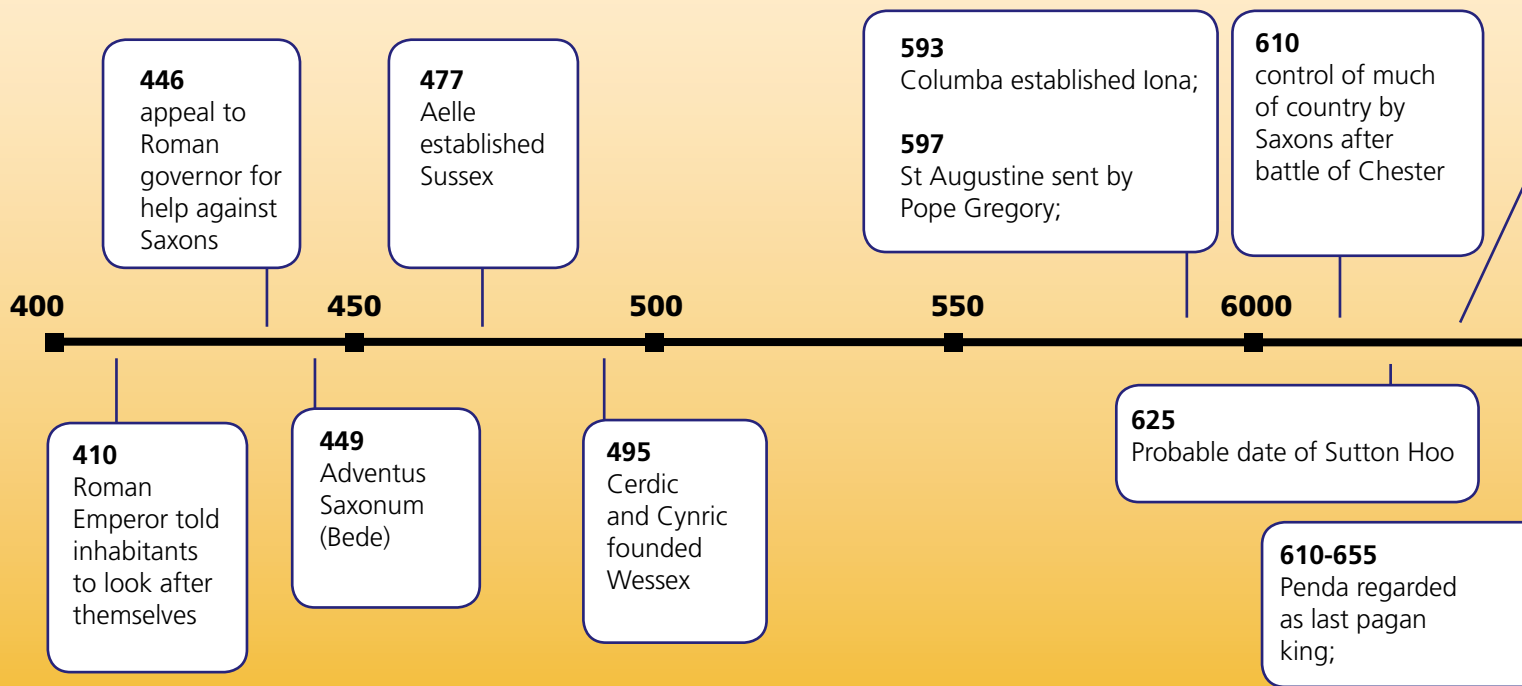


# Anglo-Saxon time-line



## Britain's settlement by Anglo-Saxons and Scots

Tim Lomas

### Briefing

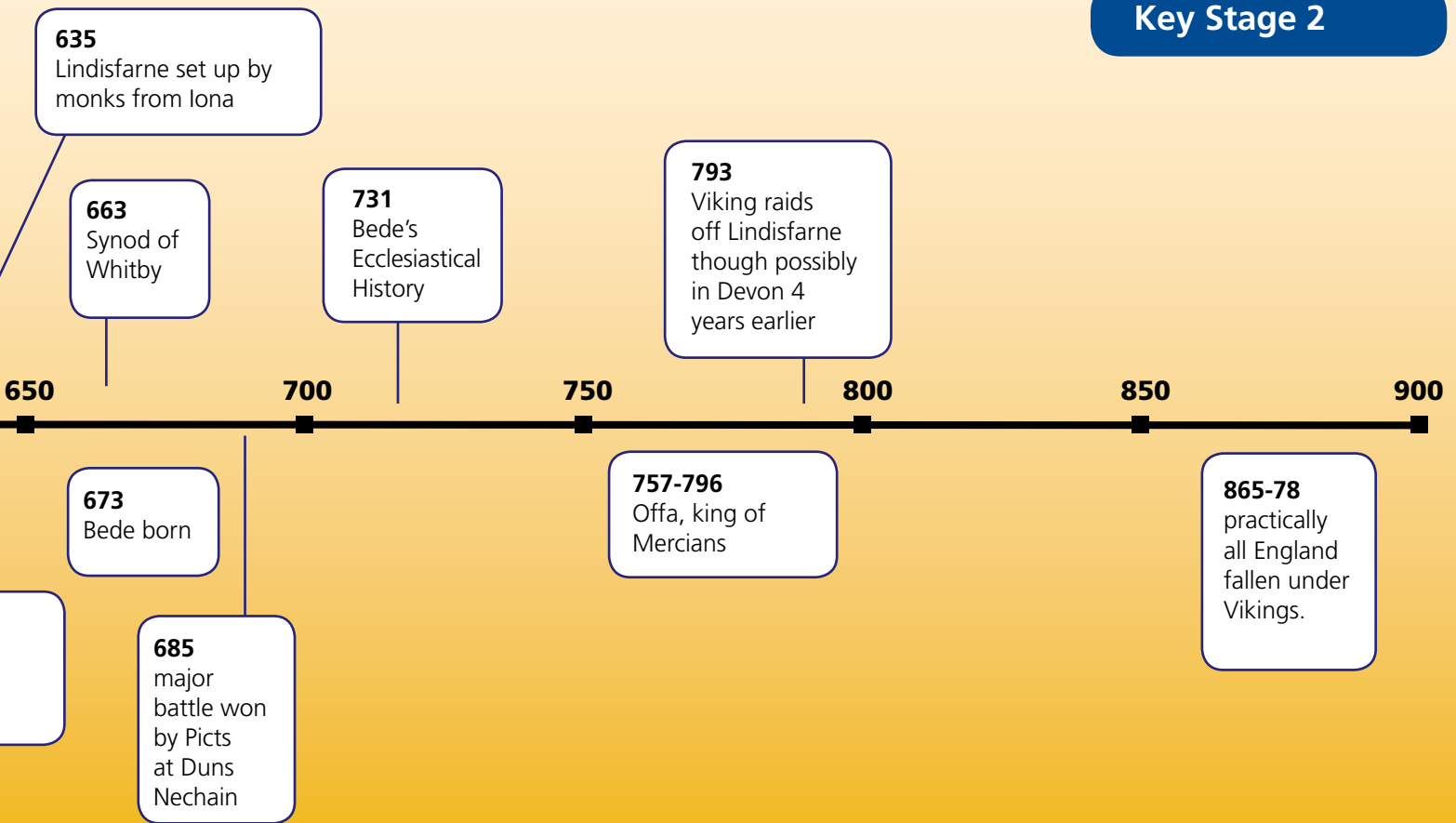
Anglo-Saxons have been a part of the primary national curriculum from the onset so they may not be as unfamiliar to teachers as some themes. Many teachers also report that pupils enjoy studying them so there is clearly much in their favour. That does not mean, however, that all is plain sailing and the listed exemplar content for the new national curriculum contains some content that has not often been taught in schools.

Primary teachers may need to consider a number of issues that may influence the direction the school takes rather than simply make a decision to repeat what has been taught over many years.

