

THE SUTTON HOO SHIP-BURIAL,
A UNIQUE CONFLUENCE OF 7TH CENTURY
EUROPEAN HISTORY

Elizabeth Ratcliffe
Seminar Scandinavian Art 407
Dennelly
Fall, 1971

THE SUTTON HOO SHIP-BURIAL,
A UNIQUE CONFLUENCE OF 7TH CENTURY
EUROPEAN HISTORY

The Sutton Hoo burial-ship stands at a shrouded crossroads of Anglo-Saxon history. It marks the times between the pagan invasions and the Christianizing of the entire British Isles, which its peculiar vessel and cargo highlights in a dramatic and as yet not totally unravelled manner. A few days after its excavation the village of Sutton Hoo held a formal Coroner's inquest at which the local coroner presided, sitting around a green baize billiard table with two London British Museum experts and fourteen villagers, including the blacksmith, a school teacher, farmers and retired army officers, to determine whether the contents of the barrow was "Treasure Trove" (hence belonging to the Crown), or private property. Used as evidence at the inquest were quotations from Beowulf, the Old English narrative poem composed slightly after the 7th-century burial had taken place.¹ Three days after the inquest had decided the gold, silver, bronze, precious stones, iron rivets and scraps of wood found in the barrow belonged to Mrs. Edith May Pretty, on whose estate it lay, this lady donated the collection to the nation through the British Museum, whose officials had been called in to help unearth the ship. Her gift was described six months later as "one of the most magnificent and munificent gifts that the British Museum has ever received...".²

¹ Illustrated London News, Aug. 19, 1939.

² T.D. Kendrick, Ernst Kitzinger, Derek Allen, "The Sutton Finds," British Museum Quarterly, XIII (1939), 111.

Today, thirty-two years after those events, working knowledge of both pagan pre- and Christian post-7th-century Britain has been radically altered by that find; art historians have revised their ideas about the sources of Hiberno-Saxon, and thence of Continental Medieval art; historical questions have been raised about the dynastic relationship between southeastern British and Swedish royalty; and the understanding of the history of shipbuilding and jewellery-making has been vastly expanded. How is it that all these changes could come from a single ship-burial which contained no body, no physical ship, and no object which could serve to fix precisely the who or when questions of the monument? In this paper I shall discuss the physical find itself--including the ship, the Saxon-made jewellery, a few of the pagan and Christian artifacts--and some of the changes that have occurred in the world's body of knowledge through them.

THE FIND

In 1938 Mrs. E.M. Pretty had, under the supervision of the local Ipswich Museum, excavated 3 of the raised-earth mounding scattered about her estate on a 100-foot cresting overlooking the estuary of the Deben River in Sussex. One of the barrows had contained remains of an 18-foot ship and of a human cremation; the second had contained other cremation remains and some artifacts lying on a 6-foot long wooden tray; the third had contained nothing, but showed signs of having been rifled in an earlier era.³ Previously, on the Continent large dynastic burial grounds had been discovered in Sweden at Vendsl and Valsgärde north of Stockholm; while on English soil in Suffolk about ten miles from Sutton Hoo at Snape on the River Alde, a mound of similar character near

³C.W. Phillips, "The Excavation of the Sutton Hoo Ship-burial", Antiquaries Journal, XX, (1940), 152.

the river had yielded a 48-foot burial ship, and somewhat farther off in Essex, a chamber burial containing grave objects (though no ship) had been uncovered in Breamfield. From these already discovered burials, suspicions were roused that the 16 mounds dotting Mrs. Pretty's estate might indicate a full-fledged ancient burial ground.⁴

THE SHIP

Thus it came about in July and August 1939 the largest mound was opened to expose the remains of the largest burial ship known to date. It was 80 feet long, had a 14-foot beam, and a 5-foot depth, and a prow curving some $12\frac{1}{2}$ feet above the keel planking. However, of this once mighty oak vessel only rusted iron rivets remained, these having been held fast by the sand so that they created a sort of ghostly sand-casting of a ship.

