

Contents and background information

Anglo-Saxon Life through Death



Box 1

Anglo-Saxon life through death

The guidance notes for this collection are designed to help support a study of Saxon life, including aspects of aspects of Saxon *culture* and '*Christian conversion*'. Since graves offer us some of the best archaeological evidence about the Saxons, **staging mock Saxon burials** can illustrate not only what the contents of graves tell us about Saxon beliefs and everyday life, but also *how we know*. During the Saxon period Christianity gradually replaced the pagan beliefs that the Anglo-Saxons who came to Britain held. Non-Christian burials often include grave goods. The choice of objects buried with the deceased may indicate the importance which the deceased or their families placed upon them. These often included jewellery, and whatever tools or weapons they regularly used in their everyday lives.

The column to the right within these notes indicates the likely gender (**Male/Female**) of the person who would have owned, worn or used the item. **IMPORTANT: most items are not faith specific, however, the cross pendant and antler rune are respectively indicative of Christian and Pagan beliefs. If items such as these are not present, burial practices, such as the inclusion of grave goods and orientation of the body, often allow archaeologists to identify different faith burials.**

Clothing and jewellery

Woman's/girls' tunic and shawl and Men's/boy's shorter tunic and trousers



The Saxons made their own clothes from wool which the women spun and wove themselves. Richer Saxons might have used linen and the very rich might occasionally use imported silk. They would also have worn animal skins from those they hunted. In burials, most clothing will have long since rotted away in the soil. Metal fastenings such as brooches and buckles generally survive. Bone pieces and leather laces would also have been used to fasten clothes and bone or wooden needles would have been used to sew clothes.

Men and women wore tunics of varying lengths with thick cloaks. Women may have had shawls while men wore trousers under their shorter tunics. Women had a pair of brooches and men just one to fasten their cloaks at the shoulders. They wore leather shoes and had leather bags and pouches.



M&F








Brooches









The Saxons were skilled metalworkers who made beautiful jewellery and objects in metal and precious stones. Women wore pairs of brooches (L) to fasten their cloaks at the shoulders, while men just wore a single brooch (R).







The larger, single brooch has a zoomorphic design, which means it includes a stylized animal. The use of zoomorphic motifs was popular right up to the time of the Norman conquest. The central crosses on the smaller brooches suggest Christian influence.

M&F

<p>Ring - Replica from the Staffordshire hoard</p> <p>Another item of zoomorphic design.</p>		<p>F</p>
<p>Cross pendant</p> <p>Christians would not have been buried with grave goods, so often Christian graves are identified simply by their orientation (E-W) and/or the lack of grave goods. However, sometimes fragments of clothing and items of jewellery the deceased was wearing survive in graves. If a Christian cross like this one were to be found it would show the deceased was Christian.</p>		<p>M&F</p>
<p>Lucky charms</p> <p>Since pagan Saxons believed in spells and magic they often wore charms to ward off evil or protect them from others' magic. Often these were animal bones for example wild boar or beaver. They could also be beads made of precious minerals such as amber or likenesses of Gods cast in metal. They were more often found on women than on men. Ours is made from antler engraved with an 'F' for Frige the goddess of love and fertility so this particular item is for a woman. The short leather thong means it could be worn round the wrist or hanging from a belt.</p>		<p>M&F</p>
<p>Conflict and war</p>		
<p>Modern replica helmet based on the Sutton Hoo helmet</p> <p>Probably the most famous helmet ever to have been found is the one discovered in the Sutton Hoo ship burial, which is believed to have belonged to Redwald ruler of Anglia who died in 625.</p> <p>Only wealthy or important warriors would have owned helmets, even then they would have been very basic and made of iron or leather. <i>It is important that pupils understand this item is exceptional and not even wealthy warriors would have worn something this special.</i></p>		<p>M</p>
<p>Spear head – broken - Reconstruction, unknown origin</p> <p>Spears were the most commonly used and owned weapon. They may have been used for both hunting and for fighting. The wooden shafts would not survive burial but the metal heads are often found in the burials of Saxon men.</p> <p><i>Even items that went into graves or were abandoned intact, would be very different when excavated centuries later. Hence our spear head may have been intact when buried but is now rusted and broken in two.</i></p>		<p>M</p>
<p>Arrow head</p> <p>Bows were widely used in Saxon times for hunting and in battle. Generally only the metal arrow heads survive in the ground, the wooden shafts rot away.</p>		<p>M</p>
<p>Shield boss</p> <p>Shield bosses are often the only part of shields that survive burial because they were made of iron whereas shields themselves were usually made of wood, sometimes covered in leather. The pointed boss offered another weapon for use at close quarters.</p> <p>Shields were often the only defensive equipment ordinary Saxons had as only important warriors could afford helmets. Shields could be used to form a shield wall against attack.</p>		<p>M</p>