For example, will schools want to teach it alongside the Vikings or as a separate unit of work? The Saxon era lasted some 600 years, with much of it overlapping with the Vikings, but they could be taught discretely or together or even alongside the Romans. Second, some of the content can be rather dry and complex such as the details of the establishment of kingdoms and organisation. Teachers may thus be challenged to make this interesting and accessible. A third matter is that our knowledge of the society is changing quite rapidly. The period may still lack a comprehensive account and the 'Dark Ages' might still be appropriate as a title but there has been much new research

even during the era of the English national curriculum – such as the Prittlewell Prince as well as new ideas such as those about the nature of the migration/invasion.

The Historical Association has produced a scheme of work on the Saxons and Vikings for the website (GIVE DETAIL) which is freely available. This article does not repeat that but instead aims to do three things – first to provide a synopsis of some of the key features of the Anglo-Saxons including a time-line; second, to provide some possible enquiries for pupils and third to provide some ideas for resources, websites and places to visit. Elsewhere in this edition, there is a double-



page spread showing some of the sources that can be used to inform us about Anglo-Saxon society.

### Synopsis/key ideas

Although schools may want to avoid teaching these sub-sections, they may well consider that pupils should know something about many of the following:

- Who were the Anglo-Saxons, where did they come from, why did they come, what happened to the people already in Britain?
- How much do we know about them? Is it true that there are huge gaps in what we know about this period of history? Do we know anything about them in the local area?
- How did they fare? What problems did they have in gaining and trying to retain control? How did they get on with their neighbours? Did they face much opposition?
- How successfully did they organise themselves? How did they make sure that their lives ran smoothly?

- What was it like living in Saxon times? What did most people do for a living? How did rich and poor people live? Was life pleasant for women and children? What were the main features of everyday life – their homes, clothes, art, crafts, food, drink and leisure?
- How did their beliefs change? In particular how did they become Christian and how important was this in their lives?
- How did the Saxons change and develop in the 600 years they inhabited Britain? Are there some people who stand out as particularly famous because of what they did?
- Did they leave much of a legacy?

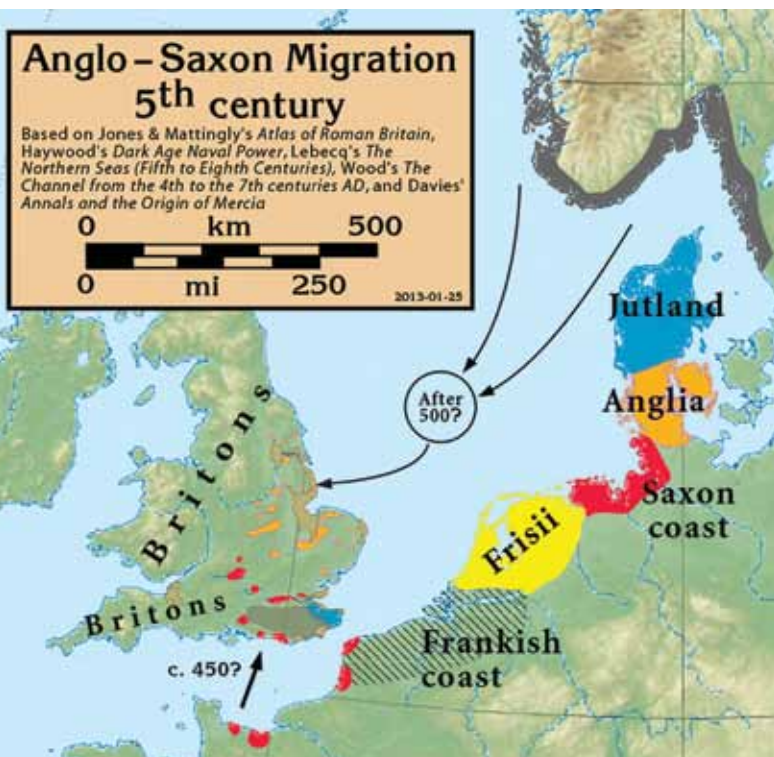
### The factual background

Within these issues raised above, there are certain ideas it may be useful to get across. This section provides some contextual knowledge to assist in answering these questions:

### Who were they and how did they arrive?

The terms 'Saxons' or 'Anglo-Saxons' were often used as a shorthand for all the tribes and groups. They included Jutes, Angles, Frisians (largely modern Holland, south Denmark and western Germany) but also Geats (Gotland), Norwegians, Franks and Wends from Baltic. They did not come to an empty island although there is some uncertainty as to how many came. Some estimate a ratio of 1:4 in relation to native peoples.

