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Introduction

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I HAVE ROAMED ENGLAND all my life. I have climbed Cornwall's cliffs, wandered Norfolk's marshes and walked the Pennine Way. I know England's cities and towns, churches and houses. For all that, until recently I did not really know England, for I was not aware of how it came to be. My England was a geographical stage set, a backdrop for events and characters familiar from my childhood: Alfred the Great, the Norman conquest, Magna Carta, Agincourt, Henry VIII's wives, Good Queen Bess, Cromwell, Gladstone, Disraeli, the Great War, Winston Churchill. Each stood as a magnificent moment in time, but they did not join up. They lacked a narrative.

I set out here to tell that narrative as simply as possible. I was helped by finding it exhilarating. England's history, its triumphs and disasters, must be the most consistently eventful of any nation on earth. Its origins lie in the Dark Ages, and possibly before, in the occupation of the eastern shores of the British Isles by Germanic tribes from the continent. They brought with them the name of Anglii, probably from the 'angle' of the coasts of Germany and Denmark. Their settlement on the north-east coast was named Angle-land and later England. These newcomers quickly drove the earlier inhabitants, so-called 'ancient Britons', to the west and north, to beyond Hadrian's Wall, the Welsh uplands and the Irish Sea, forming boundaries of England that have remained roughly constant ever since.

The English were themselves invaded by Vikings and by Normans. But while they had obliterated their British predecessors, they kept their Anglo-Saxon culture and language

through all subsequent incursions. They were astonishingly resilient, aided by the security of an insular geography and the seafaring enterprise often shown by island peoples. They quickly evolved a common language, common laws and a common system of government, rooted in a tension between the Saxon autonomy of 'kith and kin' and the Norman tradition of central authority. That tension is a leitmotif of my story. England was a nation forged between the hammer of kingship and the anvil of popular consent, a consent regularly withheld, not least by the Celtic half of the British Isles which came to form the first 'English empire'. The result was such conflicts as led to Magna Carta, the baronial wars of Henry III and the Peasants' Revolt, culminating in the religious and political revolutions of the Tudors and Stuarts. These revolutions resolved into a constitutional monarchy subject to a parliamentary democracy that was to prove the most stable in Europe.

The story was not always happy. Relations with France, the land of the Norman conquerors, were mostly dreadful, with conflict throughout the Middle Ages and again in the eighteenth century. Most British rulers understood the need for a defensive rather than aggressive stance towards the outside world. Yet from the Plantagenets to the elder and younger Pitts, the craving for overseas domain rarely dimmed. It led Britain to amass the largest empire the world had ever seen. It brought much glory and helped bind together the peoples of the British Isles in a 'united kingdom' of shared endeavour, whose legacy continues to this day. But the British empire came at a price and lasted barely two hundred years. In the twentieth century Britain's global dominance passed to its offspring, America, leaving behind as a tidemark the extent of spoken English. Britain then declined, to become a relic of its former greatness and something of a poseur as a world power, its sovereignty compromised by European government and by the disciplines of a global economy. I return to these themes in my epilogue.

This is specifically a book about England. I regard Wales, Scotland and Ireland as countries with their own histories. They have spent less than half their existence as components of a union of 'Great Britain and Ireland', an embrace that tends to subordinate them in conventional histories of Britain. But England is a country in its own right, different from its neighbours and with a people who call themselves English in differentiation from Scots, Welsh and Irish. Only when referring to all these collectively do I use the terms Britain and Britons. Indeed England is now part of two confederacies, of the United Kingdom and of the European Union, with separate assemblies and variable tiers of sovereignty. To be British and to be European is to be a legal member of one of those unions, and to become British is to sign a piece of paper. To be English is more a matter of self-definition, identifying with a distinctive culture and outlook as well as geography. To become English is a matter of assimilation, which can take a few years or a few generations. The genius of Englishness is that it encompasses all origins and races, but in a culture specific to the territory defined by the original Anglo-Saxon occupation.

