England: Anglo-Saxon

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The political history of England during the Anglo-Saxon period presents a simple central theme of movement toward unification, the creation of a true and permanent kingdom of England. By 1066, the date of the Norman conquest, the process was almost complete, though there were difficulties on the fringes. The northern border fluctuated with the fortunes of the rulers of the relatively new Scottish kingdom. To the west, political pressures were making the established Welsh boundary of Offa's Dyke unsatisfactory. But by and large the mass of historic England was fully formed and governed in the name of Edward the Confessor, king of the English. His ill-starred successor, Harold, earl of Wessex, though dismissed by the Norman conquerors as a usurper, in fact exercised unitary authority over the whole of England from the tip of Cornwall to Dover, from Southampton to the precarious Scottish border.

Early Political Divisions

The stages by which political unity was achieved are easy to identify. In the course of the sixth century, Germanic immigrants and settlers sorted themselves out into kingdoms that reflected their beliefs concerning their origins and the geographical realities of their positions within the newly won territories. Four principal groupings emerged from among those that had made the Thames estuary or the south coast their main point of entry.

Kent, which took its name from the Roman Cantium, was the most complicated and the most prosperous of these units. Settled by Jutes and Frisians, among others, and bearing traditions and some tangible evidence of federate enterprise and native survival, the Kentish kingdom was the least isolated of the new communities. King Ethelbert (ca. 560-616), who was overlord of all English people south of the Humber, had close contacts with the Frankish courts, had married a Christian Frankish princess named Bertha, and had permitted her to observe her religion and to bring a Christian bishop, Liudhard, to Canterbury. The little Church of St. Martin, just outside the walls of Canterbury, stands on the site of the church they set up even before St. Augustine's mission in 597.

Another group of migrants, more solidly Saxon in composition, made their home to the west of Kent in the area that came to be known as the land of the South Saxons, or Sussex. They rose to prominence in the later fifth century under a military ruler named Ælle, the first to be recognized as overlord by a substantial federation of German peoples in England; but thereafter they sank back into obscurity. They were the last organized English kingdom to accept Christianity, well into the late seventh century.

North of the Thames another predominantly Saxon group established itself in the territory known as the land of the East Saxons, or Essex. Their political fortunes were much bound up with control of the site of London and jockeying for position with other groups, such as the Middle

Saxons (Middle-sex), the men of the "southern district" (Surrey), settlers to the northwest of London, or, most of all, with the kingdom of Kent.

The last of the kingdoms to be set up by those who were attracted to the Thames Valley was in many respects the most important. Afforced by migrants who moved southwest from the Wash along Icknield Way, and brought to cohesion by a ruling kindred whose traditions spoke of entry through Portsmouth and Hampshire, the settlers in the middle Thames--the modern counties of Berkshire and Oxfordshire--became known historically as the West Saxons. As the community flourished, the kingdom of the West Saxons, or Wessex, expanded toward the southwest, into Somerset and Devon, but it is important to recognize that its people were originally Thames Valley folk.

The Thames and the southern shores are the best-chronicled entry points of early Anglo-Saxon migration, but there were other important routes. The Wash, with its navigable rivers, provided good access for many of the lesser folk of early Anglo-Saxon England, including a constituent element of the historic West Saxon people. Politically they formed themselves into one major kingdom, that of the East Angles (Norfolk and Suffolk), and many minor peoples who preserved awareness of their integrity into historic times, the most important being the Middle Angles, centered around the Leicester area.

The Humber was also a major point of entry for migrants, with its waterways leading north to the Vale of York and south along the Trent, deep into the heart of the Midlands. In the north the early settlers in the kingdom of Deira around York combined in uneasy partnership with others who had set up hamlets and villages still farther north around Bamborough, to form the kingdom of Bernicia. Together they were known as the dwellers north of the Humber, the Northumbrians, and in the course of the seventh century their kingdom came to be among the most powerful in England. South and west along the Trent, an early kingdom of Lindsey failed to achieve first rank, but settlers who moved to the middle Trent, around the historic centers of Tamworth, Repton, and Lichfield, formed the nucleus of the kingdom of Mercia. By attracting and subordinating smaller groups, the Mercians came to be reckoned among the most prominent of the English nations.

