

Introduction

The Anglo-Saxons

David Adams Leeming

Anglo-Saxon England was born of warfare, remained forever a military society, and came to its end in battle.

—J. R. Lander

Isolated from the European continent, rain-drenched and often fogged in, but also green and dotted with thatched cottages, quaint stone churches, and mysterious stone ruins, the island of Great Britain seems made for elves, legends, and poets. Yet if this land of mystery, beauty, and melancholy weather has produced Stonehenge, Robin Hood, and Shakespeare, it has also produced the theory of gravity, the Industrial Revolution, radar, penicillin, and the Beatles. We tend to associate the British with their monarchy and their former empire. But we should also remember that while most of the world suffered under various forms of tyranny, the English from the time of the Magna Carta (1215) were gradually creating a political system “by and for the people” that remains today a source of envy and inspiration for many nations. Although Americans rebelled against British rule in 1776, America would not be what it is today without the legacy of English common law—with its emphasis on personal rights and freedom. Nor would America be what it is today without the English parliamentary government, English literature, and the English language.

This relatively small island of Great Britain has been invaded and settled many times: first by ancient people we call the Iberians, then by the Celts (kelts), by the Romans, by the Angles and Saxons, by the Vikings, and by the Normans. Whatever we think of as “English” today owes something to each of these invaders.

A small, isolated country, England is nevertheless the origin of a legal and political system that many other countries, including the United States, have since imitated. Over the centuries, English traditions and language have been reshaped by the island’s invaders.

The Celtic Heroes and Heroines: A Magical World

When Greek travelers visited what is now Great Britain in the fourth century B.C., they found an island settled by tall blond warriors who called themselves Celts. Among these island Celts was a group called Brythons (or Britons), who left their permanent stamp in one of the names (Britain) eventually adopted by the land they settled.

The religion of the Celts seems to have been a form of **animism**, from the Latin word for “spirit.” The Celts saw spirits everywhere—in rivers, trees, stones, ponds, fire, and thunder. These spirits or gods controlled all aspects of existence, and they had to be constantly satisfied. Priests called Druids acted as intermediaries between the gods and the people. Sometimes ritual dances were called for, sometimes even human sacrifice. Some think that Stonehenge—that

array of huge stones on Salisbury Plain in Wiltshire—was used by the Druids for religious rites having to do with the lunar and solar cycles.

The mythology of the Celts has influenced English and Irish writers to this day. Sir Thomas Malory (Collection 2) in the fifteenth century, having time on his hands in jail, gathered together the Celtic legends about a warrior named Arthur. He mixed these stories generously with chivalric legends from the Continent and produced *Le Morte Darthur*, about the king who ultimately became the very embodiment of English values.

Early in the twentieth century, William Butler Yeats (Collection 13) used the Celtic myths in his poetry and plays in an attempt to make the Irish aware of their lost heroic past.

The Celtic stories are very different from the Anglo-Saxon tales that came later (see “Beowulf,” Collection 1), although it is the Anglo-Saxon myths that we tend to study in school. Unlike the male-dominated Anglo-Saxon stories, the Celtic legends are full of strong women, like the tall and fierce and very beautiful Queen Maeve of Connacht in Ireland. Maeve once led her troops in an epic battle over the ownership of a fabulous white herd bull whose back was so broad fifty children could play upon it. Celtic stories, unlike the later, brooding Anglo-Saxon stories, leap into the sunlight (no matter how much blood is spilled). Full of fantastic animals, passionate love affairs, and fabulous adventures, the Celtic myths take you to enchanted lands where magic and the imagination rule.

The first British settlers were the Celts, a people whose daily lives were influenced by their magical religion. Their beliefs survive in Celtic mythology, which has influenced generations of later writers.

The Romans: The Great Administrators

Beginning with an invasion led by Julius Caesar in 55 B.C. and culminating in one organized by the emperor Claudius about a hundred years later, the Britons were finally conquered by the legions of Rome. Using the administrative genius that enabled them to hold dominion over much of the known world, the Romans provided the armies and organization that prevented further serious invasions of Britain for several hundred years. They built a network of roads (some still used today) and a great defensive wall seventy-three miles long. During Roman rule, Christianity, which would later become a unifying force, gradually took hold under the leadership of European missionaries. The old Celtic religion began to vanish.

