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**The Uses of the ‘Anglo-Saxon Past’
between Revolutions, Imperialism
and Racism**

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The past is commonly summoned in political speeches and projects. The medieval past has been used as the cradle of nation-states and ‘the West’. This article will address how the Anglo-Saxon past has been used, from the seventeenth century to contemporary discourse. It will discuss how the view(s) and use(s) of this past have changed significantly over time, to the point that its very name has recently been challenged. The main hypothesis of the article is that despite all the debates about early medieval society in Britain, there is still a great need to highlight the connection between the interpretation of this past and racial discourses. The study of such societies in a new light is crucial for rescuing the Middle Ages from its uses by the far right.

Keywords: Medieval History; Anglo-Saxon England; Uses of the Past.

**Os Usos do ‘Passado Anglo-Saxónico’ entre Revoluções,
Imperialismo e Racismo**

O passado é comumente evocado em discursos e projetos políticos. O passado medieval foi apresentado como o berço dos estado-nação e do “Ocidente”. Este artigo irá abordar como o passado anglo-saxão foi usado desde o século XVII até narrativas contemporâneas. Ele irá discutir como a(s) visão(ões) e uso(s) deste passado se transformou(aram) de forma significativa, chegando a ter o seu próprio nome questionado recentemente. A principal hipótese do artigo é que, apesar de toda a discussão sobre a sociedade alto-medieval na Britânia, ainda há uma grande necessidade de sublinhar a conexão deste passado com discursos raciais. O estudo destas sociedades sob novas luzes é crucial para o resgate da Idade Média das garras da extrema-direita.

Palavras-chave: História Medieval; Inglaterra Anglo-Saxônica; Usos do Passado.

The Uses of the ‘Anglo-Saxon Past’ between Revolutions, Imperialism and Racism

Renato Rodrigues Da Silva*

1. Introduction

The past is commonly summoned in political speeches and projects. Evoking history can produce a sense of continuity, belonging and identity¹. These can be felt both in large social groups (such as a ‘nation’) and small ones, even in the individual². The study and teaching of medieval societies have not been cut off from this general trend. Medieval societies have been seen as the origin, the starting point of nation-states or, when considered as a whole, the origin of the West³. Despite all the criticism this perspective has received it is not unusual to still find books that echo that idea in their titles –either as a marketing tool or as an idea that is truly argued for⁴. However, the 2010s had produced reflections on how such perspectives had been appropriated by the extreme-right⁵. One of the key points of such critiques is how new faces for old forms

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1 Peter Seixas, “PART III – Introduction”, in *Theorizing Historical Consciousness*, org. Peter Seixas (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 213-216.

2 Sara A. Levy, “Heritage, History, and Identity”, *Teachers College Record* 116, n.º 6 (2014): 1-17.

3 Patrick J. Geary, *The Myth of Nations: The Medieval Origins of Europe* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2002).

4 Paul Collins, *The Birth of the West: Rome, Germany, France, and the Creation of Europe in the Tenth Century* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2013); David Rollason, *Early Medieval Europe 300-1050: The Birth of Western Society* (London: Routledge, 2014).

5 Andrew B. R. Elliott, *Medievalism, Politics and Mass Media: Appropriating the Middle Ages in the Twenty-First Century*, Medievalism, Volume 10 (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2017); Amy Kaufman and Paul Sturtevant, *The Devil’s Historians: How Modern Extremists Abuse the Medieval Past* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020).

of racism have emerged from it⁶. For this reason, it is crucial to bring the debate about race into the discussion on medieval societies. In this article, the so called 'Anglo-Saxon past' (i.e., the region that is now England in the Early Middle Ages) will be the focus of this discussion.

Throughout this article, the term 'Anglo-Saxon' will be used as a form of referencing how this historical context was addressed and named either by historiography or by different groups of people in the past. When trying to understand the context from the perspective that is defended by the author, it will be named 'Early Medieval England', mainly because of the social-racial implication of the term, as the article intends to explore. This differentiation is a way of contextualizing the term in its own historicity through time, as well as of making a point about the need to address it in the current debate.

An article that discusses a topic as delicate as 'race' needs to be clear about the sense in which the word is used. Fortunately, the term can no longer be understood in a biological sense⁷. Despite the discredit of eugenics, racist research and thought still take place in our society, remaining a highly relevant topic⁸. So, although advances in the biological sciences have proven the inexistence of races, people are still placed into socially constructed 'boundaries'. In this sense, contemporary society has 'systematically racialized certain social groups and signified them as "different"⁹. This will be the sense in which 'race' is to be understood throughout this article. It is also very important to highlight that, as a socially constructed idea, 'race' need to be contextualized, and the current text seeks to do so across different centuries.

6 Mathew Gabrielle and Mary Rambaran-Olm, "The Middle Ages Have Been Misused by the Far Right. Here's Why It's so Important to Get Medieval History Right", *Time*, 21 November, 2019, <https://time.com/5734697/middle-ages-mistakes/>; Paulo Pachá, "Why the Brazilian Far Right Loves the European Middle Ages", *Pacific Standard*, accessed 13/04/2021, <https://psmag.com/ideas/why-the-brazilian-far-right-is-obsessed-with-the-crusades>.

7 Helen Young, *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature: Habits of Whiteness* (London: Routledge, 2015), 9.

8 Robert Wald Sussman, *The Myth of Race. The Troubling Persistence of an Unscientific Idea* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard Business School Press, 2016).

9 Kenan Malik, "The Mirror of Race: Postmodernism and the Celebration of Difference", in *In Defense of History: Marxism and the Post Modern Agenda*, org. Ellen Wood and John Bellamy Foster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1997), 116-117.

The article will take the following steps: in the first place, the text will address how the seventeenth-century England revolutionaries used the Anglo-Saxon past in order to establish and justify their political claims. The next step will be to understand how in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the meaning of being Anglo-Saxon was transformed, as the term came to refer to a racial identity. The following step will address how modern studies of the Early Medieval England past were born out of a Germanist identity, and how somehow this identity still prevails. The last part of the article will address how the extreme-right have been using the Early Medieval England past, as well as how the term itself became a controversial one.

2. The Seventeenth Century:

The ‘Anglo-Saxon Past’ as a Democratic Heritage

The identification of the English people with the Early Medieval England past with explicit political implications seems to start at least as early as the seventeenth century¹⁰. During the Long Parliament period (1640-1660), the English MP John Hare stated in a pamphlet:

We are a member of the Teutonick nation, and descended out of Germany, a descent so honourable and happy, if duly considered, as that the like could not have been fetched from any other part of Europe, nor scarce of the universe¹¹.

In the seventeenth century, the notion of the English people as being ethnically Anglo-Saxon had a specific political purpose. It was meant to create an opposition between the Anglo-Saxon lower classes and people, on the one hand, and the Norman nobility, on the other¹². This distinction would be an effect of the conquest of the Early Medi-

¹⁰ Nick Groom, *The Gothic: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

¹¹ C. 6 Gothic Whiggery Groom.

