

SAXONS, DANES, NORMANS

800 TO 1154 A.D.

HOUSE OF WESSEX TO DEATH OF STEPHEN

ERA SUMMARY – SAXONS, DANES, NORMANS

At the end of the eighth century, the Saxons suffered their first attack by the Danes—also known as Vikings—a warlike race of pagans from Denmark and Norway. Shortly thereafter [Egbert the Saxon](#) unified the Saxon and Angle kingdoms for the purpose of common defense, and at that time the name of England (or Angle Land) was given to the country. Saxon kings descended from Egbert ruled the Kingdom of Wessex from 802 until shortly before the Norman Conquest in 1066. The Danish incursions continued for the next hundred and fifty years until the Danes finally drove the Wessex king into exile. By that time, however, many of the Danes had become Christian and the age of Vikings was coming to a close.

Alfred the Great and the Danish Invasion – By far the most outstanding Saxon king was [Alfred the Great](#). He reigned from 871 to 899 at a time when the Viking marauders had destroyed many important Saxon towns and monasteries, laid waste to acres of productive farmland and utterly disrupted civilized society. Alfred himself was driven from his throne and compelled to go into hiding, where he could only watch helplessly as his kingdom was ravaged by villainous pagans. However, he recovered from his ill fortune and secretly organized a Saxon army, which, when the time was right, attacked and defeated the Danes. Surprisingly, instead of merely slaughtering his enemies, he made a pact with their leader [Guthrum](#) and agreed to a settlement by which the Danes would lay down their arms, convert to Christianity, and help repel further incursions by pagans. This brought several decades of peace to the Saxon kingdom, during which Alfred rebuilt infrastructure, organized a permanent navy, and built schools and churches.



DANES EMBARKING FOR THE INVASION
OF ENGLAND

There were several other important Saxon kings. [Athelstan of England](#), Alfred's grandson, defeated a united army of Celts and Danes at the battle of Brunanburh. He, like his father and grandfather, was an excellent king. Unfortunately, by the beginning of the eleventh century, a series of 'boy' kings greatly weakened the Wessex monarchy. This series of immature rulers finally ended with [Aethelred the Unready](#), who misgoverned his entire reign and was driven

from the throne. For a time his son co-ruled with a Danish king, but eventually died, leaving a Dane as king of the Saxons. Fortunately, the Danish king's son, [Canute the Great](#) ruled well and again brought peace between the Saxons and Danes. When he died [Edward the Confessor](#), the youngest son of Aethelred, was restored to the throne. He died without issue, bringing the Wessex line to an end, and William the Duke of Normandy, who was of Norse stock, won the throne at the Battle of Hastings in 1066.

The Norman Conquest – The [Norman Conquest](#) was one of the most important events in the history of England. The Saxon kings were never as powerful as the Dukes of Normandy, for the Normans had inherited the old Roman habits of centralized government whereas the Saxons kings were merely overlords of their earls and barons. William the Conqueror ruled England with a firm but fair hand, making sure taxes were collected and justice was done in a uniform manner. He crushed all rebellions and replaced most of the Saxon overlords with Norman nobles. He made many changes in the government, all of which resulted in a relatively strong and independent central government and curtailed the power of the nobles. He was an effective king, but very unpopular with the Saxon population.

The house of Norman only lasted for three generations. After William died, his son [William Rufus](#) ruled. When he was killed in a hunting accident, his brother [Henry Beauclerc](#) ruled for 35 years, and also died without a male heir. The throne of England was then contested between Henry's daughter [Matilda of England](#) and her cousin [Stephen](#), a weak king favored by the mischievous barons. With the throne as good as vacant, the barons were allowed to have their own way, and civil wars plagued the country for almost 20 years. Finally, the Matilda's son, better known as [Henry Plantagenet](#), fought his way to the throne; during his long reign, order and prosperity were restored to the realm.

CHARACTERS – SAXONS, DANES, NORMANS

SAXONS

Egbert the Saxon	770–837	United the Saxon and Angle kingdoms in a federation to resist the Danes.
Alfred the Great	849–899	Noblest of Saxon kings. Fought the Danes and made peace. Built churches and schools.
Athelstan	895–939	Grandson of King Alfred. Fought the Danes and Celts at the <i>Battle of Brunanburh</i> .
Elfrida	~ 960	Saxon queen, wife of Edgar, mother of Athelred the Unready. Thought to be involved in her stepson's murder.
Saint Dunstan	909–988	Influential archbishop at the court of Edgar of England.
Aethelred the Unready	968–1016	Ascended to the Saxon throne at a young age, ruled poorly and was unable to effectively resist the Danes.
Edmund Ironside	988–1016	Eldest son of Aethelred the Unready, fought Canute for the throne, but then died.
Godwin	1001–1053	Very influential Earl of Wessex during reigns of Canute and Edward the Confessor. Father of Harold.
Hereward the Wake	~ 1066	Saxon rebel who led resistance to William the Conqueror for many years.
Harold Godwinson	1022–1066	Son of Godwin. Ascended to the Saxon throne when Edward the Confessor died childless.
Tostig Godwinson	1026–1066	Brought an army of Vikings to fight his brother, Harold Godwinson, at Stamford Bridge.
Edward the Confessor	1004–1066	Last Saxon king of the Wessex line. Raised in Normandy, befriended William the Conqueror.
Saint Margaret of Scotland	1045–1093	Wife of Malcolm III of Scotland. Pious and noble Queen. Mother of Maude the Good.
Maude the Good	1080–1118	Scottish wife of Henry I. Grandmother of Henry II. Patron and benefactor to poor of England.