The soil near the estuary is post-glacial quartzy gravel and yellow sand, and is quite acid, discouraging to vegetation. Interestingly, the sparse vegetation of the heath directly above the burial had in the intervening years stretched its roots as far down as 20 feet, always following the areas of wooden planking so that the 20th Century outline of the ship was caught in a fragile ancient network of hardy heath roots.⁵ Apparently long ago when the mighty hulk had been hauled and logrolled from the river harbor up to its final resting place on the escarpment it had been lowered coffin-wise into the prepared deep cavity so that both sides fit snugly into the yellow sand while at each end there was some empty space. Thus the close fit sides retained their form while both ends were left somewhat vaguely outlined in the sand-cast. This vagueness of the stern had been increased by ploughing on the surface of the mound over the centuries so that the its vertically curving end had been destroyed.

⁴C.W.Phillips,"The Excavations of Sutton Hoo", 190.

⁵C.W.Phillips, Ibid., 201-202.

A midships burial chamber had been erected for the Viking-style ship-burial, and this $17\frac{1}{2}$ foot chamber had at some time collapsed under its great weight of sand and earth, crushing many of the objects within and increasing their decay.⁶

In 1965, twenty-six years after the original excavations, the British Museum sent a second team of experts to resume excavations on the site and to take complete plaster castings of what was by then known to be a Neolithic Bronze Age ship. Three years were devoted to this task and $6\frac{1}{2}$ tons of plaster used in what must be one of the most ingenious ship buildings ever: an enormous protecting tent was raised over the reopened yawning hole; each of the some 2000 rusty iron rivets were capped with lumps of plasticine; damp Scotch paper towelling was gently pressed into $3\frac{1}{2}$ feet square sections of the sand-cast hull so that the wet plaster could then be poured without having the sand stick to it; the pouring of each square section had to be completed in the eight minutes which the plaster took to harden. Repeating this process for the entire hull, section by section, took four professional casters and three assistants three weeks. The endproducts were then carefully labelled and hauled off to the British Museum where they have since been duplicated in fibreglass in preparation for a final recreation of the 7th Century ship.⁷

This time-consuming and expensive process would certainly not have been entered upon were it not for the ever-increasing recognition of the historical importance of the Sutton Hoo. In 1954, fifteen years after the original discovery, the entire $5\frac{1}{2}$ pages of one article in the American journal, Speculum, was devoted to merely citing all the

⁶R.L.S.Bruce-Mitford,"Sutton Hoo, 1965-7 Excavations", Antiquity, XLI (March, 1968), 36-38.

⁷Bruce-Mitford, Ibid., 37.

published material dealing with the Sutton Hoo to that date.⁸ The fact that no actual ship, only a ghostly skeleton, remained, dictated the desire to somehow capture its unique form within museum walls. Its Norse "sister ships" the Nydam, the Gokstad, and the Oseberg, all were found intact and are housed today in continental museums. Its British "sister ship" from the 1938 Sutton excavation is in the Ipswich museum, while the Snape, discovered in 1862, exists only in written records of the time.

In various ways the Sutton Hoo ship differed from all its sisters, ^{Scandinavian} both continental and British. However, it is most closely related to the 76-foot, 4th Century Nydam, found in a Schleswig bog in 1863. It, like the Sutton Hoo, has no true keel or mast, and is a clinker-built (overlapping horizontal members), wide-straked (horizontal hull planks), open rowing boat. The later 9th Century Viking ships, Gotstad and Oseberg, are slightly shorter than the Nydam and Sutton Hoo ships, but their increased numbers of narrow strakes permitted them the greater seaworthiness demanded of Viking marauders. Patched areas appearing in the sand-cast Sutton Hoo hull indicate that it, like its counterparts, had seen service in battle and it, like them, was old and revered for its battle scars.⁹

In summary, the Sutton Hoo ship conforms to the typical Norse pre or post-Viking period ship-burials. With all of its continental counterparts it shares proximity to a body of water, a large oaken clinker-built hull, open decking, relatively shallow draft, upward curving bow and stern posts, starboard detachable stern paddles for steering, and paired positions for human banks of rowers.

However, in two rather important ways it seems to have differed

⁸ Francis P. Magoun Jr., "The Sutton Hoo Burial: A Chronological Bibliography", *Speculum*, XXIX (January, 1954), 116.

