

A hoard of late Bronze Age gold objects from Heights of Brae, Ross and Cromarty District, Highland Region

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SUMMARY

A late Bronze Age gold hoard comprising a minimum of three cup-ended ornaments, five penannular armlets with expanded terminals and a corrugated band is described and the circumstances of its discovery and its composition are discussed.

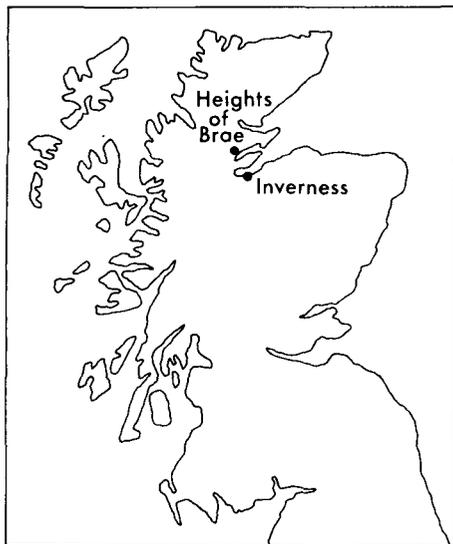
In August 1979 two late Bronze Age ornaments, a cup-ended ornament (no 3) and an armlet (no 8), were brought to the National Museum of Antiquities by Mrs D MacDonald of Dingwall, Ross and Cromarty. These objects, together with two others since lost, had been found some 12 years earlier on her parents-in-law's croft at Heights of Brae (illus 1) in the course of ploughing.¹ They had originally been regarded as horse brasses and there was a suggestion that other objects of similar appearance had been ploughed up but discarded on the field. On the basis of this information, the Museum decided that the site should be examined and three members of its Artifact Research Unit (Mr A Foxon, Mr N Sharples and Miss C Wickham-Jones) subsequently visited the site during the first week of September.

The field where the gold objects had been discovered has an area of 1.39 hectares and is located at a height of c 228 m OD. It lies on the boundary between moorland and cultivated land and, although the field had been ploughed some five times in the preceding decade, it was rough pasture at the time of the investigation. The field slopes to the S with a flattish terrace in the middle. The gold objects brought to the Museum had been recovered to the S of this terrace.

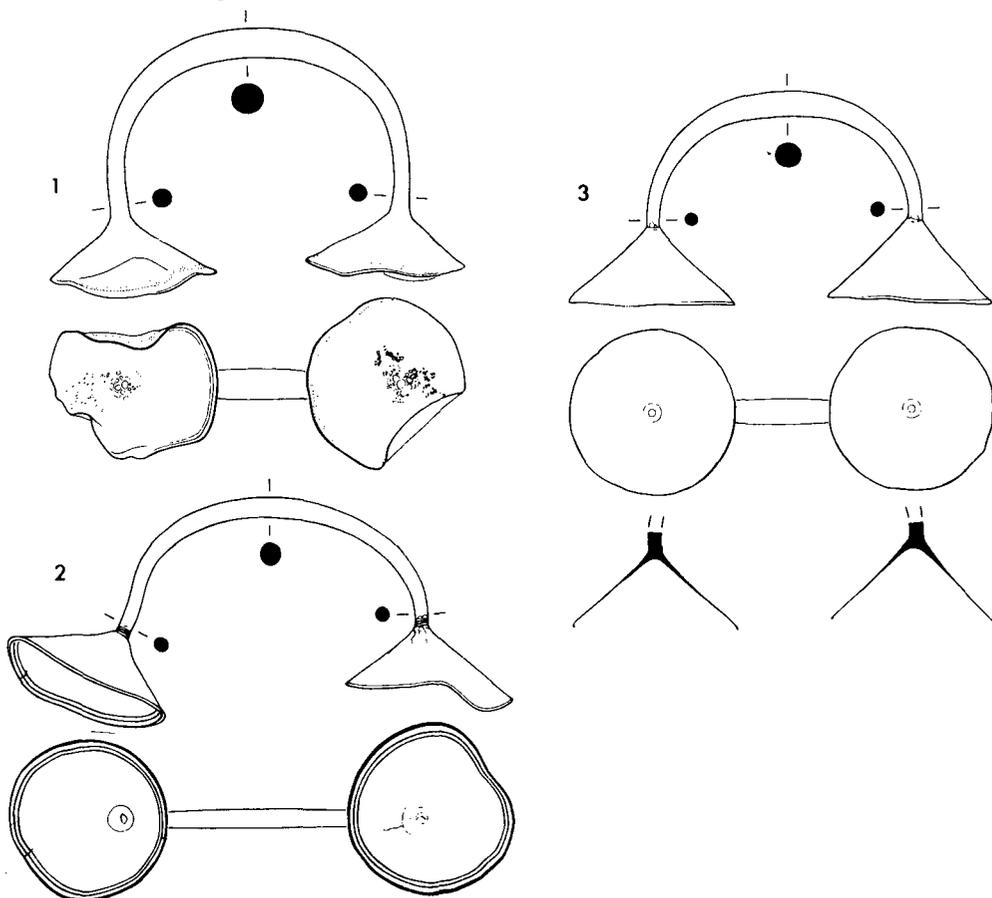
There were no obvious artificial features in the field apart from a small knoll at the N edge where the farmer had ploughed up some blackened stones, probably the remains of a small croft. The lack of obvious features prompted two surveys: a contour survey encompassing some 1100 sq m (c 8% of the area of the field) around the supposed find spot of the gold objects and a metal detector survey covering about one third of the field. The latter was responsible for the recovery of a further seven gold objects which would otherwise have been impossible to locate. The metal detector survey was undertaken with a 'C-scope' machine in 2 m strips and the operator swept a metre stretch with every step. This work produced a strong reading on the terrace and a 2 m square was opened around this anomaly.

