

**ANGLO-SAXON BRITAIN  
(410-1066): AN  
OVERVIEW**



# ANGLO-SAXON BRITAIN (410-1066): AN OVERVIEW

## Description

Through an in-depth analysis of various primary and secondary sources students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain the Anglo-Saxon period in English history, including why the “invaders” or “settlers” (depending on perspective) came to the former Roman province of Britannia, how the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms functioned politically and culturally during the time they were in control of the island, why the Normans were able to conquer Britain in 1066, and finally how Anglo-Saxon culture influenced (and continues to influence) modern British culture today.

## Subjects

World History  
European History  
English Literature

## Grade Level

11-12

## Duration

90 minutes

## Tour Links

- British Library
- British Museum, London
- Ashmolean Museum, Oxford

## Essential Questions

- Who were the Anglo-Saxons?
- Why did the Anglo-Saxons invade Britain in the 5th century CE?
- How did the Anglo-Saxons change Britain during their reign (410-1066 CE)?

# Academic Summary

## Primary Source

### **Nennius, excerpts from *Historia Brittonum* (The History of the Britons), 8th century CE**

. . . Vortigern [Guorthigirinus] then reigned in Britain. In his time, the natives had cause of dread, not only from the inroads of the Scots and Picts, but also from the Romans, and their apprehensions of Ambrosius.

In the meantime, three vessels, exiled from Germany, arrived in Britain. They were commanded by Horsa and Hengist, brothers, and sons of Wihtgils. Wihtgils was the son of Witta; Witta of Wecta; Wecta of Woden; Woden of Frithowald, Frithowald of Frithuwulf; Frithuwulf of Finn; Finn of Godwulf; Godwulf of Geat, who, as they say, was the son of a god, not of the omnipotent God and our Lord Jesus Christ (who before the beginning of the world, was with the Father and the Holy Spirit, co-eternal and of the same substance, and who, in compassion to human nature, disdained not to assume the form of a servant), but the offspring of one of their idols, and whom, blinded by some demon, they worshipped according to the custom of the heathen. Vortigern received them as friends, and delivered up to them the island which is in their language called Thanet, and, by the Britons, Ruym. Gratianus Æquantius at that time reigned in Rome. the Saxons were received by Vortigern, four hundred and forty-seven years after the passion of Christ, and, according to the tradition of our ancestors, from the period of their first arrival in Britain, to the first year of the reign of king Edmund, five hundred and forty-two years; and to that in which we now write, which is the fifth of his reign, five hundred and forty-seven years.

... And now the Saxon chief prepared an entertainment, to which he invited the king, his officers, and Ceretic, his interpreter, having previously enjoined his daughter to serve them so profusely with wine and ale, that they might soon become intoxicated. This plan succeeded; and Vortigern, at the instigation of the devil, and enamored with the beauty of the damsel, demanded her, through the medium of his interpreter, of the father, promising to give for her whatever he should ask. Then Hengist, who had already consulted with the elders who attended him of the Oghgul race, demanded for his daughter the province, called in English, Centland, in British, Ceint, and (Kent.) This cession was made without the knowledge of the king, Guoyrancgonus, who then reigned in Kent, and who experienced no inconsiderable share of grief, from seeing his kingdom thus clandestinely, fraudulently, and imprudently resigned to foreigners. Thus the maid was delivered up to the king, who slept with her, and loved her exceedingly.

... Hengist, under pretense of ratifying the treaty, prepared an entertainment, to which he invited the king, the nobles, and military officers, in number about three hundred; speciously concealing his wicked intention, he ordered three hundred Saxons to conceal each a knife under his feet, and to mix with the Britons; "and when," said he, "they are sufficiently inebriated, &c. cry out, 'Nimed eure Saxes,' then let each draw his knife, and kill his man; but spare the king, on account of his marriage with my daughter, for it is better that he should be ransomed than killed."

