



WIRRAL ARCHAEOLOGY CIC

# HENGIST & HORSIA

# Contents

Hengist and Horsa .....	3
Introduction .....	3
Hengist and horsa, founders of the english people or mythical Legend? .....	3
The decline of Roman civilisation.....	3
The battle of Maes Garmon 429-430 AD.....	4
429 AD.....	4
455 AD.....	6
465AD.....	6
The 12 battles fought by king Arthur. ....	8
Nennius stated that Arthur fought 12 major battles.....	8

# Hengist and Horsa

## Introduction

### Hengist and Horsa, founders of the English people or mythical legend?

**Legend states that the Germanic brothers Hengist and Horsa were the leaders of warbands of Saxons, Jutes and Angles who invaded post Roman Britain in the 5<sup>th</sup> century.**

Sources state that they had landed at Ebbsfleet (Eopwinesfleet) on the Isle of Thanet and that they had been employed by the British King, Vortigern, as mercenaries to assist with repulsing the so-called barbarian people who were attacking the former Roman province, especially, the Picts. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle states that Hengist and Horsa arrived in 449 AD.

Picts, Scots from Ireland as well as the Germanic peoples of north west Europe, saw lowland Britain as a desirable place to live. It had rich fertile countryside and Romano-British civilisation maintained many of the practices of the Roman Empire. It was also free from the continuing migrations of tribes from the Eurasian Steppes which brought so much chaos to the sub-Roman world. These tribes, such as Franks, Lombards, Vandals, Burgundians, Avars, Goths and Huns were all seeking their own lands but as tribes encroached on the traditional homelands of other groups a 'Domino effect' took place, with the stronger tribes displacing the weaker ones and pushing them westwards. Economic decline in western Europe as well as natural events, namely plagues and climate change were also major factors in this diaspora. Britain, following the withdrawal of the Roman military still functioned as a Roman province for a century or so after the western Empire had collapsed. In the South west of what is now England, city life continued and both Civil Governments and a military establishment continued, though it faced increasing barbarian incursions and an economic decline following the collapse of Roman central Government.

### The decline of Roman civilisation

The decline of Roman civilisation in Britain is a topical problem that cannot be easily explained. Various academics and those interested in history are often in dispute over as to what occurred. Sources are often contradictory, inaccurate and, in many cases, based on legends and myths rather than actual facts. Many of the facts have also been misinterpreted or contaminated by the various sources which are often at odds with each other.

In the end, we can only look at what we have and make one's own assumptions based on what is probable. What is clear, is that Britain would be divided up by various peoples and that the quest of these peoples to carve out a homeland for themselves, would result in endemic warfare, power struggles and centuries of instability.

The Romano-British King or warlord, Vortigern appears to have been the most influential and powerful leader in Britain during the early Germanic incursions.

It's possible that he was the high-king and that he held sway over British sub-Kings. There is no doubt that he did exist and there are references to him in several sources, including those of Nennius, Gildas, Bede and the Anglo-Saxon chronicles.

The whole period is challenging as this was also the age of Arthur, the legendary King, Warlord and saviour of the Romano-British. There can be little doubt that a great British warlord did emerge during this period and that Saxon expansion was halted for a generation or so, but again, fact and myth merge, so it is difficult to understand the sequence of events.

Twenty years or so before Vortigern invited Hengist and Horsa to Britain, there had been an intervention from the Western Roman Empire, which though in decline, sent the Bishop of Auxerre, a former Roman general to assist the Britons in fighting the barbarians. The Bishop's name was Germanus. One source, written by Nennius, stated that Vortigern and Germanus were enemies. Germanus had apparently condemned Vortigern for having an incestuous relationship with his daughter. A male child supposedly was born from this relationship and Vortigern tried to claim that Germanus was the father. It was proven that the child was Vortigern's, and that Vortigern took refuge in a fortress which was then mysteriously destroyed by fire and in which Vortigern died.

