

# A late Roman object from Cove, Dumfries and Galloway, rediscovered

Robert Janiszewski\*

## ABSTRACT

*An intriguing gold object with Latin inscriptions was found in the 18th century, in Cove, Dumfries and Galloway. Currently lost, it survived in a few antiquarian accounts. In this paper, in the light of these written sources and parallel examples, the author will try to discuss its function, possible time of import and the character of its deposition.*

## INTRODUCTION

For many years archaeologists have been looking for finds, not only in the field, but also within libraries and archives. Old written sources, such as chronicles, diaries or travel accounts, occasionally contained information about accidental discoveries of ancient monuments and portable artefacts. Such information is often only partially credible for modern researchers. Generally speaking in these accounts, while the interpretation of the finds usually turned out to be incorrect, their physical descriptions, measurements and drawings were more precise.

Modern scholars often return to the old written sources, interpreting them in the light of our current knowledge. Such reassessments can lead to the identification of objects otherwise lacking a provenance, or restore artefacts to the scholarly world even though they have been lost. One of the recent examples of such research in Britain is the identification of a uniface medallion of Constantine II Caesar, now in the collection of the National Museum in Edinburgh, as a find from Birrens, mentioned in an antiquarian account (Bland 2012: 7 no 3).

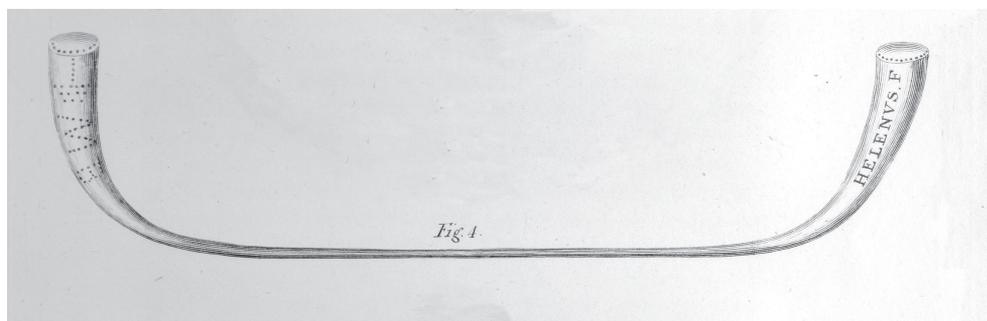
## A GOLD OBJECT FROM COVE, DUMFRIES AND GALLOWAY

A gold penannular object with Latin inscriptions found in the 18th century in Cove, Dumfries and Galloway (NY27SE 14), merits such a reassessment. The object (Canmore ID 67113), currently lost, survives in a few antiquarian records (illus 1)<sup>1</sup> which so far have not been compared with each other.<sup>2</sup>

The source which has been quoted the most frequently is an account written by Pennant, included in his *Tour in Scotland*:

Near this place [ie Ecclefechan], on the estate of Mr Irvine, writer, was found an antiquity whose use is rather doubtful: the metal is gold, the length rather more than seven and a half inches, the weight 2 oz and a half and 15 gs. It is round and very slender in the middle, at each end grows thicker, and of a conoid form, terminating with the flat circular plate: on the side of one end are stamped the words *Helenus fecit*, on the other is prick'd. •••III MB. From the slenderness of the middle part, and the thickness of the ends, it might perhaps serve as a fastening of a garment, by inserting it through holes on each side, and then twisting together this pliant metal. (Pennant 1776: 104)

\* ul. T. Pełczyńskiego 32c Apt 33, 01-471 Warsaw, Poland



ILLUS 1 Cove artefact (Pococke 1773: Pl III, Fig 4)

The second source, contemporary with Pennant's account, is a note written by Pococke:

It may be proper just to mention a piece of gold (plate III. Fig. 4) found not many years since in Scotland, in a moss, about eighteen inches under ground, on the estate of Mr Ervin, of Cove, near Ecclefechan, in the shire of Dumfries, (...) On one end is plainly seen the world HELENVS, in raised Roman capitals, evidently effected by a stamp; and on the other end, in pricked or dotted characters, the letters M. B. It is of pure gold, very soft and pliable. It is in the possession of Mr. John Davison, Jr., of Edinburgh, who communicated it to the Society, by Dr. Birch. (Pococke 1773: 41).

