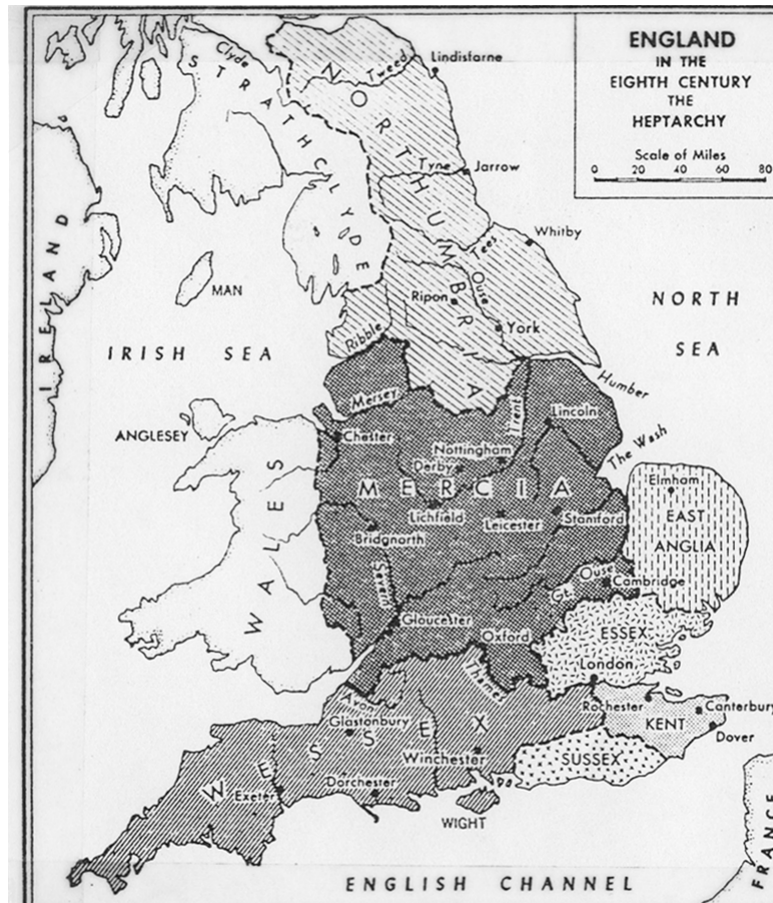


## ANGLO-SAXON CONSTITUTIONAL HISTORY IN BRIEF

### SOURCES

1. Narrative history: Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (Bede died 735); the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (late 9th to mid-12th centuries); Gildas, *On the Downfall and Conquest of Britain* (1st half of 6th century).
2. The so-called "law codes," beginning with Æthelberht (c. 600) and going right up through Cnut (d. 1035).
3. Language and literature: *Beowulf*, lyric poetry, translations of pieces of the Bible, sermons, saints' lives, medical treatises, riddles, prayers
4. Place-names; geographical features
5. Coins
6. Art and archaeology
7. Charters



