The king and his cult: the axe-hammer from Sutton Hoo and its implications for the concept of sacral leadership in early medieval Europe

Andres Siegfried Dobat*

The iron-axe hammer from the Mound 1 ship-burial at Sutton Hoo is reinterpreted as an instrument for sacrificing animals by pole-axing. As such it is a symbol of the leader-as-priest who was a feature of both Germanic and Roman pre-Christian society. (The editor is most impressed with this interesting suggestion).

Keywords: England, early medieval, Sutton Hoo, sceptre, ritual, royalty

Mound 1 at Sutton Hoo, erected on the banks of the River Deben to commemorate an East Anglian leader during the first half of the seventh century AD, covered one of the most lavishly furnished graves known from Europe. The burial is set apart not only by the material wealth of the grave furnishings, but also their complexity and the unique character of several of its elements (Bruce-Mitford 1975, 1978, 1983; Carver 1998, 2005). The burial also reflects a fundamental political break in the history of Europe: the transition from Germanic kingdoms with a strong pagan background to dynastic royal houses based on the ideology of the Christian church. From the end of the Migration Period, this process of change led to the upheaval of traditional patterns of leadership and the division of power into ecclesiastical and royal authority, constituting the two pillars of society. Facing the newly Christianised kingdom of Kent in the south and the Frankish dominion on the Continent, the ruling elite of East Anglia used the burial as a demonstration. It was a parade in which the material components of the grave assemblage communicated a set of traditional identities and values. The boat and the ornamentation on weapons seem to reflect ancestral myths, illustrating the alignment of the dead and his dynasty with Scandinavia; huge cauldrons, dishes, drinking horns and a lyre relate to the pagan ideal of feasting in the great hall; the regalia, a sceptre made from a whetstone or the sword-ring on the shield resemble the poetic motif of the ruler as the sharpener of swords and the giver of rings; the golden shoulder-clasps, whose origins must be searched in Roman prototypes, appear to be Germanic interpretations of the Imperial body armour of the Roman Emperor (Bruce-Mitford 1978: 533; Carver 1998, 2000; Filmer-Sankey 1996).

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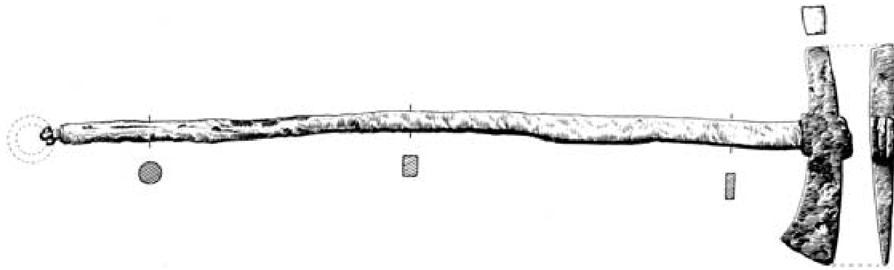

Figure 1. The axe-hammer from Mound 1 at Sutton Hoo, Scale: 1/5. Reproduced from Bruce-Mitford 1983: 837 Fig. 598.

However, a few objects in the grave deposit still remain mysterious with regard to their original connotations. One of these objects is the so called axe-hammer, a unique artefact, which has been interpreted in various ways. Citing its contextual relation to the mailcoat, Bruce-Mitford (1983: 842) proposed an original function as a horseman's axe or a war-hammer. Emphasising an association with banqueting, Werner (1986: 493) proposed a classification as a butchery tool used for the slaughter of cattle. Carver (1998: 128 and pers. comm.) suggested that its use referred to the repair of the ship, including the hammering of rivets.

This paper presents an alternative explanation and argues that the axe-hammer was one of the strongest symbols of traditional pagan leadership, in which the concept of the sacral king was of vital importance.

The axe-hammer from Sutton Hoo and its context

The axe-hammer, which at the time of its discovery was strongly corroded, had a total length of 750mm, while the length of the head can be estimated to have been around 200mm (Figure 1). The wedge-shaped head consists of a narrow blade, a hammer-shaped butt and a rectangular shaft-hole. The iron shaft is characterised by a rectangular to circular profile. A circular metal fitting with a ring was attached to its lower end (Bruce-Mitford 1983: 833-43). The original weight of the piece can be estimated to have been around 3kg.

