

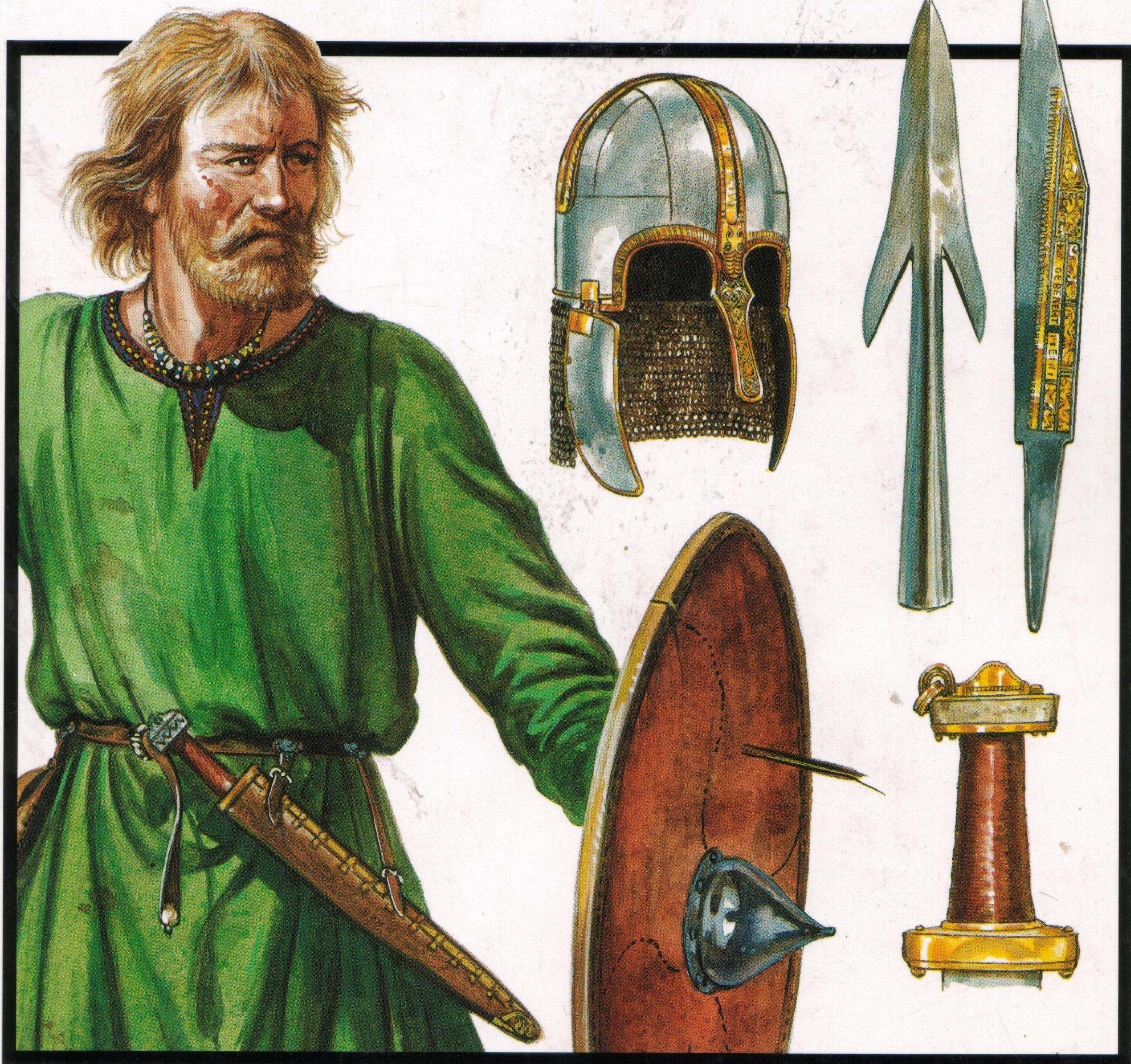
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5

# ANGLO-SAXON THEGN

449-1066 AD



WEAPONS - ARMOUR - TACTICS

MARK HARRISON

GERRY EMBLETON



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# ANGLO-SAXON THEGN

## ORIGINS OF THE ANGLO-SAXONS

The collapse of Roman rule in Britain was not so much a sudden catastrophe, as a long, and drawn-out decline. The 'Celtic' Britons, who had been 'civilised' during centuries of Roman domination, retreated gradually to the highland areas of Wales, Cornwall and the south-west of Scotland. Control of the fertile eastern lowlands was lost to warriors of Germanic origin who migrated from the Continent. These Germanic conquerors have become known to history as the 'Anglo-Saxons'. They were to dominate the lowland zone of Britain (basically 'England' – to which they gave their name), until their final defeat at Hastings in 1066.

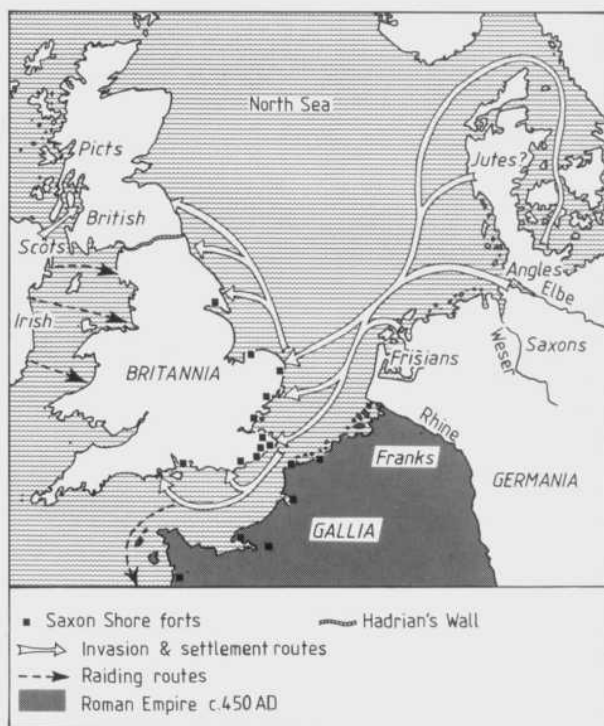
The earliest coherent history of the Anglo-Saxons is Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation*. Bede (lived AD 673–735) was a monk based in the monastery at Jarrow, Northumbria. He completed his pioneering work in AD 731. Bede divided the Germanic conquerors into three peoples, the Angles, the Saxons and the Jutes. The homeland of the Angles (or Anglii) was the Baltic coast of the Jutland peninsula in the region of Schleswig; their main settlements in Britain were in the north and east – from Northumberland to East Anglia, from where they expanded into the Midlands. The Saxons originated from south of the Angles, between the Elbe and Weser rivers, a region known in Bede's day as 'Old Saxony'. The Saxons settled mainly in south-east England, and were initially divided into East, South, Middle and West Saxons. From these groups we have the modern county names of Essex, Sussex, and the now defunct Middlesex; together with regional name Wessex. The Jutes were an obscure tribe originally from the lands north of the Anglians, somewhere on the Jutland peninsula; their main settlements were in Kent and on the Isle of Wight.

Bede's division of the German conquerors into Angles, Saxons and Jutes has long been questioned. Archaeology, place-names, and other reliable histories suggest the settlement in Britain of several further Ger-

manic tribal groups including the Frisians, the Vandals, and the Suebians. For convenience, the term 'Anglo-Saxon' covers all these groups, even though it is an oversimplification.

### German settlements

The earliest recorded Germanic arrivals in Britain were soldiers in auxiliary units employed by the Romans during the invasion of AD 55. Two semi-regular German units, the *cuneus Frisiorum* and the *numerus Hnaudifridi*, were stationed on Hadrian's Wall in the 3rd century. By the 4th century the Roman army was deploying units of *foederati* (allied troops) recruited as complete sub-tribes from Germany, and settling them in areas of military weakness. Independent Saxons were raiding both sides of the English Channel at about the same period, forcing the Romans to set up the 'Saxon shore' forts for defence. The exact pattern of early Germanic settlement in the province of *Britannia* is lost. However, Roman influences on the equipment of German *foederati* can be seen in the weapons of Anglo-Saxon warriors well into the 7th century.



Continental homelands and migration routes of the various Germanic

peoples that were to form the Anglo-Saxon nation.

It was the final demise of imperial Roman rule (c. AD 410), and the weakness of the post-imperial British authorities, that allowed the Angles and Saxons to make large-scale settlements. Their main motivation was probably the need for new land to cultivate. Excavations at Fiedersen Wierde in Holland suggest that Germanic homelands along the North Sea coastline were flooded extensively at about this date. The rather wasteful farming practices of the time may have also contributed: the poor farmland of the Angles' Continental territories appears to have become exhausted, and the only option was to move on. Much of their homeland was still deserted in Bede's day.

According to Bede, it was AD 449 when Angles and Saxons were invited to provide military assistance to the newly independent British under Vortigern (a name meaning 'high king'). The Germanic influx rapidly got out of hand. By 455, the Angles, led by the semi-mythical kings Hengist and Horsa, were engaged in full-scale

rebellion against the Britons in Kent, and summoned reinforcements from the Continent.

The Anglo-Saxon conquest was far from straightforward. British resistance was stubborn and prolonged, and the general westward spread of German influence was halted for decades at a time. Nevertheless, after two centuries of warfare and slow integration, the Anglo-Saxons became the dominant element in the population of the British lowlands.

From the earliest settlement, the Anglo-Saxons were intent on setting up their own kingdoms, with Germanic institutions and laws. From these minor kingdoms, the counties that we recognise today took their form. Aelle of **Sussex** is said to have first arrived with three ships in AD 477, landing at Selsey Bill and expanding into roughly the limits of the modern county by the end of the 5th century. Cerdic, founder of the **Wessex** dynasty, came with five ships in AD 495 (he is said to have won a victory over 5,000 Britons in AD 508 suggesting heavy reinforcement). Over the next century the Wessex kings spread their control over much of southern England, taking Salisbury in 552 and Gloucester, Bath and Cirencester in 577. The administrative sub-divisions (shires) of Hampshire, Wiltshire and Berkshire were to form the core areas of the kingdom of Wessex.

Little is known of the early history of **Essex**. Excavations at an Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Mucking in modern Essex suggest that settlement was underway by the mid-5th century though poor soil may have limited the kingdom's growth.

The first Anglian kingdom was **East Anglia**; its origins are obscure. East Anglia briefly dominated the other minor kingdoms during the reign of Redwald, *Bretwalda* ('Ruler of Britain') from AD 616 to c.620. The next important Anglian kingdom was **Northumbria**. This was formed by the fusion of two lesser kingdoms, Bernicia and Deira, the first of which had developed from a coastal fortress built at Bamburgh by King Ida in AD 547. The title of *Bretwalda* was wrested from the East Anglians in 633 by Edwin of Northumbria. The Northumbrian kings were to dominate England as *Bretwaldas* until they lost the title, in turn, to **Mercia** in the 8th century.

Mercia was an area of Anglian settlement first emerging under King Cearl in the early 7th century. Its name derived from Old English 'mierce' meaning boundary folk – because their settlement areas bordered on British territory. Mercia achieved such prominence under Offa (AD 757–796), that Charlemagne, the Frankish Emperor,



*Anglo-Saxon English kingdoms in the late 8th century. The borders of these kingdoms were extremely fluid and any map can only give a general idea of their extent.*



treated him as an equal. Mercia's wealth was sufficient to allow the building of Offa's Dyke, a continuous defensive work marking the border of Anglo-Saxon and British (i.e. 'Welsh') settlement. After Offa's reign, the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms came under increasing attack from Scandinavian invaders during the 9th century. This led to the disruption and collapse of each kingdom in turn, until only Wessex remained at the close of the century.

This book is not intended as a military history of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. Nor is it a history of the development of the Anglo-Saxon army as a whole (for that, see MAA154 *Arthur and the Anglo-Saxon Wars*, and MAA 85 *Saxon, Viking, Norman*). Rather it attempts to give an insight into the typical Anglo-Saxon warrior of this period – the *thegn* – how he was dressed and armed, how he lived, and how he fought.

## CHRONOLOGY

- AD 55–c.400 Military units of Germans allied to the Romans are involved in the conquest and occupation of Britain.
- 98 Tacitus describes the Continental ancestors of the Anglo-Saxons in his book *The Germania*.
- 300–c.450 Decline and fall of the Western Roman Empire.
- 410 Emperor Honorius refuses to aid Roman Britain against barbarians. Britannia becomes effectively independent.
- 449 According to tradition, independent British authorities invite Germanic settlement for the first time.
- 450–c.500 Germanic rebellions and foundation of early Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. More invaders arrive by sea.
- 500–c.600 Consolidation of early Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.
- 655 Battle of *Winnaed*. End of pagan kingdoms. Northumbria becomes the supreme Anglo-Saxon kingdom.
- 655–c.750 Establishment of stable Anglo-Saxon states in lowland Britain.
- 757–797 Reign of King Offa. Mercian supremacy over Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.
- 793 First recorded Viking raid on England.
- 800–900 Scandinavian attacks destabilise and destroy all the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms except Wessex.
- 871–899 Reign of Alfred the Great. Survival of Wessex assured.
- 886 'Danelaw' established by treaty between Alfred and the Vikings.
- 892 Battle of *Andreadsmeald*.



*The Coppergate (or York) Helmet, the most impressive Anglo-Saxon discovery of recent years. It is dateable to AD c.750, placing it in the lands of the Northumbrian kingdom. The skull and cheek plates are made up*

*from shaped plates of iron, while the decorative edging is from a copper alloy. A fine ring-mail neckguard was also excavated, but is not shown here. (York Archaeological Trust)*

- 899–924 Reign of Edward the Elder. Danelaw reconquered.
- 954 Death of Erik Bloodaxe, last independent Viking king of York. England unified under King Eadred.
- 991 Renewal of Viking threat. Battle of *Maldon*. Payment of Danegeld.
- 1014 'All the nobility of England' destroyed by Cnut (Canute) at battle of *Ashingdon*. Accession of Cnut, who founds the Anglo-Norse dynasty.
- 1042 Accession of Edward the Confessor, return of Wessex dynasty.
- 1055 Battle of Hereford, Welsh defeat English army.
- 1066 Death of Harold at *Hastings* ends the Anglo-Saxon monarchy.



# WHO WERE THE THEGNS?

Perhaps the most important element of the Anglo-Saxon army, from earliest days to the Norman conquest, was a class of nobleman-warrior who it is convenient here to call the thegn. The thegn (or thane), originally meaning servant, was a man who held land from the king or another hereditary noble by right of military service he owed that person. The thegn's position was thus military in character (though he had non-military duties as well). He ranked between an ordinary freeman and a hereditary noble, and was in this respect a 'nobleman', though his lands did not pass down automatically to his descendants.

The role of the thegn changed as the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms developed. The meaning of the term thegn was also not consistent, and went through subtle changes. In the early period the immediate military followers of a king were called *gesiths* rather than thegns. Originally the word *gesith* meant 'companion', in the sense of a close retainer of a king or lord, or a close personal follower who also protected and fought by the side of his lord in battle. As the Anglo-Saxons conquered territory in Britain, loyal *gesiths* were rewarded with grants of land; and so, gradually *gesith* came to mean a landowner or landholder who was expected to raise troops from among the peasants living on his land.

Towards the end of the 8th century the word thegn begins to replace the word *gesith*. Royal thegns, who held their land directly from the king, often became officials of



◀ *One of the most spectacular finds from the Anglo-Saxon period, the helmet from Sutton Hoo in Suffolk. It was found as part of a royal ship burial, possibly of an East Anglian prince of AD c.650. The helmet was probably already well over 100 years old when it was buried. (British Museum)*

▶ *The 'Benty Grange Helmet' found at Benty Grange Farm in Derbyshire in 1848. Probably 7th century Northumbrian in origin, it is badly corroded, and the spaces between the ferrous metal framework bars were probably originally filled with horn plates. At the top of the helmet is a metal figure of a boar, stippled with brass dots. A deep groove along the backbone of the boar may have originally held a horse-hair crest. (Sheffield City Museum)*



the crown. Some were eminent statesman, such as Wulfric, the 'Welsh-reeve' who was responsible for collecting the tribute from Wales, and who died in 897. This official capacity need not have kept him from military duties and he may have commanded Welsh auxiliaries in battle. Other king's thegns mentioned in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* were war heroes. For example, Ordeh, killed with many fellow thegns in the victory over the Vikings at Exeter in 894. A thegn served his king as more than just a warrior: the modern division between warfare and statecraft did not yet exist.

At the lower echelons of the thegnly class were men who had been given landholdings in the provinces, away from the royal household. Their lands did not at first pass down automatically in a thegn's family, and remained technically the property of the king. With the increase in the use of writing towards the end of the 7th century, land grants were recorded in a 'boc' (book), in a system known as *bocland*. As the population of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms grew, it became virtually impossible for the king to have direct personal knowledge of all of his several thousand subjects of middle rank, and *bocland* was resorted to for keeping track of them all. Land grants to thegns could no longer be just a personal matter between king and thegn. A thegn's heirs could now expect to inherit the estate almost automatically by 'book-right'. Thus was born the hereditary nobleman, who was to become so typical of high medieval Europe.

This new class of noble 'provincial thegns' at first made up a major part of the 'select' *fjrd* or levy troops. Senior thegns took on a major role in the organisation of the *fjrd* of the provinces, becoming organisers and middle-

**Table A: Ranks in Anglo-Saxon Society**

	<i>AD500-650</i>	<i>AD650-850</i>	<i>AD850-1066</i>
<i>Slave</i>	Thrall	Thrall	Thrall
<i>Commoner</i>	Ceorl	Ceorl	Ceorl
<i>Nobleman</i>	Gesith	Gesith	Thegn
		Thegn	Huscarle*
<i>Governor</i>	Ealdorman	Ealdorman	Ealdorman
			Earl*

Note that this table is highly simplified. Many other terms were used in the various Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.

\* Denotes Scandinavian origin.

ranking leaders. By the end of the period thegns, though still making up the backbone of the better-trained troops available in the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, were also providing an 'officer class' to command provincial levies.

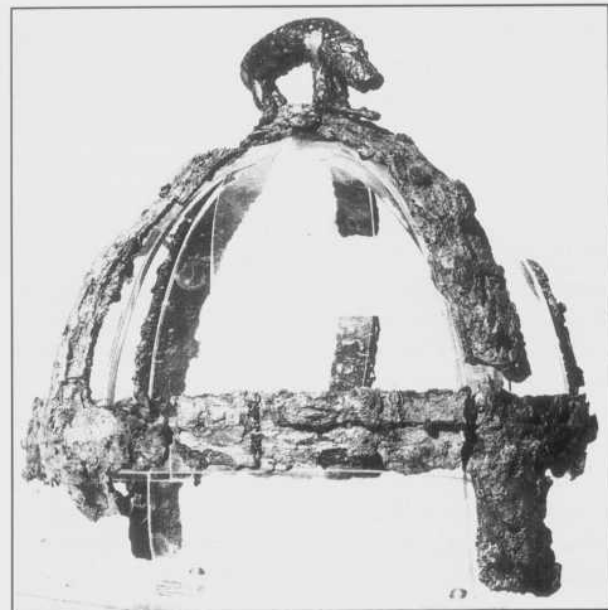
In the 11th century, thegns were overshadowed during the rule of the Anglo-Danish dynasty by a new class of royal servant, the *huscarle*. There were, however, similarities and exchanges of influence between the two. The Norman Conquest was effectively to eradicate both thegns and *huscarles*.

## RECRUITMENT & ORGANISATION

From almost the beginning of the period, Anglo-Saxon armies were made up of two distinct types of troops. The first, in modern terms, was something like a citizen militia – part-timers, who went to war only in time of crisis and then, often reluctantly. This was the Anglo-Saxon levy or *fjrd*. The second troop class was made up of 'professionals' – in the sense of men who fought for a living. Far more highly motivated, better equipped and better trained, these warriors typically made up the personal bodyguards of the various Anglo-Saxon kings; effectively they were 'household troops'. Thegns played an important role in both these formations.

### Household troops: the *hearthweru*

A separate warrior elite had already emerged by the time of the Germanic migrations to Britain. The king or leader of a tribe surrounded himself with loyal followers and companions who would protect him, and be the means by which he imposed his will over the local population. Selected out from the general masses, these high-status individuals became full-time warriors, able to devote a great part of their time to the skill of arms. They formed the personal bodyguard of the king and were effectively his







*Detail from an Anglian cross from Weston Hall of about the 10th century. This Viking period carving of a northern English*

*warrior, shows him with a sword and an axe (carried head-downwards), and a flared tunic.*

household troops. They were known in Old English as the *hearthmeru* (literally 'hearth-guard').

In the Early and Middle Anglo-Saxon periods, it would seem from the scanty source material available, that these 'household' warriors made up the bulk of the forces fielded by any ambitious king or lord. In the fragmentary poem of the *Fight at Finnsburh* which takes place in the 5th-century, one of the 'armies' contains only 60 warriors. The forces brought across from the Continent by the earliest of the 5th century Anglo-Saxon kings are said to have been carried by tiny numbers of ships typically three to five. These retinues, which can hardly have numbered more than a few hundred men, were the personal warbands of leaders who were to become the founders of the future Anglo-Saxon dynasties.

Such elite warrior bands were not restricted to the service of a king. The *aetheling* (prince) Guthlac of Mercia raised an independent band of followers in the 7th century and proceeded to lay waste the lands and strongholds of his enemies over a period of nine years. At no point did he make any pretence of acting on behalf of the king of Mercia.

The army which Penda of Mercia took on his final campaign against Oswy of Northumbria in AD 655 was

said to number 30 'legions'. Clearly these cannot have been equivalent to Roman legions of 6,000 men, as the total would have equalled the force available to the Roman Empire at its greatest extent. More probably we are again dealing with small personal bodyguards of various kings and lords allied to Penda. Such bodies cannot individually have exceeded a few hundred men, and most would have been smaller still.

In AD 685 the exiled noble Caedwalla, although a fugitive outlaw, overthrew King Centwine of Wessex in battle. Caedwalla would have had difficulty raising large numbers of troops, which suggests that the control of the entire kingdom of Wessex was decided by a battle between two tiny armies. The earliest compilation of English law is the code of King Ine of Wessex written down in about 604. The *Laws of Ine* define an 'army' (or *here*) as any group of more than 35 armed men!

It is possible, then, that early Anglo-Saxon armies contained relatively small numbers of warriors – mainly the personal followers forming the household troops of the warmongering kings. Some of the warriors making up these retinues may have been better-equipped and motivated *ceorls*. Most were, by definition, *gesithas* or 'companions' of the king – and so were the direct ancestors of the thegns.

