The Anglo-Saxon Period

449-1066

Stonehenge (c. 2000 BC)
The Anglo-Saxons: 449–1066

300s B.C.
Celts in Britain

55 B.C.–A.D. 409
Roman Occupation

A.D. 449
Anglo-Saxon Invasion

A.D. 400–699
Spread of Christianity

A.D. 878
King Alfred against the Danes

A.D. 1066
Norman Invasion

300 B.C.
A.D. 1
A.D. 300
A.D. 600
A.D. 900
A.D. 1200
The Celts in Britain

Before and during the 4th century B.C.

- Britain named for one Celtic tribe—the Brythons
- Celtic religion a form of *animism*
- Britain home to several Celtic tribes
- Druids were Celtic priests
The Roman Conquest

In 55 BC and 56 BC, Julius Caesar made hasty invasions.

True conquest, however, occurred 100 years later under the Roman emperor Claudius in 43 AD.

Roman rule of Britain lasted for nearly 400 years, ending only when Rome was threatened in Italy.

The last Roman legions left for Rome in 407 AD.
The Roman Occupation

55 B.C.
Julius Caesar invades Britain

A.D. 43
Celts defeated by Claudius
• Romans build walls, villas, baths, roads

A.D. 409
Romans evacuate their troops
• Britain left vulnerable to attack
• Central government breaks down
Result of Roman Rule

- Constructed a system of well-paved roads and founded cities
- Erected **Hadrian’s Wall** to protect from Picts and Scots
- Brought skills in the art of warfare
- Introduced Roman law and order
- Used Latin
- Introduced **Christianity** (597 AD)
Roman Rule (con’t)

Roman Roads:
- 5,000 miles of stone roads
- Linked tribal capitals and towns
- Facilitated trade, the collection of taxes, and the movement of troops

Hadrian’s Wall:
- Linked the North Sea and the Atlantic
- Held back the Picts and Scots for 250 years
Bathe, England
Early Anglo-Saxon Life

The next invaders of Britain were the Anglo-Saxons: primarily the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes. These invaders were all Germanic tribes.
Dispersal of the Britons

After the Romans left, the Britons (who were here before the Romans and lived under their rule in relative peace) were unable to protect themselves against their new invaders.

To flee the Anglo-Saxons, the Britons fled to other parts of the island: Cornwall, Wales, and some went to Ireland.
Anglo-Saxon Society

- Some highly organized tribal units
- Tribes were ruled by a king chosen by a council of elders (witan) or a leader elected by physical prowess and achievements
- Many Roman buildings did become ruins though, because no one bothered or knew how to repair them.
- Some Saxons built wooden houses inside the walls of Roman towns. Others cleared spaces in the forest to build villages and make new fields. Some settlements were very small, with just two or three families.
Anglo-Saxon Society

- kinship groups led by strong warrior chief
- people farmed, established local governments, produced fine craftwork
- English emerged as a written language
The Anglo-Saxon Hierarchy

• Anglo-Saxon king was an absolute ruler and mighty warrior.
• The Anglo-Saxons had a two-class society: the *thanes*, or earls, who ruled and were related to the leader of the tribe; and the *churls*, or bondservants, whose ancestors had been captured by the tribe.
• King consulted with the *witan* (“wise men”), an assembly of respected earls.
• Churls provided hard labor and were bound to the earls’ service unless they could earn possessions and special royal favor to become freemen (independent landholders).
• Warriors were admired.
• Social organization based on strict laws and a sense of obligation to others.
The Anglo-Saxon Invasion

Why did the Anglo-Saxons settle in England?

England was inviting to outsiders:

• Mild climate
• Rich easily-tilled soil
• Safe anchorage for invading ships
Lived close to their animals (to protect animals and provide warmth)
Lived in single-family homes surrounding a communal hall and protected by a wooden stockade fence
The Anglo-Saxons farmed, maintained local governments, and created fine crafts, especially metalwork.

