What Was Wergild in Anglo-Saxon Law?

Wergild · KS2 History · Years 3 to 6

Name _____
Class _____
Date _____

1 The price list

MATHS LINK

King Alfred's law book gave a price in shillings. These prices are from the film.

A nail of a little finger	A front tooth	A thumb	A free farmer's life	A nobleman's life
1	8	30	200	1,200

a. Four front teeth cost _____ shillings. Is that more or less than a thumb, and by how much? _____ **b.** How many little-finger nails cost as much as one front tooth? _____ **c.** How many free farmers' lives cost as much as one nobleman's life? _____

Challenge. How many thumb prices fit into the price of a free farmer's life? _____ How many shillings are left over? _____

2 What happened, in order?

CHRONOLOGY

Number the six events **1** to **6** in the order they happen in the film. Write **1** for the first.

☐	**A.** The villagers gather at the moot, and the other farmer says he did not push him.
☐	**B.** Cousins come back with sticks, and a long family fight begins.
☐	**C.** By a wooden fence, two farmers argue, and one loses a front tooth.
☐	**D.** The farmer pays eight shillings in silver pennies, and the children play together again.
☐	**E.** King Alfred's law book gives a price to each wrong.
☐	**F.** A man who cannot find enough people to promise for him carries a hot iron bar.

3 Words to know

VOCABULARY

Write the letter of the correct meaning next to each word. Use each meaning once.

1 feud	_____	**A** a solemn promise before God
2 moot	_____	**B** a test run by a priest, such as carrying a hot iron bar
3 oath	_____	**C** a count of small silver pennies, not a single coin
4 ordeal	_____	**D** a public meeting where villagers decided who was to blame
5 shilling	_____	**E** a long family fight that could last for years
6 wergild	_____	**F** man-price, the set price paid to a family when a person died

4 A price or a fight?

CAUSE AND EVIDENCE

1. Why did the king's law give a price to each wrong?

2. The film says: "A price could stop a fight, *if* both sides thought it was right." Why does the word *if* matter?

3. A nobleman's life cost as much as six free farmers. Write one reason this might seem fair and one reason it might not.

5 When, where, and what might happen

ENGLISH LINK

a. Underline the **fronted adverbial** in each sentence from the film. It tells you *when* or *where*, and a comma follows it.

- By a wooden fence, two farmers argued, and one pushed the other hard.
- After a few years, even the children might be drawn in.
- Inside a church, the man carried a hot iron bar a few paces.
- In those days, a shilling was not a coin, but a count of small silver pennies.

b. A **modal verb** such as *could* or *might* shows how possible something is. Circle the modal verb: "A price could stop a fight." "Cousins might come back with sticks."

c. Write one sentence about what might happen without a law. Start with a time or place, then a comma, and use *might* or *could*.

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Answers and teaching notes

What Was Wergild in Anglo-Saxon Law? · Wergild

Answers

1 · The price list. a. 4 × 8 = **32** shillings, which is **more** than a thumb (30), by **2** shillings. **b.** 8 ÷ 1 = **8** nails. **c.** 1,200 ÷ 200 = **6** free farmers' lives. **Challenge:** 6 × 30 = 180 and 7 × 30 = 210, which is more than 200, so **6** thumb prices fit, with **20** shillings left over. *Years 3 to 4: a to c only.*

2 · What happened, in order? 1 C (the fence and the tooth) · **2** B (the feud grows) · **3** E (Alfred's law book) · **4** A (the moot) · **5** F (the ordeal) · **6** D (eight shillings paid). Down the sheet the boxes read **4, 2, 1, 6, 3, 5**.

3 · Words to know. 1 feud = **E** · 2 moot = **D** · 3 oath = **A** · 4 ordeal = **B** · 5 shilling = **C** · 6 wergild = **F**.

4 · A price or a fight? 1. So people could pay in silver instead of fighting back. **2.** The price only worked if both sides accepted it as right. If either side refused, the fight could carry on. **3.** Accept any sound reasons. *Fair:* there was one written price for each wrong, so people knew what to expect. *Not fair:* it valued one life above another, and only free people had a wergild.

5 · When, where, and what might happen. a. By a wooden fence, · After a few years, · Inside a church, · In those days, **b. could** · **might**. **c.** Accept any sentence that starts with a time or place phrase and a comma and uses *might* or *could*, for example: *In a small village, a fight might spread from one family to another.*

Plenary. Ask: *The film says a written price list could stop a feud. What was fair about that, and what was unfair about how people were priced?*

Curriculum links

History. National Curriculum KS2 History: *the Viking and Anglo-Saxon struggle for the Kingdom of England to the time of Edward the Confessor* (non-statutory example: *Anglo-Saxon laws and justice*). Skills: cause and consequence (Question 4), sequencing an Anglo-Saxon legal process (Question 2), and reading a law code as evidence (Questions 1 and 4).
Maths. Multiplication and division facts, comparing numbers, and dividing with a remainder (Question 1). **English.** Fronted adverbials followed by a comma (Year 4 statutory, Question 5a) and modal verbs to show degrees of possibility (Year 5 statutory, Questions 5b and 5c).

Where each question comes from in the film

Question	Part of the film	The film says
1	The Price of a Person	"A little finger's nail was one shilling, and a front tooth was eight shillings"; "A thumb was thirty shillings, which was nearly four front teeth"; "a free farmer's life was two hundred shillings, and a nobleman's was twelve hundred"; "as much as six free farmers"
2	All three parts	"By a wooden fence, two farmers argued"; "cousins from the second family might come back with sticks"; "King Alfred had collected laws from earlier kings into one book"; "villagers gathered at a public meeting"; "he might face an ordeal"; "the farmer pays eight shillings in silver pennies"
3	All three parts	"A long family fight was called a feud"; "This meeting was called a moot"; "An oath is a solemn promise before God"; "A priest ran it"; "a shilling was not a coin, but a count of small silver pennies"; "That price was called wergild. It meant man-price"
4	A Tooth and a Feud; The Price of a Person	"so people could pay in silver instead of fighting back"; "A price could stop a fight, if both sides thought it was right"; "So one nobleman's life cost as much as six free farmers"
5	All three parts	The four fronted adverbials are quoted in order from the film; "A price could stop a fight"; "cousins from the second family might come back with sticks"

This sheet is careful about

The numbers. All the shilling figures come from King Alfred's law code (nail of a little finger 1, front tooth 8, thumb 30, free farmer's wergild 200, nobleman's wergild 1,200). Earlier laws from Kent, around AD 600, used different numbers. A shilling in Anglo-Saxon England was a unit of account, a set number of silver pennies, so the sheet never turns shillings into coins.

Who had a wergild. The film says every *free* person had one. Enslaved people did not, so the sheet keeps the word *free*. The oath and the ordeal are shown as beliefs of the time. Trial by jury does not come from the moot: it developed later, under the Norman and Angevin kings. No injuries or burns are shown on screen.

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