DYEING SUTTON HOO NORDIC BLONDE:
AN INTERPRETATION OF SWEDISH INFLUENCES
ON THE EAST ANGLIAN GRAVESITE

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Nearly seventy years have passed since the series of tumuli surrounding Edith Pretty’s estate at Sutton Hoo in Eastern Suffolk, England were first excavated, and the site, particularly the magnificent ship-burial and its associated pieces located in Mound 1, remains enigmatic to archaeologists and historians. Dated to approximately the early seventh century, the Sutton Hoo entombment retains its importance by illuminating a period of English history that straddles both myth and historical documentation. The burial also exists in a multicultural context, an era when Scandinavian influences factored heavily upon society in the British Isles, predominantly in the areas of art, religion and literature.

Literary works such as the Old English epic of *Beowulf*, a tale of a Geatish hero and his Danish and Swedish counterparts, offer insight into the cultural background of the custom of ship-burial and the various accoutrements of Norse warrior society. *Beowulf* may hold an even more specific affinity with Sutton Hoo, in that a character from the tale, Weohstan, is considered to be an ancestor of the man commemorated in the ship-burial in Mound 1. Weohstan, whose allegiance lay with the Geats, was nonetheless a member of the Wægmunding clan, distant relations to the Swedish Scylding dynasty. This royal family also possessed its own series of burial sites, Gamla Uppsala, Husby, Vendel and Valsgärde, which demonstrate a resemblance with Sutton Hoo in both the method of entombment and the objects uncovered within it. In point of fact, the pieces unearthed at both Sutton Hoo and the Swedish gravesites, namely the helmets and shields, possess a likeness so remarkable that many archaeologists believe the objects were cast from the
same die. This paper will further examine these aforementioned literary and
archaeological aspects and interpret the Swedish element that pervades the Sutton Hoo
burial site.
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INTRODUCTION

On 11 May 1939, Mrs. Edith Pretty, the widow of a large estate at Sutton Hoo in eastern Suffolk, England, made an astounding discovery on the grounds south of the main house. She had been keenly interested for some time in the several earthen mounds that encircled her residence (fig. 1), “lying up against the spinney known as Top Hat Wood”¹ but it was not until after the death of her husband in 1938 and her ensuing obsession with the afterlife, did she attempt any excavation of the sites. Unaccustomed to the proper manner of revealing what lay beneath the soil and quite willing to continue with the precedence put forth by landowners since the Reformation (where they would upturn land with any instrument available), Mrs. Pretty employed the services of Basil Brown, a man with a nose for antiquities, who had himself been procured from the local Ipswich Museum. Mrs. Pretty designed and crafted many of the tools that Brown would utilize, including a long probing object made of iron, and the two literally broke ground on 20 June 1938.²

Brown began work on Mound I at Mrs. Pretty’s insistence (she kept a close watch over the excavations from her ‘ringside’ wicker chair) (fig. 2) but the project there was soon abandoned when the two felt they had unearthed nothing of any real significance. Mound III, which was initiated soon after, revealed itself to be a gravesite, with bits of

² According to new research by Robert Markham (Sutton Hoo: Through the Rear View Mirror, 1937-1942. Woodbridge: Sutton Hoo Society, 2002, 23.) and the release of previously unpublished correspondence, Guy Maynard, the chief curator at the Ipswich Museum, had received a letter from a Mr. Vincent Redstone who had met Mrs. Pretty during the annual Woodbridge Flower Show in 1937. Redstone had been enamored with her description of a vivid dream she had recounted to him, of a large white horse with a helmeted rider, of a man’s burial and of numerous gold objects placed within the grave and around the body. Redstone wrote Maynard after his encounter, informing him that it was very probable that the many Hoos or Haughs, which encircled Sutton Heath, were burial mounds. Maynard and Redstone visited the site together in early June 1938, and Basil Brown was soon after sent to the estate for excavation.
glass, knives, and the tip of a sword blade in situ, even some human remains placed in a bronze bowl, but the majority of the site had been looted long before. The significance of Mound III lay in Brown’s discovery of several pieces of iron, which he soon determined were ship rivets, two-inch long pieces resembling bolts, a domed head on one side and a square plate on the other, used to secure the exterior skeleton of medieval ships (fig.3). This find proved fundamental to the entirety of Sutton Hoo as a whole, though at first it seemed like merely an accommodation, for Brown went looking for and ‘found’ a boat to accompany his rivets, exclaiming that the bottom of the burial pit was ‘boat-shaped without any question.’ After a long intermission during the autumn and winter of 1938, work on Mound I was resumed on 9 May 1939, with the help of John Jacobs and William Spooner, Mrs. Pretty’s gardener and gamekeeper respectively. At midday on 11 May, it was Jacobs who called out that he had found a bit of iron. Intent on solidifying the claim he had made the previous year, Brown halted the general clearing operation and began investigating the area with a small trowel. Almost immediately he discovered the presence of five rivets, strategically placed in a visual pattern that recalled the prow or stern of a ship.

Brown reasoned that the rivets he had just found should represent the line of a vanished wooden hull. If so, he would have to dig up and over the rivets and descend on them from above, leaving each one in position. He would then be inside the ship, and by locating the plate of each rivet, he would be able to define the inside of the hull. By 19 May he had learnt how to define the rivets on position: a pink patch in the yellow sand gave warning of the presence of a rivet, and a light brushing would reveal the red knob of corroded iron, surrounded by crusty sand. Rivet after rivet was revealed in this way at intervals of 6-9 inches, until so confident was Brown of predicting their positions that he could afford to leave a protective coat of sand over the rivets, while tracing the inner surface of the hull.4

3 Carver, 8.
4 Ibid., 10-11.
From the very moment of Brown’s discovery, Guy Maynard, the chief curator at the Ipswich Museum, began searching for parallels to this buried ship, and retrieved records from the Isle of Man that pointed to Viking Age similarities. His attempts to be discreet about the discovery at Sutton Hoo proved futile, for rumors of an Anglo-Saxon burial found in eastern Suffolk found their way to the Department of Archaeology at Cambridge within days. A representative from the University, Charles W. Phillips, Fellow of Selwyn College, paid a visit to Maynard on 6 June, and found the curator much occupied with both the excavation at Edith Pretty’s estate and its far-reaching implications for English cultural history. Phillips wrote upon viewing the dig,

I was not prepared for the astonishing sight which met me when I came round to the actual work. There I saw a very wide trench cut right down into the substance of the large oval mound on its longer axis to reveal clearly the gunwale outline of much of a large boat which was interred below the level of the old ground surface. The work had been done with care and as yet there had been little attempt to remove any of the sand which filled the vessel. I could not wonder that Maynard had been daunted by this apparition.5

On behalf of Mrs. Pretty, Basil Brown and Guy Maynard, Phillips telephoned several experts from the British Museum and the Government Office of Works who convened at Sutton Hoo several days later to decide the future course of action at the site. It was agreed upon that a more experienced and knowledgeable team with superior equipment should supervise further excavations of the mounds, but assembling such an entourage during the summer of 1939, with the threat of impending war in Europe, proved difficult. However, curators at the British Museum were able to procure Phillips to undertake the completion of the excavation, which he did, halfheartedly, being neither an expert on the matter nor entirely willing to wrest authority from Brown, whom he later

5 Ibid., 11.
retained for diplomatic reasons. (He did, however, make it quite clear to Guy Maynard and the whole of Ipswich Museum that they were no longer to have any part in the site’s further proceedings). Brown, who continued working even while the details of Sutton Hoo’s transfer were being deliberated, had by 3 July, excavated most of the Mound I ship and had reached what he believed to be the burial chamber of the chief who had been interred there. His contention, which proved to be correct, sprang from two independent sources; first, from Mr. And Mrs. Megaw of the Isle of Man Museum who had visited Brown on 8 June and offered their expert advice on Viking Age graves, and second, from his own consultation of a large volume on the Norwegian Oseberg ship-burial which had been excavated in 1904.

Meanwhile, Phillips, unwilling to do the work himself owing to his rather large physical size, invited several friends and colleagues to assist in the excavation; Stuart and Peggy Piggott, a husband and wife team, O.G.S. Crawford, founder of the periodical *Antiquity*, W.F. Grimes, Crawford’s assistant, and a few assorted others, John Brailsford, John Ward-Perkins and Grahame Clark, all eminent archaeologists who were gathered there only on the most important days (figs. 4 & 5). The group began excavating straightaway, working on random areas of the site at varying times, and on 21 July, the first piece of jewelry was unearthed, a small gold and garnet pyramid.

This brilliant object, a pyramidal-shaped strap-mount, was merely a humble precursor. The following day brought a veritable feast of golden objects: gold plaques in the form of patterned birds and animals from a purse-frame, which it could be seen had contained a handful of gold coins; buckles with garnet inlay, and a great hollow buckle of solid gold, its surface alive with the raised forms of interlaced animals.7

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6 Ibid., 14.
7 Ibid., 15.
The news of such findings reached T.D. Kendrick, the keeper of British and Medieval Antiquities at the British Museum and a prominent academic on Anglo-Saxon art. Kendrick rushed to Mrs. Pretty’s estate and upon meeting Phillips at the nearby Woodbridge railway station, was astonished to discover not only the beauty and perfection of several of the pieces Phillips had brought with him, but that they most likely constituted part of a much larger collection of treasures. It was Kendrick, whom, soon after, declared that both the jewelry and the burial itself were from the seventh century AD. It was, however, the great Anglo-Saxon scholar, Hector Munro Chadwick, of Clare College, Cambridge, who arrived at Sutton Hoo on 18 August and further solidified this claim.

A coroner’s inquest had been assembled four days earlier, on 14 August, by the North Suffolk coroner, L.H. Vulliamy, to not only establish ownership of the finds but also to determine the identity of the interred individual and also the manner of death, if possible. Stuart Piggott and Phillips persuaded those in attendance that the burial had been of a king or chieftain who had died nearly thirteen hundred years earlier. When Chadwick arrived, he laid any doubts to rest and immediately identified the grave as that of Rædwald, an East Anglian king who had ruled from approximately AD 599 to his death in AD 625 (fig. 6).

Rædwald was mentioned in the genealogy of a family called the Wuffingas, whose name had survived in a British Library manuscript. According to the Venerable Bede’s *History of the English Church and People* written at Jarrow before 731, Rædwald held sway over all provinces south of the River Humber. He had flirted briefly with Christianity before returning to his pagan loyalties, though he placed in his ‘temple’ altars to both Christian and pagan deities.8

8 It was determined that because those who had buried the treasure did not have any intention of later retrieving it, all the finds therefore belonged to the Pretty Estate.

9 Carver, 22-23.
Chadwick’s own remarks were published in *Antiquity* in 1940, in which he outlined the specific personages of the Wuffing dynasty, using not only Bede as a source, but also the Saxon Chronicle and the *Historia Eliensis*. Although his initial impression was that the entombment at Sutton Hoo belonged to Rædwald, he offered other suggestions in his article, namely Ecgric or Aethelhere, members of the same family no less, but seemed rather unconvinced that such an elaborate and splendid burial with obvious heathen connotations would have been given in honor of the partner of a monk (which Ecgric was) or the husband of a nun (Aethelhere).10

There can be little doubt that the owner of the treasure was the king within whose dominions the mausoleum lay. The possibility that the funeral was that of a stranger is hardly worth taking into account. The barrow is one of a group of about ten – which seems to indicate a family burial-place. Moreover, the grave of a stranger which was known to contain immense wealth could hardly have escaped plunder in the course of the next three or four generations, during which the tradition of the funeral was remembered. On the other hand, its preservation can be satisfactorily explained, if this cemetery was the burial-place of a native royal family, who had an important residence within a short distance.11

Chadwick’s hypothesis, however grounded in historical sources, could, nevertheless, be easily refuted for one simple reason; the burial mounds at Sutton Hoo contained no inscription of any kind, nor, more importantly, a body. Several scholars noted the volatility of the soil, specifically its acidic state, which could have facilitated the rapid decomposition of any body interred there, including its skeletal structure. Archaeologists present at the inquest were quick to note that the site may have never held a body at all, nor been intended to, but instead was erected as a commemorative symbol to herald the passing of a great leader whose remains were buried elsewhere. Chadwick perceived the Sutton Hoo burial as such, stating that it most likely was a cenotaph,

10 H. Munro Chadwick, “Who was He?” *Antiquity* v. 14 (1940): 82.
11 Ibid., 77.
“constructed for a king who lost his life at sea or on some distant expedition, from which his body could not be brought home.” Chadwick’s premise that claimed ownership of the burial site to the Wuffing family, and more particularly Rædwald, appeared irrefutable, regardless of the absence of a body, but his claim was not without contesters and those who viewed it as fundamentally flawed.

In 1948, Sune Lindqvist, a prominent archaeologist and professor from Uppsala, wrote that:

Much surprise was occasioned by the news of the Coroner’s Inquest – something unfamiliar to Swedes – at which the legal title to the find was decided with the help of the passages in Beowulf describing the passing of Scyld and the lavish furnishing of Beowulf’s memorial mound; ‘They left the wealth of nobles to the earth to keep – left the gold in the ground, where it still exists, as unprofitable to men as it had been before.’ A Swedish court of law would probably not let itself be influenced by, shall we say, quotations from the Edda. When, however, it was a matter of getting past the English law’s not very clearly thought out definition of Treasure Trove, there was certainly good reason, and especially in this instance, to cite Beowulf. For it is generally accepted that Beowulf was composed in about AD 700, that is to say, while many of those who had witnessed the burial at Sutton Hoo were still alive.

In a 1959 essay, Christopher Wrenn, an Anglo-Saxon literary scholar, praised Lindqvist for emphasizing the impact that the findings at Sutton Hoo had upon the study of the poem Beowulf and, in turn, what the tale itself may have illuminated about the objects retrieved from the mounds at the East Anglian estate, stating once again the lines purportedly voiced by the coroner at the inquiry.

The Coroner’s Inquest easily decided that the Sutton Hoo treasures had been buried at a public ceremony and had been meant to remain for ever undisturbed. The decision was reached after the jurymen had listened to an exposition of the account of the ship-passing of Scyld Scefing in Beowulf with its astonishing parallels to the Sutton Hoo ship-cenotaph: and the matter was clinched by the reading of the story of the final disposal of the Dragon’s hoard.

12 Ibid., 76.
These words, in fact, turned out to be false.

If in 1939 the recitation of *Beowulf* in the village hall of Sutton did not make as big a splash as Wrenn would have wished, it may be because it never happened. For it was not until 1948, when Lindqvist penned his piece, that anyone had imagined that the words of the poem had been declaimed to the Sutton jury. The court deposition of Charles Phillips, the site archaeologist, simply stated ‘There is contemporary literary evidence that the burial of chieftains among the northern nations in the Dark Ages was the occasion of celebrations and feasting, which lasted for several days, and nothing can be more certain than the public character of the Sutton Hoo burial.’

Phillips never did specifically mention *Beowulf* by name. However, quotations from the poem appeared in an editorial in the *East Anglian Daily Times* on 17 August, which, many believe, was the beginning of a controversial association between the two components, one literary, the other archaeological, of an exceedingly bleak and enigmatic period in history.

