

A WEALTH OF EVIDENCE:

The Identity of the Man Commemorated at Sutton Hoo

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THE HISTORY OF ENGLAND DID NOT BEGIN WITH THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION AND NOT EVERYTHING SUPPOSED ABOUT THE ANGLO-SAXONS REDUCES TO THE MYTH OF KING ARTHUR AND THE ROUND TABLE. CONTRARY TO COMMONLY HELD BELIEFS, THE DARK AGES OF THE NORTH WERE FULL OF SPLENDOR AND BRILLIANCE; THE ONLY THING DARK ABOUT THEM IS THEIR ENSHROUDED HISTORY, BUT THAT ONLY MAKES THEM ALL THE MORE FASCINATING. THE GREAT BURIAL MOUND AT SUTTON HOO IN EAST ANGLIA, DISCOVERED JUST BEFORE WORLD WAR II, SHINES AS ONE OF THE MOST GRANDIOSE SEPULCHERS IN HISTORY, YET THE IDENTITY OF ITS OCCUPANT REMAINS A MYSTERY. WAS IT A WEALTHY MERCHANT, A WARRIOR FROM OVERSEAS, OR A GREAT KING? THIS PAPER GATHERS, PRESENTS, AND SCRUTINIZES THE EVIDENCE AND ARGUMENTS FROM ANCIENT RECORDS, OPULENT GRAVE-GOODS, AND CONTEMPORARY INVESTIGATIONS IN AN ATTEMPT TO DETERMINE THE MOST LIKELY CANDIDATE FOR THE INDIVIDUAL INTERRED IN MOUND 1 AT SUTTON HOO.

INTRODUCTION

From the very moment of the gravefield's discovery in 1938, sparks of controversy have surrounded the identity of the person commemorated in what was to be named Mound 1 of the Sutton Hoo cemetery, the most lavish and magnificent burial mound yet uncovered in Anglo-Saxon England. On their visit to the site in 1939, Hector Chadwick said to Charles Phillips, "It's the grave of King Rædwald you know. I've no doubt of that."ⁱ Chadwick may have had no doubt—shortly thereafter he wrote a paper defending his positionⁱⁱ—but others after him have doubted this assertion, and it is still an unresolved question appearing at the head of most considerations of Sutton Hoo. While some claim the question to be inconsequential,ⁱⁱⁱ the reconstruction of history, art, and culture depends on such pivotal questions as much as on anything else. The development of a more precise chronology, an understanding of the culture of kingship and of pagan religious practices, and, of particular significance to the period under scrutiny, an appreciation of the meeting point of paganism and Christianity, are all spheres of study that may benefit from a more precise identification of the person honored in the greatest grave at Sutton Hoo. At the same time, these areas must actually assist in the very task we undertake, and one must carefully sift through the literary and archeological evidence accumulated since its discovery to see in what ways the evidence complements and augments, supports and is supported by, our understanding of these key areas of investigation.

DATING THE MOUND: CHRISTIAN OR PAGAN?

First, we must establish a chronology of the mound, and the most useful find for this task is the horde of 37 coins of Merovingian origin and three unstruck blanks, as well as two ingots. That they are all of foreign origin should not be surprising, as there is no evidence of coinage amongst the Anglo-Saxons from so early a period.^{iv} Five of the coins bear the name of a ruler, the latest of whom is the Frankish Theodebert II, who died in 612 AD. Although most archeologists favor a date in the 620s for the coins, individual study of the gold content of the four latest coins

would allow for a latest mint date as early as 615-16.^v

The far end of the date range is more difficult to determine. Some have argued that the burial could not have taken place more than 30 years after the lower limit, 615 AD, because coins more fresh from the mint would certainly have been utilized. A more complex investigation, however, must take into account the state of Christianity in Anglo-Saxon England around the time in question.

