

AN INSCRIBED STUD FOUND AT EGGINTON, DERBYSHIRE: AN ANGLO-SAXON LOVE-TOKEN?

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A small silver stud was found by a metal detector user in February 1987, to the south of the church at Egginton, Derbyshire (SK 284265). The stud is currently on loan to Derby Museum.

The stud is a disc of silver 1mm thick and 13mm in diameter (Plate 1). The obverse face has a beaded rim and, at the centre, a raised boss within a collar of beaded gold wire. On the upper surface the gold beading is worn smooth, and on one edge it is compressed as if by a sharp blow. There is a trace of solder in the centre of the reverse face, which is otherwise plain, and the disc was presumably mounted against a larger object. The edge of the disc has been broken away in two places, on opposite sides, possibly as a result of having been prized away from its original mounting. The inscribed text, which is the principal feature of the stud, fills the border between the central boss and the beaded rim. The text is clearly primary, that is, the stud was intended from its inception to contain a text. The border was engraved to leave the letters standing in counter-relief and the background was filled with a dark inlay, which covered the rough hatching now visible between the letters.

The stud could have formed part of the decoration on a brooch or other object. The early tenth-century brooch from the King's School, Canterbury, for example, contains several sheet-gold roundels, although they are larger in size than the stud and are decorated, not inscribed (Backhouse *et al.* 1984, 35). It is possible that there were originally other studs, now lost, from the same object, and these could have contained further parts of the text. Alternatively, the text that we have may be complete in itself. The beading on the stud is typical of late ninth and early tenth-century metalwork, for example the ring from Aberford and pieces from the Trehiddle and Beeston Tor hoards (Webster and Backhouse 1991, 269–72). The use of base silver with inlaid niello is also common in metalwork from these two hoards. These two features suggest a date from the mid-ninth to the mid-tenth century for the stud. Bosses as a decorative feature occur on metalwork of various dates but they are certainly well-known from this period, for example on the Beeston Tor brooch (Webster and Backhouse 1991, 269–70).

The script used in the text is known as Anglo-Saxon capitals. Although the letters are diminutive in size, between 1.8 and 2.0mm in height, they are neatly executed with clear serifs. The text is legible and reads clockwise with the letters facing inwards. The transliteration below uses the following conventions: 'A' indicates a legible letter A; 'A' indicates a letter A, damaged but legible; '[A]' indicates an undamaged letter of unusual form, probably A. The text reads:



Plate 1: Photograph of Egginton stud, enlarged. Original 13mm diameter.

LAEDE L[V]FIE

The space between the last letter and the first is taken up with a decorative filler but there is a deliberate space, indicating word division, in the middle of the text. A certain symmetry is achieved by each word having five letters of which the first is L and the last is E. The letter transliterated as [V] could alternatively be read as [Y].

The text is in Old English and the two words are quite legible; they are, however, not altogether easy to interpret. Nor is it clear whether the text is complete in itself or whether other studs, now lost, contained further parts of the text.

LAEDE is most likely to be a form of the common Old English weak verb *laedan* 'to take, lead'. The single *d* and the ending *-e* suggest that it is present tense and singular, either first person indicative ('[I] take') or subjunctive ('may [I/you/he/she/it] take'). Less likely alternatives include *laede* for *laed*, imperative singular ('Take!'), *laede* for *laewede* 'lay, unlearned', and *laede* for *lede* or *legde*, past singular of *leccan* 'to place, put'.

If the second word reads L[V]FIE, it is likely to be a form of the weak verb *lufian* 'to love'. In inscriptions using capital script it is usual for the vowel U to be represented by V. *L(u)fie* would be a present singular tense, either first person indicative ('[I] love') or subjunctive singular ('may [I/you/he/she/it] love'). A less likely alternative is that *l(u)fie* is a spelling of *lufe*, a recorded form in oblique singular cases of the noun *lufu* 'love'.

If the second word reads L[Y]FIE, it could be a form of the late West-Saxon verb *lyfian* 'to live' (elsewhere *lifian* or *libban*). *L(y)fie* would be a present singular tense, either first person indicative ('[I] live') or subjunctive singular ('may [I/you/he/she/it] live'). Less likely alternatives include *l(y)fie* as a spelling of the present tense singular

verb *life* or *liefe* from *liefan* 'to believe', and *l(y)fie* as a spelling of *lyfe* or *life*, dative singular of the noun *lif* 'life'.

In the corpus of Old English, the word *laedan* is not recorded in close association with any of the words *liefan*, *lufian*, *lufu* or *lyfian* in any of their variant spellings (Healey and Venezky 1980). *Laedan* is occasionally recorded with the noun *lif*; for example Aelfric ends a homily with the request that God should *us gemiltsige on andweardum life, and to ðam ecan gelaede . . .*, 'be merciful to us in the present life and lead us to the eternal [life] . . .' (Thorpe 1844, 364). The phrase is not sufficiently common, however, to suggest that this is necessarily the correct interpretation of *l(y)fie* on the stud text, especially in view of its spelling with *-ie*.

The most likely interpretation of the stud text is that it reads *laede l(u)fie*, to be translated 'may [you] love [me], may [you] take [me]'. The use of the present subjunctive in an Old English inscribed text can be paralleled, for example on the brooch, 114 Sutton, which has four instances (Okasha 1971, 116–7). If this interpretation of the stud text is substantially correct then it would seem to be a secular, not a religious, text. There are no other Anglo-Saxon inscribed objects which could be described as love-tokens, although such are well recorded from later in the Middle Ages.

Other interpretations of the text are possible, for example, 'may [you] take [me] in love' or '[I] love, [I] take'. If the reading is *l(y)fie*, there are further possibilities, for example 'may [you] live, may [you] take [me]' or 'may [you] lead [me] to life'. In the latter, a religious rather than a secular meaning might be intended. None of these texts has a close parallel on any Anglo-Saxon inscribed object but, in the field of Anglo-Saxon epigraphy, this is not an unusual situation.

There is only one epigraphic dating feature, the use of AE written as two letters not as a digraph. This is more usual in eighth or ninth-century Anglo-Saxon inscriptions than in later ones. One feature is of course quite insufficient to date a text on epigraphic grounds. The language of the text, while clearly indicating a date within the Anglo-Saxon period, does not give any evidence for a closer dating. There is nothing, however, in the script or language to argue against the mid-ninth to mid-tenth century date suggested above for the stud on art-historical grounds.

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