

# Tasting Misery Among Snakes: The Situation of Smiths in Anglo-Saxon Settlements

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## Introduction

The prominence of smiths in early medieval culture should capture the imagination of archaeologists interpreting the remains of Anglo-Saxon metalworking. The legend of *Wēland*, or *Wayland*, the smith, was circulated widely in Anglo-Saxon society. As well as being depicted visually on the eighth century Franks Casket from Northumbria, the legendary smith surfaces repeatedly in contemporary heroic literature. *Wēland* features in the opening line of the tenth century poem *Deor* and is also referenced as the producer of armour and weaponry in Old English epic poems such as *Beowulf* and *Waldere* (Wilson 1976: 263-266). Further still, in the laws of *Æthelberht* (Clause 7) the smith's *wergild* is reserved to the king rather than his kin group, suggesting that he is the 'king's man.' Being mentioned at the top of the list of clauses, in the first codified English law ever, demonstrates the immense value of smiths in Anglo-Saxon society from as early as the sixth century. Yet whilst being valued for their craftsmanship, there is substantial evidence to suggest that smiths were marginalised agents within Anglo-Saxon society. Indeed, the legend of *Wēland* sees the smith abducted on the orders of King Nerike, before being hamstrung and imprisoned on a lake-island, to prevent escape. Despite this violent act of exclusion, the smith was forced to produce items for the king whilst imprisoned, demonstrating the valued production of high-status metal goods. This ambivalent status of *Wēland*, as privileged yet ostracised, is indicative of the perception of smiths in early medieval society more broadly. Importantly, it is evidenced not only in art and literature, but by the spatial relationship of smiths to cultural centres in several archaeological excavations.

Archaeologists have recognised numerous forms of evidence for Anglo-Saxon smiths and metalworking, with the most substantial data source being the vast quantities of metalwork from furnished graves, of which knives are the most commonly recovered artefact (Leahy 2003: 124-125). In spite of their role in the production of such quotidian objects, there is significant archaeological evidence to indicate that smiths possessed a special status in Early Anglo-Saxon society. Corroborating the heroic story of *Wēland* detailed above, the material record implies a close association between elites and smiths in Anglo-Saxon England. This can be attributed to the function of gift-giving of precious objects as a key instrument of alliance, and in creating notions of kingship. It was not only such ornate metal products which were valued by elite society, but the tools of production themselves, which also came to constitute the trappings of royal power. Whetstones, for instance, appear to have had an importance beyond that of mere utility, as indicated by the sceptre/whetstone object recovered from Mound 1 at Sutton Hoo

(Bruce-Mitford 1947). Further, the sharpening of weapons seems to have possessed special symbolic significance, as surrendering arms to be honed would have constituted an act of submission, a ritual possibly inherited from Celtic kingship (e.g. Enright 2006; Shapland 2008). Such a legacy may partly explain the veneration of smiths across northern Europe in Iron Age societies (Barndon 2006).

In addition to forming relationships between elites and their followers, the iconography of ornate metal objects was used to express a plethora of social, ethnic and cultural statements (Hedeager 1992 Behr 2000: 50). The activities of smiths, and the artefacts they produced, were therefore critical to the construction and reproduction of the social and political lives of elite society in Early Anglo-Saxon England. Equally, the authority visibly demonstrated over smiths by Early Anglo-Saxon elites in their spatial positioning was part of a wider exercise of power, which included control of the resources required for industrial metalworking on a considerable scale, particularly ores, alloys and timber.

Whilst Early Anglo-Saxon metalworkers were of exceptional value to these powerful individuals, the archaeological record is aligned with the literary evidence in portraying smiths as 'marginalised' or 'other'. Based on associated collections of metalworking tools, several excavated graves in England have been heralded as the burials of Anglo-Saxon smiths. Amongst the most well known is that excavated at Tattershall Thorpe, Lincolnshire (Hinton and White 1993; Hinton 2000). A handful of human bone fragments indicated the presence of an inhumation, recovered with an assemblage of metal objects, totalling more than one hundred and thirty items, which consisted of a suite of tools including an anvil, snips and tongs. Radiocarbon analysis from the grave produced dates from the mid to late seventh century (Hinton and White 1993: 154-162). Intriguingly, the excavator inferred from the liminal location of the burial, situated on the fen-edge, that it was that of a smith employed by the local royal estate, yet treated as a social pariah. Such an interpretation should be treated with caution, as the area immediately to the west of the grave was not investigated. Nevertheless, the positioning of the grave on the limits of a marginal landscape, and the inclusion of bells in the assemblage, possibly used to signal the presence of a stranger, do support the case for a socially peripheral individual (Hinton 2000: 116).

When and how early medieval metalworkers became characterised as outcasts is not clear but may reflect part of a more antiquated provenance. A comparable sentiment is evident in Ancient Greek mythology, with the god Hephaestus (Vulcan in the Roman pantheon) portrayed as lame, being excluded from heaven as a result (Seeberg 1965: 102-103). Whilst the early medieval perception of smiths has mainly been seen as manifest in the burial record, alternative archaeological material can contribute to our understanding. Research into the location of smithing sites in Early Anglo-Saxon settlements remains relatively neglected, although the relative dearth of confidently identified forge sites is partly responsible (Leahy 2003: 116). It is important also to make the distinction between the apparent separation between ferrous and non-ferrous metallurgical activities notable on many Anglo-Saxon sites. For instance, at Hamwic excavation has demonstrated that

non-ferrous metalworking was concentrated in particular areas (Hinton 1996). High-status metalwork was almost completely absent from such zones, leading the excavators to suggest that the town may have possessed a 'socially marginal' status. A similar range of non-ferrous objects has been recovered from Anglian York (Rogers 1993: 1370-4) and it is unlikely that such products would have interested the Anglo-Saxon elite beyond their taxation value (Hinton 1996: 100). In contrast, it appears that precious metalworkers were attributed a different status, as valued but 'other', a picture corroborated by an increasing body of evidence from burials (see above).

### **Anglo-Saxon Smiths and High-Status Settlements**

The palace site at Yeavering, Northumbria, excavated in the 1950s by Brian Hope-Taylor (Hope-Taylor 1977), remains the most celebrated early medieval high-status settlement in the country. Incredibly detailed investigations revealed numerous features including a series of monumental timber halls, a double-palisaded enclosure, and an elliptical structure interpreted as a tiered auditorium. Seasonal occupation at the complex, spanning approximately one hundred years from the late sixth century AD, is thought to have accommodated the peripatetic lifestyle of the early medieval kings of Bernicia (Hope Taylor 1977; *HE* II: xiv). The monumental architecture of the complex persists as the focus of scholarly attention but at the expense of later excavations that revealed early medieval metalworking in close proximity to the palace (Harding 1981; Tinniswood and Harding 1991). As a consequence, the value of these investigations has not been explored and their wider significance remains neglected. Excavations in 1976 on the site of a henge monument not only confirmed the prehistoric date of the earthwork, but uncovered a series of pits containing Anglo-Saxon material (Harding 1981). In several of the features, sufficient diagnostic material was found to suggest that they were the result of Anglo-Saxon metalworking, processing copper alloys at the least (Tinniswood and Harding 1991: 101-108).

The location of the henge at Yeavering positioned the smiths at the edge of the palatial complex, thus allowing the elite to maintain control over industrial processes. A comparable situation is recognisable in Denmark, where excavations at the 'productive site' of Lake Tisso, West Zealand, have focussed on an early medieval 'manor' complex. Investigations revealed a magnate residence dating from the seventh century, but the relative paucity of structures led the excavators to suggest the site was seasonally occupied (Jorgensen 2003: 197-204). The high status core of the settlement consisted of a special enclosed area within which the only permanent structures were a sequence of single structure halls, a 'cult area' and a forge. The halls, situated towards the centre, formed the focus of the complex, but the forge was located in the northernmost extremity of the enclosure (Jorgensen 2003: 204). The evidence from Lake Tisso thus presents a strikingly comparable picture to Yeavering, with evidence for metalworking incorporated into a high status complex. Here, too, industry was not located at the core of the settlement, but still lay within the bounds of the monumental complex. The enclosure of the forge in the royal complex demonstrates a desire to express royal authority over the metalworking industry, yet its peripheral location ensured the smiths and their work remained at the fringes of elite social life.

