

RESEARCH PAPER

Networks of Meaning and the Social Dynamics of Identity. An Example from Early Anglo-Saxon England

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In the early Anglo-Saxon period, dressing and displaying the body in life and death played an important role in shaping and reinforcing identities and ruling social norms. Studies of the past decades have particularly highlighted the social significance of dressing and staging the body for the event of the funeral. This paper addresses how the production of dress items, the daily act of dressing, and the individuals involved in these practices helped shape the same identities that were enacted in the funeral. It argues that we must consider more explicitly how certain elements of dress *became* objects of identification through the social dialogue between groups of people who engaged with such objects at earlier stages of their lifecycle. This must include not only those who used dress items as grave goods but also those who produced and wore them. It works towards a framework that captures more fully the social communication and exchange of ideas that shaped and transformed notions of identity. Using data from the author's research on early Anglo-Saxon girdle-hangers, this paper addresses how different forms of socio-material communication, and different actors involved, can be addressed through the material record of burials. Together these formed the mental networks in which meanings and values were created.

Introduction

Identity is an ongoing process of establishing relationships, of finding a sense of self and belonging, and of maintaining a place in a world that we ourselves constantly change (Diaz-Andreu and Lucy 2005). Identity requires continued renegotiation. It is also enabled and enhanced by the material world. We have a fascinating relationship with this world in that material things *make us* as much as we make them. But never is this

relationship as immediate as with dress and personal adornment which allow us to materialise, display and communicate our ideas of our self directly on our bodies.

In current perspectives on the mechanisms that carried identity-forming processes in the early Anglo-Saxon period, the act of adorning and displaying the dead has been conceptualised as a collective strategy of reinforcing understandings of affiliation and social boundaries (Härke 1992; Lucy 1998; Sayer 2013; Stoodley 1999). Increasingly, ideas about how people identify themselves with and through daily used objects also influence how elements of early Anglo-Saxon bodily

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adornment are now being addressed in artefact studies (Brunning 2013; Felder 2014; Inker 2000; Martin 2012). These focus on identity as something experienced and created by the individual in everyday contexts, and on the production, use, use-adaptation or disuse of items of dress as fields of individual agency. Cemetery- and artefact-based studies of early Anglo-Saxon mortuary evidence have often addressed the link between dressing, human agency and identity from different angles: highlighting different human actors (collective and individual), domains of bodily display (funerary and daily worn dress) and levels of archaeological context (the cemetery, the single burial and the artefact). Recent studies of early Anglo-Saxon identity that have focused on single artefact classes have begun to develop frameworks that integrate all of these themes and types of evidence (Felder 2014; Martin 2011).

Studies like the ones named above are founded on the idea of identity as created and transmitted through social communication. However, there is a need for explicit approaches that conceptualise and develop methodologically how the dynamics and effects of this communication can be investigated through the material record. Communication is central to sharing knowledge about social meanings and creating notions of identity. The present paper thus argues that in the archaeological study of identity as a human experience, modes of communication and transmission, and particularly their materiality, need to be considered more explicitly. The conceptual outline it presents is built on the understanding that social communication is a fundamentally material practice—it takes place *through* material culture. Particular focus is on the transmission of encoded meanings within practices of production and consumption of dress. Artefact meaning is viewed here as created at all stages of the object lifecycle, and the communication of this meaning as a process in which many people are involved. The way in which artefact-analytical methods

and methods of contextual cemetery analysis are combined in this approach is influenced by the network concept which has attracted increased attention in archaeological studies over recent years (Knappett 2011, 2013b). The analytical concept of the network is useful in two ways: for coming to terms theoretically with the complex structure of the human interactions that are part of the process of identity formation; and as a conceptual step towards the application of network-analytical methods which offer innovative ways of investigating such interactions through network analyses of distributed material culture (a task that will have to be reserved for a future paper).

As a case study, this paper uses the early Anglo-Saxon girdle-hanger¹. This type of object occurs only selectively in the burial record and has traditionally been regarded as a symbol of a specific female identity. The conceptual considerations presented in the first part of the paper are applied to the data presented here by beginning at the level of the artefact and working gradually through different social contexts of production, use and disuse. In each of these contexts, the focus is on the ways in which notions of personal and social meaning were visibly assigned to girdle-hangers by different people and specific practices. The aspect of materiality and visibility of these practices had a significant function. It allowed the meanings of these objects to be non-verbally communicated and transmitted across space and over time—enabling people to internalize this meaning, and girdle-hangers to become a means of identification with a commonly shared cultural value.

Early Anglo-Saxon girdle-hangers

Girdle-hangers derive their form from functional iron keys with T- or W-shaped terminals known since the Iron Age (Manning 1989: 90). At the lower end of a narrow shank the object typically extends to a horizontal base element which forks upward on either end to form two prongs (**Fig. 1**). Girdle-hangers

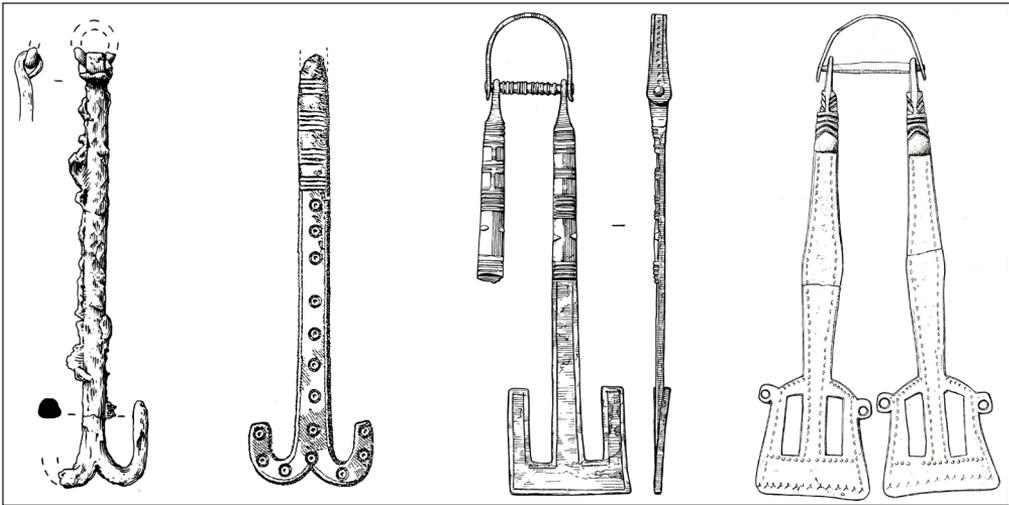


Fig. 1: Left to right: **iron key** from Morningthorpe, Norfolk grave 249; **girdle-hangers** from Faversham, Kent; Great Chesterford, Essex grave 9; Empingham, Leics. grave 85B. Not to scale. After: Green et al. 1987: fig. 377; Meaney 1981: fig. V.jj; Evison 1994: fig. 18; Timby 1996: fig. 137.

