

UNIT 1

Anglo-Saxon History and Society: Who Were the Anglo-Saxons?

The questions with which I would like to begin are these: who were the Anglo-Saxons? What do we mean by the term or label Anglo-Saxon? What does it mean to speak of Anglo-Saxon England? These questions raise issues about what constituted the Anglo-Saxon peoples?

Our sense of the geography of Anglo-Saxon England is that it excludes the Celtic regions of Wales, Scotland and the Cornish peninsula. And this is often how Anglo-Saxon England is defined in ethnic terms as well; that is, Anglo-Saxon England is said to have comprised the non-Celtic peoples, or excluded the Celtic peoples. There has been a tendency to see a rigid boundary between Anglo-Saxon society and culture on the one hand, and Celtic society and culture on the other.

In terms of a time-span, Anglo-Saxon England is usually said to cover the period from the mid 5th century to the mid 11th century, that is to 1066, the Norman Conquest following the defeat and death of the last Anglo-Saxon king. These are crude boundaries, and reflect political considerations more than cultural ones, but they are useful. This time-span is what separates us from the reign of Richard II and the world of Chaucer, the late 14th century. So, using even the crude boundaries in time from the mid 5th century to the mid 11th century, the period of time known traditionally as Anglo-Saxon England is a very long one indeed.

The purpose of this Unit and the next (Unit 2) is to examine three themes, (i) the political trends of the period, (ii) the most important cultural and social development to affect Anglo-Saxon England, namely the coming of Christianity, and (iii) some aspects of the social structure of Anglo-Saxon society.

Political trends

Sometime after the year 410 AD there began the withdrawal of the Roman legions from Britain. This was one effect of the gradual weakening and deterioration of the Roman Empire in Europe. The effect of the withdrawal of the Roman legions and the Roman military presence and to some extent its administration – but it is mainly

the withdrawal of the army which is important – left Britain and the British society prey to attack and internal disruption. The picture that archaeologists have developed for us of late Roman Britain is one in which, to varying degrees, the native Celtic population, the Britons or the British, had become significantly, some would say thoroughly, Romanized. These are the people we call the Romano-British. They would have been fluent in Latin and would have received a Roman-style education in rhetoric, literature, and law. This kind of Romano-British society was most fully developed in the lowland regions of Britain, that is, mainly in the east and the south. The highland regions such as Wales, and the north were only marginally Romanized, and, of course, the northern boundary of Roman Britain was fixed at Hadrian's wall which was a defensive line extending from Newcastle to Carlisle. The highland regions such as Wales retained much of their native Celtic language, culture and social organization. The Romano-British of the lowland regions of Britain, those who were Latin speaking and very Roman in outlook, formed a type of aristocracy; they lived in villas, and were also urban dwellers. Their role as leaders was that of landowners and administrators and lawyers. Romano-British society of the lowland region was characterized by a high level of bureaucracy, it seems, and in such a society it was useful for a leader to be well versed in the law. What the lowland Romano-British leadership were not were warriors or military leaders. In this society the leadership had ceased to be a military elite as well; that function had become a specialized function of the Roman army. So, with the withdrawal of the Roman army, the lowland Romano-British had no army to call upon to defend themselves against invaders or sporadic attacks. Significantly, however, the highland regions of Roman Britain, such as, indeed especially, Wales, which had never adopted a fully Roman way of life or social structure, were relatively quickly able to re-establish, if they had ever really abandoned, the native tribal social structure in which the leadership was a military leadership. This, archaeologists and historians argue, explains why Wales survived so successfully for so long as an independent social and political group. The Celtic people in Wales were much more successful than their counterparts in lowland Britain in maintaining their self-identity. The Welsh had retained, or quickly redeveloped, a military elite and social organization which supported it – essentially

a tribal, military society.

