

Celtic whispers: revisiting the problems of the relation between Brittonic and Old English¹

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I have had an interest in the subject matter of this paper for well over half a century. I had a primary-school teacher, an inspiring Welshman with a 1500-year-old ethnic chip on his shoulder. He took the view that the English had cheated the ancestors of the Welsh out of their rightful heritage, namely the whole of England. In this paper, as an Englishman, I intend to atone for any sins of my illegal-immigrant forefathers by reconsidering questions concerning what happened between the Britons and the English, especially in south and east England, in the middle of the first millennium of our era.

Naïve observation tells us that light may come from many different directions. Its different sources may all illuminate an object. But depending on the relative strength of the sources, strong light from one direction will overwhelm the contribution of a weaker one from a different direction, and maybe give the impression that the weaker one contributes hardly more than a shadow. If it is the birth of England which is to be illuminated, then the light to be considered comes from three sources: history (including archaeology), genetics and linguistics. We all know that history used to be about using evidence to ascertain what the facts were – “wie es eigentlich gewesen”, in the often-quoted words of Leopold von Ranke. Since that is the case, written sources purporting to supply historical facts have, for understandable reasons, been given a privileged position as regards the amount of light cast on their subject. The British monk Gildas,² enraged by the immoralities and stupidities of his people and their

¹ The precursor of this paper was read at the symposium of the Philological Society “Language Contact in the West Germanic Languages, 400-1200”, held in Utrecht, The Netherlands, on 15 June 2012, and it has been reworked as a tribute to two fine philological scholars, Professors Greule and Kremer, both of whom are renowned for their interest in the relation between language, names, history and ethnicity, which forms the substance of this paper. The text appearing here is an expanded development of my not formally published professorial inaugural lecture at the University of the West of England, Bristol, delivered on 6 December 2007, “Linguistic light on the birth of England”.

² He was no doubt a monk in Britain; his name, however, does not appear to be British

consequent ruin, says one thing about the English takeover, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (ASC) enshrining the victors' narrative says another, the English monk Bede says something related to what Gildas says, Nennius the Welsh annalist says something different again, even if they all agree on certain core things. Of course, it is a reasonable endeavour for historians to attempt to harmonize their accounts of events. More sceptical ages have questioned the independence, and even more the neutrality, of such sources, and their contribution needs to be subjected to critical analysis. This may result in the acceptance of a rather different historical goal, namely the goal of ascertaining a range of different "takes" on "the way it actually was"; and if "the way it actually was" can be ascertained at all, it needs to be inferred or reconstructed, rather than simply read from the records. That means that other categories of evidence, where inference plays a major role in establishing their contribution, can meet the historical sources without being totally overwhelmed by the light shining from those sources. Linguistic evidence comes in two forms selected as relevant for the present endeavour: the evidence of what generally happens when speakers of different languages come into contact, and the evidence of place-names. Genetic evidence is a new and potentially exciting factor, but its relationship to language and ethnicity can be problematic. Historical population genetics proposes that the geographical distribution of alternative DNA sequences (alleles) that code for some gene can illuminate the ancestry of a given population, and in particular the contribution of different alleged parent populations, though some fancy statistical work may be required, and the results may be subject to differing interpretations. In the long run, the disparate wattage of all these different lights – the historical, the linguistic and the genetic – needs to be calculated and unified.

We English people no longer teach our children the foundation stories of England that people of my age were taught: in fact, it seems that many children learn hardly anything about the past before 1914 at all except the wives of king Henry VIII and dinosaurs. But I was told that my Anglo-Saxon ancestors first came from the eastern North Sea coastal region in the fifth and sixth centuries, and that they did not enter an empty country. Following traditional and classically supported understanding, it was already occupied by Britons, a people speaking Brittonic, the ancestor of Welsh and Cornish. Whether first of all the English were invited by the/a king of the Britons, or whether they just came, is a matter of dispute. What is not disputed is that much of southern Britain

Celtic. See SIMS-WILLIAMS (1984). The name has received no satisfactory explanation in any language, though Sims-Williams allows the suspicion of possible linguistic play in the form of anagrammatology.

rapidly became English-speaking. The point of contention is the way in which this happened. The debate can be crudely polarized in the following way: did the Anglo-Saxons get rid of the Britons, or did the Britons stay and cultivate the land as they always had done, but for new overlords? In terms of the polarity which pervades modern historiography: was there more continuity, or more change? The answer may be different in different places, and it may need to be nuanced, but at least for a part of Britain, the south and east, it is fair to ask the question in its crudest form because the evidence for the survival of Britons there is particularly thin. We shall, however, need to keep in mind the background question of whether the *evidence for Britons*, the people, and the *evidence for Brittonic*, the language, must be the same thing.

If our national, or nationalist, narrative of the Anglo-Saxons' migration to Britain is essentially correct, our problem is then to understand the relations between the two peoples in the crucial period from about 450-600. For a linguist such as myself, there are two striking facts to confront. One is that the English took over a modest but not inconsiderable number of place-names from the Britons, and that they took over more of them the further west and north-west that English dominance proceeded. The second is that they took practically no ordinary vocabulary from Brittonic – the language which is usually attributed to them. The scene that this appears to conjure up suggests that the typical Angle or Saxon warrior, on arrival, asked the locals the name of the place, and on receiving a usable answer, would bury his sword in the source of information. Grim humour aside, from the linguistic perspective I think this is essentially right, in defiance of some more recent and extremely interesting thinking on the matter. A major complication in this traditional understanding is offered by Peter SCHRIJVER's suggestion (2002, 2007) that the human scabbard may have spoken Latin, not Brittonic; this is a matter to which I will return.

Traditional accounts based on the major surviving texts, such as the partly interdependent Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* and *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (ASC), explain English demographic and political progress in terms of three Evils iconically beginning with the letter E: the **expulsion, enslavement and extermination** of Britons.³ This view is held to explain both the relative lack of Brittonic place-names in at least the south-east of England and the general lack of Brittonic lexical borrowings in English: essentially, there were

³ We should bear in mind that Bede used the verb *exterminare* in relation to the English treatment of the Britons, but what he meant depends on our view of his Latin. In the classical language, this word means 'to drive out', as its etymology, involving *terminus* 'boundary', would suggest: driving across some boundary.

no Britons left of sufficient status to be worth exchanging information with. It seems superficially reasonable, and an uncritical assessment of the evidence transmitted from and about these times encourages the idea. Taken at face value, the primary historical record offers explicit evidence for each of the three Es.⁴ Some Britons fled across the English Channel; surviving sources do not make clear whether this happened as a result of panic flight or of controlled **expulsion** by the English. But the Bretons have been in Brittany since the later fifth century, and they are sufficient evidence for the partial emptying of Britain. (I accept the general view among Celticists in rejecting François FALC'HUN's opinion that Breton descends to an interesting degree from Gaulish.) The ASC contains many accounts of massacres of local Britons, and even though this often sounds like the inflated gloating expected from the winning side, ASC mentions too much blood to dismiss the occurrence of extermination in the modern sense out of hand. Old English (OE) offers its own gloss on the process in the shape of the word *wealh*, originally meaning 'speaker of a non-Germanic language; a Briton', and coming to mean 'slave' in legal texts (CAMERON 1979/1980). We cannot avoid the conclusion that this is evidence for the **enslavement** of at least some Britons. Nicholas OSTLER (2005: 313), whilst sharing the traditional view, has speculated that a fourth E might be involved: "it hardly seems possible that anything other than an **epidemic** could have so eliminated the Britons from the ancestry of central England"; an anonymous Latin-writing Welsh annalist living over 400 years later reports plagues in Britain in the critical years 537 and 547, the first of these being precisely the traditional date of the battle of Camlann in which the Briton warlords Arthur and Medraut (whose names are pretty clearly, though disputedly, of Latin origin) are said to have perished. Another E-possibility involves climate change (or at any rate, a longish period of bad weather): **Extreme Environmental conditions**. The palaeoecologist Mike BAILLIE (1995) has provided strong evidence of a severe climatic downturn in Britain beginning in 536 with effects continuing into 545 (compare also DARK 2000: 22-25). These extra possibilities are compatible with the traditional view of the **emptying** of Britain as the English advanced, though of course epidemic and environmental downturn would have opened the invaders to the same level of risk, assuming that malnutrition had not by then already compromised

⁴ Selected evidence for the fate of the Britons according to the ASC: 448 (ASC, MS. F) ... "they turned against ... the Britons and disposed of them by fire and the edge of the sword"; 457 (ASC, MS. A) "Hengest and Æsc fought against the Britons at a place called *Crecganford* and killed 4000 men there. The Britons then abandoned the land of Kent and in great dread fled to the stronghold of London"; 491 (ASC, MS. A) "Ella and Cissa besieged Pevensey, and killed everyone living there; there was not even one Briton left there."

the resilience of the Britons. A less easily fathomable complication in all of the above is whether any expulsion, enslavement and extermination of Britons was sexually discriminatory. If more women than men were “left behind” in any sense, and interbred with the invaders, that adds a layer of complication to the interpretation of some of the genetic studies referred to below. It would predict a skewing of mitochondrial DNA evidence towards British ancestry, and a skewing of Y-chromosomal DNA evidence towards Anglo-Saxon ancestry.

Mainly since 2000, an alternative account of the Anglo-Saxon ascendancy has gained in popularity (e.g. HIGHAM 1994, 2002; WARD-PERKINS 2000; MATTHEWS 2001). This holds that, irrespective of whether they by now spoke Brittonic or Latin, the Britons were not entirely ejected from much of Britain, but continued to form a majority of the population under an Anglo-Saxon military aristocracy. Given more space, I would explore more fully everything that might constitute hard evidence for this: evidence for the perpetuation of farming practices and of other customs (e.g. religious ones), archaeological evidence of continuing Romano-British funerary customs, DNA evidence both from burials and from existing populations, and linguistic evidence from inscriptions on stone and from borrowings of place-names and vocabulary; but in this paper I can do no more than touch on most of these points, and will focus on the linguistic evidence and on its relation to some deductions that have been made from the genetic evidence.

A strong reason for thinking the English did not just take over the land in the conventional military sense, and remove all its inhabitants, seems to be the number-free logistical idea that they just could not have done it: i.e., that either there were not, or could not have been, enough immigrants, or that they could not or would not have displaced practically all the Britons even with large numbers of warriors and camp-followers, and that the countryside could therefore never have been completely emptied by force or by demographic pressure. It is conceivable that archaeological evidence, combined with appropriately interpreted DNA evidence, may eventually show much Brittonic survival, but it is not available yet. Barbara Yorke, already in 1995, went so far as to affirm the numerical dominance of Britons in Wessex, despite the fact that, in her own words, “so far there has been little archaeological evidence to support the contention” (YORKE 1995: 69). The case for possible continuation of religious practices in Wessex has been interestingly set out by Yorke herself (YORKE 1995: 155-165; 177-181). There is an arguable case for continuity of agricultural practice between Britons and Anglo-Saxons, but to differing degrees in differing places, and not one which can yet be safely generalized to the entire country (RIPPON

2000: esp. 57-58). DNA analysis of skeletal material has been patchy and hard to interpret, and we await a fuller suite of burial-site analyses. An early finding in modern population genetics was interpreted as broadly, and strikingly, consistent with the traditional view (WEALE et al. 2002), with evidence for an Anglo-Saxon incursion decreasing from east to west. This study involved the recognition of signatures of Germanic influx to England which are now widely accepted. Another early study, using Principal Components Analysis (CAPELLI et al. 2003), claimed a lower Germanic influence, but one which varied widely across present-day England.⁵ Some other, more local, studies are definitely not consistent with the traditional view. A recent study infers an Anglo-Saxon contribution of about 38% to the DNA of ten fifth-century skeletons excavated in the Cambridge area (SCHIFFELS et al. 2016), a figure broadly compatible (when cautiously interpreted) with the findings of CAPELLI et al. (2003). Its authors refer to HINES (1994) and HÄRKE (2007) as providing supporting evidence for “a genetically mixed but culturally Anglo-Saxon community” at the relevant site. More extremely, Francis Pryor used earlier evidence to claim in effect that the English arrival is a myth (PRYOR 2004). DNA studies taken together do not therefore yet tell us anything unambiguous about the arrival of the English. I shall return to one particular aspect of genetic evidence later.

Each of the three academic disciplines we have mentioned offers its own light on what is clearly the very complex darkness of the tendentiously named Dark Ages. I do not, personally, much like the role of an academic conservative, but like Oliver J. Padel, David N. Parsons and Peter Schrijver⁶ in an opinion of

⁵ This study came up with some problematic findings, including that “[t]he results seem to suggest that in England the Danes had a greater demographic impact than the Anglo-Saxons. An alternative explanation would be that the invaders in the two areas were genetically different and that we cannot see this difference reflected in the current inhabitants of the Continental areas corresponding to Anglo-Saxon and Danish homelands. This would seem to be a difficult distinction to make, and it should be emphasized that our analyses assume that we have correctly identified the source populations.” (CAPELLI et al. 2003: 982). Clearly our problems of interpretation are still to a considerable extent at the level of dealing with challengeable assumptions.

