

The Anglo-Saxons

449–1066

The Saxon Infantry (in chain mail, visor helmets, and shields) holds off the Norman attack. Detail from the Bayeux Tapestry (11th century).

The Anglo-Saxons

by David Adams Leeming

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

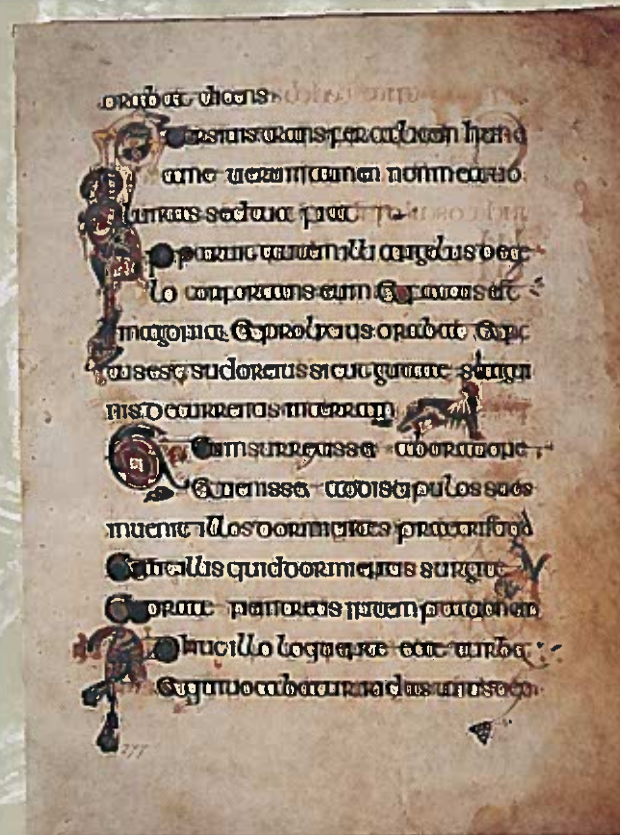
—J. R. Lander



Aerial view of Stonehenge (built c. 1800–1400 B.C.), located near Salisbury, England.

2 THE ANGLO-SAXONS

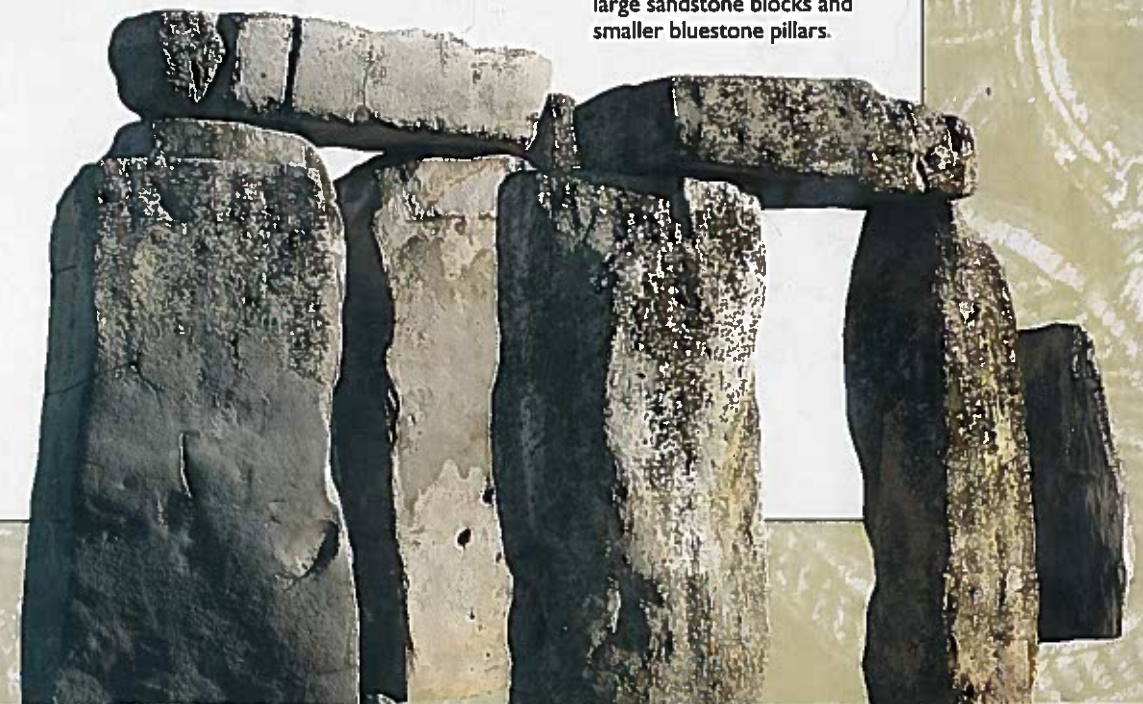
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Page from the Book of Kells (8th century).

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.

Stonehenge, consisting of large sandstone blocks and smaller bluestone pillars.



The Board of Trinity College, Dublin. Photograph by The Green Studio Ltd, Dublin.

The Anglo-Saxons, 449–1066

LITERARY EVENTS

Roman poet Virgil born, 70 B.C.

Alexandria is center of Greek learning; library begun under Ptolemy, 307 B.C.

Throughout Europe, scrolls begin to be replaced by vellum books, c. 360

Roman poet Ovid writes *Metamorphoses*, c. 5



• King Arthur in battle. From a French manuscript.

In China, books printed using carved wooden blocks and ink, 500s

• Detail from the Book of Kells (8th century). The Board of Trinity College, Dublin. Photograph by The Green Studio Ltd, Dublin.



Hymns produced by Caedmon, the earliest English Christian poet, c. 670

At Alexandria, Arabs discover the famous library with 300,000 papyrus scrolls, 640

Lyric poetry of the T'ang period promotes everyday use of Chinese language, 600s

Monks begin the Book of Kells, an illuminated manuscript of Latin Gospels, 760

Compilation of *Manyōshū* ("Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves"), Japanese anthology of about 4,500 poems, c. 759

The Venerable Bede, an English cleric, writes the *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 730

Beowulf first recorded, c. 700



• Crown of the Holy Roman Empire (10th century, with later additions).

Anglo-Saxon Chronicle begun, 891

Composition of the Poetic Edda, a famous cycle of Norse mythological poems, c. 850

Japanese court attendant Sei Shōnagon writes diary, *The Pillow Book*, c. 1000

In Japan, Lady Murasaki Shikibu writes the world's first novel, *The Tale of Genji*, c. 1000

The Exeter Book, a collection of English poetry, first copied, c. 975

Beginnings of the Arabian tales, *The Thousand and One Nights*, 900

307–1 B.C.

A.D. 1–399

400–499

500–599

600–699

700–799

800–899

900–1066

Celts called "Brythons" live in Britain, 300s B.C.

Julius Caesar invades Britain, 55 B.C.

Cleopatra VII becomes last queen of Egypt, 51 B.C.



Londinium (present-day London) founded by Romans as a supply port, c. 50

Queen Boadicea leads her eastern British tribe in an uprising against the Romans, 61

Christianity proclaimed lawful religion in the Roman Empire, c. 313

• Roman helmet. © British Museum, London.

Roman legions withdraw from Britain, 409

Patrick brings Christianity to Ireland, 432

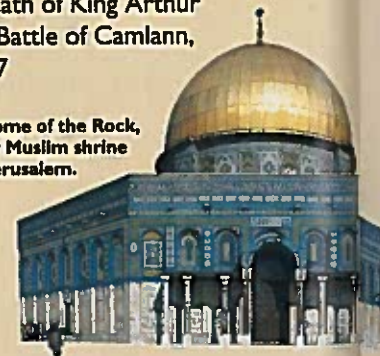
Angles, Saxons, and Jutes invade Britain, c. 449

Roman Empire falls to Germanic tribes, 476

Semilegendary King Arthur rules Celtic tribe, c. 516

Death of King Arthur at Battle of Camlann, 537

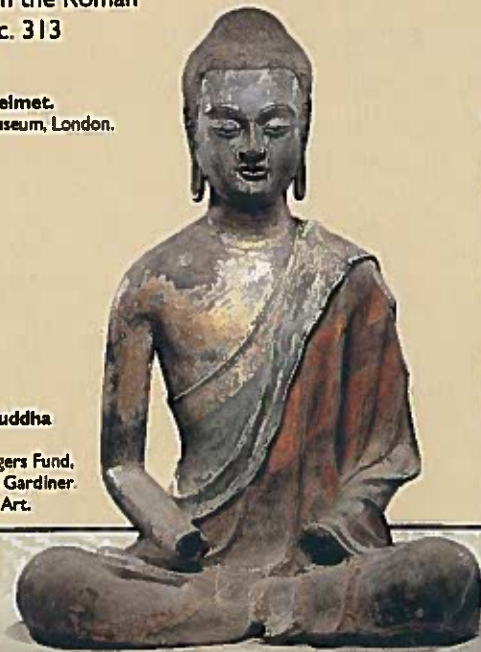
• Dome of the Rock, holy Muslim shrine in Jerusalem.



Widespread plague reaches Britain from Europe, 547

Buddhism introduced to Japan, 552

Saint Augustine converts Anglo-Saxon King Ethelbert and establishes monastery at Canterbury, 597



• Chinese sculpture of a seated Buddha (c. 650) from the T'ang dynasty. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1919. (19.186). Photograph by Lynton Gardiner. © 1989 The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Paulinus is first Roman missionary to arrive in northern England, 601

Golden Age of T'ang dynasty begins in China, 618

Mohammed (b. 570), founder of Islam, begins to dictate the *Koran*, c. 625

Egyptian caliphs introduce the first organized news and postal service, 650

Synod of Whitby unites British Christian Church with Roman Church, 664



• Mayan figure holding tortillas.

Moors invade Spain, 711

Pueblo period begins in southwestern North America, c. 750

Vikings invade Britain, beginning a century of invasions, 793



• Danes attacking an East Anglian town.

In France, Charlemagne crowned emperor of the West by Pope Leo III, 800

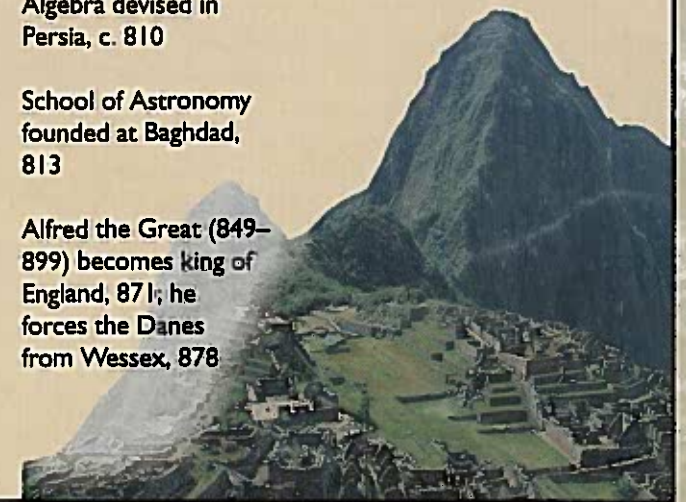
Decline of great Mayan civilization in Central America, c. 800

Incas build fortress-city of Machu Picchu in Peru, c. 800

Algebra devised in Persia, c. 810

School of Astronomy founded at Baghdad, 813

Alfred the Great (849–899) becomes king of England, 871; he forces the Danes from Wessex, 878



• Machu Picchu, Peru, lost city of the Incas.

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.



A monk's cell (7th or 8th century) on Skellig Michael, off the coast of Kerry, Ireland.

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 (page 169) 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 (page 978) 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 page 18), although it is the Anglo-Saxon myths that we tend to

All the Britons dye their bodies with woad, which produces a blue color, and this gives them a more terrifying appearance in battle. They wear their hair long, and shave the whole of their bodies except the head and the upper lip.

—Julius Caesar

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 (kân'ôt) 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.

Boadicea, queen of a Briton tribe, was flogged by the Romans after they had plundered her dead husband's property. She led the Britons to a fierce retaliation.

Boadicea's tribe, at once the most powerful and hitherto the most submissive, was moved to frenzy against the Roman invaders. They flew to arms. Boadicea found herself at the head of a numerous army, and nearly all the Britons within reach rallied to her standard. There followed an up-rush of hatred from the abyss, which is a measure of the cruelty of the conquest. It was a scream of rage against invincible oppression. . . . Her monument on the Thames Embankment opposite Big Ben reminds us of the harsh cry of liberty or death which has echoed down the ages.

—Winston S. Churchill

Hadrian's Wall, the seventy-three-mile defensive barrier built by the emperor Hadrian in about A.D. 122.

A picture stone (8th century) from Gotland showing a Viking ship under sail.

Statens Historiska Museer, Stockholm.



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.

Gold and enamel jewel (9th century) thought to have belonged to King Alfred. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.



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 also 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.

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.



The coronation of King Harold, from the Bayeux Tapestry (11th century).

Musée de la Tapisserie Bayeux.

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.

Silver figurine (c. 9th–11th century) of Viking woman, from Grödinge, Södermanland, Sweden. Statens Historiska Museer, Stockholm.



Silver dish from the Sutton Hoo burial treasure (7th century).

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

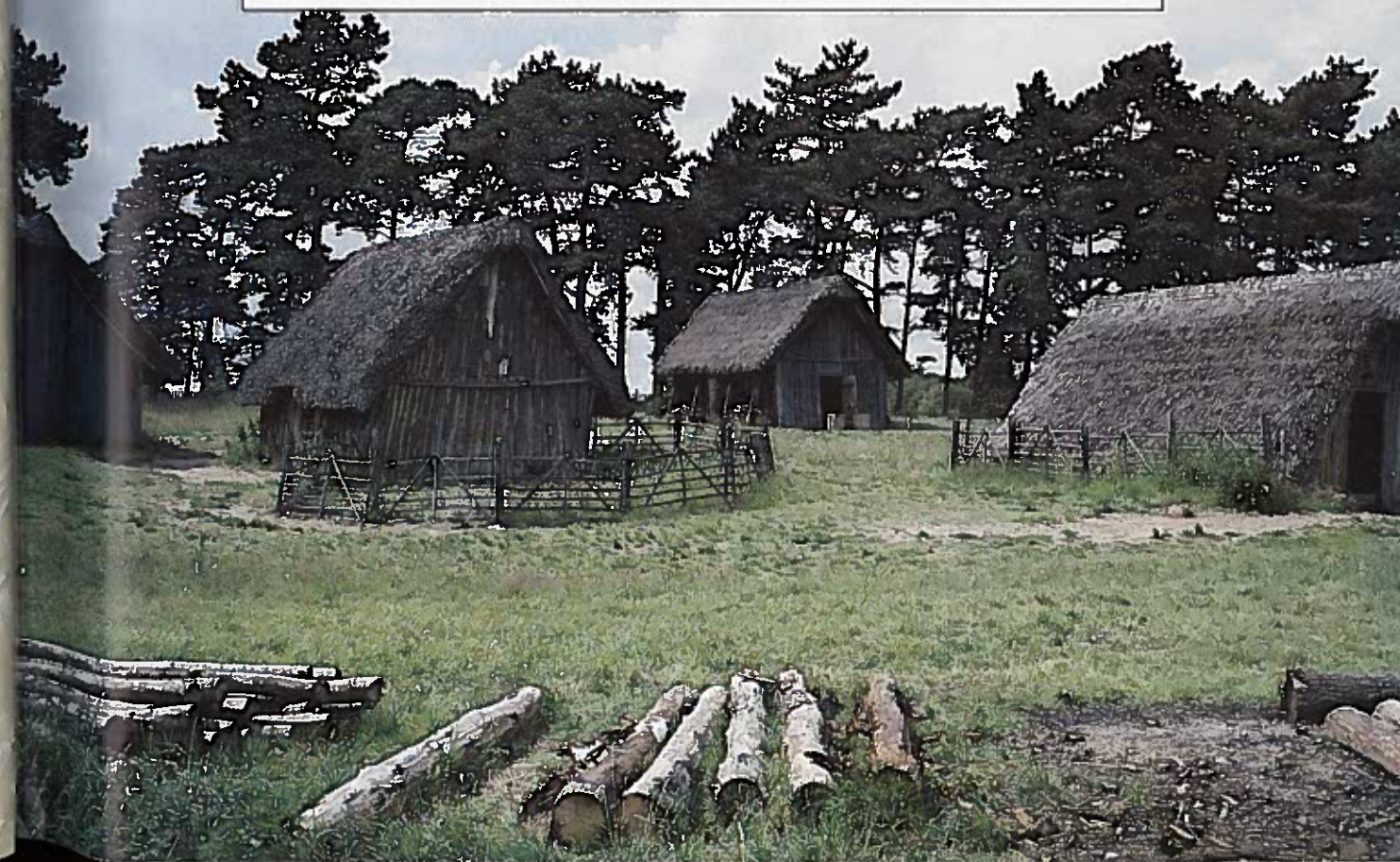
In 1939, in Sutton Hoo in Suffolk, England, archaeologists discovered a treasure that had been under the earth for thirteen hundred years. This enormous ship-grave contained the imprint of a huge wooden ship and a vast treasure trove—all of which had been buried with a great king or noble warrior. There 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.

Reconstructed Anglo-Saxon village in West Stow, Suffolk, England. The communal hall is at the right.



A pendant depicting Thor's hammer.



National Museum, Reykjavik.

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.

Coifi, the Anglo-Saxon chief priest, advises King Edwin to give up the old gods and accept the new religion of Christianity. Here is his argument.

Your Majesty, when we compare the present life of man on earth with that time of which we have no knowledge, it seems to me like the swift flight of a single sparrow through the banqueting hall where you are sitting at dinner on a winter's day with your thanes and counselors. In the midst there is a comforting fire to warm the hall; outside, the storms of winter rain or snow are raging. This sparrow flies swiftly in through one door of the hall, and out through another. While he is inside, he is safe from the winter storms; but after a few moments of comfort, he vanishes from sight into the wintry world from which he came. Even so, man appears on earth for a little while; but of what went before this life or of what follows, we know nothing. Therefore, if this new teaching has brought any more certain knowledge, it seems only right that we should follow it.

—The Venerable Bede, quoting Coifi in *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*

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.



Three standing figures (Odin, Thor, and Freyr) in tunics, from a Viking tapestry (12th century).

Svenska Historiska Museet, Stockholm.

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 *scops*) as inferior to warriors. To the Anglo-Saxons, creating poetry was as important as fighting, hunting, farming, or loving.



A knight, from a chess set carved from walrus ivory (12th century). British Museum, London.

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" (page 56), 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 modern Argentine writer imagines the last Anglo-Saxon:

In a stable which is almost in the shadow of the new stone church, a man with gray eyes and gray beard, lying amidst the odor of the animals, humbly seeks death as one would seek sleep. The day, faithful to vast and secret laws, is shifting and confusing the shadows inside the poor shelter; outside are the plowed fields and a ditch clogged with dead leaves and the tracks of a wolf in the black mud where the forests begin. The man sleeps and dreams, forgotten. He is awakened by the bells tolling the Angelus. In the kingdoms of England the ringing of bells is now one of the customs of the evening, but this man, as a child, has seen the face of Woden, the divine horror and exultation, the crude wooden idol hung with Roman coins and heavy clothing, the sacrificing of horses, dogs, and prisoners. Before dawn he will die and with him will die, and never return, the immediate images of these pagan rites; the world will be a little poorer when this Saxon has died. . . .

—Jorge Luis Borges,
translated by James E. Irby

Opening of St. Matthew's Gospel, from the Lindisfarne Gospels (7th century). Note the scribe's comments in the margins.



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.

Here and there in the surviving manuscripts . . . we find the bored scribbles of the Irish scribes, who kept themselves awake by writing out a verse or two of a beloved Irish lyric—and so, by accumulation, left for our enjoyment a whole literature that would otherwise be unknown. . . . For the most part they enjoy their work and find themselves engrossed in the stories they are copying. Beneath a description of the death of Hector on the Plain of Troy, one scribe, completely absorbed in the words he is copying, has written most sincerely: "I am greatly grieved at the above mentioned death." Another, measuring the endurance of his beloved art against his own brief life span, concludes: "Sad it is, little parti-colored white book, for a day will surely come when someone will say over your page: 'The hand that wrote this is no more.'"

—Thomas Cahill

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.

from *Beowulf*
from *Gilgamesh*
"The Seafarer"

And sometimes a proud old soldier
Who had heard songs of the ancient heroes
And could sing them all through, story after story,
Would weave a net of words for Beowulf's
Victory, tying the knot of his verses
Smoothly, swiftly, into place with a poet's
Quick skill, singing his new song aloud
While he shaped it, and the old songs as well.

—from *Beowulf*, translated by Burton Raffel