

The Anglo-Saxons

“In the case of the king, the resources and tools with which to rule are that he have his land fully manned: he must have praying men, fighting men and working men. You know also that without these tools no king may make his ability known.”

King Alfred's digressions in his translation of Boethius's "Consolation of Philosophy"

This module includes the following topics:

- ❖ Anglo-Saxon Timeline
- ❖ The Anglo-Saxons
- ❖ Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms
- ❖ Society and Structure
- ❖ Anglo-Saxon Kings
- ❖ End of Anglo-Saxon Kingdom



Depiction of an Anglo-Saxon King with nobles

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

At the end of the module, you should be able to:

- ❖ Trace the beginning and end of the Anglo-Saxon period of England
- ❖ Map the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms
- ❖ Be familiar with the rule and succession of Anglo-Saxon kings
- ❖ Analyse the life and society of the Anglo-Saxons

KEY WORDS

Anglo-Saxon
Jutes
Saxons
Angles
Kingdoms
Paganism
Christianity

Tithing
Hundreds
Normans
Burghs

ANGLO-SAXON TIMELINE

In 410, after the sacking of Rome by Alaric, King of the Goths, Roman legions departed from Britannia.

By 449, three shiploads of Saxon warriors led by Hengist and Horsa arrived in Kent.

According to legends, King Arthur defeated the Saxons at Mount Badon in 518.

By 597, St. Augustine, an Italian monk, arrived in Kent and founded a Benedictine monastery at Canterbury and converted the King of Kent to Christianity.

In 635, Aidan founded a monastery in Lindisfarne, followed by the Synod of Whitby in 664.

By 793, Danish Viking raiders began attacking Lindisfarne, Jarrow, and Iona.

Alfred the Great defeated the Danes at Edington in 878.



ANGLO-SAXON TIMELINE

Between 919 and 920, Edward the Elder, heir of Alfred, became the overlord of West Wales, Scotia, Strathclyde, and York. By the end of the series of submissions, eight British kings swore fealty to Edgar, Edward's grandson.

The reign of Athelstan was generally acknowledged as the first king of England.

In 1016, Cnut was crowned as the King of England, followed by Denmark in 1018.

1066: A year after the consecration of Westminster Abbey, Harold II (Harold Godwinson), King of England, defeated Harald Hardrada and Tostig at Stamford Bridge. On the other hand, William II of Normandy (William the Conqueror) defeated Harold II at the Battle of Hastings.



Bayeux Tapestry of the Battle of Hastings

Historically, the Anglo-Saxons were members of the Germanic people who inhabited territories of present-day England and Wales between the 5th century until the Norman conquest in 1066.



- **ANGLES**
- **SAXONS**
- **JUTES**

Based on St. Bede the Venerable, the Anglo-Saxons were descendants of the Angles, Saxons, and the Jutes who belonged to the Germanic tribes. Moreover, they were described as a group of people who migrated to Britain in the 5th century from northern Germany.

The migration was believed to have been prompted by the invitation of the Britons' ruler. Vortigern took fight against the threats of Picts and Scotti, people inhabiting present-day Scotland.

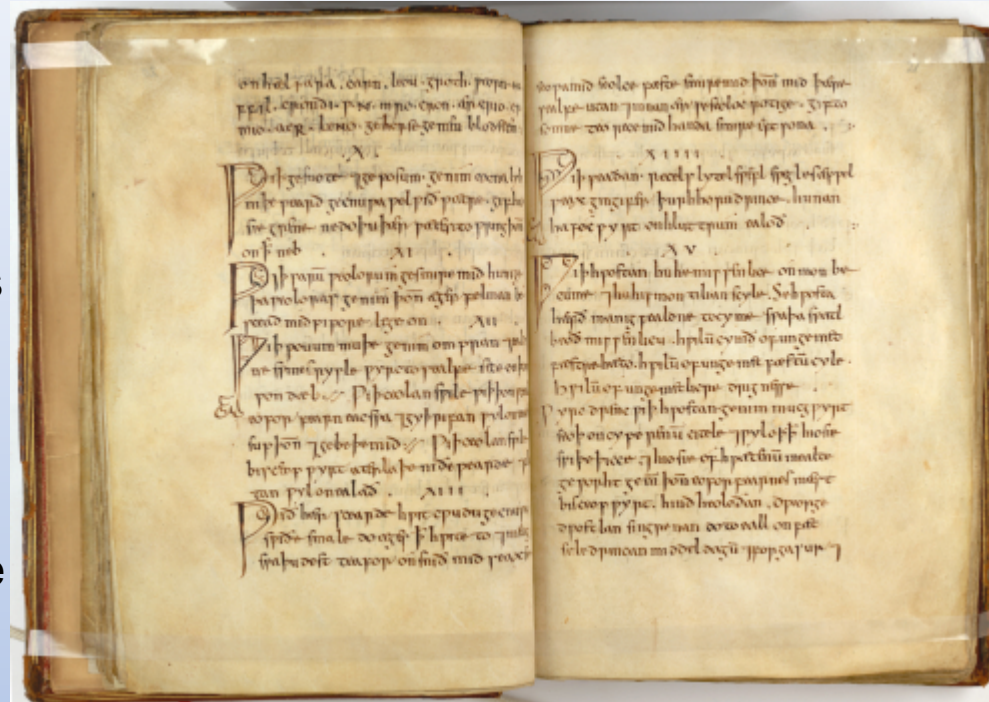
Ethnically speaking, the Anglo-Saxons were a mixture of the Germanic peoples who then coexisted with the Celts and early Vikings. In other words, they were very closely related genetically, culturally and linguistically – they were all White Northwestern Europeans.



