The splendour of power
Early medieval kingship and the use of gold and silver in the southern North Sea area (5th to 7th century AD)
By J.A.W. Nicolay

Richly illustrated, this book presents and interprets the superb collection of valuables from the southern North Sea area (5th to the 7th century AD) as a whole, and makes compulsive reading for anyone interested in the fascinating world of early medieval Europe.

From the 5th to the 7th century AD, the southern North Sea area functioned as an important cultural and political bridge, linking two power blocks: the late Roman Empire and its Frankish successor kingdom to the south, and the Scandinavian kingdoms to the north. This book examines how the region’s intermediary position is reflected in the jewellery and other ornaments of gold and silver found along the southern North Sea coasts, and how it relates to the formation of kingdoms and the expression of group identity after the collapse of the West-Roman Empire.

The book first discusses the history of earlier research into kingship around the southern North Sea, and this is followed by a description of the individual research regions: the northern and western Netherlands, northern Germany and south-east England. After presenting the valuables of gold and silver from graves, hoards and settlement sites with their dating and contextual evidence in an extensive catalogue, the author examines how such items circulated between and within early medieval societies, were transformed into symbols expressing regional or supra-regional identities, and eventually ended up in the ground. The various research themes come together in the synthesis, in which elite networks around the southern North Sea are reconstructed, and the expression of ethnic or other group identities among the members of such networks is considered.

Finally, in an epilogue, the finds from the North Sea region are confronted with the nature and composition of the Staffordshire hoard. For the first time not only presenting, but also interpreting the superb collection of valuables from the southern North Sea area as a whole, this book makes compulsive reading for anyone interested in the fascinating world of early medieval Europe.
a completely different picture. This can be explained in two ways, both of which are related to the military nature of the find complex.

First of all, the late 6th century saw the appearance of so-called bretwaldas or overlords, who according to Bede ruled the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms south of the river Humber. After the death of the East Anglian king and bretwalda Rædwald in 624 or 625, the balance of power shifted to the north, and overlordship was disputed between Northumbria and Mercia. Such overlordship was mainly aimed at making other kingdoms tributary, and usually did not result in annexation of the other kingdom’s land. Moreover, military service could be demanded from subjected kings; the Mercian king Wulfhere, for example, is said to have led an army raised from all the southern kingdoms when he fought Northumbria in ca 673. His predecessor Penda headed a similar army to fight Northumbria in 655, in which no fewer than 30 duces regii (‘royal commanders’, presumably leaders of subjected kingdoms) fought on his behalf. The formation of such large, mixed armies meant that warriors carrying weaponry that manifested personal relations to a variety of patrons fought side by side, at least in the larger battles of the 7th century.

Secondly, the war bands of particular kings or sub-kings should be seen as dynamic entities, in which individual warriors of different origins (and hence with different weaponry) might operate side by side. As explained in section 1.5, it was expected from members of a king’s retinue, especially if they were of aristocratic descent, to show their valour and courage by participating in raids or wars, and in doing so to gain honour, prestige and status – which contributed to their personal ‘worth’. Moreover, winning a war could result in an impressive amount of booty. Halsall vividly describes how early-medieval armies carried their wealth with them; and the most effective way to purloin such valuables was to seize them on the battlefield. As the story of Beowulf illustrates, heroic enterprises were not only conducted within the context of one’s patron’s war band, but also – and maybe especially – by temporarily joining the war bands of allied kingdoms. The Staffordshire hoard therefore may include weaponry not only from different war bands, but also from warriors aiming to increase their wealth outside their homeland.

Another fascinating aspect of the valuable items in the hoard is the great time-depth they represent, apparently ranging from the mid-6th to the late 7th century – a pattern that is well-known from the inventories of ‘royal’ or ‘princely’ graves in Anglo-Saxon England. The contemporaneous hoarding of both (very) old and new pieces of weaponry supports the idea that such valuables were not personal belongings: the high-status weaponry and other ornaments were given by a king or lower leader to a member of his retinue, or by a father to his son or daughter, to be returned to the donor upon reaching a new phase in life (e.g. adulthood) or after death. These items could be used again as gifts to new followers or other children, or be melted down and transformed into updated status symbols. Consequently, it was common practice to keep items in cir-

15 Bede, Historia Ecclesiastica II, 5.
17 Yorke 2005, 105 (Wulfhere), 158-159 (military overlordship).
18 Yorke 2005, 105, 158.
19 Halsall 2010.
20 E.g. the examples mentioned in section 1.8.
21 For the transformation and circulation of valuables, see chapters 9 and 10.
calculation for several generations, rather than burying them in a grave or as a hoard after the user entered a new stage of life or died. As discussed in sections 1.6 and 10.3.1, not only the worth of the user but also that of a sword or piece of jewellery could evolve in the course of their ‘lifetime’. Because of their so-called cultural biography, which would have included real or fictional stories about former users and heroic achievements, the high-status items of weaponry represented in the Staffordshire hoard at least in part were ancient heirlooms – as their wear also indicates.

The importance of heirlooms for the identity of a tribal group, a kingdom and the leading elite makes it even more astonishing that such a large collection of highly symbolic items were taken out of circulation, dismantled and (without their iron parts) buried as a hoard. This purposeful action can be understood only when the usual life-cycle of these valuables was interrupted, almost certainly because they were lost during battle and taken as war booty by a victorious king.²² Although it is unknown whether this specific battle was won by a Mercian army (including the warriors of subject kingdoms) or by that of an opponent (and its allies), the different treatment of the weapon parts made of iron and those made of gold and silver is not surprising when the latter are considered in their role of identity markers.

²² For other, less probable interpretations, see Webster 2011, 223 (robbery of an escort that travelled along Watling Street), Sparey-Green 2011, 225 (product of Viking raids on some royal hall), and Périn 2011 (product of raiding a pagan sanctuary) (all in: Webster et al. 2011).
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Photo H. Blankenfeldt, taken at the find site of the Gallehus horns.