A STAG STANDS ON CEREMONY: EVALUATING SOME OF THE SUTTON HOO FINDS

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Any study of Anglo-Saxon material culture needs to analyze artifacts in terms of political and social strategies. Only in this way can we hope to understand both the symbolism and the society.¹

J.D. Richards's essay 'Anglo-Saxon symbolism' makes several important points about the way in which we should approach archaeological finds if we are to draw the best conclusions about the way in which they were originally used and understood. In particular, it emphasizes the importance of the adoption of an Anglo-Saxon point of view; and that careful attention be paid to the symbolically encoded social content of decorated objects. In particular, Richards stresses that social position and rank seem to have been encoded in designs which previously have been considered merely decorative. Even if we are unable to know what meaning would have been apparent to a contemporary observer, it is important that any examination of a burial and its context acknowledges that meaning was deliberately contained and coherent. This principle should be applied not only to present features, but also apparent omissions; and in one case at least (detailed below) the absence of apparent symbolic content may be interpreted as an important signer of symbolic role.

Richards's most striking illustration of the way in which our interpretations of artefacts may change when structuralist principles are applied is in the case of the patterns made on cremation urns. He makes the important point that if we are to understand these properly they must, firstly, be viewed as intended; in this case, from above, as they were seen by their makers and by those involved in their burial.² It seems, from the results of his analysis of the patterns shared by coil-pots and brooches, that there was a social role to the patterns.


² Interestingly, this particular example illustrates a dichotomy between the classically-educated world and other cultures. We are used to 'seeing' pots from the side, as the classical vase is designed to be viewed. The Germanic funerary urn, despite general resemblances in form and material, had an entirely different function and we must alter the way in which we initially perceive it if we are to discover this.
This essay will consider some items from the ship burial under mound one at Sutton Hoo in terms of this aspect, and suggest ways in which elements of the ornament were intended to relate to their owner’s status. This process involves two assumptions: that the artefacts had a social role and that the form of these artefacts was to some extent dictated by the social purpose.

There is no possibility of any archaeological method supplying answers to all our questions — or even of allowing us to know what questions we should be asking. However, this essay aspires to demonstrate that the application of some assumptions and methods can increase our understanding of the burial and the events surrounding it. The principal assumption we should apply is that every part and aspect of the objects is important — both in terms of what was consciously intended by the people responsible for their designs and in what is unintentionally revealed about their unconscious assumptions and thought processes. Richards refers to ‘political and social strategies’, but we should also be aware that while strategies are conscious, much of the logic behind the way in which the objects were designed to work would not be. There is no space here to discuss all of the finds of the ship burial under mound one in these terms; instead, the essay will approach, and attempt to evaluate, three items from the hoard in the structuralist spirit of Richards’s comment.

The Purse
The purse-lid discovered more or less intact under mound one is one of the most exceptional items of the hoard. In terms not only of the value of its component materials (including over half a pound of gold) but also the time and skill its manufacture would have demanded, it represents enormous wealth and status. Moreover, it seems from the incomplete and possibly damaged state in which it was buried that it saw considerable use in its owner’s lifetime. It was clearly an item of great importance, and we should approach it in the same spirit; anyone rich enough to have had the purse made must have been a public figure — and the purse should be viewed as a public article. To dismiss the conspicuously ornamented features of the purse-lid as being merely ‘decorative’, or to omit examination of the panels on the lid (and the ornament on the rim) as potentially part of a deliberately symbolic structure would be a serious mistake.

First, we should accept that the amount of care and thought that went into the panels’ design and construction indicates that there is a structure and reason to their existence which is beyond that of the ‘ornamental’ or ‘practical’. In addition, we can perhaps accept that the scheme is complete; indicated by the fact that it was decided to repeat two elements (the bird and ‘man between beasts’ motifs), rather than add more (although the jeweller might have been influenced in this by his fondness for symmetrical designs). There are five clearly
figurative, representational groups on the lid, consisting of two groups shown twice (those of the two birds and the human between animals) and one (that of the horses) which initially gives the illusion of being a pair like the other two. In addition to this there are two abstract, patterned panels and a patterned rim. Before approaching these elements, however, I would like to suggest a distinct and complete rationale behind the figurative groups, part of which is still accessible to us.

