Invisible Britons

Abstract

It has long been believed that the Britons of what became England were effectively exterminated – whether killed, driven out and/or culturally effaced by enslavement – by the incoming Anglo-Saxons; the basis for this belief was essentially derived from the documentary record. Over recent years, a competing view has arisen, on the basis of a more critical assessment of the historical record as English foundation-mythmaking: that the Britons did not wholly disappear in any of these ways, but that many “became English” by taking on English practices, including the English language. This paper shows that the new view is not tenable in the light of what generally happens to the languages involved in contact situations, and that, at least in the English heartland, the observed patterns of lexical and onomastic borrowing suggest that the traditional view is more likely to be correct.