

The Snettisham Great Torc, a biography

By Nat Kane

The Snettisham Great torc is an antique piece of jewellery which was buried approximately around 50 BCE, making it a find from the iron age¹. It was discovered in Ken Hill, Norfolk, England, in 1950 in a field near the village of Snettisham as a farmer was ploughing the field.²



Figure 1 The Snettisham Torc The British Museum³

Interestingly the iron age torc got its name by having been the most impressive find out of a hoard of iron age torcs found at the site. Torcs are iron age neck rings, and this particular torc is now looked after by The British museum, along with the Snettisham Horde, and often goes on loan to be exhibited in Museums in British Celtic nations, and international Museums alike⁴. Concerning this exquisite piece of decoration, there are some comments made by the curator of the pieces, Julia Farley :

*This torc is one of the most elaborate golden objects from the ancient world. It is made from an alloy of gold, silver and copper, and weighs over 1kg. The neck-ring is made from 64 wires in eight separate coils. The ends are elaborately decorated with swirling motifs.*⁵

More interestingly, at its discovery, other items were found, and two in particular were attached to the torc itself. It is believed to of been buried around 50 BCE, this theory comes from experts analysing the style of adornment, techniques used, and with a coin also being found connected to these finds, contextual dating could take place. Additionally, wooden cores from similar material items were radiocarbon-dated to substantiate this theory.⁶

Whilst it could be hypothesised that the Insular Celts of modern day Norfolk could of made these beautiful items, it is more likely that they were heirlooms⁷ which would be explained later on in this biography, therefore we cannot be sure of their true origin place, however we do know

¹ British Museum. [n.d.]. 'Torc | British Museum', *The British Museum* <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_1951-0402-2> [accessed 30 April 2024]

² British Museum. [n.d.]. 'Torc | British Museum', [accessed 30 April 2024]

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *bid*

⁷ Farley, Julia, and The British Museum. 2016. 'How Do You Put on a Torc?', *The British Museum* <<https://www.britishmuseum.org/blog/how-do-you-put-torc>> [accessed 30 April 2024]

that certain designs and techniques were worked with and adopted by Insular Celts, and in these particular pieces, the British stamp of style and techniques being utilised are clear⁸

Purpose, Identity, and other items that relate to this cultural art-form

According to Farley, there is a strong possibility that many of the torcs found by archaeologists are not wearable, and these were more for a '*symbols of status*',⁹ though I will delve into the suggestive evidence shortly when introducing similar items that relate to the Snettisham Great Torc, or were found in the same horde.

In Julia Farley's article '*How To Wear A Torc*', on the British Museum website, she gives us an in-depth look at their designs, their measurements, their features, and also shows us a variety of examples of technology, and technique used in Europe, and beyond. In this article Farley takes us through how their design allows for them to be worn, though this method is of course one that causes damage over a long period of time, Farley also has a fantastic resolution to this, which was generally avoided by the people who owned, and created them, instead a rough job was made of correcting the damage. Farley describes the design of The Snettisham Great Torc is

*Of a neck-ring made of coiled or twisted wires. This torc is put on and taken off by being bent out of shape. You can see that one of the terminals of this torc has been pulled slightly forward compared to the other one. This is the result of it being repeatedly pulled open to be slipped on.*¹⁰

Farley later explained that the constant movement of the metal to make it wearable, and to remove it, like modern metal '*wire for hanging pictures*'¹¹, it causes stress when bent. This stress then results in the metal wires snapping. Farley also tells us the way the torcs were fixed back together, which was in a quite shoddy way, they had the technology to soften the torcs with heat so that they could continue to bend without snapping, Farley claims annealing the metal would indeed fix, the metal.

⁸ Julia Farley, and The British Museum. 2016. 'How Do You Put on a Torc?', *The British Museum* <<https://www.britishmuseum.org/blog/how-do-you-put-torc>> [accessed 30 April 2024]

⁹ Julia Farley, and The British Museum. 2016. [accessed 30 April 2024]

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*



Gold twisted torc. 150-50 BC, The Snettisham Hoard, UK, The British Museum.¹²

As you can see, the torc instead has a *'thin sheet of gold foil'*¹³ over it, and as Farley states, *but x-radiography of the torc shows that all the wired have been snapped! Torcs are quite fragile objects, and they were frequently broken and repaired in this way. This is curious because there was an easy way to avoid the problem.*

Looking at The Gundestrup Cauldron, Farley suggests that it is plausible that some torcs were indeed just for show. Though earlier Farley also ponders, In a suggestive way, where would the terminals go?¹⁴



