The sense of being seen: Ocular effects at Sutton Hoo

Howard Williams


Abstract
I consider the mnemonic agency of the art adorning a diverse range of artefacts interred in one of Europe’s most famous archaeological discoveries. The early seventh-century AD burial chamber constructed within a ship beneath Mound 1 at Sutton Hoo, Suffolk, UK, was uncovered in 1939. I identify a theme linking the prestige artefacts placed within this ‘princely’ grave: many are covered with eyes or eye-like forms. I argue that this ocular quality to the art – not simply visually striking but affording the sense of animated, watching presences – was integral to the selection of artefacts for burial. I argue that the beastly, monstrous and humanoid eyes commemorated the dead person as all-seeing. Those witnessing the staged wrapping and consignment of the artefacts were afforded the sense of being all-seen. By exploring art in this elite mortuary context, the article presents a case study in the early medieval archaeology of the senses.

Keywords
agency, Anglo-Saxon, animal art, early medieval, ocular, Sutton Hoo

Introduction
The sensory qualities of material culture have been widely explored by archaeologists in recent years. For mortuary archaeologists, investigating the staging of sensory experience in past funerals can provide new insights into the commemorative significance and variability of body-disposal, artefact-deposition, monument-construction and burial-location. Yet material culture can also be deployed in past funerals to articulate and constitute discourses concerning the enduring and transformed sensing nature of the dead person: their hunger, thirst, desire for communication and physical contact with the living, but also their sightedness in death. In particular, theorizing the senses foregrounds how mortuary practices transform and constitute social identities for the dead by choreographing sensory engagements with, and imaginings of, the dead within and beyond the grave. In this regard, the treatment and representation of the dead in past funerals is neither purely a social fact nor an ideological fiction, neither mirror nor mirage, but a mnemonic strategy for selectively remembering and forgetting the dead (see Williams, 2004; Williams and Sayer, 2009). However, within the rich and heterogeneous theoretical terrain of early medieval mortuary archaeology, recent studies engaging with the social, ideological and mnemonic interpretation of mortuary data have only begun to explore the senses as key to understanding how funerals operated, what they meant and how they reflected and constituted the commemoration of the dead.

This article advocates the value of a sensory approach to early medieval mortuary archaeology. In particular, I consider the mnemonic agency of the art adorning material culture placed in early medieval graves. I explore the decoration found on strikingly
coloured and bright artefacts made of gold and garnet, silver and bronze, wrapped and placed within one exceptional ‘princely’ grave of the early seventh century AD: Mound 1 at Sutton Hoo, Suffolk, UK.

**The senses in early medieval mortuary archaeology**

Early medieval graves are a rich resource for archaeological research and have been at the forefront of both period-specific investigations of early medieval society, religion and ideology as well as broader theoretical and methodological debates in mortuary archaeology (see Williams and Sayer, 2009, for a recent review of the literature). Recently, studies have begun to consider mortuary practices as more than social mirrors or ideological imaginings, but as media by which perceptions of the past – including myths, legends, genealogies and more specific family histories and personal biographies – were reproduced through commemorative bodily acts involving material culture (see Carver, 2000; Halsall, 2003; Price, 2008). In particular, Andy Jones’ (2007) concept, ‘technologies of remembrance’, has been utilized to explore how material culture can be deployed in mortuary performances to convey and constitute memories on a range of registers (Devlin, 2007; Williams, 2006). However, in this research, the role of the senses, and the sensory impact of the decoration adorning early medieval artefacts in particular, has received only limited attention with regard to the nature and experience of funerals and the particular strategies employed in remembering and forgetting the dead.

Concerning the mnemonic agency of art – the ability of art to impress memories onto those using or experiencing it – some relevant themes have been already explored in the literature, if not yet drawn into a coherent argument concerning how the senses operated in early medieval funerals. For example, recent studies have engaged with how animal art might be viewed as commemorating shared mythologies and identities when placed in graves, most recently discussed for English material by Chris Fern (2007, 2010) and Aleks Pluskowskii (2010). Other studies have considered the sensory impacts of the theatrical and embodied practices involved in funerals and the visual impact of art in composing and displaying the dead within the grave or on the pyre (Carver, 2000, 2005; Jennbert, 2006). Likewise, the effects of the brevity of such mortuary displays (Halsall, 2003) and their staged and choreographed removal from the senses have been explored to better understand how mortuary practices constituted memories (Williams, 2006: 117–44; 2010). The colour of artefacts and the creation of brilliant display through artefact provision have certainly received some attention (e.g. Effros, 2002a; Back Danielsson, 2007: 180–88; Williams, 2006: 39–42, 135–41). However, detailed and contextual explorations of how the mnemonic agency of art was integrated in strategies of mortuary commemoration have not taken place. Certainly, this author’s recent call for the explicit theorizing and systematic investigation of the roles of the senses in early medieval mortuary archaeology (including among others the roles of embodied experiences, touch, taste, smell, sound and vision) remains largely unanswered (Williams, 2005).