Whilst the smiths were clearly sited at points slightly removed from elite social centres, their positioning was not merely a geographical one. It has been suggested that the choice of the henge as an industrial site at Yeavinger was entirely fortuitous (Tinniswood and Harding 1991: 107), but this seems unlikely, especially as the bank of the henge would have been upstanding during the early medieval period (Harding 1981: 119). Instead, the ‘otherness’ of henges, as locations associated with the dead, was clearly recognised by the local population, as similar monuments in the area consistently display evidence for Anglo-Saxon burial (Harding 1981). This proposition is supported by the well-attested association of prehistoric monuments with Anglo-Saxon folklore, such as the Neolithic longbarrow of Wayland’s Smithy, Oxfordshire. Contrary to the situation at Lake Tisso, finite boundaries to the palace complex have not been identified at Yeavinger and may never have existed. Instead, metalworking was spatially bounded by its positioning within a prehistoric henge, a feature *already* recognised as liminal, thus compounding the enigmatic perception of the workers.

Spatial separation and ideological power over smithing was not solely the preserve of the secular elite, however; similarly semi-liminal locations of smithing sites are notable at Anglo-Saxon monastic settlements. Peripheral industrial buildings have been noted at the ecclesiastical centres of Hoddom and Lindisfarne, and less substantial structures have been excavated on the periphery of sites at Dorchester-on-Thames, Hartlepool and Whitby. A compelling context for these structures is provided by *Bede* (*HE* IV: xiv), who retells the story of a talented but irreligious worker of iron who caused consternation by preferring to remain in his workshop rather than attend church (Blair 2005: 203). It therefore appears that Anglo-Saxon monastic communities perceived smiths as conflated with a body of ‘others,’ that is, those who deviated from the perceived norm of the Christian convert. Monks thus demonstrated an equivalent attitude towards smiths as did their elite counterparts, tolerating their unusual behaviour for the material gain they provided.

The status of smiths and their industry did not remain constant throughout the Anglo-Saxon period, however. By the Late Saxon period, evidence of urban smiths is widespread and metalworking had assumed a more everyday position (Leahy 2003: 116). Such a situation is evident at York Minster; here, the tenth century is marked by an urban economy where smithing operated in a zoned area which no longer shows signs of exceptional status (Carver 1995: 195). The normalised status of the smith is likely associated with the changing character of kingship through the seventh and eighth centuries. The gift-giving and itinerant framework of the secular elite was gradually replaced by more permanent material investment. Society gradually lost dependence on smiths for the production of the high status goods that had previously been central to reciprocal gift-exchange (Hinton 2000: 115). The emergence of the Church as a framework for material investment, along with its alternative belief system would have accelerated the end of the superstitious image of the smith. However, the unusual status of metalworkers remained prominent enough in the social memory to be incorporated into written literature. Further investigation into high status Anglo-Saxon settlements will undoubtedly refine this picture, providing a material dimension to the charismatic characters populating those heroic tales.

## Conclusions

This paper presents preliminary observations made during the course of doctoral research, and is thus not comprehensive in its interpretations. Whilst its argument is subject to development and examination, the evidence from Early and Middle Anglo-Saxon settlements demonstrates a consistent pattern. Smiths, likely precious metalworkers, and their industry were regularly located in close proximity to high status secular and religious settlements. Such positions expressed power over an industry that was central to early medieval elite society, though the socially marginal status of the smiths ensured that metalworking sites remained semi-liminal locales.

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