The Bronze Ringed Pins in the Limerick City Museum

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In 1940 a list of the antiquities housed in Limerick City Museum was published by R. Herbert in this Journal. He noted that amongst the Early Iron Age and Early Christian material in the Museum were twenty-one metal pins, but he described only one, the so-called "Adare Pin, which is made of silver, and he also referred to another, a bronze specimen of hand-pin form. Among the remainder, not mentioned by Herbert, are a homogeneous group of seven bronze pins which belong to a type usually referred to in the relevant literature as ring-pins or ringed pins. These pins form the subject of this note.

Many of the antiquities in the Limerick Museum, including the ringed pins, belonged to the Earl of Dunraven’s collection. The manuscript register of the collection contains a numerical list of all the pins, but insufficient data to assign numbers to the individual specimens. Few provenances are allocated to the pins in the collection, and none is available for any of the ringed pins. As the Dunraven collection originally belonged to the Rev. Timothy Lee, who collected most of his antiquities in Limerick and the surrounding counties, it could be assumed that the majority of the pins were found in this region. A number of items in the collection were, however, acquired by Lee from other collectors or antiquarian dealers and some are provenanced as far afield as Co. Antrim. A Thomond or even a Munster provenance for the ringed pins cannot, therefore, be too readily assumed.

The ringed pin consists essentially of a pin with a simple swivel ring attached to the pin-head which can be looped, perforated, or merely deeply bored at either side. Armstrong included the ringed pin in his comprehensive article on the bronze pins of the Christian period but apart from this study little attention has been paid to the type. A recent analysis by the present writer of over four hundred specimens of Irish provenance indicates that two basic components of the ringed pin, the ring and the pin-head, can provide a basis for classification. Six main ring forms occur, to which the following terms are assigned by the writer: spiral, plain, kidney, stirrup, rib, and knob. The four main pin-head forms are designated: baluster, loop, polyhedral and crutch. The Irish ringed pins may be classified according to ring form and subdivided, where necessary, according to their pin-head form.

1 R. Herbert, NMAJ, 2 (1940-41), 81-89.
2 Ibid. pp. 84-86.
3 I am grateful to Miss Máire Lanigan, F.I.A.I., Limerick City Librarian, for her co-operation while examining the pins in the Museum. Two other pins, not dealt with in this note, have rings which show their relationship with the penannular and annular type brooches. The remaining ten are of the simple stick-pin variety.
5 This study was undertaken as portion of a Master’s thesis at University College, Dublin. Two of the ring forms, rib and knob, represent rather scarce types, discussion of which is omitted here.
The classes represented by the ringed pins in the Limerick Museum are the plain-ringed class, both loop-headed and polyhedral-headed varieties, and the stirrup-ringed class with crutch-headed pin. (Fig. 1).

The seven ringed pins are described below.\(^7\)

1. Plain-ringed, loop-headed. This pin is quite well preserved. The shank and head are a golden bronze in colour, while the ring is covered with a dark green patina. There is no indication of ornament. The shank is oval in section to about mid-point where it assumes a thin rectangular section and tapers to a point. The pin-head is formed by bending the flattened top of the pin into a loop which grips the round-sectioned ring. The latter is shouldered and thickened on either side of the pin-head, so that it can swivel freely but cannot slip through.

   L. 12.3 cm.; Max. T. of shank, 4.6 mm. ; W. of head, 5 mm.; External D. of ring, 2 cm.; T. of ring 4.6 mm.

2. Plain-ringed, loop-headed. This small specimen has a round-sectioned shank tapering to a point which is slightly bent. The looped-over pin-head is neatly ornamented with a series of grooves which give it a ribbed effect. It is flared at the rear and sides to give the impression that it is a separate entity. The D-sectioned ring has tenoned ends which are inserted into the pin-head and enable the ring to swivel freely. It is decorated with lightly incised concentric grooves crossed by faint zig-zag lines.

   L. 7.3 cm.; Max. T. of shank, 3 mm.; W. of head, 4.5 mm.; External D. of ring, 1.3 cm.; T. of ring, 3.5 mm.

3. Plain-ringed, polyhedral-headed. The long shank is oval in section to about mid-point where it assumes a rectangular section as it tapers to a fine point. The lower shank is decorated with an incised step pattern on its broad faces and with a double vertical line on the sides. The pin-head is of cubical proportions but faceted to produce a decided polyhedral form. Below the pin-head, which is undecorated, is a collar of incised vertical lines delimited by a double transverse line. The pin-head is deeply bored at the sides to take the tapered ends of a circular-sectioned ring which can thus swivel freely. The ring is grooved transversely in four places.

