

PROCEEDINGS
OF THE
CAMBRIDGE ANTIQUARIAN
SOCIETY

(INCORPORATING THE CAMBS & HUNTS ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY)



VOLUME XLVI

JANUARY 1952 TO DECEMBER 1952

CAMBRIDGE
BOWES AND BOWES
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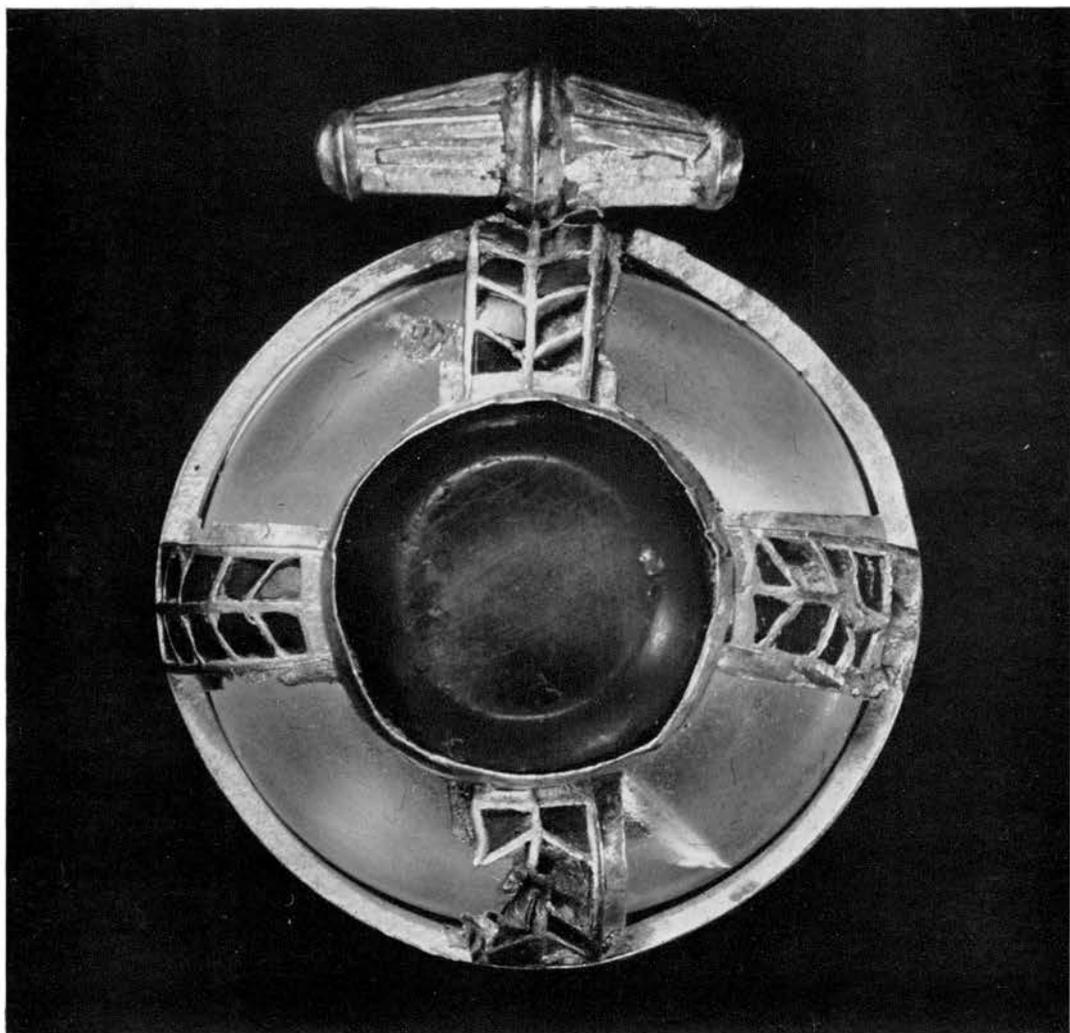
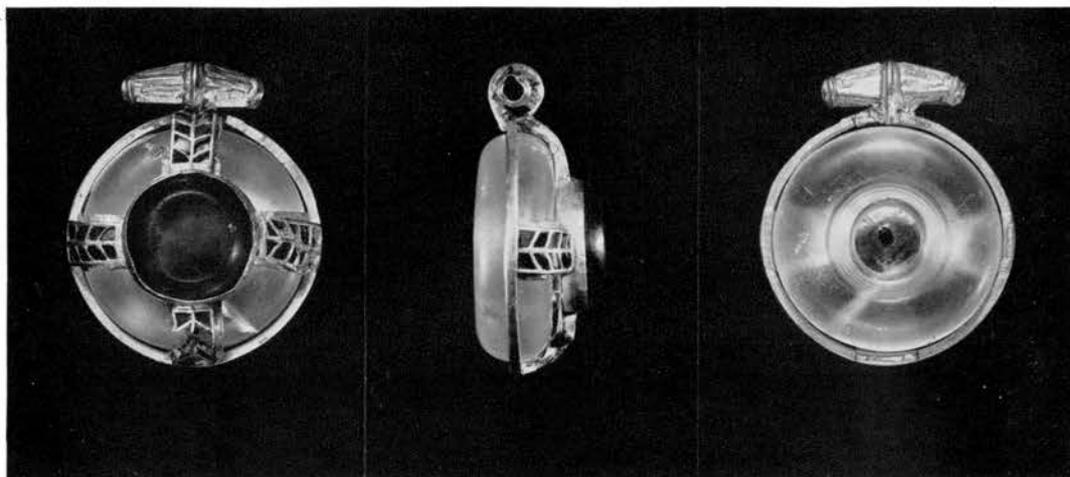
