

An Anglo-Saxon fastener from Waltham Abbey

Peter Huggins

A single chance discovery, several centuries out of context, prompts questions about the mechanics of the 7th-century Conversion to the north of London.

Introduction

THE DISCOVERY of a 7th-century animal-ornamented fastener, probably a dress fastener (Figs. 1 and 3) at Waltham Abbey, Essex, warrants discussion in advance of the publication of the excavation. It has implications for the date of the beginning of Christianity hereabouts. It allows us to ask whether the Conversion to the north of London began as a result of the Kentish appointment of Mellitus as missionary bishop to the East Saxons in 604 or as a result of Cedd's expedition from Northumbria to Essex in 653. Of the effectiveness of Mellitus, who was expelled from St. Paul's, London, in 616, we know next to nothing. From Bede we know that Cedd became bishop of the East Saxons and built churches in several places and ordained priests and deacons¹.

The term dress fastener is used in its widest sense, since there is no certainty as to how it was used or on what garment or strapping it might have been employed. The fastener, of which about 70% exists, is of gilded copper-alloy. It has evidence of a hinge at the top as drawn, and

1. D. Knowles *Bede's Ecclesiastical history of the English nation* (1970) 140.



Fig. 1: the gilt copper-alloy dress fastener from Waltham Abbey, Essex, 1993. Scale 3:2. Photo: J. H. Littlefair

site going back to the 11th century and, although the buildings themselves were not found, there were plenty of features to suggest that they were close by, probably to the south. Activities included quarrying for gravel and the erection of numerous structures consisting of posts continuing into the post medieval period.

This project has provided new information on several aspects of the archaeology of the Green as outlined above. The stratigraphy in the area survives well with a solid archaeological sequence in the ground dating from the early medieval period through to the post-medieval buildings and later. However, there is much still to be learnt regarding human activity. It is not known what the site was like in prehistory or whether there was any settlement at that time. The Romano-British period was also unrepresented although it is known that Roman Ermine street passed through Lower Edmonton. In the Saxon period there are references to Edmonton from as early as the 8th century and it was a thriving settlement by the time the Domes-

day book was compiled (from 1066-1087). The earliest features on site date from around this time but it is by no means clear exactly where the village was located.

There was a great deal of public interest in the site, especially after a notice board was erected giving a brief description of the archaeological involvement. Dozens of local people asked questions about the site and many provided information and stories concerning the area. There was also an organised visit from the history class of a local school. It was obvious that many local residents had little knowledge of Edmonton's past and equally plain that they were fascinated by it.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Unicoin (New Homes) Plc for generously funding the project. Thanks are also due to the Museum of London Archaeology Service drawing office for the illustrations and the photographic department for the photograph.

has a single rivet hole near the bottom. It is a cast piece decorated in the manner of chip-carving in wood, where the V-shaped incisions are imitated in the cast object. It is well worn, with the gilding only remaining in the bottom of the incisions and on some of the internal edges. It measures 4.4 mm (1.7 in) from top to bottom and would have measured 52 mm (2.0 in) across; it is about 1 mm thick and presently weighs 13 g (0.5 oz).

The piece exhibits spherical curvature. The broken extremities are bent and show that, although it is a cast piece, it exhibited some ductility when broken. Thus it is quite possible that some of the present curvature is a result of misuse; it is not safe to assume the piece was intended to fit a curved rather than a flattish surface.

It was found, in March 1993, in the garden of Abbey Gardens House, backfilled into the construction trench for a wall of the Augustinian period of c. 1200. The find spot is only 13 m (43 ft) from the north-east corner of the present church and perhaps up to twice as far from the same corner of the Saxon ground-standing timber church². One grave at Waltham has been dated to the 7th century, but without grave goods, and at the opposite corner of the timber church; thus the original provenance of this piece is not certain.

The design

The decorative design is of a central fish with a stylised predatory bird, probably an eagle, each side. The head of the fish, with the two small pectoral fins, is shown in plan. The rest of the fish is in profile; the dorsal and ventral fins, half way along the body, are joined to the legs of the bird; the caudal fins spread out at the tail. The fish, itself, is one of the earliest Christian symbols, the Greek word for fish being formed from the first letters of Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour.

