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An Anglo-Saxon Strap-end from Wooperton

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NORTHUMBERLAND and Durham have produced very little decorated Anglo-Saxon metalwork of the 9th century. A gold ring found between Hexham and Corbridge, two strap-ends from excavations at Bamburgh and a further unpublished strap-end found on Lindisfarne in 1986 probably gives the complete tally (Bailey 1974; Webster *et al.* 1991, no. 195). This paucity of finds is even more remarkable given the extensive excavations at Monkwearmouth and Jarrow by Professor Cramp and the numerous discoveries of 9th-century coinage in the area (Pirie 1986). The contrast with the position further south in Yorkshire, with sites like Whitby, York, Cotnam and Cowlam yielding large quantities of such material, is very marked (Peers and Radford 1943; Waterman 1959; Haldenby 1990–2). The discovery by a metal detector of a highly decorated strap-end at Wooperton is therefore of more than passing interest. What makes this find of even greater significance, however, is that its appearance provoked the first identification of a distinctive workshop active in the production of this form of object. I am very grateful to the finder and owner, Mr. Melvyn Hepple of Gateshead, for permission to publish this important piece here, to Sandra Hooper for supplying the drawing and to Lindsay Allason-Jones for alerting me to the discovery.

Description

The object (figs 1 and 2A) is of bronze, 3.7 cm long, and consists of a bow-sided plate whose butt-end is split to fit around the end of a band, belt or ribbon. Some of the larger strap-ends, such as those from Bamburgh, may have been attached to leather but the relative delicacy of

the Wooperton example suggests that it was fixed to some form of textile. The two rivet holes which secured the piece are not quite level with each other, the left hole being slightly lower than the right. These rivet holes flank a stylized palmette motif in which two curling leaves enclose a split bud. At the bottom of the plate is a stylized animal mask, the eyes formed by two small bosses, with rounded, horseshoe-shaped ears above.

The single panel carries zoomorphic orna-

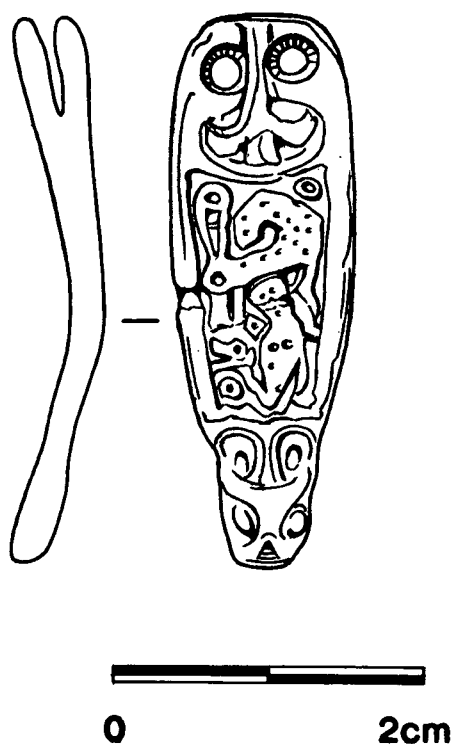


Fig. 1 The Wooperton strap-end.

