Sutton Hoo: the body in the mound

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SUTTON HOO:
THE BODY IN THE MOUND

A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and mechanical College
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Abstract

Seven miles from the Deben River in Suffolk, England is a large pagan cemetery named Sutton Hoo, which consists of eighteen burial mounds. The most impressive of these mounds contains a ninety-foot Anglo-Saxon ship buried beneath the earth. Atop the ship is a burial chamber that contained artifacts such as a helmet, sword, shield, scepter, standard, and a purse holding thirty-seven Merovingian coins. This ship-burial has intrigued scholars since it was discovered and subsequently excavated in 1939. Dozens of theories still circulate on the burial’s intended purpose and date as well as whether or not there was an individual buried within, and if so, who.

This thesis will discuss the royal artifacts found inside the burial chamber of the ship and conclude, based on historical writings and physical evidence, that a body was interred and will identify the deceased. By regarding the artifacts as regalia, objects associated with kingship, it can be established that the grave is that of a supreme ruler. The issue of who is venerated by the ship-burial can best be determined by the proper dating of the burial itself. The dates are largely dictated by the coins and have changed several times in the sixty years since their discovery. The year of c. 625 A.D. was finally agreed upon by experts at the British museum. The vacillation in the dating of the coins has led to various hypotheses as to who was memorialized by the elaborate ship-burial and why.

In this paper, the various theories as to the occupant of the mound will be addressed and scrutinized. Based on the evidence presented, I will conclude that the burial did contain a body and it is that of the seventh-century king of East Anglia, Rædwald, who died in c. 625. The artifacts included in the ship-burial are some of the
finest examples of Anglo-Saxon craftsmanship found in Britain. This single discovery changed not only Britain’s perception of their past, but the very definition of “the dark ages.”
Chapter 1. Background

The Sutton Hoo burial ground sits high on a bluff overlooking the bank of the River Deben in southeastern England, about seven miles inland from the North Sea. The mouth of the river would have been the means by which most early visitors reached Sutton Hoo. First inhabited about 2000 B.C., Sutton Hoo’s occupation spans over 4000 years, but it is only within the past seventy years that it has been recognized for its significance in the history of Britain. The area consists of a prehistoric settlement, an Anglo-Saxon cemetery (including two ship-burials), and a medieval cemetery. The Anglo-Saxon period (circa seventh century) was the most dynamic of all those represented at Sutton Hoo and was the time during which wealthy burials occurred. As one of the most important archaeological sites in British history, Sutton Hoo owes its heritage to the country’s diverse past. To better understand the meaning of the find, one needs to review history of Britain.
The topography of the region has been relatively unchanged for hundreds of years. By 600 B.C., the people of southeastern England divided the Sutton Hoo property into small enclosed fields.\(^1\) The territory retained those geographical boundaries throughout the Roman occupation of Britain, which lasted for approximately 400 years, from 43 A.D. to about 410 A.D.

By the time the ship-burial took place, Britain had been invaded by several forces: the Romans, the Christians, the Picts, the Scots, and the Saxons. In 306, Constantine was proclaimed Roman emperor, and soon after his 312 conversion to Christianity, the religion swept across the empire. By the second century Christians were already present in parts of Britain, and by 314 Christianity was well established in the northern part of the country. But Roman occupation was not to last. The Briton priest Gildas, who wrote *On the Fall of Britain* (c. 550), states that the Romans sent an army to push back the invading Picts and Scots, but when the Romans pulled out the intruders struck once more. The Roman army again came and banished the raiders and told the British to protect themselves. Instead the Britons pleaded to the Roman Magister Militum\(^2\) for help, but there was no reply. Since there was little support from the Roman government and the empire was declining, Britain was left to its own defenses. It was at this time that the councilors of Britain together with the “proud tyrant,” likely Vortigern, imported Saxons to defend the shores. The late fourth-century historian Ammianus Marcellinus also

\(^2\) James Campbell, ed., *The Anglo-Saxons* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1982), 11; Magister Militum was a commander in the Roman imperial army and was considered to be the power behind the imperial throne.
explains that a Germanic tribe was brought in and settled, quite possibly in East Anglia, the location of Sutton Hoo.³

Three shiploads of Germanic warriors were hired to secure the country. The most famous tale is that of Hengist and Horsa and their men, who were employed by the ruler Vortigern to defend Britain from the Picts and Scots. This account is mentioned in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* under the year 449 A.D., and states that the mercenaries settled in Kent.⁴ While the legendary tale of the Jutes, Hengist and Horsa, is most probably true, it in all likelihood took place almost 100 years after the Germanic tribe first arrived in Britain. After Hengist and Horsa were victorious, the warriors then began a war with their one-time employer, Vortigern. The rebel Jutes soon invaded Kent and probably settled in Lincolnshire or even East Anglia.⁵

The exact time and place of the next group of invaders is questionable and there are several theories circulating. The Venerable Bede (c. 673-735) states that the Angles,  

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⁴ Legend has it that Hengist and Horsa led the Jute invasion of Britain that founded the kingdom of Kent; Campbell, *The Anglo-Saxons*, 26. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* is an anthology from c. 862 that draws on earlier resources. ibid, 23.
⁵ Green, *The Excavation of a Royal Ship-Burial*, 117,120.
Saxons, and Jutes came in after the Roman occupation ended. Under their influence, either jointly or independently, the Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Sutton Hoo was created. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* asserts that the invaders were from Germany and began the kingdoms of East Anglia, Essex, and Mercia in the sixth century, while Bede implies that the invaders were from Sweden. It seems most likely that the Germans (Angles and Saxons) first settled in East Anglia when they were fighting as mercenaries in the fifth century and that rulers came from Sweden in the sixth century. Other than the Anglo-Saxons, the most influential group was almost certainly the Franks, for archaeological finds confirm their impact on East Anglia during the fifth century. At the end of the sixth century only about one-third of eastern Britain was not controlled or settled by Germanic people, and it is at this time that more Anglo-Saxon cemeteries appear.

Bede writes that the invaders’ genealogy begins with the god Woden, who would therefore be the first ancestor of the Anglo-Saxons. Woden is the supreme war-god in the Germanic pagan religion and his counterpart is Odin in the Norse religion. Even though the Jutes migrated from Scandinavia and the Angles and Saxons were Germanic, all had ties to this war god. Charlotte Behr states that Woden was the most important god to the migrating people, which would include the Jutes, Angles, and Saxons. These ties to Woden are referenced throughout the Sutton Hoo artifacts and are discussed in detail in chapter three.

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6 Bede, an Anglo-Saxon theologian and scholar, wrote the *Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation*, which was the most informative history of Britain until the twelfth century. He spent his life at the twin monasteries Monkwearmouth and Jarrow; Campbell, *The Anglo-Saxons*, 70-74.
7 Ibid., 22-36.
8 Bede claimed that the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes, as well as Scandinavians, invaded Britain.
The pagan kingdom of the dead for past warriors as chieftains was Valhalla, a place where the dead could spend eternity feasting and fighting. Reigning over the pagan heaven was the war-god Woden. In order to reach this pagan paradise the Anglo-Saxons cremated and buried their dead in urns or inhumed them with and without coffins or caskets.\textsuperscript{10} The Sutton Hoo Research Committee notes that archaeological studies have found various means of burial at Sutton Hoo: cremation under mounds, cremation under mounds with satellite sacrificial burial, coffins under mounds, and inhumation burial with a ship. The Sutton Hoo interments are similar to pagan burial sites in seventh-century Scandinavia, which would have been contemporary to the time of Anglo-Saxon Sutton Hoo.\textsuperscript{11}

No other burial of the same magnitude and splendor as Sutton Hoo has ever been found in England, which demonstrates that the fifth-century Germanic tribes that invaded Britain were much more advanced than originally believed. Ship-burials were quite common in the homeland of the Anglo-Saxons, but ironically, they have been rarely found in Britain.\textsuperscript{12} The craftsmanship and richness of the burials may have been inspired by the Anglo-Saxon affiliation with the Franks.

