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## CHAPTER 5

# ***TRACING CHARISMA***

## **AN ‘ANGLO-SAXON WORKBOX’ FROM AN EARLY VIKING AGE BURIAL IN NORWAY, ITS SCANDINAVIAN COUNTERPARTS AND EUROPEAN CONTEXT**

*Zanette Tsigaridas Glørstad*

This article presents a variant of a so-called ‘Anglo-Saxon workbox’ found in a woman’s grave dating to the late 700s–early 800s in Setesdal, southern Norway. It is the only one known from Norway, but it is similar to a few boxes found in Denmark. The Setesdal box is however deposited in a later context than the Danish ones, and has undergone repairs and secondary decoration. There are similarities and differences between Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon workboxes, although they are all assumed to relate to the continental custom of wearing personal containers. These are often interpreted as being used for Christian relics, but they also occur in communities in transition between pagan and Christian practice. The inclusion of this unusual and antique box in the

burial of the woman in Setesdal, exemplifies the enmeshed and unpredictable side of how societies engage and influence each other. The boxes illustrate how the material culture and its associations are constantly changing and negotiated over time, where practical use as well as the ideological and cosmological connotations of objects are redefined and processed in local terms.

## INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 1920, the farmer Åsmund Viken decided to take out sand from a ridge on his farm in Valle in Setesdal Valley, southern Norway in order to construct a road. As he dug in, several objects appeared: fragments of iron and bronze, and beads. The museum in Oslo was notified, and all the recovered objects were handed in. Mr. Viken received a finder's fee, and a letter from the Museum Conservator Jan Petersen, briefly notifying him that the objects belonged to a female burial from the 8<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> century. Later the same year, the objects were examined and entered into the museum catalogue, with full descriptions (Mus. no.: C22569). Among the finds were parts of a box of tinned bronze with a lid, containing the remains of small threads rusted into the metal. This was assumed to be the remains of

a so-called 'Anglo-Saxon workbox' (cf. 1920 entry journal at the Museum of Cultural History in Oslo). The box is the only one of its kind found in Norway.

The box represents somewhat of an enigma. In spite of its diminutive size and only partial preservation it has the charismatic qualities of a unique museum object. It invites questions about its background, significance and how it has moved between different environments and frames of meaning. It also echoes a similar fascination for the object at the time it was deposited in the grave, as its context and modifications reveal that the box was cared for and preserved through several generations. This suggests that this particular box was deemed especially valuable, and that its biography and associations were important to the owner. In this paper, the box and its context are first presented and compared to the few



**Figure 36.** The workbox from Valle, Setesdal, South Norway. Diam: 5.5 cm, height: 2.6 cm. © Museum of Cultural History, Oslo / Kirsten Helgeland.

other similar finds in Scandinavia, before this group of boxes are discussed in light of their closest parallels, the Anglo-Saxon ‘workboxes’. Both the Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon boxes are seen as variants of continental dress traditions that included small personal containers. The boxes are by some interpreted as containers for different types of Christian relics, while they also indicate varied use in communities in the transition between pagan and Christian practice. Collectively, the boxes from Scandinavia reflect contact and cultural interaction across the North Sea into the Baltic Sea in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, and also illustrate how associations towards selected meaningful objects are negotiated and embedded within new frames of reference.

### THE ‘ANGLO-SAXON’ WORKBOX FROM SETESDAL

In spite of the somewhat random discovery of the box from Setesdal, it is possible to get an idea of the context based on the finder’s information and later observations on the site. A note in the archives states that the objects were found next to the remains of an unburnt skeleton. In his letter to the museum Mr. Viken states that ‘... the one who lay there, seems to have been 3 alen’ (ca 1.80 cm, auth. comm.<sup>12</sup>), indicating that the objects were recovered from a recognizable burial of one individual.

The box from the grave is 5,5 cm in diameter, and ca. 2.6 cm in height. Approximately one third of the box

<sup>12</sup> A Norwegian ‘alen’ was by 1875 defined as 62.74 cm, building on the older Danish system adapted by the astronomer Ole Christansen Rømer, who defined the Danish ‘alen’ as 62.94 cm.

itself is preserved with about half of the lid, and with the hinge intact (Figure 36).

The box is made of tin-foiled copper alloy, with remnants of a corroded iron nail or similar item on the top of the lid. The hinge is attached with two iron rivets through the side of the box. A corroded protrusion on the hinge could suggest the remains of a loop or something similar, parallel to the loop of a chatelaine observed on other boxes from Scandinavia. The lid and sides are decorated with plain circumferential lines and lines of stamped triangles with punched dots, and the lid has an incised, cross-shaped ornament with concave lines, akin to a Greek cross with slightly expanded arms. The four arms of the cross terminate in incised, open hemispheres bordering the outer line of triangles. On the inside of the hemispheres there are uneven step-shaped patterns, and on each of the concave lines forming the arms of the cross, there are three small transverse lines towards the protruding centre of the lid.

