Anglo-Saxon

Teesside

Anglo-Saxon name-stone from Church Close, Hartlepool.

Front cover: An Anglo-Saxon Brooch from Norton.

Anglo-Saxon Teesside

Contents

1   Who were the Saxons?

The Anglo-Saxons invaded Britain from Germanic Europe in the 5th century AD. Britain was part of the Roman Empire at this time.
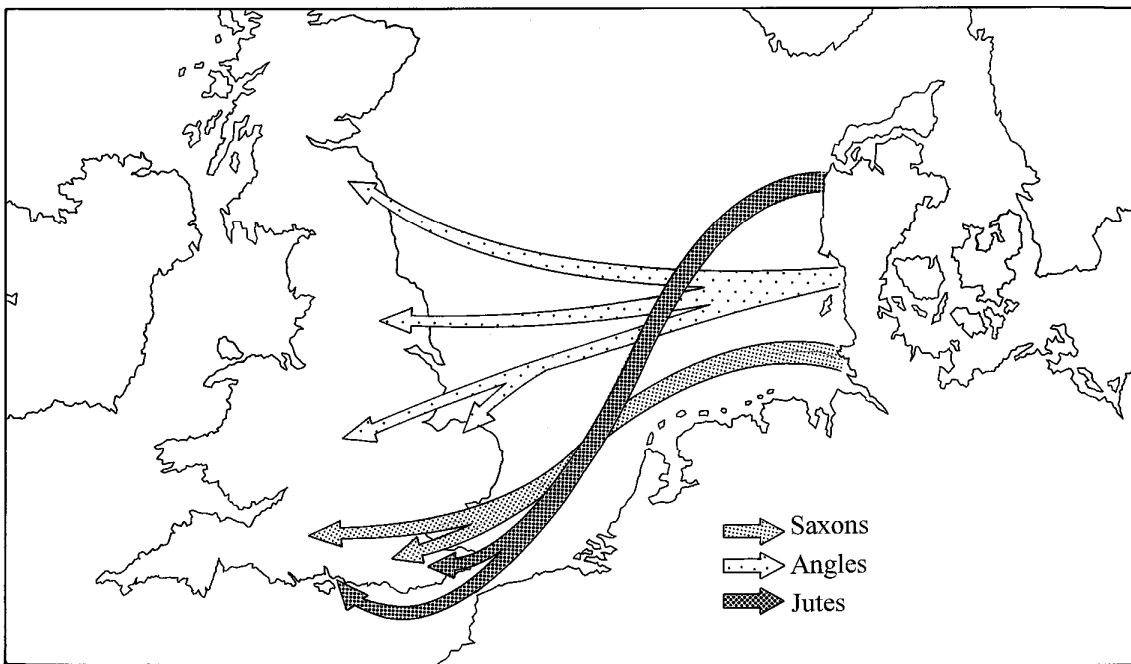
The Germanic invasion of Britain

The Venerable Bede who wrote the first history of England in the 8th century tells us that these Germanic invaders were 'Angles', 'Saxons' and 'Jutes'. The Jutes settled in the south-east, in Kent and the Isle of Wight. The Saxons mostly in the midlands with the Angles heading up the north-east coast to areas such as Teesside.

The Romans erected defences against the Anglo-Saxon raiders. They built Signal Stations along the south and east coast to warn against attacks.

There was a signal station at Saltburn. It was one of a line on the Yorkshire coast with others at Goldsborough, Ravenscar, Scarborough and Filey.
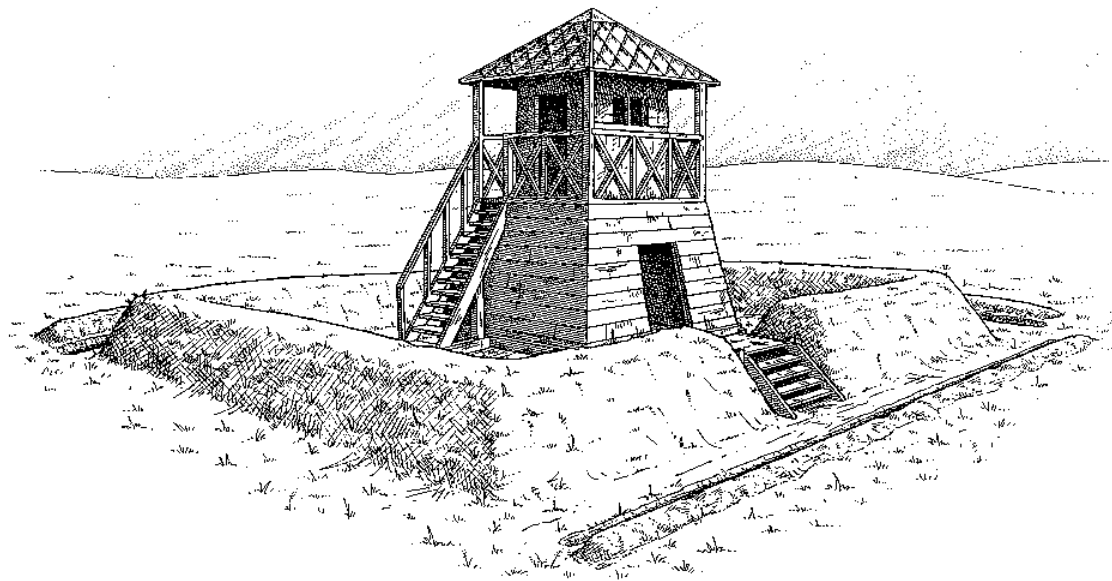
A Roman Signal Station

Unfortunately the signal station at Saltburn has disappeared as the cliff on which it stands has eroded away. Luckily part of the site was excavated in 1910 before it completely vanished.

Amongst the finds was a stone well that included the remains of 14 people who may have died defending the site against invasion. The bones included men and women and both the young and old.

After 400 AD the Romans left Britain and the Anglo-Saxons began to raid and settle in greater numbers.

2 Settlements

Most Anglo-Saxons lived in small communities or isolated farms. There were few towns of any size.

A Saxon 'village' consisted of several single-roomed buildings. These were grouped together around a large hall or meeting house where the family would have lived, eaten and slept.
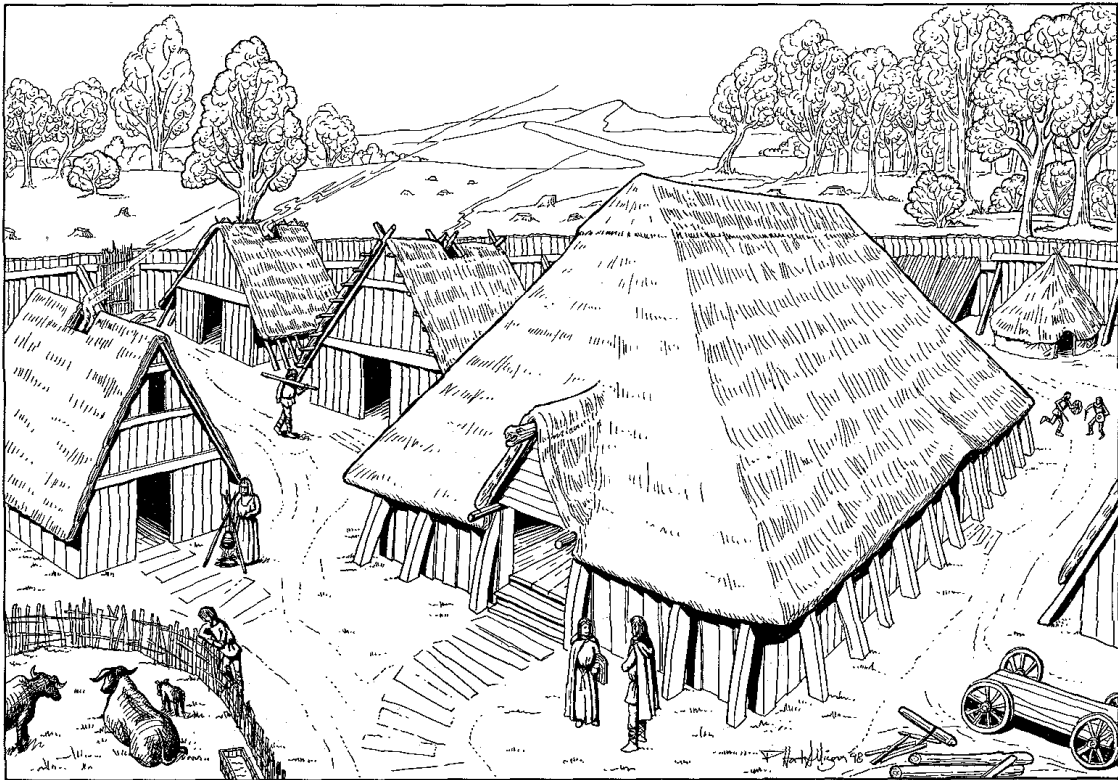
An Anglo-Saxon settlement

