Neither Celt nor Saxon

How the Irish, the British and the Anglo-Saxons Together Saved Civilisation

Introduction

A newcomer to the field of early medieval studies could be forgiven for thinking that some of the animosity between the erstwhile native Celtic inhabitants of Britain and the invading Anglo-Saxons is alive and well today amongst scholars. There is at times a rivalry of sorts between Celticists and Anglo-Saxonists that seems to mirror the troubled history of the relationship between England and her neighbouring nations. One area in which this “rivalry” manifests itself is in the debate surrounding the cultural and scholarly flowering that occurred in Britain and Ireland from the sixth century. Many Celtic scholars do not hesitate to claim credit for this and, in popular writing, such claims can become even more enthusiastic, albeit perhaps somewhat tongue-in-cheek. The finest recent example is Thomas Cahill’s How the Irish Saved Civilization. Reading the works of Anglo-Saxonists can leave a similar impression. John Leyerle, in his essay “The Interlace Structure of Beowulf” repeatedly describes the early medieval interlaced artistic style as Anglo-Saxon and does not acknowledge any possible Celtic or other influences, even when citing Hopkin-James’ work The Celtic Gospels (Donoghue & Heaney 136) or ascribing the production of the Book of Durrow to that centre of Celtic culture and learning in the seventh and eighth centuries, Iona (133).

Who, then, can claim credit for the cultural and artistic Golden Age experienced in Britain and Ireland in this period? Was it the Celts who fuelled this or the Anglo-Saxons? Or was it a team effort? How much cooperation and understanding was there between the various peoples of Britain and Ireland?

In order to elaborate the origins of this insular Golden Age, I will begin by examining the adoption of Christianity by the various peoples of the Isles because it enables the uncovering of similarities and contrasts between them, based on a set of common denominators, namely the Christian faith and its associated institutions. It also clearly demonstrates just how very interwoven the histories of these peoples are.

The intention of this investigation is to show that a culturally or nationally segregated view of this era is wrong or at best incomplete. I wish to demonstrate that it was in fact the synergy generated by the encounter between all of the cultures of the Isles that helped usher in a cultural Golden Age for the whole region. This was made possible by their newly adopted and shared worldview, which resulted in a remarkable degree of interdependence and cooperation. I also wish to show that, for many people involved in this endeavour, national or tribal identity was of little or no importance. Of course there were divisions experienced during this time but much scholarship has been devoted to them: I wish to focus on the great spirit of understanding and common cause that is evident in this age.

In a climate where a “strong sense of difference” and a “striking reluctance to acknowledge reciprocal debts” (Ward-Perkins 514) are sometimes still manifest, even the vocabulary used can be deemed to be biased or prejudiced. So, in order to be as impartial as possible, I will follow Norman Davies’ lead and collectively refer to that archipelago of islands consisting of Britain, Ireland, Man, the Hebrides, Orkney, Shetland and countless other small rocky protrusions, battered by the northern sea, not as the British Isles but simply as “the Isles”.

1 Norman Davies’ history of the “British” Isles is entitled The Isles. A History.
Beginnings – The Romano-Britons

By the early years of the fifth century, Britannia had been a province of Rome for nearly 400 years. Rome’s influence was pervasive, as the archaeological record shows, although not as completely so as in other regions closer to the empire’s heart. Although “not a word survives of their own literature” (Morris 35), it can be safely assumed that the Britons had benefited not only from Roman technology, architecture and social order but also from becoming part of a literate culture with its associated learning. Riding on the coattails of this Romanisation came the new faith of the Christians. By the start of the fifth century, the Church was firmly but not exclusively established in Britain: there is evidence to suggest that pagan beliefs “survived strongly to the very end of Roman rule in Britain” (Salway 512). Whether pagan or Christian, however, the Romano-Britons were very much a part of the greater Roman world, with cultural and economic ties to many other corners of empire.

In 400, this civilised existence of four centuries appeared to be continuing. But due to events far beyond Britannia’s borders, centralised Roman rule in Britain had crumbled only ten years later. The historian Zosimus, writing a century later, records Emperor Honorius’ advice to his subjects in Britannia to “look to their own defence” (Morris 29).

As Morris points out, however, there was no “Roman evacuation of Britain”, no ‘withdrawal of the legions’ and so “Roman civilisation … lasted some thirty years more” (Morris 30). But with many of the legions already redeployed to address more pressing emergencies nearer the centre of the empire, Britannia was easier prey for her “barbarian” neighbours – Irish from the west, Picts from the north, Saxons from the east – and more susceptible to internal divisions. A hundred years later, Britannia was in disarray, her economy in ruins and her government replaced by regional warlords. What had become of the civilised life of a century before? What art, learning and literate culture were still being sustained in the sixth century in what was once Britannia? And what rescued these things from complete obliteration in the face of continuing defeat at the hands of the invaders?

When Gildas wrote his De Excidio Britanniae around 540, he condemned in absolute terms the British Church of his day:

Britain has priests, but they are fools; very many ministers, but they are shameless; clerics, but they are treacherous grabbers [Sacerdotes habet Britannia, sed insipientes; quam plurimos ministros, sed impudentes; clericos, sed raptores subdolos] (Gildas 52)

He criticised secular leaders in a similar manner:

Britain has kings, but they are tyrants; she has judges, but they are wicked. They often plunder and terrorize – the innocent; they defend and protect – the guilty and thieving [Reges habet Britannia, sed tyrannos; indices habet, sed impios; saepe praedantes et concutientes, sed innocentes; vindicantes et patrocinantes, sed roes et latrones] (Gildas 29)

The old urban, Episcopal structure of the Roman church continued but had produced “churchmen who served the warlords” (Morris 356). Monastic institutions were known but “made no known impact upon churchman or layman” and were “as ‘torpid’ as the monasteries of Gaul” (356). These institutions were, however, the only haven for learning in a chaotic world, the “turbulent and unstable condition” of these times being “partly offset by the retreat of … culture into ascetic communities” (McNeill 35).

However, already in Gildas’ time, a “monastic reform movement on a mass scale” had begun, which “freed the church from dependence upon the warlords” (Morris 518) and “lay hold of the British church so strongly” that, in the sixth century, “all British churchmen of note were monks, including those who were also bishops” (McNeill 35). Central to this movement were places of learning such as Illtud’s famous monastic school of Llanilltud Fawr in Glamorgan, which produced a number of outstanding leaders such as Samson,
David and Gildas himself. Illtud was praised posthumously as “the most learned of Britons not only in Scripture but also in geometry, rhetoric, grammar, arithmetic, and philosophy” (McNeill 35). Reforms initiated by leaders such as Illtud and his students facilitated the transformation of the Church into a powerful force for the maintenance and eventual propagation of culture and learning in the Isles. And it was in this movement that the seeds of the subsequent Golden Age were sown.

**Sons of the Gael**

Ireland was of course never a part of the Roman Empire so it is difficult to say with any certainty when a written culture and Latin-based learning might have been introduced there. We do know for certain that such things came to be associated with Christianity, present in Ireland before Patrick’s arrival in around 432. Patrick established the new faith more firmly and his efforts were continued by others into the sixth century. At that time, the same monastic reform sweeping through the British church spread to Ireland and invigorated the monasteries there, which “were to retain an inexhaustible vitality for centuries” (Morris 372). Patrick himself was a Briton, as were “many others of the first Irish Christian leaders” and Enda, the first Irish abbot, was “schooled in Britain” (Morris 372). This influence was not all in one direction, however, for between Ireland and the British territories, “the stimulation of monastic life was mutual and continuous” (McNeill 72); “the Irish and British movements … each constantly renewing the inspiration of the other” (Morris 371). In fact, Ireland, Wales, Cornwall and Brittany experienced a type of “spiritual interdependence” (McNeill 73) during this period, a significant factor assisting this being the presence of substantial Irish colonies in South Wales.

