

England (Anglo Saxon Period)

The Middle Ages, 1996

England

The kingdom of England developed during the Middle Ages. Off the coast of mainland Europe on the island of Britain, England at the start of the period was inhabited largely by [pagan*](#) Germanic tribes. By 1500, it was a single kingdom with unique institutions that drew from many different traditions.

The Anglo-Saxon Period

Like other parts of the Western Roman Empire after the fall of Rome, the old Roman province of Britain was invaded by Germanic tribes in the 400s and 500s. These tribes were ANGLO-SAXONS who came from the German coast of northern Europe. As they settled in the new land, they forced many of the native, Christianized [Celts*](#) to move west into Cornwall and Wales and north into Scotland.

Early Kingdoms

The Anglo-Saxons were several distinct peoples whose beliefs and practices differed considerably. They set up eight separate kingdoms, each one ruled by a small aristocracy of warriors headed by a king.

Many of the Anglo-Saxons landed at the mouth of the Thames River. A group that came to be called the East Saxons founded a kingdom named Essex, to the northeast of the old Roman city of LONDON. The West Saxons founded Wessex, to the west of London. Other Saxons traveled south and founded Sussex. Two groups called the Jutes and the Frisians set up the kingdom of Kent in the southeast. Closest to the European mainland, Kent was at first the most prosperous and dominant kingdom.

Other Germanic groups invaded along rivers farther north, creating the kingdoms of East Anglia (land of the east Angles), Deira, and Bernicia, which later joined to become Northumbria, and, in the interior, Mercia.

The Bretwaldas and the Supremacy of Wessex

During the early Anglo-Saxon period, warfare raged between the different kingdoms. The head of the kingdom that was dominant was often called the Bretwalda (Britain's ruler). King Ethelbert of Kent was the first Bretwalda. During his rule in the 590s, missionaries from Rome came to CANTERBURY and began to preach Christianity to the pagan tribes.

In the 600s, the most powerful kingdom was Northumbria. It dominated politically, and there was a remarkable flowering of religion and culture at its capital in York. Northumbria was defeated by [Picts*](#) in 685 and became a political backwater, but York remained an important cultural center throughout the 700s.

The kings of Mercia were the Bretwaldas of the 700s. One of these kings, called Offa, built a defensive wall 200 miles long at the border between England and Wales. This can still be seen and is known as Offa's Dyke. Offa was well-known on the European mainland. He negotiated with the pope, corresponded with CHARLEMAGNE, and encouraged international trade.

In the 800s, a West Saxon prince named Egbert made Wessex the most powerful Anglo-Saxon kingdom. After defeating Mercia in 825, he was acknowledged as the Bretwalda by Kent, Sussex, Essex, and East Anglia. He also subdued the Celts in Cornwall. All southern England was under the control of one king. For the rest of the Anglo-Saxon period, Wessex dominated the politics of England.

For more than 200 years after the death of Egbert in 839, the British Isles were threatened by VIKINGS from Norway and Denmark. The Danes conquered Northumbria and East Anglia, an area that became known as the Danelaw. Mercia, too, was partly invaded, and Wessex, inland and further south, was seriously threatened. But in 871, ALFRED THE GREAT became king of Wessex. An outstanding general and king, Alfred became a hero to the Anglo-Saxons because of his successful wars against the Danes.

Alfred preserved the independence of all of Wessex and part of Mercia. All Anglo-Saxons not living in the Danelaw viewed him as their king. Under Alfred's successors, Wessex came to dominate the whole of England. His son and grandson reconquered many of the Danish territories. His great-grandson Edgar completed the process. Edgar was known for the peace he kept with the Danes and for his newly minted Anglo-Saxon currency. He was also famed for his laws, which applied to Anglo-Saxons and to the many Danes who remained living in England.

Troubles with the Vikings were not over, however. Ethelred, Edgar's younger son, was defeated in 991 by a new wave of Danish attacks. To secure peace, he paid a tribute called the DANEGELD. Then, in 1013, there was an invasion by the Danish king Sweyn Forkbeard and his son CNUT THE GREAT. This time the Danish victory was complete. Cnut served as king of all England for 19 years, and his two sons succeeded him. They died without heirs, however, and the Anglo-Saxon [dynasty*](#) of Wessex was restored under Ethelred's son, EDWARD THE CONFESSOR. Edward's death in 1066 paved the way for the NORMAN conquest.