*Beowulf*, whose only extant copy, a tenth-century manuscript composed in Old English and housed at the British Library, is a tale with Scandinavian origins. The 3,182-lined poem, originally passed down orally, tells of the exploits of a young Geatish prince named Beowulf who, sometime during the latter half of the sixth century, aids his kinsmen in a heroic battle with the ferocious monster Grendel, a terror in the peaceful realm of King Hrothgar of Denmark. The saga, peppered with remembrances of past skirmishes between the various ethnic and cultural groups of Migration Period Scandinavia, the Swedes (Scylfings), the Geats (Gautar) and the Danes (Scyldings), also employed various mnemonic devices such as speeches, songs, pronouncement and chants, all replete with an entanglement of Christian theology and pagan mythology. *Beowulf* survives as one of the only literary records from the Dark Ages, and through its

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15 Roberta Frank, “*Beowulf* and Sutton Hoo, The Odd Couple” in *Voyage to the Other World: The Legacy of Sutton Hoo*, ed. Calvin B. Kendall and Peter S. Wells (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 47.
text, illuminates a forgotten world inhabited by heroes, monsters, kings, gods, and a plethora of arcane pagan traditions and rituals, an antithesis to both the logically ordered Roman world of the past and the enlightened Renaissance of the future. In Sutton Hoo, *Beowulf* had found its physical form.

Perhaps because of these articles by Lindqvist and Wrenn, future scholars have come to perceive Sutton Hoo and *Beowulf* interchangeably, and while this tendency may not be entirely misguided, further exploration of the exact state of this relationship is certainly warranted. Many English archaeologists use *Beowulf* as a way to elucidate the findings at Edith Pretty’s estate, but do not consider the cenotaph to be for any other figure except an East Anglian king, commonly Rædwald. But, the story of *Beowulf* is Scandinavian, and yet a very likely association between Sutton Hoo and a specific Nordic ruler is almost always ignored, or, at the very least, downplayed. A closer examination of the objects unearthed in Suffolk reveals this judgment to be unfounded.

Aside from England, ship-burials, like the one at Sutton Hoo, have only been located in Scandinavia, predominantly Norway and Sweden. But the Sutton Hoo gravesite holds an even greater distinction; some historians have noted that it holds a very intimate connection with a series of burial mounds uncovered in Vendel, Valsgärde and Gamla Uppsala in the province of Uppland, Sweden. Far from being merely stylistic similarities in the treasures found at each location, there seemed to be an undeniable link between the two sites, insomuch that pieces unearthed at Sutton Hoo have no other counterpart in the world except in the graves at Uppland. Herbert Maryon’s article, published in *Antiquity* two years before Lindqvist’s own piece delineating Sutton Hoo with *Beowulf*, describes such a correlation.
The finds at Sutton Hoo exhibit many remarkable parallels to those of the Vendel Age. On the great shield-boss from Sutton Hoo, there are five bosses round the flange, with zoomorphic panels between each. The dragons’ heads descend from the center, between other dragons’ heads rising above the necking. A shield-boss from Vendel shows how close its resemblance to the one from Sutton Hoo. This similarity is not confined to the shield alone. It is present throughout the whole find, including the jewelry, with the exception of those imported works like the great Byzantine dish, the salver and the silver bowls, the Coptic bowl, and coins. With the exceptions I have indicated, the whole find holds together as one. It supports the conviction that practically the whole of the Sutton Hoo ship treasure is an importation from the Uppland province of Sweden. The great bulk of the work was produced in Sweden itself. Could we not see in the man commemorated by the Sutton Hoo burial the younger son of the one of the rulers of Vendel?16

Swedish antiquities professor Knut Stjerna, examined archaeological finds from various sites in Sweden in his 1908 tome, *Essays on questions connected with the Old English poem of Beowulf*, including Vendel and Valsgärde, but did so specifically with the tale of *Beowulf* in mind. Stjerna employed a rather unusual methodology, using various lines in the poem to support a particular object, or in reverse, using the object (or objects) to give credence to a line (or lines) in the piece. Stjerna also illuminated several minor Swedish figures from *Beowulf* and once again relied on historical artifacts to cement their existence. In *Vendel i Fynd och Förskning* from 1938, Holger Arbman and other leading Swedish archaeologists, including Sune Lindqvist, contributed their thoughts in a section entitled *Vendel in Uppland and the Beowulf poem*, replicating Stjerna’s methods with physical evidence used to confirm a literary source. The publication of the their work, only one year before the discovery of the grave-site in East Anglia, foreshadowed the years of parallels drawn between Sutton Hoo and *Beowulf* by so many English archaeologists.

Birger Nerman, for many years the director of the Historiska Museet in Stockholm, also employed Stjerna’s analytical tactics in his work, *Poetic Edda in the* 

Light of Archaeology from 1931, and scrutinized the Edda, a group of mythological Scandinavian tales, against their own milieu of archaeological evidence. Nerman would later augment the Sutton Hoo debate regarding the identity of the man interred there with his seminal piece published in Fornvännen in 1948. He asserted, as had Maryon, that several of the pieces at Sutton Hoo, in particular the sword, helmet and shield, were no doubt of Swedish origin. Nerman further argued that it was impossible to believe that not only could an East Anglian king have been buried in a strictly Swedish manner, but that he would have been laid to rest surrounded by Swedish-made weaponry. Apparently, he felt he had no concrete evidence to produce a name, and even admitted that perhaps the Sutton Hoo warrior had been an unknown man summoned to battle in Suffolk by an East Anglian relative, and had then later died there.\(^\text{17}\)

Michael Parker Pearson, a contemporary archaeologist whose own scholarly work concentrates on death and funerary rites, suggests a more general explanation of the finds at Sutton Hoo and seems to contest earlier claims and solicit their reexamination. He writes:

Are stylistic similarities in metalwork style and funerary rite incontrovertible grounds for establishing that the man honored by this burial [Sutton Hoo] had Swedish ancestry? We reach such conclusions by using assumptions about culture and style within a ‘culture history’ paradigm. The similarities of mound burial, use of boats in graves, and techniques of ornament in precious metals are considered to represent ethnic groupings in a direct and reflexive manner. But does this assumption give sufficient consideration to the social and archaeological context, both locally in eastern England and across northern Europe?\(^\text{18}\)

Who was buried at Sutton Hoo? If the site was not intended for a body, then whose life does the cenotaph celebrate? What do the objects placed within the ship-burial tell us about the ethnicity or nationality of the dead? What link can written sources offer, if any? Can we divulge any evidence in the argument first proposed by Rupert Bruce-Mitford when he wrote, “it is the unique nature of the Swedish connection revealed at Sutton Hoo that seems to open up the possibility of a direct connection between Beowulf and the burial itself?” Are we to see Sutton Hoo as a singular entity, a great discovery for England and England alone, or are we to view it in a larger and more complex context that embodies the whole of Northern European culture and archaeology as Pearson suggests?

This paper will explore these questions and many others regarding interpretation and offer a comprehensive interdisciplinary study of both the ship-burial in East Anglia and those in Uppland. It will incorporate literary and historical accounts and draw upon archaeological field research in an attempt to ascertain the exact nature of the often undeniable link between these two locations. Specifically, the identity of the man for whom the Sutton Hoo ship-burial was dug will be examined and the objects uncovered at the site utilized to confirm or deny specific theories.

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THE EVIDENCE OF LITERATURE

Both literary and historical sources have long been utilized to elucidate archaeological discoveries and for good reason; often a site is uncovered out of its original context and the written word serves as an apparatus to explain not only the generality of the location, but also the particular objects found within it. Owing to both the unique nature and enigmatic history of the Sutton Hoo burial, scholars looked to the writings of not only the Church but also a 3,182-lined poem from the annals of early Germanic paganism, *Beowulf*, to determine not only who they considered to have been interred at the site, but also the historical and cultural milieu in which the entombment existed.

The Venerable Bede and King Rædwald

“The favored candidate for identification as the person buried or commemorated in Mound I at Sutton Hoo has long been Rædwald, king of East Anglia in the first quarter of the seventh century.”20 His name comes to us from the Venerable Bede and his *Historia gentis Anglorum ecclesiastica*. Composed in 731 and “offered to the Bernician king of Northumbria as a narrative account of the first century of English Christianity,”21 Bede’s volume offers a skewed and often predetermined perspective of the church, one that was “constrained by his editorial judgments, his purposes as an author and his prejudices.”22 Many scholars contend that Bede’s motivations for writing such an account were political as well as ideological, and that he sought to minimize any element

22 Ibid., 9.
of heathenism or paganism that pervaded his history, components he felt threatened the foundation of his own core beliefs, namely that the English were a race chosen by God. This premise resonates especially true in the case of King Rædwald, a ruler whose power and influence stretched from south-east Britain to Bernicia in Scotland and was, during the latter years of his life, given the title of bretwalda or ‘overking’ of all the royal houses of southern England, a theory which is now contested by some scholars. Regardless of his status, he appears only three times in Bede’s tome; first, listed in a register of kings who had revived idolatry in favor of Christianity; second, at whose court Edwin experienced his heavenly vision and where Rædwald was enticed to accept bribes for Edwin’s murder, and third, to mark his passing in A.D. 627, where, according to the author, his death facilitated the end of polytheism and the eventual return of the true faith with his son, Earpwald.

Bede’s reluctance to elaborate on the successful reign of King Rædwald beyond his profane religious nature also extended to other kings, namely Cearl and Penda of Mercia, although these men were early figures whom Bede presumably felt did not challenge the development of Christianity in England. Æthelfrith, the only major king who had died a pagan before Raedwald, escaped Bede’s condemnation owing to his infamous military achievements “crucial to the foundation of the Bernician dynasty as a major force in Britain” and because the Historia gentis Anglorum ecclesiastica was written specifically for a member of the same royal lineage.

With King Rædwald, however, Bede faced a much more difficult challenge; to omit him entirely would have been a “flagrant breach of the general historical knowledge

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23 Ibid., 185. It is interesting to note that Bede considered even the Romans undamaged by their paganism, that is, until they began to actively persecute the Christians

24 Ibid., 186.
of powerful contemporaries,” especially considering he had died less than twenty years before the author’s birth. Even more pressing were the entangled alliances between Bernicia and the East Angles, family connections by marriage that emboldened the ties between north and south and which Bede could not sever over his own personal opinions of religion. “Despite these circumstances, it was essential that Bede register his abhorrence of Rædwald, whose baptism had proved to be frustra (‘to no purpose’).”

Rædwald had in fact long before received this Christian Baptism in Kent, but to no good purpose; for on his return home, his wife and certain perversive advisers, persuaded him to apostatize from the true Faith. So his last state was worse than the first: for, like the ancient Samaritans, he tried to serve both Christ and the ancient gods, and he had in the same shrine an altar for the holy Sacrifice of Christ side by side with a small altar on which victims were offered to devils. This King Rædwald was a man of noble descent but ignoble in his actions: he was son of Tytila, and grandson of Wuffa, after whom all kings of the East Angles are called Wuffings.

Bede was able to further distance Rædwald from his own unfortunate religious choices by emphasizing that responsibility for his apostasy lay not with the king but instead with his anonymous wife. Bede also stressed the king’s natu nobilis or noble birth, a characteristic he shared with the rest of his family, but concurrently distinguishing it from his actu ignobilis, his inglorious deed. This strategy “enabled Bede to air his own strictures against Rædwald as an individual while reassuring those who counted themselves his close kin that they were quite divorced from the opprobrium attaching to their most powerful antecedent.”

After Æthelberht and Sæberht, of Kent and East Saxon respectively, had both died in A.D. 616, the sons of these two deceased monarchs drove the bishops Mellitus and

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25 Ibid., 188.  
26 Ibid., 188.  
28 Higham, 189.  
29 Ibid., 189.
Justus out of Canterbury. Rædwald then seized upon his chance to assimilate the once-
Christian Kentish kingdom into his fold, and soon after the East Saxon rulers followed,
assuring their allegiance to the pagan gods while shedding all former traces of the faithful
regime they had once dominated. By exercising his own heathen convictions, Rædwald
was able to secure control of all of southern Britain, thereby becoming the infamous
_bretwalda_ for which he is still known today. “By corralling its priests in an impotent
mission at Canterbury and throwing his own political weight as overking behind
paganism, he created conditions in which the worship of indigenous deities could resume
with some confidence.”

There are problems, however, that correspond with a closer examination of
Rædwald’s status and its correlation with the wealth of Mound 1 at Sutton Hoo, which
was purportedly raised in his honor.

Rædwald was one of a number of kings who exercised authority over all the southern
kings of the Angles and their provinces, which are divided by the river Humber and
the boundaries adjacent to it from the northern ones. The word _bretwalda_ which
seems to be no more than an attempt by a late ninth-century chronicler to offer a
shorthand translation of Bede’s phrase, should be avoided, since it appears to
institutionalize a type of authority for which Bede may have had no single
institutional term. All we know is that Bede regarded Rædwald as being one of a
number of kings who exercised power over other monarchs. His grave may well have
been richer than those of rulers of inferior status, but we lack other royal graves
which might allow us to conclude that Mound 1 really is the burial or cenotaph of
a high-king.

The grave-site at Sutton Hoo, which contains items of both a Christian and pagan
nature, Byzantine spoons inscribed with the names Saul and Paul alongside Germanic

30 Ibid., 202.
31 Ibid., 205.
armor and weaponry adorned with a bestial menagerie of gold and garnet, seems a fitting tribute to a king who grappled so precariously with the question of theism, a man such as Rædwald. “The weaponry, the jewelry, and the everyday objects reflect a civilized way of life, [and while] the baptismal spoons and some motifs on [the] silver bowls are Christian in character, the overall impression is not specifically Christian. This accords well with one who first accepted, but later rejected Christian belief.”

Regardless of where his past religious affinities had led him, Rædwald most likely died a pagan, and the manner of his burial (if he was indeed the individual interred at Sutton Hoo), a ship-grave assimilated from Scandinavia, more particularly Sweden, suggests this exceedingly tangible attachment to polytheism. The Christian objects within the sepulcher, however, appear to reveal more about the faith of the people responsible for the interment rather than the man actually buried at Sutton Hoo. Bede writes of Earpwald and Sigbert, Rædwald’s sons, who both ruled after his death:

So great was Edwin’s zeal for the true Faith that he persuaded King Earpwald, son of Rædwald, King of the East Angles, to abandon his superstitious idolatry and accept the Faith and Sacraments of Christ with his whole province … Sigbert was a devout Christian and a man of learning, who had been an exile in Gaul, and was there converted to the Christian Faith, so that when he began his reign, he labored to bring about the conversion of his whole realm. Nor did he fail in his purpose; for, like a good farmer, he reaped a rich harvest of believers. He delivered the entire province from its age-old wickedness and infelicity, brought it to the Christian Faith and works of righteousness.

The Christian objects in the Sutton Hoo burial may have very well been positioned there with the explicit sanction of either Earpwald or Sigbert as an indication of their own deep-seated piety and need to juxtapose their father’s heathenism. Since the style of burial is undeniably pagan and many of the objects therein also share idolatrous

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33 Bede, 367.
34 Ibid., 132-33.
characteristics, perhaps the Christian items act as a buffer between the polytheistic heritage of the family that ends with Rædwald’s death, and the faithful and devout monotheistic future that awaits it.

Sune Lindqvist, however, perceived the entombment in a much more subtle way and ascertained that the man buried there had indeed been a Christian, but one who remained fundamentally attached to his Germanic heritage.