⁶ Schrijver’s view of the linguistic status of the south-east, as opposed to the status of the Britons as human beings (SCHRIJVER 2007), is innovative, involving a case that the Britons of the south-east had become speakers of Latin, but “[t]hat case also, however, requires a period during which the south-east is emptied, at least to some degree, under the pressure of invasion; either significant numbers of his Latin-speaking Britons move north and west, or numbers of significant Latin-speaking Britons do so, influencing the British spoken in that area. This latinized British, or Brittonic, eventually flows back into the south-east to influence Old English to a fairly small degree, either directly, or indirectly via the impact which it had had on the local Latin.”

last decade I believe that the linguistic evidence favours the traditional view, at least for the south-east and for the southern North Sea coastal lands, i.e. East Anglia. In supporting it, I consider not just the borrowing of vocabulary and place-names in this area; I also compare the linguistic consequences of other conquests world-wide by military aristocracies and the settlers or colonists who may have followed them. There are strong reasons to believe that large-scale survival of an indigenous population could not so radically fail to leave linguistic or onomastic traces. I shall examine the evidence provided by borrowed vocabulary first, and turn to toponymy later.

There is a very large literature which deals with the effects of language contact. Contact may lead to pidginization of the dominant language, or to some less drastic effects, such as the borrowing into one language or the other of a range of linguistic features: pronunciation, grammar, and of course vocabulary. It is generally accepted (see for example MORAVCSIK 1978: 110; TRASK 1996b: 314; THOMASON 2005: 691) that vocabulary borrowing is a prerequisite for the borrowing of other, e.g. grammatical, features. It is also accepted that a situation where only vocabulary borrowing occurs is evidence of contact of the lowest and most practical intensity, where all conversation is essentially “about” concrete situations and physical or conceptual necessities (THOMASON/KAUFMANN 1988: 74).⁷ Moreover, borrowing must be risk-free wherever more is at stake than the simple necessities for survival. It will not take place at all without the prospect of “projected gain” for the borrower (WINTER 1973: 135-148, at 138; McMAHON 1994: 201), and, equally, borrowing will be avoided in situations where the unconscious use of borrowed words will result in stigma for the borrowers (e.g. by making them sound foreign or low-born or stupid). In such basic contact situations, vocabulary will not be borrowed where it would duplicate existing vocabulary, because vocabulary enshrines expertise, and previously-acquired expertise removes the need for, and the desirability of, borrowing (CROFT 2000: 205), unless the entire pre-existing conceptual system expressed by the vocabulary is replaced. McMAHON (1994: 203-204) expresses a widely held view when she suggests that the most basic level of contact typically results in the borrowing of place-names and terms denoting landscape, together with others encoding the distinctive expression of local culture. This means that borrowing is limited to those terms which have no equivalent in the borrowing language because its speakers have never before met the topography or the expertises which are special in the new situation. To illustrate this point using

⁷ The inverse case, where there is only phonological borrowing, by common consent should not occur.

topographical vocabulary: presumably Old English *denu* ‘valley’ could be applied in the continental landscape (cf. Middle Low German *dene* ‘valley’; and more distantly Sanskrit *dhanu* ‘sandbank, shore’, the connecting idea presumably being low elevation). But there was a sort of feature in Britain which seemed inadequately described by this term, so the word *cumb* was borrowed for a feature with a bowl-shaped end to contrast with a long, narrow, relatively steep-sided *denu* (GELLING/COLE 2000: 103-122). We get an echo here of the kind of borrowing found in other situations where unfamiliar topography, geology and ecology presented themselves to world-exploring English-speakers, and which resulted in the acquisition (with different degrees of discourse frequency) of such terms as *mesa*, *plateau*, *butte*, *sierra*, *kopje*, *volcano*, *pingo*, *avalanche*, *canyon*, *arroyo*, *delta*, *ria*, *billabong*, *bayou*, *geysir*, *wadi*, *corrie* (*coire*), *karst*, *tundra*, *taiga*, *mangrove*, *atoll*, *tsunami*, *typhoon*, *harmattan* (and a whole range of other wind terms) ... and so forth.

When the former kinds of borrowings occur, they result in a demonstrable gain in the expressive power of the borrower’s language and in fitness for its new purposes. Moreover, using borrowed words for new concepts cannot produce the stigma of using inappropriate new vocabulary. We certainly do not need to consider any greater subtlety of borrowing from Brittonic to English than this, because neither Welsh nor English shows much sign of having been influenced in grammar or pronunciation by the other at this period. Nevertheless, cases have been made for some compatibility: that the Northern Subject Rule concerning non-standard number agreement in northern English may replicate a Brittonic feature (KLEMOLA 2000, with a question mark; WHITE 2002: 158-160; FILPPULA et al. 2008: 43-49; cautiously, BENSKIN 2011; disputed by ISAAC 2003; on the background to the Rule, comprehensively, see DE HAAS 2011: esp. 41-50, 196-199), and that the dispreference for the external possessor construction in Old English can likewise be attributed to Brittonic origin (FILPPULA et al. 2008: 30).⁸ SCHRIJVER (2002: 102-106; and 2009, suggesting wider-based Celtic influence) makes a heroic case that the structure of the vowel phoneme inventories at certain stages of Brittonic and Old English show a strong resemblance, but it remains true that the processes that operate in the two languages to produce any such similarities do not match in detail. This suggests that the two languages became aligned, but were not articulated in

⁸ The external possessor construction is that illustrated by the position of the “possessor” pronoun *me* in French in sentences like *Je me suis lavé les mains*, i.e. a position external to the phrase expressing what is “possessed”. LAKER (2010: 43) lists a dozen recently claimed, but challengeable, instances of possible Brittonic influence on English morphosyntax.

tandem, which does not suggest continuing bilingualism; Old English phonology is not, in any unqualified sense, Brittonic phonology. As regards traffic in the opposite direction, little if anything in early Brittonic can be confidently ascribed to English. The new grammatical and phonological differences of the period pull the languages apart typologically in such a massive way that it looks almost as though both peoples were taking special care to avoid speaking like the other. The syntax of (Neo-)Brittonic is verb-first at the (declarative) sentence level, and more generally head-first; it has inflected prepositions; it shows intervocalic lenition, and the alternations which this produces are morphologized in its descendant languages; it undergoes final syllable loss early in the first millennium; it has early final, then later penultimate, stress. Old English is devoid of all these features which characterize Brittonic's descendant languages Welsh and Cornish.