### BASIC CHRONOLOGY

1. The main chronological periods (*Mats.* p. II-1):  
?450-600 — The invasions to Æthelberht of Kent

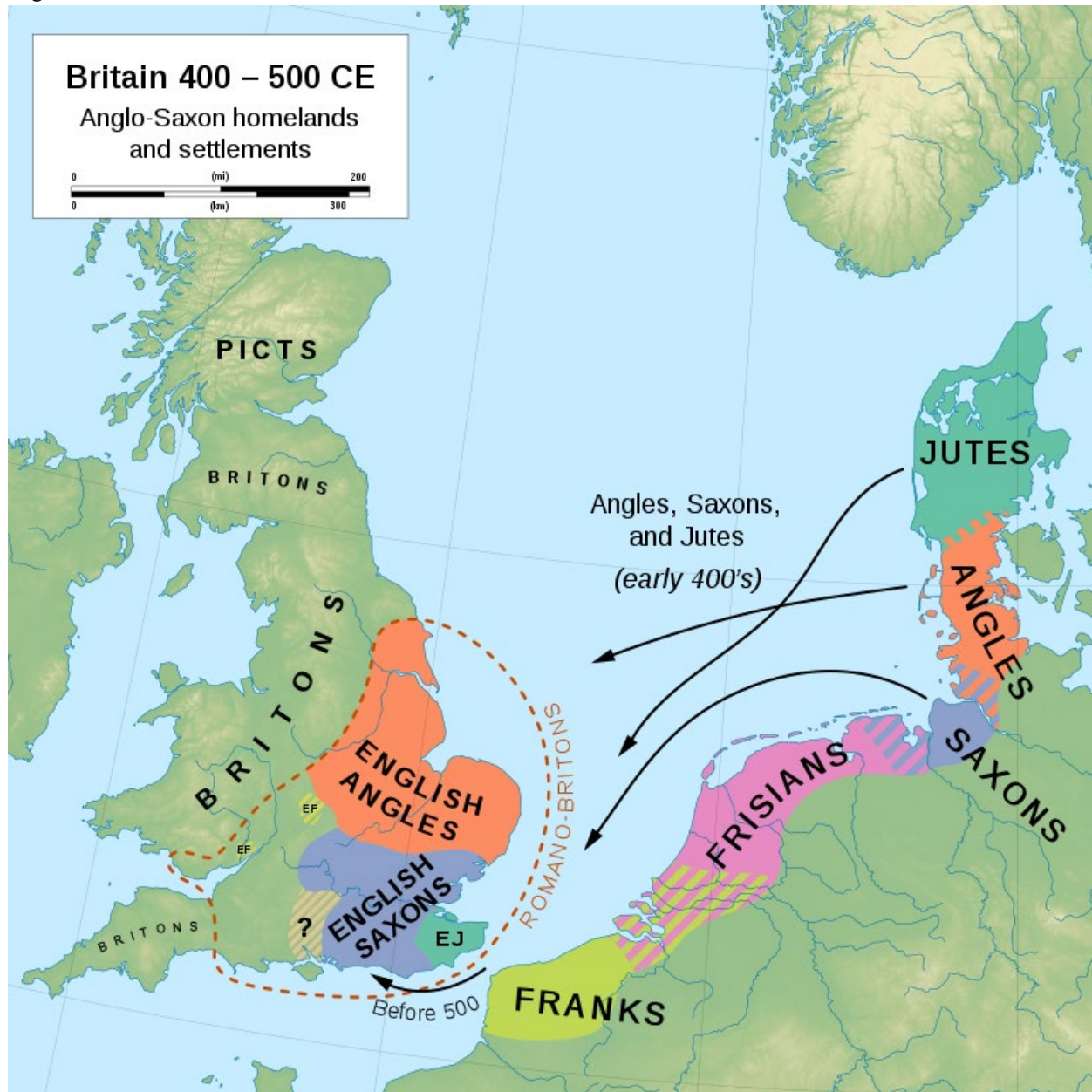
600–835 — (A healthy chunk of time here; the same amount of time that the United States has been in existence.) The period of the Heptarchy—overlordships moving from Northumbria to Mercia to Wessex.

835–924 — The Danish Invasions.

924–1066 — The kingdom of England ending with the Norman Conquest.

2. The period of the invasions (Bede on the origins of the English settlers) (Mats. p. II–1), 450–600

They came from three very powerful nations of the Germans, namely the Saxons, the Angles and the Jutes. From the stock of the Jutes are the people of Kent and the people of Wight, that is, the race which holds the Isle of Wight, and that which in the province of the West Saxons is to this day called the nation of the Jutes, situated opposite that same Isle of Wight. From the Saxons, that is, from the region which now is called that of the Old Saxons, came the East Saxons, the South Saxons, the West Saxons. Further, from the Angles, that is, from the country which is called *Angulus* and which from that time until today is said to have remained deserted between the provinces of the Jutes and the Saxons, are sprung the East Angles, the Middle Angles, the Mercians, the whole race of the Northumbrians, that is, of those peoples who dwell north of the River Humber, and the other peoples of the Angles. Their first leaders are said to have been two brothers, Hengest and Horsa, of whom Horsa was afterwards killed by the Britons in battle, and has still in the eastern parts of Kent a monument inscribed with his name. They were the sons of Wihtgils, the son of Witta, the son of Wecta, the son of Woden, from whose stock the royal race of many provinces trace their descent.



