

The Symbolism and Significance of Celtic Penannular Brooches

By Aelfifu verch Morgan (Vandy Hall Bennett)

The words “Celtic penannular brooch” usually conjure up images of elaborately decorated brooches such as the Tara Brooch, or items used to fasten cloaks. However, Celtic penannular and annular brooches held a greater purpose in Celtic society than that of decorative objects and clothing fasteners. They served as secular and religious status symbols used by all genders, showing the rank, wealth, and importance of the wearer. The richness of many brooches along with their provenance, and visual depictions of brooches being worn, help give us insight into their importance and meaning in Celtic society. This paper will present a short overview of the styles of Celtic penannular brooches. The influences upon Celtic penannular brooches and their uses will be discussed. Then the significance of Celtic penannular brooches, and the possible meanings of their iconography, will be examined.

A Short Overview of Styles and Dating

Celtic penannular and annular brooches varied greatly in style, both regionally and chronologically. Unfortunately, while Celtic brooches can be grouped by style and by which brooches are from contemporary time periods, scholars have been unable to accurately pin down an exact chronology of Celtic brooches as they do not appear to have gone through any regular stages of development.

The basic form of Celtic penannular brooches is that of a circular loop of metal with larger flattened ends or ‘terminals’ with an attached movable pin¹(fig. 1). There are two major types of Celtic brooches which are thought of as penannular, brooches with

separate terminals, and brooches which are actually annular or ‘pseudo-penannular’ (fig.2), where the ring is not split at the terminals and the pin can not slip between them. Annular brooches are mostly of later date than penannular brooches, and were usually ornately decorated as seen in examples such as the Tara Brooch. Annular brooches were sometimes solidly connected between the terminals (fig. 2) and sometimes connected with decorated bars (fig. 3), varying from appearing almost similar to penannular brooches to being visually a full ring². For the purpose of this paper both penannular and annular brooch styles will be referred to when generally discussing penannular brooches unless specifically stated. This is because of their similarity in appearance, apparent similarity in purposes, and because they contain the same types of iconography.

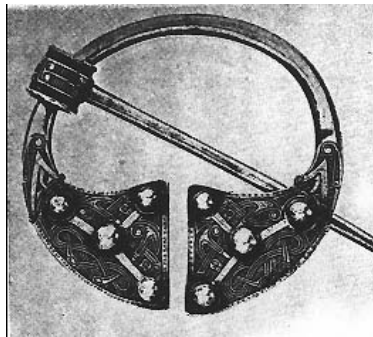


Figure 1. Penannular Brooch, Co. Cavan. National Museum of Ireland, Dublin.



Figure 2. Tara Brooch (Annular). National Museum of Ireland, Dublin.

¹ Johansen, O.S., ‘Bossed Penannular Brooches, a Systemization and Study of their Cultural Affinities’, *Acta Archaeologica*, XLIV (1973), 68.

² Johansen, 37.

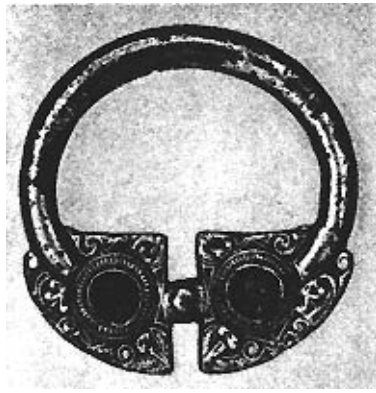


Figure 3. "Pseudo" Penannular or Annular Silver Brooch. Co. Donegal. British Museum, London.

Within penannular brooches there are two common styles: brooches with flattened terminals, and those where the terminals are separate and decorated with metal bosses (fig. 4). A variety of different decorative motifs were used to decorate most brooches including such designs as Celtic knotwork, zoomorphic figures, animals, birds, and circular patterns³. Penannular brooches varied from simple rings and pins made from crude copper alloys to elaborate creations decorated with gold filigree, glass, and enamel⁴. The most elaborate of these penannular brooches were decorated on both the front and back with motifs such as animal heads and concentric circles^{5 6}.

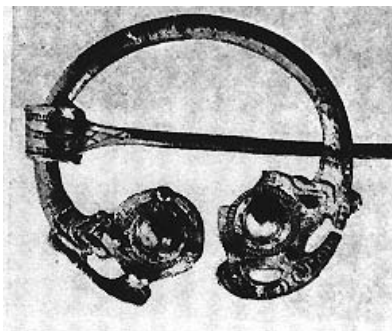


Figure 4. Bossed Penannular Brooch. National Museum of Ireland, Dublin.

³ Johansen, 72-8.

⁴ O'Floinn, R., 'Secular Metalwork in the Eighth and Ninth Centuries', In Susan Young (ed.), *The Work of Angels*, University of Texas Press (Austin, 1989), 72.

⁵ Johansen, 73.

Development

The Saxons

The process through which Celtic penannular brooches developed is not known but influences from several cultures can be observed. The earliest Celtic penannular brooches were found in England, and later brooches mostly in Scotland and Ireland⁷. During the sixth century C.E. a change is seen in Celtic penannular brooches and in Irish metalwork in general. A greater range of decorative techniques began to be used, including cast interlace, gilding, chip carving, and a greater use of gold and filigree. This development is thought to be caused by exposure to Saxon metalwork seen from the possessions of, and gifts from, visiting nobility⁸.

The Norse

The development of Norse settlements in Celtic territory also had a great impact on the production of Celtic penannular brooches. Before the arrival of the Vikings, there was no regular supply of silver to the Celts^{9 10}. Irish texts speak of gold and silver being imported and silver being used sparingly on only the most important prestige objects such as altar vessels and brooches before the advent of Norse settlements¹¹. Place names and runic inscriptions and artwork found in graves at churches on the Isle of Man utilize a combination of Norse and Celtic styles. This indicates that peaceful interaction with the Norse was occurring during the eighth century C.E.¹² It is generally acknowledged that the Norse were regularly supplying silver to the Celts by the mid ninth century C.E..

Christianity

⁶ Stevenson, R.K.B., 'Brooches and Pins: Some Seventh to Ninth Century Problems', In Michael Ryan (ed.), *Ireland and Insular Art, C.E. 500-1200*, Royal Irish Academy (Dublin, 1987), 90.

⁷ Johansen, 63.

⁸ Stevenson, R.K.B., 'The Hunterston Brooch and its Significance', *Medieval Archaeology*, 18 (1974), 28-29.

⁹ O'Floinn, 72.

¹⁰ Graham-Campbell, J., 'Two Groups of Ninth Century Irish Brooches', *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, 120 (1972), 115.

¹¹ O'Floinn, 72-73.

The development of Christianity left its mark on Celtic penannular brooches as well as on more conventionally religious Celtic objects like shrines and manuscripts. Similarities have been noted between metalwork of the eighth to tenth century and manuscripts from the same periods¹³. Especially notable are the similarities between the Tara Brooch (fig. 2) and the Lindesfarne gospels. Several scholars have noted that both items share similar designs including similar styles in rendering knotwork and animals^{14 15}.

Usage, Class, and Gender

Penannular brooches were worn by all classes and genders. However, the most impressive and expensive brooches were reserved for the rich. Women seem to have had equally elaborate brooches as those possessed by men. Brooches were used to fasten clothing, but they were also used as specifically decorative elements. Smaller penannular brooches were often used as secondary ornamentation on objects like purses or necklaces¹⁶.

While two brooches were sometimes used to fasten clothing, evidence suggests that Celtic penannular brooches were generally not made in pairs. Excavations in Bidford-on-Avon and Sleaford unearthed graves where two brooches were used to fasten clothing, but they were unmatched¹⁷.

Stone carvings suggest that while two brooches may have been used at one time to fasten clothing, it became the fashion to wear just one large brooch on the shoulder or

¹² Johansen, 116.

¹³ Graham-Campbell (1972), 119.

¹⁴ Stevenson (1974), 31.

¹⁵ Ryan, M., 'Church Metalwork of the Eight and Ninth Centuries', In Susan Young (ed.), *The Work of Angels*, University of Texas Press (Austin, 1989), 127.

¹⁶ Dickinson, T.M., 'Fowler's Type G Penannular Brooches Reconsidered', *Medieval Archaeology*, 26 (1982), 52.

¹⁷ Ibid.

breast. A carved stone from Hilton of Cadboll in Ross-shire depicts a woman a mirror and comb riding a horse and wearing a single penannular brooch on her breast. All three objects are exaggerated in size as if to emphasize their importance. Other stone carvings of women also show them with a single penannular brooch on their breast, suggesting that this was the fashion for women of the time. Stone carvings of men also depict them with only one brooch, but in all cases they wear them on the shoulder rather than on the breast. High crosses at Monasterboice, Co. Louth and at Kells, Co. Meath, show men wearing single penannular or annular brooches in the excepted fashion, on the shoulder. The finest of these depicts a warrior with an annular brooch on his shoulder¹⁸. An Irish law tract refers to the methods of wearing penannular brooches. It deals with possible accidental injury by a brooch pin and states that the wearer is not at fault for the injury if the pin dose not project too far and as long as the brooch is properly worn. It goes on to say that the proper manner for men is to wear the brooch on a shoulder, and for women is to wear the brooch on the breast¹⁹. The fact that a law had to be made about personal injury resulting from the wearing of penannular brooches suggests that they went far beyond practical objects to become exaggerated as symbols of rank. The fact that there is no separate limit for the different genders besides where brooches were worn for men and women suggests that a certain degree of equality was possible in status for both genders, as they could posses and wear the same objects.

While Celtic penannular and annular brooches are significant in that they are a large body of mainly secular artwork, they appear to have been worn or at least possessed by the clergy as well. There is reference to a Celtic penannular or annular brooch being

¹⁸ O'Floinn, 72-73.

¹⁹ O'Floinn, 73.

kept as a relic at Iona called the *Delg Aidedta*²⁰. There are also silver brooches in the St. Ninian's Isle hoard and brooches such as the Llanmadog Brooch have been found near ecclesiastical settlements^{21 22}.

From depictions of how Celtic pennanular brooches were worn and contemporary texts discussing them we know that they held importance far beyond that of mere clothing fasteners²³. By the eighth and ninth centuries, these brooches were a major status symbol and sign of portable wealth. The depiction from Hilton of Cadboll in Ross-shire of a woman riding a horse is one piece of evidence attesting to the importance of Celtic pennanular brooches. The fact that the brooch is depicted in an exaggerated way which brings attention to its self shows its importance, as does the fact that it was included on the stone carving at all, while other fasteners were not depicted. The association of the brooch with the comb and the mirror which are also shown as exaggeratedly large shows a connection with other objects also thought to be marks of status²⁴.

There is also textual evidence supporting the importance of Celtic pennanular brooches. The seventh century 'Life of Saint Bridget,' records the miraculous recovery of a precious silver brooch owned by a highborn layman poet. This brooch was earned in payment from the King of Leinster. This shows that these brooches were important enough to merit a 'miraculous' recovery. It also shows that brooches were a portable form of wealth suitable for payment. This idea of portable wealth is directly connected with the idea of brooches being visual status symbols. In Celtic society, as in other early societies, excess wealth appears to have been converted into jewelry. Objects of value such as penannular brooches were also exchanged to strengthen political alliances as part

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ryan, 126, 153-154.

²² Lewis, J.M., 'Recent Finds of Penannular Brooches from Wales', *Medieval Archaeology*, 26 (1982), 151.

²³ Green, M., *Celtic Art, Symbols & Imagery*, Sterling Publishing Co. (New York, 1996). 82.

²⁴ O'Floinn, 72-73.

of elaborate gifting exchanges. An Irish law tract on status provides details on the expected personal possessions of various grades of nobility. One of the expected possessions of the *aire deso*, the lowest grade of nobility, was a precious brooch worth an ounce of silver, along with other objects such as a house, a full set of drinking vessels, and a silver bridal, among other items²⁵.

Personal and Religious Meanings

Beyond the significance of the Celtic penannular brooch as a status symbol, the decoration and iconography of Celtic penannular brooches may have additional meaning. Several examples of elaborate brooches are inscribed with the names of the owners, making them very personal possessions. The Hunterston brooch (fig.5) is inscribed with an Irish name, the Balleyspellan brooch has a series of names in ogham, and a brooch from Killamery asks for a prayer for someone named Cormac. The area around the name on the back of the Hunterston brooch is scored as if to prevent any further inscription or addition of other names to claim ownership²⁶.



Figure 5. Annular Brooch, Hunterston, West Kilbride. Late 7th-Early 8th Century, CE. Early Medieval, Celtic. Silver, gold, and amber 12.2 cm. Edinburgh, The National Museum of Scotland

²⁵ O'Floinn, 72.

²⁶ Ibid.

The decorations on many of the more elaborate brooches such as the Tara brooch (fig.5) are so intricate that they took a great deal of skill to produce. It has been suggested that having ornamentation so small that it couldn't be clearly seen by people other than the wearer may have served as not only a display of wealth and craftsmanship but to express private, symbolic, or secret messages which only the brooch wearer or possibly god could access. This meaning has also been applied to decorations on the back sides of brooches. Another possibility is that these intricate designs were similar in purpose to complicated designs seen on carpet pages in illuminated manuscripts. These may have acted as a sort of mandala, a complex area of pattern for the owner to gaze and meditate upon²⁷.

In the later Middle Ages brooches were often used for Christian religious representation and inscription. Recently scholars have begun to re-examine the iconography and symbolism of early brooches including Celtic penannular brooches for similar significance²⁸. Celtic symbolism changed when Christianity reached Scotland and Ireland, and it the images on brooches were influenced by the advent of Christianity as well. Plausibly Christian imagery has been found on several Celtic brooches including the penannular Hunterston brooch. In a study of a Frankish reliquary box the scholar Victor Elbern identified beasts, birds and snakes around a crucified Christ as being creatures of Genesis forming a parallel to the new creation or redemption. It is suggested that the presence of similar beasts, bird heads, and snakes with fish-tales on the Hunterston brooch may have similar meanings²⁹.

The idea that Celtic annular and penannular brooches are essentially cross sectioned where the pin and arms meet has been examined and it has been proposed that

²⁷ Green, 81.

²⁸ Stevenson (1974), 38.

in several instances this arrangement has been emphasized to produce an obvious cross form. In the Hunterston brooch, small squares on the arms are used to create a cross shape. If they were originally set with garnets as is speculated, this cross shape would have stood out clearly. This method of using blocks of pattern to represent a cross is similar to other crosses where pattern is used to fill a cross rather than imagery, such as in some carpet pages in texts like the Lindisfarne Gospels and as is seen on a set of bowls thought to be of Byzantine origin from the Sutton Hoo find. It is thought that rather than representing the suffering or death of Christ as in more figural crosses, these crosses are emphasizing the risen glory of Christ³⁰. It is also thought that the elevated box-like section between what would be the terminals of the Hunterstone brooch resembles a jeweled book cover. If this was intentional, it would be directly referencing other religious art, as books were almost entirely religious in nature at that time in Scotland and Ireland³¹.

Another religious connection proposed by scholars is that the rise of annular brooch design could have been influenced by a lost reliquary brooch made as part of the cult of relics. There is evidence of brooches being used as reliquaries in other parts of Europe during this period. If a penannular brooch was modified to act as a reliquary it would require connecting the terminals to support the box to hold the relic. If such an object had once existed it would certainly have inspired other annular brooches of similar design and might account for some of the raised sections connecting the terminals of annular brooches such as the Hunterston brooch³².

Other possibly Christian imagery can be found on Celtic brooches. It is thought that the double circles on the back of the Westness brooch may have been intended to be

²⁹ Stevenson (1974), 39.

³⁰ Ibid.

inscribed with a hexafoil similar to a brooch at the British museum from Lough Ravel, Co. Antrim, and may have been meant to be used as a kind of Christian amulet similar to those inscribed with the Chi-Rho³³.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that Celtic penannular brooches were significant as secular objects and as personal religious objects. They reflect the influence of Saxon and Norse culture on Celtic society. Celtic penannular brooches were symbols of rank and a portable form of wealth given as payment and as gifts between nobility. They could be possessed by men and women, clergy and laymen. Depictions of pennanular brooches and textual evidence show that men and women could own the same symbols of rank, denoting a certain amount of sexual equality. These brooches were often personalized with inscribed names and phrases and were obviously objects of great personal importance. Some penannular brooches may have acted as a form of Christian mandala or amulet, often displayed Christian imagery and may have been stylistically influenced by the cult of relics. Celtic penannular brooches were obviously far more than mere clothing fasteners.

³¹ Stevenson (1974), 40.

³² Ibid.

³³ Stevenson (1987), 90.

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