THREE SCEPTRE OR STAFF MOUNTS FROM BUCKINGHAMSHIRE

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Three copper alloy mounts, (one including glass), from Buckinghamshire are described and illustrated. The distribution, iconography and dating of this class of artefact are discussed and a judicial function is proposed.

DESCRIPTION

Two mounts were acquired by Buckinghamshire County Museum and a third was lent to the author for examination and returned to the finder.

1. Catalogue number AYBCM 1978.209.1 (Fig. 1.1)

A copper-alloy latticed sphere with the junction of each cross-piece embossed. The crown of the sphere has the cross-shaped arrangement referred to as 'a quincunx of rivets' (Webster and Backhouse 1991, 228ff). The mouth opening has a slight flange and no neck or obvious rivet holes. It has a light reddish-green patina. Height 36mm, max. diameter 42mm, internal mouth opening 21 × 20mm. A casual find 'in a wood, Amersham area'.

2. Catalogue number AYBCM 1996.55.1 (Fig. 1.2)

A copper-alloy latticed sphere with the junction of each cross-piece embossed. The cylindrical neck terminates in a slight flange with two rivet holes, although a third may have been present in the missing fragment. It has a green patina. Height 46.5mm, max. diameter of sphere 36mm, max. diameter of distorted neck 21 mm, length of neck 18mm, diameter of rivet holes 5mm. Metal detected 'in dumped soil' near Hale Lane, Wendover.

3. In private ownership (Fig. 1.3)

A copper-alloy openwork drum-shaped mount with a rectangular neck. The neck has a rivet hole below the flange on each of its four sides. The complete face has a border of pellets enclosing a bird to dexter with its head pointing backwards and upwards, reaching for fruit. It perches among branches bearing foliage and round fruits. Under microscopic examination the bird's eye was seen to be filled with a pale amber glass with a green dot representing the pupil. The incomplete face has a border of pellets enclosing a bird to sinister with (possibly) a raised right wing. It is also perched among branches. The bird's head and a third of the branches are missing. The zone between the two faces is an openwork band of pellets and stems. The interior surfaces are smooth and the patina is a dull brown-green. The mount has been slightly distorted and has traces of corrosion. Max. height 48mm, max. diameter 39mm, depth of drum 14.5mm, length of socket 12mm, socket exterior 18 × 15mm, socket interior 13 × 12mm, diameter of rivet holes 4mm and 5mm. Metal detected at Lower Farm, Upton.

DISTRIBUTION

The recovery of this class of artefact is largely by metal detection, and it is possible that their apparent distribution is skewed by detecting activity and the frequency of reporting. Nevertheless, the information currently available shows a markedly Midland and central Southern English pattern of distribution, stretching from Staffordshire/Worcestershire to Norfolk/Suffolk and from Lincolnshire to Dorset/Hampshire. If the late Saxon dating usually proposed is accepted, it can be seen that this distribution echoes those areas once dominated and influenced by the powerful Mercian kingdom: the huge tract of Midland England, the long Welsh border, the port of London and the annexed kingdoms of the *Hwicce*, Lindsey, Essex, Sussex and Kent (Webster and Backhouse 1991, 12) and Table 1 below.
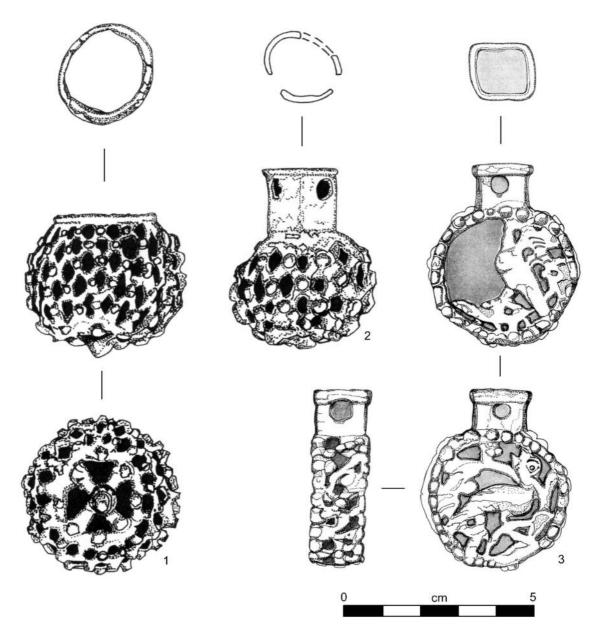
FIGURE 1 Copper-alloy mounts: Amersham (1), Wendover (2), Upton (3) *(scale 1:1)*

