Notes and News

A BONE CASKET AND RELIEF PLAQUE FROM MOUND 3 AT SUTTON HOO (Fig. I; Pl. xi, A)

This note is a reconsideration based on the published evidence of two objects from the probably intact cremation burial under Mound 3 at Sutton Hoo, the remnants of a bone-covered casket, and a fragment of a relief plaque.

Mound 3

Mound 3 was the first of the barrows to be opened at Sutton Hoo in 1938, the year before the great ship-burial was discovered under Mound 1.3 The burial itself consisted of a hollowed-out oak trencher (the so-called Butcher’s Tray) with deposits of cremated bone at either end.4 These two areas of bone were mixed when examined and contained both human and animal fragments. The human material seemingly represented an adult male while the animal remains were of horse (Equus Caballus) and possibly dog.5

The casket remains and plaque fragment were found on the wooden tray together with a bronze lid of a ewer or jug probably of Byzantine, Coptic or East Christian origin,6 two pottery sherds, a textile fragment, a fragment of bone casing apparently from a comb, and an iron and textile concretion.7 Close to the tray lay an iron axe-head or francisca, definitely indicating a male burial.

The Casket

Very little remains of the casket, just (?)six burnt and somewhat distorted fragments of bone sheeting,8 but the variety of designs that appear on the fragments provide enough information to allow the casket to be largely reconstructed.

The most significant fragment has part of a roundel containing three ‘spokes’ of pairs of parallel lines set apart at c. 60°, surrounded by five concentric circles, the distance between the second and third circles being rather greater than between the others. While the device inside the roundel may simply have consisted, as Dr R. L. S. Bruce-Mitford suggests, of six spokes,9 close examination of a casket from Heilbronn 10 raises another possibility.

This latter casket was found in grave 1 in the cemetery on the Rosenberg SE. of Heilbronn. The grave, of an Alaman woman, also contained a pair of radiate brooches, a silver spoon inscribed ‘Posenna vivas’ and the remains of a silver pin.11 According to Mrs S. C. Hawkes the grave is dated by the brooches to the early 6th century.12

The Heilbronn casket was of wood covered with bone sheets with incised decoration. The central device on the lid is a roundel containing a chi–rho flanked by an alpha and omega and surrounded by five concentric circles, the distance between the second and third circles being greater than between the others.13 The fragmentary roundel from Sutton Hoo may therefore contain the lower half of a chi–rho monogram.

At least two of the designs that occur on the fragments of the Sutton Hoo casket may in fact be paralleled to varying degrees on the Heilbronn casket. Shared designs include two adjacent sets of concentric circles and a single series of concentric circles,14 placed in the reconstruction of the Heilbronn casket on the long and short sides respectively. A third may be provided on the last of the Sutton Hoo pieces regarded by Bruce-Mitford as being from
The Heilbronn and Sutton Hoo caskets compared.
the casket. It appears to have had a device of two rectangles one set inside the other, with a small circular hole surrounded at each corner by two small concentric circles. About three-quarters of the design survives on the fragment. This decoration is similar to the border of small circular holes each surrounded by a pair of concentric circles on the lid of the Heilbronn casket. There must however be some doubt whether this piece came from the casket; at least two different objects of bone, the casket and the (?)comb-case\(^\text{19}\) are known from Mound 3 at Sutton Hoo and it is not inconceivable that there were originally others.

The Heilbronn casket measures only 114 mm \(\times\) 78 mm \(\times\) 54 mm and the Sutton Hoo fragments suggest that that casket may have been even smaller. Such caskets must have been made to hold something very small and precious. They could therefore be relic boxes, although of course it is impossible to say whether either casket was buried because of its contents or simply as a luxury item in its own right.

Goëssler suggested that the Heilbronn casket came from somewhere in Gaul or the Rhineland\(^\text{20}\) while Mrs Hawkes believes that it may have been imported from either Italy or Gaul;\(^\text{21}\) the Sutton Hoo casket could well have come from the same source.

The Heilbronn casket is considered by Dr R. Christlein as one of a series of late 5th-/early 6th-century objects with Christian symbols on them that came from Alamannic contexts.\(^\text{22}\) Christlein feels that such an object and especially the casket must have had, besides its practical uses, a magic significance for the Alamans. He cites the occurrence of the diptych plates from Fridingen on the same girdle-hanger as a pair of symbolic silver keys as an indication that these objects were probably thought of as amuletic and not overtly Christian.\(^\text{23}\)

The Sutton Hoo casket must be regarded in a similar way as a rare and curious object and therefore on a par with the bronze lid and relief plaque with which it is associated.

