

Department of Foreign Languages/English Division

Lecturer: Mrs. H. SEKHRI

British Civilization

Level: 2<sup>nd</sup> year LMD

**Lecture three:**

**Origins of the British People 2: The Anglo-Saxon Era and the Birth of England**

**Introduction: Britain after Rome**

The period between the Roman withdrawal around 410 and the rise of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms in the late sixth century is one of the shadowiest periods in British history. This period is currently referred to as sub-Roman.

The collapse of central Roman authority in Britain after 410 was preceded by years of weakening Roman military presence, and the central government withdrew troops from the remote island to use elsewhere closer to home. The Roman state was a parasite, draining men and wealth from the island while failing, or not even trying, to defend it from Picts, Irish, and Saxons. Into the gap stepped the local Celtic- Roman aristocracy.

There is little written evidence for the sub-Roman period. The British economy may have initially benefited from the Roman withdrawal as the tax burden shrank. However, the overall economy of post-Roman Britain seems to have slowly declined. Coins were no longer produced after the Roman withdrawal or even used much after the 430s. Britain ran on a mixture of coins and an increasingly dominant barter<sup>1</sup> economy, but it was not economically isolated as relations with the Mediterranean world continued.

However continuing trade, there was a general decline of urban life. Many Roman cities were abandoned, and there was an almost immediate switch from stone to the far cheaper wood as main building material. The imperial cities were almost abandoned. Another alternative was the revival of the hill forts of the Celtic period.

From the middle of the fifth to the end of the sixth century, a new culture established its domination over most of Britain outside Wales, the far southwest, and the north. These were the Anglo-Saxons, originally a group of Germanic peoples from the European continent. Around the same time, the Scots, originally a group of Irish immigrants were settling in what became Scotland. These two cultures, both of which would adopt Christianity, became the foundation for what would be the dominant kingdoms of Britain—England and Scotland. The centuries after the Roman withdrawal were also marked by a distinct insular culture. This makes them different from both the prior Roman period and the period after the Norman conquest in 1066, when British culture was much more integrated into the European mainstream. The peoples of Britain were then challenged by another invasion— that of the

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<sup>1</sup> to trade by exchange of commodities rather than by the use of money.

Scandinavians or Vikings. The Vikings would bring Britain into their world of raiding and trading and add to the cultural mix of Britain's peoples.

## **I- Anglo-Saxon Settlement and Expansion**

At first the Germanic tribes only raided Britain, but after 430 they began to settle. The newcomers were warlike and illiterate. We owe our knowledge of this period mainly to an English monk named Bede, who lived three hundred years later. His story of events in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* has been proved generally correct by archaeological evidence.

Bede tells us that the invaders came from three powerful Germanic tribes, the Saxons, Angles and Jutes. The Jutes settled mainly in Kent and along the south coast, and were soon considered no different from the Angles and Saxons. The Angles settled in the east, and also in the north Midlands, while the Saxons settled between the Jutes and the Angles in a band of land from the Thames Estuary westwards. The Anglo-Saxon migrations gave the larger part of Britain its new name, England, "the land of the Angles".

The British Celts fought the raiders and settlers from Germany as well as they could. However, during the next hundred years they were slowly pushed westwards until by 570 they were forced west of Gloucester. Finally most were driven into the mountains in the far west, which the Saxons called "Weallas", or "Wales", meaning "the land of the foreigners". Some Celts were driven into Cornwall, where they later accepted the rule of Saxon lords. In the north, other Celts were driven into the lowlands of the country which became known as Scotland. Some Celts stayed behind, and many became slaves of the Saxons.

The strength of Anglo-Saxon culture is obvious even today. Days of the week were named after Germanic gods: Tig (Tuesday), Wodin (Wednesday), Thor (Thursday), Frei (Friday). New place-names appeared on the map. The first of these show that the earliest Saxon villages, like the Celtic ones, were family villages. The ending -ing meant folk or family, thus "Hastings", for instance, is the place of the family of Hasta. The Anglo-Saxons established a number of kingdoms, some of which still exist in county or regional names to this day: Essex (East Saxons), Sussex (South Saxons), Wessex (West Saxons), Middlesex (probably a kingdom of Middle Saxons), East Anglia (East Angles). By the middle of the seventh century the three largest kingdoms, those of Northumbria, Mercia and Wessex, were the most powerful.

