

The Anglo-Saxon Invasion (410AD)

Introduction

The Anglo-Saxon period in Britain spans approximately six centuries from 410-1066AD. The period used to be known as the **Dark Ages**, mainly because written sources for the early years of the Saxon invasion are scarce. However, most historians now prefer the terms 'early middle ages' or 'early medieval period'. The Anglo-Saxon period was a time of war, of the breaking up of Roman Britannia into several separate kingdoms, of religious conversion, and, after the 790s, of continual battles against a new set of invaders: the **Vikings**.

The Fall of Roman Britain (c. 410 AD)

Following centuries of Roman rule, Britain was abandoned by the Romans about 410 AD under pressure from barbarian invasions on the continent and the declining power of the Roman Empire. The Roman legions withdrew, leaving the Britons to defend themselves against fresh threats. This event set the scene for the Anglo-Saxon invasion.

Who Were the Anglo-Saxons?

The term "Anglo-Saxon" refers to the collective groups of tribes that migrated from northern Europe to Britain. They consisted mainly of:

- **Angles:** A people from the region of Anglia (modern-day Schleswig-Holstein, Denmark).
- **Saxons:** Originally from the coastal regions of modern-day Germany, particularly from Saxony.
- **Jutes:** A smaller group from the Jutland Peninsula (now part of Denmark).

These tribes spoke early Germanic languages, which would evolve into Old English.

Causes of the Anglo-Saxon Invasion

Several factors contributed to the Anglo-Saxon invasion:

1. **Vacuum of Power:** After the Romans withdrew from Britain, the Britons were left without central governance or military support. This left them vulnerable to outside forces.
2. **Germanic Expansion:** The Anglo-Saxons were part of a larger wave of Germanic tribes moving across Europe, due to a mix of population pressures, resource needs, and opportunities presented by the weakening Roman Empire.
3. **Picts and Celtic Resistance:** In the north, the Picts (now Scotland) and other Celtic tribes posed a constant threat to the Britons. As the Britons became more isolated, they sought military help from neighboring Germanic tribes.

The Early Stages of the Invasion (5th-6th Century)

Around 450 AD, the first invasions were noted. According to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and other sources, including Gildas' writings, the Britons first asked the Anglo-Saxons to assist in defending against the Picts and other adversaries. But after arriving in Britain, these Germanic tribes started to populate and occupy territory.

The Role of Vortigern

According to some historical accounts, a British king named **Vortigern** invited the Saxons to defend the Britons against other invaders (possibly the Picts or the Scots). The Saxons, led by Hengist and Horsa, first arrived around 449 AD, establishing themselves in the eastern parts of Britain. Over time, however, the Saxons began to expand and take control of more territory.

Battles for Control

Battles between the Anglo-Saxons and the native Britons marked the early invasions. One significant conflict took place in the 490s at **Mount Badon**, where the Britons, maybe led by King Arthur (assuming the legend is based on a real person), briefly stopped the Saxon march. But this was only a temporary alleviation. The Anglo-Saxons had essentially taken control of most of southern Britain by the end of the sixth century.

Establishment of Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms (6th-7th Century)

As the Anglo-Saxons settled, they established several kingdoms that would later become known as the **Heptarchy** (seven kingdoms). These included:

1. **Kent**, settled by the Jutes.
2. **Mercia**, whose best-known ruler. This large kingdom stretched over the Midlands.
3. **Northumbria**, where the monk Bede (c. 670-735)
4. **East Anglia**, made up of Angles.
5. **Essex** (East Saxons). Here the famous Battle of Maldon was fought against the Vikings in 991.
6. **Sussex**: The South Saxons settled here.
7. **Wessex** (West Saxons), later the kingdom of King Alfred, the only English king ever to have been called 'the Great', and his equally impressive grandson, Athelstan, the first who could truly call himself 'King of the English'.

By 850 AD the seven kingdoms had been consolidated into three large Anglo-Saxon kingdoms: Northumbria, Mercia, and Wessex. The Anglo-Saxons had become a Christian people.

