

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Overview

This book is about Britain, and the people who dwelt there, between about 500 and 1000. At this stage Britain was not thought of as the basis of a shared nationality or government: it was an island that contained numerous distinct groups with different languages and ways of life, as well as strong views of their own history and ethnicity. Its population was a small fraction of what it is now, with precious few towns, and most people devoted their time to producing food from land and livestock. Resources and education were distributed very unevenly according to status and gender – and justice, too, was rough and often slow and imbalanced. By modern standards, early medieval Britain was in many ways a very harsh place. Nonetheless, its people had much to take pride and interest in. They would have seen important changes going on around them as a sequence of new kingdoms took shape, and as Christianity came to be a force at all levels of society. They would have learnt their place in that society, and in the world at large, by swapping stories and poems. At times they would also have seen new immigrants enter their community, or been migrants themselves, or adopted – either bit by bit or by a sudden leap – a whole new identity, taking on new customs and languages in the process. They would have been conscious of several intersecting layers and kinds of belonging, from families and localities upwards to kingdoms and a religious community that spanned the whole continent. All of this is interesting partly because of what it sets up – most obviously, the modern nations of England, Scotland and Wales as cultural and/or political entities – but the early Middle Ages are also interesting in themselves, as an era of possibility and change in Britain without regard for outcomes that lay centuries in the future. This book seeks to show how the latter approach can challenge and enrich the former.



## 1.2 Cathróe's Journey

Around the year 940, a Christian holy man living in Scotland decided to forsake his homeland and go on pilgrimage (see Map 1.1). This was not a targeted there-and-back-again sort of trip, but rather the adoption of a pilgrim lifestyle: he became a wanderer for the sake of religion. Cathróe, as this holy man was called, would travel far, and end



Map 1.1 Cathróe's journey, showing known or likely stopping points (drawn by the author).

up as revered master of an abbey near Metz in France. After his death, one of Cathróe's devoted monks wrote the story of his life, dwelling in particular on his long journey from Scotland to France. It began with a trip in the opposite direction, to the prestigious Irish monastery of Armagh, where the young Cathróe received his training. After a number of years back in Scotland, he set off south. The patchwork of kingdoms Cathróe moved through shows both the diversity of Britain's cultural and political landscape at this time, and the connectivity that bound it together. The king of Alba, Constantine/Constantín II (900–43), tried to dissuade Cathróe from leaving, while in the kingdom of Strathclyde the holy man was met and feted by a relative of his, King Donald. Next he was conducted to a place called *Loidam* (probably Penrith in the Leath ward of Cumberland), on the boundary of the kingdom of the 'Northmen', or vikings, centred on York, where Cathróe met the local king Erik (d. 954), who was wedded to yet another of his relatives. Finally, he travelled south through England, ending up at London. After saving the city from fire by calling down divine intervention, he was taken to Winchester to meet Edmund, king of the English (939–46), and then was guided by the archbishop of Canterbury to Lympe in Kent, where he finally boarded a ship bound for France. Cathróe would never return to Britain.

This long journey had taken Cathróe through four kingdoms. Along the way he might well have heard at least five languages being spoken: ancestors, respectively, of Gaelic in Scotland, Cumbric (similar to Welsh) in Strathclyde, Icelandic/Norwegian in York and English in England, plus Latin, which would have been known to monks and priests across Britain. He had encountered representatives of most of the major cultural and political groups who lived in early medieval Britain, among them Anglo-Saxons, Britons or Welsh, Scots and Scandinavians. Some of the kingdoms in which he met them were, or soon would be, in open conflict, and two of them would in time be subsumed by others: York by England, and Strathclyde by Scotland. None of this, however, impeded the progress of a respected and well-connected holy man. Common religious devotion and shared values (at least among the religious and secular elite) guaranteed a degree of harmony even between rivals.

Cathróe's travels introduce several themes that will recur across this book. He moved between a multitude of kingdoms, in which different languages were spoken. Political and cultural plurality was a hallmark of Britain throughout the early Middle Ages. In 500, the island's component parts were (to us) nebulous but probably very fragmented, and often looked back to the units of government in Roman Britain. This was the era known in English historiography as the heptarchy (that is, a division into seven kingdoms), and although this designation highlights the granular nature of early English politics, there probably never were exactly seven kingdoms. By 1000, the landscape had simplified, and included early forms of some entities that persisted through the rest of the Middle Ages and beyond – most notably, England and Scotland. Wales is a slightly more complicated case, as it consisted of several distinct kingdoms well after 1000 and

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was only brought together as a lasting political unit through English overlordship later in the Middle Ages, but in terms of culture and language it had a strongly defined character by 1000 as well.

