

NUOVA **ANTOLOGIA** 
MILITARE
RIVISTA INTERDISCIPLINARE DELLA SOCIETÀ ITALIANA DI STORIA MILITARE

N. 2
2021

Fascicolo 5. Gennaio 2021
Storia Militare Medievale

a cura di

MARCO MERLO, ANTONIO MUSARRA, FABIO ROMANONI e PETER SPOSATO



Società Italiana di Storia Militare

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Nuova Antologia Militare

Rivista interdisciplinare della Società Italiana di Storia Militare
Periodico telematico open-access annuale (www.nam-sism.org)
Registrazione del Tribunale Ordinario di Roma n. 06 del 30 Gennaio 2020



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Grafica: Nadir Media Srl - Via Giuseppe Veronese, 22 - 00146 Roma
info@nadirmedia.it

Gruppo Editoriale Tab Srl - Lungotevere degli Anguillara, 11 - 00153 Roma
www.tabedizioni.it

ISSN: 2704-9795

ISBN Fascicolo 5: 978-88-9295-108-2

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Bacinetto con visiera a becco di passero, Milano 1400-1430,
Museo delle Armi "Luigi Marzoli" (inv. E 2), Fotostudio Rapuzzi

The Bradwell Figurine of an Anglo-Saxon Equestrian Warrior

By STEPHEN POLLINGTON & RAFFAELE D'AMATO

ABSTRACT. A bronze figurine discovered in Norfolk, eastern England, depicts a warrior on horseback armed with sword and shield. Stylistically the piece is contemporary with the royal treasures from Mound 1 at Sutton Hoo and with the material from the Staffordshire Hoard. Its military character suggests that it may have been intended for use in a strategic boardgame.

KEYWORDS BRADWELL, FIGURINE, MILITARY EQUIPMENT, CAVALRY, GAMING PIECE

Introduction

In 2015 an unexpected find was made at Bradwell in Norfolk, on the eastern coast of England: a bronze figurine representing a horseman with weapons¹(**figs. 1, 2**). The finder was searching with a metal detector.

The figurine is tiny – only 37.5mm tall and 42mm long – but very precisely made with a great deal of detail for so small an item (**figs 3, 4, 5**). The casting depicts a horse and its rider standing straight on a small rectangular base. The horse is equipped with a bridle and reins as well as a possible saddle and straps running to the horse's rump and passing beneath its tail (**figs. 4, 6, 7, 8**).

The rider is nonetheless shown as a nobleman, a member of the wealthy land-owning class whose resources allowed them to breed horses for use in warfare. His long, rather mournful face² appears below a band of thick collar-length hair; he further sports a narrow moustache above his slit mouth, while his pellet eyes stare fixedly into the distance (**figs. 5, 9, 10**). Our nobleman wears a sword in its

1 PAS (Portal Antiquities Scheme) NMS-40A7A7. The finder, Mr. Daniel Goddard, found it in the property of Mr. R. Warthon.

2 It is impossible not to recall the faces of the much later warriors or divinities sculpted on the Oseberg wagon, see Ian HEATH, *The Vikings*, London, Osprey, 1985, p. 5.

scabbard slung beneath his left arm and extending beyond his hip to the horse's flank. His left hand and upper leg are covered by a small circular shield with a central umbo³, while his right hand loosely grips the reins. He is equipped for war, it seems, but certain important items are absent: he has no discernable helmet, for one thing, nor spear nor javelin. There are no traces of spurs on his heels⁴. Perhaps more importantly, his feet dangle below the horse's stomach, lacking the support of any kind of stirrup.

Dating and Parallels for the Figure

The dating of the piece – found without archaeological context – can be assessed from two factors: the manner and style of its manufacture, and the absence of stirrups⁵.

