Chapter 1

The Land and Peoples of Early Britain

GEOGRAPHY OF THE BRITISH ISLES

Because the development of any country is determined in part by its physical setting, a history of the British Isles must begin with a short description of the geography of England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland.

Students are often surprised at the small size of these areas. England proper contains only about 50,000 square miles. Wales, much smaller, adds only another 7,500. Scotland has a landmass of about 30,000 square miles, Ireland about 27,000.

Because Britain has been such an important world power, actively involved in colonization and international trade, its location is also surprising. England is not central to the great continents of Europe, Asia, or North America. It lies farther north than any part of the United States except Alaska and any great capital except Moscow. London is at about the same latitude as Newfoundland, not as New York, which is more central. Britain’s temperate climate is determined by the nearly constant temperature of its surrounding waters and by the warmth carried to its shores by the Gulf Stream.

Each part of the British Isles has its own physical characteristics. England can be divided into two halves by an imaginary line drawn diagonally from the mouth of the River Exe, near Exeter in the Southwest, to the mouth of the River Tees in the Northeast. Most of the fertile soil in the country lies in the lowland zone to the southeast of this line. The land is flat or gently rolling, with low hills and long navigable rivers, the most important of which, the Thames, determined the location of the great city of London. As long as English society was primarily agrarian, before the Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth century, the bulk of the population lived in this area.

Northwest of the Exe-Tees line is a highland zone, where the land is rocky and mountainous, more suitable for pasture than for intensive cultivation. Rivers are short and generally not navigable for great distances; some have rocky shoals or waterfalls. The famous Lake District, nestled in the Cumbrian mountains, boasts England’s most spectacular scenery. Until recent times, communication between the east and west coasts was made difficult by the Pennine chain of mountains, which bisects northern England. Wales shares this infertile land. Its terrain includes lush valleys as well as the craggy Cambrian mountains.
Scottish geography also has much to do with its distinctive history. Most people are familiar with the terms Lowland and Highland, though they are often confused about exactly what areas each region encompasses. Although these designations are often further complicated by issues of language and culture, in purely geographic terms the simplest way to think of these important regional zones of Scotland is to imagine a line running along the great Caledonian fault; areas north and west of that line can be considered Highland, and south and east, Lowland. Thus, the rich, fertile farmland of Aberdeenshire belongs to the Lowlands, whereas the rugged hill country of the Trossachs is properly Highland, though considerably farther south. Because of the differences in terrain, agriculture and settlement patterns were quite different in the two zones, a difference that was exacerbated by shifting political allegiances and post-Reformation religious differences.

Ireland’s saucer shape includes areas of bog and marsh as well as woodland and some very fertile tillable soil. Mountains are concentrated near the coast; the central lowlands dominate the island. The Shannon is the longest river in the British Isles, flowing down the western coast of Ireland for more than 200 miles, but it is not the heart of a great river system, and it has not been of much economic value. Rainfall is heavier than in England. Frost and snow are almost unknown in the interior of the island. The modern capital, Dublin, lies on the east coast facing Britain. Separated from the larger island by the Irish Channel, on an average about 50 miles wide, Ireland has developed its own unique civilization, frequently influenced by Britain but never integrated racially or culturally. Because so much of its history has been tied to that of England, it is very easy to perceive the island only in terms of its geographical orientation toward the English mainland. However, early cultural ties to its nearer neighbor, Scotland, were stronger. Only 18 miles separate Ulster from Kintyre, and up until the early modern period, Gaelic Ireland and the Highlands and Islands of Scotland were closely connected through a shared language and cultural history. Moreover, the west coast of Ireland was always closely connected with Continental Europe through seafaring trade and politics, a continuing influence that should not be overlooked in the complexities of Irish history.

