

# Amber beads from the late bronze-age hoard from Glentanar, Aberdeenshire

by Susan M Pearce

## CIRCUMSTANCES OF FIND

In 1971 an important portion of the late bronze-age objects found in 1843 near Glentanar House, Aberdeenshire (NGR NJ 482953) came to light in circumstances that have been described in this journal (Pearce 1971). The rediscovered objects comprised that part of the Glentanar find which had ultimately come into the possession of Mr and Mrs E Oddy, of Exeter, Devonshire, and included four socketed axes, six penannular armlets and armlet fragments, a semi-tubular ring, two sets of triple rings, a plain ring, and two handled cups, all of bronze and all now within the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland.

After the death of his wife in 1976, Mr Oddy found among her possessions a small box of amber fragments, and a written description in the handwriting of Colin Matheson Milne Miller (1826–95) to whom the Glentanar finds had originally belonged. The description is undated. It is headed 'List of Ancient Relics found at Glen Tanna (an old spelling) and Aboyne about 60 years ago'. A list of relics follows:

- 2 quoiachs (? quaighs) or cups
- 8 Axe heads (?) Bronze
- 3 Bronze rings
- 1 Circular piece Bronze
- 2 sets of 3 rings for knuckles (2)
- 11 bangles or anklets. Bronze
- 2 ditto Broken. Bronze
- Fragments of amber beads.

The character of the amber fragments in Mrs Oddy's box is consistent with a bronze-age date, and there is no reason to doubt that they are, or are part of, the amber referred to in Milne Miller's list of the Glentanar find.

## DESCRIPTION

Conservation work has shown that at least five separate amber beads are represented among the fragments, while a small group of chips and splinters remains.

*Bead 1* This is almost complete. It is of rather irregular sub-rectangular section, measuring 17 mm in diameter at its widest point, and 12 mm in depth at its deepest point. The relatively narrow central perforation, 6 mm across, is straight sided. The amber has weathered to an opaque reddish brown colour on the outside, but inside it is of a translucent dark red.

*Bead 2* This is rather less complete than bead 1. It appears to have been of sub-rectangular section, 17 mm at its widest and 10 mm at its deepest, but on one face a deep bevel surrounds the central perforation which is straight sided and 6 mm across. The surface of the amber is badly decayed, but internally it is of fine red quality.

*Bead 3* Rather less than half of this bead survives. It was of sub-rectangular section, 12 mm in depth, and approximately 13 mm in diameter. The central perforation seems to have been large, and the amber was originally of fine quality.

*Bead 4* The fragment of this bead suggests that it was of sub-rectangular section, 6 mm in depth. Its amber was of the same deep red colour.

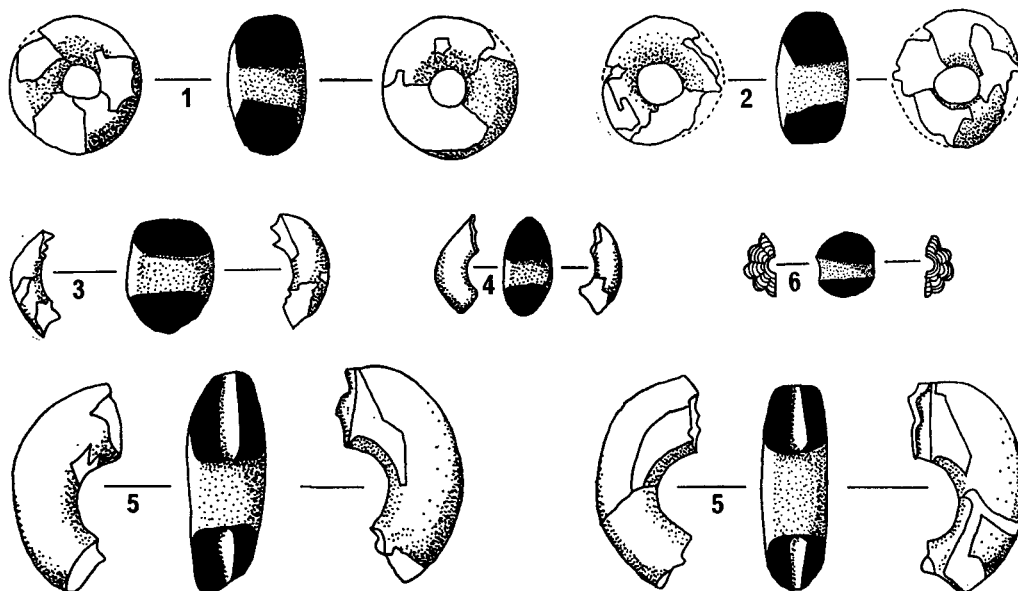


FIG 1 Amber beads from Glentinar (scale 1 : 1)

