

The Sutton Hoo helmet



This helmet was found at a burial site in Suffolk along with many other valuable objects. The burial provides insights into the life of the Anglo-Saxon elite and into connections between Britain and other parts of the world. The finds at Sutton Hoo changed historians' views about the Anglo-Saxon period, which had been regarded as a Dark Age following the end of Roman Britain.

From

Burial Mound
1, Sutton Hoo,
Suffolk,
England

Date

AD 600 – 650

Culture

Anglo-Saxon

Material

Iron with
bronze plates
covered in tin,
bronze-gilt,
garnets

Dimensions

Height: 31.8
cm
Width: 21.5 cm
Circumference
: 74.6 cm
Estimated total
original

weight: 2.5 kg

Museum

British
Museum

*(Please always check with the
museum that the object is on
display before travelling)*

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About the object



The helmet was discovered in a large burial mound in the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of East Anglia. Many other objects were also found, including armour and weapons, silver dishes, musical instruments, feasting equipment such as a drinking horn and bottles, coins and fastenings for clothing. The mound, which has worn down over time, covered a ship that must have been dragged up several hundred metres from the river Deben. The presence of other mounds suggests this was a royal burial area, but the richness of this particular burial suggests it might have been that of a local ruler.

Ship burials indicate a relationship with the seafaring communities of Scandinavia, where other rich burials with ships have been found. Three others have been found in the UK so far, but none with such rich grave goods.

In the period of continuity and change following the end of Roman rule in Britain, Anglo-Saxon rulers competed among themselves for supremacy. We know from Bede and other written sources that the royal family of East Anglia was embroiled in these conflicts. The objects in the burial referred to the role and status of the dead person, but also had a public message which would have been understood by the people assembled at the ritual of burial.

The mythological scenes on the helmet could be related to the pagan god Odin, Nordic god of war. In the Anglo-Saxon world, rulers needed to demonstrate that they could lead their people in war. Success in war meant maintaining stability and control, and perhaps expanding the kingdom. So objects such as the helmet were vital symbols of qualities of leadership.

The placing of valuable objects and materials in graves demonstrates the wealth and status of the dead person's social group not merely through the objects and materials themselves, but through the group's ability to dispose of and in effect destroy these goods.

This was a period when both pagan and Christian belief systems were being followed in East Anglia. The practice of ship burials and placement of objects within the burial space was a pagan practice. However, there are Christian symbols on several of the items.

The wealth of the burial and the quality of the objects had never been seen before in Britain and gave a vivid insight into the life of the Anglo-Saxon elite. It caused historians to re-assess the idea of a primitive Dark Age following the end of Roman rule and demonstrated that the Anglo-

Saxons were capable of great sophistication and had a network of international contacts beyond Britain itself.

More information

Why is the helmet important?

A History of the World in 100 objects: listen to a useful summary of the importance of this object or read the transcript.

(

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/ahistoryoftheworld/objects/kpnm6FD3TOaNri1gNP GJ1w>)

Burial overview

A very useful overview of the Sutton Hoo burial.

(

http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/articles/k/the_sutton_hoo_ship-burial.aspx)

Sutton Hoo: A history

Articles from National Trust on the site of Sutton Hoo and its history.

(<http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/sutton-hoo/history/>)

Helmet restoration

The restoration of the Sutton Hoo helmet.

(

http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/articles/r/restoration_sutton_hoo_helmet.aspx)

BBC Masterpieces of the British Museum – part 1

Video on the story of the helmet's excavation and detailed discussion of its meaning.

(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T5yXQrTzUeg>)

BBC Masterpieces of the British Museum – part 2

Video on the story of the helmet's excavation and detailed discussion of its meaning.

(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oOgA4uy8qDI>)

The Sutton Hoo Helmet

Book by Sonja Marzinzik, The Sutton Hoo Helmet, British Museum Press, 2007.

(

<http://www.britishmuseumshoponline.org/masterpieces/the-sutton-hoo-helmet/inv/cmc23257>)

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A bigger picture

The Sutton Hoo helmet and some of the other objects buried with it demonstrate Britain's contacts, direct and indirect, with Europe and other parts of the world.

