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The Symbolism of Zoomorphic Penannular Brooches

Conor Newman and Sandra Burke

Introduction

Penannular brooches appear in the early centuries AD and deliberate zoomorphisation of the terminals is testified to from around the third or fourth century. It is not known when or where this innovation occurred, or indeed why or from where exactly the impetus came. The zoomorphism of the earliest, most simple specimens may have been an unintentional consequence of the pliers-crimping of the terminals but by the fifth century it was normative and remained the defining attribute of the type well into the seventh century. This paper begins by examining the zoomorphism *per se*, focussing not on the macro- or public symbolism attendant upon the wearing of brooches,¹ but rather on the micro-symbolism which is a topic that has received comparatively little attention. We start out by asking two fundamental questions: what types of animals are represented, and why? It will be suggested that despite having features broadly reminiscent of living animals, the creatures in question are mythological and have been chosen for the long pedigree of their symbolism and their apotropaic qualities. It will be argued that the form of the zoomorphic penannular brooch is symbolically protean, having emerged from a background of converging mythological and artistic traditions from which arose enduring serpentiform motifs symbolising eternity and rebirth. The final part of the paper explores aspects of the appearance of Christian symbols in the decorative register of the brooches, and examines the mutual compatibility of both traditions: the non-Christian and the Christian.

Anatomical Considerations

A classificatory distinction is routinely drawn between brooches that have zoomorphic terminals and those with ornithomorphic ones. Regrettably, this taxonomic distinction has always trumped their fundamental thematic correspondence with the result that they have never been treated collectively as an Insular sub-type of a considerably more widespread tradition of bicephalism (two-headedness) in zoomorphic art and, notably in the context of this discussion, among brooches and dress-fasteners. Thus, while this paper will focus more particularly on zoomorphic penannulars, some consideration is also given to the ornithomorphic ones.²

¹ Nieke, 1993 remains the first and only treatment of these aspects of zoomorphic penannular brooches, referring to both the Christian symbolism on the terminals and the public symbolism involved in the wearing of brooches. Burke's 2008 study focuses on the pagan and Christian symbolism of both form and ornamentation. A dedicated survey of the full range of Christian symbolism appearing on zoomorphic penannular brooches is in preparation.

² For recent survey of ornithomorphic brooches, see Ó Floinn, 2009

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In almost all cases, the terminals of zoomorphic and ornithomorphic penannular brooches comprise two matching animals' heads. In the case of the zoomorphic variety the heads are, as it were, adorsed relative to one another, each having been turned around 180° to face the hoop in a pose that is often said to be 'hoop-swallowing'. The hoop indeed joins the buccal area of the zoomorph, but in fact mouths are never drawn, either open or closed. Moreover, there is little to suggest an intentional effort to make the hoop look like it is entering into or exiting from a mouth. If anything, the impression is of a 'chin' simply resting on the hoop, as a swan in repose might rest its bill on its neck. This latter may explain the impetus behind transforming a geometric form into a zoomorphic one: in the right hands the folded-back, crimped ends of the earliest forms are suggestive of a curved neck and head (ultimately the genesis of this form/posture can be attributed to the zoomorphisation of vegetal art initiated around the middle of the first millennium BC). The fact that the hoop is not entering the mouth is important in the context of the near-universal motif of the biting animal in European art of the period: the animals featuring on zoomorphic penannular brooches *do not* assume an obvious biting posture. However, neither are they disengaged from the hoop. On the contrary, the hoop and head are very much conjoined, to the extent that it is commonly held that the hoop represents the body of the animal or, more precisely its elongated neck. In this sense they correspond with an equally universal, and perhaps even more ancient motif of the backwards-looking animal. This pose is well-nigh a defining attribute of Scythian zoomorphic art, as well as being common in Thracian, Etruscan, provincial Roman and Germanic art. Curiously perhaps, it appears to be not at all as recurrent in Celtic art. Again, there is no definitive explanation for this posture but in the context of an art form that is typically two dimensional, and where animals are almost always drawn in profile, the backwards-looking pose breathes life into the animal, conferring a sense of movement and muscularity, and sometimes even regality.

Yet another quite common motif of later prehistoric and early medieval European art is bicephalism. Adorsed and affronted, it is a feature particularly of dress fasteners. In the case of the zoomorphic penannular brooches these two traditions, the backwards-looking posture and bicephalism, are combined. The discussion that follows, therefore, approaches the question of the symbolism of zoomorphic penannular brooches from the standpoint that the hoop represents a limbless, serpentiform body, shared by *both* backwards-looking heads and that these are, therefore, bicephalous serpentiforms.

