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## 6 THE COPPER-ALLOY PIN, *by Trevor Cowie*

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### 6.1 Description

The site produced an example of a simple copper-alloy pin with curved neck from context C17 ([illus 21](#)). Although this precise form lacks immediate Scottish parallels, it can be compared to a small number of pins from elsewhere in Britain and Ireland belonging to the wider family of so-called swan's-neck and ring-headed pins of mainly Early Iron Age date.

The pin is cast, with curved upper portion terminating in a plain head, while the lower part tapers slightly towards the now missing tip ([illus 40 & 41](#)). The cross-section varies from near circular at the shank to markedly oval towards the head. Some longitudinal distortion of the shank has occurred, probably as a result of wear, but its present overall condition is very good; the pin retains a glossy dark green patina which is relatively intact apart from an area with some light pocking of the surface, and minor corrosion at the head and tip. Some fine longitudinal splits probably result from the original working of the metal, while finishing of the pin has left a series of fine lengthwise striations on the shaft and some fine transverse striations in the upper portion. Two small blisters of corrosion on the shaft where the surface has swollen may reflect some inherent flaw in the metal or, just possibly, the former presence of organic material. Length 127 mm; average thickness 3mm.

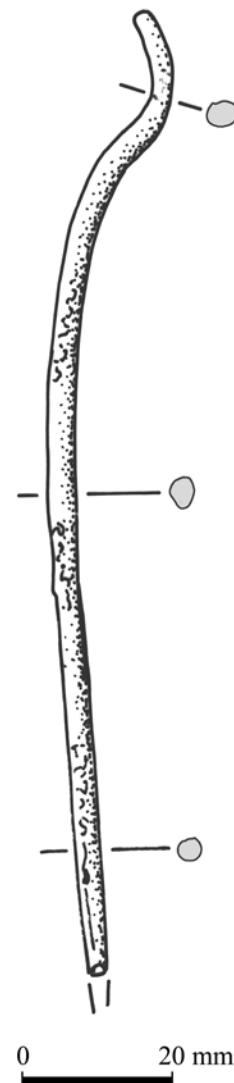
The pin was analysed by Dr Susy Kirk, Department of Conservation and Analytical Research, NMS, using X-ray fluorescence (XRF) to determine the alloy type present. The results showed that the alloy was most probably a leaded bronze; however, exact quantification was not possible due to the presence of a significant corrosion layer ([Kirk 2011](#)).

### 6.2 Discussion

While the pin appears to have undergone some distortion as a result of wear and tear, there seems to be no reason to doubt that the overall form is original. Despite its simplicity, therefore, the form of the An Corran pin immediately invites comparison with the simplest forms of the types of pin conventionally known as swan's-neck pins, characterised by the distinctive S-curved form of the neck and head and occurring in both bronze and iron. The British series of swan's neck and related ring-headed pins was first described by Dunning (1934), but apart from a brief review of the material in the light of the continental evidence by O'Connor (1980, 256–257), such pins



*Illus 40* Copper-alloy pin (photo: NMS)



*Illus 41* Copper-alloy pin (drawn by Alan Braby)

have received little detailed attention until recent research by Katharina Becker (2000; 2008).

While a relationship to the wider family of insular swan's-neck pins seems evident, finding direct comparisons for the An Corran pin is made difficult because it is not always clear from the published data whether we are dealing with intact pins of equally simple form or more complex pins that have lost their heads (eg as in the *superficially* similar copper alloy pins from Meols: Griffiths et al 2007, 37, nos 83–85). In some instances, however, the presence of distinct crimping at the end suggests that the pin heads are complete, rather than simply broken at the neck.

The insular forms of swan's neck and ring-headed pins had all emerged by the Early Iron Age (Becker 2008), considerably earlier than originally proposed by Dunning. However, detailed chronology continues to be a problem as so few pins have been recovered from securely dated contexts. In publishing a swan's neck pin from Coolure Demesne, Co Westmeath, Kelly (2005, 30) raised the possibility that some such pins of a fairly simple hooked form, all from Irish crannog sites, might even be Early Medieval in date. However in the case of An Corran, the conventional prehistoric dating is supported by the identification of the metal composition as probably

leaded bronze. Moreover, one or two examples of complete pins of comparably simple overall form occur among the swan's neck and ring-headed pins from the excavated settlement and midden site at Llanmaes in Glamorgan, suggesting a likely core date range of *c* 800–400 BC for such pins, spanning the period from the Late Bronze Age/Earliest Iron Age transition through the Early Iron Age (Gwilt 2007, 302–303 and pers comm).

In summary, therefore, despite the apparent simplicity of its form, the pin from An Corran invites comparison with a range of pins broadly datable to the period from the end of the Late Bronze Age through the Early Iron Age. While this form is unparalleled in Scotland, examples of related ring- or crook-headed pins in bronze and iron are known from a number of sites of this period in Scotland (eg Dunagoil, Bute: Harding 2004, 12, fig 2; Oakbank, Perthshire: Dixon 2004, 158). The relatively poor survival of ironwork and the problems of identification of the original forms of the contemporary iron pins, and the relatively low numbers of excavated settlement sites probably go some way to accounting for the current limited and possibly unrepresentative inventory of Early Iron Age pins from Scotland. The particular circumstances which led to the loss or deposition of the pin at An Corran must remain unknown.