The English have never been good at describing themselves. In the age of imperial confidence they did not feel the need. Today most of them dislike seeing themselves as Europeans, but they are no better at defining themselves as against their Celtic neighbours. They waged wars of suppression against Wales, Scotland and, with peculiar brutality, Ireland. At the start of the twenty-first century they find themselves with Ireland mostly detached and Scotland and Wales semi-detached, politically as well as culturally. The English component of the United Kingdom is thus left in a strangely anaemic limbo. It has no parliament or distinctive political institutions of its own. To refer to England and the English as distinct from Britain and the British is often treated as hostile to the cosmopolitanism implied by the union, even as racist. The English flag of St George

has acquired a tinge of chauvinism and xenophobia and been adopted by the far right. I find this absurd. England is a country entitled to define itself and take pride in doing so. I believe that definition should begin with a narrative of its history.

To some, history is a matter of chance, to others it is fashioned by heroes and villains, and to others it is buried in geography, economics, even anthropology. There are many ways of a telling a nation's story, with a current fashion for the personal and controversial. There are histories social, cultural, 'popular' and, in England's case, imperial. But a short history can only be selective, and the selection will be mostly devoted to politics. A nation is a political entity and its birth and development form a narrative of those who deployed power within it, be they monarchs, soldiers, politicians, the mob in the street or, more recently, the mass of voters. I regard history as more than a straight chronology but as links in a chain of cause and effect. It is this chain that holds the secret of how England came to be where it is today.

Saxon Dawn

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410 – 600

IN THE YEAR 410 a letter was sent from the embattled Roman emperor, Honorius, to colonists in his province of Britannia. They had already lost the protection of the legions, withdrawn from Britannia during the past half century to defend the empire, and had written pleading for help against Saxon raids from across the North Sea. The emperor was beset by Visigoths, and a distant colony at the extremity of the known world was strategically unimportant. The civilisations of the Mediterranean, supreme for a millennium, were in retreat. Honorius cursorily advised the colonists to 'take steps to defend yourselves'.

The fifth and sixth centuries in the British Isles were truly dark ages. Iron Age Celts, so-called ancient Britons, had migrated from the continent between a thousand and six hundred years BC, and had intermarried with Roman invaders in the three centuries after the birth of Christ. But the retreat of the legions left them too weak to defend themselves or their legacy of Roman villas, temples and theatres. They lay vulnerable to the raiders against whom they had pleaded for help.

From where did these new invaders come? Historians seeking 'the birth of England' are soon enveloped in controversy. Two theories are advanced for what happened at this time in the eastern half of the British Isles. One is that Germanic tribes moving south towards France were balked by the Franks under Emperor Clovis and diverted across the North Sea. Their

invasion, perhaps assisted by Roman mercenaries already resident in Britain, was essentially genocidal. They massacred or wholly subjugated the indigenous British tribes of eastern England, such as the Iceni and Trinovantes, and obliterated their culture.

This thesis is supported by the few witnesses who survived the period. The only contemporary source, a sixth-century Welsh (or west country) monk named Gildas, graphically laments the fiery invasion of 'impious men … that did not cease after it had been kindled, until it burnt nearly the whole surface of the island, and licked the western ocean with its red and savage tongue'. He quoted a fifth-century document, the Groan of the British, telling of a Britain bereft of Roman protection: 'The barbarians drive us to the sea and the sea throws us back on the barbarians.' By the late seventh century the 'Father of English History', the Venerable Bede, took the genocide thesis as given in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. He wrote of the Anglii invading in such force as to leave their Germanic settlements deserted. Little or no trace of any preceding British culture remained. The British, or Brythonic, language and Romano-Christian religion disappeared. So-called Romano-British villas and towns fell into decay or were burned.

Another theory is that there was no external invasion, rather an internal expansion, since the eastern parts of Britain had long been settled by Germanic and Belgic peoples, trading and raiding the shores of the North Sea. Recent DNA archaeology reinforces a view of the sea round the British Isles as navigable 'territory', while interior land forms a less permeable barrier. Thus the culture of the British Isles at the time of the Roman retreat was divided between the North Sea coast, settled over the centuries by Germanic tribes, and the Irish Sea and Atlantic coasts, which were Celtic in language and culture. The theory suggests that there were few 'ancient Britons', or Celts, in eastern parts and therefore none to eradicate. This explains the

paucity of Brythonic language traces and place names, though it does not explain the references to an overseas invasion and the overwhelming Celtic belief in one. The possible resolution of these divergent theories is that both were true in part, with new waves of Germanic settlers arriving after the Romans left, adding to longer-standing Germanic enclaves.

