A new late Anglo-Saxon seal matrix

JANE KERSHAW AND RORY NAISMITH

ABSTRACT

In 2010 a new late Anglo-Saxon seal matrix was found in Hampshire. The seal die is copper-alloy and engraved on both sides. On the obverse, it portrays and names a man called Ælfric, while the reverse is decorated with acanthus ornamentation characteristic of the later tenth- and eleventh-century 'Winchester' style. Unlike any other surviving English matrix of this period, it carries the remnants of gilding once applied across the surface and would thus have appeared to be made of gold. It is only the fourth known surviving Anglo-Saxon seal matrix, and the first to come to light in almost forty years.

CIRCUMSTANCES OF DISCOVERY

In the course of 2010 a new late Anglo-Saxon seal matrix was found in Hampshire by Mr Paul Dowsett, with the aid of a metal detector.[1] When he first discovered the seal Mr Dowsett was not sure of its date or significance, or even if it was anything other than a lump of scrap metal, and so unfortunately did not record the precise find-spot. The find did not come to wider attention until Mr Peter Spencer identified it as a late Anglo-Saxon seal and wrote a brief article on it in *The Searcher*.[2] After the publication of this notice, the Fitzwilliam Museum was able to acquire the seal in November 2012. It has since been accessioned as CM.88-2013, and reported to the Portable Antiquities Scheme as SF-BE7CB0. X-rays show that the crack visible towards the top of the seal runs all the way through the handle. However, examination by conservators at the Fitzwilliam Museum has confirmed that the seal can be made stable for long-term storage and research.

DESCRIPTION

The new seal-matrix measures 55 mm in height and 34 mm in width, and at its broadest point is approximately 6 mm thick. In its current state the seal weighs 55.56 grams.[3] It consists of a heavy round matrix, engraved on both sides (see

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[1] It should be noted that, as the seal is a base-metal object (i.e. containing less than 10 per cent gold or silver), it does not constitute treasure under the conditions of the 1996 Treasure Act.

[2] P. D. Spencer, 'An Unrecognised Anglo-Saxon Find', *The Searcher* 328 (December 2012), 26–7.

[3] At the time of writing, the seal had not been completely cleaned.

Figure 4 (*a*: obverse *b*: side *c*: reverse): the seal of Ælfric
(Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge).

Fig. 4*a* and *c*), with an outer circle about 2 mm within the edge. At the top of
the seal is an openwork handle with double-sided, moulded decoration, which
projects about 20 mm beyond the matrix itself. Although no modern impres-
sions have been made using this seal die, it seems likely that the handle (which
projects slightly beyond the surface of the seal) would have left an impression
in the wax, along with the principal engravings. Handle impressions are carried
on some extant late Anglo-Saxon and medieval wax seal impressions, including
those made from the so-called 'Edith seal', discussed below.[4]

The principal fabric of the matrix is bronze (or another copper alloy). The
handle and matrix would have been cast together in a bipartite mould. The
designs of both sides would then have been engraved directly onto the surface
of the copper-alloy, before gilding was applied to the entire surface. Although
the matrix is corroded in places, traces of gilding still adhere to the surface,
especially in recessed areas of the lettering, handle and central design. The gold
would have been applied through the technique known as 'fire gilding'.[5] This
required a buttery amalgam of gold and mercury to be painted onto the surface
of the object. When heated, the mercury would evaporate, leaving a layer of

[4] T. A. Heslop, 'English Seals from the Mid Ninth Century to 1100', *JBAA* 133 (1980), 1–16,
at 5 and 7, and pl.1A, E, F.
[5] W. A. Oddy, 'Gilding and Tinning in Anglo-Saxon England', *Aspects of Early Metallurgy: Papers
Presented at a Symposium on Early Metallurgy Organised by the Historical Metallurgy Society and the
British Museum Research Laboratory and Held at the British Museum on 22nd and 23rd April 1977*, ed.
W. A. Oddy (London, 1977), pp. 129–34, and 'Fire-Gilding in Early Medieval Europe', *The
Gold, Silver and Other Non-Ferrous Objects from Hamwic, and the Non-Ferrous Metalworking Evidence*,
ed. D. A. Hinton (Stroud, 1996), pp. 81–3.