Anglo-Saxon and Germanic art has been studied in depth by Salin³ and Speake⁴. Speake writes "The bird, or rather the stylised schema for a bird, is common in Anglo-Saxon and Germanic art. With a few exceptions the Anglo-Saxon bird is characteristically depicted in profile and possesses a curved beak, and it seems clear the intention was to depict a predatory bird. . . . It has been the predatory bird-head, with its associated angled-head surround, that has been one of the chief distinguishing features of so-called Style II animal ornament"; this latter feature is most often called the angled eye-surround. The piece was first identified by Vera Evison as a Salin Style II example of the 7th century AD; this was later confirmed by Leslie Webster.

The Waltham bird is a typical example with the angled eye-surround; the eye is set hard up in the corner of this surround. The head is clearly of a predatory bird with the top part of the bill curving down around the lower in the manner of flesh-eating birds. Speake notes that

2. Church 1, see P. J. Huggins and K. N. Bascombe 'Excavations at Waltham Abbey, Essex, 1985-91: three pre-Conquest churches and Norman evidence' *Archaeol J* 149 (1992) 282-343.
3. B. Salin *Die altgermanische Thierornamentik* (1904).
4. G. Speake *Anglo-Saxon animal art and its Germanic background* (1980).

the predatory beak can be traced back to the 7th century BC among the Scythians of southern Russia⁵; in this Scythian art quadrupeds are already "in course of dissolution owing to repeated copying; the hind leg is twisted over the back...". On the Waltham piece we may be seeing, in the two bands across the body of the bird, relics of fore and hind legs of quadrupeds so disposed when all knowledge of the original meaning of these elements has been lost. The thigh of the bird is shown in conventional manner like a pointed balloon. The leg is shown commalike; the tail is shown in herring-bone fashion.

Objects with animal ornamentation of Style II are common throughout western and central Europe, Scandinavia and Italy. In England, Speake notes "the style is concentrated in Kent, yet the two finds with its richest examples occur outside Kent, at Sutton Hoo in Suffolk and at Taplow in Buckinghamshire"⁶. In discussing the Taplow burial, it is noted that a number of the grave goods indicate a Kentish connection and "It is likely that a political reality underpins this link, connected perhaps with Kentish territorial expansion in the middle Thames region during the earlier 7th century, as much as with the spread of changing fashions in dress and religion"⁷. In this connection the pagan Anglo-Saxon craftsman would have adopted the new Christian religion of his king, he would have developed his art and broadened his repertoire⁸, such as introducing the fish, while continuing to use his traditional methods and ideas.

Mode of operation

Two of the three original projections at the top are broken but show that a small diameter pin passed right through them. Thus there seems to be two possible modes of operation. Firstly, the piece could be one element of a hinge; this leaves two further possibilities, either the hinge was permanently assembled or was fitted together temporarily by means of a retractable pin. Secondly, the pin could have been permanently fitted in the part discovered, with two loops, on a mating piece, hooking over the two visible lengths of pin; in such a use the piece would be part of a clasp with the assembly having to be under tension to ensure permanent fit.

The single rivet hole at the bottom seems casually drilled. It is not on the centre line of the tail of the fish, cutting the two left-hand vertical lines of the group of four. It is thus suggested that this single fixing hole is secondary. This argument stands in spite of the angled decoration of the fish tail being different side to side, with one curved line appearing to skirt the hole. A single fixing hole near the edge of the piece is quite insufficient however it was used, so for this reason alone it seems that the hole must be secondary. A single hole on a mount from Barham, Ipswich, Suffolk, where there were three cast attachment pins on the underside⁹, is also considered secondary. On the Waltham piece the original fixings are assumed to

5. *Ibid.*, 81.
6. *Ibid.*, 81.
7. *British Museum Guide to Anglo-Saxon antiquities* (1923) 8.
8. *Op cit* fn 4, 17.
9. L. Webster and J. Backhouse *The making of England: Anglo-Saxon art and culture, AD 600-900* British Museum (1991) 56.

have been on the back; however nothing is visible on the corroded back.