This is a recent map of the invasions, largely based on Bede, and so wrong in the ways I just suggested, by missing the Frisians and largely missing the Franks. It also does not follow Bede in putting the Jutes on the Isle of Wight, though no one today is quite sure that Bede meant by that. Like all modern maps of early history it implies a precision of borders that almost certainly did not exist.

To see a modern map of where they came from check out:

<https://www.google.com/maps/place/Denmark/@54.1621253,9.6693934,8z/data=!4m2!3m1!1s0x464b27b6ee945ffb:0x528743d0c3e092cd>

- Woden, Hengest and Horsa
- Angles, Saxons, Jutes (?Franks) and Frisians
- Why did the invaders come?

- i. The domino effect of the Huns?
    - ii. The North Sea rose?
    - iii. The Britons asked them to come.
  - d. They did not simply sweep over the land, but the conquest was fairly complete.
3. The conversion to Christianity (Bede on the conversion of Edwin by Paulinus) (Mats. p. II-2), 600–835

When the king had heard these words, he replied that he was both willing and bound to receive the faith which he taught. Still, he said that he would confer about it with his loyal chief men and counsellors, so that if they also were of his opinion they might all be consecrated to Christ together in the font of life. And with Paulinus' assent, he did as he had said. For, holding a council with his wise men, he asked of each in turn what he thought of this doctrine, previously unknown, and of this new worship of God, which was preached.

The chief of his priests, Coifi, at once replied to him: "See, king, what manner of thing this is which is now preached to us; for I most surely admit to you, what I have learnt beyond a doubt, that the religion which we have held up till now has no power at all and no use. For none of your followers has applied himself to the worship of our gods more zealously than I; and nevertheless there are many who receive from you more ample gifts and greater honours than I, and prosper more in all things which they plan to do or get. But if the gods were of any avail, they would rather help me, who have been careful to serve them more devotedly. It remains, therefore, that if on examination you find these new things, which are now preached to us, better and more efficacious, we should hasten to receive them without any delay."

Another of the king's chief men, assenting to his persuasive and prudent words, immediately added: "Thus, O king, the present life of men on earth, in comparison with that time which is unknown to us, appears to me to be as if, when you are sitting at supper with your ealdormen and thegns in the winter-time, and a fire is lighted in the midst and the hall warmed, but everywhere outside the storms of wintry rain and snow are raging, a sparrow should come and fly rapidly through the hall, coming in at one door, and immediately out at the other. Whilst it is inside, it is not touched by the storm of winter, but yet, that tiny space of calm gone in a moment, from winter at once returning to winter, it is lost to your sight. Thus this life of men appears for a little while; but of what is to follow, or of what went before, we are entirely ignorant. Hence, if this new teaching brings greater certainty, it seems fit to be followed." The rest of the nobles and king's counsellors, by divine inspiration, spoke to the same effect.

- a. Bede's account of the conversion of England: Pope Gregory I and Augustine of Canterbury (late 6th century); the role of the Irish; the synod of Whitby (663); Theodore of Tarsus and the council of Hertford (672); Benet Biscop and the founding of the monasteries of Monkwearmouth (674) and Jarrow (681)
  - b. *amicis principibus consiliariis* (loyal chief men and counsellors); *in consilio sapientium* (in the council of the wise)—the *witenagemot*; *cum ducibus et ministris* (trans. earldomen and thegns); *maiores natu* and *regis consilarii* (nobles and king's counsellors)
4. The period of the Heptarchy, Aethelberht, Northumbrians, Offa, Egbert (Bede on the concept of the *bretwalda*) (Mats. p. II-3), 600–835

In the year of our Lord's incarnation 616, which is the 21st year after Augustine with his companions was sent to preach to the nation of the English, Ethelbert, king of the people of Kent, after his temporal kingdom which he had held most gloriously for 56 years, entered into the eternal joys of the heavenly kingdom. He was indeed the third of the kings in the nation of the English to hold dominion (*imperavit*) over all their southern provinces, which are divided from the northern by the River

