

Sixth-century connections: Anglo-Saxon brooches from Somerset

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Extracted from the Proceedings of the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society for 2019.

Volume 163, 208-13.

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Produced in Great Britain by Short Run Press, Exeter.

ISSN 0081-2056

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The surveys were carried out with the kind permission of the landowner, H. M. and K. I. Stowell & Son. Thanks also to English Heritage for issuing a licence to undertake the surveys.

Special thanks to Golden Software, California, USA, for supplying Surfer 10; Ian Morton for recognising the potential use for the hydrostatic level in manual surveying and Unsal Hassan for help with analysing original electronic data; B. Wills, A. Dimmock and

members of YCCART who helped with the surveys; C. Campbell and P. English for helpful suggestions with the manuscript, and J. Wilcox for figure 2.

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SIXTH-CENTURY CONNECTIONS: ANGLO-SAXON BROOCHES FROM SOMERSET

JAMES GERRARD

The 5th and 6th centuries AD remain one of the most fascinating, but poorly understood, periods in our county's history. Sandwiched between the collapse of the Roman Empire and the region's incorporation into the Kingdom of Wessex, these two centuries mark a period of post-Roman independence for what had been a prosperous part of the Late Roman Empire.

In Somerset these centuries are defined archaeologically by inhumation cemeteries (for instance Rahtz *et al.* 2000) and high-status sites, such as Cadbury Castle (Alcock 1995) and Cadbury Congresbury (Rahtz *et al.* 1993), the identification of which depends entirely on radiocarbon dating, or the presence of pottery with Mediterranean origins. These ceramics have traditionally been interpreted as indicators of connections between the south-west of Britain and the Eastern Roman Empire, although recent research has demonstrated that the connections were probably with Bordeaux/Aquitaine and Vigo/the Iberian Peninsula (Duggan 2018). Rather less attention has been focussed on objects that provide links eastwards, towards the so-called Anglo-Saxon regions of lowland Britain (Costen 2011, 144-5). This note, which reviews six early Anglo-Saxon brooches from Somerset, will try to address this issue and shed a little light on how the region was connected with other regions of Britain during the 6th century.

Three of the brooches are so-called 'button brooches' (nos 1-3), which are small (c. 20mm in diameter), saucer-shaped disc brooches typically with a helmeted and moustachioed human mask on the front. Normally they are made from copper alloy and the front is often gilded. They were usually secured with an iron pin on the reverse. They are predominantly distributed in East Kent, Coastal Sussex, the Isle of Wight, Hampshire and the Upper Thames Valley, with some outliers in northern France (Suzuki 2008, 336). The form was first formally classified

by Avent and Evison (1982), who divided them into Classes A-L. More recently Suzuki (2008) has reassessed a much larger corpus of 209 button brooches and produced a substantially revised understanding of the type while still utilising Avent and Evison's (1982) broad framework. Since Suzuki's work the Portable Antiquities Scheme has added another 167 brooches to the total number known. The small number from Somerset emphasises their rarity in a region that was, for whatever reason, beyond the writ of 'Germanic' influence for most of the 6th century.

In chronological terms Suzuki (2008, 245) presents compelling arguments that the earliest button brooches developed from face mask roundels on Scandinavian relief brooches probably contemporaneously with the emergence of Salin's Style I c. AD 480. The earliest button brooches seem to have been manufactured in Kent and the Isle of Wight, but the type was then 'assimilated' into the existing tradition of wearing saucer brooches in the Upper Thames Valley. The form was probably falling out of use by the mid to late 6th century. Thus button brooches are a glimpse into a period of only four or five generations from c. AD 480-550.

Brooch 1: Cadbury Castle

The excavations by Alcock at Cadbury Castle in the late 1960s produced a single button brooch of Class Bi (Alcock 1995, 70 and Illus. 5.3, Br 2) (not illustrated here). This is probably 6th century and the type is a reasonably uncommon one. Its distribution is focussed in Hampshire, Wiltshire and the Isle of Wight (Fig 1).

