

Annotated by Jason Rodriguez Taveras (University of Massachusetts)

An Essay on the Original Inhabitants of Great Britain

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THE history of every nation in the world begins in a dark and fabulous manner: nor can any history be more obscure than that of Great Britain. It is impossible to guess when, or by whom our island was originally peopled. The conjectures on this head have been various; but as they amount only to conjectures, and as the point itself is of no real importance, I shall pass directly forward to the first accounts upon which we may place any reliance. The original inhabitants are represented as consisting of two classes, Priests and Soldiers. The whole island, at least that part of it called South Britain, was divided into small provinces, each of which was allotted to the sovereignty of a prince. These princes lived in constant warfare and contention. The priests were distinguished by the name of Druids; but their power was not only confined to the ceremonies of sacrifice, and other religious parts of worship, it extended to the government of all civil judicature.¹ To the ordinary druids, (who were [Page 194] very numerous, but seldom or ever of mean birth²) was committed the administration of justice in the several provinces, the determination of all causes, and the judicial decision of right and wrong; but still subject to the supreme jurisdiction of one chief druid, who, in dignity, excelled all the rest; and who, in civil affairs, had the power of a king, while in religious matters, he might be called the reigning Pope of those days.

The military men were brave, even to a degree of fierceness. They had never felt the effects of fear, fatigue, or luxury. They had been bred in woods, and inured³ to hardships. Agriculture and merchandize⁴ had made little or no progress in the kingdom. The constant diet of the people was milk and flesh-meat, of both which they had great plenty, the whole island being filled with various kinds of cattle.

Such were the Britons⁵, when Julius Caesar invaded their country. He appeared, with his fleet, hovering upon the coast of England, August the twenty-sixth, in the year of Rome, 699, fifty-four or fifty-five years before the birth of Christ. His pretence for this invasion was the

¹ “Power of distributing justice” (*Johnson’s Dictionary Online*, “Juridicture, n.s.”).

² “Wanting dignity; of low rank or birth” (*Johnson’s Dictionary Online*, “Mean, adj.”).

³ “To habituate; to make ready or willing by practice and custom; to accustom. It had anciently *with* before the thing practised, now *to*” (*Johnson’s Dictionary Online*, “Inure, v.a.”).

⁴ Merchandise

⁵ “A native or inhabitant of Britain, or (now historical) of the British Empire” (*Oxford English Dictionary*, “Briton, n. and adj.”).

constant refuge which the Belgae, a people of Gaul,⁶ had received from the inhabitants of Britain, and the perpetual succours⁷ and assistance which were granted by the Britains to the enemies of Rome. The pretence was specious.⁸ The true motive was a thirst of [Page 195] glory. Caesar's ambition like the ocean he crost,⁹ had no bounds.

[...]

But however illiterate, or however unskilled in music our ancestors might appear, it cannot be denied, that they were not only couragious,¹⁰ but of a liberal nature, totally devoid of all low art, but not totally unversed in the policy of war. Caesar gives an account of them, which as it comes from an enemy is very much to their honour. He says, he had great difficulty in landing, being annoyed by their darts, and opposed by their cavalry; [Page 196] and when he had brought his troops to an engagement, he confesses, that the battle was maintained with sharpness on both sides. *Pugnatum est ab utrisque acriter.*¹¹ At length the Roman arms prevailed.

[...]

The peace on the side of the Britons was an act of necessity, not of choice. Perhaps it was no less so on the side of the Romans. They would have penetrated farther into the island; they would have visited the coasts and would have considered the various parts that might have afforded them a refuge in any future invasion, if they had not met with a people very different from what they expected. They expected wild savages, they met with real soldiers. They had been used to strike terror upon the continent, they only excited spirit and unanimity in a little island, where they found [Page 197] courage instead of fear; and order instead of confusion.

[...]

No. 4

ESSAY ON THE Original Inhabitants of GREAT BRITAIN CONTINUED.

[...]

⁶ “An inhabitant of ancient Gaul, a region of western Europe centred on the area that later became France; a member of a Celtic-speaking people inhabiting this area before and during the Roman period” (*Oxford English Dictionary*, “Gaul, n. and adj.”).

⁷ “The person or things that bring help” (*Johnson's Dictionary Online*, “Succour, n.s.”).

⁸ “Plausible; superficially, not solidly right; striking at first view” (*Johnson's Dictionary Online*, “Specious, adj.”).

⁹ Crossed

¹⁰ Courageous

¹¹ It was fought fiercely on both sides.

