

Object Biography – The Snettisham Great Torc

The Snettisham Great Torc is an outstanding example of an Iron Age torc. It is amongst the most recognizable and well-known of Iron Age artefacts in Britain.



Figure 1. *The Snettisham Great torc (terminal 2, left, and terminal 1, right).*¹

The Great torc consists of two key components. First, the neck-ring, a curved rope-like section made from sixty-four threads which have been twisted into eight 'ropes' each consisting of eight threads measuring 1.9mm wide.² These 'ropes' are then further twisted together making up the main crescent section of the torc. Second, the ornamental ends or terminals of the torc. These were originally believed to have been made by casting using the lost-wax technique and then welded to the neck-ring. However, more recent analysis shows them to be made from sheet metal.³ The torc is of the type known as a torus torc. These are identified as having hollow, doughnut-shaped terminals, which usually consist of three sections – the torus shell, core and collar. Very few examples of torus torcs exist and those that do are specific to Britain.⁴ Contrary to expectation, the two terminals have completely different designs (Fig. 1) although they are only slightly different in size, it is not unusual given that they are made from sheet metal.⁵ The

¹ Tess Machling & Roland Williamson, *The Big Book of Torcs* (Date unknown)

< <https://bigbookoftorcs.com/2022/05/29/pattern-and-purpose-a-new-story-about-the-creation-of-the-snettisham-great-torc/> > [accessed 11 April 2024].

² The British Museum, *torc*, <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_1951-0402-2> [accessed 11 April 2024].

³ Tess Machling & Roland Williamson, *The Big Book of Torcs* (Date unknown)

< <https://bigbookoftorcs.com/2022/05/29/pattern-and-purpose-a-new-story-about-the-creation-of-the-snettisham-great-torc/> > [accessed 11 April 2024].

⁴ Tess Machling & Roland Williamson, *The Big Book of Torcs* (Date unknown)

< <https://bigbookoftorcs.com/a-history-of-torus-torcs/> > [accessed 11 April 2024].

⁵ Tess Machling & Roland Williamson, *The Big Book of Torcs* (Date unknown)

decoration on the terminals is in the form of motifs and patterns which cover the same amount of area on both ends but is completely different for each terminal.⁶ In a small area the creator of the torc has managed to include multiple design elements. These include curved raised ridges, dots, roundels and raised lentoids, with the space between being filled with a hatched pattern consisting of three horizontal and three vertical lines that resembles basketwork.⁷ The torc weighs an impressive 1084 grammes, is 20 cms in diameter and is made from an alloy of gold mixed with silver and copper.⁸ To date, the source of the gold has not been identified but current thinking is that most Iron Age gold is recycled.⁹ The British Museum dates the torc as circa 150BCE – circa 50 BCE.¹⁰ However, there is a school of thought that believes it could be around 4 BCE which is based on several factors, including the technology and manufacturing techniques.¹¹ For certain, it cannot be later than 50 BCE as when it was found it contained an Atebatine quarter-starter coin (c. 50 BCE or later) inside one of the terminals.¹²

Stylistically, the Great Torc is considered to be of the La Tène style of Celtic art.¹³ This is based on the use of typical La Tène design elements including the curvilinear raised ridges, the use of dots and roundels and the punched teardrop depressions or trumpet voids on the terminals which over all bring the ends to life by adding an organic three-dimensional design. Not surprisingly, due to the large number of torcs found at the site much research has been done on the design of the torcs. This has resulted in the identification of a ‘Snettisham style’ by Jope in his book *Early Celtic* which he described as hatched tooled panels, dummy rivets and ‘eccentric shapes defined by relief modelling conjured by dome capped trumpets and long curling curved leaves’.¹⁴ Garrow and Godson, in their work *Technologies of Enchantment?*,

< <https://bigbookoftorcs.com/2022/05/29/pattern-and-purpose-a-new-story-about-the-creation-of-the-snettisham-great-torc/> > [accessed 11 April 2024].

⁶ Tess Machling & Roland Williamson, *The Big Book of Torcs*, pattern-and-purpose-a-new-story-about-the-creation-of-the-snettisham-great-torc.

⁷ Tess Machling & Roland Williamson, *The Big Book of Torcs*, pattern-and-purpose-a-new-story-about-the-creation-of-the-snettisham-great-torc.