TABLE 1 Distribution of mounts alphabetically by county

No.	Reference	Findspot	County
1.	PAS BUC-69D596	Billington	Bedfordshire
2.	PAS BH-B64636	Sharnbrook	Bedfordshire
3.	AYBCM 1978.209.1	Amersham	Buckinghamshire
4.	Private collection	Upton	Buckinghamshire
5.	AYBCM 1996.55.1	Wendover	Buckinghamshire
6.	PAS CAM-64F318	West Wratting	Cambridgeshire
7.	PAS SOMDOR-AF3CC7	Tarrant Hinton	Dorset
8.	PAS HAMP-BC67D6	Whitchurch	Hampshire
9.	PAS HAMP3422	Winchester	Hampshire
10.	PAS BH-F48C72	Ridge, Hertsmere	Hertfordshire
11.	PAS NLM2712	Isle of Axholme	Lincolnshire
12.	PAS LIN-DO3FB1	Whaplode	Lincolnshire
13.	PAS NMS-F28FF6	Ringland	Norfolk
14.	PAS BUC-5F9404	Cotton Hall	Staffordshire
15.	PAS WM1 D-20EEE6	Shenstone	Staffordshire
16.	PAS E1D804	Finningham	Suffolk (East)
17.	PAS SF-A69D93	Great Barton	Suffolk (East)
18.	PAS WAW-8E2FA3	Fillongley	Warwickshire
19.	WARMS: A37	Walton	Warwickshire
20.	WARMS: A7157	Wixford	Warwickshire
21.	PAS WAW-8A0D21	Rock	Worcestershire

N.B. This is not a complete list of finds. PAS = Portable Antiquities Scheme

DATING

The mount excavated in Fishamble Street, Dublin, is agreed to be a southern English import of *c.*1020–30 (Halpin l987, 7–12), and the mount excavated from St George's Street, Canterbury, is from a late 11th-century context. But the mounts found in England are largely stray finds, and their dating usually relies on artistic parallels. The ancestry of some of the devices exhibited on these mounts could be ancient. For example, roundels with pearlized borders (Table 1: 4, 7 & 20), which often contain birds and paired felines (Table 1: 1), appear in Greece, Byzantium and Sassanian Persia. They were often spread through the (perishable) media of textiles, manuscripts and book bindings. The spiritual symbolism of the cross (Table 1: 9, 10 & 18), and the feeding birds (Table 1: 4), likely entered via the Roman Church from the ancient Mediterranean world. Once absorbed into the Anglo-Saxon artistic vocabulary they survived the Conquest and were revitalised in later Romanesque and Gothic art.

However, the iconography of these mounts is Christian, as discussed below, and the geographical distribution linked to Mercia suggests an Anglo-Saxon date. The ascendancy of Mercia coincided with a relatively stable and sustained period of production of metalwork and other media. A preference developed in metalwork, sculpture and manuscripts for openwork decoration, interlace meshes and a zoomorphic style featuring small exuberant animals and small plant and geometric motifs, restricted by division into self-contained fields, often separated by beaded borders. The style seems to have originated in the first third of the 9th century in southern and eastern England, then under Mercian control, but spread quickly north and west to become the preferred decoration for Anglo-Saxon secular metalwork (Webster and Backhouse 1991, 220–221). Likewise, a taste for the exotic pervaded southern English decoration and Christianity also contributed the Roman (Mediterranean) tradition of symbolism.

Manufacture

Copper alloys were used throughout the Anglo-Saxon period and deposits of copper, lead and tin were available in England. Metalworking traces have been found at a number of sites, for example Jarrow, Sutton Courtenay, Oxford, Thetford, Sarre, Cheddar, Glastonbury and Southampton (Wilson 1976, 267). Glass making has been associated with monastic sites such as Wearmouth, Jarrow and Glastonbury, and settlements such as York and Hamwic. Colours of glass range from blues and greens to ambers, reds and white. The evidence for glass working sites is sparse, but these minute glass animal eyes may in any case have been made in jewellers' workshops. It is not possible to assign these mounts to any particular workshop, and their artistic characteristics do not form clusters that might indicate local workshops or regional craft traditions.

These copper-alloy mounts are usually lost-wax castings, a technique used here since the Iron Age and also evident on small Anglo-Saxon artefacts like the mid 9th-century seal die from Eye, Suffolk (British Museum medieval & later antiquities catalogue 1822, 12–14, 1), and the 10th-century censer cover from Canterbury, Kent (BMMLA 1927, 11–16, 1). The addition of a glass eye to the bird on the Upton mount (Table 1: 4) can be paralleled on late Saxon high-status metalwork (see Appendix).

