

## Notes and News

### A MIDDLE ANGLO-SAXON RUNIC INSCRIPTION FROM THE NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY AND AN INSCRIBED FOSSILISED ECHINOID FROM EXETER STREET, LONDON

Two recently excavated sites in London have produced significant evidence of Anglo-Saxon inscriptions in both everyday and ritual use by ordinary people. The settlement boundaries of Saxon *Lundenwic* are uncertain, the known sites covering an area of c. 60 ha at its maximum extent, north of the River Thames, c. 1 km upstream from the Roman city of *Londinium* as defined by Cowie et al.<sup>1</sup> The pattern of known sites indicates a nucleated settlement clustered north of the Strand, around Covent Garden. The sites in this area consist of 'domestic' occupation characterised by structural features such as pits, dump layers, wells and metalled surfaces. The excavations at the Royal Opera House, for example, identified more than sixty buildings, separated by alleys and roads, with more than one-third of the buildings dating to before the mid-8th century.<sup>2</sup>

The sites clustered on the periphery of *Lundenwic*, in contrast, reflect 'industrial' activity characterised by pits for gravel or brickearth extraction and the disposal of domestic and small-scale industrial refuse within 'semi-rural' farmstead environments. These are represented by the Basement and Extension sites at the National Gallery, the National Portrait Gallery, 5 Excel Court, 8–18 Charing Cross Road and Trafalgar Square sites to the West; 33–7 Exeter Street to the South; whilst industrial activity is suggested at Bruce House to the East.<sup>3</sup>

The excavation at the National Portrait Gallery, for example, provided considerable environmental evidence of a semi-rural farming settlement with the pits seen to have served various functions over time, from being quarries for brickearth to cess pits and receptacles for mixed assemblages of animal bone and domestic debris. The site at Exeter Street also produced a large amount of primary deposited butchery waste from the thirteen excavated pits.<sup>4</sup> This faunal assemblage is one of the largest samples of hand-collected animal bone of Middle Anglo-Saxon date so far reported in London and exhibits a form of specialised herd management and butchery which was exemplified by species preference and age selection. The large amount of bone refuse excavated from the pits suggests that the site lay close to an industrial area and peripheral to the main settlement core. The roughly circular/ovoid pits were arranged in seven approximately N.-S. rows. Similar pit rows are known from the Peabody site, 26–7 Southampton Street, the Royal Opera House car park,<sup>5</sup> Royal Opera House and the National Portrait Gallery.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> R. Cowie, R. L. Whytehead and L. Blackmore, 'A gazetteer of Middle Saxon sites and finds in the Strand/Westminster area', *Trans. London Middlesex Archaeol. Soc.*, 39 (1988), 37–47.

<sup>2</sup> Report forthcoming, L. Blackmore et al.

<sup>3</sup> S. Farid and G. Brown, 'A butchery site in Lundenwic', *London Archaeol.*, 8 (1997), 147–52.

<sup>4</sup> Farid and Brown, *op. cit.* in note 3.

<sup>5</sup> Cowie et al., *op. cit.* in note 1.

<sup>6</sup> C. Pickard, 'An archaeological excavation report for a site at the National Portrait Gallery' (unpubl. rep., Pre-Construct Archaeology, 1998).

The pottery from the pits at the National Portrait Gallery included chaff-, sand-tempered and Ipswich-type wares; the presence of Ipswich ware in the basal fills of the pits indicated that the backfilling commenced after c. A.D. 730/750 during the second ceramic phase of Middle Saxon pottery proposed by Blackmore.<sup>7</sup> The pottery at Exeter Street contained local and regional wares as well as sherds from the Rhine/Meuse areas and indicated a Middle Saxon assemblage earlier in date than the first phases identified at Maiden Lane and Jubilee Hall.<sup>8</sup>

