James Curle of Melrose and his collection of Gotlandic antiquities
Kidd, Dafydd
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James Curle of Melrose and His Collection of Gotlandic Antiquities

By Dafydd Kidd and Lena Thunmark-Nylén*


The Gotlandic collection made by James Curle of Melrose, Scotland (1862–1944) is the most outstanding collection of later Iron Age antiquities to have left Scandinavia. It was acquired by the British Museum in 1921, and is to be published in Summary Catalogue form in the near future. Its originator was a Scottish Lawyer and amateur archaeologist who established an international reputation with work in the Romano-British field. He collected actively between 1888–1903 when he frequently visited Stockholm and Visby. The article examines the problems of establishing provenances and find-history for some of his pieces, and explores the extent of his friendship with Swedish archaeologists. Anecdotes are related in the hope that associated names and dates may be familiar to Swedish researchers. The antiquities dealers Florin and Lysholm were known to Curle, but their relationships are obscure. Curle’s collection activities must be seen in the context of Gotlandic antiquarian research at the time, and the island’s relations with the Stockholm authorities. Despite wide-reaching enquiries, concrete scientific data about this important collection remains small, but this presentation may stimulate further archival research and source analysis of material in Sweden.


In July 1921 the Trustees of the British Museum, aided by a very substantial grant from the National Arts-Collection Fund, sanctioned the purchase of the most important collection of Nordic Iron Age objects outside Scandinavia. It was the collection of Gotlandic antiquities formed between 1888 and 1903 by James Curle of Melrose in the southern Lowlands of Scotland (Fig. 1). In 1928 Nils Lithberg published an extensively illustrated article in Fornvännen listing the most significant pieces in the collection which he had seen on display in the Museum (Lithberg 1928). Although some 20 objects from the collection had been illustrated and others mentioned in the 1923 Guide to the early Medieval collections (Smith 1923), the remainder had remained largely unpublished and very few had been recorded by the ATA in Stockholm. The 60th anniversary of Lithberg’s pioneering publication occurred in 1988 and the 70th anniversary of acquisition of the collection is in 1991, so it seems appropriate now to review some of the research problems surrounding the material. These form two inter-related complexes: there are the internal difficulties that result from poor primary documentation, and there are the external relationships of the collection to the history and development of antiquarian research on Gotland. Both aspects have been actively researched in London, Edinburgh, Stockholm and Visby, preparatory to a complete summary publication of the material by the British Museum as part of a major programme of historical research into its European archaeological collections (Kidd & Haith, forthcoming; the background is summarised in Kidd 1989). In the course of such work more questions are raised than definitive answers provided.

James Curle was born in 1862 at Melrose, the eldest of three brothers and four sisters.
Fig. 1. Photographs of James Curle in his early years are rare. This is one said to be of him in 1890. He wrote on 8 November 1936 to Richard Steffen in Visby “I hope all this long account of my ‘plundringar’ won’t weary you. I suppose if I hadn’t bought the things they might have drifted away and been lost sight of but I always intended that they would eventually go to the British Museum where they are available for comparative study.” —Fotografier av James Curle i unga år är sällsynta. Detta sägs vara taget 1890.

His antiquarian training began early as his brother Alexander records.1 “Our father though one could hardly term him an Antiquary yet possessed a great interest in the subject and when he had a day in Edinburgh rarely failed to spend some time of it in conversation with Dr Joseph Anderson then the distinguished Curator of the National Museum of Antiquities . . . As we boys had often, rather unwillingly, to take part in such visits we grew up with an elementary knowledge of the bases of modern archaeology which in consequence we never required to learn. We had in fact absorbed it among the Museum cases in those early days of our lives.” James trained as a lawyer and was destined to enter the family firm of Curle and Erskine. But “... before being received into the family business at Melrose he was sent to travel with our uncle Robert Anderson, a very knowledgeable tourist for several months in Italy . . . This tour, I believe, laid the foundations of firm scholarly reading and interest in art . . . Our parents had yearly taken their holiday travelling on the Continent and Jim after his great experience in Italy had always the urge to go abroad.”

With this cultivated European background it is not surprising that James’s local archaeological studies took a broad view. His most famous archaeological investigation was that of the Roman fort at Newstead from 1905, and his model publication of it in 1911 established his reputation internationally (Curle 1911). What characterised the report, and what was new to Scottish archaeology (although preluded by his own earlier work in the 1890s), were the extensive and detailed comparative studies from both the scientific literature and his own foreign travels in France and Germany undertaken by Curle. His use of expert advisers, his innovative conservation techniques and his taking advice on details from other scholars such as Charles Hercules Read and Reginald Smith of the British Museum, all extended the scope of what he could achieve alone. While his brother Alexander was a professional antiquary, becoming director of the National Museum of Antiquities in 1913, then in 1916 of the Royal Museum of Scotland, in Edinburgh, James remained the perhaps reluctant head of a busy legal practice and deeply involved in local affairs in Melrose. In 1925 he was invited to become a Royal Commissioner for Historical Monuments in recognition of his antiquarian work. He was a Doctor of Letters at Aberdeen University and a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries in both London and Edinburgh. He died on 1st March 1944 at Melrose, a few days before his 82nd birthday. An obituary by Ian Richmond, who knew him personally and was himself destined to be a great Romano-British scholar, paints the picture of an active and humorous man of great learning and modesty (Richmond 1944).

