

A wooden-stocked fishtail pistol

by David H Caldwell

The National Museum purchased a fine Scottish pistol at auction at Christie's, London, lot 167, 20 April 1977 (pls 25a, 26, 27). It is a fishtail butted pistol with left-hand snaphance lock, brass barrel and brazil wood stock, struck on the lock plate with the mark *RA* (pl 26a) and dated 1618 at the breech. The lock plate, powder pan and cover are of brass and the stock is inlaid with brass decorative strips, a thistle on one side and a rose on the other. A pattern of holes contained metal pins, now all lacking their heads, possibly because they were of gold. The butt and underside are further protected by brass plates. The barrel is decorated with flowers and foliage, including a thistle, contained in a strapwork framework (pl 27a), and a coat-of-arms – a cross patée fitchée between an orle of eight estoiles – for Caldwell of Inglis. The muzzle is thistle-shaped with a button fore-sight and there is a back-sight cut at the breech. The lock and other metal parts are richly engraved with flowers and foliage, and there are still traces of gilding on the fence of the pan. The snaphance lock is typical of those used on all early Scottish firearms. The mechanism has been fully described elsewhere by Whitelaw (Jackson and Whitelaw 1923, 62–3) and here it will suffice to note the characteristic way the jaws of the cock are held by a separate pin inserted from below and nut screwed down over the upper jaw. On later cocks and on contemporary European examples a pin is inserted from above and screwed through the lower jaw. The trigger is baluster shaped and typically has no trigger guard. In overall length the pistol is 0.4385 m while the barrel has a length of 0.30 m. Its calibre is 10 mm.

Although generally in good condition for its age, it has suffered some severe damage, perhaps mostly caused by one hard knock or blow. The stock is cracked into three major pieces, two splinters now being missing, and the belt hook has been sheared off. At the same time the brass spindle on which the belt hook was attached has been forced through the lock plate, causing the buffer which arrests the fall of the cock to become detached. The ramrod, which was probably of wood with a brass shod tip, is missing, and the pins which hold the barrel to the stock; also part of its steel tang. The top jaw, pin and bolt and comb of the cock have been replaced (fig 1).

The design of this pistol, in common with other wooden-stocked fishtail butted pistols, is peculiarly weak. The slender stock is extensively cut out to accommodate the barrel and lock, and is even further weakened by the pin holes securing the various applied brass plates and long barrel tang. Brazil wood is of a brittle nature and it is not surprising that it has suffered the fractures it has. The substitution of a wooden stock by one all of brass in other pistols of the early 17th century was an obvious improvement in the strength of the design and the implication to be drawn, supported by the fact that the very earliest fishtail stocks are of wood, is that the brass version is a later adaption of the design. Brass fishtail stocks were made in two pieces of beaten metal. The first was formed into the fore-stock and was riveted to the rest on either side where the stock deepens to form a sleeve for the ramrod. The main part of the stock was presumably hammered round a model and then braised along the bottom edge of the side with the

lock. All-metal pistols, it should be said, were not uniquely Scottish at this time, but no others remotely compare with them.

The brass barrel has been cast, rebored and the sides filed down flat to lie snugly in the stock. The breech is screwed with an iron plug to which is attached a long iron tang extending the length of the stock and held in place by two pins inserted from the bottom through the complete height of the stock. There are also two loops on the underside of the barrel through which pins were driven through the width of the stock. This arrangement is unnecessary on the brass models.