Archaeological evidence for stirrups in Anglo-Saxon England begins some centuries later than the figure's date of manufacture, which we will place in the 7th century for reasons to be discussed below. But 'absence of evidence'⁶ is not evidence of absence' according to the archeologists' maxim⁷. The stirrup is

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- 3 A small circular shield is also covering the left or right hand and upper leg of the cavalrymen embossed on the Vendel Helmet I, see Knut H. STOLPE & Ture A. J. ARNE, *La Nécropole de Vendel*, Stockholm, Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien, 1927, pls. V-VI.
 - 4 The employment of spurs by Germanic warriors is attested since at least the 2nd century AD, under the influence of Celts and Romans, but was not a rule; for their use by the Celts see Stephen ALLEN, *Celtic Warrior 300 BC-AD 100*, Oxford, Osprey, 2001 p.32 and pl. E; near the Romans see Giuseppe CASCARINO, 'La Cavalleria Romana' in Claudio GIANNELLI, *Equus Frenatus, morsi dalla collezione Giannelli*, Tipografia Camuna, Brescia, 2015, p.133; near the 2nd century Germanic Warriors see CONRAD ENGELHARDT *Vimose Fundet*, Copenhagen, Forlaget Z.A.C., 1869 (1969) pls.15 nn. 10-134 (150 AD circa).
 - 5 The use of stirrups by the Romans is literary attested only from the 5th century AD, while the first artefacts are dated to the late 6th century AD from the territories of the Eastern Empire; therefore is highly possible that in Britannia they were never used before the 9th century, when they were introduced under the influence of Franks and Vikings; see for early Roman stirrups Raffaele D'AMATO, *L'arte della guerra in Sardegna, dagli Shardana a Bisanzio*' in Gabriella PANTÒ (ed.), *Carlo Alberto Archeologo in Sardegna*, Torino, 2018, p.157; Raffaele D'AMATO-Andrei NEGIN, *Roman Heavy Cavalry II, 500-1450 AD*, Oxford, Osprey, 2020, pp.46-47.
 - 6 The term was likely coined by philosopher John Locke in the late 17th century, see his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, London, 1690 (2017), Book IV chapter 17.
 - 7 For the application of such maxim in archaeology see, for example, Alan P. SULLIVAN,

seldom represented in archaeology because sometimes it was made of perishable organic material. The very word confirms this: 'stirrup' derives the Old English term 'stigerap' from stige 'mounting, climbing, rising' and rap 'rope'.⁸ A stirrup formed from two loops of cord, leather thong or rope would not survive in the generally hostile English soil.

The figure must be dated according to stylistic criteria⁹ because the context of deposition remains unknown. It had probably been resting in the ploughsoil for some time, but had not suffered much damage in the process. Bronze figures similar to the Bradwell example are very rare in English archaeology and the only recorded find (from Warham, Norfolk, **Fig. 11**)¹⁰ is much cruder, lacks detail and finesse, and was considered to be a late Roman piece of e. g. 4th century AD (although that dating may have to be re-evaluated in the light of the Bradwell find). Close stylistic parallels modelled in the round are so far unknown, but two-dimensional images with striking similarities are familiar from two very well-documented sources. The first is the iconography of two sheet-silver panels decorating the helmet from Mound 1 at Sutton Hoo, Suffolk, England – the famous ship-burial which is usually considered to have been erected circa 625 AD.¹¹ These panels show a horseman charging with his spear raised while a fallen opponent,

'Inference and Evidence in Archaeology: A Discussion of the Conceptual Problems' in Springer, *Advances in Archaeological Method and Theory*, in Vol. 1 Springer-Verlag (1978) pp. 183-222, pp. 183ff.; John Anthony Jamys GOWLETT & Richard W. WRANGHAM . 'Earliest fire in Africa: towards the convergence of archaeological evidence and the cooking hypothesis,' *Azania: Archaeological Research in Africa*, 48:1, 5-30, 2013, pp. 6ff.

8 Eduard Adolf Ferdinand MAETZNER, *English Grammar*, London, 1874, pp.157, 192; Friedrich HOLTHAUSEN, *Altenglisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, Heidelberg, Carl Winter Verlag, 1974, s.v. stigerap.

