

A LOOK TO DIE FOR:
A VALUATION SYSTEM FOR BURIAL ORNAMENT

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I
Introduction

Days before the outbreak of the Second World War, the backyard of Mrs. Edith May Pretty became something of a spectacle.¹ What started as a backyard dig by a hobbyist and Mrs. Pretty's gardner became one of the greatest English archaeological finds in history.² Included was one of the only ships to survive the Viking Age: eight-six feet long, leaving only the iron bolts and nails with an imprint of the wood, long since rotted away, was impressed into the ground.³ In what had been a wooden chamber or cabin was a trove of treasure, including thirty-seven gold coins and forty-one other objects of gold, thirteen of which were from the bone or ivory lid of a purse, which was encrusted with garnets and colored mosaic glass.⁴ A golden horse-harness included a sword with a blade made in the Rhineland and a gold-and-garnet pommel, as well as several belt buckles matching in style and design.⁵ Several silver pieces were also found, including a pair of spoons (inscribed in Greek with "Paul" and "Saul"), a cup and ladle, and several larger dishes, all from Constantinople or the surrounding area.⁶ The ship-burial included objects besides silver and gold, such as a ceremonial whetstone, an iron stand with a bronze stag, an iron helmet with a facemask, a decorated shield, three buckets, three bronze cauldrons, three bronze enameled hanging-bowls, another bronze bowl, seven drinking horns

¹ Bruce-Mitford, R. L. S, "The Sutton Hoo Ship-Burial," *Scientific American* 184, no. 4 (1951): 25.

² Bruce-Mitford, "Sutton Hoo Ship-Burial," 23.

³ Bruce-Mitford, "Sutton Hoo Ship-Burial," 25.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Bruce-Mitford, "Sutton Hoo Ship-Burial," 26.

⁶ Ibid.

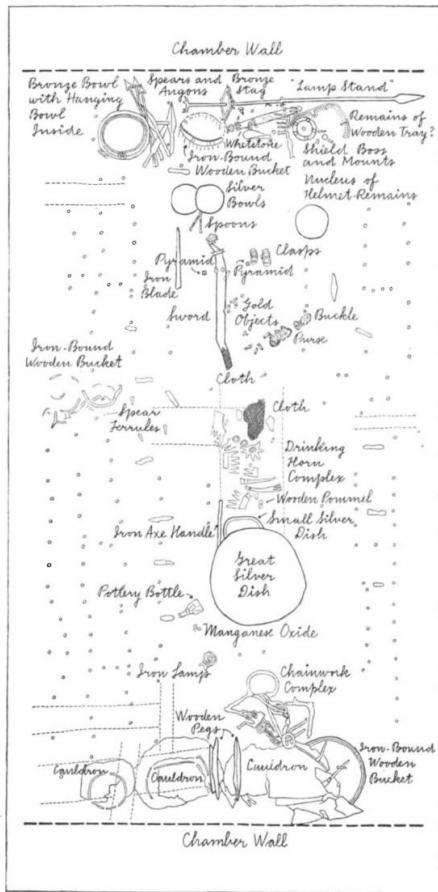
with silver-gilt mounts, and a six-string harp.⁷ This was found amidst many pieces of leather, bone, wood, and fabric; this is assumed to be a bag.⁸

The Sutton Hoo ship-burial brought a wealth of new evidence to a period with a poor literary and poorer archaeological record, throwing a spotlight on the almost-mythic world of *Beowulf* and Ælfred the Great.⁹ The entire ship was not only filled with pieces of impeccable

craftsmanship, but came from all across the world, and almost perfectly preserved.

Since the discovery of Sutton Hoo in 1939, with improved metal detecting technology and satellite mapping, more burials have been collected across the British Isles: a handful of ship-burials, like Sutton Hoo, and also many caches of coins and jewelry. There is particular “jewelry” found in caches which is better termed “ornament,” since the pieces were decorative by nature but not necessarily personal belongings. The ornament types

Bruce-Mitford's original field drawings of the Sutton Hoo ship-burial findings.



found in the majority of caches are silver wrist- or arm-rings which also served as currency or hack-silver, an immediate source of payment in a bullion economy. The ornament found in

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Bruce-Mitford, “Sutton Hoo Ship-Burial,” 23.

caches are only arm-rings, as opposed to the complete outfit of a burial like Sutton Hoo, which includes everything from ornamental martial pieces to belts and beads.

However, the goods of Sutton Hoo were *wealth*, in a conspicuous, material, and monetary sense. To inter a person with these goods involved knowingly removing very wealthy goods from social and economic circulation, some of which had been in circulation for long periods of time. Sutton Hoo includes a silver dish (27.4” diameter) stamped with the mark of Byzantine Emperor Anastasius I, meaning it was nearly one hundred and fifty years old before it is buried in East Anglia.¹⁰ This is not an isolated object, either: a sword from the Brighthampton burial incorporated fifth- and sixth-century fittings, making it almost one hundred before its interment.

¹¹ Why bury such wealth in the ground?

The difference between a burial and a cache, or horde, is that burials contain a body purposely interred.. The wealth secreted in caches is explained easily: this was a temporary removal of wealth from circulation, perhaps for safekeeping, and the owner simply died before it could be recovered. Why is the wealth interred with the dead not retrievable, instead of a temporary removal from circulation? But what is the difference between the wealth, the value, of the ornaments interred in burials as opposed to hordes or caches?

To understand the value placed on the grave goods of Sutton Hoo as funeral-goers recognized them and the differences between other buried caches of wealth, this essay begins with a review of the past literature and predominant theories surrounding the value of Sutton Hoo. This essay rejects the “Rædwald theory,” and its stress on the significance of hybrid

¹⁰ Bruce-Mitford, “Sutton Hoo Ship-Burial,” 26.

¹¹ Crawford, Sally, "Votive Deposition, Religion and the Anglo-Saxon Furnished Burial Ritual," *World Archaeology*, 91.

Christian-“pagan” objects. It takes a critical look at the lasting postcolonial impact of both the Christian authorities within the Norse-Anglo-Saxon sphere and the continued colonial impact of the Rædwald theory. Instead, this essay pivots analysis away from “kingliness” and the Christian emphasis to a comparative case study of previously interred objects, including contemporaneous graves from Vendel and Valsgärde. A brief description of the context of Sutton Hoo’s burial reframes of Viking-Anglo-Saxon relations in light of the widespread contact and eventual incorporation of the Anglo-Saxons into a Viking diaspora to help analyze the deep connections between the Norse and Anglo-Saxon cultures found in Sutton Hoo. This essay concludes with the argument that the valuation process of Sutton Hoo’s richest metalworks can be understood as falling under three categories: the preciousness, the ancient, and the exotic, and that this valuation process can be applied to wider Anglo-Norse burials.