Before the coming of Christianity, instruction in culture and learning in Ireland was entirely oral. There is evidence to suggest, however, that this took place in a structured manner, that “the institution of schools … was certainly much older than Christianity in … Ireland” and that the druids “formed communities” (Baring-Gould 11). This attitude to learning is echoed by Caesar’s description of the role of the druids in Gaul as “teachers of the young” (Chadwick *Druids* 45). The Church in Ireland “never repudiated the early cultural heritage, least of all the ancient concern for mature and protracted study” (McNeill 73). Ireland, then, was fertile soil for the seeds of monastic learning, which took root and flourished most vigorously, resulting in an “astonishing flow of youth into the monastic life” (70). One of these young people was Columcille, Columba, a member of the royal family of the Northern Ul Neill clan, who “with spiritual zeal combined with social standing” became a “great founder of monasteries” (Duncan 68). Derry was his first but it was the long-lasting results of his efforts on Iona that contributed so much to the nurture and promulgation of Christianity and its associated art, culture and learning within the Isles in the ensuing centuries.

**The Coming of the Saxons**

In many parts of the old province of Britannia, the sixth century was one of enormous change. As the monastic reform movement swept through fringe areas such as Cornwall and Wales, British control was being overturned elsewhere, with the inevitable consequences of social upheaval. Immigrants from the continent continued to arrive and settle, marginalising the native British inhabitants. These immigrants, the Angles, Jutes, Saxons and others, were pagan and had had little or no contact with written culture and learning. British society, as it had stood, was largely destroyed and the surviving inhabitants placed in a subservient position within the new Anglo-Saxon kingdoms that sprouted up in place of the previous order. In 597, Columba died, leaving a legacy of monastic institutions in Ireland and northern Britain that would continue to play a central role in the preservation and dissemination of culture and learning in the Isles for many years to come. In the same year, Augustine, sent by Pope Gregory, arrived in Kent and began his mission there. Thus began the official conversion, sanctioned by Rome, of the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity.
Although Augustine and his retinue came from Rome, the peoples of the Isles played a major role in his continuing mission to bring Christianity to the Anglo-Saxons, both directly and indirectly. The Irish, in particular Columbanus, had been instrumental in “inspiring the Franks … into greater involvement with the church” (Yorke 124) and it was from Irish-established monasteries in Francia that “a number of key missionaries in southern England” came, both “Irishmen and Franks” (124). There is also evidence of earlier British influence in Francia. For example, around 550, the British hermit John of Chinon “encouraged the Frankish queen Radegund to … establish her monastery at Poitiers” (Morris 383), and later, Columbanus, who had settled in Francia, “was saved from starvation during his first winter by Carantocus, abbot of Sauley” (383). Carantocus is a British name and there are many other place names today “from Brittany to Belgium” (383) that indicate the presence of British monks in the region during that period.

The enterprise of bringing the Anglo-Saxons into the wider Christian community extended to northern England in 625 in the person of Paulinus, sent, with others, from Rome by Pope Gregory in 601 to assist Augustine in Kent. Paulinus travelled north with Æthelburh of Kent, betrothed to King Edwin of Northumbria, as her chaplain. It is worth noting that Edwin probably didn’t encounter Christianity for the first time through Æthelburh or Paulinus, for earlier in his life, “during his exile at Gwynedd he would have come into contact with the British church” (Fairless 29). Edwin was baptised in 627 by Paulinus but there is a tradition “expressed in the Annales Cambriæ” that “it was Rhuin, son of Urren who was responsible” (Chadwick Celt and Saxon 33). Chadwick suggests that “the two stories may be reconciled by supposing that the baptism was a joint affair” (33), which would imply a high degree of cooperation between the British church and the Roman mission. In any case, in 632 Paulinus returned to Kent with Æthelburh following the death of Edwin. As a result, “the Roman mission in Northumbria … collapsed with the death of the Christian king” (McNeill 104). Shortly afterwards, in 635, the Irish monk Aidan was invited from Iona and settled on the island of Lindisfarne on the Northumbrian coast, where he established a monastery that would soon become a beacon of culture, art and learning to all of the Anglo-Saxon regions.

