The Venerable Bede

The Anglo-Saxons and the Vikings:
push, pull, cause and consequence

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The Anglo-Saxons and the Vikings shaped British history in ways that are directly relevant to us today and inform our language, laws and culture. Without them we would not have some of our greatest stories, heroes and artefacts. The recent exhibition at the British Library on the Anglo-Saxons is testament to their enduring appeal to us in the twenty-first century. In a time of political uncertainty the Anglo-Saxon attempts to make a cohesive England may still prove to be more enduring than later attempts to create a Great Britain.

How do we know?

It is important to engage children on some level with how we know about the past so that they begin the journey of seeing history as a narrative construct (see the Historical Association's advice on historical progression www.history.org.uk/primary/module/1412/progression-in-historical-learning). Where does our knowledge and understanding come from? How reliable is it and why? Our documented knowledge of the Anglo-Saxons stems largely from three primary sources. The first text is called *De Excidio*

et Conquestu Britanniae (*c.*540) by a British monk called Gildas which focuses on the period in which the Anglo-Saxons arrived. Gildas's religious stance blames the Britons for their sins while giving us some key insights into the battles to stop the Anglo-Saxons taking control of Britain. It includes the 'Groans of the Britons' in which they appealed to the Roman Emperor for help against the Picts and the Scots. As a teacher you can explain the situation the Britons were in at this time and get them to compile their own list of 'Groans of the Britons'. Gildas called the Saxons 'fierce and impious…a race hateful both to God and men'. This statement can be used with pupils to explore Gildas's beliefs and opinions and why he holds them (he was pro-Roman with a rather negative view of his compatriots and their pagan ways). The book includes an account of the Battle of Mount Badon, *c.*500 ,in which a hero of the Britons successfully beats an Anglo-Saxon army. This hero, Ambrosius Aurelianus, is often linked to the legend of King Arthur. Children can consider why a hero like Arthur may have been needed at a time of such great uncertainty and disruption in the period after the Roman armies had left.

The second text is Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (731AD). This text is one of the key documents in English history and has significance for popularising our dating conventions, including the use of dating forwards from the birth of Christ using Anno Domini. Again Bede was a monk and has an early Christian viewpoint as the basis of his work. Children can be encouraged to think about how influential his writing has become, including every time they write a date in their books. The importance of personal viewpoints and religious beliefs in shaping interpretations can be explored as can the influence of his book written with such authority and with the backing of the church at a time of relatively weak government and with little written history. Comparisons can be made with life today where there are such a wide range of information sources and much stronger civic institutions.

The third key text to discuss is the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. It was compiled during the reign of Alfred the Great (*c.*871–899). It tells the story of the Anglo-Saxons from *c.*AD60 to the point they were written. Pupils should again be encouraged to understand the viewpoint that the texts come from. In this case they are written from the perspective of Alfred the Great's court and glorify the Anglo-Saxons at the expense of others, principally the Vikings. They are propaganda. Pupils can be asked to think why Alfred would want such an account. He was very aware of his own place in history and very aware of the need to win followers at a time of division with a deadly enemy on his doorstep.

Push and pull factors

Because of the relative lack of source material from this period there are no definitive answers to why the Anglo-Saxons came to Britain. Historians tend to think that the main reasons were social, economic, political and military. Pupils can be encouraged to consider factors on cards and decide whether they are push or pull factors on a Venn diagram with some overlap in the middle where push and pull factors meet. These might include:

- The mild climate for farming in Britain – milder in some parts of Britain than they had in northern Europe.
- Trading – Anglo-Saxons had been trading with Britons for hundreds of years before they invaded – they knew what Britain was like and the opportunities it presented. They relocated and brought their families.
- Some Anglo-Saxons had served as mercenaries in the Roman Army in Britain. They knew what it was like in Britain.
- Saxon Leaders Hengist and Horsa were invited as mercenaries to Britain by the Celtic leader Vortigern in *c.*449 to help him defeat the Picts in return for land and rations.
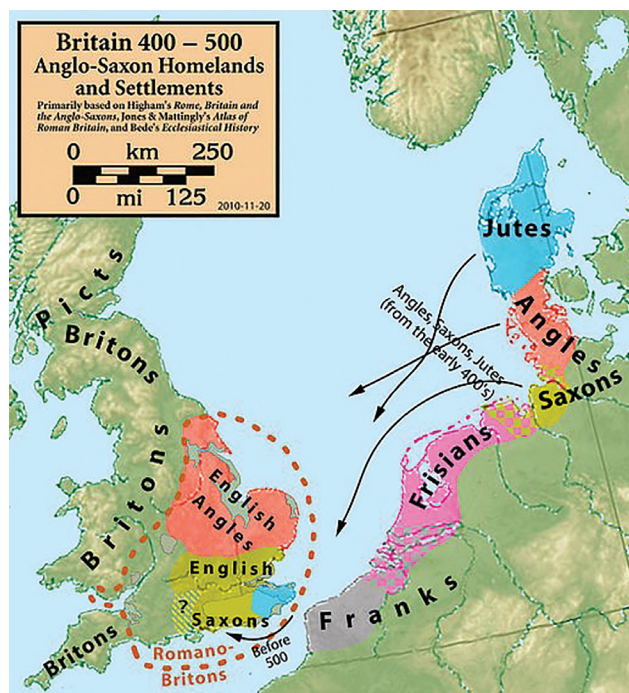

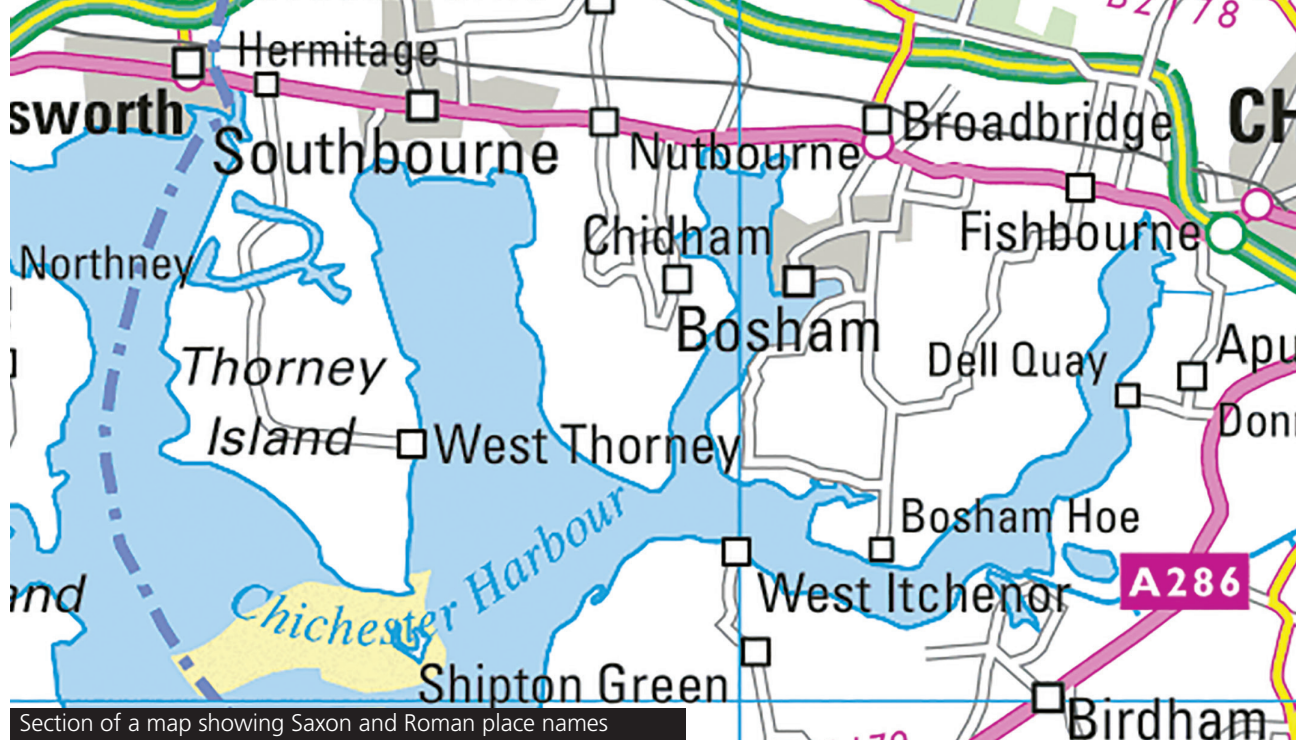
From the Anglo-Saxon 'Benty Grange' helmet.

