

Episode 4: The Arrival of the Anglo-Saxons

Scheduled Release: July 1, 2021

Cold Open - Hengest and Horsa, King Arthur holding back the invaders

Odin was the father of Wecta, who was the father of Witta, who was the father of Wictgils, who had two sons named Hengist and Horsa. Vortigern, King of the Britons, was besieged from invaders and sought the support of mercenaries. The two brothers brought men from Saxony to support Vortigern. They were successful and were rewarded with lands on the eastern shore of the island and maintained peace with the Britons for some time.

Vortigern fell in love with Hengist's daughter and married her, leading to demands by Hengist who said:

“As I am your father, I claim the right of being your counsellor: do not therefore slight my advice, since it is to my countrymen you must owe the conquest of all your enemies. Let us invite over my son Octa, and his brother Ebissa, who are brave soldiers, and give them the countries that are in the northern parts of Britain, by the wall, between Deira and Alba. For they will hinder the inroads of the barbarians, and so you shall enjoy peace on the other side of the Humber.”

The Britons were angry with Vortigern's commiserating with the mercenary invaders and found a new king to lead them. This new king, the great King Arthur, burned Vortigern's castle with him in it and marched to meet the Saxons in the great battle of Badon. King Arthur was victorious and the Britons were able to contain the Saxons for years to come.

Dates: 410-825 focus in Britain

Why is this important:

- We now move into the next phase of British history and begin to establish Anglo-Saxon rule which will ultimately lead to a unified England. The notion of “England” does not yet exist, but will come to be the unified kingdom from which the rest of our story will flow. Establishing the kingdom of England will set the stage for the pinnacle of the first half of our first season of the podcast: the signing of the Magna Carta
- We will also establish Anglo-Saxon Britain as Christian. The influence of Christianity cannot be overstated in the legal and cultural development of the island. The

Anglo-Saxons were pagans, followers of Norse mythology. This changes in the 6th and 7th centuries.

1. Germanic tribes during the Migration Period and into the 5th century
 - “Germanic” peoples are a broad set of people with a common ethno-linguistic heritage; identified by Julius Caesar as those east of the Gauls (Celts), north of the Romans, and east of the Sarmatians (who were an Iranian/Scythian people that were later assimilated by the Slavs)
 - The Germanic peoples are divided into several subgroups (a few of which will be important for today and others that we’ll talk more about next episode)
 - We start with the North Germanic tribes which over time turned into the phase North-men or Norsemen; these tribes originated in modern-day Sweden and branched over to Norway and into Denmark
 - Most notable are the Suiones or Swedes and the Danes
 - The Geats (which may or may not be related to the Goths) are also from this region and are the tribe featured in the story of Beowulf
 - Some other tribes that we’ll discuss in the next few groups may also have originated in Sweden before migrating southward
 - East Germanic peoples originated in modern day Poland and include tribes such as:
 - The Burgundians who ended up in southern France) establishing a kingdom in 411
 - The Goths who played a larger role in the fall of the Western Roman Empire which we will cover more next time
 - And the Vandals who ultimately move to modern-day Spain, North Africa, and scatter across islands of the Mediterranean
 - Moving west, the Elbe Germanic peoples originated in modern day Germany, Czech Republic, and Slovakia including:
 - This group of people are often grouped into the broader term of Suebic or Suebian peoples
 - The Lombards who ultimately migrated south and settled in Northern Italy
 - The Bavarians of which the German state of Bavaria is named
 - Various tribes in a confederation known as the Alemanni who settled in modern day Switzerland and Alsace (eastern France on the border with Germany)

- Further west, we have the Weser-Rhein which is in west/central Germany today; the only notable tribe among this group are the Franks
- Now, rotating north and east from the Franks into northern Germany, Denmark, and a bit of the Netherlands, we have the North Sea Germanic tribes; this is the key group of interest for today, notably:
 - The Jutes - from the north of the Jutland peninsula, modern-day Denmark
 - The Angles - from the southern end of the Jutland peninsula, the modern region of Schleswig-Holstein
 - The Saxons - south and west of the Angles along the German coast of the North Sea
 - The Frisians - further west along the North Sea coast of modern-day Netherlands and Germany
- The migration patterns of the Germanic peoples were broad, but it was the North Sea Germanic peoples, especially the tribes noted, which crossed the North Sea and moved west to Britain

