

Let's be Frank: a re-examination of the Lochlea crannog bit in a Continental context

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ABSTRACT

A unique bridle bit found at Lochlea crannog, South Ayrshire appears to show a fusion of traditional local Iron Age technology with Continental early medieval styling, specifically the influence of Frankish horsemanship (hereafter equitation) and equipment (hereafter lorinery and tack). The re-examination of the Lochlea bit allows consideration of Scotland's connections to early medieval Francia as well as highlighting the archaeological potential of the artefacts found at Lochlea, with emphasis on a modern examination of the chronology of the site.

Stability does not produce change. (Campbell 2019: 28)

INTRODUCTION

The recent project *Harnessing the Past*, funded by the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland (2021), examined the trends of equitation and lorinery in later prehistoric Scotland. One of the lorinery specimens examined in considerable depth was a bridle bit from Lochlea crannog, near Tarbolton, in South Ayrshire. This examination produced an important result, in that it illustrated how northern British Iron Age triple-linked bits had functioned (Maguire 2022a: 129–31), although the object itself does not appear to be Iron Age.

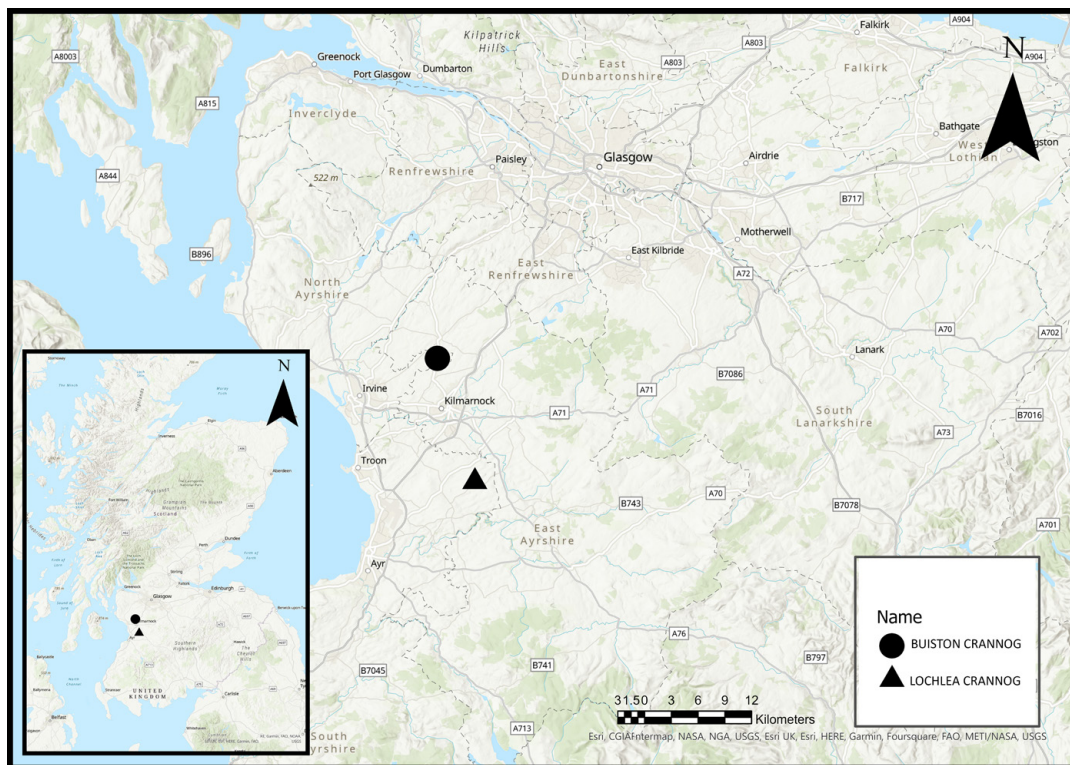
Lochlea crannog (Canmore ID 42841; Illus 1) had originally been excavated by the Scottish antiquary and physician Dr Robert Munro in 1878 (Munro 1879). The bit was found within a 'rubbish heap' at the south-eastern sector of the crannog, which is described as consisting of gritty ash, burnt bone and vegetable matter, most likely what we would now refer to as a midden (Munro 1879: 193, 234). Both Palk (1984) and MacGregor (1976) included it within their Iron

Age objects, even though it has no direct analogue among other Late Iron Age/insular La Tène-derivative bridle bits in Britain or Ireland.