The design and imagery of the helmet as well as the ship burial itself are paralleled by examples found in Sweden. This video introduces the burials at Valsgärde in Sweden: begin at 2:38 to see a burial similar to that at Sutton Hoo.

[Watch the video](#)



This scene on one of the plaques shows a mounted warrior trampling his foe and is derived from similar Roman images. See a much earlier Roman example on the Object file for the [Tombstone of a Roman cavalryman](#).

[See more](#)



The eyes and wings of the flying beasts are inlaid with garnets which came from India or Sri Lanka.

[See more](#)



Silver spoons with
Christian imagery and
Greek inscriptions

[More about this object](#)



A hanging bowl from the
Celtic west of Britain

[More about this object](#)



Gold coins from France

[More about this object](#)



Silver bowls from
Byzantium (present-day
Istanbul in Turkey)

[More about this object](#)

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Teaching ideas

Explore the helmet with the students using the resources in [For the classroom](#). Discuss which parts have survived and which have been lost. Identify the materials used and the features such as the flying beasts, the decorated panels and the ear and neck flaps. Consider how good the helmet would be for protecting its owner, why it is so elaborately decorated, what effect it might have on an enemy and what it says about its wearer.

These three activities could be done in sequence or as stand-alone.



Invite a student to lie down in the middle of the classroom. Place a range of modern objects around them. Ask the students to think about what an archaeologist in 1500 years' time might find and what might have disappeared.



Print out photos of about 15 [Sutton Hoo objects from the British Museum website](#). Give one or two to each group of students and ask them to try to work out what the objects are, what they are made of, what might be missing and what they suggest about the person they were found with. Make a set of



labels suggesting reasons for the objects to be buried: to show the strength and skills of a warrior, to show the ability to be a leader, to show wealth, to show the importance of feasting and entertainment. Ask the students to group objects around each label. Discuss their choices.



Use the information and links in [A bigger picture](#) to discuss what the Sutton Hoo burial tells us about Anglo-Saxon connections with the rest of the world. Students might follow this up with research to find out what was happening in these other parts of the world at the time when the treasures were buried at Sutton Hoo.

These four questions develop from more focused to broader historical enquiries.



Who was buried at Sutton Hoo?

What do the objects tell us about their owner? What do they not tell us? What can we never know? You could then go on to use the objects and their date, maps of Anglo-Saxon England and written sources from Bede and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, to work out who the dead person might have been.



How much does Sutton Hoo tell us about the Anglo-Saxons?

What can we tell from the Sutton Hoo burial and its objects



about social structure, what jobs the Anglo-Saxons did, what men did and what women did, about rich and poor, about how they spent their time, what they ate and drank and what they believed about death and the gods? Look at some other sources and compare them with the ideas you have got from Sutton Hoo.



What was important to the Anglo-Saxons?

Imagine you were an Anglo-Saxon noble present at Sutton Hoo as each object was placed in the grave. What would each object say to you about what your society values and thinks is important? Follow this up by looking at other sources for the Anglo-Saxons.



How important were the discoveries at Sutton Hoo?

Introduce students to the idea of a historical Dark Age, looking at objects from Roman Britain and talking about the end of Roman rule and the arrival of north European migrants. Discuss how the objects found at Sutton Hoo challenged this view of the period.

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For the classroom



The helmet as it looks now.

[Download this picture](#)



A reconstruction of the helmet.

[Download this picture](#)

Source: bbc.co.uk

A History of the World in 100 objects: images of the helmet and burial excavations.

[Visit the site](#)

An image bank of the Sutton Hoo burial.

[Download this picture](#)

Source: youtube.com

A short, silent video from the British Museum of the 1939 excavation.

[See this video on youtube.com](#)

Source: bbc.co.uk

A short video introducing objects from the burial.

[See this video on bbc.co.uk](#)

Source: britishmuseum.org

A short article for children about the Anglo-Saxons.

[Visit the site](#)

Source: nationaltrust.org.uk

Visit Sutton Hoo with your class.

[Visit the site](#)

Source: britishmuseum.org

Visit the British Museum.

[Visit the site](#)

