

I'm not a robot



The Saxons, a Germanic ethnolinguistic group originating north of the Elbe River in what is now northern Germany, played a formative role in shaping the sociopolitical and cultural fabric of both continental Europe and the British Isles. Their trajectory from peripheral tribal society to influential stakeholders in early European development reveals a complex interplay of migration, conflict, syncretism, and identity formation. Saxons, a Germanic groupThe etymology of the term "Saxon" is likely derived from the "seax," a distinctive single-edged knife emblematic of their warrior culture. While speculative references to Saxon populations can be traced to the geographer Claudius Ptolemy in the second century CE, their definitive historical appearance occurs around 356 CE, when Roman sources begin documenting their maritime raids alongside the Franks. During the broader Migration Period—a time marked by the destabilization of the Western Roman Empire and the movement of numerous barbarian groups—the Saxons became notable actors, asserting themselves through both militarized expansion and strategic settlements. Initial depictions of the Saxons by Roman authors such as Siodnius Apollinaris emphasized their belligerence and tenacity as sea raiders. These narratives also underscore their religio-cultural motivations, with divine propitiation rituals preceding raids. However, the withdrawal of Roman legions from Britain in 410 CE presented new geopolitical opportunities. The Saxons, along with Angles, Jutes, and Frisians, transitioned from transient raiders to settlers, gradually establishing a presence on the British Isles by the mid-fifth century. Contemporary archaeological and textual scholarship increasingly challenges the traditional invasionist paradigm. Instead, the Saxon incursion is now understood as a prolonged and multi-modal process involving trade, intermarriage, and socio-political integration with the indigenous Romano-British population. Structures once interpreted solely as military fortifications are being reevaluated as hybridized centers of commerce and cultural exchange. By the sixth century, Germanic settlers had established a series of kingdoms including Kent, Wessex, Sussex, Essex, East Anglia, and Mercia. Middlesex later emerged as a derivative of Essex. The descriptor "Anglo-Saxon" initially a nomenclature of convenience—became codified post-1066 to distinguish these pre-Norman inhabitants from their conquerors. One pivotal figure in this dynastic genesis was Cerdic of Wessex, reputedly arriving in Britain circa 495 CE. Intriguingly, philological evidence suggests that "Cerdic" may have been of British origin, possibly indicating a syncretic identity or strategic alliance with Saxon forces. His lineage gave rise to figures such as Alfred the Great, instrumental in consolidating territorial control and promoting a unified English identity amid Viking incursions. Formation of Anglo-Saxon PolitiesThe continental Saxons, unlike their insular counterparts, were embroiled in existential conflict with the Carolingian Empire. Charlemagne, driven by an imperial vision of Christian unity, launched protracted military campaigns—collectively known as the Saxon Wars—against these recalcitrant pagans beginning in 772 CE. The destruction of the Irminsul, a sacred Saxon cult object likely symbolizing a cosmic axis, epitomized the cultural violence underpinning these conquests. The Massacre of Verdun in 782, where approximately 4,500 Saxons were executed, marked the nadir of Carolingian efforts to eradicate resistance. Ultimately, by 804 CE, Charlemagne had succeeded in quelling overt opposition through forced deportations and administrative restructuring. Despite the loss of political autonomy, Saxon culture was not entirely obliterated. Instead, it underwent a gradual process of acculturation and diffusion within the wider Frankish milieu. The Saxons adhered to a polytheistic cosmology centered on deities such as Woden (Odin), with sacred rites performed in groves and centered around cosmic symbols like the Irminsul. Seasonal festivals such as Yule were intimately tied to their ritual calendar and would later become syncretized with Christian observances. The imposition of Christianity did not obliterate indigenous belief systems overnight; rather, it initiated a complex negotiation between orthodoxy and local custom. Vernacular theological developments, particularly under the patronage of rulers like Alfred the Great, promoted the use of Old English in liturgical and legal texts, thereby preserving elements of Saxon linguistic heritage. Historical clarity regarding the Saxons' early development remains elusive. Even medieval chroniclers, such as Widukind Corvey, acknowledged the fragmentary and often mythical nature of Saxon origin stories. His accounts, including allegorical tales of Saxons securing land through symbolic transactions with the Thuringii, function more as ideological myths than empirical history. These narratives, while lacking verifiability, reveal much about Saxon self-conception and their strategies of legitimation. It's not easy to trace the full history of the Saxons. Even writers in the Middle Ages admitted they weren't sure where the Saxons really came from. A monk named Widukind of Corvey wrote about them in the 900s but filled in the gaps with legends. One tale tells of Saxons arriving by ship and tricking the Thuringii by trading gold for a handful of dirt—then using that dirt to claim the land. These stories might not be completely true, but they show how proud the Saxons were of their culture. Whether in Britain or Europe, the Saxons made a lasting mark. In Britain, they