A late Saxon inscribed pendant from Norfolk

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The inscribed lead piece illustrated in pl. V was an isolated metal-detector find from near Weasenham All Saints, a village in north Norfolk (NGR: TF 848221; Sites and Monuments no. 34651). It was brought to our attention in April 1998 by staff at the Castle Museum, Norwich, and obligingly left by the owner in the British Museum for a considerable time to facilitate its study. It was subsequently acquired by the Castle Museum (acquisition number NWHCM: 2000.3) where Alan West, Curator, arranged for investigation by radiography. All this reflects the considerable difficulties in reading the lettering and interpreting the ornament on this small piece.

DESCRIPTION

The lead piece appears to be a pendant and to be complete. It is sub-rectangular in shape and was cut from a sheet of lead. At the narrower end it has been cut and pierced to form a projecting tab which has angled facets both at the top corners and where the tab meets the main part. The pendant is diminutive, its maximum measurements being length 23 mm, width 15 mm and thickness 1 mm. The relatively large hole in the tab shows signs of deformation where a thong or shank passed through it. When suspended, the pendant hung with the longer sides vertical.

The surfaces of the pendant are obscured both by oxidisation and by a modern sealant applied by the finder. Professional advice from Simon Dove, Conservator in the Conservation Department, British Museum, was against further cleaning or the removal of the sealant because of the risk of losing detail at present preserved in the corrosion layer. Soil or dirt might have entered the incisions of the lettering and the decoration and been subsequently retained by the corrosion of the metal.

One face of the pendant (side A) has a sub-rectangular frame formed by incised lines. This frame is divided by a pair of incised lines into three sections; the two outer sections are further divided by pairs of parallel lines set at an angle to the central pair. The other face (side B) has a similar incised frame which is further divided by four unevenly spaced parallel lines. In these is an inscribed text in five lines running down the pendant.

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Side A: the decorated side

This side of the pendant (pl. V*a*) is to be viewed from the narrow end downwards, as the pendant was hung. All the decorative elements are formed by incised lines. With the exception of the three pairs of lines described above, which frame different areas of the main field, the remaining deliberate incisions are disjointed and sketchily executed. The central area created by two parallel lines has a small clear rectangle above an equal-armed cross. Below this is a hooked line like an interrogation mark and below that a pair of short vertical lines. The upper right quadrant has a loop with a line running up to the right upper frame and a jointed line below. There may be a small cross in the bottom left corner. Below this quadrant the angled parallel lines frame another cross towards the outer frame, and there is a horizontal line running out from the central area. The lower right and lower left quadrants were clearly intentionally incised with a variety of curved and intersecting lines. Above the lower left quadrant, the angled parallel lines contain two lighter horizontal lines between them, and some other marks. The upper left quadrant carries similar decoration and there is a possible cross in the lower angle with the central panel.

Although it is difficult now to distinguish between intentional marks and later random scratches, it does seem that the design was intended as meaningful. For some time interpretation eluded repeated analysis by several observers studying the pendant under different levels of magnification and with variable lighting. Magical symbols and signs of the zodiac were considered and eliminated. The most convincing interpretation seems to be to consider the decoration as a sketchy 'short-hand' allusion to the most familiar and central subject of Christian devotion, the Crucifixion. This side of the pendant may not have been intended for show but as a personal devotional aid.

By standing back from the disjointed detail the observer can see the middle section as the upright of the cross and the pairs of parallel lines in the right and left sections as the cross-arms The small rectangle at the top of the middle area represents the *titulus*, the plaque nailed above Christ's head labelling him as King of the Jews. The interrogation mark in the central area forms the head of Christ, and his legs are indicated by the pair of short vertical lines below. The extended arms of Christ may be faintly seen running into the angled side arms of the cross. In the upper right quadrant, the loop might suggest the wing of an angel in profile. The two lower quadrants may each have contained a figure; conventionally these would be the Virgin Mary and St John. The small crosses set at the inner angles probably refer to the crosses of the two thieves.

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Side B: the inscribed text

The five lines of text (pl. V*b*) are separated by incised framing lines and the whole is made into a panel by the outer frame. The text is primary and complete. It reads horizontally from the narrow to the wide end of the pendant, that is, at right-angles to the suspension point.

The text is not easy to read. This is due partly to the small size of the letters, *c.* 2 mm in height, partly to the surface corrosion, and partly to the modern coating which obscures some details. The last two lines of text are smaller in size than the other three and these letters are the hardest to decipher. Although radiography proved to be of no help, video-microscopic examination under varied lighting was useful and part at least of the text can be made out.

The text is transliterated according to the following system:
A indicates a clearly legible letter A; A̲ indicates a damaged letter A; [A̲] indicates a damaged letter, probably to be read as A; [.] indicates a lost letter, [-] indicates complete loss of text; A/B indicates ligatured letters.