Ornithomorphic penannulars are also bicephalous but, in contrast, present the heads affronted and in profile, facing away from the hoop, beak-to-beak, making plainer the visualisation of the hoop as one elongated, limbless body. Once again we can see that this too is in accordance with general trends across the same geographical/cultural areas. In most cases the head-body junction is marked out by a collar. It is apparent that this is not an anatomical feature but a decorative one and this is a potentially important point of distinction between these and the zoomorphic penannular brooches.

Anatomically speaking, the heads of zoomorphic penannulars do not match any

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living creature despite the presence of snouts, eyes, foreheads and ears. The snouts assume roughly three forms: (1) upwards-curving like a duck's bill, (2) round and bulbous like a cow's, and (3) elongated like a cervid or wolf or long-snouted dog. While the developmental sequence has yet to be satisfactorily resolved, there is some indication of a general trend from comparatively short duck-shaped heads with snouts that are quite bill-shaped, to ones with a more elongated, flatter 'nasal bridge', typically with a mid-rib (or from what Graham-Campbell refers to as 'sub-rectangular' terminals with an ovoid recessed field to 'sub-triangular' ones with ovoid, sub-triangular and circular fields).³ These latter appear more bovine and cervid-like. Sometimes the bridge of the bill or snout is decorated with cast ornament, and this can be axially symmetric along the bridge-line. In one or two cases the combination of a slender, elongated snout and complex curvilinear raised ornamentation on the crown of the head calls to mind a deer in full antler.⁴ Similarly, in the case of a specimen provenanced only to Ireland, the combination of dome-shaped, ear-less head and high-arched snout is strongly reminiscent of a duck's head and bill (such as a Teal or Mallard).⁵ Two others of this quite simple, quasi-naturalistic style exist (from Highdown, Sussex, and Shronberrane, Co. Kerry),⁶ but they are squarer and are ornamented with zig-zags across the bill with the result that they are fractionally less naturalistic. All three have a little pelta-shaped ornamentation or setting on the forehead which, it is argued below, is of some moment. It has been argued elsewhere that these specimens are immediate predecessors to Kilbride-Jones' Class B1 brooches suggesting, *inter alia*, that they belong near the head of the series.⁷

Except in the case of the cylindrical ears of the Class B1 brooches and the round, Mickey Mouse-style ears of Class D, ears are generally nondescript and are often quite tiny, almost vestigial. Current dating, which confirms aspects of Kilbride-Jones' typology, suggests that round ears are present near both the beginning and the end of the series (Kilbride-Jones' groups B1 and D respectively) but seem to disappear—or at least lose their significance—in the middle years.⁸

The eyes can also be unremarkable. In what are probably quite early specimens they are often round or tear-drop shaped; some may have had settings, others have a drilled pupil, but in most cases they are, as it were, blind and sometimes almost pyramidal. An exception that breaks the rule is Fowler's F3 variant (Fig. 17.1) which deliberately emphasises the eyes.⁹ Curiously, Kilbride-Jones did not include the F3s in either of his two seminal surveys of zoomorphic penannular brooches, even though they are arguably the most readily zoomorphic of the lot.¹⁰ This latter observation highlights an important

³ Graham-Campbell, 1991c: 226

⁴ Kilbride-Jones, 1984: cat. nos 64 and 70

⁵ See Newman, 1995: figs 4(a) and 5

⁶ Newman, 1995; neither of these brooches appears in Kilbride-Jones, 1980a

⁷ Newman, 1995: fig. 6 (a and b)

⁸ Kilbride-Jones, 1980a

⁹ Newman, 1989

¹⁰ Kilbride-Jones, 1937; 1980a



Figure 17.1: Zoomorphic penannular brooch Type F3 characterised by prominent eyes; old find from Ballinderry, Co. Offaly (Photo: © National Museum of Ireland)

aspect of the processes at play in the cognition of an otherwise completely abstract form as a zoomorph, which includes a propensity to interpret adjacent colourful rounds as eyes. Notwithstanding the different visual literacies operating, it has been our experience that a class of first-year undergraduate students will intuitively recognise an F3 brooch terminal as zoomorphic yet struggle to recognise the animal's head in any other type. With familiarity (in other words, visual literacy) the same students will admit that the only 'anatomical' attribute of the F3 brooches are the eyes.