9 For dating according to stylistic criteria in Archaeology see for instance Claire SMITH, 'Recent developments in radiocarbon and stylistic methods of dating rock-art' in *Antiquity*. 72, pp.405-11, pp.405ff.; Ann-Sofie GRÄSLUND, , 'Dating the Swedish Viking-Age rune stones on stylistic grounds' in *Runes and their Secrets: Studies in Runology*, Copenhagen, Museum Tusulanum Press, 2006, pp. 117-140; Martina FERRARI, 'Il problema della datazione dei tessuti archeologici: la misura al 14C di una tunica del Museo Egizio di Torino' in XIII Congresso Nazionale IGIIC – Lo Stato dell'Arte – Centro Conservazione e Restauro La Venaria Reale – Torino 22/24 ottobre 2015, Torino, 2015, pp. 2-8; pp. 2ff.;

10 PAS reference NMS-32 FEA3.

11 Rupert BRUCE-MITFORD, *The Sutton Hoo Ship-Burial*. Volume 2. Arms, Armour and Regalia, London, British Museum Publications, 1978, pp. 138ff,149,183.

lying between the horse's legs, stabs the steed in the chest. The horseman's face shows the same crescent profile and pellet eyes seen on the Bradwell figurine (**fig. 12**)¹². Furthermore, the curious three-band reins of the figurine find their parallel in the Sutton Hoo image, as also the rider's attitude. The shield is small, too small to cover much of the rider's body beyond his forearm and the leg from thigh to knee¹³.

A more recent find is the exciting hoard of broken gold military items known as the 'Staffordshire Hoard'. This collection of materials is less homogeneous than the Mound 1 burial goods, but probably represents the gold fittings from weapons and wargear carried by an élite warrior force.¹⁴ The dating is in the range 550-660 (at the latest, and possibly no later than 630). Some of the items in the hoard featured repoussé foil panels similar to the helmet plates (e.g. the band, item 593 and similar items with catalogue numbers 594-604, 606)¹⁵. Again the crescent faces are in evidence, here tilted upwards, and the shields carried are shown to be quite small. A fragmentary sheet (numbered 595 in the catalogue) seems to depict a horseman similar to the one at Sutton Hoo, but the item is too fragmentary to be sure¹⁶.

It is possible, even likely, that the gold fittings in the Hoard were stripped from the weapons of a defeated foe. The context appears to be the turbulent years of the mid-7th century when the major kingdoms of eastern Britain were competing for supremacy, backed by the missionary work of the newly formed English church¹⁷.

What relevance can this figurine have for the study of military culture in 7th century England?

12 Rupert BRUCE-MITFORD, 1978, II, pp. 216-217; Ulla MANNERING, *Iconic Costumes, Scandinavian Late Iron Age Costume Iconography*, Oxford, Oxbow Books, 2017, p.99.

13 For iconography of similar small shields see MANNERING, 2017, pp. 90-91, 94-96, 98.

14 Chris FERN, Tania DICKINSON, & Leslie WEBSTER, *The Staffordshire Hoard: an Anglo-Saxon Treasure*, London, Society of Antiquaries, 2019, pp.30ff., 188ff., 292.

15 Chris FERN, Tania DICKINSON, & Leslie WEBSTER, *The Staffordshire Hoard: an Anglo-Saxon Treasure*, London, Society of Antiquaries, 2019, pp.195, 237-245, 417-420.

16 Chris FERN, Tania DICKINSON, & Leslie WEBSTER, *The Staffordshire Hoard: an Anglo-Saxon Treasure*, London, Society of Antiquaries, 2019, pp. 73, 75, 77.

17 Chris FERN, Tania DICKINSON, & Leslie WEBSTER, *The Staffordshire Hoard: an Anglo-Saxon Treasure*, London, Society of Antiquaries, 2019, pp. 258ff.; 273ff; 286ff.

The Horse and the Gaming Piece

Despite the generally held opinion that the early Anglo-Saxons did not use horses in war, this figure is just one piece in a growing body of evidence that disproves the idea.¹⁸

In pre-Christian accompanied inhumations of Anglo-Saxon date (say, early 5th-mid-7th century) identifiable remains of horse equipment are very rare: for example, a single iron spur was found in Grave 18A at Castledyke (Yorkshire).¹⁹ The burial chamber in Mound 17 at Sutton Hoo contained a young man with weapons (two spears, shield, garnet-decorated sword, knife) and beside him his horse with its harness.²⁰ But the significance of the bronze figurine may not rest solely on what it can tell us about harness and tack: actually, it says more about the owner's status as a military leader.