The king with his company, appeared at the feast; and mixing with the Saxons, who, whilst they spoke peace with their tongues, cherished treachery in their hearts, each man was placed next his enemy. After they had eaten and drunk, and were much intoxicated, Hengist suddenly vociferated, "Nimed eure Saxes!" and instantly his adherents drew their knives, and rushing upon the Britons, each slew him that sat next to him, and there was slain three hundred of the nobles of Vortigern. The king being a captive, purchased his redemption, by delivering up the three provinces of East, South, and Middle Sex, besides other districts at the option of his betrayers.

... At that time, the Saxons grew strong by virtue of their large number and increased in power in Britain. Hengist having died, however, his son Oetha crossed from the northern part of Britain to the kingdom of Kent and from him are descended the kings of Kent. Then Arthur along with the kings of Britain fought against them in those days, but Arthur himself was the military commander ["dux bellorum"]. His first battle was at the mouth of the river which is called Glein. His second, third, fourth, and fifth battles were above another river which is called Dubglas and is in the region of Linnuis. The sixth battle was above the river which is called Bassas. The seventh battle was in the forest of Celidon that is Cat Coit Celidon. The eighth battle was at the fortress of Guinnion, in which Arthur carried the image of holy Mary ever virgin on his shoulders; and the pagans were put to flight on that day. And through the power of our Lord Jesus Christ and through the power of the Blessed Virgin Mary his mother there was great slaughter among them. The ninth battle was waged in the City of the Legion. The tenth battle was waged on the banks of a river which is called Tribruit. The eleventh battle was fought on the mountain which is called Agnet. The twelfth battle was on Mount Badon in which there fell in one day 960 men from one charge by Arthur; and no one struck them down except Arthur himself, and in all the wars he emerged as victor. And while they were being defeated in all the battles, they were seeking assistance from Germany and their numbers were being augmented many times over without interruption. And they brought over kings from Germany that they might reign over them in Britain, right down to the time in which Ida reigned, who was son of Eobba.

## **Secondary Summary**

On Saturday, 14 October 1066, at the Battle of Hastings, William II, Duke of Normandy, after crossing the English Channel in a fleet of over 750 ships, led an estimated force of over 10,000 knights and men onto the field to face Harold II, King of Anglo-Saxon Britain and his army of 8000 men. Contemporary accounts say that the battle raged back and forth all day. It ended only after Harold's death late in the afternoon, when the king's army collapsed and ran in disarray. Exact casualty figures will never be known, but it is safe to assume that at least 33% of the knights and men from both sides who took the field that day never left it.

William II, of course, became known as William the Conqueror. After the Battle of Hastings, he proceeded to set up a new government in London and was crowned King of England in Westminster Abbey on Christmas Day, 25 Dec 1066. Resistance to his rule continued for several years, but William's victory at the Battle of Hastings marked the beginning of Norman rule in England, and the end of Anglo-Saxon rule.

Centuries later, Winston Churchill, Prime Minister of the government originally set up after that fateful battle in 1066, is reported to have said that history was "written by the victors." He was certainly right about the history of the Anglo-Saxons. After William's

victory, later writers, leery of crossing their Norman kings, wrote that the Anglo-Saxons had violently “invaded” Britannia in the 5th century after Rome left, setting up a brutish, cold, harsh, pagan society in what had been a God-fearing, civilized society under Roman rule. It was only after the Anglo-Saxons accepted Christianity and paid allegiance to God (and to Rome) that they began to develop a civilization worthy of the Britons. Over the centuries, English monarchs, many of whom still controlled territory in Normandy, saw themselves as descended from a line of Christian kings who had restored the true elements of civilization back to Britain. After all, William himself even ordered an abbey to be built at Hastings as penance for the battle (he also ordered construction of the Tower of London as a symbol of his power).

The problem with histories is that they are sometimes wrong. Although the Anglo-Saxon period in English history has fewer sources than others, scholarship over the last few centuries has been able to piece together what Britain was really like during the Dark Ages. Amazingly enough, looking back, it seems very different than many of the later histories tell.

First, Anglo-Saxon England: the basic facts.