St. Augustine, sent by Pope Gregory, arrived in England in 597 AD^{vi} and was drastically effective in converting, or rather re-converting, its heathens. By 601, after Augustine had baptized King Æthelberht, churches were established in Kent, which led to the conversion of Sæberht of the East Saxons in 604. While both of these kingdoms relapsed for a short time into paganism after the deaths of their monarchs, Christianity was quickly revived. Æthelberht also made attempts in East Anglia, but the Anglian king Rædwald is said to have accepted Christianity only half-heartedly. It was not until his son, Sigeberht, came to power as early as 631 AD that East Anglia was fully opened to the Christian life. Northumbria was effectively converted by 630, though it, too, suffered ephemeral relapses into paganism. Overall, Christianity had a fairly tight hold on most of Anglo-Saxon England by 635-40 AD.

It is unlikely that the newly-Christian kings would have received an extravagant funeral containing so many grave-goods and a ship, a horse, or a cart buried in the ground with them. While there are examples of Christian kings having lavish funerals, even—or more accurately, especially—in Rome, as one moves north, Christian burials tend to be plainer, with few, if any, grave-goods. The discovery of the great Christian burial at Prittlewell may be a strong argument for extending the prevalence of Christian burials sharing in previous pagan traditions further into the 7th century. The goods at Prittlewell, however, were of far more simple and even meek design and embellishment, distinguishing that site decisively from Sutton Hoo. More important, however, is that the advent of Christianity

brought with it the tradition of burying the faithful dead in consecrated ground in or near a church. Mound 1, besides being a very rich barrow, was located in the cemetery of Sutton Hoo, which was most definitely not consecrated ground in the early 6th century.



A complication, however, is the inclusion in the burial of artifacts like the Anastasius dish and the spoons marked with “Paulus” and “Saulus” that carried Christian overtones. One possible solution is that the pagan

king or his family hoped to derive some benefits from them, just as some pagan kings like Rædwald had done when they maintained the altar to Christ alongside those of the pagan gods.^{vii} Another answer appeals to psychology: even if the pagans perceived the Christian connotations of the artifacts, there is little reason to believe they would have refrained from adding these rich and valuable objects to the burial mound. They probably gave little thought to the actual claims of the Christian religion. If so, they would not have feared, loathed, or even thought twice about the Christian symbolism in the objects, but used them solely because of their splendor. Just as people today wear Halloween costumes of vampires, Zeus, or Pallas Athena because they do not believe them to be real (while even a skeptic today would think twice of dressing up like Jesus Christ for Halloween), in a like manner, those left to arrange the funeral did not believe in Christ and would have had no problem dressing up their fallen king with some Christian artifacts.

A ROYAL BURIAL?

It must, therefore, be concluded that Mound 1 honored one of the Anglo-Saxon kings who died between 615 and 640 AD. But why must it be a king? Indeed, why even someone mentioned in literary record? The second question, though perhaps valid, leads us to a skepticism that precludes any

further investigation. The first is a more valid and relevant question that cannot be ignored. Many arguments have been proffered to prove that Mound 1 at Sutton Hoo is a “royal” burial, the most famous being Rupert Bruce-Mitford’s three-volume study of Sutton Hoo, particularly his 10th chapter. A summary review of the evidence is obligatory, and it may even help develop the case in unexpected ways. For example, while some say that the small number of coins is a hint that this was the burial not of a king but of a merchant or soldier, others note that the 40 coins are just part of the total riches of the grave.

The gold and silver content alone, Shoenfeld points out, puts Sutton Hoo at the forefront of late antique and early medieval precious metal hordes in all of Europe, including Byzantium.^{viii} The shield has elements, such as gilded fittings, that point toward a ceremonial use. According to literary sources, only noblemen and warriors supported by the king were fortunate enough to have the protection of byrnie (long, sleeveless chain mail tunics) like the one found in the burial chamber.^{ix} Legal evidence confirms that gold-hilted swords were considered the property of great lords; men of lesser rank rarely acquired them.^x According to the Riparian Laws, a normal helmet was worth six solidi. This particular helmet, however, adorned with crest, nasal, moustache and eyebrow attachments made entirely of gold, was certainly more valuable (see Figure A on next page). One may claim that the presence of a mail shirt or a sword is not enough to declare it a king’s grave, but the presence of a mail shirt *and* a gold-hilted sword, as well as a half-dozen other fantastic military supplies should put the matter to rest. A man of lower rank might have been able to acquire a distinguished sword, but that the same man also acquired a shield, byrnie, and helmet, and all the other great artifacts, is, to say the least, difficult to believe. Finally, the lack of any signature female grave-goods and the profusion of military implements show it to be a man’s burial.

