



ANGLO – SAXON SOCIETY

GCSE History Paper 2

ABSTRACT

This booklet will enable you to revise the key aspects of Paper 2 Anglo – Saxon England, some of which you may remember from year 9. After you have completed this booklet, there will be some more to revise Anglo – Saxon England before we move onto Norman England from 1066.

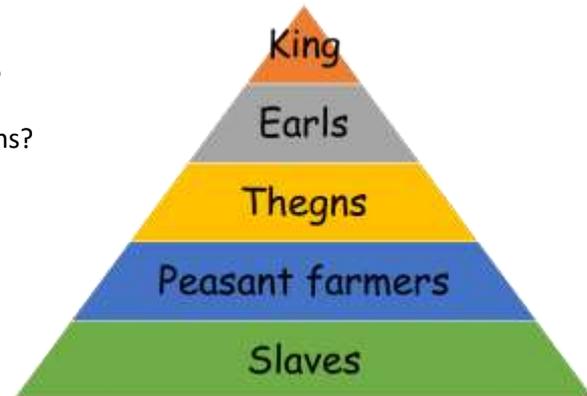
Ms Marsh

How did Anglo – Saxon kings demonstrate their power?

L.O: Explain key features of Anglo – Saxon kings

1. Which last Anglo – Saxon king ruled between 1042 - 1066?
2. Which people were the biggest threat to the Anglo – Saxons?
3. Who was at the top of Anglo – Saxon society?

(Answers at the end of the booklet)



Recap!

The **social hierarchy** of Anglo – Saxon England meant that there were clear roles for everyone in society. The hierarchy was based on **servitude** – this meant that everyone had to do some sort of role to support the country. The king was the ultimate source of authority. This meant that all his decisions were final, partly due to the belief that God had chosen the king so any challenge to the king would be seen as a challenge to God. We call this belief **anointed by God**. Even though there were **earldoms** that were extremely powerful (see map below), most earls relied on the king to grant them their power and then maintain this power. Ultimately, the king could reduce the power of his earls or completely remove them. Edward the Confessor tried to do this in 1051, when he felt Earl Godwin had become too powerful – even though it ultimately failed, as Earl Godwin was allowed to regain his earldom, it demonstrates to us the huge power of the king.



This map shows the four earldoms that made up Anglo – Saxon England; Northumbria, Mercia, East Anglia and Wessex.

Task 1 Using the information above, explain each key word with a specific example.

For example; the king was the overall leader in Anglo – Saxon England, he had ultimate control. More specifically, Edward the Confessor was the last Anglo – Saxon king.

Social hierarchy was . . .	More specifically . . .
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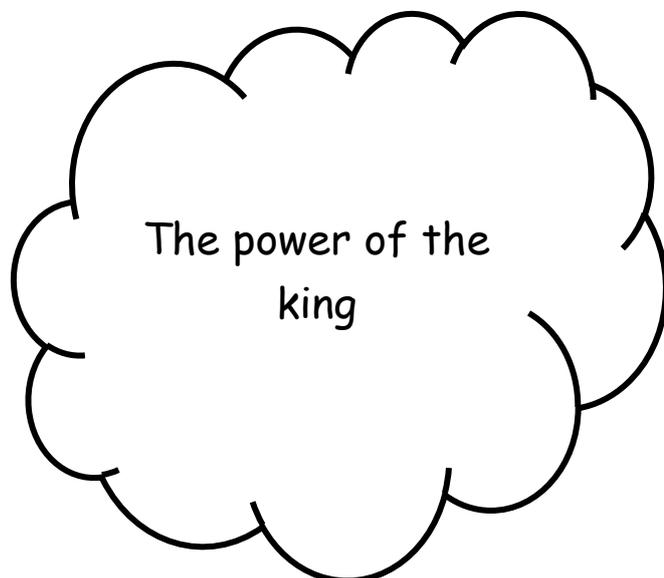
Servitude was . . .	More specifically . . .
Anointed by God meant . . .	More specifically . . .
Earldoms were . . .	More specifically . . .

What powers did Anglo – Saxon kings have?

An Anglo – Saxon king had a number of political and economic powers that ensured he remained the most powerful person in England.