Buildings would have been timber-framed, probably infilled with wattle panels daubed with clay to make them weatherproof.

Anglo-Saxon settlement sites are hard to find as very little survives. Archaeological excavation can detect the differently

coloured soil fills of post-holes and trenches left by rectangular buildings and fenced enclosures.
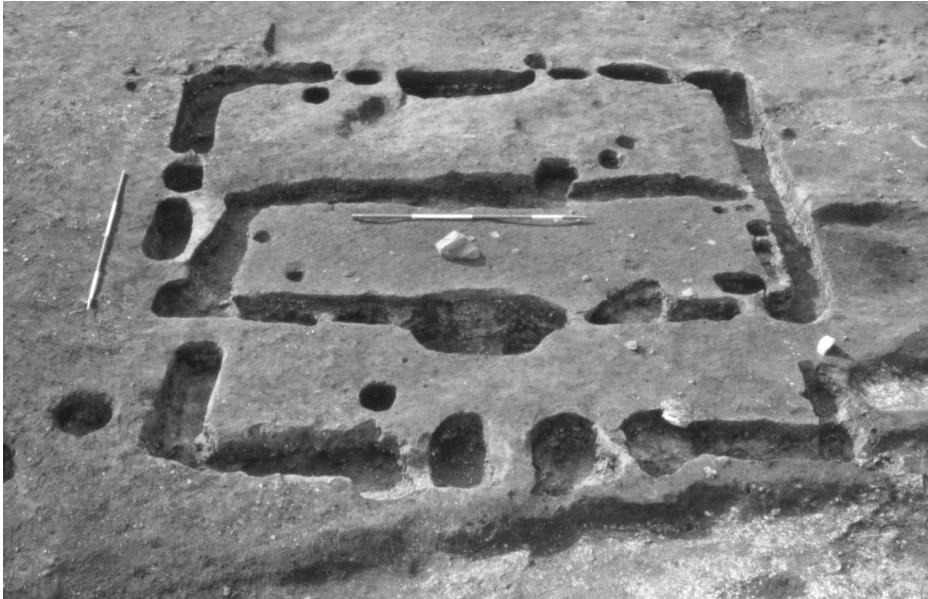
An excavated building at Hartlepool

Excavations at Hartlepool recovered the plans of 16 Anglo-Saxon buildings. These were all quite small measuring on average 3.5m x 4.5 metres. The houses would have been 2 metres high with thatched roofs.

Place names

Saxon settlements can be detected by place-names. Anglo-Saxon names traditionally end in the letters 'ton' as in Mar<u>ton</u>, 'ham' as in New<u>ham</u> or 'ley' as in Hun<u>ley</u>.

Other Anglo-Saxon names are descriptive and describe the appearance of a settlement. Examples are Acklam which means 'place of oaks', Yarm which may refer to a 'salmon fishery' and Redmarshall which means 'reed marsh'.

Later Viking place names end in the letters 'by' as in Ingle<u>by</u> and 'thorpe' as in Pinchin<u>thorpe</u>.

Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian place names

3 Cemeteries

The Anglo-Saxons buried their dead in cemeteries. Cemeteries have been excavated at Saltburn and Norton. Elsewhere, such as at Maltby and Brierton, individual burials have been found.
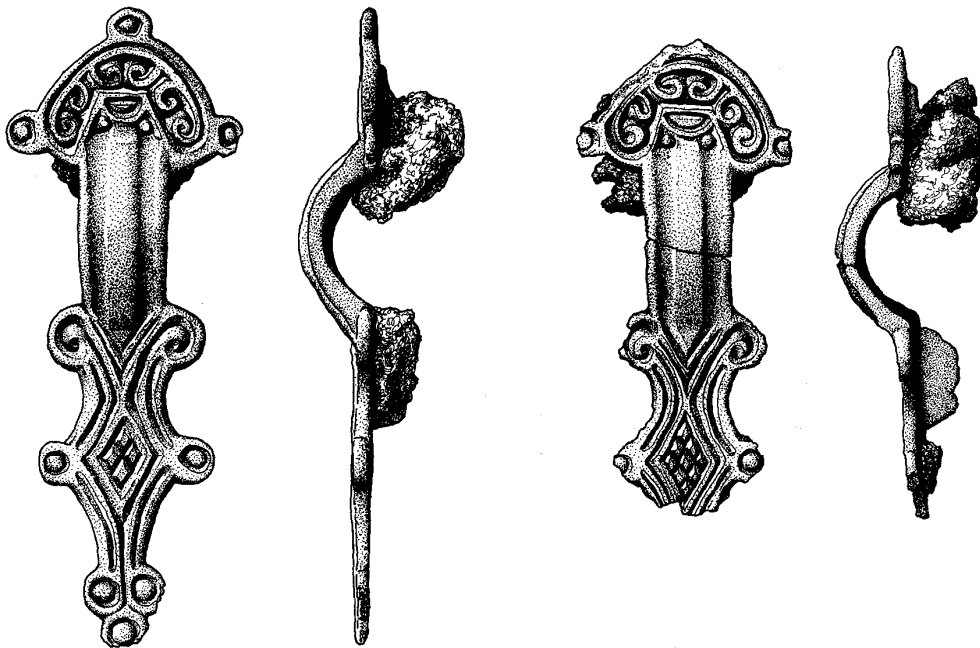
Saxon grave goods from Maltby (front and side views)

Saxon burials are often easy to identify because the dead were buried with personal possessions including jewellery and weapons. As Pagans the Anglo-Saxons believed these objects might have been useful in the afterlife.

The excavation of cemeteries tells us a great deal about the lives of the Anglo-Saxons. We can begin to reconstruct their dress and appearance, learn about their technologies, religion, and way of life.

Hob Hill, Saltburn

The earliest evidence of Anglo-Saxons in the Tees area was found at Hob Hill, near Saltburn. The cemetery was discovered in 1909 by miners quarrying for ironstone.

William Hornsby, a local man, found that the cemetery contained 48 burials. Much of the material was recorded and collected as the workmen uncovered it.

Finds from Hob Hill, Saltburn

The finds from the cemetery include bead necklaces, pottery vessels, brooches, a spearhead and a throwing axe. Many of the burials at Hob Hill were cremations placed in urns.

Mill Lane, Norton

In 1982 an Anglo-Saxon burial was discovered at Norton. The burial was found accidentally by children who had hung a rope-swing from a tree on the embankment above Mill Lane. As the children swung on the rope their feet constantly scuffed the ground creating a hollow which revealed a shallow grave.

