THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST TRANSCRIPTS

EPISODE 29: THE ANGLO-SAXON INVASION

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Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the History of the English Language. This is Episode 29: The Anglo-Saxon Invasion. In this episode, we're going to explore the invasion of Britain by the Anglo-Saxons. And specifically we're going to look at the period from around the year 410, when the Roman Empire abandoned Britain, until around the year 600. These two centuries are sometimes called the lost centuries of British history because so little is known about what happened with any certainty. As we know by now, the Anglo-Saxons were illiterate, so they didn't keep a chronicle of events as they happened. The few written accounts we do have come from a small handful of individuals, mostly monks and bishops who wrote in Latin. So in this episode, we'll explore those bits and pieces of information, and we'll try to piece together what happened during those two centuries in which a large portion of Britain passed to the Anglo-Saxons, and in the process, began to speak the language of the Anglo-Saxons.

But before I begin, I wanted to mention that I've completely redesigned the website for the podcast – historyofenglishpodcast.com. The new website is specifically designed to work with any media device, so it will automatically work with a PC, tablet, smart-phone, or any other media device with access to the web.

I've also taken the opportunity to reconfigure and remaster some of the old episodes. And I saved them to a new server. Now I'm going to release a bonus episode before the next regular episode of the podcast. And I would like you to listen to that episode. Because I'm going to be changing the feed for the podcast, and that explain what that means to you if you're a subscriber. For most of you, it won't mean very much at all, but for some of you, it could affect your current subscription. So again, just be sure to check out that next bonus episode and all will be explained.

OK, so let's turn to the Anglo-Saxons, the people who brought us the language which we call Old English. As I noted, it's very common for many histories of Britain to sort of 'skip through' these next two centuries. They often note that the Anglo-Saxons arrived in Britain around the year 450, and over the next century and half, they displaced the native Celtic-speaking people and established several new Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. And while there are some very interesting stories about what happened during this period, its difficult to determine how much is legend and how much is actual history. For example, the ultimate origins of the story of King Arthur date from this period. But even today, historians disagree as to whether there really was a leader named Arthur who fought against the invading Anglo-Saxons. Ironically, Arthur was originally said to be a leader who fought against the English – or Anglo-Saxons. It would take many centuries for the stories of Arthur to develop into the full-fledged legend of King Arthur that we have today. And that's the real problem with this period of history – separating fact from legend.

So I've decided to approach this period of history by turning to the actual sources. I'm going to take you through what we actually know about this period based upon the various scraps of evidence that we have, including both the limited written evidence and the archaeological evidence. So this episode will be a true history episode.

We'll begin the story with the year 410, the year that the crumbling Roman Empire abandoned Britain. With the Romans focused on events taking place in continental Europe, the Romanized Britons had to fend for themselves. And there were lots of challenges on the horizon. The Picts and the Scots were threatening from the north and various Germanic tribes like the Angles and Saxons were threatening from the south and the east.

So let's consider what things were like around this time in southern and central Britain.

First of all, since this is a podcast about language, let's consider what the region was like linguistically. Since the arrival of the Romans a few centuries earlier, the use of Latin has spread throughout Roman Britain. But its influence was greatest in the towns and cities where Roman influences in general were greater. Latin was made the official language of Roman Britain. And that meant that the governing classes and administrators spoke Latin. And many of the soldiers stationed there spoke Latin as well. And the traders who passed through the region, a lot of them also spoke Latin. And even some of the better educated natives learned and spoke Latin. But all of that basically meant that Latin was spoken in and around the Roman-occupied towns and cities.

But outside of the towns and cities, out in the rural areas, most Britons continued to speak the native Celtic languages. And even though Latin was more common in the towns and cities, we have to keep in mind what we mean by the term 'city' during this period. Even during this early period, London was the most important city in Britain. But it only had a population of about 30,000 people. And the entire city only covered about 300 acres. So cities were just small towns by today's standards. And the number of people who lived in towns and cities as a percentage of the overall population was much smaller than it is today. So that meant that even though Latin was the 'official' language of Britain, it was always a minority language. The Celtic languages were spoken by far more people even during the heyday of Roman Britain.

And this is a very important point as we compare the situation here to the situation in continental Europe. On the continent, where the Romans had arrived earlier, and where the Roman influence was greater, the Latin language had begun to replace the native Celtic languages by this point. But in Britain, Latin never enjoyed the same degree of influence. It was a prominent language among the elite, the educated, and the bureaucrats, but those people mainly lived in the towns and cities. And when those towns began to decline after the Roman Empire abandoned the island, Latin slowly gave way to the native Celtic languages which dominated the rural areas. And that process was accelerated when the Anglo-Saxons arrived and began to sack the towns and cities and, in the process, displaced many of those Latin-speaking elites.

And this is a very important reason why the Germanic language of the Anglo-Saxons took root in Britain. And remember that Britain is really the exception to the rule here. Pretty much everywhere else in the former Western Roman Empire, Latin held firm. When the Franks conquered Gaul, and the Goths conquered modern-day Spain and Italy, Latin continued to be the dominant languages in those regions. But Latin was never as ingrained in Britain. It was a minority language, and it would continue to be a minority language.

