Sutton Hoo and Europe AD 300–1100

This was a time of great change in Europe. The Roman Empire broke down in the west, but continued in the east as the Byzantine Empire. People, objects and ideas travelled across the continent and its seas, while Christianity and Islam emerged as major religions. By 1100 the precursors of several modern states had developed. Europe as we know it today was beginning to take shape.

The Desborough Necklace
Anglo-Saxon England, late AD 600s

This necklace, found in a woman's grave, is the finest of its kind to survive from Anglo-Saxon England. Its gold wire beads and pendants set with garnets reflect a mix of Mediterranean and continental fashions. The inclusion of a cross pendant reflects the influence of Christianity on Anglo-Saxon culture during a time of changing religious beliefs.

Desborough, Northamptonshire, 1876,0504.1

The Strickland Brooch
Anglo-Saxon England, AD 800s

This silver brooch is an especially fine piece of Anglo-Saxon jewellery. Its intricate pattern of lively animals with glittering gold bodies and blue glass eyes is inlaid with niello, a black metal alloy that was popular at this time. The mixture of materials is unusual for a brooch of this date and it was probably worn by a wealthy woman.

Purchased from the Strickland family, 1949,0702.1

The Sutton Hoo ship burial Early AD 600s

These finds come from a spectacular Anglo-Saxon grave at Sutton Hoo, Suffolk. Dating from the early AD 600s, the burial was arranged inside a wooden chamber built in the middle of a 27-metre-long ship, covered by a high earth mound. It is the richest grave yet discovered from early medieval Europe, and would have commemorated a leading figure – perhaps a king – of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of East Anglia.

The Sutton Hoo helmet

This is one of just four complete helmets to survive from Anglo-Saxon England. It has been painstakingly reconstructed from the shattered condition in which it was found. The Sutton Hoo helmet's exceptional survival and haunting appearance have made it an icon of the early medieval period.

The helmet consists of an iron cap with a crest, neck-guard, cheek-pieces and face-mask. It was originally covered with tinned copper alloy panels, decorated with animal and warrior motifs.

Viewed together, the helmet's mouth, nose and eyebrows form the image of a flying beast.

Similar helmets are known from eastern Sweden, implying shared cultural traditions and interactions with East Anglia. The scarcity of surviving Anglo-Saxon helmets indicates that only those of great status could possess them.

Late AD 500s–early AD 600s. Donated by Mrs Edith M. Pretty, 1939,1010.93

Replica of the helmet

This replica of the Sutton Hoo helmet shows how splendid the original once was. The surface is bright and silvery, with mounts enriched with gilding and vivid red garnets. The helmet's imagery combines Germanic, Scandinavian and Roman-derived motifs. It was a well-designed and fully working piece of armour.

1970s. Made by the Royal Armouries, SHR.2

A puzzle of creatures

The helmet's 'face' comprises a puzzle of creatures. The 'eyebrows', 'nose' and 'moustache' form the shape of a flying beast with garnet-edged wings and eyes. Its snout touches that of a serpent-like creature forming the helmet's crest, while its wingtips end in fierce boar heads. These formidable animals, popular in Germanic imagery, were appropriate symbols for warriors and were probably felt to have protective qualities.

1970s. Made by the Royal Armouries, SHR.2

Image caption: The flying creature forming the 'face' of the Sutton Hoo helmet

© British Museum

Dancing warriors

A curious image repeated on the helmet shows two men raising spears and swords, and wearing horned head-dresses. The position of their legs shows that they are moving. Similar scenes appear on helmets from eastern Sweden. It is thought that the men may be performing a ritual dance linked with the cult of Woden (Odin in Scandinavia), the Anglo-Saxon god of war. Later written sources describe him as accompanied by two ravens with a spear as his symbol.

1970s. Made by the Royal Armouries, SHR.2

Horseman trampling his foe

Several panels on the helmet show a mounted warrior trampling an enemy beneath his horse's hooves. A small figure perched behind the rider, holding his spear, may represent a supernatural being guiding his aim. But the fallen man is stabbing the horse with his sword, endangering the rider.

This motif, deriving from Roman imagery, is known from Scandinavia and elsewhere on the Continent but its meaning remains mysterious. It could be a victory scene or show a battlefield tactic described in Roman writings, in which warriors brought down horses to kill their riders.

1970s. Made by the Royal Armouries, SHR.2

Image caption: Detail of a Roman funerary monument from Colchester, Essex, around AD 50–60, showing a horseman trampling his foe

© Colchester Museum, Essex

Image caption: Drawing of similar 'dancing' warriors on a helmet found in a boat burial at Valsgärde, eastern Sweden

© Museum Gustavianum, Uppsala, Sweden

The Sutton Hoo ship burial
An Anglo-Saxon royal grave?

These magnificent treasures are from a single grave placed in an Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Sutton Hoo, Suffolk. But this was no ordinary grave. It was arranged inside a wooden chamber built in the middle of a 27-metre-long ship, covered by a large earth mound.

The burial took place in the early AD 600s when Sutton Hoo belonged to East Anglia, one of several competing Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. As the centuries passed, the chamber collapsed and the ship's wooden planks decayed, leaving an imprint in the ground studded with iron rivets. All trace of a human body dissolved in the acidic soil. The burial's splendour suggests that it commemorated a person of extraordinary status, perhaps even a king – but his true identity remains an unsolvable mystery.

Image caption: The Sutton Hoo ship, viewed from the side and above. The front part (bow) is shown at full size within the case

© British Museum

Image caption: Kingdoms of Britain and Ireland, AD 600s

Image caption: Burial mounds at Sutton Hoo, Suffolk

© National Trust

Image caption: The site at Sutton Hoo is managed by the National Trust. To visit and find out more – www.nationaltrust.org.uk/sutton-hoo/

Video images: © National Trust, © Cliff Hoppitt, from the Archaeology Data Service

High level quote:
'They stretched their beloved lord in his boat,
laid out by the mast, amidships,
the great ring-giver.'
'Beowulf' (translation by Seamus Heaney)

Mediterranean silver

The Sutton Hoo ship burial contained sixteen pieces of silver tableware from the eastern Mediterranean. This region was then part of the Byzantine Empire, with its capital at Constantinople.

The silverware probably reached Sutton Hoo through a network of gift exchange between rulers across Europe, bringing Byzantine luxuries to the Frankish realm (centring on present day France, Belgium and western Germany), and onwards to Anglo-Saxon England.

Early Anglo-Saxons did not produce silver dining sets – they typically used wood and horn instead. At Sutton Hoo, the silverware may have been used for dining or perhaps as a display of 'royal treasure'. Exotic and costly, it would have demonstrated its owner's status, wealth and connections.

Image caption: Position of chamber in ship

Image caption: Position of finds in chamber

Image caption: Silver spoons

Image caption: Anastasius platter with ladle underneath

Image caption: Copper alloy basin

Image caption: 10 silver bowls

Image caption: Fluted silver bowl containing small silver cup

Image caption: The Byzantine Empire, about AD 600

High level quote:
'Far-fetched treasures
were piled upon him'

'Beowulf' (translation by Seamus Heaney)

A set of silver bowls

These shallow silver bowls are from a set of ten that were stacked upside-down inside the Sutton Hoo burial chamber. They were made in the eastern Mediterranean, possibly for religious use – their cross-shaped designs may have had a Christian meaning. We do not know how the bowls were used after they arrived in Anglo-Saxon England, where Christianity was slowly taking hold.

AD 500s–600s. Donated by Mrs Edith M. Pretty, 1939,1010.79–83 and 85

Basin with animal motifs

This copper alloy basin was made in the eastern Mediterranean. Similar basins have been found in other early Anglo-Saxon burials, but this one is distinguished by its fluted design and running animal engravings. One engraving is clearly a lion, while the others may represent a camel, a hare and another big cat. It may have been used for hand-washing at the table, because food was mostly eaten with the fingers.

Late AD 500s–600s. Donated by Mrs Edith M. Pretty, 1939,1010.109

Ladle and cup

Complementing the larger vessels were a small silver cup and ladle. The ladle is partly gilded and may have been made for religious use. The function of the small cup is unclear, as its shape is not typical of Byzantine drinking cups. Both items were made in the eastern Mediterranean and their Anglo-Saxon owner may have used them for serving drinks.

AD 500s–600s. Donated by Mrs Edith M. Pretty, 1939,1010.90–91

The Anastasius platter

This Byzantine silver platter is one of the largest to survive from the period. It measures almost 72 cm across and weighs 5.6 kg. The back is stamped with the control marks of Emperor Anastasius I who reigned in Constantinople, the capital of the Byzantine Empire, from AD 491 to 518. This means that the platter was already around 100 years old when it was buried.

Large silver platters formed the centrepiece of dining parties in the Byzantine Empire. After arriving in Anglo-Saxon England, this one's size and exotic origin would have transmitted powerful messages about its owner's status.

AD 491–518. Donated by Mrs Edith M. Pretty, 1939,1010.76

Image caption: Control stamp of Emperor Anastasius I (reigned AD 491–518) on the back of the Anastasius platter

© British Museum

Image caption: Wall painting at Brigetio, Hungary, showing a servant holding a silver platter of similar size to the Anastasius platter

With the kind permission of the Archaeological Collection of the Museum Klapka György, Komárom, Hungary © Laslo Burhy

Two silver spoons

These spoons from the Byzantine Empire have Greek inscriptions on their handles. The upper spoon reads 'Paulos' while the lower one is less clear and may read 'Saulos'. This was once interpreted as a reference to the conversion of Paul, one of Christ's Apostles who changed his name from Saul when he became a Christian. Now experts believe that the engraver made a mistake and meant to write 'Paulos' on the second spoon too.

Late AD 500s–600s. Donated by Mrs Edith M. Pretty, 1939,1010.88–89

Fluted silver bowl with handles

This silver bowl was made for use as a wash basin. It is decorated with fluting and a central roundel engraved with a woman's head in Roman style. The two drop handles were originally soldered to its sides. The bowl is not of the finest quality as the engraved head is off-centre, but it would still have been prized by Anglo-Saxons unfamiliar with luxury silverware.

AD 500s–early AD 600s. Donated by Mrs Edith M. Pretty, 1939,1010.77 and 77.a–b

A set of silver bowls

These shallow silver bowls are from a set of ten that were stacked upside-down inside the Sutton Hoo burial chamber. They were made in the eastern Mediterranean, possibly for religious use – their cross-shaped designs may have had a Christian meaning. We do not know how the bowls were used after they arrived in Anglo-Saxon England, where Christianity was slowly taking hold.

AD 500s–600s. Donated by Mrs Edith M. Pretty, 1939,1010.79–83 and 85

The Sutton Hoo ship burial Discovery and significance

The Sutton Hoo ship burial was discovered in 1939, when landowner Edith Pretty asked archaeologist Basil Brown to explore the largest burial mound on her estate. Inside, he found the imprint of a decayed ship studded with iron rivets, and a central chamber filled with treasures. It proved to be the richest intact burial known from early medieval Europe, perhaps the final resting place of an Anglo-Saxon king.

The discovery confirmed once and for all that early Anglo-Saxon England was not isolated or unsophisticated. It was a place of exquisite craftsmanship, significant personal wealth and far-reaching international connections. The Sutton Hoo ship burial remains one of the most important archaeological finds ever made – a true icon of the Early Middle Ages.

Mrs Pretty donated the finds to The British Museum in 1939.

The Sutton Hoo ship burial

Image caption: The Sutton Hoo ship, viewed from the side and above

Image caption: The front part (bow) is shown at full size within the case

© British Museum

Image caption: Kingdoms of Britain and Ireland, AD 600s

Image caption: Excavating the Sutton Hoo ship burial in 1939

© British Museum

Image caption: The site at Sutton Hoo is managed by the National Trust

To visit and find out more – www.nationaltrust.org.uk/sutton-hoo/

Video images: © National Trust, © Suffolk County Council and © British Library 'Beowulf', translated by Seamus Heaney, 1999

High level quote:
'They let the ground keep that ancestral treasure,
Gold under gravel, gone to earth…'

'Beowulf' (translation by Seamus Heaney)

The Celtic World

The Sutton Hoo ship burial contained three hanging bowls of differing size and decoration. It is not known where they were made, but their form and decoration point to an origin in the neighbouring Celtic-speaking regions of Ireland or north and west Britain. They may have held water for hand-washing.

Hanging bowls were highly prized by the Anglo-Saxons. The most complete examples have been found in their graves, reflecting interactions with Celtic peoples at this time. The Sutton Hoo ship burial is unique for containing more than one hanging bowl. All three show signs of repair, hinting that the bowls were long cherished possessions.

Image caption: Position of chamber in ship

Image caption: Position of finds in chamber

Image caption: Small and medium hanging bowls

Image caption: Large hanging bowl

Image caption: Kingdoms of Britain and Ireland, about AD 600

Medium-sized hanging bowl

This unusual hanging bowl displays a curious mix of styles and techniques. The enamelled disc seen on the base is typically Celtic, while the open-work ring surrounding it is inlaid with stamped foils that are more typically Anglo-Saxon. Perhaps the bowl was made by a craftsman trained in both traditions, or in a workshop where Celtic and Anglo-Saxon craftsmen worked together.

Early AD 600s. Donated by Mrs Edith M. Pretty, 1939,1010.111

Large hanging bowl

This is the most elaborately decorated hanging bowl known from the period. The outside has three square mounts alternating with three circular mounts, each with animal-headed hooks resembling seals or otters. The mounts are embellished with scrolls, red enamel and patterned millefiori glass. Rare green and blue enamel enhances the decoration alongside more typical red.

Repairs show that the bowl was already fairly old when it was buried. A silver patch with Germanic-style bird heads may have been added at the request of its Anglo-Saxon owner, confirming that this was once a treasured possession.

Early AD 600s. Donated by Mrs Edith M. Pretty, 1939,1010.110

Rotating fish mount

This circular mount decorated with a rotating fish was originally fixed inside the largest hanging bowl. Unusually for this period, the fish is modelled in three dimensions, with fins, incised scales and enamelled spots. The mount is an extraordinary addition to the already elaborate vessel.

Early AD 600s. Donated by Mrs Edith M. Pretty, 1939,1010.110

Small hanging bowl

The smallest hanging bowl from the ship burial has three circular hooked mounts inlaid with swirling designs, red enamel and patterned millefiori glass. These are similar in style to the mounts on the largest bowl, but much less complex. Objects with similar decoration are known from parts of Ireland, so it is possible that this bowl was made there.

Early AD 600s. Donated by Mrs Edith M. Pretty, 1939,1010.112

Weapons and war-gear

The Sutton Hoo helmet, sword and shield were accompanied by spears and a rare coat of mail armour. This war-gear reflects the deceased's warrior status and the value attached to military prowess in early Anglo-Saxon society.

Violence was commonplace as developing Anglo-Saxon kingdoms competed for power. Successful and generous leaders attracted warriors to fight on their behalf and protect their communities. Loyalty, courage and glory won in battle were highly regarded qualities, as evoked in the Anglo-Saxon poem 'Beowulf':

'It is always better to avenge dear ones than to indulge in mourning… Let whoever can win glory before death.' (translation by Seamus Heaney, 1999)

Image caption: Position of chamber in ship

Image caption: Position of finds in chamber

Image caption: Spearheads

Image caption: Mail coat

Image caption: Angons

Image caption: Spearhead

Image caption: Warriors fighting, from the Franks Casket, around AD 700 (also on display in this room)

© British Museum

High level quote:
'Where do you come from, carrying these decorated shields and shirts of mail, these cheek-hinged helmets and javelins?'

'Beowulf' (translation by Seamus Heaney)

Spearheads and angons

The burial chamber contained six spearheads of different shapes and three angons (barbed lances), all of iron. Spears are the most common weapon found in Anglo-Saxon graves, but the number and variety here are unparalleled. The rarer angons are of Frankish origin and demonstrate links with the Franks on the Continent. Each weapon originally had a long wooden shaft. Spears were used for thrusting, while angons were thrown.

Early AD 600s. Donated by Mrs Edith M. Pretty, 1939,1010.97–105

Image caption: Warriors with different types of spears, from the Old English Illustrated Hexateuch, 1025–1050

© British Library Board (Cotton Claudius B. IV, f.51).

Mail coat

This now corroded mail coat was found folded on the burial chamber floor, with a leather garment and several silver vessels on top. It was made by hand-linking thousands of tiny iron rings to form a heavy yet flexible protective garment which probably reached the wearer's thighs.

Mail coats are rare finds. They were probably worn only by high status warriors, while most fought with little or no body protection. The Anglo-Saxon poem 'Beowulf' describes the sight and sound of mail coats worn in battle:

'Their mail-shirts glinted, hard and hand-linked; the high-gloss iron of their armour rang.' (translation by Seamus Heaney, 1999)

Early AD 600s. Donated by Mrs Edith M. Pretty, 1939,1010.92

Image caption: A warrior wearing a mail coat, from the Franks Casket, around AD 700 (also on display in this room)

© British Museum

Mail armour fragment, 1600s

This fragment of iron mail armour from the 1600s is similar in construction to the Sutton Hoo mail coat, which was made almost a thousand years earlier. It gives a good impression of what the Anglo-Saxon coat would have looked like before it corroded in the ground. The effectiveness of mail armour meant that it remained popular for centuries.

On loan from the Royal Armouries, Leeds

The Frankish Realm

These splendid items reflect interactions between Anglo-Saxon England and the Franks on the Continent, ruled in the early AD 600s by the powerful Merovingian dynasty.

Frankish coins like these were a source of gold, often melted down by Anglo-Saxon craftsmen to make fine jewellery.

The sword-belt fittings and large gold buckle reflect shared fashions in dress, decoration and metalworking techniques. The garnet cloisonné technique involved setting vivid red garnets into individual gold cells with gold foil backing to catch the light, making the gems shimmer. The cloisonné work from Sutton Hoo is among the finest known from the period.

Image caption: Position of chamber in ship

Image caption: Position of finds in chamber

Image caption: Gold buckle

Image caption: Sword-belt fittings

Image caption: Coins

Image caption: Frankish kingdoms,
about AD 600

Gold coins, blank coins and ingots

37 Frankish gold coins called 'tremisses' were found inside the purse in the burial, each struck at a different mint. Three blank coins and two small ingots found with them suggest that the collection was valued as bullion for payment by weight, rather than as currency. Crucially, the coins provide clues about when the burial took place. Analysis of their gold content and date of minting point towards the period around AD 610–635.

Early AD 600s. Donated by Mrs Edith M. Pretty, 1939,1003.1–42

Great gold buckle

This buckle is a masterpiece of early medieval craftsmanship. Its form with curved sides and three domed bosses resembles Frankish buckles. The plate is a hollow box that opens at the back and locks using three moveable sliders. Buckles with similar mechanisms are known from the Frankish realm and other parts of the Continent. They probably contained Christian relics, and perhaps the Sutton Hoo buckle held something precious, too.

Made using over 400 grams of gold, its intricate decoration shows 13 intertwining creatures inlaid with niello (a black metal alloy). The Sutton Hoo buckle is a superlative example of this type of animal ornament, which was popular with many Germanic peoples at the time.

Early AD 600s. Donated by Mrs Edith M. Pretty, 1939,1010.1

Sword-belt

These gold and garnet fittings come from a magnificent sword-belt. The rectangular ones were spaced along the belt's length, while the buckle held it closed. The hinged T-shaped fitting and curved triangular 'slider' connected the belt with the scabbard, steadying the sword at the wearer's side.

Similar sword-belts with rectangular fittings are known from the Continent, but none matches the Sutton Hoo example in splendour. The garnets were cut, set and inlaid with tremendous skill and precision.

Early AD 600s. Donated by Mrs Edith M. Pretty, 1939,1010.6–11 and 17

Image caption: Drawing of the Sutton Hoo sword-belt and scabbard, indicating the possible layout of the fittings

© British Museum

Feasting and power

Hospitality and feasting played a crucial role in early Anglo-Saxon society. A lord's ability to feed, entertain and shelter his followers was key to securing their loyalty and, in turn, his power and position. These objects show that the person buried at Sutton Hoo was equipped to be a generous host.

The great hall was the centre of hospitality. Although no hall has yet been found near Sutton Hoo, written accounts, artefacts and excavations at Yeavering (Northumberland) and Lyminge (Kent) show us what Anglo-Saxon halls were like. Timber-built and up to 80 metres long, the largest halls held dozens of guests and symbolised the wealth and authority of the lord who owned them.

Image caption: Position of chamber in ship

Image caption: Position of finds in chamber

Image caption: Gaming pieces

Image caption: Pottery bottle

Image caption: Iron lamp

Image caption: Cauldron and chain, tub

Image caption: Lyre

Image caption: Bucket

Image caption: Drinking horns, maple wood vessels, walnut wood cups

Image caption: Feasting with drinking horns on the Bayeux tapestry, late 1000s

© The Art Gallery Collection / Alamy

High level quote: 'So his mind turned
to hall-building: he handed down orders
for men to work on a great mead-hall
meant to be a wonder of the world forever…'

'Beowulf' (translation by Seamus Heaney)

Reconstructed tub and bucket

These are reconstructions of a large tub and one of three buckets placed in the burial. The original yew wood staves (narrow wooden strips) that formed their bodies decayed, but the iron fittings are original. These vessels probably stored food or drink for serving to guests in the hall. The tub had a capacity of around 100 litres and was probably carried on a pole threaded through loops near its rim.

The iron fittings were embellished with silver rivets and bird-head terminals. Research has shown that the individual wooden staves may have been cut to emphasise natural colour contrasts in the yew wood, creating alternating bands of cream and orange.

Early AD 600s. Donated by Mrs Edith M. Pretty, 1939,1010.116 and 119

Image caption: Colour contrasts in a piece of yew wood

© Paul Felix Photography/Alamy

1. Maple wood vessels and replicas

These fragments are from a set of six maple wood bottles or flasks, perhaps used for medium-strength alcoholic drinks like mead or ale. Maple trees were uncommon in East Anglia, so their wood may have been highly prized. The gilded silver fittings, once fixed to the rim and body of each vessel, are decorated with interlaced designs, animals and human faces. The two modern replicas show how the vessels may have looked originally.

Early AD 600s. Donated by Mrs Edith M. Pretty, 1939,1010.122–7 and 109–111, 1939,1010.122–127. A1–59 and B1–12. Maple wood given by the Canadian High Commission, SHR.12–13

2. Reconstructed drinking-horns

These drinking-horns are reconstructions of a pair that decayed in the burial. The gilded silver mounts are original, and depict interlacing beasts and human faces. The tips are shaped like fierce birds' heads. The horns probably came from an aurochs, a large type of ox. Aurochs were extinct in early medieval Britain, so these horns were probably imported from the Continent. Each horn held about two litres of mead or ale, and may have been passed around in feasting rituals.

Early AD 600s. Donated by Mrs Edith M. Pretty, 1939,1010.120–121

3. Walnut wood drinking cups and reconstructions

These cups, from a set of eight, are made from walnut burr wood with original gilded silver fittings. The brown cups are original, while the others are modern reconstructions. Burrs are knotty tree growths that produce a dark, densely patterned wood. The rarity and beauty of walnut burr wood probably made these cups very valuable. They may have held a potent drink which the Anglo-Saxons called 'beor', fermented from fruit or honey.

Early AD 600s. Donated by Mrs Edith M. Pretty, 1939,1010.129–134

4. Lamp

This iron lamp, comprising a round bowl on a tripod foot, still contains the remains of beeswax fuel, but no trace of a wick has survived. Iron lamps are extremely rare finds from early Anglo-Saxon England. So far, they have only been found in the richest burials like Broomfield and Prittlewell in Essex, as well as at Sutton Hoo.

Early AD 600s. Donated by Mrs Edith M. Pretty, 1939,1010.166

5. Pottery bottle

This bottle is the only piece of pottery from the Sutton Hoo ship burial. It was made on a wheel like Frankish pottery – early Anglo-Saxon pottery was typically handmade. Unglazed and therefore porous, it was only suitable for viscous liquids like honey unless the inside was lined, for instance with a resin. Scientific tests have so far been unable to determine what it contained.

Early AD 600s. Donated by Mrs Edith M. Pretty, 1939,1010.168

6. Gaming-pieces and replica

Several gaming-pieces placed in the burial are now stained green from contact with metal objects in the chamber. The white piece is a modern replica. Board games were popular with the Anglo-Saxons, but gaming-pieces are only found in high status burials belonging to those who had the leisure time to play games. These are made from a sperm whale's ivory teeth, instead of the more typical and readily available animal bone or teeth.

Early AD 600s. Donated by Mrs Edith M. Pretty, 1939,1010.172.1 and 172.3. Replica gaming-piece, SHR.19

7. Lyre and replica

These are the remains of a musical instrument called a lyre. Made from maple wood, it had six strings which were strummed or plucked to make music. Gilded and garnet-inlaid plaques with birds' heads embellish the top. The replica shows how the Sutton Hoo lyre may have looked originally. Music played an important role in many early medieval societies. People made music for pleasure and recited stories and poems to the accompaniment of instruments.

Original lyre, Sutton Hoo, Suffolk, early AD 600s. Donated by Mrs Edith M. Pretty, 1939,1010.203.58–77. Replica lyre, made by Dolmetsch Workshops, Surrey, SHR.9

Pieces from the cauldron chain

The elaborate cauldron chain was a masterpiece of ironwork. Made of 22 interlinking pieces, it was originally about 3.5 metres in length. It included a swivel so that the chain would not become twisted. X-rays of the surviving pieces reveal intricate spiral terminals and tightly twisted rods, now hidden by corrosion. The chain's original appearance can be admired on the replica displayed nearby.

Early AD 600s. Donated by Mrs Edith M. Pretty, 1939,1010.167

Fragment from a cauldron

This is an original fragment of the largest cauldron from the burial. It was made from copper alloy sheet and had two iron handles. The cauldron could be hung from a chain over a fire, and was probably used for warming and distributing food in the great hall. With a capacity of around 100 litres, it would have served many guests.

Early AD 600s. Donated by Mrs Edith M. Pretty, 1939,1010.113.2

Replica cauldron and chain

This is a modern replica of the largest of three cauldrons in the burial. It shows how the cauldron may have looked, suspended from a beam inside a great hall. The chain's length of almost 3.5 metres shows that the beam must have been four or five metres above the ground to allow the cauldron to hang freely over a fire. The hall's roof would have been even higher. Clearly the cauldron was made for use inside a significant building.

SHR.15

Image caption: Artist's impression of the interior of an Anglo-Saxon hall, with a cauldron suspended over a fire

© British Museum

Power and authority

These items from the Sutton Hoo ship burial convey the power and authority of the person buried inside.

The form of the long carved whetstone and glittering shoulder-clasps evoke Roman symbols of authority – perhaps in a deliberate attempt to associate their Anglo-Saxon owner with the might of the old Roman Empire.

Others express his power through unparalleled craftsmanship and opulent materials, accessible only to those of the highest standing. All are decorated with mighty creatures like boars, birds of prey, wolves and a stag. In Anglo-Saxon England, these beasts epitomised strength, courage and power – qualities to which any ruler would aspire.

Image caption: Position of chamber in ship

Image caption: Position of finds in chamber

Image caption: Shoulder-clasps

Image caption: Purse-lid

Image caption: Whetstone

Image caption: Stag

Image caption: Buckle, strap-fittings and gold mounts

Image caption: Carved human face on the whetstone

© British Museum

Whetstone

This whetstone was skilfully carved from a hard, fine-grained stone to give a perfectly smooth surface. Whetstones were typically used to sharpen knife and weapon blades, but the lack of wear and elaborate form of this one suggest that it was reserved for ceremonial purposes.

Although its significance is now unknown, several features hint that this whetstone was an emblem of authority. Its design resembles Roman sceptres (decorated staffs of high office). Carved human faces at each end may represent gods or ancestral figures, while a majestic copper alloy stag stands on top. Perhaps it symbolised a ruler's responsibility to keep his warriors' weapons sharp in defense of their kingdom.

Early AD 600s. Donated by Mrs Edith M. Pretty, 1939,1010.160, 1939,1010.205.a–b

Image caption: Ivory panel showing a Roman consul carrying a sceptre in his left hand, early AD 500s

© The Art Gallery Collection/Alamy

Gold mounts

These enigmatic mounts may have been emblems of office. Rivets and rivet-holes show that some were attached to other objects, perhaps bone or ivory rods that decayed in the ground. The most elaborate mount comprises a gold filigree (beaded wire) ring attached to a strip with 'cabochon' (domed) garnet settings. A similar setting was found elsewhere in the burial. The fluted strip has an animal-head terminal, while wolf-like beasts appear on the triangular and curved mounts.

Early AD 600s. Donated by Mrs Edith M. Pretty, 1939,1010.31–33 and 302

Gold buckle and strap-fittings

These strap-fittings come from the leather belts or harness that held the purse and sword at the dead man's waist. They are made of gold and most are decorated with cloisonné garnets. The triangular fitting resembles a stylised animal mask, with tiny animal heads looking upwards in its upper corners.

Early AD 600s. Donated by Mrs Edith M. Pretty, 1939,1010.12–16 and 18

Purse-lid

This purse-lid would have been attached to a leather pouch which originally hung from a waist-belt. The Frankish gold coins, displayed nearby, were found inside. Only the gold frame and catch of the purse survive – the leather pouch decayed in the ground.

Seven plaques of gold, cloisonné garnets and millefiori glass decorated the lid. The upper ones have complex geometric patterns and interlacing creatures, while the lower ones show images of birds and a man standing between two beasts.

This last motif is known from elsewhere in Europe and Scandinavia. Though indecipherable now, the images probably held deep significance for the Anglo-Saxons. They may refer to strength and courage, appropriate qualities for Anglo-Saxon leaders.

Early AD 600s. Donated by Mrs Edith M. Pretty, 1939,1010.2.a–l, 1939,1010.3

Shoulder-clasps

These unique gold shoulder-clasps would have displayed the power and authority of their wearer. They are similar in style to those used in older Roman forms of military dress, and were attached to a thick or padded garment using loops at the back.

Made in two halves, each clasp is decorated with cells inlaid with garnets (cloisonné) and patterned millefiori glass. They are hinged around a central animal-headed pin and curved to fit the shoulder. Setting gems on a curved surface like this required extraordinary skill. Interlacing serpents with blue-glass eyes border the clasps' edges, while two interlocking boars – symbols of strength and courage – decorate the rounded ends.

Late AD 500s – early AD 600s. Donated by Mrs Edith M. Pretty, 1939,1010.4–4.a and 5–5.a

Axe-hammer

This axe-hammer is unusual because the shaft is made of iron rather than wood. Research shows that it may have had a ceremonial function instead of being a warrior's weapon. Elsewhere in Europe long-handled axes were used to sacrifice animals during pagan rituals. If the Sutton Hoo axe had a similar purpose, it may symbolise its owner's authority as a religious leader, providing further evidence of his extraordinary status.

Early AD 600s. Donated by Mrs Edith M. Pretty, 1939,1010.96

Iron stand

This now corroded iron stand is skilfully made but its function is unknown. It may have been used as a symbol of authority. Near the top are the remains of an open cage, and at the bottom is a point with spiral terminals. The upper shaft is twisted. Small animal heads look inwards from the corners of the grille and the cross-shaped feature at the top.

Early AD 600s. Donated by Mrs Edith M. Pretty, 1939,1010.161

Image caption: Artist's reconstruction of the upper part of the iron stand

© British Museum

Shield (partly reconstructed)

This is the most elaborate shield to survive from Anglo-Saxon England. The metal rim and gilded copper alloy, gold and garnet fittings are unusual. The central iron boss protected the user's hand, while mounts depicting a bird of prey and dragon probably gave symbolic protection. The original board, made from lime wood covered with animal hide, has perished and is replaced by a modern replica.

Like the helmet, the shield is similar to others found in eastern Sweden – particularly the iron boss and decorative strips on the front, and the animal-headed grip-mounts on the back. This suggest common cultural traditions and interactions between East Anglia and eastern Sweden at this time.

Early AD 600s. Donated by Mrs Edith M. Pretty, 1939,1010.94

Image caption: Drawing of a partly-reconstructed shield found in a boat burial at Vendel, eastern Sweden

© Historiska Museet, Stockholm, Sweden

1. Double-edged sword

In early Anglo-Saxon England swords were the most prized weapons of all, given as gifts by lords and passed on as heirlooms. The Sutton Hoo sword is the finest known from the period. The double-edged iron blade was fitted with gold hilt (handle) pieces. They are decorated with garnets imported from southern Asia, set into gold cells (cloisonné). It was buried in a wooden leather-bound scabbard, lined with wool to keep the blade bright.

Early AD 600s. Donated by Mrs Edith M. Pretty, 1939,1010.95

2. Gold and garnet scabbard fittings

The pyramid-shaped fittings are decorated with garnet cloisonné and blue glass. Shaping and setting the corner pieces demanded particular skill. A bar on the base suggests that the fittings worked as toggles to secure the sword in its scabbard.

The domed fittings, originally set in bone or ivory collars, were fixed high on the scabbard in the position of two circular depressions still visible on the sword's blade. They probably attached the scabbard to the sword-belt or harness. Two colours of garnet were used – darker ones around the edges and lighter ones in a central cross-shaped design.

Early AD 600s. Donated by Mrs Edith M. Pretty, 1939,1010.26–29

3. Replica sword blade

This replica blade copies the technique used to make the Sutton Hoo sword. It was pattern welded, which involves the twisting of several iron rods which are then heated and hammered many times over to forge the blade's core. Steel cutting edges are added to each side. Finally the blade is ground and polished to bring out an extraordinary design. X-rays of the original Sutton Hoo sword were used to recreate its pattern accurately on the replica.

Made by Scott Lankton, presented by Professor and Mrs Robert Engstrom through the Medieval Institute of Western Michigan University, USA. 1989,0701.1

Image caption: Section of a pattern welded blade, showing the twisted rods used in the manufacturing process

© British Museum

Anglo-Saxon England AD 450–650

After the Roman army withdrew from Britain in AD 410, groups of Germanic peoples from northwest Europe crossed the North Sea to settle parts of southern and eastern Britain. Eventually, a new Anglo-Saxon culture and several distinct kingdoms emerged.

The early Anglo-Saxons did not write texts, but the objects they placed in graves give insights into their world. Women were often buried with domestic objects, revealing their importance in the home. Men were accompanied by spears and shields, highlighting the central role of warriors in Anglo-Saxon society. The most important were honoured with lavish burials containing gold, silver and gem-set artefacts.

Little is known about early Anglo-Saxon beliefs, but they apparently worshipped many gods and the natural world was important. Their conversion to Christianity, beginning in the late AD 500s, was a gradual process that reshaped Anglo-Saxon culture forever.

Image caption: Anglo-Saxon England and Northern Europe, about AD 450–650

A 'princely' Anglo-Saxon burial from Taplow, Buckinghamshire, early AD 600s

These objects come from one of the richest Anglo-Saxon graves ever found. Within an oak chamber beneath a large earth mound, a sumptuously dressed man was laid out amongst a wealth of luxury objects. These included feasting vessels, a lyre for playing music, gaming equipment and up to three sets of war-gear. We do not know who he was, but he was clearly of high standing – probably a local leader. Few outstanding graves are known from this time, the most spectacular being the Sutton Hoo ship burial from Suffolk.

Drinking vessels

The array of drinking vessels in the grave reflects the importance of feasting and hospitality in Anglo-Saxon society. The green glass claw beakers – two of four from the burial – would have been prized luxury items. The gilded mounts, decorated with intricate designs of interlacing creatures and human faces, were fitted to the rims of wooden cups.

Early AD 600s. Taplow, Buckinghamshire, donated by Reverend Charles T. E. Whateley, 1883,1214.13, 15, 34 and 42

Extravagant dress

The man was buried in exceptionally fine clothes. At his waist or shoulder was this impressive gold buckle decorated with garnets, glass and delicate filigree (beaded wire). The two gold clasps perhaps fastened a cloak, as loops on the back suggest they were sewn onto a thick garment. The gold thread comes from a woven braid that trimmed a tunic or belt. It is shown alongside a replica of how the braid may have looked.

Early AD 600s. Taplow, Buckinghamshire, donated by Reverend Charles T. E. Whateley, 1883,1214.1–3 and 17. Replica braid made and donated by Mrs Mary Grace Crowfoot, 1955,1012.1

Gaming-pieces

These bone gaming-pieces were originally gilded on top. Their position in the grave suggests they were laid out on a gaming board or in a carrying box when buried. We do not know how Anglo-Saxon board-games were played, but discoveries of counters, dies and gaming-pieces in richly furnished male burials suggest they were a popular pastime for high status men.

Early AD 600s. Taplow, Buckinghamshire, donated by Reverend Charles T. E. Whateley, 1883,1214.7

Reconstructed drinking-horn

This drinking-horn is one of up to six found in the burial. Such horns were prestigious in Anglo-Saxon England, belonging only to those of the highest status. They probably held ale or mead and were used during feasts for communal drinking. As the horn did not survive, the original gilded silver fittings, decorated with interlacing creatures, human faces and a fierce bird's head, are attached to a reconstruction.

Early AD 600s. Taplow, Buckinghamshire, donated by Reverend Charles T. E. Whateley, 1883,1214.19

The earliest Anglo-Saxons

From the AD 400s Germanic peoples from northern Germany, southern Scandinavia and the Frisian coast migrated to south and east Britain. While there was some continuity with the existing Romano-British culture, different types of settlement, burial customs and objects with continental parallels appeared in the generations that followed. A new Anglo-Saxon culture developed and eventually became dominant, as new communities were established and existing inhabitants either moved away or assimilated.

Glass claw beaker, early AD 400s

This glass vessel, known as a claw beaker after its claw-like decoration, is an early example of a type that grew popular throughout Anglo-Saxon England. Its form is similar to Late Roman vessels, reflecting the cultural transitions that took place in this time of migration and settlement. The beaker came from a woman's grave dating to the mid AD 500s, and was therefore around 100 years old when buried. Perhaps it was a prized heirloom, passed on through generations.

Mucking, Essex, donated by the Trustees of the Estate of F. W. Surridge, 1970,0406.1675

Image caption: Late Roman vessel of a type that influenced the form of Anglo-Saxon claw beakers, AD 350–400

In the collection of the Römisch-Germanisches Museum in Cologne, Germany. © Mario Carrieri

1. Transitional brooch styles

This gilded silver quoit brooch, named after its ring-like shape, is the finest known example of its type. Its decoration with friezes of speckled creatures in shallow relief derives from a mixture of sources, including art of the Late Roman provinces. It was probably made at a workshop that continued Late Roman metalworking traditions during the transitional time at the beginning of the Anglo-Saxon period.

AD 400s. Sarre, Kent, 1893,0601.219

2. Late Roman belt fashions

These belt fittings show the final phase of Roman fashions in England. The narrow buckle with horses' heads on the loop is Late Roman in style. The five-piece belt-set copies those worn by Roman military officers, and may have belonged to a Romano-British soldier or Germanic settler linked to the Empire through family or military service. Its complex decoration and inlaid silver wire would have shown its wearer's status.

AD 400s. Mucking, Essex, donated by the Trustees of the Estate of F. W. Surridge, 1970,0406.975 and 26.a–e

3. Early Germanic brooches

These brooches may have been worn by some of the earliest Germanic settlers in England. The supporting-arm brooch (with one broad end) is similar to examples found in Germany but differs slightly in shape, so may have been made in England. The gilded equal-arm brooch with protruding animal heads was probably imported from the Continent. The long cruciform brooch (with cross-shaped head) became popular across north Germany, Scandinavia and England until the late AD 500s.

AD 400s. Mucking, Essex, donated by the Trustees of the Estate of F. W. Surridge, 1970,0406.973, 1 and 819

4. Continental influence

Objects with strong continental parallels began to appear in England during the early Anglo-Saxon period. Some may have been brought by early Germanic settlers, while others were probably made in England under continental influence. The inlaid wire decoration on these buckles from southern England is a technique used by the Franks across the Channel, while the decorated pottery bowl is similar to examples from north Germany.

AD 400s. Mucking, Essex, donated by the Trustees of the Estate of F. W. Surridge, 1970,0406.744 and 164. Howletts, Kent, 1935,1029.12. Barrington, Kent, 1876,0212.67

Burials and beliefs

The early Anglo-Saxons either cremated their dead, burying their ashes in urns, or placed their bodies in graves with objects ranging from simple knives to the finest jewellery. Their pagan beliefs involved the worship of several gods, while animals and nature played a significant role in ritual practices. Eventually these traditional beliefs were replaced by Christianity in a gradual transition that began in the late AD 500s.

Offerings for the dead

These two vessels and their contents provide a glimpse into Anglo-Saxon beliefs and burial rituals. The small ceramic urn contains three chicken's eggs, while the large copper alloy bowl is filled with hazelnuts. Both had been placed in burials, perhaps as symbolic offerings or provisions for the dead from the mourners who set out their graves.

AD 500s–600s. Great Chesterford, Essex, donated by Mrs Doris E. King in memory of Mr Geoffrey W. King, 1964,0702.370. Faversham, Kent, bequeathed by William Gibbs, .1293.'70

Image caption: A horned figure dancing with spears, perhaps in a ritual for the pagan god Woden, on a buckle from Finglesham, Kent, AD 600s

© Ashmolean Museum, Oxford

1. Anglo-Saxon cremation

The early Anglo-Saxons practised cremation, in which the dead person was placed on a pyre and burnt along with specially chosen grave goods. The remains were then gathered into an urn like this one, and buried in the ground. Personal grooming equipment like the bone comb, tweezers and razor are often found in these burials, perhaps symbolising the rebuilding of the body after its cremation.

AD 400s–mid AD 600s. Possibly Lancashire, 1852,0429.2.a. Eye, Suffolk, donated by Sir Thomas Culham, OA.4955. Mucking, Essex, donated by the Trustees of the Estate of F. W. Surridge, 1970,0406.1414. Northfleet, Kent, donated by Sir Charles Hercules Read, 1918,1105.1

Image caption: Artist's impression of an Anglo-Saxon funeral pyre during a cremation ritual

© British Museum

2. Anglo-Saxon burial

As well as practising cremation, Anglo-Saxons also buried their dead in graves (inhumation), often with carefully selected items. Burials were usually placed together in cemeteries that sometimes served several communities. These objects from a woman's grave reveal that she was buried fully dressed, adorned with brooches, beads, and other jewellery. The quantity and quality of her grave goods suggest that she was of high status.

AD 500s. Sleaford, Lincolnshire, donated by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks, 1883,0401.270–273 and 277–283

Provisions for the dead

Vessels for food and drink were placed in both men and women's graves. The finest were made of glass, like the different coloured drinking beakers and horn. These luxury vessels would have made a statement about the dead person's status. They may also have been intended as symbolic offerings from mourners, providing the dead with refreshments on their final journey.

AD 400s–600s. Rainham, Essex, donated by Cecil John Herington, 1952,0205.1. Kempston, Bedfordshire, 1891,0624.1. Ringlemere, Kent, acquired with the support of the British Museum Friends, 2005,1205.1. Broomfield, Essex, donated by David Christy, 1894,1216.18

Decorated wooden bucket

Organic materials rarely survive from Anglo-Saxon England, making this wooden bucket quite precious. Buckets were another type of vessel that was buried with the dead, but this one is especially fine. It is fitted with copper alloy bands and triangular mounts decorated with staring male faces. The handle mounts are formed from two curving animal heads, their jaws open wide. The bucket may have been used for drinking beer.

AD 500s. Mucking, Essex, donated by the Trustees of the Estate of F. W. Surridge, 1970,0406.468

Image caption: Man buried with a small bucket and a spear, from the Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Barrow Clump, Wiltshire

© Wessex Archaeology, burial excavated by Rfn Rowan Kendrick, 5 Rifles

1. Traditional beliefs

Art offers a rare glimpse into traditional Anglo-Saxon beliefs. The gold pendant has a runic inscription that may have held magical significance. Its Roman imagery shows a helmeted emperor above Romulus and Remus – perhaps reimagined as Germanic mythical figures. The gilded silver brooch is decorated with a puzzle of animals, human faces and hybrid creatures that may refer to pagan gods and myths.

AD 400s–early AD 500s. Undley Common, Suffolk, 1984,1101.1. Chessell Down, Isle of Wight, 1867,0729.5

2. Pagan imagery

Animals were significant to pagan Anglo-Saxon beliefs. Boars and birds-of-prey often decorated war-gear like this helmet fitting and shield ornament. Women's jewellery also featured animals, like the horse-shaped brooch and gold pendant with birds' heads. Naturalistic images of humans were rarer. The four figurines may have been fertility charms, or protective amulets.

AD 400s–700s. Guilden Morden, Cambridgeshire, donated by Herbert George Fordham, 1904,1010.1. Sturry, Kent, donated by Dr A. G. Ince, 1928,0606.1. Faversham, Kent, bequeathed by William Gibbs, .1145.'70. Buckland, Kent, donated by Orbit Housing Association, 1995,0102.865. Breach Down, Kent, donated by Sir John Evans, 1884,0408.1. Bradstow School, Kent, donated by the London Residuary Body, 1988,0412.1. Higham, Kent, 2001,0711.1. Carlton Colville, Suffolk, acquired with the support of The Art Fund and British Museum Friends, 2001,0902.1

3. Beliefs in transition

These objects reflect the Anglo-Saxons' transition from pagan to Christian beliefs during the AD 600s. Fish, depicted on the fine buckle and circular mount, were an early Christian symbol but had also been used in pagan times. The gold disc pendant shows four face masks familiar from traditional art, but their cross-shaped arrangement implies a Christian meaning. The crosses represented on the gold and garnet pendants, silver pin, copper alloy buckle and pendants are more overtly Christian.

AD 600s. Crundale Downs, Kent, 1893,0601.204. Hardingstone, Hampshire, on loan from Hunt Museum, Ireland. Ash, Kent, 1862,0701.16. Wilton, Norfolk, 1859,0512.1. Sittingbourne, Kent, donated by Sir Charles Hercules Read, 1921,1020.1. Acklam Wold, Yorkshire, donated by J. R. Mortimer, 1871,1207.1. Breach Down, Kent, 1879,0524.54. Wigber Low, Derbyshire, 1873,0602.97. Breach Down, Kent, 1879,0524.62 and 64

Weavers and warriors

The objects that Anglo-Saxons placed in graves created and expressed identities for the dead, with gender roles being particularly well defined. Women were often accompanied by domestic objects like tools for making textiles, while men tended to be buried with war-gear. The quantity and quality of grave goods reflect the dead person's status, whereas different styles of jewellery and dress fittings reveal regional tastes and fashions.

Male and female identities

In early Anglo-Saxon England, objects like these had gender specific associations. The gold fittings are from a sword – an important male symbol. The quality of their filigree (beaded wire) decoration suggest an owner of exceptional status. Jewellery was typically worn by women. This gilded brooch inlaid with garnets, and the necklace of glass and amethyst beads with Roman, Frankish and Byzantine coin pendants, are opulent examples of female jewellery.

Early AD 600s. Market Rasen, Lincolnshire, acquired with support from the National Heritage Memorial Fund and British Museum Friends, 2006,1001.1.a–e. Sarre, Kent, 1860,1024.1–2.a–e

Image caption: Anglo-Saxon woman buried with brooches and beads, at Wally Corner, Berinsfield, Oxfordshire

© Oxford Archaeology

1. Female roles

Women's role in textile-making is reflected by weaving equipment found in their graves. The bone spindle whorl was used when spinning wool into yarn. The clay loom-weight, iron weaving-batten and bone pin-beater were used when weaving on a loom. The box perhaps held needles and fabric scraps. Remains of cloth on the back of the brooch show the finished product.

AD 400s–650s. Salisbury, Wiltshire, donated by Jacob Pleydell-Bouverie, 4th Earl of Radnor, 1853,1214.65. Sutton Courtenay, Oxfordshire, donated by Edward Thurlow Leeds, 1931,0210.2. Buckland, Kent, donated by Orbit Housing Association, 1995,0102.184. Faversham, Kent, bequeathed by William Gibbs, .1262.a.'70. Kempston, Bedfordshire, 1891,0624.141. Howletts, Kent, donated by Charles Wickenden, 1918,0711.2

Image caption: Artist's impression of an Anglo-Saxon woman weaving on a loom

2. Regional fashions

Women's jewellery varied amongst different groups of Anglo-Saxons. Pairs of saucer brooches worn with a central square-headed brooch were popular in central and southern England, while in Kent, women preferred disc brooches, small square-headed brooches and other items like crystal balls. In eastern England there was a taste for wrist clasps and cruciform brooches with cross-shaped heads.

AD 400s–650s. East Shefford, Berkshire, 1893,0716.41–42. Great Chesterford, Essex, donated by Mrs Doris E. King in memory of Mr Geoffrey W. King, 1964,0702.579. Lakenheath, Suffolk, 1910,1222.3. Kenninghall, Norfolk, donated by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks, 1883,0702.19. Cambridgeshire, donated by Sir Charles Hercules Read, 1900,1110.1. Faversham, Kent, bequeathed by William Gibbs, .1041.'70. Buckland, Kent, donated by Orbit Housing Association, 1995,0102.669–670 and 672

3. Women's dress accessories

Along with jewellery, women also wore other accessories. These fine pins may have been worn in the hair, but were more likely to have fastened garments. Knives, a common tool used by men and women, were hung at the waist from a belt. The girdle-hanger also hung from a belt, perhaps as a symbolic key signifying women's authority in the home.

AD 400s–650s. Leagrave, Bedfordshire, donated by Jull Bros, 1906,0213.7. Sleaford, Lincolnshire, donated by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks, 1883,0401.176. Breach Down, Kent, 1855,0521.1. Buckland, Kent, donated by Orbit Housing Association, 1995,0102.682. Searby, Lincolnshire, 1893,0618.19

Image caption: Artist's impression of an Anglo-Saxon woman's dress

1. Male roles

Weapons found in men's graves reveal the importance of fighting prowess in early Anglo-Saxon society. Spear-heads like this inlaid example were the commonest weapon buried with men and were originally attached to long wooden shafts. Fighting axes were much rarer. This one is a Frankish throwing-axe called a 'francisca'.

Late AD 400s–500s. Great Chesterford, Essex, donated by Mrs Doris E. King in memory of Mr Geoffrey W. King, 1964,0702.491. Howletts, Kent, donated by Henry Dewey, 1938,1006.1

2. Shield fittings

These fittings were originally attached to the front of a circular wooden shield. The iron boss was in the centre with the decorative circular mounts arranged in two groups around it. The gilded silver mounts, shaped like an aquatic creature and a bird clutching a fish, may have been chosen for their protective or aggressive qualities.

AD 500s. Grave 868, Sutton Hoo, Suffolk, donated by
The National Trust, 2001.0103.3.a, e, f.1, h and j

3. Ring-sword and scabbard fittings

Swords were the most prestigious weapon
in Anglo-Saxon England. This example has a
pattern welded iron blade that required great
skill to make, while its worn silver hilt fittings
suggest it was a treasured heirloom. The ring
attached to the hilt may have symbolised an
oath of loyalty sworn by a warrior to his lord.
The gold button-like and pyramid-shaped
fittings, inlaid with garnets and glass, are from
fine sword scabbards and harnesses.

AD 500s–early AD 600s. Buckland, Kent, purchased
with a contribution from the Christy Fund, 1963,1108.751.
Wickhambreaux, Kent, purchased with the support of
The Art Fund, 1905,0418.16. Broomfield, Essex, donated
by David Christy, 1894,1216.2. Newark, Nottinghamshire,
purchased with a contribution from The Art Fund,
2001,0201.1

Image caption: Sword pommel decorated with interlacing beasts, from Crundale Downs, Kent, AD 600s

© British Museum

4. Buckles and belt-fittings

Anglo-Saxon men displayed their status by wearing belts with grand buckles. Some were made of exotic or imported materials, like these examples of rock-crystal and meerschaum (a white mineral). Others were crafted from precious metals, gilded or set with garnets. The fine decoration on the three-part belt-set and animal-shaped buckle tongue required great skill to make.

AD 450s–600s. Thimbleby, Lincolnshire, 2011,8025.1. Kempston, Bedfordshire, 1891,0624.207. Howletts, Kent, donated by Charles Wickenden, 1918,0711.4. Faversham, Kent, bequeathed by William Gibbs, OA.6748. Howletts, Kent, 1935,1029.1–3. Faversham, Kent, bequeathed by William Gibbs, .1094.'70

5. Leisure and luxury

In early Anglo-Saxon England, the highest status men were buried with unique and luxurious items, like this rare gold finger-ring set with an engraved Roman gem (intaglio). Often their graves contained gaming equipment too, showing that they were able to enjoy leisure time. These gaming-pieces, from a larger set, are made from horses' teeth.

AD 500s–700s. Snape ship burial, Suffolk, donated by Mrs H. M. Davidson, 1950,1206.1. Faversham, Kent, bequeathed by William Gibbs, .1284.'70

The Roman Empire and Beyond AD 300–500

At its height, the Roman Empire extended all around the Mediterranean and into continental Europe and Britain, but its influence reached beyond its frontiers.

Dramatic political, religious and cultural changes transformed the Empire at this time. In AD 330 Emperor Constantine moved the imperial capital from Rome to Constantinople, resulting in the permanent east-west division of the Empire in AD 395. His promotion of Christianity sparked its spread and eventual establishment as the official religion. Gradually, Christian culture replaced that of the earlier Roman Empire, drawing upon the classical pagan past while forging a new and lasting artistic language.

By AD 500 invasions, religious infighting and political strife had disrupted civic and economic life in the Western Roman Empire. Badly weakened, it eventually broke down – but the eastern part endured as the Byzantine Empire.

Image caption: The Roman Empire, about AD 400

Ship's figure-head

This fierce oak figure-head was once thought to be from a Viking ship, until scientific research proved it was earlier. Images of Late Roman ships, such as the one on the medallion pictured here, show similar monstrous figure-heads. It is uncertain if this one was made by Gallo-Roman craftsmen, by Germanic craftsmen settled in northern Gaul (now Belgium), or by Germans influenced by Gallo-Roman ship-building traditions. A tenon at the base allowed it to be removed from the prow of the ship, perhaps for passing under bridges.

Late AD 300s–400s. River Schelde near Appels, Belgium, purchased with contributions from The Art Fund and Christy Fund, 1938,0202.1

Image caption: Roman medallion of Emperor Constantius Chlorus (AD 293–306), showing a ship with an animal figure-head

© Heritage Image Partnership/Alamy

The Esquiline Treasure

This treasure of Late Roman silver caskets, vessels, plate and ornaments was discovered in 1793 at the foot of the Esquiline Hill in Rome. Monograms (motifs of combined letters) on several plates show that it was owned by the Turcii, a wealthy and prominent Roman family. The collection is notable for its craftsmanship and mixture of Christian and pagan inscriptions and imagery, linking the pagan Roman past with the emerging Christian world.

Silver furniture ornaments in the form of Tyches

These ornaments show female figures ('tyches') representing the four leading cities of the Late Roman world. 'Rome' is dressed in military costume. 'Constantinople' holds a cornucopia (a horn filled with flowers and food) representing fruitful abundance. 'Alexandria' holds sheaves of corn and rests her foot on the bow of a ship, while 'Antioch' sits on a rock above the river Orantes, represented by a nude youth, beneath her.

About AD 380. Rome, 1866,1229.21–24

Silver furniture ornaments

These probably formed the terminals to the arm-rests of a chair. Each is in the form of a forearm with a twisted band around the wrist, and hand gripping a sceptre (ceremonial staff and symbol of authority). The elaborate gilding and sceptre imagery implies that the owner was not only rich, but held a significant public office.

About AD 380. Rome, 1866,1229.21–24

The Projecta Casket

This casket, inscribed 'Secundus and Projecta, live in Christ' in Latin, was probably a wedding gift to the couple shown on the top. On the front, the bride adorns herself while handmaids bring caskets of cosmetics. The lid shows a similar scene, with Venus, goddess of love, fixing her hair as winged Cupids offer caskets. This visual comparison between Projecta and the pagan goddess was clearly acceptable to the casket's Christian owners, and was likely intended as flattery. On the back, Projecta walks to a bathhouse attended by handmaids, one of whom carries a casket similar to the Muse Casket (also displayed here).

About AD 380. Rome, 1866,1229.1

Fluted dish

The largest item in the Esquiline Treasure, this dish would have been used for serving food at high status dinners. Similar fluted dishes are known from other collections of Late Roman and Byzantine silverware found across the Roman Empire, such as the Mildenhall Treasure from England (on display in Room 49).

AD 330–370. Rome, 1866,1229.3

The Esquiline Treasure

This treasure of Late Roman silver caskets, vessels, plate and ornaments was discovered in 1793 at the foot of the Esquiline Hill in Rome. Monograms (motifs of combined letters) on several plates show that it was owned by the Turcii, a wealthy and prominent Roman family. The collection is notable for its craftsmanship and mixture of Christian and pagan inscriptions and imagery, linking the pagan Roman past with the emerging Christian world.

Ewer and flask

These vessels were used for serving drinks at high status dinners. Typically, items like these were inscribed with good wishes for their users. The inscription around the body of the handled ewer reads 'Pelegrina, use (this) to good fortune' in Latin. The flask is decorated with Cupids, animals and fruit. Though found together, the lively design of the flask contrasts with the elegant simplicity of the ewer.

AD 300s. Rome, 1866,1229.5 and 4

The Muse Casket

This elaborate cosmetics box, suspended on three chains, holds five small canisters for perfumes and unguents. The outside is decorated with images of eight of the nine classical Muses. A ninth figure on top of the casket may be the final Muse, but she lacks any identifying object or the feathered headdress worn by the others. Instead she may be a portrait of the casket's owner. The images of the Muses would have flattered the casket's owner by emphasising her knowledge of classical arts, which continued to be the height of educated sophistication among the Christian elite in the Late Roman period.

AD 330–370. Rome, 1886,1229.2

Set of plates

The monogram (motif of combined letters) on these small plates represents the names of the owners. The left-hand part of the monogram may read 'Projecta' or 'Pelegrina' (named on the Projecta Casket and ewer respectively). The right-hand part reads 'Turci(i)', the name of the powerful Roman family with whom Secundus, the husband named on the Projecta Casket, is often identified.

AD 300s. Rome, 1866,1229.11–13 and 17–18

Horse trappings

These gilded silver ornaments were strung around the necks of horses owned by aristocratic Roman families, as a way of displaying wealth and prestige. Four complete and two partial sets were found within the Esquiline Treasure. They are the finest and best preserved examples known from the Late Roman world.

AD 300s. Rome, 1866,1229.29

Early Christianity

Following its adoption as the Roman Empire's official religion, Christianity spread throughout its lands and influenced its art and culture. New imagery involving Christian symbols and events from the life of Christ developed, while some pagan scenes from the classical Roman past were reinterpreted as Christian. Although Christianity became the Empire's dominant faith, others such as Judaism existed alongside it.

Ivory casket panels, early AD 400s

These carvings are among the earliest known depictions of the events surrounding Christ's death and resurrection. In the first panel, the Roman governor Pontius Pilate condemns Christ, who carries the cross to his place of execution. The second panel shows Judas committing suicide after betraying Christ, followed by the Crucifixion. Christ's empty tomb lies open in the third panel, and the final scene shows him resurrected amongst his apostles. The four panels once formed a small casket which may have held holy relics or consecrated bread.

Rome, 1856,0623.4–7

Image caption: The panels arranged as a box

© British Museum

Floor mosaic (above)

This is the decorative centre panel of a mosaic floor from a Roman villa at Abbots Ann, Hampshire. Its red, white and grey design comprises a stylised flower surrounded by concentric circles. The villa contained other mosaic floors, confirming that it was once a grand residence. It stood near a road linking Silchester and Old Sarum, major towns in southern Roman Britain.

AD 250–350. Abbots Ann, Hampshire, donated by Thomas Best through Reverend J. Best, 1854,0623.2

Ivory panels

The three surviving sides of this ivory box show Biblical stories from the lives of Saint Paul and Saint Peter. One depicts Saint Thecla listening to Saint Paul's teachings and Saint Paul's stoning. The other shows Saint Peter striking water from the Mamertine prison in Rome and baptising his captors. The third panel shows the resurrection of Saint Tabitha by Saint Peter.

About AD 430. Rome, 1856,0623.8–10

Finger-rings with intaglios

In Roman society, intaglios (carved gemstones) set into finger-rings were often used to express religious devotion. These three examples show pastoral scenes of a shepherd and sheep – a pagan motif that became a model for Christian depictions of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. Since these intaglios date from the Early Christian period, they may have been worn by either a pagan or a Christian.

AD 200s–300s. 1856,0425.10. 1856,0425.17. 1856,0425.20

Decorative glass medallions

These glass discs are from the bases of drinking vessels which may have been made as wedding gifts. Many discs have been found in the catacombs of Rome, suggesting that when one of a married couple died, the vessel's decorative base was cut out and placed over the grave as a memorial. They often express the religious affiliation of the deceased. The name 'Lea' on one of these examples suggests a Jewish family.

AD 200s–400s. Rome, 1898,0719.1–2 and 1863,0727.5–6

Glass bowl with gilded medallions

This delicate clear-glass bowl is decorated with gilded medallions, covered on the back with green and blue glass. They show Biblical characters from the Old Testament, including Jonah, Adam and Eve, and Daniel. The Old Testament was sacred to Jews and Christians, and so this bowl may have belonged to members of either faith. The lone figure holding a rod on one of the medallions could represent either Jesus or Moses.

AD 300s. Cologne, Germany, 1881,0624.1

Objects with Jewish imagery

In the Late Roman period the Jewish faith was expressed through symbols on personal items in much the same way as for Christianity. The Jewish menorah, a lamp-stand with seven branches, is depicted on this glass vessel fragment, lamp and bread-stamp. The bread-stamp, bearing the name 'Leontios', was perhaps designed to indicate that the bread was kosher.

AD 200s–500s. 1863,0727.10. Sardis, Turkey, 1888,0511.3. Egypt, 1877,0515.16

Continuity and change

The Late Roman Empire differed from the earlier classical Empire. Largely Christian rather than pagan, it was divided into eastern and western halves with Constantinople eventually replacing Rome as its capital. Late Roman art and culture was distinctive but there were continuities with the past. Imagery drew upon the visual style and pagan themes of classical art, but became increasingly stylised, while new craft techniques also emerged.

Gold coin pendant, AD 320s and silver largitio dish, AD 317

These objects are associated with two Late Roman emperors who were at the heart of the changing Empire. The gold pendant is set with a coin of Constantine the Great, while the silver dish names Licinius in its Latin inscription. These men co-ruled the Empire in the early AD 300s, but their collaboration descended into civil war which ended with Constantine defeating Licinius and seizing control of the entire Empire.

The pendant is made in a pierced metalwork technique popular in fine jewellery of the time. The dish was probably given to a follower of Licinius on his tenth anniversary as emperor through the Late Roman practice of *largitio*, whereby emperors distributed silver plate, coins and other luxuries on ceremonial occasions.

Purchased with a contribution from The Art Fund, 1984,0501.1. Niš, Serbia, 1969,0904.1

Ivory panels

The imagery of these ivory panels, made in the Early Christian period, reflects continuity with the pagan past. The larger one shows an unidentified Roman emperor becoming a god after his death. Two eagles, representing his soul, fly out of the funeral pyre. Above this, the emperor is carried towards heaven by figures signifying the wind. He is welcomed by five gods or ancestors, watched by the sun god Helios.

The monogram at the top represents the Symmachi, a prominent Roman family who petitioned Emperor Gratian (AD 375–383) for the freedom of pagan worship. The other panel shows the Greek hero Bellerophon killing the monstrous Chimera. This pagan myth was often used as an allegory for Christ's triumph over evil.

Around AD 400. Rome, 1857,1013.1. 1856,0623.2

Ivory boxes

Round boxes known as 'pyxides' (singular 'pyxis') were used throughout the Roman Empire to hold jewellery and other trinkets. The pastoral scenes decorating these examples contain no overt religious imagery. They show animals, shepherdesses and goatherds, and are reminiscent of earlier pagan artistic tastes.

AD 300s–400s. Alexandria, Egypt, 1924,0617.1. 1866,0714.1

Three trade weights

In the Late Roman period, fraud was widespread and severe punishments were introduced to prevent it. Accurate weights were essential for ensuring fair trading of goods. Images of emperors and 'tyches' (personifications of cities) indicate the issuing authority of the weights and also mark them as 'honest'. The symbol ΛΑ indicates one Roman pound.

Late AD 300s–400s. 1863,1228.1. 1980,0601.2–3

Two crossbow brooches

These brooches, known today as crossbow brooches after their shape, were worn as symbols of military and administrative rank in the Late Roman Empire. The large one is exceptionally fine, with a Christian chi-rho monogram combining the first two letters of Christ's name in Greek. The small one, made of gold, is inscribed in Greek 'Grace of God'.

AD 350–400s. 1856,0712.1. Bequeathed by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks, AF.336

The Carthage Treasure

This treasure of 31 pieces of jewellery and silver tableware, dating from around AD 400, was found in Carthage, in present-day Tunisia. It is thought to have been buried for safekeeping by the prominent Cresconii family at a time of crisis, possibly when the city was attacked by the Germanic Vandal king Gaiseric in AD 439.

The Carthage Treasure: 'Parure' of jewellery

Matching sets of jewellery ('parures') are rare finds from the Late Roman period. This set of a necklace and ear-rings combines rock emeralds, sapphires and pearls threaded on gold wire. Approximately 50 years after this jewellery was made, the Emperor Leo (AD 457–474) restricted the wearing of these specific gems to imperial use only, demonstrating the value and esteem in which they were held.

AD 300s–400s. Hill of St Louis, Tunisia, bequeathed by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks, AF.323–325

The Carthage Treasure: Inscribed spoon

Christian symbols feature prominently in the Carthage Treasure. The bowl of this elegant spoon is inscribed with the chi-rho monogram, combining the first two letters of Christ's name in Greek (XP). It is encircled by a wreath of leaves. This was a very popular Christian motif in the Late Roman Empire.

AD 300s–400s. Hill of St Louis, Tunisia, bequeathed by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks, AF.3294

The Carthage Treasure: Inscribed dish

The Latin inscription on this dish, reading D.D. ICRESCONI CLARENT ('Gift given to the distinguished Cresconii'), identifies the family who owned the Carthage Treasure as the Cresconii. They were a prominent North African family of the AD 300s – 400s, whose members included high-ranking civil servants and members of the clergy.

AD 300s–400s. Hill of St Louis, Tunisia, bequeathed by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks, AF.3277

The Carthage Treasure: Spoons and patera

These spoons are an unusual shape for the Late Roman period. Their decoration, inlaid with niello (a black metal alloy), demonstrates the fine craftsmanship represented by the Carthage Treasure. The cross symbol suggests they were owned by Christians. The frog design on the shallow bowl (*patera*) may also have had Christian significance. In pre-Christian Egypt, frogs symbolised the coming of floods and fertility to the earth. For this reason, Christians later associated frogs with resurrection.

AD 300s–400s. Hill of St Louis, Tunisia, bequeathed by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks, AF.3283–3285 and 3279

The Carthage Treasure: Decorated bowls

Pastoral scenes like those shown on the two large bowls were popular in Late Roman art. The motifs of theatrical masks between the human and animal figures were perhaps intended to emphasise the owner's knowledge of classical Roman drama. The lidded bowl is the only surviving complete example of its kind. The handle on the top doubled as a foot ring, enabling the lid to be turned upside-down and used as a dish for serving food.

AD 300s–400s. Hill of St Louis, Tunisia, bequeathed by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks, AF.3275–3276 and 3280

Image caption: A woman wearing jewellery similar to that found in the Carthage Treasure, on a mummy-case from Hawara, Egypt, AD 100–120

© British Museum

The Coleraine Hoard

This is part of a silver hoard of about 1500 pieces, comprising Late Roman coins, ingots, chopped-up tableware and military fittings. It was buried shortly after AD 410 in Northern Ireland, outside the Roman Empire. Once viewed as loot seized from Roman Britain by Irish raiders, it is now thought to represent Imperial payments made to local leaders who supplied troops to the Late Roman army.

The hoard shows how the Roman Empire influenced lands beyond its borders. Since silver was rare in Ireland, imported Roman coins and objects, like the ingots with official Roman stamps, squashed spoons and chopped-up plates with beaded rims, were melted down to make jewellery in the local style. Late Roman motifs and chip-carving techniques, shown on the fragmentary military belt fittings and spear or sword-sheath fitting, were adapted by Irish craft workers for their own creations.

AD 300s–400s. Balinrees, Coleraine, County Derry, Northern Ireland, 1855,0815.1–31

A princely burial at Leuna, Germany, late AD 200s

These objects were found in a richly-furnished grave at Leuna in present-day central Germany. Leuna is one of a group of cemeteries in the region that were restricted to high status families. As well as Germanic artefacts, the burials contained luxury goods made in and imported from the Roman Empire. Unusually, the dead were buried in wooden coffins or in timber-lined graves, at a time when cremation was more common in Germanic regions.

1. Germanic pottery

The three handmade pottery jars are of Germanic type. Two are black-burnished to imitate metal, one with pierced lugs around the side for hanging. The third is of coarse ware with pinched ('rusticated') decoration around the shoulder.

Late AD 200s. Leuna, Sachsen-Anhalt, Germany, donated by Felix Slade, 1867,0704.1–3

2. Germanic artefacts

Several silver objects, made locally from recycled Roman coins or plate, reveal the wealth of the individual buried at Leuna. These include the pair of spurs, three brooches for male costume, cosmetic tools and two arrowheads. The grave also contained the copper alloy buckle and fragments of a neck-ring.

Late AD 200s. Leuna, Sachsen-Anhalt, Germany, donated by Felix Slade, 1867,0704.7–17

3. Roman imports

The grave at Leuna also contained luxury goods from the Roman Empire, including the large red-coated bowl from Gaul, glassware from the Rhineland and eastern Mediterranean, and the ladle and strainer for serving imported wine at feasts. The upturned glass bowl is engraved with scenes from the Greek legend of Actaeon and Artemis, named in Greek letters above. Such objects may have been diplomatic gifts or rewards for military service in the Roman army, highlighting the social status of the deceased.

Late AD 200s. Leuna, Sachsen-Anhalt, Germany, donated and bequeathed by Felix Slade, 1867,0704.4–6 and S.320–321

Sutton Hoo and Europe AD 300–1100

This was a time of great change in Europe. The Roman Empire broke down in the west, but continued in the east as the Byzantine Empire. People, objects and ideas travelled across the continent and its seas, while Christianity and Islam emerged as major religions. By 1100 the precursors of several modern states had developed. Europe as we know it today was beginning to take shape.

The Lycurgus Cup
Late Roman Empire, AD 300s

This magnificent glass cage-cup is decorated with scenes from the myth of Lycurgus, a king of Thrace. Lycurgus attacked Dionysus, the Greek god of wine, as well as the maenads (Dionysus' female followers) and Ambrosia the nymph. Ambrosia prayed for help to Mother Earth, who transformed her into a vine so that she could coil around the king. The Cup shows Lycurgus trapped by the vine, while Dionysus, Pan and a satyr (male follower of Dionysus) torment him for his evil behaviour.

Formerly in the collection of Lord Rothschild, purchased with the aid of the Art Fund, 1958,1202.1

The Lycurgus Cup
Late Roman Empire, AD 300s

This cage-cup is incredibly rare. Its glass contains tiny amounts of gold and silver which cause it to turn from opaque green to translucent red when light is shone through. It may have been part of a wealthy Roman's banqueting set, making its imagery of Dionysus, Greek god of wine, highly appropriate. Its green and red qualities may even have been intended to evoke white and red wine. Alternatively, it may have been used as a lamp because the gilded silver rim and foot were probably added in the late 1700s.

Formerly in the collection of Lord Rothschild, purchased with the aid of the Art Fund, 1958,1202.1

The Byzantine Empire AD 330–650

The Byzantine Empire comprised the eastern part of the Roman Empire following its division into east and west in AD 395. Its capital, Constantinople, became a powerful political, religious and artistic centre – a 'new Rome'.

Rooted in classical and Late Roman traditions, Byzantine culture also developed its own distinctive elements. Art and craftsmanship reached new heights, influencing peoples throughout and beyond the Empire's lands. Meanwhile, its wealthiest inhabitants enjoyed cosmopolitan lifestyles of great opulence and refinement.

Christianity, the Empire's official religion, permeated Byzantine art and culture. Christ, the Virgin Mary and saints were popular artistic subjects, except between AD 726 and 843 when two periods of 'Iconoclasm' temporarily banned images of people. Individual piety was important at all social levels, revealed by personal possessions relating to Christian devotion.

Image captin: The Byzantine Empire, about AD 550

Image caption: The Baptism of Christ, from a mosaic in the Arian Baptistery, Ravenna, Italy, late AD 400s–early AD 500s

© Michael Jenner / Alamy

Roundels from a mosaic floor (above)

These mosaic roundels decorated the floor of a Late Roman villa in Halicarnassus, present-day Turkey. They show the pagan god Dionysus, a woman, and various birds and fish. The woman may be a maenad, one of Dionysus' female followers, or his consort Ariadne. Dionysus remained popular despite the overriding Christian mood of the time because of his role as a saviour god. As such, some Christian communities viewed him as an allegory for Christ.

AD 300s. Halicarnassus, Turkey, 1857,1220.421–426 and 429

Sacred imagery on dress accessories

Wealthy Christians often proclaimed their devotion through lavish dress accessories, like the cross-shaped buckle and pendant decorated with sacred images. The disc pendant shows the three Magi bringing gifts to the infant Christ. Some jewellery was thought to hold protective powers. The physician, Alexander of Tralles (AD 500s), recommended wearing octagonal jewellery like this tiny reliquary as a cure for colic (abdominal pain).

Images of Christ, the Virgin and saints frequently appeared on Byzantine jewellery like these ear-rings, finger-rings and bracelet. This was in spite of official Christian teaching which disapproved of expensive possessions. Peacocks, shown on the ear-rings and band of the bracelet, were also a popular motif. According to legend their flesh did not decay after death, so early Christians used them as a symbol of eternal life.

AD 300s–1000s. 1949,1203.1. Constantinople, 1980,0708.1. 1983,0704.1. Constantinople, bequeathed by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks, AF.354. Bequeathed by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks, AF.346, 351, 223 and 287. Smyrna, Turkey, AF.288

Pilgrimage

Pilgrimage, or a journey to a site of religious significance, was an important Early Christian activity. Pilgrim sites also attracted craft workers and traders selling mass-produced souvenirs like this glass bottle for holy water, oil or earth, and the terracotta tokens stamped with Christian scenes. Pilgrims kept such tokens as amulets or even dissolved them in water to make healing drinks.

The ivory 'pyxis' (round box) and terracotta 'ampulla' (flask) show the saint Menas with camels. His shrine, near Alexandria in Egypt, was a popular pilgrim site in the Byzantine Empire. Menas, an Egyptian soldier, was executed by Emperor Diocletian (AD 284–305) for practising Christianity. When the camels carrying his body to burial refused to move beyond a certain spot, it was taken as a sign that he should be buried there.

AD 450–650. Syria, 1911,0513.1. Palestine, 1973,0501.1–81. Abu Mina, Egypt, 1875,1012.16. Alexandria, Egypt, 1879,1220.1

Ivory icons

Icons, or sacred images of holy figures and Christian scenes, were displayed and venerated in both religious and secular settings. These ivory examples, one showing the three Magi and the other Christ's Baptism, may each have been part of a larger sequence devoted to scenes from the life of Christ.

AD 500s. Egypt or Syria, 1896,0618.1. Thessaly, Greece, 1904,0702.1

Christian rituals

Various objects would have been used during Byzantine church services, many of them crafted from luxury materials like silver, gold and ivory. The ivory 'pyxis' once had a lockable lid and was perhaps used to hold sacramental bread. Its carvings refer to the Biblical tale of Daniel in the lion's den.
The silver dish with gilded cross is similar to others found in the Anglo-Saxon ship burial at Sutton Hoo, England.

AD 500s–600s. Egypt or Syria, 1877,0706.3. Lâpseki, Turkey, 1886,0318.2

Silver chalice

This magnificent chalice or ceremonial cup was probably donated to the local church of Saint Sergius in Kaper Koraon (present-day Kurin, Syria). Its simple style is typical of silver given to Byzantine village churches during the AD 500s and 600s. The Greek inscription around the rim reads, 'In fulfilment of a vow of Sergios and John', suggesting that this chalice was offered in thanks for divine aid.

AD 600–650. Syria, 1914,0415.1

Byzantine arts

The inhabitants of the Byzantine Empire preserved many aspects of earlier classical Roman culture. Pagan mythology and literature remained popular long after Christianity became the Empire's official religion. At first, pagan and Christian imagery existed in parallel, but Christian themes eventually came to dominate Byzantine art.

Byzantine ivory diptych leaf, about AD 525–550

This is one of the largest surviving ivories from the Byzantine Empire. It comes from a hinged two-leaf diptych possibly used as a writing tablet, and shows an archangel holding an orb and sceptre. The style of his drapery is classical, but the Christian subject matter is Byzantine. The ivory's extraordinary size and quality suggest that it was an imperial commission, perhaps by Justinian I (AD 527–565), a powerful and successful emperor whose patronage stimulated a golden age in Byzantine art.

Made in Constantinople, OA.9999

Image caption: This image of the panel, taken under ultraviolet light, reveals the exquisitely delicate carving on the archangel's wings

Pagan imagery

While Christianity was the state religion of the Byzantine Empire, pagan imagery remained popular. Knowledge of classical literature, which often portrayed the lives of pagan gods and heroes, was considered a sign of culture and good education. The gold medallion showing the Greek hero Herakles, and the silver dish showing Eros, Greek god of love, would have advertised their owner's educational values.

AD 400s–500s. 1986,0601.1. 1969,1203.1

Image caption: The other face of the gold medallion, showing the pagan goddess Artemis with a bow and arrow

© British Museum

The Cyprus Treasure

At the end of the 1800s, villagers uncovered a remarkable hoard of Byzantine silver while quarrying stone from the ruins of ancient Lambousa, a town on the north coast of Cyprus. The hoard was found near the Acheiropoietos monastery which was built on the site of an earlier Christian church from the AD 500s. The pieces in the Cyprus Treasure may have originally belonged to this church.

The Cyprus Treasure: Spoons

Each spoon in this matching set has a pear-shaped bowl attached by a small disc to an ornate handle. The bowls are decorated with different leaping animals, including a ram, panther, lion, lioness, stag, bear, boar, bull, hare, horse and mythical griffin. The creatures were probably chosen for their association with hunting, a popular pastime in aristocratic circles.

About AD 650. Found near Lambousa, Cyprus, 1899,0425.18–28

The Cyprus Treasure: Bowl and plate

These vessels, decorated with Christian imagery, may have been used in religious ceremonies. The figure depicted on the bowl may be the Christian martyr Saint Sergius, a high-ranking soldier who was tortured and executed during the persecutions of Emperor Diocletian (reigned AD 284–305). He is dressed in a military cloak ('chlamys') and a tunic pinned at the shoulder with a crossbow brooch ('fibula'). He also wears a type of neck-ring known as a 'maniakion'.

The serving-plate is decorated with a cross motif inlaid with niello, a black metal alloy. Five imperial stamps on the back guarantee the silver's quality and date the plate's manufacture to the reign of Emperor Tiberius II (AD 578–582).

AD 570s–650s. Found near Lambousa, Cyprus, possibly made in Constantinople or Tarsus, 1899,0425.2; made in Constantinople, 1899,0425.1

The Cyprus Treasure: Hexagonal censer

Censers were used for burning incense, which was a popular religious rite in eastern Christian churches. This one would have been suspended on chains, threaded through the holes in the plaques attached to the rim. Each side is decorated with the head and shoulders of figures shown with halos. These represent Christ, flanked by Saints Peter and Paul, and the Virgin Mary between Saints John and James.

AD 602–610. Found near Lambousa, Cyprus, made in Constantinople, 1899,0425.3

Image caption: Figure (centre) holding a censer on a chain, from a mosaic in the Basilica San Apollinare in Ravenna, Italy, AD 600s

The Lampsacus Treasure:
Inscribed silver spoons

These silver objects come from a large Byzantine treasure found at Lampsacus in present-day Turkey. Its contents are mainly secular in nature. The spoons are inscribed with lines from the Roman poet Virgil and Greek proverbs known as the 'Sayings of the Seven Sages'. They give an insight into high status Byzantine humour and values, with phrases such as 'Love those who mock you', 'Eat, you who are lovesick!' and revealingly 'You cannot be beautiful without money'.

AD 500s. Lâpseki, Turkey, donated by Lord Cowley, 1848,0601.10–12, 1886,0318.4, 1886,0709.1. Bequeathed by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks, AF.379

The Lampsacus Treasure: Gilded silver bowl

This bowl, decorated with a gilded cross, is similar to those found in the Anglo-Saxon ship burial at Sutton Hoo, England. The central monogram (motif of combined letters) can be translated as 'Menas', a male personal name. This may provide a clue to the original owner of the Lampsacus Treasure. Five stamps on the underside of the bowl enable us to date it to the reign of Emperor Heraclius (AD 610–641).

AD 610–641. Lâpseki, Turkey, made in Constantinople, donated by Lord Cowley, 1848,0601.13

The Lampsacus Treasure: Silver lamp-stand

This lamp-stand was found alongside items of tableware and so may have been used as an elaborate centrepiece for high-class dinners. A metal oil lamp would have been attached to the spike (pricket) on the top. Official stamps on the underside show that it was made in Constantinople between AD 527–565, during the reign of Emperor Justinian I.

AD 527–565. Lâpseki, Turkey, made in Constantinople, donated by Lord Cowley, 1848,0601.1

Byzantine splendour

Constantinople, the capital of the Byzantine Empire, became an important centre for the production of sumptuous jewellery. Skilled craftsmen used a combination of Late Roman and newer techniques such as pierced work, inlaid niello (a black metal alloy) and imported multi-coloured gemstones to create luxurious pieces which were coveted far and wide. Such jewellery was unattainable for most of the Empire's inhabitants – only the wealthiest could adorn themselves so richly.

Gold necklace and ear-rings, about AD 600

These items show the skill and quality achieved by Byzantine jewellers. They come from a treasure of 36 pieces found in Egypt, which at this time was part of the Byzantine Empire. The necklace comprises a gold chain and delicate open-work pendant set with green emeralds, white pearls and blue sapphires. The ear-rings probably formed a set with the necklace, and have pendant strands terminating in the same three precious materials.

Assiût or Antinöe, Egypt, donated by Mrs. Burns, 1916,0704.2–4. The treasure is shared between museums in London, Berlin and New York

Image caption: The Byzantine empress Theodora wearing lavish jewellery, from a mosaic in the Basilica of San Vitale, Ravenna, Italy, mid AD 500s

1. Gold open-work jewellery

Late Roman and Early Byzantine jewellery became increasingly ornate, and open-work designs ('opus interrasile') embedded with jewels were popular. A chi-rho monogram, combining the first two letters of Christ's name in Greek, was worked into the design of this garnet-inlaid necklace segment. The square plaque, possibly from a belt, shows a lion hunt scene. The similarity of the pieces suggests that they were made in the same workshop.

AD 300s. Silivri, Turkey, 1980,0501.1. Possibly Turkey, bequeathed by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks, AF.332

2. Precious adornments

Wealthy Byzantine women wore exquisite ear-rings made from precious metals, enamel, gemstones and pearls. Crescent shapes and pendant chains were popular, and birds often featured in the designs. The neck-ring (torc) with lion-head terminals is made from gold sheet but packed with quartz, magnetite sand and sulphur. These techniques gave the appearance and weight of solid gold jewellery while using minimal precious metal. The loops at the front may have held gems suspended on chains.

AD 300s–900s. Bequeathed by Mrs A. M. Farvager, 1949,1008.10–11. Bequeathed by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks, AF.340. Crete, AF.349–350; AF.344; AF.338. 1984,0502.1

3. Personal devotion

Crosses worn on the chest were popular symbols of Christianity in the Byzantine Empire. The Greek inscription on this one is from the New Testament, 'Galatians', verse i, line 14. Jewellery also expressed affiliation with the Imperial house. The tear-shaped pendant with a central amethyst and pearls resembles jewellery worn by Empress Theodora in her mosaic portrait in Ravenna, Italy. The chain consists of gold coins ('solidi') of her husband, Emperor Justinian I (AD 527–565).

AD 500s–700s. Bequeathed by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks, AF.355. 1981,0104.3. Made in Constantinople, donated by Anne and Professor John Hull Grundy, 1978,1002.160

4. Gold finger-rings and strap-end

Chased or engraved decoration was used to embellish jewellery. The two signet rings bear monograms (motifs of combined letters) of family names, while the marriage ring shows male and female busts flanking a cross. Both men and women wore marriage rings in the Early Byzantine Empire. The large size of this one suggests it belonged to a man.

AD 400s–600s. Made in Constantinople, bequeathed by Sir Allen George Clark, donated through Nathan and Vandyk Oppenheimer, 1964,1204.1. Bequeathed by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks, AF.304. Constantinople, AF.267. Constantinople, 1982,0507.1

Body chain

This body chain of linked medallions is the largest item of jewellery to survive from the Byzantine Empire. It would have been worn draped over the shoulders and around the hips, as shown on the figurine. In Greek and Roman art, body chains were often associated with Venus, the goddess of love. Due to its size, this chain may have adorned a statue (possibly of Venus) instead of an actual woman.

By the AD 500s, statues from the neighbouring Persian Empire showed kings wearing similar body chains. The significance of this type of accessory may have changed from symbolising female sexuality to denoting male power and authority.

AD 600s. Assiût or Antinöe, Egypt, donated by Mrs. Burns, 1916,0704.1. Figurine, Egypt, AD 1–100s, 1926,0930.42

The ogam writing system

Ogam, a writing system for the early Irish language, probably developed in southern Ireland during the AD 300s. Consisting of short horizontal and diagonal lines that met or crossed a base line, it is found in Ireland and parts of Wales, Scotland, south-west Britain and the Isle of Man, where Irish influence or settlers were found. Typically, ogam inscriptions were short commemorative texts carved into the edges of free-standing stones, as a dedication to named individuals usually of high or ecclesiastical status.

Standing stone with Latin and ogam inscriptions

This red sandstone memorial comes from Devon, south-west Britain, which at this time belonged to the British kingdom of Dumnonia. Once part of Roman Britain, Irish groups settled the region during the late AD 400s. The resulting cultural interplay is reflected in the Latin and ogam inscriptions on this stone.

On this face, a Latin inscription commemorates Fanonus, son of Rinus, while the ogam inscription around the edges may describe the same dedication. On the other face, a Latin inscription commemorating Sagranuus is perhaps a later addition. Irish linguistic features hint that the inscriptions were made under Irish influence or even for an Irish speaker. But the shape of the Latin lettering and the custom of erecting stone memorials to the dead follow Roman traditions, preserved in the region long after Roman control had ended.

AD 400s–500s. Fardel, near Ivybridge, Devon, England, donated by Captain Pode, 1861,0209.1

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Celtic Britain and Ireland AD 300–1100

The peoples of Ireland and northern and western Britain spoke Celtic languages and shared ancient traditions and beliefs. These differed from the neighbouring Anglo-Saxons, whose eventual dominance of areas once settled by Celtic-speaking groups led to both conflict and collaboration.

A distinctive style of Christian art developed in these regions, fusing influences from Roman, continental, Anglo-Saxon and traditional Celtic art. Intricate designs in this style were used to decorate metalwork, stone sculpture and illuminated manuscripts full of colourful images.

Although the Celtic kingdoms of Britain and Ireland lay on the margins of the old Roman world, they were not isolated. Their adoption of Christianity from the AD 300s placed them within the wider Christian world, while contacts with Anglo-Saxon England, Europe and the Mediterranean were also maintained. From the late AD 700s Scandinavian Vikings brought new cultural influences and trading links into the region.

Image caption: Kingdoms of Britain and Ireland

Image caption: Decorated page from the Book of Kells, a lavish Irish manuscript, around AD 800

Pictish carving: the 'Burghead bull'

This muscular bull is an example of the magnificent stone carvings of the Picts, the Celtic-speaking people who ruled north and east Scotland between around AD 400–850s. The distinctive symbols of Pictish art, including animals, artefacts and geometric motifs, are now enigmatic. In some cases they may represent a type of commemorative writing.

Carved into a sandstone boulder, this bull is one of up to thirty bull sculptures found at Burghead, a major Pictish fortress in northern Scotland. Its lifelike pose and contoured legs and belly are characteristically Pictish. Once probably brightly painted, the carved bulls would have held a powerful presence at Burghead. Perhaps they symbolised warrior-like qualities of strength or aggression, held ritual significance, or were the emblem of the local ruling family.

AD 600s–700s. Burghead, Morayshire, Scotland, donated by James de Carle Sowerby, 1861,1024.1

Hand-bell of St Conall Cael

Hand-bells were significant Christian symbols in Ireland. This one was reputedly owned by Saint Conall Cael, abbot of Inishkeel, County Donegal in the AD 500s. Like many items linked to early Irish saints, the bell became a sacred relic that was embellished over time. The copper alloy sheet at the top, added around 1000, is incised with a cross and mixed Irish- and Viking-style ornament. In the 1400s, a glittering silver shrine was made to house the bell (Room 40), making it an object of veneration for centuries.

AD 600s–1000s. Inishkeel, County Donegal, Ireland, donated by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks, 1889,0902.22

Image caption: Stone sculpture of a figure with a hand-bell and crozier, from White Island, County Fermanagh, Northern Ireland, AD 800s–900s

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The 'Kells' Crozier

This magnificent silver and copper alloy case contains a yew wood crozier (hooked staff), a bishop or abbot's symbol of office. Names in an Old Irish inscription under the crook (curved part) were once thought to link the crozier to the monastery at Kells, County Meath, but this is now disputed.

The crozier was enshrined as a relic of an early Irish saint. Embellished at least twice over time, its fittings date to the AD 800s–1100s. The staff has four knops (mounts) decorated with interlacing beasts. The uppermost knop, with Viking-style designs, is the latest addition. The crook's bright silver covering has a gilded crest of interlinking birds, while its hollow tip, accentuated with a human head, once held a sacred relic. An outstanding survival, the crozier's past is now shrouded in mystery. It was found behind a London solicitor's cupboard in 1850 and was purchased by the British Museum a decade later.

AD 800s–1100s. Irish, found in London, 1859,0221.1

Original decorative fittings from the crozier

These are the original copper alloy fittings that were once attached to the crook of the wooden crozier. Remains of incised decoration can still be seen but were badly damaged when the fittings were filed down and covered with silver plates during the crozier's refurbishment in the early 1100s.

AD 800s. Irish, found in London, 1859,0221.1

Celtic connections

The Celtic-speaking peoples of Britain and Ireland absorbed influences from the rest of Europe. The materials, decorative styles and techniques they used were stimulated by contact with the Roman world, and later with neighbouring Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, who in turn adopted elements of Celtic culture. From the late AD 700s encounters with Vikings, both violent and peaceful, brought new artistic inspiration as well as cultural, commercial and economic change.

Silver disc-headed pin, AD 400s

This massive Irish dress pin owes much to Roman influence. The silver used to make it was rare in Ireland and probably came from melted-down Roman plate or coins. Its decoration of chip-carved spirals, scrolls and stylised leaf and fruit motifs derives from Late Roman military belt fittings, while the red enamel inlay and crescent-like pelta motifs on the pin head were inherited from Iron Age Celtic culture.

Ireland, 1888,0719.100

Image caption: Chip-carved scroll decoration on the disc-headed pin (top right) and a Late Roman fitting from the Coleraine Hoard (bottom left)

© British Museum

Roman connections: Short sword

This style of short iron sword derives from the 'gladius', a type used by Roman soldiers. With two sharp edges and a pointed tip, it was used for stabbing and had a hilt (handle) made from wood, ivory or bone. Irish warriors probably used swords like this when first raiding and settling in Britain.

AD 400s–800s. Dunminning, County Antrim, Northern Ireland, donated by Sir John Evans, 1867,0720.1

Roman connections: Artistic inspirations

Romano-British types of pin and open ring brooch became popular in Celtic-speaking Britain and Ireland. In Ireland especially they were richly developed, often inlaid with red enamel and glass.

Romano-British pin

This pin from Roman Britain has an animal head at the top which became the main motif used on Celtic brooches, like those shown beside it.

AD 300s, Dewlish, Dorset, England, 2005,0903.1

Open ring brooches

These two open ring brooches are early examples of a type based on Roman designs. The terminals on their hoops are shaped like animal heads that resemble the top of the Romano-British pin beside them. Short pins and thin hoops were typical of early ring brooches which in Ireland developed into heavier forms with longer pins, like others displayed nearby.

AD 400s. Porth Dafarch, Anglesey, Wales, donated by William Owen Stanley, 1881,0706.19. Abingdon, Oxfordshire, England, 1862,0717.1

Anglo-Saxon connections: Hanging bowls

Hanging bowls produced in Ireland and north and west Britain were prized by the neighbouring Anglo-Saxons, who placed them in graves. The finest bowls were decorated with mounts enriched with tinning, enamel and patterned millefiori glass. Originally made for Christian British patrons, some bear Christian motifs like these three, showing a cross depicted between fish or dolphins.

AD 400s–500s. Field Dalling, Norfolk, England, 1986,0706.1. Faversham, Kent, England, bequeathed by William Gibbs, .1248.'70, .1248.a.'70 and .1248.b.'70

Anglo-Saxon connections: Buckle and brooch

Buckles, like the gilded D-shaped loop, were not native to Ireland. They were probably introduced through contact with Germanic peoples like the Anglo-Saxons, for whom they were usual dress items. The open ring brooch has terminals shaped like Anglo-Saxon-style birds' heads. Moulds for making such brooches are known from Dunadd in Irish-ruled western Scotland.

