

RAEDWALD'S QUEEN AND THE SUTTON HOO COINS

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IN HIS *Historia Ecclesiastica*, Bede did not give the name of the wife of the high-king Raedwald, ruler of East Anglia from 599 to 624, but he did provide two indelible illustrations of the influence she exercised over her powerful husband. Bede's great saga of the coming of Christianity to the early English celebrates almost with approval her devotion to the pagan ideal of loyalty to one's best friend and her sense of the deep dishonour that would lie in betraying him for gold. In this paper I hope to establish the possibility that the gold in question was the purse-full of gold coins found in the Sutton Hoo ship.¹

Bede's disapproval of the East Anglian queen's faith in the old northern gods is expressed in a passage in Book II, chapter 15 (Colgrave and Mynors 1969, hereafter C. and M., 188-191). He was telling how Edwin of Northumbria, himself (as we notice in the next paragraph) a significantly tardy convert to Christianity, was responsible for persuading Eorpwald, Raedwald's son, to abandon idolatry and embrace the faith of Christ. The story reminded Bede that Raedwald himself had once, long before, in Kent, been initiated into the mysteries of Christianity, but with scandalous results. 'On his return home, he was led astray by his wife and by certain wrong-headed teachers who undermined his faith, so that his last state was worse than his first': he combined both forms of worship within one temple - possibly near his hall at Rendlesham. His great-nephew Aldwulf, who ruled East Anglia from c. 663 to 713, well into Bede's day, testified that this dual temple lasted possibly as late as c. 650, for he saw it 'when he was a boy'. If so, it would have been a source of vexation throughout the highly effective ministry of St Felix (c. 630-648), but all the more remarkable a physical memorial to the strength and personality of Raedwald's queen.

Bede continued chapter 15 with the note that, soon after his conversion by King Edwin, Eorpwald was killed: 'and after that, the kingdom lapsed into error for three years until Eorpwald's brother Sigeberht came to the throne, a very Christian and learned man'. Bede's earlier description, in chapter 13 (C. and M., 182-187), of the circumstances of Edwin's acceptance of Christianity in the year 627, in council with his chief friends and advisers and the chief priest, underlines the essentially political nature of that king's 'conversion'. It was eleven years since Raedwald had taken up his cause, defeated his enemies and set him on his throne. The delay in his conversion is fairly obviously connected with his allegiance to Raedwald, the high-king. But Raedwald died in 624 (or 625) and Edwin waited till 627 before adopting Christianity. If Raedwald's widow was still a dominant figure in her kingdom in those two or three years, that might partly explain Edwin's political reluctance to abandon the old gods in whom she believed. He owed her, and them, his life (C. and M., 180-181); and loyalty to friends was a fundamental of their belief. The fact that he quickly converted Eorpwald, probably in that same year 627, suggests that the old dowager may by then have died. Eorpwald's speedy death, and East Anglia's 'lapse' for three more years till Sigeberht's accession, attest that her influence and example survived during those final years of formal paganism in the pre-Danish kingdom.

The nature, survival and strength of the queen's influence are highly relevant in considering the circumstances of Raedwald's burial. If she herself outlived him, as suggested above, she would probably have had the ordering of his funeral, as H. M. Chadwick recognised and largely believed, in the earliest speculation on this subject (Chadwick 1940, 86-87). It has long been understood that the silver spoons with *Saulos-Paulos* inscriptions most probably refer to the conversion of the buried person (Bruce-Mitford 1947, 49). Now that the

dating evidence of the coins makes it likeliest that Raedwald was that person (Bruce-Mitford 1975, ch. IX, 578–682, and X, 683–717), we must suppose that the spoons, and possibly the nine silver bowls with cruciform decoration, were given to him in Kent at that early initiation into the Christian mysteries; and that, at his death, his pagan widow would be anxious to bury with him these symbols of his half-hearted ‘lapse’ from the truth as she saw it. All this is fairly familiar thinking. It seems worth rehearsing because what has not been suggested hitherto is that the presence of the purse of coins may be explained in a rather similar way.

Earlier in Book II, in chapter 12, Bede wrote down the circumstantial, very credible account of Edwin’s exile at Raedwald’s court c. 615–616, immediately before Raedwald went into battle on Edwin’s behalf and defeated Aethelfrith of Northumbria on the east bank of the Idle. There seems no reason to doubt the accuracy of his source (C. and M., 176–177). He wrote:

Aethelfrith sent messengers who brought (*offerent*) Raedwald much money (*pecuniam multam*) as inducement to kill Edwin. That did not work. He sent a second and third time, with more lavish (*copiosora*) gifts of silver, and threats of war if the gifts were turned down. Raedwald, whether swayed by the threats (*minis fractus*) or seduced by the bribes (*corruptus muneribus*) yielded to the entreaties (*cessit deprecanti*) and promised to slay Edwin or to hand him over to the messengers.

This passage certainly suggests that the money-inducement was sent and accepted. Then came the strange interview outside Raedwald’s hall at dead of night between Edwin and a shadowy stranger, presumably Paulinus (C. and M., 178–179). Professor Whitelock (1972, 3) notes Bede’s omission of the stranger’s name. Bede may have thought that to name him destroyed the mysterious, indeed miraculous, effect of his story. The Roman mission seems already to have marked Edwin down as a key figure for conversion. They were evidently waiting only for Raedwald’s rule to end before bringing Edwin to declare himself. The formidable Paulinus was quietly at work on this, preparing for the conversion of Northumbria and the creation of the archiepiscopal province of York, as early as 601 (C. and M., 104–105, 192–193). But now, to encompass Edwin’s survival, the mission was in the embarrassing predicament of having to invoke and to trade on the East Anglian queen’s high standards of pagan honour.

