

# An Early Christian Hoard from Derrynaflan, Co. Tipperary

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A hoard of ecclesiastical silver vessels was found by Mr. Michael Webb and his son Michael in the course of unlicensed digging undertaken by them in February 1980 at various points in and around the National Monument of Derrynaflan Church. One such sounding, prompted by a metal detector signal,<sup>1</sup> revealed the bottom of an upturned basin of bronze under which the hoard had been protected. In addition to the basin, a chalice, a paten together with its 'stand' or foot-ring, and a strainer or sieve of ladle-like form were found. The paten was a complex piece assembled from numerous parts, many of which had become detached, some evidently at the time of discovery and recovered by Mr. Webb. Others, fortunately, remained *in situ* and were subsequently recovered in their correct relative positions in the course of a scientific excavation. On bringing the objects to the National Museum on the day after their finding, Mr. Webb stated that the chalice had stood upright in the pit, the paten had rested against it, the 'stand' lay on the paten, and the strainer lay, rim downwards, on the base of the pit between the chalice and the paten. He demonstrated the relative position of the objects and this was immediately photographed as he had described it (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. The relative position of the objects as found: from a description by the finder.  
(This photograph, and all the others in this article, are by Mr. Brendan Doyle, National Museum of Ireland)

<sup>1</sup> The reader is referred to the Appendix where extracts from the National Monuments Act 1930, as amended in 1954, are printed.



In March and April 1980, the Irish Antiquities Division of the National Museum conducted excavations at the site. Although previously unaware of the find, the joint land-owners, Mr. John O'Leary and Mr. Denis O'Brien, readily gave their consent to the investigation and generously assisted the Museum in many practical ways, not least in guarding the work from the attentions of numerous illicit treasure-hunters attracted to the scene—along with many thousands of interested members of the public—by the unprecedented publicity which the discovery of the hoard had received in the media.

### The Site

Derrynaflan is an island in the middle of the Littleton system of bogs. It lies in the townland of Lurgoe, the civil parish of Graystown, and the barony of Slieveardagh, in Co. Tipperary (O.S. 6-inch scale sheet no. 54). The site is variously known locally as the 'Island' or the 'Gobán Saor' after the legendary mason who is said to have been buried there. The name Derrynaflan is an anglicisation of *Doire na bhFlann*, the 'Oak Wood of the Flanns'—three ecclesiastics associated with the ancient monastery in the time of Fedlimid Mac Crimthann, King of Cashel and bishop who died in 847 A.D. The monastery of Derrynaflan seems to have enjoyed his patronage in the early ninth century, although the documentation of this is slight.

The foundation of the monastery is attributed to St. Ruadhán of Lorrha in his medieval *Life*. Apart from the few mentions which suggest that it was a prominent foundation in late pre- and early Viking times, the history of the site is obscure. It is mentioned in fifteenth century Papal taxations of the Diocese of Cashel and, in an early seventeenth century account, the church was described as ruinous and the absence of services noted. The Franciscans mention Derrynaflan as a house of their order between 1676 and 1724, but the entries in their records do not suggest that there was a resident community. The name Derrynaflan survived in the locality to be recorded (although not as an official townland name) by the Ordnance Survey in the mid-nineteenth century. The standing masonry ruins were made a national monument during the 1930s but, apart from this, the site received little attention until the announcement of the discoveries of 1980.

The island is a long, roughly oval prominence of glacial gravels, now entirely surrounded by peat bog. Its perimeter is defined by a bank and ditch, low and abraded in places, in others still fairly substantial, which may have constituted the monastic *vallum*. On the eastern side, the bog has encroached on this and buried stretches of it. Within, numerous earthworks have been identified—small enclosures, a long bank running along the summit of the hill, small prehistoric burial mounds probably of Early Iron Age date, a trapezoidal cemetery on the eastern side containing some medieval grave-slabs and other carvings. Here and there are the faint outlines of small rectangular huts or *botháns* and evidence of more modern cultivation. Not all of these earthworks are of the same period—some clearly overlie others of earlier date.

On the brow of the hill, towards the southern end of the site, are the remains of the stone buildings—a chancel of thirteenth century date with an Irish Romanesque window re-set into its wall as an alcove; fragment of a nave of large, closely-jointed but irregular masonry of a type characteristic of pre-Romanesque Irish church buildings and, on its northern side, some parts of conventual buildings of medieval but uncertain date. Associated with these are low banks, some evidently the degraded remains of masonry walls, some of which define roughly rectangular areas. In one of these, to the north and east of the chancel, the hoard was found.

The island is approached on the south-western side by a modern causeway which



follows the line of an ancient bog trackway or *togher* (Irish, *tóchar*) the timbers of which are, here and there, evident in the drains which flank the roadway. (A passage in the life of St. Ruadhán, recounting the saint's visit to Derrynaflan to bring provisions to the monks who had been cut off without supplies, describes how God opened a miraculous trackway through the lake before the holy man and his companions). A small neighbouring island, Derrynabrone, is approached from Derrynaflan by a trackway of sand and gravel laid down in the peat—this appears to be fairly modern. A close inspection of Derrynabrone has so far failed to reveal on it any traces of ancient activity; numerous quarry-pits on its surface yielded no evidence of early occupation.

In summary, therefore, Derrynaflan can be described as a large enclosure constructed on a site which had seen prehistoric activity, if perhaps not settlement. The enclosed area appears, from surface indications, to have been occupied for a long time, at least from early historic times until the modern period. A substantial Early Christian church, of uncertain date, was built on the site to which a chancel was added in the thirteenth century. Other monastic buildings were erected at some stage in the medieval period. When the church went out of use is unknown, but at every period the well-drained land of Derrynaflan Island, in what is otherwise a large bog, must have been prized, just as it is today. It is to its value as grazing and, to a more limited extent, as arable land, that we may attribute the later phases of activity revealed in the field survey.

## The Objects

### The Paten (Fig. 2)

The paten is a plain, shallow, circular dish mounted on a low decorative rim. It has evidently been formed by hammering and lathe-polishing—there is a centering hole visible in the middle. It has been damaged and warped, and now measures 35.7-36.8 cm in diameter. The rim is 3 cm high. The object is a complex assembly of more than two hundred components and its construction is not yet fully understood. The outer surface of the rim carries twelve polychrome glass studs in gilt bronze settings, and twelve die-stamped gold or silver-gilt panels bearing tightly-woven interlace and designs of Ultimate La Tène style (Fig. 3). Within 'trichinopoly' (knitted wire mesh) mouldings on the upper surface were twelve decorated gilt-bronze frames, each designed to hold two gold filigree panels (Figs. 7, 10, 15). The frames were held in place by twelve pins—one is now missing—and the rim of the dish is perforated to receive them. The holes are laid out on radial lines scratched in the surface of the metal and the frames for filigree were fitted in accordance with a carefully planned code, twelve letters (a, b, c, d, e, f, g, h, i, j, k, l, m) in Irish half-uncial script are incised on the surface of the rim of the dish (Fig. 4). The pins securing the filigree frames terminate in elegant cast polychrome glass studs—one is now missing—while in the centre of each frame is a large decorative stud, also of cast glass. All the studs are held in simple settings within larger circular bronze fields. The twenty-four filigree panels survive, although most are now detached from their settings. It has not proved possible, so far, to establish the original sequence of motifs although the approximate placing of some of the panels recovered during the Museum's excavations is known. The use of the letter code suggests that literate individuals were involved in the processes of design or manufacture or both—the letter 'k', not normally employed in writing Irish, was familiar to early Irish scholars.

The filigree panels (Figs. 5-13) are of great interest. The motifs are executed on foil which in many cases was first stamped or traced with the desired pattern. In most cases, also, the foil background has been drilled and cut away to leave the design in openwork.



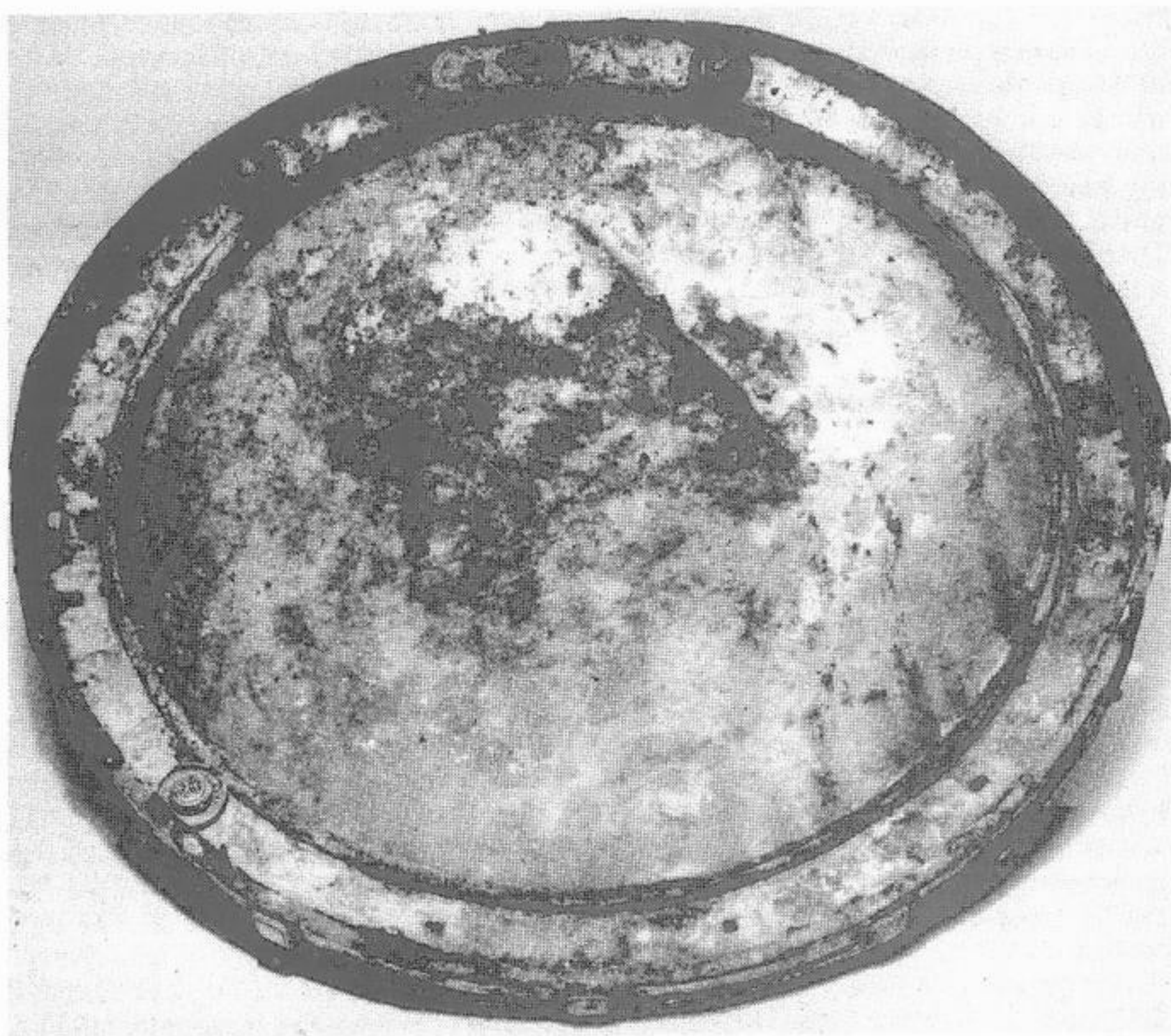


Fig. 2. The paten.

