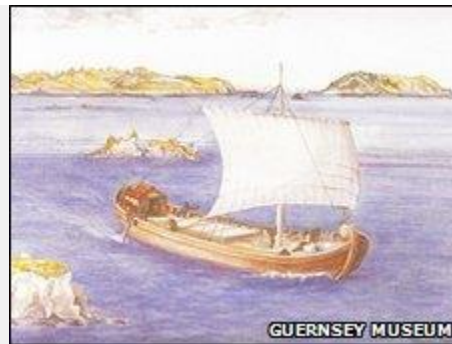# British Sea-Power in the Age of Arthur

Posted on

Naval battle as portrayed in the 5th century Virgilis Romanus MS. It portrays a classical sea battle but the ill dates to the time of Post Roman British sea-power.

The Brittonic Period–the fifth and early sixth centuries of Britain–was a pivotal period in British history and as such it remains the subject of much contentious debate; despite decades of discussion, for example, there is still no academic agreement as to the chronology or precise sequence of events for the Brittonic era.[1] However, in recent decades a certain degree of consensus has slowly emerged among scholars that the cessation of direct Roman political control over the British Isles did not automatically spell the collapse of civilized life in the former diocese of Britannia and that some manner of organized Romano-British polity continued on after the cessation of Imperial control.[2] While virtually all texts bearing on the period remain problematical and intensely debated, the archaeology of the era has begun to tilt more in the favor of continuity than any radical discontinuity in fifth century Britain.[3]

Similarly, many scholars have begun to question the whole ideology of the Anglo-Saxon Invasions• , instead arguing for a more complex process of military recruitment, trade and immigration, which only in later stages devolved into outright conflict.[4] A few

academics have even tried to make the case that southeastern Britain had already been German-speaking well before the arrival of the Romans, although this hypothesis remains an outlier.[5] Whatever model one may choose to reconstruct the events of fifth and early sixth century Britain, however, one important aspect of the era remains virtually ignored: Brittonic sea power and its relationship to the military and political events of the era. Despite the voluminous literature relating to the Brittonic Period–the storied Age of Arthur–almost no one has discussed naval aspects of Post-Roman Britain.[6] If discussed at all, it has generally been within the context of an assumed Saxon naval dominance of Britain and its seas during the whole of the fifth and sixth centuries.

Both Celtic and Saxon style vessels may have been employed by British fleets in the Age of Arthur. Artist's reconstruction of the Guernsey Ship

While no one questions the military importance of Saxon, Irish and Pictish sea power during this period, when it comes to the native British and their seafaring capabilities, a curious myopia affects English historiography. It could be argued that, like the question of Arthur's historical existence, there is no direct evidence for British seafaring for this period, much less of a Brittonic navy or fleet. To a certain extent this is a specious argument, for actual written documents relating to Britain contemporaneous to the fifth century are nearly non-existent. The written evidence that does survive consist of inscribed stones, mostly grave markers; a copy of the *Aeneid* believed to have originated from a British scriptorium of the period; and finally, later copies of material ascribed to St. Patrick's authorship.[7] Almost all other information exist either as transcriptions of the oral tradition or much copied (and thus corrupted) texts dating to the periods following; these later texts are subject to their own set of problems of accuracy or credibility. Yet the situation for Scotti, Picti and Saxons sources is the same or worse for this period: all these cultures were pre- or proto-literate and one must rely on

transcribed oral traditions or later texts for evidence relating to their history as well. Yet in all these cases, no one questions their seafaring prowess or the naval influence they wielded during this era.

:Lead ingots with Celtic inscriptions recovered from the Plumanoch wreck, ca 5th cent AD

However, we do have some evidence for the existence of Brittonic naval capabilities, albeit much of it indirect. During the late fourth and early fifth centuries, Britain acquired the unfavorable reputation for being "fertile in tyrants."• In each case, these Late Roman usurpers of necessity had to make use of sea power to transport their armies unopposed onto the European continent. Control of the sea was thus a *sine qua non* for any British usurper attempting to seize the Imperial throne. The last such "tyrant"• was Constantine III, who began his bid for power beginning in 405. Constantine nearly succeeded in his attempt, but he finally came to an ill end in 514.[8]

While details of the makeup of the usurper fleets is unknown, we do know that the rank and file of the sailors would have consisted of indigenous seafarers, even if the officers commanding them might have been ethnic Romans. From later British tradition we know that these Roman usurpers were often viewed as British by the native population of Britannia.[9] After Constantine III's fall, continental sources fall silent about Britain; there is no evidence that the diocese of Britannia was ever re-occupied, while a great deal of circumstantial evidence indicates that, after Constantine, the Western Empire had but nominal control of most of Gaul and Hispania and, therefore, for the rest of the century a military conquest and reoccupation of Britannia was simply beyond the capabilities of the Empire.[10] Whatever transpired in Britannia after Constantine would have happened under a native polity independent from Ravenna.