From the defeat of Caractacus,¹² the Britons were no longer looked upon as allies, but as tributary [Page 276] provincials¹³ to the empire of Rome: they were permitted indeed, in all controversies and rights, as were purely relative to themselves, to be determined by their own laws, and to be governed by their own princes; but in all public assessments, in levies¹⁴ for the army, and in many other instances, both the princes and the people, as far as the Roman arms had yet prevailed in the island, were equally subject to their conquerors. Their situation was particularly unhappy under Nero's¹⁵ government. The vices of that emperor soon grew to such a height, that the riches of the whole earth were insufficient to answer his demands. Every kingdom, every province in the world was taxed with great rigour; but the taxations imposed upon the Britons were more sensibly grievous and oppressive. Their state of bondage grew so very intolerable, that in the fifth year of Nero's reign, the Iceni¹⁶, whose queen Boadicea and her two daughters had been treated in a most vicious, cruel, and ignominious manner, resolved to rise up in arms against the Romans. The Iceni were joined by the Trinobantes¹⁷; and both these colonies put themselves under the command of the injured and outrageous Boadicea. Dio and Tacitus¹⁸ make the British army amount to an incredible number. There is no doubt that their forces were more numerous than had ever yet been assembled in Britain: and they judiciously chose to make this bold effort for their laws and liberty, at a time when Paulinus Suetonius, the Roman governor of Britain, was engaged in an attempt upon [Page 277] Mona,¹⁹ and had withdrawn all his forces into that island.

Boadicea, and her army were, at first successful; but alas! how very intoxicating qualities has success! The British heroine and her followers threw aside every sentiment of compassion, and became more inhumanly savage than their ancestors in the time of Julius Caesar. Their actions, as related by Dion Cassius, are too shocking to be related. Let us pass over them in silence, and if possible bury them in eternal oblivion.

Paulinus Suetonius, upon the alarm of such a sudden and extraordinary insurrection, reembarked his troops; and, without the least loss of time, marched to London, which was then only inhabited by merchants; but, as Tacitus informs us, was a city remarkably well supplied with all kinds of

¹² British chieftain of the Catuvellauni tribe until falling victim to the Roman empire's conquest in the year 50 A.D.

¹³ "A spiritual governor" (*Johnson's Dictionary Online*, "Provincial, n.s.").

¹⁴ "The act of raising money or men" (*Johnson's Dictionary Online*, "Levy, n.s.").

¹⁵ Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus reigned A.D. 54–68.

¹⁶ "An ancient British people inhabiting an area of northern East Anglia (including present-day Norfolk and adjoining parts of Suffolk, Huntingdonshire, and Cambridgeshire) from the 1st cent. B.C. to the 1st cent. A.D." (*Oxford English Dictionary*, "Iceni, n. and adj.").

¹⁷ Trinobantes or Trinovantes, one of many celtic tribes in Britain prior to the Roman conquest.

¹⁸ Lucius Cassius Dio and Publius Cornelius Tacitus were fellow Roman historians and politicians.

¹⁹ A Briton island which served as a refuge for fugitives

provisions. Suetonius pressed forward with unwearied expedition, fully resolved to take the earliest opportunity of forcing the enemy to a general battle. The exact spot where the battle was fought is not known; but we are told, that Suetonius, by choosing a very advantageous piece of ground, and by drawing up his men with all the military conduct of an experienced commander, gained so compleat²⁰ a victory, that Tacitus equals it to any of the glorious conquests obtained by the antient²¹ Romans.

Boadicea, as Dio represents her, was of a majestic presence, of a masculine countenance, tall in stature, with yellow hair.

[Page 278] This unfortunate Thalestris²² seems to have been a woman of a most intrepid spirit, and of a peculiar pride and fierceness, amounting even to barbarity. It is certain that she had received great injuries, such as might have provoked a milder disposition: but she had shewn²³ herself so utterly void of pity, and had put in practice such cruelties against the Romans, that she drew upon her own subjects in some degree an equal portion of revenge. Not a Briton received quarter: not even the women, who had attended their husbands to the battle. Boadicea could not bear the thoughts of submission: as soon as the victory was determined, she put an end to her life by poison; and this, I believe, was the first instance, in which the Romans saw themselves imitated in suicide by a Briton; would to God it had been the last!

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[...]

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ESSAY ON THE Original Inhabitants of GREAT BRITAIN, CONTINUED.

