

Early Anglo-Saxon Christian Reliquaries

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Contents

List of Tables	iv
List of Figures and Plates	iv
Abstract	vi
Introduction	vi
Archaeological and Scientific Dating Evidence	vii
Tables	viii
Artefact Distribution Map	xvii
Technical Details Type I	1
Design and Manufacturing Techniques I	2
Corpus of Type I boxes	7
Aldborough, Yorkshire	8
Arncliffe, Carr Farm, Yorkshire	8
Ascott-under-Wychwood, Oxfordshire	10
Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.....	12
Bidford-on- Avon, Warwickshire	12
Bulford, Wiltshire	12
Burwell, Cambridgeshire	14
Castledyke South, Barton-on-Humber, Lincolnshire	14
Cransley, Northamptonshire.....	15
Didcot Power Station, Oxfordshire	15
Dover Painted House, Kent.....	16
Finglesham, Kent	18
Garton Green Lane II, Yorkshire	18
Harford Farm, Caistor St. Edmunds, Norfolk.....	19
Hawnby, Yorkshire.....	20
Hurdlow, Derbyshire	20
Isle of Thanet, Kent	21
Kempston, Bedfordshire	21
Kingston Down, Kent.....	22
Lechlade, Butler’s Field, Gloucestershire	22
Marina Drive, Dunstable, Bedfordshire.....	23

Painsthorpe Wold, Yorkshire	23
Polhill, Dunton Green, Kent	24
Standlake, Oxfordshire.....	24
Tidworth, Wiltshire	26
Uncleby, Yorkshire	26
Updown, Eastry, Kent	27
Verulamium, King Harry Lane, Hertfordshire	28
Westfield Farm, Ely, Cambridgeshire	30
Wolverton, Buckinghamshire	30
Yatesbury, Cherhill, Wiltshire.....	32
Technical Details Type II	33
Design and Manufacturing Techniques II	33
Corpus of Type II boxes	37
Burwell, Cambridgeshire	38
Burwell Village, Suffolk	40
Cuxton, Kent	43
Dover, Buckland, Kent	45
North Leigh, Oxfordshire.....	46
St Mary’s Stadium, Southampton, Hampshire	50
Sibertswold, Kent	50
Stand Low, Derbyshire	51
Technical Details Type III	52
Design and Manufacturing Techniques III	52
Corpus of Type III boxes.....	54
Cuxton, Kent	55
Harford Farm, Norfolk	56
Kingston Down, Kent	56
Little Wilbraham, Cambridgeshire.....	57
Prittlewell, Essex	57
Fragments and Component Parts	58
Barrington A [Edix Hill],* Cambridgeshire	58
Barrington B [Hooper’s Field?],* Cambridgeshire.....	58
Bourne End, Buckinghamshire. SMR 0117702004.....	58
Haslingfield, Cambridgeshire.....	59
Hambleton Moor female burial, Yorkshire. PRN MCA 3633	59
Marina Drive, Bedfordshire.	59

Caerwent, Monmouthshire. PAS WAW-FF3CCA7	60
Ilam, Staffordshire. PAS WMIDS-DC4EA4	60
Kirton in Lindsey, Lincolnshire. PAS LIN-E32932	60
Stroud, Gloucestershire. PAS GLO-DA7D75	60
Wolfhamcote, Warwickshire. PAS WAW-DA3434	60
Secular Art or Sacred Symbols?.....	61
Box Type I: Components and metal fragments of boxes	61
Box Type II	67
Box Type III	69
What are they?	70
Discussion: What are they?	72
The final deposition of reliquaries	74
Appendix : Children’s Inhumation Grave Assemblages	77
Didcot (Oxfordshire) Grave 12. Female, age c.3-5 years.....	77
Marina Drive (Bedfordshire) Grave E2. Female, age 12 years	77
Marina Drive (Bedfordshire) Grave E3. Female, age 8 years.....	77
Updown Eastry (Kent) Grave 76:34. Burial of a very small child or baby	77
Acknowledgements	78
Illustrations	78
Photographs	78
Bibliography	79

List of Tables

Table 1. Corpus of boxes by county and box Type	ix
Table 2. Boxes by Type, box components (C) box fragments (F)	xii
Table 3. Boxes with cruciform decorations and contents	xiv
Table 4. Known position of boxes in graves	xvi

