

## DATASHEET 47

### ‘Disc-on-pin’ Buckles

by

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#### Introduction

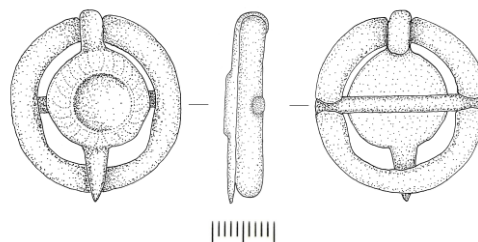
This datasheet seeks to standardise the recording of an increasingly recognised type of medieval copper-alloy buckle previously considered to be a brooch. The buckle type has a characteristic expanded, decorative pin. Here, a typology of these buckles is presented based on their pins and the decorative elements that they display. A suggestion is also made as to their attachment and use, assuming the wearer sought to show off the pin. In this datasheet, the dominant descriptive term ‘disc-on-pin’ is applied to all these buckles, and it is hoped that this will become the standard term.

#### Description, function and dating

The buckles are similar to contemporary annular brooches and consist of a circular frame, oval or circular in cross-section, with a constriction at one point to accommodate the pin. The pin wraps around the frame and can swing freely (Fig. 1).

The presence of a constriction resulted in an assumption that such items were brooches (Williams and Geake 2005), although it was

noted that the expanded pin inhibited practical use.



*Fig. 1: Disc-on-pin buckle*

However, the majority of the frames found have a bar attached across the centre – or evidence of one – perpendicular to the orientation of the pin. The bar is set into grooves cut into the reverse of the frame, the edges of the grooves being hammered over to secure the bar. The bar is similar to the strap bar on contemporary annular buckles suggesting a similar function for the object. Furthermore, several examples are now known with an extant attachment plate (Fig. 2; also NMS-0DF608, SF-1BE263 (with replacement, non-discoid pin); Marshall 1986, 9–10, no. 33); these are demonstrably buckles. The plates are very similar to the strap plates on

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annular buckles, but lack the cut-out for the pin where it wraps around the bar.

It is probable that the constriction was there to help maintain the pin's position on the buckle frame relative to the crossbar. The addition of the crossbar as a separate element of the buckle frame rather than being integrally cast into it, may also suggest that all frames for disc-on-pin buckles were originally manufactured as – or alongside – annular brooch frames.

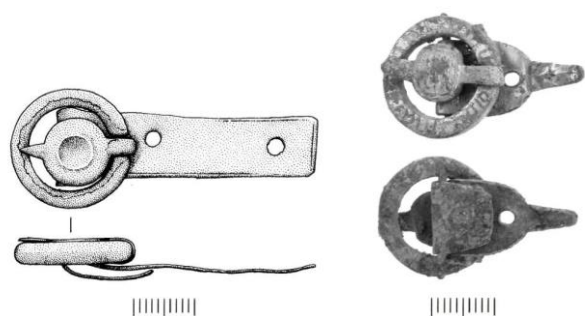


Fig. 2: Disc-on-pin buckles with plates (HAMP2980; SWYOR-C23EA8)

As noted, the distinctive feature common to all these buckles is a pin that has an expanded central section, either solid or in the form of an open ring. The pin ends in a short point which rests on the frame opposite the attachment loop. Many of these points bend upwards slightly at the tip where it meets the frame. This configuration does not allow the buckles to be used in the conventional manner, as the expanded part of the pin prevents it from fitting through a hole on a strap. It is clear that the buckles cannot be attached by the pin alone as an annular brooch would be. Potential methods of use are discussed below.

Only one element – a pin – has been found during excavation and originally it was identified as a hooked tag (Margeson 1995, 56–58). It was unstratified, and therefore cannot inform the dating of these objects.

Other published examples are mostly stray finds recovered through metal-detecting (Read 2001, 102–111, nos. 792, 820; Williams and Geake 2005, 346–348 and references therein to examples recorded on the Norfolk Historic

Environment Record) or collected pieces (Marshall 1986, 9–10; no. 83). Vastly adding to this corpus are over 100 metal-detected finds recorded on the Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS) Database and nine examples on the United Kingdom Detector Finds Database (UKDFD) ([www.ukdfd.co.uk](http://www.ukdfd.co.uk)) (at December 2013).