¹² Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas during the English Revolution* (London: Temple Smith, 1972), 163.

eval English kingdom(s) by the Duke of Normandy, William, the Conqueror in 1066; he is also known as William the Bastard by non-Norman contemporary sources¹³. This would be the first time England was united under a single king, who was of Norman origin; also, the people from the English nobility from 1066 onwards were believed to share this Norman origin. The social opposition between Norman nobility and the Anglo-Saxon lower classes was known as 'the Norman yoke'¹⁴. This contrast was also important during the seventeenth century on legal grounds, since there was a dispute between the common law (seen as Anglo-Saxon, ancestral, popular) and the Roman Law¹⁵. As the term 'Anglo-Saxon' evoked legitimacy through its embedded ancestry, it was appropriated in many different senses. Sir Edward Coke (1552-1634) argued that common law was not Anglo-Saxon, but older; it was a heritage of the ancient Britons that had survived Roman, Anglo-Saxon and Norman conquests¹⁶. The Magna Carta and constitutional liberties were seen as the confirmation that Norman nobility could not erase or dominate Anglo-Saxon traditions (common law included)¹⁷. This conception was also present in other social groups, not only among Parliament leaders (like Coke). During the troubled decade of the 1640s, revolutionary groups bolstered their arguments through Anglo-Saxon traditions as well. In this dispute, popular participation in law-making and systems of justice was perceived as a device inherited from the Anglo-Saxons¹⁸. And even that tradition was not read as a singular insular tradition, but as part of the ancient German tradition, which is referenced in John Hare's speech as 'Teutonic'¹⁹.

13 H. C. G. Matthew and B. Harrison, eds., "William I [known as William the Conqueror]"; in *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

14 Henry Noel Brailsford, *The Levellers and the English Revolution*, ed. Christopher Hill (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1961); Marjorie Chibnall, *The Debate on the Norman Conquest* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999).

15 Christopher Hill, "The Norman Yoke", in *Puritanism and Revolution: Studies in Interpretation of the English Revolution of the 17th Century* (London: Pimlico, 2001).

16 Christopher Hill, ed., *The Century of Revolution 1603-1714* (Walton-on-Thames: Nelson, 1981), 66.

17 Hill, *The Century of Revolution*, 175.

18 Hill, *The Century of Revolution*, 92.

19 Lisi Oliver, *The Beginnings of English Law* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 11.

During the seventeenth century, Early Medieval English traditions were appropriated to justify political projects. However, these traditions were not simply taken as a guide for turning the political clock back. 17th-century revolutionary groups such as the Levellers championed the so-called Anglo-Saxon political democracy²⁰. Anglo-Saxons were considered free people by these revolutionaries, and accessing their institutions was crucial to foster liberty. As Christopher Hill points out, ‘Men looked to the Bible for solutions to moral and economic problems, to the Anglo-Saxons for solutions to their political problems’²¹. Yet both religious and political dimensions converged in terms of understanding Englishmen and what was seen as their birth-right. Political participation and the right to Salvation were seen as elements inherited from their Anglo-Saxon ancestors, and it was an affront to deprive them of either²².

The Levellers’ blueprint for political democracy was radicalized by another revolutionary group. The True Levellers or Diggers (True Levellers was how they called themselves; Diggers was how other groups called them) defended that political democracy needed to walk hand in hand with economic democracy²³. Gerrard Winstanley (one of the main voices and one of the founders of the True Levellers) argued that it was necessary to go beyond Anglo-Saxon traditions, since the best laws England had produced were only ‘yokes and manacles tying one sort of people to another’²⁴. Winstanley’s criticism of Anglo-Saxon law went further: ‘All laws that are not grounded upon equity and reason, not giving a universal freedom to all but respecting persons, ought... to be cut off with the King’s head’²⁵.

20 Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down*, 140.

21 Hill, *The Century of Revolution 1603-1714*, 92.

22 Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down*, 158.

23 Andrew Bradstock, org., *Winstanley and the Diggers, 1649-1999* (Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 2000).

24 Gerrard Winstanley, *The Works of Gerrard Winstanley with an Appendix of Documents Relating to the Digger Movement*, org. George Holland Sabine (New York: Cornell University Press, 1941), 303, 390.

25 Winstanley, *The Works*, 390; Also in Gerrard Winstanley, *The Law of Freedom, and Other Writings*, org. Christopher Hill (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 37.

The emphasis on equity is crucial in this discussion, since Early Medieval English law considered people not as equals, but as different in nature. In this sense, the earliest law code (Æthelberht's, which only survives in a copy from later centuries) acknowledged the distinction in social status: *eorls*, *ceorls*, freemen, servants, slaves, women and children, etc.²⁶. The same offense to the law (for example, theft) would have different consequences and forms of compensation, depending on the person's status. In this sense, stealing for the Church involved heavier compensations (12-fold compensation) than stealing from a freeman (3-fold compensation)²⁷. Inequality was also explicit in the so-called Wergild or Wergeld. This institution literally means 'man-price', and established a compensation for the family of a murdered or injured person²⁸. The values were also different according to the person's status: noble families received higher compensation than peasants or freemen²⁹. In other words, different people literally had different values according to Early Medieval English law. Inequality was the rule.

Such explicit inequality was the reason why Winstanley's revolutionary proposal was not simply to go back to Anglo-Saxon times, 'not to revoke the Norman yoke only'³⁰. He meant to take society back to a state of equality, 'the pure law of righteousness before the Fall'³¹. In other words, Winstanley and the Levellers recognised the Early Medieval English past as a relevant point of origin for the people of England, one that held significant political relevance. The 'democratic' element of Anglo-Saxon society was questioned, deemed insufficient. The Anglo-Saxon past was not a goal to pursue. The Levellers' goal

26 Oliver, *The Beginnings of English Law*, 94-122.

27 Oliver, *The Beginnings of English Law*, 89, 99.

28 F. L. Attenborough, *The Laws of The Earliest English Kings* (Clark, NJ: The Lawbook Exchange, 2006); A. W. B. Simpson, "The Laws of Ethelberht", in *On the Laws and Customs of England – Essays in Honor of Samuel E. Thorne*, org. Morris Arnold, Thomas A. Green and Sally A. Scully (Chapell Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981), 3-17; Patrick Wormald, *The Making of English Law: King Alfred to the Twelfth Century, Vol. 1: Legislation and Its Limits* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2001).

29 Dorothy Whitelock and David Charles Douglas, orgs., *English Historical Documents. [...]* Vol. 1: *Antiquity to Early Medieval c. 500-1042* (London: Routledge, 1998), 53-58.