In Bede’s Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum, completed in 731, he is highly critical of the British clergy, who he believed “never preached the faith to the Saxons or Angles who inhabited Britain with them [ut nuncquam genti Saxonum sine Anglorum, secum Brittaniam involenti, verbum fidei praedicando committerent]” (Bede Ecclesiastical History 69). This is a belief that has proved remarkably resilient but needs to be considered in the light of Bede’s own views and prejudices. For Bede, it was his people, the English, who were, of all the peoples of the Isles, “elected by God to establish political hegemony” (MacDougall 31). His attitude to the British clergy and people is perhaps most brutally expressed in his description of the massacre of 1200 British monks from Bangor at the battle fought between the British and the pagan English king Æthelfrith. Æthelfrith is said to have “made a great slaughter of that nation of heretics [maximum gentis perfidae stragem dedit]” (Bede Ecclesiastical History 141). Bede seems to display some degree of satisfaction in telling this story! The church of the remnant British in Bede’s day still had not accepted the Roman tonsure and method for dating Easter, this not coming until the year 768 (see Chadwick Celt and Saxon 228). It was therefore seen by Bede as not just recalcitrant but perfidious, heretical, so it is to be expected that he would downplay or suppress any British involvement in bringing Christianity to his people and that he “was not inclined to seek out details of accommodation between British and Anglo-Saxon Christians” (Yorke 119). It is also likely that Bede simply lacked information from kingdoms other than Northumbria; for example, it is clear that he “received little information from western England” (119).

Furthermore, although there is some debate regarding the nature of the Anglo-Saxon takeover of much of what was once British territory, what is undisputed is the existence of significant mistrust between these peoples. If the Anglo-Saxon newcomers “were accustomed to see British in their own kingdoms as inferiors” (Yorke 119) then any free
and open exchange of ideas and beliefs between them would have proved problematic. Nevertheless, there are later indications that British clergy were in fact involved in this endeavour, for example Chad in Northumbria in 664 “is said to have been consecrated as bishop by Bishop Wine of the West Saxons with the aid of two British bishops” (120). Interestingly, although Chad was “an English pupil of Aidan” (Morris 395), his “name was British” (Morris 395).

So, within a remarkably short space of time, due largely to the efforts of the Irish and the British, the Anglo-Saxons had been drawn into the greater community of Christian Europe. They, in turn, had been infected with the same enthusiastic attitude to the support and dissemination of culture and learning via monastic institutions that the British and Irish had already displayed during the preceding century. Remarkably, this was brought about with at least some assistance from the British church, in spite of the almost complete annihilation of British rule within much of what had once been Britannia.

**Golden Age**

The stage was now set for a flowering of culture, art and learning unprecedented in the Isles. Northumbria during this period is a particularly good example of cooperation between Celt (predominantly Irish) and Anglo-Saxon. At Lindisfarne, founded by Aidan from Iona in 635, one of the outstanding artistic achievements of the era was realised, namely the production of the illustrated manuscript known today as the *Lindisfarne Gospels*. Establishments such as Lindisfarne were melting pots of influences from all over the Christian world, there being “a rich mixture of traditions influenced by Anglo-Saxon, Roman, Celtic and Mediterranean art” (Hull 24) evident in the artistic styles present in the manuscript. In the last years of the eighth century, another breath-taking example of insular art was created, known today as the *Book of Kells*. It is thought that it was produced primarily on Iona but finished at the monastery at Kells in Ireland. Hull points out that “it is not helpful to think in terms of a pure indigenous art, for early medieval art is a rich soup of the art and crafts of many peoples” (Hull 21). In referring to the art produced in the Isles during this period, he warns that “no single group, tribe, nation or culture can rightly claim to ‘own’ this art” (19). The style is sometimes referred to as “Hiberno-Saxon” (Hull 29) or “Celtic-Saxon” (Mackworth-Praed 1). There are many other examples of illuminated manuscripts from this period, perhaps not as sublime as the two already mentioned but superb nonetheless.

