

# Early Anglo-Saxon Christian Reliquaries

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## Abstract

*This corpus will discuss seventh and possibly eighth century Anglo-Saxon copper-alloy containers variously described as work boxes, needle cases, amulet containers and Christian reliquaries. Additionally it will include individual components and fragments of sheet metal that have been identified as elements of such boxes. A typology, material specification, and drawings are presented, design and construction principles discussed, and a nomenclature applicable to these containers is outlined. Since their earliest discovery, archaeologists and historians have been unable to reach a consensus as to their purpose. This publication sets out to answer that question.*

## Introduction

Seventy-one boxes, some complete, others incomplete, together with metal fragments from boxes have been recorded from forty-nine sites across Anglo-Saxon England. There is a need to compile a uniform scheme comprising where possible, individual site location, box type descriptions, decorative features and references. Principally, information has been retrieved from antiquarian books, archaeological publications, excavation reports, journals, manuscripts and physical examination.

### Format

Box classification Types I, II and III together with recognisable copper-alloy metal fragments and components from boxes will be listed alphabetically, with county, site location and references. References are those considered relevant to box(es) recovered from individual sites; they are not intended as a complete bibliographical listing for any specific site. Each Type will have its own Technical Detail section. ‘Secular Art or Sacred Symbols?’ will discuss the iconography of these enigmatic containers and ‘What are They?’ will address their identity and function.

### Inhumations

Documentation relating to the context of boxes from earlier excavated sites, e.g. Aldborough (Yorkshire), Cransley (Northamptonshire), Standlake (Oxfordshire), Yatesbury (Wiltshire), is often vague and unreliable. Other than that from Prittlewell (Essex), the remaining boxes are from inhumation burials of female adults, sub adults and children. Where it has not been possible to sex skeletal remains, female status has been defined from related grave assemblages.

## Archaeological and Scientific Dating Evidence

The dating evidence for the deposition of boxes to the second half of the seventh and possibly early eighth century based on seriation of graves assemblages and scientific evidence has been widely accepted (e.g. Hawkes 1973, 197; Geake 1997, 35; Lucy *et al* 2009, 128; Hills, 2015). Hawkes describes them ‘as one of the period’s leading type fossils’. The evidence has been vindicated in a recent publication (Hines and Bayliss, 2013) that, with the use of artefact-typology, seriation of grave assemblages and radio carbon dating (*ibid*, xvii), outlined a chronological framework for Anglo-Saxon grave goods of the sixth and seventh centuries (so-called ‘workboxes’ were included in the study). Human bones from four of the graves containing boxes or component parts of boxes were radiocarbon-dated (*ibid* Table 7.1).

### Castledyke Grave 183 (Lincolnshire)

Burial radiocarbon dated to *cal.* 575-650 (95% probability. UB-6038).

### Lechlade, Butler’s Field Grave 14 (Berkshire)

Burial radiocarbon dated and may date from *cal.* 650 -730 (84% probability. UB-4051) or *cal.* 740-765 (11% probability).

### Marina Drive Graves E1/E2 (Bedfordshire)

Burial radiocarbon dated to *cal.* 650-675 (95% probability. UB-4550 and UB -4551).

### Marina Drive Grave E3 (Bedfordshire)

Burial radiocarbon-dated to *cal.* 625-675 (95% probability. UB-4552).

Hines and Bayliss proposed that, on the basis of radiocarbon dating measurements and typology of grave assemblages, the burials at Lechlade and Marina Drive should be assigned to a phase between 665-695 (95% *posterior probability*). The burial at Castledyke is almost certainly earlier and can be assigned on one of the models used to a phase from 630-660 (95% *posterior probability*). It is of interest that chronological research suggested that the end of furnished burials in Anglo-Saxon England occurred ‘two decades or more before the end of the seventh century’ (Hines and Bayliss 2013, xvii). For a contrary view on the latter, see Archibald (*ibid.* 493-512), who on coin sequence evidence argued that furnished burials extended into the first decade of the eighth century.