Introduction

History

The Question

In Brest, at the far end of Brittany, on winter mornings, people go to work in the pitch dark. They keep the same time as Paris and Berlin, but their city is further west than most of Britain, where the clocks are set an hour earlier. It is a concrete illustration of the uneasy way in which Brittany, a long, low, folded peninsula of granite and slate, about the same size as Wales, fits into the centralised, Continental power that is modern France.¹

It is 592 km to Brest from Paris, France’s capital; for Parisians the capital cities of Belgium, the Netherlands and England are considerably closer. To the modern urban French and British holidaymaker, Brittany, with its spectacular indented coastline and mild maritime climate, is an attractive destination, laced with colourful Celtic folklore and spirituality. Before the twentieth century, the stereotype was different. As Maryon McDonald remarks tartly, ‘whatever France has seen, or wished to see, in its provinces, Brittany has been felt to have more of it’.²

These perceived qualities include physical remoteness; a population more scattered and more predominantly rural than the average; and conservative social attitudes, including an often-caricatured Catholic piety, combined with a tendency to be in revolt, usually in favour of an older cause against a newer one. Bretons took the Catholic side in the Wars of Religion (1562–98), rebelled against central fiscal impositions in the Révolte du papier timbré in 1675, and fought for the monarchy

¹ Clear introductions to the physical geography of Brittany may be found in Galliou and Jones, The Bretons, 5–7; W. Davies, Small Worlds, 29–35. The best general introduction to the history of Brittany in English is Galliou and Jones, The Bretons (prehistory to 1532); in French, Cornette, Histoire.
² McDonald, We Are Not French!, 4.
against the Republic in 1792–1800. Some historians even trace this tendency as far back as the *Bacaudae*, western Gaulish rebels against the Roman state, in late antiquity.

However, the difficulty with Brittany was not merely its perceived backwardness and resistance to centrally imposed ‘progress’: its difference went deeper. Linguistically, Brittany belongs less to France than to the western Insular world. Breton, a ‘P’-Celtic language, is closely related to Cornish and Welsh, and more distantly to ‘Q’-Celtic Irish, Scottish and Manx Gaelic, all these being relicts of the Celtic languages that in the pre-Roman Iron Age were spoken across Europe, until they were replaced by Latin and its descendants (including French) in the lands of the Western Roman Empire, and Germanic and Slavonic languages elsewhere. By the central Middle Ages Brittany’s ruling class was French-speaking, but in western Brittany Breton remained the majority first language into the twentieth century. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the Paris government, convinced that inability to speak French was an obstacle to citizenship, attempted to suppress Breton; ironically, the language survived these efforts but is now threatened by the homogenising effects of the mass media and globalisation, even as official weight is thrown behind its preservation.

Breton as a first language may be under threat, but for a millennium and a half it has been the most inescapable evidence for the connection between Brittany and western Britain. For much of prehistory, the Breton peninsula was a cultural highway between mainland Europe and the Atlantic archipelago, but the establishment of an Insular Celtic language in the peninsula was the product of a particular historical moment.

The flux that accompanied the end of the Western Roman Empire between AD 400 and 600 gave rise to Brittany, in a process as obscure as it is tantalizing to the historian. In the middle of the fifth century the lights went down, so to speak, on a disintegrating north-western sector of the Empire. When they went up again – briefly – a century later, the westernmost part of what had been the province of Gaul had a new language, a new name and a new identity: *Britannia*, later *Britannia Minor*. Even as ‘English’ language and identity replaced Brittonic in Britain’s lowland zone, and in Gaul the Frankish monarchy set out on its path as the most effective of Rome’s heirs, a large area of Gaul had been relabelled as ‘Britain’: a designation it has kept ever since, even though politically it has usually (and since 1532 definitively)
been aligned with its French neighbours. The migration from Britain that must have caused this change was not confined to Brittany. Groups of Britons, who have been termed ‘Britons of the dispersal’, were recognisable in various parts of Gaul in late Roman and post-Roman times; and a British colony in north-western Spain had a bishop of its own until the early eighth century. These migrant groups, however, did not maintain their ‘Britishness’ in the long term: the Bretons did.

