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## **PREFACE**

Arrived at the end of what I always liked to call ‘my adventure in the Netherlands’, I realize that the people I would like to thank are so many that it will be impossible to name them all in this short preface.

First of all, I would like to thank Dr. Marco Mostert for his constant supervision. His comments, always delivered with kindness and accuracy, have helped me in making this thesis a better work and me, I hope, a better student.

I would also like to express my gratitude to Prof. Rolf Bremmer at Universiteit Leiden for his support. His unexpected invitation to see the *Leiden Riddle* and glossaries rekindled the interest in and fascination for Anglo-Saxon studies when weariness had overwhelmed me. His classes, always lively, and the passion he put on his work have been a real inspiration.

And a heartfelt ‘thank you’ should also go to Prof. David Murray who with that ‘*Hwaet!*’ shouted in class when I was still studying at the Università degli Studi di Urbino, “Carlo Bo”, first led me in the path of Anglo-Saxon studies I have been following so far.

I would also like to show my gratitude to all the professors and doctors who thought me courses and tutorials. I have learnt much and I received encouragement and motivation from each one of them. Also I do not want to forget the support I received from the librarians and secretaries of Universiteit Utrecht.

However, these two years I spent in the Netherlands have been more than student-life. A special thanks goes to Rutger, who had to suffer all the changes of my mood, ranging from pure excitement for what I was studying here to real panic in the last stages of the writing of this thesis. Hans, Frieda and Renèe were spared the panic but they deserve a sincere ‘thank you’ for their support nonetheless. They are my special ‘Dutch family’.

What to say to the friends I have met here? Arwin, Cecile, Elisabeth, Emily, Fenna, Frits, Gosia, Jacqueline, Tjasa and so many others I cannot possibly name here...thanks for having made my stay here a very special one! The dinners and parties, the Christmas cards and pictures... each event, however small, was, is and

will be of enormous importance for me. I hope I'll see you all again, somewhere in the world, to talk about the 'old good Utrecht's days'.

And last but not least, allow me a few lines in my mother tongue to thank those without whom none of this would have been possible:

Cari mamma, babbo e Stefano,

eccomi di nuovo qui, alla fine di un altro capitolo, di nuovo pronta a ringraziarvi per tutto l'appoggio che mi avete dato in questi due anni. Non è sempre stato facile essere lontano da casa per studiare ma grazie al vostro aiuto tutto è andato per il meglio. Non solo mi avete sostenuta economicamente (e Dio solo sa quanti sacrifici avete fatto per questo...) ma siete sempre stati con me. Non avete mai messo in dubbio le mie scelte ma mi avete sempre supportato e siete stati sempre presenti, anche se solo per telefono, nei momenti di massima crisi: le consegne dai vari capitoli di questa tesi, le tesine durante l'anno e via dicendo....grazie mille! Non potete immaginare quanto importante sia stato per me.

Spero un giorno di potervi ripagare appieno per tutto quello che avete fatto e state facendo per me.

Vi voglio un mondo di bene,

Laura

## **INTRODUCTION**

The ability to communicate, to express our feelings and ideas, is what makes us human. Everything surrounding us is communication, from the lallation of babies, naturally learning how to speak, to the advertisement boards we see everyday at the bus stop. Society itself is built on communication. Relationships between individuals and those between individuals and institutions are regulated by various codes and norms. Our basic needs are satisfied by expressing them, but communication, in its various forms, does not only respond to practical requests. Man seems to have always had the need to go beyond the natural boundaries surrounding him, expressing his emotions, fears and his view of the world in more than just pragmatic terms. Paintings (from the cave drawings of primitive men to contemporary abstract art), literature, songs, costumes, body language...every aspect of cultural expression reflects this need.

The wealth of medieval communication can be glimpsed from the magnificent artistic production of the time, from the decorated carpet pages of insular manuscripts to the precious reliquaries and religious paraments of the bigger and smaller churches disseminated in the European landscape; from the variety of gestures, frozen in splendid manuscript illuminations, to the chants that echoed in cathedrals and minsters. This study will present a specific aspect of this wide-ranging and rich field, taking into consideration the communicative behaviour that can be deduced from inscribed movable objects, such as rings, brooches, caskets, sword pommels and helmets.

Inscriptions have been studied in the past for what they might tell us about the level of literacy in Anglo-Saxon England and for topics such as patronage and production. They have been dealt with in the detailed catalogues of the museums now preserving them, and they have been analyzed from an archaeological and art historical point of view. Never before, however, have they been put in relation to a wider communicational theory which might shed light on the semiological aspects of their production and distribution.

The aim of this thesis is to research the communicational aspects of the production, interpretation and use of inscribed movable objects. They will be analyzed taking into account the kind of literacy they display and considering them in relation to the context in which they were produced, with references to the possible reaction of both the intended audience and of later, secondary audiences.

In order to help in this investigation a model specific for messages sent as inscribed objects will be developed. Having set these definitions as a theoretical background, each surviving inscribed object of our corpus will be presented with a brief description together with transliterations of the texts inscribed on it. Whenever possible the history and present location of the objects are given. They have been listed alphabetically according to the name of the place where they were found or location as offered by the catalogues consulted. The pictures of the objects are collected in the plates at the end of the thesis.

So as to make the corpus of objects to be investigated manageable, geographical and chronological boundaries had to be set. We have limited ourselves to the objects produced in Anglo-Saxon England in the years AD 600-900. Objects imported into England have not been considered (e.g. the Sutton Hoo spoons, inscribed with Greek names, buried in AD 625 with princely treasure in a ship burial).<sup>1</sup> However, a few objects now preserved on the Continent have been included, since their Anglo-Saxon origin is widely accepted. The time boundary has been chosen to include the beginning of the spread of Christianity in England after the arrival of Saint Augustine in Canterbury in AD 597. It excludes the period of the settlement of the Vikings in England in the late Saxon period. The coming of Christianity is of fundamental importance in the analysis of the objects. The social and cultural changes brought by the spreading of the Christian faith brought changes in the codes used to send messages. The audience itself would change in time, influenced by the changes in society. The decision of leaving out the Scandinavian influence of the late ninth and tenth century is due to the impossibility in a thesis of

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<sup>1</sup> Campbell, James (ed.), *The Anglo-Saxons*, Penguin Books, London, 1991, pp. 32-33.

this length to deal with a complete new set of social, linguistic and artistic codes such as that of the Vikings.

Two of the major problems encountered in the study of the objects included in the corpus are the dating of the objects and the lack of sources. Dating can be problematic. Some of the objects can be dated with precision thanks to the appearance of a name recorded also in other sources, for instance, or on stylistic and linguistic grounds. Often, however, such clues are missing, so that an object can only be dated 'from the seventh to the tenth century', for example. In these cases, it is not always easy to decide whether an object is to be included or not in the time boundary referred to in the thesis. Reliance has been made on the catalogues and hand-lists available.

The objects dealt with in this thesis number 62. This might seem quite a sizeable quantity of objects, but if one considers that they are the remains of three centuries of history, than the figure certainly is small. Many objects produced in perishable materials such as wood and bone have disappeared. The scarcity of sources that outlived the passing of time and man is such that those interested in this period would cry in dismay if it wasn't for the richness of the few objects still preserved. But not everything is lost, and new findings can still surprise us with amazing features, such as the burial at Prittlewell.<sup>2</sup> This means that the corpus gathered in this thesis is neither exhaustive nor definitive. New findings can enlarge the corpus and bring extra information.

Even if relatively poor in number, the objects are spectacularly rich in quality. They are invaluable testimonies of the literate Anglo-Saxon world. The questions raised by their analysis touch upon many different fields of research. Important topics such as gift-giving, the Anglo-Frisian linguistic relationship or the social position of women in Anglo-Saxon England can only be mentioned here; they could not be dealt with in detail. Of these wide literatures and fields of research I can only scratch the surface in this thesis.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.molas.org.uk/pages/siteReports.asp?siteid=pr03&section=preface>. Accessed 17 July 2008.

The same is true for the semiological details. It is not possible to thoroughly examine the rich debate in communication and media studies or reception theories. This is also because the difference between the sources adduced is too big. The debate on mass media, for example, can obviously not be applied to the Middle Ages, when such a thing did not exist. However, general terms from semiology have been used in order to create a model to be applied to the objects.

The argument will be structured in five chapters. In the first one, the theoretical background will be defined. The thesis will be inserted in the debate concerning the history of medieval communication and literacy. The model will be presented there, together with a short introduction to the process of Christianization taking place in the years AD 600-900.

The second, third and fourth chapters will focus on the presentation and analysis of the corpus. The objects have been divided into jewellery, armour and weapons, and in a final chapter objects of various natures have been gathered.

In the last chapter, conclusions will be drawn regarding the literacy displayed in the objects.

Before the analysis of the corpus can start, however, a few definitions have to be given, so to avoid misconceptions. The terminology used in the thesis needs to be explained. The texts inscribed in the objects can be divided between religious and secular ones, i.e. texts not concerned with religion at all, such as maker and owner formulae or simple personal names. Moreover, there are still other texts which will be called magical. Magic, like religion, appeals to a supernatural power, from which a beneficial effect is expected. The need underlying a prayer to God and the invocation of a 'pagan' deity is the same. What changes is the way these practices and beliefs can be seen by the current religious authorities. The issue is best summarized by Meaney, who explains how 'religion and magic should be regarded as at either end of a spectrum: at one end an official, public ritual worshipping a deity at a recognized sanctuary and at the other end a secret, individual action'.<sup>3</sup> This definition will help in

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<sup>3</sup> Meaney, Audrey, 'Magic' in Michael Lapidge, John Blair, Simon Keynes and Donald Scragg (eds.), *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Anglo-Saxon England*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, 2001, pp. 298-299.

distinguishing magical texts from religious ones. The latter can be considered ‘orthodox’ texts, because they were accepted by and acceptable to the Church. Magical texts, on the contrary, display words linked to beliefs that would have been condemned by the ecclesiastical authorities because deviant from what was considered the adequate norm. This dualistic view is obviously a simplification of a much more complex situation. The Church itself, as will be shown in chapter 1.II, was to change its attitude towards pre-Christian practices and beliefs, in some cases making them into its own instruments of conversion.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, this simplification is needed for the sake of the classification of the texts inscribed in the objects.

As far as the transliteration of the texts is concerned, the texts in Latin script are transliterated using capital letters while runes are in bold. A vertical line ‘|’ represents word or letter separation while a slash ‘/’ signifies a ligature. ‘?’ appears whenever it is not possible to recognize a letter or rune.

Despite the limitations, it is hoped that this investigation on the world on Anglo-Saxon inscribed objects will prove useful and interesting.

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **COMMUNICATION AND INSCRIPTIONS**

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<sup>4</sup> For literature on the magic of the written word see Marco Mostert, ‘A bibliography of works on medieval communication’ in *New Approaches to Medieval Communication*, Marco Mostert (ed.), Utrecht Studies on Medieval Literacy 1, Brepols, Turnhout, 1999, items nos. 1553-1567, pp. 295-296 and, by the same author, the article ‘De magie van het geschreven woord’ in *De Betovering van het middeleeuwse christendom. Studies over ritueel en magie in de Middeleeuwen*, M. Mostert and A. Demyttenaere (eds.), Verloren, Hilversum, 1995, pp.61-100. For the specific case of Anglo-Saxon magic see, among others, Godfrid Storms, *Anglo-Saxon Magic*, Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, 1948; J. H. G. Grattan and Charles Singer, *Anglo-Saxon Magic and Medicine*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1952; Audrey L. Meaney, *Anglo-Saxon Amulets and Curing Stones*, BAR British Series 96, 1981 and Bill Griffiths, *Aspects of Anglo-Saxon Magic*, Anglo-Saxon Books, Hockwold-cum-Wilton, Norfolk, 1996.

## 1. I COMMUNICATION AND LITERACY

Communication is a complex phenomenon. The term ‘communication’ is used as a general description for a series of various acts that enable the exchange of information between two or more individuals. Defining the process involved in such exchanges is difficult because of the many variables at stake. However, the definition proposed by Harold Lasswell expresses effectively the basic elements of communication: ‘Who (says) what (to) whom (in) what channel (with) what effect’.<sup>5</sup> This description displays the relationship existing between the sender and the message he sends to a receiver using a specific medium with a specific intention underlying his action.

This definition, however useful, does not account for the complexity of the communicational act. The sender is himself a receiver, influenced by a specific cultural and social milieu. The content of his message and the reasons for sending it can be socially constructed, possibly also influenced by contacts with foreign elements and cultures. The channel or medium itself can send a message. The same piece of information can be sent in written form, in oral performance, with gestures, in pictures. Each of these media has its own characteristics and potentialities that can influence the meaning of the sentence itself.

The choice of adopting a new medium is in itself a statement. One thing is to make a statement in an oral performance, another is to write it on a piece of paper or parchment, and yet another is to choose a more durable material like stone or metal, as in the case of the inscriptions treated in this thesis. The supports on which the texts can be inscribed are media with specific potentialities and possible intrinsic meanings.

The receivers, like the senders, can also be influenced by a specific social and cultural background, not necessarily coincident with the one of the sender, so that the interpretation of the message can vary. One can imagine a face-to-face oral

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.cultsock.ndirect.co.uk/MUHome/cshtml/index.html>. Accessed 17 July 2008. In this chapter general terms from semiology will be used. The introductory work by Pierre Guiraud, *La Sémiologie*, Que sais-je?, Presse Universitaires de France, Paris, 1971 has been used in this context.

conversation with two participants coming from different cultural areas or being born into different social classes. These discrepancies can produce misunderstandings or cultural clashes. The same is true for written communication, which can survive the passing of time and thus be interpreted by new receivers with dissimilar expectations. As Clanchy puts it: ‘every piece of writing needs an interpreter and it is reinterpreted every time it is read’.<sup>6</sup>

The specific debate on medieval communication has been concerned for many decades with the relationship between orality and literacy.<sup>7</sup> The sharp division between literate and illiterate was, however, soon to be abandoned. Bäuml in 1980 formulated three socially conditioned and functional modes of approach to the transmission of knowledge: ‘fully-literate’, ‘quasi-literate’ and ‘illiterate’. He also warned against possible anachronisms and invited to consider the specific social function of the act of reading and writing. For instance, kings would not write documents themselves but they would let secretaries do that for them, as that would be more fitting to the position of a monarch.<sup>8</sup>

Mostert further developed the classification with the addition of a fourth mode: the ‘semi-illiterate’. He distinguished between the ‘illiterate’, who does not know what writing is; the ‘semi-illiterate’, who knows what writing is but who cannot write or read himself; the ‘semi-literate’, who is functionally literate but who does not know the sophistication of the culture of writing; and finally the ‘literate’, who is able to manipulate the culture of writing at will. Mostert defined these qualities as ‘registers of literacy’, showing how one person could fit in one or another group according to the situation.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Clanchy, Michael, ‘Introduction’ in *New Approaches to Medieval Communication*, p. 6.

<sup>7</sup> For an overview of the state of the art in medieval communication see Marco Mostert, ‘New approaches to medieval communication?’ in *New Approaches to Medieval Communication*, pp. 15-37 and Marco Mostert, ‘Reading, Writing and Literacy: Communication and the History of Medieval Societies’ in *Literacy in Medieval and Early Modern Scandinavian Culture*, Pernille Hermann (ed.), The Viking Collection, Studies in Northern Civilization 16, University Press of Southern Denmark, Odense, 2005, pp. 261-285.

<sup>8</sup> Bäuml, Franz H., ‘Varieties and consequences of medieval literacy and illiteracy’, *Speculum* 55 (1980), pp. 240-246.

<sup>9</sup> Mostert, Marco, ‘Forgery and Trust’ in *Strategies of Writing. Studies on Text and Trust in the Middle Ages*, Petra Schulte, Marco Mostert and Irene van Renswoude (eds.), Utrecht Studies on Medieval Literacy 13, Brepols, Turnhout, 2008, pp. 40-41.

This nuanced view better describes the complex process of literalization, in which members of all social groups gradually turn to writing for purposes which until then had been served by non-verbal and oral forms of communication. The introduction of writing, or of any other new medium, cannot be sudden and immediately functional. The new technique has to prove to be efficient in order to be generally accepted by society, which actively adapts the culture of the written word to its own circumstances.<sup>10</sup>

Writing itself is just a tool, although a potent one, that coexists with an entire set of communicational acts: rituals, gestures, colours, oral performances as expressed in liturgy and poetry, chant, painting, music. The introduction of writing enabled a series of changes in the way men could send their messages, giving way to new ways of thinking and conceiving the world. Goody and Watt in their seminal (and controversial) article 'The consequences of literacy' explain how writing enabled a series of changes that led to social development. Writing allowed forms of storage of knowledge that had been impossible in oral tradition, bound as that was to the limits of human memory. The fixity of the written word gave birth to the idea of a stable reality behind the ever-changing nature of oral tradition, thus dividing truth from fiction, history from myth.<sup>11</sup>

Nonetheless, illiteracy itself should not be identified with non-education. Oral communication and imitation would remain the main way in which much of the transmission of knowledge was handed down from generation to generation.<sup>12</sup> Wormald explains how literacy in Anglo-Saxon England long remained restricted, being mainly a clerical monopoly, and how the importance of non-written education for noble classes was cause and effect of this.<sup>13</sup>

Literacy experienced a significant expansion thanks to the efforts of the Church and the spreading of the Christian faith. Goody closely links the universalistic

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<sup>10</sup> Mostert, Marco, 'Reading, Writing and Literacy: Communication and the History of Medieval Societies', p. 271 and p. 275.

<sup>11</sup> Goody, Jack and Ian Watt, 'The consequences of literacy' in *Literacy in Traditional Societies*, Jack Goody (ed.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1968, pp. 27-68.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>13</sup> Wormald, C. P., 'The uses of literacy in Anglo-Saxon England and its neighbours', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, fifth series, vol. 27 (1977), pp. 114-115.

religions of conversion (excluding religions based on the book and the individual path to salvation) with literacy and the ‘individualizing’ tendency of literate technology.<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless, Christian religion and writing were already present in Britain from Roman times. Despite the abandonment of writing following the Germanic invasions, literacy in Latin persisted in British areas, it developed to a high degree of sophistication in Ireland and it also was present in the Anglo-Saxon territories.<sup>15</sup> Runic literacy, for instance, was practiced by the invaders, who brought this script from the Continent.<sup>16</sup> It is however doubtless that it is thanks to the Church that literacy could experience a significant expansion.

## 1. II CHRISTIANIZATION

The spreading of the Christian faith was one of the major aspects of change in the social and cultural context of which the objects gathered in this thesis are the product. The diffusion of the new faith brought with it many changes concerning the possible codes to be used in the production of inscribed objects: new formulae, the Latin language and the Latin script, the banning of messages now considered ‘wrong’. The implications of such changes for the corpus of objects need to be taken into consideration.

### **Historical overview**

The conversion of the Anglo-Saxons has been summarized by John Blair in five phases:<sup>17</sup>

1. AD 597: arrival of Bishop Augustine sent by Pope Gregory the Great to Kent.

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<sup>14</sup> Goody, Jack, ‘Introduction’ in *Literacy in Traditional Societies*, pp. 2-3.

<sup>15</sup> For a detailed analysis of the spoken and written languages not only in Britain but in Europe see Chapter 1, ‘Speaking and Writing’, in Julia M. H. Smith, *Europe after Rome. A New Cultural History, 500-1000*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2005, pp. 13-50.

<sup>16</sup> Page, R.I., *Runes*, British Museum Publications, London, 1987, p. 32.

<sup>17</sup> Blair, John, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2006, p. 9.

2. c. 616-625: loss of influence following the death of the converted king Æthelbert of Kent.
3. c.625-642: Canterbury-sponsored mission to Northumbria under Paulinus and Irish mission from Iona.
4. c. 653-664: expansion and synod of Whitby.
5. 670s-680s: all English kings are baptized and all English peoples are nominally Christian.

This very brief summary, however useful to keep track of the main chronological development of events in the seventh century, cannot take into account the multifaceted reality of the conversion period. Can we really think that all English people were Christian by the end of the 680s? We can imagine the subjects of a Christian king to be considered Christian as well, but would the people see themselves as such? Yorke points out that one should account for a gap of at least forty or fifty years before the old practices would be abandoned and those of the new faith could take their place.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, one has to reflect on the speed and the means of spreading the new faith. Can we suppose that the precepts of the new faith, its doctrine, rules and taboos, were known also by people living, for instance, in remote areas without direct contact with monasteries or episcopal sees?

One should also take into account the syncretic nature of the first expressions of Christianity in England. Yorke notices how the polytheistic nature of Anglo-Saxon pre-Christian spirituality allowed the acceptance of a new god without necessarily implying the disappearance of the old ones. The Christian god could thus occupy just another position in the old pantheon.<sup>19</sup>

Christianity had already been introduced in Britain during the Roman occupation of the island. Many Germanic warriors arrived in Britain fighting as *foederati* in the Roman army, living as farmers when not at war.<sup>20</sup> Also on the

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<sup>18</sup> Yorke, Barbara, 'The Reception of Christianity at the Anglo-Saxon Courts' in *St. Augustine and the Conversion of England*, Richard Gameson (ed.), Sutton Publishing, Stroud, Gloucestershire, 1999, p. 164.

<sup>19</sup> Yorke, Barbara, 'The Reception of Christianity at the Anglo-Saxon Courts', p. 164.

<sup>20</sup> Mayr-Harting, Henry, *The Coming of Christianity in England*, Schocken Books, New York, 1972, p. 13.

Continental some of the Germanic tribes that were to migrate to England had contacts with the Empire and were thus familiar with Roman ways of life and religion. Campbell shows how some Saxons had already been converted in Gaul in AD 560, in a region with close contacts with England.<sup>21</sup> The abandonment of Britain by the Roman army and the subsequent invasion by Germanic tribes formed what we can imagine was a melting pot of beliefs and practices, especially in frontier zones, where the meeting of many peoples (Britons, Irish, Picts, Romans, Franks, Frisians, Angles, Saxons, Jutes and Scandinavian peoples) and ideas could take place.

Although AD 597 is commonly considered the year of the conversion of England, more elements actually led to the acceptance of Christianity.

The link with Francia most certainly played a part in it. Gaul and England were united by bonds of marriage through the union of the Frankish Queen Bertha and king Æthelbert of Kent. The Christian queen Bertha was free to profess her faith, and in fact Augustine found a church dedicated to St. Martin in Canterbury upon his arrival. Even if the king was not yet converted, he was familiar with the Christian religion and also with the culture it produced on the Continent. In Gaul, a monastic movement had already started in imperial times and it had spread in the British Church by the sixth century.<sup>22</sup>

Ireland also played an important role. Monks on *peregrinatio* (a voluntarily religious exile for monks who decided to leave their kinsmen and their protection to travel to distant lands) passed through England, founding communities there just as Columbanus did when he arrived in Burgundy at the end of the sixth century.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, Irish monks were to play a decisive role in the history of the English Church when king Oswald of Northumbria called for their help from Iona to restore his reign to Christianity (Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, III, 2-6).<sup>24</sup> Thus it is not

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<sup>21</sup> Campbell, James, 'Observations on the conversion of England', *Essays in Anglo-Saxon History*, The Hambledon Press, London, 1986, pp. 70-71.

<sup>22</sup> Mayr-Harting, Henry, *The Coming of Christianity in England*, p. 36.

<sup>23</sup> Campbell, James, 'The first century of Christianity in England', *Essays in Anglo-Saxon History*, pp. 51-52.

<sup>24</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (eds.), Oxford Medieval Texts, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1991, pp. 215-231.

possible to imagine Anglo-Saxon England as a wild area, completely ignorant of the cultural lives of its neighbours.

The success of the mission from Rome might be due to the political implications of the acceptance of Christianity directly from the papacy. As Mayr-Harting suggests, apart from personal spiritual considerations of the king that cannot be reconstructed, the king may have considered it worthwhile to create a link with the Mediterranean area and its rich culture. But what seems even more important, the acceptance of Christianity from Rome avoided any possible claim of dependence that might arise from a conversion from Gaul.<sup>25</sup>

How could the missionary endeavours be accomplished? The obliteration of symbols and important practices related to pre-Christian systems of belief seems to have been the first step taken by the Church in its mission. As Pope Gregory the Great wrote in a letter to King Æthelbert:

(...) So, my most illustrious son, watch carefully over the grace you have received from God and hasten to extend the Christian faith among the people who are subject to you. Increase your righteous zeal for their conversion; **suppress** the worship of idols; **overthrow** their buildings and shrines; **strengthen** the morals of your subjects by outstanding purity of life, by exhorting them, **terrifying**, enticing, and **correcting** them, and by showing them an example of good works (...).<sup>26</sup>

It is clear that Gregory first envisaged the mission to England in terms of a compulsory spreading of the new faith from the king to his subjects. Markus explains how the references to Emperor Constantine in the continuation of the letter show how the pope was thinking of the coercive regime of the Roman Empire in the fourth century, when the imposition of Christian orthodoxy by compulsion was the norm.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Mayr-Harting, Henry, *The Coming of Christianity in England*, p.63.