The text reads:

+N̲OMEN
DEIISTI[N̲]
E̲/BR̲AICEE̲
[-]N̲E̲/[.][T̲.]
E̲/T̲[.T̲..NO.]

The first line is clearly legible as NOMEN preceded by a cross. Line two begins with DEIISTI and then probably N. Line three probably reads E/BRAICEE although the R might instead be read as a small B set above an R and ligatured to it. Line four begins with four or five uncertain letters followed by N. Following this is E ligatured to another letter, possibly T, then what is probably another T and finally a lost letter. Line five begins with another E/T ligature followed by about seven lost letters, amongst which T and NO are possible readings.

The text is clearly in Latin. Divided into words the first three lines probably read:

+NOMEN DEI IST I[N] EBRAICE E-.

INTERPRETATION OF THE TEXT

As is common with Insular inscriptions in whatever language, the text begins with a cross. This is followed by the words *nomen dei* '(the) name of God', where *nomen* could be nominative or accusative. This phrase is of course a familiar ecclesiastical one although it is not the beginning of any well-known biblical or

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liturgical passage. In fact phrases such as *in nomine dei, nomen domini* and *nomen tuum* are all more common, both in the Vulgate and in liturgical usage.[1]

The third word reads *ist* and can be interpreted as an abbreviated form of *istud* 'this' in the neuter, referring to the neuter noun *nomen*. This is followed by the phrase *in ebraice* for *in Hebraice* 'in Hebrew' or 'in the Hebrew language'. The loss of an initial *h* in spelling is common in medieval Latin.

The remainder of the text is no longer interpretable. The next word begins with *e-* : it could have been the start of the word *est* 'is' but of course there are many other possible words beginning with *e-*. In both line four and line five, the group *et* may be read. These letters could form the complete word *et* 'and', or could be part of a longer word. However there is insufficient else legible in the last two lines for an interpretation to be suggested.

The text could thus have begun '+ this name of God in Hebrew . . .' and might have continued 'is . . .'. Alternatively, the text could perhaps have begun '+ this (is) the name of God in Hebrew . . .'. It was suggested by two observers that the last letters of line two were in Hebrew, not roman, script and read יהוה, the Tetragrammaton or unspoken name of God. Such a reading is clearly relevant to the interpretation of the text offered here, but the present authors are of the view that the text as it stands is in roman script and in Latin.

Format and script of the text

The lettering of the text is Insular, not capital, and the letters appear to be broadly consistent in form. Some of the letters have actual serifs but most are just thickened at the extremities. As already noted, the space available, and hence the size of the letters, in the last two lines of text is smaller than in the first three.

The form of A used suggests a late Anglo-Saxon date, from the middle of the tenth century onwards.[2] The other letter forms used, in particular the form of E, are in accordance with such a dating.

The text is not carefully laid out. The first line is well spaced but after that the letters are pushed more closely together and some are ligatured. This suggests a text cut with some lack of forethought, a situation entirely typical of Anglo-Saxon inscribed texts. It looks as if, during the cutting of line two, the cutter realised there was insufficient space available for the rest of the text. The remaining letters were therefore placed more closely together and some ligatures were used.

It is unclear whether the cutter was copying a written exemplum or working

[1] *Vulgatae editionis Bibliorum Sacrorum concordantiae*, ed. F. P. Dutripon (Paris, 1876); J. Deshusses and B. Darragon, *Concordances et tableaux pour l'etude des grands sacramentaires*, 3 (3) *Concordance verbale (M-P)*, Spicilegii Friburgensis Subsidia 13 (Fribourg, 1983), 167–75.

[2] D. N. Dumville, *English Caroline Script and Monastic History: Studies in Benedictinism, A.D. 950–1030* (Woodbridge, 1993).

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from memory. What is certain, however, is that any exemplar could not have contained the text set out in five lines as it was to appear on the pendant: had this been done, the problem of spacing would have been rectified on the exemplar, not on the actual pendant.

DISCUSSION OF THE PENDANT

The pendant cannot be closely dated. The script suggests that it is likely to be from the late Anglo-Saxon period, the tenth to the eleventh centuries, and the iconography of the crucifixion scene fits into this dating context, as is argued below.

The pendant could well have been an amulet intended for the personal protection of the wearer. A crucifixion scene is clearly appropriate for such a protective amulet and it could also, as suggested above, have been an aid to devotion. The part of the text that is interpretable also fits comfortably into such a context. The diminutive size of the pendant suggests that it was designed to be worn around the neck or, less likely, the arm or leg. Medical amulets were worn in all these positions in Anglo-Saxon England.

