

# PRE-ROMAN OVERVIEW

OF

## BRITAIN

CMG Archives

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(2012)

(This material has been compiled from various unverified sources)

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### Palaeolithic Britain

Lower Palaeolithic	- older than 200,000 years ago
Middle Palaeolithic	- from around 200,000 to 45,000 years ago
Upper Palaeolithic	- around 45,000 - 10,000 years ago

Palaeolithic (Old Stone Age) Britain is the period of the earliest known occupation of Britain by humans. This extensive period saw many changes in the environment, encompassing several glacial and interglacial episodes greatly affecting human settlement in the region. Providing dating for this distant period is difficult and controversial. Generally speaking, the inhabitants of the region at this time were bands of hunter-gatherers who roamed Northern Europe following the migrating herds of animals, or who supported themselves by fishing.

There is evidence from bones and flint tools found in coastal deposits near Happisburgh in Norfolk and Pakefield in Suffolk that a species of Homo was present in what is now Britain around 800,000 years ago. At this time, Southern and Eastern Britain was linked to continental Europe by a wide land bridge which allowed the humans to move freely. The current position of the English Channel was a large river flowing westwards and fed by tributaries that later became the Thames and Seine.

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### First Written Record

The first significant written record of Britain and its inhabitants was made by the Greek navigator Pytheas, who explored the coastal region of Britain around 325 BC.

Major immigrant settlement of the British Isles occurred during the Neolithic period, interpreted by Bryan Sykes--professor of human genetics at the University of Oxford--as the arrival of the Celts from the Iberian Peninsula, and the origin of Britain's and Ireland's Celtic tribes.

The Roman historian Tacitus described the Britons as being descended from people who had arrived from the continent, comparing the Caledonians (in modern-day Scotland) to their Germanic neighbours; the Silures of Southern Wales to Iberian settlers; and the inhabitants of Southeast Britannia to Gaulish tribes. (Many modern scholars disagree with this view.)

Contemporary Britons are descended mainly from the varied ethnic stocks that settled in Great Britain before the eleventh century. Prehistoric, Celtic, Roman, Anglo-Saxon, and Norse influences were blended in Britain under the Normans, Scandinavian Vikings from northern France.

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## Iron Age Periodization

Earliest Iron Age	800-600 BC	Parallel to Hallstatt C on the continent
Early Iron Age	600-400 BC	Hallstat D and half of La Tène I
Middle Iron Age	400-100 BC	The rest of La Tène I, all of II and half of III
Late Iron Age	100-50 BC	The rest of La Tène III
Latest Iron Age	50 BC - AD 100	-

*(Hallstatt Culture - The Hallstatt culture was the predominant Central European culture from the 8th to 6th centuries BC (European Early Iron Age), developing out of the Urnfield culture of the 12th century BC (Late Bronze Age) and followed in much of Central Europe by the La Tène culture.)*

*(La Tène - The La Tène culture was a European Iron Age culture named after the archaeological site of La Tène on the north side of Lake Neuchâtel in Switzerland, where a rich cache of artifacts was discovered by Hansli Kopp in 1857.*

*La Tène culture developed and flourished during the late Iron Age (from 450 BCE to the Roman conquest in the 1st century BCE) in eastern France, Switzerland, Austria, southwest Germany, the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Hungary and Romania. To the north extended the contemporary Jastorf culture of Northern Germany.*

*La Tène culture developed out of the early Iron Age Hallstatt culture without any definite cultural break, under the impetus of considerable Mediterranean influence from the Culture of Golasecca, the Greeks in pre-Roman Gaul and later Etruscan civilizations.)*

The end of the Iron Age extends into the early Roman Empire when "Romanisation" was effected in Britain. However, in parts of Britain that were not Romanised, such as Scotland, the period is extended a little longer, e.g. to the 5th century.

The classical geographers/authors closest to AD 100 period are Ptolemy, the two Plinys, and Strabo; however, Ptolemy gives the most detail.

**Ptolemy** (c. AD 90 - c. AD 168), was a Greek-Roman citizen of Egypt who wrote in Greek. He was a mathematician, astronomer, geographer, astrologer, and poet.