The term "heptarchy" is sometimes applied to England at the beginning of the age of conversion to Christianity. No new kingdoms were created after that period, and the political experience of the English peoples depended on the fate and fortunes of the seven principal kingdoms: Kent, Sussex, Essex, and Wessex in the south, Mercia and East Anglia across the Midland belt, and Northumbria in the north.

The age of conversion, roughly the period from the arrival of St. Augustine in 597 to the death of Bede in 735, saw a further consolidation of political power. Bede's brilliant analysis of the shifting fortunes of the English kings in his Ecclesiastical History of the English People (completed in 731) provides good information on the politics of the seventh century. One general truth emerges firmly from the welter of detailed information: by the end of the century, hope of English unification rested with the three gentes or nationes capable of further colonization and expansion against Celtic peoples. Kent had subsided into a prosperous but subordinate position,

as had East Anglia, isolated behind its fenland barriers. The future rested with Northumbria, Mercia, or Wessex.

For a generation after the Battle of Winwad (654), in which Penda, the heathen creator of greater Mercia, was killed, dominance rested with the Northumbrians. The victorious King Oswy presided over the Synod of Whitby, which resolved to follow the Roman observance in the northern Christian kingdom, a decision that later extended to all the English kingdoms and the Celtic world. Then, with the disastrous military defeat at the hands of the Picts in 685 and the reopening of ancient rivalries between settled, agrarian Deira and more backward, pastoral Bernicia, overlordship passed from the north. Northumbria remained an important cultural center throughout the eighth century. Exquisite illuminated gospel books and stone crosses, the work of the great scholars Bede and (later) Alcuin, and the reputation of the school at York all testify to the vitality of the "Northumbrian renaissance." But politically Northumbria was increasingly a backwater. In 793 it suffered the first of the formidable Viking raids that were to transform the whole area.

Eighth-century politics in England were dominated by Mercia. The West Saxons enjoyed a brief period of strength under the lawgiver Ine (688-726), but their constructive efforts were directed toward the colonization of the southwest. Two Mercian military rulers, Ethelbald (716-757) and Offa (757-796), established themselves as the most powerful rulers in England.

Offa, the not unworthy contemporary of Charlemagne, left a lasting memorial in the great earth-work, Offa's Dyke, that drew the boundary between the English and the Welsh. Modern historians increasingly recognize his positive institutional contribution to the unification of England. He was more than a mere military overlord: he aimed consciously at dominating the ancient smaller kingdoms that surrounded Mercia. Great councils were held that brought together leading churchmen from the other kingdoms of England. Offa operated on an international stage, negotiating with the pope, setting up a short-lived archbishopric at Lichfield in despite of Canterbury, treating with Charlemagne as an equal on marriage alliances and trade. Indeed, a quarrel with Charlemagne over the quality of goods shipped to Francia (among other things) led to the first recorded formal trade dispute in English history.

Offa's ruthlessness bred hostility among subject peoples, notably in East Anglia (where young King Ethelbert had been the victim of a particularly outrageous assassination) and in Kent. Attempts to ensure the easy acceptance of his son Ecgfrith by recognition in Offa's lifetime and an adoption of a formal anointing to the kingship were only partially successful. Ecgfrith died a few months after his father, and the kinsmen who succeeded him and held the Mercian kingdom together for a generation never acquired the prestige of Offa. In 802 Egbert, the West Saxon prince, returned to Wessex from a profitable period of exile at the court of Charlemagne and slowly built up the power that was to displace Mercian supremacy.