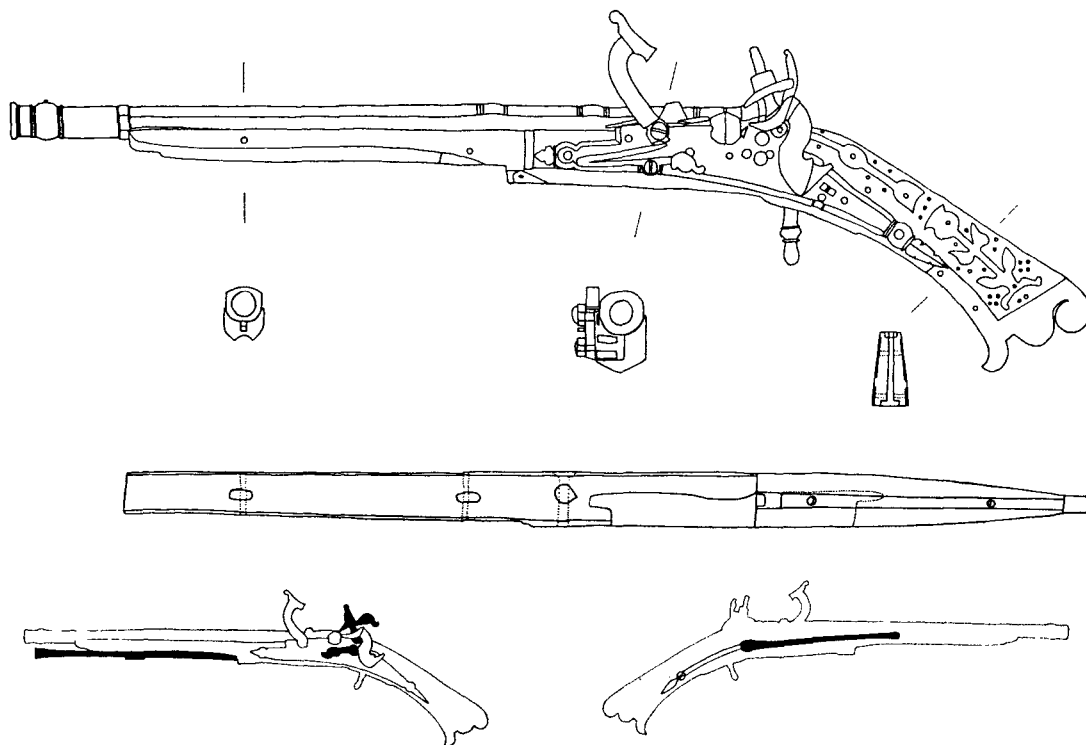


FIG 1 Pistol with sections and plan of stock (scale 1 : 3). Bottom left and right: sketches showing missing or replaced pieces in solid black (not to scale)

Instead, a hook on the underside of the barrel slots into a hole in the fore stock and a brass stud at the breech is held firmly under the top of the stock.

Two other early Scottish firearms are known with the same 'RA' mark upon them. One is another wooden-stocked fishtail pistol dated 1615 in the Musée de l'Armée, Paris (PO 817). It is a right-hand pistol and is substantially complete. The stock is rather plainer, lacking the inlaid brass plates and nails of the National Museum's pistol, and its butt mount is of engraved steel. The barrel is of steel with gold inlay (pl 25b). The other weapon is a small sporting gun, 1.283 m long, preserved in the Tower of London (XII, 63) and said to have been made for Charles I (illustrated in Jackson and Whitelaw 1923, pl I, fig 1). The lock plate and pan are of brass and the stock is of brazil wood inlaid in silver with thistles and other geometric patterns. Both the lock and the barrel are stamped and dated RA 1614.

The maker of these three weapons may be identified as a certain Robert Alison of Dundee, gunmaker. There were apparently two gunmakers of this name and it is unfortunately not clear

which one is concerned. The first is included in the list of masters with which the Locket Book of the Hammermen Craft of Dundee opens on the 26 December 1587. The second, who was the son and heir of the deceased Peter Alison, gunmaker, was admitted a freeman of the craft on 3 July 1599 (Whitelaw 1977, 49). There were several other Alisons working at making firearms in Dundee in the early 17th century, Whitelaw listing 11 in all, and it is tempting to think that two other wooden-stocked fishtail pistols, signed 'CA', may be the work of another member of the Alison family, unnoticed in the hammermen records. Both are remarkably similar to the National Museum's pistol having inlaid brass panels and studs. Both have steel barrels the one dated 1619 being in the Tower of London (XII, 737), and the other dated 1630 being in the Musée de l'Armée, Paris (PO 816) (pl 25c).

There are several Scottish pistols of the early 17th century surviving, many still, or until recently, in continental collections, perhaps as a side effect of the numerous Scots who fought in foreign armies during the 17th century. These pistols are mostly of a high standard of finish, richly decorated, and fall into two major types: those with fishtail butts and those with globular or lemon-shaped butts. They seem always to have been made in right and left-hand pairs and at least 37 pairs of pistols are represented by surviving examples in a more or less complete state:

Fishtails with wooden stocks	9	Date range	1598-1645
Fishtails with brass stocks	7		1611-1624
	—		
Total	16		
Lemons with wooden stocks	6		1614-1630
Lemons with metal stocks	15		1613-1645
	—		
Total	21		

Most of these pistols are initialled and dated, and on the basis of those gunmakers' names listed by Whitelaw (1977) we can tentatively match up the initials with gunmakers in the main towns as follows:

	Minimum	Maximum
Edinburgh	2	5
Canongate	3	5
Dundee	3	4
Perth	2	4
Glasgow	0	1
Aberdeen	0	1
St Andrews	0	1

