

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-02209-5 - A History of England: Principally in the Seventeenth  
Century, Volume 1

Leopold von Ranke

Excerpt

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## FIRST BOOK.

THE CHIEF CRISES IN THE EARLIER

HISTORY OF ENGLAND.

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AS we turn over the pages of universal history, and follow the shifting course of events, we perceive almost at the first glance one comprehensive process of change going on, which, more than any other, governs the external fortunes of the world. Through long periods of time the historic life of the human race was active in Western Asia and in the lands bordering on the Mediterranean which look towards the East: there it laid the foundations of its higher culture. We may rightly regard as the greatest event that meets us in the whole course of authentic history, the fact that the seats of the predominant power and culture have been transplanted to the Western lands and the shores of the Atlantic Ocean. Not merely the abodes of the ancient civilised nations, but even the capitals which were the medium of communication between East and West, have fallen into barbarism; even the great metropolis, from which first political, and then spiritual, dominion extended itself in both directions over widespread territories, has not maintained its rank. It was due to this tendency of things, combined with a certain geographical cause, that neither could the medieval Empire attain its full development, nor the Papacy continue to subsist with unimpaired authority. From age to age the political and intellectual life of the world transferred itself ever more and more to the nations dwelling further West, especially since a new hemisphere was opened up to their impulses of activity and extension. So it was that the chief interests of the Pyrenean peninsula drew towards its ocean coasts; that there grew up on either side of the Channel which

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separates the Continent from Britain, the two great capitals in which modern activity is chiefly concentrated; that Northern Germany, together with the races which touch on the North Sea and the Baltic, developed a life and a system of their own; it is in these regions latterly that the universal spirit of the human race chiefly works out its task, and displays its activity in moulding states, creating ideas, and subjugating nature.

Yet this transmission, this transplanting, is not the work of a blind destiny. While civilisation in the East succumbed and died out before the advance of races incapable of culture, it was welcomed in the West by races possessing the requisite capacity, which by their inborn force gave it new forms and indestructible bases for its outward existence. Nor have the nations and kingdoms arisen each from its mother earth, as it were in obedience to some inward impulse of inevitable necessity, but amid constant assimilation and rejection, ever repeated wars to secure their future, and a ceaseless struggle with opposing elements that threatened their ruin.

The object of universal history is to place before our eyes the leading changes, and the conflicts of nations, together with their causes and results. Our purpose is to depict the history of one of the chief of the Western nations, the English, and that too in an age which decisively modified both its inner constitution and its outward position in the world, but it cannot be understood unless we first pourtray, with a few quick touches, the historical events under the influence of which it became civilised and great.

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## CHAPTER I.

### THE BRITONS, ROMANS, AND ANGLO-SAXONS.

THE history of Western Europe in general opens with the struggle between Kelts, Romans, and Germans, which determined out of what elements modern nations should be formed.

Just as it is supposed that Albion in early times was connected with the Continent, and only separated from it by the raging sea-flood which buried the intermediate lands in the abyss, so in ethnographic relations it would seem as if the aboriginal Keltic tribes of the island had been only separated by some accident from those which occupied Gaul and the Netherlands. The Channel is no national boundary. We find Belgians in Britain, Britons in Eastern Gaul, and very many names of peoples common to both coasts; there were tribes which, though separated by the sea, yet acknowledged the same prince. Without being able to prove how far natives of the island took part in the expeditions of conquest, which pouring forth from Gaul inundated the countries on the Danube and Italy, Greece and Western Asia, we yet can trace the affinity of names and tribes as far as these expeditions extend. This island was the home of the religion that gave a certain unity to the populations, which, though closely akin, nevertheless contended with each other in ceaseless discord. It was that Druidic discipline which combined a priestly constitution with civil privileges, and with a very peculiar doctrine of a political and even moral purport. We might be tempted to suppose that the atrocity of human sacrifice was first introduced among them

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by the Punic race. For they were from primeval times connected with the Carthaginians and Phoenicians, who were the first to traverse the outer sea, and sought in the island a metal which was very valuable for the wants of the ancient world. Distant clans might retain in the mountains their original wildness, but the southern coasts ranked in the earliest times as rich and civilised. They stood within the circle of the relations that had been created by the expeditions of the Keltic tribes, by the mixture of peoples thence arising, by the war and commerce of the earliest age.

In the great war between Rome and Carthage, which decided the destiny of the ancient world, the Keltic tribes took part as allies of the Punic race. If Carthage had conquered, they would have maintained in most, if not all, the lands they had occupied, and especially in their own homes, their old manners and customs, and their religion in its existing form. It was not merely the supremacy of the one city or the other, but the future of Western Europe that was at stake when Hannibal attacked the Romans in Italy. Rome, which had already grown strong in warring against the Gauls, won the victory over the Carthaginians. Thenceforth one after another of the Keltic nations succumbed to the superiority of the Roman arms, which at last invaded Transalpine Gaul, and struck its military power to the ground.