West Saxon Supremacy

The reign of Egbert (802-839) is an important landmark in English history, but there are many obscurities connected with it. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle gives the impression of a long, quiet period of consolidation followed by swift and decisive campaigns against the Mercians as the

direct Mercian dynasty died out and subject peoples rebelled. In 825 Egbert won a great victory at Ellandun (now Nether) Wroughton, and he was said to have conquered Mercia and everything south of the Humber in 829, thus becoming the "eighth king who was 'Bretwalda.'" The chronicler thus linked Egbert with the seven strong rulers singled out for special mention by Bede as men who held an imperium over much or all of England: Ælle of the South Saxons, Ceawlin of the West Saxons, Ethelbert of Kent, Radwald of East Anglia, and the Northumbrians Edwin, Oswald, and Oswy. Whether by design or by accident the chronicler made no mention of the Mercian rulers, not even of Offa. In any event Mercia quickly recovered its independence, but Egbert's victories marked the first step toward West Saxon supremacy. His last recorded campaigns were directed successfully against an alliance of Cornishmen and Danish pirates at Hingston Down in 838.

The fact that Egbert laid the foundations of West Saxon hegemony has led many to consider the possibility that there was some special virtue in Wessex that permitted its ultimate triumph. Undoubtedly a greater mixture of races was present in the West Saxon kingdom, the indigenous Celtic folk enjoying a substantial role in social life. Communications were easier in the south than in the Midlands. Kent acquiesced more readily to West Saxon overlordship after its miserable experience with the Mercians, and with Kent came support from the archbishops of Canterbury. Access to the wealth of Francia, and ultimately of the Mediterranean, was also simpler for those in command of the south and southeast coasts.

For a political answer to a political question, however, immediate practical advantages rather than theoretical virtues should be considered. For two centuries and more after the death of Egbert, the Scandinavian menace threatened settled Christian English life; and Wessex, though ravaged, was farthest from the areas of greatest interest to the Danish migrants and colonizers in the northeast and eastern Midlands. The other advantage possessed by the West Saxons turned out to be the personal qualities of their rulers. For more than a century, up to the death of Edgar in 975, the dynasty provided a succession of able kings, of whom four--Alfred the Great (871-899), his son Edward (899-924), his grandson Athelstan (924-939), and Edgar (959-975)--must rank among the ablest men ever to occupy an English throne.

The Scandinavian menace, manifested in a series of piratic raids dating from the sack of the Northumbrian monastery at Lindisfarne in 793, intensified and altered its nature in the mid ninth century. In 850-851 the Danes first spent the winter in England. In 865 they opened a devastating campaign. Northumbria and East Anglia were overrun and the last native East Anglian king, Edmund, was martyred (869) in savage circumstances that were remembered for generations. A cult of Edmund, king and martyr, quickly sprang up, and his memory was honored even in the still-pagan North. Mercia and Wessex were under desperate threat when in 871, the "year of battles," the young prince Alfred succeeded his brother, virtually while on campaign, as king of the West Saxons.

Alfred, the only English king known to historians as "the Great," was by any criterion a remarkable man. More is known about him than about most early medieval figures thanks to his biographer, Asser, and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, which was put together in the form familiar to later generations during the later part of his reign. Those contemporaries or near contemporaries who wrote about him wrote from a West Saxon viewpoint, and a note of

adulation was struck, sometimes amplified by medieval and modern commentators. It may be wondered if contemporary Northumbrians, East Angles, or East Mercians, governed by pagan or newly converted Scandinavians, held him in quite such high esteem.

Even so, his achievements were considerable, just as the perils that faced him were great and at one point, in 878, almost overwhelming. The Scandinavians, especially the Danes, were out for territory to settle. In 876 their leader, Healfdene (or Halfdan), shared out the land of Northumbria, and "they proceeded to plough and support themselves." In the following year the Danes partitioned Mercia with the native ruler, Ceolwulf, described by the Chronicle as "a foolish king's thegn." The concerted move against Alfred came in 878. Taken by surprise at midwinter, he fled with a few companions to the marshy fastness of Athelney in Somerset, but, keeping his nerve, he was able to rally the West Saxons and to force peace on the Danish leader Guthrum.