Even if we were to include a sporting gun of 1635 now also in the National Museum, with the initials AP (illustrated by Jackson and Whitelaw 1923, pl I, fig 2, and pl II, fig 7) thought to be those of Andrew Philip of Dundee, and a pistol barrel marked RL, possibly for Richard Low (Eaves 1976, pl CXIV, CXV), Edinburgh and Canongate, come out as the best represented centre, which is not surprising when we consider the numbers of gunmakers known to have been working in the different towns at the end of the 16th century and up to c 1650: Edinburgh, 48; Canongate, 81; Dundee, 40; Glasgow, 18; Stirling, 13; St Andrews, 11; Perth, 9; Aberdeen, 5; Ayr, 2; Blantyre, 1; Elgin, 1; Falkirk, 1; Preston, 1; Stranraer, 1. These figures are arrived

at using the data in Whitelaw (1977), omitting the more doubtful or erroneous ones, and while they can in no way be claimed as complete, they may be taken as giving an indication of the relative importance of gunmaking in the main burghs. Now, while Edinburgh-Canongate had by far the largest amount of gunmakers (129) and there are more of its gunmakers represented by surviving firearms than of any other town, the remarkable fact is that of the 37 pairs of pistols represented, as many as 16 could be by Dundee makers, to which we could add the two fishtail pistols mentioned above stamped CA, the long gun marked RA, two all-brass sporting guns, both probably by the same maker and one of which is marked IL (? for James Low) (Maxwell 1977), the sporting gun marked AP, and the pistol barrel marked RL. In contrast to this Edinburgh-Canongate can muster at most ten pair of pistols.

A possible inference to draw from this is that at least some of the firearms made by the Dundee gunsmiths were more valued than those made elsewhere and have consequently had a higher survival rate, and this is borne out by the weapons themselves. Many of those attributable to Dundee craftsmen are of excellent decorative quality, including all the very finest. Of the 16 pairs of pistols represented, ten are marked IL, for James Low it is thought (although James Learmonth of St Andrews is another possibility), and the two brass sporting guns (or at least one of them) are also his work. The resting places of many of these pistols historically, or at least until recent times, is also instructive of the esteem in which they were held, including the royal collections of France, Russia, Sweden and Denmark. The National Museum's pistol belongs with the best examples of these Scottish firearms and can be compared favourably with guns being produced elsewhere in Europe in the early 17th century.

Dundee was well sited for being a centre of manufacture of quality firearms. It was an important port through which raw materials, especially iron, copper and brazil wood could be imported and it was centrally placed in relation to the main centres of population up and down the east coast. It must be stressed, however, that documentary evidence is lacking for an extensive gunmaking business in Dundee and what is represented is a small business in luxury weapons, much of it apparently in the hands of one talented individual, James Low. On the other hand there is some documentary evidence for the extent of Edinburgh-Canongate's business, and the nature of it. In 1575 the gun forgers of Edinburgh claimed they could produce, if commanded, 50 calivers (i.e. long guns) a week. They were also said, in the same English intelligence report, to have supplied the most part of the gentlemen and horsemen of the realm with dags (pistols), otherwise called snaphances (*CSP V*, 182). Later in the 17th century, in 1669, a syndicate of six Canongate gunsmiths got a government contract to supply 3,000 muskets to a given pattern (Whitelaw 1977, 199–200) and other references listed by Whitelaw, are suggestive that much of Edinburgh-Canongate's business was in making or repairing munition weapons. In the 16th and 17th century there was an incessant stream of legislation against the use and wearing of firearms, particularly aimed at those who wore pistols with civilian dress and particularly relating to Edinburgh or the area in proximity to the king (e.g. *RPC V*, 90–1). Gunmakers were also forbidden to make or mend pistols or dags of less than half an ell (1 ell = 37 inches) in Feb. 1595/6 (*RPC V*, 279) and of less than an ell in 1597/8 (*RPC V*, 437–8). Such legislation would inevitably have had a greater effect in Edinburgh-Canongate and may also be advanced as an explanation why the gunmakers of the capital did not go in for producing luxury firearms to the same extent as those in Dundee.

The concomitant of our proposition that the Dundee firearms were generally of a better quality than those made elsewhere is that the surviving pistols are not representative of those made in Scotland as a whole. Other late 16th- early 17th-century pistols which are in many ways similar to our Scottish pistols have been attributed to Dutch or English workers and it is a