The Old English word *hildesetl* 'war-seat' occurs in the poem *Beowulf* (probably of 8th c. date) describing the belongings of the hero as he transitions from 'young adventurer' to 'heroic man of substance and power'.²¹ A warhorse was the possession of the military leader – not simply because it gave him the opportunity to move swiftly into and out of combat, but rather because it afforded him the opportunity to fight strategically, committing his forces where they would be most helpful and successful. In this connection, we may wish

18 Kerry CATHERS, *An Examination of the Horse in Anglo-Saxon England*, Ph.D. dissertation, Reading, 2002 especially on p. 255 for metalwork representing horses; Chris FERN, 'The Archaeological Evidence for Equestrianism in Early Anglo-Saxon England c.450-700', in Alexander PLUSKOWSKI (ED.), *Just Skin and Bones? New Perspectives on Human-Animal Relations in the Historic Past*, British Archaeological Reports, International Series 1410, pp. 43 ff. and for a horse reconstruction see fig.5.18.

19 Gall DRINKALL & Martin FOREMAN, *The Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Castledyke South, Barton-on-Humber, Sheffield Excavation Reports 6*, Sheffield Academic Press, 1998, p. 251 (GALL DRINKALL: *The Prick Spur (Grave 18A)*).

20 Chris FERN, 'The Archaeological Evidence for Equestrianism in Early Anglo-Saxon England c.450-700' in Alexander PLUSKOWSKI (ED.), *Just Skin and Bones? New Perspectives on Human-Animal Relations in the Historic Past*, British Archaeological Reports, International Series 1410, p. 48; MARTIN O.H. CARVER, *The Age of Sutton Hoo. The Seventh Century in North-West Europe*, Boydell Press, 1992, p. 362, pls. 30-31-32; Martin O. H. CARVER, *Sutton Hoo. A Seventh Century Princely Burial Ground and its Context*, London, British Museum Publications, 2005, pp.115-136.

21 Richard D. FULK et al., *Klaeber's Beowulf*, 2008, line 1039; see also Martin O. H. CARVER, *The Age of Sutton Hoo. The Seventh Century in North-West Europe*, Boydell Press, 1992, pp. 65ff and 167ff.

to consider the bronze figurine as something more important than a ‘model’ or ‘child’s plaything’²². Rather, we have to assess the possibility of simulated warfare or ‘wargaming’ in developing a leader’s strategic thinking.

A routine find in some high-status Anglo-Saxon inhumation graves is the bone ‘gaming piece’, which may occur singly (e.g. Alfriston, Sussex, grave 28)²³ but more usually in large (complete?) sets (e.g. Sutton Hoo Mound 1 and Prittlewell).²⁴ The number of pieces deposited varies, and it is not clear whether this reflects different games requiring different numbers of pieces, or merely a variety of attitudes to burial.²⁵

Cremation burials²⁶, where the inclusion of large items is prevented by the

22 For ancient childrens’ toys see Pierre AMIET, *Les Grandes civilisations disparues*, Paris, 1980, p.18; Barry POWELL, *Classical Myth*, New York, 2001, pp.33-34; Toby WILKINSON, *Dictionary of Ancient Egypt*, 2008, p.251.

23 André GRIFFITH, & Louis Francis SALZMANN, *An Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Alfriston, Sussex in Sussex Archaeological Collections vol. 56*, 1914, pp.16-53; John HINES, *A New Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Great Square-Headed Brooches*, Woodbridge, Boydell & Brewer, 1997, p.279; Samantha LUCY, *The Anglo-Saxon Way of Death. Burial Rites in Early England*, Stroud, Sutton Publishing, 2000, p.63.

24 Rupert BRUCE-MITFORD, *The Sutton Hoo Ship-Burial. Volume 3. Late Roman and Byzantine Silver, Hanging Bowls, Drinking Vessels, Cauldrons and Other Containers, Textiles, The Lyre, Pottery Bottle and Other Items*, London, British Museum Publications, 1983, pp. 853-7; Lyn BLACKMORE, Ian BLAIR, Sue HIRST, & Christopher SCULL, *The Prittlewell Princely Burial. Excavations at Priory Crescent, Southend-on-Sea, Essex*, 2003, MOLAS Monograph 73, London, 2019, pp.402-3.

25 Helen GEAKE, *The Use of Grave-Goods in Conversion Period England, c.600-850*, B.A.R. British Series, no. 261, Oxford, British Archaeological Reports, 1997, p.100; STEPHEN POLLINGTON, Lindsay KERR, Brett HAMMOND, *Wayland’s Work: Anglo-Saxon Art, Myth and Material Culture 4th-7th Century*, Anglo-Saxon Books, 2010, pp. 219-24.