It is not clear now what lay behind James’s

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deep interest in Gotland and its antiquities because no explanation by him survives. A hint may be given in Alexander’s Journal. “He possessed a great desire to visit Scandinavia and ... he paid his first visit to Sweden [in 1888] with [brother] Andy and me joined on, as our father always seemed to think that such family grouping was desirable ... It was not the happiest of combinations. Jim in his research for knowledge and in interviews with Museum directors actually did not appreciate being furnished with a somewhat unintelligent tail.” Family tradition records that the brothers had wanted instead to visit Paris, but their mother saw such a potential for young mischief that Sweden with its reformed religion and more sedate atmosphere was chosen instead. On this occasion Jim and the party paid their first visit to Wisby in the Island of Gotland, and there made the acquaintance of Capt. Lindström, a retired Militia Officer, who awaited the arrival of the steamer from Stockholm in order that he might attach himself to any chance Englishman or American tourist and act as a guide.” This was the beginning of a long friendship. “Jim in this visit found a wealth of relics in the watchmakers or silversmiths shops, and through the instrumentality of the Mayor formed the basis of the remarkable collection of Viking relics he amassed over a number of years.” (Fig. 2.)

Later documents record that the beauty of Gotland impressed the brothers, and perhaps this too drew James back to Sweden six times more between 1889 and 1903 although he also travelled elsewhere, such as to Berlin, the Auvergne and America, during the period. Of the importance of his collection to him there is no doubt: “James ... loved fine books and beside his Gotland relics books were his chief hobby.”

James Curle’s collection, now in the British Museum, consists largely of jewellery and costume accessories and contains almost 400 individually registered pieces and small groups. There are some 17 Bronze-age and early Iron-age objects including a bronze sword from Denmark; 12 of the Roman Iron Age; 30 of the Migration period; about 100 of the Vendel period including the outstanding decorative terminal of a shield-grip (Fig. 3); and about 200 Viking-period objects including an unusual horse-reins guide (Fig. 4); and 20 Medieval items including a group of bone gaming pieces. Not all his coins came to the Museum, but when originally listed they included 12 Roman silver denarii, 12 gold solidi of late Roman and Byzantine origin, with more than 30 Arab dirhams, 60 Anglo-Saxon or German pennies and 2 Byzantine silver coins all of the Viking period.

Enquiries in 1988 revealed that a number of objects collected by James Curle remained in family possession. These include some 10 pieces of Bronze-age metalwork from northern Europe, and some 70 stone and flint artefacts of the Stone and Bronze Ages from Scandinavia (Fig. 5) and other places. There are several ethnographic specimens, and a Palaeolithic handaxe among some provenanced British items. They have never been referred to in print and their discovery sheds new light on the range and scope of James Curle’s interests. This important part of his collection is now being catalogued in the Department of Archaeology in the Royal Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh, by kind permission of their present owner. Among these objects was a 12th-century Viking copper-alloy mount, of a
type usually referred to as a ‘club head’ although some scholars consider it to be the terminal from the grip of a boat’s tiller (Fig. 6).4 It has been generously presented to the Trustees of the British Museum by Mrs Barbara Linehan, James Curle’s daughter (MLA 1989, 9–3,1).

About half the Iron-age objects have provenances in 35 different parishes on Gotland or were bought in Visby, and the bulk of material without provenance is of Gotlandic type. Beyond the island 2 gold bracteates come from Förslöv in Skåne; there is a cruciform brooch from Stångebro in Östergötland; and 3 brooches have an Uppland provenance. A 6th-century copper-alloy square-headed
brooch from Västergötland is known only from a reference made to it in 1904 by Salin (Salin 1904, p. 61, fig. 130, p. 366, no. 130). It did not come to the British museum and its present whereabouts are unknown. Curle himself never excavated in Sweden, and he clearly realised the problems of relying on the word of middlemen, themselves often dealing with uneducated labourers. “Although I tried to get the names of the places the things came from we cannot be certain that they are correct ... all the findspots I had I passed on to the British Museum ... I suspect in no case did I get more than the name of the parish.”

The nature of his sources must cast doubt in principle on the integrity of alleged closed groups. There are about a dozen such, ranging from objects “found together” or said to have come from one grave, to several groups of hack-silver which were mounted together on blocks but about which nothing else is now known concerning their original find-circumstances. A Viking silver hoard said to have come from Dalhem seems internally consistent (Fig. 7), as do several minor grave groups containing accessories, pins and brooches. But an unusual grave group from Kopparsvik which is said to have included a silver armlet of hexagonal section cannot be verified. Four others from the site vary in their degree of credibility.

While direct evidence about the accumulation of the collection is lacking, invaluable information comes from letters such as the correspondence with Charles Hercules Read of the British Museum. Those examples which survive from the 1890s give anecdotal details of some of the more interesting additions to his collection, and give the dates of and shed circumstantial light on his trips to Sweden. But Curle kept details of his sources and how he acquired his objects quite secret. His changing tones over the years reveal the attitudes of a true collector. There was the disappointed: “I haven’t got very much since I saw you last” of May 1897, and the more satisfied: “I got one or two good brooches in Stockholm last summer [1896] especially good—silver of the Teutonic type.” In May 1898 he wrote exultantly of “one of my latest acquisi-
Gotlandic collection and it has been most successful. It really looks as well again and I am much obliged to you for suggesting him and facilitating his coming. It seems a sad way to spend a holiday sitting in a stuffy room sticking pins on tablets but he poor soul seems to enjoy himself...

