

Information Sheet

Archaeology Series No. 27

ANGLO SAXON LINCOLNSHIRE, 400-600 AD.



Bronze 'hanging-bowl' from the great pagan cemetery at Loveden Hill, near Grantham

INTRODUCTION

Between 400 and 600 AD the area of modern Lincolnshire went through a great transformation. From being a rich and prosperous part of the Roman province of Britain, containing the second main town of the Coritanian tribe — at Lincoln, it became one of the main points of entry for settlers of Germanic origin. The incomers were mainly Angles from southern Denmark. Gradually the local population changed through war and intermarriage into one of largely Anglian background and speech. The great houses ceased to be maintained and became overgrown, the towns lost much of their importance, and new villages sprang up wherever there was good farmland and water. Over this period of two centuries political links grew and a Kingdom of Lindsey was established, probably with Lincoln as its capital. In the Fens the Roman drainage systems broke down and the area was probably not resettled until after 600, when it formed part of the new kingdom of Mercia. The incomers were pagans: the native Romano-British inhabitants were Christian at least in theory. It seems unlikely that Christianity survived long and it was not until the second quarter of the seventh century that it was reintroduced. (see Information Sheet No. 21, Anglo-Saxon Lincolnshire 600-870 AD.)



Anglo-Saxon brooches; (left) annular in the form of two biting serpents, from Searby, (right) 'swastika' or 'fylfot' brooch, from Ruskington. The swastika is an ancient religious symbol, revived by the Third Reich.

THE EVIDENCE

Much of our evidence comes from archaeological excavations and from chance finds of archaeological material. No buildings of this date survive above ground and there is little contemporary written evidence. Historians such as Bede (673 — 735) were recording hearsay and half-understood memories of this period before the Church was established. Archaeology frequently presents a rather one-sided picture of the period as so much of what survives comes from cemeteries, in the form of grave-goods. A number of house sites have been excavated, and others are known from characteristic finds, but they only represent a tiny proportion of those that existed and they may not be typical. A great number of early settlements probably underly modern villages, and so are not easy to examine.



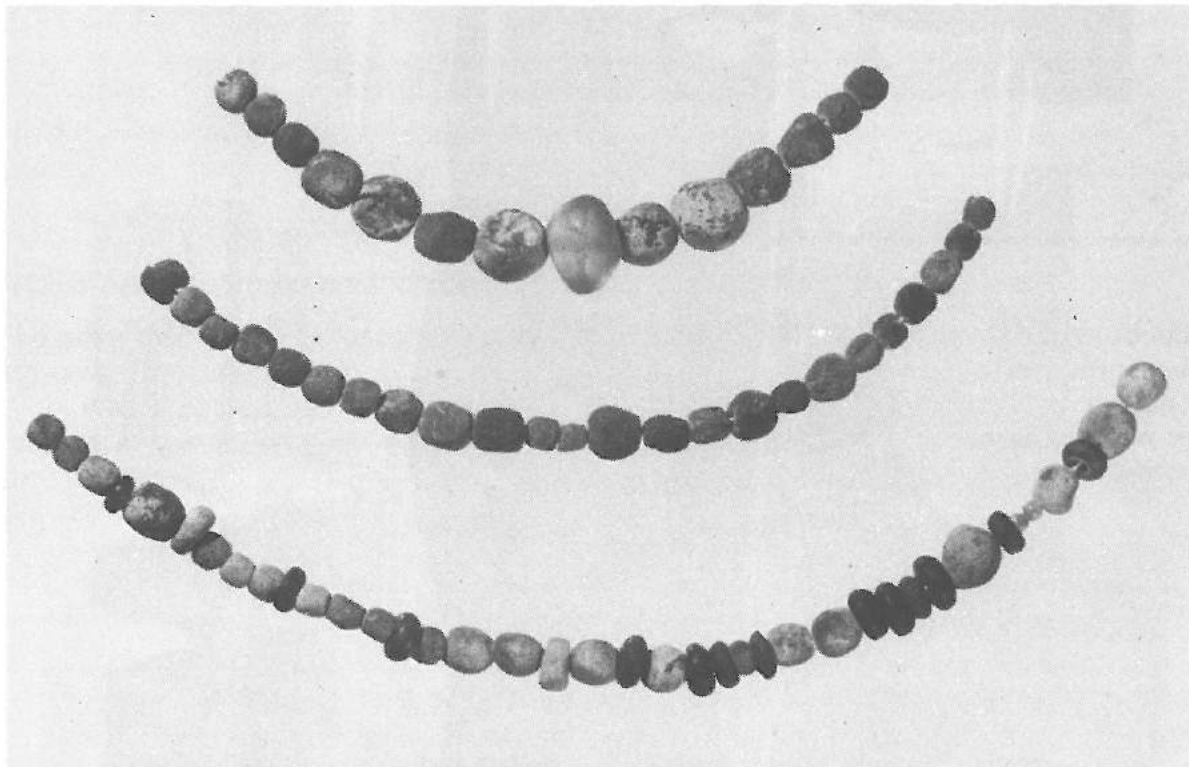
Wooden bucket bound with decorated bronze strips and iron rings, found at Loveden Hill. (The wooden staves have been restored).