Iconography

These mounts are currently accepted as terminal fixtures on shafts, probably wooden, interpreted as ceremonial staffs or sceptres. They had a purpose in addition to beautifying and protecting the shaft. Their designs conveyed messages which reinforced their purpose, and which would have been clearly understood in their day. The mounts discussed below are listed in Table 1; those reported through the Portable Antiquities Scheme may be viewed at *www.finds.org.uk*.

First, the presence of a sceptre or staff conveys a role representing those in authority. *I keep the staff in my own hand* anciently meant to keep possession and to retain the right. To *part with the staff* meant to lose or give up office or possession (Brewer n.d, 849).

Secondly, were the mount shapes a random choice, or did they have a specific meaning? Three shapes appear, all of which bore a message.

(i) Sphere. (Table 1: 2, 3, 5, 6, 9, 11, 14, 16 & 17). This represented Perfection, the Soul, the World, Heaven, Eternity. Also, Plato's *animus mundi* and Pythagoras' *harmony of the spheres* (Cooper 1978, 155; Brewer n.d, 844). A globe or sphere held in the hand signifies dominion, often an attribute of monarchs and divinities and a symbol of Christ's kingship (Murray 1996, 199).

(ii) Drum. (nos 1, 4, 7, 10, 12 & 13). This represented sound, speech, divine truth, revelation, tradition (Cooper 1978, 56).

(iii) Cube. (nos 8, 18 & 21). This represented truth, its shape being always the same however viewed. It also meant the foundation stone, stability, immaculate law, perfection (Cooper 1978, 48).

Thirdly, two forms of decoration are used upon these mounts, geometric and figurative.

Geometric

(i) Net, e.g. nos 2, 3 & 5. The net is an ambivalent Christian symbol, being the unbreakable net of the Church and the ensnaring net of the devil. It meant a unifying and complex relationship and unity. It was also an attribute of the disciples as 'fishers of men' (Cooper 1978, 111).

(ii) Quincunx (of rivets), e.g. nos 10, 17 & 18. A quincunx is formed from the four cardinal points plus the centre, the meeting point of Heaven and Earth. It also appears on late Saxon brooches, for example in the Pentney hoard and the Strickland brooch. The number *five* was also significant in numerology: the human microcosm formed by the head and outstretched arms and legs made the pentagon, a figure of endless perfection (*ibid*, 116). The five wounds of Christ were also a quincunx formed by the pierced hands and feet around a central pierced heart (Post 1990, 75). The five senses also figured in Western art as, for example, on the late 9th-century Fuller brooch.

(iii) Cross, e.g. no. 16 and cross *moline*, e.g. 15. The cross is a universal and pre-Christian symbol, standing for Man and eternal life because its arms can expand infinitely. The Christian meaning refers to atonement and

salvation through Christ's sacrifice on the cross (Cooper 1978, 45).

(iv) Knot. If the interlace design on no. 7 may be interpreted as a guilloche knot or mat, it is another ambivalent Christian symbol meaning both a uniting and binding Fate, and also loosening as in freedom and salvation (*ibid*, 92). In Scandinavia, the presence of which was certainly felt in Anglo-Saxon England, the knot was an emblem of love, fidelity and friendship (Brewer n.d, 486).

(v) Wheel. If the six-armed device on nos. 6, 14 & 20 represents a wheel, it is a universal device for the sun and its rays. It also symbolizes universal dominion, the cycle of life, nobility and changing fortune (*ibid*, 191). Clement of Alexandria saw the six days of Creation as a three-dimensional cross radiating from a fixed central hub, like a wheel, the hub being God resting on the seventh day (Child & Colles 1971, 27).

Figurative

(i) Bird, e.g. nos. 1, 4 & 13. Because of their ability to fly, birds represented the winged soul or soul in Paradise and heavenly communication with the help of angels. In Scandinavian mythology they also represented wisdom. Birds also figure in the Tree of Life (no. 1) and symbolize divine power descending into the tree. Birds are also shown consuming fruit (*q.v.*) as on no. 4.

(ii) Eagle. The bird on no. 13 resembles an eagle, which has several Christian connotations: spiritual endeavour, the ascension, resurrection, baptism, the Last Judgement when it throws the damned out of the nest. The eagle is used as a lectern in churches as inspiration of the Gospels. The eagle is one of the emblems of St John the Apostle, traditionally the author of the fourth Gospel and patron of all who work at the production of books. Interestingly, the eagle on this mount is coupled with a lion, a symbolism which invariably referred to the contest between the eagle and the lion, in which the eagle is always victorious, being the triumph of the spirit or intellect over the physical (Cooper 1978, 58).