1.1 Merovingian Influence

The Franks, who became the rulers of the Merovingian dynasty, had a connection to Britain since the time of the Roman occupation. Bede listed the people who made up


the Anglo-Saxons as the Frisian, the Rugini, the Danes, the Huns, the Old Saxons, and the Boructari. The Rugini assisted in Attila’s invasion of Gaul, in 451 A.D., which may have brought them to Britain. Toward the end of Roman occupation in Britain the imperial capital of Magnus Maximus (c. 383-88), usurper to the Roman Empire, was situated in Gaul, thus linking Britain with the homeland of the Franks. The same men who dominated Roman Britain also ruled Gaul and considered their allegiance to be not to Britain or Gaul but to the section of the empire that ruled both.13

The Merovingians ruled the Frankish kingdom (c. A.D. 450–751), a territory that covered parts of modern day France, Switzerland, Belgium, and the Rhineland. Around 550 A.D. a Merovingian king presided over the Saxons and Angles by establishing control over the southern part of England. These English territories were regarded by the Merovingian ruler as nothing more than a minor province, resembling a secondary dukedom in terms of size and influence.14 Britain may have been considered irrelevant to the Merovingians, but the people had become acquainted and had contact with other parts of the world. Procopius of Caesarea states that in 550 A.D. the Angles accompanied a group of Merovingians on an embassy to Byzantium.15 Since the Franks had multiple communications with the Byzantines, it is possible that the Angles traveled with a Merovingian delegation more than once. It is even feasible that the man buried in mound one of Sutton Hoo was a member of the entourage.16

13 Campbell, *The Anglo-Saxons*, 31, 37; Gaul consists of approximately modern France, Belgium, Luxembourg, and Germany west of the Rhine.
15 Procopius of Caesarea (born c. 490/507- died c. 560s) was a Byzantine historian and major sixth-century source; Campbell, *The Anglo-Saxons*, 22, 30, 38.
Barely a mile from Sutton Hoo, the discovery of a large Byzantine vessel probably imported from Antioch provides evidence of early trade in Britain, and some scholars believe that Britain was involved in commerce with other countries much earlier than is generally accepted. While it is assumed that the Romano-British culture collapsed with the departure of the Roman power, in many places Britain became quite sophisticated and prospered. Examples of pottery, presumably filled with wine and oil, have been discovered in southwestern Britain; such objects were imported in the fifth century from the eastern Mediterranean.\textsuperscript{17} It becomes clear that the Dark Ages in Britain were not as dark as the terminology would have one believe.

During the sixth century, Kent was inhabited by prosperous people, and discoveries indicate that a significant number of the graves were Frankish. This could suggest that members of the Frankish aristocracy settled in Kent. Archaeological finds also demonstrate that the jewelers of Kent at this time were very accomplished. By the end of the sixth century, there were Mediterranean objects found in Kent and Kentish items found in the Merovingian realm, indicating travel between the two kingdoms.\textsuperscript{18}

Christianity slowly took over Britain, and by the seventh century nearly all the nation had converted but East Anglia, which remained largely pagan. In the mid-sixth century, King Aethelbert of Kent married a Merovingian princess. Bertha, the daughter of the king of Paris, was a Christian and was accompanied by her bishop to the predominantly pagan land of Britain. It was under the influence of Bertha that Aethelbert became the first British king to convert to Christianity. In a letter, Pope Gregory I (c.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 93; Edward Schoenfeld and Jana Schulman, “Sutton Hoo: An Economic Assessment,” \textit{Voyage to the Other World}, vol.5, Calvin B. Kendall and Peter S. Wells, eds. (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1992), 21; Campbell, \textit{The Anglo-Saxons}, 22.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 44.
writes that Augustine baptized some 10,000 British people on a mission to Kent. The conversion of King Aethelbert initiated a string of other royal conversions: Aethelbert’s son, the king of Essex, and Rædwald of East Anglia’s son, Sigebert. About 625 A.D. Rædwald’s son, Sigebert, converted to Christianity while in Gaul. Upon the death of his father, Sigebert became the king of East Anglia and established a Christian bishop in the territory. While most of the credit for the spread of Christianity in Britain is given to Augustine, who was sent there by Pope Gregory I, it was actually Aethelbert’s Christian Merovingian wife who brought the first bishop to Britain seven years before the mission of Augustine.

1.2 East Anglia

The period between 400 A.D. and 600 A.D. in Britain is essentially known only through archaeological evidence. There is no accurate documentation stating what date the kingdom of East Anglia was established, but there are several resources that have helped scholars. For example, the writing of the Venerable Bede lists East Anglia as one of the seven kingdoms of Britain and states that the country was settled by the Angles. The exact borders of East Anglia are unknown, but in all probability Sutton Hoo was within the territory and the cemetery would have been created during the early establishment of the East Anglia kingdom. During the seventh century, France, Kent, and Northumbria were Christian kingdoms following Christian burial rites, but pagan burial rites were practiced at Sutton Hoo. The pagan burials were perhaps a reaction to the

19 Ibid., 44-45.
Christian movement sweeping across Britain. Christianity had already overtaken Kent during the early seventh century, and East Anglia soon felt the pressure to convert.²⁰

It is at this time that the Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Sutton Hoo was created. The cemetery consists of eighteen Anglo-Saxon burial mounds including two inhumed ships. The ship-burial and the grave-goods from the mounds show a distinct connection to Scandinavia—evidence that a relationship between the royal families of East Anglia and their homeland persisted until the late sixth century.²¹

The royal family, the Wuffingas, took their name from their first ruler, Wuffa, and by including Caesar in their ancestry after Woden, they established a connection between the East Anglian house and Roman rule in Britain. Bede writes that Rendlesham, a site in East Anglia, was used as a royal residence during Æthelwald’s reign (655-664 A.D.) over the territory.²² In all likelihood Rendlesham was active prior to the rule of Æthelwald, and it is reasonable to assume that kings of East Anglia would be buried about four miles away at Sutton Hoo.

It is in mound one that the large ship-burial was found in 1938. The archaeological finds discovered inside the mound have produced the most valuable examples of Anglo-Saxon work ever recovered on British soil. The craftsmanship of the artifacts and the scale of the memorial has brought new insight to the history of the Anglo-Saxons and has shed brilliant light on an otherwise dark period of British history. To determine who is buried in the mound-one ship-burial we must study all of the likely candidates. The East Anglian kings who could be buried at Sutton Hoo are: Wehha,

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Wuffa, Tytlla, Raegenhere (in succession, but did not rule), Eni (in succession, but did not rule), Rædwald, Earpwald, Sigeberht, or Ergric.\textsuperscript{23} Early sources and the archaeological evidence found at Sutton Hoo will allow us to further narrow down our list of candidates for the body in mound one.

Of the numerous excavations that have taken place at Sutton Hoo, only one has focused on mound one, where the largest ship-burial was found. This excavation lasted only a number of weeks, and the full magnitude of the findings was not understood for years.

\textsuperscript{23} Carver, \textit{Sutton Hoo: Burial Ground of Kings?}, 33.
Chapter 2. The Excavations

The Sutton Hoo cemetery consists of eighteen burial mounds ranging from the prehistoric period to the late Middle Ages. The earliest excavation known at Sutton Hoo was reported in the Ipswich journal in 1860. In this dig, one of the ancient mounds produced a significant number of iron clench nails, most likely from the imprint of the ship in mound two. Seven mounds were opened during the campaign, but no surviving records document what was found or what happened to the artifacts.24 The 1860 “discovery” had apparently been completely forgotten by the time Mrs. Edith Pretty decided to investigate the mounds on her property in 1938.

2.1 1938-1939, Pretty Excavation

In the twentieth century there were three excavation campaigns that took place in the 1930s, 1960s, and 1980s, and this chapter will focus on those digs. All of the mounds excavated, since the 1938 dig, had been previously plundered or disturbed.25 Even mound one, which was the richest and largest intact mound, was violated; fortunately, the looters overshot the treasure by approximately ten feet.

The curiosity of the landowner, Edith Pretty, led to the discovery of the magnificent Anglo-Saxon ship-burial at Sutton Hoo. In 1926

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she and her husband Frank bought the property, and almost immediately the mounds attracted her attention, but it was not until the death of her husband that she began actively to pursue her interest. By 1934, Edith Pretty, a widowed new mother, heard stories of a ghostly horseman and spectral figures being seen on the grounds after sunset. She also heard a tale of a plowman who found a round brooch while working on the property. It is not known if either of these stories prompted her to survey the ancient mounds, but as the landowner, Pretty required no approval to further investigate. As a child, Pretty witnessed her family’s excavation of a Cistercian monastery close to their home, so she was no stranger to archaeological procedures.26

Initial contacts with the Ipswich Museum led Pretty to Basil Brown who, under the supervision of the museum, would conduct the excavation. In 1938, Brown began the project with a salary of thirty-five shillings a week and a room at Pretty’s home. When driving a large iron rod into mound one, Brown hit rock and determined it to be a common stone. Considering the barrow pillaged, Brown abandoned it and chose mound three to investigate next.27 By the condition of the contents in mound three Brown could determine that the mound had been previously uncovered. All that remained were the remnants of a large wooden tray containing the cremated remains of a human and a

Figure 5. Mound map with descriptions.
horse, as well as pottery fragments, a corroded axe head, and a Classical or Early Byzantine plaque.\textsuperscript{28}

Beneath mound two was a discovery that, while rare, linked Sutton Hoo to another cemetery, only nine miles away in Snape. Inside mound two lay a boat-shaped imprint of a vessel that would have measured approximately eighteen feet long. A rivet found was similar to one found in Snape in 1862. A ship and two boat burials were also unearthed in Snape and would have been known to Brown. Back at Sutton Hoo, mound two and the ship had been completely plundered. Of about forty rivets found, only seven remained in their original positions. The finds in mound two also included a glass bowl, a sword, and a decorative shield fragment. An investigation into mound four, which had previously been pillaged, turned up only a bronze bowl containing cremated animal and human bones. By the end of the 1938 excavation, nothing fresh or exciting had come to light, but Pretty considered that the possible finds within the mounds were enough reason to continue.\textsuperscript{29}

