

The Anglo-Saxons

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

- Describe what Anglo-Saxon life was like before 1066

KEY POINTS

- The Anglo-Saxons were comprised of people from Germanic tribes who migrated to Great Britain from continental Europe; they inhabited the island from 450-1066.
- In the 5th century, Britain fell from Roman rule and established an independent culture and society.
- In the 6th century, Christianity was re-established and Britain began to flourish as a center for learning and cultural production.
- By the 7th century, smaller territories began coalescing into kingdoms, with the kingdom of Mercia one of the most dominant.
- The 9th century saw the rise of the Wessex kingdom, especially with King Alfred the Great, who fashioned himself “King of the Anglo-Saxons” and oversaw an increasing unity of the English people and improved the kingdom’s legal system and military structure and his people’s quality of life.
- During the course of the 10th century, the West Saxon kings extended their power first over Mercia, then over the southern Danelaw, and finally over Northumbria, thereby imposing a semblance of political unity.
- This society continued to develop and thrive until the Norman Conquest in 1066.
- The Anglo-Saxon culture was centered around three classes of men: the working man, the churchman, and the warrior.

TERMS

Hadrian’s Wall

A defensive fortification that ran from the banks of the River Tyne near the North Sea to the Solway Firth on the Irish Sea, and was the northern limit of the Roman Empire.

Norman Conquest

The 11th-century invasion and occupation of England by an army of Norman, Breton, and French soldiers led by Duke William I of Normandy.

King Alfred the Great

King of Wessex from 871 to 899, known as a learned and merciful man who encouraged education and improved his kingdom’s legal system and military structure and his people’s quality of life.

Overview

The Anglo-Saxons were a people who inhabited Great Britain from the 5th century. They comprised people from Germanic tribes who migrated to the island from continental Europe, their descendants, and indigenous British groups who adopted some aspects of Anglo-Saxon culture and language. The Anglo-Saxon period denotes the period of British history between about 450 and 1066, after their initial settlement and up until the Norman Conquest.

The Anglo-Saxon period includes the creation of an English nation, with many of the aspects that survive today, including regional government of shires and hundreds. During this period, Christianity was re-established and there was a flowering of literature and language. Charters and law were also instituted.

The history of the Anglo-Saxons is the history of a cultural identity. It developed from divergent groups in association with the people's adoption of Christianity, and was integral to the establishment of various kingdoms. Threatened by extended Danish invasions and occupation of eastern England, this identity persevered; it dominated until after the Norman Conquest.

Anglo-Saxon History

The early Anglo-Saxon period covers the period of medieval Britain that starts from the end of Roman rule. By the year 400, southern Britain—Britain below Hadrian's Wall—was a peripheral part of the Western Roman Empire, occasionally lost to rebellion or invasion, but until then always eventually recovered. Around 410, Britain slipped beyond direct imperial control into a phase which has generally been termed "sub-Roman."

In the second half of the 6th century, four structures contributed to the development of Anglo-Saxon society: the position and freedoms of the *ceorl* (peasants), the smaller tribal areas coalescing into larger kingdoms, the elite developing from warriors to kings, and Irish monasticism developing under Finnian.

In 565, Columba, a monk from Ireland who studied at the monastic school of Moville under Saint Finnian, reached Iona as a self-imposed exile. The influence of the monastery of Iona would grow into what Peter Brown has described as an "unusually extensive spiritual empire," which "stretched from western Scotland deep to the southwest into the heart of Ireland and, to the southeast, it reached down throughout northern Britain, through the influence of its sister monastery Lindisfarne." Michael Drout calls this period the "Golden Age," when learning flourished with a renaissance in classical knowledge.

By 660 the political map of Lowland Britain had developed, with smaller territories coalescing into kingdoms; from this time larger kingdoms started dominating the smaller kingdoms. The establishment of kingdoms, with a particular king being recognized as an overlord, developed out of an early loose structure. Simon Keynes suggests that the 8th century–9th century was period of economic and social flourishing that created stability both below the Thames and above the Humber. However, between the Humber and Thames, one political

entity, the kingdom of Mercia, grew in influence and power and attracted attention in the East.



England, 650. A political map of Britain c. 650 (the names are in modern English); the black text denotes kingdoms ruled by Anglo-Saxons.

