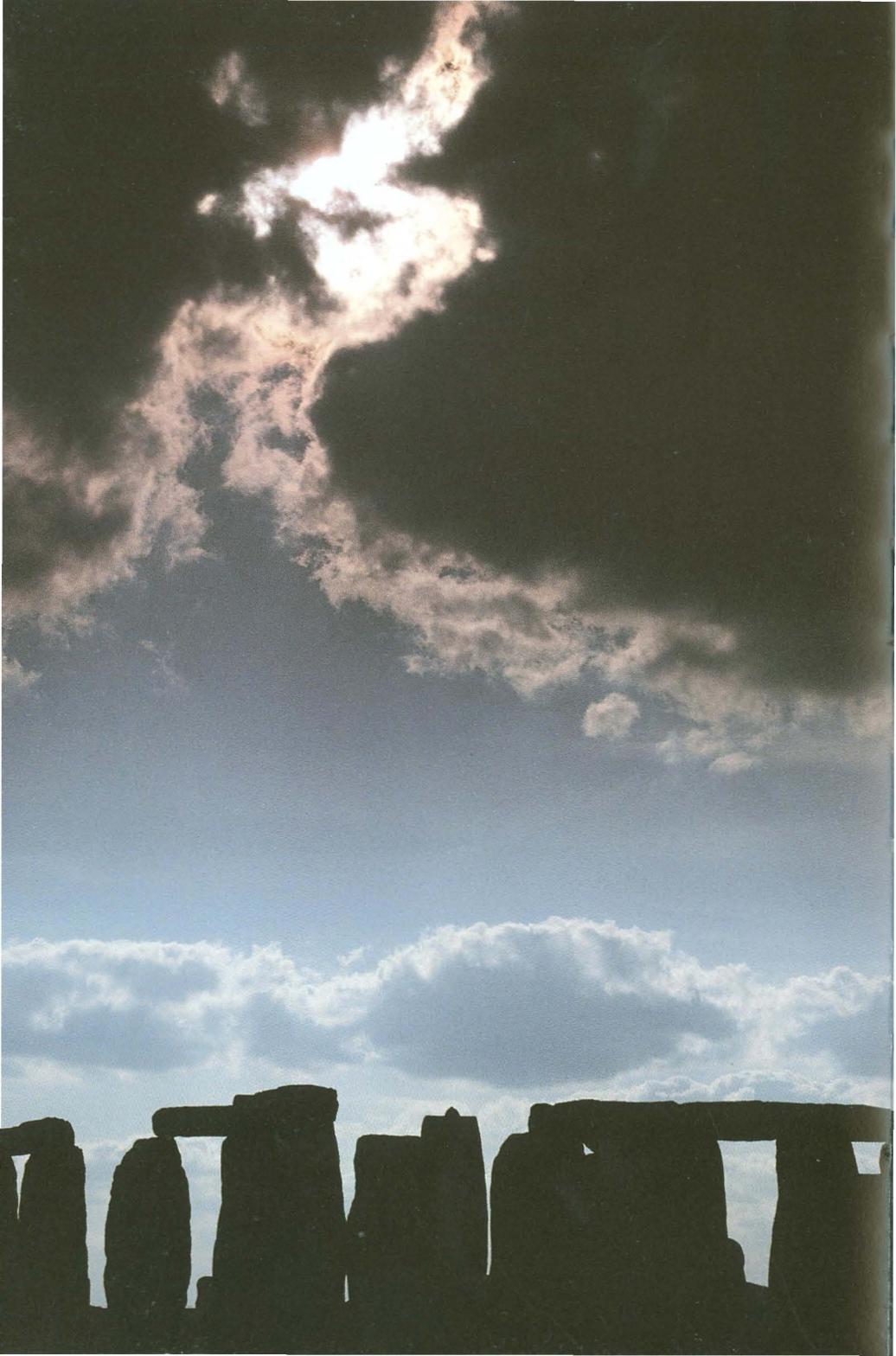


# THE BRITISH MELTING POT

From Neolithic times (5000-2500 BC)  
to the defeat of the Anglo-Saxons (1066)

# I





# 1

5000 BC to 55 BC **NATIVES AND IMMIGRANTS**

*Previous page*  
Prehistoric monoliths at  
Stonehenge, Wiltshire.

One day towards the middle of the seventeenth century John Aubrey, a young law student at the Middle Temple, set out to explore the countryside around his father's estate in Wiltshire. Near the village of Avebury he came upon an extraordinary circle of huge stones which seemed to him to comprise an ancient monument 'as much surpassing Stonehenge as a cathedral doth a parish church'. Remarkable as the monument was and long as it had stood there, however, Aubrey's was the first detailed account of it. Even so, it aroused little interest. Seventy years later, in his *Tour through the whole Island of Great Britain* of 1724-6, Daniel Defoe did not consider Avebury worthy of remark; and, later on in the eighteenth century, when a local farmer decided to clear the ground for ploughing, several of the larger stones were pushed over into a pit filled with burning straw and smashed into fragments with sledge hammers. Stonehenge was treated less cavalierly; but it was not until recent times that any serious attempt was made to uncover the secrets of its history. Instead, tales were told of esoteric ceremonies, of priestly incantations, of human sacrifices upon the so-called Slaughter Stone.

Since Aubrey's day, while scholars have stripped some of the more fanciful myths from these ancient stones, the

Stone circle at Avebury,  
Wiltshire, erected  
c. 1800 BC.



reasons why they were so arranged remain a mystery, though the alignment of the Central Stone at Stonehenge with the Heel Stone – over which the sun rises on midsummer mornings – suggests a sanctuary connected with a sun cult. At least the monuments can now be dated with some accuracy. The Avebury stones were erected between 2000 BC and 1600 BC; the Stonehenge monoliths in at least five stages covering a span of nine centuries from about 2200 to 1300 BC. But of the people who placed them here, little more is known than of their purposes in doing so.