Anglo-Saxon Achievements

Perhaps the Anglo-Saxons' greatest achievement was creating a well-organized kingdom. A regular structure of government developed. The countryside was divided into areas known as hundreds and boroughs, ruled according to local customs by appointed officials called reeves. These areas were grouped into larger territories called shires, which were administered by SHERIFFS (shire-reeves). The Normans inherited this pattern of local government in 1066.

The regional economy also developed steadily. Slavery was common, but many Anglo-Saxons were free farmers, though they rarely owned their own property. Large landowners would provide land for them to build homes and raise food, demanding in return that the peasants work in the owners' fields for a proportion of their time. Rural England developed patterns of settlement in villages and hamlets that remained a familiar feature of England into modern times. The last years of Anglo-Saxon rule also saw the start of urban growth. Industries such as wool production led to the growth of larger cities and new towns, each with its own local customs, laws, and organization.

During the Anglo-Saxon period, too, the pagan Germanic peoples were converted to Christianity. After the mission to Kent in the late 500s, Christianity slowly spread to all the Anglo-Saxon kings and royal courts. Archbishoprics were set up in Canterbury and in York. In the 600s, Celtic missionaries from Ireland and Wales joined the Romans in spreading Christianity, especially in the north of England. Religious customs of the Roman and Celtic churches differed, but these were settled at the Synod of Whitby in 663. The church became united under the authority of Canterbury. By the early 700s, the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms were all Christian.

Supported by several Bretwaldas, including Offa and Edgar, there was a monastic revival in the 800s and 900s. Monasteries gave stability to the English church and state. They produced a steady stream of well-educated, powerful men to serve the church and to act as advisers to the rulers. A strong organized Christian church was vital to the unification of England.

Christianity, as an international religion, brought England into more frequent contact with the Frankish Empire and the Mediterranean culture. The church encouraged a sense of law and of the responsibility of public office. It provided English kings with educated officials to write down laws and government records. It also led to a flowering of scholarship, especially in York, Northumbria, which produced outstanding [vernacular*](#) literature and superb illuminated manuscripts.

The Norman/Early Angevin Period

The year 1066 was a turning point in English history. It marked the rise of a new political regime that brought fundamental changes to the country. In that year, the Normans—descendants of a Viking people who had earlier settled in northwestern France (Normandy)—conquered England. The Normans ruled from 1066 to 1154, and their direct descendants, the Angevins, from 1154 to 1399. These two dynasties developed political institutions that set England apart from the rest of Europe, and that still function with some modification today. At the same time, the Normans brought England into still greater contact with the European mainland. This contact changed England's culture and also affected the history of France and Europe.

The Norman Rulers

When Edward the Confessor died without an heir, the English nobles offered the crown to Harold, the powerful earl of Wessex. But his succession was challenged by Duke William of Normandy. William's claim, based on an earlier promise by Edward, was approved by the pope. He invaded England and defeated Harold at the Battle of Hastings on October 14, 1066. William

I (the Conqueror) thus became the first Norman king of England. He quickly consolidated his power. A year before his death, he assembled a council of his barons, and everyone, from greatest to least, swore an oath of loyalty to him.

William died in 1087. His eldest son, Robert, took Normandy, and his second son, William Rufus, took England. But Robert later went on the First CRUSADE, leaving Normandy in William's hands. In the year 1100, William Rufus was shot while hunting, and his younger brother Henry I took the throne.

Robert returned from the crusade and tried to regain his inheritance, but in a long war Henry succeeded in conquering Normandy. However, he was unable to pass on his expanded kingdom peacefully. His only legitimate male heir died in 1120. So in 1127, Henry persuaded the English barons to accept his daughter Matilda as his lawful successor. Matilda was married to the count of Anjou, lord of the land to the south of Normandy.

When Henry I died in 1135, many English barons were reluctant to be ruled by a woman. Instead they supported Stephen, a grandson of William the Conqueror through his daughter. Stephen rallied the barons and took the throne of England. Matilda and her husband controlled Normandy and Anjou, however, and a civil war erupted. For almost 20 years, Stephen and Matilda fought each other for control of England. Royal government weakened, and the English barons gained much independence.

In 1153, Matilda's son, Henry, invaded England from Normandy and arranged a truce. The Treaty of Winchester stated that Stephen would rule England until his death, at which time Henry would succeed him. Stephen died in 1154, and Henry took firm control of the realm as HENRY II.

