

# The Anglo-Saxons

## Who were the Anglo-Saxons?

The Anglo-Saxons were a group of people who lived in Britain over 1600 years ago. Their culture came from three tribes living in northern Europe: the **Angles**, the **Saxons** and the **Jutes**. People from these tribes, and probably others too, came over and settled in Britain forming a new society known as the **Anglo-Saxons**. The word England comes from the Anglo-Saxon word 'Angle-Land'.

## When was the Anglo-Saxon period?

The Anglo-Saxons came to Britain shortly after the Roman Empire stopped ruling Britain around the year 410 AD. Over the next 600 or so years their society grew and flourished, lasting until 1066 AD when Britain was once again invaded, this time by the Normans.

## What was Anglo-Saxon society like?

The early settlers kept to small tribal groups, forming kingdoms and sub-kingdoms. By the 9<sup>th</sup> century, there were four main kingdoms: Northumbria, Wessex, East Anglia and Mercia.

Anglo-Saxon society was divided into several social classes with the king at the top. In the 10<sup>th</sup> century there were two levels of freemen: the **thegns** (pronounced 'thane') who were land-holding noblemen, and the **ceorls** (pronounced 'churl') who may have worked on the thegn's land, or who may have held a small amount of their own land. At the bottom of society were the **thraels** (pronounced 'thral'), or slaves.

The Anglo-Saxons developed a strong cultural identity. Myths of heroes and gods were mixed with Christianity, and honour and loyalty were important, particularly within your family. Art and literature flourished and the English language was born. In fact, many manuscripts from this period are remarkable for being written in the vernacular (everyday language); most of Europe used Latin when writing.

## What was daily life like for the Anglo-Saxons?

People lived in small villages, most with less than 100 inhabitants. These villages were largely self-sufficient, growing their own food and making their own clothes and

belongings. By the end of the period, as trade increased and flourished, towns began to appear.

Life was hard even for the rich, although they at least had fine clothes and slaves or servants to do most of the work for them. Most Anglo-Saxons made their living from farming so most of their time was spent working on the land. Women meanwhile would grind grain, bake bread and brew beer, as well as cooking, spinning, weaving and other domestic tasks.

A great deal of time was taken up with fighting, and training for war. A king was expected to provide opportunities for heroic action in war, and the looted wealth that came from victory. In addition, kinship was very important. If one of your relatives was killed or injured, you were expected to avenge them.

There were many enemies about. The different kingdoms were constantly fighting against first the British, then against the Welsh and each other, then against the Vikings, and finally against the Normans.

For those who did have some leisure time, popular pastimes included dice and board games, elaborate riddles, singing and story-telling. The nobility also enjoyed hunting and falconry, as well as feasting and drinking.

### **What religion were the Anglo-Saxons?**

When they first came to Britain, the Anglo-Saxons worshipped several gods, some of whom gave their names to our days of the week. Tiw (Tuesday's god) was the god of war, Woden (Wednesday's god) was the most important god, and Thunor (Thursday's god) was the god of thunder. Many gods had animal companions, with ravens, eagles, horses, wolves and dragons found in myths and in Anglo-Saxon art. Prayers and charms were used to heal illness and to encourage a successful harvest or victory in battle. Most Anglo-Saxons were buried with **grave goods**, but otherwise we have no evidence that they believed in an afterlife. From the 7<sup>th</sup> century onwards, the Anglo-Saxons gradually converted to Christianity.

### **How do we know about the Anglo-Saxons?**

Most of the information we have about the Anglo-Saxons comes from archaeology. Objects from graves can tell us about what the Anglo-Saxons wore and used. Skeletons can be analysed to tell us about things like diet and disease. The remains of buildings can tell us how big settlements were, and how daily life was organised. Lost or discarded objects can tell us about how rich or poor people were, and the technology available at the time. Most of the discoveries relate to the upper classes

of Anglo-Saxon society; we have far less information about the lives of ordinary people.

Some of the historical events of Anglo-Saxon England are known from the Ecclesiastical History of the English People, a history written by a monk called Bede who lived in the north-east of England. Later events were recorded in the **Anglo-Saxon Chronicle**, a year-by-year account of major events which was begun by the famous scholar-king Alfred the Great.

The influence of Anglo-Saxons can still be seen today. We still live in a distinct English nation, with English place-names and an English language. The words for our money (pounds and pence) and our days of the week date back to Anglo-Saxon times. They introduced concepts of monarchy and government, common law and trial by jury, all of which are present in today's society.

### **Famous Anglo-Saxons**

Here are some well-known people and discoveries from the Anglo-Saxon period:

- **Alfred the Great** – an Anglo-Saxon king famous for his victories against the Vikings and his translations of Latin texts into the Anglo-Saxon language
- **Offa** – King of Mercia and associated with the building of Offa's Dyke which divides Mercia from Wales
- **Bede** – a Benedictine monk who wrote the first history of the English, and books on science, grammar and poetry. He invented our system of numbering calendar years after the birth of Jesus
- **Lindisfarne** – an abbey on Holy Island, off the coast of Northumberland. Lindisfarne was an important base for Christianity during this period, and produced some of the most beautiful Anglo-Saxon manuscript art. It was attacked by the Vikings in 793, and may have been deserted after this.
- **Sutton Hoo** – site of the famous ship burial. The objects discovered here are some of the finest examples of craftwork from the Anglo-Saxon period.
- **Staffordshire Hoard** – the largest hoard of Anglo-Saxon gold and silver metalwork yet found. As with the Sutton Hoo objects, the quality of the craftsmanship is extremely high.
- **Aethelflaed** – daughter of Alfred the Great who became a respected ruler of the Mercians, defeating both Welsh and Viking armies
- **Beowulf** – probably the oldest surviving long story written in the Anglo-Saxon language, it tells the heroic tale of a young man called Beowulf's victory over three monsters; Grendel, Grendel's mother, and a dragon guarding treasure.

## Timeline

- 410** Roman rule over Britain has ended. The army of the Roman Empire was probably withdrawn in about 402 and Roman government would not have lasted much longer.
- c. 420** The first burials with Anglo-Saxon grave-goods begin.
- 596** Missionaries are sent from Rome to convert the English kingdoms to Christianity. They arrive in Kent the following year.
- c. 625** The ship burial at Sutton Hoo is made, probably for Raedwald, king of the East Anglians.
- 634** Foundation of Lindisfarne abbey
- c. 650** The Staffordshire Hoard is lost or buried
- 731** Bede finishes his Ecclesiastical History of the English People, recording the arrival of the Angles, Saxons and Jutes in south-eastern Britain, to create England.
- 757** Offa comes to the throne in Mercia and rules until 796.
- c. 789** The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle tells us of the first attack of the Vikings in England, when they land at Portland in Dorset. Lindisfarne is the next to be targeted, in 793 – causing shock as a church is attacked.
- c. 880** Alfred begins the fight back against the Vikings, and re-establishes learning in Anglo-Saxon England.
- c. 910-940** Alfred's daughter Aethelflaed and son Edward the Elder re-conquer England from the Vikings and unify Anglo-Saxon England
- 1066** The Norman Conquest officially ends the Anglo-Saxon period, and starts the Norman period.