AD 600s–700s. Ireland, 1853,1117.13. Clough, County Antrim, Northern Ireland, 1898,0618.8

Anglo-Saxon connections:
Drinking-horn terminal

Ceremonial feasting was important in both Celtic and Anglo-Saxon cultures. Fine drinking vessels decorated with mounts were involved. This mount, shaped like an animal's head, comes from the tip of a drinking-horn. Its form derives from early Anglo-Saxon mounts like those discovered at Sutton Hoo and Taplow (shown nearby), but this one has Irish features like the spiral motifs on the creature's cheeks.

AD 600s–700s. Lismore, County Waterford, Ireland, 1853,1013.3

Image caption: Horseman drinking from a horn tipped with an animal head, from a carved stone slab from Bullion, Invergowrie, Angus, Scotland, AD 900–950

© UK Alan King/Alamy

Vikings in Britain and Ireland

From the late AD 700s, Vikings from Scandinavia began to dominate the seaways around Britain and Ireland, raiding undefended monasteries, settling some areas and developing coastal towns like Dublin as international trading centres. Viking activity had a profound influence upon many Celtic-speaking regions.

Ring brooches

Ring brooches evolved in Ireland under the Vikings. Traditionally made from copper alloy decorated with gilt and enamel, these ones are silver – once rare in Ireland but now imported by Vikings in quantity as bullion and coins. The brooches' massive form and spherical or thistle-like terminals are characteristic of Irish-Viking designs. The silver brooch pin reflects a later fashion for large Irish kite-shaped brooches.

Later AD 800s–900s. Galway, Ireland, 1869,0301.1. Ireland, 1888,0719.102. Possibly Waterford, Ireland, 1888,0719.103. Clooneen, County Longford, Ireland, 1888,0719.105. Drogheda, County Louth, Ireland, 1854,0714.140

Sword

This unusually small sword from Ireland has Viking-period hilt (handle) fittings. The grip is decorated with two copper alloy rings. The iron blade, possibly made on the Continent, is inscribed on both sides with motifs including crosses, circles and vertical lines, probably signifying a maker's mark of quality. Swords like this, with two sharp edges, were typically used for slashing rather than stabbing.

AD 900s. Lough Gur, County Limerick, Ireland, donated by Count John Francis William de Salis, 1864,0127.3

Head-shaped weight

This gilded head from an Irish or Anglo-Saxon shrine-mount has been filled with lead to make a weight. Vikings used weights to measure out precious metals for trade transactions. Many weights incorporated decorative metalwork removed from other artefacts. This bearded head may be evidence of Vikings looting a church or monastery and reusing their spoils in trade – powerfully evoking Viking raiding and trading.

AD 700s. Furness, Lancashire, England, donated by Richard Hinde, 1870,0609.1

Coins and commerce

Sihtric Silkbeard, the Irish-Viking king of Dublin, minted Ireland's earliest coins in the late AD 900s. The first coin here is one of his, alongside other early coins issued in Ireland during the mid-1000s. Increased trade led to an influx of foreign coins when Viking activity stimulated the development of coastal towns.

AD 989–1065. Minted in Dublin, 1838,0919.8 and B1956,0409.27. From a hoard of 1500 coins found at Dunbrody, County Wexford, Ireland, 1890,0804.31 and 42

Three gold rings

These gold rings from Ireland and Scotland are typically Scandinavian in style. The large arm-ring was elaborately made by plaiting several thin gold rods around a thicker central one, creating a remarkable open-work effect. One of the finger-rings is plaited from six gold rods, while the other is a band knotted at the back and decorated with punch marks.

AD 900s–1100s. Virginia, County Cavan, Ireland, 1849,0301.2. County Waterford, Ireland, 1849,0301.20. Tundergarth, Dumfries and Galloway, Scotland, bequeathed by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks, AF.466

Celtic culture

The culture of the Celtic-speaking peoples of Britain and Ireland was distinctive in many ways. They developed a new art style that fused traditional swirling and geometric designs with Roman motifs and Germanic-style interlaced animals, while characteristic dress accessories and techniques like enamelling were popular. They also exploited links with the distant Mediterranean, trading resources like leather and tin from south-west Britain for wine and oil.

The Londesborough Brooch, about AD 750–850

This brooch is a richly decorated example of a type that was popular in Ireland. Its ornament, mixing intricate Celtic spirals, interlace and animal designs, is typical of the fusion of styles which characterised the art of Ireland and north and west Britain at this time. Used to fasten a cloak, the gilded silver, glass and amber settings would have proclaimed its wearer's high status.

Ireland, 1888,0719.101. Previously owned by Albert Denison, First Baron of Londesborough

Image caption: The back of the Londesborough brooch, inlaid with gilded discs decorated with spiral motifs

© British Museum

1. Open ring brooches

Open ring brooches were the distinctive dress fasteners of Celtic-speaking Britain and Ireland. Imagery shows men and women wearing them at the shoulder or breast with the pin pointing horizontally or diagonally upwards, perhaps depending upon gender or regional taste. The brooch pinned to modern fabric shows how they were fastened. Their form, Romano-British in origin, became increasingly large and ornate over time. The other brooch is richly decorated with red enamel and patterned millefiori glass.

AD 400s–600s. Lough Ravel, Randalstown, County Antrim, Northern Ireland, 1913,0715.3. County Cavan, Ireland, 1856,0320.1

Image caption: Stone carving of Christ (centre) wearing an open ring brooch, from Muiredach's High Cross, Monasterboice, County Louth, Ireland, about AD 900

© imagebroker/Alamy

2. Ring brooches

Ring brooches (with linked hoop terminals) were developed in Ireland from around AD 700. They were probably worn like pins, secured by a cord or chain. These luxury silver and bronze examples are enriched with gilding, enamel, glass and amber. The hoop fragment is decorated on both sides, so may have been reversible. The small silver brooches represent a key stage in Irish silver metalworking that culminated in the massive brooches of the AD 800s and 900s, shown later in this case.

AD 700s–800s. Mull, Scotland, donated by N. D. Smith, 1920,1109.10. Tara, Ireland, 1893,0618.29. Westmeath, Ireland, 1921,1206.44. Scattery Island, County Clare, Ireland, 1872,0520.14–15

3. The Breadalbane brooch

This gilded silver ring brooch is decorated with gold wire, green glass settings, interlacing designs, and bird and animal motifs. Irish in style but discovered in Scotland, modifications to its form show that regional fashions existed in Celtic-speaking regions. The bridge that originally linked its terminals was removed to transform it into an open ring brooch, the style preferred by the Picts of Scotland. The pin head is also a Pictish type and presumably a replacement.

AD 700s. Scotland, donated by Sir John Ramsden,1919,1218.1. From the collection of Sir Gavin Campbell, Marquess of Breadalbane

4. Four pins

These types of pin were used as dress fasteners in Ireland and northern Britain. Pins with ring-shaped heads were popular into the AD 800s and beyond. This elaborate example resembles a miniature ring brooch. The others show the development of a rarer style of pin with a hand-shaped head, from the small silver Romano-British prototype to the later ornate version with enamelling. These hand-pins were fashionable until the AD 700s.

AD 300s–700s. Crif Keran, Northern Ireland, 1862,0617.9. Welton le Wold, Lincolnshire, England, 2002,0704.1. Moreby, Cumbria, England, 1898,0618.17. Craigywarren Bog, County Antrim, Northern Ireland, donated by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks, 1880,0802.132

5. Two 'latchet' dress fasteners

These distinctively shaped objects traditionally known as 'latchets' were probably a form of dress fastener. The wire coils on the plain latchet may have secured clothing by being turned into it like a screw. The other example is decorated with red enamel and elegant swirling motifs. Uniquely associated with Irish culture, these now enigmatic items showed the high status of their wearers.

AD 500s. River Shannon at Athlone, County Westmeath, Ireland, 1854,0714.96. Dowris, County Offaly, Ireland, 1854,0714.97

6. Glass ornaments

Glass was originally imported into Celtic-speaking Britain and Ireland from the Continent, but from the AD 600s glass ornaments like these beads and armlet fragment were being made locally. Often blue in colour, glass beads could be plain or decorated with white stripes or dots. Glass was also the raw material for the enamel and millefiori techniques that characterised luxury metalwork from these regions.

AD 400s–1000s. Ireland, Northern Ireland and England, 1851,0331.1, 1855,0326.50–51,1862,0701.1, 1868,0709.55 and 1890,0215.9. Ireland, donated by Felix Slade, 1871,1210.17. Kells, Ireland, donated by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks, 1892,0421.15

7. Intricate patterns

These mounts are decorated in the distinctive Celtic art style that merged with Roman, continental and Anglo-Saxon art to create a new style in Celtic-speaking regions. They show characteristic motifs including spirals, peltae (crescent-like) and triskeles (three-legged spirals). The intricate patterns were often brightened with silver or tin, set against rich red enamel. The smaller mounts share stylistic features with the largest hanging bowl from Sutton Hoo, Engand, shown nearby.

AD 500s–600s. Faversham, Kent, England, 1870,0402.801–802. England, 1870,1013.16. 1995,0905.1

8. Overseas trade

Pottery discovered in Ireland and western Britain shows that trade was taking place with the eastern Mediterranean (AD 400s–500s) and western France (AD 500s–600s). These fragments of red slip tableware from western Turkey and amphora (storage jar) from the Aegean Sea region (around Greece) were found at Tintagel, Cornwall, showing that local tin was a tradable commodity. A Byzantine text from the early AD 600s describes a ship returning from Britain to Alexandria with tin in its cargo.

AD 500s–600s. Tintagel, Cornwall, England, donated by the Inspectorate of Ancient Monuments, 1949,0501.3, 10 and 12. Saint-Martin-le-Noeud, France, donated by Sir John Evans, 1883,0701.13

Celtic Christianity

Christianity was first established in Britain and Ireland during the AD 300s and spread amongst Celtic-speaking peoples in the centuries that followed. Monasteries were founded which became flourishing centres of learning and craft working, producing outstanding metalwork, manuscripts and stone sculpture. Celtic scholars, missionaries and saints worked in Anglo-Saxon England and parts of Europe, and many items associated with them were kept as relics for their sacred power.

Bell and bell-shrine of Saint Cuileáin, AD 600s–700s and late 1000s

This iron hand-bell, reputedly owned by the Irish saint Cuileáin, was later encased in its elaborate metal shrine and treated as a relic. The brass plate on this side is engraved with a cross. The other side is bare but was once decorated with a jewelled crucifix. The ornate mount on the top, inlaid with enamel, niello (a black metal alloy) and copper and silver wires, is decorated with human and animal faces, and interlacing Viking-style creatures. Accounts from the 1600s onwards describing the bell-shrine's miraculous healing and lie-detecting powers reveal the longevity of its spiritual significance.

Glankeen, County Tipperary, Ireland, 1854,0714.6.A–B

Image caption: Manuscript page from the Book of Durrow, decorated with flowing ornament in the Celtic tradition, AD 675–725

© The Board of Trinity College Dublin

1. Luxury decoration

Celtic Christian books, reliquaries and shrines were sometimes lavishly decorated with mounts like these. The triangular piece, probably from a book cover, has a pattern of entwined creatures with traces of bright gilding. The oval mount may have adorned a fine casket or shrine. Intricate interlace and plait-work designs surround its clear and blue glass settings. The blue ones are decorated with knot motifs for added richness.

AD 700s–800s. Phoenix Park, Dublin, Ireland, 1854,0307.3. Ireland, 1920,1022.1

2. Crosses and bells

These were important Christian symbols in Celtic-speaking regions. The square brass plaque shows Christ's Crucifixion while the copper alloy fragment is from the decorative case for a wooden cross. The hand-bells called monks to prayer in monasteries and may have been emblems of clerical office. Tradition links the bell with a curved handle to the early Irish saint Ruadhan of Lorrha.

AD 700s–1100s. Donated by Reverend Earl of Mulgrave, 1883,0218.40. Kilkenny, Ireland, 1983,0701.1. Lorrha, County Tipperary, Ireland, 1854,0714.1. Scattery Island, County Clare, Ireland, 1854,0714.7

3. Christian relics

Relics associated with holy figures were viewed as powerful artefacts able to heal, bring fortune, or secure oaths. Many were kept in shrines or reliquaries decorated with mounts, like these gilded figures and the dome-shaped boss. The boss is a masterpiece of Irish art. Its 25 settings once glittered with glass, amber or rock crystal, while its surfaces are covered with spirals and intertwined beasts.

AD 700s–1100s. Steeple Bumpstead, Essex, England, donated by Henry Oppenheimer through The Art Fund, 1916,0705.1. St John's Abbey, Dublin, Ireland, 1868,0709.52. Ireland, 1880,0802.135

Great Migrations
AD 400–750

As Roman control in Western Europe weakened, Germanic peoples from outside the Empire began to enter and settle on former Roman territories. They travelled great distances from eastern, central and northern Europe, bringing their own distinctive cultural traditions while also absorbing influences from local populations.

These peoples established their own kingdoms where they settled. The most successful were the Franks, whose realm centred on the area of present-day France, Belgium and western Germany. Various Gothic peoples from the east formed kingdoms in southern Europe – the Visigoths in Spain and Portugal, and the Ostrogoths in Italy. Later the Lombards migrated from western Hungary and conquered much of Italy. Across the Mediterranean, the Vandals from central Europe seized parts of North Africa. These kingdoms reshaped Europe after the end of the Western Roman Empire.

Image caption: Western Europe, early AD 500s

Fragments from a floor mosaic (above)

These mosaics once decorated the floor of a grand building in Carthage, a major town in Roman-ruled North Africa. Part of a hunting scene, they show a horseman leaving a town, a dog chasing a hare and a bear eating. The mosaics date from the period when the Vandals, a Germanic people from Central Europe, had conquered part of North Africa and made Carthage their kingdom's capital. The horseman may represent a high status Vandal or member of the native aristocracy living under Vandal rule.

AD 450s–550s. Carthage, Tunisia, 1967,0405.18, 20 and 21

Islam and Europe

The early medieval period saw the rise of Islam as a major religion as well as a significant political and cultural player in Europe. Following the revelation of Islam to the Prophet Muhammad in Mecca in the early AD 600s, the faith gradually spread to surrounding lands and beyond. By AD 750 a vast Islamic empire had been forged, encompassing large parts of the former Sasanian Empire in the east, and the Byzantine Empire, North Africa and Iberian Peninsula (centring on modern Spain and Portugal) in the west. Trade and diplomacy between Muslims and Christians fuelled artistic exchanges throughout the following centuries, bringing the west into contact with the cultural and intellectual riches of the Middle East and Asia as never before.

The British Museum's collection of Islamic art can be seen in the John Addis Gallery in Room 34, with additional material in Rooms 40 and 46

Two column capitals from Islamic Spain (above left)

These fine marble capitals from two stone columns were probably made for one of the buildings at Madinat al-Zahra', near Córdoba in Spain. This magnificent site was founded in AD 936 by Caliph 'Abd al-Rahman III (reigned AD 912–961), ruler of the Umayyad dynasty that controlled much of the Iberian Peninsula at this time. The deeply carved foliage decorating these capitals fuses Islamic and Late Roman artistic traditions, creating a style distinctive to the Umayyads of this region.

AD 936–976. On loan from the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, A.102-1919
and A.145-1920, given by Dr W. L. Hildburgh F.S.A.

Tombstone with Arabic inscriptions (left)

This tombstone commemorates a woman named Fatima, daughter of Ali. She died in Aswan, Egypt, in 1029 during the time of the Fatimid rulers whose capital was Cairo. The stone's Arabic inscriptions, finely carved in 'Kufic' style script, include a verse from the Qur'an which requests God's mercy for Fatima. Arabic script was a defining feature of Islamic art and, when encountered in Europe, inspired artistic developments.

AD 1029 and AH 420 (Islamic Hijri calendar). Aswan, Upper Egypt, 1887,0402.1440

The Franks

The Franks were a confederation of Germanic peoples settled by the Romans in the province of Gaul (present-day France, Belgium and western Germany). They formed a successful and wealthy kingdom, ruled by the powerful Merovingian Dynasty. Frankish art was some of the most impressive of its time, and drew on Late Roman and Germanic traditions, the art of Anglo-Saxon England and the fashions of the Byzantine Empire.

Frankish finery, AD 500–550

This jewellery was found in a Frankish woman's grave in Artres, France. The richness and fine quality of each item suggests she may have been the wife of a local leader, and reveal the increasing wealth and power of the Frankish ruling classes. The jewellery includes two large gilded silver brooches, two smaller gold and garnet bird-shaped brooches, a silver armlet, ear-rings, and a crystal ball pendant.

Bequeathed by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks, AF.514.a–b, 515.a–b, 524, 525, 518 and 3328

Image caption: Artist's impression of a woman wearing the jewellery from the grave at Artres

© British Museum

1. Weapons and war-gear

After the Western Roman Empire broke down in AD 476, the Frankish Merovingian dynasty led by King Clovis (AD 481–511) conquered much of Gaul. Frankish warriors fought with iron weapons like this spear-head, arrow-heads, francisca (throwing-axe) and armour-piercing angon (barbed javelin). The boss from the centre of a round wooden shield protected the hand and deflected blows. Swords and seaxes (single-edged bladed weapons) were also used in battle.

AD 500s. Bréban, France, ML.2418, 3319–3321 and 3855. Londinières, France, 1856,0701.1416

2. Frankish fashions

The Franks adopted the Roman 'tunica' (tunic) but wore it under a dress. They fastened cloaks and undergarments with a range of brooches, including those shown here. The various types reflect influences from the Roman Empire, other Germanic groups and regional fashions. The pincer-headed type comes from Thuringia (in present-day Germany), while bird-shaped brooches were popular in other Germanic regions.

AD 600s. Bequeathed by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks, AF.527.a. Pontoise, France,1891,1019.81. Marne region, France, ML.3570. Pontoise, France, 1891,1019.74 and 86

3. Regional forms

These silver radiate-headed (knobbed) brooches are of a type made in central and southern Germany. The back of the left-hand brooch is inscribed with runes, an early form of writing used by many Germanic peoples. The inscription, which may read 'iku wifa gamus', is hard to interpret but 'wifa' could be a personal name. Both brooches are enriched with gilding and garnets. The inscribed brooch is more expertly made.

AD 500s. Possibly found in Germany or Kent, England, 1893,0618.32–33

4. High status dress

These luxury bow (arched) brooches reflect the wealth and status of some sections of Frankish society. Women wore them to fasten outer garments in matching pairs, or in sets of a large and small pair. Later they became purely decorative, pinned to a strap hanging from the belt. The radiate-headed (knobbed) type was more common than the square-headed examples. Their decoration includes geometric and animal motifs inspired by Late Roman art, and fierce birds' heads popular with Germanic peoples.

AD 500s. Pontoise, France, 1891,1019.85. Connantre, France, ML.3556. Amiens, France, 1891,1019.51. 1897,0323.15. Herpes, France, 1905,0520.220 and 222

5. Exotic accessories

Frankish men and women emphasised their status by wearing exotic dress accessories. The ornate buckle with cloisonné (inlaid cells) decoration was probably made by a local jeweller in Ostrogothic Italy, using garnets from southern Asia. The rock-crystal loop on the other buckle was imported from the East. The impressive gold finger-ring shows a warrior and a woman, named as Dromacius and Betta in the inscription. Its hoop is decorated with fierce birds' heads.

AD 400s–600s. Cologne, Germany, 1988,0712.1. Châlons-sur-Marne, France, ML.3527. Near Mulsanne, France, 1937,1118.1

6. Personal grooming

The Franks took care of their personal appearance using cosmetic implements, like these tweezers for plucking hair, an 'ear-scoop', and a double-sided comb with different grades of teeth on each side. Both men and women wore knives as practical, everyday tools. This one is shown with a silver chape (sheath fitting) from a similarly sized knife.

AD 500s–600s. Possibly from south-west France, 1905,0520.747, 757–758, 995, 1077 and 805

1. Expressions of Christianity

Traditionally pagan, the Franks converted to Christianity under King Clovis (AD 481–511) but buried their dead with grave-goods as before. Christian imagery on these personal items may have reflected their owners' beliefs. The horseman on the circular girdle-hanger may be St. Martin of Tours. The figures on the buckle raise their hands in an early Christian gesture of prayer ('orans'), while the symbolism of the cross-shaped brooch is clear.

AD 500s–600s. Amiens, France, 1891,1019.57. Possibly from France, 1987,0508.1. Bequeathed by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks, AF.522

2. Roman continuities: Vessels

The Franks continued to produce glass vessels and wheel-made pottery using Roman methods, but the finer skills were lost and glassware became a luxury used only at high status feasts. Roman glass-making centres in the Rhineland (western Germany) apparently survived, but some probably moved to smaller workshops in the countryside. These vessels represent types being made at this time. The fine pottery bottle was burnished (polished) and decorated with roller-stamps (rouletted).

AD 400s–600s. Cologne, Germany, 1978,0601.3. St-Loup, France, ML.3303. Possibly from south-west France, 1905,0520.60. Conflans-sur-Seine and Reims, France, ML.3988–3989

3. Roman continuities: Signet rings and brooch

These signet rings were used for sealing documents in Roman custom, showing that a level of literacy was kept alive by court and religious schools. Although the Franks originally spoke a Germanic language, official documents were written in Latin. The disc brooch, based on a Late Roman medallion, shows Rome enthroned, reflecting the Franks' desire to promote themselves as the rightful successors to Rome in the west.

AD 500s–600s. Bequeathed by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks, Compiègne, France, AF.490; AF.505. Near Dotzheim, Germany, 1854,0421.1

4. Mediterranean influences

These gold items reflect influences on Frankish culture from the Mediterranean region. The finger-ring is mounted with a coin of the Byzantine Emperor Marcian (AD 450–457), minted in Constantinople. Its hoop is in the form of two hares springing from the mouths of dolphins. The coin is of Theodebert I (AD 534–548), the first Frankish king to issue gold coins in his own name. Minted at Cologne (present-day Germany), its design imitates an early Byzantine model.

AD 400s–550. River Seine at Rouen, bequeathed by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks, AF.307. Given by Count John Francis William de Salis, B.10331

The gold finger-ring inlaid with pearls and green glass, Mediterranean in type, was possibly imported from Lombardic Italy. The gold disc brooch, set with coloured glass and mother-of-pearl, would have been worn singly on an outer garment in the Mediterranean fashion. This style replaced the traditional Germanic taste for pairs and multiples of brooches by the end of the AD 500s.

AD 600s. Normandy, France, bequeathed by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks,
AF.3324. Amiens, France, 1891,1019.20

5. Anglo-Saxon connections

The Franks and Anglo-Saxons across the Channel shared political, artistic and religious contacts. Marriages between Frankish and Anglo-Saxon royalty were also important. These links are revealed by similarities in dress and domestic items.

The large disc brooch is decorated with coloured glass, mother-of-pearl and filigree (beaded wire) scrolls. The smaller brooch, set with garnet triangles, resembles Anglo-Saxon examples.

Both Frankish and Anglo-Saxon women wore strings of glass beads. Patterned beads were exported from the Continent. Later, amethyst beads were imported from the eastern Mediterranean. The spindle-whorl and bird-headed pin resemble Anglo-Saxon ones, while the belt-set's shape and decoration is similar to the great gold buckle from Sutton Hoo, England.