2. Transition of power in Britain

- As we covered already, the Romans had left the island and local power increases; the migrating tribes are successful at ultimately assuming leadership--both cultural and political; this transition is still not well understood but happened across the 5th and 6th centuries
- Geographically, a summary beginning in the north of the kingdoms that emerged as the most powerful and referred to as the “Heptarchy” (seven kingdoms)
 - Northumbria is in the north getting its name from the region “north” of the Umler (a large estuary on the eastern shore of the island along the North Sea); lies to the south of the Picts/Caledonians (tribes to the north in what we call Scotland today). This area was settled by the Angles and was two kingdoms (Bernicia in the north and Deira in the south) before merging into one around 654
 - East Anglia was the kingdom to the south of Northumbria, also along the coastline that bumps out on the east into the North Sea. It was also settled by the Angles; defended to the west by the marshlands of the Fens and the North Sea on the north and east. It was split into the north and south folk that gave us the names of Norfolk and Suffolk.
 - To the South of East Anglia is Essex, the easternmost region inhabited by the Saxons - the “east Saxons”, hence “Essex”. The most important city of Essex was London.

- In the far southeastern corner of Britain is Kent located where the island of Britain is closest to mainland Europe and settled by the Jutes. Canterbury served as the seat of Kent
- To the west along the southern coast of the island come the south Saxons which became the kingdom of Sussex. This area also included, at various times, Hastings and the Isle of Wight--both areas that had originally been settled by the Jutes
- Further to the west and inland to the north of Sussex is Wessex. As you'd expect, this is named for the Saxons as well as their western kingdom. The southwest of the island (modern-day Devon and Cornwall) remained held by Celtic Britons (along with modern day Wales)
- Finally, north of Wessex, east of Wales, and south of Northumbria, is Mercia. Mercia was settled by the Angles and became the key center of power in the first couple of centuries of Anglo-Saxon rule.
- Concept of the bretwalda and most notable Anglo-Saxon kings; we have this concept of the bretwalda (literal meaning of the word is disputed and may translate to either 'wide-ruler' or 'Britain-ruler') comes from Bede, the monk we noted at the beginning of episode 1
 - The first Anglo-Saxon king to be referred to as a bretwalda was Aelle who we know very little about; he is noted by Bede and other chroniclers tie him to our story from the top of the episode; he reigned from approximately the 480s until the 510s
 - A few generations pass before the next bretwalda comes to power; Ceawlin of Wessex likely reigned from the 560s until about 590 when his power was eclipsed by Aethelbeht of Kent--this transition is notable because Wessex later becomes the power base of future kings and Kent is the site of emerging Christian power in Anglo-Saxon Britain (more on that in a little bit)
 - Bede goes on to mention four more bretwaldas, the last three of whom are from Northumbria suggesting that the north had broad power of the south during this time--essentially the first half of the 7th century
 - At this time power definitively transfers to the kings of Mercia--in fact, the second to last bretwalda in Bede's list, Oswiu (who is recognized as a Saint by the Church of England), is killed in battle against king Penda of Mercia at the Battle of Maserfield in 641--for a period known as the Mercian Supremacy

- Mercia was the center of power for much of the next 200 years with the height of power coming during the reigns of King Offa and King Coenwulf
- Power struggles between the church, via the Archbishops of Canterbury (in Kent), and the Mercian kings ultimately weaken Mercia
- In 802, Ecgbeht, King of Wessex, begins his reign which challenges Mercia with military victories in 825 and 829 establishing the first West Saxon bretwalda since Ceawlin; we will pick up the legacy of Ecgberht in Episode 7

3. Development of Christianity in England

○ Saint Patrick

- You may know him from March 17th and have heard some vague stories about snakes, but St. Patrick is one of the most influential people in the British Isles. He is credited with being the first major missionary for Christianity in the British Isles. It existed in Britain due to the Romans and free trade, but Patrick was the first to form a movement.
- Although we can't say for certain when he lived, generally it is suspected he lived in the 400s. We know of him due to two written works, "Declaration" (or confession in Latin) and Letter to the Soldiers of Coroticus. He uses the name Patricus. We can date him through the Biblical quotations he used with a mixture of the Old Latin Bible and the Vulgate, an updated late-4th Century translation.
- Born in Roman Britain, he was captured by Irish pirates and he was held captive for six years. Captivity forced this son of a Deacon to focus on his faith and he converted to Christianity. He was able to flee his captors and as he returned home, he saw a vision prompting him to return to Ireland as a missionary.
- His position was a precarious one as he existed outside the clan structure. He refused gifts from kings which left him without protection, and he was often on trial, in captivity, or condemned to death. He would escape these situations and says he baptized thousands across Ireland while starting Christian communities out of Celtic polytheism.
- Why is the shamrock associated with March 17? Patrick would often use its three leaves to illustrate the Holy Trinity.
- And the snakes? Writings back to the third century note the absence of snakes in Ireland, and we now know it is due to glacial forces. But Patrick received credit from histories in the 8th and 9th Century. The

obvious assumption is that he made the island so Holy that the Evil One could no longer exist in Ireland.

