AN ANGLO-SAXON SAUCER BROOCH FROM HEDSOR, BUCKINGHAMSHIRE

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In 1983 an Anglo-Saxon saucer brooch was found by Mr. A. Hopkins whilst metal detecting at Hedsor. With the agreement of the landowner the brooch was subsequently purchased by the Museum (Acc. 92.1984). Although even a single find could be indicative of a cemetery, in this instance the location of the findspot, a sloping field, makes this less likely.[1] Other finds from the field included a dispersed scatter of fourteen largely illegible Roman bronze coins, including two of the early fourth century, one of Constantine I, the other of Licinius I. The nearest firm archaeological evidence for Saxon activity is the seventh to eighth-century cemetery at Bourne End (Farley, 1987).

Description

Copper-alloy cast saucer brooch without evidence of gilding (Plate 1). The rim is abraded and the metal very porous in appearance. On the back there are two lugs for the pin, of which there is no evidence, and the stub of a catchplate. The decoration is cast in low rounded relief. A central flattened boss is surrounded by a plain ring. The main field depicts two clockwise creatures executed in the triple-strand version of Salin's Style 1 (Haseloff's Style Phase D). Each creature has a hooked, 'bird-of-prey', beak, a front leg bent up and behind the neck, and a stumpy, tail-like, rear leg. Two plain rings provide an outer border. Greatest diameter: 38mm.

Discussion

By itself and without any contextual information, the Hedsor brooch has very limited significance. It belongs, however, to a distinct design-series of cast saucer brooches − two clockwise-chasing 'bird-headed' animals − first recognised by E.T. Leeds (1912, 183; 1936, 71) and later discussed as Group 7 in the Upper Thames Region series (Dickinson 1976, 75), which now deserves reassessment.

The series may be separated into two groups. In a *primary* group of eight brooches from possibly five finds (fig. 1), the design is crisply executed, with the triple-strand elements consisting of one broad sloping ridge and two, contrastingly, sharp narrow ridges. The glowing effect is enhanced by an ample coat of gilding and, variously, by the use of central glass inlays, notched border rings and double-chevron stamps round the flange. In a *secondary* group of a further ten brooches from seven finds (which includes the Hedsor brooch, number 7 on fig. 2) the design of the 'primary' group and in some cases even its individual elements are perpetuated, but with (ever) decreasing accuracy, both in terms of style of carving and control over casting. The Hedsor brooch is the only one to render the design in such flat, regular triple-strand blocks, though the logical potential for such an interpretation is inherent in the 'primary' group and is used, but with deeper relief, on the second brooch of a pair from Shefford, Bedfordshire (apparently a deliberate but poor copy of the first 'primary' brooch: Dickinson 1993, fig. 56). The 'secondary' group also introduces variation in border designs (the double rings of the Hedsor brooch; a twisted cable 'guilloche' on a pair from Cratendune, Ely, Cambridgeshire), but adopts other embellishments only rarely.

The 'metal-carving' technique of the 'primary' group is clearly cognate with that which Leigh dubs the 'fluid; or 'overlapping' style. Although he notes examples of the style widely through northern Europe, he isolates one craftsman in Kent who used it to produce garnet-inlaid, rectangular belt plates, some of the later silver square-headed brooches and, ultimately, the mounts for the larger pair of drinking horns from Taplow barrow (Leigh 1980, 115–19). Mostly, these portray animal-men, which do not offer exact analogies to the saucer-brooch bird-head creature. However, the characteristic 'helmeted'

head of the Kentish items clearly lies behind the 'bird-head', and the Taplow horns both terminate in 'bird-of-prey' heads and incorporate in their rim-mounts elements similar to the bird-beak. The curious inward-coiling 'tail' of the saucer brooches might also be explained as a transformation of the leg-like elements which terminate the animal-men on the belt-plates. Leigh argues that the development of these style traits in Kent begins about 525/530 (Leigh 1980, 474–8; Dickinson 1993, 26).

