

An Examination of Slavery in Anglo-Saxon England

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Abstract:

This paper examines the practice of slavery and the slave trade in England when it was ruled by the Anglo-Saxons, from the departure of Rome in the 5th century, to the conquest by the Normans in 1066. The vernacular language of the Anglo-Saxons was Old English, and it is documents written in this language that are the focus of research. Using the work of prominent medieval historians, a close study of legal, religious, and fictional text, an idea is gleaned of the practice of slavery in Anglo-Saxon England throughout their rule, and whether the rise of the Christian Church had an impact on the number of enslaved. Legal and religious texts frequently preach the immorality of slavery, but the reality of active slave ports as well as the language of the Wessex Gospels, imply that the concern of the English people was curtailing cruel slave masters, rather than slavery itself.

The Anglo-Saxons were a Germanic people who ruled what is now England from the departure of Roman rule in the 5th century to the conquest by the Normans in 1066. Comprised of disparate territories whose borders shifted with time, Anglo-Saxon England was split into seven distinct chiefdom territories – East Anglia, Essex, Kent, Mercia, Northumbria, Sussex, and Wessex – led by warrior chiefs called *cyningas* (pronounced: kŭh-nĭng-gās). Long before the Normans though, slavery was interwoven into the fabric of English society for the entirety of the Anglo-Saxon period. While changing rulers often brought changing laws on the regulation and treatment of the enslaved, the institution itself remained. As the ground floor of the social hierarchy, these slaves left no known written account of their own. References to the enslaved can be found, however, throughout the written documentation in the native language of Old English. Using these, along with archeological and anthropological methodologies, historians are able to glean how the enslaved were considered and treated within England and what kind of work they might have done.

Historical research of the medieval era most often focused on the later centuries, after the Norman Conquest, which brought with it the zeitgeist of what is considered ‘medieval’ into England – castles, knights, serfs, and the manorial system of labor. Despite its marginalized representation, the Anglo-Saxons were a thriving and complex people who, in their six-century reign, developed many institutions and traditions that shaped the foundation of England and the greater United Kingdom. Among these foundations was an extensive institution of slavery, both domestic and overseas. With the Anglo-Saxon era being a relatively niche topic of research, scholarship within the subject is paradoxically rather broad. Historians will often either investigate the people as a whole, or the language of Old English as it relates to the linguistic shift from Saxon runes to the Middle English of later medieval and early renaissance periods. Although research into slavery of the Anglo-Saxons, and the Old English documents thereof, does exist, it is most often focused on the extreme cultural shift that came about after the Norman Conquest.

Much of what we know about Old English and Anglo-Saxon culture can be traced back to King Alfred the Great. One of the first historians of his own people, King Alfred ruled the kingdom of Wessex from 871 to 899. Alfred believed that literacy brought wisdom, and with this philosophy he personally translated, or had translations commissioned, of many texts into the vernacular of Old English. Crucial among these for the understanding of Anglo-Saxon England was the Venerable Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, an account of the religious spread of Christianity within England,¹ and many excerpts from the Bible. This included the Ten Commandments from the book of Exodus, which preceded one of the first attempts for an English ruler to ground his own legal code with that of the Christian religion.² These translations aided in the dissemination of both information and standards of morality throughout England. Even if the common people could not read, they often received this information orally from those who could.

Perhaps his most famous contribution to Anglo-Saxon history was King Alfred's *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, a vast compendium of documents penned by various scribes in an effort to record the history of the English people from the departure of Rome onward.³ King Alfred did not concern himself personally with the plight of the enslaved, being advantaged by the system himself, but the documents he created nevertheless contained a great many references and allegories that informed the way in which slaves were considered. The casual nature of their inclusion, in fact – often the punchline to a riddle or an incidental mention – only served to reinforce the ubiquitous nature of slavery itself. The institution was so intimately woven into daily life that it did not require attention or justification; the enslaved occupied a clear self-evident position in the social hierarchy. Whether or not these stories were 'true,' in keeping with the history that has been uncovered since their creation, does not affect

¹ The Venerable Bede, *The Old English Version of Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. Thomas Miller (Oxford University Press, 1890).

