

The Story of English – 1. England before the English

C.A. Lal

Professor of English, University of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram



When Julius Caesar landed on the cold misty shores of England in 55 BC, the native inhabitants who flung spears at his legions were not English. The English language was not born in England, and the story of English begins only a few centuries after the sulky Julius left England following his not-too-successful adventures there. The Celtic tribes who were surprised by Caesar's arrival had been there a few thousand years, though we do not have clear historical evidence about exact dates. The tribe called Britons occupied much of the Island, while others, like the Picts and the Gaels, lived in the North. The name Britain is derived from these early Celtic inhabitants of the land, though they were later overrun by other tribes, who combined to form the people we call English today.

The language of the Celts belonged to the Indo-European family along with other members like Italic, Germanic and Sanskrit. England was inhabited by hunter-gatherer races of people for at least 50000 years, and the Celts came much later, either towards the end of the Bronze Age, or during the early Iron Age. The Celts were indeed the first people to settle in England, about whose language we have clear evidence today. They were also the first Indo-European branch to occupy England, and they were to be followed by two more, the Italic (the Romans)

and the Germanic (the Anglo Saxons).

The Celts had initially established themselves over large areas of Europe, extending from the British Isles in the North West, down to the East even up to Turkey. Surprisingly, by about 5th century AD, their dominion had been largely diminished, first due to the flourishing of the Roman Empire and then by the inroads of the 'barbaric' Germanic tribes. Today Celtic remnants can be seen in limited areas, including Ireland, Wales and Scotland, even where the dominant English language and culture are fast taking over.

After Julius Caesar's second landing in England and his return followed by the stiff resistance of the Celts, there was not much trouble from the Romans for about a century. The actual conquest of the island took place after 43 A.D. and the Celtic people were largely subjugated by the Romans, when much of the land, except Wales and Scotland, became part of the Roman Empire. This was followed by over 300 years of Romanization, when elaborate road systems, buildings, baths and even theatres were built across the country. Latin became the official language, though the Celtic majority continued to speak their language.

The Romans never had any idea of settling down in the areas far from home that they

annexed to their empire. They were rulers of the land and therefore fiercely protected the British Isles and its Celtic inhabitants from the increasingly frequent invasions from 'barbaric' tribes from the northwest of Europe. These invaders were various Germanic tribes whose language sounded a nonsensical 'ber ber' to the Roman ears, which accounts for the rather scornful nomenclature, 'barbarian'. The intruding Germanic tribes had ideas of permanent residence in the newly conquered areas. Their designs were different from those of the Romans.

The interesting fact is that the Celts, the Romans and the Germanic people, all belonged to the Indo-European family, though the divergence was already so much that the similarities were hardly visible. Eventually, the Roman Empire degenerated, and the officers and soldiers who guarded England from the new invaders began to retreat to their Mediterranean homeland. Centuries of subjugation had weakened the Celts and they no longer had the ability or the machinery to resist the fierce inroads of the aggressive Germanic tribes who relentlessly pushed their way into the island across the English Channel and the North

Sea.

By the early fifth century, the Roman legions had totally withdrawn from the island, and the Germanic tribes of Angles, Saxons and Jutes began systematic conquest and settlement in different parts of the island. They came as settlers, and what followed was systematic displacement of one race by another, more powerful one. In the centuries that followed, these Germanic settlers emerged as the inhabitants of the British Islands, and their language came to be called English after the Angles. In several parts, the Celts were massacred in large numbers, but many of them either fled to the west or became employees under the new masters, and eventually got blended with them through intermarriage.

That is the story of how English came to England and laid the foundations of a legacy that prompts us to teach and learn English in a distant land like ours, and discuss the language in platforms like ELTAI.

[Editor's Note: *This is the first in a series of articles tracing the history of the English language, to be continued in this column.*]

For ELTAI updates and News from our Chapters

Read our Quarterly E-Newsletter

You may access it at our website www.eltai.in