

Finding meaning in Anglo-Saxon art

Fusing the Roman, the Germanic, and the Biblical

In the first new introduction to the subject for 25 years, Leslie Webster argues that Anglo-Saxon art provides us with important insights into the politics and culture of the age. **Chris Catling** reports on her often surprising conclusions as he digs into the glittering heaps of garnets and gold in search of clues to the meaning of it all.



IMAGE: Portable Antiquities Scheme

ALL IMAGES: British Museum, unless otherwise stated

If we still tend to think of the early Medieval period as 'dark', despite academic protestations to the contrary, it is partly because we see such a contrast between the Anglo-Saxon period and the preceding centuries of Roman rule.

We think we know a lot about the Romans: what they thought, how they lived and loved, the gods they worshipped, and the ways in which their society operated. By contrast, we do not think we know much about the culture that succeeded Rome from the 5th century AD.

ABOVE Medieval masterpiece: this folded gold cross was part of the Staffordshire Hoard, discovered in 2009 (see CA 236).

Leslie Webster sets out to show that we know far more than we think, thanks in part to a significant body of Anglo-Saxon literature that embraces such heroic poems as the 7th-century *Widsith* ('Far Traveller') in which the bard describes the kings, tribes, and events that he has encountered, or the 8th-century epic, *Beowulf*. These poetic works are full of clues that help us understand the place of art in Anglo-Saxon society. One of these clues is perhaps surprising: whereas we tend to think of Anglo-Saxon and Roman as opposites, the Anglo-Saxons saw themselves as very much the heirs of Rome.

Roman emperors, dripping with bling, now looked more like barbarian kings than the plainly dressed, philosophical emperors of old.

Romanesque art

Their inheritance, however, was very different from the Rome of toga-clad senators and philosophers, Jupiter, Neptune and the Olympian deities, Romulus, Remus and the Caesars, Virgil, Horace or Livy. All that was four centuries ago (the equivalent of the Jacobean era in today's terms). By the 5th century, Rome itself had been reinvented, absorbing and blending myriad cultures. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the portraits on coins and on mosaics in Rome and Ravenna. Here 5th-century Roman emperors and empresses, dripping with bling in the form of crowns, massive ear rings, brooches, and buckles, now look more like barbarian kings and their consorts than they do Augustus, Hadrian or Marcus Aurelius, the plainly dressed, philosophical emperors of old. ▶

BELOW Roads to Rome? This 5th-century bracteate pendant from Undley, Suffolk, is based on coins issued by Constantine the Great a century before. Its design includes the helmeted head of the emperor, as well as Rome's mythical founders, Romulus and Remus, but also incorporates Germanic runes.

RIGHT Dark Age or Golden Age? The Anglo-Saxons were capable of producing stunning pieces of jewellery, such as this millefiori stud from the Staffordshire Hoard, surrounded with gold and garnets, and this buckle shaped like a dragon's head, from the 6th-century princely burial at Taplow.



IMAGES: Portable Antiquities Scheme



ABOVE In terms of shape and style, these 5th- to 6th-century saucer brooches derive from a type common in northern Germany, but their design motifs are copied from Late Roman belt-fittings.

BELOW The hunting scenes on this early 5th-century gold bracelet from Hoxne, Suffolk, show stylised animals that are seen in both Late Roman and Anglo-Saxon art.