In the distant past, before the first monoliths were dragged across the open chalk down of Stonehenge from the mountains of Wales, that is to say seven thousand years ago, at the beginning of what was to become known as the Neolithic age, these and other areas of what is now England were occupied by roving bands of hunters who lived on the wild animals they could trap and kill, the fish they could catch in the rivers, or the wild plants they could pick. They grew no crops and had no livestock. Then, about six thousand years ago, these Stone Age hunters were joined by other peoples, immigrants from the Continent, small men and women, rarely more than 5ft 6ins in height, who crossed the sea in little skin boats, dug-out canoes and wicker-woven coracles, bringing with them a different way of life. They made clearings in the forests for their animals, grew crops, fashioned themselves axes and other tools from flint, baked pottery, and established meeting places and tribal centres such as that at Windmill Hill near Avebury whose summit was crowned by three concentric lines of earthworks. Followed by other immigrants, they developed the custom of burying their dead in stone tombs like that at West Kennett in Wiltshire whose finds are in the museum at Devizes.

Among the new immigrants were the Beaker Folk who took their name from their distinctive bell-shaped drinking vessels with which they were buried in crouching positions in individual graves. These people, originally perhaps from



Prehistoric flint hand axe, found in Suffolk.

Prehistoric pottery vessel of c. 3000 BC.



Spain, came from the areas now known as Holland and the Rhineland, bringing with them a knowledge of working in bronze. They arrived towards the end of the late Neolithic period and the beginning of the period known as the early Bronze Age in about 2000 BC, and seem to have settled down amicably with the earlier immigrants. It was they who were responsible for bringing the immense stones from Pembrokeshire in South Wales for the second stage of the building of Stonehenge, probably shipping them across the Bristol Channel and up the river Avon on rafts, then hauling them up to the site from the banks of the river at West Amesbury on tree trunks serving as rollers.

Other smaller waves of immigrants followed the Beaker Folk; but the population of the island remained small and its settlements widely scattered until, for reasons not yet understood, in about 1600 BC thousands more people appeared. More and more settlements were built on the hills over the downlands; agricultural land was laid out in immense field systems surrounded by groups of hut circles. The population, it has been estimated, rose to about one million by 1500 BC when, at the beginning of the late Bronze Age, yet other immigrants arrived, bringing with them skills and ornaments of a quality which had never been seen in the island before and which were to be collectively known as the Wessex Culture. These newcomers were traders as well as craftsmen, builders as well as, when necessary, warriors. As the Beaker Folk had done before them, they turned their attention towards Stonehenge; and, in the third stage of its building, dismantled the circle of stones erected by their predecessors, then dragged eighty immense blocks of sarsen stone from the Marlborough Downs to set them up, squared and dressed with their shaped lintels, in the circle and horseshoe of trilithons which still stand today.

Diverse as the people in the island already were, their stock was to become more varied still when in about 800 BC, at the beginning of the Iron Age, other settlers arrived



Defensive earthworks at Hambledon Hill, Dorset.

from the Continent, at first in small groups then in larger bands. These were the Celts, a taller fairer race than the people who had come before, members of tribes which had long been settled in present-day France, Belgium and southern Germany and which were now moving west, retreating from more warlike tribes harassing them from the east. According to Gildas, the Celtic monk who was one of Britain's earliest historians, the Celts were 'completely ignorant of the practice of war'. In fact, their fighting men were armed with iron swords and daggers and their chieftains drove two-wheeled war chariots which were buried with them.

In the country they called Albion they built fortified hill forts with turf and stone ramparts, good examples of which can be seen at Maiden Castle in Dorset – which covers 115 acres and at one point has no fewer than eight lines of defence – and Cadbury Castle in Somerset, formerly a Neolithic settlement and occupied almost continuously for forty centuries. From such forts as these, and from other strongholds protected by water rather than ramparts – like

Glastonbury which stood on an island surrounded by swamps – Celtic tribesmen raided nearby settlements and carried off prisoners as slaves.

But the Celts were not essentially a bellicose people; even their chieftains seemed to have preferred hunting to war, while lesser men and women devoted their energies to husbandry. They were practised farmers, dividing the land into square fields separated by banks and working the earth with small ploughs drawn by oxen. They grew oats and rye, wheat and barley. Corn was ground in handmills for bread; and the alcoholic drink known as mead was made from water and fermented honey. They lived in round huts of wood and clay-covered wattle with thatched roofs. Both men and women wore brightly coloured clothes, red being a favourite colour, the material being dyed with a substance extracted from cockles. They had shoes and sandals of leather; and those who could afford them wore finely crafted ornaments and jewellery, brooches, bracelets, necklaces and rings, some of them made by their own people, others imported – together with glassware and wine – from foreign lands to which hides and slaves, cattle, dogs and minerals, tin from the mines of Cornwall, iron from Sussex, as well as gold and silver, were sent in return.

Among the most industrious and virile of the Celtic tribes were the Belgae who had begun to immigrate to Britain from the valley of the Marne towards the beginning of the first century BC. They settled at first in the south-east, where they soon became the dominant people in the area; and, as their coinage testifies, they established centres at Colchester, St Albans and Silchester. One of the most powerful of their chieftains was Cassivellaunus, uncle to Cunobelinus, Shakespeare's Cymbeline, who ruled over a large area north of the Thames in what is now Hertfordshire, Buckinghamshire and Berkshire.

