


Britons (historical)

The **Britons** (sometimes **Brythons** or **British**) were the [Celtic](#) people living in [Great Britain](#) from the [Iron Age](#) through the [Early Middle Ages](#).^[1] They spoke the [Insular Celtic language](#) known as [British](#) or Brythonic. They lived throughout Britain south of about the [Firth of Forth](#); after the 5th century Britons also migrated to continental Europe, where they established the settlements of [Brittany](#) in [France](#) and the obscure [Britonia](#) in what is now [Galicia](#), [Spain](#).^[1] Their relationship to the [Picts](#) north of the Forth has been the subject of much discussion, though most scholars accept that the [Pictish language](#) during this time was a Brythonic language related to, but perhaps distinct from, British.^[2]

The earliest evidence for the Britons and their language in historical sources dates to the Iron Age.^[1] After the [Roman conquest](#) of 43 AD, a [Romano-British culture](#) began to emerge. With the advent of the [Anglo-Saxon invasion](#) in the 5th century, however, the culture and language of the Britons began to fragment. By the 11th century their descendants had split into distinct groups, and are generally discussed separately as the [Welsh](#), [Cornish](#), [Bretons](#), and the people of the [Hen Ogledd](#) ("Old North"). The British language developed into the distinct branches of [Welsh](#), [Cornish](#), [Breton](#), and [Cumbric](#).



 [Great Britain](#) in the mid-late 400s [CE](#)
■ Mainly [Brythonic](#) areas
■ Mainly [Gaelic](#) areas
■ Mainly [Pictish](#) areas

Etymology

The earliest known reference to the inhabitants of Britain seems to come from records of the voyage of [Pytheas](#), a [Greek](#) geographer who made a voyage of exploration around the [British Isles](#) between 330 and 320 BC. Although none of his own writings remain, writers during the time of the [Roman Empire](#) made much reference to them. Pytheas called the islands collectively as αἱ Βρεταννίαι, which has been translated as the *Brittanic Isles*, and the peoples of these islands of *Prettanike* were called the Πρεττανοί, *Priteni*, *Pritani* or *Pretani*. The group included Ireland which was referred to as *Ierne* (*Insula sacra*, the *sacred island*, as the Greeks interpreted it) "inhabited by the race of *Hiberni*" (*gens hiernorum*), and Britain as *insula Albionum*, "island of the Albions".^{[3][4]} The term *Pritani* may have reached Pytheas from the [Gauls](#), who possibly used it as *their* term for the inhabitants of the islands.^{[4][5]}

The Latin name in the early Roman Empire period was *Britanni* or *Brittanni*, following the Roman conquest in AD 43.^[6]

In current usage, *Briton* also refers to the modern, mainly English-speaking, inhabitants of the United Kingdom – the [British people](#). As such it is a collective term for the [English](#), [Scottish](#), [Welsh](#), and [Cornish](#), as well as the [Irish people](#) from [Northern Ireland](#). Welsh *Brython* was introduced into English usage by [John Rhys](#) in 1884 as a term unambiguously referring to the P-Celtic speakers of Great Britain, as complementing *Goidel*; hence the adjective *Brythonic* referring to the group of languages.^[7] *Brittonic* is a more recent coinage (first attested 1923 according to the [Oxford English Dictionary](#)) intended to refer to the ancient Britons specifically.

Language

The Britons were speakers of the [Brythonic](#) (or Brittonic) languages. Brythonic languages are believed to have been spoken throughout the island of Britain.^{[1][8]} According to early mediaeval historical tradition, such as [The Dream of](#)

Macsen Wledig, the post-Roman Celtic-speakers of [Armorica](#) were colonists from Britain, resulting in the [Breton language](#), a language related to Welsh and identical to [Cornish](#) in the early period and still used today. Thus the area today is called [Brittany](#) (Br. *Breizh*, Fr. *Bretagne*, derived from *Britannia*).

The Brythonic languages developed from [Proto-Celtic](#), after it was introduced to the British Isles from the continent. The first form of the Brythonic languages is believed to be [British](#). After the Roman conquest of Britain, the British language adopted some words from [Latin](#); hence it is sometimes termed Romano-British in this period.

Some linguists have invented the terms [Western](#) and [Southwestern Brythonic](#) to classify subsequent developments of the British language. The Western and Southwestern developed into [Cumbric](#), [Welsh](#), [Cornish](#), and [Breton](#) in Gaul. While Welsh, Cornish and Breton survive today, Cumbric became extinct in the 12th century.

