

## Why did the Anglo-Saxons not become more British?\*

ETHNIC and national identities have historical roots, both in the complex concatenation of events that brought them into being, and in the simplified historical myths by which they are sustained. The origins of peoples and nations have, therefore, always been a fertile subject for historical research. Within this broader framework, recent uncertainties over the future of the United Kingdom (as it faces both internal devolution and European integration) have encouraged a particularly active debate on the origins, development and persistence of the various national and ethnic identities of the British Isles.<sup>1</sup>

For early England, interesting work has been done on the emergence of a single kingdom in the tenth century, and on the slow growth of a unified sense of 'Englishness' among the various peoples and kingdoms whom modern scholarship, for convenience, lumps together under the label 'Anglo-Saxons'.<sup>2</sup> However, historians have tended to assume that all these Anglo-Saxon groups would share one important thing in common, namely a sense that they were different from the native 'Celtic' population of southern Britain, the Britons.<sup>3</sup> In other words, whatever else they might or might not have become, it is considered self-evident

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1. See, in particular the collected essays in A. Grant and K. J. Sawyer (ed.), *Uniting the Kingdom?* (London/New York, 1995), and Linda Colley's justly well-known *Britons. Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (New Haven/London, 1992).

2. See, for the emergence of a sense of Englishness, the work of Patrick Wormald: 'Bede, the *Bretwaldas* and the Origins of the *Gens Anglorum*', in P. Wormald (ed.), *Ideal and Reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Society* (Oxford, 1983), pp. 99-129; and id., 'Engla Lond: The Making of an Allegiance', *Journal of Historical Sociology*, vii (1994), 1-24, reprinted in his *Legal Culture in the Early Medieval West* (London/Rio Grande, 1999), pp. 359-81. For the political and administrative realities behind that sentiment: P. Stafford, *Unification and Conquest. A Political and Social History of England in the Tenth and Eleventh Centuries* (London, 1989); and the highly influential work of James Campbell, as in his 'Observations on English Government from the Tenth to the Twelfth Centuries', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th series, xxv (1975), 39-54, reprinted in his *Essays in Anglo-Saxon History* (London/Ronceverte, 1986), pp. 155-70.

3. 'Celt', as used today, is a modern term, used to lump together peoples more disparate than the Anglo-Saxons, but whose indigenous languages we now recognize as coming from the same 'Celtic' language-group: S. James, *The Atlantic Celts. Ancient People or Modern Invention?* (London, 1999), pp. 43-59. In our period, only a few scholars might have encountered the word, in classical references to prehistoric peoples of the Continent. There is no evidence that insular 'Celts' of our period ever applied the term to themselves (nor indeed was there an alternative word in use to describe all the non-Anglo-Saxon peoples of the British Isles).

that the Anglo-Saxons could never have become 'British' like the Britons. Indeed in the popular imagination (including my own), the separate identity of Anglo-Saxons and Britons (who later developed into the English and Welsh) is attributed to a difference in ancestry, in other words, to 'racial' difference; and is thought of as innate, rather than culturally acquired and mutable.<sup>1</sup> Most of the English, if they know anything of early history, feel that their Englishness derives ultimately from a predominantly Anglo-Saxon ancestry, with perhaps a romantic tinge, but only a tinge, of later immigrant blood – Viking, Norman, Huguenot, or whatever. The Britons (and the Romans) play little part in the perception that the English have of their ancestry. Consequently, they see themselves as markedly different from the other ancient inhabitants of the British Isles; and they would never describe themselves as 'Celts', unless their recent ancestry included known Scottish, Irish, Welsh or Cornish ancestors.

This strong sense of difference, combined, on both sides of the English-Celtic divide, with a striking reluctance to acknowledge any reciprocal debts, seems to have been present from early Anglo-Saxon times. The Germanic invaders absorbed very little of the native culture of Britain; and, by an act of supreme arrogance, they even termed the Britons '*wealas*', or 'foreigners', in their own island.<sup>2</sup> The Anglo-Saxons learned to speak neither Latin nor Brittonic (the native Celtic vernacular of the Britons), and, unlike their neighbours, they remained for a long time illiterate. They did adopt some native British place-names, particularly in the west and north and particularly for natural features like rivers; but their failure, or refusal, to absorb any of the speech of the Britons into their wider language is quite remarkable. At present, only some thirty words in Old English are believed to derive from Brittonic.<sup>3</sup> Over the centuries, the distant Italians have had considerably more influence on English vocabulary than the Anglo-Saxons' most immediate neighbours and subjects, the Britons/Welsh.

1. Since, as we shall see, even the early sources present the difference between Britons and Anglo-Saxons as racial, such a modern perception is scarcely surprising. The stereotype, which can extend to a belief in biologically determined racial character, is magnificently debunked by J. R. R. Tolkien, 'English and Welsh', in Tolkien *et al.*, *Angles and Britons. O'Donnell Lectures* (Cardiff, 1963), pp. 1–41, at p. 12: 'In this legend Celts and Teutons are primeval and immutable creatures, like a triceratops and a stegosaurus, . . . fixed not only in shape but in innate and mutual hostility; and endowed even in the mists of antiquity, as ever since, with the peculiarities of mind and temper which can be still observed in the Irish or the Welsh on the one hand or the English on the other . . . Unlike most myths this myth seems to have no value at all.'

2. From which derives the modern English term 'Welsh'. As we shall see, the word can also mean 'slave'.

3. Continuing research is very slowly increasing the number of such words: A. Breeze, 'A Celtic Etymology for Old English *deor* "brave"', in J. Roberts, J. L. Nelson and M. Godden (ed.), *Alfred the Wise* (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 1–4, with further references.

The invaders also initially remained pagan, despite the fact that the Britons of the fifth and sixth centuries were Christians.<sup>1</sup> The Britons successfully exported their religion westwards and overseas to Ireland; but did not convert their new and immediate neighbours to the east, the Anglo-Saxons. Even when the incomers did eventually convert to Christianity, some two centuries after their arrival, they did so principally through influences that were not native and British, but were derived from abroad – from Ireland and the Irish settlements in western Scotland, from Gaul, and, of course, from Rome. Those Anglo-Saxons, like the Hwicce and the Magonsaetan (living in modern Worcestershire, Gloucestershire, Herefordshire and Shropshire), who may in fact have taken their Christianity from the native Britons, soon chose to forget their debt.<sup>2</sup>

When they recorded their past, the Anglo-Saxons and the Britons presented themselves as races apart. When both peoples wrote down the genealogies of their rulers, there were in fact a few British names, and therefore probably some Britons, among the royal ancestors of the Anglo-Saxons, including (most famously) Cerdic himself, the ancestor of Alfred and the House of Wessex.<sup>3</sup> But no attempt was made by either the Britons or the Anglo-Saxons to connect their genealogies, despite the fact that various rival Anglo-Saxon genealogies intermesh, particularly around claimed common descent from Woden; just as rival British (or Welsh) genealogies also intermesh, in particular in common descent from Magnus Maximus, a fourth-century Romano-British imperial claimant.<sup>4</sup> By contrast, no attempts were made to give the British and the Anglo-Saxon royal families a common ancestry. For both peoples, the conclusion to be derived from the genealogies is that their rulers were from races apart, despite the presence of British names among the Anglo-Saxon kings, and despite good evidence of one marriage alliance

1. It is likely that many Britons were still Romano-Celtic pagans in the fifth century; but by the mid-sixth century, when Gildas wrote, they seem to have become solidly Christian, since unbelief is one of the very few vices Gildas does not attribute to them. If the arguments presented in this article are correct, it is possible (though not demonstrable) that, by reaction, the presence of Anglo-Saxon pagans hastened the Christianization of the Britons – rather as later, the association of the Roman mission with the Anglo-Saxons probably encouraged British churchmen to entrench themselves in ecclesiastical insularity.

