

AN ANGLO-SAXON PLAYING-PIECE FROM BAWDSEY

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A jet playing-piece, presumably for a board game (Fig. 19) was found in 1969 at Bawdsey, Suffolk (NGR TM/33533772), and is now in the Ipswich Museum (reg. no. 969-63). It is 4.7 cm. high and of square cross-section, but with rounded edges. The flat top has been faceted to form a triangular field at each corner. The piece is incised (Fig. 20) with a rather ragged ribbon interlace



FIG. 19.—Jet playing-piece, scale $\frac{1}{4}$.

ornament and on the base is a cruciform pattern made up of interlocking arrows. The top is decorated with a cross constructed from four incised semi-circles, one set in the middle of each side; each has a central dot and another dot appears in the middle of the cross. Each triangular facet is decorated with an incised pattern, a ring and dot, two V-shaped ornaments, and a cross within a semi-circle. The four main faces of the object are decorated with chunky ribbon interlace patterns: these are rather crudely executed, but at least two are based on a ring-chain motif.

The object is identified by its ornament, which is undoubtedly English, and, in my judgement, of 10th century date. The most important face from the chronological point-of-view is that shown in Fig. 19, which is closely related to a mid-10th-century ring-chain ornament which appears in its pure form on sculpture in the

north of England,¹ Ireland,² Wales³ and the Isle of Man.⁴ The ornament of another field (third from the left in Fig. 20) is derived from the same well-known Scandinavian motif and appears in mid-10th-century sculpture in northern England in various guises,⁵ although the motif on the Bawdsey piece provides only the central element of the ringed-knot motifs quoted here. The muddled irregular interlace of the other two fields is also found in 10th-century contexts in the north.⁶

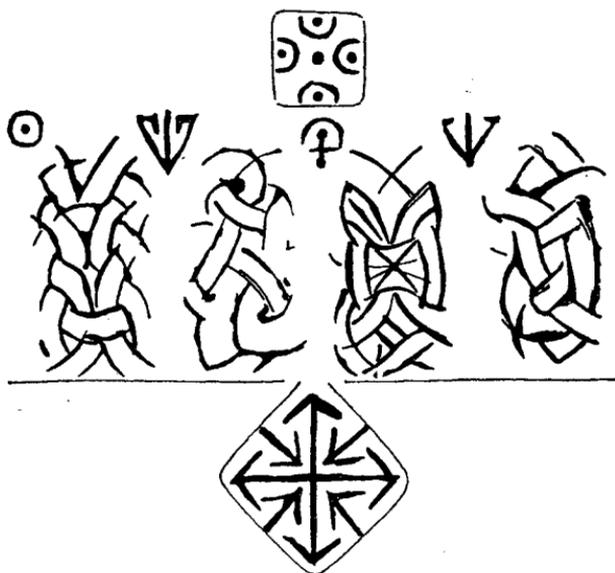


FIG. 20.—Extended ornament, scale $\frac{1}{4}$.

Whether we may assume that the object is a chess-piece is open to question. Playing-pieces are known throughout the Germanic world in the post-Roman period.⁷ Some of them are simple bone counters, some are more elaborate. The use of these pieces has been

¹ E.g. W. G. Collingwood, *Northumbrian Crosses of the Pre-Norman Age* (London, 1927), figs. 167e, 182, 184 etc.

² F. Henry, *Irish Art during the Viking Invasions (800-1020 A.D.)* (London, 1967), pl. 15.

³ V. E. Nash-Williams, *The Early Christian Monuments of Wales* (Cardiff, 1950), pl. xxxii.

⁴ P. M. C. Kermode, *Manx Crosses* (London, 1907), pls. xxx, 74B, xxxi, 75A, etc.

⁵ Cf. Collingwood, *op. cit.*, figs. 157, 178, 192, 194 etc.

⁶ E.g. *Ibid.*, fig. 178.

⁷ Anglo-Saxon objects are listed by A. Ozanne, 'The Peak Dwellers', *Med. Arch.*, vi-vii (1962-3), p. 37, and G. Baldwin-Brown, *The Arts in Early England*, iv (London, 1915), pp. 413f.

recently discussed by Dr. Page,⁸ who has tentatively, and in my opinion correctly, suggested that they belong to a game of two unequal sides, related perhaps to the Scandinavian *hneftafl*.

Archaeological evidence in the 9th and 10th centuries for the presence of this game in Scandinavia is provided most clearly at Birka, where differentiated pieces and 'kings' are found in a number of graves⁹ in the following proportions:¹⁰

Grave No.	'King'	Differentiated pieces
523	1	5 : 14
524	1	3 : 11
581 ¹¹	1	6 : 21
624	1	6 : 20
644	2	22
710	—	6 : 2
750	1	8 : 17
986	1	6 : 10

It is true that the proportions bear no relationship to each other, but neither does the proportion of the only Anglo-Saxon differentiated set (from Caistor-by-Norwich), where the pieces are in the proportion of 22 : 11—the smaller number apparently being of blackened ivory.¹² Some of these pieces—both in Scandinavia and England—are very grand and one would cite the examples from Taplow,¹³ Faversham¹⁴ and Sutton Hoo,¹⁵ the first mentioned being of turned bone with a bronze central rivet and those from Taplow being made of polished horses' teeth. None of these however is as large as the Bawdsey piece, unless the Bawdsey piece be a 'king' of the type found in Scandinavia and implied in Anglo-Saxon contexts.¹⁶ Convincing parallels are provided by the presumably Anglo-Saxon 'pawn' from Witchampton, Dorset,¹⁷ and by the similar pieces of 12th-century date found on the Isle of

⁸ R. Page, 'Old English *Cyningstan*', *Leeds Studies in English*, III (1969), pp. 1-5.

