Chapter 1

# THE ANGLO-SCANDINAVIAN FOUNDATIONS

H. C. DARBY

The Anglo-Saxon settlement was a new beginning in the history of Britain. It made a decisive contribution to the peopling of the south-east; it determined the language of the area; and it brought institutions that formed the basis of all later development. In addition, it laid the foundations of the later geography of England. With the coming of the Anglo-Saxons, a new chapter in the history of settlement and land utilisation was begun, and, with but little interruption, the story has been continuous up to the present day.

It is true that the Anglo-Saxons did not come into an empty land, and that many contributions from pre-Saxon days have entered into the making of England. The various strains in the present population may be traced far back into prehistoric times, and the early peoples of those times left remains that are still visible today. These remains are particularly numerous on the downlands of the southern counties. Megalithic monuments (long barrows, tumuli and stone circles) are prominent in the chalk country of Wessex; here is Stonehenge, the most famous of all megalithic monuments, and not far away is the stone circle of Avebury and the mysterious mound of Silbury. Earthworks, or 'camps', like Maiden Castle in Dorset and Windmill Hill in Wiltshire, with their ramparts and ditches, are also prominent local features that remain to excite our imagination. Then again, old trackways can still be traced on the present surface of the ground. The Icknield Way below the Chilterns, and the Pilgrims' Way along the North Downs, may have been already old when the Roman legionaries tramped the country, and there are others like them. Finally, there are traces of primitive cultivation that have also survived the changes of later time. Many have been destroyed by later cultivation, but others, now grass-grown, can still be seen in the present landscape. These early monuments and features are especially characteristic of the chalk downlands, but they are also to be found elsewhere. Thus there are hut circles and primitive corn plots on Dartmoor, and megalithic remains

on the Yorkshire Wolds and along many stretches of the western seaboard.

The Romans who came in A.D. 43 bequeathed, in turn, a substantial legacy to the geography of succeeding ages. The lines of many Roman roads are still in use as arterial ways. The strategical locations of many cities were recognised in Roman as in later times. In the north, the remains of the Roman Walls still cross the landscape in a distinctive fashion; and in the south many of the traces of early cultivation date from Romano-British times. The legacy of Rome to the geography of England is no mean one. But, even so, as far as there ever is a new beginning in history, the coming of the Angles, Saxons and Jutes was such a beginning.

The circumstances of this new beginning, however, are far from clear. The period that separates the end of Roman rule in Britain from the emergence of the earliest English states is obscure and baffling. The prelude to the settlement of the newcomers from across the North Sea consisted of plundering raids that began as early as A.D. 300, and even before. In the west and north, too, the raids of the Picts and the Scots left trails of devastation. But it was not until about A.D. 410 that the Roman legions were withdrawn and the cities of Britain told to look to their own defence. Whether this injunction marked the end of Roman rule in Britain is a disputed matter. At any rate, within a generation or so, it is clear that the Romano-British were incapable of withstanding the raiders from overseas. At what date this raiding passed into settlement is uncertain, but it would seem that the so-called 'Adventus Saxonum' took place in the years around the middle of the fifth century.

## THE ANGLO-SAXON SETTLEMENT

### *The arrival of the English*

The evidence that relates to the coming of the English is of three kinds – literary, archaeological and place-name.[1] Apart from a few brief and scattered references, the main body of the literary evidence is derived

[1] General sources for the account that follows include: (1) R. G. Collingwood and J. N. L. Myres, *Roman Britain and the English settlements* (Oxford, 2nd ed. 1937); (2) F. M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford, 2nd ed. 1947); (3) P. H. Blair, *An introduction to Anglo-Saxon England* (Cambridge, 1956); (4) R. H. Hodgkin, *A history of the Anglo-Saxons*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 3rd ed. 1952); (5) K. Jackson, *Language and history in early Britain* (Edinburgh, 1953); (6) H. R. Loyn, *Anglo-Saxon England and the Norman Conquest* (London, 1962).

