

Anglo-Saxon Pagan Gods

The Evidence

Professor Ronald Hutton
Gresham Professor of Divinity



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The Paradox of Anglo-Saxon Paganism

- Arrived later than Roman paganism, and so existed at a later date, yet is much less well known
- This is because it was a foreign importation never given time to put down deep roots
- Yet it left a lasting influence on English culture



The Anglo-Saxon Arrival
Experience: A Ruined Land

The Wanderer (and Wroxeter?)



*Eafa þeodnes þrym!
Hu seo þrag gewat,
genap under nihthelm,
swa heo no wære.*

Where is the horse gone? Where the
rider?

Where the giver of treasure?

Where are the seats at the feast?

Where are the revels in the hall?

Alas for the bright cup!

Alas for the mailed warrior!

Alas for the splendour of the prince!

How that time has passed away,
dark under the cover of night,
as if it had never been.

Excerpt from *The Wanderer*

Also tender humanity in
Anglo-Saxon literature:
Wulf and Eadwacer

lyned yple fman onfone ne pite forlit pftan bwofon
ohnum him hat bam pceded hon ly ffrom bairme
begn hwpofad . anre magan ellon fufe moddon 7
fwofon monrehe wille cybe cene poroum hufe cuma
hatta ed ha fe ifne heic hif ymb fpruce :

Wraelic hongad biperif heo fman unofh farte fo
man if hynel bid fah 7 hairo fceode hapad godne .
bonne fe ifne hif agn hpael ofh eno haped wile hat
cuhe hol mro hif han gellan hapeoe gnetan hat
he ife lang ah oft gefeode :

Con pin cle gefraen pax nat hpat hmdan 7 human
haine hebban onhat ban laife bwo gnarode hyge
plonc hondum hpaegle haurte hmdofhde hng haddif

Pah pat atpme mro hif pifum . Dohton :7
pam 7 hif twegh funo 7 hif twa dohton ffare ge
fwofon 7 hifne funo twegh fudlico fman bairn fceof
paf hat mine hana aefelunga . aghpaedif mro am
7ufca talha pafion fife wpla 7 iofha hif fceofna :

Modde poro fpat mehat hulre ppat licu
pwo hanc hat pundoon gefraen hat fe pifum fon
pwalz pfa gied fumanf hof hif hifno hifm paf tne
cyfde 7 haf fceangan fceahol fael gifte ne paf plice

Now the problems

- A religion of an illiterate people
- A religion without clear or universal principles
- Much of what we do know is derived from other cultures

Deities: Woden





Deities: Thor

Deities: Tiw



Deities: Frigg



Stray deities:

- Essex kings descended from Seaxnet
- Runic poem mentions Ing
- The writer Asser mentions Geat
- The historian Bede mentions spring goddesses Hreda ('earth') and Eostre ('dawn')
- Probably tribal and local deities now lost. No Anglo-Saxon mythology about goddesses and gods.

Holy Places.
Best evidence
place names -
hearg (4) and
weoh (8)



Archaeology of shrines – pretty hopeless

- None certainly identified
- Pope Gregory said turn temples into churches, but no temples underneath any known church

**Best bet for a
temple:
Yeavingering
(Northumberland)**



Priests?

Bede speaks of high priest Coifi, of Northumbria



Other References

- Tacitus and *Beowulf* speak of divination by 'wise men': lot-casting, flight of birds, motion of horses
- Kings were semi-sacred- blamed for natural disasters, inaugurated on special stones (Kingston-on-Thames)
- No priestesses, no learned sacred class like Druids
- Little evidence of beliefs: just Bede's story of the sparrow (from Coifi) and references to Wyrð (but could be Boethius)

Burials: the best evidence of all

- Prolific- almost 1200 cemeteries, with both sexes and all ages represented
- Still effectively prehistoric- no textual information
- Cremation most common but inhumation very frequent- and both often found in the same cemeteries
- The safe generalisation- the Anglo-Saxons liked to bury people in the earth and with grave goods
- Most cemeteries less than 100 graves, but 50 are larger. Some in East Anglia over 2000 burials: above all, Spong Hill.

**Cremation -
generally in urns**



Cremation

- Huge range of goods- beads, combs, shears, tweezers, razors
- So intimate articles- to make deceased look good, or to avoid contamination of living? Perhaps former as miniatures sometimes substituted.
- 80% urns decorated, with complex iconography
Serpent or dragon most common- protection?
Swastika next- fire? Could have been potter's marks or chosen by dead or relatives.