### The Relief Plaque

Bruce-Mitford wrote of the relief plaque that it is ‘unique in Anglo-Saxon archaeology and no parallel is known from any Continental grave’.\(^\text{24}\) As Professor B. Ashmole noted in his appended report, it is cut in a technique ‘akin to that of cameo carving’. Here it is proposed that it is indeed a cameo from a major studio and that it may have been a most important diplomatic gift to a barbarian chieftain comparable in that respect to the Anastasius dish in Mound 1.

Cameos were most often made of chalcedonies such as onyx or sardonyx. This one is said to have been cut in limestone. Although a physical re-examination of the gem has not proved possible, the description of its burnt condition, ‘the surface is cracked and finely crackled in places’, sounds much more like chalcedony than limestone. Its size and thickness would have made it eminently suitable for mounting in a pendant, probably the normal method of mounting a cameo.

At first sight the high quality of the gem recalls late Hellenistic and Augustan glyptic art, for instance a sardonyx cameo cut by Sostratos in the 1st century B.C. and now in Naples. It shows Nike (Victory) drawing a two-horse chariot. As on the Sutton Hoo gem, the head of Victory is set against her left wing.\(^\text{25}\) Later cameos are generally less refined but on, for instance, the Kassel cameo showing Victory with the coiffure and physiognomy of Julia Domna, the flying Victory upon the Hague masterpiece, the Triumph of Constantine or even the bust of Victory dated to the lower Empire, once set in a late medieval reliquary at St Denis and now in the Louvre, we see a developing sense of pattern and texture.\(^\text{26}\)

The low relief is best matched on late Imperial ivories. Ashmole thought that the technique was ‘too delicate to be compared with the 4th-/5th-century consular diptychs’ but although that may be true in many instances there is a notable stylistic resemblance to the priestesses on the very well cut Nichomachus — Symmachus Diptych; incidentally these ladies are shown with similar coiffures to that of the Victory.\(^\text{27}\) Professor W. F. Volbach has actually compared the style of the Nichomachus — Symmachus Diptych to that of the one
surviving later 4th-century state-cameo of real quality, the double portrait of Honorius and Maria, known as the Rothschild cameo.  

We should also note a much later diptych, one of the leaves of which depicts a Victory, her head portrayed against her left wing as on the plaque. The Basilius diptych has often been dated to the 5th century, but it has recently and convincingly been shown that it dates to 541 when Anicius Faustus Albinus Basilius held a Consulate. The modelling of the figure is rather clumsy and lumpy compared to the plaque (revealing incidentally that western studios were unable to sustain the flowing Hellenistic style), but the treatment of the feathers is very closely matched on the Sutton Hoo Victory’s wing. It leaves us with the feeling that our cameo may itself post-date the 4th century. It is not certain what the Victory was holding but a wreath is an appropriate attribute. Ashmole’s suggestion that the subject may have been two Victories crowning the Emperor supposes a rather wider gem than appears probable, but even if the subject was only a single standing Victory, Imperial power is clearly being invoked here.

The immediate origin of the gem is a matter for conjecture — a state-cameo of Constantinian date has been found in Cologne though it was not very well cut. It is presumably of western manufacture. Our gem might have been engraved in Italy, especially if it is as early as the 4th century, but the East is likelier, particularly if it post-dates the Theodosian Renaissance. Alexandria was probably too provincial in the 4th and 5th centuries; Asia Minor or Constantinople are more likely. By the 7th century, of course, it was already an antique, and the presence of other late Roman/early Byzantine items in the great ship burial at Sutton Hoo shows that relics of antiquity were valued — with the proviso that to a Christian, in particular, 'antiquity' was by no means over, for the Roman Empire with its God-appointed rulers still flourished, with its capital at Constantinople.