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gold adhering to the surface. Subsequent burnishing was needed to bring out a truly golden-looking finish; difficulty in reaching the recesses of the design has resulted in a markedly more yellowish appearance to the gilding in these areas.

On the obverse (Fig. 4*a*), the outer circle encloses a legend of angular Anglo-Saxon capitals, reading (in reverse):

+ƧIGILLVM ÆLFRICVƧ

('+ seal [of] Ælfric ')

The absence of a genitive contrasts with the more grammatically correct inscriptions on other late Anglo-Saxon seals, but epigraphic errors and uninflected names are not unprecedented in this period.[6] Within the inner circle on the obverse there is a bareheaded bust facing left. It has short, close-cropped hair represented by narrow strokes which shorten towards the temple, and lengthen towards the short, round ear. Below the bust is elaborate, undulating drapery, arranged in seven folds and secured at the wearer's left shoulder with a brooch. Corrosion to the areas immediately in front of and behind the bust obscures any additional features which may once have been present; however, what remains of the surface and the balance of the surviving figure suggests that the rest of the obverse field was left blank. This bust presumably represents the Ælfric named in the inscription. No title or position is specified for him, but the absence of any clear ecclesiastical attribute (such as a tonsure) and affinities with the other seal-matrices discussed below suggest he was probably a layman.

Both the handle and the reverse of the die are decorated with motifs from the so-called 'Winchester' school of later tenth- and eleventh-century art.[7] The engraved ornament on the reverse (Fig. 4*c*) is contained within a circular border. At the base is an acanthus trefoil, from which spring three long, thin, independent stems. These develop into a loose and asymmetrical arrangement of five fan-shaped acanthus flowers, all bound at the stem by a transverse rib. Two of the stems issue single leaves with curled lobes, while the acanthus

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[6] Other Anglo-Saxon Latin inscriptions with uninflected names and deficiencies in Latin case-endings include E. Okasha, *Hand-List of Anglo-Saxon Non-Runic Inscriptions* (Cambridge, 1971), pp. 55, 77, 84–5 and 114–15 (nos 14, 46, 85 and 111), with 'A Supplement to *Hand-List of Anglo-Saxon Non-Runic Inscriptions*', *ASE* 11 (1982), 83–118, at 88–9 (no. 161), 'A Second Supplement to *Hand-List of Anglo-Saxon Non-Runic Inscriptions*', *ASE* 21 (1992), 37–85, at 56–60 (nos. 208 and 211) and 'A Third Supplement to *Hand-List of Anglo-Saxon Non-Runic Inscriptions*', *ASE* 33 (2004), 225–81, at 246 and 248–9 (nos. 234 and 239).

[7] For general discussion see L. Webster, *Anglo-Saxon Art: a New History* (London, 2012), pp. 173–9; D. M. Wilson, *Anglo-Saxon Art from the Seventh Century to the Norman Conquest* (London, 1984), pp. 154–200; and J. Kershaw, 'The Distribution of the "Winchester" Style in Late Anglo-Saxon England: Metalwork Finds from the Danelaw', *ASSAH* 15 (2008), 254–69.

petals themselves are straight and slender. The long, attenuated stems and fan-shaped flowers extend to make best use of all available space, creating an elegant, yet lively, composition.

The double-sided, moulded handle decoration comprises an inverted cat-like animal mask, from which stems a tuft of acanthus leaves. The central foliate stem extends upwards and terminates in a bulb. Two tiers of symmetrical bifurcating acanthus leaves emanate from the base of the handle and flank the mask, creating spaces which generate the openwork. The upper tier takes the form of an S-shape, and terminates in curling lobes, giving the handle a scalloped edge. There is a transverse hole through the top of the handle, which would have enabled the seal to be worn or suspended (Fig. 4*b*).

