

Anglo-Saxon Women

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The Anglo-Saxon era is a diverse period that stretches across just over 650 years. Those we call Anglo-Saxons were not homogenous nor were their experiences. In AD 410 the Roman legions leave and the first Anglo-Saxon raiders appear. These pagan warrior bands would come to terrorise Romano-British settlements until, inevitably, they began to settle themselves. By the time of King Alfred 400 years later these settlements have developed into Christian kingdoms engaged in a battle for England with the Danes. By the end of the Anglo-Saxon period England, just prior to the Norman invasion, was established and prosperous with strong ties to other Anglo-Saxon kingdoms in Germany and Denmark.

When investigating the period it is important therefore to select a particular focus within the whole. This is a chance to identify some of those 'changes within and across periods' and to be aware that the characteristic features of life fluctuate and develop.

Sources of information are not as easy to locate as some other periods. Documentary sources tend to record the events of kingdoms and the lives of kings. Visual evidence is also sparse and tends to focus on the same areas.

The history of women always tends to be more obscure or hidden. While there are women who stand out across time they tend to be either extraordinary in some way or of high status. Named individuals who lived more ordinary lives are more difficult to locate.

Within Anglo-Saxon society there are three potential avenues to investigate concerning the lives and experiences of women:

- women within the home
- women within the church
- women within the court.

Women within the home

Rather than trying to cover all aspects of Anglo-Saxon everyday life it may again be helpful to focus on one element. Cloth-making was an important feature in every household and was also the exclusive sphere of women.

The Anglo-Saxon term 'wif' (wife or woman) was connected to weaving. Words such as seamster, webster and spinster show the female occupational suffix 'stere' and are all linked to the production of cloth. Households were responsible for supplying their own needs including cloth for clothes and household furnishing such as bed sheets, table linen, wall-hangings and seat covers. Wealthy households would also supply church vestments and altar cloths. Anglo-Saxon women in England were renowned for the quality of their needlework and embroidery. This would become known as 'opus anglicanum' and led to the use of Anglo-Saxon women to complete the Bayeux tapestry. In Anglo-Saxon law household furnishings and personal clothing was held as the woman's own property because 'she made them'. We can see examples of this in Wynflaed's will where she bequeaths her belongings, much of it clothing or furnishings, to her friends, relatives and a nunnery. Wynflaed's will is the first will we have from a woman. It dates from the 950s and shows Wynflaed as a woman of some wealth. While she frees many of her slaves Wynflaed also bequeaths a woman weaver (Eadgifu) and seamstress (Aethelgifu) to her granddaughter. Wynflaed's will gives us names for the different types of dress that she had such as 'cyrtel, tunece and and mantel'. Early grave goods show women buried with thread boxes, spindle whorls and weaving batons. The 'Gerefa' gives the duties of a reeve or steward including a list of equipment needed for producing or storing cloth.

Clearly the process of cloth-making was central to Anglo-Saxon life and was held firmly within the control of women. A focus on this process will allow some valuable links to be made with design technology and

The textile bequests from Wynflaed's will

Æpelflæder the White

- her *cincdáðenan* dress
- [cowl, hood]
- head-band
(providing she give the best of her nun's-clothing to Wulfflæde and Æbelgife)

Æbelgife

- the best of her nun's-clothing to be increased with gold to the value of 60 pennies worth

Ceolðrype

- her [bleached, whitened] [under-garments, tunics, coats] whichever there her favourite be
- her best holy-[covering, veil, curtain, cloak]
- her best headband

Æðelflæde (who is) Elhhelmm's daughter

- her *twilibrocenan* dress and another of linen or linen-cloth

Eadgyfe daughter of Eadmær(e), her grand-daughter

- one long hall-[tapestry, curtain]
- another short (hall-[tapestry, curtain])
- three seat-cloth
- two chests and therein her best bed-[tapestry, curtain] and [of linen] [covering, tapestry] and all the bedding that belongs thereto
- her best [dun, dingy brown, bark-coloured, a colour partaking of brown and black] [under-garment, tunic, coat]
- her better mantle
- a seamstress called Æpelyfu
- a woman weaver called Eadgifu

Eadwold(e) son of Eadmær(e), her grand-son

- two chests and therein the bedding – all that to one bed belongs

art with experimental archaeology focused on spinning, weaving and dyeing.