There is uncertainty about how they arrived and how violent they were. There were some writers at the time who painted a picture of catastrophe but others have suggested a slower migration. They did not suddenly appear. There was already contact and indeed attacks prior to the departure of the Romans including from the west and by Picts from Scotland as well as by Germanic tribes from the Continent. Some were settled prior to the end of Roman rule. Many do not believe that there



was an invasion in the accepted sense of the word. Roman culture survived in many places. Some have suggested that natural disasters such as flooding in their lands may have encouraged this migration.

Archaeological evidence suggests they settled along rivers. Many settled as farmers in the countryside generally shunning Roman towns but, for a number of places, the abandonment was temporary. London was trading again by the seventh century when St Paul's Cathedral was begun and by the ninth century was very prosperous.

There were many tribal groups but seven kingdoms emerged, often referred to as the Heptarchy – Northumbria, Mercia, East Anglia, Wessex, Essex, Sussex and Kent, but by ninth century, there were four major players – Northumbria, Mercia, East Anglia and Wessex. Not until the tenth century, when Wessex became predominant, did anyone gain any permanent ascendancy. Prior to this, the seventh century saw Northumbrians come as far as the Thames and, in the eighth century, Mercia, especially under Offa (757-96) ruled all lands south of the Humber and east of Offa's Dyke. There were also Picts in Scotland, Celts in Ireland and Dalriada in western Scotland.

During the 600 years that they were prominent, things did not stay the same – population increased, more land was taken up for cultivation, towns and ports grew, trade development and government became more complex.

### How do we know?

The term 'Dark Ages' is not wholly inappropriate. Evidence is indeed patchy especially for the earlier period. Nevertheless, the Anglo-Saxons were not

illiterate. Evidence of this exists in law codes and prayer books/psalters such as the Harley Psalter and the Exeter Book of Riddles. Monks wrote about events in documents such as Nennius's *History of the Britons*. Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* is rich on the period 600-680 especially for Northumbria and Kent. They also compiled very impressive religious tracts such as the Lindisfarne Gospels, a handwritten, hand-painted manuscript containing the core of sacred Christian texts, which was probably created in 715-20. Later is the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, begun in Alfred's reign and added to well into Norman days. The late Saxon period can also draw on Domesday Book which can give details of the Anglo-Saxon economy just prior to the Conquest.

Poems exist in fairly large quantities to give an idea about society and beliefs. Perhaps the most famous is 'Beowulf' described as the single most important piece of poetry in English before Chaucer. Probably describing sixth-century events, it may have been compiled c. 1000 although the dates are disputed. It deals with themes as diverse as feuds, life and death, loyalty, boat burials and the role of women. This is certainly not the only poem. In fact, over 30,000 lines of Old English poetry survive.

Archaeology can fill in many gaps especially the famous treasures such as those discovered at Sutton Hoo (now in the British Museum) and more recent discoveries such as the Prittlewell Prince near Southend or the 2000+ objects of the Staffordshire Hoard. Reconstructions such as West Stow are also invaluable as well as artefacts in museums. Modern forensic techniques have also helped such as DNA and chemical analysis. Even tooth enamel analysis of skulls can be used to indicate where people lived as children.

Many schools are already familiar with the influence of the Anglo-Saxons on language especially as shown in place-names with endings such as -ton (fenced area), -ham (village or home), -wick (dwelling), -worth (homestead), -dene (pasture), -stow (inhabited place) and -bury (fort). It has also been estimated that of the 100 key words making up half of everyday speech, most are Old English.

### How did they live?

The Anglo-Saxons were skilful administrators. They had a well-organised tax system with regulated mints. They were also prolific legislators with law codes. Having said that, there is often a romanticised view of the Saxons. They are too often portrayed as ideal country folk living a tough life with freedoms. In reality they can be said to have operated a caste system with many people condemned through their lives by their status.