THE LOCHLEA BIT

The complete bit is 26.1cm in length (including cheek-rings), with a functional iron mouthpiece of 12.2cm, reinforced at two off-centre points (Illus 2). Each side of the mouthpiece is connected to a pair of copper-alloy side links, or cannons, 6cm in length, making it a permutation of the few intact Iron Age triple-linked bits, such as those found at Burnswarke and Middlebie in Scotland, or at Rise and Stanwick in northern England (Maguire 2022a: 129–30). The Iron Age British bits are characterised by elongated central links and very short pseudo-cannons (Illus 3). The inflexible cheek-rings are often ornately decorated with cast designs in the northern British insular La Tène style, with coloured enamel insets, and it is clear that while some of

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ILLUS 1 Map showing the locations of Lochlea crannog and Buiston Loch crannog. (Image by Jordana Maguire)

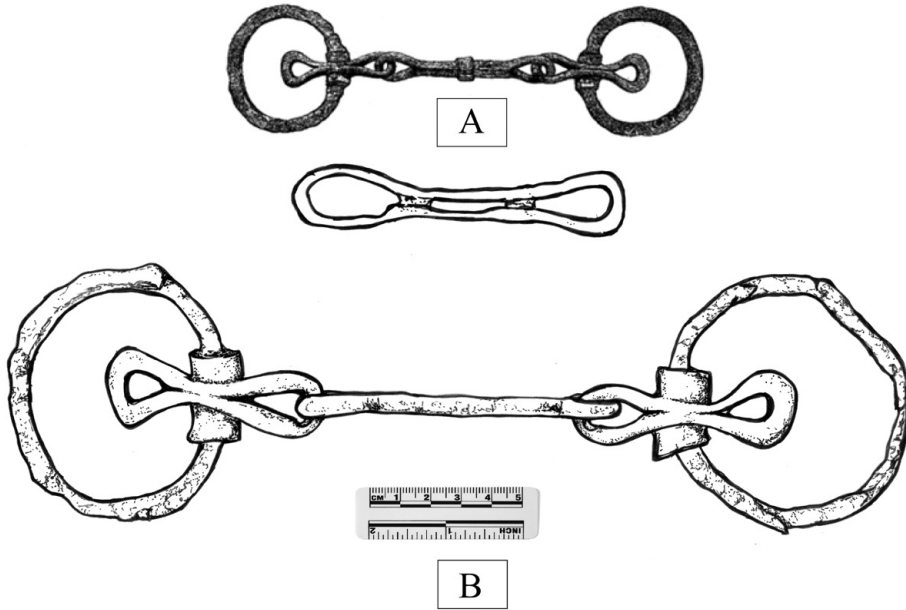
these bits (such as Accession No. XFA 71, from Middlebie) could be used successfully on a pony-sized animal, others such as the Burnswarke bit (Accession No. XFA 29), could not be used on a living, breathing equine, having too small a mouthpiece. The author's theories on these impossibly small bits were discussed at a talk given to the Royal Archaeological Institute, with an acknowledgement that one reason does not fit all objects – some may represent initiation or practice pieces, while others may bear more complex biographies connected to symbolism and group identity.

The triple-link design is where similarities with Iron Age lorinery end, as the Lochlea bit is undecorated, although exceptionally well made. The two short side cannons resemble a slightly elongated figure-of-eight, with a cuff which holds the cheek-rings. The rings are fully mobile with no restriction of stop studs. The inner connection