Presumably it was at this time of radical rearrangement in drawers and on blocks that the collection assumed the physical shape in which it was sold two decades later. The arrangement was recorded in a brief preliminary list drawn up perhaps as early as 1902, and labelled “for purchase some day”. The British Museum took a long view at that period of potential acquisitions. The same letter may hold a clue as to why Curle seems to have lost interest so soon afterwards in adding to his collection: “I am working hard to get my affairs in some sort of order before leaving

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Fig. 8. Cast gilt copper-alloy disc brooch from the Vendel period decorated in Style II (no. 277). D: 3.8 cm. — Vendeltida gjutet skivformigt spänne i förgylld kopparlegering, dekorerat i stil II. (Foto: British Museum.)

Fig. 9. 5th-century beaker of olive-green, translucent glass (no. 381). H: 20.5 cm. — Bägare av olivgrönt, genomskinligt glas; 400-talet. (Foto: British Museum.)

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home on 16th. I shan’t be sorry to get the wedding over and find myself in Italy where I hope there will be some summer weather in store for us.” This trip to the Mediterranean world appears a turning-point, and he writes on 2 December of the same year: “We are having very dull weather here which I don’t appreciate after Italian skies ...” By 1905 Curle became involved in the excavation of the Roman fort at Newstead which made his reputation. His activities had shifted definitively away from Scandinavian archaeology to that of the Roman world and its influence on the native population, a theme in which he had long been interested.

Later developments regarding his Gotlandic collection are largely undocumented, but it may be assumed that during Curle’s visits to London, his old correspondent Read raised the possibilities of purchasing the collection. The Museum was at that time quite inexplicably lacking in Iron Age objects from Scandinavia. The personal collection of J. J. A. Worsaae had been purchased in 1869, but consisted largely of earlier material. The collection of A. H. Cocks, dating largely from the 4th to the 10th centuries and originating in his own excavations and chance purchases in Norway, was acquired in 1891. Despite the lack of scientific background still the Curle collection represented a quite unique collection of material from one small geographical area. And, as was noted at the time, legislation made the export of antiquities of any importance from Sweden increasingly difficult. Early in 1920 it was confidently suggested by Read that the purchase would take place in that year. It was not to be. By the end of negotiations in 1921 relationships seem to have been rather strained. On 9 March Curle wrote of the sale: “I find it very difficult to make up my mind and I rather hate the idea of parting. I would in any case like to retain the glass beaker”, but he named a price. Read replied tartly: “I cannot begin to bargain with you. I do not think it decent. Further, if these things are to come here in my time this is my last opportunity as I am retiring in a few months and I should like

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to ‘clean up’ before I leave. But I must say that I do not think you ought to withdraw the glass in the circumstances.” This haste may have a bearing on the subsequent problems of establishing documentation for the collection, for, quite coincidentally Henry Oldland was pensioned off soon after—a man who, second only to Curle, must have known the collection intimately. In June 1921 a detailed inventory of what would be acquired had been compiled, noting the position of objects in drawers or on blocks. This list bears a comment that the “place of find in many cases is noted on the back of the wooden mounts”. The provenances were not themselves recorded at this time on the lists, but the mounts presumably gave the findspots and dates of acquisition later written into the register. At some stage they disappeared, leaving the register as the almost sole record at the end of a long sequence of events which might have resulted in the details being garbled. But in 1986, thanks to the energetic interest of the then editor of the NACF Magazine, an article about current research on the Curle collection was published (Kidd 1986). As a result, three hitherto unknown manuscript notebooks relating to James Curle’s collecting activities which included an Inventory of my collection of Scandinavian Antiquities all of which are found in the
Island of Gotland unless otherwise mentioned, were uncovered (Kidd & Ritchie 1988). They were generously presented to the Trustees of the British Museum in November 1987, in memory of James Curle, by his granddaughter, Lady Cameron of Lochbroom.

The Inventory was written by Curle himself. Internal evidence suggests it was begun after 1901, which is the latest date given for an acquisition, and before 1903 when objects were purchased that do not appear with others of their type covered by the lists. Some individual outstanding pieces acquired before that date are missing, as are whole classes of objects such as all 26 Viking penannular brooches (Fig. 10) and the 11 copper-alloy armrings (Fig. 11). The Inventory generally contains some 80 items of data not included in the register. A page of pins, for example, records provenances for many of them and preserves information otherwise lost (Fig. 12). Frequently dates or places of purchase recorded in the Inventory do not occur in the register. Sometimes the register has apparently misplaced provenances within a group or sequence when compared with the Inventory. Evidence that the Inventory was not finished also comes from individual entries: one of four gold Vendel-period bracteate pendants is clearly recorded as having been purchased in Visby in 1896, but three similar examples following that entry have the actual year in the 1890s omitted, while a silver bracteate fragment of the same type omits the decade entirely. Presumably Curle intended coming back to fill the dates in, otherwise he would not have left the gap so obviously.

