

Anglo-Saxon England

Ancient Europe, 8000 B.C. to A.D. 1000, 2004

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From an Anglo-Saxon monk, the Venerable Bede (A.D. 673–735), comes the traditional portrayal of the downfall of Roman Britain and the beginnings of early Anglo-Saxon England. Written in the first third of the eighth century, Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (*Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*) was drawn in part from *On the Fall of Britain* (*De excidio Britanniae et conquestu*), a polemical sermon by the sixth-century British cleric, Gildas. Supplementary accounts of the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons come from a ninth-century revision accredited to the Welsh monk Nennius, the late-ninth-century *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, and brief references in continental documents.

These sources present a cataclysmic history of battle and bloodshed. According to their account, Roman military forces were withdrawn from the province in the early fifth century, leaving the Britons to defend themselves against barbarian attacks. The Picts and Scots soon after recommenced their raids and were so successful that the Britons called in vain upon the Roman commander in Gaul to aid the native defenses. Although abandoned, the British rallied and overthrew the enemy forces. After a period of peace, ominous rumors led the Britons to hold council over enemy attacks. The head of the Britons' council, Vortigern, then invited the Saxons of northern Germany to protect them. Led by Hengist and Horsa, three ships bearing Saxons arrived on the English coast. The number of Saxons multiplied and, in time, a quarrel about compensation arose between the Saxon warriors and their British overlords. The Saxons rebelled and, during the ensuing destruction, the Britons fled to the safety of the western forests and mountains. The tide of Saxon conquest was halted by the British victory at Mons Badonicus. From the time of that battle to the writing of *De excidio Britanniae et conquestu*, relations between the two groups remained peaceful.

EARLIEST EVIDENCE

The traditional image of the transition from Roman Britain to early Anglo-Saxon England as a period of turmoil and warfare has been supplanted by a more complex and modulated conception

of culture change. The eighth- and ninth-century written accounts of the fifth- and sixth-century preliterate Anglo-Saxon past are not always believable, as they incorporate fantastic characters and events and invented chronologies. No longer is the Anglo-Saxon invasion viewed as a single event. Ceramics, belt fittings, and dress ornaments indicate that Germanic people were entering Britain prior to the fifth-century dates calculated from the documentary sources. The lands bordering the North Sea exhibit the earliest archaeological evidence for a Germanic presence in late Roman Britain. Germanic mercenaries in the Roman army were garrisoned at coastal forts and inland towns. The withdrawal of Roman military support from the province in the early fifth century was closely followed by the middle of the fifth century with the appearance of Germanic-style cemeteries. Continental parallels argue for the subsequent immigration into eastern England in the sixth century of people from southern Norway.

The size and character of Germanic populations engaged in this transition remains contested. Some archaeologists argue that a few warrior bands from northern Germany and southern Scandinavia seized control of regional British polities while others consider the discontinuities in material culture and language as evidence of large-scale migration. The lack of any clear continuity of urban life and the evidence for a breakdown in the rural villa system from the Roman to the Anglo-Saxon period indicates a dislocation of the economic structure. Likewise, the replacement of Celtic dialects with Old English speech and the renaming of the landscape with Old English place names indicate extensive Anglo-Saxon settlement. Although the extent and character of British continuity is contested, British kingdoms survived in the highland zone, Wales, and the southwest. Some of these kingdoms, such as Elmet, which lost its autonomy to the Anglo-Saxon king Edwin of Northumbria in 617, were subsumed in the process of political centralization. Recognition that in early medieval Europe ethnic identity was fluid and situational has called for a reassessment of the extent and character of native British survival and assimilation. Indeed, no single model adequately accommodates the regional variability now recognized during the settlement period.

CEMETERIES

Early Anglo-Saxon England remains best known archaeologically through more than one thousand cemeteries, many of which were unsystematically excavated during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Unfortunately, the relationship between cemeteries and the settlements that they served is poorly understood, as few excavations include both types of evidence. However, at Mucking (Essex) and West Heslerton (Yorkshire), the settlements display a structural uniformity that implies a social equality not apparent in the diverse burial assemblages of the adjacent cemeteries.

During the early Anglo-Saxon period (c. 450–c. 650), two main burial practices predominated: cremation and inhumation. Cremation required burning the dressed body of the deceased on a pyre. A selection of the burned bone, generally from the head and chest, was then buried either directly into the earth or enclosed in a ceramic urn, or more rarely, a metal, cloth, or leather container prior to interment. Miniature toilet implements, perhaps serving as symbolic substitutes for the full-scale items, were occasionally included with the cremated bone. Cremation pits,

sometimes marked by stones, contained a single deposit or a cluster of vessels. Wooden post-built structures, perhaps housing the cremated remains of a family grouping, have been identified at Apple Down (Sussex) and Berinsfield (Oxfordshire).