Twenty centimetres of ploughsoil overlay the bedrock. All the gold objects, except one (no 7) which lay on the bedrock, were in this ploughsoil. The seven gold objects were found close

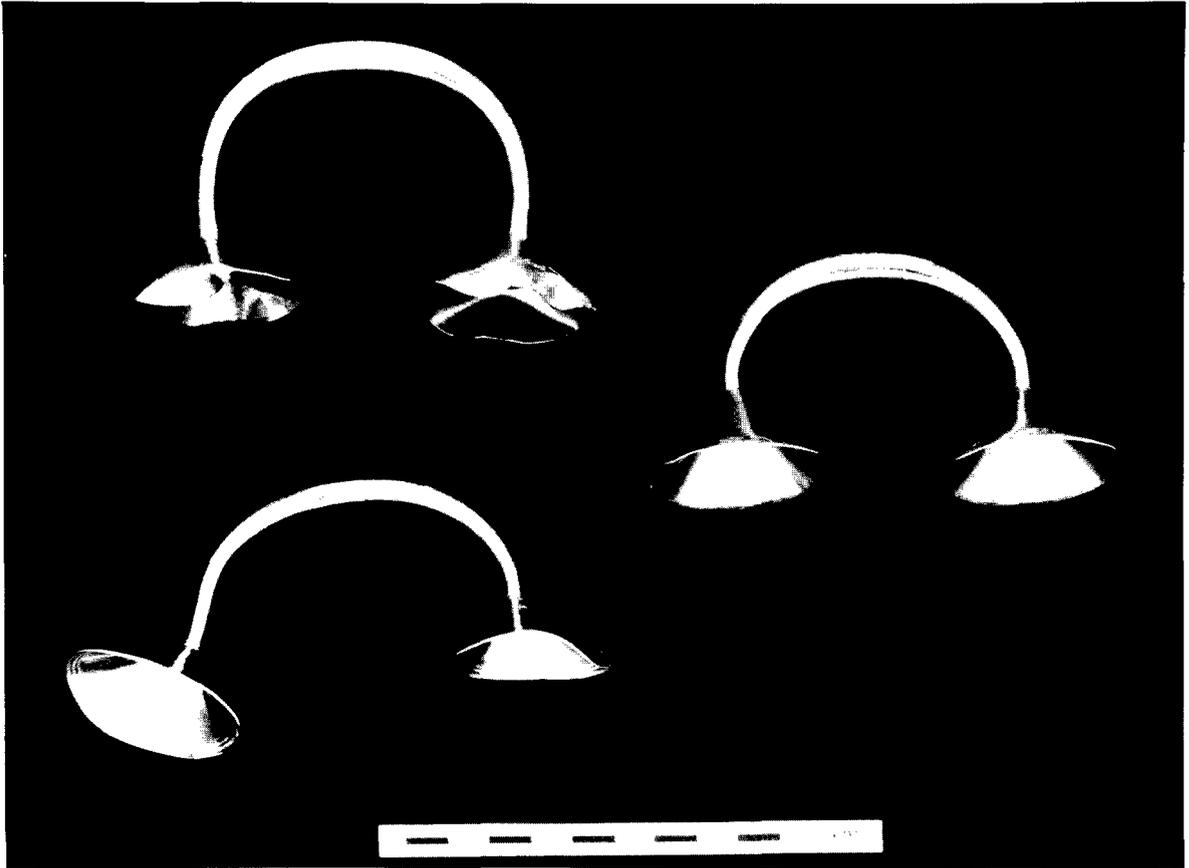
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ILLUS 1 Location map



ILLUS 2 Cup-ended ornaments (scale 1:2)



ILLUS 3 Cup-ended ornaments, arranged as in illus 2

together, four being in a small heap consisting of a corrugated, buckled and crumpled band (no 9) which partly enveloped two obliquely set armlets with expanded terminals (nos 4 & 5). A cup-ended ornament (no 1) was on top of this group, only some 5 cm below the turf. Some 30 cm to the S of this group was another cup-ended ornament (no 2) set vertically in the soil. Two armlets were c 50 cm E of the group and 65 cm NE of the isolated cup-ended ornament, one set obliquely in the soil (no 6) and the other (no 7) resting on the bedrock.