This book is about the medieval connection between Brittany and the islands of Britain and Ireland – how it may have been created, how it was kept in being and how it was explained between the fall of Rome and the zenith of the Middle Ages. The authors have not set out to write a comprehensive history of Brittany and the Bretons over this period, or a comparative history of politics and society in Brittany and in its ‘parent’ societies of western Britain. The materials for such a history are too uneven, and the basis for comparison too insecure. While some periods – especially the first three quarters of the ninth century – are well recorded in Brittany, in others it is impossible to trace even a basic framework of events. However, the cross-Channel connection is a recurring theme that links these disparate periods. By focusing on the connection itself, its successive renewals, and the resulting changes in Bretons’ understanding of their own past, some additional light may be shed on the societies that were thus connected.

The formation of Brittany holds particular interest because it blurs the grand narrative of the ‘end of the Roman empire’. The story of early medieval Europe is that of kingdoms, ruled by barbarian dynasties, which divided the Empire’s spoils. The successor-kingdoms took on the names and identities of incoming, mostly Germanic-speaking peoples: Franks, Goths, Burgundians, Lombards, Angles, Saxons and others. The formation of these peoples, with their ability to subsume disparate elements, including their much more numerous hosts, the Roman provincials – a process labelled ethnogenesis – has been the object of intense study among a generation of historians. But in Britain the inhabitants of

6 For a brief account of the events surrounding the 1532 union of Brittany with France, see Galliou and Jones, The Bretons, 247–52.
7 WAB, 57–9; Young, ‘The Bishops’, and references.
8 For this process, see for instance Anton, ‘Antike Großländer’.
9 The understanding that early medieval ethnic identity was flexible and constructed, not biologically or culturally inherited and immutable, is a lasting contribution of Reinhard Wenskus and subsequently the ‘Vienna school’ of post-Roman studies represented by Herwig Wolfram and Walter Pohl, although the early theory that a Traditionskern (a core of oral tradition preserved by leading families) was fundamental to such construction has been criticised. See, for example, Pohl, ‘Ethnicity’ and Pohl, ‘Introduction: Strategies of Distinction’.
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A former Roman province, the Brittones, preserved their own name; and in Brittany this people made territorial gains, founding an extensive new ethnic and (eventually) political unit, something that elsewhere in Europe was achieved only by invading barbarian armies. They certainly underwent great changes in political organisation and in self-perception in the immediate post-Roman centuries— not least under the influence of their sixth-century historian, Gildas, the earliest post-Roman scholar to give a formerly Roman people a dedicated history of its own. To an extent, this transformed and long-lasting sense of Britishness involved Britons being redefined as barbarians instead of Romans. And in Brittany, ‘Britishness’ subsumed the Gallo-Roman host population. This was ethno-genesis of a kind. Were the Gallo-Roman inhabitants of Brittany persuaded to ‘become British’ by the success or prestige of a non-Roman, British identity, introduced by British immigrants? Did the incoming Britons, like the Franks or the Goths, present themselves as a military elite with a noble past, able to provide the leadership in which Rome’s emperors had failed? Or did they prevail by some other dynamic? We are left guessing, since there are no contemporary accounts of the formation of Brittany. Gildas did not mention it, although it must have been taking recognisable shape while he was writing of the ‘Ruin of Britain’. Not until the ninth century do we find historians trying to explain, in long retrospect, how the Bretons had got there. This example of the transformation of part of the Roman world by migrants who were themselves originally Roman remains obscure. We have no clear answers even to the most basic questions about the British migrants to Brittany: why, when, how, how many, or from what parts of Britain they came.

The reaction of most historians who have dealt with early Brittany since the 1960s has been to normalise it as best they can by suggesting that the migration was an iteration of the long prehistory of communication along the Atlantic coasts of Europe from the Neolithic era onwards. This

