



WIRRAL ARCHAEOLOGY

THE COMING OF THE ANGLO SAXONS

THE ATTACK ON THE ROMAN FORT AT ANDERITUM
(PEVENSEY) AD 491.

Versioning

Version

Draft

0.9

1.0

Date

27 July 2020

28 July 2020

04 Jan 2021

Comments

Original Draft

Reformatted

Initial Publication

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The Coming of the Anglo Saxons

Introduction

In the twilight years of the Roman province of Britannia the Roman Emperor Honorius advised the Romano British to look to their own defence of the land as he withdrew the last of the Roman military from the island.

Barbarian tribes were on the move throughout Europe and decades of economic and military disasters would bring about the downfall of western Empire, albeit, it would be 476AD, before the last western Emperor, Romulus Augustulus was forced to abdicate and to retire into obscurity by the Germanic warlord, Odoacer, who then proclaimed himself King of Italia.

Barbarians

The word barbarian conjures up images of skin clad savages who raped, pillaged and murdered their way through the civilised world but this is a misnomer. Odoacer had been an officer in the Roman army as had many so called barbarian leaders. The Empire had changed dramatically since the glory days of the late Republic and the first and second centuries and the peoples from within the Empire and from its hinterlands had become assimilated into all aspects of Roman life, including the military. It would be a truism to state that the likes of Julius Caesar would have seen the Roman army of the 5th century as having been 'barbarised'.

Most of the western 'barbarians' were Christians and had adopted Roman law and were no less civilised than the Romans themselves. This was in effect the transformation of classical civilisation into the early Middle Ages.

The fall or decline of the Roman Empire is a huge and complex subject and cannot be covered in detail within this article.

We are interested in an emerging people who came from the areas of northwest Germany and what is now Denmark and the Netherlands, namely the Angles and the Saxons.

These Germanic peoples were initially recruited into the Roman army as 'foederati' or mercenaries and were used to protect the Roman province's northern border against the Picts and another so called barbaric people, the Scots from Ireland. However, the Romans had been experiencing major issues with Saxon raiding parties or pirates from about 250 AD and over the following decades a chain of forts were constructed on the east coast. This defended coast became known as the Saxon Shore or Litus Saxonicum in Latin. The responsibility for this defensive line fell to Roman Generals who held the title Count of the Saxon shore. (Comes Littoris Saxonici per Britanniam).

Withdrawal of the Roman army

Following the withdrawal of the Roman army the Romano British, especially in the south west of what is now England, maintained Roman culture and a Roman style army but as ever, once a central Government breaks down, localised rulers or warlords emerge and several Kingdoms begin to emerge. Rivalries resulted in endemic warfare, an issue that prevented a unified national response to the Anglo Saxon problem. Some British leaders even hired Saxons as mercenaries.

As the province of Britannia fragmented, settled Saxons in the east and Angles in the northwest became evermore powerful and encouraged more immigrants from their homelands to migrate to the new land. As numbers grew their leaders gained control of their respective areas and the Romano British population either had to assimilate or move away.

In due course, wars developed between the factions. In Anglo Saxon histories, the likes of Horsa and Hengist were revered as heroic conquerors whilst amongst the Romano British, leaders such as Vortigern, Aurelius Ambrosius and the legendary 'King' Arthur emerged.

Fact and myth have merged and produced legends of this period which cannot yet be either proven or verified as records of this period are obviously biased and often confusing. Early historians such as Gildas, Bede and those who composed many of the Irish and Welsh annals as well as those records contained within the earliest form of Anglo Saxon Chronicles, give different versions and accounts of people and events which are confusing and often contradictory.

What is clear, is that after centuries of warfare, the Romano British population were pushed back into what is now Wales, Cornwall, Cumbria and Strathclyde. The Anglo Saxons would now refer to these indigenous British peoples as Walha, the Germanic word for stranger or foreigner, namely the Welsh in modern English.