Humber and the boundaries adjoining it; but the first of them all to ascend to the heavenly kingdom. For the first who had sovereignty (*imperium*; *bretwalda* or *brytwalda* in Old English) of this kind was Ælle, king of the South Saxons [477–91]; the second Caelin, king of the West Saxons [560–90], who in their language is called Ceawlin; the third, as we have said, Ethelbert, king of the people of Kent [560–616]; the fourth, Rædwald, king of the East Angles [c.600–616 X 627], who, even while Ethelbert was alive, had been obtaining the leadership for his own race; the fifth, Edwin, king of the nation of the Northumbrians [616–33], that is, of that nation which dwells on the north side of the River Humber, ruled with greater power over all the peoples who inhabit Britain, the English and Britons as well, except only the people of Kent, and he also reduced under English rule the Mevanian islands of the Britons, which lie between Ireland and Britain; the sixth, Oswald, also a most Christian king of the Northumbrians [Saint Oswald, 634–42], held a kingdom with these same bounds; the seventh, his brother Oswiu, governing for some time a kingdom of almost the same limits [655–70], also subdued for the most part and made tributary the nations of the Picts and Scots, who hold the northern parts of Britain. But of this hereafter.

- a. *bretwalda* (*imperium*)
  - b. Æthelberht of Kent, Rædwald of East Anglia, Edwin of Northumbria and a succession of Northumbrian kings, Æthelbald and Offa of Mercia
5. The period of the Danish invasions (the Battle of “Brunanburh” from the A-S chronicle for the year 937) (Mats., p. II-2), 835–924

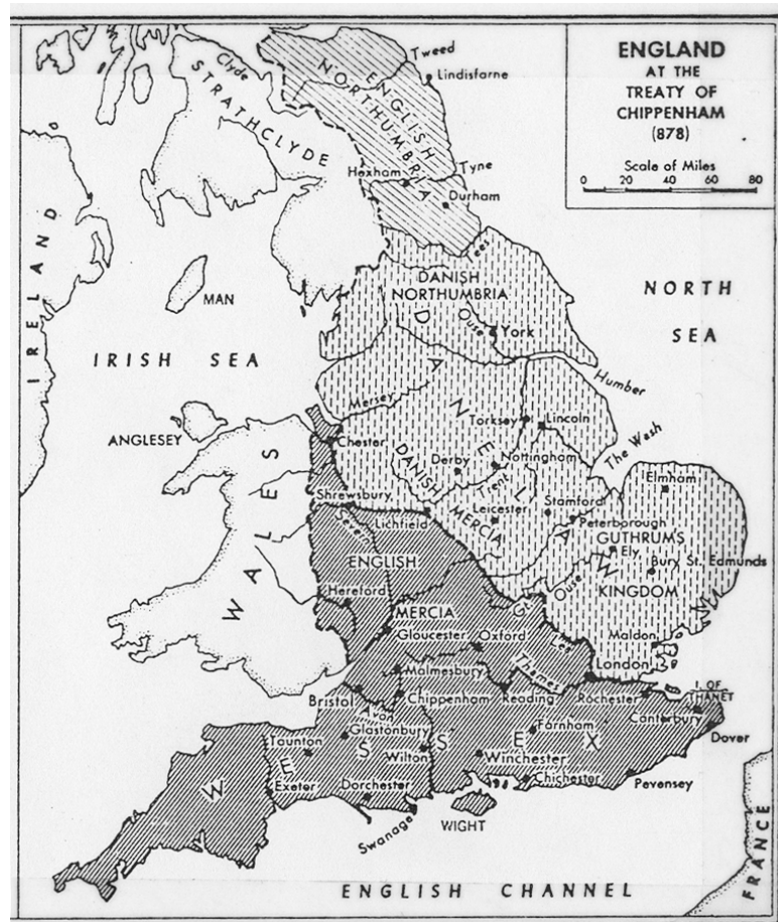
Hēr Æþelstān cyning, eorla dryhten,  
 beorna bēahgifa, ond his brōþor ēac,  
 Ēadmund æþeling, ealdorlangne tīr  
 geslōgon æt sæcce sweorda ecgum  
 ymbe Brūnanburh. Bordweal clufan,  
 hēowan heāpolinde hamora lāfan  
 afaran Ēadweardes, swā him geāþele wæs  
 from cnēomægum, þæt hī æt campe oft  
 wiþ lāþra gehwæne land ealgodon  
 hord ond hāmas.