AD 500s–700s. Meckenheim, Germany, 1899,0717.1. Rhine-Moselle region, Germany or France, donated by the Friends of the British Museum, 1902,1108.3. Possibly Bretzenheim an der Nahe, Germany, 1904,1129.6. Sigmaringen, Germany, donated by H. H. Howorth and J. L. Brunner, 1908,0801.538. Germany, 1894,0421.11–12. Possibly near Cologne, Germany, 1878,0111.2. Amiens, France, 1891,1019.63. Pontoise, France, 1891,1019.94

6. Later Frankish style

During the AD 600s, supplies of oriental garnets failed and gold and silver grew scarcer. As a result, Frankish jewellers turned to a decorative technique of inlaying designs in silver wire. These often imitated patterns used earlier in garnet cloisonné (inlaid cells) decoration, and were used on iron brooches, belt fittings and weapons like these. The ornate axe-head was probably for ceremonial rather than practical use.

AD 600s. Rhine-Moselle region, Germany or France, donated by the Friends of the British Museum, 1902,1108.139. Probably Kärlich, Germany, 1961,0505.1. Marne region, France, ML.3328. Bréban, France, ML.3374

The Lombards in Italy

The Lombards were a Germanic people who invaded Italy from western Hungary in AD 568. Although the Byzantine Empire held onto the key cities of Rome and Ravenna, the Lombards succeeded in establishing a kingdom in Italy. During the two centuries of Lombardic rule, Italy experienced a cultural revival in which urban life flourished. Lombardic art shifted away from traditional Germanic styles and adopted local Byzantine and Christian fashions.

Lombardic drinking-horn, AD 500–700

Drinking-horns were popular with many Germanic cultures during this period, but this Lombardic example from a high status grave in Sutri, Italy, is made of blue glass rather than the typical horn. It shows how the Lombards in Italy adapted Mediterranean techniques, such as coloured glass, to suit their own tastes.

Sutri, Italy, 1887,0108.2

1. Lombardic grave at Sutri, Italy

The two brooches, ear-rings, gold cross and Roman glass vessel were also found in the grave at Sutri. The radiate-headed (knobbed) brooch is a Germanic type introduced from the Lombard's temporary settlement in Hungary, while the ear-rings are Mediterranean in style. The cross, Byzantine in origin, may have been sewn to a veil. The region of Italy where Sutri is located was reconquered by the Byzantines in AD 593.

AD 500s–600s. Sutri, Italy, 1887,0108.3 and 5–9

2. Germanic, Roman and Byzantine influences

These objects reflect mingling cultural influences in Lombard Italy. The sword-pommel with ring-fitting is a Germanic type, also found in Anglo-Saxon England. The ring may symbolise an oath of loyalty or a reward for military service. The gold finger-ring bears the Germanic female name 'Gumedruta', but was used for sealing documents in the Roman tradition. The Lombards quickly adapted earrings, like these ones, from Byzantine fashion.

AD 500s–600s. Possibly from Castel Trosino, Italy, 1872,0604.1075. Bergamo, Italy, 1920,1028.2. 1856,0512.4–5. Calabria, Italy, 1872,0604.1110–1110.a.

3. Mediterranean fashions

Lombardic women adopted the Mediterranean fashion for single disc brooches, replacing their traditional Germanic dress. The garnet on the gold brooch is recycled from an earlier piece of jewellery, while the other shows an enamelled human bust. The finger-rings are also Mediterranean in style. The one with a cross-shaped bezel reflects the Lombards' conversion to Arianism, a heretical form of Christianity that lasted into the AD 600s.

AD 600s–early AD 800s. Canosa di Puglia, Italy, 1865,0712.1. Possibly Castel Trosino, Italy, 1989,0906.1. Bequeathed by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks, AF.478.a and 479

4. Christianisation

It is unclear how many Lombards were Christian when they invaded Italy, but they were steadily Christianised after settling there. The two quatrefoil (four-sided) brooches explicitly use a Christian cross in their design. The crosses are less obvious on the disc brooch, but it was found in a grave with a gold cross appliqué from a shroud or veil. Like their Frankish neighbours, the Christianised Lombards continued to bury their dead with grave-goods as they had traditionally.

AD 500s–600s. Italy, 1872,0604.766–767. Near Belluno, Italy, bequeathed by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks, AF.529

Gothic peoples

Gothic peoples migrated from the east and settled many parts of Europe between around AD 340 and 540. Initially groups settled around the Black Sea and the Crimea and later many migrated further west. The Ostrogoths took power in Italy and adopted Roman traditions which strongly influenced their impressive art and architecture. In Spain the Visigoths developed their own style inspired by the arts of the Byzantine Empire and Christianity.

Different Gothic styles

These buckles all have rectangular plates deriving from Roman forms, but their decoration reveals regional Gothic fashions. The gilded silver buckle with an eagle's head is typical of the northern Black Sea area which was settled by Crimean Goths. The middle buckle has inlaid green glass and garnet, highlighting Ostrogothic tastes for eastern Mediterranean fashions. The gilded Visigothic buckle at the bottom has chip-carved decoration which characterises much art at this time of extensive migration.

AD 400s–650s. Kerch, Crimea, Ukraine, 1923,0716.53. Possibly from Italy, 1865,0318.1. Possibly from Spain or southern France, 1995,1207.7

1. Mixed tastes on the northern Black Sea

The Crimea had long provided a refuge for many peoples. The mixed tastes represented in this exquisite garnet jewellery reflect the ethnic variety of the region. Some pieces show clear Eastern Roman influences, while others were made by local jewellers or imported from workshops around the Black Sea or Danube region (central Europe). The gold mounts with three domed cabochon garnets may have been made by the Huns or Alans, nomadic peoples from the steppes.

AD 200s–400s. South Russia or Ukraine, 1923,0716.110–111. Kerch, Crimea, Ukraine, 1923,0716.8, 9–10, 12, 14–15, 59, 45 and 54. Olbia, Ukraine, 1923,0716.73

2. Goths in the Crimea

These silver bow (arched) and radiate-headed (knobbed) brooches, along with the buckle and grooved armlet, are typical of accessories worn by the Eastern Gothic and nomadic Sarmatian peoples of the Crimea. They were found in graves in southern Russia and Ukraine, where the Goths ruled over a federation of tribes and lived in undefended villages, farming and raising livestock.

AD 200s–500s. Crimea, Ukraine, 1910.0712.51. Kerch, Crimea, Ukraine, 1923,0716.39–40. Possibly Ukraine, 1923,0716.119. Kerch, Crimea, Ukraine, 1910,0712.74 (possibly Sarmatian)

1. Ostrogothic Italy

In the AD 490s, the Ostrogoths established a kingdom in Italy where they were influenced by Roman traditions. Their first king Theoderic, made consul by the Byzantine Emperor, is named on the Byzantine-style square weight. The coins of King Baduila are also Byzantine in style and show the bust of Emperor Anastasius I. Despite these influences, Ostrogothic women still wore Germanic-style dress on arrival in Italy, like these radiate-headed (knobbed) and birds' head brooches.

AD 490s–550s. Possibly made in Rome, 1982,0105.1. Minted in Ticinum, Italy, 1853,0716.324 and 1867,0101.2222. 1978,0503.1. Possibly Italy, 1872,0604.762–763

2. The Domagnano Treasure

These spectacular items are from a hoard of Ostrogothic jewellery suitable for an aristocratic woman. Made from gold and shimmering with garnets, their style reflects Byzantine influence on the Ostrogothic court. The pieces include two mounts from a casket or purse, the larger in the shape of a helmeted head, three pendants from a collar, an ear-ring, a finger-ring, head-dress pin, chain and two knife-sheath fittings.

Late AD 400s–early AD 500s. Domagnano, Republic of San Marino, purchased with the support of The Art Fund, 1933,0405.1–11. Other parts of the Treasure are in other museums and collections

1. Visigothic Spain

The early jewellery of the Visigoths from present-day Spain and south-west France reflected their origins in the south Russian steppes. At first, Visigothic women wore Germanic-style dresses fastened by pairs of bow (arched) brooches. These slender, plain examples are of Eastern Germanic type, tinned to imitate silver. The radiate-headed (knobbed) brooches are traditionally Gothic in style, with knobs shaped like birds' heads with garnet eyes. The buckle, set with coloured glass, is in distinctive Visigothic style.

Late AD 400s–500s. Possibly from Spain, bequeathed by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks, AF.523. Spain or southern France, 1995,1207.1–2. Herpes, France, 1905,0520.186–187

2. Byzantine influence

The Visigoths were strongly influenced by the culture of the Byzantine Empire. The shape of the two large Visigothic buckles is modelled on Byzantine examples, like the small one. The Visigothic griffin-headed motifs on them are echoed on the strap-end (top). On the right, a locally-imitated coin of Emperor Justin I is shown above a Byzantine coin of Leo I with the same motif. The third coin is Visigothic, showing the king Recared I with long hair in the Germanic style.

AD 450s–600s. Athens, Greece, 1880,0501.13. 1990,0603.1. 1990,0604.3. Possibly Spain, 1991,1004.5. Minted in Gaul, 1855,0213.38. Minted in Constantinople, 1964,1203.232. Minted in Elvora, Spain, B.11596

3. Christianity

These objects reflect the Christian religion of Visigothic Spain. The mount is shaped like a Christian cross, while the buckle shows the Lamb of God carrying a cross in its mouth. The dish-like paten with a handle, used in Holy Communion, is incised with a biblical verse referring to Jesus as the Lion of Judah. It was probably hidden together with a liturgical ewer after the Muslim invasion of Spain in AD 711.

AD 600s–700s. Possibly Spain, 1993,0701.1 and 1987,0509.1. León Hoard, Spain, 1900,1214.1 and 3

Visigothic gravestone (above left)

This gravestone was recycled from a Roman building. It is inscribed with a cross and a fragmentary Latin inscription, the surviving part reading 'Gundebebius the servant of God lived about … years'. Gundebebius is a Germanic male name, suggesting that the grave belonged to a Visigoth. The cross and wording of the inscription indicate that he was a Christian. The pagan Visigoths were converted to Christianity before they settled in Spain.

AD 500s–600s. Santiponce (Itálica), Spain, OA.9295

Visigothic tile (above right)

This earthenware tile would have been mounted with others in a wooden frame to decorate the wall of a room. It shows a large chi-rho motif, comprising the first two letters of Christ's name in Greek (XP). This is flanked by the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, alpha (A) and omega (ω), signifying God the Son. A damaged Latin inscription on its sides would have read 'Bracarus, may you live long with your companions'.

AD 400s–500s. Possibly found near Ronda, Spain, 1889,0705.1

The Vandals

In AD 409, the Germanic Vandals migrated from Central Europe together with the Suevi, Alans and other peoples into Spain and Portugal. In AD 429 around 80,000 Vandals and Alans crossed into Roman-ruled North Africa, where they formed a ruling elite among the far larger local population. They seized lands and villas and made their capital at Carthage, which became a base for piracy around the Mediterranean.

Their sacking of Rome in AD 455 earned the Vandals an everlasting reputation as destroyers, but their North African kingdom was prosperous and economically stable until it was conquered by the Byzantine army in AD 534.

Jewellery fashions

During their migration, the Vandals became familiar with Roman culture and adopted it within a couple of generations. The design of this jewellery from the grave of a high status Vandal woman demonstrates this change. The disc brooches are of native Mediterranean manufacture, but were worn as a pair to fasten a Germanic type of dress. Their cruciform design reflects the Vandals' conversion from paganism to Christianity during their migration. The buckle showing a lion hunt is a typical eastern Mediterranean or Byzantine form.

AD 400s. Grave 1, Annaba, Algeria, 1865,0518.1–3

Gold and garnet buckle

The gold buckle inlaid with garnets in cells (cloisonné) is for a shoe or sword-belt and may come from a lost grave. Its design is central Danubian rather than specifically Vandal, but it was found near Córdoba, in present-day Spain in a region briefly settled by Vandals. It is a rare reflection of the migration of peoples from central to western and southern parts of Europe, who left little trace of their passage.

Early AD 400s. Near Córdoba, Spain, bequeathed by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks, AF.510

Coin with Christian symbol

This coin, minted at Carthage, was issued by the Vandal King Trasamund. It bears a Christian chi-rho symbol, combining the first two letters of Christ's name in Greek. After their conversion, the Vandals in North Africa followed the heretical Arian creed of Christianity, which denied that Christ and God were one and the same. This led to discord with the indigenous Catholic population, who were often persecuted for their beliefs – those serving in the royal household had to dress like their Vandal masters.

AD 496–523. Croatia, donated by J.P. Orfanides, 1933,0106.235

Objects from a woman's grave

The different origins of these objects, from the grave of a high status Vandal woman, reflect the different cultural influences at play in Vandal North Africa. The cosmetic implements, two finger-rings and glass vessel bases, perhaps used to smooth textiles, are Roman. By contrast, the amber beads may be from Central Europe, while the ear-rings, probably originally inlaid with garnets, are of Eastern Germanic or Alanic type.

AD 500s. Grave 2, Annaba, Algeria, 1865,0518.4–21 and 28

Sutton Hoo and Europe AD 300–1100

This was a time of great change in Europe. The Roman Empire broke down in the west, but continued in the east as the Byzantine Empire. People, objects and ideas travelled across the continent and its seas, while Christianity and Islam emerged as major religions. By 1100 the precursors of several modern states had developed. Europe as we know it today was beginning to take shape.

The Tuscany Brooch
Lombardic Italy, around AD 600

This gilded silver brooch is one of the largest Lombardic examples of its kind. The Lombards were a Germanic people who migrated from western Hungary and conquered much of Italy. Their influence helped create the characteristic art style decorating this brooch. Interlaced snake-like creatures cover its surfaces, while the foot terminates in a fierce animal head, probably a wild boar, with a double-headed serpent below its snout. The brooch was probably worn by a woman to emphasise her status, fastening her clothing around her waist.

Brooch with 'Style II' animal decoration, Tuscany, Italy, 1851,0806.10

Silver hare-shaped fitting
Northern and Eastern Europe,
AD 900s–1100s

This exquisite silver fitting is shaped like a hare. While no exact parallel is known, similar fittings shaped like animals and birds have been found in women's graves in the forested region from northern Russia to western Siberia. They are usually made from copper alloy rather than silver. The purpose of these fittings is uncertain, but some heavy examples may have been used as the handles of firesteels (fire-starting tools), worn suspended from a belt for convenience.

Bielowodsk, Perm, Russia, possibly Finno-Ugrian, 1878,0509.6

Northern and Eastern Europe
AD 500–1100

Many different peoples inhabited the northern and eastern parts of Europe. Their territories lay mostly beyond the Byzantine Empire, but still maintained links with the wider world.

In the north, Scandinavian groups traded local resources including leather, furs and walrus ivory for foreign luxuries like glass, pottery, weapons and textiles. Craft workers used imported garnets and melted down Roman, Byzantine, Anglo-Saxon and continental coins to make distinctive jewellery and metalwork.

Further east, the coasts and waterways of the Baltic Sea region provided lucrative routes towards Byzantine and Islamic lands. Baltic amber was traded widely and heavy copper alloy jewellery characterised local dress.

Central and Eastern Europe was largely occupied by Slav peoples, as well as horse-riding nomads who migrated from the Steppes. These groups clashed with the Byzantines and the Merovingian and Carolingian Franks, but were also influenced by them.

Image caption: People and territories of Northern and Eastern Europe

Necklace with brooches and pendants
The Baltic Sea region

This spectacular jewellery set comprises a pair of oval brooches linked by a necklace of multiple copper alloy chains. Among these are pendants of amber, bone, a small bell, a bear's tooth and an open-work bird. The brooches were influenced by those that characterised Scandinavian Viking women's dress. Heavy copper alloy jewellery was typical of female costume in the eastern Baltic region because of the scarcity of precious metals like silver or gold.

1100s. Aizkraukle, Latvia, 1852,0329.129

Image caption: Artist's impression of a woman wearing the jewellery set

© British Museum

Early Scandinavia

Early Scandinavia (AD 500–750) had strong links with continental Europe, despite its northerly location. Although it was never part of the Roman Empire, trade and diplomatic gifts brought foreign luxuries and cultural influences into the region. Roman and Byzantine coins and medallions became models for pendants, and were also melted down to make new artefacts. However, pagan beliefs persisted in Scandinavia long after neighbouring peoples became Christian, as reflected in the region's complex imagery.

Four brooches with birds, AD 500–700

The three 'disc-on-bow' brooches (with central disc) are typically Scandinavian but also reflect links with the wider world. Their inlaid garnets were probably imported from the East, while the bird motifs along their sides were popular with many Germanic peoples, including the Anglo-Saxons. For instance, the bird-shaped brooch strongly resembles a mount on the shield from Sutton Hoo, England. All four brooches would have been used to fasten garments.

Gotland, Sweden, purchased with a contribution from The Art Fund, 1921,1101.218, 220, 221 and 251

Image caption: Pendant of a woman wearing a 'disc-on-bow' brooch, from Östergötland, Sweden, AD 700s–1000s

© British Museum

A grave from northern Norway

These objects were found in a woman's grave in Tromsø, in the far north of Norway. The brooches are typically Scandinavian in form, but the patterned millefiori glass beads were imported from the Frankish kingdoms. The oval brooch, a shape that became especially popular in the Viking period, is decorated with an intricate interlace design and a curious animal seen from above, with its legs crossed over its back.

AD 600s–early AD 700s. Tromsø, Norway, 1900,0518.1–13

Image caption: Colourful patterns on one of the millefiori glass beads

© British Museum

Imported glass vessel

This fine glass beaker, found on the island of Gotland, Sweden, would have been a status symbol at any feast. Glass vessels were rare in Scandinavia at this time, so this one represents a luxury import. It may have come to Sweden from central or south-eastern Europe using routes through the Baltic Sea region.

AD 400s. Barshalder or Hablingbo, Gotland, Sweden, purchased with a contribution from The Art Fund, 1921,1101.381

Late Roman links

Scandinavians obtained gold coins from the Late Roman Empire as diplomatic payments to keep the peace or for military service, especially after AD 450. They are now mostly found in hoards, but many were recycled into jewellery and other precious objects. This gold 'solidus' coin of Emperor Valentinian I was pierced to wear as a pendant. The circular pieces of 'ring-gold' were recast from coins to use as bullion or as a local form of currency.

AD 200s–500s. Minted in Antiochia ad Orontem, Turkey, 1922,0523.1. Gotland, Sweden, purchased with a contribution from The Art Fund, 1921,1101.373 and 379

Three brooches

These brooches reflect contacts between Scandinavia and neighbouring lands.
The cruciform (cross-shaped) brooch is Scandinavian in form, but similar types were also worn by women in Anglo-Saxon England and northern Germany. The radiate-headed (knobbed) brooch and smaller bow (arched) brooch are decorated with abstract animal motifs and chip-carved scrolls deriving from Late Roman art.

AD 400s–500s. Ljonesvåg, Norway, donated by C. O. Skilbeck, 1910,0507.1. Gotland, Sweden, purchased with a contribution from The Art Fund, 1921,1101.43 and 217

Continuities in style

Jewellery fashions on Gotland, an island off the Swedish coast, were distinctive but retained close links with Sweden. They also reflected long-term continuity of art styles. The three disc brooches show the same motif of interlaced animal heads which developed over 200 years. The two bow (arched) brooches linked by chains are similar to later eastern Baltic examples. The characteristic, cylindrical mitre-shaped pendants were worn into the Viking period, but with increasingly elaborate forms.

AD 500s–700s. Purchased with a contribution from The Art Fund, Nygårds, Gotland, Sweden, 1921,1101.277. Gotland, Sweden, 1921,1101.276, 139, 62 and 168

Weapons for the gods

These three iron spear-heads with faceted sockets, together with the barbed javelin-head, probably come from a ritual bog deposit. Several spectacular hoards of military equipment have been found in Scandinavian bogs, some of them added to over centuries. The hoard may represent weapons taken from defeated armies and placed in sacred lakes as offerings to the gods. The javelin may have been bent in battle, or deliberately in a ritual intended to remove its power or function.

AD 1–200s. Denmark, donated by Sir John Evans, 1867,0711.1–4

Expressions of belief

Christianity made little headway in Scandinavia before the later AD 900s. The figure in gold sheet shows a bearded and helmeted man, performing what may be a pagan ritual dance. The five bracteate pendants may have been made for use by high status individuals at religious festivals. The motifs on many bracteates appear to be connected with pagan beliefs, especially the cult of the chief god, Wodan (later Odin).

AD 500s–800s. Purchased with a contribution from The Art Fund, Roma, Gotland, Sweden, 1921,1101.361. Gotland, Sweden, 1921,1101.363 and 365; Förslöv, Gotland, Sweden, 1921,1101.367–368. Probably from the Kongsvik Hoard, Norway, bequeathed by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks, OA.5798

Central and eastern Europe

Many different peoples settled the lands of central and eastern Europe. Slav groups speaking various Slavic languages inhabited vast territories, while horse-riding nomads from the eastern steppes occupied areas once partly under Roman control. Some nomadic groups like the Avars and Magyars grew powerful, but in part of present-day Hungary, a small Romanised community persisted under Avar rule. The entire region and its peoples were influenced by the Byzantine Empire.

The Martynivka Hoard, Ukraine, about AD 550–650

These pieces come from a large silver hoard discovered at Martynivka, Ukraine. Together, they represent the different cultural influences at play in Central and Eastern Europe at this time. The belt-fittings are of a type used by nomads from the steppes, although similar forms are also known from Slav-inhabited lands. The horse-shaped mount with gilded mane may also relate to steppe nomadic peoples, since horses were of special importance to them.

The two bow brooches imitate eastern Germanic types and are decorated with birds, which were popular in Slav art. The choice of peacock may also reflect Byzantine influence – they symbolised immortality in Christian Byzantine art.

Martynivka, Ukraine, 1912,0610.1–22. Other pieces from the hoard are held by the National Historical Museum, Ukraine

Slavs: mixed fashions

This hollow gold pendant embossed with birds was probably suspended from a headdress and filled with perfume or scented oil. Tiny loops around the edge originally supported a wire strung with pearls. Such Byzantine-style pendants were made in workshops attached to the Kievan princely court and symbolised the sun – a goddess of light to the Kievan Rus'. The twisted armlet decorated with filigree (beaded wire) and granulation is more Slavic in style.

1000s–1300s. Possibly Kiev region, Ukraine, bequeathed by William Burges, 1881,0802.2. Banat area, Serbia or Romania, 1860,0609.7

Slavs: distinctive jewellery

These pieces come from a hoard of western Slav silver jewellery, including two lunate (crescent-shaped) pendants, a bucket-shaped amulet, two pairs of ear-rings and two non-matching ear-rings. Each piece is decorated with granulation – tiny silver 'granules' applied to the surface in geometric shapes, typical of Slav jewellery. Coins found with the hoard include a penny of the Viking king Cnut, struck in Stamford, England around 1018–1024.

AD 900s–early 1000s. Possibly from Poland or eastern Germany, 1991,1003.1–8 and 12

Slavs: silver hoard

These objects come from a silver hoard buried near Leipzig, Germany, soon after 1060. The seven necklace-beads are typical of those found in Poland and western Russia. The eight pennies are Anglo-Saxon and Danish, struck under the kings Æthelred II 'the Unready', Magnus 'the Good', Harthacnut and Edward 'the Confessor'. Slavic peoples often recycled coins into jewellery, and one of these pieces has been pierced to wear as a pendant.

Late AD 900s–1000s. Near Leipzig, Germany, 1860,0609.13–18 and 21. Minted in Northampton, London, Scandinavia, York, Lund and Lincoln, 1860,0609.28–35.