THE tranquility of Britain perished with Constantine the Great²⁴. He was survived by three of his sons*, all men of worthless, or of infamous characters. It would be time very, ill employed to notify any particulars of their reigns: let the imperial savages, and one or two of their successors pass by nameless and forgotten. Be it sufficient to say, that the ministers and officers whom they appointed, were their exact representatives; haughty tyrants, bloody inquisitors, and rapacious governors. Britain bore the share of burdens imposed upon her by these task-masters; and her inhabitants, like the Israelites, *were fruitful, increased abundantly, and waxed exceedingly*

²⁰ Complete

²¹ Ancient

²² The mythical warrior queen of the Amazons, a society of women warriors

²³ Shown

²⁴ A Roman emperor from 306 to 337 A.D. and the first Roman emperor to convert to Christianity.

mighty: otherwise how could they have withstood the inundation²⁵ of Picts²⁶, Scots²⁷, Saxons, and Attacotti²⁸, who, in the first year of Valentinian, broke [Page 434] in at once, though in different places, upon the Roman territories in Britain.

Historians have not told us in what manner the Britains sustained themselves against such numbers of invaders, till Severus²⁹ was sent to their relief in the year 368. But neither Severus, nor his successor Jovinus³⁰ were able to vye with the barbarians, who were now dispersed throughout the whole kingdom, and had made great devastations in the city of London.

[...]

[Page 437] Such was the dismal scene, some little intervals excepted, during the whole reign of Theodosius³¹, who died in the beginning of the year 395. He left two sons, Arcadius and Honorius. The western empire fell to the lot of Honorius, who was only ten years of age at the death of his father: he was committed to the tuition and conduct of Stilico. Under his government the Saxons, Scots, and Picts, those perpetual invaders of the British territories, were effectually suppressed and repulsed.

But Stilico was called off from his attention to the affairs of Britain, by the appearance of Alaric³² in Italy at the head of a most numerous army of Goths³³. The Roman troops were immediately summoned to the continent; as not only the empire, but the whole world seemed to be in danger of ruin, and was afterwards over run by this set of barbarians.

Here, I think, may be dated the end of the Roman government in Britain. Some assistance, some legions were sent now and then, upon the supplication of the Britons in the southern parts of the island, to relieve them from immediate destruction; but such succours were few, uncertain, and at last absolutely withdrawn.

At this particular period, let us endeavour to take a general retrospect of the Britons; their manners, their laws, and their government, as far as the obscurity, and the many chasms of our history will allow the search.

²⁵ “The overflow of waters; flood; deluge” (*Johnson’s English Dictionary*, “Inundation, n.s.”).

²⁶ Picts or the painted people, were an iron age people known for their tattoos and war paint

²⁷ Scottish people

²⁸ A group that unsuccessfully raided Rome in the 4th century

²⁹ A temporary commander for the Roman defensive effort against the invading barbarian tribes

³⁰ The successor of Severus

³¹ Theodosius I or Theodosius the Great was the last Roman emperor to rule over the entirety of the Roman empire

³² Alaric I, the first king of the Visigoths

³³ Visigoths, a group of Germanic barbarians led by Alaric

[Page 438] Caesar and many other authors describe the original Britons appearing in the wildest state of nature: savages living upon plunder, inhabiting woods and mountains, and ignorant of all laws and order. The description, I am afraid, is in many instances too true; but however licentious³⁴ and untamed these barbarians may have been, some form of government certainly subsisted amongst them, especially, as Caesar himself says, that the customs of the Britons were almost the same as the customs of the Gauls. But he speaks indeed there only of the Cantii,³⁵ who, living nearest to the Gallic shores, were most humanized.

In his account of the Gauls, he tells us in how great a degree of obedience the lower classes of people were held by the nobility; an obedience which could not have been formed or regulated without a complete and acknowledged system of laws. The particulars of those laws are not perfectly ascertained: they were always composed by the Druids, who never suffered any of their institutions to be committed to writing.

Some of them, however, have been handed down to us, and are sufficiently curious to be inserted. They are these:

I. None must be instructed but in the sacred groves.

II. Mistletoe must be gathered with reverence, and, if possible, in the sixth moon. It must be cut with a golden bill³⁶.

III. Every thing derives its origin from heaven.

[Page 439] IV. The arcana³⁷ of the sciences must not be committed to writing, but to the memory.

V. Great care is to be taken of the education of children.

VI. The powder of mistletoe makes women fruitful.

VII. The disobedient are to be shut out from the sacrifices.

VIII. Souls are immortal.

IX. The soul after death goes into other bodies.

X. If the world is destroyed, it will be by fire and water.

³⁴ “Unrestrained by law or morality” (*Johnson’s Dictionary Online*, “Licentious, n.s.”).

³⁵ A Celtic group, native to Britain

³⁶ “The beak of a fowl” (*Johnson’s Dictionary Online*, “Bill, n.s.”).