**PREHISTORIC BRITAIN**

Although in the strictest sense written records pertaining to the British Isles do not exist until Roman documents beginning in A.D. 55, there is an abundance of archaeological evidence that helps us to understand early settlement and historical developments in Britain from the Mesolithic and Neolithic periods, and on into the Bronze Age and Iron Age. The earliest probable evidence for human settlement in Britain comes from Eartham in Sussex and may date back as far as 350,000 B.C. (Lower Paleolithic). From the Upper Paleolithic (approximately 35,000 to 8500 B.C.), sites become more plentiful, with at least forty known in Britain, a quarter of them located in Wales. However, it is not until the Mesolithic and Neolithic periods that we begin to see enough evidence to provide a foundation of knowledge for understanding the lives of these early inhabitants. By around 10,000 B.C. the glaciers
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were retreating for the last time. The melting ice changed the landscape of Britain, and the rising temperatures caused great forests to develop and also brought about the demise of the giant reindeer, bison, and mammoths. In this new environment, agriculture seems to have flourished. Excavations at Starr Car in Yorkshire and Anglesey in Wales suggest settlement by farmers who used stone tools.

Recent research suggests that the Neolithic age began in Britain about 4000 B.C., considerably earlier than previous writers believed. A culture group called the Windmill Hill people crossed the Channel (perhaps then no more than a wide river) from northern Europe about 3000 B.C., bringing with them a way of life that included settled agriculture, the keeping of such domestic animals as sheep and dogs, the use of well-shaped flint arrowheads, and the making of pottery ornamented with spiral or thumbprint designs. The skeletons of their dead were buried intact (this is called inhumation, as opposed to cremation, the burning of remains), usually in groups rather than individually. Long mounds or “barrows,” strikingly similar to the burial mounds of Native Americans, were erected over these burials. Today, especially when viewed or photographed from the air, they help identify sites where the Windmill Hill culture was established. The culture spread to Yorkshire, in northern England, and to Ireland.

A later Neolithic group, the Beaker Folk, migrated from northern Europe, probably between 2500 and 2000 B.C. Their name derives from the characteristic shape of their pots, which resemble the beakers used in chemistry laboratories. Such pottery has been found at sites throughout England, Ireland, and southern Scotland. The Beaker Folk usually buried their dead singly, in round barrows. The earliest known textile from the British Isles was found in one of these. Beaker sites have also yielded bronze drinking cups and jewelry, but these articles were probably acquired through trade with more advanced peoples on the Continent. A few settlers in England may have learned how to work in metal by this time, but the Beaker Folk do not seem to have known how to produce metal articles themselves.

Although there is much debate concerning the migrations and exact identities of the Neolithic inhabitants of Britain, their megalithic structures remain to puzzle and fascinate us. There are literally thousands of these great stone structures throughout the British Isles, clustering by type to some extent in the various regions. Of these massive stone structures, archaeologists delineate several different types, including chambered cairns and mounds, cromlechs, stone circles, and single standing stones, some intricately carved with geometric designs and some quite plain. Though some were clearly used for burial sites, the purpose of many of these megaliths remains unknown.

**NEWGRANGE**

The Boyne Valley in Ireland is home to many of these megalithic structures, but perhaps none are as striking as the three great tumuli or chambered cairns of Newgrange, Knowth, and Dowth. In Irish folklore, this was the land of the gods and the burial place of kings. Certainly anyone who stands inside the dry-stone chamber
of Newgrange cannot help but feel a sense of awe and timelessness. The circular structure is perfectly constructed so that even in the wettest of Irish weather, no drop of moisture enters the great chamber. Most amazingly, the entry passage (low enough that one has to stoop to enter) is designed in such a way that on the midwinter solstice a single beam of sunlight glances off the entrance stone, follows the entryway, and illuminates the great chamber. Though some skeletal remains were found in the central chamber, it seems likely that the structure was used for other purposes—perhaps astronomical observation, or community worship. Although it is uncertain who the architects of the Boyne Valley tumuli may have been, the geometrical symbols that they carved into the stone (spirals, knotwork, triskeles, and so forth) bear a striking similarity to the motifs found in later Celtic metalwork and manuscript illuminations.