possibility that included amongst these are some by Scottish makers. Even of those Scottish pieces recognised some show characteristics distinctly different from those of the possible Dundee group; for instance, a pair of wooden-stocked fishtail pistols formerly both in the Dresden Rustkammer, but one of which is now in the Metropolitan Museum, New York. They are signed with an 'I' superimposed on an 'H', possibly for John Hadden or John Haswell of Edinburgh, John Hannay of Glasgow, James Hart of Canongate, John Hoy of Glasgow, or John Hunter of Aberdeen, and they are dated 1615. Various particularities of their design have already been noted by other writers (notably Eaves 1976, 316-20) but the most obvious feature about them is the form of the butt end which has a bifurcated tail rather than the trilobate tail of other Scottish fishtails. Granscay (1947) followed by others was of the opinion that they could not be of Scottish workmanship as there could have been no Scottish craftsmen capable of the engraving on the silver butt plates, but this argument has no right to be seriously entertained in these pages. Another possibility is they have been restocked on the continent but the present writer sees no compelling reason to support such a contention. This form of butt also appears on a group of early 17th-century English pistols, like some in the Palazzo Ducale, Venice, of c 1610-15 (Eaves 1970, pl LVIII-LIX), suggesting a stylistic link with England, and other pistols with bifurcated tails of a similar sort are depicted in 18th-century engravings of Highlanders, for instance two of c 1743, by van der Gucht (Dunbar 1962, pl 42) which seem generally to be quite accurate. They are presumably poorer quality weapons of a military character, none of which have survived. One might also briefly mention a pistol of 1620 in the Tøjhusmuseet, Copenhagen (B 345.3, illustrated by Lenk 1964, pl 3) with bifurcated fishtail, a later replacement probably copying the original. Overall, it may be a continental copy of the Scottish style, the Scottish form of jaw fastening being a notable feature of it.

Let us now have a look at the general European context into which our fishtail pistol can be seen to fit. Fishtail-like butts are characteristic of many north European pistols of the late 16th and early 17th century. Early examples are a pistol (no. 115 D) in the Porte de Hal, Brussels, Flemish or English, late 16th century (Eaves 1970, pl LXXV, A) and a French wheel-lock pistol of c 1570 in the Armoury at Skokloster in Sweden (Lenk 1956, pl XXVIII). The particularly Scottish version, however, of trilobate form, is not directly paralleled and must be a Scottish development.

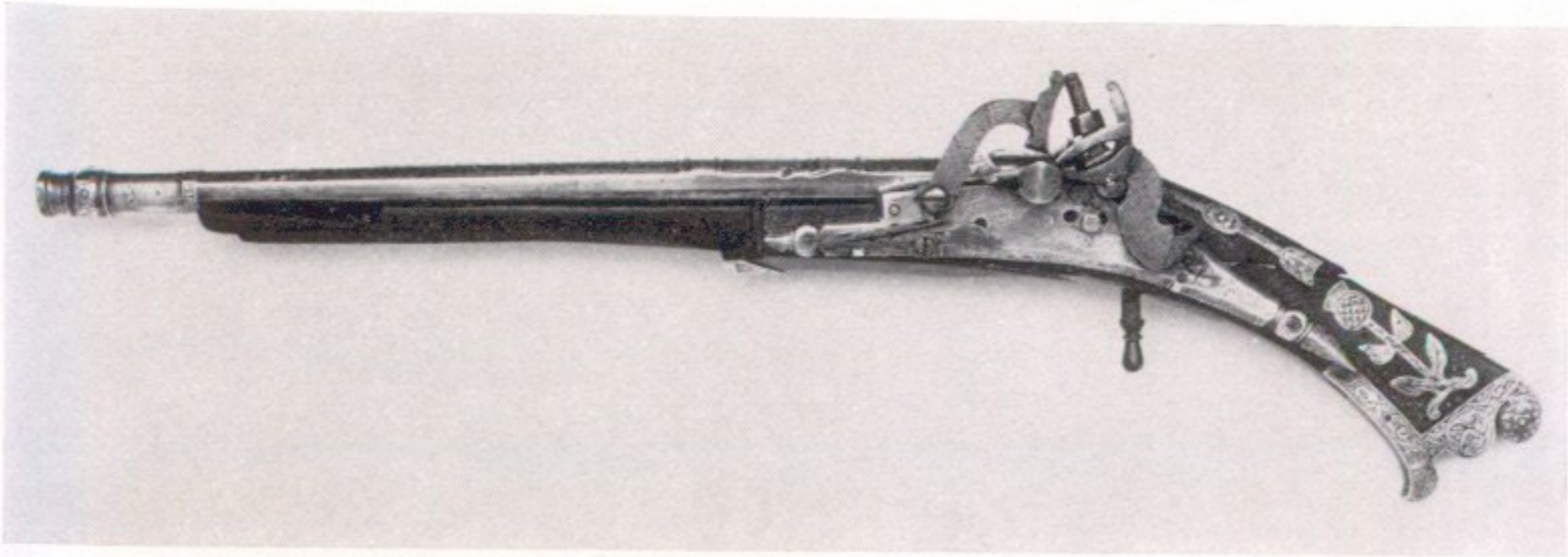
The nature of the decoration on early Scottish firearms was considered by Whitelaw followed by others to be 'Celtic' (Jackson and Whitelaw 1923, 57) but in general character the decoration can best be considered as a variant of contemporary European decorative art with its emphasis on flower heads, running foliage designs and strapwork borders. Such mannerist decoration made its appearance in Scotland in the royal palaces being built or reconstructed by James V in the 1530s and early 1540s, notably at Falkland and Stirling, and remained popular in Scotland well into the 17th century, as is witnessed especially by painted ceilings. The technique of inlaying brass panels in wood on the National Museum's pistol and others like it seems to be in imitation of the European fashion of inlay with bone, horn and mother of pearl. As far as we know, these materials were not thus used by Scottish craftsmen, though weapons so decorated were imported for the use of the nobility, for instance the muskets 'indentit with bane' in an inventory of 1600 of Lord Glenorchy's house of Balloch (Innes 1855, 336). While some Scottish inlay work, like the touchingly naïve hunting scene on the 1635 long gun by Andrew Philip, is directly inspired by continental models, the thistle and rose on the National Museum's pistol is a product of the Great British consciousness inspired by James VI's accession to the English throne, and deliberately fostered by him. A thistle is also worked into the barrel decoration.

