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The Anglo-Saxons

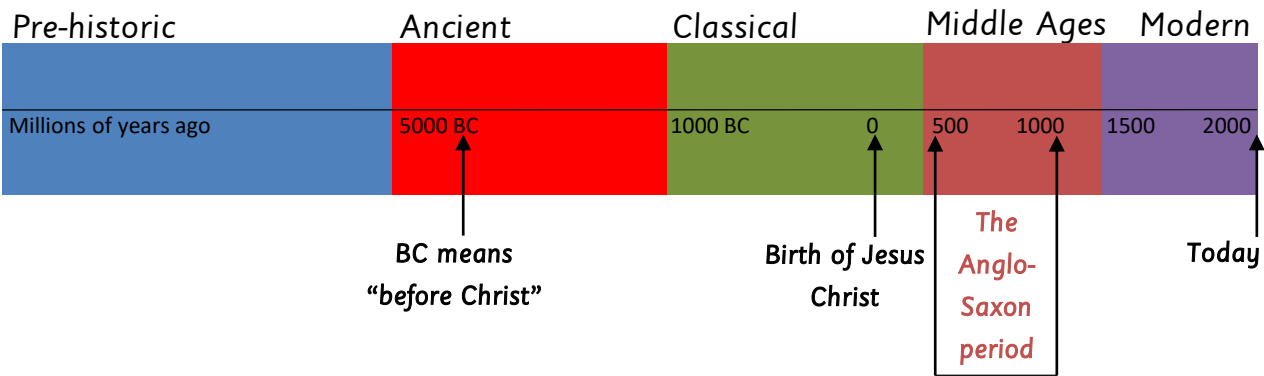
M. Wakeford

Booklet

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Historical Periods

Timeline of historical periods:



Pre-historic (millions of years ago): Stone Age, Bronze Age, Iron Age

Ancient (around 5000 to 1000 BC): Ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia

Classical (around 1000 BC to 500 AD): Greeks and Romans

Middle Ages (around 500 AD to 1450): Anglo-Saxons, Normans

Modern (1450 to today): Tudors, Great Fire of London, Victorians, World Wars

In this booklet, we will undertake the following enquiry:

How reliable is Bede's account of the Anglo-Saxon **migration** to Britain?

The Anglo-Saxons were people from northern parts of Europe who **migrated** to Britain during the 5th **century**. This means they came from other countries (what would be Germany and Denmark today) and settled in Britain. We don't know very much about how or why they arrived in Britain, because they didn't leave any written accounts of what they did. Our main source of information is a churchman called Bede (also known as the Venerable Bede), who lived 300 years later. Bede wrote important history books describing the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons in Britain, but just how much should we rely on what he wrote? We will try to answer this question by looking at the evidence available to us.

Migration: the movement of people to settle in another country. When people migrate, this means they move to live in another country.

Century: a period of one hundred years. Taking the year 0 (the birth of Jesus Christ) as the starting point of our calendar, years 1 to 100 are the 1st century, 101 to 200 the 2nd century and so on. Therefore, the 5th century would have been the years 401 to 500.

How reliable is Bede's account of the Anglo-Saxon migration to Britain? (part 1)