**Pliny the Elder** (23 AD - August 25, 79 AD), was a Roman author, naturalist, and natural philosopher

**Pliny the Younger** (61 AD - c. 112 AD), was a Roman lawyer, author, and magistrate.

**Strabo** (63 BC - ca. AD 24), was a Greek geographer, philosopher, and historian.

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## The Island of Migration

Britain was first inhabited by people who crossed over the land bridge from the European mainland. Traces of early humans have been found (at Boxgrove Quarry, Sussex) from some 500,000 years ago, and modern humans from about 30,000 years ago.

Until about 10,000 years ago, Britain was joined to Ireland.

And as recently as 8,000 years ago Britain was joined to Europe by a strip of low marsh to what is now Denmark and the Netherlands (see below).



In Cheddar Gorge, near Bristol, the remains of animal species native to mainland Europe such as antelopes, brown bears, and wild horses have been found alongside a human skeleton, 'Cheddar Man', dated to about 7150 BC. Consequently, animals and humans must have moved between mainland Europe and Great Britain via a crossing. Great Britain became an island at the end of the Pleistocene ice age when sea levels rose because of isostatic depression of the crust and the melting of glaciers.

According to John T. Koch and scholars, Britain in the Late Bronze Age was part of a maritime trading culture called the Atlantic Bronze Age, which included Ireland, France, Spain and Portugal - where Celtic languages developed; however, this stands in contrast to the more generally accepted view that Celtic origins lie with the Hallstatt culture from the continent.

Britain's Iron Age inhabitants are known as the "Britons", a group who speaks a Celtic language.

The Romans conquered most of Britain (up to Hadrian's Wall, in northern England) and this became the Ancient Roman province of "Britannia".

For 500 years after the fall of the Roman Empire, the Britons of the south and east of the island were assimilated or displaced by invading Germanic tribes (Angles, Saxons, and Jutes, often referred to collectively as Anglo-Saxons). At about the same time, Gaelic tribes from Ireland invaded the north-west, absorbing both the Picts and Britons of northern Britain, eventually forming the Kingdom of Scotland in the 9th century. The south-east of Scotland was colonised by the Angles and formed, until 1018, a part of the Kingdom of Northumbria. Ultimately, the population of south-east Britain came to be referred to, after the Angles, as the English people.

*(Picts - The Picts were an amalgam of tribes who lived in the eastern and north eastern regions of Scotland during the ancient and early medieval period, merging into other peoples around the tenth century.*

*The origins of the Picts are hotly disputed: one theory claims they were formed of tribes who predated the arrival of the Celts in Britain, but other analysts suggest that they may have been a branch of the Celts. The coalescence of the tribes into the Picts may well have been a reaction to the Roman occupation of Britain.)*

Germanic speakers referred to Britons as Welsh. This term eventually came to be applied exclusively to the inhabitants of what is now Wales, but it also survives in names such as Wallace, and in the second syllable of Cornwall. Cymry, a name the Britons used to describe themselves, is similarly restricted in modern Welsh to people from Wales, but also survives in English in the place name of Cumbria. The Britons living in the areas now known as Wales, Cumbria and Cornwall were not assimilated by the Germanic tribes, a fact reflected in the survival of Celtic languages in these areas into more recent times. At the time of the Germanic invasion of Southern Britain, many Britons emigrated to the area now known as Brittany, where Breton, a Celtic language closely related to

Welsh and Cornish and descended from the language of the emigrants, is still spoken. In the 9th century, a series of Danish assaults on northern English kingdoms led to them coming under Danish control (an area known as the Danelaw). In the 10th century, however, all the English kingdoms were unified under one ruler as the kingdom of England when the last constituent kingdom, Northumbria, submitted to Edgar in 959. In 1066, England was conquered by the Normans, who introduced a French ruling élite that was eventually assimilated. Wales came under Anglo-Norman control in 1282, and was officially annexed to England in the 16th century.

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### **Pre-Roman Invasion**

The last centuries before the Roman invasion saw an influx of mixed Germanic-Celtic speaking refugees from Gaul (approximately modern day France and Belgium) known as the Belgae, who were displaced as the Roman Empire expanded around 50 BC. They settled along most of the coastline of Southern Britain between about 200 BC and AD 43, although it is hard to estimate what proportion of the population there they formed. A Gaulish tribe known as the Parisii, who had cultural links to the continent, appeared in Northeast England.

