

## The Cultural Aspects of Anglo-Saxon England

- ✚ The wealth of Britain by the **4th century**, the result of its climate and centuries of peace, was a temptation to the greedy. At first, the Germanic tribes only raided Britain, but after AD 430 they began to settle. **The newcomers were warlike and illiterate.** The knowledge of this period owes a lot mainly to an English monk named Bede. His story of events in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* has been proved generally correct by archaeological evidence. Bede tells us that the invaders came from three powerful Germanic tribes living in today's northern Germany and Denmark. They were: the **Saxons, Angles, and Jutes**. The Jutes settled mainly in Kent and along the south coast and were soon considered no different from the Angles and Saxons. The Angles settled in the east and also in the north Midlands, while the Saxons settled between the Jutes and the Angles in a band of land from the Thames Estuary westwards. **The Anglo-Saxon migration gave the larger part of Britain its new name, England, "the land of Angles".**
- ✚ The British Celts fought the raiders and settlers from Germany as well as they could. However, during the next hundred years, they were slowly pushed westwards until by AD 570 they were forced west of Gloucester. Finally, most were driven into the mountain in the far west, which the Saxons called "Weallas", or "Wales", meaning "the land of foreigners".

### ✚ Cultural Aspects of Anglo-Saxon England: Language/ Society/ Religion/ Education

**Language:** Old English or Anglo-Saxon, is the earliest historical form of the English language, spoken in England and southern and eastern Scotland in the early Middle Ages. It was brought to Great Britain by Anglo-Saxon settlers probably in the mid-5th century. Old English developed from a set of dialects originally spoken by Germanic tribes. As the Anglo-Saxons became dominant in England, their languages replaced the languages of Roman Britain: Celtic Brittonic, a Celtic language, and Latin brought to Britain by the Roman invasion. Old English poetry has survived almost entirely in four manuscripts: the **Exeter Book, the Junius Manuscript, the Vercelli Book, and the Beowulf manuscript.**

**Society:** The Saxons created institutions which made the English state strong for the next 500 years. One of these institutions was the **king's Council**, called **witan**. The witan probably grew out of informal groups of senior warriors and church men to whom kings like Offa (king of Mercia) had turned for advice or support on difficult times. **By the 10th century, the witan was a formal body issuing laws and charters (contract/agreement).** It was not at all democratic, and the king could decide to ignore the witan's advice. But he knew that it might be dangerous to do so. The witan's authority was based on its right to choose kings, and to agree the use of the king's laws. Without its support, the king's own authority was in danger. The witan established a system which remained an important part of the king's method of government. Even today, the king or queen has a **Privy Council**, a group of advisers on the affairs of state. The Saxons divided the land into new administrative areas, based on **shires**, or **countries**. "Shire" is the Saxon word, "country", but both are still used. [In 1974, the countries were reorganized, but the new system is very like the old one]. Over each shire was appointed a **shire reeve**, the king's local administration. In time, its name became shortened to "sheriff".

**Religion: Christianity: the partnership of Church and Stat:** It was not clear how or when Christianity first reached Britain. But it was certainly well before Christianity was accepted by the Roman Emperor Constantine in the early 4th century AD. In the last hundred years of Roman government Christianity

became firmly established across Britain, both in Roman-controlled areas and beyond. However, the Anglo-Saxons belonged to an older Germanic religion and they drove the Celts into the west and north. In the Celtic areas, Christianity continued to spread, bringing paganism to an end. The map of Wales shows a number of place names beginning or ending with *llan*, meaning the site of a small Celtic monastery around which a village or town grew. In **597 Pope Gregory, the Great** sent a monk, **Augustine**, to re-establish Christianity in England. He went to Canterbury, the capital of the king of Kent. He did so because the king's wife came from Europe and was already Christian. Augustine became the first Archbishop of Canterbury in **601**. He was very successful. Several ruling families in England accepted Christianity. But Augustine and his group of monks made little progress with the ordinary people. This was partly because Augustine was interested in establishing Christian authority, and that meant bringing rulers to the new faith. It was the Celtic Church that brought Christianity to the ordinary people of Britain. The Celtic bishops went out from their monasteries in Wales, Ireland, and Scotland, walking from village to village teaching Christianity. In spite of the differences between Anglo-Saxons and Celts, these bishops seem to have been readily accepted in Anglo-Saxon areas. The bishops from the Roman Church lived at the courts of the kings, which they made centers of Church power across England. The two Christian Churches, Celtic and Roman, could hardly have been more different in character. One was most interested in the hearts of ordinary people; the other was interested in authority and organization. The competition between the Celtic and Roman Churches reached a crisis.

**Education:** School during the Anglo-Saxon period was established in AD 597 to ensure the spread of Latin Christianity. It was a privilege for the people during that time to receive an education. It was the responsibility of the church to make sure their education was being ensured in a religious manner. The schools were located in monks' or priests' homes, otherwise known as monasteries. Classes were taught by those in holy order (monks). The purpose of education during the Anglo-Saxon period was to educate future priests and monks who had to know how to read and write Latin. During the Anglo-Saxon period, women had the same educational rights as men. Monasteries for both men and women were called "Double Houses".

### Works Cited:

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