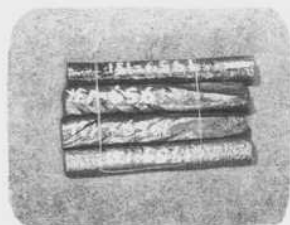
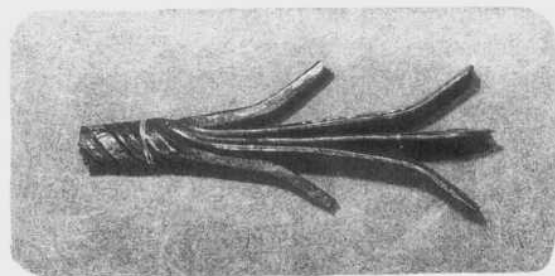
### The *fyrð*

The *fyrð* or levy of the common people seems to have developed out of the old Germanic custom that all fit men had to be ready to serve in war when the need arose. As the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms became established, wars which had earlier been endemic became less frequent. Populations became increasingly settled and agricultural, and less warlike. Yet conflicts with the native British and neighbouring Anglo-Saxon kingdoms erupted sporadically and had to be dealt with by raising the population in defence of their homes.

The first written legal obligation to brief spells of military service appears in the *Laws of King Ine of Wessex*, written c.694. This required all free men between the ages of 15 and 60 to take part in military service when summoned. Service was mainly defensive in purpose, as the men raised in such a way could be of only limited military value. This massed levy of the populace is now known by the term *General Fyrð*.

Gradually as the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms developed, it was seen that a more selective system of recruitment would be more useful. If fewer men were levied, the remaining men freed of the obligation could contribute to the levied man's expenses. The majority of men could continue to work the land and produce a surplus. That way the selected men could be better provided with provisions, and





better armed. This more selective levy of the populace is known by an invented modern term, 'select' *fyrð*. It is important to stress that this was not a term used at the time. Most records merely use the term '*fyrð*'. In reality, the distinction between the 'select' and 'general' *fyrð* was probably blurred.

Little survives in Anglo-Saxon sources of the details of the 'select' *fyrð* system. Much of what we know comes from a later text, the Domesday Book entry for the county of Berkshire (1089). The Normans retained the organisational structure of Anglo-Saxon England as the basis for their tax system, which refers back directly to the traditional methods for raising the *fyrð*. Though the Berkshire model was not applied identically in all other English shires, it gives a good idea of the basis of recruitment of the *fyrð*.

The Berkshire Domesday entry states: 'If the king sent an army anywhere, one soldier went from five hides, each hide providing four shillings towards his wages and subsistence for two months.'

The *hide* was a unit of land, traditionally the amount considered necessary to support one man and his family. In practice the *hide* was not fixed in size, but varied depending on the quality of soil in different areas. In

*Stages in the forging of a pattern-welded spearhead. At top left bundles of wrought iron rods are twisted and hammer-welded to create spiral-patterned billets (top right). Groups of these are bundled again and hammer-welded to create the separate central core and edges of the weapon. Finally (at bottom) the*

*pieces are forged into a single item; a conical socket will be added in a later stage. The centre section of the blade has been partially sectioned and polished to give an impression of the final appearance. (Royal Armouries, Tower of London)*

Berkshire, it measured about 40 acres. By the end of the Anglo-Saxon period, the *hide* had become an administrative term rather than one of measurement.

One man was to be recruited for every five *hides* in the shire. This five-hide unit turns up frequently in the earlier sources, and seems to have been a basic administrative unit. Men living within the five *hides* would have to club together to provide the equipment for the man, and to provide an additional sum of money for his maintenance on campaign.

Twenty units of five-hides made up the next administrative sub-unit of the shire, the *hundred*. This too seems to have been a military sub-unit, in that the 20 men raised



from the *hundred* would probably have served on campaign together.

In the 10th century, Wessex went through a resurgence of fortune, and extended its power northwards. Anglo-Saxon thegns who had maintained their holdings under Viking rule and new landholders of Scandinavian descent were incorporated into the *fyrð*. The unit of assessment for military service in these territories was the *carucate*, a land measure of unknown area, but probably equivalent to the *hide*. As an example, Stamford in Lincolnshire, a town founded by the Vikings, was assessed at 150 *carucates* giving an obligation to raise 30 men. Another northern English administrative division, the *wapentake*, seems to have been the equivalent of the *hundred* in the south.

The five-hide system has remarkable similarities to the system of selective levy used by the Carolingian Franks. A capitulary (law) of Charlemagne dated 807 records that 'Each freeman who seems to hold five *mansi* shall likewise come to the army'. A *mansi* or household was the equivalent of the English *hide*. The coincidence could be due to a common Germanic origin and a response to similar circumstances, but it is just as likely that English monarchs deliberately imitated Carolingian practice.

### Social classes in the *fyrð*

The *Law of Ine* refers to the rank-and-file members of the *General Fyrð* as *ceorls* (or commoners). Bede also indirectly implies that *ceorls* served as warriors when he laments a tendency amongst all classes in Northumbria, in his day, to adopt a monastic life. The *gesithas* and later thegns seem to have had mostly a supervisory role in the *General Fyrð*. The 'select' *fyrð* was somewhat different in that it contained fewer *ceorls*, and a rather larger proportion of thegns. The preponderance of thegns in the *fyrð* is stressed

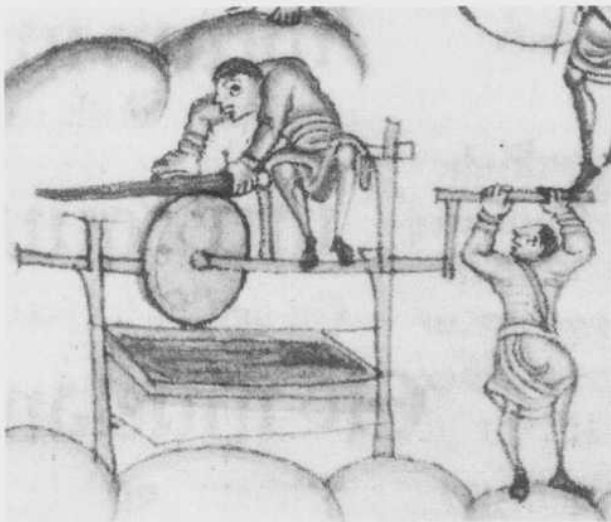
particularly by Abbot Aelfric of Eynsham, who at the beginning of the 11th century saw society organised into three orders of men – those who labour (*ceorls*), those who pray for God's help (the clergy), and those who fight (thegns). The localised *fyrð* of England who made up the bulk of the fighting forces during the 1066 campaign would have consisted of thegns and an unknown proportion of superior *ceorls*.

### The *huscarles*

In the final 50 years of Anglo-Saxon England a new and powerful military institution was introduced – the *huscarles*. The *huscarles* were of Scandinavian origin, the term meaning 'household-men' – warriors making up the household troops of a ruler. In all probability, the *huscarles* were similar to the *hearthweru* of the Anglo-Saxon courts: both had their ultimate origin in the bodyguard units of Germanic kings and their roles were virtually identical. The first reference to the *huscarles* of England appears in a late Icelandic source, *Flateyjarbok*, where they are described among the warriors brought to England by King Sweyn Forkbeard of Denmark sometime around 1010. The more dependable *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* notes that when King Cnut (or Canute) disbanded his army in 1018, he kept in arms the crews of 40 ships as his own household troops. Cnut had ruled England since 1014, and his *huscarles*, as trusted men, naturally took over the positions earlier held by Anglo-Saxons in the royal household. In later years, Scandinavians and Anglo-Saxons were recruited into the *huscarles* without distinction of race – the Old Norse and Old English languages being close enough for the operation of mixed units.

*Huscarles* performed much the same duties as the king's thegns. They could be allocated administrative tasks by the king, and could even be landholders much like provincial thegns. *Huscarles* were also found in the households of great lords such as the brothers of Harold Godwinson – Leofwyn and Gyrrh. These would have served in the royal army when required and can be seen making their last stand alongside Leofwyn and Gyrrh in the Bayeux Tapestry. The Domesday Book records the *huscarles* as landholders after they ceased to be a military force.

It is not certain, however, if the *huscarles* were paid regular salaries, since few records survive. Their support may have reverted under Scandinavian influences to older



*The sharpening of a broadsword at a grindstone. Sword sharpening was a delicate task, usually done by skilled craftsmen. Here the circular grindstone is set*

*up on wooden framework and turned by an apprentice. From the 11th century 'Utrecht' psalter. (British Library, Harleian Ms. 603)*



methods, so that the *huscarle* would have been rewarded for his service by gifts rather than money. However, increasing numbers of mercenaries were being raised by the royal household by the 11th century, and it is not beyond the realms of possibility that the *huscarles* were a paid (i.e. mercenary) force.

In 1094 King William Rufus summoned the *fyrð* for overseas duty but disbanded it before it crossed the Channel, extracting from each thegn 10 shillings in lieu of service. This money seems to have represented part of 20 shillings (4 pence per day) required by the Berkshire Domesday to be provided for each member of the *fyrð* to maintain him while on service for the two months stated by law. The money seems then to have been used to pay for mercenaries, who were becoming increasingly important in European warfare at this time.

## EQUIPMENT OF THE THEGN

In his book *The Germania* completed in about AD 98, Tacitus writes of the Germans – the ancestors of the Anglo-Saxons – as an armed society: all men were required to own arms and to know how to use them. Youths were presented with a shield and spear by a chieftain, or by a close relative, as part of the rites of passage to manhood, and so became a full member of the tribe and a warrior. Germanic chieftains gave out further weapons as gifts to valued warriors, partly from among the plunder gained by the warband. The supply of weapons thus became intimately connected with oaths of loyalty to the lord, and were part of the cement that held a Germanic warband together.

One example of a particularly generous gift occurs in the Old English poem *Beowulf*. After Beowulf had successfully killed the monster Grendel, the Danish King Hrothgar rewarded him with a golden standard, a helmet, a byrnie, and 'a famous costly sword', and eight war horses with gilded bridles, on one of them 'a skilfully decorated saddle with jewels, that had been the high-king's war-seat'.

Though such gift-giving may have been a common source of weapons among thegns of the *hearthweru*, the same could not have applied among the *fyrð*. Men serving in the *fyrð* were required to bring their own weapons. There appears, however, to be no Anglo-Saxon document which specifies exactly which weapons were to be supplied for *fyrð* service. An interesting analogy is the system in use in the Carolingian Empire. In the *Capitulare Aquisgranense* (AD 801–813) it is stated of men of five-mansi obligation: 'each one shall have a lance, shield, bow with two strings,



*Anglo-Saxon sword from King's Field, Faversham, Kent. The grip and crossguard were originally of organic material framed by metallic fittings. The gilt pommel cap has a decorative ring – a curious feature common on swords of 6th–7th*

*century date; this is too small to accept a sword knot and is perhaps of some religious significance, or connected with oath-taking rituals. (By courtesy of the Board of Trustees of the British Museum)*



12 arrows . . . let them have breast plates or helmets and let them proceed to the army, that is, in the summer'. The Carolingian warrior at this time was, however, almost certainly much better equipped than his English equivalent.

The only comparable specification of an Anglo-Saxon thegn's equipment occurs in the early 11th-century laws of Aethelraed. These state that the *ceorl* was not legally equal to a thegn even when he owned a helmet, a mail shirt and a gold-plated sword, unless he also owned five hides of land. These items we must assume were the basic equipment of an 11th-century thegn in the *fyrð*.

Another equipment list appears in the laws connected with *heriot*, or death duty. When a thegn died his heirs were traditionally obliged to give the king a gift in order for their right to the thegn's landholding to be confirmed. The gift normally took the form of weapons and military equipment (though was commonly replaced by a cash payment) – in this way the king did not lose an armed soldier when a thegn died. The weapons could be re-issued, perhaps to under-equipped *fyrð* members or to mercenaries in the employ of the king.

By the end of the 10th century the *heriot* of a king's thegn was specified as including four shields, four spears, four horses (two with saddles), two swords, a helmet and a coat of mail. The list reads suspiciously like the equipment of a small sub-unit. If this is the case, it must have included two riders, one of whom was well equipped. The two unsaddled horses were perhaps replacement mounts for the riders, and were perhaps led by attendants armed only with shield and spear. It is possible that this sub-unit was a predecessor of the medieval lance. Whatever the truth of the matter, this brings us neatly to treatment of the Anglo-Saxon use of the horse.

### The horse in Anglo-Saxon warfare

The use of the horse by the Anglo-Saxons presents something of a paradox. The Continental Germans seem to have relied heavily on horses – the employment on the battlefield of Germanic cavalry intermixed with infantry giving Roman commanders some serious tactical headaches. Even the semi-mythical Saxon leaders, Hengist and Horsa, seem to have been named after horses (*hengst* = stallion, *horsa* = mare). Yet by the time the Angles and Saxons reached Britain they seem to have shunned the horse in its true cavalry role; the limited information available suggests they employed it mainly as a transport animal, to ferry foot-soldiers to and from the battlefield.

Anglo-Saxon warriors of the 5th and 6th centuries were primarily infantrymen: horses and horse furniture are never found in graves that also include weapons. The marshy coastal areas of eastern England in which the

Germanic tribes first settled did not generally favour the riding of horses, let alone breeding them. Indeed, it is likely that the Romano-Britons had more cavalry available to them than the invading Germans. The Anglo-Saxon royal household at one point contained a corps of messengers known as the *horswealas* or 'Welsh horsemen' – that is, native Britons. Whatever the reason, we hear little of cavalry during the main part of the Anglo-Saxon period.

Something of a revival occurs in the later 9th century, when there is evidence that the Anglo-Saxons kings were making concerted efforts to breed horses. On their raids into English territory, the Vikings captured horses in large numbers on several occasions; the ease with which they did so suggests that the Anglo-Saxons were employing centralised stud farms. The Church appears to have been intimately involved in keeping royal mounts. For example, in 875 King Ceolwulf of Mercia is recorded to have lifted the responsibility for the maintenance of his horses from the diocese of Worcester.

Many individual thegns must have owned horses which they rode on personal or royal business during peacetime; they do not, however, seem to have been particularly keen to take them into battle. The shortage of war-horses does not seem to have been serious enough to prevent fighting on horseback; the main impediment was a deeply entrenched military conservatism – a tradition that real fighting took place on foot.

### Early Anglo-Saxon arms & armour

Tacitus's descriptions of the early Germanic warrior shows him as a somewhat primitive and poorly equipped figure. The main offensive weapon was a short, narrow-bladed spear called the *framaea* which could be used for thrusting and throwing. Warriors fighting on foot might also carry several javelins; those on horseback used only spear and shield. The shield, decorated in colours of personal choice, was the principal defensive equipment of all warriors. Additionally the Germans are said to have had a 'few' helmets of metal or hide.

Archaeological evidence from the Germanic homelands corroborates Tacitus's description, though with a few discrepancies. One of the most significant finds was a mass bog deposit at Ejsbøl in southern Jutland, made up of several hundred weapons. The dating of this remarkable hoard to the 4th century locates the find in the Anglian homelands and so provides a picture of the equipment of a warrior on the eve of the migrations to Britain. The Ejsbøl deposit represents the dedicated weapons of a defeated army: several classical authors mention this was a common Germanic practice. Weapons would be thrown into a bog as offerings in thanks for victory, usually in fulfilment of vows made to the gods before battle.



Analysis suggests that the Ejsbøl hoard contains the basic weapon set of spear and shield for about 180 warriors. The commonest spear type is a broad-headed variety unsuitable for throwing, and so quite different from Tacitus's *framea*. This change indicates a shift in tactics towards more hand-to-hand fighting in closely arrayed formations. Javelins used primarily as missile weapons were also present in such proportions as to indicate each warrior carried one. Also there were 60 swords – about one for every three warriors; these expensive items indicate the emergence of an elite class prior to the Anglo-Saxon migration. Tacitus makes no mention of Germanic archery, yet 675 arrowheads were also found at Ejsbøl. Arrowheads found in graves in the Saxon homelands show that a minute proportion of warriors carried bows. There appears to have been an increasing, though still minor, use of archers up to and including the Anglo-Saxon invasion of Britain.

Excavations at cemetery sites in England seem to confirm the conclusions of Continental sites like Ejsbøl, giving much the same view on the equipment of the early Anglo-Saxon warrior, though with a few important variations. Unfortunately the evidence dries up at the end of the pagan period, with the advent of Christian burial customs. Only about a fifth of male burials included weapons, which suggests that Tacitus's fully armed Germanic society did not exist in pagan England. About half of weapon graves contained one or more spears. Slightly more than 40 percent contained a shield, though only about 30 percent contained spear and shield together. It should be noted that not all weapon sets were practical – some, for example, consisted only of a shield. Local variations may indicate differing religious rites rather than variation in the weapon sets used. For example in Kent, an area of Jutish settlement, only about 20 percent of weapon burials included a shield, whereas in Anglian and Saxon cemeteries the proportion was 40–50 percent. It seems, then, that the Anglo-Saxon warrior was, like his Continental ancestors, equipped with spear and shield as standard.

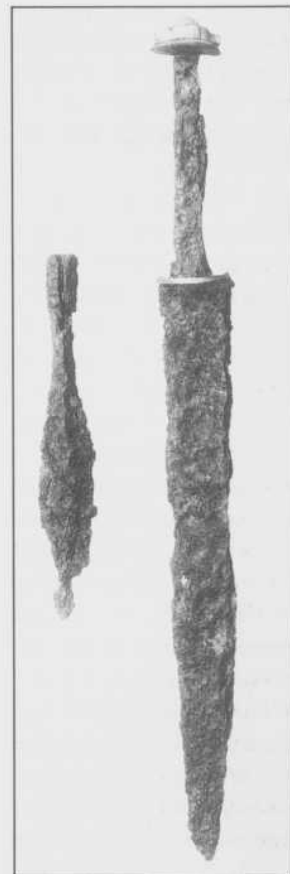
Archery equipment occurs in less than two percent of graves, axes in a similar proportion. It may be that bows and axes were not much used in war or were simply not considered suitable for burial. Warriors buried with a sword were usually higher in wealth and status. The *seax*, a single-edged knife typical of the Anglo-Saxons, appears in almost 11 percent of weapon burials in (largely Jutish) Kent as opposed to around two percent of Anglian or Saxon ones. Swords were comparatively more expensive than other weapons: their construction involved more labour, more materials and in most cases more embellishment than spears. In Anglian areas swords appear in only

three percent of graves, in Saxon ones in 10 percent, and in Kent about 22 percent. This distribution may, in large part, reflect better access to supplies of blades from the Rhineland – the main European production centre of quality blades. Again swords are the exception rather than the rule.

Two archaeological finds have rather shaped modern ideas of the equipment of the early Anglo-Saxons. The first of these was at Benty Grange Farm, Derbyshire, in 1848, where excavations revealed a middle-ranking warrior's grave containing a helmet, various personal items, and the remains of what was interpreted at the time as body armour, though is more probably a suspension chain for a cauldron. The most significant find was the helmet, illustrated in Plates D4 and D5 (see plate commentaries for description). The helmet was decorated with a curious mix of pagan and Christian emblems: a stylised boar about 4 inches (10 cm) long mounted on the top of the helmet and a silver crucifix on the nasal. These suggest the helmet dates from a period of religious change, perhaps the mid-7th-century wars of Penda. We have used this to reconstruct the equipment of a Northumbrian *gesith* at the time of the battle of Winwaed in AD 655 in Plate B.

The other significant armour find was in the ship

*A seax of early form with copper alloy guard and characteristic lobed-pommel, alongside it is a leaf-bladed spear head. When combined with a shield these 6th or 7th century weapons found together at Winchester would have made up the weapon set of a typical Anglo-Saxon thegn. (By courtesy of the Board of Trustees of the British Museum)*





burial at Sutton Hoo in East Anglia in 1939. The burial took place in the 7th century, though the spectacular armour it contained is probably much older – the closest comparable material is from the Valsgärde/Vendel culture in central Sweden, dateable to about AD 500. The Sutton Hoo armour was probably a family heirloom that had been passed down through many generations. The burial was clearly one of a royalty, and it has been suggested that the man interned was Aethelhere of East Anglia, who was killed fighting for Penda at the battle of Winwaed. If so, it is highly unlikely that the armour was actually worn at Winwaed: the level of decoration on shield, helmet and small finds indicate a ceremonial rather than a warlike function, though royal leaders might wear fine equipment even in battle. It is more likely that these items were taken from a royal treasury to form the regalia of the buried prince.

The Benty Grange and Sutton Hoo armours are unique examples. They are far too decorative to have been used by the bulk of warriors. The archaeological evidence makes it clear that the average early to middle period Anglo-Saxon warrior had only the basic weapon set of a shield and a spear, with perhaps a light javelin for throwing before contact. Richer individuals may have had swords and seaxes; but it is likely that few had bows and fewer still had metal helmets or metal body armour of any description. In the following sections we will examine the individual weapon and armour types available to the Anglo-Saxon warrior in greater detail.

### Helmets

The use of helmets prior to the 11th century is not well confirmed in the archaeological record. Only three actual examples are known: the Benty Grange helmet, the Sutton Hoo helmet, and the recently discovered Coppergate helmet. All are built up from shaped and riveted ferrous metal components. No Anglo-Saxon helmet of one-piece construction exists: this appears to have been a Central European technique. Some of the Bayeux Tapestry *huscarles* seem to be wearing such one-piece, forged helmets, though these could equally have been made by the same methods as the surviving Anglo-Saxon helmets but imitating the new fashion for conical forms.

The three surviving helmets, and those mentioned in the literature, were remarkably decorative objects. Beowulf, for example, is described as wearing: 'A shining helmet . . . decorated with rich ornament and circled with a ring-mail guard, just as the weapon smith had wrought it in days of old and wonderfully formed it; set about with boar-images so that thereafter no sword or battle-blade might bite into it.'

Such references to 'boar-images' fitted to helmets are

common in Anglo-Saxon poems, and show up in contemporary illustrations. The boars could either take the form of a close replica of the animal – as on the Benty Grange helmet – or as a stylised animal with some boar-like characteristics. The crest of the Sutton Hoo helmet is definitely an animal, but is flat and snake-like; yet this too has stylised bristles and a pig-like snout. The boar symbolised strength, ferocity and determination; perhaps the wearer hoped to take on some of these characteristics. Also, as the above excerpt from *Beowulf* suggests, the boar had a talismanic value – protecting the wearer from harm. The crest of the Sutton Hoo helmet, in fact, has actual protective value, since it reinforces the helmet from blows aimed on the top.