On each side of the tail, on the bottom-most fluke, is engraved a little stippled animal

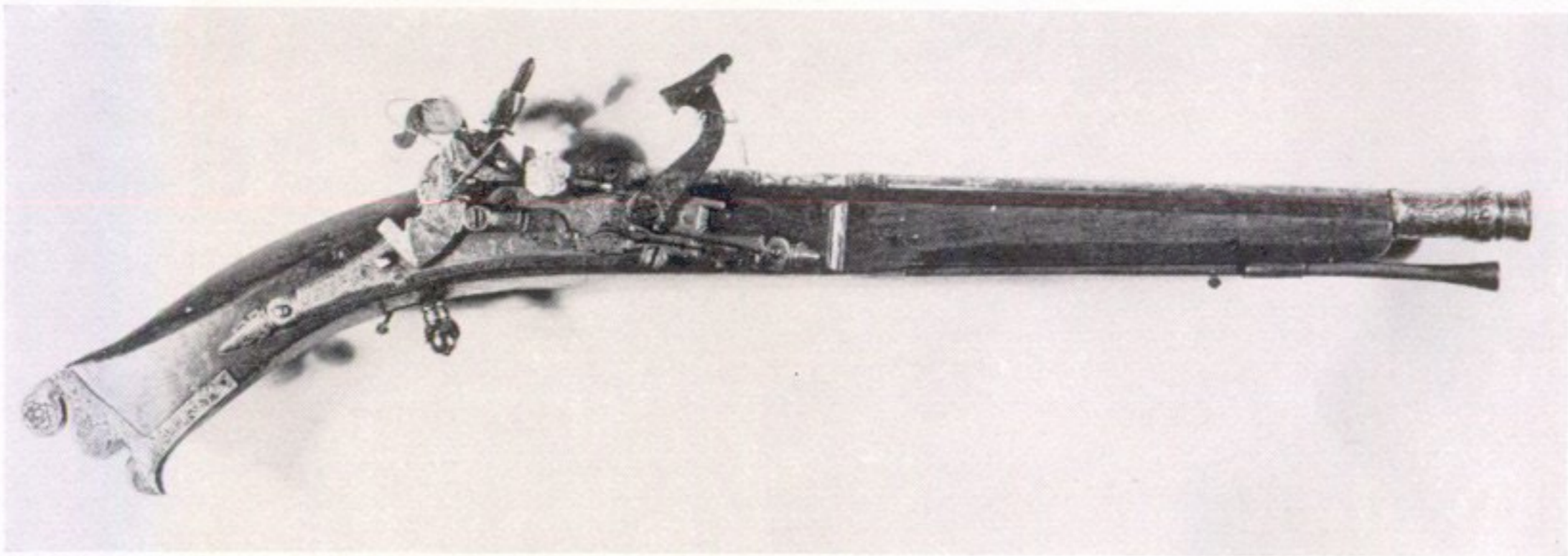
head. Similar animal heads occur in similar position on other wooden-stocked fishtail pistols and have recently been noted by Boothroyd (in a lecture at Edinburgh University, Dec. 1977, publication forthcoming), who further compares them to bird heads and suggests a possible prototype in a South German wheel-lock pistol dated 1590 in the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden, in which the butt is in outline like a bifurcated fishtail but is carved as a bird's head. In the case of the National Museum's pistol at least, a close similarity to a bird's head cannot be pressed. The form and technique of the stippling, however, is reminiscent of the spotted animals which occur in Highland art over a long period of time and the author would suggest that these animal heads are one of the more tangible cases of influence from that quarter in Lowland decoration. To a certain extent the motifs of the two regions converged at this time. Both areas used leafy scroll work, though in the case of the Highlands this was a very late survival of Gothic and Romanesque forms. The interlace designs of the Highlands are in some cases superficially similar to Renaissance inspired guilloches or plaited- and strap-work, and it has been suggested that the craftsmen of the Highlanders – and the native Irish of this period – consciously revived such decorative devices as a result of the stimulus provided by vaguely comparable designs evolved in the rest of Europe (Rynne 1969, 142). The animal heads on the pistol conform closely in shape to the outline of the space to be filled, a feature typical of Highland animals, and the stippling is composed of groups of two dashes, side by side. This form is most closely matched in the animals on the silver mount of Rory Mor's horn at Dunvegan Castle in Skye, dating to *c* 1600 (MacLeod 1939, figs 10–12). The spots on later brass brooches tend to take the form of individually placed stab marks as on several brooches of the second half of the 17th century in the National Museum (e.g. *Brooches*, pl 24).

