

A Pictish pin from Golspie, Sutherland

by Joanna Close-Brooks

In June 1974 Miss M W Grant dug up a decorated bronze pin in her garden at 3 Ben Braghie Drive, Golspie, Sutherland (NGR NH 824998); and subsequently presented it to the National Museum (see p 230, *Donations* no. 25). This pin is a unique and charming addition to the relatively small corpus of Pictish metalwork from Scotland.

The bronze pin (pl 27a) has a flat head decorated with a man's face on one side. Below the face is a motif in double ribbon interlace that has been variously interpreted as representing a forked beard, folded arms, or simply a filling pattern. The decoration was once gilded, but the gilding has now worn off except in the crevices. The pin is in good condition, but the shaft is broken and the point missing. The surviving part is 55 mm long overall; the decorated head 20 mm long, 15 mm wide and 4 mm thick. The back of the head is flat and plain, the front slightly convex with the details deeply cut. Although the decoration appears at first sight to be carved in

the metal, it is most probable that this pin, like the Pictish 'chip-carved' brooches, was cast, the appearance of carving being reproduced from the wood or lead pattern (Stevenson 1974, 19, note 8; *contra* Wilson 1973, 97–8).

No other pin of this type is known from Scotland, and the face cannot be paralleled in metalwork, but the technique and minor decorative details link it convincingly to Pictish work of the 8th and 9th centuries AD. The cast chip-carved technique has already been commented on. The double strand used for the interlace is less common than a simple ribbon interlace on metalwork, but is found on the pin-head of a brooch from near Perth (Wilson 1973, pl 43), on a brooch terminal from the Croy hoard (Wilson 1973, pl 38) and on the largest brooch from the St Ninian's Isle hoard (Wilson 1973, pl 31), while it is common on Pictish sculptured monuments. The baluster moulding on the stem is paralleled on the spoon and 'pricker' from St Ninian's Isle, and on the central rib on the hoop of a brooch from near Perth (Wilson 1973, pl 26a, b; pl 42d).

Parallels for the face may be sought both within and without Scotland. Outside Scotland, two metal pins with human faces on the head probably represent coincidental use of the same decorative idea. Closest in style and technique is the head on a brooch pin from Ireland (Coffey 1909, 34, fig 42). Closer in conception but quite different in style is a Viking pin from Denmark (Brøndsted 1970, fig p 24a). There are two bone pins with human faces from Lagore Crannog (Hencken 1951, 190–3, fig 103b, fig 105, no. 853), but these faces are modelled on the ball-heads of the pins and are very different to the flat face of the Golspie pin. The numerous full-face representations in Irish metalwork (some shown conveniently in Roe 1960) do not show any close similarities, and these rarely have the primitive protruding ears of the face on the Golspie pin.

Within Scotland, frontal representations of the human face are extremely rare in Pictish art, but then the complete corpus is very small. There are three minute faces on the circular escutcheon beneath one of the St Ninian's Isle bowls, but these are so tiny the details can hardly be said to follow a particular style (O'Dell 1960, 22, 23; Wilson 1973, pl 26c). It is not clear if the two mounts perhaps from Perthshire should be regarded as Pictish or Irish work, but in any case the cast face on one of them with highly protruding nose and chin is quite unlike the Golspie face (*Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, 23 (1889–9), 122–3). Further afield, a small bronze head comes from Iona (Thomas 1971, 53, fig 37). This is a cast head without ears, flat at the back, but slightly larger than the Golspie head (27 mm long) and more strongly modelled; Professor Charles Thomas kindly supplied the information that there is no evidence for attachment to a pin shaft. Though most faces on Pictish stones look sideways, some, perhaps relatively late, are shown from the front, but none show any close resemblance to the Golspie pin.

The two close parallels are however both in stone. The first is the stone 'face-cross' from Riskbuie, Kiloran, Isle of Colonsay, Argyll (Roe 1960, fig 1, d; Mitchell 1881, 121). The cross face is on a quite different scale to the Golspie face and the similarity may be partly accidental, due to the border effect round the face, the pronounced brow ridges, the thick lips and the presence of ears. Unfortunately both the date and the significance of the Colonsay stone are obscure. An even more interesting parallel to the Golspie pin is provided by the two faces incised on a whetstone from Portsoy, Banffshire, now in the British Museum (Thomas 1963, 48, pl 2:3, 4). The whetstone (pl 27b), some 140 mm long, is a natural pebble incised with two faces and a number of Pictish symbols. One face has ears, and both have a series of lines drawn above the eyebrows similar to the 'frown-lines' on the Golspie pin. This comparison again suggests a strongly Pictish context for the Golspie pin.

It is interesting to note the number of Pictish finds from Golspie and its neighbourhood. A hoard of eleven brooches, of which few survive today, was found some seven miles away at Rogart, Sutherland in 1868 (Wilson 1973, 81–2). This area also has a high concentration of Class I

symbol stones, no less than fifteen having been found within a radius of seven miles of Golspie. There is however only one Class II monument known from the same area, a cross-slab with a Pictish ogam inscription now in Dunrobin Castle Museum. Its original provenance is uncertain, but it may have come from the churchyard of St Andrew's Chapel, Golspie (Allen 1903, 48-50; Cordiner 1780, 72; Cordiner 1788, 4). There are also a few miscellaneous, so-called Class III stones. Within the town of Golspie itself three short-cist burials have been discovered that appear to be of dark-age date, and may well be burials of pagan Picts, since Christian burials would presumably have been extended. In 1942 an irregularly shaped short cist was discovered with a Class I symbol stone re-used as its capstone (Davidson 1943), while in 1956 two more irregular short cists were found, one containing two fragments of clay moulds of probably dark-age character (Woodham 1957). With so much evidence of Pictish activity in the area one must hope for yet further discoveries of metalwork or of an actual settlement.

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a Golspie pin (2:1)



b Whetstone from Portsoy, Banffshire (1:1) (photo Trustees of the British Museum)