A closer look at the box reveals that the hinge is secondary, and at some point replaced the original one. The perforation through the sides for fastening the original

fitting can be clearly seen partly covered by the second one (Figure 37).

The décor also shows some noteworthy inconsistencies, suggesting that it was decorated at two different stages during its time of use (Figure 38).

Along the sides and the outer rim of the lid the décor is constrained and precise, with circumferential lines and tightly places stamped triangles in rows. The lines and triangles are all meticulously and symmetrically placed, and seem to be of consistent strength and depth, suggesting that they were executed by an experienced craftsman with the necessary tools and skills. The other distinct ornamental elements, including the cross on the lid, present a different approach. This décor consists of thin lines cut into the lid, likely by the use of a thin pointed needle or awl, with several lines being irregular and partly overlapping as if the creator had to try a few times before getting the lines exactly right. From an arms distance the cross appears clearly visible and symmetrical, but up close it seems haphazardly executed. It seems unlikely that the two décor elements and styles were fashioned by the same craftsman. In spite of the



**Figure 37.** The secondary hinge partly covering the perforation for fastening of the original hinge. © Museum of Cultural History, Oslo / Kirsten Helgeland.



**Figure 38.** Detail of the lid showing the different style of ornamentation © Museum of Cultural History, Oslo / Kirsten Helgeland.

overall symmetrical impression of the décor, a closer look hints at marked differences in quality and skill, suggesting that the lid was redecorated at a later stage by a different person. The person repairing the hinge might have wished to personalize the box by adding his/her own 'signature' to the lid. On the other hand, the relatively careful mending of the box would suggest a more prepared and planned out redecoration as well, and one cannot rule out that the repair and redecoration took place on two different occasions.

The remaining objects found in association with the buried individual fit well into the general image of a well-equipped female burial from the late 8<sup>th</sup> to the early 9<sup>th</sup> century (Figure 39).

The clearly identifiable objects apart from the box are two oval brooches, an arm ring and a bead necklace. The best preserved brooch is an early, thin shelled oval brooch of type R643 (cf. Rundqvist 2010:149, subdividing this type in his R643A, catalogue nos 264 and 265). The brooch is not complete, but its incised, meandering animal pattern is clearly visible. This variant is definitely most common in Norway, and could be placed within the period 770–840 AD (Rundqvist 2010:157, table

10). In addition, there are several small fragments of a similar type of decorated brooch, it cannot however be assigned to a specific type. Part of the rim is complete, showing that this brooch was considerably smaller than the first one (12.4 cm long vs 8.3 cm long). As they would have been of visibly different size, they did not form a consistent and symmetrical pair. They may have been used as such, but it might be more likely that they were used rather as two individual brooches, centered on the dress. Early types of oval brooches occur mainly in graves as singles and not in pairs, suggesting a shift in how the brooch was included in the dress during the transition to the Viking Period. The two different sized brooches could tentatively suggest an older type of dress fashion, with oval brooches worn centered on the chest or as singular fastening devices. There were also two fragments of a narrow copper alloy armring with ring stamps and punched dots (possibly close to Petersen 1928, figure 183), and 99 glass beads from a large necklace. The assemblage of mainly plain monochrome beads (green, white, and blue) and mosaic beads with polychrome cylinders and barrels have parallels in Ribe and Bornholm (see Nielsen type R3C;

**Figure 39.** A selection of the finds from the female burial at Setesdal. From the top left: The workbox, bead necklace, oval brooch R.643, fragments of iron chain, parts of a copper-alloy bracelet and of a weaving bat. © Museum of Cultural History, Oslo / Kirsten Helgeland.



Nielsen 1987, 1997), and can be dated to ca. 775–800 AD (cf. also Callmer 1977, no 35, who pushes the dating a decade or so later). Although most of the beads can be assumed to be of local/regional production, the metal foil beads were likely produced in the eastern Mediterranean or Middle East. A few may be older styles or heirlooms from early generations of this fashion, particularly a blue multifaceted bead and a green barrel bead (pers. information by M. Delvaux, cf. also Delvaux 2017a, 2017b).

In addition, the burial contained fragments of a sickle and a scythe, a presumably iron weaving bat, and a fire steel and flint. Remains of what seems to be a rim and part of a handle, indicate that a small wooden bucket was among the grave goods, and there were several fragments of an iron chain with rectangular end fittings perforated with small rivets, of unknown function. Preserved fragments of wood might belong to the assumed bucket or shafts for the sickle or scythe. Although organic remains are rare in burials in this part of Scandinavia, the collected objects also included several human teeth that await analysis.

## **THE SCANDINAVIAN ‘WORK-BOXES’**

To establish a broader context for the unusual box, a review of the others found in Scandinavia is necessary. Six other boxes of this type have been found in Scandinavia, all from certain or possible female burials dating to the 7<sup>th</sup> century or the first half of the 8<sup>th</sup>. The following sums up the main descriptions of the other recovered boxes, together with information on their context and dating.

