

Notes and News

KNIVES IN EARLY SAXON BURIALS: BLADE LENGTH AND AGE AT DEATH (Figs. 1 and 2)

Simple iron knives are the most common of Anglo-Saxon grave-goods: they are found in 45 to 50% of 5th- to 7th-century burials in England. But they have received very little attention so far, probably because of their very frequency and certainly because of their lack of appeal to students of Anglo-Saxon artefacts. There is, therefore, no agreed typology for knives, and many aspects of their technology, their mode of carrying, and their use as everyday items and status symbols are still obscure. It is the purpose of this note to show that the study of knives and their contexts may yield important information not just on chronological and related questions, but also on social and ritual aspects.

The following observations are based on an analysis of inhumations from 47 cemeteries in England.¹ The sample includes 925 burials with knives; however, complete and detailed data (such as sex and age of the individual, date of the burial, measurements of the knife) were available for only less than half of these burials (between 300 and over 400, depending on data requirements). Although the majority of these cases are inhumations of male adults, and juveniles of both sexes, some 80 knives from female adult burials are included in the statistical analysis, and the data of most other knives from the cemeteries in the sample were also checked for the questions discussed below.

Sizes of early Saxon knives cover a wide range, from tiny 'pen knives' to large, heavy specimens which may be on the borderline between tool and weapon. In the sample, the lengths of blades range from 45 to 173 mm, with a mean of 91 mm. A more complete evaluation of knives from female burials would probably result in a slight lowering of the latter figure, bringing the average blade length down to just under 90 mm. A closer analysis of overall length, blade length, blade width and weight of each knife made it possible to identify three size groups, defined mainly on the basis of the blade length/width ratio.² It must be emphasized that it was not the overall length of the knives, but the blade length (i.e. excluding the tang) which produced the most consistent results in terms of size groups (Table 1). These groups also show marked differences in weight, and in particular the distinct character of Group 3 knives is shown up by their much greater average weight. If a more representative number of female cases were included in the sample, the relative

TABLE 1
SIZE GROUPS OF KNIVES FROM EARLY SAXON BURIALS (SAMPLE SIZE: 480 KNIVES)

<i>Size group</i>	<i>Blade length (in mm)</i>	<i>Blade width (in mm)</i>	<i>Average weight (in grams)</i>	<i>Frequency (% of knives)</i>
1 Small	45 - 99	11 - 21	20	68%
2 Medium	100 - 129	14 - 23	34	25%
3 Large	130 - 175	20 - 27	57	7%
short seax	≥ 180	≥ 24		

TABLE 2
ABSOLUTE FREQUENCIES OF EARLY SAXON KNIVES (BY SIZE GROUPS) IN 430 DATABLE BURIALS

Date (centuries)	Size Groups		
	Small	Medium	Large
5th	33	10	—
5th/6th	46	18	1
6th	77	26	4
6th/7th	48	9	5
7th	43	30	18
7th/8th	33	22	7

frequencies of the three size groups would probably be closer to 70%, 25% and 5%, respectively.

Group 3 is transitional between ordinary knives and short seaxes.³ Blades of this size have variously been called 'scramasax' or 'knife'.⁴ In view of the fact that they are too small to be real weapons, and in order to avoid confusion with short seaxes, it is suggested here that the term 'large knife' be used for Group 3. On the whole, the differentiation between large knives and short seaxes is clear enough, although borderline cases obviously exist (as they would with virtually any other subdivision of blade sizes).⁵

The sizes of knives show a chronological development as well as some regional differentiation. Large knives occurred in all regions of Anglo-Saxon England, but some of the longest blades have been found in the south, particularly in Kent where Group 3 knives were most frequent. The change over time is very clearly reflected in the increasing proportion of large knives (Table 2). Apart from two early cases, they appeared first in the 6th century, and then increased in popularity until they reached their maximum frequency in the 7th and early 8th centuries.⁶ This chronological development is exactly parallel to the frequency curve of seaxes in England.

