

Notes and News

A SEVENTH-CENTURY PECTORAL CROSS FROM HOLDERNESS, EAST YORKSHIRE (Figs. 1–2)

Reports in the national press detailing the purchase by the Ashmolean Museum in November 1999 of an Anglo-Saxon pectoral cross of gold inlaid with garnets have already brought its existence to the notice of the archaeological community. The present report aims to provide a more detailed and extensive account of the cross and to provide some assessment of its significance.

DISCOVERY AND ACQUISITION OF THE CROSS

Although scholarly awareness of the cross dates back no further than 1998, its initial discovery took place one morning over 30 years earlier, when it caught the eye of Ronald Wray, proprietor of Gray's Garth Farm at Burton Pidsea on the Holderness peninsula, E. Yorkshire (TA246312). Mr Wray recalls the moment vividly: he was making his way across the stack-yard of his farm, when suddenly he glimpsed the golden gleam of the cross, lying face-down on the ground surface, where it had been laid bare by the previous night's rain.¹

Mr Wray showed his discovery to a friend, a knowledgeable local historian; the object proved beyond the experience of this person, however, and, despite some further attempts to establish the identity of the piece, its date and cultural context (and even the nature of its raw materials) remained unestablished for the time being, causing Mr Wray to put it in a box at the back of a drawer where it was to stay for the next three decades.

Early in 1998 the cross was taken to an open Finds Day at the Hull and East Riding Museum, where the Keeper of Archaeology, Gail Foreman, had no difficulty in identifying it as an important 7th-century piece; since she also recognized the precious metal of which it was formed, the attention of the Coroner's office was drawn to the discovery. Although the Treasure Act (1996) was already in force, the Coroner for East Yorkshire, Mr Geoffrey Saul, ruled that, in view of the date of its initial discovery, the cross should be the subject of an inquest under the terms of the foregoing Treasure Trove procedure. Accordingly, an inquest was held at Hull on 19 April 1999, at which the jury found the cross not to be Treasure Trove. (There being no evidence to suggest that the cross had been buried with the intention of recovering it, the jury reached its decision on the basis that either it was likely to have been a casual loss or else it may have formed part of the contents of a grave;² either circumstance would have excluded it from the definition of Treasure Trove.)

¹ For a more detailed account of the discovery and of the process by which the Ashmolean acquired the cross, see A. MacGregor, 'The Holderness Anglo-Saxon cross', *Minerva* 11 no. 2 (2000), p. 3.

² The parish of Burton Pidsea has been known as the site of an Anglian cemetery since 1818 when 'a large number' of human skeletons was found during the excavation of foundation trenches for a new building; two earrings of gold wire threaded with glass beads found at this time were presented to the Whitby Museum. Further quantities of bones came from nearby gardens around the same period. Information from Humberside SMR files via Gail Foreman. See also G. Poulsen, *History and Antiquities of the Seigniory of Holderness* (London, 1841), II, 44; A. L. S. Meaney, *Gazetteer of Early Anglo-Saxon Burial Sites* (London, 1964), 283.

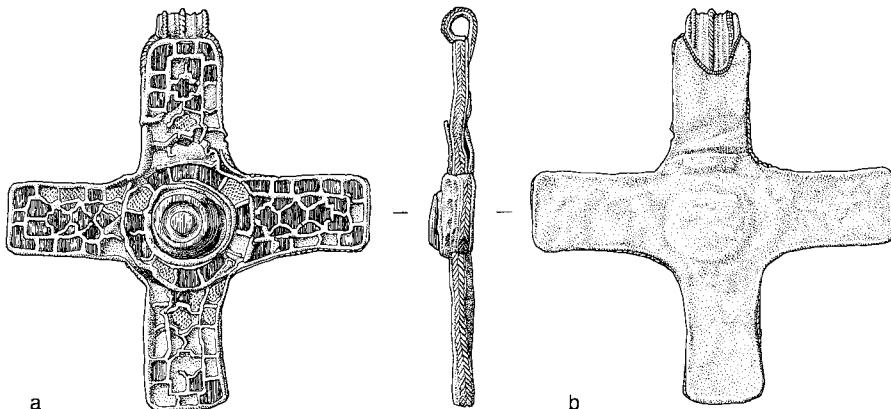


FIG. 1

The Holderness Cross: a, front view; b, back view. Scale 1:1.
Drawn for the Ashmolean Museum by Nick Griffiths.

