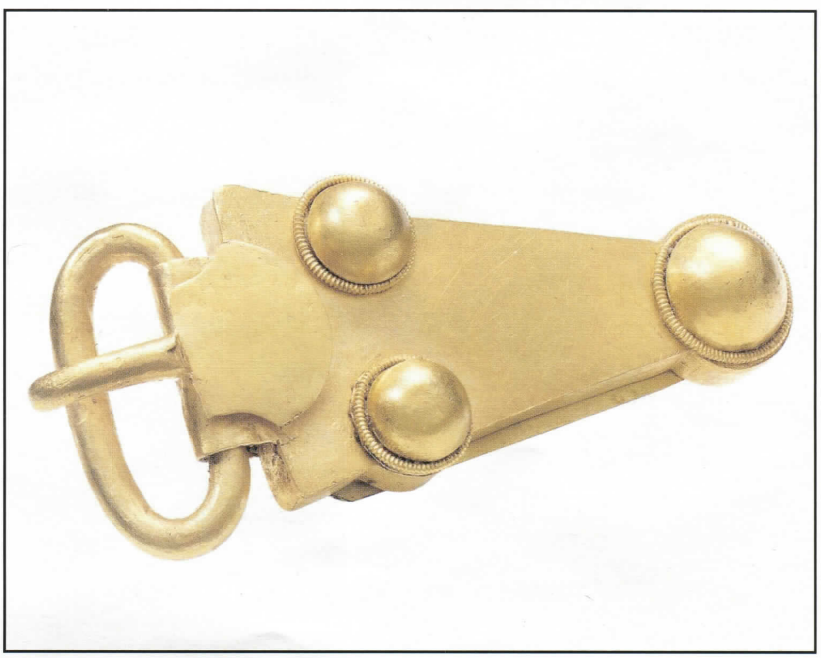
Prittlewell: Treasures

The most important Anglo-Saxon burial since Sutton Hoo has just been unearthed at Prittlewell near Southend in Essex. Dubbed the 'Prince of Prittlewell', the richness of his grave-goods means the occupant may have been an early Saxon king. The Museum of London Archaeology Service was called in when Southend council embarked on road improvements on the site of a known Anglo-Saxon cemetery, where workmen had found spears, swords and human remains in the 1920s.

Though the body was missing - the bones destroyed by acidic sand - the preservation of the burial chamber stunned veteran Museum of London archaeologist Ian Blair, who led the excavation. The chamber, approximately 4 metres square by 1.5 metres high, had been wood-lined, and sand had gradually seeped in, filling the air spaces and supporting the roof timbers. Consequently, artefacts were still *in situ*, bronze cauldrons still hanging on hooks in the wall of the chamber where they had been placed 1400 years ago, alongside personal effects like drinking vessels which had been held in place by the sand after the bags containing them had rotted away. "To find an intact chamber grave," said Ian Blair, "and a moment genuinely frozen in time is a once-in-a-lifetime discovery."

Two gold-foil crosses indicate that the king may have been a Christian convert, but he was also equipped with everything he might need to resume a life of feasting and heroic display in a pagan underworld. Most of the 60 or so grave-goods in the chamber evoke that world of smokey halls, mead-swilling warriors and rich gift-exchange that we know mainly from *Beowulf*. Among the more exotic items were a gold buckle, a flagon and bowl imported from the Byzantine Empire, a hanging bowl decorated with metallic strips and medallions, and two cauldrons, one small, the other huge, measuring 75 cm across. There were also two pairs of coloured glass vessels, eight wooden drinking cups with gilded mounts, and the remains of a large casket that may originally have contained textiles. An unusual item was the frame of a folding stool, perhaps from Asia Minor or Italy, while traces of gold braid and the presence of two Merovingian gold coins testify further to the rank of the occupant. There were also a sword and a shield.



The gold buckle, a complete shield-on-tongue buckle with triangular buckle plate under excavation, above, and in detail below.

# of a King of Essex

Above & below. Two of the wooden drinking cups with gilded mounts. Inset, below. A similar cup reconstructed and on display at the British Museum.

Who was this man and when did he live?

Preliminary study suggests an early seventh century date, broadly contemporary with Sutton Hoo. The great Mound 1 ship-burial at Sutton Hoo is thought to have contained Raedwald, king of East Anglia, and over-king of all the English (*CA* 95, 118, 128 and 180). The location is similar: the Sutton Hoo cemetery overlooks the Deben estuary, while that at Prittlewell lies beside a brook that flows into another estuarine creek. The Mound 1 burial was, however, much richer than that at Prittlewell.

