A RE-EXAMINATION OF A PAIR OF ANGLO-SAXON SAUCER BROOCHES FROM BISHOPSTONE AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS

J. F. HEAD, F.S.A.

I AM much indebted to Mr. L. R. A. Grove, F.S.A., curator of Maidstone Museum, and to Mr. T. A. Hume, F.S.A., curator of the Buckinghamshire County Museum, Aylesbury, for permitting me to examine the saucer brooches discussed below, and for facilitating my work in every way. I wish also to thank them and the Kent Archæological Society and the Architectural and Archæological Society for the County of Buckingham, the owners of the brooches, for permission to have photographs taken, and to use them in this paper. To the Trustees of the British Museum I am indebted for permission to reproduce the photograph of the mosaic (Pl. XII). I am also very grateful to Mr. David Wilson for reading this paper while in manuscript form, and to Mr. Herbert Maryon for his technical report.

The two small Buckinghamshire saucer brooches (Pl. XIII) were found in the Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Cursley Hill, Bishopstone,[1] between 1866 and 1878, and were subsequently deposited in the County Museum at Aylesbury. From this cemetery came also the well-known native, or Gallic, belt-plate with sub-Roman ornament, conventionally dated to A.D. 400–50. No records of any kind exist as to the circumstances of these finds, and this is particularly unfortunate, since this cemetery, situated on the outskirts of Aylesbury, might well have thrown valuable light on the vexed question of the nature of the occupation of this part of Buckinghamshire in pagan Saxon times.

The brooches are of bronze, cast in one piece from the same mould,[2] and still bear traces of their original gilding. Their "chip-carving" style of ornament has already been discussed by the writer in a paper to this journal,[3] and all in that connection that need here be said is that the central design derives from a well-known Roman motive which may have originated perhaps in the boss and strengthening mounts of a shield, as depicted in later ornamental form on the Trajan column.[4] An early stage of the motive appears on a Roman mosaic from London (Pl. XII), and a later variation on an imperfect "applied" or composite Saxon saucer brooch from Long Wittenham, Berkshire.[5]

The "pot-hook" design around the borders of the brooches is a decadent derivative of the acanthus-tendril pattern—another early classical motive. These Buckinghamshire brooches have been dated typologically by the writer to the earlier years of the sixth century.[6]

It is, therefore, of considerable interest to note that another pair of such brooches, gilded and of almost identical design, was found in 1954 at Lyminge, near Folkestone, in Kent.[7] They are now in the care of the Maidstone Museum. They were found—one on either shoulder—with the skeleton of a woman (Grave 39), some 60 years of age. Both the Kentish and Buckinghamshire brooches have been examined by Mr. H. Maryon of the British Museum, and I am indebted to him for the following remarks.

"The four brooches form two pairs. The Maidstone pair is definitely larger than yours. Also, its ornament is more carefully executed, and the brooches are in better condition. In your pair the 'central' line is situated 14 mm. from the first, grooved, circle on one side and 18 mm. on the other, for it is placed 2 mm. 'off-centre'. The more or less 'square' pattern in the centre is compressed laterally, but in the Maidstone examples its measurements in height and width are more regular.

"In each pair the individual examples are so much alike that they might have been cast successively in the same mould. Each brooch was 'cleaned up' with a scorper before gilding. And any little variations in the pattern could have been made during this operation."

The Lyminge brooches have been dated by Mr. Warhurst to the earlier half of the sixth century.[8]

It has long been recognised that the ornament on much of the late sixth-century and later material from the pagan Saxon cemeteries around Aylesbury was influenced by Kentish fashions, indicating contacts at that time between the Kentish and Buckinghamshire communities which these cemeteries represent. The route of communication can hardly have been other than by the Thames, which, of course, links the lower Thames estuary with the Oxford region. Taplow, *en route*, with its Kentish early seventh-century material, forms useful confirmation.

But—assuming that the manufacture of the Bishopstone and Lyminge saucer brooches is correctly assigned to the first half of the sixth century—it would appear that we now have, *prima facie*, a case for earlier contacts with Kent; reinforced by the glass cone-beaker from Dinton (near Bishopstone) which has been dated by Dr. Harden to the fifth century or, at latest, early sixth.[9] This glass, he states, may have been imported from the Low Countries to Kent or Sussex, and moved inland by trade, or in company with migrant families. In such case, we must assume that the Dinton glass and the Bishopstone brooches (or a mould from the better defined Kentish examples) passed through London up the Thames to the Oxford region, and thence to their final destination. These objects, together with the Bishopstone belt-plate ($\pm$A.D. 425) and a long brooch from Bishopstone ($\pm$A.D. 500), comprise all the earliest Saxon material from our district.

