**Hengest and Horsa**

“Their first leaders are said to have been two brothers, Hengest and Horsa. Horsa was afterwards killed in battle by the Britons, and in the eastern part of Kent there is still a monument bearing his name. They were the sons of Wihtgisl, son of Witta, son of Wecta, son of Woden.”

(Colgrave and Mynors edn, i.15)[1]

These lines from Bede’s \_*Ecclesiastical History of the English People\_* (AD 731) represent the earliest surviving reference to the legendary brothers, Hengest (sometimes spelled Hengist) and Horsa. According to Bede, they led the so-called ‘adventus Saxonum’, when the first wave of Germanic settlers, invited by the British king Vortigern, arrived in Kent in the year 449 to help fight against the Picts. Most historians agree that his account is a simplified version of a complex period of movement and migration, designed to provide an origin story for the English people as Bede wanted to define them.

The mid-sixth-century work of Gildas covers the same events as Bede, but makes no mention of Hengest or Horsa [2]. But Bede’s account was influential: the 9th century pseudo-Nennius, the ‘Anglo-Saxon Chronicle’ (C9th-12th) [3], and Geoffrey of Monmouth’s 12th-century \_*Historia regum Britannia*\_ [4], among other texts, all repeated and remixed the story. The \_*Chronicle\_* adds the detail that Horsa was slain at \_*Ægels-threp\_* [Aylesford] in battle against Vortigern, but that Hengest became king of Kent.

In Geoffrey’s inventive account, the story becomes a high-stakes drama of passion, betrayal and the supernatural; Vortigern marries Hengest’s daughter Renwein and, for his love, defects to the Saxon side when the British-Saxon alliance deteriorates. Vortigern’s son Vortimer becomes the new king of the British but is poisoned by Renwein, thus restoring Vortigern to the throne. Hengest, intent on the consolidation of his power, orders a massacre of Vortigern’s men during a peace conference in Amesbury. Both Vortigern and Hengest are ultimately killed by the Briton Aurelius Ambrosius; Vortigern is burnt alive for his betrayal of the Britons, while Hengest is executed following a defeat at the Battle of Maisbeli.

Today, the two brothers have been thoroughly incorporated into Kentish myth. The county flag bears a white horse - ‘Hengest’ and ‘Horsa’ means ‘stallion’ and ‘horse’ in Old English - and place names across the area are also said to be named for the brothers: for instance, the Horsted Valley in Kent and Hengistbury Head in Dorset.

Meanwhile, megaliths in the Medway area have become linked to the legend, including the ‘White Horse Stone’, and Kit’s Coty House, the latter said to commemorate Categern, one of the British leaders defeated by the brothers. But these associations are almost certainly post medieval inventions. In 1921, Nellie Slayton Aurner analysed eleven sources up to the 12th century, and found no mention of any monuments linked to either brother [5].

Aurner found that the person apparently responsible for first linking the megaliths with Hengest and Horsa is 16th-century antiquarian(William Lambarde)[https://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1558-1603/member/lambarde-william-1536-1601]. He claims that ‘Citscotehouse’ is named after Categern in his 1576 *\_Perambulation of Kent\_*. After Lambarde, many gentleman guidebook writers across the 16th to 20th centuries repeated the idea.

These myths can inspire communities to think more deeply about local histories, as discussed in our blog on the Battle of Crayford [LINK TO OTHER BLOG]. Yet the legend is also used by more exclusionary groups. Contemporary pagans known as ‘Odinists’ have adopted sites associated with Hengest and Horsa as spiritually significant (paganism expert Dr Ethan Doyle White has written on this [6]). Whilst some modern pagan groups distance themselves from racism, others openly espouse ethno-nationalist views and explicitly link their attachment to the Medway Megaliths with their belief in a white ‘Anglo-Saxon’ heritage, which puts these places at risk of becoming unsafe for all visitors. As many scholars of early medieval England have explained, including Dr Mary Rambaran-Olm’s brilliantly accessible and widely-shared blogs and twitter threads, the ‘Anglo-Saxon’ past is continually misappropriated by groups that would seek to harm others, and historians have their work cut out combating these appropriations [7].

Whether or not Hengest and Horsa ever existed, the fact remains that they are part of the folk myths of the area and are established characters in local and national stories of the past. Remarkably, the (Encylopaedia Britannica)[ https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hengist] categorises the names under ‘Philosophy and Religion’ and ‘Ancient Religions and Mythology’, which goes to demonstrate how lines between truth and fiction, historical events and imagined, symbolic realities become blurred [8].

**Article by Francesca Allfrey and Beth Whalley**

**Suggested images and captions**

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1LlKVI3tM-wny0EfT9efuR7elPN2i7_s-/view?usp=sharing> Hengest and Horsa as depicted in Edward Parrott's \_*Pageant of British History\_* (1909). The image is clearly an idealised version of history, but is one that remains powerful in popular culture. Wikimedia commons.

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1gKi4wrrwHA7CjJlHAQnXEZpTsn8tueA8/view?usp=sharing> ‘Hengist and Horsa arriving in Britain’, by [Richard Rowlands](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_Rowlands) (1605). This image also exemplifies how the mythological brothers fit into wider narratives of imagined ‘first arrivals’ and the stories that empires tell about themselves - compare this image with a Victorian imagining of the arrival of [Christopher Columbus in America](https://www.aoc.gov/explore-capitol-campus/art/landing-columbus). Wikimedia commons.

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1SpyvE0AZ5PrvqW-TYl-azTD_kB6c1oGV/view?usp=sharing> Kits Coty House and the White Horse Stone, composite image. Wikimedia commons.

**Works cited**

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[4] Geoffrey of Monmouth. \_*The History of the Kings of Britain\_.* Ed. Lewis Thorpe. London: Penguin, 1973. Print.

[5] Aurner, Nellie Slayton. \_*Hengest: A study in Early English hero legend\_*. Iowa: University of Iowa Humanistic Studies 2.1. Print.

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[8] Parul Jain. ‘Hengist and Horsa’. \_*Encyclopedia Britannica Online\_.* 10 February 2012. Web. <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hengist>>. Last access 1 June 2021.