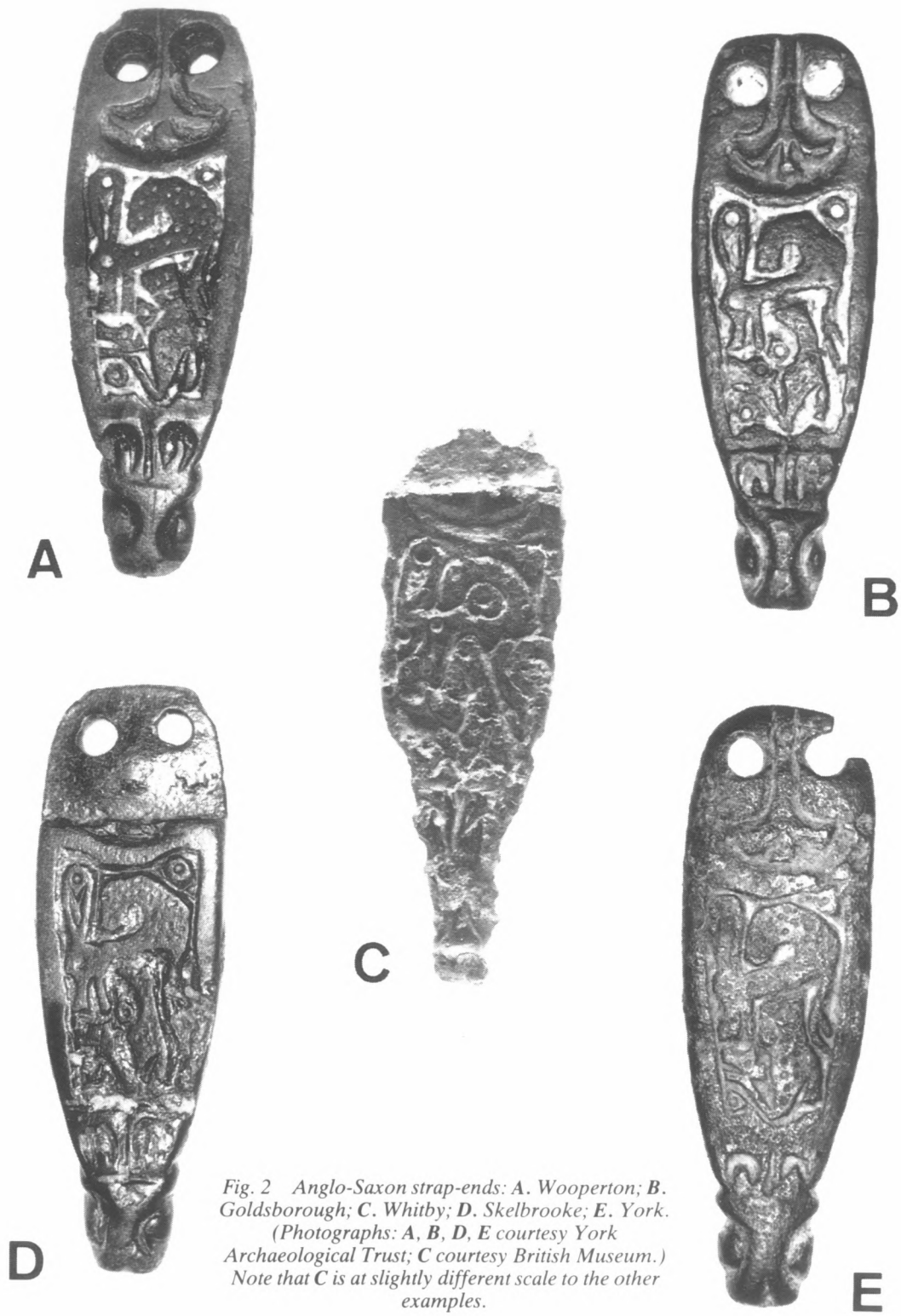


Fig. 2 Anglo-Saxon strap-ends: A. Wooperton; B. Goldsborough; C. Whitby; D. Skelbrooke; E. York. (Photographs: A, B, D, E courtesy York Archaeological Trust; C courtesy British Museum.) Note that C is at slightly different scale to the other examples.

ment whose arrangement is fraught with ambiguity. On one interpretation there are two beasts involved, and even then the upper animal can be read in two ways. It could be seen as a backward-turning beast with featureless head, a high-raised tail in the top left corner of the panel, two rear legs and a single split forepaw. More likely however the two "rear legs" should be interpreted as the jaws of a beast with round eye; the "tail" would then become a looped ear with circular termination and the rest of the body would be reduced to a curved amorphous shape with a single split leg. The surface of this animal is covered with speckles as is the body of a second, smaller, beast below. This lower animal has open jaws, a single short ear and a round eye set below its domed forehead. Its long neck is contortedly thrown back over its bag-shaped body and there is a single leg in the lower right corner of the panel. In the upper right and lower left corners are cupped bosses and there is a similar boss below the jaws of the upper beast.

A second interpretation of the ornament involves seeing these two animals as linked into one beast with heads set at both extremities of its elongated and looped body.

Discussion

In form the Wooperton find belongs to a populous group of strap-ends whose distribution reaches from Cornwall up to Sutherland (Webster *et al.* 1991, 223). The 9th-century dating of the set is fixed by their frequent decoration with Trewhiddle-style ornament, a style whose dating horizon is indicated by occurrences in coin-dated hoards and on objects associated with known historical figures (Wilson 1964, 21–35; Webster *et al.* 1991, 220–1). Trewhiddle material from hoards found at Sevington (c. 850), Talnotrie (870–1), Beeston Tor (873–4), Trewhiddle (873–5) and Cuerdale (903–5) convincingly establish the general dating of the style whilst rings carrying inscriptions of King Aethelwulf (839–58) and Queen Aethelswyth (853–89) offer further support for this chronology. Recent finds from York suggest that this kind of ornament may have continued in use in the north into the

early years of the 10th century (Hall 1984, 58), but do not change the basic assertion that the majority of objects decorated in Trewhiddle style are of 9th-century date.

