

PROCEEDINGS
OF THE
CAMBRIDGE ANTIQUARIAN
SOCIETY

(INCORPORATING THE CAMBS & HUNTS ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY)



VOLUME LV

JANUARY 1961 TO DECEMBER 1961

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DEIGHTON BELL

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PAGAN SAXON BURIALS AT LITTLE PAXTON, HUNTINGDONSHIRE

C. F. TEBBUTT AND T. C. LETHBRIDGE

ON Good Friday 1961 I happened to be visiting the gravel pits at Little Paxton. On glancing down into those on the south side of the road to Ray House Farm, I saw three schoolboys out on a mud bank recently emerged from below winter flood level (Nat. 100 m. Grid. T.L. 196629). They were squatting in a tight circle and appeared to be digging something out of the mud with their fingers. Unable to restrain my curiosity I approached and found John Jaggard, a keen young archaeologist aged 14, with his younger brother and a friend, working to extract a large and nearly whole pot from the mud.

The pot, of which only part of the neck and rim was missing, was plain and undecorated and obviously of Pagan Saxon date (Pl. II *a*). It was partly filled with cremated bones among which were two applied brooches (Fig. 1 *a*).

In the mud just under the urn we found sherds of another vessel, heavily ornamented with stamps and bosses, of which enough pieces were recovered to make possible its restoration, save for the neck and rim (Pl. II *b*). The decoration of this urn consisted of five bosses placed round the widest part, five horizontal lines of stamps each of a different pattern, and below these, between the bosses, five shield-shaped panels each with its different pattern of stamps from one of the lines above.

The remainder of the mud bank, and others in the vicinity, were dug over, resulting in the finding of a small number of sherds from other urns, some decorated with stamps (Fig. 2).

It was soon realized that none of the above finds were *in situ*. The mud in which they were found was in fact the topsoil that had been dug from above the gravel subsoil by the dragline digger, swung out over the pit in its bucket and dropped into the water. The actual site of the cemetery must therefore have been north of the find spot. It seems almost a miracle that the urn containing the brooches survived, landing upright almost intact with all its contents.

From the small number of urns represented by the sherds found, it would seem to have been a very small cemetery, perhaps even a barrow. The burials too must have been shallow, as the missing rims of the two pots showed old breaks as if by damage from ploughing while they were *in situ*.

In July of the same year, about 300 yards W.S.W. of the above site (Nat. 100 m. Grid 193628), a skeleton, lying on its back and extended, was found when the topsoil was bulldozed away from a new gravel-digging area. It was a male, lying E. and W.

and had a small iron knife lying under the right upper arm. It had all the appearance of a Saxon burial.

I am greatly indebted to the directors of Messrs Inns and Co. for permission to excavate. But for John Jaggard the discovery would almost certainly not have been

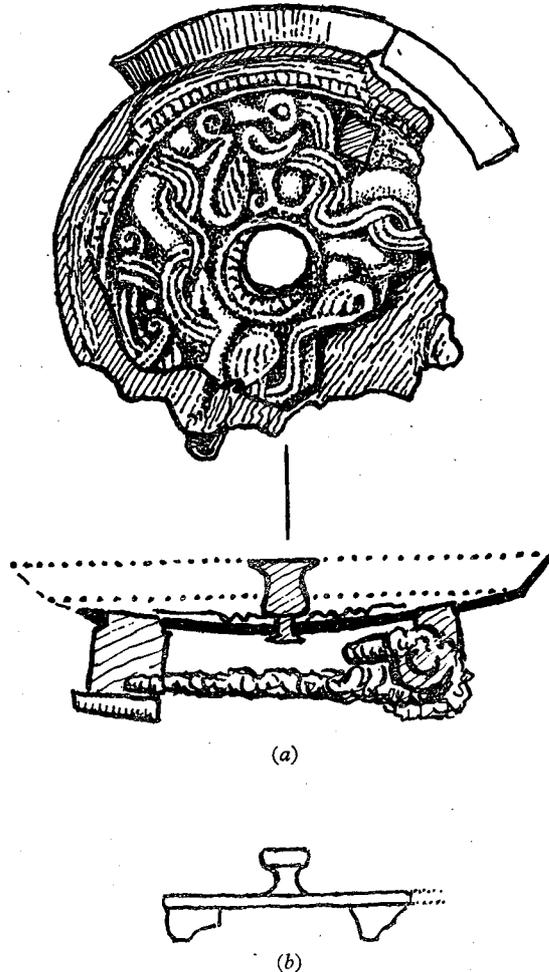


Fig. 1. (a) One of the pair of 'applied' brooches from Little Paxton, with section. (Scale: overall diameter is 2.8 in.) (b) Side view of a Romano-British disc brooch with enamel and glass mosaic face. From Woodcuts, Dorset. (After Pitt-Rivers.)

made and he and his family did most of the work. I am grateful to Mr Lethbridge for his drawings of the brooches and his valuable note on them, printed below.