THE BRONZE AND IRON AGES

The next major shift in the ancient history of Britain comes with the advent of metalworking. During the Bronze Age (now dated about 2000 to 1000 B.C.), the art of working bronze came to the British Isles. Bronze, an alloy of copper and tin, has a low melting point and thus is easier to handle than iron. It is also more attractive for decorative objects, but because it does not take a hard cutting edge it is less useful for knives and weapons like swords or axes. The most important Bronze Age group, usually called the Wessex Culture, came from the Continent to southwest England but soon spread throughout the British Isles. These invaders brought with them their skill in producing bronze articles. Some of the existing inhabitants may also have acquired the ability to work metal. Archaeologists used to attribute each technological leap to a fresh wave of immigrants from the mainland of Europe, but new work suggests that some advances were a natural, native growth. The dead of the Wessex Culture were cremated, with an urn being inverted over the remains; burials might be single, in mounds, or grouped, in urnfields. Objects from as far away as Egypt and Greece have been found in these burial sites, proof that the Wessex people were involved in international trade. During this period, the Irish were producing some of the most sophisticated metalwork in Europe. Among the breathtaking gold jewelry now on exhibit at the National Museum of Ireland are twisted gold torques (neck bands), earrings, and pennanular brooches. Not only were these valued by the native inhabitants, but they also found their way through trade to England and the Continent.

The art of working iron came to Britain about 1000 B.C. Bronze continued to be used for ornamental objects, with gold and silver also available in small quantities, but iron superseded bronze for utilitarian purposes. Large-scale settled farming was now practiced, with corrals, threshing floors, and storehouses or barns, and additional forested land was cleared for agricultural use. In addition to information from archaeological excavations, we have learned much about Iron Age agriculture through an experimental archaeology program begun in 1972 at Butser in Hampshire. Here ancient breeds of sheep, pigs, and cattle (similar to the extinct Celtic
Shorthorn) are raised, and a range of cereal crops, notably several varieties of wheat and barley, are grown. The environmental archaeologists involved in this experiment use only implements and farming techniques that would have been available in prehistoric times.

**HILL FORTS AND STANDING STONES**

Like the chambered cairns, the identity of the builders and the purpose of the great hill forts remain debatable. Most archeologists agree that they date from the Iron Age and are related to the Celticization of much of the British Isles. Traditionally, it was believed that there were groups of successive invaders, perhaps rival groups of Celts from mainland Europe, or other parts of the British Isles. One of the oldest of the Irish epics, the Lebor Gabala, or Book of Invasions, mentions four waves of invasion: the Fir Bolg, the Fomorians, the Tuatha de Danann, and the Milesians, which may in some way correspond to successive historic settlements. The builders of the hill forts were clearly worried about invasion, expending a great amount of time and resources in building huge defensible structures on hills and near the coastline. Though these structures are found throughout Britain, the greatest concentration of hill forts can be found in Wales, the north and western regions of Scotland, and the western coast of Ireland. To add to the mystery of their construction, some of the Scottish hill forts are vitrified. The stone was apparently heated to an extremely high temperature (whether by design or through attack is unknown) and the great blocks of stone fused together. Excavations undertaken at various sites of hill forts suggest a mixed usage of these structures. Danebury in Hampshire seems to have been used as both a village and a fortification for food; others, such as Craig Phadraig in Inverness, may have been a communal center for both trade and politics, perhaps having served as the capital of the Picts.

The dating of standing stones and stone circles is especially problematic, since rarely are carbon-based artifacts associated with these sites found. The most imposing monument remaining from prehistoric Britain is undoubtedly Stonehenge. This great stone circle—actually it is several concentric circles of stones—was erected on Salisbury Plain, near the middle of the south coast of England. Work on the site may have begun as early as 2500 B.C. The initial construction of the great circle can be attributed to the Beaker Folk, with modifications and additions by later peoples between 1900 and 1400 B.C. About 300 feet in diameter, it includes a set of enormous uprights weighing as much as 50 tons each, quarried near the site, and sixty smaller bluestones, hewn from the mountains of Wales and transported, probably mainly by water, for 135 miles.

