

# **SOCIAL AND CULTURAL HISTORY OF BRITAIN:I MODULE I-EARLY HISTORY BRITISH ISLES**



**ANGLO- SAXON SOCIETY, CULTURE AND LITERATURE  
I SEMESTER  
I BA ENGLISH COMPLEMENTARY PAPER  
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- Anglo- Saxon society was hierarchical.
- At its top – king and members of the royal society.
- Followed by nobility, bishops and other church men.
- The nobles were called ***erols***
- Next group in hierarchy was ***ceorols***-freemen
- The last group in the hierarchy was unfree members of society – slaves called ***laets***

Information about the social organization of Anglo-Saxon organization mainly from two sources.

1. Ethelbert's Law code

2. Domesday Book

- Ethelbert's law set out a complex system of compensation and punishment, based on the status of the offender and the injured party
- Law code reveals that women had rights and privileges in Anglo-Saxon society. But these were dependent on the individuals marital status.

- compensation wouldn't be paid to woman directly, but would instead be given to her father, husband or brother.
- Domesday Book , the original record or summary of William I's survey of England.
- The survey was carried out against the great popular resentment in 1086 by seven or eight panels of commissioners .
- Domesday Book covers all of England except the northern areas.

- Anglo- Saxon were not interested in town life.
- They preferred to live in valleys.
- They built huts of wattle and daub or mud or straw.
- The names of Saxon settlements often contained “*ing*” (group of settlers from the same family) or ton (enclosed agricultural settlement).
- For example – Hastings, Kensington, Nottingham etc.
- Anglo- Saxon men spent their day in hunting and ploughing

- They were expert farmers and when they were not at war they were busily occupied upon the land.
- Their women stayed at home and engaged in spun wove.

- **Dress**

- The men wore garments like kilts and cloak fastened onto their shoulders by brooch.
- The women wore long tunic down to ankle and mantles with hoods.
- Their head were covered with light wrap and wore considerable jewellery like necklaces, bracelets and rings .
- The wealthy Anglo Saxon usually wore over his shirt a linen or woollen tunic reaching nearly to knee.

# Men Clothing

- Apart from a skeleton, there was usually only a buckle. The belt had rotted away. They sometimes find weapons too.

- Old Saxon bodies have been dug up in bogs. Bogs were very wet.

tunic

- Men used to wear tunics.

- Saxon's men used to wear baggy trousers and 'bandages' wound round their legs.

- Saxon men also used to wear cloaks.



