**Social Structure of Anglo Saxon England**

The social system of the Anglo Saxons was sophisticated and more equitable in many ways than the Norman Feudal System which followed it.

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Saxon King and Advisors - [Wikimedia Commons](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Edward_der_Bekenner.jpg)

The social hierarchy developed by the Anglo Saxons provided a perfect solution to the two main needs of the time, an organized work force whose duties were clearly defined by their station and an army capable of taking to the field with a minimum of preparation.

Anglo Saxon Nobility

At the top of Saxon society were the Kings with the ruler of Wessex having precedence by long established tradition. Below the Kings were several Ealdormen who administered the various shires on behalf of the ruler. Ealdormen held immense power being responsible for administering justice within their lands and also raising and leading the Fryd, the militias formed from the locals in times of war. The title of Ealdormen was, like that of the King himself, originally not a hereditary one although by the later Saxon period it had become customary to concentrate power in the hands of a few families.

Next were the Thanes, the professional military in service to either the King or one of his Ealdormen. Those who served the King were accorded a higher status but any Thane could earn a place in the King’s household by virtue of his military service. The duties of the Thane were primarily to provide the kingdom with a solid foundation for the army. When not actively engaged in fighting it was the responsibility of the Thane to oversee the local infrastructure, military and civil. Thanes also held lands in their own right.

The Anglo Saxon Commoner

The most numerous class were the Ceorls who were the craftsmen and farmers. While some Ceorls were relatively prosperous land owners, the majority were little more than serfs. In addition to their agricultural obligations to their lord, service in the Fryd was also required. The Fryd was by no means a professional army and was usually poorly armed. Weapons and armor were expensive and beyond the reach of the common Saxon. At best he would be armed with a spear although some would wield the scythes, hammers and axes they used during their working day. It was possible for a Ceorl to attain the rank of Thane by acquiring 5 hides of lands. A hide was an area of land sufficient to feed an average family, roughly 120 acres depending on local conditions. If the rank of Thane could be sustained for three generations it became hereditary. For all ranks in Anglo Saxon society the service given was reciprocated by obligations on the part of the lord. All freemen had the right to attend the Moot (meeting) and have their voice heard.

Slavery

At the very bottom of the social order were the Bondsmen who were in effect slaves. The Bondsman had few rights under the law and could be punished or even killed without recourse. They were either prisoners captured during war, primarily Britons, or Saxons who had fallen on hard times and were forced to sell themselves or their dependents into slavery to escape their debts.

Wergild

The Saxon took his obligations seriously and the virtue of loyalty was highly regarded. There are many examples of Saxon warbands refusing to quit the field after their leader was slain and fighting on to the death. Killing or maiming a free Saxon carried the risk of starting a blood feud which might last for generations. This self destructive practice was eventually halted by the introduction of a system of compensation where the offender was required to pay a fixed sum based on the victim’s status and the extent of his injuries.

Each rank in society had a Wergild, or blood price, which was a sum paid to avoid a feud if a person was slain or injured. For a Ceorl the sum was 200 shillings while killing a Thane was a considerably more expensive 1,200 shillings. A tooth could be knocked out for as little as 8 shillings.

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