The Alfred Jewel: Reuse of Roman *Spolia*

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THE ALFRED JEWEL'S covering panel of rock crystal is anomalous in the context of Anglo-Saxon art. Typology indicates that it was probably not imported from a contemporary Continental workshop. Markings on the stone's surfaces show that it was, however, used in another context before being set in its present mount. Roman comparanda (crystal panels in Rome and opus sectile *elements from Kenchreai) best parallel the crystal's size and shape. The Oxford panel was probably a Roman decorative inset, possibly salvaged from a wall or piece of furniture. It must have determined the unusual shape of the Alfred Jewel.*

The Alfred Jewel in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, is justly one of the most famous works of Anglo-Saxon art (Pl. III, A).[1] An open-work inscription on its side, +AELFRED MEC HEHT GEWYRCAN, probably attributes the jewel to Alfred the Great. As the only surviving object directly associated with Alfred's patronage, the jewel is central to any discussion of 9th-century English art. This is, however, virtually the only point on which consensus has been reached. Scholars have long disputed both the function of the object and the meaning of its enamelled figure.

The overall form of the jewel has substantially contributed to its mystery. Unlike the related Minster Lovell jewel,[2] the Alfred Jewel has a curious tear-drop shape that seems to cramp the figure it displays. Also unlike the smaller work, this has a large piece of rock crystal (naturally-occurring quartz) protecting the enamelled design. No other known Anglo-Saxon object has this shape, and no other contains a flat panel of polished crystal.

Mr D. A. Hinton has suggested that these curious features could be connected: that the crystal is unique because it was not native to its Anglo-Saxon context, and that as an import it dictated the shape of the jewel in which it was set. He has further theorized that the shaped stone could have come from the Frankish kingdom on the Continent.[3] A comparative typological examination of contemporary Frankish crystals demonstrates that the jewel's stone is probably not of Carolingian origin. New technical evidence suggests, however, that Hinton's major hypothesis is probably correct. The crystal on the Alfred Jewel is almost certainly not of Anglo-Saxon manufacture, and probably did determine the form of the jewel. It appears to be reused, salvaged from some earlier object, probably Roman.

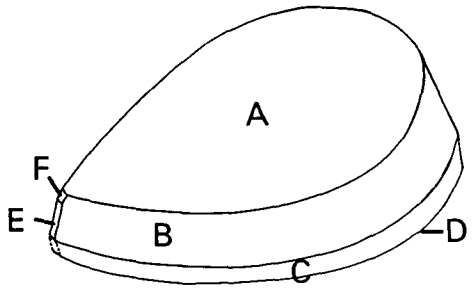

FIG. 1
The Alfred Jewel: diagram of the crystal panel

The Alfred Jewel's crystal panel shares the tear-drop form of its setting. It is quite thick, nearly ten millimetres from the edge rising above its gold mount to the back resting directly on the enamel. Its sides tilt down from the front at a wide angle, then become perpendicular to the back surface for about their lower 2.5 mm (Fig. 1). This distinctive form is quite different from the shapes typically used by Frankish artists.

On the Continent, artists were at this time producing highly-sophisticated engraved and polished gems. Best-known is the Lothar crystal in the British Museum, with eight scenes illustrating the Old Testament story of Susanna and an inscription identifying King Lothar II (855–69) as the patron.[4] A total of twenty such gems survive, seventeen of them rock crystal. Their forms vary, from oval (thirteen stones) to circular (five stones) or rectangular (two stones). All of them, however, are symmetrical around a horizontal as well as a vertical axis. Not one of the extant gems has the Alfred Jewel's tear-drop shape, symmetrical from side to side of the front surface, but not from its top to its bottom.