Kings like Cassivellaunus were far from being the barbarians of Roman propaganda. They were skilled administrators, patrons of artists whose beautiful curvilinear,

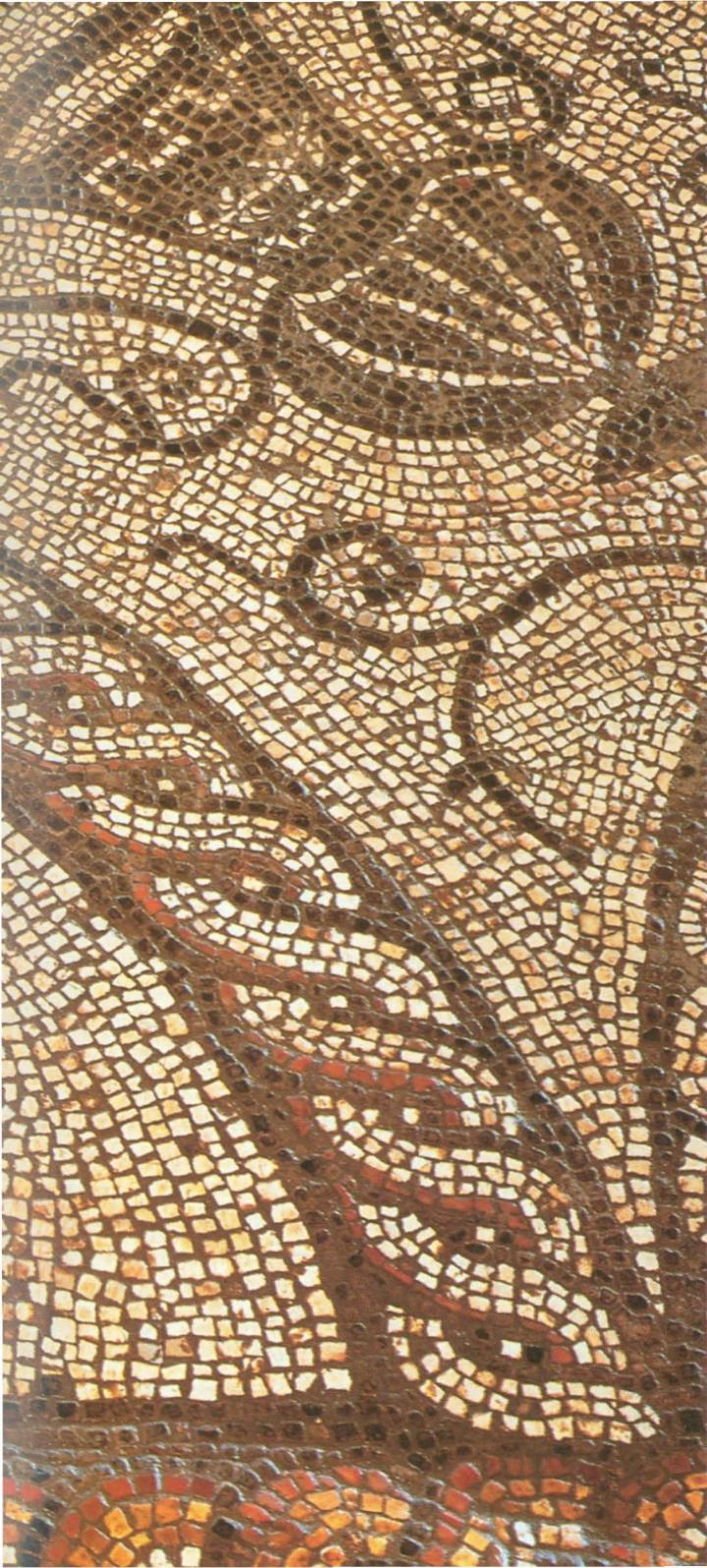
Celtic 'Battersea Shield'  
of beaten bronze,  
early 1st century AD.



abstract art decorated not only war shields and the hilts of swords but the backs of bronze looking-glasses and the lids of jewellery boxes. Certainly, when they made their appearance on the field of battle, they presented an awesome sight in their chariots surrounded by warriors wearing no armour, their hair long, their naked bodies dyed with woad. Yet for most of the time their people seem to have lived at peace with one another, marrying not only within their own tribes but with descendants of men and women who had come to Britain long before them. They learned about gods and the transmigration of souls from the wise men, astrologers and soothsayers known as Druids who worshipped and performed their rites in woods by the light of the moon beneath bunches of mistletoe clinging to the branches of oaks. According to Julius Caesar, the Druids offered up human sacrifices to their gods, sometimes single victims, at other times groups of men in immense wicker-work cages, criminals when these were available, slaves or poor men when they were not.







# 2

55 BC to 450 AD **ROMAN BRITAIN**



Fragment of Roman scale  
armour from Newcastle  
upon Tyne.

*Previous page:*  
Mosaic pavement from  
the Roman villa at  
Fishbourne, Sussex.

Bronze head of Emperor  
Claudius, AD 41-54,  
found in Suffolk.



Julius Caesar, the great Roman general, invaded Britain for the first time in 55 BC, partly to gather information about the island of which so little was then known and partly to punish the Belgae who had helped their fellow tribesmen in their fight against the conquering Romans in Gaul, the land that is now France. He landed in Kent with several thousand men, although the soldiers in one of his legions had threatened to mutiny when told they were to invade the cold and misty northern island reputed to be full of savages wilder even than the Gauls. Strong tides prevented Caesar's cavalry from getting ashore; so, after some skirmishes in which the Romans took measure of the island which they were to call Britannia, he decided to withdraw. He returned the following year; and, although his sailors once again experienced difficulties with the treacherous waters of the Channel and several of his ships were badly damaged as they lay at anchor in a storm, he marched as far as Wheathampstead in Hertfordshire, Cassivellaunus's hill fort, which he captured after fierce fighting. He then withdrew with hostages and prisoners, having extracted an undertaking from Cassivellaunus and other British chieftains that they would pay an annual tribute to Rome.