The terms of the peace proved curiously permanent socially, even though politically they may be read merely as an incident in the train of events leading to the unification of England. Alfred's sphere of influence was confined to the south and west of a line drawn along the Thames estuary, up the Lea River (immediately east of London) to its source, then straight to Bedford, up the Ouse to Watling Street, with an ultimate extension along Watling Street toward Chester. In other words, all England except Wessex and Western Mercia passed under the control of the Scandinavians, some of whom, including Guthrum, accepted Christianity.

When Alfred occupied London in 886 he very intelligently entrusted the city to the care of a Mercian nobleman, Ethelred, who became his son-in-law. To the north and east, within an area later known as the Danelaw, Scandinavian settlement intensified. Between 892 and 896 a last great effort was made to overcome Wessex, but the attempt failed. All the English people not subject to the Danes now more than ever looked to Alfred as their lord. By his conscious and systematic support of the church and by active concentration on what was essentially a program of Christian education, Alfred raised the kingship of the West Saxons to new heights. His royal line, the "kin that went [back] to Cerdic" as the Chronicle described it, was the sole ancient dynasty to survive the Danish attacks, and as such, with its strong Christian emphasis, it became the natural focal point for English nationalism.

Alfred's successors proved worthy of their heritage. Edward, helped by his sister Æthelflad, lady of the Mercians, and her husband Ethelred, began the slow process of reconquering the Danelaw and (equally important) broke down the ancient animosities between West Saxons and Mercians. Athelstan completed the process, reabsorbing rather than conquering much of the Danelaw and finally even Northumbria. The situation was still fluid: a Scandinavian kingdom again emerged at York in the 940's, when for a brief time the possibility of a political unit based on the Viking communities of York and Dublin seemed far from unrealistic. But after the flight and subsequent death of Eric (Eiríkr) Bloodaxe (954), the last Scandinavian king of York, the way was open to completion of the West Saxon conquest.

Again the right man was there for the occasion. After a few years of uncertainty, Edgar succeeded as sole ruler of the Anglo Saxons in 959. He was perhaps lucky in the timing of his reign--a period of rare freedom from Scandinavian pressure--and he took full advantage of his

opportunity. In the secular field Edgar was known for the good peace he kept and for his laws, which applied to both Danish and Anglo-Saxon England: In the ecclesiastical field he gave full support to the great movement for monastic reform associated with Dunstan, his archbishop of Canterbury, and bishops Ethelwold of Winchester and Oswald of Worcester. Edgar's splendid coronation at Bath in 973, followed by a ceremonial rowing on the Dee by Celtic, as well as Anglo-Scandinavian princes, testifies to the majesty and range of his Christian kingship.

A massive reform of the currency late in Edgar's reign, which made Anglo-Saxon silver coinage preeminent in Europe, gave evidence of the integrity and practical efficiency of his administration. The only coin to be minted as a matter of routine was (as in the rest of western Europe during the early medieval period) the silver penny, but standards of consistency of weight and craftmanship were high. Central control was maintained by savage legal penalties for false or inferior coinage and by the issue of dies from recognized centers only. At regular intervals--six years at first and two or three at the end of the Anglo-Saxon period--the coinage was recalled and fresh coins minted at sixty or more accredited mints throughout the realm. The legal claims of earlier kings, such as Athelstan, that "one coinage should run throughout the realm" were made reality by Edgar's reforms.

975-1066

The last century of Anglo-Saxon England was a time of political and dynastic turbulence. Edgar died young in 975, and the murder of his eldest son, Edward the Martyr, at Corfe Castle in 978, followed by the long and substantially unhappy reign of the younger son, Ethelred (978-1016), laid the kingdom open to renewed troubles. Scandinavian attacks were pressed hard in the later years of the century, with national leaders, Norwegian as well as Danish, taking part. English defeat in 991 at the Battle of Maldon was followed by the first payment of danegeld, and the Danish armies under the control of King Sweyn Forkbeard and then of his son, Cnut, eventually proved triumphant. Cnut governed England as part of a Danish empire for almost twenty years (1016-1035). The old dynasty was restored under Edward the Confessor, Ethelred's son (1042-1066), a much more capable ruler than reputation and legend would have him. Edward's death, and the succession of the strongest man in the kingdom, Harold, earl of Wessex (regarded by the Normans as a usurper and oath breaker), paved the way for the Norman conquest.