from the writings of Gildas (*circa* 550), Bede (*circa* 730), Nennius (*circa* 800) and from the earlier parts of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (*circa* 900). Each of these four sources is unsatisfactory, but taken together, they indicate a sequence of events that may well bear some approximation to the truth. In about A.D. 449 a certain British chieftain named Vortigern, so runs the tradition, enlisted the help, from across the sea, of the Saxons, under two brothers named Hengest and Horsa, to repel the raids of the Picts and the Scots. The mercenaries were then joined by others of their kind, and, after some dispute about their provisions, the newcomers turned against their employers and raided through the land from sea to sea. In the years that followed, others continued to come from across the North Sea. Thus did Nemesis fall upon the Britons, and, in the words of Gildas, the fire of the Saxons burned across the island until 'it licked the western ocean with its red and savage tongue'. The result of the calamity was a devastated countryside, ruined cities, and the complete collapse of British resistance. The newcomers were divided by Bede into Angles, Saxons and Jutes, but recent work has shown that Bede's generalisation was too simple and that the newcomers may also have included some Frisians.[1]

The first collapse was followed by a rally of the British forces and by a period of indecisive warfare, victory alternating with defeat, until a great British victory was won at a place called Mons Badonicus. Its date seems to have been about 500. Its site has been variously identified: one possible location is Badbury Rings to the north-west of Wimborne Minster in Dorset.[2] There is no doubt about its decisive nature for it was followed by a respite that continued for some fifty years, that is up to the time that Gildas wrote. Nennius tells us that among those who had fought against the Saxons was a man named Arthur; 'he fought against them with the kings of Britain, but he himself was the military commander'. Then follow the names of his twelve battles, and the twelfth was none other than that of Mons Badonicus. Later ages were to add legend after legend to the name of Arthur. It is interesting to think that at the core of all the romance of the Arthurian cycle, which has so fascinated generation after generation, lies something of the story of the defence of Britain against the English.

[1] F. M. Stenton, 'The historical bearing of place-name studies: the English occupation of South Britain', *Trans. Roy. Hist. Soc.*, 4th ser., XXII (1940), 5–6; H. R. Loyn, 27.

[2] K. Jackson, 'The site of Mount Badon', *Jour. Celtic Studies*, II (Temple Univ., Baltimore, Md., 1958), 152–5.

Its hero has been called the last of the Romans, the last to use Roman ideas of warfare for the benefit of the British people, and, wrote Professor Collingwood, 'the story of Roman Britain ends with him'.[1]

The last of the four sources, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, adds some further details, and describes how the Britons of Kent 'fled from the English like fire'; but, in common with the other sources, it tells us little about the shifting frontier between the advancing English and the Britons. The little it does tell us raises many difficulties. Under the year 571 it records an English victory over the Britons, and the capture of the four settlements of Limbury, Aylesbury, Benson and Eynsham, to the west of the Chilterns. 'No annal in the early sections of the Chronicle', wrote Sir Frank Stenton, 'is more important than this, and there is none of which the interpretation is more difficult.'[2] It is hard to see how the Britons could have been here at this date. Was their territory an enclave surrounded by the English? Or might it have been territory at first overrun by the English, then lost after Mons Badonicus, and then finally recovered once more in 571? Whatever the interpretation, the entry does suggest that the settlement of the English was no easy appropriation of south-east Britain. The presence of Britons here, well over a hundred years after the traditional date of Hengest's landing, may indicate that the triumph of the Anglo-Saxons was by no means a foregone conclusion. The English occupation of south Britain may well have comprised two phases separated by the fifty years or so that followed their defeat at Mons Badonicus, i.e. by the earlier half of the sixth century.

Revealing as the literary evidence is, it consists only of the fragments of a story that is far from complete. It makes specific mention of the coming of the invaders only to Kent, Sussex and Wessex. It tells us nothing, for example, of the arrival of the East Anglians and the East Saxons, nor anything about that of the Mercians, the Middle Anglians and the North Anglians. For an idea of the early spread of the Anglo-Saxons as a whole we must turn to the evidence of archaeology and of place-names. The bulk of the archaeological evidence consists of cemeteries and burial sites belonging to the age before the Anglo-Saxons became Christian, and it dates therefore roughly from between 450 and 650. To the north of the Thames, as Fig. 1 shows, was a widespread occupation both of the Midlands and of southern England by about 570. The finds are strikingly concentrated around the entrance of the Wash, and it is clear that many

[1] R. G. Collingwood and J. N. L. Myres, 34.
[2] F. M. Stenton (1947), 27.

