

An Early Medieval Bed Burial and the Trumpington Cross

Notes for PowerPoint

The bed burial was found during archaeological excavations in Trumpington, Cambridgeshire. The archaeologists uncovered evidence of a small settlement which included four small buildings and one larger hall.

Four Early Medieval burials were also found. One of the four bodies had been placed on a bed which had been lowered into the grave. The position of the skeleton's head suggests it once rested on a pillow.

The body had been buried with a number of objects including a gold and garnet cross; gold and garnet pins; a bone comb; some beads and a chatelaine (pronounced shat-a-lane). Archaeologists often call these objects grave goods and they provide us with information about the person buried and those who buried her, as they were the ones who chose what objects to place in the grave.

From the shape and size of the skeleton, the archaeologists worked out that the body belonged to a girl aged around 16. Bed burials are rare in Britain and the presence of a gold and garnet cross suggests this could be an early Christian burial.

Ideas for discussion

What could the grave goods tell us about the young woman?

Do you think every Angle, Saxon or Jute was buried with precious gold objects?

What objects would you want to be buried with?

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Introduction

Who lived in Britain before the Angles, Saxons and Jutes came?

The Romans had been living in Britain alongside the British people for four hundred years. Sometime around the beginning of the fifth century (1,500 years ago), the Romans left Britain. No-one really knows why, but maybe they were needed back in Southern Europe.

What did Britain look like when the Angles, Saxons and Jutes arrived?

The Romans built large stone buildings with mosaic floors which were abandoned for a long time before the Angles, Saxons and Jutes arrived. An Early Medieval poem describes what

the early Angles, Saxons and Jutes thought about the landscape they discovered here:

“These wall-stones are amazing!
Some disaster destroyed them, the cities collapsed,
giant’s work crumbled.
The roofs have fallen to the ground, the towers are ruined.
Ice has pulled apart the gates at the hinges,
All the storm-walls have vanished,
The years have eaten them away.” (The Ruin, ll.1-6).

The Angles, Saxons and Jutes had not seen anything like these Roman buildings before. Some of them thought the cities had been built by giants! Angles, Saxons and Jutes used Roman materials when they built their settlements, they even melted down Roman glass to make beads and cups.

Why did the Angles, Saxons and Jutes come to Britain?

Some people think that the Angles, Saxons and Jutes were invited to Britain by a king named Vortigern to help defend them from the Picts and Scots who were attacking them. This idea is based on the writings of a British man named Gildas. He was describing events that happened nearly one hundred years before he was born. What problems might there be with his version of events? The settlers may also have come to look for better farmland. Can you think of any other reasons why people move around?

Where did the Angles, Saxons and Jutes come from?

The archaeological evidence shows that most of the earliest Early Medieval settlers came from the areas now called Denmark and Germany, though they were joined by other people from Europe. These people had separate cultures and languages, although they were similar in lots of ways. Their differences mean that we can identify different groups living in Britain.

Some later Early Medieval sources describe three groups of people living in Britain: the Jutes, the Angles and the Saxons. Over time, these people mixed together and developed a shared language. England was made up of separate kingdoms for a long time after these groups first settled.

What did Early Medieval houses look like?

Archaeologists sometimes find evidence for ancient buildings in the ground. What kind of evidence do you think buildings would leave in the ground? **At West Stow, in Suffolk, lots of different houses have been built to try and work out what Early Medieval buildings looked like.** We know that buildings were different sizes but everything else is guessed based on the evidence.

How did Angles, Jutes and Saxons treat their dead?

Buildings don't leave many traces in the ground but we do find objects that people have dropped or which were buried when buildings burned down. What kinds of things do you lose that an archaeologist might find in the future?

Lots of settlements have cemeteries nearby where early Angles, Jutes and Saxon people were buried with objects and jewellery. Early Medieval jewellery can be very complicated and often animals and faces are hidden in the patterns.

Some Early Medieval burials were extremely elaborate. Burials like the largest one at Sutton Hoo were reserved for very rich and powerful people. They included boats, horses and expensive jewellery and weapons. Swords are very rare in burials and only a few people would have owned them. Shields were also put into rich burials, though the main wooden part doesn't usually survive.

Lots of Angles, Saxon and Jutes were cremated (their remains were burnt on a bonfire) before they were buried. Their ashes, as well as personal objects like combs and brooches, might be burned in the funeral fire with them, or put into urns afterwards. Lots of these cremation urns were made of decorated clay.

The way that people buried their dead relatives said a lot about who they were, their ancestors, and their beliefs about what happened to a person after they died. Early Medieval burials are very varied, both within the same cemetery, across the country and over time. These differences show how people expressed their attitudes towards family, society and death.

What did Angles, Saxons and Jutes believe?

There is very little evidence for the beliefs of the early Angles, Saxons and Jutes but archaeological finds, and some written sources, suggest that their belief systems were similar to that of people living in other countries at the same time. They believed in lots of different gods like the Greeks and the Romans. Their faith was probably quite similar to that of the Vikings.

How did Christianity change Early Medieval life?

According to Bede, who wrote a history of the English church, St. Augustine came to Britain to convert the Angles, Saxons and Jutes to Christianity not long after they arrived here. The first Christians seem to have been wealthy, powerful people. What religious symbols can you think of? How do people with different beliefs show which religions they belong to?

Many people became monks and nuns and lived in monasteries, abbeys and nunneries. These people wrote religious books, some of them spending their whole lives on one book.

The new religion changed the way that people were buried, though many of the old burial practices continued for a long time. Eventually, people stopped being cremated and their burials did not contain objects apart from the jewellery they were wearing. These burials were positioned so that the sun would rise over the person's feet and set behind their head. Lots of different religions say that people should be buried like this. For Christians it is because the Bible says that when Christ returns to Earth everyone will be resurrected already facing him. Some people were buried in coffins.

Lots of burials combined the old and new ways. The Trumpington burial might be one of these- see what you think.

Who were the Vikings?

The Vikings were people with the same ancestors as the Angles, Saxons and Jutes who lived in Scandinavia. They had similar art styles and language but they converted to Christianity much later.

What did the Vikings do when they visited Early Medieval England?

The first recorded Viking attacks concentrated on Christian places. The monastery at Lindisfarne (where the manuscript came from) was the first place to be raided. The Vikings took lots of precious religious artefacts back to Scandinavia. Scandinavian women's graves often contain Christian objects that came from England and Ireland.

Did any Vikings stay in England?

After nearly a hundred years of attacking English towns and religious places, the Vikings stayed in Britain over the winter for the first time instead of returning home to their farms. From then on, some Vikings decided to settle in Britain, mostly in villages along the east coast. These villages sometimes have Old Norse (Viking) names which survive today. After lots of fighting, King Alfred the Great agreed with the Vikings that they could live in an area of England which they called the Danelaw. York was an important Viking city.

How were Angles, Saxons and Jutes different to Vikings?

The Vikings had different ideas about cleanliness from the Angles, Saxons and Jutes who believed that they shouldn't wash too often. The Vikings bathed regularly and combed and plaited their hair. Some Early Medieval writers complained that Christian women were marrying the Viking settlers because of their stylish appearance.

Who was in charge after the Vikings?

The Viking Age ended in England when Cnut the Great became king. Cnut was a Viking who had converted to Christianity, he was also king of Denmark and he promised that no more Viking raiders would attack England while he was in charge. His grandson Harthacnut was the last Scandinavian to rule England.

Edward the Confessor was king after Harthacnut. When he died there were lots of different people who claimed that they should be the next king. This resulted in the Norman conquest, when William the Conqueror became King of England.