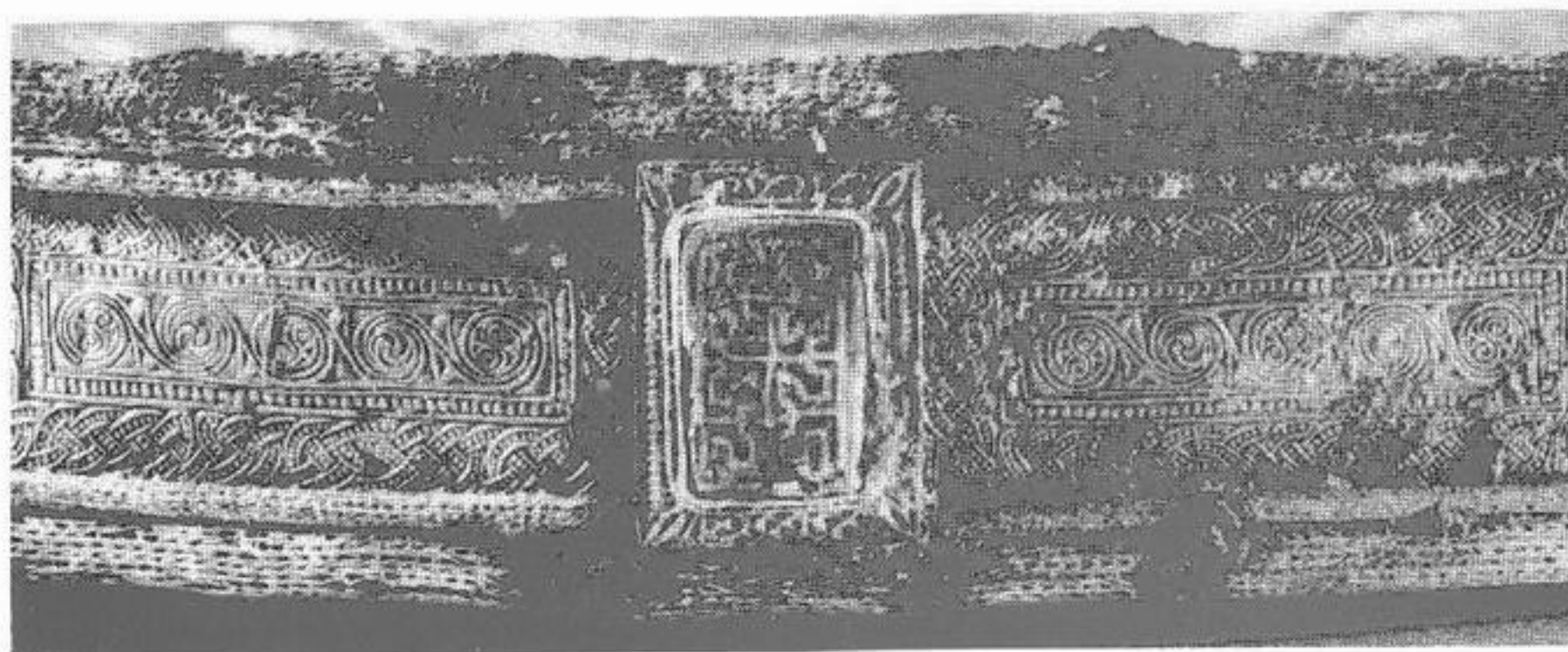


Fig. 3. Detail of the rim of the paten showing the trichinopoly mouldings, above and below, the die-stamped panels and a glass plaque in its cast gilt-bronze setting.



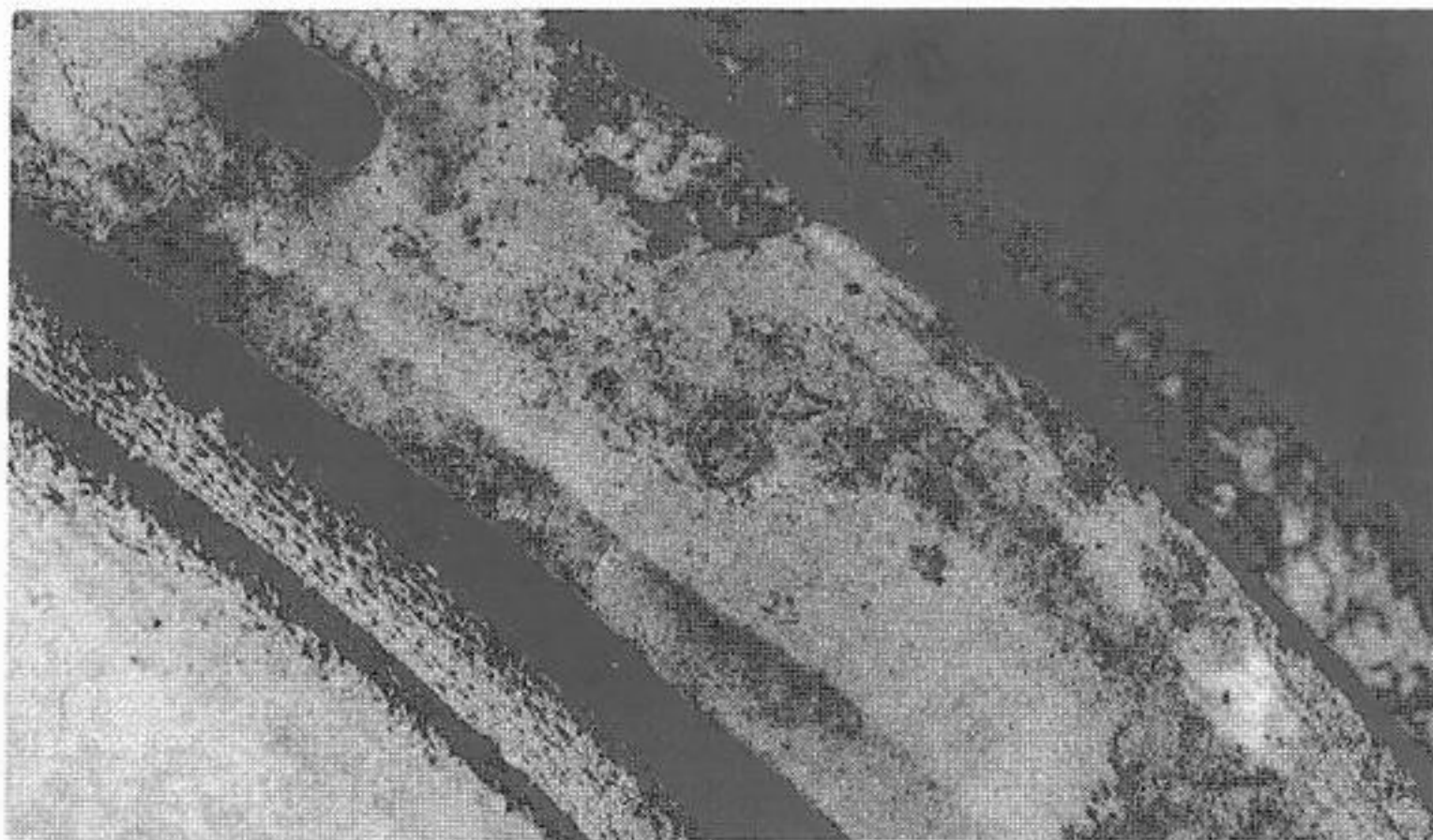


Fig. 4. The letter 'b' engraved on the upper surface of the paten.

Beaded and plain plaited gold wires, gold ribbon set on edge and gold granules are all employed. In a few cases borders are composed of stamped gold ribbon. Solder was neatly used: no surplus material floods the joints in the metal. The panels were held by the pressure of the frames on the edges of the gold foil; the ornaments were further supported by thin plates of silver in some instances and, in others, by a backing material of uncertain nature. The motifs portrayed on the filigree panels on the paten are of twelve varieties and often of slightly differing construction, though mostly of beaded gold wire and granules mounted on stamped gold foil. The varieties include panels showing kneeling men with interlaced hair (Fig. 5—the only known occurrence of the human form in early Irish filigree), quadrupeds, birds, snake-like beasts, interlocking *peltae*, 'S' and 'C' scrolls, interlace with a central cross-like void, and combined scrollwork and interlace which may perhaps be a blundered *Chi-Rho*, though unlikely.

Twelve of the glass studs (Figs. 14, 15) are purely decorative—they are large and, in most cases, occupy almost the whole of the trays made to hold them and their settings. The sides sometimes carry beaded mouldings and sometimes beaded filigree wire. They may be grouped as follows: two groups of three, two groups of two, and two individual patterns. It is not possible to be sure that this grouping is entirely accurate because some studs are partly obscured by dirt, and, on others, the glasses have faded, making identification somewhat difficult.

The first group of three consists of large studs of dark blue glass flattened on top. In the centres of two of them are sunken gold trays containing six raised whorls of beaded wire symmetrically placed about a seventh central example; the third stud has lost its gold inset. The decoration of the glass is cast relief single-strand interlace, arranged as parallel strings of loose knots within cast mouldings.

The second group of three is decorated with a complex composition of a triangle trisected by large 'C' scrolls—the design is inlaid mostly in blue on a red background, the various colours separated by pseudo-cloisons (that is, grilles of silver strips inlaid in the glass and well rubbed down). On a number of examples the red glass has faded to a greyish white.



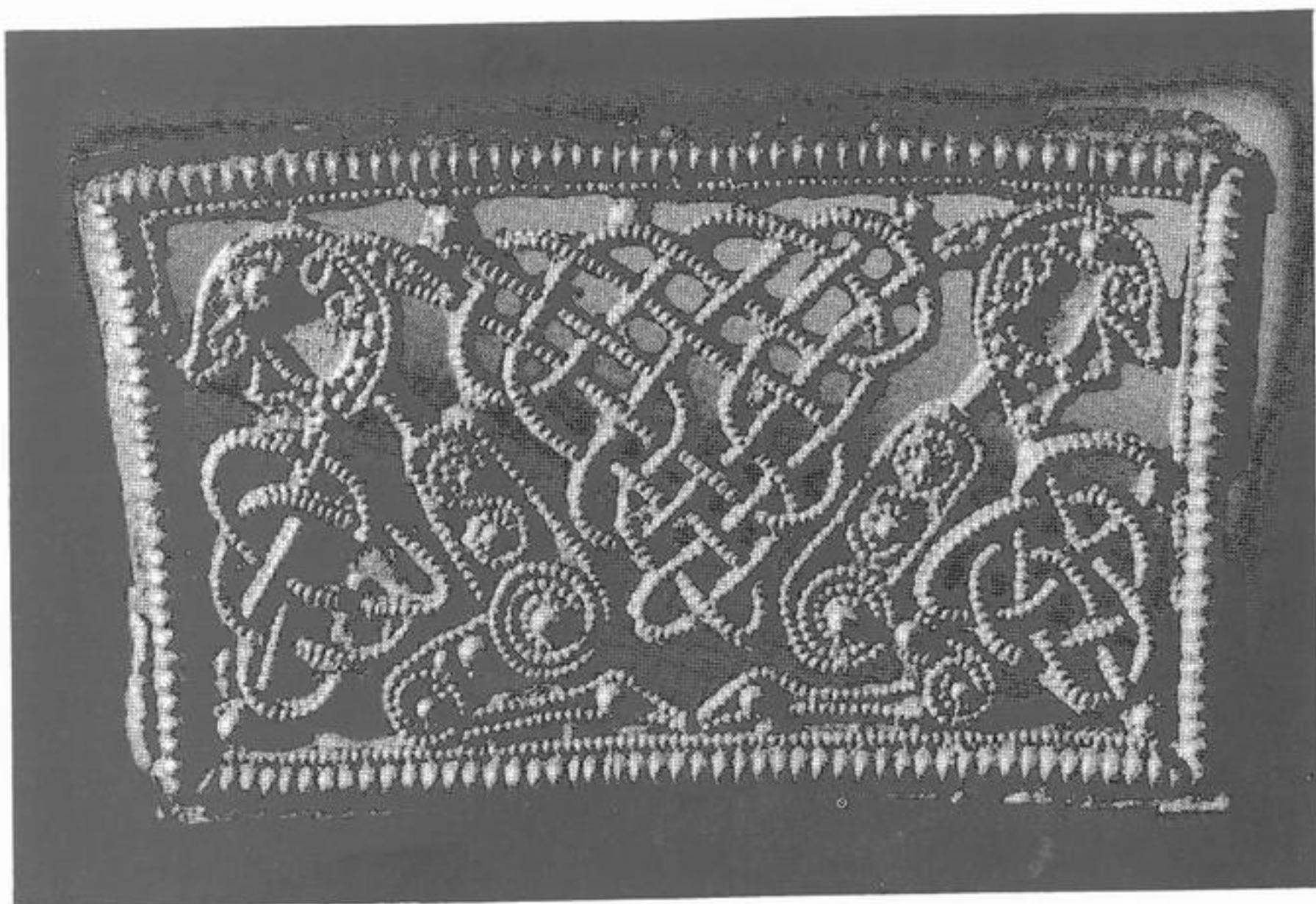


Fig. 5. Detached paten filigree panel depicting two kneeling men.