In an important sense, therefore, this period attracts attention as one of foundations. We can see in it the first emergence of some of the identities and political structures that still comprise modern Britain. This is an important part of the story, and has traditionally been seen as the most significant part. Even within the centuries covered by this book, people were conscious of an important transformation in the structure of Britain after the end of Roman rule, and traced their ancestry (or at least that of their rulers) to the murky years soon after its collapse. Interest in tracing origins from this period has never gone away; books on early medieval Britain with titles along the lines of ‘The Making of England/Scotland’ continue to be published. Approaches of this kind are described by historians as ‘teleological’: they work towards a known end, and are constructed to show how and why steps towards that end came about. This has exercised a positively magnetic effect on history-writing for millennia, for the past is the creation of the present, and so the direct explanation and justification of that present has a natural attraction.

But to view the history of the early Middle Ages as the root age of modern society is to tell only one story – a tale of the triumphant early evolution of embryonic yet precocious kingdoms, still fuzzy around the edges, that would in time blossom into ‘nations’. It is possible to look back in other ways. There is an inherent interest to the early Middle Ages, in part because they necessitate a conceptual reconfiguration of Britain and its people. They make the familiar unfamiliar. Some aspects of them may well seem very puzzling on first acquaintance. That is one reason why this book will pay particularly close attention to how we know about the early Middle Ages. Historians of all periods work closely with their sources, but early medievalists even more so because of the challenges their sources pose. They have to cast a wide net and use a variety of archaeological, landscape and linguistic evidence, as well as written narratives and documents. Texts are few, unfortunately, and frequently written with a strong agenda, or within the confines of a particular genre, meaning that they do not readily answer all the questions historians put to them (Chapter 6). It is, as a result, necessary to read them against the grain from time to time; that is, to ask questions of sources contrary to those for which they were written. In the context of early medieval Britain, thinking in terms of the island as a whole, rather than a collection of gestating later kingdoms, is an exercise in reading against the grain. It is a way to vary the teleological focus on England and Scotland, and to think about the paths not taken, for instance in the form of kingdoms or groups that have not survived. What about (to take an example from Cathróe’s journey) the kingdoms of Strathclyde and York, which were important in the tenth century, but have long since vanished? Does their disappearance mean they fell short in some way on the path to nationhood, and are less worthy of historians’ attention? There are

also vast sectors of society that we do not hear about. Cathróe's peregrinations took him from one high-status male to another. The only woman we meet directly in the story (Erik of York's wife) is not even given a name: she is only referred to because she happened to be the relative of one man and the wife of another. This is of course a skewed vision of the world the holy man moved through. Cathróe would have seen plenty of peasants and slaves, and women, while even the court that surrounded the king would have been a diverse body, in which wives and mothers were powerful figures. We hear little about the differences in custom, language or religious observance that Cathróe could have noticed, for such points seldom register in literature of this kind. To hear some of these other voices, other kinds of source will be required.

This book is like Cathróe's trip in that it moves through Britain, considering how its different parts and peoples interacted with each other, or occasionally with groups outside the island. Sometimes we will dwell in more detail on a specific region, individual or institution, for too much moving around can be draining and confusing. Unlike Cathróe's travels, however, another principal concern is to think about what was going on behind the scenes. On one level that means confronting the limitations of our sources. What are they? What problems do they present? This matters for all periods of history, but in this case it requires especially close attention. Partly this is because the distribution of the kinds of resources historians are traditionally most comfortable with is highly uneven. Precious little in terms of historical texts or records survives from what is now Scotland in this period, for example, meaning that everything from its high politics downwards needs to be reconstructed from later and external sources. As might be expected, this is a serious challenge, akin to putting together a jigsaw using only a few pieces that could in fact come from several different puzzles. Conversely, a great deal is known about northern England in the late seventh and early eighth centuries because of a remarkable cluster of Latin histories and saint's lives, while western and southern England in the tenth century are very well covered by documents and records of diverse kinds. The difficulty here is getting a grip on how such sources need to be read, for histories, chronicles and charters were written according to rules and expectations particular to their own time and genre. This does not mean we cannot trust them, but it does mean we need to ask the right questions in order to get useful answers. It also means that, in addition to contemporary texts and records, we must call on source material that may be less familiar from studying other periods of history. Language itself can be an important guide, including that preserved in the British landscape's many place names (see chapters 15 and 17). Literary texts can be a valuable window on to how people thought, even if not straightforwardly concerned with history as such. Physical survivals from the period are critically important, too: archaeological excavations of graves or settlements; artefacts of many kinds; the topography of divisions in the landscape; standing buildings; and books written in the period.