CEMETERIES

Some eighty cemeteries are recorded in the area of the present county of Lincolnshire. A number of these are only known from stray finds, but at Old Sleaford, Ruskington and Loveden Hill the totals run into hundreds of burials: the latter site alone has about 1800 in all and is one of the largest cemeteries in the whole country.

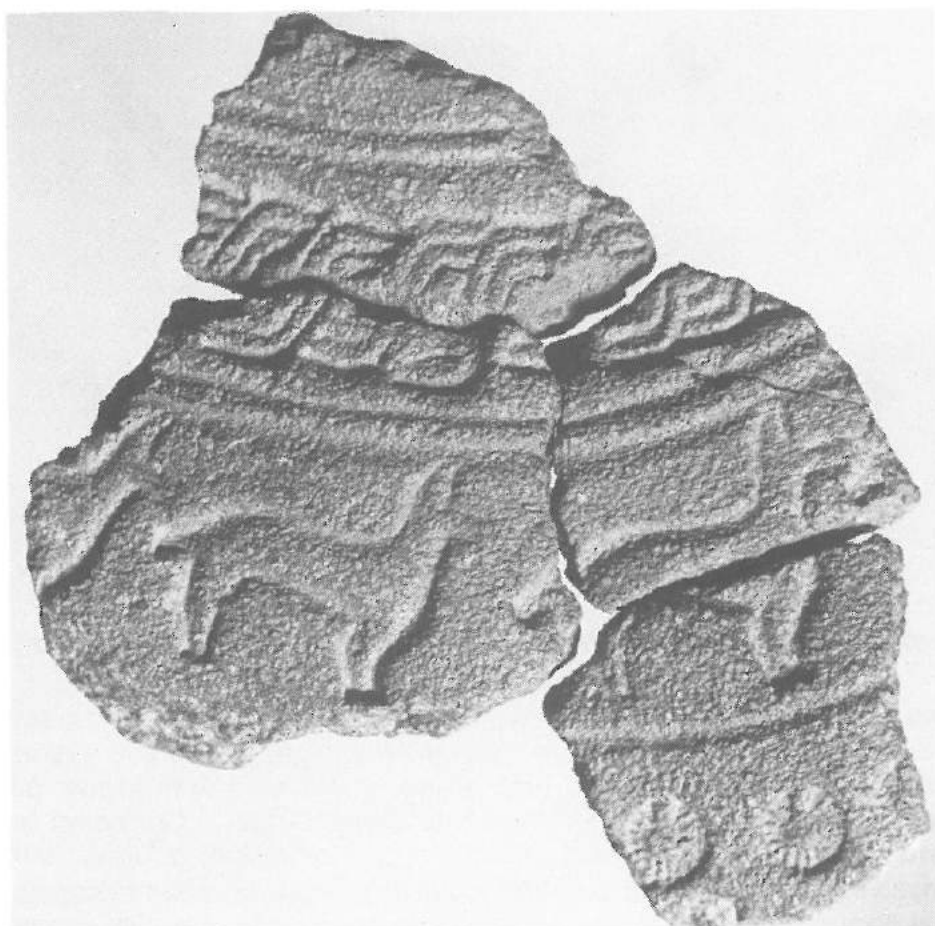
In addition to these large cemeteries there are several isolated burials such as those at Mareham Lane, Sleaford, at Grantham and at Horncastle. At the latter a skeleton discovered before 1917 was accompanied by a sword and two spearheads, an unusually rich group of personal weapons. Most cemeteries, however, lie between these extremes of numbers.

The value of the cemeteries lies in the light shed on customs and costumes at a time when history tells us virtually nothing. The dead were buried fully clothed and with their jewellery, weapons and everyday possessions. Women had brooches, beads, knives, sleeve-fasteners, 'girdle-hangers' on which keys might be suspended and sometimes bags — the evidence for which survives in large ivory rings which formed the tops. Men had knives, spears and shields, the iron bosses of which usually survive. Swords were rare and valuable. Both sexes wore brooches to fasten their clothes and at Fonaby near Caistor the corroded brooches retained much evidence for the fabric of the garments.



Strings of amber, glass, and crystal beads from women's graves at Ruskington.