In developing a study of the sensory qualities and mnemonic agency of early medieval mortuary material culture, we can draw inspiration from a range of recent studies from other periods and regions and from studies of prehistoric monumentality and material culture in particular. Considering the colours and materialities of mortuary architectures (e.g. Cummings, 2002; Jones, 2007), the sensory experiences choreographed by strikingly-
decorated artefacts (M. Giles, 2008) and the sociality of consumption (Hamilakis, 1998) provide specific cues for understanding early medieval furnished mortuary practices involving public display and feasting. When considering art in these mortuary contexts, Alfred Gell’s (1992, 1998) emphasis on the agency rather than the meaning of art, and its power to convey identities, memories and cosmologies, offers considerable potential for developing new avenues for exploring art and memory in the early Middle Ages (see also Brundle, 2009). This is a particularly useful approach when it is evident that this art was employed in funerals at a time when systems of meaning and world-views were in flux with the process of conversion to Christianity. Understanding the art as iconographically ‘pagan’ or ‘Christian’ is equally problematic (compare Wickham-Crowley, 1992, and Wamers, 2009).

Therefore, for art found in both pre- and early Christian early medieval contexts, approaching the art’s agency allows us to better understand its use less as a system of meaning and statement of belief, and more as a mnemonic strategy. Art may have enchanted and entrapped the senses through both abstracted and naturalistic ornamentation, serving to protect, communicate and commemorate (see Kitzinger, 1993). This approach is particularly pertinent when considering the sensory impact on the memories of those experiencing assemblages of material culture deployed in public rituals associated with the disposal of the dead by inhumation or cremation. In these instances, the deposition of grave goods may hold meanings and memories for the mourners embodied in their decoration, but it is the overall impact of the assemblage and the act of consigning coloured, decorated surfaces that draw together artefacts of different function, material and style to constitute memories of the dead during the funeral, whether the mourners regarded themselves as ‘pagan’ or ‘Christian’ or something in between.

To explore this idea, I want to focus on only one rich and well-known archaeological context in which such art is found: the burial chamber most likely constructed in the second quarter of the seventh century AD – at the cusp of Christian conversion – within the ship beneath Mound 1 at Sutton Hoo, Suffolk. I make no claim that Mound 1 is either unique in this regard or fully typical of the use of all art found elsewhere, but I do suggest that Mound 1 may provide a useful point of embarkation for a wider study of the varied and evolving commemorative roles of early medieval art upon which eyes are represented and humans and beasts are depicted with exaggerated ocular faculties. I consider the art’s agency to entrap and enchant the gaze and whether it may have been intended to protect and even intimidate the viewer’s gaze through the depiction of staring, watchful eyes that appear to ‘see’ the viewer. In other words, the art is not focused on the representation of narrative scenes or even symbolic ‘highlights’ to be ‘read’ as iconography. Instead, the eyes are intended to protect and commemorate, staring back at the viewer. During the funeral, this art created engagements with the viewer on – and at – different scales and distances as the objects were used in performances connected to their wrapping and placing within the grave.

The use of art in this elite – and arguably religiously syncretistic and royal – mortuary architectural setting can be seen as subsidiary to, and enhancing, the spectacle of the funeral and the allusions the grave was intended to communicate. However, it may be the case that the grave’s ocular art choreographed specific emotive and mnemonic engagements with the deceased by instilling the sense of the dead as all- and far-seeing
The survivors as being watched and all-seen. In considering this idea, the article extends an argument developed by this author elsewhere concerning the mnemonic effects of late sixth- and early seventh-century ‘princely’ burials. In particular, I have interpreted Sutton Hoo in these terms as a rapidly evolving commemorative project (Williams, 2001) in which the red and gold coloured, brilliant and seemingly ‘animated’ artefacts were integral to the technologies of remembrance in operation, constituting the dead within the mound and in the landscape (Williams, 2006: 135–41; 158–62; see also Carver, 2000, 2005).

**The mnemonic agency of early Anglo-Saxon art**

The background for this study is the highly complex and evolving animal art of Scandinavia, north-west Europe and south-east Britain from the fifth to the seventh centuries AD (Speake, 1980). There is now a diverse literature exploring the visual riddles and ambiguities of this art, its possible protective roles when used on dress accessories, weapons, armour and horse equipment, and its evocation of pre-Christian mythological themes. Specifically, studies have focused on the art’s depiction of human-animal ambiguities and transformations (e.g. Brundle, 2009; Dickinson, 2002, 2005; Leigh, 1984; Fern, 2010; Pluskowski, 2010). The art can also be considered within the broad historical context of barbarian kingdom formation, being used by martial elites to legitimize and consolidate their power and assert their (probably imagined or at least heavily reconfigured) links to ancestors and Scandinavian origin myths (Hedeager, 1999; Høilund Nielsen, 1998). It is not implausible, but far from certain, that animal art encoded references to ritual transformations linked to early versions of the cult of the Norse god Odin and his far-seeing and soul-journeying shamanic manifestations in particular (Hedeager, 1999; Kristoffersen, 1995). In this regard, as discussed recently by Ing-Marie Back Danielsson (2007) for Scandinavian contexts, the widespread representation of human face-masks and animals with exaggerated eyes makes this an art of transformation, perhaps used to facilitate the social and cosmological reconfiguration of personhood in lifecycle rituals and cultic contexts. If so, then this art might have held shifting and varying uses as an art to be seen but also an art intended for seeing into, and passing into, other worlds. Such ideas may not have been rejected wholesale upon the Christian conversion of the Anglo-Saxon elite, but were selectively adapted within the intellectually vibrant monastic cultures so closely attendant upon the newly converted secular aristocracy.