<sup>26</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, I, 32, p. 113, my emphasis.

<sup>27</sup> Markus, R. A., 'Augustine and Gregory the Great' in *St. Augustine and the Conversion of England*, p. 44.

However, a second letter, written by Gregory to abbot Mellitus on his way to England to bring help to Augustine, shows a different approach:

However, when Almighty God has brought you to our most reverend brother Bishop Augustine, tell him what I have decided after long deliberation about the English people, namely that the idol temples of that race should by no means be destroyed, but only the idols in them. Take holy water and sprinkle it in these shrines, build altars and place relics in them. For if the shrines are well built, it is essential that they should be changed from the worship of devils to the service of the true God. When this people see that their shrines are not destroyed they will be able to banish error from their hearts and be more ready to come to the places they are familiar with, but now recognizing and worshipping the true God. And because they are in the habit of slaughtering much cattle as sacrifices to devils, some solemnity ought to be given them in exchange for this. So on the day of the dedication or the festivals of the holy martyrs, whose relics are deposited there, let them make themselves huts from the branches of trees around the churches which have been converted out of shrines, and let them celebrate the solemnity with religious feasts. Do not let them sacrifice animals to the devil, let them slaughter animals for their own food to the praise of God, and let them give thanks to the Giver of all things for His bountiful provision. Thus while some outward rejoicings are preserved, they will be able more easily to share in inward rejoicings. It is doubtless impossible to cut out everything at once from their stubborn minds: just as the man who is attempting to climb to the highest place, rises by steps and degrees and not by leaps.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, I, 30, pp. 107-109.

Markus suggests that news from Britain and the real situation there must have reached Pope Gregory, who revised his earlier attitude. The second letter stresses the importance of coming to terms with the people in Britain, and the search for consent seems to be of paramount importance. But how could this consent be won?

The Church in England had to face a warrior society and it had to compromise with a warrior aristocracy in order to get protection and patronage for its missionary efforts. In order to overcome their resistance, the Church had to start talking their own language.

Some of the Old English terms used for God are *metod* (ruler), *þeoden* (prince) *cyning* (king) *hlaford* (lord) and *dryhten* (lord). Thus God could be envisaged as part of the warrior world and indeed as the supreme lord. Loyalty, the fundamental quality retainers had to possess, could actually be easily integrated into the Christian perspective. One of the best examples of the intermingling of the new Christian faith and the old heroic ethos can be found in the splendid poem *The Dream of the Rood*, preserved in the Vercelli Book, dated to the late tenth century.<sup>29</sup> In the text, the cross is described as a faithful retainer of Jesus Christ, who triumphantly embraces his fate and sacrifices himself for the sake of humankind. The cross remains loyal to its lord to the bitter end and becomes the instrument of his torture. The fundamental notion of the eschatological doctrine is thus displayed through a core notion of the heroic ethos: to face a glorious death with bravery.

Various aspects of the Christian faith were expressed in secular and heroic images to make them familiar to the Anglo-Saxon aristocratic warrior audience. There were however features in pre-Christian beliefs that could not be accepted, such as the existence of more than one god. The Church attempted to reconcile existing gods with its doctrine. One of the ways to deal with pagan deities was to render them inoffensive by showing how they were actually only human. They were maybe heroes, who were mistakenly considered gods (euhemeristic approach).<sup>30</sup> The success

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<sup>29</sup> Treharne, Elaine (ed.), *Old and Middle English, c. 890-1400. An Anthology*, second edition, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 2004, pp. 108-115.

<sup>30</sup> Johnson, David F., 'Euhemerisation versus demonization. The pagan gods and Ælfric's *De Falsis Diis*' in *Pagans and Christians. The Interplay between Christian Latin and Traditional Germanic Cultures in Early Medieval Europe*, T. Hofstra, L.A.J.R. Houwen and A. A. MacDonald (eds.), Egbert

of this approach is shown by the presence of Woden in royal genealogies as a tribal hero rather than as a powerful god.<sup>31</sup> However, as Yorke invites to notice, the very fact that the name of a former god was preserved in genealogies (symbols of power and authority) shows how important he remained due to his ancestral and hierarchical associations, and thus how he was not easy to relinquish.<sup>32</sup>

Not only gods but also pagan ancestors could not easily be reconciled with the Christian doctrine. The dogma concerning the original sin to be cleansed by baptism (based on the words of Jesus: “unless a man be born again of water and the Holy Ghost, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God” (John, 3:5)) posed a serious question for the destiny of those people who through no fault of their own were excluded from such a rebirth. The pagan ancestors of the Anglo-Saxons were destined to be damned since they did not receive baptism, because they had been ignorant of the Christian faith. Symbolic in this respect is the rejection of Christianity by the Frisian king Radbod who claimed to prefer to live in Hell with his ancestors than in Heaven with strangers.<sup>33</sup> An attempt to reconcile the pagan past with the new doctrine was provided by the image of the noble pagan. This image of the heathen who is able to read the word of God in the book of nature is derived from St. Paul’s teachings as expressed in the Letter to the Romans:

For the invisible things of him, from the creation of the world, are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made.  
(Romans I, 20)

The world is thus seen as a revelation of the divinity of God, through which also the pagans can glimpse His existence and power.

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Forsten, Groningen, 1995, pp. 35-69.

<sup>31</sup> See Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, I, 15, p. 51, for such an instance.

<sup>32</sup> Yorke, Barbara, *The Conversion of Britain, 600-800*, Pearson, Harlow, 2006, p. 108.

<sup>33</sup> Pseudo-Jonas, *Vita Vulframni Episcopi Senonici*, Wilhelm Levison (ed.), *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores rerum Merovingicarum 5, Passiones vitaeque sanctorum aevi Merovingici III*, Impensis Bibliopolii Hahniani, Hannoverae et Lipsiae, 1910, no. XXIII, ll. 10-14, p.668.

For when the Gentiles, who have not the law, do by nature those things that are of the law, these having not the law are a law to themselves. They show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness to them, and their thoughts between themselves accusing, or also defending one another.  
(Romans II, 14-15)

The word of God is then already in their hearts and they can behave according to God's law by nature, even when they miss the revelation of His will.<sup>34</sup> Larry D. Benson connects this concept of the noble heathen to the real interest of the eighth century Anglo-Saxon Church in converting the pagan tribes on the Continent and with the importance of showing them as redeemable.<sup>35</sup>

Also the landscape underwent a process of Christianization. In his thorough study of churches in Anglo-Saxon England, John Blair offers many examples of this process. Natural sites considered sacred by different groups and populations could be reused by later generations wanting to create a link with their past. This process had already been started by the native Britons, who reused the Roman past in their burial practice, for instance, and the same happened once the Anglo-Saxon tribes arrived. The Church, in its effort to convert them, adopted the same approach and thus made some of the natural sites worshipped by the Anglo-Saxons part of their own Christian landscape. Timber shrines, themselves created on the example of Romano-British practices by the pagan Anglo-Saxons, were reused as rural churches; important crossroads were signalled with stone or wooden crosses, marking the territory with constant reminders of the presence of God.<sup>36</sup>

The belief in spirits inhabiting springs, rivers, trees and other natural sites gave rise, in time, to the cult of local saints. As declared by Pope Gregory himself in

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<sup>34</sup> For a discussion on the Noble Heathen see Lars Lönnroth, "The Noble Heathen: A Theme in the Sagas". *Scandinavian Studies*, Vol. 41 num. 1 (Feb. 1969), pp. 1-29.

<sup>35</sup> Benson, Larry D., "The Pagan Coloring of *Beowulf*", in *The Beowulf Reader*, Peter S. Baker (ed.), Basic Readings in Anglo-Saxon England, vol. 1, Garland Reference Library of the Humanities, vol. 1431, Routledge, New York, London, 2000, pp. 35-50.

<sup>36</sup> Blair, John, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*, pp. 52, 187-188. See James Campbell (ed.), *The Anglo-Saxons*, p. 57 for the possible example at Yeavinger.

his letter to Mellitus, idols in shrines should be replaced by relics of saints. Saints with their miracles and healing powers could create that same link with the supernatural and the divine as those spirits had done before, offering a new answer to the same question of protection and a similar link to what is beyond. Jolly stresses the fact that this accommodation to native animistic beliefs allowed the new faith to gain access to the daily life of common people.<sup>37</sup> These popular cults and social rituals such as assemblies in open air sites or processions like the one of Rogationtide, taking place in April to call for God's mercy and protection of the crops, were expressions of ancient solidarities in agricultural communities. In time they would become the foundations for new solidarities that were to gather around rural parish churches.<sup>38</sup>

It goes without saying that this historical overview is a simplification of a much more complex situation. Localism would define different religious experiences and different ways of adaptation to the social environment. Differences would arise between centres of learning, episcopal sees, towns and rural villages. The definition offered by Peter Brown of 'Micro-Christendoms' in an attempt to label the 'particular combination of local autonomy with loyalty to the idea of a wider Christendom' fits the situation of Christian Anglo-Saxon England.<sup>39</sup> However, more cannot be done in the scope of this short historical overview. Generic though it may be, it should be a useful tool to keep tracks of the main events taking place when the objects originated.

### **1. III INSCRIBED OBJECTS AS SOURCES**

Having sketched the basic theoretical background concerning medieval literacy and communication and having introduced the historical context, it is now possible to turn to the corpus of inscribed objects. The choice of these sources is based on the assortment of the objects and the texts inscribed on them, which vary from secular to

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<sup>37</sup> Jolly, Karen Louise, *Popular Religion in Late Saxon England. Elf Charms in Context*, The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill & London, 1996, p.28.

<sup>38</sup> Blair, John, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*, p. 472.

<sup>39</sup> Brown, Peter, *The Rise of Western Christendom. Triumph and Diversity, AD 200-1000*, second edition, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 2003, p. 15, pp. 355-364 and pp. 368-373.

religious ones. These objects allow the study of a practical kind of literacy, removed from the monasteries and their scriptoria. These objects and their texts actually circulated in society and so they represent possible popular literacy.

Favreau defines epigraphy as

Science de ce qui est écrit, sur un monument ou un objet donné, en vue d'une publicité universelle et durable, et dehors des préoccupations juridique ou administrative.<sup>40</sup>

Public display and durability are the main characteristics of inscriptions. They thus represent a specific aspect of practical literacy in Anglo-Saxon England.

The richness of the texts allows access to various aspects of Anglo-Saxon mentality, in which Christian messages could coexist with popular ones. Their being inscribed means that they were all considered important enough to be registered in this medium.

Another reason why inscriptions are fundamental primary sources is that they survived the salvage operation of the eleventh century, when historical records were created from archives and libraries at the expense of documents considered irrelevant.

<sup>41</sup> Inscriptions differ from books and their manipulation. The objects did not go through this same 'depuration' process but they were fixed expressions, which can exemplify the use of writing in everyday life.

Problems regarding inscriptions as sources of literacy still remain. Wormald points out one of the main problems when he says that inscriptions are too few to be taken as indication of widespread literacy in Anglo-Saxon society.<sup>42</sup> The lack of sources is, in fact, one of the main barriers with which medievalists are confronted. It follows that sometimes the interpretations of what we have do not lend themselves to generalisation.

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<sup>40</sup> Favreau, Robert, *Les Inscriptions Médiévales*, vol 35 in *Typologie des Sources du Moyen Âge Occidental*, Brepols, Turnhout, 1979, p. 16.

<sup>41</sup> Clanchy, Michael, 'Introduction', pp. 7-8.

<sup>42</sup> Wormald, C. P., 'The uses of literacy in Anglo-Saxon England and its neighbours', p. 95.

Despite these limitations, inscriptions can be taken as evidence for change in the social use of writing thanks to their specific public role. They can also show changes in the mentality of the people, for instance following the introduction of Christianity. These transformations can be reflected in the content of the messages incised, in their forms and interpretations. Popular and mainly oral knowledge could be put into written words, such as charms in rings. Moreover, the mingling of two languages and two scripts testifies to the complexity of the linguistic and communicational situation in Anglo-Saxon England in the years AD 600-900.

When considering inscribed objects as sources, not only the content and form of the text should be considered but also the support itself, i.e. the object. The objects have a specific significance on their own, and a function. Weapons are created to respond to a specific need of self-defence or attack, for example, and brooches and pins are primarily fastening tools. However, they acquire a special value as personal possessions of their owners. Weiner explains how ‘all personal possessions invoke an intimate connection with their owners, symbolizing personal experience that, even though private or secret, adds value to the person’s social identity’.<sup>43</sup> One can imagine most items in this corpus as the private property of an Anglo-Saxon man or woman, which would be kept in the family for generations, as heirlooms and valuable commodities.

Weiner also explains how the loss of such possessions diminishes the ‘self’ and the group to which the person belongs, as these objects preserve for the future memories of the past.<sup>44</sup> The conservation of such items secures a kind of permanence for those involved in the production, ownership, use or custody of the object. One can imagine a sword or a ring being the repository of hereditary family identity or, in the case of Anglo-Saxon society, the bonds linking a lord with his faithful retainers.

A name inscribed in a ring or sword can pass from one generation to the next together with the object, keeping alive the memory of the one who first had it inscribed. However, it is also possible that successive owners would not be able to

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<sup>43</sup> Weiner, Annette B., *Inalienable Possessions. The Paradox of Keeping-While-Giving*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1992, p. 36.

<sup>44</sup> Weiner, Annette B., *Inalienable Possessions. The Paradox of Keeping-While-Giving*, pp. 6-7.

recognize the individual named any longer, or the hereditary link could be broken because of theft or loss. The object could also disappear and then reappear centuries later. It might then be impossible to retrace the individuals behind the names, but the ‘intimate connection’ that once existed between them and the object can still be detected.

Weiner also points at the difference between personal possessions and those that acquire a special status thanks to their prestigious origin or their association with an authority such as gods or ancestors.<sup>45</sup> As a result, the possession of such an inalienable possession authenticates the authority of the owner.<sup>46</sup> The rings of king Æthelwulf (no. 9) and queen Æthelswith (no. 13) can be regarded as examples of this. The retainers or other persons who may have obtained them as royal gifts would have been particularly proud of the honour shown them by the court, and wearing the rings could have enhanced their social prestige.

The words of Hilda Davidson, regarding Anglo-Saxon swords, can effectively convey and summarize this fundamental anthropological aspect of the objects:

Thus the sword was closely associated with much of what was most significant in a man’s life – family ties, loyalty to his lord, the duties of a king, the excitement of battle, the attainment of manhood, and the last funeral rites.<sup>47</sup>

## **1. IV MODEL OF COMMUNICATIVE BEHAVIOUR SPECIFIC FOR INSCRIBED OBJECTS**

Now that the specific nature of the inscribed objects has been introduced, it is possible to present the model that summarizes the communicative codes expressed in them.

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., pp. 36-37.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>47</sup> Davidson, Hilda R. Ellis, *The Sword in Anglo-Saxon England. Its Archaeology and Literature*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1962, p. 214.

Tools for the analysis of medieval communication have been developed by Mostert. A questionnaire on communicative behaviour in medieval sources can be found in ‘New approaches to medieval communication?’.<sup>48</sup> The questionnaire takes into account the ‘senders’ (who they are, their gender and their age), the ‘forms of communication’ (visual, audible, tactile, sapid and olfactory), the ‘subject of the message’ and the ‘receivers’ (who they are, their gender and their age).

Following Mostert’s scheme, and applying it to the specific source of inscribed objects, it can be said that ‘senders’ are always human and they could be both Christians (clergy and non-clergy) and non-Christians (pagans). The gender of the ‘senders’ can be sometimes deduced from the texts, while age can only be hypothesized.

The ‘forms of communication’ that can be identified are: visual signs (e.g. decorations and crosses and writing (both in the sense of the activity of author of the texts and in that of scribe of a given written text). As for reading, one has to consider what possibility the audience may have had to access these objects. Some of the texts may also have been read aloud, and consequently listened to. Non-verbal communicative signs can be also represented by the objects themselves (e.g. a gold ring can be seen as a symbol of prestige even without a written text adding to its value).

The ‘subjects of the message’ are various, ranging from the social function of the sender expressed in seals to the relationship with the supernatural. There are no messages concerned with training or education.

‘Receivers’ can include Christians and non-Christians, supernatural beings (God, the saints, the souls of the deceased, possibly pre-Christian deities) and the ‘sender’ himself.

A second tool is devised by Mostert in ‘Reading, writing and literacy: communication and the history of medieval societies’, where he develops a chart of the influence of literacy on medieval society.<sup>49</sup> The ‘message’ is central to the

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<sup>48</sup> Mostert, Marco, ‘New approaches to medieval communication?’, pp. 20-21.

<sup>49</sup> Mostert, Marco, ‘Reading, writing and literacy: communication and the history of medieval societies’, p. 273.

scheme, together with the various possibilities to express it by ‘writing’, ‘picturing’, other ‘non-verbal means of communication’ or a ‘combination’ of these forms. The ‘message’ thus expressed can enable ‘actions’ which, in their turn, can occasion the creation of a new message. An entire set of objects, institutions and situations form the context that influences the sender in his choices of encoding the message. The cyclicity and the possibility of seeing messages being sent and received are particularly valid in this model, which can account for the reception of a message by following generations and their developed, changed realia and institutions.

In any model of communicative behaviour, the specific quality of the sources should be taken into account. In our case, they are objects, and as such they have a form, a function and a possible symbolism or meaning particular to their nature. They are inscribed, and the literacy they display adds a new code to the object itself. Various sets of conventions can be used in order to encode the message to be inscribed. The craftsman, for example, has the opportunity to choose between different languages and scripts. Also the content of the text can be sacred or profane. Moreover, the verbal code is not the only one that can be added to the object. Visual codes can also appear, with decoration or various representations.

The act of decoding the message is, as a consequence, also variegated. The texts in the object could, for instance, be seen, read both silently and aloud (thus allowing the text to be heard), copied and reused. The same can be said of any images. The objects themselves could also be seen, used, copied, kept, stolen and so forth.

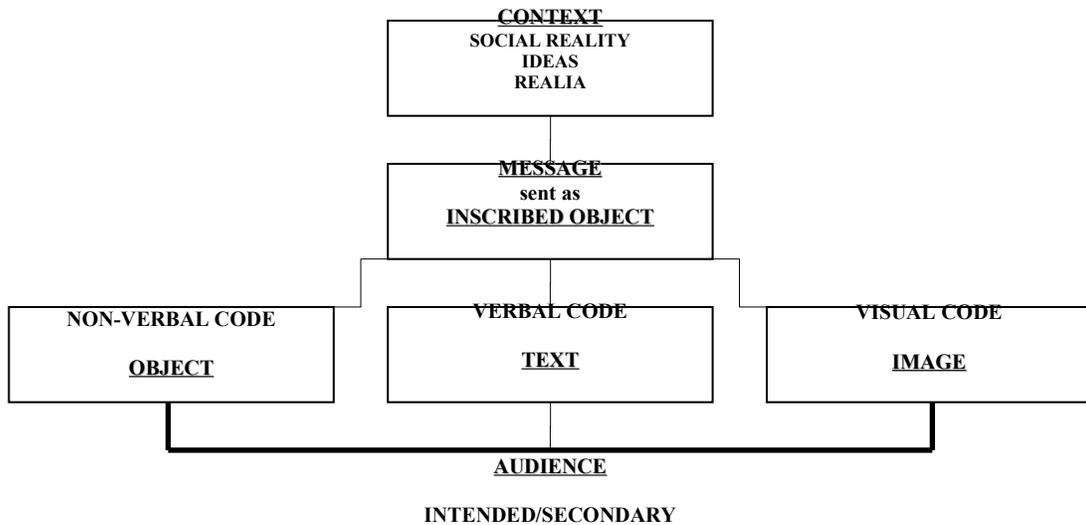
The act of encoding and decoding these messages depends on the context and on the ability of both sender and receiver to properly use the sets of conventions specific to the medium chosen to send the message.

Signs acquire a specific meaning when they are interpreted in relation to one another. A band of silver or gold, already conferring the idea of wealth, with the function of adornment for men or women, with a specific individual bond with its owner, who identifies the object as his own, can acquire added value and a new meaning when inscribed with, for instance, a royal name. Through the inscription it

becomes a symbol of royal favour and prestige. Its monetary value is not the only one to be affected by the addition of this sign, but also and especially its social one. It is most probable that the owner of such a gift would have his social relationships strengthened by the link with the court. The signs' connotations develop in time, with the audience forming a cognitive framework that allows them to recognize the denotative nature of each sign and the possible connotations, or secondary meanings, which develop as these meanings become acceptable and used in relation to the sign.

While analyzing the texts inscribed in the objects, one has to be aware of the active role of the reader. The audience is, in fact, an active agent that can interpret the texts according to a set of expectations. As a consequence, the problem of authorial intentionality arises. How influential is it? What can be said about the intentions of the authors of the inscriptions? Analyzing the texts, we can reconstruct the possible purposes of the makers and owners, but we have to take into consideration later readers/viewers who may have had different expectations and abilities, developing in time and space. The durability of the objects allows the texts to survive their original and contemporary audiences and authors. The changes brought about with time will influence the new readers and audiences, thus allowing the original meaning to be reconsidered, copied, modified and even misunderstood. Therefore, in the analysis of these inscribed portable objects, the distinction between the intended audience and later audiences will have to be taken into consideration.

Here follows the model specific for the inscribed objects.



**Figure 1 Model of communicative behaviour specific for inscribed objects**

The context is formed by the social reality, ideas (such as those of religion and popular beliefs, for example) and realia (institutions such as the Church, the royal court and family). The message is the central piece of the model and it refers to the specific case of inscribed objects. They display various codes: non-verbal codes (specific function and symbolism intrinsic in the object itself), verbal code (the text inscribed, of which content, script and language will be considered) and visual code (decorations and pictorial images). The levels of literacy of the intended and secondary audiences will be analysed.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **JEWELLERY**

Jewellery is one of the most ancient forms of art. It has been recently claimed that the oldest extant jewels were produced about 100.000 years ago. Three shells have been found in Israel and Algeria with perforations that support the idea of them being worn as necklaces or bracelets.<sup>50</sup>

Jewels can signify more than a simple decoration, and the message they can send is varied. Apart for their primary function as human adornment, jewels can represent power, social position, religious beliefs or identification with a specific group. Even nowadays, one can see people wearing necklaces with crosses, stars of David or trinkets like horseshoes, sending, consciously or unconsciously, a message concerning their faiths and beliefs. It is possible to recognize the symbolic value of objects such as royal crowns or religious paraments of bishops and popes, even if one might be unaware of their histories and specific iconographies. Nowadays, one can easily identify and possibly be surprised by the peculiar fashion of wearing gold chains and jewels heavily encrusted with diamonds by American rappers and pop singers. Jewels, then, may be a mirror of social behaviour and when they are survivals from past civilizations, they become important evidence for the reconstruction of ancient societies.

### **Anglo-Saxon Jewellery**

Anglo-Saxon jewellery survives mainly from burials. Jessup states that most of the jewels were part of treasures buried in pagan graves to distinguish the wealthy and to ensure their needs in the afterlife.<sup>51</sup> This statement is probably bold, since there is no clear evidence of the belief in a life after death. There are cases of graves furnished with food and drink, but this does not prove that Anglo-Saxons believed the dead to be in need of sustenance in the afterlife. The vessels and the food might be related to rituals performed by the mourners. The practice of burying grave goods continued also in Christian times, when cremation and inhumation often can be

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<sup>50</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/5099104.stm>. Accessed 17 July 2008.

<sup>51</sup> Jessup, Ronald, *Anglo-Saxon Jewellery*, Shire Archaeology, Shire Publications, Aylesbury, 1974, p. 10.

observed at the same time, at the same burial rite. From the eighth century on, goods cease to be buried with the dead, probably because the first Christian burials in churchyards were already showing prestige and status.<sup>52</sup> It is difficult to associate a specific kind of burial with a religious belief since the variety of the phenomenon is influenced by many factors, both religious and social.<sup>53</sup>

The variety of decoration, value, technique and form present in jewellery shows how rich the tradition was. A quick glance at the types of jewels that were found will show the point: hood-brooches and pins, necklaces, pendants, bracteates, pin-suites, armlets and bracelets, finger-rings, buckles, clasps, strap-mounts, girdle-hangers, silver-gilt spoons and crystal balls.<sup>54</sup>

As for the materials used to produce the jewels, gold is certainly the most valuable. It was used in the later Roman Empire to keep enemies at bay, pay mercenaries and pay off intruders. It could be easily worked; it was rare, imperishable and soon became an emblem of power and wealth.<sup>55</sup> Wilson explains how the disappearance of old gold coinage after AD 700 resulted in a lack of raw materials for jewellers, who found a solution for this shortage in gilding.<sup>56</sup> Silver had been an official export from Roman Britain and it would later be obtained through looting by Saxon pirates.<sup>57</sup> Silver was the most used metal in Anglo-Saxon jewellery, especially at the end of eighth century.<sup>58</sup> Bronze was available in large supplies. The accessibility made it 'the poor man's gold'. Jessup talks of mass-production of bronze objects, emphasizing the good quality of their manufacture.<sup>59</sup>

Despite the quality and quantity of jewels surviving from Anglo-Saxon England, no jeweller's workshop has been found. Possibly the bronze scales and

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<sup>52</sup> Crawford, Sally, 'Cemetery, furnished' in *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 90-91.