There is also evidence for burial customs. Some burials are rather strange: corpses beheaded, buried face down, or in pairs. The graves might be marked in some way, to avoid disturbance. Some were lined with stone or provided with stone 'pillows'. In Lincolnshire cremations are more common than grave-burials. Cremated bones were placed in urns, mostly highly decorated with stamped or incised designs. Where grave goods themselves were cremated only mangled fragments or melted droplets survive. Cremation is thought to be the main burial practice of the Anglian settlers. Some cemeteries seem to have a 'focus' — as though there might be a temple or holy place at the centre. Loveden Hill long continued as the meeting place of the local Wapentake Court.



Two urns from the cemetery at Loveden Hill; (above) with a runic inscription perhaps containing the name 'Sidebold', (below) with a repeated stamped pattern of dogs.

SETTLEMENTS

Much less is known about domestic life. A number of house-sites have been excavated and there is evidence from finds of weaving equipment etc. for several others. Houses have been found or excavated at Woolsthorpe, Caythorpe, Willoughton, Cherry Willingham and Salmonby and in each case the house was of 'sunken-floored' type. A roughly square or oblong area was dug out to a depth of perhaps 50 cm and had one or more holes for vertical posts at each end. The theory is that a suspended (and hence dry) timber floor was placed over the open area and the vertical posts carried the roof. Some of these buildings were used as weaving sheds, and it is possible that an individual 'house' was made up of several separate buildings. The absence of advanced carpentry skills or perhaps of capital imposed limits on the size of roof timbers which could be used. Houses in similar construction were built over several centuries, alongside more sophisticated types.

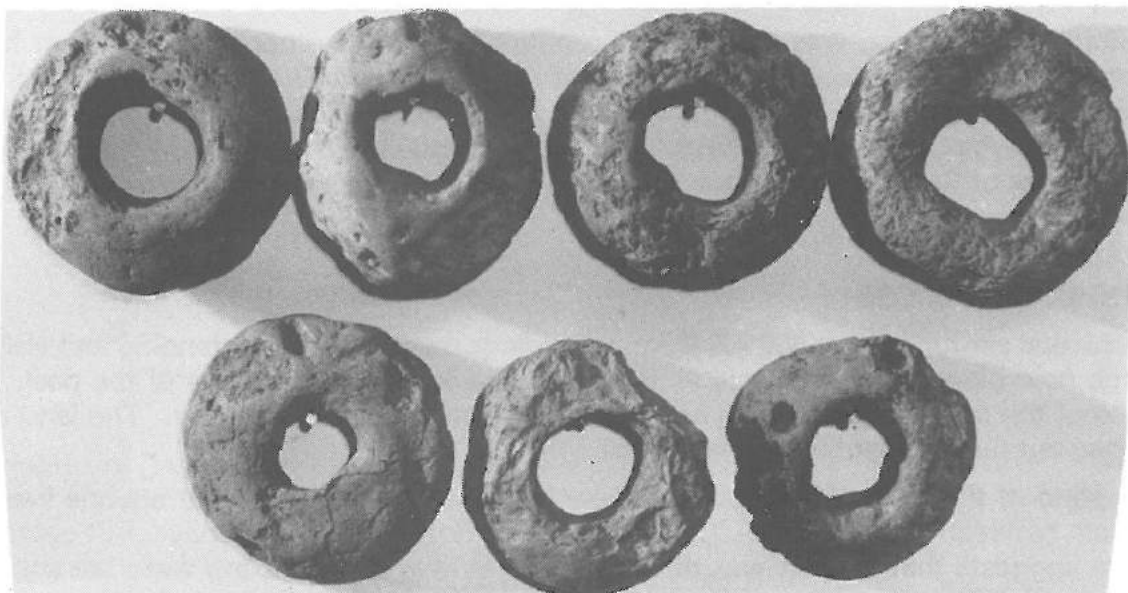
TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Various industries were practised at home, and iron-working was widespread — especially in the ironstone regions of south-west Lincolnshire. Weapons and farming equipment must have been produced locally by specialist blacksmiths. Finer metal-working was also carried out, as a bronze die, used by gold - or coppersmiths and found at Salmonby serves to show.



A gold-beater's bronze die found in a Saxon hut at Salmonby.

The other main home-industry was weaving, and most clothes must have been produced at home, from linen or wool, though a certain amount of silk may have been imported. Wool was prepared, spun on a distaff, and woven on a vertical loom. The evidence survives in spindle-whorls, loom-weights, and 'pin-beaters', used for pressing down the weft threads, and these various items have been found at Salmonby, Fulnetby, Woolsthorpe, Nettleham and Loveden Hill, amongst other places.



Baked clay loom-weights found in a Saxon hut at Salmonby, indicating that a loom was once used here.

Trade with the outside world is illustrated by the occurrence in necklaces of beads of jet — probably from Yorkshire — and of amber. Amber was traded from the Baltic area, but may also have been picked up on Lincolnshire beaches. Ivory rings demonstrate much wider trading patterns.



A glass cone shaped beaker pieced together from fragments found at Loveden Hill. Such a glass could not be put down until emptied.