The axe-hammer was found in the centre of the furnished chamber. Following the reconstruction of the layout of the grave proposed by Carver (1998: 122), it was put inside the supposed coffin at its eastern end (Figure 2). Found at its very bottom, the piece must have been one of the first implements to be deposited. Above the axe-hammer several heaps were built up; containing among other things the mailcoat, hanging bowls, wood and horn cups, leather garment, metal buckles, a silver bowl with several combs, four knives, small wooden bottles, a silver ladle and finally a fur cap (Carver 1998: 125).

The shape of the axe-hammer and its design provide limited indications of its original function. The double-sided head, however, suggests a multifunctional purpose and the ring at the end of the shaft could have been used for hanging the piece for display. As regards the find context, it is worth noticing that the axe-hammer was separated from the elements of the weapon equipment, which were deposited on the lid of the coffin and at the western wall of the chamber, perhaps reflecting a conscious distinction.

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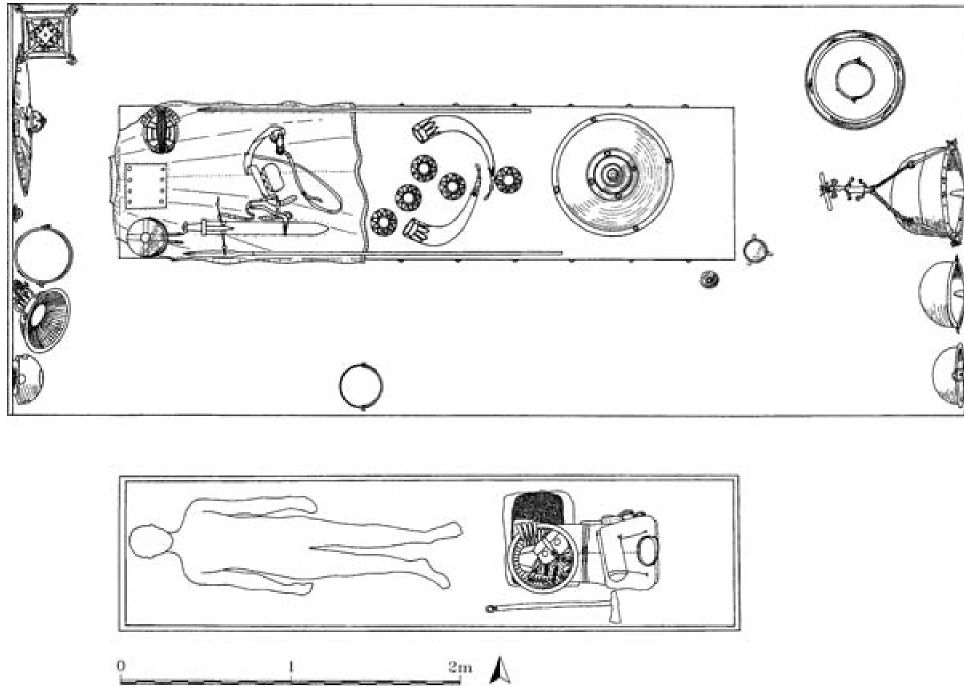

Figure 2. Reconstruction of the furnished chamber of Mound 1 at Sutton Hoo. Reproduced from Carver 1998: 128 Fig. 78.

Weapon, tool or meat axe?

Various types of battle axes are known from Early Anglo-Saxon graves, though almost exclusively in the area south of the River Thames, the only exception being Mound 3 at Sutton Hoo (Bruce-Mitford 1975: 113; Härke 1992: 107). Towards the end of the sixth century AD, the deposition of axes in graves is only rarely practiced and seems to have been given up generally at the beginning of the seventh century (Härke 1992: 105). The same is the case in the Frankish areas on the Continent and in Scandinavia, where battle axes are commonly part of the weapon equipment until around 600 (Böhner 1958; Jørgensen 1999). The battle axe generally appears to have been replaced by the single-edged seax by the beginning of the seventh century, only to reappear in Scandinavia half a century later. The sixth-century battle axes from the three areas in question show similar typological traits. The most common type is the francisca, a throwing axe which is known to have had a short, wooden handle, an example of which, with part of the wooden handle still in place, was found in another Sutton Hoo burial, that in Mound 3 (Bruce-Mitford 1975: 113). In use in the same period as the francisca were bearded axes, occasionally with extremely broad blades (Böhner 1958; Härke 1992; Jørgensen 1999). The average weight of axes from Frankish graves on the continent is between 400 and 800 grams, rarely exceeding 1000 grams (Hübener 1981). Haft weapons with iron shafts generally appear in a European context as late as the fourteenth century (Boeheim 1982; Funcken & Funcken 1977) but have not been encountered in early medieval European contexts.

