

Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms, an exhibition at the British Library

(Until 19th February 2019)

This must-see exhibition is a remarkable opportunity to engage with a spectacular range of books, manuscripts and artefacts from the Anglo-Saxon period, brought together in a wide ranging, carefully researched and beautifully presented show. It was a treat to see so many famous and iconic items, most of them previously familiar only through text books and photographs.

I was not expecting though to be greeted by an old friend at the start of the show: Spong Man, from the Anglo-Saxon cemetery site of Spong Hill in Norfolk, the finds from which I worked on as an archaeological conservator in Norwich. This enigmatic seated figure, his head supported by his hands, made a striking and very personal introduction.



Figure 1 Spong man. Ceramic pot lid from Saxon cremation urn, Spong Hill, Norfolk

Although mainly concentrating on books and manuscripts, many from the British Library's own collection, there are some stunning artefacts included. Glittering gold fittings from the Sutton Hoo burial evoked gasps of awe from visitors, and the iconic Alfred Jewel is there, along with a selection of finds from the recently conserved Staffordshire hoard.

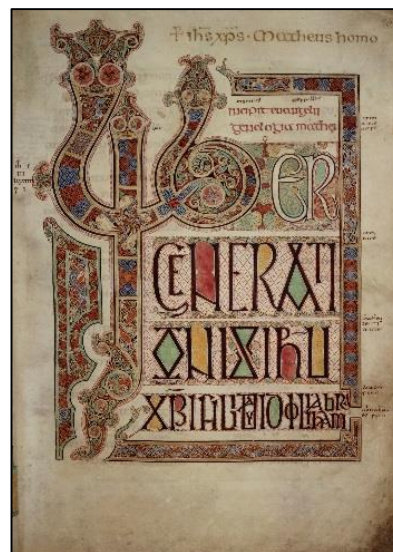


Figure 2 River Erne horn

There are also more unusual objects, such as the 8th century River Erne horn, dredged up in Ireland in 1956, shown next to the Vespasian Psalter which holds an illustration of similar instruments.

The books and manuscripts are the main stars of the show though, and include famous objects like the Lindisfarne Gospels, Bede's Ecclesiastical History and the Domesday Book.

Figure 2 Lindisfarne Gospels, St Matthew's Gospel



They are all stunning, but among my favourites was the *Codex Amiatinus*, an enormous Northumbrian Bible taken to Italy in 716 and now returned to England for the first time in 1300 years.



Figure 4 Codex Amiatinus

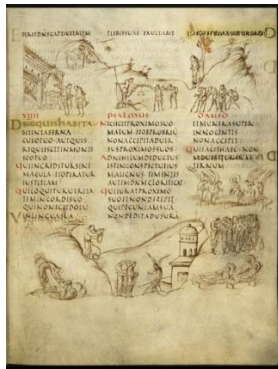


Figure 3 The Utrecht Psalter

I also loved seeing the 10th century Exeter Book, which contains a number of enigmatic riddles, apparently a popular form of entertainment among monastic communities, and the Utrecht Psalter, whose vibrant and expressive line drawings had a huge impact on later Anglo-Saxon art.

The exhibition is very big, and looks in detail at the connections between the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms and their British, Irish and continental neighbours, forged through migration, religion, trade, travel and conquest. There are 7 themed galleries, and although I spent about 2 hours in there, I could easily have stayed longer.

The exhibition is on until 19th February, so there is still time to go if you haven't already.

There is also a very good website if you can't get there, at <https://www.bl.uk/events/anglo-saxon-kingdoms>, and a comprehensive exhibition book.

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