

TD 3.1: The Heptarchy: the Seven Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms

Source: <https://www.history.org.uk/primary/resource/3865/anglo-saxons-a-brief-history?srsId=AU7gw4XWlXzuW5zxdNwK0o8XY-gZlog1Iq7oEQ2dRO9KfDQeyN0MvHq8>

Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, c. 650-800AD



1. **Kent**, settled by the Jutes. Ethelbert of Kent was the first Anglo-Saxon king to be converted to Christianity, by St Augustine around 595 AD.
2. **Mercia**, whose best-known ruler, Offa, built Offa's Dyke along the border between Wales and England. This large kingdom stretched over the Midlands.
3. **Northumbria**, where the monk Bede (c. 670-735) lived and wrote his Ecclesiastical History of Britain.
4. **East Anglia**, made up of Angles: the North Folk (living in modern Norfolk) and the South Folk (living in Suffolk). The Sutton Hoo ship burial was found in East Anglia (see below).
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.

TD 3.2: England and the Vikings

Source: Sophie Cassagnes-Brouquet « Anglo-Saxon England » June 2002 Copyright Clio 2021.
(Translated by the teacher with the use of AI)

The Viking raid on the monastery of Lindisfarne in 793 marked a turning point in English history. The Vikings used two sea routes to attack the country. The Norwegian route ran through the north: it began in the fjords of the Norwegian coast and led to the Shetland Islands, then to the Isle of Man and Ireland. The Danish route began on the Jutland peninsula and crossed the North Sea and the English Channel to reach the English coast. The first raids began in the late eighth century and became regular between 800 and 850. They took place in spring and summer, when the sea allowed it. At first, these were simple raids for plunder; from 850 onwards, however, some invaders settled in England, determined to carve out kingdoms for themselves. The English had no fleet and were left helpless in the face of these attacks.

Only the forceful leadership of Alfred, King of Wessex (871–899), gave the English the courage to resist the Danish invaders. Through his victories over the Vikings and his perseverance, Alfred laid the foundations for the country's political unity. He gradually brought all the English kingdoms under Wessex's rule and established a network of fortifications throughout the country, known as boroughs, to improve its defence. Thanks to him, England enjoyed relative peace until 950. Edgar (959–975) was the first king of England to be crowned at Bath, in 973. Unfortunately, raids resumed in 980, driven by the Danes in the south and the Norwegians in the north. The English kings responded weakly and preferred to pay tribute to the invaders. At the beginning of the eleventh century, Swein, the king of Denmark's son, succeeded in subduing all of England, forcing King Æthelred to take refuge in Normandy. When Swein died in 1014, his son Cnut succeeded him. In 1016, the leading men of the kingdom recognised Cnut as king of England. His reign marked the height of Viking power: he ruled a vast maritime empire comprising Norway, Denmark and England.



TD 3.3: Life in Anglo-Saxon England

Source: Sophie Cassagnes-Brouquet « Anglo-Saxon England » June 2002 Copyright Clio 2021.
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Sometimes described by historians as the Dark Ages, the early Middle Ages in England were marked by the decline of the urban civilisation established under the Romans. The economy contracted and the population declined. The sixth century was punctuated by a series of epidemics that caused a fall in population, although its scale is very difficult to estimate. This abrupt break in continuity in fact reflects the emergence of a new political, social and religious order.

The first kings of the Angles and Saxons were war leaders who had succeeded in establishing authority over a people...

To govern, the king relied on councils of advisers known as the witenagemot, which met on major festivals such as Christmas, Easter and Pentecost. They brought together the leading men of the kingdom, bishops and abbots, and the king's representatives in the provinces. From the ninth century onwards, England was divided into shires, each governed by an ealdorman appointed by the king. He commanded the shire's army, made up of nobles and freemen, presided over the court of justice and collected the taxes owed to the ruler. Gradually, the Anglo-Saxon term ealdorman was replaced by the Scandinavian term earl, meaning "count". By the eleventh century, however, the word no longer referred to a royal official but to a great magnate ... The king's representative in the shire was now the sheriff. He supervised village communities made up of freemen who owed military service to the king, as well as dependent peasants, both rich and poor.

Overall, the condition of peasants deteriorated considerably during this period. Faced with insecurity, free peasants were forced to place themselves under the economic and personal dependence of nobles and powerful landowners. Magnates and nobles, or thegns, enjoyed privileged status. They had received land from the king in exchange for service at court or in war, and they dominated the worlds of peasants and craftsmen. Priests and monks were still very few in number, but they dominated society because they held a monopoly on learning. From the seventh century onwards, English priests were placed under the authority of the Archbishop of Canterbury.