

History

Enquiry: How “dark” were the Dark Ages?

The Conversion of the Anglo-Saxons

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End of Christianity

At the time the Romans abandoned Britain, Christianity was the main religion. This changed when people started to migrate to Britain from northern Germany and Scandinavia. These people worshipped many gods and their religion has been described as '**pagan**'. Some of the local Britons population remained Christian and continued to worship God.



The return of Christianity

From the evidence, it seems that by the late 6th century, Christianity had mostly died out in Britain. This worried the pope, who was the leader of the **Catholic Church** and was based in the city of Rome. That is why, from the end of the 6th century, he sent men to Britain **to convert** the pagan Anglo-Saxons to Christianity.



Conversion of Kent

The first Anglo-Saxon king to convert to Christianity was called King Aethelbert and he ruled the kingdom of Kent. He already knew something about Christianity because he was married to a Frankish princess called Bertha, who was Christian. In fact, Bertha had brought her own priest with her to Kent when she married Aethelbert.



Augustine arrives

When a monk called Augustine arrived in Kent to persuade Aethelbert to convert, it didn't take too much effort. Aethelbert probably liked the idea of being part of the Christian world, which would have seemed richer and more powerful to him. Once King Aethelbert became a Christian, the people of Kent converted to Christianity too. People in the Kingdom of Kent were expected to go to church and start worshipping Jesus, rather than the old gods like Thor and Odin.



Conversion of Northumbria

At around the same time as Augustine was converting the people of Kent, there were religious changes in the north of England. Christian monks from Ireland had travelled across the Irish Sea and set up religious communities called **monasteries**. The most famous was called Lindisfarne. As a result, the Northumbrian kings were also persuaded to convert to Christianity. Like in Kent, when the king converted, the people of Northumbria also converted to Christianity.



New religion, same places

It might seem strange to us today that people changed their religious beliefs. One way that the Catholic Church encouraged people to convert was to allow them to continue celebrating in ways that seemed familiar. So pagan feasts and worshipping in pagan temples continued but the Catholic Church changed the meaning of these events.



Pagan feasts, Christian meaning

That is why many churches were built where old pagan temples had been and pagan festivals like Easter and midwinter feasts were turned into Christian events celebrating moments in the life of Jesus. Even so, it took many years for everyone to worship correctly: some were confused by the new Christian religion and kept using pagan objects.



Glossary

A pagan: Someone who worships many gods.

The Catholic Church: The official Christian church in Europe, headquartered in Rome.

To convert: To change from one thing to another.

A monastery: A place where holy men and women lived and prayed.



Comprehension Questions

1. What was the main religion of Britain when it was part of the Roman Empire?
2. What did the Anglo-Saxons worship?
3. Why did Aethelbert convert to Christianity?
4. Who converted the kingdom of Northumbria?
5. Why did the Catholic Church allow people to keep their pagan feasts?