Gemstones were valued both as antiquities and as amulets. A garnet cameo depicting a man wearing a phrygian cap has been found in an Anglo-Saxon pendant-setting of 7th-century date; it has both late Roman and Sassanian features and could have been cut in the borderland between the two empires where hybrid types are found. Other cameos from the East are more certainly Sassanian. They were found in burial mounds at Old Uppsala in Sweden and were cut on sardonyx and onyx, the same material as that assumed for the Sutton Hoo cameo. Roman gems which could have come from either the western or eastern Mediterranean are common, and include a rock crystal intaglio engraved with an eagle in a 6th-century setting from an Alamannic grave at Dettingen. This emblem of Imperial power brings to mind King Nidung of Jutland’s ‘Victory Stone’ in the medieval Thidreksaga, the saga of Theodoric of Bern, which in part draws on early Migration-Age material. In view of its subject, it is tempting to see the Sutton Hoo cameo as another ‘Victory Stone’, bringing success to its owner in war and, because he understood its subject, proclaiming his Romanitas.

Not all prized Roman gems were so solemn in their implications, and the significance of an 8th-century glass cameo imitating a Roman one showing a satyr was, we must assume, lost on the monks of Whitby.

State-cameos of major quality are recorded in western Europe by the year 1000 — including the Great Cameo of St Albans (lost since the Reformation) and the Cameo of Augustus in the Cross of Lothar, at Aachen. Such gems certainly seem to be of far too high a standard of workmanship to have been casual finds in Britain or Germany and it would not be surprising if, like the Sutton Hoo gem, they arrived in northern Europe as diplomatic gifts from the extensive treasury of the later Roman or Byzantine Emperors at some time after the collapse of Roman political control in Britain and Gaul in the 5th century A.D.

We have therefore in the case of Mound 3 at Sutton Hoo, a burial deposit of considerable importance, the high rank of the individual interred being indicated not only by the two objects of great rarity and prestige that have been re-assessed in this note, but also by the bronze lid (certainly of eastern Mediterranean origin) and iron francisca discussed in detail by Bruce-Mitford.
NOTES AND NEWS

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to acknowledge Sonia Chadwick Hawkes (Oxford), Heinrich Härke (Oxford), Mrs Leslie Webster (British Museum) and Alison Wilkins (Oxford) for their assistance in preparing this note and Sally Ann Hoddell (Oxford) for producing the final typescript.

GUY GRAINGER AND MARTIN HENIG

NOTES

2 Ibid., 109.
3 Ibid., 100-01.
4 Ibid., 103.
5 Ibid., 135-36.
6 Ibid., 103.
7 Ibid., 115.
8 Ibid., 101.
9 Ibid., 114-15.
10 Ibid., figs. 63 and 69a. Part of the concentric circles 2–4 about the roundel appear on the fragment illustrated in fig. 69d. Both fragments are shown in the reconstruction of the lid in this note, Fig. 1d.
11 Ibid., 114.
13 Ibid., 294.
14 Pers. comm.
15 c.g. Goessler, op. cit. in note 12, fig. 1.
16 Bruce-Mitford, op. cit. in note 1, fig. 69a; Goessler, op. cit. in note 12, tafel 17:7; this note, Fig. 1e.
17 Ibid., fig. 69a and ibid. tafel 17:6; this note, Fig. 1f.
18 Ibid., fig. 69b.
19 Ibid., fig. 69b.
20 Goessler, op. cit. in note 12, 299.
21 Pers. comm.
22 R. Christlein, Die Alamannen (Stuttgart, 1978), 118–19. The authors are indebted to Mrs Hawkes for bringing this reference to their attention.
23 Ibid., 119.
24 Bruce-Mitford, op. cit. in note 1, 112, 123–26, fig. 64. The total height of the cameo may originally have been some 90–70 mm as the photograph suggests that the surviving fragment was 26.5 mm wide and 29.5 mm high (not 37 mm high as stated in op. cit. note 1).
28 Ibid., 323, pl. 59; see Richter, op. cit. in note 25, 125, no. 612.
29 Volbach, op. cit. in note 27, 31, no. 5, taf. 3; A. Cameron and D. Schauer, 'The Last Consul: Basilius and his Diptych', J. Roman Studies, lxxii (1982), 126–45, pl. iv.
33 B. Arrhenius, Granatschmuck und Gemmen aus Nordischen Funden des Frühen Mittelalters (Stockholm, 1971), 32–43, figs. 37, 41–43.
34 Christlein, op. cit. in note 22, 113, abb. 91.2.
35 G. A. S. Snijder, 'Antique and Medieval Gems on Bookcovers at Utrecht', Art Bulletin, xiv (1932), 22–23, suggests that the Thidreksaga reference is to an 'Alsen gem' but these imitation gems are of course themselves imitations of something Roman.
36 Sir Charles Peers and C. A. R. Radford, 'The Saxon Monastery of Whitby', Archaeologia, 89 (1943), 55, no. 33, pl. xxvii (bust in glass imitation of a Roman cameo). Intaglios were of course more widely available; in addition to note 34 above, see in particular the nicolo set in an Anglo-Saxon gold ring in the Snape boat grave (R. Bruce-
Mitford, *Aspects of Anglo-Saxon Archaeology* (London, 1974), 23–124, pl. 21). The gem is commonplace although the ring is splendid.

