

Anglo-Saxon find acquired

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British Museum acquires exceptional new Anglo-Saxon find with help of NHMF.

Image



Anglo-Saxon sword hilt found at Market Rasen

The British Museum is delighted to announce that it has recently acquired a set of rare Anglo-Saxon sword hilt fittings with the generous assistance of the National Heritage Memorial Fund (NHMF). Discovered by a metal detectorist in 2002 near Market Rasen, Lincolnshire, the sword pommel and hilt fittings are an outstanding find of very high quality workmanship and are the first sword fittings of this type from Anglo-Saxon England. The find was valued by an independent Treasure Valuation Committee at £125,000, with £70,000 of funding being supplied by the NHMF and the remainder from The British Museum Friends and Museum funds.

Stephen Johnson, Head of the NHMF, said “These rare sword fittings provide valuable clues about medieval trade and travel in Anglo-Saxon England. This National Heritage Memorial Fund grant has ensured it is displayed among other treasures from this fascinating period.”

Sonja Marzinzik, Curator of Prehistory and Europe at the British Museum, said “It is wonderful that the generous support of the National Heritage Memorial Fund and the British Museum Friends has enabled us to preserve this extraordinary set of sword hilt fittings in the public domain. We will probably never know whether the sword they decorated was ever used in battle, but there is no doubt that it would have been a stunning weapon to anyone who saw it”.

Dating to the 7th century AD, the Market Rasen sword hilt fittings rank as some of the finest yet discovered and are a wonderful example of early English heritage, highlighting not only the skill and craftsmanship of the makers but also the importance of Anglo-Saxon England in the wider early medieval world. As there are comparable sword fittings from Italy and Scandinavia, the Market Rasen find raises questions about the mobility of people and goods in the early middle ages. The large garnet settings in the pommel are extraordinary, as substantial garnets of this kind are scarce, particularly in the 7th century when supplies from the Indian Subcontinent and Sri Lanka dried up. Their analysis can shed light on the economic background of gem stone provenance and trading networks.

Research on the acquisition will give crucial insights into 7th-century workshop practises, about which little is currently known. The early seventh-century ‘cocked-hat’ pommel design is typical of a group of high status swords. Some of the fittings from Market Rasen resemble structurally those on the famous sword from Sutton Hoo, though there is no direct connection to the burial at Sutton Hoo. The filigree work is remarkable due to the rarity of fine metalwork of this quality. The sword was presumably commissioned by a high-status individual. It may have been deposited in a grave although archaeological investigations at the findspot did not yield any evidence of a burial.

The Market Rasen fittings are an important addition to the British Museum’s collection of Anglo Saxon metalwork. The find is currently on display in Room 2 at the British Museum and will move to the Medieval galleries (room 41) in 2007. A loan to Lincolnshire where it can be seen near to the find site is currently under discussion.

Notes to editors

All finders of gold and silver objects, and groups of coins from the same finds, over 300 years old, have a legal obligation to report such items under the Treasure Act 1996. Prehistoric base-metal assemblages found after 1st January 2003 also qualify as Treasure. Treasure finds must be reported by law to the local coroner, which is normally done through the finders local PAS Finds Liaison Officer. More information is available on www.culture.gov.uk or www.finds.org.uk.

Further information

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