But whether such scanty evidence—with the newly revealed Kentish connection with the typologically mid-sixth-century Bishopstone saucer brooches particularly in mind—is really sufficient securely to date any of these Aylesbury group of settlements to before A.D. 571, must, I think, be open to doubt; and some further considerations are advanced below in this connection.

Buckinghamshire has long presented two problems in connection with its
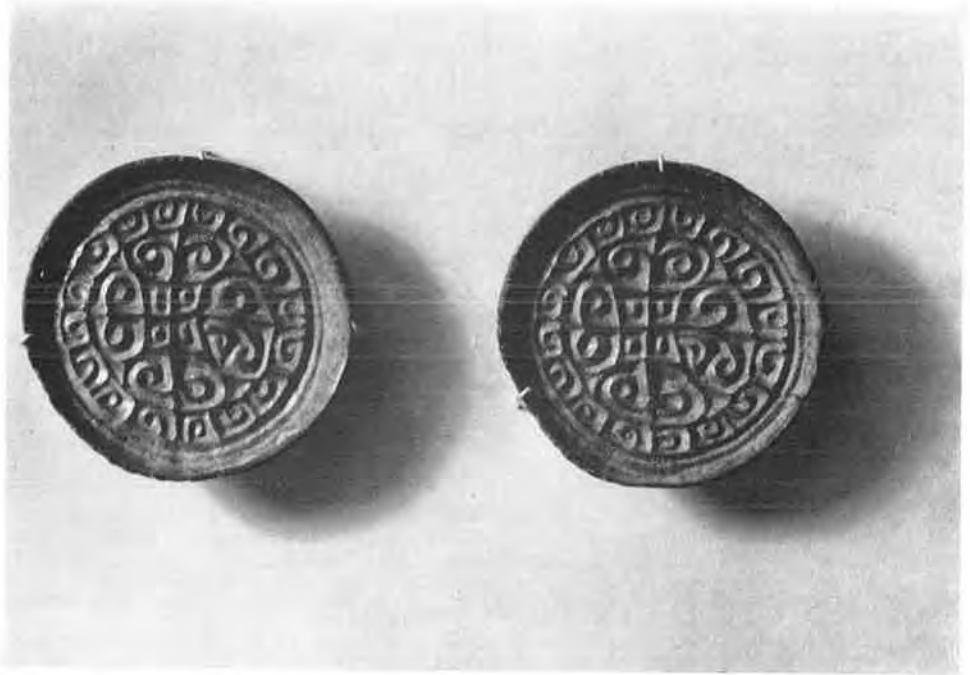
PLATE XII. Roman mosaic pavement from London.

PLATE XIII. Saucer brooches from Bishopstone, Bucks. (1/1).

PLATE XIV. Saucer brooches from Lyminge, Kent (1/1).

Anglo-Saxon settlement. First, the absence of sufficient adequate early evidence to support the late Mr. Leeds's conviction that the first fifth-century Saxon settlers of the upper Thames Valley came in a south-westerly direction from the Cambridge region along the line of the Icknield Way, and a parallel more northerly route along the high ground, via Kempston, Toddington, Leighton Buzzard and Ashendon.[10] Mr. Leeds cites undoubted parallels in the archaeological material from the upper Thames Valley and that from Bedfordshire and Cambridgeshire, but although the invaders appear to have shed themselves in some numbers along these routes as far south as Kempston and Luton, sufficient really conclusive evidence for their early presence or passage through Buckinghamshire is at present lacking.

Arguments *a silentio* cannot be pressed unduly, and Mr. Leeds has met the difficulty with the remark that the newcomers, who must have been possessed of foreknowledge of the attractions of the upper Thames Valley, would, on rounding Ivinghoe Beacon, have seen the spread of the upper Thames Valley stretched out invitingly before them, and hastened on, without further pause, to their goal. This may have been so, but the well-watered Aylesbury vale— unless peopled with hostile natives—cannot have appeared unattractive to these farmer-settlers even in these early times, and the explanation may be thought by some to be not altogether convincing.

