THE A-BRACTEATE FROM
SCALFORD, LEICESTERSHIRE

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An early Anglo-Saxon gold bracteate was found in Scalford, Melton district in July 2010 (PAS no: LEIC-EDD980; treasure no: 2010T414; Axeloe et al. 2011, 996–7; Behr 2011) (Fig. 1 a–b). It is only the second bracteate find recorded in the county of Leicestershire and Rutland, and it can be dated on stylistic grounds to the late fifth/early sixth century, a period when little is known about settlement structure, cultural identity or political organisation of this area (Stafford 1985, 65–79; Welch 2001; Knox 2004, 95). Bracteates were prestigious precious-metal objects with religious, magical and political connotations. That is why a discussion of the archaeological context of the find and its unusual iconography can contribute some new evidence to the understanding of early Anglo-Saxon developments in this part of the later kingdom of Mercia.

Bracteates are round pendants made out of gold (or occasionally silver) foil, embossed on one side with a die with anthropomorphic and/or zoomorphic images. On larger pendants the central image is surrounded by concentric zones, stamped with dies of various geometrical patterns. The foil was usually edged with a beaded gold wire. A suspension loop made out of a more or less decorated gold strip was attached. Grave finds attest that bracteates were worn on necklaces often together with beads, either individually or several of them (Gaimster 2001).

This particular type of jewellery was first made in southern Scandinavia, probably on the Danish islands, from the mid-fifth century onwards (Axboe 2004, 187–9). From here its manufacture and use spread to Jutland, southern Sweden, the Baltic islands, Gotland, Öland and Bornholm and south-west Norway, which are the areas with the densest find concentrations. But numerous finds have also been made in neighbouring regions including northern Norway, eastern Sweden, Poland, Hungary, Germany, the Netherlands and France. Across the North Sea in England bracteates have been discovered from Kent in the south to Humberside in the north. In Scandinavia, bracteates have been frequently found in hoards or as single finds in or near so-called ‘central places’, defined as settlement sites of regional or supra-regional political, economic and religious importance, recognised archaeologically through find assemblages that contained unusually high numbers of precious-metal objects and imported items, evidence for metal-working and finds with religious connotations. Exceptional building types have also been observed in many of these sites (Steuer 2007, 894–903). In fifth and sixth century England the situation is different, as no comparable settlement finds have been observed. Williams has pointed out that in eastern England cemeteries may have functioned as ‘social and sacred foci’ during the early Anglo-Saxon period (Williams 2002). In eastern Kent it can be argued that cemeteries in which gold bracteates were discovered in rich female graves were linked to sites with royal connections according to later sources.
Because of these observations that many bracteates were deposited in or close to sites of special significance, it is useful to investigate the topographical, archaeological and historical context of the finds.

Over 1,000 pendants are now known of which 56 come from Anglo-Saxon find spots. Most of the Anglo-Saxon finds cluster in the eastern counties, with some finds found further west on the Isle of Wight, along the Thames valley, and now four finds in Leicestershire, Rutland and Nottinghamshire. The new find from Scalford (IK 635) was found on the fringe of bracteate distribution (Behr 2010, 35 and fig. 17). The three bracteates in this region have been found in Rutland at Market Overton (IK 123), nine miles east of Scalford, in Nottinghamshire at Broughton Lodge, Willoughby on the Wolds (IK 227), 7.5 miles west of Scalford and at East Leake (IK 602), which is a further 1.5 miles west of Willoughby.