Aside from the people, “Anglo-Saxon” is also used to refer to the period of British history from the end of the Roman occupation in 410 to the Norman conquest in 1066. In a wider sense, this time may also be called the early medieval period.

Gradually, the foreign raiders and mercenaries began to settle with their families in Britain after the Roman legions departed. With little resistance from the populace of Britannia, Germanic-speaking Angles, Saxons, Jutes, and even Frisians arrived. Aside from the Celts and Britons, who inhabited areas of Britain prior to the foreigners, the Anglo-Saxons faced minor difficulties in settling and forming kingdoms.

The term Anglo-Saxon is believed to have been first used by writers in the 8th century.



They spoke Old English, ancestor of modern-day English, closely related to other Germanic languages of Old Friesian, Old High German, and Old Norse. Before 1100, many books were written and read in England indicating that Anglo-Saxons were literate.



Map showing the migration of the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes to Britain

Based on excavation of burial sites and on Christian writings, Anglo-Saxons in the fifth and sixth centuries were pagans. Early cemeteries suggested that they favoured cremation over burial. At times, the dead were buried with grave goods. It was only in the 6th century that Christianity reached Kent through St Augustine of Canterbury, an Italian monk, who converted King Ethelbert.

List of major Anglo-Saxon gods

God	God of ...
Blader	Immortality
Eostre	Birth
Frigg	Love
Hel	Death
Loki	Cunning
Saxnot	Family
Thunor	Thunder
Tiw	War
Wade	Sea
Wayland	Metalworking
Woden	Chief God

St Augustine, who was later appointed as Bishop by the Pope, converted the King of Kent to Christianity. King Ethelbert gave permission to build a church in Canterbury. Christianity began to spread in other parts of Britain. Pagan temples and pagan celebrations were replaced with Christian ones.

Today, the names of some of the days of the week are based on the names of Anglo-Saxons gods, including Tuesday (Tiw), Wednesday (Woden or Odin), Thursday (Thor), and Friday (Frigga or Freya).

Pagans worshiped many gods that they believed to have roles in their everyday life.

Due to light raw materials, we have little evidence of how early Anglo-Saxons dressed. With fragments of textiles and few records of continental Germanic people, the clothing of early Anglo-Saxons was presented as below in several works of literature.

MEN

Evidence indicated that early Anglo-Saxon men wore a one-piece short cloak or cape made of sheepskin or fur. Both sexes were suggested to wear “hacele”, a hooded cloak. Most men wore tunics that were usually mid-thigh to knee length. Some men of wealth wore linen undershirts. Leather belts were used to hold up both the trousers and girdle the tunic.

WOMEN

A basic clothing for Anglo-Saxon women was a “peplos”. Usually a tubular garment, a peplos was clasped at the shoulders through brooches and was often worn ankle length. Brooches were decorated in regional patterns.