Caesar returned to Rome with the knowledge that Britain was far from being the primitive island of brutal tribesmen which Romans had previously imagined it to be. It was not, however, until AD 43, after the death of the Belgic chieftain, Cunobelinus, that the Emperor Claudius decided to incorporate it into the Roman Empire. There was fierce resistance to the Roman legions which, having landed at Richborough in Kent, were brought to battle by Cunobelinus's son, Caractacus, by the banks of the Medway river. But, brave as they were, the Britons could not withstand the might of Rome. Defeated, Caractacus fled to Wales where, years later, he was captured and with his family taken in chains to Rome. After his defeat other British chieftains accepted the impossibility of successful resistance and submitted to the Emperor. Cogidubnus, chief

of the Regni, did so, for instance, and was duly rewarded, having Roman titles bestowed upon him by the Emperor and accumulating great wealth.

The Iceni of East Anglia also submitted at first; but when their chief, Prasutagus, died in about AD 60, bequeathing his property to the Roman Empire jointly with his two daughters, his wishes were disregarded by the Romans, who refused to accept Prasutagus's widow, the tall, red-haired, harsh-voiced Boudicca, as queen. When she insisted upon the recognition of her rights and those of her family, she was flogged and her daughters were raped. The enraged Iceni, assisted by the neighbouring tribe of Trinovantes, swarmed down towards the Roman town of Colchester, massacred its inhabitants, sacked the recently constructed temple and other buildings associated with the alien Roman rule, and routed the 9th Legion which had arrived from Lincoln too late for the town's defence. Then, led by Boudicca, the Britons turned south for the Thames and within a few days their rough and massive army was looking down upon the port of Londinium, then an undefended trading centre whose warehouses, shops and taverns, a few of ragstone and tile but most of wood and thatch, all lay open to attack. The destruction of the port was swift and complete. As at Colchester, its inhabitants were massacred and their buildings engulfed in flames. Boudicca's triumph, however, was short-lived. Faced by the power of a vengeful Emperor, there could be no final victory; and, rather than fall into the hands of her enemies, she took poison and joined the countless thousands of dead.

London was rebuilt, grew and prospered. By the middle of the third century, when it had become the administrative as well as the commercial capital of the Roman province of Britain, it contained perhaps as many as 30,000 people. Fifty years later there may have been almost twice that number, living in a semicircular area of 326 acres enclosed by three miles of strong stone walls, pierced by gates where the main roads entered the city and strengthened by bas-

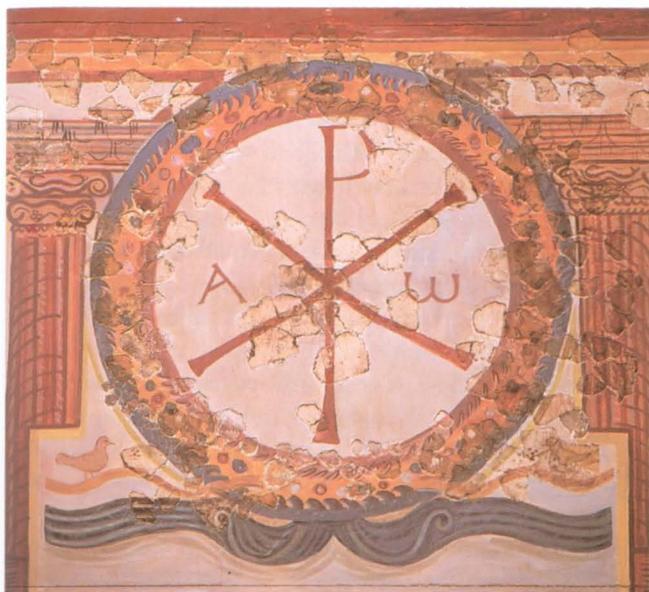


Roman baths at Bath,  
Avon, the spa of  
Aquae Sulis.

tions and towers. Elsewhere in Britain, as recalcitrant tribes were gradually conquered and pushed back towards the frontiers of Wales and Scotland, the Romans built other large towns, with temples and basilicas, barracks and public offices, amphitheatres, baths and workshops.

Most of these towns were arranged on the Romans' favourite grid-like plan which can still be recognized in the layout of the centres of Chichester (Noviomagus) and Gloucester (Glevum). In the north was York, then known as Eboracum, originally the headquarters of the 9th Legion. On the northern borders of the Welsh Marches was Chester (Deva), headquarters of the 20th Legion. Other cities were developed on the sites of old British settlements. Among these were Lincoln (Lindum), St Albans (Verulamium) and Silchester (Calleva), whose Roman walls still stand in places up to fourteen feet high. Other towns were developed as spas, most notably Bath (Aquae Sulis) whose baths and temple, now fully excavated, were revealed when the city was rebuilt during its eighteenth-century heyday. Yet others were constructed upon virgin sites, as, for instance, Exeter (Isca Dumnoniorum). Between these towns the Romans constructed a network of major and secondary roads, not always as straight as tradition would have them but of remarkable solidity as the surviving road across the moors at Blackstone Edge, Littleborough, still testifies. From London, roads radiated all over the country along routes which for much of their length are still in use as modern thoroughfares: to the north by way of Watling Street and Ermine Street; to the east by way of the Colchester road; to Chichester in the south by Stane Street; to the west by the road that passed through Silchester then on to Cirencester (Corinium) and Gloucester.