While all three earlier finds were discovered in early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries, it is uncertain how the Scalford pendant was buried as it was a metal-detector find. It might have been put into a grave that was not observed or deposited singly as a small hoard (Behr 2010, 77–80). No further finds or observations at the find spot were reported (W. Scott pers. comm.). In Scalford and its vicinity, however, a number of Romano-British and early Anglo-Saxon sites and finds have been discovered, including some early Anglo-Saxon pottery on Roman settlement sites (e.g. Liddle 1978–79, 81; Liddle 1982, 46). An early Anglo-Saxon cemetery and probably a contemporary settlement were discovered in the district of Melton to which Scalford belongs (Liddle and Middleton 1994, 85). A significant number of fifth and sixth-century metal finds have been recorded recently, mainly due to metal-detecting (W. Scott pers. comm.). The close proximity of Roman settlement
sites and evidence for fifth and sixth-century Anglo-Saxon activities have also been observed in Market Overton and Willoughby on the Wolds (Kinsley 1993, 73–4; Todd 1999, 222; Liddle 2004, 66–7). The three places are also linked because they are on Roman roads. Market Overton and Scalford are on an east–west running Roman trackway that followed an ancient salt way crossing the Foss Way, while the cemetery in Willoughby is next to the Foss Way that linked Leicester with Lincoln (Margary 1967, 219, 222). Although the Roman roads and track-ways may not have functioned as highways in the post-Roman period, as they had before, the burials associated with them suggest that in some cases they may have been used as boundaries. Anglo-Saxon burial sites were often sited close to boundaries to protect the exposed margins (Stafford 1985, 11).

A further note-worthy observation is the occurrence of the rare fieldname ‘Harrowe’ or ‘Harrow’ in the parish of Scalford (Cox 2002, 214). This may be the OE hear, a term that is interpreted as ‘heathen temple’ or ‘hilltop sanctuary’ (Meaney 1995, 31–2; Semple 2007, 370–2). As bracteates are interpreted as objects with amuletic or magical powers, its proximity to a pre-Christian sacred site is potentially significant. Unfortunately, the field has not been identified and the date of the record of the name is rather late (Cox 2002, 214), which is why it is not possible to draw any direct connections between the fieldname and the bracteate find. Thus, while the topographical, archaeological and place-name observations in Scalford are interesting and may point to a site of particular importance in the post-Roman and early Anglo-Saxon period, in the absence of systematic excavations they cannot be interpreted definitely as exceptional. Still, the find of a rare gold object adds evidence to the discussion.

Bracteate iconography was modelled on the image of the Roman emperor on late Roman gold medallions of the fourth century. Numerous gold medallions have been found in countries outside the Roman Empire north of the Danube. They were probably gifts from the Roman emperors. Most of these medallions were equipped with a suspension loop, and some even with ornate frames made by Germanic goldsmiths. The style of wearing these medallions as pendants suggests that they were perceived as symbols of power and as potent amulets because of the divine quality of the Roman imperial image (Bursche 2001). The medallions were imitated in Scandinavia as one-sided gold pendants and on these bracteates the imperial image was gradually altered, acquiring in this process of iconographic transformations new meanings (Axboe and Kromann 1992, 287–93). On some bracteates, zoomorphic figures were added to the head; on others, anthropomorphic or zoomorphic figures replaced the head. It is difficult to determine at what point in this process the significance of the images shifted. The continuous use of Roman insignia of power with which the image of the emperor was equipped suggests that they were still meaningful in the transformed images (Axboe and Kromann 1992, 287). Only a fairly limited number of scenes were represented on bracteates; several of them were repeated in a long series of images closely connected by motif and style (Pesch 2007, 370–81). The interpretation of these scenes is still controversial. The most comprehensive interpretation of bracteate images was presented by Karl Hauck, who explained them as representations of Germanic mythical stories about
the prince of the gods, Odin/Woden, the god of war and death, poetry and healing (1992, 451–7). The high level of iconographical standardisation throughout the bracteate distribution area is a remarkable characteristic. The bracteate from Scalford is in many respects a typical A-bracteate, that is defined as showing a male head in profile following the imperial model; however, it has also some features that are unique in bracteate iconography.

The pendant is 24mm in diameter and weighs 2.48g. The gold content is 89 per cent on the surface. There is no difference in the gold content in the area underneath the loop where the gold has a redder colour (La Niece and Simpson 2010). Its size, weight and gold content are average among Anglo-Saxon bracteates. The foil is now bent and scratched in several areas. A faint impression of the image is visible on the reverse. A simple undecorated gold strip was attached as a suspension loop. No beaded wire surrounds the foil, but the edge is thickened and decorated with small incisions to give the impression of a framing wire. The close stylistic and motivic connections between bracteates make it difficult to determine their areas of manufacture. The technical idiosyncrasies of Scalford-A, including the absence of a framing wire and the simple gold strip as a suspension loop, suggest that it was not imported from Scandinavia or the Continent, but was made in England as these features have only been observed on Anglo-Saxon bracteates (Behr 2010, 69).

