

Mists of Time

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Until quite late in the sixteenth century, educated Englishmen showed remarkably little curiosity about the remote past of their own country, and, in any case, the obstacles to a proper understanding of the past were considerable. For a start, the imaginable timescale of human history was very short. As the Bible was accepted as the one true record of the early world, chronologers such as Archbishop Ussher could deduce from the generations of the Old Testament that some 1,500 years had elapsed from the Creation to the Flood, and 2,500 from the Flood to the birth of Christ. So, all human activity had to be crammed into the space of a few thousand years. When people thought about the history of Britain, their understanding was coloured by the ancestral myths that had accumulated during the Middle Ages, and still prevailed in Stuart times. The broadly accepted view – commonly known as ‘The British History’ – was that Britain had been settled by the Trojan prince Brutus and his followers, wanderers since the destruction of Troy. Brutus named his new home after himself; hence Britain, and his companions became Britons. These foundation myths were put into circulation by the twelfth-century chronicler Geoffrey of Monmouth, whose ‘History of the Kings of Britain’ also paraded a line of sturdy British kings and heroes that included Lud, Lear and Cymbeline, and concluded with Arthur and Merlin.

Other medieval myths told how the British Isles were originally inhabited by a race of giants. They had built Stonehenge, and their great bones were sometimes found deep in the earth. Britain had to be linked to the biblical record in some way, so there were stories of tribes who were the descendants of Noah’s son Japhet making their way there. John Dee even tried using magic to find out the secrets of that early world. Some later writers, including Aylett Sammes (cat. 13), speculated about a Phoenician settlement of Britain. When combined, the rich ingredients of these various fantasies furnished an eminent antiquity for Britain that few scholars were disposed to question. They were much more agreeable and flattering than the surviving eyewitness accounts of Britain given by Caesar and Tacitus, which described a primitive tribal society, almost entirely lacking in civility. The myths gave Britain a pre-history that went back to the beginnings of the world, and, besides, there was nothing else with which to fill in the featureless blank of early times, before the Roman invasion. Only when printed editions of classical editions became widely available did doubts arise, for these Roman writers made no mention of the flourishing civilisation of early Britain that had been praised in the medieval chronicles. The first book to express a critical opinion of these old legends, the *Anglica Historia* (1534) by the Italian scholar Polydore

Vergil (who lived in England), was coldly received by English readers as a work designed by an envious foreigner to diminish the glorious antiquity of Britain.

In Italy, the recovery of the Roman past was well under way by the second half of the fifteenth century, as scholars, artists and architects and prominent churchmen encouraged excavation, sought manuscripts of ancient texts, collected and studied coins and gems, admired and copied antique sculpture, and began to understand the principles of classical architecture. The ubiquitous and impressive remains of the Roman world were an obvious stimulus to this process, and the rewards of research in such rich terrain were immediate and abundant. It was very different in England, where the material remains of the different pasts of Britain – the Ancient British, Roman and Saxon – were not so eye-catching, where there was little relevant literature and where the necessary spirit of curiosity was not so evident. It takes a great deal of effort to form a culture of scholarly enquiry and painstaking research, and to accumulate knowledge in a subject that has previously attracted no serious attention. Antiquarian studies were very slow to emerge in England. Those who were in a position to undertake them, clerics and educated laymen, were accustomed to working with manuscripts and books, and the traditions of learning persisting from the Middle Ages stressed respect for written authority; an independent critical faculty was not easy to develop. Looking at evidence in an objective way, having a notion of probability that took chronology and related activities in other places and societies into account, forming ideas of categories of objects with common features that could be studied comparatively: these habits of mind were rarely seen in early Tudor England.