### Swords and seaxes

Swords, in the Anglo-Saxon era were items of tremendous status. Often handed down from generation to generation they came to symbolise honour – not only of the individual warrior, but also of his clan. Famous men carried equally famous swords. Beowulf borrowed the sword *Hrunting* for his fight with the mother of the monster Grendel; this name may mean 'Roarer' – after the sound the sword made when whirled in the air. In his old age Beowulf used the dynastic blade of the Geatish kings, *Naegling* – a name which suggests it could cut through metal nails.

Swords were of the broad-bladed, two-edged form which was the dominant north-west European type until the mid-13th century. The blade of the typical early Anglo-Saxon sword had only a slightly tapering profile with edges that were almost parallel. Most swords were 4–5 cm broad. With time sword profiles became increasingly tapered although the widest point of later blades, just below the cross guard, was still about 4.5 cm.

Blades were constructed by 'pattern welding' techniques from about the 2nd century AD onwards. This involved the hammer welding of twisted sections of different grades of steel to produce intertwining patterns along the blade. Less elaborate blades could be built up from smaller amounts of steel forged in layered strips, a much older technique dating back to the earliest phases of the Iron Age. This process was known as 'fagotting'.

Seaxes, or single-edged knives, were made in a variety of shapes, the earliest being indistinguishable from Continental types. Construction methods were identical to those of swords, though pommels are not found on seaxes after the 8th century. Later seaxes had hilts made entirely of organic material. The smallest weapons of this category were probably eating utensils rather than weapons. Those with blades exceeding about 20 cm were intended either for hunting or for war. Some 9th- and 10th-century seaxes are 90 cm long and are effectively swords.



## Spears

However desirable a fine sword, the bulk of serious fighting was done with spears. These could be of either throwing or thrusting type or sometimes of an intermediate form useful as either a missile or a close-combat weapon. Spearheads survive in large numbers, so allowing reasonably accurate dating of the various types. Spear construction at the time of the Anglo-Saxon invasions followed two main traditions. One was the broad-bladed spearhead, of Celtic origin; the other was a barbarian version of the Imperial Roman *pilum*, known as the *angon* or *hebra*.

The *angon*, found in Germanic contexts before the end of Roman rule in Britain and in Anglo-Saxon ones to about the mid-7th century, was, like the Roman *pilum*, a heavy javelin. It had a short socket, barbed head and a long, slender neck made of iron. The earliest examples, like the *pilum*, were intended to bend on impact, making them useless for a returned shot. As time passed the purpose of the slim neck was largely forgotten and it evolved into a rigid elongated socket.

The broad-bladed spear type was far more common than the *angon*. The type is usually sub-divided, the two main varieties being leaf-bladed or angular. Leaf-blades have a lens-shaped profile, while angular blades have symmetrical angular projections usually more than half-way down the blade from the tip. (For further details see the commentaries to Plate E.)

## Shields

The shield was constructed of wooden planks, usually said in poems to have been of linden (lime-wood). The face was normally covered with stout cow-hide. Shield makers were specifically banned by the *Laws of Ine* from using sheep-hide, though the need for a law suggests that use of this inferior material was common. The simplest kind of shield boss was made from a flat sheet of iron, cut and folded to create a straight-sided cone with a flanged base. Four holes in the flange allowed the boss to be riveted to the shield face. Anglo-Saxon period bosses were always of iron: copper alloy and gold appear only as decorations to fittings. More complex cone-shaped bosses were typical of the early and middle Anglo-Saxon periods. These required more forging to produce the final shape but were more attractive in appearance. The Sutton Hoo shield which is either based on central Swedish models or is a Swedish import is unique among Anglo-Saxon age shields in having a metal rim, in this case of soft copper alloy which suggests parade armour. Although most Anglo-Saxon shields appear to have had rims these have not survived, and were probably made of treated leather.



*Iron Anglo-Saxon sword from the Thames at Syon Reach. A tiny square iron pommel cap which held the now-vanished grip in place can still be seen. The two circles on the left of the blade are the marks of an unknown maker. (By courtesy of the Board of Trustees of the British Museum)*

*Sword from the River Witham in Lincolnshire typical of 10th century Anglo-Saxon swords, and influenced by Scandinavian traditions. (By courtesy of the Board of Trustees of the British Museum)*



## Mail shirts

Although Old English literature makes frequent references to *byrnies* (mail shirts), the only Anglo-Saxon example to survive is from Sutton Hoo. The Sutton Hoo mail shirt is made up in the standard way, from metal rings, each one linked to four neighbouring rings. A most unusual feature is that the rivets sealing each link are made of copper. Other surviving pieces of mail, such as the neck-guard of the 8th century Coppergate helmet, are usually riveted with iron. (Alternate rows of rings in the Coppergate neck-guard are hammer-welded into solid circles rather than riveted.) Outside of literary sources there is little evidence for the use of mail by the Anglo-Saxons before the late 10th century. By the 11th, however, as apparent from the Bayeux Tapestry, the Royal Huscarles were equipped to a man with mail shirts.

## Bows

Although archers were present in Anglo-Saxon armies, these were never in large numbers. Only a single archer is shown among the English troops on the Bayeux Tapestry; another appears on the Franks Casket. Early 9th century

Carolingian laws required Frankish warriors to turn out to musters with bows in addition to their other equipment, but there is no comparable requirement in the surviving Anglo-Saxon records. Henry of Huntingdon records a remark by William the Conqueror, that the Saxons 'knew not the use of the bow'. Though this remark is clearly inaccurate, it is evident that the Anglo-Saxons did not yet appreciate the value of massed archery, and used it in a far more piecemeal manner than their Continental contemporaries. The average thegn was probably familiar with the bow as a weapon of the hunt, but was unlikely to have used it in war.

Bows were of the longbow type common to north-west Europe, with a stave about six feet long. Preferred woods were yew or ash for the stave, and poplar or beech for the arrows. The stave was either cut from the centre of a tree trunk or worked from a branch of suitable shape and size. Arrow shafts were cut from thin shoots created by coppicing the appropriate trees. Bowstrings were made of linen thread looped and bound into a cord.

# CLOTHING

In his account of the dress of early Germanic warriors, Tacitus follows the brief remarks of Caesar in his *de Bello Gallico*. Caesar says the Germans wore nothing but hides or short garments of hairy skin. Tacitus describes javelin-armed foot-soldiers, apparently in battle, as either naked or clad only in short cloaks. He implies that the lightness (or complete lack) of their clothing allowed them to skirmish more efficiently. Total or semi-nudity was a matter of honour for certain warriors, connected with a personal vow to the gods. Everyday dress was also scanty consisting of little more than a cloak fastened with a metal brooch, or in its absence with a 'thorn' (*spina*), probably a pin-like fitting carved from wood or bone. Tight-fitting undergarments were occasionally worn by the wealthier individuals.

The Anglo-Saxons in Britain were considerably wealthier than the early Germans and wore more garments



*A warrior copied from a Carolingian manuscript by J. Quicherrat in 1875. Scale armour does not seem to have been used much by the Carolingian Franks or by the Anglo-Saxons; the artist here is probably intending to show an ancient Greek or Roman. The strange helmet too almost certainly has no basis in reality: it is intended to represent the*

*crested helmets of the Greeks. However the shield, sword and cross-gartered leggings are of contemporary style. Similar artistic conventions were in Anglo-Saxon England, making the interpretation of illustrations of clothing and armour fraught with difficulty. (Royal Armouries, Tower of London)*



of woollen cloth spun on upright looms. Even so, Anglo-Saxon fashion was strongly conservative. Most garments have features that can be seen also in the dress of the Germans.

### Cloaks

Most Anglo-Saxon men wore the cloak, probably much the same as that of the Germans. Cloak brooches dating from throughout the Anglo-Saxon period are common archaeological finds. Changes in fashion are more obvious in this piece of metalwork than in the garment itself. Earlier brooches are of a cruciform design with a bowed section to allow material to be pulled through between the body and the back-mounted pin. Later brooches were mostly circular. It has been suggested that there were regional variations in brooches, the Anglians for example preferring different shapes to the Saxons. This is difficult to prove, and seems to be going beyond the evidence.

The cloaks themselves were rectangular in shape and about 2.5 m long by 1.5 m wide. When pinned at the right shoulder, as they seem to be in nearly all contemporary illustrations, they hung to about knee-length. Most cloaks had tablet-woven braid as decoration around the edges.

### Tunics

The tunic was made of woollen yarn. It was usually worn belted at the waist in such a manner as to raise the hem to the knees; when worn without a belt the hem would hang to the calves. There is some controversy about tunic sleeves: most contemporary pictures show the lower parts of sleeves heavily rumpled. Some authorities suggest that sleeves were very long, reaching well down over the fingers, but were worn pulled or folded back to the wrist, except in cold weather. Others suggest this 'rumpling' is merely artistic convention.

The neck of the tunic had either a square or circular opening for the head, generally reinforced with a placket, and was closed either by a drawstring, brooch or bead. Variegated colours could be woven into any garment, though the Anglo-Saxons appear to have preferred plain hues. Interestingly, excavated material from the bogs of Schleswig suggest their Continental German cousins preferred checked or tartan patterns.

### Leggings and footwear

Leggings found in the homelands of the Angles and Saxons usually take the form of trousers. A pair found in a bog at Thorsberg in Denmark have feet sewn into them with slits at the ankles to allow them to be put on more easily. By the 10th century separate leggings or hose had become fashionable, sometimes allowed to hang loose around the ankles. Alternatively, long fabric strips were wound closely



*The biblical 'Goliath' dressed in Anglo-Saxon fashion from a mid-11th century manuscript. His sword hangs through a loop in the narrow baldric which is thrown around the shoulder and not under the arm (an illustrator's error). The tunic is of typical Dark Age form, with rumpled sleeves and decorative inset material at the neck which is closed by a drawstring. The rim*

*of the shield is unlikely to be of metal and more likely to be of hardened leather nailed and bound to the edge, and then painted decoratively. The figures on the right wear cloaks pinned on the right shoulder by circular brooches. (British Library, Ms. Cotton Tiberius C VI)*

about the calf, like puttees, or sometimes more widely spaced according to taste. The Old English term for these leg bindings was *mininga* and they were usually worn over the legs of trousers. The bindings had the dual benefit of confining the loose folds of the ample trousers (protecting them from wear) and providing protection from cold and dirt in bad weather. They would have been particularly useful on campaign.

Few remains of Anglo-Saxon shoes survive, though it is known that the words *scoh*, *gesceo* and *switler* in Old





Differences were readily apparent between the dress of Anglo-Saxons and Vikings. The two men, centre and right, with the characteristic Phrygian caps (here of woollen fabric) represent Anglo-Saxons, while the figure at left, with Gjermundbu-style Scandinavian helmet at his feet, represents an Anglo-Dane. One of the rare surviving Anglo-Saxon personal letters written in the early 11th century refers to the two rival camps of fashion. The writer criticises his brother Edward, for adopting 'pagan' Danish ways. It is, he says, 'by such evil habits that you despise your race and your ancestors, since in insult to them you dress in Danish fashion with bared necks and blinded eyes'. (Colchester Historical Enactment Society, photo: Margaret Key)

English all denote leather footwear. The best surviving examples are Scandinavian, which would have been broadly similar; they were mostly made of cow hide. Belts were also made of leather, and were normally no more than an inch (2.5 cm) wide – a dimension revealed in the width of copper alloy belt-buckles and strap-ends, all of which have survived even though the belts themselves have decayed.

### Headgear

Anglo-Saxon manuscripts of the 10th and 11th centuries often show military men wearing a cap with a characteristic forward drooping peak. This is sometimes known today as the 'Phrygian' cap, after its similarity to an item of the classical period. This cap has come to be seen as something of a 'hallmark' of the Anglo-Saxon warrior. There are,



# EVERYDAY LIFE

however, several problems with the evidence. Many late Anglo-Saxon illustrations are copied directly from Carolingian or Byzantine originals. In these empires and in Rome, where the cap was also used, it was a symbol of free status. It is likely that Anglo-Saxon artists drew such caps to emphasise the social standing of warriors rather than to show an actual item of dress. On the other hand, it is just as reasonable that the 'Phrygian' cap was in common use by the later Anglo-Saxons precisely as a symbol of status.

Cockscomb-like crests are shown on 'Phrygian' caps in some Anglo-Saxon and Continental manuscripts, and have been interpreted for many years as a feature of Anglo-Saxon headgear. The fact that these crests appear mostly in illustrations of biblical subjects is generally ignored. In all probability they were merely attempts by the illustrator to make the caps look archaic – Byzantine manuscripts show similar caps fitted with Greek-style helmet crests. Representations of these crests seem to have degenerated over the centuries to produce the strange cockscomb form in the later illustrations.

Even if the Phrygian cap was an actual item of Anglo-Saxon dress, the materials from which it was made are not known. The caps are often shown in manuscript illustrations of battles, which suggests a fairly solid construction, possibly in leather. If, however, the caps were merely comfortable 'fatigue' hats, then they would probably be made of wool or felt.

*'When not engaged in warfare they spend a certain amount of time in hunting, but more in idleness, thinking of nothing else but sleeping and eating. For the boldest and most warlike men have no regular employment, the care of house, home and the fields being left to women, old men and weaklings of the family. In so dawdling away their time they show a strange inconsistency – at the same time loving indolence and yet hating peace.'*

In these words Tacitus describes the slothful everyday existence of the Germanic warrior. Though written four centuries before the Anglo-Saxon conquest of Britain, Tacitus's comments seem to apply equally to early Anglo-Saxon warrior life. Farming was considered too lowly a task for the average Angle or Saxon warrior, who much preferred to go on a hunting expedition or, better still, loll about at home, eating, sleeping and, of course, drinking with his fellow warriors.

In later years when the Anglo-Saxons had established a more permanent settlement, some thegns would have had to adjust to more agricultural work. Provincial thegns controlling five *hide* recruitment areas certainly would have supervised farming, and may have lent a hand themselves during the harvest. In the early and middle

*The puzzle of the short mail shirt, part one. The dress of the two sword armed warriors in this 11th-century manuscript presents something of a mystery. They seem to be wearing short-sleeved, waist-length body armour which has been interpreted as mail, but could perhaps be some form of leather armour. The female on the left represents 'Luxury' and is ordering a horn-player to sound the signal for attack. (British Library, Ms. Cotton Cleopatra C VIII)*





periods, though, the true key to life of the semi-professional warriors that made up the *hearthweru* bodyguard units was the long hall.

### Life in the long halls

The long hall or *heall* was the centre of the estate of a warrior's lord. It was the home of the lord, and of his most trusted warriors, who acted as his bodyguard and companions. The long hall was the hub of all social activity. Within its walls the lord and his thegns ate, drank, discussed, argued, and sometimes fought. The bonds between them were strengthened by sharing feasts, the giving of valuable gifts, and listening to recitations of warlike poetry.

To get a good idea of the appearance of a royal long hall, we need go no further than Yeavinger in Northumberland, where excavations revealed a royal palace of one of

the kings of Bernicia from the early Christian period. The main building was the long hall. The interior of the hall was a large open space with a central fire pit. Long rectangular tables and benches (*medubenc*) would have been erected for major meals, and removed when the company prepared for sleep – usually in the small hours judging by most accounts. Temporary partitions or textile hangings provided a measure of privacy. Women of high rank lived in separate apartments with their female servants. The junior warriors of the *hearthweru* (then known as the '*geoguth*') and unmarried senior thegns would live within the long hall. The *duguth* or veterans who had married or been granted land would live either in other buildings or on their own estates.

Near the long hall at Yeavinger was a unique 'amphitheatre'. This consisted of wedge-shaped stepped bank, with seating for about 120 people. It was probably the place in which the king of Bernicia addressed his followers. (This incidentally gives us another estimate for the small size of the *hearthweru* of a relatively well-to-do king in about AD 600). Around the long hall were a variety of small buildings providing storage space, extra dwellings and workshops, as well as sites that had perhaps pagan religious functions. Within this complex that was effectively the capital of Bernicia, the king's thegns were housed, fed, entertained, trained and prepared for war.

A 10th-century royal estate at Cheddar in Somerset has a similar range of buildings to Yeavinger, though with

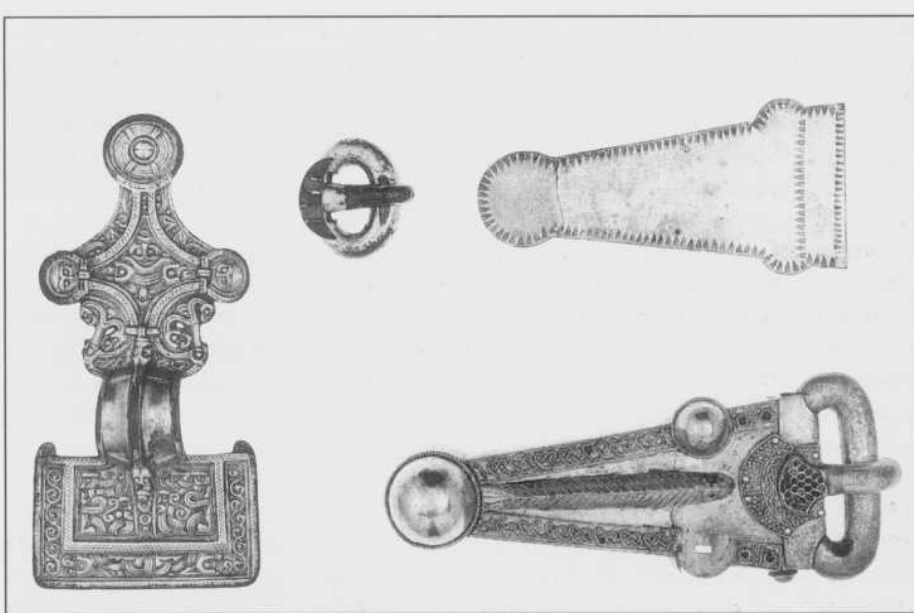
*The puzzle of the short mail shirt, part two. The four figures here represent (from left to right) Emotion, Fear, Labour and Vigour. 'Fear' is a warrior equipped with spear, shield and some form of body armour. This 'armour', which has been interpreted as a short mail shirt, may however be a ragged jerkin of wild*

*animal skin, such as bear or wolf, stressing the aspect of ferocity. Note also the leg-bindings (winingas), Phrygian cap, rumpled sleeves and cape held near the neck – all features characteristic of 10–11th-century dress. (British Library, Ms. Cotton Cleopatra C.VIII)*





The Crundale hoard found in Kent, dateable to about AD 650, and perhaps part of the dress of a high ranking thegn or nobleman. These pieces are executed in silver, gold and cloisonné work. This latter technique of mounting garnets in gold cells can be seen on the triangular belt buckle. The fish on this buckle may be a Christian symbol. The brooch is of a kind usually classed as East Anglian; it is decorated with a curious mix of pagan heads and a Christian cross. (By courtesy of the Board of Trustees of the British Museum)



an additional stone Christian chapel. The practicalities of supporting the group of armed warriors capable of maintaining royal power seems to have altered little over 300 years.

The best-known work on the life in the long halls (indeed of Germanic warrior life in general) is the poem *Beowulf*. The exact date of composition is not known though an oral version must have existed for some time before it was written down. The final form is probably best attributed, on linguistic grounds, to Mercia in the reign of Offa (about AD 780). The poem follows the exploits of Beowulf, a relative and royal thegn of Hygelac, king of a southern Swedish tribe, the Geats. Hygelac is known to have died in AD 521 during a raid on the territory of a tribe called the Hetware living near the Rhine. Although the poem *Beowulf* is set in a semi-mythical past, the attitudes it contains are very much those current in late 8th-century England.

The early passages of *Beowulf* take place in and around the long hall of the Danish King Hrothgar, which was situated probably near Lejre in modern Denmark. Hrothgar's long hall even has a name, *Heorot*, and is described as covered with gilded wooden carvings; it was a place famous throughout the Scandinavian world. The plot of *Beowulf* largely concern the attacks on *Heorot* by a supernatural monster called Grendel, who is angered by the sounds of human camaraderie in the long hall, and steals in during the night to butcher the warriors of King Hrothgar's 'hearth-guard' while they lie asleep on their benches. When Beowulf has killed Grendel, Grendel's even more terrible mother resumes the attacks on *Heorot*. To a band of warriors listening to what was effectively a

horror story in their own long hall on a dark winter night, *Beowulf* must have had its own particular appeal.

### Food, drink and feasting

The food eaten in the long halls was mostly high in protein, and included a large proportion of meat. This was normally boiled in communal cauldrons suspended on chains from the rafters of the hall above the fire pit and served as a broth; alternatively carcasses could be roasted whole over an open fire, usually on metal spits. Sausages, made then mostly of horsemeat, were known as *mearhaeccel*. Bread was also common, and seems to have had ritual significance: the word 'lord' derives from the Old English *hlaford* ('loaf ward' or 'loaf guardian') which suggest bread was handed out ceremonially by the host to those attending a feast. Eating utensils were chiefly knives (*metseax*) which were smaller versions of the single-edged fighting knife. Spoons or *metesticca* were made of horn, wood, bone or metal. Forks were not yet common.

Alcohol, the great Germanic social lubricant, was of major importance to the thegn. Most highly prized of all was mead, made mostly from honey – though the Old English word *medu* extended to cover any form of drink. Malted ale (*mealtealoth*) was another favourite. Drinking vessels might be animal horns with decorative metal fittings. Imported glass bowls or beakers were used by those of higher rank.

Old English poetry often refers to warriors engaging in communal eating and drinking. Seating arrangements reflected the status of thegns and were jealously guarded and sometimes argued over. Senior retainers would sit closest to the monarch (reflecting dispositions on the field



of battle). Important lords and kinsmen would be served food and drink by the noblewomen as a matter of hospitality.

Feasting, often to excess, took place in sessions that would last all day and night. These were one of the main means of bonding the group together. Discussions often took place during such feasts and important decisions were often made (though usually reviewed in the clearer and more sober light of the following day). However, boasts made during drinking bouts to achieve great things in battle were considered binding on the thegn who made them. Even though made under the influence of alcohol vows were not taken lightly. Quarrels and drunken brawls were frequent and commonly resolved by combat to the death.