Regardless of minor differences between the two accounts, undoubtedly both of them describe the same artefact. Pennant's account, besides brief information concerning the general location of the findspot and the interpretation of the possible function of the object, also contained information on its weight and size. Pococke's note complements the previous article, containing not only additional, more detailed description of the findspot and circumstances of its discovery, but also a drawing of the object. The compilation of both entries gives us information on the shape, weight and size of the specimen. The drawing of the object, attached to Pococke's account, allows us to verify the meaning of the graffiti and to find similar artefacts. Additionally, his note indicates the probable primary source for both accounts which was the correspondence of

the owner of the object, J Davidson Jr, addressed to Dr T Birch – antiquarian and Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London.

The original letter, dated 27 March 1755, did not survive, but in the Society's *Minute Book* there is a note, probably copied directly from that letter, from which we can learn that:

1. This Peice [sic] of Gold weighs 2 ow: [sic] 8 drams 12 grains. 2. It was lately found in the Estate of Mr. Irvine of Cove in the County of Dumfries, near Ecclefechan, in a moss about 18 Inches below the Surface. 3. HELENVSF. is stampt upon it, and the Letters are very distinct and raised, and the mark of the Stamp is distinctly seen. The Marks at the other End ... III M B are dotted or pricked on, and are also very distinct, altho [sic] the Form of the Last letter represented on the Figure, and in this note, is not so very exact, yet it approaches nearly to that of a B.<sup>3</sup>

Having reviewed all available sources, we can proceed with the description of the specimen and with the compilation of the information included in the quoted accounts. The entry from the *Minute Book* clearly indicates that the discovery took place sometime before March 1755. It might be presumed that the object was made of a bar of gold with curved, conical terminals and a wide opening between them. One of the ends was furnished with a stamp HELENVSF(ECIT), indicating its manufacturer's name, while the dots on the other end clearly formed symbols indicating a weight of 3 Roman ounces – III

followed by the initials MB. Only Pennant's account provides the information about the size of the object (7½ inches which equals 190.5mm), the other two contain the drawing.

The question of the specimen's weight is more complex and requires more detailed analysis. Apart from the information from the inscription, the specimen's weight is mentioned in the two accounts, but unfortunately neither of them contains any direct indication of the weight system in which the measurements were taken. In 18th-century Britain, a few systems were in use to measure the weight of various goods. They all shared the same smallest unit – the grain, but differed as to the weight of all other units. The Troy system, where a pound is divided into 12 ounces, was used for weighing precious metals. In this system, an ounce is 480 grains, which is approximately equal to 31.10g, and a drachm unit is not used at all. However, in the Apothecaries' system, used in pharmacy only, an ounce, equal to its Troy equivalent, is divided into 8 drachms. The Avoirdupois system, where a pound is divided into 16 ounces, was used for weighing common goods. In this system an ounce is 437.5 grains, which is approximately 28.35g, and is divided into 16 drachms.

As the object was made of gold, the form of the weight information in Pennant's account (2.5 ounces and 15 grains) could suggest that the measurement was taken using the Troy system. If this was the case, the weight of the object (c 78g) would have been very close to the weight suggested by the graffiti (3 Roman ounces, which equals 81.35g). However, the record from the *Minute Book* (2 oz, 8 Drams and 12 grains) undoubtedly indicates that the weight was expressed in the Avoirdupois system, because in the Troy system 8 drachms would make a full ounce. We can see that the object's actual weight, when converted to the metric system (2oz, 8 drachms and 12 grains which equals c 72g), is substantially lower than the weight suggested by the inscription.