It cannot be possibly true as we know that Vortigern outlived Germanus, who died in 448 AD.

### **The battle of Maes Garmon 429-430 AD**

A most intriguing battle is that of Maes Garmon, fought in about 429 AD. The traditional site is in a field between Mold and Pantymwyn in North Wales. It was recorded in several sources so it did take place though I have doubts about Mold being the right location.

A monument, erected in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century stands in a field to this battle. Nearby is an ancient well, known as the Goblin's well. It may have been an ancient sacred site for hundreds if not thousands of years. This battle is also known as the Alleluia victory. It's an impressive monument, with the inscriptions written in Latin.

The story of the battle has an element of legend about it but the main character did exist as did his second in command. This is the tale. The Roman military had left Britain in about 410 AD. Roman culture and their way of life had not disappeared and would continue for several decades. The Romano-British retained the Roman civic government, maintained armies that resembled and fought in the style of the late Roman armies and continues to live in towns and cities that were recognisably Roman. Latin was still the language of the Romano-British elite and contact with the Roman Empire, including trade continued. The Western Roman Empire continued to exist until its dissolution in 476 and at the time of this particular battle, western Rome was still able to field large armies and, indeed, would win the western Empire's last great battle at the Catalaunian plain in 451 AD.

### **429 AD**

In 429 AD, Germanus, Bishop of Auxerre and his companion, Bishop Lupus of Troyes were sent by the church to Britain to ensure that the heretical version of Christianity did not gain popularity in the former province. Pelagianism had been condemned by the Catholic church (And still is today) . Pelagius was a British born preacher who had advocated his version of what Christianity should be. It is the Venerable Bede who recoded these facts but one Constantius of Lyon had written about them in 480 AD in his work 'Vita Sancti Germanus'.

A coalition of Saxons and Picts had mounted a large scale raid on the west coast of Britain. It's possible that they may have sailed up the river Dee given that they were operating in what is now north Wales. Germanus, who would later be canonised, had been a Roman General before becoming a Bishop. He took command of a Romano-British army and set out to confront the Barbarians. Many of the Romano-British warriors would likely have served in the Roman army and to all intensive purposes, the invaders were about to meet a late Roman army.



Maes Garmon mounument, Mold.

Constantius stated that the Romano-British army placed themselves at the head of a mountainous pass and as the enemy advanced, Germanus had his soldiers shouted out 'Alleluia' three times. The echos off the valley walls were said to have terrified the Picts and Saxons who panicked and fled, throwing their weapons aside and scrambling to cross a river where hundreds of them drowned.

Highly improbable. There is little doubt that a battle did take place. Constantius's story was created just to enhance the power of Christianity. The pagan Saxons would not have been intimidated by a religious 'warcry' and the Picts would not have backed down either. The Picts had been accepting Christian missionaries into their realms since 397 AD, so many of them would have been Christian or aware of the religion. I wonder if Constantius had mixed the Picts up with the pagan tribe of Irish Scots? We will likely never know.

It would appear that the Romano-British inflicted a severe defeat on the Pictish-Saxon army and there would certainly be further battles amongst these peoples over the course of the next few centuries. As things stand, any individual will have to make up their own minds with regards to this legendary battle but it is worth considering that Germanus made a massive impact on early Welsh history, so much so, that many many places are dedicated to his memory. A church in Llanarmon -yn-al is dedicated to him as is a well at Tomen-y-Rhodwydd.





So now to what is known about Hengist and his brother Horsa, or at least as to what the legends state? Initially, the brothers served Vortigern and were supplied with lands and goods in exchange for their services, but the brothers made increasing demands on the Romano-British which eventually led to conflict and warfare.

#### 455 AD

In 455, there was a battle at Aylesford (*Ægelesford*) between the Saxons and the Britons. Horsa was killed in the battle. Vortigern, it is claimed, was the Commander of the Britons in this battle. It is even possible that Vortigern died in this battle too as he not named as the Commander of the Britons in the further battles that would take place.