- **Taxation** – the king decided when tax was paid and how much it should be
- **Religion** – the king was chosen by God to lead his people
- **Raising an army** – the king could raise the ‘fyrd’ army to fight in battle
- **Landownership** – the king could grant land to loyal followers or take it away as punishment
- **Law making** – only the king made new laws and everyone had to obey them
- **Money** – the king controlled the minting and distribution of coins

Task 2 Describe three powers of an Anglo – Saxon king with specific examples.



What type of king did Anglo – Saxons people value?

Anglo – Saxon society was nearly one thousand years ago, so their beliefs about what made a good king or leader were different to ours!

As mentioned, the belief was the king was anointed by God – so, a king had to be extremely religious, or at least be seen to be a religious person. Edward the Confessor was extremely religious – he did not have children as a way to prove his devotion to God. He was what we call extremely **pious** – very religious!

Another characteristic of a good Anglo – Saxon king was their ability to fight in battle and show military strength. A good king would also be a ‘warrior king’ – influenced by previous Viking kings who were extremely experienced in war, being a strong fighter was key! Especially to fight of those pesky Vikings!

Finally, keeping the peace in England was equally important – constant fighting has serious impacts like poverty, destruction and starvation so a peaceful kingdom was vital to ensure a king kept his power. To help him do this, the king had advisors who were earls and archbishops in his council, called the Witan. The Witan helped the king and advised him on key matters, as well as approving new law and kings.



Task 3 Explain the three characteristics that Anglo – Saxons wanted in their king

Task 4 Study the image above – it is the royal seal of Edward the Confessor that would be melted onto key orders and laws (called writs). How is Edward portrayed here? Why do you think an Anglo – Saxon king would have a royal seal?

What did an Anglo – Saxon king actually do?

The King was the head of the government and took all the important decisions. His most important decisions. His four most important tasks were to:

1. Defend his country and his people from attack, usually by commanding the army himself; military skills were therefore important, although not essential
2. Pass good laws and to make sure the laws were fairly implemented
3. Defend the church and appoint its leaders such as archbishops
4. Manage his earls and other nobles so they co-operated with his decisions and helped him run the country effectively.

The king was the only person with the power to settle disputes between the earldoms effectively. The king used a combination of two things to manage their earls – they rewarded earls and nobles with land and wealth and dominated them with their strong personalities.

Task 5 Why was it important for the king to effectively resolve disputes amongst earls? Think about the consequences of disagreements between powerful families.

The king had only a small number of administrators. The administrators wrote down the king's laws and sent out written orders called writs to officials around the country. The groups of people around the king were known as the royal household and the royal court. The household and court were not physical buildings but groups of people who moved around the country with the king.

The King's household consisted of the king, his family and his household soldiers, called housecarls, plus the servants needed to care for the royal family.

The court consisted of the king's household plus his advisors – the chief landowners and bishops were the king consulted on important decisions.



How did the Witan help the king?

As mentioned before, the king had a council of men to help and advise him called the Witan. When king's needed advice on important issues they called a meeting known as the Witanagmot, or Witan – an Anglo-Saxon word meaning 'meeting of wise men'. The Witan did not have regular meetings or a regular membership. It met whenever the king decided to hold a meeting and only those who he

summoned could attend. The men summoned included earls, thegns and senior members of the church, including arch-bishops and bishops. Even then the king took the final decision. However, by consulting the most powerful men in the country, he had shown that he respected their views and they were more likely to support his decision. The Witan's most powerful role came if there was doubt about who would be the next king. Then the Witan would meet and make a recommendation or decision, but in most cases the real decision was made by who had the most military support.

Task 6 Describe two features of the role of the Witan (4 marks)

One role of the Witan was to . . .

More specifically . . .

A further role of the Witan was . . .

More specifically . . .

What limited the king's power?

Although the king was the ultimate source of authority, there were times when his power was challenged or reduced. Several factors could limit the king's power; the influence of Danelaw, the power of earls and the Witan.

Firstly, Danelaw was the set of laws remaining from Viking rule (Vikings were Danish) that were still followed in the North of England. The map shows the area where Danelaw was followed in brown. Although the people in the North accepted Edward's rule, these Anglo – Danes still wanted to follow their own Danelaw and customs which could undermine the power of the king.



