THE INTERPRETATION OF NON-FERROUS METALWORKING IN EARLY HISTORIC SCOTLAND

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Introduction

The narratives normally associated with non-ferrous metalworking in Early Historic Scotland (c. AD 500 to AD 800) are usually confined to evidence from important, and probably high status, sites. This is particularly true in studies of the Gaelic and British Kingdoms where evidence of high status metalworking, particularly the production of brooches and use of precious metals, has been recovered from strongly fortified sites with a suite of specific characteristics and sometimes documentary evidence that indicates royal status, such as Dunadd, Argyll. Discussions of metalworking in other areas, for example Pictland, are similarly centred on iconic assemblages, such as that from the Brough of Birsay, Orkney.

This paper considers sites with evidence for Early Historic non-ferrous metalworking in the form of crucibles and moulds. Analysis of this corpus and the associated objects reveals that sites like Dunadd and Mote of Mark in Kirkcudbrightshire only form part of the story. In certain areas, particularly the Western and Northern Isles, non-ferrous metals were worked on a larger number and wider variety of sites than normally considered. The smiths who worked on these sites sometimes produced objects that were not mundane, everyday objects but items of some status hitherto considered to be manufactured only on ‘higher status’ sites. They also used precious metals. A series of possibilities are considered for these emerging patterns that are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

The evidence

Figure 6.1 and the appendix (Table 4) outline the sites with evidence for non-ferrous metalworking believed by the author to date to the Early Historic period.1

1 The dataset and the actual material are more fully discussed in Heald 2005. This article was written in 2008 and does not include material published thereafter. It is
Fig. 6.1: Non-ferrous metalworking sites in Early Historic Scotland (squares represent probable sites and numbers correspond to site numbers in the appendix).