

Public Abstract

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Why did the pagan Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of England so readily accept Christianity when missionaries from Rome came to convert them in the seventh century? This is an important question because learning how a group of people evaluates and chooses to change their religious beliefs can help us to discover how religion helps to organize both social life and individual thought.

Unfortunately, trying to discover why the Anglo-Saxons changed their religion is hard, especially because so little was recorded about the pagan religion they practiced. In response to this, recent scholarship, particularly that of Nicholas Higham, claims that the Anglo-Saxons became Christian because Christianity offered their kings methods for accessing and using power that they had previously lacked. According to this interpretation, the Anglo-Saxons did not change their beliefs so much as they changed their alliances, to the new and more powerful Christian god and away from the gods they had worshiped before.

A more nuanced evaluation, however, is needed to account for those kingdoms that resisted conversion. Examining the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Mercia, its origin, and its development shows that what concerned Mercia's rulers – especially Penda, Mercia's last pagan king – was not the things identified by Higham and others as the Anglo-Saxon kings' primary political and religious concerns. Instead, Penda's resisted Christianity because of Mercia's identity as a "border" kingdom and its status among the other English kingdoms. Penda may have kept his pagan religion in order to maintain and defend that Mercian identity.