If the Romans had stayed, Londoners today might speak Italian. But the Romans had troubles at home. By A.D. 409, they had evacuated their troops from Britain, leaving roads, walls, villas, and great public baths, but no central government. Without Roman control, Britain was a country of separate clans. The result was weakness, which made the island ripe for a series of successful invasions by non-Christian peoples from the Germanic regions of Continental Europe.

Roman conquerors remained in Britain for more than four hundred years. They built roads and the walls that fended off attacks on Britain for several centuries. When the Romans

finished withdrawing in A.D. 409, Britain was left without a centralized government—again susceptible to other invaders.

The Anglo-Saxons Sweep Ashore

This time the attack came from the north. In the middle of the fifth century, the invaders, Angles and Saxons from Germany and Jutes from Denmark, crossed the North Sea. They drove out the old Britons before them and eventually settled the greater part of Britain. The language of the Anglo-Saxons became the dominant language in the land which was to take a new name—Engla land, or England—from the Angles.

But the latest newcomers did not have an easy time of it. The Celts put up a strong resistance before they retreated into Wales in the far west of the country. There, traces of their culture, especially their language, can still be found. One of the heroic Celtic leaders was a Welsh chieftain called Arthur, who developed in legend as Britain's "once and future king."

At first, Anglo-Saxon England was no more politically unified than Celtic Britain had been. The country was divided into several independent principalities, each with its own "king." It was not until King Alfred of Wessex (r. 871–899), also known as Alfred the Great, led the Anglo-Saxons against the invading Danes that England became in any true sense a nation. The Danes were one of the fierce Viking peoples who crossed the cold North Sea in their dragon-prowed boats in the eighth and ninth centuries. Plundering and destroying everything in their path, the Danes eventually took over and settled in parts of northeast and central England.

It is possible that even King Alfred would have failed to unify the Anglo-Saxons had it not been for the gradual reemergence of Christianity in Britain. Irish and Continental missionaries converted the Anglo-Saxon kings, whose subjects converted also. Christianity provided a common faith and common system of morality and right conduct; it also linked England to Europe. Under Christianity and Alfred, Anglo-Saxons fought to protect their people, their culture, and their church from the ravages of the Danes. Alfred's reign began the shaky dominance of Wessex kings in southern England. Alfred's descendants—Ethelfleda, a brilliant military leader and strategist, and her brother Edward—carried on his battle against the Danes.

The battle continued until both the Anglo-Saxons and the Danes were defeated in 1066 by William, Duke of Normandy, and his invading force of Normans from northwestern France.

The reemergence of Christianity and the role of Alfred the Great combined to unify Anglo-Saxon England. Alfred and his descendants fought the Danish invaders until the Norman Conquest in 1066.

What does "Anglo-Saxon England" mean?

Here are some key features of this age of warriors:

- Anglo-Saxon society developed from kinship groups led by a strong chief.

- The people farmed, maintained local governments, and created fine crafts, especially metalwork.
- Christianity eventually replaced the old warrior religion, linking England to Continental Europe.
- Monasteries were centers of learning and preserved works from the older oral tradition.
- English—not just the Church’s Latin—gained respect as a written language.

Anglo-Saxon Life: The Warm Hall, the Cold World

In 1939, in Sutton Hoo in Suffolk, England, archaeologists discovered a treasure that had been under the earth for thirteen hundred years. This enormous ship-grave contained the imprint of a huge wooden ship and a vast treasure trove—all of which had been buried with a great king or noble warrior. There was no trace left of the king or warrior himself, but his sword lay there, along with other meticulously decorated treasures of gold, silver, and bronze—his purse, coins, helmet, buckle, serving vessels, and harp. This grave can’t help but remind us of the huge burial mound erected in memory of the king Beowulf.

