

Anglo-Saxon and Viking Crime and Punishment



What crimes were there?

- Theft was 74% of all crime
- Murder was about 18%
- Arson, counterfeiting coins, treason and all others: 8%

How were crimes detected?

The king appointed a shire-reeve (sheriff), who appointed a hundredman, who then appointed a tithingman. All these men had the responsibility of keeping the peace and bringing criminals to justice. They also all held criminal courts.

What happened at a trial?

At a Saxon trial there were no lawyers and a jury would decide guilt or innocence. Witnesses could be brought forward to decide whether a person was guilty or innocent. Trial by ordeal happened when no witnesses could be found. Trial by fire could include having to walk over red-hot ploughshares. Trial by water was to get a stone from a boiling pot. In all these trials, if the accused was unharmed, God had performed a miracle and they were innocent.



What punishments were there?

Different amounts of compensation could be paid to the victim or victim's family for the loss of a person, an injury or theft. In Kent in AD 603, the following weregild applied:

- Broken tooth – 1 shilling
- Broken nose – 6 shillings
- Lost finger – 10 shillings
- Lost thumb – 20 shillings
- Lost foot – 50 shillings



If the crime was very serious a person could be outlawed. This meant they could be killed without any punishment. Punishment by death was very rare, but did happen for treason and murder.