built the early kingdoms that led to modern England. In Europe, even though they were defeated, their traditions influenced Germanic culture. Anglo-Saxon Clothing, 6-9th century CE The Saxons were a Germanic people of the region north of the Elbe River stretching from Holstein (in modern-day Germany) to the North Sea. The Saxons who migrated to Britain in the 5th and 6th centuries CE along with the Angles, Frisians, and Jutes came to be known as Anglo-Saxons to differentiate them from those on the continent. The region they came from was referred to as Saxony, and their name is thought to derive from a type of knife they commonly used, known as a seax. The continental Saxons came into conflict with the Franks and were absorbed by them under Charlemagne after the Saxon Wars (772-804), while those who migrated to Britain established the kingdoms of Kent, Wessex (West Saxons), Sussex (South Saxons), Essex (East Saxons), East Anglia, and Mercia, with Middlesex (Middle Saxons) emerging later as part of Essex. Collectively, these people came to be known as Anglo-Saxons even though their communities were initially comprised of Angles, Frisians, Jutes, and Saxons. The term Anglo-Saxon initially had nothing to do with ethnicity and everything to do with clarity; as noted, it only designated those who had emigrated from Germanic territories to Britain and seems to have come into use primarily after 1066. The Saxons were among the last European peoples to accept Christianity as they associated it with the Franks, their adversaries on the continent, but mainly because their belief system (Germanic paganism) was integral to their daily lives and social structure. Saxon adherence to pagan rites and traditions, even after their nominal conversion to Christianity in the 7th-9th centuries, influenced Christian observances just as the language contributed to the development of Old English in Britain. On the continent, Saxon traditions continued even after they were conquered by the Franks under Charlemagne. Anglo-Saxon kings, such as Alfred the Great (r. 871-899), encouraged literacy and the production of books in the English of that era until the Norman conquest of England in 1066 and the introduction of French as the language of the court, giving rise to Middle English which would eventually become modern English. On the continent, Saxon traditions continued even after they were conquered by the Franks under Charlemagne, influencing the development of Germanic culture and customs. In Britain, the Anglo-Saxon Period is dated to between 410-1066 – from the departure of the Romans to the Norman invasion – and on the continent from the 4th century to 804 (from their first mention in writing to their defeat in the Saxon Wars), but their legacy continued long afterwards and up through the modern era. Origins The Saxons are thought to have first been mentioned in the Geographia of Claudius Ptolemy (l. c. 100 to c. 170 CE), but it is possible he was referring to another people whose name was translated as Axones and later mistaken for Saxones because that name was better known. The most likely first mention of Saxones is in 356, referring to them as pirates along with the Franks, but no information is given on their origin. The Saxon chronicler Widukind of Corvey (l. c. 925-973), in his Deeds of the Saxons, writes: First, I will present a little bit of information about the origin and status of the people. In this section, I am relying solely on tradition because the passage of so much time has clouded any certainty. There is a great deal of disagreement about this matter. (Ch. 2) He then relates how the Saxons came from the Danes or from the Macedonian veterans from the army of Alexander the Great. All of these claims are rejected by modern scholarship. Widukind relates how they arrived at Hadelin (on the left bank of the lower Elbe River) by ship and came into conflict with the Thuringii living there. After several battles and many deaths, a treaty was concluded granting the Saxons freedom of trade in the region but prohibiting them from farming or establishing permanent settlements. Map of the Saxon Shore c. 380 CE Widukind pattern's his work on Greek and Roman histories and, in this section, either follows an earlier writer's lead or borrows freely from the tale of Queen Dido and the foundation of Carthage. He claims a Saxon youth, laden with gold, went to the Thuringii and said he would accept whatever they chose to give him for it. He was given a quantity of earth and returned to his ship. The Thuringii were delighted with the trade and thought the man who had made it quite clever, but the Saxon youth "took up the earth and spread it as thinly as possible over the nearby fields and then secured these places with fortified encampments" (Ch. 5). Since he had legally traded his gold for the earth, and the earth was now spread on the land, the land belonged to the Saxons and, when the Thuringii objected, the Saxons explained this and how they were within their rights to defend their property; and so the region of Saxony was established, and, according to Widukind, the Thuringii dramatically reversed their opinion on that gold-for-earth transaction. Culture & Religion How Saxony was actually founded or where the Saxons came from is unclear as the early Saxons left no written record. Widukind, writing much later, claims that, after the Saxons had established themselves, the Franks formed an alliance with them to defeat the Thuringii and then planned to turn on them. The Saxons heard of the plan, however, and slaughtered the Franks in a surprise attack. They then established the provinces that would become Angria, Eastphalia, and Westphalia of Saxony.