In the largest pit at the National Portrait Gallery two brickearth deposits had collapsed into the soft upper fills of the deep pit. The compaction and general cleanness of the upper layer and the presence of twenty-four stakeholes cut into it indicated these were the remains of a brickearth floor. The depression caused by the collapse of the brickearth floor into the top of the pit was backfilled with deposits of silty brickearth and silty deposits of domestic rubbish. The artefacts present comprised fragments from several loomweights, quernstones and metal objects which included a complete cast copper-alloy strap-end, a complete knife and the iron tang of a whittle tang knife. There was also evidence of sophisticated bone-working in the form of fragments from at least two bone combs, one of which has been dated on stylistic grounds to the 8th or 9th century.<sup>9</sup> It was from the fill of this depression that a sheep's thoracic vertebra bearing two Anglo-Saxon runic inscriptions was located during bulk environmental sampling.<sup>10</sup> The fossilised echinoid or sea urchin at Exeter Street was also recovered during the bulk processing of environmental samples from one of the rubbish pits.

#### THE RUNIC INSCRIPTIONS AT THE NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY (Fig. 1)

There are two discrete runic inscriptions, one on each of the flat surfaces of the spine of the vertebra. The rune forms used are of the Anglo-Saxon (as opposed to the Scandinavian) type. Both texts are clearly cut, probably by different hands and with different implements. Inscription A is more delicately and carefully formed than B, which is coarser and looks as if made with a blunter blade. There are no ambiguities in any of the rune forms.

Inscription A reads: **t a t b e r h t**. It is some 37 mm long and rune height varies from c. 12 mm (rune 2) to 6 mm (rune 8). The runes are quite carefully formed, although there are a number of overcuts, as in the upper twig of **a**, the bows of **b**, the top of **t** (rune 8) and the upper cross-stave of **h**. Staves are occasionally double-cut, as in part of the vertical of **t** (rune 1), the left-hand twig of **t** (rune 3) and the vertical of **b**. This is presumably intentional and decorative; there are occasional other English examples of this practice, as on the Loveden Hill urn. Inscription B reads **d r i c**. The runes slope down from left to right, so that the final rune cuts the lower edge of the bone. The length of the inscription is c. 19.5 mm, and rune height 10–11 mm. Again, joins are overcut or sometimes not completed, as in the cross-staves of **d** and the top of **r**.

Inscription A presents no problem of interpretation. *Talberht* is a recorded Old English masculine personal name, although not a particularly common one. Inscription B is more problematic as there is no name *Dric*; a second element *-ric* occurs in a number of common masculine names, and in theory *-dric* could be part of a name such as *Godric* or *Eadric*. There is, however, no sign of any letter(s) before **d**, although space is available. It is tentatively suggested that the first rune, **d**, may represent its rune-name *dæg* 'day'. This is a practice

<sup>7</sup> In R. Cowie and R. L. Whytehead 'Two Middle Saxon occupation sites: excavations at Jubilee Hall and 21–22 Maiden Lane', *Trans. London Middlesex Archaeol. Soc.*, 39 (1998), 47–162.

<sup>8</sup> A. Vince, 'The Anglo-Saxon and later pottery from Site E1R 95' (unpubl. rep., Pre-Construct Archaeology, 1995).

<sup>9</sup> I. Riddler, 'The small finds', in C. Pickard (ed.), 'Excavations at the National Portrait Gallery', *Trans. London Middlesex Archaeol. Soc.* (forthcoming).

<sup>10</sup> P. Armitage, 'The animal bones', forthcoming in op. cit. in note 9.