As these Sutton Hoo ship treasures show, the Anglo-Saxons were not barbarians, though they are frequently depicted that way. However, they did not lead luxurious lives either, or lives dominated by learning or the arts. Warfare was the order of the day. As *Beowulf* shows, law and order, at least in the early days, were the responsibility of the leader in any given group, whether family, clan, tribe, or kingdom. Fame and success, even survival, were gained only through loyalty to the leader, especially during war, and success was measured in gifts from the leader. Beowulf, for instance, makes his name and gains riches by defeating the monsters who try to destroy King Hrothgar.

This pattern of loyal dependency was basic to Anglo-Saxon life. Such loyalty grew out of a need to protect the group from the terrors of an enemy-infested wilderness—a wilderness that became particularly frightening during the long, bone-chilling nights of winter. In most of England, the Anglo-Saxons tended to live close to their animals in single-family homesteads, wooden buildings that surrounded a communal court or a warm, fire-lit chieftain’s hall. This cluster of buildings was protected by a wooden stockade fence. The arrangement contributed to a sense of security and to the close relationship between leader and followers. It also encouraged the Anglo-Saxon tendency toward community discussion and rule by consensus.

Anglo-Saxon life was dominated by the need to protect the clan and home against enemies. All groups, from family to kingdom, were organized around a leader who commanded absolute loyalty.

The Anglo-Saxon Religion: Gods for Warriors

Despite the influence of Christianity, the old Anglo-Saxon religion with its warrior gods persisted. A dark, fatalistic religion, it had come with the Anglo-Saxons from Germany and had much in common with what we think of as Norse or Scandinavian mythology.

One of the most important Norse gods was Odin, the god of death, poetry, and magic. The Anglo-Saxon name for Odin was Woden (from which we have *Wednesday*, “Woden’s day”). Woden could help humans communicate with spirits, and he was especially associated with burial rites and with ecstatic trances, important for both poetry and religious mysteries. Not surprisingly, this god of both poetry and death played an important role in the lives of people who produced great poetry and who also maintained a somber, brooding outlook on life.

The Anglo-Saxon deity named Thunor was essentially the same as Thor, the Norse god of thunder and lightning. His sign was the hammer and possibly also the twisted cross we call the swastika, which is found on so many Anglo-Saxon gravestones. (Thunor’s name survives in *Thursday*, “Thor’s day.”)

Still another significant figure in Anglo-Saxon mythology is the dragon, which seems always, as in *Beowulf*, to be the protector of a treasure. Some scholars suggest that the fiery dragon should be seen as both a personification of “death the devourer” and as the guardian of the grave mound, in which a warrior’s ashes and his treasure lay.

On the whole, the religion of the Anglo-Saxons seems to have been more concerned with ethics than with mysticism—with the earthly virtues of bravery, loyalty, generosity, and friendship.

Despite the growth of Christianity, the Anglo-Saxon religion remained strong. Although it drew many of its deities and rites from Scandinavian mythology, the Anglo-Saxon religion was more concerned with ethics than with mysticism.

The Bards: Singing of Gods and Heroes

The Anglo-Saxon communal hall, besides offering shelter and a place for holding council meetings, also provided space for storytellers and their audience. As in other parts of the ancient world (notably in Homeric Greece more than one thousand years earlier), skilled storytellers, or bards, sang of gods and heroes. The Anglo-Saxons did not regard these bards (called scop) as inferior to warriors. To the Anglo-Saxons, creating poetry was as important as fighting, hunting, farming, or loving.

The poets sang to the strumming of a harp. As sources for their improvisational poetry, the storytellers had a rich supply of heroic tales that reflected the concerns of a people constantly under threat of war, disease, or old age. We are told of the king in *Beowulf*:

. . . sometimes Hrothgar himself, with the harp
In his lap, stroked its silvery strings
And told wonderful stories, a brave king
Reciting unhappy truths about good
And evil—and sometimes he wove his stories

On the mournful thread of old age, remembering
Buried strength and the battles it had won.
He would weep, the old king.
—Lines 2107–2114

Anglo-Saxon literature contains many works in this same elegiac strain. Poems such as “The Seafarer”, for example, stress the transience of a life frequently identified with the cold and darkness of winter. For the non-Christian Anglo-Saxons, whose religion offered them no hope of an afterlife, only fame and its reverberation in poetry could provide a defense against death. Perhaps this is why the Anglo-Saxon bards, uniquely gifted with the skill to preserve fame in the collective memory, were such honored members of their society.

