



*A gilded bronze 'disc' brooch.
Anglo Saxon. £120.*



*Two Anglo Saxon strap ends
with chip carved decoration.
£65 each.*



*A zoomorphic brooch found in
Kent. Saxon. £125.*

*A bronze trefoil brooch. Viking.
£145.*



*An Anglo Saxon funerary urn
with decorative bosses. £395.*



*A silver ring of twisted wire
design. Viking period. £85.*



*A 'radiate head' fibula found in
Cambs. Anglo Saxon period.
£150.*

Antiquities: Part Seven Anglo Saxon & Viking Antiquities. Includes Price Guide

by Vincent McCarthy

In the fourth century Britain was a wealthy province of the Roman Empire and as such attracted the envy of raiders from overseas. With around 50,000 troops garrisoned here such raids, though troublesome, were usually repelled. However things changed around 400AD when the Goths under Alaric laid siege to the centres of the Empire. The emperor Honorius was forced to withdraw troops from Britain to defend Rome itself and he told the citizens that they must look to defend themselves in the future.

Rome fell to the Goths in 410AD and the centres of Empire moved to the east. With no garrison to call on, the British did their best to defend their towns and estates from the fresh influx of invaders, with some degree of success. However over the years Picts and Scots from Scotland and Ireland as well as Angles and Saxons from Denmark and Northern Germany began to settle on these shores. Most of the early settlements were in the east, notably in Kent and East Anglia, whilst the raiders from across the Irish sea felt more at home in Wales and the west where they mixed with other original Britons or Celtic people.

The Angles and Saxons were fierce warriors using iron weapons but apparently little body armour. Collectors of military artefacts will find iron spearheads of the socketed kind fairly readily at around £100 to £200 depending on condition. Swords are rather more difficult and are mainly found in burials as are the domed iron bosses from the centres of their wooden shields. Prices are similar to those for spears. Helmets are rare appearing only in the graves of chieftains or kings. The early Anglo Saxon settlers were pagan and in much of the country their ideas prevailed over the Christianity of the Roman British. Up to around 600AD they buried their dead with grave goods, personal items of jewellery or weapons and domestic utensils which give us a clear picture of the sort of lives they lived.

Some of the newcomers, mainly the Angles, used cremation burials in pots of various sizes, depending on the age of the deceased. These pots or urns are usually in a dark grey-brown or black fabric, always decorated with either incised or stamped motifs or even simple faces. Some have projecting raised bosses around the shoulders and occasionally little glass windows in the base to enable the spirit to look out. All these urns are fired at low temperatures so are friable and difficult to find intact. They are surprisingly popular with collectors and can be bought for upwards of £250 depending on condition.

These early years of what is now called Anglo Saxon England were known as the 'dark ages' simply because of a dearth of written materials. Most of the documentary evidence was written at a later date, usually by clerics, so that the evidence is somewhat skewed in favour of the lives of Christian peoples. However we do have a wealth of artefacts to help fill in the gaps in the historical record. Amongst the most common finds are clothing fasteners or brooches. Many of these are directly descended from Roman types such as bow type fibulae or disc brooches. Some are gilded or have cells containing variously coloured enamels. One of the differences is the widespread use of iron for the pins of brooches. Examples are often found with only a trace of rust where the pin had been. Circular brooches with slightly raised rims are known as saucer brooches and are amongst the best in terms of decoration which may well be chip carved to a high degree of artistry and are often gilded. Bow type fibulae can vary enormously in quality of decoration and also in sheer size. Some later Anglo Saxon long or cruciform types can be up to seven or eight inches in length. I can recall seeing a few of even more impressive size.

Collectors of brooches have a wealth of material to tempt them at prices from £50 and upwards depending on style and condition. For instance a good sized long brooch in good condition with pleasing patination can be around £300 or more: a similar example, perhaps repaired may be had for less than £120. Buckles and belt decorations in bronze are also fairly easy to find. A popular type is the oval frame with high arched pin such as the ones found in the Sutton Hoo ship burial. These are from the early seventh century and can cost from £70 or rather more if nicely decorated. Larger buckles with associated plates, often imported from mainland Europe, can be amongst the most attractive of artefacts. Bronze plates can be chip carved with animals or other motifs, often gilded but nowadays found with rich green patination. A fairly simple and small example may cost £100 whilst really good specimens are highly prized and can make £500 to £1000 in the salerooms.