Inhumation burials required the dressed but unburned body to be deposited into a rectangular, often wood- or stone-lined pit. Rarely, an elaborate wooden chamber, as at Spong Hill (Norfolk), or a boat, as at Snape (Suffolk) or at Sutton Hoo (Suffolk), was incorporated into the burial structure. At some sites, such as Spong Hill and Morningthorpe (Norfolk), ring ditches enclosed a number of graves. The dead were furnished with weaponry, drinking and eating paraphernalia, foodstuffs, and tools, and in some cases were covered with plant fronds, animal hide, or fabric.

During the course of the sixth century, burial in large cremation cemeteries, such as Elsham (Lincolnshire) and Newark (Nottinghamshire) was generally replaced by the use of numerous smaller predominantly inhumation graveyards, such as Welbeck Hill in Irby-on-Humber (Lincolnshire) and Fonaby (Lincolnshire). The trend toward smaller inhumation cemeteries may reflect a change in the sense of group cohesion from membership within a larger quasi-ethnic group to membership within a localized community or may reflect the waning of ancestral claims to community identity. However, this general pattern should not obscure the fact that in most areas, cremation and inhumation rites were practiced simultaneously, often in the same cemetery, and that cremation continued into the seventh century.

From the end of the sixth century, a marked change occurred in burial practices. This transition is now believed to have connected with structural changes in the political system and in the religious and economic authorities as sources of power shifted from kinship to kingship. Many existing cemeteries were abandoned, and new burial grounds were established. Weapons occurred less frequently in male burials and, when found, were concentrated in well-furnished graves, suggesting that weapon burial shifted to an index of social, rather than "ethnic," concerns. For women, the regional dress styles apparent during the sixth century were replaced during the seventh century with a neoclassical "national" costume influenced by the Frankish kingdom. Throughout the seventh century and into the early eighth century, the appearance of elite, generally isolated graves, interred under newly constructed barrows or inserted into prehistoric monuments and furnished with weapon assemblages, jewelry of gold, silver, and semiprecious stones, and feasting paraphernalia suggest the development of an increasingly ranked society with territorial interests. The symbolism expressed through burial rituals and furnishings at rich barrow cemeteries such as Taplow (Buckinghamshire) and Sutton Hoo may have asserted an independent pagan ideology. At the same time, unfurnished, west-east-oriented supine inhumations became increasingly prevalent. Although associated by past archaeologists with the dictates of Christian burial, these unfurnished graves may represent factors such as the cessation of competitive display as a result of the consolidation of political authority or the transfer of wealth from deposition in graves to the more worldly payments required by political or religious authorities.

The influence of Christian beliefs on cemetery location and burial ritual becomes apparent from the seventh to ninth centuries. While interment in rural cemeteries continued, the new construction of early minster or monastery churches accommodated burials. In the late Anglo-Saxon period (c. 850–c. 1066) the eternal blessings of Christianity were sought by interring the

dead in proximity to the church. While a range of burial types—including charcoal burials; interment in wooden chests or coffins, or sarcophaguses, or under grave covers; and graves with stone packing—have been encountered at some churches, other religious foundations, such as the cathedral cemetery at North Elmham (Norfolk), manifest uniformity in burial practice. In the countryside, the fragmentation of large estates from the late ninth century produced a new wave of cemeteries, often associated with churches or chapels, that was complementary to the established pattern of small burial plots within or adjacent to settlements.

Execution cemeteries that served as repositories for those prohibited from burial in consecrated ground appear in the late ninth century. At these sites, perhaps most notably Stockbridge Down (Suffolk), the bodies appear to have suffered violence before or immediately after death. At Banstead Common (Surrey) and Goblin Works, Leatherhead (Surrey), the reuse of early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries may have been an explicit statement in later times of the condemned's exclusion from Christian churchyard burial.

AGRICULTURE

Although the Roman system of food production and distribution is assumed not to have survived the withdrawal of imperial authority, zooarchaeological evidence indicates that the Anglo-Saxon immigrants followed agricultural practices similar to those of Romano-British farmers. In general, the existing coaxial field systems continued in use, and it is postulated that some local Roman estates were transferred intact to their British or Anglo-Saxon successors. At West Stow (Suffolk), a rural settlement in use from the fifth to seventh centuries, Anglo-Saxon plant and animal husbandry evidence indicates a mixed agricultural economy. Plant cultigens included barley (naked and hulled), oats, wheat, rye, hemp, flax, woad, vines, and possibly beans. Although at West Stow sheep or goats numerically predominate, cattle provided the major meat source by weight. Pig and horse were also present.