Scholars remain undecided about the reasons why this great monument was created. The alignment of stones suggests that it had something to do with sun worship, though notions of white-robed druids dancing by moonlight or exacting human sacrifice may be dismissed as romantic inventions unsupported by hard evidence. One theory, advanced by the physicist Gerald Hawkins, holds that Stonehenge was actually an observatory, used to predict the movement of stars as well as...
eclipses of the sun and moon. Such a structure would have been of great value to an agricultural people, since it would enable them to mark the changing seasons accurately, and it would have conferred seemingly supernatural powers on the religious leaders who knew how to interpret its alignments.

There are other henge monuments in the British Isles, including a large henge of irregular stones at Avebury, not far from Stonehenge, and a similar circle at Castlerigg, in the Lake District. The small islands off the Scottish coast are particularly rich in these structures. The best surviving examples are the Ring of Brodgar.
on Orkney, where a ditch surrounds a ring that originally contained sixty-six stones, and the Standing Stones of Callanish on Lewis. It is thought that these are earlier than Stonehenge and that the tradition of erecting such monuments may have spread southward from Scotland to England. There are comparable structures in Ireland and on the Continent, especially in Scandinavia. Whatever their original purpose, they bear testimony to the high state of political and religious organization of the people who built them.

Because Stonehenge is now visited by hordes of tourists, it is hard to recapture any sense of mystery or awe, and visitors are struck primarily by the magnitude of the engineering feat. More remote burial sites, however, can retain an almost magical quality. A sensitive viewer cannot but ponder what beliefs and myths prompted the building of the megalithic tombs and what rituals, songs, and dances took place at them. We will never know, for the Neolithic peoples left no record other than the evidence of place.

THE CELTS

The last prehistoric invaders of Britain were the Celts, members of a large culture group that came to encompass most of northern Europe. Archaeologists distinguish three major groupings of Celts based on art, artifacts, and cultural practices: the Hallstatt civilization from the German regions; the La Tène, named after the site of excavations near Lake Neuchâtel in Switzerland; and the “insular” Celts of the British Isles. However, the terms Celt and Celtic have been used by different writers in so many different ways that it is difficult to give any simple account of them. A Celtic culture apparently developed first in central Europe, along the Danube River. It spread into what would now be France, Spain, and the Netherlands, and eventually to the British Isles. It is hard to say what prompted these migrations of Celts. The pressure of increasing populations used to be given as an explanation, but this no longer seems satisfying. It may be that the energetic, aggressive personality of the Celts themselves is the underlying factor. Roman writers describe them as warlike or even “war-mad” and tell us that Celtic women were equal to the men in stature and courage. In physical appearance most Celts were tall, with blue eyes and red or blond hair.

The Beaker Folk and members of the Wessex or urnfield culture may have been Celts. The earliest Celtic group known to us from documentary evidence—indeed, the earliest people in Britain for whom any written evidence exists—are the Belgae, who are described in Julius Caesar’s famous account of his Gallic wars. Writing a few years before the time of Christ, Caesar says that northern France was inhabited by a Celtic tribe called the Belgae (the word lies behind the name of the modern nation Belgium) and that relatives of these people had crossed the Channel and made settlements in England.

