

The reasons for West Saxon dominance during the Old English period

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What was West Saxon?



- West Saxon was a dialect spoken in the southwest of England – in Wessex.
- Most surviving documents from the Anglo-Saxon period are written in the Wessex dialect.
- Textual sources include charters, royal genealogies, martyrologies, Cura Pastoralis, Anglo-Saxon chronicle, Orosius and medicinal recipes. (Crystal, D. 2005)
- The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. A year-by-year account of major events during the Anglo-Saxon period. Provides most information we have about the Anglo-Saxons. (BBC, 2011)

England during the Old English period

West Saxon.		Kentish.		Mercian.	
<i>hilpð</i>		<i>hilpð</i>		<i>helpeð</i>	(he) helps.
<i>leóht</i>		<i>leóht</i>		<i>léht</i>	light.
<i>dæd</i>		<i>déd</i>		<i>déd</i>	deed.
<i>hierde</i>		<i>hiorde</i>		<i>hiorde</i>	(shep-)herd.
<i>dæl</i>		<i>dél</i>		<i>dæ̅l</i>	deal.
<i>gylden</i>		<i>gelden</i>		<i>gylden</i>	golden.
<i>fielð</i>		<i>feld</i>		<i>fá̅lleð</i>	(he) falls.
<i>wierpð</i>		<i>wecorpð</i>		<i>wecorpð</i>	(he) throws.

- The Old English period had four different dialects that can be distinguished: Northumbrian, Mercian, Kentish and West Saxon. (Baugh, C.A. and Cable, T. 2002)
- The Vikings had invaded England from the east and quickly spread their territory.
- Wessex was the only territory left that had not been invaded by the vikings. (BBC, 2011)

King Alfred the Great (849-899)



- Became king of Wessex in 871. At that point the Danes had conquered most of Northumbria, Mercia and East Anglia.
- He was very motivated and interested in spreading the vernacular. Introduced a revival of religion and learning to get God's support against the (pagan) Danes. (Irvine, S. 2006)
- He even translated quite a few works himself.
- He managed to push back the Danes at the Battle of Edlington in 878 and then began to win back Danish territory.
- Alfred also forged close ties with other English peoples. This gave his successors the ability to unify England. (1066andallthat.com)

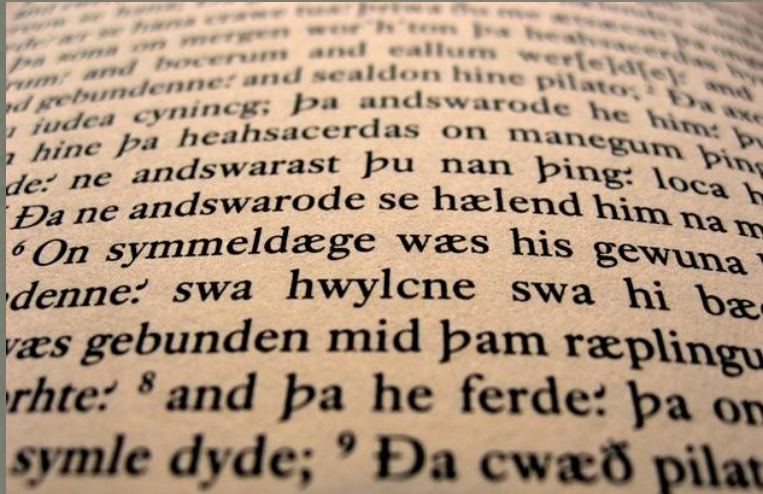
Early West Saxon (9th – 10th century)

- Most surviving prose texts from the period of Alfred's rule are mainly West Saxon.
- The texts from this period show a lot of inconsistency, dialect mixture and personal variations. (1066andallthat.com)
- The language of the government needed to be standardised to reduce the difficulty in administering the kingdom. West Saxon became this standard. (Crystal, D. 2005)
- Winchester in Wessex became the central point of power.
- West Saxon became associated with the court and intellectuals, which gave it an authority and prestige. (Irvine, S. 2006)

Late West Saxon (10th-11th century)

- At this point West Saxon had become more consistent than during its earlier stages. They consciously tried to standardise grammar, spelling and so on.
- West Saxon continued being prominent for a while. When the Normans conquered England the West Saxon standard gradually fell out of use, and English was viewed as the language of the commoners. (Baugh, C.A. and Cable, T. 2002)
- The center of power moved from Winchester to London and the dialect gradually disappeared from writing inbetween the 11th and 13th centuries.
(1066andallthat.com)

Conclusion / Summing up



- The reason why West Saxon became so dominant during the Old English period is due to king Alfred's perseverance and interest in spreading the language.
- Wessex was located in a convenient place as well– since they had not been invaded by the Danes yet.

* The English needed a common language to maintain their kingdoms and forge a sense of unity – West Saxon became the standard.

* The rise of West Saxon was cut short by the Norman invaders and ceased to be used.

References

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