Ia. The Anglo-Saxon period

Before we begin to discuss Old English literature it is essential to have a basic understanding of the historical events of the period, and the nature of Anglo-Saxon culture. This 'context-based' approach is one that is common to Medieval Literary studies (see IVk). Linked to the study of the cultural aspects is the need for an understanding of the religion of the period, which, as will become increasingly clear, is essential to the discussions of its poetry and prose (see Ie). It was, after all, the Christian monks of Anglo-Saxon England that copied, or were actually responsible for the composition of much of Old English literature and therefore an awareness of the context in which they lived and worked is required.

The term 'Anglo-Saxon' is used generically to describe the period of English history from around the mid-fifth century when the Angles and others arrived to the year 1066, the beginning of the Norman Conquest, at which point the rule of England passed to the new invaders. 'Anglo-Saxon' is also used to refer to the people who

occupied and ruled the land for those 600 years (i.e. *the* Anglo-Saxons). This apparently neat bracketing of history, however, belies a more complicated story. Britain was obviously inhabited before the Anglo-Saxons came, and these indigenous people were assimilated into Anglo-Saxon England (see below) or were driven to other lands. Moreover, even after the Norman Conquest the country was still predominantly occupied by Anglo-Saxons[1], but by then they had become subservient to Norman rule. 'Anglo-Saxon' is also used occasionally to refer to the language and literature of the period (more so by earlier scholars) but the term Old English is favoured now as it conveys the continuity of the language, i.e. from Old English to Middle English to Modern English. However, even this categorisation by chronological period is misleading, and indeed should perhaps be abandoned (see Frantzen, 1990, p. 19) since it breaks up the real ebb and flow of language across time.

The Anglo-Saxons arrived in Britain sometime in the mid-fifth century with the collapse of Roman rule. They found there the indigenous Celts (or 'Brittonic') and the remnants of Romano-British society. Their original homeland was in the area of modern-day mainland Denmark and northern Germany. Economic necessity[2] and military ambitions no doubt sparked the migration. However, the legendary tale of a British chief called Vortigern hiring Saxon mercenaries who in turn rebel against him

[1] Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*, for example, tells of a Saxon noble living in a much later period, and the equally fictional Robin Hood is also, according to some legends, a Saxon nobleman.

[2] Archaeological evidence at places such as Feddersen Wierde in Northern Germany indicate that settlements around that time were abandoned.

and seize lands, is one which clearly held an attraction for Anglo-Saxon writers themselves (see IId).

The early centuries, known as the ‘migration period’, involved gradual influxes and military incursions by people from three main tribes (according to Bede) - the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes; but other evidence points to settlements by other races such as the Franks and Frisians. It would appear the early incursions were on the east and south-east coasts of England. The complexity and chaos of the migration period can only be guessed at, but these warrior tribes eventually began to settle, forming dozens of kingdoms, at first either assimilating the locals or pushing them westwards and northwards to the traditional modern-day Celtic lands of Wales, Scotland, Cornwall, Bretony, and Ireland. The savagery of this period must also be assumed though archaeology has, as yet, failed to produce evidence of mass graves to imply many major pitched battles or genocide. There clearly was some British resistance to these incursions (it is in this period, for example, that the legendary name of Arthur first appears as a leader combating the invaders), but this seems more akin to a lengthy rearguard action, especially successful in delaying the Saxon advance into Cornwall.

Overall, though, the ‘migration period’ poses many questions, which may never be answered. Most crucially, as one scholar suggests, we are completely unclear as to whether this was ‘a huge influx of settlers over the sea from the east’ or ‘a total cultural and ethnic shift whereby the descendants of the Roman-period native population became English’ (Hines, 2004, p. 39).

As the invading tribes battled the indigenous population and themselves, larger kingdoms began to form, so that by the seventh century the famous Anglo-Saxon Heptarchy emerged. This consisted of seven major kingdoms: Northumbria, Mercia, East Anglia, Essex, Kent, Sussex, and Wessex. War between the kingdoms was clearly common, with power bases shifting back and forth; but this was all to change in the eighth century when the first Viking invasions began. The increasing attacks of the Vikings brought many of the kingdoms to their knees and led to a wave of migration from Scandinavia and the subsequent settlement of areas of England by these new invaders (mainly in the north of England). So much so that by the end of the ninth century only the kingdom of Wessex, under King Alfred 'the Great' (871-899[3]), remained independent. After a series of near catastrophic setbacks Alfred eventually 'defeated' the Vikings and began the refortification, re-education, and rebuilding of Wessex (IIe and IIg). Once the truce he had signed was broken (in which Alfred had ceded northern England to Viking control – the so-called 'Danelaw'), the King began the reconquest of England, gradually pushing northwards. This was continued by his sons and grandsons so successfully that by the mid-tenth century all of England had been reclaimed and came under the single rule of King Athelstan of Wessex, who properly deserves the title of the first King of England.

With this reconquest came a sense of national unity, and the notion of the *Angelcynn* ('race of the English') as used by Alfred, and *Engla lond* ('England' - a term which came into existence by 1000). Interestingly both were named after the Angles (the race that settled Mercia, Northumbria, and East Anglia) but accepted and adopted by

[3] Dates for kings refer to the time they ruled, not their lifespan. Alfred was in fact born in 849.

the Saxons. Yet this unity would always be tested, and the rise of the power of the Church at the expense of the nobility (thus leading to a lack of loyalty on the latter's part), coupled with the now permanent Danish population in the north, weakened national security. This was most evident under the reign of Æthelred the Unready (979-1016) where renewed Viking invasions (more organised and disciplined this time) brought England to defeat, so much so that by 1016 the throne was handed to the Viking king Cnut (1016-1035), becoming part of his wider Scandinavian empire. Although the English regained the throne under Edward the Confessor (1042-1066), Anglo-Saxon rule ended in 1066 in a flurry of political intrigue over the right of succession. The successful claim to the throne by William the Conqueror, backed with military might and papal approval, brought the Normans to power after the defeat of Harold at Hastings.