- Hengist and Horsa sent for reinforcements, so that more and more soldiers arrived and many decided to stay. They, in turn, sent for their families.
- Poor farming conditions in some parts of Anglo-Saxon homelands (Jutland and Anglia) meant that some farmers were keen to find better land.
- Anglo-Saxon societies were warlike at this time and sought new lands to conquer. This helped their kings provide wealth to their loyal supporters. They were expanding all over north-western Europe.
- Some powerful Anglo-Saxon men saw Britain as a place where they could take land and set up their own kingdoms.

Where did they come from?

According to Bede the Angles invaded East Anglia and further up along the Eastern coast of England. The Jutes invaded Kent and the Isle of Wight whilst the Saxons took Essex, Sussex and Wessex. Archaeological evidence suggests that these groups were not distinctive, separate peoples but were more multi-ethnic peoples. Look at a modern map with pupils

Britain 400 – 500
Anglo-Saxon Homelands and Settlements
Primarily based on Higham's *Rome, Britain and the Anglo-Saxons*, Jones & Mattingly's *Atlas of Roman Britain*, and Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*.
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Section of a map showing Saxon and Roman place names

and identify which countries are in the areas the invaders came from today. Also, look at the words for Angles and Saxons and discuss how these words were given to places in Britain (e.g. Wessex, Sussex, East Anglia). Highlight these places for pupils so that it is easy to identify the links between the names of the tribes and the names of the places they lent their names to. Consider how the words 'England' and 'English' are derived from the word 'Angle'.

Beowulf – the surviving manuscript is over 1,000 years old and the story dates from possibly three centuries before that.

Consequences – place names

Place names give us a valuable insight into the influence of the Anglo-Saxons on England today. For instance, a ham was a farm. We still have places simply called 'Ham' or ending with 'ham' such as Wokingham. The suffix 'ing means son of. Hastings refers to a place where the sons of Haestea lived. Referring back to Wokingham we have a farm owned by the sons of Wocca. Children can be given sections of maps and asked to complete a treasure hunt using clues derived from Saxon place names e.g. start at the farm of Bos (Bosham in West Sussex) and move north east to the stream that the Romans fished in (Fishbourne). This can allow children to develop some map and compass skills and get them used to the fact that there are sources for our place names, many of which are Anglo-Saxon. Similarly, if studying the Vikings you can look at places ending with suffixes such as 'by', 'borough', 'fell' and 'dale'.

Consequences – Christianity

St Augustine brought Christianity to Anglo-Saxon Britain in 597. Ask children to consider how this shapes life for many people in Britain today – from marriages, births and deaths, to the Queen as head of state. As an immigrant faith adopted by immigrant groups, Christianity has had a profound impact on culture. Set this in context with how other immigrant groups have brought their beliefs and ideas with them and how these can be shaped by new ideas that they encounter, adapt and develop.

