

## V.

NOTICE OF A SILVER BROOCH WITH BLACK LETTER INSCRIPTION AND ORNAMENTATION IN NIELLO, THE PROPERTY OF MISS STEVEN OF BELLAHOUSTON, AND OF A LARGE BRASS HIGHLAND BROOCH WITH INCISED ORNAMENTATION, THE PROPERTY OF MRS W. R. MITFORD, 33 COATES GARDENS, EDINBURGH. BY ALEXANDER J. S. BROOK, F.S.A. SCOT.

The silver brooch which is the subject of this paper has no authentic history. After the death of Miss Steven's brother, Lord Bellahouston, it was found in a drawer, enclosed in an envelope labelled, "Old Highland Brooch." As to where it came from and through whose hands it has passed, he has left no record, and this is all the more to be regretted, as it is a fine characteristic specimen.

The brooch is circular, and measures 4 inches in diameter on the outside and  $2\frac{1}{8}$  inches on the inside. The outside edge is engrailed, and is divided into eight divisions, each one terminating in a fleur-de-lis point (one of which is broken off). In this respect it resembles exactly the outline of the Ballochyle brooch.

On both sides the brooch is divided into eight compartments or panels, four of which are filled with inscriptions in black-letter, and the others with animals and ornamentation, engraved, and inlaid with niello.

The inscription on the obverse, or front of the brooch (fig. 1) is

***ih̄s mar̄ ia-deo gratia***

It is engraved in black-letter characters, which are formed with tolerable regularity, and here and there an attempt at ornament. The words do not form a grammatical Latin sentence, but appear to be put together in couplets, as "JESUS HOMINUM SALVATOR MARIA," and "DEO GRATIAS." They may possibly have formed a selection of words from some passage.

In three of the panels dividing this inscription are executed in niello representations of animals; the fourth, that from which the tongue starts, is ornamental. These animals are exceedingly curious, and worthy of detailed notice. The first seems to be a representation of a wolf giving suck to her young. Were it not that the heads of the young

resemble animals rather than human beings, we might suppose it to be intended for Romulus and Remus being suckled by the wolf of Latin fable. The second panel is much worn with the action of the tongue, but it appears to be a bull, its body in profile; its head affronté, with a strangely human expression in its features. The third is most curious of all; it represents an animal, possibly a lion couchant, with the head of a man in profile, bearded, and surmounted by an antique crown. All

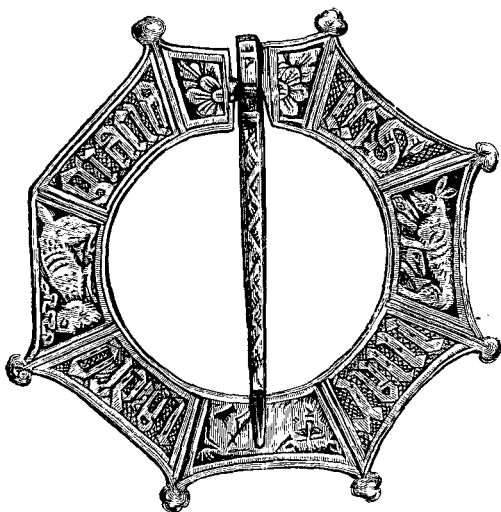


Fig. 1. Silver Brooch, Obverse (4 inches diameter).

these panels are executed with considerable skill, but whether they are intended to illustrate some legend, or have any connection with each other, I have been unable to discover.

On the other side of the brooch (fig. 2) the inscription is inlaid in niello. Although incomplete, it is quite intelligible. It is

**omate r=dei mem ento**

The final word "mei" is omitted, with the exception of the "i," for want of space. This couplet, "O MATER DEI MEMENTO MEI," is a

favourite Latin prayer, doubtless talismanic in its purport, and it meets us, as one antiquary remarks, at almost every turn on mediæval seals, signets, brooches, and monumental brasses.

There are only two figure panels on this side of the brooch. Executed by engraving and purely decorative in their treatment, they convey the impression of being intended rather to fill the space in the panel than to illustrate a special point, and in this respect they form a contrast to those on the other side of the brooch.

