

Conversion to Christianity

We have so far discussed about the Celts, the Romans and the Anglo-Saxons. It is evident that the British isles were a **melting pot** of **disparate peoples** that invaded the place over the centuries. To further understand this **merging** of different people we need to know the basic time-line of the British conversion to Christianity.

Religion is one of the most powerful factors that **forged** the entity that today we call United Kingdom. Christianity is the agent that **unified bitter adversaries** but it is unfortunately the **rivalry between** Christian **denominations** that has **plagued** the British until today.

The Celts were **polytheists** (pagans). The Romans were polytheists, too. The Romans were **tolerant towards** the polytheism of the Celts.

The first evidence of Christian faith in Britain comes in the late 2nd century AD. Christianity was still forbidden in the Roman empire and there were occasional waves of **persecution** of Christian believers. **St Alban (304 AD)** was the first British Christian martyr. He was executed in the Roman town Verulamium (today suburb of London) in 304 AD. Much later an abbey was built **dedicated to** st Alban.



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In **313** the Emperor Constantine **granted** Christians **freedom** of worship. So persecution ended and during the 4th century Christianity started becoming more **widespread** on the British isles. There is evidence that in 314 three British **bishops** attended a church council in France.

Therefore, in **407** when the Romans left Britain the majority of the indigenous Celtic population had converted to Christianity. The new religion spread from England to Wales and continued to Ireland and eventually Scotland.

Christianity in Anglo-Saxon England

The Angles, the Saxons and the Jutes started invading / migrating (open to discussion) the British isles in the mid 5th century. These German tribes were polytheists. They merged with the indigenous Christian Celtic population but they didn't immediately **relinquish** the **pagan gods**.

There is a legend that says Pope Gregory (before becoming a Pope) saw some boys on a slave market in Rome. He **allegedly** asked about them and he was told that they were Angles. Then he replied that they were '**not Angles but Angels**'.

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When he became a Pope he promptly organised a **mission** to convert the pagan Anglo-Saxons into Christianity. In **597 Augustine** accompanied by a party of approximately forty **missionaries** arrived in Kent.

Missionaries started **preaching** all over Britain and one after the other all the English kingdoms were converted (East Anglia, Wessex, Mercia, Northumbria).



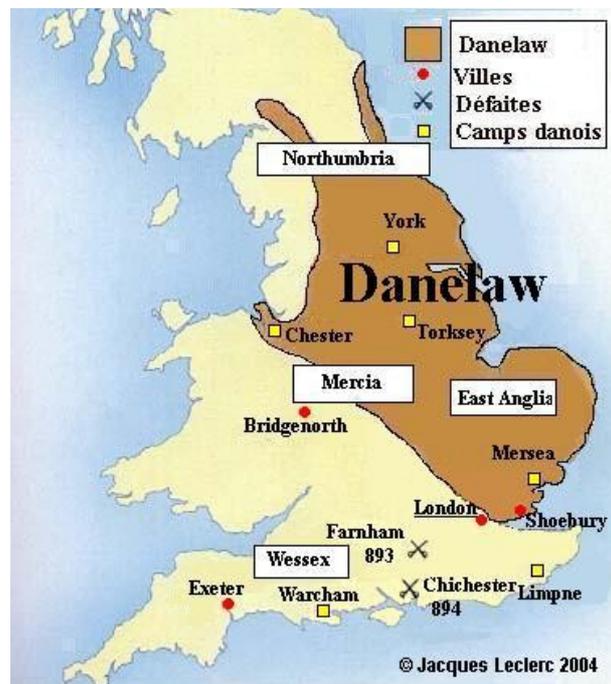
The Church of St. Mary in Sompting is one of the most striking examples of Anglo-Saxon architecture in all of England. Its primary distinguishing feature is the Rhenish Helm or Rhineland Helmet of the tower. The date of construction is not known, but the church was mentioned in the Domesday Book compiled under the direction of William the Conqueror in 1086.

(Source: <http://www.britannia.com/church/saxchurch/sompting1.html>)

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However, Northumbria reverted to paganism after the conquest of the Vikings. When Alfred the Great (King of Wessex) crushed the Danes at the battle of Edington (these Vikings that established the Danelaw) the latter agreed to become Christians.

Therefore, the Anglo-Saxon and the Vikings were now sharing a common religion and as a result they started coming culturally closer.



Churches and monasteries dominated the British landscape and prevailed in everyone's life. Religion became a powerful agent of education for the lay people and an indispensable tool for doing politics for the ruling classes.

The conversion from German paganism to Christianity is interestingly reflected in the Anglo-Saxonic poem

'**Beowulf**' that constitutes the earliest example of English literature.