

A copper alloy pin from Urquhart Castle, Inverness-shire

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ABSTRACT

The dating of a copper alloy pin with frustum head from Urquhart Castle, Inverness-shire, is discussed in relation to known parallels. Previous early dating of the type is questioned in view of the lack of examples from securely dated contexts.

THE PIN AND ITS PARALLELS

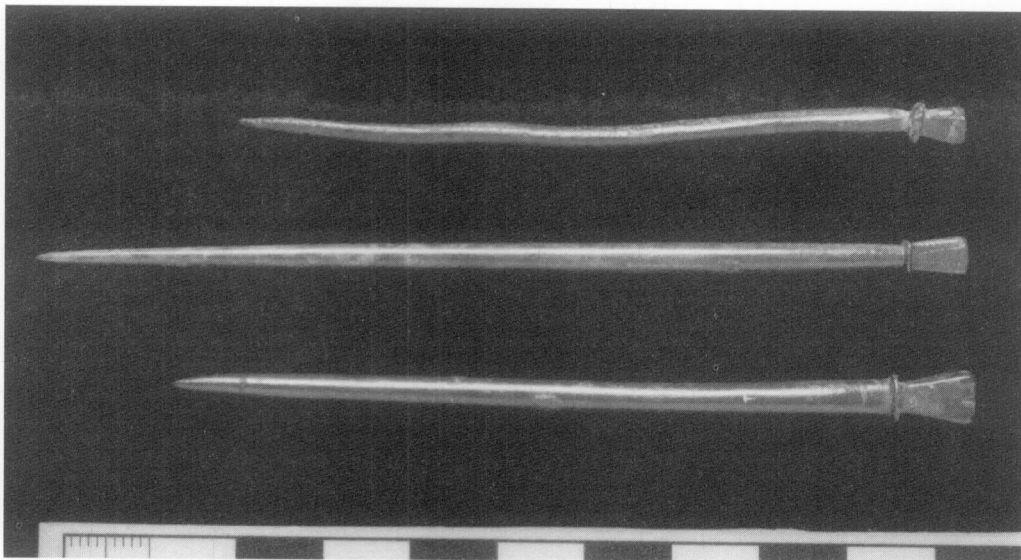
During excavations at Urquhart Castle in 1983 by Professor Leslie Alcock, a complete copper alloy pin (SF 013) with a frustum head (ie a truncated pyramid) was recovered. The pin has an 'abacus' or small sharp fillet at the junction of the head with the round-sectioned undecorated shank. Each of the four faces of the head has a simple linear 'rocker' design. The form of the head is slightly irregular, possibly suggesting hand-finishing after casting. The shank tapers slightly towards the head. The overall length is 110 mm; the shank has a maximum diameter of 4 mm; the head is 7 mm long and has a maximum width of 4 mm (illus 1).

This type of pin, which has several parallels, has proved difficult to date, given the dearth of securely stratified parallels and the disturbed nature of the context of this particular find. The pin was found in Trench UR200 which lay at right angles to the inner face of the masonry shell keep. The context, UR251, formed part of the fill of the construction trench for the wall itself. Unfortunately the upper part of the fill was recut during consolidation work by the Board of Works in the 1920s and the pin was recovered from this later modern disturbance. On balance it is more likely to have been in a layer related to the masonry castle than predating it (see Alcock & Alcock, this volume).

There are several references in the literature to this type of pin being an early form, and it is important to examine the validity of this view. The evidence for an early date is not irrefutable and it is likely that later examples were produced. In the case of this Urquhart pin, the balance of probability is that a later date, c 13th/14th century, or slightly later, could be supported.