Ornithomorphic brooches, on the other hand, display less variation and less ambiguity. Some, such as the specimen from Lagore and another found about 8km to the north-west at Baronstown, also in Co. Meath, have the long, slim, curved beaks of a wader, as well as small eyes, as nature ordained for birds of this genus.¹¹ These might be regarded as an Insular type. The equivalent Germanic-style ornithomorphic brooch (a very rare occurrence in Ireland), however, has disproportionately huge, round, staring eyes, and is not strictly naturalistic at all, unless the prototype was an owl, whose eyes can be bigger than its beak. Even though they lack the intense stare of the eagle or the hawk, in their own way these eyes are quite mesmerising and are certainly the dominant feature. The accentuated downward curl of the beak, and its relative thickness, suggests that the birds

¹¹ Hencken *et al.*, 1950: 61–64, fig. 10 (a); Linnane and Kinsella, 2009: pl. 58 A008/017:1009:13



Figure 17.2: Zoomorphic penannular brooch from Co. Westmeath, with crosses in the terminals (Kilbride-Jones cat. no. 121) (Photo: © National Museum of Ireland)

of these brooches are raptors, a genus that occupies a prominent role in Germanic art and mythology. The slimmer, wader-like specimens compare reasonably closely with two species known in the British Isles, namely the Whimbrel (*Numenius phaeopus*) and the Curlew (*Numenius arquata*). However, the bird that most resembles this brooch type is the African Sacred Ibis (*Threskiornis aethiopicus*). The Ibis was the symbol of the Egyptian god *Thot*, keeper of the universe, and both Herodotus and Pliny the Elder report that it was accredited with protecting Egypt from the annual westwards migrations of serpents from Arabia; Herodotus adds the detail that they were winged/flying serpents.¹²

¹² Herodotus, *Histories* 2.75–76 (Godley, 1926: 360–63); Pliny, *Naturalis Historiae* 10.40(28) (Bostock and Riley, 1855: 507)

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From very early on in its history the forehead and crown of the head of the zoomorph became the main locus for ornamentation which typically took the form of a sub-triangular recessed field of plain red champlevé enamel, usually off-set against a reserved fine-line design and/or millefiori. In most cases, at least at first glance, the motifs appear to be purely decorative. Some, however, bear crosses (Fig. 17.2), and quite complex iconographical schema have been suggested.¹³ This emphasis was present from very early on in the form of a deceptively simple pelta on the forehead of some of the earliest specimens. On the B1 brooches the pelta is further embellished with a single, central dot.

Finally, the hoop or ring of the brooch is frequently also decorated, the most elaborate being on the Ballinderry brooch from Co. Westmeath.¹⁴ Much has been made of fact that the register of cross-hatched, herring-bone and parallel lines is of the same order of complexity and accomplishment as that on the escutcheon frames of hanging-bowl no. 1 from Sutton Hoo, Suffolk.¹⁵ In other cases the patterns are less ambitious, while in the simplest ones the pattern is simply irregularly-spaced pairs of circumferential lines. The most heavily textured specimens, particularly those with cross-hatching, have the overall appearance of scales and, accordingly, contribute to the sense that these are serpentiform/reptilian animals. Such texturing is absent from the ornithomorphic brooches suggesting that, fanciful though they may be, ornithomorphic brooches may be marginally more faithful to nature. The zoomorphic variety, on the other hand, seems to transcend the divisions of species; the heads seem to refer to legged or winged animals, whereas the absence of limbs, the sinuous flexibility inferred by the curvature of the hoop/neck/body, and the scalar patterning on the skin, suggest serpents. The resulting zoological anomaly—a legless reptile or snake with a head at either end (or two distinct animals sharing one body) capable of, or perhaps even disposed to, forming itself into a circle—is not a creature of nature but rather of myth and legend.

Symbolism

One of the aspects of zoomorphic penannular brooches that makes them so interesting to the student of symbology is that they straddle the period of conversion to Christianity, not just chronologically but as barometers of cultural and ontological change as well. Having begun as the dress-fastener of choice of many pagans, in time they became the dress-fasteners of Christians, yet without ceding their original zoomorphic shape which was, in the long run, also amenable to Christian redaction.

Cool's account of the symbolism and religious contexts of snake bracelets and snake-headed rings from Roman Britain, and her suggestion that a particular religious meaning surrounding the snake had developed there, is especially relevant to any consideration of the possible symbolism of the bicephalic zoomorphic penannular

¹³ Newman and Walsh, 2007: 179–80

¹⁴ Kilbride-Jones, 1980a: cat. no. 89

¹⁵ Bruce-Mitford, 1987: 32–33; see also Youngs, above: 00-00

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brooch.¹⁶ The moulting of its skin might have recommended the snake as an appropriate symbol of rebirth and re-incarnation:¹⁷ as it shed its skin so was it reborn, the shed, empty skin remaining behind like a shroud from whence the renewed snake arose. Though not our preferred interpretation, a case could be made for suggesting that the bicephalic serpentiform of the zoomorphic penannular brooch was a variation on this theme, the respective heads representing the old and the new—out of one snake emerges another, the dying and the resurrected. Regardless, the serpent has a long history as a symbol of rebirth, which, under the right circumstances, makes it compatible with the Christian doctrine of resurrection. Indeed, Meehan suggests that Christ is sometimes symbolised in the Book of Kells by a snake precisely *because* it was an established symbol of rebirth and resurrection.¹⁸ Gannon, moreover, observes that the snake may have been a traditional protector of the warrior hero, to wit the symbol of the snake stood for Christ the protector.¹⁹