Brooch 2: Ham Hill

Excavations by Wessex Archaeology at Ham Hill recovered a single button brooch with a profile portrait (Class L) from

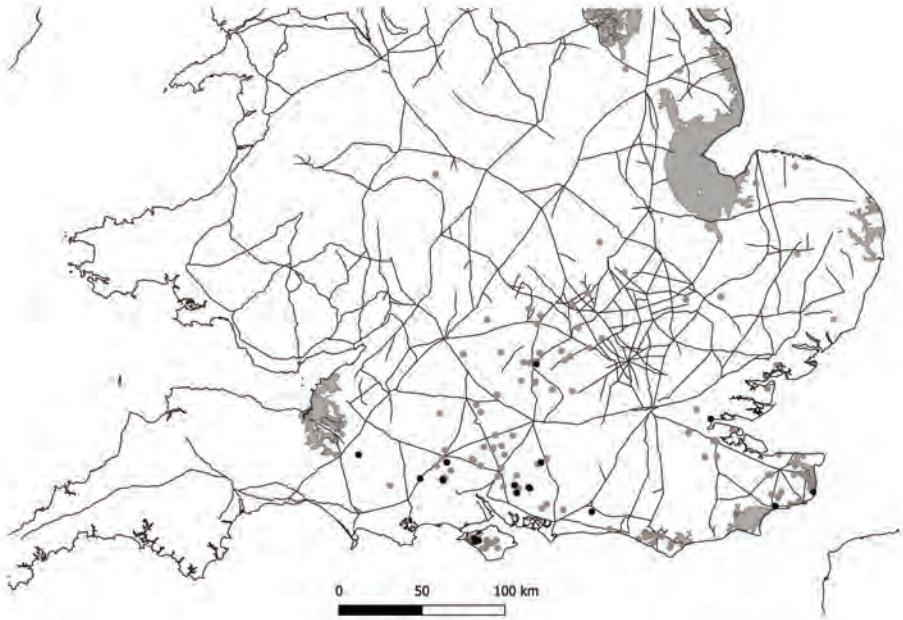


Fig. 1 Distribution of button brooches of Class Bi (black circles) against all button brooches recorded by the PAS (grey circles) and Roman roads (the author).

the fill of a ditch (Leivers *et al.* 2007, 50-51, fig. 5, no. 2 – where it is illustrated upside down) (Fig. 2). Traces of mineralised wool were identified adhering to the pin. Class L brooches are exceedingly rare and are probably 6th century. Their distribution is restricted to eastern Kent, a cluster of finds from a small area in the Isle of Wight and two outliers in northern France (Fig. 3).

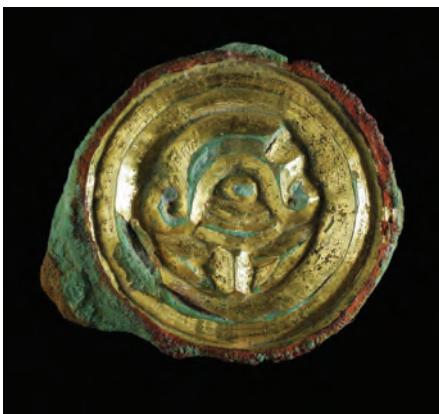


Fig. 2 Button brooch of Class L from Ham Hill (reproduced by kind permission of Wessex Archaeology).

Brooch 3: Pawlett

A button brooch of Class C was found by a metal detectorist at Pawlett, close to the mouth of the River Parrett (Burnett 2015, 139 and fig. 6) (Fig. 4). Again, this is most likely to be a 6th-century type and has a distribution focussed on Hampshire and the Sussex Coast with a few outliers elsewhere, including examples from Shillingstone (Hayward Trevarthen 2012) and Piddletrenthide (Caswell 2019) in Dorset (Fig. 5).

The remaining three brooches represent something of a mixed bag. The first of these (Brooch 4), from Otterhampton, bears some similarities to a button brooch in that it displays a human face (Fig. 6). It is a fascinating and unique object but does not easily fit into existing typologies (Payne 2006a). The second brooch (Brooch 5) is a small-long brooch allegedly found near Wells. The patina of the object and the fact that the finder was 'slightly uncertain on precise findspot' (Payne 2006b) arouses suspicions. If it is a genuine find then it is an exceptional object in a Somerset context. The final brooch (Brooch 6), is a fragment of a great square-headed brooch from Bath (Davenport 1999, 60, 90 and fig. 1.70, no. 31). It too is an unusual object in a Somerset context but its excavated provenance is beyond doubt.