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FIG. 2

The Holderness Cross: a, front view; b, back view. Scale 1:1.
Photographs: Nick Pollard, Ashmolean Museum.

Consequently the cross was returned to the finder and owner, Mr Wray, who later sent it for auction at Bonham's in Knightsbridge (21 October 1999, lot 235). The Ashmolean Museum entered an unsuccessful bid at the sale but later made contact with the new owner and, with the aid of a generous grant-in-aid from the National Art Collections Fund, finally secured the cross on 9 November.

DESCRIPTION OF THE CROSS

Essentially the cross is equal-armed in form, although there are differences of detail in the respective outlines of the arms. The latter measure 49 mm both vertically and horizontally; they are on average 11 mm wide. The weight of the cross is 12.23 g. Its garnet-inlaid cloisonné ornament is built up on a plain back-plate and a tubular suspension-loop is formed at the top.

The back-plate

On the single-piece back-plate, which is of sheet gold, the asymmetrical outlines of the cross are clearly visible (Figs. 1b, 2b). The arms each display slightly concave sides, gently expanded and rounded corners, and straight or slightly concave ends. The angles are rounded, those to either side of the lower arm having been cut to strikingly differing radii. The upper arm shows clear signs of having been bent out of its true plane and subsequently forced back into line.

The composition of the back-plate was analysed by Duncan Hook using X-ray fluorescence spectrometry on an area of uncleared surface metal, producing a reading of 77% gold, 22% silver and 1.5% copper. These values should be regarded as only approximate: reliable figures for the accuracy of the analysis cannot be quoted, since the surface metal of the cross may have been subject to alteration during burial.³

The cloisonné cell-work

On the front face of the cross a decorative scheme of cloisonné cell-work is applied to the back-plate and inlaid with garnets (Figs. 1a, 2a). The cell-work is formed by means of thin, flat strips of gold, soldered edge-on to the back-plate. Acting as a centre-piece to the entire scheme is a prominent cabochon garnet, held in place by a more substantial collet. The cabochon has a circular base, with sides which taper in a curve towards the displayed plane surface; this is incised with a deep, concentric groove 1 mm wide and with an internal diameter of 3.1 mm. The regular outlines of the stone indicate that it was lathe-turned. The concentric groove, which has a U-shaped section, undoubtedly was formed to receive a decorative inlay, perhaps of gold; blue glass⁴ or white calcium carbonate paste are other possibilities, but even with the aid of a microscope no trace of any such material can be detected today. The collet enclosing this stone, badly distorted in places, is formed from two bands soldered edge-on, one above the other, the upper band angled inwards in order to secure the cabochon.

A ring of twelve cells is formed immediately around the central cabochon, their radial walls joined at the inner end to the collet of the cabochon and at the outer end to a concentric wall formed by a single gold strip. The garnets enclosed in these cells (eight surviving) are irregularly trapezoidal in outline, with their narrower edges towards the centre.

Each of the arms is bordered by a row of square or rectangular cells, with an L-shaped cell to turn each of the outer corners. In terms of the patterns enclosed by these borders, the upper and lower arms form one symmetrical pair while the lateral arms form another. In the vertical plane, two cruciform garnets form the principal features on either arm, separated from each other by pairs of inward-facing T-shaped garnets and enclosed at the extremities by rectangular stones with steps or cut-outs at their innermost corners. On either of the lateral arms three in-line stones, roughly arrow- or pointed mushroom-shaped, are aligned with the principal axis, the outward-facing stems of the outermost stones enclosed by sub-rectangular garnets with stepped or cut-out corners and the remaining cells occupied by garnets of irregular outline. Of an original total of 95 garnets (including the central cabochon), 58 survive substantially intact, though a number are cracked or chipped; one or two more are represented by tiny chips embedded in the backing paste, while one detached stone accompanied the cross at the time of purchase. Particularly serious damage to the cell-work has occurred towards the base of the upper

³ A discussion of the accuracy and precision of X-ray fluorescence analysis of ancient metalwork is given in M. R. Cowell, 'Coin analysis by energy dispersive X-ray fluorescence spectrometry', 448–60 in W. A. Oddy and M. R. Cowell (eds.), *Metallurgy in Numismatics*, IV (London, 1998).