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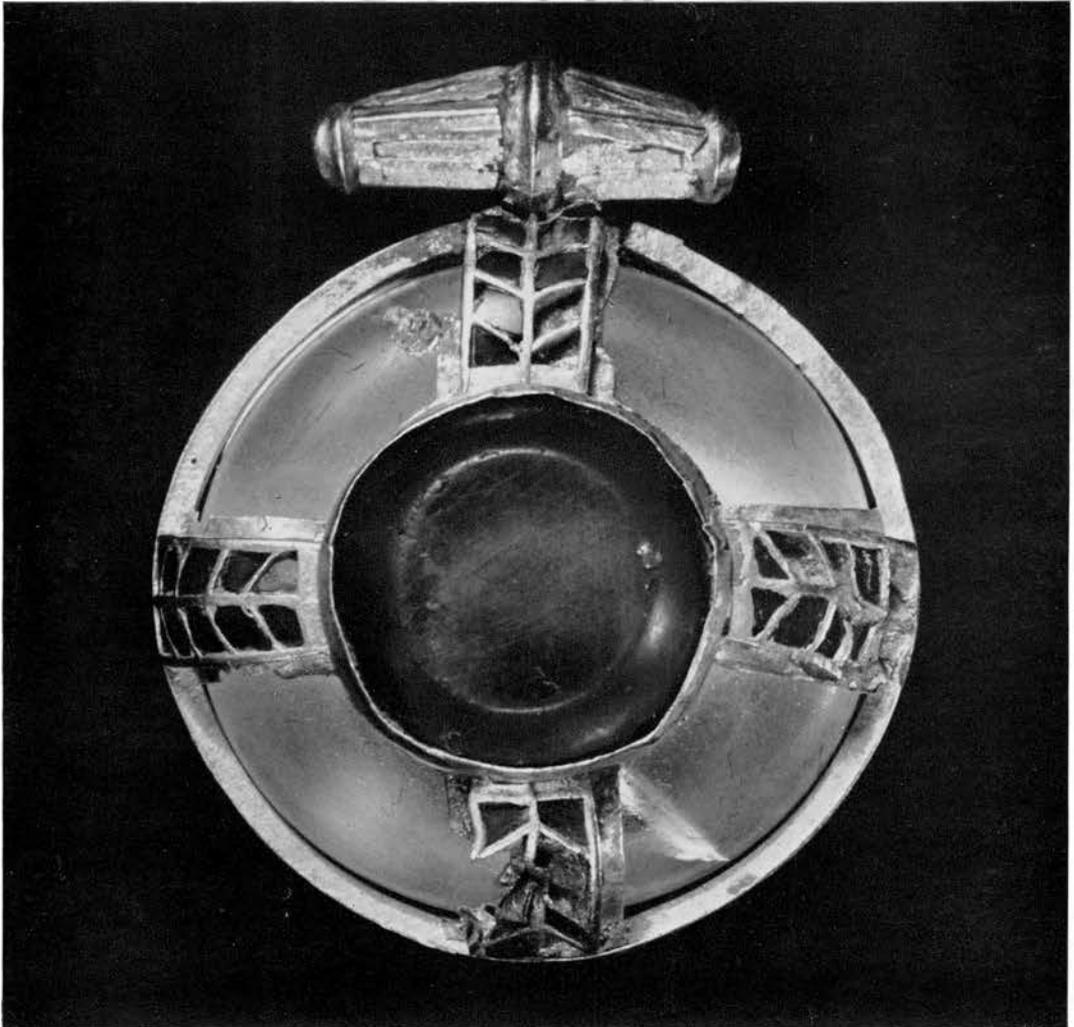
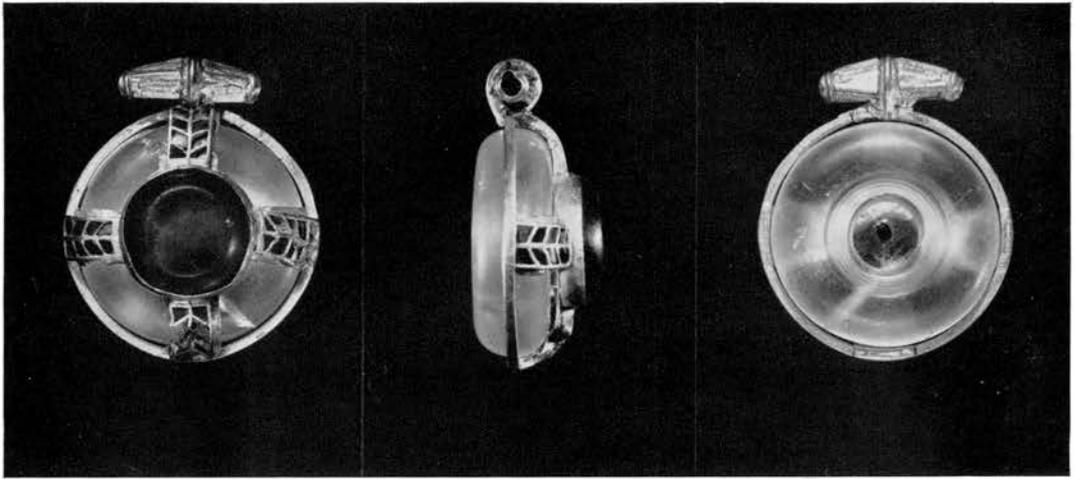
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PLATE I