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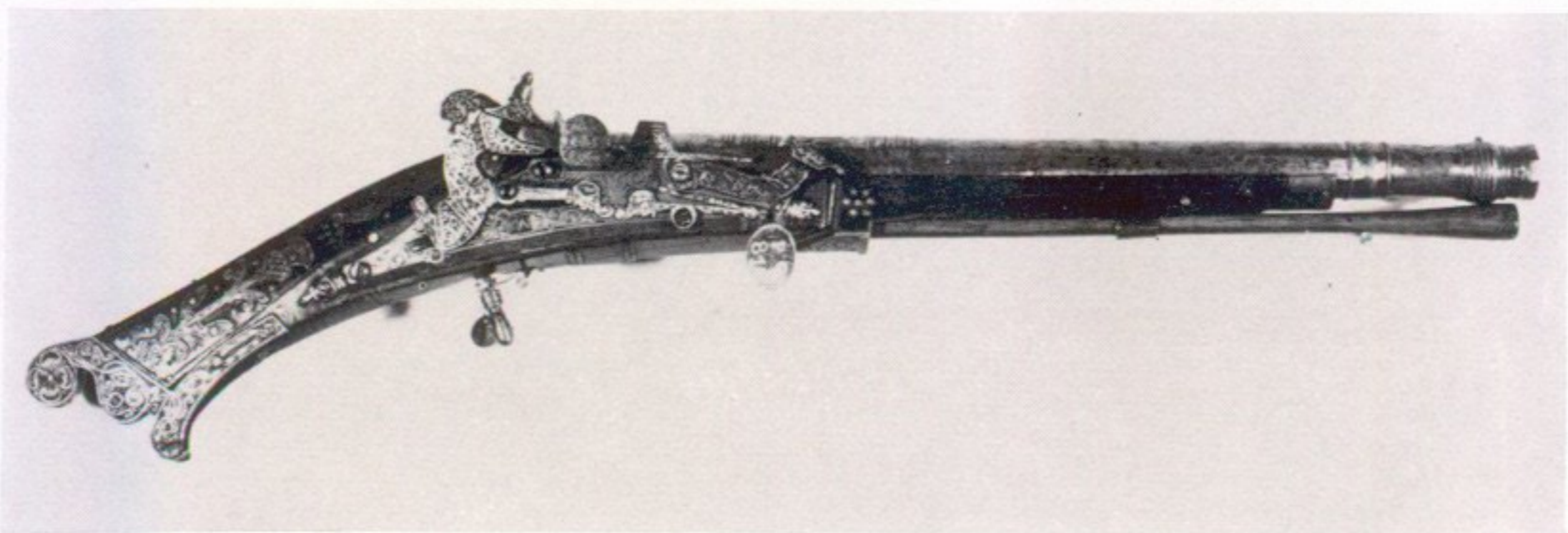
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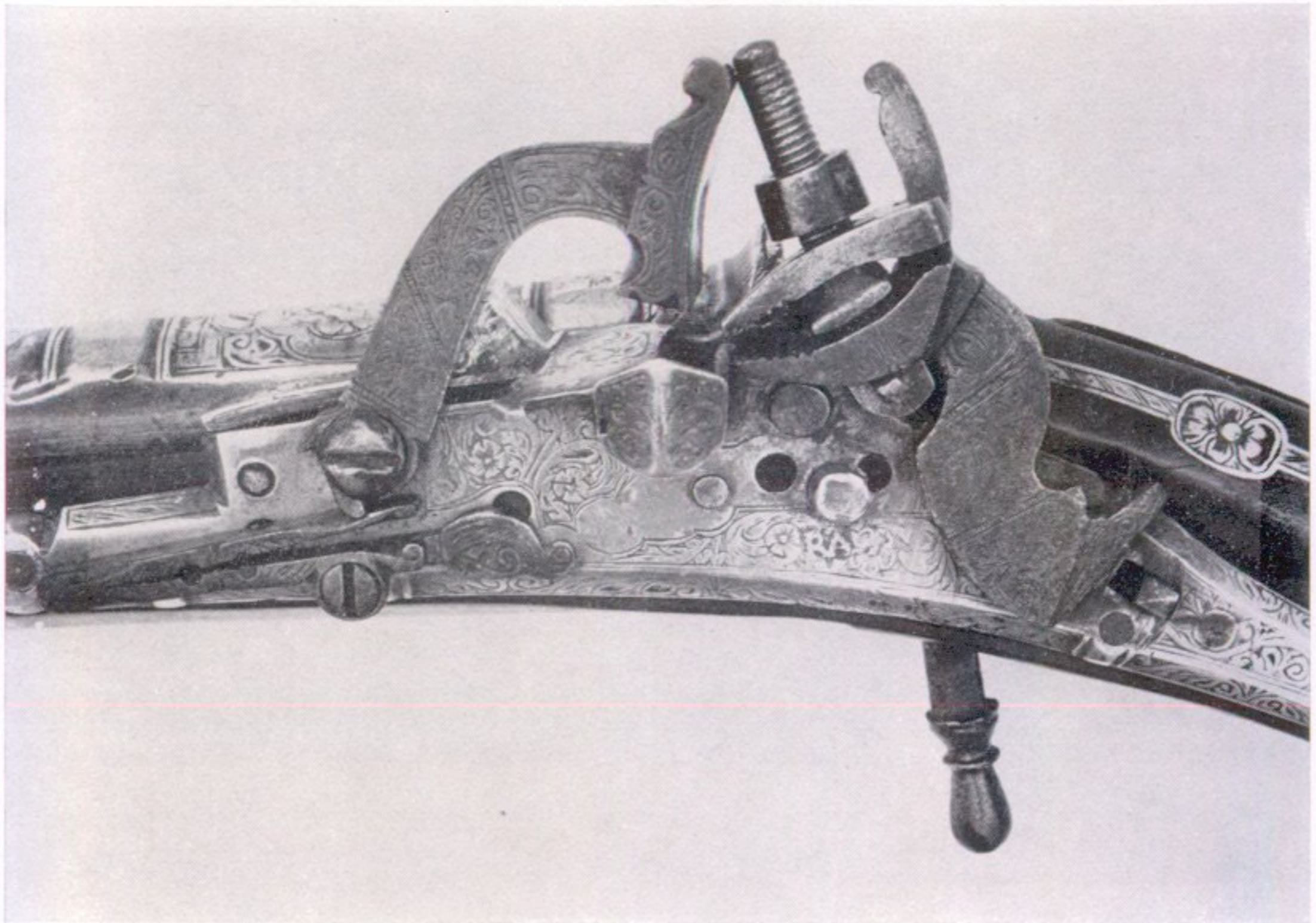
a Fishtail pistol 'RA' 1618, National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland



b Fishtail pistol 'RA' 1615, Paris, Musée de l'Armée



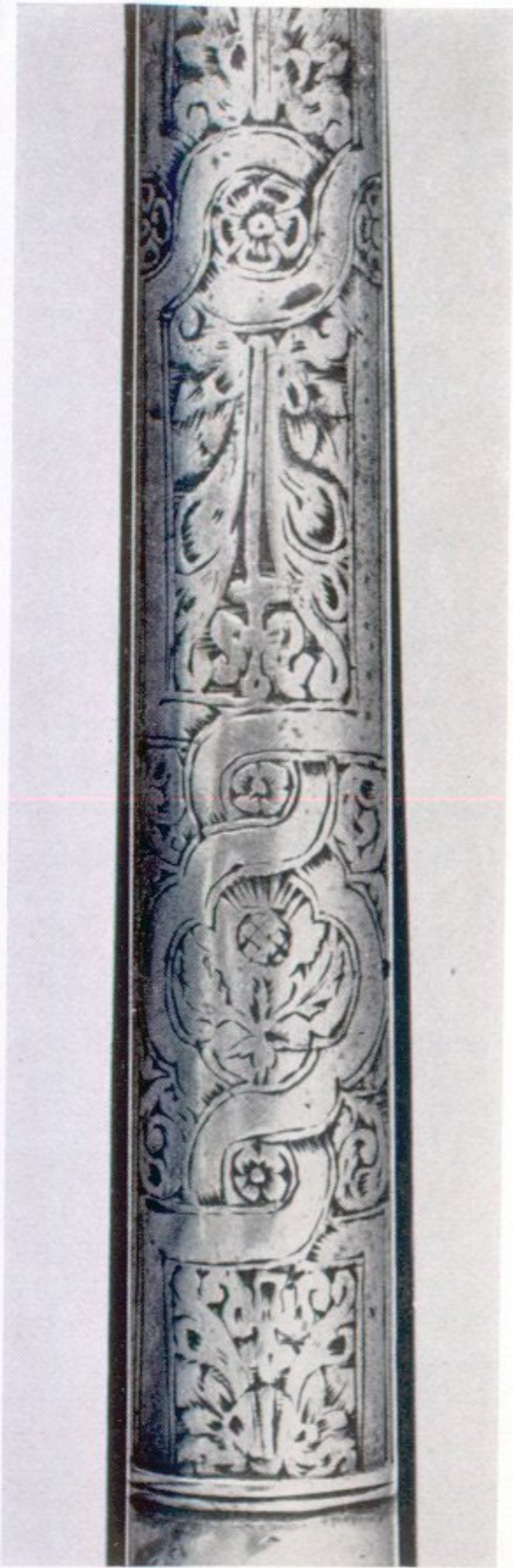
c Fishtail pistol 'CA' 1630, Paris, Musée de l'Armée



