

History is His Story

If you want to understand the Middle Ages, then the Reformation and Renaissance, then modern representative government, a good place to start is the **Dark Ages** in England. The Dark Ages, from 400 to 1000 AD were an intermittent calamity of heathen barbarian invasions in Western Europe. While Germanic invaders in southern Europe would assimilate to Roman ways, in Britain they conquered 3 times before a quieter Medieval era fell into place.

The Anglo-Saxon invasions of England began around 450 and lasted over 100 years. The indigenous Bretons, a Celtic folk, were forced into Wales and Cornwall and across the Channel to Brittany. Yet many assimilated. The invaders were, after a time, converted to Christianity and their civilization blossomed in the 700s. Even though the seven small kingdoms were not united until 829 by King Egbert of Wessex, into Angle-land, "England", there was a common culture. Each tribe had a crude democracy, a *folk-moot*, "people meeting". But when terror and atrocities rule, people sell their interests for protection to a local strong man, a baron, with a trained troop of thugs, knights, to keep order. Destitute people who had lost everything from barbarian invaders were thereupon granted a plot of land to farm by the local strong man. Living in wooden thatched huts on diets of gruel, they used barter exchange and pledged service to the baron while he protected them. The folk-moots declined but were cited by America's founders as the ideal of freemen with a social contract living under laws they had made for themselves. The Anglo-Saxon barons had their own meeting group, the Witenagemot which chose a king and made national laws. But once they became Christian, moral law held rulers in some check. Monasteries thrived by teaching Latin and writing Old English in runic characters on parchment.

But in 793 Danish Vikings began to invade. Pillaging, then settling, Danes and Swedes conquered northernmost Northumberland in 867, sacking York and its monastery, scattering and burning the books, and killing monks, the only educated people in the land. They sacked London and Canterbury, but were defeated by Ethelred and his epileptic kid brother Alfred, when they tried to attack Wessex. Alfred survived and became king. Half the Danes went south to plunder Normandy, half agreed to stay in the northeast, known as "Danelaw". Alfred lamentingly recalled his boyhood when churches had Bibles and the people had songs. So he sent abroad for scholars to "come teach us" about faith, farming, and accounting. The scholars translated the important surviving English books—that is how we inherited Bede's history of the dark ages in England. Alfred's piety, temperance, patience, and devotion to his people gave him the name, Alfred the Great. But the Danes kept invading for another century. When Ethelred the Unready discovered a Danish plot to take over and abolish the Witenagemot, he ordered all Danish nobles killed, which unfortunately included the sister of King Sweyn of Denmark. Twice Sweyn invaded in revenge and Ethelred fled to Normandy, where his wife Emma was from. But the new Danish king, Sweyn Forkbeard, died six weeks later leaving his son Cnut to secure England. Cnut ruled from London and also gained the thrones in Denmark and Norway—a short-lived empire. Cnut's father was newly Christian and Cnut realized the importance of the Church. He saw himself as protector of the English Church and ruled as an enlightened statesman for 2 decades. But succession turmoil led to Edward the Confessor being installed as King. He was very Frenchified, very pious, and gave another 20 years of peace to England. Yet the imbroglio of further succession brought William the Conqueror to England. When all was said and done, the Danish invasion didn't change the already crude English culture, it just wiped out learning, towns, and commerce under years of war. Wales and Scotland were added. 6000 Norman knights conquered 1.5 million English people in 1066. With absurd cruelty, they installed themselves as rulers. Culture changed from the top down. Norman French was spoken by the courts. But meanwhile, bears and boars ran loose in the forests. Serfs lived with their animals in huts. They practiced slash and burn agriculture with no knowledge of crop rotation or manure fertilizer. Those were things that improved gradually as the Church and its educated, trial-and-error monks could progress in peace through the Middle Ages. This kind of gradual improvement took place all over Europe from 1000 to 1500. Ironically, while life improved, pagan beliefs had crept into church doctrine. Popes became political. Priests became corrupt. The stage for the Reformation of Wycliffe, Hus, Luther and Calvin was set.