

ANGLO-SAXON ENGLAND

(From the 6th Century to 1066)

A/ The Anglo-Saxons Run England

Disconnected data of England in the 5th and 6th centuries come from the British writer Gildas (6th century), the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (a history of the English people begun in the 9th century), saints' lives, poetry, archaeological findings, and place-name studies.

In the absence of Roman administrators, British warlords, who were Christian, ruled small, unstable kingdoms and maintained some Roman traditions of governance. In the mid-5th century, they revived the Roman policy of employing Germanic mercenaries to help defend them against hostile peoples of the north (Picts and Scots).

However, the Saxon mercenaries revolted against their British chiefs and began the process of invasion and settlement that destroyed the native ruling class and established **Germanic kingdoms** throughout the island by the 7th century. Later legends about a hero named Arthur were placed in this period of violence. The invaders were variously **Angles, Saxons, Frisians, Jutes, and Franks** in origin, but were **similar in culture** and eventually identified themselves indifferently as Angles or Saxons. During that unstable period of British history, **any man of noble birth and success in war could organize an army of warriors loyal to him personally and attempt to conquer and establish a kingdom.**

By the 7th century the Germanic kingdoms included Northumbria, Bernicia, Deira, Lindsay, Mercia, East Anglia, Essex, Wessex, Sussex, and Kent. They were **unstable states**, but all **Anglo-Saxon societies were characterized by:**

- **Strong kinship groups.**
- **Regular warfare (fighting and conflicts)**
- **Customary law and a system of money compensations for death, personal injury, and theft.**
- **The practice of their traditional polytheistic religions.**
- **Lack of written language.**
- **The dependence on mixed economies of agriculture, hunting, and animal husbandry.**
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The principal concerns of the next two centuries were the successful development of Christianity and the political unification of England under King Alfred and his dynasty.

B/ Development of Christianity

Christianity came from two directions—Rome and Ireland.

In **596**, Pope Gregory I sent a group of missionaries under a monk named **Augustine** to Kent, where King Ethelbert had married Bertha, a Christian Frankish princess. Soon after, Ethelbert was baptized, **Augustine became the first archbishop of Canterbury**, and the southern kingdoms became Christian.

In Northumbria, the Christianity from Rome met Celtic Christianity, which had been brought from Ireland to Scotland by Saint Columba and then to Northumbria by Saint Aidan, who founded the monastery of Holy Island in 635. Although not heretical, the Celtic church differed from Rome in the way the monks tonsured their heads, in its reckoning of the date of Easter, and, most important, in its organization, which reflected the clans of Ireland rather than the highly centralized Roman Empire. At the Synod of Whitby in 664, Northumbria's **King Oswy** chose to go with Rome, giving England a common religion and a clear example of religious unification. **Theodore of Tarsus**, who became archbishop of Canterbury in 668, created dioceses and gave the English church its basic structure.

C/ King Alfred the Great

Alfred became king of Wessex in one of England's darkest hours. The **Danes**, part of the **Viking** forces that had begun to raid the English coasts in the late 8th century. They first **regularly looted Anglo-Saxon towns and villages** but soon gave up that primary goal and decided to conquer England. Wessex and Alfred were all that stood in their way.

At first Alfred met serious problems to counter the Danish invaders and had to buy a break. But after his victory at **Edington in 878**, he forced the Danish king Guthrum to accept baptism (religious ceremony in order to become Christian) and a division of England into two parts:

- Wessex
- The Danelaw (Essex, East Anglia, and Northumbria), under Danish rule.

Alfred created an English navy, he reorganized the Anglo-Saxon “fyrd,” or militia, allowing his warriors to alternate between farming and fighting, and he built strategic forts. These achievements enabled him to capture London and to roll back the Danish rush.

Alfred also gave his attention to good government, issuing a set of dooms, or laws, and to scholarship. He promoted the translation of Latin works into Old English and encouraged the compilation of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. For his many accomplishments, Alfred was called The Great, the only English king so acclaimed.

The conquest of the Danelaw was completed by Alfred's son, **Edward the Elder**, and by his grandson Athelstan, who won a great victory against the Danes at Brunanburh in 937. Most of the remainder of the century was peaceful. In this atmosphere, Saint Dunstan, archbishop of Canterbury from 960 to 988, was able to restore the English church to health and prosperity.

The conquest of the Danelaw meant the creation of a unified government for all England and the evolution of the territorial state, which was replacing the kinship structure of earlier times:

- The king ruled with the support of the witenagemot, a council of wise men who participated in the issuing of dooms and oversaw the selection of kings.
- About 40 shires (counties) were created out of former kingdoms or from significant military or administrative units.
- Each shire had a shiremoot, or court, consisting of all free males and meeting twice a year, at first presided over by a royal official called an alderman (later an earl) and then by a shire reeve, or sheriff.
- Smaller administrative, tax, and military units, called hundreds, had courts roughly parallel to the older folk moots, which met every four weeks, handling most of the ordinary judicial business.

During that time, **England had the most advanced system government in Western Europe**, especially at the local level and in the office of sheriff who was the basic link between the king and local administration.

After 991, that administration proved capable of collecting the **Danegeld**, a tax on land, initially used as tribute to the Danes but later as an ordinary source of royal revenue. No other country in Western Europe had the ability to assess and collect such a tax.

D/ End of the Anglo-Saxon Supremacy

A new round of Danish invasions came during the reign of Ethelred II. Often called the Redeless (meaning “unready” or “unwise”), the *Danegeld* was his idea. He also wanted to kill all the Danes from previous invasions, who were by that time becoming assimilated and lived peacefully with Anglo-Saxons. In 1014 he was driven from the throne by King Sweyn I of Denmark, only to return a few months later when Sweyn died. When Ethelred died in 1016, Sweyn's son Canute II won out over Edmund II, called Ironside, the son of Ethelred. **Under Canute, England was part of an empire that also included Denmark and Norway.**

Following the short and unpopular reigns of Canute's sons, Harold I and Hardecanute, **Edward the Confessor**, another son of Ethelred, was recalled from Normandy (nowadays in western France) where he had lived in exile. Edward's reign is noted for its dominance by the powerful earls of Wessex—Godwin, and then his son, Harold (subsequently Harold II)—and for the first influx of Norman-French influence. The reign of **Edward witnessed the building of Westminster Abbey**, which was completed just in time for his burial in January 1066.

Edward's death without an heir left succession in uncertainty. The witenagemot chose Harold, earl of Wessex, although his only claim to the throne was his availability. Yet, other aspirants claimed the throne: King Harold III (the Hard Ruler) of Norway and Duke William of Normandy. Harold II (previously earl of Wessex) defeated the former (Harold III of Norway) at the Battle of Stamford Bridge on September 25, 1066. However, **he was defeated by William at Hastings on October 14, 1066.**

William (the Conqueror) was thus crowned King of England in Westminster Abbey on Christmas Day and **the country entered a new era.**

(Adapted from Encarta & Britannica Encyclopaedias)

Further Research: Franks – King Arthur (legendary figure) – polytheistic religions – dynasty – Augustine of Canterbury – the Danes – the Vikings – the Norsemen