Manufacturing methods, morphology and surface treatment have been used to suggest a late medieval date for disc-on-pin buckles (Williams and Geake 2005, 348) and this still seems most plausible. A start date of *c.* AD 1300 or slightly earlier is suggested by the pseudo inscription around the frame of one example (Fig. 2), which is similar to that on medieval annular brooches.

The buckle frames are all very similar in design and size, with recorded examples having outer diameters ranging from 19mm to 30mm and pins of corresponding lengths. The pins however are more varied, though all are of copper alloy and with gilding on the front, if not the back. Known examples can be currently divided into the following types and sub-types based on morphology, although current evidence does not permit any nuanced chronology. This open typology allows for the addition of examples with differing numbers of embellishing rivets or other decorative elements, as yet unknown.

#### Type A: Flat disc type (Fig. 3)

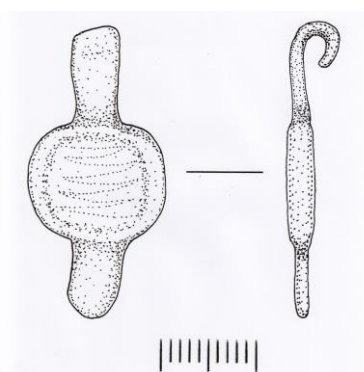


Fig. 3: Type A pin (SWYOR-C23EA8)

Type A is cast and has a flat, circular central disc. It is rare, known from a single example

found in North Yorkshire decorated with incised, rocker-arm arcs, around which is an incised border.

**Type A1: Single rivet type** (Fig. 4a)

Type A1 comprises a cast sub-circular disc with a single, circular, central perforation that probably held an additional element, most likely a dome-headed rivet (as with Types A4 and A5, below). It is rare, known from a single example found in East Sussex.

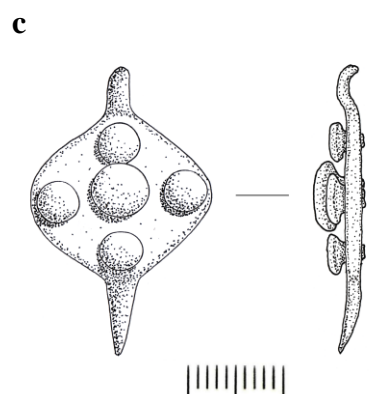
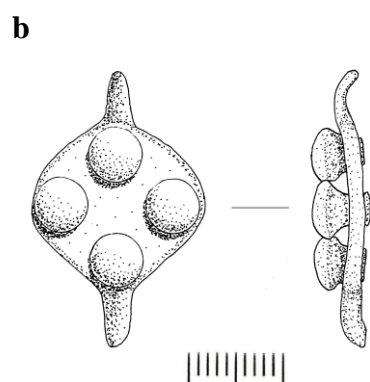
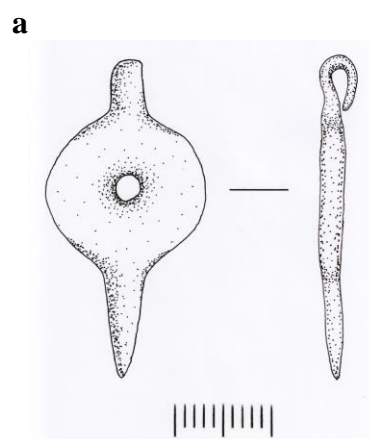


Fig. 4: a) Type A1 pin (SUSS-C19113);  
b) Type A4 pin; c) Type A5 pin

**Type A4: Four rivets type** (Fig. 4b)

The main body of the pin is a circular, sub-circular or lozenge-shaped, cast or sheet disc. The disc is drilled with four equally-spaced circular holes in a lozenge pattern, each hole containing a dome-headed copper-alloy rivet, all of equal size hammered over on the reverse of the disc to secure them. Many of the domed heads of the rivets are decorated with small punched triangular pits (e.g. SUR-04AFF5; Williams and Geake 2005, 347, Fig. 9a). Some of pins of this type are also decorated with punched dots or incised patterns as a border around the circumference or across the face of the disc.