2. P. Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature in Western England, 600–800* (Cambridge, 1990), at pp. 54–114; S. Bassett, 'Church and Diocese in the West Midlands: The Transition from British to Anglo-Saxon Control', in J. Blair and R. Sharpe (ed.), *Pastoral Care before the Parish* (Leicester, 1992), pp. 13–40. Anglo-Saxon amnesia was perhaps encouraged by Roman churchmen, eager to stamp out all trace of a particularist British Church. See, for example, the way that the cult of a local St Sixtus (at a location within Anglo-Saxon Britain now unknown) was suppressed and replaced by the cult of an established Roman saint of the same name: N. Brooks, *The Early History of the Church of Canterbury* (Leicester, 1984), p. 20.

3. The names Cerdic, Ceawlin and Caedwalla, all in the genealogy of the West Saxon kings, are apparently British: R. Coates, 'On Some Controversy surrounding *Gewissae/Gewissei*, *Cerdic* and *Ceawlin*', *Nomina*, xiii (1989–90), 1–11. Some elements in Mercian royal names may possibly also be British: Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature*, p. 26.

4. D. N. Dumville, 'Kingship, Genealogies and Regnal Lists', in P. H. Sawyer and I. N. Wood (ed.), *Early Medieval Kingship* (Leeds, 1977), pp. 72–104, at pp. 77–82.

between a British and an Anglo Saxon royal house and the probability of many others.<sup>1</sup> Any common ancestry was forgotten or suppressed.

Similarly, we know that there were in fact moments of political and military co-operation between Britons and Anglo-Saxons,<sup>2</sup> but when both peoples came to summarize their dealings with each other, the picture is straightforward and consistent. Two distinct and hostile peoples fight for the same territory; one of them comes by ship from overseas, and gradually expands its power by conquest; the other resists, with greater or lesser success, and awaits the moment when the invaders can be slaughtered and their defeated remnants driven to their boats and 'sent home' over the sea. In the tenth century, for instance, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* ended its account of Athelstan's great victory at Brunanburh over an army of Scots, Britons and Norsemen in these words:

Never yet in this island before this, by what books and our ancient sages tell us, was a greater slaughter of a host made by the edge of the sword, since the Angles and Saxons came hither from the east, invading Britain over the broad sea, and these proud assailants, warriors eager for glory, overcame the Britons and won a country.<sup>3</sup>

While, on the other side of the same coin and at roughly the same time, the Welsh author of the prophetic poem the *Armes Prydein* looked forward to the day when the Cymry (the Welsh) would drive back the Saxons with such slaughter that their corpses would 'stand up, supporting each other as far as the port of Sandwich'; then 'the foreigners (will be) starting for exile, one (ship) after another returning to their kinsmen'.<sup>4</sup> And that will be the end of the English, foreigners killed, or compulsorily repatriated, after their brief 500-year sojourn in Britain.

The tenth-century evidence of the Brunanburh poem and of the *Armes Prydein* comes from a time when 'Englishness' was being deliberately emphasized in the interests of a newly unified kingdom. In this context the hostile 'otherness' of the Britons/Welsh may have been deliberately stressed, in order to promote English unity; and English unity and strength certainly in turn provoked a powerful British reaction. However, it is striking that early written sources, those of the sixth to eighth centuries (Gildas, the *Gododdin*, the genealogies and Bede), are as clear as the tenth-century texts on the existence of a hard-and-fast difference between Anglo-Saxon peoples and Britons, and

1. For Oswiu of Northumbria's marriage to Rhiainfellt of the British royal family of Rheged, see *Historia Britonum*, ed. T. Mommsen (Monumenta Germaniae Historica, *Auctores Antiquissimi*, xiii, 1898), ch. 57.

2. See, in particular, the alliance of Penda of Mercia with Cadwallon of Gwynedd: Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, ed. and trans. B. Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford, 1969), II.20 and III.1.

3. *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, s.a. 937. Translation (slightly adapted) from D. Whitelock (ed.), *English Historical Documents c. 500-1042* (2nd edn., London/Oxford, 1979), p. 220.

4. *Armes Prydein, The Prophecy of Britain, from the Book of Taliesin*, ed. and trans. I. Williams (Dublin, 1982), lines 187-90.

(when they touch on external relations) on the 'natural' state of hostility between them. Furthermore, the broader evidence of failed contacts, in religion and in language, provides strong support for the idea that this perception of difference was no mere literary construct, but was felt (and lived) throughout society.<sup>1</sup>

The apparent obviousness of this unbridgeable difference between Anglo-Saxon and Briton, between invader and invaded, and the lack of need to examine and question its persistence, evaporate when we compare the experience of Britain with that of continental Europe. For instance, if we look just across the Channel to northern Gaul, we see a very different outcome to an apparently similar story of Germanic invasion. Northern Gaul was conquered in the late fifth century by the Franks, a people who had, admittedly, had closer dealings with Rome than the Anglo-Saxons, but who were not dissimilar to them in their social, political and economic structures, and who were certainly Germanic pagans before their arrival in imperial territory. But, quite unlike the experience in Britain, in Frankish Gaul a great deal that was native persisted, and came to influence the culture and identity of the single people, the western Franks (later the French), who eventually emerged. For instance, in fifth- and sixth-century Frankish Gaul, unlike contemporary Anglo-Saxon Britain, both administrative records and literary works continued to be written in Latin; towns and a town-based Church persisted; and even the secular administration remained urban for at least a century.<sup>2</sup> The incoming invaders were very proud of their Frankishness, and indeed managed to impose their ethnic identity as '*franci*' (from which '*français*' derives) on the natives of northern Gaul. But in the process they made many adjustments to native life, rapidly adopting as their own, for instance, the religion (Christianity) of the native Gallo-Romans, and with it the established saints of Gaul, like St Martin of Tours and St Denis of Paris. In time, the Franks of Gaul also came to speak the language of the natives, a late Latin that eventually evolved into modern French. The Gallo-Romans became 'Franks' and even widely adopted Frankish personal names,<sup>3</sup> but at the same time the Franks became culturally gallo-romanized. One important consequence of this process of mutual adjustment is that the modern French find it comparatively easy to celebrate both a Gaulish (in other words Celtic) past, and a Frankish (Germanic) one. We see this, for instance, in contemporary French admiration for Vercingetorix and Asterix; and, on

1. This is deliberately a very generalized picture. It does not preclude moments of political friendship (as in seventh-century Mercia), and some cultural interchange (as in the possible case of the Hwicce and Magonsætan, outlined above).

2. Such continuities from Roman times were much stronger in southern than northern Gaul; but, as we shall see in the case of Remigius and late fifth-century Reims, they can be documented even in the north-east.

