

ART ANCIENT



MIGRATION PERIOD HANGING BOWL ESCUTCHEONS

Britain, c. 6th-7th century AD
Bronze, blue glass and red enamel inlay
Outer escutcheons: 10.5 cm high
Central escutcheon: 7.5 cm diameter
Fish: 6 cm

PROVENANCE

British collection, by repute found in Norfolk

Subsequently UK art market, Bury St. Edmunds

DRG Coins & Antiquities, Hertfordshire, purchased from the above, 1990s

British private collection, thence by descent

A masterpiece of Celtic metal and enamel work, originally forming part of a hanging bowl, one of the most enigmatic and prestigious artefacts of early medieval Britain, representing the pinnacle of Anglo-Saxon ritual luxury and status.

This group, rendered in enamel and bronze, is one of only two known examples to preserve an internal fish decoration, a feature otherwise known only from the royal ship burial at Sutton Hoo, the richest Anglo-Saxon burial ever discovered.

The three escutcheon sets represent ravens, their beaks modelled in bronze to hang over the edge of the bowl, their tail feathers represented by three convex and scrolled motifs, and their back wings embellished with masterful Celtic enamelwork. An additional, internal escutcheon with interlaced design and two motifs of confronting hounds, supporting a central fish, with delicately incised scales and glass eye inlays.



Following the collapse of the Roman Empire in the 5th century AD, a new order emerged in Britain. As north and south competed for cultural and religious hegemony, Germanic traditions, brought to the island via the migrating Anglo-Saxons who landed in the south-east, fused with Celtic ones, transmitted via the early Christian missions from Ireland, sparking the creation of an artistic landscape unique from the rest of Europe. In particular, the iconic Celtic artforms of intricate, organic motifs merged with Anglo-Saxon interlacing patterns and zoomorphic designs to create the rich and enduring cultural identity of the British Isles in the early medieval period.

One of the greatest and most important expressions of this new style can be found in the ornately decorated escutcheons of the enigmatic hanging bowls of the period. While made in the Celtic style, these bowls came to be considered as *the* prestige object of the Anglo-Saxon elite. The present escutcheons, with their intricate trumpet-scroll design, zoomorphic motifs and internal swimming fish, are a particularly extravagant example of this object type, rivalled only by the famous hanging-bowl found in the royal ship-burial at Sutton Hoo.

Status Symbols of the Anglo-Saxons

The hanging bowls of the migration period are a particularly distinctive object type. Known today from the elaborately decorated mounts, hooks and escutcheons that would have been attached to the circumference of the bowl, it is clear that these thin-walled bronze vessels were meant to have been suspended from a central fulcrum or tripod. However, their intended use remains somewhat of a mystery, with suggestions from oil lamps to drinking vessels both for ceremonial use and at banquets.¹ On account of the rare few which feature an additional decorated escutcheon in the inside of the bowl (notably the present and Sutton Hoo examples), it seems likely that any liquid carried was intended to be water, allowing this ornamentation to be seen.²

Richly decorated and often found in high-status graves, hanging bowls came to be considered as *the* status symbol of the Anglo-Saxon elite. Yet, their intricate metalworking and signs of ancient repairs hint at earlier Celtic manufacture. Whether made by Celts and acquired by Saxons through trade, as loot or as diplomatic gifts, or made by Germanic manufacturers in the Celtic style, they are a fascinating example of the fusion of the two cultures in the period following the fall of the Roman Empire.



1 The internal rotating fish decoration of the Sutton Hoo hanging bowl.

2 Hanging bowl from Sutton Hoo, 6th-7th century BC. The British Museum, London.



Decoration and Design

The often elaborately decorated escutcheons of early medieval hanging bowls feature a range of motifs that are a unique development of the religio-political context of the British Isles during this period. On a red enamelled background, the present example's curvilinear designs and zoomorphic motifs, reserved in bronze and silvered, reflect the long-standing tradition of high-quality Celtic metalwork. In particular, the three external escutcheons bear unique iterations of the distinctive trumpet-scroll pattern, which developed in the 6th century from the Celtic curvilinear style.³ The additional central escutcheon, which would have decorated the inside of the bowl, also features two hound motifs, important in Celtic mythology as symbols of loyalty, protection and healing. Iconic in Celtic metalwork, such intricate motifs were adopted and developed by Irish missionaries spreading the word of the Gospel, which resulted in the spirals, scrolls and elaborate initials of some of the most iconic illuminated manuscripts of the age.⁴

The rotating fish on the central escutcheon is a particularly rare and enigmatic example of hanging-bowl decoration. Likely mounted on a rotating pin, it would have given the illusion of swimming, if indeed the bowl was filled with water. Aside from the present piece, the only other extant hanging bowl featuring an internal fish decoration - itself a rare example of sculpture in the round from this period - is the famous royal ship-burial found at Sutton Hoo in East Anglia.⁵ Believed to be the final resting place of King Redwald of the East Angles (d.625-6 AD), the Sutton Hoo ship is the greatest early medieval treasure found. In antiquity, the hanging bowl was suspended on the end wall of the burial chamber, near the ceremonial sceptre, a crucial emblem of the power of the deceased.⁶ Its notable position in the ship reflects the particular extravagance of its decoration, as well as the important position given to these bowls in Anglo-Saxon society.

Comparable only to the Sutton Hoo example, the present hanging-bowl escutcheons are masterpieces of early medieval metalwork.

3 Carpet page showing trumpet scrolls from the Book of Durrow, 675 AD.



FOOTNOTES

- 1 R. Bruce-Mitford, *The Sutton Hoo Ship-Burial*, London: *The British Museum*, (1975), 32.
- 2 L. Webster, 'Anglo-Saxon Art: A New History,' 102; R. Bruce-Mitford, *The Sutton Hoo Ship-Burial*, London: *The British Museum*, (1975), 31.
- 3 L. Webster, 'Anglo-Saxon Art: A New History,' *The British Museum*, (2012), 101.
- 4 S. Youngs (ed), *The Work of Angels: Masterpieces of Celtic Metalwork*, British Museum Publications, (1989), 14-5.
- 5 Another possible example of an internal fish is in the collection of the British Museum (1984.0103.9) however it has not survived with any escutcheons.
- 6 R. Bruce-Mitford, *The Sutton Hoo Ship-Burial*, London: *The British Museum*, (1975), 32.



4 Excavation image of the ceremonial sceptre in the burial chamber at Sutton Hoo, 1939. The hanging bowl was found close by.