

Early Anglo-Saxon Costume: An Archaeological Approach

One of the challenges in researching early period costume is that written and artistic records contain little or ambiguous material. In this class, we will look at Anglo-Saxon Costume in the Pagan Era (410-650 AD). Examples of men's and women's costume will be discussed. We will examine an archaeological approach to reconstructing the costume of this period. Reports of bog and grave finds as well as actual dress ornaments from the period will be used.

Course Outline

Written Period Accounts

The Saxons did not have written histories before converting to Christianity, so for written information, we are dependent on earlier and later writings, and contemporary writings by the Saxon's neighbors.

- Tacitus - earlier Roman historian writing about continental Germanic tribes
- Bede - later Saxon historian
- St. Augustine - contemporary missionary from Rome
- Nennius - contemporary British historian
- Anglo-Saxon Chronicle - later Saxon history written by a variety of authors

Nature of Art and Clothing production left few traces in the archaeological record either

- Saxon art was not clearly representational of people and their dress. There was lots of abstract ornament, and some depictions of animals and animal-like ornaments. Very few depictions of people.
- Clearer depictions of people are available on the continent in cultures in close contact with Romans, and in Roman depictions of Germanic tribes. Trajan's column and funeral carvings are examples.
- Clothing more of a cottage industry, made in the home for the local community. No large workshops with middens of broken tools, etc.
- No internal written record. A-S Chronicle began to be written in Christian era, so no illustrations in manuscripts.

Migration Patterns

Knowing the migration patterns allows us to make better guesses when we have more information at the point of origin of a migration.

- The historian Bede wrote about England being populated by Angles, Saxons, and Jutes.
- Archaeology supports different populations moving in at different times. Jewelry found in graves may match that found in sites on the continent, suggesting close trade contact between the groups if not actual migration from one place to another. Some pottery and jewelry can be shown to be made using the same tools when viewed under a microscope.
- Bogs in Denmark have produced a number of textile and leather finds that can inform finds in England where the textiles & leather have rotted away.

Early Anglo-Saxon Costume: An Archaeological Approach

- Huldremose Gown
- Thorsbjerg tunic and Trousers
- Shoes

Changes in religion (burial practices)

- Throughout the period burial practices varied by community, and changed as people gradually converted to Christianity.
- Pagan era: body buried in clothes.
- Christian era: may have been buried in shroud rather than clothing

Grave Finds

- Changing archaeological techniques have improved preservation of more fragile finds like textiles.
- Textiles preserved by or impressed in metal corrosion. Many pins on the backs of brooches were iron & the corrosion trapped & made impressions of fibers. It is sometimes possible to tell the difference between linen & wool by microscope.
- Current archaeology more likely to preserve traces of textile. Keeping the moisture level the same as the site's also helps preserve textile. Things that have been preserved in anaerobic (no-oxygen) conditions may be preserved better, and may decompose rapidly if they are exposed to air or allowed to dry out after excavation.
- Placement of brooches, buckles, etc. on skeleton provides framework to fill in the missing parts of the costume.
- Most metal artifacts are functional, either a tool or hold costume together.

Cemeteries

- Even with these problems, inhumation cemeteries provide an excellent source of information about dress in this time. Provide a better idea of what was typical.
- Many graves have no metal finds at all, or contain a single glass bead.
- Passage of time in same community. One site may be used for hundreds of years and show change in costume in the same community.
- However, finds must be taken with a grain of salt, as the deceased did not choose what to put on that day. The garments the deceased wear into the grave have religious significance in some cultures. For instance, kimonos lapped in opposite direction in Japan. Without much knowledge of funeral rites we don't know why people were buried in the manner in which we find them.

Bog Finds

- A number of textile & leather finds from bogs in Denmark have proved very useful in interpreting Saxon finds in England. Vegetable fiber (linen) less likely to survive than protein (wools & leather). Some pieces found where threads used for stitching have rotted away leaving impressions behind in the fiber or leather that survived.

Early Anglo-Saxon Costume: An Archaeological Approach

- Can give a more realistic view of “average” dress. These may be items that were lost or broken & discarded. Many are of very mediocre workmanship. This is encouraging when trying to recreate dress accessories. Not everything looks like the Sutton Hoo belt buckle.
- Antiquities also provide a much better feel for the scale of items that may be difficult to get from a book where no scale is given.

Open Issues

- The study of early Anglo-Saxon dress leaves us with many questions.
- Archaeologists continue to argue over a number of these. So we get to do our own research & make up our own minds. What colors were used & how often? often too small a fragment of textile to destructively test is found or it may be too stained by bog tannin to yield clear results
- How many layers? If pins didn't go through all layers, only top preserved in the corrosion on the backs of pins
- Saxon ladies wore lots of different objects hanging from belts. Crystal balls, perforated spoons, T shaped girdle hangers in pairs. Why were they worn?
- Many belt buckles had decoration that would be covered up if buckled like modern belts. How do you fasten your belt so the decoration shows?
- No body was found at the incredibly rich Sutton Hoo ship burial. Was King Raedwald buried at Sutton Hoo? Was anyone buried at Sutton Hoo?

Helpful Hints

- Track down good maps.
- Learn names of nearby towns/regions and alternate names for the culture (Jutes in Kent)
- Find references to interpret archeologists. Lots of very technical terminology is used. – What the heck is a cruciform brooch?
- Archeologists change their minds. Watch for newer discoveries that shed new light on old questions
- Learn the names of eminent researchers in the field & seek out their work. Article titles are often cryptic. Sonia Chadwick Hawkes, David Wilson, Martin Welch, Vera Evison, Grace & Elizabeth Crowfoot, among others.
- Do not settle for someone else's redrawing of an artifact. Seek out photographs of the side and back.
- Many dig reports have articles by specialists at the end. This is often the case for textiles.

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Page 1 of 8

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Page 1 of 8

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Page 1 of 8

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