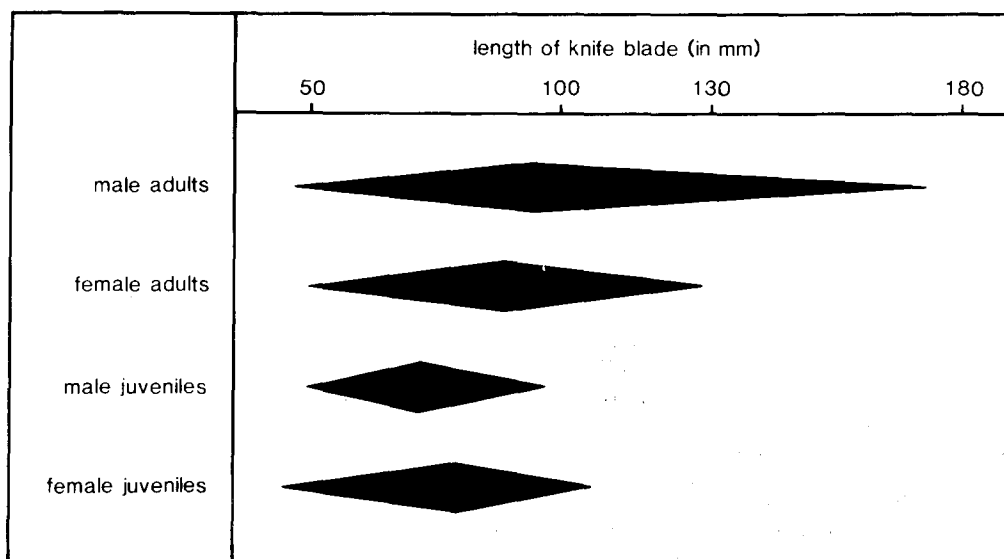


FIG. 1

Blade lengths of knives in early Saxon inhumations from 47 cemeteries (the average for each sex and age group is marked by the maximum width of the respective bar)

length of knife blade (in mm)