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Looking at the sixth- and seventh-century boat-graves from the cemeteries at Vendel and Valsgärde in Sweden, which are commonly regarded as appropriate parallels for the Sutton Hoo Mound 1 grave, there are axes deposited together with identifiable tools for wood and iron working (Stolpe & Arne 1912; Arwidsson 1954). These pieces resemble typical woodworking axes, having broad, often bearded blades with an almond-shaped profile and large shaft-holes with massive projections of the shaft-hole. Similar types are known from several other early medieval grave and hoard finds, especially in Scandinavia (Petersen 1951; Arwidsson & Berg 1983). As classical tools for woodworking, these axes appear more or less unchanged with regards to proportions and design from the Roman period until present day (Mercer 1929; Goodman 1969). Neither from prehistoric contexts nor from medieval times are any axes with iron shafts known to have been connected to north and western European shipbuilding practice, either for trimming wood or securing rivets (cf. Vadstrup 1997a, b: 101 Fig. 4-34). Some hammer-like instruments with iron shafts found in a number of boat graves at Vendel (Stolpe & Arne 1912), which were probably used for iron working, do not resemble the Sutton Hoo axe-hammer and must be rejected as satisfactory parallels.

As proposed by Werner (1986), another possible function of the axe-hammer is as a butchery axe. No other axes from this period have been identified as such. However, the frequent utilisation of axes and hammer-like instruments for the slaughter of cattle can be inferred from bone assemblages in Anglo-Saxon settlements (Hagen 1992: 35). Several skulls of both cattle and pig from Anglo-Scandinavian levels in York are either heavily fragmented or bear 'punched-in' holes in the frontal bone, indicating the method of killing (O'Connor 1989: 154 & 179). Further indirect evidence may be found in the pictorial evidence of first to third century Roman art which commonly shows hammers/clubs and axes being used for ritual killings. The latter vary in shape, but some double-sided types are characterised by narrow blades and hammer-like butts and offer direct parallels to the axe-hammer from Sutton Hoo (Figure 3). It is of special interest that the shafts of some early examples of axes on coins seem either to have been made entirely of metal, or adorned with metal fittings (Johansen 1932; Siebert 1999). An axe-head with a narrow cutting edge and a massive butt, very similar to the Sutton Hoo piece, was recovered at the Germanic sacrificial site at Oberdorla in Thuringia, dating to the Migration Period. The piece was found in association with chopped up animal bones and is very likely to have been used for the killing and butchering of animals (Behm-Blancke 2003: 146). Also from more recent times there are double-sided axes with hammer-like extensions known to have been used for butchery (Hagen 1992: 36). It is interesting to note that the word pole-axe, although it may refer to a battle axe or 'a sailor's short handled axe for cutting away rigging' (according to Chambers Dictionary), is more generally used in English in its third definition 'a butcher's axe with a hammer-faced back' used for killing or pole-axing cattle.

This very brief discussion of possible parallels to the axe-hammer from Sutton Hoo results in the following conclusion. Taking the instrument's weight and unique design into account, as well as the lack of battle-axes in the furnished graves of seventh century Europe, there seems to be no strong argument for regarding the piece as an item of fighting equipment. This conclusion is supported by its separation from the weapons in the grave chamber. Neither does the axe-hammer from Sutton Hoo resemble any of the prehistoric or more recent woodworking axes. No examples of a working axe with an iron shaft have been found

