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### The History of the Anglo-Saxons

Sharon Turner (1768–1847) practised as a solicitor in London, specialising in the law of copyright, but devoted his free time to studying Anglo-Saxon literature and history. In 1799–1805 he published this four-volume work, still acknowledged as a turning point in Anglo-Saxon studies and a benchmark in historiography. Turner was elected a fellow of the Society of Antiquaries in 1800, soon after the first volume appeared. His approach of contrasting ‘Anglo-Saxon freedom’ with ‘the Norman yoke’ held particular appeal at a time of deteriorating political relations with France. Turner’s lasting achievement, however, was to draw public attention to the rich and fascinating material contained in the Anglo-Saxon manuscripts he had studied at the British Museum. This work went through many editions, but was eventually superseded by Kemble’s *The Saxons in England* (1849, also reissued). Volume 1 (1799) covers Anglo-Saxon history up to the death of Egbert, King of Wessex, in 839.

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# The History of the Anglo-Saxons

*From their First Appearance above the Elbe,  
to the Death of Egbert, with a Map of their  
Ancient Territory*

VOLUME 1

SHARON TURNER



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THE  
HISTORY  
OF THE  
ANGLO-SAXONS,  
FROM THEIR  
FIRST APPEARANCE ABOVE THE ELBE,  
TO THE  
DEATH OF EGBERT;  
WITH  
*A MAP OF THEIR ANCIENT TERRITORY.*

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BY SH. TURNER.

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*Et si in tanta scriptorum turba, mea fama in obscuro sit, nobilitate ac  
magnitudine eorum qui nomine officient meo, me consolet.*

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1799.

## P R E F A C E.

**T**HE law of custom exacts a Preface; it is a tribute of respect which the Public require, and few Authors are so unwise as to omit what their Readers expect.

A Preface is usually the Author's apology for his composition. If the ablest veterans of literature seldom venture into the world without one, how can a young adventurer attempt his first campaign, unless he adds that ally, which the practice of better men commands him to procure?

The Author, therefore, confesses, that he has partaken of the literary enthusiasm which distinguishes the times in which he lives. He observed that literature had become the favourite recreation of all classes of society, and was generally admitted to be an abundant source of the most permanent pleasure; he has followed in the general track, and devoted to study those hours of leisure which the busiest may create.

The History of the Anglo-Saxons engaged his

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## P R E F A C E.

peculiar attention, because in reading it for his amusement he thought that it had hitherto been too hastily contemplated; he found the references of others so often incorrect, that he knew not at last who the author was that had really examined the original annals for himself. The inattentive rapidity with which our most esteemed writers have run over this part of our history has been remarked by others, and has produced various criticisms, and some histories

The view which the present Author has taken of the subject differs from that of his respected predecessors. He thought that the period of the Anglo-Saxon history, which preceded the invasion of England, was worthy of greater attention, because to contemplate the infancy of celebrated nations is among the most pleasing occupations of human curiosity; it is peculiarly important to us, the posterity of the Anglo-Saxons, to know as much as possible of our continental ancestors. The first book of this history states all the information that could be collected on this point.

The history of the Britons, during the era immediately preceding the Saxon invasion, is also of great consequence to the clear perception of the subsequent events. This part of our antiquities

## P R E F A C E.

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quities has been much neglected by our general historians; an humble attempt has been made, in the latter part of the first book, to select the truest incidents from the obscurity and error with which they are enveloped.

The defence of Britain by the natives, though highly interesting, has never been sufficiently studied. On this subject it appeared of supreme importance to consult the evidence of the Britons themselves. The present day happens to be more favourable to this subject than any preceding era. The literature of the ancient Britons, after a long oblivion disgraceful to our curiosity, is now under the attention of gentlemen able to disclose it. Some of its treasures have been brought forward. The Author has eagerly availed himself of these, though few in comparison of what actually exist, and trusts that the intelligent curiosity of the Public will call out of their dust the numerous compositions which have so long slumbered, uselessly to the world, in private libraries, and a forgotten tongue. With such unpardonable neglect have these relics of our ancient islanders been treated, that even Welchmen have complained that their language was unintelligible, and a manuscript of old British music is in existence, of which the notation is

A 3 not



## P R E F A C E.

not at present to be decyphered. While it could have been understood it was disregarded, and thus a monument of ancient days, highly precious to every inquisitive mind, is lost to us for ever.

The Poems of the Bards, mentioned in the second book of this Work, ought to appear with literal translations and notes; the British Triades ought also to be published\*. If any old British genealogies exist, they should be collected; every British fragment, that at all appertains to history, should be secluded no longer. Bretagne as well as Wales should be explored. The Danish literati have given, in this respect, an example to the world. A collection like Langebek's *Scriptores Rerum Danicarum medii Ævi, partim hactenus inediti*, should appear from every country; and until such efforts are made to rescue the relics of history from the destruction which has already consumed some, and is about to annihilate the rest, the literati of every country deserve to be stigmatized for their fatal indolence.

Of the great Arthur so much has been fabled, and so much has been denied, that it was impossible

\* The Poems and Triades are now printing in their original language. It is to be hoped that their publication will stimulate some gentleman to a translation.

## P R E F A C E.

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to pass over his actions in silence. It is now beyond our power to give his history in luminous detail. As far as the Author could safely venture he has advanced, and he has separated the Arthur of tradition from the Arthur of history. He thought it was interesting to have some of the traditions preserved, which were not only esteemed, but credited by former ages, and he has therefore inserted them in the Appendix. If they should be found to be beneath the notice of the literati, they may be serviceable to some British Virgil.

The incidents of the Anglo-Saxon octarchy, (for so he begs permission to name the Saxon heptarchy) have not been allowed the merit which they possess. The Author may be too partial to his subject, but he has always thought that the history of the Anglo-Saxon governments was full of interesting anecdotes, which had never received the consideration they claimed.

