
Anglo-Saxon 'work boxes' and the Burwell Grave 42 Box, Christian or Pagan?

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The article discusses a highly decorated box recovered from Burwell (Anglo-Saxon cemetery) Grave 42, and attempts to establish if this and other boxes had solely a secular use or whether the possession of such boxes reveals the social identities of their owners and their beliefs, pagan or Christian. Since their earliest discovery, archaeologists and historians have been unable to reach a consensus on their purpose. These enigmatic containers have been variously described as work boxes, needle cases, amulet containers or relic boxes. A typology of such containers is outlined.

Introduction

Among the objects displayed at Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology is a copper-alloy artefact (Accession Number (1927.1829K)), an example of the so-called Anglo-Saxon work box. It was found with other grave-goods in Grave 42, that of a female, at Burwell (Cambridgeshire), its position in the grave indicates that it may have been placed inside a purse or bag attached to her waist belt. This paper will examine the technical aspects relating to the design and construction of this type of box; it will also consider the evidence that the Burwell box and some of the other so-called Anglo-Saxon work boxes should be acknowledged not as secular objects associated with females but as Christian relic boxes.

Work boxes, needle cases, amulet containers or relic boxes?

Typology and Discussion

On July 17th 1772 the Reverend Bryan Faussett noted in his excavation journal that while digging Grave 60 at Sibertswold Down (Kent) he uncovered a "brass box, rather more than two inches in height; it has a straight arm, or handle, fixed on one side of it, which is furnished with a hinge, or joint, in the middle of it" (Faussett 1856 plate XIII.8, 112). The box was said to contain textile remnants including silken string, raw silk, some wool, short hair and beads of a vegetable substance shaped like the seeds of the plant called the Marvel of Peru. This was to be an archaeological introduction to Anglo-Saxon items variously called

work boxes, needle cases, amulet containers or relic boxes. Including that first recorded discovery, 46 virtually-complete boxes and parts of nine other (Table 1) of these small, often simply decorated, copper-alloy containers generally thought to date from the seventh (and possibly the early eighth) century have been found among the grave goods of women, children, including a baby, and, exceptionally, one adult male (the latter at Prittlewell (Essex)) (Museum of London Archaeology Service (MoLAS) 2004). To the author's knowledge, the only box found outside a burial context is that (not described in detail) from the Painted House, Dover Market Square (Kent). This was said to have been found with "200 circular loom weights in a *grubenhause*" (Philp 1989). Of these currently known boxes, 24 (Table 2) have some form of cruciform decoration on their lids, bases, bodies or flanges. There have been a number of studies of such boxes, usually in conjunction with newly-found boxes from excavated cemetery sites (e.g. Meaney 1981; Hawkes 1982; Evison 1987; Ager 1989; Penn 2000; Lucy *et al.* 2009). These authors have attempted to determine their function and whether those with cruciform decoration(s) indicate that possession of a box reflects the owner's association with Christianity. Recent publications (e.g. Hills (2011, 14–19), and French (2011)) have argued that some of these objects should be seen as Christian reliquaries and their contents, if any, identified as Christian religious relics. At this time, for the sake of clarity they are all referred to as boxes. These boxes can be placed into three distinct classifications, recognisable by their construction, design and appearance (Figs.1a, b and c).

Classification of boxes

General Details. All types are manufactured from copper-alloy sheet metal between 0.50 and 0.75mm in thickness. All can employ solder, rivets, or metal crimping in any combination in their construction. Lids and bases are either flat or convex.

Type I. Example Hawnby (Yorkshire). Figure 1a.

The most numerous type (n=36), distinguishable as two-piece cylindrical boxes between 40-60mm in diameter and 45-65mm in height. In all except one box

County	Site	Total	Type I	Type II	Type III	Type U= Unknown I= Incomplete	Reference
Bedfordshire	Kempston	2	2				Fitch 1863
	Marina Drive, Dunstable	3	3				Matthews 1962, Gibson and Harris 1994
Buckinghamshire	Bourne End	1				I	Bucks SMR 17702004
Cambridgeshire	Barrington A	1				I	Fox 1923
	Barrington B	1				I	Fox 1923
	Burwell	2	1	1			Lethbridge 1927, 1931
	Ely, Westfield Farm	1	1				Lucy <i>et al.</i> 2009
	Haslingfield	3				I, I, I	Fox 1923
Derbyshire	Hurdlow	1	1				Bateman 1861
	Standlow	1		1			Bateman 1848
Essex	Prittlewell (Male)	1			1		MoLAS 2004
Gloucestershire	Lechlade	1	1				Boyle <i>et al.</i> 2011
Hampshire	Southampton St. Mary's	1	1				Birbeck <i>et al.</i> 2005
Hertfordshire	Verulamium	2	2				Ager 1989
Kent	Cuxton	2		1	1		Blackmore <i>et al.</i> 2006
	Dover Buckland	1		1			Evison 1987
	Dover Painted House	1	1				Philp 1989
	Finglesham	1	1				Hawkes and Grainger 2006
	Isle of Thanet	1				U	Mason and Andrews 2012
	Kingston Down	2	1		1		Faussett 1856
	Sibertswold	1		1			Faussett 1856
	Polhill	1	1				Philp 1973
	Updown Eastry (baby)	2	2				Welch <i>et al.</i> 2008
Lincolnshire	Castledyke South	3	3				Sheppard 1939, Drinkall and Foreman 1998
Norfolk	Harford Farm, Caistor St Edmund	2	1		1		Penn 2000
Northamptonshire	Cransley	1	1				Baker 1881-83
Oxfordshire	Didcot	1	1				Boyle <i>et al.</i> 1995
	North Leigh	1		1			Leeds 1940
	Standlake	1				U	Stone 1856-59
Warwickshire	Bidford-on-Avon	1	1				Humphreys <i>et al.</i> 1923
Wiltshire	Yatesbury	1	1				Merewether 1851
Yorkshire	Aldbrough	1	1				Smith HE 1840
	Garton Slack II	1	1				Mortimer 1905
	Hambleton Moor +	1				U	Smith R 1912
	Hawnby	1	1				Denny 1868
	Painsthorpe Wold	1	1				Mortimer 1905
	Uncleby	5	5				Smith R 1912
Unknown (Ashmolean)		1	1				Unprovenanced
Totals		55	36	6	4	U-3, I=6	

Table 1. Corpus of boxes by county.