Moulting aside, the fact that the snake could compose itself into a loop or ring gave rise to yet another symbolic archetype that may have informed the deep pedigree of the penannular shape assumed by the creatures of the zoomorphic penannular brooch. The tail-biting Ouroboros has been a symbol of cyclical regeneration, immortality for millennia,²⁰ and is rendered both pictorially and in metalwork. Likewise, the Jörmungandr or Midgard of Nordic mythology is a sea serpent—sometimes depicted as triple-headed—so large it encircled the world and could bite its own tail.²¹ Not, however, accredited with eternity *per se*, according to the myth the world will end if the Jörmungandr ever lets go of its own tail.²²

For the Greeks and the Romans, however, the mythical serpent was the *drakōn/dracōn-em*. Not the winged and clawed, fire-breathing monster of today, but essentially a serpent, and one with a very special and widely-reported attribute—inside its brain was a *dragonite*, a magical gemstone retrieved only by the remarkably brave from the brains of a freshly decapitated, still breathing, *drakōn* (dragon). Niamh Whitfield rehearses the journey taken by the account of this magical gemstone from Pliny's *Naturalis Historiae*, via Isidore's *Etymologies*, to Irish texts like *In Tenga Bithmua* (the Ever-new Tongue) and the sketch that follows draws substantially on her concise survey.²³ An important consideration emphasised by Whitfield is how thoroughly this knowledge penetrated into the Insular world: it is worth reminding ourselves of the very wide dissemination and resilience of natural histories and *physiologia*, and that such were not

¹⁶ Cool, 2000

¹⁷ Cool, 2000: 34; Toynbee, 1973: 233–34

¹⁸ Meehan, 1995: 53

¹⁹ Gannon, 2003: 138, 144

²⁰ See for instance Sheppard, 1962

²¹ Old Norse *Miðgarðsormr* from *Miðgarði*, lit. 'middle enclosure' or earth, hence 'World Serpent'

²² E.g. Steinsland, 2005: 100

²³ Whitfield, 2010

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regarded as works of fiction or fantasy but rather were credible, scientific, accounts and explanations of some of the most intriguing phenomena of the natural world. Ireland of course, famously, does not have snakes (although there are lizards, including a rare legless variety)—an absence that feeds rather than starves the imagination. Whereas Pliny described the *dragonite* as colourless and transparent, and Isidore as translucent white, various Insular sources describe it as being red, a transformation that Whitfield suggests may be attributed to the popularity of garnet in the Insular world, to which one might add red enamel as well, especially in Ireland. Leaving aside the question of colour for the moment, let us recall that it is not just the magical properties of dragonite that make it desirable: merely possessing one proclaims the superior bravery of a dragon slayer.

As outlined by Whitfield, in the hands of the Irish-influenced literati two varieties of dragonstone are distinguished in the early Irish text *In Tenga Bithnua*: the Stone of Istien, which is found in the brains of dragons, and the Stone of Fanes that is found in the hearts of sea-serpents. The Stone of Istien lights up in water and stirs up storms; it makes the sound of thunder in winter, and noise like the wind on 1 May, which is the Celtic festival of *Beltaine*. Of the Stone of Fanes, on the other hand:

Twelve stars are seen in its side, and the orbit of the moon, and the fiery circuit of the sun [...]. Whoever holds it in his hand, till he has put it from him, utters no falsehood. Neither number nor multitude is capable of bringing it into a house wherein there is a parricide or an idolater. At the hour of every matins it sounds a sweet melody the like whereof the like whereof is not under heaven.²⁴

With this latter attribute the stone may bear witness to the Christianisation of a tradition with an otherwise perfectly respectable pagan pedigree! In the tale *Fled Bricrend* (the Feast of Bricriu) Cú Chulainn, the Irish mythological hero, is accredited with having eight red dragonstones (*dragonites*) in each of his eyes, and was proffered a drink by the intoxicating sovereignty goddess Medb in a cup with a golden bird on the bottom and a dragonstone as big as his two eyes.²⁵ Writing in the thirteenth century Albertus Magnus describes the dragonstone that he claimed to possess as being ‘black and shaped like a truncated pyramid’ with a beautiful picture of a serpent on it.²⁶ Evidently dragonstones were more than just gemstones that could be held in the palm of one’s hand or mounted on a piece of jewellery; they could transform into real, terrifying, seeing eyes. This association between dragonstones and the eyes of extraordinary, mythical characters such as Cú Chulainn is interesting in the light of the oddly enlarged eyes on Germanic