Just off this road, at Chedworth, Gloucestershire, are the well-preserved remains of a Roman villa, one of many which Romanized Britons occupied during the days of the Empire. Over six hundred of these Roman villas have now been unearthed, ranging from quite simple one-storey build-



Wall painting from a Christian chapel in the Roman villa at Lullington, Kent.

ings to large houses of stone and slate, and splendid palatial residences like the villa at Fishbourne which was probably occupied by the Romanized Celtic King Cogidubnus. And, from the objects dug up on their sites and in their surrounding farms, it has been possible to reconstruct the pleasant life then enjoyed by the well-to-do under the protection of Roman rule. Togas seem to have been worn in the Roman fashion and shoes or sandals of leather. In cold weather rooms, attractively furnished and handsomely decorated with porphyry and marble, bronze ornaments and terracotta figurines, were kept warm by heated flues beneath mosaic-patterned floors. In those rooms where meals were eaten there were blue and amber glass dishes and bowls, silver plates, knives and spoons, oil lamps and candlesticks. In bedrooms there were mirrors and boxwood combs on dressing-tables, ointment jars and scent bottles, ear-picks, skin-scrapers and manicure sets, pots of rouge, earrings and bracelets. There were pens and ink-wells for writing letters,

Roman glass jug and ribbed bowl of the 1st century AD, found at Radnage, Buckinghamshire.





Silver vessel, part of what is probably the oldest set of church plate from the Roman world.

dice and counters for playing games. Wine (better than the local fermentations) and olive oil were imported from the Continent, carpets from Egypt, silk, pepper and spices from the East. Latin was the official language; and most well-educated people spoke it as well as Celtic which remained the language of the poor, though many Latin words were incorporated into it.

For over three hundred years Britain remained a relatively untroubled outpost of the Roman world, the barbarians from beyond the frontiers of the Empire being kept at bay by forts and legions along coasts, at Branodunum (Brancaaster) on the east coast, for example, and Anderida (Pevensey) in the south, and in the north by Hadrian's Wall, a great defensive barrier with a castle every mile, which was constructed on the orders of the Emperor Hadrian on a visit to Britain in about AD 121. Stretching seventy-three miles from shore to shore across bracken-covered moors from the Tyne to the Solway, it remains the most impressive surviv-

The 73-mile long Hadrian's Wall, built across the northern moors in c. AD 121.



ing Roman landmark in the country.

Overrun and partially demolished by tribesmen from the north in 368, the Wall was again attacked in 383 and the sentries in its turrets and the soldiers in its forts were slaughtered out of hand. By now the Empire itself was beginning to crumble into ruins; and in Britain one legion after another was recalled to fight Rome's wars on the Continent until by the middle of the fifth century Rome's protection was at an end. The islanders were left to fend for themselves.





3

450 – 1066 **ANGLO-SAXONS**

*Previous page:*  
The Bayeux Tapestry,  
embroidered soon after the  
Norman Conquest of  
England in 1066.

The enemies of the Romanized Britons closed in upon them from every side. Fierce tattooed tribesmen rampaged down from Scotland; other marauders sailed across the turbulent Irish Sea in their light skin-and-wood boats called currachs, massacring the farmers and fishermen along the western coasts; while, surging through the waters of the North Sea, came the shallow-draught ships of the Saxons, users of the *seax* or short-sword, and their northern neighbours, the Jutes, who fished and farmed in what is now southern Denmark, and the Germanic tribe, the Angles, who were to give their name to the English people.

Fair men with long hair and beards, clothed in thick, coarse shirts and trousers, in cloaks to which skins were sewn by their women to give them extra warmth when they were used as blankets at night, these raiders from across the North Sea carried iron-spiked spears, battle-axes and round wooden shields covered with hide as well as short-swords. Ruthless, violent men exulting in their animal energy, driving their victims before them like terrified sheep, as their war horns and savage shouts spread terror along the coasts, they pillaged and looted, raped and murdered, then sailed home again to their homes on the Continental mainland. But soon, tempted by the good farmlands of Britain, they began to settle in the island, establishing small communities of rough huts around the wooden halls of their thanes.

In 446 the Britons made a final, forlorn plea for help from Rome; then, since no help was forthcoming, they turned – or so it seems from the confused and incomplete records of these times – to a powerful chieftain, Vortigern, who proposed bringing over as mercenaries a strong Saxon war party. These men, led apparently by two Jutish chiefs named Hengist and Horsa, established themselves on the Isle of Thanet, an area of rich farmland off the Kentish coast. At first all went well; but then the settlers, calling over friends and reinforcements, demanded more and more land and more generous payments until at length the quarrels between them and the Britons flared into open war. The

Britons were defeated; the Saxons advanced; and, according to the Venerable Bede, the Northumbrian monk whose *History* is our chief source of knowledge for this period, the countryside and towns were alike devastated: ‘None remained to bury those who had suffered a cruel death. A few wretched survivors captured in the hills were butchered wholesale, and others, desperate with hunger, came out and surrendered to the enemy for food, although they were doomed to lifelong slavery even if they escaped instant massacre. Some fled overseas in their misery; others, clinging to their homeland, eked out a wretched and fearful existence.’

This description is probably too highly coloured in its picture of woeful desolation; but certain it is that these were cruel times and that, rather than endure them, several families escaped across the Channel to the old Roman province of Armorica in the first of three stages of migration which eventually gave a Celtic language as well as the name of Brittany to this Atlantic peninsula of France. Other families apparently escaped to the west of Britain where a tribal leader named Ambrosius, evidently of Roman descent, offered shelter to the fugitives and to all those prepared to take up arms in defence of the old culture.

While the invaders continued to advance – one band of immigrants settling down in the kingdom of the South Saxons, which has given its name to the present-day county of Sussex, others establishing the kingdoms of the East Saxons (Essex) and of the West Saxons (Wessex) – further to the west along the borders of Wales and in Dumnonia, the peninsula occupied today by the counties of Devon and Cornwall, Roman Britain contrived to survive.