11 This has been suggested by Woolf, ‘British Ethno-genesis’; the issue is examined in Hustwit, ‘The Britons’, esp. 27–30.
15 Halsall, Barbarian Migrations, 488–97 and references.
16 The consensus has tended to be that migrants came from the southern half of Britain and probably from the south-west peninsula and Wales, although Raude, L’origine, and Kerneis, Les Céliques, have argued for a northern origin for all or some of them.
17 In particular, Fleuriot, Les origines, 13–20; Bowen, Saints, Seaways, 35–8, 79.
point is certainly worth making but does not sufficiently highlight the exceptional nature of Breton migration in its historical context. Both under the Roman Empire, and again from the seventh century onwards, most of the visible trade and communication in western Europe was across the eastern English Channel and the North Sea and along the Rhine–Rhône axis, not along the Atlantic coast. The rise of the land-based Roman Empire had turned the bulk of Europe’s economic activity away from the Atlantic, and this pattern would persist until the end of the Middle Ages – and indeed until modern times, when the dorsale européenne identified by Roger Brunet in 1989, a belt of dense population and urbanism extending from Manchester to Milan, still coincides strikingly with the Rhineland frontier zone of the late Western Roman Empire and the Trier–Milan imperial axis created by Diocletian. Only between the late fifth and seventh centuries did the Atlantic trade-routes temporarily regain importance. The revitalised connection between Brittany and the Atlantic archipelago in the early Middle Ages took place on the blind side of the ‘main’ course of European events. It was made possible by a temporary and radical ‘de-centring’ of western Europe during a century or more of extreme political volatility. It involved little archaeologically visible exchange, and is seen only in intangible aspects of culture like language, place-names and religious cults, yet in these respects the results were permanent.

It is partly in order to emphasise this process of ‘de-centring’ that we have chosen to refer to ‘the Atlantic Archipelago’ in our title, rather than ‘the British Isles’ or ‘the Insular world’. The intention is to avoid thinking of these islands as necessarily either a unified culture-zone over against the Continent, or a stable system in which cultural and political initiatives diffused predictably from south-east to north-west, from the Continent to the British lowlands, then to the highland zone and Ireland. In the centuries following the end of the Roman Empire, no such pattern was evident. When the Roman frontiers that had artificially divided the islands for centuries were breached, movements took place in any and all directions. The Irish Sea became a highway: incomers from Ireland wrought far-reaching changes in western Britain and the Irish were to be notable cultural protagonists both in Britain and on the

19 Campbell, Continental and Mediterranean Imports.
22 For the inadequacies of such a ‘core/periphery’ model see Lampitt, ‘Networking the March’, 8–13 (accessed 27 May 2020).
Continent until the ninth century at least. While the ‘Picts’ built kingdoms in the north on recycled Roman silver, eastern Britain was reconfigured by groups including invaders and migrants from across the North Sea. Barely had these changes bedded down when another group of invaders, the Vikings, arrived from the further north. Seen from this direction, the multiplicity of islands in the archipelago took on more importance, the northern and western isles not vanishing into oceanic remoteness but acting as strategic stepping stones to the larger islands of the south. The isles were, at least temporarily, a true archipelago, a polycentric waterworld. Into this context fits migration from Britain to Brittany and the long-standing contacts it established. We aim to understand the extent to which Brittany both did and did not belong to this world.

It has been tempting for historians to draw analogies between Brittany and those other western peninsulas, Wales and Cornwall, but in many ways its geopolitical situation was very different. A clue to how it was perceived is found in sources which describe it explicitly as a refuge. The Insular Celtic peoples were caught in the political maelstrom of the post-Roman Atlantic Archipelago, while Brittany was slightly but crucially removed from it. Instead of almost continuous aggression from neighbouring kingdoms, Brittany endured only occasional interference and long periods of indifference from its Frankish neighbour. This may partly explain why in some respects early medieval Brittany seems just as different from its ‘parent’ societies in Celtic Britain as from England or Francia. The lack of archaeological evidence for a ruling elite or a wealthy church-establishment, and the unusual weakness of structures of lordship seen in ninth-century land documents; comparative slowness in developing a sense of ethnic identity; all this suggests an absence of the pressures and conflicts that shaped what we think of as a typical early medieval society.

However, the unique situation of Brittany, equidistant from two worlds, ended with its capture into the Continental orbit, by the Carolingian rulers’ creation and patronage of a succession of rulers of Brittany in the ninth century. The relationship was interrupted by the Viking Age, during which Brittany again became an extension of the Insular world, but this was an intense but brief crisis which ended in