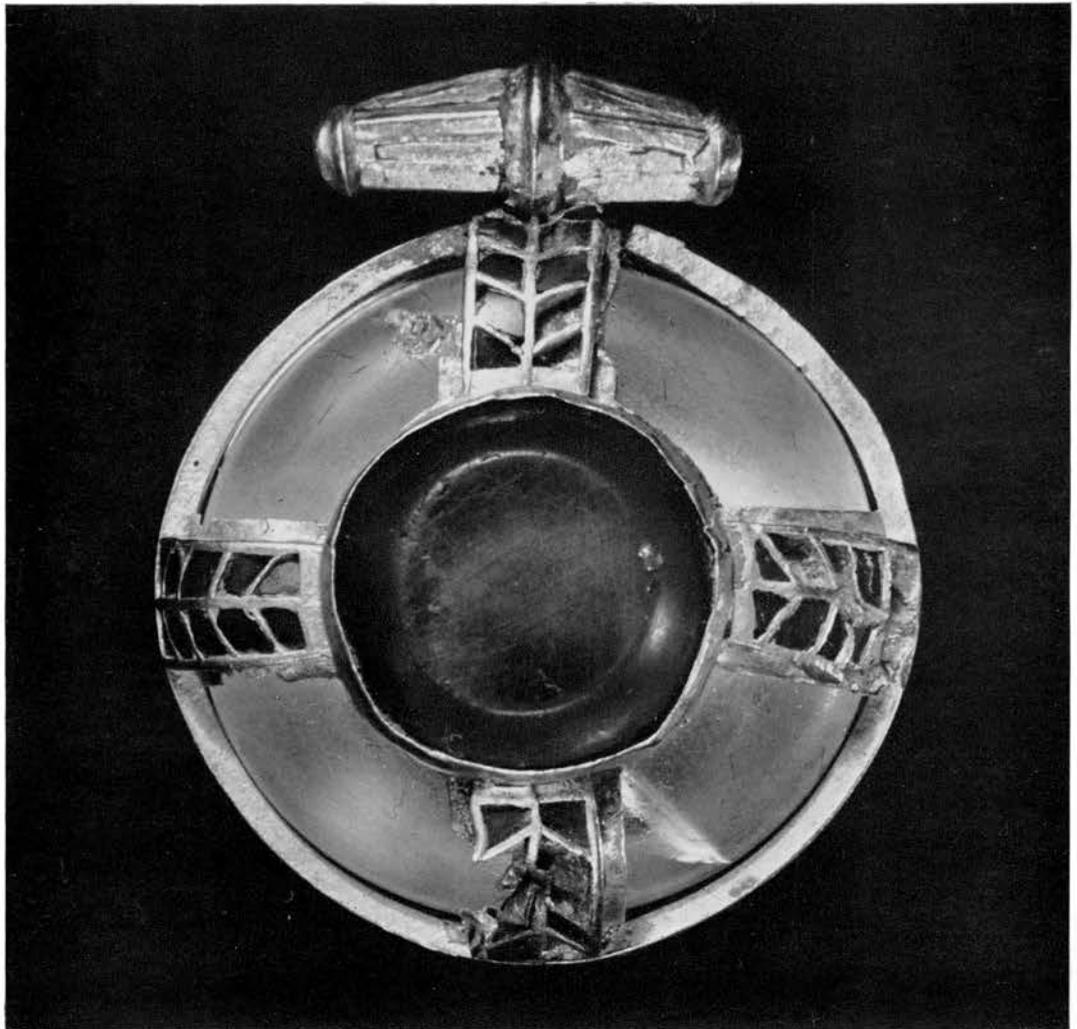
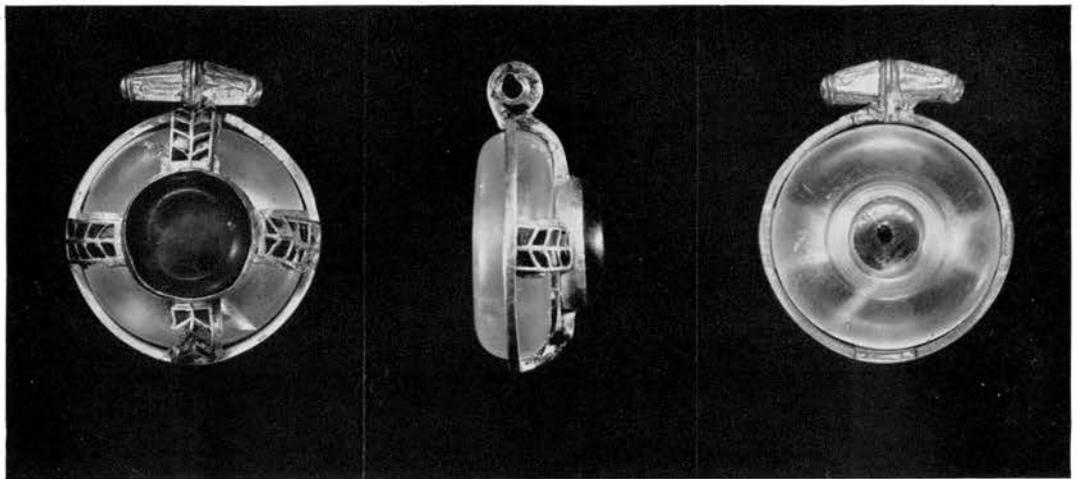
Jewelled Saxon Pendant from the Isle of Ely
(Above: natural size. Below: three times natural size)