Identification

The fastener can be contrasted with a buckle (Fig. 2) from King's Field, Faversham, also with a central fish but with, reputedly, a bird-headed quadruped each side¹²; the eyes are placed as on the Waltham example, the little holes nearby are for rivets. In the Faversham buckle the loop is integral with the buckle plate; the tongue would have swivelled relatively. Alternatively the tongue can be integral with the plate and the loop can swivel relatively. The Faversham finds appear to come from Christian graves and so are likely to be early in the period of the Conversion begun by Augustine in 597. If the Waltham piece is a buckle plate, the central projection would be part of a broken-off tongue, but with the pin-hole right through it, weakening it; this interpretation seems unlikely. So identification as a buckle plate is rejected.

If the original piece was intentionally curved it might call to mind the shoulder fasteners (called clasps) from Sutton Hoo¹³ which are, of course, in cloisonné work of much grander appearance; these are two similar mating fasteners, with a rectangular pin, curved to fit the shape of the shoulder. However, as Miss Evison points out, these pieces are hinged along the entire length of one side. Thus they contrast with the Waltham fastener which is hinged for about 12mm (0.5in) out of a total width of 52mm (2in) or a top width of about 30mm. So again this interpretation is not favoured. It is noted that on the Sutton Hoo clasps, gold staples on the back are suitable for sewing onto a garment; something similar is assumed for the Waltham piece.

If the Waltham piece is part of a clasp, as defined earlier, then a near parallel is with wrist clasps. Anglo-Saxon dress has been studied exhaustively by Owen-Crocker¹⁴ who discusses both male and female costume in detail, drawing on evidence of the disposition of archaeological finds in graves. She illustrates female dress of cylindrical form, the so-called sleeveless *peplos*-type. This 'drain-pipe' type dress would have been worn, over an undergarment with split sleeves which were fastened

with wrist clasps. Owen-Crocker illustrates such clasps in which the clasped length is about a third to a quarter of the total length. However, these clasps were worn as identical pairs and two such Waltham pieces would seem too wide to have fitted a wrist. So this too is not a convincing parallel unless one decorative piece was worn with a smaller functional mating piece.

Perhaps the nearest parallel is with objects called strap distributors which are intended to connect straps, of different widths, at up to right angles with each other. There is a cloisonné example¹⁵ from Sutton Hoo, this is rectangular with the hinge about a third the length of the plate. This distributor was 20mm wide and was fitted to a waist belt, immediately above the hip, and of at least this width. It was conveniently placed for a strap 14mm wide to drop to a scabbard slider as a supplementary suspension point for the lower part of the sword; this distributor had an additional pivoting feature so that the narrow strap did not need to meet the main strap at right angles. In this vein Miss Evison suggests that the object could have ornamented a knife or seax sheath, hinging with a narrow strap for suspension from a waist belt. Such an arrangement, shown in Fig. 3, would allow the fastener to be seen the same way up as drawn.

If an application other than as a dress fastener appears appropriate then a bookclasp comes to mind. Three bronze objects¹⁶ from Fordham, Cambridgeshire, of the 8th or 9th centuries, called 'bookclasps', are clearly not so, being decorative plaques of some sort. Bookclasps of medieval date are sometimes found at Waltham; two were found close to the church in 1992 in a 13th-century context. The object in question could have functioned as part of such a clasp. The piece with a fixed pin could have fitted on the front board of the book and a similar piece hinged with a metal strap (or a leather one with end fittings), equal in length to the thickness of the book, and which was looped at the end, could have fitted on the back. The manufacture of vellum or parchment at Waltham has been suggested¹⁷; books of this material tend not to lie flat so the edges have to be pulled together with clasps. With the Christian symbolism involved, it is conceivable that the piece could have derived from a 7th-century church book.

The Christian significance

The eagle is well known as the symbol of St. John the Evangelist. Each of the four Evangelists is typified by one of the living creatures vividly imagined by the prophet Ezekiel¹⁸ supporting the throne of God in his

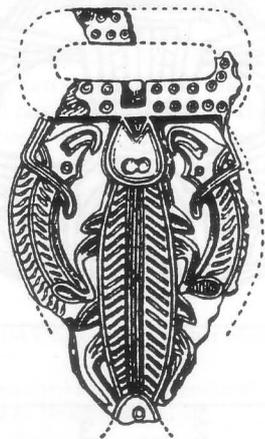


Fig. 2: gilt copper-alloy belt buckle from Faversham, Kent, c 1870. Scale 3:2. (*Op cit* fn 7, Fig. 42).