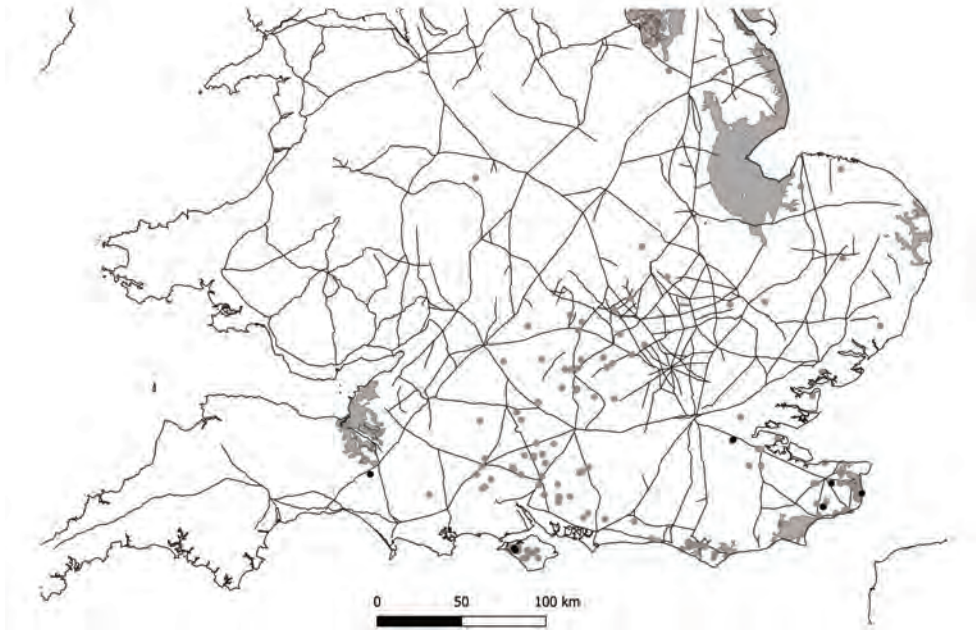


Fig. 3 Distribution of button brooches of Class L (black circles) against all button brooches recorded by the PAS (grey circles) and Roman roads (the author).

Brooch 4: Otterhampton

The fourth brooch was found by a metal detectorist at Otterhampton, to the west of Pawlett (Payne 2006a; Costen 2011, 145). Technically it is not a button brooch and is probably best described as a silvered copper-alloy disc brooch, decorated with a border of rounded crescent stamps and a face-like central roundel surrounded by concentric raised borders (Fig. 6). A 5th- or 6th-century date seems likely.



Fig. 6 Disc brooch from Otterhampton (CC-BY-SA Somerset County Council)



Fig. 4 Button brooch of Class C from Pawlett (CC-BY-SA Somerset County Council)

Brooch 5: St Cuthbert Out

The fifth brooch is a copper-alloy small-long brooch allegedly found by a metal-detectorist at St Cuthbert Out, near Wells (Payne 2006b) (Fig. 7). The brooch is decorated with ring-and-dot motifs and is an atypical form with an unusual head shape (MacGregor and Bolick 1993, 145-6, nos 15.78 and 15.79). The distribution of this kind of brooch is focussed on the so-called ‘Anglian’ regions of Britain, with outlying concentrations in the Isle of Wight, Hampshire and Kent (Fig. 8). Small-long brooches are dated c. AD 480-550 and this example is likely to be of 6th-century date.