Brittonic sailors wore "Venetian Blue" uniforms and their ships were clad in the same color, which blended with sea and sky as an early form of naval camouflage.

We do, in fact, have some direct evidence for the existence of British naval capabilities for the post Roman period. The late Roman writer Publius Flavius Vegetius Renatus included a section on naval affairs in his treatise on the Roman military. The naval section of his treatise *De Re Militari* has rarely been translated, which may account for so few scholars being aware of his mention of British naval forces. The passage is tantalizingly short, but it seems to reflect contemporary Brittonic affairs and not looking back to a previous era, as so much of Vegetius' treatise does. While scholars may debate the precise date of the tome, the best estimates places it in the reign of Valentinian III; a date between 435 and 450 would not be unreasonable.[11]

Despite the paucity of contemporary evidence, there are a few Classical sources which bear indirectly on the subject and to late Roman naval affairs in general. There also exists a large body of traditional accounts which relate to Brittonic Period seafaring and naval activities as well. As with all traditional and folkloric material, these sources must be treated with caution; nevertheless, given the conservative nature of such traditions, much legitimate information may be gleaned from them. Lastly, there is a growing body of archaeological and anthropological evidence which bear on the subject and which needs to be properly analyzed and interpreted freed from an anti-Brittonic bias.

Although Saxon naval abilities and capabilities are important for the history of the Brittonic Period, they constitute only a part of the overall subject; rather than view north German sea-power as a discreet topic isolated from the discussion of Brittonic maritime affairs, a better approach would be to see them as but an element in the larger context of general Brittonic (or British) maritime affairs. Even after the Saxon revolt, the best archaeological evidence indicates that the native British polity remained intact and still the dominant ethnic and military factor in the region; consequentially, its naval capabilities would have also remained largely intact and substantial. In putting the admittedly fragmentary evidence together for this era, rather than viewing the indigenous folk of Britain as inherently weak and incapable of self-defense in the Brittonic Period, they should be viewed as active players in the history of their island and, despite the many challenges they faced, as being generally successful in their response to these challenges until at least the mid-sixth century.
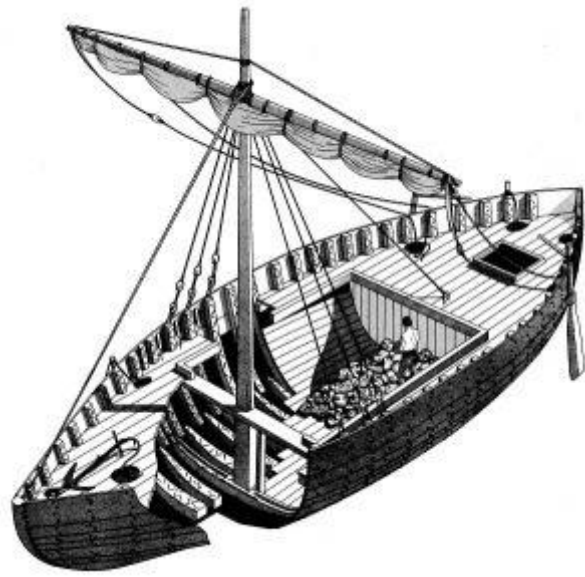

Reconstruction of the Blackfriars 1 vessel, built in the Celtic shipbuilding tradition.

More broadly, one should always keep in mind that the native folk of Britain and its adjacent isles throughout history were renowned as seafarers: as a corollary, unless there is positive evidence to the contrary, one should also posit them as skilled at naval

warfare, eminently capable of both offense and defense at sea and that they were no less so during this initial era of British independence as they were in later periods.