Objects of foreign origin or influence further upgrade the status of the man buried at Sutton Hoo. The Hanging

FIGURE A

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Bowls with running spirals and peltas, along with zoomorphic terminals, may be found in both Celtic and Anglo-Saxon traditions, but the red enamel and millefiori inlay work, rather than Germanic cloisonné, seem to point to Irish craftsmanship and indicate heirloom value.^{xi} Michael Ryan has demonstrated a number of other connections that can be drawn between objects found at Sutton Hoo and Irish metalwork.^{xii} The purse lid is embellished with several figural plaques, two of which depict a figure, flanked by two beasts, that associate the purse with La Tene and Asian traditions, and may in fact be traced all the way back to the Master of Beasts motif born most likely in Mesopotamia. The heavy bronze bowl from the Coptic region in Egypt and the Anastasius dish from Byzantium are excellent examples of the travel of goods through trade and gift-exchange. Furthermore, as Edward Schoenfield and Jana Schulman have noted, “in addition to sentimental value, an aesthetically pleasing object has a great deal of ‘snob’ value.”^{xiii} Possession of extravagant items both foreign and native and valued by others, is an impressive show of wealth and power.

Furthermore, one cannot but marvel at the amount of skill and labor necessary to construct and transport the 89-foot ship, the largest from that era unearthed in Northern Europe to date. As Gillmor has estimated, “twelve men working together could finish [such] a war ship in three months if all the building materials had been gathered in advance,”^{xiv} but, of course, they would not have been, and the cutting of trees and digging up of ore would have taken years. Indeed, the use of a ship burial of any kind almost certainly indicates a regal burial. The second great East Anglian cemetery at Snape, just north of Sutton Hoo and overlooking the Alde, also boasts a number of ship burials, the greatest of which begs comparison with Sutton Hoo: “the Snape ship was of clinker build and riveted construction, identical to that used in the Sutton Hoo Mound 1 ship.”^{xv} Looking further afield to Denmark, with its plentiful written records, one finds two distinct levels of burial customs: the upper class and the regal. The former would most likely be a lower lord or noble warrior, whose burial

was furnished with aids like a horse, riding equipment, food for the journey to Valhalla, and weapons for entertaining battle games in Odin’s Hall.^{xvi} These graves never contained helmets or mail shirts. The regal burials, on the other hand, were far more splendid, often containing a number of horses, and possibly even men, who were conceivably the king’s entourage, such as cupbearers and marshals. These graves would also contain a ship, along with riches, goods, and unusually fine weapons.^{xvii}



Finally, we must address the so-called standard and the whetstone. Many have attempted to associate this 1.5-meter-long iron stand with the *tufa*, or standard, that the Venerable Bede says King Edwin of Northumbria carried before him in battle and might have left with Rædwald during his exile, but recent finds make this unlikely. No traces of fabric or textile can be found on the stand, and a critical examination of the design reveals that it does not fit the requisites for attaching a standard. The whetstone, on the other hand, is far more promising, especially after the correction that placed the ring and stag on its extremity, rather than on the long iron stand. The persistent

belief first that this object was a scepter was first argued by Bruce-Mitford.^{xviii} The strongest argument against this is posed by Michael Wallace-Hadrill in connection to the

miniature whetstone found in a child's grave at Sancton.^{xix} It is possible, however, that the child was of royal descent, or that the miniature whetstone is equivalent to what we would call a toy gun today. Despite this evidence, the whetstone remains just one indication among many that Mound 1 at Sutton Hoo is a royal burial. Even if one makes an exception for the whetstone, or claims that a commoner could have acquired a sword or byrnie, or that the purse and coins seem to reflect a merchant rather than a king, the burial contains not only a whetstone, nor only an extravagant sword, nor a purse with 40 coins alone, but the amalgamation of these and many other unusual and magnificent objects. In the end, to maintain the position that the burial is that of a very unusual merchant rather than of a unique—though not unusual or unreasonable—king creates more questions than it answers.

EAST ANGLIA OR EAST SAXONY?

