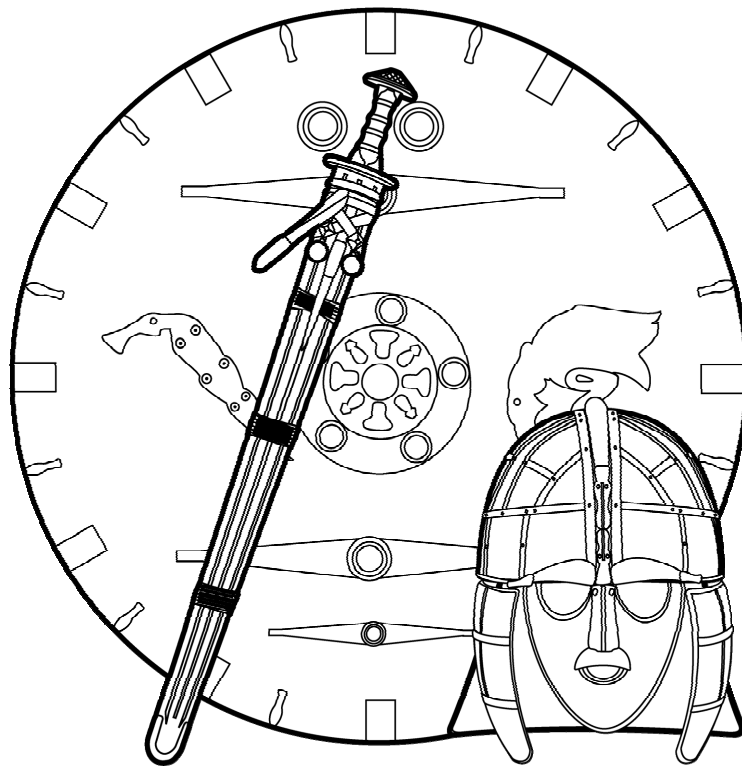


# Woden's Warriors

Warfare, Beliefs, Arms and Armour  
in Northern Europe during  
the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Centuries

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# Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	6	A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE GERMANIC SWORD FROM 1 <sup>ST</sup> TO 7 <sup>TH</sup>	
NOTES ON THE DATES AND NAMES OF PERIODS .....	9	CENTURIES.....	93
ILLUSTRATIONS .....	9	POMMELS AND GRIPS.....	93
THE STAFFORDSHIRE HOARD.....	9	BLADES .....	93
GLOSSARY.....	11	SCABBARDS .....	97
FOREWORD .....	16	RING SWORDS .....	98
INTRODUCTION .....	17	GARNET AND GOLD .....	99
<b>I. ARMS AND ARMOUR .....</b>	<b>23</b>	POMMELLED SWORDS.....	99
THE HELMET .....	23	SOME IMPORTANT SWORDS.....	105
Helmet classification.....	23	Nocera Umbra, Italy.....	105
THE SWEDISH SERIES.....	23	Valsgärde, Sweden.....	105
The Sutton Hoo Helmet.....	23	West Heslerton, England.....	106
The Functions of the Helmet .....	26	Prittlewell, England.....	107
<i>Vendel XIV and the Helmet from Broa</i> .....	28	Acklam Wold, North Yorkshire.....	108
Valsgärde 5 and the Helmet from Ultuna .....	29	Staffordshire Hoard.....	108
Valsgärde 6.....	30	SWORDS AS WEAPONS.....	109
Vendel I & Vendel XII.....	30	The Burial of Swords.....	110
Valsgärde 7 & Valsgärde 8.....	36	SWORD ORNAMENTS & SUSPENSION SWORD BEADS.....	110
Vendel XI & Vendel X.....	36	The Eye in the Sword?.....	112
Fragments of other Helmets .....	36	Sword Pyramids.....	115
in the Swedish Series.....	36	Sword Suspension.....	118
HELMETS IN THE ENGLISH SERIES.....	38	THE SHIELD.....	120
The Pioneer Helm.....	38	FUNCTION.....	120
The Coppergate Helmet.....	39	THE BOSS .....	121
Remains of other helmets found in England.....	40	GRIPS .....	121
The Guilden Moor Boar .....	40	THE BOARD .....	122
HELMETS OF HORN .....	41	LENTICULAR BOARDS.....	123
Benty Grange.....	41	BOARD COVERINGS.....	124
The Köln Helm.....	41	DECORATION.....	124
SPANGENHELMS .....	42	SUMMING UP.....	127
BROADBAND HELMS .....	43	SOME IMPORTANT SHIELDS .....	127
LAMELLAR HELMS.....	43	Sutton Hoo Mound 1.....	133
LEATHER HELMS .....	46	THE SPEAR.....	140
ICONIC HELMS .....	46	THROWING SPEARS.....	141
FURTHER THOUGHTS.....	48	THRUSTING SPEARS .....	142
<i>PRESSBLECHE</i> DESIGNS AND THE .....	49	SOME IMPORTANT SPEARHEADS.....	142
ORIGINS OF THE SWEDISH HELMET SERIES .....	49	THE SEAX.....	144
THE <i>PRESSBLECHE</i> .....	49	MISSILE WEAPONS.....	147
SYMBOLISM WITHIN THE <i>PRESSBLECHE</i> .....	54	THE BOW.....	147
OTHER ELEMENTS OF HELMET DESIGN.....	60	THE SLING AND STAFF-SLING.....	148
ORIGINS OF THE <i>PRESSBLECHE</i> HELMETS.....	60	FRANCISCA .....	148
THE SWORD .....	84	THE ARMOUR.....	150
THE SUTTON HOO MOUNDS 1 & 17.....	84	MAIL .....	150
Pattern Welding .....	84	PADDING.....	151
The Sword Hilt .....	88	SPLINT ARMOUR.....	151
The Scabbard.....	90		
Sword Belt and Decoration.....	90		