Although the Celts were illiterate, they are said to have been eloquent in speaking and to have enjoyed storytelling. Linguistically the Celts of the British Isles can be divided into two groups, distinguished by the use of a p sound in one and a q in the other. The first of these tongues is called “Brythonic.” It came to dominate in
The Battersea Shield (right). This shield was made during the Iron Age. It was found in the River Thames near London. 
Reproduced by permission of the British Museum.
The Snettisham Torc (top left). This is perhaps the finest example of Iron Age gold jewelry made in England. 
Reproduced by permission of the British Museum.
The Broighter Torc (center left). This was found in an Iron Age hoard at Broighter, County Derry, Ireland. Note the typically Celtic swirling ornament and the sophisticated clasp. 
Reproduced by permission of the National Museum of Ireland.
The Desborough Mirror (bottom left). This bronze mirror was found at Desborough in Northamptonshire. The flame-shaped curving lines are characteristic of Celtic art. 
Reproduced by permission of the British Museum.
England and Wales, and it forms the basis for modern Welsh and Cornish. The words *Britain* and *British* are derived from it. The “Q Celts” spoke the Goidelic language, now represented by Irish, Gaelic, and Manx (the dialect of the Isle of Man).

Celtic society was organized according to tribal patterns, with political life focused at the local level. During the Bronze Age, larger groupings dominated by a military aristocracy appear to have arisen; some of these were likely the builders of the hill forts. Under Celtic custom, land was held by kinship groups rather than by individuals. The Celts lived mainly on farms, some of which were large and well organized, and in small villages. Their artwork was superb: the Celts in Britain fashioned beautiful, highly sophisticated pieces of jewelry, the finest surviving examples of which are the Desborough Mirror and Snettisham Torc, made in England, and the gold Broighter Torc or collar, part of a hoard unearthed in northern Ireland. The Broighter hoard also included a small gold boat with oars. This is the earliest representation of a ship in British art, but no one knows just why it was made. The bronze shield found at Battersea, near London, is another famous example of Iron Age work. The Celts used gold and bronze coins (some of the late prehistoric coins from England are of excellent quality) as well as iron bars as a form of currency. They were sufficiently advanced economically to conduct trade with the Mediterranean countries as well as with France.

The last prehistoric inhabitants in Scotland, probably related to the Celts, were the Picts and the Scots. The Picts dominated most of the area, both Highlands and Lowlands, with their chief settlements along the southeast coast. Their name, given to them by the Romans, means “painted men,” a reference to the use of tattoos or blue body coloring. It has been argued that the Picts spoke a language that can be classified as “P Celtic,” but proving this is difficult. Their language survives only in a handful of carved inscriptions, genealogies, and place-names. The group called the
Scots originally lived in Ireland, not Scotland. A number of these men and women migrated to the Southwest of Scotland and eventually gave their name to the entire area. Some writers have held that the Picts were matrilineal: that is, their kinship groups were organized through women, and inheritance was through the female line. Although others deny this, they do acknowledge the importance of women in Pictish society.

**THE RISE OF ROMAN BRITAIN**

Roman contact with the Celts in the British Isles began with the invasion by Julius Caesar in 55 B.C. Already a great military leader, Caesar had conquered France several years earlier (he describes his campaigns in his book) and was ready to turn his attention to England.

Caesar was attracted to Britain for several reasons. He had heard rumors (unfortunately incorrect) that the British Isles were rich in gold and other treasures. He probably believed that he could not hold northern France securely without having control of the land across the Channel, since the Belgae might use England as a springboard for attack. Perhaps most important, he thought that the conquest of a distant, dangerous area like Britain would enhance his personal reputation and advance his ambition to rule the entire Roman world.

In August, 55 B.C., Caesar sailed to England with about ten thousand men. Unused to the wind and weather in the English Channel, he anchored his ships near a rocky coastline, where some were smashed and others severely damaged in a storm. He was forced to direct his attention to the rebuilding of his fleet and was not able to explore England fully. But he returned the next year, coming earlier with more men. Once again some of his transport vessels were ruined in a storm—he should have known that there was a safe harbor nearby—but he was now able to penetrate into the area north of the Thames. Here he confronted Cassivellaunus, the ruler of the Belgae, whose capital, Wheathampstead, was near the present city of St. Albans. Forced to return to France to suppress a native uprising, Caesar made Cassivellaunus a client king who agreed to acknowledge the supremacy of the Romans and to pay them an annual tribute.

