2 The Saxon invasion

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The invaders

The wealth of Britain by the fourth century, the
result of its mild 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. We owe our knowledge of this period
mainly to an English monk named Bede, who lived
three hundred years later. 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, the Saxons, Angles and
Jutes. The Jutes settled mainly in Kent and along
the south coast, and were soon considered no dif-
ferent 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 migrations gave the
larger part of Britain its new name, England, "the
land of the 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 570 they were forced
west of Gloucester. Finally most were driven into
the mountains in the far west, which the Saxons
called "Weallas", or "Wales", meaning "the land of
the foreigners". Some Celts were driven into
Cornwall, where they later accepted the rule of
Saxon lords. In the north, other Celts were driven
into the lowlands of the country which became

The Anglo-Saxon invasions and the kingdoms they established.

known as Scotland. Some Celts stayed behind, and
many became slaves of the Saxons. Hardly anything
is left of Celtic language or culture in England,
except for the names of some rivers, Thames,
Mersey, Severn and Avon, and two large cities,
London and Leeds.

The strength of Anglo-Saxon culture is obvious
even today. Days of the week were named after
Germanic gods: Tig (Tuesday), Wodin
(Wednesday), Thor (Thursday), Frei (Friday). New
place-names appeared on the map. The first of

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these show that the earliest Saxon villages, like the Celtic ones, were family villages. The ending -ing meant folk or family, thus "Reading" is the place of the family of Rada, "Hastings" of the family of Hasta. Ham means farm, ton means settlement. Birmingham, Nottingham or Southampton, for example, are Saxon place-names. Because the Anglo-Saxon kings often established settlements, Kingston is a frequent place-name.

The Anglo-Saxons established a number of kingdoms, some of which still exist in county or regional names to this day: Essex (East Saxons), Sussex (South Saxons), Wessex (West Saxons), Middlesex (probably a kingdom of Middle Saxons), East Anglia (East Angles). By the middle of the seventh century the three largest kingdoms, those of Northumbria, Mercia and Wessex, were the most powerful.

Left: A silver penny showing Offa, king of Mercia (AD 757–896). Offa was more powerful than any of the other Anglo-Saxon kings of his time or before him. His coins were of a higher quality than any coins used since the departure of the Romans four hundred years earlier.

Right: A gold coin of King Offa, a direct copy of an Arab dinar of the year AD 774. Most of it is in Arabic, but on one side it also has "OFFA REX". It tells us that the Anglo-Saxons of Britain were well aware of a more advanced economic system in the distant Arab empire, and also that even as far away as Britain and northern Europe, Arab-type gold coins were more trusted than any others. It shows how great were the distances covered by international trade at this time.

It was not until a century later that one of these kings, King Offa of Mercia (757–96), claimed "kingship of the English". He had good reason to do so. He was powerful enough to employ thousands of men to build a huge dyke, or earth wall, the length of the Welsh border to keep out the troublesome Celts. But although he was the most powerful king of his time, he did not control all of England.

The power of Mercia did not survive after Offa's death. At that time, a king's power depended on the personal loyalty of his followers. After his death the next king had to work hard to rebuild these personal feelings of loyalty. Most people still believed, as the Celts had done, that a man's first duty was to his own family. However, things were changing. The Saxon kings began to replace loyalty to family with loyalty to lord and king.

Government and 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 the Witan. The Witan probably grew out of informal groups of senior warriors and churchmen to whom kings like Offa had turned for advice or support on difficult matters. By the tenth century the Witan was a formal body, issuing laws and charters. 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. For 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 counties. These shires, established by the end of the tenth century, remained almost exactly the same for a thousand years. "Shire" is the Saxon word, "county" the Norman one, but both are still used. (In 1974 the counties were reorganised, but the new system is very like the old one.) Over each shire was appointed a shire reeve, the king's local administrator. In time his name became shortened to "sheriff".

Anglo-Saxon technology changed the shape of English agriculture. The Celts had kept small, square fields which were well suited to the light plough they used, drawn either by an animal or two people. This plough could turn corners easily. The Anglo-Saxons introduced a far heavier plough which was better able to plough in long straight lines across the field. It was particularly useful for cultivating heavier soils. But it required six or eight oxen to pull it, and it was difficult to turn. This heavier plough led to changes in land ownership and organisation. In order to make the best use of

Reconstruction of an Anglo-Saxon village. Each house had probably only one room, with a wooden floor with a pit beneath it. The pit may have been used for storage, but more probably to keep the house off the damp ground. Each village had its lord. The word "lord" means "loaf ward" or "bread keeper", while "lady" means "loaf kneader" or "bread maker", a reminder that the basis of Saxon society was farming. The duty of the village head, or lord, was to protect the farm and its produce.

village land, it was divided into two or three very large fields. These were then divided again into long thin strips. Each family had a number of strips in each of these fields, amounting probably to a family "holding" of twenty or so acres. Ploughing these long thin strips was easier because it avoided the problem of turning. Few individual families could afford to keep a team of oxen, and these had to be shared on a co-operative basis.

One of these fields would be used for planting spring crops, and another for autumn crops. The third area would be left to rest for a year, and with the other areas after harvest, would be used as common land for animals to feed on. This Anglo-Saxon pattern, which became more and more common, was the basis of English agriculture for a thousand years, until the eighteenth century.

It needs only a moment's thought to recognise that the fair division of land and of teams of oxen, and the sensible management of village land shared out between families, meant that villagers had to work more closely together than they had ever done before.