Pennant's account was the main bibliographical source for the entries of this artefact

in the *CIL* and *RIB* volumes.<sup>4</sup> Both publications misspelled the name of the location, where the object was found, and both identified the find as a gold handle. It is noteworthy that the *RIB*'s note differed in a few important points from the information contained in the antiquarian sources, which for a long time has remained unnoticed. The most important one concerned the object's weight, which was recorded as 57.67g, equivalent to 2 ounces. Only recently has the author's research revealed this, and on the basis of this observation, Tomlin has corrected the *RIB*'s record, in which he interpreted the object as a penannular arm-ring with its hoop length of 191mm and weight of 71.84g (Tomlin 2011: 460).

#### COMPARATIVE STUDY

The image and physical description of the artefact, which can be retrieved from Pococke's drawing and the measurements verified in Tomlin's corrective note, help us to find parallel examples. Despite the fact that the actual object is not available for examination, these records are precise enough to make it a valuable research resource. The stamp and the inscription with weight information undoubtedly indicate a specimen connected to the Roman world. It allows us to search for comparanda within the group of objects of Roman origin.

The closest analogy is a fragment of a gold object from a scattered hoard which also included a solid gold necklace and at least 15 gold coins. It was found in Boltinggård Skov, on Funen, in Denmark (illus 2).<sup>5</sup> It is dated by associated coins to the time soon after AD 336. This piece (length 95mm, weight 42.57g) has been interpreted as half of a bracelet of the so-called Kolbenarmringe group, very popular ornaments among the Germanic elite, serving as an attribute of social position. A dotted inscription (P – III) located on the preserved terminal has been regarded as information on the object's weight or its overall value (3 Roman

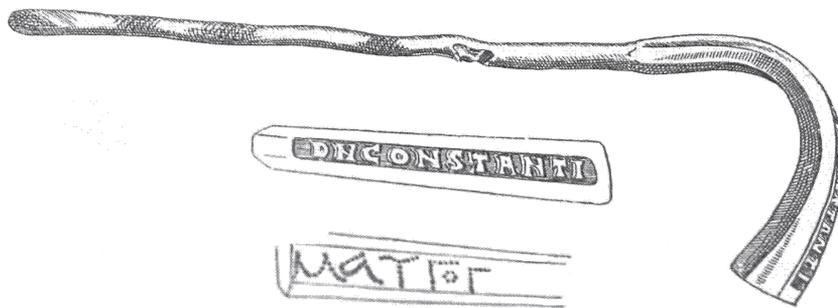


ILLUS 2 Gold fragment from Boltinggård Skov (Photo: Helle W. Horsnaes & Mogens Bo Henriksen)

pounds) expressed in silver (Henriksen & Horsnaes 2006: 264). In his recent paper, Grane argued that this armlet was a piece of booty and received the value mark as it was registered in the provincial treasury. It crossed the Roman border again as a payment to a Germanic chieftain (Grane 2013: 365–8). The similarity between the Cove object from Pococke’s illustration and the Danish fragment is striking. They both have the same shape, size and inscription marking their values. Due to this resemblance, it can be argued that the Danish fragment is of Roman rather than Germanic origin.

Another similar example was found in Watin (modern Serbia), just north of the Danube River.

It is a bracelet with polygonal terminals (illus 3).<sup>6</sup> Currently, its hoop is approximately 150mm long and weighs *c* 45g. While the left end of the ornament is well preserved, the other one was probably cut off after its discovery, just before the artefact was acquired by B. Milleker, director of the local museum. Two inscriptions have been located at the end of the existing terminal: a Latin stamp, DN CONSTANTI, and an inscription, MATTOΓ, in dotted Greek characters. The stamp most likely indicates the approximate date of manufacturing of the bracelet sometime during the reign of the Constantinian dynasty (ie second or third quarter of the 4th century AD). It also suggests that this bracelet could have been



ILLUS 3 Bracelet from Watin (Hampel 1898: 81)

manufactured in an official workshop and served as a gift offered in the name of a ruling emperor. The second inscription might be interpreted as the name of its manufacturer or owner, written in Greek (Hampel 1898: 80–1; Barački 1971: 287, 305).