<sup>53</sup> Meaney, Audrey L., 'Anglo-Saxon pagan and early Christian attitudes to the dead' in *The Cross Goes North. Processes of Conversion in Northern Europe, AD 300-1300*, Martin Carver (ed.), The Boydell Press, Woodbridge, 2003, pp. 238, 240-241.

<sup>54</sup> Jessup, Ronald, *Anglo-Saxon Jewellery*, pp. 30-43.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 20-21.

<sup>56</sup> Wilson, David M., *Anglo-Saxon Ornamental Metalwork 700-1100 in the British Museum*, The Trustees of the British Museum, London, 1964, p. 10.

<sup>57</sup> Jessup, Ronald, *Anglo-Saxon Jewellery*, p. 22.

<sup>58</sup> Wilson, David M., *Anglo-Saxon Ornamental Metalwork 700-1100 in the British Museum*, p. 26.

<sup>59</sup> Jessup, Ronald, *Anglo-Saxon Jewellery*, p. 24.

weights found in some graves were the tools used by jewellers, but no other evidence has yet been found that could identify them.<sup>60</sup>

### Anglo-Saxon Jewellery in Literature

Anglo-Saxon jewellery is well represented in Old English literature. In *Beowulf*, just to give a few examples, there are 14 references to *bēag* as ‘ring of gold used as ornament or as treasure which leaders distributed to their followers’; 4 to *bēag* as ‘gold torque’, 1 as ‘crown’ and 1 as ‘hilt-ring on a sword’. *Hring* as ‘ring of gold used as ornament and money’ appears 8 times. Heorot, King Hrothgar’s great hall, is called *hringsæle*, ‘ring-hall’ (line 2010), and a lord could be called *bēaggyfa*, ‘ring-giver’.<sup>61</sup>

Another possible appearance of rings in literature is in *Riddles 48 and 59* of the *Exeter Book*. As in most of these riddles, there is no single possible answer to the enigma. Okasha proposes the identification of the *hring* in the two riddles with ‘finger-ring’ and not, as has been previously proposed, with ‘bell, chalice, pyx or sacramental vessel’.<sup>62</sup> Let’s take *Riddle 48* as an example. The ring is said to be uttering words even without a tongue (ll. 1-3):

Ic gefrægn for hæleþum      hring endean,  
torhtne butan tungan,      tila þeah he hlude  
stefne ne cirmde,      strongum wordum.  
Sinc for secgum      swigende cwæð:  
"Gehæle mec,      helpend gæsta."  
Ryne ongietan      readan goldes  
guman galdorcwide,      gleawe be þencan  
hyra hælo to gode,      swa se hring gecwæð.

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>61</sup> Mitchell, Bruce and Fred C. Robinson (eds.), *Beowulf. An Edition with Relevant Shorter Texts*, revised edition, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 2006, glossary.

<sup>62</sup> Okasha, Elisabeth, ‘Old English *hring* in riddles 48 and 59’, *Medium Ævum* LXII (1993), p. 62.

The message uttered by the ring is religious: “Save me, helper of souls” (l. 5). The riddle continues: ‘Let men understand the mystery, the magic utterance, of the red gold, wisely entrust their salvation to God, as the *hring* said’ (ll. 6-8).<sup>63</sup> The golden object is silent, yet it speaks. This message is thought to be the text inscribed in the object. It has a religious meaning, yet it is interesting to notice the accent on *ryne*, ‘mystery’ and *galdorcwide*, ‘magic utterance’ in the last lines. The analysis of the extant Anglo-Saxon rings (nos. 1-18) will provide evidence for such a coexistence of religious and ‘magical’ traditions.

The presence of jewellery in literature, whether in the epic representations of generous kings bestowing gifts on brave retainers, or in a more popular and entertaining genre such as that of the riddles, should make one aware of the importance attributed to it.

If, as Wormald states, the values represented in literature ‘express the behaviour that a socially dominant class thought proper’,<sup>64</sup> then we can assume that the generosity in gift-giving of lords and kings was crucial in Anglo-Saxon society. Through the bestowal of arms, a young man could aspire to become a good warrior and follower of his lord (*geoguð*), and later in life the assignment of land would make such a warrior a veteran (*duguð*). The reciprocal obligations established through the exchange of gifts sustained the Anglo-Saxon social structure. The lord could gain the retainers’ loyalty and military services by rewarding them with gifts and offering them protection. Gift-giving was controlled not only by these practical purposes, but also by prestige-enhancing ones. A generous lord would be able to show his power and fame and retainers would gain honour and respect.<sup>65</sup> Gift-giving and giving daughters in marriage were also fundamental aspects of maintaining diplomatic relationships between kingdoms.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>63</sup> Okasha, Elisabeth, ‘Old English *hring* in riddles 48 and 59’, p. 61.

<sup>64</sup> Wormald, Patrick, ‘Anglo-Saxon society and its literature’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*, Malcolm Godden and Michael Lapidge (eds.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991, pp. 1-22.

<sup>65</sup> Hill, John M., ‘Beowulf and the Danish succession: gift-giving as an occasion for complex gesture’, *Medievalia et Humanistica. Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Culture*, New Series, 11 (1982), p. 180.

<sup>66</sup> See the model of the relationship between lord and warrior-follower in *Beowulf* in Jos Bazelmans, *By Weapons Made Worthy. Lords, Retainers and Their Relationship in Beowulf*, Amsterdam

## Jewellery and Literacy

The motivations for inscribing an object should now be considered. ‘The traditional view of restricted literacy is substantially valid for the whole early English period’.<sup>67</sup> This is how Wormald defines the state of literacy in Anglo-Saxon England, where literacy was mainly the monopoly of the clergy. In the analysis of the rings one should take this factor into account.

Okasha explored the possible levels of literacy of those involved in the production or use of inscribed objects.<sup>68</sup> According to her analysis, only the composer of the text needed to be literate, whether he was the owner of the object or its maker or a third party, involved only in the compilation of the written text. The commissioner could be fully literate and so be able to put the message in writing by himself, or he might require the help of another literate person to do it, such as the artisan or a scribe. An illiterate or semi-illiterate craftsman could in this way copy the text from a written example. In the analysis of the rings, all these possibilities will need to be taken into consideration.

The same variety of ‘registers of literacy’ can also be applied to the intended audience.<sup>69</sup> Some people may have been literate; they could possibly read the texts aloud to those who could not read. Some texts were probably meant for a divine audience. Okasha supposes that the association between learning and the Church gave rise to the idea of ‘divine literacy’.<sup>70</sup> To prove this, she offers the example of the stone in Haddenham, Cambridgeshire, in which is inscribed a direct invocation to God:

:LVCEM:TVAM:OVINO | DA:DEVS:ET:REQVIĒ | AMEN:

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Archeological Studies 5, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 1999, p. 169.

<sup>67</sup> Wormald, C. P., ‘The uses of literacy in Anglo-Saxon England and its neighbours’, pp. 113.

<sup>68</sup> Okasha, Elisabeth, ‘Literacy in Anglo-Saxon England: the evidence from inscriptions’, *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History* 8 (1995), p. 70.

<sup>69</sup> Mostert, Marco, ‘Forgery and Trust’, pp. 40-41.

<sup>70</sup> Okasha, Elisabeth, ‘Literacy in Anglo-Saxon England: the evidence from inscriptions’, pp. 71-73.

‘Lord, grant your light and peace to Ovin, Amen’.<sup>71</sup> However, it seems more likely that such an invocation would be meant to be read aloud. The message would be sent to God as a spoken message, similar to a prayer or chant. This message was repeated every time it was voiced. It seems more plausible to imagine God listening to an invocation than imagining Him reading it from Heaven.

The limited literacy of the earthly audience is also hinted at by the uneven distribution of word division in the inscriptions. In her investigation of the development of word separation by spaces in Anglo-Saxon inscriptions, Okasha explains how word separation is a tool that makes reading easier. It spread faster in manuscript production than in epigraphic material. The fact that the audience of inscriptions had a limited literacy is taken as one of the factors that caused this late development.<sup>72</sup>

Despite the variety of levels of literacy, the use of the written word in inscriptions suggests that literacy was considered a mark of prestige thanks to its association with the higher level of society and the Church. The patronage connected to the production of inscriptions shows a society interested in and respectful of literacy.<sup>73</sup>

The reasons why somebody would want to have an object inscribed reflect this respect. Apart from the obvious intentions of commissioners, owners or makers, openly stated in the texts, one can find unstated motivations as well. First among these would be the request for prayers and protection or the remembrance of the deceased in memorial stones. However, *all* uses of the written word would also link the commissioners with the prestige of writing; in so doing the commissioners could also advertise their wealth and generosity, while the makers could advertise their skills.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Okasha, Elisabeth, *A Hand-List of Anglo-Saxon Non-Runic Inscriptions*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1971, no. 43, p. pp. 74-75.

<sup>72</sup> Okasha, Elisabeth, ‘Spaces between words: word separation in Anglo-Saxon inscriptions’ in *The Cross Goes North. Processes of Conversion in Northern Europe, AD 300-1300*, pp. 346.

<sup>73</sup> Okasha, Elisabeth, ‘Literacy in Anglo-Saxon England: the evidence from inscriptions’, pp. 70, 73.

<sup>74</sup> Okasha, Elisabeth, ‘The commissioners, makers and owners of Anglo-Saxon inscriptions’, *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History* 7 (1994), pp. 73-74.

One last consideration has to be made before addressing the corpus of Anglo-Saxon jewellery. The names represented in the inscriptions are mainly masculine, with Old English origins. This might be surprising, since wealth was not a prerogative of men alone. Remaining Anglo-Saxon wills, however later in date, show that women could possess wealth and that they could freely dispose of it. According to Okasha, women might not appear because of the bias of a literate production which was essentially in the hands of men.<sup>75</sup>

### **Corpus of Anglo-Saxon inscribed jewellery**

The corpus of Anglo-Saxon inscribed jewels considered in this chapter includes jewellery that can be dated from the seventh to the ninth century. There are 18 rings, 3 brooches, 1 silver stud, 1 pin, 2 discs and the Alfred jewel.

The texts inscribed vary from secular to religious, they can be written both in Latin and runic script and they are made of material of varying values. This variety shows a possible differentiation in social classes and audiences. Whenever possible, the history of the objects will be considered: their manufacture, their usage, their custody and their disappearance through burials or through theft and loss. Unfortunately, the data available are often insufficient for a complete reconstruction.

## **2. I. RINGS**

The 18 Anglo-Saxon inscribed rings are listed below. They have been set in alphabetical order, according to the place where they were found. The arrangement of information in the list is freely adapted from Okasha's list in 'Anglo-Saxon inscribed rings'.<sup>76</sup> This list includes: place of finding, present location, material, diameter, date, language of text (when comprehensible), script and transliteration of the text.

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<sup>75</sup> Okasha, Elisabeth, 'Anglo-Saxon women: the evidence from inscriptions' in *Roman, Runes and Ogham. Medieval Inscriptions in the Insular World and on the Continent*, John Higgitt, Katherine Forsyth and David N. Parsons (eds.), Shaun Tyas, Donington, 2001, p. 86.

<sup>76</sup> Okasha, Elisabeth, 'Anglo-Saxon inscribed rings', *Leeds Studies in English*, ed. Catherine Batt and Andrew Wawn, New Series, XXXIV (2003), pp. 29-31.

1. Bodsham, British Museum, gold and niello, c. 22 mm, ninth century, Old English, Latin script

+ [.] | AR | MV | ND | ME | CA | HI | M |<sup>77</sup>

2. Bossington, Ashmolean Museum, gold, c. 25 mm, ninth century, Latin, Latin script

INXPŌNOMENC[.]LLAFIC |<sup>78</sup>

3. Bramham Moor, Danish National Museum, gold and niello, c. 29 mm, ninth century, runes

**ærkriuft | kriuriþon | glæstæpontol**<sup>79</sup>

4. Cramond, National Museum of Scotland, leaded bronze, c. 22 mm, ninth-tenth century, runes

**[.]ewor[.]el[.]u**<sup>80</sup>

5. Driffield, lost, gold, c. 22 mm, possibly ninth century, Latin, Latin script

+ E | C | C | E |  
AG | NV[S] | DĪ |<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Okasha, Elisabeth, *A Hand-List of Anglo-Saxon Non-Runic Inscriptions*, no. 13, p. 55.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., no. 14, p. 55.

<sup>79</sup> Page, R. I., *An Introduction to English Runes*, Second Edition, The Boydell Press, Woodbridge, 1999, p. 112.

<sup>80</sup> Page, *An Introduction to English Runes*, p. 157.

<sup>81</sup> Okasha, *A Hand-List of Anglo-Saxon Non-Runic Inscriptions*, no. 33, p. 67.

6. Flixborough, Scunthorpe Museum, silver and gilding, c. 20 mm, eight-ninth century, Latin script

+ ABCDEFGHIKL |<sup>82</sup>

7. Kingmoor, British Museum, gold and niello, c. 27 m, ninth century, runes

+ ærkriufltkriuriponglæstæpon | tol<sup>83</sup>

8. Lancashire, British Museum, gold and niello, c. 22 mm, ninth century, Old English, Latin script

+ æDREDMECAHEAnREDMECagROf |<sup>84</sup>

9. Laverstock, British Museum, gold and niello, c. 27 mm, ninth century, Latin, Latin script

+ ETH | ELVVLFR | X: |<sup>85</sup>

10. Linstock Castle, British Museum, agate, c. 29 mm, possibly ninth century, runes

ery.ri.uf.dol.yri. þol.wles.te.pote.nol<sup>86</sup>

11. Llysfaen, Victoria & Albert Museum, gold and niello, c. 29 mm, ninth century, Old English name, Latin script

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<sup>82</sup> Okasha, Elisabeth, 'A second supplement to *Hand-List of Anglo-Saxon Non-Runic Inscriptions*', *Anglo-Saxon England* 21 (1992), no. 192, pp. 45-46.

<sup>83</sup> Page, *An Introduction to English Runes*, p. 112.

<sup>84</sup> Okasha, *A Hand-List of Anglo-Saxon Non-Runic Inscriptions*, no. 66, p. 89.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 70, pp. 91-92.

<sup>86</sup> Page, *An Introduction to English Runes*, p. 112.

+ A | LH | ST | An |<sup>87</sup>

12. Rome, Victoria & Albert Museum, gold, c. 22 mm, possibly ninth century,  
Old English name, Latin script

+ A[V]F | RET |<sup>88</sup>

13. Sherburn, British Museum, gold and niello, c. 32 mm, ninth century, Latin,  
Latin script

Ā | Ð |

+ EA | ÐELSVIÐ | REGNA |<sup>89</sup>

14. Sleaford, unknown, silver and gilding, c. 22 mm, possibly eighth century,  
Latin, Latin script

+ ANULUMFIDEI | + EADBERHT |<sup>90</sup>

15. Steyning, Worthing Museum, gold, c. 20 mm, ninth century, Old English,  
Latin script

ÆSCWULFME | CAH |<sup>91</sup>

16. Swindon, British Museum, gold, c. 22 mm, ninth-tenth century, Old English  
name, Latin script

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<sup>87</sup> Okasha, *A Hand-List of Anglo-Saxon Non-Runic Inscriptions*, no 86, pp. 98-99.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 103, pp. 107-108.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 107, pp. 112-113.

<sup>90</sup> Okasha, Elisabeth, 'A third supplement to *Hand-List of Anglo-Saxon Non-Runic Inscriptions*', *Anglo-Saxon England* 33 (2004), no. 233, pp. 245-246.

<sup>91</sup> Okasha, Elisabeth, 'A second supplement to *Hand-List*', *Anglo-Saxon England* 21 (1992), no. 204, pp. 53-54.

+ BVREDRVÐ + : Ω : A :<sup>92</sup>

17. Unprovenanced, British Museum, gold and niello, c. 29 mm, ninth-tenth century, Old English, Latin script

+ : EAWEN : MIEAHSPETRVS : STANCES |<sup>93</sup>

18. Wheatley Hill, British Museum, gilded silver alloy, c. 19mm, late eighth century, Old English, runes

**[h]ringichatt[.]**<sup>94</sup>

Most of the rings were chance finds, except for Flixborough (no. 6) and Steyning (no. 15), rings found during excavations. As Okasha points out, the distribution of the findings does not provide much information, as rings were probably easily lost.<sup>95</sup>

In her reconstruction of Anglo-Saxon dress, Owen-Crocker suggests that rings, however predominant in literature, were not among the most common jewels worn by men and women. The finds are few, and they come mainly from rich graves. Owen-Crocker explains the absence of archaeological finds by the possibility that rings might be passed from one generation to the next as heirlooms, and that they would not be buried in the graves together with other jewels. According to the archaeological evidence, rings were rarely worn by men and women of the fifth and sixth centuries. The same is true for the seventh and eighth centuries. The few survivals from this period are not particularly rich. In the ninth century, however, one

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<sup>92</sup> Okasha, *A Hand-List of Anglo-Saxon Non-Runic Inscriptions*, no. 115, pp. 117-118.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 155, p.136.

<sup>94</sup> Page, *An Introduction to English Runes*, p. 169.

<sup>95</sup> Okasha, Elisabeth, 'Anglo-Saxon inscribed rings', p. 32.

can notice an increased interest in finger-rings, as can be deduced from the dating of the rings in the list. The quality is high, with many rings made of gold.<sup>96</sup>

In her article on rings, Okasha reflects on their diameters. She considers the range from 15 to 22 mm as intended for women, while those from 29 to 32 mm as suitable for men.<sup>97</sup> If correct, this would mean that our rings are predominantly meant for women (10 rings, while 5 are large ones supposedly for men and 3 are uncertain, since they fall in between the range). It is, however, possible that rings were hung and worn as pendants in a necklace.<sup>98</sup> Owen-Crocker also suggests the possibility that they could be worn on the end finger joints.<sup>99</sup>

Most of the rings are precious jewels made of gold or silver. The runic rings, however, seem to be made of baser materials (leaded bronze, agate and silver-gilded alloy). Okasha cautiously proposes that runic rings could be intended for a less elevated section of society.<sup>100</sup> The runic texts are all secular. Three of them (nos. 3, 7, 10) are possible magic formulae, one (no. 4) is unread, but it possibly contains a personal name, and one (no. 18) simply states ‘my name is ring’. It would be tempting to connect these simple texts to a popular level of society and to secular beliefs. They possibly hint at a difference between religious texts written in Latin script and texts written in runes. It is, however, important to notice that two of the ‘amulet-rings’ are made of gold, so that this simple equation of ‘poor’ with ‘popular’ cannot be sustained. It seems not useful therefore to suppose a hierarchy between the two scripts and their uses. Most plausibly they were two tools with which all kinds of messages could be encoded.

### **‘Royal rings’ (nos. 9, 13)**

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<sup>96</sup> Owen-Crocker, Gale R., *Dress in Anglo-Saxon England*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1986, pp. 56-57, 83, 96-97, 129.

<sup>97</sup> Okasha, Elisabeth, ‘Anglo-Saxon inscribed rings’, p. 33.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33-34.

<sup>99</sup> Owen-Crocker, Gale R., *Dress in Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 96.

<sup>100</sup> Okasha, Elisabeth, ‘Anglo-Saxon inscribed rings’, p. 33.

Two rings are exceptional because they both belong to the same royal house of Wessex, the first to King Æthelwulf and the second to Queen Æthelswith. They may have been royal gifts. If so, the names inscribed in the rings indicate not the owners of the object but the names of the donors. The rings would then be used by the recipients, possibly loyal retainers, who most probably would see their social status or reputation elevated thanks to the prestige of such a royal gift.

## 9. Laverstock

This decorated gold ring contains an Old English personal name engraved in capitals on the outside of the hoop, against a nielloed background. The text is preceded by a cross. Okasha explains that this is a common practice; the presence does not necessarily refer to the Christian cross. Crosses had been used to mark word division in epigraphy long before the advent of Christianity.<sup>101</sup>

The text reads + ETH | ELVVLF R | X: | with RX being an abbreviation of REX, ‘king’ in Latin. The name refers to King Æthelwulf, father of Alfred the Great. Okasha dates the ring AD 828-858, the former being the date of the first charter signed by the King and the latter the year of his death.<sup>102</sup>

The triangular bezel is highly decorated with two birds, presumably peacocks, standing at both sides of a plant motif. Jessup describes the motif as ‘sacred tree with birds’, wide-spread in Oriental art and in early Christian contexts.<sup>103</sup>

Jessup also suggests the possibility that the ring may have been lost in one of the struggles against the Danes during King Æthelwulf’s reign, such as the one in Southampton in AD 840.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Okasha, Elisabeth, ‘Spaces between words: word separation in Anglo-Saxon inscriptions’, pp. 345-346.

<sup>102</sup> Okasha, Elisabeth, *A Hand-List of Anglo-Saxon Non-Runic Inscriptions*, no. 70, pp. 91-92.

<sup>103</sup> Jessup, Ronald, *Anglo-Saxon Jewellery*, pp. 79-80.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, p 78.

The ring shows signs of wear, apart from its battered conditions due to the incident of its discovery. The ring was found in 1780 by chance in a field, pressed out of a cart-rut sideways.<sup>105</sup>

The ring may have been a royal gift to a loyal retainer.

### 13. Sherburn

This gold ring contains two texts, one on the face of the round bezel and one engraved upside down on the back. The letters are all Anglo-Saxon capitals. The first text is  $\bar{A} | \bar{D} |$ , an abbreviated formula that stands for AGNUS DEI. The text actually seems to fit with the decoration, which represents a quadruped animal, possibly a haloed lamb, inside a quatrefoil. The animal is surrounded by a foliage motif and by a beaded edge. The letters and images stand out from a black nielloed background. The shoulders of the bezel are decorated with other animals.

The text refers to the Gospel of John: ‘The next day, John saw Jesus coming to him, and he saith: Behold the Lamb of God, behold him who taketh away the sin of the world’ (John 1, 29).

On the back, preceded by a cross is the Old English personal name + EA | DELSVIÐ | REGNA, with REGNA as abbreviation for REGINA, ‘queen’ in Latin. The woman has been identified as Queen Æthelswith, sister of Alfred the Great. Okasha dates the ring between AD 853, the year of her marriage with Burgred of Mercia and AD 888, the year of her death.<sup>106</sup> This second inscription is much less worn than the one on the front of the ring. It seems plausible that it was secondary, probably to record a gift made by the Queen at a shrine in Yorkshire.<sup>107</sup>

The large diameter (32 mm) would suggest that the ring was worn by a man.

The ring was found in 1870 by a ploughman, who used it as a decoration for his dog’s collar. It then passed from a jeweller through various owners until it arrived in Sir Wollaston Franks’ hands, who bequeathed it to the British Museum.

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., p. 80.

<sup>106</sup> Okasha, Elisabeth, *A Hand-List of Anglo-Saxon Non-Runic Inscriptions*, no. 107, pp.112-113.

<sup>107</sup> Jessup, Ronald, *Anglo-Saxon Jewellery*, p. 82.

## **Rings with owner and maker formulae (nos. 1, 8, 15)**

### **1. Bodsham**

This ring was found in 1968 below ground in a field in Kent. According to the abovementioned analysis of diameters, this ring might have been used by a woman. It is a fine specimen of gold and niello, a rich object.

The text + [.] | AR | MV | ND | ME | CA | HI | M | is preceded by a cross.

The name inscribed might possibly be Garmund, a masculine Old English name. The text is an owner formula, translating as “Garmund owns me”, with the personification of the ring, typical of these formulas.<sup>108</sup> Two final letters ‘im’ are uncertain. Okasha explains how they might have been used just to fill in a gap remaining in the loop of the ring at the time of its production. It might then be that the craftsman who wrought the ring was not literate and that he added the two letters just to complete the decoration of the ring.<sup>109</sup>

The male owner formula seems to contradict the possible use of the ring by a woman. Since it seems unlikely that the text refers to a woman owned by Garmund, it is plausible to envisage the ring as an heirloom. It must be remembered, however, that Garmund, as has been already suggested, could have used the rather small ring as a pendant himself. As with all other pieces of jewellery, in time it might have acquired a new symbolic and emotional connotation as a family heirloom. The presence of the name would have had a specific referent as long as Garmund himself or his relatives were aware of the connection between the name and the person. After a few generations we can imagine that this link would be lost, with new users becoming progressively unaware of the identity of the first owner. The ring would continue to have its primary function as an ornamental piece and, being a gold ring, its monetary value would also remain.

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<sup>108</sup> Okasha, Elisabeth, ‘Anglo-Saxon inscribed rings’, p. 34.

<sup>109</sup> Okasha, Elisabeth, ‘Literacy in Anglo-Saxon England: the evidence from inscriptions’, pp. 69-70.

## 8. Lancashire

This golden band with pearled edge is nielloed, the letters thus being emphasized by the black background. The Old English text is written with a variety of scripts: Anglo-Saxon capitals, insular majuscules and runes.