Consequences – storytelling, myths and archaeology

The story of the remarkable discovery of the Sutton Hoo finds near Woodbridge in Suffolk in 1939 has opened up so many insights into Anglo-Saxon history in Britain and northern Europe. The strong links between the artefacts and the details in Beowulf are a treasure chest for teachers and children. They offer us so many rich clues about culture, society, and political life at this time. There is huge scope for considering the artefacts and the poem and unpacking what they might tell us about life at the time and for comparisons with life today. Michael Wood's documentary 'In search of Beowulf' is freely available on YouTube. Clips can be shown of the poem being told, giving a sense of the epic drama of the work. Pupils can act out scenes that tell the story and choose which items from Sutton Hoo they would use at different points to help recreate the tale. They can consider in what ways the sources link and add layers of understanding. Just as the finds at Sutton Hoo tells the story of a great king buried in a ship, so Beowulf tells of a similar story.
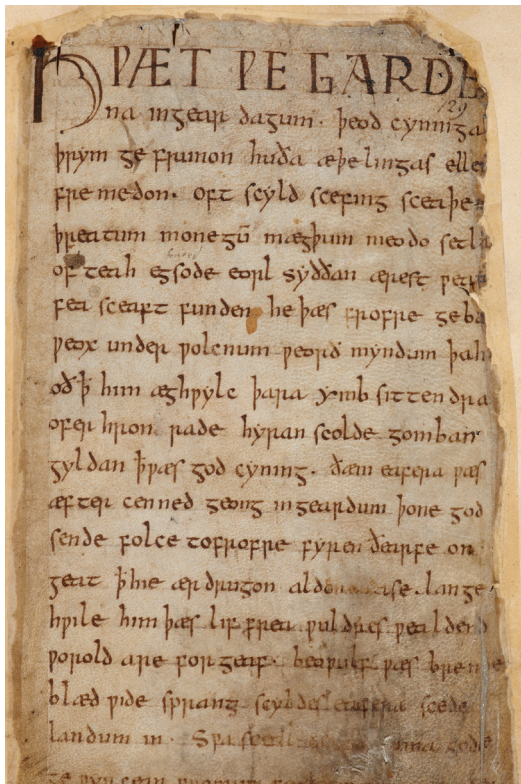
Purse lid ornaments from the Sutton Hoo finds.

Far-fetched treasures were piled upon him, and precious gear. I never heard before of a ship so well furbished with battle tackle, bladed weapons and coats of mail.

Consequences – laws and language

The first code of laws for all of England was drawn up in 928 during the reign of Athelstan. This code was heavily influenced by the laws laid down by Alfred the Great. These laws were the basis for the establishment of Parliament and modern legal codes we use today. Ask children to consider the importance of laws and why we might need them to be the same for the whole country and for each person and who makes them today. Discuss how important it would be to have laws in Anglo-Saxon times after the withdrawal of the Romans. How would they help kings to rule?

The Anglo-Saxons also gave us so many of the words we use today: words such as 'father', 'mother', 'man', 'woman' and 'sword'. These words weave together with the dynamic vocabularies brought by other migrant groups to Britain to produce the rich language we

have today. Children could consider where words come from. Every year new words enter the dictionary, with language ever evolving. Give pupils some examples of new words that have entered the dictionary in recent years and examples of Anglo-Saxon words that have dropped out of use such as Attercope (spider), Cumfeorm (visitor) or Frumbyrdling (a boy's first beard).

10 facts

- 410 AD – Alaric the Visigoth sacks Rome, leading to the withdrawal of Roman troops from Britain. This in turn opens the way for Anglo-Saxon invaders.

- The Celtic king Vortigern invites the Anglo-Saxon mercenaries Hengist and Horsa to help his military campaigns. They don't leave.

- Alfred the Great's development of the English navy provided a precedent for England as a naval power. Ask children to consider why it was so important for a country like England to have a strong navy.

- St Augustine brings Christianity to Britain.

- The words England and English come from the word for the Angles.

- Many place names come from Anglo-Saxon names.

- Beowulf is the longest epic poem in Old English.

- The Sutton Hoo ship which was found in 1939 contains treasures buried with an Anglo-Saxon king. Quite possibly this was a king known as Raedwald.

- The Venerable Bede is commonly considered to have popularised the use of our dating conventions counting forward from the birth of Christ using 'AD' after these dates.

- King Athelstan who ruled from 925 to 939 AD is widely regarded to be the first king of a united England following the successes of his grandfather, Alfred the Great, in strengthening the Anglo-Saxons against their Viking rivals.

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