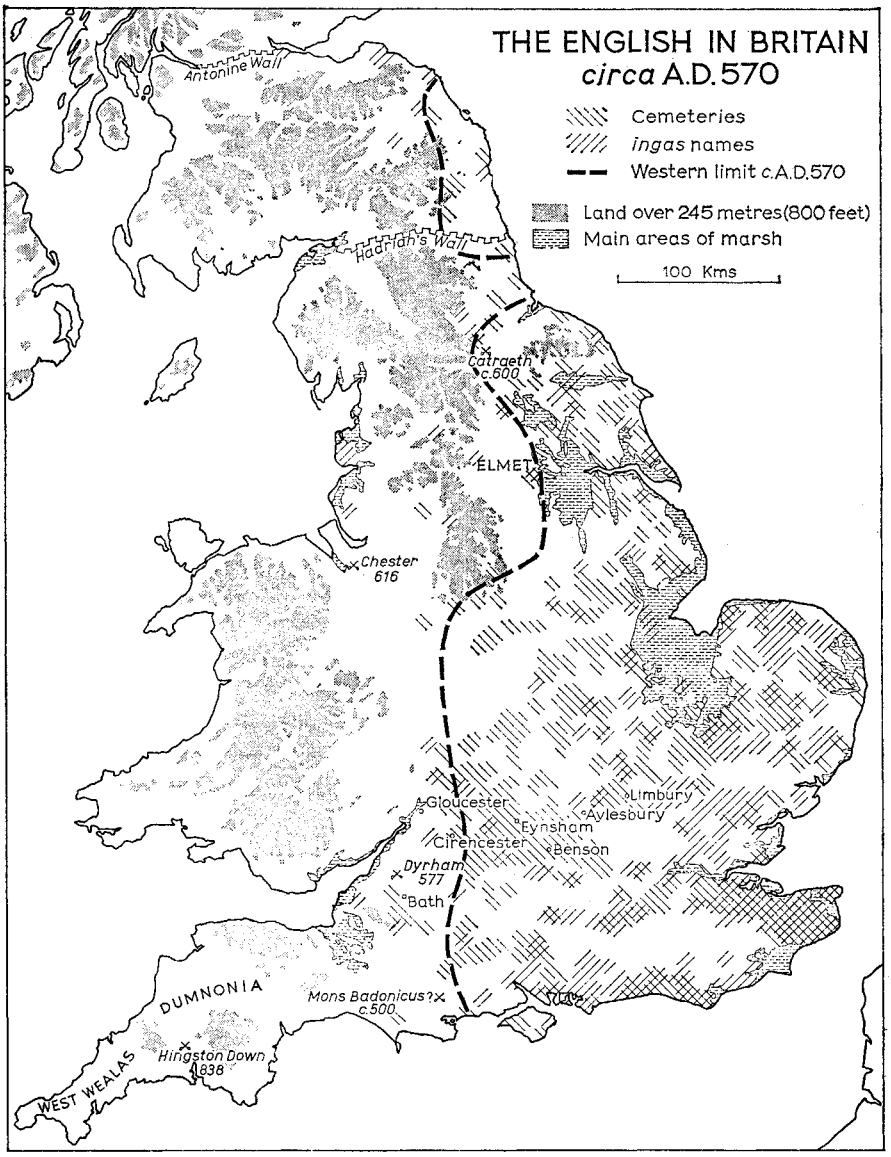


Fig. 1 The English in Britain *circa* A.D. 570
Based on: (1) E. Ekwall, *English place-names in -ing* (Lund, 1935); (2) *Map of Britain in the Dark Ages* (Ordnance Survey, 2nd ed., 1966).

invaders came up the Fenland rivers into the Midlands and East Anglia. To the north of the Wash, the estuary of the Humber provided another entry; some of these invaders turned south, along the Trent and the Soar, to mingle with those from the Wash entry; others followed the Derwent into south Yorkshire, and there is a cluster of finds on the Yorkshire Wolds. Farther north still, the finds are few. The traditional date of the founding of the northern kingdom is 547, but the archaeological evidence does not carry us back very clearly to those days. The English struggle against the Britons was still proceeding here late in the sixth century, and, in view of this, it is not surprising that the archaeological finds of the heathen period are few in number.