PLATE I



Jewelled Saxon Pendant from the Isle of Ely
(Above: natural size. Below: three times natural size)

PLATE I



Jewelled Saxon Pendant from the Isle of Ely
(Above: natural size. Below: three times natural size)

JEWELLED SAXON PENDANT FROM THE ISLE OF ELY

T. C. LETHBRIDGE, M.A., F.S.A.

THIS remarkable ornament (see Plate I), made of crystal, gold, garnet and amethyst-coloured glass, was bought from a dealer by Mr Louis Clarke in 1951 and presented to the University Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology. Subsequent inquiries showed that it had been found in the Isle of Ely some years earlier, and that there is good reason for thinking that it may have been ploughed out near the site of the pagan Saxon cemetery described on p. 70 of Vol. XLI of the *Proceedings of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society*. This cemetery was thought by Major Gordon Fowler to have been the burial ground of the village of Cratendune, whose inhabitants were removed by Saint Etheldreda to Ely in the later half of the seventh century. The identification is by no means certain. It is perhaps more probable that the jewel fell from the person of someone travelling along the old Roman street between Stretham and Ely.

The foundation of this pendant is a flattened disk bead of clear, colourless, rock crystal, 3 cm. in diameter and 1 cm. in thickness. The crystal has been skilfully worked on a lathe and the edges of the central perforation, which is 1 cm. in diameter, have been neatly countersunk. The workmanship suggests comparison with that of the well-known crystal balls sometimes found in Anglo-Saxon graves in this district.¹

The bead has been surrounded with a thin bar of gold running round its greatest circumference. From this bar spring the four arms of a gold cross, ornamented in herring-bone pattern, with small straight-sided garnets, set in cells built upon the

¹ The purpose of crystal balls found in Anglo-Saxon graves has never been satisfactorily explained. (Specimens from Barrington, Burwell and the War Ditches are in the Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology.) There is however, I think, a clue to their importance which is worth putting on record. There are several specimens of these 'Saxon' balls in Scotland. One has been for centuries in the possession of the Stewarts of Ardvorlich on Loch Earn. This ball was always known as the 'Clach Dearg'—the Red Stone. When dipped in water, this was given as a drink to cure sick cattle; suggesting, since the ball is of clear white crystal, that it was previously coated with some soluble material, which not only proved healthful to the cattle, but gave it a red appearance. Now it happens that in 1926 I recovered a similar ball from a grave in the Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Little Wilbraham (see *Recent Researches in Anglo-Saxon Cemeteries*, p. 74), but this ball, slung in metal hoops, as are the crystal balls, has been shown by Mr Donald Walker of the Sub-Department of Quaternary Research to have been made from oak bark. Tannin, from oak bark, was formerly used as a cure for dysentery, as may be seen in Culpepper's *Herbal*. The crystal balls are sometimes found in Kent with large perforated silver spoon strainers. It seems probable that the purpose of the crystal balls is for both magical and herbal healing. On the upper Rhine spherical silver boxes, comparable to our cylindrical Anglo-Saxon 'work boxes', are found in Christian Alemannic graves. One at least of these was constructed of oak (*Das Alamannische Fürstengrab von Wittislingen*, by Professor J. Werner, fig. 23 etc.). The Germans speak of them as amulet cases.

gold background. The workmanship is not particularly good. It does not seem to be of the same quality as much of the well-known garnet cell work of Kent.