### **Hägleips, Gotland, Sweden (RAÄ Hejde 149:1)**

Damaged box of copper alloy, parts of the side, as well as both lid and base are preserved: diam.: ca. 6.4 cm, height: 3.2 cm. The lid is slightly concave, and along the its bottom runs a 5 mm rim, decorated with parallel lines. On one of the sides is placed a perforated banded ornament in Sahlins Style III, and it is presumed that an identical ornament was originally placed on the other side (Figure 40).

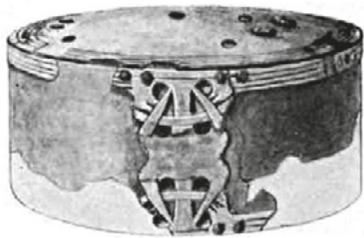
The box was found in 1930, together with 98 beads, by a farmer digging a drainage trench along a bog. Based mainly on the ornament on the side of the box, Birger Nerman (1962) claims a secure dating of the find to the first half of the 8<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Kyndby, Seeland, Denmark**

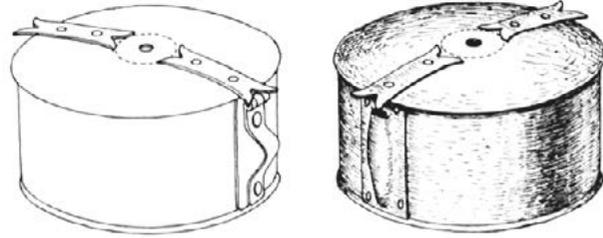
An almost complete box of silvered copper alloy, diam.: 3.6 cm, height: 2.1 cm. (Ørsnes-Christensen 1955). The box was found in fragments: lid, base and side. Remnants of soldering were preserved and facilitated the reconstruction. The remains of a side fitting with a hinge is fastened with two iron nails. A slightly concave lid is attached to the hinge. The lid has a 0.4 cm wide rim underneath, fitting into the box, and strengthened at the point where it conjoins with the hinge. This presumably gave it a certain spring force, thus pressing it towards the outer side of the box (Ørsnes-Christensen 1955:78–79). At the center of the lid is a protrusion, originally holding a rivet, a corresponding rivet presumably also decorated the base. The lid and base are decorated with two circumferential lines creating a narrow band, which is filled with cross ornaments. The side is covered with an interlaced ribbon band with three vertical fields next to the hinge, whereof two consist of a crisscross ornamentation, and the third has a roughly indicated, two-banded ribbon. The contour of a possible animal head is seen on the upper part of the side, and the piece

of bronze used to construct the side may originally stem from another object (Figure 42).

The box comes from a professionally excavated, female inhumation burial. The grave was found in an irregular, oval pit, covered with stones of various sizes. The woman had been buried with three copper alloy brooches: an S-shaped, a bird-shaped and an animal-shaped brooch, and at least 76 beads. A necklace consisting of at least 43 beads (largely red/yellow powdered glass, with white, blue and green variants as well as two bronze beads and 8 bronze spiral beads) was found, with 28 beads spread unevenly in the grave (the majority of red/yellow glass powder, and two large polished amethyst beads). Furthermore, the burial included a copper alloy spiral arm ring, an iron knife, a belt buckle, two copper alloy wire rings, a pin attached to a disintegrated organic band fastened to the box, and copper alloy fittings from an undefined object. In addition, the grave contained the osteological remains of two sheep, a pig, an ox, and two dogs. The box shows predominantly style B/C elements (Ørsnes-Christensen 1955:129–132), and the burial is assumed to be contemporary with N. Sandegård grave 426, 7<sup>th</sup> century (Becker 1990:106).



**Figure 40.** Reconstruction: Hägleips, Gotland, Sweden. Diam.: ca 6.4 cm, height: 3.2 cm. From Nerman 1962.



**Figure 41.** Reconstruction: Nørre Sandegård, Bornholm, Denmark, grave 426. Diam.: ca 6.2 cm, height: 3.7 cm. From Becker 1990, fig. 35. Reconstruction and drawing by B.Brorson Christensen.

### **Nørre Sandegård, Bornholm, Denmark (grave 426)**

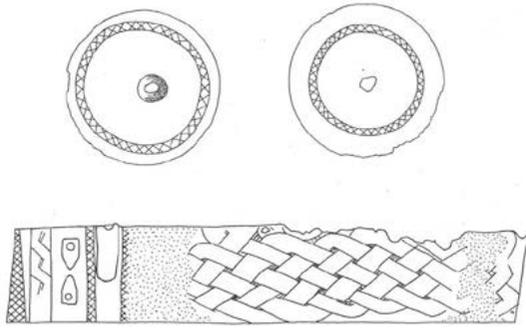
Complete box of copper alloy, diam.: ca. 6.2 cm, height: 3.7 cm (Becker 1953:145–152, 1990:102–109). The side is made out of one overlapping band, fastened together with rivets. The same rivets also hold a vertical band, forming a banded hook for a suspension chain. Remnants of a similar band/possible clasp are observed on the other side of the box, opposite the hook. Both lid and base are slightly concave, and both had some type of marking in the center, probably of a now vanished organic material. Two narrow fittings with split ends have been placed across the lid (Figure 41).