This archaeological evidence is, in a general way, confirmed by that of place-names. It has been shown that place-names ending in *ing*, representing the Old English *ingas*, are older than most other place-names, and that they were formed during the earliest phases of the settlement.[1] They were folk-names, and referred not to localities but to communities; thus Woking in Surrey is derived from 'Wocc' and 'ingas', and means 'Wocc's people'; Reading likewise 'Reada's people'. The groups designated by such names ranged from what seem to have been small communities to tribes such as the *Sunningas* (Sonning), whose territory covered much of eastern Berkshire and the *Hrothingas* of the Roding valley in Essex. All these names ceased to be formed at an early date when topographical rather than folk-names became current. But not all *ing* names belong to the age of migration, and *ing* names in general must be treated with caution.[2] Another early group of names is that indicating heathen beliefs and practices. Some of these include the names of the old Germanic gods; Woden and Thunor, for example, appear in Woodnesborough in Kent and Thursley in Surrey.[3] Over fifty of these heathen names have been identified, and they, too, appear to belong to pre-Christian days. The distribution of both groups of early names confirms the general impression of a wholesale occupation of south-east Britain before about 570. Theoretically, this distribution should agree with that of heathen burial places, and in a general sense the two patterns do agree (Fig. 1). But in detail some

[1] E. Ekwall, *English place-names in -ing* (2nd ed. Lund, 1962).

[2] See A. H. Smith (1) *English place-name elements* (Cambridge, 1956), 282–303; (2) 'Place-names and the Anglo-Saxon settlement', *Proc. British Academy*, XLII (1956), 73–80.

[3] F. M. Stenton, 'The historical bearing of place-name studies: Anglo-Saxon heathenism', *Trans. Roy. Hist. Soc.*, 4th ser., XXIII (1941), 1–24.

differences are at once apparent. There are, for example, few pagan cemeteries in Essex but many *ing* names. On the other hand, there are few *ing* names in the Upper Thames area where there are early cemeteries.

It is impossible to assess the significance of these discrepancies, but in view of the element of chance involved both in the survival of cemeteries and of place-names, it would be remarkable if they showed a detailed correspondence in every locality. Moreover, some anomalies may be accounted for by our inability to distinguish other types of archaic place-names 'which may have had a greater frequency in some districts'.[1] Many *ing* names, moreover, may belong to a period 'later than, but soon after, the immigration-settlement that is recorded in the early pagan-burials'.[2] Furthermore, many names ending in 'ham' may be older than was at one time supposed, and may belong to the earliest days of the settlement.[3]

*The Anglo-Saxon kingdoms*

Whatever the obscurity of the two centuries following 450, we know that in the course of the sixth century the Anglo-Saxons became organised into states. The process by which the historic kingdoms emerged is lost for ever from our sight. By the seventh century the names of as many as eleven kingdoms are to be found, and there may have been more. Some of these were joined to others until the result was the seven kingdoms of the Heptarchy, the boundaries of which often reflected local features of wood and marsh and heath (Fig. 2). To this Anglo-Saxon age belong some of the numerous linear bank-and-ditch earthworks that are found in many parts of the country, and that commonly have such names as Devil's Dyke or Grim's Dyke. Some were constructed primarily as boundaries of, say, cattle ranches or large sheep walks; such is Grim's Ditch in the north-east of Cranborne Chase. Others were for defensive purposes, and to these belong the striking Cambridgeshire system of dykes that cross the open chalk country between fen and wood and that were probably built by the East Angles against the Mercians (Fig. 3).

The earliest kingdoms to emerge seem to have been those of the south-east – East Anglia, Essex, Kent and Sussex; but they were soon out of

[1] A. H. Smith, 'Place-names and the Anglo-Saxon settlement', 84.

[2] J. McN. Dodgson, 'The significance of the distribution of the English place-name in *-ingas*, *inga* in south-east England', *Med. Archaeol.*, x (1966), 19. See also J. N. L. Myres, 'Britain in the Dark Ages', *Antiquity*, ix (1935), 455–64.

[3] B. Cox, 'The significance of the distribution of English place-names in *hām* in the Midlands and East Anglia', *Jour. English Place-Name Soc.*, v (1973), 15–73.