It may well be, as the place-names suggest, that a body of Romano-British did persist in the Chiltern hill-country and around the forests of Brill, but, as Dr. Myres has observed,[11] they may have preferred to preserve themselves from molestation, by granting Saxon bands free passage through the district. However that may be, if a later entry in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* is accepted,[12] Britons were actively hostile in A.D. 571 in our area since the Chronicle states that, in that year, Cuthwulf (the West Saxon leader) fought against the Britons at Bedford, and took four towns—Limbury (near Luton), Aylesbury, Benson and Eynsham. This brings us to our second difficulty which is to admit the existence, in A.D. 571 and in such circumstances, of Anglo-Saxon settlements amid a hostile British population, in the close vicinity of Aylesbury.

The known settlements—which include Bishopstone—represented by their cemeteries grouped around the headwaters of the Thame, have, with the exception of the few early objects mentioned above, yielded nothing that can be proved to be earlier than A.D. 571. Access to these settlements was readily had from the Oxford region by way of the Thame and the accompanying Angle Way which was certainly in use in Roman times, as evidenced at Long Crendon[13] and Stone.[14]

Cremation[15] occurs at Kingsey and Upper Winchendon, and Dr. Myres is disposed to regard the upper Thames area as the immediate source of influence on the decoration of the Kingsey urns, which he assigns to a fairly late date in the sixth century.[16] Also from Kingsey comes a late-sixth-century saucer brooch paralleled by examples from Petersfinger, Wilts.[17] A late-sixth-century or early-seventh saucer brooch from the Bishopstone cemetery was cast from the same mould as a pair found at Abingdon, Berks.[18]

Apart from the question of heirlooms or gifts to descendants—and the Bishopstone belt-plate shows evidence of much wear—a considerable interval

might elapse between the time of the manufacture of an ornament and its interment, and in the light of the Kentish affinities now established between our typologically earlier Bishopstone and Lyminge saucer brooches, we must, I suggest, now seriously consider whether all the Saxon settlements around Aylesbury are not "reflex", or overspill, secondary settlements from the upper Thames and Oxford region; and that they did not exist before A.D. 571.

It is not unlikely that the indiscriminate looting of the Bishopstone cemetery in 1866 may have left material undiscovered, and a controlled re-examination of the site might well throw valuable light on these questions of more than local importance.

[1] The location of Cursley Hill has been corrected by the late Mr. F. G. Gurney in a note to the *Records of Bucks.*, XIV, p. 325, but, to avoid possible confusion, I have thought it better to retain throughout this paper the name of Bishopstone, which has been associated with the well-known belt-plate for so many years.

[2] The "blob" which appears over one spiral may result from an air-bubble in casting.

[3] *Records of Bucks.*, XIV (1941), pp. 327–30.

[4] The motive occurs in Egypt, *c.* 1500 B.C. Flinders Petrie, *Decorative Patterns of the Ancient World* (1930), M73, Pl. 34.

[5] E. T. Leeds, *Archæologia*, XIII (1912), p. 169, fig. 10a.

[6] Loc. cit., p. 330.

[7] A. Warhurst, *"The Jutish Cemetery at Lyminge"*, *Arch. Cantiana*, LXIX (1955), pp.1–40.

[8] Op. cit.

[9] D. Harden, *Dark-Age Britain*, pp. 140, 148.

[10] *Oxoniensia*, XIX (1954), pp. 45–60.

[11] *Roman Britain and the English Settlements*, p. 408.

[12] For a recent historical criticism of these annals, see A. Wade-Evans, *The Emergence of England and Wales* (1959), pp. 75–88.

[13] T. Knight, *History of the Dorton Chalybeate* (1835), pp. 85–7, *illus.*

[14] *Archæologia*, XXXIV, p. 22; *Records of Bucks.*, IV, p. 122; IX, pp. 209, 270.

[15] The rite also occurs at Bledlow, above the Upper Icknield Way. For a study of cremation and inhumation in the upper Thames Valley see: Joan Kirk, *Dark-Age Britain*, pp. 123–31.

[16] *Records of Bucks.*, XIV, pp. 319–20.

[17] E. Leeds and H. Shortt, *An Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Petersfinger, Wilts.* (1953), Grave XIX, Pl. V, 43–4.

[18] E. Leeds and D. Harden, *The Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Abingdon, Berks.*, p. 37, Grave B31, Pl. VIII, 31; *Archæologia*, LXIII, Pl. XXVI, 7.