24 For an overview see Hadley, ‘Viking Raids’.
26 WAB, 72; Brett, ‘In the Margins’.
27 Smith, Province and Empire, 23–31, 119; see Chapter 1.
a quick adjustment to the new political norms of ‘feudal’ France. The fragmentation of the Frankish kingdoms allowed Brittany to engage with its immediate neighbours (Normandy, Maine, Anjou) on (rather) more equal terms than before and thus, for the first time since the fall of Rome, to develop a visible secular elite culture, French rather than British. By contrast, in the Atlantic Archipelago the Viking Age saw some rapprochement between English and Britons, but its legacy was division: between England, politically consolidated and looking towards the Continent, and the Irish Sea zone, including Wales, occupied by unstable polities which faced north and west, where political power was supported by plunder and slave-raiding. The Continent ultimately made its political move into England in the shape of the Norman Conquest, in which Bretons took part on the Norman side, bringing the wheel full circle by coming as colonists to the island from which their remote predecessors had set out. For the next century and a half the dynamic empires of the Norman and Plantagenet kings provided a setting in which the links between Bretons and Insular Britons could be renewed and re-mythologised, but this could not disguise the fact that the Bretons were now on the Continental side of the divide. In 1203 the decision of the Breton nobility to transfer their homage from King John of England to King Philip Augustus of France made this orientation explicit.

Yet despite its political separation from Britain, Brittany, though not ‘in’ the Atlantic Archipelago, was ‘of’ it in terms of language and written culture, aspects of religious practice, landscape and settlement, and much else. All this becomes evident in source-material dating from the ninth century onwards, when Brittany was already beginning the process of assimilation into the Carolingian, then French worlds. The period of Breton history that must have been the most Insular is the period about which least is known. Nevertheless, the British origin of the Bretons was continuously asserted in the Middle Ages, and must have seemed an inescapable fact. Was it told as a stereotyped historical myth founded on a single distant episode? Or was it rather the sign of an ongoing relationship that was the more interesting in that it was not reinforced by obvious political or economic imperatives – partaking instead of the nature of a ‘network’, a new area of interest for medievalists and social

28 See Chapter 5. The term ‘feudal’ is much disputed, but still serves as a convenient shorthand for features of French society in the central Middle Ages such as political decentralisation, the emergence of lordships based on castles, and the self-definition of a knightly class. For a summary of the ‘feudalism’ debate, see Innes, State and Society, 242.
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scientists? As Jonathan Shepard writes, ‘the essence of networks involving humans is that they are voluntary’.30

Explanations

Explanations of the Insular origin of Bretons have taken various forms from the ninth century onwards. These have always walked a tightrope between contradictory priorities: between normalising the Bretons in the eyes of their Christian European neighbours, and insisting on their separateness and cohesion as a people; between celebrating their Insular origins, and distancing them from the more disreputable historical connotations of ‘Britishness’. Even the earliest origin-stories represent rationalisations and, at best, highly partial selections from a complex reality. If modern historians have attempted to smooth over the oddities of the formation of Brittany, and to see it in terms of well-worn paradigms derived from elsewhere in Europe, this is arguably a tradition that goes back to the very earliest writers on Breton origins, in the ninth century, who were already intensely aware of how ‘civilised’ nations interpreted their national origins, and who may well have deliberately ‘forgotten’ untidier local stories in favour of ones with wider appeal.

Throughout Europe, from the early Middle Ages to the early modern period, the agency of a symbolic ancestor-figure was the preferred explanation for national origins. The Lives of a number of founding saints of Breton churches depicted their heroes, individually, as following divine callings to travel from Britain (mostly south Wales) to Brittany. The Welsh historian who compiled the text known as Historia Brittonum in 829 or 830 credited the settlement of Brittany to the British soldiers of the Roman emperor ‘Maximianus’, by which he seems to have meant Magnus Maximus, emperor of Britain, Gaul and Spain from 383 to 388, who became ‘a personified gateway to post-Roman legitimacy’ in medieval Welsh learned tradition.31 In tenth-century Wales, a prophetic poem, Armes Prydein, was composed which introduced a mysterious Cynan as the ancestral representative of the Bretons, part of a British world that stretched, in the poet’s view, ‘from Manaw to Llydaw’ – from the isthmus of Scotland to Brittany.32 Around the millennium, in Brittany itself, a figure called Riwal apparently from south-west Britain was credited with being the founder of Brittany and dated to the early sixth century; but the combination of Maximianus with Cynan (Conan in Breton and Latin)

proved more attractive. It was elaborated by Geoffrey of Monmouth in his brilliantly successful *Historia Regum Britanniae* (History of the Kings of Britain), published in 1137 or 1138.33

