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# NOTES ON SOME IRISH HANGING BOWL ESCUTCHEONS

CONOR NEWMAN

## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of these notes is to bring together some of the more recent additions to the growing *corpus* of Irish escutcheons and to comment on their significance for the study of hanging bowls. Three new escutcheons have come to light in the last five years and the discovery of plain bird-shaped escutcheons at Rathmullan, Co. Down, and Clonmacnoise, Co. Offaly, has once again focussed attention on the escutcheon from Ballinderry Crannog no. 2.

## THE RIVER KENNET ESCUTCHEON (Fig. 1)

This escutcheon was a chance find from mud dredged from the River Kennet, Wiltshire, north-east of Silbury Hill, in the late 1980s. It is in private possession and the accompanying drawing has been made from detailed sketches and measurements taken by the author. It is intended to publish a full account of the object jointly with the finder in due course.



the rim of the bowl. A pair of pyramidal mouldings in relief at the base of the hook separate it from the decorative plate. The escutcheon is slightly sub-circular and curves vertically in an arc originally corresponding to the profile of the bowl. The circular decorative field has a plain, irregular, narrow border. In an arc across the upper portion of the escutcheon is a band of concave-sided triangles. Though corrosion obscures the detail a little at this point, some of the triangles appear to be interlocked, but the pattern breaks down at a number of points. The principal decorative scheme consists of four fine-line spirals ending in crested birds' heads. The spirals derive from a central 'hub' that is suspended from the mid-point of the arc of triangles. Each spiral has two full coils and a tail ending in a sub-triangular or lozenge shape emerging from one side. The function of the tails is to fill the voids between the spirals and the border of the escutcheon. Each bird's head has an eye and a jowl. In the top left-hand corner a triangular reserved area of metal projects from the border to occupy the fifth void. The design is executed in false relief against a background of red *champlevé* enamel, only traces of which now remain (shown as solid black in Fig. 1).

We do not know whether the escutcheon originally had a separate frame like those of the Barlaston, Staffordshire (Henry 1936, 237) hanging-bowl. The irregularity of the border could have been hidden by a frame, however it may have been too narrow to accommodate one.

A number of features - especially the lay-out - suggest a lack of expertise in the decoration of the escutcheon. As well as the mishandling of the triangle motif - the corresponding panel on the River Bann escutcheon (Bruce-Mitford 1987, Pl.2. a) shows what was perhaps intended - the four spirals are slightly irregularly distributed within the roundel. The perpendicular element anchoring the 'hub' to the top of the escutcheon, a version of which also occurs on the River Bann escutcheon, forms an acute angle with the upper left-hand spiral which contrasts noticeably with the gentle curve of the other 'spokes' and is out of harmony with the design in general. Finally, the additional appendage filling the upper left-hand void shows a lack of forward planning while at the same time some aesthetic sensibility.

The escutcheon belongs to Françoise Henry's Group A and may have belonged to a bowl with a rim-profile of her Type b (Henry 1936, 225-31, fig. 5). Henry noted that the closest comparisons for the decoration of Group A escutcheons are to be found on Irish hand-pins, latchets and zoomorphic penannular brooches. The same is true of the River Kennet escutcheon. The animal heads, which may be ornithomorphic rather than zoomorphic, belong to a well-known family whose ancestry lies in European La Tène art (Raftery 1984, 273) and which is distinguished by having a long snout or beak and a backward-curving crest. The British series, seen for example on a roundel of the Witham shield (Megaw and Simpson 1981, fig. 7.39, a) and, more notably, on dragonesque brooches of the first two centuries A.D. (Feacham 1951), may have come to an end sometime during the third century A.D. In Ireland, however, the prominence of the motif on metalwork of the sixth and seventh centuries implies its survival well into the early Middle Ages. Its occurrence on the Petrie Crown and the Bann Disc, however, must be treated judiciously in view of the uncertainty of the dates of these objects; neither can be more closely dated than to within the first five centuries A.D. It should also be borne in mind that both objects are unique and are therefore not susceptible to typological analysis.

The crested bird's head motif may have been re-introduced into England as a predominant and recurring theme on escutcheons and dress fasteners of the later-sixth and seventh centuries and Ireland is reasonably claimed as the immediate

Fig. 1. River Kennet escutcheon.