Between the pages of the Inventory are preserved by chance a group of papers. Some are from Salin and record a routine exchange of photographs. Far more exciting is a letter written to Curle by the antiquary Richard Steffen of Visby as late as 2 November 1936. He sought further information about how the Gotlandic collection, which he had seen displayed during a visit in August 1935 to London, was acquired. The main purpose of his questioning seems to have been related to the problem of dating the earliest phase of the important Viking cemetery at Kopparsvik, to the south of Visby, and whether any Vendel-period material in the Curle collection had come from there. His letter is brief and to the point, and he asks many of the general questions about the collection that have intrigued researchers for decades, but which were apparently beyond the staff of the British Museum to formulate earlier. Curle’s reply of 8 November 1936 was re-discovered in 1988 among Steffen’s papers in the Landsarkivet, Visby (the letter collection of the “Starbäck-Steffenska arkivet”). The letter consists of 15 small, handwritten sides, and the information contained in it is quoted extensively throughout this article. It stands above all as a summary of how Curle viewed his own collection and of what he regarded as significant in its accumulation. Such a connected narrative is invaluable, but it must be evaluated as the reminiscences of a scholar in his mid-70s, some 40 years after the events he is describing and some 30 years after the end of his active involvement. It is clear from this letter, and from a second one dated 17 December, that in marshalling his thoughts Curle consulted papers at present unlocated. He declined Steffen’s suggestion to write a scientific paper

Fig. 11. Viking-period copper-alloy armring (no. 311). D: 7.5 cm. — Vikingatida armring av kopparle­gering. (Foto: British Museum.)

472. Pin of yellow bronze (scratched) 5 3/8

473. Pin of green bronze 5 3/8


475. Do brown - 3 3/4 with solid head.

476-77 Pair of pins 2 5/8 Leviu 1892.

478-79 Pair of pins 3 1/8 also small pin.

480. 2 5/8 from Nygårds Vasterheida 1898.


484. bronze pin 2 1/2 Burs.

485. Do 2 3/4 end broken.

495. Do 2 5/8 in Wistby.

Fig. 12. Page from the Inventory of his collection written by James Curle, c. 1902. — Sida ur James Curles egen förteckning över sina samlingar; ca 1902. (Foto: British Museum.)

about his collection in Gotländskt Arkiv on the grounds that he would have to visit London to refresh his memory about the individual objects. This may imply that scientific documentation still in his possession was not extensive. But he also says: "... nor for the moment do I seem to have the material to write an article on how I made my collections", implying that
it might be possible to get further circumstantial information at another time. Such papers remain to be discovered. Steffen appears to have been an enterprising researcher. He made contact with a retired Capt. Petersson of the Gotlands Bolaget who remembered Curle. But little factual information resulted other than the knowledge that at least one foreman in the Steamship Company was trading in antiquities. More important were conversations he had with people who remembered the Kopparsvik finds made in the 1890s. The reminiscences of one Hamrin have proved of value in current research on the topography of the site and the circumstances of finds.

The primary sources of information, then, about Curle’s collecting activities are diverse and fragmentary. But perhaps little of scientific value remains to be uncovered in a systematic way because the collection was accumulated as opportunity and chance allowed. Curle was very aware of the importance of provenances and closed groups. But he could only collect material available on the market which was almost entirely without a scientific context. Such considerations shaped his policy for collection. “I was very much interested in the evolution of the Gotland ornaments and I spent a great deal of time studying the collection in Stockholm. In these days everything went to Stockholm.” His personal friendship with the Swedish protagonists of the typological approach also strongly influenced Curle’s attitude towards the selection of objects for his collection. Of one animal head brooch Curle writes to Read as early as November 1891: “it almost makes my series complete ... I also have a pretty complete series of the round box fibulae from the small flat brooch to the heavy ornament of the late iron age.” (Fig. 13.) Some of them are absolutely outstanding examples of their type (Fig. 14). Also, Curle’s notebooks record his art-historical and stylistic studies from published works, such as on bracteates which fascinated him. Touchingly, it is in the middle of them that Curle records the death of his father which occurred as he was at his studies during the night of 4 January 1897, while he sat at home. The same notebooks contain detailed notes, probably fair-copies, he made of particularly interesting objects in the SHM. The deficiency of his documentation is character-
istic of both private and public collections at the time, and largely dictated how such material might be presented to the public, as he observed. His collection in this respect directly reflects the philosophy, prevalent among the professionals when it was built up, that the objects should speak for themselves.