+ British Museum Accession Number (c. 1882). PRN MCA 3633. Fragment has an identical pattern to the Hawnby box lid. This could possibly be part of the Hawnby box that has an incomplete lid ring.

Site	Grave	Type	Cruciform decorated	Contents	Reference
Aldborough		I	*		Smith 1852
Burwell	42	II	Y		Lethbridge 1927
Castledyke South	11	I	Y	Thread and seeds, said to be "caper spurge, <i>Euphorbia lathyris</i> "	Drinkall and Foreman 1998
Castledyke South	183	I	Y		Drinkall and Foreman 1998
Castledyke South	1	I	Y		Drinkall and Foreman 1998
Cransley		I	Y		Baker 1881
Cuxton	306	II III	Y, Y		Mackinder 2006
Dover Buckland	107	II	Y		Evison 1987
Ely Westfield Farm	2	I	**		Lucy <i>et al.</i> 2009
Finglesham	8	I	Y		Hawkes and Grainger 2006;
Garton Slack II		I	Y		Mortimer 1905
Harford Farm	18	I		Textiles and thread	Penn 2000
Hawnby		I	Y		Denny 1868
Hurdlow	J93	I		Two pins or broken needles	Bateman 1861
Kempston	46	I	Y	Thread and pin	Fitch 1864
Kempston	71	I	Y	Fabric or linen, bronze pin	Fitch 1864
Kingston Down	222	III		Linen and brass pins	Faussett 1856
Kingston Down	96	I	Y	"a lump of substance"	Faussett 1856
Lechlade	14	I		Thread	Boyle <i>et al.</i> 1998
Marina Drive	B3/4	I		Thread or wool	Matthews 1962
Marina Drive	E1/E2	I		Fragments of cloth or leather	Matthews 1962
Marina Drive	E3	Unknown	Y		Gibson and Harris 1994
North Leigh		II	Y		Leeds 1940, Gibson and Harris 1994
Painsthorpe Wold Barrow 4	6a	I		Thread and iron needle	Mortimer 1905
Polhill	43	I	Y	Thread	Philp 1973
Sibertswold	60	II	Y	Wool, silk, and organic beads 'like the seeds of the Marvel of Peru' (<i>Mirabilis jalapa</i>)	Faussett 1856
Uncleby	1	I	Y		Smith 1912
Uncleby	29	I	Y	Thread	Smith 1912
Uncleby	3	I	Y		Smith 1912
Updown Eastry	76/34	I		Textiles, silk, flax, wool	Welch <i>et al.</i> 2008
Verulamium	10	I	Y		Ager 1989
Verulamium	21	I	Y	Iron pin and thread	Ager 1989
Unprovenanced		I	Y		Ashmolean Museum

Table 2. Boxes with contents and/or cruciform decoration.

* This may have had an incomplete cross on the base.

** A re-appraisal may indicate a cross on the lid.

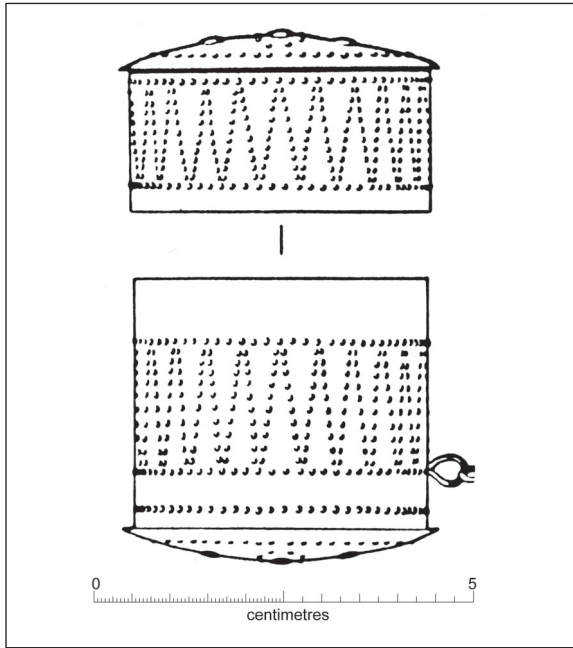


Figure 1a. Type I. Gibson, T. 1993 example from Hawonby (Yorkshire).

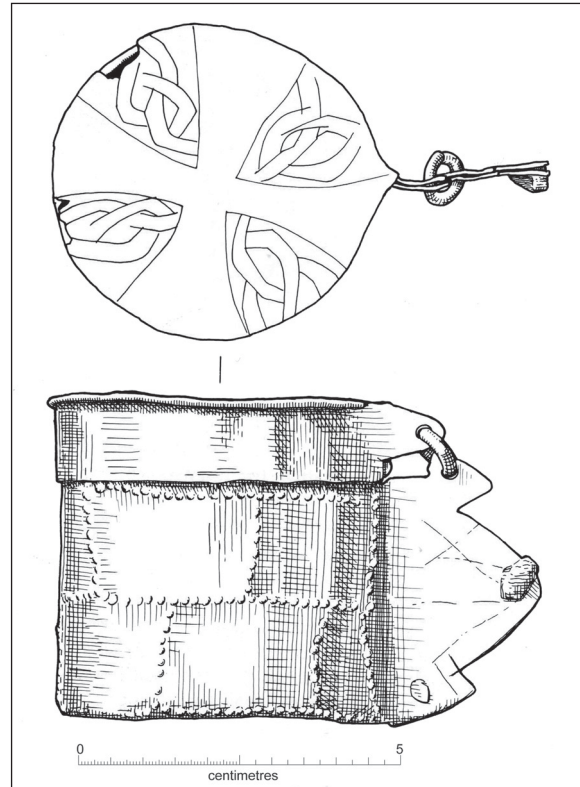


Figure 1b. Type II. After Gibson, T. and Harris, P. 1994 example from North Leigh (Oxfordshire).