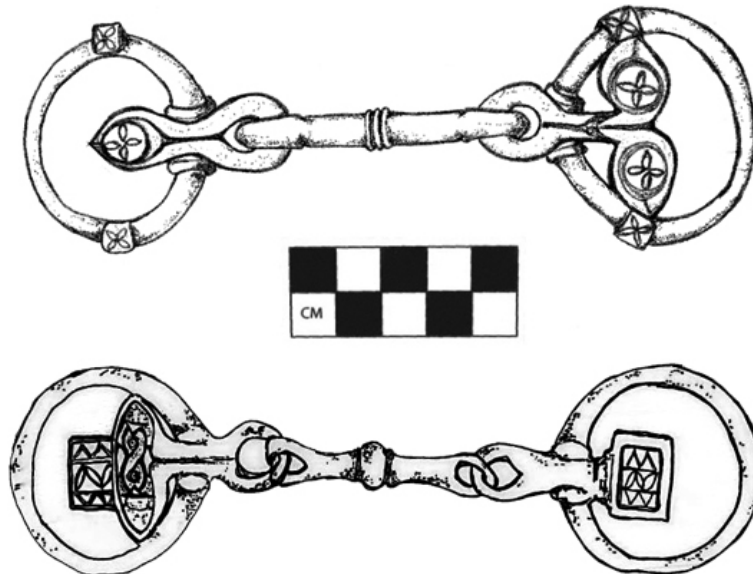
is to an iron loop which would sit on the tongue of the horse. The copper-alloy cannons would be partially within the mouth of the horse, but the outermost part would jut out horizontally from the mouth of the horse, while the cheek-rings connected to the reins.

The iron cheek-rings are of two slightly different sizes, suggesting that replacement rings were fitted at least once. The iron mouthpiece and cheek-rings are heavily oxidised, so it is difficult to tell a great deal about use-wear, apart from noting that the cheek-rings were fully mobile (loose ringed) within the alloy sleeve of the cannons. The original illustration from Munro's excavations (1879: 234, also fig 106) shows the iron mouthpiece with a central roller, but it is missing from the bit as it is today.

The iron loop mouthpiece of the Lochlea bit is reminiscent of Palk's (1984: 59) 'Roman' iron looped mouthpieces. The so far unexamined iron



ILLUS 2 The Lochlea bridle bit, (a) in original state, not to scale – note the ‘roller’ in the centre of mouthpiece, now missing in (b) author’s own drawing. (Image by Rena Maguire,¹ with insert (a) after Munro (1879: 234, fig 166))



ILLUS 3 The triple-link bit from Rise, northern England (top), which has parallels in Scotland’s Iron Age lorinery (bottom, the example from Burnswarke). The decorated cheek-rings are cast as immobile solid units. (Image by Rena Maguire, to scale)

loop bits that have been found in the Netherlands and Britain may have been influential in the creation of the highly sophisticated Irish snaffles (Maguire 2021: 82–3). Palk may have considered the ‘Roman’ bits as similar enough to classify the Lochlea specimen as Iron Age, as Lochlea, like many crannogs, appears to be multi-period.

From a purely practical perspective, the observation of small indentations on the Lochlea cannons (Illus 4) offered the first understanding of how the Iron Age bits with elongated central links fitted (Maguire 2022a: 130–1). They can be considered an early form of the modern Waterford bit. The modern versions use a flexible chain and link mouthpiece with short cannons to follow the curvature of the horse’s mouth (Illus 5). The principle is to create an even pressure and encourage a horse to chew on the links in their mouth, deterring them from leaning or pulling (Tuomola et al 2021). As a Waterford restricts a horse from grabbing hold of the bit with their tongue and teeth, it means they are unable to lean on the bit as the joints collapse and move around.

The little notch that ‘catches’ the curvature of the mouthpiece, thereby holding it in place with rein pressure, has been utilised in lorinery over a wide span of time. Similar notches are present on side links of bits found in the Arzhan-1 kurgan (and others) in 7th-to-8th-century BC Kazakhstan (Akishev & Akishev 1978: 46, 59; Horvath 2018). Stead (1991: 54) observed the notches on a snaffle from the Kings Barrow burial, and



ILLUS 4 Detail of the notch of the Lochlea snaffle. (Photo by Rena Maguire, with permission of the Dick Institute, Kilmarnock)

another from the Lady’s Barrow chariot burials of the Arras culture of Yorkshire (300–200 BC), while a 6th-to-7th-century AD Frankish snaffle from a burial context in Göppingen, Germany, has dual cast indentation ‘catches’ at each side of the cannons (Oexle 1992, vol 2: Tafel 26, #56).

It is important to remember that lorinery styles are seldom abandoned – if it existed in the ancient world, it still exists today, perhaps in a different material, or modified in some small way, and sometimes, as is the case of the single-jointed snaffle, it has not changed at all. The reason is simple – no single bit style is a universal solution for every horse’s mouth. Bitting is often bespoke, mixing different styles where needed. This is quite normal in the present day, and examples of lorinery within the global archaeological record suggest likewise for the past.

