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Further notes on the Hunterston and ‘Tara’ brooches, Monymusk reliquary and Blackness bracelet

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THE HUNTERSTON BROOCH

The description and discussion published in *Medieval Archaeology* (Stevenson 1974) explored the remarkable extent to which the designer and craftsman of the Hunterston brooch, around AD 700, could be shown to have drawn on Anglo-Saxon or Germanic jewellery both for techniques and for principles and details of design. These were in contrast to the brooch’s basic penannular form to which they were applied, since that was characteristic of earlier Celtic Ireland and Scotland north of the Clyde and Forth; and this hybrid fashion then became normal in those areas through many brooches which, it was argued, derived from the same prototype.

A major feature of the design of the Hunterston brooch, the three prominent matching triangles (the head of the pin and the two vestigial terminals) each comprising one large and two small bosses with an animal between them, was in particular derived from a type of Anglo-Saxon belt-buckle. Moreover, set around the filled-in gap between the terminals were four very Germanic eagle-heads. A much needed explanation for the revolutionary and inconvenient closure of this gap—which with modification persisted in Irish pseudopenannular brooches for over a century and in Scotland possibly for a generation—was provided by the recognition that the central motif in it was a Cross (pl 30a), such as might have covered a relic on the hypothetical slightly earlier prototype.

Some additional points may now be made relating to the function and design of this central portion of the Hunterston brooch. While an amuletic device, such as a representation of Daniel in the lions’ den or of the Magi, has long been a recognized feature of early Burgundian and Frankish belt-buckles, it comes as a surprise that in the definitive publication of the Sutton Hoo boat-burial the massive but hollow gold belt-buckle is cautiously identified as a reliquary buckle, because of its construction (Bruce-Mitford 1979; also Werner 1982, 198–200). Though its date is 70 or more years earlier than that of the Hunterston brooch, this reinforces the idea of a piece of royal jewellery incorporating a relic as was proposed for the brooch’s prototype. Bruce-Mitford cites less expensive reliquary buckles and strap-ends identified on the Continent, and the wide use of amuletic and other significant crosses in jewellery is increasingly being recognized (Stevenson 1982, 10–11). Even if there is no form of cross on the Sutton Hoo buckle, it may be significant that the creatures depicted there comprise birds, animals and snakes, as on the Hunterston

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brooch where there is reason to believe that they have a Christian meaning as the three orders of Creation according to Genesis, chapter I, though there are pagan analogies (Hauck 1982, 328).

The 'Tara' brooch was shown to be closer to Hunterston than any other brooch but less close to the prototype. Yet later frequent recurrence of rhombs on brooches suggested that the rhomb placed in the centre of the filling of 'Tara's' gap might already have been a feature of the prototype, rather than a rectangle like that within Hunterston's cross. (When crosses rather than crucifixes were normally represented there was often a roundel encircling them or at their centre, or both, less often a square or a rhomb (Stevenson 1982)). To account for the apparent lack of a cross on the 'Tara' brooch the irregularly cruciform arrangement of amber and glass insets around the amber rhomb was noted, in the absence of a better solution. Now one is evident in the enlarged colour photograph ($\times 2$) taken for an American exhibition catalogue (Metropolitan Museum 1977, 106). In the tiny gold rhomb in the centre of that of amber there have been five minute pellets set in wire collars, arranged as a cross $\cdot \cdot \cdot$. (It would, it seems, be anachronistic to imagine the further symbolism of the five wounds of Christ.)