DANES

Guthrum	d. 890	Danish king defeated by Alfred the Great. Agreed to become Christian and settle in England.
Canute the Great	994–1035	Danish king of Britain who ruled well. Married Emma, the wife of his enemy, Ethelred the Unready.

NORMANS

Emma of Normandy	988–1052	Norman princess, wife first of Aethelred, then of Canute. Mother of Edward the Confessor.
William the Conqueror	1028–1087	Claimed the crown of England and won it at the <i>Battle of Hastings</i> . Ruled forcefully but justly.
William II of England	1056–1100	Son of William the Conqueror. A bad and brutal king. Killed in the New Forest.
Saint Anselm	1033–1109	Archbishop of Canterbury under William Rufus and Henry I. Feuded with both kings.
Henry I of England	1068–1135	Son of William the conqueror. Competent king who reigned for 35 years. Left throne to Matilda.
Stephen of England	1096–1154	Grandson of William the Conqueror. Usurped the throne from Matilda. Was profligate and weak.
Matilda of England	1102–1167	Daughter of Henry I. Fought her cousin Stephen for the throne. Her son Henry II won the crown.

TIMELINE – SAXONS, DANES, NORMANS

- 787** First Viking (Danish) attack on Britain.
- 793** Sack of the monastery at Lindisfarne.
- 802** [Egbert the Saxon](#) reigns over united Anglo and Saxon Kingdoms.
- 871-899** Reign of [Alfred the Great](#), greatest of the Saxon kings.
- 878** Wessex Saxons under Alfred defeat Danes at the *Battle of Edington*.
- 879** Treaty of Wedmore grants Danelaw to [Guthrum](#) if he is baptized and withdraws from Wessex.
- 823-1016** [Danish Invasions of Saxon Britain](#) continue throughout the tenth century.
- 937** *Battle of Brunanburh*—Wessex Saxons, lead by , defeat Celts and Danes.
- 991** *Battle of Maldon*—Saxons are defeated by the Danes and agree to pay tribute.
- 1002** [Aethelred the Unready](#) orders the death of all Danish citizens.
- 1013** Aethelred driven into exile in Normandy.
- 1016** [Canute the Great](#) defeats Saxons at the *Battle of Ashingdon*. Danish king assumes throne.
- 1016–1035** Reign of Canute the Great.
- 1042** [Edward the Confessor](#), son of Aethelred, recalled to the throne. Saxon rule is restored.
- 1065** Consecration of Westminster Chapel.
- 1066** [Norman Conquest of Britain](#)
- Sept** ***Battle of Stamford Bridge***—[Harold Godwinson](#) defeats Viking invaders.
- Oct** ***Battle of Hastings***—Harold is killed and the Normans conquer England.
- 1086** Completion of Domesday Book.
- 1087** [William Rufus](#) assumes the throne on the death of his father, William the Conqueror.
- 1093** [Saint Anselm](#) appointed Archbishop of Canterbury; resists William Rufus's oppressions.
- 1095** Preparations for the [First Crusade](#) are made by William Rufus and his brother.
- 1100-1135** Reign of [Henry I of England](#) begins when Rufus is killed in a hunting accident.
- 1100** Henry I pleases his Saxon subjects by marrying [Maude the Good](#) , a Saxon Princess.
- 1120** The unexpected death of Henry's son William throws succession into question.
- 1135-1154** Anarchy and civil war between followers of [King Stephen](#) and [Matilda](#), daughter of Henry II.
- 1154** Death of Stephen; crown passes to [Henry II of England](#), son of Matilda.

RECOMMENDED READING – SAXONS, DANES, NORMANS

CORE READING ASSIGNMENTS *

- Cambridge Press - [Cambridge Historical Reader](#) [Alfred the Royal Harper](#) to [The Loss of the White Ship](#) (6)
Guerber - [The Story of the English](#) [The Danish Pirates](#) to [Matilda's Narrow Escapes](#) (19)
Marshall - [Our Island Story](#) [King Alfred Learns to Read](#) to [The Story of King Stephen](#) (15)

SUPPLEMENTAL RECOMMENDATIONS

- Haaren - [Famous Men of the Middle Ages](#) [Egbert the Saxon](#) to [William the Conqueror](#) (4)
Skae - [Stories from English History](#) [English and Norman](#) (1)
Marshall - [Stories of Beowulf](#) *entire book*
Cowles - [Our Little Saxon Cousin](#) *entire book*
Steedman - [Our Island Saints](#) [Saint Edward the Confessor](#) to [Saint Hugh of Lincoln](#) (4)
Harding - [The Story of England](#) [King Alfred and the Danes](#) to [The Rule of the Normans](#) (3)
Wood - [Boy's Book of Battles](#) [Maldon](#) to [Hastings](#) (2)
Tappan - [Days of Alfred the Great](#) *entire book*
Tappan - [Days of William the Conqueror](#) *entire book*
Morris - [Historical Tales - English](#) [King Alfred and the Danes](#) to [A Contest for the Crown](#) (7)

ALSO RECOMMENDED

- Church - [English History Stories - I](#) [King Alfred](#) to [The Red King](#) (13)
Synge - [Great Englishmen](#) [Alfred the Great](#) to [Harold](#) (2)
Synge - [Great Englishwomen](#) [Maude the Good](#) (1)
Tappan - [European Hero Stories](#) [Alfred the Great](#) to [William the Conqueror](#) (2)
Abbott - [Alfred the Great](#) *entire book*
Abbott - [William the Conqueror](#) *entire book*
Marshall - [English Literature](#) [The Story of Beowulf](#) to [Havelok the Dane](#) (7)

* Level I and II Study Questions are based on **Core Reading Assignments**.