

British History Series: Episode 8 - The Viking's Return

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Key Focus of This Week's Talk

This week's session explored the formation of early medieval Scotland and Wales, highlighting their struggles against Anglo-Saxon encroachment, Viking invasions, and internal unification. The talk contrasted these developments with the simultaneous rise of England under figures like Alfred the Great and Athelstan.

Wales: From Tribal Kingdoms to Brief Unity

1. Post-Roman Wales:

- Wales was a patchwork of Brythonic (Celtic) kingdoms, including **Gwynedd** (north), **Powys** (central borders), and **Dyfed** (southwest).
- The term "Welsh" comes from the Anglo-Saxon *wealas*, meaning "foreigners"—ironic since the Welsh were the original Britons!

2. Key Figures:

- **Rhodri Mawr (Rhodri the Great)**: Unified much of Wales in the 9th century and defeated Vikings on Anglesey (855 AD).
- **Hywel Dda (Hywel the Good)**: Created Wales' first legal code, the *Laws of Hywel Dda* (10th century), granting rights to women and children—unprecedented in England at the time.
- **Gruffydd ap Llywelyn**: The only Welsh king to rule all of modern Wales (1055–1063) and be recognized by the English. Killed in battle against Harold Godwinson (later King Harold II of England).

3. Challenges:

- Anglo-Saxon expansion fragmented Welsh-Briton territories (e.g., Battle of Chester, 616 AD).
- Viking raids targeted coastal areas like Anglesey.

Scotland: Picts, Scots, and Vikings

1. Early Tribes:

- **Picts:** Dominated the Highlands (north of the Antonine Wall), known for face tattoos and fierce resistance to Romans.
- **Scots (Dál Riata):** Gaelic-speaking settlers from Ireland, based in the west. Christianized Scotland via monks like St. Columba (Iona monastery, 563 AD).
- **Strathclyde:** Brythonic kingdom in the southwest (modern Glasgow area).

2. Unification:

- **Kenneth MacAlpin:** First king to rule both Picts and Scots (850s AD), founding the House of Alpin.
- **Vikings:** Raided Iona repeatedly (795+), forcing monks to flee to Ireland. Settled Orkney, Shetland, and the Western Isles until the 15th century!
- **Macbeth:** Real-life king (1040–1057) who killed Duncan I in battle (not murder!) and ruled for 17 years—far from Shakespeare's villain.

3. English Threats:

- Northumbria briefly controlled Edinburgh (7th–10th centuries).
- Athelstan's victory at **Brunanburh (937 AD)** crushed a Scottish-Viking-Strathclyde alliance but didn't topple Scotland.

Fun Facts & Memorable Quotes

- "The Welsh called themselves *Cymry* (comrades), not foreigners!"
- "Macbeth went on pilgrimage to Rome—no mention of witches in real life!"
- "Orkney was Norse until the 1400s—longer than the Tudors ruled England!"

Why This Matters

By 1063, Wales and Scotland had fleeting moments of unity—just as England faced the Norman Conquest. These stories are rarely taught in English schools but reveal the complex, interconnected history of Britain's nations.