DISCUSSION

This new find brings the number of surviving late Anglo-Saxon seal matrices from three to four, though one of these carries a seal carved into both the obverse and reverse, for which reason the total number of late Anglo-Saxon seals known from matrices is now five.[8] Wax impressions of at least two others of this period survive, one that of the royal nun St Edith, the other a royal seal of Edward the Confessor (1042–66) which belongs to a rather different tradition.[9] There are also several earlier seals made or found in England dating to the period from the seventh to mid-tenth century.[10] Yet the late Anglo-Saxon non-royal seals form a particularly coherent group, and share several common

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[8] These are discussed and illustrated in Heslop, 'English Seals'. See also the important discussion in E. Okasha, *Hand-List*, pp. 118–20 (nos. 117 and 119), 'Supplement', p. 99 (no. 176); and *The Golden Age of Anglo-Saxon Art 966–1066*, ed. J. Backhouse, D. H. Turner and L. Webster (London, 1984), pp. 112–14 (nos 111–13). Two are in the British Museum, while the seal of Wulfric remains in the Schøyen Collection (Norway), designated MS 2223/14: at the time of writing, a description and set of illustrations were available on the collection's website (www.schoyencollection.com).

[9] For the seal of Edith, see below, n. 22; for the 'second' seal of Edward the Confessor, known from at least two extant impressions: F. Harmer, *Anglo-Saxon Writs* (Manchester, 1952), pp. 92–105. For the latter's iconographic import see B. M. Bedos-Rezak, 'The King Enthroned: a New Theme in Anglo-Saxon Iconography: the Seal of Edward the Confessor and its Political Implications', *Kings and Kingship*, ed. J. Rosenthal, Acta 11 (Binghamton, NY, 1986), pp. 53–88 (repr. in her *Form and Order in Medieval France: Studies in Local and Quantitative Sigillography* (Aldershot, 1993), no. VIII).

[10] Earlier English seals are represented by a lead *bulla* of Coenwulf, king of the Mercians (796–821), and a matrix of Æthelweald, bishop of Dunwich (*acc.* 845×870) (for the latter see Okasha, *Hand-List*, p. 71 (no. 38)), both now in the British Museum. Earlier foreign seals found in England include a Merovingian gold seal-ring in the name of *Baldehildis* found in Norfolk in 1998 which may have belonged to Queen Balthild (d. *c.* 680), now in Norwich Castle Museum (see Portable Antiquities Scheme 'Find ID' PAS-8709C3; and the comments of L. Webster in *Treasure Annual Report 1998–1999: 24 September 1998–31 December 1999* (London, 2000), pp. 31–2 (no. 57)); and four papal or other early medieval Italian *bullae*

features not generally found in specimens made much after the Norman Conquest:[11] they are relatively small in size (*c.* 35–45 mm in diameter), carry distinct forms of epigraphy and punctuation, and, in three cases, have ornate handles.[12] However, just one other example, also found in Hampshire and in the name of Ælfric, is made of copper-alloy,[13] the other two being walrus ivory. The hardness of copper-alloy allowed for greater crispness and definition in the engravings than would have been possible in softer material, such as ivory or lead-alloys. The use of copper-alloy would also have enabled the die to be re-used time and again, without degrading the quality of the impression: the new seal die, although gilded and adapted for suspension, was thus also capable of extensive practical use.