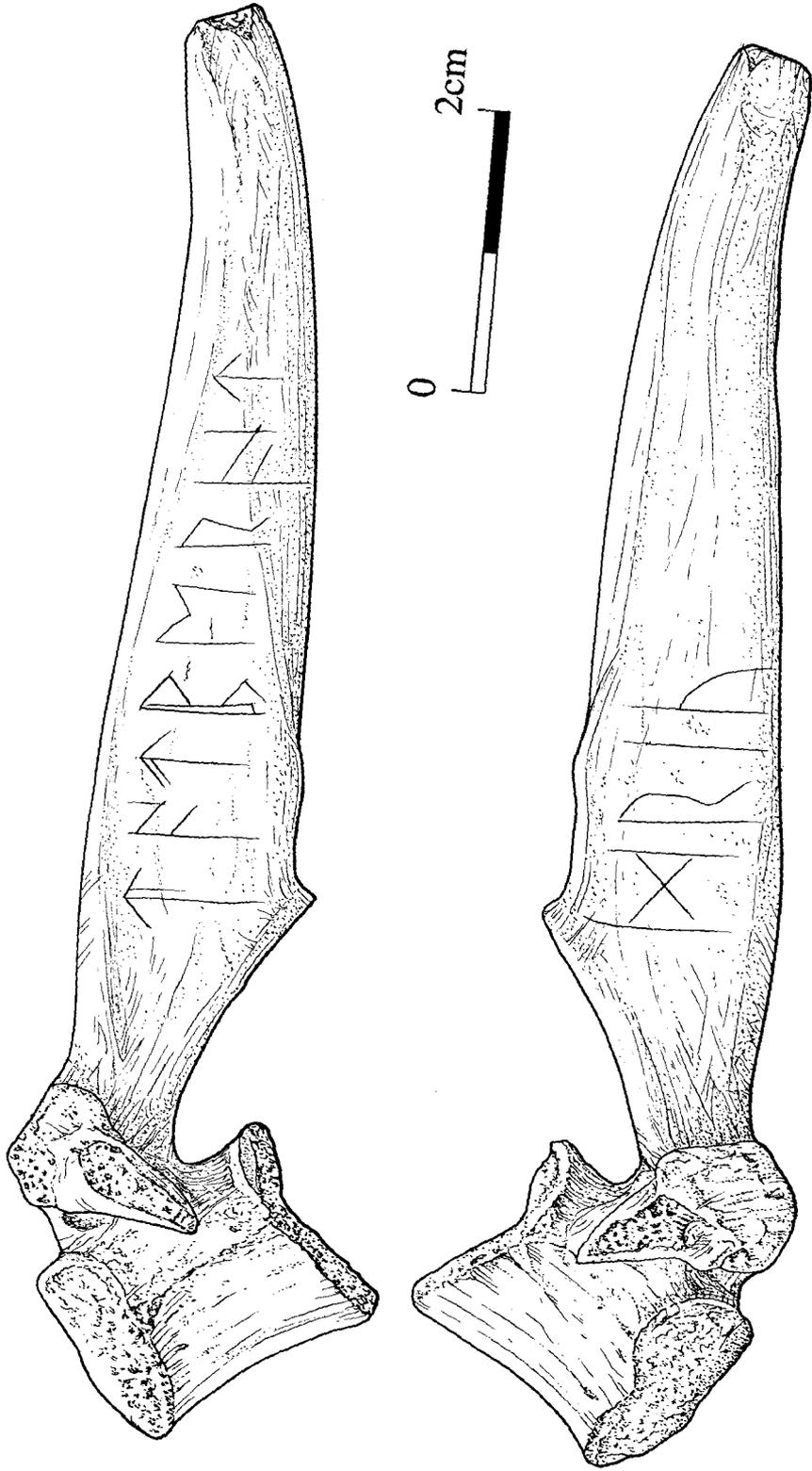


FIG. 1  
A sheep's vertebra with runic inscriptions from the National Portrait Gallery. Scale 2:1.

that occurs from time to time in manuscripts, as in the Lindisfarne Gospels gloss, which occasionally represents the Latin *dies* by the rune **d** alone.<sup>11</sup> A parallel in a personal name would be the use of **m** for its name *mon*, 'man', in the scribal signature *Farmon* in the Rushworth Gospels gloss.<sup>12</sup> These manuscript forms, however, are from 10th-century Northumbria.