⁹ C.W. Phillips, "Excavation of the Sutton Hoo", 182.

from all its continental cousins of both earlier and later times.

Its iron tholes (positionings for the oars) were firmly fixed into the gunwales with six-inch iron nails; in the Sutton Hoo's Norse ancestor Nydam's tholes were lashed to the gunwales so that by reversing their iron angles the ship could be rowed in the opposite direction; the later 9th-century ships, had round holes cut into the ship's hull permitting the ship to reverse its direction merely by having the teams of rowers turn themselves around.¹⁰ The more interesting difference lies in the Sutton Hoo's having a different basic shape from all its Norse relatives, one which would seem to go along with the difference in ear positionings. The stern end line of its gunwale, though somewhat disturbed by an earlier ploughing away of the earth above the projecting vertical stern post, seems to follow a flowing re-entrant curve which would create a rounded stubbed-off stern rather than a sharply pointed stern which repeated the pointed bow of all the Norse ships. If indeed the stern of the Sutton Hoo ship was rounded off, it would match the reported lines of the Saxon-found Snape, as well as the squared-off iron-bound stern end of the 18-foot ship found in the neighboring barrow at Sutton Hoo.¹¹ Here then there might be a unique Anglo-Saxon evolutionary development in northern-type shipping.

Common in the annals of Celtic sailing of the time of Caesar is the coracle, a small, round, portable, skin-covered wicker boat which plied the rivers and coast of the British Isles and which, when it ventured farther out into uncharted seas, seems to have evolved into the larger Irish curragh described by Caesar in his campaign against Spain in 49 B.C., and by Pliny in his Natural History written in the next century.¹² The 7th-century shipwright might well have built his

¹⁰C.W. Phillips, "Excavations of the Sutton Hoo", 10.

¹¹Romola Anderson, The Sailing Ship, (W.W. Norton & Co., 1963), 68.

¹² James Hornell, Water Transport, Its Origins and Early Evolution (Newton Abbot: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 112-113.

larger Norse-type ship with this familiar British stern curve and fixed its tholes firmly into the gunwales as the rowers would always be rowing in one direction.

GOLD AND JEWELLERY FITTINGS

...The Teutonic peoples held their jewellery in special regard. It was, for man and woman, a badge of rank and dignity. For the warrior it counted as a reward for martial prowess when bestowed upon him by his chieftain, and so a bright advertisement of his military standing as well as some indication of his wealth and capital.¹⁸

*(Anachronism?
Gothic?
a century or
two?)* Among the treasures placed Viking-style at the stern and of the Sutton Hoo burial-ship, where the proud chief was accustomed to lie in state with his most valued possessions and honor badges, were some thirty jewelled mountings of the most finely wrought cleisonée and gold, apparently having been mounted on a 7-inch royal purse lid, a 2½-foot sword hilt, a royal harness, a royal belt and one or two other unknown and long-since-disappeared leather or cloth fastener. With the exception of the heavy solid gold belt buckle which follows closely designs of some found in the Vendel 7th-Century graves, all the pieces seem to be of local Saxon origin. Their materials and style resemble their Kentish cousins. However, in workmanship and unique combination of technique and design elements the Sutton Hoo pieces stand out as brilliant masterpieces of some previously unknown craftsman who stands head and shoulders above his Kentish jeweller compatriots.

*This is to
serve as
and not
necessary* Cleisonée jewellery had been common throughout the Eastern Byzantine Empire coming into its finest era in the 7th to 12th Centuries. Before that the Roman and Teutonic peoples had adopted the technique from the oriental East where it had had a long history dating from 2500 B.C. Sumerian and Egyptian dynastic times. Caesar in the 1st Century B.C. had found that the Celts were already decorating their bronze horse

¹⁸ Ronald Jessop, Angle-Saxon Jewellery (Faber & Faber, London, 1950), 18.

trappings with fine bronze enamelled fittings and the Saxons; bronze hanging bowls of that and later times were commonly decorated with enamelled champlevé, a form of enamel work in which the thick metal base is pounded into shapes and cells to accommodate the powdered enamel pigments before baking.¹⁴ The Jutish tribes who in the period of migrations had moved to the south-east shores of Britain from the Danube and Rhine areas had brought with them skills of mounting garnets in gold filigree, and the Kentish Faversham jewellers, descendants of the Jutes, had produced magnificent gold, enamel, garnet and millefiori jewellery in the 4th to 6th Centuries.¹⁵ Many of these pieces had long before the discovery of the Sutton Hoo been housed as museum treasures in the British Museum as examples of native early British workmanship. There had already been a continuous history of local Suffolk jewelcraft prior to the Sutton Hoo burial in the 7th Century.