The text reads + æDREDMECAHEAnREDMECagROf |. The owner and maker formula can be translated as ‘Ædred owns me, Eanred engraved me’. This is the only specimen in which the two formulae can be found together. There is a final letter, similar to an inverted ‘t’ which, according to Okasha, might just be decorative.

<sup>110</sup>

The ring, which is dated by Okasha, Jessup and Wilson to the ninth century, shows signs of wear. Page prefers to leave the matter of the date open, claiming that the name forms may also be either pre-800 or post-1000.<sup>111</sup>

This ring is peculiar in its display of various scripts, intermingled in the text. Page explains that it is not surprising to find this mixture of scripts. In Appendix A of the *British Museum Catalogue of Antiquities*, he lists other stones and objects in which runes can be found side by side with Roman script. They can be seen in coin legends and also in some pages of the Lindisfarne Gospel.<sup>112</sup> Page prefers to avoid any sort of distinction between the scripts, since they were in many cases used interchangeably, and he also points out that there might have been practical reasons behind the choice of using runes, since they are easier to cut than the curved Latin letters. This is especially true when it comes to small objects such as rings.<sup>113</sup>

## 15. Steyning

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<sup>110</sup> Okasha, Elisabeth, *A Hand-List of Anglo-Saxon Non-Runic Inscriptions*, no. 66, p. 89.

<sup>111</sup> Page, R. I., ‘The Inscriptions’ in *Anglo-Saxon Ornamental Metalwork 700-1100 in the British Museum*, p. 77.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.

<sup>113</sup> Page, R. I., *An Introduction to English Runes*, p. 115 and pp. 219-220.

This ring was found in 1989 during an excavation, in a rubbish pit. The letters are set in panels on a pounced background. It is dated to the ninth century.

The text inscribed is an Old English owner formula: ÆSCWULFME | CAH | ‘Æscwulf owns me’. The name Æscwulf is a recorded Old English name.

## **Rings with only personal names (nos. 11, 12)**

### **11. Llysfaen**

The gold ring is formed by four circular panels alternated with four lozenges, which are decorated with schematic beasts. The letters are incised on the pellets, two symbols in each roundel, and they form an Old English masculine personal name, Alhstan, preceded by a cross. Jessup suggests identifying him with the Bishop of Sherborne from AD 817 to AD 867. The bishop fought against the Danes in AD 845 and he probably accompanied Æthelwulf on his expedition in North Wales. Jessup thus explains how the ring might have reached the finding place in Llysfaen.<sup>114</sup>

The letters are all Anglo-Saxon capitals except for the last letter, which is a rune. The name can refer to the owner of the ring, but, as in the case of the royal rings, it could also be the name of a donor.

It has been worn on the necktie of the finder, a labourer who found the ring in about 1773.<sup>115</sup>

### **12. Rome**

The ring has been found in Rome together with a hoard of coins, possibly dated to the ninth century. It is a golden ring, with a seal-face depicting a bust of a man with beard and moustache. The capital letters are set on the sides of the bust and they indicate an Old English personal name, A[V]FRET or A[L]FRET, preceded by a cross. It might

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<sup>114</sup> Jessup, Ronald, *Anglo-Saxon Jewellery*, p. 82.

<sup>115</sup> Jessup, Ronald, *Anglo-Saxon Jewellery*, p. 82.

be a signet-ring, the owner possibly being a nobleman or a member of the clergy whose authority was represented by the ring; it was possibly used to authenticate documents with the impression of the seal in wax.

The ring, together with the coins, may have been part of the alms King Alfred was sending to Rome. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* describes noblemen bringing the alms to Rome in the years AD 883, 887, 888 and 890.<sup>116</sup>

## **Rings with religious texts (nos. 2, 5, 14, 16, 17)**

### **2. Bossington**

Golden ring, decorated with beaded and twisted wires, with a bust at the centre of the bezel. Lines on the face suggest the presence of moustache and beard. Hinton points at the resemblance with coin busts, but he does not recognize any specific type.<sup>117</sup> Coins were used in jewellery, probably because of the decorative aspect and appeal of the coins but possibly also because of the connotation of power linked to the royal effigies depicted in them.

The Latin text surrounds the bust. Okasha reads the text as INXPŌNOMENC[.]LLAFIC |, ‘In Christ my name has been changed to Culla’, with XPŌ standing for Christo and FIC as an abbreviation of FICTUM EST.<sup>118</sup> The second letter of Culla could be runic **u**.

Okasha supports her reading of the name Culla referring to the *Liber Vitae* of Hyde Abbey in Winchester, in which the name is recorded together with the names of the other members of the religious house.<sup>119</sup> According to Revelations, the Book of Life will be opened at the time of judgment. By writing their names in earthly books

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<sup>116</sup> ‘The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle’ in *English Historical Documents c. 500-1042*, Dorothy Whitelock (ed.), Eyre & Spottiswoode, London, 1955, pp. 181-184.

<sup>117</sup> Hinton, David A., *A Catalogue of the Anglo-Saxon Ornamental Metalwork 700-1100 in the Department of Antiquities in Ashmolean Museum*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1974, no. 4, p. 11.

<sup>118</sup> Okasha, Elisabeth, *A Hand-List of Anglo-Saxon Non-Runic Inscriptions*, no. 14, p. 55.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 14, p. 55.

of life, medieval men thought that their names would then appear in the celestial one, in this way granting them access to heaven:

And I saw the dead, great and small, standing in the presence of the throne, and the books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged by those things which were written in the books, according to their works. (...) And whosoever was not found written in the book of life, was cast into the pool of fire.

(Rev. XX, 12, 15)

Jessup, on the contrary, emends the name as Ehlla and arranges the letters differently, editing the text as NOMEN EHLLA FIDES IN XPŌ, ‘My name is Ella my faith is in Christ’.<sup>120</sup> This reading seems to be now dismissed, with Hinton presenting the reading of Okasha and a second possibility in NOMEN CHLLA FIG[ITUR] IN XPŌ, ‘The name Culla is fixed in Christ’.<sup>121</sup>

Whatever the case, the text is clearly religious and the purpose seems to be to link the name to the Christian faith. Jessup dates the ring to the seventh century.<sup>122</sup> If so, the ring would be an example of a clear religious statement made soon after the arrival of Christianity in England. It may have been the property of a bishop or other ecclesiastic or a convert. Okasha, on her part, suggests that the ring is a baptismal one, thus indicating christening.<sup>123</sup>

## 5. Driffield

This ring, now lost, was composed of a circular bezel with a quatrefoil in it, around which four letters, Anglo-Saxon capitals, were set forming the Latin word E | C | C |

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<sup>120</sup> Jessup, Ronald, *Anglo-Saxon Jewellery*, pp. 83-84.

<sup>121</sup> Hinton, David A., *A Catalogue of the Anglo-Saxon Ornamental Metalwork 700-1100*, no. 4, pp. 9-12.

<sup>122</sup> Jessup, Ronald, *Anglo-Saxon Jewellery*, pp. 83-84.

<sup>123</sup> Okasha, Elisabeth, *A Hand-List of Anglo-Saxon Non-Runic Inscriptions*, no. 14, p. 55.

E |. The text continued around the hoop: AG | NV[S] | DĪ |, with the last word as an abbreviation of DEI. The text reads ‘Behold the Lamb of God’ and it refers to the Gospel of John.

#### 14. Sleaford

This gilded silver ring was found by metal-detector in 1992. Its present owner is unknown. The ring has been dated to the eighth century. The text is incised in two lines round the exterior of the hoop and it is written in Latin. It describes the object as + ANULUM FIDEI, ‘ring of faith’. The text also contains a male Old English personal name, EADBERHT. ANULUM is an accusative form. A nominative form ANULUS would be more fitting, so that this error hints to the level of literacy of the craftsman, who possibly was not fully literate. Okasha, however, points out that the phrase exists in this form in the context of spiritual marriage. The text would then be a statement of the owner’s commitment to the Church. Okasha also explains how the ‘faith’ could also be a secular one, so that the ring would be a pledge of faith between two people.<sup>124</sup>

#### 16. Swindon

This late gold ring, dated from the late ninth century to the tenth century by Okasha, contains an Old English personal name preceded and followed by a cross and the legend Ω : A, referring to God as the alpha and omega in Vulgate Revelations XXII, 13: ‘I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end’.

Page also mentions this formula in relation to ‘alphabet magic’.<sup>125</sup> The two letters, representing the beginning and end of the Greek alphabet, appear frequently in

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<sup>124</sup> Okasha, Elisabeth, ‘A third supplement to *Hand-List of Anglo-Saxon Non-Runic Inscriptions*’, no. 233, p. 246.

<sup>125</sup> Page, R. I., ‘The Inscriptions’, p. 79. See also Dornseiff, Franz, *Das Alphabet in Mystik und Magie, Stoecheia. Studien zur Geschichte des antiken Weltbildes und der griechischen Wissenschaft*. Herausgegeben von Franz Boll, Heft 7, B. G. Teubner, Leipzig, 1922, pp. 122-125.

charms. In the charm *wiþ lenctenadle*, ‘against typhoid fever’, one should write on a paten:

+++++ A +++++ Ω +++++<sup>126</sup>

‘Against a dwarf’, *wiþ dweorh*, one should write on the arm:

+ t + ω A and + t + p + t + N + ω + t + UI + M + ω A<sup>127</sup>

The name BVREDRVÐ is probably a variation of the feminine recorded name Burgðryð.

### 17. Unprovenanced ‘Eawen’ ring

The letters of this ring are nielloed, standing black on a golden background. The incised text seems to be an Old English owner formula, EAWEN MIE AH, Eawen owns me. The feminine name is preceded by a cross. The rest of the text is in Latin and Old English, with a clear reference to Saint Peter. Okasha edits the text as S PETRUS STAN CES, with S as SANCTUS and CES as CESE or CIESE: ‘May Saint Peter the Rock choose (her)’.<sup>128</sup> The identification of Peter and the rock, on which the Church of Christ would be founded, is based on Matthew XVI, 18: ‘And I say to thee: That thou art Peter; and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it’.

Page, however, suggests another possibility. He reads the texts as a possible Christian protection charm. It has already been mentioned how the Church could influence, in its process of inculturation, popular beliefs and practices (chapter 1. II). Moreover, Saint Peter appears in various charms. In a charm ‘*wiþ þeofþe*’, ‘against theft’, he is mentioned together with other saints:

<sup>126</sup> Storms, Godfrid, *Anglo-Saxon Magic*, no. 27, pp. 258-259.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 44, p. 282.

<sup>128</sup> Okasha, Elisabeth, *A Hand-List of Anglo-Saxon Non-Runic Inscriptions*, no. 155, .

And Petur, Pol, Patric, Pilip, Marie, Bricgit, Felic.  
In nomine Dei et Chiric.  
Qui querit invenit.<sup>129</sup>

His protection is also invoked in a journey-charm,<sup>130</sup> and he is the protagonist of two tooth-ache charms as well, in which he is represented sitting on a stone, holding his head in his hands, asking Christ to heal his tooth-ache.<sup>131</sup>

Page also explains how CES could actually be an odd abbreviation of CRISTES, thus rendering the text as ‘Saint Peter, the Rock of Christ’. This possible odd abbreviation and the irregular form of MIE in the owner formula might suggest that the engraver was semi-literate. Even if familiar with religious abbreviations and traditional formulae, he may have used them without full ability to manipulate them. Page also proposes that STANCES could be seen as an anagram of SANCTE or SANCTE S(piritus).<sup>132</sup> In this case, the engraver would show a certain level of literacy, allowing him to play with letters and words in a cunning way. It could be objected, though, that this display of letters is a sign of clumsiness rather than ingeniousness. In her investigation of Anglo-Saxon learning, Lendinara showed how Anglo-Saxons became particularly excellent in linguistic studies, both in Latin and in the vernacular. She stresses the typical Anglo-Saxon fascination with riddles, acrostics, cryptography and orthography.<sup>133</sup> The anagram proposed by Page would then seem more plausible.

Whatever the case, this religious text seems to confer a certain degree of protection on the wearer, whether in an ‘orthodox’ religious way or in a ‘magical’ way.

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<sup>129</sup> Storms, Godfrid, *Anglo-Saxon Magic*, no. 12, pp. 206-207.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 16, pp. 216-19.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, nos. 51, 52, pp. 288-290.

<sup>132</sup> Page, R. I., ‘The Inscriptions’, p. 90.

<sup>133</sup> Lendinara, Patrizia, ‘The world of Anglo-Saxon learning’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*, pp. 278-279.

The text, read as ‘May Saint Peter choose her’ may point to the desire of the lady to be accepted by the Church, represented by Peter himself as the rock on which it was built. Maybe Eawen intended to take vows?

### ‘Amulet rings’ (nos. 3, 6, 7, 10)

Three out of four ‘amulet’ rings are written in runic script. Runes have often been considered as remnants of an arcane lore, as symbols with special properties. Page, however, warns against such a view. He suggests that the magic might reside not in the runes but in the text itself.<sup>134</sup> As will be shown, the amulets display a specific order of letters, recalling a determinate charm that survives also in manuscripts. Thus, the power would not rely on the form but on the content of the message.

### 3. Bramham Moor

This golden ring was found in Yorkshire in the 1730s and it is now in Copenhagen.<sup>135</sup>

#### ærkriuftl | kriuripon | glæstæpontol

The text has been interpreted as a magical formula, with a possible link to two Old English charms against bleeding. The two charms present strings of letters to write in order to stanch blood in horse and man. The first has the series of letters ‘ærcrío. ermio. aer. leno.’<sup>136</sup> The second text is ‘aer crio ærmio æer leno’.<sup>137</sup> The texts inscribed in the rings and the series of letters in the charms have similar beginnings. The charms do not specify where the formula should be written down. It might be

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<sup>134</sup> Page, R. I., ‘Anglo-Saxon Runes and Magic’, *Journal of the British Archaeological Association* 27 (1964), pp. 14-31, reprinted in R. I. Page, *Runes and Runic Inscriptions. Collected Essays on Anglo-Saxon and Viking Runes*, ed. Davis Parsons with a bibliography by Carl T. Berkhout, The Boydell Press, Woodbridge, 1995, p. 108.

<sup>135</sup> Page, R. I., ‘Two runic notes’, *Anglo-Saxon England* 27 (1998), p. 291.

<sup>136</sup> Storms, Godfrid, *Anglo-Saxon Magic*, no. 76, p. 304.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 77, p. 305.

possible that the practice evolved from writing to inscribing the formula in objects, in which the protective text would endure incorrupt.

The text is repeated, with some variations, in rings 7 and 10. The tradition of inscribing magic formulae in rings would appear to be a northern one, if one can rely on the finding places of the rings. It seems that runes survived longer in the North,<sup>138</sup> where the Church also made use of runic inscriptions in, for instance, memorial stones (as in Lindisfarne II and III or Monkwearmouth I).<sup>139</sup>

The magic of this ring might be linked not only to the text but also to the specific division of the letters. The ring contains 30 letters, divided in sections of 9, 9 and 12 letters each. Three and its multiples sometimes are magical numbers.<sup>140</sup> Their magic might then add power to the amulet.

The owner, the maker and the audience of the ring could be completely unaware of the inscription, considering it a mere decoration, but this view seems improbable. Runic script was still used in monuments, for instance, so that people in the ninth century had to be at least aware of runes as a writing tool. They might be able to read (and write, at least in the case of the maker) the runic text without, however, recognizing the words expressed in it. The public display of lettering in the ring might then somehow link the wearer to the prestigious idea of literacy in general, while also showing pride in the ownership of such a refined object. A last possibility is that owner, maker and possibly audience were fully aware of the meaning of the text. We could then expect the owner to wear it, or request it to be made, as a protective talisman. If so, the formula and the script are part of a popular practice and tradition, and the message sent by the amulet would be fully intelligible to all. With the passing of time, however, this awareness could fade, and the ring would most likely continue to be used for the economical value it had (as a precious gold ring), while the magical formula would appear just as a string of letters.

## 6. Flixborough

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<sup>138</sup> Page, R. I., *An Introduction to English Runes*, pp. 34-35.

<sup>139</sup> Okasha, Elisabeth, *A Hand-List of Anglo-Saxon Non-Runic Inscriptions*, nos. 76, 77, 91.

<sup>140</sup> Storms, Godfrid, *Anglo-Saxon Magic*, pp. 96-100.

This small silver ring was discovered in 1989 during an excavation in Flixborough, South Humberside. It has been dated from the eighth to the ninth century. The diameter (20 mm) suggests it might be a female finger-ring.

The text, written in insular majuscule, is a partial alphabet, preceded by a cross:

+ ABCDEFGHIKL

Other alphabets survive from Anglo-Saxon England, but they are later (tenth-eleventh century) and not in rings (a lead piece in Waltham Abbey, Essex, (no. 49)<sup>141</sup> a carved stone in Barton St. David, Somerset<sup>142</sup> and a leather piece in Dublin<sup>143</sup>). They are most probably practice letters, sketched more or less rudely on various materials. As for the ring, it seems less likely that it is a practice specimen. The letters are carefully shaped (only the letter 'b' is reversed). Moreover, it seems unlikely that a craftsman would use a wrought silver ring just to practice his writing skills. Even if it is not gold, silver still is a valuable metal. It appears plausible that a metalworker would try out letters on a metal plaque or a wax-tablet rather than on a finished jewel. Therefore, if the text is not made of practice letters, the inscription must have a different meaning to convey. Runes had their own name and denotation, and *futhorc* actually appear with possible magical significance. As mentioned in the discussion of ring no. 16, traces of alphabet magic can be retraced in the numerous repetition of the 'A Ω' formula. Brown also suggests a possible link to abecedarian prayers, in which supplications occur in alphabetical order. If so, the ring would have a devotional and mnemonic function.<sup>144</sup> Dornseiff also mentions how the alphabet was used by the Church when consecrating new churches. Alphabets, Greek, Hebrew and Latin,

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<sup>141</sup> Okasha, Elisabeth, 'A supplement to *Hand-List of Anglo-Saxon Non-Runic Inscriptions*', *Anglo-Saxon England 11* (1983), no. 178, p. 100.

<sup>142</sup> Okasha, Elisabeth, 'A second supplement to *Hand-List of Anglo-Saxon Non-Runic Inscriptions*', no. 186, pp. 41-42.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 190, pp. 44-45.

<sup>144</sup> Webster, Leslie and Janet Backhouse (ed.), *The Making of England. Anglo-Saxon Art and Culture AD 600-900*, British Museum Press, London, 1992, no. 69 b, p. 96.

would be written with a stick on the floor. The meaning of this practice is not unambiguous. The letters might have been seen as an expansion of the signs A and Ω or as symbolizing the union of the people in the faith of Christ.<sup>145</sup> Whatever the case, this last example, together with the suggestion by Brown, shows how this alphabet might not be profane at all but religious.

## 7. Kingmoor

This ring was found in Kingmoor in 1817. It is a large gold ring with nielloed letters dated to the ninth century.

The text is composed of a string of runic letters that reads:

+ ærkriuftkriuriponglæstæpon | tol<sup>146</sup>

The last three letters are incised on the inside of the loop.

The rather large diameter (27 mm) suggests it might have been worn by a man as a finger-ring, but the possibility that it would have been worn as a pendant cannot be excluded. Sources such as the *Lacnunga* prescribe amulets to be tight to the body part to be healed by the magic of the charm, as in charm XCIII b, *wið dweorh*, ‘against dwarf’, in which a charm should first be sung and then hung on the neck of the diseased by a virgin maiden.<sup>147</sup> It is possible that rings with a supposedly magical power would also be carried in this way.

## 10. Linstock Castle

This agate ring was first recorded in 1824 when it was already in the possession of a dealer.<sup>148</sup> The text of this ring is **ery.ri.uf.dol.yri. þol.wles.te.pote.nol**. It is also

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<sup>145</sup> Dornseiff, Franz, *Das Alphabet in Mystik und Magie*, pp. 74-75.

<sup>146</sup> Page, R.I., *An Introduction to English Runes*, pp. 112-113

<sup>147</sup> Grattan, J. H. G and Charles Singer, *Anglo-Saxon Magic and Medicine*, p. 163.

<sup>148</sup> Page, R. I., ‘Two runic notes’, p. 292.

related to the ones on the Braham Moor and Kingmoor rings, but the variations are evident. The text is also not divided regularly according to the number three and its multiples.

It looks as if the maker of this ring was not an expert in magic lore. He was probably following a tradition of which, however, he did not know the rules. The fact that the ring is made of a less valuable material than the gold used for the other amulets, may point at an inferior social class, both for maker and commissioner.

### **Miscellanea (nos. 4, 18)**

#### **4. Cramond**

This bronze ring was found in a churchyard in Scotland. The ring is unfortunately in a very bad shape. Corrosion and polishing have almost destroyed the runic inscription. What is left suggests a maker formula: **[.]ewor[.]el[.]u**, with the **wor** sequence standing for Old English *worhte*. The other letters could then be part of personal names.<sup>149</sup>

#### **18. Wheatley Hill**

This silver-gilt ring is an example of what Page defines the ‘self-evident’.<sup>150</sup> The runic string incised in the hoop of the ring actually reads: **[h]ringichatt[.]**, ‘I am called a ring’. Page explains how these kinds of descriptions are quite familiar in Scandinavian runic tradition. He also demonstrates how recent analysis of the ring allowed the reading of two signs that had been covered by later decorative gem-settings, thus allowing the abovementioned reading of the text. It is most probable that the meaning of the text was already lost at the time the decoration was commissioned and produced.

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<sup>149</sup> Jessup, Ronald, *Anglo-Saxon Jewellery*, p. 157.

<sup>150</sup> Jessup, Ronald, *Anglo-Saxon Jewellery*, p. 169.

## 2. II. BROOCHES

The most common jewel was the brooch, designed as a functional fastener for dresses but soon developed into a splendid artefact. Brooches were worn both by men and women, of any age. Women would wear two of them at the shoulders, while men wore only one, on the shoulders or on the chest. There existed many kinds of brooches: saucer-brooches, brooches of annular and penannular shape, of quoit-form, disc-brooches, long, cruciform, square-headed, equal-armed and polychrome round ones.<sup>151</sup>

Inscribed brooches, however, seem to be less prominent. We can only list three brooches here. There are a few more example (Heslerton, Hunstanton, Sleaford and Wakerley, for instance)<sup>152</sup> but they are earlier in date (mainly sixth century) and they contain just a few letters that do not allow any reading.

### 19. Boarley brooch

This brooch has been included by Page in his *An Introduction to English Runes* but, as the author explains, there are still problems concerning its runes. The copper-alloy disc-brooch has ‘graphs’ cut on its back, which may or may not be runes. The brooch is dates from the sixth to the seventh century.<sup>153</sup> The inscription is cut between framing lines. No reading is given. Page, however, attests that some of the letters can be recognized as runes.<sup>154</sup>

### 20. Dover brooch

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid., pp. 34-40.

<sup>152</sup> Page, R. I., *An Introduction to English Runes*, pp. 28-29, 90-91, 93-94, 102, 114, 129, 157 and 161.

<sup>153</sup> Page, R. I., *An Introduction to English Runes*, p. 28.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid., p. 94.

The Dover brooch, dated from the sixth to the seventh century, is a wealthy piece of jewellery, made of gold, silver, garnet and shell. It was found in 1952 during excavations of a Saxon cemetery on Buckland, a hill near Dover, Kent. The inscription is composed of two texts, both with framing lines. One is more worn than the other and appears to be more carelessly done. It contains a retrograde text made of three letters: **iwd**. The second text begins and ends with **b**. Since they are both inverted it is impossible to know how to read the text, so that Page is left to say “I make nothing out of them”.<sup>155</sup> Evison, however, offers a possible reading. Considering the second **b** sign as a reflexion of the first, put there to close the frame and so only for decorative reasons, the remaining runes could be read from right to left. The text would thus read **bliss**, ‘bliss’. Evison further explains that the inscription of such a word in an object could demonstrate the persistence of the custom of the earlier Latin inscriptions found on gifts in which was incised the formula *utere felix*, ‘enjoy happiness’.<sup>156</sup> If the text in the Dover brooch can really be read as ‘bliss’, then one can see the more or less direct translation in the vernacular of a Latin formula.

## 21. Harford Farm brooch

This seventh-century gold brooch contains a runic inscription on its back that records its repair:

**luda:gibœtæsi | gilæ**

‘Luda repaired the brooch’.<sup>157</sup> The last four letters are incised on the pin anchorage used to repair the object. The personal name Luda is bigger than the rest of the text and Page ascribes this fact to a ‘naïve self-pride’. The text can be seen as a clear example of very practical use. It seems as if the craftsman who repaired the brooch

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid., pp. 180-181.

<sup>156</sup> Evison, Vera I., ‘The Dover rune brooch’ in ‘Notes’, *The Antiquaries Journal*, vol. XLIV (1964), pp. 244-245.

<sup>157</sup> Page, R. I., *An Introduction to English Runes*, p. 103.

advertised his job by labelling the object now repaired. This pragmatic use of the runic script seems to indicate that both the maker and the owner or users of the brooch would be able to read the message. Why putting an advertising message if nobody could understand it? The fact that the inscription is on the back of the brooch, however, does not allow for a public display and reading of the text.