No source of inspiration was recognized in 1974 for the quite complex *design in Hunterston's gap*, although it was assumed that the prototype incorporated its combination of very stylized eagle-heads and a central cross of whatever form. However a search beyond Anglo-Saxon England would have shown that this design may well have been achieved in the same way as that of the terminals, by transposition from another kind of ornament. For with relatively minor modifications the scheme corresponds to one of the varieties of disc brooches filled with gold filigree found in Germany. Pl 30 shows, alongside the Hunterston details, an example from the Rhine-Palatinate (Thieme 1978, Group VI, pl 17.3; cf Lasko 1971, 90-91). Dated to about 640-80, it has four stylized eagle-heads surrounding a cross of four square studs (sometimes triangular) around a large centre (always circular). Between each pair of beaks there is a setting for a boss, which on Hunterston has been pear-shaped and all of metal now mostly lost. Main changes by our designer have been greater emphasis on the heads and the omission of side bosses, part of the assimilation of the whole to the rectangular shape of the gap; there was originally a circular filigree inset in the centre of each amber stud, here acting as eye (Stevenson 1974, 22; *Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, 7 (1886-8), pl LVII). The raising of the centre, arguably greater in Hunterston's prototype to house a relic, was more or less common on Germanic brooches. The filling of their round boss- or box-like centres with mixtures of plaster, chalk, wax, clay and resin, served to prevent the top being squashed (Thieme 1978, 407-8), but this would not conflict with a holy substance sometimes being included in the filling. In connection with a reliquary strap-end containing wax, Dannheimer has cited (1966, 349) the evidence for early pilgrims taking home lamp oil, wax salve and candle wax (beeswax) from the shrines of martyrs and saints, and, from the grave of St Martin of Tours, dust in addition.

Some details of the front of the Hunterston brooch, notably the bird's head at either side, suggested that the designer had a connection with Lindisfarne or some other related Northumbrian artistic centre. This is more obvious in much of the back. There the pair of *cast panels* of zoomorphic spirals, derived from the Celtic 'trumpet' spirals, broken-backed curves and peltas, resemble some of the spiral-ends in the Lindisfarne Gospels. How closely it is hard to see on the original, obscured by the brooch's chip-carving technique and lack of colour contrasts, and even in the enlarged photograph of one panel in the 1974 paper, which accentuated the facets and reflections of the gilt metal. The necessary, and rather difficult, drawings were done sometime later by Miss Helen Jackson (fig 1, 1a & 1b). They bring out the differences between the two panels more clearly than the over-brief published descriptions, and allow comparison with the detailed

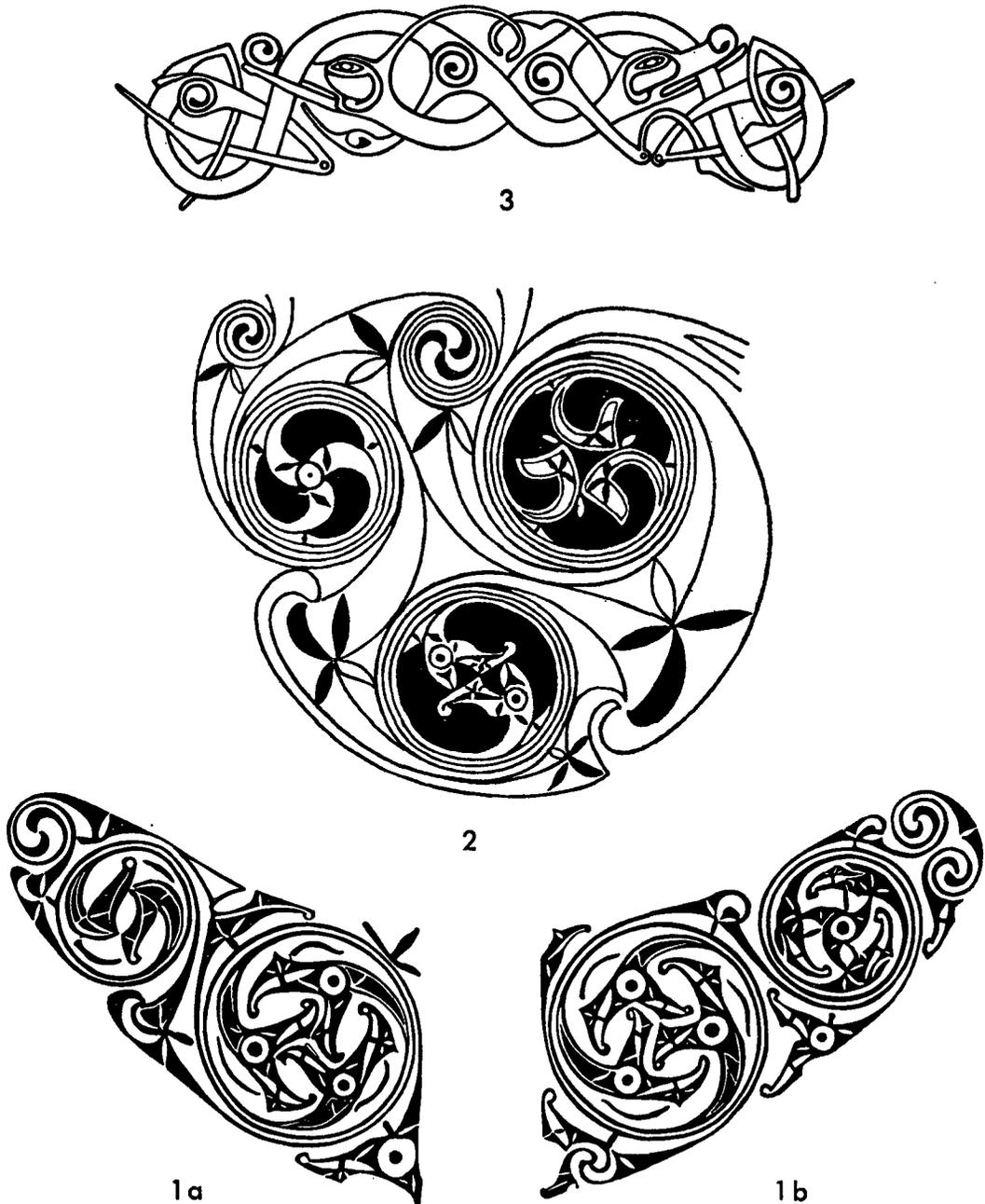


FIG 1 1a–b and 3, Cast panels on the back of the Hunterston brooch: spirals on ‘terminals’ and animals on hoop (NMAS). 2, Detail from Lindisfarne Gospels f 139v (E Wilson, with additions) (scale all 2 : 1)

drawings from the great manuscript given in the discussion volume of the facsimile. Of the various terminations developed inside its hair-spring coils, those reproduced here at twice the size of the original and of the publication (fig 1, 2) are those described by Bruce-Mitford as having the maximum zoomorphic effect (1960, 209–10, and fig 46, xxv—from folio 139v, the *Quoniam*

page; leaf-forms, left out for clarity, are now restored with Mrs Eva Wilson's permission). The heads in the Hunterston spirals appear to have evolved slightly further zoomorphically. In the large spiral in fig 1, 1a (layout reference no 31C in Stevenson 1974, fig 1) the dot-and-circle eye and the lower jaw, with single broad 'tooth', of the three gaping 'dragon' heads resemble these parts in the two Lindisfarne heads shown immediately above. The Hunterston upper jaws are as it were upside down, 'tooth' upwards, while those of Lindisfarne are rounded off short; but both jaws of three heads in a roundel on Lindisfarne's XPI page (f29, top right) do resemble those of Hunterston closely except that they gape so widely (130°) that they are less animal-like. A minor difference is that the space along the centre of the jaw in Hunterston is elongated with a lobe at one end rather than triangular, yet retains a vestigial leaf across the middle.

The same heads are repeated in 1b in the main spiral, and there is a solitary one between it and the adjacent smaller spiral, and at the corner of 1a another without the upper jaw. 'Disarticulated jaws' occur at several points, and modified into snake-like heads in the smaller spiral of 1b they surround an eye and three-legged device, which is a truncated form of Lindisfarne's upper left spiral. Hunterston's third kind of spiral-end is related to the three heads in the largest of these Lindisfarne spirals, which are very simple and without evident eye or mouth. The Hunterston pair, in 1a, are more elongated with turned-down 'muzzles' as if blind horses.

Both artists used lentoid leaves in the Book of Durrow's traditional manner to span pelta or vestigial-pelta elements from vertex to hypotenuse, often grouped into a three-leaf motif—or more accurately two or three such leaves with a curved 'stem' between two peltoid triangles or 'trumpets'. Lindisfarne's artist made use of extra lentoids and of occasional pellets and concave triangles, another old device, while Hunterston's added instead some fine contour, ramifying and isolated lines. The isolated curved lines behind the heads within the Hunterston roundels, not found in Lindisfarne, correspond to unattached crescents on the back of the 'Tara' brooch, in the flat (engraved and enamelled) panels of non-zoomorphic trumpet-spirals behind its terminals and cartouche. We may note further that the small cast spiral roundels on the back of 'Tara's' hoop are rather more elaborate than Hunterston's, and as it were more baroque but less zoomorphic (Metropolitan Museum 1977, ill 110–11); and that in the considerably later forms of the same motifs in the Book of Kells (f34r and 188r, Henry 1974) the trefoil insets have been given up as have many of the single lentoids. In Hunterston 1a there is at the vertex a trefoil simply as space-filler. Such isolated trefoils are a characteristic of a rather later Canterbury psalter, alongside the trumpet-spiral trefoils (BM *Cotton Vespasian A*, f30v; Nordenfalk 1977, pl 32), and occur on their own in the Book of Kells (f29r, top).

Fig 1, 3 for good measure shows plainly the very sinuous interlaced ribbon-animals of the cast panel on the back of Hunterston's cartouche, by omitting the hatching on the bodies as well as the chip-carved recessing of the background (Stevenson 1974, reference no 29C, pl XIA). The angularity of the chip-carving has affected the ball-and-claw feet and the trailing head-lappets; in contrast the spirals at the joints and one nostril are emphasized, making between one and a half and two coils. Only the near legs are shown. The claws are very long and the knees oddly marked by a tiny dimple. On the left side the foreleg is shortened and seemingly kneeless, while that on the right provides the brooch's only serious infelicity, or error, by having the shin bent into a semicircle. There is no close resemblance to Lindisfarne's animals (Bruce-Mitford 1960, fig 41–3), though not all of those have the familiar short muzzles. The hatching, spirals and feet are similar to those of the animals on the bronze boss from Steeple Bumpstead, Essex, as drawn in the British Museum *Guide* (1923, fig 185); its zoomorphic spiral-ends differ considerably (figs 185–6—overall photograph in Mahr 1932, pl 24; it is however probably not Irish but Northumbrian).

THE CROSS ON THE MONYMUSK RELIQUARY

The apparent absence from the house-shaped Monymusk reliquary of 'anything recognizable as a Christian symbol' has had attention drawn to it by Mr Ian Finlay and by a reviewer of his book on St Columba (Finlay 1979, 18). This has no doubt struck many people who have looked at the reliquary, and particularly at illustrations which emphasize its faint but elaborate decoration of seemingly irrelevant interlaced animals, gambolling round the gilt and enamelled medallions on the front wall and roof.

Apart from illustration (Anderson 1881, frontispiece; Eeles 1934, pl VI colour; Wilson 1973, fig 41) there has been very little consideration of the reliquary's details or of their possible significance, as happens with so many of the best-known museum exhibits. The 19th-century engraving of the well-preserved roof-tree is reasonably accurate (fig 2a), although lower down on the front the draughtsman has tried to tidy up obscurities and restored the two medallions missing from the front wall: they were probably lost along with the lower edge of the roof when the hidden locking-pin was forced, perhaps following the Reformation (Stevenson 1947).

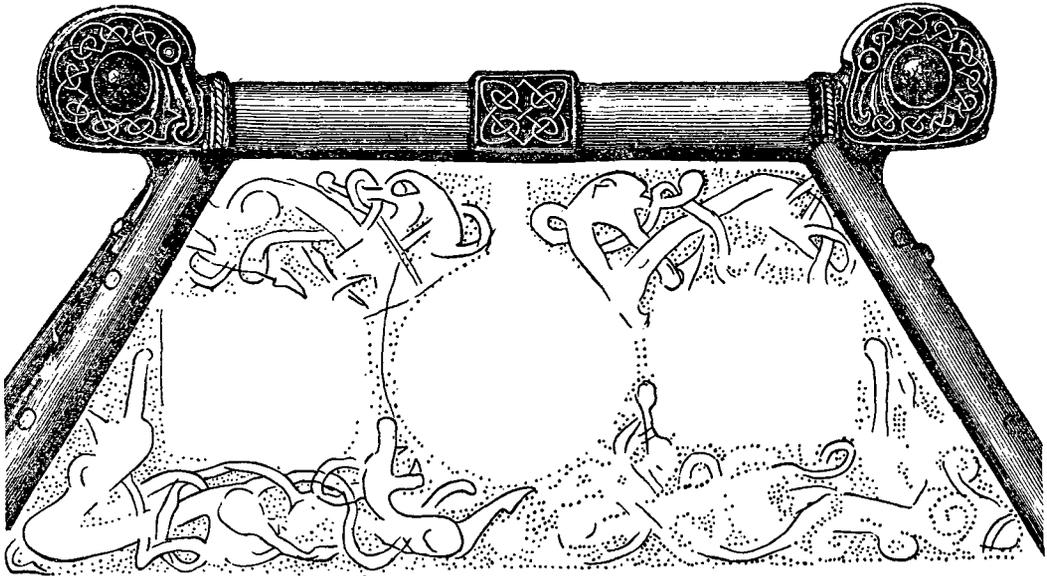


FIG 2 Monymusk reliquary: a, cast bronze roof-tree (Anderson); b, engraved silver roof-plate (D M and E Wilson) (scale c 3 : 2)

In the engraving the uppermost central feature of the reliquary can clearly be seen to be a rectangular panel of neat knotted interlace, a variant of pattern number 637 (Romilly Allen 1903). The knotted strand is so laid out as to enclose the sunken shape of an equal-armed cross with diamond ends, slightly obscured by lines crossing its centre, much as on our national flag positive areas of blue reserve the white saltire, as it were in negative, while on the Union flag red crosses partly hide but do not change it. The formula that four back-to-back curves enclose a cross, of which this is an example, has been apt to be overlooked, or thought to produce accidental effects. Comparative study shows that on the contrary it was a major motivating force in the interlace art of the period (Stevenson 1982).

Like the Hunterston brooch the Monymusk reliquary seems to belong to that revolutionary phase of Celtic metalwork when cast gilt interlace and other techniques were introduced, as well as motifs elaborated in the religious manuscripts. On the finials of the roof-tree strings of knots terminate in bird-heads which have circular eyes and long beaks that recurve lobe-like at the tips, closely comparable in outline to those in the Lindisfarne Gospels' *Quoniam* page, f 139v—where in the centre of the upright of the q there is a cross-in-interlace panel similar to that on the roof-tree. These heads on the reliquary do not look outwards like dragon-prows or stave-church finials as one might expect, but inwards and downwards—towards the cross. This is similar to the way the animals on the front of the Hunterston brooch face the cross considered in the foregoing note. A further example is to be seen on the great Pictish cross-slab at Glamis. There the heads of the interlaced snakes on the arms, and that of the deer-symbol, are turned towards the roundel of most complicated interlace at the centre of the cross, which denotes aniconically the risen, not the crucified, Christ (cf p 470 above), and which contains yet another cross 'in negative' (Romilly Allen 1903, pattern number 786). So too in the medallions on the sides of the Ardagh chalice the two filigree snakes on each arm of the gold 'Maltese' cross (cross of arcs) look inwards to the cross of blue glass set in the central silver and red enamel boss (Metropolitan Museum 1977, pl on pp 114–15).

One might go further on the reliquary itself, and interpret the animals on the top of the roof-plate as flanking or supporting the cross, guarding rather than reverencing it (as perhaps the eagle-heads do on the Hunterston brooch), while those immediately below them are shown in Dr and Mrs Wilson's drawing to be stretching up towards it (fig 2b: Wilson 1973, fig 41). An earlier comparable though more elaborate design is folio 192v of the Book of Durrow, where rows of animals surround the small central 'Maltese' cross set in a medallion of interlace (in which there may also be Trinitarian symbolism). The sketchiness of the lightly incised and dotted animal drawings on the reliquary raises the question whether they are secondary, but the shape of their heads might suggest that they are no later than say the first half of the 8th century. The ball-and-claw feet, however, persisted into the 9th century on Pictish sculpture. It should moreover be noticed that on the back of the insular house-shaped reliquary now in Copenhagen the plain interlace patterns, including negative crosses, are similarly drawn and are in execution even more inferior to their reliquary as a whole, as well as being unfinished. Yet they appear to be partly covered by the structural binding of the casket (Mahr 1932, pl 16). The design of the front is quite different.

On the otherwise undecorated back of the Monymusk reliquary the whole design of the roof-tree is repeated. Its upper edge there is much worn, which confirms the usual supposition that the reliquary was carried suspended on a neck-strap.

THE BRACELET FROM BLACKNESS

The only find satisfactorily associated with a long cist burial in Scotland south of the Forth, apart from a string of glass beads found close to the shore of the Firth in the Dalmeny estate, and some quernstones, is a bronze bracelet found in 1924 in a similar position further up the estuary, at Blackness castle, West Lothian (NMAS EQ 369; Richardson 1925). For most of the beads Baldwin Brown (1915) noted parallels in Anglo-Saxon cemeteries. The bracelet remains enigmatic; its inclusion, on the strength of the excavator's dating, in Morna Macgregor's study of early Celtic Art (1976, no 226) was accompanied by a postscript noting a suggestion from this writer that it might be a 6th-century AD import from Germany, an idea that needs to be examined, and qualified.

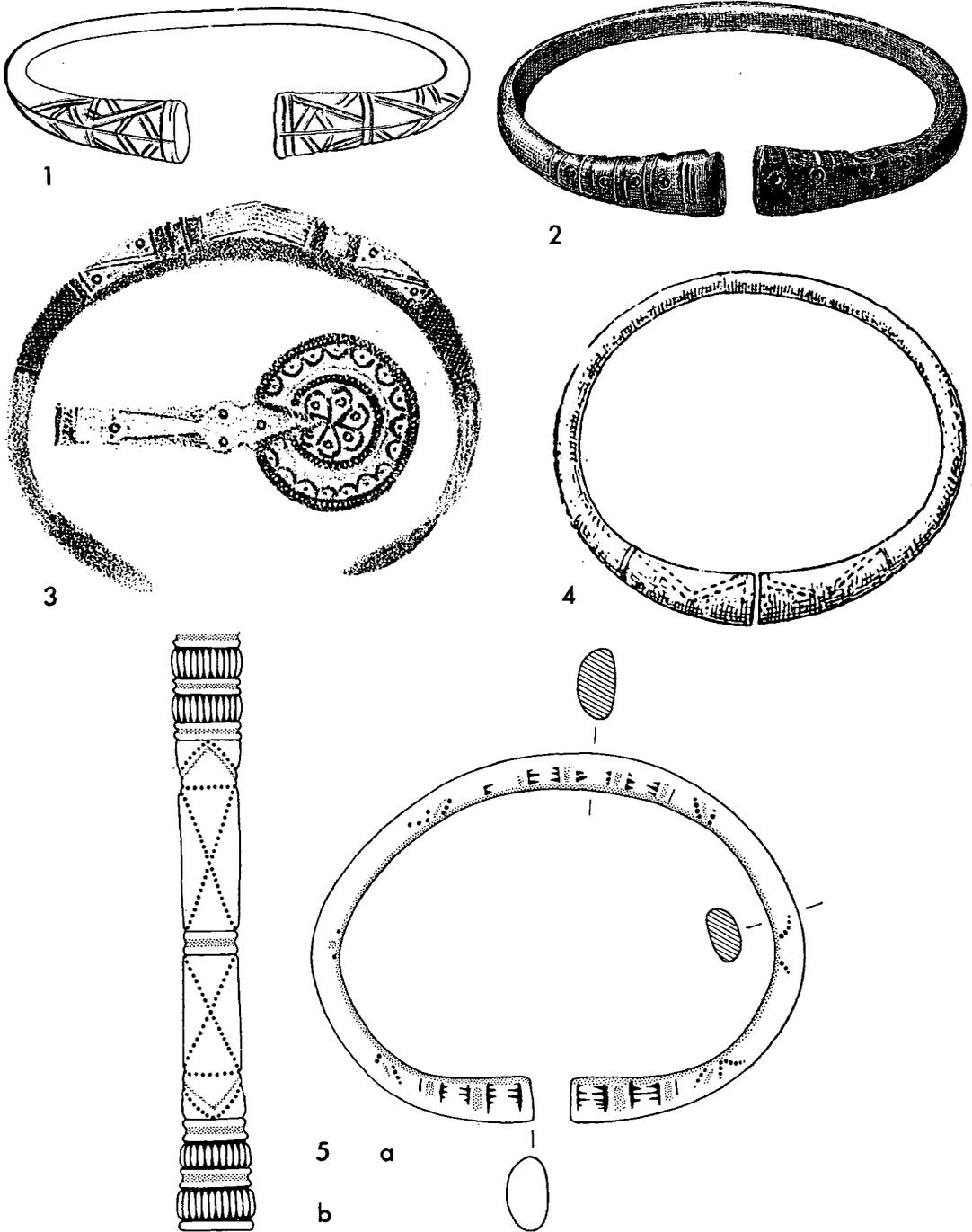


FIG 3 Post-Roman bracelets: 1, Éprave, Belgium; 2, (Northern) France; 3, Chessel Down, Isle of Wight; 4, Bolsena, Italy; 5, Blackness, West Lothian, with sections and reconstructed side-view of one half (NMAS) (scale all 1 : 1)

Post-Roman penannular bracelets called in Germany *Kolbenarmringe* from their elongated club-like ends, include a range of varieties covering four centuries or so, and stretching across the middle of Europe with a sprinkle into Italy, in gold, silver or base metal (Kleeman 1951; Koch 1967). The basic form, however, has evenly swelling ends and a relatively thin ring. Its decoration, if any, is simple and geometric, and confined to the ends (fig 3, 1: Dasnoy 1967, fig 10). These are usually circular in cross-section, but they may be flattened particularly on the inside, for example one unlocalized from northern France (fig 3, 2: Lindenschmitt 1856–1911, I part XII, pl 6.10). It seems that the development in the west from the middle of the 5th-century was from pairs (some of gold) for men, becoming also a woman's ornament—for them generally a single one of silver on the left wrist (Koch 1969). (In the Baltic area men wore one and women two—Kleeman 1951, 115.) Dasnoy says that the width becomes more uniform from the end of the 6th century.

The Blackness bracelet (fig 3, 5) is from the grave of a woman, carefully buried though face downwards; most of the occasional prone burials in Anglo-Saxon cemeteries are also female (Hawkes & Wells 1975; Faull 1977, 8 & 32). It is uncertain on which wrist it was worn, owing to disturbance, but left is probable. The metal has been examined by Dr J O Tate by X-ray fluorescence and found to be composed of: copper 77.9%, zinc 2.2%, lead 8.7%, tin 10.9%, antimony 0.3%; on the surface the proportions of lead and zinc were higher and antimony not detected. Most of the original surface has been lost through wear, and to some extent through corrosion as well. It is flattened in cross-section, and the ends are markedly club-like. They retain on the upper and lower edges enough of the decoration to allow a reconstruction drawing by Miss Jackson. Shallow vertical grooves are flanked by sharper ridges between which there is a sharply cut ladder-pattern having the ends of the rungs pointed. The ring widens out again opposite the opening, and there the terminals' decoration is repeated as well as the swelling; neither repetition is found on the continental bracelets as far as Professor Joachim Werner knew when consulted some years ago. It may be relevant that there was in southern England in the 5th century a form of bracelet which swells out and is decorated in the middle, and has terminal discs which could readily have been lost or discarded after a while (fig 3, 3: Evison 1965, fig 13a). Blackness is also peculiar in having decoration all round. From the few dots that remain, adjacent to the ladder-patterns and halfway between them, we can deduce an unemphatic scheme of saltires and verticals.

In short the origin of the bracelet remains an open question, but whether it is an import or a local divergent copy it does look like a variant of the *Kolbenarmringe* of the 6th century in decoration as well as shape. The main decoration might be a less elaborate version of that on a hinged variety (Koch 1967, 240), while the wider saltires, if correctly restored, resemble a pattern of dashes on the ends of a simple example from Italy (fig 3, 4: Kleeman 1951, Abb 11). Hybridization with a different, 5th-century, form is very speculative. A 7th-century date for the burial may be indicated by the bracelet's style and amount of wear.