The grave was that of a young woman aged between 25 and 35 years old. The woman's personal possessions were buried with her and included a brooch and glass and amber beads. These finds date to the 5th and 6th centuries AD.

Archaeological excavation revealed that the burial was part of a much larger cemetery. The cemetery was excavated over a period of two years and contained 120 burials.

Male and female burials were roughly equal in number at the cemetery. People originally thought that the cemetery might represent a war grave. If this were the case we would expect more male burials than females. The equal numbers suggests that the cemetery served a normal population.

The cemetery was situated in an area marked out by ditches. The ditches were actually Roman field boundaries that the Norton Saxons later used to define their cemetery.

The graves were laid out in rows aligned north to south. This is typical of Pagan burial sites whereas Christian burials are aligned east to west.
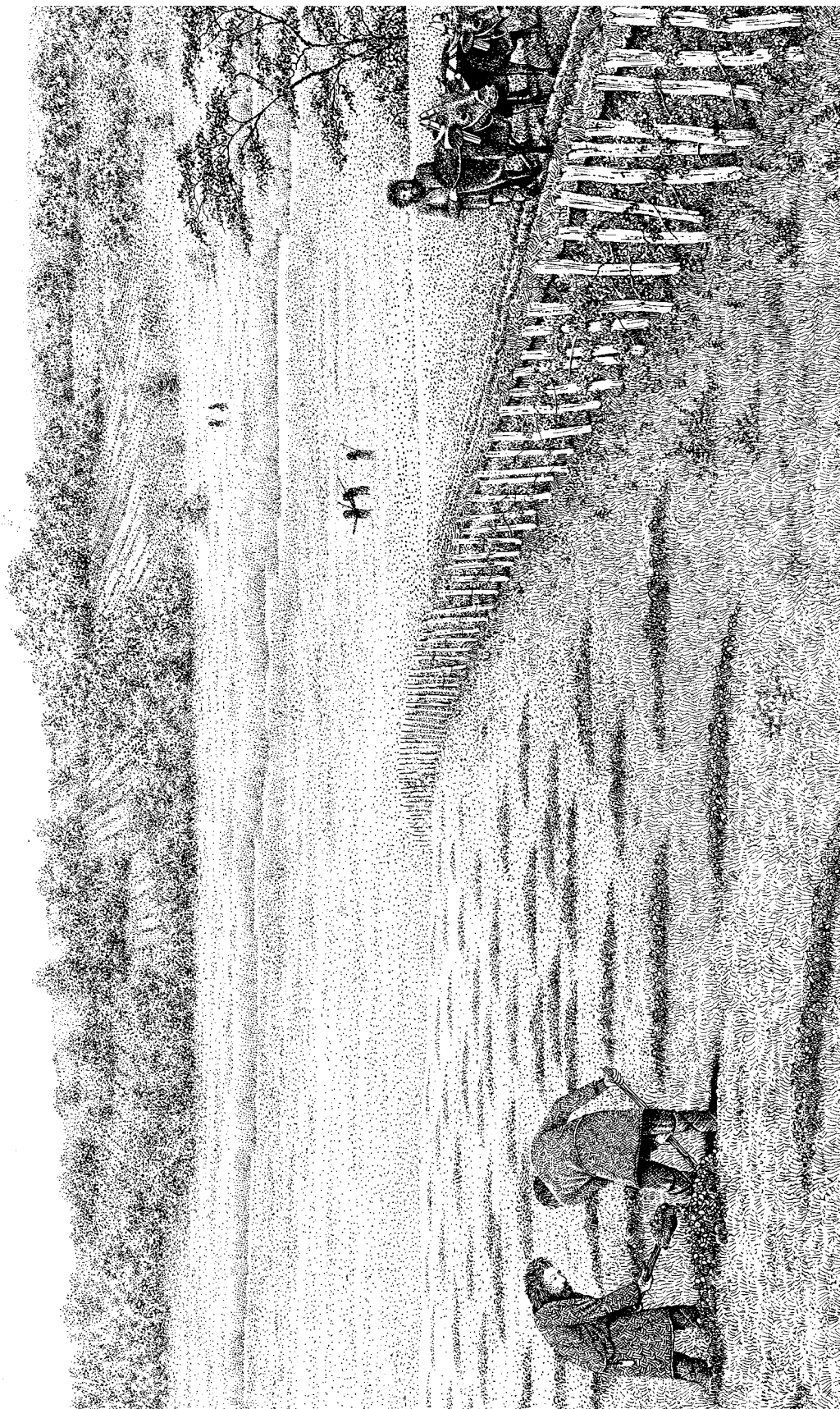
Reconstruction of Norton cemetery

There were four main types of burial at the Norton cemetery: -

1   Extended burial -

This was the most common type of burial. The bodies were placed in the grave, stretched out and lying on their backs.
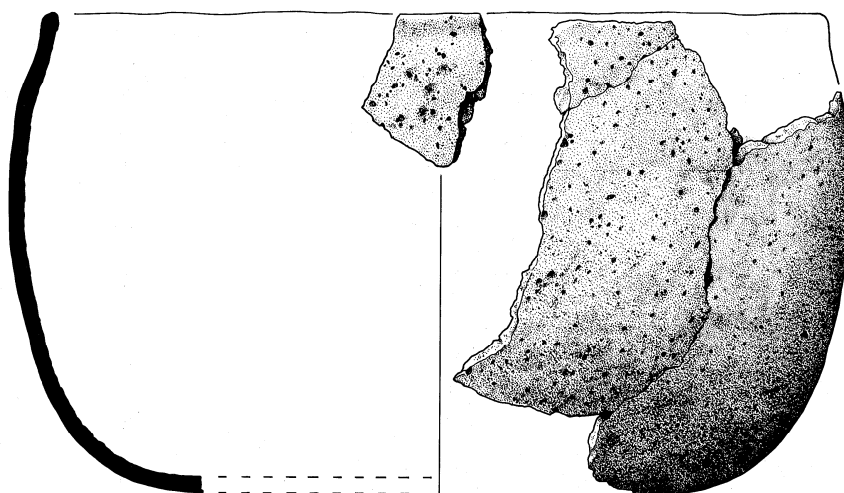
2   Crouched burial -

This type of burial was less common with the people placed on their sides as if they were asleep.

3   Prone burials - These facedown burials are very interesting. The bodies were thrown headfirst in to the grave with their hands and feet tied together. These people may have been buried alive as a punishment for cowardice or witchcraft.

4   Cremated burials - Cremations were rare at the site. The cremated remains were all placed in small urns. One of the urns had been placed in a pit on top of some animal bones. It contained the remains of two people, an adult and a teenager.

4 Men

The Saxons were buried with their clothing and personal possessions. Men were commonly buried with their weapons including shields and spears.

Warrior burial

The man above was buried at Norton with a wide range of artifacts including a shield, a seax (sword) and a spearhead.