The unique contribution of the Sutton Hoo jeweller lies not only in his unexcelled mastery of the local skills, but also in his unique combining of many far-flung elements both of design and technique, to which he then added some entirely new elements of both. In the Sutton Hoo jewels we find a remarkable and vigorous fusing of Eastern-originated cloisonné enamel and gold techniques, worked in Swedish interlaced zoomorphic curvilinear patterns, both of which had been previously adopted by the Kentish jewelers; and to these he now added Swedish Vendel-culture naturalistic motifs of birds, humans, and bi-peds. Millefiori enamellings (bundled glass rods sliced longitudinally and baked into gold cloisonné cells as vitreous enamel), inherited from Roman days by the Kentish, were worked into gleaming checkerboard patterns, never before seen locally.

¹⁴ Herbert Maryon, Metalwork and Enamelling (Chapman & Hall, London, 1959), 171.

¹⁵ Jean Evans, English Jewellery (Metheum & Co., London, 1921), 5, 6.

Sutton Hoo
discovery

These stepped checkerboard designs derived originally from the East, the Sutton Hoo craftsman combined with similarly-derived "mushroom-shaped" cleison cells into all-over Eastern style carpet patterns; we see them used most effectively in the so-called shoulder-clasps, the purse frame, and the harness and sword fittings.¹⁶

To these skillfully combined disparate elements, the genius of the Sutton Hoo craftsman himself contributed one uniquely conceived new technique. What appears at first to be continental gold champlevé, proves to be a variatal form of cleisoneé in which the cleison cell is simply fitted over with a flat gold cover creating an enlarged flat gold field which is used to balance the Kentish-inherited large flat garnet areas in the purse-lid man-beasts fitting, and in the intertwining zoomorphic frames and intertwined bears of the ends of the shoulder-clasps.¹⁷

Prior to the Sutton Hoo discovery these Hiberno-Saxon designs had been considered mainly in connection with Celtic manuscripts. Derived from many pagan sources, they seemed to have sprung more or less fully developed onto the pages of the Codes Lindisfarnes and The Book of Durrow around 675 A.D. However, the Sutton Hoo presented a likely local source for its probable date, according to Numismatists, lies between 625 and 660,¹⁸ and according to historians working with Bede's East Anglian family tree, is more precisely 654 or 655.¹⁹ In any case, it would seem that the pagan master jeweller of the Sutton Hoo court was busy at work turning out superb free-swinging jewellery appreciably before the appearance of the Irish Christian Gospels.

¹⁶ "Celtic Jewelers", Encyclopedia Americana, 1962, XXVI, 104.

¹⁷ H. Maryon, Metalcraft and Enamelling, 184.

¹⁸ R.L.S. Bruce-Mitford, Sutton Hoo Ship-Burial, a Handbook, (British Museum Publication, 1968), 48.

¹⁹ S. Lindquist, "Sutton Hoo and Beowulf", Antiquity, XXII (September, 1948), 140.

And as Bruce-Mitford, the major British Museum authority on the Sutton Hoo, ^{find} states [in his introduction to the 1960 re-issued Lindisfarne Gospels,] "the roots of Hiberno-Saxon ornament in manuscripts and sculpture are in the metalcraft of the preceding period."²⁰

PAGAN AND CHRISTIAN INTERTWININGS

Since Beowulf was written towards the end of the 7th Century by an unknown Anglo-Saxon poet possibly attached to the East Anglian or Northumbrian court, from a Christian moralizing point of view, about pagan Danes, Swedes and Geats from southern Scandinavia, there are interesting connections with the Sutton Hoo burial in time, place and lifestyle. From the impressiveness of the escarpment burial site, the large and wellmade ship, and the quality and quantity of its contents, there is little doubt that the Sutton Hoo ship memorialized a powerful and much respected leader. Since there seems to be a grouping of many mounds in the same Suffolk area, Sutton Hoo would seem to mark a family burial-ground like those of the Swedish pagan Vendel-culture. And since the hoard of Merovingian coins all come from central continental mints and bear the contemporary Byzantine Christian stamp of the cross and orb, the Sutton Hoo chieftain must have lived in a time when Christianity and paganism co-existed in Britain.