For example, while 37 Merovingian gold coins were found at Sutton Hoo, only two were found here. Nonetheless, this is a stunning discovery, since coins were not minted in England at that time, appearing only rarely in the archaeological record. Moreover, once they have been fully examined, they should help to date the grave far more exactly than would otherwise be possible. Already, Gareth Williams, Curator of Early Medieval Coinage at the British Museum, suspects they may date to about AD 600-630.

Although some Merovingian coins carry the names of rulers, providing an absolute chronology, on others, no ruler is mentioned. In such cases - as with the coins found at Prittlewell - the amount of gold used will be scientifically analysed to suggest a likely date. For, over the course of their issue, between AD 570 - 670, less and less gold was used in the coins. Even without scientific analysis, experts can see how early coins are deep gold, while later examples are silvery-gold. The Prittlewell coins seem to be a mid-goldy colour, hence Williams' guess at the date.

So who was buried here? The site's provisional date, and the gold crosses found in the chamber, fits with the first two Christian kings of the East Saxons. One was King Saeberht, who was converted by St Mellitus, the third Archbishop of Canterbury, in AD 604. Because his sons and heirs abandoned the faith, the second royal possibility is King Sigeberht, who reigned half a century later, converting in AD 653. Saeberht was contemporary with Raedwald, and the two men would almost certainly have known each other.

"The great thing about Prittlewell," says leading Anglo-Saxon scholar Sam Newton, "is that it reinforces the 'transitional burial' theory. We sometimes talk as if the pagan and Saxon worlds were on separate planets. Here, though, like at Sutton Hoo, you have a clear example of a transitional burial: Christian artefacts mixed up with the paraphernalia of pagan rites. It would be fantastic if this really was Saeberht, the first king of Essex to convert."

But what is there to say that the buried man was a king? There are no explicit symbols of kingship at Prittlewell - for example, there is no 'royal' sceptre or helmet, as found at Sutton Hoo.