Eventually, the small kingdoms developed into seven large ones: Northumbria, Mercia, Wessex, Sussex, Essex, East Anglia, and Kent. (AD 600)

Once the small settlements became more established and connected, a more unified language emerged: Old English or Anglo-Saxon (Germanic Origins)
Characteristics of the Anglo-Saxons

- Hard fighters and bold sea warriors
- Admired physical strength, bravery, loyalty, fairness, and honesty
- Great love of personal freedom
- Boastful, willing to be cruel
- Enjoyed conflict, swimming matches, horse races, banqueting, drinking mead, singing songs, and storytelling
- Bravery in battle
The Anglo-Saxon Life

- Royal living quarters were a small cluster of wooden buildings surrounded by a stockade
- Main structure was the Mead hall
- Mead is a fermented drink made of water, honey, malt, and yeast
Anglo-Saxon Life

- Here the king, thanes, wives, and servants gathered.
- Singer called a **SCOP** entertained with stories of heroism.
- Warriors slept here after king retired to a different building.
The Scops (pronounced sh(oh)p)

- The communal hall offered shelter and a place for council meetings. (Mead or banquet hall)
- The communal hall was also a place for storytellers or bards (scops) who shared (orally) the stories of the Anglo-Saxons and their gods and heroes.
- The Anglo-Saxons valued storytelling as equal to fighting, hunting, and farming.
The Anglo-Saxon Bards

- called scops
- strummed harp as they sang
- sang of heroic deeds
- were often warriors

Why were the scops important?

- Anglo-Saxons did not believe in afterlife
- warriors gained immortality through songs
Role of Women

The wife of an earl or thane supervised weaving and dyeing of clothes, the slaughter of livestock, the making of bread, beekeeping, and the brewing of mead (fermented honey).

They would work alongside men in the fields.

Women inherited and held property.

Married women retained control over their property.
Types of Anglo-Saxon Verse

Scops often recited:

- Heroic Poetry: recounts the achievements of warriors involved in great battles
- Elegiac Poetry: sorrowful laments that mourn the deaths of loved ones and the loss of the past
Anglo-Saxon Beliefs

- Human life in the hands of fate (wyrd (weird)) - Sharp contrast to the Christian belief in an individual’s free will
- Did not believe in an afterlife
- Culture: Valued honor and glory
- Honor: People were judged by their actions; To be respected and remembered was the goal of everyone’s life
- Bravery in battle
Glory

🌟 Immortality only earned through heroic actions

➥ The goal was to be remembered after death, in songs and stories of his great deeds
The Anglo-Saxon War Culture

- Tribal society – warrior kings-led their men into battle
- Always rival warriors within the tribe
- King gathered around him a retinue of fighting men called thanes
- Endless feuds between individuals and between tribes
Anglo Saxon Values

- Gold/Treasure
- Comitatus – king and thanes/warriors tied to one another
- King shares spoils of war, warriors obligated to fight for him
- Loyalty
- Bravery
- Fate = Wyrd
Anglo-Saxon Beliefs (con’t)

- Pagan/Polytheistic
- The early Anglo-Saxons worshipped ancient Germanic or Norse gods:
  - Odin/Woden: chief of the gods, god of death, poetry, and magic
  - Fria: Woden’s wife and goddess of the home
  - Tiu: the god of war and the sky
  - Thunor/Thor: god of thunder and lightening
  - Frijz/Frigga: queen of the heavens
- The names of these gods survive today in our words Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday
Weaponry

Anglo-Saxon armies were usually small, with only a few hundred men.

The soldiers had spears, axes, swords and bows and arrows. They wore helmets on their heads and carried wooden shields.

Everyone fought on foot during a battle. It must have been a bit like a giant rugby scrum, with lots of pushing and yelling, and nasty wounds.
The most feared Anglo-Saxon weapon was a battle axe, but the most precious weapon was a sword. It took hours of work by a *smith* to craft a sword. He softened iron in a red-hot fire, twisted iron rods together and hammered the sword into shape.
Grave Goods

Items buried with bodies - Archaeologists can learn a lot from old burial sites.

