2006

A Royal Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Loftus

The Anglo-Saxons were a group of people came to Britain after the Romans left, around AD410. They came from what is now North Germany and southern Denmark and settled on the east coast of England. They joined the native people of Britain, who were mostly descended from the Celts.

By the 7th century the settlers and native Britons had learned to live together peacefully, and Christianity began to appear (before that people worshipped different gods). As new beliefs emerged, ways for burying the dead changed.

The most important cemetery of this period in north-east England was excavated at Street House, near Loftus in north-east Yorkshire, in 2005-07. In the centre of the Street House cemetery was a grave that contained the skeleton of a woman who has become known as the 'Anglo-Saxon Princess'.

So, why was she called the Anglo-Saxon Princess? The skeleton was found in a grave with a lot of ironwork around the edge and three gold pendants. This type of grave dates from AD 640-660 and is known as a 'bed burial' because the corpse was buried lying on a bed. There are 17 graves of this type known in England, mostly in East Anglia and southern England. Nearly all of the people buried in this way were women. Historians believe that high status royal women were placed on a decorated bed, whilst high-status men were buried with weapons, drinking vessels, horses or a boat as symbols of their status.

The bed itself, made of ash-wood and iron, was very ornate. One of the pendants, known as the Street House pendant, is a piece of outstanding craftsmanship: there is not another one like it (in other words it is unique) in the Anglo-Saxon world. The pendant measures 37mm x 27mm and is made of gold, and would have been worn on a gold chain around the neck. It shows that the person buried at Street House was of high status and this is why she has become known as the 'Anglo Saxon Princess'.

The discovery of the Street House Anglo-Saxon cemetery has led to many questions about who the Princess was, where she lived and what she was doing at Street House. Archaeological research continues in the search for an Anglo-Saxon village near the cemetery.

Gold pendant found at the Loftus bed burial site.

Model of how the princess might have looked when she was buried.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

1. Who were the Anglo-Saxons?
A group of people who came to Britain after the Romans had left in AD410.

2. Where did they come from?
North Germany and South Denmark.

3. Before Christianity emerged in Britain, what did people worship?
Different gods.

4. Where was the most important cemetery of the 7th Century in north-east England excavated?
Street House near Loftus, in north-east Yorkshire.

5. Whose grave was found at the centre of the cemetery?
The 'Anglo-Saxon Princess'.

6. Why was she called this?
Because she is believed to have been of high status.

7. Why was this type of burial called a 'bed burial?'
Because the corpse was buried lying on a bed.

8. What was it about the bed that tells us that the person buried there was of high status?
It was made of ash-wood and iron and was very ornate.

9. In the space below, describe the 'Street House pendant':
The Street House pendant is of outstanding craftmanship and it is made of gold. It measures 37mm x 27mm.

10. What does unique mean?
There is not another one like it.

11. How would the pendant be worn?
On a chain around the neck.

Find out more:

- The finds from the excavation can be seen at Kirkleatham Museum, Kirkleatham, Redcar TS10 5NW, http://www.redcar-cleveland.gov.uk/kirkleathammuseum
- Saxon Princess Trail (Loftus): Self-guided walk leaflet available at https://www.walkingloftusandthenorthyorkshirecoast.com/self-guided-walks