

# Part 1:

# Anglo-Saxon Society

## Reading 1.1

### The Anglo-Saxon as Hero

*In the following extract the Sutton Hoo burial remains displayed at the British Museum are interpreted to create a rich description of the Anglo-Saxon warrior.*

From Lloyd and Jennifer Laing, *Anglo-Saxon England* (1982)

'The street was paved with variously coloured stones, and the road kept the fighting men in a group. The war-corselet shone, firmly hand-locked, the flashing iron rings sang in the armour as they came on their way even to the great hall in their war-gear. Tired from the sea, they laid down their broad shields, their strong bucklers against the building's wall; they then sat down on the bench. The body-armour rang out, the warrior's armour. The spears, the weapons of seamen, of grey-tipped ash wood stood all together. The armed band was furbished with war-gear. Then a haughty hero asked the fighting men about their lineage: "From where have you brought plated shields, grey corselets and masking helmets, this pile of spears?... I have not seen so many men of strange race more brave in bearing.'

Thus the seventh-century poet of the epic *Beowulf* described Anglo-Saxon warriors. Archaeology supports the picture provided by the poem, though the hero and his war band in the poem were kitted out more in the manner distinctive of seventh-century East Anglia than the rest of pagan Saxon England.

The poem is often quoted in conjunction with the results of the excavation of a unique warrior's burial, to give an idea of the world of the Anglo-Saxon heroes. The burial was at Sutton Hoo in Suffolk, excavated first under threat of the Second World War and then re-excavated and reappraised in 1967. It was certainly not the only grave of its king, but is the sole example to have survived intact into the twen-

tieth century, and to have been examined scientifically from the start. The grave shows many features that point to links with Sweden and it is now thought to be the interment of king Raewald of East Anglia who died in 625. The absence of a body among the contents has long perplexed scholars, but the acid conditions of the sandy soil near the river Deben are now thought to be sufficient explanation for this.

The burial certainly seems to be dedicated to the precept that you can take it with you when you go. Despite the conversion of king Raedwald to Christianity (there are two baptismal spoons in the grave), his followers sent him to the after-life with the full honours of a pagan hero, in his ship. The vessel was filled with gold, silver and garnet, jewellery and all the necessary accoutrements of a royal warrior. The dead hero was laid to rest with his helmet, sword and shield. A whetstone or sceptre and a standard proclaim his royalty. His entertainment was to be provided by a lyre (now reconstructed by the British Museum), and he would have been able to eat from a variety of silver bowls and quaff from one of seven silver-decorated drinking vessels. There was a magnificent silver dish with stamps of the emperor Anastasius of Byzantium (491–518) underneath, and at the east end of the burial chamber were bronze cauldrons and a mass of chainwork. It is the jewellery that excites the imagination and the splendidly decorated gear of the hero that brings the world of the Anglo-Saxons nearer. A simple list of the grave

goods is eloquent testimony to the lifestyle of a royal hero.

This burial is unusually rich, and also late in the pagan period, but the other evidence for warrior equipment underlines the fact that the early Saxons were a warrior-based society. If Hengist did not have the ornate armour of the legendary Beowulf or the historical Raewald, he would certainly have been well equipped with weaponry.

Helmets are rare finds in any period and only a couple of examples have survived from Anglo-Saxon England. The simpler of the two is probably the more typical, and was found in a seventh-century barrow at Benty Grange in Derbyshire in the nineteenth century. It had a domed frame composed of iron bands radiating from the centre of the crown and riveted to an iron headband. The spaces between the bands were filled with horn plates, fastened with ornamental silver rivets, and the medial band extended to the nose where it was decorated with a silver cross. For a crest it bore the free-standing figure of a boar, originally iron-plated and inlaid with silver. Its eyes were staring red garnets. In style it is Celtic rather than Anglo-Saxon, though both Celts and Saxons regarded the boar as a symbol of strength and ferocity, and it was associated with the god Freyr. In Beowulf such helmets are described: 'The blood-stained sword with its mighty blade cuts off the boar images of enemies' helmets', or: 'Figures of boars, gold adorned, shining, fire-hardened, glittered over the cheek-pieces. The warlike best guarded the live of fierce warriors.'