⁴ See, for example, the inlaid eyes of the birds on the Sutton Hoo purse-mounts in R. L. S. Bruce-Mitford, *The Sutton Hoo Ship-Burial, II: Arms, Armour and Regalia* (London, 1978), 511.

arm due to the bending and straightening mentioned above, which has caused several of the cells to buckle.

The standard of cutting of the garnets is (with the exception of the central cabochon) very indifferent. All the stones are thin plates, as commonly found on contemporary secular jewelled brooches.⁵ Although there is some variation in colour, there is no evidence in the formal patterning of the garnets for their having been deliberately selected according to hue in order to enhance the decorative effect.

Patterned gold foils survive within most of the cells which have now lost their garnets and are visible behind all the stones which survive (with the exception of the central cabochon, where it is impossible to determine presence or absence). The foils are punched with a regular pattern of repoussé squares to produce a 'waffled' or cross-hatched effect.⁶

Originally the garnets were set in a bedding paste of white material, identified by Susan La Niece using X-ray diffraction analysis as calcium carbonate (CaCO_3), a material commonly used as a backing paste on Anglo-Saxon jewellery.⁷

Running continuously around the margins of the cell-work is a false plait formed from two pairs of twisted gold wires, placed with their spirals opposed to each other (Fig. 1, centre). The edge of the back-plate and the upper edge of the outermost wall of the cell-work are both notched repeatedly to produce a beaded pattern, forming a decorative rim to either side of the plait.

The suspension-loop

At the top of the upper arm a substantial tubular suspension-loop of sheet gold is soldered to the upper edge of the cross, forming a roll with an extended tail which terminates in a rounded point, by which it is further soldered to the back-plate, so maximizing the contact surface. Eight vertical ribs are formed on the surface of the loop, of which three are inlaid with filigree wires; the medial wire (of two strands twisted together) is more prominent than those flanking it, which have a beaded appearance. A further beaded wire encloses the pointed extension of the suspension-loop, neatly masking the join.

PARALLELS FOR THE HOLDERNESS CROSS

The cross from Holderness joins a select group of high-status pectoral crosses produced during the early decades of the Christianization of Anglo-Saxon England.

The closest in conception is perhaps that found at Stanton near Ixworth (Suffolk) c. 1856, which later entered the collection of Sir John Evans and which, on the death of Sir John in 1908, was presented to the Ashmolean by his son Arthur (later Sir Arthur) Evans.⁸ In quality of production the Ixworth cross is superior to that from Holderness in every way, its cell-work being both more precise and more sophisticated in its decorative use of cell-walls of differing thicknesses and of highly regular shape; the stones show an equal degree of competence in their precise cutting and in their curving outlines which match

⁵ For a review of garnets as used here see M. Bimson, 'Dark Age garnet cutting', *Anglo-Saxon Stud. Archaeol. Hist.*, 4 (1985), 125–8.

⁶ See R. Avent and D. Leigh, 'A study of cross-hatched gold foils in Anglo-Saxon jewellery', *Medieval Archaeol.*, 21 (1977), 1–46. See further the discussion in K. East, 'A study of the cross-hatched gold foils from Sutton Hoo', *Anglo-Saxon Stud. Archaeol. Hist.*, 4 (1985), 129–42, and N. D. Meeks and R. Holmes, 'The Sutton Hoo garnet jewellery: an examination of some gold backing foils and a study of their possible manufacturing techniques', *ibid.*, 143–57.

⁷ S. C. La Niece, 'White inlays in Anglo-Saxon jewellery', 235–46 in E. A. Slater and J. O. Tate (eds.), *Science and Archaeology, Glasgow 1987*, (BAR Brit. Ser., 196, Oxford, 1988).

