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The Norman Conquest

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England's Conqueror

MARC MORRIS

# THE ANGLO-SAXONS

## A HISTORY OF THE BEGINNINGS OF ENGLAND



HUTCHINSON  
LONDON

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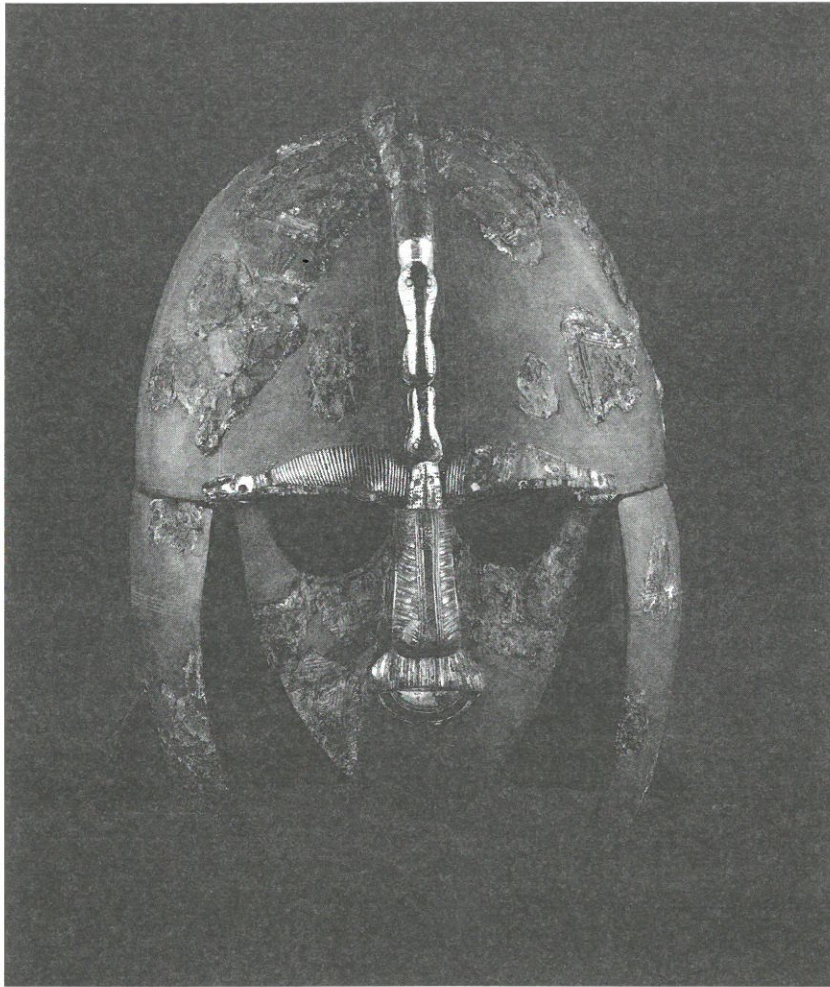
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## INTRODUCTION

In the course of writing this book, I asked numerous people to name the first thing that came to mind when they thought about the Anglo-Saxons. Naturally there were a wide variety of answers, but two in particular were mentioned over and over again. The first was the Sutton Hoo treasure, discovered in 1939, and now kept in the British Museum. The second was the death of King Harold at the Battle of Hastings, famously fought in 1066.

Neither of these was surprising: the Sutton Hoo treasure, placed in a ship with its original owner in the early seventh century and then concealed under a giant mound, remains the most impressive collection of Anglo-Saxon objects ever unearthed. Even if you're not familiar with it by name, you would almost certainly recognize its most famous items. The helmet, with its distinctive face-mask, has featured on the cover of countless books and magazines. King Harold's death at Hastings, meanwhile, is well known because it led directly to the Norman Conquest, and because it is depicted on the Bayeux Tapestry, another of the world's most famous artistic survivals.