In the lowlands, the situation was much different; with only an administrative elite, there was no effective military leadership or defence. It is in this kind of context that the Anglo-Saxons first make their appearance in written history. Archaeologists may tell us a different story, but we will look first at written history. The coming of the Anglo-Saxons to Britain is documented in a famous work by the monk Bede; he is known as the Venerable Bede and was a monk at the monastery at Jarrow, in Northumbria, near present-day Newcastle. His most famous work of historical writing is known in English as the *History of the English Church and People*. This he wrote in Latin and completed it in 733. It is important to remember that Bede was an Anglo-Saxon, that he was writing about what he thought were the origins and development of his own people, and that he was writing almost 300 years after the coming of the Anglo-Saxons to Britain. Consciously or unconsciously, Bede was writing from the point of view of an Anglo-Saxon and his work aims to justify the progress of the Anglo-Saxon peoples. To some extent Bede has been responsible for fostering a myth about the origins of Anglo-Saxon England:

See **DOCUMENT 1:** Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, book one, chapter 15.

— see first paragraph

Bede characterizes the original Anglo-Saxons as mercenary soldiers who had been invited by the British to protect them against their enemies from the north, the Picts. Bede also has something to say about the origins of the newcomers:

DOCUMENT 1: Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, book one, chapter 15.

— see second paragraph

Bede identifies the continental homeland of these peoples as that of the Germanic tribes, and he paints a picture of Anglo-Saxon tribes as settlers, not merely invaders.

The conclusions that nineteenth-century historians of Anglo-Saxon England drew from Bede was that Anglo-Saxon England began as a mass migration from the Germanic continental homeland to Britain, and that the Anglo-Saxons gradually displaced the native Celtic peoples, the British. In this account there was a mass movement of peoples within Britain as well, as the Celtic peoples, or the native

British, were gradually driven westward and re-established themselves in Wales and Cornwall and elsewhere in the west of Britain. This may be the picture that Bede wanted to promote or indeed the way he understood the origins and development of the Anglo-Saxons – the myth or view of the past with which he himself had grown up. Certainly this reading of his account of the arrival and settlement of the Anglo-Saxons in Britain, along with other meagre sources for the period, gave rise in the 19th century and 20th century to what has become known as the *Germanist* myth of the origins of Anglo-Saxon England; namely, that the ethnic origin of the founders of England was essentially Germanic and therefore quite distinct from the Celtic ethnic groups. This is a powerful myth and has strongly affected the self-identity of England and Britain, that Britain is made up of two distinct founding ethnic groups, the Germanic peoples and the Celtic peoples, and that England (as distinct from Britain) was Germanic in origin.

This view of the origins of Anglo-Saxon England may be based on a too uncritical reading of the sources. A written source much earlier than Bede is the work of Gildas, who was also a monk, but a British monk, who, in around 540, wrote a work highly critical of his own people and the way they had lost political control of the country. Here he tries to assign the blame for the decline of the British; his work is entitled *The Ruin of Britain*. Gildas was writing from a Celtic viewpoint and some 100 years after the coming of the Anglo-Saxons, so there are severe limitations to his work as well. His style is also highly rhetorical, so we are never certain how accurate he aims to be. Here is how he describes the coming of the Anglo-Saxons:

See **DOCUMENT 1**: Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, chapters 23 and 24.

What Gildas describes here is first the invitation to the Saxons to come to Britain as mercenaries, and then, in a piece of telescoping, he refers to the revolt of the Anglo-Saxons against their British overlords or employers, so that the Anglo-Saxons begin to take over political power through their military superiority. The significant aspect of the account of Gildas is that there is no mention of migration and settlement of Germanic peoples from the continental homeland on a large scale. His picture is more one of a military take-over. In this respect, Gildas can be said to contradict Bede – or the historic myth that is based on Bede – who seems to

give us a picture of mass migration and settlement.

Who is right? I should say that not all historians have accepted the Germanist view of mass migration and settlement, but it is really the discipline of archaeology which has changed the picture of the settlement period. Archaeological research has developed the theory, with varying degrees of confidence, that the coming of the Anglo-Saxons to Britain was not a migration of Germanic people on the grand scale that has been traditionally assumed, a migration that would have included military personnel as well as farmers, but something more like a military take-over by a relatively small group of leaders of high-status, what we might think of as aristocratic warleaders. The Germanic culture was one in which the leadership was a military elite, and, so the theory goes, over time this Germanic military elite displaced the Romano-British leadership or aristocracy, which was non-military and could not defend itself. In this theory the number of Anglo-Saxons involved in the take-over is relatively small, a few thousand by some estimates, mostly high-status people with military skills and inclinations; these developed aristocratic households on the Germanic model of the hall (as described in *Beowulf*) with its related buildings. These people were not farmers, but because of their status within the society, they were in a position to purchase or exchange for the agricultural surplus. In this view the Romano-British villa and urban settlement gave way to the hall-complex.