Given the date for the Sutton Hoo ship-cenotaph, [Lindqvist] determined on the evidence of the Merovingian gold coins which had fallen from the royal purse as c. A.D. 670, the ceremonial public funeral in heathen style implied [that it] must have been given to a Christian king. The Church, he thinks, did not strongly discourage rich grave-furnishings: and the two silver spoons with the words Saulos and Paulos cut on them in Greek majuscules could only be explained as baptismal gifts to symbolize the conversion to Christianity of St. Paul described in the Acts of the Apostles, where Saul became Paul after the miracle on the road to Damascus. Only a Christian king would have had such mementos among his family heirlooms. All now generally agree with the decision of the coroner’s inquest that the burial of the funeral treasures was a public affair. But at such a date an East Anglian king would almost certainly be Christian, as the silver spoons imply. It would seem probable that a Christian king must have had in this case a private burial with the proper rites of the Church, and that the public pagan affair was a concession to a still strong Germanic family sentiment for the ancient traditions.35

Rædwald’s ancestral lineage, the Wuffings, a dynamic force in early English history, can trace their genealogy to many proto-historical figures of Scandinavian and therefore pagan origin. Dr. Sam Newton has researched the Wuffing pedigree since 1983 and among his many conclusions is that one ancestor, Hroðmund, has a chronicled counterpart as a Scylding prince mentioned briefly in Beowulf.36 He appears in the poem only once, in an alliterative relationship to his younger brother Hreðric, a method Newton

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36 Sam Newton, The Origins of Beowulf and the Pre-Viking Kingdom of East Anglia (Rochester: D.S. Brewer, 1993), 78.
mentions as a staple of heroic legend (where young royal males appear in pairs), and one strikingly similar to the tale of Eanmund and his more infamous brother Eadgils of the Scylding monarchs. Lindqvist’s own analysis of the Wuffingas takes a similar approach to Newton in the substantiation of a family member as a historical figure in *Beowulf,* and yet downplays the impact of Danish influence.

If *Beowulf* really was written for a dynasty that prided itself on its northern origins, some member of that dynasty ought to be named in it. The principal hero of the poem, Beowulf himself, is excluded. He evidently left no descendants. Who then should it be but the brave nobleman, who alone dared follow Beowulf in his last fight with the dragon, and who afterwards saw to his burial? ‘He was called Wiglaf, son of Weohstan, a much-loved shield-warrior, a Scylding prince, Kinsman of Aelfhere.’ Scyldings or Skilfings is recognized as a name for the Royal House of Uppsala … the Uuffingas were in origin Swedes, a branch of the Royal House of Uppsala and descendants of Wiglaf – is as ambitious a claim as can reasonably be made.

According to Newton, the name Wehha, listed in the eighth position on the Wuffinga hierarchy, “could be identified with the name Weohstan, which is borne by the father of Wiglaf in *Beowulf.* Such a theory is certainly philologically tenable, for the form Wehha could be explained as a hypocoristic variant of the name Weohstan.” He later states, however, that the Wuffing family and their kinship to other Northern aristocracies must be viewed in a much more general context of sixth-century Scandinavia, although he continues to link the East Anglian lineage with various Danish clans. Hroðmund’s mother Wealhþeow, also identified in *Beowulf* though not included in the family pedigree, nevertheless plays an important role in constructing a link between Wuffings and Scyldings. Newton contends that:

Queen Wealhþeow may have been a Wulfing princess prior to her marriage to King Hroðgar and thus a possible Wuffing family forbear. Her matrimonial function as *friþusibb folca,* ‘the kindred pledge of peace between peoples,’ would have

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37 Ibid., 82.
38 Sune Lindqvist, “Sutton Hoo and Beowulf,” *Antiquity* v. 22 (1948): 139-140.
39 Newton, 112.
constituted an implicitly understood allegiance, realized through royal marriage, between Scyldings and Wulfings, and that Wealhþeow may therefore represent a vital genealogical link between the sixth-century Northern world of *Beowulf* and its Old English audience.  

Apart from *Beowulf*, Wealhþeow is named in Arngrímur Jónsson's abstract of the lost *Skjöldunga saga* as the daughter of an English king and more specifically in the *Hrólfs saga kraka* as the daughter of a king of Northumbria called Norðri. In *Beowulf*, Wealhþeow is described as a Helminga and the theory was advanced by Gregor Sarrazin that this familial appellation was synonymous with the place-names of ‘Helmingham’ in Norfolk and Suffolk, both of which lie in known areas of fifth and sixth-century migrant occupation. For many scholars, the Wuffings did not exist as merely the descendants of another royal family, but as a separate entity that subsisted alongside Swedish, Danish and Geatish counterparts in various Germanic and Anglo-Saxon lays. “It may be pointed out that there are no linguistic obstacles to the equation of Bede’s Uuffingas with the Wulfingas of *Widsith* and the Wylfingas of *Beowulf*. The forms are etymologically identical, and the phonological variations irrelevant.”

*Beowulf*

*Beowulf*, the Anglo-Saxon epic so intimately associated with the burial at Sutton Hoo, is a work whose provenance is greatly in doubt. Thought to be composed during either the latter half of the seventh or early half of the eighth century, the surviving
manuscript, written in the late West Saxon literary dialect of Old English, is bound with others in what is known as the Nowell Codex and catalogued in the British Library under Cotton Vitellius A.XV (fig. 7). The following pages will demarcate two seminal arguments concerning the poem, namely the date of its composition and its geographical origin, and conclusions will be drawn in regards to its relevance to the Sutton Hoo burial.

**Dating the Poem**

*Beowulf* appears, by many accounts, to have been transcribed during the eleventh-century in an “Anglo-Saxon Insular miniscule script,” although several scholars allege that the poem is in fact contemporary with the document itself. One in particular is the conclusion held by Kevin Kiernan. “Kiernan has proposed a historical argument to support his claim that *Beowulf* was a product of Cnut’s reign in England, and subsequently assigned a *terminus pos quem* for the poem at 1016.” He claimed that because of the Danish genealogy so expressly delineated in the poem’s opening lines, the copying of the poem would have been possible only after 1016 “when the genealogical panegyric was a compliment, rather than an insult, to the reigning king.”

To bolster this argument, he proposed an unusual interpretation of the codicological data contained in the manuscript. Essentially, Kiernan declared that the poem in its present form is actually a composite that had been joined together by a new transitional section. This transitional section, which includes the poem’s section known as “Beowulf’s Homecoming” (lines 1888-2199), was composed by two scribes in an effort to join together two other poems they had in their possession: one about Beowulf’s fights against Grendel and his mother, and another whose story centered on the battle between the Dragon and an aged Beowulf. According to Kiernan, Scribe B returned to the text at a later date, and washed down and subsequently composed the lines found on folio 179 in a further effort to smooth the

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45 Newton, 2.
transition between the newer segment and the final poem.48

Kiernan considered this transitional section a palimpsest, proof that the date of the poem’s composition in the form of the extant text, and the date of the actual manuscript were one and the same, “quite literally, an epic in the making.”49

When viewed in isolation, the palimpsest perhaps remains an incredible phenomenon. An eleventh-century revision of the poem has been unthinkable until now, and the MS itself has been considered relatively unimportant, because the original poem and the extant MS are supposed to be centuries apart. Yet the mere existence of a palimpsest in the middle of Beowulf is, at the very least, circumstantial proof that the poem was revised, and consequently that at least one folio of the poem, containing lines 2207-2252, is contemporary with the MS.50

Kiernan’s assessment, while plausible, remains unpersuasive since he states that only one section of the manuscript had been reworked, the justification for this being the poor condition of the vellum, the pages originally unbound, blotched, faded and riddled with wormholes, to which Newton argues that to believe that “trained scribes would allow part of a work in progress to sustain such damage, and then make so poor an attempt at restoration seems unlikely.”51 The Nowell Codex, an assorted compilation which also contains The Passion of St. Christopher, The Wonders of the East, The Letter of Alexander to Aristotle, and an incomplete Judith, appears to be concerned with an interest in the grotesque and monstrous, thematically amalgamated to present a barrage of mythical creatures, both good and evil.

If then, as seems likely, the compilation of the Nowell Codex realizes a late tenth-century Anglo-Saxon interest in supernatural wonders, it would appear that Beowulf was not necessarily included because of its quality as Old English heroic verse. Yet there is evidence that the two scribes valued the poem above the preceding prose items, for both appear to have been interested enough in Beowulf to have re-read and

48 Evans, 42-43.
49 Ibid., 43.
50 Kevin Kiernan, Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 244-245.
51 Newton, 8.
corrected at least 180 errors. The second scribe appears also to have checked and
corrected both his work and that of the first scribe. Nevertheless, over 300 errors
remain unrectified. A significant quantity of these are typical copying-errors, such as
dittography or haplography, and together they constitute clear evidence that the extant
manuscript of *Beowulf* is a copy of an antecedent text now lost to us.52

Since this ‘antecedent text’ has now disappeared, what other methods have been
employed to ascertain the date of the poem’s composition? Can historical moments in
time influence the political climate of a writer, and warrant the creation of a heroic epic
in one century as opposed to another? The observations of Dorothy Whitelock give merit
to this query:

Dorothy Whitelock advanced the *terminus ad quem* of *Beowulf* from 750 to 825,
halting before the Viking incursions of mid-century. She cited the high respect with
which the poet speaks of the Danes and their rulers; no Anglo-Saxon would praise
people who were draining England’s coffers and ale kegs and carving blood-eagles on
Christian backs.53

However, according to Roberta Frank, there is little to no compelling linguistic
evidence that could persuade us to affix *Beowulf* in the realm of Anglo-Saxon poetry
before the tenth century. Although the narrative itself describes verifiable historical
figures from the latter half of the sixth century, Frank solicits us to consider how the
political climate of a nation may compel an author to construct tales that look favorably
upon a particular ethnicity in the ruling class. “Nicolas Jacobs has recently reminded us
that from 927 onwards the Danes constituted a widely accepted element in English
society, and an English poem complimentary to them is conceivable at least down to the
resumption of raids in 980.”54 Frank utilizes Old Norse skaldic verse and its subsequent
loan words to Old English to determine the *Beowulf* poet’s interest in and knowledge of

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52 Ibid., 7.
53 Roberta Frank, “Skaldic Verse and the Date of *Beowulf*” in *Beowulf, Basic Readings*, ed. Peter
54 Ibid., 155.
the work’s Scandinavian setting as a “result of the Danish settlements in England and not part of a distant folk memory by the Anglo-Saxons from their continental homeland.”\footnote{Ibid., 156.}

Skaldic verse has established the case for Geatish survival beyond the sixth century, a period when many historians have said their singularity came to an abrupt end and they were then overthrown by and fully integrated into Swedish society. The Scyldings, the Danish monarchs who figure so predominantly in Beowulf are another matter though.

Unlike the Geats, who were known to Ptolemy, Procopius, and Jordanes, the Scyldings are surrounded by silence. Nobody mentions a single Scylding, let alone a nation swarming with them, until the Beowulf poet uses the name thirty-five times for his sixth-century Danish dynasty. Names like Healfdene, Hrothgar, and Heorogar, if they are found in England at all, are not documented before the tenth century. The first reference by a skald to an event associated with one of the Scyldings of Beowulf occurs around 965 when Eyvindr skáldaspillir calls gold the seed corn of Fýrisplains \footnote{Ibid., 157.}, alluding to the story of how Hrólf Kraki (Hrothulf) sowed those plains with gold to delay the Swedish horsemen pursuing him.\footnote{Alexander M. Bruce, Scyld & Seef: Expanding the Analogues (New York, Routledge, 2002), 40.}

Alexander M. Bruce further validates this assertion in a recent publication of the family’s patriarch, the mythical Scyld Seefing. “For example, Audrey Meaney points to the fact that the earliest text in which the Danes are called Scyldings is the anonymous Historia de Sancto Cuthberto (chs. 11, 12), first compiled in Chester-le-Street about 945, and she points to the corroboration between the West-Saxon pedigree of Æthelweard’s Chronicle dated c. 1000, and that of Hrothgar in Beowulf.” But, according to Norse sources from the eleventh and twelfth centuries, in addition to those of Sven Aggesen and Saxo Grammaticus, medieval Scandinavian poets used the word skjoldungr (Scylding) to delineate a general term for ‘king’ and not to specify any particular dynastic namesake as
If *Beowulf* had in fact been composed in the early half of the eleventh century, it was most likely written for a political purpose. It was believed that the three Norse kings who ruled England between 1014 and 1040 descended from this Scylding lineage and the poem was most likely employed to confer the legitimacy of their Danish heritage by linking them with earlier conquerors of the island from the eighth century. “The author of the Old English *Orosius*, for example, reporting Ohthere’s account to King Alfred of his passage from the Oslofjord to Hedeby along the eastern coasts of Jutland, adds on his own the comment that the Angles lived in this area before they came to England.”

Regardless of the date of the manuscript of *Beowulf*, many scholars continue to claim that the text itself had been created centuries earlier. Kaluza’s Law, a linguistic analysis which governs the resolution of syllables into a single position, has been utilized by R.D. Fulk to anchor the poem to a late seventh and early eighth century context. *Beowulf*’s meter and verse form exemplify the Type A category, where an extra unstressed syllable appears at the end of each grouping of words, either short or long. Based on phonological evidence, Fulk determined that *Beowulf*’s language occurred before the audible distinction between long and short vocalic endings had been lost, approximately AD 685 through AD 725.

If *Beowulf* had indeed been written before the Danish invasion of England in AD 793, and yet focuses on an entire host of Scandinavian heroes, can we then safely assume

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that the poem in its current form is merely the copy of another, much older work? Does the poem’s origin lay somewhere in the realm of the Scyldings and Scylfings?

**Beowulf’s Origins**

*Beowulf*, one of the first original poems celebrated in the English tongue, largely ignores England. The first editor of the poem intrepidly declared that *Beowulf* was merely the Anglo-Saxon version of a Danish or Swedish poem, concerned as it is with only Scandinavian heroes. “This idea seems really to underlie the belief which has been held by numerous scholars, that the poem is nothing more than a translation of a poem in which some Scandinavian minstrel has glorified the heroes of his own nation.”

This idea of a literary work having a particular origin based on the nationality and ethnicity of its characters is problematic at best. Several Norse lays such as *Völsunga Saga* dealt with the exploits of foreign individuals, Sigurd the Frank, Gunnar the Burgundian and Attila the Hun. In *Widsith*, an Anglo-Saxon poem contemporary to the *Beowulf* manuscript, we discover men of Gothic, Burgundian, Frankish, Lombard, Frisian, Danish and Swedish race listed among the heroes whose names were current in England. “To deny that *Beowulf*, as we have it, is a translation from the Scandinavian, does not, of course, involve any denial of the Scandinavian origin of the story of *Beowulf*’s deeds. The fact that his achievements are framed in a Scandinavian setting, and that the closest parallels to them have to be sought in Scandinavian lands, makes it probable on a *priori* grounds that the story had its origin there.”

Gregor Sarrazin, who, for many years, advanced this theory of Scandinavian origin, noted a striking resemblance between the Beowulf of the poem and Bōðvar

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61 Chambers, 98.
62 Ibid., 99-100.
Bjarki, who makes an appearance in Snorri Sturluson’s Skáldskaparmál from his seminal 12th century work, *The Prose Edda*. In this work, a Geatish hero slays a rampaging monster at the court of a Danish king and is later instrumental in the fight to return a Swedish king to his rightful throne.

