The Irish and the Anglo-Saxons
55 B.C.–911 A.D.

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The Alfred jewel

The helmet of an Anglo-Saxon king

- 410 A.D. Roman legions leave Britain
- 597 A.D. Pope Gregory I sends monks from Rome to England
- C. 700 A.D. *Beowulf* is written
- 835 A.D. Danes begin raiding England
SECTION 1  Celtic Ireland

With the coming of the Anglo-Saxons, most of the Celts who lived in Britain fled to Ireland. In time, Ireland became the major center of Celtic culture. Ireland had no cities. The people were divided into clans that lived in small villages. Most farmed and
raised cattle. The more cattle a person owned, the wealthier that person was considered to be.

The Irish were a seafaring people, too. They made boats called coracles (kor’ uh kuhls) by stretching cow hides over a wooden frame. Some coracles were large enough to hold as many as 30 people. The boats handled well at sea and were used for travel, trade, and fishing.

The Irish were able to remain free of Germanic attacks because their island was located farther out in the Atlantic Ocean than Britain. Scholars, artists, merchants, and monks from many parts of Europe came to Ireland because of its peace and safety.

Irish scholars and artists were influenced by Christianity. The Irish Church was founded by Saint Patrick. Born in Britain in the 400s A.D., Saint Patrick was kidnapped when he was young and taken to Ireland by Irish pirates. Later, he escaped to Europe, where he studied to be a priest. After becoming a bishop, he returned to Ireland and converted the people to Christianity. He spread his message all through the island and set up many new churches.

Ireland lost contact with Rome during the Germanic invasions of the Roman Empire. This meant the Pope could no longer lead the Irish Church. So, the Church turned to its abbots. Many were related to the heads of the different clans. Each clan supported its own monastery.

The monasteries became centers of Irish life, although many were in places that were not accessible—on rocky coasts or steep hills. Most monasteries were made up of a group of huts with a wooden stockade around them. Later, some monasteries were built of stone. Because of poor transportation and communication, church organization was weak. So, each monastery took charge of its own affairs. Irish monks soon began to follow practices different from those of the Roman Church. They wore their hair in a different way and celebrated Easter on a different day. Their rituals were not the same as those of the Romans.

Irish monasteries set down few rules. A monk was free to move from one monastery to another. Many monks chose to be hermits. Others set up schools to teach Christianity. Still others became missionaries. They sailed the North Atlantic and the Irish Sea seeking new converts and looking for islands on which to build new monasteries.

One of the best-known monks was Saint Columba (kuh luhm’ buh). He set up a monastery on Iona (i’ o’ nuh), an island off the west coast of Scotland. From his base on Iona, Saint Columba did missionary work among the many non-Christian Celts along the coast.

Monks from Iona went to northern England to preach to the Anglo-Saxons. Other Irish monks went to northern Europe,
IRISH MONASTERY  Irish Christian monks established monasteries throughout the British Isles and Europe. Many of their stone living quarters, like the ones shown here, still stand today along the rocky coast of western Ireland. What attracted monks to Ireland?

where they built monasteries and churches. Many Irish scholars became part of Charlemagne’s palace school. They helped spread Christianity and learning throughout his empire.

Section 1 Assessment

1. Define: coracles.
2. How did the Irish earn a living?
3. Why did Irish monasteries take charge of their own affairs?

Critical Thinking

4. Predicting Consequences  What might have happened in Britain if the Romans had not left in 410 A.D.?

Graphic Organizer Activity

5. Draw this diagram, and use it to show the cause and effects of Irish isolation from Germanic invasions.

[Diagram: Cause, Irish Isolation, Effects]
Alfred the Great

849 A.D.–899 A.D.

Anglo-Saxon King
Son of a Saxon king, Alfred led the resistance against Danish invaders. He made his kingdom the rallying point for other kingdoms, paving the way for the unification of England. In 886 A.D., he captured London and was soon recognized as king of all England. One of his greatest achievements was the creation of a navy—the basis of England’s future strength as a nation.

SECTION 2  Christianity

Ireland was Christian, but the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of Britain were not. They followed the Germanic religions. Then, Pope Gregory I decided to convert the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity. Legend has it that he saw some Anglo-Saxon boys waiting in the marketplace of Rome to be sold into slavery. Gregory noticed their light skin, handsome faces, and blonde hair and asked where their home was. When he learned that the boys were Angles, he said they had the faces of angels and should be Christians.

Therefore, in 597 A.D., Pope Gregory sent a mission of 41 monks from Rome to England under the leadership of Augustine. The missionaries landed in the small kingdom of Kent in southern England. Kent’s queen, Bertha, was already a Christian, but its king, Ethelbert (eth’ uhl bert), was not. At first, Ethelbert was very suspicious of Augustine and the other monks. He would meet with them only in the open air where their “magic” could not hurt him. Within a year, however, Ethelbert became a Christian. He allowed Augustine to build a church in the town of Canterbury (kant’ uhr ber ē) and to teach the people about Christianity.

The Anglo-Saxons were quick to accept the new religion, and by 700 A.D. all England was Christian. The Pope was head of the Church. Monasteries were built throughout England. As in Ireland, they became centers of religion and culture.

One monk, Bede (be ¯d), was a great scholar. He wrote the first history of the English people. He also brought to England the Christian way of dating events from the year of Jesus’ birth.

Although they accepted Christianity, the Anglo-Saxons kept much of their old culture. They told old legends about brave warriors fighting monsters and dragons. One such legend was about a warrior named Beowulf (bā’ uh wulf). Beowulf, one of the earliest known tales, is an epic poem of almost 3,200 lines. Created by an unknown poet in about 700, it was passed along by oral tradition for two centuries. Finally, in the 900s, the work was written down. In colorful verses it describes how the hero warrior Beowulf goes from place to place fighting wicked people and ferocious animals. His greatest battle is when he defeats a horrible monster named Grindel. The language in which Beowulf was written is a form of English called Old English. This poem is one of the most important works of Anglo-Saxon literature.

During this time, stories, tales, and historical events were told orally, sung, or recited. Beowulf and other early literature became the source of later Anglo-Saxon poetry and music. With the increased influence of the Christian Church in western
Europe, religion would also provide the subjects for much early literature. This literature reflected the lives of the people of the time and their culture.

**Alfred the Great**  
About 835 A.D., bands of Danes began attacking the coast of England. Before long, they were making permanent settlements in conquered areas. The English kingdoms decided to resist the invaders. They chose as their leader Alfred, King of Wessex (wes’ iks). Alfred later became known as Alfred the Great, one of England’s best-loved rulers.

Alfred knew the Anglo-Saxons were not yet strong enough to drive out the Danes. To gain time to build a stronger army, he paid the Danes a sum of money each year to leave England alone. When he felt his army was strong enough, he refused to make any more payments. The Danes invaded England and defeated the

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**Fun Facts**  
**Early History** The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, begun in the reign of Alfred the Great, records events in England from the beginning of the Christian era to the middle of the 12th century. It is the earliest known history of a European people written in the vernacular, or everyday spoken language.

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**Linking Across Time**  
**Keeping the Peace**  
In Anglo-Saxon times, the job of peacekeeping fell to local nobles known as sheriffs (below). In the United States, the job of sheriff now belongs to a paid public official (right). What conditions in England made it necessary for nobles to enforce the law?
Anglo-Saxons. The next year, Alfred again gathered his army and met the Danes in battle. This time, the Danes were defeated.

Alfred continued to strengthen his army. He built the first English fighting ships and constructed fortresses throughout England. The entire country rallied behind him. He was no longer just King of Wessex but King of England.

Alfred never became strong enough to drive the Danes completely out of England. So, he signed a treaty with them. The treaty recognized the right of the Danes to rule the northeast part of England, an area that became known as the Danelaw (dän’ lah). In return, the Danes promised to remain inside the Danelaw and not try to conquer more English land. In later years, the English took control of the Danelaw and made it part of their kingdom.

The Danes had destroyed part of the English city of London. Alfred had it rebuilt. Before long, it became the country’s leading city. To gain the continued loyalty and obedience of the people, Alfred set forth new laws based on old Anglo-Saxon customs. These customs protected the weak against the strong and stressed honesty in making agreements.

**MAP STUDY**

**THE WORLD IN SPATIAL TERMS**
The Danes had conquered an area north of the Thames River and established permanent settlements there. What bodies of water bordered Danelaw? What two cities were located south of Danelaw?
Alfred was well-educated and interested in learning. He did much to educate the English. Like Charlemagne, Alfred started a palace school to train nobles’ sons for government posts. At that time, books were generally written in Latin, a language most English church and government officials did not know. Alfred’s scholars translated the books into English. So that the people would become familiar with their history, Alfred had monks begin a record of English history starting with Roman times.

**The Government** The government of Anglo-Saxon England centered on the king. A council of lords generally elected kings from among members of the royal family. After 700 A.D., the Church usually crowned the new rulers. The king directed the central government, which was made up of royal servants and advisers. They handled the king’s needs and wishes.

The central government, however, was too weak to govern the whole country. So, the king set up local governments. England was divided into districts called *shire* (shírz). Each was run by a *sheriff*, who was a local noble chosen by the king. The sheriff collected money, enforced the law, called out soldiers when needed, and told the king what was happening in the shire.

The king and his household moved around instead of remaining in a capital city. Whatever area the royal household was in was under the *king’s peace*, or royal protection. Lawless acts were not allowed. Anyone who committed a crime was punished under the king’s laws rather than local laws. In time, the king’s peace spread to all areas of the kingdom, whether the king was there or not. This helped unite Anglo-Saxon England.