*Bead 5* The two large pieces may conceivably represent two separate beads, but although they do not quite join they are extremely similar and are treated here as two separate parts of the same bead. Bead 5 was of flattened ovoid shape, measuring 12 mm in depth and approximately 30 mm across the diameter. One of the upper surfaces was bevelled around the straight-sided central perforation, which measured approximately 12 mm across. In addition, a second, transverse, perforation approximately 3 mm across runs through opposing sides of the body of the bead, which has broken and crumbled a little at those points so that the perforation channels are exposed on either side of both of the broken faces. The external surface of the amber is a little weathered, but internally it shows the fine deep red quality which distinguishes the rest of the group.

*Bead 6* Approximately half of this bead survives. It was roughly spherical when complete. The body of the bead appears to visual examination to be dark red amber. The outer surface is covered with an unknown substance, golden brown in colour, which gives the bead a vertically lobed and horizontally ribbed appearance. This may be an ancient botanical formation, or it may be the result of human workmanship. Since the composition, history, and date of this bead is uncertain, and it may be a much later piece confused into the Glentinar amber, it has been omitted from the following discussion.

## DISCUSSION

The various records suggest that the extant portion of the Glentinar find represents only a small part of the group as it was originally discovered. The find seems to have included about 30 armlets, 13 socketed axes, and perhaps two rings, the whereabouts of which remain unknown, in addition to the cast cups and other pieces now in the National Museum. To this list should be added the amber beads, the surviving examples of which are, with the exception of bead 5, of sub-rectangular form, and not apparently graded in size. However, their original number is not known, and bead 5, doubly perforated to act as a 'spacer bead', suggests the possibility of a necklace of some considerable size and elaboration, unless it was a single stray piece.

The Glentinar find, on the evidence of its cast vessels and the outward expanded terminals of five of its surviving armrings belongs within the Covesea tradition of the late Scottish bronze age (Coles 1960, 39-44; Pearce 1971, 63). In northern Britain, finds of Covesea material are concentrated in NE Scotland (Coles 1960, 39), where, apart from Glentinar, its characteristic features of distinctive ornamental metalwork, cast bronze vessels, and a variant of the flat-rim pottery group are best demonstrated in the finds from Sculptor's Cave, Covesea, where there were armrings and pottery fragments (Benton 1931), Balmashanner with armrings, a small cast bowl and sherds, and the Braes of Gight with armrings and three penannular necklets (Coles 1960, 98-9, 94-5).

The finds with Covesea material contain elements which link them with the wider British late bronze-age scene. The Glentinar semi-tubular ring can be paralleled in the finds from Monmore (Perth), Inshoch (Nairn), Great Freeman Street (Nottingham), and Welby (Leicester) which also produced the best (but not close) parallel to the Glentinar cups (Pearce 1971, 60, 63); plain penannular armlets appeared at Glentinar, Covesea, and Balmashanner; Auchtertyre, Morayshire, and Glentinar contained socketed axes which belong within the local late bronze age. However, the correspondence between the Braes of Gight necklets and finds from the North European plain, the similarity between the cast bowls from Balmashanner and Ardoe with that from the Homberg II hoard, the late Urnfield character of the Covesea armrings, an example of which appears in the same Homberg hoard, and the possibly exotic character of the flat-rim pottery, all prompted Coles to suggest that the origins of the distinctive Covesea features should be sought on the NW German plain.

Amber is rare in the late N British bronze age, and apart from Glentinar the only finds which appear to have involved amber together with Covesea objects are those from Balmashanner where there were 25 beads, and Heathery Burn (Co. Durham), which produced one Covesea armlet and one amber bead (*Inv. Arch.* 1955, GB, 55, 10 (1), 4, 13). None of the Balmashanner beads carry a second, transverse perforation, but they are of approximately the same size and shape as Glentinar beads 1-4. Outside the Covesea tradition, the Orrock (Fife) find, which contained a sunflower-headed bronze pin, had a single bead, and the Adabrock (Lewis, Ross) find, with a sheet bronze vessel, had two beads (Coles 1960, 109-10, 127). Interestingly, the Orrock find also had two bronze rings pierced each by a single rectangular hole at the side of the rim. A similar bronze ring appeared at Poolewe (Ross) in company with socketed axes and a penannular ornament (Coles 1960, 129), and a comparable specimen pierced transversely through both sides of the rim came from Traprain Law.