It should be recognized that throughout this period of dynastic change the basic integrity of the kingdom remained inviolate. Halfhearted attempts at partition or asserting the independence of great regional earldoms failed. Cnut was as much a king of England as Edgar had been, and he was proud to rule in the same legal and religious tradition. The earls under Cnut and his successors were strong, but they were subject to formal appointment from above by the king (with the advice of his council) and to pressures from below by the thanes and powerful men of the shires. The territorial structure of government was firmly established in shires, hundreds, wapentakes, and boroughs, with their distinctive system of courts. The pattern of medieval local government was fully formed by the time of the conquest, needing only the military discipline of the Normans and the reinforced strength of their sheriffs to mold it into final shape.

The outstanding achievement of the Anglo-Saxon period may, therefore, be held to be the creation of a unified kingdom out of a hodgepodge of minor political units and a variety of

peoples. The dominant stock and the dominant language were Germanic: West Germanic reinforced by a strong admixture of North Germanic from the Scandinavian invaders and settlers in the latter half of the period. Political unity was coupled with the steady and ultimately effective development of the economy. The Anglo-Saxons and the Scandinavians were the first to exploit fully the agrarian capacity of England. Plowmen and cereal growers, but also masters of mixed farming, they built up the pattern of settlement in English villages and hamlets that was to remain familiar well into modern times. Whole tracts of prosperous and fertile land from Wiltshire to the Vale of York, from East Anglia to Dorset, had as many villages in 1066 as they were to have in 1700--and in favored areas as heavy and concentrated a population.

The last century and a half before the conquest was a period of urban growth. In the seventh century there were already some centers, notably London, that deserved to be called towns. It was not until after the reign of Alfred, however, that urban activity became widespread throughout England south of the Humber and at York. Defensive fortifications known as burhs, set up by Alfred and his immediate successors, developed where conditions were favorable into recognizable boroughs, enjoying their own legal customs and organization, dependent on trade and the mobile world of the merchant as well as on the agrarian economy.

In the Danelaw similar growth took place. Unlike the Anglo-Saxons, the Danes retained their skill at sea, and the towns of the east and north, supremely York but also the Five Boroughs (Lincoln, Nottingham, Derby, Leicester, and Stamford), as well as Thetford and Cambridge, thrived during the last century of Anglo-Saxon England. There is evidence of more intensive economic activity, notably connected with sheep rearing and wool production. The wealth of eleventh-century England was famous throughout western Europe.

Religious and Cultural Activity

Modern knowledge of seventh-century England is dominated by the story of Christianization. Pope Gregory I the Great (590-604) was the driving force behind the initial conversion, and the arrival of St. Augustine in 597 coincided with the first moves toward consolidation of the kingdoms. Christianity was a universal religion that had much to offer to pagan settlers from the intrinsic value of its message. The Christian church in western Europe was the direct heir of Rome, and acceptance of the faith brought direct contact with the civilized world of the Mediterranean and Francia. Christianity fostered a keen sense of law and of the responsibility of office, and it provided the English kings with literate servants, allowing the establishment of permanent institutions of government, law codes, charters, and (late in the period) formal wills and writs.