30 Winstanley, *The Works*, 292.

31 Winstanley, *The Works*, 259.

would be a return to real democracy: the world before the Fall. This is the reason why Christopher Hill argues that ‘Winstanley took over from the Levellers the traditional English revolutionary myth of the Norman Yoke’³².

The link with the Early Medieval English past seems to be ubiquitous throughout the seventeenth century, especially during the Revolution. In the examples offered in this section, it is noticeable that the past could be summoned as a guide to political action in the present, as well as establishing the legitimacy of political claims. However, it could also be seen as a potential step, but one that would need to be overcome in order to reach the furthest possible past: the times of the Garden of Eden. In both cases, however, the sense of belonging and identity brought by what was considered the Anglo-Saxon past was present. The main issue was the social division: being an ‘Anglo-Saxon’ meant being a commoner, or a subaltern. There is a substantial change in what it meant to be ‘Anglo-Saxon’ in the following centuries.

3. The Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries: Anglo-Saxonism and Race-Building

Knowledge about nature was transformed in the eighteenth century. The publication of *Systema Natura* in 1735 (written by Carl Linnaeus) changed the perspective of such knowledge, having a significant epistemological impact³³. The first edition of *System Natura* was a simple 11-page folio. However, the publication had many reissues and in each new issue, recently discovered organisms were gradually included³⁴. However, in the first issue, ‘man’ (*homo*) was already present, and it was divided into four different groups.

³² Winstanley, *The Law of Freedom*, 37.

³³ Carl Linnaeus, *Systema naturae per regna tria naturae: secundum classes, ordines, genera, species, cum characteribus, differentiis, synonymis, locis* (Stockholm: Laurentius Salvius, 1758).

³⁴ Camilla Hällgren and Gaby Weiner, “Out of the Shadow of Linnaeus: Acknowledging Their Existence and Seeking to Challenge, Racist Practices in Swedish Educational Settings” (European Conference on Educational Research, University of Geneva: Education-Line, 2006), <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/documents/157423.htm>.

The four groups were: *Homo Americanus*, *Homo Europæus*, *Homo Africanus*, *Homo Asiaticus*³⁵. Each group had their own defining traits. African people (*homo africanus*) were described as black, calm to the point of indifference or apathy, and negligent (*niger, phlegmatic, laxus*)³⁶. Asian people (*homo asiaticus*) were defined as sallow, stern, greedy and easily distracted (*luridus, ridigus, avarus, indumentis laxis*)³⁷. Native Americans (*Homo Americanus*) were defined as reddish, angry and stiff-minded (*rufus, cholericus, rectus*)³⁸. Europeans (*Homo Europæus*) were described as having fair skin, strong muscles, light-coloured eyes, golden and abundant hair and being very clever and inventive (*albus, torosus, oculis cæruleis, pilis flavescentibus prolixis, acutissimus, inventor*)³⁹.

Some scholars have argued that the idea of human grouping proposed by Linnaeus was not in itself essentialist⁴⁰. Nonetheless, the essentialist reading of Linnaeus' propositions prevailed and echoed through time, being frequently quoted on the formulation about human race(s)⁴¹. This reading stressed that humans are prone to certain behaviours, mindsets and historical developments, based on their bodily constitution. And such distinctions implied an obvious hierarchy, with white Europeans at the very top.

The notion of race was not a well-defined concept in the eighteenth century, especially when compared to the nineteenth century. 'Race' was still in the making, since it was entangled with a variety of medical and philosophical ideas that made it a more flexible category than it would be, later on. In other words, 'race' was still not seen as exclusively produced by what we nowadays call 'biology' (or 'bodily constitution', to use the term from the period)⁴². Nonetheless, the con-

35 Linnaeus, *Systema naturae*, 20–22.

36 Linnaeus, *Systema naturae*, 22.

37 Linnaeus, *Systema naturae*, 21.

38 Linnaeus, *Systema naturae*, 20.

39 Linnaeus, *Systema naturae*, 21.

40 Gunnar Broberg, *Carl Linnaeus* (Stockholm: Swedish Institute, 1992).

41 Hällgren and Weiner, "Out of the Shadow of Linnaeus".

42 Staffan Müller-Wille, "Linnaeus and the Four Corners of the World", in *The Cultural Poli-*

nection with a shared past was still a crucial part of the constitution of communities. This past and/or its connection with the present (either real or imagined) were seen as essential. This was even more true when the people were not based on the same territory of their ancestors.

In the 18th century, Western societies were looking for the medieval past to project their origins and to shape their identities. The best example of how this connection was perceived as an ethnic heritage is found outside Europe. During the creation of the United States' national symbols, the appeal to an 'Anglo-Saxon past' played its role. Thomas Jefferson (the third president of the United States) wanted replicas of Hengist and Horsa to be included in the great seal of the United States⁴³.

Hengist and Horsa were two legendary brothers who supposed to have led the Angles, Jutes and Saxon in their infiltration and conquest of Britain. It has been suggested that their names mean 'stallion' and 'horse', respectively⁴⁴. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle tells us that Hengist and Horsa were invited to Britain by Vortigern (a local war chief) to battle the Picts (Vortigern enemies); once in Britain, Hengist and Horsa asked for reinforcements back home, so they could conquer the island⁴⁵. The 'History of the Britons' (*Historia Brittonum*) tells us that Hengist and Horsa were 'sons of Guictglis, son of Guicta, son of Guechta, son of Vouden, son of Frealof, son of Fredulf, son of Finn, son of Foleguald, son of Geta'⁴⁶. Geta was described as the son of a god, but not the Christian God. He was 'the offspring of one of their idols, and whom, blinded by some demon, they worshipped according to the cus-

tics of Blood, 1500–1900, org. Kimberly Anne Coles *et al.* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2014), 193.

43 Geary, *The Myth of Nations*, 6.

44 J. P. Mallory, *In Search of the Indo-Europeans: Language, Archaeology and Myth* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994), 135.

45 James Ingram, *The Saxon Chronicle; with an English translation, and notes, critical and explanatory. To which are added chronological, topographical, and glossarial, with ... a short grammar of the Anglo-Saxon language* (London: Rare Books, 2012), 15-16.

46 Nennius Hibernicus and William Gunn, *The Historia Brittonum, from a Manuscript Lately Discovered in the Library of the Vatican Palace at Rome Edited in the 10 Century by Mark the Hermit...* Original, Notes and Illustrations by W. Gunn (Franklin Classics Trade Press, 2018), 18.

tom of the heathen'⁴⁷. Someone named Hengest is also mentioned in the Finnsburg Fragment (line 34) and in *Beowulf* (lines 1082 and 1091)⁴⁸. Bede's version of the story of Hengest and Horsa starts by saying that there were 'three very powerful Germanic people' (*tribus Germaniae populis fortioribus*), and that Hengest and Horsa were 'the sons of Wictgils, son of Wittu, son of Wecta, son of Woden, from whose stock the royal families of many kingdoms claimed their descent'⁴⁹.