King Aðils was at war with a king called Áli, and they fought a great battle on Lake Vänern. [He] sent a message to Hrólf Kraki to come to his assistance, promising to pay every man in his army while they were campaigning, and the king himself was to choose for his own three treasures from Sweden. King Hrólf was unable to go on account of his war with the Saxons, but he sent Aðils his twelve berserks. Bōðvar Bjarki was one.⁶³

Not only are the stories similar to *Beowulf*, but the names are believed to coincide. The Old English name Beowulf becomes Bōðvar Bjarki, or ‘bear-warrior’ in Old Norse, as well as Hrothulf to Hrólf Kraki, and the Scylding kings Onela to Áli and Eadgils to Aðils. However, there are also parallels between Beowulf’s adventures with Grendel and the dragon and incidents in the narratives of Saxo and Icelandic sagas, which in turn, makes the aforementioned similarity between Beowulf and Bōðvar Bjarki well founded, but not entirely extraordinary.

Sarrazin has also argued that the skald Starkathr, writing in the court of the Danish king Ingeld at Lejre in 700, was *Beowulf*’s original author, and Cynewulf, a Northumbrian monk, its Anglo-Saxon translator and religious interpolator. “It has been urged by Sarrazin that the description of the country round Heorot and especially of the journey to the Grendel-lake, shows such local knowledge as to point to its having been composed by some Scandinavian poet familiar with the locality. Heorot can probably, as we have seen, be identified with Lejre.”⁶⁴

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⁶⁴ Chambers, 101.
Gillian Overing and Marijane Osborn have somewhat cautiously supported this contention in their 1985 voyage around the Cattegat, a narrow strip of sea separating the Danish islands of Jutland and Zealand from western Sweden. While not a scientific expedition (which the two women unmistakably clarified), the journey symbolized a sort of speculative and imaginative enterprise for them, the melding of history and myth, of location and dislocation. Their aim was to map Beowulf’s voyage to the famed Heorot, the Danish royal enclave, utilizing the poem and its various geographical markers as a guide. Osborn and Overing spent several August days sailing the Cattegat searching for such a location, from Göteborg in Sweden to the Roskildefjord and Gammel Lejre on Zealand in Denmark. While not clearly stated in their travelogue, their expedition seemed to buttress Sarrazin’s assertion and that of Friedrich Klaeber who confirmed that the Beowulf poet had a clear knowledge of Northern geography.

On another, smaller voyage to Hög Edsten near Lake Vänern in Sweden, thought by many to be located in Beowulf’s homeland, the two women recount the poem and the town’s legendary attachment to it. “Sarrazin points to the nearby place-name Dragsmark, the site of a ruined monastery. He cites a local folktale that explains the name by the presence of a dragon that guards a silver cup (silfverskål) within the hill called the Skålberg, and he points out that the Beowulf dragon was awakened by the theft of such a cup.” Although most likely a mythical narrative, the account still attests to Sarrazin’s argument that the Beowulf poet was familiar with perhaps not only locations, but also a plethora of provincial stories from which he created his heroic epic.

Sarrazin’s contentions ostensibly arose from an earlier critic of the poem. Grímur

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66 Ibid., 30.
Jónsson Thorkelin, in the preface to his 1815 *Beowulf* translation wrote:

That our poem of the Scyldings is indeed Danish will be clear to anyone who sees that the author was an eyewitness to the exploits of kings Hrothgar, Beowulf, and Hygelac, and was the eulogizer at the funeral of Beowulf. I cannot easily say, however, how our poem found its way to England; but if one wishes to base an argument on conjecture, he will not be far from the truth if he posits that Alfred the Great, the glory and ideal of kings, took the work of the divine Danish bard into his protection.67

Other attempts to identify the *Beowulf* poet have been at once both diverse and as controversial as Sarrazin’s and Thorkelin’s assessments, from Archbishop of Lichfield to the same anonymous writer that penned *Widsith*. Additional hypotheses include Wulfgar, a loyal retainer of King Æthelstan or Adalbert of Bremen, an eleventh century German cleric or even Klaeber’s estimation, that the author was “a man connected with the Anglian court, a royal chaplain or abbot of noble birth.”68 The connection with Anglia would prove especially appealing.

Through a consideration of the relation of *Beowulf* to surviving Anglo-Saxon pedigrees, East Anglia emerges as the kingdom most likely to have fostered the poem’s prominent Danish dynastic concerns, insofar as a Scylding genealogical affinity is identifiable through two names listed in the ancestral tally of King Ælfwald. If this proposal is acceptable, we would have grounds for a claim that *Beowulf* could have been composed in East Anglia during King Ælfwald’s reign (ca AD 713-749).69

King Ælfwald’s kingdom was one of the earliest that possessed not only the means for the composition and preservation of *Beowulf* but an overabundance of ecclesiastical ministers, any one of which “could have provided the kind of clerical context described by historian Patrick Wormald as likely to have permitted the maintenance of Old English heroic verse, especially if such verse was concerned with the

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68 Ibid., 296.
69 Newton, 133.
noble ancestry of the Wuffings themselves.”

The royal rite of ship-burial, as evidenced by Sutton Hoo and the account of such an interment in *Beowulf* is another point of contention that reinforces the poem’s East Anglian perspective. For Newton, the burial “signals a dynastic allegiance with Scandinavia.” In *Beowulf*, the ceremony of ship-burial is associated with Scyld Scefing, the renowned founder of the Scylding dynasty, and it is this entombment which forms the culmination of his saga, a narrative that “reads like a myth to account for a funeral-rite.”

His warrior band did what he bade them
when he laid down the law among the Danes:
They shouldered him out to the sea’s flood,
The chief they revered who had long ruled them.
A ring-whorled prow rode in the harbor,
ice-clad, outbound, a craft for a prince.
They stretched their beloved lord in his boat,
laid out by the masts, amidships,
the great ring-giver. Fare-fetched treasures
were piled upon him, and precious gear.

The implication here is that “the legend of Scyld Scefing in *Beowulf* represents a version of a story told to explain the mythic origin and purpose of the Old English royal rite of ship-funeral and we can infer the existence of such a legend in Wuffing genealogical verse from archaeology.” Newton ascertains that Scylding traditions also provide an analogy since the establishment of the rite of mound-inhumation is normally attributed to the Swedish dynasty’s founder, the divine figure Yngvi-Freyr.

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70 Ibid., 135.
71 Ibid., 136.
73 Heaney, 5.
74 Newton, 137.
75 Ibid., 136.
The first Age is called the Age of Burning, for then they burned the dead and raised stones in memory of them, but after Frey [Yngvi-Freyr] had been buried at a howe at Uppsala, many chiefs made howes no less than standing-stones to the memory of their kinsmen.76

The figure of Yngvi-Freyr and his particular burial rites could also be linked with the Wuffinga family if they themselves had been descended not from the Scyldings of Beowulf, but from the Scylfings, as Lindqvist had suggested. The Scylfings of the poem, Ongentheow (Egil in Old Norse), Ohthere (Ottar), Onela (Áli), Eanmund (no known Old Norse derivative) and Eadgils (Aðils) are synonymous with the Ynglings of Sturluson’s ‘Yngling Saga’ from Heimskringla and appear on genealogical references such as the twelfth-century Icelandic lineage, Langfeðgatal, fourteen positions removed from Frey.77 Frey was known by a second name Yngvi; that name was used long after in his race as a name of great worth, and his kinsmen were afterwards called Ynglings. Frey then fell sick, and as he neared death, his men took counsel, and let few men come to him; and they built a great howe with a door and three holes in it.78

While such a placement of Frey’s name in relevance to known Scylfing kings from Beowulf, may be beyond the reach of any factual credibility, the resemblance between Frey’s method of burial and those of the Swedish monarchs exalts him to a near patriarchal status. He is the equivalent of the Scylfing family’s own legendary Scyld.

Aun [father of Egil] had now one son left, and would sacrifice him; he wanted to give Odin Uppsala and the lordships which lie thereto and he had it called Tiundaland. But the Swedes forbade him and the offering was put off. Thereupon King Aun died and was buried in a howe near Uppsala.79

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77 Bruce, 114-118.
78 Sturluson, ”Ynglinga Saga,” 7.
79 Ibid., 18.
King Egil was a great hunter, and he often rode in the daytime to the wood to hunt wild animals... he came upon an ox, so that he rode towards it to slay it, but the ox turned on him. The king struck at it but his spear sheered off and the ox stuck its horns into the flank of the horse which straightaway fell down flat and the king with him. The king then leaped up again and would draw his sword, but the ox stuck its horns into his breast so that they went deep in. The king lived only a short while and was buried in a howe near Uppsala.  

King Aðils was at sacrifice to the goddesses and rode on his horse around the temple; the horse stumbled under him and fell; so the king also rolled over, and his head fell against a stone, so that his skull burst and his brains lay on the stone. That was his death; he died in Uppsala and there now is his howe.

It is hardly a coincidence that the Ynglinga Saga tells of these three Swedish kings buried at Uppsala, Aun, Egil and Aðils, and “that there stand at Gamla Uppsala, Old Uppsala, three mighty grave mounds on a line north-east to south-west.” It is also interesting to note that these burial sites, known foremost as the particular possession of the man entombed underneath, Aun’s Howe, Egil’s Howe and Aðils’s Howe, are also imbued with mythical appellations, Odin’s Howe, Thor’s Howe and Frey’s Howe, once again associating the Yngling family with their legendary forbears, one of whom is perceived as the antecedent to a method of funeral rites found in much of medieval Scandinavia and England.

So what conclusions can be inferred from this literary evidence? It appears that Beowulf offers no concrete proof of either a Scylding or Scylding origin. Perhaps the response to such an inquiry lies in the physical evidence unearthed at Sutton Hoo.

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80 Ibid., 19.
81 Ibid., 22.
THE EVIDENCE OF ARCHAEOLOGY

Unlike literature, archaeology offers physical confirmation of a period in history. In its dual nature to either authenticate or refute literary sources, archaeological evidence is often perceived to be the superior of both disciplines, although as demonstrated in the previous pages, the two in essence complement each other. The following section of this paper will investigate the archaeological evidence excavated at both the various burial locations in Uppland as well as at the Pretty estate to determine the relevance of the aforementioned Swedish component in both the *Beowulf* poem and the Sutton Hoo burial site.

Boat Graves in Sweden

Boat burials occur mainly in Scandinavia, most notably in the Uppland province of Sweden, where the earliest examples date from the first half of the sixth century AD. They are also found in areas that were under the sphere of Scandinavian influence, such as Sutton Hoo. “In such graves, the boat replaced the coffin or wooden chamber as a container for the body and which custom also had a prestigious value that could be manifested in the size of the boat.”

The boat-grave in its typical manifestation consists of a boat placed in a trench, covered by a timber roof and surmounted by a mound of earth or gravel. The corpse is generally found to rest in the stern of the boat, sometimes richly dressed and if a man surrounded by his weapons, if a woman with her jewellery. The fore of the boat may be loaded with various necessities including provisions, which might be contained in the appropriate kitchen equipment. In and around the boat horses and dogs in varying numbers are often found laid down as company to the dead, the horses bridled and the dogs on leashes.

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84 Ibid., 124.
Uppland Burial Sites: Gamla Uppsala, Vendel and Valsgärde

Uppland, a province north of Stockholm, encompassed the hub of political and cultural life during the late Iron Age in Sweden (fig. 8). This prefecture, also known as the Mälaren valley, “has been traditionally regarded as the center of the kingdom of the Svear in the Vendel period and the cradle of the Swedish national state.” Nearly one thousand farms in the area have over sixty boat graves from this period, in places that are synonymous with early medieval Scandinavian archaeology: Vendel (the type-site from which the era also gets its name), Valsgärde, Ultuna, Tuna in Alise and Birka. The chronological range of these entombments, from the beginning of the 7th century to well on in the 11th century, suggest that they are of a family who for generation after generation interred its chieftains next to their forefathers. The earlier Vendel period graves, in particular, contain magnificent weapons and extremely rich grave-goods.

The three howes at Gamla Uppsala (fig. 9), two of which are not from the Vendel period, but from the Migration epoch preceding it, contain what some scholars believe to be the cremated remains of peaceful priestly kings, while those elsewhere in Vendel and Valsgärde (fig. 10) have been interpreted as the tombs of great landowners rather than of kings.

Manne Eriksson’s discovery that the farm beside the church at Vendel was originally known as Tuna is said to support the special character of the finds. Places with Tuna names are variously explained as defensive, market or cult sites. Lundberg’s opinion

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87 These were not considered boat-graves, but categorized alongside them owing to the deliberate use of mounded earth to cover the bodies.
88 Ambrosiani, “Background to the boat-graves of the Mälaren valley,” 17.
was that they were associated with the farm where the great landowner lived, landowners such as those who ruled the hundred of Vendel.89

Greta Arwidsson further promotes this claim with her observation that the term Tunbohamna appears in a tithe list of 1312, and also that Tunbo åtting is cited in tax registration documents from 1550s, both in reference to the central part of Vendel parish where the church itself stands directly beside the cemetery field (figs. 11 & 12). This is in direct opposition to the mound at Vendel, known as Ottarshögen (fig. 13), which lays on lands belonging to a Husby, that is, an original settlement unit from which the Svea king acquired his subsistence, a royal farm. It has been impossible, however, to find correlations for Valsgärde with any ancient Tuna farm. Its close proximity to Gamla Uppsala all but secured the Valsgärde cemetery in the king’s domain.90

The sequence of burials at Vendel and Valsgärde, which clearly exhibit a dynastic predisposition, suggests that “the boat-graves were constructed in a rhythm which statistically corresponds to one burial per generation. This may reasonably be interpreted as an expression for one family’s custom of honoring each successive head of the family and is one of the few provable examples of such family succession.”91 Scholars have determined through the use of DNA that the boat graves in Vendel and Valsgärde were not only ancestral cemeteries, but that these interred families emanated from “the royal dynasty of the Svear in Uppsala, the so-called Ynglingar.”92

89 Ibid., 17-18.
91 Schönbaek, 127.
Excavations at Gamla Uppsala, first undertaken by archaeologist Bror Emil Hildebrand in 1846, were the culmination of nearly nine centuries of historical interest in the site. The first account, penned by Adam of Bremen in his *Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum* from AD 1070, described a place identified as *Ubsola*, where both humans and animals were sacrificed to the gods. During the nineteenth century, a renewed concern in issues of patriotism and nationalism prompted the Swedish royal family to stage a series of elaborate festivities on the mounds, including cannon fire, singing, and the consumption of mead from drinking horns by the king and crown prince.93 Books and pamphlets from this period also rekindled an awareness of early Scandinavian history, encouraging Swedes to connect with their ancient past and visit various locations in the Uppland province.

