

A Late Eighth Century Disc from Mavourne Farm, Bolnhurst, Bedfordshire

ANN SMALLRIDGE

IN 1962 a small disc was brought into Bedford Museum by Mr John White. The gilt bronze disc is an isolated surface find from Mavourne Farm, Bolnhurst, (N.G.R. TL/071575), and is now in Bedford Museum, accession number 62/B/70.

border the disc is divided into quadrants by an equal armed cross in slight relief. The designs in the four panels are skilfully executed in the chip-carving technique, the surface of the ornament being cut back in places to express low relief. The

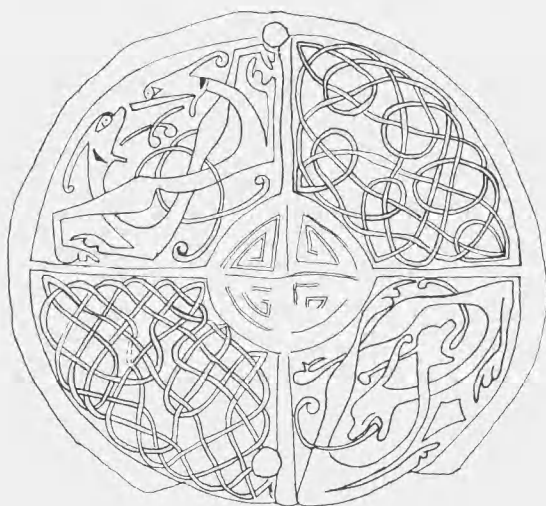


Fig 1. The Mavourne Disc.

The disc (pl Ia; fig 1) is 3.6 cm. in diameter. It is of gilt bronze, with traces of gilding still remaining on the back. There is no sign of a catch and pin, but the corrosion which has pitted the back of the disc might have destroyed traces of any fastening device. Two holes have been bored opposite each other towards the edge of the disc. This work has been carelessly carried out. Neither hole is integrated into the design: both are to the left of the vertical rib (fig 1). The holes are probably secondary, made after the damage to the rim, since one hole is on the raised border, the other a comparable distance in from the broken edge.

In the centre of the disc is a slightly raised boss with a lightly incised design. The boss has been divided into quadrants, each containing a key spiral. The disc has a raised border which probably extended around the circumference of the disc. The border is much pitted by corrosion. Within the

panels are filled alternatively with ribbon interlace and animals patterns. The animals in the top left-hand quadrant face in opposite directions but are almost identical in form and stance. One animal appears to be in front of the other, but its tail entwines with the body and tail of its partner. Each animal has a long neck which arches back over its body, confronting the other animal with its backward-facing head. The heads have sharply truncated snouts; the line of the lip is indicated, and the curved cheek line is pronounced. There is a distinct bump over the eye. The heads have short pigtailed, turning down to end in a scroll. The eye is almond-shaped; the pupil is indicated by a dot, the iris by a curved line. From the open mouth of each animal a short tongue is produced, which crosses the tongue of its partner to end in a scroll. The animals have slender bodies with the back leg protruding to give a rampant position. The tail

curls round, interlacing with the tail and body of the other animal, to end in a scroll. The feet of the animals are three-toed, the divisions between the toes being exaggerated.

The two animals in the lower right-hand quadrant are almost identical. However, unlike the superimposed animals of the opposite panel, they face each other, only their hind foot and head extend into the other's half of the area. These animals are more attenuated; their necks are longer, as are their tongues, which interlace with the body of the other animal. The shoulders of the animals have been distorted to fit into the right-angle of the field. The tapering body swells into the hip, which narrows again to a backward-turning three-toed foot. The heads of these animals are squarer than those of the animals in the opposite quadrant, with blunter, more rounded snouts. The space between the animals' forepaws is filled by an irregular lozenge. In this quadrant naturalism has been subordinated to the decorative filling of an area.