### Pastimes

The more militarily useful of a thegn's free-time activities were hunting and hawking, which developed skills useful in battle. The quarry included wolf, boar, deer or small game like hare, otter and possibly beaver. The rabbit seems to have been first introduced as a game animal only after the Norman Conquest when managed warrens were established. Although the main hunting weapon was the spear, skilful warriors showed off by taking boars with sword and shield alone. Hunting dogs are shown on the Bayeux Tapestry being loaded onto Harold Godwinson's ship at the start of his diplomatic mission to Normandy.

Hawking appears to have been particularly popular, especially on long journeys, and to break up the monotony of campaign life. Some members of the *hearthweru* seem to have even taken hawks onto the battlefield – in the *Battle of*

*Maldon* poem, one of Ealdorman Byrhtnoth's close retainers frees his hawk only immediately before battle commences.

Of the less active pastimes, the Anglo-Saxons are known to have played a number of board games. These included variants of modern backgammon, also *nine-man's morris*, and *fox & geese*. Chess does not appear to have been nearly as popular as it was among the Vikings. A set of gaming pieces made from horses' teeth decorated with copper alloy pins were found in a pagan Anglo-Saxon burial at Faversham in Kent, but it is not certain what sort of game would have been played with them. Tacitus mentions that the Germans were addicted to gambling with dice, so much so that 'when everything else is gone they will stake their personal liberty on the last decisive throw'. Unfortunately, we do not know how common this perennial soldier's vice was among Anglo-Saxon thegns.

### Poems and riddles

The pagan Anglo-Saxons were at best semi-literate. The runic *futhork* (alphabet) was widely known, but in practice it was used mainly to mark the ownership or manufacture of items and to create magical spells. Literacy was confined mostly to the Church clergy, to whom the Latin alphabet remained dominant, and to whom the runic *futhork* was of little more than antiquarian interest. Nevertheless the *futhork* remained in use well into the late Anglo-Saxon period.

Stories like *Beowulf* are unlikely to have been read by the average thegn, rather they would have been recited from memory – probably by a travelling storyteller who made his living from recounting tales which he had learnt



*A selection of belt buckles and jewellery from Barham Down, Kent. Dating from the 7th century these items include a Roman coin mounted as a pendant; below this is a short string of ceramic and bone beads in matched pairs. (By courtesy of the Board of Trustees of the British Museum)*



by heart. Performances of the poem in the long hall would have been grand occasions. As well as entertainment, they gave an audience of thegns a role model of loyalty, ferocity and commitment they would be expected to emulate.

Another favourite form of entertainment was the poetic riddle. Some of these were ribald, verging on the obscene, though usually with quite innocent solutions, typically the name of a part of a warrior's equipment, or of a farming implement. A good example (though not bawdy) is the following riddle from the *Exeter Book*:

*I am solitary, wounded by iron  
Battered by weapons, tired of battle-play  
Weary of sword-edges. I often witness war,  
Fierce fight, with no hope of help,  
Or any succour, before I,  
Amongst warriors, am totally destroyed.  
Hammered blades, hard-edged and horribly sharp,  
Batter me, the handiwork of smiths,  
Biting in the burh. I must abide at all times the hateful strife.  
Never in all the habitations of man  
Could I find the medicine to heal my scars with herbs,  
But the wounds increase on me by day and night.*

The solution to this particular riddle is 'shield'. Many others are known, nearly a hundred are contained in the *Exeter Book* alone, though not all are soluble.

For a thegn who was about to set off on campaign, the long hall, with its large central fire, abundant alcohol, and hearty camaraderie, was highly inviting. Bede recounts a passage in which one of King Edwin's chief men compares the brief life of man to the flight of a bird through a fire-lit long hall on a winter's night. The outside world is in darkness and lashed by storm, the long hall is the only fitting place for a worthy man.

# ON CAMPAIGN

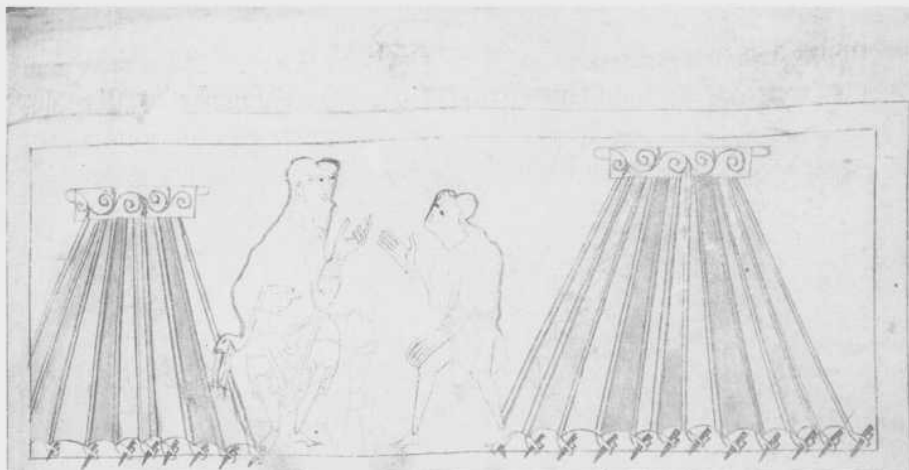
The exact method by which the *fyrð* were summoned out on campaign is not understood in detail, but the decision to do so undoubtedly originated with the monarch or the *ealdorman*. The summons to war would probably be carried by a royal messenger similar to the *horswealas* ('Welsh horsemen') recorded in the *Laws of Ine*. In emergency the *fyrð* could be summoned by the lighting of beacons on prominent hills or headlands, much as was done during the attempted invasion by the Spanish Armada in 1588. Certainly signal beacons were known in the Anglo-Saxon age, and for example (according to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*) were used to communicate between parts of a Danish invasion force in 1006.

## Mustering of an army

The *fyrð* gathered at mustering points up and down the country. Each locality appears to have had its own traditional mustering point, established by centuries of regular usage; unfortunately few are known today. One such mustering point, used for example by Alfred in his campaign of 878, was Ecgbrihtesstan ('Edge-bright's Stone') near Selwood on the borders of Hampshire and Berkshire; this was the assembly point of the *fyrð* of Hampshire and Berkshire.

The selected *fyrð* member, who was either a thegn, a wealthy *ceorl* or a paid substitute, made his way to the appointed place on horseback, or more probably on foot, by 'roads' that were little more than tracks. Men obligated to gather at a particular point would normally serve together as a single unit. When the local commander arrived, whether a shire-reeve or *ealdorman*, he would conduct a review of his troops.

*Anglo-Saxon tents. On campaign, senior thegns sheltered under structures of this kind. The tents appear to be made up of coloured panels, of canvas or heavy linen which are perhaps painted rather than dyed. (British Library, Ms. Cotton Claudius B IV; 11th century)*



Aluam dactnam andlice dreo hund manna, realita cyne



In the Carolingian Empire the responsibility for ensuring each man of the army was properly equipped fell on nobles of the rank of *comes* (count). In the *Capitulare Aquisgranense* (AD 801–813) it is expressly stated: ‘And the count himself shall see in what manner they are prepared, that is, each one shall have a lance, shield, bow with two strings, 12 arrows . . . let them have breast plates or helmets and let them proceed to the army, that is, in the summer.’ It is reasonable to assume, though no records survive, that in Anglo-Saxon England shire officials, perhaps senior thegns, had to perform a similar duty in checking the equipment of the *fyrð*, and in ensuring that the correct men had turned up.

According to the Berkshire entry of the Domesday Book: ‘If anyone summoned on an expedition did not go,

he forfeited all his land to the king.’ Relief from such a punishment could be obtained if 40 shillings was paid by the obligated man to his lord to pay for a substitute. If no substitute had been hired, then the lord, in turn, had to pay the full 40 shillings to the king.

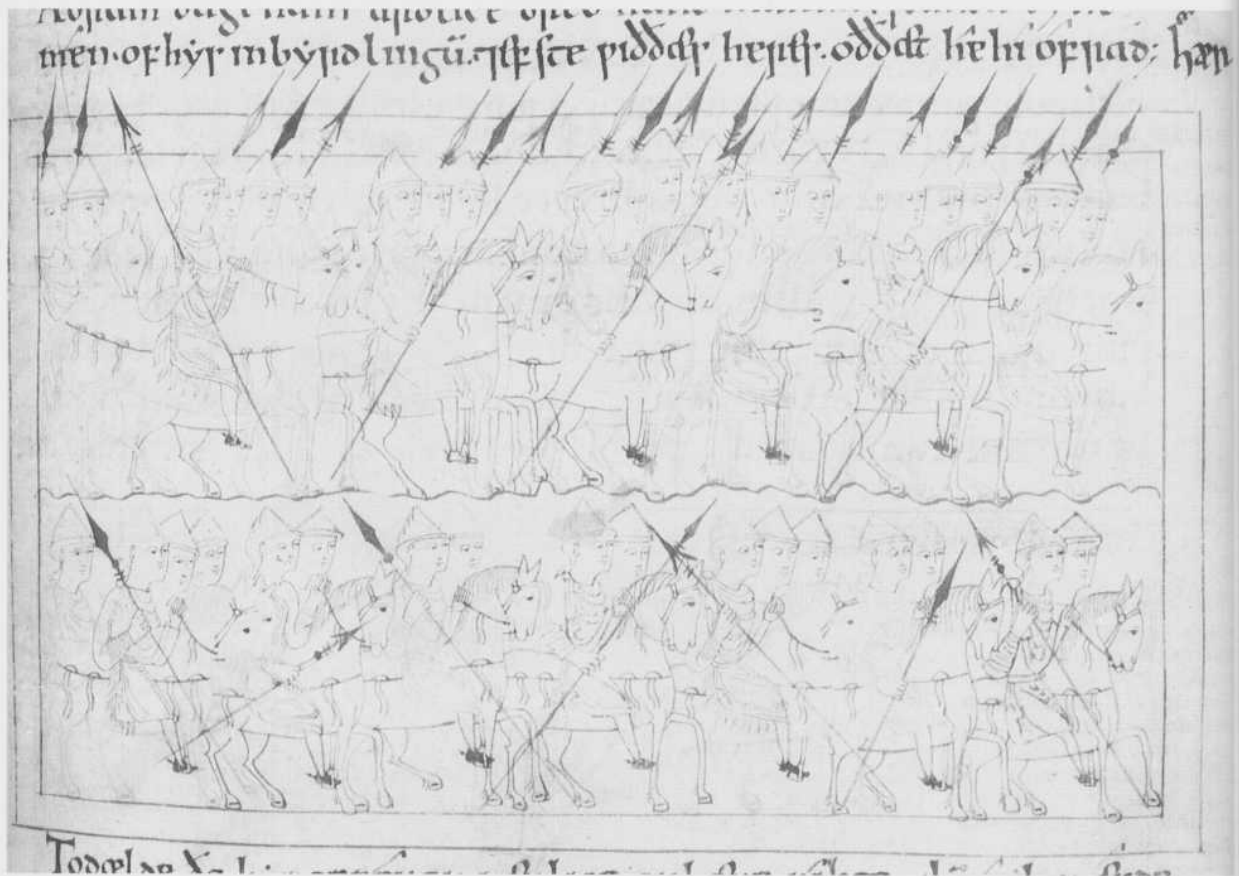
Once the local mustering was complete, the individual shire contingents would march to or be joined by the king with his household troops and mercenaries. As the army progressed through friendly territory it would have been joined by other contingents. A route known as the ‘*Fyrdstraet*’ in the West Midlands seems from its name to have been associated with the movement of Anglo-Saxon armies. Service normally continued for 60 days after which the *fyrð* was at liberty to return home.

### Supply and logistics

The individual soldier carried a certain quantity of food, supplies and equipment on his person; but the bulk of the army’s war-gear would have been carried on pack horses and carts. Carts were drawn by draught horses or oxen, but might also be light agricultural vehicles pulled by hand. Non-combatant *ceorls* seem to have been detailed to look after much of this baggage, and were also employed to carry it on their backs. This is hinted, for example, in

*An army of mounted thegns on the move, from an 11th century manuscript. The warriors are not prepared for immediate action, having no shields or armour, and being encumbered by travelling cloaks. The rumbled cone-shaped*

*headgear depicted is subject to the usual problems of interpretation, and it is difficult to be certain if these are of textile or leather. (British Library, Ms. Cotton Claudius B IV)*





Bede's anecdote about the aftermath of the battle of the Trent in AD 679. Imma, a fugitive from the beaten Northumbrian force, disguised himself as a *ceorl* detailed to carry provisions for the defeated army.

Towns along the march route would be expected to supply the army with provisions, as would lands belonging to the Church and to the king. It is not possible to say whether these provisions were purchased, or simply taken. One late Icelandic source records the *fyrð* on campaign in Yorkshire living at free quarter on the open country and by occupying settlements.

Thegns in the army used existing villages as shelter, but could also make use of tents. The Old English term for tent is *teld*. References to tents are relatively common. During the Brunanburh campaign in 937, the *fyrð* set up their tents in a false camp south of the pre-arranged battlefield to deceive the Hiberno-Norse enemies as to their true deployment. Tents are illustrated in several 10th- and 11th-century Anglo-Saxon manuscripts. These illustrations are, however, based on Continental sources, and seem to be conventional depictions rather than drawings from life.

The encampment of the *fyrð*, whether in a commanded village or under canvas, would include large numbers of communal fires where groups of thegns gathered. They cooked their food, or had it cooked for them, by *ceorls* acting as servants, in large cauldrons made up from shaped and riveted sheets of iron. Here warriors rested, made light repairs to their gear. If there was time they probably underwent weapons practice and perhaps rudimentary drill in battlefield formation. If the halt was prolonged, which was not at all unusual, these camps must have quickly begun to resemble shanty towns.

### The extended call-up

One problem that faced all Anglo-Saxon leaders was keeping an army in the field for any length of time. Thegns and *ceorls* were not keen to spend long periods away from their homes and farms. The laws required them to remain on service for 60 days. When the required period was over, they would return home, whether the campaign had reached a conclusion or not.

Alfred the Great went some way to solving this

problem, as is told in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* entry for AD 892. He divided the levies into two sections; these alternated their service between home and the camp. By splitting the 'call-up', Alfred was able to rely on the service of half as many warriors for twice as long. The only fighters exempted were those required to guard *burhs* (forts).

At first such arrangements did not work very effectively. In 893 the English army defeated and then besieged the Danes on an island in the mouth of the River Colne in Essex. However, when their obligated period of duty had ended and their food was exhausted, the army dispersed for home before the second section of the army had arrived to relieve them, allowing the Danes to escape. The last mention of this split call-up occurs in about 920.

### Destruction caused by the army

By and large the army on campaign seems to have done relatively little damage to the friendly territory it marched through. The supply and provisioning system was sufficiently well organised to cope. A notable exception occurred in 1006 during a campaign against a major Viking raid, as recorded in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*:



*Anglo-Saxon thegns equipped for battle. They have set aside their cloaks, and donned helmets in place of (or possibly over) their Phrygian caps; both wear long tunics belted at the waist. The figure on the right has the typical weapon set of a 10th-*

*century thegn, spear, broad-sword and shield; the figure on the left has a more unusual set consisting of axe, seax and shield. (Colchester Historical Enactment Society, photo: Margaret Key)*





*'David and Goliath', a biblical scene in an 11th-century Anglo-Saxon manuscript. It is possible that Saxon armies contained slingers though their low status means they receive no mention in Anglo-Saxon records. Goliath wears a conical helmet and mail-shirt, split at the front to*

*facilitate riding on horseback. Note, however, that he appears to have been stripped of this valuable mail shirt in the foreground, before David delivers the coup de grâce with a sword. (British Library, Ms. Harley 603)*

*'Then the king ordered the whole nation [the General Fyrd?] from Wessex to Mercia to be called out, and they were out on military service against the Danish army the whole autumn, . . . the Danish army went about as it pleased, and the English levy caused the people every sort of harm, so that they profited neither from the native army nor the foreign army . . .'*

Such depredations wrought by a friendly army, in part at least, resulted in the refusal of many regions to support each other in the following years.

The Viking assault on Ipswich in 1010 was aimed

directly at the mustering point of the *fyrd*, who were scattered before their gathering was complete. A series of disruptions of this sort (and incompetent leadership) meant that by the end of 1010 the regional armies were unable to co-ordinate their activity at any level above that of the shire. By 1013 the national Danish army under King Sweyn was able to extract money and supplies at will from the English kingdom. In 1016 Edmund Ironside, the son of Aethelraed Unraed, attempted to raise a national levy, but the provincial *fyrd* refused to commit itself to action unless the king turned up personally, along with his household and the London contingent. Disillusionment with the native English dynasty led to the thegns of England accepting Cnut as the new king of England in 1016, so establishing a new Danish dynasty on the throne.

### March rates

The 1066 campaign provides interesting data on march movements of an army back and forwards across Britain. King Harold's army, which was formed principally of the *huscarles* making up the royal bodyguard, marched from London to Stamford Bridge in Yorkshire, fought a major battle, and then returned to fight at Hastings in Sussex all within the space of one month. The dating of these events is sufficiently detailed in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* to allow a reasonably accurate estimate of the march rate.

At some point in the second week of September 1066, the King and *huscarles* appear to have arrived simultaneously in London to be greeted with the news that King Harald Hardrada of Norway had invaded and was likely to attack York. Immediately Harold Godwinson 'marched northward, day and night, as quickly as he could assemble his levies'. Exactly how long the mustering of the *fyrd* delayed his march is not known. By 25 September, Harold's army surprised the Norwegians at Stamford Bridge, and defeated them decisively. The journey of over 200 miles had taken approximately 12 days – not far short of 17 miles per day.

Harold's footsore warriors were given little time to rest. On 28 September Duke William of Normandy came ashore at Pevensey. The delay for news to reach Harold at York can only be guessed. But on 14 October, Harold was drawing up his army again at Hastings. The march of almost 240 miles had taken approximately 14 days – a rate again of about 17 miles per day.

This was a respectable march rate, almost equal to that of better-organised armies before the era of the petrol engine. The figures would seem to confirm the theory that the *huscarles* used horses for campaign transport. It would also suggest that the considerable numbers of the *fyrd* who managed to keep up with the *huscarles* were at least as well furnished with mounts.



# THE THEGN IN BATTLE

Anglo-Saxon poems, such as *Beowulf*, contain surprisingly little detailed description of battle. The passages they do contain are usually too highly stylised to be of much historical value. This may, however, to some degree reflect the way that battle was itself stylised and ruled by custom and tradition.

There is, however, a ‘battle poem’, an untitled piece usually known as the *Battle of Maldon*, relating the events of a battle in AD 991 between the local forces of Essex and an invading Viking army, which, though incomplete, gives us a surprisingly good view of how the Anglo-Saxons themselves regarded battle. We can add in details from a few other surviving texts, most notably the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, the *Battle of Brunanburh* (contained in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*), and the incomplete *Fight at Finnsburh Poem*. Most valuable of all, of course, are accounts of the battle of Hastings – by far the best-documented Anglo-Saxon battle.

## Tactical formations

The nature of Anglo-Saxon battle formations is not entirely clear in the sources. The Continental Germans seem to have preferred the use of the triangular wedge. According to Tacitus, the traditional battle array of Germanic foot-soldiers was a single line made up of a series of wedges. Wedges undoubtedly were used in Britain, though they are better attested in the saga literature as in use by the Vikings. Commanders positioned themselves at the front apex of the wedges. Later Old English words describing a leader are *ord* and *ordfruma* (*ord* = ‘point’, *fruma* = ‘leader’) – suggesting the continued employment of wedges by the Anglo-Saxons. The wedge seems to be a characteristic of *heathweru*-type units, and of the early period when armies were small. The less well-trained troops of the *fyrð* seem to have deployed in less sophisticated formations.

That the *fyrð* deployed on the battlefield in discrete units, rather than in a single massed formation, is at least certain. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* repeatedly refers to sub-divisions of the *fyrð* – for example, ‘the men of Kent’, ‘the people of Devonshire and Somerset’, sometimes even in terms of specific towns such as Gloucester, Oxford and London. Men with close local affiliations and blood-ties were more likely to support and encourage each other in war.

The *Chronicle* makes clear that *fyrð* from different regions not only were divided for administrative purposes

into separate units, but actually fought in them. For example, in 1010 in a battle between the army of Ealdorman Ulfkytel of East Anglia and an invading force of Danes, the East Anglians are said to have fled but the men of Cambridgeshire stood until broken. Men from a single locality that had mustered together, and gone on campaign together, would also have stood next to each other when the battle ranks were drawn up. Unfortunately very little is known about the size and tactical sub-division (if any) of such regional *fyrð* units. It is possible, though, that *shires* and *hundreds* (or *wapentakes*) were tactical, as well as administrative divisions.

The standard term used in the poems to describe a battle formation (or indeed the entire battle array) is *scildburh* – literally ‘shield-fort’, apparently a dense block. The men of the front ranks would doubtless have been the best equipped, with men towards the rear having increasingly poorer weapons, some at the rear having only improvised weapons. The *scildburh* was probably more like a square block than a line. It would appear to have been capable of forming up in defensive manner, with the men simply facing out in all directions.

Household troops (the *hearthweru* made up of noble companions, and later the *huscarles*) seem to have been deployed separately from the *fyrð*. Probably they were placed in the most exposed positions where their example could encourage the less enthusiastic levies in the shire units. It is possible that they could be deployed in the forward ranks of *fyrð* formations as a ‘stiffening’ to the less well-trained troops, though this is uncertain. At Hastings, however, the Royal Huscarles are recorded as standing to the last, which suggests they were drawn up as a separate body.

According to the late Icelandic *Flateyjarbók*, which is not always reliable, the *huscarles* were divided administratively into two bodies, one based in London and the other at Slessvik, an unidentified site near York. It is not known if these would have been deployed together or separately on the battlefield. King Harold’s brothers, Gyrth and Leofwyn, are known to have had their own *huscarles*. The Bayeux Tapestry depicts them being cut down with their followers in a different attack to that in which Harold died. This may mean that their bodyguards were fielded separately from Harold’s own *huscarles*, who fought by Harold’s side and continued to fight after he had been killed. However, the bodies of Gyrth and Leofwyn were said to have been found lying close to Harold after the battle, which would contradict this idea.

## Command and control

The thegn looked for direction in battle from much the same authority figures as he did in time of peace. The





*Sequence of shots showing the firing of a slingshot. A cheap and simple weapon, the sling would have been familiar to the Anglo-Saxons. The evidence for its use in battle in the Anglo-Saxon age is, however, very slight. Some of the less well-equipped*

*fyrð may have improvised slings, in the absence of other weapons. (Colchester Historical Enactment Society, Photos: Margaret Key and Paul Adams)*

troops, putting them in order of battle, haranguing them, and giving advice on how best to use their weapons. In battle itself they were expected to be foremost in the fighting, displaying the most conspicuous courage, and shouting constant encouragements to their warriors.

