

THE ENIGMATIC ALFRED JEWEL

IN JUNE 2019, I had the opportunity to handle the Ashmolean's replica of the Alfred Jewel (which I will refer to simply as "the Jewel"). The phenomenological experience of the Jewel was startlingly different to my expectation. The front of the Jewel is usually depicted floating in space, with the beast's head pointing down and the figure upright. Holding the Jewel that way, like an inverted teardrop, did not feel natural. Then I rotated the Jewel, holding it by the widest part with the beast's head pointing away from me. That felt right; it was comfortable. I was holding the Jewel the way a conductor holds her baton.¹ Holding the Jewel like a baton, both the teardrop shape and the bevelled sides of the Jewel made perfect practical sense. The bevelled sides assisted me to grip the Jewel between my finger and thumb. My thumb and forefinger rolled in slightly, which is a natural pincer grip. The teardrop shape concentrated the weight at the back of the Jewel. This is the widest part, where it is easiest to hold the tiny Jewel. These physical characteristics made it easy to clasp the Jewel securely while moving my hand around.

Figures 1 and 2 show the difference between clasping the Jewel like a baton, and clutching it in a fist. The Jewel is not normally depicted in use, which perhaps increases its enigmatic aura. Elaine Treharne has recently pointed out the enormous difference in the functionality of an object in a display case and an object that is handled; the display case imposes a barrier to what she calls "the integrated experience" of an object.² By way of demonstrating that barrier, consider this: we do not know how much the Jewel weighs. Its weight, fundamental to a phenomenological experience of any object, is not recorded.

Part of the Jewel's enigma lies in the absence of contemporary documentary accounts of it—who created it, who owned it, or why it was commissioned. The Jewel was accidentally uncovered in 1693 by a labourer digging for peat, on a site roughly 6.5 km from Athelney.³ Alfred had close associa-

¹ Pratt, "Persuasion and Invention," 198; Pitt, "Fabulous Alfred Jewel."

² Treharne, *Perceptions*, 7.

³ Hinton, *Alfred Jewel*, 11.

tions with Athelney, in good times and bad. It was Alfred's last refuge in 878, from which he conducted guerrilla-style raids on the Vikings who had overrun Wessex (*ASC*, s.a. 878). It was also where he founded a monastery in gratitude for the recovery of his kingdom.⁴ Most scholars cautiously link the Jewel to King Alfred and his reform program.

If we compare Wessex at the start of Alfred's reign and at the end of it, there is demonstrable change, significant reforms, in his community. These reforms continue their trajectory during the reigns of his children, Edward the Elder and Æthelflæd (Lady of the Mercians), and his grandson, Æthelstan. However, the documentary record about how those reforms unfolded, about the lived experience of reform, is sparse. The paucity of textual evidence means that there are questions about the *process* of Alfredian reform that have either not been asked in traditional historical scholarship, or have been deemed unanswerable from a lack of evidence. In fact, there is ample evidence that we can use productively to start to answer these questions—evidence which is artifactual and behavioural, and which provides new ways of thinking about the textual evidence for Alfredian reform. The Jewel is a case in point. One of the commonest approaches to the Jewel is to try to figure out what it *represents*. To explore the lived experience of Alfredian reform, I suggest that a better question is: "*What did the Jewel do?*" To explore what an object does, it is useful to consider its materiality (its material characteristics) and its relationality (context, associations).

