

A British Chronicle: from a Group of Scattered Islands to the Centre of an Empire

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses Britain both as geographical and historical entity. Having played second fiddle in the Celtic world and in the Roman Empire, Britain, during the Middle Ages, started to stand on its own two feet. At the eve of the Modern Era, Britain was already a power in the European arena; soon it became an empire, and now runs the risk of going back to square one, becoming, again, a mere group or scattered islands. Let us hope that this will not happen! The Author thanks Mr Rafael Frota for his important suggestions.

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London

Photo taken by the Author

INTRODUCTION

Since the time of the Greeks – if not before –, humanity has been aware of the close relationship between history and geography. The German geographer and ethnographer Friedrich Ratzel (1844-1904) is one among many other distinguished Western scholars to insist on the

inextricable connection between those two sciences officially inaugurated by the Greek Herodotus (c. 484-c. 425 BC).¹ It is no accident that Herodotus is considered not only “father of history”, but also “father of geography”.² Such connection becomes particularly evident when we think about Britain, an archipelago which turned into an empire that sparked the Industrial Revolution and ended up by encompassing almost 25% of the surface of the earth. Formed by four different countries (England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) and a myriad of smaller islands (which are indeed over a thousand [Hebrides, Shetland, Northern Isles...]) around Great Britain (which, besides being the largest of all the British Isles, holds first position in terms of size in the European ranking, and ninth, considering the world as a whole) and Ireland, Britain (or United Kingdom) has a surface of approximately 94.000 sq miles, which make of it the 78th largest country in the world, slightly smaller than Guinea and slightly larger than Uganda. Today Britain remains the owner of the

¹Before Hannibal (c. 247 B.C.-c. 183 B.C), the Pyrennes and the Alps were impenetrable walls; after him they were not anymore (cf. Friedrich Ratzel. *Anthropogeographie*, Stuttgart, J. Engelhorn, 1882, V, 1).

²See, for instance, Herodotus. *Histories*, IV, 191 et passim; and Rafael Arrillaga Torrens. *Introducción a los problemas de la Historia*, Madrid, Alianza Editorial, 1982, p. 8.

so-called “British Overseas Territories”, which are the remnants of the extinguished British Empire, the largest and maybe most powerful one the world has ever seen, having comprised approximately a quarter of the world’s landmass, reached its pinnacle in the 1920s and lasted almost four centuries (1583-1997), from Queen Elisabeth I (1533-1603) to Queen Elisabeth II (1926). Unlike Russia, Britain turned its attention to the waters that surrounded it; the British Empire was a maritime one. In other words, “The English did it overseas; the Russians did it overland.”³ It should not be forgotten, either, that Britain bequeathed humanity great names like Bede the Venerable (672-735), Saint Thomas of Canterbury (1119/1120-1170), Saint Thomas More (1478-1535), William Shakespeare (1564-1616), Samuel Johnson (1709-1784), Joshua Reynolds (1723-1792), Charles Dickens (1812-1870), Florence Nightingale (1820-1910), Gilbert Keith Chesterton (1874-1936), Dorothy Lawrence (1896-1964), Margaret Thatcher (1925-2013) and Roger Vernon Scruton (1944-2020), to mention just a few among uncountable others.



Stonehenge

Photo Taken by the Author

THE HOMO BRITANNICUS IS “BOTH INWARD AND OUTWARD LOOKING”

Being an archipelago has a lot to do with Britain historical destiny: “Britain is an island, and that fact is more important than any other in understanding its history. Only twice has Britain ever been conquered, once in 55 BC by the Romans and again in 1066 by the Normans”.⁴ Encircled by rough waters, Britain has always been a challenge for the invaders (were they Rhineland’s tribes, Romans, Anglo-Saxons or Vikings), who, in the case of getting to

³Norman Davies. *Europe: East and West*, London, Pimlico, 2006, p. 140.

