

Fermanagh

a story in **100** objects



The Corrard Torc

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Bronze Age gold torcs

In 2009, one of the most important single items of Irish Bronze Age gold metalwork was discovered close to the shore of Upper Lough Erne at Corrard, near Belle Isle, County Fermanagh. Corrard townland forms a low lying peninsula projecting into Upper Lough Erne. The field where the torc was discovered is boggy, characterised by coarse grass and reed growth which is prone to flooding. Investigation of the site by the Centre for Archaeological fieldwork at Queen's University, Belfast, on behalf of the Northern Ireland Environment Agency, recovered no other objects of relevance to the torc. Neither are there archaeological monuments of Bronze Age date in the immediate vicinity.

The Corrard torc belongs to a 'type' known as gold bar torcs (Eogan 1967), traditionally interpreted as items of jewellery possibly worn around the neck or waist. Gold bar torcs of this type were fashionable in Ireland, Britain and France c.1300-1100BC. What makes the Corrard torc particularly remarkable is the deliberate coiling and compressing prior to burial.

Description

The torc in its coiled state measures c.22 cm in length and in its present condition could not have been worn (Pl. 1). It was originally designed to form a large circular hoop with two solid terminals at either end which are bent back and act as interlocking clasps to allow the torc to be fastened and unfastened, acting rather like a clasp on a necklace (Pls. 2-3). The main body of the torc takes the form of a thin cross-section which has four flanges (+). These were created from working and hammering a square bar. The flanges are twisted along their entire length in a clockwise direction creating a spiral ribbon-like appearance. This treatment gives the object its typological name – a four-flange twisted

bar torc. The word 'torc', derived from the Latin 'to twist,' refers to the twisting of the square bar and not the deliberate coiling.

Recent experimental work by metal smith Brian Clarke, Co. Wicklow, regarding the construction of the Corrad torc, has confirmed earlier observations made by Maryon (1938). Maryon noted that twisting of a square bar would naturally result in a narrow hollow developing between each of the four edges, making them more prominent and creating a regular spiral twist. By hammering and working the four edges of the bar to create four thin flanges, the appearance is even more pronounced. Tools from the Bishopsland hoard, Co. Kildare, are compatible with those needed to create a torc of this shape and design (Eogan 1983:36).

As to the construction of the terminals, the current debate centres on whether they were created as part of the same gold bar, or attached separately. Taylor (1980:61) has argued that a more accomplished finish can be achieved by making the terminals separately and then soldering them on, but this may not necessarily be the case. On some torcs e.g. Enniscorthy, Wexford (NMI W.180), they are clearly a continuation of the bar. It is difficult to be certain at present which method was used to create the Corrad terminals.

Parallels and date

Within the group of bar torcs as defined by Eogan (1967), those with four flanges are rare and epitomise the skill of the goldsmith's art. There are nine other examples of this specific type from Ireland, compared to and at least 38 from Britain. Parallels include the two iconic torcs from Tara, Co. Meath (National Museum of Ireland). Where the Fermanagh torc is more unusual within an Irish context, is the coiled treatment prior to burial. The only other certain parallel is from Drumsallagh, Co. Down, which was straightened at some time after its discovery (Cahill 1989). This torc is in private possession. Conversely, in Britain and France there are numerous examples of coiled torcs.

Within the limitations of Bronze Age chronology the current hoard evidence suggests that while the origin of gold bar torcs as a group was probably early in the 14th century, the primary period of production of four-flange twisted torcs in Ireland and Britain was slightly later in date c.1300-1100BC (Needham 2004:33). This conclusion is based primarily on British hoard evidence which is more informative than the limited number of Irish hoards. This places the Corrad torc in the 'Bishopsland' phase.

Precious metal content

The Corrad torc was examined by Dr Paul Mullarkey of the National Museum of Ireland using X-ray Fluorescence Spectrometry giving readings of 87% gold, 11% silver and 2%

copper.¹ This is equivalent to 21 carat gold and is consistent with a silver content that occurs naturally in Ireland. A higher gold content renders the metal soft and easily scratched and is not ideal for jewellery making.

The Corrad results proved highly surprising when compared to other four-flange twisted torcs which have an average reading of 81% gold; 16% silver and 4% copper. The Corrad results are more characteristic of alloy-B (Warner 2004:79ff). Objects of alloy-B include ornaments in the Irish Derrinboy hoard, Co. Offaly, which are dated to the beginning of the Bishopsland phase.² This is earlier than the date suggested for four-flange torcs based on the hoard evidence. While there are no certainties in interpreting these results there are a number of possibilities: a) the Corrad torc still dates to the later Bishopsland period in Ireland (c.1300-1100 BC) along with all other four flange-twisted torcs but was recycled from the gold alloy typical of objects made a hundred or so years earlier; or b) the Corrad torc is earlier in date than the other examples of its type. A greater understanding of the situation will require further analysis.

As to whether the Corrad torc was made locally, there is a tendency to suggest that in the absence of local ore sources 'gold and bronze objects found in Co. Fermanagh were most likely produced elsewhere in Ireland (Foley and McHugh 2014:80) but this may not necessarily be the case.