The same artistic style was applied to stone crosses erected throughout many parts of the Isles around this time. The same intricate, interlaced, swirling, spiralling patterns can be found carved into stone in places as widespread as the southwest of Ireland, the Pembrokeshire coast in Wales, the Isle of Man, Cornwall, the Hebrides and all across the north of England and the south of Scotland.

But not only the artistic works created in stone and on vellum during this period attest to cooperation and cultural fusion between Celt and Anglo-Saxon. Many monastic institutions, whether in Irish, British or Anglo-Saxon areas, were filled with members of all these nations. And numerous outstanding individuals were steeped in the culture and traditions of more than just their native people.

As already stated, Northumbria was a fine example of cooperation between Celt and Saxon. The Irishman Aidan’s immediate successors at Lindisfarne – Finan, Colmán and Tuda – were all Irish. Shortly after Tuda, Chad become bishop of York (the episcopate having been moved there from Lindisfarne); as already discussed, he was consecrated with the help of two British bishops and, although apparently an English speaker, had a British name, perhaps indicating some British ancestry. The links with Ireland during this time were very strong, as Bede tells us:
At this time there were many in England, both nobles and commons, who, in the days of Bishops Finan and Colman, had left their own country and retired to Ireland either for the sake of religious studies or to live a more ascetic life … The Irish welcomed them all gladly, gave them their daily food, and also provided them with books to read and with instruction, without asking for any payment (Erant ibidem eo tempore multi nobelium simul et mediocrium de gente Anglorum, quo tempore Finani et Colmanii episcoporum, reliqua insula patria, vel diuiniae lectionis et continentioris vitae gratia illo secesserant … Quos omnes Scotti libentissime suscipientes, victum eiusmodiam sine pretio, libros quoque ad legendum et magisterium gratuitum praebere curabant) (Bede Ecclesiastical History 313)

The Anglo-Saxon rulers of Northumbria were amongst those who benefited from this close association. Kings Oswald and Oswiu, sons of Æthelfrith, spent years in exile on Iona before returning to Northumbria to rule there in succession. It was Oswald who invited Aidan to Lindisfarne. In Oswiu we have someone who brought all three peoples together – an Anglo-Saxon steeped in Irish culture, fluent in that language “married Riemmelth, granddaughter of Rhun, who must certainly have been a British princess” (Chadwick Celt and Saxon 41). And in his son, King Aldfrith, we have perhaps “the most remarkable example of Celtic influence on early Northumbrian culture” (333). He was “a pupil of Aldhelm at the Irish foundation of Malmesbury in Wiltshire” and spent “many years in Celtic lands, first in Ireland then in Iona” (333). He even composed poetry in Irish. Chadwick summarises the Celtic influence on Northumbria as follows:

It is initially to the influence of the Celtic peoples, first the Britons within northern England and southern Scotland, and later the Irish from Iona and Ireland, that I would attribute the swift development of the Anglo-Saxons of Northumbria from barbarism to a lofty civilisation, especially in intellectual matters. (Chadwick Celt and Saxon 334)

As with the interaction between British and Irish in an earlier century, this interaction between Celt and Anglo-Saxon in Northumbria wasn’t all one way. Even as early as in Columba’s day in the sixth century, there were “at least two Anglo-Saxon followers, Genererus and Pilu, living on Iona” (Yorke 123). Many Anglo-Saxon clergy were also active in Ireland, there was even a Saxon monastery in Mayo, founded, according to Bede, by Colmán, which remained influential “down to the late fifteenth century, and even according to Ussher till 1559” (Chadwick Celt and Saxon 191).