One of the best descriptions of the minutiae of Anglo-Saxon generalship is in the description of the English commander, Ealdorman Byrhtnoth, in the *Maldon Poem*:

*Then Byrhtnoth started to arrange his troops,  
Rode and advised, and showed the warriors  
How they should stand and hold their place, and bade  
That they should hold their shields up properly,  
Firm in their fists, and should not be afraid.  
When he had all his troops correctly placed,  
He dismounted, among the people that loved him best,  
His own most dear and loyal hearth troop.*

#### The use of the horse in battle

It is clear from the *Maldon Poem* that commanders like Byrhtnoth remained on horseback until the moment before battle was joined. A more vexed question is the role played by the horses belonging to individual thegns and *huscarles*.

As mentioned earlier, a significant proportion of *huscarles* and thegns had horses. Yet only a single battle is recorded in which an Anglo-Saxon army attempted to fight mounted. This was the battle of Hereford in 1055, where

overall command of the army was in the hands of the king if he was present, and there are examples of the *fyrð* refusing to fight unless he was. In the earlier period, individual shire contingents would probably have been commanded by an *ealdorman*. By the 10th and 11th centuries, the power of the typical *ealdorman* had increased to the extent that he now normally controlled several shires, and had the right to raise independent armies for local defence under his own personal command. At the battle of Maldon in AD 991, for example, overall command of an English defence force was taken by Byrhtnoth, the *ealdorman* of Essex. With this increase in the scope of the *ealdorman's* duties, command of the individual shire contingents devolved upon royal officials called *shire-reeves* – a word better known in its modern form ‘sheriff’. The commanders of the smaller sub-division of the main bodies would probably have been of the rank of thegn.

Anglo-Saxon commanders give the impression in the poems of being father figures, experienced men who led their followers by example, riding at the head of their



an English army under the recently appointed Norman earl of Hereford, Ralph the Timid, met a rebel force of assorted English, Welsh and Irish troops. Earl Ralph's army, which was composed in large part of the Herefordshire *fyrð*, seems to have been given training in Norman-style mounted tactics. It seems to have done them little good: the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* says: 'before a spear was thrown, the English fled, because they had been made to fight on horseback'. Though the blame for the defeat is put squarely on this 'unnatural' (to an Anglo-Saxon) mode of warfare, the true cause may have been nothing more than the Norman earl's unpopularity. Hereford was an exceptional battle and it would seem that Anglo-Saxon *thegns* normally dismounted (like Byrhtnoth) before the battle commenced, and sent their horses well to the rear.

### Attitude to battle

To see into the mind of an Anglo-Saxon as he stood drawn up in battle array, waiting for battle to begin is difficult since no personal accounts of battle or diaries survive, though the poems are perhaps the next best thing. What is certain is that the average Anglo-Saxon did not fear death in quite the same way as the modern soldier. The Anglo-Saxon *thegn* believed strongly in fate. His life was a 'thread', spun and woven by three immortal sisters, the 'Fates'. If he was to die in battle it was pre-ordained, to avoid death impossible. By living well and fighting bravely he would at least not tempt the Fates to bring a premature end to the spinning of his thread. If the Fates were against him, all he could do was to die well, so his reputation would live on after him.

The arrival of Christianity did little to change this view of pre-destination. By the 8th and 9th centuries, when Anglo-Saxon oral literature began to be written down, the name *Metod* (measurer) described, equally, both God and Fate. Christianity did, however, bring other influences.

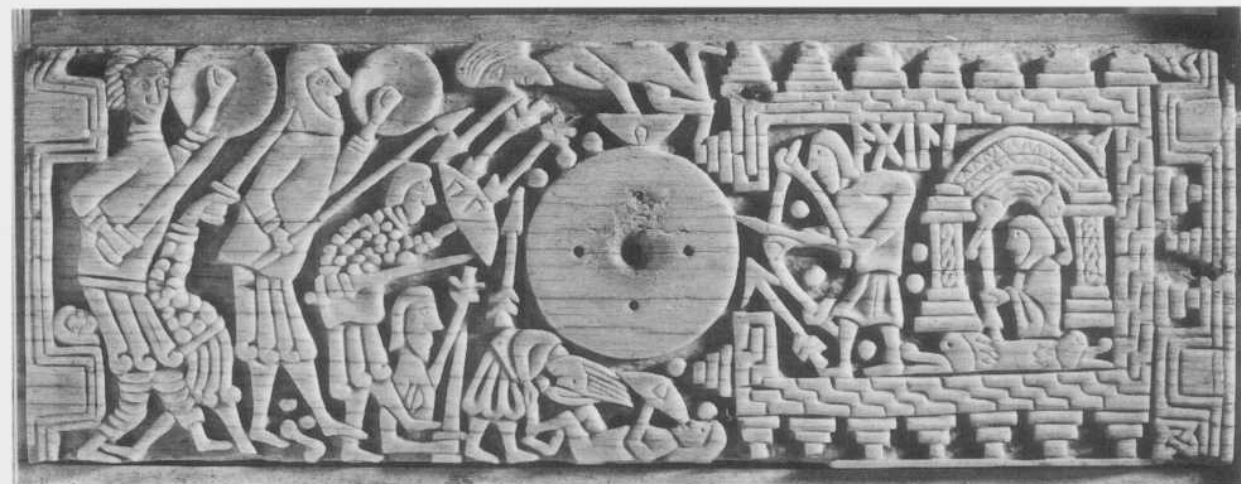
When new waves of Scandinavian invaders arrived in the 9th century the Christianised Anglo-Saxon *thegn* had new obligations. He was now a protector of Christendom against the heathen. Any compunctions about killing the enemy were now removed by religion. If he died in battle against pagans he was assured remission of his sins and an instant place in Heaven.

The Church assumed a key role in war; priests served Holy Mass to the assembled army before battle, and lectured their Christian flock on the need to fight for the holy cause. In pagan times, an army about to engage in battle had sung in praise of the pagan gods. (Tacitus mentions specifically songs in honour of 'Hercules', probably the Roman equivalent of the Germanic god, Thunor.) With the advent of Christianity, these were replaced by hymns and prayers to the glory of the Christian God.

If Christian duties were not enough, any attempt to flee on the part of the individual *thegn* was further tempered by obligations to his lord and peer group. Loyalty unto death is a theme that pervades the literature. Tacitus mentions the fate of any would-be Germanic deserter was to be hanged in a secluded grove or drowned in bog, so that other men could not see his shame. Such capital punishments are not mentioned in the Anglo-Saxon records: the greatest penalty was to separate the *thegn* from the people who gave his life meaning. The worst punishment for cowardice was Declaration of 'Nothing'. A *thegn* declared 'Nothing' became a non-

*The lid of the Franks casket, of 8th century date, and possibly Northumbrian. The scene shows a man called Aegil (identified by runes above him) defending his home*

*with a bow. One of the assailants seems to be wearing a 'Coppergate' type helmet. Others have mail shirts, and knee-length tunics. (British Museum)*





person – outside the law, with no position in society. He could be killed with absolute impunity, but just as importantly, had no home, no lord and no friends.

### Tactics

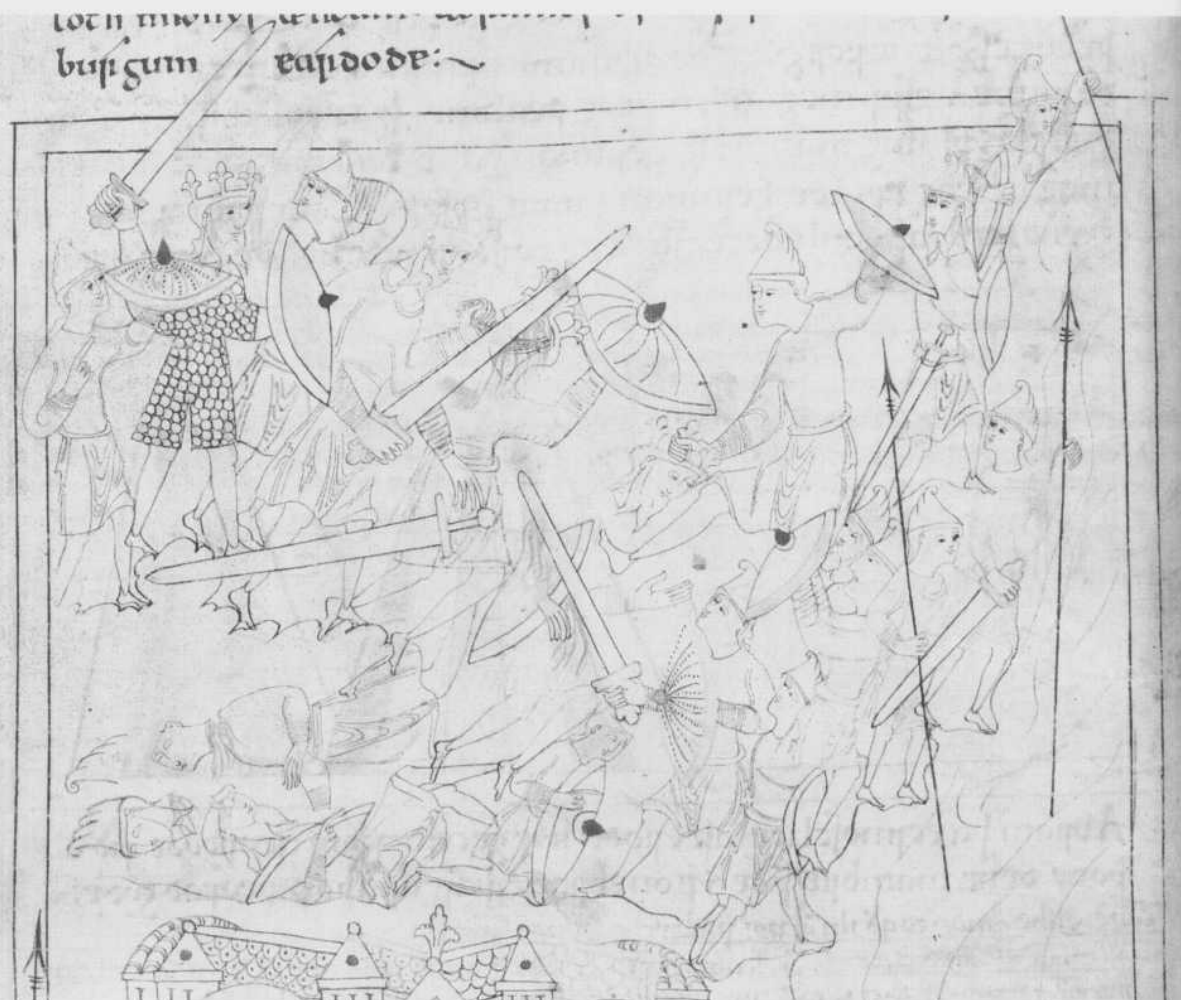
In a straightforward offensive battle against other infantry-based armies, the battle array would now slowly move forward. Each of the provincial formations would have advanced separately, in its deep 'shield-fort' formation. Attempts would probably have been made to maintain the various shield-forts together in a single unbroken line as far as was possible. Two opposing lines of shieldwalls might simply march straight at each other with little attempt at manoeuvre; but an able commander might adjust the deployment to gain a local advantage. The line could be lengthened in an attempt to outflank the enemy shield wall, or the number of ranks could be increased at a particular point in an attempt to break through by sheer weight of numbers.

In a defensive battle such as Hastings, the shield-forts

would take up a defensive position on high ground or on a hill top. They could also face outwards, effectively forming squares that could not be outflanked by cavalry. The men in the formations would have closed up ranks – to give a higher density and so make it easier to withstand the weight of a cavalry attack – with shields overlapping to withstand enemy missiles.

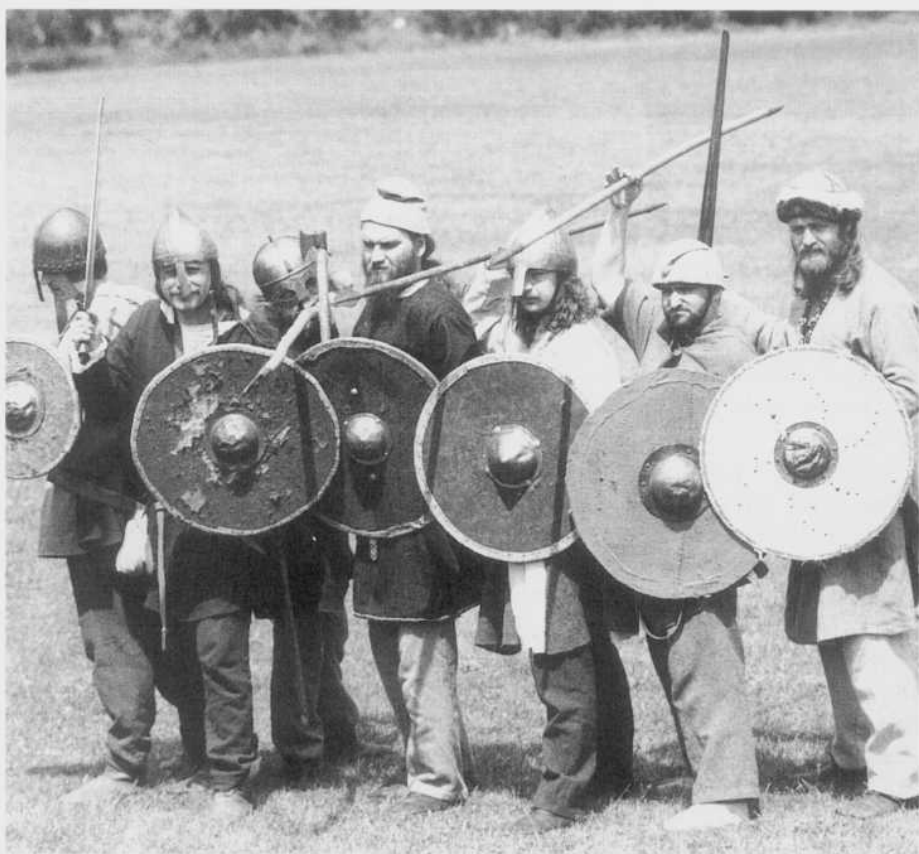
*Anglo-Saxon battle scene from an 11th-century manuscript. The number of crowned kings is a result of the biblical subject matter. Only a single figure, and that a king, wears mail – a sign of high status. The unarmoured warriors are thegns. They are mostly clean-shaven and wear stylised Phrygian caps and typical tunics. The oddly shaped spears with triple guards, are influenced by Carolingian*

*artistic conventions: no spearhead of this type has been found. The figures on the right appear to be stealing away from the battlefield, relieved of the duty to fight by the death of one of the kings. (British Library, Ms. Cotton Claudius B IV)*





Members of the Colchester Historic Enactment Society, costumed as later 10th-century Anglo-Danes, form a 'Shield-wall'. The re-enactors are equipped with a variety of weapons including spears, swords and axes; shields are of varying diameter, just as the archaeological evidence suggests. (Photo: Margaret Key)



### Missiles

Battle proper commenced with an exchange of long-distance missiles. The 4th-century Ejsbøl bog finds included in each weapon set, a javelin for distance fighting, along with a spear designed for closer work. A similar combination may have been available to many Anglo-Saxon warriors. The evidence for archery and slingshot fire is very limited, suggesting that it took place only on a small scale. It may have been directed mostly at commanders: at Stamford Bridge in 1066, the Norwegian king, Harald Hardrada, is said to have been killed by an arrow in the throat.

Normally there would be little time for the exchange of missiles before the battle lines collided. It was only prolonged in exceptional circumstances, as for example at Maldon. In that battle, the Anglo-Saxon and Viking armies are prevented from coming to hand-to-hand contact by a tidal inlet. According to the *Maldon Poem*, the two armies faced each other across the inlet, while the tide slowly went out:

*Neitherside might for water cross to the other,  
[...]*

*And so they lined the river banks,  
The East Saxon army and the Vikings.  
In fine array, but none could give a wound,  
unless an arrows flight should snatch its toll.  
The tide receded, the seamen ready stood  
a host of Vikings ready to start battle.*

Despite what was probably several hours of confrontation and archery, few wounds were caused: the real battle was to take place at close quarters.

### The battle cry

Germanic warriors had at least since the time of Tacitus advanced to combat, shouting in unison in a war chant known as the *baritus* – meaning ‘roar’. The 4th-century Roman historian Ammianus wrote that the *baritus* was in use by Germans enrolled in the army of Constantine I, and was copied from them by much of the late Roman army. Its purpose was to reinforce the courage of the warriors and to intimidate their opponents. There was an element of weighing up the enemy, perhaps not entirely understood by Tacitus when he wrote of the Germans: ‘Merely by listening to the sound, they can forecast the issue of an approaching engagement. For they either terrify their foes



or themselves become frightened, according to the character of the noise they make upon the battlefield.'

Tacitus goes on to describe the exact nature of the sound: 'What they particularly aim at is a harsh, intermittent roar; and they hold their shield in front of their mouths, so that the sound is amplified into a deeper crescendo by the reverberation.' By about AD 400, when Vegetius wrote his *Epitome of Military Science*, the *baritus* had changed slightly: 'The war-cry, which they call the *barritus*, should not be raised until both lines have engaged each other. It is a mark of inexperienced or cowardly men if they cry out from a distance. The enemy is more terrified if the shock of the war-cry is made to coincide with the blows of weapons.'

It is fairly certain that a form of the *baritus* survived in Anglo-Saxon England. (The war-cry was universal until the age when automatic weapons made it imperative not to give away the positions.) At Hastings, Wace recorded English war-cries including *Ut, Ut!* (Old English for 'Out, Out!'). Other cries, heavily influenced by the progress of Christianity, were *Godemite!* (God Almighty!) and *Olicrosse!* (Holy Cross!). The last of these may have been personally connected with Harold who had claimed to have found a piece of the cross on which Jesus was crucified, and had built 'Holy Cross' Abbey at Waltham in Essex to house it, partly as a gesture to legitimise his rule.

*A group of unarmoured Anglo-Saxons defend the crest of a hill at Hastings against Norman cavalry charges. Older interpretations identify the English troops as 'poorly equipped' ceorls. Though unarmoured, the weapons of these footsoldiers:*

*and the occasional axe and sword, are much the same as those of the huscarles. The men might be better interpreted as members of the select fyrd, in fact - thegns. (Bayeux Tapestry, with special permission of the town of Bayeux)*

## Close action

*The time had come for fated men  
To perish in that place. A cry went up.  
The ravens wheeled above, the fateful eagle  
Keen for his carrion. On earth was uproar.  
They let the file-hardened spears fly from their fists,  
Grimly ground javelins; and bows were busy too,  
Shield received spear-point; savage was the onslaught.  
Fighters fell dead, young men on either side.*

When the 'shield-forts' crashed together and the war-cry went up, the close-quarter fighting began in earnest. Immediately prior to contact, a flurry of heavier javelins would have been thrown, in an attempt to cause breaks in the enemy line, or at least to weigh down an opponent's shield, making it useless for the few precious seconds it took to get in a blow with a spear.

Such was the case at Maldon, where Byrhtnoth is lightly wounded by a 'southern spear' (perhaps a Frankish import) thrown by a Viking in the opening moments of the battle. Byrhtnoth reacts quickly and despatches the man who had thrown it:

*Enraged, the hero seized his spear and stabbed  
the proud rash Viking who had wounded him.  
No novice was the earl, he made his spear  
Pass through the young man's neck, guided his hand  
So that he pierced the pirate fatally.*

The broad-headed spear was the prime weapon of combat and could be used for thrusting, parrying and even slashing. Most warriors would have had no sword and would have had to rely primarily on their spear. The metal shield boss was a weapon in its own right. Though designed originally to protect the fist as it held the shield, it





Early Saxon warrior, late 5th- early 6th century





Death of Aethelhere at the battle of Winwaed, AD 655





Northumbrian Thegn, early to mid-8th century

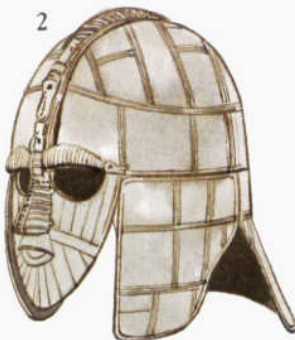




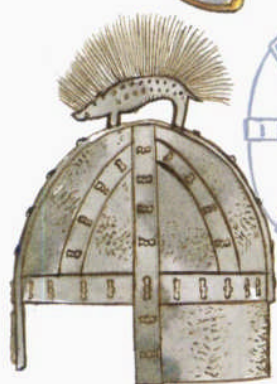
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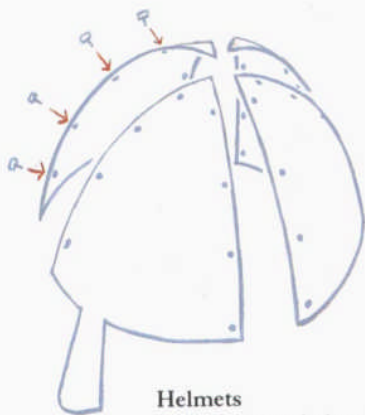
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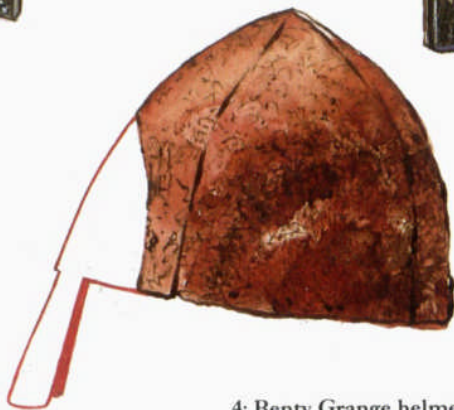
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5



6



#### Helmets

1: Coppergate helmet

2: Sutton Hoo helmet

3: Helmet depicted on the Torslunda plate dies, Sweden 5th-6th C.

4: Benty Grange helmet, side and top views

5: Benty Grange helmet, reconstruction

6: Norman-French(?) helmet, 10th-11th C.



Anglo-Saxon spearheads

- 1, 2: Nydam, Germany, 4th-5th C.  
 3: Abingdon, Berkshire, 5th C.  
 4: Kingston, Kent, 5th-6th C.  
 5: Brighton, Sussex, 6th C.

