

Lecture two:

Origins of the British People 1: The Antiquity and Roman Rule

History is governed by geography, and Britain is no exception to this rule. From the early ages the British Isles 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; the rivers swarmed with fish and provided excellent navigable inlets into the hinterland. The history of England begins with the Anglo-Saxons, who invaded Great Britain about A.D. 499. They displaced the previous occupants from the south-eastern part of the Island and called it Angle-land or England. Previously, the island, like continental Europe, was home for succession of peoples dating from the beginnings of the Old Stone Age.

Prehistory and antiquity:

England was settled by humans for at least 500,000 years. The first modern humans (homo sapiens) arrived during the Ice Age (ended about 8000 B.C.). It is during this era Neanderthals and then Cro-Magnons inhabited Great Britain when the sea levels were lower and Britain was connected to the European mainland. Later, the rising sea level produced the English Channel and made great Britain an island. In the new environment of forests and swamps the Middle Stone Age came and passed, followed by the New Stone Age during which the practice of agriculture began. That epoch brought a wave of new people to Britain.

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. These Stone Age or Bronze Age peoples, who used flint or bronze implements rather than iron, exhibited different cultural traits, and there was no sign of a “British” identity. These Neolithic developments also meant a shift from the relatively egalitarian society of hunter-gatherers to a more stratified society based on class and gender hierarchies.

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 ‘hengés’ were

constructed. Historians know very little about those remote times, and what they know is only through archeological revelations.

The Beaker Folk were late Neolithic- early Bronze Age people living about 6000 years ago in the temperate zones of Europe; they received their name from their distinctive bell-shaped beakers, decorated in horizontal zones by finely toothed stamps (their culture is often called the Bell-Beaker culture). A warlike stock, they were primarily bowmen but were also armed with a flat, tanged dagger or spearhead of copper, and a curved, rectangular wrist guard. Their extensive search of copper (and gold), in fact, greatly accelerated the spread of bronze metallurgy in Europe. Archeologists found in the graves around the Stonehenge pieces of pottery and some metal arms that attest to the artistic crafts of the Beaker Folk.



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. However, 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 makeup 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.

Thanks to their use of iron technology, the Celts were better farmers than the Iberians. The Celts cultivated the heavy soil of the river valleys with iron tools and two-wheeled, horse-drawn chariots. They subdued and absorbed the indigenous inhabitants of the islands. Their priests, the Druids, dominated their society. The settlements were also of a distinctively British type, with the traditional round house: the Celtic system of farming with its small fields and storage pits for grain.

The social system of the Celtic tribe was threefold: king, warrior aristocracy, and freemen farmers. The Druids, who were occupied with magico-religious duties, were recruited from families of the warrior class but ranked higher. They could not read or write but memorized all religious teachings, tribal laws, history and medicine. There is no record of the manners of worshipping except that they frequented oak forests as gathering location

The building of hill-forts witnessed also to the Celts' skill of organizing and distributing lands. The hill-forts were simple economic capitals and smaller towns of different tribal areas to which Britain was now divided. Besides, the building of such forts suggests the existence of powerful chieftains and the growth of strife as increasing population created pressures on the land.

By 300 BC, swords were making their appearance once more in place of daggers. Beginning in the 3rd century, a British form of Celtic art was developed to decorate warlike equipments, and eventually also bronze mirrors and domestic pottery. In addition, in their trade with the continent, they used iron bars in exchange for goods until they copied the Roman coins saw used in Gaul (France). Roman civilization widely spread in Europe will make its way to the British Isles as well much later.

Roman Invasion and Achievements:

Although it had long been known to the Mediterranean peoples as a source of tin, Britain was not part of the Roman Empire till Julius Caesar's arrival to the island in 55 BC_ a sort of afterthought to his conquest of Gaul. He willed to gain glory of the victory of extending the borders of his empire far westward. Simultaneously, Britain was a sort of huge mine of valuable resources to be plundered as well as a loaded food basket for feeding the population of far flung territories of the Empire.

Britain as a term was derived from the Greco-Roman appellation of the island 'Pretani' mispronounced as Britannia by the Romans. Beyond the strategic intention of the Roman conquest of Britain, historians suggest a secondary reason for the Roman expedition on the British Isles. It was the fact that the Celts of Britain protected their kin in Gaul rebelled against the Romans should be took in consideration as a motive for Caesar's expedition.

Julius Caesar first came to Britain in 55 BC, but it was not until a century later, in 43 AD, that Romans could occupy the land. Caesar's first expedition in 55 BC was not very successful, though it was much more an exploration, because of the difficulty of ferrying troops across the English Channel. A year later, in 54 AD, his second expedition was of much

success in terms of putting down a coalition of British tribes under the leadership of Cassivellaunus. Despite that Caesar withdrew to Gaul in order to solve more problems at home, he won the impression of senates in Rome. It is until the expedition of Emperor Claudius I that Britain began to be under the Roman control.

Emperor Claudius I invaded Britain in force in 43AD, but nearly two decades later that he could capture Anglesey, the headquarters of the Druids, as well as defeating Boudicca (60 AD), queen of Iceni. Abolishing Druidism, for the Romans, meant taking hold of both Britain and Gaul. British meddling in Gaul was causing unrest there. So that defeating the Druids in Britain and consequently weakening their followers in Gaul granted the Emperor the control over both territories.

In the first 20 years of occupation some progress had been made in spreading Roman civilization. Many towns had been founded, the imperial cult had been established replacing the Druids elite, and the merchants and the indigenous aristocracy (Romanized) were busily introducing the Britons to material benefits. Roman gastronomy and garment were introduced and adopted in the island. It was not, however, until the Flavian period (under the rule of Flavius), 69_96 AD, that the real improvements were made. Notably with the occupation of Wales and the advances into northern Scotland by Gnaeus Julius Agricola (78-84 AD), troops were removed from southern Britain, and administrative areas based on the most part on the indigenous tribes, took over local administration. This involved a large program of urbanization and of education. Roman conquest of Wales had completed by 78, but Agricola's invasion of highland Scotland failed because of the shortage of army and ammunition. This shortage was caused by extensive continental needs of army; thus, it was evident that a secured frontier would be maintained in order to protect the Roman British lowlands.

In 121 AD, Roman Emperor Hadrian (117-138 AD) ordered a construction of a wall in the north separating the Roman lands from Scotland. **The Hadrian wall** became the official frontier of Roman Britain. This wall was about 119 km in length in which placed watchtowers every 0.5 km. The wall was completed by 126 AD and was rebuilt several times throughout the 200s and the 300s to prevent the advancement of the Caledonians of Scotland until about 400.

Britain in the 3rd and 4th centuries felt the decline of the Roman Empire. Britain was stripped of its occupying forces, moving legends out to serve their own political ambitions. In 410, Rome abandoned Britain leaving little but permanent signs of its occupation: a highly developed network of roads, and sites of numerous towns as London, York, and others bearing the suffix –cester and -caster as well as education.