

Batna2 University

Department of English

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Early History of the UK

Introduction

History is important in shaping people's identities and molding their cultures; certainly, unveiling some details in the history of any nation would give meaning and significance to it and remove any ambiguities related to its past or present. Being the case, then, one should have an idea about the beginnings of the British people and their evolving throughout history.

1. Early History of Britain

1.1. Prehistoric Period

Two thousand years ago there was an Iron Celtic culture throughout the north-west European islands. The Celts who mixed with the peoples who were there already continued to use the religious sites that had been built long before their arrival. The monumental architecture found throughout the country gives the prehistoric period its mystery and significance. Stonehenge, the largest burial mound in Europe, and Stonehenge Wiltshire, in southwestern England are two of the most spectacular examples. People with inclinations towards mysticism and esoteric religion find in these places a special significance.

1.2. The Roman Period (43-410)

When the Romans invaded Britain and took control of present-day England and Wales, they have imposed their own way of life and culture. The Celtic aristocracy helped them to govern by encouraging people to adopt Roman dress and the Latin language. The Romans never reached Ireland to exert any kind of influence there. They have succeeded only the southern part of Scotland. This led a Celtic tribe called the Scots to migrate from Ireland to Scotland and unite with another tribe the Picts against the Romans. The Celts who experienced Roman rule (the Britons in

England and Wales) and those who did not (the Gaels in Ireland and Scotland) developed two distinct branches of the Celtic group of languages.

Very little was left or felt even with the long occupation of the Romans of Britain. However, in many other parts of Europe their influence is still felt in different domains such the system of law and administration which forms the basis of the modern system and a language which developed into the modern Romance family of languages. Moreover, most of their villas, baths and temples, their impressive network of roads, and the cities they founded, including Londinium (London), were soon destroyed or fell into disrepair. Place names like Chester, Lancaster and Gloucester, which include variants of the Latin word castra (a military camp) are almost the only reminders of their existence in Britain.

1.3. The Germanic Invasions (410-1066)

During the fifth century, several tribes from the European mainland invaded Britain and settled in large numbers. The Angles and the Saxons were two of these invading tribes. Soon the south-east of the country fell in their grasp. However, an army of (Celtic) Britons under the command of the legendary King Arthur (King Arthur) halted their advance to the west. Yet, by the end of the sixth century, they and their way of life predominated in nearly all of present-day England and Celtic culture and language survived only in present-day Scotland, Wales and Cornwall.

The Anglo-Saxons who had little interest in towns and cities affected largely the countryside. They were behind the foundation of self-sufficient villages which formed the basis of English society for the next thousand or so years; and they have also introduced new farming methods.

The Anglo-Saxons were pagan. Christianity started spreading throughout Britain during the sixth and seventh centuries. It was introduced into the south of England by the Roman missionary St. Augustine, and in Scotland and northern England from Ireland, which had become Christian more than 150 years earlier. Despite the fact that Roman Christianity took over everywhere, the Celtic model persisted in Scotland and Ireland for several hundred years. It was less centrally organized and had less need for a strong monarchy to support it. This partly explains why both secular and religious power in these two countries continued to be both more locally based and less secure throughout the medieval period.

In the eighth century, a second wave of Germanic tribes invaded Britain. The new invaders, known as Vikings, Norsemen or Danes, came from Scandinavia. In the ninth century they took over the islands around Scotland and some coastal regions of Ireland. However, they failed to conquer England which was defended King Alfred of the Saxon kingdom of Wessex. As a result, their settlement was confined mostly to the north and east of the country.

The cultural differences between Anglo-Saxons and Danes were almost nonexistent. They had nearly the same way of life, although they spoke different varieties of the same Germanic tongue. Moreover, the Danes soon converted to Christianity. Such facts facilitated political unification easier which was achieved by the end of the tenth century. Thus, England became a United Kingdom with a Germanic culture throughout. Most of Scotland was also united by this time, at least in name, in a (Celtic) Gaelic kingdom.