Obviously, the amount of borrowing taking place is related to the nature and intensity of the conversation between the invaders and the invaded, and therefore on the degree and type of social relations they enjoy or endure. A powerful case can be made for the major contribution of social factors to the borrowing process, rather than pure lexical "need" illustrated above when discussing topographical terminology (see especially POPLACK et al. 1988). But English also shows no borrowings from Brittonic that could be so described. Any lexical borrowing presupposes meaningful human interaction, and it is therefore a secure sign that meaningful interaction has happened. The English took practically no Brittonic vocabulary in the earliest centuries of settlement. This appears to suggest little contact in which meanings were exchanged, so relations can hardly have been intimate. When European powers set up colonies and imperial administrations, English and the other languages received a considerable amount of vocabulary, notwithstanding how technologically developed or undeveloped their dominions were. At one end of the scale is the legacy of British imperial rule in India: the so-called Hobson-Jobson vocabulary, consisting of many thousands of words absorbed from many different local languages, both Indo-European and Dravidian, and occupying a thousand pages of Yule and Burnell's dictionary (ed. CROOK 1903). Many of the expressions found in Indian English are also found in the general standard language of the high imperial period, and not just in the discourse of expatriates; they belong to a wide range of semantic fields.⁹ At the other end of the scale are the estimated 200 words in

⁹ Borrowings from Indian languages: for example *sahib*, *raj@*, *raja*, *rani*, *nawab/nabob*, *brahmin*, *khidmutgar*, *ayah*, (*punkah-*) *wallah*, *nautch(-girl)*, *dhobi*, *mahout*, *pundit@*, *sadhu*, *swami*, *yogi/yoga@*, *pariah@*, *thug@*, *sari@*, *dhoti*, *pyjama(s)@*, *cashmere@*, *khaki@*,

Australian English from a wide range of indigenous languages, though the members of this set are used with strongly differing frequency by English-speakers (DIXON et al. 1990; YOKOSE 2001). They are concentrated in precisely those semantic fields identified by McMAHON (1994), namely (1) native flora and particularly fauna, and (2) aspects and objects of Aboriginal culture, and this accords well with our historical knowledge of the types of contact between the two populations.¹⁰ Many place-names were borrowed in both countries into the invaders' name-stock, as the most casual glance at an atlas published at any relevant period will reveal.

By contrast even with the small number of Australian borrowings, the total of Brittonic words of any semantic type borrowed into early Old English is derisory. Max Förster, in a magisterial essay of 123 pages (FÖRSTER 1921: 119-242), eventually recognized 15, of which only 4 are still generally accepted: *bin*, *brock*, OE *cumb* and OE *luh* (the last two being topographical terms) and to which another was quickly added by EKWALL (1920) and agreed by FÖRSTER, *tor(r)*, yet another topographical term. Only a small handful of convincing others have been added by more recent scholarship, for example *coble* 'ferry-boat' and perhaps *crag* and ME *genow* 'mouth', and about six others in Old English first identified by Andrew Breeze, including *trem* 'pace', *wered* 'a sweet drink', *trum* 'strong' and *stor* 'medicinal wax' (BREEZE 1993abc, 1998). The current total that I would personally accept is about 14, of which about half did not survive in English beyond the Norman conquest. There may be others, but whatever number one accepts, the difference between the Brittonic-English relationship and those which existed in imperial and colonial India and Australia could hardly be more striking.

Another German Anglicist, Dieter Kastovsky, observed seventy years after the appearance of Förster's essay that "the [Briton]s have left remarkably little behind in English, a phenomenon that has not really been explained satisfacto-

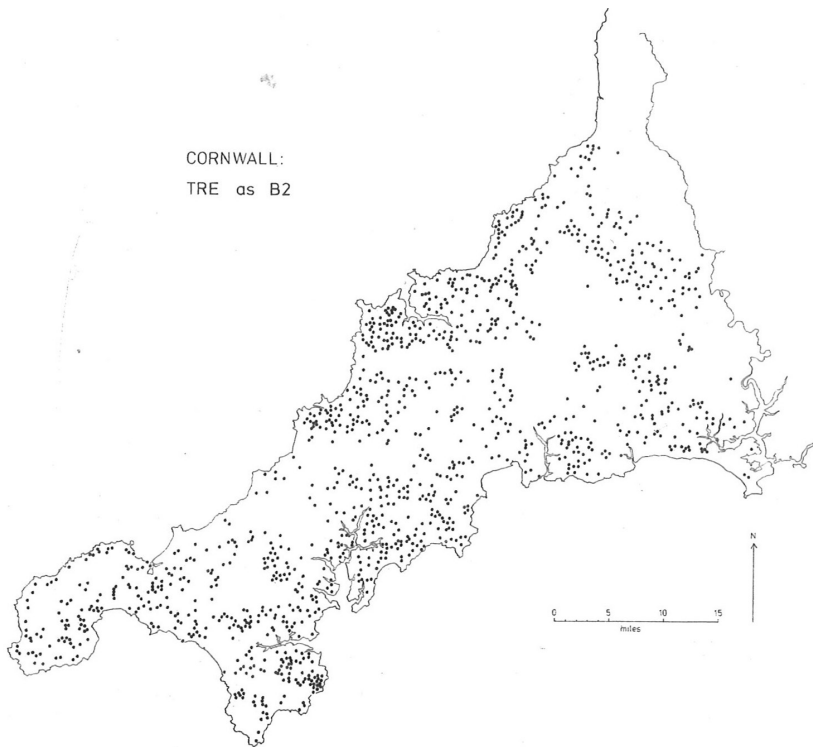
sati/suttee, *ghat*, *nirvana*, *karma@*, *yoga@*, *swastika@*, *mongoose@*, *cheetah@*, *gaur*, *jairou*, *nilgau*, *bandicoot*, *jungle@*, *bhang*, *char(@)* 'tea', *chota peg* 'whisky and soda', *betel*, *ghee*, *curry@*, *korma@*, *chapati@*, *dal@*, *naan@*, and many other terms associated with Indian cuisine, *rupee*, *pice*, *chit@*, *pukka(@)*, *cushy@*, *dekko(@)* 'a look', *sitar@*, *tabla*, *polo@*, *gymkhana@*, *darbar*, *bungalow@*, *Blighty* Words marked with @ are exceptionally well-embedded (by my subjective judgement) in the modern standard language even back home in Britain, and those marked (@) formerly were. This set and the set of words in note 10 are culled from earlier articles by the present writer.

¹⁰ Borrowings from Australian languages: for example *coolibah*, *mulga*, *waratah*, *budgerigar*, *dingo*, *koala*, *wombat*, *wallaby*, *kangaroo*, *barramundi*, *corroboree*, *boomerang*, (?*didgeridoo*), (*hard*) *yakka* 'hard work'.

rily. True [he continues], the surviving [Briton]s were a conquered race, but their culture must have been more developed than that of the German invaders due to the 400 years of Romanization, and from that point of view more loans would not have been completely unlikely ... contrary to all expectations, [Brittonic] has not really left its mark on the English language[.]” (KASTOVSKY 1992: 319-320). Kastovsky’s assessment that British culture “must have been more developed” appears to me to be unsound. He may have been thinking of still-functioning Roman architecture in stone or the excellences of later Celtic Christian art, but so far as we can judge this was new *during* the Anglo-Saxon era rather than present at the dawn of it. Moreover, recent archaeological work suggests that at the end of the Romano-British period there was not much of significance to pass on, materially. WACHER (1995: 409; ²1998: 297-299) notes a patchy decline in Romano-British culture after the late fourth century, and refers to its eventual “almost complete eclipse”, though there is emerging evidence of continued life in towns such as St Albans and Dorchester (on whose names and context see COATES 2005a, 2006). However, despite any decline in indigenous culture, it does not follow that the material culture of the invaders must have been technologically superior. If a conquered people has no distinctive material culture – e.g. pots, houses, vehicles, tools, weapons, coins, all of which failed to maintain earlier Roman standards in the fifth century – then one might think the only major type of vocabulary that can be offered to incomers is landscape terminology, including place-names. But even admitting this point, we must recognize that material poverty is no barrier in itself to a culture passing its vocabulary to a newly arrived people. A lifetime ago, the English hispanist William Entwistle noted the quite substantial amount of Celtic vocabulary in Iberian Romance even though, as he explicitly commented, it “betray[s] a culture below that of the invaders” (ENTWISTLE 1936: 41).