The notch on the Lochlea bit (Illus 4) creates an angle of about 30 degrees for the little pseudo-cannons, from the corners of the horse’s mouth, fixing it in place by hand-to-rein pressure. The Lochlea snaffle was not used on a large animal, as the functional ‘locked’ mouthpiece measures 12.2cm, a typical size which would fit a pony of between 12 and 13 hands high (1.2–1.32m) at the shoulder, or withers, a similar height to a modern Eriskay pony. This diminutive size could well indicate it was used on the



ILLUS 5 How a Waterford-type bit fits a horse’s mouth. (Photograph by Rena Maguire)

now-extinct Galloway ponies, a type which was recognised in the 1500s but whose origins likely date back much earlier (Bibby 2020).

FIGURING OUT A FIGURE-OF-EIGHT: LINKS TO EUROPE

After examination of the object as part of the *Harnessing the Past* project, Maguire (2022a: 132–4) put forward a hypothesis that the bridle bit was not created during any phase of the Iron Age but was the result of an early medieval cultural amalgamation. Northumbrian influences were suggested as a possible stimulus for the manufacture of the unusual piece, based on the constant incursions of these groups into each other's territories. Anglian/Saxon tack is highly distinctive, often with the distinctive 'axe-blade' cheekpiece, the specimen from Eriswell, England, being a particularly well-preserved example (Fern 2005: 44 & fig 5.1; Fern 2007: 93–5). Other, more utilitarian examples exist even in Ireland, at Lagore crannog and Raystown, also in County Meath (Maguire 2022b). Maguire (2022a: 136) considered the possibility of the Lochlea figure-of-eight shape being derivative from this Germanic style, only minimised, by producing the outline but not the ornate fill, perhaps to economise on copper alloys used in its manufacture.

However, further research has discovered parallels for the figure-of-eight cheekpieces in Europe, placing at least some of the biography of the bit within the early medieval period, although it must be noted that this can only be based on the state that we see the artefacts in today, as there may be multi-period modifications. Bits, like weapons, last a rather long time and were likely reused until they either went out of fashion or were too damaged to be repaired.

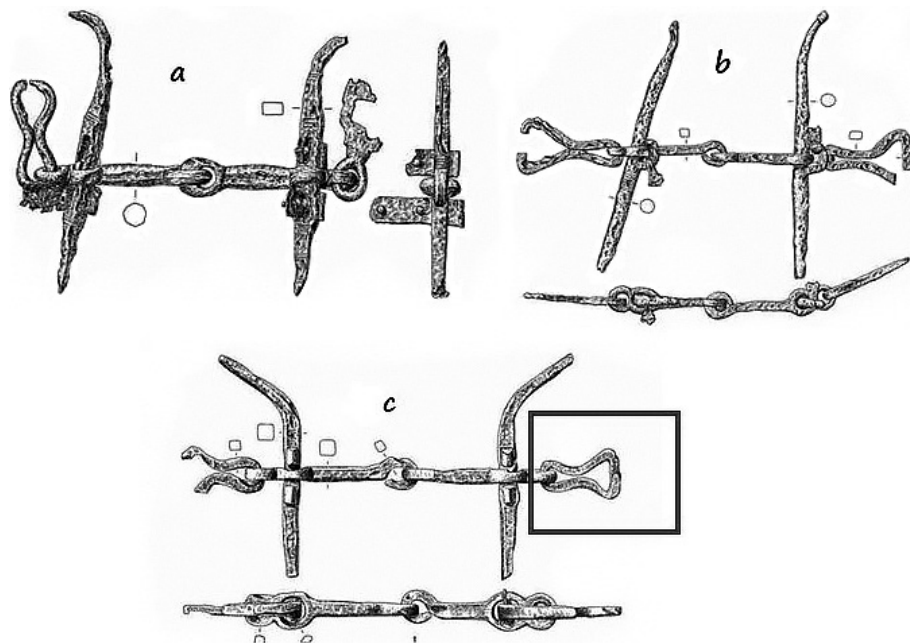
The distinctive figure-of-eight shape is regularly found in Merovingian burials, on lorinery deposited as grave goods, dating between the 5th and 7th centuries AD. Examples of the shape being used as a rein connection have been found in burials at Graves 5 and 12 at Giengen, Germany (Oexle 1992, vol 1: 131; vol 2: Tafel 19, #48 & 50), Hailfingen, Germany