Inscription B might then give a masculine personal name *Dægric*. The difficulty here is that there is no certain example of such a name recorded in Old English, though Searle quotes the form *Dairic* from a Continental source,<sup>13</sup> interpreting it as Old English on the evidence of its palatalised *g*, written <*i*>, in the first element. Though there are several examples of the name in Continental Germanic, e.g. *Dagarichus*, *Tagerich*, the name does not appear to have been very common.<sup>14</sup>

Nothing in either rune-forms or name-forms helps to date this piece, although its stratigraphic position supports a mid-8th- to mid-9th-century date. The inscriptions have the appearance of casual work produced for fun rather than information. Since the vertebra had been cooked, this might suggest two colleagues cutting their names on a piece of bone taken from the dinner table, perhaps vying with each other over their sophistication in runic technique, the one by cutting double staves, the other in using the rune-name.

#### THE INSCRIBED FOSSILISED ECHINOID FROM EXETER STREET (Fig. 2)

This fossilised echinoid, or sea urchin, is small in size, the diameter of the base being c. 25 mm. From a small hole in the apex, five pairs of lines diverge, running close together and roughly parallel over the conical sides of the fossil. They converge again at a small boss on the base. The hole, the pairs of lines and the boss represent original physical features of the echinoid. There is some black discoloration on the base of the fossil and between two of the pairs of lines. This discoloration may have occurred during the fossilisation process or may have been caused subsequently. Since it does not obscure any letters, it seems likely that it was there before the fossil was inscribed.

The five pairs of lines form five spaces on the conical sides of the fossil. The text is incised inside these spaces in letters varying between 6 and 9 mm in height. One space contains a capital letter E, set clear of the lines except for its top horizontal bar which touches the right hand line. The next space to the right contains two letters, another capital E followed by an Insular B. The E is set so close to the left-hand line that the vertical stroke of the E coincides with it; the B touches the E at the bottom and its bow crosses the right hand line. The next space to the right contains two letters placed neatly between the lines but above, and joined on to, each other. The upper letter could be an insular N although it seems to lack a top horizontal bar; it could also be read as U but in this case it lacks a lower horizontal line. The lower letter is a capital, probably either A or R but in either case lacking a top horizontal bar. The next space to the right contains some black discoloration and also a diagonal line which is probably accidental and might represent later damage. The final space is almost filled with discoloration but does also have a vertical damage mark on the left, partly on top of the left-hand lines. This arrangement of the letters suggests that the inscriber had only three spaces in which to place the text, the other two being already obscured by black discoloration. This resulted in the squashing of letters in two of the three available spaces.

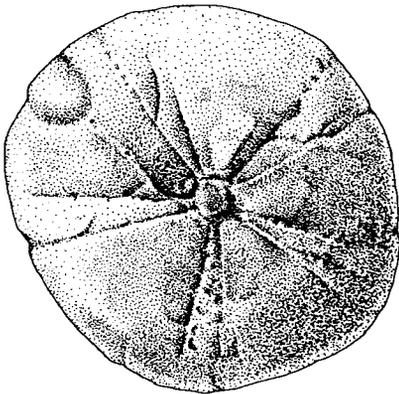
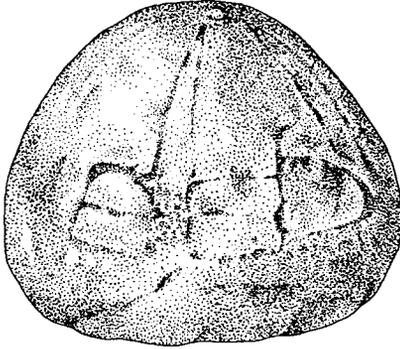
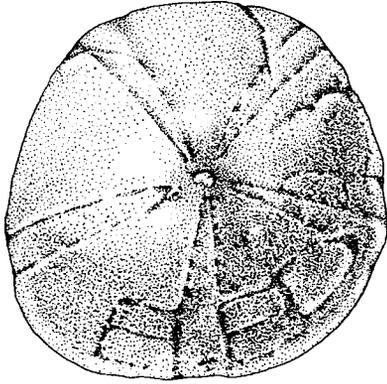
<sup>11</sup> List of examples in C. O. Elliott's note 1 to A. S. C. Ross's review of R. Derolez, *Runica Manuscripta: The English Tradition*, *Modern Language Rev.*, 50 (1955), 516.