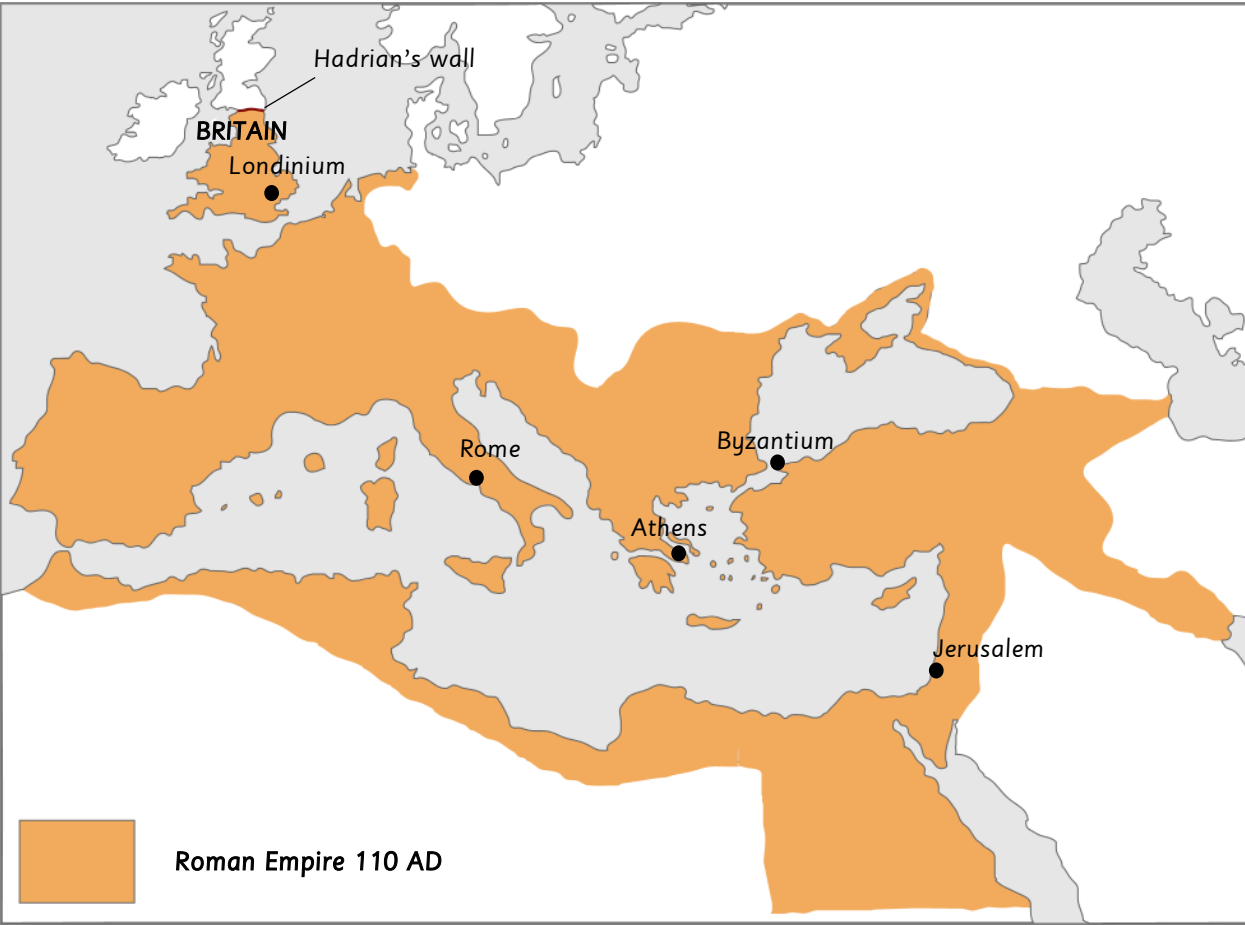
Roman Britain

From around 43 to 410 AD, Britain was ruled by the Romans. Their power extended as far north as Hadrian's Wall, which they built to defend against attacks from **tribes** in the north. The Romans controlled Britain with a large army of soldiers. They also brought their way of life, building public baths, roads and towns such as Londinium, which later became London. People from all over the Roman **Empire migrated** to Britain and mixed with the local people, who were called the Britons.

AD: this is an abbreviation which stands for Anno Domini or 'in the year of our Lord' and it is used to indicate any years after the birth of Jesus Christ (year 0). Years before 0 are indicated by BC (or Before Christ).

Tribe: a group of people who come from one area and speak the same language.

Empire: a group of nations that are ruled over by another, more powerful nation. Therefore, the Roman Empire was a large group of nations ruled over by the Romans.