Either way it seems clear that over the course of the fifth and sixth centuries a people whose language and society derived from the continent of Europe moved aggressively westward across Roman Britannia, overwhelming the indigenous British. According to Bede this movement comprised Jutes, Frisians, Angles and Saxons. 'Saeson', 'Sassenach' and 'Sawsnek' are the old Welsh, Gaelic and Cornish words for the English. In *c*.450 Jutes under the brothers Hengist and Horsa, possibly once hired as mercenaries by a Romano-British ruler, Vortigern, landed in Kent and spread as far as the Isle of Wight. At the same time Angles arrived from the 'angle' of Germany in Schleswig-Holstein, lending their name to East Anglia and eventually to England itself. Saxons from north Germany settled along the south coast and penetrated the Thames basin, forming territories known to this day as Essex (east Saxon), Middlesex, Wessex and Sussex. These peoples are referred to as Saxons and their language as Anglo-Saxon. A strong argument deployed by the invasion theorists is that all trace of Roman Christianity appears to have been eradicated from land occupied by the pagan Saxons. In contrast, Wales at this time was seeing a fervently Christian 'age of saints'. Dozens of Welsh churches date from the sixth and even fifth centuries and the oldest cathedral in Britain was begun by Deiniol in Bangor in 525. At much the same time St Petroc was preaching in Cornwall, and St Columba was travelling from Ireland to the Scottish island of Iona, founding a monastery there in *c*.563.

Gildas told not only of the misery inflicted by the Saxons on the British but of resistance. In the 540s he wrote of living

in what appears to have been the Severn valley in a period of peace, the Saxon advance having stalled in the west country. He attributed this to a British leader who defeated the Saxons at the turn of the sixth century at a place called Mount Badon, possibly near the fort of South Cadbury in Somerset. The only commander he mentions by name was Ambrosius Aurelianus, a Romano-Briton born in the late fifth century who 'won some battles and lost others'. His nickname may have been 'Bear', the skin of his military tunic. Bear is *artos* in Celtic.

This glint of light in the darkness is the nearest history gets to 'Arthur'. On it was based a giant edifice of legend. From Gildas was derived the Arthur of the ninth-century propagandist Nennius, and of the twelfth-century fantasist Geoffrey of Monmouth, responsible for much of the imagery of north European chivalric culture. This led to the bestseller by Thomas Malory in the fifteenth century, *Morte d'Arthur*. Following Malory came Tennyson, the pre-Raphaelites, Hollywood and the 'Holy Grail', conjecturing a mystic pre-Saxon paradise called Camelot, with a wizard called Merlin, and many a knightly deed, heartbreak and tragedy. Britons, Saxons, Normans and Tudors were all to claim Arthur as their own, as if driven by some desperate magnetism towards a pure and noble past.

If Gildas's period of peace existed, it did not last. Towards the end of the sixth century Saxons had settled along the length of the River Severn, where a Welsh saint, Beuno, reported on 'strange-tongued men whose voices I heard across the river'. He feared that one day they would 'obtain possession of this place and it will be theirs'. Yet while Saxons occupied the great valleys draining into the North Sea, Britons were left in occupation of Scotland, Ireland, Wales, Cornwall, Cumbria and the Hen Ogledd ('Old North' in Welsh) of the Scottish borders. The Celtic tongue had by now divided into two groups, Goedelic (Irish and Scots Gaelic and Manx) and Brythonic (Cumbric, Welsh and Cornish). At this time or earlier a migration took

place from Cornwall across the Channel to Armorica in France. Here Roman Britannia was recreated as Brittany, and the language as Breton, distantly related to modern Welsh.

By the end of the seventh century, the Saxons were combining into larger groupings under early kings. The first to emerge with any distinction was Ethelbert of Kent, who reigned from *c.*580 until his death in 616, a pagan who cemented an alliance with the cross-Channel Franks by marrying Bertha, granddaughter of King Clovis of France, subject to the condition that she retain her Christian faith. She brought her own chaplain and is said to have worshipped at the old Roman church of St Martin in Canterbury. It was probably for this reason that Pope Gregory was later to send his first Christian missionaries to Kent under St Augustine.