The horse was evidently important to the Germanic peoples. Only the rich would have been able to keep horses, and they seem to have become status symbols of some sort, for we find them inhumed near high status graves. The posture of the horses on the plaque, reared up as if fighting and with legs crossing, also seems to be symbolic. The techniques used in their depiction are of interest to us as they are shared with all of the other animals on the purse and most of the rest of the hoard. It should be noted that the design of the horses is not naturalistic, but abstract and stylized, the design leaving no doubt as to the identity of the creature at the same time as allowing its symbolic posture to be exaggerated and made more visually pleasing. In a similar way, the birds depicted may be identified by the emphasis of their distinctive characteristics. The sport of falconry was the preserve of the rich — the high costs of training and keeping birds of prey making them highly-prized luxuries. The bird here is too stylized to be positively identified by species but the exaggeration of the sharp, curving beak and the claws (which actually pierce the bird underneath) can leave us in little doubt as to its predatory nature. Likewise, its victim may be identified by its caricature of a duck’s bill.

The last representational motif on the lid has resisted firm interpretation. Bruce-Mitford identifies it as a ‘man spread eagled between two erect wolf-like animals’, which are pictured as though ‘whispering’ to him. In ‘Anglo-Saxon symbolism’ Richards revives a suggestion that the panel may represent part of the biblical story of Daniel. However, these explanations are relatively unconvincing. The analogue to the design most often cited, on the die from


2 Rupert Bruce-Mitford, The Sutton Hoo ship burial, ii (London: British Museum, 1978), 521, Fig. 384 pictures a double horse burial at Beckum in Westphalia, in which the animals are arranged in a similar pose to that of the purse.


4 Bruce-Mitford, Sutton Hoo, ii, 512-3.

Torslunda, Gotland, is of interest in this problem but the differences are so pronounced that there can be said to be few thematic links. The Swedish composition (Fig. 2) is assymetrical, the central human is clearly seen to be stabbing one of the animals, they in turn are obviously biting him, and they appear to be naturally bipedal. An interpretation of the Sutton Hoo design (Fig. 3) which relates more closely to the whole symbolic scheme is perhaps more likely. The animals could only really be described as dogs or wolves, and the explanation that they are hunting dogs showing affection towards their master seems to be the most likely explanation for their presence. They resemble, in the shape of their body and jaw, greyhounds (which we know were used in England before the Norman conquest). Not only this, but their behaviour on the plaque is unlike that of the wolf, which (unless rabid) will rarely attack an adult human and will avoid people whenever possible. Research on death by wolf-attack in eighteenth-century France indicates that ‘the presence of wolves was not considered dangerous, and attacks, even on children, were not expected’. 8 Neither does the posture of the man suggest conflict, as

the figure has his palms open wide and carries no weapon. The most likely explanation is that the figures instead represent a man (in this context, a noble of some sort) and his hunting animals.

This symbolic scheme gives the item a whole new resonance; it is apt that the purse-lid, manifestation of the owner’s wealth and status, should itself refer to the benefits that wealth and status bestow. The link between form and function here is particularly neat, and perhaps leads one to expect a similar neatness in the other items of the hoard. One point which we should definitely take from the purse is that its significance lies (in this hypothesis) not in the separate symbolic elements but in the relationship between those elements and what they have in common with the purse’s actual function as an object. However, this scheme remains incomplete for us, as the abstract panels and the rim of the lid remain mysterious. Given the coherence and strength of the symbolic scheme behind the panels discussed above it would be surprising if these did not carry encoded meaning as well. An approach to them might start with the ways in which they differ from the other abstract garnet patterns of the hoard.

The Shoulder-Clasps
The shoulder-clasps provide us with another useful subject for close analysis. One could perhaps suggest that the harness of which they are a part perhaps post-dated the purse lid. They are in better condition, apparently complete despite their complexity (there are four hundred and ninety-eight inlays in one and five hundred and fourteen in the other) which perhaps suggests less use; the way in which the gemstones are cut on a curve demonstrates increasing

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*Bruce-Mitford, Sutton Hoo, ii, 523, 617.*
confidence and skill in garnet cutting, and the abstract patterns are clearer and perhaps more satisfying than the similar panels on the purse-lid. Each clasp consists of two halves, each containing a geometric chequered pattern of cells inlaid with garnet and millefiori glass. These patterns are framed by interlacing serpentine creatures executed in cloisonné and a D-shaped area with two interlinked boars in cloisonné, with filigree creatures between their legs. The figure of the boar, reflected back on itself, could also be said to be a superior composition to the figurative symbols on the purse-lid. Another area in which the clasps satisfy is the depth of the symbolic scheme; not only the boars, but also the snakes and the way in which the snakes are arranged appear to have been significant.