² "Laws of Alfred," The Anglo-Saxons, July 9, 2024, <https://www.theanglosaxons.com/laws-of-alfred-ps/>.

³ Alfred the Great, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, trans. James Ingram and J.A. Giles (c. 890; repr., CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017).

their commentary on the nature of slavery within Anglo-Saxon England. Instead, their value comes in the assumptions one can extract on the intended audience's – the Anglo-Saxon's – familiarity with slavery and the enslaved.

The vernacular language of the Anglo-Saxons was Old English (or *englisc* (pronounced: āng-līsh) as they would have called it). This was the language King Alfred was concerned with when he campaigned to increase literacy. When searching for evidence of slavery within Anglo-Saxon texts, it is, therefore, imperative to have a base understanding of the vocabulary of Old English in relation to terms regarding enslavement or coerced labor. Historian David Pelteret was perhaps the foremost authority on this subject. His 1995 book, *Slavery in Early Mediaeval England*, offered an extensive vocabulary on the subject of slavery in Old English. Although, he, like most scholars on the subject, was focused primarily on the change that came about with the Norman Conquest, his philological and anthropological approach to the linguistics offered a valuable resource for those wishing to delve into more intricacies of the subject.⁴

Many different words were used throughout the Anglo-Saxon era to describe slavery, though the primary terms for 'slave' were *þeop* (pronounced: thē-ōw) and *þræl* (pronounced: thräll), with the latter becoming more popular into Middle English. Pelteret's book followed the etymology of these words, and the vocabulary that denoted the differing social ranks of the enslaved in an attempt to trace the shifting nature of slavery and the pejorative aspect of such labels. The word *pealh* (pronounced: wē-āl), for example, was used in the early Anglo-Saxon period to mean 'foreigner' and referred most often to the native Britons in the west. As England expanded, however, and encroached into what is now Cornwall during the 10th century, the word came to be synonymous with 'slave.' Pelteret posited that this change was a direct result of war captives' enslavement by the English. This could be

⁴ David Pelteret, *Slavery in Early Mediaeval England: From the Reign of Alfred Until the Twelfth Century* (Boydell Press, 1995).

contrasted with the word *þegn* (pronounced: thē-gŭn), which was a very high-ranking slave of a noble, or the king himself. Overtime, *þegn* came to hold such respect that it was no longer a rank of misfortune but a sought-after position, synonymous with the later medieval rank of knight.

Pelteret's examination of the minutia of Old English has, however, been criticized for being, at times, too exacting, drifting into semantics of meaning that, in practical terms, were negligible. *þeorcþeop* (pronounced: wĕrk-thē-ōw) was denoted in *Slavery in Mediaeval England* as a word to refer to slaves that were bound to a certain field for agricultural work, whereas *þeorcþyrðe* (pronounced: wĕrk-wŭrth-ĕh) was denoted as a word to refer to free people that were, nevertheless, similarly bound to an agricultural field for work.⁵ As Alice Rio, author of *Slavery After Rome: 500-1100* elucidates, this difference, while no doubt real in the context of drawn out petitions to the king or his legal arbiters, was so miniscule that it likely held no meaning in regards to England's overall consideration of slavery.⁶ In the *Domesday Book*, in fact – a massive census encompassing the whole of England commissioned by King William the Conqueror in 1066 – the Latin word *servus* is used. This word could mean either 'servant' or 'slave,' though modern translations use the latter. Regardless of exact meaning, the fact of there being only one category of bound laborer rather than two, speaks to the possibility of King William seeing no meaningful distinction between such nuances as the *þeorcþeop* and the *þeorcþyrðe*.⁷

Distinctions such as these were recorded for a reason, however, even if their definitions changed over time. While incidental in colloquial use and understanding, legal disputes often relied on such nuances, especially in a system of limited consistency and common law, in which the consequences of legal action could be as dire as one's freedom or life. Author of the 1898 legal classic

⁵ Pelteret, *Slavery in Early Mediaeval England*, 41-45; Blue Engine Web Development, "Old English Translator," <https://www.oldenglishtranslatorbeta.co.uk/>.

⁶ Alice Rio, *Slavery After Rome, 500-1100* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 124 – 125.