The acanthus design carried on the reverse and handle has a number of parallels in English manuscripts, ivories and metalwork of the later tenth and eleventh centuries, providing a cultural context as well as a date-range for the die. Basal acanthus trefoils and long-stemmed flowers are familiar components from the Winchester repertory. They appear, in full-bodied form, in a number of classic Winchester-style manuscripts, including the sacramentary of Robert of Jumièges, *c.* 1020, but a better parallel for the long stems can be found in the twisting, long-stalked flowers depicted in the borders of the frontispiece of the New Minster Charter, produced after the foundation of the New Minster at Winchester in 966, but argued by David Wilson to date from later in the tenth century.[14] Attenuated tendrils also characterize contemporary secular metalwork, including an open-work strap-end from Winchester and a, now lost, strap-end from Buccombe Down on the Isle of Wight, both dated on stylistic grounds to the tenth century.[15]

(R. Naismith, 'Peter's Pence and Before: Numismatic Links between Anglo-Saxon England and Rome', *England and Rome in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. F. Tinti (Turnhout, forthcoming)).

[11] Heslop ('English Seals', pp. 7–9) considered the possible pre-Conquest date of five ecclesiastical seals known only from impressions, but was equivocal in his conclusions. For a more confident pre-Conquest dating of the Christ Church, Canterbury seal, see *English Romanesque Art 1066–1200 (Hayward Gallery, London 5 April–8 July 1984)*, ed. G. Zarnecki, J. Holt and T. Holland (London, 1984), p. 309 (no. 347).

[12] It should be added that these features did not disappear immediately after 1066. Elisabeth Okasha lists a number of late-eleventh- and early-twelfth-century seals ('Supplement', pp. 99 and 103 (nos 177 and 184), 'Second Supplement', pp. 42, 45 and 49–50 (nos 187, 191, 197), 'Third Supplement', p. 248 (no. 238)) which possess similar attributes, albeit not in combination.

[13] Heslop, 'English Seals', pp. 4–5 and pl. 1(j); and *Golden Age*, ed. Backhouse *et al.*, p. 113 (no. 111).

[14] See, for instance, fols. 32v and 72v of the sacramentary of Robert of Jumièges (Rouen, Bibliothèque municipale, 274(Y.6) (1014×1023)) and fol. 2v of the New Minster foundation charter (London, British Library, Cotton, Vespasian A.VIII (after 966)); D. M. Wilson, *Anglo-Saxon Art from the Seventh Century to the Norman Conquest* (London, 1984), p. 174 and fig. 261; and *Golden Age*, ed. Backhouse *et al.*, p. 69 (no. 50), with pl. XIV.

[15] *Golden Age*, ed. Backhouse *et al.*, p. 97 (no. 84); and D. M. Wilson, 'Tenth-Century Metalwork',

The motif of acanthus or tendrils emanating from cat-like animal masks, as carried on the handle, is also widely paralleled in contemporary Anglo-Saxon manuscripts. In these, leonine heads with emanating foliates frequently adorn the initial 'B': examples include the Ramsey and Eadui Psalters, dated to the late tenth and first quarter of the eleventh century respectively.[16] An early stage of the motif populates the initial 'D' in a copy of Bede's verse *Vita S. Cuthberti*, produced in the second half of the tenth century.[17] In metalwork, animal masks issuing bifurcating tendrils appear on a tenth-century censer-cover from London Bridge, demonstrating the use of the motif in high-quality, ecclesiastical metalwork.[18] The same scheme appears on secular metalwork and ivory carvings, including on strap-ends of varying quality.[19] As these parallels demonstrate, the 'Winchester' style was a popular, versatile and long-lived art form which had a wide range of applications, not all within the orbit of the Church. Notably, an acanthus motif of comparable style also adorns the reverse of the other Ælfric seal die, as well as the handle of the Edith seal, demonstrating its use on seals belonging to laymen and religious alike.