In May 1939, Pretty decided to re-examine mound one and assigned her groundskeeper and gardener to assist Brown in excavating the tallest of the mounds, which stands at over nine feet. On May 11, 1939, a corroded iron rivet was discovered in mound one. Brown instantly recognized this as a ship rivet like his discovery in mound two. Because one end of the mound had been had been plowed down, Brown and


\textsuperscript{29} Carver, \textit{Burial Ground of Kings?}, 36, 167; Bruce-Mitford, \textit{A Handbook}, 15, 19; Grohskopf, \textit{The Treasure of Sutton Hoo}, 8.
his team did not expect to find a buried ship of such scale. The original size of the mound would have been much larger than the hundred-foot long and seventy-five-foot wide barrow. With each rivet left in place, the eighty-foot vessel soon took shape. At this point in the work, Pretty decided that a more experienced team of excavators was required to complete the archaeological dig.30

However, the looming threat of war left too little time to consult with archaeologists who were more experienced in excavations of this nature; the dig had to take place without delay. The British Museum and the Inspectorate of Ancient Monuments were consulted, and it was determined that work would resume under the direction of Charles Phillips, a Fellow of Selwyn College, Cambridge, and secretary of the Prehistoric Society. Having recently visited the site while he was in the area on business, Phillips was familiar with Sutton Hoo and recognized that it was not a typical find. Brown conceded the authority of the dig to Phillips and stayed on as an assistant. Phillips hurriedly assembled a number of experienced colleagues to continue the excavations.31

It was under Phillip’s direction that the history of the Anglo-Saxons changed forever. Past excavations of plundered barrows prepared the archaeologists for uncovering a ransacked burial chamber, but they were surprised and overwhelmed by the

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new discovery. The treasure was situated in the shape of a wide H (Figure 7) with a long crossbar; the space above and below the crossbar was rather bare, and the excavators could navigate the area without risking damage to the artifacts.\textsuperscript{32} Phillips and his new team unearthed hundreds of objects and materials: gold, silver, bronze, iron, wood, cloth, pottery, wax, feathers, drinking horns, and fur. Also found within mound one were weaponry, ceremonial items, and objects considered to be symbols of kingship. The archaeologists determined that the ship had one steersman and thirty-eight oarsmen.\textsuperscript{33}

Mound one proved to be the wealthiest treasure ever found on British soil, rendering Sutton Hoo an invaluable asset to Britain’s history. Ship-burial was a pagan custom that provided the deceased with a means of travel to the afterlife. Similar to those in the highly publicized Egyptian burial chambers, many pieces regarding kingship were found inside the ship’s burial chamber. A corroded iron rod, determined to be a standard, was the first symbol of royal office found.\textsuperscript{34} The center of the burial chamber held the personal belongings of the interred, such as a whetstone scepter,\textsuperscript{35} a decayed shield with iron boss and shield mounts, a helmet, a purse with coins, drinking horns, and other domestic and regal items (Figure 8). Mound one also produced a remarkable pile of

\begin{flushright}
Figure 8. Recreation of burial chamber inside the ship-burial of mound one.
\end{flushright}

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 40.
corroded silver, which was exhumed in one big clump to keep the contents intact. After finding the silver, the excavators went on to finish working in another area and were startled to hear a loud metallic click. While sitting in the heat of the sun, the clump of corroded silver separated into six magnificent silver bowls. Ten bowls had been nested together, four of which totally disintegrated, but six of which were absolutely flawless.36

The magnitude of the artifacts found in mound one testifies to the high status of the deceased honor in this memorial. The status of the dead directly relates to the size and type of ship selected for burial, as well as the regalia included. Because of the wealth and ceremonial significance of the relics found inside the burial chamber, the ship-burial was acknowledged as one of high status and, more specifically, the grave of an East Anglian king.37

Since war was imminent for Britain, the British Museum was more concerned with sheltering its collections from air raids in the London Underground Railway than with protecting research excavations such as the one at Sutton Hoo.38 The Ipswich Museum, which initially oversaw the excavations, hastily announced the discovery, leading to incessant disruptions from curious spectators. Pretty was forced to protect the site by retaining two policemen to guard the property twenty-four hours a day.

By the time the British Museum circulated the official release, however, the nation was focused on the war.39 Most of the items were extremely corroded, and a humid environment was crucial for the journey to the British Museum laboratory for further study. The packaging of the artifacts was just one more obstacle the

39 Ibid., 18.
archaeologists had to overcome. The team was quite resourceful in the use of moss from the woods to form a soft, damp packing material.\textsuperscript{40} After the artifacts arrived at the British Museum, Sutton Hoo was put on the back burner.

On August 14, 1939, the north Suffolk coroner organized a Treasure Trove inquest that was required to resolve the ownership of the finds. A “treasure trove” is a buried cache without any verifiable owner; such a treasure would belong to the Crown. If the treasure found at Sutton Hoo was buried in order to be later reclaimed, the entire treasure was the possession of the monarchy. If the treasure was buried to accompany the dead to the after-life, then it belonged to the landowner.\textsuperscript{41} The inquest found that the Sutton Hoo treasure was buried to commemorate the important person within the ship and therefore was the property of Edith Pretty. She then donated all excavated finds to the British Museum, making it the largest endowment to the museum during the life of a donor.\textsuperscript{42}

Just as the excavation was completed, Britain became involved in World War II. This absolutely eliminated all focus on the Anglo-Saxon ship-burial finds. The excavators were sent to war and the mounds were covered back up in 1942 because the British army used the area for military training.\textsuperscript{43} Later examinations would come across shrapnel and ruts from the tanks. When the war ended in 1945, the Sutton Hoo treasures were taken out of hiding and returned to the British Museum, where, six years after their discovery, they were finally inspected.

\textsuperscript{40} Grohskopf, \textit{The Treasure of Sutton Hoo}, 46.
\textsuperscript{41} Carver, \textit{Burial Ground of Kings?}, 20-21.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 22.
\textsuperscript{43} Grohskopf, \textit{The Treasure of Sutton Hoo}, 53, 62.
2.2 1940-1982, Research and Excavation

In 1940, it was not Brown, Phillips, or any other archaeologist working on the dig who was selected to publish the findings of Sutton Hoo. That job fell to Rupert Bruce-Mitford, assistant keeper of the Department of British and Medieval Antiquities at the British Museum. The three-volume set, entitled *The Sutton Hoo Ship-Burial*, was finally completed in 1983, taking over forty years to complete.\(^4^4\)

In 1966, the British Museum developed the next excavation campaign to complete the investigation of the royal burial of mound one and explore the flat ground north of the ship-burial. The excavated flat ground exposed three early medieval body burials with and without grave goods. The archaeologists discovered that the burial chamber in mound five was looted, and six early medieval graves were found between and beyond the mounds, in the flat ground. Under mound one, a group of archaeologists from the Department of Prehistoric and Romano-British Antiquities found a Neolithic trench, a Bronze Age post, and evidence of a prehistoric settlement (c. 2000 B.C.).\(^4^5\) A plaster cast was made of the sandy imprint of the remains of the mound-one ship, and a fiberglass positive later made from the cast was displayed at the National Maritime Museum. The helmet found in the burial chamber was reconstructed by conservator Hebert Margon, but it did not satisfy Bruce-Mitford because the neck and part of the face were left exposed. In 1970, the helmet was dismantled and reassembled into something more suitable for a king.\(^4^6\) From inspecting the 1939 soil heaps, thirty-four more pieces

\(^{45}\) Ibid., 38.
were discovered, including two small brooches, two buckles, and a piece of the whetstone scepter.47

In 1978, Edith Pretty’s heir, Robert Pretty, appealed for support for a new, larger campaign to be conducted under the direction of Robert Bruce-Mitford and Philip Rahtz, the new professor of archaeology at York University. Bruce-Mitford, by this time, had retired from the British Museum, but continued his work at Sutton Hoo as a volunteer. That same year, a steering committee was created and endorsed by the Society of Antiquities of London. The chair was Rosemary Cramp, head of archaeology at Durham University and excavator of sites at Monkwearmouth and Jarrow. A partnership with the Ashmolean Museum of Oxford was established, endowing the museum with the finds from the renewed excavation.48

The steering committee expected to provoke interest in a new dig at Sutton Hoo at an Oxford conference entitled “Anglo-Saxon Cemeteries, 1979,” but were stunned to realize that was not the case. Archaeology had changed in the previous thirty years and Sutton Hoo, which had already been excavated not only once, but twice, was not part of the new plan. The archaeologists were more concerned with discovering new sites than re-examining earlier discoveries.49 Without the support of her colleagues, Cramp removed herself as chair of the steering committee.