Information from contemporary publications is sadly lacking, and Curle published virtually nothing himself. “I always meant to write about Gotlandska Saker but when I got so many pieces it was difficult and it was otherwise so well studied in Stockholm ... I am always sorry that I did not write a paper on a small bracteate [sic] found at Roma.” He published a single paper in 1895 on the art-historical background of three outstanding fifth-century brooches: two from Levide purchased in 1892 and one purchased in Stockholm in 1893 (Curle 1895, pp. 292-300). Twenty years later Curle wrote to Read: “Peers [the Secretary] has been urging me to write a paper on my Gotland things for the London Antiquaries. Is it worth doing? I have always felt that I could add hardly anything to the papers done by better men in Sweden.” But this was in April 1916 when, for Curle as for other scholars, the horrors of the war pushed such matters into the background. Curle was referring to general art-historical studies, and references by both Montelius and Salin to specific items in his collection occur only in footnotes or minor references in their publications from the two decades around the turn of the century. The majority of items were published only after their exhibition in the British Museum, by Lithberg (1928), Nerman (1935 and 1969/75), and Stenberger (1947 and 1958). They were probably reliant on information in the ATA and in London, and, although pursuing their researches at a time when living memory extended back to the period of the original finds, none of these authors appears to have discovered further details. Perhaps there was nothing to find, or perhaps they never asked. The problem of unresolved and conflicting provenances based on hearsay is exemplified in the case of an outstanding glass beaker (Fig. 9). This was said by Montelius in 1897 to have come from Hablingbo, and the provenance was repeated on photographs in the ATA and in notes of the Curle collection made before 1921. Another photograph in the ATA followed by Lithberg in 1928 ascribed it to the neighbourhood of Hemse. But by 1935 Nerman provenanced it Barshaldershed in Grötlingbo parish, although whether as the result of a mistake or of private information is unknown. (Its most recent publication is Stjernquist 1985-86, pp. 158-159 no. 19 and Fig. 13, with full references.) Curle’s own account in 1936 adds only circumstantial details of its acquisition. “I had heard of its being found in Gotland and then I learned that it had been sold. Some three months later when I came to Stockholm [1891] I went to see [the coin dealer] Holmberg and was delighted when he took down a box from a shelf and produced the beaker.”

Documentary research can establish new details about even the most well-published items such as a 5th-century, gilt-silver bow brooch with cast Style I animal ornament (Lithberg 1928, Fig. 104). It was purchased by Curle in Stockholm from the dealer Bukowski for 150 kronor in 1896. Curle mistakenly recorded that it came from Öland, probably because of references to a very good parallel from that island. It came from the collection of Christian Hammer, where it has the num-

Fig. 14. Viking-period composite box brooch (no. 284). D: 5.7 cm.—Vikingatida dösspänne. (Foto: British Museum.)
ber 1358 in his catalogue of 1870 and the provenance “found on Gotland”. A replica was made for the SHM. But Hammer, who was a jeweller and silversmith by training, himself appears to have copied it before that, perhaps for an exhibition in 1866 when he had copies of other objects in his collection made. While there appears to be no catalogue of that exhibition available the copy survives. It was discovered in a street market on the Continent and presented to the Trustees of the British Museum by a well-wisher of such antiquarian research (MLA 1989,9-4,1).

A number of important primary documents in the ATA record objects in the Curle collection before they reached him. Papers there show, for example, that a small group of 7th-century items purchased by Curle in 1898 were originally in the possession of Major A. A. Kyllander (Fig. 8) and that a late Viking animal-head brooch purchased by Curle in Stockholm in 1901 was owned by Jemaima Nygren of Pavals in Lärbro parish in 1887. Two outstanding brooches were purchased from Bukowski, the Stockholm dealers in 1896, which came from the famous Hammer collection. Each has the word HAMMER in black ink on the back which clearly identifies its origin. These are the only two objects which have significant manuscript labels on them. There is otherwise very little evidence for Curle’s objects ever having been in previous collections. However some objects bear a sequence of numbers in yellow ink prefixed by the letter G., running from 11 to 44. A common-sense solution is that this was a system of numbering adopted by Curle in the early 1890s, influenced in his choice of colour by the Gotlands Fornsal system. But there are considerable difficulties in detail of this interpretation, not least since several of the numbers are noted without comment by Curle in the Inventory. The pieces may be part of a larger group acquired from another collector by Curle after 1893, the latest date given for a find in the series. Further research must settle this point.

Many undated early photographs in the ATA are of secondary value. They are prints which were later inscribed in a clerk’s hand with their ownership and sometimes with their provenance. Curle’s relations with the Swedish archaeological establishment were cordial, and exchanges of information and photographs regularly took place. This probably accounts for a small series of invaluable photographs with provenances written in Curle’s handwriting on the original background; but these are not an unambiguous source of information. A photograph of this type, for example, shows two gold bracteates: a large Vendel-period one above a small 5th-century example, arranged not quite symmetrically (Fig. 15). The findspot of Roma is usually ascribed to the lower piece. If the almost illegible word, Gotland, is considered, then the spacing of the words may equally apply to both pieces, being symmetrical with its centre on the upper, larger of the two bracteates. On such desperate shreds of evidence does this research thrive. But the records in the ATA are not necessarily complete. There appears to be no photograph of the subject of a letter from Salin in November 1901: “For the photograph of the Gotlandic brooch I send thanks … it is the first specimen I have seen of that type.” Even some of Curle’s well-known types have extremely interesting decoration, and, as recent studies have shown, are rare examples (Fig. 16). Curle was generous with some information about his material. Salin had written in 1896 to Curle about a sword-grip mount of the Vendel period of which he wanted illustrations from both sides. He was “working on a great essay on ornamentation” and it might be included. In 1895 when Salin published a gold bracteate acquired by the SHM from Förslov in Skåne, he knew that two others from the same find and struck by the same die were already in Curle’s possession. The SHM had acquired its example for 75 kronor in 1893 from Daniel Holmberg, the coin-dealer who had sold Curle his glass beaker earlier. Perhaps he handled all three, but no information appears to survive on this point.

