the date of Easter. In 663 the King of Northumbria chose the Roman Church, and his rejection of the Celtic Church caused the retreat of the Celtic missionaries from England. In the following decades Scotland, Wales and Ireland came under the control of the Church of Rome, proving that a good organization could prevail over periodic lapses of faith.

The decision to choose the Roman Church proved to be very judicious. It may have been partially prompted by the Anglo-Saxon admiration for the superior organization of Frankish kingdoms where the Roman municipal system had not been eradicated by savage invaders. The hierarchy of the Roman Church was an imitation of Roman bureaucracy and municipal life that the Anglo-Saxons had so recklessly obliterated in their earlier days; however, they presently started to regret their destructiveness as a kind of a cultural throwback.

The early adhesion of all Anglo-Saxon kingdoms to the Roman Church gave an impetuous towards unity. The Church supported the royal power and taught the kings lessons in administration, legislation and taxation. The centralization and unity of the Church became a model for the structuring of infant states and paved the way towards political unity under one single king. The administration of the Church became a prototype of the administration of the state. Additionally, churchmen, the most educated people of the times, became the chief advisers of the Crown and its secretariat. In this way, Roman ideas, perpetuated by the Roman Church, were passed across different historical periods; from the secular to the religious realm and back to the secular again. The alliance with the Papacy provided the island with the best that the Mediterranean Civilization still had

[5] The Scots were the Celtic tribes from Ireland – they were the last newcomers to Scotland and they gave their name to the whole land.

to offer. Numerous churches were built on the ruins of Roman villas. Although most of them were eventually pulled down it should be remembered that stone churches were built in England at the time when laity still lived in houses made of wood.

In 669 the Pope sent to Britain **Theodore of Tarsus** who made Canterbury an important center of Latin and Greek culture. He strengthened Roman supremacy over the island, and, after his death, the parish system mushroomed everywhere. The parish, the church and the graveyard become the centre of every village.

The Church was on the one hand modern and spiritual, but, on the other, it was aristocratic and feudal. To build **the Medieval Church** with its magnificent architecture, art and scholarship, the peasants had to pay ecclesiastical dues that quickly reduced them to serfage. The Church held the rulers and average people in awe – the clergymen were formidable people – the only ones who could read or write or make sense of administrative, ecclesiastical and secular laws. Anglo-Saxon kings and lords willingly gave their lands to the Church; some of the kings abandoned their thrones to finish their lives as pilgrims or monks. In return for the land and the dues enforced by the king and his sheriffs, the Church taught nobles jurisdiction that enriched the nobles and the Church itself. In this way the Church promoted feudalism based on an increasingly unequal division of wealth and liberty. The richer and more influential the Church was becoming, the more impoverished and subjugated the peasantry was.

In Anglo-Saxon times the line separating the Church and the State was very thin and blurred. The Bishops were kings' civil servants, priests sat next to Sheriffs in the benches of Shire courts, where both secular and spiritual cases of malpractice came for verdict. The men of the Church were the first people to write down the laws of Anglo-Saxon kings from the oral tradition. They also helped the kings to make new laws on a large number of important matters. In this way they helped to consolidate royal authority and to centralize the power in each state.

The Anglo-Saxon, even though respectful of the clergy and dedicated to the new religion, remained pagan in pure human emotions. Such poems as *Beowulf*, *The Wanderer*, and *Deor's Lament* bear witness to the popularity of older pagan ethos. Even though all early Anglo-Saxon poetry came through Christian censorship, there is an overwhelming abundance of pagan ideals and values in it. *Beowulf*, for example, praises the faithfulness of the warrior to his lord and his readiness to die in battle. The typical heroes of such poems are roving spirits and reckless buccaneers unrestrained by any religious dogmas.

Important dates:

2500 BC – 1300 BC	The Iberians
700 BC – 300 BC	The Celts
55 BC	The 1st Roman expedition of Julius Caesar
AD 122–126	Hadrian's Wall
AD 407–410	Roman withdrawal
AD 350–1066	The Anglo-Saxon Period
AD 601–800	The return of Christianity
AD 800–975	The 2nd Nordic Invasion

2: The Second Nordic Invasion and the Norman Conquest

Near the end of the 8th century the heathen **Danes and Norsemen (the Vikings[6])** were restless again and started to launch attacks on Britain, tempted by the island's wealth. The Vikings were pirates as well as farmers. At first they only raided the coasts of England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland, but gradually they started to realize that the Anglo-Saxon kings did not have any fleet to protect their realms, and that the whole island was easy prey. War and plunder on the island became the chief business of the Viking nation. The first successful warriors came home with such transfixing news of the island's riches that the Vikings soon started to perfect plans for permanent occupation.