2.3 1983-1986, the Evaluation Program

The 1983 campaign was designated as a rescue mission, implying that looters were raiding the mounds. In 1982, a mound was found to have a large hole and there was

47 Ibid., 41.
48 Monkwearmouth and Jarrow are the twin monasteries where Bede resided; Carver, Sutton Hoo: Burial Ground of Kings?, 43, 45.
49 Ibid., 45.
speculation that some of the excavators had done the damage themselves to drum up support. The 1983 excavation campaign encountered greater hostility than any other archaeological dig and was considered a waste of resources, since it was already established that Sutton Hoo was the grave of a seventh-century Anglo-Saxon king. In 1983, in a public meeting held at University College London, a new slant on the excavations was offered. There were still unanswered questions, pertaining to the size of the site, the periods represented, the condition of the artifacts, and the story the artifacts tell. In order to persuade other archaeologists or the need for another dig, the Sutton Hoo steering committee used terms that labeled the excavation as more than just a re-examination of an old archaeological investigation. Some of the language used to publicize the campaign were “evaluation,” “ethical stance,” “excavation strategy,” “intervention,” and “analysis destiny.” The new approach to rally support helped little. As grim as the future looked for a new excavation, the British Museum, faced with the threat of losing any new artifacts from Sutton Hoo, re-entered discussions with the Society of Antiquities to finance a five-year campaign.

The evaluation program finally began with the goal of clearing the land, removing the destructive rabbits that left tunnels in the mounds and mapping out the mounds with metal detectors. Most of the metal present consisted of bullets and cartridge casings left from the British army’s training base during World War II. In 1985, a large prehistoric compound stretching over twenty-five acres was found, for it had been preserved by the eleven-acre medieval cemetery positioned above it.

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50 Ibid., 46, 62.  
51 Ibid., 46, 50.  
52 Ibid., 62, 67.
Soil-penetrating radar detected a burial chamber under mound twelve and a robber’s trench through mound two. The 1938 trench dug by Basil Brown through mound two was reopened and the profile of the boat was still visible at the bottom. Even Brown’s markers were still in place, indicating the position of the ship rivets. During the 1983 excavation, it was theorized that the ship in mound two might have been placed on the surface of the ground rather than in a cavity, as in mound one.53

2.4 1986-1992, the Excavation

After the evaluation program of 1983-86, the last major excavation at Sutton Hoo started in August 1986 and lasted for seven seasons.54 The first site excavated was the cemetery of sand bodies, which are bodies that have been buried and completely decomposed, leaving their remains as stains in the sand (Figure 9). These sand bodies appear to be Anglo-Saxon and could have been sacrificial. There seem to be two types of burials at Sutton Hoo: victims and nobles.

The next site excavated was mound two. First discovered in 1938, this ship-burial was considered nothing more than a collection of rivets scattered about, most likely by robbers. There was a large hole in the center of the mound where the burial chamber had been twice breached: once by robbers and once by Brown in 1938. This mound became

53 Ibid., 62-64.
54 Ibid., 71.
an experiment in mapping the invisible. Six-hundred samples were taken from the soil, providing enough evidence to conclude that a body—probably a high-ranking male—was buried there. In its original state, mound two would have had the grandeur of mound one.\textsuperscript{55}

The same mapping technique used on mound two made the excavation of mounds five, six, seven, seventeen, and eighteen easier to conduct. All four mounds contained cremation burials that had been entirely plundered. In mound five, the skull of the cremated person was slashed with a sword or blade, indicating a possible sacrifice. The only wealthy burial of a woman was in mound fourteen. The barrow had been robbed, but the thieves were interrupted by a rainstorm that carried some of the spoils away and allowed them to remain for excavators to save.\textsuperscript{56}

The last two mounds were stumbled on almost entirely by chance. While the sun was going down one day, a faint shadow of two slight rises was noticed, revealing mounds seventeen and eighteen. Mound seventeen was the last mound excavated. Dug in 1991, it was the only mound found fully intact aside from mound one. Beside the coffin in mound seventeen appeared to be the remnants of a knapsack that once contained lamb chops; all that remained was a pile of bones. Inside the coffin was an unexpectedly well-preserved skeleton of a young man with a long sword. Also found were the remains of a purse, small pieces of glass and garnet, and a shield-boss, as well as the undisturbed burial of a horse—part skeleton, part sand body.\textsuperscript{57} A tangled mass of decayed leather belts and buckles, too fragile for the excavators to handle, was also discovered. A harness, dissected into its component parts, was also uncovered and reassembled later by

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 80-81.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 81-82.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 82-85; a shield-boss is an iron knob that projects from the center of the shield.
the British Museum: it was the first Anglo-Saxon harness to be excavated. At this time, the excavators decided to call in the British Museum conservation team.\textsuperscript{58}

In the spring of 1992, the team returned to clean up the site. The excavations were over and it was time to reconstruct the mounds to the height at which they were when first encountered in 1983. Mound two was raised to thirteen feet, which was the impressive height it stood before plowing flattened it.\textsuperscript{59}

Inside a purse, found in mound one, were forty-two coins. None of these are dated, but approximate dates can be established by studying the images on each. Because images on coins were often copied, the dating may be erroneous, resulting in numerous revisions. A group of experts determined the first date attributed to the Sutton Hoo royal ship-burial, via the coins, as 640-670 A.D. New analysis in 1960 of the Merovingian coins adjusted the date of the coins to approximately 625.

If this was a burial chamber and not merely a memorial, then where is the body? Although the remains were not there, traces of phosphate, which are often found in the soil surrounding a decaying body, were found inside the burial chamber. After examining data from a murder investigation at the Pathology Museum at Guy’s Hospital, Bruce-Mitford determined that acid rainwater could have destroyed a buried body. The body of mound one would have lain in rainwater that had penetrated the hull and burial chamber of the decaying ship. The water would have

acidified as it passed through the acidic sand in the mound. The body would have decayed completely, thereby possibly solving the mystery of “where’s the body?”\textsuperscript{60}

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 86-87.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 31-32.
The Sutton Hoo site was not merely a burial ground, but a spyglass into the lost history of the early Anglo-Saxons. Prior to the 1939 find, wealth and practices such as those indicated in the burial mounds were only considered fiction. The splendor of the mound-one ship-burial indicates that the person interred was of great importance and in all likelihood a king. Given that the cemetery is located in East Anglia, it is inevitable that it would be the burial of an East Anglian king.

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61 Ibid., 47.
Chapter 3. Finds of Mound One

In this chapter I will discuss the items found in mound one that are generally considered to pertain to kingship and what these artifacts symbolize. The objects discovered deep within mound one of Sutton Hoo are instrumental for the identification of the man interred inside the ninety-foot vessel; these grave goods are some of the most unique pieces representing Anglo-Saxon history. Excavated in 1939, this burial mound not only contained a ship with a burial chamber and coffin, but other significant artifacts regarded as regalia. The term regalia refers to objects considered to be symbols of power and kingship. By classifying the items in the grave of Sutton Hoo as regalia, we can better explore the identity of the individual buried in the mound.

There is only one acknowledged medieval burial containing authentic regalia items that irrefutably can be considered a royal burial; all other royal burials are mere speculation. In 1653, the tomb of the Merovingian king Childeric of the Franks was discovered at the church of Saint-Brice in Tournai; this burial was filled with luxurious objects, jewels, and armor befitting a king. Among these was a ring bearing the

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63 Childeric I died in 481 A.D.
inscription CHILDERICI REGIS, (“of Childeric the king”) thus without a doubt marking the tomb as royal and the various materials inside as regalia.

Rupert Bruce-Mitford analyzed the Sutton Hoo finds in 1940 for the British Museum and argued that the identity of the man memorialized in Sutton Hoo’s mound one must be that of a king because of the presence of regalia objects. The objects may not have actually been the personal property of the king, but rather may have been considered “clan possessions” bequeathed to the king or ruler as a tribute. 64 By exploring each of the regalia items found in mound one we can begin to piece together the history of Sutton Hoo and the man immortalized in the Anglo-Saxon ship-burial.

3.1 The Whetstone

Almost certainly the most bewildering find is the whetstone that was in all probability used as an ornamental scepter: a symbol of kingship. A whetstone typically is a fine-grained stone used for sharpening tools, but in this instance the stone is completely pristine and has no signs of use. At almost three feet tall and weighing more than six pounds, the whetstone is much too cumbersome to have been created merely for sharpening knives and swords. If the whetstone indeed was made to be a symbolic scepter, I agree with the opinion of

64 Campbell, The Impact of the Sutton Hoo Discovery, 82; Carver, The Sutton Hoo Ship-burial, 3.
Sir Thomas Kendrick, who suggested that it symbolized a Saxon leader in his role as forger, provider, and master of the swords.\textsuperscript{65}

Each end of the long rectangular whetstone has a crimson-painted orb located above four pear-shaped faces, possibly relating to the Norse god of war, Thor, son of Wodin. The colored knobs could perhaps signify Thor, whose iconography depicts him with a red beard. Totaling eight faces on the entire object, the whetstone has one end with three bearded faces and one—most likely masculine—unbearded face. The opposite end of the whetstone includes four female faces.\textsuperscript{66}

On top of the whetstone is a delicate bronze stag mounted atop an iron ring. The stag is another symbol connected with Thor, and the ring is at times associated with the cult of Odin. Originally the stag was thought to have been placed on top of the standard (Figure 16), but it has now been determined that it belonged to the whetstone (Figure 11).