<sup>12</sup> N. R. Ker, *Catalogue of Manuscripts containing Anglo-Saxon* (Oxford, 1957), no. 292. The mon-rune also occurs as the last syllable of the name *Salomon* in Corpus Christi College, College, MS 47, the text of the First Poetical Dialogue of Solomon and Saturn.

<sup>13</sup> W. G. Searle, *Onomasticon Anglo-Saxonicum* (Cambridge, 1897), s. n.

<sup>14</sup> E. Förstemann, *Alldeutsches Namenbuch. Vol. 1: Personennamen*, 2nd ed. (Bonn, 1900), s. n.

FIG. 2  
An inscribed fossilised echinoid (sea urchin) from 33 7 Exeter  
Street. Scale 2:1.



The text appears to be complete and to read EEB followed by N or U and then by A or R. The epigraphic evidence is in accordance with the Middle Anglo-Saxon date of the fossil's archaeological context. Diagnostic features are the mixture of capital and Insular letter forms, the shape of the Insular letter B, and the use and shape of the serifs which occur on some, but not all, of the ends of the letters. There is insufficient epigraphic evidence to suggest a closer dating.

The meaning of the text is not clear and it cannot be attributed to any appropriate language. The letters do not seem to form any known Latin word. The nearest might be *ebur*, 'ivory', but the relevance of such a text is hard to explain. The letters EE might be an odd though feasible spelling of one of the Old English words *ǣ*, 'law, religion', *ēa*, 'water' or *īeg*, 'island', but again it is difficult to see the relevance of such a text. It is just possible that the word could be read EEBUR for Old English *eofor*, 'boar'. A parallel spelling might be the word *eburðring* for *eofor-þring*, 'Orion', in the early Corpus glossary.<sup>15</sup> It is arguable that a word for 'boar' or 'boar-image' could have associations suitable for a magical text, if such it is. There are however at least four possibilities: it could be a descriptive text, or a personal name, or practice letters, or a magical text.

If the text were descriptive, the letters would presumably represent, or include, a word for 'sea urchin'. The Latin word for both 'sea urchin' and 'hedgehog' is *ericius*, which is glossed in Old English as *igil* or *īl*. It is hard to see how the text as read above could bear a relationship to either the Latin or the Old English words. This possibility can be excluded.

If the text contained a personal name, it would presumably be that of the inscriber. The texts of Anglo-Saxon inscribed objects do quite frequently contain a personal name. However the sequence EEB followed by N or U and then by A or R does not suggest any recorded Old English personal name. It is conceivable that the first three letters might represent an odd, and unrecorded, spelling of a name like *Ebba* or *Æbba*, but this leaves the remaining two letters unexplained. This possibility can probably also be excluded.

If the text consisted of practice letters, it need not be expected to make sense. Anglo-Saxon inscribed objects containing practice letters are recorded. There is, for example, a piece of lead spillage from Winchester with seven letters scratched on it.<sup>16</sup> This text starts with the letters DNE, which could (but need not) be an abbreviated form of *domine*, and continues with the certainly meaningless sequence SRÆB. The fossil text could well be practice letters.

If the text was of magical significance the letters could also be meaningless, in the sense of not spelling a meaningful word or words. Magical texts are certainly known from Anglo-Saxon England although these tend to be in runic rather than in roman script. There are, for example, the amuletic finger-rings from Bramham Moor and Greymoor Hill, both of which contain the same string of thirty runic letters, beginning AERKRIUFLT.<sup>17</sup>

It seems likely that the text consists either of practice letters or of a string of letters felt to have magical significance. Practice letters, including casually scratched personal names and alphabets both Roman and runic, appear on a number of different sorts of object from Anglo-Saxon England. As well as the piece of lead spillage from Winchester mentioned above, there are texts in Roman script on a piece of lead from Waltham Abbey and on a small piece of stone from Barton St David, Somerset.<sup>18</sup> Runic texts occur on, for example, a piece of bone from Southampton a wooden spoon from York,<sup>19</sup> and at the National Portrait Gallery in London (see above).