In the decoration that surrounds its back are also some examples of what seems the runic **d**. Page wonders if that is meant to be read as a letters or if the device was simply decorative. He explains how a runic letter could become a decorative pattern in the hands of an illiterate craftsman.<sup>158</sup> The Sleaford brooch also had a runic **d** inscribed roughly on its face. Since it has no decorative appeal, it is reasonable to consider it a runic letter. It might have been used as a marker or sign of the owner of the brooch. Page offers another possible example for this kind of use: a bowl from Willoughby-on-the-Wolds (n. 62) inside of which is inscribed **æ**. He suggests the possibility that these two runes were used as ideographs, representing respectively *dæg* and *æsc*, ‘day’ and ‘ash’, both used as elements in personal Old English names.<sup>159</sup> This fact could be sustained by the fact that the letter seems to have been added in a second moment to an already finished object.<sup>160</sup> It could then be possible that the **d** letter in the Harford Farm brooch had the same function.

## 2. III. MISCELLANEA

### 22. The Alfred Jewel

This jewel was found in 1693 in a park in Athelney. It consists of a plaque, which is set beneath a crystal. Its dimensions are 6.2 x 3.1 x 1.3 cm.<sup>161</sup> The jewel is surrounded by a gold frame, ending in an animal head socket. The text is inscribed in Anglo-

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid., p. 94.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., p. 91.

<sup>160</sup> Page, R. I., *An Introduction to English Runes*, p. 114.

<sup>161</sup> Hinton, David A., *A Catalogue of the Anglo-Saxon Ornamental Metalwork 700-1100 in the Department of Antiquities Ashmolean Museum*, no. 23, pp. 29-48.

Saxon capitals, in the gold panel that surrounds the jewel. The text is a maker formula:

+ AELFREDM | ECH | EHTGEVVYRCAN |

‘Alfred ordered me to be made’’. The text presents the familiar personification of the object, as has been seen in the rings. This formula slightly differs from those met so far for the presence of the verb *hātan* ‘to order’. This modification suggests a greater authority of the commissioner of the jewel. In fact, the Alfred named in the text has been identified with King Alfred the Great, king of Wessex from 871 to 899.<sup>162</sup>

The jewel might be one of the *æstels* that Alfred sent together with his translation of Gregory the Great’s *Pastoral Care*.

(...) ond to ælcum bisepestole on minum rice wille ane onsendan;  
ond on ælcra bið an æstel, se bið on fiftægum mancessa. Ond ic  
bebiode on Godes naman ðæt nan mon ðone æstel from ðære bec  
ne do, ne ða boc from ðæm mynstre.

‘And I will send one (translation) to every bishopric in my kingdom; and in each there will be an *æstel* worth fifty mancuses. And in the name of God, I command that no one remove the *æstel* from the book, nor the book from the minster’.<sup>163</sup>

The identification of the jewel with one of these *æstels* is supported by the presence of the socket, which could hold a small ivory or wooden rod to be used as pointer while reading the manuscript.

The plaque is decorated with a human figure, wearing a green tunic and holding two sceptres in his hands. This iconography recalls the one of the Fuller Brooch, a jewel of the end of the ninth century in which are depicted the five senses. ‘Sight’ occupies the central position and it is personified by a human figure also

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<sup>162</sup> Webster, Leslie and Janet Backhouse, *The Making of England. Anglo-Saxon Art and Culture, AD 600-900*, no. 260, pp. 282-283.

<sup>163</sup> Treharne, Elaine (ed.), *Old and Middle English, c. 890-1400. An Anthology*, pp. 12-13.

holding two sceptres in both hands.<sup>164</sup> The resemblance between the two figures is evident. The meaning of ‘sight’ would also be consistent with the use done of such a pointer, which would actually guide the sight of the reader through the text.

### 23. Egginton silver stud

This miniature stud (0.13 cm of width) was found in 1987 with a metal-detector by its present owner outside a church. The small ornamental button is circular; it was probably mounted on a larger object. The Anglo-Saxon capitals are set in relief, all round the face of the stud. It has been dated from the mid-ninth to the mid-tenth century. The text reads:

LAEDEL[V]FIE |

Okasha reads the text as: ‘may (you) love (me); may (you) take (me)’.<sup>165</sup> If this is the case the stud could have been part of a love token. The verb *lædan*, however, means ‘lead, guide, lift or bring’.<sup>166</sup> The second possible reading would be ‘may (you) lead (me) to life’ (with [V] changed in [Y]) or ‘may you lead me to love’, texts that can have both a secular and a religious meaning.

### 24. Limpsfield Grange gold disc

This ninth-century pure gold disc (0.89 cm) was found with a metal detector in 1992 in a field. It is now in the British Museum. The background is nielloed. The two letters, AQ, stand on the sides of the central decoration, a bird. The abbreviation mark on top of the Q might represent the contraction for AQUILA, Latin for ‘eagle’. The descriptive text can refer to the bird depicted in the centre and, together, to Saint John

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<sup>164</sup> Webster, Leslie and Janet Backhouse, *The Making of England*, no. 257, pp. 280-281.

<sup>165</sup> Okasha, Elisabeth, ‘A third supplement to *Hand-List of Anglo-Saxon Non-Runic Inscriptions*’, no. 223, pp. 237-238.

<sup>166</sup> Hall, Clark J. R., *A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, fourth edition, with a supplement by Herbert D. Meritt, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1960.

the Evangelist.<sup>167</sup> Okasha proposes the possibility that the disc was part of a decorative set of discs representing the four evangelists, which could have been mounted on a larger object such as a portable altar, a book cover or a reliquary, and that its function would be prophylactic.<sup>168</sup>

## 25. Brandon pin

Pins are head jewels worn by women to secure the hood, or as hair-pins. The specimens show a great variety of shape, material and workmanship.<sup>169</sup> This pin is part of a set of findings possibly from a Middle Saxon habitation or church site (see the gold plaque no. 42, the metal fragment no. 43 and the bone handle no. 54).<sup>170</sup>

The front of the pin is gilded and is decorated with two animals whose wings and legs are interlocked. It can be dated to the late eighth or early ninth century.<sup>171</sup>

The text is inscribed in the rounded head of the pin, which has a diameter of 3.6 cm. The text contains the first 16 letters of the *futhorc*:

**fuporcghnijpxstbemljðe**

There are a few scratches following the string of letters. Possibly this was a trying piece left unfinished.

## 26. Keswick disc

This copper-alloy disc (diameter 2.9 cm) comes from the river Yare at Keswick. There is no clear indication of the purpose it might have had. Also the text is unclear.

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<sup>167</sup> Okasha, Elisabeth, 'A third supplement to *Hand-List of Anglo-Saxon Non-Runic Inscriptions*', no. 231, p. 244.

<sup>168</sup> Okasha, Elisabeth and Susan Youngs, 'The Limpsfield Grange disc', *Anglo-Saxon England* 25 (1996) p. 66 and 68.

<sup>169</sup> Jessup, Ronald, *Anglo-Saxon Jewellery*, pp. 30-31.

<sup>170</sup> Page, R. I., *An Introduction to English Runes*, p. 30.

<sup>171</sup> Webster, Leslie and Janet Backhouse, *The Making of England*, no. 66 b, p. 82.

It is composed by eight runes set around the central hole with a pin plugged in it. The text still remains unread. Page tentatively offers the following:<sup>172</sup>

**+ (? or g, n) tlim\*(=?s)um(? r d)**

Unfortunately it is hard to make any sense out of it also because there is no other element useful for a possible interpretation (whether a decoration or a clear functional pattern). To quote Page:

We can confidently claim to know the meaning of fewer than half the runic legends preserved on portable objects other than coins. The rest either baffle us completely, or give the opportunity for several distinct interpretations of each. Usually there is no evidence to help us choose between them.<sup>173</sup>

### **CHAPTER 3**

#### **ARMOUR AND WEAPONS**

In order to better understand the inscribed pieces of armour and weapons, part of this corpus, one should first consider the importance of war equipment in Anglo-Saxon society.

Anglo-Saxon elite society was a warrior society. The survival of individuals and communities would depend on the sword, the spear and the shield, and on the ability of men to become good warriors. Boys were separated from their parents at the age of seven to start their training in martial skills.<sup>174</sup> This training would allow them

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<sup>172</sup> Page, R. I., *An Introduction to English Runes*, p. 161.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 160.

<sup>174</sup> Davidson, Hilda Ellis, 'The training of warriors' in *Weapons and Warfare in Anglo-Saxon England*, Sonia Chadwick Hawkes (ed.), Oxford University Committee for Archaeology, Monograph no. 21, Oxford, 1989, p. 20.

to gain combat expertise, through hunting and exercises, and it would create a sense of identity in the small group of young warriors-to-be. At the age of fourteen, the boys would receive their first arms. Davidson explains how these weapons were given to the young warriors as gifts or pledges, and how the sword, in particular,

was held to bear the “luck” of former warriors, who had used it well in past days. To the youth who received it, it must have been an ever present symbol of continuity, binding him to the past and spring him on to emulate former glories.<sup>175</sup>

These young warriors would travel and fight under the protection of a lord, far from home, or possibly as mercenaries, so as to gain experience and fame.<sup>176</sup> The young retainers (*geoguð*), having proved themselves, would then settle down, after having received a grant of land from their lord. They would become veterans (*duguð*).<sup>177</sup>

The basic strategy used by the Anglo-Saxons was melee fighting. Bows were probably used, but they don't seem to have played a major role in battle. Cavalry was not used until the eleventh century.<sup>178</sup> Warriors, especially the leaders, could possess war-horses, but it seems that they would dismount and fight on foot.<sup>179</sup>

### **Anglo-Saxon inscribed armour and weapons**

The corpus of inscribed arms and armour considered in this chapter includes a few early pieces, dated to the sixth-early seventh century, and a few later ones.<sup>180</sup> The chronology of the items is obviously important when considering the texts inscribed

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<sup>175</sup> Davidson, Hilda R. Ellis, *The Sword in Anglo-Saxon England. Its Archaeology and Literature*, p. 213.

<sup>176</sup> Campbell, James (ed.), *The Anglo-Saxons*, p. 56.

<sup>177</sup> Whitelock, Dorothy, *The Audience of Beowulf*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1958, pp. 89-92.

<sup>178</sup> Davidson, Hilda R. Ellis, *The Sword in Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 189.

<sup>179</sup> Davis, R. H. C., ‘Did the Anglo-Saxons have warhorses?’ in *Weapons and Warfare in Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 142.

<sup>180</sup> Hawkes, Sonia Chadwick and R. I. Page, ‘Swords and runes in South-East England’, *The Antiquaries Journal*, vol. XLVII (1967), p. 10.

on them. Some of the early texts seem to recall Germanic gods and pre-Christian practices. They might be important witnesses of beliefs that were widespread in England before the arrival of Christianity.

Different from jewellery, the literary evidence concerning weapons is rich, even if quite late in date. Wills date mainly from the tenth century onwards, and so does most of the heroic poetry.<sup>181</sup> Poetry seems to be reliable testimony nevertheless. Its intended audience was mainly the warrior class, which would plausibly have criticized an incorrect depiction of such fundamental objects as swords and armour. As Davidson explains, ‘the early literature was composed by men knowing no such artificial barrier between the practical world of the makers and users of weapons and the imaginative world of poets and story-tellers’.<sup>182</sup>

The objects come mainly from graves and rivers. The situation may be described in general terms as follows. In the Early Saxon period the most widespread kind of burial rite was cremation, with the ashes buried in urns. From the seventh century on one can notice a progressive switch to inhumation, while the custom of burying grave-goods went into decline. This change could have been caused by the spreading of Christianity.<sup>183</sup> However, it should be stressed that this is an oversimplification of a more complex situation. Cremation and inhumation could overlap, and regional differences can also be noticed. The eighth century is particularly poor in weapon burials, while they increase again from the ninth century onwards. It has been suggested that in the late Saxon period, the weapon burial was replaced by deposition in rivers, perhaps as a new ritual way of disposing of important weapons after the abandonment of the practice of burying grave-goods.<sup>184</sup>

In a detailed study, Heinrich Härke has demonstrated how the archaeological findings show that weapon burial was a highly symbolical act, and not necessarily a reflection of social reality. He shows that ‘the weapon burial frequencies were totally

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<sup>181</sup> Whitelock, Dorothy (ed.), *Anglo-Saxon Wills*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1930, p. xli.

<sup>182</sup> Davidson, Hilda R. Ellis, *The Sword in Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 5.

<sup>183</sup> Härke, Heinrich, “‘Warrior graves’? The background of the Anglo-Saxon weapon burial rite’, *Past and Present*, 126 (Feb. 1990), p. 24-25.

<sup>184</sup> Bone, Peter, ‘The development of Anglo-Saxon swords from the fifth to the eleventh century’ in *Weapons and Warfare in Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 66

unrelated to warfare because the rite's popularity increased, peaked, decreased and finally disappeared without any reference to endemic warfare throughout the period'.

<sup>185</sup> This can probably be explained by the fact that in times of war, weapons would be needed by those fighting in battle, so that it was impossible to dispose of weapons in ritual burials.

There are other elements that point to the fact that those buried with the weapons were not necessarily 'real' warriors. Some of the male skeletons buried with arms, whose age can vary from twelve months to sixty years old, were affected by severe disabilities.<sup>186</sup> These men could hardly have been 'real' warriors, but they were buried with weapons nonetheless.

The most common weapon found in graves is the spear, while swords and pieces of armour are usually found in richly furnished graves. This suggests that what was displayed in the graves was the status of the family rather than the status of the individual. The families which could afford to lose precious objects in burials were the wealthy ones, of the higher ranks of society.<sup>187</sup>

Before analyzing the objects, the circulation of weapons in Anglo-Saxon society should be taken into consideration. Before being deposited in the graves, arms and armour could be given and received according to specific social relationships and rituals. The most known example is the bestowing of arms from lord to retainer. In so doing, a lord would grant protection and reward to the retainer, who, in his turn, swore an oath of loyalty to the lord, offering him his military services. Armour and weapons thus became symbols of the pledge existing between the two.

'Ic ðæt mæl geman þær wē medu þēgun,  
þonne wē gehēton ūssum hlāforde  
in bīorsele ðe ūs ðās bēagas geaf  
þæt wē him ðā gūðgetāwa gyldan woldon  
gif him þyslīcu þearf gelumpe,

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<sup>185</sup> Härke, Heinrich, "Warrior graves"? The background of the Anglo-Saxon weapon burial rite', p. 31.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid, p. 36.

<sup>187</sup> Härke, Heinrich, "Warrior graves"? The background of the Anglo-Saxon weapon burial rite', p. 42.

helmas ond heard sword'.<sup>188</sup>

'I remember that time when we partook of mead, when we promised to our lord in the beer-hall, he who gave us rings, that we would repay to him the battle-gear if such need should befall him, the helmets and the hard swords'. These words of Wiglaf, pronounced to the coward warriors who abandoned their lord Beowulf during his final fight against the dragon, summarize the bond between lord and retainers and the role that weapons play in it.

Weapons could also go the other way around, and retainers could donate weapons and gear to lords. An example of this kind of circulation can be also found in *Beowulf*, when Beowulf brings to his uncle and lord Hygelac the weapons, pieces of armour and horses that he received from King Hrothgar after he cleansed Heorot from the evil of Grendel and his mother (ll. 2144-2166).

Weapons could be handed down from one generation to the next one as heirlooms. Wills, however late, are the best testimonies of this practice. One example is the will of Ætheling Æthelstan, dated to AD 1014-1015. Æthelstan grants a sword belonging to King Offa (who reigned from AD 757 to AD 796) to his brother Edmund. This means that the sword must have circulated already for two centuries.<sup>189</sup> Heroic poetry also points to this, as in one of the last scenes of *Beowulf*, in which the old dying king regrets that he has no heir to whom he can bequeath his arms and the throne (ll. 2729-2731).

Other ways through which weapons and war-gear would circulate were looting, grave robbery and theft. Looting, in particular, can be seen as a requirement of warrior society. By pillaging enemies, lords and kings could acquire the goods necessary to attract and maintain a war band.<sup>190</sup>

### 3. I. ARMOUR

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<sup>188</sup> *Beowulf. An Edition with Relevant Shorter Texts*, ll. 2633-2637, pp. 140-141.

<sup>189</sup> Whitelock, Dorothy, *Anglo-Saxon Wills*, no. XX, pp. 58-59.

<sup>190</sup> Härke, Heinrich, 'The circulation of weapons in Anglo-Saxon society' in *Rituals of Power. From late Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages*, Frans Theuvs and Janet L. Nelson (eds.), Brill, Leiden, 2000, p. 391.

The corpus of Anglo-Saxon inscribed armour is, unfortunately, very poor. It consists of only one piece, however superb.

## 27. Coppergate helmet

This iron and copper-alloy oval helmet was discovered in 1982 by builders working at the construction of a shopping centre in York. It was found in a pit together with fragments of antler, stone, glass and iron. The object seems to have been already quite old when it was buried: the brass decoration was worn from polishing and there were marks suggesting it had been worn in battle. Härke suggests that the date of manufacture could have been between AD 750 and AD 775 (this dating is based on the analysis of the decoration), while the context in which it was found can be dated to the first half of the ninth century. The helmet's signs of wear (repairs in the mail curtain and abrasions produced by polishing) are consistent with the helmet having circulated for two or more generations.<sup>191</sup> The fact that it had not been thrown carelessly into the pit, but with the mail and one cheek piece carefully placed inside, shows that the helmet was considered a treasured heirloom. It might have been hidden in the pit in order to be retrieved later.

The name Coppergate derives from the area in which it was found. The helmet is now displayed in the Castle Museum in York.

The helmet consists of the cap, two hinged cheek pieces and a curtain of mail to protect the neck. Animal heads decorate the eyebrows and the nasal. The inscription is incised in a single copper-alloy strip running from front to back. It is incised in Latin script and it contains a Christian formula in Latin (In nomine...), a personal name in Old English (Oshere) and a *nomen sacrum* (xpi). It is incised in repoussé and it reads:

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<sup>191</sup> Härke, Heinrich, 'The circulation of weapons in Anglo-Saxon society', p. 394.

IN.NOMINE.DNI.NOSTRI.IHV.SCS.SPS.D(?)ET.OMNIB  
US.DECEMUS.AMEN.OSHERE.XPI<sup>192</sup>

‘In the name of our lord Jesus, the Holy Spirit, God and with all we pray. Amen. Oshere. Christ’, with SCS SPS being the abbreviated form of SPIRITUS SANCTUS and D standing for DEUS. Two shorter strips run down towards the ears, reproducing parts of the main text in the crest, from OMNIBUS to OSHERE on the left side and from IN to SPS on the right side.

Binns *et al.* edit the text as: IN NOMINE DNI NOSTRI IHV XPI ET SPS DI OMNIBUS SCS DECEMUS OSHERE AMEN, ‘In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and of the Spirit of God, let us offer up Oshere to All Saints. Amen’.<sup>193</sup> They explain DECEMUS as a form of the verb DICARE, to dedicate or to offer. They also explain the disposition of the text as the attempt to make specific letters coincide with the centre of the cross. As they put it:

The symbolism seems clear: in the centre of all things (and physically speaking at the top of the helmet) is the Spirit of God, flanked by all the Saints, with whom Oshere associates himself within the limits of this earthly existence whose boundaries are set by Christ, the beginning and the end. This structure, although desperately artificial to the modern mind, is entirely characteristic of the highly formalized literary conventions of the time.<sup>194</sup>

Would this highly symbolic and sophisticated text (if indeed it can be edited and interpreted in this way) be understood? Would such literary virtuosity be appreciated by the audience? In order to do that, the intended audience should have been erudite and capable of decoding the techniques displayed.

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<sup>192</sup> Addyman, Peter V., Nicholas Pearson and Dominic Tweddle, ‘The Coppergate helmet’, *Antiquity*, vol. LVI, no. 218 (1982), pp. 191.

<sup>193</sup> Binns, J. W., E. C. Norton and D. M. Palliser, ‘The Latin inscription on the Coppergate helmet’, *Antiquity*, vol. 64, no. 242 (1990), p. 137.

<sup>194</sup> Binns, J. W., E. C. Norton and D. M. Palliser, ‘The Latin inscription on the Coppergate helmet’, p. 137.

Binns *et al.* also cautiously suggest the possibility that the invocation to All Saints might be related to a minster that was to develop into the All Saints' Church in York, recorded in *Domesday Book* in 1086.<sup>195</sup> The evidence to sustain this hypothesis is flimsy. If this interpretation is correct, the text would be remarkable in its call for protection not to supernatural powers but to a specific local institution.

The name Oshere can refer to different persons. He may have been the owner of the helmet, who was probably also the patron who asked for the object to be produced; he may also have been the smith or metalworker who incised the text in the brass strips and then put them together in the helmet; or he may have been a scribe or a literate layman who wrote the text to be copied by an artisan. The most plausible option seems to be the first one. Oshere is most probably the patron who requested the object to be wrought or for whom the object was produced. It seems improbable that the metalworker would have incised his name, since he may have been illiterate. This is suggested by the inscription itself. In fact, the strips with the text have been fixed to the helmet incorrectly, so that the text appears reversed. Tweddle suggests that the text had first been written by a scribe and then was raised in repoussé by a craftsman who turned the strips, reversing the text without realizing his mistake, thereby revealing his illiteracy.<sup>196</sup> This possibility is quite convincing.

The presence of a Christian text on the helmet has been generally regarded as a means to invoke God's protection for its wearer. This purpose seems to be enhanced by the peculiar display of the inscription. The incised strips actually form a cross, a universal symbol of Christ. The implication of such a display should now be considered. It is impossible to say if such a powerful exhibition of Christian lore would produce awe in the observers. One thing, however, can be certain. Everybody would have understood the main message, from the literates able to read the text to the illiterates able merely to recognize the symbol of the cross.

The custom of decorating helmets in order to obtain protection from outside powers seems to be an old practice. The seventh-century Benty Grange helmet, for

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<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137-138.

<sup>196</sup> Binns, J. W., E. C. Norton and D. M. Palliser, 'The Latin inscription on the Coppergate helmet', p. 193.

instance, exhibits a boar-crest, bringing to mind the ‘*swīn ofer helme*’ in *Beowulf* (l. 1286) and the connotation of strength and power attached to them. The same could be said of the Sutton Hoo helmet, with its dragon-like mask. The function of such ornaments seems to be to imbue their wearers with the powers represented in the decorations and, at the same time, to provoke awe in the viewers. Three remaining helmets are not enough to build a case, but it would be interesting to see if one could detect a development in such a custom, ranging from the non-Christian elements of Sutton Hoo, through the transitory phase of Benty Grange, where the boar can be accompanied by a small silver cross, to the fully Christianized message sent by the maker of the Coppergate helmet.

The Sutton Hoo helmet (27.1) was most probably deposited in AD 625.<sup>197</sup> Its face-mask contains three dragon heads (one completed of wings, made up of the nasal and the eyebrows).<sup>198</sup> The helmet is also decorated by a series of four images: two dancing warriors, a rider and a fallen warrior, one large interlace and a smaller interlace. Bruce-Mitford explains how such images ‘no doubt were chosen advisedly, as evoking heroic history and divine protection’. In particular, the image with the two warriors might be related to the cult of Odin.<sup>199</sup> If so, then the Sutton Hoo helmet really shows pre-Christian beliefs in supernatural powers and deities. The chronology supports this idea. If the helmet was really buried in AD 625 with King Redwald, then the new Christian ideas brought to England by Augustine would not have become established and accepted yet in East Anglia. Redwald himself is said by Bede to be practicing both heathen and Christian customs:

After the manner of the ancient Samaritans, he seemed to be serving both Christ and the gods whom he had previously served; in the same temple he had one altar for the Christian sacrifice and another small altar on which to offer victims to devils.<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>197</sup> Bruce-Mitford, Rupert, *Aspects of Anglo-Saxon Archaeology, Sutton Hoo and other Discoveries*, Victor Gollancz Limited, London, 1974, pp. 253-254.

<sup>198</sup> Bruce-Mitford, Rupert, ‘The Sutton Hoo helmet: a new reconstruction’, *The British Museum Quarterly*, vol. XXXVI (1971-1972), p. 125, fig. 5 p. 127.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid*, p. 129.

<sup>200</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, II, 15, p. 191.

The Benty Grange helmet (27.2) was excavated in 1848. The iron structure that survived the decay was used to hold horn plates that would form the actual helmet. As already mentioned, the crest of the helmet is decorated with a boar, with gilded tusks, silvers studs and eyes inlaid with garnets. A cross was applied to the front of the helmet, and its lower arm had been elongated, possibly to adjust it to the nasal.<sup>201</sup> Webster advances the possibility that the cross was a talisman and not necessarily a statement of Christian faith, and that it might have been seen as a sign of victory.<sup>202</sup> However, it seems more plausible that the cross had indeed a Christian connotation, and its position at the centre of the face seems to emphasize the importance attributed to it. If this is the case, the Benty Grange helmet would indeed be a noteworthy example of the combination of pre-Christian and Christian practices in the first stages of the conversion. Webster also mentions another boar-crested helmet from Wollaston (27.3), dated to the seventh century. It is a plain helmet, completely made of iron, without other decorations. It is not a ceremonial piece but a 'highly functional piece of regular fighting equipment'.<sup>203</sup> This suggests that the practice of adorning helmets with boar images was in fact widespread and not only a poetic tradition. In this context, another piece should be added: a seventh-century sword with three figures of boars stamped into the blade.<sup>204</sup> It seems, then, that the connotations of strength and power linked to the boar could be passed on also to weapons.