Beneath the king and his family were the eoldermen. They dealt with administration and justice. Below

Reconstruction of the settlement at West Stow Anglo-Saxon Village



this were the many thegns who were the backbone of the army but also often having other duties such as repairing bridges and guarding the coast. Ceorls came below them but there were different classes of these (geneats, kotsetlas, gebur). This was also a slave society but these thralls had certain rights and could have their own property and even earn money in their spare time. Many emerged as prisoners although others could sell themselves and their family into slavery such as in times of famine.

There was a huge gulf between rich and poor. There were some astonishingly rich magnates such as Wulfric Spot whose lands stretched from the Midlands to the north-west. It was possible to prosper but usually one needed inherited wealth and favour.

Happiness must have been affected by health. There were many diseases such as leprosy, TB and degenerative arthritis. The average life expectancy was probably only in the 30s and there was high infant mortality.

This could hardly be described as a golden age for children. Many began work very young. Often the age of majority was 10 or 12. Women's status varied. There is evidence of women playing roles in the court, church and even battlefield. There were also well-known examples of prominent women such as Æthelflaed, Abbess Hilda of Whitby who orchestrated the famous Synod and Emma the wife of Æthelred and Canute. Offences against women were penalised heavily. Their 'value' matched that of men and widows could inherit property.

Anglo-Saxon craft and artistic skills have been increasingly acknowledged following discoveries

such as the famous Sutton Hoo treasures and more recently the Staffordshire Hoard. Sutton Hoo seems to date from 620s as a burial place of King Raedwald, of the East Anglians. The helmet is late Roman but the bronze links to East Sweden. The great buckle clearly required complex technology to make. Two silver spoons had Greek work on them and there was also a great silver dish from Byzantium and coins from Gaul all indicating that Saxon England was not divorced from the wider world. Anglo-Saxons used a range of materials including silver, pewter, bronze, iron and leather often made into exquisite jewellery such as brooches, buckles, wrist clasps, clothing pins and beads.



Æthelstan presenting a gospel book to (the long-dead) St Cuthbert (934); Corpus Christi College Cambridge MS 183, fol. 1v



This was no peace loving idyll. War was an enduring feature certainly of the sixth, seventh and eighth centuries. Half of male burials contained weapons. In addition to the violence, life was often harsh. Houses were usually flimsy largely of wood either sunken or timber-framed but varied in size, ranging for example from 10 ft x 11 ft 8 ins (3 m x 3.6 m) at West Stow to 786 ft x 262 ft (235 m x 80 m) at Westminster Hall. Most houses were of one room. The use of stone often began with the church. Furniture for most was very sparse – a chest, shelves, loom, possibly a trestle tables and some stools. Doors often had had latches. Floors were of padded earth or wood. Windows were rare and light came from candles. A central fire was used for heat and cooking although a few houses had a clay bread oven.

Most people worked in farming but some specialisms are referred to in later documents such as bee-keeper, cowherd, swineherd, shepherd, forester and cheese-maker. Cereals often formed the mainstay – barley (for beer), rye and wheat – plus peas, beans and flax. Honey was used for sweetening. Animals kept included sheep, cows, pigs and hens. Other specialisms outside agriculture developed especially with the revival of towns, e.g. bone-workers, bronze-

smiths, glassworkers, carpenters, leatherworkers, weavers, stonemasons, fishermen and sailors.

Besides cereal-based food, Saxons seem to have used version of carrot, parsnips, wild cabbages, onions and leeks. They also had some spices. Fruit included apples, cherries, plums and sloes. Fish included salmon, eel, plaice, cod and shellfish. Meat came from sheep, cows, pigs, goats, hens and some wild birds. Much was cooked in a kind of stew. For many, there was limited meat but this was not a vegetarian society.

There is evidence of a number of sports and pastimes including falconry, feasting, music, dancing, dog- and horse-racing, dice and board games, balls and hoops.

### How did religion change?

Christianity was a dominant feature of later Saxon society as shown by monastic writers such as Nennius, Gildas and Bede but the Anglo-Saxons did not arrive as Christians. Their pagan gods were commemorated in days of the week such as Tuesday (Tiw) and Wednesday (Woden) as well as many Place-names such as Wednesbury.