The Saxons seem to have practiced a form of Germanic paganism, which included veneration of a sacred pillar. Information on Saxon culture and religion is also unclear. Their religion had no written scripture or liturgy and everything that is known of their traditions comes from later Christian writers. They seem to have practiced a form of Germanic paganism, which included veneration of a sacred pillar known as the Irminsul, which may have symbolized the World Tree (famous from Norse religion). Their chief god was Woden (Odin), and their religious rituals centered on the Irminsul erected in a sacred grove or rituals observed in groves without the pillar. According to scholar Roger Collins, the Irminsul was "directly associated with military victory and conquest" and served to rally the Saxons for campaigns (281). Saxon social structure was informed by religion as a hierarchy with nobles at the top, then freemen, then the lower class and slaves, based on the belief in higher, middling, and lower deities. Saxon law prohibited marriage between classes, but all three were fully represented at council meetings and had a voice in legal decisions and legislation. Sacrifices were regularly made to the gods, and festivals were held annually on or around dates that were later Christianized – such as 25 December which was celebrated as Yule – and included the tradition of decorating trees and exchanging gifts. The Irminsul seems to have been understood to connect the underworld with the earth and on up to the heavens and so was honored as a symbol of the all-encompassing reach of the gods and their bond with humanity. Migration, Piracy & Invasion Narrative The Saxons, like many other peoples, were affected by the socio-political changes and population shifts of the so-called Age of Migration (or Migration Period) of the 4th-6th centuries. The Western Roman Empire was in decline during this period and formerly sedentary populations including the Alans, Alemanni, Goths, Huns, Slavs, and others clashed with each other and Roman communities as they tried to flee from invading forces, maintain cultural identity in a new land, and find secure regions with plentiful resources to establish communities. Migration Period in Europe During the 4th & 5th Century Many of these groups had earlier allied themselves with Rome, sending soldiers as mercenaries in the Roman army, and among them were the Saxons, some of whom had already migrated to the coast of Gaul. Other Saxons, by this time, had long been engaged in piracy, along with the Franks and Frisians, from bases along the coast of the North Sea. These pirates regularly raided the coasts of Gaul and Britannia. According to some scholars, forts were built by the Britons to defend against these attacks, but this claim has been challenged, and it seems the structures that have been interpreted as forts were more likely trade centers, which were probably targets of Saxon raids. Rome repeatedly sent forces against these pirates since Britain had been a Roman province since 43 CE and Roman interests needed to be protected. As the Roman Empire declined, it marshaled its resources closer to home, however, and did not have any surplus to send to Britain. The Gallo-Roman diplomat and poet Siodnius Apollinaris (l. c. 430 to c. 485) mentions the Saxon pirates and their raids on coastal towns and cities in his letters. Scholar H. R. Ellis Davidson comments: A letter of Siodnius deplors the cruel custom of Saxon pirates, who would offer one prisoner in ten to the god of the sea as a thank-offering for a successful voyage. He admits, however, that they feel pledged to make their offering as a fulfillment of a vow: "These men are bound by vows which have to be paid in victims. They regard it as a religious act to perpetuate their horrible slaughter. This polluting sacrifice is, in their eyes, an absolving sacrifice." (64) By 367, Frankish and Saxon coalitions had stepped up their raids, and attendant sacrifices, along the coast of Britain at the same time the Picts north of Hadrian's Wall began making more and more incursions into Roman Britain. Years before Siodnius was writing from Gaul, in 410, the Romans withdrew completely, and the Saxons began establishing permanent settlements