⁸ Ashmolean Museum, 1909.453; see T. D. Kendrick, 'St Cuthbert's pectoral cross and the Wilton and Ixworth crosses', *Antiquaries J.*, 17 (1937), 283–93; R. Bruce-Mitford, *Aspects of Anglo-Saxon Archaeology* (London, 1974), 31–2, 281, 285, 287–90, 295; L. Webster and J. Backhouse (eds.), *The Making of England: Anglo-Saxon Art and Culture AD 600–900* (London, 1991), no. 11; A. MacGregor and E. Bolick, *Ashmolean Museum: A Summary Catalogue of the Anglo-Saxon Collections (Non-Ferrous Metals)* (BAR Brit. Ser., 230 Oxford, 1993), no. 24.9.

exactly the progressively expanding outlines of the arms. On the other hand, the layout of the cells, with two concentric rings around a setting at the centre of the cross and with complex patterns on the arms outlined by borders of simple cells, finds echoes in the decorative scheme of the Holderness cross. It is attributed to an East Anglian workshop, finds affinities with the workmanship of the Sutton Hoo jewellery, and is dated to the mid-7th century.

A near relation of the Ixworth cross is the stray find from Wilton (Norfolk), now in the British Museum.⁹ Here the form of the cross is dominated by a large central roundel in the form of a gold solidus of Heraclius, datable to between 613 and 630, set within a filigree collar and surrounded by a ring of garnet-inlaid cloisons. The flaring arms are somewhat abbreviated on account of the roundel; three of the arms are set with mushroom-shaped and stepped cells, while the fourth — the upper arm — is straight-sided and filled with a double row of garnets set in chevron form. The Wilton cross is ascribed to the same East Anglian workshop as that from Ixworth and in terms of technique the two are very closely comparable in execution.

A more distant but highly prestigious relative is the cross recovered from the coffin of St Cuthbert at Durham; there is a strong possibility that it was indeed the personal cross of Cuthbert himself and that it was buried with him at Lindisfarne in 687, before his body undertook the series of removals that brought it finally to Durham in 995. The equal-armed cross has expanded terminals like those from Ixworth and Wilton and a garnet boss at the centre recalling that from Holderness, although the arms are more elongated in outline than any of these and they have garnet-inlaid lobes at the angles. The cell-work is also of quite different construction, being built up in a soldered assembly of three layers with dog-toothed borders enclosing the cell-work and the central boss. With the exception of the central cabochon, the garnets are all square-cut in the transverse axis and (where appropriate) along the medial line, while their outer edges are curved to follow the line of the arms.¹⁰

While St Cuthbert's cross is generally attributed to a Northumbrian workshop, it is to the East Anglian milieu that produced the other two parallels that we may look for a place of manufacture for the cross from Holderness — an area that was under Anglian domination in the early decades of the 7th century when the cross was produced.

DISCUSSION

With the advent of the pectoral crosses noted above, Anglo-Saxon specialists are inclined to acknowledge the earliest tangible signs of the new religion in the material record, corresponding to the horizon marked in cemetery archaeology by the gradual abandonment of the deposition of grave-goods with the deceased and by increasingly regular adoption of a more-or-less E.-W. axis for the alignment of the burial, both practices in accordance with Christian custom. But while there can be no doubt of their specifically Christian connotations, everything else about these crosses speaks of a striking degree of continuity rather than change.

It was, of course, entirely natural that the goldsmiths producing these fine pieces should have employed exactly the techniques that had served them so well in a secular context. Every technical feature present on the pectoral crosses can be paralleled repeatedly on jewelled disc brooches, discoid pendants and other ornaments recovered from burials assigned to the pre-Christian era. As the numbers of such crosses increase, we are

⁹ British Museum, M&LA 1859, 5–12, 1; see Kendrick, op. cit. in note 8; Bruce-Mitford, op. cit. in note 8, 28–33; Webster and Backhouse, op. cit. in note 8, no. 12.