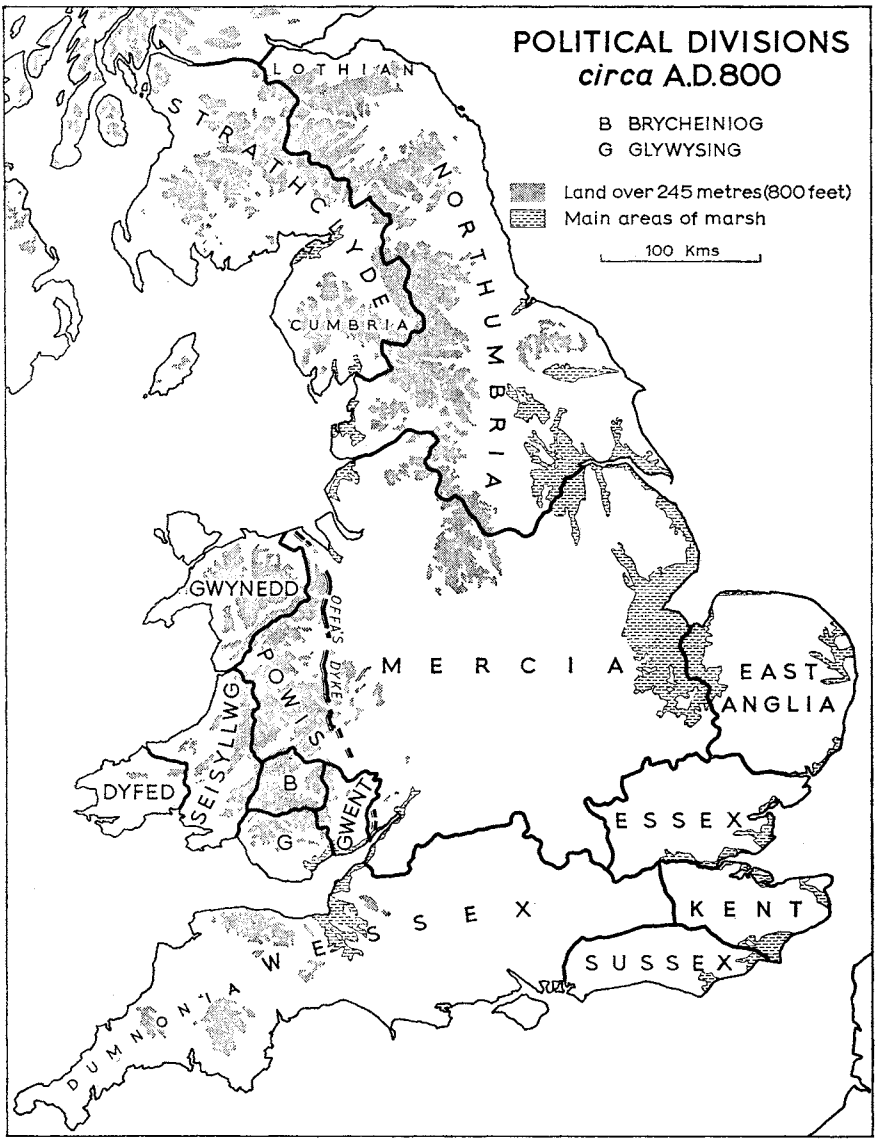


Fig. 2 Political divisions *circa* A.D. 800
Based on: (1) R. L. Poole, *Historical atlas of modern Europe* (Oxford, 1902), plate 16; (2) W. Rees, *An historical atlas of Wales* (2nd ed., Cardiff, 1959), plate 22.

