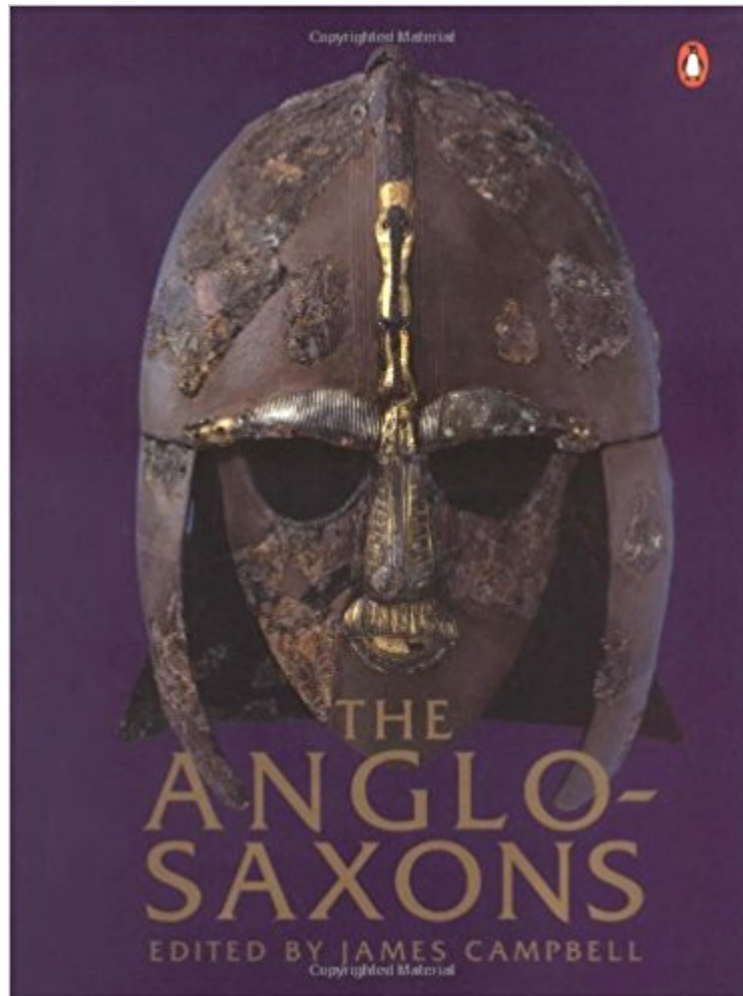


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The Anglo-Saxons



Synopsis

In this major survey three distinguished historians, James Campbell, Patrick Wormald and Eric John, have produced an exciting introduction to the field. Although the "Lost Centuries" between AD400 and 600 suffer from a scarcity of written sources, and only two writers, King Alfred and the Venerable Bede, dominate our understanding of later times, the authors have created a rich and thought-provoking account of the stormy era when Britain became Christian and sustained several waves of Viking invaders. A single nation, they suggest, slowly emerged from the rivalries and fluctuating fortunes of separate kingdoms like Mercia, Wessex and East Anglia. Major figures such as Offa, Alfred, Edgar and Cnut are discussed in detail, while the stunning illustrations convey the immense achievements of Anglo-Saxon centuries were 'simply a barbarous prelude to better things'.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Written by three of the leading historians of the Anglo-Saxon period, this is easily the best introduction to its subject. The writing is authoritative yet accessible, giving a good idea not only of the course of Anglo-Saxon history, but also of the problems with the sources and of disputes within the historical community. Only in the final chapters, by Eric John, do major historical disputes sometimes go unnoted; one would not know, e.g., from his discussion of Harold Godwineson that some historians greatly respect Harold, or that not all historians believe that Edward the Confessor firmly intended William of Normandy to succeed him. To his credit, however, John's presentation here is more orthodox than elsewhere (for his unadulterated views, see his contentious and delightful *Reassessing Anglo-Saxon England*). The physical presentation of the book is far more

attractive than is usual for textbooks. It is in a large format and lavishly illustrated, including a number of color pictures, and has several good maps of England (although it is curiously lacking in maps illustrating the European context of English history, and it could also use genealogical tables to help sort through some of the myriad characters). The bibliography is good up to 1981, the original date of publication, but unfortunately it was not updated when Penguin reissued the book, and thus cannot take account of the scholarship of the past two decades. It also has, regrettably, "secret" endnotes at the back of the book, not signaled in the text, which often lead the reader to primary source material and some secondary discussions; it is well worth the reader's effort to seek out the endnotes periodically. In short, *The Anglo-Saxons* is highly recommended for anybody seeking a general introduction to the history of this period. My highest praise is that when I taught a university course on Anglo-Saxon history, this is the only book I considered for a main textbook.

The book is rich in detail, highly informative and well illustrated. The picture essays throughout the book are great, the ones on the cult of St. Cuthbert and the formation of boroughs I found particularly enjoyable. Part history, part archeology the book tracks down and gives origins and backgrounds of the source materials that the authors use providing some great insight not normally found in other books on the subject. After reading this book, one can't help become an admirer of Bede. Also what I found interesting is that most of the book emphasizes the history of Anglo-Saxons ecclesiastically instead of following the monarchs like most others. My one severe criticism of the book is that there is no mention of the Witanagemot anywhere. Other problems that I had were that the last third of the book was surprisingly a glossy overview of events. Which is ironic since that is the era of Saxon England that has the most detail. And the book can be dry in places. It has been noted that this has been used as a text book and I can see why. But I do not recommend this as the first book to get regarding this subject. The authors expect you to have at least a general knowledge of Anglo-Saxon England, particularly when it comes to its kings. Those familiar with the history will find this an excellent addition to your library. Criticisms aside, this is an admirable work and I'm glad I bought it.

This well-illustrated volume provides an excellent introduction to the Anglo-Saxon period. The "picture essays" regarding coinage and other specialized topics help provide detail without interrupting what amounts to historic narrative. The problems of using source documents are detailed as well as the triumphs of modern archeology in expanding our understanding of this period of history. The photographs, drawings, and maps compliment and support the text nicely. Highly

recommended as an introduction to the period and its people.

I recently used this text in a graduate course on the early Middle Ages. I like it because it does several things really well -- most of what is written about the period tends to focus on the period after Alfred the Great because historians are rightly dependent upon written sources that become relatively more plentiful in the later period. This text draws on archaeology really nicely and gives a lot of good visuals. The sidebar discussions of things like estimating the populations of medieval cities are really nice jumping off points for discussion. The book does gloss over several ongoing historiographical debates and becomes, I think, problematically idiosyncratic for the eleventh century. It also lacks discussion of some important issues such as institutional and military history (which is hard to write about in an engaging fashion) and women's history. I wouldn't use it in an undergrad course without a lot of supplementation.

I'm not a historian but I loved this book. I think the transition between Roman Britain and Anglo-Saxon England is one of the most fascinating periods in history (together with the 10/12th AD awakening). This book, along with Michael Wood's *In search of the Dark Ages* are a wonderful read.

If learning about the 'lost' centuries of the Anglo-Saxons is your thing, then this book is a must read. Beautifully illustrated, peppered with excellent essays on particular subjects of interest (such as the dating of the coins found during that era) and thoroughly researched, this book gives the intelligent and well-informed layman a satisfying peek into the ancient past. It will also serve as an excellent resource for more serious scholars. College age and up.

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