II Rædwald & Revision

The Rædwald theory was first proposed at the site of Sutton Hoo shortly after its excavation in 1939 and has held sway over the scholarly community ever since.¹² Munro Chadwick of Clare College, Cambridge, was the first historian on the site, and declared that the grave belonged undoubtedly to King Rædwald of East Anglia.¹³

Rædwald was the king of East Anglia and most powerful king in the Heptarchy, according to the Venerable Bede, from 599 to 625 AD. He was known particularly for his complicated relationship with Christianity and the traditional religion: he was originally raised in the traditional religion, considered the Christian alternative and overtures towards the Church,

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

but ultimately returned to the traditional religion.¹⁴ However, it appears that Christianity still held some influence over him: he reportedly placed altars to both Christian and other deities in his temple.¹⁵

The reasoning behind Chadwick's explanation was threefold: such a rich grave could only belong to a king, and the king who fit this area and dating was Rædwald.¹⁶ Furthermore, the fact that Rædwald had been singled out as following the traditional religion, with Christian influences, aligned with a clearly "pagan" grave.¹⁷ There was no inscription or body left to support this conclusion, or even that the grave was that of a king's, but Rædwald became both the favorite subject and explanation for the nature of the grave ever since.¹⁸

The Rædwald theory is emblematic of the larger, problematic scholarly trend with regards to both Sutton Hoo and later Viking-Anglo-Saxon research. The value of the grave goods in Sutton Hoo, the theory contends, are that they are not Christian. There are Christian materials found (the silver cache from Byzantium), but these are placed within a solidly non-Christian context. What the Rædwald theory prioritizes above all else is the "hybrid" nature of the grave: the interaction between Christianity and traditional religion, particularly that the Sutton Hoo-complex ought to be read as "pagan defiance from a people threatened by Christian encroachment."¹⁹

However, this reading simplifies that East Anglia and the other Anglo-Saxon kingdoms were a complex network of Christian and non-Christian religious adherents governed by rulers

¹⁴ Ibid, 23, from Bede's *History of the English Church and People*.

¹⁵ Ibid, 23.

¹⁶ Ibid, 22. The radiocarbon dating cannot give an exact date, but the burial is placed

¹⁷ Ibid, 22.

¹⁸ Ibid, 23. Carver's book, published in 1998, still ultimately supports the hypothesis that the burial belongs to King Rædwald.

¹⁹ Ibid, 53.

who frequently took to one religion or the other for political reasons. The theory of Rædwald's grave rests, first, on the idea that this *must* be the grave of a king, and, second, the Byzantine-Christian symbols can only be reckoned within the non-Christian grave as a larger statement of anti-Christian sentiment against a Christianity that was destined to triumph over England.

Utilizing Sutton Hoo as a slow progression of Christianity, creating a "hybrid" grave, fundamentally devalues one half of this "hybrid" in favor of another. As the article "Hybridity and Its Discontents: Considering Visual Culture in Colonial Spanish America" discusses, determining objects as "hybrid," particularly within a Christian-non-Christian context, divides objects into halves and sets them in opposition to each half.²⁰ Hybridity is not a consequence of an "us" meeting "them," but instead a recognition or delineate of an "us" and "them."²¹ However, as explored below in part three, the Church struggled to make divisions between the syncretic Christianity that had grown up in England and the pure "pagan" religion, which often closely resembled this syncretic Anglo-Saxon Christianity. In short, delineation was not possible during the time period, and it is equally impossible to read divisions into this fundamentally intertwined multi-religious complex.

The desire to identify and put a life's story to the mystery occupant of the grave is not inherently flawed or even impossible. The Rædwald identification surmises the best it can from the extant written materials possible. However, Rædwald theory's fallacy rests on its

²⁰ Dean, Carolyn, and Dana Leibsohn, "Hybridity and Its Discontents: Considering Visual Culture in Colonial Spanish America," 2003, 5-35. While the article addresses scholarship on colonial Spanish America, the discussion of "indigenous" or "pagan" material culture set in opposition to Christian and the predominant European culture can be applied to the discussion of Anglo-Saxon and Viking material culture.

²¹ Dean, Liebsohn, "Hybridity and Its Discontents," 6.

understanding that Christianity was, by necessity, a dominating and unfamiliar force that needed demonstration against. It posits Christianity as a slow but assured conquest. This ignores the complicated religious history of England, which saw conversion and reconversion of Christian and non-Christian religions multiple times over the past several hundred years, even before the Vikings arrived. Christianity's eventual domination was never assured from the perspective of seventh century England and that must be recognized as a cautionary measure before placing something as "anti-Christian." The theory's assumptions also completely abbreviate the nuanced and melded English society, which by nature saw Christians and non-Christians existing next to one another, and a very syncretic Christianity that had embraced many aspects of traditional religion.²² The hybridity promoted by the Rædwald theory dictates strong delineations and almost a complete separation of Christian and non-Christian material culture. In short, the Rædwald theory places Sutton Hoo as only existing within a Christian context and in Christian apposition.