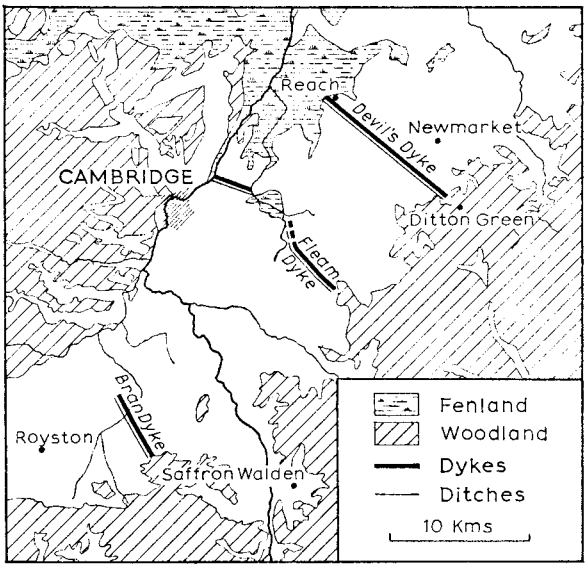


Fig. 3 The Cambridgeshire dykes
Based on C. Fox, 'Dykes', *Antiquity*, III (1929), 137.

touch with the advancing frontier against the Britons, and the great powers of the later Anglo-Saxon period came to be those of Wessex, Mercia and Northumbria. Their rivalry features prominently in the records of English history during the seventh and eighth centuries, but the complexities of their mutual relations did not prevent continued advance to the west.

The evidence for the origin of the kingdom of Wessex has been much debated. On the one hand, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, in entries for the years between 495 and 519, speaks of West Saxon chieftains landing on the Hampshire coast and fighting and killing many Britons. On the other hand, the archaeological evidence seems to show that the West Saxons arrived from the east, maybe from the Wash along the Icknield Way to the Upper Thames area and so southwards. The two versions have been reconciled on the assumption that the archaeological evidence bears witness to a mass movement of people, while the literary evidence records the exploits of individuals who were to become the ancestors of the royal house of Wessex. Whatever be the truth, the frontier against the Britons was being vigorously pressed long before the end of the sixth century. Under the year 577 the Chronicle records a victory over the Britons at Dyrham, and it tells how the Saxons took Gloucester, Cirencester and

Bath. Dyrham is six miles north of Bath, and the victory opened up the lower Severn valley to Saxon colonists, thus separating the Britons of the south-west peninsula from those of Wales.

The details of the further advance of the Saxons into the south-west are far from clear. The place-names of Dorset and Somerset suggest Saxon occupation in the seventh century.[1] To the west lay the Welsh kingdom of Dumnonia, the memory of which survives in the name of Devon; and it would seem that the eastern part of this passed into Saxon hands before the end of the seventh century, and that the northern and western parts were occupied after 710 when Ine of Wessex defeated Geraint, king of Dumnonia.[2] The Saxon occupation of Devon was thorough. Its place-names are overwhelmingly English, both in the west as well as in the east of the county; and Welsh names are, surprisingly, fewer than in Somerset or Dorset.[3] The reason may possibly lie in the fact that the Welsh population of Devon was sparse when the Saxons arrived, partly because, during the fifth and sixth centuries and earlier, there had been a large migration across the sea to transform Armorica into what later became Brittany.[4] Even so, it has been suggested that the Welsh constituted 'a far from negligible element in the population of Devon' in the Dark Ages.[5]

Farther west still, were the Welsh of Cornwall into which Dumnonia had contracted, and there are echoes of warfare between Welsh and Saxon. They were fighting in 710, in 722 and again in 753, and in 815 the Saxon king 'laid waste West Wales from east to west'. Ten years later the Welsh raided into Devon, and in 838 they joined a Danish army against Wessex only to be defeated at Hingston Down, to the west of the Tamar in Cornwall. Henceforward, Cornwall came under Saxon overlordship, but a native dynasty of Welsh kings seems to have survived probably into the early years of the tenth century. By this time, the force of Saxon colonisation had spent itself, and Cornwall, except in the extreme east, did not lose its Celtic character with its independence.

The details of the expansion westward across the Midland Plain are lost from our sight. But in the early seventh century various groups in the area emerged as the kingdom of Mercia. A limit to the westward expansion

[1] F. M. Stenton (1947), 63.
[2] W. G. Hoskins, *The westward expansion of Wessex* (Leicester, 1960).
[3] J. E. B. Gover *et al.*, *The place-names of Devon*, pt 1 (Cambridge, 1931), XIX.
[4] H. R. Loyn, 47; Norah K. Chadwick, 'The colonization of Brittany from Celtic Britain', *Proc. British Academy*, LI (1965), 235–99.
[5] H. P. R. Finberg, *The early charters of Devon and Cornwall* (Leicester, 1953), 31.