A Saxon shield was a small defensive weapon used to deflect an opponents attack. The shields were made of wood and covered in leather with a central iron fitting known as a boss.
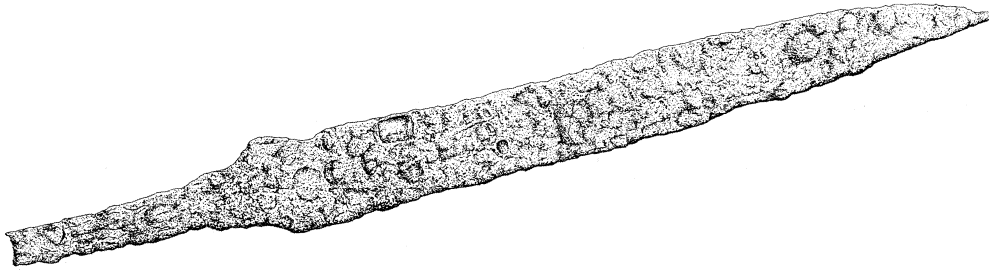
Iron Seax

The seax was a small single edged iron sword. This was the only example found at Norton.
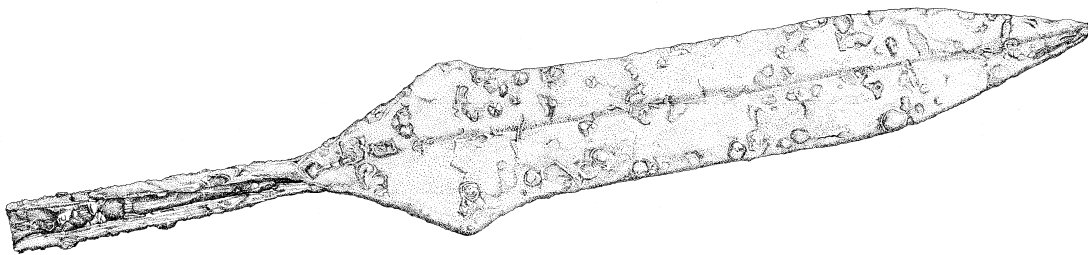
Iron Spear

The spear was the basic weapon of an adult free man. The spearhead was made of iron with a shaft of wood.

The amount of weaponry in a grave denotes its status. Graves of the lowest rank had a single weapon. Higher ranked burials had a shield as well. The most important individuals had a third weapon such as an axe or a seax.

Very wealthy or royal graves are rare. They include uncommon finds like helmets. A possible Anglo-Saxon helmet was found at Yarm many years ago.

Male burial with spear and bucket

This male burial from Norton was found with a spear and a wooden bucket. The bucket was made with wood from the yew tree with decorated bronze bands. It is a very rare find and denotes the high status of the man.

It is not unusual to find male graves with female grave goods. This is common in Saxon cemeteries although the reason is not known. It is possible that cross-dressing took place.
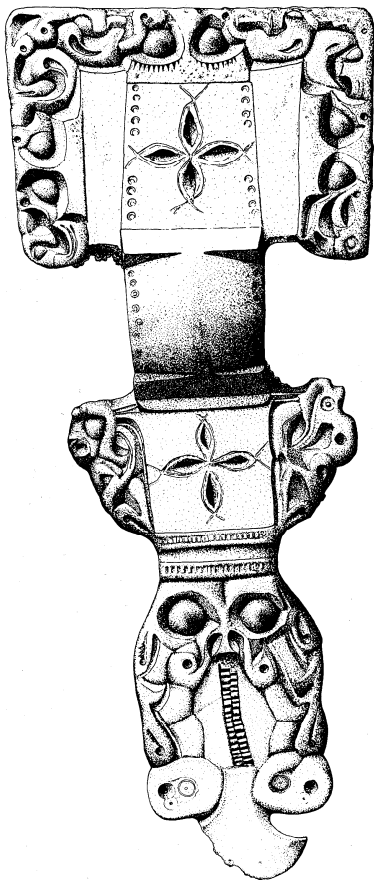
Clothing

The basic clothes for men were

1   a linen undershirt

2   trousers belted at the waist and fastened to the
           legs with cross garters

3   a cloak fastened across the shoulders

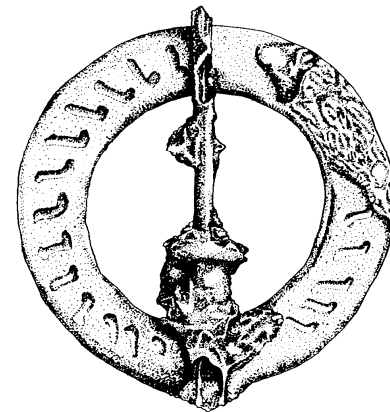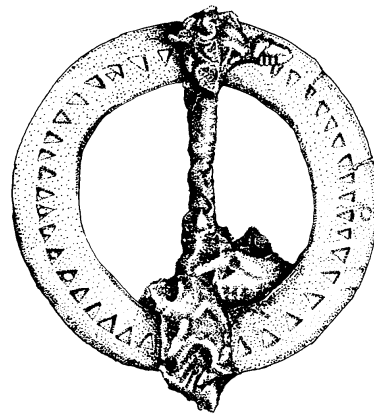4   a pair of leather shoes

5   Women

Women were commonly buried with fine jewellery. Brooches were used to fasten garments such as cloaks together.
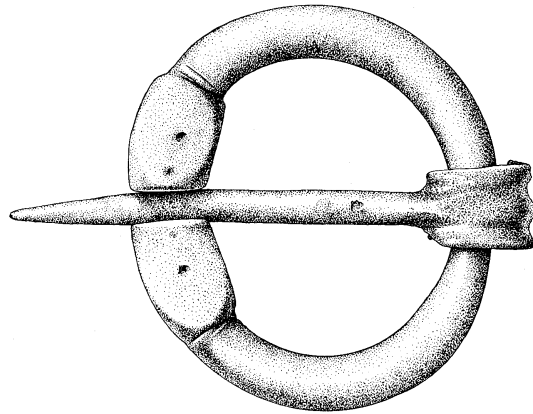
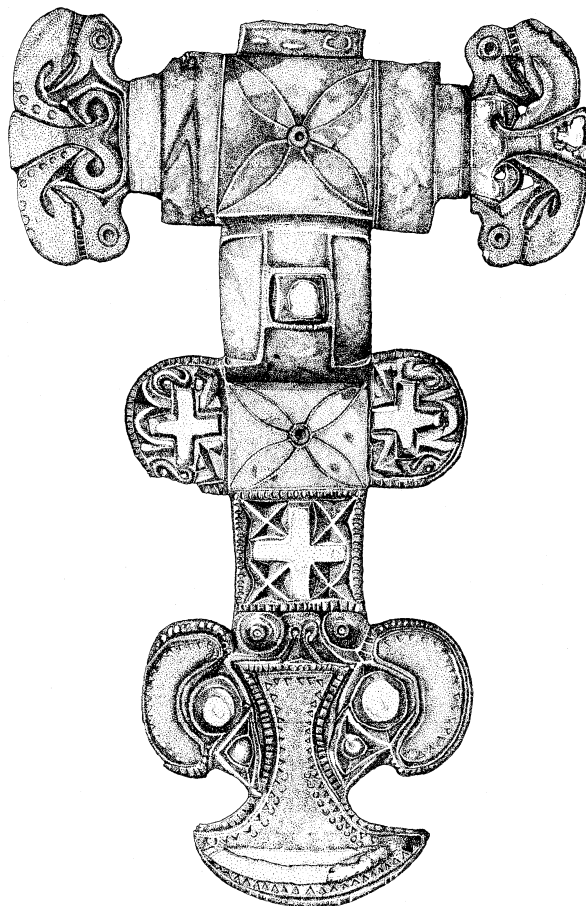There were four types of Saxon brooch: -

1   Square headed -
This was one of the most popular brooches in Northern England during the Saxon period.

2   Annular -
These circular, bronze brooches were often worn in pairs. The central pin was made of iron and rarely survives as it rusts away.

3   Penannular - This is the same as an annular brooch except there is a break in the circle.

4   Cruciform - Many of these were found at Norton and elsewhere on Teesside. They may have been worn with the cross upside-down.

The quality and quantity of jewellery within a grave as with male graves tells us something about the status of the individual.