Only two associated grave groups are known for the series from which corroboration of the dating might be gained. Both come from Alveston, Warwickshire, and both contain examples (though different) of the 'secondary' group. The more crucial is the pair from grave 5. First, these have central disc-headed rivets in the form of button brooches, though they are not exact versions, corresponding in size and general form with Class Ei (found only at Mucking, Essex) but with the partial vertical striation of the hair of Class 1 (a Thames-valley type; Avent and Evison 1982, 84–6). They imply a general period of currency from the late fifth to mid-sixth centuries (*ibid.*, 99; cf. Welch 1985). Second, Hines identifies the associated great square-headed brooch (of his Group I, Leeds' type B8) as an early piece on the grounds of its strong Scandinavian parallels, dating it to his first phase of manufacture, c. 500 520 (Hines 1984, 119–21, 178–80, 185–6). Leigh too, using an independent seriation analysis, argues that it is earlier than Leeds believed, but not as early as Hines proposes (Leigh 1980, 41–50). The date of deposition may be complicated, however, by the soldered-on pin fittings in the form of a Greek cross and a fish: these seem to be secondary, either originally a brooch (technical examination by Mike Corfield: Bill Ford pers. comm.) or perhaps a shield mount. Stylistically, they could extend the dating into the later sixth century. However, a starting date for saucer brooches with two clockwise bird-headed animals in the second quarter of the sixth century would accord with other evidence that this period saw a significant uptake of (interrelated)

zoomorphic designs, many apparently under Kentish influence, into the saucer-brooch repertoire. Previously suggested dates for the Hedsor type (viz. middle to second half of sixth century: Dickinson 1976, 75; Vierck 1970, 359) should therefore be revised upwards.

How the design came to be adopted is more problematic. Although Leigh allows independent development to account for the wide spread of the 'overlapping' technique (Leigh 1980, 118–9), a more specific Kentish influence is possible. The stylistic and technical relationship of the 'secondary' group to the 'primary' group appears to be an excellent example of Leigh's hypothesis that manufacture was based on the use of skin (?) templates and individual wax models, which enabled designs to be copied by craftsmen but without necessarily the accomplishments of their original creators (Leigh 1980, 172–4). That the majority of the 'secondary' group form a northerly (Midlands) penumbra to the distribution of the 'primary' group adds to the argument for technical and geographical diffusion (fig. 1). It is unfortunate, however, that four of the 'primary' brooches (probably two pairs) lack any provenance,[2] leaving the other three finds (Luton and Shefford, in Bedfordshire, and Warlingham, another new find recently reported to the British Museum, in Surrey) to indicate, perhaps, an area of initiation in the south either side of the Middle Thames and a plausible contact-zone with Kent. Here the Hedsor brooch may itself be relevant, for it is the most south-easterly of the 'secondary' group and the only example from the Thames valley proper (there is no evidence now that this type ever reached the Upper Thames). Its propinquity to Taplow is particularly tantalising: although current opinion would see Taplow as a symptom of late sixth-century Kentish dominance in the Middle Thames (Webster 1992, 79 80), the Hedsor brooch might indicate that Kentish fashions (and therefore social connections?) were reverberating there two generations earlier.

ENDNOTES

1. Approx. NGR at BCM. CAS 5431.
2. British Museum M. & L. 99,6 13,1 and 1909,3 9,1 are a pair 'bought in Winchester' and donated by O. M. and Mrs Dalton; but the former is now marked, erroneously, with the registration number of a Fairford object (58,3 3,1), which led to its mistaken inclusion in the Upper Thames series

(Dickinson 1976, 75). Arguably this pair derives from south Wessex: since this note was written, a further specimen of the 'secondary' group has been recovered from the new site at Market Lavington, Wilts. British Museum M. & L. 97, 3 23, 16 (ex-Lord Hasting's Collection) and Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford are also sufficiently alike to be interpreted as a pair.

KEY

Two bird-headed animals

● Primary group
◆ Secondary group

Key to find numbers

Primary Group
1. Luton 1 (pair);
2. Shefford (first member of the pair);
3. Warlingham (single);

Secondary Group
4. Alveston grave 5 (pair);
5. Alveston grave 26 (pair);
6. Cratendune, Ely (pair);
7. Hedsor (single);
8. Market Overton II (single).
9. Shefford (second member of the pair);
10. Woodston 1 (single).