Before we move on from the language issue, let me mention a few things about the native Celtic languages in the British Isles. Though all of these languages are generally grouped together under the general heading of 'Celtic' languages, linguists have noticed distinct differences between the Celtic languages that were spoken in Britain and the Celtic languages which were spoken to the west in Ireland. And this is not really surprising because we're dealing with two different islands and both groups were somewhat isolated from each other over many centuries. But keep in mind that the northern part of Britain was home to the people called the Picts who were likely native people who pre-dated the arrival of the Celtic-speaking people.

Now around the time the Romans were leaving Britain, a group of Celtic-speaking people from Ireland called the 'Scots' began to settle in northwestern Britain. Over several centuries, the Scots overcame the Picts, and the Picts were assimilated into the Scots. And this is the ultimate origin of Scotland. And that means that the Celtic-language of the Scots – called Gaelic – is very closely related to the Celtic-language of the Irish. And the Celtic-language spoken in the Isle of Mann in this same general region – called Manx – is also part of this sub-family. So all of these are descended from that original form of Celtic which was spoken in Ireland.

But remember that that particular form of Celtic was different from the Celtic dialects spoken in Britain. So the Gaelic language of the Scots displaced the native language of the Picts in the north. And the Germanic language of the Anglo-Saxons displaced the native Celtic languages in central and southern Britain. That left the Celtic language in the far west of Britain in the region we know today as Wales. And it also left a Celtic language in the southwestern peninsula of Britain known as Cornwall. Now Welsh still survives today, but Cornish no longer exists as a spoken language.

So these languages of western Britain were descended from the Celtic languages spoken in Britain when the Anglo-Saxons arrived, and they form part of a separate sub-family of Celtic languages. And I wanted to make that point because even though Scottish Gaelic is spoken today in northern Britain, it isn't actually descended from the original Celtic languages of Britain. Its roots are in Ireland.

So we've looked at the general decline of Latin relative to the native Celtic languages. But it wasn't just the language of the Romans that was beginning to decline during this period around the year 410. The economy and the culture of the Romans was also beginning to experience a general decline.

Back in Episode 19, I discussed the Romanization of Britain, and I mentioned how the economy of the region had actually flourished in the decades and centuries that followed the arrival of the Romans. Roman-style marketplaces were built. New roads were constructed. Trade with the Empire increased. And Roman coins poured into Britain, which meant that the Romanized Britons began to use a common, international currency. And this currency largely replaced the older barter system.

But after 410, when the Roman Empire pulled out of Britain, all of those developments gradually began to fade away. Roman coins began to disappear since Roman mints were no longer providing Britain with new coins. Within a couple of decades, Roman coins had stopped being used on a regular basis, and the people had returned to barter as the primary means of exchange.

In the years after the Romans arrived, a massive pottery industry had developed in Britain. But shortly after 410, the pottery industry collapsed. And the high-quality Roman pottery stopped being produced.

During the Roman period, the people of Britain had become accustomed to all of the benefits and comforts of Roman civilization. At least in the cities, they had running water, public baths, and a variety of luxury items. But many of these things were starting to disappear, and they wouldn't return for over 1,000 years.

They might not have realized it at the time, but the native Britons had really become dependent on the Romans. The Romans provided them with the benefits of Roman civilization, but just as importantly, they provided them with the benefits of Roman troops and defenses. So the native Romano-Britons weren't accustomed to fighting in their own defense. And this was in stark contrast to the warriors who had been invading from the north and the west – the Picts and the Scots – especially the Picts.

The Picts up in modern-day Scotland had been a long term threat even to the Roman troops. The Romans had constructed Hadrian's Wall across the entire width of the island to keep the Picts out. And as long as the Romans manned the wall, it was effective. But when Rome left Britain to its own defenses in 410, the wall was abandoned and the Picts poured across it. And the Celtic-speaking Scots from Ireland were also joining in the invasions and adding to those problems.

Keep in mind that the reason why 410 is often cited as the year when Rome abandoned Britain is because that was the year when the Britons asked Rome for help in fighting the Picts. And Rome said, "Sorry, we've got our hands full with the Goths and the other tribes here on the continent."

Now even though the Pictish threat was growing to the north, the native Romano-Britons fared pretty well for a while. And even the economy held on for a couple of decades. And the reason why we know that the decline we actually very gradual at first is because we have a written account from around the year 429 which gives us our first insight into the situation in Britain in the years after the Romans abandoned the island.

Around that year 429, a couple of decades after the Romans left, a bishop named Germanus arrived in Britain from Gaul, and a second-hand written account of his trip provides some details about the situation on the ground. The account was written a few decades later as part of a general biography of Germanus. And it indicates that he encountered a "most wealthy island" (that's a quote) with communities that were still thriving. Trade at the port in London, which was then called Londinium, was still active. People were still making and selling local crafts. The biography also indicates that there were many highly educated people and that many of them

could speak Latin. So at least a couple of decades later, things hadn't changed all that much. But the account also indicates that there were foreign invaders on the horizon, and that included both Picts and Saxons. The Britons were actively engaged in fighting them, but the Picts were only a threat in the northern border regions and the Saxons were only a threat along the coast. They weren't really considered a threat to the fortified towns at this point.