⁴Roy Strong. *The Story of Britain from the Romans to the Present*, London, W&N, 2018, p. 1.

disembark, needed to be in small numbers. Another rule is this: once in Britain’s land, the conquerors “were absorbed into the existing population”.⁵ Such is, perhaps, one of the reasons why the *homo britannicus*— if one can call him so — became “both inward and outward looking”.⁶ Indeed, “The British still cherish their island as a domain separate and inviolate from the rest of the world”.⁷

Human presence is a reality in Britain since over 800,000 ago. *Hominessapientessapientes* (i.e., representatives of the only human species extant today) started to arrive about 30,000 BC – not forgetting that, until c. 14,000 years ago, Great Britain “was connected to Ireland, and as recently as 8,000 years ago it retained a land connection to the continent, with an area of mostly low marshland joining it to what are now Denmark and the Netherlands.”⁸ Britain is rich in pre-historical sites, being more than four millennia old Stonehenge the most famous of all. Produced at a time when written records did not exist in that part of the Old World, the purpose of Stonehenge’s construction raises much more questions than answers, let alone a number of myths. Some arrangements suggest symbolical connections with the winter solstice’s sunset and the summer solstice’s sunrise. As for further astronomical associations concerning the precise significance of Stonehenge for those pre-historical British, such as the eventual existence of a pagan worship of the sun, this is still food for thought. Undeniable, however, is the stunning aesthetic effect it still causes in everybody who sees that megalithic monument.⁹

Uncertainty and doubts in general also surround the Celts (especially in what regards ethnic, linguistic and cultural factors), this remarkable Indo-European people who emerged probably in Central Europe around 1200 BC and spread through most of what is now called Europe, including practically the whole of the British Islands. The very names “London”, “Britain”, “Ireland”, “Scotland” and “Wales” are all reminiscences of the Celtic culture, which

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⁸Robin Edwards et al. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Britain#History.

⁹Cf. N. A. Dmitrijewa et alii. *Allgemeine Geschichte der Kunst: die Kunst der Alten Welt* (translated from Russian into German by Ullrich Kuhirt et alii), Leipzig, Veb E. A. Seemann, 1961, I, p. 43.

already says a lot. Consider also the philosopher John Scotus Eriugena (c. 815-c. 877). Strictly speaking, the double by name of the author of the *De divisione naturae* (the first “cathedral of ideas written in the West”¹⁰) means nothing less than “Irish Irish” (= “Celtic Celtic, if we prefer), as the Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986) once said, with the wit that was peculiar to him.¹¹ Anyway, “One thing is certain: modern linguistic research has proved beyond doubt that the languages of the Celts are cognate both to Latin and to Greek, and to most of the languages of modern Europe. The Celts were the vanguard of a linguistic community that can be more clearly defined than the archaeological communities of prehistory. The Celts stand at the centre of the Indo-European phenomenon.”¹² Last but not least about the Celts, it must be remembered that the Carolingian Renaissance (late 8th century to the 9th century), that came to be the *cellula mater* of the Renaissance properly said (late 13th century to the 16th century)–, had as protagonists intellectuals of Celtic origin, being John Scotus Eriugena one of them.¹³

By the middle of the 1st century BC, the Romans started to bring to the archipelago their formidable legions, responsible for the *pax romana*, together with the Latin language and writing, and the Greco-Roman culture in general. Curiously, *Britannia* – which is how the Romans called the part of the archipelago which they came to dominate (Scotland and Ireland, for instance, were never Romanized [consider the Hadrian’s Wall]) until 410 AD – is the only ex-province of the Western part of the Roman Empire which did not choose a variant of Latin as its official and definitive language (think of France, Portugal, Spain, Italy, Romania and so on). Roman Britain “was a fragile civilisation on the fringes of a mighty empire. When the empire began to break up, the legions were called back from its

frontiers to cope with threats at its heart. (...) Once the army and the fleet were gone, Britain was left unprotected and devoid of any central authority”.¹⁴ More than ever, Britain had become ripe for invasion. German tribes, namely Angles, Saxons and Jutes did not let the grass grow under their feet and sat sail for the British shores; a few centuries later, came the Vikings.¹⁵ From the Old English spoken by the Angles and Saxons stemmed the modern English language, used nowadays all around the British Islands and turned into *lingua franca* in the whole planet.



