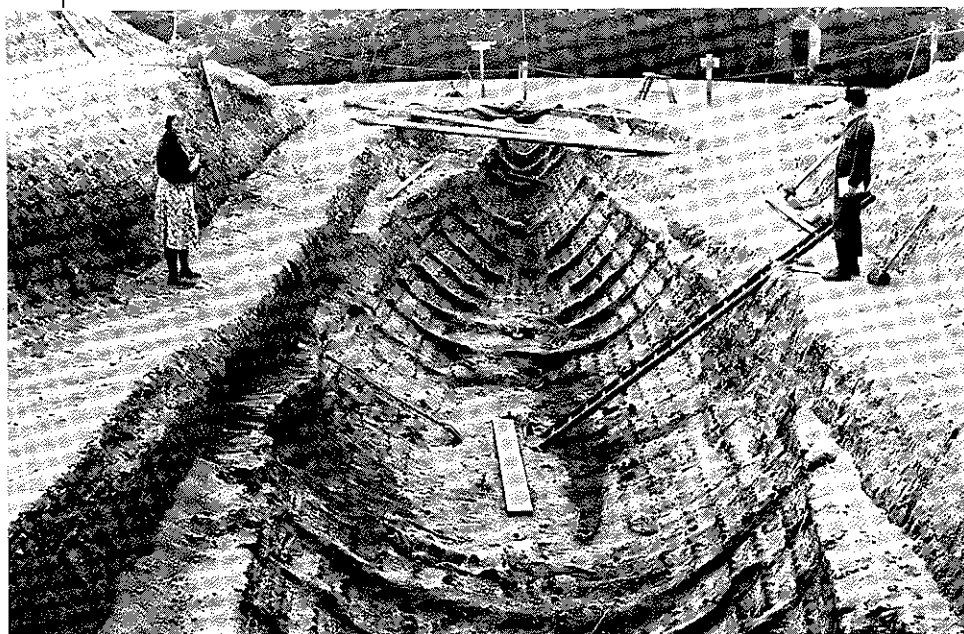


# Sutton Hoo

1 The ship under excavation. The timbers had disappeared but the rivets, and stains in the sand, permitted their reconstruction, except for the high tips of bow and stern. Nearly 90 feet long and, at its widest, 14 feet wide, the ship is larger than any other from the early Dark Ages so far found.



In 1939 the tomb of a seventh-century king was found at Sutton Hoo, near Woodbridge in Suffolk. He had been buried like this. A ship had been dragged from the river Deben up to the top of a 100-foot-high bluff, and laid in a trench (1). A gabled hut had been built amidships to accommodate a very big coffin and an astonishing collection of treasures and gear. The trench had then been filled in and a mound raised over it to stand boldly on the skyline. The burial was found untouched. Simply to list what was there would exhaust this small space. The weapons included a helmet (fig. 70), a sword and a shield, all magnificent. There were numerous personal ornaments, most of gold inlaid with garnets (e.g. fig. 77), silverware, kitchen equipment (3) and much else. Most enigmatic was the 'ceremonial whetstone' (fig. 69).

Whose was the grave? With the body was a purse containing 37 Merovingian gold coins. The latest of these date from the 620s. So the tomb could be that of Redwald; its wealth would match his great power (see p. 56), and the presence of Christian objects in an apparently pagan context would accord with Bede's account of him as having syncretized pagan and Christian practices (*HE*, II.15, p. 116). These argu-

ments are inconclusive. It could just as well be one of his successors (see p. 56) who lay here.

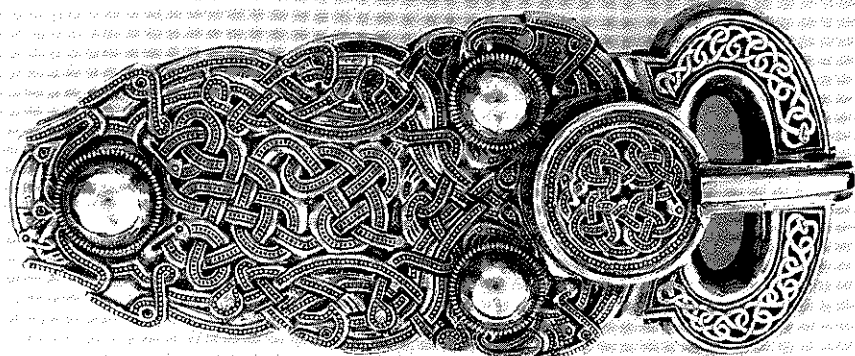
Other treasures have survived from seventh-century England; but those from Sutton Hoo are outstanding not only in number, but in quality. In that

2 The great gold buckle, length 13.2 cm, weight 414.6 gm. The design is a complex of animals, snakes and bird heads, picked out in niello (all the objects from Sutton Hoo are now in the British Museum).

they are unsurpassed, indeed unsurpassable. Consider, for example, the shoulder-clasps (fig. 77). They are cloisonné: that is to say they consist of plates of gold on to which were brazed gold strips, set on edge in such a way as to create a pattern of cells into which were fitted thin slices of garnet or millefiori glass. The skill displayed is at its height round the edges of the clasps. The garnet interlace there seems set into solid gold. In reality 'the plain fields between and around these garnet elements . . . are . . . cells, just like those which carry the garnets, often of the most irregular shapes, with thick gold lids brazed over their tops' (Bruce-Mitford). They were wealthy kings indeed who could afford such jewels and such craftsmen.

The finds reveal distant influences and wide connections. Most emphasized have been those with Sweden. Ship burials have been found in only two parts of the Germanic world, east Suffolk and east Sweden. The impression of a Swedish connection is reinforced by the nature of the helmet and shield, such that Mr Bruce-Mitford can say that they were probably 'made in Sweden or by armourers from Sweden working in Suffolk exclusively in their traditional Swedish manner and with Swedish dies, moulds and other equipment'. Perhaps the East Anglian royal house and kingdom had been established by Swedes in the sixth century. There are other indications there of migration from Scandinavia, though they suggest in the main connection with areas west and/or south of those indicated at Sutton Hoo (see p. 34).

Other elements in the treasure point to Gaul. The coins are Merovingian. No two are from the same mint, which suggests their selection from a large hoard. Such a hoard need not, but could, have been

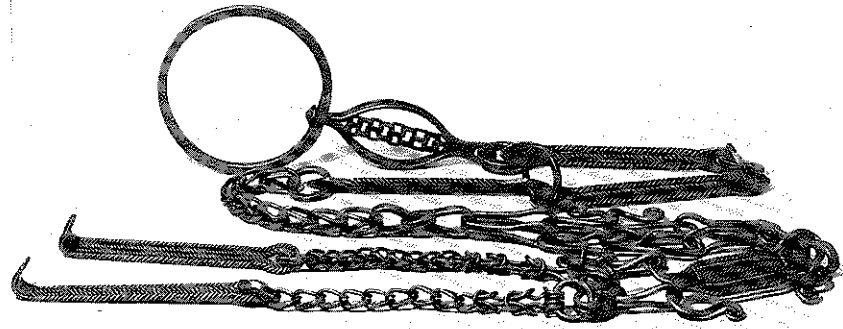


of slaves. Equally suggestive, and yet more enigmatic, is the great gold buckle (2). Mr Bruce-Mitford regards it as locally made but 'unmistakably Swedish' in style. It leads his mind to the pagan shores of the Gulf of Bothnia. Dr Werner, however, emphasizes a singular thing about it, that it is hollow, with a hinged back which opens like that of a watch. He believes it to be a reliquary. His mind is led to parallels in the Christian world of Gaul and Burgundy.