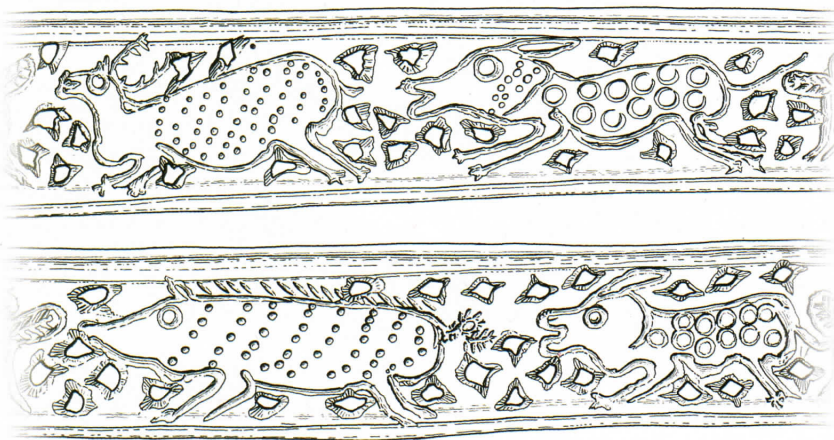
Arguably, even while fighting each other, the barbarian and Roman worlds had been growing closer together for a century or more. Emperors and generals increasingly resemble the warrior heroes of Germanic oral culture. It is thus no coincidence, Leslie argues, that the art of the Anglo-Saxon age begins with showy status symbols: lavish gold and garnet-inlaid jewellery, weapons, horse-trappings, and armour that all evoke a Roman inheritance. If you are a regional ruler seeking to establish and hold on to power, or an ambitious ruler seeking to extend your kingdom, your claim to be the heir of Rome can be demonstrated visually by dressing like a Roman emperor on those special occasions when you are on public show.

You must ensure that your entourage is equally well dressed, and, on a very practical level, you must form alliances and keep your fighting bands happy by gaining and dispensing gold and jewels

– as poems like *Beowulf* and *Widsith* vividly illustrate. This in part helps to explain why decorative metalwork of the most sophisticated kind continues to be made in the 5th century and beyond, after so many other ‘Roman’ crafts, such as ceramics, mosaic, stone architecture, and wall plaster cease to be practised.

The first settlers who arrived in Britain from north Germany, southern Scandinavia, and the Frisian coast would not have lacked gold, nor examples of fine metalwork to copy. Those who served in the Roman army could expect gold in the form of pay and official insignia in the form of belts. Gold also came as booty from raids, and some from imperial payments designed to buy barbarian compliance. Skilled artisans specialised in making the prestige buckles and straps that were worn by the Late Roman military and other officials (see CA 267). These same artisans made copies, adapted to include various Germanic decorative idioms, that are found in 5th-century Anglo-Saxon graves, such as in Mucking, Essex, but also throughout the Continent.

The earliest manifestation of Anglo-Saxon art in England – art, that is, associated with Saxon settlements and cemeteries – reflects the styles of the Saxon heartlands of northern Germany (today’s Lower Saxony, between the Elbe and the Weser rivers), an important focus of migration into England in the 5th century. Their shapes are Saxon – saucer brooches, equal-armed brooches, and supporting-armed brooches – but the motifs are derived from the decoration of Late Roman belt-fittings and sword-mounts: bead and reel motifs, spirals and scrolls, crosses, palmettes,





ABOVE Made in the early 6th century, this square-headed brooch from the Isle of Wight is crammed with complex decoration alluding to the Germanic god Woden but also features scrollwork from Late Roman metalwork. The 9th-century Strickland brooch makes striking use of gold and silver contrasted with black enamel, and while its swirling animals have their roots in pagan Germanic art, the cross and silver bosses (representing the Five Wounds of Christ) are unmistakably Christian.

and stars. Animals, where they occur, are the sea-beasts, beaked dolphins, and running creatures with speckled and dashed bodies representing fur that are again commonplace in Late Roman metalwork in, for example, the hunting scenes on a gold bracelet from the Hoxne treasure.

Mixed messages

The consensus is that much of this early jewellery was not produced on the Continent and imported, but made in south-east England by existing 'Romano-British' workshops that adapted their production to cater for new tastes. Equally there is much debate about whether the people in whose graves they are found were migrants or 'natives' who have adopted Anglo-Saxon burial customs. Leslie Webster's thesis that Anglo-Saxon culture sought continuity with Rome makes such a question much more complex. It begs the question whether rigid concepts of Saxon and Roman are relevant; instead, as with much in human history, we should probably think of subtle blending and multiple hybrids.