Now Germanus arrived as a preacher, but he had previously been a soldier and military governor in Gaul. And while in Britain, he reorganized the local militias and he taught them how to fight battles in the traditional Roman fashion. According to his biography, he actually led a group of Britons in a successful battle against Saxon invaders during this period. Now we don't know for certain whether that story is true, but we can take from this account that the Britons were fighting the invaders and apparently having some success at this early point.

Now unfortunately, that's about all we get about from the biography of Germanus, but it's enough to get a general sense that Britain was still doing OK a couple of decades after the Empire abandoned the region.

And this account is consistent with the archaeological evidence as well. There is no evidence of any permanent Saxon settlements in Britain until around the years 430 to 440, so that would be the decade after Germanus visited. And even then, those original settlements were very sparse. So for a few decades, the decline in Britain was very gradual and the outside threats were managed.

After Germanus left, we don't have a contemporary written account from within Britain itself for over a century. So it becomes increasingly difficult to pinpoint exactly what happened next. But it appears that the Saxon and Pictish invasions increased significantly in the next few years after Germanus left. And for the first time, the archaeological evidence confirms the existence of permanent Saxon settlements. Those settlements began to pop up during the decade that followed that visit by Germanus.

So what happened after Germanus left? Did the Saxons simply overwhelm the Britons? Well maybe. Our next piece of evidence is a letter written sometime between 446 and 454 by a group of Britons to a Roman General in Gaul who was busy trying to repel Atilla the Hun from that region. The letter was a plea for help and it was quoted by later writers like Gildas and Bede who I will discuss later. The letter was addressed to this particular general in Gaul who was in power there from 446 to 454, so that's why we have a general time frame for the date of the letter. So that means the letter was written around 20 years after Germanus left – give or take a few years. The letter was titled 'The Groans of the British.' And it read: "The barbarians drive us to the sea; the sea throws us back on the barbarians. Thus two modes of death await us; we are either slain or drowned."

So obviously, the Romano-Britons were under attack around this time, around the year 450, and this letter was a desperate plea for help. But the Roman General in Gaul had his hands full with Attila. So once again, the Romans were of no help.

Now we don't have a copy of this particular letter today. We only know it through these later writers, but since it was quoted, historians believe the letter actually existed and those later writers had access to it – or at least a copy of it. And this particular letter may actually be pinpointing the time during which the Anglo-Saxon invasion was beginning to explode across eastern and southern Britain. And as we'll see shortly, later historians also identify this period the middle of the fifth century as the real beginning of the Anglo-Saxon invasion.

So from the account of Germanus's visit around 429 to this particular letter which was written sometime around 450, the situation had changed dramatically in Britain. So what happened during this intervening 20 year period to cause the situation to deteriorate so much? At the beginning of that period, Roman society still existed in Britain, at least in the inland cities. And the foreign threats were manageable. But now, they were desperate for help. But who were these invaders? Were they Picts and Scots pouring in from the north. Or were they Saxons invading from the coast. Or were they both?

Well, we have another written source from this same general time frame which sheds some light on this question. Around this time in Gaul, a chronicle was being maintained. We don't know for certain who wrote the chronicle, but it likely originated from a monastery in southern Gaul. The original manuscript has long since been lost, but it survives in the form of a later Medieval French copy from the ninth or tenth century. The chronicle is called the Gallic Chronicle of 452 because that is the year of the last entry. But it contains entries for earlier years as well. And for the year 441, the chronicle contains the following entry: "The Britains, which to this time had suffered from various disasters and misfortunes, are reduced to the power of the Saxons."

So according to this chronicle – the Gallic Chronicle – it was the Saxons who were in the process of conquering the island, and presumably it was the Saxon threat which led to the letter to the Roman general in Gaul around this same time. Now modern historians have a 'field day' with these dates. As I said the chronicle itself is dated to the year 452, so that time is completely consistent with that letter pleading for help. But the chronicle places the entry I just read under the year 441 a decade earlier. Now most later historians have tended to dismiss this date of 441 as being a little too early given the other sources. And in fact, the dates for other events in the Gallic Chronicle are indeed off by a few years given other more reliable sources. But I just wanted to note that this is one of the sources relied upon by those who believe the Saxon conquest happened a little bit earlier. For our purposes, it isn't really important to put a specific date on the events, and as I discussed in the last episode, the Anglo-Saxon conquest was a gradual event. It didn't just begin in one particular year.

So rather than focusing on the dating inconsistencies, the more important point it that this Gallic Chronicle confirms that the plea for help around 450 occurred at the same time that the Saxons were conquering the island. And both of those documents paint the same picture of native Britons rapidly falling to invading Saxons. But again, they don't provide us with any real details. But we do have some archaeological evidence from this same time period.

As I noted, the archaeological evidence confirms the existence of the first permanent Saxon settlements in Britain during this period. So we know that the Saxons were no longer just raiding. They were now settling in Britain and becoming permanent residents.

In fact, about 30 years ago, a small gold medallion was found in a field near Suffolk in eastern England. Archaeologists believe the medallion was dropped or buried there between the years 450 and 480, so right in this same time frame. The same time frame as the Gallic Chronicle and that letter to the Roman general in Gaul pleading for help.

Now what's interesting about this particular medallion is that it bears a Germanic runic inscription which reads "This she-wolf is a reward to my kinsmen." Now, it may not be Shakespeare, but it is the earliest known Anglo-Saxon inscription in Britain, and that makes it the first known sentence in the English language. And that means that English was on the ground – literally on the ground – around the year 450 or soon thereafter.