²⁴ *In Tenga Bithnua* §47: I cridhib inna ndracon tormthét fo mhuir arrearar dogrés. Nach duine a mbi laimh nocon rala uad, nocho labrunn goi. Ni thalla impi do lin na sichraidi a tabuirt I tech I mbi fer fingaili no adhartha idhal, Im trath cecha iarmerighi dorddaid ceol mbind diná frith cosmailins fo nimh (Stokes, 1905: 116–17)

²⁵ *Fled Bricrend* §62.9–11: Ocus doberar cúach dergóir dó ocus a lán do fín sainemail and ocus én do lic lógmair for a lár, ocus doberar cutrumma a da súlu do dracon dó leis sech cách (Henderson, 1899: 78–79)

²⁶ Albertus Magnus, *Book of Minerals* Ch. 4 (trans. Wyckoff, 1967: 86–87)

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ornithomorphic brooches, raising the possibility, as it does, that they represent dragonites. Even more intriguing is the possibility that rather than being applied, embossed or tattooed onto the forehead of the animal, the ornamentation on the crowns of the heads of zoomorphic penannular brooches is intended to reveal what is *inside* the head. Just as the *shape* of the zoomorphic penannular brooch may owe aspects of its ancestry to the motif of the mythical tail-biting serpent, could it be the case that the *ornamentation* on the forehead refers to the tradition of the partially de-capitated *drakon*—the reserved curvilinear patterns and red enamel reflecting the folds and blood of the brains—or even a dragonstone itself? One might take this hypothesis a step further by suggesting that the platelets of millefiori might represent a dragonite.

Unlike the Ouroboros or Jörmungandr, however, the creature of the zoomorphic penannular brooch is two-headed, or bicephalic, which introduces into the discussion of the possible pedigree of the of the creature of the zoomorphic penannular brooch yet another mythical creature, the Amphisbaena, and takes us back to Pliny's *Naturalis Historiae*: 'the Amphisbaena has a twin head, that is one at the tail end as well [...] as though it were not enough for poison to be poured out of one mouth'.²⁷ The Amphisbaena has remarkable longevity in European lore, from Aeschylus in his fifth-century BC *Agamemnon* to medieval bestiaries, along which journey it evolved into the legged and winged monster that we think of today as a dragon, though sometimes, as in the case of one from medieval Galway, with a human head at the tail end.²⁸ The common medieval form has a raptor's head at one end, which may explain the appearance of the clawed, talon-like feet and the wings. It is interesting in the context of the ornithomorphic brooches that a serpentiform, dragon-monster can have a bird's head. Also interesting is the fact that many early sources report that the Amphisbaena has big, glowing eyes, though the second-century BC Greek poet Nicander seems to contradict this when he reports that it is 'always dull of eye'.²⁹

According to Greek mythology the Amphisbaena arose from the blood that dripped from the severed head of Medusa. Despite this rather ghastly genesis, Pliny reports that wearing a live Amphisbaena safeguards a pregnancy, while a dead one draped around the neck is a cure for rheumatism. Diodorus Siculus describes how the blood has marvellous potency: when applied it can glue back detached limbs as long as the wound is fresh and affects limbs that are not vital to sustain a person's life.³⁰ Isidore reports that the Amphisbaena moves in a circular motion, in the direction of either head, and alone among the snakes it goes out in the cold.³¹ It acquired other magical properties along the way including the suggestion that consuming its flesh made one irresistible to the opposite sex,

²⁷ Pliny, *Naturalis Historiae* 8.35.85: *geminum caput Amphisbaenae, hoc est et a cauda tamquam parum esset uno ore fundi venenum* (Rackham, 1940: 62–63)

²⁸ Newman Johnson, 1987: fig. 15:1

²⁹ Duce, 1910: 291–92 attributes the kernel of the tradition to Nicander

³⁰ Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca Historica* 2.58(2–4) (Oldfather, 1935: 75–76)

³¹ *Etymologies* 12.4.20 (Barney *et al.*, 2006: 256)

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and if slain during a full moon would confer remarkable powers on the hunter, all desirable qualities to be sure and commendable apotropaic devices.

