

THE ICENI—TEUTONS OR CELTS ?

By GORDON WARD, M.D., F.S.A.

IT is generally if not universally accepted in this country that the population of Britain when Julius Caesar visited us (55-54 B.C.) was Celtic-speaking. The discussion of other possibilities has mostly been concerned with the areas south of the Thames and, so far as the present writer is aware, no particular attention has been directed to the language or history of East Anglia before the Roman occupation of A.D. 43. There is therefore an almost virgin field for exploration.

We may well consider to begin with whether the accepted view that the Icení were Celts is really well founded. Our only remaining evidence of their pre-55 B.C. language is enshrined in the few personal or place-names which we can find in the pages of Tacitus. In his "Annals," book 14, cap. 31, there is our fullest account of the rebellion of the Icení and from this we have the following local names—

1. The ICENI, a tribal name, perhaps pronounced "ikeni."
2. PRASUTAGUS, king of the Icení, father of the next.
3. BOADICEA (traditional), BOUDICCA (Tacitus).

These names are the only solid evidence available as to the language of the Icení but even this is not as solid as one would wish for it is clear that they come before us in a Roman dress and may even be Roman names or nicknames which would not have been recognized by the persons concerned.

The tribal name of the Icení, however, would seem to be genuine enough for it occurs again in the ICCENHILDE WEG of A.D. 903, now Ickneild Way. We have also the village of IKEN (Ykene 1212, Ikene 1254) in Suffolk and the ICANHO of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, anno 654, which may be connected with it (*J. Brit. Arch. Soc.*, Vol. XXXVI, Pt. 2, June, 1931). The syllable ICCEN- or IKEN- bears no resemblance to any modern or remembered Celtic tongue but it must also be admitted that there is nothing particularly Teutonic about it.

PRASUTAGUS is equally un-Celtic but the syllables PRAS- and -TAG- might have Teutonic bases.

BOUDICCA is the Latin form of some Icenian name as it was communicated to Tacitus by his father-in-law Agricola, both of them being Latins who had never met the lady and were not in Britain when she rebelled. It may be more accurate than the traditional BOADICEA but we have no adequate evidence on that point. In any case it seems not far from the Teutonic personal name BODECA which is to be deduced from the place-name "Bodecan leah" (B.C.S. 300). BODA, BODO and BUDA are common elements in personal and place-names as first written down after the Anglo-Saxon occupation and we may accept "Boudicca" as more obviously Teutonic than the name of her father.

It follows from such considerations that our little solid evidence suggests that the Iceni are more likely to have been of Teutonic than of Celtic origin. It is our bounden duty, I think, to reject the commonly voiced arguments that (1) the Iceni were Celts and therefore their personal names must have been Celtic whatever their forms, or (2) that these names are obviously Celtic and the Iceni must therefore have been Celts, no matter what evidence may exist to the contrary. These arguments are indeed served up on much broken pottery and spiced with no little learning but they are no more valid on that account.

We pass now to another approach to the main question, that is, to ask where the Iceni came from. The answer is that they came from Frisia and were expelled from that watery country by the pressure of other tribes moving steadily westward for excellent reasons of their own. This answer can hardly be accepted upon no better evidence than the writer's personal opinion. We must consider the state of affairs on the Continent, perhaps about 200 B.C. or earlier (the true date is quite unknown), in the light of Julius Caesar's Commentaries and the accounts of a few other Roman writers.

We have evidence that people called the Celts occupied much of Europe at about 500 B.C. They must have spent many years spreading out from a centre which was probably round about the area in which both the Rhine and the Danube originate. They occupied what we now call France as far as the mouths of the Rhine and including central France (where they fought with Caesar) and also Britain. Although they did not cross the Rhine mouths they did occupy the right bank perhaps nearly as far down as Cologne. Neither the date of these happenings nor the precise extent of their spread is at all well documented but this brief sketch is probably accurate for that part of Europe with which we are concerned, that is, the western seaboard.

When Caesar occupied Gaul he found that the Celts were everywhere being very hard pressed by a new race, namely, the Teutons or Germans. At this stage they were known only by tribal names. There was no national name as yet in existence but it is convenient to call them by a collective name which they would not themselves have recognized, i.e. Teutons.

Caesar tells us that a group of Teutonic tribes, the Morini, the Menapii and the Atrebates, had crossed the mouths of the Rhine and had settled in a country which he called Belgium. The Celtic inhabitants had been driven out, those who declined to go were exterminated. This country was what we now call Flanders and not the whole of modern Belgium. A Teutonic dialect has been spoken there ever since.

Why did these tribes leave their homes and cross the Rhine. The answer is stated by Ammianus Marcellinus (xv. 9, 4.) who is quoting a writer called Timagenes whose works have perished except for a few quotations such as the following—

“According to the Druids a part of the population (of Gaul) was indigenous but some of the population came from outlying islands and lands beyond the Rhine, driven from their homes by repeated wars and by the inroads of the sea.”