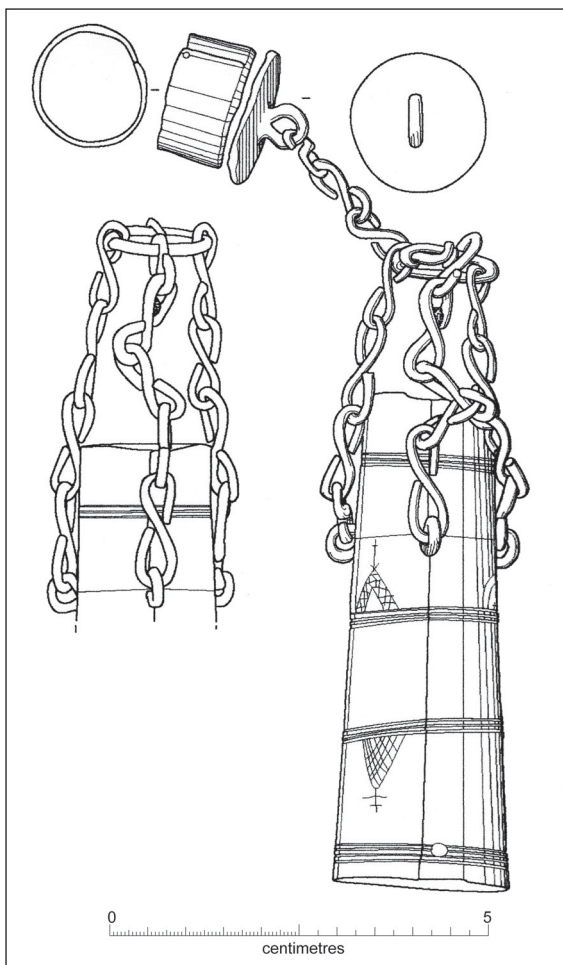


Figure 1c. Type III. After Blackmore, L, Mackinder, T, and Power, N. 2006 example from Cuxton Grave 306 (Kent).

the lid is held in the closed position by friction between the inside of the lid and the outside of the base assembly. The lid and base assemblies are retained together by a ring and chain. One box has the refinement of a hinged lid, one has external catches.

Type II. Example North Leigh (Oxfordshire). Figure 1b.

The six boxes in this classification, unlike Type I boxes, differ noticeably in various ways from one another. However, they have enough common characteristics to enable them to be grouped together. All share some features with Type I boxes in that the lid and base assemblies are constructed in the same manner. Additionally all have either a rigid or pivoting suspension flange projecting from one side of their body and all employ a hinged lid. These instantly recognisable features are the principal criteria for the identification of this type.

Type III. Cuxton Grave 306 (Kent). Figure 1c

Boxes of this type (of which there are four) are similar in construction to the Type I boxes in that they have a push-on lid assembly, however, they are smaller in diameter and have a greater height than any Type I box. One from Harford Farm has a cylindrical form, two, those from Kingston Down and Cuxton, have a tapering cylindrical appearance, that from Prittlewell is sheath-like. They are considered to be of European or Eastern Mediterranean origin (Blackmore *et al.* 2006, 35). Cuxton Grave 306 contained two boxes, the other was a Type II box.

Most have repoussé-formed punched-dot patterns in their decorations; the exceptions are from Aldborough (Yorkshire) (Smith 1852), and Hurdlow, (Derbyshire) (Bateman 1861; illustration opp.52) which only have incised markings; those from Marina Drive Dunstable (Bedfordshire) Grave B3-B4 (Matthews 1962, 28) and Painsthorpe Wold (Yorkshire) Barrow 4, Grave 6a (Mortimer 1905, 113–117) are undecorated. The Type II boxes from North Leigh (Oxfordshire) (Leeds 1940, 21; Gibson and Harris 1994, fig. 5) and Cuxton (Kent) Grave 306 (Blackmore *et al.* 2006, Vol. 2 fig. 24) are exceptional in that they are the only boxes with two types of applied decoration.

The North Leigh box body has repoussé markings, and the lid is inscribed with an equal-armed cross with poorly applied, irregular Salin Style II interlacing inside the four cross arms. A further cross can be seen scratched on the trefoils which make up the flange, this would seem to have been applied after manufacture, for it appears to be out of symmetry with the other decorations. The use of different decorative styles combined with what can be observed under magnification to have been the use of a different tool to crimp the lid from that used on the base implies that the lid top is not original and so accounts for the two decorative styles.

The Cuxton Type II box has all-over repoussé decoration on its lid and base with four concentric rings centred around a boss and a crudely applied punched-

dot representation of a leaf-like cross centred on the lid and base. The body has four lines of repoussé dots and a number of angled and vertical lines, a saltire is positioned adjacent to the flange. The pivoting flange found detached from the box consists of three zones: on either side of the centre zone are what appear to be representations of outward looking animal heads separated from the central zone by cross hatching with what can best be described as a Latin cross intersecting a hill and, positioned on either side, two smaller crosses. These overtly Christian symbols can only refer to the crosses erected at Calvary. It is suggested that the inscribed scenes have been applied by, or for, its owner after the box was manufactured, as they lack fluency and the skill levels associated with other areas of the box. A detailed description of the two boxes from Cuxton can be found in Blackmore *et al.* 2006 Vol.2,17 ON 21 and ON 22).