Territory

Throughout their existence, the territory inhabited by the Britons was composed of numerous ever-changing areas controlled by [tribes](#). The extent of their territory before and during the [Roman](#) period is unclear, but is generally believed to include the whole of the island of [Great Britain](#), as far north as the [Clyde-Forth isthmus](#). The territory north of this was largely inhabited by the [Picts](#), although a portion of it was eventually absorbed into the [Gaelic](#) kingdom of [Dál Riata](#). The [Isle of Man](#) was originally inhabited by Britons also, but eventually it became Gaelic territory.

Meanwhile, [Ireland](#) is generally believed to have been entirely Gaelic throughout this period. ^{[[citation needed](#)]}

In 43 the [Roman Empire invaded Britain](#). The British tribes initially opposed the Roman legions, but by 84 the Romans had decisively conquered southern Britain and had pushed into what is now Scotland. In 122 they fortified the northern border with [Hadrian's Wall](#), which spanned across what is now [North England](#). In 142 Roman forces pushed north again and began construction of the [Antonine Wall](#), which ran between the Forth-Clyde isthmus, but they retreated back to Hadrian's Wall after only twenty years. Although the native Britons mostly kept their land, they were subject to the [Roman governors](#). The Roman Empire retained control of "Britannia" until its departure about AD 400.

Around the time of the Roman departure, the [Germanic-speaking Anglo-Saxons](#) began an invasion of the Eastern coast of Britain, where they established their own kingdoms. Eventually, the Brythonic language in these areas was replaced by that of the Anglo-Saxons ^{[[citation needed](#)]}.

At the same time, some Britons established themselves in what is now called [Brittany](#). There they set up their own small kingdoms and the [Breton language](#) developed there from [Insular Celtic](#) rather than [Gaulish](#). They also retained control of Cornwall and Northwest England, where Kingdoms such as [Dumnonia](#) and [Rheged](#) survived. By the end of the 1st millennium, the Anglo-Saxons and [Gaels](#) had conquered most of the British territory in Britain, and the language and culture of the native Britons had largely been extinguished^[9], remaining only in [Wales](#), [Cornwall](#), parts of [Cumbria](#) and Eastern [Galloway](#).



Britons migrated westwards during the [Anglo-Saxon invasion](#)
Main articles: [British Iron Age](#), [Roman Britain](#), and [Sub-Roman Britain](#)

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Armorica

Armorica or **Aremorica** is the name given in ancient times to the part of [Gaul](#) that includes the [Brittany peninsula](#) and the territory between the [Seine](#) and [Loire](#) rivers, extending inland to an indeterminate point and down the Atlantic coast.^[1] The [toponym](#) is based on the Gaulish phrase *are-mori* "on/at [the] sea", made into the Gaulish place name *Aremorica* (**are-mor-ika*) "Place by the Sea". The suffix *-ika* was first used to create [adjectival forms](#) and then, names (See regions as [Pays d'Ouche](#) < *Utica*, [Perche](#) < *Pertica*). The original designation was vague, including a large part of what became [Normandy](#) in the 10th century and, in some interpretations, the whole of the coast down to the Pyrenees. Later, the term became restricted to Brittany.

In [Breton](#) (which with [Welsh](#) and [Cornish](#) belongs to the [Brythonic](#) branch of [Insular Celtic languages](#)), "on [the] sea" is *war vor* (Welsh *ar for*), though the older form *arvor* is used to refer to the coastal regions of Brittany, in contrast to *argoad* (*ar* "on/at", *coad* "forest" [Welsh *ar goed* (*coed* "forest")]) for the inland regions.^[2] These cognate modern usages suggest that the Romans first contacted coastal people in the inland region and assumed that the regional name *Aremorica* referred to the whole area, both coastal and inland.

Ancient Armorica

[Pliny the Elder](#), in his *Natural History* (2.17.105), claims that Armorica was the older name for [Aquitania](#), stating Armorica's southern boundary extended to the [Pyrenees](#). Taking into account the Gaulish origin of the name, this is perfectly correct and logical, as *Aremorica* is not a 'country name', but a word that describes a type of geographical region - a region that is by the sea. Pliny lists the following [Celtic tribes](#) as living in the area: the [Aedui](#) and [Camuteni](#) as having treaties with [Rome](#); the [Neldi](#) and [Secusiani](#) as having some measure of independence; and the [Boii](#), [Senones](#), [Auleri](#) (both the [Ebuovices](#) and [Cenomani](#)), the [Parisii](#), [Tricases](#), [Andicavi](#), [Viducasses](#), [Bodiocasses](#), [Veneti](#), [Coriosvelites](#), [Diablinti](#), [Rhedones](#), [Turones](#), and the [Atseui](#).