Nobles and church officials gave the king advice on how to run the country. They could not, however, order a king to act against his will. A group of nobles and church leaders, known as the *witenagemot* (wit uhn uh’ guh mōt), met with the king to talk over problems. Each member of the group was known as a *witan* (wi’ tuhn), or wiseman. The group approved laws drawn up by the king and his household. It also acted as a court.

**The People** The people in Anglo-Saxon England were generally divided into two classes. One was the nobles. An Anglo-Saxon became a noble by birth or as a reward for special service to the king. Nobles had to attend the witenagemot, keep peace in local areas, and serve the king in war. Noblemen wore pants and tunics covered by silk or fur cloaks. Noblewomen wore tunics and long cloaks held in place on each shoulder by a brooch.

The king rewarded many nobles with gifts of gold, silver, horses, and weapons. He also gave them estates throughout the kingdom. As a result, nobles spent a great deal of time moving from place to place with their families and servants. A noble’s house had a large hall where meals were served and guests
entertained. Its walls were covered with *tapestries* (tap’ uh strēz), or woven hangings with pictures on them. Tables and benches were the hall’s only furniture. The bedrooms of nobles and their families were next to the hall or in a separate building.

The other class of people in Anglo-Saxon England was the peasants. They lived in small villages on or near a noble’s estate and led a hard life. Most did not own their own land but worked fields belonging to the noble. Every year, the noble redivided the land, and each peasant received different strips. This was done to make sure that peasants would be treated equally. They helped each other farm the land by sharing tools and oxen. The peasants kept part of the crop for food and gave part to the noble. In return, the noble protected his peasants from enemy attacks.

Peasants lived in one-room wood and plaster huts. Both the family and the animals shared the same room. An open fireplace, which provided heat during winter, stood in the center. Smoke from the fire escaped through a hole in the straw roof.

**Section 2 Assessment**

1. **Define**:
   - shires, sheriff, king’s peace, witenagemot, witan.
2. How did Christianity come to the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of England?
3. What did Alfred do to unite Anglo-Saxon England?

**Critical Thinking**

4. **Drawing Conclusions** Why do you think Alfred was given the title of “the Great”?

**Graphic Organizer Activity**

5. Draw this diagram, and use it to record the things that nobles and peasants gave to each other.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nobles Gave</th>
<th>Peasants Gave</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Chapter Summary & Study Guide**

1. After Roman legions left Britain in 410 A.D., it was overrun by the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes, who united to become the Anglo-Saxons.
2. After the Anglo-Saxons drove most of the Celts from Britain, Ireland became a center of Celtic culture.
3. Monasteries became centers of Irish life.
5. When bands of Danes began raiding England in the 800s, the Anglo-Saxons united behind Alfred the Great.
6. English kings directed the central government, but they relied on help from local governments, nobles, and church leaders.

**Self-Check Quiz**

Visit the *Human Heritage* Web site at [humanheritage.glencoe.com](http://humanheritage.glencoe.com) and click on Chapter 19—Self-Check Quiz to assess your understanding of this chapter.
CHAPTER 19 Assessment

Using Key Terms

Write a paragraph to be used in a book on the Celts and Anglo-Saxons describing one part of their lives. Use the following words in your paragraph.

- coracles
- shires
- sheriff
- king’s peace
- witenagemot
- witan

Understanding Main Ideas

1. Why did the Romans have trouble ruling Britain?
2. Why did Roman rule in Britain crumble during the 300s A.D.?
3. What happened to Britain when the Roman legions left?
4. What country became the major center of Celtic culture?
5. Why did the Irish church turn to its abbots for leadership?
6. Why did Alfred the Great pay the Danes to leave England alone?
7. Why did the king set up local governments in England?
8. What were the duties of nobles?

Critical Thinking

1. What effect did the Germanic invasions of the Roman Empire have on the history of England?
2. How did Ireland’s location affect the development of Celtic culture? Explain your answer.
3. Would you agree or disagree that the king had too much power in Anglo-Saxon England? Explain.
4. What parts of an Anglo-Saxon noble’s life would you have liked? What parts would you not have liked?

Graphic Organizer Activity

Culture Create a diagram like this one, and use it to compare the development of Christianity in Ireland and in the Frankish Empire.

Geography in History

The World in Spatial Terms Refer to the map on page 294, and determine the most direct route from Edinburgh to London. How far would a person using this route have to travel? How much farther would that person have to travel to meet with priests of the church in Canterbury?

Using Your Journal

Review the role of a witan in the Anglo-Saxon government. Imagine you are a witan today working with the President of the United States. Write a letter to the President explaining the problems you think should be solved.