The Jewel's Materiality

When considering the materiality of the Jewel, due weight should be given to the fact that its physical characteristics were deliberately chosen—the Jewel was created. The Jewel is tiny, a lot smaller than the impression given by its free-floating image. It is 64 mm long, 32 mm at its widest, and 13 mm thick. It consists of a teardrop-shaped natural quartz rock crystal overlaying a cloisonné enamel, bound together in an open gold fretwork frame. The enamel features a seated human figure. Both the cloisonné and the rock crystal are highly unusual in an Anglo-Saxon artifact.⁵ Cloisonné enamel appears in high status Anglo-Saxon archaeological contexts from the seventh century onwards. It is a feature of the sumptuous grave goods in the Sutton Hoo

4 Asser, ch. 92; Winterbottom and Thomson, *William of Malmesbury: Gesta pontificum Anglorum*, bk. 2, chap. 92, 313.

5 Webster, "*Aedificia nova*," 101.

ship-burial, for example.⁶ However, Anglo-Saxon cloisonné objects feature abstract patterns. There is no contemporary European exemplar for the cloisonné figure depicted in the Jewel, and no later English derivative of it.⁷ The rock crystal was similarly novel, lacking both traceable precedent and later imitation. It may be reused Roman spolia.⁸ Rock crystal is extremely rare in early medieval Britain. The other prominent example of roughly contemporary rock crystal, the Galloway hoard rock crystal jar, is also a repurposed crystal.⁹ (The crystal in the Warminster jewel is a bead, also reused.)¹⁰

The rock crystal is bevelled, so that it is wider at its flat base than at its top surface. Inscribed in the gold framework are the words “+ÆLFRED MEC HEHT GEWYRCAN” (+Alfred ordered me to be made). The Jewel has a sheet gold backing plate, with a tree-like pattern. At the narrow end of the crystal, sheet gold is fashioned into an intricate animal’s head. Its jaws clasp a short gold tube, with a rivet inserted crossways at the end of the tube furthest from the head. The tube is empty, and gives no indication of what was originally held in place with the rivet.¹¹

Soon after its discovery, it was suggested that the Jewel was an amulet.¹² If the Jewel were suspended from a chain threaded through the tube, then the figure would be displayed upside down. The cloisonné figure would surely have been created facing the other way up, if the Jewel was intended to hang down. Various other theories have been put forward for the Jewel: it might have adorned a rod of office, a royal helmet or a crown, or been used as a seal of office.¹³ Using the Jewel as a seal would replicate the pattern on the back of the Jewel, which is not its finest workmanship, leaving the most impressive (and expensive) elements of design and craftsmanship underutilized. The inscription would not appear on a sealed document. There would be no need for the tube and rivet.

The slenderness of the tube, the use of sheet gold rather than a sturdy material where the Jewel was fastened to something else (making it a pressure point likely to fail), and the weight of the Jewel all militate against the

6 Bruce-Mitford, *Sutton Hoo Ship-Burial*, 2: chapter 10.

7 Pratt, “Persuasion and Invention,” 200.

8 Kornbluth, “Alfred Jewel,” 35.

9 I am grateful to Greg Waite for this suggestion. A full analysis of the Galloway hoard rock crystal jar is yet to be published. See “Galloway Hoard Rock Crystal Jar.”

10 Hinton, *Alfred Jewel*, 34–35.

11 Hinton, *Alfred Jewel*, 12–17.

12 Keynes, “Discovery,” 1–2.

13 Karkov, *Art of Anglo-Saxon England*, 217; Pratt, “Persuasion and Invention,” 197.

Jewel being affixed at the high point of a device like a staff, a crown or a helmet.¹⁴ A brooch is theoretically possible, but neither the Jewel nor any similar objects (such as the Minster Lovell jewel, the Warminster jewel, and the Bowleaze Cove jewel) has any trace of the fittings necessary to fasten a brooch.¹⁵ The tube and rivet are superfluous in terms of the Jewel's ornamentation; they are not a part of any beast's head in nature or legend. Although the tube and rivet were not part of the depiction of the animal, their inclusion was purposeful. These characteristics, deliberately chosen and therefore meaningful, become comprehensible when the Jewel is in action, rather than passively displayed.

Certain physical characteristics of the Jewel suggest that it was designed for practical use. The Jewel's shape facilitates it being held delicately, like a baton. The Jewel's gold fretwork and luminous crystal glow and catch the light, as the Jewel is moved in a pincer grip. The cloisonné figure is visible, if the Jewel is held in a pincer grip. The sumptuous materials, expert craftsmanship, and sheer *showmanship* of the Jewel strongly suggest that this was not a utilitarian device. Nevertheless, the flat back of the Jewel makes it apt to put the Jewel down on a page of a book, to mark a place on the page, perhaps while reading aloud. And if the tube held a narrow wand, secured by the rivet, then the Jewel could be used as a pointer.

Identifying the Jewel as an *æstel*

There is cogent documentary evidence which supports the interpretation of the Jewel as a pointer. At the end of the Prose Preface to the *Pastoral Care*, in the context of plans to distribute the text for study, there is reference to an *æstel*:

ond to ælcum bisepestole on minum rice wille ane onsendan; ond on ælcra bið an æstel, se bið on fiftegem mancessa.

(and to each episcopal seat in my kingdom I intend to send one copy; and in each there will be a certain pointer which will be valued at fifty crowns.)¹⁶

The word *æstel* is rarely used in the Old English (OE) corpus, and its meaning has long been the subject of debate. The *Dictionary of Old English* records four usages, and tentatively links an *æstel* with a small piece of

¹⁴ Webster, "Art of Alfred," 57n25; Hinton, *Alfred Jewel*, 26.

¹⁵ Hinton, *Alfred Jewel*, 24.

¹⁶ *Pastoral Care*, 8–9.



Figure 3. Replica of the Alfred Jewel, with a rod.
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wood used as a pointer or indicator.¹⁷ Robert Fulk’s new edition of the *Pastoral Care*, quoted above, translates *æstel* as “pointer.” Leah Parker has recently suggested that an *æstel* was specifically a “law-pointer.”¹⁸ The Prose Preface makes it clear that an *æstel* was physically separate from the book, not an indivisible part of it, and that each book would have one. These words cannot be reconciled with the suggestion that an *æstel* was an elaborate book-binding.¹⁹ The explicit direction that book and *æstel* not be separated strongly implies that they were easily and temporarily separable, and arguably, that book and *æstel* could be used independently of each other. That is not the case for a book-binding.

The only surviving contemporary manuscript of the *Pastoral Care* (Oxford, Bodleian Libraries [Bodleian], MS Hatton 20) does not provide any clues. However, a later version of the *Pastoral Care* (Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 12) contains a handwritten Latin gloss written above the word *æstel* in the Preface: the words *festuca* and *indicatorium* (fol. 3r), and *festucam* (fol. 3v).²⁰ The gloss in CCCC, MS 12 has been ascribed to the thirteenth-century scribe known as the “tremulous hand of Worcester.”²¹ The “tremulous hand” also glossed Hatton 20 (as did Wulfstan, Bishop of Worcester and later Archbishop of York, and John Joscelyn, assistant to Matthew Parker, Archbishop of Canterbury), but not in relation to *æstel*.²² The words *æstel* and *indicatorium* are paired in Ælfric’s *Glossary*.²³ The words *indica-*

¹⁷ *Dictionary of Old English*.

¹⁸ Parker, “*Æstel* and Divine Law.” See also Faulkner, *Wealth*, 40.

¹⁹ Collins, “King Alfred’s *Æstel*,” 48–50.

²⁰ Page, “Yet Another Note,” 11–12.

²¹ Franzen, *Tremulous Hand*, 60–61; Ker, *Pastoral Care*, 25.

²² Ker, *Pastoral Care*, 24; Page, “Sixteenth-Century Reception.”

²³ Page, “Yet Another Note,” 14.

torium and *festuca* may mean something similar to “indicator” and “rod.”²⁴ If the Jewel was created with a short slender rod of wood or bone, then it could be used as an aid to keeping one’s place when reading the plain and largely unpunctuated text of the *Pastoral Care*, particularly if the text was being read aloud to an audience. It could be used as an indicator or pointer.

If an *æstel* was a pointer intended to be used in conjunction with a text, then the Jewel (with a slender rod fixed to the tube by the rivet) was apt for that purpose. Figure 3 shows the replica in proximity to a narrow rod. The salient features of the Jewel are all consistent with its use as a pointer, and indeed there is no feature of the Jewel which is at odds with that purpose.

The Jewel’s Relationality

The Jewel’s materiality thus provides important insights into what it *could* do. Thinking through the context of the Jewel, its relationality, deepens our understanding of what the Jewel may have actually done. My argument proceeds on the assumption that the Jewel was created during King Alfred’s reign and on his commission.

When Alfred ascended the West Saxon throne in 871, it was four years since Northumbria had fallen to Viking conquest. The Vikings were eyeing up the southern kingdoms and testing their resolve.²⁵ Only Wessex successfully fended them off. At the heart of its success was an extensive and astonishingly innovative military system that demanded the commitment of vast resources of labour and materials. At the same time, there were significant social innovations in education and justice. Early medieval Christian communities threatened by Viking depredation universally interpreted their woes as divine punishment meted out by a wrathful God, and increased their religious observance in response. Alfred’s prescribed response to this existential Viking threat was unprecedented in its focus on action rather than supplication—the reorientation of the community back to God by the acquisition and application of practical Christian wisdom to the governance of the kingdom.

The Jewel was produced during the period in which this novel prescription (the cornerstone of Alfredian ideology) was articulated, disseminated, and inculcated in the areas of justice, adult literacy and education, and defence. At the centre of these reforms was the king. Alfred must have played

24 Latham and Howlett, *Dictionary of Medieval Latin*, 933, 1325; Latham, *Revised Medieval Latin Word-List*, 190, 244.

25 Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms*, 96–97; Christie, “Creating Defended Communities,” 54.

a pivotal role in the formulation of Alfredian ideology and the deployment of that ideology to facilitate and drive societal reforms, even though we cannot calibrate his role precisely. The king's centrality in a properly functioning Christian kingdom as envisaged by Alfredian ideology is one key indicator of close royal involvement in the development of Alfredian ideology. It makes intuitive sense that a specific area of reform (such as literacy, the administration of justice, or the application of Christian wisdom to day-to-day life) may have been dear to the hearts of individual councillors or subsets of the king's advisors. However, no one benefited as immediately from the package of reforms as the king, because Alfredian reform was fundamentally about the governance of the kingdom. No one else was in a position to authorize any of these reforms or to meld them into a coherent program. Although we lack the corroborative evidence, the breadth and extent of Alfredian reform means that it had to pivot around the king. It is in this context of change and of action that the Jewel was created, if it is an *æstel*.

Intriguingly, there are artifacts which have features in common with the Jewel. None of them comes close to the Jewel in terms of materials, design, and workmanship. The objects most often linked with the Jewel are the Minster Lovell jewel, the Warminster jewel, and the Bowleaze Cave jewel. The Bidford-on-Avon object, the Aughton object, and the Borg object also share features with the Jewel, but they are of significantly lesser craftsmanship and value. These are all fully described by David Hinton in his monograph on the Jewel.²⁶ (There are also a number of other objects which have come to light as a result of the Portable Antiquities Scheme, whose connection to the Jewel is much more uncertain. I discuss these more fully in chapter 7, when I revisit the Jewel.)

While there is an ongoing debate about classification of the individual objects listed above, there are characteristics which they all share: the tube and rivet, the absence of any other fitting, the use of gold instead of more readily available silver. Three characteristics aside, the objects could be mapped as a series of Venn diagrams, sharing a set of finite characteristics, but not all alike. There are patterns in their materials and manufacture which strongly suggest a link between some of the objects, but that link may be independent emulation. It is not necessary to assume that all these objects were commissioned or created by the same person over time, or by different people at the same time. It is hard to resist the tentative conclusion that the Jewel was copied. These objects were deliberately created; they had a purpose. It is impossible to discern the purpose behind the creation of

26 Hinton, *Alfred Jewel*, 31–36.

individual copies, or to track their circulation, but emulation was presumably part of the motivation.

Just as there is no unequivocal evidence which links these objects, there is no incontrovertible proof of their usage. A coherent interpretation of these objects must account for the features which all the objects share: the absence of any evidence of fittings other than the tube and rivet, the narrow diameter of the tubes, the comparatively flimsy construction of the tubes, the heaviness of the objects relative to the tubes, and the flat backs of the objects. Most interpretations revolve around the tube and rivet.²⁷ It is the tube and rivet protruding from the beast's jaws which strongly suggest that the Jewel was an *æstel*. What, then, was the Jewel's role in Alfredian reform?

What Did the Jewel Do?

I argue that the Jewel was an active agent of persuasion in the Alfredian project of reorienting the West Saxon community back to God, to re-earn divine favour and avert annihilation at the hands of the Vikings. To re-earn God's favour, Alfred's people had to apply the principles of Christian wisdom in everyday life. The Alfredian version of Christian wisdom focused on principles connected to good governance of the kingdom and the social order. This concept of Christian wisdom had profound political and social consequences for Alfred's people. I use the expression "reorienting the community back to God" throughout the book, but I always mean it as encompassing the good governance which results from the application of the Alfredian concept of Christian wisdom. Reorientation had significant political and social dimensions.

Alfred was not in a position to coerce his people to adopt his reforms; he had to persuade them. The Jewel acted on multiple levels to persuade Alfred's elites to opt in to his reform program, and to do as he asked. Objects and behaviours can be powerful agents in the expression and inculcation of an ideology.

A modern analogy may help to illuminate the point. Donald Trump blazed his way to the Oval Office in 2016. His ideology was a necessary part of his success, but not sufficient on its own. When we think of how "Trumpian" ideology was disseminated, certain things spring to mind: the extraordinary interactive rallies, the red caps emblazoned with MAGA—acronym for the Trumpian catch cry "Make America Great Again"—, the citations of American patriotism and exceptionalism, and the novel use of social media. The

²⁷ Keynes, "Discovery," 5.

catch cry referenced a particular worldview, encapsulating a specific perception of America's past and a desire to regain lost prominence. It was simplistic and easily understood—and it fitted neatly on a distinctive cap or t-shirt. Wearing that slogan advertised a particular identity, a set of values and beliefs, and identified the wearer to others. Trump's rallies were high-octane events which made their participants feel validated, powerful, and enthused, and allowed them to bond with like-minded others. Social media was used innovatively and extensively. Objects and behaviours overlapped in the inculcation of Trumpian ideology and in the voluntary adoption of a new communal identity—Trump's America.

We can more easily discern the agency of objects and behaviours in this contemporary analogy because we witnessed it unfold. The Trumpian phenomenon provides useful insights into the process by which ideology can be communicated and absorbed. Of course, a direct parallel between modern and medieval societies cannot be assumed. Nevertheless, thinking through the agency of objects and practices in our own time provides some useful guidance on the kinds of questions to ask, the things to look for, in an analysis of Alfred's society. This is why political sociologist Michael Mann advocates "analysing specific situations with the intuitive and empathic understanding given by our own social experience."²⁸ Thinking through the agency of objects and behaviours in Alfredian Wessex provides new perspectives on hierarchy, power, and community, and how they may have interacted. This has real value: "when the Anglo-Saxon historian is frustrated by the lack of firm evidence, it is good to be reminded how much can still be left to the powers of our historical imagination."²⁹

Thinking through the way that the Jewel may have exercised its persuasive agency illuminates Alfredian reform from the perspective of those who participated in it. That is the aim of this book—to examine the reception, the lived experience of Alfredian reform. To do so, I use theoretical frameworks which do not depend upon the written word to explore how change occurred.

28 Mann, *Sources of Social Power*, 3–4.

29 Keynes, "Anglo-Saxon Entries," 119.