**Type A5: Five rivets type** (Fig. 4c)

Similar in style, material and construction to the Type A4 pins, these have an additional dome-headed rivet in the centre of the disc. In many cases, the central rivet is slightly larger than the surrounding four. Because of the extra rivet, the pins tend to be more frequently lozenge-shaped than the Type A4 pins. A decorated border is a common feature, with some showing decoration across the face of the disc between the rivets.

**Type B: Central recess type** (Fig. 5)

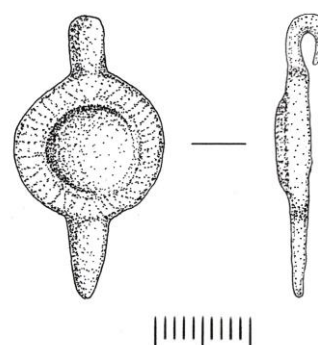


Fig. 5: Type B pin

Type B pins comprise a circular or sub-circular cast disc with a central circular or oval recess, the edges of the recess raised slightly above the border. The size of the central recess is variable with some almost filling the disc (LVPL-AA50F4; DENO-AFDBC5) whilst others have a smaller recess, the area of the disc surrounding it often having additional

decoration. Many are decorated with incised lines radiating outwards from the edges of the central recess, either perpendicular or obliquely to it. In some cases these radiating lines reach to the outer circumference of the disc, whilst in others they terminate part way across the disc creating the effect of a halo. Some examples have a degree of integrally-moulded patterning on the front of the disc in addition to the central recess (SUSS-BDB5A3, SF-28D5B7). Some examples have the remains of a glass setting within the recess (LVPL-AA50F4, WAW-92A6C7) and many others retain the remnants of a fixing paste or glue, suggesting that the recess in these pins also once held an additional element. As these pins offer the most variation in design they may be subject to further sub-division as more examples are discovered.

**Type C4: Four recesses type (Fig. 6)**

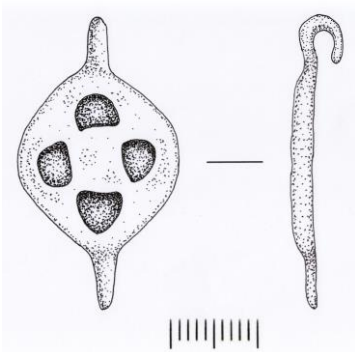


Fig. 6: Type C4 pin (SF-3E0013)

The disc is a cast rounded lozenge with multiple recesses in the upper surface. It is rare, known only from a single example found in Cambridgeshire which had two opposing pairs of sub semi-circular recesses, set in a similar pattern to the rivets of a Type A4 pin. The recesses may be purely decorative in their own right, or may have been filled with other elements, e.g. glass, stones or studs. It is also possible that they are attachment points for a single decorative element covering much of the front face of the disc, however no remaining fixative is evident.

**Type D: Open ring type (Fig. 7)**

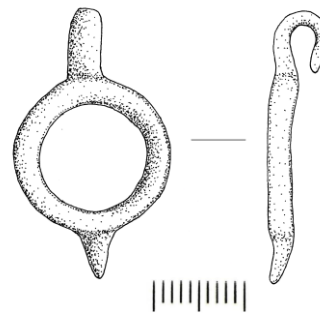


Fig. 7: Type D pin

Type D has a cast open ring of circular cross-section that still serves to expand the centre of the pin. The rings vary, some having a narrow cross-section and a large central aperture, others with a wider cross-section and a smaller central aperture. Decoration, evident on some, consists of punched pits in regular patterns around the upper surface. Gilding is also used on some examples on both upper and lower surfaces. If a decorated strap plate was used on the buckle, this open style of pin would possibly allow more of it to be visible when worn.