³⁷ “A hidden thing; a mystery, a profound secret” (*Oxford English Dictionary*, “Arcana, n.”).

XI. Upon extraordinary emergencies a man must be sacrificed. According as the body falls, or moves after it is fallen: according as the blood flows, or the wound opens, future events are foretold.

XII. Prisoners are to be slain upon the altars, or burnt alive, inclosed in wicker³⁸, in honour of the Gods.

XIII. All commerce with strangers must be prohibited.

XIV. He that comes last to the assembly of the states ought to be punished with death.

XV. Children are to be brought up apart from their parents, till they are fourteen years of age.

XVI. Money lent in this world will be repaid in the next.

XVII. There is another world, and they who kill themselves to accompany their friends thither, will live with them there.

[Page 440] XVIII. Letters given to dying persons, or thrown on the funeral piles of the dead, will faithfully be delivered in the other world.

XIX. The moon is a sovereign³⁹ remedy for all things, *as its name in Celtic implies.*⁴⁰

XX. Let the disobedient be excommunicated; let him be deprived of the benefit of the law; let him be avoided, and rendered incapable of any employ.

XXI. All masters of families are kings in their own houses: they have a power of life and death over their wives, children, and slaves.

The learning, and the religious tenets of the Druids are specified in various authors. Diogenes Laertius⁴¹ assures us, that their chief precepts were ‘the worship of the Gods; an abstinence from all kinds of evil; and a constant exercise of manly fortitude.’

³⁸ “A pliant twig or small rod, usually of willow, esp. as used for making baskets and various other objects; an osier; a withe” (*Oxford English Dictionary*, “Wicker, n.”).

³⁹ “Supreme in power; having no superiour” (*Johnson’s Dictionary Online*, “Sovereign, adj.”).

⁴⁰ “To involve or compromise as a consequence or concomitant” (*Johnson’s Dictionary Online*, “*imply*, v.a.”).

⁴¹ A biographer, best known for his “Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers,” which preserved some ideas of Greek philosophers.

Pomponius Mela⁴² informs us, that the Druids were remarkably expert in geography and astronomy^{*}: and Caesar says, that they taught the transmigration of souls, and by that means inspired their disciples with an absolute contempt of death, which, in their articles of faith, was looked upon only as a passage from one body to another; or, as Mr. Rowe expresses it from Lucan's description of the Druids,

“A stop, which can but for a moment last,

“A point between the present and the past.” [654]

[...]

By the departure of the Romans, the Britons looked upon themselves as delivered from their first conquerors: but they little considered that they were still subject to a worse set of tyrants, their own passions and disunion: no people upon earth are formed with more acute sensations, or deeper resentments against each other. These are the causes that fill our history with such frequent revolutions. Our climate is a representation of our nature: it is uncertain [...]

[...]

Britons left to themselves are like horses unbridled, and let out to pasture: they wince; they roar; they kick their heels towards heaven in all the wantonness⁴³ of liberty. Their freedom might be perpetual, [Page 445] if they knew how to direct it, or were conscious of their own strength; but they employ their time in self-destruction: they impolitically tread down the pasture which ought to feed them, and, inconsiderately striking at each other, they become so lame, as to stand in need of assistance from the first awkward⁴⁴ farrier⁴⁵ who presents himself.

[...]

We are told, that while Vortigern⁴⁶ was upon the throne, the Britons, finding themselves overpowered, and almost ruined by invasions from the Scots and Picts, sent a solemn embassy with most submissive letters to implore the assistance, and to require the immediate presence of their old enemies the Saxons. Is it possible to believe our ancestors guilty of so absurd a resolution? That they were factious, discontented, and unversed in the rules of government, is certain; but that they should imagine themselves under a necessity of seeking refuge from

⁴² The earliest known Roman Geographer

⁴³ Lack of care

⁴⁴ Awkward

⁴⁵ “A sho[w]er of horses” (*Johnson's Dictionary Online*, “Farrier, n.s.”).

⁴⁶ King of Britons at the time of the Scots and Picts invasion

Charybdis, because they were close upon the rocks of Scylla,⁴⁷ is highly improbable. How indeterminate are the historical accounts of this particular period, when the introduction of the Saxons is recorded in a [Page 446] manner that bears so little resemblance to truth? The Britons might not be willing, or more probably might not be capable to oppose the Saxons, when those invaders were arrived; but it is scarce credible to imagine that the Britons solicited⁴⁸ their arrival. However, by the generality of historians, we are to suppose that the sheep invited the wolves. A modern writer differs from many of his predecessors, and tells us, from Nennius,⁴⁹ that the arrival of the Saxons was accidental: the only fact that can be depended upon is, that *they arrived*. The year cannot be ascertained; in that point the chronologists differ.