Helmets are frequently depicted in art, and are generally of this bowl-shaped form with a projecting nose-guard. They appear worn by the little figures that adorn the mounts of the Taplow drinking horns, and by the men of the Franks Casket. One of the best representations of a warrior in a helmet, again of the seventh-century appears on a gilded bronze buckle found at Finglesham, Kent in 1964. The hero is naked apart from his belt, and his helmet is bowl-shaped and crowned by huge horns ending in what appear to be birds' heads. This type of helmet seems to be Swedish, though it may have an Iron Age Celtic ancestry, and may also have been, by the sixth or seventh century, out of regular use in fighting. Warriors wearing similar helmets appear on the stamped plates that decorate a late sixth-century helmet of Swedish manufacture found in the royal ship burial at Sutton Hoo. This superb helmet has a visor which covers the face, and eyebrows ending in boars' heads. Like much in the Sutton Hoo burial, it was a ceremonial object, probably never worn in the heat of real battle, and it can be assumed that helmets were rarely worn by the ordinary Anglo-Saxon warrior.

Nor was body armour often worn, though once again Sutton Hoo and Benty Grange have provided examples of chain-mail, and there is one further example from Kent. Chain-mail is shown on the Franks Casket.

All warriors, however, carried shields. They were normally made of limewood, and were circular, up to 1m across, with a central hole which was covered by the boss and took behind it the grip, so that the boss is in effect protecting the fist. Usually only the iron fittings survive—central *umbo* or boss and the shield grip. Part of the wood survived in the grave at Petersfinger in Wiltshire, where it was found to have been made of sheets fixed together like plywood. It was probably curved like a watchglass, and would often have been covered in leather. Ornamental attachments for shields are known, the best example being from Sutton Hoo. All-leather shields without any ornament may have been carried by some.

Socketed spearheads are common grave finds, suggesting that most men carried them for hunting or warfare. A specialised type of thrusting spear, descended from Roman types and known as the *angon*, is also found in what seem to be the graves of the rich. Bows were certainly used, but none has survived intact. Traces of a bow about 1.5m long were discovered at Chessel Down on the Isle of Wight, a cemetery which has also produced arrowheads. Archers with small bows are depicted in Anglo-Saxon art—it may have been a hunting weapon. The throwing-axe (*francisca*) of the Franks was also used in battle.

The most characteristic weapon was the *scramasax*, a single-edged iron hacking sword, with an angled back sloping towards the point. The finest known example was found in the Thames. It was inlaid with silver and bronze along the back of the blade, and had the runic alphabet inlaid in silver. It dates from around 800. Beowulf carried a similar weapon in a sheath suspended from his mail-coat, and so did his monster adversary Grendel. The sixteenth-century antiquary William Camden, in recounting the suggested origin of the term Saxon, noted... that:

'The Saxon people did as most believe, Their name from *Saxa*, a short sword, receive.'

The most treasured possession of the pagan Saxon warrior was his sword. In modern times, they would have cost as much as a television set. Few have survived as they were handed down from father to son. They appear to have been given names occasionally, like king Arthur's legendary sword Excalibur. They were also believed to possess magical powers. They were double-edged, cutting rather than thrusting weapons, about 90cm long, and were kept in a scabbard (usually of wood and sometimes fleecelined),

suspended from a belt. The hilts were often elaborate—a horn example survives from Cumberland, decorated with filigree gold insets—but many hilts were of wood. Typical of the pagan period are three-cornered pommels with slightly curved-in sides. A fine example with bronze and silver mounts was found at Brighthampton, Oxford, and is ornamented in the late Roman style. It is a Continental piece of the fifth century and has a rivet in the form of a cross on it. In Kent a distinctive type of sword with a ring on the hilt developed—such ring swords are mentioned in *Beowulf*. The ring could sometimes be replaced by a bead of amber or rock crystal and seems to have had a magical significance. A ring-sword was found at Sutton Hoo with a skeuomorphic ring (that is, made for ornamental purposes). Some sword hilts are very elaborate, such as the gold and garnet ornamented example from Sutton Hoo or that decorated in gold from Coombe in Kent, which dates from the sixth century. A sixth-century sword pommel from Faversham has a nielloed rune *tir*, and a later Norse poem says, ‘if you want victory, learn victory runes and cut them on to your sword hilt... and name Tyr twice’. This *tir* rune suggests an invocation of Tiw, the god of war and death.