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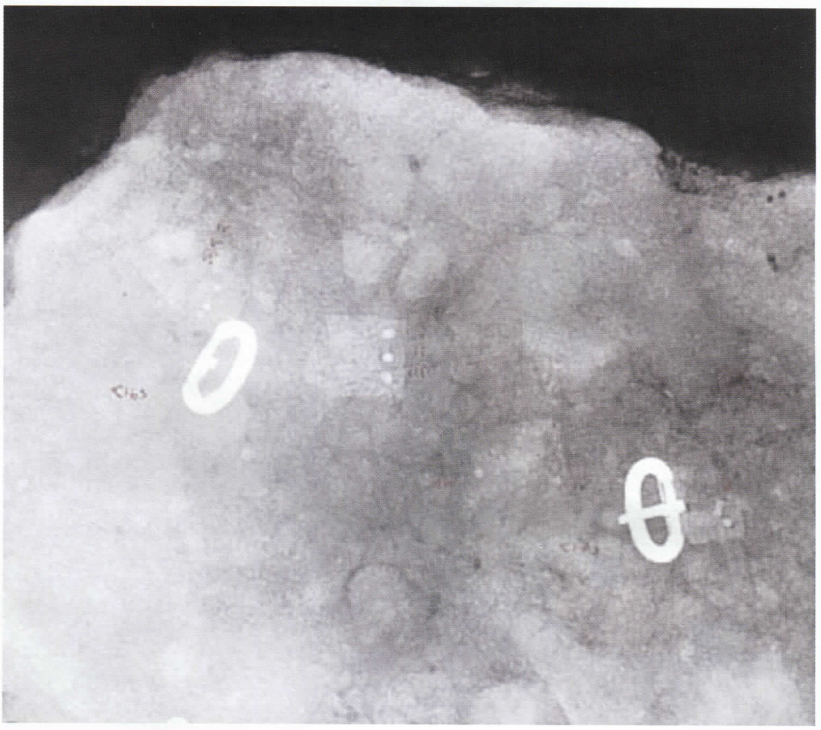
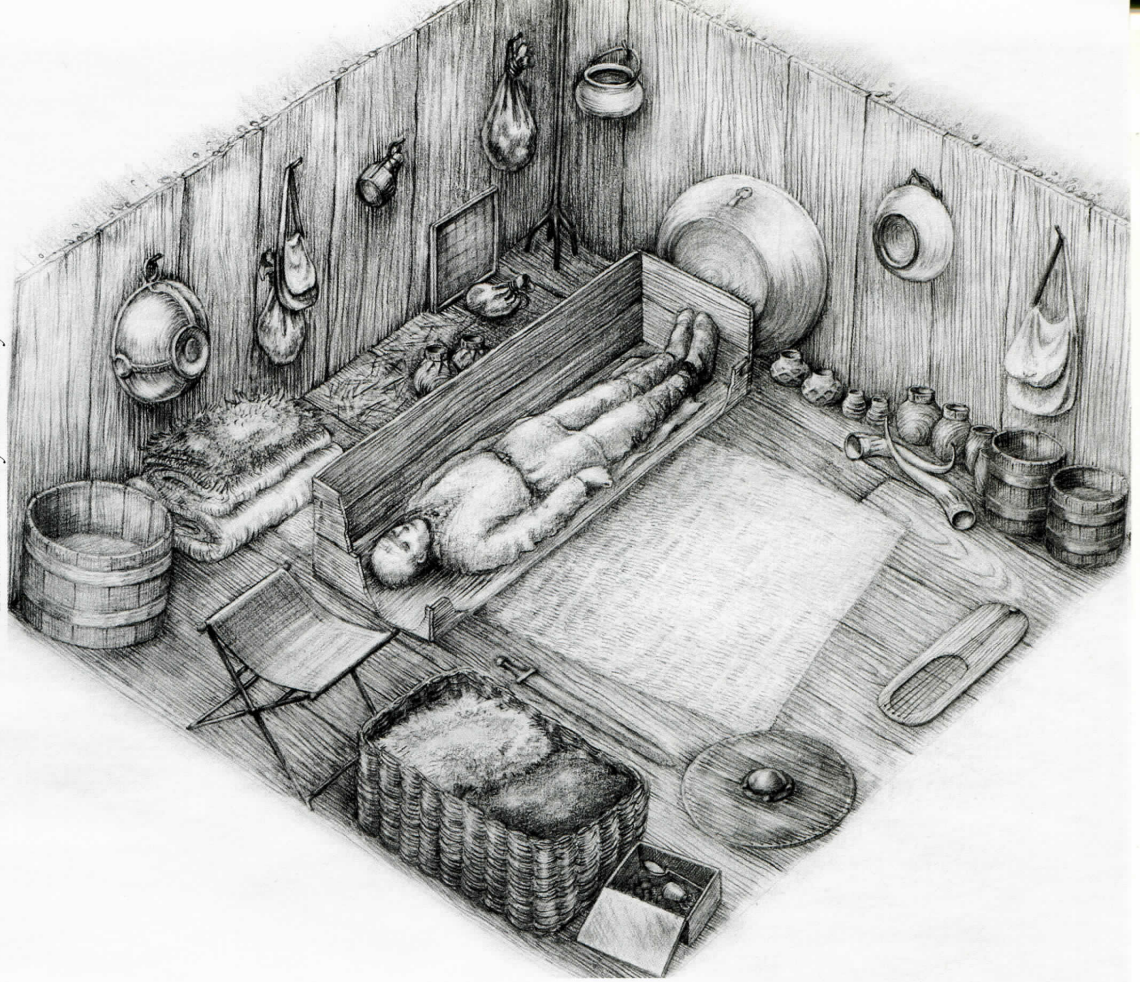


Right. An X-Ray showing the buckles from the shoes in which the corpse had been dressed.

Below. The accidental discoveries made in 1923 alerted archaeologists to the potential of the site.

The Burial Tomb

The reconstruction, right, shows the position of all the grave goods, some of which can be seen below as they are being dug up below. (The photo needs to be tilted 45 degrees to give the exact correspondence). At the top of can be seen the the 'coptic' bronze bowl, on the left the flagon, still attached to the wall. Ian Blair, (on the left) is excavating the area where the body lay, and where the coins, buckle and gold foil crosses were found. At the bottom of the picture is the folding chair, and to the right another archaeologist is excavating the sword.



Reconstruction by Faith Vardy

The Grave Goods - in detail

'Coptic' bronze bowl

This large, undecorated bronze bowl has a footring and handles on either side. In England, bowls of this type are most commonly found in East Anglia and Kent, where they can be dated to the first half of the seventh century. Similar bowls were used in the high status burials at Taplow (Bucks) and Sutton Hoo (Suffolk). This is the first known example from Essex.

Glass

These jars have a single trail that creates six petals around the base/lower body and a spiral around the neck. Similar jars are known from Faversham (Kent). The glass was almost certainly made in England, possibly in Kent. Most English finds of squat jars seem to be from seventh century contexts, but earlier examples are known from Norway, and a general dating of 580–630 is accepted for the type.

