

Knowledge Organiser – Crime, Punishment and law enforcement in Medieval England

Part 2 – Law enforcement and punishment in Anglo-Saxon England

Key Words

8.	Collective responsibility	Everyone was responsible for the actions of others.
9.	Shires/Hundreds	Counties, divided into hundreds/Smaller areas divided into 10 tithings.
10.	Tithings	Groups of men over the age of 12.
11.	King's Shire Reeve	A man appointed locally to bring criminals to justice.
12.	Tithings System	The system where local people were responsible for crime in their villages
13.	Hue and Cry	A shout for help.
14.	Oaths	A formal declaration of facts, calling on God to witness that what is said is true. A typical oath would begin 'I swear before God..'
15.	Oath helpers	People in the community who supported a person's oath of innocence.
16.	Trial by Ordeal	A way of testing if the accused was innocent or guilty in the eyes of God.
17.	Trial by hot iron	The accused picked up a red-hot weight and walked 3 paces. The hand was bandaged and unwrapped 3 days later. If the burn healed well, God judged the person to be innocent.
18.	Trial by hot water	The accused put their hand in boiling water to pick up an object. The hand was bandaged and unwrapped 3 days later. If the burn healed well, God judged the person to be innocent.
19.	Trial by cold water	The accused was thrown into water with their arms tied. If they floated they were guilty, as they had been rejected by God's 'pure' water. If they sank they were innocent as they had been accepted by the pure water.
20.	Trial by blessed bread	Taken by priests. Another priest would pray they would choke on bread if they lied. The accused ate bread and was found guilty if they choked.
21.	Wergild	Fine paid by a murderer to a victim's family. Means 'man price'.
22.	Blood feuds	Members of the victim's family killed the murderer, and so on.
23.	Capital punishment	The death penalty.
24.	Corporal punishment	Causing harm or pain to the body.
25.	Maiming/mutilation	Causing physical harm by having a hand or ear cut off, or a tongue cut out.
26.	Deterrent	Something done to stop others committing crimes.
27.	Retribution	Where a severe punishment is meant to match the severity of the crime.
28.	Stocks and Pillory	The stocks secured the ankles and the pillory secured the arms and neck.

1. Anglo-Saxons believed the role of the local community in policing the behaviour of others was very important. People were expected to take **collective responsibility** for upholding the law.
2. **Shires**, or counties, were divided up into smaller areas called **hundreds**, which was then divided into ten **tithings**, made up of men over 12 who were responsible for preventing crime in their communities. One man from each hundred and one from each tithing met regularly with the **king's shire reeve**. This system was known as the **tithing system**.
3. Everyone was also responsible for catching those suspected of crimes. Anyone who witnessed a crime could raise a '**hue and cry**', and everyone who heard it was expected to help chase and capture the suspects. Failing to respond was a crime in itself.
4. Justice relied heavily on religion when deciding if someone was guilty. Someone accused of a crime could publicly swear their innocence under **oath**, and could call on others to support their claim as '**oath helpers**'. Repeat offenders, or those caught 'red-handed' were not given this option.
5. If there was not enough evidence to prove a person's guilt, the accused could be tried by the Church in a '**trial by ordeal**', the outcome being God's judgement on their guilt. Most ordeals, happened inside a church, and the accused would fast for 3 days and attend mass in preparation. The most common ones were **trial by hot iron, by hot water, by cold water and by blessed bread**.
6. The most serious crimes received **capital punishment**, such as hanging, while lesser crimes received **corporal punishment**, such as **maiming and mutilation**. This acted as a **deterrent**, and was favoured by the Church, as it gave the criminal time to seek God's forgiveness. Both were forms of **retribution**. Murder could be punished by the **wergild**, a fine paid to the victim's family, the amount being decided by the victim's social class. It was meant to reduce **blood feuds**.
7. The **stocks and pillory** were punishments causing pain, discomfort and public humiliation. They would usually be in the town or village centre, where criminals were exposed to bad weather, sometimes for several days. The public might also throw rubbish or verbally abuse them.