

Caird's Cave Bone Pin:

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unique and precious

Some time between about 700AD and 900AD, a skilled craftworker created this exquisite bone pin. What probably started off as a simple splinter of sheep's leg-bone was transformed by careful workmanship into a little masterpiece.

The craftsperson has carved five recesses on the pin head to receive settings of amber. Each recess is surrounded by a carefully carved raised collar.

Three of the amber settings survive; greyish material in the empty recesses may represent the traces of some kind of adhesive.

Two rings have also been carved around the neck and the whole pin has been carefully polished.

It has clearly been made by someone, highly skilled in the working of bone but with access to exotic resources such as amber. Archaeologists have certainly found evidence of varied craft skills being practised at Portmahomack's Pictish Monastery, not far to the north east. Might such a pin have been made among the craft community there?



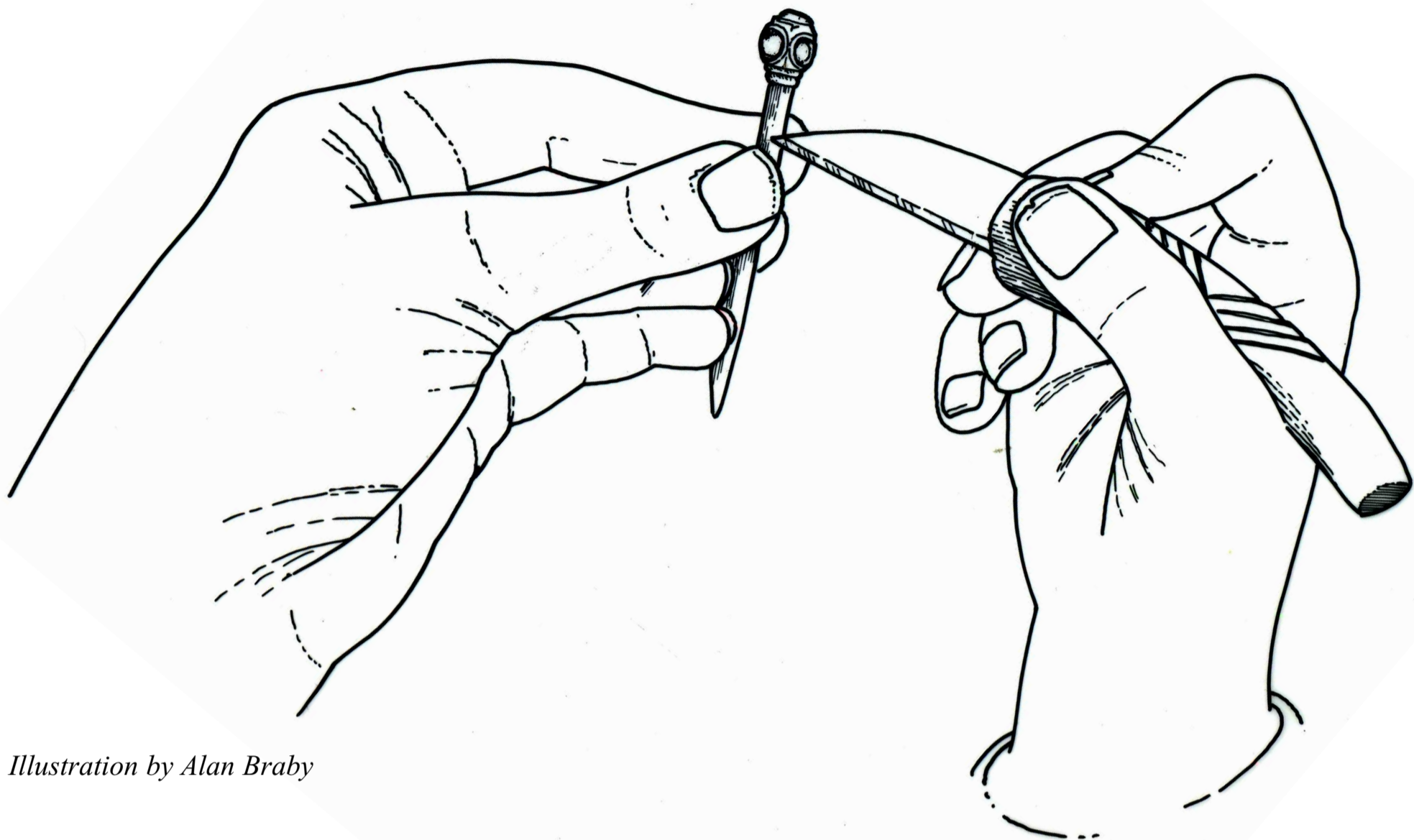


Illustration by Alan Braby

The 'crazed' patterning on the shaft appears to be made up of scratch marks possibly to give it better grip. This suggests the pin was worn a great deal; a cherished item.

At less than 60mm long it inspires many guesses as to its original use. Ideas include a hair pin, a jewellery piece, a body piercing, or most likely a dress pin for lightweight clothing such as a veil or head dress.

What we can guess is that this unique pin was probably made for someone of high status. However, whether it was lost, stolen, or even hidden in the cave remains a fine piece of mystery - but whoever spotted this tiny item during Dr Maclean's excavations must have had keen eyes!