⁷ "Serf or Slave," Hull Domesday Project, <https://www.domesdaybook.net/domesday-book/data-terminology/peasantry/serf>.

History of the English Law Before the Time of Edward, Frederick Pollock, whose research only briefly discussed slavery, was nevertheless a foundational historian of English law. He elaborated on the legal instances in which one might enter into or exit slavery. The Anglo-Saxon's extremely local court structure led to an environment where linguistic minutia could be vital if a case were heard in the right place. Crime in Anglo-Saxon England, and the punishment thereof, was usually a private affair. Only large-scale disruptions were frequently brought to arbitration, such as murder, grievous harm, and livestock theft. Punishments were harsh but brief, and rarely involved imprisonment. Enslavement was not a habitual punishment, but for such crimes that might otherwise merit death, enslavement was seen as the merciful option. Enslavement, therefore, functioned as both a punishment for undesirable individuals, and a form of mercy for the penitent.

The other process of enslavement Pollock discussed most frequently was self-selling into slavery, which happened in cases of extreme impoverishment when one had no other recourse for subsistence. Slavery in England was predominantly domestic in nature, perpetrated by the wealthy, which opened the possibility to surrender one's independence in exchange for regular meals and shelter. Other forms of enslavement were not expanded upon in Pollock's work, which was likely due to the work's focus on the written law, when other forms of enslavement did not have the same firm legal backing.⁸ A linguistic example of this legal differential was *rihtþeop* (pronounced: rīt-thē-ōw), a word used primarily in law rather than common parlance, which referred to a slave that was obtained 'rightfully,' or through due process of the court, while the word *geþeopian* (pronounced: yēh-thē-ōw-ē-āhn) was used to mean the obtaining of a slave without that legal process. More laws were put to writing on the regulation of the enslaved once they had already entered the institution. Most telling of these was the prohibition on selling Christians overseas, which is to say, to non-Christians. In his own

⁸ Frederick Pollock, *The History of English Law Before the Time of Edward I: Volume I* (Cambridge University Press, 1895), 43 – 45.

book, Pelteret mentioned the apparent historical disposition to resist enslaving those who were considered their ‘own kind.’⁹ With the increasing unification of the kingdoms of England and the rapid spread of Christianity, this concept could be used to explain the heightened regulation against English slaves owned by the English.

King Æthelred II, who ruled Wessex from 978 until 1016, forbade the selling of Christians to ‘heathens’ overseas, and this condemnation was echoed in the homilies of ðulfstan (pronounced: wūlfstān), who was Archbishop of York at the same time. However, this ordinance seemed ineffective, as Pollock recorded that nearly every port city in England, along with London, was a primary market for slaves. This, along with the necessity to repeat the same prohibition in both the laws of King Cnut (r. 1018-1028) and King William (r. 1066-1087),¹⁰ implied the continuous breaking of this ordinance. The account of Imma of Northumbria, a *þegn* owned by Æthelred II, reinforced the idea of a continued slave trade. As told by Bede in his *Ecclesiastical History*, Imma was wounded in battle and imprisoned in Mercia with the intention of being sold overseas before his noble background was discovered, at which point he was returned to his family.¹¹ Though attributed to divine intervention in the tale, if the account was based in truth it was likely that Imma was ransomed back home, as this was increasingly the way in which slave traders offloaded their human goods when they were lacking in buyers.

Rather than transporting captives overseas or holding them until a buyer could be found, it became increasingly popular as the Anglo-Saxon period progressed and the enslaving of Christians became less acceptable, for raiding parties to offer their captives back to their people, for a price. As a compromise between profit and piety, this practice allowed captors to sidestep the increasing taboo on Christian slaves by selling them back to their homelands, rather than selling them into labor. Pelteret, in his etymology, elaborated on *þergeld* (pronounced: wër-yæld), literally meaning man-

⁹ Pelteret, *Slavery in Early Mediaeval England*, 14.

¹⁰ Pollock, *The History of English Law Before the Time of Edward I*, 43.

