Anglo-Saxon square-headed brooch

Title/Description: Anglo-Saxon square-headed brooch

Born: 0525 c. - 0550

Object Type: Brooch, Jewellery, Metalware

Materials: Gilt copper alloy

Measurements: h. 149 x w. 71 x d. 21 mm

Accession Number: 570

Historic Period: Early Medieval (Anglo-Saxon)

Production Place: Britain, England, Europe

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1978

This Anglo-Saxon 'Great Square-Headed brooch', dating from c. AD 525-550, was found at Mildenhall, Suffolk, England.

Brooches are important cultural signifiers in the early medieval period. They are predominantly found in graves, amongst female grave assemblages. Often two smaller brooches such as small, long, annular or disc brooches were worn on the shoulders, securing a peplos-style dress [1], with a larger brooch – such as this, the Great Square-Headed brooch from Mildenhall – fastening an outer garment in the centre of the chest. Technically, a brooch is nothing more than a highly ornamented fastener of the 'safety-pin'-type, but the shape and decoration of brooches vary considerably across the regions of 5th-6th century Anglo-Saxon England [2].

There are closely linked parallels from other Anglo-Saxon sites in Suffolk, such as Westgarth Gardens, Bury St Edmunds; Holywell Row, Mildenhall, Lakenheath, Ipswich, as well as sites from Anglo-Saxon sites in Norfolk [3]. It is probably of mid-sixth century date and in style it shows signs of being a fusion of Kentish and Danish influences [4]. If such brooches were worn in the fashion of their Roman predecessors, then what is normally described as the 'head' would have been its base originally.

The great square-headed brooch was made from gilt copper alloy with four silver appliqué corners around the head plate and, very likely, circular silver appliqués on the large terminal lobes. The copper alloy body and gilding survive virtually intact; the silver appliqués on the lobes are now missing and partially survive on the corners of the head.

Leeds classified this brooch in his B group, with 'divided foot' [5]. The ornament includes two vestigial biting beast heads, one on each side of the foot, but it is otherwise largely geometric,

although some traces of zoomorphic origins can be detected here and there. The corners of the rectangular head, the centre and ring of the disc mounted on the bow, and the three rounded terminals of the foot were originally plated, perhaps with silver foil.

Stylistically, the brooch is decorated with both chip carved and punched decoration. Both decorative styles are present on the head as well as the foot. The head plate's central and middle panels, as well as the central areas of the foot display chip carved decoration with punched decoration applied in the order borders. There are three panels to the head plate, its centre area being divided into two central squares with cabled border which in turn is surrounded by a border of small ring punches.

The outer area is flanged with two lines of stamps (rings and triangles with their corners missing). The corners of the head had applied silver angled pieces on the corners, but only little of them survive. The short bow is ribbed, with a central hole for the attachment of a disc (still in place). The small disc was attached with a small rivet on its back that was in turn hammered flat on the inside of the bow. The disc is made from gilt copper alloy, with circular chip-carved decoration matching the brooch.

The decoration on the foot of the brooch shows two downturned beaked heads, central bar and bordered decorated with punched circles. Like the corners of the head, the side and terminal lobes would have had applied silver plates, but they are now completely missing. The brooch has lost its spring coil and pin (which were in all likelihood made from iron), but its copper alloy attachment – a double lug construction - and a large part of the catch survive at the back.

Dot Boughton, December 2021

[1] Owen-Crocker, Gale R., *Dress in Anglo-Saxon England. Revised and enlarged edition.* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2004), 46-47.

[2] Owen-Crocker, 37-39.

[3] West, S., *A Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Material from Suffolk. East Anglian Archaeology Report No. 84.* Suffolk County Council Archaeology Service. (Ipswich: Suffolk County Council Planning Department, 1998), 14.

[4] Owen-Crocker, Gale R., *Dress in Anglo-Saxon England. Revised and enlarged edition.* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2004), 90-91.

[5] Leeds, E.T., *A Corpus of Early Anglo-Saxon Great Square-Headed Brooches* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1949), no 63.

Further Reading

J. Hines, A New Corpus Anglo-Saxon Great Square-Headed Brooches. Report of the Research Committee of the Society of Antiquaries of London (Woodbridge: Boydell 1997), 142-145, Plate 75.

J. Hines, and A.Bayliss, (eds.) Anglo-Saxon Graves and Grave Goods of the 6th and 7th Centuries AD: A Chronological Framework. (London: The Society for Medieval Archaeology Monograph 33, 2013), 220, Fig. 5.,189.

E.T. Leeds, A Corpus of Early Anglo-Saxon Great Square-Headed Brooches (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1949), no. 63.

D. Leigh, The square-headed brooches of 6th century Kent (Cardiff University: PhD Thesis, 1980)

T.F. Martin, The Cruciform Brooch and Anglo-Saxon England (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2015)

G.R. Owen-Crocker, Dress in Anglo-Saxon England. Revised and enlarged edition. (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2004)

S. West, A Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Material from Suffolk. East Anglian Archaeology Report No. 84. Suffolk County Council Archaeology Service, (Ipswich: Suffolk County Council Planning Department, 1998)

Provenance

Acquired 1974; Found at Mildenhall, Suffolk (England)