

A DECORATED AND INSCRIBED STRAP-END FROM NUFFIELD, OXFORDSHIRE

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The object described and discussed in this paper is a recently found Anglo-Saxon strap-end. Although incomplete, the strap-end is of interest in view of its rarity in being made of silver, of its decoration and of it containing an inscribed text. One part of the decoration is a depiction of the agnus dei. In the discussion, the decoration on the strap-end, and its significance, is set in the context of other instances of the agnus dei, both on artefacts and in manuscripts, from late Anglo-Saxon England.

Keywords: Late Saxon metalwork; Anglo-Saxon iconography; strap-end; *agnus dei*; Old English inscription

INTRODUCTION

An incomplete inscribed and decorated strap-end was found by Mr M Washington at Nuffield, Oxfordshire, on 20 September 2014, using a metal detector. The strap-end was reported to the late David Williams, the finder's local Finds Liaison Officer, as possible Treasure (Treasure case 2014T666). It can be viewed on the Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS) database (no. SUR-970F39), and a short illustrated account is given by Biyard.¹ It was subsequently declared to be Treasure at an inquest in Oxford in April 2015 and has now been acquired by Oxfordshire Museums Service. We are grateful to Dr Stuart Brookes for bringing to our attention his forthcoming publication on the landscape of the Ewelme Hundred in South Oxfordshire, which draws attention to features of the strap-end's immediate find context that may reflect the troubled times of the age.²

DESCRIPTION

The strap-end is now incomplete and only one part remains (fig 1). It is made of cast silver, partially gilded, with niello inlay, and is decorated on both faces. Its present dimensions are 19.75mm × 16.50mm. The remaining piece represents the lower part of a tongue-shaped

*David Williams sadly died as this paper was being completed. The other two authors record with gratitude their thanks to David for bringing the strap-end to their attention and for his contribution to the paper.

1. Biyard 2017, no. 37.

2. Mileson and Brookes, [forthcoming](#).



Fig 1. Anglo-Saxon inscribed parcel-gilt strap-end fragment, Nuffield, Oxfordshire. Early eleventh century. Photograph: PAS Database, Berkshire Archaeology.

strap-end, Thomas's Class E, Type 1,³ which has been broken, apparently deliberately. It is generally in good condition, but details of the decoration on the front face are abraded by wear and the back has a series of cut marks close to the break, and particularly at the left-hand edge, suggesting that they could be associated with it.

The front face is decorated in relief with Winchester-style acanthus foliage, in which two downward-pointing lizard-like animals are entwined, their heads turned round towards their backs. The animals' necks and bodies are emphasised by niello inlay in the form of dotted bands; their tails, and the surrounding foliage, have simple linear inlays. The recessed background is gilded.

The rear face is decorated with a now incomplete *agnus dei*, surrounded by an also incomplete Old English text. The lamb faces the viewer's left. The head of the lamb is missing, but its neck and two-legged body remains, with a cross set behind it. The front foot rests on a book. Immediately to the left of the lamb's neck, a circular element with a central depression may be all that remains of a nimbus composed of dotted roundels. The image of the lamb with its attributes is delineated in niello, and the contours are highlighted with gilding. Its neck and body are additionally outlined with a diagonally hatched band, perhaps intended to suggest fleece.

The accompanying inscription is inlaid with niello. While the beginning of the text is lost where the strap-end is broken, the remaining letters are clearly legible, in spite of their diminutive size (maximum 3mm). They are carefully executed Anglo-Saxon capitals with

3. Thomas 2000, 101–11, 2001, 39–48, 2004, 2 and fig 4: 22–4.

seriffing on all extremities. The remaining letters run from the cross down to the book, all the letters facing inwards. The text is likely to be primary; that is, the strap-end is likely to have been designed from inception to be inscribed.

TEXT: READING AND INTERPRETATION⁴

The text is in Old English and reads: [-] Ð M E C A H. Divided into words, the text reads *-ð mec ah*, that is, ‘-ð owns me’.

The letters of the two complete words are set fairly closely together while there is a larger space on each side of the letter ð, which is presumably the last letter of the name of the owner. Many Old English names, both male and female, end in *-ð*, so it is not possible to guess at the name or the sex of the owner. There is no sign of a lost letter before the *-ð*, indicating that the letters of the name were probably more widely spaced than that of the remaining words. Poor spacing is common in Anglo-Saxon inscribed texts, suggesting that an exemplum was often not set out in the same way as the text would appear on the object. It is not profitable to speculate on how many letters are lost since it is not clear how much of the complete strap-end would have been inscribed and Old English personal names differ in length. The use of Old English *mec* for the more usual *me* ‘me’ is a form that occurs in poetry and not uncommonly also in inscribed texts.

The text employs an owner formula that occurs on eleven other Anglo-Saxon inscribed objects, most of which are made of metal. Ten of these are listed by Okasha. The eleventh was published by Thomas, Payne and Okasha.⁵ The types of objects, and the material they are made from, differ: there are seven items of jewellery, two weapons, one weaving-tool and one other strap-end. They are all made from metal (gold, iron, silver) except for the weaving-tool, which is bone, and the other strap-end, which is lead.