(iii) Lion/feline, e.g. nos 1 & 13. As well as standing for majesty, courage, justice and law, the lion also symbolized the power of Christ to deliver Christians from the Devil who, ambivalently, was described as a 'roaring lion' (*ibid*, 99). The lion is the emblem of St Mark, author of a Gospel, but if no. 13 pairs Mark and John, where would Luke and Matthew have been depicted?

(iv) Dragon/serpent, e.g. no. 13, was an interchangeable beast and yet another ambivalent Christian symbol. In its good aspect it represents Christ as wisdom and sacrifice. Its bad aspect represents evil, the devil as tempter, paganism and heresy. It also represents the power of evil that Man must overcome in himself. If the creature has a knotted tail it means that evil has been defeated, because it was thought that its power, like the scorpion, was in its tail (Cooper 1978, 56, 146–9). On no. 13 the creature seems to be biting its own belly.

(v) Tree and foliage, e.g. nos 1 & 4. In various cultures the tree dynamically unites Earth and Heaven – the Christian Tree in the Midst – and represents the cycle of constant death and renewal. The dying god is always killed on a tree. A branch alone may also symbolize the Tree of Life. Trees bearing life foods (fruits) such as no. 4 are always sacred. Trees are often accompanied by birds (nos 1 and 4), which in Christian iconography symbolize souls resting in Christ and spiritual fruitfulness. The Christian tree is also an image of Man, in putting forth both good and evil fruits (*ibid,* 176, 178, 186).

(vi) Fruit, e.g. no. 4. Christ was seen as the first fruit of the Virgin, and first fruits were the best for sacrifice. Christian iconography also associated fruit with the Tree of Passion (world attachment), the Tree of Knowledge (the Fall) and the Tree of Life (immortality) (*ibid,* 72).

Appearance

Although correctly seen as medieval artefacts, these mounts were initially identified as sword pommels, as in the *London Museum Medieval Catalogue* of 1940. Simon Bailey (1994, 171–9) attributed them as terminals of ecclesiastical or liturgical ceremonial staves or sceptres. Two types were illustrated, a sphere and a drum shape. These are paralleled by the Buckinghamshire and other examples and there is also a third type described as a cuboid. While the

majority of these openwork castings have geometric designs capable of any orientation, those with figurative details strongly suggest that they were intended to be fixed as lower terminals of staves or rods. Their relative lack of wear suggests that they were not 'drops', *i.e.* the terminal which rested on the ground, but were carried on something shorter. The socket openings only admit slender rods (no material from a shaft is yet known to adhere to a mount), rather than a robust staff.

There is debate as to whether the upper end of such a rod would also have had a mount. A fitting such as the Alfred and Minster Lovell jewels and the Bowleaze Cove mount has been proposed (Webster and Backhouse l991, 282), even if not made of such precious materials as those examples. No instance is reported of a pair of mounts found in proximity, indicating that a staff/sceptre decorated at both ends had lain undisturbed until discovery. Organic terminals may have existed. Medieval illustrations and sculpture do portray staff and sceptre terminals, but these must be treated with caution because artistic licence makes their evidence unreliable (Hourihane 2005, 6).

FUNCTION

A staff of office denotes official administrative authority, perhaps entailing legal and fiscal matters. Mid and late Saxon society was shaped by two institutions, royal and ecclesiastical, and both developed networks of control linked to land divisions. In view of the religious iconography employed on these mounts which carry messages referring to dominion, justice, judgement, tradition, truth, salvation and so on, which have previously been discussed, it is suggested that they were secular staffs of office with a Christian ecclesiastical connection. The sophistication of the three Buckinghamshire mounts begs the question as to which establishment would require them. They are not made richly enough for royal use. None seem specifically related to monastic or collegiate sites. There was a complex patchwork of estate ownership in late Anglo-Saxon England and, unfortunately, surviving charters are of a scant and dubious nature. However, we do know from the Domesday Survey and related documents that the late Anglo-Saxon Church was organized by parishes, many of which were of relatively recent creation. It seems that the 10th century, and especially the later part of

it, was a key period in parochial development. Danish invasions in the 9th century had virtually exterminated monasteries and large collegiate foundations, and so had increased the importance of district churches from then on. Also, by the late 11th century a class of new landowners often based their estates on new villages, with a new church providing extra revenue (Campbell 1991, 202).