According to Gildas, a sixth-century chronicler who emigrated to Wales from Scotland where his father’s estates were being constantly overrun by Pictish marauders, the Romanized Britons and British tribes threatened by the Saxon invaders flocked to Ambrosius’s banner ‘as eagerly as bees when a storm is brewing’. Presumably to protect



The 8th-century Northumbrian historian, Bede, at work in his monastery.

themselves from the foreign marauders, and their cattle from raids by other British tribes, they built a series of earthworks, among them the Wansdyke, a massive ridge that stretches fifty miles from Inkpen in what is now Berkshire, across Savernake Forest and the Marlborough Downs to the Bristol Channel; and, behind this earthwork, they seem to have withstood attack and even to have won the occasional battle. It was at this time that there arose the legend of the mighty King Arthur, champion of the British, noble knight and courageous warrior, who, as Ambrosius's successor, stood firm against his people's enemies. He fought twelve great battles against the Saxons, so the Welsh monk Nennius recorded, and 'in all these battles stood out as victor'.

Whether or not King Arthur lived it is impossible now to say. But that there came to the fore at this time a British cavalry leader of extraordinary prowess there seems to be little doubt; and of the power and fascination of the Arthurian legend and of his Round Table of heroic warriors there can be no doubt at all. Places named after him can still be found the length and breadth of the country: no other name in Britain is encountered so often, except that of the Devil. And from time out of mind the site of Camelot, King Arthur's court, has been identified as that of a yellow sandstone hill, Cadbury Castle, which rises in the heart of the quiet gentle countryside of Somerset. Here in recent years have been discovered fragments of pottery similar to those unearthed at Tintagel in Cornwall – where King Arthur is supposed to have been born – and splinters of glass of a type imported from the Continent in the sixth century as well as the outlines of what seems to have been a large feasting hall of the same date.

The last of the twelve victories ascribed by Nennius to King Arthur, 'Commander in the Battles', was apparently fought between 490 and 520 at Mount Badon which is believed to have been somewhere in Dorset or Wiltshire. This great victory, in which 'nine hundred and sixty men

fell in a single onslaught of Arthur's,' apparently brought peace for a time. But the encroachment of the Saxons across the island could not finally be resisted; and, before the end of the sixth century, Roman Britain was all but forgotten as Anglo-Saxon England began to take shape.

In the north the kingdom of Northumbria – one of the seven kingdoms, or Heptarchy established by the Angles and Saxons – extended its boundaries to the west; while, in the Midlands, the kingdom of Mercia assumed control over tracts of land so vast that by the end of the eighth century its ruler, King Offa – who built the great earthwork known as Offa's Dyke along his western borders to keep out the Welsh – controlled for a long time virtually all central, eastern and south-eastern England. In the south the kingdom of Wessex took control of Devon and Cornwall as well as the lands of the South and East Saxons; and, at the beginning of the ninth century, under their King, Egbert, the West Saxons defeated the Mercians and even laid claim to authority over the lands north of the Trent. When the Northumbrians submitted to him and took him for their master in 829, Egbert could reasonably consider himself overlord of all the English.

The confederation of the different kingdoms was a very loose one, though; and Egbert's dominion over it was far from secure. He had no central government and no means of raising an army well disciplined enough to defeat England's new enemies from overseas. These were the Northmen, Norwegian Vikings and Danes, tall fair warriors and pirates, as hungry for land as the ancestors of the English had been four centuries before. At first they came as raiders in their high-prowed ships, ravaging and looting along the coasts, sailing home to winter in their *fjords*. But then they came to settle, sailing up the Thames, wading ashore in East Anglia and on the coasts of Northumbria, pagan men as ready to beat in the skulls of defenceless monks as to cut down the English farmers who were assembled in their fighting forces known as *fyrds* to resist the



Offa, King of Mercia, from a painting in St. Albans Cathedral, whose Abbey he is said to have founded.



A page from the Gospels illuminated on the island of Lindisfarne in the early 8th century.

approaches of what the Anglo-Saxon chroniclers described as the 'great heathen host'.

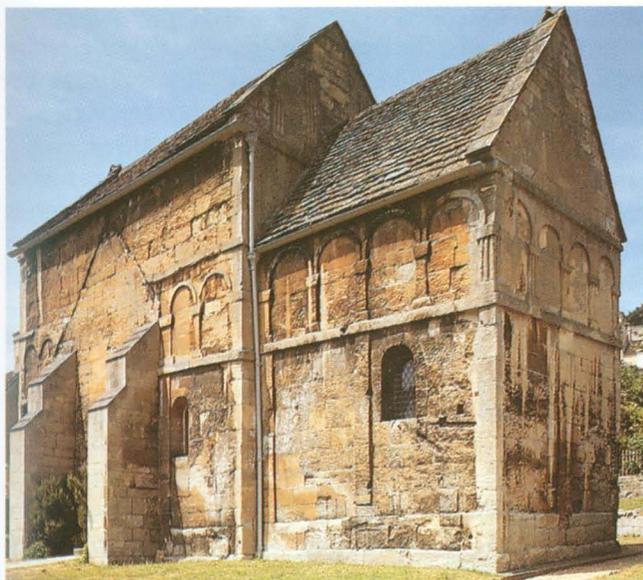
Christianity had come to England long before. Towards the end of the sixth century, Ethelbert, King of Kent, had ridden from his capital to the coast to meet Augustine, the Prior of St Andrew's Monastery in Rome, who had been sent by the Pope to convert the heathen English to Christianity. Afraid of the stranger's magic, the King had received him in the open air but, soon persuaded by his sincerity, he had allowed him to preach to his people and within a few months Ethelbert had become a Christian himself. He provided Augustine with a house for his followers in Canterbury and in 597 allowed him to be consecrated Bishop of the English.

Seven years later another missionary from Rome, Mellitus, had been established as Bishop in London where King Ethelbert had built for him a church which was dedicated to St Paul. But Mellitus had found the staunchly pagan Londoners far more intractable than Augustine had found the people of Kent and, after the death of his royal patron, the men of London had driven their Bishop out of the city gates and had returned to their old religion and their former priests.