The lid, bottom and sides are covered with engraved motifs: the lid and bottom with depictions of four entwined snake-like animals in Sahlin style II/Style B.

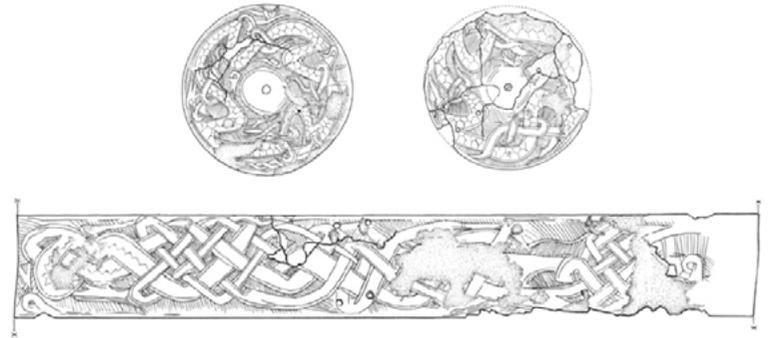
The side pattern, also Style II, is somewhat different and consists of two intertwined animals (Figure 43).

The box contained four small skeins of yarn, whereof three were wool and one was stinging nettle, and a small fragment of good twill.

The box was found in a professionally excavated burial: a rectangular, submerged grave for a female who was buried with 119 beads (almost all red or yellow/orange, of powdered glass), originally placed in four rows and held in place with bead hooks, a bird-shaped fibula, a knife, a toiletry set with tweezers and ear twigs. A thin iron chain and iron needle were found next to the box, and have most likely been used to fasten the box, suspended from the chain, to the dress. Based on the style of decoration and the composition and type of beads, Becker dates the burial to the 7<sup>th</sup> century (Becker 1953:144, 150, 1990:106).



**Figure 42.** Reconstruction of decoration on the box from Kyndby, Seeland, Denmark. From Ørsnes-Christensen 1955, fig. 6.



**Figure 43.** Reconstruction of decoration on the box from Nørre Sandegård, Bornholm, Denmark, grave 426. From Becker 1990, fig. 36.

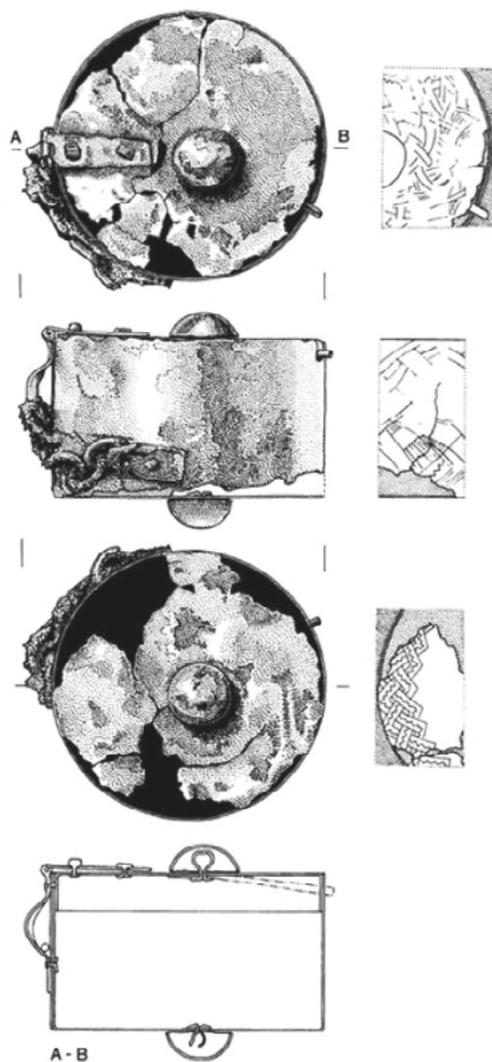
### **Nørre Sandegård Vest, Bornholm, Denmark (grave 32)**

An almost complete box of copper alloy, 4.5 cm in diam, and 2.7 cm in height. Similar to Nørre Sandegaard grave 426, the box has a banded hook on one side, in which the remains of a thin suspension chain can be seen. The hinged lid could be closed by inserting a small stick into a perforation on the other side of the box. In the center of the lid and the base is a hemispheric protrusion, akin to the box from grave 426, Nørre Sandegård. The excavators note that the box had signs of ‘wear and tear’, but the lid still had visible remnants of an incised animal pattern, and on the base a double ribbon pattern (Figure 44).

The box contained a small skein of thin, white spun woollen strands and several fragments of woollen thread as well as the outer shell of a wild onion, presumably the remains of an intact wild onion placed in

the box before the burial. The onion is in this context interpreted as a symbol associated with pagan cosmology and rituals, and the excavators of the find point to mentions of onions in Norse sagas and written sources, e.g. a similar combination of onion and yarn in a passage in the Saga of Ragnar Lodbrok (Hald *et al.* 2015).