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All of this gives early medieval history a very distinctive flavour. This diversity is one of the attractions. It requires us to think in a very agile way, and allows new and stimulating connections to be made by putting pottery remains alongside Welsh poetry, or Scandinavian place names and burials alongside an Old English chronicle. The result is a highly varied intellectual texture.



### 1.3 The Land and Kingdoms of Britain

One essential preliminary is to get a feel for the basic shape of the area in question: Britain, in a form very distant from that of modern times. Chapter 2 will look in more detail at the concept of Britain, and reflect on how applicable it is to think in terms of Britain as a unit at various points over this period. For now, it is important only to stress that early medieval men and women thought of 'Britain' in much the same way that modern inhabitants of Britain, France or Germany might think of 'Europe', with all the conceptual fuzziness the term entails. They might mean the geographical body of Europe, or a looser idea of European cultural identity, perhaps to be compared with others around the globe. 'Europe' might alternatively be shorthand for the (political-economic) European Union, even though it contains only half the geographical area of Europe. Britain in the early Middle Ages could likewise mean a number of different things. The Welsh saw themselves as the original and rightful Britons, and harboured a sense that the English (or, as they and Gaelic-speakers called them, the Saxons) were temporary and unwelcome interlopers, even after they had been a fact of life for five centuries. A poet in north Wales in the tenth century wrote a poem in which he called for the separate kingdoms of Wales and northern Britain to unite, drive out the English and reclaim Britain for the Britons. At around the same time, English kings were, for their part, asserting overlordship of all Britain. Everyone at this point wanted to think in terms of the island as a larger arena, with very different ideas of who should be its master. At other times there is little evidence that mastery of Britain mattered at all, and it was by no means the only frame of reference with which the inhabitants of the island could fit themselves into larger constellations of identity. If they turned their minds to religion, they could think of themselves as part of a much larger community of Christians centred on Rome and Constantinople. If inhabitants of parts of Scotland, Wales and north-west England thought of language and economic ties, Ireland might have seemed a lot more important than the rest of Britain. For settlers of Scandinavian extraction, connections with the homeland across the North Sea might loom larger than links to other parts of Britain. Britain was, in short, a concept that could be picked up, put down and remoulded as individual circumstances dictated, and it could carry multiple meanings at the same time. It was just one of many larger geographical and cultural configurations that mattered, and the seas that surrounded the island could connect as well as divide.

Within Britain was an array of smaller groups and polities. The shape and make-up of these will be the subject of several later chapters (7–10), but the point that needs to be underlined here is diversity. There was no one blueprint for early medieval political or cultural units that claimed autonomy either actively or implicitly. Some, like England towards the end of this period, were comparatively durable, and could sustain severe trauma without coming apart at the seams. Others were fissile, like the expanded kingdoms welded together by individual rulers from Gwynedd, Mercia and Northumbria between the fifth and ninth centuries. Personal bonds mattered a great deal in all cases, for it was through these that rulers commanded loyalty and support. Religious structures were also crucial, from the churches that provided routine ministry to the bulk of the populace, to bishoprics that oversaw this process and mediated with rulers, and monasteries that held the relics of popular saints and attracted pilgrims from far and wide. All of these generated allegiances that might or might not interface with secular organisation at various levels. Political configurations in particular could undergo rapid and substantial change. It can be difficult to decide whether some configurations constitute the merging of kingdoms, as with the case of Welsh and Scottish rulers who attended the court of English kings in the tenth century. Most scholars would be hesitant to accept that this made their territories into parts of England; rather, they formed part of a looser sphere of English political supremacy. Subordination and allegiance did not necessarily mean incorporation, at least immediately, and one needs to bear this in mind when thinking of cases we know did form the basis of permanent association.

It is usually taken for granted that states meant kingdoms in this period, and that high-level statecraft was synonymous with kingship [Figure 1.1]. A labyrinthine undergrowth of local, Roman and biblical tradition supported the ideology and practice of kingship (Chapter 11). The position of king and its aura mattered deeply to contemporaries. In modern times it also carries connotations of sovereignty: legal and political self-determination. Things were rather looser in the early Middle Ages. Not all kings were created equal, and formally recognising the superiority of another ruler did not necessarily undermine a king's position within his own territory. That said, changes in the relationship between kingdoms meant that some kings might, at least in the eyes of their overlords, no longer be kings at all. In this way a king might cease to be 'king' but remain in power. It should be noted that there were also examples of lands in this period that were not ruled by kings, and that for most of the population, the king would have been a relatively distant figure, his decrees mediated through layers of more local power that could just as well operate on their own. The same was true of religion: most people would have had much more to do with the nearest centre of regular Christian worship and offices than the local bishop. As the historian Wendy Davies put it, the early Middle Ages was a mosaic of 'small worlds', typically no larger than a modern county and often much smaller: a few adjacent such territories constituted the main frame of reference for local communities.<sup>1</sup> Worries and relationships at this