Women within the church

The Anglo-Saxon period sees a move from pagan worship to early then conventional Christianity. In the central period we have what is known as the conversion period. It is a period of change and upheaval as the Christian church in England begins to define itself. It is useful when selecting a focus to identify a period of change or flux that will come to shape later periods. The conversion period is such a moment particularly for religious women. St Hild or Hilda of Whitby was one of these significant women. She was of royal birth related to the reigning family of Deira. She was baptised at the age of 13 by the Bishop Paulinus with the rest of the court of Northumbria. She was part of a powerful, wealthy and influential family. In her thirties she decided to



St. Hilda monument detail in Whitby.

Whitby Abbey.



enter holy orders becoming a nun first at Hartlepool and then the founding abbess at Whitby. The monastery at Whitby was a double monastery with both men and women living and worshipping there. Members of the community lived in small houses of two or three people around the central church. This followed the Celtic tradition of Lindisfarne and the great double monasteries of Ireland. The abbey was a centre for culture and learning, which Hild ran with commitment and authority. Bede describes her as wise and kind as well as a great teacher. Whitby was predominantly a place of learning. In 664 a great synod was held at Whitby. While one of the aims of the synod was to agree a method to calculate the date of Easter, what actually transpired at Whitby was the direction that the church would take in England. Thanks to the eloquence of Wilfred English Christianity moved away from Ireland and the Celtic tradition towards the orthodoxy of Rome. After this period the great double monasteries run by high-status capable women would become a thing of the past. St Hilda is the patron saint of learning and culture shown with a pastoral staff and abbey church. Hild is also supposed to have turned snakes to stone and so ammonites are also associated with her.

Women within the court

Women were influential in court particularly in bringing Christianity to Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. Female relatives were prominent in promoting literacy and creating cultural centres. One woman in particular stands out: Æthelflæd of Mercia – Alfred’s daughter. Royal women had special status in Mercia, playing leading roles within the court. Æthelflæd is described as a noble beauty, the most wise of all lay women or ‘*la plus sage des femmes seculaires*’. She had many roles: queen, wife, mother and war leader. She was cultivated and intelligent. Growing up in Alfred’s court enabled her to understand the roots of governance and the arts of fighting the Danes. She married, probably around the age of 16, Æthelred the ealdorman (leader) of Mercia. Together they campaigned against the Danes (Vikings) in East Anglia, East Midlands and Northumbria.

Æthelflæd in the thirteenth century. Genealogical Chronicle of the English Kings, Royal MS 14 B V



Working alongside her brother Edward, once he became King of Wessex, they established fortified burhs at key points. After Æthelred’s death Æthelflæd continued to strengthen the kingdom of Mercia. She ran the comitatus or court, was backed by the earls and thanes and became known as the Lady of Mercia. She undertook campaigns, strengthening border zones and bringing strategic places under her control. Her burhs were partly military and partly commercial. They were very successful in building up and securing her territory. The Annals of Æthelflæd, written in the Midlands and included in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, give an account of her reign and achievements. At her death she was initially succeeded by her daughter Ælfwyn until her brother Edward took Mercia under his direct rule.

Hilda dies 684 – Æthelflæd dies 12 June 918 – Wynflæd dies 950s/960s

If you want know more about any of these women you can listen to the BBC Radio 3 podcasts on Anglo-Saxon Portraits at the following link: www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0144xrk



'A woman's work ...' activity

You will need some images of spindle whorls or thread boxes from Anglo-Saxon graves. There are a number of sites that have such images



You may also want to prepare a pictorial vocabulary sheet for children.

These objects along with weaving batons were found in the graves of Anglo-Saxon women. These objects are only found in the graves of women or girls.