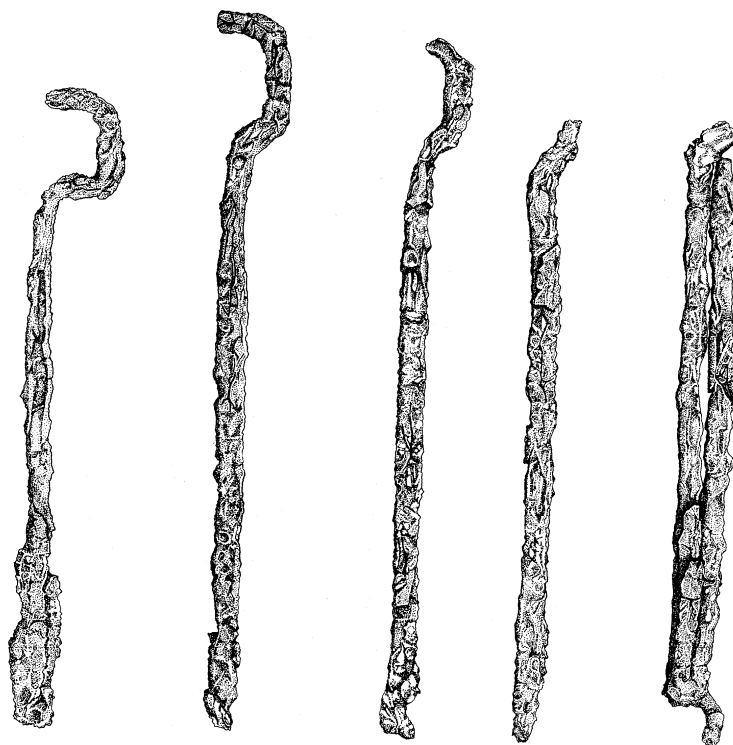*Norton burial with silver bracelets*

This lady was buried at Norton with a wide range of artifacts including a pair of silver bracelets.

The silver bracelets were unique at the Norton cemetery. The lady who wore them must have been important and well respected.
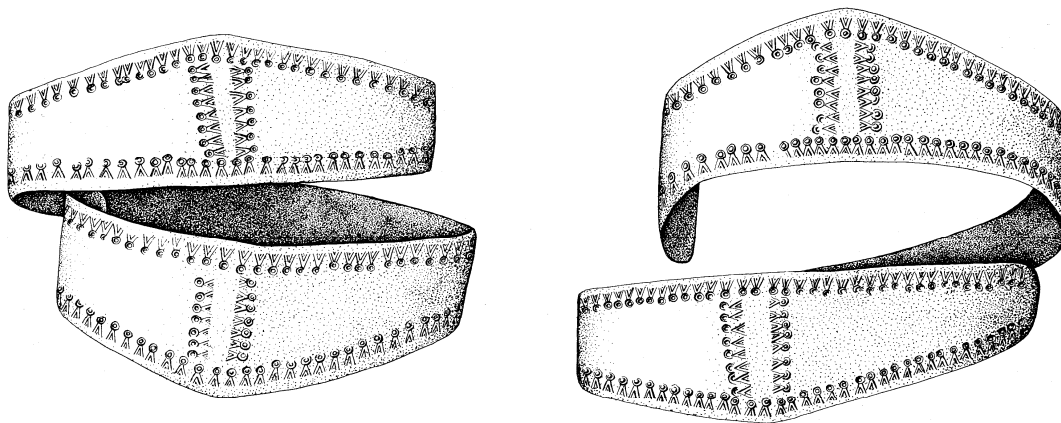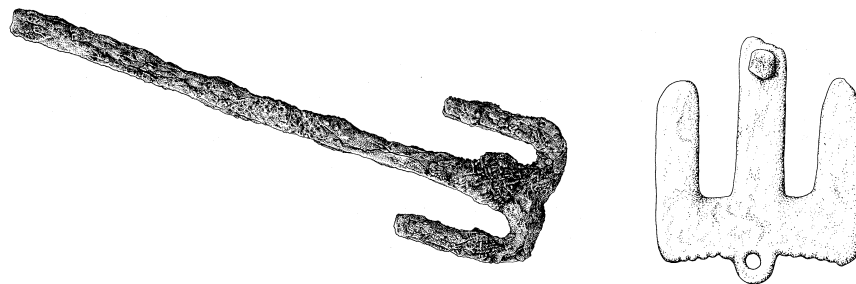
*Silver bracelets from female burial at Norton*

Other items from female burials include: -

Latchlifters - These functional iron keys are often found in female graves. It would seem that women had control of the home and held the 'keys to the door'.

Girdle Hangers - These were worn hung from the waist. Unlike the latchlifter keys they were purely symbolic and had no functional use. They may represent the woman's role as head of the household.
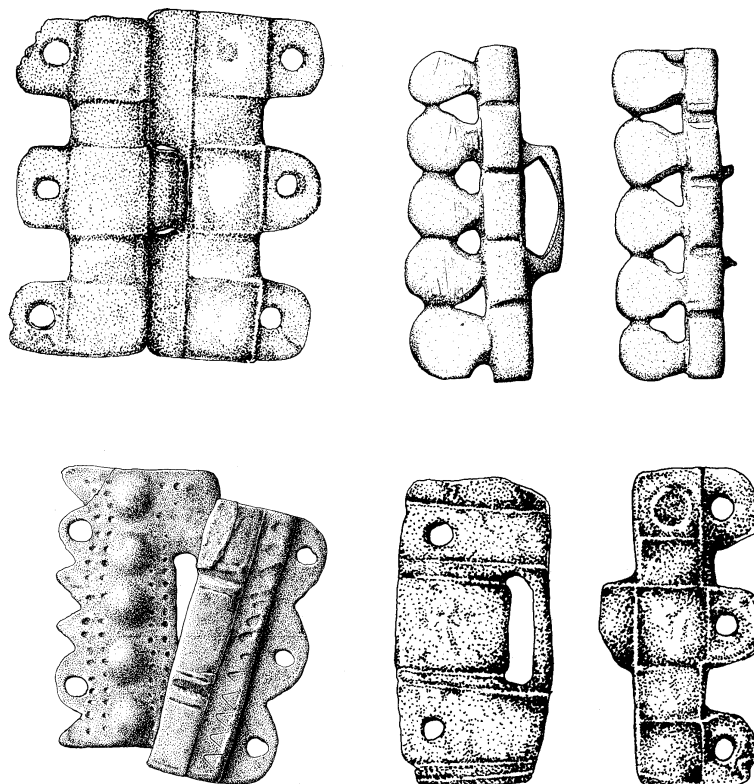
Wrist Clasps - These pairs of clasps were made of bronze and fastened shirtsleeves with a simple hook and eye mechanism. There were many different designs of wrist clasp found at the Norton cemetery.

Saxon women wore necklaces made from strings of beads. The beads were made from bone, glass and amber.
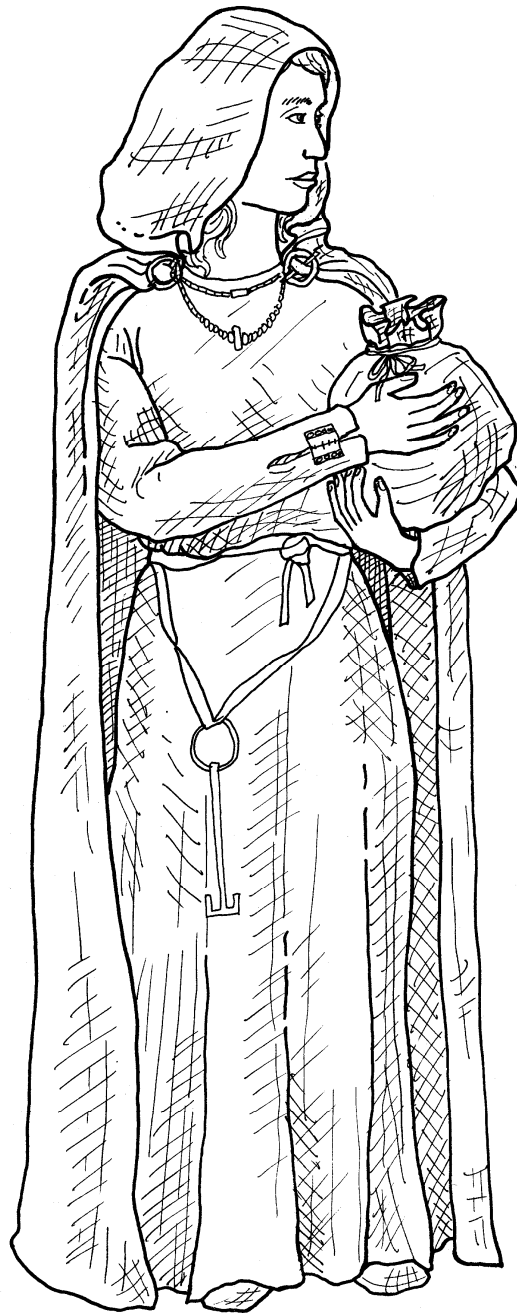
A Saxon woman's clothing consisted of