Four of the surviving seals (including the new one) are certainly or probably in the name of laymen: one for a *minister* named Godwine, one for Wulfric and now two for men named Ælfric. Ælfric was a common name in late Anglo-Saxon England, borne by at least two ealdormen, three thegns and thirteen other recorded laymen in the time of Æthelred II alone:[20] despite the evident similarities between the two Ælfric seals there is no way to determine if the two men named on them were the same individual, or if either seal belonged to one of the individuals named Ælfric recorded in other sources. The one

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Tenth-Century Studies: Essays in Commemoration of the Millennium of the Council of Winchester and Regularis Concordia, ed. D. Parsons (Chichester, 1975), pp. 200–7 and 247–8, at 203, fig. 25

[16] London, British Library, Harley 2904 (s. x^ex.) and London, British Library, Arundel 155 (1012 × 1023): *Golden Age*, ed. Backhouse *et al.*, pp. 60 and 72–4 (nos 41 and 57), with pl. IX; E. Temple, *Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts 900–1066* (London, 1976), pp. 64–5 and 84–5 (nos 41 and 66).

[17] London, British Library, Harley 1117 (s. x/xi), fol. 45r: Webster, *Anglo-Saxon Art*, p. 175, fig. 133.

[18] D. M. Wilson, *Anglo-Saxon Ornamental Metalwork 700–1100 in the British Museum* (London, 1964), pp. 151–2 (no. 44), with pl. XXIV. Although note that the precise function of the piece has recently been called into question: Webster, *Anglo-Saxon Art*, pp. 201–2.

[19] See, for instance: *Golden Age*, ed. Backhouse *et al.*, pp. 128–9 (no. 133); Portable Antiquities Scheme 'Find ID' WMID-53D814; SUR-1401D2 (accessible via www.finds.org.uk)

[20] See, for example, the appropriate entry in the *Prosopography of Anglo-Saxon England* (www.pase.ac.uk), where 205 individuals named Ælfric are recorded in total. One of the ealdormen (PASE Ælfric 87, in office 982–1016: A. Williams, 'Ælfric', *ODNB* i.385–6) presided over Hampshire and Wiltshire, where both seals were found: he is perhaps the most plausible candidate on the basis of the available evidence, but it is impossible to assign either or both seals to him with any real confidence.

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other extant seal, found on the reverse of the Godwine matrix, is in the name of a nun (MONACHE D[ɇ]O DATE) named Godgytha. Impressions survive from a lost seal matrix very similar in appearance to that of Godgytha, which belonged to another female religious; it is also comparable in size and epigraphy, and traces of an ornate handle can clearly be seen in impressions. This lost matrix seems to have belonged to the same tradition as the other late Anglo-Saxon seals, and is significant as the only example which can be associated confidently with a specific person and date, on the strength of its inscription +SIGILL[*um*] EADGYÐE REGAL[*is*] ADELPHE ('+ the seal of Edith, royal sister'). It must belong to the time when its original owner, St Edith (961×964–984×987), abbess of Wilton, was sister to a king: 975–984×987.[21] This important seal continued to be used at Wilton throughout the Middle Ages – probably down to the Reformation, for it was still in service in 1526.[22]

The Edith seal helps to clinch the general late Anglo-Saxon date assigned to these seals on the basis of the artistic comparisons made above. Although the 'Winchester' school of art spanned the mid-tenth to mid-eleventh centuries, stylistic parallels for the new seal die seem to cluster in the later tenth century. Further evidence pointing to the same conclusion derives from numismatic comparisons. The likenesses between seals and coins are in some cases very striking; so much so as to prompt the suggestion that specific issues of coins might provide a clue to the date of a seal.[23] Closest to the new seal in the form of the bareheaded bust is the *Crux* issue of Æthelred II (conventionally dated *c*. 991–7); the drapery on this coinage is generally similar to that of the seal, though closer still is that on the earlier *Hand* coinages (*c*. 979–91).[24] On the face of it this would suggest a date in the 980s or 990s, which is entirely consistent with other evidence for the seal's likely date, but it is worth heeding Stewart Rigold's important observation that seals were more likely to inspire coin designs than vice versa.[25] Seals were visual and material expressions of individual potentates' authority (up to and including the king), intended to be used at important occasions, and which therefore were, if later seals are any guide, the object of much attention and expense: precisely the sort of items for which the best available craftsmen might be called in, and which could make a

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[21] On Edith, see B. Yorke, 'Edith', *ODNB* xvii.737–8.