The two remaining panels are filled with interlace ornament. In both panels all strands of the design are subject to a strict over/under order. The interlace in the right-hand quadrant is more elaborate, with five whorls worked into the pattern; that in the left-hand quadrant appears as an irregular basket-weave design.

The holes may have been bored so that the disc could be attached to others by an arrangement of plates and links as with the Witham pins¹ or the pinhead from Kegworth, Leics.² However, there is no pin attached to the Mavourne disc. The disc may have been originally a mount from a box or binding, but it is not in the usual form of objects that can be identified as mounts, (see the Whitby Abbey mounts³ of a similar date and technique). It seems probable that the Mavourne disc was originally used as a brooch, since, in size and general configuration, it resembles most closely the Ixworth brooch⁴ among comparable material. However, it should be noticed that the catch and pin on the Ixworth brooch are secondary.

In material, technique and form of design, the Mavourne disc is closely paralleled by the Witham pins. These are also of gilded, chip-carved bronze, but the craftsmanship is probably surpassed by that of the Mavourne disc. Like the Mavourne disc, the three discs of the Witham pins are divided into four fields. The centre pin also has raised ribs, rim and central boss. The rim is decorated by punched dots, a feature which cannot be confirmed on the Mavourne disc due to corrosion. The careful interlace in the lower left-hand quadrant of the left-hand pin is similar to that in the lower left-hand

quadrant of the Mavourne disc. The animals on the centre pin have the same bump over the eye, sharply truncated snout, defined upper lip and open mouth with protruding tongue as the Mavourne disc animals in the left-hand quadrant. They have a similar swelling at the hip with the hind leg turned upwards against the natural body line as the animals in the right-hand quadrant of the Mavourne disc. Both discs bear examples of animals with long, arched necks and backward or forward facing heads.

Another close parallel to the Mavourne disc is the Ixworth brooch, although the latter is slightly dished in form. This again is circular, divided into quadrants by raised, but flat, ribs, has a central boss and is surrounded by a raised border. Animal and interlace ornament is again portrayed by chip carving, but all four panels show one animal surrounded by interlace. The Ixworth brooch animals are less disciplined and formalised than those on the Mavourne disc, but there are similar features. The eyes of the animals on the Ixworth brooch are portrayed in a similar manner, although the corners of the eye turn downwards and the eye is more exaggerated as a feature. Both sets of animals have arched necks, a swelling hip which tapers to end in three-toed paws with exaggeratedly arched knuckles. The Mavourne disc is a richer object executed more finely than the Ixworth brooch.

The Witham pins and Ixworth brooch are two of a series of gilded objects which includes a gilt-bronze mount from Bjorke churchyard,⁵ Norway. Again, this is an object with chip-carved animal and interlace ornament. There is a marked similarity to the Mavourne disc in that the interlace in the four corners of the mount is developed into whorls like that in the top right-hand quadrant of the disc.

This series of gilded objects can be dated to the eighth century on the basis of parallels cited here. The Witham pins and associated material can be dated by reference to the Tassilo chalice.⁶ This was made for presentation by Duke Tassilo to the monastery of Kremsmünster, between 777 and 788. The Tassilo chalice has been shown to belong to the Anglo-Carolingian school of metalwork and is not native Anglo-Saxon work, but general parallels can be drawn. The Bjorke mount can be dated to the early Viking period by accompanying grave goods, and was probably taken to Norway in the Viking raids at the end of the eighth century, which gives a *terminus ante quem* date.

The Witham pins have parallels in eighth-century stone carving. The animal seen from above on the right-hand pin is found on the Thornhill,

Dumfries, cross fragment.⁷ The sharply pointed wing of the animals on the centre pin is found on a carving of an eagle from Brixworth, Northants.⁸ and on an animal whose general configuration is very similar to that of the Witham pin animals. This animal occurs on a cross fragment from Elstow, Beds.⁹ (this journal, pl Ib), and its head and tongue form a close parallel to those of the animals in the left-hand quadrant of the Mavourne disc. The interlace on the Witham pins and the Mavourne disc can be compared to that on the Bakewell cross,¹⁰ dated by Kendrick to the second half of the eighth century, and to the interlace on the Gandersheim ivory casket,¹¹ which is also of eighth-century date. It should be pointed out that these parallels can only be dated on stylistic grounds, grounds which are questionable.