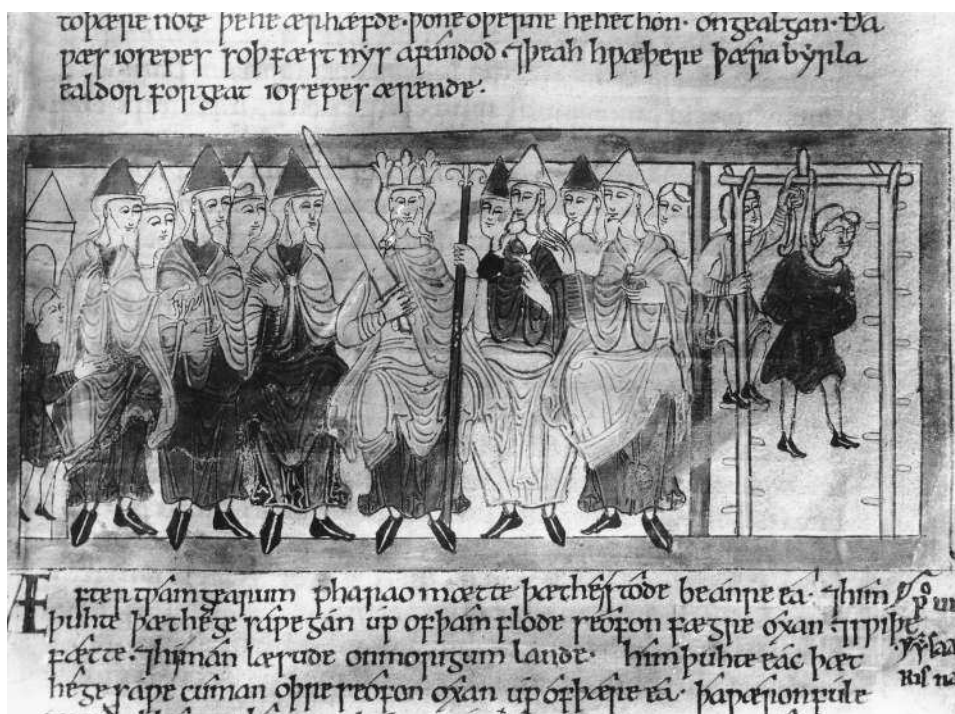


Figure 1.1 An early eleventh-century scene of a king and his councillors dispensing justice. This early eleventh-century scene of a king meting out justice – notice the man being hanged to the right – is in fact supposed to be the Egyptian pharaoh. However, he is represented in the style of a contemporary Anglo-Saxon ruler. From London, British Library, Cotton Claudius B.IV, f. 59 r (the ‘Old English Hexateuch’).

level mattered deeply. Meetings for people of substance within each territory (typically meaning those who were male, of sufficient status and also often in possession of land) provided a setting not just for hammering out quarrels and hearing communiqués from on high, but also for showing off to one’s peers and indulging in other kinds of network-building. Broadly speaking, the wealthier and higher-status elements of the population had a greater degree of mobility, and news and gossip about the outside world were keenly devoured in ‘small worlds’. But it is well to remember that even one of the greatest scholars of this period, the Venerable Bede (672/3–735) – a monk and priest – lived out most of his life in the immediate environs of his monastery at Sunderland, and may never have travelled further away than York. His wider world was that of books and letters.

Living so close to the landscape meant that average early medieval Britons would have been rather more aware of its physicality than their average twenty-first-century counterparts. Most, indeed, would have made a living directly from the land by one means

1. W. Davies, *Small Worlds: The Village Community in Early Brittany* (Duckworth, 1988).



or another. The pathways, fields, hills and rivers of a person's locality would be known intimately – and a deluge of Anglo-Saxon charter boundary clauses vividly demonstrate how minute that knowledge might be, extending to precise descriptions of individual tree stumps, ditches and hedges. Some can still be followed to this day (see Chapter 15). At a thousand years' remove, it is on the basis of such texts (combined with archaeological and scientific resources) that we must build up a picture of what early medieval Britain actually looked like. It emerges that this was a very different landscape in some ways, and strikingly familiar in others. There were comparatively few people, though they were quite spread out: what was missing were the great, sprawling cities of modern times, and the infrastructure that connects them (see Chapter 14). In the countryside, the pattern of paths, streams and cultivation would have been more recognisable; in fact, in some areas there has been considerable continuity in the general layout of the land since at least this period.



