



WIRRAL ARCHAEOLOGY CIC

# THE SAXON SEIGE OF ANDERITUM 491 AD

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# The Saxon Seige of Anderitum, 491AD

## Introduction

By 490 AD, it had been 80 years since the Roman army had departed from the Province of Britannia. The Western Empire had officially dissolved some 15 years previously, when the Senate had sent the Imperial Regalia of Rome to the Eastern Emperor in Constantinople.

## 490AD

In the former province of Britannia, the legacy of Rome still survived. Many parts of the country still retained and practiced Roman law and, in several Towns, and Cities, local Councils maintained order and ensured that the vestiges of Roman civilisation continued.

There had been changes, of course. Many towns and cities saw rapid decline as their populations deserted them and returned to lives of an agricultural society, such as had existed before the Roman invasion of 43 AD. Building in stone became rare with most buildings being constructed of wood and many of the old Hill forts of the Celts were both reoccupied and re-fortified. Troubling times lay ahead.

Several proto-Kingdoms began to evolve, led by local warlords, in response to the increasing threat of Saxon incursions in the east and, also, in order to counter the threats from the tribes that inhabited the land north of Hadrian's wall.

## The Romano-British

The Romano-British or Britons had appealed for military aid from the Roman Emperor, Honorius in 411 AD, because they were under increasing pressure from Saxons, Picts and other hostile tribes from Ireland, which included the Scotti. They wanted the return of the Roman military in the hope that order could be restored to the troubled former Province which the Romano-British elite still believed was part of the Roman Empire.

The Emperor refused assistance, he couldn't supply it as the Empire was under attack from several Barbarian tribes along all of its borders and he informed the Britons to look to their own defences. Rome itself had been sacked by the Visigoths in the August of the previous year and the shock of that event had reverberated across the whole of the civilised world.

There is so much debate about the events of the late 5<sup>th</sup> century and those of the 6<sup>th</sup> century. Written sources are scarce and those that do exist are often contradictory or lacking precise detail but what does seem clear is, that by the 490's, that the Britons controlled what is now Wales and the West of what is now England within an imaginary line that ran more or less from York to what is now Bournemouth. The Saxons controlled everything to the East of this area.

A number of British leaders or warlords rose to supremacy, namely the likes of Vortigern, Aurelius Ambrosius and the legendary Arthur and for a period, they held the Saxons at bay. Ambrosius was obviously of Roman descent whilst Arthur's background cannot be known. Some state that he was actually Ambrosius but we just cannot claim with any confidence as to who he actually was or as to from where he originated. We know that at sometime between the late 5<sup>th</sup> and early 6<sup>th</sup> century that the Romano-British inflicted a severe defeat of the Saxons at the battle of Mount Badon or Mons Badonicus.

## Nennius

The 9<sup>th</sup> century Welsh monk, Nennius, attributed the British victory at Mount Badon to Arthur, but the likes of Gildas, recorded the victory but not the name of the British war leader.

There would be many battles between the Britons and the Saxons, too many to debate or list in this article but we are now concerned with a Saxon Invasion that occurred in AD 477, led by one King Elle and his three sons, who were intent on carving out their own Kingdom in what we now call Sussex.

## 477 AD

The Anglo—Saxon Chronicle states that in 477, Elle and his sons came ashore at a place called Cymen's shore or Cymenes ora. This was probably Selsey Bill on the Manhood Peninsula, in West Sussex. They were met by a Romano-British force and a battle took place in which the Saxons were Victorious.



Selsey Bill on the Manhood Peninsula, Sussex. Elle's landing at Cymenesora?

image by Grzegorz Petka – Permission to use in public domain.

Elle then seized the old Roman city of Noviomagus Reginorum which would later become his regional capital. Today it is called Chichester and it's likely that it took its name from one of Elle's sons, one Cissa. For the next decade or so, Elle consolidated his newly acquired territory. Little is known of what occurred during this period but in AD 485 he fought a battle against the Romano-British at Mercredesburne. The battle seemed to have achieved little with neither side being able to claim a victory. It was a stalemate. We have no details of what actually happened, nor do we know the size of the respective armies or as to how many casualties they suffered. One source suggests that after the battle, the Saxons sent a message back to their original homelands requesting that more warriors be sent to Elle's aid.

The site of the battle of Mercredesburne is unknown but a possible location is that of Creep Wood, between the towns of Ashburnham and Penhurst in East Sussex.

## 491 AD

In 491 the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle recorded the following –

Here Elle and Cissa besieged Anderitum (Andredescester) and killed all who lived there, there was not even one Briton left.

The Roman Saxon Shore fort at Andredescester or Anderitum was a formidable fortress. Today, its ruins are still impressive.



The Roman Saxon Shore fort at Pevensey. Andredescester.

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The western curtain wall today.

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It would appear that the Romano-British had manned the fort with a substantial number of troops. It is believed that their women and children had also taken refuge within the fort. The Saxon attack was met with fierce resistance and they suffered huge casualties. As with most of the military engagements of this period, detail is lacking.

### Henry of Huntingdon

Henry of Huntingdon, writing in the 12<sup>th</sup> century does provide some detail of the battle. As to where his information came from, nobody knows, but it is possible that he had access to a now long -lost source of information.

Henry suggests that the besieging Saxons were attacked by a Romano-British relief force and that a fierce and deadly battle took place before the walls of the Roman fortress.

The Romano-British had retained much of the tactical capabilities of the late Roman army and they would have appeared very similar in dress and equipment to a late Roman army. They were therefore, disciplined and a formidable fighting force.

The Romano- British emerged from the great forest of Andredesweald as the Saxons would later call it. To the Romans it was the forest of Anderida.

They smashed into the rear of the Saxon forces, slaughtering hundreds of men, however, the besieging force was much larger than that of the relieving one and they were able to repel the attack.

All we know is that the Saxons managed to defeat the Romano-British. It appears that they breached the walls and gates of the fort and that the defenders were slaughtered. It is claimed that all the Britons including the women and children were slaughtered but we cannot verify this. It could be the case, given that the Saxons suffered very heavy casualties themselves or it may be that many of the defenders, especially the women and children, were taken captive or enslaved. We just do not know!

This event gave the Saxons the control of the area which they would now call Sussex. The County name derives from the word **Sūpsēaxe**, which just means 'South Saxons'.

The wars between the Britons and the Saxons would last for centuries. There were massacres and the brutality of the warfare was often extreme but as the Saxons slowly got the upper hand many of the people who would have been Celts, Britons or Romano-British would have merged with the Saxon invaders and become Saxons themselves. Ruling dynasties would change and the Saxons would form those dynasties but the people eventually just merged. In the mountainous areas of the likes of Wales, Cornwall and the North of England the Britons were able to resist the Saxons for centuries. Such is the complexity of 'Dark Age' Britain and that of the early medieval period.