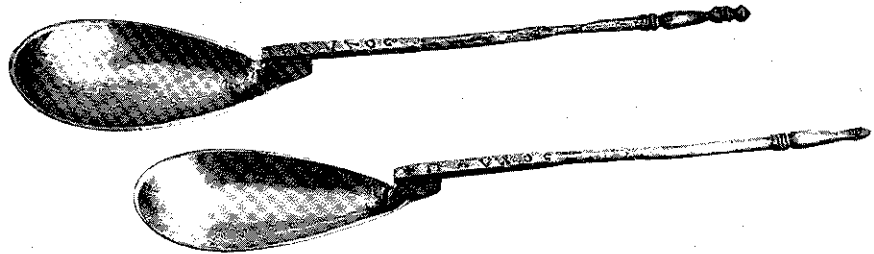
Some of the finds undoubtedly came from the far south. The great silver dish (3) was made in Byzantium in about 500. A set of 10 silver bowls had a more recent Mediterranean origin. A bronze bowl had come from Alexandria fairly recently; among the animals incised on it is a camel. The three 'hanging bowls' had a very different and probably Celtic origin (see fig. 64). Links of a different kind are suggested by close resemblances between the pattern of the shoulder-clasps and that of a carpet-page in the Lindisfarne Gospels (see figs 76, 77).

The interpretation of many of the ob-

5 The Anastasius silver dish, diameter 72.4 cm. It is of Byzantine origin and bears control stamps dating its manufacture to between 491 and 518.



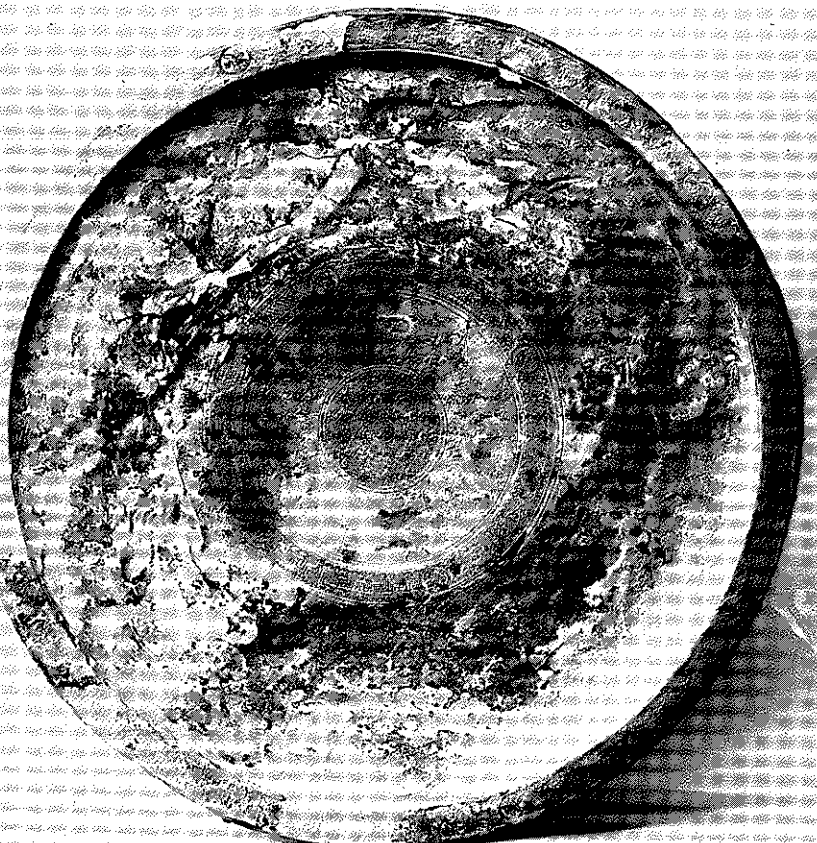
3 A modern reproduction of a chain-work complex for the suspension of a bronze bucket. It is 12 ft 6 in (3.75 m) long and its elaboration suggests that it was not just kitchen equipment, but rather that it hung for some purpose in the king's hall.



4 A pair of silver spoons of late classical type, length 25.4 cm. One is inscribed, in Greek letters, PAULOS, and the other SAULOS, which suggests the possibility of their having been a christening gift to Redwald.

jects found at Sutton Hoo is a matter for speculation, whose pleasures, however exquisite, do not satisfy. Perhaps the spoons (4) were a christening present to Redwald: perhaps they were not. Dr

Werner's view of the great buckle makes one reflect that Sigbert (see p. 45) was converted in Gaul and that his bishop was a Burgundian; who can say how much the reflection is worth? Mr Bruce-Mitford suggests that the whetstone may have been a symbol of bretwaldic power (cf. p. 53). Fascinating; but there is a risk of circularity here, for if he is right, it is by far the best evidence for bretwaldship as an institution. More secure is what the treasure taken as a whole tells us. For example, it emphasizes how much of the Germanic world England had links with, directly or indirectly. The animal ornament of some of the jewellery was of a kind which became fashionable over nearly all that world. So minor a decorative device as the use of mushroom-shaped cloisons is paralleled c. 600 in objects found from Sweden to Lombardy. Or again, in more ways than one the treasure shows the pervasive influence of Rome (see p. 66). But the most important function of archaeology is its simplest: to recover the physical reality of the past. If anyone wishes to know the true importance of Sutton Hoo, the answer is: read Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* II.12, II.15 and III.18 without having considered that treasure; then read those chapters again, having done so.



J. Campbell



55 A bronze-hanging bowl, diameter 24 cm (cf. fig. 64) lies in a cist grave in the earliest (7th-century) phase of the church of St Paul in the Bail, Lincoln. Erected in the courtyard of the Roman forum (compare p. 40) this church may be that which Bede says Paulinus (see p. 45) built at Lincoln, then under Edwin's control. No body was detected in the grave.

whose authority, at least for part of their reigns, extended over other kingdoms. Others may for periods have been as powerful, or nearly so, for example Penda of Mercia (?632–55) (and see below, pp. 67, 70, 73, 99).

The list indicates the instability of hegemony. First one kingdom has it, then another. Although Northumbria has a long run at the end, all three of its *bretwaldas* faced the rising power of Mercia; the first two died facing it in battle. If their power was wide it was never safe for long. But it was wide. Bede says that the first four of these rulers had authority over all the kingdoms (he may mean just the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms) south of the Humber. He goes on to say that Edwin had wider authority extending over all the peoples of Britain, British and English, except Kent; and including Anglesey and Man, which he subjected to English rule. Oswald ruled within the same bounds. Oswy had authority over much the same lands for some years, and also subjugated most of the Picts and the Scots and made them tributary. Historians, quiet men always liable to confuse the less interesting with the more plausible, are apt to leave what Bede says here with some such phrase as 'vague overlordship'; but we do not know how vague or otherwise it was. If Bede is right, then Oswy had wider power in this island than any ruler till James I and VI. That of the Mercian overlords of the eighth century was much less extensive; it stopped at Wat's or Offa's dyke (see below, pp. 120–1) and the Humber, whilst that of their predecessors had run from sea to sea.

It is significant that after the death of Redwald no southern or eastern kingdom was supreme. Dominance went to the frontier states of Northumbria, Mercia and Wessex. It probably had much to do with the conquests they made at British expense. Between the late sixth and

the late seventh century Northumbrian kings subjugated vast areas west of the Pennines and north of the Tweed. In the early seventh century the western boundary of Wessex was about that of modern Wiltshire; by c. 700 it was the Tamar. Much of the West Midlands passed from British to Mercian hands in the seventh century. Rulers making such conquests had lands to give, slaves to sell, and (possibly) minerals to exploit. The dynamics of power in early England are likely to have been such as to ensure that these advantages enabled them to gather armed power sufficient to dominate their neighbours to the south and east.

In understanding those dynamics the poem *Beowulf*, the only secular epic in Old English to survive, is useful. Its story is of how Beowulf, a prince of the Geats, a Swedish people, ridded Hrothgar, king of the Danes, of two monsters, returned home, and ultimately himself was killed by another monster, the guardian of a treasure hoard. It is the poem's assumptions about power, rather than the nature of its plot, which concern us. (It has to be borne in mind that the date of the poem is uncertain; it may be considerably later than its often suggested date of the eighth century; it cannot provide answers, but it can provide clues to answers about the nature of the world of power.)

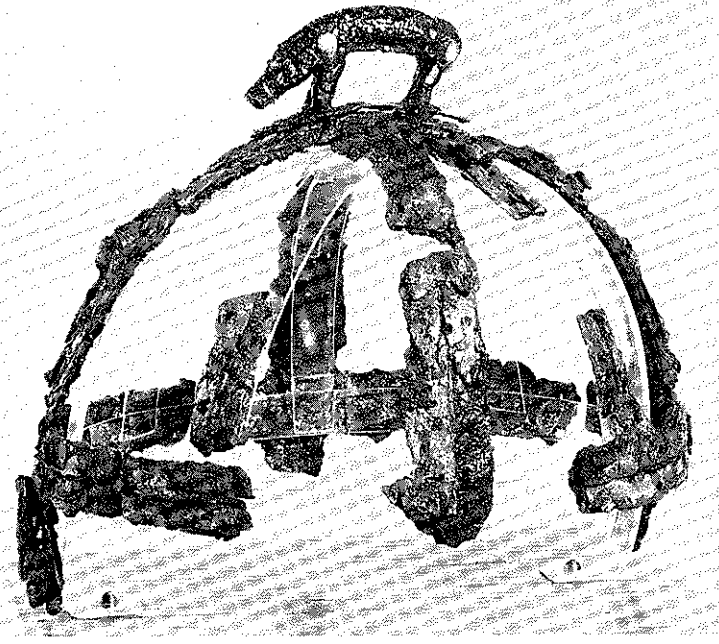
In the political world of the poem four things stand out: the importance of the king's noble retinue, some of whose members may derive from kingdoms other than his own; an indissoluble connection between success and gifts of gold; the store set by good weapons, which are regarded as treasure; and the endless insecurity associated with feud. A king lives surrounded by noble warriors who feast with him, sleep in his hall by night, fight for him and are ready, or anyway sincerely hoped to be ready, to die for him. Their number and loyalty are crucial to royal power. As king Hrothgar prospered, so did the number of his young retainers increase. A king's followers can come from abroad, as Beowulf comes from Geatland to Denmark. Adventure or the hope of profit brings some; the harsher compulsion of exile others.

To secure followers and power treasure is essential. Kingship and treasure-giving go hand in hand. Kings are 'treasure-guardians', 'gold-friends', 'ring-givers'. A good king gives. Hrothgar was 'the best of earthly kings . . . the best of those who bestowed gold'. A bad king 'begins to hoard his treasures, never parts with gold rings'. Treasure rewards service, creates the expectation of loyalty, and is the outward sign of honour. The gift of a splendid sword ensured that the recipient was 'more honoured on the mead-bench thereafter'. The social and emotional significance of gold-giving and gold-wearing was complex and deep; and it was not for nothing that Beowulf died to win a treasure hoard. With the poet's interest in treasure goes a similar interest in weapons. Gifts of armour and of pattern-welded swords are treated as treasures.

All the kings and kingdoms mentioned in the poem ultimately come to grief, and the poet is at pains to remind his audience of this. The world he describes is an unstable one in which it is all-important for a king to give



57 (right) This later 7th-century helmet from Benty Grange, Derbys. (Sheffield City Museum), is the only one to survive from early England other than that from Sutton Hoo (fig. 70). They differ greatly. This was composed of an iron framework covered with horn plates. It has a splendid boar crest (see fig. 43). Such crests were probably thought (as Tacitus indicates much earlier) to give protection in battle. If so, the warrior who wore this helmet was doubly protected; for its nose-piece has a silver cross set in it.

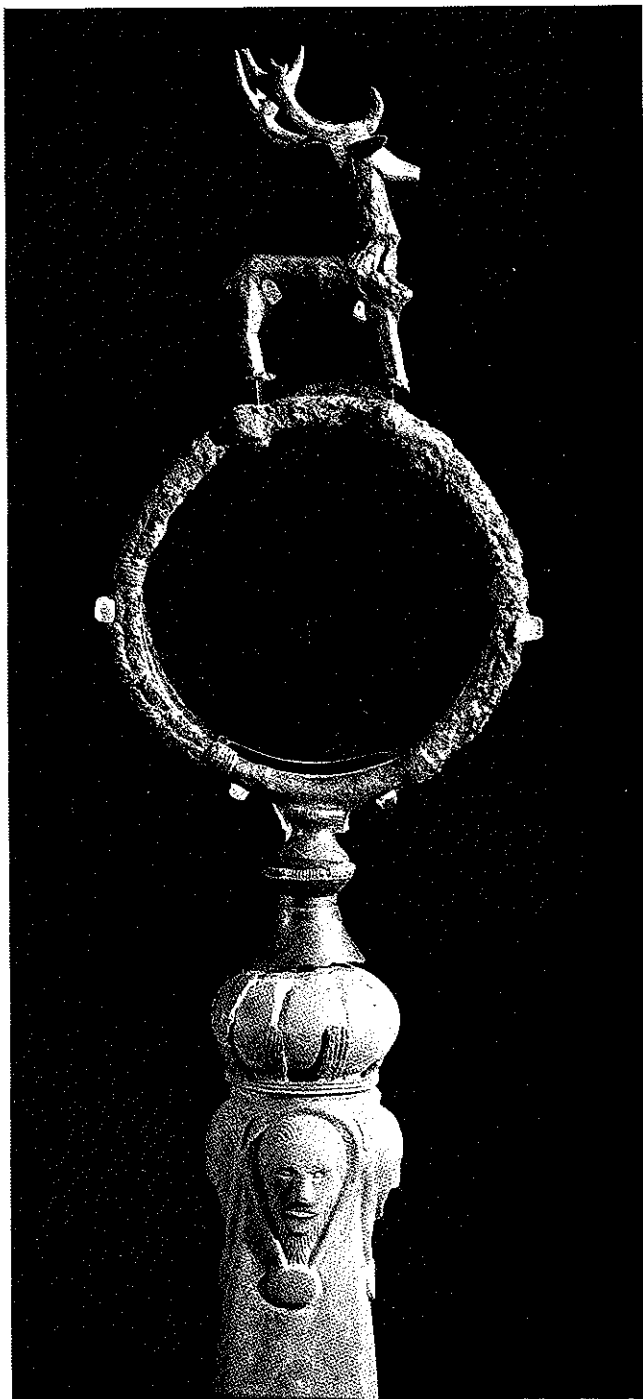


56 (left) The blade of a 'pattern-welded' sword (Cambridge University, Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology). Such swords were very elaborately made. The centre of the blade is an iron strip. To it were welded two steel edges. The channels left on either face were filled with strips made from layers of iron and steel twisted together, then beaten to shape.

treasure, which includes arms. If he has gold to give, and is successful in war (these things feed one another), he can attract followers from other kingdoms, because noblemen are often on the move through hunger for reward or the necessities of exile. To keep giving he has to keep taking, and so adds feud to feud. No kingdom or king can hope for long success. When a great king grows ill or old or mean there are always enemies waiting at home or abroad. They seize their advantage and other kings rise, taking the treasure, the men, and the glory.