No soil or rock-cut features associated with the objects could be determined. A soil discoloration around the group of four objects and a circular stain around the isolated cup-ended ornament (no 2) were very insubstantial and careful excavation of both suggested that they were not contextually significant. They corresponded with ploughmarks seen in the sections of the trench and on the bedrock. It seems probable that these seven objects as well as the four found by the farmer (two of which are now lost) were not *in situ* at the time of their discovery. Nevertheless, it appears equally likely that they all form one hoard and that recent ploughing had separated them.

The pieces were acquired by the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland as Treasure Trove.

CATALOGUE

CUP-ENDED ORNAMENTS (illus 2-4)

- 1 The piece is badly scratched and the terminals are dented. The decoration is unfinished: scratched incisions occur 1.5 mm from the edge of the cup on both inside and outside but only for half the circumference of each cup. Peck marks from the manufacturing processes are visible on the inside of the cups, on the outer necks of the cups where they join the band and around the mid-point of the band.

Overall dimensions : 65.25×40.35 mm
 Band thickness : 5.25-8.25 mm
 Max diam of cups : 42.5 mm
 Max ht of cups : 14.5 mm
 Weight : 112.6 g
 XRF analysis : Cu 6.8%; Au 80.6%; Ag 12.6%
 NMAS catalogue no : FE 94

- 2 The most finished of the cup-ended ornaments and the most polished item in the hoard. The cups are slightly dented and the inner surface of the band is quite abraded. There are a few cracks visible in both the inner and outer surfaces of the cups. Three incised lines, 2 mm in total width, are present on the band at the point where it joins the cups (illus 4a). On the inside edge of the cups are two grooves forming three ridges. Each groove is c 1.5 mm wide and runs parallel to the cups' rims (illus 4b). The outer surface of the cups has no decoration. The cups are not centred on the join with the band but instead project outwards, increasing the overall width. The object appears finished apart from the smoothing down of a bump (? an impurity in the metal) on the band near the join with one of the cups.

Overall dimensions : 74.5×27.5 mm
 Band thickness : 4-6 mm
 Max diam of cups : 45 mm
 Max ht of cups : 16.65 mm
 Weight : 66.2 g
 XRF analysis : Cu 6.1%; Au 76.0%; Ag 17.9%
 NMAS catalogue no : FE 95