⁸ The British Museum, *torc*, <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_1951-0402-2> [accessed 11 April 2024].

⁹ Tess Machling & Roland Williamson, *The Big Book of Torcs* (Date unknown)

< <https://bigbookoftorcs.com/2023/06/23/beyond-snettisham-a-reassessment-of-gold-alloy-torcs-from-iron-age-britain-and-ireland/> > [accessed 11 April 2024].

¹⁰ The British Museum, *torc*, <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_1951-0402-2> [accessed 11 April 2024].

¹¹ Tess Machling & Roland Williamson, *The Big Book of Torcs* (Date unknown)

< <https://bigbookoftorcs.com/2023/06/23/beyond-snettisham-a-reassessment-of-gold-alloy-torcs-from-iron-age-britain-and-ireland/> > [accessed 11 April 2024].

¹² J. W. Brailsford, ‘The Snettisham Treasure. ‘*The British Museum Quarterly*, vol. 16, no. 3, (1951), pp. 79–80. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4422336>.

¹³ Brailsford, J. W., *The Snettisham Treasure*, *The British Museum Quarterly*, vol. 16, no. 3, (1951), pp. 79–80. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/44223> [Accessed 12 April 2024]

¹⁴ F. M. Jope, *Early Celtic Art in the British Isles* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000).

refer to the terminal decoration as '... some of which form trumpet voids with matted hatching. Details, including the small knobs with triple dots...', in support of the '*Snettisham style*'.¹⁵

Culturally, torcs seem to be common in Celtic life, appearing to have great significance in many situations. To the ancient Greeks and Romans, a torc was a symbol of Celtic identity. They were worn by both men and women across Europe, and beyond, to show their status and power. One group of people best known for wearing torcs are the Celtic warriors. The famous statue of the *Dying Gaul* from the Capitoline Museums in Rome is clearly wearing a torc with a twisted rope style neck piece and rounded terminals.¹⁶



Figure 2. *The Dying Gaul (detail)* (Musei Capitolini, Rome; photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)¹⁷

It is possible that the Celts believed that torcs were a form of amulet and would protect the wearer in some way. Torcs are also often present on depictions of the gods in pieces of Celtic Art suggesting that the Celtic viewed them as having a spiritual symbolism. Some examples of this are seen on the Gundestrup cauldron where godlike figures on both the interior and exterior of the cauldron are wearing torcs.

¹⁵ Duncan Garrow, and Chris Gosden, 'Artefactual Times: Swords, Torcs, and Coins', *Technologies of Enchantment? Exploring Celtic Art: 400 BC to AD 100* (Oxford, 2012; online edn, Oxford Academic, 16 Mar. 2015), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:osobl/9780199548064.003.0005>, [Accessed 10 Apr. 2024].

¹⁶ Musei Capitolini, *Statue of "Capitoline Gaul"*, <<https://museicapitolini.org/en/opera/statua-del-galata-capitolino>> [Accessed 11 April 2024].

¹⁷ Tess Machling & Roland Williamson, *The Big Book of Torcs*, pattern-and-purpose-a-new-story-about-the-creation-of-the-snettisham-great-torc.

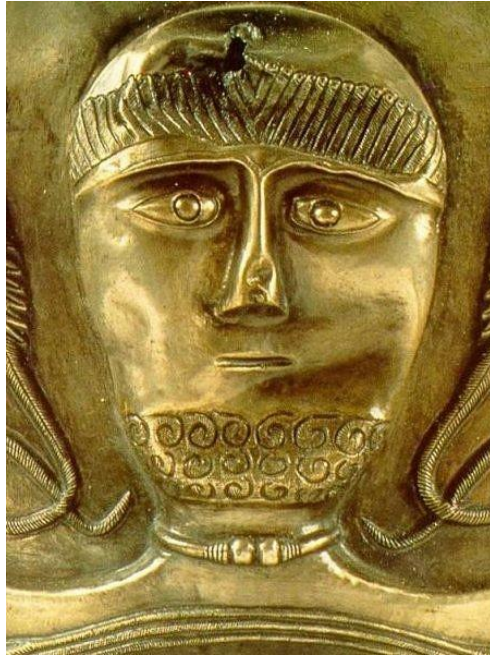


Figure 3. *Celtic God, Gundstrup Cauldron, (Unknow Artist, Public Domain).*

Torcs also appear in burials but are more common in those of females than males. One well-known example of this is the Vix burial that is located near Châtillon-sur-Seine in northeast France (often known as the princess burial).¹⁸ This was an inhumation dated to around 500 BCE of a high-status female who was buried wearing a heavy gold torc.¹⁹



¹⁸ John Davies, *The Celts* (London: Cassell, 2000), p23.