- 6: Luton, Bedfordshire, 6th C.  
 7: Fairford, Gloucestershire, 6th C.  
 8: Shepperton, Middlesex, 6th C.  
 9: Harnham Hill, Wiltshire, 6th C.  
 10: Battersea, London, 6th C.

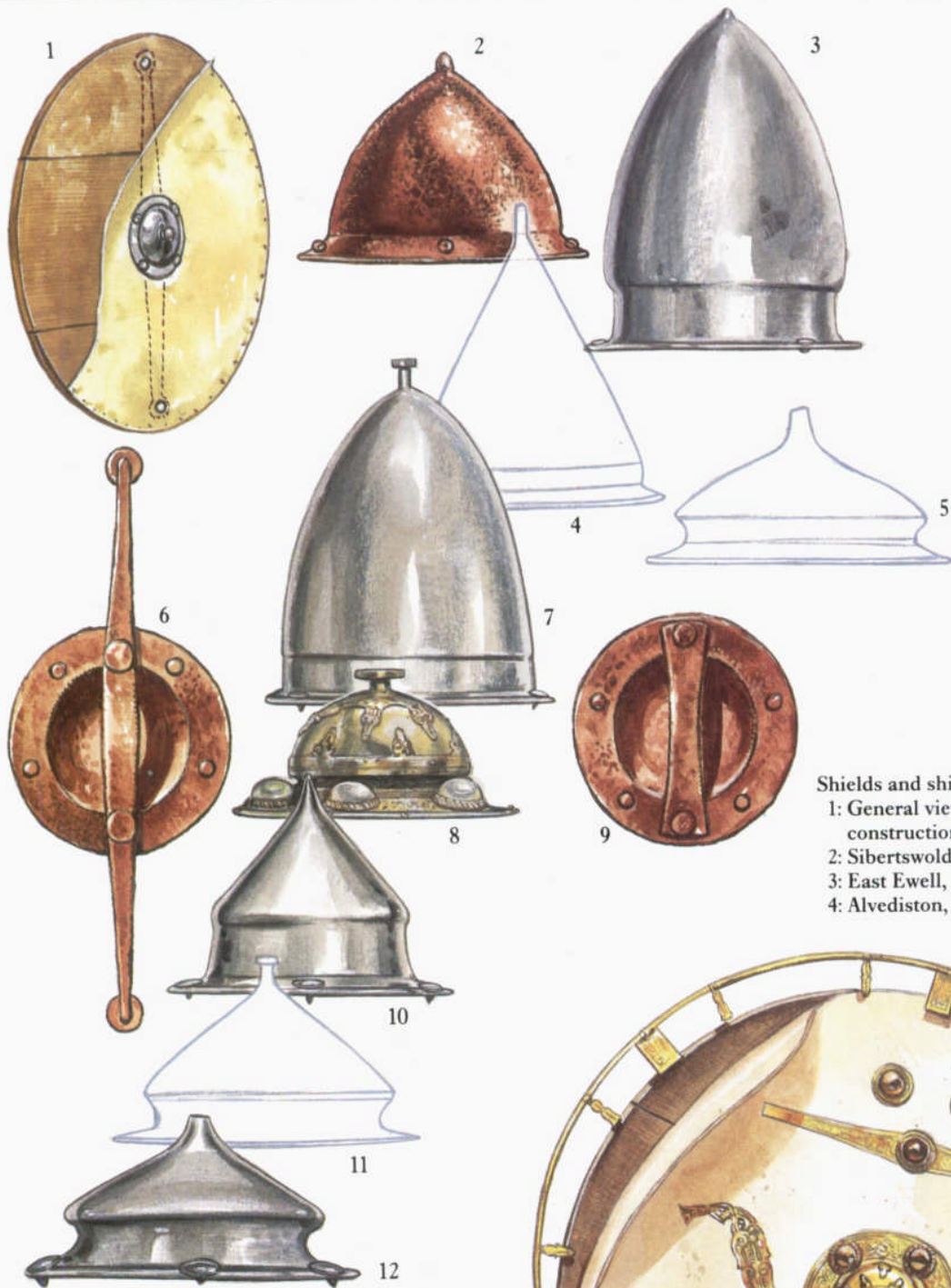
- 11: Beddington, Surrey, 6th C.  
 12: Linton Heath, Cambridgeshire, 6th C.  
 13: Stratford, Warwickshire, 6th-7th C.  
 14: Battersea, London, 6th C.



- 15: Linton Heath, Cambridgeshire, 6th-7th C.  
 16: Harewell, Berkshire, 6th C.  
 17: Kempston, Bedfordshire, 6th C.

- 18: Little Wilbraham, Cambridgeshire, 6th-7th C.  
 19: Snells Corner, Hampshire, 6th-7th C.  
 20: Longbridge, Warwickshire, 6th-7th C.  
 21: Petersfinger, Wiltshire, 7th C.





Shields and shield bosses

- 1: General view of shield construction  
 2: Sibbertswold, Kent, 6th C.  
 3: East Ewell, Surrey, 6th C.  
 4: Alvediston, Wiltshire, 6th C.

- 5: N. Ruffenham, Rutland, 6th-7th C.  
 6: Shield boss and grip, 7th C.; Mitcham cemetery  
 7: Lowbury, Berkshire, 6th-7th C.  
 8: Sutton Hoo, Suffolk, 6th-7th C.  
 9: Shield boss and grip, 7th C.; Mitcham cemetery  
 10: Toddington, Bedfordshire, 6th-7th C.

- 11: Abingdon, Berkshire, 6th-7th C.  
 12: Frilford, Berkshire, 6th-7th C.  
 13: Sutton Hoo, Suffolk, 6th-7th C.



Swords and seaxes

1: Battersea seax, late 9th C.

2: Battersea seax, late 9th C.

3: Sittingbourne seax, early 10th C.

4: Little Bealings seax, 10th C.

5: Type I, 'Frankish', late 6th-8th C.

6: Type II, 'Norwegian', 7th-8th C.

7: Type III, 'Hurbuck', 8th-10th C.

8: Type IV, 'Honey Lane', 10th-11th C.



9: Seax with scabbard; Ford, Wiltshire, 6th C.

10: Longsword hilt; River Witham, 10th C.

11: Migration Period hilt, 5th-6th C.

12: 'Semispatha' type, 6th-7th C.

13: Broadsword; River Witham, 10th C.

14, 15, 16: Anglo-Saxon pommels 9th-10th C.

17: Reconstructed scabbard, Sutton Hoo, 7th C.

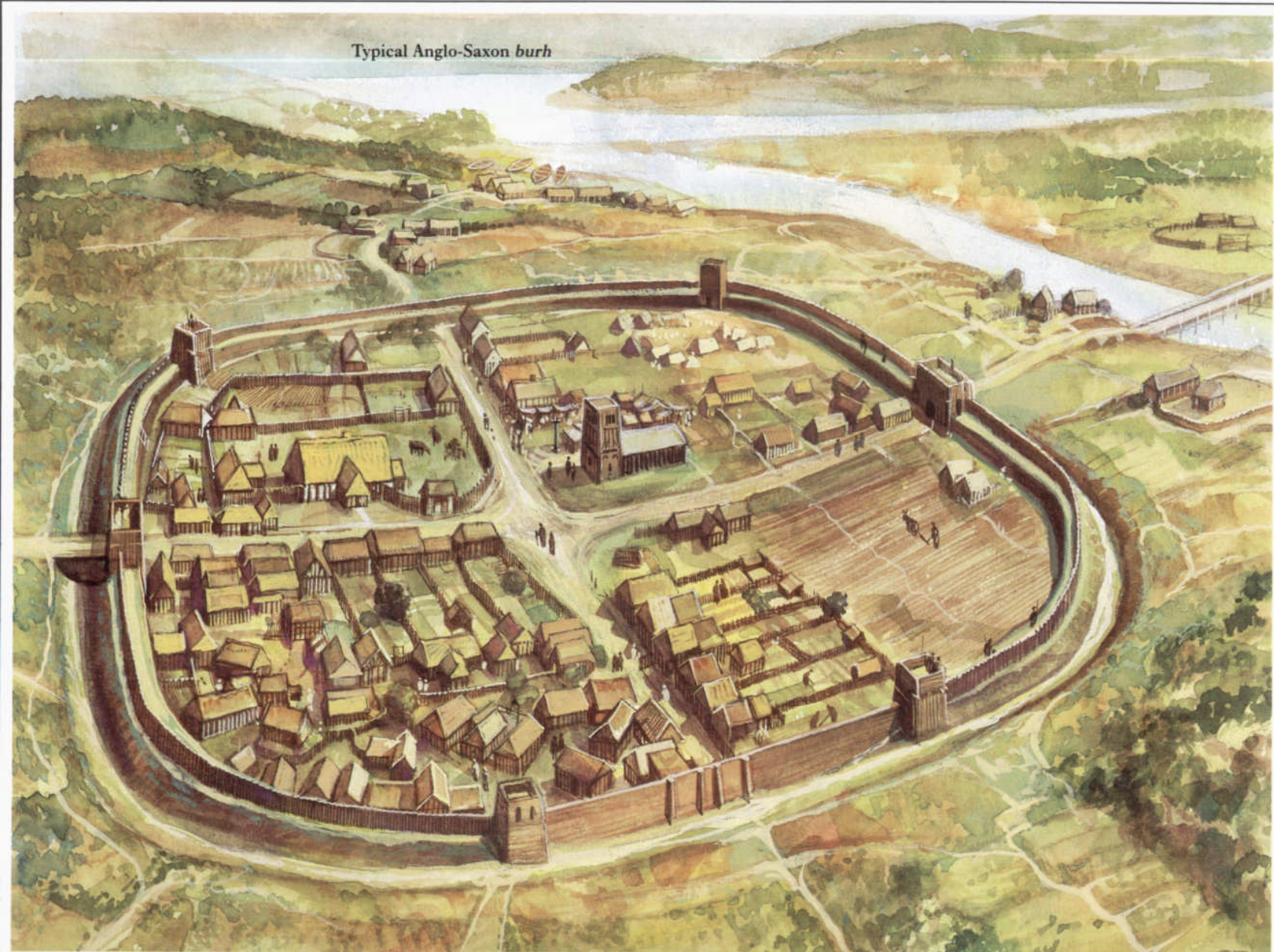


Training the Fyrd, Wessex, 9th C.





Typical Anglo-Saxon burh





The battle of Andraedsweald, AD 892





Anglo-Saxon supply train, AD 1066





Anglo-Saxon *huscarle* of Ralph the Timid, AD 1055





had evolved over the centuries into a sharp and vicious weapon. A vigorous punch with the point of a boss could incapacitate almost as effectively as any sword or spear blow.

Distance weapons, such as bow and javelin were not reserved merely for long-range use: they played a major part too in close combat. Men in the rear ranks who had not expended their javelins in earlier phases of the battle could now throw them at individuals who by chance exposed a vulnerable side during the turmoil of combat.

It is possible that the Anglo-Saxons had worked out systems for maximising the effectiveness of their weapons. Axemen, of whom the Bayeux Tapestry suggests there were a large number among the *huscarles*, were vulnerable to return blows once they had swung their heavy axes. In the initial stages of a combat they would probably need to be covered by spear-armed individuals. Axemen may have been employed for specific tasks such as breaking through the enemy hedgerow of spears, a job for which their weapons were ideally suited. The sword was primarily a weapon of last resort, used when spear or axe had been lost or broken, or when the formations became too packed for these weapons to be wielded effectively.

As a combat progressed, the ordered ranks of the

shield-wall would begin to jumble, both as the result of casualties and as groups of warriors penetrated into the enemy's formation. So long as the shield-fort was dense enough this disorder need not have any serious effect. A shield-fort that had been broken up by penetrative attacks, and which began to thin out and fragment, was doomed to defeat: despite the poems, battle was primarily the contest between bodies of troops, rather than a series of individual and independent duels.

In normal circumstances, in its defensive stance, an ordered shield-fort was fully capable of dealing with enemy cavalry. The wall of shields was not in itself a physical barrier to a determined cavalry attack, but in combination with a hedge of spears would have created a psychological barrier that forced horses to shy clear before contact. When horses did venture closer, they could be dealt with by a mixture of spears and axemen. The Bayeux Tapestry shows one Anglo-Saxon, presumably a *huscarle*, felling an overzealous Norman knight's horse with a single blow to the head. 'Distance' weapons again could play a crucial role in the close action of a defensive battle. The Anglo-Saxon archer on the Bayeux Tapestry is seen preparing to fire his bow as the spear-point of the forward-most Norman reaches the line of *huscarles*.

*King Harold Godwinson (far right) at Hastings. Beside him are spear-armed huscarles, and the royal standard bearer, with the dragon standard of Wessex. The large quantity of arrows*

*embedded in their shields (and in Harold's eye), suggest that the Normans were already beginning to understand the value of massed archery. Indeed Norman archery, which the Anglo-Saxons were*

*unable to reply to effectively, proved to have as decisive an effect on the course of the battle as the Norman use of mounted knights. In the lower register, the dead are being stripped of their mail*

*shirts and helmets, while one figure has gathered up an armful of swords. (Bayeux Tapestry, with special permission of the town of Bayeux)*







Other poems make it clear that body armour was also often badly damaged. In the *Finnsburh Fight*, for example, after a heavy battle:

*A wounded hero then went on his way,  
Said that his byrnie was broken  
His armour useless and his helmet holed.*

The final stages of battle: this 11th-century manuscript illustration of a biblical subject appears to show the massacre of prisoners, who have been stripped of all weapons except (intriguingly) their shields. Note the Anglo-Saxon broad-swords with

tri-lobed pommels, and the conical headgear. The crumpled form of the cap of the man at centre, suggests these are of textile or soft leather rather of metal or rigid leather. (British Library, Ms. Cotton Claudius B IV)

Much of this equipment could eventually be repaired, either by the men themselves or by armourers who accompanied the army. Iron swords heavily notched by sword-play would have to be resharpened after battle. Broken spears and javelins could be rehafted with relative ease. The repair of mail-shirts, however, required specialist tools and was probably done by trained mail-workers. Some other equipment could perhaps be replaced from spares brought along by the thegn himself, or resupplied out of army stocks (see Plate K).

The main source of resupply – to the victors, at least – was the battlefield itself. Stripping the dead began even during the battle, and is shown for example on the Bayeux Tapestry in scenes alongside those in which the battle is at its height. Valuable items, such as mail shirts and swords, were the main prizes: mail shirts are shown being removed, and swords being stacked in heaps. It is against this backdrop that we must see the mass deposits of military equipment of the type made in a bog at Ejsbøl in Denmark. The collected equipment of a defeated army was a great prize. To offer it all to the gods in thanks for a victory, as at Ejsbøl, was indeed a great sacrifice.

**Treatment of casualties**

The treatment of wounded seems to have been the responsibility of a thegn's companions and the camp-followers of his immediate *fyrð* unit. There is no evidence that any 'doctors', as such, were present with an Anglo-

Saxon army, but it is safe to assume that some basic (albeit primitive) knowledge of medicine existed. Almost certainly some knowledge of cauterising or closing wounds to prevent death by blood-loss would have been known. Most treatment took the form of traditional cures and charms passed on by word of mouth from generation to generation. The line in the Riddle of the Shield – 'the medicine to heal my scars with herbs' – makes it clear that herbal poultices at least were in use.

It has been said that Anglo-Saxon medical expertise was concentrated in the hands of the clergy; this in large part assumes that clerics would have been the only persons able to read or copy written medical texts. All that survives of these texts is a small number of Anglo-Saxon 'leech books' which contain herbal remedies and semi-magical poetic charms. The 'Nine-Herbs Charm' for example involves a concoction made from a selection of plants including feverfew and nettle, which is to be administered together with the following rhyme:

*If you were a skin-shot, or if you were a flesh-shot,  
Or if you were a blood-shot, or if you were a bone-shot,  
Or if you were a body-shot, as never before in your life.*

Some ailments for which cures are given in the leech books are compared to war-wounds. The *ylfá gescot* or 'elf-shot' is a pain caused by invisible attackers from the super-



natural world. The *maelsperu* or 'spear of woe' is an acute pain caused by a wound from a *seax* forged by the 'six smiths of Satan'. It may be that some of the corresponding cures had originally been intended for battle injuries. Little is known of the effectiveness of these primitive remedies, though it is likely that few had anything more than a 'placebo' effect. Recovery from battlefield wounds in an age when knowledge of medical hygiene was minimal must have been largely a matter of luck.

### The 'beasts of battle'

The classic Anglo-Saxon battle poem ends with the battlefield covered with a pile of naked dead bodies. This is the realm of the 'beasts of battle', animals that have been circling the heads of the combatants and skulking on the sidelines since the beginning of the engagement, waiting to feed from the bones of the fallen. In the *Battle of Brunanburh* poem, for example, when the defeated men left the field in disarray:

*They left behind them corpses for the dark  
Black-coated raven, horny-beaked to enjoy,  
And for the eagle, white-backed and dun-coated,  
The greedy war-hawk, and that grey wild beast,  
The forest wolf.*

Carriion birds such as the raven and hawk, and scavengers like the wolf, were the archetypal 'beasts of battle'. The black raven had particularly strong associations: the Vikings had a raven banner called 'landwaster', which they

unfurled prior to battle, apparently as a deliberate threat of the fate that awaited the bodies of anyone who opposed them.

This was more than just poetic imagery. The practice of leaving bodies on the battlefield was a conscious political decision. Bodies were the clearest proof of victory – incontestable evidence not only of the size of the battle, but also of the fact that the victory had been so decisive that the vanquished had not been able to recover their dead.

The dead could not pass on properly into the afterlife unless their bodies had undergone the correct rituals. To give a warrior a proper sending off was a sacred obligation: not to do so, a crime against the warrior and his memory. 'They bring back the bodies of the fallen even when a battle hangs in the balance,' wrote Tacitus on the Germans. In *Beowulf*, King Hrothgar is unable to recover the bodies of his personal thegns who have been killed by the monster Grendel; as a result he is shamed and loses much of his authority. This obligation of recovering the bodies of the slain remained deeply ingrained in the Anglo-Saxon mind. Even well into the Christian era when the significance of pagan rituals was forgotten, proper burial remained paramount.

To deny burial was an expression of the power that the victor had over the defeated. It was the victor's whim to leave the fallen on the field. After Hastings, King Harold's mother Gyfa offered Duke William her son's weight in gold for his body so that it might be given a Christian burial. William refused the payment out of pride, and allowed her to bury the body at Harold's Holy Cross Abbey at Waltham in Essex. Other relatives and friends arrived at the battlesite gradually over the next few days and were given specific permission to take away their dead. But many, if not perhaps most, of the Anglo-Saxon slain were left lying in the field unburied, as markers of the importance of the victory. Writing 70 years after the battles of 1066, Orderic Vitalis reported that piles of bones were still to be seen on the battlefields of Stamford Bridge and Hastings.

\* \* \*

The destruction of the Anglo-Saxon army at Hastings allowed the Norman Conquest to proceed over the next generation. The first edition of the Domesday Book shows a number of thegns continuing to enjoy their holdings in Yorkshire. By the time of the second edition, about ten years later, only a single one remains. Not one thegn had succeeded in passing on his land to a descendant; all had been replaced by Normans. Almost the entire edifice by which the English shire had been organised was gone; and along with it the representatives of an ancient warrior group.



*Unarmoured Anglo-Saxon warrior copied from a Latin psalter. Heavily influenced by and perhaps even directly copied from the art of the Carolingian Empire, it should nevertheless give a reasonable idea of the less-well armoured Anglo-Saxon soldier of the time; the three spears are probably intended for throwing. Drawn by Hewitt in 1855 from Harleian Ms. 603 in the British Library. (Royal Armouries, Tower of London)*



# THE PLATES

## A: Early Saxon Warrior, late 5th – early 6th century

This is a composite figure reconstructed mostly from two warrior graves at Dorchester-on-Thames in Oxfordshire and at Ford in Wiltshire; both areas were part of Wessex in the early 7th century. This warrior represents either a senior *eorl* or a lower ranking *gesith*. His main weapon is the spear, about 6½ feet (2 metres) in length, with a split-sided socket. As a secondary weapon he carries a *seax* slung at his waist; although only 12 ins. (30 cm) long, this is an item of considerable value having a pommel plated with silver and set with a garnet and leather scabbard reinforced with a copper alloy strip. His shield is built up from lime-wood planks butted together and bound at the rim with hardened leather; the shield face is covered by four pieces of leather sewn together. The metal boss turned the shield into a secondary offensive weapon.

The long tunic is somewhat stained from the rigours of campaign, but was originally a fashionable garment. It is gathered at the waist and has decorative woven bands at neck, cuff and hem. The shoes are made of leather and the 'puttee' calf bindings (or *winingas*) are of undyed linen. His purse would contain small valuables and the odd coin, though his main item of portable wealth is a silver arm ring, perhaps a gift from his overlord for some notable act of loyalty. Around his neck he wears a string of millefiori beads made of twisted, coloured glass.