Nomads from the steppes

From the late AD 300s horse-riding nomads from the steppes of the East, such as the Huns, migrated west to new grasslands with their flocks and herds. Some like the Khazars, Magyars and Avars, established powerful realms that spanned vast territories. While their arrival sparked conflicts with local populations and the powerful Byzantine Empire, cultural exchanges also took place – leading to artistic developments on both sides.

Khazars: horse equipment

The Turkic Khazars were a semi-nomadic people from the steppes, who were converts to Judaism. Their cavalry enabled them to dominate vast territories and control the trade of silver objects and coins from the East, which they exchanged for furs and luxury goods from the far north. These decorated iron stirrups and bridle-bit, perhaps from a grave, reflect the importance of horses to the Khazars and their allies.

The bridle-bit is enriched with silver sheet, creating elegant vine and floral motifs. Their style derives from Byzantine and Slav decoration, highlighting contacts between the Khazars and surrounding peoples.

AD 800s–900s. Bielowodsk, Perm, Russia, 1878,0509.46–48

Magyars: belt set

The horse-riding Magyars were driven from the steppes by other nomads in the late AD 800s. They conquered the middle Danube region, with its extensive grasslands for grazing their flocks. The kingdom they established there laid the foundations for modern-day Hungary. This gilded silver belt set is of Magyar origin. Nomadic men like the Magyars wore belt sets as a sign of rank. They may also have had a deeper personal significance.

AD 900s. Possibly from Hungary, 1997,0208.1–34

Avars: belt-fittings

In the AD 500s, the Asiatic Avars were expelled from the steppes by the Turks. Settling in the Carpathian Basin region (east and central Europe) they dominated local Germanic and Romanised peoples. Like other nomadic groups, the Avars were influenced by the different cultures they met. The scrolls and griffins decorating these belt-fittings show Byzantine inspiration. The strap-end with Germanic-style animal motif was made by Germanic Gepid or Lombardic craft workers under Avar rule.

AD 600s–700s. Győr, Hungary, 1926,0511.4 and 7–8. Possibly from Hungary, 2008,8013.1

Romanised populations

Pannonia, a former Roman province in part of present-day Hungary, came under Avar control in the AD 500s. For a while the existing Romanised populations maintained their own Christian, Mediterranean fashions, notably around the old Roman towns of Keszthely and Pécs. This is reflected by the ear-rings, dress-pin and armlets which are Mediterranean in style. During the AD 600s local peoples began to adopt typical Avar fashions.

AD 600s–700s. Keszthely or region, Hungary, purchased with a contribution from The Art Fund, 1933,0405.12–15, 17–18 and 20

Box brooch with a Christian scene

The Romanised peoples of Pannonia remained Christian under Avar rule. This brooch from the region shows the Adoration of the Magi, a well-known Christian scene. On the right, three bearded men bring gifts to the infant Christ in the stable at Bethlehem. The arrangement of the scene is so similar to Byzantine examples that it was probably copied from a Byzantine source, reflecting continuing links with the Empire.

Late AD 500s–600s. Possibly Hungary, 1987,0101.1

Baltic jewellery

Precious metals like silver and gold were scarce in the Baltic Sea region, so copper alloy was typically used to make jewellery and dress accessories. Heavy jewellery expertly cast in this metal, like these two armlets, was especially distinctive of female dress in the eastern Baltic Sea region.

1000s–1100s. Aizkraukle, Latvia, 1852,0329.194 and 412

Pendant

Amber was an important export from the south-eastern Baltic Sea region, traded and exchanged across Europe and beyond. It was often used to make jewellery, like beads and pendants. This amber pendant is partly worked into the shape of a bear's tooth, like the real one shown next to it.

Late 1100s–early 1200s. Near Sigulda, Latvia, 1852,0329.47. Aizkraukle, Latvia, 1852,0329.15

Belt-fittings and pendants

Dress accessories with jingling pendants were popular in the Baltic Sea region. The sound they made when the wearer moved was probably thought to have protective qualities. The two belt-fittings on the left have horse-like heads, the larger one with pendants shaped like ducks' feet. On the right are two pendants, one with bell-shaped terminals and the other shaped like a bird, its jingling features now missing.

AD 700s–1100s. Vangsbakken, Norway, 1891,1021.108. Perm, Russia, 1922,0601.244 and 249. Kudymka, Russia, 1922,0601.268

Cultural and trading exchanges

The Baltic Sea region was a busy zone used by traders and travellers between northern, western and eastern Europe. It provided access to Russian rivers that led towards Constantinople, and onwards to Islamic lands further east. The resulting exchanges and influences upon Baltic peoples are reflected by these finds.

Three open ring brooches

These three open ring brooches are of a type that became popular throughout the Baltic Sea region, reaching Scandinavia and beyond.

AD 900s–1200s. Latvia, 1852,0329.148 and 141. Aizkraukle, Latvia, 1852,0329.16

Glass beads

These glass beads were produced from imported materials. One of the beads is made of amber.

Late 1000s–early 1100s. Aizkraukle, Latvia, 1852,0329.21–23

Two neck-rings

The copper alloy neck-ring is typical of Baltic jewellery, while the silver one, found as part of a hoard with the Islamic coin, may reflect contact with Scandinavian Vikings. Thousands of Islamic silver coins brought through the Baltic by Vikings were melted down to make jewellery.

AD 800s–900s. Latvia, 1852,0329.190. From a hoard found near Tallinn, Estonia, 1924,0108.1 and Islamic coin, minted in Samarkand, Central Asia in AD 919, 1924,0108.2

Islamic silver

The upper coin, minted in Merv (present-day Turkmenistan) but found in Latvia, was pierced for use as a pendant. The lower pendant imitates the shape and inscriptions of an Islamic coin, but bears the Christian symbols of a cross and dove-like bird.

AD 860s–900s. Minted in Merv, Turkmenistan, found in Latvia, 1852,0329.162. Possibly Tartu area, Estonia, Livonia or Russia, 1852,0329.423

The Vikings
AD 750–1100

The term 'Viking' is commonly used to describe the Old Norse-speaking peoples of Norway, Denmark and Sweden at this time. Its origin is uncertain, perhaps coming from Old Norse words for pirates, seaborne expeditions, or an area in south-eastern Norway called Viken.

During these centuries, Vikings voyaged overseas to raid, trade and settle new lands. By 1100, they had travelled as far east as Central Asia and as far west as North America. These achievements were aided by Viking expertise in ship-building and sailing honed by navigating Scandinavia's extensive coasts and waterways.

Vikings are still remembered as fierce raiders, partly because most surviving accounts of their attacks were written by those who confronted them. While violence and raiding are important parts of the Vikings' story, archaeology has provided a fuller picture of their lives, culture and beliefs.

Image caption: Areas of Viking Settlement and influence, AD 750–1100

Image caption: Two ships carrying warriors (bottom and centre left), on a picture-stone from Gotland, Sweden, Viking period

© PhotoAlto sas/Alamy

Raiders and traders

For the Vikings, raiding and trading were closely linked. Many who travelled overseas behaved opportunistically, deciding whether to raid or trade depending on a settlement's defences. Both activities relied on the Vikings' ship design and maritime skills. These could navigate diverse waterways from the coasts of Britain in the west, where undefended monasteries offered easy plunder, to the Russian rivers of the east – gateways to the markets of Constantinople and beyond.

Double-edged sword

Double-edged swords were the most prestigious weapon used by Vikings. Available only to high status warriors, many were enhanced with rich fittings. This sword has a silver-encrusted hilt decorated with Viking-style beasts, while the grip is wrapped in silver wire. The iron blade is pattern welded, a complex technique that gave it an intricately patterned appearance. Despite its splendour, swords like this were also lethal weapons, capable of devastating slashing blows.

AD 900s. Possibly from the River Thames at Temple, London, bequeathed by Henry Dunbar Baines through Reverend J. C. Jackson, 1887,0209.1

Battle-axe and spear-head

Many Viking warriors fought with axes and spears, fixed to long wooden shafts. This battle-axe was a fearsome weapon. Held in both hands, it was brutally powerful but also left the warrior vulnerable because he could not hold a shield at the same time. Spear-heads like this one delivered lethal thrusting blows. Its socket is inlaid with intricate designs in silver and copper wire, creating a weapon both beautiful and deadly.

AD 800s–1000s. River Thames, London, 1838,0110.2, and donated by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks, 1893,0715.2

Trading equipment

Viking traders made transactions by weighing out bullion – typically pieces of cut-up silver – on balance scales, like this portable set with its own case. Silver fragments like those shown here were placed on one side, and lead weights on the other, to find the right amount. These lead weights are inlaid with decorative metalwork fragments, an Anglo-Saxon coin and a pendant shaped like a bearded male head.

AD 700s–1000s. Gotland, Sweden, purchased with a contribution from The Art Fund, 1921,1101.320–321, 341–351 and 360. Possibly from Northumbria, 1993,0502.1–2. Wareham, Dorset, 1991,0304.1. Tadcaster, North Yorkshire, 2011,8024.1

Islamic silver

Far-flung Viking trade routes reached Islamic lands in Central Asia and the Middle East. The region was hugely important as a source of silver in the form of coins called 'dirhams'. Vikings brought hundreds of thousands of these coins into and around Europe. They have been found in many places where the Vikings travelled, buried in hoards, melted down to make new objects, or used as bullion like these cut-up fragments.

AD 800s–900s. Gotland, Sweden, purchased with a contribution from The Art Fund, 1921,1101.350.c–f

Viking homelands

Despite the enduring popular image of fierce Viking raiders, most Scandinavians lived in small rural communities in their homelands. Farming, fishing, hunting and crafts were central to daily life. Women organised the household, cared for the family, prepared food and made clothing. Viking beliefs were largely pagan, until Christianity began to spread in Scandinavia from about the mid AD 900s.

Whalebone plaque, AD 800s

This plaque, from a wealthy woman's grave in at Lilleberge, in Norway, probably symbolised the important role and status Viking women held in the home. It may have worked like an ironing-board for smoothing and pleating clothing, or as a platter for serving food at feasts. Similar plaques have been found elsewhere in northern Norway and overseas where Vikings settled. This fine example is decorated with two animal heads and ring-and-dot motifs.

Lilleberge, Namdalen, Norway, 1891,1021.67

Image caption: Modern reconstruction of a Viking house, at the Viking settlement of L'Anse aux Meadows, Newfoundland

© David Muenker/Alamy

Viking women

These items, also buried with the woman at Lilleberge, Norway, demonstrate women's roles and fashions in Viking Scandinavia. The stone spindle-whorl was used for spinning wool or flax into yarn to make fabric. The oval brooches, decorated with animal motifs, are typical of Viking female costume. They fastened a dress at the shoulders, with the glass beads strung between them. Similar brooches were worn by women in Scandinavian settlements overseas.

AD 800s. Lilleberge, Namdalen, Norway, 1891,1021.75, 73–74 and 68–72

X-rays of a bundle of textiles, wood and feathers from the woman's grave at Lilleberge revealed this beautiful gilded mount hidden inside. Its form and decoration suggest it was made in Ireland or Scotland during the AD 700s–800s, demonstrating Viking contacts overseas. Remains of a pin added on the back show that the mount was made into a brooch for wearing.

AD 700s–800s. Lilleberge, Namdalen, Norway, 1891,1021.78. X-ray image of the mount inside the bundle © British Museum.

Living on the land

In the Vikings' Scandinavian homelands, most men were not full-time warriors but farmers. They lived on small farmsteads and exploited the resources of their local environment. These three arrow-heads were used to hunt different types of prey for meat, while the curved iron sickle was an agricultural tool, used to harvest crops like barley or rye.

AD 700s–1000s. Bronhø, Norway, 1891,1021.3.
Holungsfjellet, Norway, 1891,1021.7. Bolstad, Norway,
1891,1021.14. Norway, donated by Anders Lund Lorange,
1875,0716.7

Using the water

Throughout Scandinavia, rivers, lakes and
the sea were vital for food as well as travel.
These iron rivets come from a boat that was
buried with a man inside a mound at Lilleberge,
Norway. The wooden planks had decayed,
leaving only an impression of the boat in the
ground – but its length of around 10 metres
suggests it was a fishing craft.

AD 800s–900s. Lilleberge, Namdalen, Norway,
1891,1021.87

Viking rings

Neck-, arm- and finger-rings were of great significance to the Vikings. They were given as gifts by lords and kings, and worn as symbols of status or wealth. Cut-up rings were also used as bullion. Scandinavian-style rings, comprising twisted and plaited metal rods or simpler punched bands, are found overseas where Vikings travelled. These arm- and finger-rings were found on the island of Gotland, near Sweden.

AD 900s–1100s. All from Gotland, Sweden, purchased with a contribution from The Art Fund. 1921,1101.302 and 303. När, 1921,1101.305. Hemse, 1921,1101.307. Smiss, 1921,1101.374. 1921,1101.375. Bequeathed by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks, AF.539

Image caption: Figures in procession holding rings, on a picture-stone from Gotland, Sweden, Viking period

© The Art Archive/Alamy, in Historiska Museet, Stockholm

1. Animal art styles

Sophisticated patterns of interlacing animals dominated Viking art. Several distinctive styles developed and spread overseas, where they influenced local art and fuelled new styles. The sword scabbard fitting, rein-holder, disc brooch and trefoil (three-pointed) brooch are decorated in the so-called 'Borre' style, which often featured animal masks and ring-chain patterns. The box and animal-shaped brooches show the 'Urnes' style, characterised by slim interlacing creatures with elongated eyes.

AD 800s–1000s. Purchased with a contribution from The Art Fund, Vallstena, Gotland, Sweden, 1921,1101.318; Anga, Gotland, Sweden, 1921,1101.282. Gotland, Sweden, donated by the Friends of the British Museum, 1901,0718.1. Roskilde, Denmark, donated by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks, 1873,1211.1. Gotland, Sweden, 1894,0217.1. Kiaby, Sweden, 1982,0602.1

2. Regional identities

While many fashions were shared across Scandinavia, others were distinctly regional. On the island of Gotland, Sweden, these brooches shaped like stylised animal heads were a local variation of oval brooches popular elsewhere in Scandinavia. Both types were worn by women at the shoulders, often with glass beads strung between them. The circular box brooch was another Gotlandic fashion, worn centrally on the chest to fasten a cloak or shawl.

AD 800s–1000s. All from Gotland, Sweden, purchased with a contribution from The Art Fund. Kopparsvik, 1921,1101.86. Vallstena, 1921,1101.98, 1921,1101.53 and 55. Boge, 1921,1101.284

3. A magical staff?

This iron rod from a woman's grave in Norway may have been used in pagan magical practices. It resembles similar rods found in burials of women who may have been sorceresses ('völur' in Old Norse). The rituals involving such staffs are mysterious, but they may have included divination and the control of others. This staff was deliberately bent before burial, an act perhaps thought to remove its power.

AD 800s–900s. Villa Farm, Vestnes, Norway, 1894,1105.5

4. Pagan beliefs

These objects reflect the traditional pagan beliefs that Vikings held before they were Christianised. The small mount shows a mythological woman called a Valkyrie welcoming a horseman to Valhalla, a great hall where brave warriors went after death. The bearded face on the silver pendant may be a god or mythological figure, while the T-shaped pendant adapted from a balance arm may represent the hammer of Thor, the Norse god of thunder.

AD 800–1000s. Peterborough, England, 1988,0407.1. Bridlington, England, 2001,0501.1. Thirsk area, England, part of the 'Ainsbrook' Hoard, 2006,1203.16

5. Changing beliefs

Pagan Vikings settling in Christian regions rapidly became Christianised. In Anglo-Saxon England this process is reflected on these coins issued by the Viking rulers of York. The first shows a pagan Thor's hammer, the second a bird – perhaps the Norse god Odin's raven or the Christian eagle of Saint John. The knot-like motif on the third appears in pagan Viking imagery but could also symbolise the Holy Trinity. The last coin, showing a cross and a saint's name, is overtly Christian.

AD 921–941. Minted in York, 1844,0425.2702, 1915,0507.768, 1915,0507.767, E.5092

Image caption: Figurine of a man with one eye closed, thought to represent the one-eyed pagan god Odin, from Lindby, Sweden, Viking period

© Christer Åhlin/National Historical Museum, Stockholm

Vikings overseas

Political strife at home and opportunities for trade, wealth and land motivated Vikings to travel overseas from the AD 700s. They raided and settled many lands, including parts of Britain and Ireland. By the later AD 800s Vikings controlled much of northern and eastern England, and eventually Scandinavian kings like Cnut (1016–1035) briefly ruled the whole realm. Interactions between Vikings and local populations fuelled cultural change, leading to new art styles fusing Scandinavian and local traditions.

Silver 'thistle' brooch, AD 900s

This open ring brooch is of a type that probably originated in Ireland but was adopted by Vikings. They developed larger versions and even took the idea back to Scandinavia, where local versions were made. Such brooches are often called 'thistle' brooches because their ball-like terminals resemble thistle flowers. This one would have fastened a man's woollen or leather cloak, with the pin pointing upwards over the shoulder.

Bequeathed by William Forster, 1904,1102.3. Perhaps from a hoard of brooches found at Flusco Pike, near Penrith, Cumbria (1909,0624.2 and 1991,0109.1–10) .

Image caption: The thistle-like ball on the pin head

© British Museum

The Vikings in Anglo-Saxon England

Once Vikings started to settle in Anglo-Saxon England, cultural interactions began to take place. Objects of Viking form, decorated with Viking motifs or inscribed with Viking text were imported from Scandinavia, or made in England under Scandinavian influence. New art styles mixing Viking and Anglo-Saxon traditions emerged.

Open ring brooch with Viking runic alphabet

The back of this brooch is inscribed with runes, a writing system that Vikings used to write short texts. Some perhaps had magical significance.

AD 900s. Flusco Pike, near Penrith, Cumbria, 1991,0109.2

Oval brooches

Pairs of oval brooches were typical of Viking women's dress. These ones are enriched with gilding, silver wire and animal motifs.

Late AD 800s–early AD 900s. Santon Downham, Suffolk, donated by Reverend William Greenwell, 1883,0727.1 and 1888,0103.1

Arm and finger-rings

Viking-style gold arm and finger-rings, including twisted and punched types.

AD 800s–1000s. Wendover, Buckinghamshire, donated by G. Robert Fox, 1849,0210.1. Brixham, Devon, 1979,1004.1. Wickham Lodge, Hampshire, 1851,0313.2. Maunby, North Yorkshire, 2009,8001.1. Newark, Nottinghamshire, 2010,8015.1

Bone pin and silver pendant

The decoration on these dress accessories has such strong Scandinavian parallels that they were probably imported to England.

AD 900s–1000s. River Thames, London, 1893,0618.72. Little Snoring, Suffolk, 1999,1001.1

Combs and trial piece

Bone and antler carving were popular crafts practiced in towns stimulated by Viking activity. These combs were found in York and Lincoln. The lower comb-case is inscribed in runes 'Thorfastr made a good comb'. The name is Scandinavian. The bone was used by a craft worker practising Viking-style patterns.

AD 900s–1000s. 1921,0714.1. York, donated by N. W. J. Westlake, 1866,0510.1. Lincoln, 1867,0320.12

Stylistic cross-currents

These objects reflect the mixing of Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian art styles at this time. The speckled beasts on the silver casket panels are Anglo-Saxon in style, but their double-lined bodies are influenced by Viking art. The snake and four-legged creature entwined on the disc brooch are of Viking style, but the dots on the snake's body and the brooch's scalloped border are Anglo-Saxon features.

AD 900s–1000s. 1954,1201.1–2. Pitney, Somerset, 1979,1101.1

Viking economies

Vikings operated a bullion economy, using pieces of precious metals (hacksilver) in transactions. Contact with peoples overseas who used coins, like the Anglo-Saxons, eventually led Viking rulers to mint their own. Many Viking hoards contain hacksilver and coins, reflecting both economic traditions.

These are parts of two major hoards buried inside gilded silver cups in northern England. The Vale of York hoard (bottom) held 617 silver coins, much hacksilver and a gold arm-ring.

It was probably buried shortly after the West Saxon king Æthelstan conquered the Viking kingdom of Northumbria in AD 927. The Halton Moor hoard (top), buried in around 1025, contained 860 silver coins, several gold discs and a silver neck-ring. The two cups are Frankish and were probably made in the same workshop. Originally used in church services, they were perhaps looted from a northern Frankish church or monastery during Viking raids in the AD 800s.

Vale of York, North Yorkshire, 2009,4133.77–693 and 2009,8023.1–76. The hoard is a joint acquisition of the British Museum and York Museums Trust, supported by The Art Fund, National Heritage Memorial Fund, Wolfson Foundation, British Museum Friends and York Museums Trust. Halton Moor, Lancashire, AF.541–542 and OA.3393

Vikings in the east

Vikings journeyed east into the Baltic Sea region and along the rivers of Russia and Ukraine, following lucrative trade routes to Constantinople and beyond. The Viking-style oval brooch was found in Latvia, while the open ring brooches, found in Gotland, Sweden were popular throughout the Baltic region. Typically made from copper alloy, the silver example reflects the result of Vikings bringing back thousands of Islamic silver coins that were often melted down to make jewellery.

The three silver coins of King Sven Estridsen of Denmark (1047–1076) have similar designs to Byzantine imperial coins and were perhaps copied from examples brought back by Vikings returning from the east. The silver pendant is made from an Islamic 'dirham', minted in Afghanistan but found thousands of miles away in Gotland, Sweden. Its worn surface suggests it was a treasured possession.

AD 900s–1000s. Minted at Lund, Sweden, 1846,0313.4, 1890,0904.1 and 1906,1103.5141. Found in Gotland, Sweden, purchased with a contribution from The Art Fund, 1921,1101.370. AD 900s–1100s. Aizkraukle, Latvia, 1852,0329.158. Purchased with a contribution from The Art Fund, Västergarn, Gotland, Sweden, 1921,1101.190; Dalhem, Gotland, Sweden, 1921,1101.206

The Cuerdale Hoard

This is part of an enormous Viking silver hoard found in a lead chest beside the River Ribble at Cuerdale, Lancashire. Consisting of around 7500 coins and 1200 pieces of bullion, it is the largest Viking hoard known from Western Europe. Its contents, weighing about 40kg, were probably collected through trading, looting and tribute payments. Bone pins hint that the silver was parcelled up in cloth bags.

The coins date the hoard's burial to between AD 905 and 910. One theory is that it belonged to Vikings occupying Dublin who were expelled by Irish forces in AD 902, because the river Ribble, directly across the Irish Sea from Dublin, was a convenient place for fleeing Vikings to regroup. But while this explanation is enticing, it remains unproven.

Buried about AD 905–910. Cuerdale, Lancashire, part on loan from the Assheton Collection and donated by HM Queen Victoria via the Duchy of Lancaster, 1841,0711.1–741, 1873,1101.1 and 1954,0202.1–2

Contents of the Cuerdale Hoard

Like many Viking silver hoards, the Cuerdale Hoard contained a mixture of coins, ingots and hacksilver. Ingots are bars of silver, a portable way to store wealth. Hacksilver comprises cut-up objects like brooches, rings and other ornaments. Coins made up most of the hoard's contents. They came mainly from Viking-ruled parts of England, with some from the Continent and the distant Islamic world.

AD 800s–early AD 900s. Donated by HM Queen Victoria via the Duchy of Lancaster, 1841,0711.91. On loan from the Assheton Collection, 6, 120 and 149

Thor's hammer pendant

The hoard contained this small silver pendant shaped like the hammer of Thor, a popular Norse god. An amulet for protection or luck, it may have been buried with the hoard to place it under Thor's guardianship. However, marks on its surface show its silver purity had been tested, so perhaps it was seen as just another piece of bullion.

