

The Staffordshire Hoard: An Anglo-Saxon Treasure. Edited by CHRIS FERN, TANIA DICKINSON and LESLIE WEBSTER, Pp XXXV + 586, 314 figs, 32 tabs. Research Report of the Society of Antiquaries of London 80, Society of Antiquaries of London, London, 2019. ISBN 9781527233508. £49.95 (hbk).

Every few years major new discoveries are made in archaeology that cause the scholarly equivalent of an earthquake. Early medieval archaeology has been graced with a series of discoveries of such phenomenal opulence that the capacity of post-Roman societies to produce material culture of quite-possibly unassailable quality cannot be doubted, despite a continuing general sense that early medieval culture lacked the sophistication of the Classical/Late Antique world. Since the discovery of the tomb of the 5th century Merovingian king Childeric in Tournai in 1653, other finds such as the 7th century northern Iberian gold treasure, including the Visigothic votive crowns of kings' Recceswinth and Suintila, from Guarrazar, near Toledo serve to underscore the phenomenal wealth that could be accrued by early medieval elites. Closer to home, the discovery of the early 7th century ship-burial in Mound 1 at Sutton Hoo on the eve of the Second World War and the 7th century and later contents of St Cuthbert's Tomb at Durham recovered in 1827 showed that even a far-flung former province of the Roman Empire could itself produce materials of the highest technical competence carrying in their artistic schema an often-complex melding of ideological strands drawn from a variety of geographical regions and cultural traditions.

Then, in 2008, there was the Staffordshire Hoard. Prior to the discovery, the words 'Anglo-Saxon' and 'Staffordshire' were uncommon bedfellows. The sheer scale of the find with its c. 600 objects, including nearly 4600 fragments, many unidentifiable, many of them unique pieces of exquisite quality and workmanship, invited immediate wonderment as news of the find went 'viral'. Excavations took place, an enormous sum of money (3.28M) had to be raised to purchase the find from its legal owners; the finder and land-owner since fell out (Independent 22 March 2011) and discussions ensued over the eventual home of the material, now housed in the museums of Stoke-on-Trent and Birmingham, although elements of the Hoard have since travelled far and wide. Conferences and workshops were quickly organised and held, generating everything from genuine wisdom and insight, to hot air and dogma; anyone with even a tangential interest in early medieval archaeology had a view to offer on the purpose and meaning of the discovery. Subsequent public interest in the find saw extraordinary numbers of visitors making their way to the various exhibitions.

Several aspects generated great excitement among the research community: the Hoard lay beyond known distributions of Early Anglo-Saxon material culture, and yet further from the distribution of the comparably lavish material commonplace in the graves and metal-detector finds of East Anglia and Kent; no documents could be linked to the hoard; and it was found in a lonely spot alongside a major route without any indications of contemporary settlement or burial close by. Inscriptions and a processional cross initially seemed ill at ease with the strongly martial and entirely male-associated objects which comprised the hoard (although swords are to be found in several late Saxon women's wills). All in all, the discovery marked a back-to-the-drawing-board event for early medievalists writ large, as interest in the material went far beyond the world of archaeology into the realms of art history, linguistics, history, landscape archaeology and the hard analytical sciences in ways that really made scholars think long and hard and in new ways about this most remarkable and enigmatic discovery.

While 80 per cent of the identifiable objects are fittings from weapons, almost all of these are hilt-fittings crudely stripped from (mostly) swords and seaxes. No iron blades were recovered and very few scabbard fittings or buckles, suggesting that whoever assembled the Hoard had acquired a substantial collection of weapons, but not their associated gear: what circumstances might lead to

such a selective collection? A fine helmet (possibly more than one) is represented by a multitude of fragments and finds its best parallel in that from the Mound 1 ship burial at Sutton Hoo; dated to c. 600, its material and decorative qualities point towards a royal context. The chronological aspects of the hoard are of great interest, with four phases of material culture dated to the 6th century, c. 570-630, c. 610-650 and c. 630-660. The long-term curation of swords across three or more generations is acknowledged and handing swords down as heirlooms must have been the norm in the Early Anglo-Saxon period, with deposits in graves and watery places the exception, probably for a variety of reasons. The material thus covers one of the most formative periods in English history, including the emergence of the English kingdoms and their subsequent conversion to Christianity of which both these processes find particularly strong resonances in the hoard's contents.