Christianity, however, was gaining a strong hold elsewhere in England where the gospel was spread not only by missionaries from the Continent and their followers but also by Celtic missionaries from Scotland and Ireland and from the holy island of Lindisfarne which St Aidan, a monk from Iona, had been given by Oswald, the Christian King of Northumbria. The missionaries who came from Rome held that the Pope's authority was supreme, the Celtic evangelists that Christian belief did not require a final earthly arbiter. There was little agreement between the two factions who differed even upon the calendar that settled the date for Easter; so in 664 a conference was held at Whitby in Yorkshire where a house for monks and nuns had been founded a few years before by St Hilda, great-niece of the

King of Northumbria. This Synod of Whitby decided in general favour of the Roman missionaries, foreshadowing closer ties with the Continent as well as the organization of the church into bishoprics, largely unchanged to this day, by such Christian leaders as the Greek, St Theodore, who was appointed Archbishop of Canterbury by the Pope in 668 and who called the first Council of a united English Church in 672 at Hertford, a demonstration of ecclesiastical unity that served as a model for a political unity not yet achieved.

As Christianity spread in England, churches were built all over the island. Most were constructed of split tree trunks which have long since disappeared but some were of stone, among them the original church of All Hallows by the Tower, the Northamptonshire churches of Brixworth and Earls Barton, and the little early eighth-century church of St Laurence, Bradford-on-Avon. Monasteries and abbeys were also being built, minsters, chapels and oratories; and



The Saxon church of St Laurence, Bradford-on-Avon, Wiltshire.

as the Church received bequests and grants of land so its riches and influence grew year by year.

It was this increasingly Christian England, slowly evolving into a unified state, which was threatened by the Vikings and the Danes who, well established in the north, were by the middle of the ninth century posing a threat to the Saxon kingdom of Wessex whose capital was at Winchester.

Here a remarkable young man had come to the throne in 871. This was Alfred, scholar, lawgiver, warrior and king, the first great statesman to emerge clearly from the mists of early English history. Of his physical appearance little can be said with confidence, but his biographer and friend, Asser, Bishop of Sherborne, painted a portrait of a man of exceptional gifts, devout and humane, devoted to the welfare of his people, as brave in battle as he was studious in scholarship, always careful to make the best use of his time so that he could continue with his studies and translations without neglecting the cares and duties of government, even inventing a water clock to help him in this endeavour.

In battle against the Danes at Ashdown in the Berkshire hills Alfred fought 'like a wild boar'. But, although his enemies were here defeated, the Danish incursions into England were soon resumed; and for a time Alfred, with a small company of faithful followers, was driven into hiding from the invaders on the Isle of Athelney in the Somerset marshes, moving 'under difficulties through woods and into inaccessible places' and giving rise to the famous legend that he sought shelter in a cottage where a woman scolded the unrecognized fugitive for allowing her cakes to burn by the fire.

Gradually, however, the number of his supporters increased; and by 878 Alfred was able to bring the Danes to battle once more and to defeat them decisively. He obliged them to remain within an area bound by Watling Street known as the Danelaw, and persuaded their leader, Guthrum, and several of his leading warriors, to be bap-

Anglo-Saxon ring belonging to King Alfred's sister.



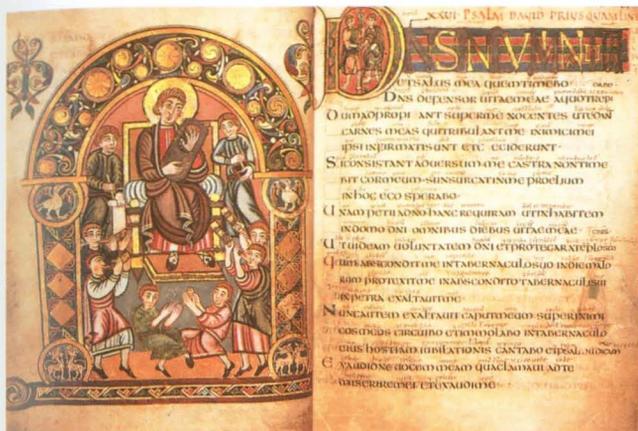


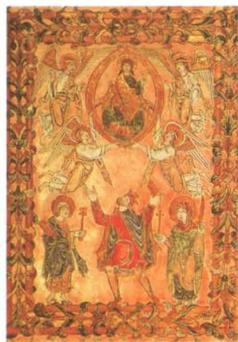
Illustration from an 8th-century prayer book showing the biblical King David and his musicians.

tized as Christians. Taking advantage of the temporary peace, Alfred reorganized the *fyrð*, satisfying the complaints of men who had had to leave their farms for indeterminate periods to serve as soldiers; and he built up a strong navy to patrol the English Channel, forcing many would-be invaders to turn their attentions to northern France where their settlements became known as Normandy, the land of the men from the north.

Alfred, left for the moment in peace, turned his own attention to the restoration of English Christian culture, repairing pillaged churches, founding schools, setting scholars to work on the compilation of histories and the translation of texts, himself translating Bede's *History* – which celebrates the English people as a chosen race – grieving that men 'in search of learning and wisdom' had taken to going abroad 'when once they had come to England in search of such things', and looking forward to the day when 'all the youth now in England, born of free men, who have the means they can apply to it, should be devoted to learning'.

When Alfred died in 900 England was united as never before. By saving his own kingdom from the Scandinavian threat, he had given encouragement to others and had made

The 10th-century charter of Winchester Minster shows King Edgar offering the charter to Christ.