37 The Great Cameo of St Albans, see Henig, op. cit. in note 32, 162 and fig. 3, (almost certainly much too fine to have come from Verulamium); E. G. Grimme, *Der Aachener Domschat* (Düsseldorf, 1972), 24–28, no. 22.

38 Bruce-Mitford, op. cit. in note 1, 113.

**EARLY SAXON SETTLEMENT FINDS**

Mucking is one of a growing number of excavated sites of the early Saxon period which offer alternative, settlement, data to the long domination of cemetery evidence. Reports of these excavations are now appearing in print: Bishopstone,1 Heybridge,2 Old Down Farm,3 Walton,4 and Willington5 are examples. It would seem that by far the greater number of finds, and that mostly pottery, derives from the fills of sunken huts. Sites represented for the most part by ground-level buildings, such as Chalton,6 Catholme,7 Cowdery’s Down,8 and Thrilings,9 produce few finds.

There is a tendency to publish these new settlement finds as hut groups, following Leeds’s example with the Sutton Courtenay material. However, Leeds regarded his Saxons as living in their ‘cabins, with bare headroom, amid a filthy litter of broken bones, of food and shattered pottery’.10 With recent changes in attitude to Saxons and Vikings such huts (and their contents) are also due for a reappraisal, particularly where finds deposition is concerned. Yet only two of the sites mentioned make a distinction between upper and lower fills, while another recent report attempts to date a hut on the basis of 20 sherds ‘found either in the fill of the hut or nearby’.

It might be argued that when small amounts of pottery are in question their presentation is of minor interest. The site value is then the important factor, at times leading to new distribution maps following Myres’s11 exemplars with ‘stehende Bogen’, Buckelurnen, faceted carination, etc. Some recent finds already suggest new maps: of surface treatments such as ‘Schlickung’, combed and rusticated;12 of shapes such as ‘swallows’ nest’ lugs and all-over perforated braziers.13 All these can be reliably identified from the small sherds typical of settlement material. Distribution maps are already an integral part of the new Archive of Anglo-Saxon Pottery Stamps.14

With large assemblages, however, where there is a good chance of establishing an internal sequence, the detailed presentation of finds in their contexts is important. This seems especially true of Mucking where the 1965–78 excavations fulfilled several criteria in the Society’s research priorities. It is not only the largest excavated settlement, but it is the only site where cemeteries and settlement(s) showing a succession from extensive Romano-British settlement (with four cemeteries) have been excavated at one time. Evidently it has an important role as type site and reference collection.

The Mucking settlement finds are from several different types of context. There is an approximately equal amount from the late fills of earlier (usually Romano-British) features such as ditches and wells, and from pits and post-holes, which occasionally form elements of the 50 or so ground-level buildings. By far the largest amount comes from the fills of the 213 sunken huts. (Proportions of pottery are [in D.o.E. boxes with an estimated 300 sherds per box] 30:30:260 — more detailed figures must await computer retrieval.) Associated with this pottery are:

- c. 60 pieces of copper alloy including brooches and military belt fittings
- c.700 pieces of iron including pins, buckles and knives
- Roman and Saxon coins including the only ‘mini-hoard’ of primary sceattas yet found15
- glass fragments including cone and claw beakers
- whetstones and querns and, rarely, jet, shale, amber and amethyst.

Finds reflecting the economy include animal bone. This had a low survival rate but horse, ox, sheep, pig, deer, dog and cat are identified. Seed impressions on sherds include barley, wheat