METAL LAMELLAR.....	152	SUTTON HOO.....	200
SCALE ARMOUR.....	152	Timing of the Sutton Hoo Mound Burials.....	202
LEATHER AND FABRIC ARMOUR.....	153	SNAPE.....	202
SHIPS AND NAVAL WARFARE.....	155	CAISTER-ON SEA.....	203
PIRATE ACTIVITY.....	155	OTHER EAST ANGLIAN BOAT BURIALS.....	203
SHIPS.....	157	TAPLOW.....	203
The Sutton Hoo Ships.....	160	PRITTLEWELL.....	204
Hygelac's Frisian Expedition.....	161	SWEDISH BOAT BURIALS.....	204
<b>II. SOCIETY AND RELIGION.....</b>	<b>164</b>	Uppsala.....	204
THE MEADHALL.....	164	Vendel.....	205
THE HALL.....	165	Valsgårde.....	205
MEAD AND CELEBRATIONS.....	165	Other boat burials.....	206
HALL RITUAL.....	166	SYMBOLS OF KINGSHIP.....	207
EVALUATING THE EVIDENCE.....	166	THE SCEPTRE.....	207
THE RITE OF SYMBEL.....	167	The Functions of the Sceptre.....	208
WARRIORS AND WARFARE.....	168	The Sceptre: Concluding Thoughts.....	213
WARFARE IN THE 6 <sup>TH</sup> AND 7 <sup>TH</sup> CENTURIES.....	168	THE WAND - THE WOOD, BONE OR IVORY ROD.....	213
TRAINING.....	168	THE IRON STAND.....	214
RECRUITMENT.....	169	THE JEWELLERY.....	216
THE SIZE OF ARMIES.....	170	THE MANUFACTURING SKILLS.....	216
MOTIVATION.....	171	<i>Pressbleches</i> and Casting.....	216
LOGISTICS.....	172	<i>Cloisonné</i> .....	216
TACTICS.....	172	Filigree and Granulation.....	217
PSYCHOLOGY.....	174	Punching.....	217
TYPES OF BATTLE.....	175	THE SWORD BELT.....	217
THE EXPERIENCE OF BATTLE.....	176	THE GREAT GOLD BUCKLE AND ASSOCIATED BELT.....	218
RELIGION.....	177	THE PURSE.....	218
RELIGION.....	177	THE SHOULDER CLASPS.....	219
EVIDENCE.....	177	THE MEANING OF THE JEWELS.....	219
NATURE.....	177	THE AXE HAMMER.....	221
THE GODS.....	178	ANIMAL SYMBOLISM.....	223
GENEALOGY.....	178	HORSES.....	223
THE FERTILITY CULT.....	179	The Importance of Horses.....	226
WODEN.....	183	BOARS.....	226
COSMOLOGY, WYRD, SPACE & TIME.....	185	THE ANIMALS OF BATTLE: EAGLES, RAVENS AND WOLVES.....	228
SACRAL KINGSHIP.....	188	<i>Eagles And Ravens</i> .....	228
Duties of the King.....	189	<i>Wolves</i> .....	229
THE ALCIS.....	192	SERPENTS, SNAKES, WYRMS OR DRAGONS.....	230
TIW/THUNOR AND FRIGG.....	194	<b>III. CONCLUSION.....</b>	<b>233</b>
Tiw.....	194	RELIVING WARFARE.....	233
Thunor.....	195	THE USE OF WEAPONS.....	233
Frigg.....	195	THE USE OF HORSES.....	238
CONCLUSIONS.....	195	POSTSCRIPT.....	243
BURIAL.....	198	BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	245
MOUND BURIAL.....	198		
SHIP BURIAL.....	198		
Why Ship Burial?.....	199		

# Foreword

This book shows something of the way of life and outlook of warriors in 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> century Northern Europe, which is a time when the cemetery at Sutton Hoo was active. We will use the burials at Sutton Hoo - mainly Mound 1 - as a starting point for our exploration. The artefacts found there provide a link to a culture and attitudes found across northern Europe. In some cases we will dwell on certain particularly interesting artefacts which, at the time of writing, are unique. However, this book is not just about Sutton Hoo but about the warriors of that culture and time. An attempt has been made to peer into the world-view of those warriors, which includes exploring heathen / pagan beliefs.

The period is one of great change which ended with the near universal adoption of Christianity by the elites of northern European. However, most of the population for most of this period were either still heathen or members of families and communities where Christianity had only recently taken hold. The customs, beliefs and attitudes of this time were therefore heavily influenced by a pre-Christian way-of-life. There was no overnight change from one way-of-life to another.

In trying to understand the outlook of the people at that time it is probably better to first understand the view of Christians at that time because we are much more familiar with Christian morals. It is more difficult for us to gain an insight into heathen attitudes and how they regarded such things as loyalty, honour and death. So we should remember that there is much that we cannot relate to simply because we are so far removed in time and culture. For instance, most of us will never really know what it was like to experience the more mundane aspects of life in that time, such as the lack of privacy and the tastes and smells they knew. The feeling of the clothes they wore affected their lives as did the darkness at the end of the day which considerably limited what they could do. For many such reasons we are unable to gain a full understanding of what it was like to be a warrior at that time.

Other things that make us strangers to the period are that those of us who live in the western world are fortunate in being protected by medical care and welfare provision. In the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries an individual relied on family and community for many things, but to what extent did they believe that their fate was determined by the strength of their arm or their 'luck'? And to what extent were beliefs and superstitions similar across northern Europe? There is no suggestion of a common body of heathen beliefs and rituals across the region at that time but a broad range of ideas and attitudes were shared, and the spread of certain types of artefacts suggests that they tended to value very similar symbolism.

