

## A late Celtic enamelled mount from Galson, Isle of Lewis

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### ABSTRACT

*Close parallels in eighth/ninth-century contexts in the Isle of Man, Ireland and Norway are adduced for this Lewis mount.*

The enamelled mount that forms the subject of this note was found by Dr F W Rennie near the midden overlying a 'chambered earth-house' at Galson, Isle of Lewis (Edwards 1924; RCAMS 1928, no 9).<sup>1</sup> This midden, suffering from coastal erosion, had already produced an assemblage of Viking-age artefacts including a copper-alloy, plain-ringed, polyhedral-headed pin and the crutch-headed shaft of a second ringed-pin, as well as a coin of Eadgar (959–75).<sup>2</sup> The closest parallels for the newly-discovered mount are also from Viking-age contexts, in Norway and the Isle of Man, where they are associated with ornamented horse-harness; their enamelled designs demonstrate that they are of insular Celtic workmanship.

The copper-alloy mount (illus 1) is circular in form with a flat, enamelled upper surface and plain straight edge (diameter: 30 mm); the reverse is slightly concave, with a centrally-placed, pierced lug. The reserved ornament consists of a degenerate, triskele-type pattern, with the three elongated elements or 'arms' whirling about a central circle and linked by a meandering line around the outside. The enamel has lost almost all traces of its original colour having decayed to a greenish-yellow, but the innermost, elongated cells of the whirling 'arms' are noticeably yellower in appearance.

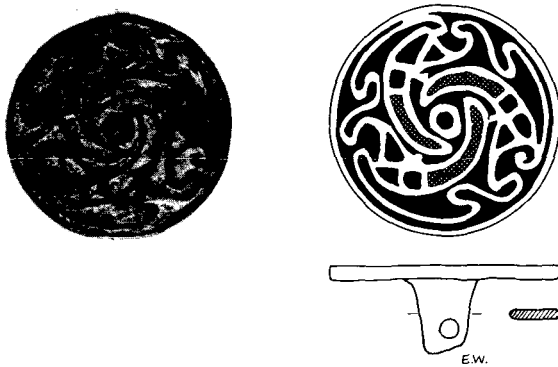
Examination in the British Museum Research Laboratory demonstrated by energy-dispersive X-ray fluorescence analysis that the metal is 'a leaded bronze (ie a bronze containing a substantial lead percentage); no zinc was detected' (the significance of which is pointed out below).<sup>3</sup> Both X-ray fluorescence and X-ray diffraction were used to analyse the enamel and revealed that two colours were present, with yellow in the innermost cells of the 'arms' and red for the rest.

'Both enamels are of the heavily-leaded lime-silica type of glass typically used for bright colours in antiquity: yellow enamel, coloured with lead-tin oxide and red enamel, coloured with cuprous oxide.'

Zinc was also detected, particularly in the red enamel, which puzzles Dr Hughes who comments that

'It cannot have been derived from corrosion of the metal backing; it may have derived from some other object buried with the mount, or from the soil, or have been actually present in the enamel originally. If the latter is the case, it is a previously unrecorded occurrence of zinc in ancient enamels: no useful function can be suggested for it.'<sup>4</sup>

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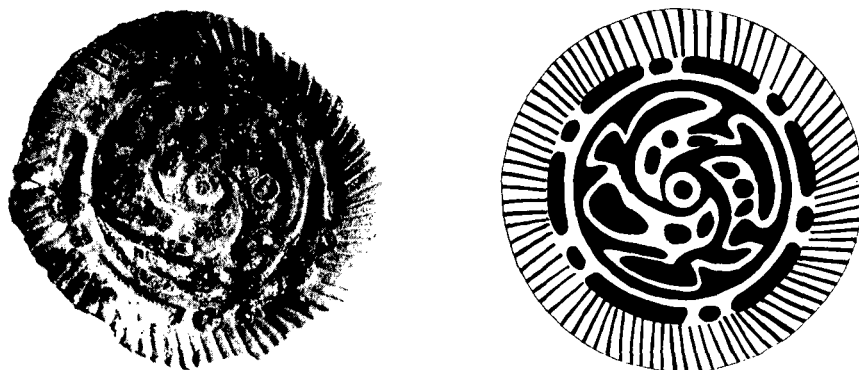


ILLUS 1 Enamelled mount from Galson, Isle of Lewis: in drawing (right), black=red enamel and stipple=yellow enamel (scale 1:1)