3. A. Dauzat, *Les Noms de personnes* (Paris, 1925), p. 35.

the Germanic side, in the way that Clovis the Frank was recently exploited to celebrate the supposedly ancient and holy union between right-wing France and the Catholic Church.<sup>1</sup>

When I came to do some of the background research for this article, I found that precisely this comparison and contrast, between the experience of Britain and that of Frankish Gaul, had already been explored in detail in the later nineteenth century by the great Victorian Anglo-Saxonist Edward Freeman.<sup>2</sup> Freeman emphasized the same contrast, between the very Romano-Gallic Frankishness which emerged in Frankish Gaul, and the exclusively 'Teutonic' character (as he termed it) of the parts of Britain settled by the Anglo-Saxons, which owed almost nothing to the native post-Roman Britons. Freeman explained this contrast in terms of radically different Germanic conquests. In Gaul a military and political take-over by a comparatively small group was followed by a fairly rapid process of going native. But in Britain, or to be more precise in eastern and southern Britain, a violent migration occurred that swamped and effectively destroyed the native Britons – either killing them, or driving them into exile, and leaving only a remnant to become the sexual or enslaved property of the dominant Anglo-Saxon males. He repeated this view several times during his career; and, for the youth of England, with chilling clarity in his *Old English History for Children* of 1869:

The [British] women of course would be made slaves, or they would sometimes be married to their masters. Thus there may doubtless be some little British and Roman blood in us, just as some few Welsh and Latin words crept into the English tongue from the very beginning. But we may be sure that we have not much of their blood in us, because we have so few of their words in our language . . . Now you will perhaps say that our forefathers were cruel and wicked men . . . And so doubtless it was . . . But . . . it has turned out much better in the end that our forefathers did thus kill or drive out nearly all the people whom they found in the land . . . [since otherwise] I cannot think that we should ever have been so great and free a people as we have been for many ages.<sup>3</sup>

Freeman's ideas were followed closely by John Richard Green, author of an immensely popular *Short History of the English People* (1874). Both historians argued that tribesmen in Germany, not the Britons, were the true racial and moral ancestors of the English. For instance, Freeman

1. On the Franks' historical afterlife, see E. James, *The Franks* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 235–43. It is worth noting that, in order to adopt the Frank Chlodovech as an ancestor, the French have had to soften and gallicize his Germanic name to 'Clovis'. Clovis and Chlodovech, like Charlemagne and Karl der Grosse, are not always instantly recognizable as the same person, despite recent attempts to make both into forerunners of Europe and of Franco-German friendship.

2. In particular, in E. A. Freeman, *Four Oxford Lectures 1887* (London/New York, 1888), pp. 61–112 ('Teutonic Conquest in Gaul and Britain. Two Lectures').

3. E. A. Freeman, *Old English History for Children* (London, 1869), pp. 27–9. For the same view, in academic prose and without the explicit conclusion: E. A. Freeman, *The History of the Norman Conquest* (6 vols., Oxford, 1867–79), i. 18.

directly compared the lukewarm feelings that the young in England should have towards the leaders of British resistance to Roman rule, with the devotion they should feel towards Arminius, the German leader whose victory in AD 9 ended Roman expansion beyond the Rhine:

Now I have told you about Caradoc [Caractacus] and Boadicea, and it is right that you should know about them and care for them. But you should care for Arminius a great deal more, for though he did not live in our land, he was our kinsman, our bone and our flesh. If he had not hindered the Romans from conquering Germany, we should not now be talking English; perhaps we should not be a nation at all.<sup>1</sup>

While Green, waxing equally lyrical, praised the unprepossessing spot in the Kent marshes where Hengest, the first Englishman, landed in Britain:

It is with the landing of Hengest and his war-band at Ebbsfleet on the shores of the Isle of Thanet that English history begins. No spot in Britain can be so sacred to Englishmen as that which first felt the tread of English feet.<sup>2</sup>

It is possible that Freeman and his followers were correct in attributing the remarkable cultural changes that followed the Anglo-Saxon invasion of southern Britain to a racial take-over. Our best contemporary source, Gildas, certainly suggests that just such a change of populations did take place. However, Freeman's ideas did not go unchallenged, even as they were being propounded. In particular, the essayist Grant Allen believed in a strong Celtic contribution to Englishness; while the natural scientist Thomas Huxley argued that both historical probability and the appearance of the contemporary English population suggested racial mixture, including many Celtic ancestors.<sup>3</sup> Subsequent opinion has

1. Freeman, *Old English History for Children*, p. 22. As so often, in a popular work we find views explicitly stated that are only implicit in academic monographs. Caractacus and Boadicea do indeed play a comparatively small part in English historical consciousness, despite the latter's feminist credentials, and despite her imposing statue of 1902 on the embankment at Westminster, with its echoes of another great (if more decently clad) *British* queen, Victoria. As in the famous case of Arthur, British heroes are contested between the English and the Welsh – Boadicea is the one woman honoured amongst the eleven statues of heroes of Wales unveiled in Cardiff City Hall in 1916: J. B. Hilling, *Cardiff and the Valleys. Architecture and Townscape* (London, 1973), p. 149; R. R. Davies, *The Revolt of Owain Glyn Dŵr* (Oxford, 1997), p. v.

2. J. R. Green, *A Short History of the English People* (London, 1874), p. 7.

3. G. Allen, *Anglo-Saxon Britain* (London, [1881]), particularly pp. 55–70 and 225–34; and id., 'Are we Englishmen?', *Fortnightly Review*, xxviii (1880), 472–87, reprinted in M. D. Biddiss (ed.), *Images of Race* (Leicester, 1979), pp. 238–56; T. H. Huxley, 'The Forefathers and Forerunners of the English People', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 10 January 1870, pp. 8–9, reprinted *ibid.*, pp. 159–69, and letter to *The Times*, 12 October 1887. Huxley's arguments are heavily dependent on the impressive research (based on the widescale recording of hair- and eye-colour) of the physical anthropologist John Beddoe: see his *The Races of Britain. A Contribution to the Anthropology of Western Europe* (Bristol/London, 1885). Freeman ignored Beddoe's findings, presumably as inappropriate material for an historian to use (and perhaps as awkward for his own arguments).

continued to fluctuate wildly. Some, in particular Nora Chadwick and, recently, Nicholas Higham, have argued for small numbers of Anglo-Saxon incomers, ruling, and eventually anglo-saxonizing, a population that was very substantially British in its ancestry.<sup>1</sup> Others, including Sir Frank Stenton, have favoured 'folk-migration', which racially, as well as culturally, swamped the native British population.<sup>2</sup>

Such widely different interpretations are possible because at the moment neither the archaeological nor the textual evidence can show how many Anglo-Saxons crossed the water to Britain, and what proportion of the population they then constituted. In the comparatively near future we may have harder and better information on this point, when the study of modern genetic profiles is more advanced, and when this can be combined and compared with DNA from early Anglo-Saxon and British skeletons.<sup>3</sup> For the present, like Freeman, we are for the most part trying to understand the process and causes of change from its cultural manifestations and by analogy with other better documented conquests, but with little or no independent historical evidence on the process itself. Furthermore, many of the cultural effects on which we base our theories are documented only in the later Anglo-Saxon and post-Conquest periods. Speculation based on such evidence, though fascinating, will never lead to certainty.<sup>4</sup>

However, even without genetic evidence to the contrary, it is probably reasonable to doubt Freeman's picture of racial swamping of the Britons by the incoming Anglo-Saxons. Freeman was keen on this idea for good nineteenth-century English reasons. In common with almost all thinkers of the time, he was certain that different moral and intellectual characteristics were biologically innate to different races. The shared certainty that nineteenth-century Englishmen had of their immense and self-evident superiority over their Celtic subjects (in particular the Irish), therefore had to be provided with a racial and biological explanation. Furthermore, links with Germany were fashionable at the time, as was an ideal of cultural and racial 'purity'. In this intellectual climate, and given the message of the early sources, it is not surprising that, for Freeman, the

1. N. Chadwick, 'The British or Celtic Part in the Population of England', in *Angles and Britons. O'Donnell Lectures*, pp. 111–47; N. Chadwick, 'England is Celtic too!', *The Irish Digest*, lxxxii (1965), 77–80; N. Higham, *Rome, Britain and the Anglo-Saxons* (London, 1992), pp. 153–236.