Despite its changing character and use on very different artefact types, the presence of human, beastly and monstrous eyes is a ubiquitous feature of both Salin’s Style I and Style II animal art. This quality has tended to be overlooked in previous work in favour of studies of style and iconography (e.g. Speake, 1980). Yet if we consider the eyes of the figures, we recognize connections with the art on other artefacts of the sixth and seventh centuries from England such as bronze button brooches (female dress accessories; Suzuchi, 2008) and the gold cultic artefacts from contemporary southern Scandinavia, namely gold bracteates, gold-foil figurines (Back Danielsson, 2007) and anthropomorphic pendants (Helmbrecht, 2007). For Style I animal art, the seemingly deliberate ambiguity (see Dickinson, 2002) of the representations appears to shift the viewer’s perspective from seeing animals to humans, pivoting around the omnipresent eye. In later Style II animal art, humans, boars, birds and serpents have prominent, exaggerated eyes while animal interlace forms a fluid field of entwining animal bodies which create eye-like loops and eyes are the only fixed points (Speake, 1980). As both the Style I and II animal art change and are
abbreviated over time, the ocular emphasis does not decline. Indeed, it can be seen to persist to become the overwhelming feature of each style as other elements fragment and lose their naturalistic appearance.

This leads us to consider whether further eye-like abstract decoration disassociated from human and animal bodies might also have been regarded as ocular representations in early Anglo-Saxon art. For sixth- and early seventh-century southern and eastern England, a wide selection of dress accessories and some weapons are adorned with animal art but further artefact categories are adorned with humanoid or monstrous faces, staring out at the viewer. Indeed, circular punches are placed on a far wider range of artefacts and, while purely abstract, might possibly also refer to eyes. From pots to combs, buckets to weaponry, making artefacts ‘see’ is achieved by impressing and punching circular and lentoid shapes onto them. The challenge for considering the ocular qualities of abstract art is therefore not so much reading meaning into the art and the particular beasts and humanoid figures depicted, but recognizing the eye-catching and animated qualities of artefacts so decorated and the relationship between this art and the commemorative contexts in which it is deployed.

Yet meaning is not arbitrary although decoration might be multi-vocal (Speake, 1980: 92) and might vary further still depending on context of use (e.g. Hinton, 2005: 61). While there need not be a single, coherent iconographic meaning to this ocular emphasis, the theme of visual riddling and far-seeing identified in this art does accord in broad terms with the qualities afforded to the Norse deity Odin in later Scandinavian myths. Odin’s ravens travelled widely and see the world for him, and he sacrifices an eye to learn hidden knowledge of the past and future (Hedeager, 1999). Artefacts adorned with animal art including boars, birds and serpents juxtaposed with human representations might be regarded as invoking the use of the eyes depicted, constituting claims of far-seeing and knowledge of the past, present and future. The art certainly invokes movement and perhaps was deemed to empower the practical use of artefacts from brooches to shields, particularly in their role of covering and protecting the human body. Hence, the art may have also conveyed the themes of memory and wisdom for the user or wielder; the accumulation of knowledge by seeing into other worlds and far-sightedness achieved through animal familiars and animal transformation may be rendered in short-hand through the use of ocular art.

If early Anglo-Saxon art shares, at least in part, this theme, then its ocular emphasis – providing visual riddles and emphasizing the eyes of those depicted – might be connected elements of a common cultural logic. The art challenges the viewer to see, and asserts claims to the art’s wearer or wielder of seeing what cannot be seen. In a pre-Christian worldview, this art might have been a passport to supernatural realms during communal rituals taking place within the hall, on the battlefield and at the grave. Of course, sightedness and seeing might not be an end in itself, but a symbolic first-step towards knowledge gained and transmitted by oral transmission. In turn, entrapping the gaze and affording the sense of all-seeing and being all-seen can be understood as a passport to knowledge gained from, and used in, oral performance. In this way, the use of art adorned with watching eyes might have protected but also legitimated the utterances and actions of those using it, forming part of an elite discourse and bolstering their authority (see
The use of the ocular art on dress (mainly for sixth-century Style I) and weapons, armour and horse-riding gear (increasingly for late sixth- and early seventh-century Style II) might be seen as ways of asserting claims and allegiance to particular myths, memories and identities embodied within the art, and perhaps facilitating particular types of ritual performance involving visions of the past and the future (see also Price, 2008). In a more practical sense, ornamentation might have directly conferred the sense that the wielder or wearer has the appropriate knowledge to effectively use the items and assert the quality of the items they adorned.

