

Two Late Saxon Swords

By DAVID A. HINTON

THE finding of a late Saxon sword by Mr. D. J. Porter when ploughing on land adjoining Barrow Lane, Drayton, Berks. in 1965 was briefly reported in the annual report of the Ashmolean Museum. Since then the sword has been cleaned and treated in the museum's conservation laboratory, and this work has revealed a small decorated plate of bronze above the guard.¹

The hilt of the sword is broken, and lacks a pommel (FIG. 1). The lower guard is very much pitted; no decoration is visible on it, nor was any revealed by X-ray photography. It appears to have had expanded terminals, and is a pointed oval in plan. The blade, which is pattern-welded, tapers slightly and is fullered; it has been bent at right angles, and broken off above the point. The present length of the blade is 51.3 cm.; the width is 4.4 cm. at the guard, and 3.8 cm. at the broken end. Above the guard is a bronze plate with zones of beading around its edges, and expanded, flattened terminals; the tang of the hilt passes through the centre of this plate.

The Drayton sword is a late Saxon type, closely comparable to the Gooderstone sword (Norwich Museum, acc. no. 11,958), and a sword from the Thames at Windsor (British Museum, 1929, 2-6, 1).² Both these have a bronze plate or strip above the curved guards with expanded terminals; on the former, the guard is nearly straight-sided, while on the latter it is pointed oval in plan, as on the Drayton sword. The bronze plate on the Windsor sword is also very similar to that on the Drayton sword. Wilson suggests a 10th-11th century date for this, and Miss Evison agrees on the 11th century; a similar date would therefore seem probable for the Drayton sword. It is interesting that the blade has been bent and broken; Wilson has suggested that many blades might have been deliberately 'killed', particularly those found in rivers, in an 'unrecorded sacrificial custom', although land-finds, like the Drayton sword, may have been damaged in battle, or subsequently by a plough.³

¹ Ashmolean Museum, *Report of the Visitors*, 1965, 22. The treatment of this sword, and of the Abingdon sword, was undertaken by Mrs. K. Kimber. I am grateful to Miss O. Godwin for the photographs, and to Mrs. P. Clarke for the drawings.

² D. M. Wilson, 'Some Neglected Late Anglo-Saxon Swords', *Medieval Archaeology* ix (1965), 32-54; V. I. Evison, 'A Sword from the Thames at Wallingford Bridge', *Archaeological Journal*, cxxiv (1967), 160-90.

³ Wilson, *op. cit.*, 50-1.

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When the Drayton sword was X-rayed, the famous Abingdon sword was also X-rayed, to see if further information could be obtained on a point raised by Miss Evison⁴ about the reconstruction of the guards. Unfortunately it appears that very little original iron remains in the core ; though the X-ray did show that the blade is pattern-welded, as would be expected. Since the cleaning of the silverwork in 1966 it has been possible to see the end plates on the guards more clearly, and these can perhaps be taken as evidence that the terminals were originally expanded. The heights of the end panels which can be measured are all greater than the heights of the centre panels on the same strips, by amounts varying from $\frac{1}{2}$ to $1\frac{1}{2}$ mm. The vertical setting of these end panels heightens the optical effect, as the enlarged photograph of part of the upper guard shows (PL. IB). Another point worth noting is that the borders of the panels may have been trimmed, as the border on one end of the lower guard is much broader (PL. IC). This end at some stage became detached from the rest ; it is now convex in plan, but was presumably flat originally. The Museum does not at present propose to undertake a new reconstruction of the guards.

Expanded terminals on the guards of the Abingdon sword would suggest that it is likely to be later than the second half of the 9th century, and this confirms the art-historical evidence, for the decoration on the silverwork includes acanthus leaves, their first appearance on metalwork.⁵ Wilson compares the Abingdon decoration to that on the Sittingbourne scramasax (B.M. 81, 6-23, 1), which in turn compares to the foliage ornament on St. Cuthbert's embroidered stole and maniple, dated by inscription to 909-16. But he also points out the similarities between other details on the sword, and on one of the Beeston Tor brooches, deposited c. 875, and suggests that they may even have come from the same workshop, although the sword, being more developed, would be later.⁶ On that evidence it would be quite easy to argue a 9th century date on stylistic grounds.