In a review of this length, it is not possible to delve into the fine details of each chapter, but the stand-out contributions are in the main those of the volume's editors and principal contributors. Chapter 1 gives the background to the discovery and the subsequent treatment of the material and includes the results of survey and excavation of the of findspot which appear to confirm the isolated nature of the find and the plough soil context of the objects. Chris Fern's characterisation of the material components in Chapter 2 is exceptionally detailed, written in crisp prose and beautifully illustrated. Chapter 3 presents a state-of-the-art consideration of the material from a technological-compositional perspective by Fern and Blakelock, with overall oversight of the analyses by Martinon-Torres. Chapter 4 by Fern is a thought-provoking and detailed consideration of the post-manufacture 'object biographies', moving beyond traditional art-historical approaches and building on theoretical perspectives found, for example, in the work of Toby Martin and (more explicitly) Sue Brunning to consider how items were worn about the person and curated over time. Fern highlights the 'total disregard' for the qualities of the objects by those who took them to pieces. The apparent lack of battle-inflicted nicks and cuts, as opposed to damage as a function of disassembly, perhaps has much to say about the nature of warfare in the formative period of the earliest English kingdoms. Chapter 5 represents a state-of-the-art analysis, again by Fern, of the stylistic attributes of the Hoard - it is in every way exemplary, and again finely illustrated. In Chapter 6 Fern considers the dating of the Hoard (noted above) and addresses questions of the possible geographical origins of the material suggesting that the various styles of decoration and form reflect distinct regional/kingdom-level social identities. East Anglia and Sutton Hoo provide the most obvious parallels, with Kentish connections too, but to a much lesser degree; Northumbrian origins are possible for certain objects adorned with filigree.

The volume then moves on to a series of essays by specialists in various disciplines and topical fields; Yorke on the early kingdom of Mercia and Thacker on the early church in Chapter 7. Yorke suggests, among other possibilities, that the vicious wrecking of the objects might reflect the personification of bladed weapons and perhaps the dis-honouring of their former owners in the context of the rise of Mercian power; Thacker emphasises the religious instability of the period when the Hoard was buried, noting that changing political affiliation may have led to the material being 'jettisoned' as opposed to being recovered from a battlefield by a victor before burial. Thacker also parallels the Christian and martial objects as items of great power, real or perceived. In Chapter 8 Hines considers the archaeological context providing a generalised view of the settlement and burial archaeology of the region and period, but his main contribution is to assess the contemporary value of the hoard in relation to coin and wergilds and in relation to social context. Placing the pommels into a social setting using various sources and approaches suggests that if pommels can be equated to heads of households then these objects alone might equate to the territorial equivalent of a lower order region of the 600 hide+ kind found in the 7th-century Tribal Hidage, quite possibly, indeed likely, not

from one coherent political territory in the case of the geographical origin of the former sword owners.

In Chapter 9, Webster and Dickinson, with contributions by Guest, Hardt and Fischer, tackle the tricky issue of the nature of the Hoard itself in comparison with wider hoarding traditions both in geographical and chronological terms; it is an expert synthesis and a starting point for any future work in this topical area. The notion of 'tainted' material is again raised in relation to the Staffordshire Hoard and the marked difference in the composition of the collection in relation to the nature of the large majority of the comparanda discussed is more than evident.

Chapter 10 by Dickinson, Fern and Webster concludes the narrative part of the volume with a consideration of 'how' and 'why' the Hoard came to be. The previous chapters largely foreground conflict within a rapidly developing socio-political environment as the context, while this chapter discusses the various possibilities in great depth. The main theories can be summarised thus: war booty, theft and tribute, all within a royal milieu based on the quality and nature of the objects. There is an interesting and well-reasoned argument here that the items were dismantled by smiths rather than by warriors, although perhaps smiths might have had a higher regard for the objects? A case is presented that the material is a collection made prior to being melted down, but the editors note various problems with this line of thought, not least the selectivity evident in the Hoard. The suggestion that destruction of a previous regime's regalia might have taken place following a power grab is interesting, but perhaps mitigated against by the evidence of the Anglo-Saxon royal genealogies with their emphasis on connections with ancestors and also by the inclusion of old objects both in the hoard and elsewhere as grave finds; the creation, appropriation and maintenance of lineage was key to the aspirations of early medieval elite families. A further notion is that the collection was gathered with the sole intention of burial. The possibility of illicit burial of stolen material is raised but dismissed on the basis that the findspot was accessible and identifiable, but it must be remembered that the site is remote, population density would have been low, the Hoard itself could be contained in a shoe box and a single individual working in the dark could have concealed the collection quickly and easily without notice.