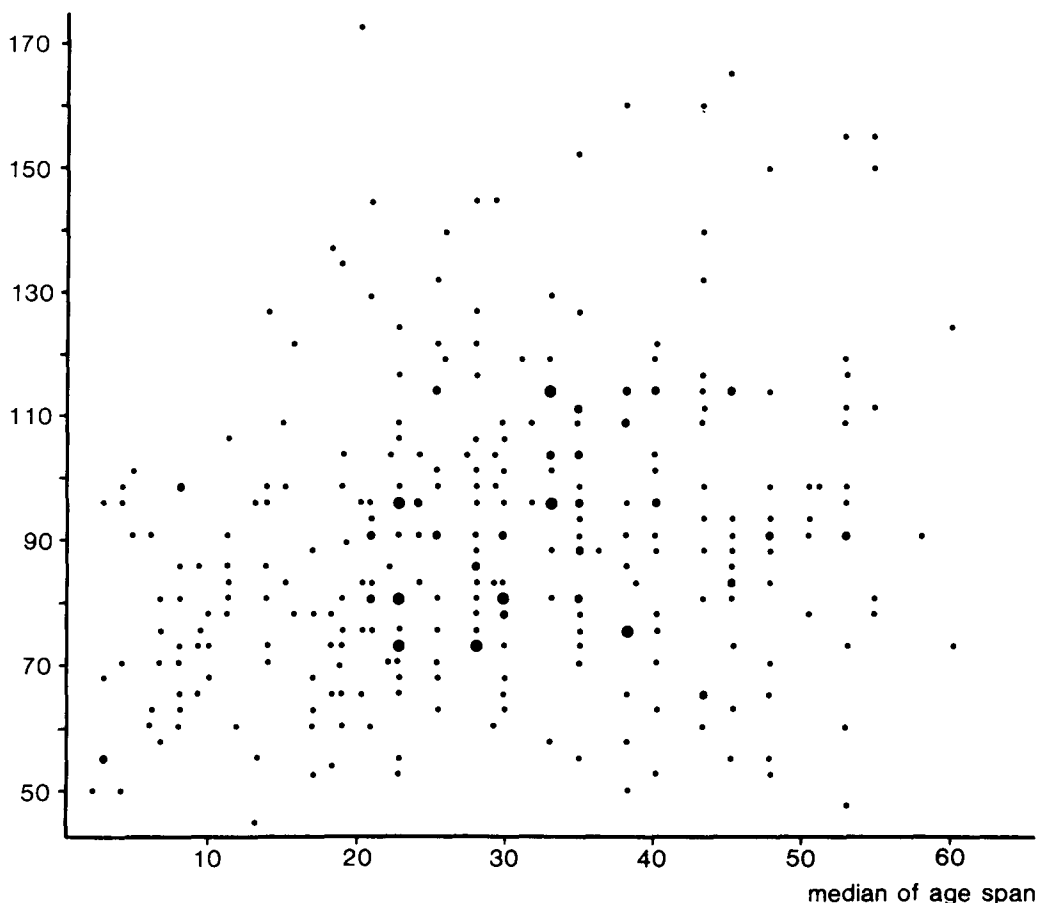


FIG. 2

Scattergram of knife-blade length and age at death in 321 early Saxon inhumations

But even more interesting is the correlation between the lengths of knife blades, and the sex and age at death of the individuals buried with them (Fig. 1). No juvenile in the sample had a knife with a blade longer than 106 mm. The scattergram (Fig. 2) even suggests a correlation between the age of an individual (or more precisely: the median of the age span inferred by the anthropologist) and the maximum length of the knife that could be put into his or her grave. Moreover, no female adult in the 47 analysed cemeteries was accompanied by a knife with a blade longer than 128 mm.⁷ Large knives of Group 3 were limited entirely to burials of male adults (Fig. 1).⁸

An ethnographic parallel for this sex differentiation of knife sizes may be found among the Sami (Lapps) of Northern Finland: the *lapinleuku* ('Lapp knife') of the men has a normal blade length of about 180–90 mm (with a maximum of 220 mm), whilst the knives of the women have blades about 90 mm long.⁹ But it must be borne in mind that the Lapp case relates to knives of the living, to observed everyday reality. By way of contrast, the Anglo-Saxon knives were grave-goods of the dead, and therefore part of a ritual act.

Thus, large knives were a symbol of male adult status in the early Saxon burial rite, mainly in the 7th and early 8th centuries, i.e. during the decline of the weapon burial rite. However, these two ritual expressions of male status were not mutually exclusive: two thirds of the Group 3 knives in the sample, including the earliest cases, are from weapon burials. But in the 7th century large knives were increasingly placed in male burials without weapons until, in the final phase of the grave-goods custom, the situation was reversed: only one third of large knives of later 7th-/8th-century date were associated with weapons. Also, burial with weapons is statistically correlated with greater wealth and more elaborate grave structures, but large knives as a group are not: in their case, clearly correlated factors are only sex and age. This means that, as the weapon burial rite became limited to an ever smaller number of comparatively rich burials, large knives became an alternative means of expressing male adult status in poorer graves.

In juvenile burials, the sex of the individuals had no discernible influence on the sizes of the knives deposited with them. However, the frequency with which knives were put into children's graves seems to have been affected by the sex: 63% of juveniles with male grave-goods (i.e. weapons) were accompanied by knives, but only 31% of juveniles with female objects. In adult burials, this male/female discrepancy is much less marked: knives were found with 61% of male adults and 48% of female adults (anthropological sexing); or in 78% of adult burials with male grave-goods and 63% of adult burials with female finds.

There was, then, a link between male status and knives in both adult and juvenile burials. But whereas this link was very strong in adult burials and was expressed primarily in the sizes of knives, the weaker link in juvenile burials was reflected only in the frequencies of the deposition of knives. Another difference between juvenile and adult burials is that only an adult could have two or more knives (although this was rare). A child burial was restricted to a single knife, and there is no exception from this rule in the analysed sample.