2. For example, F. M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England* (3rd edn., Oxford, 1971), p. 18 (Sussex) and p. 64 (Devon).

3. The historical potential of the genetic profiling of modern populations is explored in W. F. Bodmer, 'The Genetics of Celtic Population', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, lxxxii (1992), 37–57; while the possibilities and problems of recovering uncontaminated DNA from skeletal evidence are explained in M. Richards, K. Smalley, B. Sykes and R. Hedges, 'On the Problems and Potential of Recovering Analysable DNA from Skeletal Material', *World Archaeology*, xxvi (1993), 18–28.

4. Rather as, a little later in British history, we can at present only speculate how many Vikings it took to change a place-name.



English are in both culture and race pure Teutons, and not, to use his own term, a *Mischvolk*.<sup>1</sup>

The problem for us with this explanation for the pure Englishness of England is not just that it is based on unfashionable, and, as it turned out, sinister racial theorizing, but also that it does not fit perfectly the early medieval evidence from Britain.<sup>2</sup> Freeman himself acknowledged that in large parts of modern England, in the west and north (in regions like Devon and Cumbria), there can never have been large numbers of Germanic Anglo-Saxon settlers in comparison to the native Britons.<sup>3</sup> Yet these areas also became thoroughly anglo-saxonized<sup>4</sup> at apparently quite an early date. For instance, even in the far west, in Devon and Shropshire, the place-names recorded in the tenth century are almost all Old English, rather than Welsh in derivation.<sup>5</sup> Within England, only Cornwall, which was both remote and poor, resisted this trend; and indeed remains the one part of England where not all indigenous inhabitants automatically describe themselves as 'English'.

The thorough and rapid anglo-saxonization of the west and north suggests that we do not need to suppose racial swamping of the natives in order to explain the cultural swamping of the Britons. Since cultural change on this scale could happen in those regions without massive immigration, it is clearly not essential to believe in a substantial

1. For example, Freeman, *Four Oxford Lectures 1887*, p. 112: 'We are not a *Mischvolk* in the same sense as our French neighbours, who draw their blood from one set of sources [the Gauls], who draw their language from another [the Romans], and their name and political history from a third [the Franks]'.  
 2. Freeman unquestionably had a blind spot when examining the origins of his own people (mesmerized perhaps by the proud Germanic heritage of his own surname). But it should be noted that he was a political essayist and historian of remarkable breadth, sensitivity and learning. His article on 'Race and Language' (*Contemporary Review*, xxix [1877], 711–41, reprinted in Biddiss, *Images of Race*, pp. 206–35), when not touching on the English, is a model of comparative analysis of the relationship between language, race and ethnic identity. It is very well worth reading today, and indeed provides many counter-examples and arguments to his own racially-based explanations about Britain: e.g. (at pp. 720–1) '... language cannot be an absolutely certain test of physical descent. A man cannot, under any circumstances, choose his own skull; he may, under some circumstances... choose his own language... Both individuals and whole nations do in fact often exchange the language of their forefathers for some other language.' Even when discussing the English, although his conclusions are dubious (and, fortunately, easily mocked), the questions he posed are the right ones.

3. E.g. Freeman, *Four Oxford Lectures*, p. 88 (his tone in accepting the existence of these Englishmen 'by adoption' is a little reluctant). Green, by contrast, in a late work, enthuses over these additions to 'the pure English stock', and attributes the genius of Shakespeare to a mixed ancestry which combined 'the mobility and fancy of the Celt with the depth and energy of the Teutonic temper': J. R. Green *The Conquest of England* (London, 1883), p. 3. If the arguments set out in this article are at all correct, it is more than likely that many of the 'Anglo-Saxons' who conquered the north and west in the seventh and eighth centuries were in fact themselves Anglo-Saxons by adoption.

4. Since we are dealing with a period before the creation of England and the English, I am deliberately using this inelegant word, rather than the more convenient, but anachronistic, 'anglicize'.

5. M. Gelling, 'Why aren't we speaking Welsh?', *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History*, vi (1993), 51–6, at 55. (This is a very interesting article, but poses rather than answers, its own question.)

movement of Germanic peoples, even in the south and east. Certainly, in terms of global numbers of Germanic invaders and surviving Britons, it is very unlikely that the invaders were a racial majority overall; though this does not, of course, preclude racial predominance in limited geographical areas. According to the calculations of archaeologists who have analysed the settlement evidence discovered over the last two decades, Roman Britain had a population of at least two million, and possibly one as high as five million. A recent informed discussion of the issue plumps for an estimate of around three-and-a-half million.<sup>1</sup> It is very possible (though currently not susceptible to proof), that Britain's native population fell dramatically in the fifth and sixth centuries, perhaps even by a factor of two. But even taking the lowest current estimate for the fourth-century population, and then allowing for a sharp reduction of numbers in the fifth and sixth centuries, this would still leave perhaps one million Britons living in what was to become England.

Many may subsequently have fled before the invaders, and many more may have been killed or been driven to an early grave; but the large majority must have remained, since only a thorough policy of 'racial cleansing', which would be uncharacteristic of the Germanic invaders of continental Europe (and which, as we shall see, is contradicted in Britain by the evidence of Ine's law code), could have driven the majority of a population into the grave or into miserable exile.<sup>2</sup> The Anglo-Saxon invasion may well have been violent and brutal, and Anglo-Saxon texts certainly occasionally celebrate the massacre of Britons;<sup>3</sup> but even brutal invasion is most likely to have left the vast majority of the native peasant population physically unharmed, if only in order to exploit them and their land more effectively. Perhaps, at the very least, 800,000 Britons survived to become subjects of the new Anglo-Saxon rulers. How many of these there were is even more difficult to guess at; but 200,000 immigrants in all may be a generous estimate, given rough (and admittedly scarcely reliable) figures that we have for invading Germanic

1. M. Millett, *The Romanization of Britain. An Essay in Archaeological Interpretation* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 181–6, with full reference to previous estimates.

2. Though it should be noted that the English conquerors of Wales and Ireland in the later Middle Ages were indeed capable of the racial cleansing of parts of their conquests. See, e.g. *Brut y Tywysogion or the Chronicle of the Princes. Peniarth MS.20 Version*, trans. T. Jones (Cardiff, 1952), p. 27, s.a. 1108, describing the forcible resettlement with Flemings of part of south-west Wales: 'A year after that, a folk of strange origins and customs . . . were sent by King Henry to Dyfed. And they occupied the whole cantref called Rhos . . . and drove away all the inhabitants from the land.' That the indigenous inhabitants really were driven away, is supported by modern research into the blood-groups of the area: Bodmer, 'Genetics of Celtic Population', 43.

3. For example, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, s.a. 491; Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, II.2. There is considerable debate amongst scholars as to the degrees of violence and consent involved in the Germanic take-over of Britain (and indeed of continental Europe). The issue is not central to my purposes here, though (as we shall see later) strong mutual distrust and dislike would help explain the lack of cultural exchange between Britons and Anglo-Saxons.

peoples on the continent.<sup>1</sup> So, even taking a fairly high Anglo-Saxon figure (200,000) and a low British one (800,000), Britons are likely to have outnumbered Anglo-Saxons by at least four to one. In parts of Anglo-Saxon Britain they almost certainly outnumbered them by very much more.