The woman was buried with a richly decorated rectangular brooch of gilded bronze, an animal-shaped plate brooch of bronze with remains of the chain used to affix the box, a bronze arm ring, a few beads, costume pins, a knife of iron, studs from a comb and a spindle whorl of sandstone. Some objects might have been removed during the initial disturbance, and one should expect that the burial would have contained another brooch and several beads (Hald *et al.* 2015). The burial is dated to the mid 7<sup>th</sup> century (Hald *et al.* 2015).



**Figure 44.** Reconstruction: Nørre Sandegård Vest, Bornholm, Denmark, grave 32. Diam.: 4.5 cm, height: 2.7 cm. From Hald *et al.* 2015, fig. 2. Drawing by P. Christensen 1997.

### Nørre Sandegård, Bornholm, Denmark (K51)

Another workbox was found in a female burial in 2014, but the find has not yet been fully published. An x-ray shows it to be similar to the previous ones from Nørre Sandegård, with a seemingly intact chain connecting it to a brooch or fitting (Hald *et al.* 2015). The box has decorated sides, but its details are still unresolved (pers. information F.O. Sonne Nielsen). Indoor post-excavations showed the box to have contained the remains of probably a small skein of wool, and traces of a woven fabric were preserved in the bronze corrosion on top of and underneath the box (Skals 2016).

### Nørre Sandegård, Bornholm, Denmark (K69)

A similar box is assumed to have been found in a burial close to K51. This is preserved in a plastered outtake from the burial and is visible on x-rays. The find has yet to be examined and published (pers. information F.O. Sonne Nielsen).

The recovered boxes from Scandinavia have distinctively common characteristics and display a largely uniform construction although with unique details. They are often ornamented with elements of animal décor, and have similar dimensions, ranging from 3.6–6.4 cm in diameter and 2.6–3.7 cm in height. Four boxes contained the remains of threads/textiles (including the initially observed fragment in the Setesdal-box).

All boxes recovered in Denmark were likely suspended on a chatelaine. They were also all recovered through professional excavation, and can be placed quite securely in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. The box from Gotland, Sweden and Setesdal, Norway were found earlier and accidentally, causing the loss of context details as well as most likely other, less noticeable items, as for instance box fragments or possible remains of thin chatelaines.

Due to this, the dating of the Swedish box and its context to the early 8<sup>th</sup> century must be considered somewhat unclear. For the Setesdal box, the noted observations of its context and the objects retrieved at the spot provide a somewhat fuller image of the burial in question. This box shares many similarities with the other boxes of comparable construction in Scandinavia, but it seems to have been kept in circulation for a considerably longer time. Dating the burial to the late 8<sup>th</sup> to early 9<sup>th</sup> century, suggests that the box was deposited around 100–150 years after the Danish burials containing similar boxes. It bears signs of being repaired and modified – a likely consequence of its prolonged use, but also possibly its added meaning over time by several owners.

### **RELIQUIES AND MAGIC: THE USE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF SMALL BOXES IN FEMALE BURIALS IN THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES**

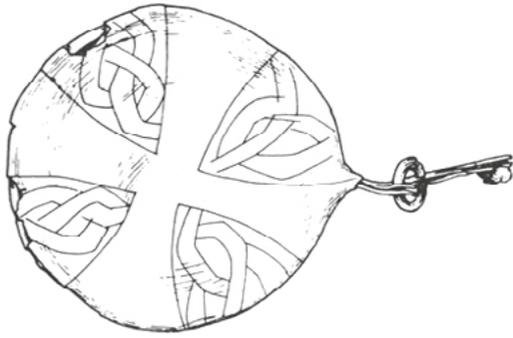
In C. J. Becker's (1953) presentation of the first box from Nørre Sandegård, he states that this is a new form of object from the Scandinavian Merovingian Period. Becker points to similar boxes found on the continent and in England. The 'Anglo-Saxon workboxes' are highlighted as the closest parallels to the Danish finds (Becker 1953:149; Gibson 1993), just as the museum records for the box from Setesdal indicated. More than 50 such boxes have been found in England. There is a slight concentration in Kent, but otherwise they are widely distributed from the Thames up to Northumberland (Geake 1997; Gibson 1993; Hills 2011). A few Anglo-Saxon workboxes are also known from northern France and Switzerland (Becker 1953:148). They are made of copper alloy sheet, occasionally tinned/silvered or gilded, often equipped with suspension loops and/or chatelaines for suspension, similar to the boxes from Nørre Sandegård. They are found in female burials, occasionally in children's

graves, and are dated to ca. 675–750 AD (Geake 1997:34; Hills 2011). In some cases remains of the contents have been preserved, consisting mainly of small pieces of thread, scraps of textile or organic material (Hills 2011; Meaney 1981:189). The textile fragments are often of high quality, and include embroidery, tablet weave and silk (Crowfoot 1990:51).

