

**Lecture three: The Anglo-Saxons invasion of Britain (410-1066AD)**

**1. Introduction**

The Anglo-Saxon period in Britain spans approximately six centuries from 410-1066AD. The period used to be known as the Dark Ages, mainly because written sources for the early years of the Saxon invasion are scarce. However, most historians now prefer the terms 'early middle ages' or 'early medieval period'. The Anglo-Saxon period was a time of war, of the breaking up of Roman Britannia into several separate kingdoms, of religious conversion, and, after the 790s, of continual battles against a new set of invaders: the Vikings.

**2. Anglo-Saxon Invasion Historical Facts**

Anglo-Saxon mercenaries had for many years fought in the Roman army in Britain, so they were not total strangers to the island. Their invasions were slow and began even before the Roman legions departed. When the Roman legions left Britain, the Germanic-speaking Angles, Saxons, Jutes, and Frisians began to arrive – at first in small invading parties, but soon in increasing numbers. Initially, they met little firm resistance from the relatively defenseless inhabitants of Britannia. Around 500 AD, however, the invaders were resisted fiercely by the Romano-British, who might have been led by King Arthur, if he existed – and there is no hard evidence that he did. However, the monk Gildas, writing in the mid-6th century, talks about a British Christian leader called Ambrosius who rallied (grouped or assembled) the Romano-British against the invaders and won twelve battles. Later accounts call this leader Arthur.

The Celtic areas of Britain regarded the Saxons as enemies and foreigners on their borders: their name became *Sassenachs* to the Scottish and *Saesneg* to the Welsh. The various Anglo-Saxon groups settled in different areas of the country. They formed several kingdoms, often changing, and constantly at war with one another. These kingdoms sometimes acknowledged one of their rulers as a 'High King'. By 650-850 AD, there were seven separate kingdoms called the Heptarchy<sup>1</sup> which are:

1. **Kent**, settled by the Jutes.
2. **Mercia**, whose best-known ruler. This large kingdom stretched over the Midlands.
3. **Northumbria**, where the monk Bede (c. 670-735)

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<sup>1</sup> Heptarch means seven kingdoms. Hepta is seven. Archy is kingdom

4. **East Anglia**, made up of Angles.
5. **Essex** (East Saxons). Here the famous Battle of Maldon was fought against the Vikings in 991.
6. **Sussex**: the South Saxons settled here.
7. **Wessex** (West Saxons), later the kingdom of King Alfred, the only English king ever to have been called 'the Great', and his equally impressive grandson, Athelstan, the first who could truly call himself 'King of the English'.

By 850 AD the seven kingdoms had been consolidated into three large Anglo-Saxon kingdoms: Northumbria, Mercia, and Wessex. The Anglo-Saxons had become a Christian people.

### **3- The Role of Alfred the Great in the Defense Against External Enemies**

King Alfred, called 'the Great' because he is the only king amongst the other Heptarchy's king who resisted the Vikings invasion and could maintain his kingdom Wessex and the Anglo-Saxon presence in Britain. His achievement can be summarized as follows:

- He defeated the Vikings in the Battle of Edington in 878, then converted their leader Guthrum to Christianity.
- He recaptured London from the Vikings and established a boundary between the Saxons and the Vikings - the area ruled by the Vikings was known as the Danelaw.
- He strengthened his kingdom's defenses by creating a series of fortresses and a decent army.
- He built ships against Viking sea attacks which mark the beginning of the English navy.
- He had books translated into English and promoted learning;
- He founded monasteries.
- He commissioned the writing of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, a historical record of the Anglo-Saxons in Britain.

After 793, when the Vikings raided Lindisfarne Monastery, the history of the Anglo-Saxons becomes entangled (linked) with that of the Vikings. In many ways they were similar: in language, religion, and Northern European origins, yet they are not the same.

## **4. The Anglo-Saxon Cultural Facts**

- **Languages of the Anglo-Saxons**

The Anglo-Saxons spoke the language we now know as Old English, an ancestor of modern-day English. Its closest cousins were other Germanic languages such as Old Friesian, Old Norse, and Old High German. The surviving Anglo-Saxon manuscripts from Anglo-Saxon England show that there were different dialects spoken in different parts of the country, such as West Saxon, Northumbrian, and Mercian. The oldest English poem, *Cædmon's Hymn*, was composed in the Northumbrian dialect of English. The old epic poem *Beowulf* is written in Old English.

### - **Houses and Daily Activities**

The Anglo-Saxons were farmers and didn't like the stone houses and streets left by the Romans, so they built their villages. They looked for land which had lots of natural resources like food, water, and wood to build and heat their homes and practice agriculture, and Britain's forests had everything they needed. They surrounded each village with a high fence to protect cattle from wild animals like foxes and wolves, and to keep out their enemies, too. The Anglo-Saxon attacked the villages and the monasteries and took all their properties. They disliked everything related to the Romans.

### - **Food**

They grew wheat, barley, and oats (cereals) for making bread and porridge, grew fruit and vegetables like carrots, and apples, and kept pigs, sheep, and cattle for meat, wool, and milk.

### - **Cloths**

Anglo-Saxons made their clothes out of natural materials. The men wore long-sleeved tunics (coat) made of wool or linen, often decorated with a pattern. Their trousers were woolen and held up by a leather belt from which they could hang their tools such as knives and pouches (bags). Shoes were usually made out of leather and fastened with laces.

The women would wear an under-dress of linen or wool and an outer-dress like a pinafore called a "peplos" which was held onto the underlayer by two brooches on the shoulders. Anglo-Saxon women loved beaded necklaces, bracelets, and rings.

### - **Religion**

Many of today's Christian traditions came from the Anglo-Saxons, but they were not always Christians. When they first came over from Europe they

were Pagans, worshipping lots of different gods who they believed looked different parts of their life, such as family, crop growing, weather, and even war. The Anglo-Saxons would pray to the Pagan gods to give them good health, a plentiful harvest, or success in battle.

When the Pope in Rome sent over a missionary, led by a monk called Augustine, to England in 597AD, the Anglo-Saxons became Christians. Augustine convinced the Anglo-Saxon King Ethelbert of Kent to convert to Christianity and slowly the rest of the country followed him. Pagan temples were turned into churches and more churches (built of wood) started popping up all over Britain.