\textsuperscript{65} Bruce-Mitford, \textit{A Handbook}, 31.
With the stag placed on the top of the whetstone, it becomes more apparent that the object was less functional and more of a ceremonial royal scepter.  

While there are no other cases of whetstones from this period that are as intricate or refined as the piece from Sutton Hoo, there are three similar objects that are often compared to the Sutton Hoo whetstone: the Hagested bronze pin, the Husiatyn pillar, and the Gundestrup cauldron. Like the whetstone, the fifth-century Hagested bronze pin (Figure 13) features four faces that look toward the points of the compass and are crowned by an animal form. The Husiatyn pillar (Figure 14) consists of four faces similarly laid out. Although two of the faces are male and two are female, they may even be the same god in disguise, since all faces are under a single hat. In addition, the pillar was once painted red, akin to the red spheres of the whetstone. The Gundestrup cauldron (Figure 15), created between the second and first century B.C., dates much earlier than the whetstone and displays four bearded deities and three, possibly four, female deities comparable to the four male and four female faces on the whetstone. One god is identified as Tara, a Celtic thunder god who is the counterpart to Thor. The number four (or

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68 Ibid., 31.
patterns of four) is symbolic of Thor, and these patterns are seen on the cauldron, the bronze pin, the pillar, and the Sutton Hoo whetstone.\textsuperscript{69}

The Germanic and Celtic influences in the whetstone are great, but the theories as to where the scepter was created are greater. The use of stone and the style of the stag suggest a possible Celtic association and perhaps production. The stag may also already have been a Celtic-made heirloom at the time that it was attached to the whetstone.\textsuperscript{70} Whetstones with faces carved on at least one end are known in Germanic and Celtic settings in Britain, but none rival the Sutton Hoo whetstone in scale or scope.

The signet ring of the Merovingian King Childeric I (c.436-481), which has since been destroyed, depicted a king holding a spear rather than a scepter, so why does the Sutton Hoo ship-burial contain a scepter if it were of German creation? The grave of Childeric I was, after all, considered the German epitome of a royal tomb. Perhaps Childeric I was buried with a scepter, regardless of the illustration on the signet ring, but when the grave goods were plundered the scepter vanished. Although there is a visible Germanic relationship, as in the pear-shaped heads on the whetstone, there are no comparable Germanic objects.\textsuperscript{71} Regardless of a Celtic or Germanic origin, it is the sheer presence of the scepter whetstone—a symbol of kingship—that corroborates that the Sutton Hoo mound is the grave of a king.

\section*{3.2 The Standard}

The identification of the standard has had a complicated history. Upon discovery, the five-foot-three-inch wrought-iron standard was first considered to be a decorative

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid., 467-469.
\textsuperscript{71} Bruce-Mitford, \textit{Aspects of Anglo-Saxon Archaeology}, 6; Ryan, \textit{The Sutton Hoo Ship-burial and Ireland}, 83.
torch with a spike at the base for being stuck in the ground. An oil-soaked rag was thought to have been twisted around the iron grid to serve as a giant wick for the torch. The bronze stag and iron ring from the whetstone were originally considered to have been mounted on the top of the standard and were, in fact, displayed in that manner in the British Museum for more than twenty years. It was discovered, however, that the stag would not have withstood the intense heat from the fire, and there is no evidence that the standard or iron stag had ever been in a high temperature for any amount of time. The stag did not even fit correctly on the standard, and upon further investigation it was revealed that the proper place for the stag and ring were on the whetstone.\footnote{Bruce-Mitford, \textit{A Handbook}, 29; Green, \textit{The Excavation of a Royal Ship-Burial}, 66.}

Ancient Roman standards were constructed basically in the same manner as the Sutton Hoo standard, and the East Anglian royal house used any means to link itself to the power of Rome in Britain. As a standard, pennants might have hung from all four sides of the iron grill, suspended by the stylized ox horns and attached to the staff underneath. Professor Sune Lindqvist, of Uppsala University, has

\begin{figure}[h]
    \centering
    \includegraphics[width=0.3\textwidth]{figure16.png}
    \caption{The Sutton Hoo standard.}
    \label{fig:sutton_hoo_standard}
\end{figure}

\begin{figure}[h]
    \centering
    \includegraphics[width=0.3\textwidth]{figure17.png}
    \caption{Example of standards that would have been seen on Roman coins.}
    \label{fig:roman_standards}
\end{figure}
suggested that the spike was designed to fit in a leather loop fastened to a belt so that the standard could be carried, rather than being placed in the earth. The details of the iron grill work of the horizontal piece have no counterparts on any Roman standard. There are no surviving Roman standards today, but illustrations on Roman coins and on Roman relief sculptures show how they might have looked. There is no way to know if the Sutton Hoo standard is styled after a Roman standard or after the standards the Anglo-Saxons could have seen on Roman coins circulating Britain at the time. The Sutton Hoo standard was positioned in the burial chamber next to the other regalia and exceptional objects.73 These points give support to the Sutton Hoo burial as the final resting place of a king.

### 3.3 The Purse, Coins, and Buckle

Thirty-seven gold coins found inside an ornate purse give some of the strongest evidence as to the dating and environment surrounding the Sutton Hoo burial. The purse (Figure 18), supported by a belt with an elaborate buckle (Figure 19), would have been placed inside the ship’s burial chamber on top of the coffin. The lid of the purse is covered with ornamental millefiori glass.

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designs and gold and garnets mounted within a gold frame.\textsuperscript{74} The buckle (Figure 19) is packed with thirteen stylized animals including two bird heads that are possible references to Wodin. Eagles and falcons are often associated with nobility in the Germanic world. The knotted style of the gold buckle resembles work done in Sweden, called Style II, but because it is analogous to other Anglo-Saxon pieces, it is believed to be of English craftsmanship. The intertwined animals of Sutton Hoo can be considered a link between the pagan world and the creation of the Lindisfarne Gospels in 698 A.D.\textsuperscript{75}

Not only does the dating of the coins indicate a \textit{terminus post quem} for the burial, but the coins also tell us with whom the Sutton Hoo inhabitant was in contact. The coins found in the purse, three of which are unstruck blanks and two of which are ingots, all stem from Merovingian Gaul and can be dated in the late sixth or early seventh centuries. Of the thirty-seven coins, only five identify a specific monarch. The two ingots have been stripped of their monetary value by being mounted as jewelry; thus they retained their value as gold but could not be considered legal tender. It has been speculated that because each of the thirty-seven coins was minted in a different location, the collection was deliberately chosen. However, the Merovingians had so many mints that there is a fifty percent chance of getting two from the same mint in a group of thirty-seven. Of the 144 coins of the same period found in England before 1975, the majority are Merovingian, so it is not surprising that the hoard of coins found at Sutton Hoo was Merovingian.\textsuperscript{76} Alan Stahl, Curator of Numismatics at Princeton University, maintains that only nineteen coins

\textsuperscript{74} Carver, \textit{Burial Ground of Kings?}, 126; Grohskopf, \textit{The Treasure of Sutton Hoo}, 70.
from the Sutton Hoo parcel that are marked with the name of the mint have been positively accepted. Perhaps more interesting is that when counting the blank coins, the total inside the purse comes to forty, suggesting that a specific number of coins was desired. This could possibly be payment for forty oarsmen, and the two ingots could have been payment to two steersmen for the passage to the other world. While such speculation is fascinating, there is no evidence of similar practices in comparable burials. The idea that the thirty-seven coins, three blanks, and two ingots represent the fees for forty oarsmen, a pilot, and a steersman was advanced by the historian Philip Grierson, by analogy with the Roman payment to the ferryman who took souls across the river Styx to Hades. If this was the meaning for the coins, then the date of the coin parcel could be close to the date of their placement in the burial. Despite the fact that it was a conscious choice to include coins in the purse, it remains conjecture whether the types of coins, their source, or their number were of any particular significance.

### 3.4 The Helmet

Perhaps the most recognizable artifact associated with Sutton Hoo is the helmet, which is regarded as a quite extraordinary find, since only four other Anglo-Saxon helmets have been ever discovered. When found, the helmet consisted of nothing more than hundreds of corroded pieces of iron (Figure 20). The first of the reconstructions of the helmet took over six months to be finished. Originally covered with bronze plates, the helmet would have been similar in design to those found in Sweden dating to the Vendel period (600-800 A.D.)—Vendel and Valsgärde are the sites of large burial

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80 Grohskopf, *The Treasure of Sutton Hoo*, 64.
Figure 20. Sutton Hoo helmet reconstructed from fragments found in mound one.

Figure 21. Sutton Hoo helmet reconstruction as it would have looked.

Figure 22. Detail from the Sutton Hoo helmet of dancing warriors.

Figure 23. Helmet from a burial mounds at Vendel, Sweden.

Figure 24. A bird-shaped metal shield fitting from Vendel.

