

THE WINCHESTER ANGLO-SAXON BOWL, AND BOWL-BURIAL

By W. J. ANDREW, F.S.A.

IN August I was asked by the Hampshire Field Club and Archaeological Society to undertake a tentative excavation of the earthwork near Winchester known as Oliver's Battery to ascertain its date of construction. Mr. F. W. Talbot, the lessee of the site, Mr. E. S. McEuen, the Rev. S. T. Percival, Mr. G. Weeks, and Mr. Lewis Williams at once offered to join me, and with the help of our own men we were the working party. We had the assistance of the Hon. Secretary Mr. Frank Warren, F.S.A., Dr. J. P. Williams-Freeman, Sir Thomas Troubridge, F.S.A., and Mr. V. B. Crowther-Beynon, F.S.A.

The Earthwork. This stands on the eastern side of the crest of a chalk ridge, 400ft. above Ordnance datum, and overlooks Winchester, a mile and three quarters away to the north-east. It is a straight sided irregular parallelogram, 73yds. in length on the north, 105 on the east, 85 on the south, and 90 on the west, covering¹ in all 2.032 acres. The vallum, as disclosed by the spade, averages 15ft. in width rising to 4ft. above the original surface, and at the site of our discovery is 8ft. 10in. above the bottom of the surrounding ditch, which is V shaped and 20ft. wide.

The Discovery. Owing to the slope of the hillside, the north-east corner of the vallum projects further than the rest of the earthwork, and is the most prominent feature seen from the valley below, its rounded construction giving it almost the effect of a tumulus. This prominence caused our selection of it for the first trench, as it had probably attracted our Anglo-Saxon predecessors for their interment. But for the obstruction of trees and danger to a footpath passing round it, we should have cut the trench exactly across the corner, and we pegged our lines on its western side as closely as we thought practicable. At the last moment luck played its part, and we ventured to move them 2ft. nearer to the angle, an alteration of plan that was to give us the discovery.

Our trench was 4ft. wide, and we gradually removed the vallum in level layers of 6in. deep per course. When we had thus lowered the trench level to exactly 2ft. below the crest of the vallum we touched on its eastern side, and therefore almost in the centre of the corner, the left humerus of a skeleton, which

1. According to the Ordnance Survey.

we proceeded to excavate with the greatest care. It was the skeleton of a man of about 5ft. 8in. or 5ft. 9in. in height and 25 or 30 years of age. A straight cut edge in the rubble chalk at the head and foot of the grave, sloping slightly inwards, showed that it had been dug down from the surface of the vallum, and was 6ft. 4in. in length. Stress is laid upon this because it removes any possibility that the burial and vallum were coeval. The cuttings also showed that the vallum had already consolidated when they were made, for the chalk was looser within the grave, and around the skeleton it was finely crumbled. The original surface of the ground was disclosed 2ft. below the bottom of the grave.

The body had been laid at full length, with the feet upright and a foot apart. The legs pointed to 10 degrees east of north, the body was very slightly inclined to the east, reducing that to 5 degrees, whilst the head was turned to the east, or shall we say, facing the rising sun? The arms had rested round a bronze bowl, the small iron spear- (or javelin-) head lay on the right thigh with its point at the knee, and the scramasax, or sword-knife, also pointing downwards, was upon the left hip. With the exception of the skull and breast bones, which were crushed, the skeleton was in perfect preservation; and it so remains to-day, complete in its grave, and as little disturbed as possible during our necessary examination and search.

The grave was in the centre of the vallum at its corner, but pointed northward instead of north-east across the corner where there was more room. This would seem therefore to have been intentional orientation. There was no depression nor indication of the grave on the surface, yet the bowl had sunk through the breast bones to the vertebrae. It is probably to this gradual sinking and the shallow chalk above, that its perfect shape and condition are due.