The Middle Saxon period (c. 650–c. 850) introduced changes in agricultural practices, including new cereal crops, use of water mills and meadows, farming of open fields, production of animal surpluses, and adoption of the moldboard plow, which enabled the increased production of agricultural yields.

SETTLEMENTS

Settlement evidence suggests a range of forms from clusters of small sunken-featured huts (Grubenhäuser) to communities of longhouses or halls to royal complexes with public buildings. Building types in early Anglo-Saxon England have been paralleled by those excavated at contemporary continental sites such as Feddersen Wierde, near Bremenhaven (Germany), Wijster (Netherlands), and Vorbasse (Denmark).

Evidence from the early Anglo-Saxon complex at Mucking suggests that rural communities were small, dispersed, and impermanent. At West Stow, roughly contemporary hall buildings, surrounded by sunken-featured huts, are interpreted as single family farmsteads. Finds of loom weights and evidence for animal stalling in the sunken-featured buildings suggest that the general domestic activities conducted in the halls were complemented in these outlying structures by specialized tasks such as textile production or livestock housing. Population estimates for the settlement at West Stow at any time range from twenty to forty individuals.

Bede's account of the villa of ad Gefrin, the royal residence of the Northumbrian king Edwin in the late 620s (*Ecclesiastical History of the English People* book 2, chap. 14), provides a context for the archaeological discoveries at Yeavinger (Northumberland). The earliest buildings at Yeavinger include posthole and plank-in-trench structures similar to those at West Stow and Mucking. Subsequent construction of timber halls, a livestock enclosure, and a curved grandstand indicate a change in site function and importance. Yeavinger appears to have served as a royal estate center, a type of settlement governed by a peripatetic ruler who received tribute, hosted feasts, and settled disputes during his residence. At Yeavinger, the investment of labor and resources in residential and ritual structures implies a belief, if not a reality borne out by the documentary record, that kingship was a permanent office.

Middle Saxon high-status estates also served as industrial and trading centers. Excavations at Flix-borough (Humberside) and Brandon (Suffolk) have produced evidence for large-scale textile manufacture, carpentry, bone working, leatherworking, and metalworking. Finds of nonlocal goods indicate that these types of settlements, strategically positioned to exploit local and interregional communications, controlled extractive and exchange networks. The ability of these sites to serve the joint interests of ecclesiastical and political powers may explain the ecclesiastical tenor of some Middle Saxon "productive" sites. In this context, the legitimization and sanctification of royal authority offered by the Christian church may have facilitated the control of trading networks and the consolidation of land and resources under ambitious rulers.

More important than estate centers were royal centers described as *civitas* or *urbs*. From the seventh century, former Roman towns such as York (Yorkshire) and Canterbury (Kent), functioned as royal centers. Evidence for a diversity of urban settlements appears as early as the late seventh and eighth centuries with the cathedral town of Canterbury, the minster town of Reading (Berkshire), the possibly fortified towns of Cambridge (Cambridge-shire) and Hereford, and trading centers (*emporia*) at London, Hamwic (Southampton, Hampshire), Ipswich (Suffolk), and York. The population of Hamwic is conservatively estimated to have numbered two thousand to three thousand.

In rural areas, charter evidence indicates the practice of open-field agriculture, with crop rotation and cultivation of narrow common fields, as early as the tenth century. The nucleated villages attributed to this time and earlier are implicit in the communal labor requirements of the open-field system and archaeologically attested by the increase in concentrations of late Saxon pottery. While this settlement shift may have been stimulated by soil exhaustion and population pressures, nucleation may also indicate the attempts of Anglo-Saxon lords to maximize production from their lands. Defended Late Saxon manor houses, such as those at Sulgrave (Northamptonshire) or Facombe Netherton (Hampshire) anticipate the later fortified Norman

manor houses and castles. The development into parish churches of village churches serving the spiritual needs of estate laborers accounts for the frequent corollary between later ecclesiastical parishes and tenth and eleventh century estate boundaries.