**Type D4: Open ring with four rivets type (Fig. 8).**

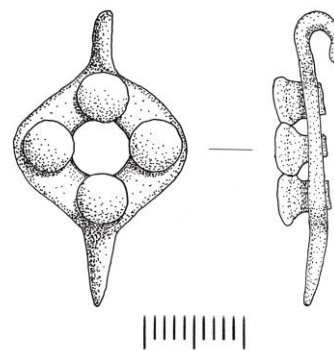
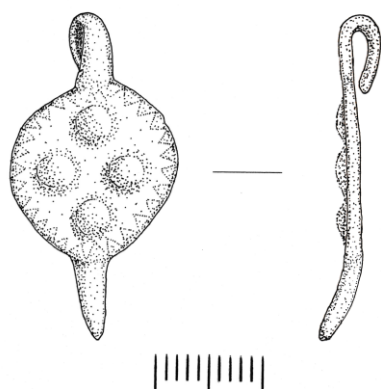


Fig. 8: Type D4 pin

This pin is similar in form to Type D, having an open ring, though comparable in construction to Type A4, being flatter in cross-section. The four rivets echo those of Type A4 and suggest a degree of hybridity within the corpus.

**Type E4: Four raised boss type (Fig. 9)**



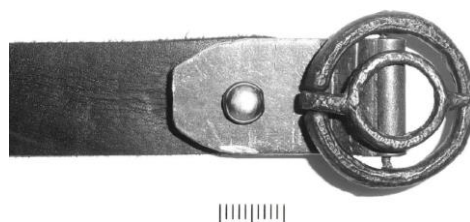
*Fig. 9: Type E4 pin (HAMP-3F5652)*

The Type E4 pin is rare with only one example known, found in Hampshire. The disc is sub-circular in plan with four recesses on the reverse that translate to four, raised bosses on the front face in the same pattern as the rivets of a Type A4 pin and giving a similar appearance. These bosses appear to have been individually punched through the flat plate from the reverse. However, it is also possible that they have been integrally cast with the rest of the pin. There is a zigzag, rocker-arm design around the outer circumference and traces of gilding over the whole pin.

**Use**

When considered as a brooch, it has been suggested that these objects did not serve any real function and may have been purely decorative (Williams and Geake 2005, 348). A re-categorisation as buckles demands an exploration into their functionality and experimentation shows that they could be both practical and decorative. Use was made of reproductions of an original buckle frame and a Type D pin, which led to several suggestions of ways in which these buckles could have functioned as fasteners whilst still exhibiting all their decorative features.

The reproductions were informed by the presence of a plate on various buckles and this arrangement was reproduced, with the plate riveted to a strap (Fig. 10).



*Fig. 10: Reproduction buckle with metal plate*

Equally, a leather strap could be wrapped around the crossbar, to which the most likely attachment might be a woven strap fastened by riveting or stitching (Fig. 11).



*Fig. 11: Reproduction buckle with leather 'plate'*

It is considered that these buckles worked either as part of a continuous loop, as in a belt, or connected to a separate strap attached to an item of clothing, a book or a spur. This was tested experimentally using a thin leather strap. When passed round the buckle frame the point of the raised pin was located into one of the holes in the strap. On tensioning, the pin was pulled down until it seated against the buckle frame. The free end of the strap could then be secured under a loop (Fig. 12).



*Fig. 12: Reconstruction disc-on-pin buckle in use*

This method relies on a very thin strap of pliable leather or textile; if the strap is too thick or stiff, the pin will not seat correctly and remains insecure. Although part of the frame is obscured, the pin is fully visible

except for the point and the buckle largely shown to best advantage.

### **Conclusion**

It is clear that these highly decorative buckles were designed to be seen and appreciated when worn. Archaeological evidence currently permits reconstruction using plates in metal, or equivalents in organic materials. Experimentation has shown that disc-on-pin buckles could be used to fasten thin, pliable straps when folded back on themselves and secured with strap loops. Such an arrangement allows for secure attachment without compromising the decorative intent. Other methods of attachment were also successful and research is ongoing into use and functionality. Even when parts are found separately, pins and frames from disc-on-pin buckles are diagnostic and can be identified separately. An initial typology has been proposed which covers all known examples but also leaves flexibility for new combinations.

### **Acknowledgements**

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Any remaining errors are the author's own.

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