"Ill-Understood Relics"

A Group of Early Anglo-Saxon Artifacts in The University Museum

It was the labour of four long days to cut entirely through the barrow, but we who were not absolutely diggers contrived to pass our time to the full satisfaction of all the party. ... A plentiful supply of provisions had been procured for pic-nicking on the hill, and we remained by the barrow all day, watching and directing the operations. ... We contrived to pass our time, at intervals between digging and pic-nicing, in games of various descriptions ... and in other amusements. The season was fortunately exquisitely fine, and it was only once or twice that we were visited with a heavy shower from the south-west, when the only shelter was afforded by the hole we had ourselves dug ... in which we managed to interlace parasols and umbrellas—much as the Roman soldiers are said to have joined together their shields when advancing to the attack of a fortress—so as to form a tolerably impenetrable roof over our heads. ... (Gentleman's Magazine, Dec. 1852:569)

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In 1890, The University Museum received a group of early Anglo-Saxon artifacts from Francis Campbell Macauley. Macauley, a founder and early benefactor of the Museum, was instrumental in the development of its European collection. His obituary in The Philadelphia Public Ledger of March 17, 1896, recorded that Macauley gathered objects for the Museum "with rare taste and discernment from various parts of the world." Nothing is known of the circumstances by which these Anglo-Saxon objects came into Macauley's hands; presumably, he acquired them during one of his collecting trips. Macauley corre-
The early Anglo-Saxon period in England is conventionally dated A.D. 450–650. In recent years, the traditional view of this period is changing. British and Scandinavian burials have been excavated by the University of Cambridge, with the remains of some of the most significant Anglo-Saxon graves being displayed in the Cambridge Museum of Archaeology. These burials have shed light on the culture and society of the Anglo-Saxons, providing valuable insights into their daily lives, beliefs, and practices.

Anglo-Saxon Archaeology

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Anglo-Saxon Women's Dress

How would the dress of Anglo-Saxon women have been worn by an Anglo-Saxon woman? Because no Anglo-Saxon garment has survived, a reconstruction must be based upon indirect evidence. Documents occasionally refer to women's costume. Our literary sources for this period are largely ecclesiastical and do not reflect as many secular concerns as we might wish. It is clear from these writings, however, that garments were made of linen and wool. The abandonment of these fabrics is a conspicuous feature of early Anglo-Saxon society. The 6th-century Bede records that St. Ethelreda renounced linen in favor of woollen garments upon entering religious life (Historia Ecclesiastica IV.9). St. Guthlac was even more virtuous: his biographer claims that the hermit forsook clothes of linen and wool for that of skin (Colgrave 1956, Felix ch. 28). While Guthlac's choice of skin garments is offered as an example of his abstinence from worldly comforts, a ditto of bone was rendered, apparently as a luxury gift, between less ascetic clerics (Tangell 1916:251).

Ecclesiastical writers occasionally mention specific garments worn by the laity. Bede records a miracle in which a paralyzed girl, restored to health, "arranged her hair, covered her head with a linen kerchief, . . . and returned home" (Historia Ecclesiastica IV.9). In his protest against the luxurious costumes...
The Distribution of Annular Brooches

Annular brooches, traditionally associated with Anglian taste, are found predominantly in eastern England, within this area, however, their distribution is not uniform. The types of dress fasteners found in closed burials from the traditionally Anglo-Saxon regions of Lindsey and East Anglia (approximate to the modern counties of Lincolnshire/South Humberside and Norfolk/Suffolk respectively) were examined. Using the chi-square test as a measure of association with a sample size of 120, the number of graves containing annular brooches was compared with the number furnished with other types of dress fasteners. A statistically significant difference in the number of graves with annular brooches between Lindsey and East Anglia was identified (p < 0.005, df = 8, 8.267, d = 1). Thus, annular brooches appear to have been more popular features of feminine dress in Lindsey than they were in East Anglia, where other types of dress fasteners were favored.

Norican tombstone from Klagenfurt

3 Annular brooches from the Macauley group. The University Museum, no. 5351, D. of largest 5.0 cm.

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4 Annular brooches from the Macauley group. The University Museum, no. 5351, D. of largest 5.0 cm.

