Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

SAXON PEASANTS H3

The Anglo-Saxon age covers a very long time - 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.

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 lower class of Anglo-Saxon society. The Bayeux tapestry concentrates on the activities of the rich and powerful, but poorer people appear too, which makes it possible to get some idea of their dress.

Peasant Man

The main difference between English and Norman was not in their clothes, but in their hairstyles. The hair of Norman knights was cropped short - in fact they are always shown in the tapestry with the back of their heads shaved bare. King Edward is shown with a shaggy beard, but English warriors are more often shown with fuller hair and a large moustache. Even among the poorer men, both English and Norman, beards seem a minority taste. However, they can occasionally be seen. The illustration shows two Norman carpenters at work on a ship, one of whom has a shaggy beard.



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The model is dressed in a tunic and hood. The tunic hangs to just above his knee. His legs are bare and he has no shoes. Tunics like this are worn by every male figure in the tapestry. Richer men wear ones that have coloured bands around the neck and a lower hem. They also often wear cloaks, which are pinned at the right shoulder with an expensive brooch. Poorer figures simply wear a tunic.

The model is shown wearing a hood. No one in the tapestry is shown wearing such a garment. They seem to have been introduced in the twelfth century. In fact, apart from helmets and occasionally a hat, most men in the tapestry are shown bareheaded.

The model's bare legs are also rather unusual. Most figures, even clearly poor men, are shown wearing either trousers or stockings and none are shown without shoes. The bearded carpenter on the previous page, for example, seems to be bare legged, but even he has a pair of shoes. Sometimes it is difficult to tell whether the figures have trousers or not. The illustration below shows Anglo-Saxon men fleeing from the battlefield. They clearly are not elite warriors, because they have neither chain mail nor swords - each of them holds a kind of club, maybe simply rocks tied onto a stick. One of them may be bare legged, but most have leggings of some form. (Note, too, that at least one of them has a beard). The bare-legged and shoeless model clearly belongs to the lowest level of Anglo-Saxon society!



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Peasant Woman



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. However, all of these women seem to belong to higher levels of society than the woman represented by the model.

The model does, however, wear clothing similar to that shown on these figures in that very little of her body is exposed - only her hands and face. Anglo Saxon women were expected to be well covered up.



The model is wearing a plain coloured tunic-dress, a simple cloak, a hood and shoes. *Cyrtel* seems to be the Anglo-Saxon word most often used for the tunic-dress that she is wearing. Thrown over that is a cloak for outdoor use. Finally, her head is covered with a red hood. The hoods worn by women in the tapestry seem to be looser, but follow the same basic design. Christian Anglo-Saxon women, unlike their pagan ancestors, covered their heads both indoors and out.

The clothes on both models are predominantly grey, as if their tunics were undyed, but it is difficult to know if this would have been normal. One scholar has written: 'It would perhaps be a mistake to think that the average farm worker was awash in dull brown, grey, or even undyed wool. As most dyestuff was readily available for the picking, there is no reason to suppose the milk-maid's gown was any less brightly-coloured than her mistress's everyday dress.' Few examples of cloth have survived from the period, especially from peasant clothing. The evidence from the Bayeux tapestry suggests that a variety of red, yellow and green tunics were worn by men from well below the aristocratic class.



Images from the Bayeux tapestry. Top: the mysterious Aelfgyva. Below: a woman flees from her burning house.