(Stoll 1939: 74), Tannheim (Oexle 1992, vol 1: 72; vol 2: Tafel 80, #157), Aschheim, Germany (Oexle 1992, vol 1: 177; vol 2: Tafel 86, #176), Mömlingen, Germany (Oexle 1992, vol 1: 185; vol 2: Tafel 98, #207), Grave 3 at Volxheim (Oexle 1992, vol 1: 214; vol 2: Tafel 140, #302), Bessungen (Oexle 1992, vol 1: 217; vol 2: Tafel 144, #312) and Grave 10 at Bremen (Oexle 1992, vol 1: 238–9; vol 2: Tafel 174, #378). A selection of these are shown, not to scale, in *Illus 6*.

The Merovingian (and Frankish) mouthpieces are mostly simple single-jointed affairs – two cannons linked together in the centre. This is the most difficult style of lorinery to date, due to its longevity, as it remains basically unchanged from the Bronze Age to the present day. The cheekpieces of the Merovingian bits listed have a distinctive appearance, with figure-of-eight loops that connect directly to the reins. These may be skeuomorphs representing figure-of-eight loop knots on fabric bridles or they may be derived from Roman-style bits which Manning (1985: 68, and fig 17) refers to (erroneously) as 'Type 1' curbs, when they are closer in principle to modern two- or three-ringed Dutch gag bits.¹²

The Merovingian bits shown in Oexle (1992) often employ full cheek-bars to prevent the mouthpiece sliding sideways. As the Franks were an equestrian people dependent on their cavalry (Gassmann 2022), this style of lorinery reflects a need for very instant and direct contact with their mounts. There is no indication from use-wear of any cheek-bar on the Lochlea bit, but then, the central roller illustrated by Munro is also now absent. The copper-alloy cuff connects to a conventional iron cheek-ring, which then connects to the rein like a modern bridle.

While there are similarities to the Frankish bits, such as the cheek-ring structure and the figure-of-eight loop, the Lochlea bit has differences: as noted earlier, it follows the curve of the mouth with three connective points rather than one single central joint, perhaps taking its inspiration from the ornate 1st- and 2nd-century AD northern British bits. The iron mouthpiece of Lochlea has parallels across Europe (Maguire 2021: 82–4), but this may be a shared influence from the late Roman period. In short, the bit displays a fusion



ILLUS 6 Bits found in Merovingian burials: (a) Grab 4 Pfalheim (Oexle #117); (b) Volxheim Grab 3 (Oexle #302); and (c) Bessungen (Oexle #312). The figure-of-eight rein connector is highlighted. Not to scale. (Image by Rena Maguire; (a), (b) and (c) all after Oexle (1992))

of different cultural influences from different time periods. While this is the first piece of tack that has been identified as displaying multiple influences, this kind of reworking exists on other objects – a good example is the Breadalbane brooch, from the Scottish Highlands. This brooch was originally an Irish-style annular ornament, which was modified gradually to become Pictish in style. As broken parts were replaced with features which reflected a new or altered identity (Hall 2021a: 472), the object was re-created, with a readily visible biography of practical and ideological change.

FRANKISH INFLUENCES IN BRITAIN AND IRELAND

How might this hybridisation be accounted for? The answer may lie in the upheavals of the post-Roman period, from the 5th century AD onwards, which eventually affected Scotland and

northern Britain. Under Roman rule, northern Gaul and Britain had been part of the same regional economy, with a constant flow of goods between the two regions (Fleming 2020: 371–3). Groups of people were also transregionally active (Heather 2010: 148), often involved in the movement of goods. With the Roman army's withdrawal from Britain by the early 5th century AD, and the gradual collapse of rule in Gaul through the late 5th century AD, both economies became unstable (Scheidel 2019; Jones 2021: 19).

As supplies of Imperial coinage effectively ceased in Britain after AD 408 (Moorhead & Walton 2014), the result was predictable disruption of trade which previously had enjoyed regular and robust connections. This 'perfect storm' of socio-economic collapse coincided with groups of people migrating across Europe, many using the chaos as an opportunity to acquire territories once controlled by Rome (Landon 2020). The Franks, a loosely allied group of Germanic peoples, had been displaced from the Upper

Rhine region in the early 5th century by regular skirmishes with other migrating groups. They gradually gained power, culminating in their victory over the last Roman foothold at Soissons in AD 486 (Crosby 2020: 3–4). As expected from a martial and equestrian culture, this was a highly mobile society, and their territory expanded as far east as Bavaria and westwards to Britany (Murray 2022).