Certainly hybridisation is what happens next, as metalworkers begin to adapt their styles and motifs in ways that progressively include more and more animal and human elements,

probably representing creatures and heroes from Germanic myths. Thus a splendid early 6th-century silver-gilt square-headed brooch from an Anglo-Saxon woman's grave at Chessel Down, on the Isle of Wight, still has scrolls down each side that are derived from Late Roman metalwork, but the decoration now is dominated by back-to-back crouching animals. More animal heads, birds, and human masks pack the footplate, including the central figure of a man with moustache and ornate hat or helmet, flanked by two birds. This probably represents Woden, chief among the Germanic gods, and the two ravens from Norse mythology called Huginn ('thought') and Muninn ('mind'), that fly around the world and keep Woden informed.

Multiple messages are conveyed by this richly decorated brooch: wealth, power, status, and cultural affiliation; but also a sense of vulnerability and the desire for good fortune: these images are probably apotropaic, invoking the protection of supernatural beings against the dangers of the world. The Chessel Down brooch typifies another



LEFT This 9th-century silver strap-end from Braughing, Herts, exemplifies the Anglo-Saxon love of dual readings: one way up, the narrow end depicts an owl; the other way up, it becomes a dragon with ears, bulging eyes, and snout.



ABOVE Imperial inheritance: this gold and garnet-inlaid purse lid from Sutton Hoo demonstrates both the skill of Saxon goldsmiths and the importance of patronage and wealth distribution – practices drawn from the Late Roman period.

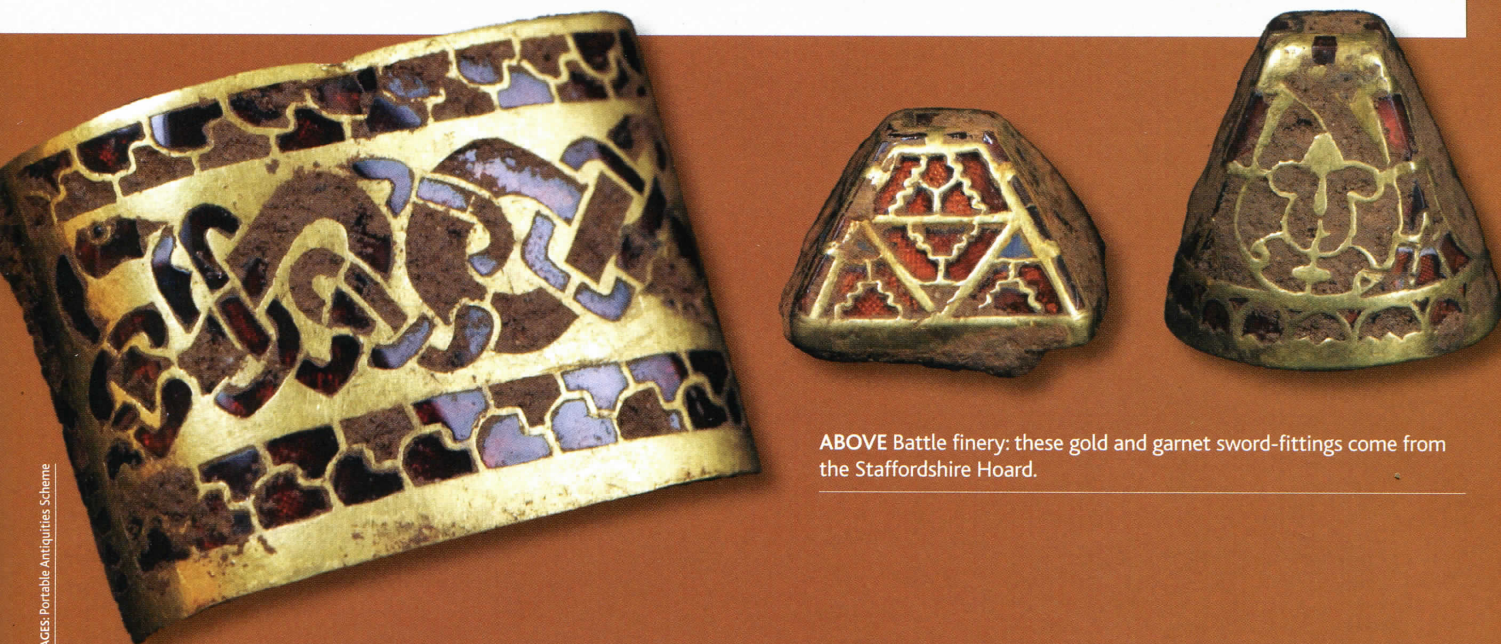
aspect of the development of Anglo-Saxon visual art: at first glance it can seem bafflingly intricate and overly busy, with its impenetrable jumble of dismembered animal limbs, eyes, and beaks. It would be a mistake, argues Leslie, to see this as the work of unskilled and barbaric people. On the contrary, this brooch has been carefully constructed to be read systematically and its many meanings teased out. Just as Anglo-Saxon poetry uses recurrent phrases, complex vocabulary, internal rhymes, alliteration, and densely patterned metrical structures, so the art of the period is designed for an audience fond of riddling metaphor and cryptic meanings.