The archaeological evidence also shows that some Britons were beginning to flee the southern coast of Britain during this period, and actually beginning to head south across the channel to northern Gaul. If the Roman general in Gaul wouldn't come to their aid, then they would just head to Gaul where maybe they would be safe from the Anglo-Saxons. These Britons established a new home in the northwestern part of Gaul. And this region came to be known as Brittany, and that name is not a coincidence. The name ***Brittany*** comes from the fact that it was settled by refugees from Britain. In fact, there is evidence that both regions were called ***Brittania*** very early on.

Now, in an upcoming episode I'm going to look at the expansion of the Franks throughout northern Gaul and the impact that their language had on French, and then later had on English. In fact, I'm going to explore the etymology of a lot of English words which can be traced back to the Germanic Franks. But for now, we just need to keep in mind that the Frankish invasion of Gaul was happening around the same time as the early Anglo-Saxon invasion of Britain.

But at the same time that the Franks were expanding westward, the fleeing Britons were expanding into the same general region in the northern part of Gaul. So the emerging region of Brittany in northwestern Gaul remained distinct from the expanding Frankish territory.

And we get another scrap of written evidence from around this same time period which confirms that the exodus from Britain to northern Gaul was occurring. The evidence come to us in the form of two letters written by a Bishop in Gaul. The bishop's name was Sidonius Apollinaris. Now Sidonius was very active in the Catholic Church, and he corresponded with many of the prominent people of his day throughout Western Europe. And fortunately many of his letters have survived the centuries.

One of his letters is dated in the year 468. And again, as with so many of these sources, we can't be 100% sure if that date is accurate, but given the time in which he lived and wrote, it can't be off by very much. This particular letter was written to a friend named Vincentius. And in it, Sidonius notes that a government official in Gaul had sent a message to the Gothic King – not the

Frankish King – but the Gothic King, Eeuric, and that letter had been intercepted. And the official's secretary had been arrested and the secretary confirmed that the letter did indeed come from that particular official in Gaul. According to Sidonius, the intercepted letter was "evidently addressed to the King of the Goths, whom it dissuaded from concluding peace with 'the Greek Emperor', urging that instead he should attack the Bretons north of the Loire, and asserting that the law of nations called for a division of Gaul between Visigoth and Burgundian. There was more in the same mad vein, calculated to inflame a choleric king, or shame a quiet one into action. Of course the lawyers found here a flagrant case of treason."

So it sounds like this particular official found himself in a bit of trouble, but what's interesting from this account is that Sidonius specifically mentions the "Bretons north of the Loire." So he is confirming that the British refugees were in place in northern Gaul around this time – around the year 468. And of course, the Britons had to be fleeing something, and based on that Gallic Chronicle entry from a couple of decades earlier, we know that they were fleeing the Saxons.

So you can start to see how historians have pieced together scraps of information here and there to figure out what happened.

Now Sidonius also wrote another letter which is interesting and provides a little more information about the situation in Gaul. This other letter was dated 470, a couple of years after that first letter I just discussed. And it was written to a British military leader who was busy fighting against the Visigoths who remained in northern Gaul. The British leader's name was Riothamus. And the late Roman historian Jordanes actually called Riothamus the 'King of the Britons.' In fact, the name Riothamus is a Latin version of a Celtic name which meant 'king-most' or 'highest king.' So why was such a supreme British king active in northern Gaul during this period. Well, part of the answer has to do with the general exodus of Britons from southern Britain. The exodus was so great that even prominent generals had apparently made the trek. But for some later historians who are intrigued with the legendary figure of Arthur who pops up in some later accounts of this period, they think that there might be a connection to this leader named Riothamus. In fact, it is possible that he was the same person who was later referred to as Arthur in some of those accounts. But I'll look at that issue in more detail in the next episode.

For now, we just need to focus on this particular letter written to Riothamus around the year 470. Apparently Sidonius, who wrote the letter, knew someone who had his slaves enticed away by a group of armed Bretons in northern Gaul. He wrote the following:

"I will write once more in my usual strain, mingling compliment with grievance. Not that I at all desire to follow up the first words of greeting with disagreeable subjects, but things seem to be always happening which a man of my order and in my position can neither mention without unpleasantness, nor pass over without neglect of duty. Yet I do my best to remember the burdensome and delicate sense of honour which makes you so ready to blush for others' faults. The bearer of this is an obscure and humble person, so harmless, insignificant, and helpless that he seems to invite his own discomfiture; his grievance is that the Bretons are secretly enticing his slaves away. Whether his indictment is a true one, I cannot say; but if you can only confront the

parties and decide the matter on its merits, I think the unfortunate man may be able to make good his charge . . ."

So this letter once again confirms the presence of British refugees in and around the region of Brittany around the year 470. And remember that that's about 20 or 30 years after the other sources we looked at which indicated that the native Britons had started to be conquered by the Saxons.

Now before we move on from the Bretons in northern Gaul, let me note that since they came from Britain during this period, their Celtic language is closely related to the Celtic languages of southern Britain.

So we can place Breton in the same Celtic sub-family as Welsh and Cornish. All of those are descended from the early Celtic languages of Britain. And remember that those are all distinct from the other Celtic subfamily which includes Irish and Scottish Gaelic.