Caesar may have intended to return to England but never did so. His later career, his coronation as emperor, and his assassination by his friend Brutus are among the best-known episodes in ancient history. England paid the tribute for only a few years and then reverted to its prehistoric independent condition for nearly a century. Then, in A.D. 43, the Emperor Claudius decided to undertake a second conquest of the British Isles. He believed that Caesar had always intended this, and he found the Empire peaceful, with surplus troops available. His timing was perhaps determined by the fact that the king of the Belgae, Cunobelinus, had just died, leaving the natives without an established leader. Claudius sent a larger force than Caesar had gathered, perhaps as many as forty thousand men. His generals finally found a safe harbor, and they met little resistance as they marched inland. During a brief visit (he was only in England for sixteen days), Claudius organized southeast
England as a province under direct Roman rule and accepted the submission of native tribes in other areas. Returning to Rome, he erected a triumphal arch to celebrate his victory.

The progress of the Roman conquest was interrupted in A.D. 61 by the revolt of Boudicca, queen of a Celtic tribe called the Iceni, who lived in eastern England with their capital at Colchester. A Roman writer described Boudicca as being “huge of frame, terrifying of aspect, and with a harsh voice; a great mass of bright red hair fell to her knees; she wore a great twisted golden torc, and a tunic of many colors, over which was a thick mantle, fastened by a brooch.” Although the Roman sources are a little unclear, Boudicca was the widow of one of the chieftains who had tried to negotiate with Rome, and the provisions of his will seem to have indicated that she was to assume control of the tribal territories upon his death. Angered by the Roman governor’s attempt to assume direct control of the lands of the Iceni and infuriated by the Roman soldiers’ mistreatment of her daughters, she waited until the Roman legions were occupied in Wales then gathered an enormous force of natives (perhaps more than 200,000) to ravage Roman settlements. Her troops burned three great Roman cities (London, Colchester, and Verulamium) and are said by a Roman writer to have killed as many as seventy thousand Roman citizens and their friends. It would be hard to exaggerate the horror of these events. Ultimately subdued by the Roman legions, Boudicca probably poisoned herself. She is often regarded as an early British heroine—her statue now stands on Westminster Bridge in London, near the houses of Parliament—but in fact her revolt chiefly illustrates the turmoil within British society during the period of Roman occupation.

During the years after Boudicca’s revolt, the Romans continued the military conquest of Britain. By A.D. 78 they had completed the subjugation of Wales. Making their way into what is now Scotland in A.D. 84, they defeated the Picts in a battle...
fought at Mons Graupius, an unidentified site probably near Aberdeen. But the Picts remained unfriendly and warlike. To protect their northern frontier, the Romans undertook the construction of a great wall stretching from the mouth of the River Tyne, on the east coast, to Solway Firth, on the west. Known as Hadrian’s Wall in honor of the emperor who ordered it built, the wall is a superb piece of military engineering, 73 miles long, finished with dressed stone, and well supplied with forts and sentry posts. Hadrian’s Wall was built between 122 and 128; much of it still stands in good condition. The most famous fort adjoining Hadrian’s Wall is Housesteads in Northumberland. It was the base for a contingent of infantry that may have numbered 1,000 and also attracted a large civilian settlement. The ruins include barracks, granaries, a military hospital, and a well-preserved latrine, testifying to a level of hygiene that was not equaled until the twentieth century.

Tempted by the fertile lands in the Scottish midland plain, the Romans in 142 constructed a second frontier farther north, the Antonine Wall running from the Firth of Forth to the Firth of Clyde, near the present cities of Edinburgh and Glasgow. Much shorter and simpler than Hadrian’s Wall, the Antonine Wall was soon abandoned, as the Romans gave up hope of controlling Scotland and concentrated on maintaining control of England. They never attempted to invade Ireland.
THE DECLINE OF ROMAN RULE

For ethnic and social reasons Roman rule of Britain was always shaky. A two-tier social structure was based on ethnic divisions. The prehistoric Celtic natives were not driven out of their homelands; they remained as workers, tilling the soil, paying taxes, and providing servants. Roman soldiers and civil officials formed a relatively small governing class. In the later centuries of Roman rule some natives adopted Roman ways, learned Latin, and gained acceptance in Roman society. But the basic situation did not change. Naturally, Roman rule did not please the Celts, who had been used to managing their own affairs. As long as the Romans maintained their garrisons at full strength they were able to retain control, but any show of weakness was likely to produce a revolt or uprising. One writer has likened the situation to the condition that prevailed during the period of British rule in India.