Figure 25. An ornamental metal plate from another Vendel warrior helmet.
mounds in Sweden containing artifacts similar in design to those of Sutton Hoo (Figure 23). Some of the pieces of the Sutton Hoo helmet that were instantly recognizable were the nose, mouth, and moustache sections and two bronze dragon heads (Figures 20 and 21). A few of the fragments even had traces of stamped and embossed designs.\(^{81}\)

There are three figurative scenes that are repeated across the surface of the helmet. The scenes include one of a figure on horseback trampling a fallen chain-mailed warrior (Figure 26), a scene of dancing warriors, and a scene of battling figures (Figure 22). There are also interlaced ornamental designs of ribbon-like knotwork, classified by specialist as style II, that are similar to the pieces from Vendel.\(^{82}\) The scene of dancing warriors (Figure 22) was shrouded in mystery until Bruce-Mitford noticed similar designs on a helmet from Valsgärde, the location of Viking and pre-Viking ship-burials. It was then discovered that the warriors were participating in a ritual sword dance.\(^{83}\)

The helmet consists of two facing bird-like figures, in all likelihood flying dragons, with large teeth and garnet eyes. The outstretched dragon wings of the central creature forms the nose piece; the body serves as the nose guard, with the tail constructing the moustache on the helmet. The body of the second beast stretches across the top of the helmet over the cap and ends with another dragon head (Figure 21).\(^{84}\)

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\(^{81}\) Ibid., 62-64.
3.5 The Shield

Fragments found in the burial vessel and the study of contemporary sources have allowed for a complete reconstruction of the Sutton Hoo wooden shield (Figure 27). The shield, decorated with winged creatures (Figures 28 and 29) similar to the style of those on the helmet, was likely owned by a high-ranking individual. When the arched shield was discovered, all the wood had rotted away and the only fragments that remained were the iron centerpiece and scattered pieces of metalwork. The body of the shield was made of wood with leather stretched over the surface, and in the center was a projecting iron knob; the entire shield was approximately thirty-six inches across.

There are two surviving decorative pieces: a gilt bronze bird with an open beak and sharp claw (Figure 28), similar to shield fittings from Vendel (Figure 24), and a winged dragon reminiscent of the dragons from the Sutton Hoo helmet (Figure 29). Above the claw of the bird is a pear-shaped garnet inlay.

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85 Grohskopf, The Treasure of Sutton Hoo, 87.
of a stylized human head. The facial type of the head resembles those of the bearded heads on the whetstone scepter.

One unique find connected with the shield is a sword ring. Traditionally sword rings were attached to swords as symbols of high rank and as a result are very rare. Over time, the rings evolved into solid and purely decorative objects; at Sutton Hoo the sword ring was actually mounted to the shield. A similarly designed sword ring, affixed to a drinking horn, was found in a ship grave in Sweden, and like the Sutton Hoo helmet, the shield is comparable to similar objects found at Vendel.86

By taking photographs from a range of angles to show how the fragments lay in the ground, scientists were able to reconstruct the shield. Because of the deteriorated condition of the finds, it still remained difficult to determine the original shape of the shield. This is because the wooden shield would have been placed against the west wall of the chamber and the subsequent decomposition of the chamber would have pushed the rotting shield about.87

Figure 29. Winged dragon decoration from the Sutton Hoo shield.

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The study of seventh-century Scandinavian shields and contemporary items depicting shields helped determine the shape of the Sutton Hoo shield. The Franks casket (Figure 30), created in northern England in 650 A.D., is a small carved box that portrays the Weland story and depicts a warrior carrying a round shield. Because the casket is contemporary with Sutton Hoo, was created in northern England, and shows a round shield, it was concluded that the Sutton Hoo shield would have been round, as well.

### 3.6 Drinking Horns

Carol Neuman de Vegvar suggests that the drinking horns found at Sutton Hoo also were to be regarded as symbols of authority and possessing noble significance (Figure 31). The remains of two drinking horns of exceptional size were found alongside several other drinking vessels. Measuring over

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88 Weland is the protagonist of a Scandinavian, German, and Anglo-Saxon legend. Weland or Wayland was a talented smith of superior skill. Imprisoned by a Swedish king, Weland was forced to work in the king’s metalsmith shop and was crippled to prevent his escape. The smith then murdered the king’s two young children and created cups from their skulls, which were sent to their father. When the king’s daughter brought a gold ring to be repaired, she was raped by Weland, who, by enchanted flight, flew to his freedom. “Wayland, or Weland, the Smith,” Britannica Student Encyclopedi, 2005, Encyclopædia Britannica Premium Service, 28 Dec. 2005 <http://www.britannica.com/ebi/article-9340021>.

89 Grohskopf, The Treasure of Sutton Hoo, 87.

three-and-a-half feet long, the horns were from the now extinct auroch. The auroch, similar to an ox, is believed to have died out in England before 55 B.C., but the species persevered in central Europe until the early seventh century. In all likelihood the two drinking horns came from the north German forest. The mouths of the drinking horns are decorated with a silver-gilt panel with ornamental animal designs stamped into the surface. The points of the horns are also adorned with silver-gilt panel stampings with the tips forming stylized bird’s heads.

The drinking horns are often overlooked as regalia because they were not placed in the burial chamber with other regalia items, nor were they located with the more domestic items. The horns were found between a Byzantine bowl and most of the personal objects of the deceased. The Sutton Hoo drinking horns are decorated similar to the ones depicting German barbarians on Roman triumphal arches in France. The captured barbarians are shown with drinking horns because they were considered traditional Germanic objects. The tradition of drinking horns goes back as far as 500 B.C., the date attributed to a royal grave in which one was found. Presumably, warriors would sit in a circle, possibly by order of rank, and would ritually drink from a single drinking horn. If a warrior partook from his leader’s cup, that warrior would then be obligated to follow his leader to death, even if that meant his own demise.

While these artifacts may not individually represent regalia, when considered in context with one another, the objects suggest that the tomb was that of a leader or even a king. The whetstone, standard, and shield are more obvious regalia items with clear

connections to leadership. The helmet, while nothing exceptional in the grave of a warrior, is more elaborate than one would expect to find and therefore would likely have been in the possession of a wealthy leader. The purse and coins reflect more of a memorial to a high-ranking individual. The drinking horns symbolize the devotion of warriors to their leader and would be considered items associated with leadership or kingship. The only artifacts that point to a particular time period are the dates of the coins. It is the study of history and the use of the regalia found in the Sutton Hoo ship-burial that will guide us in determining who is the body in the mound.
Chapter 4. The Body in the Mound

In the Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Sutton Hoo there is a mystery. Who is the person buried along with the regal artifacts in the elaborate ship-burial? Numerous leaders of East Anglia have been mentioned as possible candidates. In discussing the succession of rulers of East Anglia, I will eliminate each of the candidates, leaving the pagan ruler Rædwald as the most likely person commemorated in mound one of Sutton Hoo. I will show how the historical record and the artifacts found in the burial chamber reveal clues as to the identity of the interred man.

Since no remains of a body have been found, the question of whether or not there even was a body interred in the ship must be addressed. As mentioned in chapter two, higher levels of phosphates were found inside the burial chamber of mound one than outside, indicating that biological remains may have existed inside the chamber. Just because phosphates were found does not mean that there was a body, but along with the arrangement of artifacts (Figure 7) and the connection with the Scandinavians, who were also burying their dead in ship-burials, the odds that a body was interred are very high.

Bones were found in other parts of Sutton Hoo dating to the seventh century, so why were there not bones found in mound one? The soil in the area of mound one is very acidic, and it is not surprising that no bodily remains were found. In other parts of the cemetery sand bodies were uncovered; the bodies were only still visible because of the difference in texture from the surrounding earth. Tests concluded that in less than six years a body could turn to sand in the Sutton Hoo soil. This indicates the possibility that a body could have been buried in the ship, because under nine feet of earth, the weight of the collapsing vessel would have crushed any delicate outline of a sand body. This, in
conjunction with the discovery of phosphates in the burial chamber, almost completely refutes the theory that the mound was a cenotaph, a commemorative monument without a body.\textsuperscript{94}

If one assumes that there was a body, there is still no archaeological “smoking gun” that irrefutably identifies the body buried in the mound one ship-burial. However, by looking at historical documentation and the artifacts found within, scholars have been able to narrow down the list of candidates. Bruce-Mitford attests that the burial must be that of a king, not only because of the exceptional craftsmanship of the objects, but also because of the presence of items acknowledged as “regalia.”\textsuperscript{95} By identifying some of the artifacts found within the burial chamber as regalia, we are in effect confirming that the burial is that of a king. There were no possessions or artifacts found to identify the person buried as a woman. Also, a foreign king who died while visiting would have lacked the means to have such an ornate funeral. Sutton Hoo is only miles from Rendlesham, which Bede refers to as the royal residence of the East Angles, and it is possible that Sutton Hoo was a royal cemetery for the Angles. If Sutton Hoo was the royal burial ground, then the king interred in mound one would have been an East Anglian king. The rulers of East Anglia most often suggested as possible candidates for the Sutton Hoo burial are Wehha, Wuffa, Tytila, Raegenhere (in succession, but did not rule), Eni (in succession, but did not rule), Rædwald, Earpwald, Sigeberht, Ecgric, Anna, Æthelhere, and Æthelwald (Table 1). While twelve nobles of East Anglia have been mentioned as the possible person immortalized in the ship-burial, the most likely individual is Rædwald, who ruled from about 599 until his death in c. 624.