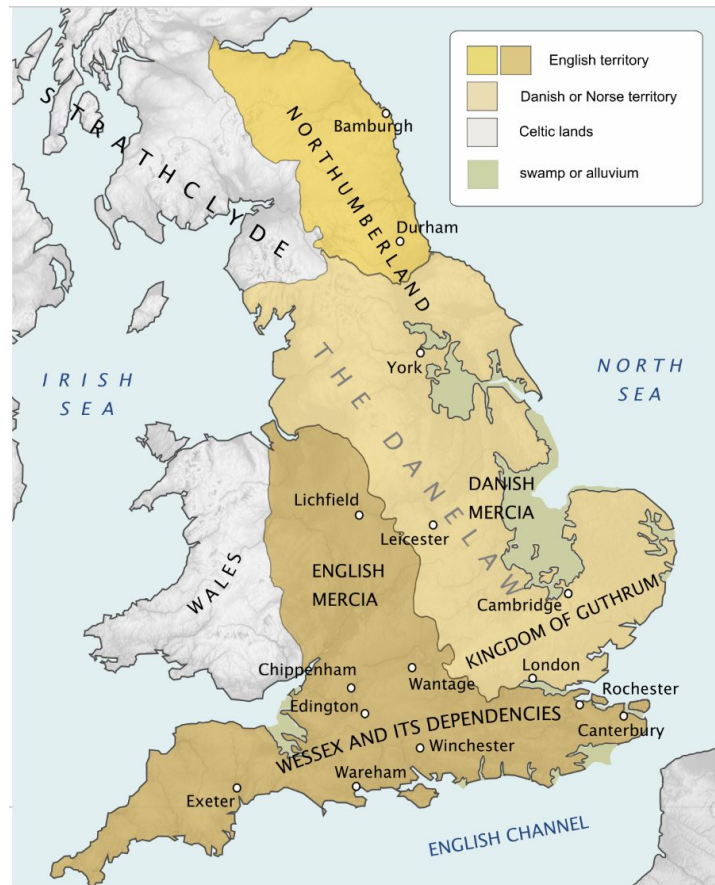
Placing Sutton Hoo as an anomaly, the death throes of traditional religion as a demonstration of anti-Christian sentiment, not only ignores England's religious history, it also ignores Sutton Hoo's contemporaneous relatives. There are multiple ship-burials in the same manner, style, and time period that provide greater context for the Sutton Hoo burial in broader world not solely dependent on protesting Christianity. In part three, this essay will examine the close links between the Anglo-Saxon English inhabitants and the wider Viking diaspora to situate our deeper understanding of Christian-non-Christian relations and influence Norse

²² Ohlgren, Thomas H, "The Pagan Iconography of Christian Ideas: Tree-Lore in Anglo-Viking England," 145-173. This article includes an overview of the widespread syncretic Christianity throughout England as well as the Church's approach and even limited approval of it.

traditional religion played in the reemergence of “paganism.” In part four, we will analyze Sutton Hoo’s contemporaneous burials, before we draw our final conclusions in part five, with a comparison between wealthy burials and other buried wealth, like hordes.

III Separated by Seas

The multi-layered, intricate religious complex that makes up early medieval England is tied tightly to their Norse neighbors, who eventually form a larger Viking diaspora that incorporates the Anglo-Saxon English inhabitants. This diaspora is tied together through traditional, non-Christian religion and mutually intelligible language. Furthermore, the emphasis on Christianity, placed in opposition to traditional religion, that the Rædwald theory observes, is a result of the anxiety from ecclesiastical authorities of a reconversion effort spawned by the similarities between the newcomers and the locals.



Spread of
Viking-held
England at
its height.

The first record of aggressive Viking contact is from the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, dated 789 CE.²³ The Norsemen, inhabitants of Scandinavia and would-be modern nation-states of

²³ Ohlgren, Thomas H, "The Pagan Iconography of Christian Ideas: Tree-Lore in Anglo-Viking England," 145-173.

Sweden, Denmark, and Norway, were not unfamiliar to the British Isles. During the 789 attack at the town of Portsmouth, England, the Vikings sailed on water routes that had been familiar knowledge for at least three centuries.²⁴ Indeed, during shortages of herring fishing, the Norsemen had established trade links in port cities across the British Isles and continental Europe, and by the fifth century had accumulated a large quantity of gold from profitable trade, with no documented antagonism on the behalf of the Norse.²⁵ The question of what spurred Norsemen to, seemingly on a whim, turn from benevolent traders to terrifying raiders has been the subject of much scholarly debate, but is ultimately beyond the scope of this work.²⁶ Nonetheless, by 793 Vikings made their first successful raid on the monastery-island of Lindisfarne and by 886 had established a collection of kingdoms in England termed the Danelaw.²⁷ The Danelaw displaced several of the Seven Kingdoms of Anglo-Saxon England, which later unified into the Kingdom of England under Ælfred the Great in 886 to resist continued Viking influence.²⁸ Viking influence—later Norwegian and Danish nation rule—continued in some areas of the British Isles, such as Scotland and the Orkneys, until the fifteenth century.²⁹ This continued influence to *circa* 1500 is referred to as “the long Viking

²⁴ Blair, Peter Hunter. *An Introduction to Anglo-Saxon England*. 2nd ed. Cambridge University Press.

²⁵ Blair, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 55.

²⁶ Blair, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 55.

²⁷ Ohlgren, “Tree-Lore,” 145. The Danelaw comprised fifteen shires, with York, Northumbria, and the Midlands being understood the centers of power and most heavily Scandinavianized.

²⁸ Blair, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 11. The Seven Kingdoms (called the “Heptarchy”) included East Anglia, Essex, Wessex, Sussex, Kent, Mercia, and Northumbria. At the time of Ælfred’s “unification” he only maintained control of Kent, the only Anglo-Saxon kingdom not to fall to the Danelaw. It took until the tenth century under Ælfred’s grandson, Æthelstan, for the Heptarchy’s lands to consolidated into united England.

²⁹ Jesch, *The Viking Diaspora*, 3. The Northern Isles of Orkney and Shetland remained a possession of Norway (and later Denmark) until 1468-9. Both Norse culture and Old Norse continued until then, if not onward.

Age,” whereas the historical Viking Age can be considered, for the purposes of this work, to last from 750 to 1100.³⁰

Viking, derived from *vikingr* (plural *vikingar*) does not denote a specific ethnicity within the Scandinavian peninsula nor the occupation of raiding.³¹ *Viking* refers more broadly to the person with affiliation to contemporaneous Scandinavian-style culture, but does not necessarily demand descent from a geographic location within the Scandinavian Peninsula, nor a military career, and in fact includes any profession or social status.³²

While the above discussion defines the term “Viking” within the context of this paper, the question of the Viking identity, forged for and by Vikings, is impossible to determine with any certainty as a natural consequence of time. However, a Viking identity can be understood in a reaction to another identity. The Viking identity, as mentioned above, is not constrained by time or even space. Judith Jesch writes in *The Viking Diaspora* that the Vikings cannot simply be considered migrants, but instead form an entire diaspora that crosses countries, and “through linguistic and cultural contacts assiduously maintain[s] [...] a Viking world for some centuries after the migrations.”³³ A diaspora, Jesch argues, is about the migrant’s sense of connectedness: (a) to the homeland; (b) to the other migrants from the homeland; (c) to other regions with

³⁰ Jesch, Judith, *The Viking Diaspora*, 10. “The long and broad,” Viking Age, as Jesch terms it, assesses more widely the lasting influence of the Norse in Greenland, Iceland, and the Northern Isles, whereas for the Anglo-Saxon region of the Viking diaspora, influence is limited after William the Conqueror successfully invaded England in 1066.

