

A) The Venerable Bede: Anglo-Saxon monk, poet, historian and innovator

A wealth of Old English material exists due to two particular groups of people, monks and nuns. Both were taught to read and write from an early age, and many became scholars, scribes, authors and teachers. Naturally, their collective work was often focused from a religious perspective, recounting stories from a biblical context. However, one particular monk, known as the Venerable Bede, left a larger footprint of work than others. This included his book called *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, one of 44 works written by Bede, and a piece for which he is principally remembered due to its pioneering methodology. The book is highly regarded and remains the most important source for the early Anglo-Saxon period.



St Peter's Church at Bede's monastery in the North of England

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<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=3904928>

In the *Ecclesiastical History*, Bede recorded many stories detailing the conversion of the English to Christianity, beginning in the time of St Augustine (died 26 May 604) through to the early eighth century. He also studied the multiple layers of biblical interpretation, seeking greater spiritual meaning, and reassessed the traditional dating of events such as 'annus mundi' or 'the year of the world', which led him dangerously close to being charged for challenging the church. Due to the factual challenges Bede was subjected to, he responded practically by effectively introducing footnotes, which he used as a tool in his writings to cite his authors and justify his facts.



The Venerable Bede (in a 12th century manuscript from Engelberg)

<https://www.e-codices.unifr.ch/de/list/one/bke/0047>

Bede recounted the lives of saints to try and provide the people with positive role models but went against expectation when writing about his personal heroes, by not positioning them as miracle makers, but instead focusing on their historical contribution. Bede was a linguist, he worked in many languages and devoted his life to the study of biblical works. In his later years, Bede sought reforms of the church, fighting against abuses of power by bishops, especially the extortion of payments from the poor in remote rural areas, a group of people who would barely ever see a priest. In 731 AD, when Bede was fifty-nine, he concluded his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* with an autobiographical note in which he stated that 'it has always been my delight to learn or to teach or to write'.

When his final days were upon him, he spent them in study and prayer, chanting psalms and Old English verse. These included a poem, which became known as "Bede's death song", a 5-line piece speaking directly about the ponderings of a dying man. It is questioned whether Bede himself was responsible for its writing, but it was a poetic end to a man who made his mark in the world of writing, scripture, poetry and linguistics.

Questions:

- (1) What did Bede do in his lifetime so that he is still remembered over 1200 years after his death?
- (2) What was special about Bede's most famous works – the Ecclesiastical History and Bede's death song?
- (3) Discussion question: Why do you think that nuns and monks were often some of the most educated in society and what sacrifices did they have to make?

B) The Anglo-Saxon Missionaries: Spreading Christianity among Germanic tribes

The Christianisation of Anglo-Saxon England was a long and slow process taking almost the whole of the 7th century. It was led by Augustine, a Roman monk, who would later become the first Archbishop of Canterbury. After his arrival in Kent, a small kingdom in the south-east of England, he and his fellow monks visited the kingdoms of Anglo-Saxon England and slowly Christianised them, starting with their kings. After about fifty years, they were joined in their efforts by a steadily growing number of Anglo-Saxons. In 644, the first native Anglo-Saxon was made bishop in Rochester, a city in Kent. Only eleven years later, another Anglo-Saxon reached the position of the Archbishop of Canterbury. Finally, in 686, the last pagan¹ king of Anglo-Saxon England fell in battle and England was officially and entirely Christianised.



The Frankish Empire in 768

<https://tenthmedieval.wordpress.com/2016/05/26/anglo-saxon-england-and-the-european-union/>

Saxon influence on the regions. Saint Willibrod was later joined by another English monk, Saint Boniface, who moved on from Frisia to Christianise other pagan parts of Europe. Boniface's efforts were supported by the Frankish empire, a kingdom that had already been Christianised more than 200 years before Boniface came to mainland Europe. The Frankish empire sought to destabilize other pagan empires of Europe in the hope of

¹ non-Christian

² The area under a bishop's control

Even before England was completely Christian, efforts to spread the religion to parts of mainland Europe had already been planned and put into action by the newly converted Anglo-Saxons. First efforts to convert the pagan king of Frisia in the late 7th century were unsuccessful. However, the Frankish king, a Christian, went to war against the Frisian king and succeeded in defeating him in multiple battles. Following this, an Anglo-Saxon missionary, Saint Willibrod, successfully established a bishopric² in Frisia. During the efforts to Christianise mainland Europe, Anglo-Saxon missionaries founded several monasteries in western and central Europe. Some of the monasteries stayed in the hands of their families for over 100 years, enabling a tradition of Anglo-

making them easier to conquer. Saint Boniface established or re-established numerous bishoprics in central Europe. In recognition of his work, Boniface was made Archbishop of the German area by the Pope. Those two Anglo-Saxon missionaries and saints were joined by other Anglo-Saxon monks and nuns in their efforts to Christianise mainland Europe and even after their deaths many more followed. The Anglo-Saxon mission continued until the 770s when Charlemagne united large parts of western and central Europe. Even then, Charlemagne was still advised by Alcuin, a famous Anglo-Saxon scholar and teacher, securing Anglo-Saxon influence on the continent.