It is interesting to reflect on developments in Cornwall as the influence of English culture pressed further and further down the south-western peninsula (for the detail of which, see PADEL 2007). It became an English county in the tenth century, and was progressively anglicized over the following eight centuries or so. As the Cornish language disappeared, which it finally did by 1800, it gave very little vocabulary to English. Even the words which are perhaps the best known as stereotypical manifestations of Cornwall’s culture, *piskie* and *pasty*, are not of Cornish origin, but (probably, according to the *Oxford English dictionary*) English and Norman French respectively. Martyn Wakelin’s book based on the findings of the Survey of English Dialects identifies only 21 reasonably secure borrowings. All are rather obscure, and none of them got any

further into England than the river Tamar which forms the eastern boundary of the county (WAKELIN 1975: chapter 7). Was the situation in the far south-west a repetition or continuation of the process seen a thousand years previously in the south-east? Was this also a case where a relatively small English aristocracy entered a foreign land and plucked out its linguistic heart, not to feed on it, but to throw it away as clinical waste? There is one major interesting difference. The incoming English did not trouble to replace the local stock of place-names, and Cornwall is still today easily characterized by its Cornish place-names and the surnames derived from them (see map 1, showing the distribution of the many Cornish place-names beginning with *tre* 'farm', virtually absent from adjacent Devon).



Map 1: Place-names in Cornwall beginning with *Tre-*, reproduced from PADEL 1985, with permission.

The Cornish facts suggest what we have seen in other cases of imperial expansion, namely that a smallish new aristocracy ruling an essentially unchanged peasantry will not obliterate all the linguistic evidence for the previous demographic situation even when mass settlement follows it. There are many cases where a successful conquerors' language has absorbed much, especially vocabulary, from the conquered people (for example South American Spanish and Portuguese; North African French; and notably the case of the hybrid French/Cree language Michif in central Canada, along with other "mixed" languages). On the other hand there are many cases where it is the conquerors' language which has disappeared altogether (Norman French in England; the language of the Mughal khans in India; Sanskrit in what is now Indonesia and Indo-China; and lately also Dutch in Indonesia (MAIER 2005)).

Let us turn to the question of whether Peter Schrijver was right (SCHRIJVER 2002, 2007) that the invading Anglo-Saxons met Latin-speaking Britons, rather than speakers of Brittonic, and that that is a sufficient reason for the absence of Brittonic loanwords whilst being compatible with the presence of significant numbers of Latin loanwords, especially in later Old English. Schrijver considers that "the man in the street" in post-Roman Britain spoke Latin, and I am not quite sure what he thinks about "the man in the field", who must have been in the majority. If he is right, in fact, the basic argument regarding the lack of impact on English does not change much. Alfred WOLLMANN (1990) reviewed the evidence for Latin lexical borrowing into the earliest English, but concluded that such borrowings could have been received by the English before they left their continental home, though his view has been bluntly challenged by PARSONS (2011: 120-121), who follows CAMPBELL (1959: 199-214) in suggesting that some 200 Latin words show signs of early integration into the oldest surviving English. It seems to me that we shall never be able to be sure where the borrowing of such words took place, and that this potential support for Schrijver's view remains tantalizingly equivocal. An issue deserving investigation is whether the Latin borrowings in this set show any unambiguous signs of having passed through Brittonic, but that is a difficult issue. It is especially difficult because, as Schrijver himself has forcefully pointed out (SCHRIJVER 2002: 92-95; 2015: 204-205), Continental Latin and Brittonic were passing through similar sets of phonological changes at the relevant period, and the degree to which British Latin participated in them is hard to establish. But this means that we cannot dismiss the possibility that key early Latin borrowings came with Continental phonology in the wake of Augustine's mission (597 C.E.).

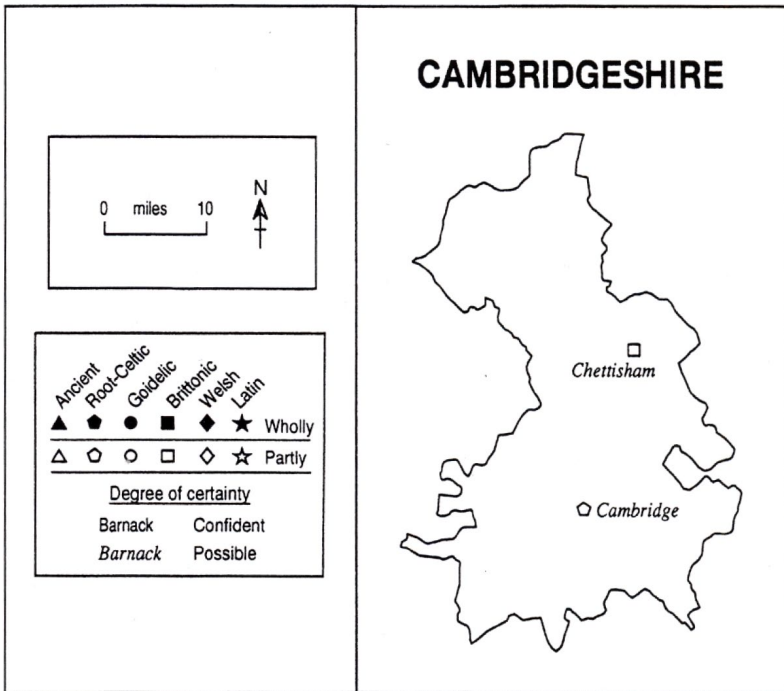
My main reason for scepticism about Schrijver's "Latin-speaking Britons in south-east England" hypothesis comes from the fact that there is solid evidence for the survival of Brittonic after the Anglo-Saxon conquest in at least some areas of England whose extent cannot be determined: mythically in the appearance of Brittonic-speaking devils to St Guthlac in the English Fen Country, which at least suggests that Brittonic was known about or remembered in this area in Guthlac's time (early eighth century); documentarily in the famous *Crycbeorh* text which gives an alternative Brittonic name (*Cructan*) for a landscape feature in Somerset (SAWYER 1968: document 237); and phonologically in evidence for the operation of Brittonic sound changes in English place-names of Brittonic origin well after the date of the Anglo-Saxon conquest (using Jackson's chronology) *throughout Britain: i-affection in London*,¹¹ *Brent* and the *-devers* in Hampshire, original intervocalic voicing in the final [d] of *Andred* (which phenomenon might however be shared with Latin), cluster reduction in *Lynn* < **Lindon*, rounding of the long low vowel in the first syllable of *Moggerhanger* (COATES 2005b), and in the cluster of possible survivals in north-west Wiltshire with late phonological characteristics (summarized by PARSONS 2011: 133-134; on Wiltshire names, see now also EAGLES forthcoming: 000). Some of these names, of course, have been the subject of alternative explanations.

