**Faculty of Letters and Languages – M’sila** **Department of English**

**Level:** Second year license **Course:** British Civilisation

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**Lecture Two: The Saxon Invasion**

**(The Invaders, The Vikings, the Church and the State)**

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.

**I- The Invaders**

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 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 migrations gave the larger part of Britain its new name, England, "the land of the Angles."

**The Heptarchy**

The Anglo-Saxons established a number of kingdoms referred to as the heptarchy (from new Latin *heptarchia,* meaning seven kingdoms: *“hepta:* seven, *-archy:* rule”). 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.

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

**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. 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.

**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.

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.

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.” 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 ministers, 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.

**II- 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.

Viking rule was recognized in the east and north of England. It was called the Danelaw, the land where the law of the Danes ruled. In the rest of the country Alfred was recognised as king. During his struggle against the Danes, he had built walled settlements to keep them out.

**The End of the Anglo-Saxon Rule**

By 950 England seemed rich and peaceful again after the troubles of the Viking invasion. But soon afterwards the Danish Vikings started raiding westwards. The Saxon king, Ethelred, decided to pay the Vikings to stay away. To find the money he set a tax on all his people, called *Danegeld,* or “Danish money.” Itwas the beginning of a regular tax system of the people which would provide the money for armies.

When Ethelred died Cnut (or Canute), the leader of the Danish Vikings, controlled much of England. He became king for the simple reason that the royal council, the Witan, and everyone else, feared disorder. Rule by a Danish king was far better than rule by no one at all. Cnut died in 1035, and his son died shortly after, in 1040. The Witan chose Edward, one of Saxon Ethelred's sons, to be king. Edward, known as 'the Confessor', was more interested in the Church than in kingship.

King Edward the Confessor died in 1066, leaving no heir. The Witan chose Harold Godwinson as his successor. But there were other claimants to the throne: King Harald Hardrada of Norway and William Duke of Normandy. To defend his crown, Horold fought, defeated and killed the former. But in his turn, he was defeated and killed by the latter at the battle of Hastings on October 14th, 1066. The battle marked the end of the Saxon rule over England and initiated the Norman Conquest.

**Exercises**

**1-**Examine the following terms:

Heptarchy - Wessex - Witan- Danelaw- *Danegeld*

**2-**Write a short paragraph in which you compare the Anglo-Saxons with the Vikings.

**REFERENCES**

Mcdowall, David. 2008. *An Illustrated History of Britain*. New York: The McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc.