

Bifrons Grave 41

by

Sonia Chadwick Hawkes

Introduction

The Anglo-Saxon cemetery known as Bifrons, in the parish of Patricbourne in East Kent, was partially excavated by Thomas Godfrey-Faussett, partially by the gamekeeper of the landowner, the Marquis of Conyngham, in the autumn of 1867. No plan has survived and we do not know the exact lay-out or size of the cemetery, but we can estimate that the excavated graves numbered not less than 150. Of these 91 were tolerably well recorded by Godfrey-Faussett and published in *Archaeologia Cantiana*, X (1876), 298–315, and XIII (1880), 552–6. The grave-groups, particularly those illustrated, have been preserved more or less intact in the Kent Archaeological Society's collections in Maidstone Museum. The Bifrons cemetery is remarkable for the large number of sixth-century aristocratic burials which remained unrobbed: two men with gilt-silver hilted ring-swords and several richly furnished women. The burial in Grave 41 is perhaps the most important of these. It lay 'close by the side' of Grave 42, which contained another female with fine jewellery, and both were 'more carefully and regularly dug than most of their neighbours' (Godfrey-Faussett, 1876, 313–15 and figs.). Otherwise, for Grave 41, we have little more than a finds-list, with approximate positions, and the information that the square-headed brooches were worn pin upwards and head downwards on the dress when the woman was buried.

The inventory which follows is based on the excavator's published notes and drawings (no manuscript diary can be traced) and on labelled objects at Maidstone. The illustrations are copied from drawings made (by Mrs. Elizabeth Fry-Stone and Mrs. Marion Cox) for the writer's forthcoming monograph publication for the British Academy.

Inventory

(1–4, Fig. 90; 5–20, Fig. 90; 21, not figured; 22–24, not identified)

1–2. Pair of silver-gilt *small-square-headed brooches*. Length 5.4 cm. Cast from similar but not identical moulds, with decoration in 'chip-carving' style. Rectangular headplate has square cells, inset with tabular garnets or red glass mounted on gold foil, slightly projecting at upper corners, and degenerate Style I animal figures at top and sides; at top a complete animal couchant, with framed head, body with angle between back and neck, and forefoot curled under: at sides creatures with bodies contracted to incoherence: at centre an inverted triangular cell with red setting enclosed in a rectangular relief-frame consisting of an ungilded band decorated with niello-filled triangles set alternately in two rows. A similar band forms the median division of the short, shallow, bow, otherwise undecorated except for parallel grooves at sides, and continues down centre of footplate where it is crossed by another. At bottom and sides of foot these bands terminate in ovate cells with red settings. The footplate's sharply angled upper corners contain Style I ornament, apparently anthropomorphic heads with upraised forearms: the narrow lower divisions contain stylised heads with attenuated bodies. On back, normal catchplate and attachment for iron pin (missing). Both brooches are worn, especially on the bows where the niello has been partly destroyed, and each has lost a setting. The foot of 1 had been broken off before burial. Godfrey-Faussett (1876), fig. on p. 313; KAS 588, 575.

3. Silver-gilt *bird brooch* found near 1—2. Length 2.8 cm. Cast in ‘chip-carving’ style. Eared or crested head with hooked beak, lightly grooved and nicked, and bossed eye with drilled dot in centre; curled foot, perfunctorily rendered; pear-shaped wing, set at right-angle to body, and wedge-shaped tail, both filled with nicked contour grooves. On back, catchplate broken, normal attachment for pin (iron spring-coil alone survives). Very little worn. Godfrey-Faussett (1876), fig. on p. 313; KAS 583.

4. Silver-gilt *great square-headed brooch*, on right side of chest. Length 13 cm. Headplate, bow with catchplate, and footplate all cast separately and riveted and soldered together. Brooch now in three pieces as it came out of the grave, rivets missing and solder decayed. Cast with decoration in ‘chip-carving’ style.

The rectangular headplate is unusually broad. At centre, set low above the bow, is an inner rectangular panel framed by an unglilded relief band decorated with a double row of niello-filled triangles; above bow, this band is interrupted by the ribbed brow fillet of the inverted full-face human mask, executed in high relief, which occupies the centre of this inner panel. This mask has prominent brow ridges, slanting eyes heavily underlined, wedge-shaped nose, globular cheeks, wide moustache and spade-shaped chin or beard. Flanking it are back-turned Style I animals, neatly contorted to fit the space at either side, each with head in the upper outer corner, neck leading down to shoulder and forequarter at bottom, and vertical body connecting up with hindquarter and leg in upper inner angle: the profile head is U-shaped with niello-filled groove above a round eye, and has a pointed ear and curving, grooved beak; neck and body are longitudinally grooved, with four-strand effect; hip and shoulder joint are each set in an arched socket; forefoot has three toes and a single moulding or bracelet on wrist; hindfoot has two long toes, a single bracelet on ankle and two more below the hip.