There are similar stories from other parts of England. In Mercia, the earliest church was “wholly Celtic in character” (Chadwick Celt and Saxon 344). Much later in Wessex, Alfred, for his literary work, called on “four Mercian helpers” whose learning “was probably of Irish origin” (347). And Alfred’s “permanent teacher and advisor” (347), Asser, was of course a Welshman.

Perhaps the final word on the spirit of this era should come from that enthusiastic Hibernophile, Thomas Cahill:

What is far more impressive about the period as a whole …is the close fraternal cooperation between the Irish and the English. The Christian Saxons at all times received the Irish warmly … and borrowed generously from those generous elders. If Christians of different tribes had in all ages cooperated with one another as did these men and women, the world would be a very different place. (Cahill 202)

Peregrinatio pro Amore Dei

Such a blossoming of culture and learning could not be contained within the Isles alone. Many people from all parts and nations of the Isles were inspired to follow the paths of self-exile and take their learning, their faith, their energy to the continent, where, at this
time, “learning was almost extinct” (Crawford 92). As has already been mentioned, there were British monks such as John of Chinon and Carantocus in Francia in the sixth century. Columbanus and other early Irish pushed still further to “Switzerland, France, and Italy” (Crawford 94). They were followed by wave after wave of Irish *peregrinati*, joined from the eighth century by influential Anglo-Saxons such as Alcuin and Boniface. In fact, there were so many Irish landing on the continent that Heiric of Auxerre was prompted to say rather wryly, around 870, that “almost all Ireland, despising the sea is migrating to our shores with a herd of philosophers” (Heiric quoted in McNeill 178).

This willingness for self-exile for the love of God is a powerful symbol of the unity of spirit amongst the people of the Isles during this period. This was a shared yearning, expressed time and again in all of their surviving literatures. Forsaking the comforts of home and kin, they set off gladly across the waters in service of their God, usually never to see their homelands again. A number of Anglo-Saxon poems are infused with this, for example, *The Seafarer*:

So now the thoughts of my heart
urge me on, I strive
with the towering crests, the rolling salt waves.
My soul’s desire urges me on,
my spirit thrusts me forth. And I, far from native soil,
seek out the homeland of a foreign people.
……………… Indeed the joys of the Lord
burn hotter for me than this dead life,
 fleeting on this earth

*Forþon cnyssað nu
beortan geþohtas  þæt ic hean streamas,*
*sealdyþa gelæc  sylf cunnige -
monað modes las ðæt ic feor heonan
elþeodigræ eard gesce.*
……………… *Forþon me hatran sind
Dryhtnes dreamas  þonne þis deade lif
lane on londe*] (Mitchell & Robinson 279/280 trans. author)

The combined efforts of such men and women from all nations of the Isles were of incalculable benefit to culture and learning on the continent:

The devotion of the Anglo-Saxons of the seventh and eighth centuries saved much of the classical and sacred learning handed down to them from the Graeco-Roman world by transmitting it to the Frankish Empire a generation before the Danish Invasion burst upon the schools of England, as it burst on those of Ireland, where for some three centuries learning banished from the rest of Europe had found a welcome and a home. (Crawford 109)

The cooperative spirit experienced in the Isles during much of the period from the sixth to the eighth century and beyond unleashed an explosion of cultural and scholastic enthusiasm that spread throughout Europe, transforming as it went. McNeill quotes Ermenrich, abbot of Reichenau (in modern day Germany), who wrote in glowing terms of Ireland in 860, but they are words that can be rightly applied to the Isles and all of her people:

How can we forget Ireland, the island where the sun of faith arose for us, and whence the brilliant rays of so great a light have reached us? Bestowing philosophy on small and great, she fills the Church with her science and her teaching. (Ermenrich quoted in Crawford 192)
Jaded Genes

There have been some fascinating and very recent developments in the field of genetic research relating to the racial makeup of the population of England. They may shed some light on the nature of the encounter between the native British population and the newly arrived Angles, Jutes and Saxons. Research published in the paper by Weale et al. in 2002, “Y Chromosome Evidence for Anglo-Saxon Mass Migration” has been recently added to by a paper from Thomas et al. in July 2006, “Evidence for an apartheid-like social structure in early Anglo-Saxon England” (Thomas was also involved in the research for the Weale paper in 2002). In this new paper, Thomas argues, based on genetic data, that the British and Anglo-Saxon populations were deliberately kept apart for centuries during and following the arrival of the Germanic population from the continent. The Weale sample of genetic information in a band across central England shows a remarkable parity with similar samples taken in Frisia and significant difference to data taken from the north of Wales, geographically in line with the English samples. To explain these differences, Thomas suggests that the two people groups may have remained artificially separated for up to “fifteen generations” (Thomas 3).

Recent scholarship, however, has emphasised the likelihood of a largely British population being rapidly “anglo-saxonised” on a cultural and linguistic level, and thereby quickly becoming indistinguishable from the relatively small number of “original” Anglo-Saxon immigrants and their descendants. Law codes such as those of King Ine of Wessex from the seventh century would have encouraged this. During his reign, British/Welsh subjects in his kingdom were still being treated as inferior to their English contemporaries. It is not hard to imagine that, in response to such discriminatory laws, the embattled British population would have begun to adopt the language and culture of their new overlords, thereby quickly becoming “Anglo-Saxon”, just as in much later times in Ireland and Gaelic-speaking Scotland, the native tongue was rapidly replaced by the language of economic and social superiority. Chadwick asserts that the British would have “formed the basic population of the country which became Anglo-Saxon Northumbria” (Chadwick Celt and Saxon 327), which allows for the intriguing possibility that “many of the ‘Anglo-Saxons’ who conquered the north and west in the seventh and eighth centuries were in fact themselves Anglo-Saxons by adoption” (Ward-Perkins 521).

At first glance, the new information from Weale and Thomas appears to contradict these scholarly opinions. But Thomas also states that other evidence, both textual and archaeological, indicates that such an apartheid system, if it existed, is “likely to have originated in the immigration situation of the fifth and early sixth centuries” (Thomas 4) and have lasted “until the seventh century when this distinction began to break down” (2). Such a system may have been in place in the earlier centuries, but during the seventh century, as any remaining “distinction began to break down”, the peoples of the Isles also began to find their common ground in Christianity and learnt to work together, ushering in the Golden Age discussed above. Whether in the admirable, cooperative endeavours of the monks of the period, or in the shifting military and political allegiances between “nations” that occurred even after their adoption of Christianity, interplay, interaction and cross-fertilisation continued, even if social structures were devised to attempt to prevent this. Trying to filter out the achievements or pre-eminence of individual nations, tribes or races in such an environment, perhaps in the cause of a narrow, exclusive nationalism, is as limiting as attempting to apply a bland, global sameness to this remarkably diverse collection of interlaced and intertwined cultures and societies. On a rather ironic note, Ine himself had British forbears, being directly descended from the first king of (Anglo-Saxon) Wessex, Cerdic. Cerdic is a British name, as are the names of two others of Ine’s predecessors, Caewlin and Caedwalla.
Perhaps the final word on race, nation and tribe should come from the village of Cheddar in Somerset (Wessex). Here is a page from its tourist website:

**Cheddar Man**

Britain’s oldest complete skeleton, Cheddar Man, was buried in Gough’s Cave 9,000 years ago and discovered in 1903.

Your ancestors lived in the caves for 40,000 years, leaving behind many stone-and-bone clues to their lifestyle.