From this perspective, the meaning of the art is crucial, but archaeologists can say most about the proven and likely contexts for the art’s use and its agency in these contexts to attract and enchant, intimidate and trigger/impose an emotional state or a mode of remembrance upon the viewer. Animal art and other early Anglo-Saxon ocular art can be considered part of what Alfred Gell (1992, 1998) would term a technology of enchantment. The art had an agency that drew in its viewers and impacted on their senses. In the funeral – the context in which the art is most often recovered – the enchantment and intimidation may have both been key ingredients of their significance as a commemorative medium by affecting how the dead were remembered by creating a specific sensory, and perhaps also a distinctive emotional, environment (Jones, 2007; Williams, 2006).

The art of Sutton Hoo

The story of the discovery, excavation and analysis of Mound 1 at Sutton Hoo, Suffolk, is now well-told (Bruce-Mitford, 1975, 1978; Bruce-Mitford and Evans, 1983; Carver, 2005, 2010; see also Williams, 2001, 2006: 137–41, 158–62; Williamson, 2008). Through the research of Martin Carver in particular, the cemetery can be understood as a series of elite and exclusive ideological statements using the medium of mortuary theatre, expressing East Anglian kingly power on the cusp of Christian conversion. The exclusive and ‘princely’ cemetery at Sutton Hoo was therefore short-lived, spanning perhaps only two or three generations during which time at least 17 mounds were raised over cremation and inhumation graves and joined by only a handful of more modest interments (Carver, 2005: 492). Seemingly it was only in the later stages of the cemetery’s use that two very different forms of ship-burial took place and neither were subsequently repeated (Mounds 1 and 2).

In Mound 2, a wealthy male-gendered chamber-grave was covered by a ship, although the details of the grave are obscured by later grave robbing. Meanwhile, Mound 1 escaped tomb-robbers, revealing an unprecedented wealthy burial assemblage interred within a specially-built chamber within a ship and covered by a large mound (for a recent reinterpretation in detail see Carver, 2005: 179–99). This grave has usually been attributed to East Anglia’s apostate warrior king, Raedwald, who died around AD 625, but it might still be argued that it is the grave of another East Anglian (or, at a far-stretch, East Saxon) elite individual with aspirations to high, perhaps royal (or indeed imperial: Filmer-Sankey, 1996), status whose name is either known or unknown to history. No human remains survived in the highly acidic soils of the burial chamber and a royal status and specific attribution continues to be treated cautiously by many academics (e.g. Hinton, 2005: 62). There remain different possible scenarios for how the burial was arranged (Carver, 2005: 192–4). The cultural affiliations of the grave are eclectic and an exclusive Swedish link is doubtful, although south Scandinavian (Danish) connections are likely (Høilund Nielsen, 1999: 200). Likewise, the religious affiliation of Mound 1 is ambiguous, neither conclusively Christian.
nor incontrovertibly pagan, and appears to draw artefacts and ideas from both traditions (see Hinton, 2005: 67).

The art of Mound 1 has been studied with regard to its technical achievements, date, stylistic parallels and iconographic programme (Bruce-Mitford, 1975, 1978; Evans and Bruce-Mitford, 1983; see also Wickham-Crowley, 1992). The ocular art of Sutton Hoo is varied indeed and cuts across artefact-types and artefact-provenances. Eyes of beasts, monsters and humanoid figures adorn the personal costume, weaponry and feasting gear placed within the chamber. In addition to these indisputable representations of eyes, the art creates many further ‘abstract’ eyes including circular bosses, the arrangement of rivets and knots within serpentine Style II. Further eyes are now lost but may well have once been present; we do not know whether the embroidery that covered artefacts and lined the chamber had further human and animal art upon it (see Carver, 2005: 187–91), nor do we know whether the wood of the ship and the chamber was also adorned with beasts and masks with staring eyes. Equally, we do not know how many pairs of dead eyes filled the chamber. Were sacrificed animals, for example, strewn within or around the ship, their dead eyes staring up at the onlooker? Yet from the evidence available, the treasure from Mound 1 included ocular artefacts made in East Anglia as well as those acquired or inspired (directly or indirectly) from western Britain, Scandinavia, Frankia and Byzantium. To illustrate how this art may have operated within the mortuary context, I want to consider two martial implements in more detail – the Mound 1 helmet and shield.

The helmet from Mound 1
The famous and unique Sutton Hoo helmet was old when buried (Bruce-Mitford, 1978: 224) and is either a Scandinavian import or heavily copies Scandinavian helmet styles (Marzinzik, 2007). Made of iron with tinned bronze fittings and inlaid garnets, the helmet was a colour-mix of silver, gold and red. It can be interpreted as both a martial and ceremonial artefact and an heirloom likely to have had fame and social memories accrued to it (Bruce-Mitford, 1978: 138–231; Marzinzik, 2007; Norr, 2008; see Figures 1 and 2). Yet here I want to highlight the ocular qualities of the helmet. Certainly the helmet transformed the senses, affecting the wearer’s visual and auditory communication and affording the wearer with a transformed experience of their surroundings. As such, the helmet was essentially a mask as well as a martial artefact that may have given the wearer the sense of supra-sensory experience as well as physical protection (see also Back Danielsson, 2007: 108–13).