OK, so by now we've established that there was a great Anglo-Saxon invasion of Britain, that the Anglo-Saxons had begun to settle there, that outside sources refer to a Saxon conquest of Britain, and that there was a massive migration of Britons out of southern Briton into northern Gaul. But we still don't know much about that actual Anglo-Saxon invasion. We don't know exactly what led to that invasion. And we don't know much about the actual conquest of Britain.

So we might be led to assume that the Saxons had just begun to arrive in greater numbers, and that they had simply overwhelmed the native Romano-Britons. But it turns out that things were a little more complicated than that.

Our next written account actually comes about 70 or 80 years after the letters of Sidonius. So that puts us around the year 550, or maybe a few years before. And this particular written account is probably the most important contemporary account of the events during this period that we have. Even though it was written around a century after that initial Saxon invasion around 450, it's still the first detailed account we have which describes what had happened over those intervening years. So needless to say, it's a pretty important document.

The document is a three-part extended sermon written by a British monk named Gildas the Wise. And according to Gildas, the Saxons didn't just show up one day and start looting and pillaging. In fact, believe it or not, they were actually invited in by the native Britons. According to Gildas, the Picts to the north had become such a tremendous threat that the Saxons were invited in as mercenaries to fight the Picts. So let's consider what Gildas has to say, and why and when he says it.

The first potential problem with Gildas is the time frame. As I noted, his account was written about 100 years after that Gallic Chronicle entry which says the Saxons conquered the Britons. And in keeping with the tradition of the church, it was written in Latin. In its English translation, the sermon was called 'On the Ruin and Conquest of Britain.'

So what about that 100 year time frame? Well, obviously Gildas wasn't old enough to have been around for over a century and have first-hand knowledge of what happened. So he had to rely at least in part on other evidence, probably stories passed down in the oral tradition.

And he also had access to some documents which we don't have today. One of those documents was that letter to the Roman general in Gaul around the year 450 because he was the first writer to actually quote the letter. And it's very likely that the later writers simply quoted it directly from him. So he may have been the only person with direct access to the letter to leave a written account of it for future generations.

Now even though he may have had access to some documents and oral accounts of what happened a century earlier, we still have to consider the fact that he was writing at a much later date.

The other potential problem with Gildas was his motivation and purpose. As I noted, Gildas was a monk and a native Briton. And it is very clear from his writing that he was trying to convey a moral message, that it had been wrong to invite in pagan barbarians to fight the Picts. And he believed that the people of Britain had been punished for that decision. They had experienced a great deal of suffering, but it was all a consequence of their own misdeeds. So the account of Gildas is primarily a sermon – not a literal record of history. So we have to keep that in mind as we consider what he has to say.

Gildas begins his sermon with a summary of the events which had taken place in Britain from the time the Romans first arrived until the time of his writing shortly before the year 550. Some of his early history of Roman Briton is clearly wrong, but as he describes events closer to his own time, it is believed that his accounts are more accurate.

According to Gildas, the native Britons came under increasing attacks from the Picts and the Scots, and in an effort to defend the region, they turned to the Saxons. Here is a portion of the sermon:

"Then all the councillors, along with the proud tyrant, were so blinded, that, as a protection to their country, they sealed its doom by inviting in among them (like wolves into the sheep-fold), the fierce and impious Saxons, a race hateful both to God and men, to repel the invasions of the northern nations. Nothing was ever so pernicious to our country, nothing was ever so unlucky. What palpable darkness must have enveloped their minds – darkness desperate and cruel! Those very people whom, when absent, they dreaded more than death itself, were invited to reside, as one may say, under the same roof."

So according to Gildas, a 'proud tyrant' invited the Saxons. As we'll see shortly, later sources identified this tyrant or leader as a man named Vortigern.

Gildas then says that the Saxons were given lands in eastern Britain, and soon their relatives back on the continent heard of their successes and many more flocked to Britain. But at a later date,

the Saxons turned on their British hosts, and fighting broke out between the two groups. This is how he described the root of the conflict between the Saxons and the Britons:

"The barbarians being thus introduced as soldiers into the island, to encounter, as they falsely said, any dangers in defense of their hospitable entertainers, obtain an allowance of provisions, which, for some time being plentifully bestowed, stopped their doggish mouths. Yet they complain that their monthly supplies are not furnished in sufficient abundance, and they industriously aggravate each occasion of quarrel, saying that unless more liberality is shown them, they will break the treaty and plunder the whole island. In a short time, they follow up their threats with deeds."

So basically, the Saxons began to complain about their provisions and supplies. This is very reminiscent of the complaints of the Goths after they were allowed to cross the Danube in Roman territory. And as we know, the Goths began to starve and soon rose up and defeated the Romans. Now we don't know if the Saxons were as desperate as the Goths, but it's possible that the same basic process was happening again here in Britain. And it's also possible that the Saxons just wanted an excuse to plunder.

According to Gildas, the fighting between the Saxons and the Britons lasted for many years. And he described the consequences in great detail. In one passage, he writes:

"For the fire of vengeance, justly kindled by former crimes, spread from sea to sea, fed by the hands of our foes in the east, and did not cease, until, destroying the neighboring towns and lands, it reached the other side of the island, and dipped its red and savage tongue in the western ocean."

