Sutton Hoo – historical background for teachers

The Sutton Hoo burial is far from being the only major Anglo-Saxon archaeological discovery but it is the most famous, partly because the discovery of 'buried treasure' is always headline news, partly because of the beauty and delicacy of the objects that were found , partly because of the mystery over who was buried there. All these features make 'Sutton Hoo' a great subject for classroom investigation but another facet also needs underlining – what the story of the burial and the burial tell us about the Anglo-Saxon peoples. This makes work on Sutton Hoo a great springboard for investigating the whole Anglo-Saxon period.

Coins found amongst the burial treasure date the burial to roughly 625-630AD. This is a little over 200 years after the departure of the Roman legions and the beginning of the period known as 'Anglo-Saxon England'. At the time of the burial the country was still split into a number of individual kingdoms. The Kingdom of East Anglia may have been the most powerful kingdom in England at this time. It may help to get a sense of chronological perspective to think of the Sutton Hoo burial as taking place250 years before the reign of Alfred the Great (870-899) – the same time period that separates us from the beginning of the Industrial Revolution and the beginning of the reign of George III.

The discovery and the wider site

The famous ship burial wasn't the only burial on this site. The first excavation in 1938 uncovered another ship burial but no objects because the site had been looted at some time in the distant past. Then the famous discovery was made in the summer of 1939 shortly before war broke out. Since then several more excavations have been carried out at the site, revealing a number of other graves including a double burial of a young man and his horse. It seems that the site was the cemetery for the burial of high-status individuals c. AD570-630.

For a summary of these excavations see:

http://www.archaeology.co.uk/specials/the-timeline-of-britain/sutton-hoo.htm

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The finds

The quantity of objects found in the ship burial is staggering – the problem with a list is that it just creates a sense of 'lots of stuff' but here goes:

The remains of a helmet, chain mail, an iron axe, spears and a long knife.

A sword with a jewelled gold pommel and hilt and a wooden scabbard

A shield decorated with a dragon and bird made from gilt, bronze and jewels.

A stone bar (sometimes described as a sceptre)

A small stringed instrument such as a harp

An iron object – which has been called a standard

A large gold buckle and a purse lid made from gold and jewels

A gold shoulder clasp decorated with jewels

7 drinking horns

17 gold and jewelled mounts for a harness

A silver bowl with a Roman head on it

A large silver dish from Byzantium

3 bronze cauldrons, 3 buckets, an iron lamp, a wooden bottle and a feather pillow.

37 coins and 3 gold 'blank' coins and 2 small pieces of gold

10 silver bowls with the design of a cross on them, a bronze bowl from Christian Egypt and a pair of silver spoons with the names Saul and Paul written on them in Greek.

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For pictures of the finds see the British Museum website:

http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/pe_mla/h/helmet_from_sutton_hoo.aspx

The king?

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The riches of the objects have led to the belief that a king was buried at Sutton Hoo and the most likely king was Raedwald, King of East Anglia who died c.625. Two pieces of information support the identification of Raedwald. Firstly he was the most powerful of the kings of East Anglia in this period. Bede names him as 'Bretwalda' meaning that he had authority over the other Anglo-Saxon kings in the rest of the country. No other East Anglian king had this power. Secondly Raedwald converted to Christianity late in his reign though he never completely rejected his previous 'pagan' beliefs – this would fit with the mixture of a pagan burial and the presence of objects which may be interpreted as Christian i.e. bowls with the crosses and the silver spoons listed above. However there is not complete certainty over the identification of Raedwald.

The following extract comes from the British Museum website at:
http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/articles/w/who_was_buried_at_sutton_hoo.aspx

> *Analyses of soil samples for residual phosphate (a chemical left behind when a human or animal body has completely decayed away), taken in 1967 during the British Museum's excavations, support the idea that a body was originally placed in the burial chamber, but that this had totally decayed in the highly acidic conditions at the bottom of the ship.*
>
> *The burial also contained a leather purse with a jewelled lid. It held a group of 37 Merovingian gold tremisses from Francia, three coin-sized blanks and two billets (ingots). All the identifiable coins were struck at different mints after around AD 595 and probably before around AD 640. They are important because they give the burial a terminus post*

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quem, i.e. the time at which the latest coins were minted is the earliest possible time at which they could have been included in the burial.
This in turn gives us some clues as to who may have been buried in this sumptuous grave. For example, there are four kings who may have been buried here: Raedwald who was overlord of the English kingdoms between AD 616 and his death (at the latest in 627, probably in 625/6), Eorpwald (died 627/8) and co-regents Sigebert and Ecric, who both died fighting Penda of Mercia in AD 637. Of these, opinion is divided between Raedwald, a convert to Christianity who abandoned his faith, and Sigebert, a devout Christian.

But we do not know what a king's burial would have looked like, so we cannot exclude the possibility that Mound 1 was, for example, for a member of the royal kin or a powerful member of a high-ranking family.

Website links

The British Museum website provides a wide range of information plus many illustrations of the excavation and finds.

http://www.britishmuseum.org

The National Trust

http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/sutton-hoo/history/

Google's Cultural Institute (much better than it sounds!)

http://www.google.com/culturalinstitute/exhibit/sutton-hoo-anglo-saxon-ship-burial/gQOPNM9M?hl=en-GB

And finally - the Sutton Hoo novel … and maybe one day even the film!

The Dig by John Preston – the story of the excavation retold as fiction

http://www.amazon.co.uk/Dig-John-Preston/dp/0141016388

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