The finds will be preserved in the Norris Museum, St Ives.

C. F. T.

THE PAXTON 'APPLIED' BROOCHES

(Fig. 1 a)

Cambridge is really at the eastern limit of the 'applied' brooch area. These brooches are common in the Anglo-Saxon cemeteries which lie round it, and even more common to the west; but they are rare on the other side. For some reason it became the fashion to speak of the 'applied' brooch and its cousin, the cast 'saucer' brooch, as Saxon, although the area in which they are most commonly found was apparently

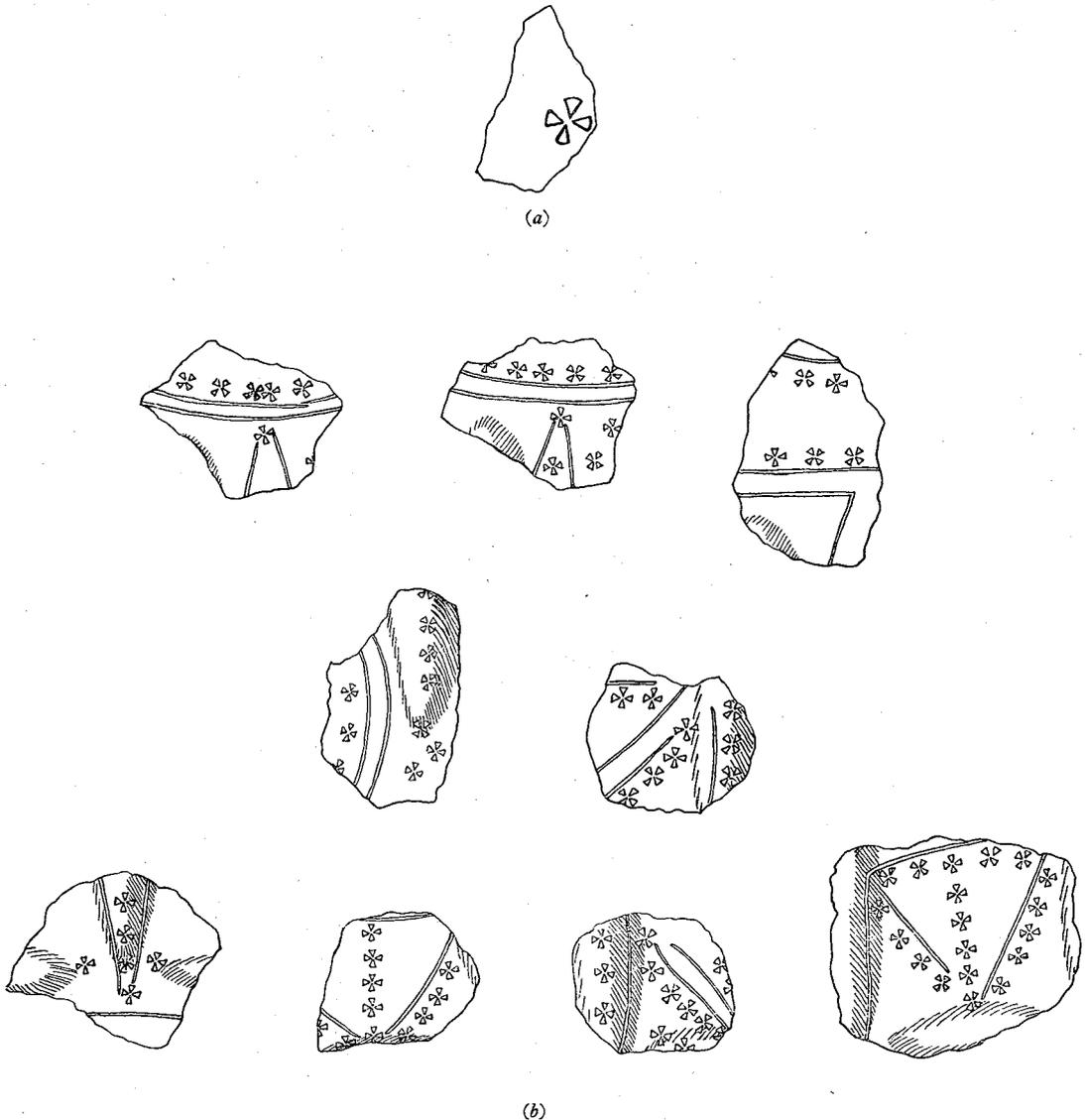


Fig. 2. Sherds of Anglo-Saxon urns from Little Paxton. (Scale: $\frac{1}{2}$.) (a) Single sherd with cruciform stamp. (b) Some of a number of sherds from an urn with incised decoration and a small cruciform stamp; this urn appears to have had both vertical and horizontal bosses.

once part of Middle Anglia. The brooches are of course numerous in some districts, such as Wessex and Sussex, which really were known as Saxon, but I do not think any cemetery has produced so many of them as the Anglian one at Kempston in Bedfordshire.¹ It has therefore become rather a crucial matter in Anglo-Saxon studies to try and find out who made these ornaments. I do not know what theory is now taught to students and so circulated to the populace in general, but I, for one, do not believe that the things were made by Anglo-Saxons at all, and only use the term Saxon as a convenience in describing the period to which they belong. The Paxton brooches therefore provide an interesting opportunity for examining the matter.

I have never counted the 'applied' brooches in the Cambridge Museum, which contains a large number of them. They are mostly faced with a disc plate of gilded bronze, which has been stamped with a metal die to form a repoussé ornamental pattern. Several of these plates in the museum, especially from the cemeteries around Barrington, are stamped with the same die as many from Kempston. They were therefore distributed over an area of perhaps thirty miles in diameter. A rarer form of applied brooch, stamped with a star pattern, apparently ranged from Guildown in Surrey to Lackford and Holywell Row in Suffolk. The theory that such