The motifs in this brooch – human masks, animal/man hybrids, beast heads, birds, and crouching creatures with large



RIGHT Excavated at Sutton Hoo, these shoulder-clasps are modelled on the regalia of Late Roman emperors and senior army officials. The dark red garnets could allude to both imperial purple and the protective blood of Christ – often referred to in Saxon literature as a warrior and someone worth having on your side in battle.





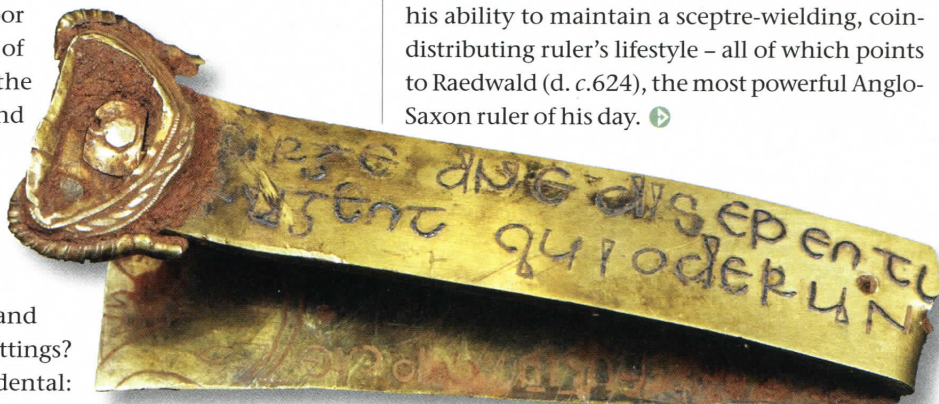
ABOVE Battle finery: these gold and garnet sword-fittings come from the Staffordshire Hoard.

eyes and raised foreleg – are the mainstays of early Anglo-Saxon art, suggesting that they are important symbols, embodying some encoded meaning that would have been understood by everyone, even when these motifs are reduced to their most basic form – perhaps no more than a dot and semicircle for an eye. Some of those meanings are lost and impossible to recover, but (again by analogy with Anglo-Saxon literature) Leslie believes that underlying themes can be detected, not least a fascination with bold contrasts, such as the opposition of light and dark.

This can be seen in the contrast between the smooth, plain surface of the curving bow of the Chessel Down brooch and the busy ornamentation of the headplate and footplate. It is interesting to speculate what this brooch would have looked like in the flickering firelight of the hall, or under the glow of a candle or a lamp, as light reflects off the calm surface of the bow and the restless glittering surface of the relief decoration. Such a scene is evoked in one of the most famous passages from Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, in which he compares life's brevity to the flight of a sparrow in one door of the hall and out the other. The power of this simile rests in its contrasts between the warm firelit hall where the king feasts, and the wintry darkness and storms outside.