The military success of the Franks relied heavily on cavalry, for whom the horse was spiritually and economically important. Childeric (AD 457–81), the founder of the Merovingian dynasty, was buried with 21 horses, deposited in pits around his grave in Tournai, present-day Belgium (Hanot et al 2020), a firmly pagan gesture for a people who had commenced their conversion to Christianity, but who obviously wanted to retain their own traditions for as long as they could.

The Franks nurtured economic interests in southern Britain, the extent of which has been debated energetically, with some considering that the formation of the Kentish polity of the 6th century AD may have been due to Frankish expansionist policies (Brookes & Reynolds 2019; Bavuso 2021). Southern Britain did, undeniably, become economically revived to some extent by reliable and regular trade across the English Channel and North Sea, waterways which were mostly controlled by the Franks (Brookes 2007).

Trade routes and connections existed as far west as Ireland. From the small glass bottle at Moynagh Lough crannog (Bradley 1991: 11, fig 4) to glass fragments at the ecclesiastic centre at Randalstown, County Meath (Kelly 2010: 58), or the glass bowls, dating to the 5th and 6th centuries AD, found at Garranes (some of which Campbell (2007: 61) suggested could be Kentish type rather than Frankish per se), Clogher, Reask and Dalkey Island (Bourke 1994: 167–73), the revived economy established by the Franks was firmly international. But it was not just an economic liaison. While glassmaking and winemaking were very much in demand from Frankish suppliers, the kingdom of Francia was also a well-trodden route of peregrination for Irish ecclesiastics (Doehard 1978: 199), with

Columbanus himself no stranger to the throne rooms of the Merovingians (Corning 2006). Dagobert II (reign estimated to be between AD 675 and 679) is recorded as having been educated in Ireland, at either Glendalough or Slane (Picard 1991; Wood 1994).

Scotland's links to the Franks are less obvious, yet they are there. Alcock (2003: 83) records that the cleric Adomnán observed Gaulish trade ships arriving into the Gaelic kingdom of Dál Riata (modern-day Argyll). Glass beads, most likely 5th- to 6th-century Frankish, were found at the hillfort of Dunadd (Canmore ID 39564), in western Scotland (Lane & Campbell 2000: 176), while Buiston Loch crannog, Ayrshire (Canmore ID 42950) has produced sherds of Frankish pottery, beads and a forged gold Saxon thrymsa coin, originating in south-eastern Britain, which itself is an imitation of a Merovingian coin (Crone 2000: 148; Blackwell 2018: 286; Hall 2021b: 265); likewise, an ancient copy of a Merovingian tremissis was found along the borderlands of northern Britain, in the village of Yeavering, Northumberland (Abdy & Williams 2006: 46, no. 170; Blackwell 2018: 286). The genuine gold Merovingian 7th-century tremissis found at Coldstream, in the Scottish Borders (Blackwell 2018: 286), is some 40km north-west of another (although of a different style) found at Thirston, Northumberland (PAS reference DUR-184009; Naylor 2020). Frankish influences are there, but it is harder to ascertain if they are direct or indirect.

Blackwell (2018: 317) sagely cautioned that south-western Scottish small finds of pottery sherds, beads and buckles are likely to represent complex trade systems – wheels within wheels – between southern Britain, the Continent, and the Scottish elite centres, which would include Dunadd and Buiston Loch crannog. The coin finds could represent direct contact with Kent and southern Britain, or with the Continent itself, although interpretations of trade networks are complicated by two similar coin finds, from Trim, County Meath and Portlaoise, County Laois (O'Floinn 2016), which were minted in western France, and probably represent movement of goods rather than people.

Yet, there are indications of personal connections to Frankish Europe. Osmanna, the daughter of a Lothian noble, chose to take vows and enter the Frankish convent of Jouarre (Schoenbechler 1995: 333). Adomnán allegedly acted as a scribe for Arculf, a Merovingian bishop shipwrecked on Iona (Alcock 2003: 10), although some modern scholars consider that Arculf may have been an invented character to carry forward a cracking good travelogue (Hoyland & Waidler 2014). Even if these are pseudo-histories, they still highlight sufficient familiarity with Frankish society. As Columbanus and Gallus had founded monasteries in Frankish territories (Flechner & Meeder 2017; Broome 2020), it is likely that mobility between the Continent and the westernmost parts of Europe was not one-sided. While southern Britain had undeniable direct Frankish input, the territories from East Lothian to Ayrshire were (eventually) under Northumbrian rule, making it more complex to discern the nature and direction of trade and personal networks with the Continent.