The Celtic peoples had been forced into the west of the island whilst what is now Scotland was populated by Picts, Scots and the Welsh of Strathclyde.

Many battles from this period are recorded in the likes of the Anglo Saxon chronicles. It is interesting to note that the ASC never mentions defeats inflicted upon the Anglo Saxons and that there are lengthy periods where no conflicts are recorded but when compared with the writings of the Celtic chroniclers, it is clear that the Walha inflicted several serious defeats upon them which delayed their westward expansion. Mount Badon or Mons Badonicus, being one of the most famous battles, fought sometime between 490 and 517AD, in which the Saxons suffered a catastrophic defeat.

This subject is vast and too complex to detail here, but a notorious event took place in 491 AD, when the Saxons launched an attack on the Roman fortress at Anderitum. (Anderida in old English) This fortress was a huge stone built defensive complex which has more in common with a castle rather than a fort. The remains of this fort now lie inland but originally it was built on a peninsula and overlooked Pevensey bay and its southern wall protected the harbour. The fort covered an area of 9 acres and was the largest of the Saxon shore forts. Today, the curtain walls still stand to a height of 8 metres and are some 4.2 metres in width. The fort had at least 13 curvilinear towers and 4 heavily defended gateways. After the departure of the Roman military, the local Romano British population had maintained the fortress as a place of safety.

Paradoxically, the Saxon shore defences were so huge that it would seem that they were beyond the capability of the Saxons to attack or even besiege.

It is probable that they were built on such a huge scale, not to deter Saxons but to defend against the legitimate Emperors of the 3rd century, as the Province of Britain had become part of an independent Gallic Roman Empire, ruled by usurper military commanders such as Allectus and Carausius. In reality they were built to repel any Roman invasions by the rightful Emperor and the Roman army.

491 AD

In 491 AD, a Saxon army led by one Aella and one of his sons, Cissa, laid siege to the great fortress. The Anglo Saxon chronicle records that the Saxons eventually forced entry and that not one Briton was left alive.

No details of the besieging Saxon Force are known and there is no record as to how many Britons occupied the fortress. The size of the fortress demands that the attacking force would have had to have been significant. Attacking a formidable defended position requires an advantage of there being 3 attackers for each defender in modern military doctrine.

Archaeology has revealed that the fortress of Anderitum had originally been surrounded by a huge ditch as was usual in Roman defensive installations but it would appear that at sometime in the 5th century, that the locals had built a causeway across the ditch, leading up to the West gate. This was the gate stormed by the Saxons, which suggests that they actually managed to break through the gate. They must surely have taken heavy casualties.

The building of the causeway had compromised the defensive capability of the fortress.

The massacre of every Romano British defender, which likely included their families too, was enough to subjugate the local population who would now accept the invader, Aella as their overlord.

Aella

Aella would subsequently become the first Anglo Saxon king of Sussex whilst the later town of Chichester would take its name from Cissa (Cissa-Cester).

Sussex was the land of the 'South Saxons, (Suth Seaxe) Essex, (Eastseaxna ri'ce) that of the East Saxons, Middlesex, (Middel Seaxe) that of the middle Saxons and Wessex, (Westseaxna ri'ce) the land of the West Saxons.

The adding of 'ri'ce) suggests that there were regional dialects amongst the Anglo Saxon tribes.

Whilst Wirral Archaeology's articles focus mostly on the conflicts between the Anglo Saxons and the Vikings this article conveys the fact that the early Anglo Saxons treated the Romano British in the same manner as the Vikings would later treat them.

FOOTNOTE.

The fortress is believed to have been occupied throughout the late Anglo Saxon period and it was likely utilised during the Viking wars. There is some evidence that it was also a Royal centre, but this is not verified.

On the 28th of September 1066, 3 days after the Anglo Army under King Harold Godwinson had destroyed the Norse Vikings at the battle of Stamford Bridge, William of Normandy and the Norman invasion force landed at the fortress and occupied it.