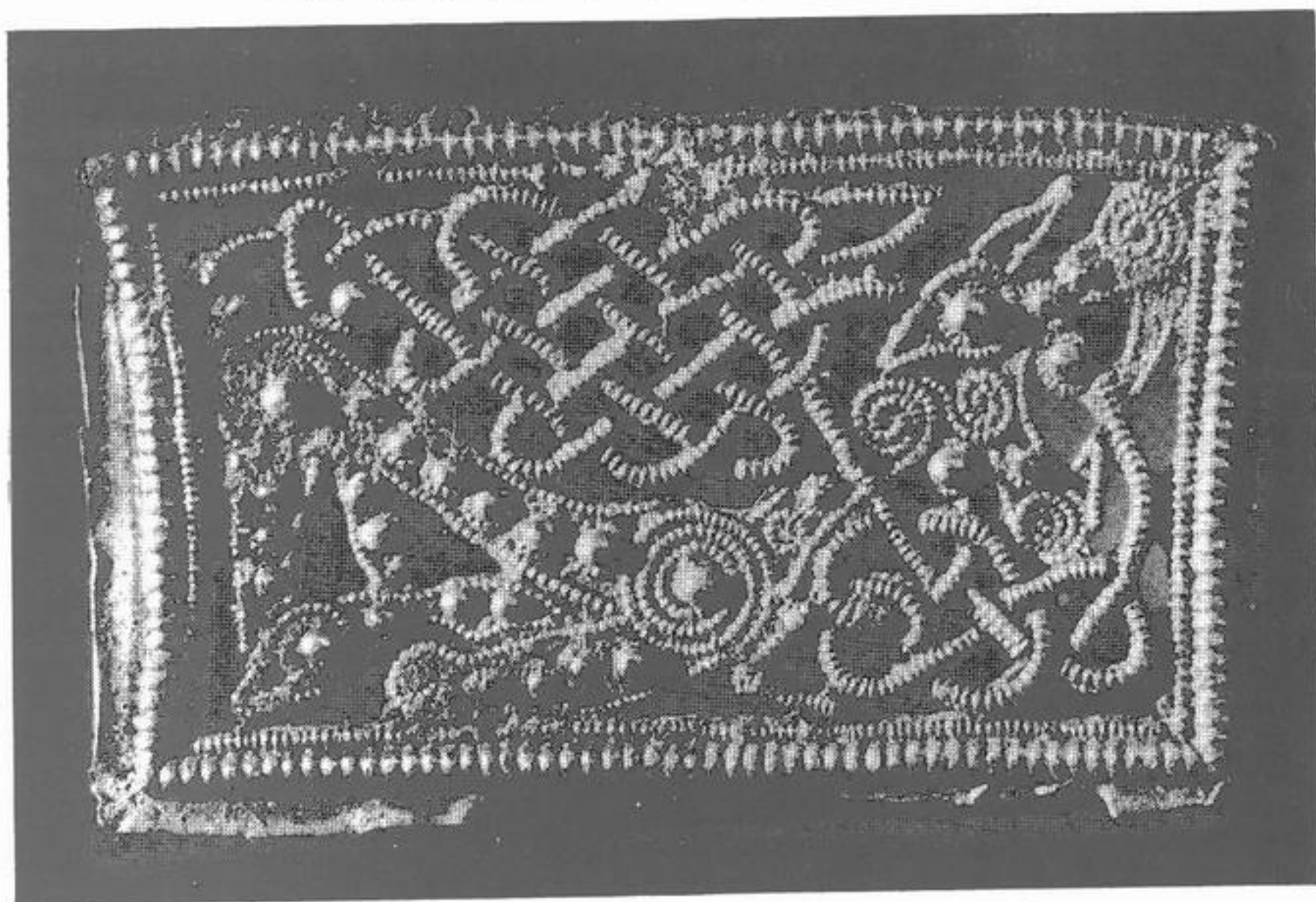


Fig. 6. Detached paten filigree panel depicting a quadruped.

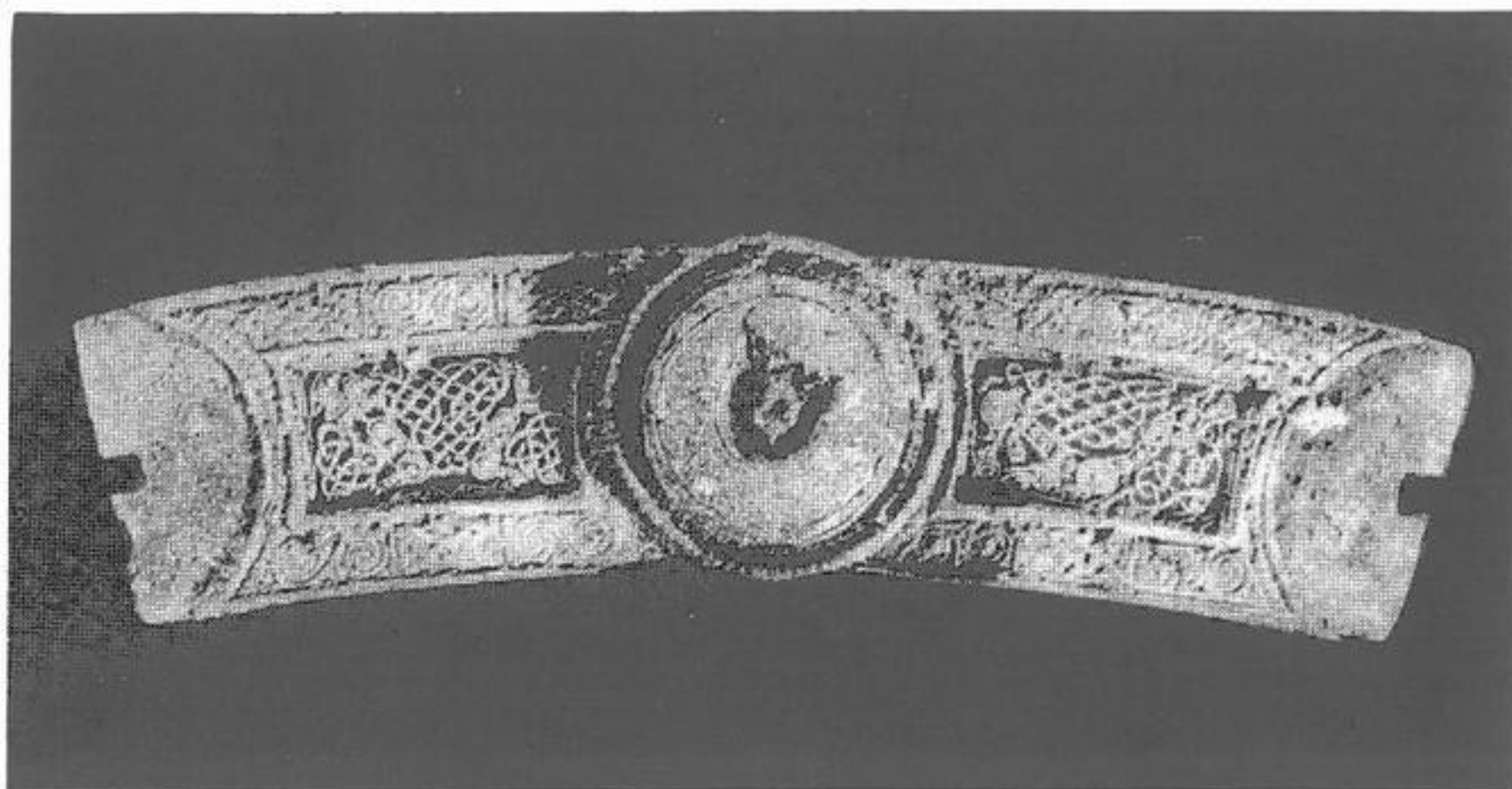


Fig. 7. Two paten filigree panels (as Figs. 5 and 6) still in their frames.

The first group of two consists of blue studs inlaid with a border of 'Wall of Troy' pattern, with the principal central design built up of a series of 'Y' shapes about and dividing a central triangle. These are enamelled in red within inlaid silver strips. In the arms of the 'Y' are stepped members. The settings for these studs carry stamped gold strip and braided gold wire ornaments. Fading is far advanced on one example.

The second group of two blue studs bore central trays, both now missing. Surrounding these was a running device of squat, connected swastika shapes, defined by concentric borders. These divide the background into interlocking 'T' shapes. The inlay is now whitish but may once have been red. Stamped gold strip and beaded gold(?) wire decorate the sides of the settings.

Of the two remaining studs, one contains a sunken tray bearing three opposed, contiguous, tightly-wound 'C' scrolls of gold wire disposed around a centrally placed scroll. The stud is of blue glass with a faded yellow inlay forming a border about the sunken area. This is divided in three by radial lines. A complex step and cross design, forming 'L' and 'T' shapes, fills each zone. The other stud is inlaid in blue on a red background. A series of arcs of metal define two central concave-sided triangles. The innermost thinnest lines bifurcate to form wedge shapes enamelled in blue. The voids defined by this three-legged figure carry stepped devices in red.

The smaller studs which decorate the ends of the pins are also fixed in bronze saucer-like trays, the bases of which are covered in gold foil and carry filigree designs in beaded wire (Figs. 16, 17). The beads are in blue glass with red inlays, frequently with silver pseudo-cloisons in step-and-cross and other angular designs. There is also one with curvilinear designs in the Ultimate La Tène style. In a number of examples the design is produced by inlay. The sides of the settings sometimes carry extremely fine gold filigree scrolls of plain wire or braided wire. In many respects they find extremely close comparisons among the studs of the bowl-girdle of the Ardagh Chalice. In fact, it is the close technical and design comparisons with the Ardagh Chalice which suggest so strongly that the date of the paten may be considered fairly near to it in time.





Fig. 8. Detached paten filigree panel depicting a standing quadruped in a field of interlace.