If these very rough figures even remotely approximate to the racial balance of the area of Britain ruled by the Anglo-Saxons, then the Freeman model, explaining the exceptional purity of Anglo-Saxon England's Teutonicness in terms of its exceptional Germanic racial purity, does not work. Culturally, the later Anglo-Saxons and English did emerge as remarkably un-British, but their genetic, biological make-up is none the less likely to have been substantially, indeed predominantly, British. Given this probability (and the various waves of later immigrants into England from Viking and Norman times onwards), it is likely that the self-evident 'Anglo-Saxonness' of the English is in fact rooted in a cultural choice, and not in an immutable fact of race and biology. This may be slightly unsettling for some in modern England. The late Geoffrey Elton, for instance, in his book on *The English*, with all the zeal of a recent convert to Englishness found himself unconvinced by arguments 'saddling the Anglo-Saxons with Celtic wives and institutions . . .'.<sup>2</sup> But it may be even more unsettling for some in modern Wales to accept that vast numbers of early medieval Britons, when subjected to Anglo-Saxon rule, fairly rapidly abandoned their Britishness and thoroughly anglo-saxonized themselves.

In order to understand how such a process of anglo-saxonization might have come about, we need to examine two subjects: first, the underlying reasons which encouraged the subject Britons to take on a new identity; and, secondly, a number of case-studies elsewhere in the post-Roman world, which show that, although the experience of Britain is at one extreme of the range of developments which could occur when one early medieval people conquered another, it is none the less not without parallels.

A key text that helps explain why the native Britons, once conquered, chose to abandon their Britishness, is the law code of Ine of Wessex, of the end of the seventh century. Ine set down *wergilds* (blood-money) and requirements to prove guilt or innocence, both for his own people and for 'foreigners/*wealas*' (also termed 'Welshmen/*wyliscmen*'). These *wealas* must have been people under Ine's rule in Wessex (perhaps mainly in the west, where his kingdom was expanding at this period) who still identified themselves as Britons, and who were therefore still

1. See, for example, P. J. Heather, *Goths and Romans, 332–489* (Oxford, 1991), p. 327.

2. G. Elton, *The English* (Oxford, 1992), p. 2, n. 4, and see also p. 3.

seen as 'foreigners' by the West Saxons.<sup>1</sup> Ine gives wergilds to these *wealas*, and differentiates them by wealth and status in the same way that he does for the Saxons. Some of them indeed are wealthy, with landed possessions of five and more hides, and one category has even secured privileged status and a privileged wergild by entering royal service.<sup>2</sup> But, and this is the crucial point, the wergilds set by Ine for the *wealas* under his rule, and the burden of proof required to incriminate them, are both considerably lower than those for Saxons of comparable status. In these circumstances, it is perhaps not surprising that the Britons of Wessex chose to abandon their Britishness and become Anglo-Saxon. To do so, they probably had to adopt, not only the name, but also the speech of the invading Saxons. As Thomas Charles-Edwards has pointed out, the binary ethnic distinction that appears in Ine's Laws seems to be between 'Englisc/English' ('us') and 'Wylisc/Welsh' ('them'). Since Ine's people were Saxons/*Seaxe*, this very early use of the word 'English' (unless it is a later introduction into the text) suggests that it was the speaking of a particular language (already recognized as a single language, and already called 'English'), that, for Ine's Saxon Wessex, was the crucial determinant in ethnic identity.<sup>3</sup>

At an earlier date, however, before the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity, many Britons, in becoming Anglo-Saxon and in abandoning their ancestral identity, may well have changed not only their ancient language, but also their religion. There were undoubtedly Christians, who are presumed to be Britons, within the pagan Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of the fifth and sixth centuries. The survival of the cult of the Romano-British martyr Alban in the heavily anglo-saxonized south-east of Britain proves this beyond any doubt.<sup>4</sup> But, on the basis of the available evidence, it is reasonable to presume that by 597 Germanic paganism was the religion of the majority of the population of Anglo-Saxon-controlled Britain. This had come about despite the fact that, as I have argued above, in its ancestry most of the population was probably British, and therefore in its ancestral beliefs Christian or Celtic

1. F. Liebermann (ed.), *Die Gesetze der Angelsachsen* (3 vols., Halle, 1903–16). i. 88–123; English translation in Whitelock (ed.), *English Historical Documents, c. 500–1042*, pp. 398–407. For the 'foreigners/Welshmen' (referred to in the singular as *wealh* or *wylisc man*), see clauses 23.3, 24.2, 32, 33, 46.1, 54.2 and 74.

2. Clause 24.2 (for five-hide Welshmen) and clause 33 (for the *cyninges horswealh*).

3. If so, this is evidence of a perceived common bond, that was both linguistic and ethnic (and already termed 'englisc'), between all the Anglo-Saxon peoples, long before the Church or the tenth-century kingdom of England had been able to consolidate a common sense of 'Englishness': T. Charles-Edwards, 'Language and Society among the Insular Celts', in M. Green (ed.), *The Celtic World* (London, 1995), pp. 703–36, at p. 733; citing Ine, clauses 24, 46.1, 54.2 and 74 for the *Englisc*. However the text of Ine's laws survives only as appended to the laws of Alfred, by which time a sense of 'Englishness' was being deliberately promoted; it is therefore just possible that the word 'Englisc', where it occurs in Ine's code, is a ninth-century alteration to the original text.

4. Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, I.7. This, and evidence from other areas, is considered by J. Campbell, 'Observations on the Conversion of England', in his *Essays in Anglo-Saxon History*, pp. 69–84, at pp. 71–2.

pagan.<sup>1</sup> Scholars have occasionally wondered whether, before the arrival of the missionaries, the hold of Germanic paganism over Anglo-Saxon Britain was in decline. Rather, the sixth century may well have been a period in which paganism was spreading rapidly, as part of the process of anglo-saxonization of the native British population.<sup>2</sup>

To understand and appreciate this remarkable cultural and ethnic change more fully, we need to look overseas. Here many other examples show that in the early Middle Ages, as in other periods, ethnic identities were not immutable, but could change, given the right encouragement and enough time;<sup>3</sup> and that the change was generally in the direction of the conquered coming to identify themselves with the conquerors. The most striking of all examples of this phenomenon in the post-Roman world occurred outside modern Europe, in the Near East and North Africa. Here, between the seventh and tenth centuries, millions of people, once solidly Christian (and sometimes prepared to die for their versions of that faith), speaking Latin, Greek and a variety of local languages such as Coptic and Syriac, and identifying themselves with citizenship of Rome, converted to Islam, learned Arabic, abandoned their past identities, and became Arabs.<sup>4</sup> As in Ine's Wessex, the subject peoples had been carefully protected by the law of their new masters, but, again as in Ine's Wessex, their protected position was a subordinate one, paying in particular a poll-tax, levied on Jews and Christians but not on Moslems. In the case of the Arab world, we also know – while for Anglo-Saxon Britain we can only guess – that the main stimulus for change came from below, from the subject peoples, rather than through encouragement from above, from the Arab conquerors. For the Arabs, the presence of Christians and Jews was unthreatening, since, unlike pagans, they were at least 'peoples of the Book'; and it was, in fact, financially advantageous that they remain unbelievers, since this would mean that they would continue to pay the poll-tax to their Moslem masters.

Inside Europe too it was not at all uncommon for subjects to throw in their lot with their new masters. We have already seen how the Gallo-Romans in time decided to assume the identity of Franks. Similarly, the Slav peoples of modern Russia all eventually adopted the

1. A switch from Romano-Celtic paganism to Germanic paganism may, of course, have been much more straightforward than a change from Christianity.