The actual course of the conversion is clear in general outline, partly because its story has been transmitted by one master historian, the Venerable Bede, who wrote his account at a time when memory of many of the events was still fresh. In the first generation (597-633) the initiative rested with the missionaries, St. Augustine and his successors, who came directly from Rome. Their approach was slow and cautious, depending essentially on the conversion of kings and royal courts. Their achievement in the southeast was permanent: the conversion of Kent, the establishment of an archbishopric at Canterbury and bishoprics at London and Rochester, and the further extension of Christianity to Essex and the peoples surrounding London. They also (627-

632) planted the seeds of the Christian message at the court of King Edwin of Northumbria. The second generation (633-663) saw the great break-through, with Celtic missionaries joining the Romans to spread Christianity throughout England, even through Mercia after the death of the obdurate heathen King Penda in 654.

In the last decades of the seventh century, after differences of custom and usage between Romans and Celts had been resolved at the Synod of Whitby in 663, the church was consolidated and put on a firm institutional basis under the direction of Archbishop Theodore of Tarsus (668-690), one of the greatest archbishops of Canterbury. Men of outstanding ability, such as Abbot Adrian of Canterbury, St. Wilfrid of Ripon and York, St. Cuthbert of Lindisfarne, and St. Benedict Biscop, founder of the monasteries of Jarrow and Wearmouth, flourished in this consolidating generation of the conversion. Sussex, the last of the organized Anglo-Saxon kingdoms to succumb, accepted the new faith, thanks largely to the efforts of St. Wilfrid in the early 680's. The creation of an organized church with diocesan bishops, powerful monasteries, synods, councils, and written legislation on customs and procedures relating to services, baptism, confirmation, and penance foreshadowed the later unity of England itself.

Two immediate consequences of the conversion deserve attention. A cultural revival of importance to the whole of western Europe took place in England, and supremely in Northumbria, in the late seventh and early eighth centuries, expressing itself above all in literature (the work of Bede and Aldhelm) and in the production of superb illuminated manuscripts such as the Lindisfarne Gospels. The other consequence was of even more importance. A reverse movement of missionaries back to the Continent took place and was largely instrumental in effecting the conversion of the Germans east of the Rhine. St. Boniface (Winfrid from Crediton in Devon) was the driving force behind this movement; he was the first archbishop of Mainz and active beyond the Frankish border until his martyrdom at the hands of the Frisians in 754. The church continued to flourish in spite of the political troubles of the eighth century, and Charlemagne was content to draw one of his principal ecclesiastical and cultural advisers from Northumbria: the great scholar Alcuin, who had been trained in the school at York.

Much of the ninth century, owing to the dislocations caused by the Scandinavian invasions, was a time of tribulation for the church, but toward the end of the century Alfred emerged as its energetic supporter. His program of translating useful literature into Old English helped to make the West Saxon monarchy a true basis for a Christian kingship of England.

His successors carried on the good work. Edgar's support of the monastic revival in the mid tenth century proved vastly important in politics as well as in culture. The new monasteries--some, such as Ramsey, Peterborough, and Ely (later Bury St. Edmunds), firmly planted in the Danelaw--were well endowed and provided permanent bases of strength to the English church and state. Their educational work in the vernacular has yet to be fully appreciated, and they sent out a steady stream of well-educated, powerful men to serve as bishops. In spite of the turbulence of the reign of Ethelred and the subsequent Danish conquest, the inner social stability of England was preserved in large part by the efforts of men trained in these Benedictine monasteries.

On the eve of the Norman conquest there were abuses in the English church. The archbishop of Canterbury, Stigand, was a political figure, pluralism was a common fault, particularly among the higher clergy, and, as in the Germanic world, the lower clergy were, to say the least, ambivalent toward celibacy. But overall the Anglo-Saxon church (like the Anglo-Saxon state) had much to be proud of in its stable organization and its educational activities. The works of the great scholars Ælfric and Wulfstan were widely known and disseminated. Churchmen were active in the inner workings of the royal house-hold and government. Encouragement of vernacular literacy, initially for religious purposes, helped to preserve the finest Anglo-Saxon poetry and prose. There were imperfections in the Anglo-Saxon polity, but it was an essentially Christian and potentially integrated society that William of Normandy came to rule in 1066.

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