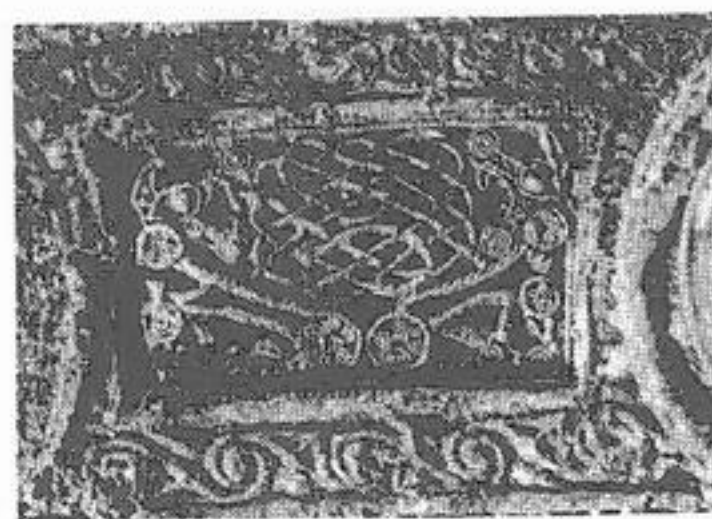


Fig. 9. A paten filigree panel depicting two kneeling beasts.

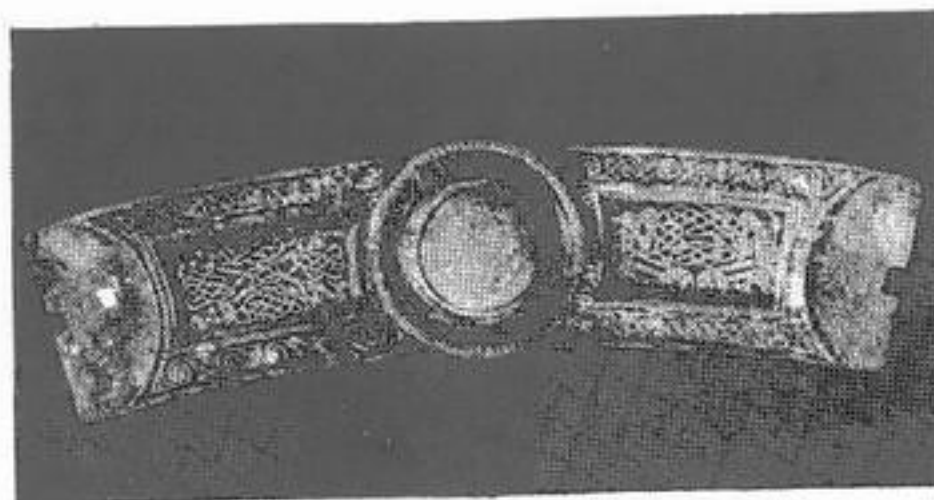


Fig. 10. Two paten filigree panels in their frames: left, four interlaced snakes; right, two kneeling beasts.

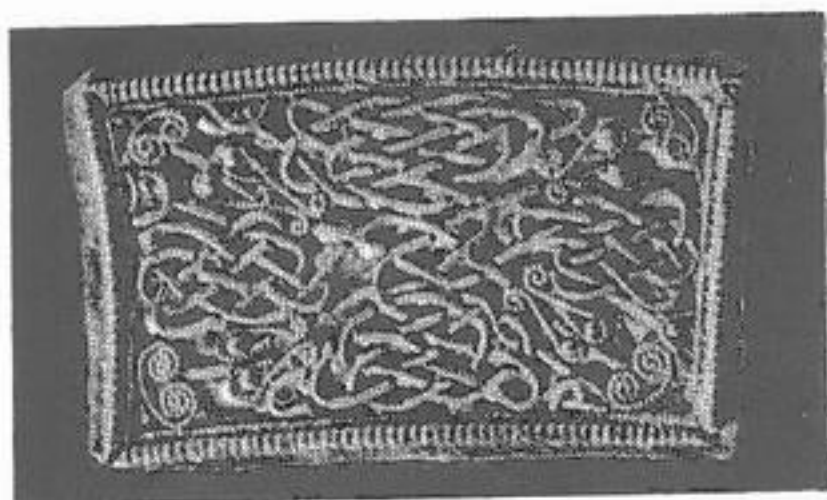


Fig. 11. A paten filigree panel depicting four interlaced snakes.

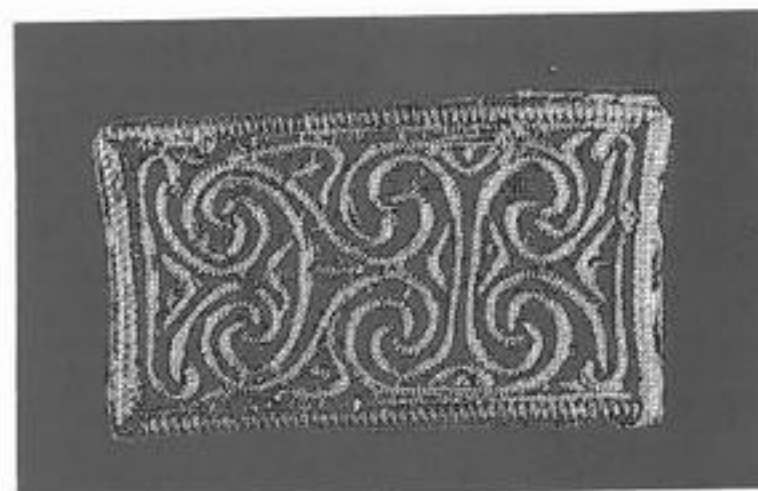


Fig. 12. A paten filigree panel of interlocking peltae.

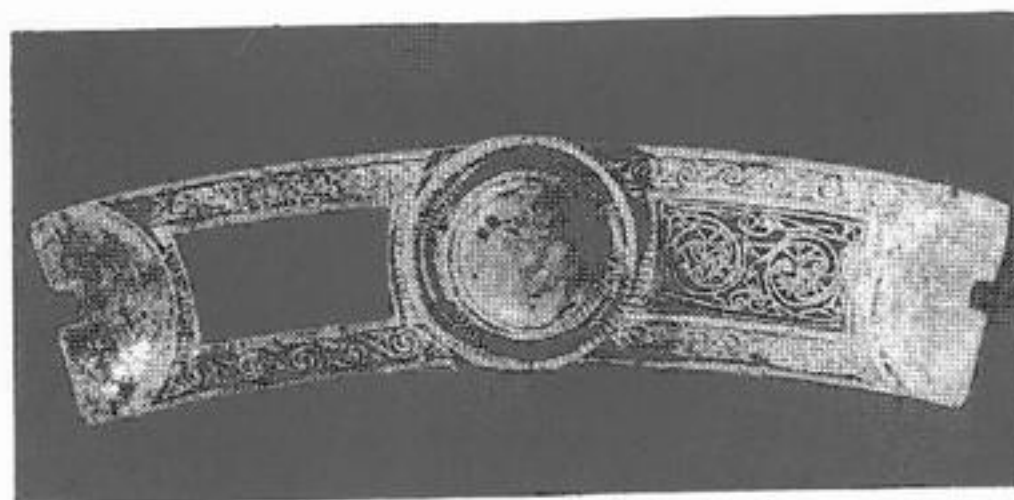


Fig. 13. A paten filigree panel (right) in its frame depicting an Ultimate La Tène device of a running 'S' scroll, peltae and triskeles.



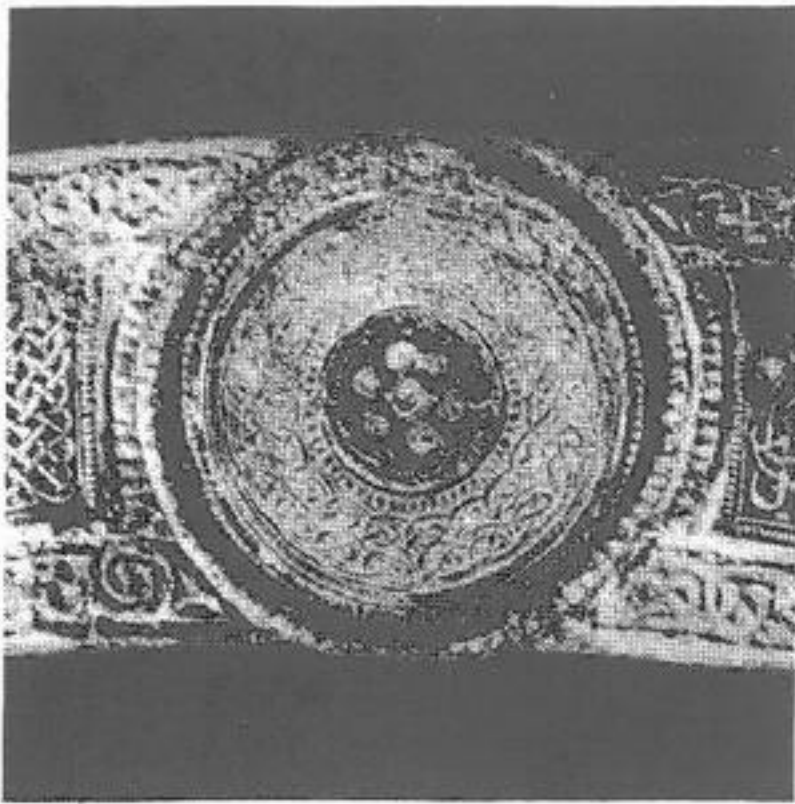


Fig. 14. Paten: large cast glass stud with central sunken filigree panel.

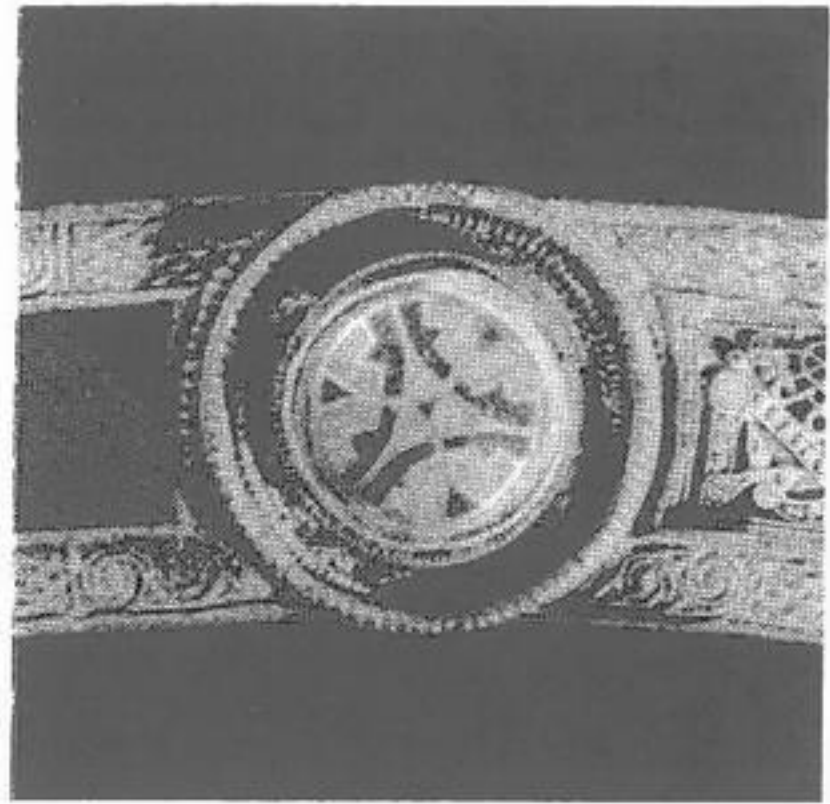


Fig. 15. Paten: large cast glass stud with pseudo-cloisonné work.



Fig. 16. Paten: smaller cast polychrome glass stud in its setting.



Fig. 17. As Fig. 16, with step and cross motif and simple knotwork inlaid.

### The 'Stand'

Referred to in all previous accounts as a 'stand', it now seems probable that this object was a foot attached originally to the underside of the paten but broken off in antiquity. It is a flanged hoop of silver, decorated on its outer surface with eight large die-stamped silver-foil panels and eight smaller ones. The latter are each pierced to act as settings for rectangular polychrome glass studs similar to those on the side of the paten. The foils are held in position by imitation rope mouldings running around the circumference just inside the upper and lower flanges, and by vertical mouldings at the point where the smaller and larger foils meet. These mouldings are secured at their upper and lower ends by rivets which are concealed by small round glass studs in cup-shaped settings.