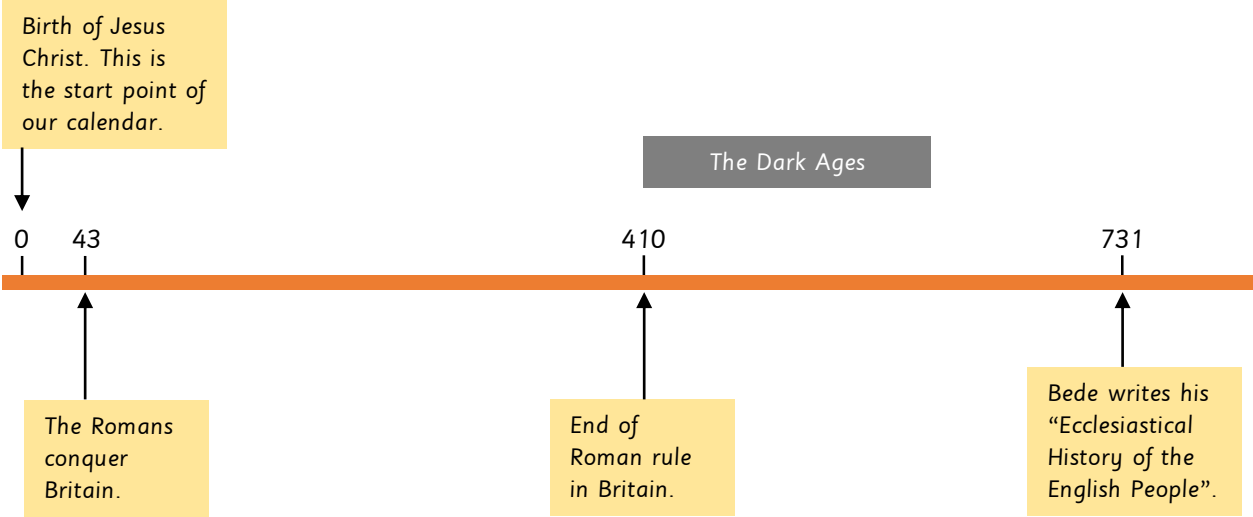
In the early 5th century, the Roman **Empire** began to get into trouble, suffering attacks from **Barbarian tribes** in the east. Many of the Roman soldiers in Britain were called back to help defend Rome. In 410 AD, it's thought that the last **garrison** of Roman soldiers departed from Britain. For the first time in 400 years, Britain was no longer part of the Roman **Empire**, but on its own. We don't know much about what happened next; it's one of the big mysteries of history.

The Dark Ages

The period after the Romans left Britain is often called the Dark Ages. This is because we have very little written documents that survive from that time. Instead, we have to act as detectives, piecing together different clues to try to work out what happened. This is where Bede comes in. The history books he wrote in the 8th century, describing the end of Roman rule in Britain and the coming of the Anglo-Saxons, provide us with important clues. However, how can we be confident that his information was correct? In part 2 of this enquiry, we will examine the story told by Bede and then in part 3 we shall look at other pieces of evidence – other clues – to evaluate that story.

Barbarian: this was a word used by Romans to describe foreign tribes who lived on the borders with the Roman Empire and who had a different way of life to the Romans. We still use the word 'barbarian' today to describe savage, uncivilised people.

Garrison: a group of soldiers defending a town or place.



Explain and answer:

1. Who were the Anglo-Saxons? *(p. 3, lines 3-4)*

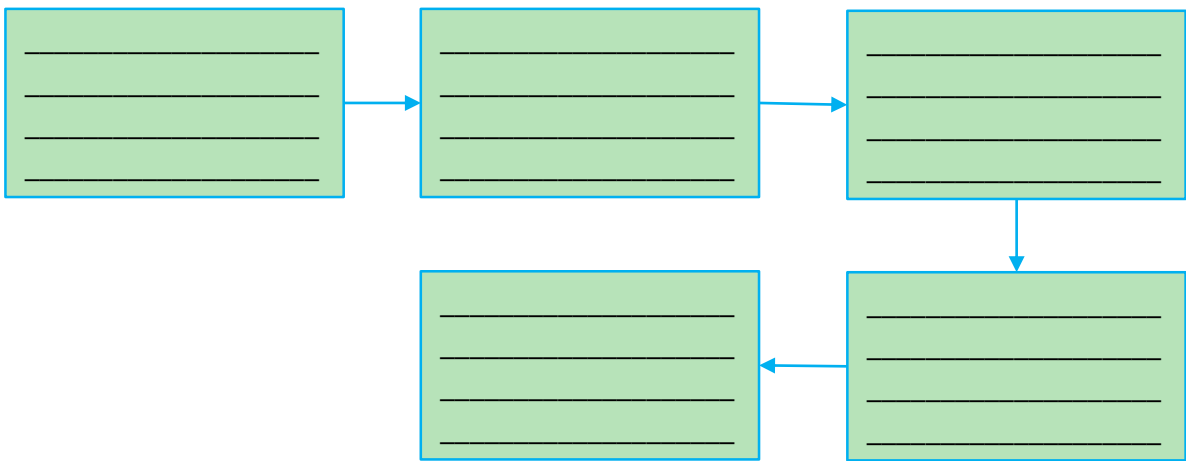
2. Why did the Roman army leave Britain in the early 5th century? *(p. 5, lines 1-5)*