At the same time in the north, Northumbria was cohering under a great warrior, Ethelfrith, king of Bernicia (593–616), who was to entrench the boundaries of Saxon settlement against British resistance. The north-British Gododdin tribe, possibly based on the rock of Edinburgh, had their deeds recorded by a bard named Aneurin in *The Gododdin*, the first great work of British (as opposed to English) literature. His saga tells how an army of 300 warriors marched south under their leader Mynyddog, sometime about 600, meeting Ethelfrith near Catterick in Yorkshire. Of one British soldier Aneurin wrote:

In might a man, a youth in years,
Of boisterous valour …
Quicker to a field of blood
Than to a wedding
Quicker to the ravens' feast
Than to a burial.

Yet the Gododdin were wiped out, with only Aneurin escaping to tell the tale. His poem is known in a transcription

into medieval Welsh, but scholars believe the original to have been in the Cumbric language of the north British tribes and similar to Welsh (in which case present-day signs at Edinburgh airport in Gaelic should be in Welsh).

Worse was to follow for the British. In 603 a Scots-Irish army from Dalriada, a kingdom stretching across the Irish Sea from Argyll to Antrim, met the same Ethelfrith in battle at Degsastan, believed to be near Roxburgh. The Northumbrians were again victorious. They then carried their supremacy south along the west coast to confront the Welsh. In *c*.615 Ethelfrith encountered 1,200 Welsh Christian monks near the old Roman town of Chester, and slaughtered them 'for opposing him with their prayers'. He went on to defeat the main Welsh army and bring his domain to the banks of the Dee. To the Anglo-Saxon Bede, writing a century later, Ethelfrith was the true founder of Northumbria, who 'ravaged the Britons more than all the great men of the English, insomuch that he might be compared to Saul, once king of the Israelites, excepting only this, that he was ignorant of the true religion'.

The area of Saxon England was beginning to take shape, south of Hadrian's wall and east of the Severn and the Devon border. Pockets of ancient Britain appear to have survived in the Pennine uplands and in places such as Elmet in west Yorkshire (which was overrun in 627). But the surrounding England was in no sense a nation. No authority, king or church had replaced the Romans. People were ruled, if at all, by Saxon warlords regarded by the Christian Celts in the west as marauding, illiterate pagans. Saxons were people of lowland rather than upland, accustomed to fight and farm across the great plains of northern Europe. They could fell trees and use ploughs that cut deep into alluvial soil, but they stopped when they reached higher land. Here the country was less fertile and the Britons perhaps less easy to overcome. The zest for conquest seemed to evaporate as it moved west.

Saxons were rooted in loyalty to family, settlement and clan, embodied in the Anglo-Saxon phrase 'kith and kin', derived from 'couth [hence uncouth] and known'. Their focus was not a distant king and court but a communal hall in the centre of each settlement, where communities of free farmers (ceorls) would swear allegiance to their chiefs. These elders – or ealdormen – and subordinate thanes were owed hospitality and military service in return for the defence of the subjects' lives and land. The oaths Saxons swore bound them to those whose lineage they shared and with whom they tilled the earth. This contractual 'consent to power', as distinct from ancient British tribalism and Norman ducal authority, was described by later law-givers as habitual 'since time out of mind'. It found its apogee in the representation of leading citizens on the king's 'witengemot' or witan, most primitive precursor of parliament. To Victorian romantics all this was a dim Saxon echo of what the Greeks called democracy.

The Birth of England

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600–800

IN 596 POPE GREGORY NOTICED two blond-haired slaves in a Roman market place and asked where they were from. On being told they were 'Angli' he is reported by Bede as replying, 'Non Angli sed angeli,' not Angles but angels of God. Britain was a forgotten colony on the distant border of the Frankish empire, then covering much of modern France and Germany. Gregory was an ardent missionary and sent a bishop, Augustine, to the court of Ethelbert of Kent and his wife, the Frankish Christian Bertha. On landing at Thanet in 597, Augustine's party of forty Benedictines was ordered to meet in the open air, for fear of what the pagans regarded as their sorcery.