We expected to find a sword, possible remains of a helmet, brooches or buckles of the clothing, ornaments, and especially the ferrule of the spear, which would have determined its length, but none of these things was there. The bowl, too, contained nothing but chalk, and we examined this for any indication of decayed food, nuts, etc. It was interesting to notice that the bowl not only rested exactly in the centre of the breast, but was quite horizontal.

The Bowl (figs. 1, 2, 3). I will describe it as discovered. It was of thin beaten bronze originally gilded, almost a foot across and five inches deep, of ordinary bowl-shape but strengthened on the half-tubular principle by a recessed moulding beneath the rim, the metal being then brought forward and doubled back,

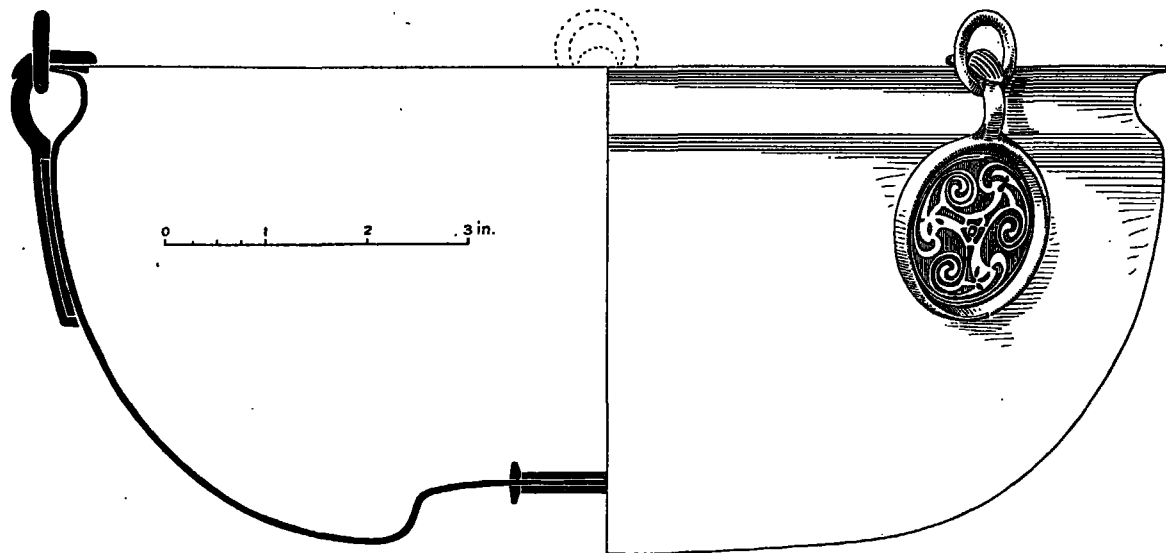


Fig. II. THE WINCHESTER ANGLO-SAXON₂BOWL ($\frac{1}{2}$)

to form a horizontal brim of double thickness, half an inch wide. The base was rounded except in the centre where a circular depression, 4in. in diameter, had been carefully recessed to a depth of $\frac{5}{8}$ th in., which gave stability to the bowl when in use.

At equal distances around the rim were three escutcheons of the base or imitation silver of the period, as evidenced by that of the early Anglo-Saxon sceattas. Each of these was in the form of