¹¹ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 326-331.

payment, which was the price one would pay for someone's return. Although the alternative was enslavement, Pelteret emphasized the difference between this and *freogan* (pronounced: frē-ō-gǎn) which was the formal manumitting of a slave through payment, with the freed person thusly referred to as *freolæta* (pronounced: frē-ō-lăt-ă).¹² This, another minor difference in wording, marked the lingering impression slavery left. When one was freed in this way, they were not classified as free, rather as a former slave. So pervasive was this practice of *pergeld* that ðulfstan of York lamented that funds for paying off *pergeld* were only available to the wealthy. For those who could not afford it, captivity could easily be extended into a de facto permanent condition.

Not only for raiding armies or captors, *pergeld* was also a formal system of payment in the court system. In a function similar to the modern institution of bail, in which money is forfeited to a bondsperson to ensure appearance in court, *pergeld* was a currency for human value, used to settle disputes or avoid punishment. As expounded in Rio's *Slavery After Rome*, in cases where the alternative was not execution – from which there was no redemption – slavery as a punishment for severe crime, most often a substantial theft, could be circumvented by the timely payment of the criminal's *pergeld* to the court. In a legal system with no reliance on precedent and a large oral tradition of common law, this allowed a degree of flexibility and exception in criminal sentencing, especially for those who had substantial financial or social resources. If either the criminal themselves or their guardian (most often, but not always, family) could not afford the *pergeld*, payment could be deferred. That deferment, however, came at the cost of enslavement for the duration. In brief, an individual could enter a state of bondage, colloquially, if not legally, indistinguishable from enslavement, until a payment was made in full. This was another way in which one might obtain a *rihtþeop*, a person enslaved through the legal system of the court.¹³

¹² Pelteret, *Slavery in Early Mediaeval England*, 44.

¹³ Alice Rio, *Slavery After Rome, 500-1100* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 32-33, 68.

In Anglo-Saxon England, exiting slavery was just as common as entering it. Manumissions were a frequent occurrence that were seen as a generous and righteous endeavor, though this tended to apply only when freeing the slaves of others, or upon the owner's death. Nearly all scholars of medieval slavery include the reading of manumission documents, though some, such as Pelteret and John Blair, author of *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*, were focused more on the way in which the Christian Church influenced the rate and manner of manumission. Pelteret, who believed slavery disappeared from England after the Norman Conquest, held Christian influence high on his reasons for it doing so. In his study, he quoted frequent sermons and homilies that preached the morality of manumission.¹⁴ However, in his same study, Pelteret quotes the Wessex Gospels, a translation of the four gospels of the Christian Bible in Old English. This translation refers to those who serve Satan as his *prælas* (pronounced: thräll-ās), an increasingly pejorative word for a low class of slave, while those who serve God are referred to as his *pegnas* (pronounced: thē-gŭn-ās), a high class of slave that held predominantly positive connotation.¹⁵ The prerogative of the Christian Church in the Anglo-Saxon era seemed, therefore, to place a firm distinction between 'good' and 'bad' forms of slavery, and not question the morality of slavery itself.

In a more nuanced view, Blair acknowledged that the church's clergy, as individuals, did not seem to promote any sort of abolition, but maintained that large scale manumission was an integral part of early medieval Christianity. The church incorporated regular ceremonies, especially in the 1000s, that freed large numbers of slaves at one time.¹⁶ He proposed that these ceremonies, and the encouragement of frequent manumission, especially in the form of last wills, contributed to the decline of slavery in England overall. Wills were indeed a plentiful source of manumission, for Rio used the reading of wills in her work to extrapolate the feelings of the church on the institution of slavery. The

¹⁴ Pelteret, *Slavery in Early Mediaeval England*, chap. 2.

¹⁵ Pelteret, *Slavery in Early Mediaeval England*, 69.