From around 175 BC, the areas of Kent, Hertfordshire and Essex developed especially advanced pottery-making skills. The tribes of Southeast England became partially Romanised and were responsible for creating the first settlements (oppida) large enough to be called towns.

The last centuries before the Roman invasion saw increasing sophistication in British life. About 100 BC, iron bars began to be used as currency, while internal trade and trade with continental Europe flourished, largely due to Britain's extensive mineral reserves. Coinage was developed, based on continental types but bearing the names of local chieftains. This was used in Southeast England, but not in areas such as Dumnonia in the west.

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## Appendix

### Overview of Britain to 1 BC

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| c. 950,000 to<br>c. 840,000 BC | - Early Humans migrate to Britain from Europe. Flints worked in south-eastern Britain. (Some scholars disagree with this "early" date and contend that the 1st human migration to Britain only occurred (c. 450,000 BC) during the First Interglacial Period.)   |
| c. 500,000 BC                  | - First Ice Age.   |
| c. 450,000 BC                  | - First Interglacial Period Starts - Possible first inhabitants of Britain.  |
| c. 400,000 BC                  | - Second Ice Age.  |
| c. 250,000 BC                  | - Second Interglacial Period - Second inhabitants of Britain Swanscombe Man - the oldest known human remains in Britain.   |
| c. 180,000 to<br>c. 6,500 BC   | - English Channel forms, separating Britain from the mainland. (Some scholars disagree with the "early" date of c. 180,000 BC and contend that Britain only became an island c. 6,500 to 5,000 BC.)  |
| c. 150,000 BC                  | - The Third Ice Age.   |
| c. 75,000 BC                   | - The Forth Ice Age.   |
| c. 15,000 BC                   | - Last glaciers in Britain.  |
| c. 6,000 BC                    | - Ice retreats to its present limits.  |
| c. 26,000 BC                   | - Cave-dwelling Upper Paleolithic peoples in Britain.  |
| c. 10,000 BC                   | - Last Ice Age ends and Mesolithic period begins. (Middle Stone Age: c. 10,000 BC - c. 4500 BC)  |
| c. 4000 BC                     | - Neolithic period begins in Britain (New Stone Age c. 4,000 BC - c. 2,500 BC), introducing the first agriculture.   |
| c. 3000 BC                     | - First stone circles erected (henge monuments).   |
| c. 2600 BC                     | - Main phase of construction at Stonehenge begins, replacing earlier wood and earth works.   |
| c. 2300 BC                     | - Arrival of the Beaker People in Britain. (Beaker People - a widely scattered cultural phenomenon of prehistoric Western Europe, which emerged in the late Neolithic or Chalcolithic and ran into the early Bronze Age. The term was coined by John Abercromby, and was based on their distinctive pottery drinking vessels.) |
| c. 2100 BC                     | - Bronze Age begins.   |
| c. 1800 BC                     | - Wessex culture brings bronze-working to Britain.   |
| c. 1,650 BC                    | - Trade routes begin to form.  |