The head is turned towards the left, while the bust is facing the viewer. The hairstyle consists of vertical strands of hair that are divided by a double line of dots indicating the imperial diadem that ends in front of the head with a triangular feature with three dots signifying the central jewel, and in the back with crossing double lines standing for the ribbons. The face is designed with an oval eye, pronounced eyebrow, straight nose, spiral-shaped ear and an open mouth. The dot on the cheek is the imprint of the hole from the compasses used when making the die. The details of the hairstyle and facial features allow its relative dating within the sequence of bracteates. According to the seriation of the great anthropomorphic heads on bracteates by Axboe, this new find belongs to his group H2 that can be dated to the last quarter of the fifth or early sixth century (2004, 122–32). It is thus among the earliest bracteates found in Anglo-Saxon England. The bust is shown with four hatched zones that indicate the folds of the imperial cloak. A dotted and framed line depicting beads along the neck and a similar line on the lower edge of the image may be derived from the jewelled rims of the richly decorated imperial garment (Daim et al. 2010, 295). On the breast, two of the fields with the folds end in mirror-image spirals. On the left shoulder are three lines ending in semicircular features. They can be best described as pendilia, with lunulate pendants hanging on the imperial brooch that was worn by the emperors, usually on the right shoulder to fasten the imperial coat. The brooch is hardly visible underneath the folds. The placement on the left shoulder may be the result of a mirror effect when the Roman medallions were imitated (Daim et al. 2010, 294). Coin images suggest that by the later fourth century, in the time of the emperors Valens and Valentinian I (364/65), the use of brooches with three pendilia was ‘reserved for imperial rank’
On several Danish A-bracteates from Jutland, Funen and Sealand, *pendilia* are shown on the left shoulder in somewhat misunderstood versions (IK 162, 1 and 2, IK 225, IK 329).

In front of the bust a rather short and thin right arm is visible, with a hand that holds a long tapered object with three parallel lines at the upper end in front of the mouth. The gesture of a raised right hand is common on fourth century Roman medallions often holding various objects like a *mappa* or a globe, but no artefact resembling the cone-shaped one on the bracteate. The shape, position and decoration of the item on Scalford-A can be best explained as a conical drinking glass. The three lines may indicate the straight mouthpiece and two glass trails that were typical features of decorated glass beakers. Quite large numbers of glass vessels were used in fifth and sixth-century England, as the numerous grave finds and occasional settlement finds show (Evison 2008, 11–12). But there is no evidence that glass vessels were produced in England at that time (Evison 1972, 48). As imports from the Rhineland they were valuable and prestigious objects, and signified, as the grave finds show, high status. Most conical glass beakers were found south of the Thames. From Leicestershire only two glass fragments from cone beakers are known (Evison 1972, 55; Liddle and Middleton 1994, 81, 83).

In front and behind the head are various signs that imitate the Latin capitals that surround the imperial head on the Roman medallions. From left to right are in front of the head a circle or an ‘O’, an equal-armed cross with a straight line at the end of each arm, a triangle and a ‘T’; behind the head are a zigzag line, a reversed ‘N’ and a square with dots at each corner. Imitations of Latin letters, together with various signs, are quite common on bracteates. On the A-bracteate from St Giles’s Field, Oxfordshire (IK 323), imitations of Latin letters and a cross, on this example with arms ending in small circles, were placed in front and behind the head. The square feature behind the head is so far unique among signs used on bracteates. This sign was, however, used on five early Anglo-Saxon stamp-decorated pots from four different sites that are all concentrated in the Lark valley/Cambridgeshire area in Suffolk and Cambridgeshire (D. Briscoe pers. comm.).