The Anglo-Saxon boxes are different from the Scandinavian ones in some respects. Their diameters fall mainly within 5–6 cm, with heights between 4–7 cm. (Hills 2011). The majority of the boxes are thus taller and more cylindrical than their more compact, Scandinavian counterparts. They are also decorated differently. The majority have a simple decoration with punched dots in lines or bands of zig-zag, sometimes in the shape of a cross design on the lid. A rare variation of this is seen in the box from North Leigh, Oxfordshire (Figure 45). The sides of the box have a simple, repoussé décor similar to many Anglo-Saxon workboxes, but the lid has a clearly marked Greek cross where the spaces between the arms of the cross are covered with coarsely shaped ribbon bands (Geake 1997:87), similar to sections on the boxes from Kyndby and Nørre Søndegård 426.

An exceptional variant from Burwell, Cambridge-shire (Figure 46) shows an elaborate style of decoration similar to the Danish boxes. The Burwell box has a complex ornamentation with Style II animals in repoussé. The lid and base have identical patterns consisting of four scenes, of which two have been interpreted as scenes from the Sigurd legend, or even Beowulf (Geake 1997:87; Gibson 2015; Lethbridge 1931:56).

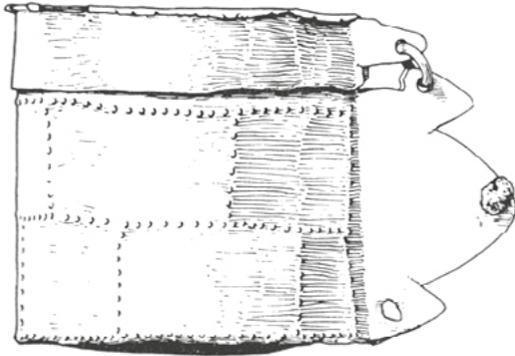
The Anglo-Saxon boxes have been the subject of much guesswork and fascination, and very different views have been presented concerning their function. Their apparently mundane appearance and simple décor coupled with finds of threads and textiles within them, have led to the term ‘work-boxes’, a box to carry things that might come in handy in the daily life of the women who owned them (e.g. Brown 1925). Others have argued that the small remains of textiles could not have had much practical use, proposing instead that the boxes were used for keeping amulets or objects for magic use, and that the textile fragments could have had a medicinal use based on references in Anglo-Saxon texts to cures using fabric or thread of specific type or color (Hills 2011; Meaney 1981:189). Others have



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**Figure 45.** North-Leigh, Oxfordshire. From Vida 2009, Fig.5.6.

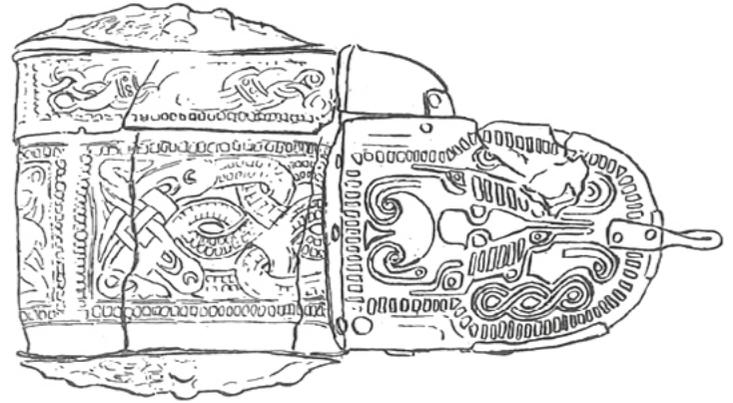
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**Figure 46.** Burwell, Cambridgeshire. From Lethbridge 1931, plate III.

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suggested that they were used mainly as reliquaries or for fragments of venerated objects, pointing to the practice of the preservation of scraps of cloth that had been in contact with the sacred bodies of saints, or cloth dipped in oil blessed in sacred places (Crowfoot 1990:51; Geake 1997:35; Hills 2011). The equal-arm cross design on some Anglo-Saxon boxes might indicate their Christian

connotations and context. This cross motif was widespread in Anglo-Saxon England, often with unequivocal Christian significance. Specific Christian motifs on recent finds of boxes, i.e. three crosses symbolizing Calvary – Christ between the crucified thieves – seem to enforce their overall association with Christian belief (Hills 2011; contra: see Gibson 1993).

Catherine Hills (2011) explores this latter view of the boxes by pointing to the large number of finds of amulet capsules, possibly capsules for relics, in female burials in the Rhineland and along the North Sea coast. These continental ‘Kapselreliquiaren’ are largely made of copper alloy or bone, and are found predominantly in female burials, mostly dating to the 7<sup>th</sup> century (Wamers 1995). Throughout central and eastern Europe, they come in variants of spherical or cylindrical shapes, some with conical lids (‘pyxis’). They are assumed to represent a similar type of usage and significance, derived from the Classical bullae or ‘Amulettkapseln’. These narrow cylindrical containers date back to Late Antiquity and the early Byzantine period, and to the custom of wearing personal containers containing small objects with magical or ritual meaning. The introduction of relics in churches and monasteries as sources for public veneration and belief, generated belief in so-called secondary or tertiary relics, objects that had been in contact or in some way could be related to a holy body or a holy place and could include textile fragments, soil, stones or splinters of wood (see also M. F. Simonsen this volume).

The continued use of small, personal containers could be seen in conjunction with a growing fascination for relics and consequently secondary/tertiary relics, for personal protection and use, from the 6<sup>th</sup> century (Hills 2011; Krueger 2015; Vida 2009; Wamers 1995). In this light, the Anglo-Saxon boxes represent a variant of continental amulet capsules, crafted within an Anglo-Saxon context. Hills (2011) argues that the idea of relic boxes would have spread through close cultural and economic contact across the Channel during this time, including the presence of Anglo-Saxon women in cloisters in northern France, and was then spread into Anglo-Saxon society during the conversion period from around 600 AD.

The Scandinavian boxes would then appear to be another late variant of Early Medieval amulet or relic boxes, based on or developed simultaneously with the Anglo-Saxon workboxes. Both types are likely to represent a continuation of the custom of personal containers for magic and/or religion related objects, originating from the Late Antique and Early Byzantine bullae or ampullae and copied and integrated into central and eastern European communities from the 5<sup>th</sup> century

onwards. While their form and décor vary quite significantly throughout the continent, the idea seems to have caught on in Anglo-Saxon England during the 7<sup>th</sup> century, developing into the typical ‘Anglo-Saxon workbox’: a distinctive dress accessory in the shape of tall carry-on cylinders often with simple repoussé décor (Geake 1997:114). During the same period, boxes were integrated into the dress repertoire of women in at least certain parts of Scandinavia, but then with distinctive regional traits. The seven known Scandinavian boxes seem to form a separate mode of production. This suggests a Scandinavian workshop (Becker 1953:149–150) most likely in Denmark, perhaps Bornholm. Their dating and content are however similar to the Anglo-Saxon boxes, as are their association with female burials and traces of how they were worn attached to a belt or similarly on a chatelaine. The Anglo-Saxon and Danish boxes are as such the extension of a continental tradition, although with a separate trajectory in which the boxes gained not only distinctive traits but possibly also a different purpose (Becker 1953:148–149).

### **THE SCANDINAVIAN BOXES: SIGNS OF PAGAN MAGIC OR SYNCRETISM?**

A central question is whether the Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian boxes have been used with the same intent as their various and partly older continental counterparts. As stated above, Hills (2011) argues that they represent a continental Christian fascination for relics, and thus express the Christian faith of the wearer. The contexts, décor and content of both Anglo-Saxon and continental capsules and boxes indicate that this is not as straightforward as suggested. In England, many amulet capsules or boxes are found in burials with additional grave goods, suggesting an overall non-Christian religious practice, or at least burial practices anchored in older traditions. There might not be a simple ‘either – or’ answer to whether these capsules were associated with Christian practice and secondary reliquies, or used mainly as containers for objects meaningful within a pagan universe. In England, the Anglo-Saxon workboxes are largely dated to late 7<sup>th</sup>–early 8<sup>th</sup> century, also dubbed the conversion period. The variety of burial rites and furnished burials points to an experimental phase combining old customs and new trends, reshaping rituals and

belief systems. The diffuse overlap between pagan and Christian praxis and symbolism would link the variety of amulet capsules and boxes to communities in transition to Christianity, expressing degrees of syncretism and the perpetuation of tradition in a transitional phase (Vida 2009; see also Geake 1997:24, 63–65).

Through studies of a large number of amulets and boxes of various shapes, including material from central and eastern Europe, Tavidar Vida (2009) maintains that studies of amulet capsules and the use of secondary relics provide a lens through which to view aspects of cultural and ideological change in Europe during the Early Middle Ages. Vida presents a different, more complex description of how objects are transferred and assigned meaning in the transition from one cultural and ideological framework to another. In the Early Middle Ages, secondary relics would have been brought from the Mediterranean region by merchants, soldiers, mercenaries, pilgrims or diplomats and hence came into the possession of members of the elite. In one instance, analysis shows that the greasy content of a box from Hungary was originally a pink substance, most likely a form of cosmetic, while others seem to

have contained medical remedies, like cloves (Vida 2009), or antler bone (Pöppelmann 2004). Remains of a sponge from the Mediterranean and remnants of vinegar in a box from Niederrein, Germany could refer to the suffering of Christ, but could also have had cosmetic use (Hald *et al.* 2015; Wamers 1995). All in all, the contents seem to point to a rather miscellaneous use of personal boxes.

Objects associated with Christianity were disseminated and integrated in a range of different communities, connected to Christianity in varying degrees. Communities on the outer rim of the Late Antique/Byzantine Empire would handle Christian influence in a variety of ways depending on the local situation and traditional practices. The inclusion and reworking of Christian objects would have differed, as would the process of Christianization have varied in different regions and within the many non-Christian belief systems that extended across central Europe in the 5<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> centuries. The varieties of the resulting bricolages were crucial for the subsequent reshaping of identities and introduction of Christianity as a social practice (Vida 2009). The idea of personal amulet boxes or small containers for magic

objects could have been transmitted to populations subjected to Christian influence, but their inclusion and use might have differed markedly according to local and regional cultures. This includes burials combining local dress objects, pagan types of amulets and Christian symbols, hinting at the intermixing of profane and ritual functions of the objects (Vida 2009).