This theme seems matched by the decoration on the helmet; its surface was covered with eyes looking out at the viewer. When the helmet was worn, the eyes of its wearer would be the only characteristics visible to onlookers and were strikingly framed by the face-mask. Moreover, the anthropomorphic face-mask was adorned with eyes and eye-like motifs. These included the boars with prominent eyes that comprised the eyebrows. Meanwhile, two cast bronze serpents with countersunk garnet eyes meet above the nose-guard. A further serpent’s head keeps a look out behind at the back of the crest; the wearer literally had eyes in the back of his head (Bruce-Mitford, 1978: 159–63)!
Figure 1. Front view of the helmet from Mound 1, Sutton Hoo, showing the distribution of designs (not to scale). Below: designs 1 and 5 (both scale 1:1). Redrawn and designed by the author after Bruce-Mitford 1978, figures 108 and 110.
The panels of the helmet’s cheek-pieces, face-mask and neck-guard are also ocular. The interlace panels (Designs 4 and 5: Bruce-Mitford, 1978: 200–2) were composed of beastly eyes and further ‘eyes’ were created by the looping bodies of the serpentine beasts. Yet it was the three figural scenes that would have looked out at the viewer most strikingly. Two of these could be reconstructed. Design 2 (Rider and Fallen Warrior: Bruce-Mitford, 1978: 190–7) depicts two warriors in combat, one on a horse, the other on foot and stabbing the horse from beneath. The eyes of the two warriors are prominent in combat. The rider is aided by a third diminutive figure aiming the rider’s spear that might be interpreted as a helping spirit or deity. The figures’ eyes look out at the viewer while simultaneously entrapped in their own scene of action. In contrast, the most prominent, outward-looking eyes are those of Design 1 (The Dancing Warriors: Bruce-Mitford, 1978: 186–9). The birds
on the warriors’ headdresses resemble the Mound 1 drinking horns’ terminals as well as those from other princely graves (see below; also Webster, 1992). With striking eyes, they may be regarded as far-seeing birds of prey (like Odin’s ravens) transmitting knowledge and skills gained from their farseeing directly into the dancing warriors who wear them. In turn, these warriors confront the viewer at the front of the helmet.

Taking these design elements together, the worn helmet transformed the senses of the wearer but in addition afforded the wearer with an ocular corona of watchful eyes charged with far-seeing knowledge and skill. We can speculate that this served to render the helmet effective and memorable in a range of roles, during feasts, gift exchange ceremonies, cult activities, assemblies, in the hall and not least upon the battlefield. The Sutton Hoo helmet was therefore a powerful and empowering piece of war-kit that in the grave would have made an indisputable statement about the claimed secular and supernatural authority of the deceased.

A further implication of the helmet is that these ‘eyes’ were still active when the helmet was not worn and the human eyes are absent from the face-mask. In this sense, the helmet had a dual agency to enhance the identity of its wearer and invoke his presence in absentia. The empty helmet remained a watching agent when at rest and on display – akin to the way skulls afford a sense of the person’s absence and presence. This sense of staged absence may have come to the fore with the helmet’s interment and wrapping beneath textiles in the Mound 1 chamber, a watchful presence adjacent to the deceased’s body.

The shield from Mound 1
Next, I wish to consider the shield from Mound 1 (Bruce-Mitford, 1978: 1–137; see also Dickinson, 2005; Figures 3 and 4). Regarded as a product of southern or central Scandinavia (Bruce-Mitford, 1978: 91–9), this striking artefact was placed at the west end of the chamber close to the helmet and the postulated location of the head of the deceased. Its upright position facing out over the chamber made it central to the burial tableau (Dickinson, 2005: 161). It was made of leather-covered lime with an iron boss and gilt-bronze fittings, some with garnet inlays. Like the helmet, the shield was replete in ocular art (Bruce-Mitford, 1978: 4). Before deposition it may have been displayed in the treasury or hall and used as readily in ceremonies as conflicts. Tania Dickinson (2005) has argued that the animal representations on early Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian shields of this period may have been mythical and intended to provide the wearer with a sense of protection, invoking supernatural assistance and affording the user the evasive qualities of the (often aquatic and aerial) beasts depicted. In addition, in combination with the helmet, I suggest that the animals on the Sutton Hoo shield were intended to afford the wielder, and contexts in which it was placed, with supra-sensory far-seeing and create an all-seeing surface to intimidate, curse, bless and ward off both physical and spiritual attacks. Here, I believe we can identify eyes as important on both the animal art and perhaps also the more abstract components of the artefact.
The shield would have been a striking colour-mix of red and gold. It was covered with leather held in place by gilt-bronze animal-headed fluted clips with countersunk garnet eyes interspersed with gilt-bronze foil rectangular panels of animal interlace (Bruce-Mitford, 1978: 29–36). The edge of the shield was therefore fixed and protected by staring animal heads. The shield boss was also excessively ocular, adorned with multiple face-masks, equine beasts and animal interlace, all of which had eyes that stare out at the viewer (Bruce-Mitford, 1978: 48–52). Yet between the eyes at the edge and centre of the shield, the paramount ocular ornaments are the two shield mounts. The first of these is a gilt-bronze dragon with a cabochon garnet eye that clearly invokes the theme of human-animal transformation. This is because the dragon’s tail constitutes a human face-mask and its body is a succession of three paired garnet ‘eyes’ marking the joints of the wings. There is a final eye-like garnet above the tail’s face-mask (Bruce-Mitford, 1978: 63–7). Likewise, the second mount is a bird of prey of gold foil impressed with animal interlace. Again, human-
animal transformation is invoked as it has within its leg a cloisonné garnet human face-mask (Bruce-Mitford, 1978: 55–62). Along the bird’s wing are tiny helmeted profiles of heads and face-masks with wings. In other words, both dragon and bird are represented as ‘containing’ watching human forms. Therefore, both serpent and bird transformed and hence protected their wielder and the contexts of their use. Indeed, it is tempting to regard even the bosses and ornamental strips on the shield-board as further ocular presences, making the shield board a constellation of staring eyes (Bruce-Mitford, 1978: 67–8).

