

A Cruciform Brooch, said to be from Colchester

by Barry Ager

In summer 1983 a cruciform brooch (Pl. I) was taken to Colchester and Essex Museum for identification on behalf of a friend by a member of Colchester Metal Detector Club. The brooch was said to be from Colchester.

The copper-alloy brooch (surviving length, 50 mm; surviving width, 28 mm) is damaged; the foot-plate, almost the whole of one wing of the head-plate and the corners of the others, as well as one of the side-knobs, are missing. The head-plate has a square central panel punched in the middle with a single bull's-eye stamp, used also to decorate the top and bottom ends of the remaining, originally rectangular wing and, no doubt, the missing one too. The terminal-knob and extant side-knob are cast in one piece with the brooch and are of flattened oval section. The bow is plain, convex-topped and roughly faceted at the junction with the head-plate.

In the absence of the foot-plate, the brooch is difficult to classify satisfactorily. What does remain approaches most nearly in form the Anglo-Saxon versions of the Midlum type of Dr. Reichstein's classification, all of which have zoomorphic terminals. Parallels are the brooch from Bradwell-on-Sea, though this has a trapezoid instead of a square central panel to the head-plate (Reichstein 1975, 42, Taf. 81, 1); or, with shorter, broader bow, from Lakenheath, Suffolk (*ibid.*, Taf. 85, 6). It also appears more distantly connected with one-off forms from West Stow Heath, Suff. and Little Wilbraham, Cambs., both with flat wings and plain, relatively narrow bows (*ibid.*, Taf. 119, 1 & 3).

If Reichstein's typology is accepted (but see Dickinson 1978, 336-7) and if it is assumed that closeness of form probably indicates approximate contemporaneity, then the Colchester brooch can be assigned to his phase D3 of the latter half of the fifth century. Further, a provisional subdivision of the type proposed by Dr. Hills (1981, 107-8) carries the implication that the typologically later brooches of this type, with integral side-knobs — as on the Colchester and other English brooches just noted — might on the whole be dated more towards the end of the century than those with separately cast ones, although there would certainly have been some chronological overlap. Reichstein's survey of the north European and Scandinavian cruciforms, on which the English dating depends, includes one, though only one, brooch that comes close in form to the Colchester example, from Staurnes, Møre og Romsdal, Norway (Reichstein 1975, Taf. 56, 5). This belongs to his Volstad type and dates to the same phase D3, further supporting the attribution of the Colchester brooch to the second half, if not towards the end, of the fifth century.

The Midlum and Volstad type-groups, are distributed throughout the North Sea region. The greater number of English parallels suggests that it might be an insular product and, since the closest parallel is that from Bradwell-on-Sea, it is possible that it is from a local workshop. Further evidence would really be necessary to confirm this.

This brooch therefore is a useful addition to the corpus of cruciforms from an area of the country where the distribution map for Aberg's groups I-IV has been a near void until recently (Reichstein 1975, Karte 1). The map is further filled out by the pair of group IV from Mucking, Essex, grave 92 (Jones, Evison & Myres 1968, Fig. 3a), two others of the same group from Great Chesterford, Essex, grave 20 (British Museum reg. no. M & LA 1964, 7-2.98 unpublished) and Colchester itself (Hawkes 1981, Fig. 11, left) and two of group I, also from Colchester, together with a spring-coil from a third (*ibid.*, Fig. 13, 1, 4, 5).

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A copper-alloy cruciform brooch, probably from Colchester. Scale 1:1. (Photo: Alison Colchester, Colchester Archaeological Trust Ltd.)

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