St Gregory the Great and St Augustine

(Westminster Cathedral)

Photo taken by the Author

BRITISH EMPIRE

Christians arrived in Britain at the beginning of the third century, or maybe earlier. Mention must be made of at least four saints who lived between the Late Antiquity (313-476) and the Early Middle Ages (476-1000): the Romano-British Christian missionary Saint Patrick, who is known to have lived in the fifth-century and brought the Gospel to Ireland – hence his epithet of “Apostle of Ireland”; Saint Brigid of Kildare or Brigid of Ireland (c. 451-525), who was nun, abbess and foundress of several Irish monasteries; the Irish missionary and abbot Saint Columba (521-597), who evangelised what is now Scotland; the Italian Benedictine monk Saint Augustine of Canterbury (first third of the 6th century-c. 604), who was sent by the Pope Saint Gregory I as head

¹⁰Jacques Paul (quoted by Sylvain Gouguenheim in *Aristóteles y el islam: las raíces griegas de la Europa Cristiana* [translated by Ana Escartín], Madrid, Gredos, 2009, p. 57).

¹¹Jorge Luis Borges. *Professor Borges: a Course on English Literature*, New, York, New Directions Publishing, 2013, p. 104.

¹²Norman Davies. *Europe, a History: a Panorama of Europe, East and West, from the Ice Age to the Cold War, from the Urals to Gibraltar*, New York, Harper Perennial, 1998, p. 84.

¹³Cf. Thomas Woods, Jr. *How the Catholic Church Built Western Civilization* (with a new foreword by Cardinal Antonio Cañizares), Washington, Regnery, 2012, pp. 15-23 et passim.

¹⁴Roy Strong. *The Story of Britain from the Romans to the Present*, op. cit., p. 17.

¹⁵Cf. João Vicente Ganzarolli de Oliveira. “Scandinavian Chronicle: from Geology to History or from Stones to Mankind”, in *Annals of Geographical Studies*, II, 2, April 2019, pp. 1-4.

of an evangelising mission (the famous *Gregorian Mission*), aiming at converting the Anglo-Saxons – for whom, till then, “unlike the Britons, the whole existence was war”.¹⁶ Indeed, “The real turning point was the papal mission to the south-east led by St Augustine. The King of Kent, Ethelbert, was married to a Christian Frankish princess who practised her faith within the royal household. When Augustine landed, the king, fearing magic, insisted that his meeting with the missionaries take place beneath an open sky. Out of this came the grant of a place in Canterbury in which they could live and had permission to preach”.¹⁷

French renowned medievalist Georges Duby (1919-1996), focusing on France of the year 1000, highlights the existence of vast inhabited areas, true empty spaces where man is still a “rarity” (“*l’hommeest encore rare*”).¹⁸ The same assertion applies for Britain of that time. The major political event of the 11th century in the archipelago was undoubtedly the Battle of Hastings (1066), “which launched a period of Norman rule that was as influential as that of the Romans”.¹⁹ The Normans, an ethnic group who “arose from the mixture of Scandinavians and Franks, preserved from their Viking ancestors nothing but juridical elements, notably the law of the sea and the criminal legislation.”²⁰ In any case, “Nothing was quite the same after 1066”.²¹ Under the Normans, Britain, in spite of its continuous internal disturbances, became an European power. The Black Death of 1348, the Hundred Years War with France (1337-1453) and the War of the Roses (1455-1487) did not alter its strength as a nation either. Imperial days were ahead.