Trade between Armorica and Britain, described by [Diodorus Siculus](#) and implied by Pliny^[3] was long-established. Because, even after the campaign of [Publius Crassus](#) in 57 BC, continued resistance to Roman rule in Armorica was still being supported by Celtic aristocrats in [Britain](#), [Julius Caesar](#) led two invasions of Britain in 55 and 54 in response. Some hint of the complicated cultural web that bound Armorica and the *Britanniae* (the "Britains" of Pliny) is given by Caesar when he describes [Diviciacus](#) of the [Suessiones](#), as "the most powerful ruler in the whole of Gaul, who had control not only over a large area of this region but also of Britain"^[4] Archaeological sites along the south coast of England, notably at [Hengistbury Head](#), show connections with Armorica as far east as the [Solent](#). This 'prehistoric' connection of Cornwall and Brittany set the stage for the link that continued into the medieval era. Still farther East, however, the typical Continental connections of the *Britannic* coast were with the lower Seine valley instead.

Archeology has not yet been as enlightening in Iron-Age Armorica as the coinage, which has been surveyed by Philip de Jersey.^[5]

Under the [Roman Empire](#), Armorica was administered as part of the province of [Gallia Lugdunensis](#), which had its capital in [Lugdunum](#), (modern day [Lyons](#)). When the [Roman provinces](#) were reorganized in the 4th century, Armorica (*Tractus Armoricanus et Nervicanus*) was placed under the second and third divisions of Lugdunensis. After the legions retreated from Britannia (407) the local elite there expelled the civilian magistrates in the following year; Armorica too rebelled in the 430s and again in the 440s, throwing out the ruling officials, as the Romano-Britons had done. At the [Battle of the Catalaunian Plains](#) in 451 a Roman coalition led by General [Flavius Aetius](#) and the Visigothic King [Theodoric I](#) clashed violently with the Hunnic alliance commanded by King [Attila the Hun](#). [Jordanes](#) lists Aëtius' allies as including Armoricans and other Celtic or German tribes (Getica 36.191).

The "Armorican" peninsula came to be settled with [Britons](#) from Britain during the poorly documented period of the 5th-7th centuries.^[6] These settlers, whether refugees or not, made their presence felt in the naming of the westernmost, Atlantic-facing provinces of Armorica, [Cornouaille](#) ("Cornwall") and [Domnonea](#) ("Devon"). These settlements are associated with leaders like Saints [Samson of Dol](#) and [Pol Aurelian](#), among the "founder saints" of Brittany.

Questions of the relations between the Celtic cultures of Britain— [Cornish](#) and [Welsh](#)— and Celtic [Breton](#) are far from settled. Martin Henig (2003) suggests that in Armorica as in [sub-Roman Britain](#), "there was a fair amount of creation of identity in the [migration period](#). We know that the mixed, but largely British and Frankish population of Kent repackaged themselves as 'Jutes', and the largely British populations in the lands east of Dumnonia (Devon and Cornwall) seem to have ended up as 'West Saxons'. In western Armorica the small elite which managed to impose an identity on the population happened to be British rather than 'Gallo-Roman' in origin, so they became Bretons. The process may have been essentially the same."^[7] According to C.E.V. Nixon, the collapse of Roman power and the depredations of the [Visigoths](#) led Armorica to act "like a magnet to peasants, *coloni*, slaves and the hard-pressed" who deserted other Roman territories, further weakening them.^[8] This flux of shifting self-identification in the Early


Middle Ages, characterizes the modern view, which is supplementing traditional assertions of continuity from the Iron Age.

When [Vikings](#) or [Northmen](#) settled in the [Cotentin](#) peninsula and the lower Seine around [Rouen](#) in the ninth and early tenth centuries, and these regions came to be known as [Normandy](#), the name *Armorica* fell out of use in the area. With western Armorica having already evolved into [Brittany](#), the east was recast from a Frankish viewpoint as the *Breton March* under a Frankish [marquis](#).

[\[edit\]](#) Armorica popularized in contemporary culture

The home village of the fictional comicbook hero [Asterix](#) was located in Armorica during the [Roman Republic](#); there, "indomitable Gauls" hold out against Rome. The unnamed village was reported as having been discovered by archaeologists in a spoof article in the British *The Independent* newspaper on April Fool's Day, 1993.^[9] *North Armorica* is mentioned in the first sentence of [James Joyce](#)'s novel [Finnegans Wake](#).



 Map of Britton settlements in the 6th-century.