List of Figures

Figure 1. Type I Harford Farm reconstruction after Penn, K, 2000.	1
Figure 2. Type I design principles	3
Figure 3. Type I assembly features	4
Figure 4. Type I and II techniques used for attaching lid top and body base (a) rivets, (b) flange and solder, (c) convex and solder, (d) material clenching.....	5
Figure 5. Type I general arrangement when worn	6
Figure 6. Aldborough (Yorkshire) unusual box with unfinished cruciform on body base.....	9
Figure 7. Ascott-under-Wychwood (Oxfordshire) Type I base assembly with impressive Style II incised iconography	11
Figure 8. Ashmolean Museum (Oxford) Type I, unprovenanced.....	13
Figure 9. Dover Painted House (Kent) Type I after Philp 2003, base assembly with angled stop ridge, body decorated with chevron, cross saltire and diamond pattern.....	17
Plate 1. Harford Farm (Norfolk) Type I after Penn 2000, reconstruction Tony Gibson and Peter Grey	19
Plate 2. Hawnby (Yorkshire) Type I, reconstruction Tony Gibson.....	20
Figure 10. Polhill (Kent) Grave 43 Type I after Philp 2003, with raised stop ridge. Lid ring and body repoussé decorated in curvaceous Salin Style II, lid top and body base with equal arm Latin cross.....	25
Figure 11. Verulamium (Hertfordshire) Grave 21 Type I after Ager 1989, artistically decorated suggestive of Style II.....	29
Figure 12. Wolverton (Buckinghamshire) Grave 2168 after PAS BUC-337D72, Type I with runes and hinged lid.....	31
Figure 13. North Leigh (Oxfordshire) Type II with repoussé body and incised lid top decorations.....	34

Figure 14. Suspension Flange Type II [a] Stanlow [b] Dover Buckland Grave 102 [c] Sibertswold Grave 80 [d] North Leigh [e] Burwell Grave 42 [f] Cuxton Grave 306 (iconography exaggerated) [g] St Mary's Stadium Grave 4202	35
Figure 15. Burwell (Cambridgeshire) Grave 42 [a] Type II most highly decorated of all Types of boxes [b] lid top and body base decorated with die stamped reconstruction of the Beowulf Dragon Fight?	39
Figure 16. Burwell Village (Suffolk) Incomplete Type II decorative flange	42
Figure 17a. Cuxton (Kent) Grave 306 Type II after Blackmore et al. Incised iconography on hill very faintly scratched on original , exaggerated for illustration	43
Figure 17b. Cuxton (Kent) Grave 306 Type II after Blackmore et al. Incised iconography on hill very faintly scratched on original , exaggerated for illustration	44
Plate 3. Dover Buckland Grave 107 Type II after Evison 1987	45
Figure 18. North Leigh (Oxfordshire) Type II, lid top with incised decoration, body block type repoussé similar to that on a Type I box from Verulamium (Hertfordshire) Grave 21	47
Figure 19. North Leigh (Oxfordshire) Type II, proposed construction sequence 1. Size and cut metal blanks 2. Decorate body with repoussé 3. Shape blanks around a core former, possibly a tree branch 4-5 Drill holes, apply rivets, shape trefoil flange and lid ring notch 6. Incise lid top around a physical cross? 7-8 Material clench lid top to lid ring, base to body 9. Fit pivot ring	48
Plate 4. Stand Low, Derbyshire, reconstruction by Peter Grey after a watercolour painting by L. Jewitt..	51
Figure 20. Cuxton (Kent) Grave 306 Type III after Blackmore et al 2006, with incised secondary Gospel scene.....	53
Figure 21. Harford Farm(Norfolk) Grave 18 Type III after Penn 2000.....	56
Figure 22. Marina Drive (Bedfordshire) Grave E3 lid top or body base, solder on underside, reused as a pendant.....	58
Figure 23. Examples of cruciform decorations [a] Polhill Grave 23, [b] Kingston Down Grave 96, [c] Marina Drive Grave E3, [d] Uncleby Grave 1, [e] Sibertswold Grave 60, [f] Ashmolean Museum, [g] Garton Green II Barrow 6, Grave 4a, [h] Uncleby Grave 29	62
Figure 24. [a] Illustration of design concept: cross saltire and diamond pattern [b] Pottery examples after Myres, J 1977 Bagginton (Warwickshire), Chamberlain's Barn (Bedfordshire), Chevron example Sancton (Yorkshire). [c] Dover Painted House body decoration. [d] Finglesham (Kent) Grave 95 Buckle back plate after Hawke and Grainger 2006.....	63
Plate 5. Bronze figurine 9cm height, Imst, Austria.....	65
Plate 6. Centre piece bronze diadem, Late Iron Age, Vergina, Greece.....	66