10. D. M. Wilson *The Anglo-Saxons* (1960) 142.

11. *Op cit* fn 9, 56.

12. *Op cit* fn 7, Fig. 42.

13. Construction seen in A. C. Evans *The Sutton Hoo ship burial* British Museum (1986) pl. 76.

14. G. R. Owen-Crocker *Dress in Anglo-Saxon England* (1986) 28-34.

15. *Op cit* fn 13, Fig. 26.

16. *V.C.H. Cambridgeshire I* (1936) Pl. XII.

17. P. J. Huggins 'Excavations on the north side of Sun Street, Waltham Abbey' *Essex Archaeol Hist* 19 (1988) 150.

18. Chapter 1, v 5-10.

vision; the book of Ezekiel was written some centuries before Christ¹⁹. In the Apocalypse or Revelation of St. John the Divine, possibly the Evangelist, the same beasts surround the throne of God, the fourth beast is said to be like a flying eagle²⁰. Irenaeus, writing in the 2nd century AD²¹, likens the eagle to “the spirit hovering with his wings over the church”²². The imagery can be traced back to the Egyptian sphinx which has the wings of an eagle. The bird has taken on the identity of the constellation Aquila which lies outside the zodiac.

In Christianity the symbolism of the eagle is variously interpreted. It has been associated with St. John since at least the 4th century; this generally adopted association is included in Jerome, c 342-420 AD²³, but the symbols of the Evangelists (including man for St. Matthew, the lion for St. Mark and the ox for St. Luke) first appear in Christian art on a mosaic dated 384-398²⁴. Later the symbols, including the eagle, appear in sculptures, for example on the south portal at Moissac, on each side of Christ in majesty²⁵.

John is taken to have had visionary qualities beyond the limits of the other three Evangelists, to the Higher Intelligence of the Logos or Word of God. The eagle by its soaring flights and powers of sight symbolises the Logos²⁶; thus on the lectern the Word is read from the open wings of the eagle. The eagle is apportioned to John because it “wings his flight beyond created things to the contemplation of the eternal word”²⁷. By the 2nd century, at latest, the four living creatures were made symbolic of events in the life of Christ, the Ascension being represented by the flying eagle²⁸. The eagle also represents the Spirit, aspiration, spiritual endeavour or renewal, the last judgment, when it throws young out of the nest, and Christ gazing on the glory of God. Also, when plunging to take fish out of the sea, it represents Christ saving souls from sin²⁹.

The eagle often appears in illuminated manuscripts as the emblem of St. John, particularly in the Book of Kells. Especially interesting is an eagle, with an extra pair of wings, from the Book of Armagh, which holds a fish in its talons³⁰. This latter bird, together with that depicted on the Waltham fastener, may be the golden eagle, *aquila chrysaetos*, which will take fish as part of its diet, or the osprey, *pandion halietus*, of which the diet is mainly fish³¹.

The Kentish connection

The Kentish connection may be particularly significant with regard to the Waltham fastener. Ethelbert, king of Kent, in 560 married the Christian princess Bertha, daughter of Charibert king of Paris. She, with her priest Luit-hard, was worshipped in the little church of St. Martin at Canterbury. This presence may have been an impetus for the mission of Augustine which landed in Thanet in 597. Among reinforcements who arrived in 601 were Justus and Mellitus. Justus was appointed to the see of Rochester. Mellitus was sent by Ethelbert of Kent into the kingdom of his nephew Sabert as missionary bishop to the East Saxons. His seat was at St. Paul's in the old Roman city of *Londinium*; this was probably in accordance with Pope Gregory's plan to have the southern

