

The story of English 2: The Anglo-Saxons

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The Celts probably lived in England for much longer than the English themselves, but we do not have a lot of Celtic words in English today. There are several place names, though, and a handful of words like *basket*, *beak*, *crag* and *doe*. There are a few rivers in England with the name Avon, including the one beside Shakespeare's home-town. The *Avon* in Stratford-upon-Avon, is a Celtic word meaning 'river'. The English river names Thames, Esk and Wye are also of Celtic origin. Much of the Celtic language was effaced over the next few centuries by the English tribes who came to England by the middle of the first millennium, and stayed on to see Brexit and the resignation of Theresa May as Prime Minister! They had little need to use the language of the people they conquered and displaced, and Celtic exerted much less influence on English than any other foreign tongue it encountered during its early history. The legendary King Arthur was a Celtic king, who is believed to have resisted the Saxon invaders in the late fifth and early sixth centuries. It is a paradox that we remember him today almost as an 'English' hero, as he later became a popular theme of romantic tales and poems since the Middle Ages.

Germanic was a branch of the Indo-European family just like Celtic, Italic, Greek or Sanskrit. It was spoken by

different tribes living in north-western Europe. Modern German, Dutch, Danish, Swedish, Icelandic and Norwegian are all modern versions of the languages of these Germanic tribes. The West Germanic tribes of Angles, Saxons and Jutes who lived in mainland Europe had attempted to invade the British Isles even during the Roman days. Once the Romans withdrew totally to their Mediterranean homeland, these West Germanic adventurers began a systematic and aggressive migration to the misty islands where the defenceless Celts lived.

From around 450 to 550 AD this relentless occupational influx continued, and by mid sixth century, the Anglo Saxons had largely occupied the entire island but for certain parts of the inclement north and the west which form modern Scotland and Wales. We do not know much about these days, but from accounts in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of England*, we learn that the Angles, Saxons and Jutes finally formed seven major settlements in the south, east and north of the island, below Scotland, which was still occupied by the aggressive Celtic tribes of Picts and Scots. Popularly called the Heptarchy, these seven kingdoms of Anglo-Saxon England existed until the ninth century when they were largely united by Saxon kings, particularly King Alfred.

Northumbria, called so because of its position north of the river Humber, along with Mercia and East Anglia were the provinces of the Angles. Wessex, Essex and Sussex, situated to the south and east of the Thames formed the Saxon provinces, and Kent was the land of the Jutes. These different tribes spoke very similar languages, being dialects of West Saxon, and over time amalgamated to form one people. Though the words 'English' and 'England' came from the Angles, the Saxons evolved as the dominant tribe by the ninth century, and much of the written records of the time that we have today exist in the Saxon dialect.

King Alfred (d. 899) not only consolidated the Anglo-Saxon people, but also caused the extensive documentation of texts created even in the other dialects. We have a general dearth of written samples of Old English Dialects other than West Saxon, and much of the literature composed in Anglian and Kentish dialects are preserved today in the West Saxon form. Perhaps for the first time in European history, a vernacular language became the language of scholarship, administration and the church. Alfred had major works of the time translated to English, encouraged literary activities considerably, and initiated the ambitious project of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, which went on being updated even up to the twelfth century.

The period from the early days of the Heptarchy to the Norman conquest of the islands in 1066 is called the Old English or the Anglo-Saxon period. The language that finally evolved from the amalgamation of the different dialects is referred to as Old



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English or Anglo-Saxon. This period saw the near complete takeover of the Islands from the Celts by the invading English tribes, the influence of Latin language coming in through various sources, the invasions of the Vikings and its impact on the English language and culture, the development of English as an independent, fully developed and much respected language, and its near obliteration by the catastrophic French takeover under William the Conqueror. We will look at these aspects in a little detail in the forthcoming parts in this series.

[Editor's Note: This is part of a series of articles tracing the history of the English language, to be continued in this column.]