Having thus established Mound 1 as a royal burial, it is time to consider the great Anglo-Saxon kings of the early 6th century. First, we examine the strength and durability of the arguments that place Sutton Hoo in East Saxony as opposed to its commonly agreed location in East Anglia. The main argument is that none, or very few, of the grave-goods in the barrow were specifically East Anglian, as they exhibit Continental, Kentish, or even East Saxon styles.^{xx} It must first be noted, however, that the rite of ship burial has been satisfactorily linked with Scandinavia, where the East Anglian affiliations lie. Also, it will be recalled that the accrual of foreign goods, whether from near or far, was considered a pompous display of wealth and power. Furthermore, it has been shown that the East Anglian styles, particularly the dress styles, were not absolutely distinct from other styles: "Indeed, we should presume a greater mixing of people than suggested by Bede, and we should not presume that distributions of ethnic groups, as defined by dress styles, coincided with political territories."^{xxi} Although some of the ornament on the jewelry, such as the zoomorphic filigree, "knotted snakes," and triangular buckles, have ties with the East Saxons and with Kent, other ornamental devices, like the "perforated animal

body," "compact all-over animal interlace," and "processions of interlocked animals" are found almost exclusively in East Anglia.^{xxii} Broadening the search reveals more complex and seemingly contradictory evidence: Snape, located just north of Sutton Hoo, is predominantly Anglian in grave-goods, while the contemporary cemeteries in Ipswich, and the Boss Hall cemetery, south of Sutton Hoo, are all characteristically Anglian.^{xxiii}

The styles, designs, and ornament of the grave-goods in Mound 1 of Sutton Hoo are not definitive in establishing a connection with either the East Anglians or the East Saxons, so other sources must be consulted. The piece of evidence most often cited in this regard is the passage from Bede:

"Sigebert was succeeded in the kingdom by Suidhelm, the son of Sexbald, who was baptized by the same Cedd, in the province of the East Angles, at the king's countryseat, called Rendlesham, that is, Rendil's Mansion; and Æthelwald, king of the East Angles, brother to Anna, king of the same people, was his godfather."^{xxiv}

This succession took place around 655 AD, this being a different Sigebert than the East Anglian Sigeberht who ruled c. 631-35. Thus, by the mid-7th century, Suffolk was most certainly under East Anglian dominance, though some contend that the territory might have been under dispute earlier in the century between the East Saxons and East Anglians. There are a number of problems, however, with this hypothesis. In the first place, Sutton Hoo was used continuously from the end of the 6th century well into the 8th century. If the East Saxons originally held the grave-field, even up until 620 or 630, and lost it to the East Anglians, it is highly implausible that the latter people would continue to use it for their own dynasty. More importantly, the cemetery as a whole does not fit neatly into what is known of the history of the East Saxons, but fits remarkably well within the history and culture of the early East Anglians.

Recently, the study of East Anglia has increased significantly, not only the study of Sutton Hoo and Snape, but also of the recently excavated Boss Hall and Buttermarket cemeteries, as well as the reevaluation of the Hadleigh Road cemetery in Ipswich. Much remains to be published, but preliminary reports point to certain similarities and differences among these cemeteries that may reveal the true nature of Sutton Hoo. Snape and Sutton Hoo parallel each other in location (overlooking a river estuary), in the use of existing earthworks (the “swamping” of Bronze Age barrows at Snape), in the attempts to place graves along linear banks and ditches,^{xxv} and, of course, in the lavish ship burial. Yet in this last similarity a delicate disparity has been noticed. At Snape, the majority of burial mounds should properly be called ‘average’ Anglo-Saxon graves,^{xxvi} while Sutton Hoo is predominantly composed of two types of graves. On the one hand, there are the impressive and costly burial sites of the upper class, and on the other the humble, inferior graves of their servants: the class distinctions are clear and possibly even programmed. As Martin Carver puts it, “This is no ‘folk cemetery’ which developed extravagant burial styles in its later phases, but a ‘separated’ cemetery, reserved for the elite, where to gain entry you must either belong to the aristocracy or be co-opted into their ideological drama.”^{xxvii} Furthermore, Snape was used from the end of the 5th century to the end of the 6th century, while Sutton Hoo began its run around 600 AD, and though it was used well into the 8th century, the period of regal splendor was relatively short, as the coming of Christianity brought with it a clear simplification of burial practices.

