

Anglo-Saxon Crime and Punishment Knowledge Organiser

Keywords

arson	Purposely setting fire to things. Particularly dangerous at this time as all buildings were wooden or thatched.
ecclesiastical	Religious crimes; crimes against God such as immorality.
Danelaw	The East of England that was controlled by the Danes (Vikings). The Danelaw had different laws to the rest of England.
slander	Telling lies about a person; damaging their reputation.

Key Dates

c1000:

Ethelred the Unready rules of the Anglo-Saxon part of England. The East is known as '**Danelaw**' and is controlled by Vikings.

1016-1042:

England is ruled by Viking kings, beginning with the reign of the famous Canute.

1042-1066:

Edward the Confessor rules but dies without any heirs.

1066:

The Norman Conquest.

Wergild

If convicted of murder, the murderer would be expected to pay the family of the deceased for their crime. This was known as wergild or the 'man price'. Killing a slave was cheaper than killing a free man, killing a noble was very expensive indeed!



Hue and Cry

When a criminal was seen to be committing a crime, it was the responsibility for all men in the local Tithing to apprehend him or her. A witness would raise the hue and cry; shouting and chasing the criminal. All men in the Tithing that heard this were expected by law to join in the shouting and chasing until the criminal was caught.



Shire Reeves

Shire Reeves became known as Sheriffs. These men were often selected from local Shires and were given the responsibility for enforcing crime, collecting taxes and raising troops for the king. They were often highly-respected individuals and feared by criminals across the land.



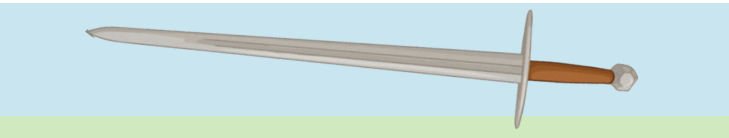
Anglo-Saxon Community

Anglo-Saxon England was divided into Shires, Hundreds and Tithings. Each Shire contained many Hundreds, and each Hundred was divided into roughly ten Tithings. Community was important in law enforcement – each man in a Tithing was responsible for apprehending criminals using the hue and cry system. Each Tithing had a representative for law enforcement, and each Hundred was headed by a Reeve. Each Shire was headed by a Shire Reeve or 'Sheriff' who would be responsible for the punishment of the most heinous criminals.



Crimes

Crimes in Anglo-Saxon England were broadly things that would damage the community or go against the authority of the king or Church. The most serious crimes were things such as plotting to kill the king, kidnapping nuns and **arson**. Murder was most often seen as less serious, being punished with fines rather than death.



Punishments

Punishments in Anglo-Saxon England fell into a few broad categories:

- Capital punishment – execution, usually by hanging, for those who committed crimes against the king.
- Fines – paying money to atone for crimes (see **Wergild**).
- Mutilation – the removal body parts, i.e. tongue for **slander** or a hand for theft.
- Public humiliation – being put in the stocks or made to confess crimes to the community.

Courts

Courts in Anglo-Saxon England were often local affairs. Local Lords would hear cases in their own manors, known as Manor Courts. More serious crimes would be heard in the Hundred Courts or Shire Courts, depending on the severity. The highest court in the land was the King's Court. Here, the king himself would often pass judgement on the most tricky or serious criminal issues. The Church also held its own courts, mainly, but not exclusively, for **ecclesiastical** crimes. There was no unified system for these courts, different regions and Lords would deal with crime as they saw fit.



Trial by Ordeal

Innocence or guilt were often judged by trials. A priest would lead a trial and ask God to show whether a person was innocent or guilty of a crime. The two most common trials in Anglo-Saxon England were:

- Trial by Cold Water – the accused was bound and thrown into a body of water. If they sank, it was a sign of God's acceptance and the accused would be hauled out and set free. If the accused floated it was a sign of God's displeasure and they were punished.
- Trial by Hot Iron – the accused held a red-hot bar until it burnt their hand. If the hand began to heal over the following days they were innocent, if it did not and instead become infected, they were guilty.

Many people would confess when threatened with an ordeal, making them rare occurrences!