The first such uprising occurred in 197, when the Roman governor of Britain, Clodius Albinus, drained troops from England in his abortive attempt to become emperor. The Picts stormed Hadrian’s Wall, but it was quickly rebuilt and Roman rule was reestablished. Nearly a century later, in 296, another Roman leader named Carausius declared himself to be the emperor of Britain, independent of Rome itself. He was murdered by his own minister of defense, but not before an onslaught of Celts and Picts disrupted the government. At about this time the south and east coasts of England began to be subject to raids by the Saxons, who lived in northern Europe. The Emperor Diocletian commanded the construction of the Saxon Shore Forts to defend Roman Britain from this threat.

By the late fourth century the entire Roman Empire was in decline; the government lost control of one area after another and was eventually unable to hold Rome itself. Roman forces were gradually withdrawn from Britain to meet more pressing needs elsewhere. In 367 Britain was attacked simultaneously by Celts from Ireland, Picts from Scotland, and Saxons from the Continent. Many of the inhabitants of England also turned against their rulers. Shortly after this, Hadrian’s Wall was breached and not rebuilt. The end came, undramatically and without any actual fighting, about 410. In that year the pathetically weak Emperor Honorius sent letters to the residents in Britain and some other outlying parts of the Empire, saying that they would have to be responsible for their own defense, since Rome could no longer guarantee their safety. Honorius may not have meant to abandon Britain forever, but in fact Roman officials never returned.

LIFE IN ROMAN BRITAIN

Recent estimates of the population of Roman Britain are surprising. It used to be assumed that about two million people lived in England during the height of Roman rule, about the same number as in the early Norman period or in the reign of Henry VIII. But new research suggests a population somewhere between four and six million, a figure that would not be reached again until the seventeenth or eighteenth century.
The people, both the Roman newcomers and the descendants of the prehistoric Celts, were ruled by governors sent out from Rome—for most of the period we know their names and dates—and by financial officials called procurators. Large standing armies were maintained. Officers were Romans, or at least men who had learned Latin and adopted Roman ways, but many natives were drafted into military service. As soldiers they attained Roman citizenship, which conferred certain legal privileges. In the later years of Roman rule they were allowed to marry, and living quarters were provided for their families. Slavery was common in the Roman Empire, and some wealthy inhabitants of Roman Britain had personal slaves.

Although agriculture remained basic to economic life in Roman Britain, urbanization produced important social changes. Indeed, urbanization was probably essential if the large population was to be accommodated and employed. Unlike the Celts, the Romans were great city builders. Hundreds of Roman cities and towns can be identified, often simply by the derivation of their modern names, and excavation has revealed Roman remains in many of them. The Romans are responsible for the establishment of London, built on a marshy bank of the Thames, which had been avoided by the natives because of the difficulty of building there. Originally a commercial center, London had become the capital of southern England by about 200 and was already the largest city on the island. Its population probably reached at least thirty thousand. York was established as the Roman capital in the North; recent excavations there have yielded Roman as well as Viking remains. The Romans also built a spa at Bath in the Southwest. They reconstructed the native capital at Wheathampstead and changed its name to Verulamium. (This was the only city in Britain that the Romans called a municipium.) They established a host of towns that were originally military camps (in Latin, castra) and whose present-day names betray their origin. Among these are Chester, Colchester, Winchester, Chichester, Cirencester, and Exeter. The Romans built a few cities, called coloniae, specifically for the resettlement of retired army personnel. Lincoln is the best known of these.