The great treasure found at Sutton Hoo (Picture Essay, pp. 32-3) shows how strongly, at least in some respects, seventh-century reality resembled what the poet described. To see the splendid jewellery is to apprehend how men might live and die for such treasures. There is no problem in understanding how arms like those found here might be regarded as treasures, and some of them correspond very closely to descriptions in the poem. This is particularly true of the helmet. Indeed one particularly difficult passage describing a helmet would be securely translated only by considering the real helmet from Sutton Hoo; it refers to 'a comb passing over the roof of the helmet wound round with wire inlay'. The poem fairly frequently mentions mail shirts, as if they were normal gear for the great. The only certain find of such armour from early England is that from Sutton Hoo. (There may perhaps have been some in association with the only other known helmet, that from Benty Grange.) Although spears and knives are common in Anglo-Saxon graves, swords are not common, and the really good, pattern-welded swords, such as could shear armour, are rarer. That is to say that, however many men may have been liable to serve in war, the best equipment was confined to those who were royal or noble. If so, the movement of such men from one kingdom to another to seek shelter or service could have had a military significance far outweighing their small number.





69 The 'ceremonial whetstone' or 'sceptre' from Sutton Hoo (British Museum) is nearly 84 cm long (diameter of the ring at the top 10.2 cm) and had never been used as a whetstone. Its significance is for speculation; it has been plausibly suggested that whetstones were associated with the thunderbolts of a sky god.

gained authority over Essex during the 660s, and so access to the sea at London, which must have been crucial. The dominions of the kings of Wessex were being expanded fast in the west; and Ine was one of the greatest kings of his day. It is unlikely that any king had overlordship over the whole of southern England. This may

be a reason why Theodore and his successors were able to establish a degree of independence; the authority of the archbishops of Canterbury stretched over a wider area than that of any king.

In the building up of the greater kingdoms many small dynasties, perhaps even great ones, had been subordinated or, we may fairly assume, wiped out and their memory lost. Anglo-Saxon kings sought to exterminate enemy lines; that is why, for example, the wife, children and household of Edwin had to flee as far as Gaul from the conquering Oswald; somehow they seem to have felt that his Christian faith did not guarantee their safety, and no doubt it did not. With failure went oblivion. The history we have is of, or written largely from the point of view of, the dynasties which survived and flourished.

Theodore found all the successful dynasties Christian. In considering those kings and the nature of their faith two things have always to be borne in mind: our ignorance and their diversity. There are so many things that we only just know—for example, it is only the immense good fortune of having found Sutton Hoo and Yeavering that gives us any idea of the magnificence of these rulers. There must be many things we do not know at all. We can only guess at what their culture was like. Almost certainly there was a great deal of verse; their minds would have been well-stocked with quasi-knowledge of the past derived from poems perhaps resembling *Beowulf*. But it would be rash to assume that the later poetry produced after the coming of Christianity gives an adequate idea of what earlier verse was like. Or again, it could be that wood carving was a major art form in the pagan period; if so, it is bad luck, for none survives.

In some ways what had happened to kings, as to their subjects, was a development, almost a natural development, a matter of assimilation of their ways and beliefs to those of the lands to the south and of new beliefs to old. Christian kings still fought and slew, killed members of rival families and killed rivals within their own. The Church in many ways fitted itself remuneratively enough into their world, taking tribute and claiming its share of booty. Saints of a new kind appeared very well suited to dynastic needs and heroic values. In the later years of the century cults developed both of Oswald and of Edwin, warrior kings who had died in battle; their principal claim to sanctity being that among their enemies were pagans. They were in a sense among the first crusaders. But the contrast, seen earlier at its extreme between Redwald and Sigbert, between those who conformed and those who were transformed, continued. If some kings sat very easily to their faith, others were led by it to enter a monastery or to go to Rome to die. The England of Bede and Aethelbald, if in some ways an old world with new things in it, was in others a very new world.

70 (right) The Sutton Hoo helmet (British Museum). Although this type is of late Roman (and ultimately Sassanid) origin, the nearest immediate connections are with eastern Sweden. For example, the decorative bronze panelling closely resembles similar work on a helmet from Old Uppsala (see fig. 65 and pp. 66-7).