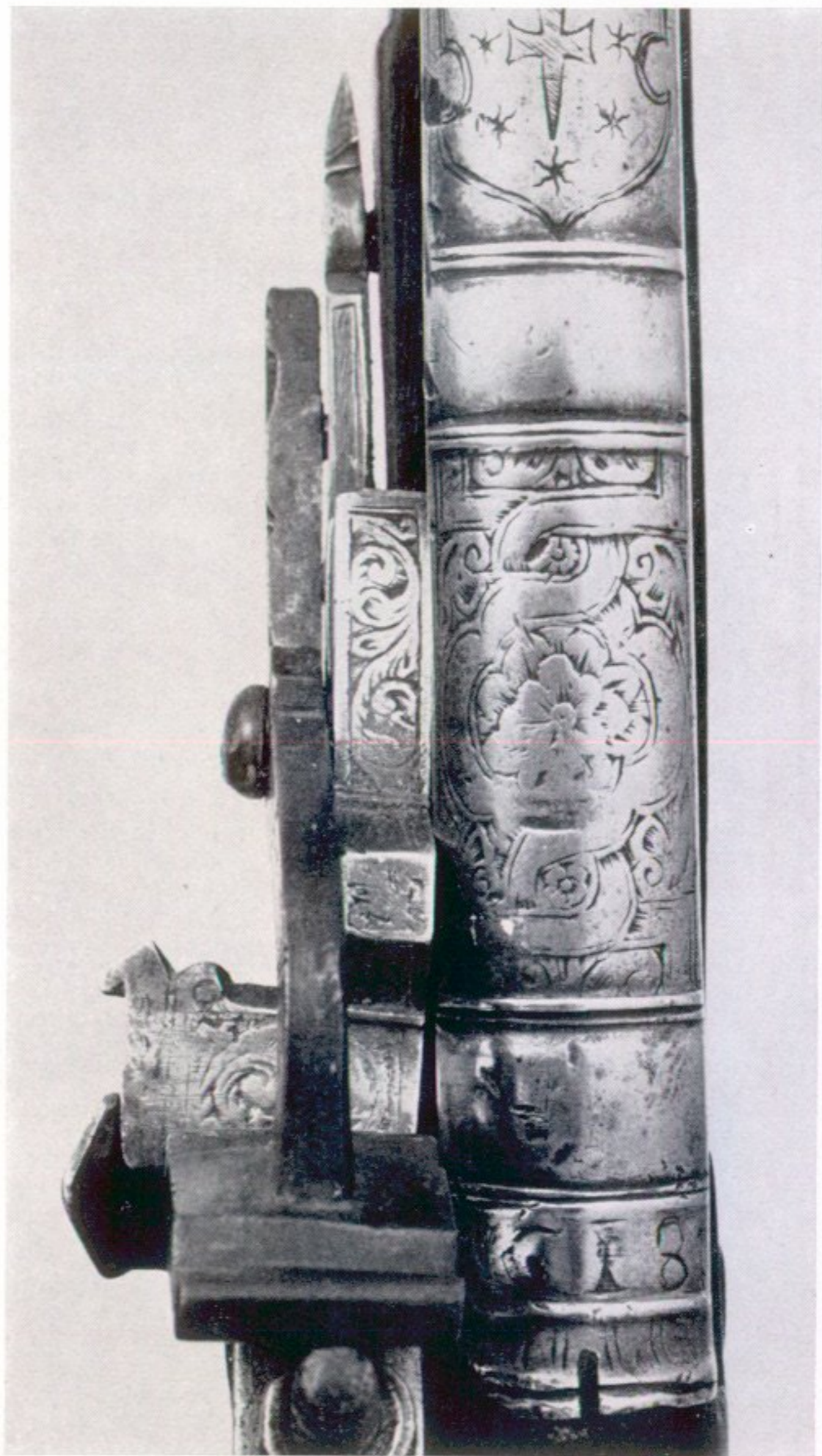
a Pistol 'RA' 1618, lock



b Pistol 'RA' 1618, detail of stock



a



b

Pistol 'RA' 1618, details of barrel, National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland