# BOX

## Unique ID: OXON-1A54A6

Object type certainty: Certain Workflow status: Awaiting validation

Oxfordshire PAS find no. 35,000 is this incomplete sheet copper alloy 'work box' or 'relic box' and chain of early-medieval date (c. 7th century AD). The work box is missing its lid and some of the chain and is slightly distorted but otherwise survives in remarkable condition. The body of the box is now lentoid in shape due to damage but would have circular originally. The extant base of the work box is formed from a separate sheet of copper alloy, is (sub)circular in plan and domed. The body of the box has been formed from a single rectangular sheet of copper alloy which has been curved to form a tube with the two ends riveted together creating a vertical seam; the three rivets, also of copper alloy, are extant. There is a protruding lip around the bottom of the sheet, seen on other examples, which slots under the curled rim of the base of the box to told the two together. A short length of chain, consisting of three figure-of-eight links, was found with the work box and is almost certainly associated; the opposing lid, now missing, and the body of the work box would have been secured together via this chain. There is an area of iron corrosion through one of the links which could indicate an iron loop/hook or part of a chatelaine from which the work box was suspended. The chain (and corrosion) measures 36.8mm long, and the links are 1.85mm thick. It weighs 2 grams.

The work box is decorated with incised zoomorphic and interlace motifs arranged in two panels running around the circumference of the box. The top panel of decoration contains repeating motifs of a serpent-like creature, its body in a figure of eight with its long jaws biting across its body to its tail. The motif is set in a hatched background with the design being repeated in full four times, with a third of a creature visible against the box's seam. The hatching is not uniform; the pattern can completely envelope a creature and fill the panel, or it is restricted to the area immediately around the creature's body. The decoration may be unfinished. Although there is corrosion down the length of the seam, the designs do not appear to continue underneath seam, suggesting that the box was decorated once in its completed, cylindrical form. The lower panel features a continual triplestranded interlace design on a plain background. There is a mistake in the design near the overlap of the seam - one of the strands joins another although an attempt to rectify the pattern has been made. There is one patch of cross hatching within the interlace to the right of the seam (as viewed), otherwise the background is plain and undecorated. Again it does not appear that the pattern continues under the seam; the mistake in the interlace and the fact that the border lines are aligned, supports the idea that the box was inscribed after manufacture. The execution of the designs is varied - many of the lines overlap, are misaligned or have been amended after a mistake. The cross hatching is equally uneven and untidy.

Discussion: Cylindrical and lidded sheet copper alloy work boxes have been interpreted as containers for sewing equipment (Walton Rogers 2007, 40-1) as several have been found with the remains of textile, pins and thread within, however the fragmentary nature of these items has led others to suggest that they are keep-sake or reliquary boxes (PDC Brown, quoted in Meaney 1981:181, after Macgregor & Bolick 1993:232). They are associated with women and many of the over 60 known (Helen Geake, British Museum, pers. comm) have deen discovered in graves. Many work boxes are decorated, the geometric patterns usually formed by the repoussé technique although some incised decoration does occur (Macgregor & Bolick 1993:232). The decoration found on the Ascott-Under-Wychwood work box does not (as yet) have an exact parallel. A work box discovered in 1928 at North Leigh, only c. 8km from this new discovery and held by the Ashmolean

Museum (AN1929.399), has comparable interlace on its lid (Prof. Helena Hamerow, University of Oxford, pers. comm.). Similar interlace is also seen scratched in to the reverse of some composite disc brooches (*ibid.*), which are of mid-seventh century date.

Grave 14 at Butler's Field, Lechlade (Glos.) contained several grave goods including a decorated work box. That work box is complete with a copper alloy chain linking the lid to the main box and also has a wire ring attached to it to aid suspension.

This object is due for publication by Blair and Johns in Oxoniensia 2018.

# Notes:

Boyle, A., Jennings, D., Miles, D., Palmer, S., 1998. The Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Butler's Field, Lechlade, Gloucestershire. Vol 1: Prehistoric and Roman Activity and Grave Catalogue. Thames Valley Landscapes Monograph no. 10. Oxford Archaeological Unit.

Hines, J. and Bayliss, A., 2013. Anglo-Saxon Graves and Grave Goods of the 6th and 7th Centuries AD: A Chronological Framework. London: The Society for Medieval Archaeology. The Society for Early Medieval Archaeology Monograph 33

Leeds, E.T., 1940. Two Saxon Cemeteries in North Oxfordshire. In *Oxoniensia Vol. V* (1940). Pp 21-30 and plate VI.

Macgregor, A. and Bolick, E., 1993. *A Summary Catalogue of the Anglo-Saxon Collections (non-ferrous metals)*. BAR (British Series) 230. Oxford.

Research is ongoing - comparison between the North Leigh and Ascott boxes (manufacture and design) is desirable.

# Find of note status

This is a find of note and has been designated: Include in MedArch

Class: Work box

# **Subsequent actions**

Current location of find: MRC Subsequent action after recording: Donated to a museum

# Chronology

Broad period: EARLY MEDIEVAL Subperiod from: Early Period from: EARLY MEDIEVAL Subperiod to: Middle Period to: EARLY MEDIEVAL Date from: Circa AD 620 Date to: Circa AD 700

## **Dimensions and weight**

Quantity: 1 Height: 56.7 mm Thickness: 0.75 mm Weight: 31.7 g Diameter: 50 mm

#### **Discovery dates**

Date(s) of discovery: Sunday 17th September 2017

#### **Rally details.**

This object was found at Detectival 2017

#### **Personal details**

This information is restricted for your access level.

#### **Other reference numbers**

Other reference: OXPAS2018.333 Museum accession number: OXCMS 2019.64

#### Materials and construction

Primary material: Copper alloy Manufacture method: Hand made Decoration style: Interlace Completeness: Incomplete

# **Spatial metadata**

Region: <u>South East</u> (European Region) County or Unitary authority: <u>Oxfordshire</u> (County) District: <u>West Oxfordshire</u> (District) Parish or ward: <u>Ascott-under-Wychwood</u> (Civil Parish)

# **Spatial coordinates**

4 Figure: SP3017 Four figure Latitude: 51.85079344 Four figure longitude: -1.5658675 1:25K map: SP3017 1:10K map: SP31NW Grid reference source: From finder Unmasked grid reference accurate to a 1000 metre square.

# Discovery metadata

Method of discovery: Metal detector Current location: MRC General landuse: Cultivated land