The Burwell Box

The most highly decorated of all boxes was found with other grave goods at Burwell (Cambridgeshire) in Grave 42 (Fig.2) having been excavated by T C Lethbridge in 1927 (Lethbridge 1927, fig. A).

It can be seen as one of six boxes classified here as Type II, the others being from Buckland, Dover Grave 107 (Kent) (Evison, 1987, fig.48.4), Cuxton, North Leigh, Sibertswold Down and Standlow (Derbyshire) (Bateman 1848, 74–76). These boxes, although notably different in appearance from one another, have enough characteristics in common to enable them to be classified together. All have a suspension flange attached to one side of the box and a hinged lid assembly. Three boxes, those from Cuxton, Sibertswold Down and Standlow, have the added feature of a suspension flange that can pivot. This ability to pivot can only imply that these boxes, if worn, were suspended from a belt as this pivotal movement enables the boxes to accommodate and flex with hip movement and make them more comfortable. This supports an argument that Type I and Type III boxes may have been worn in this fashion. Further, boxes including those from Aldborough, Buckland (Dover) and Burwell, demonstrate repairs which may indicate an occasional mobile rather than a static use. Hills (personal communication) makes an argument for the boxes to be considered as primarily stationary objects, suspended in a special place for worship, perhaps above a private shrine, they may have had a dual function, acting as both private and public devotional artefacts. A feature that supports Hills' and French's conclusion, that all such boxes are Christian reliquaries, is that five of the six Type II boxes have crosses included in their decoration: an exception may have been the box from Standlow, which is lost, its decorative scheme other than its flange is not illustrated in Llewellynn Jewitt's painting *Relics of a Primeval Life in England 1850* (Sheffield Museum).

The Burwell box when excavated was in a worn,

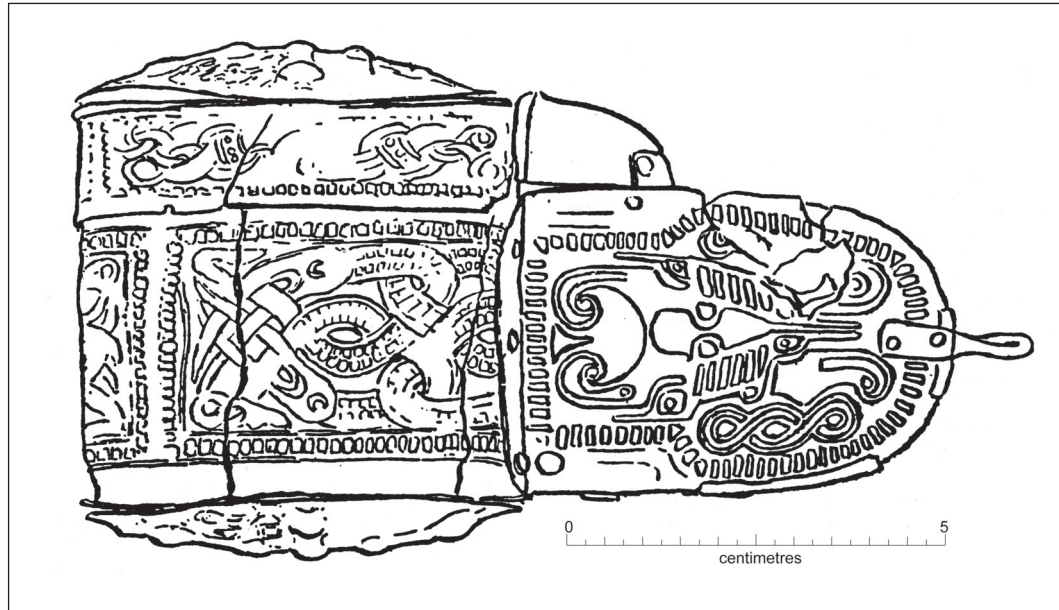


Figure 2. Burwell Grave 42 box. After Lethbridge, T. 1927.

repaired and fragile condition, it is nevertheless an exceptional and important example of Anglo-Saxon metal-work and artistic application. It will be argued below that, artistically, this box is unique, for together with the manufacturing techniques, and time used to produce the box, the maker demonstrates skilful metal workmanship and design knowledge. This can be seen on the undecorated bracket which supports the opening and closing of the lid. This has been reinforced by the addition of a shaped piece of copper alloy placed between the double plates of the flange. This acts to make a triple section exactly at the hinge's weakest point; an iron, rather than a copper-alloy hinge pin acts as a fulcrum. That this hinge bracket assembly is the only undecorated component of the box may indicate that this is a later addition; it is also possible that the box started life as a Type I box and at a later stage was altered to a Type II by the addition of the hinged lid and flange; this is demonstrated by the fact that the flange was riveted to the box body – it overlies part of the body decoration. The outstanding feature of this box lies in the much-worn, but impressive, Salin Style II zoomorphic decorations on the lid ring, body and flange and the quite remarkable figurative scenes displayed on both the lid top and base (Fig.3).