- Saint Augustine (not that one)
 - The first major Christian figure in England was St. Augustine. No, not that one. He lived in the late 500s.
 - This “Apostle to the English” was appointed by Pope Gregory the Great (who was extremely influential in the building of the Catholic Church) as a missionary to Britain in 597.
 - The British Church was in disarray after the exit of the Romans. Despite help from Gaulic Bishops, it was obvious to the growing Church that they needed an authority there to manage the affairs of the faithful.
 - Irish missionaries had helped settle a Church presence, but did not make an effort to convert the Anglo-Saxons.
 - There is some speculation that Bertha, wife of King Æthelberht of Kent (eastern England) was a Christian and wanted her Pagan husband to allow her the freedom to worship and that he sent for a holy man to come to the island to talk this religion over.
 - Our friend from episode one, Bede, recounts Pope Gregory seeing two fair haired British slave children with angelic features and wanted to convert their people to Christianity.
 - It is more likely that Gregory went to Kent because it was the main power base in England at the time. Kent was best situated to communicate with the European continent.
 - Augustine was well educated, but a bit terrified at the prospect of his mission and tried to beg Gregory for a reprieve. It was denied and he traveled on to Kent. Upon his meeting with Æthelberht, he converted him to Christianity, which meant his entire kingdom had to convert as well.
 - This was the first in a trend that led to a growth strategy for the church. By marrying political power and religion, the number of souls saved would be much greater in numbers than if speaking to individuals one-by-one. It also left the Church free to operate as it see fit, which avoided the problems of St. Patrick.
- The Archbishop of Canterbury
 - Listeners will have heard of the “Archbishop of Canterbury” but may not know why it is important. It is now the symbolic head of the Anglican Church.
 - As holder of one of the “five great sees” (along with those of York, London, Durham and Winchester), the Archbishop of Canterbury is ex officio one of the Lords Spiritual of the House of Lords. He is one of

the highest-ranking men in England, ranking directly below the Royal Family.

- Originally Gregory had intended there to be two archbishoprics, one in London and the other in York, yet he was ignorant of the politics of the island and Canterbury was a better base. (The eventual feuds between Canterbury (in the south) and York (in the north) will come into play in later episodes.
- Bede and monastic culture
 - As we noted with our conversation on Bede, the monastery was an important repository of knowledge. Much of what we know about this period is due to the literacy of the monks.
 - Ignoring St. Patrick.

Reading List

Podcasts

- The British History Podcast - <https://www.thebritishhistorypodcast.com/>
- The History of England - <https://thehistoryofengland.co.uk/>

Video

Books

Meigs, Samantha A, and Stanford E Lehmborg. 2016. **Peoples of the British Isles : A New History. From Prehistoric Times to 1688**. New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press. - <https://amzn.to/2SPYPIG>

Bede, The Venerable Saint, Bertram Colgrave, Judith McClure, and Roger Collins. 2008. **The Ecclesiastical History of the English People**. Oxford: Oxford University Press. - <https://amzn.to/3w4sb4k>

J Robert Wright. 2008. **A Companion to Bede : A Reader's Commentary on the Ecclesiastical History of the English People**. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub. <https://amzn.to/3bssLB0>

Loades, D M. 2013. **The Kings & Queens of England : The Biography**. Gloucestershire: Amberley.

Stenton, F M. 1971. **Anglo-Saxon England**,. Oxford [England] Clarendon Press.

Hindley, Geoffrey. 2006. **A Brief History of the Anglo-Saxons**. New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers ; [Berkeley, Calif.

Venning, Timothy. 2011. **The Anglo-Saxon Kings**. Stroud, Gloucestershire: Amberley Publishing.

The Oxford Illustrated History of Medieval England. 1997. Oxford: Oxford University.

Higham, N J, and Martin J Ryan. 2015. **The Anglo-Saxon World**. New Haven: Yale University Press.