The foundations of the British Empire “were laid when England and Scotland were separate kingdoms. In 1496, King Henry VII of England, following the successes of Spain and Portugal in overseas exploration, commissioned John Cabot to lead a voyage to discover a route to Asia via

the North Atlantic. Cabot sailed in 1497, five years after the European discovery of America, but he made landfall on the coast of Newfoundland, and, mistakenly believing (like Christopher Columbus) that he had reached Asia, there was no attempt to found a colony. Cabot led another voyage to the Americas the following year but nothing was ever heard of his ships again. No further attempts to establish English colonies in the Americas were made until well into the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, during the last decades of the 16th century. In the meantime, the 1533 Statute in Restraint of Appeals had declared ‘that this realm of England is an Empire’. The subsequent Protestant Reformation turned England and Catholic Spain into implacable enemies. In 1562, the English Crown encouraged the privateers John Hawkins and Francis Drake to engage in raiding attacks against Spanish and Portuguese ships off the coast of West Africa with the aim of breaking into the Atlantic slave trade. This effort was rebuffed and later, as the Anglo-Spanish Wars intensified, Elizabeth I gave her blessing to further privateering raids against Spanish ports in the Americas and shipping that was returning across the Atlantic, laden with treasures from the New World. At the same time, influential writers such as Richard Hakluyt and John Dee (who was the first to use the term ‘British Empire’) were beginning to press for the establishment of England’s own empire. By this time, Spain had become the dominant power in the Americas and was exploring the Pacific Ocean, while Portugal had already established trading posts and forts from the coasts of Africa and Brazil to China, and France had begun to settle the Saint Lawrence River area, later to become New France”.²²



Ireland

Photo taken by the Author

¹⁶ Roy Strong. *The Story of Britain From the Romans to the Present*, op. cit., p. 19.

¹⁷Id. pp. 21-22.

¹⁸Georges Duby. *Le MoyenÂge: De Hugues Capet à Jeanne de d’Arc (987-1460)*, Paris, Fayard/Pluriel, 2011, p. 9.

¹⁹Alex Leviton et alii. *Europe on a Shoestring*, Victoria (Australia), Lonely Planet, 2005, p.146.

²⁰Sylvain Gouguenheim. *Le MoyenÂgeen questions*, Paris, Tallandier, 2019, pp.49-50.

²¹Roy Strong. *The Story of Britain From the Romans to the Present*, op. cit., p. 44.

²²SaulDavid et alii. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British_Empire.

WHAT NEXT?

As already mentioned here, the strongest common denominator in Britain society is the Celtic heritage, beginning with the very name of Britain and its main component parts (Wales, Scotland, Ireland) – being “England” the exception, since it derives from the Old English *Englaland*= “land of the Angles”, one of the main Germanic tribes that settled in the archipelago just after the Roman military force was called back to the mainland, in order to defend the shrinking continental borders of the then dying Western Roman Empire. It is important to keep in mind that the first attempt of unifying what we now *still* call Britain happened in 1272, under the reign of the Plantagenet king Edward I. In fact, “What is striking is that this had not been attempted before. Had William I conquered both Scotland and Wales, the history of Britain would have been very different”.²³ Total political unity of its geologically

²³Roy Strong. *The Story of Britain From the Romans to the Present*, op. cit., p. 76.

piecemeal territory was achieved only in the first decade of the 18th century through the so-called *Acts of Union*. Having led the resistance against the aggressors in the two world wars of the 20th century, the British saved twice not only their beloved archipelago, but also the rest of Europe and why not to say the entire world?

Nevertheless, Britain got off with the wrong foot in this already tragic 21st century: sadly, today fragmentation and surrendering are top items on the British agenda.²⁴ Let us just hope that a new Winston Leonard Spencer-Churchill (1874-1965) will arise among the sons and daughters of this *pays de Cogne*, and say loud and clear, so that everybody could hear: “We shall go on to the end. (...) We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender”

²⁴See Id., pp. 536-542; and Udo Ulfkotte. *Mekka Deutschland. Die stille Islamisierung*, Rottenburg, Kopp, 2015, pp. 128-151.

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