most often carry a moulded element below a transverse suspension loop at the upper end, and their body surface commonly carries punched, incised and notched decoration. There are many indications that girdle-hangers were purely non-functional imitations of keys. Lock mechanisms typical for T-keys required the insertion of the prongs into fitted holes in wooden bolts which had to be lifted or slid aside by the key in order to release a bar (Manning 1989: 90). No traces of wear corresponding to use in a technical construction have been observed on girdle-hangers, and the build of the 100–160mm long flat cast copper-alloy objects whose terminals were rarely thicker than 2mm also makes such a function unlikely. Prongs of girdle-hangers often end in extended decorated lobes which in many cases are connected with the central shank through horizontal or tilted extensions (see **Fig. 1**), making them unusable for lock mechanisms like the ones described.

Girdle-hangers, commonly occurring in pairs, are always found associated with female jewellery in graves of the 5th and 6th centuries AD. Where bone material could be aged and/or

sexed, 83% of the individuals were identified as adult, 90% as women. Girdle-hangers were suspended by a construction with U-shaped hoop and horizontal bar and mostly worn on the left hip (see examples in **Fig. 1**; Lucy 2000: fig. 3.7 for a reconstruction). Despite early comparisons to continental openwork discs with chain elements (Smith 1852), there is no evidence so far that girdle-hangers were used to suspend further items. The total number of grave contexts with girdle-hangers recorded in the present study comprises 80 inhumations and 12 cremations, which altogether contained 155 girdle-hanger specimens. An additional 98 unstratified specimens recorded in 19th-century antiquarian collections and during modern cemetery excavations, despite missing a grave context, can be regarded as conjectural grave goods based on their good state of preservation, often as intact specimens, and on their recording in pairs.

The database assembled for the author's study comprises just over 600 (complete and fragmented) single specimens of girdle-hangers. Approximately 300 of these were found by metal-detectorists. These are finds with known findspot data, but missing

contextual data, recorded in the *Historical Environment Records (HER)* and the *Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS)* database. Such finds are not suitable for contextual analysis, but there are clear benefits in including metal-detected finds in studies of early Anglo-Saxon artefacts (Chester-Kadwell 2007; Martin 2011; McClean and Richardson 2010). They provide, for instance, a much more comprehensive data basis for technological, typological and spatial analysis².

Girdle-hangers were recorded in 39 cemeteries with 5th- and 6th-century material across the east and north-east of England. Finds from antiquarian collections and modern ploughed-up material indicate that the original number of burial sites with girdle-hangers will have been higher. However, overall girdle-hangers are comparatively rare. Girdle-hangers are found in 0.5 to 5% of all graves with female jewellery at a cemetery. Only at the cemetery at Morningthorpe, Norfolk, a higher number of female gendered graves with girdle-hangers (10%, n=9) was recorded. This, however, was shown to be a locally specific exception (Felder 2014).

Ideas about the possible meanings of girdle-hangers began to take shape from the mid 19th century (Smith 1852: 235; Neville 1852).³ Their enigmatic imitative character and their infrequent occurrence in the archaeological record prompted ideas of a specific, not immediately accessible, symbolism. Smith was reminded of Victorian *châtelaines* (Smith 1852: 235), a construction worn by women to suspend small household items which often included keys. In another context he suggested that “keys may be particularly considered as insignia of the Saxon women, as they were, to a comparatively late period, of the English housewife” (1856: xli). Similar connections were also drawn between female key possession and the domestic authority of the housewife in the Roman period (Pitt-Rivers 1883: 15). This was taken as evidence for the possible origins of this concept in pre-Anglo-Saxon times, and provided a closer historical analogy for a

corresponding interpretation of early Anglo-Saxon girdle-hangers (Lethbridge 1931: 5; Steuer 1982: 204). Historical analogies were then further pursued in the later 20th century with a stronger focus on medieval source material. It was shown that the key as both physical symbol and metaphor of the married woman’s role in managing the household and its material resources was prevalent in the wider Western European medieval world by the 11th century (Gräslund 1999; Hines 1997: 263; Smith 1856, xli; Steuer 1982). Particularly significant for early Anglo-Saxon contexts is Fell’s (1984) study that traces this meaning in the early 7th-century laws of Aethelbert of Kent.

Susan Hirst’s publication (1985) of the early Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Sewerby, Yorkshire, and her discussion of girdle-hangers from the site introduced a corresponding interpretation of girdle-hangers into modern Anglo-Saxon grave good studies. In addition, her discussion of grave 49, a prominent wealthy burial at Sewerby which contained girdle-hangers (Hirst 1985: 38–43), had a decisive influence on ideas of the girdle-hanger as occurring in higher-status contexts. The girdle-hanger as a symbol of a woman’s economic authority in the household and an indicator of higher status thus still prevails in descriptions of girdle-hangers in modern publications (Evison 1994; Houghton and Powlesland 1999; Leahy 2007; Penn and Brugmann 2007; Sherlock and Welch 1992).