26 Alongside inhumation, it was common for early Anglo-Saxons to cremate their dead by burning the corpses and then burying the cremated remains within an urn. Cremation rites declined in the seventh century, but throughout that century remained a viable form of burial at sites like St Mary’s Stadium in Southampton. For cremation burials costume in Anglo-Saxon England see Catherine HILLS, ‘Spong Hill and the Adventus Saxonum’, in Caroline E. KARKOV, Kelley M. CROWLEY WICKHAM, and Bailey YOUNG B.K. (eds.), *Spaces of the Living and the Dead: An Archaeological Dialogue. American Early Medieval Studies 3*. Oxford, Oxbow Books, 1999, pp. 15–26, p. 20; Kevin LEAHY, ‘Interrupting the Pots.’ *The Excavation of Cleatham Anglo-Saxon Cemetery*. In CBA Research Report 155. York: Council for British Archaeology, 2007, pp. 10–13; Howard WILLIAMS, ‘Mortuary practices in early Anglo-Saxon England’, in Helen HAMEROW, David HINTON and Sally CRAWFORD (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Anglo-Saxon Archaeology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 238 ff.

small dimensions of the ceramic urn, sometimes feature plano-convex counters. Bone and other gaming pieces were found in three separate urns at Caistor-by-Norwich (Norfolk) and a fourth was a stray find from the site.²⁷ Urn N59 had a full set: twenty-two white bone pieces (**fig.13**) and eleven darker ones (**fig.14**), perhaps made from shale²⁸. In the same urn were thirty five or more sheep's astragali (knuckle-bones), plus a larger roe-deer astragalus with a short runic text which is among the earliest known English (Anglian) inscriptions. Apart from bone, such items are also made from horses' teeth, glass and possibly antler²⁹.

Decoration is usually minimal, consisting of ring-and-dot designs, hatching or scoring; glass examples may have been coloured differently. The larger sets are more common in male graves, while females tend to have just one or two pieces³⁰. The presence of gaming pieces in a male grave indicates that the incumbent was an older warrior or leader, capable of using the counters in games of strategic thinking.³¹

It seems reasonable that the horseman figurine may have formed part of such a set, perhaps like the famous carved ivory group found on the Isle of Lewis, Scotland, dating to the 12th century³², or the very famous pieces of the so-called

27 John Nowell Linton MYRES, & Barbara GREEN, *The Anglo-Saxon Cemeteries of Caistor-by-Norwich and Markshall Norfolk*, London, 1973, pp.98-100. The many similar Continental finds are noted.

28 Similar gaming pieces have been found also in the in the Anglo-Saxon cemetery site at Spong Hill in Norfolk (ca. AD 540-600), where a number of graves contained gaming-pieces (WHITTAKER,2006, p.106).

29 Helen GEAKE, *The Use of Grave-Goods in Conversion Period England, c.600-850*, B.A.R. British Series, no. 261, Oxford, British Archaeological Reports, 1997, p. 227; WHITTAKER, HELENE., 'Game-Boards and Gaming-Pieces in Funerary Contexts in the Northern European Iron Age' in *Nordlit*, 10/2, p. 108.

30 Angela CARE EVANS., *The Sutton Hoo Ship Burial*, London, British Museum Press, 1986, p.69; TANIA M DICKINSON, GEORG SPEAKE, 'The Seventh-Century Cremation Burial in Asthall Barrow, Oxfordshire: A Reassessment', in Martin O. H. CARVER, *The Age of Sutton Hoo. The Seventh Century in North-Western Europe*, Woodbridge, Boydell & Brewer, 1992, pp. 109-110; Helène WHITTAKER, 'Game-Boards and Gaming-Pieces in Funerary Contexts in the Northern European Iron Age', *Nordlit*, 10/2, 2006, p. 107.

31 Mads RAVN, 'The Use of Symbols in Burials in Migration Age Europe. A Theoretical and methodological Approach', in *Form, Function & Context. Material culture studies in Scandinavian archaeology*, Stockholm, 2000, pp. 288 ff.

32 David H. CALDWELL, Mark A. HALL; Caroline M. WILKINSON, *The Lewis Chessmen Unmasked*, Edinburgh, 2011, pp. 23-28, 33, 39.