(In this year King Æthelstan, lord of earls / ring-giver of warriors, and his brother also, / Edmund ætheling, undying glory / won by sword's edge in battle / around “Brunanburh.” Shield-wall they cleaved, / hewed war-linden [linden bucklers] with hammers' leavings [hammered blades], / offspring of Edward, as was inborn to them / from their ancestry, that they at battle oft / with each enemy defend their land, / hoard and homes.)

- a. Hēr : ‘here’, cyning : ‘king’, eorla : ‘earl’, gifa in bēahgifa : ‘give’, ond his brōþor ēac ‘and his brother eke’, sweorda ecgum : ‘swords’ edges’, ond : ‘and’, his : ‘his’, æt : ‘at’, wæs : ‘was’, from : ‘from’, þæt : ‘that’, wiþ : ‘with’.
- b. Germanic heroic verse
- c. *cyning*, the son of the kin—*eorla dryhten*, lord of earls—*beorna beahgifa*, ring-giver of warriors—*æþeling*, son of the nobility
- d. The poem describes a battle of the Anglo-Saxons against the Norse and the Scots at an unidentified place on the northwest coast of England.

## THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE KINGDOM OF ENGLAND

1. The eighth century is the period to ascendancy of Mercia, a kingdom in the north part of England. Æthelbald 716–757, whom Bede mentions, and Offa 757–796, who calls himself *rex totius Anglie patrie* ('king of the whole fatherland of England'). The other kings are *subreguli* 'underkings'.
2. In 802, Egbert, way out of the line of succession, became king of the West Saxons. In 825, he defeated the Mercians at Ellendun. From there on the leading king in England was the king of the West Saxons.
3. But the West Saxons had a new and dangerous enemy to face. In 835, the Vikings who had been raiding England since the early part of the century launched a major invasion. In 865 the *mickel here* ('big army') arrived and spent the winter. They began a conquest that threatened to take over the whole of England.
4. But their progress was stopped by Alfred 871–899, the greatest of the Anglo-Saxon kings; he contained the Danes in the Danelaw, and launched a massive revival of Anglo-Saxon culture.



5. The Danish presence in England was substantial, not only in the area of the Danelaw. They affected the language. Our word 'law' comes from Danish, not Old English.
6. Alfred's son, Edward the Elder 899–924, with his sister Æthelflæd, reconquered the Danelaw to the Humber. There was a great religious revival under Dunstan.
7. During the reigns of Æthelstan of the poem 924–39 and Edmund of the poem 939–46, the north of England was recovered, then lost, then recovered again.

8. Edgar, known as the peaceable, became king of all England 957–75 – major coronation ceremony at the end of his reign. Mats. p. II-3.

This writing has been copied, letter by letter, from the writing which Archbishop Dunstan gave our lord at Kingston on the day that he was consecrated as king, forbidding him to make any promise save this, which at the bishop's bidding he laid on Christ's altar:—

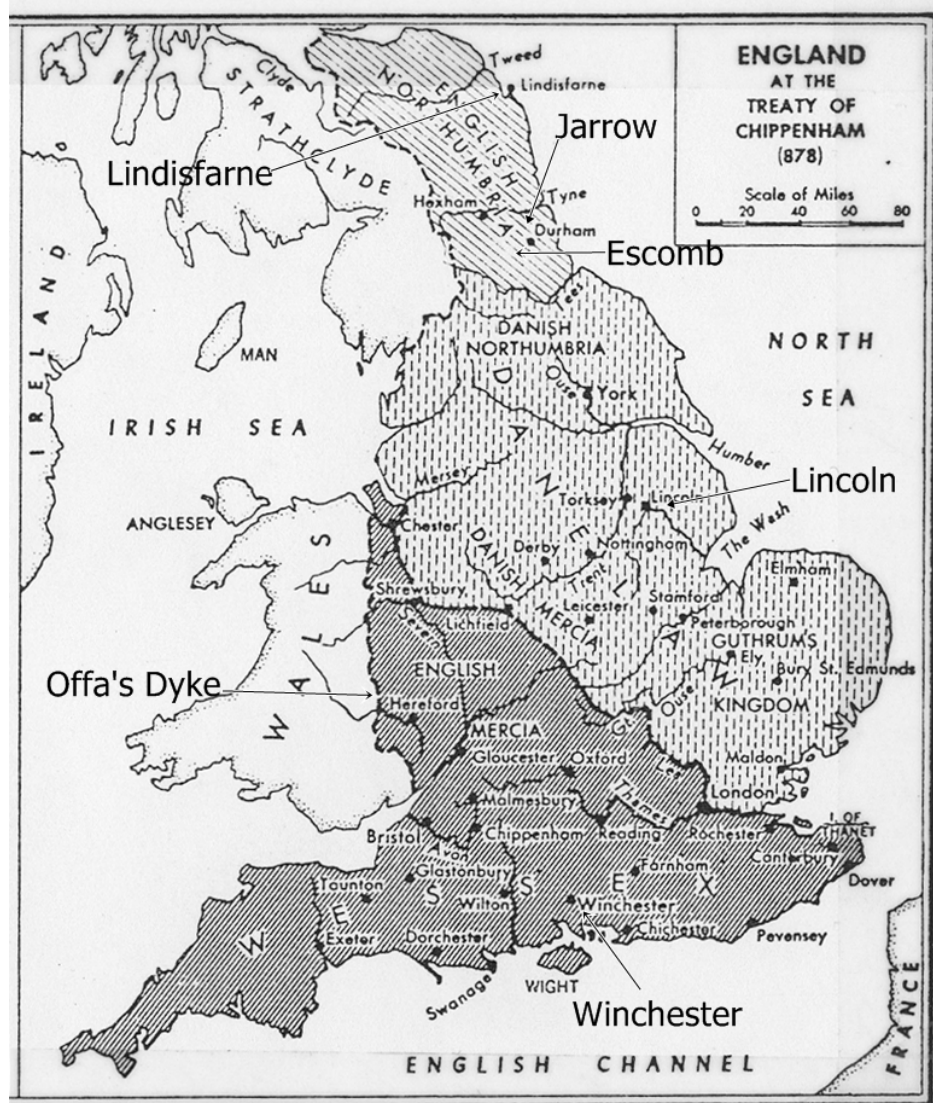
In the name of the Holy Trinity, I promise three things to the Christian people of my subjects: first that God's Church and all Christian people of my realm shall enjoy true peace; second, that I forbid to all ranks of men robbery and wrongful deeds; third that I urge and command justice and mercy in all judgments, so that the gracious and compassionate God who lives and reigns may grant us all His everlasting mercy.

9. Unfortunately, the next major king was Ethelred the Unready (means he didn't take counsel) 978–1016, who had a long and disastrous reign.
10. He was succeeded by Cnut 1016–1035, a Danish king, but this was a different kind of Danish invasion. Cnut was a Christian. He governed a North Sea empire that included Denmark, and he ruled in England through native Anglo-Saxons and native Danes.
11. The native Anglo-Saxon dynasty returned with Edward the Confessor, son of Ethelred the Unready. Edward began reign in 1042 and died childless on 5 Jan. 1066. But that is a story for next week.

## SLIDES

If there is time, I will show some slides. If there is not, the URLs are given below with some brief remarks about them. The following map shows the location of the items in the slides:





1. [[http://www.law.harvard.edu/faculty/cdonahue/courses/ELH/slides/LincolnArchEast\\_11\\_01\\_24.jpg](http://www.law.harvard.edu/faculty/cdonahue/courses/ELH/slides/LincolnArchEast_11_01_24.jpg); [http://www.law.harvard.edu/faculty/cdonahue/courses/ELH/slides/LincolnArchWest\\_11\\_01\\_24.jpg](http://www.law.harvard.edu/faculty/cdonahue/courses/ELH/slides/LincolnArchWest_11_01_24.jpg)]  
The Roman arch in Lincoln—this is the only standing Roman arch left in England. There would have been hundreds of them when the A-S invaders arrived.
2. [<http://www.law.harvard.edu/faculty/cdonahue/courses/ELH/slides/OffaDykeWestSide.jpg>; <http://www.law.harvard.edu/faculty/cdonahue/courses/ELH/slides/OffaDykeEastSideVert.jpg>; <http://www.law.harvard.edu/faculty/cdonahue/courses/ELH/slides/OffaDykeView.jpg>; <http://www.law.harvard.edu/faculty/cdonahue/courses/ELH/slides/OffaDykeFromBelow.jpg>]  
Offa's dyke (8th century) on the border between Mercia and Wales—the use of archeology to confirm what is hinted at in the surviving written sources; we are particularly badly informed about Mercia.
3. [<http://www.law.harvard.edu/faculty/cdonahue/courses/ELH/slides/EscombWest.jpg>; <http://www.law.harvard.edu/faculty/cdonahue/courses/ELH/slides/EscombSouthFace.jpg>; <http://www.law.harvard.edu/faculty/cdonahue/courses/ELH/slides/EscombPorch.jpg>; <http://www.law.harvard.edu/faculty/cdonahue/courses/ELH/slides/EscombNave.jpg>; <http://www.law.harvard.edu/faculty/cdonahue/courses/ELH/slides/EscombAltar.jpg>]  
The Escomb church (co. Durham, 9th century)—a remarkable survival showing (1) that Christians



did survive the Danish invasions in the North (note the map on p. II-1 [map01Danelaw.bmp] shows the area as being in English Northumbria, although the Danes didn't always recognize the boundaries), (2) that the churches were built according to a Roman plan.

4. [<http://www.law.harvard.edu/faculty/cdonahue/courses/ELH/slides/LincolnSaxonTower.jpg>]  
St. Peter's in Lincoln (11th century, pre-Conquest)—By the end of our period the Anglo-Saxons were ready to engage in quite large-scale building and in building something like this tower, which has largely a display function.
5. [<http://www.law.harvard.edu/faculty/cdonahue/courses/ELH/slides/JarrowNaveOutside.jpg>]; [<http://www.law.harvard.edu/faculty/cdonahue/courses/ELH/slides/JarrowChoirOutside.jpg>]  
Jarrow, nave and choir on the outside—Founded in 681 by Benet Biscop who also founded Monkwearmouth in 674, under the patronage of King Egfrith of Northumbria. Bede lived here from its foundation until his death in 735. In 867, the monastery was pillaged and burned by Danes; it is said to have been totally destroyed by Danes in 937, but the site was apparently not deserted because the remains of Bede were brought to Durham cathedral in 1022, where they remain to this day. The place was burned again by William the Conqueror in 1069. In 1074 Aldwin, prior of Winchcombe (Gloucs.) with two monks of Evesham (Worcs.) named Elfwy and Renfrid traveled north and east, and refounded the monastery at Jarrow as well as that at Monkwearmouth. Things were not looking very good in 1074 if your names were Aldwin, Elfwy and Renfrid. This was an act that took considerable courage. It is said that they arrived at Jarrow late in the afternoon. The place was a total mess. No roof, you could barely see where the choir had been. So what did they do? They sat in what was left of the choir and sang Vespers to each other. That's what monks are supposed to do. In 1083, the Norman bishop of Durham (William of Calais) was so impressed with the devotion of the monks that he expelled his secular chapter and created a monastic one with the monks from the two places. For the rest of the MA both places were cells of Durham Cathedral priory with 3–4 monks each. The church was rebuilt in 1783, on the basis of architecture that largely dates from the 14th century, but supposedly on the floor plan of the A-S church.
6. [<http://www.law.harvard.edu/faculty/cdonahue/courses/ELH/slides/JarrowNave.jpg>] The nave interior today.
7. [<http://www.law.harvard.edu/faculty/cdonahue/courses/ELH/slides/JarrowInscription1.jpg>): The inscription reads:  
  