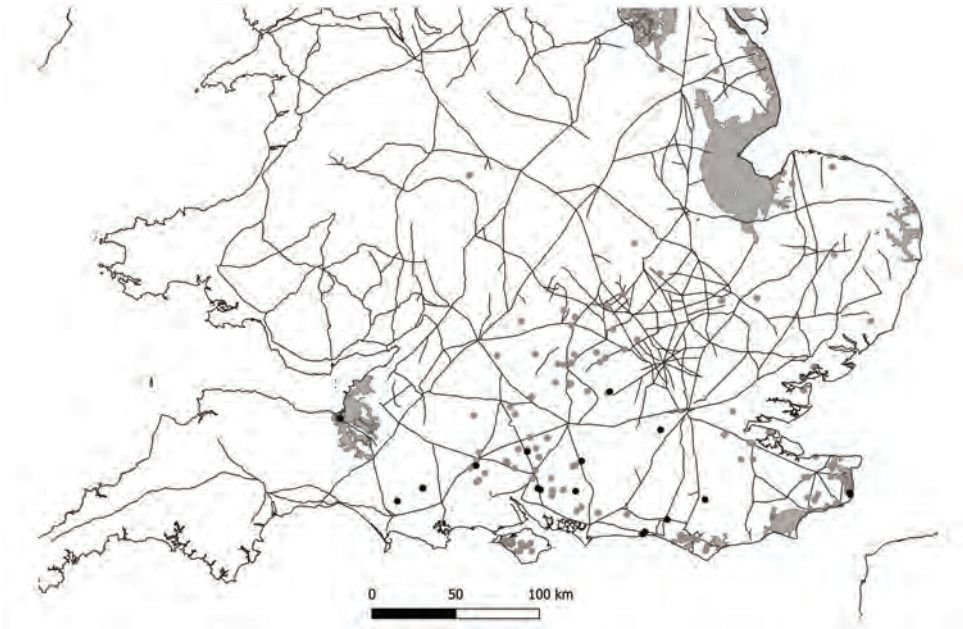


Fig. 5 Distribution of button brooches of Class C (black circles) against all button brooches recorded by the PAS (grey circles) and Roman roads (the author).

Brooch 6: Bath

Excavations in the Bath Street/Beau Street area of Bath produced a small fragment of what is probably the foot of a great square-headed brooch (Davenport 1999, 60, 90 and fig I.70, no. 31). Great square-headed brooches are dated from c. AD 500-70 and have a distribution traditionally described as ‘Anglian’ (Hines 1997), predominantly east of the Pennines and north of a line from Felixstowe to Derby.

Interpreting how these objects came to be lost in Somerset, on the periphery of their normal distributional areas, must be a matter for informed speculation. They were clearly not in common use in what is now Somerset or Dorset, although some forms – such as the button brooches – were commonplace further east in Hampshire, Wiltshire and Oxfordshire. A traditional interpretation would see these brooches as indicating the movement of people, specifically women (Lucy 2000; Costen 2011, 144-5). Here our models of interaction rely on our historical prejudices: did these women move of their own free will in search of a different life? Or were they (and others) slaves, trafficked, or captured in war, from lands to the east? Alternatively, these women might have been components within broader socio-political networks moving as hostages, or in arranged marriages to secure alliances and treaties.

Of course, there are alternative interpretations. The



Fig. 7 Small-long brooch allegedly from St Cuthbert Out, near Wells (CC-BY-SA Somerset Country Council).

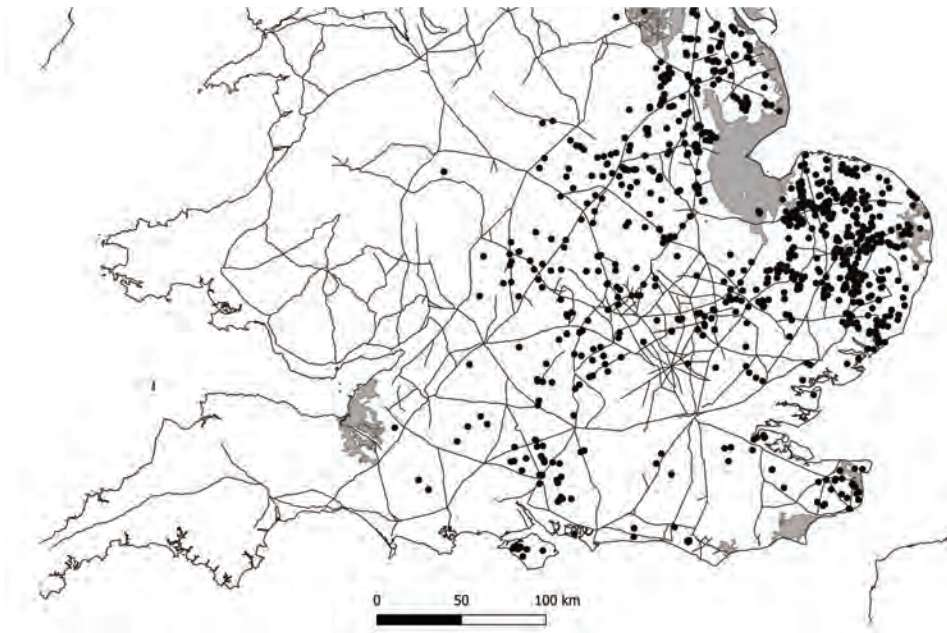


Fig. 8 The distribution of small-long brooches based on PAS data.
The St Cuthbert Out, Wells find is the most westerly example (the author).

brooches may not always have been worn by women, and this may have been especially true in the peripheries of their normal distributions. Here we can hypothesize that the brooches travelled from their homelands to Somerset either alone or attached to clothes. These clothes and the brooches may have been traded, exchanged as gifts, looted in war or stolen.