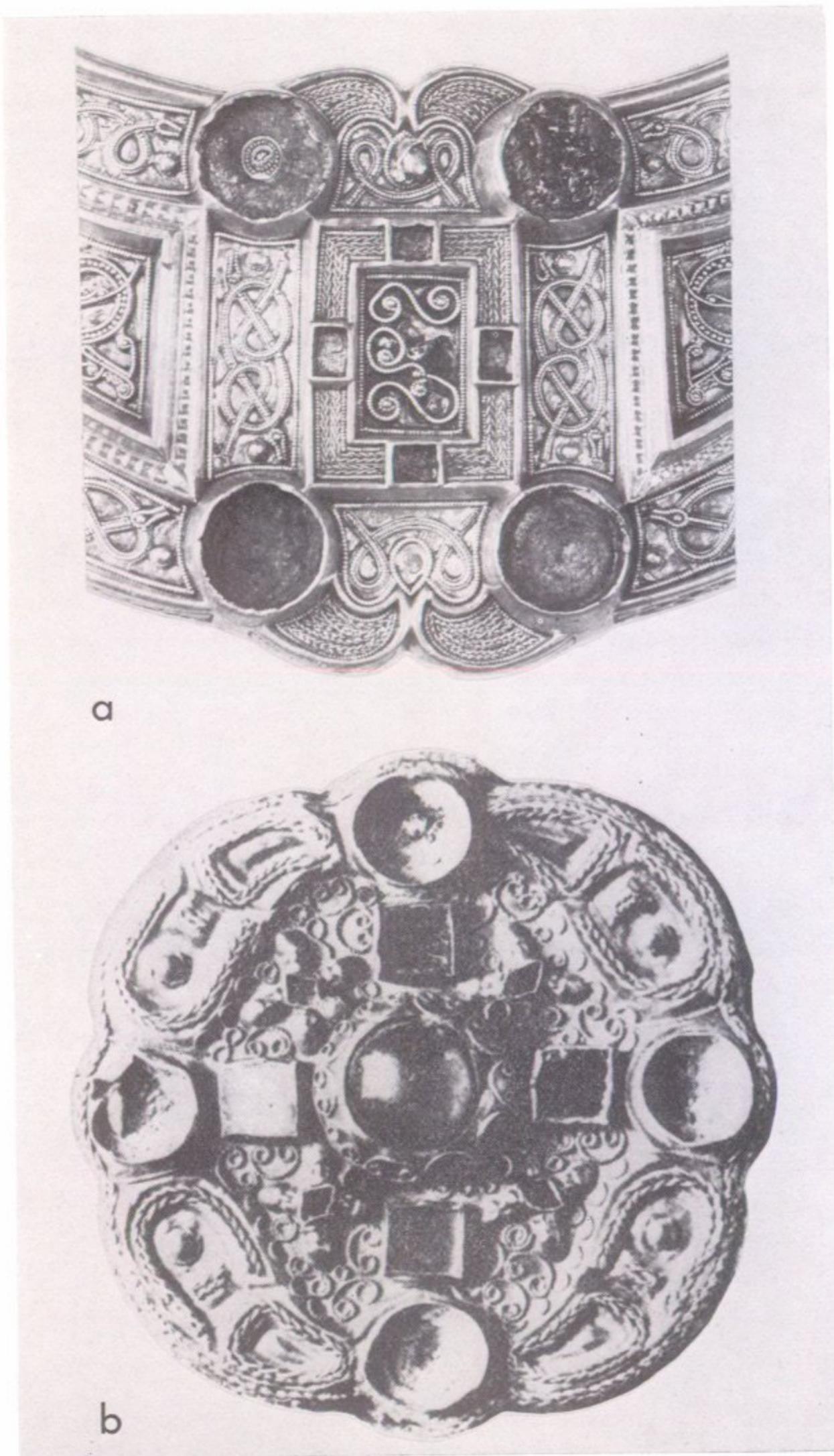
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a, Panel in the 'gap' of the Hunterston brooch; gold eye extrapolated from c 1867 illustration of amber stud 7A (Scale c 3 : 2)
b, Seventh-century brooch from Kärlich, Colberg-Trier, Rheinpfalz (Scale 3 : 2)