One interpretative avenue, however, has lain neglected, which does explain the selectivity of the Hoard, and that is the possibility that the material represents a pre-selected body of material stolen on occasion of a major assembly and buried close by with the intent of recovery. How might such pre-selection come about? Fern comments on the nature of the findspot's locale as suitable for an early medieval assembly site, as does Yorke, and several authors note the liminal location of the site, arguably in a border region between the *Pencersæte* and the *Tomsæte*, early constituents of the emerging Mercian kingdom. Proximity of the site to a major route, probably a crossroads, taken together with the boundary location all strengthen the case for a place suited to early medieval assembly; indeed, Dickinson, Fern and Webster describe the Hoard as 'a communal assemblage of the elite' in Chapter 10. Arguably then, the collection could represent a snapshot of the range of elite gear in use at a moment in time rather than the result of episodic addition.

In Chapter 8, Hines mentions in passing the reference in the epic *Beowulf* to the protagonists arrival at Heorot, Hrothgar's hall, whereby Beowulf and his retinue leave their weapons at the entrance to the hall (see *Beowulf* lines 321b-31a and 399-404: Mitchell and Robinson 1998). Here is a clear context for the kind of selectivity evident in the Staffordshire Hoard, with weapons alone removed from high-ranking warriors in the context of visiting the hall of another.

In a similar vein, there are strong indications from English and Scandinavian law codes relating the necessity to maintain peace in the context of an assembly and of the special circumstances that

could apply to assembly spaces. Aethelberht of Kent's lawcode of c. 600 refers to a penalty for the violation of assembly peace (Oliver 2002, 61, clause 7), while the Scandinavian *Vapnabing* at which 'all free men of major age' should attend and produce arms for inspection shows that armed warriors (at least in that region) attended assemblies. Scandinavian texts also refer to the importance of maintaining peace at assemblies with the suggestion that enclosed spaces were subject to particular 'peace' regulations (Pantos 2002, 80; Sanmark 2017, 52 and 86-8), perhaps among them a requirement to lay down weapons. Whatever the details, men gathered for assembly provide one possible means by which weapons might become collected together in the manner represented by the Hoard.

If the Hoard did indeed relate to weapons laid down at a major assembly or perhaps at a social gathering at an elite residence, it would explain why ancient sword fittings and later ones are found together, as heirlooms and new objects, why different regional styles are represented, why objects of an ecclesiastical character are there, and why high status women are not represented. The almost complete absence of belt and scabbard fittings might also be explained by weapons being voluntarily surrendered for the duration of, or part of, an important meeting, perhaps kept in a safe-house, but then stolen, quickly dismantled and the high-end fittings buried with the intent of recovery. The exclusion of crosses from an assembly at this time may also reflect ancient customs relating to neutrality in such settings, especially at such an early date and in such ideologically ambiguous times. Assemblies would have been catalysts for violence as much as they were for maintaining peace, especially in instances of contentious dispute between emerging polities. Indeed, many of the battles found in early medieval annals might be better read as failed attempts at conciliation as opposed to one party seeking out another with the initial aim of violence or two parties agreeing to meet with fighting as the principal aim.

At the end of the day, it is clear that discussion about the meaning of the Hoard will continue for decades to come. Whether splitting of the Hoard was ultimately desirable will provide a generation of museum studies students with an essay topic. Overall, however, this most excellent book presents a cutting-edge analysis and discussion edited into shape and with major contributions by three of the most prominent scholars of such material at the present time, with many other valuable contributions. The fine catalogue makes for astonishing viewing and in many respects ought to where the reader of this volume should begin. As the volume's publishers, the Society must be delighted with the outcome of the collective efforts of all those who have contributed to this monumental work.

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