The boar carried a number of different connotations in Germanic religion and mythology; on helmets, it seems to have had protective attributes and there is no reason to suppose that it did not signify similarly in this context — although we do not know what the shoulder-clasps were made to carry, they are similar in design to those used on some sorts of Roman parade-ground armour and could have been a part of the wearer's own armour. Boar motifs, in both archaeology and literature (mentioned in *Beowulf* in this context), are also associated with helmets. Not only was the boar a symbol of protection, it also seems to have been associated with royalty; in *Anglo-Saxon animal art*, George Speake notes that boar motifs in England seem to be associated with kingship — there are ten at Sutton Hoo and seven from the 'King's field' at Faversham, Kent. The motif had other connotations — with fertility, for instance — which it interestingly shared with the other animal depicted on the clasps, the snake.

It is likely that on another level, the abstract geometric patterns of the garnet-cells on the clasps (and the other items) were also significant; there were presumably conventions of colour and shape which to us are inaccessible. Richards notes the correlation between different cremation-urn decorative devices and those whose ashes were contained in the vessels; it is impossible to try realistically to

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10 The reflection may have been symbolically important as well; Speake notes that boar motifs often appear in pairs, and it is possible that their power was associated with this feature. George Speake, *Anglo-Saxon animal art and its Germanic background* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 78-9.

11 Speake, *Anglo-Saxon animal art*, 79-81. The Anglo-Saxon helmet recently (1997) excavated in Northamptonshire has a boar crest visible on X-ray photographs, see Ian Meadows, 'Wollaston: the “pioneer” burial', *Current Archaeology*, no. 154, xiii, 10 (1997), 391-5, esp. 394, Fig.


13 'When it [the boar] appears on brooches, bracelets and ornaments from women's graves, its probable role is as a symbol of fertility', Speake, *Anglo-Saxon animal art*, 81.

14 'The association of the serpent with Cernunnos would suggest some connection with fertility'; Speake cites Hilda Ellis Davidson's interpretation of the serpent and her young on the runic horn from Gallehus as being associated with fertility and healing. Speake, *Anglo-Saxon animal art*, 86.
apply these principles here, as the sample size is so small, but we should be aware that the precise ordering of seemingly decorative panels could have been a signifying feature for contemporary observers. The interlacing designs on the clasps are not entirely abstract but are made of twisted caricatures of snakes, which themselves carried symbolic significance. Like boars, they seem to have had protective attributes and been emblems of fertility; like boars, they were associated with Odin. In the context of this symbolic mix, the clasps may be seen not only as functional articles but as powerful symbolic statements based around ideas related to kingship. These statements clearly have a depth and complexity to them which is not entirely clear to us, but we can conclude that there was a whole system of nuance and shading involved in the combination of different symbols and ideas in arrangements such as this.

The Whetstone
The whetstone (Fig. 4) has four principal elements; the rest or stand, the main body of the stone, with eight faces carved into its sides, the iron ring mounted on top of this, and the bronze stag figure itself mounted on top of that. All the elements except the first appear to have some symbolic importance, although their precise nature is unclear: here it would be sensible to work down each of these elements briefly before evaluating their arrangement and how this relates to the whetstone's significance. The stand we may consider purely functional; however, it tells us that the stone was designed to be held and viewed, upright, as a sceptre.

Bruce-Mitford makes a convincing case for the identification of the animal on the basis of the antlers which are stylized as the essential identifying characteristics. The stag appears to have been a symbol of royal (or similar) authority; in later medieval times, stags such as the one represented on the whetstone (a red deer

Figure 4
Reconstruction of Sceptre, Sutton Hoo, Suffolk
(Reproduced by permission of The British Museum Press)
stag with twelve points to his antlers) were called ‘royal’, and it is likely that they carried similar connotations earlier. In *Beowulf*, the royal hall is named Heorot (‘hart’) and is perhaps decorated with antlers or resembles antlers in the architecture of its gables; the hall is associated in the poem with an idealized Germanic kingship. The fact that the stag motif is present at Sutton Hoo in what appears to be a king’s memorial reinforces the impression that the one is the symbol of the other.