The number of panels (eight as opposed to twelve on the paten) might at first sight suggest that the relationship between the two objects was not close. The diameter of the



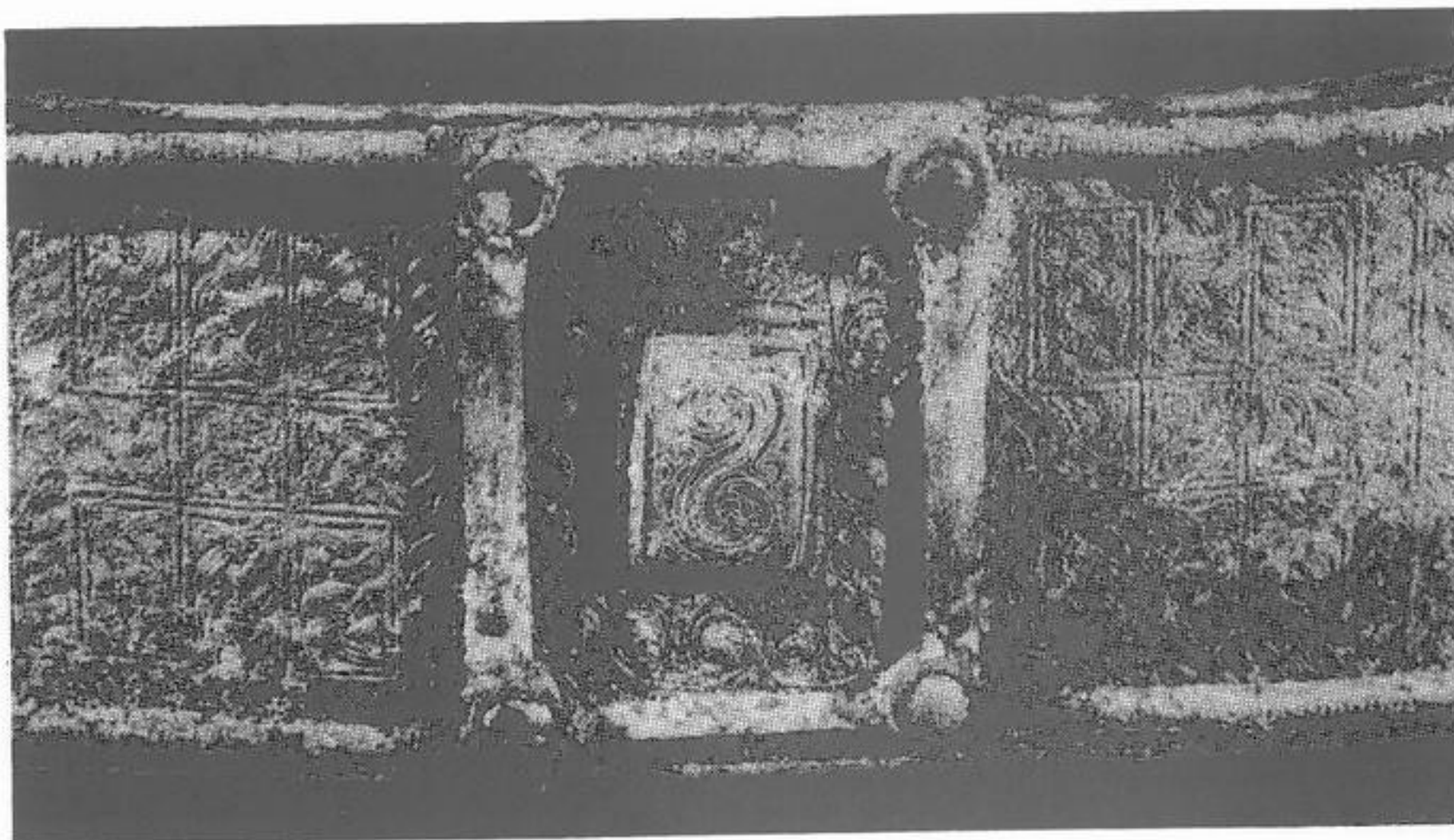


Fig. 18. 'Stand': detail, rectangular stud with complex 'S' scroll-and-triskele device.

'stand' is such that the paten when assembled would sit neatly on it. Small projecting pins on the rim of the 'stand' have been found to engage well with holes in the underside of the paten assembly. It seems clear, therefore, that the paten stood on the ring and was fastened to it, however weakly. Because certain die-stamped silver discs and squares attached to the underside of the paten would have been concealed by the fastening of the 'stand', it may be that the latter was an afterthought in the design.

The longer die-stamped silver panels on the side of the 'stand' bear complex double-strand interlace, disciplined in zones to produce cross effects and to form a border around a rectangular central area which is filled with an elaborate Ultimate La Tène style composition. The smaller panels have raised whorl ornament. The glass plaques compare closely with those on the side of the paten in range of colour and motif: one example is especially noteworthy in having inlaid on it an 'S' scroll-and-triskele device closely similar to that in filigree on the paten (Fig. 18). Diameter of hoop 33.5-33.8 cm. Height of hoop 3.85 cm. Width of flange (upr.) 4-5 mm. Thickness of metal (av.) 0.5 mm.

### **The Chalice (Figs. 19, 20, 21)**

The chalice consists of a large, two-handled bowl with a plain flared rim, a cast cylindrical copper-alloy stem, and a flanged sub-conical foot. The handles are applied to the bowl; they are small, of cast silver-gilt, each with a decorative escutcheon. The stem is composite, consisting of a cylindrical trunk presumably rebated at each end to engage with two separately cast broad rings, an upper one designed to seat the bowl and a lower one to engage the foot (Fig. 22). The outer edge of the upper ring has a high, decorative flange which projects downwards. A stout bolt or pin, the head of which is visible inside the bowl (Fig. 21), holds the assembled parts of the chalice together. Cast, gilt copper-alloy decorative plates, alternating with studs, are riveted to the upper surface of the





Fig. 19. Chalice: general view.



Fig. 20. Chalice: general view from side.



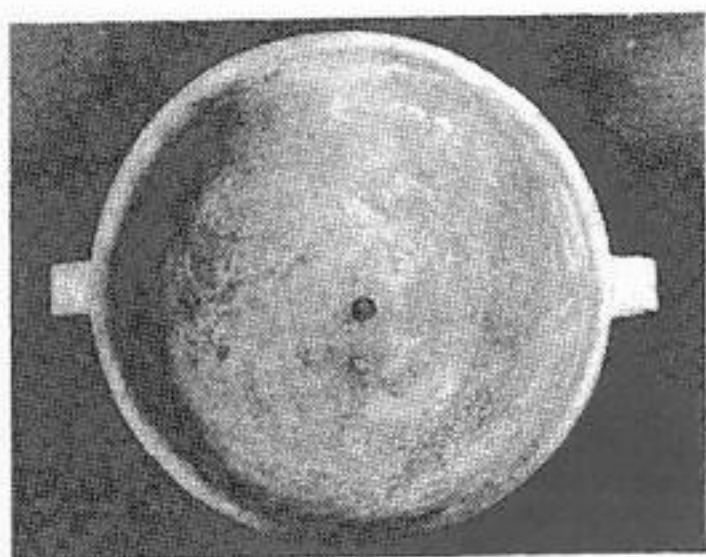


Fig. 21. Chalice: view into bowl.

flange of the foot (Fig. 23). An ornamental roundel of cast, gilt, copper-alloy with seven hemispherical amber studs decorates the underside of the foot and conceals the structure of the stem-foot junction at that point. The bowl and foot are formed by 'raising'—that is, hammering on a 'stake' or anvil specially devised for bowl-making. They are finished by means of lathe polishing. The purity of the silver is about 70%, showing that the craftsman not only had access to a supply of metal of good quality but also that he had deliberately alloyed it with copper.

The chalice is slightly lopsided because the bowl is not seated quite true on the upper ring of the stem. It is 19.2 cm in maximum and 18.75 cm in minimum height. The rim diameter varies between 20.7 cm and 21 cm; the depth of the bowl is 11.5 cm. The diameter of the foot, including its flange, is 16.7 cm. The rim-thickness varies between 0.8 mm and 1 mm.

The handles, escutcheons, stem, flange of the foot and a band or girdle around the body of the bowl just below the rim are embellished with gold filigree panels, eighty-four in all, not counting the gold insets on the six principal amber studs on the escutcheons. Fifty-seven amber studs decorate the chalice; both hemispherical and rectilinear shapes, with both rounded and faceted surfaces, are used.

The majority of the filigree panels carry animal ornament—quadrupeds, beast- and bird-heads being most frequently depicted. With the exception of two panels of crude, bird-headed interlace, the animals are never shown as interlaced or entwined as is extremely common on the metalwork of the eighth century. Whole panels are frequently devoted to the depiction of single beasts and, while these are often contorted to fit the frame provided (Fig. 29), they are never twisted into the fanciful knotwork of those on, for example, the 'Tara' Brooch or the Steeple Bumpstead Boss. On the contrary, in the frequent clear depiction of anatomical detail there is an obvious attempt at true naturalism—this is especially marked on some panels devoted to beasts shown running at full stretch (Fig. 24). The ultimate source of much of this animal style probably lies in the art of the Late Antique rather than the Germanic world.

One animal represented both in filigree and in imitation *kerbschnitt* (chip-carving) is a squatting, dog-like beast with back-turned head. It is closely comparable with the well-known beasts engraved on the reverse of the ninth century Killamery Brooch. A long-snouted or beaked animal in a similar pose is frequently represented in the gold filigree (Fig. 28 upper right and left). Ultimate La Tène patterns are present in the filigree of the handle escutcheons (Fig. 28 centre). Cast interlace and other knotwork is present on the bowl-girdle, handles, stem, flange of the foot and decorative roundel on the underside of the foot (Figs. 22–27, 29).

### The Strainer (Figs. 30, 31)

The strainer is a plain bronze ladle in which is fitted a decoratively perforated strainer plate. Decorative mounts have been added to the rim of the bowl, strainer-plate, handle, and terminal of the handle.