There are parallels among manuscripts to the Witham pins/Mavourne disc series, particularly to the general principle of division of an area into small fields filled with decoration, and to the interlace designs. Parallels to the pointed wings of the Witham pin animals are found in the Book of Cerne,¹² and the Leningrad gospels.¹³ The Leningrad gospels (c. 746) also show an animal seen from above. The pigtail feature of the Mavourne disc animal heads is found in the Lindisfarne gospels (c. 698). It is not a common feature on metalwork, but is much in evidence on the drinking-horn mounts of the Trewiddle hoard, deposited c. 873.

The design of the Mavourne disc frees the animals from the demands of interlace patterns. The bodies of the animals, although formalised, do not develop into ribbon interlace, as on the centre disc of the Witham pins, neither are they shown against a background of interlace, as on the Ixworth brooch. Unlike the sceatta of 700-750, where the animal bodies are completely subordinate to the interlace design, the portrayal of the animals on the Mavourne disc moves towards the naturalistic style of the animals in the roundels of manuscripts of the Canterbury school (c. 750-825). As on the Mavourne disc, these manuscripts employ interlace and animal ornament in separate panels. The key patterns of the Royal I E IV (Folio 4a)¹⁴ suggest those incised on the boss of the Mavourne disc. However, manuscripts like the Royal I E VI

must be dated later than the disc because of the degeneration of their animals into floriate forms, quite apart from the fact that they have their own established series of parallels in later silver work. However, if the comparatively naturalistic portrayal of the Mavourne disc animals could be taken as evidence of a date later than that of the Witham pins, then the disc could be dated towards the end of the eighth century. A later date seems unlikely in view of the appearance of discipline and balance which the design of the disc retains, and which is not often met with in the ninth century manuscripts and metalwork.

The Mavourne disc, then, is one of a series of gilded chip-carved objects which includes the Witham pins, Ixworth brooch and Bjorke mount as its closest parallels. These objects are to be dated to the second half of the eighth century, and the Mavourne disc is probably to be dated to the end of this period. The series of objects has been used to define an Anglian or Mercian school, and the provenance of the Mavourne disc comes within this area. The Mavourne disc is an important object in this series, bearing comparison as it does in richness and technique with the Witham pins, Ixworth brooch and Bjorke mount.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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NOTES

¹D. M. Wilson, *Anglo-Saxon Ornamental Metalwork, 700-1100*, (1964), 11-14, 132-134, pl 18.

²*Ibid.*, 14, 57, 58, 106, pl 3.

³*Ibid.*, 192, pl 38.

⁴*Ibid.*, 137.

⁵*Ibid.*, pl 1; *Antiquaries Journal* xii, 440 f.

⁶D. M. Wilson, (1964), 10 with fig.

⁷D. M. Wilson, *The Anglo-Saxons*, (1960), pl 61.

⁸T. D. Kendrick, *Anglo-Saxon Art*, (1938), pl 93, 4.

⁹D. M. Wilson, (1964), pl 2.

¹⁰D. Baker, 'Recent discoveries at the Benedictine Abbey of Elstow', *The Bedfordshire Magazine*, Vol 11, no 87 (1968), 289.

¹¹J. Brondsted, *Early English Ornament*, London, 1924, fig 57.

¹²D. M. Wilson, (1964), pl 1.

¹³D. M. Wilson, (1964), 22, pl 3.

¹⁴D. M. Wilson, (1964), 11.

¹⁵D. M. Wilson, (1964), pl 5.