The missionaries that left Anglo-Saxon England to spread Christianity in Europe often took Old English Christian texts with them. One such example was a glossary that explained the Old English names of birds found in the Bible. As the Bible and other Christian texts were almost exclusively written in Latin at the time, such glossaries were designed to make the teachings of the Bible useful to the general population.

Questions:

- (1) What was the role of Anglo-Saxon monks in spreading Christianity in central Europe?
- (2) How did Christianity contribute to Old English texts still being found in mainland Europe today?
- (3) Why did the Anglo-Saxons – and not the Romans – Christianise central Europe?

C) Producing manuscripts in the Anglo-Saxon period

Writing Materials

In Antiquity, papyrus was one of the most commonly used writing materials. Papyrus originated in Egypt and was later adopted by the Greeks and Romans. It was made from papyrus sedge, a plant growing in swamps, and used to create scrolls.³ Papyrus has two disadvantages: it is brittle and tends to break when folded, and it is extremely sensitive⁴ to changes in temperature and humidity. In the 4th century AD, with the gradual adoption of the book in the West, parchment started to replace papyrus as the preferred writing surface. Parchment is made from animal skin, most commonly, calfskin, sheepskin, or goatskin. Until the introduction of paper in the 12th century, parchment was the most important writing material in the western world. Unlike paper, texts written on parchment could be erased and re-written. On the other hand, parchment is expensive. Paper was invented in China in the second century AD, however, in some places, such as England, papermaking only became established in the 17th century. Initially, paper was only used for transitory documents such as court records but as paper became cheaper and more easily obtainable, it started to replace parchment in other areas.

In the Middle Ages, black or brown coloured ink was primarily used for the main text of a manuscript. Iron-gall ink (which has a colour range from light brown to black) was produced by mixing oak galls⁵, metallic salts, and acacia gum⁶ with water or wine. Carbon ink (black colour) was manufactured by mixing water, wine or vinegar with acacia gum and charcoal.⁷ Red ink was used for headings (so called *rubrics* coming from the Latin word for red: *rubrum*), initials or more important passages. Purple, gold, and silver ink were reserved for luxurious manuscripts.

During Antiquity, scribes wrote with reed pens⁸ (*calamus*), whereas the quill was the dominant writing tool throughout the Middle Ages. The feathers were taken from either geese, ravens or swans and were sharpened with a small, very sharp knife. These writing tools were used until steel nibs were invented in the 18th century.



a b c d e f
g h i j k l
m n o p q
r s t u x y

The Anglo-Saxon
alphabet

³ Schriftrolle

⁴ anfällig

⁵ The ball-shaped lumps on plants caused by the sting of gall wasps.

⁶ Harz vom Akazienbaum

⁷ Holzkohle

⁸ Schreibgerät aus Schilfrohr

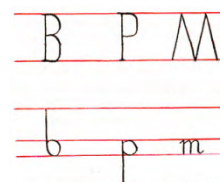
Writing Systems

Old English was first written in runes. The characters are known as the futhorc from the Old English pronunciation of the first six runes. It was developed from the 24-character elder futhark, which was a writing system used by Germanic peoples. In Scandinavia, the script was simplified to the younger futhark, while the Anglo-Saxons extended it to 31 distinct characters (however, the letter sequence and letter inventory could vary depending on location and time, making it impossible to define a unified list of runes). Anglo-Saxon runes were likely to have been used from the 5th century onwards, until they were gradually replaced by the Old English Roman alphabet introduced by Irish missionaries. The Anglo-Saxon alphabet included two modified Latin letters *æ* and *ð* (= th) and two others developed from the runic alphabet *ƿ* (= w) and *þ* (= th).



The Anglo-Saxon runic script

The system of Roman script is divided into two main categories: majuscule (with large letters) and minuscule (with small letters). Letters written in majuscule fit between two lines. It takes much longer to write in majuscule, because each pen stroke has to be newly placed, and the letters are not connected. The second category consists of minuscule script, which needs a four-line scheme. The letters have upper and lower lengths and are often connected with bows. These scripts can be written more quickly because the pen does not have to be lifted so often. Minuscule scripts were used for less prestigious texts, such as correspondence and administration. One script that developed as a standard in medieval Europe is the Carolingian minuscule. It was created under the Emperor Charlemagne (hence its name) and is a direct ancestor of most modern-day scripts and typefaces.