in Britain by 429, but this does not seem to have stopped the raids of Saxon pirates on coastal ports. It may have been the actions of these pirates that led later medieval historians to craft their narrations of a Saxon invasion of Britain. The Saxon migration has been characterized as an invasion, owing to the works of the historians Gildas (l. 500-570), Bede (l. 672-735), and Nennius (l. 9th century), the latter two drawing on the work of the first. Gildas depicts the Saxons as savages who were invited to Britain by his kings to deal with the Picts after the Romans left and then turned on their hosts. The Saxons then ravaged the land until they were defeated by the hero Ambrosius Aurelianus at the Battle of Badon Hill c. 460. Bede develops Gildas' version of events, and Nennius adds the detail of King Vortigern's betrayal by the Saxons and their defeat by the war chief Arthur at Badon Hill, a figure who would later be developed as the legendary King Arthur of the Britons. Modern scholarship has challenged the narrative of a Saxon invasion as it seems increasingly certain that Saxons, Angles, Frisians, Jutes, and Britons lived together in Britannia and engaged in mutually beneficial trade. As noted, the "forts" which were earlier thought to have been built for defense against the Saxons were probably trade centers, and archaeological excavations have determined peaceful trade in the interior between the Saxons and others who seem to have lived side by side. According to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles, the Saxon chief Cerdic of Wessex, and his son Cyric, arrived in Britain in 495, defeated the Welsh and then the Briton forces, and founded the Kingdom of the West Saxons (Wessex). Cerdic is recognized as the first king of this region, and many later genealogies of the English monarchy claimed him as their ancestor. Modern scholarship, however, has challenged the traditional interpretation of Cerdic as Saxon chief, noting that his name is British and he was most likely a British earl who had taken refuge with the Saxons, learned their language, and returned in 495 to reclaim a lost kingdom. The interpretation of Cerdic as a leader, or the leader, of a Saxon invasion of Britain has been largely debunked. Sign up for our free weekly email newsletter! Whoever Cerdic was, however, he established one of the most vibrant Anglo-Saxon kingdoms in the land. The Anglo-Saxons had first landed at Kent and established themselves there before moving on to settle other areas with their own governments. In Wessex, only a man who was descended from Cerdic could claim kingship from the time of his son Cynric down through the reign of Alfred the Great. Alfred the Great Statue, Winchester Alfred defeated the Vikings, first at Edдингton in 878 and again at London in 886, and emerged as King of the Anglo-Saxons, governing all those regions not still held by the Danes. He unified his kingdom through his law code, upgrades to the infrastructure, trade agreements, and educational programs. His grandson, Aethelstan (r. 927-939), continued his policies as the first King of England, reigning over a diverse but unified people. The Saxon Wars On the continent, however, it was a different story as the Franks rose in power and the Saxons resisted efforts at assimilation. Charlemagne, as King of the Franks (r. 768-814), then King of the Franks and Lombards (r. 774-814), and finally as Holy Roman Emperor (r. 800-814), was not interested in diversity, only unity. Shortly after becoming King of the Franks, he launched a military campaign against the Saxons in 772 in an effort to eradicate Germanic paganism and Christianize Saxony. On the pretext that the Saxons had burned a church, Charlemagne invaded Westphalia and cut down the Irminsul there in an effort to break the Saxons' spirit. He then looted the shrine associated with the Irminsul and slaughtered any Saxons in his path as he marched away. The Saxon Wars raged, on and off, for over 30 years as Charlemagne claimed victories, which the Saxons refused to recognize. In 777, a Saxon war chief named Widukind negotiated with King Sigfried of Denmark to allow Saxon refugees into his kingdom, which Charlemagne interpreted as a challenge to his authority, and