³¹ Jesch, Judith, *The Viking Diaspora*, 7. Recent scholars have attempted to narrow down usage of “Viking” solely to pillaging actors or within a military context, as the Old Norse usage of *vikingr* had a pejorative sense in some applications of the word. However, Jesch suggests a broader use of the term of Viking, so to discuss the wider cultural ties of the Norse world without tying a term, such as Scandinavian, to a specific geography, when its influence far outgrew the peninsula.

³² Jesch, *The Viking Diaspora*, 7. Using the term “Viking” allows the inclusion of places such as Iceland, the Faroe Islands, Greenland, the Isle of Man, and the Orkneys, which all have tight cultural, political, and economic ties to Scandinavia, but are not geographically within the Peninsula.

³³ Jesch, *The Viking Diaspora*, 81.

migrants from the same homeland; (d) to their new home.³⁴ Ultimately, a diaspora refers to the ongoing connectedness that came from the migration, and Jesch identifies two major cultural markers of connectedness for the Viking diaspora: (1) traditional, non-Christian religion and (2) language (*dǫnsk tunga*, Old Norse).³⁵

The emphasis of Viking identity being non-Christian is not an indigenous construct of identity, but instead a contemporaneous Christian as well as later projection by modern scholars. However, it is a useful identifier to consider in light of the fact that Vikings were purposely othered by majority Christian communities, such as the Anglo-Saxons, because of their non-Christian nature.³⁶ Christian doctrine and the regimes of many Christian kings, such as Kings Ælfred and Æthelstan of the Anglo-Saxons (847-899; 925-939), required Christianity for participants in trade and war.³⁷ This resulted in a number of “half-Christians”: non-Christian Vikings who would accept “prime-signing” or provisional baptism to conduct trade or sign on as mercenaries, and never follow through on actual conversion.³⁸

However, for the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms to brand Vikings as “heathens” purposely ignores the continued presence of native Anglo-Saxon “pagan” traditions. Since the

³⁴ Jesch, *The Viking Diaspora*, 81.

³⁵ Jesch, *The Viking Diaspora*, 76, 81. The term *dǫnsk tunga*, meaning “Danish tongue,” is to refer to Old Norse. Despite the apparent specificity of “Danish tongue,” it refers to the more general language today understood as Old Norse, which was spoken across the Scandinavian Peninsula during the Viking Age and should not be understood as tied to the modern country of Denmark alone. Note: these are the two defining characteristics of the diaspora, but in Chapter Three Jesch articulates extensively nine different ways in which the Viking diaspora illustrates the nine different parts of a diaspora as illustrated by Robin Cohen.

³⁶ Timofeeva, Olga, “Alfredian Press on the Vikings: A Critical Discourse Approach to Outgroup Construction,” 230-53.

³⁷ Ohlgren, “Tree-Lore,” 163.

³⁸ Ohlgren, “Tree-Lore,” 163. Such an example of prime-signing is demonstrated in *Egills saga*, wherein Þórólfr and Egill accept prime-signing so they may serve as mercenaries in King Æthelstan’s army; ironically enough, they are tasked with suppressing non-Christian activity.

Christianization of the Anglo-Saxon invaders in the sixth century, the Catholic presence in England had been restrained to isolated churches on private manorial estates and purposely remote monasteries; parish churches administered to the laity, but were funded by land-bound nobility, which in effect created a private church system.³⁹ There lacked definitive oversight and central ecclesiastical power in England, which allowed traditional religion to persist.⁴⁰ The Venerable Bede wrote that the indigenous British clergy did not even attempt to convert the Anglo-Saxons, and they refused to help Augustine, who had been sent by Pope Gregory I in 597 to try and convert the Anglo-Saxons.⁴¹ Several local kings had converted to Christianity in the intervening century, causing many Christian writers to declare Anglo-Saxon England “converted,” but it is unclear whether the general populace converted or even whether the kings adopted Christian practices.⁴² Legates to Pope Hadrian write in 786 (before any Viking settlement in England) about continuing concern of pagans in Northumbria: “if anything has remained of the rites of the pagans, it is to be plucked out, despised, cast away.”⁴³ Woden, the Germanic god equivalent with the Norse god Óðinn, enjoyed considerable popularity and worship by the Saxons and Angles in Northumbria, Essex, Wessex, and Kent before Anglo-Saxon Christianization.⁴⁴ This suggests not only continuing familiarity with traditional religion pre-Viking contact, but an active fear by Christian authorities of reconversion efforts. These Christian fears were rewarded with the resurgence of a non-Christian Viking presence and,

³⁹ Ohlgren, “Tree-Lore,” 162.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Thomas Charles-Edwards, *After Rome: Conversion to Christianity*, 128-9. Bede, *History of the English People*, 11.2.

⁴² Charles-Edwards, *After Rome: Conversion to Christianity*, 126. These included the kingdoms of Kent, Sussex, and the Isle of Wight.

⁴³ Ohlgren, “Tree-Lore,” 151.

⁴⁴ Ohlgren, “Tree-Lore,” 149. Understood as the patron god of towns founded by Angles and Jutes through place-names.

later, established Viking kingdoms. In a letter from Pope Formosus to the bishops of England (dated 891-96), he writes “the abominable rites of pagans having sprouted again in your parts.”⁴⁵ Formosus’s fear is not unfounded: in a letter fragment written in Old English, the author bemoans his brother for having converted to the cult of Óðinn: “abandoning the English practices which your fathers followed, and in loving the practices of heathen men.”⁴⁶ This shows an actively converting population of Anglo-Saxons during the reign of the Viking kingdoms, and a non-Christian religion which continues well into the eleventh century, with Wulfstan, archbishop of York 1002-1023, denouncing non-Christian rites in multiple documents.⁴⁷ Wulfstan particularly specifies the rite of worshipping of trees, which is deeply associated with the cult of Óðinn/Woden, and accuses his own Anglo-Saxon countrymen of continuing this practice.⁴⁸

All of this demonstrates a continual, active, and arguably even growing non-Christian presence in England, dwindling after the Anglo-Saxon Christianization and revitalized by Viking arrivals in the ninth century. The pace of conversion to the Viking religion—arguably *reconversion*—is rapid. The gap between the establishment of the Danelaw (886) and the attention of the pope (891) to the growing conversion problem is only five years. Comparatively, after the Þing in Iceland voted to convert the entire country to Christianity in 999, the Christianization process was not considered “complete” until the fourteenth century.⁴⁹ The common factor that allowed the Vikings to establish and maintain a diaspora that exerted such

⁴⁵ Ohlgren, “Tree-Lore,” 151.

