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Taunton

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## Early Medieval Bowl from Taunton Priory

BY H. ST. GEORGE GRAY, F.S.A.

THE subject of this article—a thin bronze bowl of golden hue (Plate IV)—was found immediately to the west of the Tithe Barn formerly belonging to Taunton Priory. This ground now forms part of the yard and works of Mr. Frank Small, builder. The vessel was found by one of his men when digging at an approximate depth of 6 ft., *circa* 1932. For some years it rested on the office shelves at the yard, where it was noticed by Colonel Cameron Dunbar when engaged upon his enquiries in connection with Air Raid Precautions. Mr. Small subsequently presented the vessel to the Somerset County Museum.

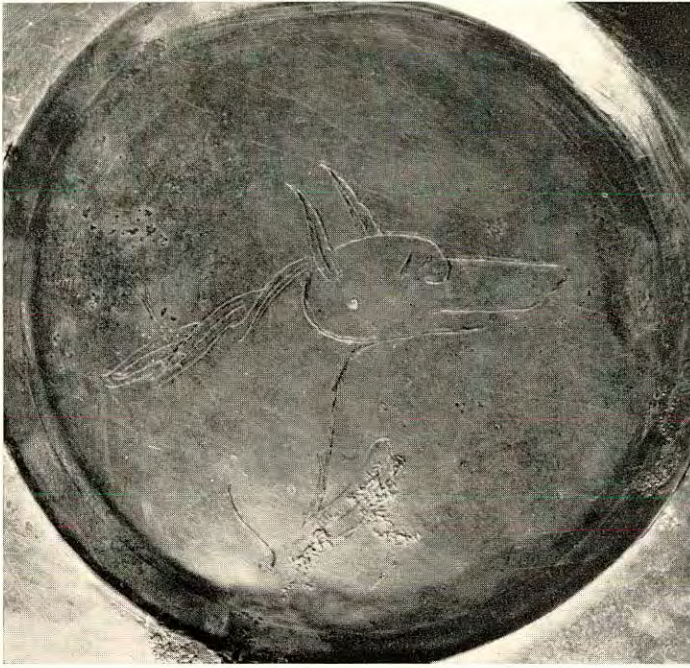
The bowl had been somewhat crushed, but has now been restored to its original form, and has only one small hole at the base and one or two slight cracks.<sup>1</sup>

The metal is very thin and bears evidence of constant use extending over a long period. Its present weight is only 255 grammes. The diameter at the top of the rim varies from  $10\frac{1}{3}$  to  $10\frac{1}{4}$  in. ; and the height of the bowl is  $2\frac{5}{8}$  in.

The flat rim,  $\frac{5}{16}$  in. in width, is ornamented by dotted triangles of isosceles form, placed at intervals averaging  $1\frac{1}{4}$  in. apart with their bases outwards. This particular detail of ornament is represented on other bowls of the period.

Viewed externally the base is recessed and has a diameter of  $3\frac{7}{8}$  in., making a raised bottom when seen internally. On this almost flat bottom the head and shoulders of a dog have been faintly engraved (see accompanying illustration). The upper jaw forms a long protruding snout of rather wide proportions ; the lower jaw recedes greatly. The ears are sharp at the top, and narrow at the base. The upper part of the neck is covered

<sup>1</sup> The repairs, the cost of which Col. Dunbar kindly defrayed, were made by Messrs. A. H. Isher and Son, of Cheltenham.



REPRESENTATION OF DOG ON THE RAISED  
BASE ON THE INNER SURFACE OF THE BOWL



MEDIEVAL BOWL FROM TAUNTON PRIORY

*From Photographs by Mr. H. St. George Gray, F.S.A.*

with what appears to be a mane. The representation is so highly stylized that it is difficult to determine what species of dog was intended, but on the whole it seems likely that the artist had in mind a large hunting dog, such as a wolf-hound.

Other incised ornament is seen to be very faintly traceable on the inner sides of the bowl, now that it has been thoroughly cleaned.<sup>2</sup> There are four devices at equal distances apart—opposite one another—all of the same design. They appear to represent dwellings, kilns or other constructions with conical roofs and large internal chimneys or central roof-poles—each device enclosed by a double circle.

It has not been definitely determined whether the ornamentation on these bowls is the result of engraving and punching by means of metal tools—which seems probable—or whether the lines were bitten by acid. This has been discussed to some extent by Mr. O. M. Dalton, F.S.A.<sup>3</sup> Some authorities think the engraved lines may have been filled with a dark substance, so that the detail might stand out effectively against the bright bronze or gilded ground, for some antiquaries think these bowls were finished by gilding.