¹⁰ See R. L. S. Bruce-Mitford, 'The pectoral cross', 308–25 in C. F. Battiscombe (ed.), *The Relics of St Cuthbert* (Durham, 1956); E. Coatsworth, 'The pectoral cross and portable altar from the tomb of St Cuthbert', 287–301 in G. Bonner, D. Rollason and C. Stancliffe (eds.), *St Cuthbert, his Cult and his Community to AD 1200* (Woodbridge, 1989); Webster and Backhouse, op. cit. in note 8, no. 98.

confronted more and more forcibly by the fact that their formal features, as well as their manufacturing techniques, already occupied a firm place in the Anglo-Saxon goldsmiths' vocabulary and that an entire generation had already grown up in a period when Christian iconography — specifically the cross — had deeply permeated ostensibly 'pagan' metalwork styles. Hitherto archaeologists have shown a very proper caution in attributing religious significance too readily to ornamental designs purely on the basis of cruciform arrangement, but the extreme closeness with which the pectoral crosses follow the outlines and the decorative schemes found on some early 7th-century metalwork surely demands more explicit acknowledgement. By way of example, attention may be drawn to garnet-inlaid composite disc-brooches such as those from Sarre and Kingston Down (both in Kent),¹¹ from Monkton grave 3 (also Kent),¹² and from Milton near Abingdon (Oxfordshire),¹³ all of which feature strong cruciform motifs with expanding arms which closely prefigure the most common pectoral form. Contemporary jewelled pendants showing a similar predilection for cruciform designs (though with a greater variety of outline) include examples from Canterbury and from Milton next Sittingbourne (Kent) and from Boss Hall (Suffolk),¹⁴ or from Faversham (Kent), Compton Verney (Warwickshire) and Ducklington (Oxfordshire).¹⁵

Steps have indeed already been taken towards such a view, for example with Leslie Webster's acknowledgement of the 'expressly Christian design element' in the pendant from Old Westgate Farm, Canterbury, a piece which she describes as 'in effect a brooch translated into a pendant' and whose manufacture she attributes to a workshop serving the newly Christian Kentish court.¹⁶ The characteristics of the series of pectoral crosses considered here should, it may be suggested, encourage not only acknowledgement of their own Christian pedigree but also a firmer recognition of their direct antecedents in the metalwork from graves whose adherence to a traditional and therefore pagan burial rite has hitherto tended to mask the impact of distinctively Christian influence on Anglo-Saxon material culture (perhaps particularly in Kent, but also in the Anglian region that produced the Holderness cross) a generation or more before the date that is normally accorded it.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Several debts of gratitude are owed for assistance with this paper. Gail Foreman of the Hull and East Riding Museum, to whom all credit must go for initial identification of the cross, kindly provided details of its discovery and subsequent history; these were later confirmed by the finder, Mr Ronald Wray, and by H. M. Coroner for East Riding and Kingston upon Hull, Mr Geoffrey Saul, respectively. As well as providing me with guidance in the course of its acquisition, Angela Care Evans of the Department of Medieval and Later Antiquities, British Museum, through whose hands the cross passed prior to the Treasure Trove inquest, supplied me with a copy of the report which she had prepared for the Coroner. Susan La Niece and Duncan Hook of the Department of Scientific Research in the same institution generously allowed me to quote from the analytical reports which they had prepared for the same purpose. Joanna van der Lande of Bonham's enabled the Ashmolean to pursue the cross beyond its appearance at auction and the Museum was able to secure it from the new owner through the generosity of the National Art Collections Fund.

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¹¹ Webster and Backhouse, op. cit. in note 8, nos. 31a and 32a.

¹² MacGregor and Bolick, op. cit. in note 8, no. 8.3.

¹³ Ibid., no. 8.5.

¹⁴ Webster and Backhouse, op. cit. in note 8, nos. 10, 33b and 36a.

¹⁵ MacGregor and Bolick, op. cit. in note 8.

¹⁶ Webster and Backhouse, op. cit. in note 8, no. 10; see also L. Webster, 'The Canterbury pendant', *Antiquity*, 56 (1982), 203–4.