[22] F. Douce, 'Some Remarks on the Original Seal Belonging to the Abbey of Wilton', *Archaeologia* 18 (1817), 40–50, at 40–1. Cf. Heslop, 'English Seals', p. 4.

[23] For instance in Heslop, 'English Seals', pp. 4–7, with earlier references cited in the footnotes.

[24] A representative selection of specimens may be seen in (for example) R. P. Mack, *Ancient British, Anglo-Saxon, and Norman Coins in the Collection formed by Commander R. P. Mack R. N.*, SCBI 20 (London, 1973), nos 818–901; and A. S. Robertson, *Hunterian and Coats Collections, University of Glasgow*, SCBI 2 (London, 1961), nos 783–839.

[25] S. E. Rigold, 'Seals and Titles', *BNJ* 44 (1974), 99–103, at 99–100.

lasting impression when seen or displayed.[26] Seal matrices could be high-status objects in their own right. It was most likely for this reason that the Fitzwilliam specimen was given a loop-hole and gilded, so that it could easily be worn or displayed and so that it would have every appearance of being made entirely from precious gold. The central point of this is that, despite superficial similarities, the manufacture and use of seals was a far cry from the mass production and circulation characteristic of coins. Parallels between coins and seals can therefore only be relied upon for dating evidence of a very general nature, the more so because of the pitiful number of surviving seals next to the probably quite complete record of late Anglo-Saxon coin-types.[27] One might be confident in dating the new seal to the later decades of the tenth century, or conceivably the beginning of the eleventh – in other words, approximately to the reign of Æthelred II (978–1016) – but it would be unwise to venture any closer attribution.

An important new paper by Simon Keynes considers in detail the functions of seals within late Anglo-Saxon England, for which reason all that need be said here is that seal matrices like the new Fitzwilliam specimen were closely integrated into the operation of royal government and the upper echelons of society.[28] They were a key tool for those who would have regularly sent messengers and documents, attended meetings of the witan and undertaken other duties in the course of which a seal impression, or a flourish of a suitably impressive matrix, might be needed.[29]

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[26] See in general B. Bedos-Rezak, *Form and Order* and *When Ego Was Imago: Signs of Identity in the Middle Ages* (Leiden, 2011); H. Keller, 'Zu den Siegeln der Karolinger und der Ottonen. Urkunden als Hoheitszeichen in der Kommunikation des Herrschers mit seinen Getreuen', *FS* 32 (1998), 400–41, and 'Ottonische Herrschersiegel. Beobachtungen und Fragen zu Gestalt und Aussage und zur Funktion im historischen Kontext', in *Bild und Geschichte: Studien zur politischen Ikonographie. Festschrift für Hansmartin Schwarzmaier zum fünfundsechzigsten Geburtstag*, ed. K. Krimm and H. John (Sigmaringen, 1997), pp. 3–51.

[27] It is impossible to gauge with any confidence how representative the rarity of surviving specimens may be. Ivory seals are of course invisible to modern metal-detectors, while copper-alloy matrices would – like the new specimen here – be liable to corrosion. Yet the absence of any other recognizable examples in forty years of excavation and metal-detecting suggests that they were probably never plentiful.

[28] S. Keynes, 'The Use of Seals in Anglo-Saxon England', *Early Medieval Monetary History: Studies in Memory of Mark Blackburn*, ed. R. Naismith, M. Allen and E. Screen (forthcoming).

[29] The authors would like to thank David Hinton and Elisabeth Okasha for reading and commenting on a draft of this paper; other valuable information was provided by Paul Dowsett and Peter Spencer. Figure 1 is reproduced with the kind permission of the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.