2. Though it is also possible, indeed likely, that Germanic pagan beliefs were at the same time altering and moving closer to Christianity, through the Anglo-Saxons' contacts with Christian peoples at home and abroad.

3. There is a massive literature on 'ethnogenesis' (the formation/redefinition of peoples) among the barbarian invaders of the continent: see, e.g. W. Pohl, 'Conceptions of Ethnicity in Early Medieval Studies', in L. K. Little and B. H. Rosenwein (ed.), *Debating the Middle Ages: Issues and Readings* (Oxford, 1998), pp. 15–24. The continental debate has, however, focused primarily on shifting ethnic identities within the Germanic tribes, and not on the issue considered in this article – cultural integration, or failed integration with the indigenous conquered population.

4. R. H. Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period: An Essay in Quantitative History* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979).

name of the tiny Scandinavian military elite who conquered and ruled them in the ninth and tenth centuries, the 'Rus'. However, the cases of both the Franks and their subject Gallo-Romans, and the Rus and their subject Slavs, are also very different from that of the Anglo-Saxons and the Britons. As we have already seen in the case of the Franks, and as also happened in the case of the Rus, the process of creating a new single people was in name a shift by the majority, subject people into the identity of their new masters; but in culture the change involved much more adjustment on the part of their masters, the Franks and Rus. The French, as they emerged, are culturally much more obviously Gallo-Roman than Frankish; and the Russians are, and have been from very early times, entirely Slav and Slavonic in their culture.

The problem that needs to be addressed in Anglo-Saxon Britain is not why the Anglo-Saxons did not become Britons, because that would have been a very extraordinary thing to have happened, whereas the Britons' decision to become Anglo-Saxons is easy to parallel elsewhere in Europe. Rather what needs to be explained, is why, during this process of creating a new single identity, the necessary cultural change all occurred in one direction, in favour of the conquerors. Unlike the Franks and the Rus, the Anglo-Saxons remained very Anglo-Saxon. In absorbing huge numbers of Britons into their ranks, they adopted remarkably little from them, rejecting their religion, and, as we have seen, taking only a handful of Brittonic words into Old English.

Anglo-Saxon Britain is undoubtedly a particularly extreme case of cultural domination, and we shall shortly see why this might have been the case. But again, elements of it can be paralleled elsewhere. In particular, there are other examples of the imposition of the language of what was almost certainly a smaller group of conquerors, onto more numerous subject peoples – most obviously, before our period, in the case of Rome and Latin over the native languages of Italy, Gaul and Spain. But there is also the example, closer to the Anglo-Saxon case, of a nomadic steppe-people, the Magyars, who in the late ninth century conquered and settled what had once been Roman Pannonia. The majority of their subjects must have been Slavs, speaking a Slavonic language; but in time the descendants of these Slavs all took on the identity of Magyars and came to speak Hungarian, which is a very distinctive Finno-Ugrian language.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, and much closer to home, the Dalriadic Irish, after taking over the kingdom of the Picts in the

1. Though, unlike in the relationship between Brittonic and Old English, Slavonic has apparently provided many Hungarian words (in particular those relating to the Church and Christianity, as well as to agriculture, crafts and domestic life): P. Hajdu, trans. and adapted by G. F. Cushing, *Finno-Ugrian Languages and Peoples* (London, 1975), pp. 113–14. It is quite beyond my competence to explain why an apparently similar nomadic steppe-people, the Bulgars/Bulgarians, with a proud and very successful early history, should (unlike the Magyars) have changed their language to Slavonic, and adopted a Bulgar identity that thinks of itself as part of the great family of Slavs.

ninth and tenth centuries seem to have destroyed the Pictish version of Celtic speech (probably close to Brittonic), replacing it with Irish.<sup>1</sup> The Britons too, at the very same time as their culture and identity were being eliminated within Anglo-Saxon territory, were able to assert them successfully elsewhere. The north-western part of Romano-Gaulish Armorica, during the fifth and sixth centuries, through a process of conquest, immigration and cultural assimilation, became 'Brittany', the country of the Britons (later the Bretons), speaking a Brittonic language, and with a powerful sense of its British heritage.

Though the experience of Anglo-Saxon Britain is not unparalleled, it seems nevertheless to lie at the very outer edge of the spectrum of cultural changes that occurred when one early medieval people conquered another. The Dalriadic Irish (the *Scotti*), for instance, in contrast to the Anglo-Saxons, while imposing their name and language on the conquered Picts, do seem to have adopted and enhanced some of the native sacred sites of their new territory, such as Scone and St Andrews.<sup>2</sup> To explain what happened in southern Britain, we perhaps need to focus on two peculiarities of its internal post-Roman history, which can again usefully be contrasted with Gaul.

First, the native British offered exceptionally effective resistance to the Anglo-Saxon invaders. It took until 1282, when Edward I conquered Gwynedd, for the last part of Roman Britain to fall. Indeed a strong case can be made for Gwynedd as the very last part of the entire Roman Empire, east and west, to fall to the barbarians.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, it was not just mountain fastnesses that offered long and effective British resistance to Anglo-Saxon take-over. Much of what was later to be western England was still under British rulers until about AD 600, 150–200 years after the Anglo-Saxons' arrival, including the lowland and once very romanized territory around Bath, Cirencester and Gloucester. And even east of the Pennines, a British kingdom, that of Elmet, survived until the early seventh century, when it was conquered by the Northumbrian Edwin.<sup>4</sup> This is all very different from Gaul, where, by the 480s, the Franks and other barbarian peoples had taken control of everything, except the mountainous territory of the Basques in the south-west, and, interestingly, the lands of the formidable Britons of Brittany.

1. K. H. Jackson, 'The Pictish Language', in F. T. Wainwright (ed.), *The Problem of the Picts* (Edinburgh, 1955), pp. 129–66.

2. Because of the lack of Pictish written evidence, the subject is admittedly highly controversial. See, for St Andrews, A. Macquarrie, *The Saints of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1997), pp. 181–3. And for Scone, A. O. Anderson, *Early Sources of Scottish History* (2 vols., Edinburgh, 1922), i. 224, n. 1 (for a reference in 728, in Pictish times, to the *Castellum Credi*, which may be the Moot Hill at Scone). However, against the general thrust of my argument, there is (archaeological) evidence that the Anglo-Saxons did some similar things: J. Blair, 'Anglo-Saxon Pagan Shrines and their Prototypes', *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History*, viii (1995), 1–28.

3. If we take account of the temporary capture of Constantinople by 'Franks' in 1204, and of various Persian, Slav, Avar and Seljuk invasions of Byzantine territory. I am here elaborating on an observation by J. Campbell, *The Anglo-Saxons* (Oxford, 1982), p. 19.

4. *Historia Brittonum*, ed. Mommsen, ch. 63.