And then he writes in graphic detail:

"Lamentable to behold, in the midst of the streets lay the tops of lofty towers, tumbled to the ground, stones of high walls, holy altars, fragments of human bodies, covered with livid clots of coagulated blood, looking as if they had been squeezed together in a press; and with no chance of being buried, save in the ruins of the houses, or in the ravening bellies of wild beasts and birds."

And then he notes the following:

"Some, therefore, of the miserable remnant, being taken into the mountains, were murdered in great numbers; others, constrained by famine, came and yielded themselves to be slaves forever to their foes, running the risk of being instantly slain, which truly was the greatest favour that could be offered them: some others passed beyond the seas with loud lamentations instead of the voice of exhortation."

So from all of that, Gildas confirms that many of the native Britons fled the Saxon onslaught. He says that some of them fled to the western mountains – basically modern-day Wales. And he said that some of them fled 'beyond the seas, ' so that presumably that means across the channel to Brittany in norther, Gaul.

Gildas then notes that the fighting lasted for many years. Eventually though, the Britons began to fight back under the leadership of a man named Ambrosius Aurelianus. And they eventually won a decisive victory at a place called Mons Badonicus. He says that the victory occurred about 44 years earlier in the same year in which he was born. And that victory at Mons Badonicus ushered in a period of peace between the two groups that had lasted until the time of Gildas's writings about 44 years later. So that means the British victory at Mons Badonicus took place sometime around the year 500.

He then states the following: "And yet neither to this day are the cities of our country inhabited as before, but being forsaken and overthrown, still lie desolate; our foreign wars having ceased, but our civil troubles still remaining."

So Gildas is indicating that the region has been devastated and the native Britons had been largely displaced. In the next episode, we'll look at the legacy of the Celtic-speaking Britons – especially their legacy on the English language. And one of the great on-going debates is whether the Britons were wiped out by the Anglo-Saxons or whether they were just consumed within the new Anglo-Saxon society. Gildas suggests the former – that they were basically wiped out with the regions occupied by the Saxons. But as we'll see, modern evidence suggests that this view may be an exaggeration.

Now Gildas concludes his history by describing a period of relative peace during his lifetime, and since he was writing for a contemporary audience, we can assume that he was somewhat accurate in this part of his description. But what about the rest of it?

Is there any actual evidence of an invitation being extended to the Saxons? Well, no.

And who was the 'proud tyrant' who invited the Saxons in? Well, Gildas doesn't say, though later sources provide the name of Vortigern.

When did this alleged invitation to the Saxons occur? Again, Gildas doesn't tell us.

When did the Anglo-Saxons begin to arrive? Well, again, we don't know.

And where is this place called Mons Badonicus where the Britons supposedly won a decisive victory? Again, we don't know.

And that's the problem with Gildas. He wasn't writing as a historian. He was writing as a preacher. But while we are left with lots of questions, we have to assume that his account is roughly based on facts. And the reason for that assumption that is because Gildas was writing for a contemporary audience. He was writing about events were taking place during his lifetime and which had taken place over the prior century, and he was writing to the people of his time. So it appears that his description reflects the common knowledge and understanding of the people of Britain at the time.

And the events described by Gildas are actually very consistent with Roman practice at the time, especially the basic idea of using the Saxons to fight the Picts. As we've seen over the past few episodes, the Romans had come to rely heavily on Germanic mercenaries. Tribes like the Goths and the Franks had been invited into Roman territory to fight Rome's enemies. In fact, by this point, a large portion of the Roman army in western Europe was composed of Germanic mercenaries, and Germans were rising to the highest ranks of the Roman army. So it's not surprising that those Romano-Britons left behind in Britain would do exactly what Rome had been doing for decades. Bring in some mercenaries to fight the invaders. Let the barbarians fight the barbarians. Let their enemies fight each other while they stood on the sidelines. That was all very Roman, and so the account of Gildas may be accurate in this respect.

Now before we move on from Gildas, let me note a few more things about his account. First, he described the Germanic tribes simply as 'Saxons.' He doesn't use the terms Angles, Jutes, Frisians or Franks. It's just Saxons. And the Gallic Chronicle did the same thing a century earlier. It only refers to 'Saxons.' But this appears to have been a common practice at the time. Remember the 'Saxon Shore' which I discussed in the last episode. It appears that all of the North Sea Germanic tribes were sometimes collectively referred to as the 'Saxons.'

Another key point about Gildas is that he did make a few mistakes in his narrative. For example, he attributed the construction of Hadrian's Wall to a period much later that the period when it was actually constructed.

Also, earlier I mentioned that letter from a group of Britons to the Roman General in Gaul pleading for help. Well, Gildas quotes that letter and that is part of the reason why we believe that letter actually existed. And we know from the dates in which that General was in power that it had to have been written around the year 450. But the letter didn't mention who the invaders were. So Gildas assumed that the invaders were the Picts and the Scots. But we know from that Gallic Chronicle written about the same period that it was the Saxons who were invading. So Gildas also apparently made a mistake in that regard.