The Saxons settled previously unfarmed areas. They cut down many forested areas in valleys to farm the richer lowland soil, and they began to drain the wet

land. As a result, almost all the villages which appear on eighteenth-century maps already existed by the eleventh century.

In each district was a "manor" or large house. This was a simple building where local villagers came to pay taxes, where justice was administered, and where men met together to join the Anglo-Saxon army, the *fyrd*. The lord of the manor had to organise all this, and make sure village land was properly shared. It was the beginning of the manorial system which reached its fullest development under the Normans.

At first the lords, or *aldermen*, were simply local officials. But by the beginning of the eleventh century they were warlords, and were often called by a new Danish name, *earl*. Both words, alderman and earl, remain with us today: aldermen are elected officers in local government, and earls are high ranking nobles. It was the beginning of a class system, made up of king, lords, soldiers and workers on the land. One other important class developed during the Saxon period, the men of learning. These came from the Christian Church.

Christianity: the partnership of Church and state

We cannot know how or when Christianity first reached Britain, but it was certainly well before Christianity was accepted by the Roman Emperor Constantine in the early fourth 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

The opening page of St Luke's Gospel, made at the Northumbrian island of Lindisfarne, about AD 698. In his History, Bede wrote how one man told the pagan Northumbrian king, "when you are sitting in winter with your lords in the feasting hall, with a good fire to warm and light it, a sparrow flies in from the storms of rain and snow outside. It flies in at one door, across the lighted room and out through the other door into the darkness and storms outside. In the same way man comes into the light for a short time, but of what came before, or what is to follow, man is ignorant. If this new teaching tells us something more certain, it seems worth following." Christianity gave the Anglo-Saxon world new certainty.

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 which brought Christianity to the ordinary people of Britain. The Celtic bishops went out from their monasteries of 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 centres 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 organisation. The competition between the Celtic and Roman Churches reached a crisis because they disagreed over the date of Easter. In 663 at the Synod (meeting) of Whitby the king of Northumbria decided to support the Roman Church. The Celtic Church retreated as Rome extended its authority over all Christians, even in Celtic parts of the island.

England had become Christian very quickly. By 660 only Sussex and the Isle of Wight had not accepted the new faith. Twenty years later, English teachers returned to the lands from which the Anglo-Saxons had come, bringing Christianity to much of Germany.

Saxon kings helped the Church to grow, but the Church also increased the power of kings. Bishops gave kings their support, which made it harder for royal power to be questioned. Kings had "God's approval". The value of Church approval was all the greater because of the uncertainty of the royal succession. An eldest son did not automatically become king, as kings were chosen from among the members of the royal family, and any member who had enough soldiers might try for the throne. In addition, at a time when one king might try to conquer a neighbouring kingdom, he would probably have a son to whom he would wish to pass this enlarged kingdom when he died. And so when King Offa arranged for his son to be crowned as his successor, he made sure that this was done at a Christian ceremony led by a bishop. It was good political propaganda, because it suggested that kings were chosen not only by people but also by God.

There were other ways in which the Church increased the power of the English state. It established monasteries, or *minsters*, for example

Westminster, which were places of learning and education. These monasteries trained the men who could read and write, so that they had the necessary skills for the growth of royal and Church authority. The king who made most use of the Church was Alfred, the great king who ruled Wessex from 871–899. He used the literate men of the Church to help establish a system of law, to educate the people and to write down important matters. He started the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, the most important source, together with Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, for understanding the period.

During the next hundred years, laws were made on a large number of matters. By the eleventh century royal authority probably went wider and deeper in England than in any other European country.

This process gave power into the hands of those who could read and write, and in this way class divisions were increased. The power of landlords, who had been given land by the king, was increased because their names were written down. Peasants, who could neither read nor write, could lose their traditional rights to their land, because their rights were not registered.

The Anglo-Saxon kings also preferred the Roman Church to the Celtic Church for economic reasons. Villages and towns grew around the monasteries and increased local trade. Many bishops and monks in England were from the Frankish lands (France and Germany) and elsewhere. They were invited by English rulers who wished to benefit from closer Church and economic contact with Europe. Most of these bishops and monks seem to have come from churches or monasteries along Europe's vital trade routes. In this way close contact with many parts of Europe was encouraged. In addition they all used Latin, the written language of Rome, and this encouraged English trade with the continent. Increased literacy itself helped trade. Anglo-Saxon England became well known in Europe for its exports of woollen goods, cheese, hunting dogs, pottery and metal goods. It imported wine, fish, pepper, jewellery and wheel-made pottery.

The Vikings

Towards the end of the eighth century new raiders were tempted by Britain's wealth. These were the Vikings, a word which probably means either "pirates" or "the people of the sea inlets", and they came from Norway and Denmark. Like the Anglo-Saxons they only raided at first. They burnt churches and monasteries along the east, north and west coasts of Britain and Ireland. London was itself raided in 842.

In 865 the Vikings invaded Britain once it was clear that the quarrelling Anglo-Saxon kingdoms could not keep them out. This time they came to conquer and to settle. The Vikings quickly accepted Christianity and did not disturb the local population. By 875 only King Alfred in the west of Wessex held out against the Vikings, who had already taken most of England. After some serious defeats Alfred won a decisive battle in 878, and eight years later he captured London. He was strong enough to make a treaty with the Vikings.

The Viking invasions and the areas they brought under their control.