things were made by itinerant metal workers is most improbable, for their manufacture involved several different processes: die cutting, bronze casting, gilding and other crafts which required a settled workshop. It was an industry which produced the things in considerable numbers. It is clear then that it was the finished article which was distributed by a travelling salesman, from a fixed centre of production. If this is the correct answer, then the brooches are not of the slightest value to students in fixing the boundaries of Anglo-Saxon tribes. They simply indicate the beats of travelling salesmen and the countrywoman's taste in a given area.

The Paxton brooches are not unique in the matter of ornament. A second pair from Barrington, from the same die, is in the Cambridge Museum and there is also a single specimen of unknown provenance (Pl. III *a, b*). This kind of ornamentation used to be known as Salin's Style I, but Sir Thomas Kendrick in his *Anglo-Saxon Art* recognized various English, or rather British, variants of this style and detected a Romano-British ancestry behind them. Our Paxton ornament is close to what Kendrick termed the Kentish variety of the Helmet style; although I do not think the helmet comes into the composition of our beast. One from Howletts in Kent (Kendrick, *op. cit.* fig. 16, v) comes reasonably close to it in general appearance. Our animal is, however, less disjointed and is presumably earlier than any of his examples. Ours (Fig. 1*a*) seems to have been formed by the addition of a beast's head and legs to a Classical skein pattern. In fact, as far as decoration counts for anything, one would say that the Paxton brooches were ornamented in a barbarized sub-Roman style.

¹ The distribution of the brooches as known at present appears to be roughly as follows: Cambridgeshire 50, Berkshire 25, Bedfordshire 20, Northamptonshire 20, Gloucestershire 12. Odd pairs are found elsewhere, but not in numbers comparable to these counties. Had the brooches been Saxon, we should have expected large numbers in Essex, Middlesex and Sussex. Berkshire may have been a Saxon area, but this is uncertain. No one knows whether the *Gewissae* were Saxons or *foederati*.