The escutcheon is of bronze and the suspension hook and escutcheon are cast as one. The hook is plain and has a groove cut into the lower front edge at the point where it would sit on

source area (Warner 1987, 20). Central to the view that the crested bird's head of Group A escutcheons was an Irish contribution is its absence from any, other than Irish, metalwork of the sixth century. The view that the motif originated in Ireland (*ibid.*, 19-20) is less plausible given that it occurs in the European, e.g. Cernon-sur-Coole (Raftery 1984, 103) and British La Tène and in Roman (Thompson 1968) contexts, although Warner is correct to identify a distinctively Irish version of the motif developed in the fifth-seventh centuries from Irish La Tène boss and fine line ornament. Where the crested bird's head does occur in North Britain, in Hiberno-Saxon contexts, it is invariably in conjunction with Ultimate La Tène developed trumpet patterns of the late sixth and seventh centuries, thus giving some credence to the *hypothesis that there is a chronological difference between the combination of crested bird heads and fine-line spiral motif and that of crested bird heads and developed trumpet pattern; the former being the earlier.* Unless the *corpus* of British fine-line *champlevé* ornament increases, Ireland will remain the strongest candidate as the source for this style of decoration.

The best parallels for the ornament of the River Kennet escutcheon are found on the River Bann escutcheon, on an unprovenanced Irish latchet (Henry 1965, Pl. 13) and on the Faversham print (*ibid.*, Pl. 5, 5). Other noteworthy parallels are found among the zoomorphic penannular brooch series (notably brooches 62, 63 and 72 of Kilbride-Jones' (1980a) classification) and a number of hanging bowl escutcheons, such as those of hanging-bowl No. 1 from Sutton Hoo and the Baginton escutcheons (Bruce-Mitford 1987, Pls I & II).

As space-fillers, appendages to fine-line spirals, such as the tail-shaped ones of the River Kennet escutcheon, are well known. The form of the River Kennet specimens is, however, somewhat unique. Unattached space-fillers, which are separate from the main design can be employed, as on the Barlaston escutcheons (Kilbride-Jones 1980b, fig. 80,1), and are a manifestation of the *horror vacui* which is a hallmark of Insular art of the period. The 'hub' from which the spirals emanate is also distinctive, good comparisons existing in only a select few pieces, i.e. two Irish zoomorphic penannular brooches (Kilbride-Jones 1980a, cat. 62 and 63), an unprovenanced Irish latchet (Henry 1965, Pl.13) and the enamelled Barrington disc (Kilbride-Jones 1980b, fig. 82, 4). The motif on the Barrington disc is particularly relevant for not only does it have the same number of 'spokes' as the River Kennet design, but it too has one which is really just a thin, undeveloped appendage, which was not catered for in the main scheme and whose sole function is to anchor a section of the motif that is required to complete the circuit of the design. A similar device has been employed in the right-hand terminal of an unprovenanced Irish zoomorphic penannular brooch (Kilbride-Jones 1980a, cat. 63) where failure to invert the motif of the left-hand terminal before applying it to the right resulted in a space filler being added in what would otherwise have been considered an unsightly undecorated space.

The parallels cited for the River Kennet escutcheon are dated art-historically to the sixth and seventh century period (see, for example, Bruce-Mitford 1987). The preponderance of Irish parallels suggest that it was probably made in Ireland. It is not known whether any special significance should be attached to its findspot given that it is clearly surrounded by a dense complex of important prehistoric ritual monuments. Its proximity to a major Roman road may, however, indicate the route along which the escutcheon was transported.

#### BIRD-SHAPED ESCUTCHEONS

The plain, bird-shaped escutcheon from Ballinderry Crannog no. 2 was for long the only one of its type in Ireland. The discovery of closely similar escutcheons at Rathmullan, Co. Down, and Clonmacnoise, Co. Offaly, has reawakened interest in the type. An escutcheon, from Ballynee, Co. Meath, also a very recent addition to the *corpus*, probably dates to the eighth century, but appendages to the escutcheon plate symbolising wing and tail feathers reveal that its ancestry lies among bird-shaped escutcheons of the fifth to seventh centuries (Eogan 1990).