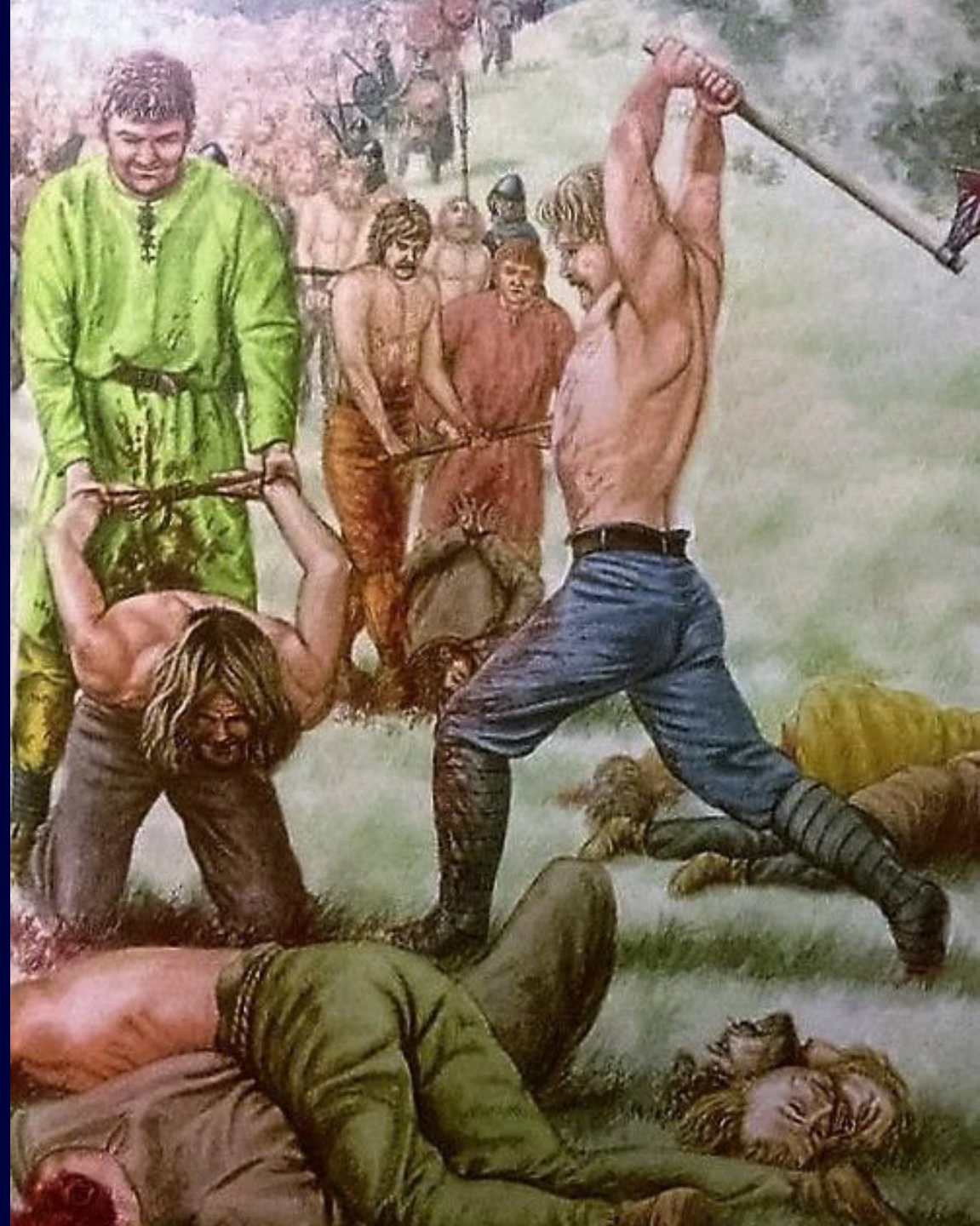
Inhumation:
almost 6000
recorded



Inhumation types

- Children often crouched (foetuses?) Often with adult weapons or jewellery - to keep on growing, or gifts to deities?
- Adults fully clothed, on backs, heads pointing east. Almost all men had belts and knives- for eating. Some had tools or weapon, often vessels. But huge range of items- ornaments and maybe magical objects like crystal balls and amulets.
- So powerful, if not necessarily standard, concept of afterlife.