Majuscules and minuscules

Questions:

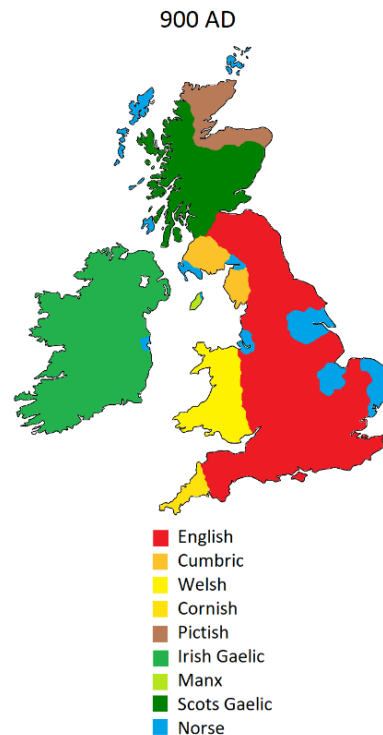
- (1) Why did paper replace papyrus and parchment? Which writing materials did people use in the past? What advantages/disadvantages did they have?
- (2) What is the advantage of a minuscule script?
- (3) The word book evolved from the Old English word *boc*, which stems from a Germanic word that is related to *beech* ('Buche'). What does that imply?

D) The Languages of Early Medieval Britain

With the collapse of the Roman Empire around the year 400 AD, a new era was about to start, namely the Middle Ages, which conventionally lasted from 500 to 1500. The Romans had lived in Britain alongside the native Celts. They spoke varieties of insular Celtic, as opposed to continental Celtic dialects that were, for example, spoken in the area of Gaul (modern France). Today, continental Celtic languages have died out and there are only a few insular Celtic varieties left: Welsh, Irish Gaelic and Scots Gaelic.

After the Romans had left around the year 400 AD, further invasions were soon to follow: in c. 450, Germanic tribes from present-day Germany and Denmark invaded Britain and gradually established settlements there. These settlements were only temporary at first, but the Germanic tribes – the Angles, the Saxons and the Jutes⁹ – settled very quickly. The Germanic tribes brought with them their Germanic dialects, which, being separated from their continental origins, evolved in Britain and eventually gave rise to the language known as Old English. Old English was used as a spoken language from c. 450/500 onwards. The first written records of Old English can be dated to c. 700, by which time the Roman alphabet had been established in Britain. Old English was then further split into four major dialects: Northumbrian, Mercian, West Saxon, and Kentish. The Old English language coexisted with the Celtic language, and it can safely be assumed that there was intermarriage between Celts and Anglo-Saxons, which combined their cultures. Celtic influence can marginally be felt in the English vocabulary, for instance in words such as *clan*.

Towards the end of the sixth century, Latin, which had already been on the British Isles in the pre-Old English period, found its way to Britain once again: it was brought by Christian missionaries along with their religion, the language of the Church and their manuscript culture. Latin was then above all used in ecclesiastical¹⁰ contexts. Another wave of invasions followed in the course of the following few centuries: in the ninth, tenth and eleventh centuries, there were successive waves of Viking raids, seafarers from Norway, Sweden and Denmark that plundered all that was in their way and destroyed



Languages spoken in the British Isles in 900 AD

⁹ The names of all three tribes live on in areas in Denmark and Northern Germany, cf. Jutland, Anglia (in Schleswig-Holstein), Lower Saxony.

¹⁰ adjective of *church*

churches, thereby trying to re-establish their pagan cults¹¹. King Alfred of Wessex successfully managed to temporarily introduce a period of peace through a division of England into Wessex and the Danelaw area, a territory under Danish law. The Vikings mostly spoke Old Norse¹² and their presence in Britain was also felt linguistically: they left many words in the English language – at times even belonging to the core vocabulary of English – and their influence was and still is particularly strong in the former Danelaw area, for instance with place names. Words such as *take*, *die*, *sky* and *skirt* are of Old Norse origin. The Old English period ends with the arrival of William the Conqueror from France in 1066, which marked a significant shift not only in socio-political but also in linguistic terms, when French was introduced as the language of the new ruling elite.