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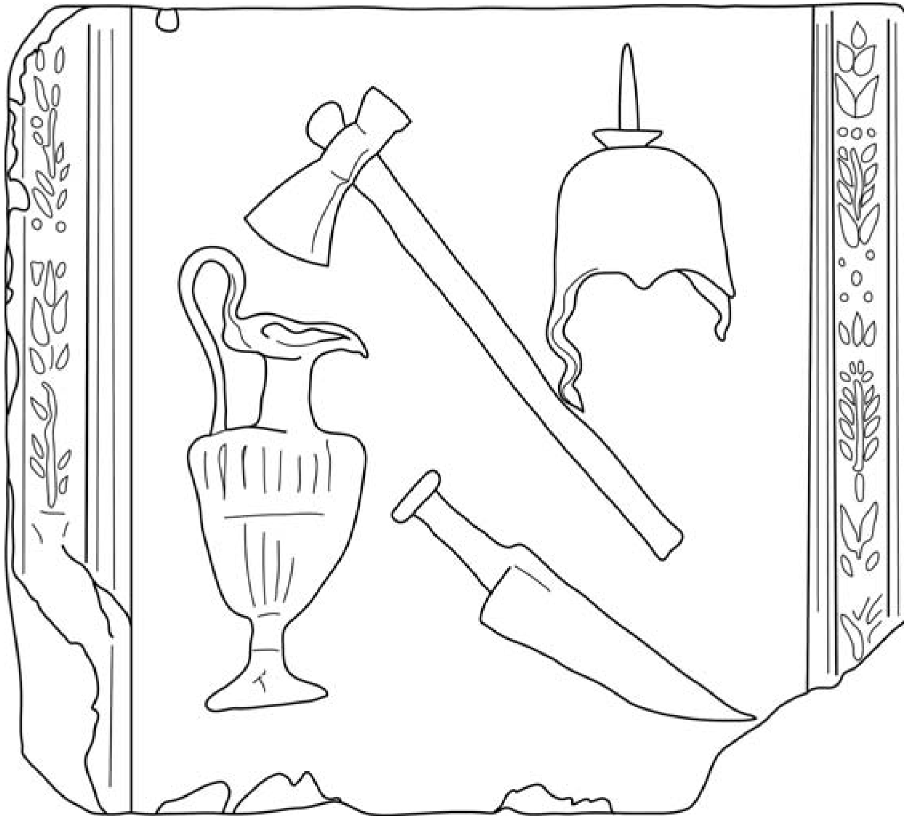

Figure 3. Tiberian altar-relief from Rome with depiction of sacral objects. Reproduced from Siebert 1999: Plate 10b.

and according to experts in traditional shipbuilding, it would have been impractical in use (pers. comm. Thomas Finderup, The Viking Ship Museum, Roskilde, Denmark).

With regards to the evidence for instruments of butchery, it is important to stress that the various examples are wide-spread, both chronologically and geographically. Nevertheless, the similarities between the implements related to the killing of animals and the axe-hammer from Sutton Hoo are striking. Of particular importance is the fact that the iron shaft finds a reasonable explanation in this particular functional context. The weight of this piece must have made it suitable for performing a single fatal blow, necessary for instance to penetrate the skull of an ox. To sum up, even if it is difficult to point out direct parallels to the axe-hammer, pictorial and archaeological evidence can imply a functional classification as an implement used in the context of slaughtering animals.

The notion of sacral leadership

As part of the grave furnishing of an Anglo-Saxon aristocratic burial, and especially considering its context inside the burial, it somehow seems inadequate to regard the Sutton Hoo axe-hammer as an implement of cuisine. All elements of the burial in Mound 1 appear to have been carefully chosen to communicate, among other things, the central roles and

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responsibilities of the interred person. In the special case of the axe-hammer, the theoretical and historical notion of sacral leadership offers an interpretative framework within which it may be possible to model both its function in lived practice and its role in the final statement of the burial.

The concept of authority in many societies incorporates a religious dimension and the clear separation of secular and sacral authority is a rare phenomenon (Lind 2003; Erkens 2002; Minkenberg & Willems 2003). The concept of 'traditional power' that was introduced by Max Weber includes, among other things, the belief in the sanctity of the rule and the use of religious authority to legitimise power (Hanke & Mommsen 2001). Various ethnographic observations testify to the significance of sacral leadership, especially in pre-modern societies, regularly involving a combination of secular and cultic/religious functions (Service 1971: 162; Winkelman 1996; Krausse 1999; Frazer 1890; Claessen 1978; Sundquist 2002).The concept of sacral leadership was apparent in the Roman Imperial cult. As *Pontifex Maximus*, the emperor was the leading practitioner of the state-cult until AD 382, and animal sacrifices formed one of the central features of Roman religious practice until the conversion to Christianity (Gagé 1988; Stepper 2003). A substantial body of historical and pictorial evidence features the emperor performing the symbolic killing of animals or involved in other ways in sacrificial practice (Latte 1988; Siebert 1999). Motifs of the sovereign as religious practitioner and objects pertaining to the act itself even became an essential part of the public representation of the emperor; the depictions on coins of sacrificial axes or the *Pontifex Maximus* at the altar with a *patera* in his hand, may serve as examples (Johansen 1932). In this context one must include the mystery cult of Mithraism, to which the sacrifice of oxen was central, both as actual practice and symbolic representation (Cumont 1899). The possession of both religious and sacral authority also characterised the Byzantine rulers. Even the Christian kings and emperors in medieval Europe maintained the title *rex et sacerdo*, in spite of the fact that the actual implementation of religious service had been assigned to ecclesiastical officials (Dagron 2003; Anton 2004; von Padberg 2004).

The notion of sacral leadership, comprising among others the claim of descent from divine ancestors and actual sacral functions, is also evident in pre-Christian Germanic societies (Chaney 1970; Sundquist 2002; Beck *et al.* 2004). Germanic ritual generally appears highly dependent on Roman culture (Hedeager & Tvarnø 1991), and its development substantially inspired by the imperial strategies of political authority. Bede's (Chap. 15) account of the East Anglian king Raedwald, the number one candidate to have been buried in Mound 1 at Sutton Hoo (Bruce-Mitford 1975: 683 ff.), claims that he '*turned aside from the sincerity of the faith; (. . .) and in the same temple he had an altar for the Christian Sacrifice, and another small one at which to offer victims to devils*' (transl. after Colgrave & Mynors 1992). Bede's account not only reveals that the King of East Anglia adapted the new Christian ideology to his own agenda, but also that he functioned as the practitioner of a sacrificial cult. Bede's report of a letter written by Pope Gregory around AD 600 (HE, Chap. 30) instructing Mellitus on how to deal with the sacred places of the Pagans in Britain probably refers to the sacrificial killing of oxen and ritual feasting.

Animal sacrifice constituted a central element of pre-Christian religion in Anglo-Saxon England. The significance of animals or parts of animals in Anglo-Saxon mortuary practice is well known. Prominent examples are the complete depositions of horses, but other species

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also played a vital role. Among other things, this is illustrated by the remains of animals in cremations in Mounds 3-6, a horse in Mound 17 and the ox horns found in pits around Mound 5 at Sutton Hoo (Vierck 1970/71; Richards 1992; Carver 2005: 83, 287, 298). The deposition of ox-skulls within the context of the building D2 at Yeavering in Northumbria also probably reflects ritual activity. The building itself has, on the basis of its special structure and architecture, been interpreted as a centre of cultic activity, and the deposition is explained as the remnants of sacrifices, which took place during the second half of the sixth or the first half of the seventh century, thus more or less contemporary with the funerals at Sutton Hoo. The site is historically referred to as a centre of pagan cult as well as the seat of the Northumbrian royalty, which again indicates a close connection between sacral and secular authority (Hope-Taylor 1977: 100).

In the present context it is relevant to widen the geographical perspective to include pre-Christian Scandinavia, since this region seems to have provided a common frame of reference for the burial practice at Sutton Hoo. In the sixth and seventh centuries, the deposition of various species of animals in burials, both complete individuals as well as leftovers from funeral feasting, was practiced with varying intensity in nearly all parts of northern and western Europe (Müller-Wille 1970/71; Sten & Vretemark 1988). As in the case of Yeavering, the early medieval archaeological evidence additionally demonstrates the slaughtering and consumption of animals at hall buildings and other places of special cultic significance (Nielsen 1996; Andersson *et al.* 2004: 14). Excavations at Uppsala in Sweden and Lejre in Denmark have led to the discovery of magnificent hall buildings and high-status burials, indicating the presence of a ruling elite. The eleventh- and twelfth-century chroniclers mention these places as major cultic centres and the scene of massive sacrificial feasts, which included the killing and consumption of a vast number of various animals. In the case of Uppsala, the royal family of the Ynglinga is said to have supervised the sacrificial feasts (Steuer 2004: 189-91). Furthermore, the late Norse Sagas regularly give accounts of chieftains or kings as the organisers and performers of sacrificial feasts. Even detailed descriptions of the sacrificial rituals are given in these texts, which, though referring to events in pre-Christian times, were written down in the twelfth and thirteenth century (de Vries 1956; Simek 2000: 271; Sundquist 2002: 176; 2004). The description of these events, however, must relate to some historical reality as indicated among others by the seventh-century rune-stone from Stentoften, Blekinge, Sweden, commemorating a certain '*Hapuwulfr, who with nine bucks, with nine stallions (. . .) gave good growth*' (transl. after Santesson 1989). Confirmation of the central role of the leading figures of society as cultic practitioners is further provided by the early-tenth-century rune-stone from Glavendrup in Denmark commemorating an individual as both secular authority and priest (Sundquist 2002: 78).

