

Transition from Roman Town to Anglo-Saxon Settlement

Note: Archaeologists use the collective name Anglo-Saxons when talking about the races of Angles and Jutes (migrating from Denmark) and Saxons (from North Germany and Holland) who came to settle in this country from around the middle of the 5th century onward.

When we hold the Roman and Anglo-Saxon reconstructions side by side, we are looking at the exact same location in the town. The view of Anglo-Saxon Canterbury is an image of how the area may have looked some 200 years after the final withdrawal of Roman troops. The enormous difference between the two pictures is striking. Let us begin by investigating what happened in those intervening years...

The end of Roman Britain: An overall picture

Since the 3rd century there had been spasmodic attacks along Britain's eastern and southern coast by tribes of continental peoples. There were many internal migrations on the continent at this time and the search for new lands to settle had become urgent. The on-going external threat to the stability of Roman Britain combined with serious conflicts between Roman forces and Germanic peoples in Gaul and civil unrest in other parts of the Empire all resulted in an ever-increasing drain on Roman military resources.

Although coastal attacks became more frequent towards the end of the 4th century (and therefore the need for protection increased) many troops were re-deployed to defend provinces where the need was perceived to be greater than ours.

The vulnerable Romano-British were now subjected to increasing attacks by tribes from the north and north-west of Britain (Picts and Scots) who had never submitted to Roman dominance. On top of all this, the situation was exacerbated further by random, disruptive attacks from roving bands of Gaulish brigands.

An ancient historian named Zosimus (writing in the 5th century) tells us that around AD 410 Rome itself was attacked. The subsequent withdrawal of yet more troops meant that the Romano-British people could no longer be assured of Roman protection. They were now even more vulnerable to both Anglo-Saxon invasion and increasing internal attacks from Picts and Scots. Such a dire situation led to a degree of anarchy among the Romano-British themselves with opportunists out for whatever power they could get.

As priorities turned more and more to both national and personal defence there must have been a gradual breakdown of civic administration. It would have become increasingly difficult to maintain the day-to-day services to which many people had become accustomed, like repairing buildings and roads, ensuring adequate

water supplies and the mechanics of successful trading. In trying to imagine the circumstances people found themselves in, we might compare from our own time troubled areas of the world like Bosnia, where just to survive is the key priority.

These latter decades of Roman occupation must therefore have been extremely disturbing for ordinary people who had little or no control over such an unstable and threatening environment.

An invitation to the Anglo-Saxons: Hengist and Horsa

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and the historian Bede (writing in the 8th century) tell us that by the middle of the 5th century people in southern Britain were so desperate to be rid of their enemies from the north that they asked certain Anglo-Saxon tribes for help and tried to strike a deal with them. The deal was that in exchange for their protection Anglo-Saxon warriors would receive payment and land of their own in the east of the country. Although for a time the Anglo-Saxons kept their side of the bargain, they later saw this as an opportunity to further their own interests. In time they turned traitor and used their position to allow more of their own people to enter the country. We think that these mercenaries were led by two brothers named Hengist and Horsa.

For some decades conflict continued between the Romano-British and Anglo-Saxon invaders with victories and defeats on both sides. Bede makes a point of mentioning a significant defeat for the Anglo-Saxons which took place at 'The Battle of Badon Hill' around AD 495. Archaeologists and historians do not know where exactly this was. Evidence to date has led them to three possible locations: Bath, Badbury Hill (near Swindon) and somewhere in the county of Dorset. However, the Battle of Badon Hill was only a temporary setback for the Anglo-Saxon forces. Bit by bit they gained ground until eventually theirs became the dominant force and consequently, the dominant culture throughout most of England.

What happened at Canterbury?

Canterbury in the 3rd and 4th Centuries

Canterbury, like many other Romano-British towns, was affected by these events. But as its growth was a gradual process so was its decline. As we have seen, the 3rd century was a particularly troubled time in Roman history. Instability within the Empire as a whole opened the door to further attacks from migrating peoples. For eastern and southern Britain this meant coastal invasions by tribes of Angles, Saxons and Jutes.

What evidence have we found?

Dateable artefacts from excavations along the foundations of Canterbury's Roman town wall show us that it was built at the end of the 3rd century as a major defensive

structure. It was also during this period that the massive 'Saxon Shore' forts at Lympne, Dover, Richborough and Reculver were erected (p. 21). Such defences show us that the ruling Roman forces at this time took the threat of invasion very seriously.

In the image of the town set around AD300 the artist has drawn in some dilapidated buildings to illustrate a degree of degeneration (bottom left). Excavations show that in some areas inferior timber buildings were being erected within the boundaries of ruinous masonry ones and on top of former streets. There is an impression of 'make do' at a time when materials and labour were not as available as they once were.

Evidence from artefacts

We have found other archaeological evidence of significant cultural change, for example in pottery manufacture at the end of the 4th century. While Roman Canterbury flourished, local people could buy quality Romano-British and imported merchandise for kitchen and table (Figs. 6 and 8). Canterbury had its own kilns mass-producing wheel-turned jars, dishes, flagons and mortaria. But towards the end of the Roman period people were reverting, in part, to making domestic vessels by hand and firing them in primitive kilns, as in pre-Roman times.