Continental stones also differ from the Anglo-Saxon work in profile. The Susanna crystal and many other Carolingian gems are convex on one or both major faces. There are also, however, narrative panels as flat as the Alfred Jewel, and it is to these less well-known intaglios that the jewel's stone can best be compared.[5] Again, not one has the large bevel and short perpendicular side of the Oxford crystal.[6]

That highly distinctive form which has caused scholars to look for sources outside Anglo-Saxon art must likewise force us to look outside Carolingian glyptic. The shape fits no better on the 9th-century Continent than in the British Isles. The attractive suggestion that the Alfred Jewel crystal is Carolingian must therefore be abandoned. Technical analysis may, however, open to us other possibilities.

There are on the crystal six distinctly different types of markings (see Fig. 1 for designation of the stone's faces).

1. The front surface of the stone (parallel to the enamel, face A) is heavily scratched, and there is a small chip in its left edge, near the lower point of the jewel.[7] These marks are irregularly shaped and randomly spaced, indicating that they were produced by normal wear during use. By far the largest number of scratches runs approximately parallel to the vertical axis of the figure.

2. Between scratches, the surface of face A is exceptionally smooth, showing the marks of polishing-grit only under high magnification (more than 20x). The polishing marks are most easily visible on the upper edge of face A (Pl. III, B). All form a regular series of lines running parallel to each other. This formation, as opposed to abrasive-lines crossing each other in random patterns, is characteristically produced by a mechanical polishing wheel.[8] The wheel is not known to have been used for polishing flat surfaces before the 13th century. These marks therefore indicate polishing of the stone after the jewel's completion. It seems likely that this restoration was done after the object's rediscovery in 1693, perhaps when the jewel was taken apart in the Museum before 1906.[9]

3. The sides of the crystal within the openwork inscription (faces B and C), and most of its back surface resting directly on the enamelled figure (face D), are less finely polished than face A. Abrasive-marks on these surfaces are larger and more easily visible, indicating use of a larger grit for polishing. They form no regular pattern, but rather cross each other at random angles (Pl. III, C). Randomly distributed, relatively coarse marks are characteristically produced by polishing with a hand-held plate, rather than a mechanically-turned wheel.[10] The marks were almost certainly made before the 13th century and probably represent the original polishing of the crystal.

4. Face D appears slightly roughened in strips following the course of several cloisons. This roughness is probably the result of the metal cloisons rubbing the back surface of the stone, and indicates that the crystal was for a substantial period of time more loosely held in its mount than is presently the case. (The padding which currently tightens the fit of the jewel's parts is modern.[11])

5. The side of the crystal is damaged in two places. Face C is slightly cracked at its join with face D, on the upper right of the jewel (to the viewer's right of the enamelled figure's head). More significantly, face B is chipped behind the lower left point of the inscription's 'W' (Pl. IV, A and B).[12] The chip must have been made after the stone had been shaped and polished, since its edges are sharp, and not smoothed by abrasion. Its centre is just below the edge of the jewel's metal frame, and there is no visible damage to the gold at that point. The stone must therefore have been struck while it was unprotected by its current setting.

6. At the pointed tip, the shape of the stone is modified (Pl. IV, C). The overall tear-drop shape does not end in a sharp angle, but rather in a narrow flat strip running the entire depth of the stone, from the front to the back, within the metalwork frame (face E). This flat strip continues up onto the front of the stone, joining faces A and E with a shallow bevel (face F, Pl. IV, D). The stone is much rougher here than elsewhere, with a coarse matt surface. Such a surface is produced by relatively large abrasive grit, less fine than the grit used anywhere else on the crystal.

Another similarly rough area appears on the upper portion of face B, above the enamelled figure's head.

Both coarse patches are located on parts of the stone particularly vulnerable to chipping, at the extreme edges of the panel. These areas may have been damaged, and then restored by grinding away the chipped portions. The flattened point of the

tear-drop is probably the result of such grinding. The coarseness of the new surfaces, particularly when compared to the demonstrably modern restoration of face A (Pl. III, B), shows that this grinding was not part of the jewel's modern repair. The alteration must still, however, have been made when the crystal was unmounted, since it runs under the current setting. The most likely time for this is when the parts of the jewel had not yet been assembled, though it could also have been done when the mount was later so damaged that its animal-head socket had to be resoldered.[13]

The physical evidence of the crystal indicates the following chronology: the panel was shaped and polished (marking-type 3). Loose or in an unknown mount, it was subjected to wear and damage (type 5). It was subsequently set in the Alfred Jewel, where it acquired the marks of cloisons (type 4). Some damage to the stone was repaired (type 6) either before it was set or during a later medieval restoration. In either a previous or the current setting, the crystal was subject to more wear (type 1), and ultimately its front surface was repolished (type 2).