Abstract

This corpus will discuss seventh and possibly eighth century Anglo-Saxon copper-alloy containers variously described as work boxes, needle cases, amulet containers and Christian reliquaries. Additionally it will include individual components and fragments of sheet metal that have been identified as elements of such boxes. A typology, material specification, and drawings are presented, design and construction principles discussed, and a nomenclature applicable to these containers is outlined. Since their earliest discovery, archaeologists and historians have been unable to reach a consensus as to their purpose. This publication sets out to answer that question.

Introduction

Seventy-one boxes, some complete, others incomplete, together with metal fragments from boxes have been recorded from forty-nine sites across Anglo-Saxon England. There is a need to compile a uniform scheme comprising where possible, individual site location, box type descriptions, decorative features and references. Principally, information has been retrieved from antiquarian books, archaeological publications, excavation reports, journals, manuscripts and physical examination.

Format

Box classification Types I, II and III together with recognisable copper-alloy metal fragments and components from boxes will be listed alphabetically, with county, site location and references. References are those considered relevant to box(es) recovered from individual sites; they are not intended as a complete bibliographical listing for any specific site. Each Type will have its own Technical Detail section. ‘Secular Art or Sacred Symbols?’ will discuss the iconography of these enigmatic containers and ‘What are They?’ will address their identity and function.

Inhumations

Documentation relating to the context of boxes from earlier excavated sites, e.g. Aldborough (Yorkshire), Cransley (Northamptonshire), Standlake (Oxfordshire), Yatesbury (Wiltshire), is often vague and unreliable. Other than that from Prittlewell (Essex), the remaining boxes are from inhumation burials of female adults, sub adults and children. Where it has not been possible to sex skeletal remains, female status has been defined from related grave assemblages.

Archaeological and Scientific Dating Evidence

The dating evidence for the deposition of boxes to the second half of the seventh and possibly early eighth century based on seriation of graves assemblages and scientific evidence has been widely accepted (e.g. Hawkes 1973, 197; Geake 1997, 35; Lucy *et al* 2009, 128; Hills, 2015). Hawkes describes them ‘as one of the period’s leading type fossils’. The evidence has been vindicated in a recent publication (Hines and Bayliss, 2013) that, with the use of artefact-typology, seriation of grave assemblages and radio carbon dating (*ibid*, xvii), outlined a chronological framework for Anglo-Saxon grave goods of the sixth and seventh centuries (so-called ‘workboxes’ were included in the study). Human bones from four of the graves containing boxes or component parts of boxes were radiocarbon-dated (*ibid* Table 7.1).

Castledyke Grave 183 (Lincolnshire)

Burial radiocarbon dated to *cal.* 575-650 (95% probability. UB-6038).

Lechlade, Butler’s Field Grave 14 (Berkshire)

Burial radiocarbon dated and may date from *cal.* 650 -730 (84% probability. UB-4051) or *cal.* 740-765 (11% probability).

Marina Drive Graves E1/E2 (Bedfordshire)

Burial radiocarbon dated to *cal.* 650-675 (95% probability. UB-4550 and UB -4551).

Marina Drive Grave E3 (Bedfordshire)

Burial radiocarbon-dated to *cal.* 625-675 (95% probability. UB-4552).

Hines and Bayliss proposed that, on the basis of radiocarbon dating measurements and typology of grave assemblages, the burials at Lechlade and Marina Drive should be assigned to a phase between 665-695 (95% *posterior probability*). The burial at Castledyke is almost certainly earlier and can be assigned on one of the models used to a phase from 630-660 (95% *posterior probability*). It is of interest that chronological research suggested that the end of furnished burials in Anglo-Saxon England occurred ‘two decades or more before the end of the seventh century’ (Hines and Bayliss 2013, xvii). For a contrary view on the latter, see Archibald (*ibid.* 493-512), who on coin sequence evidence argued that furnished burials extended into the first decade of the eighth century.