

## DNA, Anglo-Saxons and a bit of Polish

For the archaeologist as well as the detective DNA has become a vital interpretative tool. This was spectacularly demonstrated when the skeleton recovered from a car park in Leicester was positively identified as that of Richard III, thanks to DNA. And recently also DNA has been used to try to solve one of British history's most enduring puzzles, - how did the Anglo-Saxons manage to gain control so quickly of the reins of power in Britain after the end of Roman rule? Following widespread sampling of DNA across the country it was clear that assimilation and not ethnic cleansing, (i.e. slaughter of the Brits,) had taken place. Some 30% of us now have traces of Anglo-Saxon DNA in our genes. Many of us are a little bit German.

An article in the March 2016 edition of *Current Archaeology* (no.312) summarises some more recent research in this area. This has used samples of DNA, not from the present day living population, but from skeletons recovered during archaeology in the Cambridge area. These date from the Late Iron Age to the 9th century and analysis confirms that whatever their cultural and biological heritage and ancestry they were buried in such a way that suggests they were all well integrated into the community, all with similar grave goods. The research also confirms that some 38% of the present day population of eastern England have DNA similar to modern Dutch and Danish people. (The full paper, which is rather complex, can be found at [www.nature.com](http://www.nature.com))

But there is one question of the Anglo-Saxon puzzle which cannot be solved through DNA. How did so relatively few invaders/immigrants, (guestimates vary, but some authorities think that up to 200 000 arrived over many decades), manage to impose the various forms of their spoken language on the much larger native British population? The Brits spoke Brittonic, a form of early Welsh, and had done so throughout the Roman period, the Romans having failed completely over 400 years to impose Latin on this country. Yet in a relatively short time, (200 years?), Anglo-Saxon had become the lingua franca throughout the land, except for the western fringes, where Brittonic and its later forms survived.

One possible answer to this conundrum is that Anglo-Saxon was a written as well as a spoken language, whereas Brittonic never achieved a written form. Anglo-Saxon could also exploit the Roman alphabet, with a few embellishments, and the sounds of Anglo-Saxon could easily be replicated in written form through the Roman alphabet. This was not true for Brittonic, nor for its modern version, the Welsh language of today. Welsh and the Roman alphabet make for uneasy bed-fellows. There was a splendid example of this over the Christmas 2015 period. Much publicity was given to the Welsh village of **Eglwysrwrw** where it had rained every day for more than 80 days. TV reporters descended on the village, but were completely baffled, not surprisingly, as to how to pronounce a name so totally lacking in vowels. Driving round rural Wales can reveal many similar piles of indigestible consonants. Welsh, it would seem, is in need of a totally different form of written symbols to replicate the sounds made by the spoken language. No wonder the Germans won! (In his radio drama "*Under Milk Wood*" Dylan Thomas poked gentle fun at Welsh place names. All the action takes place in the fictitious town of **Llareggub**. Geddit? Try reading it backwards).

History, as we are regularly reminded, likes to repeat itself and we are witnessing a spectacular example of this today. In the past few years some 800 000 Poles have migrated eastwards from Poland to the UK, just like the Anglo-Saxons. And just like the Anglo-Saxons they have settled mainly in the east and south east of Britain. Polish

shops, supermarkets and cafés have opened to cater for them. Job centres display adverts for work in the Polish language. The hotel and catering industry, as well as the building trades, would collapse without them. **In fact, Polish is now England's second language.** What conclusions might we draw from this mass movement of population based on our Anglo-Saxon experiences?

Firstly, we should not forget that we have been here before. At the end of World War 2 in 1945 some 200 000 Poles, mainly service men, opted to remain in this country rather than return to the communist paradise being unveiled in their homeland. They assimilated easily into British society, whilst remaining proud of their Polish heritage, and are identified today mainly by their surnames. Now a couple of generations down the road their children and grandchildren regard themselves as true Brits. No doubt these newer arrivals will tread the same path if they also choose to remain here.

But what of the effect on our language? Will English suffer the same fate as Brittonic? Will we all be speaking Polish in two hundred years time? I think this rather unlikely. The English language, now called by some Globish just because of its global reach, is a formidable force and is almost certainly the most commonly spoken language in the world with some 359 million native and non-native speakers. That will take some shifting! In the first instance the children of the new settlers will be bi-lingual. They will learn and speak English at school, and Polish with their parents at home. But after that the Polish will fade away and by the next generation there will remain a few faded photographs and little more than a vague curiosity, and perhaps a little embarrassment, about who they are and where they came from and why their names are spelt and sound rather peculiar.

The real challenge will be for the archaeologist some 500 years down the line, trying to interpret the possible life and times of a skeleton whose DNA displays a rich blend of Celtic, Anglo-Saxon, Norman French, Asian and Polish. Let's hope he can rise to that challenge, since we can't all be Richard III.