Thus equipped the hero went into battle. Fighting forces were probably numerically small. In the late seventh century the Laws of Ine of Wessex announce that ‘up to seven men’ were thieves, ‘from seven to thirty-five a band and above three dozen an army’. In 786 Cynheard’s army amounted to eighty-five men, which was nearly sufficient to capture Wessex from king Cynewulf. Hengist and Horsa are described as having come over in three ships, while Cerdic and Cynric came over in five. In other words, war bands coming to England were of the order of 100–250 men, which helps to account for the considerable mix-up of peoples in the population of early Anglo-Saxon England. Such armies were organised on a basis of personal loyalty, with as its nucleus the war band of the chief. In return for their loyalty, the chief rewarded his followers with weapons, gold rings, feasts and drink.

The strongest image of the hero that spans the centuries is that of him among the war band in the feasting hall, where he would be listening to songs and poems glorifying heroic adventures. A lyre measuring about 74cm long was found at Sutton Hoo, with sound-box and frame of maple and pegs of poplar. Other lyres were found at Taplow and Abingdon, and one is illustrated being played by David in an early Canterbury manuscript. Harps are mentioned in *Beowulf*, where it is reported that the troll Grendel woke when he heard ‘loud merriment in the hall, the music of the harp and the clear sound of the minstrel’. Other musical instruments known from

Anglo-Saxon manuscripts are the horn, trumpet, pipe, shawm, rebec and probably the bagpipes. A Danish-period flute has been found at York.

The feasting hero was also entertained by dice and board games, and gaming pieces are fairly common finds in graves. At Caistor-by-Norwich an urn was found to contain thirty-three pieces, a third black (of ivory), the rest white (of bone). The same cemetery produced a set of thirty-one knuckle-bones of sheep, used in a game similar to jacks. The largest was engraved with a runic inscription which has not been deciphered. Decorated bone playing pieces have been found at Taplow, Sarre, Faversham and elsewhere. One from Witchampton Manor has two horses’ heads on it, rather like a chess knight, though there is little evidence for chess-playing in England before the Norman Conquest. Not all players were honest—two loaded dice were found at North Elmham, Norfolk, in the Bishop’s Palace, contrived so that they always came up with a six.

Other pastimes were hunting, falconry... and weapon sports.

Anglo-Saxon literature abounds with tales of brawls resulting from drunkenness at the feast, caused by mead, wine or beer. In *Beowulf*, after the defeat of Grendel, the hall was adorned with gold wall hangings, and the men on benches round their king quaffed mead while the king presented gifts to the hero and his followers. The court minstrel played and sang, and the cupbearers served wine. The queen offered wine to the king and his guests, and at the end of the feast the benches were cleared away and the beds (which were pallets) laid out. At such a feast the lord’s retainers were expected to make promises or boasts about their loyalty. In the story of the *Battle of Maldon* one hero urges his companions to remember their mead speeches, ‘when we warriors in hall raised our boasts at the bench about harsh battle. Now we can test who is brave.’

Such, then, was the Anglo-Saxon hero, drunk, boastful, brave, a barbarian in a mould made centuries before in the flamboyance of late prehistoric Europe, and not so very different from his Celtic counterpart.



## Reading 1.2

### The Ranks of Men: the structure of Anglo-Saxon society

The following extract makes use of some of the sources we have used in class — Anglo-Saxon poetry and the Dooms or laws of early Anglo-Saxon kings— to illuminate the gradations of English society in the ‘Dark Ages’.

