Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

SAXON CHIEF & LADY H2

The Anglo-Saxon age covers a very long period from about AD 450 to AD 1100. Fashions changed over that period, but the basic garment for both men and women was the tunic - just as it had been for the Romans. In its simplest form a tunic is a rectangle of cloth folded over, with slits left for head and arms, which was belted around the waist. In the later Roman period sleeves were added to this basic garment. The Anglo-Saxons, too, wore long sleeved tunics.

Few items of clothing have survived from the Anglo-Saxon period, but it is possible to find out what people wore from manuscript illustrations and from special objects like the Bayeux tapestry. The Museum of Reading has a copy of the Bayeux tapestry on display and the photographs used here are from this source.

The models in this box represent a man and a woman from the upper class of Anglo-Saxon society.

Saxon Chief

The picture below shows a scene from the Bayeux tapestry in which Earl Harold (later King Harold) is introduced to William the Duke of Normandy. William is seated, while Harold is standing to his right.

The main difference between William and Harold is not in their clothes, but in their hairstyles. The hair of Norman men was cropped short - in fact they are always shown in the tapestry with the back of their heads shaved bare. The English are shown with fuller hair and, often, a large moustache. The model in this box reflects this fashion for long hair in England.



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The model is dressed in a tunic, cloak, trousers and leather shoes. The features correspond with the aristocratic clothing illustrated in the tapestry. The belted tunic reaches to just above the knee and is decorated with tablet woven borders. Tablet weaving was common among the Anglo Saxons. It involved the use of a small wooden board to produce long decorative bands for clothing. The trousers are bound with fabric (called winninga) that was laced up the calf. These winningas can be clearly seen on both Duke William and the guard standing behind Harold. Some trousers had feet sewn in. It is often difficult to tell which kind are being worn in the tapestry, but clearly men seldom went about with bare legs. Shoes were mostly ankle high and of simple construction. Finally, there is a cloak pinned with an expensive brooch at the right shoulder. It is clear from the tapestry that cloaks were only worn by rich and important individuals.

Apart from the helmets on warriors about to go into battle, men in the tapestry never seem to be shown wearing a hat. It is possible that some of the Norman bowmen and a few other figures are wearing a hat, but their headgear could equally well be a helmet. However, manuscript illustrations do show men wearing similar headgear to that on the model, a kind of Phrygian cap. There is dispute as to whether these caps were actual pieces of headgear or whether they used artists to denote high social status. Phrygian caps, in Roman times, denoted free status



Earl Harold and other Anglo-Saxon aristocrats, all dressed in fine cloaks, hunting with hawks and hounds.

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Anglo Saxon Lady



Only three women are shown in the main section of the Bayeux tapestry. One of these women is named as Aelfgyva, but it is unclear who she is or why she is shown at all. King Edward's wife is shown at the deathbed of her husband. Finally an unnamed English lady is shown running away as the Normans burn down her house.

The model wears clothing similar to that shown on these figures in that very little of her body is exposed only her hands and face. Clearly Anglo Saxon women were expected to be well covered up. However, she is wearing both an under- and an over-skirt and her sleeves are not as wide at the wrist as those shown in the tapestry. Sleeves got longer and more elaborate towards the end of the Anglo-Saxon period, so the style of the model's clothing is of a slightly earlier time than that of the tapestry.

The model's under-dress is plainly coloured. Over that she wears a shorter tunic-style dress. Like the tunic of the Anglo-Saxon chief it is decorated with elaborate and colourful tablet woven borders. Cyrtel seems to be the Anglo-Saxon word most often used for the outer gown. Thrown over that is a cape for outdoor use. Finally, her head is covered with a simple length of white cloth. The women in the tapestry are shown with more elaborately tailored mantles. Whatever the case, Christian Anglo-Saxon women, unlike their pagan ancestors, covered their heads both indoors and out.



Two of the three women shown in the Bayeux Tapestry. Top: the mysterious Aelfgyva. Below: an unnamed English woman flees as the Normans burn down