Further south, two groups from Anglesey contained amber beads, that from Tŷ-Mawr with a socketed axe and knife, tanged chisel and jet bracelet (Savory 1958, 41; Lynch 1970, 210-15, fig 69), and that from Llangwyllog, with a class II razor, a pair of tweezers, a looped corrugated

'horse-gear' button, looped wire bracelet, various rings including one of hollow bronze transversely pierced, a jet bead and a stone ring, both similarly perforated (Way 1866; Lynch 1970, 206–10, fig 68). A small series of amber finds are known from E Britain. Heathery Burn, Co. Durham, has already been mentioned. A single amber bead was part of the find from Feltwell Fen, Norfolk (*Inv. Arch.* 1958, GB, 35, 16). Amber beads have appeared as a small element in the finds from the late bronze-age settlement site at Runnymede Bridge, Egham, Surrey, from which came also a range of bronze finds and horse gear (Longley 1976, and personal communication). Apart from Glentinar, none of the British finds of amber, apparently, included the transverse perforation feature.

Outside Britain, amber is relatively common in Irish contexts defined by Eogan as belonging to his Dowris phase (Eogan, 1964), broadly contemporary with that of the Scottish Covesea phase. The hoards from Cullinagh, Co. Cavan, Tooradoo, Co. Limerick, Maryborough, Co. Leix, and Banagher, Co. Offaly, each produced enough amber beads to string up as at least one elaborate, graduated necklace of the kind best demonstrated at Tooradoo, together with bronze objects belonging to the Dowris phase (MacWhite 1944, 123–4; Eogan 1964, 293–314). Smaller numbers of beads came from the Dowris-type finds from Coachford, Co. Cork (11 beads), Killycreen West, Co. Fermanagh (six to eight beads), Scotstown, Co. Monaghan (fragments), Drumcooley Hill, Co. Offaly (two beads), and Rathtinaun, Co. Sligo (MacWhite 1944, 123–4; Eogan 1964, 347). A find from Kilmore, Co. Cavan, had 25 amber beads placed alternately with 25 bronze rings of Dowris type. Several of these Irish bronze and amber finds contained bronze rings transversely pierced like the various pieces from N Britain and Llangwyllog. Maryborough, Tooradoo, Drumcooley, and Rathtinaun all involved rings with this feature (MacWhite 1944, 123–4; Eogan 1964, 347). In addition to the amber found in association with datable bronzes, there are about 20 Irish finds of amber beads unassociated with bronze (MacWhite 1944, 127). That the bulk of these should also be assigned to the Dowris phase is rendered virtually certain both by their similarity to the finds of associated amber, and by the result of pollen analyses and radiocarbon dating tests carried out upon the peat in which the Derrybrien, Co. Galway, necklace was found embedded: the pollen count suggested that the peat was laid down between 500 BC and 500 AD and the radiocarbon tests indicated a date of c 150 BC (Prendergast and Mitchell 1960, 64–6).

At Cruttenclough, Co. Kilkenny, amber and gold beads were found together. From Cogan, Co. Offaly, came 160 amber beads found with gold ornaments. Two hundred and seventy-eight beads were found in a bog in Co. Cavan, 116 at Garvagh, Co. Derry, 'hundreds' at Ballycurin, Shrule, Co. Mayo, 300 at Whitegates, Co. Meath, probably 500 were represented at Derrybrien, Co. Galway, and over 400 at Kurin, Co. Derry: these constitute the most considerable finds.

Several of these amber finds included beads with the additional transverse perforation. At least nine of the medium-sized beads in the Derrybrien find possessed this feature (Prendergast and Mitchell 1960, 61). Similar beads were part of the finds from Meenalabban, Co. Donegal (Ó Ríordáin 1935, 164–5; Prendergast and Mitchell 1960, 63), Cogan, Co. Offaly, and Ballycurin, Shrule, Co. Mayo (Prendergast and Mitchell 1960, 63). Such beads also formed part of a necklace from Croghclough, Co. Kilkenny (Armstrong 1920, 30). Three unlocalised necklaces in the National Museum, Dublin (nos 1864 : 1841; 1907 : 55; 1907 : 56) have beads of this type (Eogan 1977, personal communication). The transversely perforated beads are best interpreted as spacer beads, which will allow the stringing of elaborate necklaces including more than one row of beads (Prendergast and Mitchell 1960, pl III). Amber spacer beads have, of course, a history which extends back into the British early bronze age, but at this later period the use of spacer beads of spherical/ovoid form appears to be a feature of Irish craftsmanship. It may be

that the transversely perforated bronze rings, and similar pieces, which have a rather wider distribution, were intended to fulfil the same function.

