

A GOLD BRACTEATE OR UNIFACE
FROM MARTLESHAM, SUFFOLK

by J. Newman and D.M. Metcalf

During the Second World War an important find of Anglo-Saxon date was made on the Martlesham Airfield near Woodbridge in south-east Suffolk by a serviceman on the base and was kept by the finder as a talisman or good luck charm. The find, which was reported recently to the Suffolk County Council Archaeological Service by a member of the finder's family, is a small gold disc with an impressed decoration probably derived directly from a contemporary Merovingian coin of 7th- or 8th-century date and is of a bracteate or uniface type (Fig. 91).

The gold bracteate (by Dr D.M. Metcalf, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford)

The bracteate bears a tall cross. All four limbs end with a pellet, and there is one pellet in each of the lower angles. There is a confused pattern of strokes (V, V, l, l, l) at the bottom of the cross, possibly representing a base on which it stands. A circular legend composed of large pseudo-letters reads, from 7 o'clock:

XV?ΛΛΛ

There is no outer border; the irregular diameter of *c.* 22mm varies between 20mm and 27mm, recorded from colour prints. The bracteate weighs 1.2g.

The design of a cross surrounded by a circular legend is reminiscent of the reverse designs of many Merovingian gold coins (*tremisses*) of the 7th century. This artefact is distinctly larger than a *tremissis*, and it is unlikely that it is an imitation of a coin. The design of the cross may have been perceived as having protective qualities, but it is to be noted that the artefact is neither pierced nor mounted. The craftsmanship is unskilled, making it difficult to judge the date of manufacture. On general grounds a date in the 7th to 8th centuries seems plausible, and the findspot offers some encouragement to assume that this is a middle Saxon artefact.

The context (by J. Newman, Archaeological Service, Suffolk County Council)

The find does not come from a secure and readily identifiable archaeological context, since



FIG. 91 – Gold bracteate or uniface from Martlesham, obverse and reverse (scale 2:1).

it was found as a stray object on the base in the early 1940s. However the general area of the findspot is of particular interest for Anglo-Saxon studies, lying as it does across the Deben Valley in the Sandling region of south-east Suffolk some four kilometres west of the royal cemetery of Sutton Hoo. In addition the findspot is eight kilometres north-east of the early trading *wic* or town of Ipswich, which was growing in importance during the early middle Saxon period.

The airfield, which was initially developed during the First World War and expanded in the Second, lies on flat, former heathland three kilometres west of the river Deben. Owing to the poor quality of the very acidic, free draining sandy soils of the Sandling heathland in south-east Suffolk, historic land use has, until recent times, been restricted to sheep-grazing. This has allowed relic features in the landscape to survive until the need for wartime and later redevelopment of the area. In particular, evidence for prehistoric activity was preserved in the form of numerous round barrows, or tumuli, of probable Early Bronze Age date, on Martlesham Heath until the early years of the 20th century.

Re-use of prehistoric burial mounds either in a limited manner or as foci for additional barrows or larger cemeteries is well attested in the earlier Anglo-Saxon period. Locally this can be seen on the adjoining Brightwell Heath where a small group of tumuli was levelled on the western edge of Martlesham Airfield during the First World War. Several of these barrow sites were investigated in 1919 and one produced apparently primary inhumations of late 6th- or early 7th-century date (Reid Moir, 1921).

Therefore it would appear likely that the gold bracteate or uniface-type object recovered as a stray find in the 1940s derived from another burial of 7th- or 8th-century date, of which there is no other record. The find is therefore of particular importance, as it indicates evidence for the Anglo-Saxon period lost to the world of archaeology owing to the wartime needs of the nation. Fortunately the talismanic quality of the object appears to have been good, since the finder survived the war, allowing this record of an important find with a fascinating history to be made.

Acknowledgements

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References

- Reid Moir, J., 1921. 'The Excavation of Two Tumuli on Brightwell Heath', *J. Ipswich and District Field Club*, 1-14.