In the form of a finger- or neck-ring, the ring is also a powerful image in this context — or at any rate for the *Beowulf*-poet. As Raw notes:

> When Hygd offers Beowulf the kingdom of the Geats after the death of Hygelac, she offers him *hord ond rice, beagas ond bregostol*, ‘treasure and kingdom, rings and royal seat’ (*Beowulf*, 2369-70).

However, the ring’s role is not entirely clear:

The neck-ring, like the standard, seems sometimes to be a personal item, sometimes a public one. When Beowulf gives his neck-ring to Wiglaf, the gift is clearly connected with his designation of Wiglaf as his successor (*Beowulf* 2809-12). Hygelac’s neck-ring, on the other hand, was a gift by Wealhtheow to Beowulf, given by Beowulf to Hygelac’s wife, Hygd, and by her to her husband (*Beowulf*, 1195-1211, 2172-76). It is highly unlikely that it was a symbol of kingship.

If the ring is not a symbol of kingship as such it may perhaps be read as a symbol of something closely related to kingship — namely, the relationship between ruler and ruled. This distinction may appear artificial, but could be compared to the role of a modern wedding ring, which represents neither husband-ness nor wife-ness but the relationship between the two. A good king, for the *Beowulf*-poet, was a ‘ring-giver’, and Heorot is called *hringsele* (‘ring hall’), and although we should not be too hasty in reading the ring of the whetstone in this context, the possibility that it was a deliberate reference to these ideas cannot be ruled out; after all, as a physical support to the stag it is superfluous.

The heads are of particular interest, since naturalistic representations of human beings are unusual from this period. It is not known who or what the heads on the whetstone are intended to represent, what sex the apparently beardless figures are, or what their differing hairstyles may signify, though they probably represent either humans or gods. In this context, I would prefer to stress the absence of decoration along the main body of the stone. Although the modern

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15 See F. Klaeber, *Beowulf*, lines 78, 82.
17 Raw, ‘Royal power’, 173.
eye might find satisfaction in the lines of the stone or in its natural colour and texture, nearly every surviving work of art of the early Anglo-Saxon period (including the jewellery and armour of the hoard) exhibits horror vacui or distaste for empty space. The complete lack of decoration along the main body of the stone (and the survival of paint only on one end of the stone would seem to indicate that the rest of it was not originally painted) is a clear sign that it was vitally important for its maker (and the figure who commissioned it) that the whetstone/sceptre be identifiable as a whetstone. The whetstone’s symbolic function must therefore be intimately related to its physical shape, and the fact that it would be physically functional as a whetstone. In this respect, the stone is effective in the same way as the purse-lid earlier discussed: practical and symbolic functions echoing, and referring to, each other.

I would tentatively propose a symbolic structure linking all the elements of the whetstone; however, it must be stressed that what follows is entirely unverifiable, included merely as an illustration of hypothetical method. I would suggest that the stone signifies in its design an ideal notion of the relationship between the lord (or king, or Bretwalda), represented by the stag, and his comitatus (or nobles, or subservient kings, or subjects), represented by the unidentified faces carved upon it. These two elements are linked by the ring, representing not only the physical ceremony of ring-giving but also symbolizing (in a wider sense) the circular and mutually dependent nature of royal power which the Beowulf-poet also stresses. Tellingly, the stag is not supported directly by the comitatus, but by the mutually beneficial relationship. Perhaps there is also a deliberate parallel here between the relationships of comitatus/lord and whetstone/sword; without the one, the other is redundant. This recalls the similar relationship between function and symbolism present in the purse, but the whetstone would be a symbolic object of a different importance from the purse lid: instead of conspicuously celebrating wealth (as the purse does in its use of precious materials) and its benefits (the leisure activities depicted so vividly) it is a serious representation of the roles of ruler and ruled, a physical embodiment and constant reminder of the ideal relationship between different ranks of society. The importance of this idea — the survival of the community as a distinct entity did after all depend on it — makes it a fitting subject for part of the regalia of a king.

The quality of the design and execution of the finds in the hoard has never been in doubt; what I hope this essay has begun to demonstrate is that the depth of thought which went into the subject-matter and into its arrangement is also impressive and is, in part, accessible to us. The picture which emerges from this is one of a court not only rich and powerful but also sensitive to symbolic roles; aware not only of its own pleasures but also its duties and the dignity which proper fulfilment of these duties was thought to have brought.