¹⁹ Lloyd Robert Laing, and Jennifer Laing, *Art of the Celts* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1992), p.31.

Figure 4. *Hollow gold torc from the 'princess burial' at Vix.*²⁰

The discovery of the Great Torc was a complete accident. It happened in 1950 (although some reports say 1948) when Tom Rout was ploughing a field at Ken Hill, Snettisham, in north-west Norfolk.²¹ The torc forms part of a collection of finds known as the *Snettisham Treasure*.²² This is also known as the *Snettisham Hoard*, but this is technically incorrect as the treasure belongs to multiple hoards, known as Hoard A to Hoard P. These finds happened during the period 1948 – 1992 due to ploughing, metal detecting and finally in 1990-1992 an excavation coordinated by the British Museum. The artefacts that make up the *Snettisham Treasure* are torcs (approx. 200 of which 75 are intact), ingot rings/bracelets (over 100), coins (in the region of 170) plus ingots and various other pieces of metal making it the largest collection of Iron Age torcs discovered in Western Europe.²³ In total, some 30 - 40 Kg of precious metal make up the collective hoards.

In 1951, The National Art Collection Fund (Art Fund) gifted the Great Torc to the British Museum having acquired it for £1,850 as part of the Snettisham Hoard that it purchased from the finder after it was declared Treasure Trove.²⁴ Since it was acquired by the British Museum, the torc has been part of seven temporary exhibitions, namely:

November 1991 – March 1992 at the Norwich Castle Museum, East Anglia, taking it back to the county in which it was originally discovered.²⁵

Dec 1993 – March 1994 at the National Museum of Wales, Cardiff. The exhibition was named '*Celtic Treasures: The Snettisham Torcs*'.²⁶ From the name of the exhibition, it can be assumed that the Snettisham Torcs were fully accepted as being Celtic and would therefore be of interest to the people of Wales, a Celtic Nation.

October 2003 – January 2004 at the Hayward Gallery, London. The exhibition was called '*Saved! 100 Years of the National Art Collections Fund*'.²⁷ The purpose of the exhibition was to showcase the works of art that The National Art Collection Fund (Art Fund) has helped to secure for

²⁰ Rosemania, *Vix burial torc*. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/rosemania/4120473015>, CC BY 2.0 [Accessed 10 Apr. 2024].

²¹ Tess Machling & Roland Williamson, *The Big Book of Torcs*, pattern-and-purpose-a-new-story-about-the-creation-of-the-snettisham-great-torc.

²² Norfolk Heritage Explorer, <<https://www.heritage.norfolk.gov.uk/record-details?MNF41314-Snettisham-Iron-Age-Treasure>> [Accessed 10 Apr. 2024].

²³ Norfolk Heritage Explorer, <<https://www.heritage.norfolk.gov.uk/record-details?MNF41314-Snettisham-Iron-Age-Treasure>> [Accessed 10 Apr. 2024].

²⁴ Richard Verdi, *Saved! : 100 years of the National Art Collections Fund* (Scala Press, 2003), p.148.

²⁵ The British Museum, *torc*, <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_1951-0402-2> [accessed 11 April 2024].

²⁶ The British Museum, *torc*, <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_1951-0402-2> [accessed 11 April 2024].

²⁷ The British Museum, *torc*, <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_1951-0402-2> [accessed 11 April 2024].

collections across the United Kingdom.²⁸ The Great Torc was included as it was presented to the British Museum in 1951 as a gift by the Art Fund.²⁹

March 2007 – June 2007 in the Palace Museum, Beijing, China. The exhibition was called '*Britain meets the World*'.³⁰

October 2011 – February 2012 at the Western Australian Museum, Perth. The exhibition was called '*Extraordinary Stories from the British Museum*'.³¹ The exhibition's purpose was to celebrate the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in October 2011 and together with artefacts that represented many of the (then) 54 Commonwealth countries tells a story of the world's people from the earliest times.