A direct comparison between the Abingdon sword and the early 10th century Durham embroideries is provided by the leaf ornament in the panel next to the Eagle (PL. IB). In this, there are four leaves of distinctive form, having cusped interior sides, and volute ends. Similar leaves occur in the embroideries (best seen below the figure of Peter the Deacon),⁷ and it is interesting that both embroiderer and metalworker added short curves or nicked lines to these leaves, giving a three dimensional effect ; this is a common feature on English 9th century metalwork.⁸

⁴ Evison, *op. cit.*, 175.

⁵ D. M. Wilson, *Anglo-Saxon Ornamental Metalwork* (1964), 38.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁷ C. F. Battiscombe (ed.), *The Relics of St. Cuthbert* (1956), Plate xxv.

⁸ Wilson, *Metalwork*, 23 seq.

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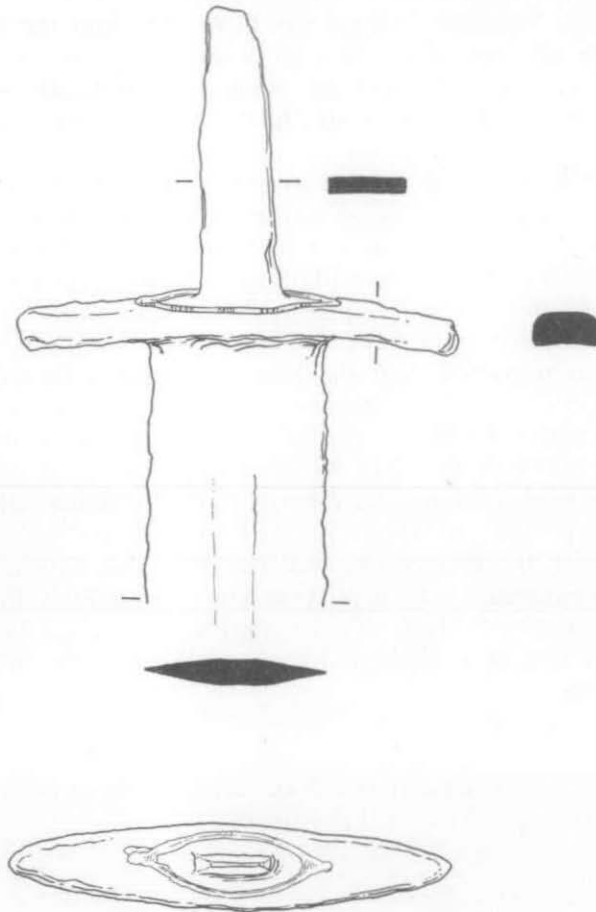


FIG. 1

The Drayton Sword, Scale 1 : 2.

This leaf-form occurs on the top and bottom leaves of the design on the back of the Alfred Jewel (PL. IA), which has been compared to the Durham embroideries by both Rickert⁹ and Freyhan.¹⁰ The pattern is very clumsily executed, and might almost be secondary. It has punched lines, however, that also occur on some of the letters of the inscription, and it is perhaps unlikely that this embellishment would have been added later, because of the risk of damage to the crystal and enamel. Other objects on which the leaf-form

⁹ M. Rickert, *Painting in Britain in the Middle Ages* (1954), 35.

¹⁰ R. Freyhan, in Battiscombe, *op. cit.* note 7, 416.

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occurs include the Poslingford ring,¹¹ the Fulset disc and the Hon ring from Norway,¹² strapends from Bradwell and Winchester,¹³ the Fuller brooch,¹⁴ the East Stour cross-shaft,¹⁵ and the stone animal heads at Deerhurst.¹⁶ Of these, a 9th century date is indicated for the Hon ring by associated coins.¹⁷ Bakka argued a date before 875 for the disc, and the Winchester strap-end is ascribed stylistically to a date later than most of the 9th century series. The Deerhurst heads are generally dated to the early 10th century,¹⁸ although an 8th century date has also been proposed,¹⁹ and the Alfred Jewel is of course usually associated with King Alfred (871-99). Dates in the second half of the 9th and early 10th centuries seem apposite for the leaf-form.