hostilities resumed. In 782, he ordered the execution of 4,500 Saxons (the Massacre of Verdun) to break their will and force them to abandon their traditions, accept Christianity, and submit to Frankish rule, but they continued to resist. Widukind disappears from the historical record after 785, and no other leader of note took his place. Charlemagne and the Carolingian Empire c. 814 In 798, Charlemagne halted all Saxon migration to Denmark and continued to pressure the people of Saxony to submit to his authority. When they continued to resist, he abandoned his usual policies and, in 804, had 10,000 Saxons deported to Neustria, replacing them in Saxony with Franks, and ending the Saxon Wars. The Saxons in Denmark, Neustria, and those left in Saxony then assimilated with the rest of the population. Conclusion Britain had become Christianized beginning in 597 with the arrival of St. Augustine of Canterbury and the conversion of the court at Kent, but Anglo-Saxon religious traditions, such as the observance of Yule, continued, as did folk beliefs, which were transmitted through stories that became folktales and legends, forming the basis for the development of English literature. The earliest European literary epic, Beowulf, is an Anglo-Saxon work as are other famous pieces of medieval literature such as Caedmon's Hymn. The literary tradition established by such works was later developed by writers including Geoffrey Chaucer and William Shakespeare. Anglo-Saxon contributions to culture range from contract and property law to trial by jury, the construction of houses, the development of weaponry and armor (famously evinced by the Sutton Hoo Ship Burial), and many others, but the term Anglo-Saxon has unfortunately been appropriated in the modern era by members of far-right organizations advocating white supremacy. It should be remembered that, by the time the Saxons enter the historical record, the Indus Valley Civilization and those of Mesopotamia and Egypt had already risen and fallen over a thousand years before. The legacy of the Saxons and Anglo-Saxons has and continues to exert a vital influence on world culture but should be understood in the context of global, not just European, history. Page 2

Vêtements anglo-saxons, VIe-IXe siècles Les Saxons étaient une peuplade germanique originaire de la région du nord de l'Elbe qui s'étend du Holstein (dans l'Allemagne actuelle) à la mer du Nord. Les Saxons ayant émigré en Bretagne au V^e et VI^e siècles en même temps que les Angles, les Frisons et les Jutes ont été baptisés Anglo-Saxons par les différencier de ceux qui étaient restés vivre sur le continent. Ils venaient d'une région appelée la Saxe, et l'on pense que leur gentilé découle du mot seax, terme désignant un type de couteau qu'ils utilisaient couramment. Les Saxons du continent entrèrent en conflit avec les Francs qui les absorbèrent sous Charlemagne après la guerre des Saxons (772-804), tandis que ceux qui émigrèrent en Bretagne fondèrent les royaumes du Kent, du Wessex (Saxons de l'Ouest), du Sussex (Saxons du Sud), de l'Essex (Saxons de l'Est), de l'Est-Anglie et de la Mercie, le Middlesex (Saxons du Milieu) étant plus tard rattaché à l'Essex. Collectivement, ces peuplades sont désignées par le terme d'Anglo-Saxons, même si leurs communautés étaient initialement composées d'Angles, de Frisons, de Jutes et de Saxons. Le terme d'Anglo-Saxon n'avait à l'origine rien à voir avec une quelconque appartenance ethnique, mais pour une raison de clarté, comme mentionné précédemment, il ne désignait que ceux qui avaient émigré des territoires germaniques vers l'île de Bretagne et semble avoir été utilisé principalement après 1066. Les Saxons furent parmi les derniers peuples européens à accepter le christianisme car ils s'associèrent aux Francs, leurs adversaires sur le continent, mais surtout parce que le système de croyances (le paganisme germanique) faisait partie intégrante de leur vie quotidienne et de leur structure sociale. L'adhésion des Saxons aux rites et traditions païennes, même après leur conversion officielle au christianisme aux VII^e et IX^e siècles, influença les pratiques chrétiennes, influença la langue et contribua au développement du vieil anglais en Grande-Bretagne. SUR