A TALE OF TWO CRANNOGS – BUISTON LOCH AND LOCHLEA

Lochlea crannog produced evidence of long-term human settlement, from Neolithic and Early Bronze Age lithics to Roman period/Iron Age artefacts and early medieval objects. The early medieval objects included a 10th-century Hiberno Norse ring-pin (Fanning 1983: no. 32) and five E-Ware pottery sherds, perhaps from the same shattered vessel (Crone 2000: 151; Campbell 2007: 52–3). Certainly, many of the domestic wooden artefacts recovered at Lochlea which were inspected by the author have analogues in early medieval sites such as the 8th-century AD raised rath of Deer Park Farms, County Antrim (Earwood 2011: 386–406) and, perhaps more importantly, the wooden artefacts found at Buiston Loch (Crone 2000: 117). The two sites even share the same peculiar finds of woven and plaited moss, which Crone (2000: 134) dated to around the 6th century AD, the possible shared construction/refurbishment date of Buiston and Lochlea.

Persistence of place and multi-period artefact assemblages is not unusual for crannog sites in either Scotland or Ireland when we consider examples such as Lagore in County Meath, which not only straddles time periods but British and Irish culture too (Hencken et al 1950; Henderson & Sands 2012: 278; Maguire 2022a: 132).

Buiston Loch crannog (Canmore ID 42950) is some 18.5km north of Lochlea crannog. Like Lochlea, Buiston crannog was occupied during the Roman period, and each site also has considerable evidence of early medieval deposits (Oakley 1973: 111; Crone 2000: 8, 106, 107). However, both Buiston and Lochlea have such similar constructions of palisades and walkways that Crone (2000: 106) suggested that both features are contemporary and may have been built by the same group of people. Buiston Loch crannog has been dated via both radiocarbon and dendrochronology to having a 6th-century AD construction phase (Crone 2000: 161), with early medieval Continental objects substantiating the dates (Ewart & Pringle 2004: 10).

Crone (2000: 161) has suggested that Lochlea was restructured around the 6th century AD, probably by the builders of Buiston, possibly as defence against the regular raids from Northumbria. These were not regal pleasure dwellings like Lagore or Ballinderry crannogs in Ireland. Instead, their inhabitants were closer to comfortably off farming folks who wished to consolidate and remain relatively safe. There is a likelihood they were related to the earlier dwellers and saw their continued presence in the area as maintaining a personal heritage. They may not have belonged to the upper echelons of their society but they would have been aware of technological changes (crucible material from Lochlea is on display in the Dick Institute, Kilmarnock), and may have chosen to update the styles of tack they were using on their ponies.

CONQUESTS, IDENTITY AND BOUNDARIES

During the earliest phases of the medieval period, Scotland was divided into four main

ethnic groups, with each of their territories made up of several kingdoms. The area known as South Ayrshire today was, like all these territories, a contested region by the early medieval period, with Gaels, Britons and Northumbrians interacting – sometimes benignly, at other times with hostility. Lochlea may have been within the Brythonic kingdom of Alt Clut, although the boundaries between its southern and eastern neighbours appear to have been somewhat fluid (Alcock 2003: 43).

The regions we know now as southern and eastern Scotland were affected by regular waves of attempted conquest by Bernician Angles during the late 6th century AD. As Northumbria became increasingly powerful, they were determined to claim more land, defeating the Gaelic Dál Riata by AD 603 at the battle of Degsastan (Evans 2011), and gradually securing land from Ayrshire to the Firth of Forth (Edmonds 2019: xv).

The material culture from these areas highlights the complex relationships between people, boundaries, things and identity. Regional identities, and how they were expressed, were ambiguous by necessity (Wadden 2022). Debates continue as to whether Bernicia was a British kingdom which liberally adopted Germanic material culture from long-term settlers, rather than one which had been invaded and conquered (Campbell 2009; O'Brien 2012). Blackwell (2010: 370) has noted that there is more Saxon-style gold and garnet jewellery from East Lothian than in parts of Bernician-controlled Northumbria, suggesting that at least some aspects of Germanic material culture were adopted, which would not be a typical response towards invaders. The possibility that these objects may represent loot or payment, whether bribes or subsidies, also exists.