The Sinister Stuff



The sinister stuff:

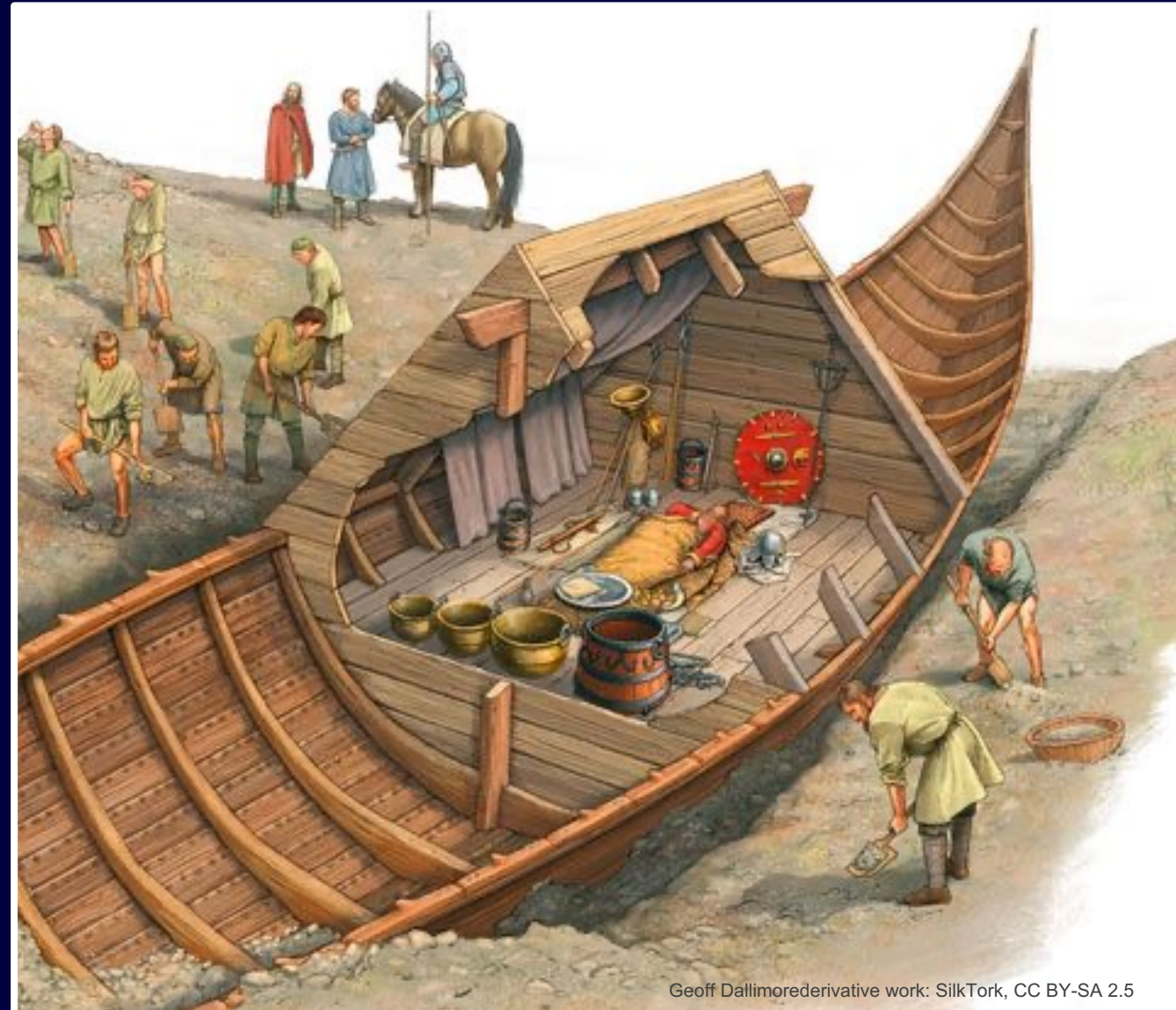
- 25% inhumations superimposed. Most probably families, but 9 suggest a dominant relationship - e.g. the Welbeck Hill and Portway Down women,
- Some bound bodies - the Worthy Park (Hampshire) girl. Live burial?
- Prone burials rare - 1 in 145 - so must be deliberate: to confine spirit?
- Some decapitations. A few mass cemeteries (Thetford). Plus 29 in ordinary cemeteries- war, execution, sacrifice.
- Tacitus said German very fond of human sacrifice. Sidonius (fifth century) said Saxons killed a slave before each raid

Markers: wooden markers may have rotted,
but Anglo-Saxons take to mounds in sixth
century



So very adaptable people with wide horizons

- Take ideas from Romans, British, prehistoric monuments
- Spong Hill had goods and designs from Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Germany
- Tendency for funerals to get more elaborate over time—culminating in the early seventh century, with the royal cemeteries of the rulers of East Anglia at Snape and Sutton Hoo.



Christianity already arriving: converted
English 597-664: surrounded by
Christians, and all
richer and more
powerful neighbours
Christian.



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