Not mapped: Primary group
British Museum 99, 6–13, 1 and 1909, 3 9, 1 (pair);
British Museum 97, 3–23, 16 & Pitt Rivers Museum,
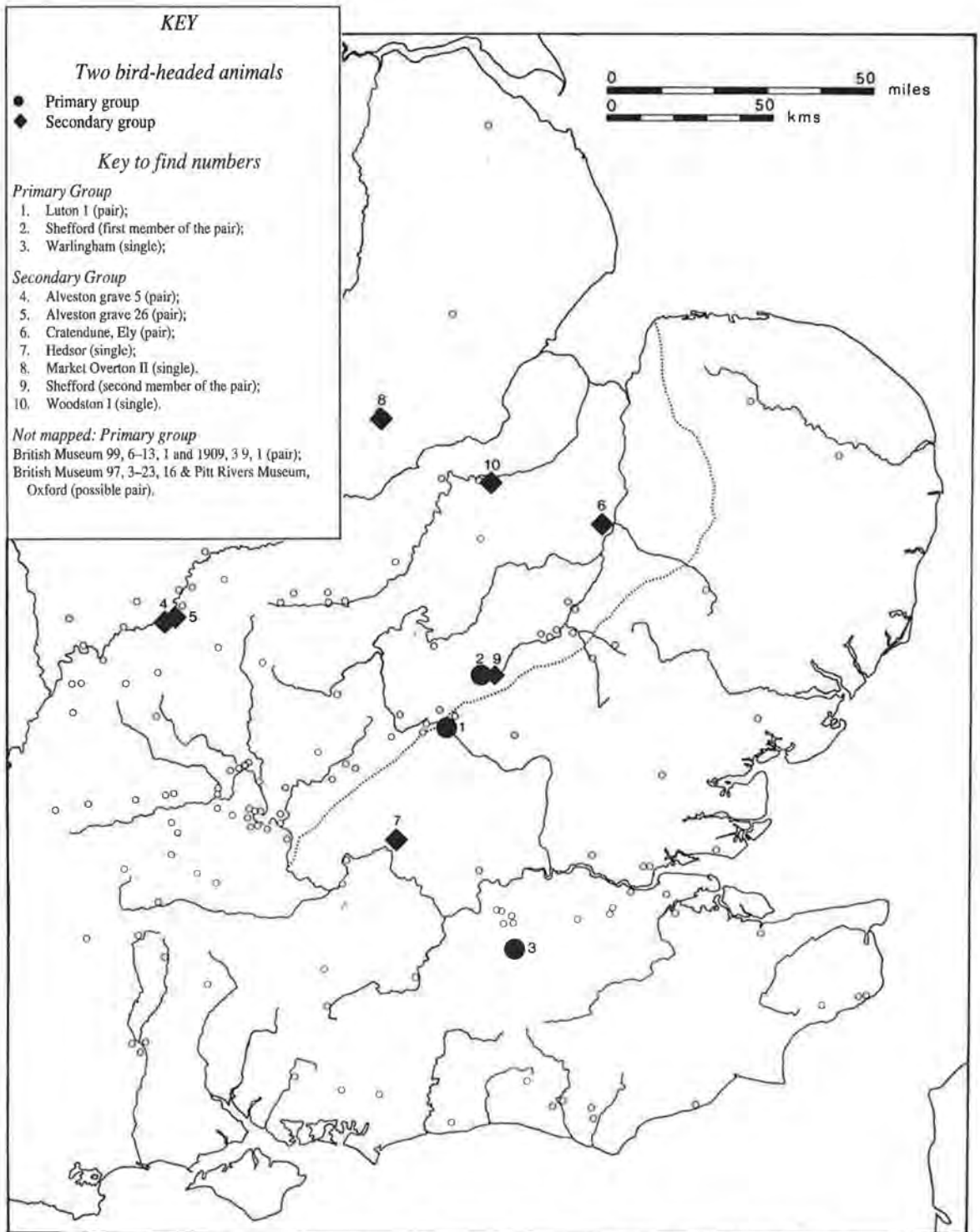   Oxford (possible pair).

Fig. 1: Distribution map of cast saucer brooches with design of two clockwise-chasing bird-head animals.

Plate 1: Anglo-Saxon saucer brooch from Hedsor, Buckinghamshire.

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100