The 9th century saw the rise of Wessex, from the foundations laid by King Egbert in the first quarter of the century to the achievements of King Alfred the Great in its closing decades. Alfred successfully defended his kingdom against the Viking attempt at conquest and became the dominant ruler in England. He was the first king of the West Saxons to style himself “King of the Anglo-Saxons.” Alfred had a reputation as a learned and merciful man with a gracious and level-headed nature who encouraged education and improved his kingdom’s legal system and military structure and his people’s quality of life.

During the course of the 10th century, the West Saxon kings extended their power first over Mercia, then over the southern Danelaw, and finally over Northumbria, thereby imposing a semblance of political unity on peoples who nonetheless would remain conscious of their respective customs and their separate pasts. The prestige and pretensions of the monarchy increased, the institutions of government strengthened, and kings and their agents sought in various ways to establish social order. This was the society that would see three invasions in the 11th century, the third of which was led successfully by William of Normandy in 1066 and transferred political rule to the Normans.

Anglo-Saxon Culture and Society

The visible Anglo-Saxon culture can be seen in the material culture of buildings, dress styles, illuminated texts, and grave goods. Behind the symbolic nature of these cultural emblems, there are strong elements of tribal and lordship ties. The elite declared themselves kings who developed *burhs* (fortifications or fortified settlements), and identified their roles and peoples in Biblical terms. Above all, as Helena Hamerow has observed, “local and extended kin groups remained...the essential unit of production throughout the Anglo-Saxon period.” The effects persist in the 21st century as, according to a study published in March 2015, the genetic makeup of British populations today shows divisions of the tribal political units of the early Anglo-Saxon period.

The ties of loyalty to a lord were to his person, not to his station; there was no real concept of patriotism or loyalty to a cause. This explains why dynasties waxed and waned so quickly; a kingdom was only as strong as its leader-king. There was no underlying administration or bureaucracy to maintain any gains beyond the lifetime of a leader.

The culture of the Anglo-Saxons was especially solidified and cultivated by King Alfred. The major kingdoms had grown by absorbing smaller principalities, and the means by which they did it and the character their kingdoms acquired as a result represent one of the major themes of the Middle Saxon period. A “good” king was a generous king who won the support that would ensure his supremacy over other kingdoms through his wealth. King Alfred’s digressions in his translation of Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy* provided these observations about the resources that every king needed:

In the case of the king, the resources and tools with which to rule are that he have his land fully manned: he must have praying men, fighting men and working men. You know also that without these tools no king may make his ability known. Another aspect of his resources is that he must have the means of support for his tools, the three classes of men. These, then, are their means of support: land to live on, gifts, weapons, food, ale, clothing and whatever else is necessary for each of the three classes of men.

The first group of King Alfred's three-fold Anglo-Saxon society are praying men—people who work at prayer. Although Christianity dominates the religious history of the Anglo-Saxons, life in the 5th and 6th centuries was dominated by “pagan” religious beliefs with a Scando-Germanic heritage. Almost every poem from before the Norman Conquest, no matter how Christian its theme, is steeped in pagan symbolism, but the integration of pagan beliefs into the new faith goes beyond the literary sources. Anglo-Saxon England found ways to synthesize the religion of the church with the existing “northern” customs and practices. Thus the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons was not just their switching from one practice to another, but making something fresh out of their old inheritance and their new beliefs and learning. Monasticism, and not just the church, was at the center of Anglo-Saxon Christian life. The role of churchmen was analogous with that of the warriors waging heavenly warfare.

The second element of Alfred's society is fighting men. The subject of war and the Anglo-Saxons is a curiously neglected one; however, it is an important element of their society.

The third aspect of Alfred's society is working men. Helena Hamerow suggested that the prevailing model of working life and settlement, particularly for the early period, was one of shifting settlement and building tribal kinship. The mid-Saxon period saw diversification, the development of enclosures, the beginning of the toft system, closer management of livestock, the gradual spread of the mould-board plough, “informally regular plots,” and a greater permanence, with further settlement consolidation thereafter foreshadowing post-Conquest villages. The later periods saw a proliferation of “service features,” including barns, mills, and latrines, most markedly on high-status sites. Throughout the Anglo-Saxon period, Helena Hamerow suggested: “local and extended kin groups remained...the essential unit of production.”



West Stow Anglo-Saxon village. Panorama of the reconstructed 7th-century village, characteristic of the Anglo-Saxon peasant villages.

Adapted from <<https://courses.lumenlearning.com/suny-hccc-worldhistory/chapter/the-anglo-saxons>>