The bowl was shaped by hammering, and has a slightly flattened base and an everted flattened rim. It bears a pair of inscribed concentric circles externally and internally. The rim's top bears a series of eight die-stamped silvered-bronze panels, with herring-bone



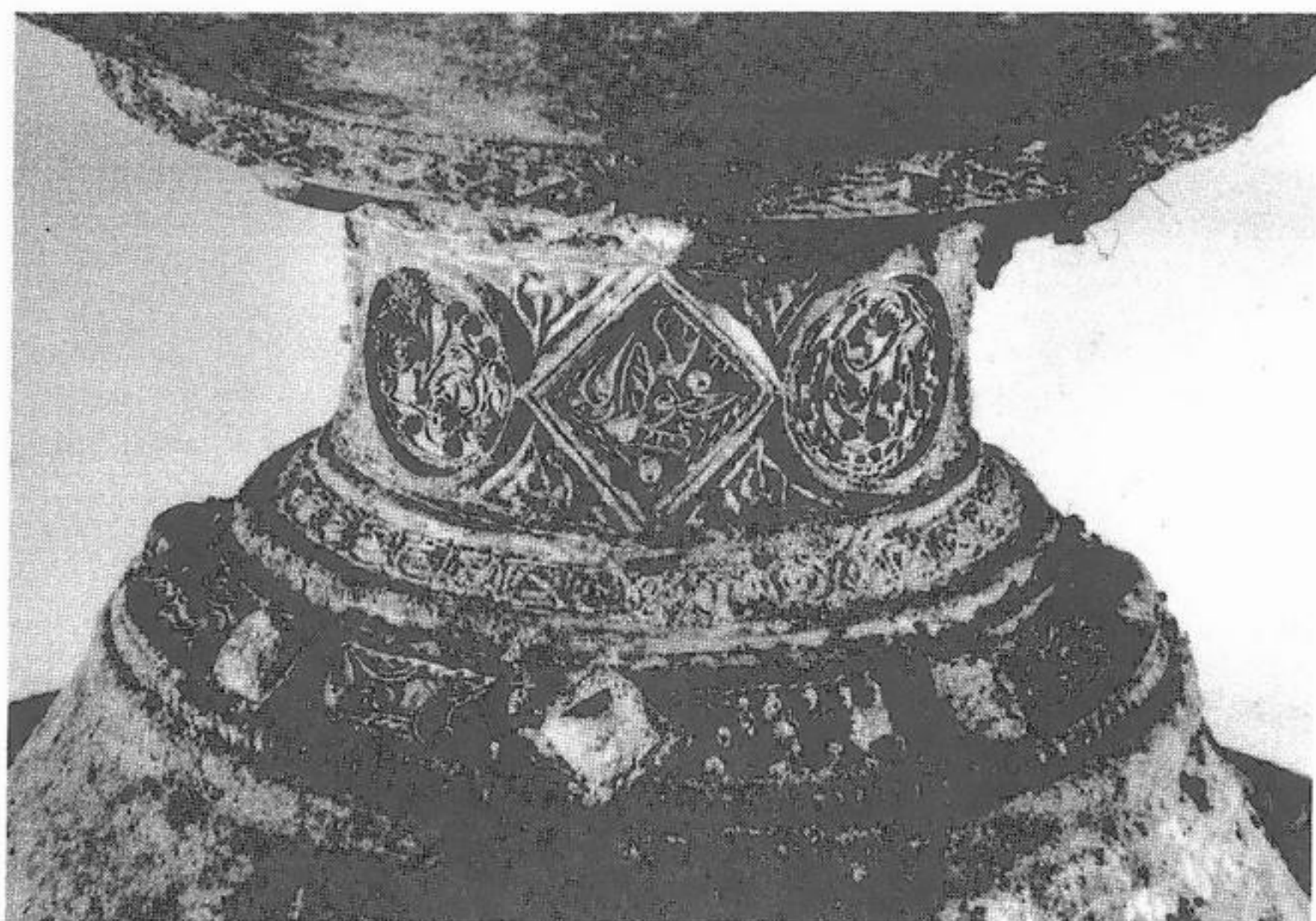


Fig. 22. Chalice: detail of stem.

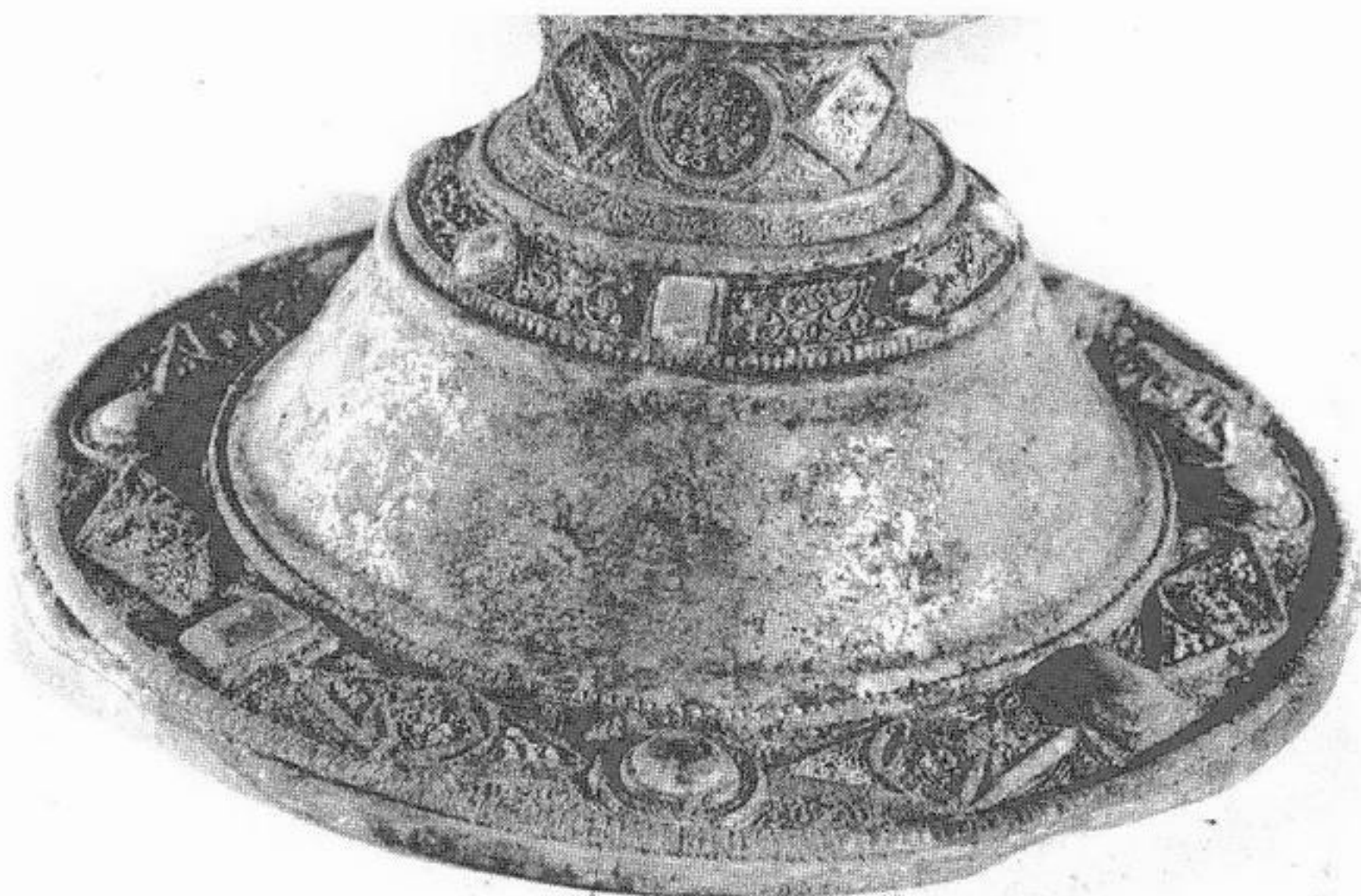


Fig. 23. Chalice: detail of foot.



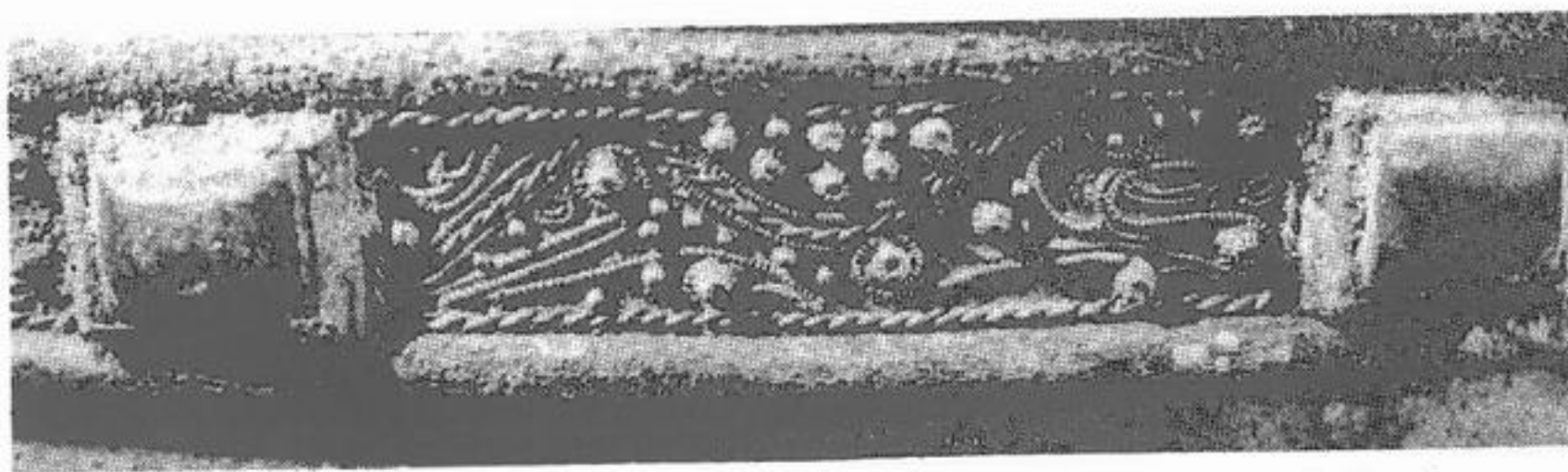


Fig. 24. Chalice: filigree panel of the bowl girdle, running quadruped with bird-head (above rump, top left corner).

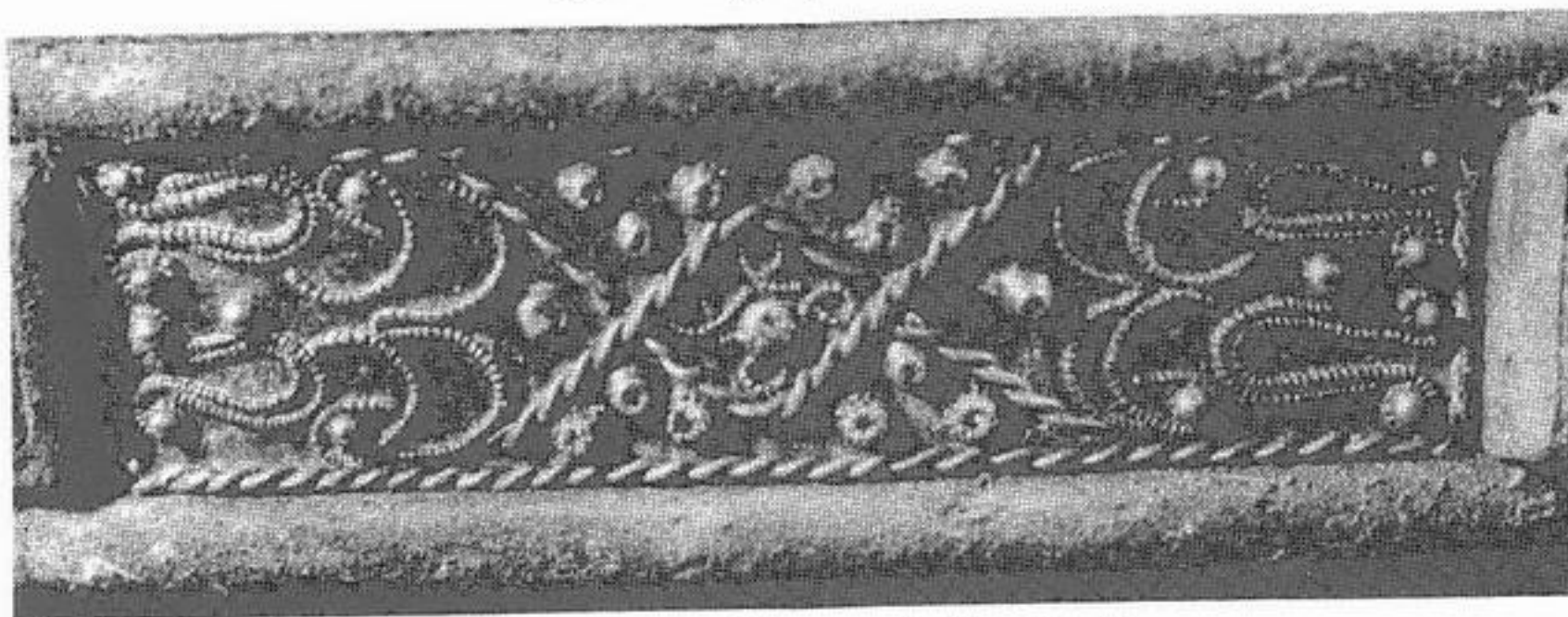


Fig. 25. Chalice: filigree panel of bowl girdle.