Around this inner panel, at top and sides, is a frieze of zoomorphic ornament in such deep relief that secondary working has cut part of the ground away. Here there are four animals: a pair confronted at the top, and one climbing up at either side. In the upper pair each has a long rounded nose with nostril portrayed as a ball with two bars behind, a round eye with drilled dot at centre, and, below eye, a globular jowl which breaks the otherwise continuous contour-line around nose and upper jaw: the lower jaw juts down from the upper at a rather open angle: the brow-ridge is a cross-ribbed band. The legs have joints set in an arched socket, single toes and double bracelet on wrist and ankle: the hindleg, which has an additional double bracelet below the hip, is bent up over the back of the animal, whereas the foreleg is in couched position. The bodies are longitudinally grooved with three-strand effect. The animals at the sides are almost identically similar, but their hindlegs are bent out behind. The lower part of the frieze is narrow and partly cut away by the top of the bow, partly occupied by the hindquarters of the side animals: the remaining area is filled with billeting. The frieze, like the panel within it, is framed by the usual band of nielloed triangles, and between this and the edge of the headplate, at top and sides only, is a billeted border. This is interrupted below the upper corners by small panels containing different ornament, and there is a further interruption to the design on the upper edge near the corner, but the details in both places are obliterated by the wear which, except at the top, has also rubbed away the outermost band around the headplate.

The bow rises 1.5 cm. above head- and footplates, ascending steeply by a series of shallow ridges to a heavy decorated disc, diameter 2.9 cm. Inside an inner and an outer rim, from which any original ornament has been rubbed away, is a bizarre human mask in heavy relief: the face has close-set beady eyes, aquiline nose, globular cheek-mouldings, moustache and pointed beard: the enclosing band, cross-ribbed and filled level with niello, is peaked at the brow with two tufts above, and terminates at the sides in cross-mouldings, once grooved, below which appear terminals resembling tassels (apparently a rendering of a hair style with frontal braids or plaits).

The footplate is triangular with convex sides, partly cut away at the top to accommodate the lower edge of the bow. At its centre is an elongated lozenge-shaped panel with concave sides, outlined by the usual nielloed relief band. Immediately below the bow is a full-face animal mask, with long upsweeping ears or horns, peaked brow ridge with nielloed cross-ribbing, round eyes with dot at centre, globular jowl beside eye, and long rounded jaw in a continuous contour, with ball nostril below

three bars on either side of the grooved and nielloed nose rib. Except for the ears or horns it is a full-face version of the animal heads in the headplate frieze. At the bottom of the panel, another animal mask makes the lower terminal of the footplate: it is similar except that there are no ears, the peaked brow ridge is simply grooved and nielloed, and there are only two bars above the ball nostril. At side angles of lozenge panel are roundels, containing inward-looking and simplified human masks full-facing, with nielloed cross-ribbed frames. At centre of panel is a lozenge-shaped boss moulded in high relief and divided by a double-contoured cross with simple scroll motifs in its angles. Around this boss is a frieze of ornament with two main features: at the top, inverted below the upper animal mask, a pair of human heads in profile (or a single full-face mask split in two halves by the upper angle of the boss) with straight brow ridges and nose, round eyes doubly underlined, globular cheeks, uniting in a common moustache and beard: at the bottom a complete animal, its body climbing downwards from the left with forefoot at the bottom, and its head bent sharply back to the right around the corner of the boss. It has a long rounded muzzle, with ball and two bar nostril, globular jowl, jutting lower jaw and grooved U-shaped head; the feet have three toes; the socket for the joint is arched on the forelimb and pearshaped on the hindlimb, and the long band-like body is cross-ribbed: the remaining spaces in this panel are filled up with two animal limbs, two scrolls, two human hands and some lines and knobs.

All the remaining ornament on the footplate, around the centre panel, is in openwork, the field having been deliberately removed to leave the marginal animal figures in cut-out relief. At the top a pair of bird-heads curve down on either side of the animal mask: they have grooved necks and beaks, grooved U-shaped heads and doubly underlined eyes. Crouched on their necks are downward-facing animals similar to those in the headplate's frieze: their jaws touch the side roundels; their forelegs rest on the birds' heads. Two more of these animals, one at either side, climb up the lower edges of the footplate. Marginal animals, roundels at sides and terminal mask are all badly abraded.

The catch mechanism is in one piece with the bow. At the top it consists of a flat inverted T-shaped plate, which was soldered to the back of the headplate, and carries the pierced lug that attached the iron pin (spring-coil along remains): the pin-catch is carried on another T-shaped bar which was soldered to the footplate and made doubly secure by the addition of rivets at the ends of the cross-piece. The rivet holes can be seen on the necks of the bird heads just below the bow.

The amount of damage this brooch as suffered through wear is extreme and deserves stressing. Up to 3 mm. of metal has been lost along the edges of head- and footplate, and all corners and projecting ornamental features have been rounded off. It was certainly old, and may already have been in pieces, when it was buried. Godfrey-Faussett (1876), figs. between pp. 312—13; KAS 607.