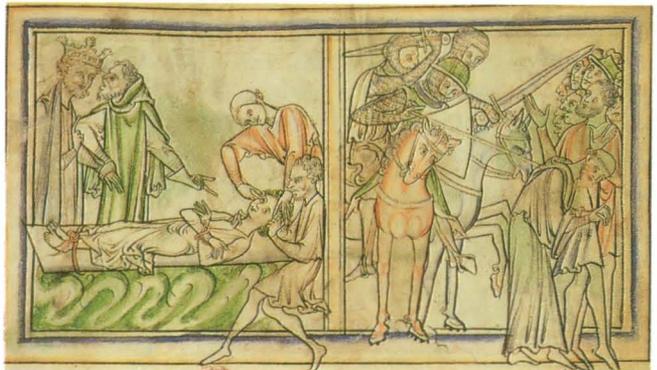


A helmet from the burial ship of an Anglo-Saxon king found at Sutton Hoo, Suffolk.

the West Saxon cause the cause of England. His successors did what they could to continue his work. His son, Edward the Elder, as skilled a soldier as his father though not so dedicated a scholar, and his formidable daughter, Ethelfleda, wife of Ethelred of Mercia, who ruled that kingdom after her husband's death as 'Lady of the Mercians', kept the Danes at bay and constructed a system of defences by building *burghs* or fortified settlements later to be known as boroughs, at strategic points, including Bakewell in Derbyshire, Tamworth and Stafford, Hertford and Warwick. Edward's son, Edmund, and his grandson, Edgar, gradually realized Alfred's dream of a unified England. The Danelaw was reconquered and in 973 Edgar was not only accepted as King of the English by Saxons and Danes alike, but also acknowledged as their overlord by kings in Scotland and Wales. During the reign of King Edgar, 'the Peaceable', between 959 and 975 there was a late flowering of Anglo-Saxon art and culture as well as an increase in the number of monastic houses for both men and women under the direction of St Dunstan, the scholar, musician and craftsman, maker of organs, bells and metalwork, who became Abbot of Glastonbury in 940 and Archbishop of Canterbury twenty years later.

King Edgar's descendants were, however, ill-suited to the task of defending England from renewed Viking invasions.

The Danish King Cnut takes over the throne of England by force in 1016.



His eldest son, Edward, was stabbed to death while he was still a boy; another son, Ethelred, who was crowned by St Dunstan when he was barely ten years old, was to be nicknamed ‘the Unready’ or ‘the Ill-advised’. His willingness to buy off the invaders with bribes known as Danegeld angered his own people – who were heavily taxed to meet the cost of the payments – while failing to placate the Danes whose King, Cnut, took over the throne in 1016, incorporating England into a Scandinavian empire which included Norway as well as Denmark.

England prospered under Cnut, a firm, just ruler who took pains to conciliate the English, marrying Ethelred’s widow and becoming a Christian, much to the pleasure of the monks of Ely who ‘sang merrily as the King rowed thereby’. In his time Danes and Englishmen learned to live more amicably together – though the riches and power of Danish earls were the cause of much jealousy – and there began to emerge the counties of England as we know them today, an England divided into shires with shire courts and shire reeves, or sheriffs, responsible for administering laws as comprehensive as any in the early medieval world.

Most people still lived in country villages. But perhaps as many as ten per cent were now town-dwellers; and several towns, notably Winchester, Norwich and York, were growing fast, as were ports like Southampton from which the English exported their textiles, metalwork and food-stuffs, as well as the slaves and the hunting dogs for which they had long been celebrated. London’s population had risen to about fifteen thousand.

It was natural that such a country should continue to attract the eye of foreign adventurers, despite the strong fleet that Cnut maintained by renewing the annual tax of the Danegeld. And after the short reigns of his two sons and the accession to the throne of Ethelred the Unready’s son, the white-skinned, white-haired Edward – known because of his piety as ‘the Confessor’ – greedy eyes were turned to the kingdom of this indolent man who seemed more con-



Portrait of Cnut, who incorporated England into a Scandinavian empire.

A coin depicting King Ethelred, known as ‘The Unready’.



An 11th-century illustration showing Edward the Confessor at a banquet with his nobles.

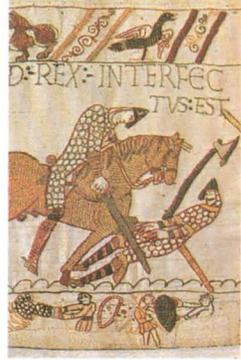


cerned with the building of a great Abbey at Westminster than with affairs of state.

As soon as it was learned that Edward was dying no fewer than four men laid claim to the English throne, the King of Norway, the Duke of Normandy, and two brothers of Edward's Queen, Edith, one of whom, Tostig, the deposed Earl of Northumbria, was living in exile in Flanders. The other of these two brothers was Harold Godwinson, the hereditary ruler or Earl of Wessex, who immediately took advantage of his rivals' absence from the country to have himself crowned in the new Abbey of Westminster on the very day that its founder was buried there.

Shortly afterwards Tostig's men invaded Kent, then sailed up the east coast to pour ashore in Lincolnshire. Defeated by local levies, Tostig retreated north to await the arrival of the King of Norway whose Scandinavian warriors were soon sailing up the Humber towards York. Informed of this second invasion, King Harold, who was in the south preparing to resist the expected attack from Normandy, rushed north, won a brilliant victory at Stamford Bridge

and, leaving both his brother, Tostig, and the King of Norway dead, brought his exhausted troops back to the Sussex Downs to face the army of the Duke of Normandy who had landed his knights at Pevensey. On 14 October 1066 the two armies clashed in a hard-fought battle north of Hastings at Battle. Towards the end of the day Harold was killed, shot through the eye by an arrow as tradition supposes, then hacked to death by Norman knights, one of whom cut off his leg, an unknighly deed for which Duke William dismissed him from his service. Anglo-Saxon England perished with Harold's death.



The death of King Harold at the hands of the Normans, at Hastings, 1066, from the Bayeux Tapestry.