While not all of this evidence is conclusive, one fact is readily apparent. The crystal on the Alfred Jewel was not specially made for that object, but was rather salvaged from some other context in which it had sustained appreciable damage.

As the typological examination of Carolingian crystals makes unlikely one possible source for the jewel's panel, this technical evidence opens up other avenues of research. Since the stone is not necessarily a product of the 9th century, one may look for its provenance in earlier cultures.

Although there are no precise parallels for the form of the Alfred Jewel's crystal, remarkably similar objects survive from the Roman Empire. Twenty-nine flat rock-crystal panels are preserved in the Vatican collections.[14] They range from 56 to 144 mm in the longest dimension, and from 7 to 8 mm thick (reasonably close to the Oxford stone's 33 mm long and *c.* 10 mm thick). Their major surfaces appear to be as flat as the jewel's crystal, and at least two have edges similarly bevelled.[15] These bevelled edges probably served to anchor the panels when they were set into other, larger objects.[16] Two more Roman crystal panels from the Esquiline, each 7 mm thick, were found with a large number of polished gem-stones originally set in a ceremonial throne or, more probably, in architectural surfaces.[17]

The Alfred Jewel crystal's tear-drop shape may be compared to parts of the *opus sectile* panels abandoned in Kenchreai, A.D. 365 or 375.[18] In the non-figural borders of eleven recovered mural panels, tear-drops are liberally strewn between other decorative motifs. These glass inserts are much thinner than the crystal panel on the jewel, but otherwise of similar dimensions. While not proof positive, they do strongly suggest that the tear-drop shape was a common one for Roman decorative inlays.

These objects do not exactly parallel the form of the Alfred Jewel crystal. They do, however, document the existence in Roman times of decorative inserts of the appropriate size and thickness, in crystal and with bevelled edges (Esquiline and Vatican panels), and of the same tear-drop shape as our panel (Kenchreai glass). Such comparisons suggest that the jewel's crystal may have originally functioned as a decorative inset on a Roman wall or piece of furniture.[19]

This conclusion does not answer the questions most frequently asked of the Alfred Jewel, the meaning of its iconography and its original function. It does,

however, suggest that a new approach be taken to understanding the object's place in Anglo-Saxon art. The jewel's shape should be seen as an accident of available *spolia*, rather than a freely chosen element of design. Given the rarity of such acquisitions, the Alfred Jewel can no longer be regarded as the chance survival of a form once widespread. It must always have been unique, and of unique value, both to its creators and to its patron.

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NOTES

[1] A full discussion of the jewel, with extensive bibliography, is given in D. A. Hinton, *A Catalogue of the Anglo-Saxon Ornamental Metalwork 700–1100 in the Department of Antiquities, Ashmolean Museum* (Oxford, 1974), 29–48. For more recent bibliography, see R. L. Collins, 'King Alfred's *Aestel* Reconsidered', *Leeds Studies in English*, n.s. XVI (1985), 37–58.

[2] Hinton, op. cit. in note 1, 27–29.

[3] Ibid., 34 and 39.

[4] On the Carolingian engraved gems, see G. A. Kornbluth, 'Carolingian Treasure: Engraved Gems of the Ninth and Tenth Centuries' (unpublished Ph.D. diss., Univ. North Carolina, 1986), with bibliography.

[5] These gems are crystals engraved with the following images: the Crucifixion (Paris, Cabinet des Médailles, no. 2167ter; Venice, Cini Collection); the Baptism of Christ (Rouen, Musée Départemental des Antiquités de la Seine-Maritime, no. 473; Freiburg im Breisgau, Münster, Treasury); St Paul (Paris, École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, housed in the Cabinet des Médailles, no. H3416); and the winged man of St Matthew (Berlin, Kunstgewerbemuseum, no. 88, 635).

