The Anglo-Saxons

What’s in it for you? Learn how the Anglo-Saxons made England.

Look at a map of Europe in 400 AD and you won’t find a country called England. Nor will you find anything recognizably English in the territory that was later given that name. The laws are Roman and the locals speak a mix of Celtic languages and Latin. Urban settlements don’t have winding lanes and thoroughfares, but rigid grids. The English language doesn’t exist. Fast-forward to 1066, the year of the Norman Conquest, and you’ll find all the familiar markers of England. The countryside is divided into shires, sheriffs keep the peace, and the locals speak a tongue that’s more or less comprehensible even to us. What changed? The short answer is that the Anglo-Saxons who settled on this island after the year 400 made England. How? That’s what we’ll be looking at in these blinks. Along the way, you’ll learn

how the Romans lost control of Britain; where the Anglo-Saxons came from; and how the foundations of modern English culture were laid.

Roman Britain – a civilized island.

November, 1992. We’re in Suffolk, a county in southeast England, where a farmer has just lost a hammer in one of his fields. A stubborn man, he borrows a metal detector and goes looking for it. He finds something much more valuable: a treasure hoard containing 584 gold coins, 14,000 silver coins, and hundreds of decorative objects. Luckily for us, the coins are well preserved. Based on the emperors engraved on them, we can tell they were minted just before 400 AD. We don’t know who owned this treasure, but we can guess why it was buried. Historians see treasure hoards as barometers of social unrest. Wars, revolutions, invasions – whenever the future’s uncertain, people protect their assets, often by burying them. In Britain, there are many hoards from two periods in particular: the Norman Conquest of 1066 and the Civil War of the 1640s. So what was happening on this island at the beginning of the fifth century? Well, the Roman government that had ruled large parts of Britain for almost four centuries was collapsing. This wasn’t a case of plucky Britons casting off the imperial shackles. This was a worrying time. Whatever came next, it seemed unlikely that it’d be as good as life in Roman Britain had been. Rome, after all, provided a central government, laws, and legions to keep the peace. Its towns and cities were orderly and well-planned, boasting civilized amenities like bathhouses, theaters, and forums. Bridges spanned rivers, canals connected rivers, and a network of roads conveyed people and goods from one end of the country to the other. Its mills processed enough grain to maintain a lucrative export industry and its factories churned out high-quality pottery, tiles, ironwork, and glass. Roman ports ensured a lively trade with Europe – the source of exotic products like olive oil and wine. Wealthy Britons lived in villas with indoor plumbing and underfloor heating. Plebeian Britons were poor and overworked, but even they were better off than their counterparts in Scotland and Ireland. The lower classes in these nations weren’t just impoverished – they were also often enslaved. So what went wrong? Why did this prosperous and peaceful province suddenly collapse at the end of the fourth century? To answer that question, we need to zoom out and look at the wider Roman empire.

A fraying empire – the last days of Roman rule.

Roman rule was a contract. The conquered laid down their weapons and pledged loyalty to the conquerors. In return, they received a share of the imperial spoils. Peace was the cornerstone of this agreement. Without peace, Roman civilization meant little: orderly towns with bathhouses aren't worth much if you can't prevent marauding invaders from sacking them, after all. In Britain, as in other provinces, the army guaranteed this peace. Its soldiers defended the coasts and manned Hadrian's Wall – a 73-mile-long fortification along the Scottish border built in 122 AD. In the second century, some 50,000 legionaries had been stationed in Britain – around 10 percent of the imperial army. Rome's empire, however, was large, and there were other frontiers to worry about. By 300, most of that fighting force had been redeployed, leaving just 15,000 soldiers behind. They were stretched thin – too thin to protect British seaboards against a wave of raids launched by Picts and Scots in the north and by Germanic groups in the east around 360. The fate of Roman rule in Britain wasn't decided on its coasts, though; it was sealed by events in the empire's distant eastern provinces. In 378, while attempting to put down a rebellion, Rome lost 10,000 men in a single battle in Turkey. Its empire in the east, which included the Balkans, Greece, Palestine, and Egypt, was badly exposed. Rome scrambled to move troops from western provinces like Britain eastward, but it was too late. The Germanic people whose armies had inflicted that devastating defeat, the Visigoths, tore through the Balkans and were soon at Italy's borders. As the fighting drew nearer, Roman officials – including those responsible for minting coins – retreated ever further down the Italian peninsula. Britain was now cut off from the imperial center. Unable to access Roman currency, its economy collapsed. Legionaries who hadn't been paid decided to mutiny, leading to a total breakdown of order. The whole point of the Roman state was to guarantee peace. But it couldn't do that without an army. And if it couldn't prevent towns from being pillaged and citizens from being murdered on its well-paved roads, why pay taxes or obey laws forbidding you to carry weapons? More to the point, if Britons had to defend themselves, shouldn't they also rule themselves? The answer to these questions was given in the form of a popular revolt. The writing was on the wall. In 410, after almost four centuries, the Roman order in Britain collapsed.

Pirates and pioneers – the sudden arrival of the Anglo-Saxons.

The Picts and Scots who plundered the west coast and broke through Hadrian's Wall were well known to locals. That's no surprise: they'd been around since the early days of Roman rule. The Germanic groups on the east coast were different. Their arrival was sudden and shocking. Who were these people, and what were they doing in Britain? We catch an early glimpse of them in the letters of Sidonius Apollinaris, a Roman diplomat writing around 450 AD. He describes them as bloodthirsty "pirates" who attacked defenceless communities without warning, stole their valuables, and sacrificed their inhabitants to strange pagan gods. But there was more to these so-called pirates than raiding; they also established their own settlements. Contemporary sources don't shed much light on how this happened, so we have to rely on later accounts. One is the Ecclesiastical History of the English People, a study of Christianity in the Anglo-Saxon

age written around 731 by a Northumbrian monk known to us as the Venerable Bede. He claims that the first settlers came from three powerful tribes – the Saxons, Angles, and Jutes. Archaeological evidence supports Bede's argument. Fifth-century graves and objects excavated in southeast England are strikingly similar to those found in Saxony, Anglia, and Jutland – the German and Scandinavian areas from which these groups came. So why did these proto-Anglo-Saxons migrate and settle on the other side of the North Sea? Archaeologists speculate that rising sea-levels may have played a role, but our second major source for this period highlights a different factor: political miscalculation. Completed around 540, the Ruin of Britain was written by another monk – Gildas. Post-Roman Britain, he narrates, was divided into several kingdoms. Too weak to defend their territories, their rulers forged an alliance with Germanic groups. In return for helping them defeat the Picts and Scots, these kingdoms allowed their allies to colonize the east coast. If we're to believe Gildas, then, the first Anglo-Saxon settlers were invited into Britain by the country's ruling class. This decision, Gildas argues, led to Britain's "ruin." As more and more Germanic settlers arrived, they gradually gained the upper hand, at which point they turned on their British hosts. How believable is this version of events? Gildas makes lots of mistakes – he misdates the construction of Hadrian's Wall by 300 years, for example – so we know his sources were unreliable. On the other hand, we know that the Romans used Germanic mercenaries in Britain, so it's plausible that their British successors resorted to the same tactic. Ultimately, the jury is still out on this question.

"Barbarians" at the gate – Roman civilization through Germanic eyes.

Language can help us understand complicated historical developments. French and English, for instance, both emerged in a similar historical context – the context of conquest, when Germanic "barbarians" invaded the Roman provinces in the fifth century. But that's where the languages' similarities end. Take French day-names like mardi and jeudi and their English cognates, Tuesday and Thursday. The former come from the Latin names of the Roman gods Mars and Jupiter. Tuesday and Thursday, by contrast, are named after the Anglo-Saxon gods Tiw and Thunor. It's a significant divergence. The Franks who conquered Gaul – today's France – knew Roman civilization well and borrowed freely from its culture. They learned to speak a plebeian form of Latin that later evolved into French. That's why we call it a Romance language: like Italian and Spanish, it ultimately comes from Rome. Meanwhile, life in major cities like Lyon continued under Frankish kings just as it had under Roman emperors. Cathedrals not only remained untoppled; their bishops converted the new Frankish elite. In France, the use of old day-names is a symbol of this continuity between Roman and post-Roman culture. Roman civilization wasn't well-known in Anglia or Saxony, and settlers from these areas showed little interest in what remained of it in Britain. New day-names like Tuesday and Thursday symbolize this cultural break. Urban life disappeared after the Anglo-Saxons' arrival, and once-bustling cities became ghost towns. London, home to some 50,000 people in Roman times, was all but abandoned. Latin disappeared, too, as did the official religion of the Roman empire – Christianity. Britain's native culture didn't leave much of a mark, either. All in all, Old English borrowed just 30 words from the Celtic language spoken by Britons. Gildas paints an apocalyptic picture of this rupture. Germanic settlers, he says, killed or enslaved huge numbers of Britons and drove the rest from their homes, effectively extinguishing their way of life. Archaeological evidence does suggest a large-scale crisis. Villas were abandoned in

favor of fortresses and Christians retreated into the hills and forests of Wales and Cornwall. Numerically, however, Gildas's narrative doesn't add up. The lowest population estimate for late-Roman Britain is two million. Anglo-Saxon ships were small and carried around ten passengers. A hundred boats arriving every year over five decades would mean 250,000 settlers plus their children. Even if one in two Britons died, Anglo-Saxons would still have been a minority. How did they gain the upper hand, then? To explain that, we need to look at their culture.

Blood and guts – the violent world of the early Anglo-Saxons.

Early Anglo-Saxon settlers left a light footprint on the historical record for a simple reason: their material culture resisted preservation. Their halls and huts, for example, were short-lived timber constructions. Flimsy fences marked the boundaries of fields and most everyday objects were made of wood, fabric, or leather. Little of what they built or made between roughly 400 and 600 AD survived long enough for archeologists to dig it up. Although they didn't leave many material clues behind, we aren't completely in the dark: thanks to their literature, we know something about their view of the world. Take the epic poem Beowulf. Composed by an unknown author in eighth-century Britain, it's set in sixth-century Scandinavia and recounts the exploits of the eponymous hero, Beowulf. The narrative begins with Beowulf visiting the court of a Danish king, Hrothgar, where he learns of a terrifying monster. Grendel, as this creature is known, appears at night and devours men in their sleep. Beowulf, a brave warrior and a skilled swordsman, slays first Grendel and then Grendel's mother, liberating Hrothgar's kingdom from this otherworldly menace. It's a neat fable, but does it really tell us anything about the Anglo-Saxons other than that they enjoyed tall tales? Well, yes. Reading between the lines, we get a sense of their values. What sustains Beowulf during his battles isn't faith but a desire for prestige. What matters most in this world, it seems, is reputation. And if you're the noble-born son of a royal clan like Beowulf, there's no better way of securing fame than to embark on adventures as a sword-wielding warrior. Bravery doesn't just win you the plaudits of peers, though. It's also handsomely rewarded. When Beowulf returns to Hrothgar's court, he's lavished with gifts, such as jewel-studded weapons, and feted at endless meat- and mead-heavy banquets. Of course, fifth- and sixth-century Anglo-Saxon warriors didn't do battle with mythical monsters – they fought one another. The stronger a king and his clan were, the more territory they could conquer. That, too, was richly rewarded. Here, the mythical world of Beowulf overlaps with other sources. These tell us how the real-life counterparts of kings like Hrothgar could afford all that gift-giving and feasting: they used the threat of violence to extract goods from subjects. One document even gives us a list of what every hide – a group of ten farms – was expected to pay in tribute to Anglo-Saxon rulers every year. Among the listed items are 300 loaves of bread, 360 gallons of ale, two cows, five salmon, ten hens, ten cheeses, and a hundred eels!

How to bury a king – Rædwald of East Anglia.

By the early seventh century, Britain had been divided into dozens of warring kingdoms. Rulers and clans fought for wealth and prestige. The risks to life and limb were great.

But the rewards were great as well. To get to that, however, we need to return to Suffolk – the county in which we met that stubborn farmer who went looking for a hammer and found a treasure trove. Suffolk is part of East Anglia, a region named after the people who once ruled it: the inhabitants of the eastern part of a peninsula straddling the German-Danish border called Anglia. After crossing the North Sea in the fifth century, they rowed down Suffolk's shingle shores until they reached the Deben, a river which they followed inland until it became too narrow to navigate. That's where they settled. In 599, Rædwald ascended to the East Anglian throne. An exemplary warrior-king, he extended the kingdom's influence to the river Humber some 160 miles north of Suffolk. According to Bede, Rædwald was a bretwalda or "Britain-ruler" – an overlord whose ultimate authority was accepted by neighboring rulers. By the time of his death in 624, East Anglia's power and wealth was virtually unrivalled. To understand just how prosperous this kingdom was, we need to fast-forward to 1939. We're now at Sutton Hoo, a cemetery overlooking the Deben not far from where the first East Angles settled. Archaeologists have just unearthed an 80-foot longship laden with treasure. Among the precious objects: an exquisitely engraved helmet, swords embellished with gemstones, finely-tooled clasps, and household goods made from iron and gold. The quality of the craftsmanship is remarkable. So is the provenance of many of these objects, which come from distant lands like Syria and India. This isn't a treasure hoard – it's a grave. Like other Scandinavians, the East Angles buried people with things they'd owned in life. Who did they place inside this ship? A body was never recovered, so it's impossible to say with certainty. We can make a pretty good guess, though. The fact that the site contains so many valuable and exotic objects suggests that this must have been an important person. Then there's the poem Beowulf, which depicts the mythical slayer of monsters being buried in a treasure-laden longship. Anglo-Saxons, we can infer, saw this as a fitting send-off for noble-born warriors. Finally, coins found inside the ship date the site to between 610 and 635. Add all that together and it's likely that we're looking at the grave of Rædwald, who died around 624.

Returning to Rome – the reemergence of British Christianity.

Late sixth-century Britain was a land of many gods. Some Britons still worshipped ancient deities associated with landmarks or sacred objects like trees and rocks. Then there were the gods introduced by conquerors. The Romans, who converted to Christianity in the fourth century, brought this new creed with them to Britain along with bathhouses, roads, and forums. The arrival of Anglo-Saxon settlers didn't wipe out Roman Christianity, but it did squeeze it into Celtic hinterlands like Cornwall and Wales. The Anglo-Saxons had their own gods. Theirs was a Germanic religion similar to that of Scandinavians like the Norwegians. Woden, for example, was the Anglo-Saxon answer to the Norse god Odin, while Thunor was their version of the Norse god of thunder, Thor. These were the deities of their kingdoms. The Roman church wasn't prepared to abandon Britain to Scandinavian "paganism." When Pope Gregory I saw a group of English boys in Rome in the 590s, he declared that they were angels, not Angles, and resolved to convert Britain. Gregory's missionaries made quick inroads in the early seventh century, converting both the rulers of southern kingdoms like Kent and Essex and the country's most powerful man – the king of Northumbria. From the perspective of the Roman church, however, this mission was ultimately a failure. Baptized kings continued worshipping pagan gods alongside the new Christian God. Worse, many of them later rejected the faith entirely. In Bede's memorable and hostile words, they

“returned to their vomit.” That’s not the end of the story, though. In the mid-seventh century, there was another, more successful wave of Christianization. The impulse didn’t come directly from Rome this time – it came from the west. Ireland was converted in the fifth century by Saint Patrick. Born in Britain, Patrick had been kidnapped by seaborne raiders as a child and sold into slavery. After escaping, he set about converting the land of his captors. Christian Ireland then became a launching pad for missionary activity in Britain. It was Irish church officials who converted much of the northeast. It was also an Irish bishop who founded Lindisfarne. This island monastery would go on to train the priests who brought Northumbria back into the Christian fold in the 630s. From this point on, Northumbrian missionaries took up the cause of Christianizing Britain. They spread across the island and converted the rulers and subjects of kingdoms like Sussex, Mercia, Wessex, and East Anglia. By around 670, their work was done: a Christian sat on every throne in Britain.

Bishops and barterers – the renewal of British cities.

There were lots of good reasons to build a city where the Romans built London. Take the Thames. It’s deep and wide enough to be navigable, which gives you access to the North Sea and its trade networks, but not too broad, which means you can build bridges across it. The banks are flat and firm – just what you need if you want to enclose a city behind three miles of sturdy stone wall. It’s no surprise, then, that Roman London prospered. It was easy to defend and resupply. Its port became a vital node in the European grain market and fortunes were made shipping wheat to Germany. By 150 AD, it was home to 50,000 people and boasted the largest forum north of the Alps. The city declined sharply after 410, when it was all but abandoned. Life only returned much later. Once the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms had been converted, the church turned its attention to administrative matters. The country was divided into bishoprics. London received its own bishop in 675 and a small ecclesiastical community took shape. That was the first sign that the city’s fortunes might improve. But it wasn’t religion that tipped the scales – it was an economic boom. Trade between the Anglo-Saxons and the kingdom of Francia picked up around 670. You can only trade with neighboring states if you have two things: a currency to pay for imports and goods of your own to sell. Archeological evidence shows that large quantities of silver coins were being minted during these years. We also know that new manufacturing centers were springing up in Roman cities and towns. These commercial hubs were identifiable by their suffix, -wic, which originally meant “dwelling” but came to signify places in which artisanal goods were produced and sold. There was Hamwic, today’s Southampton, and Ipswich, which retains its Anglo-Saxon name. Northumberland had Eoforwic, which became York. The largest was Lundenwic – London. Lundenwic wasn’t like Roman London. It didn’t have a forum or theaters and it was outside the old city walls. In fact, it looked more like a shanty town than an imperial metropolis. Bede describes it as a “trading center for many nations who visit it by land and sea.” In short, it was a rough-and-ready place – somewhere you went for business, not for pleasure or culture. Its existence was significant, though: it was another sign that there might be a future for British cities.

The calm before the storm – peace and prosperity in the eighth century.

Mercia was a large kingdom. It extended from London in the south to the Humber in the north. From west to east, it covered every blade of grass between the Welsh frontier and the Norfolk coast. Its true influence, however, exceeded even these far-flung geographical markers. After the accession of Æthelbald in 716, Mercian rulers referred to themselves as overlords of "all the provinces called by the general name Southern English." This wasn't an idle boast. Æthelbald spent around half a century interfering in the affairs of Mercia's southern neighbor, Kent. His successor, Offa, went further. Between 757 and 796, he subjugated every kingdom south of the Humber, leaving him in control of a territory that closely resembled the old Roman province of Britain. The significance of that wasn't lost on him. Offa wasn't like the bretwaldas, or "Britain-rulers," of old – he was more like his contemporary across the English Channel, Charlemagne, the king of Francia. These men weren't adventure-seeking warriors like their ancestors. They desired stability, order, and legitimacy. Both turned to the past for those things. For Offa, that meant grand public works. Hadrian had built his famous wall, so he constructed a monumental structure of his own: Offa's Dyke, an 82-mile long earthwork along the Welsh frontier. He also commissioned new public buildings. These weren't just patterned on Roman designs – they were often constructed with materials salvaged from abandoned Roman cities like Leicester. At one point, Offa even wrote to his "dearest brother," Charlemagne, to ask if he could organize shipments of porphyry from Italy. This rare and expensive stone had been a favorite of Roman emperors. Offa's love of Romanitas – the culture of Rome and its way of doing things – wasn't a put-on. Nor was he dreamily nostalgic. He wanted to rule Britain differently, and the Roman past provided a template. Under Mercian influence, Britain became a more sophisticated place than it had been for some time. Laws were standardized and more written records were kept. Kings convened councils more regularly and issued more royal charters and grants. Slowly but surely, a bureaucracy emerged. Cities were refortified and new silver coins bearing Offa's portrait were issued – the first mass currency in centuries. The Anglo-Saxons had rediscovered the old Roman virtue of orderly, centralized government, but this wasn't a revival act. The political order now emerging was both new and distinctly English.

The northern storm – the Viking assault on England.

One of the best written sources for our period is the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. Compiled by royal request in the ninth century, it's a wide-ranging, though incomplete, chronological summary of events. The pages concerned with the year 789 contain an ominous entry. It records that three longships appeared in Northumbria and landed a party of raiders, who then killed a government official. After this attack, references to seaborne raiders become increasingly common in the Chronicle. Who were these people? The victims of their attacks called them "Vikings." The origins of this word are unclear, but we know what its users meant by it: "pirates." Like the Anglo-Saxons, these seafaring folk were Germanic. Contemporaries often used the terms "Dane" and "Norwegian" interchangeably, and this is indeed where they came from. So what drove them out of Scandinavia? As we've seen, late eighth-century Anglo-Saxon kingdoms enjoyed an economic boom. This was an age of craftsmanship, gradual urban renewal, and expanding trade. Thanks to royal sponsorship, the English church was also prospering. Scandinavia was different. It was poorer and people didn't manufacture goods for export – they farmed and hunted animals. Danish and Norwegian traders, who often sold their wares in England, must have returned home with tales of the rich

pickings to be found on the island. In the 790s, Viking raiders sacked and burned three of Britain's most sacred Christian sites: the monasteries at Lindisfarne, Jarrow, and Iona. Churches were also plundered. Such attacks were opportunistic – these were unguarded soft targets, after all. But there was also a bigger picture. In Europe, the Frankish king, Charlemagne, was busy building a new political entity – the Carolingian empire. Like his Roman role models, he set out to civilize the "barbarians" on his frontiers. That meant converting "pagans" to Christianity, and Charlemagne's soldiers and missionaries penetrated deep into Germanic and Scandinavian territories in their bid to do just that. It's possible, then, that there was more at stake when Vikings plundered monasteries – they may well have seen these as acts of retaliation in a defensive struggle against crusading Christians. Unfortunately, we can't be sure of their motives. The Vikings didn't record their view of things until much later, by which time these events had been greatly mythologized. What we do know is that their ambition was growing. Like the Anglo-Saxons, they were much more than simple pirates.

Stemming the Viking tide – Alfred the Great's first act.

Mercian power didn't outlast Offa. After his death in 796, Mercia was eclipsed by a rising star: Wessex, the land of the West Saxons. This kingdom in the southwest of what was now called England prospered in the eighth century; in the ninth, it expanded. In 814, Wessex annexed Celtic Cornwall and laid claim to its wealth of mineral resources. Over the next decade, Kent, Essex, Surrey, and Sussex met the same fate. Northumberland remained nominally independent, but it also recognized the overlordship of Wessex's rulers. Subjugating rival Anglo-Saxon kingdoms was one thing – stemming the incoming tide of Viking armies was a taller order. After years of sporadic raiding, the Viking leaders Halfdan and Ivar the Boneless assembled a Danish "Great Army" and landed in East Anglia in 865. Their forces made light work of Rædwald's ancestors and were soon marching on Northumberland. Within twenty-four months, both of these once-mighty Anglo-Saxon kingdoms had disappeared from the map. Mercia, too, was swallowed up, albeit later. For now, Wessex was in the firing line. In 870, the Danish army launched its assault. Wessex was a tougher nut to crack, and Halfdan and Ivar suffered their first serious defeat. There was little respite, though. The following year, a second Danish army landed. The West Saxons were now pinned in on all sides. In the middle of this crisis, their king, Æthelred, died. Just as it seemed that all was lost, one of early medieval England's greatest leaders stepped onto the stage – Æthelred's brother, Alfred, later dubbed Alfred the Great. The first years of Alfred's reign weren't promising, however. A series of defeats left him with no choice but to give the Danes their Danegeld, or "Dane yield," a tribute paid to in return for an end to Viking raids and invasions. Wessex was left in peace for five years. The Danes used this time to conquer Mercia. Alfred meanwhile rallied his forces. In 878, he defeated the Danish Great Army and forced its commander, Guthrum, to the negotiating table. The peace treaty they concluded divided England into two zones: Wessex and western Mercia, to be ruled by Alfred, and the rest of the country, which fell to the Danes. Alfred had halted the Viking advance, but it was what he did next that secured his claim to greatness.

The making of the English nation –

Alfred the Great’s second act.

Alfred’s response to Scandinavian raids and invasions changed England’s built environment. Viking soldiers were well organized, swift, brave, and often all but unstoppable on open ground. They weren’t especially good at besieging fortified settlements, though. England’s wics, which had sprung up outside the walls of old Roman settlements, gradually moved inside them. Lundenwic, for example, developed around the sandy beaches on the Thames’s northern bank. It was a good spot for loading and unloading boats – a feature of the landscape which the Vikings, who wanted to land soldiers rather than cargo, also appreciated. Lundenwic thus retreated behind the three-mile circuit of stone wall built by the Romans centuries earlier. Alfred observed these developments and hatched a plan. What had initially been a spontaneous response to the Viking threat became government policy. Dilapidated iron-age and Roman defensive structures were renovated and new forts, called burhs, or “strongholds,” were built. Alfred also commissioned a report known as the Burghal Hidage, which calculated how many men from each hide, or group of ten dwellings, were needed to successfully defend individual burhs. Most strongholds were initially little more than military compounds, but the presence of soldiers who needed provisions attracted other residents, like artisans and traders. Burhs, then, were the seeds out of which many English towns and, eventually, cities would grow. Alfred’s reforms also transformed England’s intellectual environment. When Vikings burned down monasteries, they destroyed large numbers of important manuscripts and records. Alfred set out to repair this cultural damage. He personally translated works like Bede’s Ecclesiastical History from Latin into English and commissioned others, including the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. Under his watch, English – previously the language of common folk – became the language of the state and its institutions. Alfred’s achievements outlasted him. By the time of his death in 899, he’d arranged an orderly line of succession. Between 900 and 946, his successors reconquered Danelaw, the territories occupied by Danish forces. They also consolidated and furthered his reforms. Laws were issued regulating everything from the suppression of thieves to the sites of markets, the hierarchy of churches to kingly duties. England was divided into administrative units called shires – an arrangement which remained untouched until 1974, when it was reformed – and a new currency was issued. Alfred’s greatness can be seen in these changes: it was his and his successors’ work that laid the foundations for modern England.

The final act – Danish and Frankish kings in an English kingdom.

The action that leads us to the final act of our drama takes us first to Scandinavia. The Danes and Norwegians have united, creating a Nordic superpower. Its eyes are set on England. The “King of the English” – the name given to each of England’s rulers – is Æthelred. His reign begins in 971. It’s his job to repel the coming Viking invasion. It does not go well. Viking troops land in Essex in 971 and overwhelm English defences. Æthelred sues for peace, which means paying Danegeld, the “Dane yield.” Æthelred resorts to an inspired bit of institutional tinkering to raise this money: he makes tax collection more efficient by creating local bailiffs to oversee the process. A bailiff is a reeve in Old English. Add shire to his title and you get a shire-reeve – the ancestor of the local law enforcement officials we call sheriffs. Æthelred’s second decision isn’t as

clever: he orders the massacre of Danish civilians in northeastern England. At a stroke, he alienates thousands of subjects and provokes an invasion. When Viking armies arrive in 1013, northern subjects desert their English king and accept a Danish commander, Cnut, in his place. Æthelred flees into exile in the Duchy of Normandy. Cnut is crowned "King of England" in 1016. He's a far cry from a clichéd bloodthirsty Viking warrior. He styles himself as a civilized and Christian king. The English state is left pretty much as he finds it. Just how stable these years are can be gauged by the fact that it's a West Saxon king who succeeds him – Edward, Æthelred's son, who comes to power in 1042. Edward's reign is mostly taken up with ecclesiastical matters, but it's his last years which interest us. Edward never names a successor. Cnut's Norwegian descendents are an obvious choice, but he doesn't seem to like them. Nor does he want Harold Goodwinson, a nobleman whose family is close to Cnut's, to succeed him. Instead, he looks to Normandy, the land in which he spent the first 25 years of his life. Norman sources swear that Edward promises the throne to William, the Duchy's seven-year-old king. Are they telling the truth? Plenty of contemporaries think so. When Edward dies in early 1066 and is replaced by Harold, Normandy invades and installs William. Many believe the Normans have both might and right on their side. Either way, England will never be ruled by another Anglo-Saxon king. The country the Anglo-Saxons made, however, endures. Many different nationalities will sit on its throne, but it will remain an English throne in an English-speaking state.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks is that: The Romans controlled Britain for four centuries. But when their empire collapsed in 400 AD, few traces of their civilization remained on the island. The country was remade in the image of the Germanic settlers who came after the Romans – the Anglo-Saxons. Over seven centuries, they laid the foundations of modern England, creating institutions that would outlast even their own demise at the hands of the Normans in 1066.