<sup>15</sup> Corpus Glossary 1464: H. Sweet (ed.), *The Oldest English Texts* (EETS, OS83, London, 1885).

<sup>16</sup> E. Okasha, 'A supplement to *Hand-List of Anglo-Saxon Non-Runic Inscriptions*', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 21 (1983), no. 182, 102 and plate XIII.

<sup>17</sup> R. I. Page, *An Introduction to English Runes*, 2nd ed. (Woodbridge, 1999), 112–13 and pls. 7 and 8.

<sup>18</sup> Okasha, op. cit. in note 16, no. 178, 100 and plate XIa; eadem, 'A second supplement to *Hand-List of Anglo-Saxon Non-Runic Inscriptions*', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 30 (1992), no. 186, 41–2 and pl. Ib.

<sup>19</sup> Page, op. cit. in note 17, 170–2 and plate 5.

No other inscribed fossils are known from Anglo-Saxon England so it is not clear what purpose this one could have served. It could, perhaps, have been used as a gaming piece. It is certainly a convenient size and shape for a gaming piece and Anglo-Saxon gaming pieces were occasionally inscribed. For example, a piece of bone used as a gaming piece contains a runic inscription and two fragments of whale-bone chess pieces have fragmentary roman texts.<sup>20</sup> However the fact that no other fossilised echinoids were found with this one argues against its being a gaming piece.

A more likely possibility is that the fossil was used as an amulet. It is of a suitable size to be carried on the person and the use of amulets is well recorded from Anglo-Saxon England.<sup>21</sup> Similar fossils used as amulets have been found in early Anglo-Saxon graves. For example, a female was buried in the Early Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Westgarth Gardens, Bury St Edmunds, with a fossilised echinoid in her right hand, and another fossilised echinoid was found in the grave of a young female in Buckland, Dover, amongst burials dated to the second half of the 7th century.<sup>22</sup> None of the fossils used as an amulet is inscribed. However inscribed amulets of other materials are known, for example the runic finger-rings mentioned above, both of which date from the 9th century.<sup>23</sup> If the text on the echinoid were to be interpreted as a form of Old English *eofor*, 'boar-image', this could be associated with the amuletic use of boar teeth, boar tusks and boar images amongst the early Anglo-Saxons.<sup>24</sup>

It seems most likely that the inscribed fossil was an amulet. In this case its text might well have contained letters indicating, or reminiscent of, a magical formula. Alternatively the letters might simply be practice letters with no meaning. Even if the letters of the text were meaningless in themselves, they could have been recognised as letters by the literate and also perhaps by the illiterate.

#### DISCUSSION

Anglo-Saxon runic inscriptions are not common and it is evident that what survives is only a fraction of what was once cut; therefore no safe general conclusions can be drawn from their distribution in type, place and time. The distribution of English runic inscriptions shows that they are generally found concentrated in the South-East (and occasionally elsewhere in the South), in East Anglia, the East Midlands, the North and North Midlands. The west of England has hardly any runes.

At present there are thirty-seven known examples of rune-stones which are presumably memorials or grave identifications and some fifty inscriptions on various portable objects with an exact figure being hard to define because of the problems of identification. There are also numerous runic inscriptions on coins, but here the number of coins surviving is less significant than the number of dies from which they were struck.

Although English Anglo-Saxon runic inscriptions on bone found to date are rare, this may be a consequence of a lack of adequate scrutiny on and off site, a trend that has been reversed in recent years. In contrast Scandinavian runic inscriptions on bone are relatively common, often coming from town sites. Examples have been recovered from Dublin, Orkney and in Danish-occupied England, and there are also numerous examples from Scandinavia proper. No comparable inscribed fossilised echinoids have previously been found in Anglo-Saxon England.