The Anglo-Saxon takeover took two centuries, slowed by both British resistance and the limited numbers of Anglo-Saxons who could arrive by ship. The Anglo-Saxon invasions were more a matter of small groups of settlers than vast armies. Most battles in Britain during this period involved fewer than a thousand people on either side. Battles were also fought on a low matériel level; the archaeological evidence shows that the principal weapon of ordinary Anglo-Saxon warriors was the spear, as only the elite could afford enough metal to make a sword. Anglo-Saxon armies were mostly infantry<sup>2</sup>, as few could afford expensive warhorses.

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<sup>2</sup>soldiers or military units that fight on foot.

The earliest Anglo-Saxon leaders saw themselves as leaders of peoples rather than as territorial rulers. The following of a successful war leader would increase as his military success and generosity attracted more and more warriors to his banner. Some of the most successful would take the title of king, but none were powerful enough to rule Britain or England as a whole.

## **II- Government and society**

The Saxons created institutions which made the English state strong for the next 500 years. One of these institutions was the King's Council, called the Witan. The Witan probably grew out of informal groups of senior warriors and churchmen to whom kings had turned for advice or support on difficult matters. By the tenth century the Witan was a formal body, issuing laws and charters. It was not at all democratic, and the king could decide to ignore the Witan's advice. But he knew that it might be dangerous to do so. For the Witan's authority was based on its right to choose kings, and to agree the use of the king's laws. Without its support the king's own authority was in danger. The Witan established a system which remained an important part of the king's method of government. Even today, the king or queen has a *Privy Council*, a group of advisers on the affairs of state.

The Saxons divided the land into new administrative areas, based on *shires* or counties. These shires, established by the end of the tenth century, remained almost exactly the same for a thousand years. "Shire" is the Saxon word, "county" the Norman one, but both are still used. Over each shire was appointed a *shire reeve*, the king's local administrator. In time his name became shortened to "sheriff".

In each district was a "manor" or large house. This was a simple building where local villagers came to pay taxes, where justice was administered and where men met together to join the Anglo-Saxon army, the *fyrd*. The lord of the manor had to organize all this and make sure village land was properly shared. It was the beginning of the manorial system which reached its fullest development under the Normans. At first the lords, or *aldermen*, were simply local officials. But by the beginning of the eleventh century they were warlords, and were often called by a new Danish name, earl. Both words, alderman and earl, remain with us today: aldermen are elected officers in local government, and earls are high ranking nobles. It was the beginning of a class system, made up of king, lords, soldiers and workers on the land. One other important class developed during the Saxon period, the men of learning. These came from the Christian Church.

### **III- Development of Christianity:**

Christianity came from two directions- Rome and Ireland.

In 596, Pope Gregory I sent a group of missionaries under a monk named **Augustine** to Kent, where King Ethelbert had married Bertha, a Christian Frankish princess. Soon after, Ethelbert was baptized, Augustine became the first archbishop of Canterbury, and the southern kingdoms became Christian.

In Northumbria, the Christianity come from Rome met Celtic Christianity, which had been brought from Ireland to Scotland by St. Columba and then to Northumbria by St. Aidan, who founded the monastery of Holy Island in 635. Although not heretical, the Celtic church differed from that of Rome in the way the monks tonsured their heads, in its reckoning of the date of Easter, and, foremost, in its organization, which reflected the clans of Ireland rather than the highly centralized Roman Empire. At the Synod of Whitby in 664, Northumbria's king Oswy chose to go with Rome, giving England a common religion and a clear Example of religious unification.

Theodore of Tarsus, who became archbishop of Canterbury in 668, created dioceses and gave the English church its basic structure.

### **IV- King Alfred the Great**

Alfred became king of Wessex in one of England's darkest hours. The Danes, part of the Vikings forces that had begun to raid the English coasts in the late 8<sup>th</sup> century. They first regularly looted Anglo-Saxon towns and villages but soon gave up that primary goal and decided to conquer England. Wessex and Alfred the Great stood in their way.