Distribution and origins of bar torcs

There are a number of gold finds from County Fermanagh which range in date from the Early to Late Bronze Age (Foley and McHugh 2014:102ff). There are also an array of bronze tools and weapons with a particular concentration around Enniskillen and Belleek (Williams and Gormley 2002: fig.13). As regards bar torcs, the Corrad torc is a comparatively isolated north-western example. Although a spectacular object, the discovery adds little to alter Eogan's overall conclusions on their distribution (1994:57) and reflects the difficulty of interpreting distribution patterns from a limited number of finds.

What is more interesting to note since Eogan's publication, is the increasing number of finds from southern Britain. This body of evidence is beginning to challenge earlier assumptions that bar torcs developed in Ireland. Southern Britain was a focal point of cultural exchange as indicated by the discoveries of cargoes from Bronze Age shipwrecks. Most remarkable is the site of Salcombe in Devon where divers have recovered a staggering 320 Bronze Age objects dating between 1300-800 BC (Roberts and Veysey

¹These figures are averages resulting from a series of almost identical measurements. The copper content was less than 2% and was deliberately added.

² A C14 date for the Derrinboy hoard 3310+/-50 (1740-1450 cal. BC) would place it earlier in time than the conventional dates for the beginning of the Bishopsland phase (Cahill 2006).

2011). Among the gold artefacts are three small fragments from four-flange twisted torcs, presumably cut for recycling. The discovery of these cargoes provides a tangible mechanism for the transmission of ideas, transport of objects and the movement of people. As a region of cultural exchange it is hard to overlook southern Britain's role as the possible area for the development of four-flange twisted torcs which then had local areas of manufacture Ramsey (2013).

The distribution of bar torcs reveals one further interesting pattern. Irish examples are on the whole much heavier than from elsewhere. The Corrad torc weighs 720gms; only one of the Tara torcs and an example from Jersey is heavier. What exactly to make of these regional variations is uncertain, but access to gold supplies did not seem to be a problem.

Function of gold bar torcs.

No torc has been discovered with skeletal remains which could indicate on what part of the body it was worn, while gold objects of any type recovered from Bronze Age burials are rare (this makes the Early Bronze Age find of a gold pommel-binding for a dagger from Topped Mountain cairn noteworthy; see Foley and McHugh 2014:86). While torcs are generally regarded as neck rings, larger examples could have been worn around the waist. Although now coiled, the Corrad torc was created from a bar that measured c.121cm (c.47½ inches) in length, to which the terminals were added. If it was designed as a belt, the individual was well fed! The interpretation of torcs as armlets seems unlikely as the terminals would serve no practical purpose. If not intended for personal use then there is the possibility that torcs decorated a deity or were used as part of a ritual ceremony.

Unfortunately, the assessment of the find spot has not added significantly to our appreciation of either the circumstances or the context of the torc's deposition. Corrad (Corr Árd, 'high round hill') almost probably refers to the drumlins that characterise the surrounding landscape enclosing an area of boggy ground that is prone to flooding today and also during the Middle Bronze Age. It is tempting to suggest that the Corrad torc was part of a widespread phenomenon based around ritual deposition as 'gifts to the gods' (Waddell 1998:201). This appears to be the case for many bronze objects from the context of wet locations i.e. rivers, lakes and bogs (Ramsey 2001:21ff). It is of course possible that some objects were lost at fording points, as at Portora Ford on the R. Erne, in Enniskillen (Day 1895). However, gold objects deposited during the Bishopsland phase are predominately from dry land and over all the quantity and quality of both gold and bronze objects makes them difficult to account for in terms of accidental loss.

The deliberate coiling remains one of the most interesting features of the Corrad torc, irrespective of whether it was a votive offering or part of a burial ceremony. Why torcs were coiled and compressed in this manner is uncertain, though it would make the act of

burial or concealment easier. Perhaps coiling was an act of decommissioning, making the object no longer part of this world? This scenario is not unlike the case of Flag Fen, Cambridgeshire, where objects were deliberately broken or bent before being thrown into the water (Prior 1991:115). The remarkable and elaborate torc or belt from Pas-de Calais, with its large and extravagant terminals is unique in that has been coiled and then pinned, with gold pins driven through the coils so that they could not be unwound (Périn 2005).

Transporting torcs in a coiled state may also have been convenient for trade. The intriguing coiled torc from the Burton Hoard, Wrexham (pl.4), was possibly stored in an accompanying pottery vessel (Gwilt et al 2004). There is evidence to suggest that torcs could be uncoiled as suggested by a find from Sculthorpe, Norfolk (Varndell 1986). This practice did not present a major technical problem for the gold worker. The Corrad torc reflects access to extreme wealth and an ability to secure a commodity which was highly sought after in the Bronze Age.

The torc has been acquired by National Museums Northern Ireland under the Treasure Act (1996), generously funded by the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and is on display in the Ulster Museum.

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Pl.1 Corrad torc, Co. Fermanagh BELUM.A2013.1_01958
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Pl.2 Corrad torc, terminal detail BELUM.A2013.23
©National Museums Northern Ireland Collection Ulster Museum



Pl.3 Corrad torc, terminal detail BELUM.A2013.22



Pl.4 The Burton Hoard, Wrexham DH000795 © National Museum of Wales

'Fermanagh: a story in one hundred objects' is a project involving people from the local community, historians and students from the University of Ulster.

Supported by the Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund, this project is part of our 'Fermanagh Heritage Gateway' activity programme. The research project tells aspects of Fermanagh's diverse history through the selection and interpretation of one hundred key objects. Objects are locally important as well as of wider international significance.

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