Thus there is no question about there being any secrecy over Curle’s active collecting. Quite the contrary. In 1896 Curle wrote to Montelius thanking him for kindnesses during
a visit to Stockholm, and for sending a brooch and a replica of the famous Åsum bracteate (which is still in the collection). Montelius, Salin and Hildebrand all visited Melrose to see the collection. When he visited Stockholm, on occasion Curle may have stayed with a Per Söderberg. Solid research is required to establish whether this is a relation of the celebrated antiquary, but it would not seem unlikely. Such pleasant contacts did not stop there. Curle presented the SHM with the figure of a bronze lion he had purchased in Visby in 1893, and in 1899 with the replica of an outstanding gilt copper-alloy disc brooch he had recently added to his collection. In 1901 he presented part of a 5th-century, gold pendant decorated with filigree and granulation, found just to the north of Visby (Fig. 17). “On one of my last visits to Visby [1901] I was told that a man had a gold ornament for sale. So I went to see it. It was half of a lunette-shaped ornament which I was familiar with in silver but I had never seen in gold. I bought it for a small sum and took it to the Museum in Stockholm where Professor Montelius produced the other half which they had acquired fifteen years before [in 1885 for 30 kronor from L. Kolmodin]. I was glad to be able to complete it.” In exchange for the fragment Curle requested an example of the multiple-construction animal-head brooch with an openwork top which his collection lacked. But such a type was so rare that the KVHAA voted instead to give him something else he wanted, 80 duplicate silver coins with a value of 100 kronor: 20 Arab dirhams from Sweden, and the rest German and Anglo-Saxon pennies from a Viking-age hoard found in 1900 at Mannegård in Lye parish.  

Nevertheless, Curle kept details from his Swedish friends. For example, he wrote to Read in May 1897: “I have also got—but this

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Fig. 15. Early photograph inscribed by Curle giving the provenance of one or both gold bracteate pendants illustrated (nos. 361 and 366). D: 6.3 cm. — Tidigt foto med Curles anteckning rörande provenien­ensen för de två avbildade guldbakteaterna.
is a secret—two gold bracteats not very fine ones but as you know anything of the kind is very scarce. You needn’t mention this as I don’t want Bror Hildebrand to drop on tbc finders.” The reason for such reticence may lie in the curious world of subterfuge and deception which surrounded the Swedish trade in fine antiquities at this time. When the average wage for an agricultural labourer was some 2 kronor per day, the financial windfall to be gained from a good find of antiquities might be considerable. One of Curle’s least spectacular pieces, a late, small, animal-head brooch with all-over pitted decoration, bears a price-label of 8 kronor. A small spiral ring of gold rod, which may be identifiable with one now in the Curle collection, changed hands in Visby for 9 kronor, sold to Florin. But in Stockholm prices were much higher because of the dealer’s mark-up. A letter to Montelius of 29 March 1896 from O. V. Wennersten (for several decades the link between Gotland and Stockholm’s antiquarian establishment, as local representative for the central authorities) very loosely rendered here, sets the scene. (This letter and the two following are in the ATA.)

I only acquired the pieces that I am now sending to save them from the fate of going abroad through local dealers. It is said that bronze objects are found on every occasion that graves are dug in the churchyard at Havdhem. Last summer I induced the local gravedigger to offer, through Rev. Jacobsson there, a couple of such finds to the Museum. In the last few years however, most of what has been found there has been bought by a Mr A. Florin, Tranhusgatan 18, Visby. Similarly objects from another churchyard in Gotland (Burs, where antiquities were found every year, especially when digging on the north side of the churchyard) have ended up in the hands of a Dealer Lysholm in Hemse. Most of the objects in question would have by-passed the Collections of the State. This is also done with other old cemeteries in Gotland, for instance Grötlingbo on the border with Fide. This latter place, I believe I have mentioned once before in a letter addressed to the Museum. This came about when I learnt on a trip through the said parish that quite a lot of graves had been disturbed. After that, on another journey through there, I had the opportunity to watch how they went for the graves when digging gravel to see whether they contained anything that could be sold. And our old Gotland relics of the past deserve a better fate than to be destroyed by farmers and to be brought abroad …

Both Burs and Grötlingbo are frequent provenances in the Curle collection, and the objects from there were acquired by him in the early 1890s. But significantly Havdhem is not recorded among his provenanced pieces.

One very important find known to Wennersten was from a complex, part of which entered Curle’s collection in 1896. This prized purchase was a set of 1st–2nd century copper-alloy mounts from a drinking horn. Some of the heads of the decorative rivets on the chain are covered in silver sheet or inlaid.

_Fornvännen_ 85 (1990)
with red and blue glass. Curle corresponded with Salin about it that year and sent to the SHM a water-colour (Fig. 18) and then photographs of the pieces. They are part of a grave find from Linde made in 1896 and Curle records in his Inventory that “two were found in the grave but I only recovered one”. Further details of it, seen from the Gotlandic point of view, are recorded in two letters to Montelius from Wennersten. One is dated 16 December 1896:

I send herewith the photograph of the drinking horn mount from Linde. It is said to have been found at Myrungs at the same time as the pieces sold to England, of which the Museum already owns a drawing (Fig. 18). This mount was bought from Myrungs by Lysholm, and it is reported that he has sold it or promised it to a Dane for 40 kronor. According to the information I have obtained they
were probably found during the removal of a large “heap of stones”. It’s probably particularly when taking away and digging out such, that the farmers out there have good luck. At Myrungs, you see, there is a rather fine cemetery. That “good luck” in parishes around Hemse has been quite profitable is best demonstrated by the fact that Mr Lysholm whom I mentioned, according to his own testimony, could buy things for up to 100 or 200 kronor a day during his first time in Hemse; certainly neither he nor anyone else can do this nowadays. I think that a proper investigation at Myrungs would reduce even more the private excavation and export out there.