Every honest, enlightened Swede … in order to enhance his knowledge and refresh his soul with the recollection of heroic deeds visiting Scandinavia and the land of its heroes – yea, even the tourist, traveling for pleasure, will not fail to take the train or steamboat from Stockholm on a fine Scandinavian summer’s day of blue sky and fluffy cumulus, bound for Uppsala. No deep-thinking, inquiring Swede with a love for the bygone memories and ancient exploits of his native land will readily neglect to visit Old Uppsala, the most ancient temple city in Sweden, the resident of pagan kings and the See of Catholic Archbishops.94

The mounds at Gamla Uppsala yielded very little in terms of archaeological discoveries. Within the most easterly mound, Hildebrand “found a cairn 2.5 meters high built over a funeral pile. The grave itself, however, was disappointing: a simple urn containing the remains of cremated human and animal bones along with a number of fragmented objects. These objects included the remnants of gold filigree, glass, gaming

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93 Alkemade, 272.
pieces, and bronze and silver Pressblech fragments which many consider to be the remains of a helmet.”95 Work on the most westerly mound began in 1874, nearly three decades later and once again Hildebrand uncovered a cremation beneath a stone cairn, littered with fragments of gold foil, whetstones, bone combs, cameos, a golden braid and cloisonné-work. Owing to the lack of weaponry and abundance of items typically associated with females situated within the graves, Hildebrand concluded that the mounds had been raised for women of high social status, although “the idea that peace-loving priest-kings were interred there also continued to be in vogue.”96

Knut Stjerna, an early proponent of utilizing literary texts to illuminate various archaeological sites, “connected the emergence of the Svear state and the burial mounds at Gamla Uppsala directly with the destruction of the Geatish kingdom using the heroic epic of Beowulf.”97 Not only did he determine that the age of the objects found at Gamla Uppsala coincided with the supposed time-frame of the Beowulf poem, but that there was a considerable similarity between the construction of the burial sites and those described in the literary work.98

Expounding on Stjerna’s work a few years later, Birger Nerman utilized other written sources, such as Sturluson’s Ynglinga Saga, to ascribe the mounds at Gamla Uppsala to individual kings, particularly Aun, Egil and Aðils, Svea monarchs of the fifth and sixth centuries.99 Owing in part to Nerman’s hypothesis of a Yngling lineage at Gamla Uppsala, work began in 1914 by Bernhard Salin (who was later replaced by Sune

95 Alkemade, 274.
96 Ibid., 274-275.
97 Ibid., 275
Lindqvist) on a mound at Husby in Vendel, traditionally identified as Ottarshögen.

According to Sturluson, Egil had a son named Ottar who was torn asunder by ravens\textsuperscript{100} and in \textit{Beowulf}, a young warrior named Eadgils (Aôils) ascends to the throne of Sweden after the death of his father, Othere (Ottar) at the hands of the Geats.\textsuperscript{101}

In 1882, during work in the churchyard of Vendel parish, a boat grave was uncovered. Under the direction of Hjalmar Stope and Ture Arne, a total of fourteen burial chambers were subsequently uncovered between 1882 and 1893, and labeled in order of discovery, Vendel I-XIV. “The dead were inhumed in boats about 10 meters long with grave goods consisting of a warrior outfit (spatha, helmet, sax, shield, spear), glass vessels, drinking horns, gaming-pieces, tools, cauldrons, roasting spits, spoons, and food.”\textsuperscript{102} The boat-grave cemetery at Valsgärde, less than three kilometers from Gamla Uppsala, which had been excavated throughout the 1920s and contained fourteen graves as well (Valsgärde 1-14, although only Valsgärde 5, 6, 7 and 8 are from the Vendel period), exhibited roughly the same sort of objects, in quantity as well as richness, although “the weapons and various types of domestic objects were in some way incomplete or totally useless when they were deposited in the graves, and that certain objects were badly worn or repaired in antiquity.”\textsuperscript{103}

The objects found in Vendel period boat-graves can be categorized either into Style II, the Early Vendel Style from c. AD 600-700 and Style III, identified as the Late Vendel Style from c. AD 700-800, though a few pieces clearly exhibit features of Style I, the Migration style from c. AD 450-600. Sune Lindqvist attempted to demonstrate that

\textsuperscript{101} Heaney, 167-168.
\textsuperscript{102} Alkemade, 275.
\textsuperscript{103} Arwidsson, 72.
Style II descended from late Roman art and was contemporary with later aspects of Style I,\textsuperscript{104} while Nils Åberg was the principal supporter of the premise that Style II had originated in Lombard, Italy under the influence of Byzantine art.\textsuperscript{105}

The objects unearthed at the Vendel and Valsgärde burial sites are characterized by a highly acute sense of animal decoration. Bestial images often appear on a wide-ranging variety of items, namely weaponry and may be either abstractly stylized or presented in a more literal fashion depending on the century. The helmets found both at Vendel and Valsgärde, which have long been named Vendel helmets as a type, epitomize the Late Vendel Style in decoration, where humans and animals are clearly delineated and appear virtually natural in both form and fluidity. The helmets themselves are comprised of slightly differing physical characteristics, but for the most part consist of a brow band, a nose-to-nape band and other lateral bands that constitute the remainder of the framework.\textsuperscript{106} Other variations include a low cap with shallow concavities, which form part of the eyeholes (also known as an ocular), and a prominent crest with a medium spine embellished by animal heads on each side (figs. 14 & 15).\textsuperscript{107}

In general, the Vendel helmets are thought to have drawn directly on Roman prototypes (fig. 16). The helmet plate ornamentations from Vendel and Valsgärde are typically stylized in character with details that suggest their design had been acquired from the late Roman Iron Age. There are details on the Vendel helmets that are also found on late Roman crested helmets, the termination of the crest with an animal’s head, 


\textsuperscript{106} These areas would have been covered with copper foil ornamentation held in place with strips, which were in turn held in place with copper alloy rivets.

\textsuperscript{107} Dominic Tweddle, \textit{The Anglian Helmet from Coppergate} (York: York Archaeological Trust, 1992), 21.
and the pictorial motif of warriors holding weaponry in their right hand. The Vendel artisans clearly improvised upon this theme, depicting warriors in full battle regalia with spears positioned in their hands. They appear alongside a range of zoomorphic beings, most predominantly eagles, boars and wolves, though in many instances, these animals adorned the headdresses of the figures, as evidenced on plates from Valsgärde 7 and 8. “The eagle, boar and wolf often formed a distinct ‘trinity’ of motifs, which must have had some symbolic significance. All three appear in different forms in the Edda. The eagle is most likely a symbol for Odin who, according to the Edda, sometimes evaded his pursuers by assuming the guise of an eagle.”

These motifs also exist on a set of four bronze die plates found at Torslunda on the island of Öland off the southeastern coast of Sweden and commonly referred to as the Torslunda plates (fig. 17). The plates are designated as follows:

A. A dancing man with a spear and a man with a spear wearing a wolf mask.
B. Two walking warriors with boar headdresses carrying spears.
C. A man with an axe holding a roped animal.
D. A man between two bears.

According to many archaeologists, the impressed bronze sheets struck from these dies were designed to be mounted on helmets. In particular, dies of this size, shape and character appear to have been employed exclusively in the manufacture of helmets. Regardless of the location of their discovery in proximity to helmets found in the Uppland province, the Torslunda plates retain their importance thematically rather than

108 Ibid., 77.
geographically, especially in their depiction of a man between two bears. “This scene is not an isolated thing but one in a long series of similar representations in the Vendel art of Sweden and is unlikely to have been so completely assimilated into the art cycle to which it belongs as a solitary disconnected element from an outside source.”

Another plate from Torslunda, that of a man with an axe taking the chain off the neck of a bear, is nearly identical to a scene on the oldest Vendel-helmet, with the same type of figures in the same positions. “On the helmet in grave No. 14 are compartments, on which are figured two armed warriors in Indian file, and we find the same combination on [another] of the Torslunda plates (figs. 18 & 19). These cannot have been mere chance coincidences.”

The Vendel helmets also existed, according to Stjerna, as pictorial forms of the Beowulf saga. Stjerna was particularly interested in the helmet uncovered at Vendel I, a helmet from which he stated “we know the like of Grendel and his mother, whom Beowulf overcame,” implying that the monstrous shape adorning the piece could very well be a characterization of Grendel. He also perceived another episode from Beowulf on several of the bronze plates. One plate, depicted in repetition around the circumference of the helmet, shows a warrior on horseback adorned with helmet and shield, presumably Beowulf, a serpent poised for attack at the bottom left corner of the panel, directly in front of the horse’s feet (figs. 20, 21 & 22).

On the helmet in grave No. 1 the rectangular plates round the helmets contain two repeated pictures. One exhibits an armoured chieftain riding, his horse being led by a

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110 Ibid., 54. Representations of a man situated between two beasts have been found throughout the Vendel period in Europe, from the Reinstrup brooch in Denmark to a Frankish openwork mount from Amiens.


112 Ibid., 39.
man. The latter is figured on a smaller scale than the horse and rider, evidently in order to show his lower rank – a feature which constantly appears in primitive art. Behind the rider’s head two birds are flying. Possibly there may have been birds in front of the head also. The other picture represents a rider dressed in the same way, and also with two birds, but aiming at a serpent with his lance.113

In these instances, the serpent represents the dragon who clashes with Beowulf in the final fight of his life, although this dragon has often been associated with a \textit{wyrm}, a solitary creature found often in European folklore, whose appearance was actually most more snake-like than that of a dragon. During the course of the fight, Beowulf rushes out on horseback to face the dragon alone (since the rest of his men remained too afraid to assist their king), and when he suffers a setback, Wiglaf, a Scylding nobleman, goes to his aid, presumably on foot.

Next thing, they say, the noble son of Weohstan saw the king in danger at his side and displayed his inborn bravery and strength. He left the head alone, but his fighting hand was burned when he came to his kinsman’s aid.114

This episode from \textit{Beowulf} depicted on a Vendel helmet further solidifies the circular connection of Vendel and Sutton Hoo by way of the poem, especially where ancestry is concerned. The sword, which Wiglaf uses to help Beowulf slay the dragon, was given to him by his father Weohstan, a champion of Onela, which he in turn procured from Eanmund, brother of Aðils, after Weohstan murdered him. This episode from \textit{Beowulf} also retains its importance on the Vendel helmet, most particularly to the piece’s owner, because it gives predominance, both figuratively and literally, to the whole of the Scylding clan, a family of which the owner most likely would have been a member. Wiglaf, a distant element of the Scyldings, is literally depicted as Beowulf’s

\footnotesize{113} Ibid., 43-44.
\footnotesize{114} Heaney, 180-183.
defender, while the sword itself acts as the figurative aspect of this scene, taken as it was from a more prominent personage in the immediate Scylding royalty, one of Ottar’s sons.

Among the other objects of interest in the Vendel and Valsgärde graves are the elaborately embellished swords and shield bosses, evidence of a burial site reserved for either royalty or the upper stratum of society. The swords (of which the most significant is found at Vendel I), worked in gold or gilt-bronze on the pommel and fitted with meticulously pattern-welded blades (small bundles of iron forged together), also held a ring on the grip. These rings, coined sword-rings or ring-swords, were thought to have magical functions and were the objects on which warriors swore their oaths in battle. The presence of beadwork on the hilts of many swords, created predominantly with gold and garnet inlays, suggests either a decorative purpose or like the rings, a talisman of some sort.

In Hjälmar och svärd i Beowulf, Stjerna determined that the expression in strophe 9 of Helgakviða Hjorvarþssonar [from the Poetic Edda] hringr er i hialti [there is praise in the hilt] referred to ring-swords of the sixth and seventh centuries. Stjerna also concluded that the ring in the hilt was not intended for any practical purpose, but was instead placed there as a symbol of the rank of chieftain. This is in fact, indicated by Beowulf, where the Danes’ dynastic figurehead Scyld was identified as the great ring-giver.

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117 Hringr in this sense refers to an abstract concept, that of either a symbolic relationship or an emotion of goodness or heroism, which would be pertinent to a ring on which oaths were sworn.
The shield-bosses from Vendel XI and Vendel XII respectively, encompass the most spectacular examples of that particular object type. Domed in the center and inlaid with gold and garnet cloisonné, these bosses were constructed in two parts, the top welded to a flanged base, while the piece in its entirety was secured to the center of the shield by five or more rivets. Apart from the rich metalwork, the Vendel bosses are ornamented with zoomorphic patterns, a surging animal progression of eagles and dragons that encircles the entire circumference of the mounts. These bosses, as well as the sword-rings, will also be discussed in greater detail in a comparative analysis with the same objects excavated at the Sutton Hoo ship burial.

Sutton Hoo

Work resumed at Sutton Hoo in early 1940, but not that of the archaeological sort. Fearing German invasion, by air as well as by land or sea, “draglines were soon busy creating a grid of deep ditches all over the flat heath of Sutton Walks, to inhibit the landing of enemy gliders. These ditches came right up to the Sutton Hoo burial mounds, where they can still be seen: long slots, with humps of soil at regular intervals on each side, all now grassed over.”119 These maneuvers soon came to an end, along with the estate’s requisition as a training ground for infantry target practice by 1942 when Edith Pretty had died and the Sutton Hoo House was sold. “In fulfillment of Edith Pretty’s request, the finds from the ship-burial [were bequeathed] to the British Museum; they spent the war in a disused arm of the London Underground where they sough protection, like so many London citizens, from the bombs of the Third Reich.”120

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119 Carver, 25.
120 Ibid., 26.
The colossal undertaking of the inventory, reconstruction and publication of the thousands upon thousands of objects unearthed at Sutton Hoo, was not given to Basil Brown, Charles Phillips or even W.F. Grimes, but was instead bestowed upon an assistant keeper at the British Museum’s Department of British and Medieval Antiquities, Rupert Bruce-Mitford, who was confirmed while still in uniform at an army camp in 1940, and who would later make the East Anglian ship-burial his life’s work. ‘You will also be responsible for Sutton Hoo, wrote T.D. Kendrick, Bruce-Mitford’s immediate supervisor at the British Museum; ‘Brace yourself for this task.’\(^\text{121}\) He as well as his team members “had to work out the attributes of a unique assemblage, rapidly retrieved and sparsely recorded … bring order to material in widely different states of preservation [and] interpret an extraordinary range of artifacts some of which had a shape or structure never seen before.”\(^\text{122}\)

**The Objects**

Excerpts from the diaries of various excavation party members provide a highly intimate context in which to view the discovery of the objects. Written during the summer of 1939, after he had been joined by the Piggotts, Grimes and Crawford (friends and colleagues who had been called in to assist in the original excavation), Charles Phillip’s writings are exact and scientific in their description, but with a subtle sense of urgency that denote the excitement and anticipation that infused every member of the team. His earliest major entry concerns the discovery of the shield and shield boss.

Friday July 28, 1939. The day was devoted to the complete clearance of the western end of the burial deposit. A large shield boss (IV.8) was revealed by brushing the western edge of the burial deposit. A long strip of wood edged with gold leaf,

\(^{121}\) Ibid., 26-27.
\(^{122}\) Ibid., 27.
with gold leaf panels of interlace decoration and the wood itself paneled out into impressed rectangles partly overlay the boss on the western side and extended further to the north and south (IV.6). It was of generally similar character to the aforementioned strip, but was probably not part of the same object … There were four bronze zoomorphic mountings with gilt hemispherical bosses and facings near the shield-boss. It consisted of a central spine with zoomorphic head and side volutes at the base of which was a circular gold-leaf covered boss of similar type.123

W.F. Grimes also kept a diary at the same time as Phillips, yet his entries are much more concerned with the pieces themselves, rather than their location and placement within the burial chamber. He describes the cleaning and salvaging of the shield.

The greater part of 28 July was devoted to what was perhaps the most intricate piece of cleaning, that of the remains of the shield. The central feature was the massive boss, which was solid and unlikely to cause trouble. But radiating irregularly from it were several richly decorated bronze mounts. Some of almost paper thinness, some face upwards, some reversed, all at angles and presenting a picture of completed confusion.124

One of the most remarkable finds unearthed at the site was the remains of the chieftain’s helmet, which was discovered over the course of several days, beginning on the same day as the excavation of the shield and in close proximity to it as well. Phillips writes,

Friday July 28 1939. The crushed remains of an iron helmet were found four east of the shield boss on the north side of the central deposit. The remains consisted of many fragments of iron covered with embossed ornament of an interlace type with which were also associated gold leaf, textiles, an anthropomorphic face-piece consisting of a nose, mouth, and moustache cast as a whole (bronze), and bronze zoomorphic mountings and enrichments.
Saturday July 29. A few more fragments of the iron helmet came to light and were boxed with the rest found the day before.
Tuesday August 1. The day was spent clearing out the excavated stern part of the ship and preparing it for study. Before this a final glean and sift in the burial area had

124 Ibid., 11.
produced a few fragments which are probably to be associated with the helmet and the chain mail respectively.\textsuperscript{125}

Both pieces were immediately noted to possess unique Scandinavian characteristics and exhibited many parallels to those of the Vendel Age. Many members of the excavation team wondered if the pieces had in fact been manufactured somewhere in Sweden. The remaining pages of this archaeological section will investigate this long-held question of provenance of these items, the helmet and the shield, with its associated parts, the shield-boss and the sword-ring.