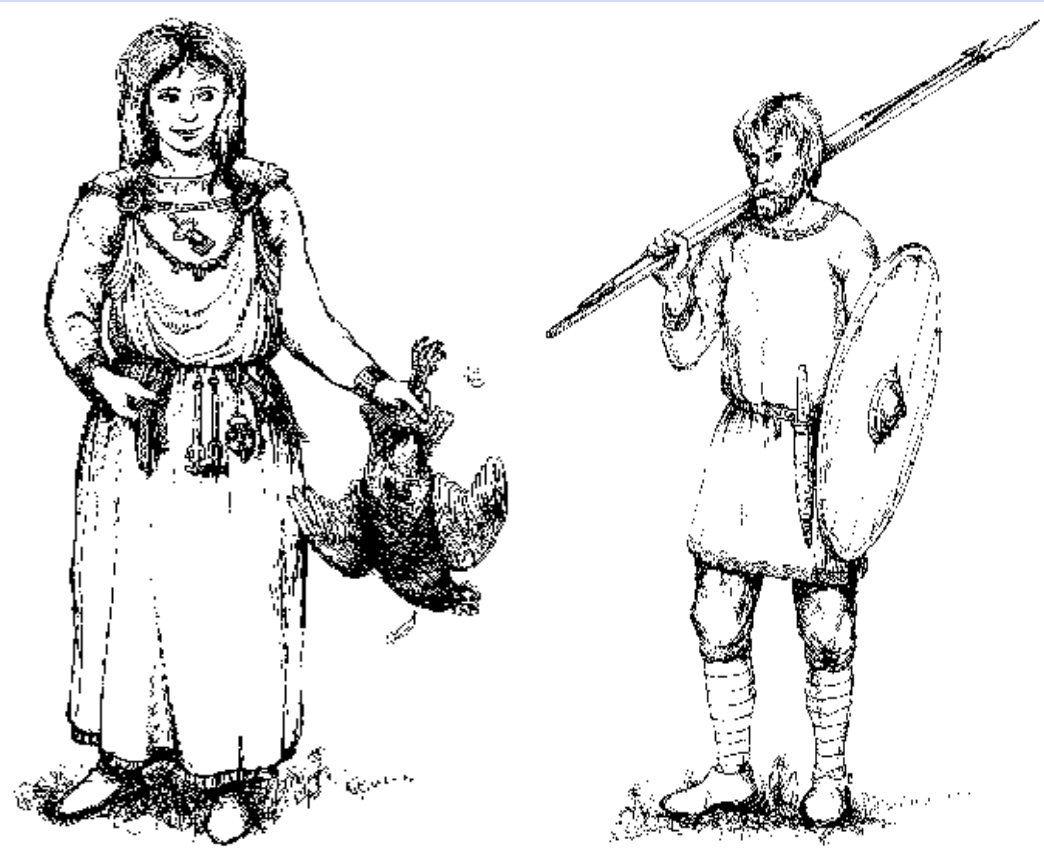


Image of early Anglo-Saxons

After learning the events during the Anglo-Saxon period, answer the following questions:

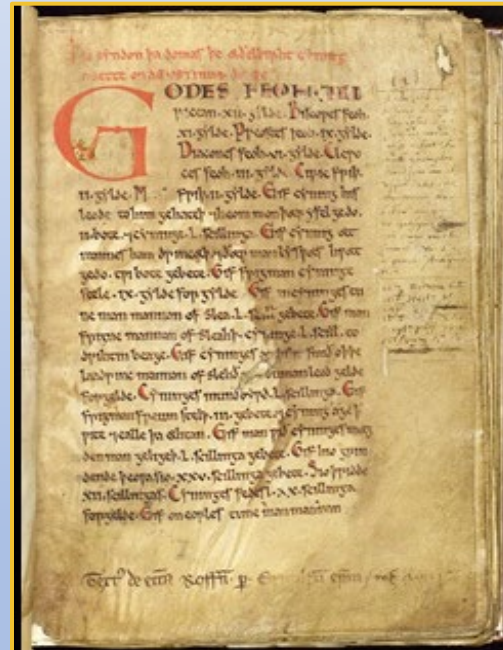
- ❖ What were the events comprising the beginning and end of the Anglo-Saxon period?
- ❖ Who were the Anglo-Saxons? Where were they from? What type of people were they?
- ❖ Describe their way of life?

ANGLO-SAXON KINGDOMS

Between 650 to 800 AD, Anglo-Saxon kingdoms were established, with constant threats from rival kings there was often fighting between them.



Settled by the Jutes, **Kent** was probably formed from at least two smaller kingdoms. With Ethelbert as king, Kent became one of the wealthiest kingdoms in southern Britain. At the time of his reign, laws of Kent were written down as charters to be implemented.