In summary then the history of Anglo-Saxon England is a complicated story. Yet it is important to take away some key observations:

* the Anglo-Saxons started to migrate to an already occupied Britain in the mid-fifth century from the area we now term northern Germany and Denmark;
* according to Bede (see IIa and IId) they consisted of three tribes – the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes – but we know that other races were also represented;
* it is assumed that originally they continued their warrior tribe structure, but gradually these formed into larger kingdoms, eventually becoming the famous seven kingdoms or Heptarchy;

* Viking attacks in the eighth and ninth centuries nearly destroyed Anglo-Saxon rule, but under Alfred the Great the reconquest began and England was unified in the tenth century under Athelstan;
* Anglo-Saxon rule finally came to an end with the Norman Conquest in 1066.

Further Reading

Throughout this book we refer to many monographs and series that will reinforce the study of Old English from a literary, linguistic, and historical perspective. For a gentle introduction to the events of the period we recommend Blair (2000), John (1996), the *Short Oxford Histories of the British Isles* (Charles-Edwards, 2003, and Davies, 2003), and Campbell *et al* (1991). If you are interested in the cartography and geographical development of Anglo-Saxon England then see Hill (1981). For more information on Anglo-Saxon society, see Ib, Ie, If, and IId.

Ib. Anglo-Saxon Society

The legacy of the Anglo-Saxon period (outlined in Ia) was remarkable. Not only did the English language rise to a dominant position in terms of the language of court, and to a certain degree the church, but the boundaries of England as a country and its administrative system were also set. We will touch on these issues many times in this book, but for now it is worth capturing a few of the general points.

The period began with the migration of tribes from mainland Europe to Britain (see Ia). These small groupings, or war bands, were probably built primarily around family ties and led by war leaders. They survived according to a harsh code, based on violence, feuding, and vengeance (see IIc). Original settlements in the east and south of the country were basic, with wattle and daub huts made of timber, smaller craft huts, and a large – probably communal – hall. This latter building seems to have been a place were the local populace gathered, feasted, and told tales or were told tales by the *scop* ('poet', see Donoghue, 2004, pp. 24-55). The hall was so important to the people that it became symbolic in their literature of a well-ordered society (for example, various halls, and thus the kingdoms they represent, are contrasted in the heroic poem *Beowulf*).

As time progressed these tribes grew, and the settlements grew with them. Mergers and conflict gradually saw some of these gain supremacy over their neighbours and thus small kingdoms began to form. These fought each other, and via conquest and political mergers (we assume) formed larger countries until the formation of the

Heptarchy. These seven kingdoms were subdivided into shires (many of which survived up until their boundaries were restructured in 1974) and these in turn into smaller land areas called ‘hundreds’ (or ‘wapentakes’ in the Danelaw – an area of northern England controlled by the Danes in the early tenth century).

A kingdom was ruled by a king who was chosen by the group (so not necessarily by succession). Occasionally in this early period kings were recognised as being the dominant power by other kings, hence the term *bretwalda* or ‘overlord’. Beneath the king were his *gesithas* or ‘companions’ made of thegns and ealdormen. These were divided into the *duguth* - the trusted/proven companions; and the *geoguth* - the young warriors. The relationship between the king and his nobles, the so-called *comitatus*, was key to early Anglo-Saxon society and was based on a system of loyalty and reward (see IIj). Beneath the nobility were the *ceorls* or freemen, and then finally the slaves. This tightly structured society was based on mutual dependencies (see If) and we can detect in their writing a clear fear of exile from the community (see Iii).

The place of women in society is also noteworthy. Although it would be inaccurate to say they enjoyed equal status to men, they were certainly not as disenfranchised as they were in later medieval society (Fell, 1984). In Anglo-Saxon England, for example, they could hold property, bestow it, run joint religious houses, and lead armies into battle.

Eventually, as we outlined in section Ia, a single nation was formed: England. However, although this was a new nation, often troubled by internal difficulties and external attackers, it was also a country that continually remembered its roots. Bede,

for example, called the other Germanic tribes on the Continent *gens nostra* or 'our people', and this is probably linked to the efforts made by Anglo-Saxon missionaries to convert the Germanic tribes on mainland Europe. They were aware also of the mythological beliefs they held in the past (Ie) and celebrated many of the ideals that we can assume were prized in their early history such as: heroism, loyalty, the reliance on kinship and family bonds, and the *comitatus* relationship between the warrior and the lord (see IIj). All of these hearken back to the original tribal societies and structures. Even when towns and cities emerged and systems of administration more akin to modern society formed, their understanding and fondness for the past was still evident. This is clear in the famous 'elegies' where the problems of the present are set against a eulogised the past (IIi).

Further Reading

For approachable introductions to life in Anglo-Saxon England one should look to Page (1970), and Lacey and Danziger (1999). Pollington (2003) provides a specific study of the hall in Anglo-Saxon society, to which one should add general books on the history and archaeology of the Anglo-Saxons. For a more detailed study of the development of the role of kings, see Chaney (1970), and for an introductory study of the role of women in the period, see Fell (1984), and the notes on feminist criticism in IVk.