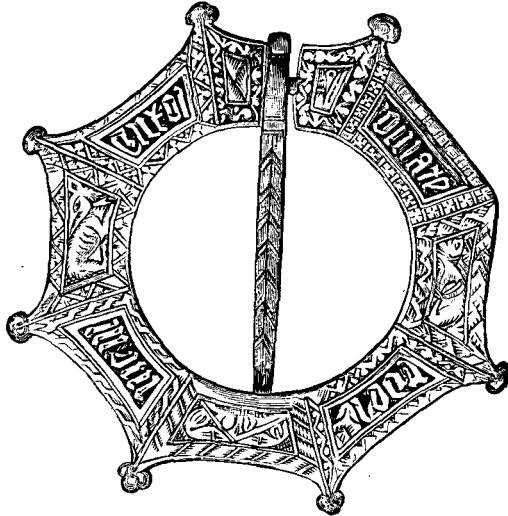


Fig. 2. Silver Brooch, Reverse (4 inches diameter).

As to the probable age of this brooch, it has been ascribed by Dr Anderson—than whom I know no better authority—as belonging to about the end of the fifteenth century.

The other brooch which I have the pleasure of submitting to you, differs from the latter in size, material, form, decoration, and age, and presents a view of the development, unfortunately of a retrograde character, which such articles underwent in the course of a couple of centuries.

The brooch (fig. 3) is circular, made of brass, and measures on the outside  $5\frac{1}{8}$  inches and on the inside  $2\frac{7}{8}$  inches. Its decoration, which is incised throughout, consists on the front of four circles of interlaced work placed at equal distances, divided by four triangular panels, each enclosing a triquetra, the spaces on each side of the triangles being filled



Fig. 3. Highland Brooch of Brass ( $5\frac{1}{8}$  inches diameter).

with foliaceous ornaments. The four triangles, viewed as a whole in relation to the design, give the appearance of a star, an uncommon ornament in Celtic work. The back of the brooch is simply ornamented with the segments of a number of concentric circles, which appear to have been produced by a lathe. It is probable that the brooch was manufactured

about the end of the seventeenth or the commencement of the eighteenth century.

It is curious to trace the changes which the designs of these brooches underwent between the periods represented by those two now described. In those of the fifteenth century and earlier, talismanic inscriptions in Latin almost invariably appear. More than one brooch in the Museum has the inscription, "JESUS NAZARENUS, REX JUDÆORUM." After this period the knowledge of Latin seemed to decrease, for it is rendered in some of the sixteenth century brooches so barbarously as to be unintelligible. A little later this gave way to an ornament resembling old black-letter, which unique peculiarity may be observed in another of the brooches in the Museum. During last century the decoration was purely ornamental. In the silver brooches it was produced by engraving and niello; in the brass brooches usually by engraving alone.

To the goldsmith of the present day these brooches present many features of much interest. They differ in almost every respect from what could have been produced in any age by regular craftsmen. They seem also to have originated exclusively from the Highlands of Scotland. It has long been a matter of speculation to me as to what class of artificers produced them.

The very earliest examples of such work—such as the Tara and Hunterston brooches—have been ascribed to the Ceards. But the skill of the ceard does not seem to have been transmitted to many generations. The peculiar beauty and power of his work lay principally in the skill with which he designed and fabricated marvellous ornaments of wire, and the results he produced I have seen nowhere equalled, except, perhaps, in the finest productions of the Chinese goldsmiths. The brooches we are now considering are much lower in the scale, both in their art and in the technical skill they display, than any of these early specimens. Dr Anderson has advanced a theory, which fits in exactly with the conclusions I would be disposed to draw from the workmanship of the brooches themselves.

The art of engraving, of being able to use certain tools and of fabricating certain articles, formed part of a liberal education in the twelfth and fourteenth centuries onward.

We find Kali, who afterwards became Earl of Orkney in the twelfth century, thus describing his accomplishments:—"I can engrave Runic letters : I can use the tools of the smith." But the acquisition of such arts was not confined to the educated. In Martin's *Description of the Western Islands of Scotland*, published in 1716, there are many notes commenting upon "the mechanical genius and quickness of apprehension" of the Highlanders, which he describes as being superior to that of any other country. He particularly refers to their dexterity in engraving trees, birds, deer, dogs, &c., upon bone, horn, or wood, without any other tool than a sharp-pointed knife. In describing the dress, he also mentions the buckles of silver or brass, "curiously engraven with various animals," and frequently set with crystals or other stones, which they wore. John Lane Buchanan, in his *Travels in the Western Hebrides*, 1782-1790, remarks, "that the common people are wonderfully ingenious. They make hooks for fishing, cast metal buckles, brooches, and rings for their favourite females."

