

The responsible use of the term 'Anglo-Saxon'

A summary

Many scholars across the range of specializations concerned with the study of the period from the 4th to the 11th centuries CE/AD in Europe have observed the convulsion in the former International Society of Anglo-Saxonists (ISAS) with both dismay and profound concern for its wider implications. The following statement focusses on the associated stigmatization of the term 'Anglo-Saxon', and summarizes the case for its continued use as a precise and valid mode of expression in study and discussion aimed at increasing knowledge and understanding, and fostering engagement with the human past.

The conditions in which the term is encountered, and how it is perceived, are very different in the USA from elsewhere. In the UK the period has been carefully presented and discussed in popular and successful documentaries and exhibitions over many years, and is now incorporated in the National Curriculum for History in England in a forward-looking way. The term 'Anglo-Saxon' is historically authentic in the sense that from the 8th century it was used externally to refer to a dominant population in southern Britain, and came into regular use within England itself from the late 9th century onwards. Its earliest uses, therefore, embody exactly the significant issues we can expect any general ethnic or national label to represent: it was applied, adopted and adapted for specific cultural and political purposes, and what it was employed to denote was subject to continuous reconstruction. The scholarship that focusses on what, in standard western European terminology, are the Early Middle Ages provides abundant evidence of care, sensitivity and determination in examining the complexities of identity and associated matters of controversy.

The term 'Anglo-Saxon' has been in use in scholarly literature to denote the population and culture of England from the end of Roman rule (the early 5th century) to the Norman Conquest of 1066 for more than four centuries. It became more frequent around the mid-19th century, superseding earlier common use of 'Saxon' alone, not least because it was shown by archaeologists that the influence on Britain from Germanic-language areas of the Continent and Scandinavia was geographically diverse and appeared to represent several distinct sources and populations. The term then became firmly established as a well-defined label for the radically new range of material and visual cultures which appeared over a large area in Britain from the 5th century onwards, and as a collective term for the populations and societies with which such evidence is associable.

The linguistic label 'Old English' has long been established for the vernacular language of this community and its literature. For reference to the contexts in which the language was used and its texts were produced and transmitted, the term 'Anglo-Saxon' allows for precise and concise, unmarked reference. It does not prevent the choice of more precise terms such as 'West Saxon' or 'Anglo-Scandinavian' where appropriate, nor does it hinder critical reflection on situations in which it might encourage preconceptions and over-generalization. Alternative constructions involving 'Early Medieval' with 'England' or 'English' are seriously ambiguous in many contexts as well as often verbose and clumsy. 'Anglo-Saxon' represents a readily identifiable although fluid cultural complex with open borders, and not a unitary linguistic, territorial or political field.

The appropriation, misuse and misrepresentation of a historical concept for political ends from any part of the political spectrum, right, left or centre, is to be deplored and resisted. It is an honourable and valid position to defend and insist upon a historically and interpretatively correct use of the term, and to reclaim misinterpreted features of the Early Middle Ages where necessary rather than abandoning them. It is undoubtedly essential to understand that linguistic pragmatics change with circumstances, and that the responsible use of the term must now include awareness of the perceptions and reactions demonstrated in the ISAS controversy. All have a duty to avoid behaving provocatively, and to exercise good will and tolerance towards others. However, the transformation of 'Anglo-Saxon' into a shibboleth whose use or shunning will distinguish the bad from the good will only create further destructive divisions – not least, in this instance, between scholars and students from different areas and in different disciplinary fields of enquiry.

The responsible use of the term 'Anglo-Saxon': a fuller statement

The value of Anglo-Saxon studies

Objection to the term 'Anglo-Saxonists' in the name of the International Society of Anglo-Saxonists (ISAS) has progressed to the stigmatization of the term 'Anglo-Saxon' itself and the proposal that this term should also be treated as unacceptable. This statement seeks to present the case for the validity of the term and for its continued use as a precise mode of expression in scholarly discourse.

The study of the Anglo-Saxon period focuses upon the population of a large part of southern Britain between the end of Roman imperial rule in the island in the early 5th century and the Norman Conquest of England (1066) and its consequences. This is a field of immense importance, relevance and potential for all in contemporary society. These six centuries and more were a key formative stage for a framework of power and identities that has continued to develop, often dramatically, in Europe to the present day — a framework that has inevitably conditioned Europe's interaction with the wider known or accessible world all this time. Research into the period now includes detailed study of: extreme climate change — both deterioration into a 'Little Ice Age' and the return of a marked warm period; migration, settlement and cultural interaction, enhanced with powerful new evidence from biomolecular analyses of ancient DNA and stable isotopes in human skeletal remains; dramatic sequences of social and political evolution, in the contexts not only of economic collapse and military crises but also of periods of stability; and a wealth of artistic and literary production reflecting creative and spiritual ambitions, along with the consolidation of the Church in step with the centralization of a monarchical state.

In the UK well-made archaeological and historical TV programmes, popular exhibitions and literature, present the topic in a responsible and informative manner. Scholars in the field have played a major role in the development of a new strand in the school National Curriculum for England, whereby younger children of Key Stages 1 and 2 (5–11 years) begin to learn of 'the Anglo-Saxons' and where this period and its peoples belong in history, coordinated with a forward-looking and important module on the GCSE History syllabus (14–16 years) 'Britain: migration, empires and people', from AD 790 (the start of the Viking Period) to the present day, properly connecting the experiences and evidences of the more distant period to a contemporary, diverse, population. There is much to be proud of in such mature, positive and well-focused academic engagement, and an emphasis upon these qualities is what will best serve to combat ignorance and prejudice. Elsewhere, unfortunately, the word 'Anglo-Saxon' is used less straightforwardly, with the result that for many speakers of English it has become tainted. Although the point has been discounted or ignored, there is a profound contrast between much of the world and the USA in respect of the familiarity and understanding of 'Anglo-Saxon'.

A Statement of Values

In light of the ethical and political issues within which the current controversy is embedded, it is important to be explicit that those who work or study within this field, as civic society generally, have a duty to be aware of a common heritage that is marked by past and ongoing atrocities, injustices and inequalities, and indeed of the serious risk of such conditions continuing and even worsening in the future. This statement is issued in the spirit of desire to promote genuine inclusivity and tolerance, and to assert the values of good will, and temperate, courteous and respectful behaviour, between academics, students and interested members of the wider public, in every circumstance. That should not prevent robust debate over scholarly work, but criticisms in

those respects should always be focused upon evidence, methods and interpretations, and not directed personally.

It is precisely in the context of taking the ethical issues involved very seriously that it is a matter of grave concern that criticisms and accusations levelled at the heritage of 'Anglo-Saxon' studies (primarily research and teaching of the history of the period, and of the material and visual cultures), and by extension at 'Old English' textual and linguistic studies, indiscriminately impugn the character of current and past specialists within these fields and their work.

Historical use of the term 'Anglo-Saxon'

The compound term, in Latin forms, was current in the Early Middle Ages (i.e. in the later part of the 1st millennium AD/CE). It is recorded first in a Continental source, the Langobard historian of the late 8th century Paulus Diaconus; similar expressions around that date testify to its regularity in literate and powerful Continental circles. It was adopted in the elite West Saxon sphere by the end of the reign of Alfred in the late 9th century, probably from Carolingian usage but possibly re-invented. There are several 10th- to early 11th-century instances from England, when it was one of many terms used, often creatively, to designate the political and ethnic entity dominated by speakers of Old English which in the course of that century crystallized into a kingdom of England. When first used, the compound was apparently designed to distinguish 'the Saxons who call themselves "Englishmen" [= *Engle*]' from the 'Old Saxons' of northern Germany; but in its immediate political circles of the late 9th century onwards the fact that the term combined the Anglian and Saxon identities of the nascent England must have been appealing.

As 'Anglo-Saxon', the term re-emerged in Modern English. It occurs intermittently in works of history of the 17th and 18th centuries (occasionally attributed to 'Anglo-Saxonists'), at a time when equivalents of the term also appear widely in learned works in other European languages. In the newly founded and rapidly expanding United States of America it came to be used in connexion with a range of facets of politics and idealism, from Thomas Jefferson's republican utopianism to the racially supremacist 'Anglo-Saxon Clubs of America' of the 1920s. It occurs more regularly in scholarly writing from around the mid-19th century, largely displacing 'Saxon' at that time as the referential label for things to do with England in the period preceding the Norman Conquest. Its instances are inevitably associable with the full range of ideas and attitudes of their contexts: in a modern perspective politically and ethically creditable or not; sometimes absurd, sometimes astute. In informed literature, an important contributory factor in the establishment of 'Anglo-Saxon' must have been the recognition by the 1840s, on the basis of empirical archaeological evidence, that the stream of overseas influence in southern and eastern Britain from the 5th and 6th centuries onwards was far from homogeneous, and appeared to embody a diversity in material and visual culture that looked consistent with Bede's attribution of the Germanic-speaking settlement of Britain to distinct population groups: the Angles, Saxons and Jutes. Shortly afterwards (from the 1870s), we have the first uses of 'Anglo-Saxonist' to denote crude racist and nationalist attitudes. The instances cited in the Oxford English Dictionary in fact represent the critical imposition of this label on such movements rather than its adoption within those quarters.

Current uses of the term

In relation to the language, the label 'Anglo-Saxon' was superseded by 'Old English' in the course of the second half of the 19th century: the labelling of Old English literature followed suit with some time-lag. When Archaeology consolidated as a well-defined and professional discipline by the end

of the 19th century, however, 'Anglo-Saxon' became established as the summary, conventional term for the radically new range of material and visual culture that was introduced to southern and eastern Britain from the Continent and Scandinavia starting in the 5th century; and as a collective term for the range of societies with whom those remains were associable. At that time the term tended to be attached by historians primarily to studies of 'Anglo-Saxon' institutions, but that represents the focus of History then rather than a divergence of meaning. Although generalizing, the term has been no barrier to discussion and investigation of demographic and cultural variety and hybridity in its context — of the much-debated extent of sub-Roman/'native' survival and continuity, for instance; or of the consequences of the Viking invasions, in relation to which the comparison and contrast of 'Anglo-Saxon' and 'Anglo-Scandinavian' phenomena has proved efficient and fruitful.

The situation in respect of Art History is fundamentally similar. Art in Early Medieval Britain and Ireland, with which we may justifiably associate palaeography, rapidly developed characteristics distinct from those of the contemporary Continent and Scandinavia. 'Insular art' can be used of the art of Britain and Ireland as a whole across the Early Middle Ages. In some contexts it is more precisely focussed on the productive period of the 7th and 8th centuries, when Anglo-Saxon artists, with their own range of sources and contexts, were significant but not dominant amongst those who served the inter-connected but competing churches and social elites of Britain and Ireland. There are inevitably key differences between the art and scripts produced in various regions and cultural domains, so that 'Hiberno-Saxon', 'Carolingian', 'Viking' and other phenomena and influences are discussed alongside the widely understood category of Anglo-Saxon art. The range of terminology of this field was indeed coined precisely to negotiate problems resulting from nationalist associations in scholarship referring to 'Celtic', 'Irish', 'Scottish', 'Welsh' or 'English' art.

While the present statement has avoided casual use of the term 'Anglo-Saxon' as far as possible, it is impossible for scholarship and debate to continue in the future at the level of clarity and precision it enjoys at present without the use of this term, and acceptance of its use. 'Anglo-Saxon' is a precisely defined term in Archaeology and History, Art History and Palaeography, and thus indispensable for any serious attempt to contextualize Old English language and literature. It represents a certain level of generalization, and the ability to move between broader and narrower levels of reference is essential to the articulate and precise presentation and interpretation of evidence. 'Early Medieval' qualifying 'England' or 'English' can serve instead in some cases, but together these are stylistically clumsy in the adjectival construction and more seriously are both ambiguous and inaccurate. 'Early Medieval'/the 'Early Middle Ages' means the 11th to early 13th centuries in Scandinavia and eastern Europe, where 'prehistory' covers the 1st millennium CE/AD, and these phrases are also frequently used in scholarship in English — conventionally so in some fields — for the same early post-Conquest contexts. Our 'Early Middle Ages' are the 'High' (and sometimes 'First') Middle Ages in French and Italian scholarship. To define the boundaries of England and to identify who was or was not 'English' in the period in question is a massive problem, and to cut through the Gordian knot of these details by imposing an insensitive term will undermine explanation and understanding. Outside the English-speaking world, meanwhile, the term 'Anglo-Saxon' has additional meanings and connotations, both scholarly and vernacular, and many students of this period and field are also engaged in promoting historically valid, careful and unprejudiced uses of the term.

'Anglo-Saxon' is a historically authentic term, and is so both clearly and precisely in the significant ways one would expect a group term of this kind to be: it is a compound, and may first have been externally imposed as a label before being adopted within the group itself. What it was used to

denote in its earliest articulations was unquestionably subject to continuous reconstruction — as has been widely studied and discussed. It represents a readily identifiable although fluid cultural complex with open borders, and not a unitary linguistic, territorial or political field.

Conclusions

The appropriation, misuse and misrepresentation of a historical concept for political ends from any part of the political spectrum, right, left or centre, is to be deplored and resisted. It is an honourable and decent position that to defend and insist upon a historically and interpretatively correct use of the term is far better than abandoning it to political extremism, or even just leaving it open to naïve appropriation for romantic notions of ‘identity’. There is no justification for a selective approach to reclaiming elements of the European Early Medieval past — including also symbolism and religion — that are misinterpreted and corrupted in the construction of group identities by supremacist movements. The imposition of a taboo on the term ‘Anglo-Saxon’ will only exacerbate divisions and entrench geographical and disciplinary non-communication amongst the world-wide body of scholars, students and the wider public with whom we wish to share knowledge and understanding, and enhance interest in an accurately portrayed past, with all of the moral issues it represents. Continuing to use the term ‘Anglo-Saxon’ in a rational, informed and responsible way is entirely consistent with the obligation to raise awareness of the controversial history of our field (as part of the controversial history of the West), as is widely done with historical buildings and monuments.

We reiterate a heartfelt desire that the energy of the current wave of controversy be directed constructively into a far more comprehensive and practical assessment of what may be done to engage a much wider public (and thus future students and scholars) with Old English studies and the Anglo-Saxon contexts from which that material originated than we have seen before. Positive efforts are indisputably needed to reach out to groups within society who may perceive these subjects as ‘not relevant to’, or ‘not for’, them. It can also be held in good conscience that it is a damaging misdirection of attention to target a word rather than the actual realities that need to be tackled. It is neither justified nor constructive to impose collective guilt upon colleagues who are not directly responsible for wrongs committed in quite different contexts. Nothing productive can be achieved in an atmosphere of prejudice, lack of sympathy, and intimidation in any direction between parties committed to the goal of promoting and disseminating research and education.

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