The arms of the cross are joined in the centre by a circular setting, which holds a truncated cone of amethyst-coloured glass. This gives the pendant an overall thickness of 1.8 cm.

The loop for suspension is in the form of a biconical bead of gold (1.8 cm. long), built up of thin strips applied to a central core, and giving it a fluted appearance. The greatest diameter of the pendant, from the top of the loop to the outer edge of the gold bar enclosing the crystal bead, is 4 cm. This loop is very much worn by the friction of the cord which formerly passed through it. It would not be surprising if the loss of the jewel had been caused by the chafing of the cord passing through this loop.

The jewel certainly belongs to the Anglo-Saxon period and suggests immediate comparison with the Cross of St Cuthbert (Kendrick, *Anglo-Saxon Art*, pl. xxxiv, no. 3, and the Ixworth pendant on the same plate), or the herring-bone inlay on the Sutton Hoo purse-mount (see coloured illustration in R. Jessup, *Anglo-Saxon Jewellery*). It will be remembered, however, that Mr Jessup makes the suggestion in his book (*ibid.* p. 123), that St Cuthbert's Cross might be an object surviving from the early British Church in Strathclyde rather than one made in St Cuthbert's own lifetime during the seventh century. My own feeling is that our jewel is of much the same date as the Sutton Hoo purse and that all these crosses and pendants fall into one period, lasting perhaps from about A.D. 600–700. The differences in style can well be less important than similarities of type.

It may be of interest here to recall the dream of Earcongota, daughter of Sexberga, sister of Etheldreda, as reported in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*:

She had seen a number of men, all in white, come into the monastery, and being asked by her what they wanted, and what they did there?, they answered they had been sent thither to carry away with them the gold medal that had been brought thither out of Kent.¹

Earcongota was daughter of Earconbert, King of Kent. The dream foretold Earcongota's immediate death and indicated that she was wearing a distinctive Kentish gold pendant.

It seems highly probable to me that such an expensive jewel was in some way connected with Earcongota's mother, Sexberga, or her aunt, Etheldreda; either of whom might have been expected to have possessed jewels of this type. Etheldreda began the monastery at Ely in A.D. 673 and died in A.D. 679. She was succeeded by her sister Sexberga. A date about the middle of the seventh century appears possible for the construction of our jewel, and makes the comparison with St Cuthbert's Cross quite reasonable, for he died in A.D. 685. The treatment of a bead in this manner can also be seen, in a less ornate fashion, on the gold and glass jewel found at Shudy Camps cemetery in grave 24 (*A Cemetery at Shudy Camps, Cambridgeshire*, fig. 4). It was in fact this jewelled bead which convinced Mr Louis Clarke of the date of the

¹ Giles' translation.

one under discussion. I found it in 1933 in one of a large group of burials, which I have frequently given reasons for dating in the Christian Anglo-Saxon period. Yet another comparable ornament is the gold disk pendant found at Burnett in Somerset. This has a raised central amethyst coloured setting at the junction of a cross applied to the surface of the disk (*Art Journ.* II (1922), p. 383).

I have no doubt of the 'Christian' character of our 'Cratendune' pendant, if I may call it by this name. The cross set upon its surface is clearly deliberate, and not merely an artistic embellishment. The crystal also is an ancient emblem of purity. The pendant with its crystal foundation, its cross and its amethyst-coloured central setting (a protection against intoxication) is clearly a religious charm of considerable potency and value. It would be attractive to think that it had once been associated with the powerful queen who founded Ely. Although the workmanship may not be of the highest quality, it is one of the most beautiful Anglo-Saxon objects in existence.

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