The network of parochial church buildings would be suitable places in which to hold official proceedings. Late Anglo-Saxon England saw an increasing royal concern for law and order. The *burhs* and hundreds were endowed with judicial authority as instruments of royal government at a distance. Laws increasingly affected every social group and empowered the crown (Campbell 1991, 180–1). It should be remembered that in addition to their religious functions, churches were places of judicial administration. For example, the 8th-century Baptistery of St Augustine's Church at Canterbury was also used for judicial trials. The early 12th-century document known as the 'Laws of Edward the Confessor' directed that proceedings by the King's Justices should be held in or near churches *(Leges Edwardi Confessoris*, 24; Liebermann 1903 vol. 1, 649). For example, the Saxon church of Bradford-on-Avon, Wilts, has a disproportionately large stone porch suitable for secular business. The tradition of using church porches in this way was long-lived; for example, in both Alrewas and Yoxall, Staffs, Manorial Courts were held in unbroken sequence from the reign of Edward II (1307–27) until the 19th century (Anderson 1995, 73–74).

Some counties have produced more than one of these mounts and Table 2 suggests a link of find-spots to significant proximal ecclesiastical sites rather than to their particular county town. Another possible focus could be moots, although the iconography favours a religious connection. The laws of Ethelred (978–1016) and Cnut (1016–35) named four classes of churches (VIII Ethelred 5; I Cnut 3.2., Liebermann 1903, vol. 1, 264, 283):

Heafod Mynster: a cathedral or mother church.
Medrema Mynster: ancient parish church with a wide jurisdiction. 'Minster' is a corruption of the Latin *monasterium* and was used loosely for any large church.
Laessa: smaller parish church.
Feld-Cirice: a district chapel with no burial place (Goulder l965, 36).

TABLE 2 Distance of findspots from known minster

No.	Nearest known minster	Distance (miles)
1.	Wing, Buckinghamshire	2.5
2.	Oundle, Northamptonshire	18
3.	Burnham, Buckinghamshire	11
4.	Burnham, Buckinghamshire	4
5.	Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire	5
6.	Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk	18
7.	Wimborne Minster, Dorset	9
8.	Winchester, Hampshire	12
9.	Winchester, Hampshire	0
10.	St Albans, Hertfordshire	6
11.	Hibaldstow, Lincolnshire	12
12.	Crowland, Lincolnshire	10
13.	North EImham (or) East Dereham, Norfolk	11 or 9
14.	Lichfield, Staffordshire	6
15.	Lichfield, Staffordshire	3
16.	Bury St Edmunds (or) South EImham, Suffolk	15 or 16
17.	Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk	3
18.	Polesworth, Warwickshire	10
19.	Stratford-on-Avon, Warwickshire	5
20.	Wootton Wawen (or) Stratford-on-Avon, Warks	7 each
21.	Bromyard, Herefordshire	12

Therefore, the hypothesis that these sceptres of office could be linked to important known minsters was tested by the exercise shown in Table 2.

CONCLUSION

This is a tentative exercise proposed to stimulate debate, and problematic because the number of finds is so small. Perhaps the best that can be said is that if these mounts are the remnants of judicial activity within counties, then most of the findspots are less than fifteen miles from a minster as a proposed site of activity, a possible day's journey. Could these elegantly mounted sceptres be a tangible survival of the royal hand made manifest, perhaps the furniture of a secular (? Mercian) judicial procedure within the context of Christian church buildings?

Appendix: Late Anglo-Saxon artefacts with glass eyes
BMMLA = British Museum, Medieval and Later Antiquities catalogue

a) Gilded silver V-shaped mount with an animal head terminal having blue glass eyes. From the River Thames near Westminster Bridge, late 8th century. BMMLA 1869, 6–10, 1.
b) Gilded silver pin with a hound's head terminal with glass eyes. Unprovenanced, mid to late 8th century. BMMLA 1989, 3–3, 1.
c) The right-hand pin of a triple pin set has a head with four creatures, all with inlaid glass eyes. From the river Witham at Fiskerton, Lincs, late 8th century. BMMLA 1856, 11–11, 5.
d) Cast disc (? mount) bearing two animal pairs, one animal having a glass eye inset. From Mavourne Farm, Beds, late 8th century. Bedford Museum, 62/B/70.
e) A pair of the six silver disc brooches in the Pentney hoard both have addorsed beasts with eyes originally inlaid with glass. From Pentney churchyard, Norfolk, first third of 9th century. BMMLA 1980, 10–8, 1–6.
f) The Strickland disc brooch's decoration includes four animal head terminals, each having blue glass eyes. Unprovenanced, mid 9th century.

BMMLA 1949, 7–2, 1.

g) Silver strap-end, the animal head terminal having prominent eyes set with glass. From Hertfordshire, late 9th century. BMMLA 1984, 1–4, 1.

h) Seal die with decorative animal heads, one retaining an inset glass eye. From Eye, Suffolk, mid 9th century. BMMLA 1822, 12–14, 1.

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