Let us move to a wider consideration of place-name evidence. The great bulk of place-names in England (excluding Cornwall), at the village or manor level, are English and originated in the Anglo-Saxon period. Some are certainly older, and were presumably taken over either from speakers of Brittonic, or from speakers of Latin with a Brittonic accent who were using long-established names of Celtic etymology. There are few names indeed which can be confidently viewed as of Latin origin (COATES 2000: 40-53) or transmission, though some cases can be made in special circumstances where there is some archaeological evidence of urban continuity (COATES 2005a, 2006). I believe that more English names are of Brittonic origin than was formerly admitted, but that does not call for a radical revision of the general view; the number has not been increased massively as a result of recent work, as reviewers have correctly noted. Early interethnic contacts, for whatever reason, seem to have afforded rather little opportunity for Brittonic-speakers to pass on place-names to the English; contacts which occurred later and more westerly afforded more opportunity for the transmission of names of Brittonic etymology, for instance and especially in

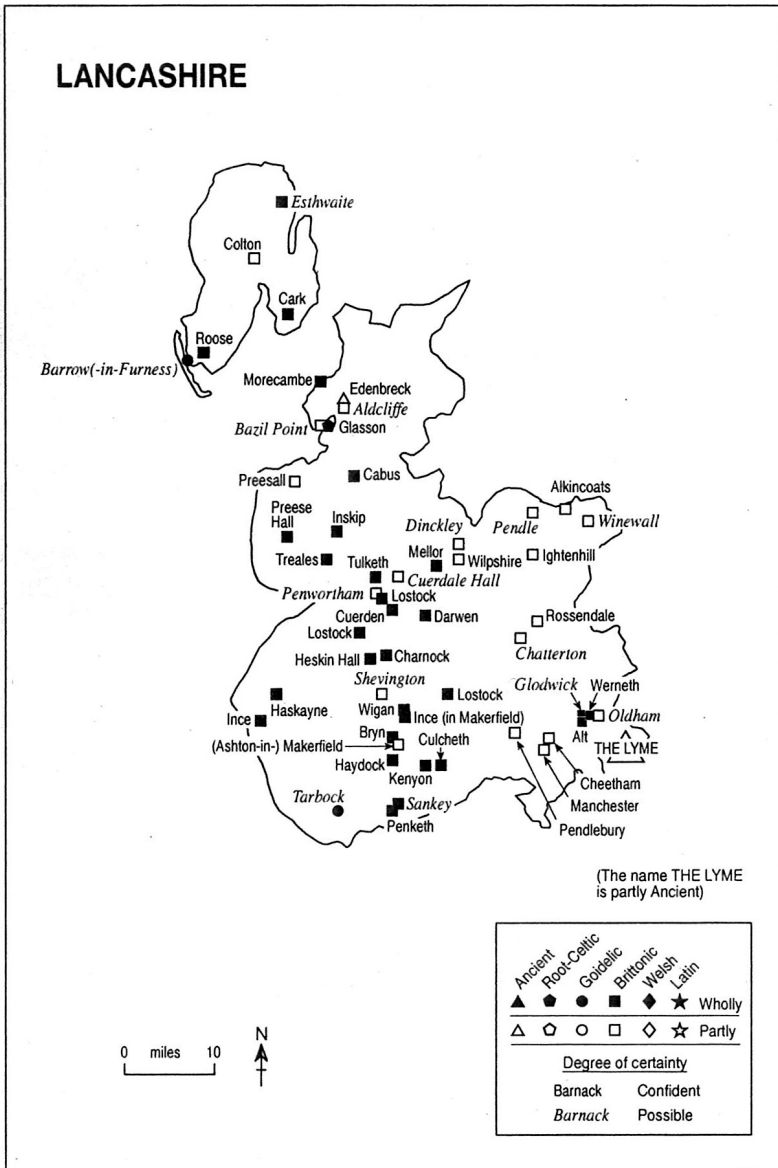
¹¹ This remark is predicated on the analysis of *London* offered by COATES (1998); alternative etymologies have been suggested recently by BREEZE (2014) and BYNON (2016), but this is not the appropriate place to discuss them. See also SCHRIJVER (2014: 57).

Lancashire and in the western parts of the border counties of Herefordshire and Shropshire.

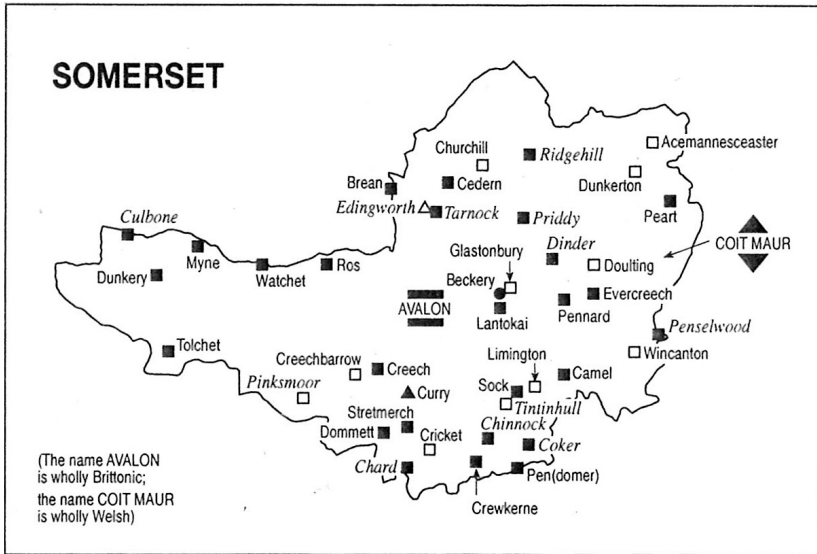
Almost twenty years ago, I worked on a book intended to clarify the contribution of Brittonic to place-names in England. Part of the work codified, critically reviewed and mapped existing knowledge; part of it, with the collaboration of Andrew Breeze, made new suggestions for the survival of a number of Brittonic names (COATES/BREEZE 2000). I can illustrate its contribution to the business of this paper by presenting maps of certain counties taken from it. Those of Sussex, Middlesex, Hertfordshire, Bedfordshire, Huntingdonshire and Cambridgeshire show almost no evidence of Brittonic names at all. These should be contrasted with the maps of more westerly counties, such as Lancashire, Wiltshire, Somerset and Gloucestershire, which show a larger measure of surviving Brittonic names (see sample maps 2, 3 and 4).