He also concluded his history by noting that, at the time of his writings around the year 550, that there had been an extended period of 'peace' between the Saxons and the Britons. But archaeology suggests that the term 'peace' used by Gildas must have been a relative term – maybe it was peaceful compared to the earlier period of warfare. Because the archaeological evidence suggests that skirmishes were still occurring during the time in which Gildas lived. Cemetery evidence indicates that the Saxons (or Anglo-Saxons) were still expanding westward and northward during that period. Hilltop sites in the west were also re-fortified during that period. And that also suggests an ongoing threat.

So that's Gildas. And while we can be skeptical about some of his purported history, we also have to consider that his is really the closest thing we have to a contemporary account of the history of the Anglo-Saxon invasion.

Now after Gildas, the only other contemporary account of the events in Britain during this period comes from the Byzantine writer and historian Procopius.

I actually mentioned Procopius a couple of episodes back. He was the Byzantine writer and historian in Constantinople during the time of the Emperor Justinian. And he wrote three histories during his lifetime, one of which was a series of scandalous stories published after his death called 'Anekdota,' which is the origin of the word ***anecdote*** in Modern English. Remember that? Well he also wrote a history of wars of the Eastern Roman Empire. And he wrote that history around the same time that Gildas wrote that sermon we just looked at. So Procopius was a contemporary of Gildas. And in his history, Procopius mentioned a couple of things about events in Britain.

Now in order to understand what Procopius has to say, we have to consider the context in which he wrote. Remember that he was writing from Constantinople – modern-day Istanbul in Turkey. So needless to say, he wasn't exactly providing a first-hand account of events in Britain. But remember that at the same time the Anglo-Saxons were conquering parts of Britain, the Franks were expanding across northern and central Gaul.

And by this point, around the year 550, the Franks had effectively conquered most of Gaul, except for that region of Brittany with the British refugees in the northwest. Around the year 553, the Franks sent some emissaries to Constantinople. And these Frankish emissaries were accompanied by some Angles as well. And this was the source of the information which Procopius included in his history. So again, we're dealing with second-hand accounts, and we have to consider the possibility of hearsay and the impact of the personal opinions of the Franks and the Angles.

One thing that was confirmed by the sources is that many Britons were now living in northern Gaul in Brittany. Procopius writes:

"Three very populous nations inhabit the Island of Brittia, and one king is set over each of them. And the names of these nations are Angles, Frisians, and Britons who have the same name as the island. So great apparently is the multitude of these peoples that every year in large groups they migrate from there with their women and children and go to the Franks. And they *[the Franks]* are settling them in what seems to be the more desolate part of their land, and as a result of this they say they are gaining possession of the island. So that not long ago the king of the Franks actually sent some of his friends to the Emperor Justinian in Byzantium, and despatched with them the men of the Angles, claiming that this island *[Britain]*, too, is ruled by him. Such then are the matters concerning the island called Brittia."

So Procopius confirms the settlement of Britons in Brittany, but we already knew that. What's more interesting is the way he describes the inhabitants of Britain. Keep in mind that, up until this point, other writers just use the term 'Saxons.' But Procopius doesn't use the term 'Saxons' at all. He describes the residents of Britain as Britons, Angles and Frisians. This is the first specific reference we have to those two groups settling in Britain. In fact, it is the only historical reference which specifically mentions the Frisians And again, there is no mention of the 'Saxons' which is interesting. And he doesn't mention the 'Jutes' either. But at least we're starting to get specific references to other North Sea tribes in Britain. I should also note that Procopius uses the term 'Brittia' which has led some later scholars to wonder if he was using that

term to refer to the island Britain or the region of Brittany in Northern Gaul. But I'm not going to get into that debate here.

So that really concludes out look at the contemporary sources who wrote during the period of the actual Anglo-Saxon invasions.

The period of the Anglo-Saxon invasions – or uprising – lasted from the early 400s through the very early 600s. So the last sources we have from this period, Gildas and Procopius, were writing around the year 550, so about three-quarters of the way through that period. And as we know today, the story was far from over when they were writing. That period of relative peace mentioned by Gildas would soon come to an end because the Anglo-Saxons soon conquered all the territory which today as modern England.

And with respect to the Britons who were fleeing to Northern Gaul, the archaeological evidence suggests that there were two general periods of migrations. There was that initial period around the year 450 when the first Anglo-Saxon onslaught began. And most of those refugees came from the central coast of Southern Britain. But around the year 575, shortly after the time of Gildas and Procopius, a second period of migration occurred. Most of this second wave of refugees came from the western regions of Britain around Devon and Cornwall.
So that suggests that shortly after the time of Gildas, the period of relative peace ended, and the native Britons who had fled to the west came under attack again. And many of them fled from those regions down into Northern Gaul.

As I noted earlier, later historians wrote about the Anglo-Saxon invasion and filled in some of the details which were missing from these contemporary accounts. But that's the real dilemma as we look at this period of history. Many of the details come from accounts which were written many years after the fact – usually several centuries later. And without knowing the sources of those extra details, it can be difficult to determine what is fact and what is legend.

But we can't leave the topic of the Anglo-Saxon invasion without discussing a couple of these later sources because they provide many of the missing details of this story.

The first source is the history of England which was written by the Bede in the eighth century. The other is the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle which began to be compiled around the year 900. These are generally considered to be the two definitive sources of Anglo-Saxon history since they were both written during the Anglo-Saxon period. But as it relates to the initial Anglo-Saxon invasion, both of these sources had to deal with the same problem of time – the fact that they were written so many years after the fact.