6 Diagram of attachment of annular brooch to fabric.

It appears that [annular brooches] secured the necklace or shoulder straps of the dress.
fabric if the cloth was inserted over the pin from behind the brooch (Fig. 6). The pull of the cloth on the pin shank from behind would close the pin against the brooch head.

Inhumation burials at Spong Hill indicate how annular brooches, such as those in the Maceneey group, secured clothing. Twill fragments on the annular brooch in inhumation grave 14 are folded in loops around both ends of the brooch pin (Fig. 7). In inhumation grave 38, the pin of another annular brooch pierces a fragment of twill-woven braid. This decorative head frame could have been secured to the neckline of a garment. The Spong Hill annular brooches may have secured an overdress either by fabric straps or by catching the cloth at the shoulders (Crowfoot in Hills et al. 1984:18–19).

Inspection is supported by textile finds from Birka, Sweden. Some of the Viking-period Birka brooches exhibit strips of fabric on their reverse side draped in a similar manner to the Spong Hill fragments. The Birka fabrics, which generally form a loop encircling both ends of the brooch pin, have been interpreted as shoulder straps that were attached to the upper hem of a long overdress (Fig. 8). This overdress is thought to have been formed by wrapping a square of cloth around the body (Geijer 1984:98).

The position of textile remains in graves at several cemeteries indicates that Anglo-Saxon women wore a long-sleeved garment under this overdress of solid fabric. In Spong Hill inhumation grave 24, flax twill fragments on the two annular brooches are thought to have come from an underskirt or shift. Coarser twill fragments found in chertelaine items from the same grave may represent the overdress (Crowfoot in Hills et al. 1984:19).

Evidence that women sometimes wore a cloak as well as a dress comes from a grave at Berinsfield, Oxfordshire. Here, the woman was buried with a dish-shaped saucer brooch on each shoulder and, on top of the brooch on the left shoulder, an elaborate square-headed brooch. On the back of the two saucer brooches were fragments of woollen braid thought to have decorated the dress. On the front of the saucer brooches and the back of the square-headed brooch were linen fragments belonging to an overdress which must have covered the dress beneath (Brown 1975:24–25). Twill weave fragments found both softly folded on the front and tacked softly behind the back of the larger brooches at Swaffham, Norfolk (Crowfoot in Hills and Wade-Martins 1976:29), and Spong Hill (Crowfoot in Hills et al. 1984:19) may be the remains of veiled headresses.

The bronze pin from the Maceneey group is 11.7 centimeters long. The circular perforated head (now broken) and projecting neck are flattened (Fig. 9). Below the neck, the shank section of the pin changes from rectangular to round. The rectangular portion of the shank is decorated on all four sides with an incised X along the incised transverse lines. Similar bronze pins with perforated, flattened heads are known from the Anglo-Saxon cemeteries at Broadway Hill, Worcestershire (Cook 1958:70, fig. 9, 12), and Collingbourne Ducis, Wilts (Ginnell 1975:fig. 19, 3).

In the Collingbourne Ducis burial, the decoration of the pin on the chest between a pair of brooches - indicates that it secured a garment. From the 5th to the early 7th centuries, a pin was often part of the brooch suite worn on the chest. The bronze sleeve-clasps in the Maceneey group form a functional but decoratively unmatched pair (Fig. 10). The hook portion is ornamented around the edges with incised lines and punched dots, while the eye is decorated alone on its length with two rows of punched crescents. When found in inhumation burials, sleeve-clasps are commonly positioned in pairs at the wrists, suggesting that they secured the bottom of the sleeve in a manner comparable to modern cuff links. Fortunately, a reconstruction of their function is facilitated by textile remains on several examples. Fragments of woollen fabric on an eye-clasp from Mildenhall, Suffolk, indicate that the long sleeve of the twill garment was banded with a cuff of twill-woven braid (Fig. 11). The metal sleeve-clasp was sewn on the cuff braid (Crowfoot 1952). The cut edge of the cuff braid, turned under and stitched down, is visible on a sleeve-clasp from Fosny (Crowfoot in Cook 1951:99). On a more elaborate pair of clasps from Mitchell’s Hill the edge of the cuff braid was hutton-holed in a blanket stitch (Crowfoot 1952). The twill-woven fragment on a clasp from Spong Hill inhumation grave 5 is additionally decorated with surface brocading or embroidery (Crowfoot and Jones in Hills et al. 1984:19, fig. 7). Based on the neck or between the brooch on either shoulder was often strong a necklace of beads. Thanks to careful excavation of a grave in Berinsfield, the position of the rows of beads across the chest of the interred woman could be reconstructed. Strong between the brooch on each shoulder was a short strand of glass beads and two longer fobs of amber beads (Brown 1975:24).

