

Ancient Loyalties

Time to declare a personal interest. I'm a historian and earn a living writing history books – check me out on Amazon – advising TV and film production companies and such like. So I love history. And now I'm going to impose on you a rather sideways look at the Brexit decision.

Looking back at the results, it was striking how the five nations of Britain voted.

England vote Leave, Wales voted Leave, Cornwall voted Leave, Scotland voted Remain, Northern Ireland voted Remain.

Now, this plays into one of my pet theories about Britain and British history. It is widely accepted that the various nations of Britain were fixed in the chaotic and violent years of the Dark Ages that followed the collapse of the Roman Empire. In AD400 the British Isles were divided into Roman-controlled areas south of Hadrian's Wall, Pictish and Celtic tribes of varied cultures to the north of the Wall and a culturally united, but politically fragmented Ireland. Come the year 600 and all that had changed. The English, Welsh, Irish, Scots and Cornish were [more or less] where they are today.

How all this came about is a matter of bitter dispute among historians. Written sources for the period are slim, while archaeology can tell us only so much.

I have my own theories, of course. I believe that what had once been Roman Britain remained politically united rather more than has generally been thought. While the English flooded in and grabbed most of the land, leaving the Romano-Celts to inhabit Wales and Cornwall, there remained an overarching political authority. The English usurped what had been the Roman authority over all lands south of Hadrian's Wall. They gave the office of governor their own title of

Bretwalda and monopolised it for themselves. Quite what powers this title carried with it have always been rather obscure, as has the process by which it passed from one monarch to the next, but we know that it had a real power of some kind.

Crucially the title covered not just England, but also Wales and Cornwall. By the more settled times of the High Middle Ages, England had become a single kingdom and the King of England sought to exercise this power over the Welsh. That led to long wars and disputes with the Welsh princes, who sought to protect their own powers and rights. Those disputes ended when Wales was integrated into the English system of local and national government.

The point I seek to make is that culturally and politically England and Wales have a lot more in common with each other than either does with the Scots or the Irish. Those links stretch back centuries into the poorly understood Dark Ages, but they are very much alive today when it came to Brexit.

Photo by The British Library