1.4. The Medieval Period (1066-1458)

Britain entered the mainstream of western European culture after the successful Norman invasion of England (1066). Previously, most links had been with Scandinavia. The English kings owned land on the continent and were often in conflicts with the French kings. But, unlike the Germanic invasions, the Norman invasion was small-scale and could not achieve a Norman area of settlement. Yet, the Norman invading soldiers owned land and the people living on it. This was achieved by imposing a strict feudal system in which nobles, or barons, were responsible directly to the king; lesser lords The lords and the barons(the French-speaking Normans), each owning a village, were directly responsible to a baron. The peasants (The English-speaking Saxons who were tied by mutual duties and obligations to the local lord) were forbidden to travel without his permission. This system initiated the English class system (Language and social class).

The Anglo-Norman kingdom was the most powerful political force in Britain and Ireland thanks to the system of strong government which was introduced by the Normans. This allowed the English monarch to extend his authority in the 250 years to come. By the end of the 13th century, the Anglo-Norman lords (in the name of their king) controlled a large section of eastern Ireland, however, the whole of Wales was under his direct rule. Only Scotland was forced to fight different wars to remain politically independent.

250 years after the Norman Conquest, all classes of society in England spoke Middle English and not the Norman language. Moreover, it was the Anglo-Saxon concept of common law,

and not Roman law, which formed the basis of the legal system. Despite English rule, however, in northern and central Wales the story was different. The region was never settled in great numbers by Saxons or Normans despite English rule. Consequently, the (Celtic) Welsh language and culture remained strong. National festivals of Welsh song and poetry continued to be celebrated throughout the medieval period and continue today. The Anglo-Norman lords of Ireland remained loyal to the English king but, despite laws to the contrary, mostly adopted the Gaelic language and customs.

Although Scotland enjoyed a certain political independence, it witnessed a gradual switch to English language and customs in the lowland (southern) part of the country. This was due to two major facts: first, many Anglo-Saxon aristocrats had fled there after the Norman conquest. Second, the Celtic kings saw that the adoption of an Anglo-Norman style of government would strengthen royal power. This has caused a cultural split between the lowlands, where the dominant culture and language was similar to that in England, and the highlands, dominated by a Gaelic culture and where the authority of the Scottish king was hard to enforce.

It was in this period that Parliament began its gradual evolution into the democratic body which it is today. The word 'parliament', which comes from the French word parler (to speak), was first used in England in the thirteenth century to describe an assembly of nobles called together by the king.

1.5. The Sixteenth Century

The outbreak of the bubonic plague or the Black Death in the middle of the fourteenth century, killed about a third of Britain's population, caused a shortage of labor, increased the importance of trade and towns and made the ties between lord and peasant weak. These developments increased largely the power of English monarchs.

Establishing a system of government departments run by professionals during the Tudor's rule (1485-1603) weakened the position of the feudal aristocracy, who needed the monarchy's support to maintain their position. Another considerable change witnessed during the period is the important role acquired by the house of commons. The monarch now is in need of the house agreement to have his policies implemented, being the house where the powerful merchants and landowners are represented explains this.

The rise of Protestantism in England led to a divorce with the Pope and Rome. The king declared himself head of the 'Church of England' thus, all church lands fell under his control and

became a new source of income. Rejection of the Roman Church was combined with a spirit of patriotism in England. After losing all claims to lands in France, the country became a distinct 'island nation' and geographically the center of western civilization after the European exploration of the Americas grew. The last quarter of this adventurous and optimistic century saw the beginning of Shakespeare's famous works which paved the way to modern English.

By the end of the century, Protestantism prevailed in England taking the form of Anglicanism which not so very different from Catholicism in its organization and ritual. In Scotland it took an idealistic form which stressed dislike of ritual and elaboration. This form of religion is Calvinism. However, Catholicism remained in the highlands and Ireland. remained and so further widened the gulf between the two parts of the nation.