
Anglo-Saxon Hoard: Gold from England's Dark Ages

National Geographic Museum, Washington, D.C.

Candace McGovern

Currently on exhibit at the National Geographic Museum, the Anglo-Saxon Hoard provides a brief but thorough examination of a large hoard found in Staffordshire, England. The museum does an outstanding job presenting the largest collection of Anglo-Saxon gold ever found, valued at close to \$5 million dollars. Since the majority of artifacts are military in style, the exhibition also includes an in-depth analysis of Mercia, a powerful Anglo-Saxon kingdom, known for their aggressiveness.

Beginning with a section detailing the contents and history of the hoard, visitors unfamiliar with the time period and terminology are welcome to read large texts covering a range of topics introduced in the exhibition. In the main room, curators divided artifacts by type with a particular emphasis on military and religious objects. Since the majority of artifacts are small, it is difficult for an untrained eye to determine the purpose of many objects. To overcome this, the museum has incorporated computer displays, which allow the visitor to zoom in on different objects and determine their functionality. This incorporation of technology serves only to enhance the visitor's knowledge. Aside from military artifacts such as pummels and other sword parts, other cases focus on the clergy with golden crosses and jewelry. Short videos stationed throughout the exhibit also enhance the visitor's experience and explain a variety of topics ranging from "how English craftsmen fashioned gemstones to the gold objects" to a video on "the history of the hoard," which includes theories of who buried it and how it was discovered. The second wing provides a less scholarly approach to the period and shifts to everyday life during the "Dark Ages." Aimed at children, this section covers clothing along with the language used in England at the time. The hands-on section for children allows them a chance to operate a metal detector and hunt for buried objects.

The scholarship behind the exhibition is, as expected from National Geographic, outstanding. The curators walk visitors through the process of rural excavation in England by incorporating video reenactments. Whenever possible, curators used actual objects for displays, particularly pummels from sword

handles. Aside from simply presenting a find, the exhibition includes important background information allowing anyone to walk away feeling like they have attended a seminar on the topic. Overall, this is an outstanding exhibition and historians and archaeologists or the public should not miss it.

Editor's note: The exhibit ran from October 29, 2011 to March 4, 2012.