Many escutcheons of the earliest hanging-bowls are unambiguously bird-shaped, giving the impression of birds clutching the rim of the bowl as they drink, good examples occurring on the bowls from Nauheim-an-der-Lahn and Barton, Cambridgeshire (Henry 1936, Pl XX, 1 and 3), both apparently from Roman contexts. The escutcheons on the silver dish from Traprain Law, East Lothian (*ibid.*, 215, Pl. XXI, 1 and 2), albeit stylised, are swan-shaped and differ from the preceding examples by having out-turned hooks, directed away from the dish. A pre-A.D. 400 date is generally accepted for the Traprain Law hoard (Thomas 1981, 102). An escutcheon from Arncliffe Cave, Yorkshire, (Henry 1936, fig. 3), which may have been associated with a second century fibula, has also been fitted with an out-turned hook. V-shaped shoulder blades extending downwards from the nape of the neck, which are also a feature of the Nauheim-an-der-Lahn and Barton escutcheons, animate the escutcheon plate.

In some instances the development of an outward-turned hook is carried to its logical conclusion and the hook is joined back on to the escutcheon plate forming a complete ring. Such is the case with the escutcheons of a hanging-bowl from Sleaford, Lincolnshire, (*ibid.*, Pl. XXI, 4) which was found in an Anglican grave of the sixth century, although Kendrick (1932, 165), arguing that the bowl may have been quite old by the time that it was buried, suggests that its true date lies in the late Roman period. Two further examples of bowls with outward-facing escutcheon rings come from an Anglo-Saxon grave at Sarre, Kent (Henry 1936, Pl. XXI, 3) where they were associated with an escutcheon of the more common inward-facing variety, thus indicating that the two types were in use concurrently. However, the fact that so few bowls with outward-turned hook or full-ring suspension have been found in Britain or Ireland implies that this type ran into an evolutionary cul-de-sac, not surviving beyond the period of the Sarre burial in the fifth or sixth century.

Plain, bird-shaped escutcheons with inward-facing hooks which compare well with the three Irish specimens include those on the hanging-bowl from Ford Down, Wiltshire, found in a seventh century weapon-dated Saxon grave (Fowler 1968, 295, Pl. XIII, top), the escutcheons of the Chessell Down, Isle of Wight, hanging-bowl (Kendrick 1932, 166, Pl. II) and those of the Hawnby, Yorks., hanging-bowl (Henry 1936, Pl. XXXI, 1). The bowls in question have rim-profiles of Types a (e.g. Chessell Down) and b (e.g. Hawnby) after Henry's classification (1936; see also Bruce-Mitford 1987). Recent analysis suggests that manufacture of bowls with Type b rim-profiles took place in the late sixth and seventh centuries (Bruce-Mitford 1987; Youngs 1989, 47-52); relevant recent discoveries include the hanging-bowl from Garton Station, Humberside (Youngs 1989, cat. 32).

Decorated bird-shaped escutcheons, which are probably contemporary with the plain specimens, include the beautiful Faversham escutcheon (*ibid.*, cat. 35) and those from Benniworth and St. Paul in the Bail (Bruce-Mitford 1987, Pls I, e and II, k) which can be dated to the seventh century on art-historical grounds (see in particular Bruce-Mitford 1983, 263-295).

#### THE BALLINDERRY CRANNOG NO. 2 ESCUTCHEON

The bronze, bird-shaped escutcheon from Ballinderry Crannog No. 2 was found in Section IV, 3, in the south-eastern area of the site, between the timber floor and the palisade (Hencken 1942, 44, fig. 18, 189). There is no record of its stratigraphic context, though it is noteworthy that this area appears to have suffered particularly heavy disturbance during nineteenth century treasure hunting and it is possible that little or no undisturbed deposits survived. Recent re-assessment of the excavations (Newman 1986) has distinguished a pre-crannog, early medieval horizon dating to the later sixth/seventh century A.D.; the crannog proper is dated to the eighth or early ninth century. The escutcheon could belong to either phase and its dating must be based on art-historical analysis.

Hencken draws a comparison between it and the

escutcheons of the Hawnby, Yorkshire, hanging-bowl (Henry 1936, Pl. XXXI, 1) which was apparently found in an Anglo-Saxon grave (the associated material was not preserved), and those of the hanging-bowl from Skomrak, Norway (Kendrick 1932, Pl. II, 2), which was found in a Viking grave. He concluded that given these two parallels, a date between these chronological parameters (Anglo-Saxon to Viking) would not be inconsistent with his original dating of the site to the eighth century. Hencken (1950, 17-18) subsequently re-dated the main phase of occupation to the seventh century. Fowler, on the other hand, draws a parallel between the Ballinderry escutcheon and those of the Ford Down, Wiltshire, hanging-bowl which she dates to the seventh century A.D. on the basis of its association in an Anglo-Saxon grave with a diagnostic sword (1968, 294-95, Pl. XIII, topo). Most recently, Bruce-Mitford comments that the escutcheon probably belongs in the fifth-seventh century period, though it is not readily datable "since plain oval or bird-shaped escutcheons occur both early and late" (1987, 36).