The 'Antlered god' depicted on the Gundestrup Cauldron.¹⁵

As you can see, the *'Antlered god'*¹⁶ depicted on The Gundestrup Cauldron reveals to us that the torcs weren't always worn, and were held up as if a symbol in art-work. Farley suggests it

¹² Farley, Julia, and The British Museum. 2016. 'How Do You Put on a Torc?', *The British Museum*

¹³ Farley, Julia, and The British Museum. 2016. [accessed 30 April 2024]

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

denotes how they are to be viewed as, when it comes to being worn though, as Farley earlier stated that she wasn't sure how another torc in her article would be up or down on the neck, we see the torc the pagan deity wears here has the terminals at the front. So it could be argued that the position of the torc being up doesn't relate to the neck positioning of the torc.¹⁷



Silberring von Trichtingen. 200-50 BC, Baden-Württemberg, Germany, silver, iron, The British Museum.¹⁸

It can still be argued that some were indeed worn but for special occasions, depending on how decorative it was, and blander torcs could've been used for more regular use, and the very decorative ones are not worn.¹⁹



Silver torc of two strands twisted together with double-loop terminals. 150 – 50 BC, Ken Hill, Silver, Snettisham Horde, British Museum.²⁰

The theory Farley puts forward is that maybe the gold foil technique to fix these items were more about the story that told, and where they came from. It also adds to the earlier point made where the origin of creation cannot be hypothesised with accuracy due to the traveling items like this did across the Atlantic sea trade, and Europe as a whole.

¹⁶ Farley, Julia, and The British Museum. 2016. 'How Do You Put on a Torc?', The British Museum <<https://www.britishmuseum.org/blog/how-do-you-put-torc>> [accessed 30 April 2024]

¹⁷ Farley, Julia, and The British Museum. 2016 [accessed 30 April 2024]

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

Exhibitions, treatments and storage of the Snettisham Horde Artifacts

Exhibitions

- In the years of 1991-1992, between 12 November and 1 March, the Snettisham great torc was displayed at Norwich Castle Museum, alongside the rest of the Snettisham Hoard
- In the years of 1993-1994, between December 3 and March 4 the Snettisham Torcs were displayed at the National Museum of Wales, the exhibition was '*Celtic Treasures : The Snettisham Torcs*'
- In the years of 2003-2004, between October 23 and January 18, the Hayward Gallery, London, held an exhibition to honour one hundred years of the 'National Collections Fund, where the Snettisham Great Torc was displayed
- In 2007, between March and June, the Palace Museum in Beijing held the 'Britain meets the world' exhibition with the Snettisham great torc on display
- In the years 2011-2012, between October 22 and February 5th, The Western Australian Museum, In Perth, held the 'Extraordinary stories' exhibition where the Snettisham Great Torc was displayed
- In the years of 2015-2016. Between September 24 and January 31 The British Museum held an exhibition displaying the Great torc, called 'Celts :Art and Identity'
- In 2016, between March 11 and September 25, The National Museum Of Scotland, in Edinburgh held the 'Celts' Exhibition where The Snettisham Great Torc was also displayed²¹

Conservation

- The Snettisham Great Torc was given a treatment of polish with a Goddards long term silver cloth in November 18th 1993. The purpose of this treatment was to make sure it was in good condition to be displayed at The National Museum of Wales in Cardiff.
- Then again on January 27th 2007, The Snettisham Great Torc was cleaned to go on display at The Palace Museum of Beijing. The treatments that the item received were *The areas of tarnish were removed with cotton wool swabs bearing a trace of moisture from Duraglit wadding, further moistened with White Spirit. The areas were then swabbed with White Spirit and dried with paper tissues.*²²

²¹ Alice Roberts, and The Guardian . 2015. 'The Celts: Not Quite the Barbarians History Would Have Us Believe', *The Guardian* <<https://www.theguardian.com/science/2015/oct/04/celts-great-torque-snettisham-hoard-british-museum-alice-roberts>> [accessed 30 April 2024]

²² British Museum. [n.d.]. 'Torc | British Museum', *The British Museum* <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_1951-0402-2> [accessed 30 April 2024]

- Then when the Snettisham Great Torc arrived back from The Palace Museum of Beijing, it received another treatment, this was held on July 13th 2007. The treatment was very similar to the previous one, this was to also remove tarnish.



Alice Roberts seen leaning over to view *The Snettisham Horde of Torcs*, including the Great torc, shown by British Museum Curator, Julia Farley²³

²³ Roberts, Alice, and The Guardian . 2015. 'The Celts: Not Quite the Barbarians History Would Have Us Believe', *The Guardian*
<<https://www.theguardian.com/science/2015/oct/04/celts-great-torque-snettisham-hoard-british-museum-alice-roberts>> [accessed 30 April 2024]

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