This was no doubt due to the gradual breakdown of quality 'industrial' pottery production which the Romans had developed with their technological and administrative expertise.

Canterbury in the 5th and 6th Centuries

Archaeologists know relatively little about what happened in Canterbury in the 5th century. There is no evidence of the town being subjected to enemy onslaught and no layers of burnt soils (as archaeologists have found at sites of Queen Boudicca's rebellion against Roman occupation in the early years after the Conquest).

However, it clearly experienced dramatic change and it was to be a long time before Canterbury could recover. It appears that having slipped into a gradual decline it then sunk into a phase of general abandonment. Because excavations have produced few dateable artefacts of this period it is very difficult to say how long it lasted.

From excavations, we have a picture of widespread dilapidation. Roman stone and timber buildings were left to the decaying effects of the weather and uncontrolled wild vegetation. Some fell into a state of collapse and became buried.

What happened to the local Romano-British people? Many probably deserted the town in the hope of finding refuge elsewhere. Others probably accepted the change of fortunes which they may well have seen as inevitable. Some may have tried to co-operate with the newcomers while others simply were victims of the many spasmodic attacks. Some tried to at least protect their valuable possessions

by burying them in the ground, hoping to go back and retrieve them when things were more settled. In 1962 archaeologists found a hoard of Roman silver buried in what is now the West Gate Gardens (the hiding place was just outside the town walls in Roman times, Fig. 4). It was placed there sometime early in the 5th century. However the fact that archaeologists find such hoards suggests that perhaps the owner was prevented from returning to the hiding place. Or maybe he or she tried but had lost track of the spot! The silver hoard can be seen in Canterbury's Roman Museum.

Historical sources suggest that there were several outbreaks of plague in Britain at this time which may have reduced the local population considerably. As in more recent times of turmoil, there were doubtless many factors which came into play. Evidence so far suggests that the town itself may have been practically deserted throughout the 5th century, with any habitation being of a temporary kind. The first waves of Anglo-Saxon invaders passed through or erected only makeshift shelters while they consolidated their position. When they had succeeded in dominating the local population it seems that the first settlers chose to live outside the old Roman town.

This is suggested by a few discoveries of rare early Anglo-Saxon pottery found outside the town walls, for example at Lady Wootton's Green to the north-east. The pottery was made and decorated in the Jutish style and is dateable to the end of the 5th or early 6th century. We will see that this was to become a very active area later on in the Anglo-Saxon period.

It was probably not until the beginning of the 7th century that the heart of Canterbury began to recover some stability.

What evidence have we found?

The many excavations carried out in Canterbury give a similar picture, that is one of widespread abandonment within the town walls. This is represented by a widespread band of rich, 'black soil', upto 20 centimetres thick in places, lying over the Roman ruins and streets. We think that this is what has remained of the rampant weeds and other vegetation which aided the decaying process of the Roman buildings, at a time when the local population had all but disappeared. You could think of this soil as very well compacted compost.

Under the present Marlowe Shopping Arcade we have found remains of Anglo-Saxon dwellings which had been on top of, or in some cases cutting down into, this dark soil. But because there has often been a lack of dateable artefacts found with these structures they themselves are very difficult to date. They could be evidence of 5th or 6th century occupation but they could also have been built much later. In other parts of the town we have found no evidence of building between the end of the Roman period and 8th or 9th century. In such cases we might find nothing but a thick layer of dark soil representing the intervening centuries.

We have also found important 'negative' evidence. No Anglo-Saxon cemeteries from the 5th and 6th centuries have yet been discovered near the town. This would

indicate that there was no significant population living in the town during this time, to warrant them.

But...interpreting this another way, it may just mean that the cemeteries lie undiscovered in an area that we are unable to excavate. Or that they have been destroyed by later developments.

We have one more piece of evidence which gives us a dramatic snapshot of one particular incident in these times which were no doubt oppressive and distressing for many people.

The 'Family' Grave (Fig. 12)

In 1980 archaeologists found an isolated deep pit while excavating near the junction of Castle Street and Beer Cart Lane (Fig. 3 and 4). At the bottom of the pit lay 4 human skeletons, an adult female, adult male and two young females. They appeared to be of a mother, father and two young daughters (one about 8, the other about 11 years of age). Across the father's lap lay the skeleton of an elderly deaf and arthritic dog...

We think they died sometime in the early years of the 5th century (their Germanic jewellery is of this date) but how these people died remains a mystery. Were they murdered? Were they victims of plague or perhaps suicide? Were they local Romano-British people or were they Anglo-Saxon immigrants? Whatever happened, the location of the grave (inside the town walls, within the precinct of the long since deserted Roman temple) is an indication of severe breakdown of the civic order which would have once governed the Roman town.

DNA investigations using archaeological remains

The Department of Biological Sciences at Kent University is about to embark on a project which will investigate the DNA of ancient human remains from excavated sites. This 'family' is to be the first sample. This is a very exciting development. Such investigations can potentially extend our knowledge in a number of areas including telling us more about familial relationships among peoples of the past.

This Canterbury grave remains a unique find, but are there others waiting to be discovered?...

Many of the artefacts discovered with the skeletons are on display at Canterbury's Heritage Museum. For more detail see the children's book, Roman Canterbury (see bibliography).