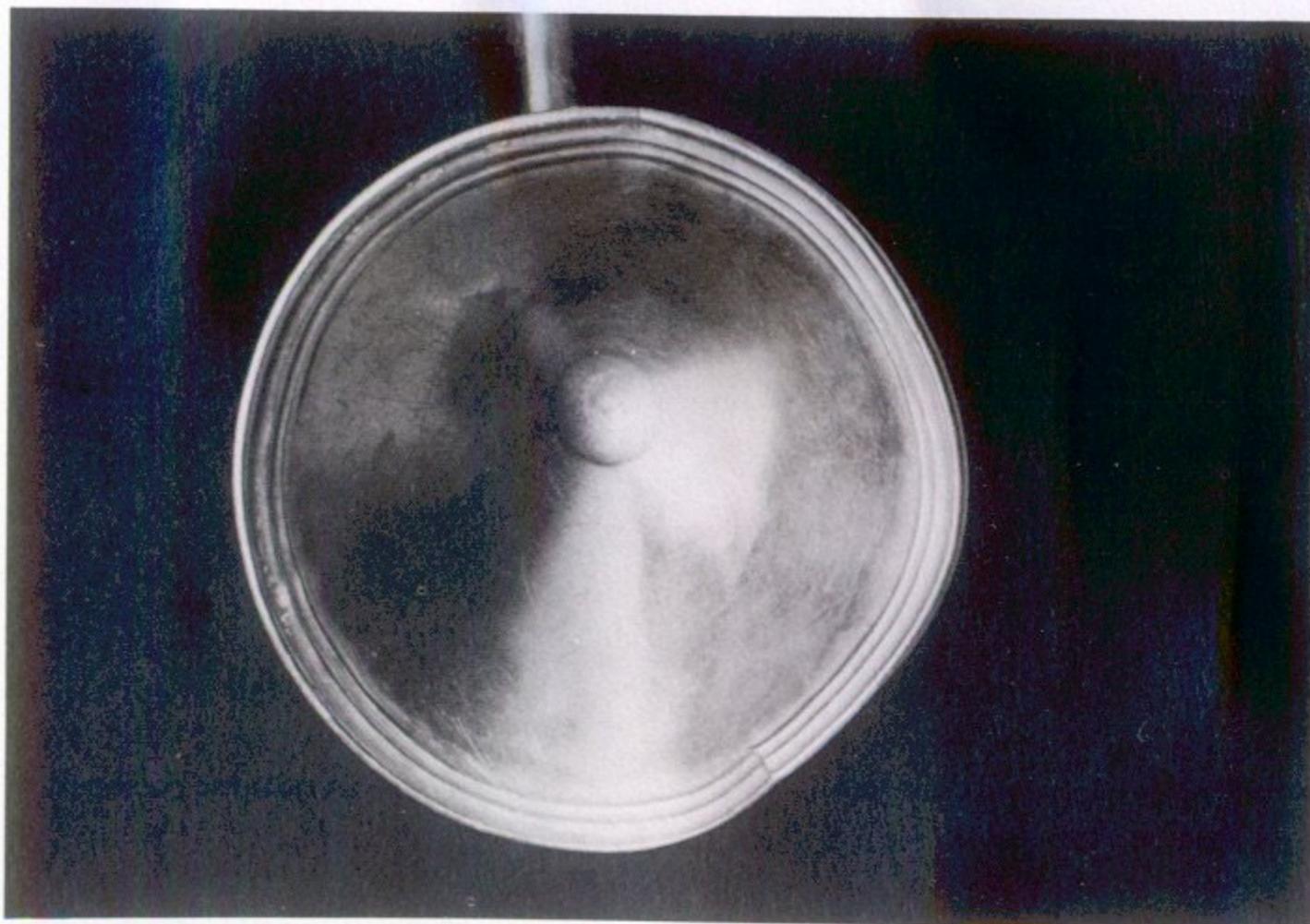
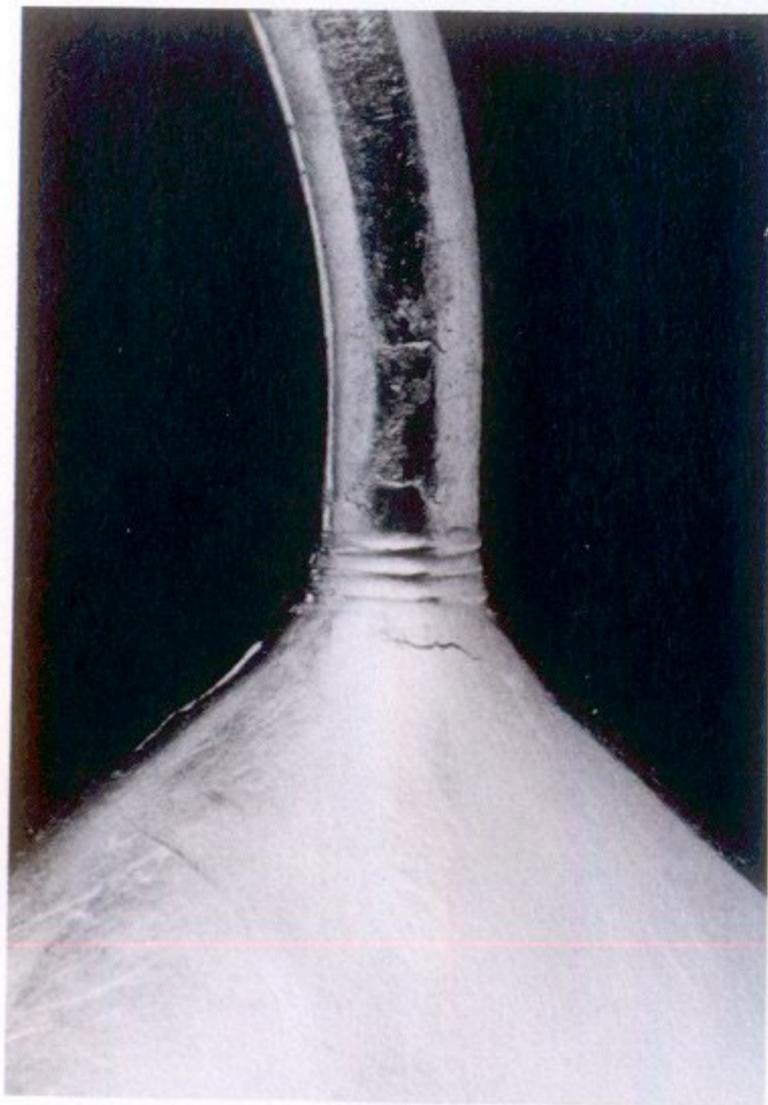
- 3 The cups are scratched on their outer surfaces. Peck marks from the manufacturing processes are visible on the band where it joins the cups. At these points the band is slightly faceted. There is no decoration on the object. Unlike the other two examples the cups are centred on the join with the band. The piece appears unfinished since the edges of the cups are rough and have inward jutting lips. There is no evidence that these lips were retaining material filling the cups.