Languages can change radically over time: Old English was so different from Modern English that it cannot be translated today without the help of a glossary: for instance, in Old English the word for 'head' was *heafod*, the word for 'holy' *halig*, and the word for 'mouse' *mus*. It is interesting to note that Old English was much closer to (Swiss) German than Modern English – some words are even identical (see the *mus* example). Similarly, drastic changes also happened in other languages, such as in German (Old High German *furimugan* gave us Modern German *Vermögen*), or also within other language families, such as within the Romance language family with French (Old French *ialz* gave us Modern French *yeux* 'eyes').

Questions:

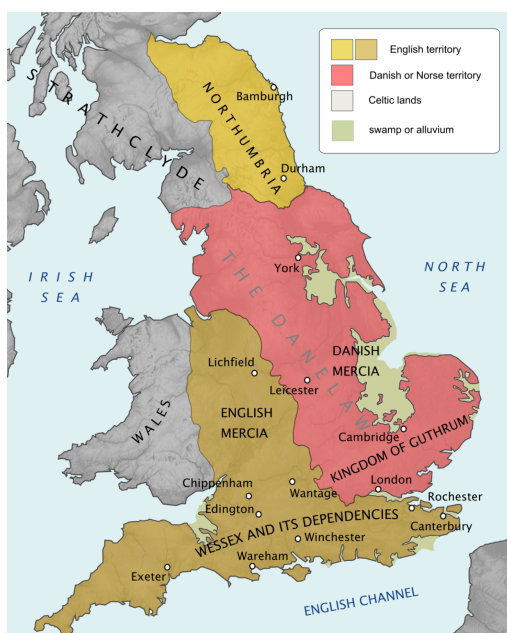
- (1) What languages were spoken in Britain in the Early Middle Ages? Explain how they arrived there.
- (2) Why and how do languages change? Give an example.

¹¹ non-Christian worship

¹² ancestor of modern Scandinavian languages

E) The Anglo-Saxons: the Native Speakers of Old English

England, which had been under Roman rule for almost 400 years, was abandoned by the Roman Emperor in the year 410: he withdrew his legions from Britain because he needed soldiers to defend Italy from a barbarian invasion. After the Romans had left, the Anglo-Saxons established their rule over England. They were Germanic peoples who had migrated to England from the coasts of northern Europe in the 5th and 6th century. These migrants spoke a language that we now call Old English. At first, the Anglo-Saxons were mercenaries¹³ in the service of Roman and local British rulers. However, they succeeded in taking over power in all of England by the end of the 6th century. Anglo-Saxon England was initially divided into several small kingdoms. The most important ones were Wessex, Northumbria, East Anglia and Mercia. In 927 AD, King Æthelstan united these independent kingdoms into one realm: the Kingdom of England.



The Danelaw (red) in England, 878

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:England_878.svg

The second half of the Anglo-Saxon period in England was defined by Viking invasions. Starting in the 9th century, Vikings from Scandinavia raided England. Soon after, people from Scandinavia settled in north-eastern England and founded their own realms. This territory that was under Viking rule became known as the Danelaw. This meant that Danish law – and not Anglo-Saxon law – applied in that area.

An important Anglo-Saxon king in this period was Alfred the Great (848-899). He was the king of Wessex and organized the resistance against the Vikings. Today, Alfred is also known for promoting education and literature in Old English during his reign. In fact, several works of Old English literature have survived and still exist today. The most famous piece of their literature is an epic poem called “Beowulf”. It follows the adventures of the hero Beowulf (literally ‘bee-wolf’), who has to defeat two dangerous monsters and a mighty dragon.

The Anglo-Saxons were also masterful metalsmiths and produced ornamented metalworks and jewellery. Archaeologists have excavated many artefacts from the Anglo-Saxon period, such as the Sutton Hoo helmet, which is believed to have belonged to a king.

¹³ soldiers

Another impressive work of Anglo-Saxon art is the Fuller Brooch. It is made of silver and depicts personifications of the five senses.



The Fuller Brooch

(© British Museum, CC BY-SA 4.0)

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=80450363>



A replica of the Sutton Hoo helmet

https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_SHR-2

The Anglo-Saxon period came to an end in the year 1066. At the battle of Hastings, the last Anglo-Saxon king Harold II was defeated by his cousin William the Conqueror, who was the Duke of Normandy. William's invasion of England became known as the Norman Conquest, which marked the end of Anglo-Saxon rule in England.

Questions:

- (1) Who were the Anglo-Saxons and where did they come from?
- (2) Which important events shaped the Anglo-Saxon period?
- (3) What were some of the cultural achievements of the Anglo-Saxons?
- (4) What uses did an Anglo-Saxon king have for an ornamented helmet, such as the Sutton Hoo Helmet?