belt

shield

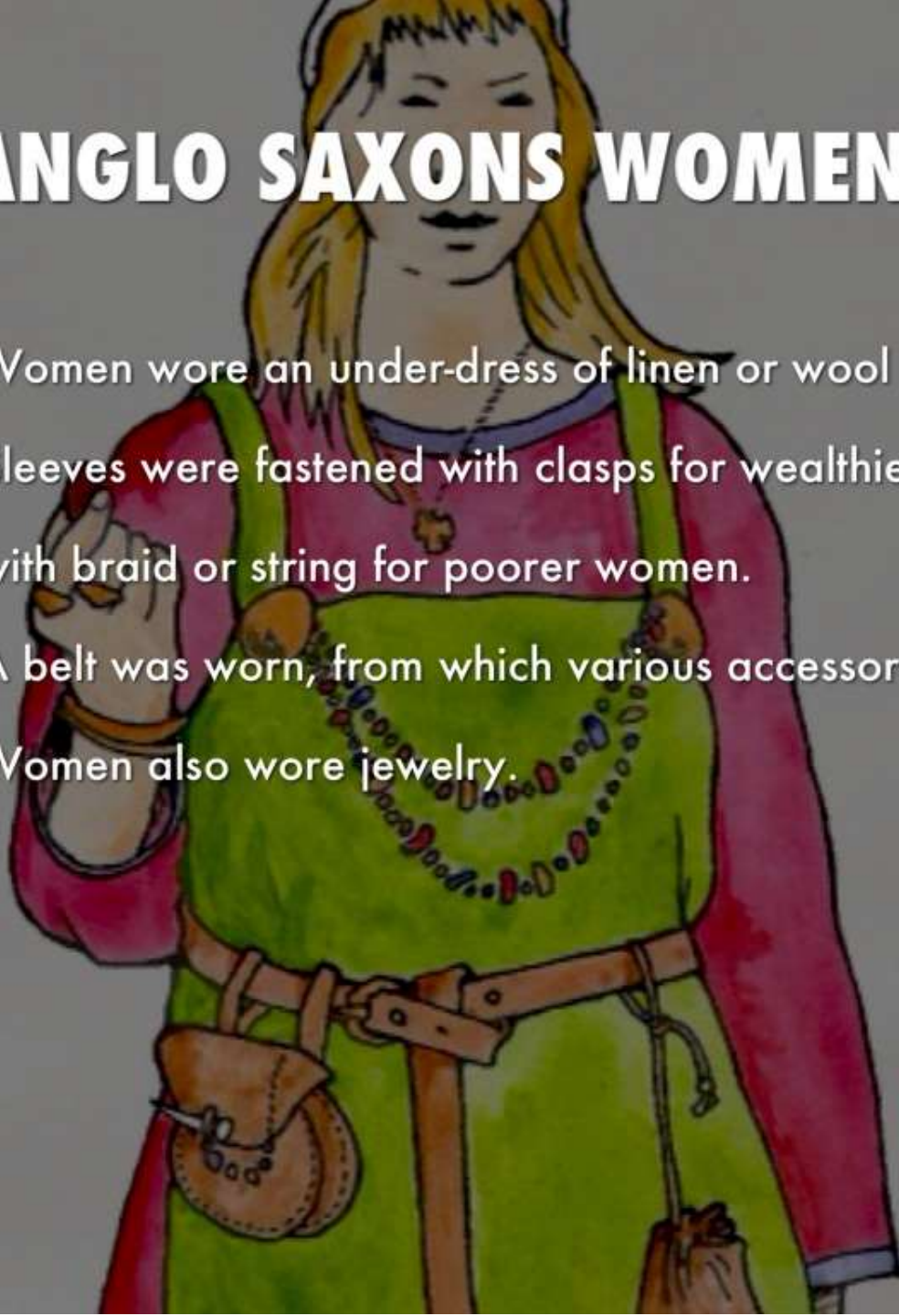
knife





# ANGLO SAXONS WOMEN CLOTHING

- Women wore an under-dress of linen or wool with long sleeves.
- Sleeves were fastened with clasps for wealthier women, or drawn together with braid or string for poorer women.
- A belt was worn, from which various accessories were hung
- Women also wore jewelry.







- **Burial practice**

- The warrior chiefs were buried with gold-embroidered cloths and gilt buckles and cups.
- The common man buried with everyday things like work box, beads and knives.

# • **Hundred Courts, Shire and the Witan**

- **Hundred and Shire** were the administrative division during the Anglo- Saxon period.
- Ordinary prosperous **freeman generally owned an area of land about 60 to 100 acres of land.**
- This land was called a ***hide***.
- This hide was sufficient to maintain the owners household and family in comfortable circumstances.
- A **hundred hides formed a unit known as Hundred.**
- This hundred unit had to supply sufficient number of trained soldiers to King when needed.
- These Hundreds were presided over by **headman known as a Reeve.**
- The Reeve settled local disputes in the Hundreds and had the right to punish for offences against law.
- Thus **this Hundreds became Hundred courts.**

- **Shire** was an administrative division above the Hundred and existed in the time of Alfred the Great and fully developed during **the reign of Edgar (959-975)**.
- It was administered by an *ealdorman* and by a *shire-reeve*.
- *Shire reeve* presided over the shire court.
- The *Witan* was the council of the Anglo-Saxon kings.
- Kings ruled through a sort of parliament called *Witan or Witanagemot*.
- Members of the royal family, ealdormen and *thegns*(ministers) constituted *Witan*
- Main duty – advise king on all administrative and judicial matters
- Sometimes the witan proved quite strong enough to depose the king and to elect a successor of their own choice

# Religion



- Anglo-Saxons were polytheistic pagans when they first came to Britain.
- Evidence about the religious practice comes from their burial customs, and from records in the later Christian Writings.
- Excavation of the earliest Anglo-Saxon cemeteries at Sutton Hoo shows they favoured cremation over inhumation (burial).
- But their dead were sometimes buried with grave goods—suggest that they believed in an after life.

- **Woden** (Chief God), **Tiw** (the God of War), **Thor** (the God of Thunder), **Freya** (Goddess of Love), **Saturn** (God of Fun and Feasting) were the prime Anglo-Saxon deities.
- Temples to Woden or Thor were built by kings and rich landowners.
- Oxen horses and pigs were sacrificed and people sprinkled themselves with their blood.
- After the Gregorian Mission in 597 CE , Anglo-Saxon were converted in to Christianity.

# Language and Literature.



- Anglo- Saxon language- Old English – ancestor of modern day English.
- Old English was spoken and written in Anglo Saxon Britain from CE 450 until 1150 CE.
- Surviving Anglo- Saxon manuscripts shows that there were different dialects spoken in different part of the country, Such as West **Saxon**, **Northumbrian** and **Mercian**.
- The oldest English poem **Caedmon's *Hymn*** was written in Northumbrian dialect of Old English.



- During the time of Alfred the Great there was development in the field of Anglo- Saxon language and literature.
- Evidence for a central language is first seen during the time period of King **Ethelred** around 1000 CE.
- During his reign there was an explosion of Writing in Latin and Old English.
- This included the first **English Law Code**, prepared in Old English and collection of contemporary and classical poetry such as **Beowulf**, a heroic poem.

## • **Beowulf**

- Highest achievement of Old English literature.
- Earliest European vernacular epic.
- Deals with the event of the early 6<sup>th</sup> century.
- Most scholars argued that Beowulf was composed between 700 and 750 CE.
- It was named after Scandinavian hero Beowulf, whose exploits and character provide its connecting theme.

## • **Venerable Bede**

- Prominent writer of the period-Anglo- Saxon monk and scholar.
- Wrote excellent book titled ***Ecclesiastical History of the English People.***
- Published in the year of 731 CE and commissioned by Northumbrian King.
- Written in LATIN.
- History of English church and England from 55 BCE when Julius Caesar first conquered Britain upto the 8 century CE.
- He published 40 books in his life and many of them were translated into Old English.

## • ***Anglo- Saxon Chronicles***

- Another achievement- collection of entries from documents written in various monasteries in England through the Anglo- Saxon Period.
- It deals with military and political events during the period.
- Chronicle consists of 7 interrelated manuscripts
- Primary source for early history of England.
- Original manuscript of the Chronicle was created during the reign of Alfred the Great.