This brief review of the archaeological and historical context makes it clear that the ruling characters in Germanic societies did, or at least were expected to, play a central role in the context of religious ceremonies. The actual function of these sacral magnates obviously included much more than a merely protective responsibility. The sacrificial killing and consumption of animals was apparently one of the most central elements of religious practice in pre-Christian Anglo-Saxon England and Scandinavia. It seems clear that the supervision and active participation in these acts of religious service formed an essential part of leadership identity and legitimisation.

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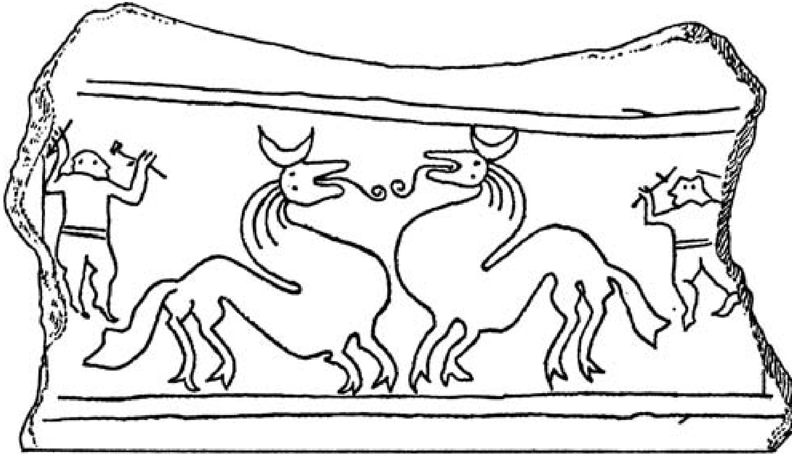

Figure 4. Migration Period picture stone from Häggeby, Uppland in Sweden. Reproduced from Ellmers 1970: 244 Fig. 44.

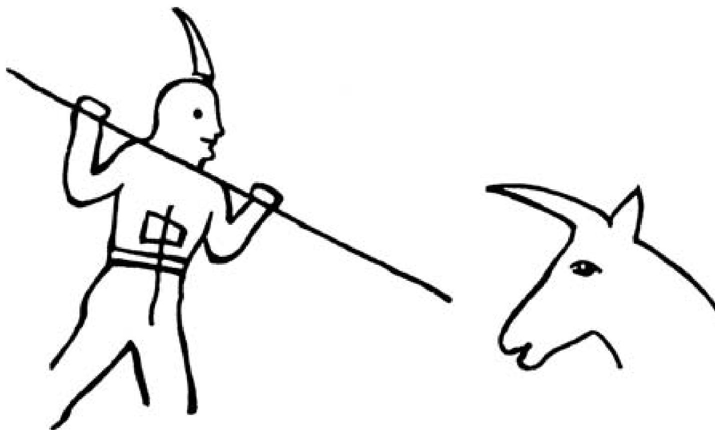

Figure 5. Sacrificial scene on the so-called Weser Runenknochen, OL 4988. Reproduced from Pieper 1989: 198 Fig. 46b.

The axe-hammer as an instrument of sacrifice and a symbol of sacral leadership

Returning to the axe-hammer from Sutton Hoo, it is important to note that the iconographical depictions and the archaeological finds of axes and axe-hammers, which were referred to above as possible analogies, all relate to the religious or cultic act of animal sacrifice. Besides the specific examples from Roman altar reliefs and the sacrificial site at Oberdorla, axes seem to have played a central role in the context of animal sacrifice in early medieval Europe more generally. Unspecified axe heads were found in the ninth-century boat graves from Gokstad and Ladby, where they had been deposited along with the skeletal remains of horses (Nicolaysen 1882: 52; Thorvildsen 1957: 112). Much earlier are the Migration Period depictions of what is, presumably, to be interpreted as sacrificial acts on the Scandinavian picture stone from Häggeby (Figure 4), the so-called Weser Runenknochen found in north-western Germany (Figure 5) or the famous Migration