¹⁶ John Blair, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society* (OUP Oxford, 2005), 453.

mass freeing of slaves correlated with the granting of land to church owned property, and because of this Rio argued that both were religiously motivated. Some people, such as Þynflæd (pronounced: wūn-flǣd), a noble woman with a large estate, went so far as to mention those enslaved as a legal punishment specifically, stating that she, personally, had enslaved them. Rio argued that while Þynflæd owned the slaves, it was very doubtful that she had enslaved them all herself. Stating that she had freed them, therefore, along with the special mention of criminal slaves, gave her will a Christ-like ambition for redeeming both herself and the ‘sinners’ under her purview.¹⁷

The choice to manumit one’s slaves was entirely personal, with very few laws regulating the exit of slavery, beyond when a slave could afford to buy their own *pergeld*. While manumission was seen frequently in wills, it was only present in significant numbers in those wills that seemed to be seeking additional forms of salvation insurance, such as the giving of large numbers of items, structures, or land to the church. When a will bequeathed such assets to a relative, spouse, or heir for example, it was unlikely to accompany the freeing of slaves; rather, those slaves would join the other such assets in being passed along to the beneficiary.¹⁸ This reinforced the assumption that mass manumission upon death, while very real for the slaves themselves, was largely performative and had little bearing on the individual’s moral consciousness regarding their ownership of said slaves. In Anglo-Saxon England to own slaves was a natural and ordinary occurrence – so too was making them free as insurance for heavenly entrance. As a part of his research, Pelteret also closely viewed wills, along with anecdotes and allegories involving religiously motivated manumission. Pelteret suggested that the rate of religiously motivated manumission was such that as the Anglo-Saxon era came to an end, there was an overwhelming number of newly freed individuals. These free people were above the rank of the enslaved, yet below the rank of those who had never been enslaved, a unique middle ground

¹⁷ Rio, *Slavery After Rome, 500-1100*, 68 – 69.

¹⁸ Rio, *Slavery After Rome, 500-1100*, 114 – 117.

defined by the Old English word *læt* (pronounced: lăt). The *læt* were still dependent on their former owners, however, and frequently worked on the same property they had previously, bound *de facto* to the land, if not *de jure*.

With extensive manumissions, and the usage of the word *læt*, Pelteret posited that this explained the rise of serfdom after the Norman Conquest and the disappearance of slavery.¹⁹ Rio, however, disagreed. She believed Pelteret was giving the church too much credit. While this in between class of individual certainly existed, the rate of manumission, religiously motivated or otherwise, would not have been high enough to create an entirely new demographic that superseded the previous.²⁰ According to Rio, Anglo-Saxon rhetoric against slavery, plentiful though it was, was used primarily as propaganda against non-Christian, non-English people. Although these stories featured the freeing of slaves, it was almost always a foreign land perpetrating the type of cruelty that would require intervention, whereas the English were benevolent and kind.²¹ This was why the laws of Æthelred II forbade the selling of slaves overseas, but not slavery itself. Like the phrasing in the Wessex Gospels implied, slavery was not the evil Christianity was fighting, rather cruel slave masters.

Despite its heavy influence in the later centuries, the Anglo-Saxon's were not always followers of Christianity. Marc Morris, author of *The Anglo-Saxons: A History of the Beginning of England* used archeological evidence and linguistics of both Latin and Old English to explore the life and culture of the Anglo-Saxons. Although he rarely discussed slavery in his work, unlike many other early medieval historians, he did linger on the period before Christianity took hold in the 6th and 7th centuries. Before Christianity, the Anglo-Saxon's followed a polytheistic nature-based religious system, kept from their Germanic origins. This religion, like Anglo-Saxon Christianity, allowed for a slave class of people. Even less is known about the pre-Christianity institution of slavery, though one could assume it

¹⁹ Pelteret, *Slavery in Early Mediaeval England*, 44-45, 121.

²⁰ Rio, *Slavery After Rome, 500-1100*, 117.