A more significant factor that could limit the king's power was the power of earls. The most powerful earl was the Earl of Godwin, and he heavily influenced Edwin the Confessor. Some historians argue Earl Godwin pressured Edwin the Confessor with his wealth and power. In 1051, Godwin was forced into exile when he refused to obey the king, however when Godwin returned with an army the king was forced to give Godwin his earldom back to prevent war. Ultimately, this proves how the power of the king could be seriously challenged when an earl, with their wealth and power, decided to go against their ruler.

A final factor that could limit the power of the king was the Witan. Although it was a useful council of men that advised the king, if they decided not to follow the king's orders or their advice was ignored by the king conflict could arise. Although the king did not have to follow the advice of the

Witan, without the support of these important earls and religious leaders the king's power was threatened.

Task 7 Explain why the power of Anglo – Saxon kings was limited?

One reason why they had limited power was due to the presence of Anglo – Danish . . .

Another reason why they had limited power was due to powerful earls such as Earl of Godwin . . .

A further reason why was the power of the Witan . . .

Summary

Task 8 Complete the following exam question – Explain why Anglo – Saxon kings had significant power. (12)

Aim for 3 PEEL paragraphs, you could include; military power, economic power, religious power, land ownership, the Witan.

See model PEEL paragraph below

One reason an Anglo – Saxon king had significant power was their military power. More specifically, they could call on the fyrd to fight when needed which supported the king's housecarls in his own smaller army. Therefore, they had significant military strength that could be used when needed against invasion or an earl's army. Thus, their power was significant as military strength was arguably the most important aspect of an Anglo – Saxon king's reign and would ensure their power was maintained through fear of this military strength or its successful deployment.

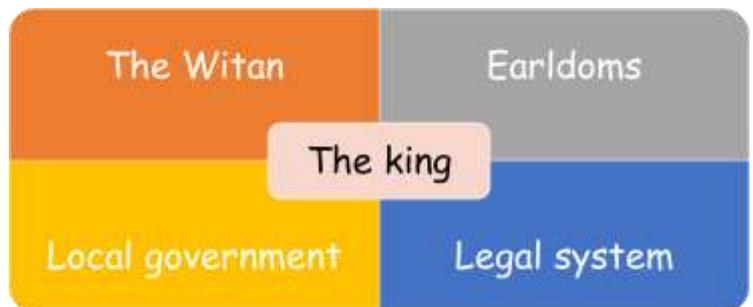
How was the government and legal system organised in Anglo – Saxon England?

L.O: Explain key features of the government and legal system

1. Which earl was the most powerful in Anglo – Saxon England?
2. What was a ceorl?
3. What was a housecarl?

Recap!

So far we have studied three key aspects of Anglo – Saxon society; the king, the Witan and earldoms. Each one had different roles, responsibilities and power. All three were small in number but great in influence. Underneath these three aspects, the day to day running of the country needed to happen. We will look at how local government did this, and what the legal system looked like in Anglo – Saxon England.



The king could not govern every part of the country directly from the centre. He needed other people to govern each local area, making sure criminals were punished and taxes were collected. This work and the work of the officials who did it are described as the local government.

Even though the earls had ultimate responsibility for running their earldoms, they could not do this alone. Therefore, kings created a more detailed system of local government that was very effective – the shires and the hundreds. There were about 40 shires or counties. The king appointed a local thegn as sheriff – his chief official in each shire. The king sent him instructions in documents called writs. The hundreds were sub-divisions of shires. Hundreds each contained around 12 villages, divided up as tithings. Each hundred had its own reeve who held a hundred court each month to deal with less serious jobs.

Task 1 Finish the sentence for each box to explain how land was divided.

Earldoms were divided into . . .



Shires divided into . . .



Hundreds were divided into . . .

What happened in each shire?

There were four main functions of shires . . .