Rather than encircling the neck, the Berinsfield beads appear to have been suspended from shoulder to shoulder between the brooches. Because of the way in which annular brooches functioned, the bead string could be attached to the brooch with a simple loop around from the back of the brooch pin; the closed pin would secure the bead string, just as it would the dress fabric. A more elaborate fixture occurs on a pair of annular brooches from Newham, Cambridgeshire. Here, each brooch is pierced with a small ring from which, it is conjectured, was suspended a string of beads (Viereck 1976:246–247). Fragments of linen and woollen strips from bead necklaces were found in two graves at Fosny (Cook 1951:81).

Some of the square-headed among the Maceneey group (Fig. 12). Of these, 3 are of glass and 17 are of amber. The amber beads are common in Anglo-Saxon types: a green and a blue glass square-sected cylinder (Beck 1973, type IX D.2.1), a black short barrel bead with a white wave around the perimeter (type A.1.a), an aqua and yellow swirled circular bead (type I C.1.a), and a yellow-green fitted bead (type XXII.A). Although amber beads are common in Anglo-Saxon graves, the source of this resin has not been identified. The amber for these beads may have been collected locally from the North Sea.
coast of England or acquired from well-known Baltic sources. The chemical composition of the 'meerschaum' bead is of considerable interest, for the nearest sources for meerschaum are in the area of the Baltic Sea. Several Anglo-Saxon beads of 'meerschaum' have been claimed, but only one is from Fennaby, Lincolnshire, are of this material (Cook 1981:30).

The missing artifacts—the tweezers, 't-shaped ornament,' and ceramic vessel—provide a tantalizing complement to these items of feminine dress. Tweezers were carried by both men and women during the early Anglo-Saxon period. From the description of the 't-shaped ornament,' this missing artifact is probably a pair of them a 'girdle-hanger' (Fig. 13). Bronze girdle-hangers, small or in pairs, were suspended with other chatelaine objects from a belt. In addition, metal, bone, and ivory rings often found at the hip probably served as the frameworks for cloth or leather bags, simple open pouch or drawstring pouches, which have left no traces, may also have been popular. These bags appear to have contained a miscellany of animal, mineral, plant, and mammal objects whose purpose has been interpreted as amuletic (Meany 1981). A plain weave fabric fragment on an iron button lying at the hip of the woman buried in Swaffham grave I may be the lining of a small bag (Crowfoot in Hills and Wade-Martins 1976:28).

The ceramic vessel is catalogued as a brown ware jar with stamped decoration. This ovoid-shaped, flat-based pot with a wide mouth is recorded as measuring 132 by 154 millimetres, although it is not specified to what dimensions these figures refer. A Meironogia is ascribed to the vessel; although not common, wheel-thrown vessels of continental manufacture are occasionally found in English barrows, although none can be attributed to the excavations of the Meironogia group. Anglo-Saxon women frequently wore one or less, frequently two belts around their midriff. On her belt, almost every woman carried her own knife. The absence of these small iron objects may be attributed to the excavation conditions under which the entire artifact was preserved. In the search for glittering prizes of bronze, amber, and glass, these mighty little items, such as the knives and belt buckles, would have appeared to be—may well have been consigned to the spoil heap.

Bibliography

Bede, The Venerable. Saint 837–735


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13 "Girdle-hanger" from Sprowg Hill grave 38. L. cm. 33.6 cm. (Drumming after Hills et al. 1984: fig. 91, no. 1b)