## 1.4 Peoples and Places

This chapter so far has used the words 'England' and 'Scotland' to describe the largest kingdoms that had emerged in Britain by the tenth century. Each was the ancestor of its later medieval and modern namesake. But acquaintance with this period will quickly show how much names and languages matter: they reflect underlying assumptions about what a person, place or period means historically. And because the early Middle Ages is thought of as an age of origins, names and labels that go back to this time need to be handled with particular care. In the case of England and Scotland, using these terms is a trade-off: one gains simplicity at the expense of buying implicitly into a national origin story. To call these kingdoms by the same name as their modern descendants is to acknowledge, albeit subtly, a connection with later developments – and while this may be perfectly acceptable, and indeed important in some respects, in others it can be decidedly misleading. Neither England nor Scotland occupied quite the same territory as its modern counterpart or was configured in the same way, with a clear capital, exact borders and integrated regions. Much of northern England, and northern and western Scotland, was never really incorporated into either kingdom during the centuries covered here. The name Scotland is an especially revealing case. In the seventh and eighth centuries, *Scotti* referred (in Latin) to speakers of Irish and Gaelic, and *Scotia* was anywhere they lived – so Ireland as well as parts of what is now western Scotland. It was only from around 900 that the dominant kingdom of central Scotland started to take on a new identity, founded on a new name (*Alba*, an Irish and Gaelic word meaning 'Britain') and a wider uptake of the Gaelic language. Long after this period, in the twelfth to fourteenth centuries, historians in Scotland constructed a narrative that put the 'Scottish' (i.e. Gaelic-speaking) dynasty of the period centre stage and grafted it on to the kingdom's earlier Irish-related element. This enabled them to craft a more

coherent national identity, one that emphasised its ‘Scottish’ element’s success over the Picts and others. As we will see in Chapter 10, it is likely that virtually the opposite was true, and that Alba was a reimagined version of a larger, older Pictish kingdom that had overshadowed and absorbed the Gaelic-speaking kingdoms of Dál Riata.

This is not to say that ‘Scotland’ (or ‘England’) should be abandoned when dealing with this period, and they will be used in this volume as helpful points of reference. But it is necessary to keep in mind how the kingdoms have evolved since the first millennium. Alba, along with the kingdom of Alclud (‘Clyde Rock’ or Dumbarton) and the earldom of Bamburgh, is in fact unusual in being named for a geographical feature: most kingdoms of this age were named after peoples, such as the Angles who gave their name to England, or the Venedoti who gave their name to Gwynedd in Wales. At the same time, there was generally a strong idea of where a people’s territory lay. ‘People’ is another problematic word. It is not quite as politically freighted as ‘kingdom’, for many peoples were not kingdoms and many kingdoms contained more than one people. It also does not carry as much unwelcome baggage as ‘tribe’, which is sometimes used to describe looser communities founded on face-to-face ties and kinship rather than more abstracted forms of loyalty. Most polities of early medieval Britain were significantly larger and more sophisticated than that, though the term can be helpful for thinking about the operation of smaller groups. Quite a number of units present their own special interpretative problems (like *Scotti*). ‘Viking’ is another chestnut. It is not clear whether the word denotes an activity or an ethnicity, leading to some authors preferring ‘vikings’ over ‘Vikings’ – and in any case, the term was used rarely in early medieval Britain, and has gained widespread currency only since the eighteenth century (see also Chapter 10). It was also entirely possible to belong to multiple peoples simultaneously: most of the larger kingdoms later absorbed into England (Essex, Mercia, Wessex, etc.) were themselves based on the name of a people (East Saxons, Mercians and West Saxons, respectively), and in turn contained many smaller peoples who had been subsumed into the larger collective. Chapters 5, 7 and 8 will pick up this thread; for the moment, it is important simply to state that peoples provided a vital touchstone of identity, sometimes closely tied to the ‘small worlds’ that shaped the experience of so many early medieval men and women, sometimes to major kingdoms, and to everything in between. Concepts of belonging and identity therefore make a particularly rich subject in the early Middle Ages.



## 1.5 Rethinking ‘the Middle Ages’

What images are conjured by the early Middle Ages? Brooding, gritty heroes who stand on the prow of a longship; ancient mystery and magic, exemplified by misty landscapes and ruins; wild-eyed holy men and women who preach fire and brimstone on the frontier of civilisation [Figures 1.2, 1.3 and 1.4]. This is an impression owed in large part