19. E. A. Livingstone *The concise Oxford dictionary of the Christian church* (1977) 187.
20. Revelation chapter 4, v 6-7; this was probably written between 81 and 96, see *op cit* fn 19, 438.
21. *Op cit* fn 19, 264.
22. J. Bradner *Symbols of Church seasons and days* (1977) 61.
23. *Op cit* fn 19, 270.
24. W. E. Addis and T. Arnold *A Catholic dictionary* (1952) 323.
25. M. Schapiro *The sculpture of Moissac* (1985) 81; this particular scene with Christ, the symbols of the Evangelists and the church elders depicts the Apocalyptic vision of John as described in Revelation chapter 4.
26. H. Whore *Church monastery cathedral: a guide to the symbolism of the Christian tradition* (1977) 66, 100.
27. *Op cit* fn 24, 323.
28. *Op cit* fn 22, 51.
29. J. C. Cooper *Illustrated encyclopaedia of traditional symbols* (1978) 58.
30. P. Brown *The book of Kells* (1980) 85.
31. B. Campbell *The dictionary of birds in colour* (1974) 232, 307.

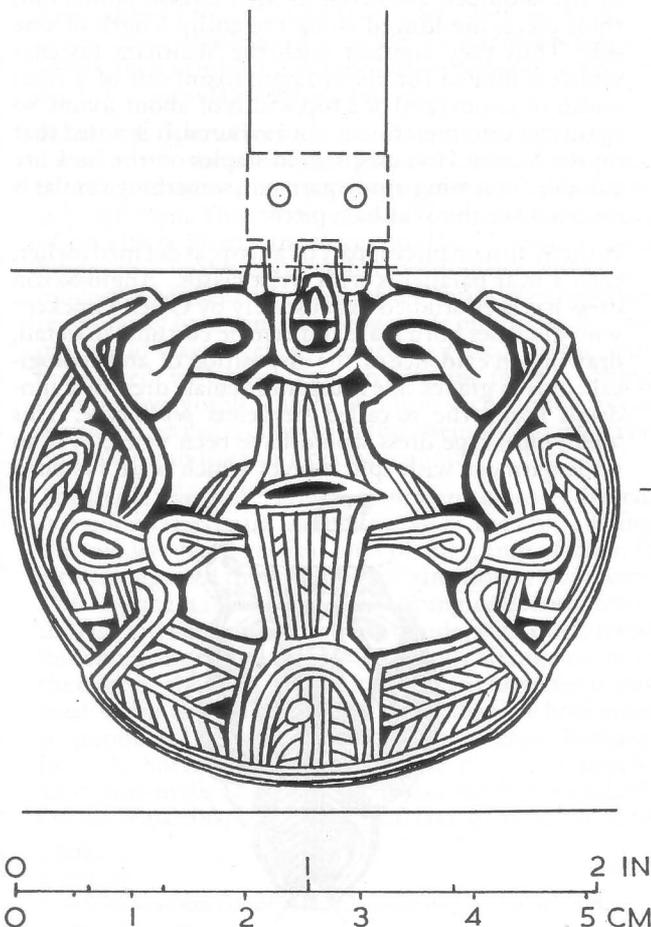


Fig. 3: reconstructed design, based on Fig. 1, and possible use as a strap distributor. Scale 3:2.

metropolitan see in London³². This appointment was in 604; Mellitus remained in post until 616 when Sabert's sons apostasised and he was driven out. This event may be as much a reaction against Kentish domination as against Christianity³³.

Waltham, since the Synod of Hertford in 673, has been in the diocese of London, and was only a half day's walk or ride (some 20km) from St. Paul's. Sabert was baptised by Mellitus in 604, when he was 34 years old, but it has been suggested³⁴ that "the new religion struck only shallow roots". However, if Sabert owned the estate at Waltham, later to become the minster parish, it is entirely possible that he built a church there. The possibility that Sabert owned Waltham is perhaps supported by the fact that, c 700 AD, his great-grandson Swaefred granted lands in the north of the minster parish for setting up a house of God at Nazeing³⁵. Waltham has also been reasoned to have been a royal estate on the basis of its name³⁶ from as early as c 450 AD.

It has perhaps been wrongly assumed that Mellitus achieved little, this may be because of the known period of church building from the mission of Cedd, who landed at Bradwell-juxta-Mare in 653 from Northumbria. This assumption was based on Bede's comments³⁷ that churches were built by Cedd at several places in the kingdom of the East Saxons. The Waltham fastener has clear Kentish connections stylistically and is certainly a product of Anglo-Saxon inspiration rather than an example of Celtic art, as might have been brought down from Northumbria. The period of the Kentish connection is that of Mellitus' bishopric from 604 to 616. It thus remains to be considered if the design of the fastener can be as early in the 7th century as this.