\textit{The Helmet}

Like many of the helmets excavated at the Vendel and Valsgärde cemeteries, the Sutton Hoo helmet was discovered littering a section of the burial chamber in many small, disjointed pieces.

The remains of the helmet as uncovered in the burial deposit consisted of a great many fragments of corroded iron, among which there stood out some better preserved and immediately recognisable elements in cast bronze: a modelled nose and mouth with ‘toothbrush’ moustache, gilt-bronze animal heads and a pair of eyebrows. The iron of the helmet had completely oxidised before the final collapse of the burial chamber, or before some object or element in the chamber fell on it; as a result the helmet shattered, and clean fractures have made possible its restoration to shape. Had the helmet been crushed while the metal was pliant, as might have happened if the chamber had fallen sooner, it would not have been possible to examine the remains with the same freedom, or to restore its shape perfectly.\textsuperscript{126}

Herbert Maryon first undertook the helmet’s reconstruction in 1947 and a detailed account of this undertaking was published soon after. However, this restoration was never found to be wholly suitable, especially to Bruce-Mitford “who decided the evidence for the reconstruction should be re-examined”\textsuperscript{127} and the piece was dismantled in 1970 and

\textsuperscript{125} Ibid., 138.
\textsuperscript{126} Ibid., 138.
rebuilt by Nigel Williams, at that time the Conservation Officer in the Department of Medieval and Later Antiquities at the British Museum (fig. 23).\textsuperscript{128}

The new reconstruction followed rigorous principles, using only joins that could be demonstrated, and omitting altogether the fragments whose position was equivocal. The basic structure was of iron, but decorative panels of bronze were secured to sites on the facemask and cheek-pieces by riveted bronze strips. The bronze was tinned and would have had a silvery appearance, imitated in the replica that was made by the Tower Armouries.\textsuperscript{129}

According to Bruce-Mitford, who oversaw the helmet’s restoration, “the resultant reconstruction [was] based exclusively on the information provided by the surviving fragments, guided by archaeological knowledge of other helmets, particularly those from the East Scandinavian milieu to which the Sutton Hoo helmet belong.”\textsuperscript{130}

The helmet itself consisted of a cap, which at the level of the brim, was affixed with cheek-pieces, a face-mask and neck guard, most likely fitted inside with a leather lining as was customary with late Roman helmets. “Nothing of this lining survives but its presence is inferred from the peculiar color and configuration of the iron corrosion inside the cap.”\textsuperscript{131} The outer portion of the cap would have originally been covered with sheets of bronze, parts of which survived besides the iron pieces of the helmet itself. “These bronze sheets had carried decorative and symbolic subjects stamped into them by dies. There were two distinct dies of interlacing animal patterns, one larger in scale and of rectangular shape measuring 5 x 5.3 centimeters, the other smaller in scale and long and

\textsuperscript{128} A modern version of this rebuilt helmet was then created by the Royal Armouries in the Tower of London, using associated cast bronze parts and electrolyte versions of the decorative stamped bronze sheets which covered the surface of the piece.
\textsuperscript{129} Carver, 29.
\textsuperscript{130} Rupert Bruce-Mitford, \textit{The Sutton Hoo ship burial} (vol.2) (London: British Museum Publications, 1978), 140.
\textsuperscript{131} Ibid., 146.
narrow in form. There were also two dies with figural scenes.”132 Bruce-Mitford identified the four designs as follows (figs. 24 & 25):

1. Figural scene: dancing warriors.
2. Figural scene: rider and faller warrior.
3. Large interlace.
4. Small interlace.

The exterior differences between the Sutton Hoo helmet and its contemporary Swedish counterparts are at once apparent. The Sutton Hoo example is silver-gilt and of a richer quality overall, while those from Vendel and Valsgärde appear dull and burnished. The dome of the Sutton Hoo helmet seems to have been constructed in a single vaulted shell, while the Swedish pieces seem closer in structure to a *spangenhelm*, a common European combat helmet design of the Middle Ages.133 “A feature of the Sutton Hoo helmet possessed by no other Vendel helmet type yet discovered is the solid neck-guard,”134 although this conjecture is in fact repudiated by pictorial representations, namely those on the Torslunda plates, which portray warriors in single file with neck coverings extending downwards from the bottom of their helmets, and the discovery of a helmet at Vendel X, which may have very well had a neck-guard “as a hinge seems to have belonged to it.”135 The majority of surviving helmets from Vendel and Valsgärde are thought to have had neckline protection in the form of mail curtains, which were

133 *Spangen* refers to the metal strips that form the framework for the helmet. The frame of the helmet was usually a conical design that curved with the shape of the head and culminated in a pointed apex. The front of the helmet usually included a nasal and oculars. Many *spangenhelms* are also known to have incorporated chain mail for neck protection.
135 Ibid., 212.
attached directly to the brim and oculars and cascaded down to the shoulders. This theory is, again, supported by a reference from *Beowulf* about the title character’s own helmet, befoðn frēa-wrāsnunum (encircled with lordly chains)\textsuperscript{136} that clearly “indicates the use of mail in Scandinavian aristocratic warrior circles at this period.”\textsuperscript{137}

The difference between the Sutton Hoo helmet and those from Vendel and Valsgärde could be invariably due to a distinction in status between the various burial sites. The graves at Vendel and Valsgärde were created no doubt for the upper stratum of society, but the Sutton Hoo helmet “is uniquely from a royal burial”\textsuperscript{138} and in fact has nearly identical characteristics from a solitary helmet fragment unearthed at Gamla Uppsala (figs. 26 & 27).

A fragment of stamped foil from the great cremation in the East Mound at Gamla Uppsala [is] so close in every respect to the corresponding warrior on the Sutton Hoo helmet as to appear at first glance to be from the same die. The close similarity of the East Mound scene in scale and detail to [the] Sutton Hoo design may indicate that it too is from a helmet. The die, though not identical with the one used at Sutton Hoo, was certainly cut by the same man.\textsuperscript{139}

A die, bearing a scene of twin dancing warriors, was utilized four times on the Sutton Hoo Helmet, once on each of the two cheek-guards, at the front directly above both eyebrows, and twice on the cap. The iconographic similarity between this scene at Sutton Hoo and another on a helmet unearthed at Valsgärde 7 is striking, perhaps even relegating the burial site to a substantially regal status like Gamla Uppsala (fig. 28).

The elements common to the two warriors (headdress with horns, arms and wrists, tops of spears) are identical but reversed and this indicates the reconstruction. The only major iconographic difference (as distinct from differences in style and drawing) between the Sutton Hoo scene and that on the Valsgärde 7 helmet, used in arriving at

\textsuperscript{136} Heaney, 100-101.
\textsuperscript{138} Ibid., 214.
\textsuperscript{139} Ibid., 208.
[the] reconstruction, is the presence on the Sutton Hoo scene of the loose crossed spears (i.e. not held), seen below the elbows of the two men and between their legs. This detail, which does not occur on the Valsgärde 7 helmet, suggest that they are performing a spear dance, the crossed spears being conceived as lying on the ground.\(^{140}\)

Each warrior in the Sutton Hoo scene is wearing a rather unusual headdress with pointed flaps over each ear, a central rectangular shape over the eyes, and a “pair of broad upward-sweeping horns which curve inwards at the top and end in inward-pointing birds’ heads.”\(^{141}\) The birds’ beaks touch, much as they do on the headdress of the walking warrior on one of the Torslunda plates, although on that die the animal in question is generally characterized as a boar and not a bird. Regardless, the general iconographic resemblance between the two headdresses is apparent.

The rider and fallen warrior scenes from the Sutton Hoo helmet (fig. 29) also appear on the Valsgärde 7 piece, albeit with slightly differing and additional elements (fig. 30). The dies are reversed, so that on both sides of the helmet the riders are moving to the front, a sophistication that does not occur on the Sutton Hoo helmet, where the riders are simply moving in one continuous procession around the piece’s circumference.

The Valsgärde 7 helmet is also linked to the whole of the Sutton Burial in an interestingly circular fashion, in that a version of the man-between-bears scene on the helmet (fig. 31), most likely taken from the same scene on Die D of the Torslunda plates (fig. 32), may be related iconographically to the man-between-wolves scene (fig. 33) on the Sutton Hoo purse-lid (fig. 34). “The Valsgärde 7 and Sutton Hoo Helmets between them serve to emphasize the East Scandinavian context against which the scenes on the Sutton Hoo purse must be in the first instance be considered, and the wealth of the East

\(^{140}\) Ibid., 188.
\(^{141}\) Ibid., 189.
Scandinavian indigenous repertoire of representational scenes.\textsuperscript{142}

The Sutton Hoo helmet also possessed a crest or comb inlaid with silver wires, while those from Vendel and Valsgärde were only imitated in cast bronze. “Chemical analysis has reinforced the visual evidence that there is no trace of solder on either crest or cap so the crest must have been forged on. This implies that the silver wire inlays, which would have melted or become discoloured with the heat, were not put in until after the crest was in position.”\textsuperscript{143} This in stark contrast to nearly the entire stock of Vendel period helmets from Sweden, which were in all probability pieced together from older and previously used headdresses (usually ruined in battle), or any other suitable bits of scrap that the metal smith could utilize.\textsuperscript{144} Owing to its unique construction, vis-à-vis the attachment of the crest to the cap, it seems apparent that the Sutton Hoo helmet, unlike those from Vendel and Valsgärde, was designed and made specifically for its owner.

The Sutton Hoo crest itself consists of an iron tube, D-shaped in cross-section, which runs the entire length of the cap and attains a height of \( \frac{3}{4} \) inch at its middle point on the top of the helmet. This sturdy construction would have enabled the wearer to take a blow of the sword across the crest and avoid its falling parallel and splitting the cap.\textsuperscript{145} Helmets devoid of a crest such as the example unearthed at Vendel XIV (fig. 18), must have instead served a ceremonial role, as the ridge-less cap would have been easily cleaved in half during battle. This functional purpose for the crest, protecting the wearer from certain death, gives credence to the word \textit{walu} in the \textit{Beowulf} poem.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[142] Ibid., 220.
\item[143] Ibid., 158-159.
\end{footnotes}
An embossed ridge, a band lapped with wire
arched over the helmet: head-protection
to keep the keen-ground cutting edge
from damaging it when danger threatened
and the man was battling behind his shield.146

Stjerna determined the relevance of the word *walu* from *Beowulf* when he
examined helmet crests from Vendel, which in all ways besides material, are nearly
identical to the one adorning the top of the Sutton Hoo find.

The protective framework for the head (*hēafod-beorge*) issued from the comb of the
helmet on both sides, consisting for the most part of a lattice of iron ribs, riveted
together (*wīrum bewunden*), which evidently enclosed an inner and softer head-covering. The form of the helmet and its comb shows clearly what a graphic and
correct expression ‘around the crown’ (*hrōf*) of the helmet was in reference to
*walu*.147

The Sutton Hoo helmet does possess one exceedingly significant difference from
its Swedish counterparts; it was evident early on that the helmet did not carry a boar on
its crest as is found on many similar Vendel pieces. Instead, the bronze eyebrows, which
were inlaid with silver wires and set with a line of square garnets, terminated in gilded
boars’ heads (fig. 35). Lines from *Beowulf* elucidate the prominence of this bestial
feature.

Boar-shapes flashed
above their cheek-guards, the brightly forged
work of goldsmiths, watching over
those stern-faced men.148

The presence of a boar, even placed in a marginal position on the Sutton Hoo
helmet, indicates a Scandinavian connection, if not a direct Swedish provenance. “In
Scandinavian mythology, the boar was sacred to the fertility god Freyr, who was

146 Heaney, 68-69.
147 Knut Stjerna, *Essays on questions connected with the Old English poem of Beowulf*, trans. and
148 Heaney, 22-23.
considered the ancestor of the Swedish royal house, and the boar was used iconographically to represent both Freyr and Sweden.\textsuperscript{149} After Aðils’ battle against his uncle Áli, and the subsequent assistance offered by Hrólf Kraki and his berserker Böðvar Bjarki, described in the Literature section of this paper, Hrólf demanded his payment, three treasures from Sweden of his own choosing. Sturluson writes of this episode,

Then Hrólf Kraki’s berserkers asked that each of them should be paid three pounds of gold for their services. Furthermore, they asked to take back to Hrólf Kraki the treasures they would choose for him: the helmet Hildigölt and the mail shirt Finnsleif, which weapons could not pierce, and the gold ring called Sviagriss, which had been in the possession of Aðils’ ancient ancestors. But the king refused to give up any of these treasures.\textsuperscript{150}

King Aðils’ unwillingness to part with these objects, the helmet Hildigölt [Battle Boar] and Sviagriss [Swedes’ Pig], demonstrates both their reverence and importance within the Svea kingdom, most notably due to the animal which adorns the helmet’s surface and for which the gold ring is named. The boar was considered to be the feral embodiment of the Scylfing dynasty, and all instances where this animal appears indelibly links the object to the Uppland province. Why include among the personal effects of the burial of an East Anglian king a helmet decorated with a symbol of a particular Swedish dynasty if he himself were not a member of that same ancestral house?

However, in England, boar helmets are not particular to the Sutton Hoo burial site alone. The most noteworthy specimen, known as the Benty Grange helmet, was unearthed in Derbyshire in 1848 by Thomas Bateman. The object was located in a barrow, intermingled with a variety of personal ornaments, a leathern cup, four enameled

\textsuperscript{149} The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki, trans. Jesse L. Byock (New York: Penguin, 1998), 85
ornaments and two thin silver crosses.

