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Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

SAXON PEASANTS H3A

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.

Saxon Man

The model is dressed in a tunic and short cloak. The tunic hangs to just above his knee. His legs are bare and he has no shoes. Tunics similar to this are worn by every male figure in the tapestry, although they all have full-length sleeves. The short cloak is unusual. In the tapestry only rich, upper-class men wear cloaks, which are pinned at the right shoulder with an expensive brooch. Poorer figures generally wear a simple tunic.

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The model's leggings and bare feet are also rather unusual. Most figures, even poor men, are shown in the Bayeux tapestry wearing either full-length trousers or stockings and none are shown without shoes. The illustration below shows Anglo-Saxon men fleeing from the battlefield. They are clearly not elite warriors, because they do not have chain mail or swords. They are shown holding a kind of club. One of them may be bare legged, but most have leggings of some form. The half-leggings and shoeless feet of the model suggests that he belongs to the very lowest level of Anglo-Saxon society!

The clothes on the male model are predominantly grey, as if his tunic was 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.



Saxon 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 these women belong to higher levels of society than the woman represented by the model.

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The model wears clothing similar to that shown on these figures although she is exposing more skin than a well-brought up lady would have considered appropriate. Anglo Saxon women were expected to be well covered up.



Left: An English woman flees as the Normans burn down her house

The model is wearing a dull green tunic-dress, with a simple cloth pinned to form a hood and no shoes. *Cyrtel* seems to be the Anglo-Saxon word most often used for the tunic-dress that she is wearing. The hoods worn by the women in the tapestry are more fully tailored and cover more of their head than that worn by the model. Presumably this woman could not afford such a grand item of headgear. Nevertheless all Christian Anglo-Saxon women, unlike their pagan ancestors, covered their heads both indoors and out.



Left: Aelfgyfa, one of the three women shown in the Bayeux tapestry