Another battle took place at Crayford (*Crecganford*) in 457. Hengist inflicted a defeat on the Britons who are said to have had 4000 men killed.

#### 465AD

In 465, Hengist and his son Esc are said to have fought the Britons at the battle of Wippedesfleot. The result of this battle is disputed with some sources stating that the casualties were heavy on both sides. It's likely that we will never know as to what exactly happened.

Kent became the Realm of Hengist who was considered to have been the first Jutish King of the county. After years of warfare both sides were looking to come to terms and seek peace. Vortigern had apparently declared an interest in Hengist's daughter and to ensure peace, Hengist arranged a meeting with Vortigern and the other British sub-Kings and nobles on Salisbury plain. It may have taken place at Stonehenge. This possibly took place in about 460 AD. British sources called this event 'The treachery of the long-Knives'. During a feasting session, Hengist gave out the order for the Saxons and Jutes to slaughter their guests. Weapons had been banned but the Saxons had hidden knives on their persons and it is said that 300 Romano-British nobles were slaughtered. Vortigern was spared and ransomed but also, he had to agree to concessions of land and booty. As to how and when Vortigern died, cannot be ascertained. Several deaths are mentioned in various sources but none are reliable and it is clear that myth has shrouded any historical facts. Other semi mythical figures emerge during this period such as Aurelius Ambrosius, Merlin, Uther Pendragon and King Arthur. Geoffrey of Monmouth, writing in the 12<sup>th</sup> century has Vortigern being burned to death in a tower by Aurelius Ambrosius. Ambrosius then turned his attention towards the Saxons and defeated them in battle. Hengist was captured and then executed.

This is unlikely to have occurred and the Anglo-Saxon chronicle stated that Hengist died in 488 but doesn't say either where or how.

The early struggles between the Romano-British and Saxons would, of course, continue. Heroic figures emerged, and names such as Arthur, Ambrosius, Ella, Cissa and Cedric are intrinsically linked to the mysterious and compelling history of these islands.

Sources such as the *Annales Cambriae*, The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles, the works of Bede, Gildas and Nennius all tell of these individuals and of the long-lost battles that have faded from memory. It is clear that in Sub-Roman Britain, that the various peoples fought to survive and retain their own identities and to establish their own independent Kingdoms, but myth combined with some real events have merged into legends and the truth will never be known.

Hengist and Horsa real?

So were Hengist and Horsa real people, the original Hero's and founders of Britain's first Anglo-Saxon Kingdom? All part of the great mystery of Britain's history!

List of known battles between the Britons and the Saxons between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Andredesleag	477
Mercedesburne	485
Mons Badonicus	circa 500
Cerdicesford	508
Beran Byrig	556
Bedcanford	571
Arthuret	573
Arfderydd	573
Deorham	577
Fethanleag	584
Wōdnesbeorġ	592
Raith	596
Catraeth	600
Beandun,	614
Chester	616
Hatfield	630
Heavenfield	631
Maes Cogwy	644
Bradford -on- Avon	652
Winwaed	655
Penselwood	658
River Carron	710
River Avon (Scotland)	710
Hehil	722
Garth Maelog	722
Pencon	722
Hereford	760
Bensington	779

## The 12 battles fought by king Arthur.

Nennius stated that Arthur fought 12 major battles.

River Glein

The next 4 were fought on the river Dubglas

The river Bassus

Celidon Coit.

Guinnion fort

The city of the Legion

The river Tribruit

Agned Hill

Badon Hill

Camlann (Where Arthur died)

The struggles that took place in sub-Roman Britain occurred over centuries and demonstrate what was a violent part of our history. It was a complex and confusing period where myth and truth seem to have merged, which, in turn, has created legends that cannot be dismissed as legends always contain some elements of the truth.

It is hoped that this article promotes your interest in this fascinating period and that you may wish to investigate and study it yourself.



South Cadbury Hill, Somerset. Was it here that Arthur fought the battle of Mount Badon and defeated the Saxons?