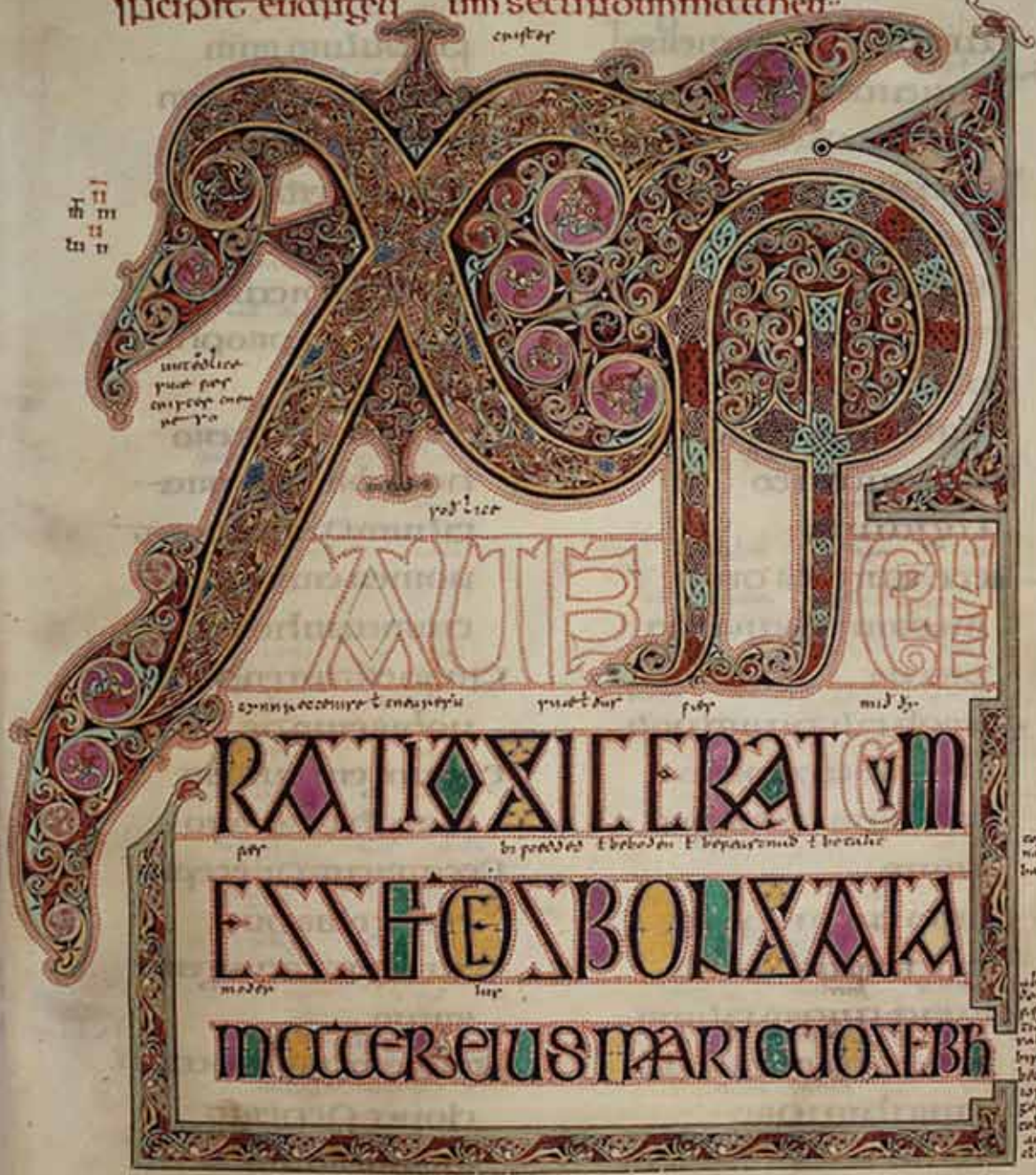
The conversion to Christianity beginning with Pope Gregory's mission to Kent in 597 was a top-down approach – work on the rulers first, then the population would follow. It was not always a straightforward process. Some of those converted worshipped pagan gods and the Christian God simultaneously or returned to paganism. In 627 King Eadwine welcomed Paulinus and was baptised along with his court, but on Eadwine's defeat, the court reverted back to paganism. Penda of Mercia (610-55) is often regarded as the last great pagan ruler. Diocesan sees were established in Canterbury, Rochester, London and York and by 1035 there were 16 dioceses.