The opening of King Ethelbert's law code

With the establishment of Canterbury by St Augustine, subjects like poetry, astronomy, mathematics, and Greek were taught, making it a major intellectual centre. Similar to Kent, other kingdoms began to emerge. **East Anglia** was inhabited by the Angles: the “North Folk” (living in modern Norfolk), and the “South Folk” (living in Suffolk). It was known for its wealth as excavated at Sutton Hoo. Under the influence of the King of Kent, East Anglia was, also, converted to Christianity.

The Sutton Hoo treasures included important items from the Byzantine Empire and Scandinavia.

In the north, **Northumbria** became the most powerful kingdom in the north from the smaller kingdoms of Bernicia and Deira. With its strong cultural connection with Ireland and Rome, Northumbria emerged as the most influential Anglo-Saxon kingdom. In 635, the monastery on Lindisfarne was built and became the kingdom's cultural and religious centre.

When **Mercia** gained power in the 700s, Northumbria's dominance declined. In the 7th century, Penda, a Mercian king who refused to convert to Christianity, defeated two Northumbrian kings. During the reign of Penda, Mercia accumulated enormous wealth and military power, for a time, Kent, Mercia, and East Anglia were ruled by one king, Ethelbald, who became known as the King of South English. Succeeded by King Offa, Mercia extended its power and seized London, East Anglia, and Kent. With the death of King Offa, the Pope deposed the late king's son and abolished the archbishopric of Lichfield (it replaced the archbishop of Canterbury). By the 800s, East Anglia was freed from Mercian control.

In 825, King Ecgberht of the West Saxons defeated Beornwulf, King of the Mercians, which resulted in the transfer of overlordship of the kingdoms Kent, Sussex, Surrey, and Essex to **West Saxon** (Wessex).

Territorial gains under King Ethelwulf were further sealed with the marriage alliance to a Frankish princess and great granddaughter of Charlemagne.

TASK

Either use a printed blank outline map of Britain or draw your own, then draw the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms on the map and say which group of people lived in each kingdom.

SOCIETY AND STRUCTURE

Due to successful trade and use of land in towns and villages, England at the time of the Anglo-Saxons became one of the wealthiest kingdoms in Europe.

Upon gaining dominance in the mid 9th century, the royal family of the Kingdom of Wessex was the recognised English royal family.

Also part of major nobility were bishops and some churchmen.

ROYAL FAMILY A king and his family topped the social hierarchy. As a rule, succession to the throne was hereditary, however, the Witan of council of leaders also held right to choose who would be the best successor amongst the royal family.

MAJOR NOBILITY The Earls who owned lands and other properties served as the king's right hand men. Whilst not being hereditary, by the 10th century, Earls became concentrated to a few families.

MINOR NOBILITY Thegns were the backbone of the Anglo-Saxon army. With loyalty and service, a Thegn received lands and the chance to be an Earl.

FREEMEN Members of the upper group of commoners who participated in local courts in times of disputes.

SERFS The majority of England's population who did not own land. They worked for others for food and shelter.

Courts were also organised in hierarchy. The king had the power to appoint officials in charge of local courts in each shire and borough.

Local courts were composed of “Tithings”, or groups of ten families.



Local courts were called ‘Hundred’ courts, where local cases were heard.



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They were responsible for maintaining order and enforcing laws against murder and theft.

Groups of ten Tithings was known as the “Hundreds”, who each elected a constable. Meanwhile, a collection of Hundreds formed shires or counties. The head of the shire was called a “shire-reeve” or “sheriff”. Each shire was under the control of an Earl who needed to pay the king one third of collected fines or taxes.

Compared to the Roman and Normans, Anglo-Saxon houses were short-lived. Materials used in housing were largely timber, leather, and textile. Major churches were the only buildings made of stone.