On the box body are three bead-edged die-embossed panels. Each panel shows scaly back-biting, sinuous, open-mouthed serpents or worm-like creatures interlaced together with curved elongated jaws and coiled back feet; these are similar to those on the seventh-century silver-gilt sword pommel from Crundale Down (Kent) (Webster 2012a, fig. 44). The lid ring is decorated with two rectangular bead-bordered panels with interlaced looped back-biting, spotted, snake-like animals; these show some resemblance to those on the Mitchell's Hill copper alloy die

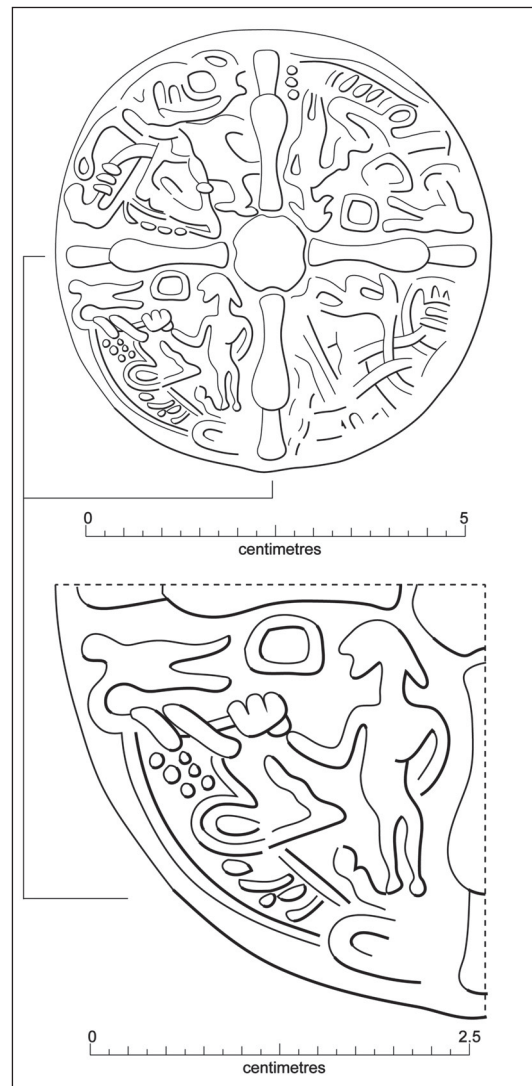


Figure 3. Burwell Grave 42 box and lid top. After Lethbridge, T. 1927

(Speake 1980, fig.14f). In contrast, either side of the projecting, double-thickness, curved flange are crude versions of opposed predatory birds' heads, with curved beaks, shown in profile. The near-circular lid and base may well be unique in Anglo-Saxon art, not because they demonstrate precision workmanship, but for what is displayed in a simplistic artistic style. Both components are stamped with an unusually shaped equal-armed, waisted cross positioned around a central rosette; inside each quarter is a figurative scene representing a helmeted warrior or hero figure engaged in the killing of a prostrate dragon. Lethbridge (Lethbridge 1927, 88) suggests the scenes are representations of "Beowulf and the Dragon or Sigurd slaying Fafnir"; they could be representations of these heroic stories. An examination of the box indicates that during its manufacture the punch used to emboss the lid and base lost its sharpness and six of the quartered scenes became degraded.

The box and other grave goods (e.g. a cowrie shell, T-shaped key ("girdle hanger") a bead toggle, a bronze pin, iron shears and the remains of a wooden box) that accompanied the woman buried at Burwell suggest that the woman who (presumably) owned this box almost certainly had significant social status within her community.

The dating evidence for the deposition of boxes to the second half of the seventh and perhaps the early eighth century (based on seriation of grave artefacts) had, until 2013 (see below), been widely accepted (e.g. Hawkes 1973, 197; Geake 1997, 35; Lucy *et al.* 2009, 128). Hawkes describes them "as one of the period's leading type fossils" A recent publication (Hines *et al.* 2013) has, with the use of artefact-typology, seriation of grave assemblages and radiocarbon dating (*ibid* xvii) outlined a chronological framework for Anglo Saxon grave goods of the sixth and seventh centuries (some "work boxes" were included in their study). The authors note that human bones from three of the graves containing work boxes, Castledyke South Grave 183, Lechlade Grave 14 and Marina Drive Grave E1/2, were radiocarbon-dated (*ibid* Table 7.1). The skeletal material in the Lechlade grave may date from cal AD 650–730 (84% probability, UB-4051 or cal AD 740–765 (11% probability)), that from E1/2 from Marina Drive to cal 650–675 (95% probability, UB-4550 and UB-4551), and Hines *et al.* propose that these burials should be assigned (on the basis of radio-isotope measurements and the typology of grave assemblages) to a phase between cal AD 665 and 695 (with a posterior probability of 95%). The skeletal material from the Castledyke South Grave 183 is almost certainly earlier (radiocarbon dated to cal AD 575–650 (95% probability, UB-6038) and can be assigned, in one of the models used by Hines *et al.*, to a phase from cal AD 630–660 (95% posterior probability) (*ibid* Figure 7.84). There are no radio-carbon dates determined from material from the Burwell cemetery but there is a consensus of opinion that it was established in the 7th century. Some boxes, when found (Gibson 1993, 150–200) were in a decayed, fragmented and crushed condition whilst those from Aldborough,

Burwell Grave 42, Dover Buckland Grave 107, and North Leigh all have evidence of repairs, which is an indication that they were in use prior to deposition and therefore not made exclusively for deposition. It is of interest that the chronological research (above) suggests that the end of regular furnished burials in Anglo Saxon England occurred two decades, or even more, before the end of the seventh century (Hines *et al.* 2013, xvii)

Many of the boxes recovered, including that from Burwell, were found in a worn condition and four had been repaired. Of the 26 boxes examined by the author all display evidence of wear, indicated by smooth and possibly polished external metal surfaces. As a consequence we cannot accurately determine how long the Burwell box, or indeed any box, was in use prior to the date of deposit. Wear and repair are not always good indicators of age, they may also reflect use. All the boxes, by their design were portable accessories; they were presumably both functional and articles of display. That they were probably intended for display is demonstrated not only by their decoration but by the gilding apparent on the Marina Drive, Dunstable Grave B3-B4 and the Kempston (Bedfordshire) Graves 46 and Grave 71 boxes, which the excavator (Fitch 1864, 269) remarked were finished in "gilding in its most original purity and brightness". If Hills' and French's conclusions are accepted, that all boxes should be seen as reliquaries, they would have been worn, and displayed, as an expression, a visible identifier, of the owners' Christian beliefs and be containers to hold portable relics. Relic boxes were a statement of their owners' faith and the acceptance of a new God; it would have served no purpose to have had their everyday use hidden away in a bag or box. It is, however, impossible to determine if they were worn every day or appeared only on holy days. If the former was the case the degree of metal wear, repairs and damage could indicate that such boxes had been in use for some time before burial.