<sup>20</sup> Page, *op. cit.* in note 17, 182-3; E. Okasha, *Hand-list of Anglo-Saxon Non-runic Inscriptions* (Cambridge, 1971), nos. 136-7, 126 and plates.

<sup>21</sup> R. I. Page, *Life in Anglo-Saxon England* (London, 1970) 40-1; D. Wilson, *Anglo-Saxon Paganism* (London, 1992), 103-15 and 137-9.

<sup>22</sup> Wilson, *op. cit.* in note 21, 114; see also pp. 78 and 87.

<sup>23</sup> Page, *op. cit.* in note 21, 40-1.

<sup>24</sup> Wilson, *op. cit.* in note 22, 108-10.

Among the miscellaneous inscriptions from Anglo-Saxon England there are perhaps ten inscribed on bone. Some of these are very formal as on the Franks (Auzon) casket, the Derby bone plaque, the Whitby comb, and perhaps the Southampton fragmentary plate. Others are more enigmatic such as the Royal Opera House handle, whilst on an antler tool handle from Brandon is a riddling inscription translated as 'I (It) grew on a wild beast'. It is only occasionally, however, that there is a completely casual inscription cut on a piece of unworked bone as at the National Portrait Gallery.

Comparable examples may be the Caistor-by-Norwich astragalus (but this was probably a formal object, used as a playing-piece) whilst more casual texts on unworked material are those on the *Hamweih* bone (which may be a Frisian import), and the Mote of Mark fragment, which seems to have the personal name or name element **aþili**.<sup>25</sup>

Personal names are common in Anglo-Saxon inscriptions. Sometimes these are formal, used in inscriptions which commemorate a deceased person, or the maker or owner of the property. In some instances the name alone was cut, which again indicates a formal quality, namely the owner, maker or donor of the piece. Clear runic examples of personal names are the legends of the Llysfaen ring (part runic only), an inlaid name **beagnob** on a short sword from the Thames, + **aldred** on a pair of silver tweezers from Brandon, and part of a name, probably feminine, on a linking plate for a set of pins from Wardley. Rather different, but perhaps still relevant, are the travellers' graffiti that Anglo-Saxons left on pilgrimage routes. So far they are only reported in Italy, but it may be that the casual scratching of personal names on tourist monuments was fairly common in Anglo-Saxon times.

It is evident that the power of the written word, whether it was understood by all the populace or not, was active in negotiating relationships in the everyday lives of some of the people of Anglo-Saxon *Lundenwic* on a number of levels, from the sacred arena to the casual graffiti of two associates. The National Portrait Gallery runic inscriptions provide at least an indication that there was a more extensive use of the script for demotic purposes in Anglo-Saxon England than has hitherto been known. The inscriber of the fossil from Exeter Street (whether it is magical or meaningless) possibly sought to increase the potency of an amulet as a symbol of power and authority by its being directly associated with literacy.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## INSULAR METALWORK FROM FLIXBOROUGH, LINCOLNSHIRE

An Anglo-Saxon settlement near modern Flixborough is represented by a cemetery and a complex palimpsest of buildings and dumps which show occupation and activity on

<sup>25</sup> The Dublin inscriptions are recorded in M. P. Barnes, J. R. Hagland and R. I. Page, *The Runic Inscriptions of Viking Age Dublin* (Dublin, 1997), IR 5, IR 8 10 and IR 12-15. For bone inscriptions from Lincoln and from Orkney, see K. Holman, *Scandinavian Runic Inscriptions in the British Isles: their Historical Context* (Trondheim, 1996), 49-53, 237-9 and 243-5. As examples from Scandinavia we quote E. Svärdström, *Runfynden i Gamla Lödöse* (Stockholm, 1982), Vg 256, 261, 271, 282 and J. R. Hagland, *Runesfunna: Ei kjelde til Handelen sin Historia* (Trondheim, 1986), N-28957, N-30844, N-37425, N-58258, N-93495, N-94415, N-94416, N-95829 and N-96784.