1   a linen undershift
2   a loose sleeved long tunic or tubular cloth dress
3   a mantle with a hood.
4   a pair of leather shoes.

6 Technology

The Anglo-Saxons were highly skilled at many and varied crafts. We can begin to understand their technology by studying the objects that we find on their settlements and buried with their dead.
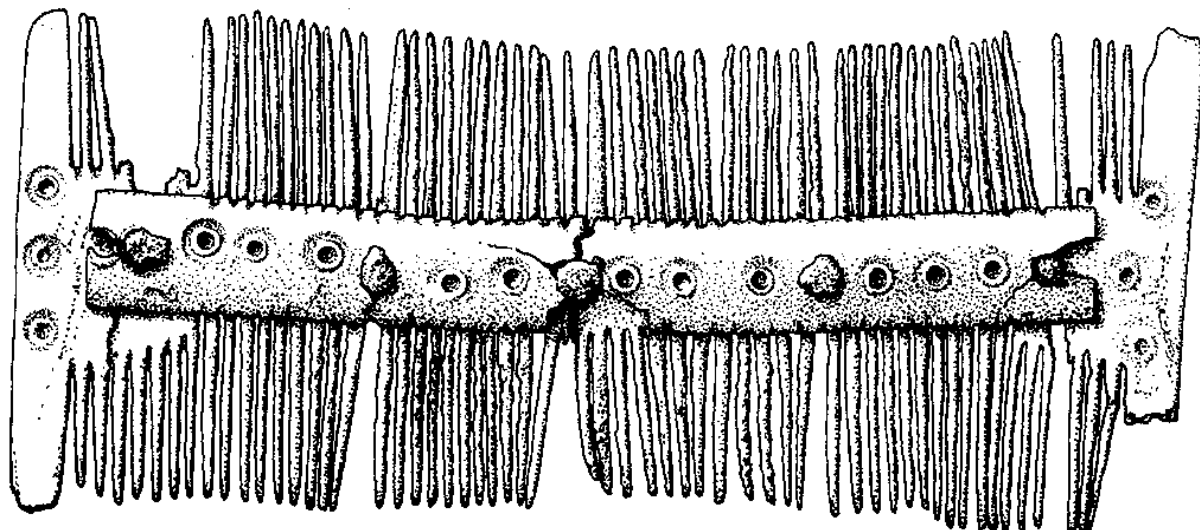
Pottery

Saxon pottery was made by hand. The clay pots were left to dry then baked in an oven or bonfire to harden them.
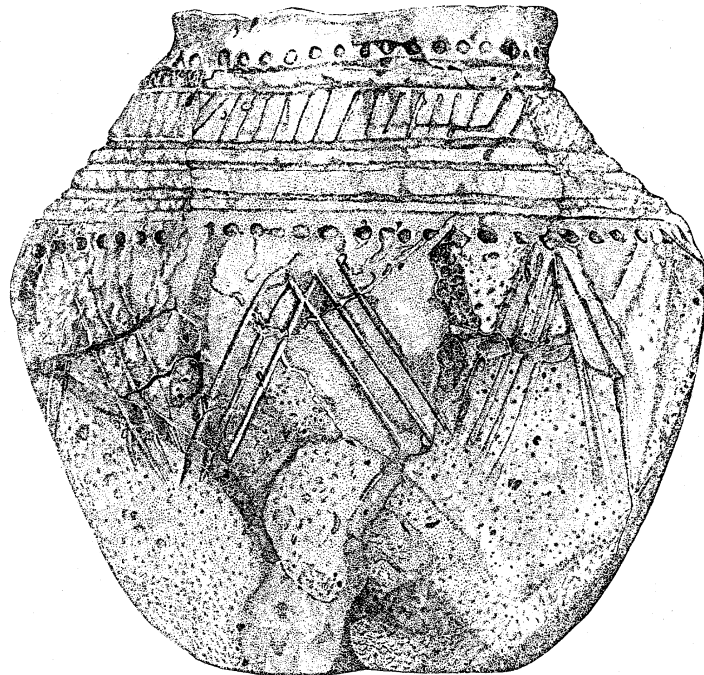
Saxon cremation urn from Yarm

Pottery could be decorated in many ways. Lines and drawings were made in the surface of the unfired clay with antler or wooden tools. This pot found at Yarm had complicated decoration.

Bone Working

Bone comb from Norton

Many objects were made out of bone and horn. This was a very specialised craft. Various objects such as combs, rings and pins were manufactured. Some of the larger items like combs may have been made out of whale bones.

Jewellery

Jewellery was a common part of Saxon costume. Most jewellery was made of bronze although gold or silver was used for richer examples. Brooches were often cast in separate pieces and soldered together.

Jewellery could be made in moulds. A series of moulds were found at Hartlepool and date to the 8th century. The calf mould is thought to represent a calf heralding the end of the world. This is an early Christian symbol linked to St. Luke.
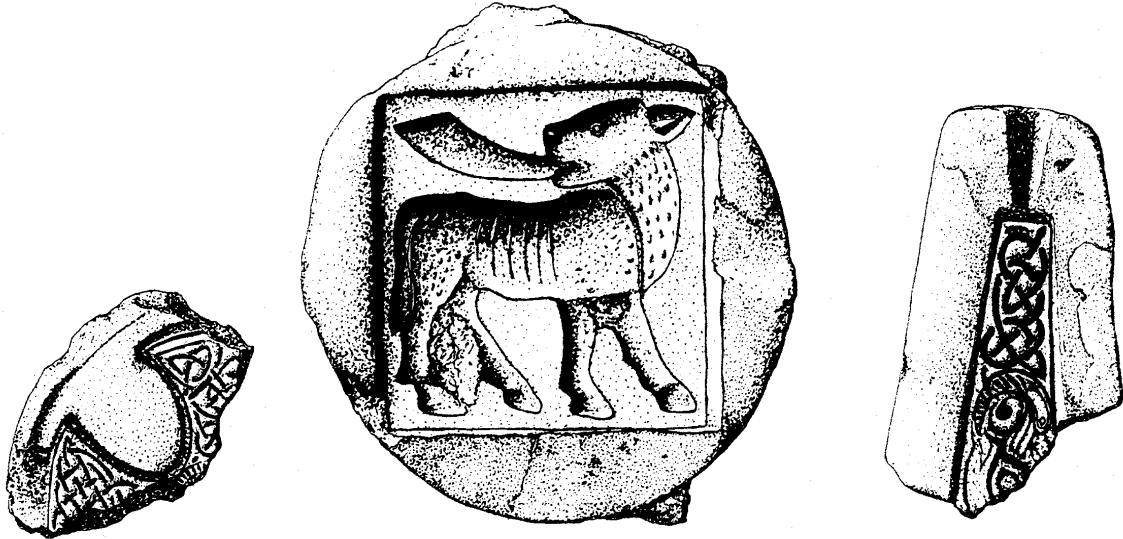
Metalworking moulds from Hartlepool