Geoffrey created a panoramic pre- and post-Roman British past, partly invented and partly based on Welsh sources. He claimed that in the fourth century, after the reign of the Emperor Constantine, Maximianus, a Roman senator, invaded Gaul with the help of a Briton, Conanus Meriadocus, who established himself as ruler of a new British kingdom and became the ancestor of Arthur and other great kings. Geoffrey's flattering depiction of the Bretons as the heirs to the ancestral British character (uncannily similar to Norman chivalry), and the Welsh as deviants from it, was almost the reverse of the truth. Unsurprisingly, however, his version became canonical for the dukes and leading nobles of later medieval Brittany; it also resonated in vernacular tales and pseudo-history in Wales for the remainder of the Middle Ages, in which, even now, historians search for fragments of 'genuine' tradition. The mythology of Brittany as a refuge where the noblest traditions of the Britons could continue, and an idyllic, other-worldly setting for courtly literature, was developed, while in historic fact Brittany was increasingly integrated into the language, culture and society of northern France.34

By the late Middle Ages, after the traumatic conquest of Wales by the English in 1282–1283, there was no longer any living Insular British polity with which to link the Bretons, nor any particular commonality of interest between the Bretons and the Welsh, now English subjects.35 The continuing relevance – and contentiousness – of Geoffrey's pseudo-history was chiefly that its acceptance would give Bretons an older claim to rule on French soil than the French crown itself. For the late fourteenth-century author of the Chronicle of Saint-Brieuc, the first connected history to be written in and specifically on Brittany, the only contemporary Insular people to matter were the detested English: even so, he based his account of Breton origins on Geoffrey of Monmouth.36 So did Pierre Le Baud in his *Histoire de Bretagne*, written in the late fifteenth century under the patronage of Duchess Anne of Brittany, and Alain Bouchard in the *Grandes Chroniques de Bretaigne*, published in

33 *HRB*, ed. and transl. Reeves and Wright; for concise introduction and bibliography, see Jankulak, *Geoffrey of Monmouth*.
34 Larrington, ‘Brittany in Middle English’.
36 *Paris BnF Lat. 6003* and 8899, partly published in Le Duc and Sterckx (eds.), *Chronicon Briocense*; for authorship, see M. Jones, ‘Memory, Invention’ (accessed 20 March 2018). For Breton ‘national’ historiography in the later Middle Ages, see Kerhervé, ‘Aux origines’.
Controversy raged as the French monarchy tightened its grasp on Brittany: rival Breton and French jurists passionately upheld and as trenchantly attacked the ‘Conan Meriadoc’ story. A new scholarly approach was offered by the Benedictine Congregation of St Maur: the Maurist Dom Guy-Alexis Lobineau (1707) was supported both by the French crown and the Estates of Brittany in writing his *Histoire de Bretagne*, but neither side was pleased when the author upheld the priority of Breton over Frankish settlement in France, while rejecting the historicity of Conan Meriadoc and his royal successors.

With the advent of the ‘scientific history’ pioneered by the Maurists, it seemed that Geoffrey’s account of the origin of Brittany would be consigned to the realm of fiction. But in the same year that Lobineau published his *Histoire*, there appeared Edward Lhuyd’s *Archaeologia Britannica*, the first philological demonstration of the interrelatedness of the Celtic languages. A whole new scholarly underpinning was now available for the notion of Brittany’s Insular origins. Yet this resource was double-edged. The eighteenth-century discovery of the language-groups of Europe eventually fed ethnic nationalism and a belief in unchanging ‘racial’ essences.

The agent of nation-building was no longer thought of as the symbolic royal ancestor but the ‘race’ or ‘people’ with its enduring character. In the next century the Romantic movement fostered a mythology of the ‘Celts’, ‘poetic visionaries ... in touch with the Otherworld and the world of Nature’, qualities that the nineteenth-century urban and secularised centres of Europe felt they had lost. The patriotic Breton historian Arthur de la Borderie made the ‘clan-based’ Breton people the protagonist of his narrative.

Joseph Loth, the author of pioneering studies of early Breton glosses and place-names, responded to La Borderie’s work with the aim of introducing more ‘linguistic rigour’ into the study of British settlement in Brittany. But he, too, fell victim to...