Is it pushing the point too far to see the same sorts of stark contrasts as the underlying aesthetic behind the glitter of red garnets against gold in so much Anglo-Saxon metalwork, or of the gold and silver inlays against black niello in sword-fittings? Certainly the use of red is far from accidental:

BELOW This gold strip from the Staffordshire Hoard bears a Biblical inscription that reads: *surge d[omi]ne [et] dispentur inimici tui et fugent qui oderunt te a facie tua* ('Rise up, O Lord, and may thine enemies be scattered, and those who hate thee be driven from thy face').



the fashion for using garnets once again derives from Late Roman and Byzantine high-status jewellery, not least because of its association with the imperial colour, *purpura*. This deep purple-red is the colour of status and luxury – so much so that Aldhelm, writing in the 7th century, rebukes certain aristocratic nuns for wearing crimson tunics and scarlet shoes instead of dressing more humbly as befits a devout Christian.

All that glitters

The vogue for garnet inlays is widespread in Continental Europe in the 6th and 7th centuries, but nowhere is it used to more stunning effect than in the Sutton Hoo treasure, which exceeds in craftsmanship anything that was produced anywhere else in Europe at the time. Debate continues as to whose grave this was, though the scale of the burial, the opulence of the gold-and-garnet warrior's kit, the grand Roman-style dinner plate and feasting equipment, and the purses full of gold coins all speak of a king using distant echoes of the Roman past to state his right to rule and his ability to maintain a sceptre-wielding, coin-distributing ruler's lifestyle – all of which points to Raedwald (d. c.624), the most powerful Anglo-Saxon ruler of his day. ➔

Equally, the Sutton Hoo treasure begs the question of who had the skill to support this lifestyle by manufacturing such technically sophisticated buckles, clasps, and purse-fittings? Since it was discovered in 1939, this superbly crafted assemblage has been seen as something unique in the history of Anglo-Saxon art. Now an unexpectedly different light has been shone on the art of early Anglo-Saxon England by the discovery, in 2009, of what has become known as the Staffordshire Hoard. Even in their broken and twisted state, the artistic quality of the 3,500 pieces that make up this massive hoard suggest that the makers of the Sutton Hoo treasure were not alone in possessing the skills to make richly ornamented helmets, saddle-mounts, and hilt-fittings.

The work of investigating the Staffordshire Hoard is still at an early stage, but will surely include such questions as whether one workshop produced all this material as well as the Sutton Hoo treasure (an idea suggested by some stylistic similarities), whether such workshops served more than one ruler, whether there were multiple (perhaps itinerant) workshops, and whether it is possible to detect stylistic differences that help to pin down the products and insignia of different kingdoms: do different stylistic motifs reflect the products of royal workshops or different patrons in East Anglia, Kent, Mercia or Northumberland?

Art of war

The presence in the Staffordshire Hoard of the parts of three gold crosses, one of them inscribed with a ferocious Biblical text calling on God to scatter his enemies (Numbers 10: 35), touches on another intriguing aspect of Anglo-Saxon art: having begun as Late Roman, then evolved into Anglo-Saxon, it went on to absorb Christianity, subtly assimilating Biblical stories alongside

BELOW The Saxon love of riddles and ambiguity is revealed in the (replica) helmet from the early 7th-century ship burial at Sutton Hoo, in which the prominent eyebrows, nose and moustache becomes a winged red-eyed dragon, while the helmet crest forms another dragon or serpent.



Germanic myth. We should not be surprised. When Christ enters the story of the Roman world with Constantine the Great, he is not the self-sacrificing, sharing, caring champion of the poor and down-trodden of the Gospels; rather he is the deity who helps you win battles and humiliate your enemies – in Constantine's case, the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, which left him sole ruler of the Roman empire in AD 312 (see *Military History Monthly* 21).

St Augustine must have found this a potent message when he and his companions landed in Kent in AD 597, to be welcomed by Æthelberht, the powerful King of Kent, and a man with ambitions to extend his realm and influence. From then on, religion and power became inextricably linked.

