Heights of Brae Late Bronze Age hoard

Author: Susan Kruse

In the 1960s several gold objects were ploughed up in a field on marginal land at the Heights of Brae, near Dingwall. Originally mistaken for horse brass, they were drawn to the attention of the National Museum of Antiquities in 1979, and the area was then excavated. The surviving pieces of the hoard contain three cup-ended ornaments, five penannular armrings and a corrugated gold band. Two other objects are known to have been lost before the excavation.

The objects have Irish parallels, pointing to a date in the Late Bronze Age. The majority of them are unfinished, suggesting that they were Irish imports in that state, the work of Irish craftsmen in the area, or that they were native copies of high calibre. Irish connections in this area are well known, including the discovery that the man buried in the early Bronze Age at Culduthel with archery equipment (including gold rivets on the bracer) was from Ireland (Parker Pearson et al 2019, 395).

The cup-ended ornaments, thought perhaps for use in fastening cloaks, have been found mainly on the west coast. An unique example in copper alloy formed part of the very early Iron Age Poolewe hoard, showing a local fascination with the ornament, attempted (with more difficulty) in bronze (Case study X; Knight et al forthcoming).

Examples of the armlets have been found throughout Scotland; in the Highlands pairs were found in Caithness and Lochaber. The band is without parallel. If the objects were traded, rather than manufactured locally, they would probably have come via the Great Glen. XRF analysis of the objects was undertaken, and may help identify where the gold came from; however, as noted above, an Irish provenance for the gold, as is likely, does not necessarily mean Irish production.

The objects were clearly possessions of a wealthy individual, but it still remains unclear whether they were buried for safekeeping or religious reasons. Unlike some other Bronze Age hoards, there was no obvious landmark marking the place of deposition.

The hoard was found in a prehistoric landscape, with a Neolithic chambered cairn and a number of large roundhouses and fieldsystems nearby. This area appears to have been without much settlement from at least the 1500s until its re-settlement by crofters around 1800. As such, the area has potential for landscape studies, where on the basis of this find, the homes of high status natives may well be preserved.

Futher information

Clarke, D.V. and Kemp, M.M.B. 1984. ‘A hoard of late Bronze Age gold objects from Heights of Brae, Ross and Cromarty district, Highland Region,’ PSAS 114, 189-98.

Coles, John 1959-1960. ‘Scottish Late Bronze Age metalwork,’ PSAS 93, 16-134.

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