The eleventh-century *Lacnunga* gives instances of charms to be written on objects to be worn as amulets; examples include wafers, as used in the Mass, and a piece of vellum, and in both these cases the amulet was to be worn around the neck.[3] The charm to be written on the piece of vellum includes words of Hebrew, Greek and Latin as well as some gibberish. The Hebrew words are transliterated (that is, are not in Hebrew script) and include the phrase *adonai el*, 'Lord God'. It may be that the reference in the Weasenham text to the name of God in the Hebrew language had a similar function. Larratt Keefer and Burrows have demonstrated that there was at least a little knowledge of Hebrew in Anglo-Saxon England.[4]

The choice of lead for the pendant is interesting. This metal has been associated with interment since ancient times and used for coffins and coffin linings. In post-Conquest England, lead and its alloys of pewter and latten were used for chalice and paten funerary furnishings, possibly as early as the time of the burial of Bishop Flambard of Durham in AD 1128.[5] There are nine inscribed lead crosses known from late Anglo-Saxon and early post-Conquest England.[6] Some of these were clearly funerary crosses, either from their texts

[3] J. H. G. Grattan and C. Singer, *Anglo-Saxon Magic and Medicine* (London, 1952), respectively pp. 160–3 (*Lacnunga* XCIII) and 188–9 (*Lacnunga* CLXVIII).

[4] S. Larratt Keefer and D. R. Burrows, `Hebrew and the *Hebraicum* in late Anglo-Saxon England', *ASE* 19 (1990), 67–80.

[5] J. T. Fowler, 'An Account of Excavations made on the Site of the Chapter House of Durham Cathedral in 1874', *Archaeologia* 45 (1880), 385–404, at 388.

[6] E. Okasha, 'The Lead Cross of Bishop Godfrey of Chichester', *Sussex Archaeol. Collections* 134 (1996), 63–9, at 68.

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or because they were found with burials; indeed all of them may well have had a funerary connection. The texts, where still legible, are all religious in nature but no particular form of words is employed. In addition, there are two rather earlier Anglo-Saxon inscribed lead plates, from Flixborough, Humberside, and Kirkdale, North Yorkshire.[7] There are also two twelfth-century examples from Canterbury.[8] These plates may all have had a funeral or a memorial function.

On the Weasenham pendant, there is a clear indication of the *titulus* on the upper arm of the cross. This is an uncommon feature in late Anglo-Saxon crucifixion scenes although it is included in some of the fine illuminated manuscripts associated with Winchester.[9] This small lead pendant seems very different from such luxurious productions but it must be a product of the same intellectual environment. The deliberate upward slope of the side of the arms is also unusual. It is found uniquely in sculpture on the free-standing Cross of the Scriptures at Clonmacnoise;[10] this cross reflects Carolingian influence and, as argued by Stalley, probably dates from around AD 900.[11] A more relevant manuscript example of a cross with upward sloping arms occurs on p. 53 of the Sherborne Missal, dating from *c.* AD 1061. Here the cross is formed from the letter 'T' and is shown as a living tree with upswept arms.[12]

The Weasenham pendant, with its crucifixion scene and its ecclesiastical text, seems likely to have been produced for someone actively involved in the religious life. The fact that the pendant is made of lead, not of a precious metal, might suggest that it belonged to someone who had made a vow of poverty. It is possible that it was designed to be worn by a member of a religious order beneath their clothes, for personal protection, as a devotional object, or perhaps as a *memento mori*. The text and the decoration of the pendant would have suited any or all of these functions.[13]

[7] E. Okasha, 'A Second Supplement to *Hand-List of Anglo-Saxon Non-Runic Inscriptions*', *ASE* 21 (1992), 37–85, at 46–7 (no. 193); L. Watts *et al.*, 'Kirkdale – The Inscriptions', *Med. Arch.* 41 (1997), 51–99.

[8] E. Okasha, *Hand-List of Anglo-Saxon Non-Runic Inscriptions* (Cambridge, 1971), p. 149.

[9] B. C. Raw, *Anglo-Saxon Crucifixion Iconography and the Art of the Monastic Revival*, CSASE 1 (Cambridge, 1990), 92.

[10] P. Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland: an Iconographical and Photographic Survey*, Römisch-germanisches Zentralmuseum Forschungsinstitut für Vor- und Frühgeschichte, Monographien 17, 1–3 (Bonn, 1992) I, 48 and II, fig. 132.

[11] R. Stalley, 'Scribe and Mason: the Book of Kells and the Irish High Crosses', *The Book of Kells*, ed. F. O'Mahony (Dublin, 1994), pp. 257–65, at 262–5.

[12] E. Temple, *Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts 900–1066* (London, 1976), p. 121, no. 104; Raw, *Anglo-Saxon Crucifixion Iconography*, pp. 89 and 197, and pl. xii*b*.

[13] The authors are most grateful to Simon Dove, Department of Conservation, British Museum, and to Alan West, Curator, Castle Museum, Norwich, for their help and technical assistance. Dr Silke Ackermann, Dr Michelle Brown, John Cherry and Christopher Whittick also kindly commented on aspects of this piece. Grateful acknowledgement is made to the research fund of the Faculty of Arts, University College Cork, for financial assistance.

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a *b*

V Inscribed lead pendant from Weasenham All Saints, Norfolk (scale 2:1)

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