

# The First Clash With Rome

PART V OF THE SERIES,  
"DID ROME CONVERT BRITAIN?"

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*Hengist and Horsa landing in Kent.*

WITH the withdrawal of the Roman legions Britain fell upon evil days. The Picts and Scots in the north, no longer held in check, began periodically to ravage the northern part of the country. And from the East across the intervening sea came sea pirates who began systematically to plunder the towns and villages along the eastern coast.

The Britons sought to play one enemy off against the other and invited some bands of barbarian Jutes, from what is now known as Jutland, to assist them against the Picts, promising them suitable rewards when the enemy were driven back. The invitation proved fatal, for when the northern invaders had been defeated the Jutes turned their arms against the Britons themselves. After desperate fighting the Jutes, led by Hengist and Horsa, first occupied East Kent and then obtained possession of the rest of the country. Saxon war bands followed from the German coast ravaging the southern shores, whilst tribes of Angles landed on the north side

destroyed all before them. Homestead and church were alike given to the flames, pastors and people were both slain with impunity. Gildas sadly relates that,

"All the husbandmen were routed, together with their bishops, priests, and people, while the sword gleamed and the flames crackled around on all sides. Lamentable to behold, in the midst of the streets lay the tops of lofty towers tumbled to the ground, stones of high walls, holy altars."

Many of the Britons were taken captive and became slaves to the conquerors, while the rest retired westwards into the forest-guarded regions of Somerset, Devon, and Cornwall, into Wales, and northwards into Strathclyde (now Lancashire, Cumberland, Westmorland, and South Scotland). Some crossed over to Ireland and Brittany and settled there.

### *Flight of British Church*

The three archbishops of Caerleon, London, and York remained as long as they dared, but when in A.D. 586 they realized the situation to be hopeless they,

of the Thames and along the eastern coast.

### *With Flame and Sword*

In their progress the brutal barbarians

too, fled with all their clergy into Wales. One hundred and eighteen bishops assembled at Llanddewi Brefi, where the church was re-organized and centres established at Bangor, St. Asaph, St. Davids, Llanbadarn, Llandaff, and Margam.

The few churches in England which escaped the Saxon torches were converted into heathen temples and their altars polluted with pagan sacrifices.

The only representatives of Christianity who remained in the country were the Christian Britons who had been enslaved.

### *A New Vision*

The consequences of the Saxon invasion were not, however, wholly evil, for the missionary zeal of the exiled British church now restricted in the home fields was diverted towards the pagans of Central Europe who had been hardly touched by the church of Italy, absorbed as it had been in its struggle for self-preservation against the barbarian invaders of the Roman Empire. The monastery of Iona led the way in this new field of evangelism, and for the next few centuries the Brito-Irish church became the greatest missionary force in Europe. Iona itself came to be known as the "Light of the Western World."

The first company of twelve set out under the leadership of

Columbanus in A.D. 585 and settled among the inhabitants of the Vosges Mountains in the south of France.

#### *First Conflict with Rome*

It was here that the British church first came into conflict with ecclesiastical Rome as distinct from the primitive and pure church established by the apostles.

In the days of Constantine, it will be remembered the British bishops had been in close touch with the rest of the church and had met with representatives of East and West in the general councils of Arles and Nicea. Soon after this, however, the barbarians from Asia swept down upon the decadent Empire and interposed themselves like a wedge across Central Europe, thus isolating Britain from the rest of the church.

During this period the Roman branch of the church had exalted itself largely by forged decretals and political intrigue to the position of chief of all the churches, and at the same time had become sadly corrupted through pagan influence. When Columbanus and his co-labourers appeared on the scene most of the southern Continental churches had already submitted to the primacy of Rome.

The difference between the teachings and practices of the British missionaries and those of the new Rome, and their refusal to acknowledge the leadership of the sovereign pontiff, quickly aroused the antagonism of the Roman bishops, who organized a conspiracy to expel them. When in addition Columbanus rebuked the crimes of King Theuderick II and the queen-mother Brunhilda, which diplomacy had led the papal party to overlook, the conspirators gained the support of the court in their opposition, and Columbanus with

Gall and others were compelled to move into Switzerland. There they worked successfully among the Suevi and the Alamanni. After a time they were driven from there also and took refuge in Italy, where they established the monastery of Bobbio in the Apennines. At this place Columbanus died in A.D. 615.

#### *Ascendancy of Celtic Christianity*

Other companies of British missionaries carried the Gospel into Germany, Bavaria, and Thuringia, where many churches were founded. Five centres were established in the Netherlands, and others in France and elsewhere. Bernard of Clairvaux compared the Irish missionaries on the Continent to a "flood" and Aldhelm declared that they came in "fleets." Walafrid Strabo wrote that travel had become second nature to them.

So tremendous was the impact

made by the British church as it burst upon Central and Western Europe that J. R. Green says:

"For a time it seemed as if the course of the world's history was to be changed, as if the older Celtic race, that Roman and German had driven before them, had turned to the moral conquest of their conquerors, as if Celtic and not Latin Christianity was to mould the destinies of the churches of the West." —*Short History of the Christian Church*, page 86.

The native and independent British church is thus entitled, under God, not only to the credit for the evangelization of Ireland, Scotland, and the islands of the northern seas as far as Iceland, but also for giving the Gospel to a large part of Europe as well. Rome stepped in and usurped authority after the British missionaries had won the heathen tribes for Christ.

(*Next Time: "Did Rome Evangelize the Saxons?"*)