Back to the Coppergate helmet. It has been suggested how the primary sender, possibly Oshere, would have his helmet inscribed with a Christian text in order for it to get protection and how, it should be added, he decided to have his name written down in order for it to be publicly displayed with the 'In Nomine' formula. The object is a rich one, and doubtless the patron would want to state his ownership.

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<sup>201</sup> Bruce-Mitford, Rupert, *Aspects of Anglo-Saxon Archaeology, Sutton Hoo and other Discoveries*, p. 234.

<sup>202</sup> Webster, Leslie and Janet Backhouse (ed.), *The Making of England. Anglo-Saxon Art and Culture AD 600-900*, no. 46, p. 59.

<sup>203</sup> Webster, Leslie, 'Archaeology and *Beowulf*' in Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson (eds.), *Beowulf. An Edition with Relevant Shorter Texts*, p. 189.

<sup>204</sup> Davidson, Hilda R. Ellis, *The Sword in Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 49-50.

We should also consider a possible secondary user and audience for the helmet. As we have mentioned above, the helmet had been used before being put into the pit. We may suppose that the helmet had been used by the generations following Oshere and his primary audience. Would the message remain the same? A new audience would still perceive the Christian text with its protective function, but changes would probably involve the name of Oshere. If we imagine family members using the helmet and reading the text, then we may assume that the object would have an added value for them, as a treasured heirloom. If, however, the subsequent users would not be related in any way, then we can picture them wondering about the identity of this man.

### 3. II. WEAPONS

The corpus of inscribed weapons is richer than that of inscribed armour. The objects consist of parts of sword-hilts from the early period, while inscriptions in the blades are a later development. The symbolic function of weapons and armour has already been described, but it might be useful here to stress the specific role of the sword:

unlike spear or bow, which could also be used in hunting, the only use of the sword was in warfare. As such it would have been a potent symbol of the aristocratic warrior class, marking its bearer as both wealthy and a warrior'.<sup>205</sup>

In her thorough study of Anglo-Saxon swords, Hilda Davidson describes the development of these weapons, from the first short swords similar to the Roman *gladius* to the later long swords, possibly influenced by those used by the Roman cavalry or by the Gauls.<sup>206</sup> Davidson also demonstrates how the epithets used in the heroic literature to describe weapons are not conventional: they tell us something

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<sup>205</sup> Bone, Peter, 'The development of Anglo-Saxon swords from the fifth to the eleventh, p. 69.

<sup>206</sup> Davidson, Hilda R. Ellis, *The Sword in Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 36.

about real swords. An example related to the corpus of inscribed weapons is the following:

Swā wæs on ðæm scennum scīran goldes  
þurh rūnstafas rihte gemearcod  
geseted ond gesæd hwām þæt sweord geworht  
īrena cyst ærest wære,  
wreoþenhilt ond wyrmfāh.<sup>207</sup>

‘Also was on the sword metal plate of bright gold, in runes rightly marked, it was set and said for whom the sword had first been wrought, the best of irons, with twisted-hilt and serpentine ornament’. This might be the description of a sword with pattern-welded blade (the pattern resulting from this specific technique is wavy, recalling a serpent),<sup>208</sup> with an adorned hilt on which a runic owner formula was inscribed.

## 28. Ash/Gilton pommel

The pommel was found in the eighteenth century in a cemetery in Kent.<sup>209</sup> There is no find report of the object, but in 1845 it is said to have reached an antiquary.<sup>210</sup> The text measures c. 4 cm in length, while the height of the signs varies from c. 2 to 7 mm.

This silver-gilt pyramidal pommel has a runic text clearly cut on one side. Elliot interpreted the text as **eicsigimernemde**, ‘Sigimer named the sword’ and he suggested that the other side of the pommel might have contained the name of the sword.<sup>211</sup> The custom of giving names to weapons might have been a current one, if one can trust the literary sources. In *Beowulf*, for instance, we have Hrunting (lines

<sup>207</sup> *Beowulf. An Edition with Relevant Shorter Texts*, ll. 1694-1698, pp. 103-104.

<sup>208</sup> Davidson, Hilda R. Ellis, *The Sword in Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 129-135.

<sup>209</sup> Elliott, Ralph W. V., ‘Two neglected English runic inscriptions: Gilton and Overchurch’ in *Mélanges de Linguistique et de Philologie. Fernand Mossé in Memoriam*, Joseph Vendryès et al., Didier, Paris, 1959, p. 141.

<sup>210</sup> Page, R. I., *An Introduction to English Runes*, p. 167.

<sup>211</sup> Elliott, Ralph W. V., ‘Two neglected English runic inscriptions: Gilton and Overchurch’, pp. 142-144.

1457, 1490, 1659 and 1807) and Nægling (line 2680), respectively the sword of Unferð and the sword used by Beowulf in his later years. The name in the pommel, however, is no longer legible, probably because it disappeared after the rubbing of the pommel against the body of the warrior wearing the sword or, as Elliott suggests, because of a frequent superstitious touching or rubbing of the pommel.<sup>212</sup>

Davidson defines the uncertain hand with which the script has been incised as ‘the work of an amateur who was not accustomed to inscribing runes upon a sword-hilt’.<sup>213</sup> Perhaps the roughly sketched runes represent the attempt of a semi-literate person to have his own name inscribed in his weapon. This idea may be corroborated by the fact that the central runes, containing the name, are bigger than the other ones. This would put the name of the owner at the centre of attention. One should also say, however, that the disposition may be simply the result of the shape of the pommel.

## 29. Chessel Down scabbard plate

The silver plate (c. 4 x 1 cm) at the back of the scabbard found in a cemetery in Chessel Down, Isle of Wight, is inscribed with a runic text, **æco:sœri**. The text has been interpreted as ‘increase to pain’, which would testify to the custom of giving names to swords. It has also been interpreted as a formula containing the name Acca.<sup>214</sup> In the latter case, the text might contain the name of the owner.

The sword seems to be composite.<sup>215</sup> In particular, the text seems to have been inscribed in a plate added to the scabbard in a second moment.<sup>216</sup> Since the inscription, just like the ornamental piece itself, is not too worn, it is possible that the sword circulated for some time after the inscription was added (a generation, according to Chadwick Hawkes).<sup>217</sup> The text is roughly incised. It is also possible that

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<sup>212</sup> Ibid., p. 144.

<sup>213</sup> Davidson, Hilda R. Ellis, *The Sword in Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 82.

<sup>214</sup> Hawkes, Sonia Chadwick and R. I. Page, ‘Swords and runes in South-East England’, pp. 3-4.

<sup>215</sup> For a detailed account of the components of the hilt see Sonia Chadwick Hawkes and R. I. Page, ‘Swords and runes in South-East England’, pp. 11-16.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

the runes were cut before the burial, in a ritual practice.<sup>218</sup> The very fact that no attention was paid to the aesthetic appearance of the runes might support the idea that they were cut for magical or ritual reasons, since the power expressed by the cutting of the runes was probably more important than shaping them neatly, the action being more important than the result.<sup>219</sup> Unfortunately, without a clear interpretation of the runes, it is impossible to go beyond these speculations.

### 30. Faversham pommel

The silver-gilt pommel from Faversham, Kent, is now preserved in the British Museum.

In each end of the pommel there is a nielloed sign ↑ that can be read as a ‘t’ rune. The rune (c.0.7 cm) would have been used as an ideograph, the sign recalling the name of the rune. The Anglo-Saxon name for this symbol is ‘*tir/tyr*’, referring to Tiw, the Germanic god of war.<sup>220</sup> Examples of the custom of inscribing the name of this god in objects can be found in various sources, which, however, are much later. One such example is to be found in the *Edda*, which survives in a thirteenth-century manuscript. The *Lay of Sigrdrifa* tells how the hero Sigurd releases Sigrdrifa, a valkyrie, from her spell. The valkyrie then offers him advice. In the sixth stanza of the poem, Sigrdrifa tells Sigurd:

Victory-runes you must cut if you want to have victory,  
And cut them on your sword-hilt;  
Some on the blade-guards, some on the plates,  
And invoke Tyr twice.<sup>221</sup>

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<sup>218</sup> Page, R. I., *An Introduction to English Runes*, p. 114.

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 113-114.

<sup>220</sup> Page, R. I. *Runes*, pp. 14-15.

<sup>221</sup> *The Poetic Edda*, translated with an introduction by Carolyne Larrington, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999, p. 167.

One should proceed with caution when working with the later Icelandic and Norse sources. However, the similarities with the inscriptions on the pommel seem to be more than just a coincidence. The runes are cut on the hilt and Tyr is actually invoked twice, if we take the two runes to refer to the god. The practice would thus respond to the call for victory and divine intervention. The inscription of such a sign would fit with the practice of applying special devices and decorations to weapons and armour with the intention of augmenting their powers, and to call for protection.

If one accepts the aforementioned examples as evidence of a traditional and widespread practice, then we can imagine the first user of the sword and its primary audience to be familiar with the device and the message. The invocation to Tiw for strength in battle would then be effectively sent and received. However, it is difficult to say if the same message would be received in a similar way generations afterwards, by other users or observers of the sword. Would the sign be still recognized or would it be taken for a decorative design? It is hard to say if the practice of inscribing the rune of Tiw could survive the coming of Christianity. This tradition may have died out in time, and the fact that there are no late examples of it seems to sustain this hypothesis.

### **31. Gilton pommel**

The silver-gilt pommel from Gilton, Kent, is now in the Liverpool Museum. As with the Faversham specimen (no. 30), runes (c. 1 cm) can be found at both ends of the pommel. The sign is less clear than the one in the Faversham pommel, but it has been read as an ‘x’ rune, a quite rare rune in Anglo-Saxon England, since it represents a sound which is not needed in Old English. Only a few examples survive, such as in the *futhorc* incised in the Thames scaramax (no. 35). In manuscripts the ‘x’ rune is called ‘*eolhx*, *iolx*, *ilx*’, names related to the Old English verb *ealgian*, ‘to protect, to defend’.<sup>222</sup>

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<sup>222</sup> Hawkes, Sonia Chadwick and R. I. Page, ‘Swords and runes in South-East England’, p. 8.

If the identification of the sign incised in the pommel with the rune ‘x’ is correct, then this seems to be a second example of the use of runes as ideographs, where the meaning is conveyed by the rune-name. If ‘x’ was actually linked to the idea of protection, then we can again see the custom of adding signs and inscriptions to weapons and pieces of armour in order to increase their offensive and/or defensive powers.

The text is primary, incised and nielloed during the original manufacturing of the sword, and not added at a later moment. It is interesting to ask oneself who would have wanted this rune incised: the first owner of the sword? If so, he must have been familiar with the peculiar ‘x’ rune, found more often in manuscripts than in inscriptions. One might also wonder why he chose a rune meaning ‘protection’ for a sword instead of calling down the powers and strength of a god of war. Unfortunately, any attempt at an explanation would be hypothetical rather than realistic. It seems safe to say, however, that secondary users and audiences would gradually look at the signs as merely decorative patterns in the pommel (if they weren’t doing so from the first moment). Runic inscriptions endured in the following centuries, but the use of runes gradually diminished, suppressed by that of Latin script.<sup>223</sup> It would seem likely that a later audience would gradually lose its skills in recognizing and reading runes.

### **32. Holborough spearhead**

This seventh century iron spear-blade shows another example of the inscription of a possible ‘t’ rune (0.5 cm), which, in this case, is inlaid in contrasting metal.<sup>224</sup> It shows the same practice of inscribing the rune of Tiw in a weapon, as in the Faversham pommel (no. 30). This piece is also from Kent, possibly hinting at a regional practice. Evison points at the possibility that the sign was a mark of property,

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<sup>223</sup> Page, R. I. *Runes*, p. 13.

<sup>224</sup> Page, R. I., *An Introduction to English Runes*, p. 92.

but its dimension (0, 5 cm) seems to show that ‘the purpose was symbolic rather than a visual aid to identification of ownership’.<sup>225</sup>

### 33. Sittingbourne knife

This knife (6 x 32.2 x 0.6 cm) was dug out while working on the foundations of a house, some time before 1871.<sup>226</sup> It is an iron scramasax, inlaid with copper, bronze, silver and niello, of which only blade and tang survive. Contrary to the previous items, this is a late example, dating to the ninth-tenth century. It is now preserved in the British Museum.

The blade is decorated with plates containing various decorative elements: a winged animal, a plant motif and a scroll motif. The texts incised are an Old English owner and maker formula. The first is contained in two plates:

+ S GEBEREHT | MEAH

‘Sigebereht owns me’. The letter ‘I’ is missing after the first ‘S’. Page explains the mistake saying that the craftsman that inscribed the text was probably illiterate, copying from a written text in which the ‘I’ was accidentally erased. Being illiterate, the craftsman was not able to fill in the gap.<sup>227</sup>

The text continues on the other side of the blade:

+ BIORHTELMMEWORTE

‘Biorhtelm made me’. As mentioned above, the custom of inscribing not the hilts but the blades of the swords is a later development. This knife and the following items are precious and highly decorated objects, surely the possessions of people from the

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<sup>225</sup> Evison, Vera I., ‘An Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Holborough, Kent’, *Archaeologia Cantiana* 70 (1956), p. 100.

<sup>226</sup> Wilson, David M., *Anglo-Saxon Ornamental Metalwork 700-1100 in the British Museum*, no. 80, pp. 172-173 and Elisabeth Okasha, *A Hand-List of Anglo-Saxon Non-Runic Inscriptions*, no. 109.

<sup>227</sup> Page, R. I., ‘The Inscriptions’, p. 86.

higher ranks of society. They show the same kind of formulae used in inscribed jewellery. Compared to the early examples, one can notice a progressive use of the written word. Whether the owners and/or commissioners of these objects were literate themselves, is probably of no primary importance. The objects show how literacy was at least considered by them to be a mark of prestige, whether or not they were able to manipulate written language and script themselves.

#### **34. Thames handle/mount**

This late eighth-ninth century silver-gilded mount (18.8 cm) was dredged from the river Thames, near Westminster Bridge, in 1866.<sup>228</sup> It is decorated with an animal head in full relief. The mouth is open, showing long arching teeth and the tongue, which curls back forming a scroll. The eyes are made of blue glass.<sup>229</sup> It was possibly the binding of a knife sheath.<sup>230</sup>

The text is:

**sbe/rædht bcái | e/rh/ad/æbs**

The runes have serifs. This detail might imply that the carver was familiar also with Latin script and the monumental tradition.<sup>231</sup> The text does not make sense as it is, but the signs in the second half of the text could be a rather complicated anagram of at least some of the signs in the first part. If this is the case, these runes might have had an amuletic function.<sup>232</sup> The sequence of letters ‘er, h, d’ appears also in a charm against theft.<sup>233</sup> The slight resemblance, however, does not seem to be convincing. The text in the Thames handle contains too many letters of which no interpretation can as yet be given. Still it is a fascinating idea to imagine the

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<sup>228</sup> Wilson, David M., *Anglo-Saxon Ornamental Metalwork 700-1100 in the British Museum*, no. 45, p. 153.

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 152-153.

<sup>230</sup> Page, R. I., *An Introduction to English Runes*, p. 29.

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103-104.

<sup>232</sup> Page, R. I., ‘The Inscriptions’, p. 78.

<sup>233</sup> Storms, Godfrid, *Anglo-Saxon Magic*, no. 86, p. 311.

possibility that an owner would have a charm against theft being inscribed in the handle of his weapons.

### 35. Thames scramasax

This long one-bladed knife (81.1 cm) is dated to the late ninth century. It was dredged from the River Thames at Battersea, Inner London.<sup>234</sup>

Knives of this kind, of native manufacture, were usually worn together with the sword, usually in a sheath on the belt.<sup>235</sup> They were possibly used not only as weapons but also as domestic tools. They seem fit for hunting and actions like skinning and disembowelling animals. In time, they might have acquired a symbolic meaning, becoming the emblem of the hunter and even the mark of a free man. The variety in value and decoration of these seaxes might cover the range of social statuses from free men to noble men and possibly kings.<sup>236</sup>

The blade is heavily decorated with copper, bronze and silver, forming lozenges and zigzag ornaments, and it displays two texts.

The first text reads:

**fuporcgwhnij pxftbejdlmœaæyêa**

This *futhorc* has some peculiar runes, with otherwise unknown shapes. The order is also unusual. Some of the unusual signs are closer to the runes written in manuscripts than to epigraphic ones. Page suggests that the carver who produced the scramasax was not familiar with the runic tradition and that he derived the text from a manuscript account.<sup>237</sup> However, the custom of inscribing runic characters on swords must have been known to him or to the commissioner of the work. It is plausible that the belief in the magical power of the runes would have decreased in the late ninth

<sup>234</sup> Wilson, David M., *Anglo-Saxon Ornamental Metalwork 700-1100 in the British Museum*, no. 36, p. 146.

<sup>235</sup> Davidson, Hilda R. Ellis, *The Sword in Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 42.

<sup>236</sup> Gale, David A., 'The seax' in *Weapons and Warfare in Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 80.

<sup>237</sup> Page, R. I., 'The Inscriptions', pp. 70-71.

century and, with it, the skills and knowledge of the practice. However, the commissioner was probably recalling what he considered an ancient tradition to enhance the prestige of his already richly decorated blade.<sup>238</sup>

The second part of the text contains a masculine personal name:

**bêagnop**

This might be the name of the maker, the owner or the rune-master; the owner seems again the most plausible choice.

### **36. Lincoln sword**

This sword, like the Thames items, was also found in a river.<sup>239</sup>

On one side of the blade there are two inlaid small crosses. On the other side, in the fuller of the blade, close to the hilt, is inscribed a personal name: + LEUTLRIT. The final T is reversed. The name is a Continental Germanic one, and it probably refers to the smith.<sup>240</sup> Davison suggests that, in the late Saxon period, the names that were handed down in swords were the names of the smiths producing the blades. Since there are many cases with the same name inscribed, it is possible that that name actually became the trade-name of a workshop and not necessarily the personal name of an individual smith.<sup>241</sup> It is quite intriguing to see how the written word could be used for advertising purposes. This fact would also hint that a wider audience had to be able to read or at least to recognize the symbols incised.

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<sup>238</sup> Page, R. I., *An Introduction to English Runes*, p. 113.

<sup>239</sup> Wilson, David M., *Anglo-Saxon Ornamental Metalwork 700-1100 in the British Museum*, no. 33, pp. 142-143.

<sup>240</sup> Page, R. I., 'The Inscriptions', p. 90.

<sup>241</sup> Davidson, Hilda R. Ellis, *The Sword in Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 48.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **MISCELLANEA**

In this chapter is gathered a series of objects of various date, value and function. Contrary to the previous items, these inscribed articles cannot be grouped under one heading such as 'jewellery' or 'weapons', but they represent an important testimony for the use of literacy in Anglo-Saxon society in the years AD 600-900. The variety of objects and texts offers a significant contribution to the previous analysis, allowing access to uses of the written word that range from what appears to be a limited knowledge and use of writing skills to the sophisticated and erudite display of the Franks casket.

#### **4. I. CASKETS**

The following three objects are all preserved on the Continent, but their style or the letters of the inscriptions reveal that they are insular pieces. They may have reached the Continent through trade, gift exchange, plunder or inheritance, some of them only after the Middle Ages. They are all boxes, possibly used as reliquaries or as containers for precious objects.

#### **37. Brunswick casket**

This late eighth-century house-shaped ivory casket (12.6 x 12.6 x 6.8 cm) is also known as the Gandersheim casket, from the convent in Saxony where it was first found. It is now preserved in the Herzog Anton Ulrich Museum in Braunschweig.<sup>242</sup> It is sometimes believed that it was taken to the Continent by an Anglo-Saxon pilgrim before the Viking assault on Ely in AD 870.<sup>243</sup>

The casket is decorated with panels containing animal and bird interlaces. Interlaces can also be seen in the bronze frame.

A runic text is inscribed in a metal plate attached to the base of the casket as a possible repair, since it does not fit with the original frame. The runic inscription has been read by Page as:

**uritneþiisixhiræliinmc\*hælixæliea\***

**þiis** and **liin** can be read as ‘this’ and ‘linen’ respectively, but the rest of the text does not seem to make much sense. Page confidently rejects the old reading of the text that would see in the signs **æliea** a reference to Ely.<sup>244</sup> Beckwith, however, still accepts this reading and offers the translation ‘Holy Virgin be thou a light to Ely’. He mentions that Gandersheim convent was recorded as having had relics of the Virgin’s clothing.<sup>245</sup> The casket would then be regarded as a possible reliquary. The text, however, is of doubted authenticity. Page proposes that it might be a fake, made by someone who must have had a good exemplar to copy from, since the runes are seriffed and clearly cut.<sup>246</sup> The date of the text is also unknown. The text may even have been carved in the nineteenth century, but this is hard to prove. The date and meaning of the text remain a mystery.

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<sup>242</sup> Webster, Leslie and Janet Backhouse (ed.), *The Making of England. Anglo-Saxon Art and Culture AD 600-900*, no. 138, p. 177.

<sup>243</sup> Beckwith, John, *Ivory Carvings in Early Medieval England, 700-1200, 8<sup>th</sup> May to 7<sup>th</sup> July 1974*, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, Arts Council of Great Britain, London, 1974, no. 2, p. 19.

<sup>244</sup> Webster, Leslie and Janet Backhouse (ed.), *The Making of England*, no. 138, p. 178.

<sup>245</sup> Beckwith, John, *Ivory Carvings in Early Medieval England, 700-1200*, no. 2, p. 19.

<sup>246</sup> Webster, Leslie and Janet Backhouse (ed.), *The Making of England*, p. 177.

### 38. Franks casket<sup>247</sup>

This casket, dated c. AD 700, was in a church in the Haute Loire and, in the nineteenth century, it passed into the possession of a family in Auzon, where it was used as a work-box. It measures 12.9 x 22.9 x 19.1 cm. Some of the panels were bought by Sir W. A. Franks in 1857 from a dealer in Paris and then bequeathed to the British Museum. The lid panel found its way to the Museo Nazionale del Bargello in Florence.<sup>248</sup>

The casket is a superb piece, showing remarkable linguistic mastery. The borders of the panels, richly decorated with Christian and Germanic images, are inscribed with texts, written both in Latin script and in runes. The languages displayed are Latin and Old English. Moreover, code runes are used in a cryptic text on the right side of the box: the consonants of this text have the usual form, but the vowels have been substituted with arbitrary shapes. Page lists examples from runic texts in manuscripts in which vowels have also been substituted, for instance by dots or with the consonants following them in the alphabet.<sup>249</sup> The use of this kind of cryptic code can be linked to the idea of secrecy. As for the manuscripts, Page suggests the possibility that teachers would like to keep some notes or the explanations of some words secret from their pupils.<sup>250</sup> Perhaps the same need of concealment was required in the case of the casket. The right panel might actually contain images related to pagan beliefs, and Page suggests that they might have been regarded as offensive to some Christians, and that they could not be referred to openly.<sup>251</sup> This view, however, doesn't seem to be convincing. There are other non-Christian references in the box (Weland the smith and Egil, for instance), which are not encrypted. Perhaps the concealing trick was not related to religion after all. If the

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<sup>247</sup> The literature on the Franks casket and the possible interpretations of both the inscriptions and the pictures are very vast. I will here consider the transliterations and translations offered by Raymond Ian Page in *An Introduction to English Runes*, pp. 172-179. They concord with those given by Elisabeth Okasha in *A Hand-List of Anglo-Saxon Non-Runic Inscriptions*, no. 6, pp. 50-51.

<sup>248</sup> Beckwith, John, *Ivory Carvings in Early Medieval England, 700-1200*, no. 1, p. 18.

<sup>249</sup> Page, R. I., *An Introduction to English Runes*, pp. 86-87.

<sup>250</sup> *Ibid*, p. 87.

<sup>251</sup> *Ibid*, p. 88.

image was offensive, why would one want to display it in the first place? Nevertheless, the cryptic text was directed to a specific audience, able to decode the secret message.

There are eleven discrete inscriptions on the five sculpture panels. They are all runic texts, except for three words on the back, which are in capitals and uncials.<sup>252</sup>

The front panel shows two scenes. On the left, Weland the smith is standing close to his anvil. He appears in the Anglo-Saxon poems *Deor* (ll. 1-13), *Waldere* (I, l. 2 and II, l. 9) and *Beowulf* (l. 455) and in Norse sources, such as the *Lay of Volund* in the *Poetic Edda*. On the right, the adoration of the Magi scene is depicted. There is a small *titulus* inscribed above the three wise men, identifying them as **mægi**.