A number of pins of very similar form have been noted by Laing (1973, 71; 1975, 329). These are from the National Museum's collection: Boreray, Harris (GT 244; Laing 1973, Type M, no 47), Lismore, Argyll (FC 142–3; Laing 1973, Type M, nos 48 & 49) and Knap (more likely to be Kneep, pers comm M Harman), Lewis (FC 299; Laing 1973, Type M, no 50). Although the dating of these pieces is not clear because there is a lack of contextual information available, R B K Stevenson has suggested that they are unlikely to be much later in date than the Irish crutch-

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ILLUS 1 Frustum-headed pins, from Loch Boralie, Sutherland (*top*), from Urquhart Castle, Inverness-shire (*middle*: UR 251, Alcock), and from earlier work at Urquhart Castle (*bottom*: NMS HY 19). (Copyright: Trustees of the National Museums of Scotland)

headed pins of the 11th/12th centuries (pers comm). Unfortunately, I can locate no Irish parallels for the Urquhart type, which would assist in the discussion. I am grateful for the help of Dr Sally Foster for supplying information from work undertaken on pins from this period in Ireland by C O'Rahilly (1973).

In a brief publication of the MacKenzie Collection, Close-Brooks classes the single frustum pin illustrated, GT 977 from North Uist, as a pre-medieval type (Close-Brooks & Maxwell 1974, 287 & 289, fig 2), although it is not discussed. In 1975 Laing noted that the type is found in Scotland (by implication, only in Scotland) and 'dating is uncertain – they do not appear to have been current later than the early Viking period and do not occur in contexts that suggest a date earlier than the eighth century' (Laing 1975, 329). The archaeological evidence to support this statement is far from certain. More recent study of artefactual material from the period under consideration by Foster includes, as Group 30, pins with frustum heads (Foster 1990, 96 & fig 27), but she notes that the longer metal pins, interestingly with swollen hips unlike the Urquhart piece, are more likely to be Norse (or later, pers comm).

The closest parallel (illus 1) for the pin has come from the earlier excavations at Urquhart Castle (Samson 1982, 466, 473 no 78), but unfortunately stratigraphical information is lacking. It is tempting to suggest an early date for the two pieces, encouraged by the evidence of vitrification at the site and the recovery of the Urquhart brooch fragment of eighth-century date (Small, Thomas & Wilson, 1973, Plate XLIV), but this cannot be supported. Indeed, I am grateful to Professor Alcock for pointing out that the Urquhart brooch was formerly labelled as being 'From Glen Urquhart' and it would seem safer to state that 'the earliest accounts, at several removes from the original finder, place it at or in the vicinity of Urquhart Castle' (Alcock pers comm). The new guidebook to Urquhart Castle does still include a photograph of the earlier recovered pin (Tabraham & Stewart 1991, 16), but the reference in the previous edition (Simpson 1983, 12) to a possible earlier dating for the pin has been omitted: this would seem to have been wise.

Recent excavations at Perth have produced the only apparently stratified example of the type, from the South Methven Street site, context 101, dated by pottery to the 14th/15th centuries (Ford 1987, 123 & illus 60, 124 no 13). There does appear, however, to be no discussion in the main text of this significant context in which there were several finds recorded.

On balance, therefore, it would seem that the frustum-headed pin, as represented in two examples at Urquhart Castle, is likely to be post-13th century in date, although by how much is difficult to say. Several examples are already known and commonly noted as being early in date. The archaeological evidence for this is slim, however, and although it is possible that the form continued to be made and used over a long period, such conservatism seems unlikely in view of the wide range of pin types represented in extant assemblages. New information is constantly being accrued, and an almost identical pin was recently sent to the National Museum for comment from Loch Boralie, Sutherland (illus 1). Unfortunately it lacks a stratified context, but was handed in with Later Medieval material with which it may or may not have been originally associated (pers comm Dr A Sheridan). Evidence for the manufacture of the type is now awaited and may be forthcoming from urban excavations, the publication of which is eagerly awaited.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Several people have assisted with information, and most are acknowledged at relevant points. However, it should be noted that staff of the Department of Medieval & Later Antiquities of the British Museum also expressed opinions on the piece, serving to support the suggestion that this form is apparently peculiar to Scotland since it has no readily available parallels in England.

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