Objects clearly of Style II have been found in the tomb of Bertha's step-grandmother at St. Denis, Paris. The tomb is dated to 565-570³⁸. The pieces in the tomb show typical features such as the angled eye-surround and the curved beak³⁹. The Taplow clasps are dated to the early 7th century⁴⁰; the terminals of the associated drinking horns indicate the use of the angled eye-surround and the curved beak⁴¹ and the Kentish connection has been discussed above. Objects from the Sutton Hoo ship burial are also of Style II; the great clasp has angled eye-surrounds and a predatory beak very like the Waltham fastener; the shield has a flying bird in the reconstruction⁴² also with a very curved beak. The Sutton Hoo burial is thought to be of the East Anglian king Raedwald who died c 625. He was converted, but not permanently, by king Ethelbert of Kent, so there could be a

Kentish element in the burial goods although the predominant connection there seems to be with Sweden⁴³.

Discussion

The minster church status of Waltham has been discussed⁴⁴, it being reasoned that the minster parish was a cross-river territory involving land currently in Essex, Middlesex and Hertfordshire, and including Nazeing mentioned above. The parish was reasoned to have taken on the form of a previous royal estate later owned c 700 by Swaefred and possibly earlier by Sabert.

There is knowledge of a handful of Christian burials around the church which are dug from the Saxon ground surface, but there is not enough skeletal evidence to sex them. Thus we must not infer the existence of a nunnery or double house, as known later in the 7th century at Barking and Nazeing and in Kent; the period in question is probably too early anyway to consider such a house with a royal kinswoman as abbess. Rather perhaps we might envisage a small community of priests possibly under one of the companions of Mellitus and Justus who came from Rome in the early years of the century.

Conclusions

The Waltham fastener is decorated with Style II animal ornament, with clear Kentish and Christian connections. At the start of the 7th century, Kentish influence was dominant in Essex, or rather in the larger kingdom of the East Saxons. King Sabert was converted through the actions of his uncle Ethelbert of Kent; the latter built and endowed St. Paul's in his nephew's kingdom. Sabert, being 34 years old at the time, may well have taken his responsibilities as a churchman seriously enough to have constructed the first church at Waltham.

The dating comparanda suggest that the clasp could well be from as early in the 7th century as the bishopric of Mellitus. Thus it may have been through the actions of Sabert and Mellitus that the first church was built at Waltham, and the clasp found its way there nearly fourteen centuries ago. The radiocarbon date for a nearby Waltham burial of 590-690 cal. AD at the 95% confidence level⁴⁵ is consistent with such an interpretation.

Acknowledgments

The excavation, directed by the author, was run by Waltham Abbey Historical Society for the Abbey Church as part of the field evaluation for a new Parish Centre. The fastener was found by Kim Sandwell of the West Essex Archaeological Group which often helps at Waltham. Vera Evison and Leslie Webster are thanked for their contributions as described in the text. Dinah Dean is thanked for her recognition of the significance of the eagle.

32. B. Yorke *Kings and kingdoms of early Anglo-Saxon England* (1990) 47-8.

33. *Ibid.*, 48.

34. K. Bailey 'East Saxon kings: some further observations' *Essex J* 23 no 2 (1988) 37.

35. K. N. Bascombe 'Two charters of king Swebred of Essex' in *An Essex Tribute* (ed) K. Neale (1987) 85-96.

36. R. M. Huggins 'The significance of the place-name wealdham' *Medieval Archaeol* 19 (1975) 198-201.

37. *Op cit* fn 1, 140.

38. *Op cit* fn 4, 26.

39. Illustrated in *op cit* fn 4, 27.

40. *Op cit* fn 9, 55.

41. *Op cit* fn 7, Fig. 5.

42. British Museum slide ML15.

43. *Op cit* fn 4, 29-37.

44. P. J. Huggins 'Towards the minster parish of London' *London Archaeol* 6, no II (1991) 292-300.

45. *Op cit* fn 2, 334.