Bede's text is one of the most influential in terms of historical interpretation⁵⁰. It is crucial, therefore, to highlight two aspects of his narrative. The first one is the connection of Early Medieval England with Germanic tribes in the continent. In this sense, a sense of German belonging and even an ethnic connection with the German populations is acknowledged in Bede's narrative; such an understanding has produced a long-lived impact⁵¹. The second crucial point is how the lineage connection to gods that were identified with paganism was not a major concern for the Christianized people at that time. In other words, Christianity did not erase German identity, not even when this meant acknowledging a connection to pagan gods associated with strength and virility⁵². By connecting the 'Anglo-Saxon past' with a Pan-Germanic identity, the Anglo-Saxons (and people that saw themselves as their descendants) were included in a larger group which, despite religious differences, shared a common bloodline.

The most important aspect of Thomas Jefferson's appeal to use Hengist and Horsa in the great seal (a national symbol of great importance) can be found in his justification. Hengist and Horsa are those

47 Hibernicus and Gunn, *The Historia Brittonum*, 18.

48 Howell D. Chickering, org., *Beowulf: A Dual-Language Edition* (New York: Anchor Books, 2006), 111, 113.

49 *Erant autem filii Uitgislī, cuius pater Uitta, cuius pater Uecta, cuius pater Uoden, de cuius stirpe multarum prouinciarum regium genus originem duxit.* Bede, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, org. Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 50-51.

50 George Hardin Brown, *A Companion to Bede* (Woodbridge and Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 2009); Scott DeGregorio, org., *The Cambridge Companion to Bede* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

51 Mallory, *In Search of the Indo-Europeans*.

52 Mallory, *In Search of the Indo-Europeans*.

‘from whom we claim the honor to being descended, and whose political principles and form of government we have assumed’⁵³. In other words, Jefferson was arguing for a continuity between the Anglo-Saxon past and the foundation of the United States. That continuity was based on lineage (biological ancestry), values, politics and forms of ruling. Jefferson studied Early Medieval English law, which produced his own understanding of English liberty⁵⁴. Jefferson believed that the Saxons ‘introduced into England an elective kingship, an annual assembly of tribal chiefs, [...] trial by jury, and the common law’⁵⁵. In other words, the idyllic Anglo-Saxon society, composed of independent farmers free of rents and entails was destroyed by the Norman Conquest and the introduction of feudalism into England, which also destroyed Saxon laws⁵⁶. Jefferson shared some understanding of the Early Medieval English world with the English revolutionaries of the seventeenth century, which endured his whole life⁵⁷.

The most important point for this article is how during the foundation of America it was clear that Americans were seen not only as descendants of the Anglo-Saxons, but the people who would fulfil Anglo-Saxon destiny. As Reginald Horsman argues, the colonists of the seventeenth and eighteenth century inherited the myth of the free Anglo-Saxon past⁵⁸. The revolutionaries of the eighteenth century renewed the interest in the myth as a form of breaking the ties with England, admiring the English (and therefore their own Englishness) while hating the British government⁵⁹. In other words, Americans believed themselves to be the most distinguished people to descend from Anglo-Saxons⁶⁰.

53 Geary, *The Myth of Nations*, 6-7.

54 Merrill D. Peterson, *Thomas Jefferson and the New Nation: A Biography* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1975), 63.

55 Peterson, *Thomas Jefferson*, 63.

56 Peterson, *Thomas Jefferson*, 63.

57 Peterson, *Thomas Jefferson*, 65.

58 Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 81.

59 Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny*, 81.

60 Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny*, 82.

There is a crucial element about being the most prodigal son of the Anglo-Saxons. It has already been suggested that Early Medieval English society produced a sense of being the 'New Israel', the land of the 'Chosen People'⁶¹. This interpretation has been developed, including interpreting the Britons (who occupied Britain before the Anglo-Saxons) and the Anglo-Saxons through the lens of the people of the Old and New Testament, respectively⁶². According to Rollason, the 'chosen' status of the Anglo-Saxon developed by Bede made them responsible for converting the continental Germanic population (seen as the Anglo-Saxon relatives), described in the book V, chapter 9 of his *Historia Ecclesiastica*⁶³. Bede's narrative has been identified as intentionally portraying an unrealistic vision of national identity that bore a sense of destiny, that would later on be appropriated 'as "a sort of ideological heaven" for later notions of unity and supremacy'⁶⁴.

The notion of being the 'chosen people' or the 'New Israel' was not unique to Early Medieval England. This notion was shared by Franks in Gaul, by Visigoths in Spain, among others; however, it has recently been argued that the identity of these medieval groups as the 'chosen people' could be a historiographical myth⁶⁵. However, Americans saw themselves as descendants of the 'chosen people' (Anglo-Saxons), and other societies had similar claims.

The newly-founded Republic in America was seen as the great protector of man's natural rights, a key element to ensure that the pursue of happiness was possible⁶⁶. The idea that Americans should expand as much as possible, as a way of extending those rights and fulfilling

61 Andrew Scheil, *The Footsteps of Israel: Understanding Jews in Anglo-Saxon England* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004).

62 A. H. Merrills, *History and Geography in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 281.

63 David Rollason, *Bede and Germany: Jarrow Lecture 2001* (Jarrow: St Paul's Parish Church, 2001).

64 Windy A. McKinney, "Creating a 'Gens Anglorum': Social and Ethnic Identity in Anglo-Saxon England through the Lens of Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*" (York: University of York, 2011), 11; Alfred P. Smyth, "The Emergence of English Identity, 700–1000", in *Medieval Europeans*, ed. Alfred P. Smyth (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1998), 41.

65 Conor O'Brien, "Chosen Peoples and New Israels in the Early Medieval West", *Speculum* 95, n.º 4 (2020): 987–1009.

66 Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny*, 85.

their chosen destiny was the common sense right after the Revolution⁶⁷. The major difference from other ‘chosen people’ was that American society flourished according to their ideal of progress, and their expansion in all directions was taken as a sign of the fulfilment of Divine Providence⁶⁸. In this sense, just as the Anglo-Saxons had conquered and spread throughout Britain and then taken Christianity to their German ‘cousins’, now it was time for America to do the same in the New World. Exceptionality, expansion, being God’s chosen and destiny was intertwined in American practice after the Revolution, echoing the reading of an Anglo-Saxon past, considered their own ancestors.

The use of an ‘Anglo-Saxon past’ in America was also a form of distinguishing themselves from other European identities, and also other forms of whiteness(es). In this sense, reclaiming Anglo-Saxon ascendancy for oneself was a way for distinguish themselves from those that have immigrated from Scotland, Ireland and Wales⁶⁹. Around 1815, the enmity between the United States and England had diluted, and ‘Anglo-Saxon connection’ between English and American people was strengthened; this proximity was one of the components of the transformation of ‘Anglo-Saxon’ into a racialized term, taking the biological element beyond national borders⁷⁰.

There were two main influences responsible for producing the change in the use of ‘Anglo-Saxon past’, from an approach based on institutions to one based on race. The first one was the Germanic influence on philology, which connected language and race⁷¹. The second was the emergence of ‘ethnology’, which gave Anglo-Saxonism a ‘racial cast’, in the words of Horsman⁷². Through body measurements and ‘physical analysis’, ‘Anglo-Saxons’ were seen as stretching back from their Indo-European origin to the making of a superior race (in the pre-

67 Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny*, 85.

68 Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny*, 85.

69 Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny*, 93.

70 Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny*, 94–95.

71 Reginald Horsman, “Origins of Racial Anglo-Saxonism in Great Britain before 1850”, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 37, n.º 3 (1976): 395.

72 Horsman, “Origins of Racial Anglo-Saxonism”, 395.

sent)⁷³. The belief in a superior race was not limited to Britain; rather, racial Anglo-Saxonism was a branch of the racial Germanist belief. Before going further on the topic, it is necessary to take a step back and discuss the meaning of racial thinking.

The attempt to identify specific and clear-cut distinctions between human groups recurred throughout the 18th century⁷⁴. In this sense, Linnaeus was not alone. However, no consensus was reached on the concept of races or on how many races existed⁷⁵. For Linnaeus, describing eyes, skull (shape and size), skin colour and what he identified as 'common behaviour traits' was crucial⁷⁶. However, as Helen Young puts out, skin colour as a fundamental trait for racial definition emerged in 1795⁷⁷. According to Helen Young (following on Hannah Augstein ideas about race), it is possible to see three main elements in racial-thinking in the nineteenth century: 1) racial features are fixed and cannot be changed by external influence; 2) different races have different intellectual and moral capacities; 3) mental traits are expressed in the shape of the face (physiognomy) and can be revealed through a systematic study of it⁷⁸. Race was therefore expressed and determined by blood(line), skin colour and language – although the focus fell more on the use of language than on the language spoken in itself⁷⁹. The chosen criteria, defined by white Europeans, proved that there was a hierarchy of races, and that the white European race was on its summit⁸⁰. And, among the whites, English-speaking nations would be at the top, based on the idea that their nations were great because of the racial traits inherited from Anglo-Saxons⁸¹.

73 Horsman, "Origins of Racial Anglo-Saxonism", 396.

74 Justin E. H. Smith, "'Curious Kinks of the Human Mind': Cognition, Natural History, and the Concept of Race", *Perspectives on Science* 20, n.º 4: 504-529.

75 Young, *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature*, 7.

76 Linnaeus, *Systema naturae*, 20-22.

77 Young, *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature*, 7.

78 Hannah Franziska Augstein, org., *Race: The Origins of an Idea, 1760-1850* (Bristol: Thoemmes Pr, 1996), x; Young, *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature*, 7.

79 Young, *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature*, 7.

80 Young, *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature*, 9-10.

81 Will Kaufman and Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson, orgs., *Britain and the Americas: Culture, Politics, and History: A Multidisciplinary Encyclopaedia* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2005), 90-91.

Racial discussion in the nineteenth century was also connected to both nationalism and debates on national identity⁸². The so-called race sciences operated throughout Europe in the nineteenth century, and it has recently been argued that national identities and discourses were shaped within the framework of these sciences (and not the other way around)⁸³. The nineteenth century was also a stage of global imperialism, in which European nations conquered and shared the globe⁸⁴. In other words, the birth of the nation-state in Europe and North America cannot be thought without taking into consideration racial-thinking and its embedded racism. The ‘nation’ in the ‘nation-state’ was not the whole population, but those who were white.

In this context, Anglo-Saxonism had political and practical consequences. One of the direct consequences was that the ‘Anglo-Saxon past’ was now used to justify imperialist and expansionist projects⁸⁵. In the English context, it was used to justify the conquest and occupation of Ireland⁸⁶. In the United States, it was a form of opposition to, and justification of, the enslavement of the black population and the war on the indigenous societies⁸⁷. It was a declaration of whiteness, a justification for racial inequality and the conquest of the West; it was not only a part of Manifest Destiny, but a backbone to the implied ‘White’ in that Destiny.

The capture of the Early Medieval English past was a very important page in the history of 19th century imperialism, as well as the

82 Richard McMahon, org., *National Races: Transnational Power Struggles in the Sciences and Politics of Human Diversity, 1840-1945* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2019).

83 Richard McMahon, *The Races of Europe: Construction of National Identities in the Social Sciences, 1839-1939* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

84 Winfried Baumgart, *Imperialism: The Idea and Reality of British and French Colonial Expansion, 1880-1914* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982); Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Age of Empire: 1875-1914* (New York: Vintage, 1989); P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins, “IX Gentlemanly Capitalism and British Expansion Overseas II: New Imperialism 1850–1945”, *South African Journal of Economic History* 7, n.º 1: 182-215; Carl Cavanagh Hodge, org., *Encyclopedia of the Age of Imperialism, 1800-1914 Set* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood, 2007).

85 Jr L. P. Curtis, *Anglo-Saxons and Celts, A Study of Anti-Irish Prejudice in Victorian England* (The Conference on British Studies, 1968).

86 Peter Fryer, *Aspects of British Black History* (London: Index Books, 2007), 30.

87 Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny*, 94.

making of nations (both internally and while expanding their dominance) and whiteness. In both cases, the study of Anglo-Saxonism is crucial to understand racial relations, both in the past and their echoes in the present.

4. 20th Century: Early Medieval England Scholarship between Liberalism, Germanism and Whiteness

The turn to the twentieth century did not produce radical changes overnight. Scholarly knowledge of history continued to develop based on the ideas proposed by the nineteenth century, carrying some of the themes and perspectives of the old century into the new one. One discussion that continued was related to the question of race, especially considering the specificities of white European men. One of the ideas proposed was Pan-Germanism.

Pan-Germanism emerged in the European continent as a form of unifying all people considered German (or who spoke a variation of any Germanic language), under a nation-state⁸⁸. This state would be known as Great Germany, or *Großdeutschland*⁸⁹. This idea was particularly influent in Germany's unification process, but also in the Austro-Hungarian Empire⁹⁰. In this context, many pan-Germanic thinkers formed the Pan-German League, which was openly eugenic, racist and imperialist (defending the German right to expansion) and were crucial in the formation of the Nazi ideology and the start of World War II⁹¹. The justification for the unity of all German people was found in a text attributed to Tacitus (c. 56-c. 117), called *Germania*.

The Germans described by Tacitus were perceived as lovers of liberty, virile, war-oriented and endogamic –and, therefore, racially pure.

