

Anglo Saxon Gold “Pyramidal” Sword Belt Fitting found at Bembridge, Isle of Wight

Author: Frank Basford

The Isle of Wight has long been noted for the rich grave goods found in the Anglo-Saxon cemeteries of Bowcombe Down and Chessell Down, which date back to the Island's pagan past in the sixth century AD. Now an important new Anglo Saxon find has been discovered in Bembridge Parish. This item of Treasure, a gold sword belt fitting, was found on 22nd September 2002, by Darren Trickey, using a metal detector. The British Museum has provided a technical report on the sword belt fitting for the Isle of Wight Coroner. Details of the find, given below, are taken from the British Museum report.



The sword belt fitting is the most elaborate piece of metal-work or jewellery to have been found on the Island since the excavations at Bowcombe and Chessell in the nineteenth century. The gold fitting has an octagonal base and is decorated with sixteen panels divided into cells. Originally these cells were inlaid with garnets, only one of which now survives. At the base of the fitting is a bar through which a leather strap would have been threaded. The British Museum has dated the find to the seventh century AD. We know that in the seventh century the pagan Jutes came under the political domination first of the South

Saxons and then of the West Saxons, whose king Caedwalla "laid waste Kent and the Isle of Wight" in AD 686, according to the Anglo Saxon Chronicle.

The eighth century historian, the Venerable Bede, credits Caedwalla with converting the local Jutish population of the Isle of Wight to Christianity. If this is the case, his conversion methods sound rather drastic! According to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, however, the Island had accepted Christianity some twenty-five years earlier when it was first ruled by the South Saxons. We cannot date the sword belt fitting more specifically than to say it is of seventh century date - nor can we be certain that it belonged to an Island resident. As it was found on the beach it may have been dropped by someone visiting (or even invading) the Island. We can be confident, however, that its owner was of very high rank, as the sword was the weapon worn by men of wealth and position in Anglo Saxon society. The Bembridge sword belt fitting is particularly fine, and its octagonal form makes it a unique example of such an item. These fittings were generally made of either copper-alloy or silver but the Bembridge example belongs to a small high-status group made of gold or gold sheet, one of which comes from the seventh century royal ship burial at Sutton Hoo in Suffolk. We can thus make certain assumptions about the owner of the Bembridge sword belt fitting although his identity will always remain a mystery.

Frank Basford Finds Liaison Officer & Coroner's Officer Isle of Wight Archaeology & Historic Environment Service 17 August 2003: 01983 823810