An examination of these and similar brooches—apart from all historical references—leads me to the conclusion that they are the work of men to whom it was an accomplishment, or one of many accomplishments, rather than their trade. One of the main features of these brooches which suggests this inference is, that the constructive ability is small as contrasted with the taste in decoration. The smaller brooch is simply cut from a piece of silver, which has been cast in a skellet and hammered out to the required thickness. The brass brooch is more peculiar in its construction. The metal overlaps at the point where the pivot on which the tongue works is formed. In all probability this was done to increase the thickness and strength where the wear and tear was undoubtedly greatest, and possibly because the artificer had not sufficient appliances to forge a sheet of brass of sufficient size from which to pierce it. The object could have been attained much easier by hard soldering on a joint pin ; but it is noteworthy that in both brooches the application of hard solder has been avoided, and in neither of them has the opening in the joint of the tongue been soldered. Now soldering, which to a trained craftsman is comparatively simple, is both difficult and dangerous to one unaccustomed to it. Failure means irreparable injury,

for the least error of judgment in overheating may result in the fusion of the work. These ancient artificers evidently feared this difficulty, and an examination of their work will show that they invariably avoided it, and riveted rather than soldered.

Again, the manner in which they formed their ornaments is noteworthy. For raised decoration, they formed it from wire and laid it on. This is a laborious, but comparatively simple process. A Nuremberg goldsmith would have accomplished it by embossing. For flat ornamentation they engraved, and the result reveals the potentiality of the artist, but the weakness of the craftsman. Sometimes they inlaid it as well. The art of inlaying with niello is not so difficult as would at first sight appear. Niello might be described as a kind of metallic enamel. It is composed of silver, copper, lead, and sulphur. When prepared, it was pounded down and stored in goose quills. It was applied much in the same way as modern enamel, but it does not seem to have required the same intense heat to cause it to liquefy. It is an art that could be learned much easier by an amateur than that of enamelling.

There are two features in work produced under these conditions that we would expect to find, and we find them. The first is, that the different specimens of work would be manifestly unequal. Everything would depend upon the skill of each individual artificer. After the establishment of the goldsmiths under the hammermen's corporations in Glasgow and Inverness, many brooches are to be found bearing the hall-mark of these towns, and the uniformity of the work both in design and in technical skill is very marked. The conditions, of course, under which the trade was learned tended to produce this, and there is little difficulty in distinguishing the productions of the self-taught artificer of the Highlands from those of the craftsmen of the burghs.

The second feature is, that we would expect that men who made such brooches would make many other articles besides. An examination of the engraving on the brooches suggests this. The brass brooch specially is the work of a man who could carve as well as engrave. The deep lines appear to have been chiselled with hammer and graver, rather than to have been cut with the hand.

John Lane Buchanan remarks, that "it is very common to find men

who are taylor, shoemakers, stocking-weavers, coopers, carpenters, and sawyers of timber. Some of them employ the plane, the saw, the adze, the wimble, and they even groove the deals for chests. They make hooks for fishing, cast metal brooches, and rings for their favourite females. They make nets of different kinds for fishing, with all the other tackle and necessary implements; some of them even make as well as mend their own boats. As for other implements, as ploughs, harrows, rakes, casschrom and cassdireach, necessary for husbandry, every man is more or less used to make them." Their ingenuity even went the length of making neat wooden locks, upon the same principle as that now known as the Bramah lock.

One difficulty presents itself at once in dealing with articles produced under these conditions, and that is the almost insurmountable one of fixing the age of any articles emanating from these artificers.

Doubtless many causes have contributed to the origin and continuance for so long of these self-taught artists.

Their mechanical genius fostered it; their language and the inaccessibility of the Highlands cutting them off from all trade almost made it a necessity. But it is remarkable that, although many of them migrated to our large towns, notwithstanding their inherited mechanical genius, very few of their names are to be found on the rolls of our trade corporations. Down to the commencement of this century there only appear the names of four Highland families—although there were several members of some of them—in the roll of the Edinburgh Incorporation of Goldsmiths.