The inclusion of the conical vessel from which the male figure appears to drink is a unique representation in bracteate iconography. To the knowledge of this writer no depiction of a drinking vessel or someone drinking or holding a cup has been discovered before on an early Anglo-Saxon object. Not until the mid-Saxon period are examples known. On the eighth-century Franks Casket a goblet is shown standing on a mound on the (Bargello) panel on the right side, and on the front panel in the Weland scene the smith offers a drink to the king’s daughter in a palm cup, while in the juxtaposed Adoration scene one of the kings presents a stemmed cup to Christ (Gannon 2003, 66–7; Webster 2010). Sceattas of the secondary series K, type 20, also dated to the eighth century, show a bust in profile with a hand holding a cup to the lips (Gannon 2003, 66–7; Gaimster 2004). Gannon interpreted the coin image as ‘alluding to hospitality and generosity, kingly qualities in pagan times, and desirable also in a Christian context’ (2003, 67).

There are, however, several examples on contemporary and near-contemporary Scandinavian objects. On the longer of the two gold horns from
Gallehus, dated to the early fifth century, a female figure is shown holding a large drinking horn (Axboe et al. 1996, 332). On a number of gold foils, dated to the sixth or seventh century, from Uppåkra in Skåne, and Smørenge, Sorte Muld and Mølegård on the island of Bornholm, either a single male figure is depicted raising a beaker to the mouth that appears to overspill, or a single female figure is shown holding a drinking horn in front of her (Watt 2004, 175, 187–8). Watt argued that the other attributes of the figures, including staffs or scepters, neck rings, collars, beads, weapons and belts, can be interpreted as signs of status and rank, and that is why the drinking vessels too may have had some significance as status indicators. She suggested that the differences between the male and female figures, their vessels and their gestures may notify that the women were using the horns as jugs with which they filled the smaller beakers from which the men drank (2004, 213–14). On several eighth-century picture stones from Gotland, a woman is shown who seems to offer a drinking horn to a horseman. The scene is usually interpreted as a valkyrie welcoming a dead warrior at Valhalla (Nylen and Lamm 1978, 68–73). On the picture stone from Tängelgårda (IV), five men were shown with raised horns apparently drinking to each other (Ellmers 1964/65, 35). The meanings of the images on the gold horn, gold foils and picture stones are debated, and the identification of the figures as secular, mythical or divine is controversial (Enright 1988; Hauck 1992, 530–40; Simek 2002). Still, a clear pattern can be discerned according to which men tend to be shown drinking, while women were carrying or offering horns ceremoniously, an observation that may point to familiar rites in social situations.

In early medieval literature, feasting and drinking in the hall played an important social and symbolic role. The ritualised drinking scenes of warlords with their followers were set in mythical and heroic, not in contemporary, contexts, nevertheless, they reflect contemporary values and social customs. Successful leaders were expected to be generous and to provide hospitality (Magennis 1999, 21–8). Similarly, grave assemblages in male princely graves are often characterised by sets of drinking vessels and containers that are interpreted as signifying the role of a leader to provide feasting equipment for his followers also in the afterlife. The seventh-century grave finds from Sutton Hoo, mound one, Prittlewell and Taplow are famous Anglo-Saxon examples of drinking horns, beakers and containers (Lee 2007, 72–6).

To conclude: While there was clearly some activity in Scalford in the early Anglo-Saxon period and the find of a rare precious metal object is exceptional, there is not enough evidence to suggest it was a site of special importance. In the debate about cultural identities in the region, the appearance of an object with its distinct Scandinavian/Continental connotations is unusual among contemporary finds. This bracteate was not brought or imported from abroad, but designed and made in England, deliberately adopting and adapting ideas about leadership that were expressed in bracteate iconography. If the interpretation is correct and the Roman insignia were used together with a new attribute – a prestigious glass beaker that stood for a particular quality of hospitality and communal drinking of a Germanic warlord – the bracteate offers new insight into attempts to express
visually the concept of a ruler in the fifth and sixth century. How and why it got to Scalford only future finds and research may reveal.

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