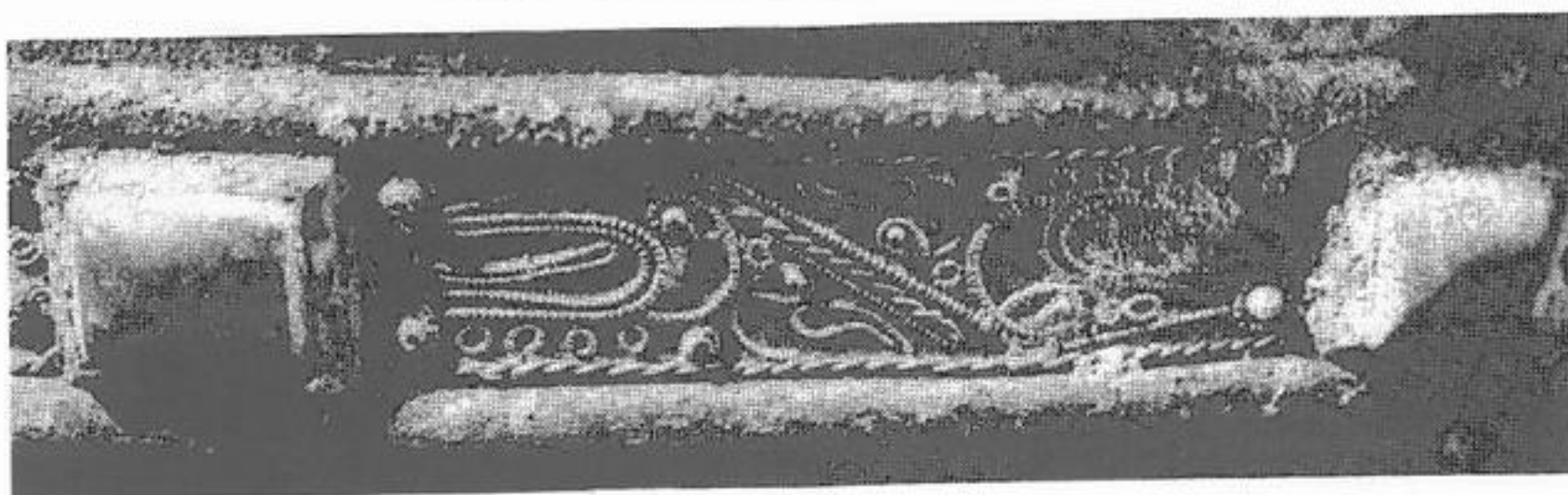


Fig. 26. Chalice: filigree panel of bowl girdle.



Fig. 27. Chalice: cast gilt-bronze panel of bowl-girdle under the handle.



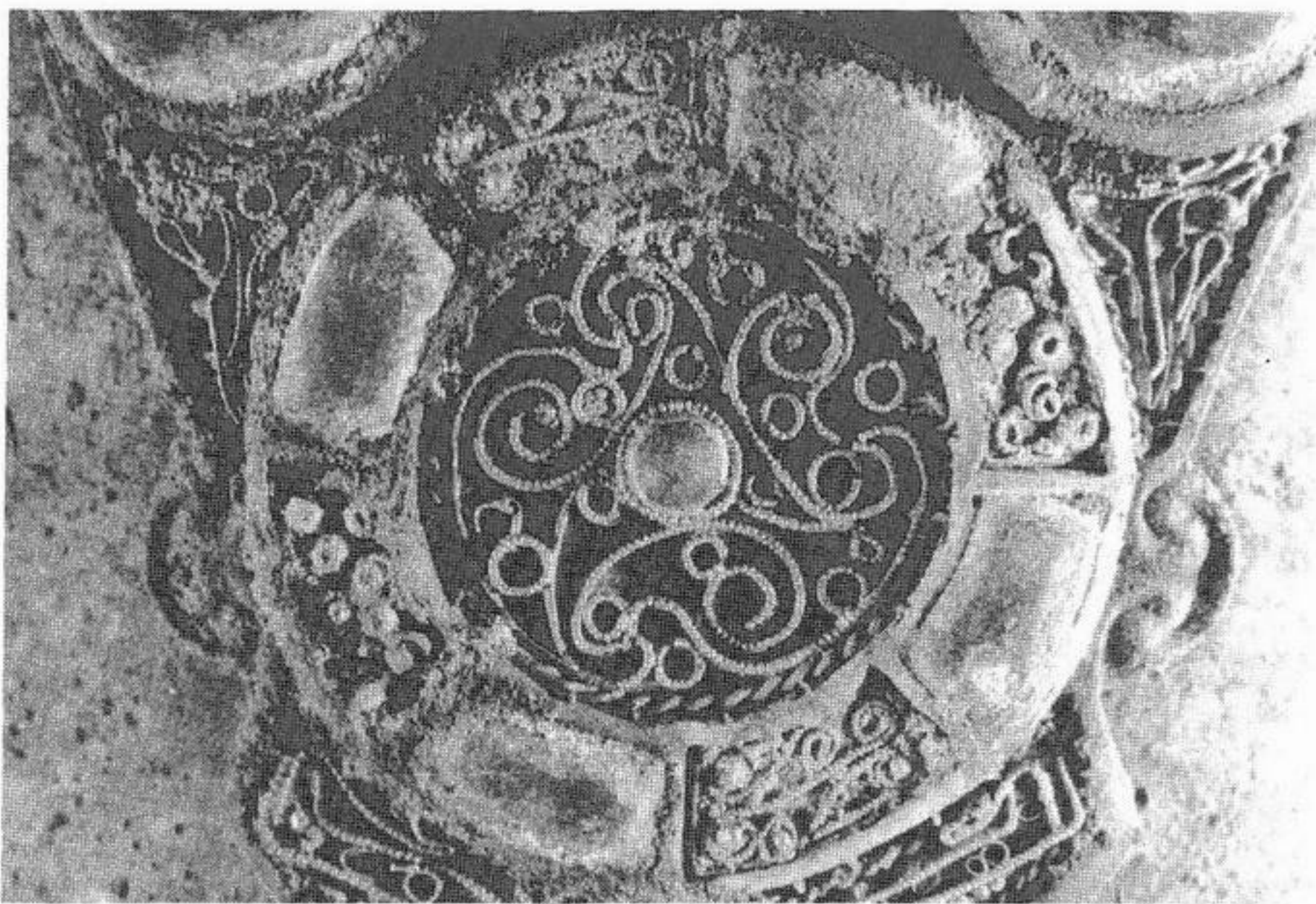


Fig. 28. Chalice: detail of filigree panels of the handle escutcheon: centre, Ultimate La Tène triskele; sub-triangular panels, beasts. The motifs are produced by seating beaded wire on the upper edge of a plain gold ribbon soldered in place on edge. Note the panel top right where the beaded wire has come away to reveal the ribbon on which it was placed.

pattern set in a frame secured by six dome-headed rivets. The top of the strainer-plate bears a border of bronze framing two further panels, each decorated with a row of bosses connected by scrolls. Three decorated glass studs, one round, two rectangular, now obscured by dirt and other deposits, are set along the strainer-plate, one at the end of the handle, one (round) in the centre, and one at the edge of the bowl. Two of them carry millefiori insets; the round stud is blue with a cross device inlaid, the square studs are red with inlaid step-and-cross patterns.

The handle is long and terminates in a round finial. The ends of the handle at the junctions with the finial and bowl have angular expansions emphasised by added plates of similar shape. The upper surface and sides are outlined by grooves—a double groove on the former. The round finial carries a domed rock-crystal, apparently with a foil backing, in an elaborate setting embellished with red and blue glass and billeted mouldings. The back of the terminal was fitted with a hinged ring for suspension—this is now detached. Length 37.8 cm. Diameter of bowl 11.5 cm. Depth of bowl 4.7 cm. Preliminary analysis suggests that the object is made of 77% copper, 15% lead and 8% tin.

### The Basin

A large round basin beaten from a single piece of bronze. The rim is folded over inwards and there is a wide groove immediately below it, bordered on its lower edge by a hammered ridge. The metal is considerably thicker at the rim than in the body. The base is rounded with a deep central dimple, in the middle of which is a small perforation 2 mm



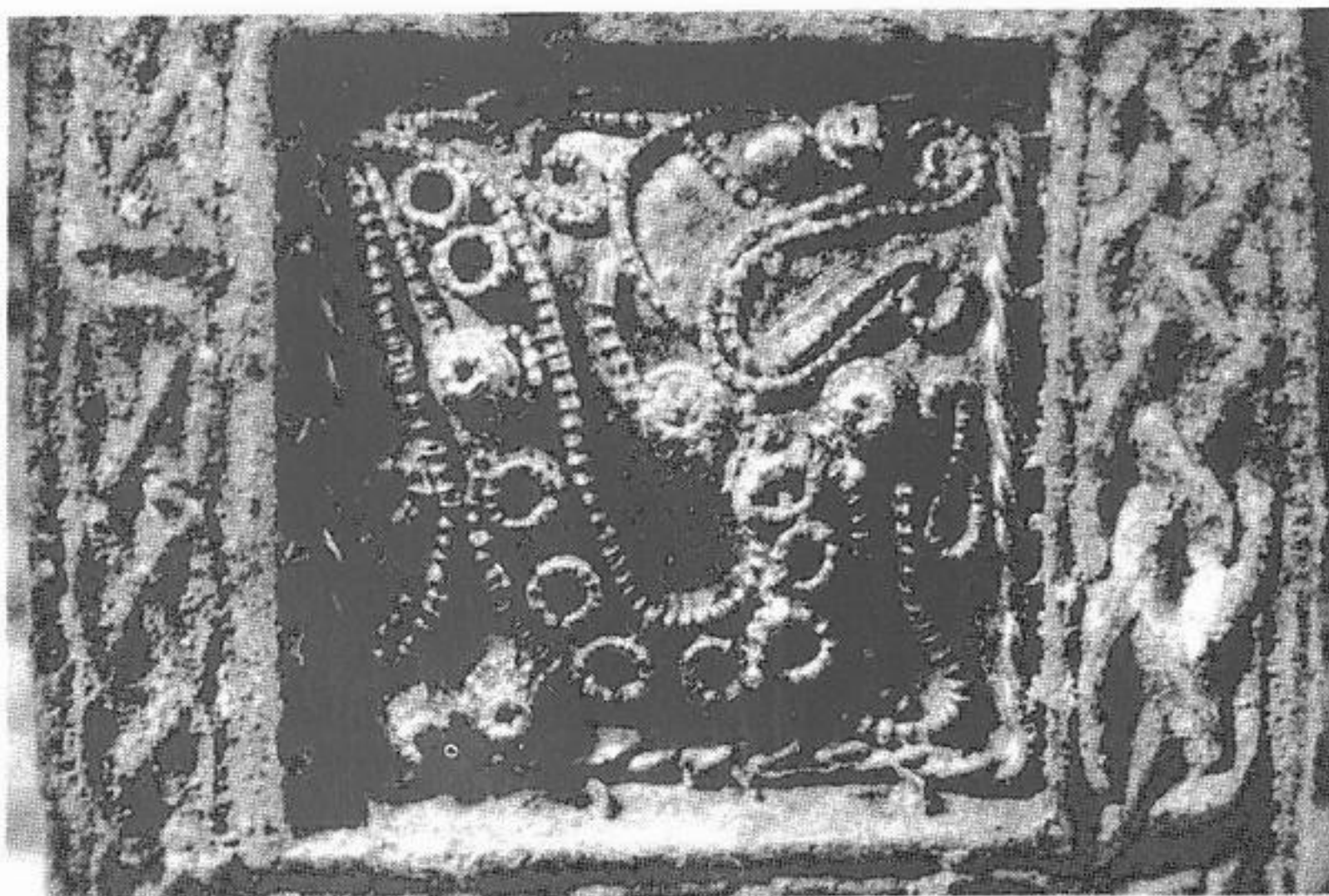


Fig. 29. Chalice: detail of filigree panel (contorted beast) on handle.  
Note also the cast interlace of the handles.

wide. The basin rested on top of the other objects—it is now very badly decayed but where its original surface survives the pristine golden colour of the bronze shines through. Height 18-19 cm. External diameter 44-46 cm.