The above observations should have demonstrated that the close study and analysis of knives can be more rewarding than is often assumed. This note has by no means exhausted the possibilities for the study of knives from early Saxon burials. Other aspects which may repay further, and broadly based, analysis are the age and sex correlations of blade shapes, and the exact locations and positions of knives in graves.¹⁰ Such analyses might eventually lead to functional interpretations of knife types and sizes which will be more reliable than previous speculations based almost entirely on blade shapes.¹¹

The chronological and social relevance of the sizes of Anglo-Saxon knives has a further implication: any future typology will have to take account of this factor. So far, classifications of knives were based directly on the typology devised by Böhner,¹² or they were variations of his scheme, using the shape (outline) of the knife blade as the only criterion for type definitions. The most recent typology¹³ is no exception. Future classification schemes for early Saxon knives might be drawn up along the lines of Swanton's spearhead typology:¹⁴ defining types on the basis of blade outlines (e.g. A, B, C, etc.), and sub-types on the basis of the size groups identified above (i.e. A1, A2, A3, etc.).

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NOTES

¹ The database was compiled for research on the social and ritual context of the early Saxon weapon burial rite (Dr.Phil. thesis Göttingen, West Germany, 1987). A list of the evaluated cemeteries will be published in an article on 'Early Anglo-Saxon weapon burials', in S. C. Hawkes (ed.), *Anglo-Saxon weapons and warfare* (Oxford, in press). Particular reference is made below to the unpublished cemeteries of Berinsfield (Oxon.), Finglesham (Kent), Wakerley I (Northants.) and Worthy Park (Hants.). I am grateful to Mr B. Adams (St Albans), Mrs S. Hawkes (Oxford) and Mr D. Miles (Oxford) for access to the data and finds from these sites.

² Much of the initial, detailed analysis which led to the identification of the three size groups was done on the 112 knives from Finglesham (cf. note 1). I am grateful to Mr G. Grainger (Oxford) for his assistance in taking measurements of the Finglesham knives, and for checking and discussing the preliminary results.

³ The term 'short seax' follows accepted Continental terminology (*Kurzsax*); cf. U. Koch, *Das Reihengräberfeld bei Schretzheim* (Berlin, Germanische Denkmäler der Völkerwanderungszeit A 13, 1977), 106; and C. Pescheck, *Neue Reihengräberfunde aus Unterfranken* (Kallmünz, Kataloge der Prähistorischen Staatssammlung München 21, 1983),

41. This term covers single-edged blades which are too long to be knives, and too short to fall under Böhner's definition of a 'narrow seax' (with a blade length of 220 mm or more); cf. K. Böhner, *Die fränkischen Altertümer des Trierer Landes* (Berlin, Germanische Denkmäler der Völkerwanderungszeit B1, 1958), 135-45. Hawkes and Dickinson grouped English short seaxes with narrow seaxes, differentiating them on the basis of blade shapes into seaxes with triangular blades, and small narrow seaxes: cf. S. C. Hawkes, in B. Philp, *Excavations in West Kent 1960-1970* (Dover, Res. Rep. Kent Ser. 2, 1973), 189; and T. Dickinson, 'The Anglo-Saxon burial sites of the Upper Thames region, and their bearing on the history of Wessex, circa A.D. 400-700' (Oxford, D.Phil. thesis 1976), 269-70.

⁴ The term 'scramasax' has been used by Hawkes for knives of Groups 2 and 3: S. E. Chadwick, 'The Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Finglesham, Kent: a reconsideration', *Medieval Archaeol.*, 2 (1958), 25; and A. L. Meaney and S. C. Hawkes, *Two Anglo-Saxon cemeteries at Winnall, Winchester, Hampshire* (London, Soc. Medieval Archaeol. mono. 4, 1970), 43. The term 'knife' has been applied by Evison to a short seax: A. Corney, P. Ashbee, V. I. Evison and D. Brothwell, 'A prehistoric and Anglo-Saxon burial ground, Ports Down, Portsmouth', *Proc. Hampshire Field Club Archaeol. Soc.*, 24 (1967), 33-34.

⁵ The clearest borderline case is the blade from Charlton Plantation (Wilts.) grave 76/burial 90, with a blade length of 182 mm and a width of 24 mm: S. M. Davies, 'The excavation of an Anglo-Saxon cemetery (and some prehistoric pits) at Charlton Plantation, near Downton', *Wiltshire Archaeol. Natur. Hist. Mag.*, 79 (1984), 113.

⁶ The earliest case of a large knife in Table 2 is from grave 6 at Berinsfield (unpublished, cf. note 1). This grave had a broken belt stiffener from a Dorchester-type belt set in its backfill. But its true date is indicated by a shield-boss of Dickinson's Group 1.1 (op. cit. in note 3) which is mostly of late 5th-/early 6th-century date, although individual cases may be as late as the middle or later 6th century. I am grateful to Dr A. MacGregor (Oxford) for taking the exact measurements of a knife in the Ashmolean Museum, which eliminated a possible, second case of a large knife of equally early date. It should be noted that the knives in the present sample were not dated on the basis of their blade shapes, but by context and associated finds.

⁷ The longest knife blades from female adult burials are between 124 and 128 mm long. The cases in the sample are: Droxford (Hants.) grave 8 (possibly female; measurement taken from the published drawing because the knife length given in the cemetery catalogue is patently wrong, and the knife could not be located in the Hampshire Museums Services during my visit there: F. R. Aldsworth, 'The Droxford Anglo-Saxon cemetery, Soberton, Hampshire', *Proc. Hampshire Field Club Archaeol. Soc.*, 35 (1978), 114-16); Finglesham grave 205 (robbed and badly disturbed, female and male skeletal remains in backfill; unpublished, cf. note 1); Swaffham (Norfolk) grave 9 (C. Hills and P. Wade-Martins, 'The Anglo-Saxon cemetery at The Paddocks, Swaffham', *East Anglian Archaeol.*, 2 (1976), 5-6); and Wakerley I grave 74 (unpublished, cf. note 1). In the recently published cemetery of Dover-Buckland (Kent; not included in the analysed sample), the longest knife blade from a female adult burial (grave 133) has an extant length of 122 mm, but was originally about 128 mm long: V. I. Evison, *Dover: The Buckland Anglo-Saxon cemetery* (London, Hist. Build. Monum. Comm. Engl. Rep. 3, 1987), 326, fig. 55 no. 133:4.

⁸ The youngest male individuals buried with large knives had an anthropologically determined age of about 18 to 20 years: Finglesham burial 62A (age c. 18) and Worthy Park grave 84 (age c. 18-20; unpublished, cf. note 1).

⁹ W. Reb, 'Messer vom Polarkreis', *Deutsches Waffen-Journal*, 2/87 (1987), 125.

¹⁰ Correlation between blade shapes of knives, and sex of individuals at Dover: Evison, op. cit. in note 7, 114, 116 table XVIII; negative result for Sewerby, cf. S. M. Hirst, *An Anglo-Saxon inhumation cemetery at Sewerby, East Yorkshire* (York Univ. Archaeol. Pub. 4, 1985), 89. Locations and positions of knives in graves: cursory analysis of the incomplete Holywell Row evidence in E. J. Pader, *Symbolism, social relations and the interpretation of mortuary remains* (Oxford, Brit. Archaeol. Rep. Internat. Ser., 130, 1982), 114-22 passim; a very detailed study of knife positions in the Finglesham burials has been done by G. Grainger (Oxford) for the final publication of this cemetery.

¹¹ H. F. Bidder and J. Morris, 'The Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Mitcham', *Surrey Archaeol. Coll.*, 56 (1959), 126.

¹² Böhner, op. cit. in note 3, 214-15.

¹³ Evison, op. cit. in note 7, 113.

¹⁴ M. J. Swanton, *The spearheads of the Anglo-Saxon settlements* (London, Roy. Archaeol. Inst. 1973).

AN ANGLO-SAXON SUPPORTING-ARM BROOCH FROM EASTRY, KENT (Fig. 3; Pl. IX, A-C)

In 1987 a substantial fragment of a gilt-silver supporting-arm brooch was brought by a collector to the British Museum for opinion. It was reported to have been found on the E. (or possibly NE.) side of Eastry, Kent, on the opposite side of the road from unspecified excavations. The collector had obtained the brooch from another source and was unable to give any more precise details about provenance.

Description

The fragment is 38 mm long, with a maximum width of 26 mm and thickness (of bow) of 3.5 mm. It consists chiefly of the bow of the brooch with a stub of the head-plate surviving, in the centre of the back