When Anglo-Saxons died, their bodies were either cremated or buried in a grave. Belongings buried with the dead person, for use in the next life, provide evidence of the jobs people did.

Men's graves include knives and spears, which suggests hunting, fighting and farming.

Women's graves include tools used for sewing and weaving - showing that women made cloth and clothing.

The grave of a king, like the ship-burial at Sutton Hoo, was filled with treasures, weapons and armour.
Sutton Hoo

https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/sutton-hoo
The Coming of Christianity

In 432, the whole of Celtic Ireland was converted by Patrick, a Romanized Briton.

In 563, a group of Irish monks led by a soldier and abbot named Columba established a monastery on the island of Iona off the West coast of Scotland.

Later, the Roman church began to send missionaries throughout Europe.

In 597, Saint Augustine converted the King of England and established a monastery at Canterbury.

By 650, most of England was Christian in name, if not in fact.
Christianity and Literature

The church brought education and written literature to England.

Monks established churches, monasteries, and libraries.

Monks recorded and duplicated illuminated manuscripts, at first only written in Latin.

Oral literature was transcribed into written form.

Monks preserved not only Latin and Greek classics but also popular literature (*Beowulf*).
The Spread of Christianity

Around A.D. 400

- Christian monks settle in Britain
- Christianity and Anglo-Saxon culture co-exist

597 St. Augustine sent from Rome by A.D. 699

- British pagan religions replaced by Christianity
Exeter Book

- A tenth-century book or codex which is an anthology of Anglo-Saxon poetry.
- Survived in Exeter Cathedral library
- Among the other texts in the Exeter Book, there are over ninety riddles.
The Venerable Bede (673-735)

A monk

Considered the “father of English history”

Wrote *A History of the English Church and People*: the clearest account we have of Anglo-Saxon times
Vikings

8th century
Invaded from across the North sea from Denmark and Norway
867-877 Vikings invaded and took over most of northeast and central England
The Danish Invasion

Due to rising population and limited farmland, many Scandinavians (the Norse and the Danes) took to the seas—the Vikings.

In 800, Danish raiders attacked Britain.

The Norse settled in Northumbria, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland.

The Danes targeted eastern and southern England.
Viking Raids: “From the Fury of the Northmen, O Lord, Deliver Us”

- Sacked and plundered monasteries
- Stole sacred religious objects
- Burned entire communities
- Murdered villagers
- Halted the growth of learning

By the middle of the ninth century, most of England had fallen. The Vikings called their territory Danelaw.
King Alfred the Great
Alfred the Great

Only the Saxon kingdom of Wessex managed to fight the Danes to a standstill.

In 871, Alfred ascended to the Wessex throne.

Alfred resisted further Danish encroachment.

A 886 truce formally divided England: the Danish ruled the east and north; the Saxons ruled the south.

Alfred translated the Bede’s History and other works from Latin into English to make them more accessible, as well as instituted the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, a history of England from the earliest days through 1154.
Danish Contributions

- Built their Danelaw communities as military fortresses and trading centers
- Generated growth of English towns
- Expanded English vocabulary as Norse words crept into the language
- For example, *law* is Danish, and its use reflects the Danes’ interest in legal procedures.
The Norman Conquest

Toward the end of the tenth century, the Danes increased attempts to recapture and widen Danelaw and eventually forced the witan to select a series of Danish kings.

In 1042, the throne returned to a descendant of Alfred, King Edward the Confessor, a Christian.

Edward’s association with the Normans weakened Saxon power.

Upon his death in 1066, Edward was succeeded by Harold.

William of Normandy challenged Harold’s right to the throne and defeated Harold in the Battle of Hastings.

William was crowned King on December 25, 1066.
The Norman Invasion 1066

- William defeats Harold and Anglo-Saxon army
- William of Normandy crosses the English Channel
- French replaces English as the language of the ruling class

The Norman Invasion, Bayeux Tapestry