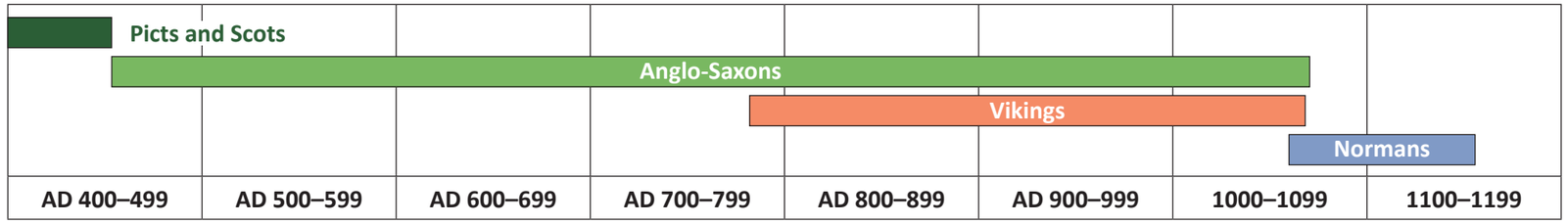
Invasion

After the Romans

After the Romans left Britannia in AD 410, many towns fell into disrepair and the country became vulnerable to attack. This marked the beginning of a period of invasions from different groups: Picts and Scots from Scotland and Ireland; Anglo-Saxons from Germany, the Netherlands and Denmark; Vikings from Scandinavia and Normans from France. This time in history is called the early Middle Ages.



Timeline showing the periods of invasion and settlement in Britain from AD 410–1199

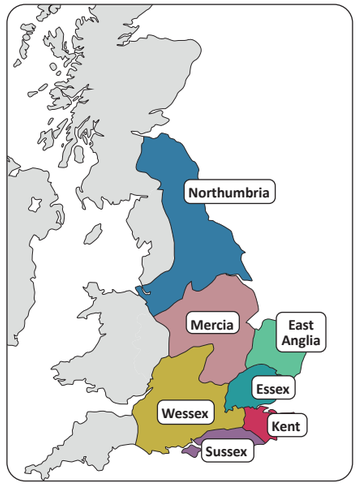
Anglo-Saxons

Invasion

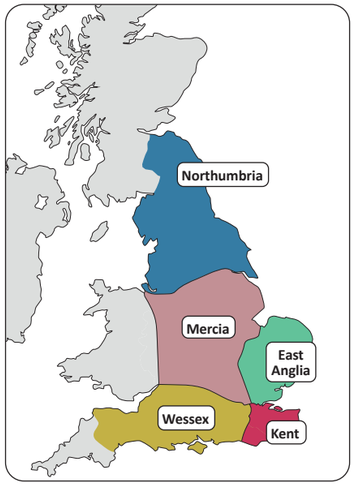
The Picts and Scots tried to invade England after AD 410, because the Britons were undefended. In AD 449, a British leader, Vortigern, asked Hengist and Horsa, two Jutes, to come to England to help the Britons. However, the Jutes realised that the land in England was good for farming, so they, along with the Angles and Saxons, invaded England.

Settlement

The Anglo-Saxons invaded the east and south coasts of England and pushed the Celtic Britons west. They split England into seven kingdoms, which became known as the heptarchy. The rulers of these kingdoms fought each other for land and power. By AD 800, there were five main kingdoms: East Anglia, Kent, Mercia, Northumbria and Wessex. Celtic Britons still lived in Wales, Cornwall, Scotland and Ireland.



The heptarchy



The five English kingdoms cAD 800

Christianity

Christianity declined in England after the Romans left, so Irish and Roman Christians were sent to Britain to reestablish Christianity. Monks like St Columba, St Aiden and St Augustine converted the Anglo-Saxon kings, and then their people, to Christianity. They also established churches and monasteries.

Monasteries

Monasteries were significant in Anglo-Saxon England because they spread Christianity, promoted reading and writing and provided help for the poor. Monasteries were usually built in isolated places and were rich with money and precious objects.