Smithing

A blacksmith would have been available at most villages. Blacksmiths would have made spades, ploughs, weapons, locks and jewellery. Most of a smith's everyday work would have been repairing broken objects.
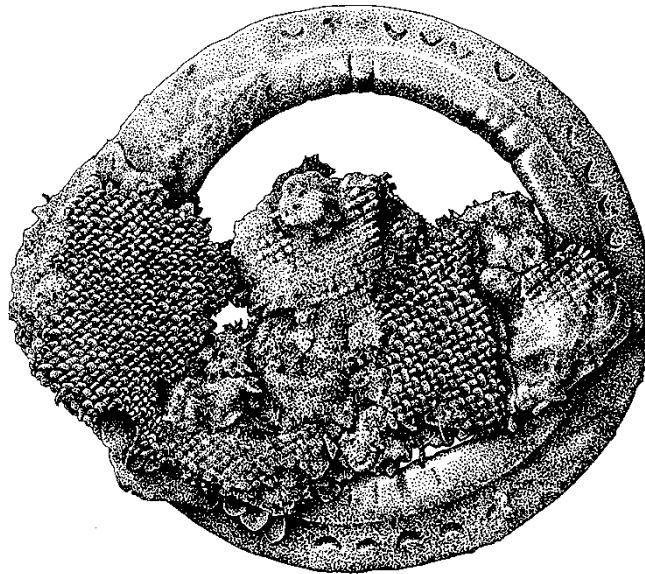
Metalwork was often decorated with patterns. Many designs were simply punched onto metalwork. There were many types of punch-mark identified at Norton.
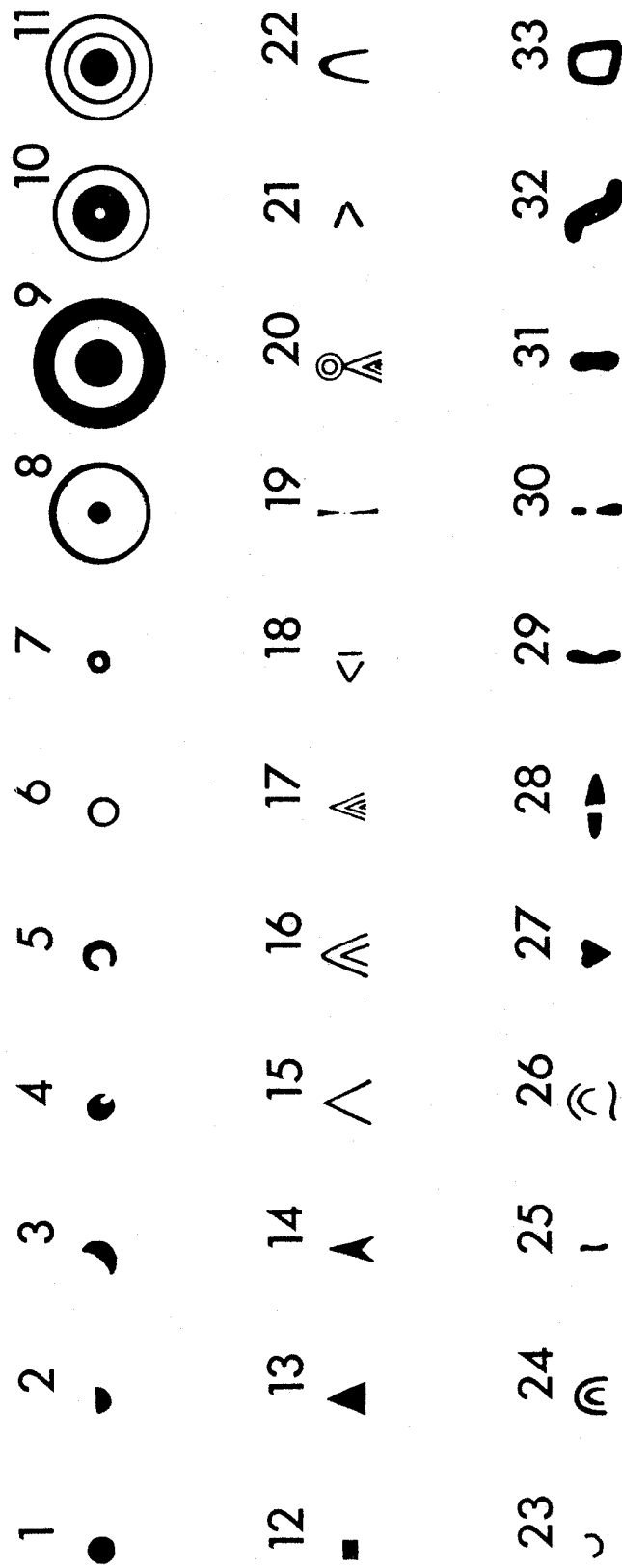
Metalworking stamps from Norton

Textiles

Saxon fabric rarely survives. However we can often see traces attached to brooches where the rust from the decaying iron pins mineralises the fabric.

Brooch from Norton with fabric impressions
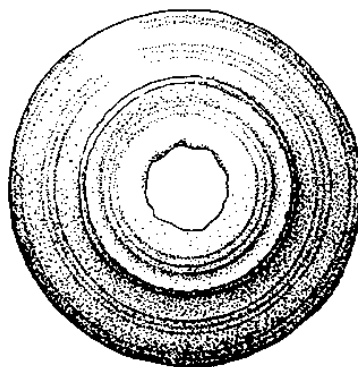
Bone spindle whorl from Norton

Spinning has been used for thousands of years to produce fabric. A spindle was used to stretch out wool. When the spindle is spun it twists the wool into a thread. The material was used for clothing and bedding.

7   Trade

Many of the objects found on Anglo-Saxon sites have foreign origins and were either brought to the country by the earlier invaders or traded from the continent.

Frankish buckle and rivets from Norton

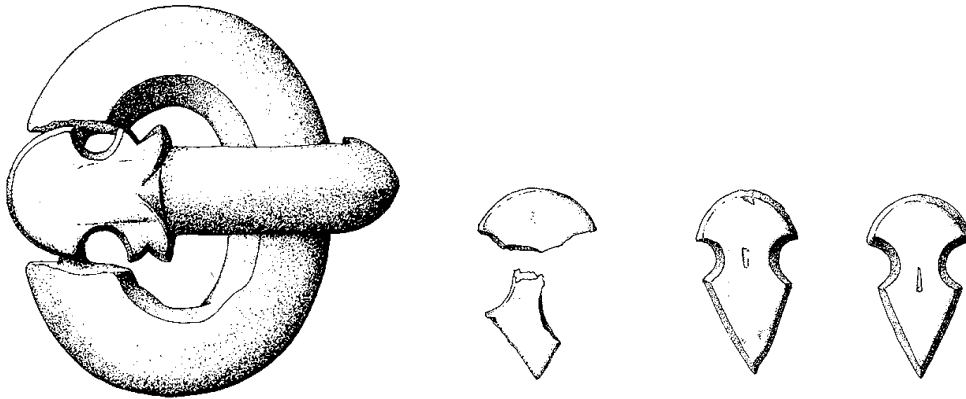This buckle was the finest buckle found at Norton. The metal has a white finish and is made from bronze with a high tin content. This was a 6th century import from the continent.

Amber was commonly used by the Anglo-Saxons to make beads. It is likely that the raw material was imported from the Baltic region.