Although dispersed rural settlements continued to exist into the Late Saxon period (c. 850–c. 1066), urban settlements assumed increasing importance. While some urban sites developed from ecclesiastical or economic stimuli, a group of fortified towns (burhs) were founded in the late ninth century to protect the interests of the West Saxon king Alfred (r. 871–899) against Viking incursions. These planned towns, as listed in the Burghal Hidage, include reused Roman walled towns, such as Winchester (Hampshire), newly founded towns located on open sites, such as Oxford (Oxfordshire), and new towns sited on promontories, such as Lyd-ford (Devon) and Lewes (East Sussex). Use of these fortified towns in the early tenth century enabled Edward the Elder (r. 899–924) to conquer the Danelaw lands to the north and to unify the kingdom of England. As well as providing security, these fortified towns structured trade through a network of regional market centers. Towns, such as London, developed a distinctive architecture of timber buildings fronting on graveled streets. The Domesday Book, an assessment roll enumerated under William the Conqueror, indicates that by the late eleventh century as much as one-tenth of the population lived in towns.

TRADE AND EXCHANGE

Anglo-Saxon England was incorporated into larger and overlapping cultural spheres centered in the Frankish kingdom and Scandinavia. The appearance from the late fifth century onward of Anglo-Saxon metalwork in Continental Frankish graves indicates the maintenance through intermarriage, immigration, and trade of close cross-Channel links. Competition for trade goods produced conflicts between local groups and facilitated the concentration of power in the hands of successful leaders. Rulers who could control access to and redistribute luxury imports, exploit relationships with Continental elites, and successfully manipulate the symbolism of new ideas were best placed to promote their own expansionist concerns.

The development of commercial trading centers (emporium) in the seventh and subsequent centuries was one consequence of the increasing sociopolitical elevation and territorial control of the fifth and sixth-century leaders. Each major Anglo-Saxon kingdom controlled at least one emporium. The rise of the emporia presupposes an integrative process of extracting, processing, and distributing agricultural products that would have been impossible in the fragmented political circumstances prior to the seventh century. The goods that passed through the emporia were linked to local markets or exchange sites at smaller, probably nonurban settlements. Archaeological finds demonstrate that the Continent supplied Anglo-Saxon England with prestige goods such as precious metals, gemstones, ceramics, jewelry, textiles, glassware, and weaponry, as well as more utilitarian lava quern stones and soapstone vessels. Documentary sources suggest that in exchange the English provided slaves, lead, honey, and textiles.

By the late seventh century, many members of the Anglo-Saxon elite had also adopted a Roman Christian ideology from the continent. A mutually beneficial patron-client relationship existed

between the Anglo-Saxon kings and the Christian church. The church promoted the image of the English people in insular literary sources for the purposes of political and religious cohesion. In the late eighth century, the church formalized the sacral role of kingship through ritual anointing and synodic degree. West Saxon and Mercian kings, seeking support for their dynastic ambitions, gave gifts of land and other resources to the church.

Despite the uncertainty surrounding the scale of settlement and disruption effected by the Vikings from the second half of the ninth century, the raids realigned and even enhanced systems of exchange. York, captured by the Vikings in 866, developed into a prosperous market town during the Viking period that produced crafts and traded locally and internationally in raw materials and luxury goods. Documentary accounts identify Danish merchants in York, as well as visits to other late Anglo-Saxon towns by merchants from Ireland, northern France, and Germany.

Early Anglo-Saxon England lacked a coin economy, as Roman coinage did not enter in bulk after the early fifth century and, during the sixth and early seventh centuries, imported Continental coins were valued as ornaments or bullion. The striking of gold thrymsas in the southeast, most notably at London, in the seventh century was superseded in the late seventh century by the circulation of debased silver-rich pennies, or sceattas. From the late eighth century, particularly during the reign of Offa of Mercia (757–796), coins often served as potent propaganda by incorporating the name of the issuing king and his people. Edgar's (r. 959–975) major coinage reform, marked by a uniform currency and periodic recoinage, established minting practices that lasted through the Norman Conquest. By c. 973, moneyers at over sixty mints produced a national coinage used for the payment of taxes, fines, and other transactions.

TERRITORIES AND BOUNDARIES

From the late fifth century, the political structure of early Anglo-Saxon England was characterized by groupings that were fluid both in extent and authority. By the late sixth or early seventh centuries, however, archaeological and textual sources indicate that these popular confederations had allied into larger units, presaging the formal kingdoms of the later Anglo-Saxon period. Philological evidence suggests the decline of regional dialects of Old English by 600 in favor of a more uniform English language. The development from popular to territorial concerns may be indicated by the construction of physical boundaries.

The reuse of ancient monuments as early Anglo-Saxon burial sites has been associated with the process of kingdom formation. Initial associations of ancient monuments with large fifth- and sixth-century cemeteries suggest that monument reuse was relevant to the construction of communal concepts of ancestry and identity. During the late sixth and seventh centuries, however, the increasing exclusivity of monument reuse suggests that elites appropriated existing attitudes about the past in order to identify themselves as heirs to a mythically established legacy, thus legitimizing their more worldly political strategies. During later Anglo-Saxon times, ancient monuments continued to be reused as boundary markers.