![Figure 4. The front of the shield from Mound 1, Sutton Hoo (scale: 1/12), showing the principal ocular ornamentation on the bird and winged dragon mounts (scale: 3/4). Redrawn and designed by the author after Bruce-Mitford 1978, figures 6a, 43d, 44, 49, 50, 63b and 63c.](image)

Eyes do not only look out from the front of the shield (Figure 5). On the back of the shield we find the same theme: ‘dragon’ face-masks and pairs of birds adorn the ornamental hand-grip extensions from the shield’s back (Bruce-Mitford, 1978: 75). These afford the user close interaction with watching beastly forms and perhaps provide, as with the helmet, eyes watching for attack from behind. The result is that, staring out from the front and back
of the shield, the viewer is faced by a complex array of eyes operating on different scales for those viewing the shield from different distances and perspectives.

These ocular qualities were likely connected to other sensory qualities of the shield: its weight when used, the sound created by crashing a spear against its back, its movement in battle-training and combat. All may have combined to enhance its use as spectacle and invoke armorial and spiritual protection for its user. Yet when viewed from a distance, the circular form of the shield itself could have been regarded as one great eye. Certainly for an artefact with a protective function its fittings and decorations all emphasize ocular qualities, a veritable sea of eyes staring out at anyone approaching it and its bearer. In doing so, the surface has depth: humans are within the beasts and both are within the eye of the shield itself.
Feast for the eyes

The discussion of the Mound 1 helmet and shield illustrates how the form, ornament, colour and luminosity of the helmet and shield combine to emphasize both their striking and 'seeing' qualities. If the ocular theme were restricted to the helmet and shield, one might be tempted to dismiss their inclusion as coincidence or residual of their primary Scandinavian context of design rather than the pertinence of this decoration for the mortuary theatre conducted at Sutton Hoo. Yet eyes are ubiquitous within the range of gold and garnet jewellery interred in Mound 1. These items bear craft technology derived from Frankish contacts and Scandinavian styles but were designed for the East Anglian context (Henderson, 1999: 32). The two gold and garnet scabbard bosses render the sword adorned with two striking eyes protecting the blade (Bruce-Mitford, 1978: 275, 277). The unsurpassed high-quality gold dress accessories are also populated by animals and humanoid figures in which the staring eyes are emphasized by size and colour. The great gold buckle is a surface of intertwining serpents and paired birds, its centrepiece a pair of lentoid eyes forming a half-concealed face-mask (Bruce-Mitford, 1978: 536–64). Likewise, the shoulderclasps are decorated with the overlapping bodies of boars, birds and serpents with their eyes marked out in bright blue glass (Bruce-Mitford, 1978: 523–35). A lupine animal head adorns the pin-head of the clasps; here the animal serves as a binding agent, fastening the clasp together while looking outwards at the viewer (Bruce-Mitford, 1978: 531). The purse mount is protected by wolves, birds and other beasts with exaggerated eyes (Bruce-Mitford, 1978: 487–522). Of course the purse also contained many eyes – the busts of kings on 37 Merovingian gold coins! So the beasts on the mount protect the kingly image placed repeatedly within the purse before or during the funeral. The sceptre (Bruce-Mitford, 1978: 311–93), gold and garnet-adorned rod (Bruce-Mitford, 1978: 394–402) and iron stand (Bruce-Mitford, 1978: 431) also had eyes and beasts that looked outwards in all directions. A bronze stag (notably without its eyes marked out) and eight human face-masks on the whetstone itself look out from the sceptre found in Mound 1, arguably a symbol of royal status or aspirations (Bruce-Mitford, 1978: 311–77). Regardless of the precise meaning these objects held, in different ways they all contained eyes with fixed outward gazes or watchful stances.

Eyes dominate the decoration of artefacts from Mound 1 associated with music and the consumption of food and drink, practices regarded as integral to the establishment and workings of elite power and commemoration in the early Middle Ages (Effros, 2002b; Hinton, 2005: 63; Lee, 2007). The lyre has a pair of bird-heads (Bruce-Mitford and Evans, 1983: 630–5). Therefore, for the player of the lyre, the birds might be seen as conveying knowledge and memory to the wielder, subsequently passed on to the audience through the medium of oral performance (Bruce-Mitford and Evans, 1983: 630–5; Wickham-Crowley, 1992). Anthropomorphic pilasters and beastly eyes dominate the rims and terminals of the pair of drinking horns and the triangular mounts of the six maplewood cups (Bruce-Mitford and Evans, 1983: 316–95; Figure 5). Eyes also have a 'fixing' role on the tub and two buckets, where birds’ eyes are the rivets that attach the handles to the vessels. Perhaps protection and access to knowledge were invoked for those drinking and eating.
from the ocular vessels, or perhaps the eyes were intended to inspire oral performances from those participating in the feast.

As with the sceptre briefly mentioned above, the eyes upon the large hanging bowl illustrate that this theme is present through both Germanic and Celtic art within Mound 1. The large hanging bowl has three boars’ heads (perhaps later additions) below the escutcheons, each with deep red eye sockets. The escutcheon hooks bear the heads of what may be seals or otters that look into the vessel. Meanwhile, a fish with shimmering eyes looks up from within the bowl, appearing to swim when the bowl is filled with liquid. The fish and seals/otters therefore watch each other in a ‘scene’ of hunter and hunted animals interacting visually with each other (Bruce-Mitford and Evans, 1983: 217; Bruce-Mitford, 2005: 258–66). As with the gold and garnet jewellery, weapons and armour, the hanging bowls also foreground the colour red in their art. It may be no coincidence that when the bowl was repaired by a Germanic craftsperson, one silver patch was ornately adorned with a pair of Style II bird-heads with prominent eyes (Bruce-Mitford and Evans, 1983: 231–2). We can speculate whether this ocular theme was also perceived as present in the lavish Byzantine silverware interred in Mound 1 where we find human and animal faces looking out at the viewer. While I have deliberately avoided discussion of the precise iconography of each ocular representation and I do not advocate that their meanings are identical, these examples suffice to illustrate the ubiquitous ocularity of the Mound 1 assemblage.

A chamber of visions
The wealth in Sutton Hoo’s Mound 1 chamber is indisputably ‘princely’, suggesting that the deceased and survivors belonged to the highest echelon of society. This group might best be understand as a fluid, mobile and dynamic social group rather than an established and consolidated ‘royal’ or ‘aristocratic’ rank. Indeed, the mortuary performances at Sutton Hoo might be regarded as constitutive of this group’s aspired identity rather than reflections of long-established power and authority (Carver, 2000, 2005). Martin Carver (2000, 2010) has regarded the chamber as poetic and dreamlike, laden with allusions to prestige and mythology drawing upon eclectic sources from Scandinavia to Byzantium as well as those home-grown in early Anglo-Saxon England. We can extend this argument, but also question the focus on meaning in the burial process, to consider the chamber as a ‘sensory environment’ (see Graves, 2008). The Mound 1 assemblage includes artefacts of use in social, ceremonial and martial contexts that were strategically selected for burial. In combination, the use of the art in ritual performances leading up to the composition of the burial tableau within the chamber would have actively employed artefacts and their designs in oral and bodily performances invoking claims to remembering pasts and imagined futures (Williams, 2006: 33–4). Yet we can now be more specific: the memory creation and negotiation of the funeral employed artistic claims to mythological pasts and invocations of supra-sensory power, knowledge and protection. The details of these messages and claims may be lost to us, but we are left with the ocularity of the art as a striking statement of group memories and aspirations constituted and expressed in the mortuary theatre.

As argued elsewhere, however (Williams, 2006: 118–21), the ‘scene’ created within Mound 1 was not a single tableau but a moving stage of scenes and closures. Within the burial chamber, the art may have been displayed and then consigned in a complex procedure,
enclosed and wrapped within wood, leather and textiles. Artefacts were perhaps brought by different groups among the survivors, perhaps from different locales, used in performances, enclosed within the coffin and/or wrapped in textiles and placed at different moments during the funeral. Therefore, rather than on display pre-composed for an audience to view (as people view art today), the ocular effects were created by active participants rather than passive viewers. In this sense, the artefacts may have gained their efficacy through the brevity and exclusivity of their revelation, perhaps only by select persons, before being taken out of view at different stages of the funeral. This involved different scales and alignments of view, within the chamber, the ship and the burial ground as well as at earlier stages and places along the funerary procession’s route to the grave. Performances and practices in which the ocular artefacts were deployed may have taken place, including eating, drinking and the display and use of weapons and other ritual practices, each contributing to the all-seeing significance in the chamber through the placing of the grave-goods. The result was that the Mound 1 chamber was not only a chamber full of allusions and brilliance (Williams, 2006: 135–41) but was one in which watching, all-seeing eyes were concealed within its walls amidships of a seaworthy vessel. Moreover, these allusions were not part of a singular innovative and unique performance that perhaps was intended to create a distinctive ancestor in death (see also Price, 2008). It is worth speculating whether such vibrant ocular art invested the grave with a persistent persona for the deceased, animated and continuing to watch and communicate with the living through memory and ritual rather than closing off interaction with the living world. Perhaps the watchful art of Mound I enabled the deceased to live on and inhabit the East Anglian landscape. This might be seen as a key element of the territorial and symbolic claims of the survivors by building a unique and rapidly evolving commemorative programme upon a prominent ridge above the Deben estuary, simultaneously a focus of settlement, land and maritime transport and a threshold for those entering and leaving the East Anglian kingdom (for the landscape context see also Carver, 1998, 2005; Williams, 2001; Williamson, 2008).

