

British History Series: Episode 4 - The Rise of Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms and the Arrival of Christianity

Presented by Chris Green

Key Points Covered:

1. The Consolidation of Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms:

- By the 6th century, the Anglo-Saxons had established several kingdoms in Britain, including **Wessex**, **Sussex**, **Essex**, **Kent**, **Mercia**, and **Northumbria**.
- These kingdoms were often ruled by strong warlords and gradually consolidated into larger territories.
- The **Bretwalda** (overlord) system emerged, with certain kings like **Ethelbert of Kent** and later **Raedwald of East Anglia** holding dominance over other kingdoms.

2. The Arrival of Christianity:

- In 597 AD, **Augustine** was sent by Pope Gregory the Great to convert the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity.
- Augustine successfully converted **Ethelbert of Kent**, whose wife, **Bertha**, was already a Christian. This led to the establishment of the first Christian church in **Canterbury**.
- Christianity spread slowly, with Northumbria becoming a key center for the faith under King **Edwin**, who was converted in 627 AD.

3. The Rise of Northumbria:

- **Aethelfrith of Northumbria** was a powerful warlord who united the kingdoms of **Bernicia** and **Deira** to form Northumbria. He expanded his territory by defeating the **Picts**, the **Irish kingdom of Dalriada**, and the **Welsh kingdom of Gwynedd**.
- After Aethelfrith's death, **Edwin of Northumbria** took the throne and continued to expand his kingdom, conquering **Lindsey** and **Elmet**.
- Edwin was eventually killed in battle in 632 AD, leading to a period of instability in Northumbria.

4. The Role of Mercia:

- **Penda of Mercia** emerged as a powerful pagan king who defeated multiple Anglo-Saxon kings, including two from Northumbria and three from East Anglia.

- Penda's reign marked the rise of Mercia as a dominant force in England, though he was eventually killed in battle in 655 AD.
- After Penda's death, Mercia continued to grow under kings like **Ethelbald** and **Offa**, who built **Offa's Dyke** to mark the border between Mercia and Wales.

5. The Synod of Whitby (664 AD):

- A major religious debate took place at the **Synod of Whitby**, where the **Roman Catholic Church** and the **Celtic Church** clashed over practices like the date of Easter and monastic traditions.
- The Roman Church, represented by **Wilfrid**, won the debate, leading to the decline of the Celtic Church in England.

6. The Decline of Northumbria:

- Northumbria's power waned after a devastating defeat at the **Battle of Nechtansmere** in 685 AD, where the **Picts** ambushed and destroyed the Northumbrian army.
- Following this defeat, Northumbria shifted from being a military power to a center of learning, with monasteries like **Lindisfarne** and **Jarrow** becoming hubs of scholarship.

7. The Rise of Mercia and Offa:

- Under **Offa**, Mercia became the dominant kingdom in England. Offa built alliances with **Charlemagne** in France and minted coins with his image, modeling himself after Roman emperors.
- Offa's reign marked the height of Mercian power, but his death in 796 AD left the kingdom vulnerable to new threats.

8. The Arrival of the Vikings:

- In 793 AD, Viking raiders attacked the monastery at **Lindisfarne**, marking the beginning of the Viking Age in Britain.
- The Viking invasions would delay the unification of England for over a century, with **Wessex** eventually emerging as the dominant kingdom under **Alfred the Great**.

Key Figures Mentioned:

- **Ethelbert of Kent:** The first Anglo-Saxon king to convert to Christianity and the first Bretwalda.
- **Augustine:** The missionary sent by Pope Gregory to convert the Anglo-Saxons.
- **Aethelfrith of Northumbria:** A powerful warlord who united Bernicia and Deira to form Northumbria.

- **Edwin of Northumbria:** A Christian king who expanded Northumbria's territory before being killed in battle.
 - **Penda of Mercia:** A pagan king who defeated multiple Anglo-Saxon kings and made Mercia a dominant force.
 - **Offa of Mercia:** A powerful king who built Offa's Dyke and allied with Charlemagne.
 - **Wilfrid:** A Northumbrian monk who helped the Roman Church win the Synod of Whitby.
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Key Events:

- **597 AD:** Augustine arrives in Kent and begins converting the Anglo-Saxons.
 - **616 AD:** Raedwald of East Anglia defeats Aethelfrith of Northumbria at the **Battle of the River Idle**.
 - **627 AD:** Edwin of Northumbria converts to Christianity.
 - **632 AD:** Edwin is killed at the **Battle of Hatfield Chase**.
 - **655 AD:** Penda of Mercia is killed in battle, leading to the rise of Northumbria under **Oswiu**.
 - **664 AD:** The **Synod of Whitby** decides in favor of the Roman Church over the Celtic Church.
 - **685 AD:** Northumbria is defeated by the Picts at the **Battle of Nechtansmere**.
 - **793 AD:** Vikings raid Lindisfarne, marking the start of the Viking Age in Britain.
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Questions from the Audience:

Q: How did the Anglo-Saxons navigate and know the lay of the land without maps?

A: Chris explained that the Anglo-Saxons didn't have detailed maps like we do today. Instead, they relied on landmarks such as rivers, hills, and settlements to navigate. For example, during the Battle of Hastings in 1066, the English army was told to gather by an old apple tree, which was a well-known landmark. This method of navigation was common in many early societies, including African cultures in the 19th century.

Q: What happened to the Celtic Church after the Synod of Whitby?

A: After the Synod of Whitby in 664 AD, the Roman Catholic Church became the dominant form of Christianity in England. The Celtic Church, which had different practices like the date of Easter and monastic traditions, went into

decline. Bishop Coleman, who represented the Celtic Church at the synod, left in protest and returned to Iona in Scotland. Over time, the Roman Church's influence grew, and the Celtic Church's practices faded in England, though they continued in Scotland and Ireland.

Q: Why is Offa's Dyke significant?

A: Offa's Dyke, built by King Offa of Mercia, is a massive earthwork that marks the border between Mercia and Wales. Its exact purpose is still debated, but it may have been a defensive structure to protect Mercia from Welsh raids or a way to control trade and movement between the two regions. It remains one of the most impressive engineering feats of the Anglo-Saxon period.

Q: What was the significance of the Staffordshire Hoard?

A: The Staffordshire Hoard, discovered in 2009, is a collection of Anglo-Saxon gold and artifacts, including weapons and religious items. Chris suggested that it might have been part of the tribute paid by Northumbria to Mercia after a battle. The hoard is significant because it provides insight into the wealth and craftsmanship of the Anglo-Saxon elite during this period.

Q: How did the Viking raids impact Anglo-Saxon England?

A: The Viking raid on Lindisfarne in 793 AD marked the beginning of the Viking Age in Britain. These raids disrupted the process of unifying England, as the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms had to focus on defending themselves against the Vikings. It wasn't until the reign of **Alfred the Great** of Wessex that the Anglo-Saxons began to push back against the Viking invaders and start the process of unifying England.

Next Week's Topic: Alfred the Great and the Vikings

- The Viking invasions and their impact on Anglo-Saxon England.
- The rise of **Alfred the Great** and his efforts to defend Wessex against the Vikings.
- The beginning of the unification of England under Wessex.

Thank you for joining us! If you have any questions or would like to revisit previous talks, please feel free to reach out. See you next week for more fascinating stories from British history!

Note: This handout is based on the closed captions from the talk and is designed to provide a concise summary for those who missed the session or want to revisit the key points.

Series presented by Chris Green, 2025.