This was followed four days later by Wennersten’s second letter.

If you do write to [Lysholm] I would be very grateful if my name and my sending the photograph of the drinking horn mount were not mentioned; if that were the case I’m afraid I would lose the opportunity to observe his future purchases. I’ve got a promise from the said L. to obtain photographs of his antiquities, if I pay for the photography. I’ve also got a promise that I can look through his coins. If he gets the idea that he might get into trouble through this, I think it would be difficult to obtain any information from him. And he is so smart, that one cannot get a legal reason for prosecution. The mount that went to England has gone through Florin* (*according to Lysholm), who in this case got in there before Lysholm, and this has brought those gentlemen to an all but friendly relationship with each other. This is quite advantageous, for if I have weighed them up right, they will lie in wait for each other and bring about mutual unpleasantness. Furthermore I believe that after this Florin is wary of sending anything abroad. I’ve threatened that I will tell Prof. Lindström, on whom he is very dependent, that he is selling one or two of the better pieces abroad in this fashion, and as he is fully aware that this could do him harm, he has now promised in writing that he ‘henceforth will send everything to the Museum’.

This last letter introduces what is one of the most intriguing questions surrounding the Curle collection. How was it actually acquired? Such treasures as the Vendel-period bracteates must have originally formed part of known hoards, and were either discovered in advance of the main find or were purloined from larger groups now in the SHM or Gotlands Fornsal. Research into their typology in detail, and documentation of objects from the same place found at the same time will reveal more about associations. But this will be a laborious process so long after the event, and it remains a mystery that such investigations were not undertaken earlier in view of Curle’s Swedish friendships and contacts.

A small yet choice part was purchased in Stockholm, but he wrote that the larger part came “from Gotland direct”. Curle visited Visby seven times in all, but “I never stayed more than a few days and my last three visits at least were only for the day”. He wrote in 1936 of the earlier “happy days in Visby and på Landet. When I was young it wasn’t easy to get about. There were no cars and the railway to Hemse was not very rapid or very comfortable travelling, and I regret that I did not see more of the country churches though I recall Barlingbo and Folingbo and Dalhem.” On his travels Curle probably did pick up single objects of particular merit (Fig. 19) or rarity. But only rarely are these noted in his Inventory, like a hinged copper-alloy belt-mount of the 5th century bought in Hemse (Fig. 20). Of the bulk of his collection he writes: “had I bought them on the spot I should have had some amazing tales to tell”. Some purchases were made quite by chance: “I remember getting a very nice silver armlet (Vikingatid) from an officer on the steamer.” It must be concluded that Curle had a regular middleman acting as his agent in the acquisition of much of his collection. It is unlikely to have been his friend Capt. Lindström of Visby, as his name occurs individually in the Inventory as a source of rare gifts (Fig. 21). Purchases made in Visby itself are specifically noted, but are not remarkably common. For instance, when referring to three outstanding disc-on-bow brooches, figured by Lithberg (1928, fig. 112–114), Curle writes in a non-committal fashion: “As regards the jewelled brooches... I bought the finest of them in Wisby in 1903... from a man who I think was a photographer and who lived not very far from the...
harbour. I got no information as to where these pieces were found ... The brooch on the right seems to have come from Hejnum” [and was acquired in 1896].

But, as early as 1891, Curle “heard” of the find of the outstanding glass beaker he subsequently purchased a few months later, when in Stockholm—a clear implication that he had a correspondent on the island. In 1891 he refers to “an importation of things from Gotland” including “a middle Iron Age grave” in terms that imply a package. In March 1895 he received “three brooches from the north a few weeks ago”, and he was sent his horn mounts in 1896. All this while he was in Scotland, and employing an agent. The hypothesis is further supported by a remark he made to Read in February 1895. It had been suggested by an English scholar that a group of early Medieval dice and gaming pieces (Fig. 22) acquired in 1893 were not from Boge, as was claimed, but came from northern Scandinavia: “I myself got them on the island and ... throughout my dealings with the man from whom they were purchased I have seen nothing to make me suspect that he gathered antiquities for my benefit from other parts of the country.” A clear statement. If the agent lived on Gotland his identity would be revealed by saying where he lived if outside Visby which was presumably large enough for him to remain anonymous. Therefore it may be inferred that the town was not where his agent lived. Objects were saved against Curle’s coming, but objects sent by post could presumably only have been sold on the basis of first sending photographs from which Curle selected what he wanted. Since it is known that Lysholm was engaged in photographing objects and also sold Wennersten prints, is it possible that Lysholm was Curle’s agent? Perhaps this might explain why Hemse, where Lysholm lived, is casually mentioned in Curle’s account of his visits to Gotland. On the other hand Wennersten’s letter about the horn mounts suggests Lysholm denied having sent them to Curle. Curle never said who it was. It appears not to have been the other strong possibility, the antiquities dealer, Florin. In response to a direct question from Steffen, Curle unambiguously wrote: “Though I never saw Florin or had as far as I remember any communication with him, I think a good deal of the collection must have
This statement also implies there was a “third man” involved. It is remarkable that in no surviving papers does Curle reveal more about his source of objects. In his Inventory his lawyer’s caution probably warned against naming people who were presumably still alive. On the other hand it is remarkable that Curle never met face to face with such an important dealer as Florin, who actually lived in Visby. Is it credible? Or was his agent so jealous of competition? All this is circumstantial evidence, but in 1928 Lithberg wrote that we should probably never know about Curle’s main supplier (Lithberg 1928, p. 206). Today perhaps we are justified in looking more deeply into the activities of these antiquities dealers, should relevant papers survive.