That they belong to the Romanesque period and date from early in the twelfth century there can be little, if any doubt. Their treatment and feeling accord with that dating.

Mr. Dalton, writing in 1922,<sup>4</sup> says 'It is to the region of the lower Rhine and the Meuse that such evidence as we now have seems to point as the chief home of this engraved work on metal. This was an area rich in monasteries in which all the arts were practised. . . . The master craftsmen were at first monastic, working within their own monasteries; in time laymen entered the field, and getting pupils about them, formed schools'.

However, 'it need not be supposed that in an age so cosmopolitan as that of Romanesque art',<sup>5</sup> nothing was done of this kind beyond the borders of the Rhineland. In fact there is a

<sup>2</sup> The cleaning of the bowl was done by Mrs. St. George Gray, and revealed ornament not previously seen.

<sup>3</sup> *Archæologia*, lxxii, 158.

<sup>4</sup> *Op. cit.*, 133-160.

<sup>5</sup> *Op. cit.*, 158.

growing opinion that some examples of these bowls found in Britain are of English workmanship, and certain circumstances give weight to an English claim ; but no factory or workshop has yet been located.

And, finally, as to their use. It is not improbable that some of them, especially those ornamented with secular designs, were used as bowls carried round at table that the guests might cleanse their fingers. The custom is thought to have been introduced by the Crusaders. Rose-water or other scent may have been used in them as in the East.

Those bowls, finely engraved with such subjects as the legend of St. Thomas like that found in London and exhibited in the British Museum,<sup>6</sup> perhaps had a liturgical use ; ‘ they may have served to contain the water in which the celebrant washed his hands at the altar ’. Hence the term ‘ liturgical bowls ’, or basins. Mr. Dalton believes that occasionally they may have been used at the rite of baptism.

The decoration of the Taunton bowl is definitely secular, and therefore it is unlikely that the vessel was intended for liturgical purposes, and we may assume that it was used as a finger-bowl or for some other purpose connected with the service of the table. The depth below the surface at which it was found suggests that it was not brought to the site of Taunton Priory in recent years, but was buried accidentally, or intentionally, either at the time of the dissolution of the priory or at an earlier date. A piece of domestic plate of such quality, although of bronze, would have been used only at the Prior’s high table if it was brought to the monastery when it was newly made, and it is interesting that the period to which the bowl is considered to belong falls within the lifetime of Henry de Blois, Bishop of Winchester. This distinguished prelate, the brother of King Stephen, is thought to have visited his manor of Taunton more frequently than most of his successors. His liberality to Taunton Priory entitled him to be called co-founder.

At least five other examples of this art are shown in the

<sup>6</sup> *Op. cit.*, 133ff ; *Guide to Medieval Antiquities, British Museum, 1924*, p. 189. This specimen has dotted triangles or chevrons in close order on the flat rim.

British Museum.<sup>7</sup> Three of these have plain bases internally, without any moulding. The largest is some 13 in. in diameter ; the smallest about the size of the Taunton specimen. The latter (B.M.), unlabelled, is similar in other respects to the Taunton bowl but has no dotted chevrons on the rim. It is engraved with four grotesque animals, opposite each other, on the inner face.

Two of the British Museum specimens are engraved all over with mythological subjects, and they have dotted chevrons on the rim. They were found in the river Severn at Haw Bridge in 1824.<sup>8</sup>

The national collection possesses another bowl, found in London, which is engraved with figures of the Virtues ; another, found at Ghent, exhibits figures of the Vices. Both of these vessels have traces of the dotted triangles on the rim.<sup>9</sup>

Another specimen, having a diameter of  $10\frac{1}{2}$  in., is to be seen in the London Museum. It is precisely similar in form to the Taunton bowl, but its general condition is poor. It was found in Moorgate Street, London. There is no ornamentation on the rim, but the inner surface is engraved with alternate ' plant forms ' and ' horse-shoe forms '.

<sup>7</sup> Mr. T. D. Kendrick, F.S.A., Keeper of the Department, tells the writer that a few other specimens are preserved in cupboards.

<sup>8</sup> *Archæologia*, lxxii, 140ff.

<sup>9</sup> The bowls in the British Museum are now exhibited in Bay xxv in King Edward VII Gallery.