   L. 16.5 cm.; Max. T. of shank, 5 mm.; W. of head, 8 mm.; External D. of ring, 1.87 cm.; T. of ring, 4.2 mm.

4. Plain-ringed, polyhedral-headed. This specimen is well preserved and has a fine dark green patina. The shank is oval in section to about mid-point where it assumes a rectangular section tapering to a fine point. This lower portion shows faint traces of an incised zig-zag pattern. The polyhedral pin-head has outlined facets, the central lozenge panels being ornamented with a simple quatrefoil interlace on one side and an enclosed salile motif on the other. The lozenge panel on top of the pin-head is decorated with an enclosed salile motif with a dot in the centre of each small lozenge. The pin-head is perforated to take a plain circular-sectioned ring with shouldered ends, the perforated area showing signs of wear, due probably to the swivel action of the ring.

   L. 11.5 cm.; Max. T. of shank, 3.5 mm.; W. of head, 6.4 mm.; External D. of ring, 1.74 cm.; T. of ring, 3.3 mm.

5. Plain-ringed, polyhedral-headed. A poor specimen, much pitted, corroded and worn. The shank is oval in section and tapers towards a point which is now missing. The polyhedral pin-head is ornamented with deeply punched dots on all facets except on top though the pattern has been almost obliterated on one side. The pin-head is perforated to hold the tapered ends of a circular-sectioned ring. Although much corroded, the ring still bears traces of transverse grooves in three places. It swivels freely in the pin-head.

   L. 11.2 cm.; Max. T. of shank, 4 mm.; W. of head, 8 mm.; External D. of ring, 1.8 cm.; T. of ring, 3.6 mm.

\(^7\) The numbers refer to the illustrations in Fig. 1. The words length, thickness, width and diameter have been abbreviated to L., T., W. and D. respectively.
Fig. 1. The bronze ringed pins in Limerick City Museum
6. Stirrup-ringed, crutch-headed. A small pin, rather poorly made now pitted and corroded in places. The shank is circular in section throughout and tapers to a fine point. The crutch head is bored at each end to hold a small stirrup-shaped ring of D section. This is held in the pin-head by means of tiny inward-projecting tenons near its ends. It swivels freely. There is no indication of ornament on either the pin-head or ring.

L. 8.7 cm.; Max. T. of shank, 2.8 mm.; W. of head, 7 mm.; External D. of ring, 10 mm.; T. of ring, 3 mm.

7. Baluster-headed, (the ring is missing). The shank is round in section to mid-point where it assumes a square section tapering to a point which is now missing. faint traces of a criss-cross pattern can be seen on the shank. The head is faceted to produce a lozenge-shaped panel, decorated with four tiny dots, on both main faces. Circular collars, now much worn, complete the baluster form. The head is perforated and shows distinct signs of wear caused by the swivel action of the missing ring.

L. 7.7 cm.; Max. T. of shank 3 mm.; W. of head, 4 mm.

Ringed pins are of frequent occurrence on habitation-sites such as ringforts and crannogs which date to the Early Christian and Early Medieval Periods in Ireland. They were worn, along with other current pin and brooch types, as dress-fasteners or as mere ornaments, on the cloak (or brat) which formed an essential element of the native costume in early historic times. Although its precise origins are difficult to locate, the ringed pin was probably an adaptation by Celtic craftsmen from certain forms of provincial Roman dress equipment. With the passage of time the form developed, and during the Viking phase a variety of types, some tastefully ornamented, were in existence.

Although the majority of Irish ringed pins are of bronze, iron specimens are not uncommon. These correspond in ring and pin-head form to the simple bronze types. A number of silver ringed pins are also known, probably the most famous, and almost certainly the longest (c. 37 cms. in length) being the Adare Pin. In form it can be classified as plain-ringied, polyhedral-headed, and the motifs employed to ornament it are similar to those found on Nos. 3 and 4 (Fig. r).

The pins in the Limerick Museum serve to illustrate some of the stages in the development of the ringed pin. Nos. 1 and 2 belong to the plain-ringied loop-headed variety. This is a very common type with a long-lived tradition, the simple form possibly accounting for its popularity and for the fact that it is also a common iron type. Pins of this variety have been found in what is probably a late 7th century context in ringfort No. 1 at Garryduff, Co. Cork, and the form may well have been current in the preceding two centuries. The Garryduff pins are of iron, the bronze specimens from this site belonging to the spiral-ringed class. Plain-ringed loop-headed pins also occur on sites dating to the 10th century and later, e.g. Ballinderry Crannog No. 1, Co. Westmeath. They are found, too, in Viking graves in Scotland and in Scandinavia itself, particularly the form represented by No. 1, the datable contexts indicating a possible floruit for the type in the 9th and 10th centuries A.D.\(^\text{11}\)

\(^8\) M. J. O’Kelly, *PRIA*, 63, C(1963), 50, fig. 8, nos. 85 and 447; H. O’N. Hencken, *PRIA*, 47, C(1942), 44, fig. 18, no. 73.

\(^9\) M. J. O’Kelly, *op. cit.*, pp. 31-34, fig. 2, nos. 123, 360 and 491.

\(^10\) H. O’N. Hencken, *PRIA*, 43 C (1936), 134, fig. 6, B. This specimen was discovered in close proximity to the wooden gaming-board dated to the mid-10th century by its Jellinge Style ornament.

Present evidence would seem to indicate that the idea of a ringed pin was adopted by the Vikings from Irish fashions in dress ornament. The faintly incised pattern on the ring of No. 2 is a rare feature, though quite closely paralleled on an unstratified specimen from Lagore Crannog, Co. Meath.  

Nos. 3, 4 and 5 belong to another sub-division of the plain-ringed class, the polyhedral-headed variety. The central lozenge-shaped panel on the pin-head is often decorated with simple basic motifs such as the quatrefoil interlaced knot and the dot pattern seen on No. 4 and No. 5 respectively. The step-pattern which is used to embellish the lower shank of No. 3 is quite frequently found on pins of this variety, but, like the majority of decorative motifs employed on ringed pins, it offers very little help as to dating. No. 4 can be compared to a specimen from Lagore which bears traces of a similar interlaced knot within an outlined lozenge panel. No. 5 can be paralleled by a broken pin from the earthen ringfort at Lissuie, Co. Antrim, which was found in a level dated by the excavator to the late 10th century. The polyhedral-headed type is also found in Viking contexts, where the burial evidence suggests that they were used as a kind of shroud pin, and a probable 9th to 10th century horizon for the form is indicated by the datable associations.

No. 6 is a typical example of the stirrup-ringed class with its distinctive crutch or T-shaped head. Both the rings and pin-heads of this class of pin are often decorated with a dot and circle motif, e.g. a specimen from Togherstown, Co. Westmeath, and another, with its ring missing, from the monastic settlement on Church Island, Valentia, Co. Kerry. This motif is extensively used on bone or antler objects, such as combs which date to the Early Christian and Early Medieval periods in Ireland, but is useless as a dating factor. At Ballinderry Crannog No. 1 three crutch-pins, all missing their rings, were discovered in strata dated to the 11th century or later. Recent excavations at High Street in Dublin have produced quite a number of stirrup-ringed pins some of them undecorated like No. 6. The majority of these were found in what are probably late 11th and 12th century levels and, together with the evidence from Ballinderry, might indicate that this class lies towards the end of the ringed pin sequence.

Incomplete ringed pins, i.e. pins which have lost their rings, are often recovered during the excavation of ringforts and crannogs. If the pin-head is intact it can provide an indication of the ring form it may have originally held. The baluster-headed type represented by No. 7 is usually threaded by a spiral ring formed from a strip of bronze wire, e.g. the pins from the stone fort at Carraig Aille 2, Co. Limerick, and those from Garryduff I already referred to, though the spiral ring is also found with a looped head. A number of plain-ringed pins have baluster heads, and the small hour-glass

12 H. Hencken, PRIA, 53, C (1950), 72, fig. 14, no. 1430.
13 Ibid., p. 72, fig. 15, no. 605.
14 G. Beran, UJA, 10 (1947), 50, fig. 10, no. 1.
15 G. Bersu and D. M. Wilson, Three Viking Graves in the Isle of Man, London 1966, pp. 43, 68, 69 and 87, pl. XII, D.
17 M. J. O’Kelly, PRIA, 59, C (1958), 105, fig. 11, no. 2.
18 H. O’N. Hencken, PRIA, 43, C (1936), 152, 157, and 221, fig. 21, B, and 26, H.
19 I am grateful to Mr. A. B. O Riordáin, National Museum of Ireland, for this information prior to publication.
20 S. P. O Riordáin, PRIA, 52, C (1949), 68, fig. 9, no. 429.
21 M. Dunlevy, NMAJ, 11 (1968), 75, fig. 1.
perforation of No. 7 would suggest that the plain ring was the form associated with this particular pin.

The entire ringed pin series seems to have been current for almost a millennium. Within this long period certain developments in ring and pin-head form occurred. Beginning with the two probable initial forms—the spiral-ringed and plain-ringed loop-headed varieties—a gradual development from types with large rings to types with smaller, more close-fitting rings can be traced. In contrast, a tendency to enlarge the pin-head probably sprang from a desire to experiment with a wider range of decorative motifs. The last stages in this probable typological sequence are best indicated by the kidney-ringed class, where a swivel-ring or “cap” is at first cast separately and fitted into the pinhead, later it is soldered to the pin-head, and, in the final stage, cast as one with the pin. Together with the stirrup-ringed class these kidney-ringed forms represent the final expression and subsequent loss of the ringed pin tradition which probably occurred during the 13th century A.D. The small medieval annular brooch or some form of stick-pin may have superseded the ringed pin as a dress-fastener for a time. Later on, in the 14th and 15th centuries, buttons began to replace pins and brooches as fastening devices on clothes.