The beasts on the Wooperton strap-end carry many of the diagnostic hallmarks of Trewhiddle ornament. The speckled contorted bodies and domed foreheads are ubiquitous across the corpus and so are many of the other features; good parallels for the lengthy jaws and amorphous bodies can be found, for example, on the Ingleton sword (Wilson 1964, fig. 32)—which also has double-headed beasts—whilst the Trewhiddle hoard itself offers an analogue for the distinctive looped ear of the upper head at Wooperton (Wilson 1964, fig. 40).

A 9th-century dating for the Wooperton find thus seems assured. What is more interesting than its date however is the contribution this object makes to issues of manufacture, distribution and regional variation of strap-ends, problems which are only just beginning to be tackled (Graham-Campbell 1982; Taylor and Webster 1984; Webster *et al.* 1991, 233 ff).

The starting point for this discussion lies in the recognition that four other strap-ends, all from Yorkshire, carry very similar forms of decoration. These are (fig. 2).

- (B) *Goldsborough* (Collingwood 1915, 179). Length 3.7 cm. Complete and in good condition except for the lower element of the split butt. Now in the Treasury of Ripon Cathedral where it is associated in a display case with a silver "Thor's hammer" from a hoard deposited in c. 920 which was found in the churchyard in 1858 (Vaux 1861; Wilson 1957; Graham Campbell 1980, no. 524). The strap-end itself was found in 1910 in the churchyard under the base of a (possible) stone cross and there is no reason to assume any link to the Viking-age hoard.
- (C) *Whitby* (Peers and Radford 1943, fig. 11:12; Wilson 1964, no. 120). Length 3.5 cm. Most of the butt-end is missing and there is damage elsewhere, notably in

the lower left corner of the panel. Now in the British Museum, Dept. of Medieval and Later Antiquities.

- (D) *Skelbrooke*, near Doncaster. Unpublished and in private possession. Length 3.7 cm. Complete except for the upper element of the split butt; good condition. I am very grateful to the finder, Mr. Barry Morgan of Doncaster, for permission to examine the piece and to allow publication here—and to Leslie Webster for informing me of its discovery.
- (E) *York* (Waterman 1959, fig. 10:3). Length 3.7 cm. Complete except for the lower element of the split butt and damage to a rivet hole; otherwise in good condition. Now in the Yorkshire Museum.

When set alongside the Wooperton find it is clear that these Yorkshire examples carry identical decoration, with animals disposed in the same relationship both to each other and to the scooped pellets. This identity extends to the smallest details: witness the position of the rivets relative to each other, the split bud, the split leg of the upper beast, and the circular element at the end of the tail. It is therefore difficult to resist the conclusion that all emerged from the same workshop and this, in view of the distribution of the five examples, is likely to have been located at York itself. It is improbable that they were manufactured any further north than York since Leslie Webster has acutely observed that the use of horseshoe-shaped ears on the beast terminal is a form which is common in the south and east of the country with York on the periphery of the known distribution. Wooperton's strap-end must, then, be seen as an import from the York area.

Given the identity of both ornament and size—all are 3.7 cm long with the exception of the damaged example from Whitby—it might seem reasonable to infer that they were all cast from the same mould. Closer study, however, suggests that matters may be more complicated than this because there are differences within the group. Some of these differences turn out

to be more apparent than real; the published drawing of the York piece, for instance, omits the circular termination to the upper beast's tail and a cupped boss which are actually present on the original whilst Whitby's ornament is more coherent than its published illustration might suggest. Other differences can be attributed to working-up after casting; this would account for variations in speckling across the group. Further distinctions, however, do seem to be more fundamental and certainly seem to separate the Whitby piece from the rest. Even allowing for the confusing effects of corrosion on this strap-end its decoration has added another cupped boss to the basic design, set within the looped body of the upper beast, and there seem to be further differences in the lower left corner of the panel. York might also be distinguished from the others by the triangular form of the boss in the upper right corner and the more prominent shape of the eyes on the beast mask at the base of the strap-end. Until all five examples can be brought together for simultaneous examination it will not be possible to achieve complete certainty on this issue, but provisionally I would argue that the Wooperton, Skelbrooke and Goldsborough pieces were produced from moulds which were impressed with the same model; York might be grouped with this set if its seeming differences could be explained by variations in casting. Whitby's example, I would suggest, employed a variant model whose use must imply that this particular form of decoration was extremely fashionable in 9th-century Yorkshire.

In summary, this new find from Wooperton provides us with a rare example of late Saxon decorative metalwork from the region and has stimulated the recognition of a Yorkshire-based workshop. That identification in turn now offers the possibility of further detailed exploration of manufacturing techniques employed in the production of strap-ends.

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* *Note:* Since this article went to press, Mr David Haldenby has informed me of a further four metal-detector finds of this class of strap-end; all are from Yorkshire.