From H. R. Loyn, *The Governance of Anglo-Saxon England 500–1087* (1984)

#### Ealdormen, Gesiths, and Thegns

Principles of government of permanent importance developed from the exercise of royal authority, but this was not the only significant type of authority known to the Anglo-Saxon world. The king was in a special position elevated over lesser mortals; his authority possessed a capacity for residual growth denied to that of other men. He could not however act alone. As the kingdoms grew in size his advisers were drawn increasingly from a noble class, the ‘twelve-hundred’ men of the laws who were protected by the high wergeld or blood-price of 1200 shillings, six times that of the ordinary freeman in Wessex. Some of these men were themselves royal princes, kinsfolk of the king with possible rights in the succession. Others were representatives of former ruling dynasties which had lost royal title and independence as they were absorbed into the larger heptarchic kingdoms. Others again owed their status to service which they or their ancestors had performed to kings. Their privileges mirrored the privileges of the crown. Protected by their high blood-price they also enjoyed their own *borh*, their rights to compensation if their own peace were disturbed. Anyone fighting in the home of an ealdorman or other important councillor was to pay 60s. compensation and to give another 60s. as a fine... Terminology to describe the nobility is naturally still fluid in the early Anglo-Saxon period. The three vernacular terms in most frequent use were *ealdorman*, *gesith*, and *thegn*... The *ealdorman* already had closer links with the kings and possessed more of an official status. He could lose his office (unless the king wished to pardon him) if he failed in his duty, particularly in his duty against thieving. Forcible entry into an ealdorman’s dwelling made an offender liable to the heavy penalty of 80s. An *ealdorman* was expected to be prominent in the army and in the courts, leading contingents of the *fyrð* in the field, acting as the royal deputy in active military service and in the more

prosaic business of delivering judicial judgements. Privileges, an extra weight to the value of his oath in the courts, brought correspondingly heavy penalties if privileges were abused... The laws of Ine were particularly explicit on the matter of military service. Neglect of such service was to be punished by forfeiture of land and a fine of 120 shillings from a nobleman who owned land, by a fine of 60 shillings from a nobleman who did not own land, and by a fine of 30 shillings from an ordinary freeman. In time the term *gesith* became somewhat antiquated, chiefly used in poetry, but it served a useful purpose in early Anglo-Saxon society to describe noblemen possessing estates of their own, with some considerable measure of authority independent of that of the king. The *thegn* on the other hand, and even more so the king’s thegn, though a ‘twelve-hundred’ man, was normally more of an exalted servant, one who performed an office about his lord. *Thegn* indeed covered a wide range of service from men with great privileges and status to humble retainers: in law an element of nobility was to be expected in a *thegn*, but the term still lived in the language of the seventh or eighth century in its root sense of ‘one who served’.

We know much about the nobility of early Anglo-Saxon England but some matters, vitally important to an effective study of government, escape us completely. We can assume that a nobleman’s undoubted military obligations had corresponding fiscal obligations. There is no direct statement on the nature or limitation of his powers of jurisdiction, but the value of his oath, and the fact that the presence of a man of his rank was essential among oath-helpers in certain cases if exculpation was to be effective made him an important figure in all early judicial processes...

It seems evident, too, that a nobleman’s authority over a village community rested on his social rather

than his legal dominance, and would be determined in part by sheer physical and material factors, now outside the historian's knowledge. Wealth, size of hall, nearness in kinship to the king or the ealdorman, past prestige as a warrior, judge or royal servant, could determine the degree of authority exercised more so than mere physical force or apparent status. The ideal of a 'twelve-hundred' man having automatic rights of a legal nature over other freemen should be summarily dismissed. The nobility of early Anglo-Saxon England operated as far back as the written record goes in a framework of law that was both royal and communal. When the Anglo-Saxon poet discussed the special 'gifts of men' he placed high on the list those who knew the law 'where men deliberate' and also those who 'in the assembly of wise men determine the custom of the people'; such gifts were not exclusive to one class. This is not to deny variation in authority. The nobleman, already distinguished by speech, dress and appearance from the ordinary freeman, could, particularly in a military context, act in an apparently arbitrary fashion. Bede tells how in a war between Mercia and Northumbria a young Northumbrian king's thegn, Imma by name, was taken captive. The nobleman (*gesith*) who held him captive noticed from his face, bearing and speech that he was not of the meaner sort, as he had said, but of the nobler class. He persuaded him to tell him the truth and when he did so, confessing that he had been a king's thegn, the *gesith* replied:

'I realised by all your replies that you were not a peasant, and now indeed you deserve death, for all my brothers and kinsmen were killed in that battle; yet I will not kill you, that I may not break my promise.'

In the event the young thegn was sold into slavery to a Frisian in London. The passage is of considerable importance in illustrating the authority of a military commander over his captives and in reminding us of the active world of warfare and kindred vengeance that flourished in the seventh and eighth centuries. Such arbitrary action should not however be taken as typical of noblemen in their dealings with civil dependants.