The Early Angevin Rulers

Henry II was the first Angevin king of England. The word Angevin comes from his title as count of Anjou in France. Both Henry and his son and heir RICHARD I THE LIONHEARTED spent more time on the mainland than they did in their new island kingdom. Richard

was also heavily involved in the Third Crusade. But under their rule, the combined lands became stable, powerful, and influential. The marriages of Henry and his children made the Angevins heirs not only to England, Normandy, and Anjou but also to Aquitaine, Saxony and Bavaria, Sicily, and Castile.

Richard's brother JOHN succeeded him as king. John's greed, cruelty, and military failures brought about the collapse of the Angevin Empire. By the end of his reign, King PHILIP II AUGUSTUS of France had driven the English out of Normandy and Anjou. In addition, John's power as king of England had been severely challenged. Not only had he become unpopular because of unfair taxes. A dispute with the church had led to an interdict, or suspension of church services in all of England, from 1208 to 1212. With the help of the archbishop of Canterbury, the nobles rebelled and forced John to approve a document called MAGNA CARTA, which set bounds on the king's powers.

The king was to be able to raise special funds only with the “common consent of the realm.” The Magna Carta also demanded that a council of barons share power with the king. This document, which played an important part in later English history, was soon disregarded, however. The barons rebelled again, inviting the threat of an invasion from France. Then John died in 1216, leaving England to his son Henry III. Normandy and Anjou were no longer a part of the English king’s lands.

Achievements of the Normans and Early Angevins

As rulers of England and a large part of France, the Normans and early Angevins were the leading kings in western Europe. They governed with great authority as lords of the realm. They called the barons together on occasion but did not need baronial approval for their actions. Instead, the barons owed everything to them: rank, power, and property.

Before 1066, Anglo-Saxon lords on whose property the farmers worked usually owned that land. But William of Normandy brought with him the [feudal*](#) customs of Normandy. He claimed all the land for himself and his family, granting parts of it as [fiefs*](#) to his leading warriors and churchmen—who in turn granted some as fiefs to their followers. Anglo-Saxon landholders were replaced by Norman [vassals*](#) .

Administrative control over England was established very quickly and efficiently. William organized a unique feudal survey of England in which all lands and landholding vassals were identified and recorded. The results of two years of inquiry were written up in a book called the Domesday Book, which could be used to settle disputes about land. The book helped give the royal government great authority.

Non-feudal ideas from Anglo-Saxon government were used when it was to the royal advantage, however. Instead of granting whole shires or counties to his vassals and allowing the vassals to govern these, as was usual on the European mainland, William kept the system of Anglo-Saxon sheriffs and reeves. This gave the king closer control. Only in dangerous areas such as the Welsh border were barons given full governing authority.

The Normans made other important administrative changes in England. There were new officials—including a chancellor, chamberlains, and a constable—to handle the routine business of the kingdom. A new permanent financial office was set up to store royal income, pay royal bills, and keep track of all financial transactions. Later, under the Angevins, a new court was added to judge financial disputes: the court of Exchequer. As the population grew larger, other courts were created for cases between private citizens and between the king and his subjects. Judges regularly traveled around the country to make justice more obtainable.

The Normans accepted many aspects of local Anglo-Saxon law, but they added their own features too. For example, the inquest system, in which people gave evidence under oath, was expanded and improved in Norman times. It became a central means of getting information for settling cases. Another important change was the separation of public and church courts, which had been joined together under the Anglo-Saxons.

The French Connection

England's holdings on the European mainland played a key role in the politics of the later Middle Ages. William I was born in Normandy, and Henry II grew up in Anjou. Those lands were the native homes of England's kings and also were an important source of English power and wealth.

In feudal law, however, the dukes of Normandy and the counts of Anjou were vassals of the French Kings, whereas kings of England were independent monarchs. This put the English monarchs into an awkward position. Small wonder that when Edward III saw a chance to claim the French throne, he accepted the challenge!.

Other new legal procedures included trial by jury in property disputes and the use of grand juries to formally accuse those suspected of major crimes. But the basis of the law was still traditional Anglo-Saxon customs.