\textsuperscript{94} Carver, \textit{Sutton Hoo Burial Ground of Kings}, ?, 171.
\textsuperscript{95} Campbell, “The Impact of the Sutton Hoo Discovery,” 82.
Table 1. Kings of East Anglia.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>King</th>
<th>Death Date</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wuffa</td>
<td>d.578</td>
<td>Founder of the Wuffinga</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tytila</td>
<td>d.599</td>
<td>Son of Wuffa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rædwald</td>
<td>d.624/5</td>
<td>Son of Tytila and grandson of Wuffa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Earpwald</td>
<td>d.627/8</td>
<td>Son of Rædwald</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sigeberht</td>
<td>d.636/7</td>
<td>Son of Rædwald</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecgric</td>
<td>d.636/7</td>
<td>Kinsman of Sigeberht</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>d.654</td>
<td>Son of Eni</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>æEthelhere (æEthelric?)</td>
<td>d.654</td>
<td>Brother of Anna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>æEthelwald</td>
<td>d.663/4</td>
<td>Brother of Anna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ealdwulf (Aldwulf)</td>
<td>d.713</td>
<td>Son of æEthelhere</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aelfwold (Alfwold)</td>
<td>d.749</td>
<td>Son (or brother) of Ealdwulf</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While it is widely accepted that Sutton Hoo is a pagan burial, there are some scholars who still make claims that the burial is that of a converted Christian. Of the several Christian candidates, we either know where they are buried or that their bodies were lost in battle, thus initiating the cenotaph or memorial theory. The idea of a Christian burial or cenotaph no longer has any standing, as it has since been discovered that the burial chamber did in all likelihood hold a body.

The specific dating of the Sutton Hoo burial depends on the coins in the purse. The original dates given to the coins in 1939, by Derek Allen of the British Museum, were 640-70 A.D. Based on these dates, Rædwald, who most likely died in 624 (Table 1), could no longer be considered a viable candidate. After the war, in 1946, John Allan, Keeper of the Coins in the British Museum, revealed that the hoard of coins contained one dating to the reign of King Dagobert I (628-38), which still eliminates Rædwald from the list of players since his death took place prior to 628. Then in 1952, Phillip Grierson, a scholar of coins, confirmed the earliest date for the burial, between 650 A.D. and 660 A.D.96 The original dating of the coins led scholars to focus their attention on æEthelhere, who died in 654. Over the past sixty-eight years, technology has enabled scholars to more

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accurately date artifacts; in particular the coins have been re-analyzed, resulting in another set of dates. In 1960, French coin expert Jean Lafaurie established the date of one of the coins to be around 625, which was confirmed by John Kent of the British Museum, who conducted his own independent investigation. Rædwald was considered a serious candidate. Christian items found in the mound date the burial to before c.640, and the coins date the burial to after 625, leaving a window of about fifteen years in which the burial could have taken place. Historian Norman Scarfe believed that the coins’ find spot in the ceremonial purse suggests a political payment, possibly in reference to the bribing of Rædwald by Æthelfrith.

By shifting his allegiance back and forth between the pagan religion of his ancestry and one foot in the new religion of Christianity, Rædwald seems to be the only king that can be associated with the various religious and ceremonial artifacts in the burial chamber. Pressed by the king of Kent during a visit, Rædwald fell to the political pressures of the day and converted to Christianity. Bede reports that upon his return to East Anglia, Rædwald was encouraged by his wife to renounce his new-found religion and return to the pagan belief of their ancestors. According to Bede, in an effort to please the East Anglian pagan populace Rædwald housed both a Christian and pagan shrine in the same temple. Christian artifacts did find their way into the burial chamber. Two spoons with the inscription “Paul” on one and “Saul” on the other and ten silver bowls with a cruciform design are acknowledged as gifts for a royal convert. After Rædwald converted to Christianity in Kent, it is possible that he received gifts commemorating the

97 Ibid., Campbell, “The Impact of the Sutton Hoo Discovery,” 82.
99 Ibid., 34.
100 Ibid., 34; Bruce-Mitford, Aspects of Anglo-Saxon Archaeology, 26.
occasion. This conversion would have been of great significance to Pope Boniface V, who, Bede notes, sent various Saxon kings gifts upon their conversion.\footnote{Grohskopf, The Treasure of Sutton Hoo, 107, 127.} The East Anglian king’s conversion to Christianity was, in all probability, a political maneuver rather than the result of spiritual enlightenment.

Edwin of Deira resided for a time in the court of Rædwald and it is this stay that gives further support to the claim that the body in the mound is that of Rædwald. In an escape from King Æthelfrith of Bernicia, Edwin requested and received protection from Rædwald. Æthelfrith subsequently offered Rædwald a bribe for the murder of Edwin, which Rædwald initially accepted. Bede notes that it was Rædwald’s unnamed queen who convinced him of how dishonorable it would be for such a great king to deceive a friend for the sake of gold. With Rædwald’s support, Æthelfrith was defeated at the river Idle in c. 616 and Edwin was crowned king of Christian Northumbria. Because of Rædwald’s power and influence, he earned a place in Bede’s list of Bretwaldas. The term Bretwalda means “wide ruler” or “great ruler” of Britain.\footnote{Carver, “Research Reports 1990–1992,” Bulletin of the Sutton Hoo Research Committee 7 (1990), 34; Simon Keynes, “Rædwald the Bretwalda,” Voyage to the Other World, 116; Steven Fanning, “Bede, Imperium and the Bretwaldas,” Speculum (1991), 4. Bede actually never used the term Bretwalda; it was coined by the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle that copied Bede’s commentary of the seven greatest men of Britain.} According to Bede, King Edwin was accustomed to having a standard carried before him on his royal journeys. It is possible that the East Anglian stay may have introduced Edwin to that custom and the very standard found at Sutton Hoo may have been seen by Edwin leading Rædwald in a procession.\footnote{Bruce-Mitford, A Handbook, 26.}

Rædwald’s queen, according to Bede, had great influence over his life, so why not in death? She possibly controlled his burial and may have made the interment an
extravagant pagan event because of her strong beliefs. It was, after all, Rædwald’s wife who convinced him to renounce his new religion of Christianity. The blatant pagan attitude could be perhaps a reaction to the Christian faith that was sweeping Britain.\textsuperscript{104} The queen may have been the one to choose the grave goods that would depict the ideal balance between the king and the man. Included in the burial chamber, near where a body would have lain, were symbols of leadership, such as a sword, helmet, shield, scepter, and standard; these objects were juxtaposed to washing cloths, shoes, spare socks, knives for clipping hair and nails, and other personal items that one would assume were selected by the wife of the deceased.\textsuperscript{105}

The sophisticated pagan ship-burial of Sutton Hoo would have been reserved for a highly revered pagan ruler, but did anyone other than Rædwald fill this role? Earpwald was raised following the pagan religion of his father, Rædwald, whom he succeeded as king. \textit{The Chronicle} alleges that in c. 632 King Edwin of Northumbria converted the newly crowned king Earpwald to Christianity. But Earpwald, killed about 633, lacked a significant reign and is therefore seen as undeserving of such an elaborate pagan ship-burial.

East Anglia’s possible political connection with the Franks may have helped provide some of the grave goods found inside the burial chamber. The name Sigeberht which Rædwald chose for his second son, was probably selected from the Frankish royal family genealogy. Edward James believes that Sigeberht escaped to Gaul, possibly to the Merovingian court, when at odds with his father. It was in Gaul that Sigeberht learned of his succession to the throne, almost certainly leaving inundated with gifts. Ian Wood

\textsuperscript{104} Carver, \textit{Sutton Hoo: Burial Ground of Kings?}, 136.  
\textsuperscript{105} Ibid., 169.
alleges that some of these gifts may have been part of the treasures found in the mound one ship-burial.\textsuperscript{106}

Shortly after Sigeberht came to the throne in c. 636 he converted to Christianity; this decision would soon turn his life into chaos. As a devout Christian, the new king founded the future Bury St. Edmunds monastery. Within three years of being crowned, the king abdicated the throne to a kinsman in order to enter the monastery. About 640, the pagan king of the Mercian Angles attacked East Anglia, and the East Anglian nobles requested that Sigeberht join them to show a unified front. When he declined, he was forced at knifepoint into combat. During the battle, the Mercian forces won, and both Sigeberht and Ecgric, the kinsman, were slain. If the body of Sigeberht were retrieved from the battle, chances are he would have been buried in the monastery he established.\textsuperscript{107} A Christian king would have been buried in consecrated ground, not in the ancient pagan cemetery of his ancestors in the heathen manner. As dedicated as the Christian rulers were, being buried in the pagan fashion would have gone against their convictions.