The Saxons considered the Vikings brutes, and the truth was they were barbarians in comparison with the Danes and Norsemen. In the 9th century the Vikings visited various parts of the world (Venice, Constantinople, Spain, Normandy or even North America). Their voyages gave them knowledge of the world and made them skillful tradesmen. When the 9th century was drawing to a close and it was absolutely clear that the Anglo-Saxons could not keep them out, the Vikings started to take over the best farming lands in England.

The largest host of Viking immigrants came in the days of **Alfred of Wessex.** This group was just a small fraction of a large population movement which changed the political map of the whole of Europe. One of the Viking bands established Normandy in Northern France; other bands settled across the Channel in England. By 875 only King Alfred of Wessex held out against the invaders for one sole reason – Wessex was furthest removed from the Vikings' landing areas.

The Vikings warriors were pioneers in a new type of warfare. They used body-armor, which made them immune to the spears of Saxon peasants. They could move in their boats on rivers and sea, launching surprise attacks in distant parts in the country. Furthermore after their conquest of Normandy they learnt from the French how to mount horses, and on horseback they were as fast and formidable as in their boats.

The twelve years in which the Viking invasion continued gave Alfred the Great (of Wessex) the time to learn to beat the Viking at their game. He reformed his army, organized a mounted infantry made of his vassals, and built permanent garrisons and a fleet. Step by step, he recovered the territories conquered by the invaders where the Vikings, once they settled, started numerous feuds among one another. After he re-captured London, he was strong enough to force the Vikings to accept a treaty.

Alfred the Great was a truly great leader. He brought to Wessex learned men and gave refuge to many scholars. He founded the first school for laymen – the sons of noblemen, his future civil servants, thus breaking the Church's monopoly for learning. After his

[6] Viking means 'warrior'.

death, the Crown of Wessex went into the hands of his equally gifted and enlightened successors, who merged the Viking population with the indigenous Anglo-Saxon people. A hundred years after the invasion the memory of the atrocities and interracial wrongs grew very dim and common ethnic roots and customs prevailed. When the Vikings received baptism almost all differences between them and the Anglo-Saxons were removed. At first the Viking authority was recognized in the east and north of England (between the Thames and the Tees) but gradually the Vikings accepted the rule of the house of Wessex, provided that they could live under their own traditional Danish laws and their earls. Therefore the territories, which they inhabited, were often referred to as **'Danelaw'**. The term was used in the 11th century to indicate an area in which customary law was influenced by Danish practice.

In fact, the coming of the Danes gave a powerful stimulus to the development of **English Common Law**.[7] The very word 'law' is of Danish origin. The Vikings were very appreciative of law and had men especially trained in legal arguments and procedures. The Anglo Saxons took over from the Danes their zeal for legal disputes.

During the war with the Vikings, the Anglo-Saxons built walled settlements called **burghs**. In the post-war years these military garrisons and trading centers became also sites of legal proceedings. Soon burghs or **boroughs**, as they are called today, situated in restored Roman cities or in new strategic points (Lincoln, Derby, Northampton, Cambridge among others) became the basic units of municipal (town) administration. In this way England was covered with a network of garrisons and organs of administration similar to contemporary ones.

Contrary to the Anglo Saxons who were pioneer farmers making clearings in the forest to plough the land, the Vikings were city-dwellers and indefatigable traders who made boroughs bustling centers of commerce. Apart from that both Danish and Anglo Saxon farmers continued the strenuous work of deforestation and colonization of new areas. The people of those remote times were still very primitive agriculturists for whom hunting was the main source of food. The state, in the modern sense of the word, did not exist, and work was carried under the leadership of a feudal lord, who provided military protection, economic help and justice. But the lord's assistance had a very extortionate price – in return for the lord's protection the peasant had to labor for the lord. Therefore **feudalism**[8] which was the outcome of differentiating the functions of warrior and husbandman (farmer) entailed putting limits to individual freedom. On the other hand, the protection of the community and the advancement of agriculture would not have been possible without stratifying medieval society. After the end of tribalism and before the beginning of the state, it was the feudal lord who organized the life of each community.

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[7] In the course of time Common Law came to designate the law administered by the king's judges, which was the same regardless of the region. Before Henry II evolved the Common Law in the 12th century, the law differed from one region to another. From the 12th century onwards the king's judges always used the same law. They were specially trained in the Common Law that was based on Anglo-Saxon and later Norman customs, cases and decisions. It was different from the Civil Law of the Roman Empire or the Common Law of the Church.

[8] The word feudalism comes from the French word *feu* (land held by a lord in return for his service to the sovereign); the tenure of the land that belonged to the king but was used by his vassals was the cornerstone of feudalism. The vassals and the lord were mutually bound – the king had to give his vassals land without which the vassal would not fight for the king. Vassals in turn gave a portion of this land to the knights who were their vassals and owed them military service.