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A SHORT HISTORY OF THE ANGLO-SAXONS

Henrietta Leyser

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‘*A Short History of the Anglo-Saxons* opens new windows on a distant yet very present world at a corner of early medieval Europe. The book provides a valuable guide for the newcomer and yet still throws up surprises for those already familiar with the period. Henrietta Leyser revels in the new work undertaken on the Anglo-Saxon period in recent years. She reveals how much we now do know, while at the same time reminding us how much we still don’t, and raises provocative questions that those of us who wish to understand the period should think about. This little book packs in a great deal.’

– Ryan Lavelle, Reader in Early Medieval History, University of Winchester

‘Henrietta Leyser not only sets out the tumultuous events of Anglo-Saxon history with elegant clarity and eloquent cogency, but also explores many of its byways with a pithy wit. General readers will be drawn into a compelling narrative ranging over many centuries, and illustrated throughout with a wealth of translated quotations from contemporary sources. Students and specialists, meanwhile, will appreciate the breezy ease with which this sometimes baffling and always complex material is summarized and analysed by its distinguished author. This is a beautifully crafted and well-researched book.’

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To my children
Conrad, Otto line, Crispin and Matilda
and my grandchildren
Francesca, Joshua, Hester, Hildie, Riddley, Felix and Tenar

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Preface

It was an act of great faith on the part of Alex Wright to ask me to write this book and of considerable temerity on my part to have agreed. In my research as a historian I have generally worked on periods after the Norman Conquest of 1066, but in my teaching the Anglo-Saxons have long held my attention. The need to consider so many different kinds of evidence and the problems to be faced in scrutinizing such sources as have survived was a challenge that before long became something of a preoccupation. In the chapters that follow I chart a rapid journey from what used to be called 'the adventus', when various migrants arrived in England in the fifth century, until the Norman victory at Hastings in 1066. Since the days when I was myself an undergraduate both these events have come to be seen as considerably more complex than once was thought; it is some of this complexity that I hope to have shown in the following pages.

The great historian of the Anglo-Saxons, James Campbell, died as this little book was nearing completion. During visits I paid to him in his final months, I told him, with some trepidation, what I was doing: 'I hope' (he said) 'you have plenty to say about the Germanic homelands of all those who came.' I had to confess I had not and it fills me with considerable apprehension to consider in what other ways this book would have disappointed him. But he will also have known how behind it lay the inspiration of his scholarship and its power to transform our understanding of this period of English history.

I have many debts: to St Peter's College, Oxford for entrusting me with undergraduates to teach and for the pleasure and privilege

of still being able to use its library; to my friends for their continued encouragement, support and incomparable fellowship. I would like also to thank Kate Sykes for her careful reading of the whole manuscript and to Lisa Goodrum, David Campbell and the I.B.Tauris team together with Kim Storry at Fakenham Prepress Solutions for all their work in the book's final stages; Susannah Jayes for invaluable help with the illustrations and Gustav Zamore for his patience and exemplary copy editing of a very messy manuscript. Errors that remain are of course my own.

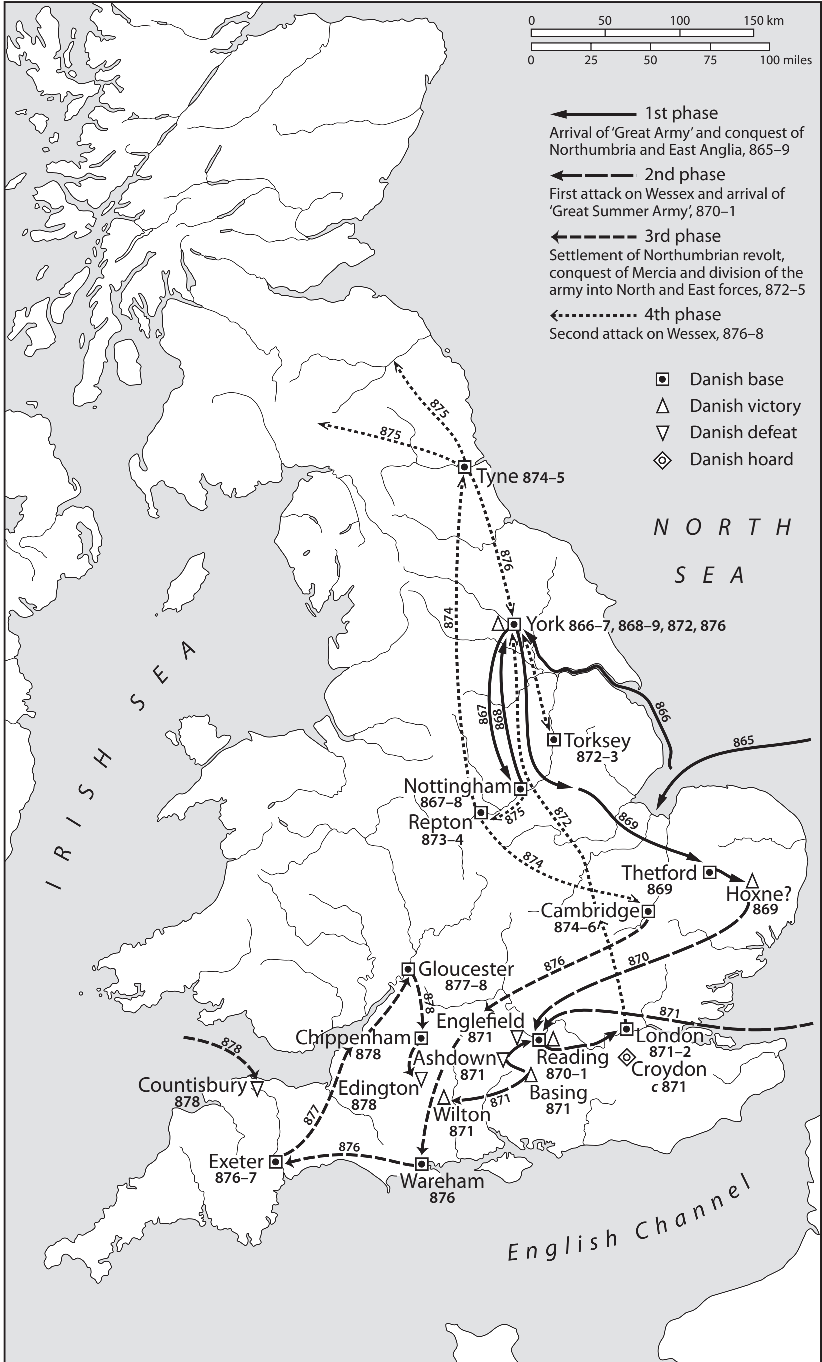
Timeline

410	Roman legions leave Britain.
429	Visit of St Germanus.
	[further fifth-century dates in general too uncertain for inclusion]
592	Aethelfrith: king of Bernicia (604 also of Deira).
597	St Augustine, sent by Pope Gregory, arrives in Kent to convert the English.
616	Penda, king of Mercia defeats and kills Aethelfrith.
	Accession in Northumbria of Edwin of Deira.
627	Baptism of Edwin.
633	Death of Edwin at the Battle of Hatfield Chase.
634	Oswald (son of Aethelfrith) becomes king of Northumbria.
635	Aidan (from Iona) arrives at Lindisfarne as Northumbria's missionary.
642	Battle of Maserfelth: Mercian victory. King Oswald is killed.
651	Death of Aidan.
655	Battle of the Winwaed: death of Penda of Mercia.
	Christianization of Mercia.
*c.*657	St Hilda: abbess of Whitby.
*c.*660	Wilfrid: abbot of Ripon.
664	Synod of Whitby: disputed date of Easter settled.
668	Theodore of Tarsus: archbishop of Canterbury.
671/3	Foundation of Hexham by Bishop Wilfrid.
673	Foundation of Ely community by Aethelthryth (formerly Queen of Northumbria).