- Social – each shire had its own court for trying cases, they dealt with the most serious crimes of murder, theft and land ownership disputes
- Political – the king's representative in the shire was the shire reeve (sheriff); the king sent him instructions called writs to carry out duties like collecting taxes
- Economic – each shire had a burh (a fortified town, see image opposite) at its economic centre. All significant trade had to be carried out in the burhs by law. This trade was then taxed.
- Military – each shire provided troops for the fyrd (the Anglo – Saxon army), it was the job of the sheriff to get the king soldiers whenever the royal army needed them



Task 2: Describe two functions of the shire

One function of the shire was a social function related to crime. More specifically, each shire had its own court for trying and punishing criminals.

Another function of the shire was a military function . . .

More specifically . . .

What did the shire reeve (sheriff) do?

As the king's official in the shire, the sheriff had a number of responsibilities. Sometimes they were also a local thegn (lord). Sheriffs were expected to collect taxes and fines owed to the king, carry out justice in the king's shire-court and raise soldiers for the royal army whenever they needed. Following the instructions issued through writs, a sheriff would . . .

- Collected geld tax (land tax)
- Collecting revenue from the king's land
- Collected fines from the shire court
- Enforcing the law at the shire court
- Providing men for the fyrd

Task 3 Why was the sheriff important to Anglo – Saxon local government? Give at least two reasons.

What did the fyrd do?

The fyrd was the Anglo – Saxon army. It provided military service to the king when needed. Each group of five hides must provide one man and battle equipment. By 1060 they could pay fees instead to hire professional soldiers.

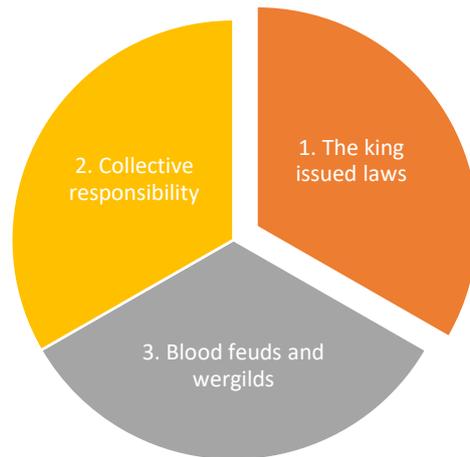
The 'select' fyrd was a section of the army made up of thegns able to fight anywhere. They offered service for 40 days a year.

The 'general' fyrd was men who fought in the local area.



What was the legal system like in Anglo – Saxon England?

The legal system means the way crimes are dealt with and punishments are issued. Maintaining law and order was important to ensure peace and economic prosperity. There were three components of the legal system in Anglo – Saxon England; the king issued laws, the community having a collective responsibility to maintain law and the use of wergilds and blood feuds.



1. **The king issued laws**; the king made laws to keep the peace and act justly. Offences against the king's peace were punished harshly.
2. **Collective runaway**; all the community was responsible for enforcing the law. Members of the tithing would hunt for the criminal using the hue and cry. If a member of a village committed a crime, there would be consequences for everyone in the tithing
3. **Blood feuds and wergilds**; if a family member was attacked, the rest of their family would punish the attacker, causing blood feuds lasting generations. Compensation (Wergild) could solve this. Paid compensation to the murderers' family.

Summary

Task 4 Complete the following exam question – Explain how law and order was maintaining in Anglo – Saxon England. (12)

Aim for 3 PEEL paragraphs, you could include; the sheriff, the use of writs, collective responsibility and blood feuds and wergilds.

See model PEEL paragraph below

One way law and order was maintained in Anglo – Saxon England was through the role of the sheriff who helped enforce law in the shire. More specifically, they collected fines and administer justice in the shire court. This meant that they were the highest law official in the area and thus had significant power. As a result, they used this power to ensure that members of the community were following the law and uphold the laws issued by the king.

Do now answers

Lesson 1

- 1. Which last Anglo – Saxon king ruled between 1042 - 1066? Edward the Confessor**
- 2. Which people were the biggest threat to the Anglo – Saxons? Vikings**
- 3. Who was at the top of Anglo – Saxon society? The king**

Lesson 2

- 1. Which earl was the most powerful in Anglo – Saxon England? Earl Godwin of Wessex**
- 2. What was a ceorl? Free peasant**
- 3. What was a housecarl? Highly trained soldier**