Next, let us look at the construction of the brooches. The 'applied' brooch is not confined to the Anglo-Saxon period. In an early form it was made by the pre-Roman Celts of Gaul (P. Jacobsthal, *Early Celtic Art*, pl. 166, no. 349). Then it appears as the well-known 'griffin' brooch from Santon Downham in the Cambridge Museum (Sir C. Fox, *Pattern and Purpose*, pl. 37*b*). This is clearly a British product of about the time of the Claudian Conquest. Applied brooches are found on Romano-British sites, but satisfactory dates are not easy to obtain. R. G. Collingwood, in his classification of Romano-British brooches (*Archaeology of Roman Britain*, fig. 64, 105), gives an example of a fairly common form, with a Celtic pattern of scroll and trumpet on its face, but he is not definite as to its date. These brooches are not rare. Boyd Dawkins in his *Cave Hunting* gave a figure (25) of one apparently found with fourth, or fifth, century *minimi*. Several examples have also been found of another Romano-British type, whose front plates are stamped with a design of soldiers and standards based on Constantinian coinage of the fourth century.

Another feature of several Saxon 'applied' brooches, including the Paxton specimens, is the biconical central stud. This is found on numerous Romano-British disc brooches, where it is often set with enamel on top (Fig. 1*b*). Examples are shown in the Third Wroxeter Report (pl. xvi, 11 and 12) and in Pitt-Rivers' excavation report on Woodcuts (*Excavations in Cranborne Chase*, vol. 1, pl. 13).

As far as one can see then, all the features which go to make up the applied brooch are Celtic or Roman in origin. The barbarizing of ornamental design had spread far over Britain and the Continent long before the Anglo-Saxon Conquest. The only reason we call these brooches Saxon is that they were worn by people buried in graves of that time. We do not, however, speak of the numerous corpses buried in graves of the period who had rings of elephant ivory buried with them as being Numidians! As far as the skeletons with 'applied' brooches are concerned, and this holds good also for the 'saucer' brooches, we might just as well speak of them as Britons. There is no justification whatever for theories of tribal distributions which are based on the idea that these brooches are Saxon. It is far more probable that they were produced in a sub-Roman workshop and distributed far and wide by pedlars.

I no longer feel happy in attempting to fix the date of objects in the Anglo-Saxon period, but, as far as ornament is any guide, these Paxton brooches are fairly early in the series. Their pattern should be compared with that on the big square-headed brooch from Holywell Row Grave 11. I have tried to resolve it into its component parts elsewhere (*Dark Age Britain*, fig. 21). In fact it seems to me that all these brooches, whether square-headed or applied, have, when they belong to so-called 'Kentish' types, originated in sub-Roman London between A.D. 450 and A.D. 600. Many other objects of continental and even African origin found their way into Anglo-Saxon graves, which clearly shows that merchants were getting their products distributed far about the country. It seems reasonably clear that this is what happened to brooches also.



(a)

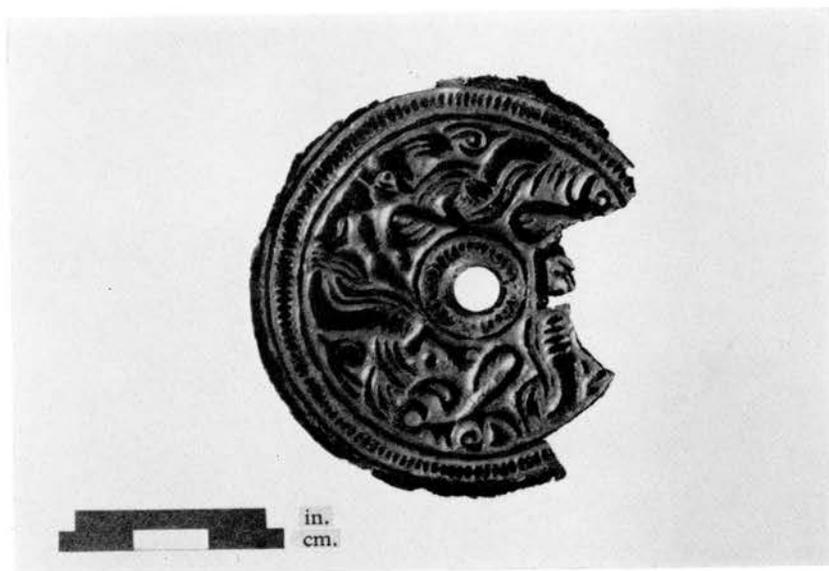


(b)

Pagan Saxon urns from Little Paxton.



(a)



(b)

Saxon 'applied' brooches. (a) A pair from Barrington, Cambs.; (b) no provenance.

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