- c. 1600 BC - Last construction at Stonehenge.
- c. 1400 BC - Wessex culture replaced by more agrarian peoples; stone circles and early hill-forts produced.
- c. 1,200 BC - 1st Small Villages are formed.
- c. 800 BC - Celts bring iron working to Britain; Hallstatt Culture. (*Hallstatt Culture - The Hallstatt culture was the predominant Central European culture from the 8th to 6th centuries BC (European Early Iron Age), developing out of the Urnfield culture of the 12th century BC (Late Bronze Age) and followed in much of Central Europe by the La Tène culture.*)
- (*Celts - The Celts were farmers and lived in small village groups in the centre of their arable fields. They were also a warlike people who fought against the already established people of Britain and other Celtic tribes.*)
- Immigrants from Urnfield. Use of the light plough confined people to the light soils of the chalk downs.
- c. 750 BC - By this time Iron Age underway - iron replaces bronze as most useful metal. Population about 150,000.
- c. 400 BC - Parisi tribe from northern France settle in Yorkshire. First brochs constructed. (*Broch - an Iron Age dry-stone hollow-walled structure of a type found only in Scotland*)
- c. 330 BC - Pytheas of Massilia circumnavigates Britain.
- c. 300 BC - La Tène artwork introduced from northern France. (*La Tène - The La Tène culture was a European Iron Age culture named after the archaeological site of La Tène on the north side of Lake Neuchâtel in Switzerland, where a rich cache of artifacts was discovered by Hansli Kopp in 1857.*)
- La Tène culture developed and flourished during the late Iron Age (from 450 BCE to the Roman conquest in the 1st century BCE) in eastern France, Switzerland, Austria, southwest Germany, the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Hungary and Romania. To the north extended the contemporary Jastorf culture of Northern Germany.*
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- International trade especially in metal begins to attract the attention of others.
- c. 100 BC - First wave of Belgic invaders settle in the south-east, establishing the Catuvellauni and Trinovantes tribes. First coins introduced. (*Belgae - The Belgae were a group of tribes living in northern Gaul, on the west bank of the Rhine, in the 3rd century BC, and later also in Britain, and possibly even Ireland. They gave their name to the Roman province of Gallia Belgica, and very much later, to the modern country of Belgium*)
- c. 80 BC - Second wave of Belgic invaders settle in Sussex, Berkshire, and Hampshire, establishing the Atrebates and Regnenses tribes.
- 55 BC - Commius, chieftain of the Atrebates, captured by the British after serving as an envoy to Rome.
- 26 August - Julius Caesar lands between Deal and Walmer, wins skirmishes against the British, and frees Commius.

- 31 August - Britons in war-chariots defeat the Romans. Romans return to Gaul.
- 54 BC
  - July - Julius Caesar invades Britain and defeats the Catuvellauni under Cassivellaunus.
  - September - Tribute fixed, and peace agreed between the Catevellauni and the Trinovantes, allied with Rome. Romans return to Gaul.
- 50 BC
  - Fleeing to Britain after a failed revolt in Gaul, Commius becomes chieftain of the Atrebates.
- 34 BC
  - Emperor Octavian makes an alliance with the Atrebates and Trinovantes.
- c. 25 BC
  - Tincommius, leader of the Atrebates, issues Roman-style coinage.

## Appendix

### Irish Overview from 10,000-100 BC

- 10,000 BC - Earliest settlers arrived in Ireland - crossed by land bridge from Scotland. These people were mainly hunters.
- 3000 BC - Colonists of the stone-age period reached Ireland. These people were farmers, and remnants of their civilization have been excavated at Lough Gur in Co. Limerick. They traded in a limited form in products such as axe-heads. One of their monuments, a megalithic tomb at Newgrange in Co. Meath, has survived.
- 2000 BC - Prospectors and metalworkers arrived in Ireland. Metal deposits were discovered, and bronze and gold objects were made. Items such as axe-heads, pottery, and jewellery have also been found.
- 1200 BC - More people reach Ireland, producing a greater variety of weapons and artefacts. A common dwelling was the "crannog", an artificial island, constructed in the middle of a lake.
- 500-600 BC - Celts started to arrive in Ireland, and continue to do so up to the time of Christianity. The Celts soon began to dominate Ireland.
- 200 BC - The Celtic culture of the La Tene civilization reaches Ireland.
- 100 BC - Arrival of the Gaels. (*The Gaels or Goidels are speakers of one of the Goidelic Celtic languages: Irish, Scottish Gaelic and Manx. Goidelic speech originated in Ireland and subsequently spread to western and northern Scotland and the Isle of Man. The Goidelic languages are one of the two branches of the Insular Celtic languages, the other being Brythonic.*)

*(Gaels or Goidels - a group of ancient Celtic tribes who settled in Ireland in the fourth century B.C. By mixing with the native pre-Indo-European population, the Gaels began the formation of the Irish people. In the fifth to the sixth century A.D. part of the Gaels migrated to Scotland, where they took part along with the Picts in the formation of the Scottish nationality. The name "Gaels" is still used for the ethnic group that inhabits the mountainous regions of northern Scotland and the Hebrides Islands.)*

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