The text surrounding the pictures reads:

**fisc·flodu· | ahofonferg | enberig |  
warþga: sricgrornþærheongreutgiswom |  
hronæsban**

Page shows how the text constitutes two lines of alliterative verse:

*fisc flodu ahof on fergenberig  
warþ gasric grorn þær he on greut giswom*

He translates the passage as ‘the fish beat up the sea on to the mountainous cliff. The king of terror (or storm) became sad when he swam on to the shingle’. The text can be seen as a riddle describing the origin of the material used to produce the casket, **hronæsban**, ‘bone of whale’.

The left panel depicts in the centre Romulus and Remus being fed by a she-wolf. Men with spears stand on both sides. The text reads:

**romwalusandreumwalustwægen | gibroþær |**

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<sup>252</sup> Ibid, p. 173.

### afœddæhiaewylifinromæcæstri: | oplæunneg

The text can be edited as *Romwalus and Reumwalus, twægen gibroþær, afœddæ hiaewylif in Romæcæstri, oplæ unneg* and translated as ‘Romulus and Remus, two brothers, a she-wolf nourished them in Rome, far from their native land’.

The back panel shows Titus’s capture of Jerusalem. In the top half of the scene, armed men and fugitives are represented; in the lower half there are two scenes, one described by a small *titulus* as **dom**, ‘judgment’, on the left, and another one described as **gisl**, ‘hostage’, on the right. The text on the border of this panel presents a mixture both of runic and Latin scripts and of the Old English and Latin languages:

### herfegtaþ | titusendgiuþeasu

### HICFUGIANTHIERUSALIM | afitatores

The text can be divided in *her fegtaþ Titus end Giuþeasu, hic fugiant hierusalim afitatores*, which can Page translates as ‘here Titus and a Jew fight: here its inhabitants flee from Jerusalem’.

On the top lid, an archer is defending a house from armed men. Inside the house is a woman. Above the archer is the *titulus* **ægili**, usually identified as Egil, Weland’s brother.

The right panel is the one whose interpretation is most dubious. As mentioned above, it is the one containing the cryptic text. This accompanies a still unidentified picture. On the right, sitting on a stone, is a creature with a beast’s head. In front of it stands a warrior with helmet, spear and shield. In the centre there are a horse, a man with a stick facing it and another human shape inside a mound or a cave. On the right, three hooded figures stand in consultation. Around the horse are three *tituli*, **risci**, **wudu** and **bita**, meaning respectively ‘rush, reed’, ‘wood’ and possibly the name ‘biter’. Page interprets the texts as follows, offering three lines of alliterative verse:

*Her Hos sitip on harmberga  
agl[.] drigip swa hiræ Ertæ gisgraf  
sarden sorga and sefa torna.*

‘Here Hos sits on the sorrow-mound; she suffers distress as Ertæ had imposed it upon her, a wretched den of sorrow and of torments of mind’.

The display of learning in the casket is impressive. Christian scenes, Roman and Jewish history and Germanic lore are combined in an elaborate narrative programme. Unfortunately, not everything is clear, and the impossible interpretation of the right panel demonstrates that we have lost part of the knowledge necessary to decode the messages inscribed. Such a rich object could have been produced only in a learned and aristocratic community. Webster suggests it might have been one of the major centres of learning in Northumbria: Ripon, Lindisfarne or Monkwearmouth/Jarrow (Northumbria has been accepted as the most probable place of origin of the casket, both because of some dialectal inflection in the texts and on stylistic grounds).<sup>253</sup> Bruce-Mitford defines it a ‘monument of transition’ between pre-Christian and Christian times, together with the ship burial of Sutton Hoo, Benty Grange and the *Beowulf* epic.<sup>254</sup> The casket is indeed a piece that, even if already Christianized depicts the pre-Christian tradition with vigour. Its early dating to AD 700 would explain how such a tradition could still be alive. Only a few generations would have passed since the arrival of Christianity in England and, as has been briefly presented in chapter 1, II, the old practices and beliefs did not disappear entirely but could find their place into the new system. It might be worthwhile to quote the famous passage from a letter of Alcuin to a Mercian Bishop in AD 797, in which he complains about the fact that heathen, i.e. Germanic lore is still sung in Lindisfarne. The casket, if its date is correct, would have been produced a few generations before this letter was written, so that the letter might bear witness to a

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<sup>253</sup> Webster, Leslie and Janet Backhouse (ed.), *The Making of England*, no. 70, p. 103.

<sup>254</sup> Bruce-Mitford, Rupert, *Aspects of Anglo-Saxon Archeology. Sutton Hoo and other Discoveries*, p. 33.

still lively environment where Christian faith and pre-Christian tradition could coexist:

Verba Dei legantur in sacerdotali convivio. Ibit decet lectorem audiri, non citharistam; sermones patrum, non carmina gentilium. Quid Hinieldus cum Christo? Angusta est domus: utrosque tenere non poterit.<sup>255</sup>

Let the Word of God be read when the clergy are at their meal. It is seemly to hear a reader there, not a harper; to hear the sermons of the Fathers of the Church, not the lays of the heathen. For what has Ingeld to do with Christ? The house is narrow; it cannot contain them both'.<sup>256</sup>

### 39. Mortain casket

This house-shaped casket (13.5 x 11.5 x 5 cm) was discovered among the treasures of the church of Saint Évroult, Mortain, in Normandy in 1864. It can be dated to the second half of the eighth or the first half of the ninth century.<sup>257</sup>

The box is composed of a wooden base and sheets of gilt-bronze.

Christ is represented in repoussé in the centre of the front panel, with the archangels Michael and Gabriel at his sides. On the top of the lid is an equal-armed cross, which seems to be a secondary addition.

A runic text is inscribed on the back of the lid. It is cut in three lines and is divided by raised patterns running along the lid. It is an Old English text reading:

**+goodh | e | lpe:æadan**

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<sup>255</sup> Alcuin, *Alcuini Epistolae*, Ernst Ludwig Dümmler (ed.), *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, Epistolae 4, Epistolae Karolini Aevi II, Berolini apud Weidmannos, 1895, letter no. 124, ll. 21-23, p. 183.

<sup>256</sup> 'Documents bearing on *Beowulf*' in Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson, *Beowulf. An Edition with Relevant Shorter Texts*, 2006, p. 225.

<sup>257</sup> Webster, Leslie and Janet Backhouse (ed.), *The Making of England*, no. 137, pp. 175-176.

**Þiosneciis | m | eelgewar  
ahtæ**

‘*Good helpe: Æadan þiosne ciismel gewarahtæ*’. The text contains a maker formula with an initial prayer for protection: ‘God help Æadan who made this *cismel*’. Page explains how *cismel* does not appear anywhere else in Old English and he offers three possibilities:

- a. Latin *crismal(e)* or *chrismarium*, ‘box for the consecrated host’,
- b. Latin *cimelium*, ‘treasure’
- c. Old English *\*cismel*, ‘casket cross’.<sup>258</sup>

The first proposal seems the most suitable for the object, and the idea seems to be corroborated by the reference to the host in the representation of the archangels, who hold a circular object in their hands.

The front panel also displays written texts. They are two Latin *tituli*, written in insular capitals, running vertically along the images of the archangels. They are: SCSMIH and SCSGAB, referring to Saint Michael and Saint Gabriel.

#### **4. II. SEALS**

Two seals have survived from AD 600 to 900. One is an episcopal seal, while the other might possibly be a royal one. Seals were impressed in a soft material, such as wax, and were used to authenticate documents. They thus represent important symbols of power. It is worth asking oneself if the idea of power is linked to the writing itself, or if, on the contrary, the authority and prestige relies more on the act of impressing the seal. In the case of the signet ring, it seems that the wearing of the gold ring was already a declaration of authority, independently from the written name on the bezel.

#### **40. Eye seal**

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<sup>258</sup> Webster, Leslie and Janet Backhouse (ed.), *The Making of England*, no. 137, p. 176.

This bronze seal-die was found by a labourer in a garden close to the site of the monastery of Eye, Suffolk, sometime before 1822. It is now in the British Museum.

The centre of the die (diameter 3.2 cm) is adorned with a floriated cross, and the edge is decorated with a dotted circle. Above the seal is a conical construction terminating with a trilobate pattern and ornamented with animal heads, of a height of 7 cm.<sup>259</sup>

The text is written in capitals, with the letters facing inwards and reading anti-clockwise. The text is in Latin and it reads:

+ SĪGEDILVVALDIEP̄

The text contains two abbreviations: SĪG for SIGILLUM and EP̄ for EPISCOPI. The text can be translated as ‘+ the seal of Bishop Eðilvvald’. Okasha identifies the bishop with Ethelwald, Bishop of Dunwich from AD 845 to 870.<sup>260</sup> Campbell considers it an invaluable testimony to East Anglian ecclesiastical culture in the ninth century, of which he regrets the otherwise scant evidence.<sup>261</sup>

#### 41. Postwick seal

What was found in 1998 by metal detector in a field in Postwick is what remains of a signet ring. The ring itself has not been found. The surviving bezel is made of gold; it is decorated with a human head at its centre and it is of minute size (0.16 cm of width).

The text is written in capitals; it surrounds the head and it is read clockwise. It contains a personal name:

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<sup>259</sup> Wilson, David M., *Anglo-Saxon Ornamental Metalwork 700-1100 in the British Museum*, no. 18, p. 131.

<sup>260</sup> Okasha, Elisabeth, *A Hand-List of Anglo-Saxon Non-Runic Inscriptions*, no. 38, p. 71.

<sup>261</sup> Campbell, James (ed.), *The Anglo-Saxons*, p. 135.

## + BALDE HILDIS

The name is feminine. Okasha explains that this seal is peculiar in its disposition of the letters and also wonders if the –IS ending can be accepted as a possible Latinized genitive form, so that the text would be ‘of Baldhild’. This form would be rare, and so is the name. She suggests the possibility that the name and the seal are actually Merovingian. Merovingian female names can end in –IS in the nominative and a Frankish queen is actually called in this way.<sup>262</sup> Bede tells how in AD 709 she had Dalfin, Bishop of Lyons, executed and how Wilfrid, being a foreigner, was saved from this same destiny.<sup>263</sup>

### 4. III. PLATES

The plates grouped in this section are of various materials and had various possible uses.

#### 42. Brandon gold plaque

This gold plaque, together with the following tweezers’ silver fragment (no. 43), the bone handle (no. 54) and the pin (no. 25), has been found during the excavations of a Middle Saxon settlement in a small island beside the River Ouse in Suffolk. The settlement seems to have been composed of thirty-five buildings, a church, a cemetery and an industrial area for the production of clothes. Some of the other objects found in Brandon, uninscribed, are a spoon/fork set, a key, a few styli and glass fragments.<sup>264</sup>

The rectangular gold plaque was found in 1978. It measures 3.5 x 3.3 cm. The decoration is enriched with niello and it represent the bust of Saint John the

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<sup>262</sup> Okasha, Elisabeth, ‘A third supplement to *Hand-List of Anglo-Saxon Non-Runic Inscriptions*’, no. 232, pp. 244-245.

<sup>263</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, V, 19, p. 521.

<sup>264</sup> Webster, Leslie and Janet Backhouse (ed.), *The Making of England*, pp. 81-88.

Evangelist with an eagle head and a halo. He is holding a book and a pen in his hands. There are four holes in the edges, suggesting that the plaque was riveted to an object, most likely the cover of a Gospel book.<sup>265</sup>

The text is a *titulus* of the image, written in capitals. The letters are displayed vertically at both sides of the figure:

SCS | EVA | N | GE | LI | ST | A | IO | HA | NNIS

The high quality of the craftsmanship displayed in the gold plaque, together with the hints of literacy offered also by the pin and the tweezers, demonstrates that the community in Brandon was a lively and rich one. Texts are written both in Latin script and in runes and they vary from the Christian Latin *titulus* to the *futhorc*, roughly scratched in the pin.

### 43. Brandon tweezers fragment

This silver fragment (2 cm) forms half of a pair of small tweezers, dated to the eighth century. The border is decorated with niello, like the runic inscription. The runes are clearly cut and seriffed and they are preceded by a cross. The text contains a masculine personal name: + **aldred**.<sup>266</sup> As in the case of other personal names, it seems most likely that the name is that of the owner of the object. The fact that the runes are seriffed suggests that the carver, if not the owner himself, was literate also in the Latin script. This fact points again to the high level of literacy and craftsmanship achieved in the settlement of Brandon. This specimen, in particular, is important because it demonstrates how runes continued to be used also in ecclesiastical centres and at a relatively late date, showing how runes were not swept away entirely by the Roman alphabet.<sup>267</sup>

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<sup>265</sup> Ibid, no. 66 a, p. 82.

<sup>266</sup> Webster, Leslie and Janet Backhouse (ed.), *The Making of England*, no. 66 o, p. 85.

<sup>267</sup> Page, R. I., *An Introduction to English Runes*, p. 34.

#### 44. Derby bone plate

This rectangular bone plate (9 x 2.3 x 0.3 cm) was in the possession of an antiquary by 1884 and is now preserved in the British Museum.

There are two small holes on the right side. It has been suggested that a string or a ribbon could pass through them, so that the object could be suspended as a sort of bookmark from a codex. The piece could have actually been used as a ruler or as a tool to turn pages and indicate the line to be read. The object can only be dated from AD 700 to AD 1000.<sup>268</sup>

The runes are seriffed, and this detail is yet another feature that shows the link of this plate with a literate milieu, where seriffed Latin letters would be used in manuscripts or in monumental inscriptions. A double border frames the runes.

**godgecaparæhaddaþiþiswrat**

A definitive interpretation has not been found yet.<sup>269</sup> Bammesberger suggests to read the text as *god geca þaræ hadda þi þis wrat*, ‘God (vocative), help (imperative) this Hadde (a woman’s name), who wrote this’.<sup>270</sup> This interpretation would be an invaluable clue for research on women’s literacy. It would actually be the first inscribed maker formula containing a female name.

#### 45. Flixborough lead plate

This lead plate (11.7 x 5.9 cm) was found in 1990 during the excavation of Flixborough, South Humberside, where also ring no. 6 was found. The settlement was inhabited from c. AD 700 to the 870s. The findings suggest that the settlement was of

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<sup>268</sup> Bately, Janet and Vera I. Evison, ‘The Derby bone piece’, *Medieval Archaeology* 5 (1961), p. 302.

<sup>269</sup> For a detailed account of the possible word divisions and grammatical cases of the words in the text see Janet Bately and Vera I. Evison, ‘The Derby bone piece’, pp. 302-305.

<sup>270</sup> Bammesberger, Alfred, ‘Three Old English runic inscriptions’ in *Old English Runes and Their Continental Background*, Alfred Bammesberger (ed.), *Anglistische Forschungen*, Heft 217, Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, Heidelberg, 1991, p. 134.

high status, with an industrial area probably dedicated to the production of textiles. The plate, together with the ring and a number of styli found in the area, provides important evidence for the study of literacy in the settlement.<sup>271</sup>

The plate can be dated to the eighth or ninth century. It contains, written in insular majuscules, seven Old English personal names, six male and one female.

+ ALDUINI:ALDHERI:HAEODHAED:EODUINI:|  
EDELGYD:EONBEREC[T] | EDELUI[I]N

The names are forms of the recorded masculine names Ealdwine, Ealdhere, Eadhæð, Eadwine, Eanbeorht and Æðelwine, while the feminine name can be Aeðelgyð.<sup>272</sup> The names are divided by dots, a type of word-division usually used in manuscripts.

Holes in the plate suggest that it might have been riveted to another object, such as a coffin. The plate is quite small (6 x 12 cm) but it may have been used as a small memorial object, maybe to label the graves of the people mentioned. Brown suggests that the plate could be a commemorative list of benefactors of an ecclesiastical community or a list of those whose relics were contained in a reliquary on which the plate could be nailed.<sup>273</sup>

#### 46. Kirkdale lead plate

This plate (4.7 x 6.2 x 0.1 cm) was found in 1996 during an excavation in Kirkdale, North Yorkshire, to the north of the churchyard wall of St. Gregory Minster. It was broken into fragments, two of which fit together and contain the text. The plate has been dated to the late eighth or ninth century.<sup>274</sup>

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<sup>271</sup> Webster, Leslie and Janet Backhouse (ed.), *The Making of England*, no. 69 a, p. 95.

<sup>272</sup> Okasha, Elisabeth, 'A second supplement to *Hand-List of Anglo-Saxon Non-Runic Inscriptions*', no. 193, pp. 46-47.

<sup>273</sup> Webster, Leslie and Janet Backhouse (ed.), *The Making of England*, no. 69 a, p. 95.

<sup>274</sup> Watts, Lorna et. al., 'Kirkdale – The inscriptions', *Medieval Archaeology*, 41 (1997), p. 65.

The fragmentary text is written in insular majuscule and it is in Old English. The script, material and disposition of the words resemble the Flixborough plate (no. 45).

[.]ER[+ ...] | [...] + BANC[...] | [...] ISBREFDER

Okasha expands the BANC in *bancyst*, a compound name meaning ‘bone-chest’. This can possibly be a kenning denoting a coffin. *Brefan* is a rare verb that means ‘to write’. IS can be expanded to *bis*, and ‘R’ can be seen as the first letter of a possible name. The text can thus be read as ‘...coffin. R... wrote this’.<sup>275</sup> If this is indeed the case, then here is another example of a maker formula.

Like the Flixborough plate, this one also may have been used as a label for an ossuary or reliquary. Watts *et al.* suggest that the most probable intended users of such a plate could be religious curators who had to take care of relics.<sup>276</sup>

#### 47. Selsey gold fragments

These two small gold strips (1.8 x 0.5 cm)) seem to be part of a same object, possibly a ring. They were found on a beach near Selsey, in West Sussex, and they are now in the British Museum.

They contain a few roughly scratched runes, but the pieces are fragmentary and the text does not make obvious sense:

**brnrn**

**anmæ or anmu or anml**<sup>277</sup>

Hines attributes the fragments to the period from the late sixth to the eight century.<sup>278</sup>

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<sup>275</sup> Okasha, Elisabeth, ‘A third supplement to *Hand-List of Anglo-Saxon Non-Runic Inscriptions*’, no. 225, p. 239.

<sup>276</sup> Watts, Lorna et. al., ‘Kirkdale – The inscriptions’, p. 74.

<sup>277</sup> Page, R. I., *An Introduction to English Runes*, p. 157.

#### 48. Southampton bone plaque

This ninth-century bone plaque comes from an unstratified pit. It is broken into two fragments, both decorated with an interlace pattern. A few runes are inscribed at the edge of the plate. Unfortunately the edge is damaged, so that only the first **d** rune can be seen in its entirety. The others might be **pdlm**, but no interpretation can be given.<sup>279</sup>

#### 49. Waltham lead piece

This small lead piece (4.5 x 5 x 0.2 cm) was found in 1971 during excavations in Waltham Abbey. It cannot be dated with certainty. Okasha suggests a very broad range of time: from the ninth to the eleventh century.<sup>280</sup> The piece is quite deteriorated, and there is no decoration or other element that might help dating it more closely.

The text looks secondary. It is an almost complete alphabet, written in insular minuscule.

[A]BCDEFGHI[K]L[M]NOPQRS[TVX.]

The most plausible explanation for this text, written without too much care in a small piece of lead, maybe spillage, is that it was a practice piece possibly cut by a metalworker working on precious metals. Okasha also suggests the possibility that the text could be ‘merely the idle product of an empty hour’ or the product of a

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<sup>278</sup> Hines, John, ‘The runic inscriptions of early Anglo-Saxon England’ in *Britain 400-600: Language and History*, Alfred Bammesberger and Alfred Wollmann (ed.), *Anglistische Forschungen*, Heft 205, Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, Heidelberg, 1990, p. 448.

<sup>279</sup> Page, R. I., *An Introduction to English Runes*, p. 160.

<sup>280</sup> Okasha, Elisabeth, ‘A supplement to *Hand-List of Anglo-Saxon Non-Runic Inscriptions*’, no. 178, p. 100.

person who wrote down the alphabet in order to show his/her literacy,<sup>281</sup> possibly a student learning skills as a carver.

#### **50. Wardley copper-alloy plate**

This metal plate, found by metal detector and dated to the eighth century, might form part of a connecting plate in a set of linked pins.

In it is inscribed part of a runic text, possibly a woman's name. What remains is **olburg**, perhaps the final part of the feminine personal name Ceolburg. The inscription is carefully wrought, with small serifs. Since the last rune is less clearly cut, it is possible that the text was first sketched and then engraved more carefully.<sup>282</sup>

If the plate was actually connected to a pin, it is most probable that the name is that of the owner. If so, it is worth considering the possibility that she may have inscribed the name herself, or that she might have had it inscribed, in an attempt to personalize the object. However, it is possible that name was not inscribed by or for the owner. One could speculate, for instance, that the inscription was the work of a literate man who offered the set of pins to a lady and decided to inscribe her name on it, to enrich the object and to make it unique.

#### **4. IV. SAINT CUTHBERT'S TOMB**

Saint Cuthbert died on 20 March 687 and was buried in Lindisfarne. A few years later, his body was enshrined and he became one of the most important saints venerated in England. In the ninth century, due to raids of Vikings who managed to repeatedly sack Lindisfarne, in AD 875 his body was moved until in AD 995 it reached its final resting place in Durham Cathedral.<sup>283</sup>

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<sup>281</sup> Okasha, Elisabeth, 'The Waltham alphabet: an Anglo-Saxon inscription' in P. J. Huggins, 'The excavation of an eleventh century Viking hall and fourteenth century rooms at Waltham Abbey, Essex, 1969-71', *Medieval Archaeology* 20 (1976), p. 130.

<sup>282</sup> Page, R. I., *An Introduction to English Runes*, p. 30.

<sup>283</sup> Campbell, James, 'The tomb of Saint Cuthbert' in *The Anglo-Saxons*, pp. 80-81.

## 51. Saint Cuthbert's portable altar

This portable altar (13.3 x 12.06 cm) was found in 1827 during an excavation in Durham Cathedral. It was lying on the breast of the skeleton.

This rectangular altar was made of wood in the seventh century. It seems that it was first enshrined with the saint and later modified during one of the following enshrinements. It was encased in a silver case, probably of the late eighth century. On one side are a draped and haloed figure and the fragmentary inscription

P ... [A] ... OS ... S.

No obvious sense can now be made of the text.

On the other side, each corner is adorned by a foliate motif, and in the centre is a disc containing an equal-armed cross. Around this disc is part of an inscription, in capitals, reading

IASECSER[A]

The letters 'S' are reversed.<sup>284</sup> Okasha sees this symbol as a word division. She then edits the text as IA : EC : ERA and expands the text to [OMN]IA HAEC ERA[NT], 'all things were this.'<sup>285</sup>

The wooden base contains a Latin inscription in capitals:

INHONOR[... ]SPETRV

The text can be edited as IN HONOREM S PETRV. The text can mean 'in honour of Saint Peter'. S is most probably part of the abbreviation of the genitive of SCS, for SANCTI. However, PETRV should also be in the genitive case and read PETRI. This

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<sup>284</sup> Webster, Leslie and Janet Backhouse (ed.), *The Making of England*, no. 99, p. 134.

<sup>285</sup> Okasha, Elisabeth, *A Hand-List of Anglo-Saxon Non-Runic Inscriptions*, no. 35, p. 69.

mistake might indicate that the carver was not fully literate and did not see the grammatical error.

## 52. Saint Cuthbert's coffin<sup>286</sup>

The coffin of Saint Cuthbert was excavated in 1827, behind the High Altar in Durham Cathedral. It is a carved oak coffin (46.4 x 168.9 x 39 cm), with texts carved both in runes and capitals. It can be dated to AD 698.<sup>287</sup>

On the lid the symbols of the four Evangelists surround Christ. Their names are inscribed as:

**math[...]s | marcus | LVCAS | [...]han [...]s**

On the smaller foot end is a highly deteriorated inscription containing the *nomen sacrum* of Jesus Christ in runes and a capital A, probably from the name MARIA. They are *tituli* labelling the figures carved in this end:

**ih[...]xps | A**

At the head end is what remains of the names of the Archangels Michael and Gabriel:

**..MI.H..L | ABR[.]EL**

On one of the long sides are depicted five archangels, but only the names of the Archangels Raphael and Uriel can be detected:

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<sup>286</sup> St. Cuthbert's coffin is, like the Franks casket, subject to a vast research. I will use here the transliterations given by Okasha in *A Hand-List of Anglo-Saxon Non-Runic Inscriptions*, no. 34, pp. 67-69. For a detailed analysis of the single runes and words inscribed see R. I. Page, 'Roman and runic on St. Cuthbert's coffin' in *St. Cuthbert, His Cult and His Community*, Gerald Bonner et al. (eds.), Woodbridge and Wolfeboro, 1989, pp. 257-265, reprinted in R. I. Page, *Runes and Runic Inscriptions. Collected Essays on Anglo-Saxon and Viking Runes*, pp. 315-325.

<sup>287</sup> Okasha, Elisabeth, *A Hand-List of Anglo-Saxon Non-Runic Inscriptions*, no. 34, pp. 67-68.