The Burwell box is an important apparently overlooked and little debated item of metalwork art. The box, with the unique scenes on its lid and base, is technically sophisticated, demonstrating good sheet metal techniques in its design and the added strengthening of the hinged-lid construction. Its importance to Anglo-Saxon art and archaeology lies in the theatrical display on its lid and base. This reflects the effort needed to carve a punch, possibly made from bone, or fire-hardened wood, suitable to produce that scene. Moreover, if we consider that the figurative scenes depicted on the lid and base are representations of the *Beowulf* poem or some other, but unrecorded, mythological, oral historical legend, a fight between a warrior and a dragon, then the ownership of the box and burial at Burwell, even if of Scandinavian origin, could predate the composition of the epic Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf*. The dating of the Anglo-Saxon poem is the subject of ongoing scholarly debate and controversy. Opinions differ, Newton (1993, 17) opines that "*Beowulf* may have been composed during the eighth century", Heaney (1999:

ix) considered that the "poem called *Beowulf* was composed sometime between the middle of the seventh and the end of the tenth century". Liuzza (2013, 22), in a far-reaching discussion, records that earlier critical opinion of the poem's origin "placed the genesis of the poem in the late seventh or early eighth century" but states that many scholars now view the composition "towards a later date ninth or tenth century". It is possible, therefore, that the box predates the poem's composition, and might predate the eighth century *Franks Casket*, which Webster (2012b, 5) states is "the earliest recognizable versions of famous legends from Germanic traditions", emphasising how little is known and understood about the Burwell box.

Hills' article (2011, 17) relating to the use of these containers as Christian relic boxes presents four strong arguments, the first is that when boxes are found with textiles, thread, pins and organic material this could indicate that the contents are Christian relics. Sixteen boxes (Table 2) contained such artefacts. Secondly, she argues that even when a box lacks contents this should not preclude it from being seen as a reliquary, as some Christian relics are known to have been more mundane: "like earth ... from Mount Sinai" and "a piece of cloth from a silk bag which had contained stones from the grave of Saint Peter". Contents like these could easily have been missed by early excavators and barrow diggers. This reinforces the view that boxes should be opened only in a laboratory environment, immediately after excavation. Then Hills makes a comparison between the hand held, hinged-lid, Continental, spherical, amulet capsules, some of which have cruciform symbols in their decorations, and the Anglo-Saxon boxes that have cruciform designs (Gibson and Harris, 1994, fig.3) these include those found in Kingston Down (Kent) Grave 96, Polhill (Kent) Grave 43 (Philp, 1973 fig, 51 and 53), Sibertswold Down Grave 60, and Uncleby Grave 1 (Yorkshire). Finally, there is the evidence of the Christian biblical scenes on both the Cuxton boxes (Blackmore *et al*, 2006, figs 24 and 25). French views the Anglo-Saxon relic boxes as being a continuation of use of those "common in northern Italy and Gaul" (French 2011, 5), she also likens textiles found inside the boxes to *brandea* and uses a biblical story about a miraculous cessation of a flow of blood (*Mark* 5: 25-34) to associate the boxes with women. Nine of the boxes (Table 1) are incomplete, "unpublished" or the precise nature of their decoration, if any, is uncertain. Of the remaining 46 boxes 24 have some form of cruciform symbol on them; 22 do not. The irrefutable evidence that some may have been used as Christian reliquaries relates to the two boxes found at Cuxton, one a Type II box, the other a Type III. Both have what can be described as explicit scratched scenes relating to the New Testament's description of Calvary. Hills (2011, 18) suggests their owner may have been a non-Anglo-Saxon pilgrim presumably because the Type III boxes are considered to be of non-Anglo-Saxon origin (Blackmore *et al*, 2006, 35). What we do know of the inscriptions on both of the Cuxton boxes is they do not appear to have been present when the boxes

were originally manufactured, for they lack the quality evident in the boxes' construction and appear to have been applied as secondary additions.