#### Freemen and the Unfree

To judge from the law-codes an ordinary freeman, a *ceorl*, the basic unit in organised society, was a man who paid or was paid for. This was only part of the story. A freeman in one of our early territorial kingdoms still bore the characteristics of a free member of a tribe. He was oath-worthy and weapon-worthy, a person of repute, possessed of a free kindred and capable of playing a full part in the army and the courts. Such a part involved much more active self-help than would have been considered proper or

seemly in a later age. Provided that he paid the recognised dues, a *ceorl*, a 200-shilling man, with or without a recognised link of lordship between himself and the king, would rarely need the services of anything resembling public authority. His personal safety was recognised by his own arms and his free kindred. Similar sanctions ensured his safe possession of a share in the village arable, his homestead and his flocks. Marriage and the rearing of his children were matters for arrangement among free kindreds and personal control. Public duties at the army and in the courts, it is true, had to be performed on pain of fines and intervention by royal officers. Restraints of an ordered society lay heavy on him in that sense, but these restraints were as much internal as external. As a free member of the people of Deira or East Anglia or Kent or Wessex he fulfilled his duties without an elaborate hierarchy of officialdom to sustain him.

Discussion of courts, of simple freemen and of kindred obligations and sanctions can be helpful. It can also mislead. Anglo-Saxon England was a slave-owning society, and in no period is this more true than during the early centuries, even after the conversion to Christianity. The laws of Ethelbert show a considerable sophistication in the gradations of slavery and anyone lying with a *ceorl*'s woman-slave had to pay compensation to the *ceorl* according to the category of the slave, six shillings for one of the first class, 2 1/2 shillings for one of the second class, and 1 1/2 shillings for one of the third. It seems certain that these classes were determined roughly according to function and training... Legal concern was naturally concentrated on compensation to the slave-owner. Distinctions of dress, mien, appearance and sometimes language, thickened the social lines and barriers between the free and the unfree. The West-Saxon lawyers of the late seventh century were particularly anxious to incorporate whole classes of Welshmen, free and unfree, into their social structure as the kingdom extended to the south-west.

A slave would have no legal redress against the will of a powerful master. Public courts could not interfere, and he could be punished corporally or even killed without penalty... The public courts could take no cognisance, but loss of a slave, or of a slave's work, harmed a freeman, and so indirectly brought even the most vulnerable and miserable of slaves into some sort of communal protection. The very processes of manumission and of reduction to slavery demanded some degree of recognition at public courts.

From the point of view of the growth of institutions of government the treatment meted out to slaves has a special importance. More than the arbitrary commands of a master were at stake. At the

lord's central household, or at the ceorl's farmstead, some disciplinary court, no matter how informal, must have been in existence. Bede on occasion mentions the reeves, the *vilici* or *tungerefan*, who hold positions of authority within an estate. When Caedmon (the first English poet according to the delightful story told by Bede) discovered that he had the gift of song he reported to the reeve who was in authority over him. There were none of the agencies of a full-fledged territorial state such as had been in Imperial Rome to safeguard slave-owners against their own slaves. The balance of social forces was more delicate in the Anglo-Saxon world. The Church played what to modern eyes so often appears an ambiguous role in relation to slavery. Archbishop Theodore legislated widely but with only a flicker of humanitarian thought towards the slave. Lawyers at witans and at Church synods concerned them-

selves with proper observance of ecclesiastical routine and ceremonial, and accepted slavery as part of the human condition. If a slave worked on Sunday at his master's command he was to be freed and his master to pay a fine of 30 shillings. If he worked on Sunday without his master's knowledge he was to be flogged; and a freeman working on that day without his lord's command was to forfeit his *healsfang*, that is to say a proportion of his *wergeld* or bloodprice, half of which was to go to the man who discovered the infringement together with half the proceeds of the guilty man's *borh*. Some safeguard to person was recognised implicitly. The most hopeful text for the early Christian centuries as for the later was that he who Christ had redeemed with his precious blood was indeed worthy of a shepherd's care. David was more pleasing in God's eyes when he was a *servus* than when he was *rex et dominus*.