As mentioned in the introduction, though observed and noted by many, the bicephalism of familiar objects, ranging from the bicephalic ornithomorphic peltae on distance slabs from the Antonine Wall,³² to Dragonesque brooches,³³ and the bicephalous raptor+dragon on the front of Sutton Hoo shield and the bicephalics of the grip-extension on its verso,³⁴ has elicited comparatively little cogitation on the possible symbolic meaning of this particular form.³⁵

Analysing bicephalism in the entirely different contexts of prehistoric European and North and Meso-American cultures commentators have suggested a variety of different, and sometimes context-specific explanations. Marshack, for instance, suggests that the bicephalic Bighorn sheep depicted on the petroglyphs at, for instance, Coso Range, California, and Moab, Utah, represent both migratory directions simultaneously. Closer to home, Sopeña observes that bi- and tricephalism in Celtiberian art may be an artistic device designed to portray the multiple attributes and personas of certain deities, the bicephalic image of Lugh(?) at the sanctuary at Peñalba de Villa Star being a case in point: in early Irish literature Lugh is distinguished as the omni-competent god. Both Marshack and Balaji Mundkur are keen to emphasise the metaphoric potentialities evoked by depictions of bicephalic animals.³⁶ Although more readily apparent in the case of artistic depictions combining different species in one fantastical animal, such considerations bring us closer to understanding the bicephalous zoomorph portrayed in the zoomorphic penannular brooch because it encourages us to reflect on the possibility that, like any competent symbolist, the artist-creator of the two-headed creature of the zoomorphic penannular brooch was attempting to capture in one compact image multiple mythological themes and essences. While no one common source can be advanced for bicephalous symbols, the qualitative, thematic and pictorial simulacra that exist across Eurasia and the Americas are not easily dismissed as coincidental and the implication seems to be that this is a very ancient and protean symbol indeed. Against a background as richly textured and enduring as this it is worth considering that the form of the zoomorphic penannular brooch draws, perhaps almost subconsciously, from elements of a number of such traditions, the immortality of the annular Ouroboros and Jörmungandr, the apotropaic potency and ambivalence of the Amphisbaena, and the magic of the dragon-stone.

³² Phillips, 1972: 177; Breeze, 2006: 69–71

³³ E.g. Kilbride-Jones, 1980b: 170–83

³⁴ Bruce-Mitford, 1972: pl. 5,d

³⁵ In his survey of the Amphisbaena in ecclesiastical art Duce, 1910 tends also to focus more on description than meaning.

³⁶ Mundkur, 1983; Marshack, 1985: 145; Sopeña, 2005



Figure 17.3: Detail of the cruciform arrangement of millefiori platelets on one of the terminals of a zoomorphic penannular brooch from Ballinderry crannóg no. 2, Co. Offaly (Photo: © National Museum of Ireland)

Christian Symbolism

There is no better way to conquer a tradition than by appropriating it: no Christian message was above being communicated on the back of a reformulated myth. Consequently, not only did such traditions live alongside Christian doctrine and apocrypha, the two were thoroughly blended. In this last section of the paper we turn to the Christian symbolism that was applied to the zoomorphic penannular brooch and explore, *inter alia*, the potentially new perspectives that emerged from the fact that the pagan bi-cephalic serpentiform survived the transition intact conceding only the teardrop-shaped, decorative field on its forehead to explicitly Christian motifs. Here, on a number of brooches, we find Maltese crosses (see Fig. 17.2). Crosses can also be executed in millefiori (Fig. 17.3), and in a previous analysis it was suggested by one of the authors that a considerable degree of interpretive complexity was achieved in the case of the Ballinderry brooch (which because it has hollow terminals may have been a reliquary) and an unprovenanced Irish specimen, both of which rehearse with ingenious brevity the same Resurrection narrative that Werner attributes to some of the Bobbio ampullae made in sixth-century Palestine.³⁷ In cases such as these, whether or not the original symbolic meaning was abandoned, the host bi-cephalic serpentiform is, as we have seen, congruous with the Christian doctrine of Resurrection and available for reformulation.

Here, however, we wish to explore a complimentary formula used to symbolise the promise of life everlasting arising from the Death and Resurrection of Christ: namely, the very popular image of pairs of doves or peacocks sipping from the urn/chalice. From the mausoleum of Galla Placidia to Merovingian belt-buckles, this motif speaks to the eternal sustenance of the eucharist, where the vessel is both sepulchre-urn and chalice (Lat. *calyx*, cup).³⁸ Sometimes the birds are drawn standing on the lip of the vessel, otherwise, more

³⁷ Werner, 1990

³⁸ E.g. Lombardic choir screen panel, Santa Maria in Trastevere, Rome, see Child and Colles 1971: fig. 98

