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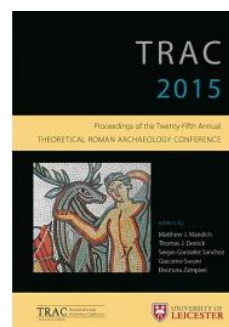
From Treasured Items to Trash? The Use of Brooches in Roman Cornwall in the Creation of Identity and Social Memory

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Introduction

Adornment items, such as brooches, were part of the language of identity, which could have been read and understood by other members of society in both late Pre-Roman Iron Age and Roman Britain. They were a visual symbol forming part of the wearer's social and perhaps political persona, and can be used to explore how an individual or a group perceived themselves and how they wished to be perceived by others (Jundi and Hill 1998: 125; Olson 2008: 1). The conscious choice of brooch style, display over functionality for example, can provide us with insights into changing attitudes towards bodily adornment; and how the social and political personas of individuals or groups altered and evolved over time.

   This paper will examine the use and function of brooches from Roman sites within Cornwall (Fig. 1), and their role in the (re)creation of identity and socio-corporeality, defined here as the social display of the body. I aim to show that brooch use in Cornwall increased shortly after the Roman military arrived in the south-west peninsula and will argue that the choice of more decorative forms suggests that these objects were more than just functional items and played a significant role in the process of (re)negotiation of identity in the early Roman period. Many of the brooches appear to have been curated and, furthermore, I would like to examine the idea that, for a section of the native population at least, these objects were imbued with social memory and may have acted as heirlooms before their final deposition.

Beyond the Edge of Empire?

Under the Romanisation paradigm, Cornwall and the lands traditionally ascribed to the Dumnonii have been considered largely 'un-Romanised'. A famous passage by Hencken (1932: 194) describes the simple stone structures which persisted in Roman Cornwall from the Iron Age, and suggests an impoverished people who chose to continue with their simple way of life rather than embrace the comfort of a Roman lifestyle. This image of Roman Cornwall has endured until fairly recently (see Cripps 2006). The lack of developed urban centres, villa estates, temple sites, and the low level of engagement with imported ceramics and other materials from the Roman world has been highlighted by researchers and interpreted through the Romanisation model to suggest that Cornwall was never fully integrated into the province of *Britannia* (Cripps 2006: 12). It has been argued that the Late Iron Age population of Cornwall lacked a clear social

hierarchy and so it follows that with no elite members of society to negotiate their place in the new power structures the Roman style infrastructure seen elsewhere in the province failed to develop (see Todd 1987: 167; Cripps 2006; 2007: 153). This model, however, negates the agency of the lower tiers of society to affect change for themselves.

In recent years, the Romanisation paradigm has been heavily critiqued. Roman culture is now recognised for its malleability and fluidity as an entity that was itself changed by contact with other cultures (Gosden and Lock 2003). New theoretical concepts such as discrepant identity theory and globalisation have been developed which recognise that interactions in the provinces of the Empire were far more complex than the simplistic dichotomy of Roman versus Native. What is seen as 'Roman' elsewhere cannot be used as a benchmark for 'Romanisation' in Britain and it should be expected that different people had different relations with Rome and the cultural aspects associated with the Empire (Woolf 1995; Hingley 2005; Mattingly 2004; 2006; 2011). These new theoretical models put forward the idea that people interpreted and adapted aspects of the Roman cultural package to suit their needs and those of their communities.

In line with these theoretical shifts, more emphasis is now being placed on artefacts and their use in the creation of identity. A number of artefact studies have been undertaken in the last fifteen years, all of which have helped to provide a more nuanced view of the Empire and the use of material culture (e.g. Swift 2000; 2003; Pitts 2004; 2010; Cool 2006; Hingley and Willis 2007; Eckardt 2014). The quantity of material is perhaps no longer as important as *how* these artefacts were used to (re)negotiate and express identity within the power structures of the

Figure 1: Map showing the locations of the sites discussed within the text.

provinces and the wider Empire. Using these new theoretical approaches it may now be possible to look beyond the lack of urban centres and villas and reassess the relationship between the communities within Cornwall and the rest of the Roman world. Re-evaluating material, such as brooches, from Roman period sites will allow the relationship between material culture and the creation of identity to be explored in a different way.

Brooches and Identity in Roman Cornwall

The critiques extended to the Romanisation model may at times be levelled at the use of the term identity, which if not applied critically can have the same polarising effect, with individuals either 'Roman' or 'native'. This is an excessively simplistic reading of the archaeology as identity is now recognised as multifaceted and fluid. The aspects that influence and define individual or group identities are numerous and vary greatly depending on individual circumstance. Although embedded in daily routines, identity is not static and is continually altered and redefined through day-to-day cultural and social interactions. The imbalance of power within society would have been a significant factor in the negotiation of identity in the ancient world as it influenced who was included or excluded from social rituals and placed constraints on how individuals expressed themselves (Jones 1997: 13–14; Jenkins 2004; Pitts 2007; Mattingly 2011; Eckardt 2014: 5).

The role of appearance and bodily adornment is one facet in the expression of identity. The dress of an individual pointed towards aspects such as status, wealth, gender, and ethnic origins (Hill 2001: 16). In the Late Iron Age, appearance and adornment of the body began to change. The increase in items such as brooches, toilet implements and mirrors, suggest personal appearance took on a more important role in creating distinct personal identities (Jundi and Hill, 1998: 130). This increase in the number of brooches produced and worn in the first century B.C. is not particularly distinct in Cornwall, with few brooches of restricted types dating to this period having been excavated. The largest collection came from the Late Iron Age cemetery at Trethellan Farm near Newquay, with seven recovered. These are mainly La Tène II and III brooches, including a Hawkes and Hull type 3B and a type 6, as well as a penannular brooch with highly stylised terminals (Fig. 2). Analysis of mineralised textiles preserved on three of the brooches shows they were likely pinned to cloaks that the deceased were wearing at the time of burial. Of the seven brooches, two appear to have had a decorative as well as functional role (Nowakowski 1991: 221–228). The Hawkes and Hull type 6 is thought to have had a coral inlay in the circular setting on the foot (Nowakowski 1991: 224) and the stylised terminals of the penannular brooch appear to be purely decorative as they have little impact on the function of the brooch as a clothes fastener. The Atlantic type brooches found at Harlyn Bay are also highly decorative, with an upturned foot that has an elaborate knob with concentric circle decoration. These were originally thought to be Iberian types, but the bow and arms were cast as one piece, which differs from the continental examples. The unfinished state of one example from the Stamford Hill cemetery at Mount Batten suggests that these brooches were actually of local manufacture (Boudet 1988: 62; Adams 2013: 71–72).

The appearance of these brooches in the archaeological record, at a time when decorated mirrors were being produced within Cornwall or on the Isles of Scilly (Joy 2008: 89–90; 2010: 73), indicates a greater emphasis was beginning to be placed on personal appearance. However, these items are only found in grave assemblages and so may not necessarily reflect the identity of the individual. Members of society and their inherently embedded social rituals would have
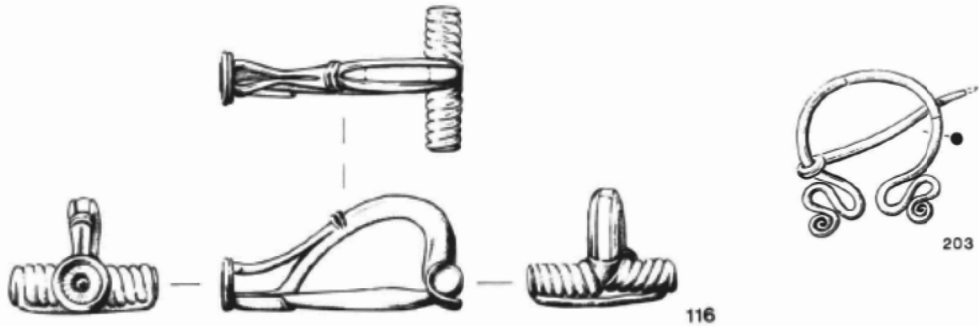
Figure 2: The penannular brooch and Hawkes and Hull type 6 brooch from Trethellan Farm, Newquay. Nowakowski, 1991: 223–225. © Cornwall Archaeological Society and J. Nowakowski.

influenced the way in which the deceased were buried, and which items were buried with them (Parker Pearson 1999: 84; Williams 2006: 77). Therefore, the presence of the brooches may indicate what the mourners felt was appropriate to bury with the deceased.

Brooches are better represented in the archaeological record for the Romano-British period in Cornwall, although their number is low in comparison to other areas of Roman Britain. Over 130 are now known, largely thanks to the Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS) – through which 86 have been recorded. The vast majority of the brooches date from the middle of the first century to the early second century A.D. The numbers show an intensification of the changes in social practice that began in the Late Iron Age, although the context of all but one of the excavated examples is domestic and suggests that social rituals may have altered, with brooches becoming more important for everyday life rather than as part of the burial rite. It is likely that they played an important role in the renegotiation of identity for certain sections of the population after the arrival of the Roman military in the A.D. 50s (Bidwell 1980; Manning 2002, 35). The establishment of the, albeit small, fort network would have altered the existing social hierarchy and have led to individuals trying to find their place within the new power structures. This could have provided communities the opportunity to actively reconstruct aspects of their identity, this may have manifested itself outwardly in the adoption of different types of material culture including personal adornment items such as brooches (Eckardt 2014: 5). As suggested by Jundi and Hill (1998: 126) times of social change may have led to people becoming more concerned with their appearance and how they presented themselves.

It is clear from the excavation reports that the majority of brooches found in Cornwall were manufactured in the first or early second centuries A.D., with highly decorated brooches having been preferred over more simple, less decorated forms, which predominated in the mid to late first century A.D. (Bayley and Butcher 2004: 207). The choice of decorated types suggests that brooches were more than merely functional objects and their prominent display on the body spoke to the status of the individual and how they wished to be viewed by other members of society. Two brooches in particular are quite striking. The first was excavated from the site of Porth Godrevy near Gwithian and is made from bronze with an iron pin (Fig. 3). When excavated a link from a chain was still in situ within the hole in the catchplate suggesting it was one of a pair. The decoration on the bow was cast in one piece and riveted onto the brooch. When

the site report was written this brooch was unique, as no other brooches with this decoration were known, and thus, it was ascribed to the late first or early second century A.D. (Fowler 1962: 52–53). However, this is no longer the case, as a very similar example from Cornwall was recently registered on the PAS website. The brooches differ in the pin attachment style, with the PAS example on a spring rather than being secured by a rod through the arms of the brooch like the Porth Godrevy example. The PAS example also has one more decorative boss on the bow (PAS CORN-24EB51).

The second, highly decorated example was excavated from Shortlanesend near Truro and was again described as unique at the time the report was written. It appears to be an Aesica variant with the bow decorated with lozenge shaped cells containing enamel and the flat fantailed foot being separated from the bow by a loop. The enamel along the outer edges of the bow was thought originally to have been olive in colour while the central lozenges contained turquoise enamel (Harris 1980: 75). This brooch is also no longer unique, with a parallel from Cornwall now registered in the PAS database. The central cells of this brooch contain red enamel (PAS CORN-A1A469). These are not isolated examples, as 29 of the 51 brooches excavated from Cornish sites are decorated types (a small number are too badly corroded or preserved to identify whether they were originally decorated or plain examples, so the overall figure may actually be higher). The decoration on these brooches would have made them highly visible on the wearer's body and may suggest a shift in socio-corporeal practices from the Iron Age, away from more simple forms. The increased number of brooches in comparison to the Late Iron Age, indicates that the practice of bodily adornment became more widespread through the communities within Cornwall. It is possible that this may represent a shift in dress style from the Iron Age, with cloaks becoming more predominate, although on present evidence this would be difficult to confirm.

Only a small number of excavated sites within Cornwall have produced brooches, which could suggest that these items were only available to certain sections of society, perhaps only the more wealthy individuals or families within Cornwall. The majority of brooches have come from rounds (Fig. 4), small univallate enclosures that are thought to have been inhabited by small communities or extended families. These sites are thought to have had a higher status than would normally be suggested by such simple enclosures, and it is possible that their inhabitants were involved in the political administration of Roman Cornwall (Quinnell 2004: 213–214). However, aerial photographic evidence suggests that there could be in the region of 2000
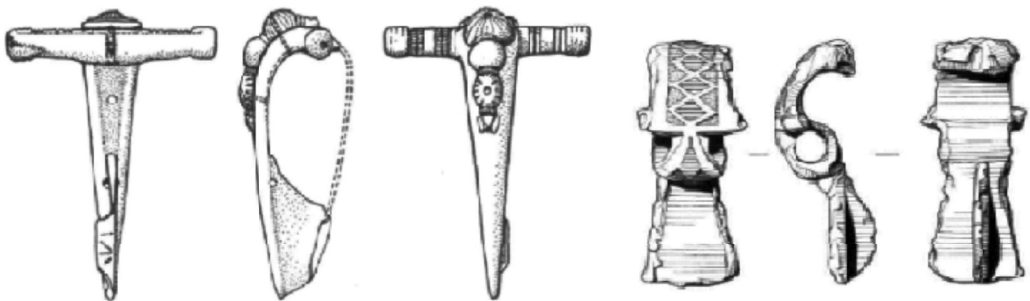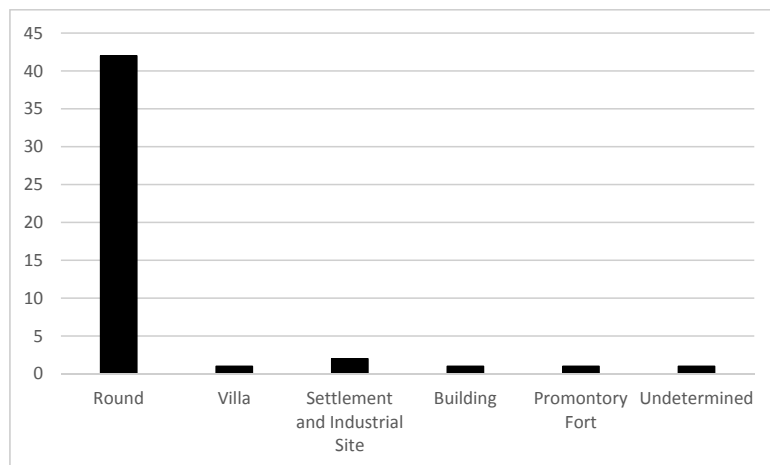

Figure 3: Brooches from Porth Godrevy (left) and Shortlanesend (right). Fowler, 1962: 53; Harris, 1980: 74. © Cornwall Archaeological Society, P. Fowler and D. Honour.

Figure 4: A demonstration of the number of brooches found by site type.

rounds within Cornwall, with a density in some places of two per square kilometre. Although it is unlikely that they were all contemporary, rounds first appear in the fourth century B.C. and continue to be built and occupied into the fifth century A.D. The excavated examples indicate long occupation sequences (Gossip and Jones 2007: 40–45), and so it is doubtful that all were involved in the administration of the area.

Mapping sites which have produced brooches, as well as those that have not, alongside the PAS data, shows that the sites and findspots have geographical bias, with clusters around the larger river valleys and along the coastline (Fig. 5). This is particularly evident around Hayle, Padstow/Wadebridge, and close to Plymouth Sound. Given this distribution pattern, it is likely that this reflects the areas where archaeologists and metal detectorists have been most active. Although as Figure 5 demonstrates, a number of sites located in central Cornwall, away from the larger river systems, did not produce brooches during excavation. It has been suggested that trade within Cornwall relied on coastal and river networks, as the deep river valleys along the south coast and the granite inland massifs made overland trade routes more difficult, although not impossible. Holbrook (2001) has used the evidence of imported ceramics from Cornwall and Devon, such as South East Dorset Black Burnished ware and the movement of South Devon ware, to highlight the importance of coastal trade in the Roman period. The fact that ceramics manufactured from gabbroic clays, only found on the Lizard peninsula are found on the Isles of Scilly (Johns 2012: 114), supports the idea that coastal and riverine trade was important, and so, it is perhaps not surprising that the brooch findspots tend to be located on the coast or along river systems.

Excavation data indicate that these sites and their communities were not all of equal status, although these data are somewhat limited. The material assemblages from rounds show evidence of connection to long distance trade routes, with ceramics imported from other areas of Britain, as well as the continent, however, the purchasing power of each round community appears to have differed (for example see Threipland 1956; Fowler 1962; Saunders and Harris 1982). Overall, imported ceramics make up a very small percentage of the assemblage, usually 5% or less, with the local gabbroic clays much better represented (Thorpe 2007). However, richer sites are known, such as Trethurgy and Carvossa, where 18% and 19% respectively of the ceramic assemblage was imported (respectively Quinnell 2004; Carlyon 1987). The majority of the brooches found
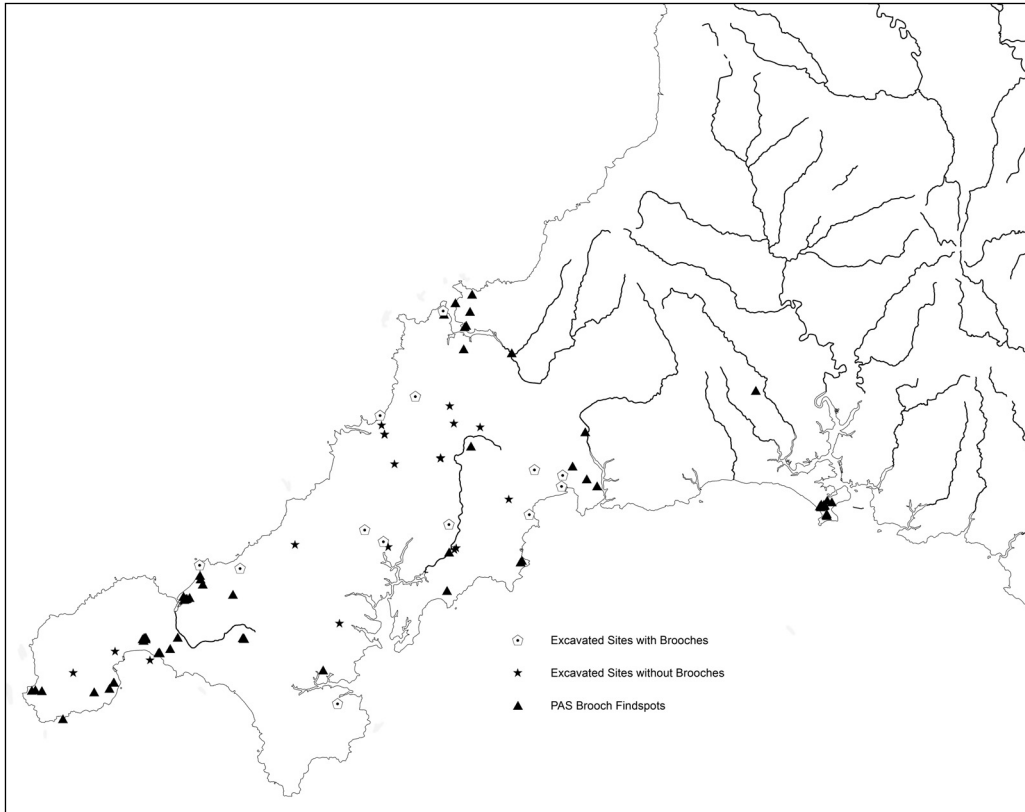
Figure 5: Map showing the distribution of Roman brooches within Cornwall.

within Cornwall come from rounds that produced a very small imported ceramic assemblage. Therefore, it is possible that personal choice and access to the trade network were important factors in brooch selection, rather than being determined by wealth or social standing.

It is likely that the use of these brooches by individuals and communities indicates a renegotiation of certain aspects of identity, with these items used perhaps as a symbol of status and power. All of the examples except the equal ended plate brooch from Carvossa (Carlyon 1987: 126–127) were of British manufacture and they maintain pre-Roman decorative styles. It is possible that the unique nature of some of these brooches, such as those from Porth Godrevy and Shortlanesend, was an attempt to express a new identity which both integrated them into the new administrative structure of the province, but also acted as a link to the past. This is something Tyacke *et al*. (2011) have suggested for the recently recognised Cornish Hull Type 31 brooches. Again, these are a highly decorative variant of the Aesica type brooch and display elements of La Tène style decoration. The predominately Cornish distribution of these brooches, (Fig. 6), has been used by Tyacke *et al*. to suggest they were manufactured in the area. Each one varies slightly and analysis shows different alloy compositions were used for each. She suggests that they were made from scrap metal and the only excavated example from St Mawgan-in-Pydar was found in association with evidence of metalworking (Threipland 1956: 72; Tyake *et al*. 2011).
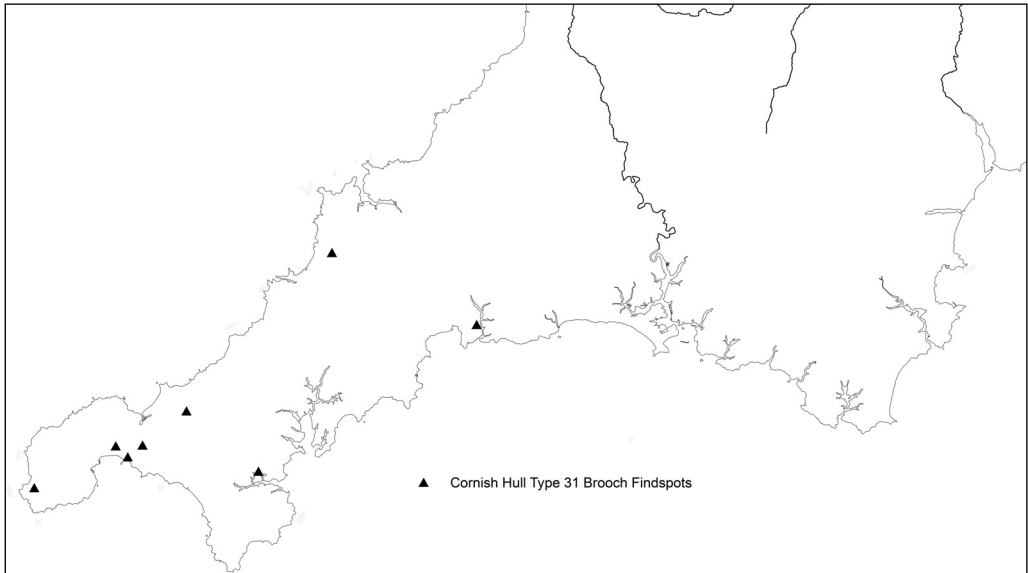
Figure 6: Map showing the distribution of Cornish Hull Type 31 brooches (after Tyake et al*., 2011, Fig. 11.3).*

Depositional Practices and Social Memory

The depositional contexts of many of these objects suggests that they had long biographies, continuing in circulation for a number of generations after their manufacture and initial period of use. At the site of Castle Gotha a south-western T-shaped brooch and a penannular brooch, both of first century A.D. manufacture, were found in separate gully features (Saunders and Harris 1982: 145–146). The ceramic assemblage from both features suggests a deposition date in the second century A.D (Saunders and Harris 1982: 132–143). The discussion of the gully features within the report indicates that both were purposely backfilled, with the material deposited as part of one deliberate action rather than accumulating slowly over time (Saunders and Harris 1982: 122–125). The nature of the gully fills may suggest that the brooches were purposefully deposited rather than becoming incorporated through casual loss. The deliberate deposition of brooches in later contexts is also evident at Porth Godrevy, Goldherring, Shortlanesend, Kilhallon, Trethurgy and Par Lane (Fowler 1962; Guthrie 1969; Harris 1980; Carlyon 1982; Quinnell 2004; Sims and Valentin 2011). At Trethurgy the brooches appear to have remained in circulation for an extended period of time with around 300 years in between manufacture and final deposition (Butcher 2004: 70–72). This pattern of curation and deposition suggests that these deposits were intentional and so they may be viewed as special or structured deposits (Needham and Spence 1997: 87).

The longevity of these brooches may allow them to be recognised as heirlooms, which were bound up in the creation and manipulation of both personal and social memory (Lillios 1999: 243). Social memory, however, is not fixed and is continually reproduced by societies through active remembering as well as the forgetting of certain aspects of their past (Forty 1999: 1–18; Eckardt 2004; Williams 2006: 2). One way in which this can be achieved is through the use of selected items of material culture. Objects are not only imbued with memory, as with heirlooms,

but they can also be used in the process of forgetting, as their deliberate burial may help to erase memories from the social conscious (e.g. Eckardt 2004: 37; Williams 2006: 20). The original meaning ascribed to the curated brooches was perhaps constructed around their association to a specific point or individual in the past (Haug 2001: 111). In this case, perhaps, the change in political and social structures associated with the arrival of the Roman military led them to become objects of remembrance. Their continued circulation through time, however, would have led to their initial social meanings becoming altered as they were conserved and transformed by different generations. Bradley (2003: 221) has discussed the idea that memories became unstable over even short spaces of time, and the altering of the meanings ascribed to the brooches may eventually have led to their deposition and so their removal from society.

The deposition of brooches within Roman Cornwall after a period of curation may be linked to the process of forgetting. The excavation data indicate that the majority of brooches were buried within periods of settlement reorganisation, when structures were demolished and new features constructed. The two brooches excavated at Goldherring were found in features relating to the first phase of occupation. After these features were sealed the site appears to have been abandoned for a number of years before a courtyard house, (Fig. 7), was built within the remains of the round during the late second or third centuries A.D. (Guthrie 1969). The construction of a courtyard house marks a complete shift in settlement morphology away from the round. These structures have been suggested to be a native take on the atrium style villa (see Cripps 2007: 151), but, however they are viewed, courtyard houses were a new form of settlement within Roman period Cornwall. So too was the oval house, which emerged as a new architectural form (Saunders 1972: 52; Quinnell 2004: 183). At Castle Gotha a number of discrete occupation phases were evident within the round, culminating in the construction of at least one oval house. Both brooches were recovered from the fills of gullies, which were sealed prior to the construction of the oval building (Saunders and Harris 1982).

The deposition of brooches is also linked to the process of complete settlement abandonment. At Kilhallon, a shoe sole brooch was found within one of the final fills of a ditch, which was thought to be the outer enclosure ditch of a possible round. The fill appears from the report to have been a secondary midden deposit, deliberately dumped in the ditch to backfill it (Carlyon 1982). This use of midden deposits to backfill and seal features is something that has also been noted in Devon and it has been suggested that this may indicate 'an active interest in abandonment' (Morris 2013: 70). This can also be seen at Par Lane, where a brooch was found in the backfill deposits of a working hollow that was then filled when the site was abandoned (Sims and Valentin 2011).

The specific nature of the contexts in which these brooches were discovered indicates that they were structured deposits, although this concept has only recently begun to appear in discussions of Cornish sites and material (Gossip and Jones 2007: 49). Hill (1995: 126) suggested that the deposition of certain aspects of material culture within sites was not a random act, but rather it was structured according to symbolic rationales and the social practices of communities. It is, therefore, likely that the total abandonment of settlements had wider political and psychological implications. The dismantling of structures, slighting of the enclosure bank and backfilling of the ditch would have required substantial physical effort which would have essentially wiped the settlement from the landscape (Morris 2013: 70). Such a decision would not have been taken lightly, and may be a consequence of the need for the community to sever their links to the past. The deposition of brooches may then be seen as a symbolic part of this process – the burying of a visual reminder of that past.
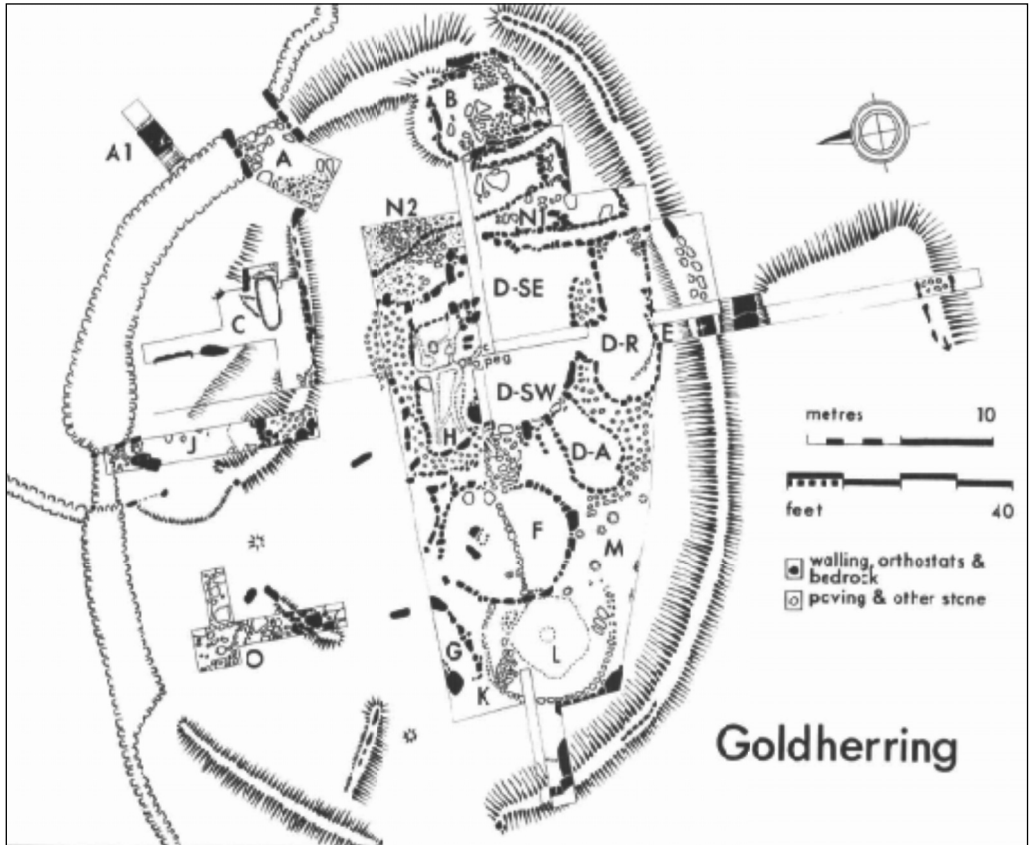
Figure 7: Plan of Goldherring, showing the courtyard house within the remains of the round. Guthrie, 1969: 9. © Cornwall Archaeological Society and A. Guthrie.