St. Augustine's mission had been sent to Canterbury by Gregory the Great to convert the Angles and Saxons in 596, and the next year the Venerable Bede tells us King Ethelbert of Kent welcomed him and adopted the new religion publically. At the king's death in 616, there was a general pagan reaction to Ethelbert's conversion techniques and in the struggle King Edwin of Northumbria took over the dominion of England.

²⁰ R.L.S. Bruce-Mitford, "Introduction" (Decoration and Miniatures), Codex Lindisfarnensis (facsimile copy printed in Switzerland with permission by the Trustees of the British Museum, 1960), 109.

In 627 Edwin also succumbed to Christianity so that it is no surprise to find that the neighboring king of East Anglia, Redwald, of the Wuffingas Dynasty, also joined up and became a Christian. The date of this event we are not told, but we do know from Bede that later he regretted his decision and when he died in 625 or 626, he had reverted to paganism.²¹

Because the general time seemed correct and because Redwald was known to be the first East Anglian king to adopt Christianity, the excavators' first assumption was that the Sutton Hoo ship-burial, though it contained no signs of either a body or a cremation, was his memorial. However, with the accumulation of evidence put forward by various experts which dated the burial as somewhat later, it is generally thought now that the cenataph mourned one of Redwald's succeeding nephews, either Anna or Aethelhere, who died in 654 and 655 respectively. Anna was known to be a devout Christian and his body is chronicled to have been given Christian burial at Blythburgh. It is not known whether Aethelhere became a Christian or not, but it is known that his body was lost in the battle of Winwaed in Yorkshire, and Bede writes of that battle that, "many were lost also by drowning in the flood waters while trying to escape", making it even more likely that his body could not be retrieved.²²

*This should
have been
established
in the
order
of the work
"persecuted"
marked*

With such a confusion of religious customs, it is not surprising that the burial of an important royal personage might combine elements of both Christian and pagan burial practices. Although the Sutton Hoo-type of burial is certainly not Christian, there are Christian artifacts aboard which would not likely have been selected were there not some Christian connection involving the king or his family. Possibly the two silver spoons marked in Greek with "Saul" and "Paul", similar to Byzantine christening or baptismal spoons of that time, had been a

²¹ Sandra Glass, "The Sutton Hoo Burial Ship," Antiquity, XXXVI (September, 1962), 179-83.

²² Bruce-Mitford, Sutton Hoo Handbook, 53-56.

present for a momentous royal baptism. The set of ten silver bowls found near the spoons bear engraved crosses and are from the Byzantine Empire, and typical of Eastern workmanship. A large flat silver dish bears the hallmark stamps of the Emperor Anastasius (491-518) which marks it as of Christian origin. There are other silver artifacts which, though they are not specifically marked with Christian symbols, do also come from the East, where Christianity was well established. None of these silver items are fine enough to have been a likely royal gift, so they must have been acquired as valued trade items.²³

Beside these artifacts involved with the Christian world lay the specifically pagan ones. The enormous shield and helmet mounted with combined naturalistic and zoomorphic bronze, gold and garnet cloisonné fittings might well have come right out of the Swedish Vendel-cluture graves where others bearing almost identical fittings had been earlier found. Since the shield and helmet of the Sutton Hoo grave (painstakingly restored by British Museum experts) showed signs of having been used and mended, and were already old when consigned to the earth, they might have even been heirlooms inherited from some distant time of the family history. These have, indeed, raised questions in some authorities' minds of a direct dynastic link between Sweden and East Anglia.²⁴

From local pagan Saxon ground comes the strange six-foot iron standard surmounted with a bronze star and ending in a sharp point, which is related to the Roman-Britain tufa, a standard borne by Saxon kings according to Bede, and which in Beowulf is mentioned in a similar context as part of the royal burial equipage.²⁵ Among the most

²³ T.D.Kendrick et.al., "The Sutton Finds", 104.

