



Britain in the Middle Ages: A History for Beginners

Florence L. Bowman

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The world is very old, and it has taken a long time to discover much of the ancient story of Britain. Scholars have found out many things because they are able now to read the signs on the rocks and under the soil. From the tools left behind, from the remains of dwellings and from treasures found in graves, we have learned about the ways of men in times before history was written down.

Once, it seems, Britain was a hot land. Great forests grew up everywhere. Strange wild creatures roamed about, and there were monsters in the waters.

Once, too, it was a very cold land, and the snow lay in the valleys and ice-glaciers came sliding down the mountains, making great river beds as they passed.

As it grew warmer, the ice melted and disappeared. The ice fields left pools of water behind them, the lakes that you find in the country still. The rivers, too, brimming over, flowed swiftly to the sea. Mighty rivers they must have been, broader and deeper than they are now.

When men came, they made their homes in the caves and in underground dwellings, and later they built mud huts. They hunted for their food, learned to weave clothes from the grasses, to make weapons from stone and to strike fire from the rocks. This is a very long story and we know little about it.

Of the Britons who dwelt here, we know something from those who had heard of them and wrote about them. Round about their villages, they made wattle-fences to keep away their enemies and the wild beasts that came out of the forests in winter nights.

They were shepherds and had many herds of sheep and cattle, and they grew a little corn. Sometimes, travelers from far-off lands came to visit them, to exchange their eastern coins for grain and skins.

The Britons loved beautiful things. They made cunning designs on their shields and helmets and with dainty tracings they ornamented their pots and jugs. They wove linen in fine patterns and knew how to make dyes. They were fond of music and told stories to one another of dragons and heroes and the great dreams of men.

When their chief died, they raised a mound over his grave; sometimes, too, great pillars of stone. They carried presents of corn and meat and fruit to put upon the grave, because they thought he might need them on his long journey. In some parts of the country, there are pillars of stone set up in circles. It is thought that perhaps the Britons used these as temples, praying and making their offerings under the sky, in sunshine and starshine.

The Romans said that the Britons loved riding wild horses, which they had tamed, and they were so skillful that however fast they galloped, the rider could make the horse stand quite still at any moment. They

sometimes rode in chariots and drove furiously. When they went into battle they armed their chariots with sharp knives and cut the enemy down on both sides. But they did not use their chariots often, for they would rather tend flocks in the fields than go to war.

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