Perhaps due to this cultural admixture, early medieval Scottish material goods – metalwork in particular – display considerable innovation and originality. The copper-alloy bridle mount found at Trusty's Hill, Galloway, may have Germanic style decoration, but the object itself may be more interpretation than import (Blackwell

2017: 36). A circular bridle mount found at the Mote of Mark hillfort, near Dalbeattie, Dumfries and Galloway, is comparable (but not identical) to specimens found in 7th-century Frankish burials at Ittenheim, Alsace and Niederhone, near Hesse in Germany (Laing & Longley 2006: 145). Equally, the axe-shaped moulds found at the Mote of Mark (*ibid*) may have been for the manufacture of the ubiquitous 'axe-head' cheek-pieces (Maguire 2022b) but they were obviously being made locally and not imported.

Campbell (2019: 26–7) has conjectured that this was the result of a different economic system than the rest of Europe, theorising that respect for artisans remained strong in Scotland long after the apex of Iron Age metalworking had passed. Local traditions were transformed into new art styles, and Scotland was in a

liminal, non-mainstream situation; the people were exposed to constantly changing conditions, political, economic and social as well as environmental, making survival imperative on being adaptable, but also allowing native traditions to flourish. Coupled with its geographical position at a crossroads of Irish, Pictish, British and Anglo-Saxon (and later Norse) cultural influences, integration and innovation were perhaps inevitable. Stability does not produce change (Campbell 2019: 28).

The imitation Frankish *tremissis* found at Yeavinger, and the Saxon specimen at Buiston, both discussed earlier, show that the skill and material existed to create interpretations of Continental objects, although the desire to do so may add weight to the theory of Bernician acculturation rather than assimilation. The genuine Merovingian *tremissis* found at Coldstream, near Kelso, on the south-east Scottish border may indicate direct communication with Europe or, equally, contact with southern Britain – there is no way to be certain. The clusters of Frankish imports found at sites such as Dunadd and Buiston Loch crannog demonstrate that despite social upheaval, the territories of any of the ethnic groups were never truly in isolation from the rest of Britain or Europe.

Riders, regardless of whether they were peaceful or warlike, would have been open to new designs in tack, because no matter how far back we go in the long history of equitation, there is always a willingness to try someone else's solution to successful equitation. Certainly, there is evidence for Saxon mobility northwards, which includes a decorative and distinctive bridle mount found in Forfar, Scotland (Dickinson et al 2006), as neither technology nor design remain static in one area. Carver (2019: 99–102) has hinted at this, perhaps, with his island-wide 'equestrian class' theory, of a connected mounted elite during the 7th century.

CONCLUSIONS

The Lochlea bit could well have been created locally to 'keep up with the Joneses' (or in this case, the Franks), based on observations of Frankish lorinery; it may be an interpretation of a Frankish bit traded from southern Britain, effectively a nod and wink to a non-local style of lorinery, but also wishing to maintain the older tradition of the proto-Waterford style of the Iron Age. It is not a Merovingian bit, but it does incorporate some of their design features into a much older regional style, making it an utterly unique and liminal object. Hall (2021a, 2021b) has noted that objects can be modified to create amulets and talismans. While this is less likely with a piece of lorinery than with a brooch, the bit may represent a desire to ride out in something resembling the equipment of the charismatic Frankish ruling class, in the hope that the rider or driver may be imbued with status or fortune – after all, the Merovingians saw themselves as having a supernatural origin.

Perhaps the important thing is the fusing of old styles with new, an object made not just on a boundary of land but also on the border of time and cultures. It shows the desire of the makers to create something beautiful and practical, which acknowledged changes but also kept their own traditions and regional identity.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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NOTES

- 1 <https://www.royalarchinst.org/events/2022/best-british-practical-analysis-later-prehistoric-equitation-britain>
- 2 These can be viewed on most saddlery shop websites, but https://www.thesaddleryshop.co.uk/sc_241_bits-gag-bits-traditional-gag-bits has a particularly sensible display of variations.

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