

The Torc in the Middle Ages: literary motif or living artefact?

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Background/ Aims

To explore why the Torc seemingly appears throughout poetry and prose texts - both in insular Celtic languages and Latin - throughout the Middle Ages when the archaeological record ends in the second century CE.

Did the Torc in fact survive as a piece of material culture into the post-roman and medieval eras?



Great Snettisham Torc, source:

https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_1951-0402-2

Research Questions

- Did the warriors of the Kingdom of Gododdin wear Torcs? What could the use of Torcs in the poem refer to if not?
- Is the Torc of St Cynog, described by Gerald of Wales in the 12th century and in several other sources, a real object? How certain can we be that it is a 'Torc'?
- Do later appearances of Torcs in insular Celtic literatures represent a survival of the artefact into the middle ages, or is this simply a literary motif?
- In either case, can the case be made for the Torc as a unit of Celtic continuity?

Sources

Archeological and iconographic sources

- Iron-age and Roman-era Torcs (and gravestones) across territory of the Votadini
- Early medieval Pictish artefacts, potentially Torcs
- Early medieval silver chains from Pictish and British territory
- Pictish Sculptured Stones



Aberlemno Stone Cross reverse, source: <https://visitangus.com/event/pictish-day-at-aberlemno-village-hall/>

Early Heroic Poetry

- Y Gododdin
- Llyfr Taliesin

Court Poetry of the Middle Ages (literary comparison to Gododdin)

Later (C15) poetry*

Latin prose texts *

- Gerald of Wales' *Journey through Wales*
- De Situ Brecheniauc

Welsh prose texts

- Life of Gruffudd ap Cynan (Viking Torc?)
- The Dream of Macsen Wledig
- How Culhwch won Olwen

Current Arguments/Findings

Torcs in the Gododdin

- Torc most-mentioned item of jewellery in the poem
- Cessford: Norrie's Law Hoard Artefacts [Pictish] are Torcs: Torcs made in Northern Britain into the time of the composition of the Gododdin poem (*Craig Cessford, Torcs in Early Historic Scotland, Oxford Journal of Archaeology 12 (1995), 229- p. 237.*)
- Alcock: Silver chains could become Torcs in the Gododdin poem (*Alcock, L., 'Gwŷr y Gogledd: an Archaeological Appraisal', Archaeologia Cambrensis, 132 (1983), pp. 1-18. pp. 13-14.*)
- Iron-age Torcs passed down and re-used?



Potential Torcs in the Norrie's Law Hoard, source: <https://www.nms.ac.uk/explore-our-collections/stories/scottish-history-and-archaeology/norries-law-hoard/>

Hypothesis

Some older Torcs may have survived and been used as symbolic objects, perhaps connected collectively to a band of elite warriors (some of whom may have themselves worn torcs as personal decorations). Precedent is Roman:

*‘Torques...could be awarded to either individuals or whole units...’...soldiers in a unit which had been awarded the *torques* would be likely to choose a torc as piece of jewellery to wear.’*

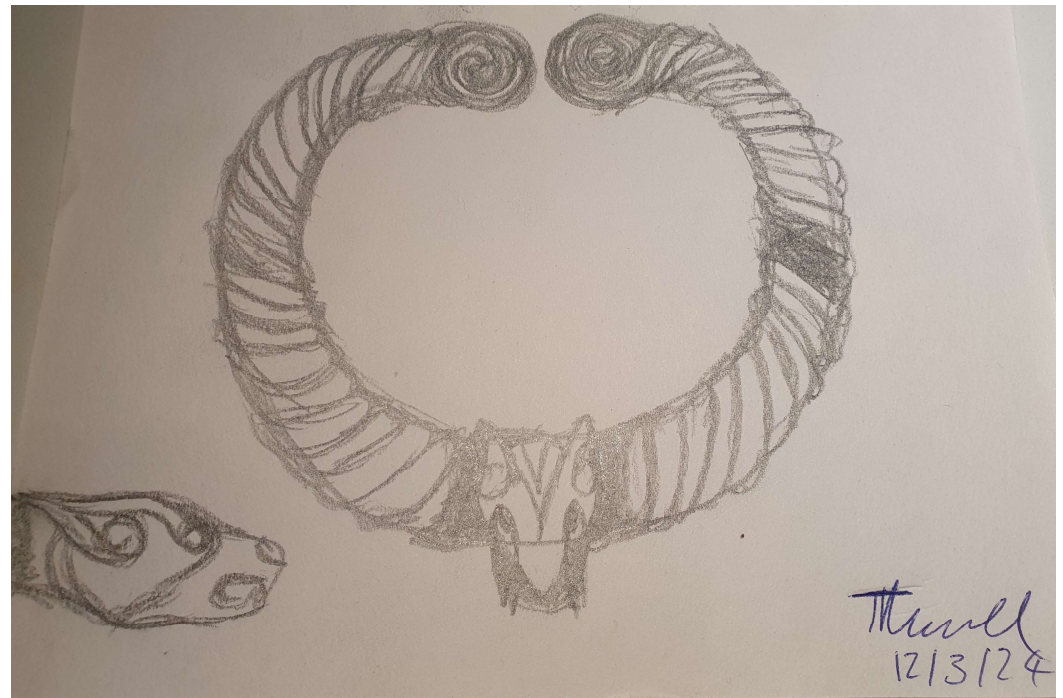
(Craig Cessford, Torcs in Early Historic Scotland, Oxford Journal of Archaeology 12 (1995), pp229-242. pp. 233 – 235.)

If so, then the term *Eurdorchogion* could be both an epithet and a sort of title cognate with Knight, or a term to denote that the unit had been awarded with Torcs similar to the Roman fashion.

Current Arguments/Findings

The Torc of St Cynog

- Several, arguably non-dependent sources – it likely existed
- Torc in the specific sense – detail of Gerald's description, Dafydd Epynt describing an Omega shape: 'It is the name of the word in Greek' (Lewis, B.J., (ed., trans., and notes)., Medieval Welsh Poems to Saints and Shrines. Dundalgan Press 2015. Poem 15, line 55.)
- An iron-age relic, passed down or rediscovered
- A Viking Torc?



Torc of St Cynog, artist's impression based on description by Gerald of Wales.
Tessa Marshall, 2024, tmarshall1096@gmail.com

Developing arguments: Later Literature

- In some cases, Torc seems a more general term – Olwen wears one, but so do the dogs!
- On the other hand, there are notable examples of the torc being described as worn around the neck (Dream of Macsen) or arm (De Situ Brecheniauc, Hywel Dafi)
- Literary purpose: heroic ideal; antiquity; origins of Welsh people/Nation; part of a packet of ethnic distinctiveness along with motifs such as throwing spears (Day)

Further work

- Further examination of secondary literature on Torcs/neck rings in other cultures
- Survey of concordances of torc-related terms across Welsh literature

Unfortunately, due to constraints of time and word-limit, an examination of Irish literature, as well as developing an argument around the Torc as a symbol of Celtic continuity beyond the Middle Ages, will have to wait for another time!

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