



# **A.D. 500: A Journey Through The Dark Isles Of Britain And Ireland**

*Simon Young*

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From back cover - "From Tintagel and tin-mining to saints and slave markets, from alcohol and King Arthur to boat burials and beavers - here are the realities of life in the sixth century A.D.

Based squarely on archaeological and historical evidence, this window on the mysterious world of the Dark Ages is written as a practical survival guide for the use of civilised Greek visitors to the barbaric islands of Britain and Ireland.

With the narrative of the Greeks providing a condescending and often hilarious running commentary on 'the barbarians', this is a vivid and original picture of life in the Dark Ages."

## **A.D. 500: A Journey Through The Dark Isles Of Britain And Ireland Details**

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Author : Simon Young

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# From Reader Review A.D. 500: A Journey Through The Dark Isles Of Britain And Ireland for online ebook

## Candace says

Reading this back-to-back with The Lost City of Z is kind-of funny, because they're essentially about the same thing, half a world and 1,500 years removed from each other.

If I had know it was written in a narrative, as it is, I probably wouldn't have picked it up; the writing's a bit precious so far. Hopefully it'll get better as it goes on!

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## Kevin says

In 410AD, the last of the Roman Legions left Britain to defend Rome from the increasing incursions of Barbarian tribes. The Romans had been part of these isles for nearly four centuries, arriving around 43AD under Claudius. Their legacy was great; they had to an extent civilised most of Britain, bringing their culture and law, a road network and developing towns and trade. Prior to the Roman arrival, Britain had belonged to the Britons, a tribal people, whom probably did not venture very far from their lands. Uncivilised, certainly, and we can safely say that the four centuries of Roman rule laid the foundations of what is now the UK. It brought civilisation to these lands.

What happened after 410AD is not very well chronicled. For a few hundred years, what is known as the Dark Ages lay upon Britain. With no social structure, no centralised government, laws or authority, Britain became a very dangerous land, whilst the old Roman towns, villas and forts slowly decayed into rubble, and a whole host of tribal peoples claimed their own lands and proclaimed their leaders King. This was also the era of the gradual conversion from Paganism to Christianity, with churches and monasteries popping up throughout the isles, which may explain the lack of latin records. Instead, what we really only have is conjecture, hearsay, poetical works and a lot of mythical storytelling, such as the legend of King Arthur (who it is said existed around this time, a Celtic/Romano-British King who waged war against the encroaching Anglo-Saxons). We have the Celts, situated in the South West, Wales and Ireland; the Picts, descended from Scandinavians who existed in the North of the land and finally the Saxons, whom were a mixed bunch and had arrived from Europe and laid claim to what is now England.

This is how Simon Young paints Britain in this book. 500AD is a fictionalised account of a group of Greek travellers, hailing from Byzantium, who are ordered to travel the length and breadth of the UK producing a log and travel guide, chronicling the various fiefdoms and customs they come across. Arriving by boat to Tintagel, they set off to record what they find to see what Britain had become since the last of the legions sailed away a hundred years ago and also to try and trace a previous expedition who had set out on a similar mission twenty years earlier whom had never returned. It's a fictional semi-historical narrative, with the travellers explaining the areas they visit, such as the isolated island hermitage of Lundy in the Severn (which shows how the early Christian monks lived – frugal probably being an understatement); the benignity of the Celts towards travellers; the way to gain protection from local Kings whilst in Ireland (usually via ‘nipple sucking’); the highly dangerous countryside where bandits roamed and attacked without compunction and so on. The Greeks travel through Cornwall, Dorset, South and North Wales, Ireland, over to the Orkneys and down through the dangerous land of Scotland and into Saxon territory, all the time gathering information on local customs, meeting the various Priests, Poets and Kings whose records have been recorded of this era, describing their customs and so on.

The book is an interesting portrayal of sixth century Britain portraying a very bleak, unchronicled period of our history. Through the Greek travellers we see a country ruled by differing fiefdoms (and there were many), little communication between the various clans, hardly any trade, the slow spread of Christianity (which, in many respects appears to be the only unifying force), and much internecine strife – involving Christians and Pagans, Celts and Saxons. Oh and the Picts. Simon Young has produced a relatively short fictional, sometimes humorous travellers guide, which should give you a small but important insight into early British History. Its quite a short book, and he certainly has made this rather confusing period of our history accessible to everyone. Informative.

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### **Margaret says**

Written like a travelogue, this is an interesting, fascinating and at times enchanting book.

A lovely introduction to dark ages Britain.

A must read.

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### **BettyAnn says**

Loved this book! What an interesting and fun way to read about history. Using facts and other information, it's set up like a travel guide - where to go, what to see, where to stay, type of thing. Very unique. Highly recommend!

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### **Scotchneat says**

The conceit is of a Byzantine librarian and researcher of the "Dark Isles" who is asked to write up a "how to" guide for a new expedition to the same. He has a journal that came back to the palace from the last expedition (though none of the adventurers survived) as source material.

And though he is horrified by some of the customs (like sucking nipples to get protection, running around naked with body paint, or pagan-like sacrifices), he's pretty sure he's equal to the task.

It was an enjoyable read, and I may have even learned something along the way.