*Swanton's Typology of Early Anglo-Saxon period spearheads, with, in each case, the find site of the prototype example. (Left to Right):*

*Top row:*

*Type A – Carvoran, Northumberland;*  
*Type B1 – Thames, London;*  
*Type B2 – Fairford, Gloucestershire;*  
*Type C1 – Long Wittenham, Berkshire;*  
*Type C2 – Longbridge, Warwickshire;*  
*Type C3 – Winterbourne Gunner, Wiltshire.*

*Second row:*

*Type C4 – Alfriston, Sussex;*  
*Type C5 – Kempston, Bedfordshire;*  
*Type D1 – Droxford, Hampshire;*

*Type D2 – Sarre, Kent;*

*Type D3 – Stratford, Warwickshire;*

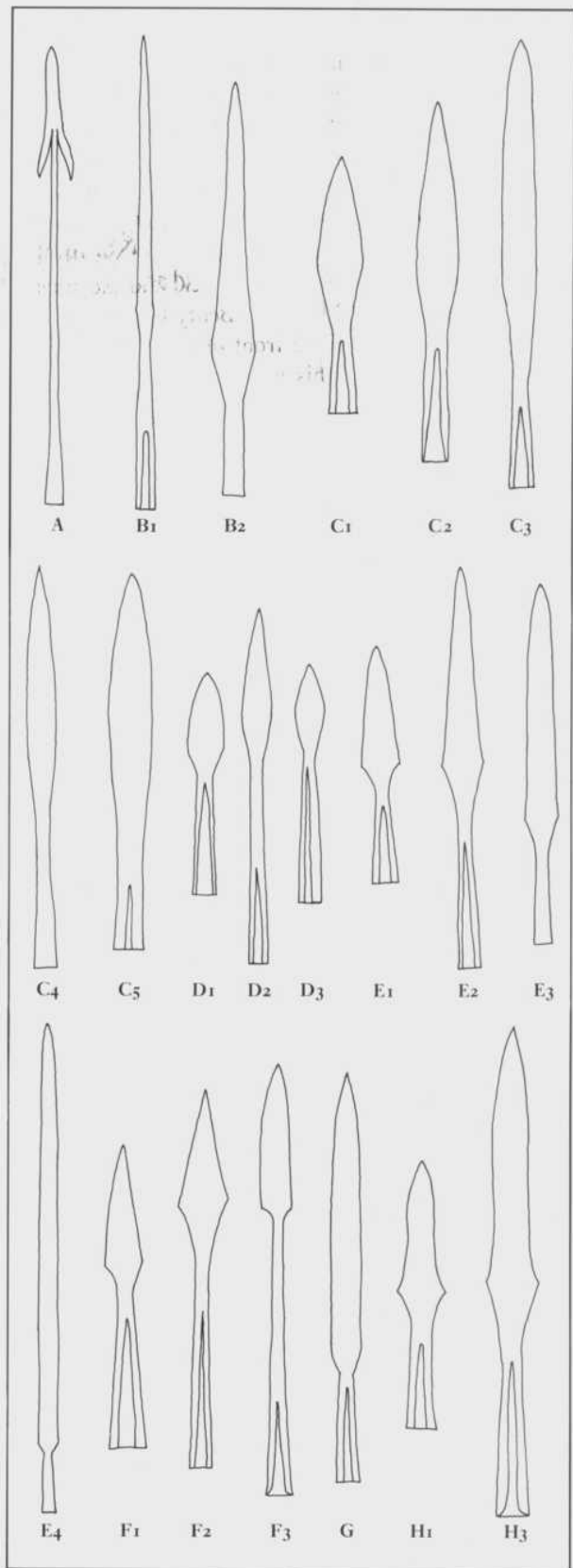
*Type E1 – Long Wittenham, Berkshire;*

*Type E2 – Woodstone, Huntingdon;*

*Type E3 – Kempston, Bedfordshire.*

*Bottom row:*

*Type E4 – Lowesby Hall, Leicestershire;*  
*Type F1 – Brooke, Norfolk;*  
*Type F2 – Sibertswold, Kent;*  
*Type F3 – Prittlewell, Essex;*  
*Type G – Dover, Kent;*  
*Type H1 – Burford, Oxfordshire;*  
*Type H3 – Hinchbrook, Huntingdon.*





**B: Death of Aethelhere at the battle of Winwaed, AD 655**

A group of Northumbrian warriors attack the crown-prince of East Anglia, Aethelhere, during the battle of Winwaed. The engagement was fought in a flooded river valley where the large army of King Penda of Mercia (to whom the East Anglians were allied) was destroyed by a Northumbrian force one third its size. The leading figure in the Northumbrian attack is a high status *gesith* (or royal 'companion') armed with a mail shirt, shield and axe, plus a helmet based on the one found at Benty Grange. The *gesith* has placed himself at the front of a wedge-shaped attacking formation where his example will inspire his followers. This was the position of the *ordfruma* ('point-leader').

In aiming their attack at Aethelhere the Northumbrians are hoping to break the will to fight of their opponents, by killing their leader. Only warriors with the highest sense of loyalty will remain to defend the body of their lord or continue the battle. The falling figure of Aethelhere is represented in a helmet of the archaic Sutton Hoo/Vendel type. While there is little evidence that fine equipment of this type was ever worn in combat, royal leaders might be expected to wear high status war gear.

The pagan associations of Aethelhere's supporters can be seen in the hammer-shaped amulet hanging at the neck of the warrior at the extreme left. The Northumbrians were comparatively recent converts to Christianity. The wild-boar crest of the leading Northumbrian *gesith* is a pagan symbol, yet the cross on the helmet nasal is already Christian. After the defeat of the pagans at Winwaed, Anglo-Saxon England turned quickly to Christianity.

**C: Northumbrian thegn, early to mid-8th century**

This figure's posture is taken directly from the Frank's Casket, where a helmeted warrior is shown defending himself against arrows. The raised shield is held by a central grip with a hemispherical boss; the shield tapers from the thickest section at the centre to thinner edges, so aiding the chance of deflecting a blow while also reducing weight. The helmet is the famous example found at Coppergate in York. The brooch which holds the scarlet cloak in position is a valuable piece similar to the Fuller Brooch. The quality of helmet and brooch indicate the wealth and importance of this warrior who could be either a local lord or a retainer of the Northumbrian king.

The spearhead is decorated with gold inlay, and mounted on a shaft of ash-wood of about six feet long. The *seax* could equally be replaced by a long sword but has been selected here to show the interesting scabbard mount. This item is of Northumbrian origin and similar in date to the brooch and helmet. The animal head and stiffener are



*Anglo-Saxon iron spearhead from Great Chesterford, Essex, of 6th or 7th century date, with the characteristic 'strickened' profile. The process of forging has created a depression on the left of the blade which is matched on the opposite face by a similar feature on the right; this increases the strength of the blade. (By courtesy of the Board of Trustees of the British Museum)*

*Ninth century spearhead found in the Thames in 1837. The form of the lapped socket suggests it is of Anglo-Saxon origin; Scandinavian or Continental spear-types usually have a more complete hammer-welded seam on the socket. (By courtesy of the Board of Trustees of the British Museum)*



*Top: Remnants of a spearhead of angon type. The long slender socket and short barbed head owe their origin to the Roman*

*legionary pilum, a weapon that bent on impact to prevent it being thrown back. (Royal Armouries, Tower of London)*

*Bottom: Unusually long spearblade of angular profile. Anglo-Saxon origins are suggested by the characteristic split-*

*sided socket. (By courtesy of the Board of Trustees of the British Museum)*

of gilded copper alloy. The upper portion of the scabbard mount is lost, and a reconstruction has been made by comparison with later *seax* scabbards. The *seax* cannot be drawn rapidly but has the advantage of being extremely secure. The shoes are based on a contemporary Danish bog find and could be a trade item. The tunic is of undyed wool, though is perhaps a little humble for a warrior of the status of a thegn.

#### **D: Helmets**

Anglo-Saxon helmets are extremely rare. The earliest example shown here is the helmet from Sutton Hoo (**D2**). Precise dating is difficult, though the closest known analogies are the Valsgärde-Vendel culture helmets from Central Sweden of the 5th and 6th centuries. The helmet may have been an ancient heirloom when deposited in the first half of the 7th century. During its 'working life' it was an artefact of the highest possible quality, literally 'fit for a king'. The exterior of the helmet was entirely covered with thin metal plates decorated with raised designs of figures and geometric patterns. These decorative plates were tinned to give a silvered appearance. The crest, eyebrows and face mask had additional decoration in gold leaf and garnets. The Sutton Hoo helmet has been said to represent a barbarian version of a Late Roman cavalry helmet, though this type of helmet seems to have been reaching Scandinavia from the Middle East via Russia quite independently of Roman influence.

The two other Anglo-Saxon helmets illustrated are the 7th-century Benty Grange helmet (**D5**) and the late-7th or early-8th-century Coppergate helmet (**D1**). Despite heavy decoration, both are more functional than the Sutton Hoo helmet. The iron framework of **D5** bears similarity to later helmets built up from bars with plates serving to fill the gaps riveted to the main structure; here these plates are of

horn. This framework of iron bars can be seen in the sectional views **D4**. One bar, a brow band, encircles the head, one runs from front to back and extends to form a nasal, and another runs side to side at about the position of the wearer's ears. Additional reinforcing bars are attached between the brow band and transverse band. The early date of the excavation (1848) limited the information extracted, and reconstructions of the neck area now seem impractical and are perhaps inaccurate. The flared Sutton Hoo neck guard and the flexible mail of the Coppergate helmet would certainly have been more comfortable to wear.

The Benty Grange helmet has an appliqué silver cross on the nasal and an iron crest device of a wild boar. The boar is embellished with copper alloy spots and tusks and has a slot running the length of its back, in which there may originally have been mane of horsehair or even genuine hog bristle. The boar is a pagan emblem, and occurs frequently on representations of Germanic helmets, as for example on the Toroslunda plate dies, of Valsgärde-Vendel origin, shown here as **D3**.

The later Coppergate Helmet, **D1**, has a crest in the form of a stylised dragon with a Latin inscription along its length. The plates making up the dome of the helmet are not supported by cross bars as in the Benty Grange find; the strength of the structure lies in the riveting and shaping of the various components which are of a roughly equal composition and thickness. The mail of the neck guard is formed from wire of a round section. Half of the rings from which the neck guard is made are closed into complete circles by forge welding, the other half are closed after linking with tiny rivets.

Evidence indicates that the majority of Anglo-Saxon warriors had no more head protection than a simple textile cap. Although 10th- and 11th-century manuscripts illus-



trate warriors in conical helmets with nasals – a continental form – no English head defence of this type has yet been found. D6 is a helmet in the Metropolitan Museum, New York. It is said to be Northern French and to date to the 10th or 11th century. The damaged helmet was restored with a nasal to the forward plate, the restored area is outlined in red. The other view shows how a helmet of this type would have been constructed. The four plates are individually shaped and riveted together. Similar helmets are shown in the Bayeux Tapestry worn both by the *huscarles* of King Harold and by the Norman knights.

### E: Spearheads

Spearheads E1 and E2 are types used by the ancestors of the Anglo-Saxons at roughly the time of their move to Britain. E1 is a short-socketed type with a stiff blade of almost 'X' section. This may be comparable to the dual-purpose, thrusting and throwing spear of the ancient Germans which Tacitus calls the *framea*. The find from 5th-century Berkshire, E3, is a broad-headed *angon*, a Germanic development of the Roman *pilum*. E5, E6 and E7 are 'leaf-bladed' spears: E5 is of diamond-shaped section while E7 is of lens-shaped section. E6 is a small, leaf-bladed head with minimal socket shaping, and was possibly intended as a disposable javelin. E8, E9 and E10 are early types which do not survive the 6th century. The blades of E8 and E9 are forged with a corrugated section (see the sectional view in black). The long, leaf-bladed head E10 has two narrow fullers in the lower blade isolating a section of the mid-rib.

E11 and E12 are of a type appearing in 5th–6th-

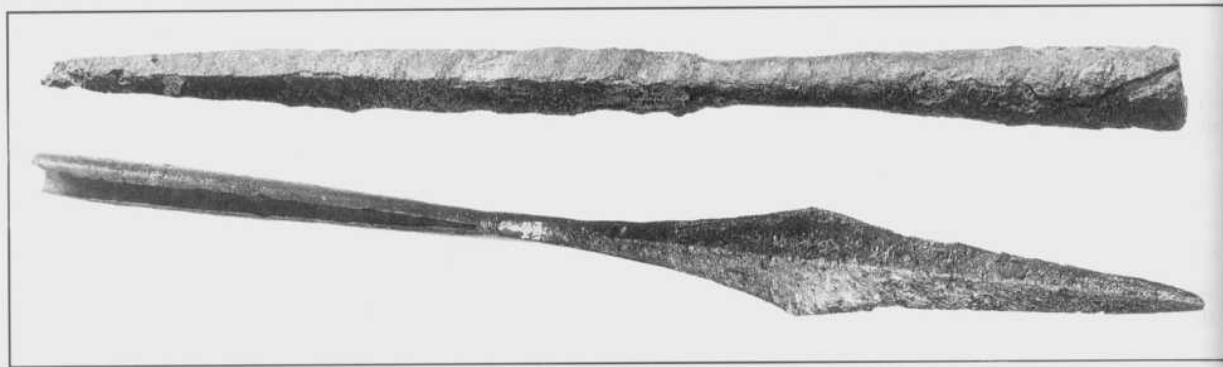
century Scandinavian contexts and may ultimately have Nordic origins. E13 and E14 are angular-bladed types with diamond cross-sections – early examples of the form which was to become dominant in the later Anglo-Saxon period. The short, strong head E16 may be a lance head for use from horseback; this is far from certain, however, and is based on a similarity to much later cavalry lance heads. E18 with its long, slender socket and broad leaf-shaped blade is comparable to a common 6th/7th century Continental form. Heads of this type are found mostly in the eastern counties of England, and may be either local copies of Continental originals or imports. The long, angular-profile heads, E19, E20 and E21, are of a type known from the 6th century, but proliferating toward the end of the pagan period. They are similar to the commonest form of Viking spearhead, and are found in Anglo-Saxon sites throughout the areas of settlement. From the 9th century they become the dominant form of Anglo-Saxon spearhead.

All spearheads were manufactured in basically the same way, either with or without a mid-rib and two edges forged outwards from the centre line. Mid-ribs were forged by raising the head to yellow heat and progressively hammering on alternate faces of the blade while keeping the centre line lying along the straight edge of a block-shaped anvil. This had the effect of spreading the edges and leaving a raised rib. Spearheads without mid-ribs were forged by rocking the heated blade from side to side, while hammering it, on the flat top of an anvil.

The socket was constructed by forging a triangular extension below the blade over a cone-shaped former. Anglo-Saxon spearheads almost always have a socket with an incomplete or 'split' side. This split can vary considerably in shape, and distinguishes spearheads made between the 5th and 8th centuries from those made before and after, which normally have an overlapped and welded seam on the socket. Full sockets with no apparent split were made by overlapping the sides of the socket and hammer welding a seam, a process reintroduced (as a matter of fashionable taste) under Scandinavian influence between the 9th and

*Top: Spearhead, probably 10th century, with a lapped socket that indicates Scandinavian or Continental influence. The long, narrow blade has a lozenge-shaped section, a design ideal for thrusting. (Royal Armouries, Tower of London)*

*Bottom: Unprovenanced, angular spearhead with a long split socket. Decorative mouldings can be seen at the neck and below the hole for a rivet, which attached the head to an ashwood shaft. (By courtesy of the Board of Trustees of the British Museum)*



11th centuries. Construction is simplified by cutting out this process, which does not seem to add significantly to the strength of the weapon.

### **F: Shields and shield bosses**

Illustration **F1** shows the basic shield design used throughout the Anglo-Saxon period. The circular board is made up of three planks of lime-wood (linden) – a light, strong timber with a close, straight grain making it easy to shape and unlikely to split. The planks do not appear to have been rebated or nailed together, but may have been fastened by wooden pegs. Evidence for the lamination of the planks is dubious and each section of the shield is a separate piece of wood rather than a series of thin, layered sections. The wooden sections are held together by a long hand-grip (also seen in the rear view, **F6**), possibly a Scandinavian innovation. The grip is riveted through wood and boss at the centre of the shield and through the wood only at the spatula-shaped ends. An alternative form of grip was the short type, shown in **F9**, which may have been intended for smaller lighter shields. There appears to have been a tendency for shields to increase in diameter as the Anglo-Saxon period progressed, though this was probably always a matter of personal preference. Diameter appears to have varied between about 18 and 30 ins. (46 and 76 cm). The shield is faced with a thick piece of leather which both protects the wooden face from slashing strokes and holds the structure together. It is held in place by nails around the edge.

The shield boss was of ferrous metal and stiff conical construction and protected the hand. Dimensions varied from 11–15 cm across the base and 8–15 cm in height. The bosses in the centre of this plate are of types used until the 8th century. Dating after this is less certain owing to the disappearance of weapons as grave goods in Christian burials. Bosses **F3**, **F4** and **F7** are of the ‘sugar-loaf’ form, being taller than the width of the flange (the border around the base). All except **F2** are ‘carinated’ bosses – with a ridge worked into the profile. This ridging helps to strengthen the conical shape and improves the visual appearance. The

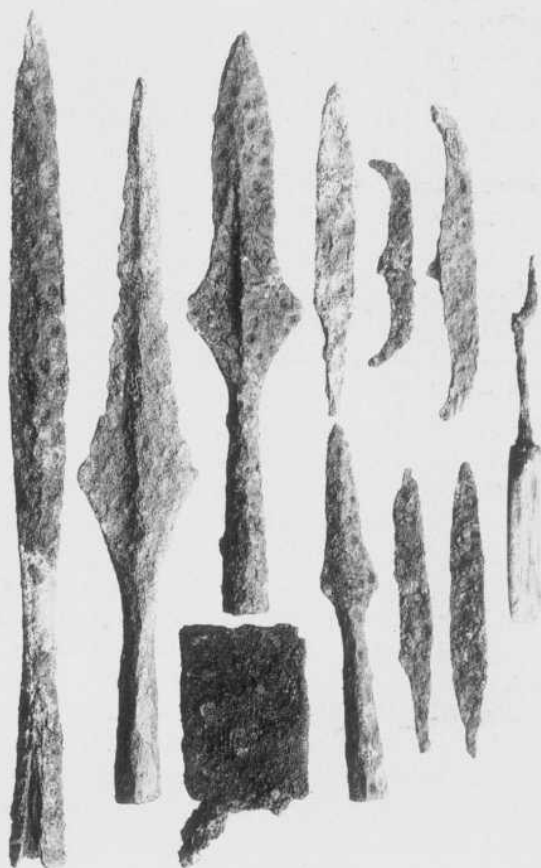
majority of bosses appear to have been finished with a decorative disc added to the apex as in **F7**, **F8** and **F11**. Bosses **F12**, **F5** and **F4** were also formerly fitted with discs, but the crucial welded joint has failed and the discs are now lost. The highly decorative Sutton Hoo shield, **F13**, has several interesting features, the most remarkable being its metallic rim. Metallic rims are highly unusual in Anglo-Saxon contexts and rare in Early Medieval Europe in general. The boss is made of gilded iron. The dragon-like creature to the left of the boss is made from an appliqué plate and is purely decorative. The three circular objects above the boss are covers for rivets or nails which hold in place the ends of the long centre-grip, and for a ‘guige-strap’ which allows the shield to be slung across the warrior’s back.

### **G: Swords and seaxes**

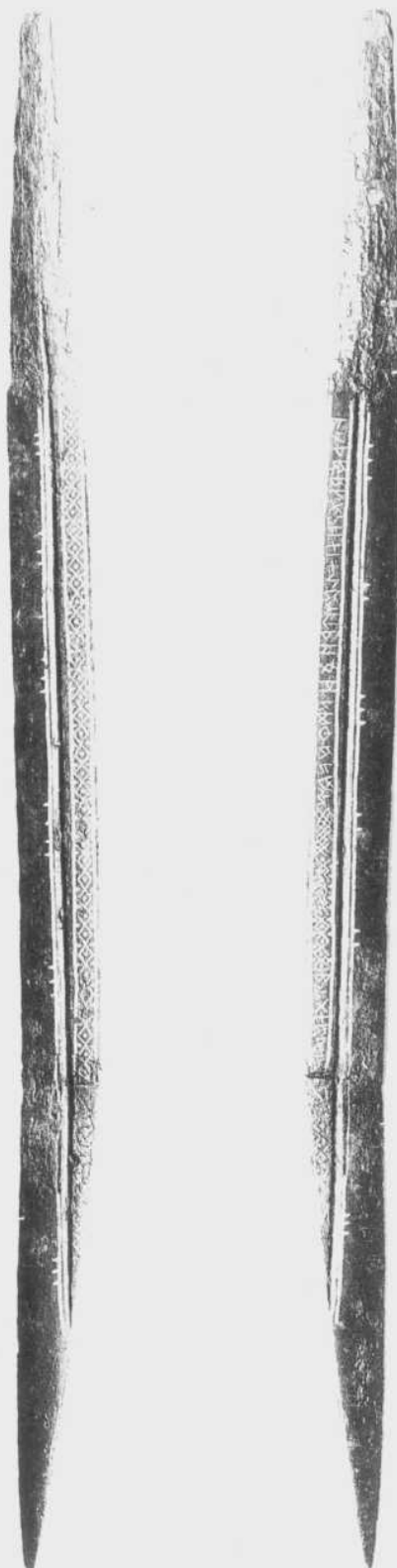
The upper row of weapons are of the type known as *seaxes* or *saxes*. These were the distinctive single-edged knives of the period, and were characterised by their angled backs. They varied greatly in length, from the short utility knife of about 3 to 4 inches long, to the fighting *seax* of about 3 feet. **G1** and **G2** are the two sides of the sword-length

*The four heavily corroded spearheads among this group of objects from Harnham Hill, Wiltshire are the main Anglo-Saxon spear types; they are (left to right) leaf-bladed, angular-bladed, and two with ‘strickened’ profile. The rectangular item is a belt buckle with textile remnants adhering to it. Three seaxes of the small utilitarian type used mostly*

*for eating are to the right. The objects with curving tips are iron shoes for wooden spades. The object at extreme right is a fork, and originally had two prongs. (By courtesy of the Board of Trustees of the British Museum)*







Battersea *seax*. **G2** shows the present condition with the iron taking on a dark patina after long deposition in the River Thames. **G1** is the other side of the blade 'as new', with a conjectural hilt reconstruction.

The most interesting *seaxes* are inlaid with runes. These are usually of copper alloy, and can take the form of intelligible inscriptions, or of the entire Anglo-Saxon runic alphabet or *futhork* written in sequence. The inlaid decoration has not suffered the same degree of corrosion as the blade and the runes can still be read. **G3** is the Sittingbourne *seax* with a reconstructed grip of organic material but otherwise shown in original condition. This weapon is substantially shorter than the Battersea *seax* and is inlaid with the name of its original owner, Sigibereht. The name of the otherwise unknown smith, Biorhtelm, appears on the opposite face.

**G4** is another sword-length *seax* discovered at Little Bealings. **G5**, **G6**, **G7** and **G8** represent the dating typology given in the Museum of London catalogue *London and the Saxons* by R.E.M. Wheeler. The late 5th or early 6th-century *seax* discovered at Ford in Wiltshire is shown as **G9**. This owes much to Continental designs and can be placed in Wheeler's Type I (the so-called 'Frankish' type). The scabbard fittings and pommel of copper alloy have survived better than the ferrous blade, while the organic grip has vanished altogether.

The diagrams in the lower portion of the plate show the varying hilts fitted to the common north-west European broadsword during the Anglo-Saxon era. **G11** is a typical 'Migration Period' hilt and could be of any date between the late 3rd and early 5th centuries. Swords of this form were outmoded by the time of the Anglo-Saxon arrival in Britain.

The sword **G12** has pommel, upper guard and lower guard built up from small components rather than cast or forged in one piece. Dating can be from between late 5th and 8th centuries. Swords of the 6th and 7th centuries frequently have a ring, or ring-shaped ornament, attached to the hilt. This appears to have had a ceremonial function, perhaps in the swearing of oaths. The sword was the main symbol of the warrior's rank and honour; an oath made on a sword could only make the obligation more binding. Another possibility is that hilt-rings were symbols of bravery or service, rather like modern medals.

