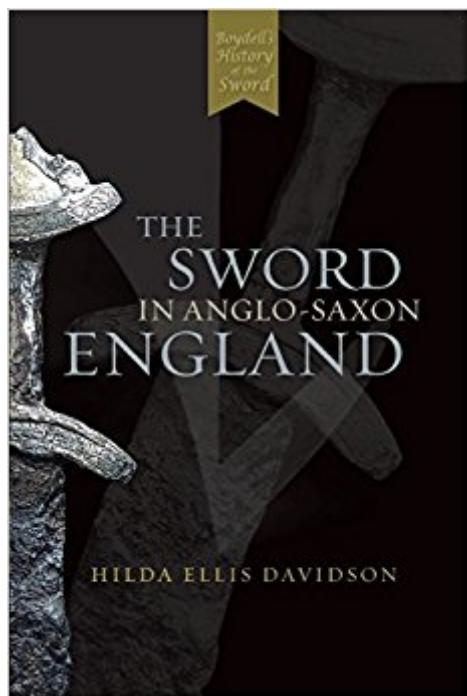


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The Sword In Anglo-Saxon England: Its Archaeology And Literature



Synopsis

This book is an invaluable exploration of the significance of the sword as symbol and weapon in the Anglo-Saxon world, using archaeological and literary evidence. The first part of the book, a careful study of the disposition of swords found in peat bogs, in graves, lakes and rivers, yields information on religious and social practices. The second is concerned with literary sources, especially Beowulf.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

The Sword is closely associated with all that was most significant in a man's life in the Anglo-Saxon world: family ties, loyalty to a lord, the duties of a king, the excitement of battle, the attainment of manhood, and the last funeral rites. Hilda Ellis Davidson explores the revelations of archaeology, methods of sword-making, and references in Anglo-Saxon poetry and Old Norse sagas to reveal a past where the sword was of supreme importance, as a weapon and as a symbol. She restores a vital dimension to Old English literature, and endows those few surviving swords in museums with a real glamour and magic. She shows that for a fuller understanding of Anglo-Saxon poetry it is important to have due regard to the warrior culture from which it sprang, and of the potent part played by the sword within that culture. Much can be learnt from surviving swords and from the context in which they are discovered. Careful study of the disposition of swords found in peat bogs in Denmark, and in graves, lakes and rivers in the British Isles, yields information on religious and social practices. The swords themselves, and their decoration, reveal the technical skill and cultural achievements of the people who wielded them. To read Beowulf is to be immediately aware of the aura of magical power the poet vested in the sword, and Hilda Ellis Davidson's other concern in this

book is to look at literary sources for what they reveal of the quality of a good sword and its significance in Anglo-Saxon and Viking societies - for Viking raiders played as important a part as Anglo-Saxon colonists in the history of early medieval Britain. A survey of the sword in Anglo-Saxon historical records and poetry is followed by an exploration of descriptions of the sword, and of the parts of the sword, in Old Norse literature. The real world of the Anglo-Saxons is brought into dramatic close-focus through this thorough study of the physical remains and literary memorials of a highly-charged symbol.

The Sword in Anglo Saxon England by Hilda Ellis Davidson is the best book of its kind for the sheer number of aspects of the topic covered - and covered well. I must admit I was impressed by this book, the author's expertise and the depth of the research done to bring so much about this subject to the reader, Davidson brings every aspect of the sword from many different disciplines. The book covers the technical aspects of the swordsmith's art, beginning with the development of pattern-welded swords on the continent from whence the Anglo Saxons came. There are brief forays into the development of swords in northern Europe before the Germanic tribes began to move onto the world scene and how Celtic and Roman weapons influenced German sword makers. There is then a detailed discussion of the metallurgical requirements as well as the experimentation of modern swordsmiths who have been able to duplicate the work of "dark age" smiths. The author relates the evidence from archeology and literature for pattern-welded swords. There are good conversations in regard to the blades, the hilts, the ornamentation, scabbards, belts, baldrics, fittings...you name it. I found it interesting that swords were not only suspended from baldrics and belts, but were also strapped to the side with the hilt high on the body almost under the armpit as well as slung over the soldier. The author covers the sword as a weapon of the elite and were highly valued, being lavishly decorated. Though decorated, they were used in combat and were exposed to the damage of hand-to-hand combat in spite of their embellishment. These were the real deal - used to deal out death in battle. Also covered are the examples of using swords in battle as well as duels. There is a lot of good information of the spiritual aspects of the weapons and how they were viewed by the culture of the Anglo Saxons. There is so much good information here that anyone truly interested in "dark age" heroic combat and weapons will be delighted by it all. I award this fine work five stars.

There were errors in comments on metallurgy and comments about the production of steel did not match with the time period covered. I would recommend the works by Ewart Oakshott over

this.Doug

The Sword in Anglo-Saxon England: Its Archaeology and Literature was originally published in 1962. There have been a number of discoveries since that time, however, Davidson's book is still relevant and a primary text on the subject. The book is reasonably easy to read and grasp. The author chose to write the book in two parts, one part on morphology and a second on swords in the literature (wills, receipts, stories, etc...). A good bit of space is devoted to pattern welding - a subject often glazed over by other authors. The text is very well researched and cited. Davidson presents a few theories that would eventually prove true, but she avoids stating speculation as fact. Make no mistake, this is a text. Reading it requires an interest in the subject. Incidentally, Oakshott illustrated the book. EDITED on 10/4/12

H.E. Davidson is one the best European/English historians of the early to mid 20th century, having written many great works including the now unavailable "Road to Hel", "Myths in Pagan Europe", numerous works on Norse mythology, and many works on Goddess-lore that never strays into the "fluffy bunny" utopianisms of Gimbutas or other fantasies. Here, Davidson puts her considerable skills as a compiler of numerous fields including Anglo-Saxon poetry, lore, archeology, history, and just about anything else she can think of to put together an excellent monograph on the most potent ancient weapon and symbol, the sword. Since there is no preview available, I will list the contents here:

List of swords in Museums in the British Isles

THE MAKING OF THE SWORD

1. Iron for the Blade
2. Eastern Sword-blades
3. Pattern-welded Blades
4. When and Where were they Made?
5. The Teutonic Sword
6. Inscribed Blades
7. The Construction of the Hilt
8. The Pommel
9. The Grip
10. The Guard
11. The Decoration of the Hilt
12. The Ring on the Hilt
13. Inscribed Hilts
14. Sword Attachments
15. The Scabbard
16. Scabbard Inscriptions

THE TELLING OF THE SWORD

1. Historical Records
2. Anglo-Saxon Wills
3. Some Sword Terms in Beowulf
4. The Sword Hrunting
5. The Sword from the Lake
6. Other Swords in Anglo-Saxon Poetry
7. Sword Riddles
8. The Sword-blade in Old Norse Literature
9. The Hilt in Old Norse Literature
10. The Scabbard in Old Norse Literature

THE USING OF THE SWORD

CONCLUSION

APPENDIX A. The Forging of a Pattern Welded Sword

APPENDIX B. The Shifford Sword, by RE OAKSHOTT

Anyone with an interest in ancient European sword-craft, warrior society lore and mythos, or Beowulf scholarship will find this an excellent resource. I hope this review has been helpful.

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