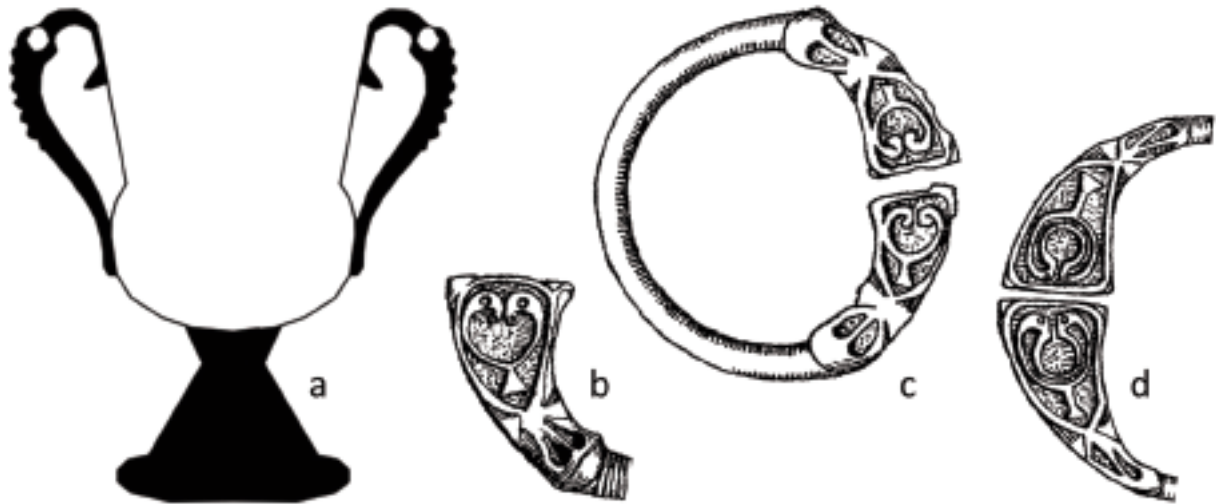


Figure 17.4: a. Silhouette section drawing of the Gourdon chalice showing the melding of the ornithomorphic handles with the cup, juxtaposed with drawings of zoomorphic brooches from: b. Rathvilly, Co. Carlow; c. Bloomfield, Co. Roscommon. A variation on this motif shows the birds holding between them a disc or annulus, centrally placed within the chalice, as shown in d. an unprovenanced Irish brooch (Brooch Drawings: after Kilbride-Jones, 1980a)

typically where peacocks are used, the birds simply crane their necks over the rim of the vessel, as on the Lombardic altar front at San Michele alla Pusterla, Pavia.³⁹ In the case of the sixth-century Gourdon chalice, the birds (doves/peacocks) *form* the handles; they are, in short, *of* the chalice itself. In Figure 17.4 we have juxtaposed the silhouette of the Gourdon chalice alongside Kilbride-Jones' drawings of the brooches from Rathvilly, Co. Carlow, and Bloomfield, Co. Roscommon,⁴⁰ in order to demonstrate the similarity between the two. In the case of the zoomorphic penannular brooches the motif has been yet further condensed, probably in order to fit it in to the tiny reserved field. Thus, the chalice is made up of the two affronted birds, in a somewhat heart-shaped pose, where their slender, elongated necks rise elegantly from a triangular base which we would argue represents the foot of the chalice. Appraising such comparisons requires one to bear in mind the considerable challenge of scale; the field available for ornamentation on these brooches is no more than 7mm long and a maximum of 5mm wide. For an artist to distil and miniaturise what are sometimes quite complex tableaux down to the essential or core message is not simply a technical challenge but also requires considerable sure-footedness on doctrinal matters.

The brooches from Rathvilly and Bloomfield represent quite simplified versions of this motif. A more common variety (Fig. 17.5) is where the birds appear to be in the act of jointly retrieving with their beaks a ring or annulus from the putative chalice.⁴¹ It is hard to avoid concluding that the ring or disc represents the Eucharist. In the case of one