These people from "beyond the Rhine" were obviously the same as those whom Caesar met in Belgium. The object of quoting Timagenes is to show that the country beyond the Rhine was not a peaceful land from which emigration might take place as the population increased but, on the other hand, a troubled land afflicted by the inroads of the sea and by the movement westward of the Teutonic migrations. This land was what we now call Frisia—and it was beyond the limits of Celtic expansion. The Frisians were Teutons who were continually being obliged to war with other Teutons, just as the Belgae were Teutons and had also to fight for their homes against wave after wave of migrating compatriots. As far as the Menapii, Morini, etc., were concerned, Caesar, who derived his information from the Remi, puts the matter shortly as follows:—

" . . . the greater part of the Belgae were sprung from the Germans, and that having crossed the Rhine at an early period they had settled there (in Belgic Gaul) on account of the fertility of the country and had driven out the Gauls who inhabited those regions."

Our next evidence is from Pliny the Elder, writing about A.D. 70. This is long after the Belgae left Frisia and more than 100 years after the record of Julius Caesar. But the state of affairs in Frisia had not improved. Let it be granted that Pliny had the soul of a reporter rather than that of a historian and his words must accordingly be taken as somewhat unduly picturesque. Nevertheless, he was personally very well acquainted with Germany and, even if he never visited Frisia (as to which we have no knowledge), he certainly had access to good sources of information. This is what he wrote about the Frisians, some of whom it is here suggested migrated to East Anglia and became the Iceni.

" With immense tidal flow the Ocean floods over the land twice in every 24 hours, spreads its water wide, and raises Nature's eternal question, whether these regions are to be regarded as belonging to the land or to the sea. Here the wretched inhabitants dwell upon high mounds, as it were platforms constructed by men's hands above the level of the highest tides. Thus when the water covers everything around, they are like sailors on board a ship; but are more like ship-wrecked men when the sea retires, and around their huts they pursue the fish receding with the tide . . . they dig the peat up with their hands and dry it, more in the wind than in the sun, and then with it cook their food and warm their bodies benumbed with the north wind. Their only drink is rain-water, which they collect in holes dug at the entrance of their huts.

And yet these tribes, were they to be conquered by the Romans to-day would call it slavery!"

Before making obvious criticisms of this story it is well to remember that these mounds still exist and are known as "terpen." They are of great extent and are often the sites of modern villages. Saxon urns are found in them so that we may well believe that the earlier inhabitants of Pliny's day were driven to migrate. They have left few if any archæological remains but the Saxon burials are above the earliest strata.

We can now claim to have produced some evidence that—

- (1) Frisia as far north as the mouth of the Elbe (the terpen area) was a land from which its inhabitants were glad to escape because
- (2) They were oppressed by the sea on the N.W. and the Germans on the east.
- (3) Some of them escaped across the Rhine to Belgium (Flanders) from which, as is well known, they invaded south-east Britain before the time of Caesar.
- (4) Others did not cross the Rhine but nevertheless had excellent reasons for wishing to migrate.

Now for the crucial question—what happened to the Frisians who did not choose the rather difficult migration across the Rhine? The answer which the writer suggests is just this, that many of them came overseas into East Anglia and there performed the usual rite of driving out the inhabitants and taking their places. In fact, that many of them were the Iceni.

There is no documentary evidence for this suggestion, in fact, there is no certain evidence but only a series of probabilities.

1. Since these Frisians had to go somewhere, if the evidence of Pliny, etc., is to be accepted, and it can hardly be disputed, they could not find a refuge anywhere on the mainland of Europe. So far as we know the land now called Denmark was under the same stress from hostile Germans (the Cymbri) as was Frisia. There would be little other choice but the sea voyage to East Anglia.
2. The Frisians were Teutons, speaking a Germanic tongue. They presumably called their homes by the earliest Teutonic habitation name with which we are acquainted, namely -ham. This name or word they would bring to East Anglia and it is a fact that East Anglia is more densely spattered with -ham names than any other part of Britain.
3. It is further a fact, although it would take more space than is available to demonstrate it, that many of these -ham names are extremely similar to names still current in Frisia.

Three examples from the terpen area may perhaps be allowed (1) There is a place in Frisia now called BEETGUM but, according to Moerman (Nederlandse Plaatsnamen), it was formerly BEDINGAHEM and commonly BADINGHAM. These form are the same as Bedingham in Norfolk and Badingham in Suffolk. (2) MARSUM in Friesland was written MARSHAM in 1252. It compares with Marsham in Norfolk. (3) DOKKUM in Friesland was DOCCINGA in the eighth-ninth centuries. It is the same name as Docking in Norfolk.

4. Procopius, who was a sort of head of the Secretariat to the Emperor Justinian, has recorded some curious stories which he does not even accept himself. He says they were told to him by a deputation from Britain. The point of importance is that these stories do suggest a rather intimate connection between East Anglia and the nearest parts of the continent—earlier than the Anglo-Saxon invasions.

All this is very far short of proof but it is a strong point that the terpen people must have migrated and that East Anglia seems to be their most likely landfall. Where neither archaeological nor documentary evidence is available it is surely permissible to weave what picture one can from place-names, probabilities, etc.

To sum up—we have no evidence of any sort whatever that the Iceni were Celts and we have a great likelihood that they were Teutons in origin. Of course, the place-name authorities will not hurry to accept a theory which makes -ham older than the Anglo-Saxons but there is not wanting some evidence on the continent itself which supports this view. It is negative in character. There are no -ham names in the area from which the Anglo-Saxons came but only names in -heim. The two terminations have the same meaning but -ham is the older form or, if it be preferred, is that of the earliest migrants, while -heim is that of those who followed. It was probably the -heim wave of migration which pushed the Frisian -hams over the sea to East Anglia.