From this point the reaction against the Keltic enterprises necessarily extended itself also to Britain.

The great general who conquered Gaul did not feel sure of being able to accomplish his task unless he also obtained influence over the British tribes, from which those of the Continent constantly received help and encouragement, unless he established among them the authority of the Roman name.

It was an important moment in the world's history, well worthy of remembrance, when Caesar first trod the soil of Albion. Already repulsed from the steep chalk cliffs of the island, he found the flat shore on which he hoped to disembark occupied by the enemy, some in their war-chariots, others on horseback and on foot; his ships could not reach the shore; the soldiers hesitated, encumbered with their armour as they were, to throw themselves into a

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sea with which they were not familiar, in presence of an enemy acquainted with the ground, active, brave, and superior in numbers; the general's order had no effect on them; when however an eagle-bearer, calling on the gods of Rome, threw himself into the flood, the men would have thought themselves traitors had they allowed the war-standard, to which an almost divine worship was paid, to fall into the hands of the enemy; fired by the danger that threatened their honour, and by the religion of arms, from one ship after another they followed him to the fight; in the hand-to-hand combat in the water which ensued they gained the superiority, supported most skilfully by their general wherever it was necessary; the moment they reached the land, the victory was won<sup>1</sup>.

We cannot reckon it a slight matter, that Caesar, though not at the first, yet at the second and better prepared expedition, succeeded in carrying away with him hostages from the chief tribes. For this very form was the one customary in that century and among those tribes, by which he bound them and their princes to himself.

It was the first step towards the Roman supremacy. But Gaul and West Germany had first to be subdued, and the Empire securely concentrated in one hand, before—a century later—the conquest of the island could be really attempted.

Even then the Britons still fought without helmet or shield, as did the Gauls of old before Rome. In Britain, just as on the Lombard plains, the war-chariot was their best arm; their defective mode of defence necessarily yielded to the organised tactics of the legion. How easily did the Romans, pushing forward under cover of their mantelets, clear away the rude entrenchments by which the Britons used formerly to secure themselves against attack. The Druids on Mona trusted in their gods, whose will they thought to ascertain from the quivering fibres of human sacrifices; and for a moment the sight of the crowd of fanatics collected around them checked the attack, but only for a moment: as soon as they

<sup>1</sup> The words of some MSS. in Caesar's Commentaries, iv. 25, 'deserite, milites, si vultis, aquilam, atque hostibus prodite,' might well be taken for the genuine words, originally noted down in his Ephemerides (journal).

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came to blows they were instantly scattered, and their holy places perished with them. For this is the greatest result of the Roman wars, that they destroyed the rites which contradicted the idea of Humanity. Yet once more an injured princess—Boadicea—united all the sympathies which the old constitution and religion could awaken. Dio has depicted her, doubtless according to the reports which reached Rome. A tall form, with the national decoration of the golden necklace and the checquered mantle, over which her rich yellow hair flowed down below her waist. She called on her peoples to defend themselves at any risk, since what could befall those to whom each root gave nourishment, each tree supplied shelter: and on her gods, not to let the land pass into the possession of that insatiable, unjust foe of foreign race. So truly does she represent the innate characteristics of the British race, when oppressed and engaged in a desperate defence. She is earnest, rugged, and terrible; the men who gathered round her were reckoned by hundreds of thousands. But the Britons had not yet learnt the art of war. A single onslaught of the Romans sufficed to scatter their disorderly masses with a fearful butchery. It was the last day of the old British independence. Boadicea would not, any more than Cleopatra, adorn a Roman triumph; she fell by her own hand.

Within a few dozen years the Roman eagles were masters of Britain as far as the Highlands: the Keltic clan-life and the religion of the Druids withdrew into the Caledonian mountains, and the large islands off that coast; in the conquered territory the religion of the arms that had won the victory, and the might of the Great Empire, were supreme. The work which was begun by superiority in war was completed by pre-eminence in civilisation. It seemed an advantage and an improvement to the sons of the British princes, to adopt the Roman language, and knowledge, and mode of life; they delighted in the luxury of colonnades, baths, feasts, and city life. Men like Agricola used these modes of Romanising Britain by preference. Just as the Britons exchanged their rude shipbuilding and their leathern sails for the discoveries of a more advanced art of navigation, so they learnt to carry

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I. I.

*AND ANGLO-SAXONS.*

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on their agriculture in Roman fashion; in later times Britain was considered as the granary of the legions in Germany. Most of the cities in the land betray by their very names their Roman origin; London, though it existed earlier, owes its importance to this connexion. It was the emporium destined as it were by nature for the peaceful commerce that now arose between the Western provinces of the Empire. Once in the third century an attempt was made to make the island independent, but it failed the moment the marts on the opposite coast fell into the hands of the Emperor who was universally recognised. Britain seemed an integral part of the Roman Empire. It was from York that Constantine marched forth to unite its Eastern and Western halves once more under one government.

