

Under what circumstances would southern Britain have become Romance speaking?

The early 5th century saw the collapse of the western Roman Empire and the irresistible invasion of Germanic speakers into Roman territory. At the end of December 406 there was a mass crossing of the frozen Rhine; the Germanic Suebi and Vandals, together with the Alans (Iranian speakers, driven westward from the Pontic steppes by the Huns) made their way through Gaul and entered Spain. The Visigoths, under their king Alaric, had entered Rome in 410; Alaric died shortly afterwards, and the Visigoths turned westward through southern Gaul and into the Iberian peninsula, where the earlier Suebi, Vandals and Alans were constricted into corners of the peninsula. The Visigothic kingdom dominated the peninsula for 250 years until the Muslim invasion of 711.

Elsewhere in the western Empire, we find that by the end of the 5th century, the east Germanic Burgundians were holding south east Gaul, while the various Germanic tribes that made up the confederation known as Franks, united under the Merovingians, had assumed control over the rest of Gaul which, henceforth, would be known as *Francia* (i.e. France). The Ostrogoths had taken Italy, soon to be displaced by the equally Germanic Lombards (also known as Longobards or "Long Beards").

Yet when all the turmoil of the 5th century had settled, we find the linguistic boundary much the same as it was before the century began. Everywhere, the Germanic conquerors had accepted Christianity and the "Roman language" (i.e. the Romance vernacular of the area).

Why in Britain alone did the Germanic invaders hold onto their own language and their own polytheistic religion? *Prima facie*, one would have expected the fate of Britain to be similar to that of Gaul, Iberia and Italy. Indeed, the complete loss of a Romance language in Britain is even more surprising if one recalls that while the Romans held Dacia for just under 170 years, the Romanian language survives to the present day, whereas in Britain, which the Romans occupied for almost 370 years, the only surviving vestige of Vulgar Latin are the numerous word borrowings from this period that survive in modern Welsh.

In later times, Bede was to complain that the Britons neglected the various Germanic immigrants, making no attempt to convert them to Christianity. It was, indeed, left to missionaries from Ireland in the north, and from Rome in the south to bring Christianity to the Germanic peoples of Britain. But are we to assume that in Britain alone, the Christian Latin-speaking peoples simply turned their backs on the invaders and moved westward? This seems an unlikely scenario. Indeed, if this is what happened, then Welsh should be a Romance language, not a Celtic one.

There was clearly a breakdown of society in the urbanized lowlands of Roman Britain. Nothing else can explain the complete walkover of the Germanic immigrants (Saxons, Angles, Frisians and Jutes), the complete loss of Romance speakers and the survival of pre-Roman Celtic in the mountainous rural western areas. One can see then why the demoralized Celtic-speaking survivors turned in on themselves and regarded the Germanic invaders as God's punishment for their own shortcomings. But what caused this drastic depletion in the Romano-British population?

This is one of the enigmas of history. It has been suggested that Britain was badly hit by bubonic plague during the 6th century and that the population of the urbanized lowlands of Britain was thus severely depleted (cf. David Keys, 1999, *Catastrophe: an Investigation into the Origins of the Modern World*, London:Century, chapters 13 – 16); but that is a century too late to explain our enigma.

The only feasible circumstance that would, in my opinion, have left southern Britain Romance speaking is if the Romano-British population had suffered no depletion, and that the Germanic invaders had adopted Christianity together with the "Roman language" as they did in the other western provinces of the former Roman Empire.

Let us assume that in an alternate timeline, which we may call the "British Alternative Romance Timeline", this did happen. Our point of divergence is that the urban centres of Roman Britain suffered no depletion of population during the 5th century and that the Germanic peoples who settled in Britain adopted Christianity when they arrived and had no more effect on the proto-Romance language in Britain than did the Franks and Burgundians in Gaul, the Suebi, Vandals, Alans and Visigoths in the Iberian peninsula, or the Ostrogoths and Lombards in Italy.

More precisely, I assume that the young 5th century chieftan, Vortigern, emerged as the *Imperator Britanniae* and that among the mercenaries who helped Vortigern to fight off the Picts from the North were Hengist and his Saxon followers. While in Britain, Hengist and Vortigern became friends; Hengist and his followers accepted baptism, and their alliance was cemented with the marriage of Vortigern to Hengist's daughter, Ronwein. Hengist returned to the continent with two Christian priests and set about spreading Christianity among the Saxons and their neighbouring Angles and Jutes.

Some three years later, Vortigern was assassinated by a British rival, and Britain looked set to fall into civil war. Hengist, fearing for his daughter's safety, invaded Britain with a federation of Saxon, Angle and Jute Christian followers, took control, established peace in Britain and was the first king of the Vectingian line (so-called from Hengist's supposed ancestor who was named 'Vecta' in Latin).

Thus began the divergence of the British Alternative Romance Timeline from our own timeline.