- 1 *Why do you think this might be important? Were they important to the person or the family?* Stress that these objects were either favoured possessions or important artefacts for the person concerned.
- 2 *What could the items be used for? Were they decorative or functional?* Children may well think that the spindle whorls are beads. They may recognise that the cylinder is a box or container of some sort but may not be able to suggest what is put in it. These boxes could be hung from a girdle and generally held needles, thread and pieces of textiles. Even if you tell children this is a 'thread box' you may need to explain what that is as many households no longer have sewing boxes.
- 3 *What could the spindle whorls be? What shape are they? Why do they have a hole in them? What are they made of? Why might they be decorated?* A

spindle whorl was the weight that formed part of a drop spindle. These could be of different sizes depending on the thickness of thread to be spun. A small spindle would be for tight fine thread. Spindle whorls could be made of pottery, glass, lead or horn. Lead was one of the most common materials used.

Drop spindles were used to spin wool or flax into thread before it was woven into cloth. The prepared fleece or flax was stored on a distaff and then spun by teasing out the thread as the spindle creates tension and the spin of the spindle twists the thread.

Show children a series of images from illuminated manuscripts. While these are often from later work they show women spinning and weaving.

Can the children identify anything that is similar from the different images? Could they link this to the artefacts from the graves? (Probably not at the moment) What are the women doing and where are they doing it?

Other key vocabulary words for which you will need a definition – distaff and rolag (roll of prepared fibre for spinning)



Detail of a miniature of Gaia Caecilia or Tanaquil at her loom, while women spin and card wool. British Library.



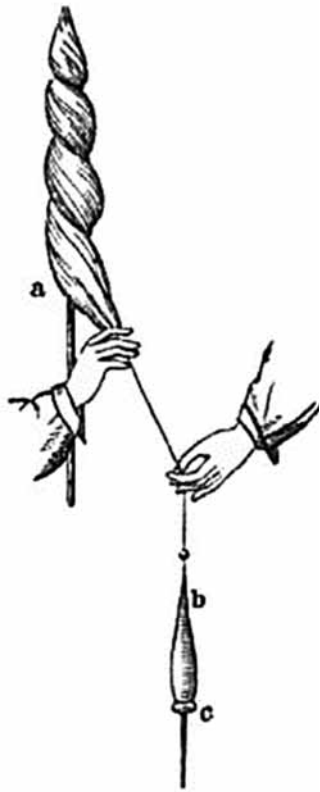
Hunterian Psalter. British Library



Luttrell Psalter. British Library



Historia Alexandri Magna. Bodleian Library



Here you can introduce the drop spindle by having a replica(s) for children to see and touch. Wool and drop spindles can be purchased from Amazon (£3.95 and £6.95 respectively)

This diagram shows how the spindle and distaff work

a= distaff
b= spindle
c= spindle whorl

<https://theheritagetrust.wordpress.com/2013/11/01/object-of-the-month-anglo-saxon-runic-spindle-whorl/>

Watch a video demonstrating how to spin with a drop spindle
www.youtube.com/watch?v=bKAJTKvl0nE

Let children each have a chance to spin a length of yarn. Create individual, group or class weaving boards and include the length of spun yarn into it. Have samples of woven woollen cloth or flax so that children can feel the texture of the weave.

How long would it take to spin and weave a piece of cloth? What does this tell us about how important these tasks were within the household?

Finish by looking at Wynflaed's will. Wynflaed's is the first will that we have that was written by a woman. She died around Ad 960 leaving a detailed list of her belongings.

What can we tell by looking at Wynflaed's bequests? How important was cloth and clothmaking?

Saint Hilda activity

Read the following account of Hilda's life by Bede in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation*:

Hilda, the handmaid of Christ, being set over that monastery, began immediately to order it in all things under a rule of life, according as she had been instructed by learned men; for Bishop Aidan, and others of the religious that knew her, frequently visited her and loved her heartily, and diligently instructed her, because of her innate wisdom and love of the service of God.