²⁴ Herbert Maryon, "The Sutton Hoo Helmet", Antiquity, XXI (September, 1947), 139.

²⁵ Bruce-Mitford, Sutton Hoo Handbook, 20.

amazing and completely unique objects is a six-pound, two-foot long polished stone whetstone, placed honorably close to the royal badges of Saxon-originated standard and Sweden-originated shield and helmet. Of this lobed and bronze-fitted object carrying four sober staring human heads at each end, and thought to be some sort of pagan ceremonial scepter, ^{It has been observed that} British Museum Quarterly of December, 1939 says, "Nothing like this monstrous stone exists anywhere. Archaeologically it is the most amazing find....(of the Sutton Ho^o).²⁶"

So with the magnificent polished wetstone and the two fragile Saul and Paul christening spoons, we might summarize the historical confluence of the Sutton Ho^o. Weighted down by 1300 years of Saxon heath, shrouded in mystery and unknown origins, carrying no human remains to claim its contents, ^{including both} melding pagan and Christian artifacts and jewels, it has served to make tangible Bedwulf, its slightly later literary poetic parallel, to open possibilities of a Swedish-Saxon royal linkage, to bring Saxon jewellery crafts and ship designing to a level not before dreamt of, and to correct a wrongly-held chronology about the origins of Irish illuminated manuscript arts.

For its importance in throwing light upon a dark period of history and for the intrinsic beauty and archaeological significance of its contents, the Sutton Ho^o ship-burial has been rightly described as the greatest find ever made in England.²⁷

²⁶T.D.Kendrick et al., "The Sutton Finds", 128.

²⁷Herbert Maryon, "The Sutton Ho^o Shield", Antiquity, XX, (March, 1946), 21.

WORKS CITED

BOOKS

Anderson, Remola and R.C. The Sailing Ship--Six Thousand Years Of History. New York: Bonanza Books, 1963.

Codex Lindisfarnensis

Bruce-Mitford, R.L.S. The Sutton Hoo Burial Ship, A Handbook. London: Trustees, British Museum, 1968.

Evans, Joan. English Jewellery, From the 5th Century A.D. to 1000. London: Methuen & Co., 1921.

Hornel, James. Water Transport: Origins and Early Evolution. London: Newton Abbot, David Charles, 1970.

Jessup, Ronald. Anglo-Saxon Jewellery. London: Faber & Faber, 1950.

Maryon, Herbert. Metalwork and Enamelling. London: Chapman & Hall, 1959.

ARTICLES

Bruce-Mitford, R.L.S. "Sutton Hoo Excavations." Antiquity, XLII (December, 1968), 36-39.

Glass, Sandra. "The Sutton Hoo Ship Burial". Antiquity, XXXVI (September, 1962), 179-183.

Kendrick, T.D.; Kitzinger, Ernst; and Allen, Derek: "The Sutton Hoo Finds". British Museum Quarterly, XIII (1939), 111-136.

Lindquist, Sune. "Sutton Hoo and Beowulf". Antiquity, XXII (September, 1948), 131-140.

Magoun, Francis P., Jr., "The Sutton Hoo Burial: A Chronological Bibliography". Speculum, XXIV (January, 1954), 116-123.

Maryon, Herbert. "The Sutton Hoo Shield". Antiquity, XX (Mar., 1946), 21-22.

_____. "The Sutton Hoo Helmet". Antiquity, XXI (Sept., 1947), 137-144.

Phillips, C.W., F.S.A. "The Excavation of the Sutton Hoo Ship Burial." Antiquaries Journal, XX (1940), 149-202.

ARTICLES, UNSIGNED

"Celtic Jewelers." Encyclopedia Americana. 1962. Vol. XXVI. p. A

"Treasures of Sutton Hoo: The Burial Ship and Inquest". Illustrated London News, August 19, 1939.