The Nuffield strap-end is of great interest in clearly being a high-status object. It is rare in being a late tenth- or early eleventh-century Anglo-Saxon strap-end made of silver, and it is extremely rare in being only the second Anglo-Saxon strap-end found that contains an inscribed text. The text might refer to the strap-end itself or, possibly, to the set of objects of which the strap-end formed part. The other inscribed strap-end is that made of lead and mentioned above.⁶ It was found in Crewkerne, Somerset (PAS database no. SOMDOR-oDB481). and contains a similar text. Its text reads *wulfstan mec ah a*, ‘Wulfstan owns me’, with an extraneous letter *a* at the end.

DISCUSSION

The strap-end is of a type that derives from Carolingian tongue-shaped equivalents,⁷ and was popular from the middle years of the tenth century into the first half of the eleventh century. Many of the earlier Carolingian examples are of gilded silver, and are associated

4. The text is transliterated into capitals, with [-] indicating complete loss of text.

5. Okasha 1994, 71–7; Thomas *et al* 2008, 173–81; the Hinckley brooch is described and illustrated in the PAS database, no. WMID-B1C4E3 and in Okasha 2019, 373 and fig.

6. Thomas *et al* 2008, 173–81 and figs.

7. See, for example, Wamers and Brandt 2005, cat. nos 36 b and c, and 39.

with high-status sword and spur fittings; a few also bear makers' inscriptions.⁸ However, it is likely that the usual Anglo-Saxon examples, executed in copper alloy, were a more all-purpose type of object. The dense acanthus-leaf decoration of the continental versions served as a model for the Winchester-style foliate ornament, usually inhabited by beasts or birds, which is typical of Anglo-Saxon strap-ends of this kind. Versions that have similar decorative schemes to the Nuffield example include a fragmentary silver specimen from Catworth, Huntingdonshire (PAS database no. CAM-123165), and copper alloy versions from Winchester,⁹ Foulsham, Norfolk (PAS database no. NMS-A429B1), and Ixworth, Suffolk.¹⁰

The occurrence of the *agnus dei* on a strap-end is unique, but the image appears in other contexts in the Anglo-Saxon period, and had particular resonance at certain times. In patristic commentary, the sacrificial lamb that takes away the sins of the world (John 1, 29) was often combined with that of the apocalyptic lamb of God that will bring judgement (Revelations v, 6–7).¹¹ Copying Roman practice, the earliest Anglo-Saxon usages of the image of the *agnus dei* reflect a new dynamic in the iconography of the lamb, which followed the introduction of the *Agnus Dei* chant into the Mass by Pope Sergius (687–701). This new practice reflected the strong opposition of the western church to the ban on the depiction of Christ in other than human form, imposed in canon 82 of the Emperor Justinian's Quinisext Council of 692.¹² Bede mentions the passage from John 1, 29 several times in his commentary on the Gospel of Luke,¹³ and it is thus perhaps no surprise that the first recorded Anglo-Saxon *agnus dei* appears in the Codex Amiatinus, fol 6v,¹⁴ a manuscript written at Wearmouth/Jarrow before 716, and with which Bede seems to have been closely associated.

Not much later, sculptural representations of the lamb occur on the eighth-century crosses at Hoddom and at Ruthwell in Dumfriesshire,¹⁵ the latter linked stylistically to the Romanising traditions associated with Wearmouth/Jarrow. A haloed lamb survives on an early ninth-century stone cross-head at Hart, Co Durham,¹⁶ and a recumbent lamb appears along with other apocalyptic iconography on a ninth-century or later grave slab in the church at Wirksworth, Derbyshire.¹⁷ Two inscribed gold rings with *agnus dei* iconography are also recorded. One is a ring from Sherburn-in-Elmet (North Yorkshire) containing the name of Queen Æthelwulf of Mercia (853–88).¹⁸ The other is a now lost ring from Drifffield, East Yorkshire, with an inscription reading *ecce agnus dei*; this presumably refers to an image of the lamb on its missing central setting, which the word *ecce* 'behold' surrounds.¹⁹

8. Ibid, cat no. 30. They also suggest a possible parallel use of such strap-ends in contemporary priestly vestments, based on the depiction of similar strap-ends as part of Jewish priestly costume in the Carolingian Bible of San Paolo di fuori le Mura; see Wamers and Brandt 2005, 92–4 and Abb 33.

9. Backhouse *et al* 1984, cat no. 82.

10. Hinton 1974, cat no. 17, 23–4.

11. Okasha and O'Reilly 1984, 39–41; Craig 1992, 1, 123; Osborne 1994, 73–8.

12. Coatsworth 1978, 1, 51; Osborne 1994, 74.

13. Howlett 1974, 333–6.

14. Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, MS Amiatino 1.