One major aspect of Brittonic sea-power that has been overlooked or ignored is the fact of British expansion overseas during this period. It is well known that the Celtic British established colonies in northern Hispania and northwestern Gaul during this era and, moreover, participated in at least one direct military intervention into Roman Gaul during the fifth century.[12] Such colonial expansion and military intervention required maritime capabilities and naval power of some considerable strength to carry out. Even if details of these fifth and sixth century continental activities remain poorly documented, the mere fact of their existence constitutes proof of Brittonic naval sea-power for the period in question. While much new research is needed and a reassessment of old archaeological and written evidence is called for, even given the current state of knowledge the role of sea-power in the history of Post-Roman Britain, and of Brittonic naval expertise in this history, should be regarded as a basic fact and not theory.
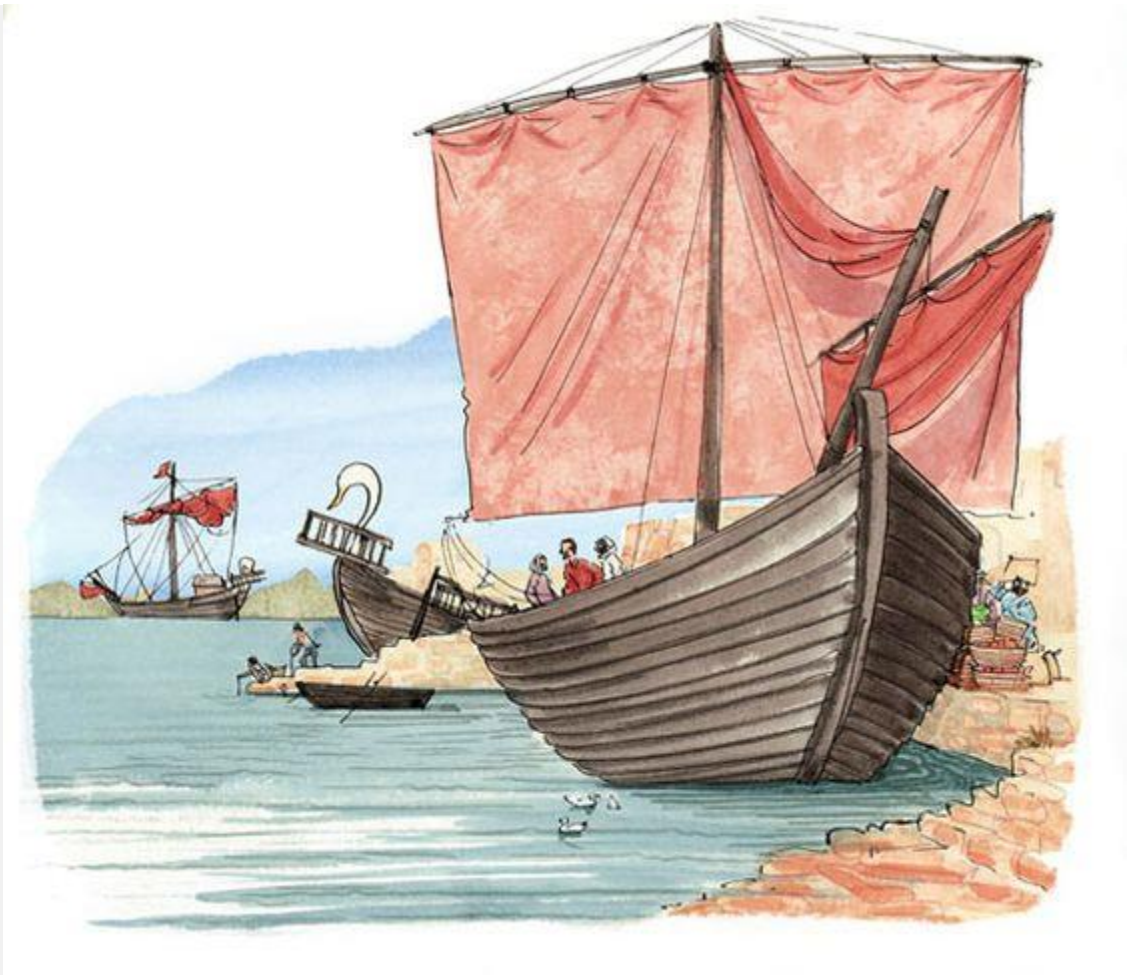
Ancient harbor scene showing different types of late Roman vessels.

The task for the future, therefore, is to create a synthesis of the diverse material relating to the fact of British sea-power in the fifth and sixth centuries and present it in published form to an interested readership. Such a coherent narrative may well be disputed in its details or in its conclusions criticized, but ultimately it is preferable to make the attempt rather than continuing to allow so important an aspect of the Brittonic era to remain unexamined and ignored.[13]

[1] The term Brittonic was first used by Chris Snyder to describe the distinct period following the Roman era but before Saxon ascendancy, when the native Britons and their culture flourished. This phrase is used in preference to the pejorative "sub" Roman label, or to use the now contentious phrase "Age of Arthur,"•   which has been much

disputed and made anathema to the Minimalist school of English historiography by Professor Dumville since the 1970's.