The last example from the list of analogies is a curved terminal with Latin inscription •SCBONS•MB, found in Newgrange, Ireland (illus 4).<sup>7</sup> This fragment weighs 19.35g and is approximately 77mm long when stretched. This object came from the votive site located at the foot of the Neolithic tumulus in the *Bru na Boinne* complex. The site produced a number of finds, mostly Roman imports, including gold coins and ornaments. In previous studies, the curved fragment was interpreted as the end of a torc, due to its close resemblance to the terminals of the flanged torcs (Bateson 1973: 71; Carson & O’Kelly 1977: 51). However, in the light of the examples described above, particularly the one found in Serbia, we can regard the Newgrange piece as a fragment of a Roman

bracelet, most likely intentionally bent after its fragmentation. We can also argue that the fragment from Newgrange represents half of the original object, as was the case for the specimen from Boltingaård Skov. If this presumption is accurate, the complete bracelet from Newgrange would have been made of a bar of gold with a length of 150mm and weight of 40g. The inscription from this specimen has not yet been explained. The last two letters, MB, also occur on the Cove artefact (Bateson 1973: 71; Carson & O’Kelly 1977: 51). The chronology of activity at Newgrange has been based on the Roman coins and other datable finds and it stretches between the end of the 1st and the beginning of the 5th century AD (Bateson 1973: 97). However, since all the gold coins found on the site were minted between the end of the 3rd century and the last quarter of the 4th century AD, and other gold objects could be dated by parallels to the second half of the 4th century, it seems very likely that the curved terminal may be assigned to the same period. Finally, it is noteworthy that another



ILLUS 4 Gold fragment from Newgrange (© National Museum of Ireland)

hacked gold piece associated with Newgrange – a tubular fragment (NMI Inv no R1546) found on one of the adjacent fields – was recently recognised as a fragment of a late Roman gold bracelet with dated analogies included in hoards from Bonn, Germany (*terminus post quem* AD 353) and Hoxne, Suffolk (first quarter of the 5th century AD) (Janiszewski 2011: 53–63).

Although the number of parallels is very limited, it is remarkable that all of them belong to the 4th century AD. Moreover, even though they undoubtedly circulated in a Roman milieu, they were deposited beyond the Roman borders. It can be argued that the Cove specimen, though devoid of archaeological context, belongs to that period. If so, it would be a very interesting

case, as there was a very limited inflow of gold to Scotland during the late Roman period. There were no gold finds recorded at Traprain Law, East Lothian, a major centre of Roman contact, while the recently published catalogue of Roman and Byzantine gold coins from the British Isles cited only four pieces found in Scotland which could be firmly dated to the 4th century AD (Bland & Loriot 2010: 69, 334–6). To this list we can also add a fragment of a gold fibula found in a bog in Erickstanebrae, Dumfries and Galloway, dated to the early 4th century AD by an inscription commemorating the 20th anniversary of the reign of Emperor Diocletian (Curle 1932: 370–1; Wilson 2003: 146 No ID 19). It is noteworthy that three gold objects,



Map 1 Distribution of gold Roman imports dated to the 4th century AD in Dumfriesshire region (Wikimedia Commons). 1. Birrens: uniface medallion of Constantine II Caesar; 2. Cove: specimen with a stamp and inscription; 3. Erickstanebrae: fragment of cross-bow fibula

the Cove specimen, the crossbow fibula and the Constantine II Caesar uniface medal found in Birrens, came from a relatively close area, just north of Hadrian's Wall, and all could be dated to the early part of the 4th century AD (Map 1).<sup>8</sup> It can be argued that all three items might represent payments or official gifts offered by the Romans to the local tribe, which lived just beyond the Roman border, in order to secure peace. The presence of *areani*, native scouts involved in the Roman defence system in 4th-century Britain, was attested by a reliable written source (Ammianus Marcellinus 28.3.8) and discussed in the context of Roman influence on the native Caledonian population (Wilson 2003:121). Although the object from Cove seems to be a single find, it still represented significant value as it weighed nearly 3 Roman ounces. It was the equivalent of 16 (real weight)