But what did these two most popular 'Anglo-Saxon' associations have in common with each other? They were separated by almost half a millennium, during which there had been an enormous amount of change. Harold was the ruler of a single kingdom, which contemporaries called England, with boundaries very close to where they are today. It was peaceful and prosperous, with an expanding economy, an abundant silver coinage, and dozens of towns, cities and ports. It was also a Christian country,



1. The Sutton Hoo helmet.

with sixteen cathedrals, around sixty monasteries, and thousands of local churches.

At the time of the Sutton Hoo burial, the picture was very different. What would eventually become England was a gaggle of smaller kingdoms, all vying against each other for temporary advantage. None of them had a settlement of more than a few hundred people, or silver coins, or much in the way of trade.



2. The Bayeux Tapestry: the death of King Harold.

Nor was there much organized Christianity, which had arrived only a generation earlier, and had so far made very little progress: almost everyone was still pagan, worshipping gods like Thunor, Frig and Woden. King Harold, who lived in a world of bishops, boroughs, shires and sheriffs, would probably have felt far more at home with the English of the later Middle Ages than the people who had buried their lord in a boat over four centuries earlier. Those intervening centuries had been ones of fundamental transformation.

Generalisations about 'the Anglo-Saxons' are consequently difficult, and, unless made at the most simplistic levels, fairly redundant. It is as meaningful to talk about 'Anglo-Saxon warfare', for instance, as it would be to generalize about military tactics between the fourteenth and the nineteenth centuries. In this book, therefore,

I have for the most part avoided wide-ranging discussions, and tried to chart major social and political developments as they occurred. Each chapter seeks to explore the dominant theme of a particular era. Chapter 3, for example, discusses the second half of the seventh century, which saw the dynamic expansion of Christianity, and the foundation of monasteries and bishoprics. Of course, there were other important things happening in Britain during this time, and these are also discussed, but only as secondary concerns. This approach has meant that a lot of material has inevitably ended up on the cutting-room floor, but it is impossible to write about a period that spans more than seven centuries, from Roman Britain to the Norman Conquest, without being selective. By confining myself to one major theme per chapter, my hope has been to create a clearer story.

In the case of most chapters, I have also concentrated on one particular historical character. Four are focused on individual kings, two on individual bishops, and one on an individual family (the Godwinesons). Again, this was primarily in the interests of narrative clarity, and because biography is a way of framing events in relatable, human terms. At the same time, I wanted the book to be more than just a series of unrelated portraits, so there is plenty of non-biographical material included in each chapter, exploring the book's wider themes and linking one chapter to the next. This is not intended as a series of potted histories, but as an account of the emergence of the English and the development of England.

Sadly, none of the chapters is focused on a woman, because there is simply not enough evidence to sustain such an extended treatment. In the case of certain kings and bishops, we are lucky to have contemporary accounts of their lives, but in the case of queens or abbesses, no such source material has survived. The Venerable Bede provides a few brief sections on particular religious women in his mammoth *Ecclesiastical History*, written in the early eighth century. After that, there are no narrative sources about women until the mid-eleventh century, when two queens, Emma and Edith, commissioned political tracts that touched on aspects

of their careers. Yet even these late sources, valuable as they are, contain insufficient material to support an entire chapter. Frustratingly, there are periods where we can discern that certain women were playing a pivotal political role. On several occasions in the tenth century, young kings come and go in quick succession, while their mothers continue at court from one reign to the next, appearing as the leading witnesses to royal charters. But powerful though these women were, their activities are otherwise unrecorded, and their personalities and careers are unrecoverable.

This gap in the evidence might seem surprising, given that the Anglo-Saxon era is often thought of as having been a golden age for women. Since the late eighteenth century, it has been a commonplace that women in England had better rights before the Norman Conquest than they did afterwards, and were held in higher esteem by society. Before 1066, said one eminent historian in the mid-twentieth century, men and women enjoyed 'a rough and ready partnership'.<sup>1</sup> As so often with golden ages, however, this picture rests on a selective reading of very limited and debatable evidence. One of its principal props is an account of German women written by the Roman historian Tacitus towards the end of the first century AD. These women, claimed Tacitus, were virtuous, frugal and chaste, and supported their sons and husbands by encouraging them to acts of valour. But this was simply a Roman praising 'barbarian' society in order to criticize his own. German women were portrayed as laudable because, unlike their Roman counterparts, they did not conduct adulterous affairs or waste their time at baths and theatres. The reality, unfortunately, seems to be that the status of women in first-century Germany and Anglo-Saxon England was no better than it was in later centuries.<sup>2</sup>

The same is largely true in the case of Anglo-Saxon men. The argument that the pre-Conquest period was a golden age for people in general has an even longer history. When England broke with Rome in the sixteenth century, scholars sought to prove that the Anglo-Saxon Church had originally been a pristine, home-grown institution, unsullied by papal influence. During the

Civil War of the seventeenth century, Parliamentarians argued that the freedoms and representative powers they were fighting for had once belonged to their Anglo-Saxon ancestors and been lost in 1066. Almost all of this was myth, but it was enduring and pervasive. In the late nineteenth century it took on a sinister edge when people began to extol the supposed racial superiority of the Anglo-Saxons, leading some scholars today to suggest that the use of the term 'Anglo-Saxon' should be abandoned.<sup>3</sup>

Needless to say, given the title of this book, I do not agree with that suggestion. The term 'Anglo-Saxon', it is true, was not much used by the people we refer to by that name, who tended to think of themselves as either 'Angles' or 'Saxons'. But it was used in the late ninth century by Alfred the Great, who commonly styled himself 'king of the Anglo-Saxons', and also by several of his tenth-century successors. In addition, the use of the term 'Anglo-Saxon' as a convenient means of describing the various English-speaking peoples who lived in lowland Britain between the departure of the Romans and the arrival of the Normans has a long-established history, stretching back at least 400 years.

What is important is that we attempt to see these people as they were, and try to shed the misconceptions about them that have developed in later centuries. This is not easy, for they come laden with much accumulated baggage. The enthusiastic revival of Anglo-Saxon personal names in the nineteenth century makes it hard not to think of the various Alfreds, Ediths and Harolds in this story as honorary Victorians. The reality, of course, is that they were very different, both to us, and to our more immediate forebears. In looking at their lives we will see many things that may strike us as admirable: their courage, their piety, their resourcefulness, their artistry, and their professed love of freedom. But we will also find much that is disconcerting: their brutality, their intolerance, their misogyny, and their reliance on the labour of slaves. Their society produced works of art that continue to dazzle, and institutions that are still with us today, but it was highly unequal, patriarchal, persecuting and theocratic. Their difference to us, even though they possessed certain similarities,

is what renders them fascinating. We need to understand them, but we do not need to idolize them.

Our understanding of the Anglo-Saxons must ultimately rest on the historical sources, but for most of the period these are extremely meagre. For the first two centuries after the end of Roman rule, we have virtually no written records of any kind, and are almost entirely reliant on archaeology. The situation improves as the period progresses, and richer material survives, but there are still huge gaps in our knowledge. Sometimes major events are known to us only because of an allusive reference in a charter or a single excavated coin. Often they can only be surmised, because we have no direct evidence at all.

The less evidence, the more contention. The fact that so much is debatable means that the academic arguments are endless. Engaging with them is like navigating a huge, fast-flowing river, fed by a thousand streams of scholarship, and attempting to summarize them is as foolhardy as trying to freeze a waterfall. A definitive history of this period is impossible. What follows is the reading of the evidence that seems most plausible to me, and the arguments I have found the most persuasive. I have tried to show my reasoning whenever possible, without compromising the course of the story, because the story ought to seem remarkable. Like an old reciter of tales, called on by the king to relate the events of earlier times, I hope my audience will be entertained.