[2] See Kenneth Dark, "Centuries of Roman survival in the West"• *British Archaeology*, Issue no 32, March 1998, and Dark, *Civitas to Kingdom: British Political Continuity, 300-800* (Studies in the Early History of Britain) (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1994); Martin Henig, "Roman Britons after 410″• *British Archaeology*, Issue 68, December 2002.

[3] Christopher Snyder "Sub-Roman Britain an Introduction" *Vortigern Studies* (1997)

[4] See, for example, Howard Williams, "Forgetting the Britons in Victorian Anglo-Saxon archaeology" in N. J. Higham, Ed., Woodbridge *Britons in Anglo-Saxon England* (Woodbridge : Boydell Press, 2007) ; Also see Francis Pryor, "The Invasion That Never Was,"• Episode 3, *Britain AD*: (BBC Channel 4, 2004); print edition: Francis Pryor, *Britain AD*, (NY: Harper Perennial; 2005).

[5] Stephen Oppenheimer, *The Origins of the British: A Genetic Detective Story*, (London: Constable, 2006)

[6] The number of studies which consider Dark Age Celtic naval developments can be counted on one hand (assuming that hand has been subjected to multiple amputations). See, for example, Bernard S Bachrach, "The Questions of King Arthur's Existence and of Romano- British Naval Operations" *The Haskins Journal 2*, 13-28; although concerned with Germanic naval developments, John Haywood, *Dark Age Naval Power: Reassessment of Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Seafaring Activity* (London: Routledge, 1991) is also relevant; Geoffrey Ashe, *Land to the West* (NY: Viking, 1962) while mainly concerned with St. Brendan, disambiguated all the early Classical and Celtic references to seafaring in the western seas and therefore is of value, albeit marginally. There is, admittedly, a voluminous literature on Saxon seafaring and ships, which discuss a number of issues related to the Brittonic Navy, but which are outside the purview of this present short essay.

[7] Robert Vermaat, "The Vergilius Romanus: the first British book? Vergil MS Vat. lat. 3867= Romanus" *Vortigern Studies*; David H. Wright, *The Roman Vergil and the Origins of Medieval Book Design*. (Toronto, Univ. of Toronto Press 2001); St. Patrick,

"A Letter to the Soldiers of Coroticus"• _AncientTexts.org_; Mark Redknap, John M. Lewis and Nancy Edwards Eds., _A Corpus of Early Medieval Inscribed Stones and Stone Sculptures in Wales_ (Cardiff: Univ. of Wales Press, 2007-2013) (three volumes).

[8] Michael Kulikowsky, "Barbarians in Gaul, Usurpers in Britain"• _Britannia_, vol. 31 (2000), 325-345.

[9] See, for example, "The Dream of Maxen Wledig," _The Mabinogion_, (Gwyn Jones and Thomas Jones, Eds.) (NY: Everyman's, 1949).

[10] Eric Morse, "Decade of Darkness; the Collapse of the Roman Army in the West" (AD 395-405) _Royal Canadian Military Institute Lecture_ (Toronto, Dec. 23, 2014).

[11] Paul D. Emanuele, _Vegetius and the Roman Navy_, MA Thesis, (Vancouver: Univ. of British Columbia, 1974), 28; Nikolas Boris Rankov, in 2002, in the _Proceedings of the XVIIIth International Congress of Roman Frontier Studies,_ attempted to dismiss the notion of British naval vessels, but Emanuele had already foreseen these arguments in 1974 and successfully countered them in his thesis.

[12] For Britonia, see: Simon Young, "Britonia, The Forgotten Colony" _History Today_, Vol. 50 Issue 10 (Oct. 2000); Antonio Garcia y Garcia, _Historia de Bretona_ (Lugo: Edita Servivio /Publicacions Deputacion Provincial, 1999). For Brittany, see: Joseph Loth, _Emigration Bretonne en Armorique du Ve au VIIe siecle de notre ere_ (Paris: Picard, 1883); Leon Fleuriot, _Les origines de la Bretagne_, (Payot, 1980); John Morris _The Age of Arthur_, Chapter 14, 249-260. On Riothamus and his campaigns in Gaul, see Geoffrey Ashe _The Discovery of King Arthur_, (London: Guild, 1985), 53-56; Morris, _Age of Arthur_, ibid; Dane Pestano, "Riothamus and the Visigoths"• _Dark Age History_ blog, August 21 2011.

[13] See Christopher K. Coleman, _Britain's Best Bulwark; Celtic British Naval Power in the Brittonic Era_ (forthcoming).