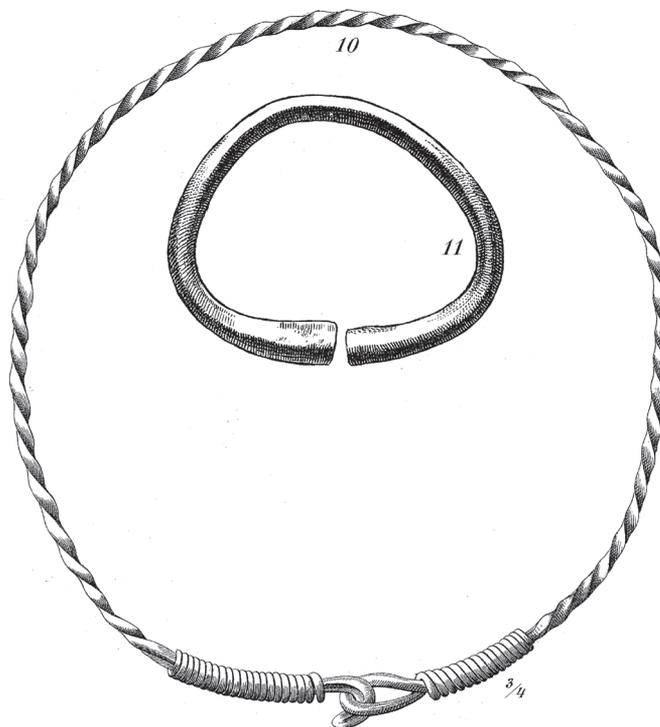
or 18 (nominal weight) *solidi*. Within the barbarian zone of the British Isles, in terms of the value of gold deposits it could be matched only by the so-called Conyngham hoard – a set of five gold ornaments – found in Newgrange, Ireland (Topp: 1956: 53–62; Kent & Painter 1977: 128–9). Nevertheless, its overall value was still much lower than the hacked silver hoards from Traprain Law (Curle 1920: 102–4) and Ballinrees, Co Derry (Mattingly, Pearce & Kendrick 1937: 39–45).

#### NOTES ON THE FUNCTION AND CHARACTER OF THE DEPOSIT

In all publications to date, various functions have been suggested for the analysed object. A very limited number of partially damaged parallels



ILLUS 5 Gold set from Boltinggård Skov (Photo: Helle W Horsnaes and Mogens Bo Henriksen)



ILLUS 6 Gold set from Wrocław, Poland – Zakrzów (Sackrau) Grave III  
(Grempler 1888: Pl VII)

have not been helpful in the attempts to interpret its original function.

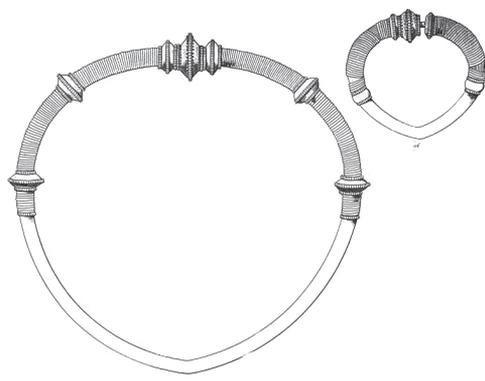
The probable usage of the object was discussed briefly in the two antiquarian accounts cited above. While Pennant suggested that it could have been a sort of garment fastener (1776: 104), Pococke (not being aware of the chronological gap between the Cove object and suggested parallels) indicated its similarity to the Irish Bronze Age bracelets (1773: 41). Both the *CIL* and *RIB* entries interpreted the analysed object as the handle of a gold vessel (Collingwood & Wright 1991: 29). This interpretation was repeated by Wilson in his study of the Dumfriesshire area during the Roman Iron Age (2003: 144 No ID 13).