⁹ The following figures are abstracted from H. Arbman, *Birka I* (Uppsala, 1943). Note also H. Arbman, 'En kammargrav från Vikingatiden', *Formvännen*, XXXI (1936), p. 95, where they appear in the proportions 1 : 6 : 12.

¹⁰ Other graves contain plain undifferentiated pieces: e.g. graves 886 and 917.

¹¹ These horn objects are differentiated by a small pin—the 'king' has a lead core.

¹² Page, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

¹³ British Museum, *A Guide to the Anglo-Saxon and Foreign Teutonic Antiquities* (London, 1923), fig. 50.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, *loc. cit.*

¹⁵ R. L. S. Bruce-Mitford, *The Sutton Hoo Ship-Burial* (London, 1968), p. 35.

¹⁶ See Page, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

¹⁷ O. M. Dalton, 'Early chessmen of whale's bone excavated in Dorset', *Archæologia*, LXXVII (1928), pp. 77-86.

Lewis.¹⁸ These finds provide further parallels in that pieces in each find are decorated with an interlace pattern,¹⁹ a feature which also occurs on another unprovenanced piece described by Goldschmidt as *nordisch*.²⁰ In neither case is the find a simple 'chess' set and although it is perhaps heresy to suggest that the Lewis find may belong to another game, it is possible to believe that these pieces—all seventy-seven of them—were not just an odd number of pieces from the workshop of an ivory carver. Such fine pieces, so uniform in their quality, could only have been made specifically to order; they are the work of an exceptionally gifted craftsman and it might be possible to see them as pieces for a now obscure board game. Chess—*sensu strictu*—is not attested in Anglo-Saxon England. The word *tæft* means, simply, a board, and Dr. Page,²¹ who has examined the evidence, has shown no philological ground to support the existence of chess in the Anglo-Saxon period. The Viking gaming-board from Ballinderry is not set out as a chess board.²² Boards varied²³ and Dr. Page has even suggested that *sumum tæfte cræft|bleobordes gebregd*, in *Fates of Men*,²⁴ refers to a chequered board; although he might be stretching the evidence slightly here.

It would seem reasonable to assume that this Bawdsey object is a piece from a two-colour board game. The use of jet for 'chess' pieces is attested by examples of early medieval date from Thelton, Norfolk,²⁵ and by two examples in the Warrington Museum,²⁶ all of which are, however, later than the Bawdsey example. The only example known of a black gaming piece of undoubted Anglo-Saxon date, is a fragmentary example from Witchampton, which is of dyed bone.²⁷

The main source for jet seems to have been Whitby in Yorkshire, and objects of early Anglo-Saxon (pre-9th century) date have

¹⁸ Particularly O. M. Dalton, *Catalogue of the Ivory Carvings of the Christian era . . . in . . . the British Museum* (London, 1909), nos. 127 and 128.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, no. 128 and Dalton, *op. cit.* in n. 17, pl. v, 1.

²⁰ A. Goldschmidt *Die Elfenbeinskulpturen aus der romanischen Zeit*, iv (Berlin, 1929), fig. 241b.

²¹ *Op. cit.*

²² Henry, *loc. cit.* It occurs to me that the peg holes in the board could correspond with the peg-holes in the base of some of the gaming pieces found in Scandinavia; cf. e.g., Arbman, *Birka 1*, pl. 150, 7-11.

²³ Cf. 'The board from the Gokstad ship': O. Nicolaysen, *Langskibet fra Gokstad ved Sandefjord* (Christiania, 1882), pl. viii, 1.

²⁴ Page, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

²⁵ *Norf. Arch.* vii (1872), p. 354.

²⁶ *Arch. Jour.* xiii (1856), p. 180. Interestingly these are considered by Murray to be pieces for *hneftafl*: H. J. R. Murray, *A History of Board-games other than Chess* (Oxford, 1952), p. 60.

²⁷ Dalton, *op. cit.* in n. 17, pl. V, 2.

been found during the site clearance of the monastic site there.²⁸ These jet workings seem to have been developed by the Vikings, for jet objects of undoubted 9th-century date are found in Scandinavia, where there are no native sources for this material.²⁹ It was not considered a semi-precious stone in early medieval England—a thesis based on the fact that it is not mentioned in the English lapidaries³⁰—and it is extremely rare in Anglo-Saxon contexts despite its obvious attraction.

In sum, I would suggest that the object was indeed a 'man' from a board game, perhaps of the type outlined by Dr. Page. On the basis of the material from which it is made, and on the basis of the ornament, I would suggest that it was made in Yorkshire in the middle of the 10th century.

²⁸ C. Peers and C. A. R. Radford 'The Saxon Monastery of Whitby', *Archaeologia*, LXXXIX, fig. 19. A cross of similar form to those found here is known from Mr. V. Bellamy's as yet unpublished excavations at Pontefract, another Yorkshire monastic site.

²⁹ J. Evans and M. S. Sergeantson, *English Medieval Lapidaries* (London, 1933) (Early English Text Society, cxc).

³⁰ E.g. D. M. Wilson and O. Klindt-Jensen, *Viking Art* (London, 1966), pl. xx, a and b.