The distribution of the finds suggests that amber found its best market in Ireland. The provenance of the amber remains uncertain, and only further analysis will show whether the bulk of the amber used came from the Baltic coast, or the coast of E Britain. Nevertheless, W Baltic and N European coastal types, including disc-headed and sunflower-headed pins, 'dress fasteners', some bracelets and other elaborate objects are a widely distributed element within the final Irish bronze age (Herity and Eogan 1977, 212-14), and amber would fit well within this complex. Northwestern European pieces of the types which appear in Ireland are rare in late bronze age Scotland, and the best examples are probably the sunflower-headed pins from Orrock and Tarves (Piggott 1948). The NW European plain affinities of the Covesea material have already been mentioned but, broad similarities among the penannular bracelets apart, the NW European types which appear as part of the Covesea tradition are not those which appear in Ireland. It has been suggested that the flat-rimmed ware that appears in the Covesea tradition may relate to that in Ireland, but this is at present obscure (Hencken 1942, 10-12). It would seem that the NW European links which appear in the late Irish bronze industries, and those which appear as the Covesea material in N Britain, are part of a widely diffused and complex series of contacts which extended in a wide arc from N Europe, through S Scotland, and into Ireland (and apparently also into Anglesey), in which the Irish figured most conspicuously as the initial customers. Within this broad scene, amber played a conspicuous part and it seems to have reached the Irish market by way of N Britain. The Glentinar find, interestingly, brings together bronzes like the socketed axes, which are a normal feature of the local late bronze age, objects like the cast cups and five of the armrings which point towards the N European plain, and amber, which itself probably derived from the same broad area but has been worked according to the contemporary Irish fashion.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Grateful thanks are due to Mr E Oddy who drew my attention to the Glentinar amber and who has presented the material to the National Museum of Antiquities so that it may be lodged with the other Glentinar objects. Analysis of the amber has not proved possible, but the small fragments may be suitable for study at a later date. I am grateful to Mr Tim Padley who produced the drawings and who assisted with the preparation of this paper, and Dr George Eogan, Mr David Longley, and Mr Stuart Needham for their comments. My thanks go also to Mr Bob Child for the conservation work on the beads, and to Mr Kelvin Boot who examined bead 6 visually.

#### REFERENCES

- Armstrong, E C R 1920 *Catalogue of Irish Gold Ornaments in the Collection of the Royal Irish Academy*. Dublin.
- Benton, S 1931 'The excavation of the Sculptor's Cave, Covesea, Morayshire', *Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, 65 (1931), 177-216.
- Coles, J M 1960 'Scottish late Bronze Age Metalwork . . .', *Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, 93 (1959-60), 16-134.
- Eogan G 1964 'The later Bronze Age in Ireland in the light of recent research', *Proc Prehist Soc*, 30 (1964), 268-351.
- Hencken, H 1942 'Ballinderry Crannog No. 2', *Proc Roy Ir Acad C*, 47 (1942), 1-76.
- Herity, M and Eogan, G 1977 *Ireland in Prehistory*. London.
- Inv. Arch. Inventaria Archaeologia.*

- Longley, D 1976 'Excavations on the site of a late Bronze Age settlement at Runnymede Bridge, Egham', *London Archaeol*, 3, no. 1 (1976) (not paginated).
- Lynch, F 1970 *Prehistoric Anglesey*. Anglesey Antiquarian Society.
- MacWhite, E 1944 'Amber in the Irish Bronze Age', *J Cork Hist Archaeol Soc*, 49 (1944), 122-7.
- Pearce, S 1971 'A late Bronze Age hoard from Glentanar, Aberdeenshire', *Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, 103 (1970-1), 57-64.
- Piggott, C M 1948 'A late Bronze Age burial from Orrock, near Burntisland', *Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, 70 (1947-8), 306-8.
- Prendergast, E and Mitchell, G 1960 'Amber Necklace from Co. Galway', *J Roy Soc Antiq Ir*, 90 (1960), 61-6.
- Ó Ríordáin, S P 1935 'Recent Acquisitions from Co. Donegal in the National Museum', *Proc Roy Ir Acad*, C, 42 (1935), 145-91.
- Savory, H 1958 'The late Bronze Age in Wales: some new discoveries and new interpretations', *Archaeol Cambrensis*, 107 (1958), 3-63.
- Way, A 1866 'Notice of ancient relics found at Llangwyllog, Anglesey', *Archaeol Cambrensis*, 12 (1866), 97-111.