These circumstances are all which the Author has attempted in this part of his Work. Another volume will carry on the Anglo-Saxon history from Egbert to the Norman conquest, and some new matter will be occasionally inserted in it. This part is preparing for the press.

To complete the Anglo-Saxon history, a review of their laws, manners, government, literature,

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ture,

## P R E F A C E.

ture, and religion, will be requisite. May not the progress of the human mind from barbarism to knowledge be viewed in epitome in the history of every nation which has undergone this happy progress? It is the Author's intention, in this third part of his Work, to exhibit the gradual advances of the Anglo-Saxon intellect; to display the savage pirate slowly ameliorating into the civilized, moral, and scientific man. But this attempt will be peculiarly difficult; much illusion of conjecture must be guarded against; many little traits must be collected, without which the picture cannot be completed, and consequently some time must elapse before the performance can venture to approach the public eye.

When he recollects that he is about to appear before that Public, whose esteem is becoming every day more valuable, because the prosperity and consequence of the country are every day augmenting, he cannot repress sensations of the most anxious awe. It is in vain that he may state, that his Work, being the child of leisure hours, could receive only an attention occasional and interrupted; he feels that the public judgment is not formed on the personal considerations of the individual, but on the substantial merit of the composition: it is here that his ground trembles

## P R E F A C E.

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trembles beneath him ; it is this reflection which has awakened many a desponding anticipation ; it is here that he dreads and deprecates comparison.

The historical compositions which adorn our nation the Author has long contemplated as a young artist surveys the works of a Raphael—with emulation—but with despair ; yet to fail in a commendable pursuit is no disgrace, because the effort of competition is a merit ; excellence itself cannot be visible without attendant mediocrity, and the Author will be satisfied if his essay be admitted into the train of the illustrious who have preceded, though it be but to enhance their beauties, or, like a humble valet, to serve up those circumstantial minutiae which their commanding minds have disdained to accumulate.

He will only add, that he has procured and consulted the original authorities in every possible instance. The Authors he quotes are those which he has himself examined ; if he has derived a reference he has remarked it ; it has not been often.

The Map is from the *Tabula Ducatus Holstatiæ* of Pontanus, with a few additions and adaptations.

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**A few verbal errata have escaped the Author's revifal ; for  
which he apologizes.**

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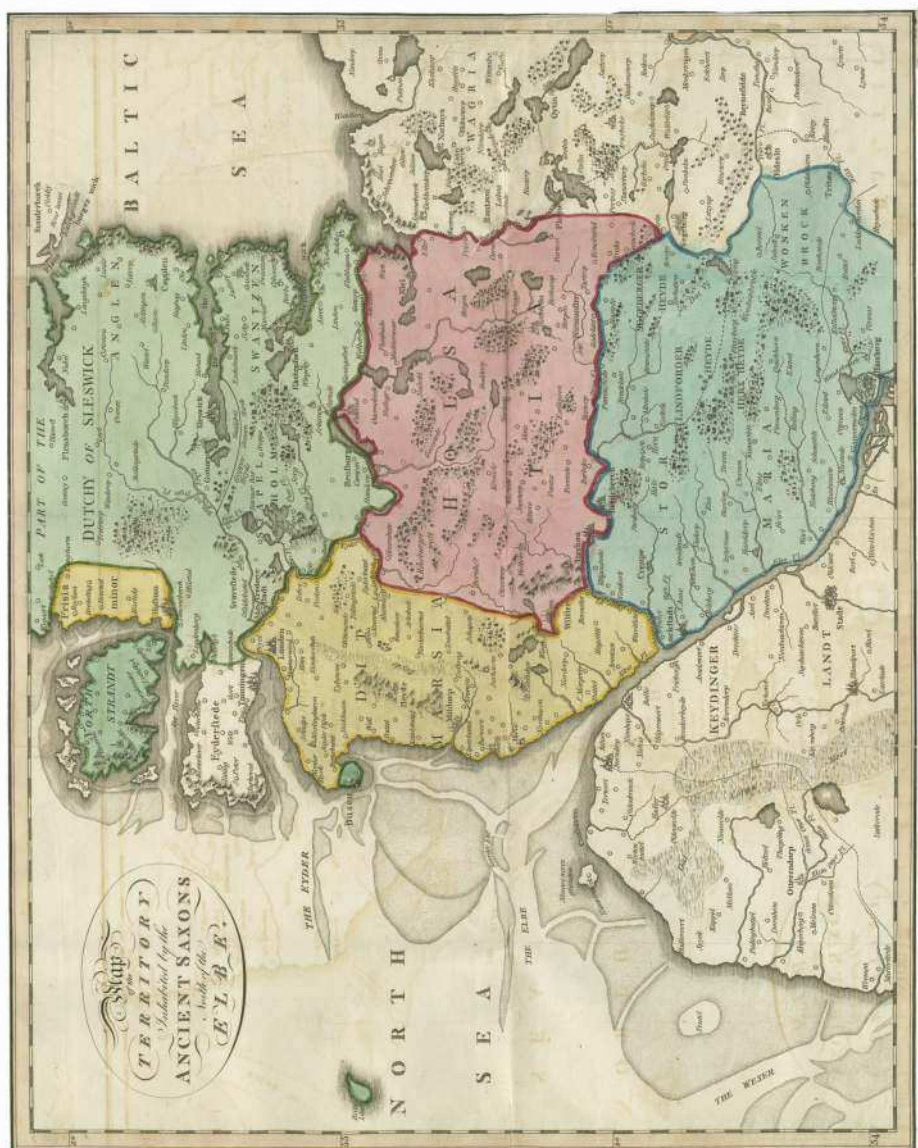
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