Sandra Glass believes that a burial on the scale of Sutton Hoo could only be by a king for a king. After the death of Sigeberht and Ecgric, Anna, the son of Rædwald’s younger brother, Eni, was crowned in 635. Glass contends that upon the death of Ecgric, Anna allowed the pagan warriors to erect a memorial to their fallen leader.\textsuperscript{108} The royal treasury was emptied of pagan heirlooms because, as a Christian, Anna wanted all

\textsuperscript{106} Edward James, “Royal Burials among the Franks,” The Age of Sutton Hoo: The Seventh Century in North-Western Europe (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1992), 241.
\textsuperscript{107} Green, The Excavation of a Royal Ship-Burial, 93; Bruce-Mitford, Aspects of Anglo-Saxon Archaeology, 24.
\textsuperscript{108} Grohskopf, The Treasure of Sutton Hoo, 124-125.
reminders of the pagan past buried and what better way to remove them than by donating the items to the burial of Ecgric.\textsuperscript{109} While this is an exciting theory, Glass is the only scholar I have found to suggest Ecgric as the body in the mound.

Other scholars consider Anna to be buried in or memorialized by the mound. Anna was a Christian leader who founded a monastery in Blythburgh, where most consider him to be buried.\textsuperscript{110} The twelfth-century Ely Chronicle recorded that his body was venerated there. To consider that the Sutton Hoo ship-burial was for Anna we would have to believe it to be a cenotaph set up by the pagans in his court in honor of their king who fell defending their country.\textsuperscript{111} Since we suppose a body was buried in the ship, and it is known where Anna was buried, he can almost certainly be eliminated as a candidate for the mound-one interment.

After the death of Anna, his brother Æthelhere, came to the throne. Less than a year after the death of Anna, in about 655 A.D., Æthelhere was massacred in the battle of Northumbria, along with all of his soldiers and the Mercian leader, Penda. The dating of artifacts does not help in choosing between Æthelhere and Anna, since they died so close to one another, but the location of the body may be of assistance. The body of Æthelhere was lost in the battle of Northumbria, and the body of Anna is buried in Blythburgh. Although a cenotaph would seem likely for Æthelhere, especially since there is no suggestion that he was Christian, there is actually evidence to the contrary. Since he fought a battle along side Penda, and there were still surviving signs of paganism in East

\textsuperscript{109} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{110} Before scientific studies indicated phosphates in the burial chamber of mound one, suggesting a decomposed body. Anna was considered the main candidate commemorated in the ship-burial.
\textsuperscript{111} Bruce-Mitford, Aspects of Anglo-Saxon Archaeology, 25; Green, The Excavation of a Royal Ship-Burial, 94.
Anglia; in all likelihood he followed the same pagan religion. There are even speculations that he plotted with Penda in the murder of his brother Anna.

There are signs that paganism survived in East Anglia. Bede states that as a boy, the future king Aldwulf described seeing the altars of Rædwald, which implies that they survived until about 650 or later. During Anna’s reign (c. 640-654) Rædwald’s pagan temple with the Christian altar survived, indicative of a deep-rooted pagan following. The Bishop of East Anglia (c. 636-653) was unable to suppress the pagan religion in the eighteen years he had been there. For paganism to endure regardless of a Christian king, there must have been clear pagan leadership in the court, probably by a member of the royal family. Anna’s successor, Æthelhere, must have been that person, and he was probably the last royal leader of any power who continued to practice paganism in East Anglia. It is possible that while Anna achieved more as a leader, the populace may not have cared for him owing to his denunciation of their pagan traditions; such a hypothesis gives more support to Æthelhere as the body in the mound.\textsuperscript{112} In reviewing all the information given, the field has now been narrowed down to just two candidates: Rædwald and Æthelhere.

The remaining rulers are, in all probability, too late to be seriously considered as possible candidates. Æthelwald, the younger brother of Æthelhere and Anna, succeeded them in c. 654. Æthelwald, who is not regarded as an outstanding figure, would not have had such an elaborate pagan funeral, since he was a Christian king. Æthelwald was succeeded by his nephew Aldwulf, who was the grandson of Eni. It was Aldwulf whom Bede mentions as having seen Rædwald’s dual altar temple. Aldwulf reigned until about 713, when his son Ælfwald succeeded him. Ælfwald was most probably the last of the

\textsuperscript{112} Green, \textit{The Excavation of a Royal Ship-Burial}, 97-98.
Wuffing line when he died in 740. Anglo-Saxon burial customs would not have taken place that late.

Rædwald of East Anglia was a powerful and influential king in sixth-century Britain. His status was further immortalized by Bede when he was named the fourth Bretwalda of Anglo-Saxon England. Obviously Rædwald was well thought of by his community, and it would not be unexpected to find that he was venerated with a ship-burial rivaling that of his Scandinavian ancestors. While Rædwald had converted to Christianity, in reality he never abandoned his pagan roots, which is evident in his establishment of two altars in his temple. Who else but Rædwald perfectly fits the profile of the man buried with both Christian and pagan artifacts? The most accurate dating of the Sutton Hoo burial is based on the coin horde, whose most recent dates place the burial at the same time as the death of Rædwald. His queen, who never approved of her husband’s short lived conversion, would have made every attempt to humiliate and embarrass the expanding Christian religion with an ostentatious pagan memorial. By including heirloom objects and items of regalia uncharacteristic for Anglo-Saxon Britain, Rædwald’s queen exhibited what mattered most to Rædwald and his people: kinship, conviction, and ceremony. There is inconclusive evidence regarding all other figures, and any claim that they were the one commemorated by mound one would be pure conjecture. The evidence presented in this paper suggesting Rædwald, substantiates that he was indeed buried in mound one of Sutton Hoo.

113 Ibid., 94-97.
Figure 32. Artist rendering of Rædwald with the objects found in the Sutton Hoo ship-burial.
Chapter 5. Conclusion

The earliest documented interest in Sutton Hoo occurred in 1860, but it was not until Edith Pretty’s 1939 excavation of the mounds exposed the magnificent ship-burial that the potential impact of the site was realized. The major factor that diverted attention from Sutton was World War II, but Britain’s lack of a national archaeological division was also a deterrent. All excavations and investigations were done on a local level and were not always given the support the project deserved. The finds of Sutton Hoo were shelved for six years before they could be examined, and by that time the discovery had been out of the public’s mind too long for anyone to care.

In 1939, a small, one-paragraph notice appeared in the newspaper that proclaimed the burial to be that of Rædwald the Cautious, an ancient Viking conqueror from 650 A.D.; without further research, this proposal was accepted by the public and many scholars. In actuality, the published dates for the burial eliminated Rædwald, who died in c.625. Less than ten years after the discovery of the mound, the dating was revised. Overall, the majority of people were unaware of the fluctuation in dating and the controversy in determining who was actually in the grave. All attempts at further excavations met with indifference because as far the public was concerned, the body had been identified. Each subsequent dig occurred in locations other than the mound-one ship-burial. Only in recent years has the date of the coins in the burial been generally agreed upon, which, along with historical data and the conclusions derived in this paper, point to Rædwald as the body in the mound.

In 2002, Sutton Hoo became part of the National Trust charity, which acts independently of the government. The first order of business was to open a visitor’s
center and an exhibition hall worthy of the site. The future of Sutton Hoo actually looks brighter now that it had in the sixty years since mound one was uncovered. Without the discovery of the seventh-century ship-burial and the artifacts found inside, it would still be believed that Britain accomplished little of significance from the time of the Roman exodus in the early fifth century, till the Viking invasion in the late eighth century. Sutton Hoo proves this to be false. Although students are still taught of the “dark ages,” Britain has evidence that, from the fifth to the eighth centuries, the period was not dark at all.
Bibliography


Figure 33. Sutton Hoo property in 1953.

Figure 34. An aerial view of Sutton Hoo (bottom right) and the River Deben. The ship would have been brought to its final resting place from the river. The mounds would have been seen easily from the river.

Figure 35. This is a mound, as seen today, after it has been returned to its original impressive height. The fence posts in the background indicate the scale of the mound.

Figure 36. A constructed replica of the Sutton Hoo mound one ship.

Figure 37. Cloisonné’ clasp found at Sutton Hoo.
Figure 37. Artist rendering of how the burial chamber would have been constructed and the arrangement of the body and artifacts inside.

Figure 38. Display inside the Sutton Hoo Visitor Center of how the Body would have been laid out inside the burial chamber.
Figure 39. A medieval grave at Sutton Hoo of a warrior and his horse.

Figure 40. Detailed stamp work from the Sutton Hoo drinking horn.

Figure 41. Paul and Saul silver spoons, found in mound one. These Christian artifacts led many to consider Sutton Hoo to be the grave of a Christian.
Figure 42 and 43. The Sutton Hoo helmet as seen from the back and the front.

Figure 44. Scandinavian helmet contemporary with Sutton Hoo helmet. Note the similarities such as the warrior panels and the winged creature forming the protective piece over the nose and brow.
Figure 45. Scandinavian shield boss contemporary with Sutton Hoo shield.

Figure 46. Sutton Hoo shield boss.

Figure 47. Sutton Hoo whetstone.
Figure 48. The Merovingian coins found in the purse at Sutton Hoo. These coins were critical in the dating of the burial.
VITA

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