³⁹ Christie, 1995: pl. 36

⁴⁰ Kilbride-Jones, 1980a: cat. nos 122 and 101 respectively

⁴¹ Kilbride-Jones, 1980a: cat. nos 114, 115 and 117

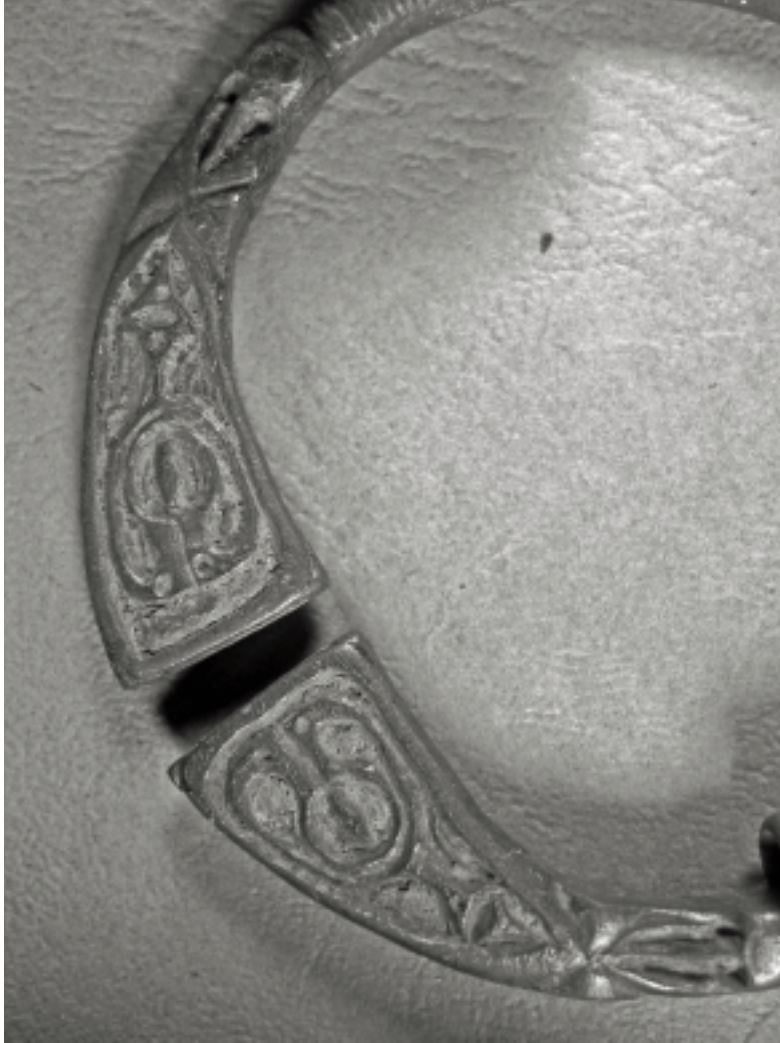


Figure 17.5: Detail of unprovenanced zoomorphic brooch from Ireland (Kilbride-Jones, 1980a: cat. no. 115) showing a variation of the ornithomorphic chalice motif where the ornithomorphs hold in their beaks a disc with a seed-shaped pellet in the middle (Photo: © National Museum of Ireland)

of the unprovenanced specimens,⁴² a raised, seed-shaped element is positioned centrally in this annulus and in another, from Togher, Clonmore, Co. Louth,⁴³ which may be the same variety, is a circular cell containing remnants of a yellow vitreous material. This variation is potentially quite significant when one considers the possibility that in other brooches a dragonite may be symbolised in the same position because it gives birth to the possibility that the apotropaic qualities of one have been supplanted by the other; whatever benefits may have been promised by the possession of a dragonite may now have been transposed by the image and the promise of the Eucharist which carries with it what is a more sophisticated and probably ultimately more appealing message of resurrection and salvation.

⁴² Kilbride-Jones, 1980a: cat. no. 115

⁴³ Kilbride-Jones, 1980a: cat. no. 116

17. THE SYMBOLISM OF ZOOMORPHIC PENANNULAR BROOCHES

Concluding Remarks

In this short and speculative essay we have attempted to offer some possible explanations for the shape, zoomorphic form and decoration of the zoomorphic penannular brooch, founded on the belief that these aspects are likely to be symbolically charged and, moreover, complementary, even when the zoomorphs are decorated with Christian symbols. We have suggested that the penannular/annular zoomorphic bicephalic form of the brooch situates it in the *longue duree* of some very ancient mythological topoi pertaining to world genesis, death and re-birth, as well as physiological and lapidary traditions which introduce apotropaism to the form and decoration. The protean qualities of the symbols from which the shape and form derive mean that when conflation occurs they are revealed to be compatible with Christian doctrine and the register of symbolism of that religion.

In *In Tenga Bithnua*, one of the primary Irish sources for information on the dragonstone, for instance, we are told of the divine ordination of the circle, which applies to the seas, the earth, the firmament and so on: '*Is aire is i ndeilb chruind ro damnaiged in doman*' (Therefore, the world has been embodied in a round shape).⁴⁴ Though it may seem like a somewhat trite explanation for their not being annular, the penannularity of these brooches was a function of how they operated mechanically long before they ever became zoomorphic, and in our opinion does not undermine the theory that the generality of their shape is a circle. Rendering them zoomorphic, bicephalic or otherwise, opened up other dimensions of the same general symbolic order by revealing further ontological correspondences, this time with the round, tail-biting, world serpent a pre-Christian symbol of rebirth. It remains to be seen whether the tradition of the dragonite offers a worthwhile line of enquiry, but meanwhile the Resurrection symbolism is quite unequivocal. That such resonates so harmoniously with the older iconographies suggests that there is more to the appearance of this iconography on zoomorphic penannular brooches than mere coincidence, that there is a deliberate attempt to promote on an existing brooch type the idea that eternal life is a gift only of the Christian God, arising from the sacrifice of his Son and symbolised by the eucharist.

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⁴⁴ *In Tenga Bithnua* §19 (Stokes, 1905: 106–107)