One of the reasons that this area of study is so intriguing is that we know so little about the period. Despite the many physical remains and a fairly rich literature, they are just fragmented pieces in a jigsaw that has many (if not most) of its parts missing. However, there is still much to glean from the pieces we have and I hope the discussion can be advanced a little further with this volume. There is no claim that I have arrived at definitive answers to any of the questions raised by other observers and commentators but hopefully I have raised more questions. I have relied heavily on the works of others in order to provide as coherent a picture as I believe is possible. It is certain that some will reject a number of my ideas and suggestions but where I have made suggestions and interpretations I have done so with consideration for all the evidence known to me at the time of writing, including experiments carried out by myself and others. The book is mainly concerned with the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries but there is much from other periods that helps illuminate our study. When out of period evidence has been used I have endeavoured to make this clear.

A glossary has been included but some terms (such as the names of modern countries) are used as a convenient way of roughly marking out regions and do not refer to present day states or countries unless there is an explicit reference to it. 'Anglo-Saxon', 'early English' and '*Englisc*' tend, in this book, to be synonymous, except with reference to the language where 'Old English' is always used. I have tried to avoid expressions like the *Vendel Period*, the *Viking Age*, or the *Late Roman Iron Age*, as these are not precise and there is much disagreement regarding the period boundaries among those who are experts in the field. These terms can be emotionally loaded depending on who and where you are and, as we have seen on page 9, even the experts can't quite agree on the nomenclature or timing.

# Introduction

From the 4th century onwards there had been large movements of peoples all around Europe and elsewhere, so much so that this time is often referred to as the *Migration Period*.<sup>1</sup> The 5th century brought with it the definite decline of the Roman Empire, with Rome withdrawing troops from areas that the Emperors considered peripheral to the fortunes of Rome, one such being Britain. By the 6th and 7th centuries, most of those movements of people were beginning to consolidate into local powerbases often vying with each other for wealth and power.

Northern Europe in the 6th and 7th centuries was politically far removed from anything that we would recognise today; not one modern European state or country existed at that time but some of the peoples who were to create homelands/countries that bore their name were very much in evidence. For example, the Franks - a vigorous and dynamic people - were more or less united, give or take the odd squabble or major war, under the Merovingian kings. They were busily trying to extend their influence and absorb as much of the wealth and land within Europe as the ambition of their kings and logistics would allow. The Merovingians were the major power in northern Europe during this period and tended to look towards Roman systems of power and the Byzantine Empire as the models to follow. The Franks would provide France with its name.

Scandinavia was split into kingdoms and chiefdoms, depending on the land, fishing, controlling trade, raiding and warfare were ways of building power and wealth. There is a lot of evidence that some areas were able to exploit other natural resources, such as iron, to their advantage; this is particularly so in the Lake Mälaren region of Sweden.<sup>2</sup> The bog finds, mainly in Denmark from the 1st to 5th centuries, have told us much about the turbulence and warlike character of the populations of this area. Poems, like *Beowulf*, and later sagas have given us glimpses of the life of these peoples which appears to have been inhabited by great heroes, kings of varying character and great wealth, plus the odd monster. Some of the leaders in Scandinavia were the sea-kings mentioned in the literature of the time. Both the *Dani* in Denmark and the *Svear* in Sweden would give their names to modern states. The continent had other peoples of considerable power too, such as the Alamanni and the Lombards in more southern parts and Thuringians and Saxons further north.

The British Isles were politically very different from today. It appears that the Romans left a power vacuum behind them, which many rushed to fill, both from the British Isles and from elsewhere. One group of these invaders, the Angles, gave their tribal name to the country of England. By the 6th and 7th centuries England<sup>3</sup> was made up of a number of different and constantly changing political entities. Traditionally, at this time England is regarded as consisting of the “Heptarchy” – seven kingdoms. In fact this was not often the case, as kingdoms tended to come and go, new ones would emerge for a time only to be absorbed by a neighbour a few years later. In this world of competing kingdoms, loyalty would often be to the local *hard man* – often called “king” but in reality the local warlord; he might be not just the ruler but the one who was charged with interceding between his followers and the local gods. It is likely that one of his main

tasks was to gain success in war – “unlucky” rulers tended not to last long as they were unable to reward their followers appropriately. This ‘lord and retainer’ principle probably pertained in all the areas of northern Europe throughout our period of study and beyond, eventually developing into a fully fledged feudal system in many places.