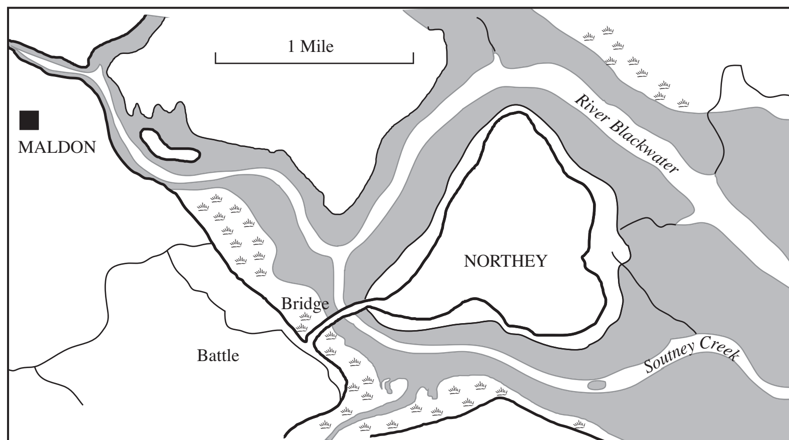
673/4	Foundation of Wearmouth by Benedict Biscop.
c.681	Foundation of Jarrow by King Ecgfrith of Northumbria.
687	Death of Cuthbert, bishop of Lindisfarne.
688	Death of Cadwalla of Wessex, last pagan king (but dies baptized). Succeeded by Ine.
705	Aldhelm appointed Bishop of Sherborne.
c.731	Bede completes his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*.
754	Martyrdom of St Boniface.
757	Death of Aethelbald, king of the Mercians. Accession of Offa.
787	Lichfield given archiepiscopal status.
793	Vikings sack Lindisfarne.
797	Death of Offa.
871	Accession of Alfred as King of Wessex.
878	Alfred's victory over the Viking army at Edington
899	Death of King Alfred; accession of Edward the Elder.
924	Accession of Athelstan. Reconquest of territory from Vikings.
937	Athelstan's victory at Brunanburh.
939	Death of King Athelstan.
959	Accession of Edgar as 'king of the English'.
973	Council of Winchester endorses *Regularis Concordia*. Coronation of Edgar at Bath.
978	Accession of Aethelred the Unready.
991	Battle of Maldon signals Viking return.
1016	Death of Aethelred the Unready. Cnut completes his conquest of England and becomes its king.
1037	Harold Harefoot succeeds Cnut.
1040	Harthacnut succeeds Harold.
1042	Edward the Confessor succeeds Harthacnut.
1051/2	Rebellion of Godwine family against Edward.
1066	January: death of Edward. Accession of Harold. September: Battle of Fulford Bridge. October: the Battle of Hastings. December: Crowning of William the Conqueror.

Map 1: Bishoprics and selected minsters

Map 2: English kingdoms *c.*850



Map 3: Movement of Viking Armies before the battle of Edington, 878



Map 4: The Battle of Maldon, 991

The Battle of Maldon was fought between Ealdorman Byrhtnoth of East Anglia and a newly arrived Viking army. The Vikings had offered to sail away in return for tribute but this Byrhtnoth refused, challenging the Vikings instead to fight. In the course of the battle Byrhtnoth allowed the Vikings to cross the causeway (illustrated here). The result was disastrous for the Anglo-Saxons. Byrhtnoth himself was killed as were many of his men but the battle was commemorated in a poem notable for its insistence on the heroic nature of both Byrhtnoth and his loyal followers, as well as its indictment of those who fled once Byrhtnoth had been killed. Here, from the poem, is Byrhtnoth's speech to the Viking messenger who has asked for tribute:

Go, viking herald, answer back again,
Tell your men a much more hostile tale:
Here stands an earl undaunted with his troop,
One who intends to save this fatherland,
Ethelred's kingdom, and my liege lord's land
And people. It shall be the heathen host
That falls in fight. It seems to me too shameful
That you should take our tribute to your ships
Without a fight, now that you have advanced
So far onto our soil. You shall not win
Treasure so easily; but spear and swords
Must first decide between us, the grim sport
Of war, before we pay our tribute to you.'

trans. Richard Hamer, *A choice of Anglo-Saxon Verse* (London, 1970), p. 53.