Secondly, in Britain, and again in contrast to Gaul, Roman ways of doing things disappeared peculiarly fast, and with exceptional totality. Towns, coinage, architecture in brick and stone, complex industries, and even basic technologies like the use of the wheel for pottery production, all vanished during the fifth century, probably along with widespread literacy in Latin. Some things survived from Roman times, in both the British and the Anglo-Saxon areas of Britain, and scholars have been able convincingly to document the persistence of field-boundaries, of estate structures, of systems of assessment and tribute collection, and even of political units.<sup>1</sup> But, particularly when compared with the situation across the Channel, it is not the survivals, but the disappearances that strike the eye, not only in the parts of Britain already invaded by the Anglo-Saxons, but also in those parts still ruled by Britons. Here, a few important cultural habits inherited from Rome persisted – in particular, the use of Latin as a language of writing,<sup>2</sup> and, most widespread of all, the Christian religion – but, even in British Britain, there were huge changes and a massive abandonment of Roman ways. Political, social and ecclesiastical life from the fifth century onwards no longer revolved around towns; towns themselves disappeared and were sometimes replaced by iron-age hill-forts as political centres; almost all signs of economic sophistication (such as specialized mass-production industries and the use of coin) disappeared. This happened autonomously within western Britain, long before the Anglo-Saxons reached this area, even in seemingly heavily romanized regions like modern Gloucestershire.<sup>3</sup>

These two peculiarities of the British experience – successful native resistance to the invaders, and the rapid de-romanization of the province – may in fact be connected. Militarized tribal societies, despite their political fragmentation and internecine strife, seem to have offered better protection against Germanic invasion than exclusive dependence on a professional Roman army (that in the troubled years of the fifth century was all too prone to melt away or mutiny). It is just possible that a less romanized Britain found it easier than Gaul to slip back into these unsophisticated but successful tribal ways. Certainly the effective resistance put up by the Britons, and, in particular, the rapid de-romanization of their culture seem central to understanding why the Anglo-Saxons so conspicuously either failed, or refused to learn from

1. On the difficult issue of survivals from Roman into Anglo-Saxon times, see Campbell, *The Anglo-Saxons*, pp. 38–42, 58; and id., *Essays in Anglo-Saxon History*, pp. 127–8.

2. The most eloquent testimonies to the use of Latin amongst the Britons are the Llandaff charters, several being of the sixth century, and the work of Gildas whose written style is evidence of a good quality Latin education, that cannot have been acquired in a cultural vacuum: W. Davies, *The Llandaff Charters* (Aberystwyth, 1979); M. Lapidge, 'Gildas's Education and the Latin Culture of Sub-Roman Britain', in M. Lapidge and D. Dumville (ed.), *Gildas: New Approaches* (Woodbridge, 1984), pp. 27–50, at pp. 48–50.

3. Fifth-century Britain is surveyed (with full reference to other literature) in A. S. Esmonde Cleary, *The Ending of Roman Britain* (London, 1989), pp. 162–205; and in Higham, *Rome, Britain and the Anglo-Saxons*.



their British neighbours and subjects. The influence of the first factor, successful British resistance, is speculative; but it is possible to envisage a world in which British and Anglo-Saxon cultural difference might be exacerbated and sharpened by military strife. The Welsh, of course, saved Britishness in Wales by their extremely successful resistance to invasion; but this may have been at the expense of losing the Britishness of those areas that were conquered by the Anglo-Saxons. The Gallo-Romans, by contrast, may have done badly militarily, but this may have aided the survival of Gaulishness, by making the gallicization of the Franks a less threatening, and therefore an easier experience. For the Franks, becoming a Christian and adopting the saints of Gaul did not mean taking on the religion, and part of the identity, of an enemy.

The importance of the second factor, the rapid de-romanization of Britain, is less speculative, and must be the single most important reason why developments in Britain were so different from those in Gaul. The Franks, when they entered Gaul, found an urban church, even in the troubled north, celebrating its mysteries in great late Roman cathedrals. By contrast, the urban churches of fifth-century Britain are at present mainly conspicuous only by their absence. Again, the Franks found a people speaking Latin, the language of high culture and civilization; whereas the Anglo-Saxons encountered a people whose elite certainly used Latin, but among whom the normal language was Brittonic. This was a language whose cultural aspirations and claims were little higher than the Germanic dialects of the invaders. It is not a coincidence that there are apparently more words borrowed from Latin into Old English than there are from Brittonic.

It is, of course, also very possible that the different histories of Britain and Gaul were affected by differences between their invaders. The Franks, unlike the Anglo-Saxons, had already been exposed to Roman ways (particularly through service in the imperial army), and this could well have predisposed them to further Gallo-Roman influence. However, it is also true that, despite Roman influence, the Franks' earliest laws, their fragmented and unstable kingship before Clovis, and their fifth-century pagan beliefs, all suggest that at the time of their conquest of Gaul they were still fundamentally a similar type of people to the Anglo-Saxons. In my opinion, the differences between the native Gallo-Romans and the Romano-Britons are more important in explaining the different histories of Gaul and Britain, than differences between the invaders.

A detailed example perhaps illustrates and makes this point. About 481, Clovis, the new king of some of the Franks in north-east Gaul, buried his father Childeric outside Tournai. Childeric was sufficiently romanized to wear a seal-ring bearing a Latin inscription and a portrait of the king, revealing a very 'Roman' need to certify written documents and to present his rule in near-imperial style; but the general tone of his burial, which we must presume to have been organized by Clovis, was

very un-Roman. He was interred in full pagan and Germanic splendour, in a ceremony that seems to have involved the slaughter of some thirty full-grown horses.<sup>1</sup> However, at about the same time as he buried his father, Clovis received a letter from one of the native Christian bishops of his territory, Remigius of Reims.<sup>2</sup> Remigius wrote from a Roman town, and (we can assume) from a late Roman episcopal palace, and he flattered Clovis by portraying him, in cultured Latin, as the rightful ruler of the province of Belgica Secunda. Reading this letter, with all the weight of an ancient culture and a glorious history behind it, it is not hard to understand why, later in his reign, Clovis romanized and gallicized himself enough to abandon the religion of his father and of his ancestors and to accept baptism at the hands of the very same Remigius. On his death in 511, Clovis, unlike his father thirty years earlier, was buried in a church, whose dedication (to the Holy Apostles) echoed, not some misty and obscure Germanic past, but the architectural splendour and impressive history of the funerary church of the Roman emperors in Constantinople. If the Anglo-Saxons had encountered among the Britons a late Roman and Latin culture as powerful as that which the Franks found in Gaul, the cultural history of what was to become England might have been very different.

It has often been observed, and the experience of post-Roman Britain confirms the observation, that the amount of borrowing between one culture and another is determined, not only by the amount of contact between the two, but also by the perceived status that each culture has in the eyes of the other. When invaders find a native culture that they feel to be superior to their own, they borrow heavily and readily from it, as happened amongst the Franks in romanized Gaul; but when, as in Britain, they find a culture that they, rightly or wrongly, perceive to be inferior, the story is very different. Sadly (because the parallel does not suggest a happy state of affairs in Britain), what happened as the Anglo-Saxons pressed westwards and northwards may have been very similar to what happened when, later in history, Germans pressed eastwards into the Slav territories beyond the Elbe. Hundreds of thousands of conquered Slavs eventually abandoned their original ethnic identity, and chose to become Germans. But, in the process, remarkably little from Slav culture, and very few words from the Slavonic language were adopted by the dominant German conquerors.<sup>3</sup> Rather, the *Drang nach Osten* created a new German word *Sklave* (from which medieval Latin *sclavus*, and modern 'slave', *schivo*, *esclave*, etc. all descend), with its stark equation of enslavement with a particular subject people. In just

1. See the summary of the archaeological evidence in James, *The Franks*, pp. 58–64.

2. *Epistolae Austrasicae*, ii (in MGH, *Epistolae Merovingici et Karolini Aevi*, I [Berlin, 1892]), p. 113.