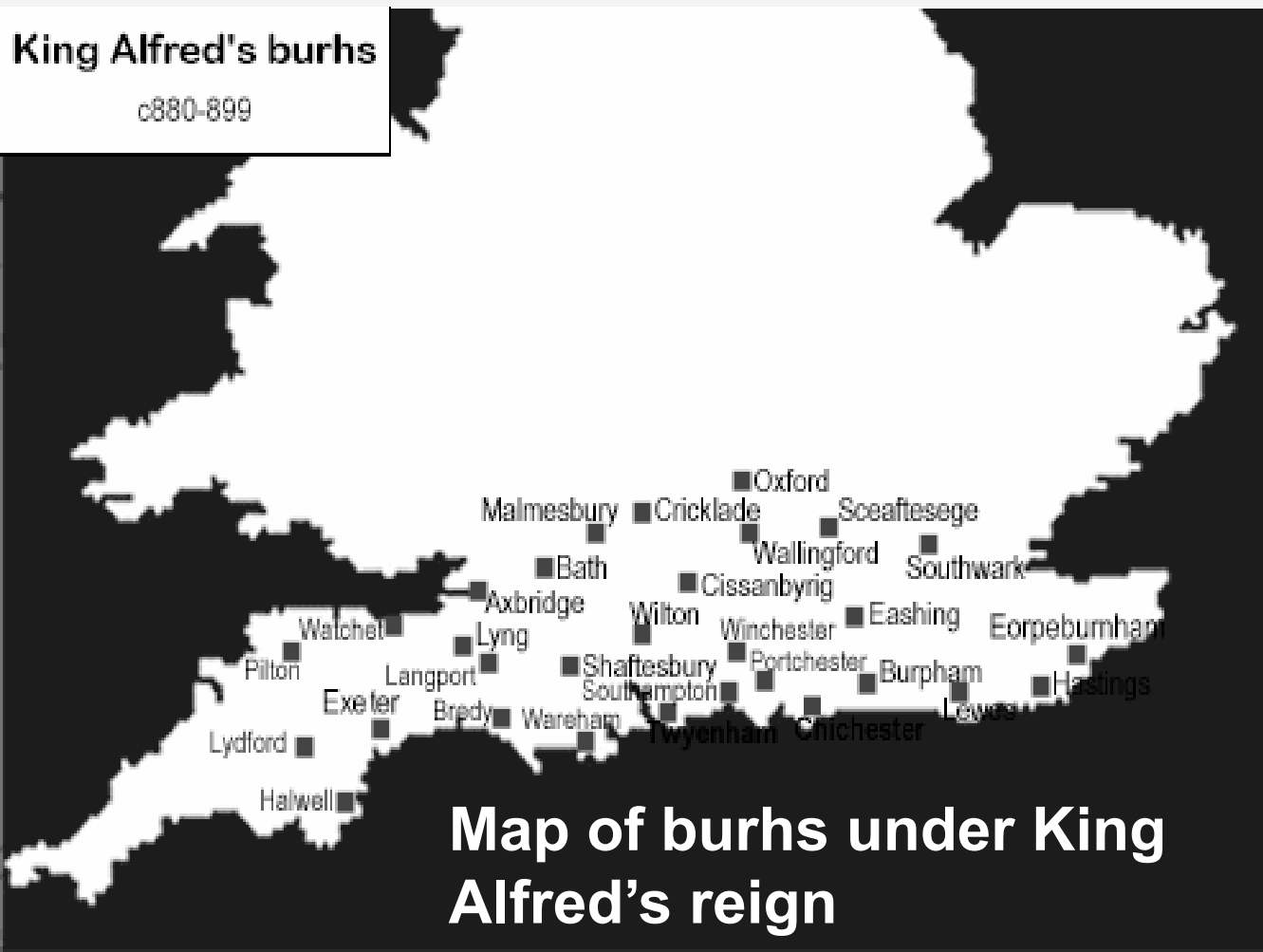
A reconstruction drawing of an Anglo-Saxon settlement at Bishopstone. This shows a high-status courtyard house, probably of the early 9th century.

Most houses were built facing the sun for heat and light. The biggest house in an Anglo-Saxon village was the Hall, where the Thegn or Earl and his warriors lived. A hall was long with the fire on a stone in the middle. Like other civilisations, villages were built near natural resources, such as water, wood, and food. For protection, most villages were secured with high fences.

The Anglo-Saxons both domesticated and hunted animals for food. Moreover, household goods were made of wood, metal, and pottery. They also traded goods like hunting dogs and slaves in exchange for glass and other foreign items. Villages were usually composed of less than 100 inhabitants.

Burh/Burgh means fortress or fortified settlement.

In order to protect Anglo-Saxon England from the raiding Danes, Alfred the Great began the policy of fortification of towns, or burhs. Fortified towns were built to advance the kingdom's defense force. Most burhs protected centres of commerce and the seat of local government. In exchange for free plots of lands, settlers built fortifications.



Although not as sophisticated as the Romans, Anglo-Saxon burhs were effective in protecting towns against the Vikings. Burhs were built through the following steps:

- ❑ Digging of very deep trench
- ❑ Building of wooden or stone walls
- ❑ Large gates were positioned on either end of the town

ANGLO-SAXON **KINGS**



In 946, **Eadred** succeeded his brother as king and brought up Edmund's sons Edwy and Edgar as his heirs.