S ...RA..AEL | SCS VRIA[...]| SCS

On the other long side are presumably the names of the twelve Apostles, depicted in two rows of six:

NVS | BAR[...]| ... .A..BVS | IOHANNIS | ANDREAS | PETRVS | MATH[E]Æ |  
THOMAS | [PA]

There are also two inscribed fragments which are unplaced:

VmIA and PPVS

The use, side by side, of runes and Latin script is yet another proof that runes were not a mystical or arcane tool. The fact that monks would allow them to be carved in the coffin of one of their most revered saints is a clear sign that the Church actually used runes in the same way as any other writing system. Even more, this usage can be seen as another way the Church could use to infiltrate pre-Christian practices and bring them under its aegis. As Page puts it:

... runes were a script as any other; if they had been employed for pagan practices, all the more reason for applying them to Christianity, so that people accustomed to using them might be reconciled to a new religion. Whatever else the later history of Anglo-Saxon runes shows, it makes clear that the Church, far from discouraging writing in runes, exploited the script.<sup>288</sup>

The runes inscribed in the coffin appear to be secondary, as they are influenced by the Latin script. Page suggests that they were copied from a manuscript. This is hard to prove. In the case of the sequence **ihsxps**, however, it is possible to see a direct

<sup>288</sup> Page, R. I., 'Roman and runic on St. Cuthbert's coffin', p. 317.

transliteration into runes of a Latin form. Runes appear to have been considered suitable for religious use. They were a learned script, the use of which was possibly the result of antiquarian interest.<sup>289</sup>

#### 4. V. OTHER

##### 53. Blythburgh bone writing tablet

This rectangular writing tablet (9.4 x 6.3 cm) was found before 1902 and is now in the British Museum. It has been dated to the eighth century. The front is decorated with a knot design set within a frame. On the left are two holes, possibly for thongs to hang it or to connect it to a second tablet. The back of the tablet has a recess where wax was contained and written upon. In this recess are a few runic signs; they appear to be rather random and roughly scratched. They are probably practice letters.

**unþ | ocuat\*\*þ | lsunt | mamæmæm**

The sequence **lsunt** suggest that the writer was probably trying to write a Latin verb in runes,<sup>290</sup> while the sequence **mamæmæm** looks like the attempt of memorizing or practicing the specific writing of the runes **m** and **æ**.

##### 54. Brandon bone handle

This bone object is another of the findings from the Brandon settlement (see nos. 25, 42 and 43). It seems to be a handle for some kind of tool. In it, a runic riddling text is inscribed:

**wohswildumde[.]ran**

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<sup>289</sup> Page, R. I., 'Roman and runic on St. Cuthbert's coffin', pp. 323-324.

<sup>290</sup> Webster, Leslie and Janet Backhouse (ed.), *The Making of England*, no. 65, p. 81.

The words can be separated as *wohs wildum deoran* or *wohs wildum deor an*, both meaning ‘(I) grew on a wild beast’, thus referring to the bone itself, the material from which the object was produced.<sup>291</sup> This is a riddling text close to the one in the Franks casket (no. 38) describing the bone of whale.

### 55. Heacham tweezers

This pair of metal tweezers, dated to the sixth or seventh century, is now preserved in the Castle Museum in Norwich.

Unfortunately, the metal is severely corroded so that not much can be recognized from the texts inscribed in the two halves. They appear to be the same text repeated on both halves, but only the runes ‘**d**’, ‘**f**’ and ‘**u**’ can now be read.<sup>292</sup>

### 56. London bone

This bone piece was found in 1996 during the excavations at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, London. It is a hollow bone, possibly used as a handle for a tool. It has been dated to the middle of the eighth century.

The text contains some vertical lines which could be just some kind of word division. The inscription measures 3.1 x c.1 cm. The other runes can be read from right to left as:

**ææwþrd** or **ææwwrd** or **ææþþrd** or **ææþwrd**

The text does not have much sense like this, but Page proposes:

The sequence **ææwwrd** could be tortured into some sort of sense if the rune **æ** is taken to represent its rune-name *æþil* (*eðel*). We could

<sup>291</sup> Page, R. I., *An Introduction to English Runes*, pp. 169-170.

<sup>292</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 160.

then have a double form of the name *Æþilw[a]rd*, perhaps the owner's claim to the implement. But this is guess-work only, and there is no way of confirming it.<sup>293</sup>

### 57. London echinoid

This fossilized sea-urchin (diameter 2.3 cm), found in London in 1995 during excavations, can be dated to the eighth century.

A small text, now quite deteriorated, was carved in the outside of the echinoid, written in capitals.

E | EB | [...]

The last two uncertain letters could be UR. If this is the case, the word EEBUR could be a spelling of the Old English noun *eofor*, 'boar'. It has been suggested that this echinoid was used as an amulet.<sup>294</sup> If so, it would be possible to see yet another example of the use of the boar with a talismanic function. Would the boar in this case be seen as a symbol of power and protection as it was with the helmets (nos. 27, 27.2 and 27.3)? Brown *et al.* read the letters as either practice letters or as a magical formula, and they exclude the possibility that they are a personal or a descriptive name.<sup>295</sup>

### 58. Mote of Mark bone

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<sup>293</sup> Page, R. I., 'Runes at the Royal Opera House, London', *Nytt om Runer* 12 (1997), p. 13.

<sup>294</sup> Okasha, Elisabeth, 'A third supplement to *Hand-List of Anglo-Saxon Non-Runic Inscriptions*', no. 227, p. 241.

<sup>295</sup> Brown, G. et al., 'A Middle-Saxon runic inscriptions from the National Portrait Gallery and an inscribed fossilized echinoid from Exeter Street, London', *Medieval Archaeology* 45 (2001), p. 208.

This small bone fragment (3.3 cm), presumably dated AD 650-750, derives from an unstratified pit. It is inscribed with a few letters, **apili**, which might be a name element. Final *-ili/-ele* seems to be a diminutive element for names.<sup>296</sup>

## 59. Southampton bone

This inscribed bone was found in a rubbish pit in the early settlement of Southampton, *Hamwih*. It cannot be dated precisely. Page suggests the very wide time range of mid-seventh to early eleventh century.<sup>297</sup> *Hamwih* was an important trading port. Great quantities of bones have been found in the area, suggesting that animals were slaughtered there to sell their hides.<sup>298</sup>

This is not the first inscription on bone found at this site, as can be seen from item no. 48.

The four runes inscribed in the bone read:

**catæ**

The word might be related to Old English *cat(t)* or *catte*, ‘cat’ or ‘she-cat’ and possibly be used as a name element. This would be another case of an animal personal name like *Wulf*.<sup>299</sup> The name Cat, however, is not recorded anywhere else. More plausible is the option that the inscription is actually Old Frisian and that it would read **katæ**, ‘knuckle-bone’. In this case, the name would just be another example of a self-evident *titulus* given to the object itself. The runes could have been inscribed by a Frisian traveller who found himself in the port of *Hamwih*.<sup>300</sup> It is

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<sup>296</sup> Laing, L., ‘The Mote of Mark and the origins of Celtic interlace’, *Antiquity* 49 (1975), p. 101.

<sup>297</sup> Page, R. I., *An Introduction to English Runes*, p. 168.

<sup>298</sup> Campbell, James (ed.), *The Anglo-Saxons*, pp. 102-103.

<sup>299</sup> Page, R. I., *An Introduction to English Runes*, pp. 168-169.

<sup>300</sup> Giliberto, Concetta, *Le Iscrizioni Runiche sullo Sfondo della Cultura Frisone Altomedievale*, Göppinger Arbeiten zur Germanistik nr. 679, Kümmerle Verlag, Göppingen, 2000, pp. 70-72. On the link between Frisia and England see, among many others, Rolf H. Bremmer, ‘The Anglo-Frisian complex’ in *An Introduction to Old Frisian. History, Grammar, Reader, Glossary*, John Benjamins, Amsterdam and Philadelphia, 2008, sections 220-225 and Catherine Hills, ‘Frisia and England: the archaeological evidence for connections’ in *Frisian Runes and Neighbouring Traditions, Proceedings*

difficult to understand the intent expressed in this inscription but one can imagine the traveller scratching a few runes in order to show an Anglo-Saxon host his literacy, or perhaps to show how the Frisian runes could differ from the Anglo-Saxon ones. This is pure speculation, but the fact that the bone was not worked or shaped in any way does not suggest any other function it might have had.

## 60. Whitby bone comb

This comb was found in a rubbish pit near the ruins of Whitby Abbey. The elegant runes in this comb were produced by someone who knew Latin. The runic text begins with the formula **dæus mæus**. The text continues with a prayer to God to help the owner of the object, or possibly its maker.

**dæusmæus | godaluwalu | dohelipæcy**

Page explains that the text is in Anglian dialect. **Aluwaludo** stands for *eallwealda*, ‘almighty’. The text can be translated as ‘My God: may God Almighty help Cy...’ where Cy can be expanded to the name element *Cyne*.<sup>301</sup>

## 61. Whitby disc

This disc was found during excavations at Whitby Abbey and is now preserved in the British Museum. The disc seems to be a spindle whorl. It contains three runes. They might be owner’s marks, but they differ from the well-wrought and erudite runes in the comb (no. 60). The runes are not clearly readable. Only the second one is surely ‘e’. The possible readings of the sequence are:

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*of the First International Symposium on Frisian Runes at the Fries Museum, Leeuwarden, 26-29 January 1994*, Tineke Looijenga and Arend Quak (eds.), *Amsterdamer Beiträge zur älteren Germanistik* 45, Rodopi, Amsterdam, 1996, pp. 35-46.

<sup>301</sup> Page, R. I., *An Introduction to English Runes*, pp. 164-165.

## leu or ler or uer

All of them can be taken as elements of personal names, like *Leof* or *Wær*. Page notes that these elements suggest masculine names, which seem inappropriate in a tool typically used in the female occupation of spinning. However, owner's marks seem the most plausible interpretation, according to Page.<sup>302</sup> Nonetheless, one can speculate that the masculine name is that of the maker of the disc, which was then given to and used by a woman. Or the name could stand as a mark of a donor, who then offered the disc to a lady. Page also tentatively suggests the possibility that **uer** could be a northern form of West Saxon *wær*, 'token of friendship'.<sup>303</sup> If this is the case, all gender issues would be resolved, and the disc would be a good example of a new kind of *titulus*, labelling not so much the material or the object itself (no. 18 and no. 59, for instance) as the function of the object. In this case the name would express the relationship between two individuals, involved in the exchange of this object. This would also suggest that both donor and receiver were literate, the first in order to write the text and the latter in order to identify the gift.

## 62. Willoghby-on-the-Wolds bowl

This bronze bowl, dated to the sixth-seventh century, contains a single rune 'æ' roughly scratched in its base. The position of this rune demonstrated that it was not meant as a decorative device, since it is not openly displayed on the outside of the bowl but inside, in the bottom. It is most probable that it was used as an ideograph (cf. nos. 30, 31 and 32). *Æsc* is a common Old English personal name element. If so, the rune can stand for the owner's or maker's name.<sup>304</sup>

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<sup>302</sup> Page, R. I., *An Introduction to English Runes*, p. 170.

<sup>303</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 170.

<sup>304</sup> Page, R. I., *An Introduction to English Runes*, p. 91.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The inscribed objects studied proved to be an extremely fascinating source of information for literacy and communicational strategies in the early Middle Ages. The specific character of the objects allowed access to varied levels of literacy, different from those present in manuscript production, which in the centuries under

consideration was mainly restricted to the monasteries. The objects actually circulated in society, so they raised different questions concerning the nature of literacy and illiteracy in Anglo-Saxon England. As expected, the objects here analyzed showed uses of literacy ranging from simple marks of ownership to elaborate linguistic and pictorial programmes.

Of the objects considered in this thesis, 17 contain religious texts, either mentioning God and asking for His protection, or texts that appear to have been used in a religious milieu, such as the metal plate no. 45 that was possibly a label of an ossuary or a coffin. Of these 17, 14 are in Latin script and 3 in runes. This seems to confirm the Church's predilection for the Latin script. Two of the pieces are early. They are St. Cuthbert's coffin and altar (nos. 51 and 52), which also contain runes. The others are dated mainly to the eighth and ninth century, hinting at the fact that it took a while for the Latin script and literacy to spread, together with the Christian faith. Of the religious inscriptions, 4 texts are in Old English, 6 in Latin, 3 in Latin containing Old English names, 3 in a mixture of Old English and Latin, and 1 with an Old English name and the Greek letters A and Ω.

There are 21 objects with secular texts, such as owner and maker formulae or personal names, with no references to God or to other religious or possibly magical practice. Of these 11 are runic, 8 are written in Latin script and 2 contain a mixture of both. The geographical distribution of these objects is mainly in the South or South-East of England, possibly indicating that literacy there was more widespread than in the North. The runic texts and objects are equally divided between early and late ones, showing a continuous use of runes, while the Latin script appears mainly in pieces dated to the ninth century. This might indicate that it took some time for the Latin script to become widely known and used for non-religious purposes. Its widespread use from the ninth century onwards is again evidence of the spread and growth of literacy in the Latin alphabet. 17 texts are in Old English (many are personal Old English names) and 1 is in Latin with an Old English name; there are also 1 possible continental Germanic name (no. 36), 1 Merovingian name (no. 41) and the Frisian noun in no. 59.

There are 12 objects which are more or less clearly related to magical practices. Of these 12, 9 are in runes and 3 in Latin script. The latter ones are dated to the eighth and ninth century, as most of the other objects written in the Latin alphabet, while the runic texts are equally divided between early and late pieces. The three runic amulet-rings (nos. 3, 6 and 10) and one *futhorc* (no. 35) are late, while another *futhorc* (no. 25) is early, as are the three ‘t’ like runes in weapons (nos. 30, 31 and 32). These early pieces come mainly from the South-East of England. The practice of inscribing this kind of runic texts soon disappears, most probably because of the arrival of Christianity in Kent in the sixth and seventh century. Of these texts, 4 are written in an unknown language (the charms on the amulet-rings and the possible charm on the Thames mount, no. 34), 2 are Latin alphabets (nos. 6 and 49), 2 are *futhorcs* (nos. 25 and 35), 3 are single runes and 1 seems to be in Old English (no. 57).

The Franks casket (no. 38) contains both Christian and pre-Christian texts and is written both in runes and Latin script, in Old English and Latin. The ring of Queen Æthelswith (no. 13) contains a primary religious text, written in Latin and Latin script, and a secondary secular one (her name and title), also in Latin and Latin script.

One text (no. 23) can be interpreted either as a religious or as a secular text. It is written in capitals, in Old English.

Finally, there are 9 texts of which no sense could be made.

It is to be stressed, however, that these generalizations are based on a limited corpus of objects. New findings might change the geographical and chronological distribution of the objects and their texts, and the addition of other kinds of sources, such as monumental stones, for instance, might change the picture offered here.

It might be useful to list here those objects that come from the same settlement. Viewing the objects together instead of individually might shed new light on their historical significance.

In Brandon were found the pin no. 25, the gold plaque no. 42, the metal plate no. 43 and the bone handle no. 54. Here a settlement was discovered with 35

buildings, an industrial area where textiles were presumably produced, a church and cemeteries. The number of finds is impressive: over 230 sherds of vessel glass and 130 of window glass, 234 bronze pins, some 60 bone implements, 3 styli, 8 sceattas with a date range between AD 720 and AD 760, a fragment from a Coptic bowl, eighth- and ninth-century metal work and the gold plaque.<sup>305</sup> The settlement seems to have been deserted at the end of the ninth century. The richness of the objects, and especially of the gold plaque with Saint John, the styli and the imported Coptic bowl, suggests that the settlement was a monastic community. However, of the four inscribed objects, only one has a religious text written in Latin script. The other texts are runic: a *futhorc*, an Old English personal name and a riddling definition in a bone handle. Runes seem to be the favourite medium to write simple, secular texts. But if the site was a monastery, can we imagine monks preferring runes to the learned Latin script for texts not related to their religious duties and practices?

Two objects come from Flixborough, the ring no. 6 and the lead plate no. 45. They are both written in Latin script. One contains a partial alphabet and the other lists some Old English names. The plate was probably used as a label for an ossuary or a reliquary, suggesting that it was used in an ecclesiastical community, where at least a few could use the script in a functional way. The ring might allude to a more profane use of the written word, hinting at magical practices using the power of the letters of the alphabet. But such a power was used also by the Church, and the ring could thus fit the image of a literate ecclesiastical community.

The two objects from the tomb of Saint Cuthbert, now in Durham, are the product of the highly literate community of Lindisfarne. One only has to think of the Lindisfarne Gospels (dated to the late seventh-early eighth century) to understand the level of literacy reached in the monastery, which became one of the major centres of learning in Anglo-Saxon England. The two inscribed objects enshrined with Saint Cuthbert, the portable altar (no. 51) and the coffin (no. 52), present Latin texts written both in Latin script and in runes. The coffin also displays an iconographical

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<sup>305</sup> Carr, R. D., A. Tester and P. Murphy, 'The Middle-Saxon settlement at Staunch Meadow, Brandon', *Antiquity* vol. 62, no. 234 (1988), p. 375.

programme, with the array of archangels, disciples and Mary with the Infant Jesus on all sides of the sarcophagus.

A short remark on the dimensions of the objects and their texts is in order. Many objects were small, such as rings and brooches, so one has to consider the possibility that the text would not have been accessed easily by viewers/readers. Possibly the simple presence of the written text was enough - or perhaps the texts were meant to be read by a restricted audience in the first place, that is the owners/users. Most probably the fact of having an invocation to God or a charm inscribed in a small object such a ring was powerful enough without it necessarily having been read and understood by an audience.

Opening up the usual archaeological analysis of the objects at a theoretical or semiological level seems to be a useful approach that might help in counteracting the scarcity of sources, but much more needs to be done. The semiological and anthropological analysis, which could merely be alluded to in this thesis, should be applied more thoroughly, and new theories and models could be applied both to portable inscribed objects and to different sources. Such an approach would have to take into consideration the localism and specific nature of the source and its context, its function and symbolism, but at the same time allow theoretical generalizations and new hypotheses. Studies on contemporary, twentieth-century media and their effects on the public might lead to new ideas concerning the introduction of new media in the Middle Ages (not only in writing but also in the development of iconographies, for instance) and their reception by the public. Areas could be studied by taking into consideration the entire set of communicational strategies used there to send specific kinds of messages, thus uniting sources and methodologies from usually separated fields of research such as literary studies and art history. The study of messages sent, both written and pictorial, for instance, might help elucidating specific cultural areas and specific reception modes.

Let us consider the model we have elaborated. The context has been introduced in the first chapter, in which the importance of the coming of Christianity in England has been presented. With the spread of the new faith, a new set of textual messages could be sent with specific codes. Invocations to God, descriptive formulae such as ‘A Ω’ or ‘Agnus Dei’ were part of the new messages that could be sent. But it was not only the content of the message that could change, but also its form. Latin was the official language used by the Church during the Divine Office, and Latin was also the language of learning in monasteries everywhere in Europe. The Latin script was a new tool, too, which could be used side by side with the autochthonous runes. Some messages, however, disappeared, as we could see from the case of the Tiw-rune. The new faith brought with it also new taboos which became part of the context influencing the production of messages.

As for the various codes displayed, we have seen how important the objects themselves could be. Gold rings are prestigious objects in themselves, whose prestige was possibly further enhanced by the presence of the written text. Swords and scramasaxes are the symbols of the warrior class, functional tools of defence, but also icons of the pledge between lord and retainer. All the objects, moreover, may have had an added value intrinsic to them, due to their being ‘inalienable possessions’, parts or emblems of the identities of their owners and makers. All these non-verbal codes are inherent in the objects.

All the objects contain verbal codes, since all of them were inscribed, whether with a single sign or a complex text. As mentioned above, they display a full array of contents, from religious invocations to functional owners’ marks, thus allowing us access to different level of literacy in society. They exhibit various written codes, from runes to Latin script and mixtures of both. They also show different languages: Old English and Latin, to which should be added the case of the Greek letters A and Ω. This multiplicity of codes raises questions on the nature of the literacy of the owners and makers of the inscribed objects. Were they fully literate, able to encode and decode all these varied elements? Or were only some of the participants in the production and use of the objects aware of all the subtleties of literacy? Sometimes

mistakes in the texts hint that the craftsmen inscribing the objects were not able to master the skills necessary to create fully literate texts. There is also the possibility that the commissioners and owners of the inscribed objects were not literate themselves, but, living in a society in which literacy acquired a high status thanks to the Church and the spread of Christianity from the royal courts, they were aware of the prestige attached to the written word.

Visual codes expressed in images are not present in every object. Sometimes the texts would be functional to understand the images, as in the case of the many *tituli* labelling characters and images portrayed. The pictorial decorations can vary from very simple lines to impressive and beautiful forms, as in the Franks casket. Here again the variety of codes displayed is great. The artistic elements would deserve a deeper study than the one that could be presented here. The debate on whether images can be considered the book of the illiterate could be addressed taking into consideration a set of depicted objects. An analysis that would take into account possible different levels of ‘visual literacy’ of both the intended audience and secondary ones would certainly be useful. Would the images be intelligible for an audience not familiar with the specific subject depicted? Do changes in iconographies reflect specific changes in the context from which they originate? The answers obviously require expertise in art history, but it would be worthwhile approaching this matter also from a wider point of view that would consider their communicative role in society.

As far as the audience is concerned, much has already been said about the intended audience and its possible literacy (and its different degrees). Sometimes, when the histories of the objects allowed it, we have taken into consideration secondary audiences, users of the objects and readers of the texts inscribed. This is the most speculative aspect of this investigation, because most of the time we can only guess at what might have happened when a new context would have transformed the ideas and reality of the later audience(s). We could thus speculate that a fully Christianized audience would possibly not be able to recognize a Tiw-rune as an invocation to a pantheon by then forgotten or forbidden by the authority of the

Church. As far as personal names are concerned, we have the possibility that the secondary audience would remain linked to the person identified by the name, as in the case of heirlooms handed down from one generation to the next. Even after decades had passed they may have recognized the name and perhaps have even treasure it the more for its link to a past, forming their own family identity. However, once these objects were lost and disappeared, as many of them did, buried underground for centuries, the link would be broken and later audiences would not have a clue as to the identity behind the name. At this point, cases like the one of the ring of Queen Æthelswith can happen, in which the – modern – finder thought so little of it that he used it to adorn the collar of his dog. Only when other sources can testify to the identity of the people mentioned, can one reconstruct their history and recognize properly the message sent with the object in the first place.

As suggested above, research could be extended by choosing different kinds of sources. In the case of inscriptions, monumental stones and coins would prove to be interesting sources of information.

Monuments have a wider public display than the moveable objects here analyzed. The audience of our objects would be restricted to those people who could get close enough to the swords and rings and brooches, so as to be able to read the texts inscribed on them, while we can assume that a larger number of persons would pass by a church, a graveyard or a standing cross and look at their inscriptions. Also in this case the various levels of literacy of the audiences could be investigated. The same model could be applied with this corpus of messages, since monumental stones would display, as the inscribed portable objects, non-verbal, verbal and visual codes.

The same can be said of coins. Numismatics is a rich and specialized field of research, in which chronology plays an important role and in which dates can be assessed with far more precision than with our moveable objects and the monumental stones. A model concerned with the codes displayed in coins would be similar to the one used for the other moveable objects. Coins have an intrinsic symbolic, non-verbal, function, and a monetary value that gives them significance and power. They can have texts inscribed on them, usually the names of the moneyers who issued them

or the king who requested their production. Thanks to these names and their specific weight and metal composition, their chronology can be established. They can also display images, such as busts which may or may not recall Roman prototypes. All these elements could be studied considering the kinds of communicative modes they exhibit. Would the written text add a specific value to the coin? Would the name be recognized? Or would the simple ownership of a coin be a sufficient element communicating power and prestige? Thanks to the fact that coins can be dated with relative certainty, the comparison between coins with similar texts and iconographies could reveal trends in communicational strategies, possibly hinting at changes in a context that could be localized with more certainty than the one of the other moveable objects.

This investigation has made me conscious of the complexity of the discourse on literacy and communication in the Early Middle Ages, of the pitfalls awaiting the unsuspecting student (the danger of anachronisms, the lack of sources, the tentative answers and interpretations) but also of the wealth of possibilities open for further research and the fascination intrinsic in such an effort.

Browsing through the objects and their texts also made the names and the characters present in poetry and historiographical works more real, as if by observing the objects and analyzing them I could grasp part of the reality from which the epic poems and the elegies I had been reading so far arose. This was an extremely rewarding aspect of this work.

This research has also made me wonder what would happen if the makers and owners of the objects could look on us. I suppose that they might laugh at our attempts of making sense of messages of which we do not know the code. These messages are like mysteries to solve without clues. Or perhaps they would marvel at our ability to read and understand their messages properly even after so much time has passed and much has been lost of the specific context from which their messages originated. If that would be the case, they might also marvel at their own ability of having handed their messages to that *longsumne lof* sung in epic poetry.

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**APPENDIX A: MAP**



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Plate A Distribution map of inscriptions on moveable objects

- Latin script
- ▲ Runes
- Latin script and runes