Bede described the dramatic outcome. When Raedwald told the queen of his intention to kill Edwin,

she talked him round with the warning that it ill became so great a king to exploit the misfortune of his best friend and sell him for gold; still less to lose his own honour, more precious than all adornments, for the love of money (*amore pecuniae*). What more (Bede continued rhetorically) is there to say? Not only did Raedwald not hand Edwin over, he even helped him to gain his kingdom. As soon as the messengers had gone home, he assembled a large force and attacked and slew Aethelfrith on the Idle before he had time to get his whole army together.

The one thing more we would like Bede to have said is whether Raedwald returned the money with the messengers. On this he is silent, leaving us to decide for ourselves whether it seems more in Raedwald’s character to have packed them off empty-handed. To me, it does.

What Bede seems to have said is that Aethelfrith sent money, and that money changed hands. Where would Aethelfrith have acquired any money? In Northumbria in the second decade of the 7th century, a very strong likelihood – perhaps the only real possibility – is by way of a diplomatic gift.

Reviewing *The Sutton Hoo Ship-Burial*, Vol. I, in *The Antiquaries Journal* (1978, 427), Professor Rosemary Cramp wrote: 'To my mind the coin group makes most sense as a diplomatic gift put together in an area where such coinage was common so that selection could have been easily effected.' (A salient fact about the thirty-seven coins is that all are different, none duplicate.) Hitherto, the possibility has been considered that some such gift as this had been made direct to Raedwald (Bruce-Mitford 1975, 585). No-one has considered Aethelfrith, yet he is not an unlikely recipient for such a gift. By the time of his attempt to bribe Raedwald, c. 615–616, he had ruled Northumbria twenty-three or twenty-four years. Bede described him in Book I, chapter 34 (C. and M., 116, 117) as

a very brave king and most eager for glory, who might indeed be compared with Saul except that he was ignorant of the Christian religion; for no ruler or king carved out more land for the English people, after either exterminating or subjugating the natives.

Irish and British slaves may have been Aethelfrith's main export commodity to Europe. Just before his time, some angelic-looking boy-slaves had caught Pope Gregory's eye, in one of Bede's most often-repeated stories (C. and M., 132–135): that they were from Northumbria is less well remembered. Later (C. and M., 140–141), Bede described Aethelfrith's resounding victory over the British at Chester, sometime between 613 and 616. The most celebrated episode in the battle was Aethelfrith's slaughter of about 1,200 monks from Bangor who had misguidedly taken up a praying position in full view of both armies. After such a victory, a diplomatic gift from the Merovingian king Chlothar II (613–629) could well have been a response to a present of slaves, or conceivably to a manumission of a number of Christian slaves, possibly some survivors from Bangor. J. P. C. Kent's brilliant dating of the Sutton Hoo coins seems to fit into this kind of programme perfectly (Bruce-Mitford 1975, 588–647). In a much later passage (C. and M., 228–229), Bede described how St Aidan in Northumbria made a point of 'distributing gifts of money (*donaria pecuniarum*), either for the use of the poor or for the redemption of those who had been unjustly sold into slavery.'

If Aethelfrith received such a diplomatic gift, he was the kind of king who would not scruple to make practical use of it. Nor would he have been much surprised that it did not bring immediate results. The resort to the 'more lavish gifts of silver' may also, as Rupert Bruce-Mitford thought on reading the first draft of this note, relate to part of the Sutton Hoo treasure – the Anastasius dish, the fluted bowl and, conceivably, the nine silver bowls mentioned above. But equally, as he points out, the phrase might be taken to imply that the first gift was also 'of silver', and thus could not be the gold coins. The text remains ambiguous and inscrutable on this point. The contents of the purse contrast relatively meanly with the surrounding splendours aboard the burial-ship. Birgit Arrhenius has equated them with a mere two ounces Roman weight (1978, 195). Even so, there is one person who might have wanted them buried with Raedwald. If they were part of a bribe, and if his queen felt so strongly that acceptance of such a bribe tarnished her husband's character intolerably, she would surely have wanted to bury that purse-full of thirty-seven coins, three blanks and two small ingots intact, as evidence to her gods that it had failed to dishonour him, and that it had not been 'spent'. She could never have guessed how deeply 20th-century archaeologists would be in her debt for providing their best evidence for dating and identifying everything that she thought she was committing to eternity in that trusty old ship.

NOTE

- ¹ Dr Rupert Bruce-Mitford, for whose kind scrutiny I am grateful, notes the dependence of the argument upon what Bede meant by *pecunia*, and rightly observes that it could mean wealth and riches, as well as money. We, too, take words like gold and riches to mean money. Bede was familiar with the use of money in his own lifetime, and there seems to me, as to the standard editors of his great work, a strong degree of probability that he was thinking of money when he wrote *pecunia* in the three passages discussed here. In a few details of phrasology I have risked an alternative to their admirable translation.

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