⁴⁶ Ohlgren, “Tree-Lore,” 151.

⁴⁷ Ohlgren, “Tree-Lore,” 147-8. *Institutes on Polity, De Falsiis Diis, Canons of Edgar, and Sermo de Baptismate* are all works by Wulfstan in which he writes about non-Christian rites. Ohlgren discusses the connection between the cult of Óðinn and trees on pages 148-151, as well as the rest of the article.

⁴⁸ Ohlgren, “Tree-Lore,” 147-8. In the *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos*.

⁴⁹ Jesch, *The Viking Diaspora*, 140.

influence as to reckon several kingdoms' worth of conversion almost overnight is the second defining characteristic of the diaspora itself: language.

The Vikings spoke what they themselves referred to as *dǫnsk tunga* (Old Norse), which was mutually intelligible across all of the Scandinavian Peninsula.⁵⁰ This was a marker of group consciousness between the Viking peoples: multiple sagas identify those who speak *dǫnsk tunga* as speaking *várt mál*, “our language,” and those who speak “our language” as *Norðmenn* and *norrænn* (both literally mean “northmen” but refer more broadly to “Norse-speakers”).⁵¹ Notably, this group was not an *ethnic* group link, but a *linguistic* link. *Norðmenn* and *norrænn* are identified as living across the known world or, more accurately, across the diaspora, including Iceland, Greenland, and all throughout the British Isles as well as mainland Scandinavia. The group who spoke *várt mál* were considered to be the in-group, to the point where according to early Icelandic laws (collectively known as the *Grágás*) and later, Norwegian laws revised for Icelandic conditions (*Jónsbók*), make two important considerations. Firstly, provisions of inheritance are excepted for “of all languages other than Norse [*danskri tungu*]” and, secondly, the *Grágás* hold that the laws are essentially the same in Greenland, Norway, and the Scottish Isles, while making certain exceptions for Britain and Europe, but only account of the kingship being different—not the laws themselves.⁵²

⁵⁰ Jesch, *The Viking Diaspora*, 76.

⁵¹ Jesch, *The Viking Diaspora*, 76, 77. The texts cited are *Valla-Ljóts saga*, *Egills saga*, *Grænlendinga saga*, *Eyrbyggja saga*, and *First Grammatical Treatise*.

⁵² Jesch, *The Viking Diaspora*, 79. The *Grágás* speak of those who can vouch for killings outside of the “south of the realm of the Danes” (those killings being perpetrated by Norsemen): “[the guarantors who had been] in the realm of the king of the English or the king of the Welsh or of the king of the Scots or the king of the Irish or the king of the Hebrideans.”

How quickly the Anglo-Saxons could incorporate themselves into the Viking diaspora, then, must be attributed to language: Norse and Anglo-Saxon were mutually intelligible to the extent that extensive bilingualism and translators were unnecessary.⁵³

The development of the Viking diaspora clearly traces back its roots to the meeting of a people who were, by all accounts, neighbors. The Vikings were a familiar folk, who spoke the same language, and practiced a ritual religion similar to the legacy that was still lived in Anglo-Saxon territory. The authorities in the Seven Kingdoms understood these newcomers as pagan and fundamentally non-Christian. However, as illustrated above, Christianity in the British Isles was incredibly syncretic and the Church itself detected the traditional Anglo-Saxon religion as still surviving. The “barrier” that divided Christianity and traditional religion was clearly porous and flexible even before the Vikings arrived. Once the Vikings began to settle and establish kingdoms and develop relationships with the local Anglo-Saxon populace, it was clear that the Norse and Anglo-Saxons regarded themselves as fundamentally familiar people and easily incorporated each other into a wider diaspora. With the development of this relationship, the only overarching difference the Church could detect was Christianity and tried to enforce it. The rigorous enforcement of the Church, trying to draw lines between the approved syncretic variation of Christianity in Anglo-Saxon kingdoms and the arrival of the non-Christian Vikings, demonstrates how truly malleable the Anglo-Saxon populace’s conception of Christianity was. There was no strict division, either of culture or religion, between the Anglo-Saxon and Norse population: thus, a vigorous division needed to be solidified.

⁵³ Jesch, *The Viking Diaspora*, 90. From Matthew Townsend, *Language and History in Viking Age England: Linguistic Relations Between Speakers of Old Norse and Old English*, 2002.

Now, we return to the ship-burial at Sutton Hoo. The ship at Sutton Hoo is dated in the early 600s AD, during the precise time when Christianity was purportedly gaining ground in England, two centuries before the Vikings even arrived. Sutton Hoo, as the largest and most intact burial site dating from this period, became the most influential find on scholarly inquiry for the period. The conclusions and evidence drawn from the site also determined the majority of theory and scholarly thought on Viking-Anglo-Saxon relations in the succeeding centuries. Indeed, dating from 1939, the work of Rupert L.S Bruce-Mitford, the archaeologist assigned by the British Museum to bring Sutton Hoo to publication, dominated scholarship ever since with the Ræwald theory.⁵⁴ As demonstrated above, the simplistic approach of the Ræwald theory with regards to Christianity in England does not hold up in light of the multi-religious complex of Anglo-Saxon England. Now, the essay turns to understand Sutton Hoo within the context of traditional religion and contemporaneous burials, and how, unlike the Ræwald theory promotes, Sutton Hoo was not a unique burial.

IV Sutton Hoo's Sisters

Far north of Sutton Hoo, in northeastern Sweden, two graveyards were unearthed that revealed an incredible parallels to Sutton Hoo.⁵⁵ Not only were the ship-burials at Vendel and Valsgärde, Uppland, Sweden, merely “similar,” they were also dated at the same time as the Sutton Hoo ship-burial. The shield and military regalia were so homogenous, especially with regards to the garnet cloissoné, that one scholar claimed the entire military outfit was imported from Sweden.⁵⁶ Regardless of whether or not that is true, or that East Anglia and Uppsala were

⁵⁴ Carver, Martin, *Sutton Hoo: Burial Ground of Kings?*, 1998, 22.

⁵⁵ Klevnäs, Alison, "Abandon Ship! Digging Out the Dead from the Vendel Boat-Graves," 2015, 1.

⁵⁶ Maryon, H, "The Sutton Hoo Shield," 30.

definitively in contact, the fact remains that Sutton Hoo has counterparts and they are worth examining to gain a greater understanding of the nature of ship-burials during this time period.

The Vendel graveyard was first discovered in the 1880s by Hjalmar Stolpe and is comprised of fourteen graves.⁵⁷ Out of these fourteen, twelve of the graves include ship-burials.⁵⁸ However, due to the fact that nine of the graves had been robbed during the medieval period previous to discovery and another three took damage during the archaeological process, the wealth uncovered within them was only a fraction of what their total is assumed to be (and therefore only a fraction of Sutton Hoo's).⁵⁹

Valsgärde, discovered in 1920s, contained fifteen ship-burials.⁶⁰ Unlike Vendel, the majority of them had escaped grave-robbery, and, like Vendel, showed a startling similarity to the objects found in the Sutton Hoo ship-burial: the time period when burial occurred, the burial itself, and type of objects buried.⁶¹

The Vendel discovery gave its name to the Vendel Period (*circa* 520-750 CE), which took place between the Migration Period (*circa* 300-520 CE) and the Viking Age (*circa* 750-1100 CE), as the preeminent archaeological find of the time period yet discovered.⁶² Both the Vendel and Valsgärde graveyards contain burials dating centuries after the Vendel Period; however, the graves which dates align most closely with the Sutton Hoo dates bear a great resemblance to Sutton Hoo.⁶³

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 4.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 17. The grave-robbery was primarily to remove the bodies and adornment on the body. Klevnäs argues that the intent was to leave the site empty of occupants, not to raze or de-memorialize the site.

⁶⁰ Ljungkvist, John, "The development and chronology of the Valsgärde cemetery," 2008, 13.

⁶¹ Ibid.

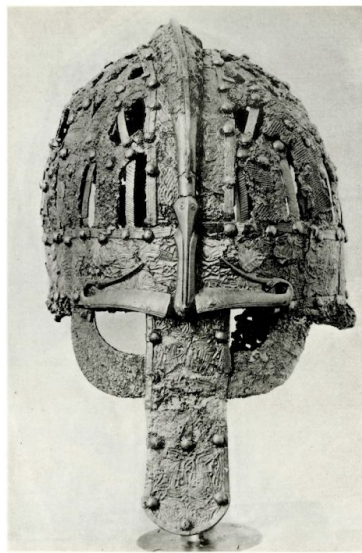
⁶² Klevnäs, "Abandon Ship," 1.

⁶³ Klevnäs, "Abandon Ship," 2; Norr, Sundkvist, "Valsgärde Revisited," 6. Particularly Graves 1, 12, and 14 at Vendel; 8, 6, and 14 at Valsgärde; and Mound 1 at Sutton Hoo.

The similarities firstly include the burial itself: all three featured a ship, clinker-built, with a small cabin or construction within to house the body, that had earth piled over it to create a mound formation.⁶⁴ All three cemeteries include multiple mound structures, where bodies (whether in ship-burial, inhumation, or cremation) were buried underneath.⁶⁵

Within in each grave, the ship contains the body, with accessories as well as surrounded by military regalia, including a shield, sword, and helmet in each.⁶⁶ Each grave also included other, more daily items: bowls and vessels (made from silver, gold, and glass: the most luxurious materials), textiles, and even sacrificed animals.⁶⁷

Besides having a similar corpus of goods—martial goods, utilitarian goods, ornamental goods—the goods themselves are quality items. They are all made of the finest, most expensive, and rarest materials. The sacrificed animal corpus in one Vendel grave includes a hunting hawk.



Vendel, Valsgärde, Sutton Hoo helmets.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Klevnäs, “Abandon Ship,” 7. Sutton Hoo Mound 1 does not include sacrificed animals, but the rest of the Sutton Hoo cemetery complex does include evidence of animal sacrifices.

⁶⁸ Over all, the grave goods in Sutton Hoo, Vendel, and Valsgärde were clearly wealth of the highest quality and interred specifically to be irretrievable. Sutton Hoo, therefore, is not unique, but forms part of a larger pattern of wealth internment.

The helmets pictured above, from Vendel, Valsgärde, and Sutton Hoo respectively, show a tremendous amount of similarity: they each include heavy eyebrows, an emphasized cornice, and stamped scenes of warriors. Each helmet shares a comparable formation, with a cheek coverings and heavy emphasis on protection of the nose. It is clear that, between the dating, the correlation between the construction of the graves, and the similarity of the extant pieces, that the cemetery at Sutton Hoo shares some sort of connection with the Vendel and Valsgärde graves. While ferreting out the connection between these three cemeteries is not the object of this paper, the importance of the connection between these three, seemingly disparate sites, is that this larger trend of wealth internment can be placed with the greater Anglo-Saxon-Norse cultural sphere, and not just East Anglia alone.

Due to the rich nature of the graves, much scholarly speculation has been done on whether or not the graves belong to “kings.”⁶⁹ Just as Sutton Hoo is within the Kingdom of East Anglia, both Vendel and Valsgärde sit on the traditional sites of *Uppsala öd*, ancient royal Swedish estates meant to provide income to the crown.⁷⁰ As such, the occupants of the Vendel and Valsgärde sites are suggested to be members of the Yngling dynasty, traditionally cited as Sweden’s original royal family as detailed in Snorri Sturlusson’s *Ynglingasaga*.⁷¹ As the

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Norr, Sundkvist, “Valsgärde Revisited,” 6. Refer to the section “Chieftains and Changeability” for their discussion on the political construction of kings and “sub-kings” (*rex et subregulus*) in early medieval Scandinavia.

⁷⁰Norr, Sundkvist, “Valsgärde Revisited,” 6.

⁷¹ Ibid.

connection between the Vendel, Valsgärde, and Sutton Hoo sites is very clear—though the nature of this connection remains less so—it was suggested that the Yngling dynasty is related through Wiglaf (a semi-historical character found in *Beowulf*) to the East Anglian ruling house of Wuffingas.⁷² Rædwald, king of East Anglia and supposed descendent of Wiglaf, was the predominant theory for occupant of Sutton Hoo’s ship burial, and this created a tidy connection between the three very similar sites.

This possible connection, while worth exploring, distracts from a larger analysis of wealth interment and grave goods by “solving” the problem with one semi-historical link. It also relegates Sutton Hoo as being one unique blip on the screen, the lost son of a royal Norse house, and closes further discussion about other, possibly not-yet found sites. Clearly, there is a greater pattern of wealth interment both with and without bodies that occurs across the Anglo-Saxon-Norse world, even before Viking invasion. The question remains, however: what is the difference between wealth chosen to be interred with a body versus the wealth chosen to be interred alone?

V

Dying Wealthy & Burying Wealth

As Sutton Hoo has been linked to other, pre-Viking Norse sources, as demonstrated above, we can now confidently turn back to other Norse sites of large accumulations of wealth within the Danelaw in England to cross-examine with Sutton Hoo. The accumulation of wealth, in general, was not necessarily unusual: it is mentioned frequently within Norse sagas and *Beowulf* and even Anglo-Saxon chronicles about the amount of wealth that chieftains possessed.

⁷² Ibid. From Sune Lindqvist, 1948.

These descriptions usually included a vast amount of gold and silver, highly decorated arms, and other, gilded pieces, like a harp or drinking-horn inside the lord's hall.⁷³

When archaeologists find Norse or Anglo-Saxon accumulation of wealth, however, it tends to be from within three types of buried places: (a) lost-objects (b) caches or hordes or (c) burials. The largest accumulations of wealth generally occur within hordes or burials, with the richest accumulations being within purposeful hordes (as opposed to cache-burials made hastily, presumably even on the run) and from ship-burials (as opposed to non-ship inhumation or cremation burials). Thus, the examination of Sutton Hoo's vast amount of wealth will be done in comparison with a horde of comparable size: in this case, the horde in question will be the Staffordshire Hoard.

The Staffordshire Hoard was unearthed in 2009, in southern Staffordshire, in the historic kingdom of Mercia.⁷⁴ Discovered within were over 3,490 pieces, mostly of gold or silver alloy,



Garnet-and-gold cloisonné from Staffordshire (left) and Sutton Hoo (right).

⁷³ From *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, Beowulf, Egills Saga, Heimskringla, and Njáls Saga*.

⁷⁴ Dean, Stephen, Della Hooke, and Alex Jones, "The 'Staffordshire Hoard': The Fieldwork," *The Antiquaries Journal* 2010, 139-52. The majority of the Kingdom of Mercia would come under control of the Danelaw.

and the objects all made within the sixth to eighth centuries.⁷⁵ The majority of objects were of a martial character, such as ornamented gold pommels, hilts, and fittings, but what were not discovered were any actual blades, though a helmet was found.⁷⁶ Two crosses were found, as well as a golden band with a Biblical verse.⁷⁷ All of the production appears to be local, presumably Anglo-Saxon work: the majority was done in the gold and garnet cloissonné observed at Sutton Hoo.⁷⁸ While no exact date of burial can be determined, this places the Staffordshire hoard within the timeframe of the Sutton Hoo burial.

The Sutton Hoo burial, while dramatically smaller in size, contains a vast amount of wealth, with the locally-produced items done in a similar style to the Staffordshire Hoard. See the comparison of gold-garnet cloissonné and gold inlay knotwork: they are done with the same



Comparison of the gold inlay and knotwork from the helmet-cheek piece from the Staffordshire Hoard (left) and the great buckle from Sutton Hoo (right).

style, materials, and produced in the same general location.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

The table above lists all the metalwork found at the Sutton Hoo site, excluding the iron buckets and iron rivets from the ship itself. Now, examining the catalogue below of grave-goods at Sutton Hoo in comparison with those of the Staffordshire Hoard, there is a definitive difference between the objects themselves.

Sutton Hoo includes a number of domestic items, textiles, and coins, none of which can be found in the Hoard. The martial objects are also not in pieces. One might suggest this a product of decay, but the martial Staffordshire Hoard items were purposely taken apart, the pommels removed from their swords, before interment.⁷⁹ Meanwhile, all of the objects in Sutton Hoo were unbroken before interment; any damage happened when the burial chamber collapsed under the weight of the mound or during the archaeological process. In addition, a large number of objects are foreign make, such as the blade of the sword, from the Rhineland, and the cache of silver goods from Byzantium.

⁸⁰ Object	Material	Special Quality
37 gold coins, 3 coin-shaped blanks, 3 golden ingots	Gold	Frankish-minted from between <i>circa</i> 572-625; there are no duplicates among the group
7 drinking horn	Silver-gilt mounts, modelled off of aurochs horn	
Horse-harness	Gold	
Sword	Gold and garnet pommel, iron blade	Blade from Rhineland
Belt buckles	Gold and garnet	Matching belt for the sword
Clasps	Gold and garnet	

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Bruce-Mitford, R. L. S, "The Sutton Hoo Ship-Burial," *Scientific American* 184, no. 4 (1951): 25. All objects and their descriptions come from the original catalogues from the 1939 excavation.

Purse	In 13 pieces at discovery, gold with garnet and mosaic colored glass, over bone or ivory	m
Spoon pair	Silver	From Asia Minor, inscribed in Greek with “Paul” and “Saul”
2 dishes	Silver	From Asia Minor, matching pair with the spoons
Great silver dish	Silver	From Constantinople, during the reign of Emperor Anastasius I (already 150 years old at time of burial)
Cup and ladle	Silver	From Asia Minor, matching pair
Small silver dish	Silver	From Asia Minor
Helmet with facemask	Iron	The type of helmet has matching counterparts in the Vendel and Valsgärde graves, perhaps manufactured there
Shield		Only the boss/mounts remain, with the rest of the shield having rotted away. The boss/mounts match the stamping at 12 Vendel. Previously repaired.
4 bronze buckets	Bronze	
3 bronze-enamel hanging-bowls	Bronze	
Stag	Bronze	Originally thought to be the head of a “standard,” which was later disproved
“Lamp-stand”	Iron	The function of this object is

		still unidentified, but was originally thought to be a “royal standard”
Chainmail work	Iron	

If the Sutton Hoo and Staffordshire metal work is so similar, what is the difference in burying *these* metal objects with the body, instead of *those*?

There are a few clear distinctions between what was scurried away in the Staffordshire Hoard, to be retrieved, and the Sutton Hoo burial, to be left undisturbed. Each piece in the Sutton Hoo ship-burial either pertains to life and, if it is not used in daily life, such as bowls, drinking vessels, and buckets, the object had a life a history of its own. The valuation system between metalwork objects placed within as grave goods in Sutton Hoo falls into three categories: (a) the best materials (b) the already-old goods and (c) the non-local goods.

All of the metalwork materials here are made from a large amount of non-ferrous materials, of silver, gold, and bronze. While no different on the surface from the Staffordshire Hoard, the “best” materials are not solely metalwork: it grafts the best non-ferrous metals on to other, equally precious goods, onto garnets as well as ivory and wood. While the Staffordshire Hoard objects appear to have been stripped of “lesser” goods, such as iron blades, not only are the Sutton Hoo objects whole, their non-metal material is equally as valuable as their metalwork. Sutton Hoo’s objects take on a life of their own as being such an extreme measure of wealth that burial with them becomes and honor in of itself; they celebrated in *sagas*, given as gifts showing great generosity, meant to ennoble both the giver and receiver. As Norse and Anglo-Saxon

cultures function on an honor-based system, this imbues these objects with a life and death, as they die and the honor simultaneously dies and increases with their burial.

Furthermore, many of the goods within the Sutton Hoo ship-burial are already ancient. The silver bowl, as mentioned above, was one-hundred and fifty years old already at the time of interment. The coins found were dated from a range of *c.* 525 to 625, placing many of them as already one hundred years old before burial. The objects within the Staffordshire Hoard were interred shortly after their production. The already-ancient objects of Sutton Hoo reach back then, crossing the barrier of time, and perhaps even an expression of kinship and ancestors.

Finally, out of the objects listed on the above table, nine out of ten had a foreign manufacture. From the coins to the spoons to the blade, these metal objects were exotic and foreign to East Anglia, as opposed to the entirety of the Staffordshire Hoard, which was manufactured within Anglo-Saxon Britain. The exotic nature of these objects, coupled with their interment of previously-used ship, and the widespread nature of the diaspora, signifies the interest in the exotic.⁸¹⁸² The exotic, movement, and exchanged homeland for homeland would not have been unfamiliar to the Anglo-Saxons of England, who migrated from mainland Europe; looking even further afield, to places like Byzantium, shows an even greater reach, and an interplay between migration, voyage, and exploration and command of the unknown gives these objects a history and life they lived, now ending with their “death” in the grave.

⁸¹ Dobat, Andres Siegfried. "Viking Stranger-kings: The Foreign as a Source of Power in Viking Age Scandinavia, Or, Why There Was a Peacock in the Gokstad Ship Burial?" 2015. See this article for more discussion of Viking sacral-kingship, which coupled heavily with the idea of the foreign meeting local.

⁸² Judith Jesch suggests in *The Viking Diaspora* that one of the fundamental aspects of a diaspora is recalling the ancestor; in this case, the Norse homeland. Jane Kershaw in *Viking Identities* also makes the case that clothing and brooches were frequently used to signify continued identification with Scandinavian ancestry within the Danelaw.

The categories of preciousness, ancient, and exotic also align with the previously-discussed graves at Vendel and Valsgärde as well as ship-graves such as Gokstad (*c.* 800s) which include displays of wealth, precious metals worked onto ivory and bone; exotic items such as the hunting hawk, a Buddha head, a peacock feather; ancient items such as swords and ornamental items found to be over a hundred years old. Across all the wealth of the Anglo-Saxon and Norse world, the few great ship-burials uncovered maintain a special feature; not just in the person who was buried, but the special status of the goods buried alongside them.

The Sutton Hoo ship-burial is not only the grave of a man who may or may not be a king—it is the graveyard of a wealth of objects, goods that each have their own life, travelling from far-reaching lands or having seen centuries of life or expressions of otherworldly beauty. Their internment with a body not only speaks to the deadman's fantastical life and death, but speaks to the extraordinary life these objects possessed on their own.

VI Conclusion

Across the vast catalogue of wondrous Anglo-Saxon and Norse metalwork, Sutton Hoo offers something truly special: a glimpse, not only into the life of a man who lived a thousand years ago, but of the life these many objects did, as well. Out of all the wealth that crisscrossed the Scandinavian Peninsula and British Isles chronicled in the sagas, we may catch a glimpse into how their own owners perceived that wealth. That metalworked wealth—which was made of most precious materials, already ancient, and terribly exotic and foreign—was that which was reverently buried to “die.” The value of objects placed in graves at Sutton Hoo, as opposed to the magnificent Staffordshire Hoard, is that these objects which were buried were objects that had lived a life. Staffordshire Hoard, meanwhile, is comprised of items that could be unearth again

and put to use monetarily dual bullion- and coinage-economy of East Anglia and the later Danelaw.⁸³

While R.L.S Bruce-Mitford and his team helped catalogue one of the most important archaeological finds ever discovered in Britain, the Rædwald theory he promoted was rife with flaws, resting heavily on the assertions that Sutton Hoo was, one, an objectively anti-Christian expression and, two, a completely unique find. As presented previously, Anglo-Saxon Christianity was a multi-layered and multi-religious complex that was heavily syncretic. Therefore, a pure schism or hybrid cannot, by definition, exist. The Anglo-Saxon and Norse communities were fundamentally familiar with another as their mutually intelligibility allowed, sparking fears of reconversion efforts, and the Church authorities' emphasis on Christianity was an expression of this anxiety. Furthermore, Sutton Hoo belongs to a larger network of ship-burials and wealth interment. The Rædwald theory, while an interesting examination of Christian-non-Christian relations before Viking arrival, places the entire valuation system of the grave goods on that of a Christian backdrop, failing to accurately assess the value system of those who buried this man.

While it is impossible to know what the East Anglians or Vikings thought about what, this essay hopes to have provided a systematic case study with valuation categories that can be expanded in the future to examine not only the Vendel-Valsgärde ship-graves, but also inhumation and cremation graves, especially in comparison of rich hordes.

⁸³ Graham-Campbell, James, and Williams, Gareth, eds. *Silver Economy in the Viking Age*. Walnut Creek, 2007.

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Image Citations

Image One

Bruce-Mitford, R. L. S, "The Sutton Hoo Ship-Burial," *Scientific American* 184, no. 4 (1951): 25.

Image Two

Graham-Campbell, James, and Williams, Gareth, eds. *Silver Economy in the Viking Age*. Walnut Creek: Routledge, 2007. Accessed February 21, 2019. ProQuest Ebook Central.

Figure Three

Courtesy of Staffordshire Hoard (the Birmingham Museum).

Courtesy of the British Museum.

Norr, Svante, and Anneli Sundkvist. "Valsgårde revisited: Fieldwork resumed after 40 years." *Tor* 27, no. 2 (1995): 395-417.

Figure Four

Courtesy of Staffordshire Hoard (the Birmingham Museum).

Courtesy of the British Museum.

Figure Five

Courtesy of Staffordshire Hoard (the Birmingham Museum).

Courtesy of the British Museum.