

History

Enquiry: How “dark” were the Dark Ages?

# Anglo-Saxon Society

Mr Cooper



# A different way of life

Britain was a peaceful and **civilised** place when it was part of the Roman Empire. Many people lived a long time, ate well and lived in good quality buildings. This changed dramatically when the Romans left. The remaining British population tried to hold onto this way of life, but failed. It became even harder when barbarian tribes started to migrate from Northern Germany and Scandinavia. While we cannot know for sure what these tribes believed or how they behaved, there are some pieces of historical evidence that give us some big clues.



# Beowulf

One historical source that historians have used to build a picture of Anglo-Saxon life is a poem called Beowulf. It is one of the oldest examples of writing in the English language. The poem was written in the sixth century, so about 200 years after the Romans left Britain. It is set in Denmark but describes a world that would have been very familiar to Anglo-Saxons in England. Historians think that the descriptions in Beowulf about what made a king successful are based on Anglo-Saxon kingship. Beowulf describes a world of violence and war. Above all, a king had to be a warrior and had to be able to win battles in order to keep the support of his followers. The most important place in a kingdom would have been a wooden hall, where feasts would have regularly taken place.



# Ine's Laws

Another source used by historians to find out about Anglo-Saxon England is a set of rules known as Ine's **Laws**. They were created at the end of the 7th century by a man called Ine who was the King of Wessex. The laws tell us that Ine believed he got his power from God. From the laws we also learn that Ine ruled his kingdom following the advice of a group of powerful men called **the witan**. Many laws show that his kingdom was a violent and unsafe place. People who fought in the king's house or a **monastery** had to pay a fine. If someone decided to fight someone in revenge, rather than going to a judge to sort out a problem, then a fine also had to be paid. The fact that such rules existed suggest that fighting was a serious problem for King Ine!



# Blood money

Ine's laws also give historians information about an Anglo-Saxon idea, known as "**wergeld**". If a man stole something from people in another village then he needed to be punished. According to Ine's law, he could either be killed or he could pay a fine instead. The amount of money he would pay in the fine was based on how much money he was worth. How much he was worth was called his wergeld or "blood money". The more important he was, the higher his wergeld. Another important law describes the responsibilities that a person owning land owed the king: if he refused to fight for the king, he could end up losing his land. This suggests that the king gave land to his followers, and in return for this land, the person had to fight.



# Glossary

To be civilised: To live in an advanced way.

A law: A rule passed by someone in charge to control someone else.

The witan: A group of important people who advised the king.

A monastery: A place where holy people lived and prayed.

Wergeld: The value of a person.



# Comprehension Questions

1. What was the name of the poem written in England in the sixth century?
2. What did kings have to be good at, according to Beowulf?
3. What was the witan?
4. What was the wergeld?
5. Why did King Ine need laws?