Introduction

> You see, my boy, before the Normans, the English had no real civilization: they had been living in the Dark Ages, after all.
>
> (Field Marshal Montgomery in conversation with Michael Wood, in 1966, quoted in Michael Wood, *In Search of England*)[1]

Anglo-Saxon history, consigned once to the 'Dark Ages' that were thought to have followed on from the collapse of the Roman Empire in the fifth century, has for some time now been enjoying a renaissance. The unearthing of the great ship burial at Sutton Hoo in 1939 scotched forever any idea that the Germanic peoples who had migrated to England after the departure of the Roman legions in 410 were no more than poverty-stricken barbarians, reduced to subsistence farming. The development now of new techniques – DNA samples, for example, and the use of isotopes – is providing innovative ways of deciphering the incomers' origins and population patterns. Moreover, quite unexpected and random discoveries are, with seeming regularity, being unearthed through the use of metal detectors, the Staffordshire Hoard of 2009 being the most spectacular to date. Anglo-Saxon history is then a fast moving field, exciting in its interdisciplinarity. Even at the time of writing news is coming in of important archeological work in progress at St Cuthbert's original monastery of Lindisfarne.

The chapters that follow aim to provide an introduction to some of the current debates in Anglo-Saxon history thrown up by such discoveries as these and to show why the period is an essential part of English history. England was not born fully fledged but it was in this period that it emerged, assuming a shape that is still

recognizable today. Up until 1974, when the shires of England were reorganized, the boundaries were essentially those which Anglo-Saxon rulers had determined; the great monasteries of Anglo-Saxon England now serve as Anglican cathedrals but their earlier traditions have not been forgotten. Edward the Confessor's abbey of Westminster has remained the principal site of coronations ever since its re-foundation by Edward, the form of service derived from the 973 ceremony mandated by King Edgar.

But history is never, of course, only or even principally about the search for roots or continuities. Above all, it is about understanding the complexity of the past and how it is always possible to ask new questions from what we know and indeed from what we do not. My hope therefore is that the chapters that follow will provide not so much answers but rather frameworks for enquiry which readers can pursue for themselves in their search for the making of Anglo-Saxon England.

The book was completed in the summer of 2016 at the time of the referendum which asked all British citizens whether they wished to remain in the European Union or whether to leave it. Many 'leavers', having won the vote, expressed their delight at having 'won back England from Europe'. It was impossible, as I wrote my final pages during those days, not to be struck by how differently both Europe and England (not even named then as 'England' for most of the book) were seen during my time period. Around AD 400 Europe, originally a mythical land, now shared the universe with Asia and Africa, and was fast becoming equated with Christendom. Britain was still (just) a Roman province and all freeborn Britons were, automatically, Roman citizens.

What may have happened to these 'Romano-British' after the departure of the Roman legions in 410 is discussed in Chapter 1. Chapter 2 begins with the mission sent by a pope to bring Christianity to the 'English people' but it is not until after the Viking invasions and the reconquest of territory the Vikings had won that the country known as 'England' came into being (Chapters 5 and 6), to be conquered some 125 years later in 1066 (Chapter 8) by second-generation Vikings from Normandy whose descendants would in time come to see themselves as 'English'.