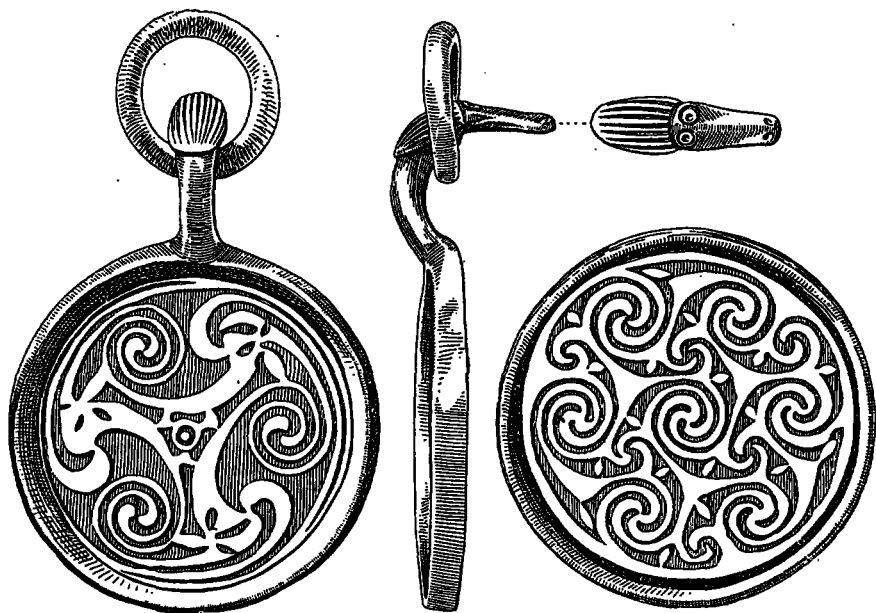


Fig. III. ESCUTCHEON AND PRINT ON THE WINCHESTER ANGLO-SAXON BOWL (†)

a swan, the head resting with the bill upon the rim of the bowl, and the neck arched gracefully outwards and downwards, to enclose a ring of similar metal for suspension of the bowl when not in use. In place of the swan's body the neck spread into a complete ring almost 2in. in diameter, which enclosed an enamelled disc of beautiful colouring and design of the characteristic Anglo-Saxon spiral or serpentine type.

Within the bowl resting in the centre upon the raised face of the circle I have described, and beneath the bowl within that recessed circle, was an enamel of similar character but slightly

larger and perhaps of even finer art. Each was similarly framed in a base silver ring, but of course without the swan's head or neck, for no ring for suspension was required. The total of these ornaments was therefore five, and the old gilding of the bowl was then quite distinct ; but now it is only visible where it has been protected in places beneath the rim.

The curious feature of the discovery was that every one of these ornaments was loose and detached. Two only of the three escutcheons were in their place, and this was due to outside pressure of the chalk and the hold of the swans' bills on the rim. The central ornament within the bowl had moved two inches, and that below remained on the chalk when the bowl was carefully lifted. Also the enamel discs were loose within their rings. The explanation of this may be that they had been originally fixed with a very soft solder that had disintegrated, and there were apparent remains of this. But if so, the third escutcheon must have been knocked off at the actual burial, or when the bowl gradually sank. This is proved by the fact that where the two others remained in their original position they protected the golden surface of the bowl behind them, whereas where the third was missing the surface was deadened to dull bronze like most of the bowl. Its empty frame lay beneath the side of the bowl, but neither its enamel nor suspension ring was there. The enamel disc was found on the following day by Mr. McEuen beneath the adjoining undisturbed surface of our trench, but the little suspension ring was not forthcoming, and may possibly have been lost before the burial. Similarly there was a lighter spot in the inside of the bowl where the metal was protected after the shifting of its central ornament, whenever that occurred.

It would seem, therefore, that even at the time of burial these ornaments were very lightly fixed.' This is one of my reasons for believing that the bowl is earlier in date than those hitherto known, because on them the ornaments are riveted, probably owing to similar experiences, and I shall presently quote an explanation of this from *Beowulf*.

The Scramasax (fig. 4). This hunting- or sword-knife was about 15 in. in length and within the remains of its wooden sheath, of oak I think. It was mounted with a silver pommel of the 'cocked-hat' type and silver oval plate below it, also with silver bands to the guard of the wooden-cased grip and to the mouth of the sheath. This latter band still contained the original tiny silver pins which fixed it to the wood ; but as the weapon was not ours, we could not definitely ascertain the shape of the blade, nor examine it for a possible runic inscription, such as some of its kind bear. So far as the sheath indicated, it seemed to be unlike

the usual scramasax, which was single-edged with the back cut off in a straight or even concave line towards the point, whereas this suggested a sword of ordinary form. If so, this is another indication of early date for the Saxon interment, because the older and simpler form of blade would be the earlier.

