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The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: The History of the Anglo-Saxons

King Alfred the Great

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The History of the Anglo-Saxons

Compiled on the orders of

King Alfred the Great

Translation by Rev. James Ingram (London, 1823), with additional readings from the translation of Dr. J.A. Giles (London, 1847).

Originally compiled on the orders of King Alfred the Great, approximately A.D. 890, and subsequently maintained and added to by generations of anonymous scribes until the middle of the 12th Century. The original language is Anglo-Saxon (Old English), but later entries are essentially Middle English in tone.

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle is a collection of annals in Old English chronicling the history of the Anglo-Saxons. The original manuscript of the Chronicle was created late in the 9th century, probably in Wessex, during the reign of Alfred the Great. Multiple copies were made of that one original and then distributed to monasteries across England, where they were independently updated. In one case, the Chronicle was still being actively updated in 1154.

Nine manuscripts survive in whole or in part, though not all are of equal historical value and none of them is the original version. The oldest seems to have been started towards the end of Alfred's reign, while the most recent was written at Peterborough Abbey after a fire at that monastery in 1116. Almost all of the material in the Chronicle is in the form of annals, by year; the earliest are dated at 60 BC (the annals' date for Caesar's invasions of Britain), and historical material follows up to the year in which the chronicle was written, at which point contemporary records begin. These manuscripts collectively are known as the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle.

The Chronicle is not unbiased: there are occasions when comparison with other medieval sources makes it clear that the scribes who wrote it omitted events or told one-sided versions of stories; there are also places where the different versions contradict each other. Taken as a whole, however, the Chronicle is the single most important historical source for the period in England between the departure of the Romans and the decades following the Norman conquest. Much of the information given in the Chronicle is not recorded elsewhere. In addition, the manuscripts are important sources for the history of the English language; in particular, the later Peterborough text is one of the earliest examples of Middle English in existence.

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