The Scottish church was founded by Columba in 563. Iona was the centre of Irish monasticism for four centuries. Lindisfarne was created by monks from there in 635. It was a centre of learning from which emanated the Book of Kells in the late eighth century.

Christianity took two forms in early Saxon society. Celtic Christianity was associated more with grass-roots monasticism and did not recognise the authority of the Pope. They also had a particular affinity with asceticism and nature. The Roman form was more hierarchical and linked closely to the rulers. Their priests had the status of thegns and the bishops of eoldermen. The beliefs collided at the Synod of Whitby in 663 with the Roman form emerging victorious.

Much of our knowledge of early Christianity comes from the writings of the Venerable Bede. Born in 673, he spent his life at Jarrow. His famous "History of the English People and the Coming of Christianity" dates from 731.

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Hic incipit euangeli um secundum mattheum



ii  
iii  
iiii  
v

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apostolice scripturae & evangelii    pua' d' huc    pōr    mid h-

RATIOXILERATION

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apostolice  
nalle' d' huc  
bi pōd' d'

apostolice  
nalle' d' huc  
bi pōd' d'

## Teaching and learning with suggestions for co-ordinators

The information above shows that there is potentially an enormous amount to cover and the teacher's major challenge is to make sense of this to pupils in a manageable format. The format needs to get over some of the key content while also developing the skills and concepts such as change and continuity, similarity and difference, causation, interpretation and significance. Experience suggests that organising the teaching and learning around some valid and worthwhile enquiries helps to achieve this. This is not meant to represent a scheme of work but some examples of worthwhile enquiries.

Examples could include:

### 'Britain at this time only consisted of Saxons who came from Saxony.' Is this true?

#### Why does this make a good question/task?

This can encourage pupils to look at the nature of the people who came, why they came, when they arrived, where they came from and how they affected the people who were already there. They should understand that the Roman period was transplanted but native peoples survived through England and in Scotland and Ireland. They can also investigate why the Saxons came, learning something about problems in their own lands and what Britain had to offer. Pupils might look at maps as one of the sources.

### Do you agree with the person who said that the Saxons were only interested in destroying everything they came across?

PICTURE: Saxon raiding party – Sorrell reconstruction in Colin Shephard and Rosemary Rees, *OCR Medieval History: Raiders and Invaders: power and control* (Hodder Murray) 0 340 92738 0, p.4.

#### Why does this make a good question/task?

Pupils can wrestle with some of the evidence that is conflicting, some saying it was violent with others saying that they settled and intermingled. This might give some grasp of interpretations. Some good imaginative work can be done such as imagining themselves as an invader or as a native.

### Which groups of people might have been happy living in Saxon times and which unhappy?

#### Why does this make a good question/task?

This allows pupils to look at the different groups of

people, e.g. rich and poor, children, kings, ealdermen, thegns, ceorls and slaves looking at aspects of their lives such as houses, jobs, clothes, food, leisure and health etc. This is potentially a very big enquiry so the different groups could be divided up. The benefits and downsides of the groups could be compared and pupils discuss their ideas. Pupils might come to some conclusions as to which type of Saxon they might want to be themselves and why.

### Were the Saxons around in our area?

#### Why does this make a good question/task?

A chance to link the national scene with what was happening locally. Evidence might be examined such as place-names or archaeological discoveries. Local events or remains such as battles, finds and churches could be examined. The importance of the area in Saxon times can be assessed and Saxon life compared with today.

### What evidence is there that the Saxons were clever people?

#### Why does this make a good question/task?

Pupils can probe a number of issues such as their wonderful craftwork evidenced at places such as Sutton Hoo or in the Staffordshire Hoard or how they produced manuscripts such as the Lindisfarne Gospels. The artefacts could be examined and interpreted. They might investigate their occupations and various skills including farming as well as others such as boat-building. The themes can be extended to look at their organisation such as the social structure, the kingdoms (heptarchy map work). They might also point to their laws, crime and punishments, coins and so on. Pupils might want to consider how some aspects compare with life today or whether they might have been able to improve their organisation. They might also speculate on how their products, e.g. jewellery were produced.