Overall dimensions : 65.15×27 mm
 Band thickness : 4.25-7 mm
 Max diam of cups : 43 mm
 Max ht of cups : 21.1 mm
 Weight : 83.3 g
 XRF analysis : Cu 5.8%; Au 79.2%; Ag 15.0%
 NMAS catalogue no : FE 96

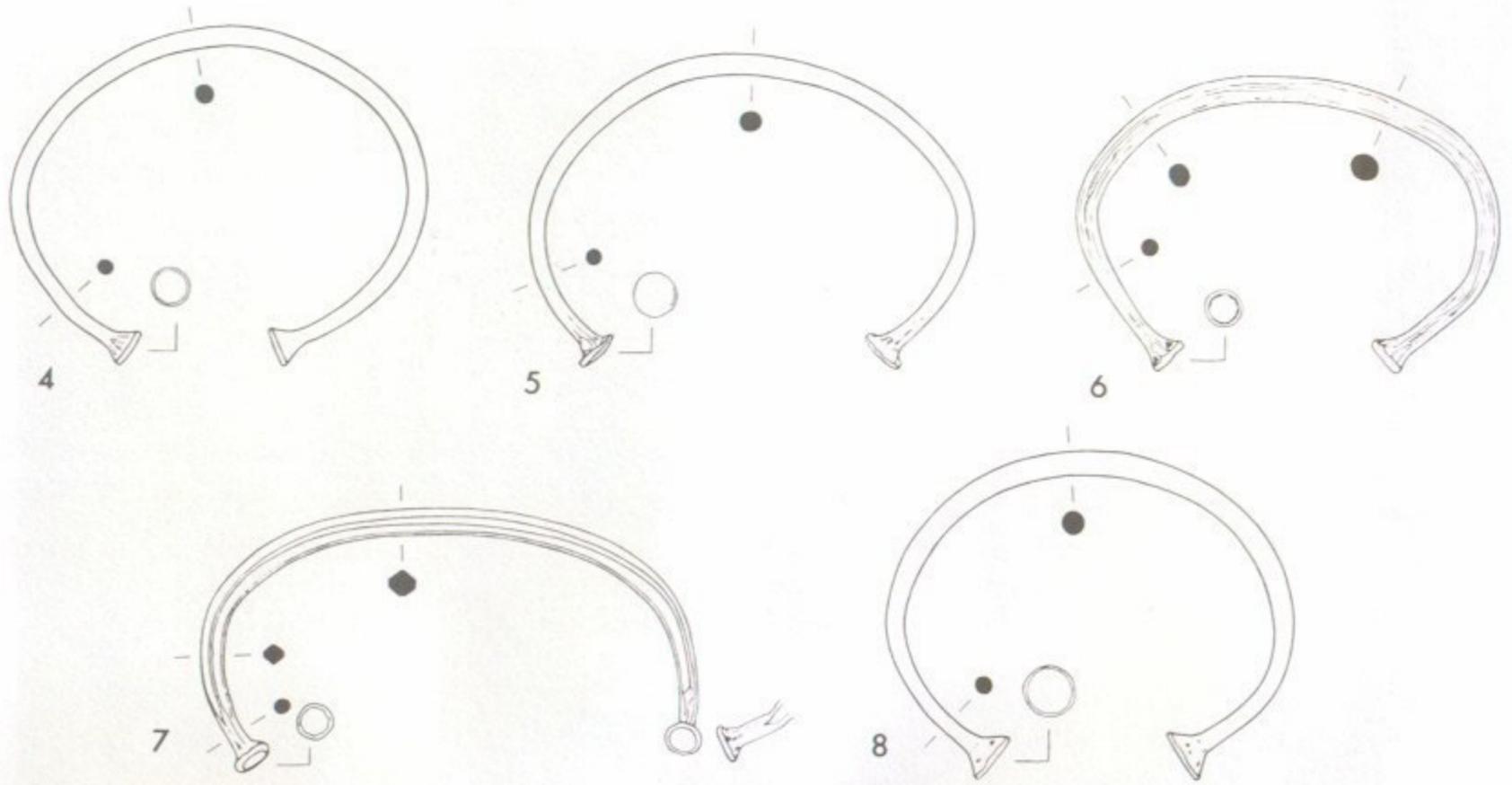
PENANNULAR ARMLETS WITH EXPANDED TERMINALS (illus 5-6)

- 4 One side of the armband is markedly more scratched than the other. There is a crack and a bump (? an impurity in the metal) in the middle of the bar, which is round-sectioned. The terminals are solid and cone-shaped with a rough lip around the edge which suggests that they are unfinished.