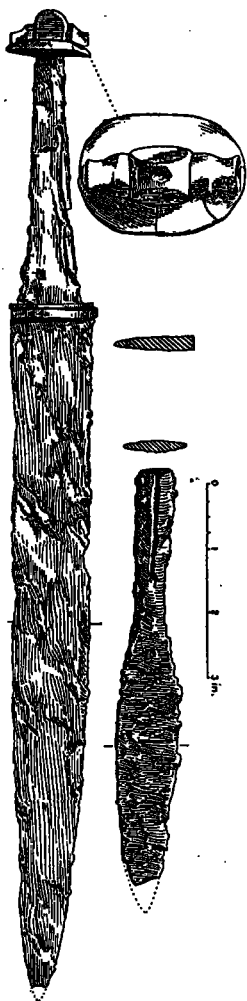


Fig IV. SCRAMASAX AND
SPEAR-HEAD ($\frac{1}{2}$)

The Spear-head (fig. 4). This was of iron, only $6\frac{1}{2}$ in. long, but the point, perhaps an additional half-inch, had been broken off, probably before deposit. It was of the split-socket type, and within the socket were the remains of the head of the wooden shaft. Microscopic examination indicated that the wood was ash. The position of the weapon when found and the confines of the grave prohibit a longer shaft than about 3ft. 6in., or at the most 4ft. in all. This, coupled with the fact that the pointed shaft within the socket was little thicker than a lead-pencil, suggests a javelin rather than a fighting spear, and this seems to conform with the general character of the burial as indicated by the presence of the bowl and absence of sword and helm.

The Date. The interment was clearly a pagan burial, and I think that we may rule out any possible attribution of it to the Jutes, although the site was within their original sphere, because remains of bowls of this character have been found over a very wide area of early Saxon-England, that is, to the east of a line drawn from Carlisle to Bournemouth. This reduces the possible date of the burial to the period between the Saxon invasion of what is now Hampshire about the year 500, and the conversion of the district to Christianity by Birinus in 634 with, of course, a margin of safety, but the site itself was included in the grant to the new see of Winchester soon after the latter year, and in view of its early character I prefer to date the interment before 550, and to associate it with the Saxon conquest of Winchester.

Bowl-burial.

With the exception of a single escutcheon found in Belgium, which Mr. Reginald A. Smith very reasonably believes must have strayed from England, such bowls as this, usually represented by their fragments, belong to the British Isles. Unfortunately the details of their discovery are most scanty, or vague as to the position of the bowl in relation to the human remains, but some, of course, were not sepulchral deposits. In two instances at least the bowl was, or had been upon the breast of the body, and this therefore is the third; and it may indicate a custom at the burial of a tribal chieftain in the sixth and seventh centuries.

The purpose of the bowls when in use has been so interesting an archaeological mystery that I can hardly hope to solve it, yet I believe that their use and ultimate burial on the breast of the deceased have for long been on record. It has been suggested that they were hanging lamps, or hung in the halls to contain valuables, but the inside decoration is fatal to either theory. The enamels preclude any culinary purpose, so all that remains is some use which would disclose the beautiful enamels when the bowls were filled with clear liquid, or tilted, or emptied, and hung in the halls as treasures and ornaments when not in use.

In this relation Mr. Crowther-Beynon has reminded me of the beautiful Ardagh silver chalice, which is probably a survival of these bowls into early Christian times in Ireland, because it also has a beautifully enamelled Celtic decoration beneath the foot, only visible when tilted in use, or hung. Its bowl also, although only 9½ in. wide, is very similar in form to this, and if there be any link between the two, there may be a similar link between the custom of bowl-burial and chalice-burial, and so an almost complete chain of cup-burial from the early beaker and "food" vessel, to the chalice-burial of medieval times.