However, not all brooches were treated in such a way, with some communities viewing these objects differently. St Mawgan-in-Pydar produced seventeen brooches of varying types (Threipland 1956: 69–72). The site was first occupied in the first century B.C. and continued in use until the mid-second century A.D. The remains of nine structures were excavated which produced evidence for both domestic and industrial activity (Threipland 1956: 39–52). The recovered material assemblage indicated strong links to the long distance trade networks with imported ceramics such as amphorae and Samian Ware. The imported items began to appear in the mid-first century A.D. and the richness of the artefactual assemblage, as a whole, suggests that the site was occupied by a community of higher status (Threipland 1956: 53–69). One of the brooches is thought to be of very Late Iron Age manufacture and part of another similar brooch is likely to be of the same date. These are both undecorated, and have thin triangular bows and are likely part of Mackreth's Durotrigian series (Threipland 1956: 70–71; Mackreth 2011). The change in attitudes towards personal adornment and bodily display in Cornwall after the Roman conquest is clear, with a number of decorative brooches within the assemblage. Contact with the Roman military is likely to be responsible for the evolving corporeal practices evident within Cornwall, with decoration and the visibility of these objects increasing in importance above

their functionality. The large number of brooches from St Mawgan-in-Pydar indicates that they were easily obtainable and that a different social meaning was applied to these objects by this community. This is evident in the fact that none appear to have been curated, all of them were found in deposits that were contemporary to their dates of manufacture (see Threipland 1956).

Curation of brooches has also been noted in Devon, at the recently discovered site of Ipplepen. The evidence indicates that these had been treated as heirloom objects by the community, or perhaps by individual families in this case as the brooches are from part of a small roadside cemetery. The brooches were recovered from the lower plough soil, which sealed the cemetery. *In situ* recovery of other items from grave fills and the obvious animal disturbance evident in the skeletal remains, noted by the author during excavation, suggests that it is most likely that the brooches were originally deposited within selected graves. The brooches found were again of early Roman date, all of either first or second century A.D. manufacture, including a complete example of a fantail brooch. The graves are currently thought to be of late Roman date, as fourth century A.D. coins were found with one individual and the ceramic evidence included New Forest wares, indicating that the brooches were in circulation for many generations before final deposition (Davey and Wood, 2014). Grave goods played an active role in the creation and reproduction of social memory. Williams (2006: 42) suggests that the careful selection of artefacts for burial with the deceased worked to both enhance and supress memories, simultaneously working to remember and forget.

The brooches found at the exceptional site of Nornour on the Isles of Scilly also appear to have been treated differently. Although not part of mainland Cornwall, there was clearly a link between the communities in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly (see Johns 2012), and therefore should not be excluded from the discussion. Nornour has been interpreted as functioning as a shrine during the Romano-British period, with over 300 brooches excavated from the site. The vast range of brooches date from the first to the third century A.D., with the majority having been manufactured in Britain (Dudley 1967; Butcher 2001). There are also large numbers of equal ended plate brooches thought to have continental origins, and Butcher (2001: 15) remarks that the number of this particular brooch type is exceptional for Britain. The date range and depositional contexts of these brooches suggests that they were not curated but rather acted as votive offerings and so had different meanings attributed to them (Dudley 1967: 1–64; Butcher 2001: 5–44). The earliest votive deposits at Nornour are of British type brooches which date to the Flavian period, and indicate an intensification in worship during the first century A.D. (Butcher 2001: 15). These early deposits highlight the earlier point that the conquest of Britain led to different aspects of identity being renegotiated in various ways and that objects do not only relate to one facet of identity but can have multiple roles, even within a single community (Eckardt 2014: 214). The fact that people would have travelled long distances to reach Nornour suggests that the items deposited may have had some personal significance, which is why they were chosen as a votive.

Conclusion

The arrival of the Roman military in Cornwall appears to have stimulated a change in the attitudes towards personal adornment and the display of the body evident through the increasing use of decorated brooches. When worn on the body, these objects would have been highly visible and would have communicated certain aspects of the wearers' identity, and perhaps political affiliations to both members of the community and outsiders. The dramatic increase in numbers

of brooches used after the conquest suggests that for certain sections of the population these items had symbolic as well as personal value. The creation of the province of *Britannia* would have changed the social and political landscapes of the time with new power structures being implemented. Navigating their way through these changes would have led some individuals and communities to express themselves in a different manner, with the use of decorative brooches becoming an integral part of their identity. The symbolic value of these items as points of remembrance subsequently led them to become heirloom objects, and thus, their curation. Large-scale reconstruction and reordering of settlements, or indeed their complete abandonment, appears to have signified a break with the past and an intentional forgetting of it, with brooches carefully deposited in closing or abandonment deposits. It is clear, however, from excavation data that separate communities behaved differently in their treatment of brooches, with larger wealthier communities bestowing differing meanings on brooches than those communities of lower social standing. I hope this paper has shown that, even where a lack of engagement with the Roman World has been postulated due to a supposed dearth of 'Roman' material culture, it is possible to see nuances in changing identities through the study of even a small number of artefacts.

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