[...]

[Page 447] The articles of compact between the Saxons and the Britons were these: *That the Saxons were to fight for the Britons against all foreign enemies, and were to receive the pay and maintenance from the nation for whom they fought*. In the general name of Saxons were included the Jutes and the Angles, who had enlisted themselves under the banner of Hengist and Horsa⁵⁰. These two brothers were the direct descendants of Woden, an Asiatic⁵¹ king, who came from Scythia into Europe, and seized those German territories that are now distinguished as Saxony. The Angles were inhabitants of Sweden. The Jutes were a people of Denmark.

[...]

No. 7

ESSAY ON THE Original Inhabitants of GREAT BRITAIN, CONTINUED.

[...]

The Saxons relished their present situation too well to exchange it: they refused to return; so that the Britons were compelled to rouse⁵² themselves from every symptom of lethargy, and to assume that glorious spirit of liberty, which, whenever exerted in a proper manner, renders the British nation a powerful, and a happy people. They unanimously rose up in arms against the Saxons, who were joined by the Scots and Picts.⁵³ Many battles were fought, and great numbers

⁴⁷ Scylla and Charybdis are sea monsters originating from Greek mythology as depicted in the *Odyssey*, as a choice between two evils.

⁴⁸ Solicited

⁴⁹ A ninth-century Welsh Monk

⁵⁰ Germanic brothers and leaders of the Saxons during the fifth century

⁵¹ Deriving from the continent of Asia

⁵² Rouse

⁵³ “A painted person” (*Johnson’s Dictionary Online*, “pict, n.s.”).

of men were destroyed; woods were burnt, churches [Page 514] were demolished, and whole cities were depopulated. At length, many of the Saxons returned into Germany: Their return was owing to the warm reception which they met with from our ancestors. The Britons might be plundered, but could not be absolutely conquered: they might be forced or betrayed into slavery, but they had native strength sufficient soon to unshackle themselves, and to burst forth again into the plains of liberty. The Britons, as a national body, or as individual men, seldom failed to appear with remarkable lustre⁵⁴ under misfortunes and oppressions. In milder times, they were either totally inactive, or impolitically⁵⁵ employed in disputes and animosities among themselves. They were naturally honest, indolent, and unsuspecting; too easily captivated with strangers; too hasty and irresolute, and, consequently, too easily led into danger and disasters. These were some of their earliest, and these will probably be some of their latest characteristics.

[...]

But what shall be said of king Arthur? or at what time shall we suppose that he reigned? since his very existence itself is call'd in question; and since he has unfortunately been celebrated by so many fabulous writers, that his true history can never be known. That he existed is beyond all doubt, and that he reigned is a point which many authors have sufficiently proved: but the actions of this prince, although in themselves brave and glorious, are so outrageously magnified, that the [Page 520] real soldier is lost in the fictitious giant-killer; and the genuine and noble form of the hero is so utterly dissolved, that from a substance, it becomes a shadow.

[...]

In the choice of Arthur, the Britons were entirely unanimous: he was an honour to the country where he was born, and a defence to the territories where he resided. From the departure of the Romans, to the settlement of the Saxons, Christianity, by degrees, and at different periods, had made a considerable progress into various parts of Britain. The first step, and certainly a very wise one, was the establishment of schools, in which the Britons in their earliest time of life were taught the doctrines of religion, and the principles of moral virtues. From such seeds alone must spring every flourishing branch of civil government and order.

[...]

By the perfection, I mean the division of the kingdom into seven Saxon monarchies.

⁵⁴ “Brightness; splendour; glitter” ([Johnson's Dictionary Online](#), “Lustre, n.s.”)

⁵⁵ “Imprudent; indiscreet; void of art or forecast” ([Johnson's Dictionary Online](#), “Impolitick, adj.”).

To give an history of the church, or to enter minutely into the ecclesiastical⁵⁶ government, would be a laborious, and a very unprofitable undertaking; neither suitable to the intent of these papers, nor available in any material point whatever. To our happiness, and to our honour be it spoken, we have long ago thrown off the yoke⁵⁷ of Rome: we have discovered her pretended miracles, and we have despised her idolatrous⁵⁸ vanities. The memorials of her errors need not be minutely specified, unless when they are connected, or interwoven with the systems of the state.