### Was it easy for the Saxons to become Christians?

#### Why does this make a good question/task?

This task allows pupils to explore both the evidence for and the sequence of the establishment of Christianity introducing key content such as earlier pagan beliefs (evidence in place-names, days of week), the survival of Celtic Christianity, the role of Iona, St Augustine, the differences between Roman and Celtic, key individuals such as Bede and Abbess Hilda and the Synod of Whitby. They might use examples such as local churches but also consider evidence that the process of conversion was neither continuous nor easy. Pupils might imagine themselves as a missionary and how they may have reacted.

## One day in the life of a Saxon (child or woman or soldier or farmer etc)

PICTURE: Saxon ploughing scene in Colin Shephard and Rosemary Rees, *OCR Medieval History: Raiders and Invaders: power and control* (Hodder Murray) 0 340 92738 0, p.11.

### Why does this make a good question/task?

Looking at a range of evidence, maybe even reconstructions such as West Stow or artefacts, pupils piece together some of the likely events affecting a particular Saxon bringing in knowledge of farming, domestic conditions etc. They might want to make inferences about difficulties, what they enjoyed or feared and how their lives were different to today, or produce a day's time-line.

## Would you have preferred to live in Saxon times or [another period/ society studied such as Roman Britain]?

### Why does this make a good question/task?

Partly a revision exercise but also an opportunity to compare things with previous learning. Pupils would be asked to consider two (or more) different societies and make some decisions as to which was preferable and why. Ideally the comparison would not be with today as that is likely to lead to a one-sided conclusion.

## Was Saxon England the same at the end of their 600 years as at the beginning?



## Places to visit

**West Stow**, Icklingham Road, West Stow, Bury St Edmunds

**Bede's World**, Church Bank, Jarrow

**British Museum** especially for Sutton Hoo exhibition, Great Russell Street, London

**Sutton Hoo**, Tranmer House, Woodbridge, Suffolk

**Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery**, Chamberlain Square, Birmingham

**The Potteries Museum and Art Gallery**, Bethesda Street, Stoke-on-Trent



## Websites

[www.brown.edu/Departments/Medieval\\_Studies/anglos.html](http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Medieval_Studies/anglos.html)

[www.regia.org/village.htm/re-enactment](http://www.regia.org/village.htm/re-enactment)

[www.britainexpress.com](http://www.britainexpress.com)

[www.englandandenglishhistory.com](http://www.englandandenglishhistory.com)

[www.primaryhomeworkhelp.co.uk](http://www.primaryhomeworkhelp.co.uk)



## Resources

### HA Podcast Series – The Anglo-Saxons

[www.history.org.uk/resources/primary\\_resource\\_6530\\_177.html](http://www.history.org.uk/resources/primary_resource_6530_177.html)

In this HA Podcast Series Professor Joanna Story of the University of Leicester looks at the history of the Anglo-Saxons.

**Cathie Mclroy, 'A View from the Classroom: Teachers TV, the Staffordshire Hoard and Doing History' in PH 55.** A focus on pupils as detectives, investigate the archives, a Y4 simulated archaeological dig and a Y3 classroom museum

**Nuffield Primary History, 'Sutton Hoo' in PH 54.** Ideas include a poem for Raedwald, pupils asking questions based on the mound, questions for the archaeologist, planning a burial chamber, telling the story of the discovery, making a jigsaw of the boat, listing grave goods, devising an archaeological record sheet and preparing an exhibition.

**Jon Nichol, 'Classroom Archaeology: Sutton Hoo or the Mystery of the Empty Grave' in PH 51.** The Mystery of the Empty Grave is the classic classroom archaeological exercise. It was taken up by Nuffield in 'Doing Archaeology and History' with its emphasis on group work. The Mystery of the Empty Grave is aimed at 9–11-year-olds with a five-session scheme including excavating and planning a burial; a classroom dig; dating and artists' reconstructions and Beowulf and poetry.