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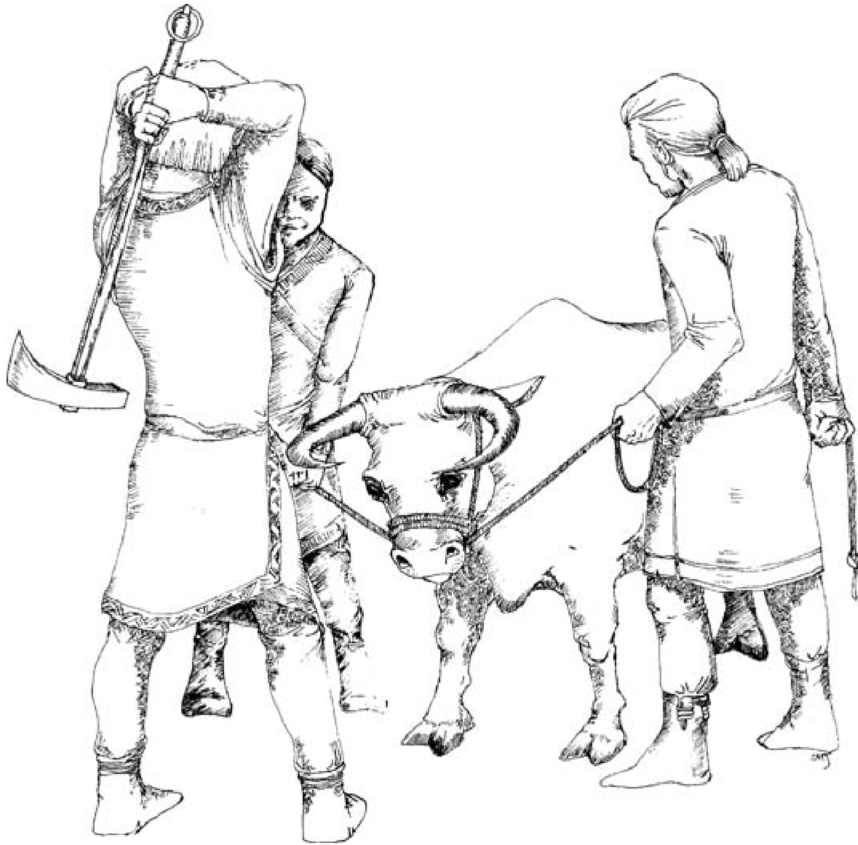

Figure 6. Artist's impression of the use of the axe-hammer in the context of animal sacrifice. Drawing by Sara Jensen, Department of Prehistoric Archaeology, University of Aarhus.

Period horns from Gallehus in southern Denmark. In all these cases, axe or hammer-like implements are part of the composition (Ellmers 1970: 244; Pieper 1989; Axboe 1998, 332). Unmistakable cut marks on the bones from grave contexts as well as depositions in settlements indirectly reveal the importance of axe-like instruments for the killing and dismembering of animals in sacrificial contexts (Backe *et al.* 1993: 335; Arwidsson 1942: 110). The slaughtering and consumption of animals as a central component of pagan religious practice thus included axe- or hammer-like instruments as essential requisites. Given the background of the importance of animal sacrifice in pagan Germanic societies, one must suppose that an Anglo-Saxon community, the spectators of a funeral ceremony in particular, would have been able to identify the axe-hammer as a sacrificial instrument.

It is within the concept of sacral leadership that we can reach an understanding of the connotation of the axe-hammer. In its significance as a sacrificial instrument, the piece must, like all the other elements of the grave furnishing, have referred to the dead man's role; in this case as a cult leader and principal practitioner of religious practice, mediating the notion of sacral kingship (Figure 6). Since the Roman world, including the early Imperial period, is often cited in Anglo-Saxon material culture, it is tempting to compare rationale

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for the deposition of the axe-hammer at Sutton Hoo to the representations of axes and other sacrificial requisites on coins, minted by, among others, Caesar and Augustus. After the deconstruction of the Republic it was essential for these early emperors to consolidate authority by emphasising their religious offices as implied in the title *Pontifex Maximus*. The crucial importance of sacral identity as part of a ruling elite's public representation in a pre-Christian society is mirrored in one passage of the Old Norse Hervarar Saga, which at the same time provides a historical motif as to the possible reasons for the deposition of the axe-hammer in Mound 1. The Saga reports the following about the newly Christianised King Ingi: '*At the assembly that the Svear held with King Ingi, they gave him two choices. Either he would maintain the ancient law or he had to give up the kingdom. King Ingi said that he was not ready to give up that faith, which was the right one. The Svear shouted and threw stones at him and drove him off the assembly place. Svein, the king's brother-in-law, remained at the thing. He told the Svear that he would make sacrifice on their behalf if they would give him the kingdom. All assented to that proposal. Svein was taken as king over all Svetjud. A horse was led to the meeting place, dismembered and distributed for eating . . .*' (transl. after Sundquist 2002: 174). The value of the Hervarar Saga as a historical source has been doubted due to its late recording in the thirteenth century. There is, however, little reason to question its central motif as a reference to historical reality. The Hervarar Saga reflects the conflict between the traditional Germanic ideal of the sacral king as cult leader, versus the Christian concept of a sacred king whose religious authority was reduced to a merely enabling function. It consequently reflects the dilemma of the Christianised king who wishes to surrender his sacral authority to the central organ of the church and, in the eyes of his pagan contemporaries, thereby abandon the most central legitimisation of his rule.

Discussion

Sacral leadership in pre-Christian Germanic societies, comprising the active participation of leading characters in religious practice in general and the sacrifice of animals in particular, provides the context for a new interpretation of the axe-hammer from Sutton Hoo Mound 1 as a sacrificial axe. As part of the grave furnishing, it mediated the king's role as a cult leader and his sacral identity. The notion of sacral leadership complements and enhances the perception of the burial in Mound 1 at Sutton Hoo.

This hypothesis also invites a reconsideration of the context of the axe-hammer within the Mound 1 burial, and of other objects as possible requisites of religious practices and statements on sacral identity. As an instrument of butchery, it might be said to belong with the cauldrons on the floor, rather than inside the personal space of the coffin, something that is stratigraphically possible (Carver 2005: 190), although the position of the pole-axe inside the coffin may have had an added significance (see below). The Anastasius dish, which was originally deposited on top of the supposed coffin has parallels in the *patera*, which became the most significant attribute of the *Pontifex Maximus*. In this case it can hardly be seen as coincidence that the dish was found to contain the remains of burnt bones which may have been animal (Bruce-Mitford 1975: 547; Carver 2005: 287). This re-interpretation also invites reassessment of other grave furnishings such as the one from Valsgärde 7, where

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a narrow-edged axe-head was found clearly separated from weapons and tools (Arwidsson 1977: 78), in the same manner as at Sutton Hoo.

Apart from the possible parallels mentioned above, the axe-hammer from Sutton Hoo so far stands alone as a material expression of the Germanic concept of sacral leadership. The uniqueness of its deposition in a grave context might be explained by the exceptional character of the Mound 1 grave in general. Yet the very special expression of Mound 1 itself can be seen as a consequence of the special political situation of the time. During the decisive centuries between AD 500 and 1000, many pagan Germanic rulers in the area of modern Europe faced the same dilemma as king Ingi in the Hervarar Saga. Among those was the East Anglian king Raedwald, who, if we believe Bede, tried to combine Christian ideology and the ideal of the Germanic sacral king. He has been proposed as the man who was buried in Mound 1 at Sutton Hoo around 624/25, although others have also been discussed as possible candidates (Carver 1998: 172). With regard to the topic of this article, however, the question is rather irrelevant. All early East Anglian leaders must have legitimised their role in the traditional Germanic combination of priest and king. This role, and consequently the identity and legitimisation of these kings, was threatened by the Christian mission, with its foundation in the Frankish kingdom on the Continent. The kingdoms of Kent and Essex in the south had already become associated with the dominant Frankish rulers and in the 620s, Christianisation also spread northwards to Northumbria.

The East Anglian royal family probably tried to oppose this development, which in the end not only brought a new religion, but was to fundamentally transform social structures, concepts of authority and the spiritual role of rulers. The pagan burials at Sutton Hoo, and the ship-burial in Mound 1 in particular, can be seen as expressions of resistance (Carver 1998: 136). The investment in these statements was enormous, not necessarily from an economic point of view, but with regard to the number of unique and probably irreplaceable objects such as the sceptre or the standard, the emblems of chiefly authority. Such items are only rarely found in grave contexts, probably less due to their economic value than to their significance as material arguments for the continued legitimacy of rule. Normally, they were to pass on to the successor of the dead ruler, and their presence at Sutton Hoo only seems to underline the significance of the burying community's investment. As a symbol of the king's status as a cult leader, on which he partly based the legitimacy of his rule, the axe-hammer might have been one of the most important elements of the grave furnishing. This could be one of the reasons why it was placed inside the supposed coffin and not together with the regalia, the weapons or the elements of the royal banquet. It was placed right at the feet of the dead, emphasising his sacral identity. One cannot think of a more powerful statement of sacral leadership, than the tool for the most central ritual of the cult: the animal sacrifice.

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