Tomlin has recently suggested that the object in question was a penannular armband

and indeed there are several points in favour of such an interpretation. All the discussed examples share a similar form, which consists of a solid, simple and relatively thin hoop finished with conical terminals. Bracelets of such form – so-called Kolbenarmringe – have been frequently found among the grave goods in high rank burials of the Germanic elite, dated between the second half of the 3rd century and the end of the 5th century AD (Werner 1980: 1–49). Such an interpretation was offered for a fragment found in Boltinggård Skov, which seems to be the closest parallel to the Cove object. The specimen found in Watin was clearly a bracelet as well, and, as per the stamp, it was most likely produced in an official, state controlled workshop. As was also suggested above, the curved fragment found in Newgrange

could be interpreted as half of a bracelet. In the light of these analogies, it seems very likely that the discussed artefact was a bracelet or armlet.

However, an alternative primary function might be considered. As already mentioned, the object from Cove and the fragment from Boltinggård Skov appear to be very similar. It is remarkable that both artefacts have a very wide opening between the terminals. In the author's opinion, neither the Danish fragment nor the specimen from Cove had been stretched prior to deposition and both were discovered in their



ILLUS 7 Gold set from the chieftain's grave from Ostrovany, Slovakia, Find I (Armeth 1850: GIXS)

original shape. Such a wide opening makes them unwearable on the wrist or arm and distinguishes them from the group that are unquestionably bracelets. This observation is particularly evident when we compare pictures of the Boltinggård Skov piece and any Kolben bracelet accompanied by their associated necklaces. In the latter case, the bracelet's hoops are easily enclosed within the much larger necklace's ring, while the Boltinggård Skov fragment (reconstructed) terminals would extend beyond the necklace loop (illus 5–8).

Both objects bear inscriptions marking their value and weight, although, according to the

cited reports, the inscription from the Cove specimen did not reflect its actual weight. It is true that the Roman gold bracelets were often made in relation to the weight of the Roman ounce, its multiples and/or its fractions. For example, in the Thetford hoard there were two bracelets weighing one ounce each, while the heaviest bracelet (No 26) weighs about 4 ounces (Johns & Potter 1983: 95–6). Similarly, several bracelets from the Hoxne hoard weigh approximately one ounce or half of an ounce, while the heaviest specimen (No 26) is comprised of about 5 ounces of gold (Johns 2010: 214–17). None of them, however, bear any graffiti with weight information. Inscriptions containing such information have frequently been found on silver vessels or on gold or silver ingots.<sup>9</sup> The latter have been recorded in hoards within and beyond the Roman Empire and are interpreted as part of the payment for military service of high rank officers. It may be suggested that both specimens from Cove and Boltinggård Skov served as 'gold bars' of a certain value, yet further, more detailed study would be necessary to prove this theory.

Very limited information on the circumstances of the discovery, as well as the location where the Cove object was found, makes it difficult to understand the character of the deposition. Thus, what follows should be regarded as speculation. As none of the analysed sources mentions any associated finds and there are no records of later discoveries from the area which could be linked to our object, it might be argued that the specimen from Cove represents a single deposit. At the same time though, it should be highlighted that many of the sites where old discoveries have been made still produce finds when revisited by archaeologists or metal detectorists. In my opinion, the Cove object was too valuable and too large to be a casual loss, so it was either hidden for safe-keeping or was a ritual deposit. Since no account mentions any distinctive feature which could act as a deposition marker, it seems that if it was an intentional deposit,