The Anglo-Saxon bard’s ability to recite poetic stories was considered as important a skill as fighting. Fame in the bard’s mournful poetry—and a place in the community’s memory—was a hero’s only consolation against death.

A Light from Ireland

Ireland had historical good luck in the fifth century. Unlike England and the rest of Europe, Ireland, isolated and surrounded by wild seas, was not overrun by the Germanic invaders. Then, in 432, the whole of Celtic Ireland was converted to Christianity by a Romanized Briton named Patricius (Patrick). Patrick had been seized by Irish slave traders when he was a teenager and had been held in bondage by a shepherd in Ireland for six years. He escaped captivity, became a bishop, and returned to convert his former captors. His success was speedy and undying. From 432 to 750, while Europe and England sank into constant warfare, confusion, and ignorance, Ireland experienced a Golden Age. The Irish monks founded monasteries that became sanctuaries of learning for refugee scholars from Europe and England. Thus, it was in Ireland that Christianity, in the words of Winston Churchill, “burned and gleamed through the darkness.”

The Christian Monasteries: The Ink Froze

In the death-shadowed world of the Anglo-Saxons, the poets or bards provided one element of hope: the possibility that heroic deeds might be enshrined in the society’s memory. Another element of hope was supplied by Christianity. The monasteries served as centers of learning in this period, just as they would in the Middle Ages. In England the cultural and spiritual influence of monasteries existed right alongside the older Anglo-Saxon religion. In fact, the monasteries preserved not only the Latin and Greek classics but also some of the great works of popular literature, such as *Beowulf*.

Monks assigned to the monastery’s scriptorium, or writing room, probably spent almost all their daylight hours copying manuscripts by hand. (Printing was still eight hundred years away in England.) The scriptorium was actually in a covered walkway (the cloister) open to a court. Makeshift walls of oiled paper or glass helped somewhat, but the British Isles in winter are cold; the ink could freeze. Picture a shivering scribe, hunched over sheepskin “paper,” pressing with a quill pen, obeying a rule of silence: That’s how seriously the Church took learning.

Latin alone remained the language of “serious” study in England until the time of King Alfred. During his reign, Alfred instituted the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, a lengthy running history of England that covered the earliest days and continued until 1154. Partly because of King Alfred’s efforts, English began to gain respect as a language of culture. Only then did the Old English stories and poetry preserved by the monks come to be recognized as great works of literature.

Christian monks preserved the literature of the ancient world as well as works of popular culture.

Quickwrite

Think about the importance of preserving a society’s literature and language. Suppose that the monasteries had not preserved the classics of Greek and Latin literature. What might we have lost? Is there any possibility that our own literature and language could disappear from the earth? Write your thoughts on these questions.

A Closer Look

Women in Anglo-Saxon Culture

Anglo-Saxon culture, with its emphasis on warfare, sounds as if it would be an inhospitable place for women. But women had rights in this society that were sharply curtailed after the Norman Conquest in 1066.

Evidence from wills first used during the later Anglo-Saxon period shows that women inherited and held property. Even when married, women still retained control over their own property. In fact, a prospective husband had to offer a woman a substantial gift (called the *morgengifu*, the “morning-gift”) of money and land. The woman (not her family or her husband) had personal control over this gift; she could give it away, sell it, or bequeath it as she chose.

Christianity also offered opportunities for women. Women joined religious communities, and some women became powerful abbesses. These abbesses, usually women from noble families, were in charge of large double houses that included both a monastery and a nunnery. Hild (614–680), the abbess of Whitby (in present-day Yorkshire), was one of the most famous of these women. Hild accumulated an immense library and turned Whitby into a center of learning. Vikings sacked Whitby Abbey in the ninth century. The ruins of a monastery later founded at the same site still stand today, high atop cliffs overlooking the wild, gray North Sea.