Roman cities were regularly laid out with streets on a grid pattern and were walled for defense. Public buildings, temples, theaters, baths, and facilities for games and circuses were erected at their centers. They generally had an engineered water supply, with fountains and sewers—it is thought that some inhabitants may have suffered from lead poisoning because of the lead piping used for water distribution. Local government was provided by urban councils, which elected two senior and two junior magistrates to manage urban affairs and preside in local courts.

To connect their cities the Roman armies built a great network of roads, almost all radiating from London. The Great North Road ran to York and on to Hadrian’s Wall; the Great West Road led to Chester. The alignments of these remain today as the highways designated the A1 and A3. Many other Roman roads survive. They can often be recognized because they run for long distances in a straight line. Medieval roads tended to twist and turn, following the boundaries of fields; only the Romans and the twentieth-century freeway engineers assumed the power to cut direct paths through the countryside.

Some wealthy Romans, and perhaps some natives who were able to adopt their
way of life, lived in villas scattered around the countryside, surrounded by farmland. These villas have been compared to the great country houses of eighteenth-century Ireland, the haciendas of colonial Mexico, and the plantation houses erected in the American South before the Civil War. The larger ones were often luxurious, with mosaic pavements, central heating, and walled gardens. One of the best-known villas, at Fishbourne near Chichester on the south coast of England, was of considerable size and elegance; it is thought to have been the residence of the client king Cogidubnus. Composed of four wings built around a central garden, it was destroyed by fire in the third century, but the remaining walls and mosaics were excavated in the 1960s, and artifacts are now displayed in a museum at the site. Another villa, at Woodchester, had more than sixty rooms. The Mildenhall Treasure, a hoard of thirty-four silver platters, bowls, and goblets that is now housed in the British Museum, also gives an idea of the sophistication of life in Roman Britain. Unearthed in 1942 by plowing near Mildenhall in Suffolk, it was probably buried by a villa owner not long after 410 in the hope of preserving it from a barbarian attack. Because the treasure was not recovered, we presume that the owner was killed. Some of those who lived in villas also had town houses in London or other cities, since they were involved in business or governmental affairs that could not be managed easily from the countryside.
The history of religion in Roman Britain is important but obscure. Both the Celts and the Romans originally adhered to a variety of pagan cults, including the worship of the sun and of specially sacred sites as well as mythic gods and goddesses. Some Roman emperors were worshiped as well, and they were occasionally identified with the sun. Christianity gradually gained acceptance in Rome and then in outlying parts of the Empire like England. A full account of its early development will be deferred to Chapter 2, but here we may note the first English martyr (St. Alban, executed near Verulamium, most likely about 208 rather than the traditional date 304) and the first English heresy (Pelagianism, a belief in free will and the ability of individual men and women to work out their own salvation). Both pagan temples and Christian churches have been excavated, and in some cases there is evidence to suggest conversion from pagan to Christian use. The owner of the Mildenhall Treasure appears to have been a Christian, since several of the pieces bear Christian symbols.

The Roman villas and cities alike fell into decay shortly after 410. A Romanized way of life may have lingered on in some places, but the Celtic natives who remained after the Romans left did not share their enthusiasm for urban life. Roman coins do not appear to have been used after 420 or 430. The fact that the Roman theater at Verulamium was used as a rubbish dump in the fifth century is a telling symbol of the difference between the two cultures.

In the end the Romans made few permanent contributions to British civilization. Their governmental system, famous for maintaining peace and order, disappeared, as did the Latin language. Roads, walls, and towns decayed, although they would be reconstructed later in the Middle Ages. Celtic artwork, always finer and more imaginative than that of the Roman invaders, continued, uninfluenced by the rational style of the Romans. The chief legacy of the Roman period was the Christian religion, which had been accepted by a number of the natives and which survived among the Celts after the Romans departed.

Suggested Reading
———, *The People of Roman Britain* (Berkeley, 1979).