AN INSCRIBED BONE FRAGMENT FROM NASSINGTON, PETERBOROUGH (Fig. 6)

A fragment of inscribed bone was found in 1992 by Jane Baile and Patrick Foster during excavation at Prebendal Manor, Nassington, Peterborough. It was found in a residual context, in a Late-Saxon pit which dates from the second half of the 10th century.
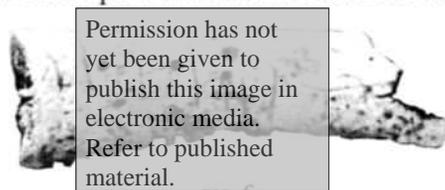

FIG. 6

THE NASSINGTON BONE FRAGMENT
Sc. 2:1. Photograph: Jane Baile.

The piece of bone is small in size, measuring 27 mm in length, 9 mm in width and 2 mm in thickness. The two short ends are broken but the long sides are both original. The lower side contains several small notches. The bone appears to be from a single-sided comb, the notches being from where the teeth have broken off. One of the rivet marks from where side-plates were fastened on is still visible.

The bone has been identified by Umberto Albarella as likely to be pig bone, perhaps a lateral metapodial.[1] It has a slightly shrunk and distorted appearance and is calcified, suggesting that it had prolonged contact with a fire or some other source of intense heat. This could have been before the bone was made into a comb, if for example the comb-maker utilized a piece of bone discarded after cooking; alternatively, and perhaps more likely, the contact with fire may have occurred after the comb had been broken and thrown away. Other pig bone has been found on the site, including a piece made into a Late-Saxon 'toggle'.[2]

One face of the bone contains a now incomplete text, incised horizontally along its length in Insular script without any guiding lines. To fit into the space available, the letters are necessarily tiny, the largest being 5 mm in height. The letters are not easy to read due to their size, their being lightly incised and their being rather worn.

The text is transliterated using the following system:

A indicates a clearly legible letter A; A̲ indicates a letter A, damaged but legible; [A̲] indicates a damaged letter, probably to be read as A; [.] indicates one lost letter; A/B indicates the letters A and B ligatured; - indicates complete loss of text.

The text reads:

-[. . .]EHIR/[.]-

The first few letters, indicated above by [. . .], are incised close together and are now more worn than the rest. It is not clear how they should be read. One possibility is that they read [./E̲H̲] where the first letter, ligatured to the E, could be part of a Y or S. Another possibility is that they read [./D̲/.]. The first letter, ligatured to the D, could again be part of a Y or S; the third letter, which might or might not be ligatured to the D, could be N or S. This group is followed by four letters clearly to be read as EHIR. The final letter of the

[1] Pers. comm., Umberto Albarella, University of Birmingham.
[2] Pers. comm., Jane Baile.

text appears to be E ligatured to the preceding R, although T and T/E are also possibilities. There are then at least two possible readings of the text:

-[.eh]ehir[.]-   and   -[.dn]ehir[.]-

Where the reading of the text is so uncertain its interpretation must also be uncertain. Indeed, it is not immediately clear whether the text is in Old English or in Latin. Word division is not often indicated in Anglo-Saxon inscribed texts and does not appear to be shown here. However the letter *h* rarely, if ever, appears between vowels in Old English or in Latin and so it seems likely that the group HIR begins a word. If the text is in Old English, the word beginning *hir*- could be *hir[e]*, meaning 'her', or 'its' referring to a feminine noun. There are other possibilities too, for example that it could be a spelling of *her*-, either the beginning of a word like *here* 'army', or the common first name element *here*-. The preceding word could then be *[h]e* meaning 'he', or 'it' referring to a masculine noun. The two letters preceding this, -[.e], would then form the end of a word now lost. Alternatively the text could begin -[.] and continue *[dn]e*, the usual abbreviation for the Latin *domine* 'Oh Lord'. Inscribed texts otherwise in Old English do sometimes contain Latin ecclesiastical words. The Kirkdale sundial text, for example, is in Old English but includes the words *scs gregorius* (twice) and *prs* for *presbyter* or *presbyteri*.[3]

If the Nassington text is in Latin, the word beginning with the group *hir* could be one of several, for example a form of *hirtus* 'hairy; rough' or a word beginning *her*-. The preceding letters could be read as above, as either -*[dn]e* or -*[h]e*: in Latin, *he* could be a spelling of *hi* or *hae* 'these' (masculine or feminine).