To make clear the significance of the Curle collection and to put such important material in its local context is difficult. The results are like a jigsaw puzzle where many pieces are either missing, or obscured, or only present in outline. Witnesses who could fill the picture are now silenced, and only their papers may remain, if recognised, to record some details. Much background historical information about the objects will come to light as a result of further detailed analysis of documents in public archives in Stockholm and Visby, and from the discovery of relevant papers in private possession. Information at present available in London about every individual object will be published in Summary Catalogue form in due course. But this is only a beginning.

The detailed scientific study of individual objects in the Curle collection continues with the keen interest and active collaboration of the British Museum. A number of important recent studies, Swedish doctoral theses, have concentrated on the detailed typological study of groups of individual artefacts (Blumbergs 1982, Carlsson 1983, Thunmark-Nylén 1983, Näsman 1984). Individual pieces from the collection regularly feature in papers and monographs. The latest is that of a truly marvellous 2nd-century gold bead published last year in *Gotländskt Arkiv* which is put in its Swedish context by an accomplished young scholar (Andersson 1989). For there is a class of object in James Curle’s very choice collection which is technically or artistically so outstanding as to rival anything which Stockholm or Visby can display. James Curle was a true connoisseur in the grand European tradition of British antiquaries which flourished before...
1914. One of the enduring legacies, and one of the most delightful seen from London's point of view, is the opportunity that such a great collection affords today for Anglo-Swedish co-operation and friendship. This is precisely the spirit in which it was established by James Curle of Melrose, almost a century ago.7

Notes

* The English text is the responsibility of D. Kidd; discoveries made in Stockholm and Visby and copies of documents sent from there by L. Thunmark-Nylén form the basis of it.

1 Almost all the early personal information about James Curle derives from a memorial written by his brother Alexander in his private Journal, dated 22 March 1944. This and other papers are now in the library of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, Edinburgh, the gift of Mrs C. Curle, and I wish to thank Dr Graham Ritchie for his kind assistance. I owe the reference to the late Lt.-Col. Alexander Curle and the late Mrs Cecil Curle FSA. I wish to acknowledge their protracted help and good will and that of all the Curle family in these researches. I am indebted to Mrs Barbara Linehan for the photograph of James Curle.

2 I wish to thank Mrs Christian Pinnan for family information over a number of years.

3 I am most grateful to Mrs Barbara Linehan for permission to publish these items and to Dr R. B. K. Stevenson for his good offices in arranging their recording. Dr Alison Sheridan is cataloguing the lithic material and Trevor Cowie the bronzes. I am grateful to them both for generous access to their preliminary results and analyses—a further example of international co-operation stimulated by the Curle collection.

4 Trevor Cowie first identified the piece in Fig. 6 and has most kindly agreed to this being included here.

5 I am grateful to Dr Jan Peder Lamm for his great assistance with the Hammer Collection. A number of important discoveries including the existence of a manuscript catalogue were made during his original research, stimulated by the British Museum’s enquiry. They are published by Lamm (1984a; 1984b).

6 I wish to thank Professor Brita Malmer for details of the original find.

7 In addition to those already named I should like to thank Dr Agneta Lundström and Dr Anders Carlsson for their advice and encouragement.

Abbreviations

ATA Antikvarisk-Topografiska Arkivet, Stockholm
KVHAA Kungliga Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien, Stockholm
MLA Department of Medieval and Later Antiquities, British Museum
NACF National Arts-Collection Fund, London
SHM Statens historiska museum (Museum of National Antiquities), Stockholm

References

James Curle of Melrose och hans samling av gotländska fornsaker


Trots att Curle ledde en stor advokatpraktik ägnade han mycket av sin tid åt sina antikvariska intressen. Han blev Royal Commissioner for Historical Monuments 1925, och var ledamot Society of Antiquaries i både London och Edinburgh.


Samlingen presenterades visserligen redan 1928 för en svensk läsekrets (Lithberg 1928), men nu ägnas den förnyat intresse i samband med en revision av de komparativa samlingarna i British Museum och med anledning av nyfunna arkivalier. I många fall kan man förmoda att föremål i Curlesamlingen harrör från slutna fynd, och det är viktigt att så långt möjligt sätta in dem i sitt sammanhang. Denna forskning – i samarbete mellan svenska och engelska forskare – är ännu i sin början; resultaten kommer att publiceras i katalogform.

Hur Curle bedrev sitt samlande är inte känt i detalj, en del köptes i antikhandeln i Visby och Stockholm, annat genom mellanhänder, som försåg honom både vid hans personliga besök och per post. Att närmare klarlägga förvärvsvägarna är en av uppgifterna i arbetet att avlocka den viktiga Curlesamlingen maximal information.