²¹ Rio, *Slavery After Rome, 500-1100*, 33 – 34.

functioned in a similar manner to the Vikings', who frequently raided the English for captives. As Morris explained, weapons were paramount to the Anglo-Saxons. The creation, maintenance, and retiring of weapons were all complex and critical aspects of the warrior led community. Burials, therefore, included personal weapons as grave-goods. The way in which Morris traced who was enslaved and who was free, therefore, was by tracking which burials did not include weapons; these were interpreted by Morris to be those of slaves, who did not own personal weapons.²²

It was Morris, too, who connected an anecdote within Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* with the introduction of Christianity to England. Bede wrote of young boys from England sold as slaves in Italy, where they garnered the attention of a monk named Gregory. Enamored, this monk bought the boys. He then went on to become Pope Gregory the Great, who campaigned to bring Christian missionaries to the 'barbarian' lands of England. Following this was the first substantial shift into Christianity in England with the 597 conversion of King Æthelberht.²³ The very presence of Christianity within England relied on the extent international slave trade. Bede himself cast doubt on the validity of this tale, however, with the story having quite a few themes and motifs that were echoed in popular moralistic fiction. While the story itself was doubtful, in his analysis, Morris brought forward letters from Pope Gregory in 595 that might have inspired such a tale, in which the pope inquired as to the purchase of English slave boys, so that they might be raised in Italy as monks.²⁴ Regardless of its factual plausibility, to reproduce this tale Bede must have considered the presence of young slaves traveling as far as Italy from England to be sold, and those slaves being bought by a prominent Christian figure, to be so unremarkable as to be widely believed with credulity.

By the time of the Norman Conquest in 1066, Christianity was firmly established as the dominant religion in England. The Church's influence was already influencing and changing

²² Marc Morris, *The Anglo-Saxons: A History of the Beginnings of England* (Pegasus Books, 2021), 50.

²³ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, part 13 – 14.

²⁴ Morris, *The Anglo-Saxons*, 58 – 59.

prevailing attitudes on who, why, and for how long one could be enslaved, with increasing rhetoric, if not practice, of mass-manumission. Along with the multitude of cultural and structural changes William the Conqueror brought to England came a substantial change in the classification of slavery. Two theories dominated scholarship on Norman England slavery – that slavery disappeared entirely from England, or that slavery only transformed in its nomenclature and structure, in particular, that the new classification for ‘slave’ was ‘serf.’ The latter argument suggests, perhaps due to a desire to circumvent the growing taboo of enslaving Christians, the Normans merely redefined an existing restriction under feudal terms that placed Christians into forced labor while maintaining their legal, if semantic, freedom. This ambiguity reflects the difficulty in tracking the progress of slavery and coerced labor in legal systems that seek to obscure or soften the definitions while maintaining the practice.

To say that slavery disappeared from England would make it an aberration in the medieval world to an unlikely extent and would not account for the *servus* classification in the *Domesday Book*, which additionally used the word *villanus* to refer to the large number of unfree peasantry (as opposed to the freeman, which was referred to as *francus homo* or *socmannus*).²⁵ The theory that serfs were simply slaves by another name, likewise, would not account for the term *esclave* which was the Latin and Old French word that referred to the state of slavery existing before the Norman Conquest. If these pre-Norman slaves were simply called serfs, there would be no need for a separate classifier. Furthermore, this class of people could still be found in England after the Conquest, though in much smaller numbers and only on small estates.²⁶ Reminiscent of the distinction between *peorcþeop* and the *peorcpyrðe*, the distinction between serf, *esclave*, and *servus* may have been so small as to be indistinguishable to the contemporary worker. Nevertheless, the fact that there was a distinction, as

²⁵ “Serf or Slave,” Hull Domesday Project; “Villager or Villein,” Hull Domesday Project.

²⁶ Pelteret, *Slavery in Early Mediaeval England*, 17.

marginal as it may have been, is evidence to the continuation of slavery into Norman England, changed though it may have been.

While historical research into slavery rarely focuses on the Anglo-Saxon era of England, and research into the Anglo-Saxons rarely focuses on slavery, historians on both subjects have contributed to the continuity of knowledge on Anglo-Saxon slavery. Utilizing historians of the era, such as the Venerable Bede and King Alfred the Great, historians have a foundation upon which to build a close examination of the vernacular language of Old English and the culture surrounding it. Changing vocabulary within the centuries of Anglo-Saxon rule reflected the changing status of the enslaved. A discriminatory reading of these works, along with a close familiarity of contemporary Old English documentation can reveal the views and opinions of the Anglo-Saxons themselves regarding slavery. The extensive, complex reality was that the Anglo-Saxon slave trade was integral to the economy of the seven kingdoms that constituted England under Anglo-Saxon rule.