The [helmet] consists of a skeleton former of iron bands, radiating from the crown of the head, and riveted to a circle of the same metal which encompassed the brow. On the crown of the helmet is an elliptical bronze plate supporting the figure of an animal carved in iron, with bronze eyes, now much corroded, but perfectly distinct as there presentation of a hog. The animal generally represented was the boar and it is to this custom that reference is made in Beowulf where the poet speaks of the boar of gold, the boar hard as iron.\textsuperscript{151}

It is this feature, the boar, that brought the Benty Grange helmet to pre-eminence, since it existed (at least until 1997) as the only headdress to be discovered with a free standing boar-figure as a crest; “the boar crest is, however, much smaller and lest dominant than those depicted in Vendel art.”\textsuperscript{152} This may be due to the assumption that the boar is not an original feature of the helmet; instead “it is an appendage rather than structurally integrated with the design.”\textsuperscript{153} The specific positioning of the boar atop the Benty Grange helmet appears rather similar to one of the Torslunda plates, specifically in Die B where the animal was placed slightly to the front of the headdress and would have appeared with its head bent downwards. Corresponding rivet traces on the helmet’s frame attest to this belief.\textsuperscript{154} The boar associated with Freyr in Scandinavian mythology, (fig. 36) Gullinborsti or golden-bristled “may have had a bearing on the design of the Benty Grange boar, especially since the exposed surfaces of the silver studs were gilded. With the studs embedded, an effect of gold spots would be given but the intention could well have been to suggest golden bristles.”\textsuperscript{155}

\textsuperscript{151} Bateman, Ten years’ digging in Celtic and Saxon grave hills, in the counties of Derby, Stafford, and York, from 1848 to 1858, with notices of some former discoveries, hitherto unpublished, and remarks on the crania and pottery from the mounds (London: J.R. Smith, 1861), 30-33.
\textsuperscript{154} Rupert Bruce-Mitford, Aspects of Anglo-Saxon Archaeology: Sutton Hoo and Other Discoveries, 242.
\textsuperscript{155} Ibid., 238.
Much like the Sutton Hoo helmet, which many archaeologists state has an apparent Swedish provenance, the Benty Grange example is clearly a product of Germanic workmanship. The intricately crafted gold and garnet eyes of the piece’s boar, as well as the beaded gold wire collars encircling the garnets are considered to be a foreign goldsmith’s work. However, the Benty Grange helmet is devoid of scenes stamped into the plates encompassing the piece’s frame as there are on the Sutton Hoo example. Another boar-crested helmet unearthed in Northamptonshire, England, in 1997 and from approximately the early seventh-century is also devoid of decorative panels on the frame (fig. 37). Furthermore, the boar on this example is even less dominant and much more highly stylized; the shape of the animal is crude at best and there is no gilt or silver ornament covering its surface to suggest fur or golden bristles as there is on the Benty Grange piece. These two helmets have no connection to either Sutton Hoo or the Uppland province, and because they are nearly a century older than those previously mentioned, they most likely exist in a historical milieu where the boar had lost its specific connection to the Scylding dynasty and became merely a symbol of fertility as well as a protective talisman during war.

*The Shield, Shield-Boss and Sword-Ring*

The shield unearthed at Sutton Hoo is considered to be “an entirely exotic piece in the Anglo-Saxon milieu”¹⁵⁶ and for this reason was the subject of intense reconstruction and examination. It was discovered in many fragments close to the western end wall of the chamber with several accoutrements lying beneath it, a large boss, several strips of wood edged with gold leaf and four zoomorphic mountings with golden facings. Very

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 92.
little of the shield-board remained in solid form, but it was soon determined that the piece had been circular in shape, approximately 91.5 centimeters in diameter and constructed with a slight curvature across its midsection towards the rim. This curvature was established by the presence of grip extensions in the form of solid bronze dragonheads on the back of the shield, animal forms that demonstrated a definite arc in the casting.\footnote{The size of the Sutton Hoo shield and its corresponding grip extension is relatively smaller than those found at Vendel and Valsgärde, though what this comparison may imply is still unknown.} The shield-board was covered front and back with leather, as was customary, and mounted directly upon this were a cluster of zoomorphic shapes, two of which were identified as a winged dragon and the head and leg of a bird (fig. 38).

These animal forms, both on the mountings and the grip extensions (fig. 39) show a definite correlation to representations from the Upland province, particularly on the handle for a shield uncovered at Valsgärde 7 (fig. 40). The grip illustrates an unambiguous trinity of mammalian forms, the eagle, boar and wolf, staple characters of Scandinavian mythology, as does the Sutton Hoo shield handle, although there are only two and they each point in opposite directions. Nonetheless, the resemblance of the figures on each analogous grip is unmistakable.

Swedish counterparts to the winged dragon and bird can be found on shields from Vendel I and again on Valsgärde 7. The design of the bird leg from the Sutton Hoo shield, specifically the point where the leg is attached to the body, imbues the piece as a whole with a distinct Scandinavian character.

The use of the pear shape of the hip to enclose a human face with pointed chin is a familiar theme in Vendel art. On the Sutton Hoo shield the theme occurs in the interlace animal ornament of the bird’s wing. The cloisonné panel on the bird’s hip show a point of difference: it is not merely a face, but one within a border, ‘stopped’
below the chin by a semicircular opaque yellow inlay.\textsuperscript{158}

These ‘human faces with pointed chins’ occur on the shield several times, in numerous different locations on the bird itself, the stylized representation of its head, once more on the hip of its leg, and again on the grip extensions, dragons’ heads that simultaneously appear anthropomorphic as well as zoomorphic.

The bird head and leg in both construction and general design (fig. 41) is also nearly identical to a Vendel period brooch unearthed at Skälby, Hammarby, nearly thirteen kilometers southeast of Gamla Uppsala and Valsgärde (fig. 42). Both pieces demonstrate the same use of delicately applied gold foil and garnet, the same punched circle decoration around the bird’s perimeter. Another comparable piece was found at Vallstenarum in Gotland, far removed from the Uppland province context, a bird worked in metal with a punched circle outline and similarly curved feet and head. The remainder of the animal’s body is not nearly as complex as in the aforementioned instances, with a noticeable paucity of interlace patterns on the torso and wings. This particular Gotland example was not intended to be a brooch, but also most likely came from the face of a shield.

The prominent placement of the bird upon the shield indicated it was most likely utilized as a heraldic device, one meant to be a distinguishing badge for the man commemorated at Sutton Hoo.\textsuperscript{159} Taking into consideration the stylistic similarities noted thus far between the Sutton Hoo shield and those unearthed in Uppland, one could very well perceive the bird figure as a Vendel raven, thereby further securing the shield in a Swedish, and more specifically, Scylfing context.

\textsuperscript{159} Maryon, 26.
The elaborate boss, located in the center of the Sutton Hoo shield also possesses uniquely Swedish characteristics (fig. 43). Constructed of iron and sumptuously decorated with meticulous interlace, the piece is nearly identical in size, shape and design to the shield-boss from Vendel XII (fig. 44). Each mount consists of a flat base with a domed center that has an internal depth of approximately eight centimeters. This dome is then crowned with “a thick solid central cylindrical stem surmounted by a flat circular disc.” The disc on the Sutton Hoo boss has a rather flat and rough design worked into it, while that on the Vendel boss appears to possess depth and dimensionality.

The sides of the dome, also known as the boss’s collar, are impressed with a gilt interweave that recalls the die on a shield from Valsgärde 7. “The flange [on the Sutton Hoo boss] is broad and carries five equally spaced gilt-bronze hemispherical rivet-heads, each surrounded by a raised collar.” Between the rivet-heads are sheets of stamped bronze foil, immensely gilded and in the case of the Sutton Hoo piece, bearing the design of two pairs of interlinked horses. The Vendel example seems to possess a similar equine interlace.

This appearance of an equestrian theme on the Sutton Hoo shield-boss indicates a Scandinavian connection, if not, much like the Sutton Hoo helmet, a direct Swedish provenance. The Scylfings were known to be expert horsemen, particularly Aðils, who was in possession of two of the most infamous steeds in Norse folklore, Slöngvir and Hrafn, the latter whom he procured from his uncle, Onela, after killing him. Aðils’ prowess as a horseman secured him a place in a þula or register of illustrious medieval

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161 Ibid., 49.
162 Even today, horses, horse training and horse farms are an integral part of economic life in many parts of the Uppland province, especially in the Vendel parish stretching eastward from Husby to Örbyhus.
leaders and their horses, also known as the Kálfsvisa, a poem partially preserved in Sturluson’s Skáldskaparmál.

Björn rode Blakkr,  
and Bjárr rode Kertr  
Atli rode Glaumr  
and Aðils on Slöngvir,  
Högni on Hölvir,  
and Haraldr on Fölkvir,  
Gunnarr rode Goti,  
and Sigurdr, Grani.  

The gilt-bronze ring, also associated with the shield, was not identified as such until much later (fig. 45). The ring “was found among boxes of material from the shield complex. It fell out of a lump of sand in the Laboratory when shield material was being examined. Though not at the time thought by the Laboratory staff to belong to the shield, it was nevertheless noted in the Laboratory as having come from the shield region.” The Sutton Hoo ring never belonged to the Sutton Hoo sword contained in the burial deposit; “the pommel was neither designed nor adapted to receive a ring, and the projection of the upper guard mount beyond the pommel to either side is only one centimeter.” In fact, the ring was later determined never to have come from a sword at all. There have been suggestions “that the Sutton Hoo example might have been a spare, available for presentation by the king when the occasion arose; after presentation, it would be cut or adapted by the recipient to fit his own sword.” This seems highly unlikely however, considering the Sutton Hoo ring was fashioned out of bronze, and would have therefore been entirely too difficult to cut to size. “If it were intended to be

165 Ibid., 133.
166 Ibid., 134.
added without cutting, it would need a sword with an abnormally large or long upper
guard to accommodate it alongside the normal pommel without overlap, but swords
without long upper cross-guards are a late development and associated with very large
rings.”¹⁶⁷

All indications therefore point to the ring having been designed exclusively for
the shield alone. Bruce-Mitford, who was responsible for the second reconstruction of the
shield (after Maryon), ascertained that the ring and its associated strip would have been
placed beneath the boss near the rim, not at the top near the bird and dragon, as there
would have been a loss of stylistic balance and symmetry.¹⁶⁸

The boat-burial at Valsgärde 7 has a ring nearly identical to that from Sutton Hoo
(fig 46). The Swedish example is also “of bronze and cast in one piece, and had the same
flattening of the horizontal lobe and narrowness in the vertical lobe.”¹⁶⁹ The Valsgärde
ring was also not found affixed to a sword, but was instead mounted on a decorative
silver-gilt strip set lengthwise atop a drinking horn (fig 47). Perhaps, it is not only the
physical characteristics of these two rings that are so parallel. In their similarity to fasten
a sword-ring upon an object other than a sword, the connection between the Sutton Hoo
and Valsgärde pieces becomes that much more compelling. Regardless of this, the Sutton
Hoo ring also has no known analogies in the Anglo-Saxon world and is believed to be
wholly comprised of Eastern Scandinavian elements.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 134.
¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 46.
¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 134.
CONCLUSION

The Swedish character of the Sutton Hoo ship-burial at Mound 1, as pervasive as it may be, still remains an enigmatic element of the gravesite as a whole. It manifests itself initially in a literary manner; firstly, through the work of the Venerable Bede, who established not only the identity of the East Anglian king at the time of the burial (and thereby linked him by ancestry to several older Scandinavian families) but also the king’s spiritual frame of mind; and secondly, through the saga of Beowulf, also utilized to establish ancestral links between England and Scandinavia but moreover to illuminate the objects uncovered at Sutton Hoo as well as their cultural context. The Swedish element also manifests itself in an archaeological manner. Several pieces from the Sutton Hoo ship-burial share an affinity to those unearthed in Sweden, an affinity from which conclusions must be drawn concerning not only the physical attributes of the objects themselves but also the tangled web of perspectives in which they exist, namely genealogy, religion and as mentioned above, literature.

The ruler long identified as the individual commemorated in the Sutton Hoo ship-burial was Rædwald, King of the East Angles from c. 600 AD until his death in c. 624 AD. Rædwald’s name comes to us from the Venerable Bede and his Historia gentis Anglorum ecclesiastica, a history of England and its rulers from the time of Caesar to the work’s completion in AD 731. According to Bede, Rædwald descended from Wuffa, the eponymous founder of the Wuffinga house, a family pedigree with a distinct Scandinavian heritage. The name Wuffa, a diminutive form of the Old English word for wolf, not only gives the family its dynastic eponym, but also links it with the Wulfings, literally the ‘wolf-clan,’ a Geatish tribe from Eastern Sweden mentioned in the Old
Another ancestor, Hroðmund, has a chronicled counterpart as a prince cited briefly in *Beowulf*; however he is a member of the Scylding house.

Still another member of the Wuffing dynasty, Wehha, listed in the eighth position on the ancestral hierarchy, could be identified as Weohstan, the father of Wiglaf, from *Beowulf*. Weohstan, whose allegiance lay with the Geats, was nonetheless a member of the Wægmunding clan, distant relations to the Swedish Scylding dynasty. The rite of mound-inhumation, as evidenced by the ship-burial in Mound 1 at Sutton Hoo and according to Sturluson’s *Heimskringla*, is normally attributed to the Swedish dynasty’s mythical founder, the divine figure Yngvi-Freyr.

The saga of *Beowulf*, which gives historians the aforementioned registry of names with which to forge a connection between Wuffing and Scylding, was nonetheless focused predominantly on Danish concerns. In it, the ceremony of ship-burial is not associated with Yngvi-Freyr, but instead with Scyld Scefing, the renowned founder of the Scylding dynasty. The work itself has been argued by several historians to be contemporary to the age of the manuscript upon which it was written, approximately AD 1016, a product of Cnut’s reign in England, most notably due to the Danish genealogy so explicitly outlined in the poem’s opening lines. This literary demarcation of Scandinavian lineage would have been seen as deliberate on the author’s part, as Danes were not only a widely accepted element in English society at that time, but also constituted the ethnicity of the ruling class.

Other historians consider *Beowulf* to have been a much older work and that the *Beowulf* manuscript exists solely as a reproduction of the antecedent text which is now

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170 Interestingly enough, Beowulf himself was also a member of the Wægmunding clan, which may account for the kindred relationship between himself and Weohstan’s son Wiglaf, especially during Beowulf’s final battle with the dragon.
lost to us. Theories abound as to who exactly the original author might have been, and remarkably enough an anonymous poet in the kingdom of East Anglia emerges as the most likely candidate. The early eighth century court of King Ælfwald, fiercely Christian as it was, nonetheless provided the means and opportunity for the preservation of Old English heroic verse such as *Beowulf*, primarily since the work was concerned with the noble ancestry of the Wuffings themselves.

It has been argued by some historians that *Beowulf* has an East Anglian connection; firstly, by the royal court, which again could have very well fostered an environment for the continuation of heroic poetry, especially if it concerned the lineage of the ruling family; secondly, in the Wuffing royal pedigree itself and its relationship to the Scyldings of the poem; and thirdly, by the rite of ship-burial and mound-inhumation assimilated by the East Anglian monarchy from their Danish predecessors (evidenced in the poem with the burial of their dynastic figurehead, Scyld), particularly in the prime example at Sutton Hoo. However, if other historians are to be believed, then the Wuffings are actually the English lineage of the Scylfing family with its origins in central Sweden. These Scylfings of *Beowulf*, known as Ynglings in other accounts, also retain a ship-burial and mound-inhumation tradition (most notably at Gamla Uppsala, Husby, Vendel and Valsgärde), passed down through the ages by their own mythical chieftain, Frey. If the burial at Sutton Hoo was for a Wuffing member such as King Rædwald, and the Swedish Scylfings of *Beowulf* are related to the Wuffings of East Anglia, then, by way of inference, the Sutton Hoo burial would possess clearly Swedish elements. Does the site offer archaeological evidence to substantiate such a claim? Yes, in fact, it does.
One can deduce with certainty that the Sutton Hoo ship-burial was not erected for a Swedish chieftain or king, as Nerman had intimated, but instead belonged to King Rædwald. The two main hypotheses of Nerman’s argument, that the interment was for that of either a Swedish conqueror who subjected part of the country to his rule or a Swede called in to assist his East Anglian relative in war, can easily be refuted. “That a Swedish chief could have been called in to help the Wuffingas in their wars against Mercia is feasible,”171 although the last significant battle that occurred in the early seventh century which is known to have used foreign support, Penda’s Northumbrian expedition, was in AD 655, a full thirty years after the Sutton Hoo ship-burial is thought to have been constructed. However, the proposal that the Sutton Hoo entombment was for a Swedish relative who came to England for whatever reason and simply died while there could very well be credible. “Beowulf furnishes us with examples where persons who belong to the royal family in one country are received as exiles in another country.”172 Unfortunately, this scenario is without evidentiary support.

