

## COURSE DESCRIPTION

# England before the Norman Conquest

ANGLO-SAXON, NORSE, AND CELTIC TRIPOS, PRELIMINARY EXAMINATION, PAPER 1  
ANGLO-SAXON, NORSE, AND CELTIC TRIPOS, PART I, PAPER 1

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### Course description 2011–13

In this course we study the history of the English-speaking peoples from the settlements of the Angles, Saxons, Jutes, and others, in the late fourth and fifth centuries, to the Norman Conquest in 1066. Attention is given to the major political developments, to particular aspects of social, economic and regional history, and to the ecclesiastical and cultural developments which took place in the Anglo-Saxon period as a whole. The lectures do not presume any prior knowledge of the subject, and are intended to provide a basic framework (itself more a matter of interpretation than of established fact), an introduction to the main issues and areas of current debate, and some close discussion of primary texts. Most of the written sources are available and will be studied in modern English translation.

The lectures are presented in a **two-year cycle**, beginning in October 2009. They are intended to be complemented by a full course of eight supervisions on particular subjects or themes, and by private study (especially during the vacations). Students intending to offer this paper in the ASNC Tripos, Part I, are urged to attend all lectures in *both* years of the cycle. Students reading for the Historical Tripos will find that no clear distinction is recognised or maintained between ‘Political and Constitutional’ history (Paper 2) and ‘Social and Economic’ history (Paper 7). Such matters are inseparable, and we proceed in the belief that they are best studied as an integrated whole, even if for other reasons they can be examined in different papers.

#### AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The aim of the course is to provide an introduction to the study of Anglo-Saxon history. The emphasis is not so much on the accumulation of knowledge for its own sake, as on instruction in historical method. The intention is that the course should stimulate your interest in the period, and provide you with an opportunity to develop and practise your skills. The approach involves a return to first principles, the exercise of common sense, and recognition of the need to be constructive as well as critical.

(i) Attention is given to the development of received historical wisdom, and to the different opinions of modern scholars on some of the general issues at stake. The parameters of the subject were defined in the 1940s and 1950s by Sir Frank Stenton and Professor Dorothy Whitelock, but understanding of it has advanced much further since then, and is always changing. Received wisdom, and whatever has been built upon it, does much to determine the assumptions we make in first approaching the

subject, affecting what we want to ask of the evidence and how we formulate our questions. In many respects received wisdom will stand, and we can continue to build upon secure foundations; but in other respects it might be judged, for one reason or another, to be mistaken, and is best cleared away.

(ii) Emphasis is placed on the importance of accommodating the full range and varied nature of the available evidence (literary, documentary and liturgical sources, in Latin and the vernacular, archaeological material, place-names, manuscripts, coinage, sculpture, metalwork, architecture, etc.), involving respect for and assessment of each kind of evidence *on its own terms*, and where appropriate suggesting how one might make effective use of such evidence for historical purposes. We learn from experience how to resist the temptation to leap to conclusions; for much is seen to depend on the close reading of texts, and on the integration of evidence derived from a variety of different disciplines.

(iii) Importance is attached to the formulation of a general view of the unfolding course of Anglo-Saxon history, arising from a critical review of the primary sources, and taking full account of advances of modern scholarship in related disciplines. It is in the nature of the subject, however, that other views are available, and it is understood, therefore, that plenty of scope will remain for the discussion of these alternatives.

(iv) Value is seen in fostering approaches which help to ensure proper understanding of the subject, promote independence of judgement, and lead to originality of thought and expression. There is no sense in pretending that the distant past can be made relevant to the present, and no need to feel that it should be. We may be interested in it because we are interested in understanding what we see around us, and wish to know more about certain aspects of the long and complex process which lies behind it; but if we seek to justify our interest in the past by relating it to present concerns, we immediately expose ourselves to the danger of misunderstanding what we study. The value of the subject lies, therefore, in providing an advanced training in analytical, critical and constructive habits of mind, and at the same time in satisfying a natural curiosity about the past.

The objective of any single lecture is to pursue this exercise in respect of a particular aspect of the course as a whole, and in this way to contribute towards the fulfillment of the larger aims of the ASNC Tripos.

### **CONTENT OF THE COURSE**

The basic structure of the course is chronological, but the aim at all times is to show how our understanding depends on the close analysis of evidence derived from a variety of different sources (including coins, law-codes, and charters, as well as the major 'literary' sources). It is intended, in other words, to go some way beyond an exercise in the learning, processing, and recitation of recorded fact. You will be expected to display appropriate levels of understanding of major issues and current debates, and strongly encouraged to exercise your own independence of judgement. The scope of the course is suggested by the subjects listed below. Lectures will cover only parts of the course as a whole, since it is assumed that they will be complemented by supervisions and by private study.

*The establishment of peoples and kingdoms (fourth–eighth centuries)*

- The transition from Roman Britain to sub-Roman Britain, in the late fourth and early fifth centuries, and the circumstances in which Germanic peoples came to Britain.

- The nature and progress of the ‘Anglo-Saxon’ settlements in the fifth and sixth centuries, with particular reference to the interplay of written evidence (notably Gildas, Bede, and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*), archaeological evidence (settlements as well as cemeteries, pottery as well as metalwork), and linguistic evidence (including place-names). Other themes include aspects of continuity and survival from the past, as well as aspects of change.

- The emergence of the several kingdoms of the so-called ‘Heptarchy’ in the sixth century, and the differences which developed between these kingdoms thereafter (in the seventh and eighth centuries), in terms of their political organisation, social composition, economic resources, etc.; always bearing in mind that the sources for one kingdom tend to differ from those for another.

- The conversion from paganism to Christianity in the seventh century, including the nature of the pagan religion, the respective methods and achievements of the ‘Roman’ and ‘Gaelic’ missionaries, conversion as a political and social process, and the impact of Christianity in different parts of the country. The evidence of saints’ *Lives*, and Bede, is complemented by the evidence of law-codes, charters, cemeteries, and church-building.

- The origin and development of Bede’s distinctive (Northumbrian) view of the past, as represented by his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (completed in 731): the viability of his views (e.g. notion of seven overlords, otherwise known as the ‘Bretwaldas’), and the need to search for other perspectives.

#### *Mercia, Wessex, and the Vikings (eighth–ninth centuries)*

- The significance of the so-called ‘Supremacy’ of the Mercian kings in the eighth century, with particular reference to the reigns of King Æthelbald (716–57) and King Offa (757–96); treated as an object-lesson in the deconstruction of an historical myth, and its replacement from first principles by a different structure. Integration of different types of evidence. Due attention is given to developments in the kingdoms of Sussex, Kent, Essex, and East Anglia, and comparisons have to be made with the kingdoms of Wessex and Northumbria. Certain aspects of the subject have to be understood in close relation to developments on the continent.

- The major political developments in the ninth century, marked by the apparent ‘decline’ of the kingdom of the Mercians, the ‘rise’ of the kingdom of the West Saxons (especially during the reigns of Ecgberht and Æthelwulf), and the extension of West Saxon control into the south-east. Comparison with developments in the kingdoms of East Anglia and Northumbria. Connections with the Frankish world, and with the papacy. The impact of the Viking invasions in the central decades of the ninth century, on society, culture, and the economy. The use of numismatic evidence.

- The reign of King Alfred the Great (871–99), including the nature of the available source material, and introduction to the main areas of debate. The emergence of the ‘kingdom of the Anglo-Saxons’ in the 880s, as Alfred’s legacy to his successors in the early tenth century; and the purpose and impact of his revival of religion and learning. The significance of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, and of Asser’s *Vita Ælfredi regis*, and their value as sources for our knowledge of this period. Metalwork, including the Alfred Jewel (and associated objects), the Abingdon Sword, and the Fuller Brooch.

#### *The making of the kingdom of the English (tenth century)*

- Scandinavian settlements in eastern and northern England, in the late ninth century, and the emergence of the ‘Danelaw’ during the tenth century. Scandinavian settlements in north-western England, and relations between the Hiberno-Norse kingdom of Dublin and the Hiberno-Norse kingdom of York.

- The complex circumstances behind the political unification of England in the tenth century: King Edward the Elder (899–924), the continuation of the ‘kingdom of the Anglo-Saxons’, and the extension of royal authority to east and north; King Æthelstan (924–39), and the further extension of royal authority beyond the river Humber; the complications arising from the history of the Hiberno-Norse kingdom of York, the activities of Archbishop Wulfstan I, and dynastic politics, in the period 939–59; the reign of King Edgar (959–75), and the significance of Edgar’s second coronation at Bath in 973. The question arises whether practices of government were ever uniform throughout the country, and whether there was always some residual regional identity.

- The origins and progress of the monastic reform movement in the tenth century. The significance, or otherwise, of Alfredian initiatives. The court of King Æthelstan, and Bishop Coenwald’s visit to monasteries in Germany (929). The separate activities of Dunstan, Æthelwold, Oswald, and others, on their own terms and in relation to the role of the king. The promulgation of the *Regularis Concordia*, and the emergence of the monastic reform movement. The significance of the *Lives* of Dunstan, Oswald and Æthelwold (written c. 1000), and their value for historical purposes.

- The renewal of Viking raids, and attendant domestic complications, during the reign of King Æthelred the Unready (978–1016). Major literary sources for the period are the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, *The Battle of Maldon*, the works of Ælfric, and Archbishop Wulfstan’s *Sermo ad Anglos*. Documentary sources include the corpus of the king’s charters, and royal legislation. Other major sources include the coinage.

*From Anglo-Saxon to Anglo-Danish and Anglo-Norman England (eleventh century)*

- The conquest of England by Swein Forkbeard and Cnut, and the rule of the Anglo-Danish kings (1016–42). The significance of the *Encomium Emmae Reginae*, and its value as a source for our knowledge of this period.

- The reign of King Edward the Confessor (1042–66). The reign of King Harold II (1066), and the Norman Conquest of England. The significance of the *Vita Edwardi regis*, and its value as a source for our knowledge of this period.

- English resistance and response to the Norman Conquest; the effects of the Conquest on royal government, patterns of landholding, social organisation, the rural and urban economies, and aspects of religious and material culture.

*Major themes (which of their nature run through the period as a whole)*

Anglo-Saxon history has many dimensions beyond the limits of the chronological framework outlined above. We cannot expect to do justice, in the time available, to all other aspects of the subject, but it is important to recognise their existence, and to pursue the bearing which they might have on larger historical issues. It is to be expected that you will find certain aspects more interesting than others; and while you may wish to explore some on your own initiatives, you may find that you encounter others in connection with your work for the Tripos as a whole.

- The history of the English-speaking peoples in relation to the history of the Brittonic-speaking peoples (Cornish and Welsh) and the Gaelic-speaking peoples (Irish and Scots), in relation to the history of France, Germany and Italy (including the papacy), and in relation to the history of the Scandinavians, otherwise known as the vikings. Nor should one forget the importance of understanding the activities of (Christian) Anglo-Saxon kings in relation to their ultimate role-models, notably David and Solomon in the Old Testament.

- Anglo-Saxon kingship and royal government. The variety of different practices, and the variety of different experiences. Conceptions of kingship; political realities; royal succession; royal families; dynastic strategies. Development of rights

and powers. Exploitation, control, and use of resources. The court, the royal household, and the concept of royal councillors. Itinerant kingship, including royal estates and palaces. Business conducted at meetings of the king and his councilors, including grants of land. Reaching the people: agents and agencies of royal government, and the use of the written word. Driving ideologies; practical constraints. The 'Anglo-Saxon State' (whatever that may be).

- Law and legislation. The Kentish legislation of the seventh century, in relation to the West Saxon legislation of Ine. The problem of Mercian legislation. The law-code of King Alfred the Great. The apparatus of law-enforcement in the tenth and eleventh centuries, represented by reeves, shires, hundreds, and tithings, and by the surviving law-codes of Edward the Elder, Æthelstan, Edmund, Edgar, Æthelred, and Cnut. Archbishop Wulfstan as draftsman of royal legislation 1008–23.

- Coinage. The contribution made by numismatic evidence to many aspects of the subject, including the 'Mercian Supremacy', relations between Wessex and Mercia in the ninth century, developments in East Anglia and Northumbria, and the emergence of the kingdom of England in the tenth century. The location of the main centres of commercial activity in the seventh, eighth and ninth centuries; royal control of the coinage in the tenth and eleventh centuries; coinage as a form of royal propaganda, advertising royal control, and projecting images of kingship. Use of the 'Early Medieval Coinage' database on the website of the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

- Cultural history, as represented by literature in Latin and in the vernacular. History and hagiography. Old English prose, represented by the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (compiled in the late ninth century) and by its tenth- and eleventh-century continuations, and by the works of Ælfric and Wulfstan (in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries). Old English poetry, represented by *Beowulf*, the contents of the Exeter Book (including *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*), *The Battle of Brunanburh*, and *The Battle of Maldon*.

- Cultural history, as represented by metalwork, sculpture, and manuscript illumination. Metalwork is especially important for the settlement period. Sculpture throws light on the church in the eighth and early ninth centuries, and on aspects of the material culture of the Danelaw in the tenth and eleventh centuries. The significance for historical purposes of manuscript production in Anglo-Saxon England is self-evident: periods for study include the late seventh century to the early ninth century (e.g. the Codex Amiatinus, the Lindisfarne Gospels, the Codex Aureus), the late ninth and early tenth centuries (the Alfredian revival, the Junius Psalter, the Æthelstan Psalter, CCC 183, etc.), the late tenth and early eleventh centuries (e.g. the Benedictional of St Æthelwold, and other products of the reform movement), and further developments in the eleventh century. Patronage of the arts and crafts, and the accumulation of treasures in religious houses (and elsewhere).

- Ecclesiastical history, as represented by themes other than the conversion, the secularization of the church in the eighth and ninth centuries, and the monastic reform movement in the tenth century. The circumstances behind the foundation and endowment of religious houses in different parts of the country, and their place in local society. The development and promotion of the cults of particular saints, for a variety of popular, political and other purposes, as attested by the writing of hagiography, movements of relics, public ceremonial, re-building and re-dedication of churches, liturgy, and so on.

- Ecclesiastical architecture. Much is to be gained from visiting the surviving churches, for example at Escomb, Jarrow and Monkwearmouth (Co. Durham), at Brixworth, Earls Barton and Barnack (Northants.), at Deerhurst (Gloucs.), and at

Wing (Bucks.). It is also important to recognise the former existence of churches on a grander scale, attested not only by archaeological excavation, but also by descriptions in literary sources.

- Social history, including the nature of Anglo-Saxon paganism, the circumstances of the conversion to Christianity in the seventh century, the bonds of society (especially kinship, lordship, and other kinds of personal relationship), the structure of society (from slaves to kings, and possibility of movement between classes), gender issues (widows, women in religion, kings' sisters or daughters, queens), and interaction between secular society and agencies of church and state. Much may be gained from examination of the fairly small corpus of Anglo-Saxon wills and vernacular charters.

- Economic history, including the significance of trade, and the control of trade, in the emergence of the early political orders, the development of towns, the management of rural estates, regional differences in estate structure, the relationship between the rural and urban economies, manifestations of the wealth of England in the tenth and eleventh centuries, the use of gold and silver, and the role of money.

### **RELATIONSHIP WITH OTHER COURSES**

The course depends on the use of literary and documentary sources written in Latin or Old English, and thus combines well with the corresponding literary and linguistic papers, and with the paper on palaeography and codicology. Many of the issues at stake are best understood in relation to aspects of Scandinavian, Gaelic, or Brittonic history. Knowledge of Old Norse language and literature would be helpful in understanding some of the sources for Scandinavian activities in England in the tenth and eleventh centuries. Knowledge of Medieval Welsh and Medieval Irish would help to put certain sources for the tenth century in their appropriate literary contexts.

### **ORGANISATION OF TEACHING**

The basic teaching for the course consists of a series of 32 lectures, presented in a two-year cycle. In the first year of the cycle, there are 16 lectures (one a week, throughout the Michaelmas and Lent Terms) covering the period to the end of the ninth century. In the second year of the cycle, there are 16 lectures (one a week, throughout the Michaelmas and Lent Terms) covering the tenth and eleventh centuries. All of the lectures are supported by handouts, which are designed to provide you with your own copies of important texts, and with relevant maps and other illustrative material. These lectures are supplemented by a series of four classes in the third (Easter) term; on these occasions you will have an opportunity to raise for discussion any matters relating to the course as a whole (including subjects not covered during the year in question), and we shall also work through sample questions of the kind which appear in the Prelim and Part I papers, in order that you might better understand what is expected in the examinations.

### **Guidance in the form of Reading Lists**

Guidance for further reading is available in four forms:

(i) *A Selection of Primary Sources in Translation*, combined on a single page with *A Selection of Secondary Reading*, providing in each case a selection of about ten titles which might be regarded as essential reading for the paper as a whole. Anyone considering the possibility of taking this paper might find it helpful in making the decision to peruse a selection of the items on these lists.

(ii) *Primary Sources Recommended for Study*, which provides references to accessible texts and translations of the main primary sources which you would be expected to

read during the course of your work for Part I. Questions in the examination papers are set on the assumption that you have read this material.

(iii) *Suggested Secondary Reading*, comprising a slightly more extensive range of secondary reading, including all of the basic textbooks, and examples of other material which will be encountered in studying for this paper.

Copies of (i) will be distributed in the first lecture of each year. Copies of (ii) and (iii) are available on the Anglo-Saxon England page of the Camtools website.

Reference to primary or secondary material will be made in lectures by means of the appropriate number in a more substantial guide (intended also to be of use for purposes of supervisions and private study):

(iv) S. Keynes, *Anglo-Saxon England: a Bibliographical Handbook*, 7th ed., ASNC Guides, Texts, and Studies 1 (Cambridge, 2006), comprising c. 280 pp., including coverage of the whole range of primary source material available for the study of Anglo-Saxon history, and also providing lists of secondary reading organised according to broad historical themes.

### **Supervision and Private Study**

Your attendance at lectures will be complemented by 8 supervisions arranged by your Director of Studies, for which you will write essays on selected topics within the course (as assigned by your supervisor, in accordance with your particular interests and needs). The supervisor will help you to clear up any difficulties about the subject, discuss matters of fact, judgement, and interpretation, and give guidance on the organisation, presentation and expression of your written work. If the supervisor is different from the lecturer, you will probably benefit from exposure to a different view or method of approach. It is expected that you will cover other subjects on your own initiative, by reading and taking notes in time available during term and during the vacations. Your Director of Studies may be able to arrange two or three revision supervisions, in the Easter Term, should you feel in need of them.

### **LIBRARIES**

You may wish to have your own copies of certain books, for ease of reference. Your college library might reasonably be expected to have a basic selection of books relating to the course, as well as some of the mainline journals (*English Historical Review*, *History*, *Anglo-Saxon England*, etc.). Please make recommendations for the purchase of essential books not found in your library. A checklist of books recommended for college libraries is available from the Departmental Secretary. Many of the standard editions of texts, monographs, textbooks, and works of reference, as well as specialised journals, will be found in the Departmental Library (part of the English Faculty Library in the faculty building on the Sidgwick Site) or in the Seeley Library (Faculty of History). You should be able to find absolutely everything, without much difficulty, in the University Library.

### **OTHER RESOURCES**

You are strongly recommended to explore the resources freely available on the **Internet**, including electronic texts of primary sources, images of manuscripts, artifacts and coins, and essential tools for private study (such as library catalogues, online bibliographies, dictionaries, concordances, information on research projects currently in progress, and so on). There are links to several sites of this nature on the Anglo-Saxon England pages of the Camtools website.

**Cambridge.** The oldest building still standing in Cambridge is the tower of St Bene't's Church, in Bene't Street (opposite the Eagle pub, near Corpus Christi College), which is a fine example of late Anglo-Saxon church architecture. The principal collections of Anglo-Saxon manuscripts in Cambridge are to be found in the following libraries: the University Library; the Parker Library, Corpus Christi College (formed by Matthew Parker, archbishop of Canterbury (1559–75); and the Wren Library, Trinity College. Some of these manuscripts may be on display during opening hours. There are numerous Anglo-Saxon artifacts in the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, on the Downing site, in Downing Street. The Fitzwilliam Museum has a superb collection of Anglo-Saxon coins. Other sites within striking distance of Cambridge include the Devil's Dyke (near Newmarket), West Stow and Sutton Hoo (in Suffolk), Maldon (in Essex), and the sites of the great fenland abbeys, at Ely, Ramsey, Peterborough, Crowland, and Thorney.

**London.** You are strongly urged to take full advantage of cheap and easy travel by rail (or bus) to London. There are always spectacular Anglo-Saxon (Norse, and Celtic) artifacts on display in the British Museum (including the finds from Sutton Hoo, and objects such as the Franks Casket, and the Fuller Brooch), and no less spectacular manuscripts on display in the British Library (including the Lindisfarne Gospels, the *Beowulf* manuscript, the Benedictional of St Æthelwold, and several manuscripts of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*). Trains from Cambridge to King's Cross railway station generally take less than an hour; both the BM and the BL are within easy walking distance from King's Cross.

#### EXAMINATIONS

There will be a single three-hour examination paper. You will be required to answer four questions, each carrying equal weight.

**Scope.** The papers for the Preliminary Examination (end of first year) and for Part I (end of second year) both cover the whole period (fifth century to the eleventh), and are likely to include questions on social, economic and ecclesiastical history as well as political history. First-year students will thus need to ensure that they have covered the whole period, in their own combination of lectures [on one or other half of the period], supervisions, private study, and revision; second-year students will need to bear in mind that they have to cover subjects which they studied over a year before, as well as subjects studied afresh in the current year.

**Format.** Both papers will contain a compulsory 'gobbet' question, and a range of essay questions. Gobbets are short passages (in translation) from primary sources, selected because they contain a particularly interesting statement, or represent a particularly interesting event; the term might be extended to apply to an image of a coin, or other small object, or an image from a manuscript, or some other kind of visual material. In a gobbet question you are invited to comment on matters of interest raised by two or three of the gobbets in question. The exercise is intended (a) to enable you to display your general understanding of the subject, through your ability to enlarge upon the historical context of whatever is said in the passage, and to identify the particular issues at stake; (b) to enable you to display your powers of source-criticism, in whatever ways are appropriate in the given case; and (c) to enable you to demonstrate your skill in the close reading of a text. At another level, the exercise is intended to encourage you (a) to read the primary sources, and (b) to inject some variety into the examination paper as a whole.

**Expectations.** The essay questions are designed not so much to test your factual knowledge of events, as to enable you to display your command and understanding of

the subject, your ability to construct and to control an argument, the clarity of your exposition, the independence of your judgement, and perhaps the originality of your thought. Use of relevant material drawn from other disciplines (e.g. OE or ON literature, or Insular Latin, or Scandinavian or Celtic history) is strongly encouraged.

Complete sets of **past examination papers** in the ASNC Tripos (1979 onwards) are readily available in college libraries and in the University Library. Recent papers are also available on the departmental website.

**Should you have any queries about any aspect of the course, you should approach SDK after lectures, or in his rooms in Trinity College (D1 Great Court), or via e-mail ([sdk13@cam.ac.uk](mailto:sdk13@cam.ac.uk)).**