Of *Beowulf* there have been more recent editions, but for this purpose I will now quote from Thomas Arnold's, checked when necessary by Benjamin Thorpe's, and I hope that literary experts will remember that I am discussing Bowls rather than *Beowulf*. This epic poem was composed about A.D. 700 by an English ecclesiastic who had probably been a missionary in Friesland, and there collected the traditions and fables that he commits to verse. The author must have been brought up in the Winchester district, because he uses the purest English of the time, and therefore among the possible ecclesiastics suggested I think that the most likely was St. Boniface from the monastery of Nursling, or his kinsman St. Willibald from Waltham.

The mythical story of *Beowulf* is of the sixth century and therefore contemporary with the deposit of this bowl. True, the scene is laid in Gothland and Friesland, but for our purpose

there is little difficulty in that. No doubt the story was gleaned and repeated from the sagas and traditions of Friesland and the Goths, but the domestic setting, customs, and descriptions of a century and a half before his day would be filled in from the author's own knowledge, and that knowledge would have been gathered in England. For instance, the English clerics of his time, as we do to-day; credit the Jews, in their version of the Bible, with using English money, and similarly the author of *Beowulf* credits the Goths of the sixth century with using the only money known to him in England in the eighth, the sceatta.

The bowl in *Beowulf* was a ceremonial vessel which when in use stood in the centre of the hall table, and from it the wine, described as *scir* (clear, or transparent), was served to the guests, on some occasions even by the queen herself. No doubt it was the origin of the wassail bowl. It is referred to constantly throughout the poem and always as a special possession, such as "the great treasure vessel," "the precious vessels," "the chased ale flagon in the beer hall," "the cup-bearers handed wine from wondrously wrought vessels," and so on, until we come to a passage which I might have used myself when describing the condition of the ornaments when the Winchester bowl was discovered. It is, "the bowls of the old twilight flyer (the Dragon) standing, the vessels used by men of old, with none to polish them, with their ornaments fallen off."

The gilding of the bowl is frequently referred to as "the plated vessel," "the plated vessel, the precious drinking-cup," "precious things with gold adorned," "precious treasures of plated gold," and "the plated cup."

The enamels are described as "curious devices," "enriched and many coloured," and "chased with a serpent pattern of many colours." Even their process of manufacture is disclosed as "many hued and hardened in the fire."

The hanging of the bowl as a treasure in the hall, as indicated by its rings for suspension, is corroborated by constant reference to it as "the hall vessel," and "the hall cup." The happy symbolism of the swans sipping the wine from the brim of the bowl finds a weak parallel in the poetic description of the ocean as "the wild swans' path."

The custom of burying these bowls on the breast of a chieftain is indicated as follows. They seem always to be treated as the principal treasure, and in the account of the hoard recovered at the death of the dragon we are told that "beside it stood bowls and cups." These again are described when deposited in the mound at the cremation of *Beowulf* as "all such ornaments in the Hoard" and "let the earth hold the treasure where it now yet remaineth as useless to men as it formerly was." But in

the account of the romantic ship-burial of Scyld the body was laid at full length and the treasures placed upon his breast. "They laid their beloved prince, the ring-dispenser, in the bosom of the ship, by the mast they laid the famous one. Thereon was stowed great store of treasures, of ornaments from afar. . . . On his bosom (*on bearme*) lay a pile of treasures that were to go far away with him into the possession of the Flood."

The scramasax is referred to as the *wael-seaxe* drawn by Beowulf when his sword failed him in his last fight, and even the spear, with the remains of its shaft of ash, finds its fellows in "their spears were of ashen wood."

Bowl-burial must have had its meaning and superstition, and I think that it was the attribute to a chieftain only. I will close with the encouraging words of *Beowulf*, "easily may the gold in the ground excel any treasure among mankind, hide it whoso will."

The Hampshire County Council, on whose land the bowl was found, have placed it on permanent loan in the British Museum, and the latter has presented a replica of it to the Winchester Museum.



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Fig. I. THE WINCHESTER ANGLO-SAXON BOWL.

[Photograph by E. Gardener.]