5. Glass *bell-beaker*, by head. Height 9.5 cm., rim diameter 6.9 cm. Metal pale green, thin, with few air bubbles but distinct blowing spirals. Rim splayed and in-folded; body unconstricted and tapering to a pointed base (terminal knob broken). Decorated with spiral trails in clear pale green glass, below rim and on lower part of body. Godfrey-Faussett (1876), pl. II; KAS 268.

6. Silver *finger-ring*, on left hand. Made of tapered strip wound spirally, both terminals broken. KAS 570.

7. Bronze *finger-ring* (?), on left side, corroded to iron buckle. Diameter 1.6 cm. A broad band with overlapping ends, decorated at sides by paired grooves. KAS 567.

8. Shale *counter or gaming piece*, at feet. Disc-shaped, diameter 1.8 cm. KAS 636.

9. Bronze *buckle*. Width 2.9 cm. Loop oval with straight bar; tongue with simple round-based shield, attached by bronze hook. KAS 534.

10. Tinned bronze *belt-rivet*. Length 1.8 cm. Shoe-shaped with usual pierced lug at back. KAS 555.

11. Bronze *strap-tag*. Length 4.4 cm. Slender tongue-shaped, with square butt, split to take end of strap and pierced by a single rivet. KAS 545.

12. Iron *knife*, by left side. Length 8.6 cm., but incomplete. KAS 699.

13. Iron *key*, by left side. Length 15.5 cm., but incomplete. KAS 799.

- 14–15. Two iron *rings*, by left side. Diameters 5.0 and 6.5 cm. The larger has a piece of iron rod adhering.
- 16–19. Four bronze *Roman coins*, by left side, perhaps originally in a bag. KAS 517.
16. Carausius: *Pax Aug.*, vertical sceptre; S P/MLXXI (London).
17. Constantine I: *Vot. XX* in wreath; mint illegible.
18. Constantius II (barbarous copy): *Fel Temp. Reparatio*, Emperor in galley.
19. Urbs Roma: /TRS. Worn.
20. 35 *beads*, at the head. Translucent glass: — blue, long cylinder (1). Translucent glass with marvered inlay: — pale olive with opaque yellow median band and adjacent festoons of opaque yellow, large ring (1); pale olive with traces of opaque yellow, ring (1). Translucent clear glass with gilding: — multiple (8 triple, 2 double, 2 single); barrel (1). Opaque glass: — red, ring (1). Amber: — irregular, some large (20). KAS 309.
21. Fragments of ‘*gold-wire*, woven as part of a riband’, at the head. Not identified but certainly amongst the three lots of gold brocading strip without grave-numbers in the KAS collection¹.
22. Iron *buckle*, corroded to 7, by left side.
23. ‘A few *beads*, mostly of bugle shape’, at feet.
24. Fragment of *green glass*, ‘somewhere in the grave’.

General Remarks

Like many of the richer female graves in sixth-century Kent, notably Finglesham D 3, Bifrons 41 contains a mixture of Kentish, Frankish and Danish objects. I am wholly in agreement with Professor Haseloff about the Danish origin of the great square-headed brooches from these two burials. The dating of Bifrons 41 was well discussed by Egil Bakka in 1958 and there is no need to enlarge on it here: his view that the burial took place ‘about the middle of the sixth century or somewhat earlier’ still appears unexceptionable². Nothing in the deposit need be later than this. I am also in agreement with Bakka that Finglesham D 3 may be dated rather earlier, c. 530³. Most interest focuses on the women’s brooches and the appearance of old and new jewellery together in these graves. In both the Frankish bird brooches were in fresh condition and clearly the most recent acquisitions. Their being rare and virtually undatable north French types is an unhappy chance that renders them useless as precise chronological indicators. The small Kentish square-headed brooches in Bifrons 41 show more wear on the bow than the Frankish radiates in D 3. They had clearly been worn for some years and, in a period when adult life expectancy did not average much more than thirty years, this could have been the woman’s whole adult lifetime. That we do not know the age at death of either woman is a great misfortune. The amount of wear on the great square-headed brooches, however, more extreme in the case of D 3 even than Bifrons 41, could hardly have been achieved in one lifetime. I think one has to see these as precious heirlooms, in aristocratic families of Danish ancestry, which were handed down from the mothers or even the grandmothers of their last wearers. They were finally buried only when the rise in material prosperity and the fashion for the polychrome style had rendered them hopelessly old fashioned. On grounds of wear alone, the Bifrons 41 brooch must have been easily fifty years old when buried, Finglesham D 3 perhaps older still. I am in agreement with Professor Haseloff that a date of manufacture around 500 for the Bifrons brooch and a generation earlier for the Finglesham brooch seems most probable.

¹ Published by Elisabeth Crowfoot and Sonia Chadwick Hawkes, ‘Early Anglo-Saxon Gold Braids’, *Medieval Archaeology*, XI (1967), 42–86, especially 67–8, pl. x.

² Egil Bakka, *On the Beginning of Salin’s Style I in England* (1958), 69 ff.

³ Egil Bakka, ‘Goldbrakteaten in norwegischen Grabfunden: Datierungsfragen’, *Frühmittelalterliche Studien*, 7 (1973), 53–87.