WHICH KING?

The East Anglian dynasty was born out of the Wuffingas, named after their father, Wuffa, father of Tytil and grandfather of Rædwald, who probably died in the third quarter of the 6th century. Tytil most likely died just before the turn of the century, for Rædwald appears to have commanded the Wuffingas from 600 AD,^{xxviii} becoming a great and powerful king, worthy of mention among the list of *bretwaldas* found in the *Ecclesiastical History*^{xxix} and the *Anglo*

Saxon Chronicles.^{xxx} Some claim that this *bretwalda* title has no basis, and that the Chronicler simply copied what was really an invention of Bede’s—the addition of kings to the list from purely personal, ulterior motives. Perhaps the list in the *Anglo Saxon Chronicles* does depend upon Bede, but Bede did not use the term *bretwalda* (meaning “lord of Britain”). The Chronicler may have thought it appropriate to give some title to the positions implied by Bede and thus divined from his imagination the term *bretwalda*. It is more likely, however, that it was a term already in use, whether as an official title or as an acclamation called out in the mead-halls at the king’s approach. Furthermore, no one has discerned any specific bias in Bede’s list; if anything, the list admits of authenticity in giving claim to the power and dominion in England of Rædwald “the heretic”. Ultimately, “this list perhaps flattered the power of some kings and ignored that of others, but for our purposes the important point is the fact of such an ascendancy . . . Behind the power of a *bretwalda* was the memory of the political unity of Britain under the Romans.”^{xxxi}

Rædwald was certainly pagan and probably only accepted Christianity initially on Æthelberht’s account, quickly reverting after his own ascension as *bretwalda*.^{xxxii} East Anglia was almost certainly pagan from the 5th century, if not earlier, until at least the early 630s when Sigeberht came to power. Essex was more or less Christian in the early 600s after Sigeberht converted in 604 and, aside from a short relapse around 620 propelled by Sigeberht’s sons, continued to be Christian thereafter. Early Sutton Hoo, as exemplified in Mounds 1 and 2, was, as shown above, a great pagan burial ground and, therefore, far more appropriate to the rising East Anglian power under the pagan Rædwald than to the Christian East Saxons led by Sigeberht. For similar reasons, we can rule out Sigeberht of East Anglia, who, as a devout Christian brought up in Gaul, actually relinquished the throne in Rendlesham around 633 AD to enter a monastery.^{xxxiii} His contemporary Ecgic ought also to be supposed a candidate, if only we could determine just who he was. Bede mentions him only once, relegating him to a minor supporting role in the story of his

cousin, the pious Sigeberht.^{xxxiv} It is possible that he is the same as the Edric of the *Historia Brittonum* (philologically comparable to Elric as a late form of Æthelric), a theory supported by the fact that the list of kings in the *Historia Brittonum* appears to have a number of variant spellings that could be the result of philological change, scribal error, or just plain indifference.^{xxxv} In such a case, Ecgric married Hereswith and sired king Ealdwulf, which would place him in high enough regard to receive a great kingly burial, but also among pious and devoted Christians. Such an identification is problematic, however, as Ealdwulf appears to have lived possibly as late as 713 AD,^{xxxvi} which would make him an improbably long-lived man, even by contemporary standards! Furthermore, we know that Anna ruled following the deaths of Ecgric and Sigeberht c. 635 AD and was certainly a sincere Christian; he probably gave both the devout Sigeberht and Ecgric—whatever his true identity—Christian burials.