At first Alfred met serious problems to counter the Danish invaders and had to buy a break. But after his victory at Edington in 878, he forced the Danish king Guthrum to accept baptism (religious ceremony in order to become Christian) and a division of England into two parts: - Wessex

- The Danelaw (Essex, East Anglia, and Northumbria) under the Danish rule.

Alfred created an English navy, he reorganized the Anglo-Saxon "fyrd", or militia, allowing his warriors to alternate between farming and fighting, and he built strategic forts. These achievements enabled him to capture London and to roll back the Danish rush.

Alfred also gave his attention to good government, issuing a set of dooms, or laws, and to scholarship. He promoted a translation of Latin works into Old English and encouraged the compilation of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. For his many accomplishments, Alfred was called the Great, the only English king so acclaimed.

The conquest of the Danelaw was completed by Alfred's son, **Edward the Elder**, and by his grandson **Athelstan**, who won a great victory against the Danes at Brunanburh in 937. Most of the remainder of the century was peaceful. In this atmosphere, St. Dunstan, archbishop of Canterbury from 960 to 988, was able to restore the English church to health and prosperity.

**The conquest of the Danelaw meant the creation of a unified government for all England** and the evolution of the territorial state, which was replacing the kinship structure of earlier times:

- The king ruled with the support of the **witenagemot**, a council of wise men who participated in the issuing of dooms and oversaw the selection of kings.
- About 40 shires were created out of the former kingdoms or from significant military or administrative units.
- Each shire had a shire moot, or court, constituting of all free males and meeting twice a year, at first presided over by a royal official called alderman (later an earl) and then by a shire reeve, or sheriff.
- Smaller administrative, tax, and military units, called hundreds, had courts roughly parallel to the older folk moots, which met every four weeks handling most of the ordinary judicial business.

During that time, **England had the most advanced system of government in Western Europe**, especially at the local level and in the office of sheriff who was the basic link between the king and local administration.

After 991, that administration proved capable of collecting the *Danegeld*, a tax on land, initially used as tribute to the Danes but later as an ordinary source of royal revenue. No other country in Western Europe had the ability to assess and collect such a tax.

#### **V- End of the Anglo-Saxon Supremacy:**

A new round of Danish invasions came during the reign of Ethelred II. Often called Redeless (it does not derive from the modern word "unready", but rather from the Old English *unraed* (meaning "poorly advised"); it is a pun on his name, which means "well advised"), the *Danegeld* was his idea. He also wanted to kill all the Danes from previous invasions, who were by that time becoming assimilated and lived peacefully with the Anglo-Saxons. In 1014, he was driven from the throne by King Sweyn I of Denmark, only to return a few months later when Sweyn died. When Ethelred died in 1016, Sweyn's son Canute II won out over Edmund II, called Ironside, the son of Ethelred. **Under Canute, England was part of an empire that also included Denmark and Norway.**

Following the short and unpopular reigns of Canute's sons, Harold I and Hardecanute, **Edward the confessor**, another son of Ethelred, was recalled from Normandy (nowadays in western France) where he had lived in exile. Edward's reign is noted for its dominance by the powerful earls of Wessex \_ Godwin, and then his son, Harold (subsequently Harold II) \_ and for the first influx of Norman influence. The reign of Edward witnesses the building of Westminster Abbey, which was completed just in time for his burial in January 1066.

Edward's death without an heir left succession in uncertainty. The witenagemot chose Harold, earl of Wessex, although his only claim was his availability. Yet, other aspirants claimed the throne: King Harold III (the hard ruler) of Norway and Duke William of Normandy. Harold II (previously earl of Wessex) defeated the former (Harold III of Norway) at the battle of Stamford Bridge on September 25<sup>th</sup>, 1066. However, he was defeated by William at Hastings on October 14<sup>th</sup>, 1066.

**William (the Conqueror) was thus crowned king of England in Westminster Abbey on Christmas Day and the country entered a new era.**