LE CONTINENT, LES TRADITIONS SAXONNES SE SONT MAINTENUES MEME APRES LA CONQUÊTE PAR LES FRANCS DE CHARLEMAGNE. Les rois anglo-saxons, comme Alfred le Grand (r. de 871 à 899), encouragèrent l'alphabétisation et la production de livres dans la langue anglaise de l'époque, jusqu'à la conquête normande de l'Angleterre en 1066 et l'introduction du français comme langue de la cour, donnant naissance au moyen anglais, qui allait donner à son tour naissance à l'anglais moderne. Sur le continent, les traditions saxonnes se sont maintenues même après la conquête par les Francs de Charlemagne, influençant ainsi le développement de la culture et des coutumes germaniques. En Grande-Bretagne, la période anglo-saxonne s'étend de 410 à 1066 - du départ des Romains à l'invasion normande - et sur le continent, du IV^e siècle à l'an 804 (de leur première mention écrite à leur défaite lors de la guerre des Saxons), mais leur influence s'est poursuivie longtemps après et jusqu'à l'ère moderne. Les origines Les Saxons auraient été mentionnés pour la première fois dans la Géographie de Claude Ptolémée (de l'an 100 à l'an 170 de notre ère), mais il est possible qu'il ait fait référence à un autre peuple dont le nom fut traduit par Axones et qui fut ensuite confondu avec les Saxons parce que ce nom était plus connu. Les Saxons sont probablement mentionnés pour la première fois en 356, en tant que pirates au même titre que les Francs, mais aucune information n'est donnée quant à leur origine. Le chroniqueur saxon Widukind of Corvey (l. c. 925-973), dans son ouvrage intitulé "L'histoire des Saxons", écrit : Tout d'abord, je vais présenter quelques informations sur l'origine et le statut de ce peuple. Dans cette section, je m'appuie uniquement sur la tradition, car le passage du temps a rendu toute certitude impossible. Il y existe beaucoup de controverse à ce sujet. (Ch. 2) Il raconte ensuite que les Saxons sont issus des Danois ou des Grecs ou qu'ils étaient des vétérans macédoniens de l'armée d'Alexandre le Grand. Toutes ces affirmations sont rejetées par les chercheurs modernes. Widukind raconte leur arrivée par bateau à Hadelin (sur la rive gauche de l'Elbe inférieure) et leur conflit avec les Thuringiens qui l'occupaient. Après plusieurs batailles et de nombreux morts, un traité fut conclu, accordant aux Saxons la liberté de se livrer à des activités commerciales dans la région, mais leur interdisant de cultiver la terre ou d'établir des colonies permanentes. Widukind base son travail sur les histoires grecques et romaines et, dans cette section, soit il s'approprie d'un auteur antérieur, soit il emprunte librement à l'histoire de la reine Dido et de la fondation de Carthage. Il affirme qu'un jeune Saxon, chargé d'or, se rendit chez les Thuringiens et déclara qu'il accepterait tout ce qu'ils choisiraient de lui donner en échange. On lui remit une quantité de terre et il retourna à son navire. Les Thuringiens étaient ravis de l'échange et pensaient avoir roulé le jeune Saxon, mais celui-ci 'prit la terre et la répandit aussi finement que possible au-dessus des champs avoisinants, puis sécurisa ces endroits en y installant des campements fortifiés' (chap. 5). Puisqu'il avait légalement échangé son or contre de la terre, et que la terre était maintenant répandue sur le terrain, le terrain appartenait désormais aux Saxons et, lorsque les Thuringiens voulurent s'y opposer, les Saxons expliquèrent qu'ils avaient le droit de défendre leur propriété. C'est ainsi que fut créée la région de Saxe et, selon Widukind, les Thuringiens revinrent radicalement sur leur opinion concernant l'échange de l'or contre de la terre. Culture et religion On ne sait pas avec certitude comment la Saxe fut fondée ni d'où venaient les Saxons, car les premiers Saxons ne laisserent aucune trace écrite. Widukind, écrivain bien plus tard, affirme qu'après que les Saxons se fussent installés dans la région, ils formèrent une alliance avec les Francs dans le but de vaincre les Thuringiens, puis ayant eu vent du fait que les Francs avaient l'intention de se retourner contre eux, ils les massacrèrent au cours d'une attaque surprise. C'est alors qu'ils créèrent les provinces qui allaient devenir l'Angrie, l'Estphalie et la Westphalie de la vieille Saxe.