Key Events in the Anglo-Saxon Period

1. **The Battle of Deorham (c. 577)**: The Anglo-Saxons achieved a significant victory over the Britons in this battle, which resulted in the conquest of the areas of Bath, Gloucester, and Cirencester. This further weakened British control of the western parts of England.
2. **The Conversion to Christianity**: One of the major turning points in Anglo-Saxon England was the **conversion to Christianity**. In 597, **Pope Gregory I** sent **St. Augustine** to Britain to convert the Anglo-Saxons. This led to the Christianization of many Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, marking a cultural and religious shift in Britain.
3. **The Rise of Wessex**: By the 9th century, the kingdom of **Wessex** emerged as the dominant power in Anglo-Saxon England. Under rulers like **Alfred the Great** (r. 871-899), Wessex successfully defended against Viking invasions and began to unify the southern kingdoms.

The Viking Invasions (8th-9th Century)

The Viking Age, which began in the late 8th century, brought new challenges to the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. The **Viking raids** started in 793 on the monastery of **Lindisfarne**, and over the next few decades, the Vikings invaded large parts of Anglo-Saxon England, leading to the establishment of **Danelaw** (the Viking-controlled territories in eastern England).

However, the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, especially Wessex, resisted and eventually pushed back the Vikings, culminating in the victory of **King Alfred the Great** (because he is

the only monarch who resisted and defeated the Vikings) at the **Battle of Edington** in 878. This laid the foundation for the eventual unification of England under Anglo-Saxon rule.

Alfred's the Great achievement can be summarized as follows:

*He defeated the Vikings in the Battle of Edington in 878, and then converted their leader **Guthrum** to Christianity.

*He recaptured London from the Vikings and established a boundary between the Saxons and the Vikings - the area ruled by the Vikings was known as the Danelaw.

*He strengthened his kingdom's defences by creating a series of fortresses and a decent army.

*He built ships against Viking sea attacks which marked the beginning of the English navy.

*He had books translated into English and promoted learning; He founded monasteries.

*He commissioned the writing of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, a historical record of the Anglo-Saxons in Britain.

Legacy of the Anglo-Saxon Period

The Anglo-Saxon period left a lasting impact on England:

1. **Language:** The Anglo-Saxons spoke Old English, a Germanic language that forms the foundation of modern English. In their Old English, the Anglo-Saxons wrote some of England's first great works of literature, most notably the epic poem *Beowulf*.)
2. **Law and Governance:** The Anglo-Saxons established the **witan** (a council of nobles and clergy) and laid the foundations of English common law. The Saxons divided the land into new administrative areas, based on *shires*. or counties.
3. **Cultural Contributions:** The Anglo-Saxons were also responsible for preserving important texts, such as the **Beowulf** epic, and making advancements in art, architecture, and agriculture.
4. **Religion:** The conversion to Christianity played a major role in shaping the cultural and religious identity of England.
5. **Fighting** was a way of life, and not to avenge the death of a family member was a social disgrace. Two alternatives for ending a blood-feud were 1) paying "wergild" -- the man price, or 2) arranging a marriage. Women were known as "cup-bearers" (because they served the mead) and "peace-weavers" (because of this function whereby feuds could be ended).

Conclusion: The End of the Anglo-Saxon Period

The Anglo-Saxon period came to an end in 1066 with the **Norman Conquest**. The Battle of Hastings, where **William the Conqueror** defeated King **Harold II**, brought England under Norman rule. Despite the conquest, many elements of Anglo-Saxon culture and governance persisted, particularly in the English language and legal systems.

Key Dates to Remember

- **410 AD:** The Romans officially withdrew from Britain.
- **449 AD:** First recorded Anglo-Saxon settlement.
- **577 AD:** Battle of Deorham.
- **597 AD:** St. Augustine's mission to convert the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity.
- **878 AD:** Battle of Edington, victory of Alfred the Great over the Vikings.
- **1066 AD:** The Norman Conquest.

This period marked the birth of what we now recognize as medieval England, laying the foundations for future political and cultural developments.