### Comment

It will be argued elsewhere (in the National Museum of Ireland's official preliminary account) that the principal objects in the Derrynaflan Hoard were made at different periods, *viz.* the strainer in the eighth century, the paten, because of its close relationship to the art and technology of the Ardagh Chalice, in the later eighth century, and the chalice, somewhat later, probably in the early ninth century—insofar as it is possible to apply dates to these objects without independent evidence. It is not the place to discuss the details here at this early stage. It is, however, worth noting that the find has increased the corpus of filigree ornaments in early Irish art substantially, and that many of the motifs are new to us while others are clearly related to patterns familiar on other pieces. Despite the probable differences in date, it is likely that the same or two very closely related workshop traditions were responsible for the chalice and the paten.

The objects will have to be studied from several different points of view—the form and development of liturgical vessels, the techniques of manufacture, the sources of raw materials, and the art-historical relationships of the decoration. Some conclusions are obvious now and may therefore be stated baldly here. *Firstly*, the hoard indicates the continuity of metal-working styles in Ireland over a considerable period of time. *Secondly*, the close similarity in the design of the Derrynaflan and Ardagh chalices indicates that, during the period in question, a distinctive Irish version of the minstral chalice had emerged. *Thirdly*, patrons, whether lay or ecclesiastical, existed who were able to command the resources necessary for the production of such sumptuous pieces.



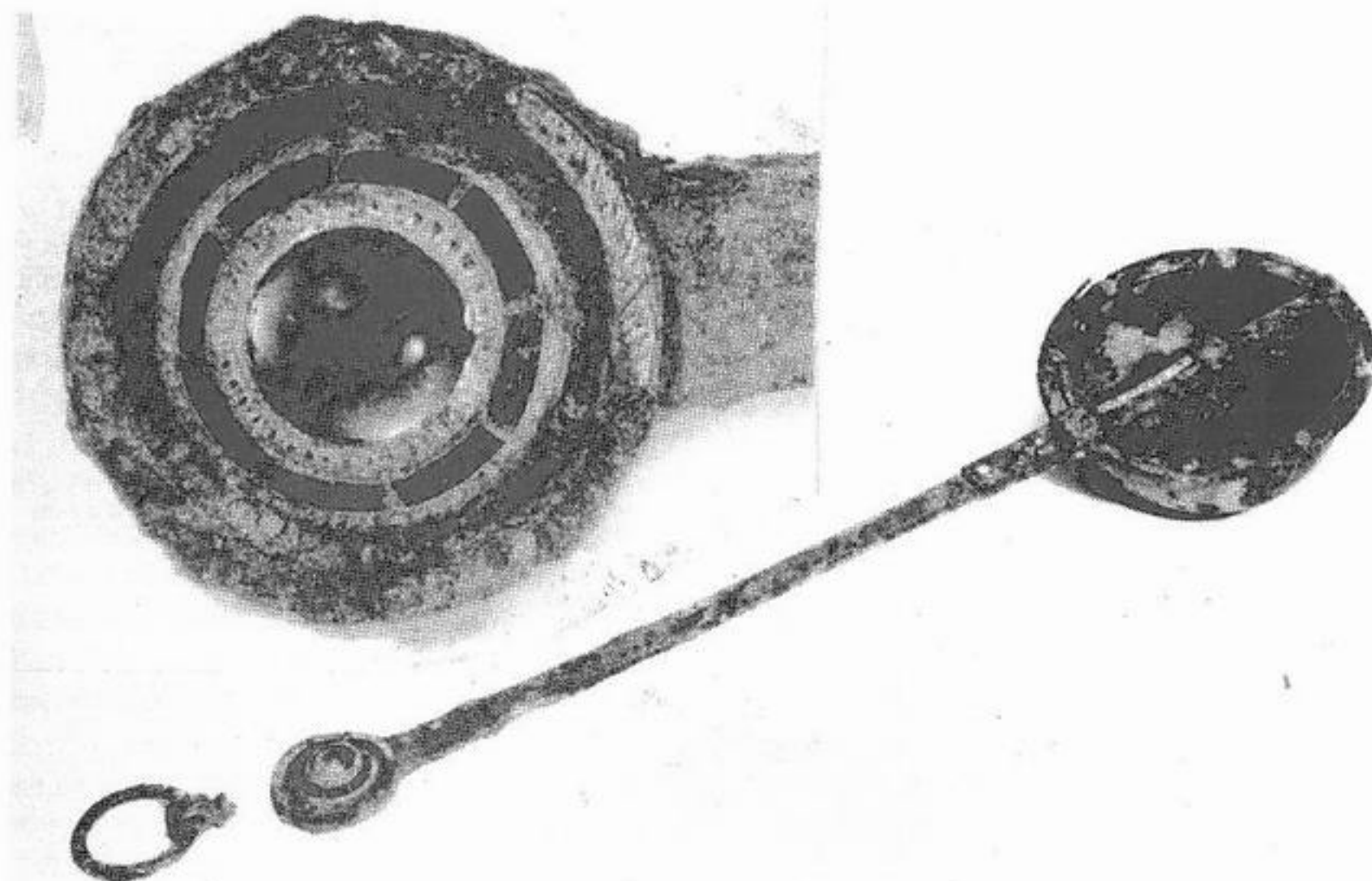


Fig. 30. Strainer: general view, and (*inset*) detail of handle terminal.

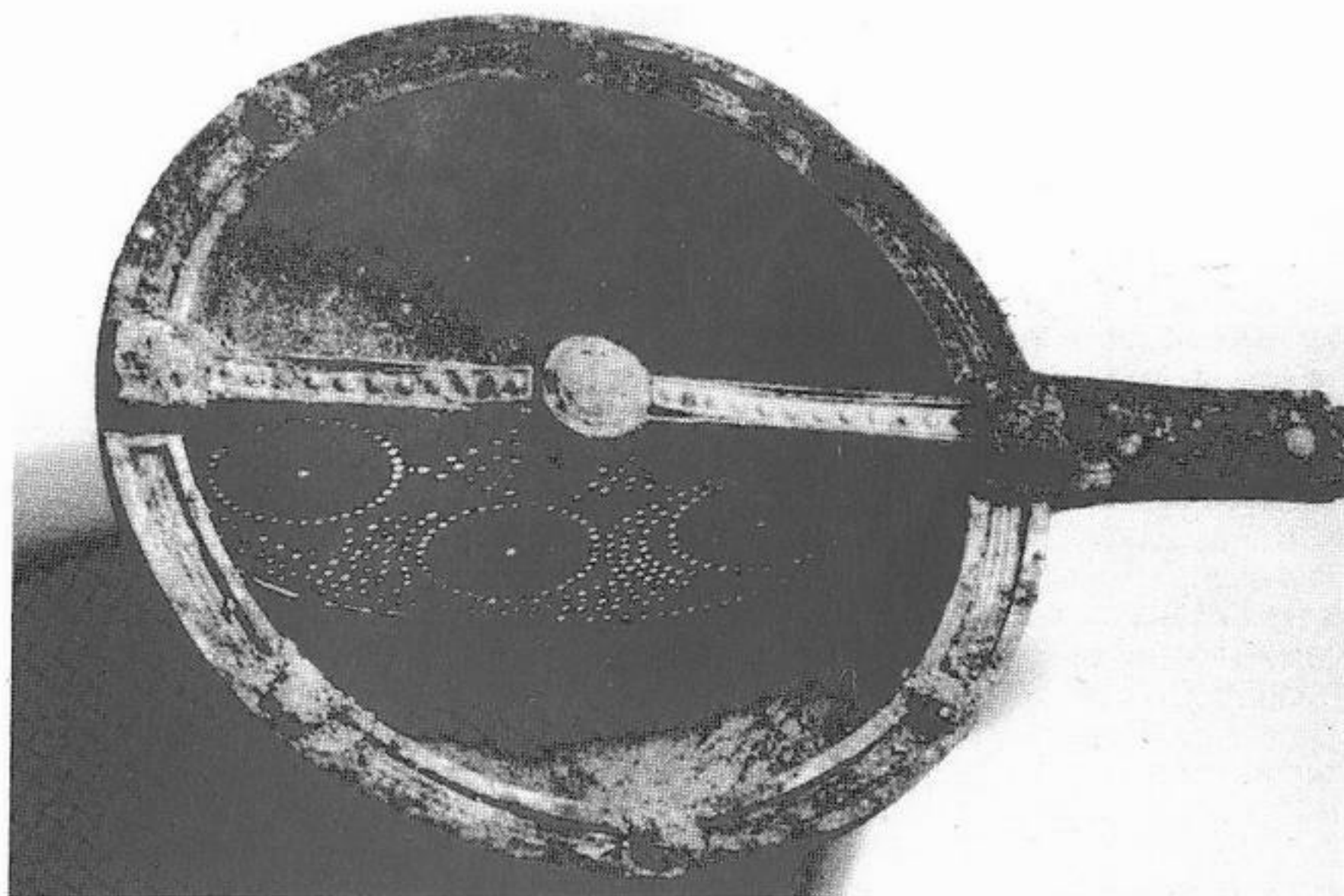


Fig. 31. Strainer: detail of bowl.

## APPENDIX

### Extracts from the National Monuments Act

#### Section 14

*(1) It shall not be lawful for any person (whether he is or is not the owner of the monument or is or is not seized or possessed of an estate or interest therein) to do any of the following things in relation to a national monument of which the Commissioners or a local authority are the owners or the guardians or in respect of which a preservation order is in force, that is to say:*

*(a) to demolish or remove wholly or in part or to disfigure, deface, alter, or in any manner injure or interfere with any such national monument without or otherwise than in accordance with the consent hereinafter mentioned, or*

*(b) to excavate, dig, plough or otherwise disturb the ground within, around or in proximity to any such national monument without or otherwise than in accordance with the consent hereinafter mentioned, or*

*(c) to sell for exportation or to export any such national monument or any part thereof.*

(Section 16.2 specifies that the consent in writing of the Commissioners of Public Works is required for sites of which they are guardians and the joint consent in writing of the Commissioners and the local authority where the local authority is the owner or guardian of the monument.)

#### Section 26

*(1) It shall not be lawful for any person, without or otherwise than in accordance with a licence issued by the Commissioners under this section, to dig or excavate in or under any land (whether with or without removing the surface of the land) for the purpose of searching generally for archaeological objects or of searching for, exposing or examining any particular structure or thing of archaeological interest known or believed to be in or under such land or for any other archaeological purpose.*

The National Monuments Act defines an 'archaeological object' as follows:

*any chattel whether in a manufactured or partly manufactured or an unmanufactured state which by reason of the archaeological interest attaching thereto or of its association with any Irish historical event or person has a value substantially greater than its intrinsic (including artistic) value and the said expression includes ancient human and animal remains . . .*