3. Why do we know so little of what happened after the Roman garrisons left Britain? *(p. 5, lines 8-10)*

4. Why is Bede important to us in understanding this period of history? *(p. 5, lines 11-12)*

Summarise events in the correct order:

Write the following statements into the diagram below, placing them in the correct order.



- The Dark Ages period begins.
 - Britain is under Roman rule.
 - The Roman army leaves Britain.
- Bede writes his history books.
 - The Roman Empire is attacked by Barbarian tribes.

How reliable is Bede's account of the Anglo-Saxon migration to Britain? (part 2)

Retrieval practice

Complete the sentences below, using information you have learned so far.

The Roman army left Britain in the early 5th century because _____

The period after the Romans left Britain is often called the "Dark Ages" because

Vocabulary recap

Complete the sentences below with a definition of each word.

A century is _____

An empire is _____

Migration is _____

Who was Bede?

Bede was a **monk** living in the 8th **century**, who wrote many books on religion and history. His most famous book was the ‘**Ecclesiastical** History of the English People’, which was completed in 731 **AD**. The book tells the story of how the English people became Christians. It also tells the story of Britain during Roman times and the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons.



Detail from a late 14th century copy of the Ecclesiastical History of the English People showing a monk (possibly Bede) writing at the desk.

Bede was writing about these events over 300 years after they happened. He would have had available to him several documents (books and letters) which no longer survive today. He lived in Jarrow, a **monastery** that was famous at the time for being a centre of learning. The library at Jarrow would have had as many as 200 books which Bede could study. He would also have been familiar with stories passed down through the generations about the Anglo-Saxons. However, it is important to remember that he was not writing with first-hand knowledge of the events he described. This is why we say that Bede is a **secondary source** of information.

- Monk:** a man who devotes his life to God and lives in a religious community that is separate from the world. The female equivalent of a monk is a nun.
- Ecclesiastical:** something to do with the Christian Church.
- Monastery:** the religious house where monks or nuns live.
- Secondary source:** a source of information about a historical event which was not produced at the time it happened. Therefore it comes to us second-hand. A source that comes directly to us from the time of the event is called a primary source.

What does Bede tell us about the coming of the Anglo-Saxons?

According to Bede, the Britons faced **perilous** times after the departure of the Roman army. The main danger came from the Picts, a **tribe** who lived in what is today eastern and northern Scotland. There were also regular attacks from the Irish. With no Roman **garrisons** around anymore to defend the country, the Britons invited **mercenaries** to help protect them. These **mercenaries** were from **tribes** called Angles and Saxons in northern Europe. 5

However, the Britons would come to regret inviting these fierce, foreign warriors into their country. For once they had successfully dealt with the threat from the Picts, the Anglo-Saxons turned against the Britons. This is what Bede tells us in his ‘Greater Chronicle’ written around 725 AD: 10

“The people of the Angles or Saxons were conveyed to Britain in three long-ships. When their voyage proved a success, news of them was carried back home. A stronger army set out which, joined to the earlier one and first of all drove away the enemy they were seeking [the Picts]. Then they turned their arms on their allies [the Britons], and subjugated almost the whole island by fire or sword, from the eastern shore as far as the western one”. 15

In his ‘Ecclesiastical History’, written a few years later, Bede gives us some further details:

“They came from three very powerful German peoples, the Saxons, Angles and Jutes.” 20

He then explains that the Jutes settled in Kent and the Isle of Wight, the Saxons in the southern parts of the island and the Angles in the east and north. What then happened to the Britons? According to Bede, they suffered a terrible fate:

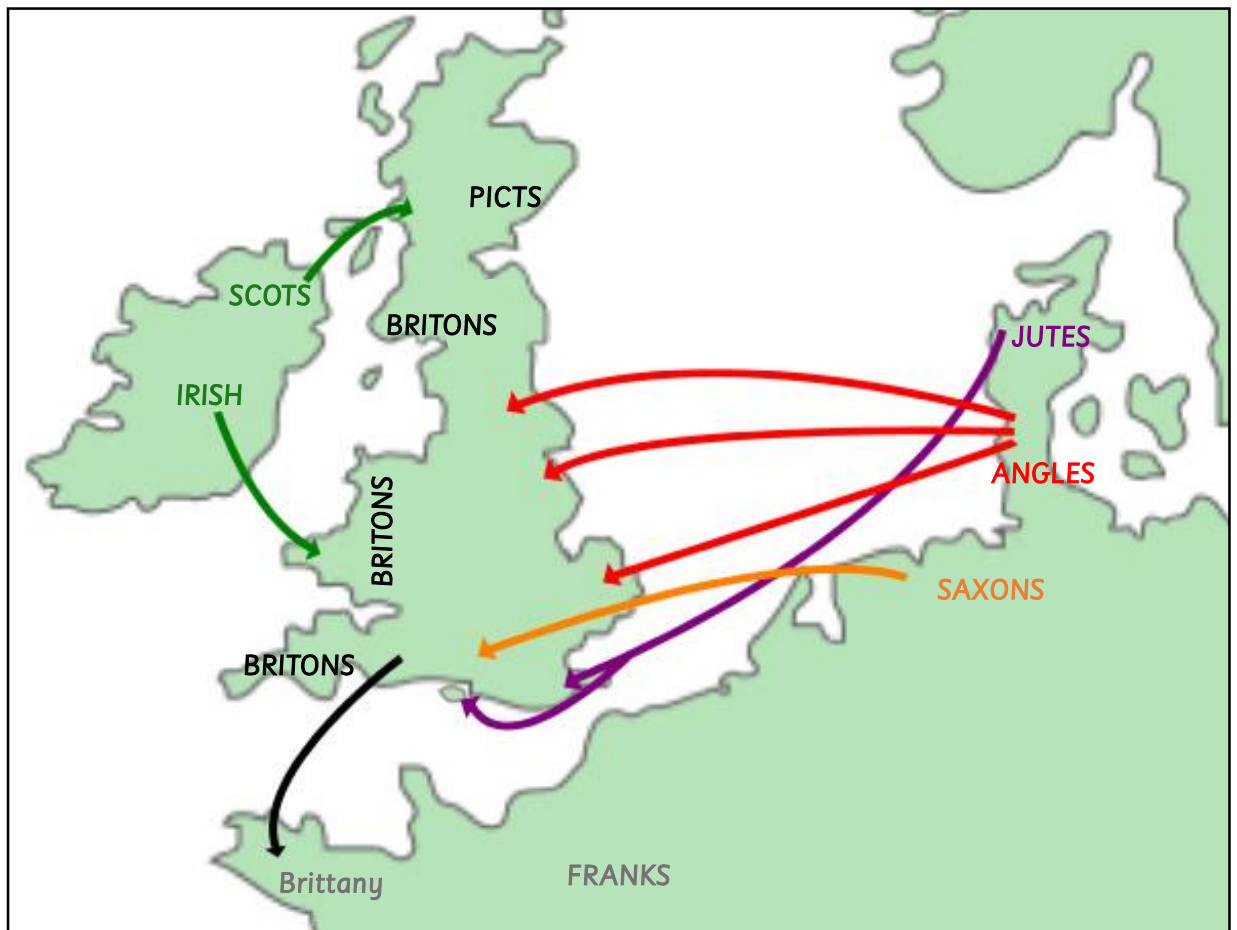
“the people were destroyed with fire and sword; nor were there any left to bury those who had been thus cruelly slaughtered.” 25

Perilous: highly dangerous.

Mercenaries: professional soldiers paid to fight for a country they do not belong to.

Subjugate: to dominate and take control of people or a country.

Slaughter: to kill someone.



A map showing the **migration** of people in and out of Britain during the Dark Ages

Bede tells us that some of the Britons submitted to the Anglo-Saxons and became their servants, but that:

“Some, with sorrowful hearts, fled beyond the seas. Others, remaining in their own country, led a miserable life of terror and anxiety of mind among the mountains, woods and crags.”

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The Britons who fled across the sea most probably settled on the European mainland, in a region of modern-day France that still bears their name: Brittany. Others sought refuge in the west and south-west part of the island, what would now be Wales and Cornwall. Some Britons also settled in the north-west of the island.

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In summary then, Bede tells us that large numbers of Anglo-Saxons came to Britain, took control of it and either killed or drove the Britons out, with a few remaining as lowly servants.

Explain and answer:

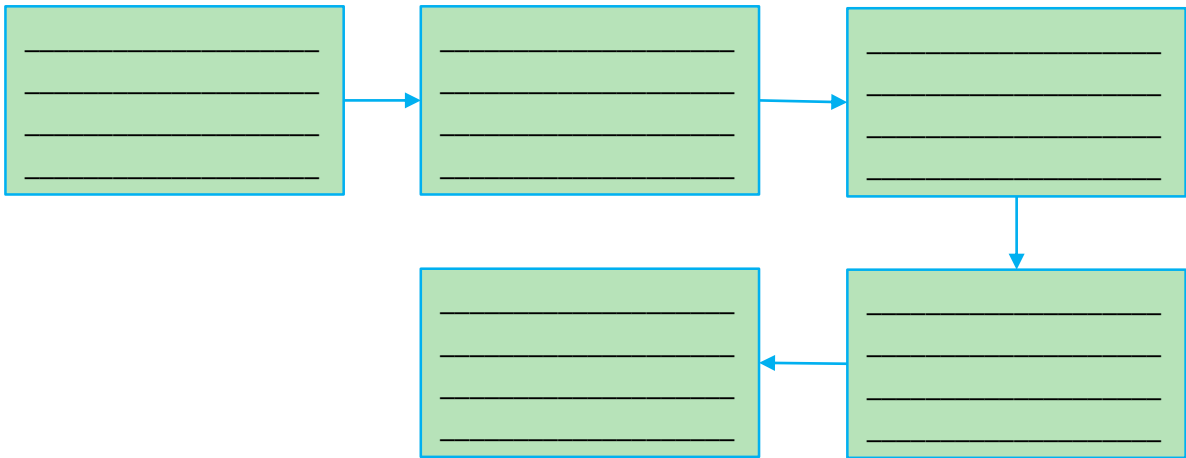
1. Why is Bede considered a secondary source for the migration of Anglo-Saxons to Britain? *(p. 8, lines 19-23)*

2. According to Bede, why did the Britons invite Anglo-Saxon mercenaries to Britain? *(p. 9, lines 5-7)*

3. Why did the Britons come to regret their decision? *(p. 9, lines 10-18)*

Summarise Bede’s version of events in the correct order:

Write the following statements into the diagram below, placing them in the correct order.



- The Anglo-Saxon mercenaries turn against the Britons.
 - The Britons are attacked by the Picts and Irish.
 - The Roman army leaves Britain.
- Britons are driven out by the Anglo-Saxons.
 - The Britons invite Anglo-Saxon mercenaries to protect them.

How reliable is Bede’s account of the Anglo-Saxon migration to Britain? (part 3)

Retrieval practice

Complete the sentences below, using information you have learned so far.

Bede was a monk who wrote _____

According to Bede, the _____ conquered Britain and drove the _____ out.

Vocabulary recap

Complete the sentences below with a definition of each word.

A mercenary is _____

A secondary source is _____

What other evidence do we have for this period of history?

Bede is our main written source of information for the early Anglo-Saxon period, but we can also look to other evidence for clues as to what may have happened. We have a few other written sources but also evidence from **archaeology**, where old towns, forts and cemeteries have been **excavated**. Advances in technology have provided us with new information too. For example, scientists are able to make a chemical analysis of skeletons found in burial sites, to date them (to say approximately when that person was alive) and even to identify where that person was from (though the science for this is still developing).

Does this other evidence match what Bede tells us about the coming of the Anglo-Saxons? If it does, then we can be more confident that Bede’s account is accurate, even if it is second-hand. Let’s have a look at this evidence and decide.

Archaeology: the study of human history by examining the remains of buildings, tools and other objects, which are often buried underground.

Excavate: to remove earth that is covering very old objects in the ground in order to discover things about the past.

1. Evidence from “Life of St Germanus”

This was a book written around 460-480 **AD** about a churchman called Germanus who lived and taught in Rome. In the book, we’re told that Germanus made two visits to Britain, the first nearly two decades after the end of Roman rule. During his journey, Germanus met with some high-status individuals with Roman-sounding names. He was able to travel around Britain safely, so the country was not in a state of chaos and the roads must have been maintained in good order. This suggests that for several years after the departure of the Roman army, life in Britain continued to function as normal.

Does this evidence match Bede’s account of what happened after the Roman army left Britain? (*p.9, lines 2-5*)

2. Evidence from Iron Age hillforts

There are Iron Age hillforts dotted all around Britain. These are earthworks in an elevated position, which were used for defensive purposes by Iron Age people. Many of these hillforts were abandoned when the Romans first conquered Britain.

However, there is evidence from **archaeology** indicating that these Iron Age hillforts were re-occupied and re-built during the 5th **century**. For example, **excavation** at the Iron Age hillfort in Cadbury (south-west England) has revealed that it was extensively re-built in the years 475 to 500 **AD** using Roman building methods. This suggests the hillfort was occupied by Britons, not by Anglo-Saxons. According to Bede, the Anglo-Saxons conquered the island from the eastern shore to the western one, but this is evidence of a significant number of Britons still living in the country and in control of their own forts. Perhaps they decided to abandon their towns and villages to go and live within the safety of old hillforts, which were easier to defend from Anglo-Saxon attacks.



Prospect of Camaleet Castle. 15 Aug. 1723.

Suckley Del.

An engraving made in 1723, showing the Iron Age hillfort at Cadbury.

Does this evidence support Bede's account of what happened to the Britons?
(p. 9, lines 23-26 and p. 10, lines 1-5)

3. Evidence from cemeteries (brooches)

Archaeologists have **excavated** ancient cemeteries and discovered some interesting clues. In cemeteries dating from the 5th **century**, they found that people were buried with their personal items (such as weapons or jewellery). However, skeletons in cemeteries dating from Roman Britain did not have personal items buried alongside them. It seems that there was a change in the way people were buried and that this change happened around the time after the Roman army left Britain.

These changes in burial practices are to be found only in the areas where Bede tells us that Anglo-Saxons settled. If we draw a line from Lyme Regis in the south west, up to Sunderland in the north east, we see on the left of that line very few cemeteries with personal items next to the bodies (this is the area where the Britons are supposed to have escaped to).



Archaeologists have found many brooches of different designs in **excavated** cemeteries. A large number of square-headed brooches have been found in Kent, the area where Bede says the Jutes settled. In areas of southern Britain, which according to Bede were settled by the Saxons, the brooches found were of a saucer design.

In the east and north of Britain, the area occupied by the Angles, brooches were annular or cruciform in design. Could it be that each of these **tribes** brought with them to Britain their own fashion style of brooches?

4. Evidence from cemeteries (analysis of teeth)

Archaeologists have also been able to use new technology that analyses the teeth of a skeleton to find out where the person grew up. This type of analysis was done on 19 individuals found buried in a cemetery in Oxfordshire, dating to the period 450-550 AD. All these people had been buried in the Anglo-Saxon style, with personal items alongside them. However, the analysis of their teeth revealed that 15 of them were local people, 3 of them had moved to Oxfordshire from elsewhere in Britain and only one of them had come from Germany. This suggests that the population did not change very much, and that the number of Anglo-Saxons that came to Britain is much smaller than previously thought.

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How does the archaeological evidence support Bede's account of the Anglo-Saxon migration to Britain? Give two examples. (*p. 15*)

Where does the archaeological evidence contradict Bede? (*p. 16*)

Conclusion

In this enquiry, we have investigated Bede’s account of the Anglo-Saxon **migration** to Britain. Unfortunately, this period of history is a mystery to us. We have many clues but it is very difficult to form a clear picture. Historians look at the evidence and then come up with their best theory for what they think happened.

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Based on the evidence, most historians now believe that the Britons were not driven out in great numbers by the Anglo-Saxons. Archaeologists have **excavated** many Iron-Age hillforts which seem to have been re-occupied by the Britons during the 5th **century**. Analysis of buried skeletons also seems to indicate that many Britons stayed on in their country.

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However, there is also evidence of an influential Anglo-Saxon presence in Britain after the departure of the Roman army. The population adopted Anglo-Saxon fashion and customs. More importantly, it adopted the Anglo-Saxon language: English. During Roman times, people in Britain would have spoken Latin (the Roman language) or Celtic (the ancient language of Britons). However, by the end of the 5th **century**, most people in Britain had switched to speaking English. How did this happen? Could it be that Anglo-Saxon warriors took control of Britain and imposed their language and culture on the Britons? Or was this process a much more peaceful one? Historians are still asking questions and searching for new clues to help find some answers to this mystery.

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Complete the sentences:

Bede’s account of the Anglo-Saxon migration to Britain is unreliable because

Bede’s account of the Anglo-Saxon migration to Britain is unreliable, but

Bede’s account of the Anglo-Saxon migration to Britain is unreliable, so

How reliable is Bede’s account of the Anglo-Saxon migration to Britain?

Chronology

1	Britain under Roman rule:	from 43 to 410 AD.
2	End of Roman rule:	in 410 AD when the Roman army leaves Britain to defend the rest of the Roman Empire from Barbarian attacks.
3	The Dark Ages:	the period following the end of Roman rule in Britain, for which we have very little written evidence.
4	Bede writes his history books:	during the first half of the 8 th century (700-750 AD).

Key Figures

7	Bede (also known as the Venerable Bede)	A monk who lived during the 8 th century and wrote several history books which are a valuable source of information to us.
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Bede’s account

8	After the departure of the Roman army, Britain is attacked by the Picts and the Irish. The Britons invite Anglo-Saxon mercenaries to help defend them from these attacks, but the Anglo-Saxons turn against them. They conquer the island from east to west and drive out the Britons.	
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Other evidence

9	Evidence that supports Bede’s account:	Evidence that contradicts Bede’s account:
	• Change in the way people were buried from 5th century onwards; personal items found buried next to the bodies. • Brooches from burials are a different design according to the areas settled by Angles, Saxons and Jutes.	• Iron-Age hillforts re-occupied and re-built by Britons during late 5th century, suggesting they weren’t all driven out. • Analysis of teeth from skeletons found in 5th century cemetery indicates most of the people there are locals (Britons).

Glossary

Migration:	the movement of people to settle in another country.
Century:	a period of one hundred years.
AD:	an abbreviation which stands for Anno Domini, used to indicate any years after the birth of Jesus Christ (year 0). Years before 0 are indicated by BC (or Before Christ).
Tribe:	a group of people who come from one area and speak the same language.
Empire:	a group of nations that are ruled over by another, more powerful nation.
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Garrison:	a group of soldiers defending a town or place.
Monk:	a man who devotes his life to God and lives in a religious community that is separate from the world.
Ecclesiastical:	something to do with the Christian Church.
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Perilous:	highly dangerous.
Mercenaries:	professional soldiers paid to fight for a country they do not belong to.
Subjugate:	to dominate and take control of people or a country.
Slaughter:	to kill someone.
Archaeology:	the study of human history by examining the remains of buildings, tools and other objects, which are often buried underground.
Excavate:	to remove earth that is covering very old objects in the ground in order to discover things about the past.