The triskele-type pattern is virtually identical to that on a circular enamelled mount (illus 2) from the Balladoole boat-burial on the Isle of Man, dated by Wilson to the period 850–950 (Bersu & Wilson 1966, 85–7). This mount (diameter: 41 mm) has the addition of a border of rectangular cells and differs somewhat in form in that its upper surface is slightly domed, the edge is curved and milled, and there are two pierced lugs on the reverse close to the rim (*ibid*, 26–7, fig 17, pl 1). A second circular enamelled mount from Balladoole (*ibid*; illus 4) is, however, closer in form to the Galson mount in respect of having a single, centrally-placed lug, as also does a circular, enamelled mount (illus 3) from another late ninth/early 10th-century Viking grave, found in Norway at Kolset, Mære, Sparbu, Nord-Trøndelag.<sup>5</sup> This slightly larger flat mount (diameter: 47 mm) has a cruder version of the Galson/Balladoole motif, with a border of rectangular cells and oblique hatching related to that of the latter mount, but less skilfully executed. Both graves contain a set of functional bridle-mounts of insular Celtic workmanship, of the type also known in the Isle of Man from the Viking grave at Knoc y Doonee (Kermode 1930, 131–2, fig 3), and in Scotland from the Viking grave at Kiloran Bay, Colonsay (VA II, 57–8, fig 30); the two associated enamelled mounts in both the Balladoole and Kolset burials are therefore presumed also to be harness-fittings. Wilson has suggested that all these sets are from the same workshop ‘perhaps in Man or the Sudreys’ (Bersu & Wilson 1966, 25). The hypothesis of a Manx origin has perhaps been strengthened by Mr P S Gelling’s publication of his excavations of a metalworking site at Kiondroghad, Kirk Andreas, Isle of Man, during which he



ILLUS 2 Enamelled mount from Balladoole, Isle of Man (diameter: 41 mm)



ILLUS 3 Enameled mount from Kolset, Mære, Sparbu, Nord-Trøndelag (scale 1:1)

found an enameled disc with partly obscured ornament described by him as a 'triquetra pattern' but which is in fact a spiral triskele; it has a wide border with a 'ray pattern' reminiscent of that around the Kolset mount (Gelling 1969, 74, 82, pl X, a).

Wilson discussed a variety of related mounts in the late Celtic tradition of enameled metalwork, mostly from Viking-age contexts (Bersu & Wilson 1966, 27–8) to which should be added not only the Kolset mounts referred to above, but also one from the Danish Viking fortress at Aggersborg (Roesdahl 1981, 115–16, fig 12). A close parallel for the second Balladoole mount (illus 4) has recently been discovered in the immediate vicinity of Newtownlow crannog, Co Westmeath (illus 5); both mounts have the same form, with a single central lug, and identical ornament. The bulk of the 'pre-excavation' material from this site, now being excavated under the direction of Mr C Bourke, is of 10th/11th-century date, although it may yet prove to have been established as early as the ninth century. The 'very degenerate spiral motif' common to the Galson, Balladoole and Kolset mounts is, as Wilson stated (Bersu & Wilson 1966), 'not easily paralleled within the compass of Hiberno-Saxon metalwork', but his conclusion that the Balladoole mount would seem to be of eighth/ninth-century date and of Irish, Scottish or Manx manufacture still stands and should apply equally to those from Galson and Kolset.

Given the similarity in design between these three mounts, and between those from Balladoole



ILLUS 4 and 5 Enameled mounts from Balladoole, Isle of Man (diameter: 47 mm), and Newtownlow, Co Westmeath (scale 1:1)

and Newtownlow, it would be of particular interest to have all the enamels analysed (including the Kiondroghad disc) to establish whether they have the same unusual zinc content as the Galson enamel and also to see whether they were likewise executed in two colours. Samples from the Kolset mount were kindly provided by Trondheim for Dr Hughes who established that its metal is a leaded bronze similar to that of the Galson mount. Small amounts of zinc were detected, but it was not possible to determine whether this was derived from the enamel or from the body metal. The only original colouring agent present in the decomposed enamel of the samples submitted was a tiny fragment of high-lead cuprite red from a border cell, although the sample from an 'arm' showed evidence suggesting that its enamel was probably a lead-tin yellow (File No 5069: 22/6/87). These results are inevitably somewhat inconclusive. It nevertheless remains possible that all these mounts are from the same workshop, particularly given the similarities that also exist between the two sets of bridle-mounts, from Balladoole and Kolset, but these fall outside the scope of the present discussion.

#### NOTES

- 1 I am grateful to Dr Rennie for making the mount available to me for study; it is now on display in the Western Isles Museum at Stornoway. The drawing is by Eva Wilson and the photograph is copyright by the British Museum; those of the Balladoole mounts are published by permission of the Manx Museum.
- 2 Pins recorded in *Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, 56 (1921-2), 260, and the coin in 57 (1922-3), 12; see also Edwards 1924, 198, 202, and VA II, 147 (where the site is wrongly spelt as 'Calson'). For the ringed pins, see now Fanning 1983, nos 21 and 54.
- 3 The analyses were undertaken by Dr M Hughes (BM Research Laboratory File No 5069: 10/7/84), who has kindly allowed me to quote his report.
- 4 Dr J Tate informs me that he has likewise not seen this on any of the enamelled pieces examined in the Research Laboratory of the Royal Museum of Scotland (pers comm: 8/1/85).
- 5 I am grateful to Mr Oddmunn Farbregd for providing me with the photograph and drawing of the Kolset mount, and for arranging for the samples to be taken for the British Museum (published here by permission of Det Kongelige Norske Videnskabers Selskab Museet, Trondheim). The complete grave-group (reg no: T 14329) is published in *Det Kongelige Norske Videnskabers Selskab Museet Oldsaksamlingens Tilvekst 1931* (Trondhjem, 1932), no 13; the harness-mounts are also published in VA V, 67-8, fig 75, and most recently in Wamers 1985, no 15, pl 22, 2.
- 6 Information from Mr Cormac Bourke of the Ulster Museum who has kindly allowed me to illustrate this mount in advance of his own publication.

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