Map 2



Map 3



Map 4

Maps 2, 3 and 4: Pre-English names surviving in Cambridgeshire, Lancashire and Somerset, reproduced from COATES/BREEZE 2000, with permission. Readers should note that I might well now label in different ways the names identified on these maps, but the stark differences in the incidence of pre-English names on the three maps are evident, and sufficient to support the points made in the text about the differential survival of such names.

The clear conclusion to be drawn, from map 2 as representative of the English south-east, is that the Brittonic etymological contribution to place-naming in the south and east is minimal. This is something that deserves explanation. The insertion of an English military aristocracy into a Brittonic landscape is not the answer; the insertion of an English military aristocracy into a Latin landscape seems unprovable. We have explored what happens to the languages of conquerors in general, and we can add to our earlier conclusion the fact that such changes in the dominant language are mirrored in all cases by the acceptance of existing local place-names. This is too obvious on the map of India or Australia, the Ivory Coast, Mozambique or Peru to need further comment. In India the process went so far as to permit the construction of culturally English elements (usually surnames) into place-names with an indigenous structure.¹²

¹² For example: *Captainganj, Daltonganj, Forbesganj, Lyallpur, Abbottabad, Jacobabad.*

Before leaving place-names, we should consider what can be gleaned from the borrowing into English of functioning Brittonic name-elements. As noted above, Max Förster identified in the 1920s two borrowed words which became English enough to be used as elements in otherwise English-language place-name: *cumb* and *torr*. Some other words were borrowed for which there is no evidence outside place-names; it must be suspected, unless further information comes to light, that the English took over some simple Brittonic words for landscape features as if they were proper names, possibly many times over, but in such a way that no new word of the relevant form entered the English lexicon. Into this category seem to fall **kēd* ‘wood’, frequently found in English wood-names in forms like *cheet* and *chet*; the south-western term **kors* ‘reeds, bog’, in names in e.g. Somerset, Worcestershire and Gloucestershire: **krūg* ‘burial mound’, frequently found nationwide in barrow-names (or perhaps hill-names) in forms like *crook*, *crick*, *creek*, *creech* (though these and the supposed relationships among them require further study); **eglēs* ‘church’, regularly found as *eccles*; **penn* ‘head, top, end’; and **ros* ‘moor’. Significantly, none of these words is ever found as the generic element in an early two-element English place-name, whilst most of them are used as single-element names (e.g. *Creech*, *Crick*, *Eccles* (several), *Penn*, *Roos*, *Ross*). That reinforces the view gained from the minimal amount of lexical borrowing: that Brittonic was not much understood by the incomers, and that most items that were borrowed were understood as being used to refer to a place, but not as conveying a meaning encoding the nature of the place. They performed the task of naming, but in practically all cases did not become lexical words. This is illustrated perfectly by the fate of the Brittonic word **aβon* ‘river’ (Modern Welsh *afon*), which appears as the proper name of six rivers of England but not as a word meaning ‘river’.¹³ If it had become a true English word, there is no reason why it should not, like *cumb* and *torr*, have served as generics in place-names in the same way as their respective English approximate equivalents *ēa*, *denu* and *stān* did.

The situation we should seek to explain, then, is one in which the Britons transmitted to the English hardly any general vocabulary at all, some topographical words whose import does not appear to have been fully understood, and a quite modest number of place-names. Some southern and eastern counties are practically devoid of Brittonic names altogether (as represented by map 2, compared with maps 3 and 4). The English were clearly never required, and presumably never wished, to engage persistently in meaningful use of the Bri-

¹³ PARSONS (2011: 127) guardedly suggests that the name of the Bristol Avon may have reached Old English through Latin.

tons' language. We return to our point of departure: is this evidence more consistent with the idea of ethnic cleansing by the English, or with the idea of a takeover by an English military aristocracy? If there was a purely aristocratic takeover, then the Britons must have learned English; and in the assessment of Kenneth Jackson, the known facts entail that "the natives learned Anglo-Saxon thoroughly and accurately, so accurately that they had to mangle their own names to suit the new language rather than the new language to suit their own sound-system ... [i]t is impossible to point to any feature about Anglo-Saxon phonology which can be shown conclusively to be a modification due to the alien linguistic habits of the Britons they must have learned the new phonology very completely." (JACKSON 1953: 242). Jackson's scenario depends on the complete integration of individual Britons into the English-speaking community and the disappearance of any Brittonic communities that might sustain the ancestral language. The same argument broadly applies if we argue, with Schrijver, that the Britons, by the relevant time, spoke Latin; we can declare that "it is impossible to point to any feature about Anglo-Saxon phonology which can be shown conclusively to be a modification due to the alien linguistic habits of Latin-speakers". Neither scenario, Jackson's or Schrijver's, can easily be squared with the idea of "genetic" Britons forming a massive element of the population.¹⁴ Jackson goes on to compare the small vocabulary uptake from Brittonic with the "few Gaulish words in Romance", implying that the situations in Britain and Gaul were similar, but LAMBERT (1997: 186-203) actually identifies about 40 Gaulish borrowings into Latin and 116 into French or Provençal (counting only the secure ones in his survey), and this is a far greater tally than that of supposed Brittonic survivals in English. We have already noted that even in the case of Cornish, the new aristocracy did not suppress all linguistic traces of its subject people even though driving the language to extinction. So we have to confront again the fact that the situation in Britain does not bear easy comparison with other documented cases where a population has survived invasion and subjugation by limited numbers of aggressive migrants.

Stating my thesis unambiguously: I know of no case where a political ascendancy has imposed its own language on a conquered people without an easily

¹⁴ It is not clear how to square Schrijver's view that Welsh descends from a form of latinized lowland Brittonic that was taken west by fleeing Britons with the possibility that post-conquest changes in eastern place-names consistent with changes characterizing the history of Brittonic were effected by speakers who stayed behind but must have shared phonological trends with those who fled. To what extent was eastern Brittonic compatible with the ancestor of Welsh? What is it safe to hypothesize?

discernible impact from the language of the conquered, even if the conquered had little to offer the newcomers materially or culturally. Not even the Gaelic replacement of Norse in the Hebrides, which offers some political similarities to the case considered here, eradicated the older tongue so brutally; there are some borrowed Norse words in Gaelic in particular spheres of activity (OFTEDAL 1961; MACAULAY 1992: 149-150) and many adapted Norse place-names in Gaelic (NICOLAISEN ²2001: 109-155). Equally rare is the case where the conquerors' language has little impact on that of the natives. A case in point is the Roman "conquest" of the Basque territories. There is no discernible Basque impact on Latin; but there again the Romans' overlordship was only nominal, and there is hardly any solid evidence of Roman penetration (TRASK 1996a; cited more fully in COATES 2007a). For the sociolinguistic reasons that I mentioned earlier and that I have spelt out more fully elsewhere (COATES 2007a), the pattern in both the case from the Hebrides and the case of the Britons in England appears consistent with withdrawal of speakers of the previously dominant language, rather than with assimilation of the dominant classes by the incomers. "Withdrawal" can be achieved in a number of ways already alluded to: murder, enslavement, flight, exile or negotiated withdrawal, accidental external (e.g. climatic or bacteriological) pressure. But what we see in southern and eastern England, when contrasted with what happens in genuine contact situations, amounts to a strong linguistic and onomastic case that the incomers must have moved into a landscape from which a major withdrawal had taken place. There is no *linguistic* reason to reject this older view in favour of the newer one which asserts the survival of a substantial local population having the option of cultural assimilation, especially given the undeniable historical evidence for flight across the Channel, massacre (whether exaggerated or not) of local Britons, and the use of what had passed previously for a once purely ethnic term, *wealh*, to mean 'slave'.