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### **Andy Horton says**

Was recommended this as a resource for Celtic/Saxon-inspired RPG campaigns. A fun read, using the conceit of a guide for Greek travellers base dona failed embassy to give an overview of post-Roman, early Saxon Britain and Ireland.

Lots of interesting local colour, and a good sense of different factions and culture throughout the isles.

I found the last section, on Saxon England, least convincing - it's the area I know best, and I think having less

history of the period to rely on the author has over-used later Anglo-Saxon literature. The Saxons speak in proverbs taken from AS wisdom poetry, recite poems and speeches written down word for word in later centuries, tell the story of Beowulf - not that they might not have done this, but it doesn't wholly convince, and I would have hoped for a better sense of the developing colonisation of England and the nascent Seven Kingdoms.

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### **Edoardo Albert says**

Fascinating, thoroughly enjoyable tour through the Dark Isles of Britain and Ireland around about AD 500. The literary conceit of making the book the supposed guide written by a Byzantine geographer working to Imperial commission works very well, providing an amusing and bemused viewpoint on the oddities of the various groups fighting over the islands. Full of interesting details - it will take a while to forget just what was entailed in being crowned high king of Ireland - and illuminated by the author's footnotes. A lively and engrossing journey.

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### **S. Ben says**

Interesting, well-researched overview of life in the British Isles in the 6th century, fictionalized as a guide for travelers from Byzantium. Some of the main text is extrapolated beyond the evidence specifically available for the British Isles, but is not beyond the bounds of plausibility, is based on actual research (e.g. continental and/or later practices), and is flagged as such in the endnotes.

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### **Ian Kemp says**

An excellent read, much better than I expected from the cover notes. Young takes us on a Cook's tour of the four nations of dark age Britain - the Gaels, Celts, Picts and Saxons - using the entertaining device of a faux travelogue written to inform a Byzantine explorer.

His method really brings the dark age people to life and proves three things - (1) intelligence wasn't invented in the 20th Century, (2) parochialism rules the UK, a region where hatred of one's neighbours seems to be baked into the DNA, (3) in determining a society's situation, the threat and exercise of arms is the only currency that matters.

The only irritation is that Young seems to feel the need to include EVERY dark age testimony in the fictional tour. How did I know that the travellers would arrive at Sutton Hoo just in time to see a ship burial :-)?

But this is a small criticism, and doesn't outweigh the overall impact. Recommended for history nerds everywhere.

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### **Ocean Gebhardt says**

Still not sure if I liked the format or not. Written as a travelogue by Byzantine explorers in the 6th century. It

made a lot of the information fresh and relatable, although I was often wishing to delve into more detail in terms of the prevalence, veracity, etc. etc. of certain facts and occurrences. Anyway, still very interesting and entertaining.

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### **James Joyce says**

This was an interesting way to impart dry historical data.

Simon Young, a Celtic and Dark Ages historian, created a fictional Byzantine travelogue, narrated by an adviser to the Emperor. The Emperor is always "planning" for the eventual reconquering of the barbaric isles of Britain and this travelogue is from a previous, fateful expedition. The narrator makes many "helpful" comments, giving insight into both the actual period and various misconceptions that other peoples had about England, of the time.

The journal entries refer to the names of places at the time, but footnotes clarify which are still existing places. Copious footnotes and end-notes provide additional details.

Overall, I enjoyed this approach and I now intend to seek out some other works by Young, just because of how he wrote this one.

Fun, for fans of the time and place.

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### **David says**

Although a fictionalised account of a journey through 6th century Britain and Ireland this book is still an excellent historical book.

It is adapted from the fictional travel log kept by a group of Greeks as they make their way through the 'Dark Isles' of Britain and Ireland. This fictional journey gives the reader a more accessible insight into the culture of these lands during this period. No specific year is given and this is deliberate, as it allows the author to choose people and events from throughout the 6th century, without being tied down to a single year.

The Greek travellers offer a witty if condescending viewpoint of the 'Barbarians' they encounter. This is of course in keeping with the way the 'civilised' Greeks and Romans viewed Ireland.

For anyone who wants a useful and entertaining history of Early Medieval Ireland and Britain, then this is an excellent book.

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### **Martin says**

very enjoyable book. reminded me of an historical equivalent of bill bryson's science book 'a short history of nearly everything' with the book much more accessible than the average history book but yet just as informative and a lot more fun !

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## Eloise says

The 'Byzantine-travelog' concept (and resulting style) could be a little grating, but on the whole, I found *A.D. 500* a readable account of the "Dark Age" British Isles and various peoples contained therein. Young's copious notes were very open about his authorial choices and the historical/archaeological basis for his speculation well sourced and explained.

I'd certainly recommend it as more lighthearted, digestible, general overview; although it has the notes and index if you are so inclined.

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## Beorn says

A good, if far from unique, idea of introducing the reader to a specific period of history through the guise of what would nowadays be called a travelogue, albeit it one written in the style of a Byzantine courtier. Nice at first but gets a bit bland and tiring after a while, especially with the somewhat circuitous route the book takes.

One niggle would be that the downside to this format would be that anything interesting brought up by the (fictional) courtier is lacking in real world information to back it up, blurring the lines between fiction and fact and making the reader unaware of which niche the author is trying to fit into the most.

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