3. G. Bellmann 'Slavisch/Deutsch', in W. Besch, O. Reichmann and S. Sonderegger, *Sprachgeschichte. Ein Handbuch zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und ihrer Erforschung*, vol. 2.1 (Berlin, 1984), pp. 897–907.

the same way, Old English conflated in the word *wealh* the meaning 'a foreigner', 'a Welshman', and 'a slave'.

The cultural identity of the English would certainly have been very different if the Anglo-Saxons *had* become more British; and the subsequent history of the British Isles might have been a happier one, if it had been possible for the English to view themselves as fellow Celts, with the Welsh, the Cornish, the Irish and the Scots. But to assume that this would necessarily have removed or softened the ethnic/national boundaries that exist today within the British Isles, might be a mistake. The emergence of an Anglo-Saxon identity that was very different from the identity of the indigenous inhabitants of southern Britain, was undoubtedly a vital building-block in the structure of British history. But it would be more accurate to see it as strongly influencing, rather than dictating, the pattern of later developments.

For instance, because the 'Celts' of Britain are peoples with very diverse cultures, historical experiences and political needs, Celtic solidarity has seldom been a moving force in British history. Its most powerful common denominator is less any strong intrinsic unity of culture and identity (especially since the decline of the Celtic languages in the face of English), than a shared sense of having been oppressed and threatened by the people of the populous, rich and powerful lowland kingdom, who happen to be readily definable as the 'English'. Oppression by people from the rich south-east of Britain, who spoke a Celtic language, would probably have produced a similar feeling of common difference and shared hostility among the highland- and island-peoples of the north and west. Nor indeed did a sense of cultural difference always prove an insuperable obstacle to collaboration between the English and their 'Celtic' neighbours. A common threat from outside the British Isles, or the possibility of mutual advantage, could unite Celts and English – as, for instance, Viking aggression did for the southern Welsh and the West Saxons and Mercians in the late ninth century; and as, much later, Empire, trade and Protestantism did for the eighteenth-century Britons of the Union.

We have already seen that what is often thought of as a racial difference, that between Anglo-Saxons/English and Britons/Welsh, was in reality based primarily on cultural and linguistic choices. But, although the boundaries between 'races' prove on examination to have been very blurred, at least in our early period the boundaries between the languages and the ethnic identities of the British Isles were coterminous and relatively clear. However, in later medieval Britain this straightforward equation between language and ethnicity broke down – due to the spread of the English language into regions, such as the lowlands of Scotland, that lay well beyond English political control and beyond the area where people thought of themselves as 'English'. Much of Britain became linguistically anglicized; but, unlike in the early Anglo-Saxon period, this was not because all these areas had fallen under English

control and had become 'English' in their identity. From the later Middle Ages onwards, neither race, language nor ethnicity were necessarily any longer overlapping categories within the British Isles.

The complexity of later medieval ethnicity, and the ways in which the clearer cultural and ethnic divisions of the early Middle Ages had been undermined, are well illustrated by the example of southern Scotland. The political power and settlement of the Northumbrian kingdom in the seventh century had reached up to the Firth of Forth, controlling (and anglo-saxonizing) the area that is now Lothian. Cuthbert, whom we think of as very 'Anglo-Saxon', was born into a family of this region, near Melrose.<sup>1</sup> However, after the ninth century, Lothian was conquered and absorbed by the nascent kingdom of the Scots. One consequence of this military and political conquest was to encourage the anglicization of the Scottish kingdom, in the sense of helping to make English the dominant language of lowland Scotland, both north and south of the Forth-Clyde divide. But another consequence was that the inhabitants of Lothian (including, presumably, the descendants of Cuthbert's kin) in time abandoned their Anglo-Saxon/English identity and instead became 'Scots'. In language, lowland Scotland was anglicized; but, in its ethnic/national identity, Lothian was 'scoticized'.

The example of Lothian shows that not everyone who had been thoroughly anglo-saxonized would necessarily become English. But even within a solidly English identity, there have been, and still are, choices as to how to define and describe this 'Englishness' – in particular, whether to celebrate the isolation of the 'race', or whether to emphasize its links with other peoples (both within Britain and on the Continent). As we have seen, the Englishness of Freeman and Green, although racial in its definition and ring-fenced against the other peoples of the British Isles, was very German in its flavour. Unsurprisingly, two world wars have subsequently cut the Anglo-Saxons and the English free of this close association. Modern scholars, when describing the Anglo-Saxons, no longer use terms like 'German' and 'Teuton' (the latter, after all, has acquired a strong derogatory sense in contemporary English, scarcely suitable for our forebears), and plump instead for the much looser affiliation implied by the word 'Germanic'.<sup>2</sup>

In Tudor times, because of the partially Welsh ancestry of the dynasty, an English pride in British origins and in a British past was very present. The example of Scotland suggests that, in the right circumstances, this pride might have been built on. The early history of Scotland, though poorly documented does not at first sight look very different from that of southern Britain: a people come from overseas (the Irish, or *Scotti*); take

1. *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert*, ed. and trans. B. Colgrave (Cambridge, 1940), p. 69 (tending sheep in youth on the River Leader).

2. See G. K. Chesterton, *A Short History of England* (London, 1917), at pp. 18 and 33–4. Here, in a work published towards the end of the First World War, the author laid into 'Teutonists' like Green, depicting them as apologists for Teutonic barbarism.

over power from the natives (the Picts); and successfully impose on their subjects both their language (Gaelic, the Celtic language of Ireland), and their identity (as 'Scots'). However, quite unlike the way in which the English story has developed, Scottish national mythology has tended to stress both a powerful legacy from the Picts, and the peaceful assimilation of these with the incoming Scots.<sup>1</sup> This is probably because, for the modern Scots, the indigenous Picts make better ancestors than the (now foreign, and not always loved) Irish. Perhaps, given the right historical circumstances, the English might have developed a similar relationship with their British ancestors.<sup>2</sup>

In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, when monarchs came from overseas, the multiracial ancestry of the English sometimes had to be stressed by supporters of the Crown – as in Defoe's satirical poem of 1701, *The True-born Englishman*, which mocks those who extolled their own Englishness in order to criticize William of Orange as a foreigner. The extract with which I close this article is not a close analysis of the relationship between race, culture, and ethnicity; but it certainly illustrates as well as any text I know, the fact that biological ancestry alone is not the determinant of ethnicity. It also reminds us that, like all peoples, the Anglo-Saxons and the English, in constructing a simple narrative of their origins and of their biological and cultural descent, have chosen to forget much more of their past than they have chosen to remember.

The Romans first with Julius Caesar came,  
Including all the Nations of that Name,  
Gauls, Greeks, and Lombards; and by Computation,  
Auxiliaries or Slaves of ev'ry Nation.  
With Hengist, Saxons; Danes with Sueno came,  
In search of Plunder, not in search of Fame.  
Scots, Picts and Irish from th' Hibernian Shore:  
And Conqu'ring William brought the Normans o're.  
And these their Barb'rous Offspring left behind,  
The Dregs of Armies, they of all Mankind;  
Blended with Britains who before were here,  
Of whom the Welsh ha'blest the Character.  
From this Amphibious Ill-born Mob began  
That vain ill-natur'd thing, an Englishman.<sup>3</sup>

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1. M. Chapman, *The Celts. The Construction of a Myth* (London, 1992), p. 91.

2. Admittedly, in southern Britain, the survival of the present-day Welsh, and the existence of early accounts of hostility between Britons and Anglo-Saxons, has always made such a model of peaceful fusion harder to sustain than in Scotland, where the defeated Picts and most of the documentation conveniently disappeared.

3. Daniel Defoe, *The True-born Englishman. A Satyr* (London, 1701), p. 4.