The ground on which the battle between those who believe the Britons were displaced and those who believe they hung on takes place was transformed a decade ago by the potentially exciting new work brought together by Stephen OPPENHEIMER (2006), to whom I am indebted for lively discussion in 2007. Its relevance today is that Oppenheimer finds no support in the genetic profile of modern Britain for the idea of an incursion of Angles and Saxons in large numbers at the time required by the traditional historical account derived from Gildas, the ASC and Bede. According to him, any genetic disparity between western and eastern England can be accounted for by prehistoric population movements. He claims that there is indeed evidence for a significant arrival

from the east, but earlier, perhaps much earlier, than the fifth century (2006: 305-443). The methodology which Oppenheimer espouses is given considerable credibility by the fact that the results which he cites place the Vikings' genetic contribution to England and Wales in the right areas at the right time, and as a convincing proportion of the population (2006: 444-469).

I have no space here to do justice to the detail of Oppenheimer's arguments, but the work I have just described leads him to one conclusion in particular which is directly relevant to my topic but which I cannot accept. Genetic considerations suggest to him that there must have been large numbers of speakers of a language directly ancestral to English in Britain before the departure of the Roman garrisons in 410, and they may have already been there for centuries. This means that, according to him, the traditional account of the taking of Britain by the English – both its method and its date – is a fable, probably derived from Gildas. The hypothetical early presence of the English is sufficient, he argues, to account for the near-absence of Brittonic place-names in the south and east. This view is not at all persuasive, and the arguments against it are mainly linguistic. I offer several challenging questions to anyone believing in a substantial Germanic presence in what was to become England in late Roman times. If it is true that part of south and east England was English- (or at least Germanic-) speaking in late Roman times:

- Why does the contemporary record show no tribes with demonstrably Germanic names in this region; why do the known tribes have interpretable Celtic names (*Trinovantes, Atrebrates, Cantiaci*); and why are the names which are not clearly Celtic (or clearly not Celtic) also clearly not Germanic (*Regni, Icenii*)?
- Why, when place-names are among the most transmissible of linguistic material in contact situations (see above), does the contemporary record show not a single place with a demonstrably Germanic name in this region (or indeed anywhere in Britain); why do the interpretable place-names appear to be fully Celtic (*Dubris, Anderitum, Branodunum, Noviomagus, Regulbium*); and why are the apparently non-Celtic names not readily explainable as Germanic (*Venta, Londinium, Tanatus*)?
- PARRY-WILLIAMS (1923) demonstrated almost a century ago that there was virtually no lexical borrowing into early Welsh from English. We have seen that the total of Brittonic borrowings in English is close to zero. Is it really credible that Celtic and Germanic populations had lived side by side for a period perhaps as great as thousands of years without exchanging more than a thimbleful of words?

It has become unfashionable to imagine significant population movements in the relevant era, but we should remember the context: there is more general late Roman evidence reporting such movements throughout Europe. But even if the reported scale of migrations – the *Völkerwanderungen* – is exaggerated, the concept of such folk-movements is archaeologically supported. In relation to our problem here, we know that dwellings built on mounds in the marshland of the North Sea coast of Germany, such as the famous site at Feddersen Wierde near Bremerhaven, and other sites nearby on different kinds of ground, were abandoned in the mid-fifth century (BEHRE 2003). The reason for the abandonment is disputed, and there may or may not be a climatological cause, but this is an archaeologically recorded large event which appears to coincide with the traditional mass-migration period, and this event is widely assumed to be associated with the irruption of the Anglo-Saxons into Britain.

The final, and truly difficult, methodological problem lies in Oppenheimer's apparent equation of a genetic stock with a linguistic stock. The undisputed presence of early "eastern" traits in the genetic profile of eastern England would be the main licence for his speculative suggestion that the area might for long have been English-speaking (or at least Germanic-speaking). This is fallacious. Assuming that this evidence does indeed show an early migration from what is now Germany and adjacent lands, we still cannot conclude that the people embodying the profile spoke a Germanic language. They may never have spoken one at all; the little we know of pre-Indo-European Europe suggests it was a patchwork of small distinct unrelated local languages, such as Etruscan, Ligurian, Tartessian, Iberian and Proto-Basque, a situation that presents difficulties for any theory of human history which emphasizes biological continuity and common humanity arising monogenetically in eastern Africa. If we follow Oppenheimer, any "non-Celtic Britons" may have spoken a Germanic language and shifted to Celtic under the social and political dominance of speakers of other languages in Britain, but there is no way we could know that unless the Brittonic languages contained lexical material that we could identify as early Germanic. As we noted earlier, we cannot do that, since no distinctive Germanic component has been found in the vocabulary of the early Celtic of Britain. In short, whatever the genetic evidence shows, we can conclude nothing from it about what languages were spoken by the human beings carrying it.

There is, then, no evidence which should lead us to believe in a significant English-, or even Germanic-, speaking presence in south and east England before the end of the Roman period. I suggest that the linguistic evidence that

there was no significant interaction between Britons and Anglo-Saxons is consistent with a version of the traditional view that southern and eastern England was depopulated or emptied of viable Brittonic-speaking communities and of any speakers of Latin with a Brittonic accent. The genetic evidence remains equivocal, and in any case no simple conclusions about language can be inferred from the DNA of individuals or populations, even if its detail may be richly suggestive. I would like to conclude by reaffirming that the light cast on this major problem by contact linguistics and onomastics should not be allowed to be outshone by non-linguistic evidence, but fully acknowledged as an independent source of understanding about “wie es eigentlich gewesen”.

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[**Abstract:** The chronology of the English intervention in Britain has recently become controversial among population historians, but the linguistic evidence for its timing and its nature has remained largely unchanged. In this paper I set out to review once again the small amount of toponymic evidence and the almost non-existent lexical evidence for Brittonic-English contact in the earliest English centuries. This linguistic evidence has led to diverse responses among historians and archaeologists, but since it is primary evidence it is legitimate to explore again the question of what historical scenarios of ethnic contact it is compatible with: extermination, expulsion, enslavement, assimilation, cultural overwhelming or ignoring; and mass English population movement versus élite expatriate settlement from beyond the North Sea.]