This very specific meaning had been assigned to girdle-hangers primarily through analogical inference, specifically from historical sources which were situated in either culturally or chronologically differing contexts. The need for a detailed archaeological study of the artefact group had repeatedly been expressed through the years (for instance, Hines 1992). However, while the last decades of the 20th century saw extensive studies of the more regularly occurring early Anglo-Saxon artefact types (Dickinson and Härke 1992; Härke 1992; Hines 1993, 1997; Mortimer 1990; Swanton 1973 among

others), archaeological observations on girdle-hangers remained anecdotal. More recently, increased interest in the girdle-hanger was reflected in topical choices of University dissertations (Felder 2009; Kerr 2009; Knox 2006),⁴ and the artefact group began to be included in quantitative cemetery evaluations (Leahy 2007) and chronological studies (Penn and Brugmann 2007). Current trends in early Anglo-Saxon artefact studies show a growing interest in dressing and wearing as a social field of action (Brunning 2013; Martin 2011, 2012; Weetch 2013).⁵ It is this discourse in which the present author's study of girdle-hangers is situated.

Identity and material culture in current early Anglo-Saxon archaeology

Archaeology has long embraced the view that the human experience of identity, belonging to a group and distinguishing oneself from others, is inseparably tied to material culture (Diaz-Andreu and Lucy 2005; Insoll 2007; Sofaer 2007). The foundation of identity in material practices is thus one of the many fields where archaeology can particularly contribute to wider fields of social and anthropological study. Indeed, significant early contributions to a theoretical framework that integrates identity, material culture and the archaeological burial record have come from within Anglo-Saxon studies (Pader 1982; Härke 1992; Lucy 1998). These have characterised the early Anglo-Saxon burial ritual as a complex, socially regulated material performance where ruling social norms were enacted and group identities shaped and reinforced.

Aspects of collective identity and negotiations of cultural and social affiliation are particularly strong themes in the story of the two centuries following the end of Roman Britain in the early 5th century AD. In this period, Britain's cultural and material landscape underwent a large-scale reconfiguration. Views of these socio-cultural changes have changed considerably in recent years.

Traditional notions which saw the larger-scale material-cultural zones known from the 5th- and 6th-century cemetery record as static territories of historically attested *Anglian* and *Saxon* tribes have long come under critical scrutiny (Hills 2003). Our knowledge of the varying demographic scales and regionally distinct courses of early Germanic immigration is continuously growing (most recently, Hills and Lucy 2013), enabling us to draw increasingly enhanced pictures of a landscape of complex localised material traditions. However, larger-scale zones of affiliation, apparent in broad distribution patterns of characteristic items of female costume, do remain a focus of interest. One zone, for instance, is emerging in the overlapping distributions of wrist-clasps (Hines 1993; Lucy 2000: fig. 5.5(d)), later 5th- and earlier 6th-century cruciform brooches (Martin 2011: table 3.17, maps 5–8) and girdle-hangers (**Fig. 2**). Based on the current state of research this is now understood as a broader region of collective identity newly emerging in the later 5th century.

Importantly, however, the broader cultural affiliations within such larger zones intersected with multiple other identities. Through multivariate analyses of parameters such as grave good provision, body position, grave construction and space use (Carver et al. 2009; Hakenbeck 2011; Härke 1992; Lucy 1998; Malim and Hines 1998; Pader 1982; Sayer 2009, 2010; Stoodley 1999), many studies of early Anglo-Saxon burial sites have shown the great diversity in how communities materially dealt with aspects of social, gender, ethnic, regional, local and household/family identity. Such practices could differ considerably between and even within sites, shifted over time and, most importantly, were constantly at work at once. This places considerable challenges on interpretations of the rich early Anglo-Saxon burial record. It invites us to reconsider how we can conceptually draw together these multiple scales and practices of identity and investigate them with adapted methodologies.



Fig. 2: Overall distribution of girdle-hangers in 5th- and 6th-century England.

Identity from a network perspective

The act of negotiating identity takes place on different social and phenomenological scales, “from the personal to the political” (Dobres 1999: 17), performed by individuals as well as entire societies. Analytically it can be looked at on different levels of data resolution, from the individual body to larger-scale spatial distribution patterns. None of these dimensions exist in isolation; they are all connected, making identity an immensely complex social phenomenon. The archaeological study of identity is faced with the challenge of unravelling these multiple intersecting scales and, at the same time, *making the links visible*.

For some years now, network-based approaches have been gaining in popularity in archaeology as a way of understanding complex interrelations in the archaeological record and accessing human interactions in the past. Networks provide thinking tools and analytical techniques for

conceptualising, visualising and explaining the interdependencies between different variables within these interactions. Formal analytical approaches in archaeology have been influenced by *Social Network Analysis* (SNA), developed in the social sciences (Wasserman and Faust 1994), and network-scientific advances in physics and complexity science (Knappett 2013a).

Archaeology inherently works with incomplete material datasets that have to serve as proxy for past human activity. Archaeological network approaches thus require critical reflection and adaptations of the available models and techniques in order to fill the gaps between material representations of human activity with actual people and their actions (Brughmans 2010; Knappett 2011, 2012, 2013a). The most important insight is that human interaction and the building of social networks never take place between humans alone, but are fundamentally constituted by material culture. Material culture is a variable that creates links and relations between people; it can be a precursor for human actions and interaction as much as a result of them. In Actor-Network-Theory, this notion is represented in the characterisation of both humans and objects as equivalent *actors* in networks (Latour 2005: 70–82). The way to understanding human interaction and social relations according to Latour (2005: 5) is to follow the trail of associations between these actors. Archaeology has particular expertise in identifying *material associations* between sites, assemblages or artefactual traits (see especially *artefact analysis* below). By following these associations across space and time it is able to trace human interactions where humans are mostly physically absent.

Formal applications of network analysis in archaeology are not without innate methodological difficulties and limitations (see Brughmans 2012; Isaksen 2013; Knox et al. 2006 for discussions), but they are proving their potential to enhance knowledge of past human interaction in a

growing number of archaeological studies. They have been shown to be particularly useful in studies of regional interaction (Knappett 2013b) and especially larger-scale spatial analyses, for instance in studies of long-distance trade and contacts, centrality and (proto-) urbanism (Fulminante 2012; Knappett et al. 2008; Sindbaek 2007; Riede 2014). In archaeology, these fields have a longer tradition of using the term *network* to describe larger-scale interaction spheres such as trade networks and political networks. In these the distributions of artefacts and assemblages across wider geographical spaces have readily been understood as connectors between network nodes such as settlements and markets, and encouraged the development of purpose-built applications of network analysis.

Smaller-scale, more intimate dimensions of human interaction on the other hand are still addressed less frequently (Knappett 2011: 9–11, 2013a: 12). Different from studies of larger geographical scope, they can be viewed as taking place in the social space of everyday, face-to-face interaction. Here, the network is particularly useful as a thinking tool for coming to terms with the social and mental spaces of human interactions which are archaeologically more elusive (cf. Evans and Felder 2014). The present study focuses on these smaller-scale interactions.

Identity is created, performed and transformed in this social space of everyday, face-to-face interaction. It fundamentally builds on the exchange of ideas about what things, people and practices meant for identity—it is *formed in interaction*. Material culture is built into this concept as a medium of human communication, suited for the transmission of information and meaning (Jessen and Jensen 2012; Wobst 1999). Accordingly, humans and objects can be thought of as forming a network in which material-cultural meanings were shaped and transmitted (see, for instance, Knappett's (2012) exploration of *semiotic networks* in a study of Minoan pottery). The following addresses how this

idea can be incorporated into the archaeological study of identity and its specific materialities by considering the function of dress in social communication.

Communicating identity with early Anglo-Saxon dress

We identify with a group by using outward devices, certain artefacts for instance, which both we and other members of the group understand as a representation of group membership. Dress is an ideal context for conveying notions of affiliation directly on the human body, affiliations which would be difficult or even impossible to communicate efficiently without the help of an instantly visible material medium (Wobst 1999: 120). In characterising this role of worn material culture, authors have in fact often adopted terms that describe conversational processes—*aspects of identity are talked about materially, communicated non-verbally through style, or reinforced through repeated citation* (Gilchrist 1999: 82; Wiessner 1990: 106–107; Wobst 1999: 120).

Visibility plays a crucial role in making the communication of identity work (White 1989). This is especially prevalent in the early Anglo-Saxon period where identity is conspicuously performed on the adorned human body, especially by women who wear socially and regionally specific costumes which can include ostentatiously decorated dress fasteners. Equally, identity relies on readability, considering that the meanings conveyed by dress are subtle and indirect rather than instantly apparent from the artefact (see Knappett 2012: 87–88 for an expanded discussion of *direct* and *indirect* perceptions of meaning). This refers, for instance, to the indirect meaning conveyed by the design of a brooch or where it is worn, as opposed to the directly perceivable meaning that the brooch has in its function as a dress fastener. Readability of such indirect meanings relies much more on continuous reinforcement through social dialogue and material performance.

The majority of early Anglo-Saxon archaeological finds come from burials, and so the study of identity in this period is inseparable from the investigation of the funerary record. Where this focuses on the social event of the funeral, the material enactment of identity is viewed from the perspective of the group. Items of dress are investigated at the last stage of their material and social lifecycle, used by mourners as grave goods. The burial is viewed as a social arena which communities used to describe an idealised version of society. Techniques such as dressing the dead, placing and constructing the grave, laying out the body and gathering for the event of the funeral functioned as narrative aids and mnemonic devices (Sayer 2013: 155; Williams 2006) in the conveyance of this social message to the community. Statements of affection, affiliation and social position were directed at recipients on different personal, local and regional levels, and single burials could convey statements about multiple nested identities of the individual (Hakenbeck 2007, 2011).

However, death and burial formed only one of many contexts in which body ornamentation was used to create images of identity (White 1989: 214). Taking place directly on the individual human body, creating identity through dress is always an immediate physical experience of the living. Fowler (2004) has argued that funerary practices form no parallel universe, but rather bring idealised and lived images of human identity together, encapsulating “all of the relationships that sustained and composed the person” (Fowler 2004: 84; similarly Sayer 2009: 155). “It would seem unlikely that death and the dead formed an isolated sphere of interaction which was ideologically at odds with other everyday social relations” (Fowler 2004: 99). In his view, personhood is construed in both life and death according to the same principles. Consequently, funerary dress tells as much a story about the wearer’s self as it tells of collectively sanctioned rules and traditions (cf. Dobres 1999; Wobst 1999). This has

significant bearings on how we interpret the assembled material record of the buried body.

Fowler (2004) is against a rigid conceptual separation between funerary costume and real-life costume, arguing that burial practices pick up on identities which are the subject of real-life social discourses, in which people perform identity with meaningfully charged dress in daily contexts. Choices made by mourners must inevitably reflect daily discourse because only the meanings formed through this daily discourse can be understood by those who are addressed by the funerary tableau. Thus, even though we are dealing with burial evidence the investigation of performances of identity through dress cannot be limited to studying the collective practice of the funeral. It also requires the investigation of the dress found in a grave as a matter of lived experience and choice. This means the analysis of patterned burial practices in the early Anglo-Saxon cemetery record needs to be complemented by analyses of artefact wear and use and costume composition (see below). We cannot reveal the exact modalities of dressing in daily practice, but burials form a useful snapshot of these practices.

Meanings can also be subtly, often secondarily, encoded in artefact style. Importantly, this communication of meaning through style does not begin with the wearer’s choice, but is fundamentally determined by the maker’s choice (Wiessner 1990; Wobst 1999). Early Anglo-Saxon non-ferrous dress items provide a highly complex, dense material basis for analyses of style (see Hines 1997 and Martin 2011 among others). Studies of artefact meaning and identity should therefore also consider the makers of items of dress, and include technological and stylistic analysis. “Style always talks loudly about individuals” (Wobst 1999, 121), and style variation and change provide a fruitful ground for exploring how these individuals translated and communicated meaning. A maker will aim to give an object the physical appearance that will be *readable* to its anticipated

recipients and adequately convey the social message intended with the object (Wobst 1999: 124). At the same time, artefact design is conditioned by a maker's individual experience, knowledge, skill and vision (DeMarrais 2004). What has been said above about the assemblage of funerary dress equally applies to the style of single items of dress: it tells as much a story about the maker's self as it tells of collectively sanctioned rules and traditions. As a further consequence, style inevitably changes, intended or unintended by the craftsman. Each new artefact potentially reshapes the template for following artefacts, resulting in multiple, stylistically related sequences. Constructing systematic typological sequences is of course not new to archaeologists. However, the angle towards typological creation and development taken by Wobst and others (similarly Inker 2000 and recently Knappett 2012) changes significantly how they are socially interpreted.

In summary, in the study of identity and specific artefact meanings via the burial record it is essential to combine established methods of cemetery analysis with more specific, individualised analyses of artefact style, wear and costume composition. Such an approach has the potential to reveal how people and things could form semiotic networks (Knappett 2012: 104)—here, generating meaning in the social dialogue between makers, wearers and mourners. This is the approach adopted in the author's study of the early Anglo-Saxon girdle-hanger (Felder 2014). The following will illustrate its practical application with selected data from this research.

Girdle-hangers and communicated meanings

In the present study the above approach is applied by looking at how the social and personal significance of girdle-hangers was perceived, communicated and reinforced by individuals and collectives in different social contexts. Shared ideas of the meaning of girdle-hangers are understood as (a) cumulating by people's continuous engagement

with this meaning at all stages of the artefacts' lifecycle, in manufacture, use, repair and discard (cf. Fowler 2004: 65); and (b) created in people's exchange of ideas in ongoing daily discourse. Knappett (2012: 104) has described these dimensions of meaning generation as *vertical* and *horizontal* networks of meaning. The following describes how the engagement of makers, wearers and burying communities with girdle-hanger meaning has been approached in the material record of girdle-hangers.

Artefact analysis

Girdle-hangers are an ideal case study to demonstrate the approach towards stylistic reproduction, reinterpretation and gradual change outlined above, in which artefact styles and makers' choices are understood as one form of social communication (**Fig. 3**). Style analysis can also serve to illustrate notions of the *vertical* and the *horizontal* by viewing style evolution on a vertical and style variation on a horizontal axis. Although consisting of simple designs, girdle-hanger style variation is rather complex. Trails of stylistic interrelations form a dense mesh rather than mere linear sequences (something also noted in cruciform brooch design; Martin 2011). On one hand, the material allows sorting according to coherent evolutionary sequences within both type groups A and B (**Fig. 3i.b-iii; 3i.c, v-viii**). These can be described as *vertical* developments.⁶ The linking variable in such vertical sequences can be a gradual degradation of previously well-articulated shapes, for instance through silhouette rendition (cf. Martin 2012: 355). In the case of girdle-hangers, variants of bird profiles (**Fig. 3i.a-c and v**) pass through a process of increasing abstraction (**Fig. 3ii, iii, vi, vii, x**). Simultaneously, *horizontal* style links are created: through different interpretations of the same principal element, as seen, for instance, with variations of bird profiles (**Fig. 3i.a-c**), or through the re-use of identical elements on different terminal frames (linking for instance, group A types with group

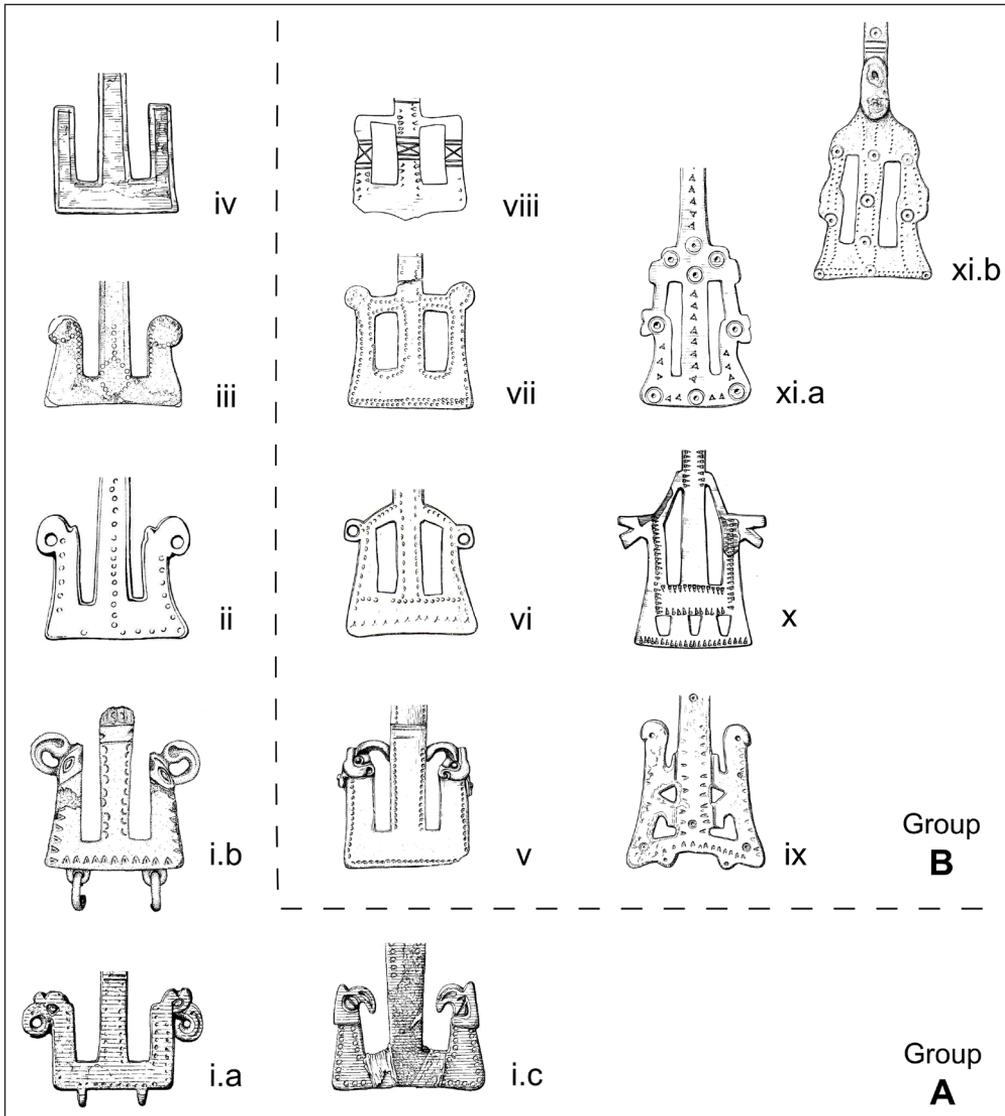


Fig. 3: Girdle-hanger style variation and interrelations. **i-iv**: sequence within group A (types with open terminal). **v-viii**: sequence within Group B (types with closed terminal), developed from i.c. **ix-xi**: extravagant variants of type B. Not to scale. (Classification A and B after Felder 2014; i.a–xi.b are figure numbers, not sub-type specifications). (Drawings after Cook 1981: fig. 26; Evison 1994: fig. 18; Green et al. 1987: fig. 299, fig. 413; Hills et al. 1984: fig. 91; Kinsley 1993: fig. 65, fig. 81; Timby 1996: fig. 109, fig. 137; West 1988: fig. 61; others by author).

B types, like 3ii with vi, 3iii with vii and 3iv with viii). The stylistic bandwidth is also increased with the incorporation of decorative elements borrowed from other artefact categories or the invention of entirely new

elements which can result in very recognisable extravagant designs (**Fig. 3ix-xi**; **Fig. 4**). In turn, these new designs can be diluted down again (**Fig. 3xi.b**) or even form templates for whole new vertical sequences (**Fig. 5**).

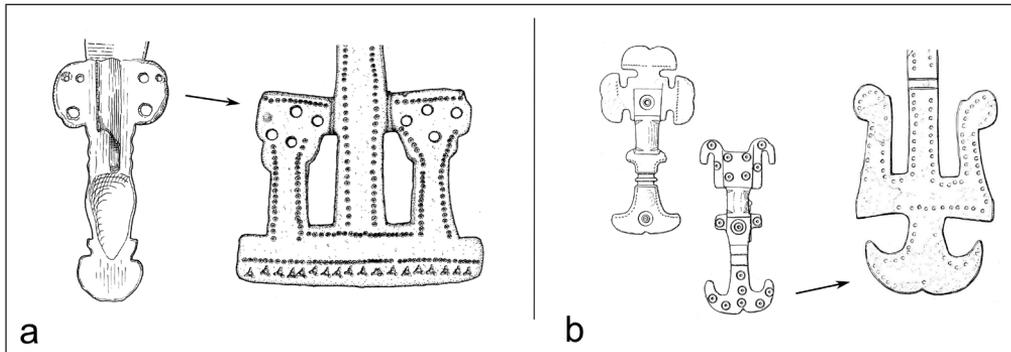


Fig. 4: Adaptation of decorative elements from brooches. **a** Left: cruciform brooch from Londesborough (Yorks.), lower part, reverse view of Style I-decorated, perforated side lappets; right: girdle-hanger from Holywell Row (Suffolk) grave 11 (front view) with perforated prong terminals. Drawings by author **b** Left: small-long brooches from Suffolk with fluke-shaped brooch feet and headplate lobes (after West 1998: fig. 42.8 and 50.4); right: girdle-hanger from Empingham (Leics.) grave 22 with fluke-shaped bottom lobe (after Timby 1996: fig. 99). Not to scale.

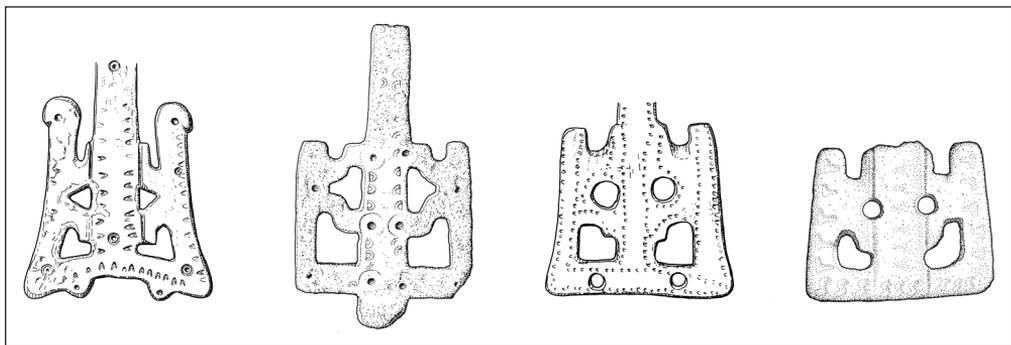


Fig. 5: Sequence of gradual formal degradation. Not to scale. Drawings by author.

Girdle-hanger design was clearly determined to a great extent by variations in artistic vision, skill, and social knowledge. As Wobst (1999) has pointed out, it is this variation which makes it possible to explore artefact style as social translation and transmission in the first place. In the chronological and spatial analysis of girdle-hanger design (Felder 2014) it was possible to use the trails of stylistic relationships and typological sequences traceable across the landscape to identify a spread of girdle-hangers across increasingly distant areas over the late 5th and early 6th century. This corresponded with a diversification of designs which included

the formation of local schools of style, suggesting the development of specific ideas about girdle-hanger iconography within smaller regions. Less individual elements of girdle-hanger design—the reference to the T-key frame (Fig. 1), average size and proportions and more basic typological features—on the other hand were maintained consistently across their entire period of usage and area of distribution. Both on the local and the supra-regional scale, an understanding of the significance of certain formal features for the *readability* of the girdle-hanger was exchanged and maintained, discursively and non-discursively, by craftspeople in the

process of artistic imitation, adaptation and reinterpretation.

Costume analysis

Looking at how girdle-hangers were displayed as worn items in the graves of their wearers provides a window into the lived social rules and conventions concerning girdle-hangers as well as into individual stories of usage and curation. In early Anglo-Saxon graves dress items are primarily found in places where they would have fulfilled the fastening function for which they had been designed. Brooches are usually placed on shoulders and chests, wrist-clasps on wrists. Girdle-hangers are found in the hip or upper leg area and this is certainly the place where they were worn suspended in everyday contexts. Multivariate analysis of six burial sites (Felder 2014) has shown that girdle-hangers were systematically associated with specific collections of items worn on the belt and regularly carried in girdle bags. In their overall composition these were often distinct from the girdle assemblages worn by other women at the same sites. Different types of girdle assemblage, including those with girdle-hangers, were also systematically distributed across household groups identified within single sites. It is reasonable to assume that these reflected, if only in basic terms, how female costume was structured among the living. A girdle-hanger, combined with a specific costume, would have had importance for the wearing individual in providing a sense of self and a certain place in the community. Further strands of artefact analysis can make this assigned importance visible, focusing on aspects of use, modification, repair and reuse (similarly Brunning 2013; Joy 2010). Martin (2012), for instance, has made an interesting observation regarding cruciform brooches. Repairs on brooches did not always serve the purpose of restoring function. Where they had lost their fastening mechanism, brooches were tied or sewed onto the garment in fastening position. Broken-off decorative elements were soldered back on or riveted into place, and

even specimens that had lost nearly all decorative elements were deposited with individuals in fastening position. He concludes that in such cases, as a motivation for repair, fastening was clearly secondary to the purpose of restoring *this same brooch* as a carrier of social and personal meanings (Martin 2012: 58).

Like cruciform brooches, the girdle-hanger material shows consistent evidence for material wear, breakage and repair. 32% of all specimens from burials (including both excavated finds and conjectural burial finds from antiquarian collections; see above) had been damaged through wear before deposition (Fig. 6). 63% of these had been repaired (see Fig. 3xi.b). The remainder ended up in the grave as fragments. Even repairs could show signs of wear. Of all specimens with preserved upper part (metal-detected finds not included) 27% showed loop damage, including worn-through, broken-off and repaired loops. Girdle-hangers were worn for considerable periods before deposition, and we should assume that motivations similar to those raised by Martin resulted in varying methods of curation: it was necessary to keep *this same girdle-hanger*, as an item intimately linked to the wearer's social and individual identity. The fact that this personal attachment to an owned item was reiterated through daily wearing would have contributed to wider understandings among early Anglo-Saxon communities of the inalienability of these items, and of their indivisible link with persons of a certain social identity.

Burial analysis

Women were buried *with* their girdle-hangers, and their funerals occasionally took conspicuous forms. The significance of girdle-hangers for certain individuals was not solely a matter of private experience, but was perceived and had relevance to groups of people of different social scales. Perceptions of girdle-hangers as integral to *defining* a person may have, on one level, only had relevance to a small, intimate group of people. Detailed analysis of in-situ evidence of girdle-hangers

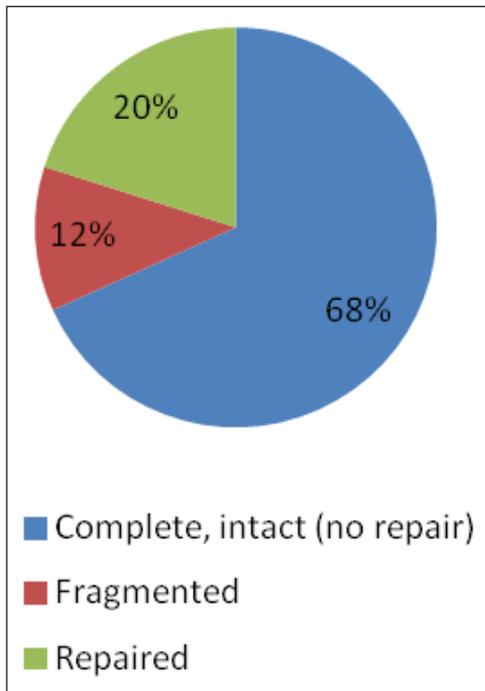


Fig. 6: Rates of breakage and repair on girdle-hangers from burials (including conjectural burial finds from antiquarian collections) (n = 214).

has shown that they were often deposited contained *inside* bags or wrapped in textile. They would have not been visible to onlookers of the laid-out body. However, their inclusion in the bag would have had importance to those people who equipped the body for burial. The fact that girdle-hanger wearers were sometimes buried in what can be interpreted as household burial plots suggests that these people were relatives or other members of the household to which the wearer had belonged (cf. Sayer 2009; Felder 2014). This form of funerary enactment would have contributed to the transmission of girdle-hanger meaning within the confines of family or household identity.

Some graves which contained girdle-hangers indicate that their wearers' funerals were more marked events for wider circles of people, and the messages conveyed through this enactment would have probably been of a different kind. This is indicated in cases

where girdle-hanger graves are found in either prominent or liminal positions in relation to how space was used at the cemetery, and where, compared to general patterns of female costume, the dress worn by the buried individual implies a more outstanding social position. This can be illustrated with the examples of two prominent girdle-hanger graves, West Heselton grave 113 (Haughton and Powlesland 1999: 185) and Sewerby grave 49 (Hirst 1985: 38–43). The woman buried in grave 113 at West Heselton was buried prone in a too-small grave pit (Haughton and Powlesland 1999: 185), aligned with and partly cut into a pre-historic hengiform enclosure ditch which formed a boundary for burials in this part of the site. The area also appeared to have gone out of use at the time of her funeral, situating her in a doubly liminal location (based on a re-evaluation of the cemetery chronology (Felder 2014) and supported by a new radiocarbon date for grave 113; Hines and Bayliss 2013: 342 table 7.1). Besides girdle-hangers, her costume incorporated an exceptional range of objects which can be described as amulets.⁷ Equipments of this type have been interpreted as characterising a so-called *cunning woman* (Dickinson 1999) who had special powers and practiced benevolent magic, healing and divination in her communities (Meaney 1981: 249). If the woman in grave 113 was such a person and if people had respect for and potential fear of her spiritual powers, the techniques deployed in her burial would have made a strong statement about this.

In a different, but equally visually effective way, a woman with girdle-hangers was buried in grave 49 at Sewerby. Grave 49 has come to fame because of a prone burial (grave 41) placed exactly above it in identical orientation. Due to its body position and a quern stone fragment placed on the body, grave 41 was interpreted as a live burial (Hirst 1985: 38–43; 1993). Grave 49 was dug unusually deep, placed in a prominent spot among other graves and contained by far the wealthiest grave-furnishing found

on site. Hirst interpreted this woman as a high-status lady and the prone burial as the sacrificial or punitive burial of a woman in some kinship, household or servile relation to her (Hirst 1985: 38–43). Even if the individuals were not buried during the same event (most recently debated by Reynolds 2009: 70–71), the woman buried in grave 49 with girdle-hangers had certainly had a significant social position in the community burying at Sewerby.