These perspectives applies equally to the distribution and design of boxes in England and Scandinavia, both areas being largely pagan or transitional Christian societies, living on the verge of the Frankish Empire and with knowledge of Christianity and Christian organizations. The substantial reorganization of economy and trade in the area form the apparent regional backdrop for their distribution. By the 7<sup>th</sup> century, both Anglo-Saxon England and Denmark were engaging in extensive trade relations and commodity exchange in the lively burgeoning commerce around the North Sea. Extensive examinations of burial sites and settlements reveal close and continuous contact between areas like Kent and the Frankish Empire (Tys & Loveluck 2006). The Uppland area in eastern Sweden became a hub for commerce and political power, with extensive contact

with Anglo-Saxon areas (Ljungkvist & Frölund 2015). The island of Bornholm emerges as a strategically placed port on routes between insular and continental areas, up towards eastern Sweden (Becker 1953:151-154). Located between the North Sea and the Baltic Sea, it has produced a remarkable range of wealthy burial sites from the period, as well as four of the seven Scandinavian type workboxes. There is however little to suggest that the original Christian idea behind secondary reliquies was paramount to Danish society in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. The characteristic form and décor of the boxes from Scandinavia do, however, suggest that the suspended box – as a popular dress element – was adopted and integrated into a largely non-Christian context.

### **THE CHARISMA OF THE SETESDAL BOX: WHO, WHY AND WHEN?**

As a unique object, the Setesdal box reflects the complexity of how not only singular objects, but material cultures and ideas in general, spread through regions and in time. The overall shape and ornaments of the box link it to the Danish parallels, but it represents the only

one known from Norway, and must have been considered highly unusual in the local dress repertoire during the transition to the Viking Age.

There are two main venues to explain how the box then ended up in Norway. It could conceivably have been kept as a precious family heirloom by a family in Denmark, perhaps as a memento of a beloved grandmother, and then brought to Norway in the possession of a woman settling in Setesdal, perhaps as a result of an exogamous marriage alliance. The repair of the hinge suggests a wish for care and continuous use. The similarities between the bead necklace found in the Setesdal burial and Danish burials would not rule that out, although the combination of beads might just reflect current fashion and available beads.

Another option might be that it was kept in circulation in Denmark before it ended up as a trade object or gift brought to Norway by a southern Norwegian tradesman or woman. The latter option would fall into a larger picture of increasing patterns of contact and exchange between Denmark and different regions of Norway during the 8<sup>th</sup> century. Norwegian graves and settlements dating to the 8<sup>th</sup> century contain types of pottery, beads

and ornaments similar to items produced or exchanged in Ribe, although it is not clear whether they represent direct interaction (Sindbæk 2011). The amount and variety of goods nevertheless show that many communities in Norway at this point had considerable access to products of urban manufacture, most likely through the largest Scandinavian emporium at the time, Ribe (Munch *et al.* 2003: 203, 216; Sindbæk 2011). In Ribe, samples of antlers from reindeer suggest that exchange networks towards the Norwegian mountain areas already existed during the 8<sup>th</sup> century (Ashby *et al.* 2015). Finding a workbox in Setesdal valley is then perhaps not so surprising. Continuous exploitation of outfield resources, in particular iron, is known in the valley from the Roman Iron Age (Glørstad & Wenn 2017). The vast mountain areas in the upper part of the valley border one of the largest wild reindeer habitats in Norway, and would have been a possible resource area for antlers gathered for export. Other finds from the valley testify to considerable contact or trade with insular and continental Europe from the beginning of the Viking Age (Larsen 1980), and that possible trade links would have resulted in the influx of foreign objects during the 8<sup>th</sup> century, is not unlikely.

One might wonder whether the owner of an old family object, passed down through generations, would have ventured into what seems an amateurish redecoration of the lid. It does perhaps rather suggest that it was done by a new owner, not caring for its sentimental value and thus adding a redesign without thinking twice. Perhaps this was just meant as a decorative enhancement, resembling something that the owner had seen and found attractive. Or perhaps it reminded him or her of a trip across the North Sea, to the southern and exotic emporium, where the Greek cross was perhaps already in use by inhabitants or visitors with a different religion (Søvsø 2014)?

The distinctive inclusion of an unusual and antique box in the burial of the woman in Setesdal, highlights the enmeshed and unpredictable side of how societies engage and influence each other. The distinctive differences between Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon boxes illustrate how contact and influence across different regions leads to both regional and unique outcomes.

The material culture constitutes an arena for demonstrating knowledge of and contact with other communities and ideologies, but the adoption and redefinition of these objects also form a way to formulate regional identities and confirm – but perhaps also question – the prevailing view of cosmology.

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