That leaves Rædwald, his son Eorpwald, and the latter's murderer, Ricberht. Eorpwald is an unlikely candidate for Mound 1 of Sutton Hoo: he was a Christian, converted just before his death through the influence of Edwin of Northumbria,^{xxxvii} and reigned but a few short years, being murdered around 627 AD by Ricberht, a shadowy figure whom Bede clearly disfavored and who may have taken control of East Anglia after slaying Eorpwald. According to Bede:

Some time after this, it happened that the nation of the Mercians, under King Penda, made war on the East Angles; who, finding themselves inferior in martial affairs to their enemy, entreated Sigeberht to go with them to battle, to encourage the soldiers...hoping that the soldiers would be less disposed to flee in the presence of him, who had once been a notable and brave commander.^{xxxviii}

On the basis of this passage, some have argued that Sigeberht may have “taken his throne by force of arms, if so presumably from the ‘pagan called Ricberht.’”^{xxxix} Furthermore, if Eorpwald was killed in a pagan reaction

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against his recently-adopted Christianity, Ricberht may have led the revolt, which would be a further reason to assume he took the crown thereafter and a sound reason to argue that Ricberht might have received a royal pagan burial from the grateful heathen people of East Anglia. This argument, however, breaks down once the pious Sigeberht succeeds to the throne: Sigeberht would not have given Ricberht, the pagan assassin of his half-brother Eorpwald, a royal burial.

CONCLUSION

Rædwald, then, remains, almost by default. The grave-goods of the burial mound indicate a royal burial, and, along with the historical records, the list of possible kings comes from the East Anglian dynasty between 615 and 635 AD. Eorpwald was a short-lived, minor king, unlikely to receive a luxurious burial from his assassin and successor, Ricberht. Neither would have Sigeberht and his brother Ecgric, who together subdued Ricberht, been accorded a royal pagan burial as a consequence of the coming of Christianity. Rædwald alone remains and indeed all the evidence converges on him. He was the greatest of the kings of East Anglia, the only one worthy of mention among the Northumbrians and Kents in the list of *bretwaldas*.^{xl} He fought and won a great battle against Ethelfrid of Northumbria and put Edwin on the throne^{xli} and held his power for over 20 years. He was the first to be introduced to Christianity, most likely in 618 at the court of Æthelberht of Kent, from which the spoons marked with “Paulus” and “Saulus” perhaps came. And who would be left to bury the great king Rædwald around 625 AD? Doubtless it would have been his son, Eorpwald, and his wife, nameless, whose unyielding adherence to the ancient gods, as presented in the *Ecclesiastical History*, marks her as definitively

pagan.^{xlii} She would have made it a point to render Rædwald a rich pagan burial, perhaps as a deliberate attack on Christianity through a remarkable display of high pagan rites. Thus, in the end, Hector Chadwick's firm assertion holds true, and in the absence of any new (and what would certainly be revolutionary) evidence, we can only conclude that King Rædwald's final resting place on earth was Mound 1 at Sutton Hoo.

ENDNOTES

- i. Pearson (27)
- ii. Chadwick (76-87)
- iii. Carver (349)
- iv. Kendall and Wells (3)
- v. Pearson (29)
- vi. Bede (I.xxv)
- vii. Bede (II.xv)
- viii. Kendall and Wells (19)
- ix. Kendall and Wells (19)
- x. Kendall and Wells (19)
- xi. Kendall and Wells (33)
- xii. Ryan (122)
- xiii. Kendall and Wells (24)
- xiv. Kendall and Wells (20)
- xv. Filmer-Sanke and Pestell (194)
- xvi. Kendall and Wells (161)
- xvii. Kendall and Wells (162)
- xviii. Bruce-Mitford (689)
- xix. Kendall and Wells (85)
- xx. Pearson (41)
- xxi. Pearson (39)
- xxii. Pearson (44)
- xxiii. Pearson (37)
- xxiv. Bede (III.xxii)
- xxv. Filmer-Sanke & Pestell (265)
- xxvi. Filmer-Sanke & Pestell (265)
- xxvii. Carver (363)
- xxviii. Bruce-Mitford (696)
- xxix. Bede (II.v)
- xxx. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles* (827)
- xxxi. Mayr-Harting (18)
- xxxii. Mayr-Harting (65)
- xxxiii. Bede (III.xviii)
- xxxiv. Bede (III.xviii)
- xxxv. Bruce-Mitford (702)
- xxxvi. Bruce-Mitford (695)
- xxxvii. Bede (II.xv)
- xxxviii. Bede (III.xviii)
- xxxix. Bruce-Mitford (701)
- xl. Bede (II.v)
- xli. Bede (II.xii)

xlii. Bede (II.xv)

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