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# THE ANGLO- SAXON AGE

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## 盎格鲁-撒克逊简史

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John Blair 著 肖明翰 译



通识教育  
双语文库

A VERY SHORT  
INTRODUCTION

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外语教学与研究出版社  
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# Introduction

Perched on the edge of the fragmenting Roman world, Britain between AD 300 and 700 was at a meeting of currents flowing from several directions. Much of its indigenous Brittonic ('Celtic') population had been under Roman rule, but only in the lowlands of what would be southern and eastern England was it Romanized in any meaningful sense; to the north, Hadrian's Wall was the frontier not merely of Britain but of the Roman Empire. Much of Britain, like Ireland to its west, thus remained a reservoir of Celtic and Pictish culture only superficially touched by Rome.

The attentions of Pictish, Scottish, Frankish, and Scandinavian raiders, barbarians from outside the boundaries of the empire, became increasingly threatening to the authorities in Britain and Gaul during the later fourth century, and would overwhelm them in the fifth. Yet the Roman civilization of Europe was always too close, and too powerful, for even the most primitive invaders to be impervious to it for ever. Sandwiched ambiguously between the pagan barbarian north and the Christian Roman south, the lost province of Britannia became a melting pot of diverse influences. This ambiguity, and this diversity, help to explain the distinctiveness of the early medieval cultures that would take shape in Britain.

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# Chapter 1

## The English Settlements

The sources for the fifth and sixth centuries are few and unsatisfactory in the extreme. On the one hand is the archaeological evidence, mainly objects from graves in pagan cemeteries. This evidence cannot lie, but the questions which it answers are strictly limited. On the other hand is a small group of texts, annals, and fragments. Of these the only substantial contemporary work is *The Ruin of Britain*, a tract written around the 540s by a British monk named Gildas whose purpose was to denounce the evils of his day in the most violent possible language. The Venerable Bede, a monk in the Northumbrian monastery of Jarrow, completed his great *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* in 731. This overshadows all other sources for the seventh and early eighth centuries, and although the invasion period was remote from Bede's own day he provides some surprisingly well-founded scraps of tradition.

The only other narrative sources are fragments of chronicles preserved in later compilations, a few poems, and passing references by Continental writers. The later annals, known collectively as *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, which give a year-by-year summary of events in the southern English kingdoms, contain distant echoes of legend but are highly unreliable before the 570s. Thus the early fortunes of the English can only be glimpsed through the hostile eyes of Britons, through the ill-informed eyes of foreigners, and by means of their own half-remembered traditions. Until the late sixth century, informed guesswork must make do for history.



1. Reconstruction of an early Anglo-Saxon sunken hut at the Weald and Downland Museum, Singleton, Sussex. This was one of the most typical sorts of building in settlements of the fifth to eighth centuries.

Archaeology provides suggestions – still inconclusive and much debated – that Germanic settlers first came to Britain as mercenaries in the late Roman army. The English of later centuries dated their ancestors' arrival some decades after this, and it does seem to have been from the 430s onwards that the immigrants arrived in large numbers. Before considering this remarkable process, it must be asked who the invaders were and what they were like. The first question is answered, almost as well as any modern scholar can answer it, in a startlingly well-informed passage which Bede composed from unknown sources:

They came from three very powerful Germanic tribes, the Saxons, Angles and Jutes. The people of Kent and the inhabitants of the Isle of Wight are of Jutish origin, and also those opposite the Isle of Wight, that part of the kingdom of Wessex which is still today called the nation of the Jutes. From the Saxon country, that is, the district now known as Old Saxony, came the East Saxons, the South Saxons and the West Saxons. Besides this, from the country of the Angles, that is, the land between the kingdoms of the Jutes and the Saxons, which is called Angulus, came the East Angles, the Middle Angles, the Mercians, and all the Northumbrian race (that is those people who dwell north of the River Humber) as well as the other Anglian tribes. Angulus is said to have remained deserted from that day to this.

In broad terms, archaeology confirms Bede's analysis: objects found in English graves are comparable to those from North Germany and the southern half of the Danish peninsula. Some urns from the fifth-century cremation cemeteries in East Anglia may even be the work of the same potters as urns found in Saxony. A district north-east of Schleswig is called to this day Angeln. To Bede's list we can probably add Frisians, mixed with Saxons who seem to have been infiltrating the coastal settlements of Frisia in the early fifth century. Even Bede's statement that some of the homeland settlements were deserted is confirmed by excavations at Feddersen Wierde, near the mouth of the Weser. Here a village of large timber buildings was abandoned in



c.450, apparently in consequence of rising sea-levels. With the natural fertility of lowland Britain, and the evidence that its inhabitants deliberately imported mercenaries, this flooding of coastal settlements suggests a specific context for the migrations to England, though they also have a much broader context in the movements of many barbarian peoples into and across the provinces of the empire.

## A Multi-Ethnic Community

Bede's division of the English into ethnically distinct groups is over-neat. The labels which kingdoms and regions later attached to themselves by c.600 – 'Angles', 'Saxons', 'Jutes', and so on – probably indicate the origins of their leaders and elite groups. But archaeology does not suggest that the bulk populations were so clearly differentiated, and by the late sixth century, when the kingdoms emerge into the light of day, there is much blurring at the edges. Thus, the finest metalwork of the East Angles resembles that of Kent, and their royal dynasty seems to have been Swedish. The settlers probably came in small, disparate groups; sea-passage must have weakened ethnic ties, and new types of settlement and social organization developed to suit the needs of pioneer colonists. The precise origins of the settlers mattered less than that they belonged to the same broad culture as southern Scandinavia, Germany, and northern France. Their earliest known poems include hero-legends set in Denmark and Frisia; an early seventh-century East Anglian king possessed Swedish and Gaulish treasures; and the south-eastern English became Christian through a Kentish king's marriage with a Frankish princess.

Here then was a new sort of 'international' community, poised between the Roman and non-Roman worlds. In time the former would reassert its influence, but the earliest Anglo-Saxon generations were essentially a product of the latter. Unlike most of the other 'barbarian' invaders of Europe, the English came from right outside the circle of Roman