The Saxons were descended from those Germans who are often mentioned by Caesar, and fully described by Tacitus; and who appeared under the denomination of Goths and Vandals, titles dreadful to learning, and all the civil arts of peace! [Page 522] [...] [Page 523] [...] [Page 524] they were a rude, robust, warlike people; and subsisted under a kind of government, to which it would be difficult to appropriate any general name. It was neither oligarchy,⁵⁹ monarchy, democracy, nor commonwealth.⁶⁰

[...]

Whatever system of government might have prevailed among these northern nations, while they remained upon the continent, they were wise enough to perceive that the regal⁶¹ state was most natural, and agreeable to the disposition of the Britons. The first step of Hengist was to make himself king. Six other Saxon chieftains, whose names I have already mentioned, followed his example. The Britons fought often, and fought bravely in defence of their rights and privileges, particularly the liberty of chusing⁶² their [Page 525] own kings: they were overpowered by numbers; and time, often the best friend to conquest, inured them to Saxon monarchs, and to Saxon laws. Their own customs were forgotten, and the customs and religion of the conquerors were received. They even lost their name; and, from the Angles, will be called English, as long as the nation shall subsist.

The Saxons apparently laid the foundation of that mighty pillar of our state, a parliament: at least the basis of it seems to have been built upon the Saxon Wittena-Gemot. The column indeed has since been formed and fluted with all the power and skill of architecture; and when a sovereign is properly placed upon the capital, the justness of the several parts, and the exactness and beauty of the proportions will be universally admired, except by those who think the king a superficial

⁵⁶ “Relating to the church; not civil” (*Johnson’s Dictionary Online*, “Ecclesiastical, adj.”).

⁵⁷ “A chain; a link; a bond” (*Johnson’s Dictionary Online*, “Yoke, n.s.”).

⁵⁸ “Tending to idolatry; comprising idolatry, or the worship of false gods” (*Johnson’s Dictionary Online*, “Idolatrous, adj.”).

⁵⁹ “A form of government which places the supreme power in a small number; aristocracy” (*Johnson’s Dictionary Online*, “Oligarchy, n.s.”).

⁶⁰ “A polity; an established form of civil life”

⁶¹ “Royal; kingly” (*Johnson’s Dictionary Online*, “Regal, adj.”).

⁶² Choosing

ornament. The Wittena-Gemot of the Saxons was an assembly in which all public and private business was transacted. Leagues of alliance and affinity with other nations were there determinately passed: inconveniencies⁶³ were remedied, and rights were established, and sanctified by law. The assembly was composed of king, lords, and freemen. The debates were concluded by votes, and the numbers were determined by voices, unless when the noise was doubtful, and the majority uncertain: in that case the votes were taken severally.

[...]

From the arrival of St. Augustine,⁶⁴ to the end of the heptarchy,⁶⁵ by the establishment of a single monarch over the whole kingdom of England, is a space of about two hundred and thirty years. Throughout that period we might expect to find many remarkable events in a monarchy, consisting of seven royal branches; but scarce any part of the English history is more sapless and unfruitful. The scenes which heretofore represented civil wars between the native Britons, were now only changed into civil wars between those Britons, and the engrafted Saxons.

[...]

No. 8

ESSAY ON THE Original Inhabitants of GREAT BRITAIN, CONTINUED.

OUR modern writers, with indefatigable⁶⁶ industry, have given us a most exact historical dictionary of the several Saxon monarchs, who successively reigned in the seven kingdoms of Britain. Dictionaries are always voluminous, but always useful; they are lesser libraries, and the compilers of them are entitled to the highest acknowledgements from all lovers of learning. I have gone through these biographical lexicons⁶⁷, which, like the chronicles of the kings of Israel, give us many barbarous names that tend rather to weary than to indulge our curiosity. The times indeed are at such a distance, and the face of government has been long since so entirely changed, that we are scarce any farther interested in the Saxon heptarchy, than as it serves to continue and compleat⁶⁸ the line of our English history.

⁶³ Inconveniences

⁶⁴ St Augustine of Hippo's philosophy synthesized Christian and pagan thought and was profoundly influential in the Middle Ages.

⁶⁵ "A sevenfold government" (*Johnson's Dictionary Online*, "Heptarchy, n.s.").

⁶⁶ "Unwearied; not tired; not exhausted by labour" (*Johnson's Dictionary Online*, "Indefatigable, adj.").

⁶⁷ "A dictionary; a book teaching the signification of words" (*Johnson's Dictionary Online*, "Lexicon, n.s.").

⁶⁸ Complete

Within the space of sixty years from the arrival of Augustine, the people of England were entirely converted from paganism to christianity; but, as in general they had been converted by monks, most of them were taught, that a monkish life was the [Page 594] surest, and perhaps the only road to heaven: and, in obedience to this doctrine, several of the kings renounced their thrones, quitted all commerce with the world, and retired into monasteries.