Two coins

Merovingian gold coins carry the name of the issuer and the town from which they were issued. One of the coins was issued by Ioannes (John) of Cadolidi or Capolidi, probably early in the seventh century. The front shows a very crude diademed bust, probably facing left. The back shows an unusual cross, probably derived from a Byzantine cross–on–steps design. Although very little of the inscription can be read, it can be identified from its similarity to another coin, now in Paris. The location of Cadolidi/ Capolidi is uncertain. This second Merovingian gold coin is of the issuer Vitalis. The inscription on the front tells us that the coin was issued in Paris. The back gives the name of the moneyer, although part of the inscription is missing. The front shows a diademed bust facing right, and the back shows a cross, possibly over a globe. This coin belongs to a series that was in use from *c.* .570/580–670; more precise dating will depend on testing the purity of the gold; however, British Museum coins expert Gareth Williams thinks the date may well lie between 600 and 630.

Belt buckle

This is an example of a complete shield–on–tongue buckle with triangular buckle plate. The back is secured to the front by three rivets with decorative boss mounts on the front face. The piece is in pristine condition and may have functioned as a reliquary, containing a fragment of bone or textile. This form of buckle is a Continental style that was also copied in Kent; it could, therefore, be an import, but was probably made in England. The fashion was most popular *c.* 600–640, although they begin earlier and continue later than this. This is only the third example of a gold buckle from a burial of this date in England (the others are from Sutton Hoo and Taplow).

Two gold–foil crosses

These tiny crosses are about 30 mm long. They are the first such gold crosses to be found in England. They were probably custom–made for the burial ceremony; most have perforations that would enable them to be sewn onto the clothing, but here they are quite plain and must simply have been laid on the body after it had been placed in the grave.

Blue glass

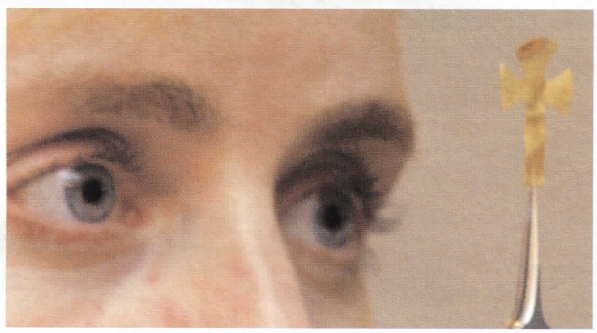
These squat jars/beakers are decorated with an applied floral design (seven petals) on the base and plaitwork of three overlapping wavy lines around the body. There are exact examples of pairs of these jars at Broomfield in Essex and at Aylesford in Kent. Archaeologists speculate that it is likely that all were made by the same craftsman.

Bronze Flagon

This cast flagon (shown opposite, top) has a lid that is secured to the ornate handle by a chain. The lower part of the handle is fastened by a band around the neck of the flagon, on which is embossed medallions of a figure, possibly a saint on a horse. Vessels of this type were made in the eastern Mediterranean between the sixth and ninth centuries. They were widely exported; similar finds are known from Persia, Turkestan, Tunisia, Germany and Sweden. This is the first example of its type from England.

Pictures from the collection on display at Southend Museum.

Above, the bronze flagon, left, the bronze bowl, right, the foil cross, and below, excavator Ian Blair admires the blue glass jars.



Above. The two gold-foil crosses.
Top left. The two Merovingian gold coins each shown front and back, which will provide crucial dating evidence.
Left. The folding stool under excavation.
Bottom left. The bronze flagon - or 'coffee pot' as it has been called - under excavation.

Also absent is the rich decoration found on the Sutton Hoo objects, the elaborate gold filigree with garnet inlays for example; there is nothing like this at Prittlewell.

Out of all the objects discovered in the grave, the sword may reveal whether this is the grave of a king. It is currently encased in a block of soil, and whether this is a royal sword will only be clear once it has been cleaned. However, as Lynne Blackmore, who is currently dealing with the finds points out, there are perhaps fewer than ten burials yet found in England that come close to the Prittlewell grave in terms of wealth. This strongly indicates that the man buried there was a high-status person; and very possibly a king, even if not as wealthy a king as the man buried at Sutton Hoo.

Source

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All the site images are by Maggie Cox & Andy Chopping (both MoLAS). The studio images are all Andy Chopping. The finds pictures on p435 (except top right) are all Ian James for Southend–on–Sea Borough Council

The finds can be seen at Southend Museum from Feb 21st to March 21st (01702 434449)