

EARLY BRITAIN – ERA SUMMARY

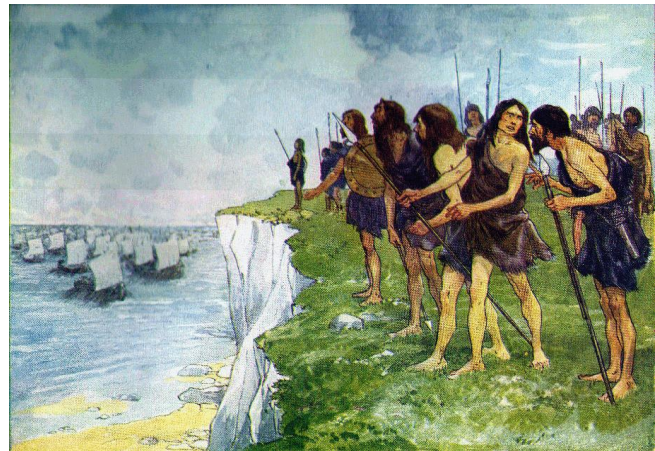
BRITISH MIDDLE AGES: 54 B.C. TO 800 A.D.

ROMAN CONQUEST OF BRITAIN TO FIRST VIKING RAID

The British Isles were originally settled by Celtic tribes, a race of tall, fair-skinned, but non-Germanic people. They were known for their druid priests, colorful fabrics, clever metal-working, and ferocious warrior spirit. The Romans had extensive contact with the Gauls, or southern Celts, who inhabited most of Western Europe, and by the time they sought to take possession of the British Isles, they had already conquering most of Celtic Gaul (France) and Hispania (Spain). [Julius Caesar](#) was the first Roman conqueror who sent ships across the channel in order to subdue the Britons in 54 B.C. and succeeded in vanquishing a local tribe, but he did not follow up his victories by establishing permanent forts in the region.

Roman Britain

It was not until more than one hundred years later, in 51 A.D. that [Claudius](#) led a second, more permanent [invasion of Britain](#). United under [Caractacus](#), the Celtic tribes continued to resist for several years, but at last submitted to Roman rule. For the most part, the Britons submitted peacefully, especially after [Agricola](#), a prominent Roman general became governor and began building schools, roads, aqueducts, demonstrating the best aspects of civilization. The only rebellion of Britains against Romans was led by [Queen](#)



THE SHORE WAS COVERED WITH MEN READY FOR BATTLE

[Boadicea](#) just ten years after the second invasion. Although the Romans were able to subdue the Britons in the south, they were never able to permanently conquer the wild tribes of Picts in the north. Emperor [Hadrian](#) therefore built a wall from the River Tyne to the Solway Firth, which composed the northern border of civilization. This same boundary remained the border between the countries of England and Scotland for more than a thousand years following.

Britain fared well under Roman rule. Many roads were built, trade and commerce thrived, and as Christianity spread throughout the empire, many native Celts became Christian. [St. Alban](#), who was put to death shortly before [Constantine](#) legalized Christianity, is known for being the first Christian martyr in Britain. [Saint Patrick](#) was a Celtic Christian who left Britain in 433 as a missionary to Ireland, and is well known for converting most of the Irish to Christianity. The Celtic Christians in both Britain and Ireland built monasteries, which were important repositories of learning. It was mostly the great Celtic Christians, lead by saints such as [Saint David](#), [Saint Brigid](#), [Saint Mungo](#), [Saint Cuthbert](#), and [Saint Columba](#), that kept Christianity alive in the British Isles during the years of struggle with Teutonic invaders.

Saxon Britain

In 402, Rome officially withdrew its legions from Britain, leaving the Celts to fend for themselves against the Pictish savages of the north and the Saxon pirates who raided the coastal towns. The Jutes, Angles, and Saxons were three northern German tribes and were well aware of the good roads, wealthy towns, and productive farmland that could be found in Britain. Almost as soon as the Roman legions were gone, these German tribes began their incursions. The first known Jute settlers were [Hengist and Horsa](#). [Vortigern](#), a Celtic king, sought their help in defeating his enemies and invited them in, but he soon regretted permitting them to settle in Britain, for they brought more of their tribesmen and soon threatened the Celtic kingdoms. There followed several centuries of war between the Celts and the invading Saxons, at the end of which the "Anglo-Saxon" barbarians were the uncontested rulers of the rich and prosperous southeast lowlands. The great Celtic heroes of these wars were the legendary [King Arthur](#) and his Knights of the Round Table, but we know little of this struggle between the Celts and Saxons other than that the Christian Celts had been driven to the far reaches of Wales, Ireland, and Scotland. Much of what we know about Britain in these Dark Ages was given to us by monks such as [Venerable Bede](#), who lived in monasteries in the British Isles which had been established by the 700's.

The next important event in British history was the conversion of [Ethelbert](#), a Saxon king, to Christianity by the Roman missionary [Saint Augustine of Kent](#). The Saxons were too proud to be converted by the despised Celts, but they were impressed by the embassy from Rome, and gradually Saxon England became Christian. The Celtic and Saxon churches continued to be governed independently and were not officially joined for many years after Saxon Britain became Christian.