

Unit 3: Anglo-Saxons & Scots in Britain

← Roman Britain

410CE – 800CE

Anglo-Saxon & Viking Britain →

Period Overview

The Anglo-Saxon period is usually considered to begin from around 410 following the withdrawal of the Romans from Britain, although some Saxon incursions had taken place earlier. The Anglo-Saxons came from modern-day areas of northern Germany, southern Denmark and the borders of the Netherlands. Tradition also suggested that some invasions of Gaels from the north or Ireland had taken place on the west coast of Scotland, although more recent findings indicate that there is no evidence for such an invasion, and that rather the Scot cultures existed alongside one another in the two modern nations, sharing a common language. The Anglo-Saxon period in England extended over 600 years, right up to the invasion of William the Conqueror in 1066.

Life in Anglo-Saxon Britain

Many of the Anglo-Saxon settlers came to Britain seeking land to farm, having previously lived in frequently-flooded areas of northern Europe. The majority of the influx took place after the departure of the Romans, although in many cases Anglo-Saxons did not occupy existing Roman settlements but rather developed their own more rural settlements. Families usually lived all under one roof in small communities living in wooden houses with thatched roofs. During this period most communities were self-sufficient with relatively little trade between communities, although this changed significantly by the later Anglo-Saxon period. There were craftsmen, and some evidence has been found of things including pottery from the early Saxon period. The residents of Britain were largely pagans at the start of the period, although Christianity was brought to the islands particularly in the 7th Century. Common clothing included tunics for men, and longer robes for women. Popular drinks included beer and mead, which were brewed and therefore much safer to drink than water. A common diet was made up of bread and items such as eggs and cheese.

Changing Times

In the years after the departure of the Romans from Britain, Angles and Saxons from Germany and Jutes from Denmark settled in various places across what is now England. In the past it was thought that these were all invasions, but more recent historians suggest that coexistence was agreed, although with Celtic Britons becoming 'lesser' citizens. Originally settling in small communities they gradually developed into larger kingdoms, and by the middle of the 6th Century there were 7 main kingdoms in England, stretching from Northumbria in the north, to Wessex on the south coast. During this period, Christianity was first brought to England by St Augustine in 597, and spread widely over the following centuries. By the last 8th Century power had begun to centralise with stronger kingdoms either over-taking or combining with others, such that by 757 Offa – king of Mercia – became King of the whole of England below the River Humber. It is Offa after whom the defensive ditch on the Welsh borders – Offa's Dyke – is named. Much of what we know of this period comes from a history of the English church and people written by a monk named Bede.

Possible Enquiry Questions

- Where are English people from?
- Are all English people immigrants?
- Who was the first king of England?
- Was England always a Christian country?
- Why isn't England part of the Roman Empire today?
- Who wrote history books in Anglo-Saxon times?
- Who was buried at Sutton Hoo?
- Was King Arthur real?

Key Individuals

- **St Augustine** – Christian missionary considered to be responsible for the widespread adoption of the faith
- **King Aethelbert** – King of Kent who created the first Germanic law code in the early 7th Century
- **King Offa** – King of Mercia, and of most of England in mid 8th Century
- **King Arthur** – possibly mythical King of Wessex, acclaimed for defeating Saxon expansion
- **Bede** – monk in a Northumbrian monastery who wrote a history of the English church and people



Staffordshire Hoard of Anglo-Saxon gold³

What have the Saxons ever done for us?

One of the most obvious legacies of the post-Roman period is the language we use. English has its roots in Old English which was spoken during the time of the Saxons. Many words that we use today are based on Saxon original words, including the days of the week.

Also, the administration of England is still very much based on Saxon lines in lots of cases. The modern counties are often based on – sometimes even identical to – old Saxon shires. Also, many county courts are still based in the same place as a court from Saxon times.

Big Concepts

Traditionally the Anglo-Saxon period has been thought of as a series of **invasions**. However, more recently historians have doubted this simple narrative, explaining that some settlements may have been far more peaceful.

It also makes a very good unit in which to consider the values of **Britishness**, in the context of both our island nation, and the many centuries of immigration

Places to Visit:

Many local museums will have information and artefacts from the Saxon period.

Possible visit sites include:

- [Tatton Park](#), Cheshire
- [Sutton Hoo](#), Suffolk
- [Butser Ancient Farm](#), Hampshire
- [Alice Holt Forest](#), Hampshire
- [West Stow Anglo-Saxon Village](#), Suffolk

Timeline of Key Events:

All dates below are approximate:

- 350 CE** Some arrivals from north Europe
- 410 CE** Last Romans leave Britain
- 430 CE** First Christian church in Britain is built in Whithorn, Scotland
- 450 CE** German Saxons settle in Kent
- 516 CE** Battle of Mount Badon
- 570 CE** Heptarchy* emerges in England
- 597 CE** St Augustine brings Christianity to England from Rome
- 600 CE** First Law Code written in English in Aethelbert's kingdom in Kent
- 613 CE** Northumbrian kings rule over most of England
- 664 CE** Synod of Whitby held
- 731 CE** Bede completes ecclesiastical history
- 757 CE** Offa becomes king of Mercia and arguably first king of all England
- 789 CE** First recorded Viking attack (Dorset)
- 793 CE** Viking attack on Lindisfarne

*The Heptarchy refers to the seven kingdoms of Northumbria, Mercia, East Anglia, Essex, Sussex, Wessex and Kent

Broader Context

- Vandals sack Rome, 455
- Romulus Augustus, last Western Roman Emperor forced to abdicate, 475
- Mohammed is born (Muslim prophet) c.570
- Sui Dynasty in China, 581
- Tang Dynasty in China, 618 (to 907)
- Synod of Whitby, 663
- Jerusalem captured by Arab army, 638
- Arabs and Berbers invade Spain, 711
- Beginning of Abbasid Caliphate, 750
- Charlemagne crowned Holy Roman Emperor, 800

Further Information:

- BBC Anglo-Saxons: <http://bit.do/bbcsaxon>
- Ashmolean Museum : <http://bit.do/ashsaxon>
- British Museum: <http://bit.do/bmsaxons>
- Staffordshire Hoard: <http://bit.do/shoard>
- Primary Homework Help: <http://bit.do/phhsaxons>
- Early British Kingdoms: <http://bit.do/ebk>

³Staffordshire Hoard [<http://bit.do/hoard>] image by David Rowan is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic License. The licence can be viewed at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0>