A Gold Band found near Rathkeale, Co. Limerick

RAGHNALL Ó FLOINN

In March 1855, a thin gold band was found in the immediate neighbourhood of Rathkeale, Co. Limerick. It was acquired by the Cork antiquarian, Captain Edward Hoare who published a drawing and description of it in 1857.\(^1\) Shortly afterwards the object came into the possession of Mr. Forman of Dorking\(^2\) in Surrey (England), and its present whereabouts are unknown. The purpose of this note is to show that the Rathkeale gold band represents one of a small group of similar ornaments known from Ireland and western Scotland which can be dated to the eleventh or twelfth centuries A.D.

The object, to judge from Hoare's drawing (Fig. 1), is made from a thin strip of sheet-gold, 40.5 cm. in length. It measures 5.5 mm. in maximum width midway along its length and tapers gently towards the terminals. The latter are circular, each pierced with a centrally placed perforation. As illustrated by Hoare, the band was oval in outline in the manner of a necklet or collar. The narrow edges are outlined in repoussé by narrow ridges. It is further ornamented at each end for a distance of c.5.5 cm. with a row of repoussé pellets the inner end of which terminates in a cruciform arrangement of pellets. The object weighs a mere 4.6 gm.

DISCUSSION

Hoare described the band as unique and suggested that it may have been used as a collar or hair band. Windele compared it in shape and size to a gold neck-ring from Duhallow, Co. Cork.\(^3\) The latter, recently re-published by Megaw, has been tentatively dated to the Later Bronze Age.\(^4\) It differs considerably from the Rathkeale Band in that it is formed from a series of twisted rods laid side by side and soldered together. The terminals consist of closed rings made in a similar manner. The Stuttgart analysis of Irish gold ornaments places the Duhallow neck-ring in Hartmann's MC/NC group which contains the majority of Dowris Phase gold ornaments.\(^5\)

There are, however, much closer parallels for the Rathkeale band from Ireland. Part of an unprovenanced gold band, 16 cm. in length and 1 cm. in width, is preserved in the National Museum of Ireland (Fig. 2.1).\(^6\) The long sides are bordered by rows of repoussé pellets and an arrow-shaped arrangement of pellets occurs at one end, in this case pointing outwards towards the original terminal. The Stuttgart analysis places this piece in a miscellaneous group containing such diverse pieces as the gold hilt-mounting of a dagger from Topped Mountain, Co. Fermanagh, the flange-twisted earrings from Castlerea, Co. Roscommon, and a lock-ring from Harristown, Co. Meath.\(^7\) Also included in this group,

\(^7\) Hartmann op. cit. Analysis No. AU804 and p. 30.
ANCIENT CELTO-IRISH

UNIQUE COLLAR OF GOLD

For the Hair or Neck.

Found 21st of March 1853
Near Rathkeale in the County of Limerick.

IN THE COLLECTION OF CAPTAIN EDWARD HOARE,
North Cork Rifles, CORK.

Fig. 1. Gold band found near Rathkeale, Co. Limerick. Scale: 1/1.
significantly, is an unlocalised plain strip of gold now 22.5 cm. in length and 4 mm. wide. The analyses of these two pieces are very close. Both contain trace elements of platinum but only 2% and 2.5% silver respectively, and because of this low silver content were excluded by Hartmann from his PC-Iron Age-group.

Another portion of a gold fillet, unfortunately also unprovenanced, in the National Museum, is very close in shape and dimensions to the Rathkeale band. This measures 6.9 cm. in length but is broken at both ends. It is 6 mm. wide and the edges are decorated with rows of repoussé pellets (Fig. 2.2). This piece, formerly in the collections of the Royal College of Science, was analysed by Smith in the late nineteenth century, and its gold content and low silver content (1.98%) corresponds almost exactly with the Hartmann analysis for the two gold bands described above.

In the excavations at Christ Church Place, Dublin, the terminal of a similar gold band was found. This fragment, measuring 9 mm. in length and only 3 mm. in width, is pierced by a small pin-hole near the rounded terminal and traces of a second perforation.