The suggestion of a Swedish conqueror who imposed his rule over parts of the country, an idea that Nerman argued was plausible due to the placement of the Sutton Hoo entombment,173 is also easily disproved. “Bede, who was well informed about East Anglia in this period, gives no inkling of any such occurrence as the irruption of a pagan conqueror into an area that was at this very time (AD 625-670) the center of East Anglian

173 The site of the burial, on an arm of the sea, corresponded with the idea of a foreign intruder of this kind.
Christianity. Moreover, it can hardly be imagined that the grandiose treasure-mound of a foreign invader set up in the heart of the Wuffing domain could hardly have escaped plunder after the assailant had been driven out. The reputed wealth of the burial would have been widely known and the mound “would assuredly have been razed and the treasures confiscated to the royal treasury.”

Regardless of the East Anglian identity of the man entombed at Sutton Hoo, the manner of the burial itself is decidedly Swedish in character. Such richly furnished unburnt warriors’ graves in a boat under low mounds or flat ground are only known from Sweden, although Bruce-Mitford pointed out that such burials without the boat are also highly characteristic of Anglo-Saxon archaeology. The height of the Sutton Hoo mound, which reaches approximately eight feet, corresponds to those at Vendel and Valsgarde, while its overall shape, circular, rather than flat-topped, is much more consistent with both the kings’ graves at Gamla Uppsala and Ottarshögen in Husby. There is however, a complete absence of animal sacrifice in the Sutton Hoo ship-burial, which appears at all the aforementioned Swedish gravesites on a lavish scale.

The East Mound [at Gamla Uppsala] yielded remains of horse, at least three dogs, sheep or goats and bear. The West mound yielded horse, bird, pig, bear and at least two dogs; the center mound, cat, dogs, horses, domestic pig, smaller ruminating animals and cattle, fowls and possibly geese. There were similar finds from Ottar’s mound in Vendel. From the Vendel boat-inhumations were taken remains of many horses and other animals and species of birds, including falcon, crane and owl.

The absence of animals in the Sutton Hoo ship-burial, especially those of horses and their nearly indestructible teeth (which could have easily withstood the acidic Suffolk

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175 Chadwick, 77.
179 Ibid., 50.
sand) indicates that although the entombment may have been Swedish in character, it was both influenced and strongly modified by its Insular environment.\textsuperscript{180} There would have certainly been no animal sacrifice at a Christian burial.

Regardless of the Swedish manner of entombment at Sutton Hoo and the various objects within it that suggest a Swedish affinity, the burial is primarily viewed as Christian in character, although as Lindqvist suggested, one that was prepared specifically for a convert. In fact, the date for the Sutton Hoo burial occurs during the transition from paganism to Christianity in East Anglia. The grave-site itself, which contains items of both a Christian and pagan nature, Byzantine spoons inscribed with the names Saul and Paul alongside Germanic armor and weaponry adorned with a bestial menagerie of gold and garnet, seems a fitting tribute to a king in the crux of that transition and one who grappled so precariously with the question of theism, a man such as Rædwald. Perhaps in order to appease both sides of the religious gamut, “it would seem probable that a Christian king must have had in this case a private burial with the proper rites of the Church, and that the public pagan affair was a concession to a still strong Germanic family sentiment for the ancient traditions.”\textsuperscript{181} Lindqvist also suggested that the Church encouraged the provision of elaborate grave-goods within the burial as an inducement to abandon cremation, which would have been a prominent feature of the Wuffing family’s Scandinavian heritage. It was also probable that the “Church did not hinder new converts from furnishing their dead with everything they could wish to have in order to step forth on resurrection-day with all the pomp to which their station in life

\textsuperscript{180} Ibid., 50.
\textsuperscript{181} Chambers, 511.
Martin Carver, who oversaw the later Sutton Hoo excavations, considered the cemetery field as a whole (including the infamous Mound 1 ship-burial) as a pagan monument in which burial rites relatively new to England were drawn from a common pagan heritage and enacted in defiance of pressure from Christian Europe.¹⁸³

Many historians view the Sutton Hoo ship-burial as a cenotaph since the site itself did not contain a body. Others have noted the volatility of the soil, specifically its acidic state, which could have facilitated the rapid decomposition of any body interred there, including its skeletal structure. However, the question of cremation seems important to examine at this junction. Archaeological excavations were undertaken on mounds 2, 5, 6, 7, 17 and 18 at Sutton Hoo from 1983-1992 and it was later determined that several of the burials were cremation graves. In each, the cindered remains of men and various animals, usually horses, were deposited in bronze bowls and buried with an assortment of other goods, gaming-pieces, small iron shears, drinking vessels and sword-belt fittings. Mound 17 featured a young man interred in a pit along with his sword, shield, two pyramidal strap mounts, and a bridle for his horse, the decomposed body of which was consequently discovered in an adjacent ditch. The lack of animal remains in the Mound 1 ship-burial continues to be vexing, but the inclusion of such in the remainder of the mounds in the Sutton Hoo cemetery field, the inhumation grave containing man and horse under the same mound, as well as the aforementioned cremation graves of man and beast entombed collectively, signifies a possible link with their common Scandinavian heritage, particularly Sweden.

¹⁸³ Carver, 111.
In the aforementioned cremation graves, the ashes were wrapped in cloth and placed in bronze bowls or urns, although in Mound 5, the remains of cremation were in fact not contained within any receptacle. Can it be plausible that the absence of a body in the great Mound 1 ship-burial indicates that King Rædwald had been cremated? This act of cremation would link the East Anglian ruler to his Swedish relatives, many of whom were resigned to the funeral pyre after death. Excavations undertaken on the Eastern Mound (Aun’s mound) at Gamla Uppsala unearthed a clay pot filled with cinders and burnt bones in the centermost section of the cairn. The Western Mound (Aðils’s mound) contained the remains of a fire along with charred grave offerings. At Ottarshögen in Husby, it was also determined that the dead king had been cremated at the place of burial. Beowulf himself was given an elaborate cremation ceremony after his death, aptly described in much detail at the end of the poem.

The Geat people built a pyre for Beowulf, stacked and decked it until it stood four-square hung with helmets, heavy war-shields and shining armour, just as he had ordered. Then his warriors laid him in the middle of it, mourning a lord far-famed and beloved. On a height they kindled the hugest of all funeral fires; fumes of woodsmoke billowed darkly up, the blaze roared and drowned out their weeping, wind died down and flames wrought havoc in the hot bone-house, burning it to the core. They were disconsolate and wailed aloud for their lord’s decease.\(^{184}\)

The ship-burials and cemetery fields at Vendel and Valsgärde were not cremation graves, but instead contained a corpse placed in the stern of the boat, richly dressed and adorned with treasure. Because these deceased were thought to have been great

\(^{184}\) Heaney, 211.
landowners rather than kings, it would not have been customary to provide them with any outfit on the pyre, which would have transported them with all speed to Valhalla. In other words, one can distinguish the act of cremation as being reserved for royalty alone.

The absence of any cremation remains in King Rædwald’s ship-burial does not seem to make the burning of his body after death any less plausible; the ashes could have simply been unurned as in Mound 5 and eventually became saturated into the soil. This however seems unlikely for a man of Rædwald’s royal status. The remains of his burnt cadaver could have been wrapped in a cloth and placed in any number of bowls included among his burial as was customary, but the violent collapse of the chamber roof, which occurred many decades after the interment itself, and which shattered nearly all of the objects into hundreds of disjointed fragments, could have again suffused his ashes into the soil.

Apart from the burial practices shared jointly among the Sutton Hoo ship-burial and those from Sweden, the possible cremation like that at Gamla Uppsala, but also the utilization of a boat to hold the king’s effects like those at Vendel and Valsgärde, there is an almost undeniable link among the objects uncovered at all four places. In particular, the helmet and shield from Sutton Hoo demonstrate a likeness extremely remarkable to those from Sweden, especially in decorative ornament. A fragment of stamped foil believed to have come from a helmet in the East Mound at Gamla Uppsala is so analogous to a warrior on the Sutton Hoo helmet that many archaeologists believe that the objects were cast from the same die and by even the same craftsman. Other instances abound between Sutton Hoo and pieces from Vendel and Valsgärde, including iconographic similarities on various helmets and pieces associated with the shield,
namely the boss and sword-ring. The Valsgärde 7 helmet is also linked to the Sutton Hoo burial by way of four bronze plates unearthed at Torslunda in Öland, Sweden, particularly the scene of a man positioned between two animals. These plates possess similar pictorial decorations with the Valsgärde helmet, as well as being viewed as the source of a parallel scene in gold cloisonné work on the Sutton Hoo purse-lid. It has even been ascertained that the Sutton Hoo ship itself, which was thought to have been at least one hundred years old when buried to judge from patches on the hull, was a direct import from Sweden and “treasured as a symbol of the origin or history of the royal house.”

What appears also equally striking is the employment of three bestial images that are present on both the helmet and shield and which discernibly identify them with Sweden: the boar, the horse and the raven. The presence of a boar, even placed in a marginal position on the Sutton Hoo helmet, indicates a Scandinavian connection, if not a direct Swedish provenance, for not only was the boar sacred to the fertility god Freyr (considered the ancestor of the Swedish royal house), but it was also utilized iconographically to represent both Freyr and Sweden. The prominent placement of a bird upon the shield indicated it was most likely utilized as a heraldic device, one meant to be a distinguishing badge for the man commemorated at Sutton Hoo. It is possible that one could very well perceive the bird figure as a Vendel raven, thereby further securing the shield in a Swedish, and more specifically, Scylding context. Finally, the presence of an equestrian theme on the collar of the Sutton Hoo shield-boss also indicates a direct Swedish provenance. The Scyldings were known to be expert horsemen, particularly Aðils, who was in possession of two of the most infamous steeds in Norse

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186 Maryon, 26.
folklore, Slöngvir and Hrafn, and was frequently celebrated in heroic verse. Again the question must be asked: why include among the personal effects of the burial of an East Anglian king objects decorated with symbols of a particular Swedish dynasty if he himself were not a member of that same ancestral house?

The only manner in which this question can be answered correctly and succinctly, while also encompassing the major tenets put forth at the beginning of this section, namely the objects unearthed at Sutton Hoo which exhibit Swedish qualities and the labyrinthine web of religion, genealogy and literature in which they exist, is by supposing that the helmet and shield are heirlooms, remnants of a Swedish forebear who brought the items with him when he founded the kingdom of East Anglia.\textsuperscript{187} Bruce-Mitford writes:

The statements in the sagas … that the Swedish king Ivar Vidfamne conquered a fifth of England, might, if [the] interpretation is correct, be seen to have some sort of generalized basis in historical fact, even though the achievement might have attached itself to the wrong individual and come to be referred to the wrong part of England.\textsuperscript{188}

This heirloom conclusion was also reached by Lindqvist and Bruce-Mitford and seems to be the only likely explanation that would sufficiently clarify all aforementioned aspects. They both ascertained that the helmet and shield were much older than the date of the Sutton Hoo burial. Bruce-Mitford suggested that the shield was manufactured in the mid-sixth century, while Lindqvist proposed that the helmet was constructed around AD 520, dates which both correspond to the height of Scylding power in Sweden as stated

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{187} On an interesting note, there has been in recent years, a resurgence of interest in the \textit{Beowulf} story, in either crafting a sequel or constructing a narrative that gives an alternate view of one of the other main characters. John Gardner’s extremely inventive work, \textit{Grendel}, immediately comes to mind. Another recent tome, \textit{Beyond Beowulf}, by Christopher L. Webber, imagines an ending that incorporates recent literary and archaeological discoveries. In it, \textit{Beowulf} has died, and his successor, Wiglaf, fearful of Swedish aggression, searches the world for a peaceful homeland for himself and his Geatish people. Eventually, they settle near a tributary of the Thames in eastern England, a location which the author does not mention by name, but which the reader must presume is an area around Sutton Hoo.

\footnotesuperscript{188} Rupert Bruce-Mitford, \textit{Aspects of Anglo-Saxon Archaeology: Sutton Hoo and Other Discoveries} (New York: Harper’s Magazine Press, 1974), 57.}
in *Beowulf* and *Heimskringla*. Again, Bruce-Mitford writes:

The archaeological evidence conveys the impression not only of a pervasive Swedish influence at the highest social level but of such an influence extending back into the earlier days of East Anglia and its royal house. From what we know of the dynasty, much the most probable time for the introduction of such an influence would be at its inception.  

This theory would again explain the Swedish elements in an otherwise Insular burial; that the family, already established in East Anglia for nearly four generations, had become completely integrated into their Anglo-Saxon milieu, although they possessed pieces, such as the helmet and shield, which still adhered them to their Scandinavian ancestry. Perhaps it was King Rædwald’s devotion to the rites of polytheism that afforded him the placement of these family relics in his entombment. It seems more than fitting then that the last ruler of East Anglia to practice the religion of his primogenitors would have buried amongst him the remnants of his great pagan family. For after his death, began the great conversion of nearly half of England by his son Earpwald.

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APPENDIX. FIGURES


Figure 7. The first page of the Beowulf manuscript.
Figure 8. Map of the Uppland province and its significant burial sites. Nico Roymans and Frans Theuws, eds. Images of the Past: Studies on ancient societies in Northwestern Europe (Amsterdam: Universiteit van Amsterdam, 1991).
Figure 9. Gamla Uppsala. Photograph by the author.

Figure 10. The grave field at Valsgärde.
Figure 11. Vendel church. Photograph by the author.

Figure 12. The grave field adjacent to Vendel church. Photograph by the author.
Figure 13. Ottarshögen. Photograph by the author.


Figure 22. Detail drawing of helmet, Vendel I depicting the monster Grendel from *Beowulf*. Ann Sandwall, ed. *Vendeltid* (Stockholm: Statens historiska museum, 1980).
Figure 23. The Sutton Hoo helmet as reconstructed in 1971.
Figure 25. The Sutton Hoo helmet, detail of the left cheek-piece on the modern replica depicting the location of the four designs. Rupert Bruce-Mitford. *The Sutton Hoo ship burial* (vol.2) (London: British Museum Publications, 1978).


Figure 28. Drawing of dancing warriors from the Valsgärde 7 helmet. This drawing and any others from Valsgärde 7 are incomplete because reconstruction of that corresponding section of the helmet was not possible. Rupert Bruce-Mitford. *The Sutton Hoo ship burial* (vol.2) (London: British Museum Publications, 1978).


Figure 34. The Sutton Hoo purse-lid with the man-between-wolves scene on either side.  
http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/families_and_children/online_tours/sutton_hoo/purse.aspx
Figure 35. A modern replica of the Sutton Hoo helmet with eyebrows terminating in gilded boars' heads.
Figure 36. The Norse god Freyr and his boar Gullinborsti. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Freyr_art.jpg

Figure 37. A boar-crested helmet from Northamptonshire. http://www.trin.cam.ac.uk/sdk13/ASObjects/boarhelmet.jpg
Figure 38. A modern replica of the Sutton Hoo shield.
http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/families_and_children/online_tours/sutton_hoo/shield.aspx


Figure 44. The shield-boss from Vendel XII. Rupert Bruce-Mitford. *The Sutton Hoo ship burial* (vol.2) (London: British Museum Publications, 1978).


Figure 47. Drawing of the drinking horn from Valsgärde 7 with the gilt-bronze ring mounted on a decorative strip. Rupert Bruce-Mitford. *The Sutton Hoo ship burial* (vol.2) (London: British Museum Publications, 1978).