88 Tim Kirk, *Nazism and the Working Class in Austria: Industrial Unrest and Political Dissent in the "National Community"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

89 Kirk, *Nazism and the Working Class in Austria*.

90 Kirk, Tim Kirk, *Nazism and the Working Class in Austria*, 20-22.

91 Hajo Holborn, "Origins and Political Character of Nazi Ideology", *Political Science Quarterly* 79, n.º 4: 542; Bernard Mees, *The Science of the Swastika* (Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 2008).

Besides that, one element that was highlighted in Tacitus's description of *Germania* that was enormously influential in continental (Pan-)Germanism was the notion of a social division understood as harmonic. In other words, society was divided mainly in a two-tier set: a warrior aristocracy as the elite (from which national and social leadership would emerge) and a peasant mass that could be united through a sense of patriotism⁹². This harmonic class division became a hegemonic topic on racial-national discussions of Pan-Germanism in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth⁹³. It has also already been suggested that the German bourgeoisie was dependent on the *junker* (i.e. land-owning aristocracy) authoritarianism, and so it was also dependent on the ideology built by them⁹⁴.

England also took part in the discussion about Germanism, although with its own differences and nuances. In 1870, the *Forster's Education Act* established teaching parameters for children in England and Wales, from age 5 to 12⁹⁵. Three authors had great success, following the parameters laid out in this Act. Those were Macaulay's *History of England* (published between 1855 and 1861); Stubbs' *Constitutional History of England* and *Student's History of England*; and the most widely read one, J. R. Green *Short History of the English People*⁹⁶. All three had a common starting point: English history began with the introduction of three German peoples in the island: Jutes, Anglo and Saxons, echoing the words of Bede⁹⁷. In other words, this was a process that helped build the hegemonic historiography of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth. From this perspective, Britain was not properly Romanised, and as Jutes, Anglo and Saxons conquered the island they formed a homogenic society. Consequently, this historiography produced – explicitly

92 George L. Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology: Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich* (New York: Howard Fertig Pub, 1998).

93 Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology*.

94 Georg Lukacs, *Goethe and His Age* (London: The Merlin Press, 1968), 9-10.

95 Nigel Middleton, "The Education Act of 1870 as the Start of the Modern Concept of the Child", *British Journal of Educational Studies* 18, n.º 2 (1970): 166-179.

96 David Cannadine, "British History as a 'New Subject' – Politics, Perspectives and Prospects", in *Uniting the Kingdom?: The Making of British History*, org. Alexander Grant and K. J. Stringer (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 14-15.

97 Cannadine, "British History as a 'New Subject'".

or implicitly, intentionally or not – an idea of racial purity⁹⁸. The idea of an English nation, an English language and an Anglo-Saxon race was built by philologists, and Anglo-Saxon England was seen as the merging of these elements into one single race⁹⁹. As argued above, this idea also found an echo in the United States and Australia.

The scholarly discussion about the social structure of Early Medieval England has another built-in topic: how 'Germanic' (in the sense of *Tacitesque*) was Anglo-Saxon England. Maitland and Pollock argued that German common law prevailed in the Anglo-Saxon period and that the traits of Roman Law only came together in the eleventh century, the social structure being more fluid until then¹⁰⁰. For Chadwick, social structure was rigid from the seventh century on, with a nobility that held clear privileges, right and duties¹⁰¹. The most influent name on this discussion, however, was Stenton.

The great work of synthesis of the early twentieth century was Frank Stenton's *Anglo-Saxon England*¹⁰². In this book, Stenton sustained the narrative of the German origin of the Anglo-Saxons, despite mentioning the presence (and influence) of Celtic elements. Most importantly for this article is the social structure presented on his book, especially the 'early English society' (i.e., pre-Viking). For Stenton, the most important actor in Early Medieval England is the free peasant (*ceorl*), both quantitatively and in terms of social structure¹⁰³. The main characteristics of this peasant would be his direct connection to the king and the possession of a *hide*, a unit of land. The property of the land was familiar, but individual and private; productive lands were occupied and developed by 'individual enterprise'¹⁰⁴.

98 Hugh A. MacDougall, *Racial Myth in English History: Trojans, Teutons, and Anglo-Saxons* (Montreal: Harvest House, 1982).

99 Young, *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature*, 16.

100 Frederick Pollock and Frederic William Maitland, *The History of English Law before the Time of Edward I* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2010), 25-26, 33-39.

101 H. Munro Chadwick, *Studies on Anglo-Saxon Institutions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 103-114, 153-170.

102 Frank M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

103 Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 277.

104 Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 286, 238.

The work of Stenton must be contextualized. *Anglo-Saxon England* was published for the first time in 1943, during World War II. It took Stenton several years to conclude it, with many drafts and revisions along the way. At the time, he was teaching at Reading, and most likely knew about the Germanist readings proposed by the Nazi in the continent¹⁰⁵. In other words, Stenton narrative follows in the footsteps of his predecessors (mostly Maitland), but also upholds a different sense of Germanism, fashioning a liberal version of it – in the sense of the small, individual enterprise being the foundational stone of history. It was significantly different from the continental version of Germanism, which was mostly racial.

Not many works of synthesis about the peasantry have been produced. Those that have tried to expand on the topic have developed the question and made it more complex¹⁰⁶. Questions generally thought of as being more ‘subjective’ have been recently addressed¹⁰⁷. Nonetheless, the discussion about the status of the ‘common man’ in Early Medieval England (either the free peasant or the one that served under the direct authority of a lord) is still essentially grounded on the reflections of Maitland and Stenton¹⁰⁸. In other words, there are still Germanist echoes in terms of defining Anglo-Saxon social structure.

The Germanist approach has a built-in element that until recently was not evoked or widely discussed. If the Middle Ages in certain regions were more Germanic, it meant that they were also white. People who historically analyse race as an ideology have pointed out that race was not a significant question for the Middle Ages, at least not before the twelfth century¹⁰⁹. However, it mattered for the historiography pro-

105 Kirk, *Nazism and the Working Class in Austria*.

106 Rosamond Faith, *The English Peasantry and the Growth of Lordship* (London: Leicester University Press, 1999); Chris Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages: Europe and the Mediterranean 400-800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Debby Banham and Rosamond Faith, *Anglo-Saxon Farms and Farming* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

107 Rosamond Faith, *The Moral Economy of the Countryside: Anglo-Saxon to Anglo-Norman England* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

108 Sometimes also alongside Vinogradov and Douglas. See Faith, *The Moral Economy of the Countryside*, 15, n. 1.

109 Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), xxxi; Matthew X Vernon, *The Black Middle Ages Race and the Construction of the Middle Ages* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 18-28.

duced in nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, especially since it was portrayed as the cradle for both 'the West' and 'whiteness'¹¹⁰. In this sense, a quick reflection about whiteness is required.

One impressive trick played by whiteness is how invisible it became¹¹¹. As Assad Haider points out, 'race' is a concept that has been thoroughly used to describe 'Others'¹¹². In this sense, race studies were perceived as a form of understanding the black population, Indigenous and First-Nation communities, Asian nations etc. This implies that those are the 'different', while the 'universal', 'neutral' and 'primordial' standard for race is 'white'¹¹³. One of the consequences is that scholarship was placed in a comfort zone, which implied that only those interested in topics like 'ethnicity' and 'identity' in frontier zones (like the Mediterranean or the East) or conflicts (like the Crusades) had to address these topics. In other words, by not addressing the (implied) question of race in the historiography, whiteness was (as usual) taken for granted, and seen as the norm for medieval society, without question or complexity. However, recent historical developments have shown how crucial it is to address this issue, both in scholarship and in public debate and politics. This is the subject of the next section.

5. The Twenty-First Century: Anglo-Saxonism between the Far-Right and the Deconstruction

The past is often mobilized in times of crisis as a way to find perspectives and possibilities, looking for what the field of experience can offer¹¹⁴. In his book about how the Middle Ages were used as a myth for nation-making, Patrick Geary highlights how 'Today, politicians of hate can ignite enthusiasm by raising the spectre of an America where

110 Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010).

111 Steve Garner, *Whiteness: An Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 34.

112 Assad Haider, *Mistaken Identity: Race and Class in the Age of Trump* (London and Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2018), 44.

113 Haider, *Mistaken Identity*, 44-45.

114 Reinhardt Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

English is not the only official language'¹¹⁵. It is crucial to underline that the first issue of this book was published in 2002, and that 2002 is the 'today' meant by the text. Unfortunately, Geary's reflections on racial belonging, language and hate politics remain relevant after almost twenty years.

During the 2012 presidential campaign, a foreign policy advisor of the Republican candidate Mitt Romney stated that 'We are part of an Anglo-Saxon heritage [...] The White House didn't fully appreciate the shared history we have'¹¹⁶. The subtext of the message was that the then president's (Barack Obama) race and partial African heritage made him different from the majority of America (or more specifically, the 'true' Americans). In August 2017, a pagan group named 'Odinist Fellowship' demanded two churches as compensation for a 'spiritual genocide' that started in the seventh century¹¹⁷. When Henry Bolton was elected the leader of UKIP (the main political party to champion Brexit), he stated that 'we mustn't let Anglo-Saxon British culture die', since 'in certain communities the indigenous Anglo-Saxon population is nowhere to be seen'¹¹⁸. Just like in the case of Obama, the subtext meant that the problem was non-whiteness (and immigration).

The uses of history that these people make are not limited to words, especially if one considers the far right. The uses of the past also translate into deeds. In 2017, a double murder happened in Portland, Oregon; the murderer was very vocal on the local alt-right community, and quite proud of what he identified as his Viking heritage¹¹⁹. The

115 Geary, *The Myth of Nations*, 7.

116 Max Fisher, "Sorry, Romney: Neither America Nor the U.K. Are 'Anglo-Saxon' Countries", *The Atlantic*, 25/07/2012, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/07/sorry-romney-neither-america-nor-the-uk-are-anglo-saxon-countries/260309/>.

117 Olivia Rudgard, "Pagans Demand Return of Church Buildings 'stolen' 1,300 Years Ago", *The Telegraph*, 27/08/2017, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/08/27/pagans-demand-return-church-buildings-stolen-1300-years-ago/>.

118 "New UKIP Leader Henry Bolton Says 'We Mustn't Let Anglo-Saxon British Culture Die'", [accessed 28/12/2020], <https://talkradio.co.uk/news/new-ukip-leader-henry-bolton-says-we-mustnt-let-anglo-saxon-british-culture-die-17100419330>.

119 Jason Wilson, "Suspect in Portland Double Murder Posted White Supremacist Material Online", *The Guardian*, 28/05/2017 [accessed 29/12/2019] <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/may/27/portland-double-murder-white-supremacist-muslim-hate-speech>.

most known expression of how the so-called alt-right has weaponized the past was the demonstration at Lee Park, Charlottesville, in August 2017. The demonstration named 'Unite the Right' was called to protest against the removal of a statue of the Confederate General Robert Lee from a public park. Among the participants, many slogans were sung and flags were waived, expressing sounds and images that evoked the Confederacy, Nazi German, Ku Klux Klan and many mediaevalsque crosses and runes¹²⁰. The symbols inspired by medieval heraldry had crosses that were seen as Celtic, runes that were seen as Germanic (either Anglo-Saxon or Viking) and shields with red crosses with the *Deus Vult* inscription, emulating crusaders¹²¹. There were so many symbols appealing to 'medieval' heraldry, Nazi iconography and other far right symbols (or symbols that were appropriated by the far right) that a critical index was produced as way of fact-checking it¹²². Not few of those symbols can be connected to White Supremacy groups.

The alt-right and the far right (if there is a fundamental difference between these two groups) feeds on the rhetoric of the 'clash of civilizations'¹²³. This idea claims that the West has a unique civilization, and that because of the difference in perspectives and social practices, civilisations will collide and struggle; the West, however, needs to be extremely careful to preserve its uniqueness¹²⁴. Such claims were reinvigorated after 9/11, especially after President Bush's immediate responses using terms like 'crusade' on his speech to address what would be later known as the War on Terror¹²⁵. However, in such speeches 'Medieval' was portrayed as the opposite of 'Modernity', as part of an

120 Becky Little, "How Hate Groups Are Hijacking Medieval Symbols While Ignoring the Facts Behind Them", *HISTORY* [accessed 29/12/2020], <https://www.history.com/news/how-hate-groups-are-hijacking-medieval-symbols-while-ignoring-the-facts-behind-them>.

121 Becky Little, "How Hate Groups".

122 "Flags and Other Symbols Used by Far-Right Groups in Charlottesville", *Southern Poverty Law Center* [accessed 28/12/2020], <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2017/08/12/flags-and-other-symbols-used-far-right-groups-charlottesville>.

123 Zbigniew Brzezinski and Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011).

124 Brzezinski and Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*.

125 Bruce Holsinger, *Neomedievalism, Neoconservatism, and the War on Terror* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2007).

Orientalist framework within which the non-West is seen as regressive and obsolete¹²⁶.

The shift to the Middle Ages as the origin point of the West and the White (and superior) Race was fundamental for the birth of the so-called alt-right. The main soil from which this phenomenon sprouted was the complex ecosystem that was their social media networks and platforms¹²⁷. In their celebration of what they saw as their ‘heritage’, the rhetoric was filled with themes like the crusades, Germanism and, of course, Anglo-Saxonism. The latter was particularly important, since it was the way through which the United States alt-right could reclaim their medieval past: through racial belonging and whiteness. Anglo-Saxonism is one of the cornerstones of the American far right.

The public discussion about these themes has not been disconnected from scholarly debates. Recently, the term Anglo-Saxon as a way to refer to England in the High Middle Ages has been called into question¹²⁸. One of the main points is that the term ‘Anglo-Saxon’ was not often used by the ‘Anglo-Saxon’ people; its use was more localized in the eighth and ninth centuries, and even then it was not the most common label¹²⁹. In the vernacular, it has been argued that it has been used a mere three times: in the poem *Aldhelm*; a translation of a Bull by Pope Sergius, originally in Latin; and one charter (S566). In Latin it is also not used often; most of its uses are from people outside Britain to distinguish between Saxons in the Continent and those in Britain¹³⁰. If there is no connection with historical sources, why was the term created? As it has been argued, ‘Anglo-Saxon’ was not simply used by nineteenth-century scholars that happened to be racists; it was a term

126 Andrew B. R. Elliott, “Internet Medievalism and the White Middle Ages”, *History Compass* 16, n.º 3.

127 Elliott, “Internet Medievalism”.

128 Mary Rambaran-Olm, “Misnaming the Medieval: Rejecting ‘Anglo-Saxon’ Studies”, *History Workshop*, <https://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/misnaming-the-medieval-rejecting-anglo-saxon-studies/>.

129 Susan Reynolds, “What Do We Mean by ‘Anglo-Saxon’ and ‘Anglo-Saxons’?”, *The Journal of British Studies* 24, n.º 4 (1985): 398.

130 Reynolds, 398.

built for racism, imperialism and colonialism¹³¹. In other words, what was discussed and presented in the earlier sections of this article are not things left in the past, but ideas that still echo in the present.

In September 2019, Mary Rambaran-Olm, the second president of the (then called) International Society of Anglo-Saxonists (ISAS) resigned from her post in an academic conference, stating that the group had serious problems with racism, sexism and ties to white supremacy¹³². One of the problems was that the association was deeply defensive when it came to changing its name, despite all the denounced ties between the term 'Anglo-Saxon' and white supremacy. Later on, the group changed its name to 'International Society for the Study of Early Medieval England', and the pressure of the public since might have been the push it needed for this change. Yet, some scholars have defended that the term should be kept, in spite of its racist history and its capture by supremacists, inasmuch as it is the already established nomenclature¹³³. The argument is based on how modern scholarship uses the term to frame matters of chronology, not racial homogeneity¹³⁴. Another important point is that 'early medieval England' (as the association has proposed) or any other variation do not erase the immediate association with a national identity. Actually, 'early medieval England' might produce a strong sense of continuity between the High Middle Ages and the country that is now called England. Also, changing names would not guarantee that the far right would not simply use the next chosen name. In this sense, the content of the teaching and researching of this context is not automatically disconnected from whiteness as a social relation.

Whiteness is described by Steve Garner as often invisible, because it is seen as a norm, 'standard'; its composing elements are perceived as

131 Mary Rambaran-Olm, "Misnaming the Medieval".

132 Hannah Natanson, "'It's All White People': Allegations of White Supremacy Are Tearing Apart a Prestigious Medieval Studies Group", *Washington Post* [accessed 19/12/2020], <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2019/09/19/its-all-white-people-allegations-white-supremacy-are-tearing-apart-prestigious-medieval-studies-group/>.

133 "Why We Should Keep the Term 'Anglo-Saxon' in Archaeology – Howard Williams | Aeon Essays", *Aeon* [accessed 29/12/2020], <https://aeon.co/essays/why-we-should-keep-the-term-anglo-saxon-in-archaeology>.

134 "Why We Should Keep the Term 'Anglo-Saxon' in Archaeology".

universal. However, when exercising its power (and, it could be added, its privilege), whiteness becomes extremely visible¹³⁵. When the term Anglo-Saxon was challenged, this was exactly the case. After her resignation, Dr. Mary Rambaran-Olm received many threats from supremacist groups¹³⁶. The message was clear: as a woman of colour, she should not undermine or criticise white peoples' connection to the imagined past supremacists idealized¹³⁷. The reaction to her actions confirmed how right her message was, on how supremacists felt emboldened by Anglo-Saxonism¹³⁸.

Academic knowledge must face and deconstruct the damage that some ideas can produce. Challenging the view of whiteness and the fantasized racial unity of the past is a mandatory task for people dedicated to Early Medieval Europe. A fine example of how this task can be done was the project 'The Impact of Diasporas on the Making of Britain: evidence, memories, inventions'¹³⁹. Drawing on an interdisciplinary approach, the research led by Joanna Story proved how ethnic and racial purity was impossible throughout Britain's history (either Modern or Pre-Modern); the (genetic, linguistic, etc.) data indicated how Britain has always been a land of migrations and migrants and a constant mix of populations¹⁴⁰. Not only must more research be done, but they need to reach the broader public, challenging how people think about the past. Changing the name might be an important first step, a display of recognition. But the content of what is produced must directly challenge these assumptions.

135 Garner, *Whiteness*, 34.

136 "SMFS Statement in Support of Dr. Mary Rambaran-Olm – SMFS" [accessed 29/12/2020], <https://smfsweb.org/%ef%bb%bfsmfs-statement-in-support-of-dr-mary-rambaran-olm/>.

137 "Statement of Support for Dr. Mary Rambaran-Olm – Medievalists of Color" [accessed 29/12/2020], <https://medievalistsofcolor.com/race-in-the-profession/statement-of-support-for-dr-mary-rambaran-olm/>.

138 Natanson, "'It's All White People'".

139 "The Impact of Diasporas on the Making of Britain" [accessed 29/12/2020], <https://www2.le.ac.uk/projects/impact-of-diasporas>.

140 Joanna Story and Iain Walker, eds., *The Impact of Diasporas: Markers of Identity* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017); Joanna Story, Elizabeth M. Tyler and W. Mark Ormrod, eds., *Migrants in Medieval England, c. 500-c. 1500* (Oxford: OUP, 2020).

6. Conclusion

Anglo-Saxonism has a long history and has been appropriated in many different forms. From its revolutionary appropriation in the seventeenth century to the white supremacist abuse in the twenty-first, it is possible to observe shifting trends and some fundamental continuities. The most important and significant change was the transformation of the term into a race-building idea, in the late eighteenth century and, in particular, in the nineteenth century. From there on, the term 'Anglo-Saxon' became a crucial point in the articulation of racism, imperialism, colonialism, Germanism, whiteness and white supremacy.

The recent challenges in the field do not put an end to its uses and abuses. On the contrary: they brought to light very important questions that underpinned this scholarly field for decades, hidden in plain sight – not coincidentally, one the main traits of whiteness. The field of study now stands at a crossroad: it can ignore the questions posed and proceed with the same conferences and researches, and grants, etc. Or, alternatively, it can acknowledge and address its own problems, responsibilities and challenges. This past was weaponized by the far right, and this is precisely why the same past can become a starting point to fight back, and rescue history from such interpretations and uses. It is an unmissable opportunity to not only be against racism, but to in fact be anti-racist.

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