How might we try to prove that the Burwell Grave 42 box is a Christian reliquary? Although the author is confident that the scenes portrayed on the lid and base of the Burwell box Grave 42 box describe a pagan poem, there is a need to examine a Christian story (Williams, 1899), that relates to a dragon-killing. Saint Gildas (AD 500-570) while on a pilgrimage to Rome and Ravenna, was called upon to destroy a dragon whose obnoxious breath had caused death and a plague. Saint Gildas, staff in hand, approached the dragon's mountain lair and offered up a prayer that resulted in the dragon's death. This scenario is far removed from that displayed on the Burwell box; that of a warrior, sword in hand, possibly Beowulf, killing a dragon. Initially the pagan scene on its base and lid would only seem to imply that the box represents a non-Christian object; can the unusually shaped cross be viewed as no more than space division between the scenes portrayed? If so, the cross would have no connection with the new religion and owe nothing to its beliefs, so should we not accept the box as a Christian relic box? Is the cross alone enough evidence to establish that the box is a religious object? If the box is to be considered a Christian reliquary, an explanation is needed for the portrayal of the dragon-killing. If the slaying of a dragon by a warrior is a symbol of Christian beliefs, can an explanation be made linking the box to both females and biblical events? Reference has been made to the paper by French in which she applied the biblical story of the woman with a flow of blood and her argument that the fragments of linen, cloth and other material when found in seventh-century Anglo-Saxon relic boxes should be considered as devotional relics, *brandea*. If we are to look for a biblical explanation that can in any way relate to the Burwell box we need to examine the final book of the *New Testament*, the *Book of Revelation*. Pagels (2013, 1) speculates that it is "the strangest book in the bible and the most controversial, instead of stories, miracles and moral teaching, it only offers visions, dreams and nightmares"; women and dragons are featured in *Revelation*. Is it possible that what is portrayed on the lid and base of the Burwell container is an allegorical message? *Revelation* (12: 4-17) tells the story of the persecution in heaven by a dragon of a woman and her unborn child that results in a battle between Archangel Michael and his angels and the dragon and his angels. Michael triumphs and "...the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan", the dragon, now on earth, continues, without success, to pursue the woman with her male child. Could the Burwell box symbolise the defeat of the Satan by God's warrior, the ultimate triumph of good over evil, allied to the protection of women?

It is impossible to determine the geographic origin of the Burwell box; the dragon fight portrayed appears, like the *Beowulf* poem or the *Sigurd* legend, to be a folk story or myth passed down by oral tradition that reflects a Scandinavian origin. Despite this,

it may have an "East Anglian origin" (Newton, 1993, 132). Notwithstanding that the art work portrayed on the Burwell box indicates a pagan, non-Christian genesis, can the scenes be viewed as a paradox and is the imagery Christian imagery? If an explanation is required to understand why both pagan and Christian themes are evident on the Burwell box, an example linking Germanic pagan legends to biblical events through English decorative art can be seen on the early eighth-century *Franks Casket*. Webster (2012b, 96) remarks that the story on the casket makes "Christianity more attractive and accessible to the heathen populace. Hence once again we see the past used to inform understanding of the present". This could explain how the blending of the cross and the dragon-fight on the Burwell box could be perceived as a biblical event expressed in a pagan setting. The Burwell box can be considered to be a Christian reliquary on the grounds of its iconography and physical

appearance. Unlike Type I and Type III boxes, all extant Type II boxes have a Christian association recognisable by cruciform decorations (Fig 4). Physical, in that all Type II containers differ in appearance from one another but all have a flange and a hinged lid that replicates the Continental religious spherical amulet or relic boxes. The hinged lid makes the security of contents more reliable than is the case with Type I containers. All are recognisably special and different. Without exception, unlike the Type I boxes, they represent many hours of skilled metal working, none more so than the Burwell box, with its impressive lid and base together with the Salin Style II decorative panels that link the box to a pagan past. When these features are allied to the unusually shaped cross, the cross becomes a conduit connecting ancient legends and beliefs to the new religion, Christianity. We should now consider that all Type II boxes are Christian reliquaries and not decorated utilitarian

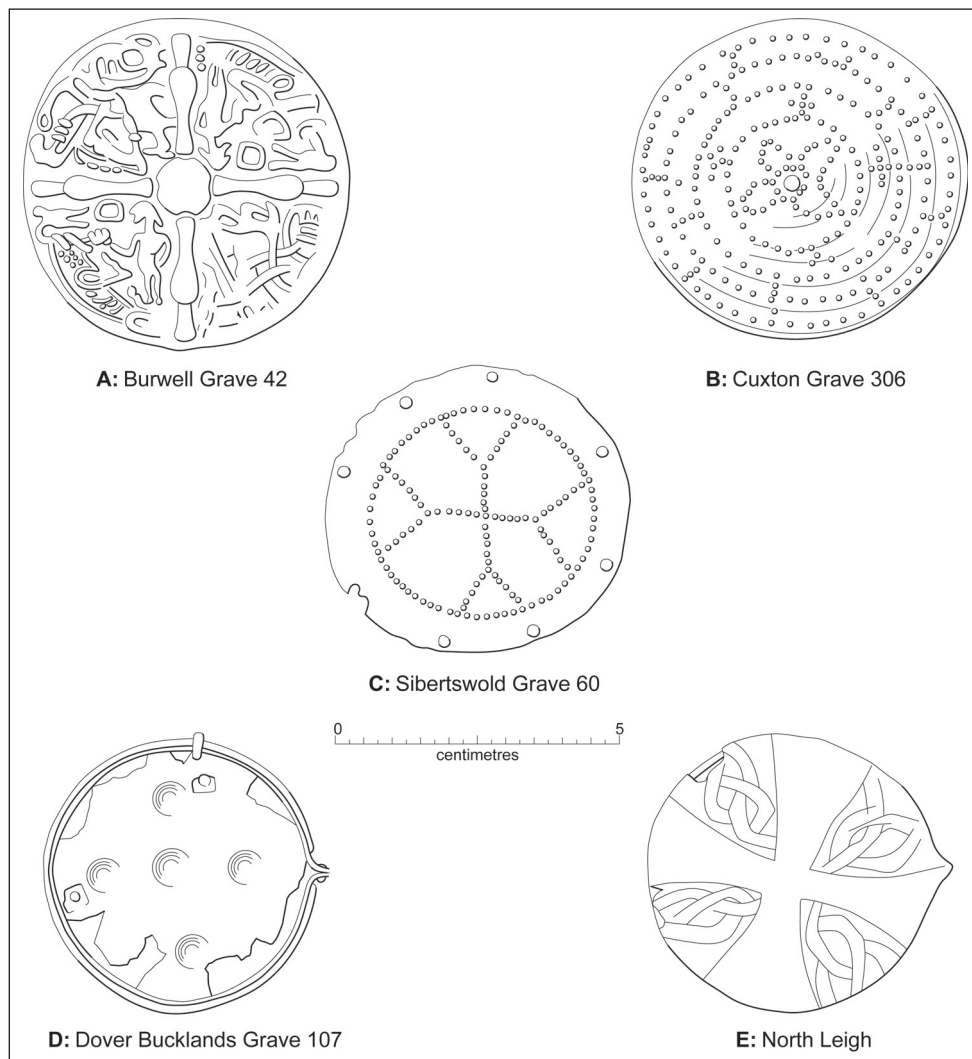


Figure 4. Cruciform decorations on Type II relic lid tops.