Around 600AD, largely thanks to the efforts of Augustine and Paulinus, the country began to convert to Christianity. The spread was fairly quick and is evidenced by the change in burial customs and the appearance of chapels and churches, along with a number of small cells occupied by hermit monks. As time went on we had Christian kings who promoted monasteries for a new clergy. We owe most of our written evidence to these clerics. Learned men like Bede and Roger of Wendover leave many insights into life in mid Saxon England.

The fragmentary nature of the early settlements coalesced into the four larger kingdoms of Northumbria, Mercia, East Anglia and Wessex. This led to some measure of stability and made the issue of coinage possible and helped increase trade. Iron was still used extensively for the manufacture of tools such as axes, knives and tongs. Bronze was also much used for smaller articles such as keys, pins, tweezers, strap ends, wrist clasps for clothing etc. Many of these small artefacts are available to collectors at modest prices. For example a pair of tweezers or a hair pin may cost £20 and a strap end from £40. Other examples of inexpensive small artefacts lie in the area of personal adornment such as rings and bangles of bronze or silver from £50. Beads of amber or glass, possibly of the popular melon shape are available for about £20. Bone combs or hair pins are sometimes found. Being fragile they are usually in poor condition.

In 793AD the monks of Lindisfarne recorded that... 'God's church has been ravaged by heathen men...' The Vikings had arrived. The very name Viking means something akin to pirate, and this is what they appeared to be; a sea borne band of raiders. Coming from Scandinavia they caused havoc along the coastal regions of Britain. In the course of time the Vikings fought their way to rule most of the country. Only Wessex held out, especially under King Alfred. After many setbacks Alfred signed a peace treaty with the Viking king and a period of relative calm ensued with much trade between the two sides. The Vikings were fearsome warriors but also fine artists and craftsmen producing extremely decorative weapons and items of personal adornment. Some distinctive motifs appear; the swirling serpent, the intertwined rope, the circle enclosing spirals. These motifs appear in wood and stone carving and in smaller scale on personal jewellery. The collector may find 'tortoise' brooches (slightly domed circular disc types) and large penannulars with long pins, all very decorative. Prices can be high for particularly good examples, from £200 to over £1000 and upwards. Smaller Viking artefacts such as finger rings, simple disc brooches and pins are around £50 to £100, and iron tools can be had for similar prices. As the Vikings were pagan they had a pantheon of deities such as Thor, Odin and Freyja to revere. These deities occasionally appear as little bronze figures or as elements in other kinds of decoration.

The runic alphabet was used, being a simple system of letters represented by a series of short straight lines, easy to cut in stone or wood. Inscriptions do sometimes turn up on bronze rings or strap ends but are scarce. The Viking-controlled area of Britain, east of a line roughly drawn between London and Lancashire, produced artefacts that were an amalgam of Anglo Saxon and Scandinavian influences. Not as vigorous or splendid as the native Viking products they are nevertheless worthy of collection and study especially as they are reasonably priced. There was a revival of Christianity which is reflected in artefacts such as ivory carvings from churches and bronze decorative clasps from books and caskets. Collectors will sometimes find these but as religious artefacts are generally popular they are not cheap.

A period of fairly enlightened rule ended with the death of Cnut. This was followed by a crisis over the succession and endless disputes between rivals in England and in France. The end of Anglo Saxon England came with the victory of William of Normandy at Hastings in 1066. This did lead to dramatic changes in the way the country was governed but between them the Anglo Saxons and Vikings left a legacy of language and law which survives to this day.



A bronze disc brooch with animal motif. Viking. £125.



A socketed iron spear head. Anglo Saxon. £125.



An iron wood cutting axe found in Lincolnshire. Viking. £95.



A trefoil head brooch found in Yorkshire. Anglo Saxon. £135.



A bronze stirrup decoration with mythical animal design. Anglo Scandinavian. Found in Oxfordshire. £135.



A decorated annular brooch. Late Anglo Saxon. £120.



An 'equal arm' type brooch with scroll motifs. Anglo Saxon. £95.