Whatever the truth, these brooches point to the fact that people in 6th-century Somerset were in contact with people who had access to button brooches of types current in Hampshire, the western Isle of Wight, the Sussex Coast, Kent and even Northern France. The other brooches possibly point to contacts further afield with the 'Anglian' regions of Britain. Of course, these objects may also imply other, archaeologically invisible, contacts and connections. Their location in Somerset is also intriguing. Two come from hillforts with other evidence for 5th- and 6th-century activity (Alcock 1995; Burrow 1981, 268-77). The small-long brooch comes from near Wells, a location with strong suggestions of post-Roman activity and the great square-headed brooch from Bath, a city with intriguing post-Roman potential (Gerrard 2007). Meanwhile, the Pawlett and Otterhampton brooches both come from close to the mouth of the River Parrett. Otterhampton has also produced an early-medieval penannular brooch of Fowler's Type G (Payne 2005). Not far away lies Cannington, well known for its extensive

early-medieval cemetery and potentially reoccupied Iron Age hillfort (Rahtz 1963; Rahtz *et al.* 2000) and the parish now has produced a cast pendant with Style I decoration (Burnett 2015, 139-40 and fig. 8). The Parrett was clearly a major regional conduit for the movement of people and goods, including imported Mediterranean pottery.

Six brooches is a small corpus, but they provide a useful change in perspective. They demonstrate that 6th-century Somerset looked not just to the Severn Sea, Tintagel and the Atlantic Façade, but also towards the lands bordering the Solent and the English Channel.

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A GROUP OF LATE 16TH-CENTURY POTTERY EXCAVATED FROM PIT 13 IN THE GARDEN OF WELLS AND MENDIP MUSEUM, 8 CATHEDRAL GREEN, WELLS, SOMERSET, 1992-1997

DAVID DAWSON, TERESA HALL AND LINDA IVESON

INTRODUCTION

Five vessels are presented here together with an accompanying glass flask as one of the few stratified groups of pottery of this date recorded in the county. They are the only finds recorded from pit 13 and represent a tiny fraction of the pottery recovered from the excavations led by Simon Almy and the late Christopher Hawkes between 1992 and 1997 in advance of the works part funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund to provide new reference stores and a learning space at the rear of Wells and Mendip Museum (Almy and Hawkes 1992; 1994; 1997). The 13th-/early 14th-century group from pit 6 has been published (Dawson *et al.* 2015) and a corpus of 17th- to 19th-century red earthenwares is being prepared (Dawson *et al.* forthcoming). A photograph of the pottery from pit 13 group was published in the interim report for 1995-7 (Almy and Hawkes 1997, 26). The finds can be consulted at Wells and Mendip Museum under accession numbers 1994.14.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In the 16th century the property now known as the Wells and Mendip Museum was in the hands of the

Dean and Chapter (Fig. 1). An extensive examination of its complex post-medieval historical context will accompany publication of the later red earthenwares

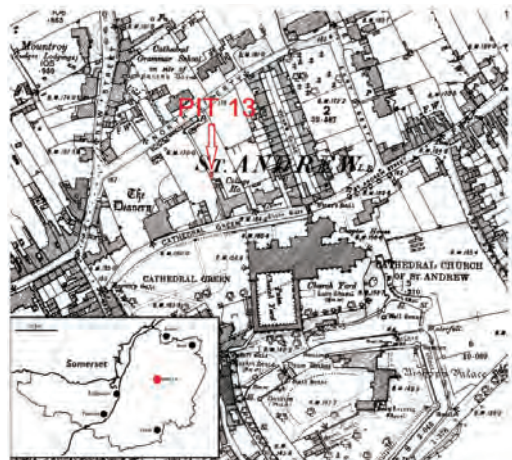


Fig. 1 Location of pit 13 and Wells and Mendip Museum (formerly College House) based on the Ordnance Survey 1:2500 map revised in 1902.