The Angles and Saxons were two “tribes” from the northern reaches of the Germanic lands and/or southern Denmark (there is evidence to support claims from both areas) who came to the old Roman province of Britannia sometime during the 5th century, after Roman emperors had abandoned the province in 410 in a vain attempt to save other parts of the Western Empire. Whether the Angles and Saxons were “invited” to settle or they invaded the island is a matter of conjecture, but by the 6th century, five Saxon kingdoms stretched across what is now modern-day England. The original inhabitants of the island (Celts and Picts), some of whom had lived under Roman rule for centuries, either migrated into the wilds of Wales or Scotland or they simply continued to go on living among their new Anglo-Saxon neighbors. After an intense effort to Christianize the heathens by both Celtic Christians from the west and from Roman Christians coming from the continent, Ethelbert of Kent was baptized as the first Christian Anglo-Saxon king in 601 CE. After his death in 616, the kingdom slipped back into paganism for a few decades, but Christianity eventually won out by the end of the 7th century. By 700 CE, Christianity in Anglo-Saxon England was so strong that missionaries traveled to the continent and participated in Christianizing the Frankish kingdom.

Anglo-Saxon England during this period didn’t really exist, but instead was series of separate kingdoms that at times warred with each other, at times fought off Viking invasions, sometimes enjoyed prosperity, and sometimes feared both the present and the future. In essence, Anglo-Saxons in England were much like the rest of European population during the Dark Ages: fearing the cruel world of today, urgently praying for God’s justice in paradise tomorrow and desperately hoping that the Church had the roadmap and the answers people needed to get there.

Second, Anglo-Saxon England: glimpses of culture.

The Angles and Saxons brought with them notions of religion, philosophy and culture from the Germanic lands. Pagan beliefs died out after the adoption of Christianity, but other elements of Anglo-Saxon culture survived to influence modern Britain. The most obvious one is the English Language. Old English, the language of 5th century Anglo-Saxons, was a northern Germanic dialect. Modified and transformed over the centuries, picking up bits and pieces of Latin along the way, the English language nonetheless retains its German roots. Anglo-Saxon art and architecture, too, is similar to that found on the continent, especially in the illuminated manuscripts produced by monks and abbots throughout the period. Anglo-Saxon literature, dominated by hero stories such as those found in Beowulf, continues to be studied into the present day (much to the consternation of many 11th and 12th grade American students).

Unlike the Roman exodus in the 5th century, after 1066 the Anglo-Saxons didn't pack up and leave. Instead, late medieval Norman England became an amalgamation of cultures that made, and continues to make, the island unique. English culture today still carries its Celtic, Roman, Anglo-Saxon and Norman roots, and understanding how those cultures came together is key to understanding British (and thus American) culture. Even the modern British based legal systems found around the globe draw inspiration from the mixing of civil law (from the Romans and Anglo-Saxons) and common law (introduced by the Normans).

Through an in-depth analysis of various primary and secondary sources students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain the Anglo-Saxon period in English history, including why the "invaders" or "settlers" (depending on perspective) came to the former Roman province of Britannia, how the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms functioned politically and culturally during the time they were in control of the island, why the Normans were able to conquer Britain in 1066, and finally how Anglo-Saxon culture influenced (and continues to influence) modern British culture today.

## Objectives

1. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain how and why the Anglo-Saxons were able to "invade" or "settle in" (depending on the perspective) the former Roman province of Britannia starting in the early 5th century after the Romans pulled out.
2. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain the development of Anglo-Saxon culture and how those traditions continue to influence British culture today.
3. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain why the Normans were able to conquer Anglo-Saxon Britain in 1066 and what happened to the Anglo-Saxons in the wake of the Norman invasion.