15. Craig 1992, 1, 123–4 and pl 42c.

16. Cramp 1977, 95.

17. Hawkes 1992, 246–89.

18. Okasha 1971, 112–13 and fig.

19. Ibid, 67 and fig.

After the Codex Amiatinus, the *agnus dei* does not feature in any Anglo-Saxon manuscript until the middle of the tenth century, when the motif undergoes a revival, appearing in a further ten manuscripts over the next hundred years;²⁰ this was presumably in response to continental influences associated with the Benedictine reform movement. The first presage of this is the appearance of the lamb at the centre of St Cuthbert's stole, an early Winchester-style embroidery made for Bishop Frithestan of Winchester between 909 and 916, and subsequently presented by Athelstan to the shrine of St Cuthbert in 934.²¹

The Anglo-Saxon interest in the *agnus dei* appears to peak in the late tenth/early eleventh century with a cluster of occurrences in ivory carvings, stone sculpture, metalwork and a 'special' issue of coins of Æthelred the Unready. This may reflect an increased interest in apocalyptic iconography, generated by renewed Viking attacks of the period as well as by millennial concerns.²² The dual nature of the lamb, emblematic both of Christ's sacrifice and of apocalyptic judgement, spoke to the anxieties of the age. Images from this period usually show the lamb haloed, as Christ, accompanied by the sacrificial cross and with a foot placed upon the apocalyptic Book of Life (Revelations v, 1–9 and 21, 27), as is the case in our example.²³ These attributes appear to have been introduced in this period. On two of the earlier Anglo-Saxon examples, the Hart cross-head and the Sherburn ring, the lamb faces right, as it does on a number of early Christian continental examples. However, it is not clear whether a left-facing or right-facing posture has any special significance.

Three objects from this later period that feature the *agnus dei* are also inscribed. The Paris altar and the Brussels cross, both dating from the eleventh century,²⁴ have a haloed lamb with a cross and a book. The damaged eleventh-century Sulgrave brooch also features a lamb with a cross behind, but apparently no book.²⁵ The strap-end, together with the brooch, the 'special' coin issue and the two much earlier rings, form rare examples of the appearance of this iconography on secular objects; all other instances come from a specifically religious context.

DATE

There is no linguistic evidence from the text on the strap-end, but the eleven other inscribed objects utilising this formula all date from the ninth to the eleventh centuries. The letter-forms used are also consistent with a tenth- to eleventh-century date for the strap-end.

Stylistically, a date in the late tenth, or more probably the early eleventh, century is plausible. While the Winchester-style foliage is of a configuration common in the late tenth and early eleventh century, the lizard-like animals with distinctive spotted bands adorning their necks and bodies have their best parallels with similar creatures in manuscripts of the early part or first half of the eleventh century.²⁶ The type of the *agnus dei* on the strap-end is

20. Ohlgren 1986.

21. Battiscombe 1956, 375–432 and pl 33.

22. Cramp 2006, 232–3; Webster 2008, 238–53; Keynes and Naismith 2012, 180–1, 203–6.

23. See, eg, Webster 2012, 200–1, 203–4.

24. Backhouse *et al* 1984, cat. nos 75, 76; Webster 2012, 200–1.

25. Okasha 1971, 116 and fig; Keynes and Naismith 2012, pl vi c.

26. For example, the gaping serpent that forms the mouth of Hell in BL, Cotton Claudius B I, 4 fol 2, and the creatures in an initial in BL, Royal 6.a.vii, fol 2; in CCCC 41, p 410; and at the foot of the cross in CCCC 421, p 1; Temple 1976, cat. nos 86, 60, 81, 82, figs 265, 257, 261, 254.

fully consistent with such a date. It has the full quota of attributes, including what seems probably to have been a halo composed of dotted roundels, like an example in the early eleventh-century Bury Psalter,²⁷ and on all the lambs on the *agnus dei* coinage of Æthelred the Unready. The twenty-three silver pennies of Æthelred that bear the *agnus dei* were probably struck in the autumn of 1009 in the context of the Viking invasion of England by Thorkel the Tall.²⁸ While it is unlikely that this exceptional issue has any direct relationship to the strap-end, it provides further support for dating the strap-end to the early part of the eleventh century, and situates it within a general context of peri-millennial focus on this potent image of judgement and redemption, as Viking attacks intensified.

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ABBREVIATIONS AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abbreviations

BL British Library, London
 CCCC Corpus Christi College, Cambridge

Manuscripts

Abbazia di San Paolo fuori le Mura, Rome, Bible of San Paolo di fuori le Mura
 Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Rome, Reg. lat. 12
 Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Florence, MS Amiatino 1
 BL, Cotton Claudius B 1, 4
 BL, Royal 6.a. VII
 CCCC, 41
 CCCC, 421

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27. Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Reg. lat. 12, fol 168v: Ohlgren 1986, cat no. 189, 49.
 28. Keynes and Naismith 2012, 175–223, 2015, 307–8.

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