a. After Lethbridge, T. 1931.

b. After Blackmore, L., Mackinder, T, and Power, N 2006.

c. After Gibson, T. 1993.

d. After Evison, V. 1987.

e. After Gibson, T. and Harris, P. 1994

objects. These boxes with differing and unusual decorative patterns are more than just relic boxes, it needs to be recognised that they also represent examples of Anglo-Saxon folk art.

The importance of the box to a community steeped in pagan traditions and custom must relate to its outstanding feature, the iconographic story on the lid and base. In a largely illiterate society individuals had the ability to see, in detail, images of a warrior defeating a dragon in combat and possibly a biblical event: a scenario that in the past had probably only been celebrated by spoken words in stories, poetry and song. This must have had a profound effect on the audience, more so that the box represented not only the arrival of a new god but a new religion. In addition the reliquary would have made a spectacular and prestigious article. We need to accept that its female owner was a person of status within the Burwell community not only for her possession of a reliquary but for what was portrayed on that reliquary; a dragon, a warrior, predatory birds, and serpents. Heroic deeds and male warriors such as Archangel Michael, Beowulf, and Sigurd have long been associated in religious tracts, secular stories, songs and poetry. Dragons and birds of prey in seventh century society and art appear largely as a masculine prerogative. Speake (1980, 81) observes that "birds of prey frequently occur on fighting equipment". Dragons are considered to be "invested with a special apotropaic quality ..." (Dickinson and Härke 1992, 109) and are to be seen on shields at the male elite status burials at Sutton Hoo Mound 1.

Other than Gibson (1993), a dissertation strong on technical detail but lacking critical analysis, and Gibson and Harris (1994) no in-depth study of Type I boxes has been undertaken. They are the most numerous, and a re-appraisal of existing evidence should be undertaken to determine if any can be considered as Christian reliquaries; for it can be seen on Type I boxes that 47 % (n=17) of the thirty-six have Christian symbols. Further, they lack the design and skill levels associated with the manufacture of Type II boxes (see above). This is reflected in the "less secure" push on lids, these are easily detached when worn. The fact this was a potential problem is demonstrated by the addition of twin catches on the Kempston Grave 71 box and a hinged top on the Finglesham (Kent) Grave 8 box; further they are not difficult to make (Gibson 1993, plates 14-16). To add to the complexity in attempting to understand these containers both the Kempston and Finglesham boxes are cruciform-decorated. Notwithstanding the many difficulties in assessing and understanding Type I boxes the author is in agreement with Hills and French that some boxes should be considered as Christian reliquaries, however some can be considered to have a pagan function (see below). If we are unable to demonstrate the purpose of every one of these evocative boxes, it can be argued that they were not work boxes (*vide* Hines *et al.* 2013 fig 5.217) or "possibly a needle case" (British Museum Accession Register 1891.0624,141) in the accepted sense of sewing repair boxes or containers to hold needles. This opinion can be supported; the

method used to open and close Type I boxes (Gibson and Harris 1994, fig. 2) is by sliding the lid assembly over the body, the box is then held in a closed position by metal friction between the internal diameter of the lid and the external diameter of the body. Of the 26 boxes examined by the author none exhibit any degree of wear that would have been indicated by metal serration on these components as a consequence of constant use in opening and closing, if they were used as practical sewing or needle boxes. Further, a paper by Crowfoot (1990, 47-56) describes material obtained from a number of so-called work boxes as fragments of cloth "too small to have been kept for any useful purpose". None appear suitable to be used in the repair of the everyday clothing of the period. If, as argued, Type I boxes, through design and construction faults, (because their lids are inherently not secure) are unfit for purpose as work boxes it follows that they are also unsuitable containers to hold sacred objects; relics. The research and debate should continue.

Conclusion

The author is confident that the box in Burwell Grave 42 and all extant Type II boxes should, on current evidence, be seen and described as Christian reliquaries. If this is so, not only were they designed and constructed to a high standard, replicating the Continental relic boxes with hinged lids; but, unlike the Type I boxes, they were functional in the important use of containing, and securing, relics. These features, considered together with the cruciform symbol displayed on all extant Type II boxes; combined with the explicit Christian scene on the Cuxton box, and that on the Burwell box possibly alluding to a biblical story are convincing evidence of a Christian accessory. The evidence does not support an argument that all Type I boxes should be seen as reliquaries. It is attractive to see some having a Christian religious function as they apparently occur only in the later phase of furnished burials; a time when the conversion of Anglo-Saxon England was at its zenith. Most, when found, were in a worn and repaired condition and it is possible that they had a function in a pagan setting. This does not preclude that some may have been adapted or adopted as Christian accessories and finally consigned to the grave before the acceptance of the unfurnished burial practices of the new religion. For whatever reason, pagan or Christian, parts of boxes were respected, this can be seen in the re-use of a lid top from a (Type I or Type II) broken or discarded box used as a waist pendant in Marina Drive Grave E3. (Gibson and Harris 1994, fig.1). The evidence available on the small number of Type III boxes indicates they were not originally intended as relic boxes but they were secular artefacts, the Cuxton example illustrates only its secondary use as a visible declaration of its owner's religious beliefs.

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