ILLUS 8 Gold set from the chieftain's grave from Ostrovany, Slovakia, Find II (Henszlman 1866: Pl. II)

collection by the depositor would have been an extremely difficult task. Several deposits buried in similar, inhabitable settings have been usually regarded as votive offerings and the deposition of the object from Cove might be of the same nature.<sup>10</sup> In his analysis of gold deposits from Funen, Denmark, dated to the Late Roman and Migration Period, Henriksen showed that the finds from inhabitable areas outnumbered other finds. Within the first group, single finds were much more frequent than hoards and most of them seem to be intentionally deposited (Henriksen 2010: 411–12). It is noteworthy also that the gold

cross-bow fibula from Erickstanebrae, even if found near the old Roman road, was uncovered during peat-cutting, and so was also deposited in marginal ground. However, more detailed research on the environmental conditions of Scottish gold and silver deposits from the Late Roman and the subsequent period is needed.

#### ABBREVIATIONS

*CIL* – Hübner, E [ed] 1873. *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum. Inscriptiones Britannicae*. Berlin.  
 KHM – Kunsthistorisches Museum (Vienna)

RIB – Collingwood, R G & Wright, R P [ed]  
1991. *The Roman Inscriptions of Britain* II  
fasc. 2: Instrumentum Domesticum.  
SAL – The Society of Antiquaries of London

## NOTES

- 1 I am grateful to Dr R Tomlin for allowing me to include an illustration of the object from Cove used in his publication. This image was scanned from Pococke's publication (*Archaeologia* 2 (1773), Pl. III Fig. 4) in the Sackler Library.
- 2 I would like to thank Dr F Hunter for encouraging me to write this paper and his comments which helped me to improve it.
- 3 The record from the *Minute Book* I received courtesy of Mr Adrian James, Assistant Librarian, to whom I am very grateful.
- 4 *CIL* VII 1284: 'Ansa aurea (of pure gold, soft and pliable) rep. On Mr Irvine's estate at Cowe, about a mile west of the church of Kirkpatrick-Fleming (Ecclefechan); *longa erat dig 7½*; *pondo 2½* ounces and 15 grains, round and slender in the middle, but thicker at the ends and of a conoid form plus minus, terminating with a flat circular plate. *Ab altera parte impressum est HELENVS FECIT; ab altera litteris, quae punctis constant, scriptum ... III MB; Pennant's tour in Scotland* [1772] I (1774) p 91s. (*inde* Goughs *Camden* 4 p 63; *Stuart Caledonia* p 256, *male uterque*). *Titulus alter sine dubio pondus indicat.*  
*RIB* II 2413: '2413.1 Cowe, Dumfries and Galloway Region [Dumfriesshire] Gold handle, length 190.5mm, weight 57.67g. Found before 1772 about one mile west of Ecclefechan and now lost. Reprinted from *CIL*. *CIL* vii 1284. Pennant, *Scotland* (1772) i, 91. stamp on obverse: HELENVS FECIT; reverse, grafitto in punched dots: III MB.'
- 5 Inv no Dnf. 3/05, currently in the possession of the National Museum in Copenhagen. I am grateful to Dr H Horsnaes and Dr M B Henriksen for allowing me to use pictures of the Boltinggård Skov specimen.
- 6 Inv no 12/1897, currently in the possession of the City Museum in Vršac. I would like to thank Dr P Quast for drawing my attention to this artefact.
- 7 Inv no E56.945, currently in the possession of the National Museum of Ireland in Dublin.

- 8 I would like to thank Dr F Hunter for drawing my attention to this group.
- 9 Symbol P III was found on the silver ingots from Kaiseraugst hoard (Cahn & Kaufmann – Heinemann 1984: 324–6, 382–3).
- 10 The hoard from Boltinggård Skov has been interpreted as a votive offering. More famous examples of ritual deposits are Danish wetland deposits (Illerup, Nydam, Vimose). On the interpretation of single deposits found in various environments in Funen please see the recent publication of M B Henriksen (2010: 411–12).

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