Girdle-hangers as a symbol of female identity

The diverse burial evidence described above allows a brief consideration of possible interpretations of girdle-hangers (expanded on in more detail in Felder 2014). As mentioned in the beginning, previously women with girdle-hangers have been interpreted as persons of economic authority within their households. Characteristic costumes and burial rituals for female heads of the household may have differed within and between regions. Household burial plots identified at some cemeteries have been found to include single women buried in the most comprehensive and wealthiest costumes; these may have been the leading women within their families (Sayer 2010: 72-73). The cemeteries investigated in the girdle-hanger study showed a similar pattern. Women with the most lavish costumes sometimes also wore latch-lifters, a form of simpler keys with different angled hooks. This resonates with the notion of keys as symbols of economic authority in the Anglo-Saxon period, which has also been convincingly argued for from a historical perspective (Fell 1984; Gräslund 1999; Hines 1997: 263; Smith 1856: xli; Steuer 1982).

However, the larger-scale analysis of girdle-hanger graves has now shown that girdle-hangers were not typically found among this group of women. Although instances are known where outstanding wealthy female burials contained girdle-hangers, in the majority of cases they were found with individuals buried in more simple costume.

These women could sometimes be additionally distinguished by certain types of equipment such as specific bags and amulets (see above). It is possible that these costumes identified them as women of a specific social role that was distinct from female leadership of a household. Girdle-hangers may have had a function in the practical performance of this role while simultaneously serving as a public signifier of it. Keys are portrayed in historical, folklore and ethnographic contexts as symbols of the transitional nature of rites of passage, as releasing life into, or the dead out of this world, and have been known as amulets in practices related to conception, pregnancy or childbirth and funerary rituals (Bonner 1950: 79–87; Jobs 1962: 920–1; Goldmann 1935; Steuer 1982). Respectively, some authors have considered a function of girdle-hangers as items imbued with respective protecting and power-enhancing qualities (Meaney 1981: 179; Steuer 1982: 221). It is possible that they were worn by women who had medical knowledge and spiritual authority in allowing human life to enter and leave this world safely, and who dealt with the disruptive events of birth and death within early Anglo-Saxon communities (cf. Geake 2003 for a notion of cunning women as *death-midwives*). Such a position may have been held by a woman who had such powers that her death was perceived as dangerous by the whole community and necessitated specific measures in the funeral; but such tasks could have also been performed by individuals within single households and of different social standing. An interpretation of girdle-hangers as objects with protective or enhancing qualities seems better suited to accommodate the many diverse contexts in which they can be observed in the archaeological record.

Conclusion

Our understanding of identity as a complex, changing human experience of belonging and affiliation confronts the archaeological study of identity with particular challenges.

It seems that we have found it easier to look at single dimensions of identity, single social fields where identity is being performed, and single material settings where it takes physical form, than to tell the whole story of *making identity*. With the aim to convey the dynamics of this story, this paper explores a methodological approach towards early Anglo-Saxon burial evidence that combines different strands of archaeological analysis. At its heart lies the principle that semiotically charged items of dress, individuals and different groups of people were tightly knitted into networks of meaning generation. Within these, shared ideas about identity and its material representations were formed in an ongoing dialogue in which the visible engagement with the object played a significant role. In recent decades, the study of early Anglo-Saxon identity based on the adorned buried human body has strongly focused on meaning transmission in the practice of burial. It has been argued here that identity needs to be viewed as a dialogue between many more social actors—makers, wearers/users, and burying groups alike. The example of the girdle-hanger, a symbolic key and symbol of the identity of a specific group of early Anglo-Saxon women, was presented as a case study to help define different types of archaeological evidence that can reveal different forms of human engagement with material culture worn on the body and its role in communicating notions of identity.

The approach proposed here has been influenced by current archaeological thought on networks as a useful concept for investigating past human interactions. Defining the above types of evidence is also a first step towards developing formal network-analytical approaches to early Anglo-Saxon burial material. These will have the potential to offer new insights into social communication in this period by enabling an innovative graphic visualisation, analysis and interpretation of complex interrelations within the material record. Regretfully, such

an analysis has to be the subject of a future paper. However, starting by thinking in network terms about social interaction in the early Anglo-Saxon period is already offering a useful tool for conceptually linking separate types of archaeological evidence and analysis. It can help us understand identity, collective knowledge and shared social values as a product of complex social communication processes—highlighting above all the smaller-scale daily practices which took place within rural communities and were carried by their individual members.

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Notes

- ¹ An investigation of girdle-hangers in early Anglo-Saxon England based on a comprehensive national sample has recently been completed by the author as PhD research (Felder 2014).
- ² They also provide the opportunity to shed further light on the use of dress items such as girdle-hangers before the death of the wearer, because metal-detected finds most likely include a proportion of items accidentally lost by their wearers (Chester-Kadwell 2007; Felder 2014; Geake 2011; McClean and Richardson 2010).
- ³ *Girdle-hanger* was first used by Tymms (1853) in a discussion of such objects from Suffolk. It is admittedly a problematic, because seemingly universally

applicable term, but it was soon established to describe early Anglo-Saxon copper-alloy model keys (Brown 1915: 394; Thomas 1882: 386). This use of the term is most widely accepted today. It is still occasionally used for other types of early Anglo-Saxon girdle items such as keys, *chatelaines* (a suspended ensemble of objects linked by rings or chain elements, mainly 7th century AD; cf. Geake 1997) and other decorative pendants. However, for each of these, sufficiently concise terms and defining criteria have been formulated (see Felder 2014). Occurrences of any of these objects in female graves have important regional, chronological and social implications, and thus the need for a strict differentiation between classes of girdle items and a consistent use of terminology cannot be overemphasised.

⁴ I am grateful to Beverly Kerr and Alexandra Knox for kindly providing me with their unpublished theses.

⁵ I thank Toby Martin for providing me with his unpublished doctoral thesis, and Sue Brunning and Rosie Weetch for allowing me to cite their work.

⁶ In parts this could be shown to be a chronological development (Felder 2014; Penn and Bruggmann 2007).

⁷ The interpretation of archaeological artefacts as amulets is not without problems and requires critical consideration (see Felder 2014 for a detailed discussion).

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