The only feature distinguishing the Ballinderry escutcheon from the Rathmullan and Clonmacnoise escutcheons is that it was probably soldered, and not riveted, to its bowl. A change in the method of attaching the escutcheon to the bowl, from soldering to riveting, appears to have taken place, possibly towards the end of the seventh century; escutcheons attached to bowls with Type c rim-profiles are, in the main riveted, whereas those attached to Type a and b rims are soldered. Novel evidence of the change in practice is seen on the hanging-bowl from Garton Station, Humberside, where detached escutcheons, which had originally been soldered, were subsequently riveted to the bowl (Youngs 1989, cat. 32). The comparison with the Ford Down and Hawnby escutcheons, coupled with the lack of evidence of its having been riveted to its bowl may imply a seventh century date for the Ballinderry escutcheon.

#### THE RATHMULLAN AND CLONMACNOISE ESCUTCHEONS

The Rathmullan and Clonmacnoise escutcheons were riveted to their respective bowls, which may imply that they belong in the eighth century or later. It is interesting to note that the rivet of the Rathmullan escutcheon does not appear to perforate the escutcheon plate, which is most unusual and warrants closer inspection.

The Rathmullan specimen is definitely stratified and belongs to Phase 2 of the site (Lynn 1982, 145, Fig. 28). Carbon 14 estimations are available from the preceding and succeeding phases, but are of little use when adjusted to their most acceptable ranges (240-960 A.D. in the case of Phase 1 and 660-1160 A.D. in the case of Phase 2 (Warner 1985, 142-3)). Unfortunately, other diagnostic types from Phase 2, in particular the souterrain ware and the spiral-ringed loop-headed ringed-pin, are not susceptible to close dating, but would not be out of context in the sixth to ninth century (Lynn 1982, 84).

The plain bird-shaped escutcheon (Fig. 2) found recently at Clonmacnoise, Co. Offaly, appears to be of iron and was riveted to the bowl - thanks are due to Mrs. H. King for permission to refer to this object prior to its full publication. Its form and dimensions are extremely close to those of the Ballinderry and Rathmullan specimens. We must, however, await the full results of the excavation before any further comment on its context.

The composite bronze escutcheon from Ballynee, Co. Meath, was found in the course of archaeological excavations of a souterrain. The context in itself is not closely datable and the dating of the escutcheon is based on art-historical analysis of its form (Eogan 1990). The escutcheon-plate is sub-circular and would originally have had three thistle-shaped appendages riveted to each side and to the base. The relief ornament on the plate is badly corroded but was, nonetheless, divided into four quadrants. Good comparisons can be drawn with escutcheons from Whitby, recently dated to the eighth century (Youngs 1989, 60) and others from Benniworth and St. Paul in the Bail (Bruce-Mitford 1987, Pls. 1.e and 2.k) which have fan-shaped, or crescentic appendages at the bottom of the escutcheon

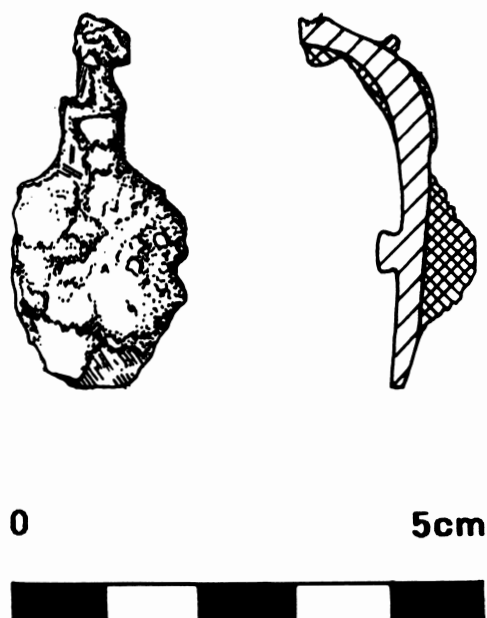


Fig. 2. Clonmacnoise, Co. Offaly, iron escutcheon (Before conservation).

signifying tail feathers. The Whitby escutcheon has additional lateral appendages which parallel those of the Ballynee escutcheon. I have argued that the appendages represent highly stylised birds wings and tail feathers and that the ancestry of the Ballynee escutcheon lies among bird-shaped escutcheons of the sixth and seventh century (Newman, in Eogan 1990). The form of the Ballynee escutcheon compares with the circular *appliqués* on the Moylough belt-shrine (Henry 1965, Pl. 35) and on a buckle from Lough Gara, Co. Roscommon, dated to the seventh/eighth century (Youngs 1989, cat. 46). Various dates have been advanced for the Moylough belt-shrine, from the late seventh to the late eighth century (Rynne 1987, 87-88 and Harbison 1981, 231-239), the majority of commentators agreeing on an early eighth century date. Coupled with the fact that the escutcheon was riveted to its bowl, these parallels suggest that the escutcheon belongs in the eighth century.

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

Problems peculiar to the study of hanging-bowl escutcheons tend to be compounded rather than resolved by each new addition to the *corpus*. The small but highly significant Group A group has its best parallels in the decorative art of Irish metalwork, even though the greatest number has been found in England. Françoise Henry's (1936) thesis that Group A escutcheons were out of their native context in England, although still of some moment, has always been undermined by the dearth of hanging bowl escutcheons in Ireland. To date only one Group A escutcheon is known from Ireland, that from the River Bann; it belongs to a distinctive, openwork variety (Bruce-Mitford 1987, Pl. II a).

Plain, openwork escutcheons are predominant in the Scottish *corpus*. Plain and decorated specimens are known from England, and while there is no evidence of a chronological distinction between the two types, there may be an undetected cultural one. A workshop at Craig Phadrig, Inverness, yielded a mould for a plain openwork escutcheon, the only definitive evidence for the production of escutcheons anywhere (Stevenson 1972, 49-51). The discovery naturally raises the question to what extent the predominance of plain openwork escutcheons in Scotland is due to Pictish influences; the contribution of Pictish craftsmanship and tastes to the development of Insular Celtic art in general, during the fifth to seventh centuries, has not been properly ascertained.

Warner's (1987, 21) proposal, that plain escutcheons were sent to Ireland to be decorated, fails to take due cognisance of what Irish style metalwork and workshops (e.g. Dunadd) there

are in Scotland, but does raise the interesting question of whether the Picts were interested in, or indeed capable of, producing decorated cast bronze objects, in particular escutcheons. The fact that only plain openwork escutcheons are known from Scotland could be viewed as somewhat of a corollary to the paucity of decorated, and demonstrably Pictish, bronzework from Scotland in general.

Decorated Irish and Anglo-Saxon style bronzes were being produced in workshops located at royal sites, such as Dunadd which were exposed to international ideas and designs during the sixth and seventh centuries. It appears that the most noteworthy modifications that Irish types (notably, hand-pins and zoomorphic penannular brooches) underwent in these workshops was simply a reduction in their size (see Newman 1990, 148), which could be accounted for by factors such as the availability of raw materials, consumer preferences or non-Irish workmanship. The range of Irish style metalwork in the area of the Moray Firth (the immediate catchment area of Craig Phadrig) alone, which includes the Gaulcross hoard; the Freswick Links, Caithness, and Urquhart, Elginshire, hand-pins and the Culbin Sands, Moray (Newman 1990), and Shurrery, Caithness, zoomorphic penannular brooches, clearly places Craig Phadrig in an international arena and not a purely Pictish one which its location might otherwise suggest. There is, however, no strong evidence that the Irish style metalwork found in the area of the Moray Firth, for example, was made in any other than Irish, or Irish-influenced workshops (*ibid.*). Direct Pictish involvement in the production of developed, sixth or seventh century, hand-pins and zoomorphic penannular brooches, with the notable exception of a silver hand-pin from Norrie's Law, cannot be proven and may have been minimal. It has been suggested that the pin with the z-rod symbol on the *verso* is a copy of its partner (Stevenson 1976, 248). Microscopic analysis reveals that in contrast to the heavily scored surface of the original, no scoring of the surface preparatory to enamelling is evident on the copy. Moreover, the mortice and tenon joint between pin-head and shank employed on the copy differs from the normal practice of one-piece casting. The enamel may have been deliberately removed from the original in order to take an impression of the motif for copying. The workshop at Craig Phadrig, on the other hand, is likely to have been more strongly influenced by Pictish tastes and it therefore seems likely that the choice of undecorated openwork escutcheons in Scotland derives, at least in part, from a Pictish preference.

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