[6] The Freiburg Baptism and Paris Crucifixion profiles are divided into three roughly equal zones, bevelled on both front and back, with a perpendicular in the centre. The Paris St Paul is bevelled front and back, the two angled planes having the same size and meeting in an acute angle. The Rouen Baptism is bevelled on one side only, and perpendicular for the rest of its depth; but the angled portion occupies only about one-tenth of the side, not three-fourths as on the Alfred Jewel. The profile of the Berlin stone is hidden by its current mount, and the Cini Crucifixion has not been available for close examination.

[7] The surface scratching is noted by Hinton, op. cit. in note 1, 34.

[8] On the history of the wheel used on glass and gems, see R. J. Charleston, 'Wheel-engraving and -cutting, some early equipment: I', *J. Glass Studies*, 6 (1964), 83–100. On the chronology of application to rock crystal, see H. R. Hahnloser, 'Theophilus Presbyter und die Inkunabeln des mittelalterlichen Kristallschliffs an Rhein und Maas', in *Rhein und Maas: Kunst und Kultur, 800–1400*, II (Cologne, 1973), 287–96.

[9] Hinton suggests that the object was dismantled to make replicas, op. cit. in note 1, 34.

[10] For a full discussion of manual polishing in the 9th century see Kornbluth, op. cit. in note 4, 73–74 and notes.

[11] Hinton, op. cit. in note 1, 34.

[12] This chip was noted without further comment by Hinton, ibid., 31 and 34.

[13] See ibid., 34.

[14] Catalogued by F. Fremersdorf, *Antikes, Islamisches und Mittelalterliches Glas sowie kleinere Arbeiten aus Stein, Gagat und verwandten Stoffen in den Vatikanischen Sammlungen Roms*, vol. 5 of Catalogo del Museo Sacro della Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticano (Città del Vaticano, 1975), nos. 1034–62, pp. 116–17.

[15] Ibid., nos. 1046 and 1059. Many of the panel-edges are currently inaccessible. Although Fremersdorf declines to date most of the panels, he does designate no. 1046 as 'frühe Kaiserzeit' (117).

[16] For his no. 1042, for example, Fremersdorf notes, 'Vielleicht handelt es sich um einen kleinen Fenstereinsatz (luminare)' (ibid., 116).

[17] M. Cima, 'Il "prezioso arredo" degli Horti Lamiani', 105–44 in *Le tranquille dimore degli dei* (Venice, 1986). The edges of the crystal panels (141–42) are not visible in the published photographs. A similar role is suggested by the find-spot of two large cameo-glass panels from Pompeii, 7 to 10 and 6 to 7 mm thick, probably used as inlays for furniture: A Maiuri, 'Due pannelli vitrei figurati da Pompei', *Bollettino d'Arte*, 46 (1961), 19. On the use of gem-stones

as inlays, see G. M. A. Richter, *The Furniture of the Greeks, Etruscans and Romans* (London, 1966), 126, and the excellent analysis in Cima.

[18] L. Ibrahim, *et al.*, *Kenchreai, Eastern Port of Corinth, II: the Panels of* Opus Sectile *in Glass* (Leiden, 1976), nos. 29, 31, 32, 49–52, 55–58; dated ibid., 1, 252, 268–69.

[19] Investigations of the precise origin of this Roman panel and its transmission to England are outside the scope of this paper. Roman objects have been found in many Anglo-Saxon contexts (at Sutton Hoo, for example: see G. Grainger and M. Henig, 'A bone casket and relief plaque from Mound 3 at Sutton Hoo', *Medieval Archaeol.*, XXVII [1983], 136–41). For a convenient summary, see M. Hunter, 'Germanic and Roman antiquity and the sense of the past in Anglo-Saxon England', *Anglo-Saxon England*, III (1974), 29–50, esp. 35–38.