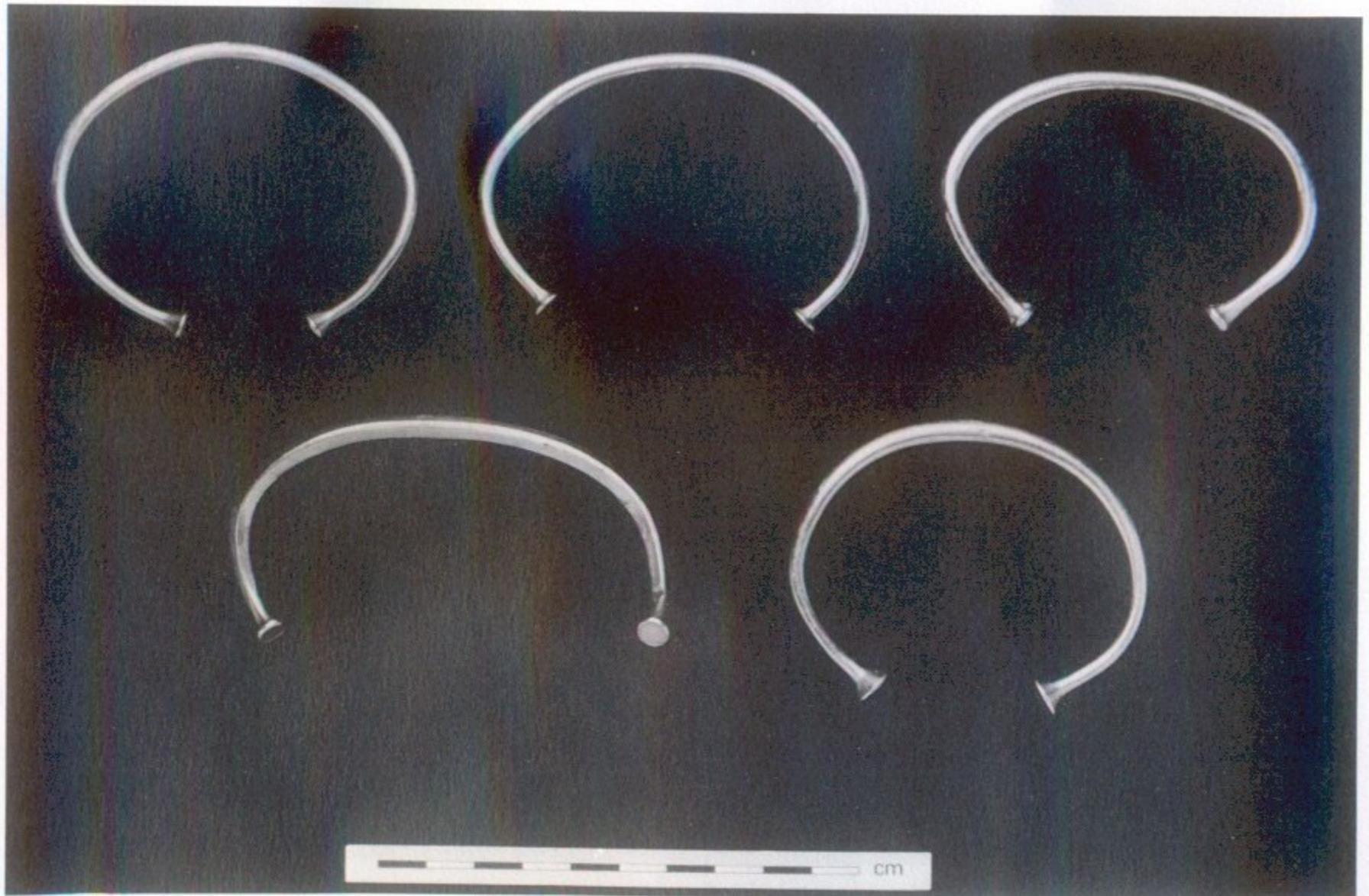
Overall dimensions : 69.4×50.3 mm
 Bar thickness : 3.15-4.7 mm
 Max diam of terminals: 7.6 mm
 Weight : 34 g
 XRF analysis : Cu 6.8%; Au 80.1%; Ag 13.1%
 NMAS catalogue no : FE 97



ILLUS 4 Details of decoration on cup-ended ornament no 2



ILLUS 5 Penannular armlets (scale 1:2)



ILLUS 6 Penannular armlets, arranged as in illus 5

- 5 There are scars and scratches on the inner surface of the bar and marks from the manufacturing processes are visible at the joins with the terminals. The bar is round-sectioned. The expanded surface of the terminals is slightly concave while the face itself is flat with rough edges.