When she had for some years governed this monastery, wholly intent upon establishing a rule of life, it happened that she also undertook either to build or to set in order a monastery in the place called Streanaeshalch, and this work which was laid upon her she industriously performed; for she put this monastery under the same rule of monastic life as the former; and taught there the strict observance of justice, piety, chastity, and other virtues, and particularly of peace and charity; so that, after the example of the primitive Church, no one there was rich, and none poor, for they had all things common, and none had any private property. Her prudence was so great, that not only meaner men in their need, but sometimes even kings and princes, sought and received her counsel; she obliged those who were under her direction to give so much time to reading of the Holy Scriptures, and

to exercise themselves so much in works of justice, that many might readily be found there fit for the priesthood and the service of the altar.

Thus this handmaid of Christ, the Abbess Hilda, whom all that knew her called Mother, for her singular piety and grace, was not only an example of good life, to those that lived in her monastery, but afforded occasion of amendment and salvation to many who lived at a distance, to whom the blessed fame was brought of her industry and virtue.

When she had governed this monastery many years, it pleased Him Who has made such merciful provision for our salvation, to give her holy soul the trial of a long infirmity of the flesh, to the end that, according to the Apostle's example, her virtue might be made perfect in weakness. Struck down with a fever, she suffered from a burning heat, and was afflicted with the same trouble for six years continually; during all which time she never failed either to return thanks to her Maker, or publicly and privately to instruct the flock committed to her charge; for taught by her own experience she admonished all men to serve the Lord dutifully, when health of body is granted to them, and always to return thanks faithfully to Him in adversity, or

Task

You have been asked to design a stained-glass window of St Hilda for a church in Whitby. Design the window including ideas about what colours you would use.

What will you include? How will you show her life? Will you make this realistic or symbolic? Will you show her as an Anglo-Saxon princess or a nun? Will she be alone or with others? How will you show whether she is learned or kind or good?



bodily infirmity. In the seventh year of her sickness, when the disease turned inwards, her last day came, and about cockcrow, having received the voyage provision of Holy Housel, and called together the handmaids of Christ that were within the same monastery, she admonished them to preserve the peace of the Gospel among themselves, and with all others; and even as she spoke her words of exhortation, she joyfully saw death come, or, in the words of our Lord, passed from death unto life.

Highlight all the words that show what sort of person Hilda was. *Do you think she was influential in the area? If so, why do you think this? How did she deal with her long illness?*

Hilda is also known for encouraging Cædmon to develop his poetry. Initially a herdsman for the abbey he became a renowned English poet. Bede describes him as:

In the Monastery of this Abbess a certain brother particularly remarkable for the Grace of God, who was wont to make religious verses, so that whatever was interpreted to him out of scripture, he soon after put the same into poetical expressions of much sweetness and humility in English, which was his native language.

He is the earliest named poet of English. Only his first poem remains 'Cædmon's Hymn'. You can hear it read in old English here:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=2SRmtbu0iXQ

Hilda is also supposed to have been plagued with snakes when the monastery was first built. She gathered all the snakes together, cut off their heads and threw them off the cliff where they became petrified. These are the ammonites found on Whitby bay.



Look at images of Hilda on the web. We do not know what she looked like. *How have other artists portrayed her?*

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Æthelflæd's legacy?

Use internet sources to research the life of Æthelflæd.

Look at the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. What were her greatest achievements were they military conquests or the creation of the burhs? Is she important because she was the daughter of Alfred,

wife of Æthelred, sister of Edward or is she important in her own right?

Look at a series of text books about the Anglo Saxons. How often is Æthelflæd mentioned? Does this give you enough information to know her story?

Task

Write to the publishers of one of these textbooks and explain why you think Æthelflæd should be given more page space.

Why is she significant?

Extract from *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*

((A.D. 911 . Then the next year after this died Ethelred, lord of the Mercians.))

A.D. 912 . This year died Ethered, alderman of Mercia; and King Edward took to London, and to Oxford, and to all the lands that thereunto belonged. This year also came Ethelfleda, lady of the Mercians, on the holy eve called the invention of the holy cross, to Shergate, and built the fortress there, and the same year that at Bridgenorth.