But soon after him an epoch began in which the third great nationality, at first thought to be part of the Keltic race, then driven back or taken into service by the Romans, but always maintaining its peculiar original independence—the German, rose to supremacy in the West. In the fifth century it had become everywhere master in the militarily-organised Roman frontier districts: encouraged by the embarrassments of the authorities it advanced into the peaceful provinces.

It is of importance to remark what the fate of Britain was in these struggles.

From the Romanised territory an Augustus, called Constantine, set up by the revolted legions, invaded Gaul, not merely to check the inroads of the barbarians, but at the same time to possess himself of the Empire. He at one time held a great position, when the legions of Gaul and Aquitaine also took his side, and Spain saluted him Emperor. But the authority of Honorius the generally recognised Emperor could not be so easily set aside: discontented followers of the new Augustus again went over to the old one: before them and the barbarians combined Constantine fell, and soon after paid for his attempt with his life.

The result, then, was that Honorius restored his authority to a certain extent everywhere on the Continent, but not in Britain. To the towns which had taken up arms while Constantine was there he gave the right of self-defence—he could



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do nothing for them. The Roman Empire was not exactly overthrown in Britain—it ceased to be<sup>1</sup>.

At this time, when the connexion between Rome and Roman Britain was broken off, the Germans possessed themselves of the latter country.

### *The Anglo-Saxons and Christianity.*

Germans had been long ago settled in this as in so many other provinces of the Western and Eastern Empires. Antoninus had brought over German tribes from the Danube, Probus others from the Rhineland. In the legions we find German cohorts, and very many others joined them as free allies. In the civil wars between the Emperors we hear of one side relying on the Franks, the other on the Alemanni in their service; Constantine the Great is called to be Caesar by help of the chiefs of the Alemanni. But besides this, German seafarers, who appeared under the name of Saxons, after they had learnt shipbuilding and navigation from the Romans, settled on the opposite coasts of Britain and Gaul, and gave their name to both. Not then for the first time, nor at the invitation of the Britons, as the Saga declares<sup>2</sup>, did the descendants of Wodan make their first trial of the sea in light vessels. Alternating between piracy and alliance—now with a usurper and now with the lawful Emperor, between independence and subjection, German seafarers had long ago filled all seas and coasts with the terror of their name. In the North too they are mentioned together with Scots and Attacotti. When now the Roman rule over the island and the surrounding seas came to an end, to whom could it pass? To the peaceful Provincials, if they could indeed gird on the

<sup>1</sup> Βρεττανίαν μόντοι οἱ Ῥωμῆιοι ἀναλώσασθαι οὐκέτι ἔσχον, ἀλλ' ὄσα ὑπὸ τυράννοισ ἀπ' αὐτοῦ ἔμενε. Procop. de bello Vand. I. No. 2. p. 318 ed. Bonn. Compare Zosimus, vi. 4. on, we may assume, the better authority of Olympiodorus.

<sup>2</sup> The simplest form of the Saga occurs in Gildas, with very few historical ingredients. Nennius enlarges it with Anglo-Saxon traditions. Beda has combined both with some notices from the real history. Since the departure of the Romans was rightly fixed about 409, and Gildas said the Britons had rest for forty years, Beda settled that the Saxons arrived in 449.

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I. I.

*AND CHRISTIANITY.*

II

sword, or to the old companions in arms of the Romans? There is no doubt that the same general impulse which urged on the German peoples, in the great revolution of affairs, into the Roman provinces, led the enterprising inhabitants of the German and Northern coasts, Frisians, Angles, and Jutes, as well as Saxons, into Britain. A fearful war broke out, in which it may be true to say the ruined towns became the sepulchres of their inhabitants, but no man found the quiet time necessary for depicting its details. After it had filled a century and a half with its horrors, and men again lifted up their eyes, they found the island divided between two great nationalities, which had separated themselves as opposing forces. The natives had as good as abandoned the civilisation they had learnt from Rome, and leant on their kinsfolk in North Gaul, and the Scots in Ireland and the Highlands; they occupied the west of the island. The Germans were settled in the east, in the greatest part of the south, and in the north, in most of the old Roman settlements,—but they were far from forming a united body. Not seven or eight merely, but a large number of little tribal kingdoms, occupied or fought for the ground.

If we wish to point out in general the distinction between the Anglo-Saxon and other German settlements, it lies in this, that they rested neither on the Emperor's authorisation whether direct or indirect, nor on any agreement with the natives of the land. In Gaul Chlodwig assumed and carried on the authority of the Roman Empire;—in Britain it went wholly to the ground. Hence it was that here the German ideas could develop in their full purity, more so than in Germany itself, over which the Frankish monarchy, which had also adopted Roman tendencies, had gained influence.

Just as the natives who would not submit were driven out of the German settlements, so within their boundaries the germs of Christianity, which had already spread in the island, were as good as annihilated. Among the victorious Germans the Northern heathenism existed in full strength. In many names of places, at the water-springs, the watersheds, in the designations of the days of the week, the names of the gods of Germany and the North appear; the kings trace their descent directly from them as their immediate ancestors;