*This seax found in the River Thames at Battersea, London is a sword length variant of the standard Anglo-Saxon knife. The copper alloy and silver inlay takes the form of a runic alphabet. The narrow fuller is*

*largely decorative being too slight to lighten the weapon by much and unlikely to provide rigidity to a blade of this type. (By courtesy of the Board of Trustees of the British Museum)*

By the end of the 9th century, this form **G12** was replaced by swords of the kind shown in **G10**. The latter is a reconstruction of the sword found in the River Witham in Lincolnshire. Of 10th-century date, this weapon conforms to Scandinavian constructional methods but like **G14**, **G15** and **G16** the silver decoration of the pommels is purely Anglo-Saxon. The sword **G13** is another found in the River Witham, and is marked with the name of the smith 'Leutfrit' of whom nothing else is known. The scabbard and belt shown in **G17** are an interpretation of the Sutton Hoo sword hanging arrangement. Unfortunately no leather parts survive, and this reconstruction relies on the interpretation of metal fittings. Assuming the Sutton Hoo garniture was not already archaic at the time of deposition then arrangements of this type were current in the first half of the 7th century.

The characteristic features of the early Anglo-Saxon sword are in the hilt. Although the shape of the hilt was usually simple, the construction was quite complex. Decoration of the hilt of a sword, in the late 6th to 8th centuries, could be in precious metal foil (embossed with repoussé designs). Engraving and inlaying of the metal parts of a hilt were equally popular, and referred to constantly in the poems.

In the 8th century, cross-guards made of solid iron rather than laminated in the archaic fashion became common on the Continent and in Scandinavia. The English began to imitate these forms during the 9th century. By the 10th century Anglo-Saxon swords were only distinguishable from Scandinavian ones by minor details of decoration.

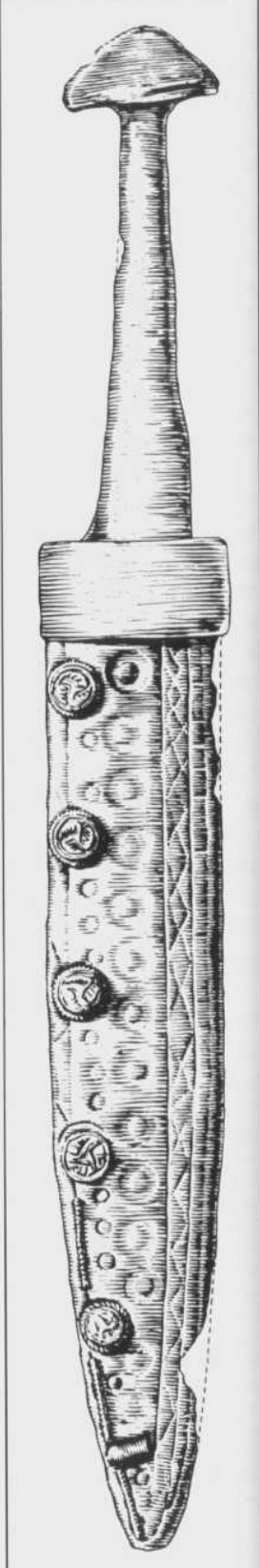
### *H: Training the fyrd*

The Carolingian Franks are known to have held an annual parade and inspection called the *Marchfeldt* to monitor the preparedness of obligated men for war. There is no evidence that the Anglo-Saxons ever held musters of this type. It does seem likely, however, that a system existed to review and train the *fyrd*. Most basic training was probably done locally, though again, there is no evidence that it was a legal obligation. Further training was probably carried out as the *fyrd* was mustered prior to setting off on campaign. The process of gathering the levy together would cover several days and early arrivals would be able to prepare themselves for battle while all the warriors straggled in. This scene represents an attempt to instil weapon skills in a group of the Wessex *fyrd* during the reign of Alfred the Great. The seated monarch views the efforts of two warriors hurling javelins. The warriors are all men of the same *hundred* (an administrative sub-division of a shire), and will march together on campaign, and in battle will serve in the unit commanded by their shire-

*The Sittingbourne seax is a little over a foot in length and therefore a secondary weapon. The copper alloy and silver decoration, however, indicate high value. While not intended for everyday use it might well have been a hunting knife. The inner face of the blade is marked S(I)GEBEREHT MEAH—an ungrammatical rendition of 'Sigeberht owns me'. The other face of the blade bears the name of the weapon-smith, Biorhtelm. (By courtesy of the Board of Trustees of the British Museum)*







reeve who stands at the left hand of the king.

Tents provided shelter for Anglo-Saxon warriors during musters and when on campaign. The basic structure of an Anglo-Saxon tent seems to have been similar to that of a modern ridge tent. The frame consisted of a ridge pole, supported by two upright poles, one at either end of the ridge-pole. A rectangle of canvas was stretched over this frame, and apparently held in place by a sleeve sewn along the centre through which the ridge-pole was inserted. The long edges of the canvas had rope loops attached to them through which they could be pegged into the ground. Guy-ropes do not appear on the pictures though this does not necessarily mean they were not used in practice.

The warriors are not fully equipped for battle but rather are dressed in long-sleeved Anglo-Saxon tunics, and tight leggings which are probably similar to the hose of the later medieval period. One figure has the traditional bindings (*winingas*) on his lower legs, while his companion (with throwing spear) has simple garters at the knee. The archer fires a longbow of the form introduced by the Angles from the southern part of Jutland. His quiver hangs from his waist.

**I: Typical Anglo-Saxon burh**

The Roman forts inherited by the Britons appear to have done much to slow the Anglo-Saxon conquest. Having no siege equipment the Angles and Saxons were limited to blockade and sudden assault as methods of dealing with defensive works. The major fortress of Anderida (Pevensey), one of the Roman 'Saxon Shore' forts, fell to Aelle of the South Saxons in AD 491, all of 14 years after his arrival in Britain. Refurbished hill forts were another important defence used by the Britons: the ancient Celtic hill fort at South Cadbury, Somerset, was extensively rebuilt in about AD 500, probably to defend against raids from Wessex. The celebrated siege of Mons Badonicus (dated by the 6th-century British monk, Gildas, in his *De Excidio et conquestu Britanniae* to about AD 500) seems to have centred around another such hill fort. Though details of the siege are sketchy, Gildas says its outcome prevented further conquest by the Anglo-Saxons for over 40 years.

▲ *Short seax found in Waltham Forest, of the size and form used for eating or as a tool. This example may have been shortened from a substantially larger battle-worthy weapon. (By courtesy of the Board of Trustees of the British Museum)*

► *A 6th century Continental seax with an unusually well-preserved leather scabbard. Unlike later Anglo-Saxon seaxes it has a pommel and crossguard. Copper alloy rivets, with decorated heads, secure the back edge of the scabbard and allow suspension of the weapon from a waist belt. (Royal Armouries, Tower of London)*

The Anglo-Saxons constructed their own fortifications when necessary, though these were rather less solid than those of the Britons. Ida, founder of the dynasty of Northumbrian kings, is known to have built a palisaded wooden fortress at Bamburgh in 547. Such *burhs* or fortresses became commonplace in all the developing Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, usually as royal works such as Yeavering. However, many seem to have had little defensive capability. The major port of Wessex at Hamwih (modern Southampton) had no defences – a fact which may have led to it being temporarily abandoned when the Vikings attacked.

At the height of the Scandinavian threat the West Saxons were forced to refurbish the very hill forts that had delayed the conquest by their ancestors. Indeed much of Alfred the Great's success in Wessex must be credited to the defensive works he built around population centres. Urban *burhs* became refuges for those forced out of farmsteads and villages; they also became new centres of royal power. Since the Vikings were usually unwilling to engage in siege warfare for long periods, *burhs* constructed roughly every 20 miles across Wessex provided that kingdom, at least, with reasonable security, and contributed greatly to the final defeat of the Vikings.

This reconstruction of a typical *burh* or fortified Anglo-Saxon township shows features taken from several archaeological sites. This particular settlement has a Roman foundation as is evident from the stretch of brickwork wall in the foreground. This section includes a former double gateway bricked up to create a continuous stretch of wall. Similar 're-cycling' of Roman brickwork

took place in defensive walls at Colchester. The stone tower, to the left of the Roman section, was raised in the 7th century to fill a gap in the ruined defences of the sub-Roman town. This structure is based on the 'Anglian Tower' excavated in York.

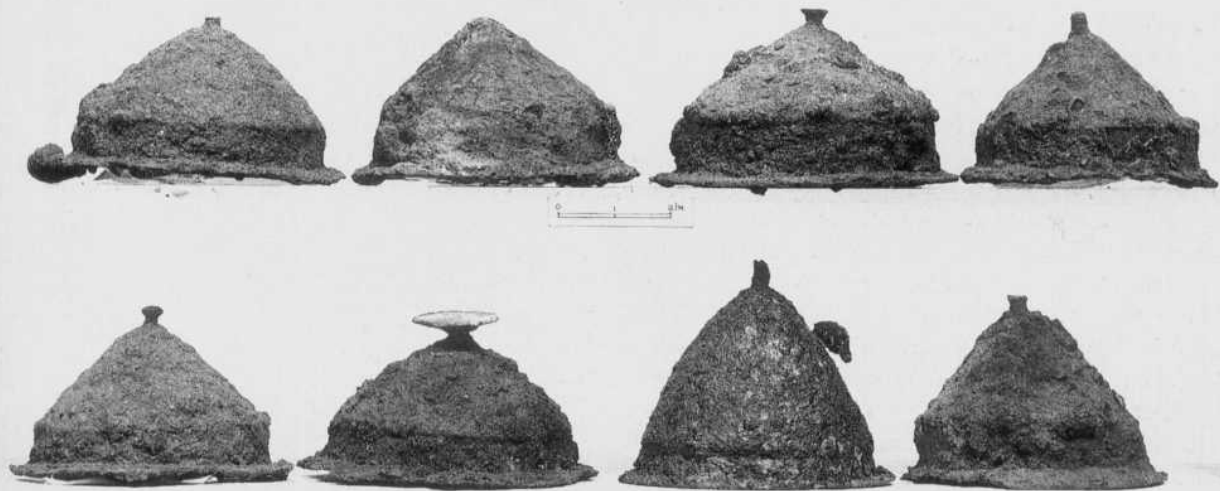
The remainder of the ruined Roman circuit wall has been completely replaced. The construction of this defensive work would have been carried under the direction of thegns living in the town. The workers whom they supervised have here created a ditch, bank and palisade around the settlement. In some locations where the military threat was greater, more than one ditch could be constructed, as at Witham – originally a border post against the Vikings of the Danelaw.

The route running through the centre of the town from left to right follows the course of a Roman road, which has deteriorated over the centuries into little more than a cart-track. The bridging point over the river was the original reason for the Roman foundation and explains the survival of settlement in the Anglo-Saxon period.

Outlying farmsteads provide the craftsmen and administrators of the town with agricultural produce in a

*Anglo-Saxon shield bosses from Kempston, Bedfordshire. All are iron and have a steep vertical, or near-vertical profile to a part of their height and then a shallower curve towards the apex. All except the second from the left in the upper row had*

*(or still have) a disc finial. As well as protecting the hand, these bosses could be used to deliver punching attacks. (By courtesy of the Board of Trustees of the British Museum)*





weekly market. In return, specialised artisans in the town produce items otherwise unobtainable in the surrounding countryside. The stalls of the market place are seen around the free-standing cross to the left of the church at centre. The market is regulated by officials working for the king's representative, the *shire-reeve* (sheriff). The *shire-reeve* lives in the larger hall structure in the left upper quadrant. To the left of the hall is a smaller structure housing a mint where coins are produced under royal licence.

The importance of religion is clear from the size of the church. It stands at the crossroads at the very centre of the town. In the upper right quarter of the town, an area of wasteland is covered with tents. These are the temporary homes of people from the surrounding countryside who have fled from Viking raids. These refugees will return to their homes when the danger has passed.

The lower left quarter is being farmed. Farming in otherwise uninhabited sections is known to have taken place inside the royal *burh* and capital of Winchester. A number of paddocks or pens for livestock can also be seen around the town; these hold horses, oxen, cattle, sheep and goats belonging to the townsmen and refugees. The timber and thatch houses of the townspeople follow older Roman street alignments in some places (as at Canterbury) but are

more randomly positioned in other areas. Some have fenced enclosures containing small gardens.

### *J: The battle of Andraedsweald, AD 892*

The attack on the unfinished fort at Andraedsweald, by a force of Vikings who had arrived from the Continent, was the opening of a major campaign in south-east England which tested the newly organised military defences of Alfredian Wessex to their limit. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* describes the attack of the Vikings as follows: 'They crossed in one voyage, horses and all, and then came up into the mouth of the *Lympe* [in Kent] with 250 ships they pulled their ships upstream as far as the forest, four miles from the entrance to the estuary, and there stormed a fort within the fen; occupying it were a few peasants and it was half built.' In this reconstruction the moment of the Norse assault is shown. The 'peasants' have been caught unprepared while building a ditch, with a bank raised from the spoil surmounted by a wooden palisade.

As with all aspects of Anglo-Saxon warfare, the building and manning of defence works was a legal obligation. Fortress work was one of the *trimodas necessitas* (or three requirements) laid on the holder of a five-hide obligation, the other two being bridge-building and



military service. A 10th-century Anglo-Saxon document, the *Burghal Hideage*, suggests that obligation of fortress work was linked to fortress defence, in other words the thegn had to defend what he had built.

A local thegn has been supervising the *ceorls* – he was required to do so as the obligation of his land-holding. Having taken up his spear and shield he is attempting to rally the building workers for defence. These are equipped with whatever improvised weapons they might have been able to snatch up. The Viking attackers are more experienced, better equipped and in general more highly motivated than the Kent ‘peasantry’, who are doomed to a speedy defeat.

However, the defenders of *Andraedsweald* were soon avenged. The Viking army was caught in a strategic trap by the main *fjrd* and forced out of Kent. After a partially successful attempt to break out into Essex they were eventually run to earth and destroyed at Benfleet by local levies.

#### **K: Saxon supply train, 1066**

This illustration is based on a scene in the Bayeux Tapestry showing Norman preparations for the invasion of England; almost identical activities would have been

underway in Harold’s kingdom. The workshop, sited on a royal estate, has been working through early 1066 to make good shortfalls in the equipment of the *fjrd*. The workshop has forges both indoors and out, where work proceeds under the direction of a royal official – either a reeve (paid official) or a landholding thegn. His red over-tunic indicates a higher rank than the workmen he supervises.

The supply train is setting off on its way towards a *fjrd* mustering point. The quantity of weapons is somewhat unusual as most *fjrd* members would probably be expected to provide their own equipment. Spears are most in evidence, as they could be produced more cheaply and quickly than swords or axes, and were the most cost effective way of arming a man in this period.

The helmets mounted on the uprights of the cart siderail are probably intended for the use of *huscarles* or thegns, perhaps to replace battle-damaged or lost items. Similarly the mail shirts, carried between two bearers on a pole, are intended for household troops. The bearers are inferior *ceorls* levied from the king’s estate who would not normally be expected to fight.

#### **L: Saxon huscarle of Earl Ralph the Timid, c.1055**

The equipment of the *huscarles* reflected contemporary

◀ *An elaborate shield boss from Steeple Bumpstead, Essex, probably of Irish origin. The Celtic knotwork decoration and mounts (now empty) for semi-precious stones would have made this a high status item. The flange was damaged apparently during the working life of the piece. (By courtesy of the Board of Trustees of the British Museum)*



▶ *Remains of an iron shield boss from Barton Seagrove, Northamptonshire. The central gilt iron roundel is decorated with an interlaced animal design. A middle status pagan period item, this unusually decorative boss would probably have adorned the shield of a gesith or a wealthy thegn. (By courtesy of the Board of Trustees of the British Museum)*



Scandinavian fashion. The *Lex Castrensis* of the Danish writer Saxo Grammaticus says that helmets, mail shirts and gold-plated swords were the required basic equipment of a *huscarle*. Shields, as shown in the Bayeux Tapestry, could be either circular or kite-shaped. The broad-bladed axe with a haft about 4 feet in length became virtually the trademark of the *huscarle*.

In spite of his 'Norman' appearance this man is a Saxon; the only outward display of this is his full moustache. The remainder of his equipment might be that of any high-status warrior of 11th-century north-western Europe and is influenced by Continental fashion. His Anglo-Norse sword with its three-lobed pommel could, for example, have been carried by a true Norman.

The helmet is a one-piece forging similar to that from the treasury of Olomouc (Olmütz) Cathedral in the Czech Republic. The long mail shirt and coif are of native manufacture. The skirt is divided to facilitate riding.

Leather binding protects the edges of the garment from wear and reduces chafing. The spear is of Norman origin and, although also designed for use from horseback, is not much longer than an infantryman's spear at about 6-7 feet (approximately 2 metres). The *huscarle* has simple prick spurs strapped to his heels which have been imported from Normandy.

The kite-shaped shield has a mythical animal as a device. This is added in appliqué leather sections, sewn to the leather shield face. Alternatively the blazon could be painted on the shield. The shield-rim is bound with leather. The arrangement of carrying straps can only be inferred from the four decorative rivet heads grouped around the small false boss on the upper portion of the shield. These rivets would probably hold in position four leather straps arranged as a hollow square with a rivet at each corner.



◀ *Axe head and belt fittings from Howletts, Kent. The axe head is of Merovingian Frankish origin, of a type normally used by cavalry. (By courtesy of the Board of Trustees of the British Museum)*

▶ *The all-iron axe from the Sutton Hoo ship burial. This unique weapon was presumably part of the royal weapon set. The end of the shaft is pierced to accept a ring for a lanyard, which could be looped around the owner's wrist allowing free use of both hands; this suggests the axe was intended for use on horseback. (By courtesy of the Board of Trustees of the British Museum)*

# MUSEUMS

Most municipal museums in England have display examples of Anglo-Saxon weapons; these are most commonly spearheads and shield bosses, though swords and *seaxes* (usually of knife length) are quite common. Though it is impossible here to include a full list, attention should be drawn to the following museums whose holdings, while not as extensive as those of some national museums, are of high quality.

## *York Castle Museum, York*

Houses the 'York' or 'Coppergate' helmet – the most important Anglo-Saxon armour find of recent years.

## *Sheffield City Museum, Weston Park, Sheffield*

The Anglo-Saxon display includes the Benty Grange helmet and a range of supporting pieces of notable quality.

## *Winchester City Museum, The Square, Winchester, Hampshire*

A rich collection of small finds from the ancient capital of Wessex.

## *Museum of London, London Wall, London*

A large collection of well-preserved Anglo-Saxon weapons found in the River Thames is held by this museum, as also are a number of grave finds from the London region.

The top national collections are:

## *British Museum, Russell Square, London*

By far the best single collection of Anglo-Saxon weapons in the world; the Sutton Hoo panoply is an absolute must.

## *Royal Armouries, H.M. Tower of London*

Examples of Anglo-Saxon weapons are shown as an introduction to the display of medieval arms and armour.

# COLLECTING

While Anglo-Saxon weapons are very occasionally available for sale, they are mostly in very poor condition and relatively expensive. The most likely purchases are spearheads and knife-sized *seaxes* (more often tools rather than weapons). It is unlikely that swords in anything other than fragmentary condition will ever be in the range of the average pocket. Helmets of the period are so rare as to rank as national treasures and cannot be expected to ever appear on the open market. Actual body armour is virtually unknown, though shield bosses may, infrequently, be available. Expert advice as to authenticity should be sought. Most museums will not give estimates of monetary value, nor give opinions on items held on approval; they will, however, assist with authentication and provide information as far as they can. Care should be taken to familiarise oneself with the differences between Anglo-Saxon items and those of medieval date; this can sometimes cause difficulty even for experts, as the shape of many types of weapon altered only in minor details over several centuries.

# RE-ENACTMENT

The two main groups involved in re-enacting this period in Britain are:

*The Vikings (previously the Norse Film and Pageant Society)*

C. Johnson/N.Tate  
16 Magdala Road, Flat 2  
Mapperly Park  
Nottingham, NG3 5DF

*Regia Anglorum*

J.K. Siddorn  
9 Durlough Close  
Headley Park  
Bristol, BS13 7NQ

Of a host of smaller, local groups one deserves special mention:

*Colchester Historic Enactment Society*

Margaret Kay (Secretary)  
Newgrange, Cannon St.  
Colchester, Essex





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# GLOSSARY

- Angon** A type of spear derived from the Roman *pilum*.
- Burh** Originally a defensive work of any kind but extending in meaning to cover defended sites of strategic or economic importance.
- Ceorl** A commoner, usually a peasant who works the land, but is nevertheless a free man.
- Danelaw** The part of northern and eastern England controlled by the Danes in the 9th–11th centuries.
- Ealdorman** A royal governor. In the Middle Anglo-Saxon kingdoms he ruled an area roughly equivalent to a *shire*, and commanded the *fyrð* of the shire in battle. In the later period, he might have authority over an entire minor kingdom.
- Fyrð or General Fyrð** The Anglo-Saxon levy of all free men required to bear arms.
- Gesith** Early Anglo-Saxon word describing a ‘companion’ or military retainer of a king. Later came to mean a senior noble landholder in the same sense as *thegn*.
- Hide** An area of land sufficient to support one family, clearly a variable measure.
- Hundred** Administrative subdivision of a shire; it included, in theory, 100 *hides*, though this was far from constant.
- Huscarles** The household troops of the late Saxon kings from no later than the foundation of the Anglo-Norse dynasty by Cnut in 1014. The term was an anglicisation of the Norse *huskarl* (‘household man’), and could be used individually to describe a royal official or servant.
- Seax or Scramaseax** A single-edged blade weapon of varying size and shape.
- Select Fyrð** A term coined by modern historians to describe the limited levy of only the better-equipped and motivated warriors.
- Shire** Administrative and military subdivision of a kingdom.
- Shire-reeve** From *reeve* meaning official, the shire-reeve was the administrative official of a *shire*. He could command the *fyrð* of the shire when the need arose. The term later took the modern spelling, *sheriff*.
- Thegn** A term which altered meaning during the Anglo-Saxon period. Initially, the thegn was specifically a royal servant or retainer. By the middle period, *thegns* were landholders of middle rank, usually of the noble military class which made up the backbone of the army.
- Wapentake** Used in the north of England it was an administrative sub-division with roughly the same meaning as *hundred*.