Conclusion
Sutton Hoo’s Mound 1 was a unique performance for what may have been a unique individual at a time of rapid socio-political change and perhaps even crisis for the incipient East Anglian kingdom. As such, it may prove an unhelpful starting point to consider broader strategies in which art was deployed to commemorate the early medieval dead. Yet if the multiplicity and intensity of ocular art interred in Mound 1 is exceptional, the grave’s use of ocular art is not completely unprecedented. Other princely graves of the late sixth and early seventh-century represent a horizon of elite expression in which weapons, armour, horse-riding gear and feasting gear were buried, much of it adorned with Style II animal art. The decoration upon such items combined to afford graves with a pervasive ocular presence within elite burial chambers (see also Webster, 1992). Yet these princely graves represent the culmination of a longer-term tradition of deploying art adorned with the eyes of humans and beasts upon brooches and other female dress accessories in mortuary contexts within the fifth and sixth centuries AD but here transferred to a predominantly martial context. This in turn is but one element of a far wider theme in the use of ocular art in mortuary and other ritual contexts more generally in mid- and late first millennium AD Scandinavia and northwest Europe. Indeed the art at Sutton Hoo represents one version of a trend that spans Christian conversion and sees the deployment of protective, watchful
ocular art continuing upon metalwork but also employed in a wide range of new commemorative media from manuscripts to stone sculpture. This art is usually perceived as almost exclusively imported from continental Late Antique Christian visual culture (e.g. Henderson, 1999: 16–18) and it is indeed possible that the Christian Mediterranean icon was one of the inspirations for the link between vision and sacral authority posited at Mound 1 (see Kitzinger, 1993). However, rather than the diffusion of an existing idea, I would emphasize the syncretistic and adaptive nature of the use of art in Mound 1, drawing upon both pre-Christian and early Christian commemorative practice. As such, Sutton Hoo’s Mound 1, while unique, does provide a useful starting point for reconsidering the varied and shifting commemorative uses of ocular art in the syncretistic and rapidly changing environment of kingdom formation and Christian conversion in the seventh century.

I suggest that in life and in death, the individuals and groups that composed the Mound 1 assemblage were adopting and adapting material culture from elsewhere – including Style II animal art – at a specific historical juncture of an East Anglian dynasty’s claims to kingly power, used to invoke protection and assert the deceased as holding the supra-sensory skills necessary for kingly governance. The acquisition of hidden knowledge through far-seeing and the sense that the living person and dead within the grave retained that all-seeing character seem to be asserted through the anthropomorphic, zoomorphic and abstract ocular qualities of the art. Rather than indicating a coherent institution of sacral kingship, this was a discourse that was constitutive of aspired identities in death, not necessarily a worldly reality. The reading of Mound 1 presented here suggests that public ritual contexts were rendered unique and memorable as a commemorative strategy to narrate mythical pasts and assert claims over certain futures (see also Williams, 2001) in which all-seeing was promoted and the sense of being all-seen was constituted. It is possible that the artefacts interred not only had functions, meanings, biographies and fame of their own, but as an assemblage the eyes adorning a range of surfaces protected and testified to the presence of the dead, affording an animacy that was intended to persist long after the mound had covered the burial chamber.

As one case study, this article points the way to the potential for explicitly studying the senses as integral to the meaning and experience of early medieval art, and more broadly, the potential for studying the senses in interpreting early medieval mortuary practices. Archaeologists can in this way confidently explore contextual and historically-situated deployments of material culture to construct particular sensory environments. To date, these debates have begun among archaeologists studying prehistoric mortuary practices (e.g. Cummings, 2002; M. Giles, 2008) or architectural spaces at the very end of the Middle Ages (K. Giles, 2007; Graves, 2008), yet the case study here highlights that archaeologists can chart such themes for the early Middle Ages. The complex and shifting sensory environments provided by early medieval graves and tombs therefore offer fertile ground for extending and developing an understanding of the mnemonic agency of art.

Acknowledgements
I am grateful to Ing-Marie Back Danielsson, Lisa Brundle, Andy Jones and three anonymous reviewers for insightful comments on a draft of this article. Thanks to Martin Carver for persistent dialogue over the interpretation of Sutton Hoo.
References


---

1 Images of many of the artefacts found in the ‘Sutton Hoo treasure’ from Mound 1 can be viewed on the British Museum’s website: http://www.britishmuseum.org/