LES SAXONS SEMBLENT AVOIR PRATIQUE UNE FORME DE PAGANISME GERMANIQUE INCLUANT LA VÉNÉRATION D'UN PILLIER SACRÉ. Le peu d'informations disponibles sur la culture et la religion saxonnes n'apportent guère d'éclaircissements non plus. Leur religion n'avait pas d'écriture ou de liturgie écrite et tout ce que l'on sait de leurs traditions provient d'auteurs chrétiens postérieurs. Ils semblent avoir pratiqué une forme de paganisme germanique incluant la vénération d'un pilier sacré connu sous le nom d'Irminsul, qui pourrait avoir symbolisé l'Arbre du Monde (célébre dans la religion nordique). Leur dieu principal était Wotan (Odin) et leurs pratiques religieuses étaient centrées autour de l'Irminsul érigé dans un bosquet sacré ou autour de rituels pratiqués dans des bosquets dépourvus de pilier. Selon l'écrivain Roger Collins, Irminsul était 'directement associé à la victoire militaire et à la conquête' et servait à rallier les Saxons en vue de possibles campagnes guerrières (281). L'organisation sociale saxonne était structurée par la religion sous la forme d'une hiérarchie comprenant les nobles au sommet, les hommes libres, les classes inférieures et les esclaves, en fonction de la croyance en des divinités supérieures, moyennes et inférieures. La loi saxonne interdisait les mariages interclasses, mais les trois classes étaient pleinement représentées lors des réunions du conseil et avaient leur mot à dire dans les décisions juridiques et la mise en place de la législation. Des sacrifices étaient régulièrement offerts aux dieux et chaque année, des fêtes étaient organisées à des dates qui seront plus tard christianisées - comme le 25 décembre, alors célébré sous le nom de Yule - et incluaient la tradition de la décoration des arbres et de l'échange de cadeaux. L'Irminsul semble avoir été considéré comme reliant le monde souterrain à la terre et aux cieux. Il était donc honoré en tant que symbole de la portée universelle des dieux et de leur lien avec l'humanité. Migration, piraterie et le narratif d'invasion Les Saxons, comme beaucoup d'autres peuples, furent affectés par les changements sociopolitiques et les déplacements de population de ce que l'on appelle l'ère des migrations (ou période des migrations) du IV^e au VI^e siècle. Durant cette période, l'Empire romain d'Occident était en déclin et les populations autrefois sédentaires, telles que les Alains, les Alamans, les Goths, les Huns, les Slaves et les Vandales, entrèrent en conflit les uns avec les autres et avec les communautés romaines alors qu'ils tentaient de fuir les forces d'invasion, de maintenir leur identité culturelle dans un nouveau pays et de trouver des régions sûres dotées de ressources suffisantes pour y établir des communautés. Les migrations en Europe au cours des IV^e et V^e siècles Beaucoup de ces groupes, entre autres les Saxons, avaient auparavant été alliés avec Rome, fournissant des soldats en tant que mercenaires dans l'armée romaine. Certains d'entre eux avaient déjà migré vers la côte de la Gaule. A cette époque, d'autres Saxons se livraient depuis longtemps à la piraterie, avec les Francs et les Frisons, à partir de bases situées le long des côtes de la mer du Nord. Ces pirates attaquaient régulièrement les côtes de la Gaule et de l'île de Bretagne. Selon certains chercheurs, les Bretons avaient construit des forts pour se protéger de ces attaques, mais cette hypothèse a depuis été réfutée. En effet, il semble aujourd'hui que ces structures, interprétées de façon erronée comme des forts avant plus probablement été des centres de commerce, et, selon toute probabilité, la véritable cible des raids saxons. Rome envoya à plusieurs reprises des forces contre ces pirates, car la Bretagne était une province romaine depuis l'an 43 de notre ère et les intérêts romains devaient être protégés. Cependant, avec le déclin de leur empire, les Romains se virent contraints de regrouper leurs troupes plus près de chez eux et n'avaient absolument plus les moyens d'en renvoyer de nouvelles en Bretagne. Le diplomate et poète gallo-romain Sidoine Apollinaire (de 430 à 485 environ) mentionne dans ses lettres les pirates saxons et leurs raids sur les villes côtières.

L'écrivain H. R. Ellis Davidson commente: Une lettre de Sidoine déplore la coutume cruelle des pirates saxons, qui sacrifieraient un prisonnier sur dix au dieu de la mer en guise de remerciement pour une expédition réussie. Il admet cependant qu'il se sentent tenus de pratiquer leur offrande pour l'accomplissement d'un vœu : 'Ces hommes sont astreints par des vœux qui doivent être acquittés au prix d'un certain nombre de victimes. Ils considèrent leur horrible massacre comme un acte religieux. Ce sacrifice qui pollue leur âme est, à leurs yeux, un sacrifice qui les absout.' (64) En 367, les coalitions franques et saxonnes avaient intens