Image from: Getty Images/Heritage Images

Everyday life

Anglo-Saxon society had a hierarchy, with a king at the top. Landowners, called thegns, were below the king and peasant farmers worked on the thegn's land. Slaves were at the bottom of the hierarchy. Most Anglo-Saxons were farmers or craftspeople. They lived in homes made from wood or wattle and daub, with a single room and central fireplace. Settlements were surrounded by high fences to protect animals and villages from thieves and attack.

Legacy

There are still aspects of life in modern England that date back to the Anglo-Saxons, including the English language, the rule of law, place names, Christianity and even the layout of England itself.

Uniting England

Alfred the Great's grandson, Athelstan, was a successful Anglo-Saxon warrior. During his reign from AD 924–939, he defeated Welsh, Scottish, Celtic and Viking kings to become the first King of all England. England has been united since the reign of Athelstan.

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Vikings

Invasion

The Vikings first visited England in AD 789, when they sailed from Norway to the Isle of Portland on the south coast and killed the reeve, who had greeted them on the shore. However, their first major raid was four years later, on the monastery at Lindisfarne.

Viking raid on Lindisfarne

In AD 793, the Vikings arrived on Lindisfarne and destroyed the monastery buildings, stole precious objects, killed and injured the monks and took some as slaves. The Christian world was shocked by this raid on a remote monastery and monks wrote about the attack.

Resisting the Vikings

Over the next 60 years, the Vikings continued to raid England in the spring and summer, before returning to Scandinavia in the winter. To try to stop the raids, some Anglo-Saxon kings paid the Vikings money, called *Danegeld*, to leave. However, the Vikings returned, and *Danegeld* became another way for them to make money.

Great Heathen Army

After 60 years of summer raids, a huge army of 3000 Vikings arrived on the south coast to invade England in AD 865. They conquered every kingdom other than Wessex and took control of Jorvik (York).

Everyday life

The Vikings lived in a similar way to the Anglo-Saxons. Most Vikings were farmers or craftspeople, but they were also warriors who carried out frequent raids. Men and boys trained in boat building, weapon making, crafts and combat. They lived in longhouses, with a central fire and thatched roof. When the Vikings first invaded, they were pagans and worshipped many gods. Over time, they converted to Christianity.

Alfred the Great

Alfred the Great was the King of Wessex from AD 871–899. He defeated the Viking leader, Guthrum, at the Battle of Edington in AD 876. He made peace with Guthrum and insisted that he was baptised as a Christian. Alfred the Great split England into Viking Danelaw and Anglo-Saxon Wessex.

Normans

Invasion

When the King of England, Edward the Confessor, died in 1066, he left no successor to the throne. His adviser, Harold Godwinson, was crowned king, but the King of Norway, Harald Hardrada, and William, Duke of Normandy, also claimed the throne. Harold Godwinson defeated Harald Hardrada at the Battle of Stamford Bridge in the north of England and then marched south to fight William, Duke of Normandy at the Battle of Hastings. William, Duke of Normandy won the battle and Harold Godwinson was killed. He was crowned king on Christmas Day in 1066 and became known as William the Conqueror. This was the end of Anglo-Saxon or Viking rule in England.

Bayeux tapestry, depicting the Battle of Hastings

Glossary

Christianity	A religion based on the teachings of Jesus Christ.
conquer	Overcome and take control of a place or people.
Danegeld	A tax collected from the Anglo-Saxon people paid to the Viking invaders in exchange for peace.
invasion	When a foreign army enters a country by force.
monastery	A building where monks live, work, study and pray, separate from the outside world.
monk	A member of a male religious community who lives in a monastery.
pagan	A person who believes in many gods, or does not follow one of the world's major religions.
raid	A sudden attack, which aims to cause damage.
reeve	A local official in Anglo-Saxon England.
Scandinavia	An area of Europe, which includes Sweden, Norway and Denmark.
wattle and daub	A traditional building material made from woven twigs or sticks and mud.

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