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9Hartmann *op. cit.*, p. 30.
11Reg. No. EI22:16545. I am grateful to the Director, National Museum of Ireland, Mr. Breandán Ó Riordáin, for allowing me to refer to this object in advance of his own publication.
are visible on the fractured end. As with three of the previous bands, it is bordered by a row of repoussé pellets. From the same levels, two Hiberno-Norse coins dated to the first quarter of the eleventh century were found.

Two further finds of similar bands are recorded from Ireland by the eighteenth century antiquarian Ralph Ousley. Writing from Limerick, Ousley states that he was shown a gold ornament "fifteen inches long, very thin and narrow, about a quarter of an inch broad, of fine gold and worth about a guinea, the ends have small holes in them to admit a thread thro'." The appended sketch and Ousley's measurements describe an object identical in shape and size to the Rathkeale band. He further states that a similar object was found a few years earlier near Ballinasloe, Co. Galway.

The Rathkeale band can, therefore, be shown to belong to a group of similar ornaments, seven examples of which are recorded from Ireland, related in shape, size and (where known) metal composition. One example comes from a dated archaeological context.

Further confirmation of the fact that these pieces form a related group comes from a number of finds from Western Scotland, all from hoards. The first is a hoard containing gold and silver objects found with coins at St. Blane's Church on the Isle of Bute. The deposition date for the hoard, on the basis of the coin evidence, is c. 1150 A.D. The objects consisted of a twisted gold finger-ring, a penannular gold ring, a silver ingot and two complete gold bands and a fragment of another. The complete examples measured 43 and 33 cm. in length and each were 6 mm. in maximum width tapering towards the ends. The terminals were rounded and perforated and the edges were bordered with repoussé pellets. As in the case of the Rathkeale and one of the unprovenanced National Museum of Ireland specimens the bands were further embellished with repoussé designs extending for a short distance from either end (Fig. 2.5).

Similar bands were found in two hoards of objects from Iona. In one, a complete band, 33 cm. long, and a fragment were found with four silver spoons in the Nunnery. This band (Fig. 2.4), in addition to a border of pellets, was decorated along its length with a continuous running vine scroll. The second Iona hoard, from St. Ronan's Chapel, contained in addition to a fragment of a gold band, perforated at one end (Fig. 2.3), a twisted gold finger-ring similar to that from St. Blane's Church and a fragment of gold wire. Curle, in publishing the Iona finds, dated the silver spoons to the twelfth or thirteenth centuries with a preference perhaps for the twelfth. The St. Ronan's hoard he dated on analogy with the hoard from St. Blane's Church to the twelfth century.

It is difficult to suggest a plausible function for these objects. Curle suggested that they were used to secure a linen veil or wimple such as were worn by women in the Middle Ages to gather the hair in protuberances above the head.

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14A. O. Curle, "A note on four silver spoons and a fillet of gold found in the Nunnery at Iona; and on a finger-ring, part of a fillet, and a fragment of wire, all of gold, found in St. Ronan's Chapel, the Nunnery, Iona", Proc. Soc. Antiq. Scotland, 58(1923-24), 102-111.
15A date in the late twelfth or early thirteenth centuries has recently been proposed for the Iona spoons by Wilson. See A. Small, C. Thomas, D. M. Wilson, St. Ninian's Isle and its Treasure, Oxford 1973, Vol. 1, p. 113.
16Curle op. cit., p. 111.
Hoare and Windele also suggested that these objects were personal ornaments—either neck rings or hair bands. It is unlikely that they functioned as decorative mounts for shrines or weapons, or objects such as shields or scabbards on account of their general uniformity of length and their tapering, rounded ends. That they were used as some form of jewellery seems a more likely interpretation. Their occurrence in three instances on church-sites need not necessarily imply an ecclesiastical use. The silver spoons found with one of the Iona fillets could equally have been used for secular as for ecclesiastical purposes. In two of the Scottish hoards, fillets were associated with gold finger-rings of twisted wires with lozenge-shaped bezels. This type of finger-ring is of Viking origin and is common in hoards of gold and silver ornaments of Scandinavian character from the tenth to the twelfth centuries. The occurrence of a fragment of a gold band in eleventh century levels in Dublin confirms the Scandinavian character of the type, although present evidence suggests that their distribution is confined to Ireland and western Scotland. Like many of the ornament-types of the later Viking period from these islands, it is difficult to say whether they should be regarded as native or Scandinavian forms or, indeed, whether such a distinction can ever be made.