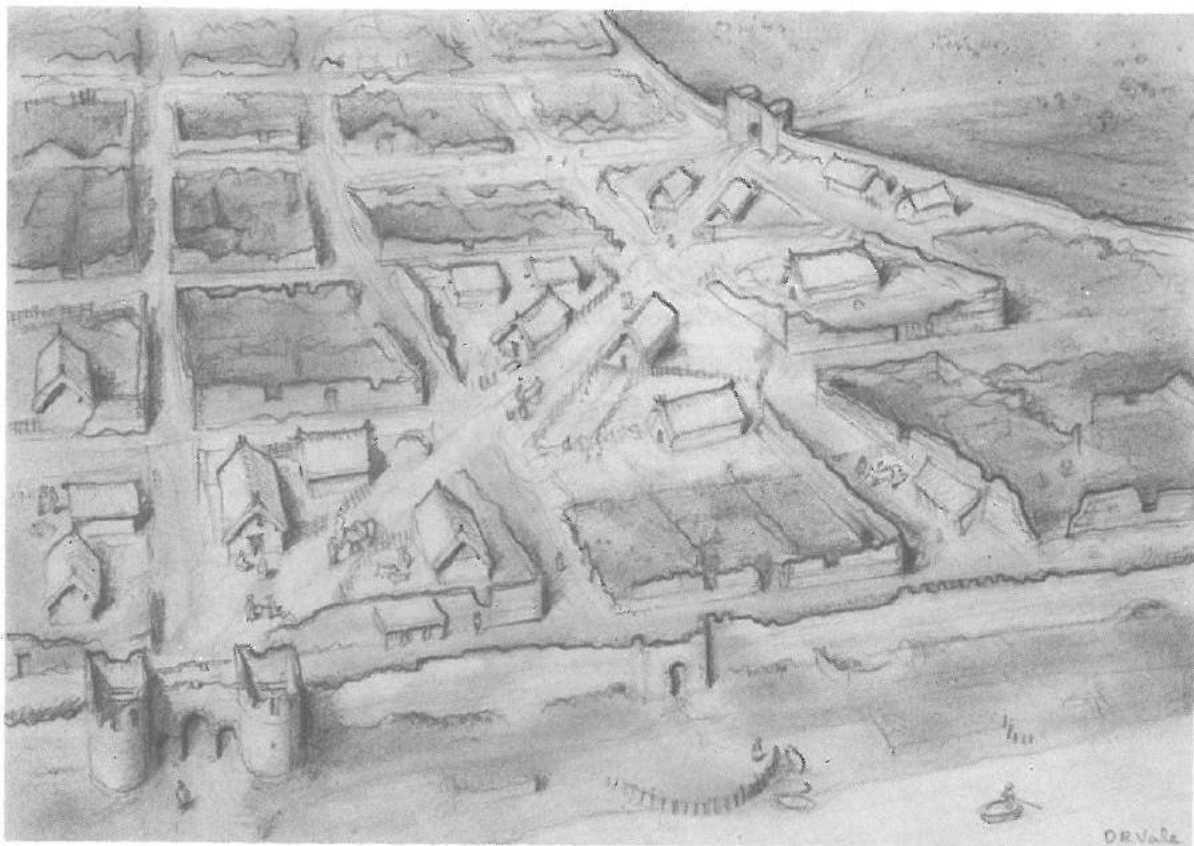
In view of the importance of salt in the Lincolnshire economy we might expect to find salt-making sites on the coast, but despite plentiful earlier and later evidence no early Anglo-Saxon salterns have yet been identified.

Agriculture, however, was the main occupation and most other activities must have been carried out in the quieter moments of the farming year. There was woodland to be cleared, drainage to be done, and stock to be guarded. The origins of the medieval open-field system probably go back to this period, though there must everywhere have been traces of Roman farming practices, and a good deal of continuity in the working of estates.

ROMAN BUILDINGS

For several centuries after 400 AD Roman buildings must have been standing and visible. Some now played no useful role — the great villa estates were things of the past, like some of the crumbling Georgian and Victorian country houses of today. The land was farmed but the grander building left to fall.

The state of the towns is less clear. There is little direct evidence that anyone lived in Lincoln between 400 and 600 AD, and only half a dozen artefacts survive, but common sense suggests that Lincoln was not deserted. Within its crumbling walls we should perhaps picture a shrunken population living among ruins, with large open spaces given over to crops.



Artist's reconstruction of the south-east corner of Lincoln in Anglo-Saxon times. Roman buildings lie in semi-ruin and new roads cut across between gates. D. Vale

Burials directly outside the walls of Horncastle, found in 1980, suggest that Anglo-Saxons did not avoid the ruins, while cemeteries around Caistor and Ancaster point to similar continuity there.

FURTHER READING

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