But, what of the native Celtic or British population? One of the arguments against the notion of a small scale military take-over has always been linguistic: after all, in England, English, not Welsh, is spoken, and place-names in England are largely Anglo-Saxon. There are almost no place-names which are of Celtic or British origin until we reach the western parts of England. This evidence of place-names has been thought to confirm the theory of mass migration which obliterated native Celtic sites and evidence of settlement.

The theory or view that has been developed to account for the idea of a high-status military take-over by a relatively small group of Anglo-Saxons argues that the Celtic population, apart from its leadership, remained largely in place and largely intact. In other words, the theory argues that there was no mass displacement of Celtic peoples to the west, but rather a high degree of stability and

continuity among the majority of the population, that is, farmers and peasants – those who worked the land. The new Germanic elite was successful in bringing stability and establishing social organization at a high level. What happened then was that the native Celtic peoples underwent a process of *acculturation*; the verb is *acculturate*. These terms are used by archaeologists and social historians. There are a number of historical examples to support this theory. The argument is that, in the case of Anglo-Saxon England, the Celtic or British peoples gradually adopted Anglo-Saxon culture and language; that is, they effectively became Anglo-Saxons. The evidence of place-names is explained away by the argument that the evidence we have for place-name records (as distinct from the place-names themselves) is relatively late, well after the settlement period, and that Celtic place-names have been obscured by translation in Anglo-Saxon. What look like Anglo-Saxon place-names frequently mask what were originally Celtic place-names.

This view is widely held now by archaeologists and historians of the settlement period. Its implications for the self-identity of the English are enormous, for it argues that the English are not largely ethnically Germanic but Celtic, and that in terms of ethnic roots, there are more similarities than differences between the Celtic peoples and the peoples of England. From our point of view, it means that we need to think of the term or label 'Anglo-Saxon' as a cultural term, not an ethnic one. Anglo-Saxon England could be said to have developed a distinctive culture based on the contributions of Celtic people and a Germanic military elite. Eventually, it is argued, Celtic peoples became absorbed into this hybrid Anglo-Saxon culture and came to assume positions of power and influence – perhaps after only a few generations.

This view of the origins of Anglo-Saxon England has important implications for how we read its literature and look at its material culture. We need to be open to the mixture of contributions to the culture.

Another implication is that when we look at Anglo-Saxon history, we are looking at political expansion and conflict, not necessarily ethnic expansion and conflict. In the initial stages, of course, the leadership was Germanic.

Document 2: MAP MAP 1: 660

Here we can see the political expansion of Anglo-Saxon England by around 660.

You can see that the Cornish Peninsula still remained British or Celtic. Beginning in the north we can see the emergence of the large kingdom of Northumbria. The kingdom comprised two more ancient regions, Bernicia which was centred on Bamburgh in present-day Northumberland, and the southern kingdom of Deira, based on York. These two names are in fact British, and indicate ancient Celtic kingdoms. The two were united but occasionally exhibited the tendency to split apart in times of political crisis, as they did, for instance, after the death in battle of king Edwin.

Further to the south, we can see the existence of the British kingdom of Elmet, the area around present-day Leeds, which was taken over by Northumbria in the latter part of the 7th century.

In the area round the Wash, there is a clearly discernible political group known as the East Angles, bounded to the south by the East Saxons, and further south still, by Kent.

To the west of Kent lay the area controlled by the South Saxons and the West Saxons.

In the central part of the country we can see a variety of tribal distinctions – the Middle Saxons, Middle Angles, Hwicce, and Magonsaete.