In England - and in East Anglia in particular - most people by this time spoke a form of Old English. Whatever their ancestors’ origins, by now they belonged to the predominant Germanic culture that had become established in large parts of the island of Britain following the loss of control by the Romans and the coming of the Angles, Jutes, Saxons, Frisians and others. The vast majority of these people at this time were heathens, although by the very late sixth century Christianity was beginning to exert its influence and missionaries had been busy in parts of England.

The kingdom of the East Angles, based mostly in what is now Norfolk and Suffolk, had by the middle of the sixth century become powerful and was able to dominate some of its neighbours, although it is not possible to exactly delineate the boundaries of this kingdom as they are not known, and were probably never exactly defined.

The kings of the East Angles were keen to maintain their power and prestige and would have gone out of their way to make certain that everyone within their sphere of influence accepted the dominance of their ruling family; that sphere included their own kingdom and surrounding territories. This was particularly important because they could never feel totally secure from potentially hostile neighbours or internally from over-ambitious followers or kinsmen taking advantage of any lessening of the king’s power. Then there was the effect of the new religion of Christianity: it must have been quite a fine judgement as to whether it was more politically advantageous for a king to convert – perhaps to gain powerful allies - or remain faithful to the old ways.

One way in which kings were able to demonstrate their power was through the accumulation of wealth - and the burials at Sutton Hoo are surely a testament to this.

Having allies and contacts in other parts of Europe was a significant method of demonstrating power and influence, and certainly the elite at Sutton Hoo, if the evidence of the burials and of Bede can be trusted, had no shortage of diplomatic contacts. The burials contain coins and rich artefacts from all over Europe, Christian as well as heathen, from the Merovingian Empire as well as the Byzantine. They controlled an important port at *Gippeswic* (Ipswich) and presumably raised proceeds from the trade that occurred there. They also had extensive lands to farm in the fertile areas of East Anglia.

However, the East Anglian elites’ most powerful cultural ties seem to have been with Scandinavia, this is particularly evident in the art they created but also in their wargear, religion and rites of burial. The most frequently used funeral rite in East Anglia, as in most other Germanic areas of northern Europe, was cremation. Mound burial seems to indicate high status. Ship burial is so rare that it occurs almost exclusively in southern Sweden and in East Anglia.<sup>4</sup> Mound 1 at Sutton Hoo contained the largest of all known ship burials in Europe.

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<sup>1</sup> The *Migration Period* is not a precise term and commentators often use different starting times and end times to define it- see Foreword for comment.

<sup>2</sup> Buchwald, 2005. p.323.

<sup>3</sup> England, like the names of all modern countries in this book are used as terms of convenience

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<sup>4</sup> As opposed to boat burials, which are a little more frequent. For the purposes of this book, a ship is a vessel of more than nine metres. Also see the chapter on Ship Burials below

Maritime links with Scandinavia and the mainland North Sea coast are not surprising since there was trade and communication with the lands from which the Germanic settlers had come. Travelling overland was generally quite difficult with few, if any, serviceable roads. There was also the possibility of meeting unfriendly forces guarding their territories, or with outlaws of various kinds. Travelling at sea, especially directly across the North Sea but also along coastal routes, would have been quicker and much safer than travelling by land. No place on the North Sea or Channel coast is many days' sailing from from any other similar place. So, despite the distance, maintaining relations with southern Sweden may not have been too arduous and could well have been an important trade and diplomatic link as many commentators have suggested.<sup>1</sup>

It is with sixth and seventh century Northern Europe that this book is concerned. We will consider how the warriors of this period saw their place in society, what they believed and the bonds of loyalty that shaped their lives.

The book is organised in three distinct sections:

Section 1 discusses arms and armour and those things directly connected with fighting;

Section 2 deals with the social and religious background to warfare, which includes religion, feasting and symbolism;

Section 3 is concerned with concluding thoughts together with some ideas about what re-enactment can teach us.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, see John Hines, *The Scandinavian Character of Anglia England*