September 2015 – January 2016 at the British Museum, London. The exhibition was called '*Celts: Art and Identity*'.³² The exhibition explored the full history of both Celtic Art and Celtic Identity whilst trying to define who the Celts were by telling their story through the amazing objects they created. Once again, the Great Torc, as it did at Cardiff in 1993, is clearly identified as a Celtic artefact, and its inclusion in the exhibition highlights its historical significance.

March 2016 – September 2016 at the National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh. The exhibition was called '*Celts*'.³³ This was a major exhibition that sought to untangle the complicated story of the various groups that have been known as 'Celts' by looking at the amazing art object they created and used. The Great Torc is seen in this exhibition as an important example of insular Celtic Art.

Currently the Great Torc is on permanent display in Room 50 of the British Museum, London where it is part of the Britain and Europe 800 BC–AD 43 exhibition.³⁴ The British Museum describes the contents of Room 50 as telling the story of the huge changes experienced by the people of Britain and Europe during the Iron Age. It does this through their material culture and decorated artefacts known as 'Celtic Art', of which the Great Torc plays its part in the narrative.

Popular Celtic Art, as we know it today, has a very distinctive style taking its various design components from Celtic artifacts. Artists and designers continue to be inspired by Celtic Art, often incorporating it into their work with an added twist of their own. A very good example

²⁸ Richard Verdi, *Saved! : 100 years of the National Art Collections Fund* (Scala Press, 2003), p.12.

²⁹ Richard Verdi, *Saved! : 100 years of the National Art Collections Fund* (Scala Press, 2003), p.148.

³⁰ The British Museum, *torc*, <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_1951-0402-2> [accessed 11 April 2024].

³¹ Western Australia Museum, *Extraordinary Stories*, <<https://museum.wa.gov.au/extraordinary-stories/extraordinary-stories/>> [Accessed 11 April 2024].

³² The British Museum, *Who Were the Celts*, <<https://www.britishmuseum.org/blog/who-were-celts>>, [Last accessed 11 April 2024].

³³ National Museums Scotland, *Celts*, <<https://www.nms.ac.uk/>> [Last accessed 11 April 2024].

³⁴ The British Museum, *Britain and Europe 800 BC–AD 43*, <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_1951-0402-2> [accessed 11 April 2024].

of this is the work of artist Ruth Fillery-Travis who has taken the design from the collar of the Snettisham Great Torc as her inspiration for a line motif that she used to decorate a cup.³⁵



Figure 6. *The Snettisham Great torc (terminal 1, showing the collar pattern).*³⁶

When creating the design, the artist was looking to incorporate symmetry to the pattern so that it would be more pleasing to the modern eye. The finished design is shown in Fig. 7



Figure 7. *Stylized motif based on the Snettisham Great torc collar design.*³⁷

³⁵ Norfolk Heritage Explorer, <[https://www.heritage.norfolk.gov.uk/record-details?TNF2320-Snettisham-Iron-Age-bracelet-from-the-Snettisham-Treasure---Ruth-Fillery-Travis-\(Archaeology-and-Art\)](https://www.heritage.norfolk.gov.uk/record-details?TNF2320-Snettisham-Iron-Age-bracelet-from-the-Snettisham-Treasure---Ruth-Fillery-Travis-(Archaeology-and-Art))> [Accessed 10 Apr. 2024].

³⁶ Tess Machling & Roland Williamson, *The Big Book of Torcs* (Date unknown)
< <https://bigbookoftorcs.com/2022/05/29/pattern-and-purpose-a-new-story-about-the-creation-of-the-snettisham-great-torc/> > [accessed 11 April 2024].

³⁷ Norfolk Heritage Explorer, <[https://www.heritage.norfolk.gov.uk/record-details?TNF2320-Snettisham-Iron-Age-bracelet-from-the-Snettisham-Treasure---Ruth-Fillery-Travis-\(Archaeology-and-Art\)](https://www.heritage.norfolk.gov.uk/record-details?TNF2320-Snettisham-Iron-Age-bracelet-from-the-Snettisham-Treasure---Ruth-Fillery-Travis-(Archaeology-and-Art))> [Accessed 10 Apr. 2024].

In summary, The Snottisham Great Torc is both stylistically and culturally identifiable as a piece of Celtic Art. It has a clear and unquestionable provenance and is a magnificent example of its kind which has been a part of many exhibitions around the world. It was designed to display the wearer's high status and to impress, something it continues to do today.

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