Daily life		
<p>Latch lifters - Reconstruction of item from West Stow</p> <p>In Saxon times the women held the house keys and controlled the home finances. Keys, latch lifters and/or girdle hangers were symbols of a woman's role. They were worn hung from the waist.</p>		F
<p>Iron cooking chain/pot hanger - Reconstruction of item from grave 34 Chartham, Kent</p> <p>This would have been used to suspend a cooking pot over a fire. The cooking heat was controlled by moving the pot closer or further away by hooking or releasing links of the chain to raise or lower the pot.</p>		F
<p>Strap ends - Replicas of items excavated in Southampton.</p> <p>Items such as this are fairly common Saxon archaeological finds. They may have helped to stop leather or braided straps of clothing or animal harnesses from getting frayed and ragged at the ends. Again these feature zoomorphic designs.</p>		M&F
<p>Cooking pot - modern replica</p> <p>Women would have been in charge of cooking. Pots such as these were used over open fires. Kitchen utensils were made of iron or wood and cups and plates were usually of bone or wood although elite households may have had some silver or copper items.</p>		F
<p>Wooden pot stamps – modern interpretation</p> <p>Stamps like these were used to create patterns on unfired pots.</p>		F
<p>Spindle and some carded wool - modern interpretation</p> <p>Spinning and weaving cloth was important women's work. Archaeological finds of spinning or weaving items in graves support the idea that making cloth was important and widespread. Women would spin wool and use looms for weaving. Tablet weaving to make decorative braid was also used. Skilled weavers and embroiderers were highly regarded, and textiles are often included in Saxon wills.</p>		F
<p>Bone weaving comb – modern replica</p> <p>Combs such as these were used in the spinning and weaving of woollen cloth.</p>		F
<p>Pig tail reaping hook – modern replica</p> <p>For harvesting crops. Most Anglo-Saxon people relied on farming and hunting to provide food for themselves. At main harvest times men, women and children would have all been involved in getting in the harvest.</p>		M&F

<p>Iron nail – replica</p> <p>Iron was used to make items that needed to be robust and durable. Sadly iron rusts and often does not survive the centuries. Nails such as this may have been used in the construction of buildings, ships</p>		<p>M</p>
<p>Child's toy horse – modern reproduction</p> <p>Toys from the past often reflect aspects of the lives of the adults around them. Only elite Saxons would have owned/ ridden horses, however this does not mean that children from less wealthy households would not have had toy horses to play with.</p>		<p>M/ Both?</p>
<p>Other resources</p>		
<p>Saxon rune sheet (A4 laminated)</p> <p>Like the Vikings, early Saxons used a form of writing that is said to resemble fish bones. Their runic alphabet is called the FUTHOR^Q (as opposed to the Futhark for Vikings). Inscriptions written in these can sometimes be found on pots or even weapons in graves.</p> <p>As Christianity gained favour the use of Latin for written texts grew. Later, under Alfred, English (old English or Saxon) gained in importance – the first English translation of the Bible from Latin was made at the time.</p>		
<p>Loom illustration (A4 laminated)</p> <p>Artist's impression of what a Saxon loom may have looked like. The round objects at the bottom are <i>loom weights</i> to keep the <i>warp</i> threads taut. The thread carried backwards and forwards between the warp threads by the <i>shuttle</i> is the <i>weft</i>.</p>		
<p>Saxon jewellery- enlarged cut-outs x7 with accompanying information sheet</p>		
<p>Poster the Sutton Hoo helmet - this shows the actual helmet with remnants of the decorative foils that would have originally covered its whole surface. You might look for images like the one on the right of a replica helmet upon which the foils have been re-created.</p> <p>Set of 5 postcards - a helmet, a carved casket, a zoomorphic ring and two psalters (religious texts) – each with information on the reverse</p> <p>Saxon social structure – A3 laminated chart.</p>	