AD 800s–early AD 900s. On loan from the Assheton Collection, 107

The Viking World in one hoard

The Cuerdale Hoard's contents comes from many different regions, ranging from Ireland in the west to the distant Middle East and many places in between – Byzantine, Baltic and Slav lands, the Frankish realm and the Vikings' Scandinavian homelands. The Vikings' expansive network of contacts made it possible to bring so many different pieces together in one spot in north-western England.

Cut-up open ring and 'thistle' brooches, made in Ireland or the Irish Sea region

AD 800s–early AD 900s. On loan from the Assheton Collection, 147, 149a–b and 151

Fragment of a silver comb, possibly made in Pictish Scotland

AD 800s–early AD 900s. On loan from the Assheton Collection, 155

Strap-end and mount fragment with Anglo-Saxon-style animal decoration from England

AD 800s–early AD 900s. Donated by HM Queen Victoria via the Duchy of Lancaster, 1841,0711.456–457

Buckle loop, belt mount and brooch fragment, made in the Carolingian Frankish realm

AD 800s–early AD 900s. On loan from the Assheton Collection, 143 and 145–146

Plaited and plain arm-rings, one with a finger-ring added to increase its weight, probably from Scandinavia

AD 800s–early AD 900s. On loan from the Assheton Collection, 121. Donated by HM Queen Victoria via the Duchy of Lancaster 1841,0711.431

Cut-up neck-rings with distinctive decoration, made in the region of Perm, Russia

AD 800s–early AD 900s. On loan from the Assheton Collection, 129. Donated by HM Queen Victoria via the Duchy of Lancaster, 1841,0711.441 and 523

Cut-up Islamic 'dirham' coins, minted in Central Asia and the Middle East including present day Azerbaijan and Afghanistan

AD 870–890. Donated by HM Queen Victoria via the Duchy of Lancaster, 1838,0710.1438, 1442 and 1444

Anglo-Saxon stone cross-shaft

This fragment from the shaft of a large, free-standing stone cross is richly carved with Christian imagery. The swirling vines evoke the concept of Christ as the 'True Vine', while the archer shooting his arrow may symbolise the spread of God's 'Divine Word'. The raising of large stone crosses became popular in parts of Anglo-Saxon England. Typically placed outdoors, sometimes in churchyards, they acted as beacons of belief in the landscape, marking places where people could gather to hear Christian preaching.

Early AD 800s. Sheffield, Yorkshire, donated by Mrs John Walter Staniforth, 1924,1015.1

Anglo-Saxon England and the Continent AD 650–1100

This was a particularly turbulent time in Europe's history. England developed from a collection of kingdoms into a unified Anglo-Saxon state ruled by one king. On the Continent, the Frankish Merovingian kingdom was replaced by the mighty Carolingian and Ottonian Empires, who dominated through military conquests and Christian missions.

Strong connections between England and these continental empires sparked intense trade and commercial activity along the coasts and rivers, in towns which became important production centres. Churches and monasteries in both regions became powerful institutions where art and learning flourished.

In England, these impressive achievements occurred during a time of great disruption, first from Viking raids and settlement, and finally from the Normans, whose invasion in 1066 heralded the end of Anglo-Saxon England.

Image caption: Anglo-Saxon England and the Continent, early AD 800s

Image caption: Anglo-Saxon England and the Continent, AD 900s

Anglo-Saxon stone cross-head

This fragment of stone sculpture comes from the top of a tall, free-standing cross. Runes inscribed on the central panel read 'pray for Cynibalth, Cuthbert', revealing that it was a form of Christian memorial. This side is finely carved with knot motifs, interlace and an animal head, while deep holes in the cross-head show that it may have been set with metalwork, glass or even jewels. The other side is plainer, suggesting that the cross was intended to be viewed mainly from the front.

Late AD 700s. St. Mary's Church, Lancaster, donated by the Natural History Society of Manchester, 1868,1004.3

Kingdoms and crafts

During the AD 600s the many small kingdoms of early Anglo-Saxon England merged into several larger ones. After various struggles, both internally and against incoming Vikings, a unified Kingdom of England emerged in the AD 900s. Nobles held considerable regional authority and displayed their status through lavish jewellery and weapons. At the same time affordable, mass-produced items like dress accessories and homewares became more readily available in thriving towns and markets.

The Fuller Brooch, late AD 800s

This large Anglo-Saxon silver brooch is of extraordinary quality and perhaps belonged to a high-ranking church official, or even a noble from the court of King Alfred the Great (AD 871–899). The central part is decorated with five figures representing each of the human senses. Sight is in the centre with large bulging eyes, and is surrounded by Touch, Taste, Smell and Hearing, who can all be identified by their actions.

Donated by Captain Fuller, 1952,0404.1

Image caption: A graphic highlighting the five Senses on the Fuller Brooch

© British Museum

1. Dress pins

These gilded silver linked pins were worn as part of a high status woman's dress. The fine decoration of winged beasts and interlace is of the highest quality. The right-hand pin is in a different style and was probably a later repair, showing that this piece of jewellery was valued and cared for over time.

Late AD 700s. River Witham, Lincolnshire, donated by the Royal Archaeological Institute, 1858,1116.4

2. Silver brooches

These silver brooches were found together with two others, probably as part of a jeweller's hoard. They would have been the latest fashion in the early AD 800s and were most likely worn in pairs by high status women. Their exceptionally fine decoration is made up of plant motifs and pairs of interlaced beasts in striking open-work.

Early AD 800s. Pentney, Norfolk, 1980,1008.1–4

3. Decorated weapons

Opulent war-gear was prized by high status men. The iron blade is a seax, a prestigious single-edged weapon possibly used in hunting. It is inlaid with the runic alphabet ('futhorc') and the male name 'Beagnoth', probably its owner or maker. The fittings come from gilded silver sword hilts. The open-work pommel shows many strange beasts, while the hilt is covered with a pattern of swirling snakes.

Late AD 700s–900s. River Thames, London, 1857,0623.1. Fetter Lane, London, 1893,0715.1. River Seine, Paris, France, 1862,0728.1. Royal Oak Farm, Oxfordshire, purchased with a contribution from The Art Fund, 1994,0407.1

4. Gold finger-rings

Gold was reserved for prestige objects. The two large finger-rings bear the names of Wessex royalty – King Æthelwulf (AD 839–858) and his daughter Æthelswith, a queen of Mercia. The rings probably did not belong to them, but were gifts to loyal supporters. The other two finger-rings would also have been prized possessions. One is decorated with three linked triangles, a possible magical symbol, and the other with an image of Saint Matthew.

Mid AD 800s–1000s. Laverstock, Wiltshire, 1829,1114.1. Aberford, West Yorkshire, bequeathed by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks, AF.458. River Nene, Cambridgeshire, 1855,1115.1. Acquired with the support of The Art Fund and British Museum Friends, 2005,1001.1

5. Emergence of England, AD 757–975

These coins from left to right represent key players in the emergence of a unified Anglo-Saxon state under one king. Offa (AD 757–796) and Coenwulf (AD 796–821) were powerful kings of Mercia who extended their authority beyond their borders. Alfred the Great (AD 871–899), King of Wessex, styled himself as king of all Anglo-Saxons at a time when much of England was under Viking control.

His grandson Æthelstan (AD 924–939) became the first king of all England around AD 927 and is the first Anglo-Saxon king to appear crowned on his coinage. Edgar (AD 959–975) built upon the achievements of his predecessors, establishing political alliances and a national coinage.

BMC I, p. 26, no. 14. Biggleswade, Bedfordshire, acquired with the support of The Art Fund, the National Heritage Memorial Fund, British Museum Friends and individual donations, 2006,0204.1. Cuerdale, Lancashire, donated by HM Queen Victoria, 1838,0710.283. 1846,0915.21. 1956,1108.9

Pottery production

This pitcher for wine or ale was made at Stamford, Lincolnshire, which became a major centre for pottery production from the AD 800s. It was made using techniques new to Anglo-Saxon England, like wheel-throwing and glazing. The small cooking pot is an example of Pingsdorf ware, made in the Rhineland region of Germany. Both forms of vessel were traded over Britain and the near Continent.

1000s–1100s. Oxford, donated by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks, 1887,0307.B.200. Possibly Cologne, Germany, 1933,0114.1.CR

Coinage and international trade

As the scale of trade and commerce grew in Anglo-Saxon England, coins became an increasingly important form of currency. Small silver coins like these, known as pennies (or 'sceattas'), were used widely in trade across the North Sea between AD 675–750s. Different versions of these coins were made in the trading ports of northwest Europe, such as London and Southampton in England, Ribe in Denmark and Dorestad in the Netherlands.

AD 700s. Minted in London, found in Southampton, 1838,0908.82. Minted in London, found in Barham, Suffolk, 1983,1024.1. Minted in London, 1988,0909.1. Keary.195. Minted in England, 1932,0516.46. 1935.1117.240. Keary.33, 67, 145 and 148

Metalworking

Anglo-Saxon craft workers used items like these to produce metal jewellery and other artefacts. This bone was used to practice Anglo-Saxon designs that were popular in the AD 800s. Metals were melted in the small pottery crucible and the molten liquid poured into moulds. The silver hooked tag and gilded silver rectangular mount show the finished article.

AD 700s–1000s. York Castle, York, donated by L. R. A. Grove, 1940,0202.1. Moorgate Street, London, 1856,0701.1602. Surlingham, Norfolk, 2003,0904.1. Charminster, Dorset, 2009,8029.1

Dress accessories

From the AD 900s, towns like London and York began to produce standardised dress accessories in large numbers. Made from base-metals like lead alloy, they were affordable to wider sections of Anglo-Saxon society. These brooches and strap-fitting show some of the popular motifs, like backward biting beasts, crosses that may have held a Christian meaning, and fleshy foliage which drew on Carolingian art from the Continent.

AD 900s–1000s. Castle Acre Priory, Norfolk, donated by E. M. Beloe, 1908,1005.1. Swaffham, Norfolk, donated by Plowright, 1854,0721.1. 1989,0302.2

Woodworking

These iron tools formed part of an Anglo-Saxon woodworker's toolkit. The T-shaped axe was used to fell and chop trees, while the smaller curved adze was for smoothing and shaping wood. The long spoon-like auger could be used like a drill to bore holes. These tools were found together in a hoard which also contained several long blades, perhaps scythes for cutting crops or saws for cutting wood.

AD 800s–1000s. Hurbuck, County Durham, 1912,0723.9, 11 and 8

Whalebone chess pieces

Much of the material culture that survives from Anglo-Saxon England is made of metal, but these objects show that the Anglo-Saxons also created remarkable objects in perishable organic materials. They are whalebone gaming pieces, made for playing chess-like board games. The small pawn has similarities with the famous Lewis Chessmen (Room 40), while the largest piece is decorated with two animal heads on the top, and knot motifs on the back.

AD 900s–1000s. Witchampton Manor, Dorset, donated by Mrs McGeagh, 1927,0404.1, 2 and 4

The Church and monasteries

Christianity became firmly established in later Anglo-Saxon England and brought about many cultural and artistic changes. The Church and monasteries were patronised by kings and wealthy individuals and became extremely powerful and influential institutions. They were also centres of craft, producing outstanding objects and decorated manuscripts. Christianity stimulated the spread of literacy, while Christian imagery became a strong influence upon Anglo-Saxon art.

Anglo-Saxon crozier head, 1000s

Croziers were long staffs carried by senior church officials, and were symbols of authority and status within the Anglo-Saxon church. They often had hooked heads, but this example, made from walrus ivory, is called a 'tau' crozier because its shape resembles the Greek letter 'T'. Christ's Crucifixion is carved on one side, while on the other the risen Christ tramples a lion and dragon, representing sin and death. These exquisite carvings were originally embellished with gold foil and gems.

Donated by the Friends of the British Museum, with a contribution from The Art Fund, 1903,0323.1

Image caption: Two haloed figures holding tau croziers, from an Anglo-Saxon illuminated manuscript, around 1050

© Durham Cathedral Library MS B. 111. 32, Fol. 56v

1. Christian practices

Christianity brought changes to religious practices in Anglo-Saxon England. This gravestone from a monastery represents a new way of commemorating the dead. It is inscribed with a man's name and a Christian cross. The exact use of the tower-shaped ornament is unknown, but it may have been a censer-cover used when burning incense in Christian rituals, or a fitting from a piece of grand church furniture.

AD 700s–mid AD 900s. Hartlepool, County Durham, 1880,0313.4. Canterbury, Kent, 1927,1116.1

2. The Trewhiddle Hoard

These objects come from a silver hoard found at Trewhiddle, Cornwall that contained coins, dress accessories and religious items. The chalice, gilded inside, was probably used in church services, while the scourge (whip) may have had a ceremonial function. Both are unique survivals from Anglo-Saxon England. The other items, including strap-ends and mounts, are decorated with distinctive lively animal decoration known as the 'Trewhiddle Style', after this hoard.

Buried about AD 868. Trewhiddle, Cornwall, donated by John Jope Rogers, 1880,0410.1–6, 9–10, 13 and 19

Image caption: An Anglo-Saxon silver strap-end, decorated with a typical Trewhiddle Style creature, mid AD 900s

In the Whitby Museum, Yorkshire

3. Literacy

Christianity stimulated literacy in England, leading to the production of texts and religious books. The whalebone tablet had a wax layer for writing on with a stylus (pointed tool). The seal authenticated documents, while the gold fitting was probably attached to a pointer that helped readers follow words in manuscripts. Writing was mostly in Latin letters, but the old runic alphabet lingered, as seen on the finger-ring.

AD 600s–1000s. Blythburgh, Suffolk, donated by John Seymour Lucas, 1902,0315.1. Marne, France, ML.3738. Wallingford, Oxfordshire, donated by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks, 1881,0404.1. Bowleaze Cove, Dorset, 1993,0102.1. Carlisle, Cumbria, donated by George Hamilton Gordon, 4th Earl of Aberdeen, OA.10262

4. Christian imagery

Christian imagery grew popular in Anglo-Saxon art as the faith developed. Holy figures, sacred motifs and scenes from Christ's life were typical themes. The ivory plaques show Christ in Majesty, his Baptism and Crucifixion, while the gold and silver plaques depict haloed saints. A Latin inscription on the gold one identifies the eagle-headed figure as Saint John the Evangelist, whose symbol was an eagle.

The tiny disc inlaid with jewel-like enamel shows the Hand of God, a significant Christian motif. The plaques and disc perhaps decorated book covers or reliquaries, while the pendant shaped like the Christian cross was a piece of personal jewellery.

AD 900s–1000s. Purchased with a contribution from The Art Fund and Pilgrim Trust, 1974,1002.1. Lewes Priory, East Sussex, 1887,1025.14. 1991,0401.1. Brandon, Suffolk, 1978,1101.1. Hexham, Northumberland, donated by Reverend Frederick George Lee, 1858,0814.1. Possibly Hampshire, 2007,8049.1. Gravesend, Kent, 1839,0319.1

Anglo-Saxon England and the Continent

After AD 800 the Frankish Carolingian Empire dominated much of Europe under the powerful Emperor Charlemagne (AD 768–814). The empire grew wealthy and the arts experienced a renaissance, while neighbouring Anglo-Saxon England absorbed many aspects of Carolingian culture. After the empire was broken up, a new power emerged under Emperor Otto I (AD 936–973). He founded a dynasty of rulers known as the Ottonians, who controlled much of central and southern Europe until the mid 1000s.

The Lothair Crystal, AD 855–869

This engraved rock crystal was probably made for the Carolingian King Lothair II (AD 855–869) and is an example of the spectacular wealth and art of the Carolingian Empire. Its engravings tell the Biblical story of Susanna and the Elders, in which Susanna is accused of adultery before being found innocent by the prophet Daniel. Rock crystal was a very hard material that required great skill to work, making this object even more remarkable.

Possibly River Meuse, Belgium, 1855,1201.5.
The copper-gilt mount was added in the 1400s

Image caption: Left: Coin of Charlemagne, Carolingian emperor, AD 800–814. Right: Coin of Otto I, Ottonian emperor, AD 936–973

AD 768–973. Minted in France, donated by King George IV, G3,FrGC.10. Minted in Cologne, Germany, bequeathed by T. B. Clarke-Thornhill, 1935,0401.15466

Carolingian rock crystal

This large rock crystal is associated with the Court School of the Carolingian ruler Charles the Bald (AD 840–877). He may have commissioned it as a gift for St-Denis abbey in France. The crystal was made with incredible skill. Engraved on the back is the Crucifixion of Christ, which appears magnified from the front due to the crystal's domed shape. The metal frame and chain are modern additions.

Around AD 846–869. Abbey of St-Denis, France, 1855,0305.1

Carolingian pyx

This gilded silver cup or pyx is the most elaborate of its kind. Others have been found in Viking hoards in England (displayed in this room), but this one retains its original lid. Typically for Carolingian art, the pyx's rich decoration draws on classical Roman and Christian imagery. Acanthus foliage was a popular Roman motif, while the birds eating fruit refer to the Biblical story of Christ as the True Vine. The pyx was perhaps used for Holy Communion.

Around AD 850. Spain, bequeathed by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks, AF.3041

Carolingian ivories

Charlemagne promoted an interest in the classical Roman past, associating his expanding realm with this imperial power. These ivories reflect the resulting artistic influences. The small panel depicts the Miracle at Cana, where Christ turned water into wine. The style of its buildings echoes those in earlier Roman art. The large panel, showing Christ's Baptism and Nativity, is bordered with Roman-inspired acanthus foliage.

The pyxis (round box), portraying the Healing of the possessed Demoniac, was perhaps based on an Early Christian model from the eastern Mediterranean, where the subject was popular.

AD 800–900. Probably found in Germany, 1856,0623.20. Probably made at Aachen, Germany, 1903,0514.1. Possibly from the Cotton Library, Tournai School, attributed at Trier, Germany, OA.3065

Religious devotion

Religious devotion was often expressed on personal jewellery, like the two enamelled disc brooches depicting the Lamb of God (Agnus Dei) and an unidentified saint. The long brooch is decorated with three crosses. The arms of the cross-shaped brooch feature Anglo-Carolingian style animals, while the centre is set with an Islamic black glass gem with an Arabic inscription. It may have been viewed as an amulet.

Late AD 700s–early AD 800s. Given by K. J. Hewett, 1956,1101.1. Thetford area, Norfolk, England, made in Germany, 1989,0111.1. 1990,1007.1. Near Ballycotton, Ireland, 1875,1211.1

Carolingian influence in Anglo-Saxon England

The style demonstrated by these five Carolingian pieces strongly influenced Anglo-Saxon art in England in the AD 900s. The plant and foliage motifs decorating the two strap-ends and rectangular mounts from a sword- or horse-harness are typical of Carolingian art. The two oval-shaped mounts illustrate this stylistic influence. They are Anglo-Saxon, but decorated with animal, plant and bird motifs that are Carolingian in flavour.

AD 700s–900s. 1991,1002.1. Wareham, Dorset, given by D. Isaacs, 2007,8022.1. Tollerton, North Yorkshire, 2007,8024.1. Suffolk, 2009,8019.1. Old Romney, Kent, 2007,8009.1. Brabourne, Kent, 2007,8013.1

Ottonian ivory and brooches

Ottonian art was notable for its luxury and exquisite skill. The ivory panel, from a church altar or pulpit, may have been backed by gold that would have glinted through the open-work design. The five opulent brooches are enriched with pearls, gems, filigree (beaded wire) and cloisonné enamel set into gold cells. The oval-shaped brooch is inlaid with a cameo inscribed in Greek, wishing luck to the wearer.

AD 900s–1000s. Magdeburg Cathedral, Germany, attributed at Milan, Italy, 1856,0623.25. Near Dowgate Hill, London, 1856,0701.1461. Possibly from Italy, 1872,0604.761. Bequeathed by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks, AF.352. Charles Townley collection, 1814, OA.4821. Italy, 1887,0513.1

The Norman Conquest and the end of Anglo-Saxon England

The first two coins show the last Anglo-Saxon kings of England, Edward the Confessor (1042–1066) and Harold II (1066). The last coin depicts the first Norman King of England, William the Conqueror (1066–1087). William, a duke from Normandy (north-west France), invaded England and defeated Harold II at the Battle of Hastings in 1066. This event traditionally marks the end of the Anglo-Saxon period in England.

AD 1042–1087. Minted by Leofwold of Winchester, 1851,0313.2. BMC II, p. 473, no. 114. 1851,0313.111

The Franks Casket

This spectacular whalebone casket was probably made in the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Northumbria. Modelled on early Christian caskets, it was most likely created in a monastery for a significant – perhaps royal – patron. The casket's imagery, accompanied by runic and Latin inscriptions, comes from an array of sources including Germanic and Roman legends, the Bible, and historical events. Made at a time when Christianity had not long been established in Anglo-Saxon England, its carvings reflect a wish to convey Christian messages by relating them to the remembered pagan past.

Germanic and Christian tales

The left half of this panel refers to the Germanic tale of Weland, a smith who was imprisoned and made lame by a legendary king. Weland took revenge by killing the king's sons and turning their skulls into drinking cups. Here Weland stands in his forge, holding a skull in his tongs. The right half of the panel tells the Christian story of the three Magi, who bring gold, frankincense and myrrh to the newborn Jesus. A runic riddle around the panel's edges refers to the whalebone used to make the casket.

Around AD 700. Found in Auzon, France, donated by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks, 1867,0120.1

A lost Germanic legend

This replica panel refers to a lost Germanic legend about a figure called Hos who, the runic inscription relates, is made to suffer by Ertae. Its mysterious imagery includes cloaked figures (right), a horse bending over a burial mound containing human remains (centre), and a warrior confronting a strange, human-like creature with wings and a horse's head (left). While these images and their meaning are a mystery today, they would have been familiar to the Anglo-Saxons.

Replica: the original panel is in the Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence, Italy

Image caption: Artist's impression of how the Franks Casket may have looked originally

© British Museum

Egil – a lost Germanic hero

This surviving panel from the lid of the casket depicts heavily-armed warriors attacking a building. A lone archer defends it, raining arrows down upon the attackers. A runic inscription above his head reads 'Ægili', identifying him as Egil, a renowned archer in Germanic legend and brother of Weland the Smith. This panel illustrates a now-lost episode from his tale. The plain disc in the centre of the panel once carried a fitting for a handle or hasp.

Around AD 700. Found in Auzon, France, donated by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks, 1867,0120.1

The capture of Jerusalem

The casket's rear panel depicts the capture of Jerusalem in AD 70 by the future Roman emperor, Titus. Wearing a helmet (upper left), he leads the destruction of the arched Jewish temple (centre). The Ark of the Covenant, surrounded by sacred creatures, sits inside the temple. Meanwhile, Jews can be seen fleeing the city (upper right). The lower part of the panel shows scenes of judgement (left) and hostage-taking (right). The surrounding inscription describes these scenes in Old English and Latin, using runic and Latin letters.

A famous Roman legend

This panel depicts a scene from the Roman legend of twin brothers Romulus and Remus. Abandoned as children, they were rescued and suckled by a she-wolf (centre). Another wolf, perhaps her mate, licks their feet, while men with spears rush in from both sides to capture or save the twins. Runes around the edges describe the scene. According to the legend, Romulus eventually murdered his brother and founded the city of Rome.

Around AD 700. Found in Auzon, France, donated by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks, 1867,0120.1

Image caption: An Anglo-Saxon bone plaque also depicting Romulus and Remus with the she-wolf, from Larling, Norfolk, AD 700s

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