DNA tests in 1997 established that Cheddar Man still has descendants living in Cheddar! (Cheddar Village Website)

Long before anyone knew what a Celt or a Saxon was, there were people living throughout the Isles. Their descendants are still there today.

**Working our Works out of View**

There is, of course, another people group of the Isles that I have not included in this investigation, predominantly for the sake of brevity. They are the Picts. There is no doubt that they too played an important role during the early medieval period in the region, although their history is considerably less well documented than those of the other peoples of the Isles. Yorke summarises their incorporation into the Christian world as follows:

Bede believed that the Picts had received two missions and that the southern Picts had been converted by Ninian from Whithorn [in the fifth century] and the northern Picts by Columba from Iona [in the sixth century] (Yorke 128)

**Conclusion**

Whether in the “spiritual interdependence” of the Irish and the British in the sixth century, the lesser known interactions between Britons and their newly arrived Anglo-Saxon neighbours and conquerors, the enormously important influence of the Irish on the development of learning and culture in the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, or the combined efforts of all of them in re-introducing scholarship and re-invigorating faith in continental Europe, the cooperation made possible between these people through their embracing of a common belief system brought about an age of creativity and vitality not often equalled and of pivotal importance in the history of Europe. The history of the Isles during the early medieval period cannot be separated into discreet histories of individual nations or peoples. It was a period of collaboration and cross-fertilisation, of mutual participation in a great and exciting new venture. And only together was it accomplished.

**Afterword**

Bede provides us with the charming account of Caedmon, of how the old pagan Germanic poetic forms were reconciled with the new light of Christ in Caedmon’s creative
There is another way to read this story. It takes place in Anglo-Saxon Northumbria at the monastery at Whitby, founded on the Irish model by multicultural King Oswiu. Caedmon is a British name and in his time in the seventh century, the majority of the inhabitants of Anglo-Saxon Northumbria would have been British, whether those continuing to speak their original language or those in the process of adopting the new lingua franca. In the Old English version of the story (Bodleian Library MS Tanner 10), Bede describes Caedmon’s bashfulness:

He was a man established in secular life and into the time of advanced old age, who had never learned poetry. And for that reason, during festivities, when there was revelry and it was decided that they all should play the harp and sing in succession, whenever he saw the harp approaching him, he arose from the feast in shame and went home to his house [Wæs he, se mon, in weoruldhade geseted oð þa tide þe he wæs gelyfdre ylde, & næfre nænig leod geleornæde. Ond he forþon oft in gebeorscipe, ponne læræ wæs blisse intinga gedemed, þat heo ealle sceolden þurh endebyrdnesse be hearpan singan, þonne he geseah þa hearpan him nealecan, ponne æra be for some from pæm symble & ham eode to his huse] (Mitchell & Robinson 222 trans. author)

Now, anyone who has learnt a language as an adult will know that speaking the new language in front of a group is the most daunting of tasks. Is it not possible that this was the cause of Caedmon’s hesitancy? As a British speaker, speaking the learnt tongue, English, in front of a large group of merry companions (all of them native speakers?), let alone following that language’s poetic conventions, would have been a rather intimidating prospect. But in his dream, lying amongst the livestock, a gift of language is imparted to him. He awakes and finds he has mastery of his adopted tongue! And all the creative genius of his race, ancient, learned and for centuries Christian, is channelled into the strict meter and disciplined forms of the newcomers’ idiom. Here is the true miracle! For in Caedmon we see the reconciliation of old and new, of two cultures unable to encounter each other in fairness and equality, being fused together in harmony, in an environment profoundly influenced by a third. Old Caedmon, as symbol of the ancient British church and her venerable people

battered, beaten, bruised in spirit
now singing to their Saviour in the Saxon tongue.

As St. Paul would have said: “There is neither Celt nor Saxon, for you are all one in Christ”.

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