The success of Augustine's mission was confirmed in the Christianising of Ethelbert and his donation, in 602, of a site in Canterbury for a new cathedral. Augustine became Canterbury's first archbishop while Ethelbert drew up England's first legal code of ninety clauses, granting privileges to the new church. It is also the first document in the 'English' or Anglo-Saxon language. The following year Ethelbert and Augustine boldly sought reconciliation at a meeting in the Severn valley with Welsh church leaders from Bangor and elsewhere. The latter practised a Celtic liturgy inherited from Rome, but were monastic rather than evangelical, following their own calendar, penitent customs and form of tonsure, shaving the front rather than the crown of their heads. The two parties could not agree,

not least over the authority of Rome. An angry Augustine allegedly threatened the British that, 'If you will not have peace with your friends, you shall have war from your foes.' He returned to Kent empty handed.

Meanwhile King Redwald of East Anglia (*c*.600−24), was expanding his domain across the heart of England to form what became the central kingdom of Mercia. He is little known except as probable occupant of the Sutton Hoo ship burial in Suffolk, found in 1939 and now in the British Museum. It includes plate and gems from the Mediterranean and Byzantium, swords and a splendid helmet from the Rhine. Sutton Hoo offers a window on a cosmopolitan civilisation that remains tantalisingly obscure.

In Northumbria Ethelfrith, scourge of the Gododdin, had been succeeded by Edwin (616−33), a king with an army potent enough to sweep south through Mercia as far as Kent. On defeating the West Saxons he carried back to York not only Ethelbert's Christian daughter Ethelburga, but a Roman monk, Paulinus, who in 627 baptised him and his thanes, and founded York Minster. One converted thane spoke to Edwin of a sparrow in a wintry hall at dinner time, which 'flies in at one door and tarries for a moment in the light and heat of the hearth, then flying out of the other, vanishes … So tarries for a moment the life of man in our sight, but what is before it, and what after it, we do not know. If this new teaching tells us anything certain of these things, let us follow it.' Edwin's pagan high priest was less reflective. He hurled a spear into his own temple and ordered its conflagration.

Edwin's supremacy did not last long. He was challenged by the powerful Penda of Mercia, a pagan allied to the Welsh ruler Cadwallon of Gwynedd. In 633 these leaders met and killed Edwin at the battle of Hatfield Chase in Yorkshire, putting much of Northumbria to fire and the sword. The Christian cause in the north briefly collapsed, but a year later another Christian Saxon, Oswald, occupied Northumbria from his asylum on Iona. He

brought with him a monk named Aidan, with whom he founded a monastery in 635 at Lindisfarne off the Northumbrian coast. England appears to have taken to Christianity with speed. Even Penda allowed his children to be baptised and asserted that 'they were contemptible and wretched who did not obey their god, in whom they believed'. When he was finally defeated in 655 by Oswald's brother, Oswy, the last pagan ruler of England died. The Saxon animist and warrior gods Tiw, Woden, Thunor and Freya survived only as days of the week.

What sort of Christianity England should espouse remained open. Lindisfarne practised the Ionan rite, reinforced in 657 when Oswald's brother and successor, Oswy, founded a new monastery at Whitby. But many at the Northumbrian court followed the Roman rite introduced to York by Paulinus. What began as a domestic dispute over when to fast and celebrate Easter soon extended to disputes within the Northumbrian church, Ionan traditionalists confronting Canterbury modernists. In 664 Oswy summoned church leaders from Canterbury to a synod at Whitby, where battle was joined between Colman of Northumbria and Wilfrid of Ripon. Wilfrid, who had visited Rome and strongly supported its cause, represented Canterbury because he spoke Anglo-Saxon. To him, the authority of the pope and the expansive Roman liturgy outshone the backwardness of the Celts. He swayed the synod, and, more important, Oswy, preaching that St Peter was 'the rock of the church' and holder of the keys to life hereafter. The Ionans under Colman retired in dudgeon to Ireland, itself the scene of liturgical divisions. Wilfrid became bishop of York.

Rome swiftly exploited its triumph. A new papal emissary arrived in 669, Theodore of Tarsus, born in Asia Minor and versed in Greek, Roman and Byzantine scholarship. By the time of his death in 690 he had established fourteen territorial bishoprics under Canterbury. The kings of Kent and Wessex were encouraged to write new legal codes based on those

throughout the papal domains, exempting the church from civil duties and laying down rules for social and marital conduct. Penalties for theft, violence and trespass recognised a hierarchy under the king, where bishops ranked with thanes and clergymen with ceorls.