The political conquest and take-over by these peoples were determined in large measure by geographical factors. The settlement of Northumbria, for example, was made from the sea, while the East Angles penetrated the rivers flowing to the Wash. The importance of geographical factors is illustrated by the fact that, whereas Kent was the first Anglo-Saxon kingdom to be converted to Christianity, its near neighbour of Sussex was not converted for another 50 years, the two being separated by the almost impenetrable weald, meaning 'densely forested area'.

The names for political and social groups in Anglo-Saxon England very often sound like names with which we are familiar. The modern name Sussex is a development of the tribal name, South Saxons. Bede was able to speak of Northumbria as the home of the people living north of the river Humber. East Anglia refers to the East Angles and this region was divided into two parts, Norfolk, that is, the North Folk or people, and Suffolk, that is, the South Folk or people.

And many of the regional place-names used today are survivals of Anglo-Saxon place-names.

Document 2: MAP II

During the course of the 8th and 9th centuries, the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms vied among themselves for supremacy in the island. Bede mentions the existence of an Anglo-Saxon overlord, what the English called the Bretwalda. This term may in origin have been used to designate a ruler of Britain, that is, one king who held overlordship over the others. The kings named by Bede as overlords or Bretwaldas were from the South and West Saxons, Kent and East Anglia, followed by 3 kings of Northumbria. In the latter case, the power of Northumbria was constantly being challenged and the period was one of endemic warfare.

By the late 8th century we can see the emergence of the Heptarchy, the 7 kingdoms of: (i) Northumbria (which you can see has spread its domain to the west coast), (ii) East Anglia, (iii) Essex, (iv) Kent, (v) Sussex, (vi) Wessex (which was beginning to take over the Cornish Peninsula), (vii) Mercia. Mercia was a coalescence of the Midlands people mentioned earlier, and under king Offa (757-96) established its ascendancy in central England.

Document 2: MAP 3

By the time of Offa's death in 796, two threats were emerging: (i) the growing power of Wessex, under king Egbert, and (ii) the beginning of Viking raids on the east coast of Britain. The Viking attacks were sporadic and took place over a long period. In the course of time, the Vikings became intent on settlement. Beginning in 865, the Viking army made a concerted attack on Northumbria, Mercia and East Anglia, and successive defeats of the Anglo-Saxons led to the partition of the country and the establishment of what became known as the Danelaw. As you can see, the Vikings were concentrated in the Norse kingdom of York, Danish Mercia, and East Anglia. Among the Anglo-Saxons, Wessex became predominant, and under king Alfred (who ruled from 871-899) and his successors led the counter attack. The Viking attacks, and the growth of Wessex as the dominant power in Anglo-Saxon England, were among the factors that led to the emergence of a kingdom of England.

From the late 10th century the Viking invasions became aimed at the

conquest of England. The Battle of Maldon was fought in 991, and represents still the phase in which the Vikings were raiding the country. But raiding gave way to the desire for military and political conquest. There was a period of fighting between the Anglo-Saxons under Athelred the Unready and Svein Fork-beard, king of Denmark. The result is that in 1016 Cnut who was king of Denmark became also king of England. Some time after that he became king of Norway as well. There is therefore an inter-connection between Denmark and Norway which has one effect of making certain Danes and Norwegian rulers think that they have a claim to the throne of England.

Document 2: MAP 4: England under Edward the Confessor

England was ruled by Danish kings, Cnut and his sons, from 1016 until 1042. In 1042 the line of the kings of Wessex was restored in the person of Edward the Confessor, son of Ethelred the Unready, who since 1016 had lived in exile in Normandy. Edward was king of England, but the ancient names of Northumbria, Wessex, East Anglia, and Mercia remained, no longer as kingdoms but as the territories governed on the king's behalf by his powerful earls.

The next section, 'Introduction II', takes up those other themes mentioned at the beginning, literacy and learning, and the coming of Christianity, and some aspects of the social organization of Anglo-Saxon England.

ANGLO-SAXON HEROIC WRITING: BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Students should be aware of dictionaries; the *OED* demonstrates the development of Anglo-Saxon forms from the earliest records to Modern English. The standard dictionaries of Old English are:

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