Three of the pieces that have the lobed pelta leaf-form ornament, the strap-end, the embroideries, and the Jewel, are associated with Winchester or with the royal court. It is interesting that of the very few Late Saxon metalwork objects that have a recognizable symbolism, most are 9th century, and have royal connections. The Agnus Dei appears on the Queen Aethelwith ring,²⁰ two birds pecking at a tree of life on the King Ethelwulf ring,²¹ and Sight, perhaps, on the Alfred Jewel.²² The major exceptions are the Fuller brooch, with the Five Senses, and the Abingdon sword, with the four symbols of the Evangelists. Both of these are outstandingly fine pieces, and both have the lobed pelta leaf. It is tempting to connect both the sword and the brooch with a workshop under royal patronage, if not with the Wessex capital itself.

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¹¹ Wilson, *Metalwork*, no. 61.

¹² E. Bakka, 'Some English Decorated Metal Objects found in Norwegian Viking Graves', *Arbok for Universitet i Bergen*, I (1963), 19-23.

¹³ V. I. Evison, in M. Biddle and R. N. Quirk, 'Excavations near Winchester Cathedral, 1961', *Archaeological Journal*, cxxix (1962), 186.

¹⁴ Wilson, *Metalwork*, no. 153.

¹⁵ N. Drinkwater, 'A Pre-Conquest Cross-Shaft', *Archaeological Journal*, cxvii (1960), 82-7. The shaft is now in the British Museum (acc. no. 1969, 4-1, 1).

¹⁶ E. Gilbert, 'Deerhurst Priory Church Re-visited', *Trans. Bristol Gloucestershire Archaeol.*, LXXIII (1954), 109-113.

¹⁷ H. Shtetelig (ed.), *Viking Antiquities in Great Britain and Ireland* (1940), no. 146.

¹⁸ H. M. and J. Taylor, *Anglo-Saxon Architecture* (1965), 205-6.

¹⁹ Gilbert, op. cit. note 16, 114.

²⁰ Wilson, *Metalwork*, no. 1.

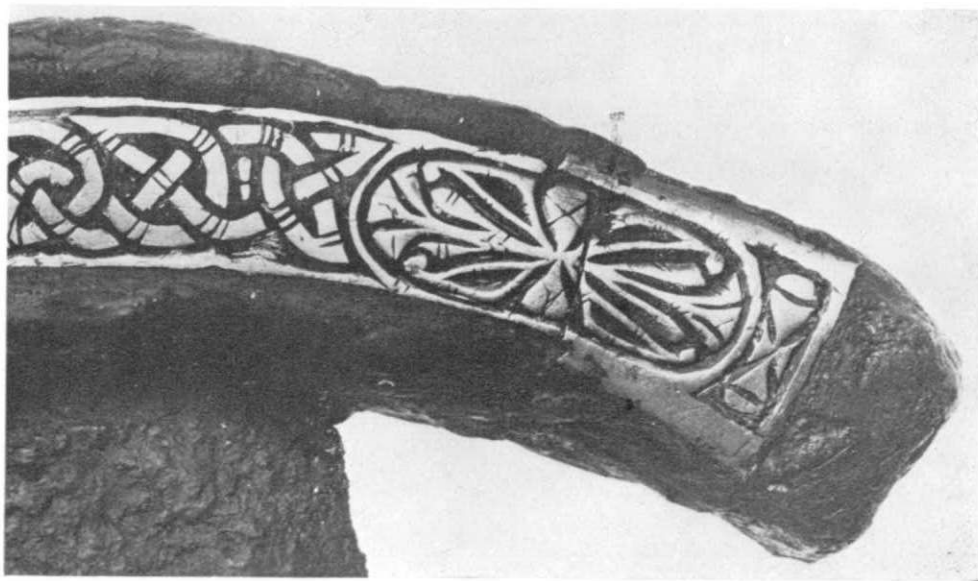
²¹ *Ibid.*, no 31.

²² E. Bakka, 'The Alfred Jewel and Sight', *The Antiquaries Journal*, XLVI (1966), 282.

PLATE I



A. THE ALFRED JEWEL
(enlarged)



B. and C. DETAILS OF THE ABINGDON SWORD (enlarged).

Photos: Ashmolean Museum