Bucket pendants from Norton

Bucket pendants were found in five of the Norton graves. These small bronze items are miniature buckets. They were a Scandinavian fashion brought to Britain in the 6th century.

8   Religion

The Anglo-Saxons had their own religion. When they came to Britain their beliefs replaced the organised Christianity of the Roman Empire.

The Anglo-Saxons had many Gods. Many of the names of the Gods survive in our language and most obviously in the days of the week.

Tuesday   is named after one of the most ancient Saxon Gods Tiw.

Wednesday is named after the greatest and most popular god Woden or Odin.

Thursday   is named after Thunor or Thor.

Friday   is named after Friga the wife of Odin.

Odin was associated with wisdom and warfare. He was helped by his 'Beasts of Battle', including two ravens that brought him news. A 10th century carved stone from Kirklevington shows Odin with a raven on each shoulder.

The Anglo-Saxons worshipped in natural places. Roseberry Topping may have been a place of worship. The present name is derived from 'Othensburg' or 'Odin's Hill'. Anglo-Scandinavian sculpture is present in the Church at Newton under Roseberry to support this theory.
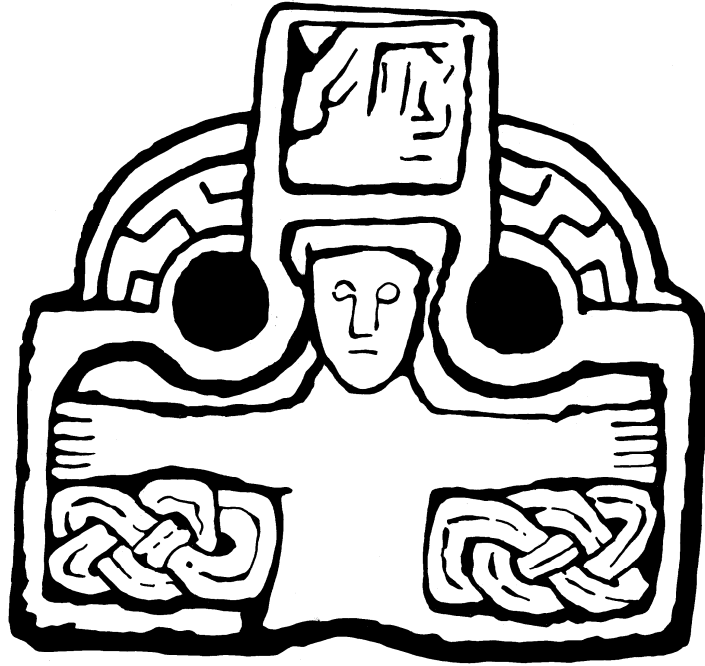
Carved stone from Kirklevington Church

The Anglo-Saxons were converted to Christianity from 597 AD but the effects were probably not felt in Northern Britain for another 30 years.

In 640 AD a monastery was founded at Hartlepool. The second abbess was Hilda who later established the monastery at Whitby and became a Saint after her death.
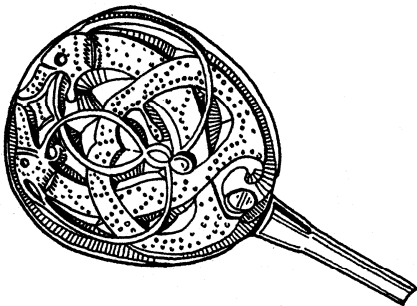

The monastery at Hartlepool was a double monastery and would have housed both monks and nuns. Archaeological finds from Hartlepool include the namestones which accompanied burials and a gilded silver alloy pin.

Silver pin with entwined dragons from Hartlepool

9 The end of Saxon England

Viking raids began in England with an attack on the monastery at Lindisfarne in 793 AD. The Norwegians and Danes had won control of most of the north by 880 AD.
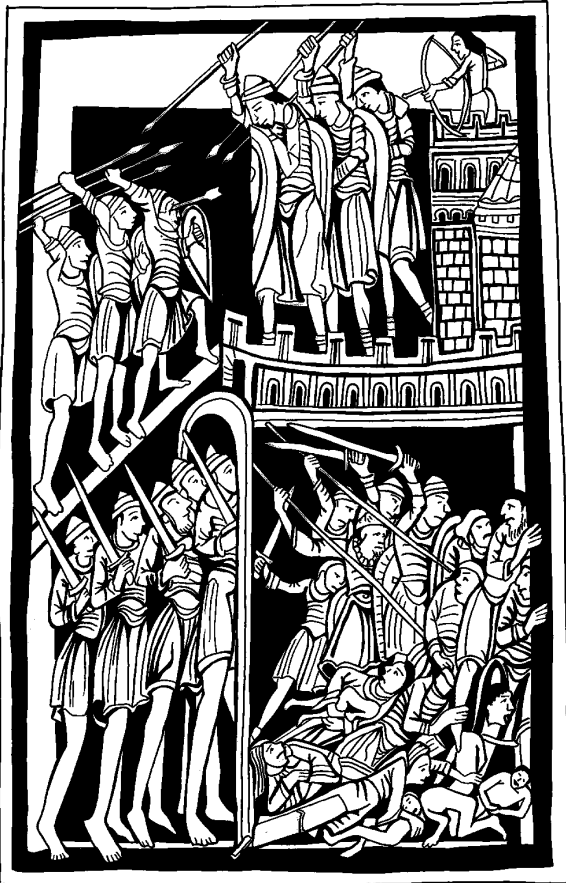
Vikings attack an English town

Place name evidence can help to reveal the Viking origins of many of our local settlements.

The Vikings and English appear to have lived side by side with names such as 'Normanby' meaning 'village of the Northmen' and others like 'Ingleby' meaning 'village of the English'.

The Vikings were Pagan when they came to England. They were however soon converted to Christianity.

Evidence of Viking influences can be seen in many of our local churches where stone carvings survive amongst the later medieval building.
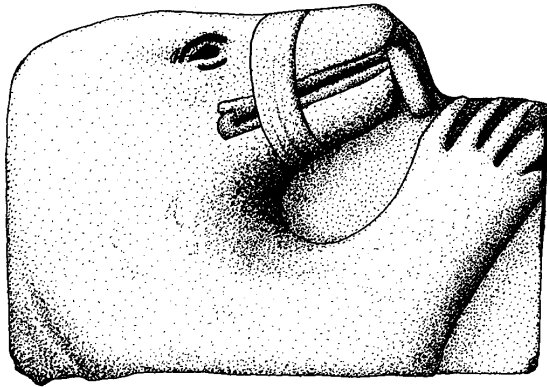
Carving of a muzzled bear at Stainton Church

In 1066 King Edward, the last Anglo-Danish ruler, died. Edward had not produced an heir and Harold the Earl of Wessex was proclaimed King.

Harold had to defend his Kingship in battle against the King of Norway who was aided by Harold's own brother Tostig. He defeated the Norwegian army at Stamford Bridge but had to move south immediately to fight William of Normandy at Hastings. Harold was killed and William the Conqueror became England's first Norman King.

There was a great resistance to Norman rule, particularly in the north. William sent his men to put down the rebellion destroying whole villages in the process. This became known as the 'Harrying of the North'.

William was a great organiser and established a survey of his Kingdom. The survey recorded the size and value of every manor in the land. It became known as the Domesday Book. As William had ransacked the north east most of the entries for Teesside settlements are described as 'waste'.

The Tees acted as a significant barrier to William who never had complete control of ancient Northumbria.

William pressed his advantage and set about reorganising the northern 'wastes' into the formal settlement pattern of towns and villages which we know today.

Further Reading

The Anglo-Saxons

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Local Anglo-Saxon Sites

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Leaflets

A full range of archaeological leaflets are available from local libraries or direct from Tees Archaeology.

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