England might still have been disunited politically at the end of the seventh century but the synod of Whitby saw it join the mainstream of Europe's ecclesiastical culture. The church now began a period of wealth and influence that was to last until the Reformation. In a country often at war with itself, Theodore's church ministered to all English people, educating them and offering them welfare and public administration. It instigated, on the bleak coast of Northumbria at Lindisfarne, a flowering of scholarship that was to become as rich as any in Europe. To produce great illuminated codices and gospels required an industry of scribes and materials. The gospel produced at Lindisfarne in 698 and now in the British Library displays a marriage of Celtic and continental motifs as rich as anything yet seen in the civilisation of northern Europe. It would have taken years of labour and is estimated to have used the skins of 1,500 calves.

In 674 a new monastery was founded on the Tyne at Jarrow by Bishop Biscop, a churchman of the new era who had been on five pilgrimages to Rome, returning each time with craftsmen, musicians, manuscripts and donations for his churches. The Jarrow monastery was host to the Venerable Bede, whose *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* was published in 731. Bede saw Britain over the previous two centuries as a pagan land brought to a state of grace by Saxon Christianity, a highly coloured thesis since in most of the British Isles, the reverse was the case. None the less Bede was a unique witness to England's earliest years and the first to show a sense of Englishness. He was the earliest to use the word Angle-land and the first to apply some chronology to the country's birth and growth.

By the eighth century what was termed 'ascendancy' in England was passing from Northumbria to Mercia. Here in 757 arose Offa, the first English king whose dominance was recognised across Europe. Offa (757–96) was a monarch in perpetual movement, administering justice and exacting tribute across his domain. He had his own coins minted – including, uniquely, one with the head of his consort Queen Cynethryth – and in 785 marked England's boundary with Wales with a rampart, Offa's Dyke, from the Dee to the Severn. The dyke was more a border demarcation than a defence, and there is evidence it was located so as to give some fertile land to the Welsh, as in a treaty. In 786 the pope sent ambassadors to Offa's court, with papal demands on both canon and secular law. That the Mercians should entertain such demands is a measure of the reach of Roman jurisdiction. Offa obtained a new archbishopric, at Lichfield, in return for an annual gift of gold, and agreed to 'consecrate' his son Egfrith as heir to his throne. This secular contract between the English state and the Roman church was significant and was to cause Saxon and Norman monarchs no end of trouble.

Towards the end of Offa's reign a Northumbrian monk, Alcuin of York, the leading scholar at the court of Charlemagne, was able to refer to him as 'a glory to Britain [Britannia] and a sword against foes, shield against enemies'. But Offa's personal ambition exceeded his power. When Charlemagne proposed that his son might marry the Mercian king's daughter, Offa agreed on condition that Charlemagne's daughter married his son. The emperor was reportedly enraged by such implied equality and broke off relations, even banning trade with Mercia for a period.

After Offa's death a weak line of successors led to another shift of ascendancy, this time south to Wessex. Lichfield was demoted in favour of Canterbury and in 814 Egbert of Wessex (802–39) invaded Cornwall, bringing it under Saxon

sovereignty. This invasion was not occupation or assimilation as in regions to the east. The Saxons called the region West Wales, and it retained its language and local rulers. To this day, the Cornish regard inhabitants east of the Tamar as 'English' and outsiders. Egbert then moved against Mercia, consulting his elders over whether to fight the Mercians or sue for peace. The Anglo-Saxon chronicles record that 'they thought it more honourable to have their heads cut off than to lay their free necks beneath the yoke'. In the end, they had to do neither. The Wessex victory at the battle of Ellandun, near Swindon, in 825 moved the centre of English power emphatically south, where it has resided ever since. Egbert went on to attack East Anglia and Northumbria and unite the land that was England.

After two centuries of what Milton called 'the wars of kites and crows, flocking and fighting in the air', the English people under Egbert and his successors could contemplate a Saxon peace. The temporary ascendancy of Wessex was acknowledged and its capital of Winchester became the seat of England's kings. But a nemesis was at hand. As the Saxons had threatened the ancient Britons from the east so now, wrote an Anglo-Saxon chronicler, 'whirlwinds, lightning storms and fiery dragons were seen flying in the sky'. Alcuin reported to Charlemagne: 'Never before has such terror appeared … as we have now suffered from a pagan race.' The Vikings were coming.