**Anglo-Saxons Culture**

# The Anglo-Saxons

* The term Anglo-Saxon is a relatively modern one. It refers to settlers from the German regions of Angeln and Saxony, who made their way over to Britain after the fall of the Roman Empire around AD 410.

The Roman armies withdrew from Britain early in the fifth century because they were needed back home to defend the crumbling centre of the Empire. Britain was considered a far-flung outpost of little value.

At this time, the Jutes and the Frisians from Denmark were also settling in the British Isles, but the Anglo-Saxon settlers were effectively their own masters in a new land and they did little to keep the legacy of the Romans alive. They replaced the Roman stone buildings with their own wooden ones, and spoke their own language, which gave rise to the English spoken today.

The Anglo-Saxons also brought their own religious beliefs, but the arrival of Saint Augustine in 597 converted most of the country to Christianity.

The Anglo-Saxon period lasted for 600 years, from 410 to 1066, and in that time Britain's political landscape underwent many changes.

**The Anglo-Saxon period stretched over 600 years, from 410 to 1066...**

The early settlers kept to small tribal groups, forming kingdoms and sub-kingdoms. By the ninth century, the country was divided into four kingdoms - Northumbria, Mercia, East Anglia and Wessex.

Wessex was the only one of these kingdoms to survive the Viking invasions. Eric Bloodaxe, the Viking ruler of York, was killed by the Wessex army in 954 and England was united under one king - Edred.

Most of the information we have about the Anglo-Saxons comes from the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, a year-by-year account of all the major events of the time. Among other things it describes the rise and fall of the bishops and kings and the important battles of the period. It begins with the story of Hengist and Horsa in AD 449.

Anglo-Saxon rule came to an end in 1066, soon after the death of Edward the Confessor, who had no heir. He had supposedly willed the kingdom to William of Normandy, but also seemed to favour Harold Godwinson as his successor.

Harold was crowned king immediately after Edward died, but he failed in his attempt to defend his crown, when William and an invading army crossed the Channel from France to claim it for himself. Harold was defeated by the Normans at the Battle of Hastings in October 1066, and thus a new era was ushered in.

## Immigration and land

To speak of the 'differences' between English and Norman society is to start from the wrong standpoint. We should never forget that the Normans and the Anglo-Saxons came from the same basic stock.

At rock bottom, they were each Scandinavian immigrants who had settled in another land and taken over from its ruling aristocracy. It should therefore not surprise us that on a fundamental level, English and Norman social structures were very similar. What is interesting is the way these similarities received different shadings because of the time and place in which each side had finally settled down.

**...it was a self-perpetuating dynamic fuelled by expansion and warfare...**

For both societies, land was the defining currency. The Lord owned land, which he parcelled out amongst his followers in return for service. They in turn settled the land as minor lords in their own right, surrounded by a retinue of warriors to whom they would grant gifts as rewards for good service and as tokens of their own good lordship (of which the greatest gift was land).

Success in war generated more land and booty which could be passed around. If a lord wasn't successful or generous enough, his followers would desert him for a 'better' lord. It was a self-perpetuating dynamic fuelled by expansion and warfare in which the value of a man was determined by his warlike ability: the lord led warriors; the warrior fought for his lord; they were both serviced by non-fighting tenant farmers who owed their livelihoods to the lord; and below them came the unfree slaves.

**The hearth**

The basic building block of the system was the hearth. On his land, the Lord owned a hearth-hall, within which he housed his retinue of warriors. His tenants brought their produce to this hall, feeding and maintaining the retinue. In return, the lord provided all on his land with security. It was when he was unable to provide that security that the lord got worried: lack of security was the defining trait of 'bad' lordship.

This is best exemplified in the epic Saxon poem Beowulf, in which the adventurer Beowulf is drawn to the hearth of the Danish king Hrothgar by the king's famed generosity. There, he rids Hrothgar of the monsters which are threatening the security of his hearth and is generously rewarded. Beowulf finally dies trying to win a treasure hoard from a dragon threatening his own land - a potent combination of security and gold, the two driving forces of lordship in his time.

**Administration**

**...pre-Norman England had become the most organised state in Western Europe...**

In 10th Century Anglo-Saxon England, this dynamic had been complicated by a highly chequered history. In administrative terms, it meant that pre-Norman England had become the most 'organised' state in Western Europe. The king controlled a land divided into shires and hundreds, on which taxation was assessed and levied. These taxes were collected in coin from the burhs and fresh coin was minted 3 times a year in 60 royal mints arranged throughout the country. In this respect, it was a very Roman system.

It is even likely (though not certain) that Edward the Confessor had a Chancery headed by the clerk Regenbald. The whole system was run by a set of royal officers, the shire reeves (sheriffs), with individual reeves looking after each hundred.