Overall dimensions : 75×47 mm
 Bar thickness : 3.15–4.25 mm
 Max diam of terminals: 8.35 mm
 Weight : 32.5 g
 XRF analysis : Cu 5.5%; Au 80.9%; Ag 13.6%
 NMAS catalogue no : FE 98

- 6 Scars and scratches are visible on the inner surface of the bar and close to the terminals. Manufacturing marks, triangular in shape and consistent with the use of a pointed tool, are concentrated at the union of bar and terminals. The bar is round-sectioned. The terminals are solid cones with rough edges.

Overall dimensions : 69.35×44.2 mm
 Bar thickness : 3.3–5 mm
 Max diam of terminals: 7.65 mm
 Weight : 41.4 g
 XRF analysis : Cu 5.7%; Au 75.9%; Ag 18.4%
 NMAS catalogue no : FE 99

- 7 The bar, which has been pulled out of shape, has both long and short vertical scratches. Manufacturing marks occur on the terminals. Unlike the other armlets, the bar is lozenge-sectioned although not at the junction with the terminals where it is rounder. The four main facets are c 3 mm wide although in places there are three smaller facets creating an irregular heptagonal section. The edges of the terminals are rough. The lozenge section is best interpreted as a design feature although parallels are not common. Two of the armlets found at Stonehill Wood, Carmichael, Lanarkshire have a similar cross-section but are not otherwise closely comparable (Anderson 1886, 211–12, figs 228–29, but note that fig 229 is not wholly accurate: NMAS L. 1978. 4–5); better parallels occur in the Downpatrick hoard (Proudfoot 1955).

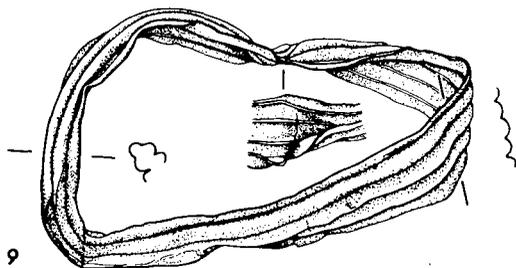
Overall dimensions : 74.65×36.5 mm
 Bar thickness : 3.75–5.2 mm
 Max diam of terminals: 7.27 mm
 Weight : 38.4 g
 XRF analysis : Cu 5.5%; Au 76.5%; Ag 18.0%
 NMAS catalogue no : FE 100

- 8 The bar is round-sectioned. Unlike the terminals of the other armlets, these give every indication of being finished with well smoothed off lips and slightly convex faces.

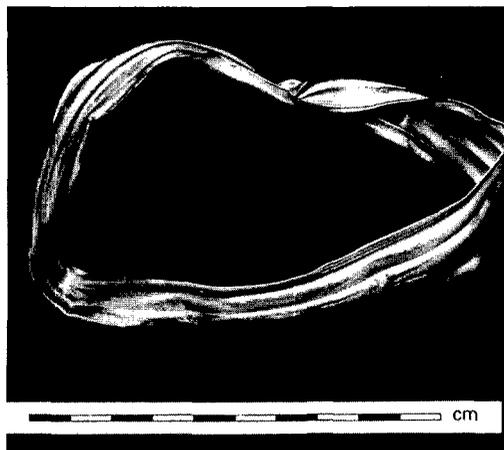
Overall dimensions : 66.7×44.7 mm
 Bar thickness : 3.6–5.25 mm
 Max diam of terminals: 9.45 mm
 Weight : 41.48 g
 XRF analysis : Cu 7.8%; Au 75.2%; Ag 17.0%
 NMAS catalogue no : FE 101

CORRUGATED BAND (illus 7–8)

- 9 The band is made of sheet gold which, although badly twisted and dented, retains a good deal of rigidity. The decoration consists of corrugations forming five ridges of which the central three, c 5 mm wide, are the most prominent. No join is now visible on the band. The only close parallel appears to be an unprovenanced Irish piece described, on no good grounds, as a 'bracelet' (*Christie's Sale catalogue*, 7 September 1970, lot 179). Apart from this uninformative comparison the closest



ILLUS 7 Corrugated band (scale 1:2)



ILLUS 8 Corrugated band

resemblance, despite a significant difference in size, is provided by the hilt-mounts for early Bronze Age daggers from Scotland and Ireland (Henshall 1968; Flanagan 1961).