Chi Rho. DEDICATIO BASILIKAE  
SCI PAULI VVVIII KL MAI (23 April 681, Tues. after Quasimodo)  
ANNO XV ECFRIDI REG  
.....  
CEOLFRIDI ABB EIVSDEM  
Q ECCLES DO AUCTORE  
CONDITORIS ANNO IIII.  
  
The lettering is not half-bad. Perhaps learned from Britons, perhaps just learned by copying surviving Roman inscriptions.
8. [<http://www.law.harvard.edu/faculty/cdonahue/courses/ELH/slides/JarrowChoir.jpg>]. Under Benet Biscop's successor Ceolfrid there are said to have been 600 monks between Monkwearmouth and Jarrow. It is hard to imagine that more than forty or fifty fit into the choir that we see here, though it is possible that the Saxon choir extended further than the modern choir and than the modern archeological remains show.
9. [<http://www.law.harvard.edu/faculty/cdonahue/courses/ELH/slides/JarrowCredenceTable.jpg>]; [<http://www.law.harvard.edu/faculty/cdonahue/courses/ELH/slides/JarrowGlass.jpg>]; [<http://www.law.harvard.edu/faculty/cdonahue/courses/ELH/slides/JarrowBede'sChair.jpg>]  
Credence Table. Medieval, perhaps Anglo-Saxon, glass, made into a modern design. The chair is

clearly very old. Traditionally it is Bede's chair, and why not. The workmanship is almost certainly medieval and perhaps Anglo-Saxon.

10. [<http://www.law.harvard.edu/faculty/cdonahue/courses/ELH/slides/JarrowCapital.jpg>]  
Column capital. The fascination with scrolls and circles and animals. This is certainly not Roman. Whether it is Germanic or Irish is hard to tell. Both used them. To me the scrollwork is more Irish, the bird more Germanic.
11. [<http://www.law.harvard.edu/faculty/cdonahue/courses/ELH/slides/LindGospels.jpg>]  
Opening page of John's Gospel from the Lindisfarne Gospels. 'In principio erat verbum' is buried in this elaborate scrollwork. The book is contemporary with Bede and hence early eighth century.
12. [<http://www.law.harvard.edu/faculty/cdonahue/courses/ELH/slides/KingEdgarMs.jpg>] King Edgar offering a book to Christ from the New Minster Charter of 966. The book is being presented to Christ in majesty. The British Library identifies the saints as the Virgin Mary and St. Peter, to whom the New Minster was dedicated. There was an important school of manuscript painting at Winchester, which was the West Saxon capital. This is one of the earliest examples of that school.
13. [<http://www.law.harvard.edu/faculty/cdonahue/courses/ELH/slides/ASCoins.jpg>]  
Clockwise from top left: Silver penny of Offa, Anglo-Saxon king of Mercia (obverse and reverse); silver coin of Cynethryth, Anglo-Saxon queen of Mercia (obverse and reverse); silver penny of Alfred the Great, Anglo-Saxon king of Wessex (obverse and reverse); and silver penny of Æthelberht II, Anglo-Saxon king of East Anglia (obverse and reverse). [Credit: Jarrett A. Lobell, 'The King's Dues', *Archaeology*, May/June 2021 <https://www.archaeology.org/issues/422-2105/features/9598-england-anglo-saxon-kingdoms>]
14. [<http://www.law.harvard.edu/faculty/cdonahue/courses/ELH/slides/ASCharter.png>]  
King Æthelbald of the Mercians and of the South Angli grants ten hides at Ismere by the river Stour and land at Brochyl in Morfe forest, Worcestershire, to Cyneberht, comes, for the construction of a minster, dated 736. [Credit: British Library <https://blogs.bl.uk/digitisedmanuscripts/2018/07/anglo-saxon-charters-online.html>]