Chess of Charlemagne, a product of the 11th century South Italy³³. While this interpretation may seem fanciful in the absence of known bronze gaming pieces, there is no other obvious purpose for the item which is too small to act as a decorative mount on a helmet or battle-standard.

Conclusion

The Bradwell figurine is a curious item, one of very few early Anglo-Saxon effigies of the human form modelled in the round³⁴. Its small size and fine detailing preclude any possible use as an emblem or item of long-distance display: indeed, its dimensions suggest an intimate environment where close observation would be possible.

Its context is clearly of one élite status and importance, consistent with the ‘meadhall’ culture of 7th century Anglo-Saxon England, the Heorot of *Beowulf*.³⁵

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33 David NICOLLE, *The Normans*, London, Osprey, 1987, pp.48-49.

34 Leah MORADI, *Animal and human depictions on artefacts from early Anglo-Saxon graves in the light of theories of material culture*, Exeter, 2019, pp. 42ff., figs. 4.2,4.4.

35 John D. NILES, ‘*Beowulf’s Great Hall*’, *History Today*, October 2006, 56 (10), pp. 40–44; Stephen POLLINGTON, *The mead-hall community*, *Journal of Medieval History*, 37:1, 19-33, 2011, pp.19ff.

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Acknowledgments

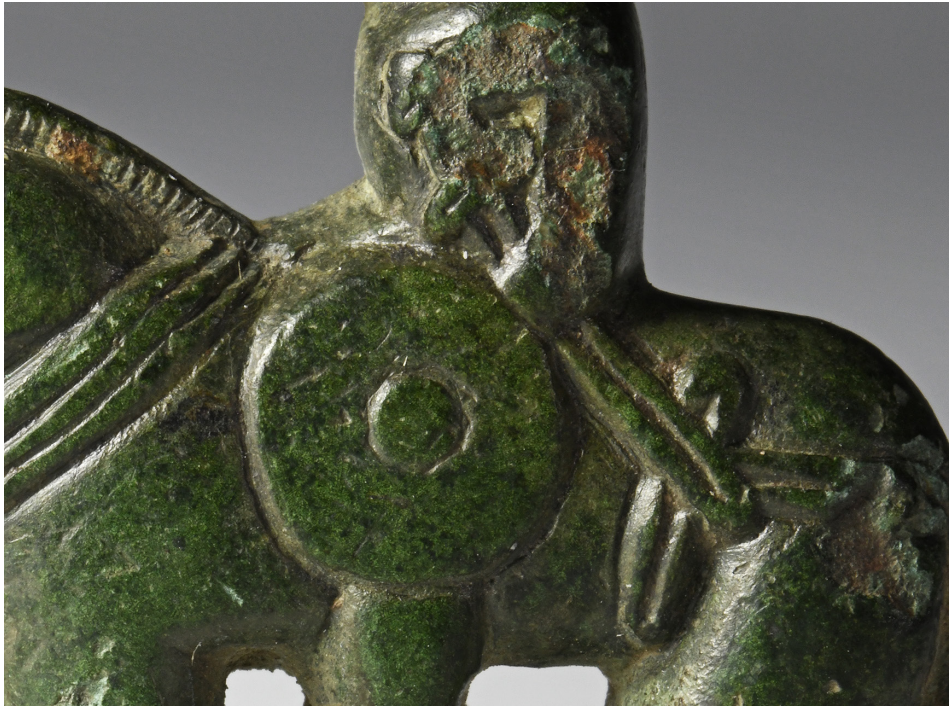
The authors of the present article would like to thank Mr. Brett Hammond of Timeline Auctions for the possibility to examine and study in detail the statuette of the Bradwell rider. They also would like to thank all the Timeline staff for the courtesy and the assistance given during the study of the statuette.

They would like also to thanks the Portable Antiquity Schema and the History Blog for the photographic credits of the material used in the article.