Circumference	: 251 mm
Max width	: 22 mm
Thickness of sheet	: 1 mm
Weight	: 37.5 g
XRF analysis	: Cu 4.6%; Au 80.6%; Ag 14.8%
NMAS catalogue no	: FE 102

The X-ray fluorescence analyses quoted in the catalogue were carried out in the National Museum's Research Laboratory by Miss C Mortimer as part of her undergraduate dissertation and are quoted here with her permission.

DISCUSSION

The principal aim of this paper is to place on record what is, apart from the lost hoard from Coul, Islay (Clarke 1976), the largest hoard of late Bronze Age gold objects yet found in Scotland. Nevertheless, a few comments, arising from the circumstances of its discovery and composition, are worth making.

Despite the desirability of such work, the discovery of apparent stray finds is seldom investigated more fully even when the objects are of types regularly recovered in hoards. There is a variety of reasons why this should be so but the work at Heights of Brae provides a salutary reminder of the evidence which we may be wilfully abandoning. Indeed it is worth recalling that it was the information that other objects had been left on the field which provided the stimulus for the subsequent fieldwork. Coles (1960, 93) listed 18 finds of late Bronze Age gold ornaments (discounting the Torloisk, Mull material now shown to be Irish in provenance: Eogan 1967) but no less than 13 contained two or less objects and only one discovery exceeded five. There would, therefore, have been no reason, without the additional information provided by the finder, to suppose that the two objects (or four if the lost items were indeed part of the hoard) did not represent the complete find. Certainly, subsequent investigation did not provide information about the nature of the hoard's deposition but it did greatly increase the number of objects and expand the variety of types represented.

There can be little doubt that the hoard dates to the 8th or 7th centuries BC and contains objects with well known parallels in Ireland and to a lesser extent elsewhere in Scotland. The corrugated band, however, is less readily incorporated into such a description. Sheet gold was, of course, used in the late Bronze Age, most spectacularly in the production of gorgets, but few pieces are quite so reminiscent of early Bronze Age design as this band. Its discovery, together with the general state of the objects, must influence the wider interpretation of the hoard. The large number of finds of cup-ended ornaments and armlets with expanded terminals in Ireland has caused most commentators (eg Coles 1960) to interpret Scottish discoveries as imports from that country. This, of course, remains a possibility but the Heights of Brae material is not easily understood within such a framework. As has been noted in the catalogue, only nos 2 and 8 can reasonably be regarded as being in a finished state – the corrugated band (no 9) might also fall into this category although its present damaged state precludes certainty. The rest all appear to show traces of manufacture, albeit not readily interpreted in terms of Maryon's descriptions (1938), which one might expect to be removed on finished objects. It is difficult to understand such evidence within the normative explanations of trade or exchange but altogether much easier if more local manufacture is envisaged. The unusual corrugated band might also be more easily interpreted as the product of a local workshop. Certainly, there is no obvious reason to interpret types with parallels in Ireland as necessarily the products of Irish artisans solely on the basis of the greater number of finds in that country. The moulds for bronze tools and weapons found at Jarlishof (Hamilton 1956, 28–9) should introduce caution into our judgements.

Our inability to resolve satisfactorily even the problems of provenance make wider explanations of the hoard's significance extremely difficult. Despite the field investigation, no information about the circumstances of deposition was obtained, although the evidence from Downpatrick (Proudfoot 1955, 1–2, 11–12) does not suggest that we would necessarily be in a much stronger position even if the hoard had not been disturbed. Its contents do not materially aid interpretation. Unwarranted descriptions involving terms such as merchant's, votive or personal, which are often applied to hoards, obscure rather than enlighten through a spurious image of understanding. There is at present very little evidence to explain why hoards of gold objects were buried in the later Bronze Age or whether the objects before burial were controlled by an individual, a family or a community.

Viewed in terms of gold ornaments the hoard from Heights of Brae is very much an outlier; only the two armlets from Hillhead, Caithness (Curle 1913) are more northerly finds on the Scottish mainland. However, hoards containing bronze ornaments occur in the same area and are linked, typologically and distributionally, to the rich hoards from Grampian Region (Coles 1960, 63, map 8). Hoards such as Auchtertyre, Moray (Smith 1872, 435–8), Wester Ord (*Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, 8 (1870–2), 309–10) and Poolewe (Jolly 1880), both Ross, contain a number of bronze ornaments as well as tools and weapons. Many of these ornaments are Covesea types but Poolewe contains a bronze cup-ended ornament closely comparable to the gold examples from Heights of Brae while the contemporaneous use of armlets with expanded terminals and Covesea armlets is suggested by the find at Alloa, Clackmannanshire (Anderson 1883, 447–8). Indeed within this wider perspective it can be argued that the Heights of Brae goldwork is by no means the most unexpected or exotic of the material so far discovered.

NOTE

1. The exact position of the find is available to research workers on application to the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland or the National Monuments Record of Scotland.

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