# Procedures

## I. Anticipatory Set

- Writing / Question: Why did the Roman government pull its legions out of Britain (and other frontier provinces) in the 5th century CE? (5 min)
- Handouts – Copies of the primary sources and readings from the websites listed. (5 min)

## II. Body of Lesson

- Lecture / PPT – Brief overview of Anglo-Saxon England. (20 min)
- Video – Anglo Saxons in Britain (20 min)
- Independent Activity – Students read the primary sources and articles on the Anglo-Saxon period in British history, taking notes as appropriate. (20 min)
- Suggestion: Have the students read some of these articles for homework to prepare for class discussion.
- Suggestion: Break students into groups and assign different articles/photographs to each group.
- Group Activity – Socratic Discussion: The Anglo-Saxon period in English history, including why the “invaders” or “settlers” (depending on perspective) came to the former Roman province of Britannia, how the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms functioned politically and culturally during the time they were in control of the island, why the Normans were able to conquer Britain in 1066, and finally how Anglo-Saxon culture influenced (and continues to influence) modern British culture today (20 min)

## III. Closure

- Assessment – Essay / DBQ: Explain in detail the Anglo-Saxon period in English history, including why the “invaders” or “settlers” (depending on perspective) came to the former Roman province of Britannia, how the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms functioned politically and culturally during the time they were in control of the island, why the Normans were able to conquer Britain in 1066, and finally how Anglo-Saxon culture influenced (and continues to influence) modern British culture today.

## Extension

### **On tour: British Museum, London**

While on tour in Great Britain, students can visit the British Museum in London, where they can see for themselves many artifacts from the Anglo-Saxon period on display. Archaeological digs all over England over the last 150 years have turned up everything from simple artifacts to armor to a full size ship, and many of these finds ended up in the British museum.

### **On tour: Bede's World in Jarrow, England**

While on tour in Great Britain, students can visit Bede's World in Jarrow (about 25 minutes north of Durham), where they can learn for themselves about the monk called Bede and his place in Anglo-Saxon England. The site has replica buildings from that time period, a museum dedicated to Bede, a science gallery, a working farm (where the students can see the types of food Anglo-Saxons may have eaten), and an herb garden based on 9th century monastery gardens. Bede's World hosts school-age children from across the UK and the world, and can accommodate large groups as well. Special lectures on Saturday highlight various aspects of Bede's Anglo-Saxon world. Admission is very reasonable. Prices can be found on the Bede's World website (listed below in the Links section), and there are special rates for groups of 15 or more.



# Web Links

## Lesson Plan Websites

- [www.fordham.edu/Halsall/source/gildas.asp](http://www.fordham.edu/Halsall/source/gildas.asp)  
Gildas: from Concerning the Ruin of Britain (primary sources) – from the Medieval Internet Sourcebook at Fordham University
- [www.fordham.edu/Halsall/source/nennius.asp](http://www.fordham.edu/Halsall/source/nennius.asp)  
Nennius: The History of the Britons (Historia Brittonum), 8th Century (primary sources) – from the Medieval Internet Sourcebook at Fordham University. Best source on the Arthurian legend from the Anglo-Saxon era.
- [avalon.law.yale.edu/medieval/saxlaw.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/medieval/saxlaw.asp)  
Anglo-Saxon Law – Extracts from Early Laws of the English (primary source). From the Avalon Project: Documents in Law, History and Diplomacy at Yale University.
- [www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/anglo\\_saxons/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/anglo_saxons/)  
Anglo-Saxons (website) – from the BBC
- [www.history.org.uk/resources/primary\\_resource\\_3865\\_132.html](http://www.history.org.uk/resources/primary_resource_3865_132.html)  
Anglo-Saxons: A brief history (website) – from the Historical Association (UK). Good overview of Anglo-Saxon history.
- [www.wmich.edu/medieval/resources/IOE/genintro.html](http://www.wmich.edu/medieval/resources/IOE/genintro.html)  
The Anglo-Saxons and their Language (website) – Western Michigan University. Explores the works of Bede with the development of English.
- [www.britishmuseum.org/explore/cultures/europe/anglo-saxon\\_england.aspx](http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/cultures/europe/anglo-saxon_england.aspx)  
Anglo-Saxon England (website) – from the British Museum
- [faculty.history.wisc.edu/sommerville/123/123%205%20Anglo%20Saxons%20I.htm](http://faculty.history.wisc.edu/sommerville/123/123%205%20Anglo%20Saxons%20I.htm)  
Anglo-Saxon England (website) – from JP Sommerville, Professor of History, University of Wisconsin-Madison
- [anglosaxondiscovery.ashmolean.org/index.html](http://anglosaxondiscovery.ashmolean.org/index.html)  
Anglo-Saxon Discovery (website) – from the Ashmolean Museum (UK). Website is built around primary/middle school grades in England, but is very useful for students, especially those struggling with the basic facts of the Anglo-Saxon period.
- [www.tha-engliscan-gesithas.org.uk/](http://www.tha-engliscan-gesithas.org.uk/)  
The English Companions: A Society for all those interested in the history and culture of Anglo-Saxon England (website). Great resource for advanced/AP students who want to know more about Anglo-Saxon culture and how it influenced modern British culture.
- [www.history.org.uk/resources/primary\\_resource\\_3865\\_132.html](http://www.history.org.uk/resources/primary_resource_3865_132.html)  
Anglo-Saxons: A Brief History (website) – from the Historical Association (UK)
- [www.catawbaschools.net/schools/MaidenHigh/staff/LeeAnn\\_Perry/English\\_IV\\_Handouts/Beowulf\\_Unit\\_Handouts/Anglo-Saxon\\_Period\\_09.ppt](http://www.catawbaschools.net/schools/MaidenHigh/staff/LeeAnn_Perry/English_IV_Handouts/Beowulf_Unit_Handouts/Anglo-Saxon_Period_09.ppt)  
The Anglo-Saxon Period 449-1066 (PowerPoint) – from Lee Ann Reynolds, Maiden High School, Maiden, NC
- [www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1](http://www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1)  
Reading Like a Historian: Primary Source Documents (video) – great 2-minute video on how to incorporate primary sources into the Common Core and history classes. From Shilpa Duvoor of Summit Preparatory Charter High School in Redwood City, CA. Highly recommended for teachers.
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=VIqleCLH3kA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VIqleCLH3kA)  
The Anglo-Saxon Period (video) – video of a 20 min lecture from the English Department at Coronado HS
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=2EAwokOFjvA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2EAwokOFjvA)

History of Britain: the Anglo-Saxon Invasion (video) – BBC Documentary. Very well done and highly recommended for all students studying the Anglo-Saxons. At 50 minutes long, the video may be too long for many classes, but it is well worth it.

## **Background Information**

- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anglo-Saxons](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anglo-Saxons)  
Anglo-Saxons – Wikipedia article
- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anglo-Saxon\\_settlement\\_of\\_Britain](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anglo-Saxon_settlement_of_Britain)  
Anglo-Saxon settlement of Britain – Wikipedia article
- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anglo-Saxon\\_England](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anglo-Saxon_England)  
Anglo-Saxon England – Wikipedia article
- [passports.com/group\\_leaders/on\\_the\\_road/the\\_united\\_kingdom/country\\_profile](https://passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/the_united_kingdom/country_profile)  
On the Road: Britain (country profile) – from Passports Educational Travel

## **Other Relevant Passports Lesson Plans**

- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/england/medieval-britain-anglo-saxons-bede-history](https://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/medieval-britain-anglo-saxons-bede-history)  
Anglo Saxons in Britain – Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the Church and People
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/england/medieval-britain-anglo-saxons-beowulf](https://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/medieval-britain-anglo-saxons-beowulf)  
Anglo Saxons in Britain – Beowulf
- [www.passports.com/lesson-plans/england/norman-invasion-of-1066](https://www.passports.com/lesson-plans/england/norman-invasion-of-1066)  
Medieval England – Norman Invasion of 1066
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/england/medieval-britain-king-arthur](https://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/medieval-britain-king-arthur)  
King Arthur and the Arthurian Legend

## **Key Terms**

- Anglo-Saxon
- Britain
- Britons
- Germanic culture
- Norman
- Old English