Although it is impossible to be certain, the text seems more likely to be in Old English than in Latin: *dne* or *he* and *hire* or *Here*- are all particularly common words or parts of names, whereas if this is a Latin text, the words are less common. However we cannot rule out the possibility that the text consists of practice letters inscribed on the bone after the comb had been discarded.

If the text is in Old English, a likely reading is: -[.] [dn]e hir[e] -, meaning '. . . Oh Lord, her . . .'. Such a text could perhaps have commended the female owner of the bone object to God, or requested God's curse on anyone who removed the object. An alternative is: -[.] [dn]e Hir[e]-, meaning '. . .Oh Lord, Here- . . .' commending to God the maker or owner of the object. This maker or owner could have been male (called, for example, Herebeorht) or female (called, for example, Herefrith).

A comparable text commending someone to God, presumably with reference to the Biblical quotation, appears on a stone from Manchester. This text, with the abbreviations expanded, probably reads: *in manus tuas domine commendo spiritum*, 'into thy hands Oh Lord I commend (my?) spirit'.[4] A brooch containing a curse in Old English was found at Sutton, Cambridgeshire. Translated, this text reads, ' + Aedwyn owns me; may the Lord own her. May the Lord curse him who takes me from her unless she gives me voluntarily'.[5] The word for 'her' on the Sutton brooch is *hire*, as on the Nassington bone fragment, but the word for 'Lord' on the brooch is Old English *drihten*.

As noted above, the Nassington bone fragment seems to have formed part of a composite single-sided comb with side-plates riveted on. A fairly large number of such combs survive from Anglo-Saxon England.[6] Many of these are made of antler although some also incorporate other animal bone. The fact that the comb was made from bone not

[3] E. Okasha, *Hand-list of Anglo-Saxon Non-runic Inscriptions* (Cambridge, 1971), no. 64, pp. 87–88 and fig.
[4] Okasha, op. cit. in note 3, no. 89, p. 100 and fig.
[5] Okasha, op. cit. in note 3, no. 114, pp. 116–17 and fig.
[6] A. MacGregor, *Bone, Antler, Ivory & Horn: the Technology of Skeletal Materials since the Roman Period* (London, 1985), 73–96.

antler suggests that it may have been from a handled comb; however no other Anglo-Saxon combs made from pig bone are known, whether handled or unhandled.[7] The vast majority of combs of the period are uninscribed although two inscribed combs have been found in Dublin. One is of wood and appears to contain two personal names.[8] The other is of antler and is inscribed with the first few runes of the *fuþork* followed by what may be a personal name.[9]

A better parallel, however, is afforded by the Anglo-Saxon comb from Whitby.[10] This single-sided comb is made of bone, at least some of which is probably cattle bone, and it also had riveted side-plates. Like the Nassington comb, it was found in a rubbish pit. It is however a little earlier in date, probably late 7th to early 9th century. The Whitby comb is also inscribed, but its text is in runic not roman script. It starts with two Latin words for 'My God' and then continues in Old English. It reads: *d[æ]us mæus god aluwaludo helipæ cy-*, 'My God: may God almighty help Cy-', where 'Cy-' is the beginning of a personal name. The Nassington comb, as argued above, might also have contained a personal name, although possibly on one of the portions of the object now lost.

The script used in the Nassington text is Insular minuscule with a high proportion of ligatured letters. Epigraphically speaking, the most similar inscribed text is a piece of lead spillage from Winchester.[11] The letter forms are similar and, coincidentally, it also contains the sequence *dne*. The Winchester text is likely to consist of practice letters and may date from the 11th century.

The Nassington fragment is dated from its archaeological context which gives a *terminus ante quem* of the second half of the 10th century. Since the context is a rubbish pit, the bone fragment could be earlier than this date. Single-sided combs were current in both the Middle and Late Saxon periods. The language (if it is indeed Old English) and the script are both consistent with a date in the 10th century.

[7] Pers. comm., Ian Riddler.
[8] E. Okasha, 'A supplement to *Hand-Lit of Anglo-Saxon Non-Runic Inscriptions*', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 11 (1983), no. 162, pp. 89–90 and figs.
[9] M. P. Barnes, J. R. Hagland and R. I. Page, *The Runic Inscriptions of Viking Age Dublin* (Dublin, 1997), 44–45 and fig.
[10] R. I. Page, *An Introduction to English Runes* (London, 1973), 168 and fig.
[11] Okasha, op. cit. in note 8, no. 182 (Winchester VII), p. 102 and fig.