(figs. 1, 2)





(figs. 3, 4)





(fig. 5)





(fig. 8)

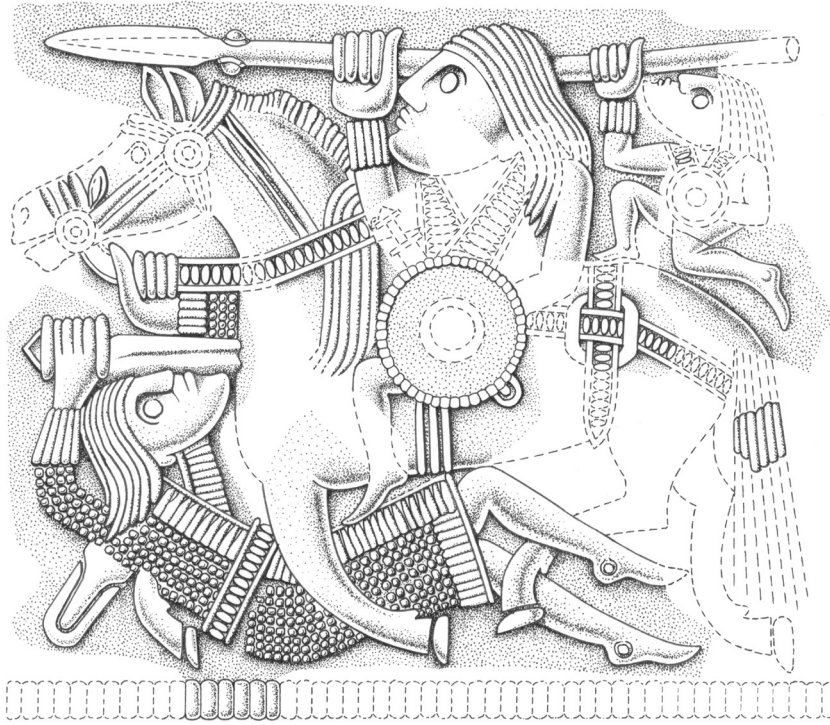


(fig. 9)



(figs. 10, 11)





(figs. 12, 13)





(fig. 14)



Pavia, capitello raffigurante uno scontro tra cavalieri, XII secolo, Musei Civici (foto Fabio Romanoni 2019, licensed in Public Dominion, Wikimedia Commons).



Clusa ubet q sic me quo rex stem ino fessor
 Olius armati sequi sum naq professor
 Oritatis referat suam sic stando figuram
 Indulge fidei subiecte respice puam
 Oentem deflexam tibi semper ubiq parantem
 Nam dno michi te dnm qz te fere gratam
 Effe meum noctas in precantio quia cerno
 Exe quia uirtutes sequeris nuq tua sperno
 Iusta precor dignare preces audire precans
 Sponte tibi uero fidei celo famulans
 Proq mea tibi matre preces ai suplia mte
 Porrige pro Roma genitrici mea mo flente
 Nunc cogit ipa parens tutela nuncq senatus
 Sensato senio rex cuius tu rubeat
 Quondam consil amor quia scis urte Senator
 Ee ratur ut culpe ne crescat sio mediator
 Indiget ipa tui presenti condicione

Conspice puate qui regia carmina adre
 Hec tua que tude in unida pro fientate
 Paudire nelid que postit nomine prati
 Et tibi sine qm uuenes rex pie celio
 Laia lausq deo tibi rex deus inde paratur
 Et anteq datur exime spes magna trophoo
 Res facienda leu uerfoz fato laboe
 Iusta salus fore qua postur ut mala seui
 Nue pante uenit si flendo uideatur
 Ipsi necis dantur sic pelia dum face mirat
 Et quasi te mira contingere q meditant
 Unde retardantur ne figant uulnera dca
 Resca completa seddit bella uetusta
 Eumq ma iusta reddet comota quiete
 Non sunt faale que no in pace petuntur
 Eonaz planquntur senio q iam uuenile
 Tempus ridebat rex dupliis puius esto
 Et ficas presto tuus ut pater ipa plebat

† Eum manet anapi mentis luctanas agone
 Si uirtute tua quam sperat pace fructur
 Confidas felix q te fortuna sequetur
 Et licet ipa dei que gra pssera reges
 Sublimat suat letatur condere leges
 Sic ego spero quidem timor hinc orietur in orbe
 Dq dilectio longe tu pessime morbe
 Plene doli qnam te falso putasse pudebit
 Et q qui sequitur tua pessima uota dolebit

Convevole da Prato, *Regia Carmina*, London, British Library, Royal 6 E IX, c. 24 r.

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