The Anglo-Saxons who adopted Christianity found no difficulty in seeing parallels between the life of Christ – who fought and won the greatest battle of them all, against death itself – and the heroes of ancient Germanic poetry. A substantial proportion of the 400 or so works that have survived from the Anglo-Saxon period consist of hagiographies in which the saints take on mythic demons and perform epic deeds. Christ himself is portrayed as a warrior in the poem the *Dream of the Rood*, as is the Biblical Judith, heroine of the eponymous poem, who is described in terms befitting an Anglo-Saxon warrior in her battle with the tyrant Holofernes.

This hybrid of Roman, Germanic, and Christian traditions results in an art whose meanings are more than ambiguous: an image can simultaneously mean one thing and its opposite. *Beowulf* is a poem that records heroic deeds performed in a distant Germanic past of dragons, monsters, and cannibalistic giants; it describes war and elaborate



ABOVE Cutting-edge symbolism: this late 8th-century sword pommel (**RIGHT**) from Woodeaton, Oxon, is another example of the Saxon love of ambiguous artworks, becoming the mask of a horned beast when inverted. Going back to the trend for hybrid designs, this 7th-century pommel (**LEFT**) from Dinham, Shropshire, shows the cross and halo of Christian iconography flanked by pagan beast heads.

IMAGES: Courtesy of Shropshire Museums

funerals in which ships, weapons, armour, golden cups, coats of mail, and boar-shaped helmets are piled upon funeral pyres to go with the dead into the afterworld. And yet this apparently pagan poem delivers a central Christian message, which is that Beowulf's heroism and valour stems from God, and that he is God's agent in the defeat of evil. The same can perhaps be said of the Bayeux Tapestry, another splendid example of an enduring Anglo-Saxon work of art created to celebrate a famous battle and notable victory, casting Duke William in the heroic tradition, but again with the solid Christian message that God punishes those who break their solemn vows.

We should remember this when we contemplate Anglo-Saxon art, which becomes more explicitly Christian over time, with its sculpture, ivory carving, and illuminated manuscripts. Yet it retains a pleasing duality in such objects as the helmet from Benty Grange, in Derbyshire, with its boar for a crest but a cross on its nose; or the 7th-century garnet and gold sword pommel from Dinham, Shropshire, that incorporates protective beast heads flanking the Cross of Christ; or the numerous depictions on cross-shafts and stirrup-mounts of Odin bound by sea monsters, but whose attributes also allow him to be seen as Christ on the Cross, the Devil bound in hell, and the Viking trickster Loki. (Ironically such ambiguities were lost on the Protestant iconoclasts who broke up and buried the great cross at Ruthwell, Dumfriesshire, in 1642, objecting to its 'pagan' elements, but

BELOW An exquisitely decorated cheekpiece from the Staffordshire Hoard.



thereby helping to preserve this 8th-century Northumbrian masterpiece.)

A love of riddles, paradoxes, and ambiguities is thus central to much Anglo-Saxon visual and poetic art, not least in the way that beasts can shift their shapes and appear at one moment like a jumble of disconnected lines, the next forming an outline of a bird. A splendid example is the Sutton Hoo helmet, the stern facial details of which incorporate heavy eyebrows, long nose, and bushy moustache, all modelled in gold that contrasts with the silver body of the helmet; look again, and this suddenly turns into a flying dragon. Another, more modest object, in the form of an 8th-century sword pommel from Woodeaton, Oxfordshire, turns into a horned beast when the sword is drawn from its scabbard and held as when fighting.

Right up to the dawn of the Norman age, similar ambiguity is found in the heads of dragons, wolves, and foxes that abound in Anglo-Saxon church sculpture, especially at the entrances to the nave and chancel, serving as protective and aggressive, the ferocious guardians of the church and its treasures, there to put fear into the hearts of anyone who comes as an enemy. Such enigmata also teach the observer to seek the secret riddles of created things, as Aldhelm, the 7th-century scholar taught in his treatise on the subject. For beneath what looks like superficial decoration are great depths of subtlety, to which Leslie Webster's book provides a key. **A**

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Leslie Webster (2012) *Anglo-Saxon Art: A New History*, The British Museum Press, 978 0714128092, £18.99.