

The Rise, Fall and Resuscitation of the Taplow Burial

Resumé of the lecture given to the Society, 28 October 2001

by Leslie Webster

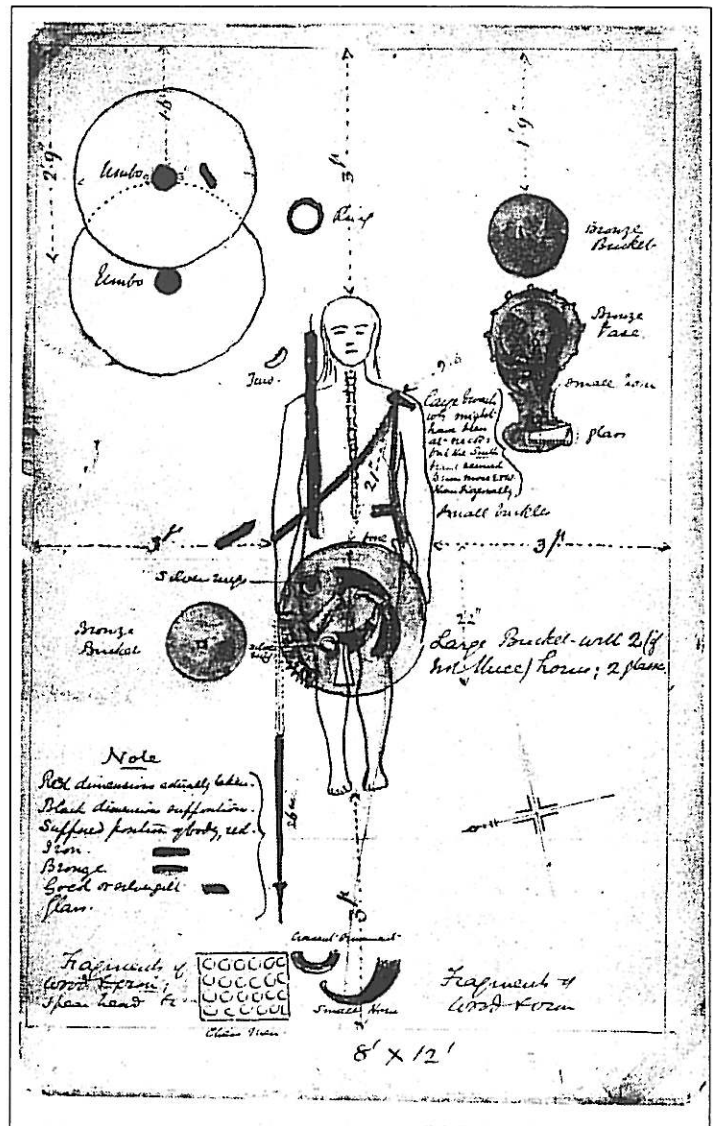
The story of the early 7th century burial in the old churchyard at Taplow, near Maidenhead in Buckinghamshire, is one of the most poignant and tantalising in the annals of Anglo-Saxon archaeology.

The huge mound which dominates the churchyard and surrounding landscape today, and gives its name (Taeppa's Barrow) to the adjacent village, like Sutton Hoo, must long have been a focus of legend and curiosity. But fatefully, there was no Basil Brown among the local antiquarians who tunneled into it in the damp Autumn of 1883. They attacked the mound with a zeal only outmatched by their incompetence, bringing down tons of earth onto the exposed burial deposit, producing contradictory plans of the burial, and failing to keep any systematic record of their observations.

The result was catastrophic; although some of the key objects salvaged were restored for display at the British Museum, the shattered condition of the many remaining artefacts defeated the skills and resources of the late 19th century; and it was not until the skills learnt from analysing and conserving the Sutton Hoo Mound 1 material could be applied, that the many conservation and interpretative problems posed by the Taplow burial could be tackled.

What we can now unravel from patient sifting of the evidence is a fascinating story. The dead man was – unusually, and perhaps significantly – buried facing west, in a massive oak chamber, within which he was probably laid out on a bier covered with a featherbed. He wore a tunic trimmed with gold braid, and what may have been a cloak with leather straps fastened by gold sheeted clasps; at his waist was a massive gold and garnet inlaid buckle, and his sword lay at his right side. Laid around the body in the chamber was an extraordinarily lavish array of accompanying grave goods. Among these were vessels for feasting and drinking – over 19 in all – , at least three weapon sets, a lyre, gaming board and playing pieces, and many rich textiles. In scale, quantity and quality, much of the vessel assemblage matches the contents of the Sutton Hoo Mound 1 burial; admittedly there are no hanging bowls or imported silver, but the four glass claw beakers are certainly luxury items, as are the elaborate Coptic bowl and stand, the five or six silver-mounted drinking horns, and the silver and bronze mounted wooden cups. Also reminiscent of the Sutton Hoo burial are the large cauldron, tub and buckets, symbolic or actual containers for the meat, ale and other provisions for the feast.

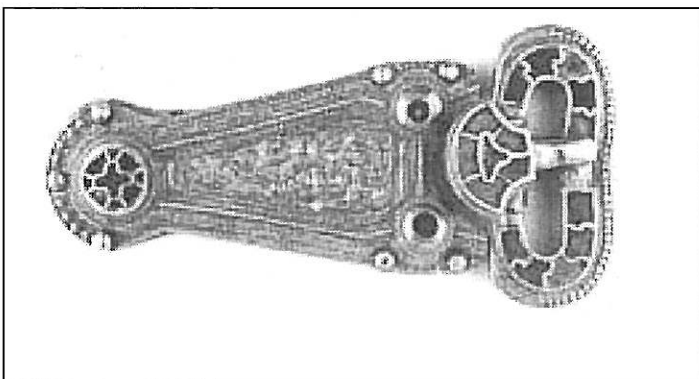
In all of this, we can sense the need to keep a fighting troop fed and entertained, graphic symbols of the communal joys of hall so vividly described in Beowulf and other Anglo-Saxon poetry; these grave-goods clearly signal the dead man's power and command over men. But they also carry another, intriguing message. Many of these



Watercolour illustration of the plan of the burial
(Courtesy, British Museum)

objects, old and new, appear to be of Kentish origin, or would have been imported via Kent; very few of them relate to the local Thames Valley culture and they certainly surpass other Anglo-Saxon graves in the region by far in sheer wealth displayed.

This sense of political statement is lent further weight by the barrow's prominent setting on a dramatic natural boundary. High on a cliff overlooking the Thames, and deliberately set within the compass of a prehistoric hillfort, it commands a wide view westwards, seeming to send a message of ancestral defiance into the Wessex heartland, or at very least, to be a watchful guardian on the border of its territory. Hints from the documentary record suggest that the southern Chilterns at this time might have been a westerly outpost of Kentish domination at the height of the Kentish kings' power in the years around 600, before Mercia overwhelmed the region a few years later; so the barrow's occupant might perhaps have been a Kentish sub-king of a kind encountered elsewhere in the records. We shall never know 'Taeppa's' identity; but we can at least marvel at this expression of his might, and perhaps, glimpse some hint of the power struggles at work as the early Anglo-Saxon polities jostled for domination.



Gold and garnet buckle from the burial.
(Courtesy, British Museum)