

CURATOR'S CHOICE

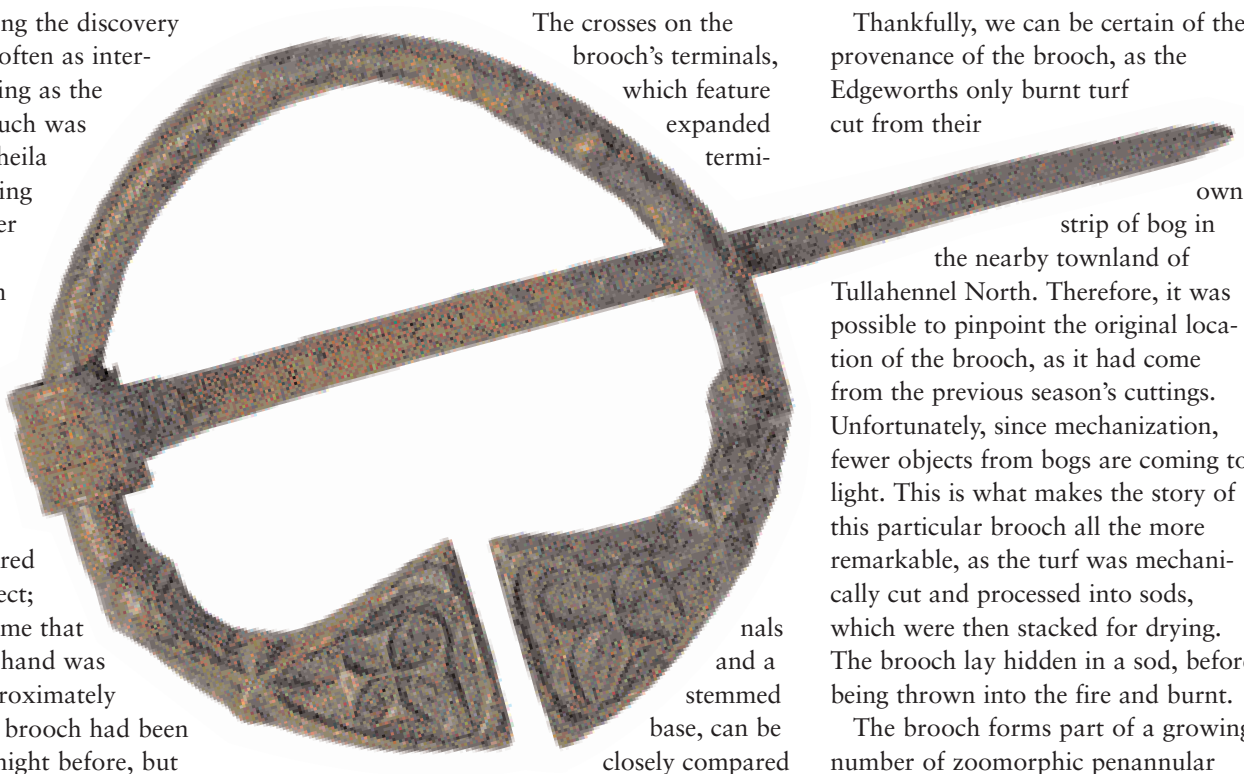
Risen from the ashes

Griffin Murray selects a zoomorphic penannular brooch from the collection of the Kerry County Museum

Stories surrounding the discovery of artefacts are often as interesting and exciting as the objects themselves. Such was the case when Mrs Sheila Edgeworth was clearing out the ashes from her turf-burning Stanley range one morning in 2009. It was while performing this routine domestic chore that she noticed something stuck in the grating of the range. She retrieved what appeared to be an unusual object; not realizing at the time that what she held in her hand was a bronze brooch approximately 1,400 years old. The brooch had been burnt in the fire the night before, but miraculously had managed to survive its ordeal relatively intact.

Known as a zoomorphic penannular brooch because of the animal head decoration it features, it is a type of brooch that developed in Ireland in the 6th and 7th centuries. However, what makes this particular brooch significant is the fact that it is decorated on its terminals with two Latin crosses, which also form the Chi-Rho monogram.

Crosses are uncommon on brooches of this type, as the terminals are usually decorated with abstract ornament. They are also often inlaid with red enamel, as this example was originally. The enamel was probably lost in the fire, but scientific analysis of the brooch in the National Museum of Ireland indicated its original presence, as well as the fact that the surface of the bronze was originally tinned to give it a silvery appearance.



The crosses on the brooch's terminals, which feature expanded terminal

Thankfully, we can be certain of the provenance of the brooch, as the Edgeworths only burnt turf cut from their

own strip of bog in the nearby townland of Tullahennell North. Therefore, it was possible to pinpoint the original location of the brooch, as it had come from the previous season's cuttings. Unfortunately, since mechanization, fewer objects from bogs are coming to light. This is what makes the story of this particular brooch all the more remarkable, as the turf was mechanically cut and processed into sods, which were then stacked for drying. The brooch lay hidden in a sod, before being thrown into the fire and burnt.

The brooch forms part of a growing number of zoomorphic penannular

IT HAS BEEN ARGUED THAT THE OCCURRENCE OF THE CHI-RHO SYMBOL IN IRELAND REPRESENTS DIRECT INFLUENCE FROM THE CONTINENT AND MEDITERRANEAN REGION AT THAT TIME

Zoomorphic penannular brooch, Tullahennell North, Co Kerry (© Kerry County Museum)

with a number of crosses in Ireland's earliest extant illuminated manuscript, the Cathach (Royal Irish Academy), a psalter from Co Donegal dated to c.600AD. The only other brooch of this form known to feature the Chi-Rho symbol on its terminals is an example from Ballymoney, Co Antrim (Hunt Museum). Indeed, the Chi-Rho symbol is very rare in Ireland, although a notable number of examples occur on contemporary cross-inscribed upright slabs in west and south Kerry. It has been argued that the occurrence of the Chi-Rho symbol in Ireland represents direct influence from the Continent and Mediterranean region at that time.

brooches (currently eight), that feature overt Christian symbolism, highlighting the significance that different styles of dress and jewellery may have had during Ireland's conversion period. Indeed, it is conceivable that the brooch may have belonged to a cleric and may have even denoted that individual's ecclesiastical office. The brooch is now on public display with other treasures of early medieval Kerry as part of Kerry County Museum's permanent exhibition. ■

Griffin Murray is the Collections Officer at Kerry County Museum.

Further reading: Murray, G. 2010. 'A Zoomorphic Penannular Brooch from Tullahennell North, Co. Kerry.' *North Munster Antiquarian Journal* vol. 50, 15-27.