The dating of the Rathkeale-type bands to the eleventh or twelfth centuries raises the possibility that other gold objects listed by Armstrong and others as prehistoric may in fact be later. Bøe, in his catalogue of Viking antiquities of Ireland, suggested that a group of five penannular bracelets, four of which are of rectangular cross-section from Vesnoy, Co. Roscommon, and a single find of a similar bracelet from Edenvale Caves, near Ennis, Co. Clare, were of Viking Age date. Graham-Campbell, however, omitted these from his list of Viking Age ornaments suggesting that they might well be prehistoric. The Vesnoy bracelets were considered by Eogan to be of uncertain date as parallels for their form are rather difficult to find. Hartmann includes them in his Group M which includes bar-torcs and flange-torcs of the Bishopsland Phase (c. 1200-1000 B.C.). The weights of the Vesnoy bracelets indicate a unit of c.25.5 gm. which would be consistent with a weight unit based on the Viking öre of 24–26 gm. The heaviest bracelet, at 48.98 gm. and the lightest (of circular cross-section) at 25.98 gm. would approximate to a 2 öre and 1 öre unit respectively. Similarly, the Edenvale Caves bracelet, weighing 63.44 gm., would be equivalent to a unit of 2½ öre. Two other unprovenanced bracelets of similar type but with recurved terminals, which weigh 23.45 gm. and 28.69 gm., also conform to a 1 öre unit. The excavations at Edenvale Caves also produced a bronze armlet with spirally twisted terminals which is certainly a Scandinavian type. It may well be that this

17 Pollexfen op. cit., Pl. VI, 2, and Curle op. cit., Fig. 4.
18 Graham-Campbell op. cit., p. 124.
20 J. Graham-Campbell, ‘The Viking-Age Silver Hoards of Ireland’, in B. Almquist and D. Greene (eds.) Proceedings of the Seventh Viking Congress, Dublin 1976, p. 69. Graham-Campbell also refers to a hoard of two gold bracelets similar in form to the Vesnoy examples which was found in 1860 at Glengarriff Castle, Co. Cork.
23 The weights are (using Armstrong’s catalogue numbers): 413–48.98 gm; 414–44.19 gm; 415–38.49 gm; 416–33.05 gm; 417–25.98 gm.
24 Armstrong op. cit., p. 94, Nos. 418, 419 and Pl. XVIII, 383, 393.
group of ribbon bracelets of rectangular cross-section should be now regarded as being an ornament-type peculiar to Ireland of probable Viking Age date.

The gold band from Rathkeale is a welcome addition to the list of Viking Age finds of gold and silver ornaments and coin hoards found in Thomond.\textsuperscript{26} Finds of ornaments of eleventh century date which may be contemporary with the Rathkeale band are not common. Two finds—a silver torc found at Miltown Malbay, Co. Clare,\textsuperscript{27} and a hoard of silver ‘ring-money’ from the Clare side of the River Shannon\textsuperscript{28}—are of types current elsewhere in the Viking world between about 930 and 1060 A.D. There are also two hoards of Hiberno-Norse coins dating to the eleventh century; one found at Adare (deposited c.1050 A.D.), the other found near Limerick City (deposited c. 1063 A.D.).\textsuperscript{29}

\textsuperscript{26}J. Graham-Campbell, op. cit. (note 20), provides the most up-to-date list.
\textsuperscript{27}J. Bge, op. cit. (note 19), p. 122 and fig. 83.