**The Germanic system**



An Anglo-Saxon Housecarl  [**©**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/about/copyright.shtml)

Overlaid onto this was the old Germanic system of lordship and the hearth, but it had been altered almost beyond recognition by the demands of the previous two centuries.

Military service was still technically based on land 'loaned' from a lord in return for service. Yet by the 10th Century, this land had often been granted away in the form of 'bookland' which was a royal gift in perpetuity to a loyal retainer. Alfred and his successors had dealt with the problem by instituting the fyrd and military obligation was measured in hides.

**...the Anglo-Saxon kings had bypassed the problem of lordship...**

In essence, the Anglo-Saxon kings had bypassed the problem of lordship by imposing duties on the land itself. Large landowners were now expected to bring a retinue of thegns with them, based on the hideage of their land, and the very definition of a thegn was someone who could afford to arm himself as a warrior with the proceeds of his land. The more powerful thegns themselves had retinues of housecarls, old-style military retainers who served in the hope of being granted bookland and thegn status in return for their loyalty.

**The Norman system**

By contrast, the Norman system was much more basic. In Saxon terms, the Normans were second or third generation immigrants to Northern France. According to their own foundation myth, the land of Normandy was granted to their founder, Rollo c.911, and he and his successors ruled it as 'marcher' lords of the frontier on behalf of the Frankish king. Therefore, the Norman system was coloured by Frankish practice and was still firmly entrenched in the familia - the lord's hearth.

**...the Normans were second or third generation immigrants to Northern France...**

Whilst technically the Norman Duke had the power to call out a general levy (much like the fyrd), he usually relied on his military familia, which was the complex set of family ties and loyalties he had established with the great magnates who occupied his land. By the time of William, this relationship had hardened from one of mutuality in which the Norman nobles were fidelis (faithful men), to one of dominance, in which the duke was dominus (lord). William himself had had a lot to do with that change. It was this familia which helped govern the country and owed personal loyalty to the duke.

Though Norman dukes controlled the coinage in their domain, no new coins had been minted since the time of William's grandfather. The duke still called upon his nobles to provide an army when he wanted to go to war, and they obliged in the expectation of a share in the spoils of conquest.

**Differences**

In essence, both systems had a similar root, but the differences were crucial. The Norman system had led to the development of a mounted military élite totally focussed on war, while the Anglo-Saxon system was manned by what was in essence a levy of farmers, who rode to the battlefield but fought on foot. That is not to say that the English thegn was any less formidable than the Norman knight, as Hastings was to show. In the crucial months leading up to the Hastings campaign however, Harold was to be hamstrung by the limitations of the fyrd. On the 14th October 1066, much of Harold's tiny force was made up of the housecarls of his most powerful magnates because the fyrd had been disbanded.

**Similarities**

**...Harold was to be hamstrung by the limitations of the fyrd...**

Yet the similarities remain more important than the differences. On a macro level, they meant that William could come in and superimpose the Norman system onto the Saxon with virtually no problem - the thegns simply became Norman knights (or Norman knights became thegns, however you want to look at it). The emphasis of obligation returned to the old familia structure, which we used to call feudalism until it became a dirty word. The methods of Anglo-Saxon kingly control, the use of writs, courts and sheriffs became the instruments of dominance for the new Norman king, who also introduced the concept of justiciars and regents to represent the king when he was abroad in the rest of his land.

**County society**

On a micro level, the differences were even smaller. Look at Anglo-Saxon Jorvik or Norman Rouen, and the two are pretty indistinguishable. Both were emporia with similar social structures in terms of tenements and mercantile quarters dedicated to specific trades. In the countryside, the Domesday Book illustrates that the only thing which changed was the name of the landlord. Villages remained much the same as they had for hundreds of years: with villani and bordars, rights of sake and soke, woodland measured in the number of pigs it could support and mills and minor industries run on behalf of the lord by the local reeve. Perhaps one in every 100 villages was transformed by the appearance of a castle (a Norman innovation in England), but other than that, often even the thegn remained the same.

**English law**

**...a final telling example of the cruder nature of the Conquerors.**

Finally, the Normans introduced one major change into English law. Prior to the Conquest, cases were tried in front of juries selected from the hundred on the basis of Trial by Ordeal, or Trial by Oath Taking.

Oath Taking was a specifically Saxon process whereby a man would rely on the oaths of his lord and peers to vouch for his innocence and good name - the higher the status of your oath-helper, the better your chances of success. It relied on good lordship and reciprocity to make it work (and we can see it in action in the sworn testimonies of the Domesday Book).

These were complemented by the Norman practice of Trial by Battle, in which the judgement of God was determined not by the speed it took you to heal from the Ordeal, but by the success of your champion in battle. In this, it typified the military onus of Norman society and provides a final telling example of the cruder nature of the Conquerors.