Let's start with Bede – or 'the Venerable Bede' as he came to be known in later centuries. Bede was a monk who lived in Northumbria in northern England. In the year 731, he completed a history of England and the English church called the "Ecclesiastical History of the English People." And this is still generally considered to be the definitive history of Anglo-Saxon England up to that point.

Bede begins his history with the following description:

"In the year of our Lord 449, Martian being made emperor with Valentinian, and the forty-sixth from Augustus, ruled the empire seven years. Then the nation of the Angles, or Saxons, being invited by the aforesaid king, arrived in Britain with three long ships, and had a place assigned them to reside in by the same king, in the eastern part of the island, that they might thus appear to be fighting for their country, whilst their real intentions were to enslave it."

So Bede gives us a specific year for the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons – the year 449. And because Bede and his history were so influential, that year has become the traditional date often given for the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons. But this particular date – 449 – was almost certainly a reconstructed date, and probably more of a guesstimate. In reality, as we know by now, there probably wasn't a specific date that we can look to. It was a very gradual process, not a dramatic event like the arrival of the Romans in the year 43 or the Normans in the year 1066. In fact, as I noted earlier, the archaeological evidence confirms that there were permanent Anglo-Saxon settlements in place over a decade before the date given by Bede.

But it also appears that, what was initially a gradual immigration, did accelerate at some point. We know that a group of Britons wrote a letter to a Roman general pleading for help around the year 450. And the Gallic Chronicle also mentions a Saxon conquest of Britain around this same time frame. So Bede was probably 'in the ballpark' with that year of 449.

Bede then follows the account of Gildas by stating that the Anglo-Saxons were invited in. He writes:

"The newcomers received of the Britons a place to inhabit, upon condition that they should wage war against their enemies for the peace and security of the country, whilst the Britons agreed to furnish them with pay. Those who came over were of the three most powerful nations of Germany – Saxons, Angles, and Jutes. From the Jutes are descended the people of Kent, and of the Isle of Wight, and those also in the province of the West Saxons who are to this day called Jutes, seated opposite to the Isle of Wight. From the Saxons, that is, the country which is now called Old Saxony, came the East Saxons, the South Saxons, and the West Saxons. From the Angles, that is, the country which is called Anglia, and which is said, from that time, to remain deserted to this day, between the provinces of the Jutes and the Saxons, are descended the East Angles, the Midland Angles, the Mercians, all the race of the Northumbrians, that is, of those nations that dwell on the north side of the river Humber, and the other nations of the English."

So there is the definitive statement that Britain was invaded by Angles, Saxons and Jutes. And he also gives us the traditional regional breakdown for those groups. The Jutes settled in the east in Kent. The Angles settled in the central regions. And the Saxons settled in the south. The area of the East Saxons became Essex. The area of the South Saxons became Sussex. The area of the West Saxons became Wessex.

Once again, Bede was working from a vantage point almost three hundred year later. By this point, there were certainly regional differences in the dialects of the Anglo-Saxons. And the

kingdoms that had emerged within these regions had distinct names as well. Sussex, Essex and Wessex all had names which clearly derived from the name of the Saxons. And they all spoke similar dialects. Meanwhile, in the east there was the region known as 'East Anglia.' And that name clearly derived from the name of the 'Angles.' And the people in that region also spoke a distinctive dialect. And those differences in dialects persisted through the years and could be detected by later generations. And some of those differences persist to this day.

And Bede's description reflects those regional differences as they existed at the time – the time when he was writing. But historians still debate whether those differences were there from the beginning or whether they developed later from an initial mixture of tribes.

After describing the initial settlement of Angles, Saxons and Jutes, Bede continued his history, and in doing so, he basically followed the same narrative as Gildas. It seems clear that Gildas was one of Bede's primary sources, but Bede adds some additional details as well. For example, the 'proud tyrant' who invited the Anglo-Saxons to Britain was named Vortigern. And the early leaders of the Anglo-Saxons were Hengest and Horsa. So were these real people or just legendary figures? Well, that still a matter of debate. And I'll leave it to the professional Anglo-Saxon historians to figure that out.

But the bottom line is that Bede's summary of the Anglo-Saxon invasion has secured its place as the traditional view of the invasion in the minds of most historians. It was so influential, that when the Anglo-Saxons began their own annual chronicle around the year 900, they largely deferred to Bede's history of the period. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle follows Bede's narrative, as well as Bede's time frame. And this is not really surprising. While the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle is the most important source for late Anglo-Saxon history, the chroniclers obviously had to rely on other sources for events which had occurred over 400 years earlier.

So as you can probably see by now, we have a very general idea of what happened around the 5th and 6th Ccenturies in Britain, but lots of questions remain and there are a lot of details which we may never know.

One of the biggest mysteries from this period concerns the legacy of the native Celtic-speaking Britons in the region which fell to the Anglo-Saxons. Were they wiped out as many of the early historians originally thought? Linguistically, there is very little Celtic influence in English. So that's been the traditional view. But that view has been challenged by recent research in both linguistics and genetics. So next time, I'm going to explore the legacy of the Celts in Anglo-Saxon England – and in the English language.

So until next time, thanks for listening to the History of English Podcast.