The modern notion of coherent political units circumscribed by static boundaries is anachronistic in early Anglo-Saxon England. Because, during the seventh and eighth centuries, political authority was vested in individual rulers, the extent of a "kingdom" waxed and waned with the king's career. Central to any consideration of Anglo-Saxon political geography is the putative tax register, the Tribal Hidage, believed to have been compiled for the ascendant Mercian overlords in the seventh century. Attempts to reconstruct the political geography of early Anglo-Saxon England generally employ toponymic, or place-name, evidence to assign the social units of the Tribal Hidage to specific locations. During the Middle Saxon period (c. 650–c. 850), the numerous polities cited in the Tribal Hidage had been subsumed by the dominant kingdoms of Mercia and Wessex.

From the eighth and ninth centuries, documentary and archaeological evidence indicates the development of political units whose integrity was not dependent upon personal authority and which outlived the death of their ruler. The obligation to provide men and material for military service and civic constructions appears in eighth-century Mercian charters. The massive linear earthwork known as Offa's Dyke, which runs along the modern English-Welsh border, exemplified the process of consolidation exercised by the Mercian king Offa (r. 757–796). At Offa's Dyke, the labors of individual work crews, identified through archaeological excavation, demonstrate the community discharge of obligations.

THE POLITICAL ORGANIZATION OF ANGLO-SAXON ENGLAND

Bede, writing in the second quarter of the eighth century, used Latin to describe the powerful men of Anglo-Saxon England. Only a few relevant documents, including some Mercian charters and the laws of the Kentish kings, appeared in the vernacular prior to the ninth century. Most Old English texts, such as the laws of Alfred (r. 871–899), the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, and the translation of the Ecclesiastical History of the English People, originated in Mercian or West Saxon contexts during the late ninth century.

Three status levels may be inferred from Bede's account: overlord, rex (king), and princips. At the apex were the overlords, who ruled over many men, including reges, or kings. Bede (Ecclesiastical History of the English People book 2, chap. 5) enumerated seven overlords who, each in turn, had held sway over the English south of the Humber: Ælle of Sussex (probably late fifth century), Caewlin of Wessex (560–591/592), Æthelbert of Kent (560–616), Rædwald of East Anglia, Edwin of Northumbria (616–633), Oswald of Northumbria (634–642), and Oswy (642–670). This list of overlords reappears in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, where they are described with the problematic term, "rulers of Britain" or "wide rulers" (bretwaldas, or possibly brytenwaldas). In Bede's account, below the overlords were the reges of the major kingdoms of Northumbria, Mercia, Wessex, East Anglia, Sussex, and Kent. Bede most frequently described the lesser potentates, who formed the third rung on the ladder of authority, as princeps.

Recognizing that political organization was grounded in fluid patron-client relationships can diminish the confusion presented by kingship terminology. The same conditional relationships, in which a ruler's power and prestige grew through his patronage of less-powerful client leaders, characterized relationships between the polities. The successful leaders of the larger extended families expanded their influence—through alliances, exchange, conquest, asylum, and intermarriage—over ever-wider areas. These polities eventually reached such size as to be characterized by contemporaneous writers, such as Bede, as "kingdoms" and "subkingdoms" and their leaders as higher- and lower-order kings.

Among the Anglo-Saxons of the sixth and seventh centuries, a king did not assume his kingdom borne on a well-oiled mechanism of succession. In order to be considered for the throne, contenders had to demonstrate legal title through real or fictitious descent. Gift exchange, motivated by social consumption and extolled in saga literature, structured early medieval society through systems of reward and loyalty. Historical records indicate that by the late eighth and ninth centuries, rulers such as the Mercian king Offa (r. 757–796) exploited genealogical connections and patronage to secure and legitimize their authority. By the tenth century, a monarchy descended from a single lineage and invested with sanctity, whose authority was supported by military force and taxation, heralded the Anglo-Saxon state.

See also [Emporia](#) (vol. 1, part 7); [Ipswich](#) (vol. 2, part 7); [Angles, Saxons, and Jutes](#) (vol. 2, part 7); [Spong Hill](#) (vol. 2, part 7); [Sutton Hoo](#) (vol. 2, part 7); [West Stow](#) (vol. 2, part 7); [Winchester](#) (vol. 2, part 7); [Viking York](#) (vol. 2, part 7).

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