[...]

The outward forms of the Romish⁶⁹ church were so much finer and more embellished than the plainer ceremonies of Woden and Thor,⁷⁰ that the people were easily induced to quit paganism for what was called christianity. The ignorance of the times contributed much to their conversion. All appearances of learning were centered in the priests; and, with the true art of sacerdotal⁷¹ cunning, they pointed out different paths to heaven, according to the different dispositions of the persons who were desirous to travel the road: so that after the first monkish times of melancholy and retirement, journies were undertaken to Rome, miraculous images were gorgeously dressed up, various sorts of idolatry⁷² were practised in the most public manner, with equal devotion by the princes, and their subjects of every degree. The truth is, many of the heptarchical monarchs were either weakly devout, or wickedly inhuman; governed by hypocritical prelates⁷³, or governing by lawless tyranny; inferior to common sense, or superior to all religion and morality; tamely submissive or brutally destructive. How was it possible for such a government to subsist? only by the accidental succession of some kings of abilities and understanding: by the prudence of some prelates, who at the same time that they supported the church, defended the state; and by the wise resolutions taken in the wittenagemot,⁷⁴ or great council of the land. During the intestine wars of the heptarchy, it is to be presumed that this council could neither [Page 602] meet so often, nor bear so great an influence, as in more peaceable and settled times; yet it was the most essential institution of the Saxon government. Before the arrival of St. Austin, few records are to be found of it. The clergy, as they grew more powerful, became very leading members in the wittenagemot. They appeared, and gave their voices in that assembly; and at the same time they lost no opportunities of assuming all possible power and prerogatives⁷⁵ entirely to themselves, so as to become superior to the king in most if not all ecclesiastical affairs. Thus in one of the

⁶⁹ “Of, relating to, or belonging to the Roman Catholic Church; adhering to or favouring Roman Catholic doctrine, practice, etc.; Roman Catholic” (*Oxford English Dictionary*, “Romsih, n. and adj.”).

⁷⁰ Gods who are father and son in Norse and Anglo-Saxon mythology

⁷¹ “Priestly; belonging to the priesthood” (*Johnson’s Dictionary Online*, “Sacerdotal, adj.”).

⁷² “The worship of images; the worship of any thing as God which is not God” (*Johnson’s Dictionary Online*, “Idolatry, n.s.”).

⁷³ “An ecclesiastick of the highest order and dignity” (*Johnson’s Dictionary Online*, “Prelate, n.s.”).

⁷⁴ Witenagemot

⁷⁵ “An exclusive or peculiar privilege” (*Johnson’s Dictionary Online*, “Perogative, n.s.”).

canons passed by a synod,⁷⁶ anno,⁷⁷ we find this expression, *Neque de hac re aliquid pertineat ad regis saecularis imperium*. “With this affair,” [the government and appointment of abbots, abbesses, presbyters, and deacons,] “the king has nothing to do.”

But what are become of the native Britons? Lost and buried as it were among the Saxons. Few, very few remaining, and those in corners of the island, unseen and unknown. Unhappy people! hidden at home in rocks and fastnesses, or driven abroad, like vagabonds, in quest of habitations: destroyed by wars, wasted by time, wounded by persecution, and sunk into eternal oblivion.

To the Saxons therefore the present race of English may be said to owe their original, those parts of Wales and Cornwall excepted, whose inhabitants by their mountainous situation may possibly have flowed in an uninterrupted channel, from the Aborigines⁷⁸ of our island.

It is asserted, if I am not mistaken, by Bede,⁷⁹ that now and then a true British chieftain stepped into [Page 603] one of the thrones. This might have happened towards the latter end of the heptarchy, when all was confusion; but the successive line of kings, in general, consisted of English Saxons; not chosen in an hereditary, nor absolutely in an elective manner, oftner⁸⁰ by caprice than by judgment. They sometimes succeeded by accident, sometimes by cunning, sometimes by force. Many of them were murdered, many were dethroned, many fell in battle, and many crept into religious cells.

Hitherto⁸¹ I have represented the black part of the tablet; let us turn to a fairer side. The Britons certainly owe the first institution of order and government to the Saxons. The Saxons owe the first institution of their church-government to St. Austin. Their civil policy, which they transplanted with them, had been long established in Germany: it was Gothick,⁸² but it was regular. As soon as they settled themselves in England, a king became an additional part of their constitution. The contract between the king and his people was mutual; they were bound to defend each other: the properties on both sides were ascertained: the people had their patrimonies,⁸³ the king had his regalities.

⁷⁶ “An assembly, particularly of ecclesiasticks. A provincial synod is commonly used, and a general council” (*Johnson’s Dictionary Online*, “Synod, n.s.”).

⁷⁷ Year

⁷⁸ “The earliest inhabitants of a country; those of whom no original is to be traced; as, the Welsh in Britain” (*Johnson’s Dictionary Online*, “Aborigines n.s.”).

⁷⁹ Anglo-Saxon monk, historian and author

⁸⁰ More often

⁸¹ “To this time; yet; in any time till now” (*Johnson’s Dictionary Online*, “Hitherto, adv.”).

⁸² Gothic

⁸³ “An estate possessed by inheritance” (*Johnson’s Dictionary Online*, “Patrimony, n.s.”).

The nobility were next to the king in dignity. This high rank could only be attained by remarkable and brave actions; either by great achievements in war, or by sagacity⁸⁴ and wisdom in peace. The honour, when attained, went in succession to the next heir, but was still to be forfeited by baseness and degeneracy.

The subsequent order of people were the freemen: they were joined in judicature with the nobility: [Page 604] they were above all arbitrary power; nor were they liable to any compulsive law to which they did not voluntarily give their consent. They were much more numerous than the nobles, and consequently were the chief bulwarks⁸⁵ of legal justice, and every other branch of liberty. They were divided into two sets, being chosen to the rank of freemen, either from their superior merit, or from their great military service, and the large possessions which they had gained in war.

The inferior and meanest classes of the Saxons were in a state of bondage; subject to the will, disposition, and commands of their landlords. They were called villains, because the lands which they occupied were held in villenage,⁸⁶ or servitude. These were the only people who were exempted from the power of voting in the wittenagemot.

[...]

The heptarchy was a fabric which for some years had been growing too heavy for itself. Several of the partitions which had been framed and fitted within it, had either burst asunder,⁸⁷ or were forcibly destroyed. The building had been tottering long before it fell. A skilful artist was wanting to gather up the best materials, and to form a new edifice of magnificence and duration. Such an architect was found in the person of Egbert, king of the West Saxons.

No. 9

ESSAY ON THE Original Inhabitants of Great Britain, CONCLUDED.

[...]

How much is it to be regretted, that among such a number of monarchs, so few acts of greatness, policy, jurisprudence⁸⁸ appear? how intricate and dark, how teasing⁸⁹ and immaterial are the several historical accounts, from the invasion of Julius Caesar, to the reign of Egbert, king of the

⁸⁴ “Acuteness of discovery” (*Johnson’s Dictionary Online*, “Sagacity, n.s.”).

⁸⁵ “A fortification; a citadel” (*Johnson’s Dictionary Online*, “Bulwark, n.s.”).

⁸⁶ “Baseness; infamy” (*Johnson’s Dictionary Online*, “Villeinage, n.”).

⁸⁷ “Apart; separately; not together” (*Johnson’s Dictionary Online*, “Asunder, adv.”).

⁸⁸ “The Science of law” (*Johnson’s Dictionary Online*, “Jurisprudence, n.s.”).

⁸⁹ Teasing

West Saxons, and afterwards sole king of England? The history of the Pagans during that period, produces nothing but blood and slaughter. The history of the christian church, nothing but ridiculous miracles and fulsome enthusiasm. All we perceive is, that the several monarchies were continually at war with each other; the motives and incitement of these wars scarce ever appear. We know that [Page 696] there was a general assembly, consisting of the chief and greatest men in each kingdom: we know that it was called the Wittenagemot, and in that assembly were debated, regulated, and ordered, the affairs of the nation. Such a glimmering of light is very pleasing, as it seems to shew us the rise and bulwark of our freedom, a parliament. This is almost the only interesting point of the heptarchy. The tedious narratives of privileges, revenues, and immunities granted to the church, the endowments of monasteries, and the power of the clergy, are not only unprofitable and disgusting, but totally useless and despicable: at least they must appear so to these times, when the pope can scarce keep up his authority among the roman catholic states. When his power as a prince is no longer dreaded, and his power as a pope held in a very diminutive⁹⁰ degree of veneration.⁹¹ When, on the other hand, sense, liberty, industry, and courage, unite and coincide to fortify, preserve, and augment the present glorious and happy state of England.

⁹⁰ “Small; little; narrow; contracted” (*Johnson’s Dictionary Online*, “Diminutive, adj.”)

⁹¹ “Reverend regard; awful respect” (*Johnson’s Dictionary Online*, “Veneration, n.s.”).