England's economy prospered under the Normans and early Angevins as a result of their contacts with Normandy and France. More towns and markets arose, merchants gained power, and GUILDS were formed. Rural change also occurred. The prosperity of towns led some peasants to flee the countryside to find other employment. This forced local lords to improve the treatment of peasants, and many lords then accepted rent payments instead of demanding labor in their fields.

Culture and learning reached a high point under the early Angevins. The royal court encouraged scholarship and learning, becoming the patron of historians, philosophers, theologians, and poets. ELEANOR OF AQUITAINE, the wife of Henry II, was celebrated for her patronage of TROUBADOURS and their poetry. A number of celebrated scholars wrote important prose works. One of these works was the popular *History of British Kings* by Geoffrey of Monmouth. In architecture, the ROMANESQUE style of the Normans was gradually replaced by the English GOTHIC, of which Lincoln Cathedral is a fine example.

The Beginnings of Parliament

After the loss of much of its mainland territory during the reign of King John, England continued to create institutions and laws that distinguished it from the rest of Europe. The Norman and early Angevin kings had great freedom and power. However, there had been two lapses in royal control over England: first during the struggles of Stephen and Matilda and then during the reign of John.

When John's young son HENRY III came to the throne, his [regent*](#) reissued and confirmed the Magna Carta. Toward the end of Henry's reign, Parliament emerged as a regular institution for consulting nobles and churchmen as well as representatives of the shires and towns. The decisions reached in Parliament were said to represent the judgment of "the community of the kingdom of England."

During the next three centuries, Parliament became the recognized place for addressing problems of law, making adjustments in England's legal system, and authorizing taxation. During this time, three English kings were [deposed*](#). In each case, Parliament approved the deposition and also approved the new king's right to rule. Strong kings were still able to enforce their own decisions. But when the kings needed community support, groups and factions represented in Parliament were sometimes able to gain rights from the kings.

EDWARD III launched the HUNDRED YEARS WAR to establish his claim to the French throne after the last [Capetian*](#) king died without a direct heir. For this, he needed to raise taxes, and he invited wealthy commoners from the cities to join the barons and bishops in Parliament. The power of these commoners became more secure as the war dragged on. Fighting continued during the reigns of four other kings, during which England conquered Normandy, lost it, won it again, and lost it again. The high point for the English was in 1422, when HENRY V's infant son was recognized by treaty as king of France as well as England. But many French nobles refused to accept this settlement, and after almost 30 years of fighting, that son, as HENRY VI, had lost all the English territories for the last time.

The loss of France caused new waves of popular and baronial discontent. Many commoners from the south of England stormed London during the shortlived CADE'S REBELLION. Then the duke of York led a campaign that started the so-called WARS OF THE ROSES, resulting in Henry VI's being deposed. The duke's son Edward IV was confirmed as king by Parliament, but the rivalry between Henry's and Edward's families continued after both of them were dead.

The Wars of the Roses were settled on a hot August day in 1485 at the Battle of Bosworth Field. RICHARD III, the duke of York's second son, was defeated by a distant relative who became England's Henry VII. One of Richard's supporters made it clear how much the authority of Parliament had grown since the time of the Angevins. Defending his actions to the new king, he said: "(Richard) was my crowned king, and if the parliament authority of England set the crown upon a stock, I will fight for that stock. And as I fought for him, I will fight for you, when you are established by the same authority."

Later kings of England, including Henry VII, still retained great power. The authority of Parliament was not fully established until the late 1600s. However, between the Battle of Hastings and the Battle of Bosworth Field, Parliament had established itself as an important institution in the government of the English kingdom. (See also [Feudalism](#) ; [Kingship, Theories of](#) .)

Definitions

- * pagan word used by Christians to mean non-Christian and believing in several gods
- * Celts ancient inhabitants of Europe and the British Isles
- * Picts northern British Celts who are said to have used a bluish dye for war paint
- * dynasty succession of rulers from the same family or group

- * vernacular language or dialect native to a region; everyday, informal speech
- * feudal referring to the social, economic, and political system that flourished in western Europe during the Middle Ages
- * fief under feudalism, property of value (usually land) that a person held under obligations of loyalty to an overlord
- * vassal person given land by a lord or monarch in return for loyalty and services
- * regent person appointed to govern a kingdom when the rightful ruler is too young, absent, or disabled
- * depose to remove from high office
- * Capetians princely and royal family that controlled the west Frankish kingdom for several centuries

See map in [London](#) (vol. 3).

See map in [Vikings](#) (vol. 4).

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