A.D. 913 . This year, about Martinmas, King Edward had the northern fortress built at Hertford, betwixt the Memer, and the Benwic, and the Lea. After this, in the summer, betwixt gang – days and midsummer, went King Edward with some of his force into Essex, to Maldon; and encamped there the while that men built and fortified the town of Witham. And many of the people submitted to him, who were before under the power of the Danes. And some of his force, meanwhile, built the fortress at Hertford on the south side of the Lea. This year by the permission of God went Ethelfleda, lady of Mercia, with all the Mercians to Tamworth; and built the fort there in the fore-part of the summer; and before Lammas that at Stafford: in the next year that at Eddesbury, in the beginning of the summer; and the same year, late in the autumn, that at Warwick. Then in the following year was built, after mid-winter, that at Chirbury and that at Warburton; and the same year before mid-winter that at Runkorn.

((A.D. 915 . This year was Warwick built.))

A.D. 916 . This year was the innocent Abbot Egbert slain, before midsummer, on the sixteenth day before the calends of July. The same day was the feast of St. Ciricius the martyr, with his companions. And within three nights sent Ethelfleda an army into Wales, and stormed Brecknock; and there took the king's wife, with some four and thirty others.

A.D. 917 . This year rode the army, after Easter, out of Northampton and Leicester; and having broken the truce they slew many men at Hookerton and thereabout. Then, very soon after this, as the others came home, they found other troops that were riding out against Leighton. But the inhabitants were aware of it; and having fought with them they put them into full flight; and arrested all that they had taken, and also of their horses and of their weapons a good deal.

A.D. 918 . This year came a great naval armament over hither south from the Lidwiccians; (40) and two earls with it, Ohter and Rhoald. They went then west about, till they entered the mouth of the Severn; and plundered in North-Wales

everywhere by the sea, where it then suited them; and took Camlac the bishop in Archenfield, and led him with them to their ships; whom King Edward afterwards released for forty pounds. After this went the army all up; and would proceed yet on plunder against Archenfield; but the men of Hertford met them, and of Gloucester, and of the highest towns; and fought with them, and put them to flight; and they slew the Earl Rhoald, and the brother of Ohter the other earl, and many of the army. And they drove them into a park; and beset them there without, until they gave them hostages, that they would depart from the realm of King Edward. And the king had contrived that a guard should be set against them on the south side of Severnmouth; west from Wales, eastward to the mouth of the Avon; so that they durst nowhere seek that land on that side. Nevertheless, they eluded them at night, by stealing up twice; at one time to the east of Watchet, and at another time at Porlock. There was a great slaughter each time; so that few of them came away, except those only who swam out to the ships. Then sat they outward on an island, called the Flat-holms; till they were very short of meat, and many men died of hunger, because they could not reach any meat. Thence went they to Dimmet, and then out to Ireland. This was in harvest. After this, in the same year, before Martinmas, went King Edward to Buckingham with his army, and sat there four weeks, during which he built the two forts on either side of the water, ere he departed thence. And Earl Thurkytel sought him for his lord; and all the captains, and almost all the first men that belonged to Bedford; and also many of those that belonged to Northampton. This year Ethelfleda, lady of the Mercians, with the help of God, before Laminas, conquered the town called Derby, with all that thereto belonged; and there were also slain four of her thanes, that were most dear to her, within the gates.

((A.D. 918 . But very shortly after they had become so, she died at Tamworth, twelve days before midsummer, the eighth year of her having rule and right lordship over the Mercians; and her body lies at Gloucester, within the east porch of St. Peter's church.))

A.D. 919 . This year King Edward went with his army to Bedford, before Martinmas, and conquered the town; and almost all the burgesses, who obeyed him before, returned to him; and he sat there four weeks, and ordered the town to be repaired on the south side of the water, ere he departed thence.

((A.D. 919 . This year also the daughter of Ethelred, lord of the Mercians, was deprived of all dominion over the Mercians, and carried into Wessex, three weeks before mid-winter; she was called Elfwina.))

www.britannia.com/history/docs/902-24.html