

Anglo-Saxon Period (449-1066)

I. Historical Context

A. Centuries of Invasion

1. Early Britain

- a) Roman general Julius Caesar attempted to conquer British isles
- b) Romans introduced cities, roads, written scholarship, Christianity
- c) Rule lasted more than 300 years
- d) Romanized Britons- urban lifestyle, living in villas, frequenting public baths, depend on Roman military for protection

2. Anglo-Saxons

- a) Along w/other Germanic tribes arrived around A.D. 449
- b) Briton led by Celtic chieftain Arthur (As in King Arthur) fought series of battles against invaders
- c) Britons driven west (Cornwall/Wales), north (Scotland), Brittany (France)
- d) Main part of Britain took new name: Angle-land (England)
- e) Anglo-Saxon culture = basis English culture
- f) Old English language = guttural, vigorous language

3. Vikings

- a) Fearsome group seafaring marauders (Denmark & Norway)
- b) Looted, killed, burned down entire villages
- c) Gained control of north & east of country
- d) Danes, in south, defeated by Alfred the Great (Anglo-Saxon king)
- e) Unified the English; learning & culture flourished

B. Norman Conquest

1. Edward the Confessor

- a) Descendent of Alfred, took throne 1042, deeply religious
- b) No children, made French cousin William, Duke of Normandy, "heir" to the throne

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c) Council of nobles & church officials chose English earl Harold to succeed Edward

2. Norman Conquest

a) Norman army, led by William, had last successful invasion of Britain

b) Harold killed @ Battle of Hastings (1066)

c) Christmas Day 1066, William the Conqueror crowned King of England

II. Cultural Influences

A. *Spread of Christianity*

1. Early Invaders

a) Seafaring wanderers lives bleak, violent, short

b) Pagan religion marked strong belief in “wyrd” (fate)

c) Admiration for heroic warriors fate to prevail in battle

d) Anglo-Saxons once settled became agricultural people (less violent, more secure, more civilized)

e) Christianity = suffering of world prelude to eternal happiness of heaven

2. Christianity Takes Hold

a) A.D. 300, # of Christians significant

b) Next 2 centuries, spread to Ireland & Scotland

c) 597, Roman missionary Augustine, arrived in Kingdom of Kent

d) Augustine established monastery @ Canterbury

e) 690 all of Britain nominally Christian, many held on the pagan traditions & beliefs

3. Monasteries

a) Centers of intellectual, literary, artistic, social activity

b) Offered only opportunity for education

c) Copied (by hand) imported books in Latin, then in Old English

d) *History of the English Church and People* = earliest recorded history of English people (written by Venerable Bede)

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III. Literature of the Times

A. *Epic Tradition*

1. Epic Poems

- a) Praised deeds of heroic warriors
- b) Reflected reality of life at this time (often brutal)
- c) Context not grim in delivery
- d) Brought to life by scop – chant in clear voice and told tales of courage, high drama, tragedy
- e) Anglo-Saxons epics = history lesson, moral sermon, pep talk instilling cultural pride & teach how a true hero should behave
- f) Scop reminded listeners = helpless in hands of fate & all human ambition end in death
- g) Oral art form = memorized & performed

2. Literacy

- a) Spread w/Christianity
- b) *Beowulf* most famous survivor of epics; more than 3,000 lines

B. *Reflections of Common Life*

1. Lyric Poems

- a) Shorter poems reflecting a more everyday reality
- b) Mourn loss & death in the mood of grim fatalism
- c) Express religious faith or offer moral instruction