Crowned by the archbishop of Canterbury, **Edwy**, Edmund's eldest son, faced the break away of Mercia and Northumbria.

Upon his brother's death, **Edgar**, King in Mercia and the Danelaw, succeeded the throne. Also known as Edgar the Peaceful, he united the English kingdom with justice and order.

Edward II the Martyr became King of England in 975 and was murdered in 978 by his half brother's supporters.

Upon the murder of his half brother, **Ethelred the Unready** became King. Without military skills, he was deposed by the Viking Sweyn of Denmark and fled to Normandy in 1013. He returned in 1014 after the death of the Viking king.



Edmund II the Ironside, son of Ethelred, ruled the Danelaw independent of his father. He became the King of England from April to November 1016.

Canute the Great, son of Sweyn, ruled as King of England between 1016 and 1035 when his rivals (sons of previous kings) fled abroad. Aside from being King of England, he was also the King of Norway and Denmark, which made him the largest overlord in the north.

Upon the death of Canute, his sons **Harold Harefoot** and **Harthacnut** shared the rule of the kingdom. Harold took over Mercia and Northumbria while his brother ruled Wessex and Denmark. When Harold died in 1040, Harthacnut succeeded him until 1042.



Edward the Confessor

lacked necessary military skills as he was brought up in exile in Normandy. Although he was the undisputed king, he had a rival in the person of Godwin of Wessex, one of Canute's powerful Earls. In order to seal an alliance, Edward married Godwin's daughter, Edith, in 1045. However, Godwin defied Edward and assembled his own army. As a result, Godwin was sent into exile abroad. The appointment of Normans at court also began.

Threatened by the claim of William, Duke of Normandy, Edward made an alliance with Harold, Godwin's son. Harold led the king's army. While on his deathbed, Edward named Harold as his successor.

During his reign, Edward became known as a simple king who did not live off the revenues of his own land. With deep religiosity, he ordered the building of Westminster Abbey, where he was buried in 1066.

Invited by his brother Hardicanute, Edward, son of Ethelred to his second wife Emma, became the King of England in 1042.



Harold Godwinson from the Bayeux Tapestry

Edward's brother-in-law, **Harold Godwinson**, was confirmed by the Witenagemot (king's council) as Earl of Wessex and King of England on January 6, 1066, the day after Edward's death. King Harold's throne was threatened by William, Duke of Normandy and Harald, King of Norway. In September 1066, Harald Hardrada and Tostig (King Harold's brother) invaded England, but were later defeated.

Both Harald and Tostig were killed in the battle. Meanwhile, William, who claimed to be Edward's successor, in 1066 sailed to Sussex. On October 14, 1066, Harold was defeated at the Battle of Hastings, which ended the Anglo-Saxon rule of England. The Duke of Normandy then became known as William the Conqueror.

After learning about the Anglo-Saxon kings, answer the following questions:

- ❖ Who was the most notable Anglo-Saxon king?
- ❖ What did you notice on the rule of succession?
- ❖ How significant were the reigns of Edward the Confessor and Harold Godwinson?

Choose an Anglo-Saxon king that strikes you the most and write a short biographical narrative about him.

THE END OF THE **ANGLO-SAXON KINGDOM**

By the beginning of the 11th century, the kingdom of England was challenged by conquests; first by Canute in 1016; and second by William of Normandy in 1066, which also ended the Anglo-Saxon rule of England.



Bayeux tapestry depicting the Battle of Hastings, 1066

Following the Norman conquest of England, Anglo-Saxon nobility were either exiled or lowered down to peasantry. By 1087, it was estimated that only 8 percent of the total English land remained to be under Anglo-Saxon control. Lords were replaced by Normans and Anglo-Saxon soldiers were used as mercenaries, mostly in the Byzantine Empire.

Anglo-Saxon commoners learned Norman French to understand the new ruler, whilst many still spoke Old English. By 1200, scholars called Anglo-Saxon English "Middle English". Moreover, nearly all Anglo-Saxon abbeys and cathedrals were replaced with Norman-inspired architecture. It took about a decade for William the Conqueror to consolidate his kingdom.

After learning how the Anglo-Saxon period ended, answer the following questions:

- ❖ Who was William the Conqueror?
- ❖ How did Harold Godwinson become King of England?
- ❖ What were the changes brought by the Norman conquest of England?

Make a timeline highlighting the reign of Edward the Confessor, the battle for the throne, and the Battle of Hastings.