The story this book tells is then complex – the telling of it made all the more so by the fragmentary and partisan nature of the written evidence and by the challenge of absorbing the new archaeological

finds that over recent years have come thick and fast. To quote the late James Campbell, writing about the fifth and sixth centuries:

> The natural vice of the historian is to claim to know about the past. Nowhere is this more dangerous than when it is staked in Britain between 400 and 600. We can identify some events and movements: make a fair guess at others: try to imagine the whole as a picture in the fire. That is all. Knowledge will creep forward by the accumulation of facts, especially archaeological facts and by the dialectic of hypotheses. But what really happened will never be known.[2]

Welcome, then, to what Campbell himself calls 'a quagmire' …

1

AFTER THE ROMANS

> As the Romans went back home, there eagerly emerged from the coracles that had carried them across the sea-valleys the foul hordes of the Scots and Picts, like dark throngs of worms who wriggle out of the narrow fissures in the rock when the sun is high and the weather grows warm … [then was] devised [a plan] for our land … that the ferocious Saxons … hated by man and God should be let into the island like wolves into the fold, to beat back the peoples of the north. Nothing more destructive, nothing more bitter has ever befallen the land.
>
> (Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*)[1]

'410: In this year the Goths stormed Rome and the Romans never afterwards reigned in Britain.' Thus did the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, first compiled in the ninth century, recount with unwavering certainty the abrupt end of Roman Britain. The urgent need for troops to withstand barbarian attacks on the continent had indeed led to the sudden withdrawal of the Roman armies stationed on the island and, in many parts of the country, the economic consequences were swift, devastating and remembered as such. In 418, continued the *Chronicle*, 'the Romans collected all the treasures which were in Britain, and hid some in the ground, so that no one could find them afterwards, and took some with them into Gaul'.[2] The reference is enigmatic but telling: with the withdrawal of the army, and the need to pay its soldiers, the monetary economy and the urban life of Roman Britain had swiftly collapsed. For the better part

of 200 years, no new coins were minted. Meanwhile, the nearest contemporary record, from the sixth century, entitled *The Ruin of Britain*, was unsparing in its description of the chaos and internecine fighting that was to follow the aftermath of the Roman departure: 'fragments of corpses, covered (as it were) with a purple crust of congealed blood, looked as though they had been mixed up in some dreadful wine-press'.[3]

The *Ruin of Britain* was the work of Gildas, a scholar, possibly a monk, who was most probably based in the south-west of Britain. In *The Ruin*, Gildas describes how after the departure of the Roman legions, Scots and Picts from the north of the island relentlessly pushed southwards, whereupon the Britons beseeched the Romans to return and come to their aid, but the Romans refused; in their despair the Britons turned for help to pagan mercenaries, the Saxons, from across the sea. Through this act of 'crass stupidity', as Gildas saw it, Christian Britain became ravished and plundered by these Saxon barbarians: 'All the major towns were laid low by the repeated battering of enemy rams; laid low, too, all the inhabitants – church leaders, priests and people alike, as the swords glinted all around and the flames crackled.'[4]

Historians have long been wary of prose as colourful as Gildas'. But Gildas was no tabloid writer. He was a learned and a brilliant writer, well-schooled in Latin oratory.[5] Uncertainties as to exactly when and where he was writing continue, however, to puzzle historians and make it difficult to use his work to establish any kind of chronology of events. He himself tells us that he took up his pen 44 years after a spectacular British victory over the Saxons at the Battle of Mount Badon (*Mons Badonicus*). Gildas' target was the five British kings whom he castigates for indolence, complacency and the squandering of the opportunity which this great battle had offered them. The dates of at least one of Gildas' kings can be calculated with a reasonable degree of confidence and on this basis it would seem as if the famous battle took place sometime near the end of the fifth century, with 530–50 as a likely time then for the composition of *The Ruin*.[6] Such a date, well over a hundred years after the departure of the Roman legions in 410, together with the very western setting of Gildas' work – the kings he addresses ruled in what is today Wales and in the West Country – means that there is every reason to read his narrative of the fifth century with caution. The scenario