Not only was there no sense of different periods in the past, with identifiable features, there was also an inability to look at objects or remains with a discriminating eye. No vocabulary existed to describe the remains of the past. It was even difficult to distinguish between natural and cultural objects. Fossils were often considered to be the products of human craft; stone implements, such as the Gray's Inn axe (cat. 14), were sometimes seen as the products of nature. In the seventeenth century, the cabinets of curiosities assembled by gentlemen who had a taste for antiquity promiscuously mingled genuine antiquities with oddities of the natural world and interesting and unusual items. John Bargrave's cabinet (cat. 7) is a good example of these miscellaneous collections without definition or categories. After the foundation of the Royal Society in London in 1660, there was a shift towards the systematic ordering of knowledge along lines set out by the lawyer and philosopher Sir Francis Bacon in the early part of the seventeenth century; he had demonstrated the necessity of methodical research and verifiable information. The Royal Society, however, directed its research principally towards the phenomena of the natural world, and had little interest in antiquities.

Just as the depth of the past was not understood, so the varied topography of Britain was not appreciated. Most people did not travel far beyond their own locality, and did not know what

different parts of the country looked like. The appearance of major towns or important buildings was unfamiliar to the great majority of Englishmen. Not until William Camden attempted to trace the routes of the Roman roads in his *Britannia* of 1586 (cat. 17) was there a comprehensive topographical view of the country, but very few scholars tried to develop Camden's interest in the relationship of landscape to antiquities until the middle of the seventeenth century. When maps of the country (such as those by John Speed [cat. 6]) began to appear towards the end of Elizabeth's reign, they did not show any roads; rivers were the defining features of the land. The rivers ran between geography and mythology, as they did in poetry. The illustrations to Michael Drayton's *Poly-Olbion* (cat. 5) show that their banks are full of nymphs and river gods; there was a happy coexistence of the natural and the mythological that few wished to disturb.

Myths and legends are hard to dislodge, particularly when they are flattering to national identity. Trojan origins and legends such as those telling of Joseph of Arimathea's coming to Britain after the Crucifixion with the Holy Grail and spreading the Christian gospel here had a remarkably long currency, and got in the way of objective enquiry. The material remains of the past attracted little attention: there was no expertise in identifying or interpreting such remains, nor were they thought to be of much significance. How could one identify anything in the wreckage of the past? What did a Roman urn look like? How could one recognise a Saxon arch? How did one begin to make sense of what was often called the 'rubbish' of the past, and put it into a coherent historical context? Thomas Browne's *Hydriotaphia, Urne-Buriall* (cat. 16) was an early attempt to interpret the anonymous objects that came out of the earth.

The first person publicly to declare himself 'Antiquarius' or an antiquary was John Leland (c. 1505–1552) whose activities well exemplify the limitations of outlook in one who aspired to review the historical remains of England. He was a court-scholar and priest who received a licence from King Henry VIII to search the monasteries and colleges throughout the country for rare and important manuscripts that could be removed to the King's own libraries. Thereafter he formed the ambition to travel the kingdom in order to give a comprehensive description of Britain, and made a 'Laborious Journey & Serche ... for Englandes Antiquities' (cat. 15). The results – which he never published – were disappointing. His voluminous notes give only the barest accounts of towns and villages. The prominent medieval structures are recorded, but of genuine antiquities there is scarcely a trace. The Saxon world did not exist for Leland, and he largely ignored the Roman presence underlying everything. His work is nonetheless valued because it is the only survey of its kind before the time of Elizabeth I, and Leland remains an honoured name in antiquarian circles.

The prospects for an effective advancement of antiquarian learning in England depended on a number of requirements: detailed knowledge of the Greek and Latin texts that referred to Britain; an ability to understand the Anglo-Saxon language; and an acquaintance, at least, with the

methods that continental scholars were using to explore their own national pasts. These methods included philology, etymology, numismatics, comparison (both of texts and objects), linking written sources with material remains and publication of results. In addition, it was desirable to define certain subjects that could become the focus of organised investigation. As antiquarian activity increased in Elizabeth's reign, it became clear that these would include the origins of the early inhabitants of Britain, the languages spoken here, the planting and growth of Christianity in the British Isles, the modes of government in post-Roman society, the evolution of the laws of England, and the origins of institutions and offices of Church and state, including that most sensitive subject, the nature and powers of Parliament. It is worth noting that investigation of ancient sites – archaeology – was not a concern of early antiquaries.

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