

A rediscovered Iron Age torus torc terminal fragment from 'Near Stowmarket', Suffolk.

By Tess Machling & Roland Williamson



Figure 1: Terminal front (Image © T. Machling & R. Williamson)

Background:

In May 1996, a metal detectorist working fields close to Stowmarket found a fragment of gold from a torus torc terminal. The field has been walked and detected regularly over the years and no other Iron Age material has been found in this location. The exact find spot is known and recorded, but for security reasons neither that, nor the name of the detectorist, can be released. For ease of reference, the new torc fragment will be known as the 'Near Stowmarket' torc.

In 1996, the find was shown to Suffolk County Council Archaeological Service and then sent to the British Museum for examination. The Coroner was informed and a decision was made that the object did not meet the Treasure Trove requirements of the time and so was returned to the finder.



Figure 2: Terminal back (Image © T. Machling & R. Williamson)

In late 2019, a record of the find was located at the British Museum by curator, Dr Julia Farley, and the information passed to us. At that stage the location of the terminal piece was unknown. Email conversations then led us to the current location of the torc piece – which had been retained by the finder – and in December 2019 they kindly allowed us to see the torc fragment so that it could be recorded and published.

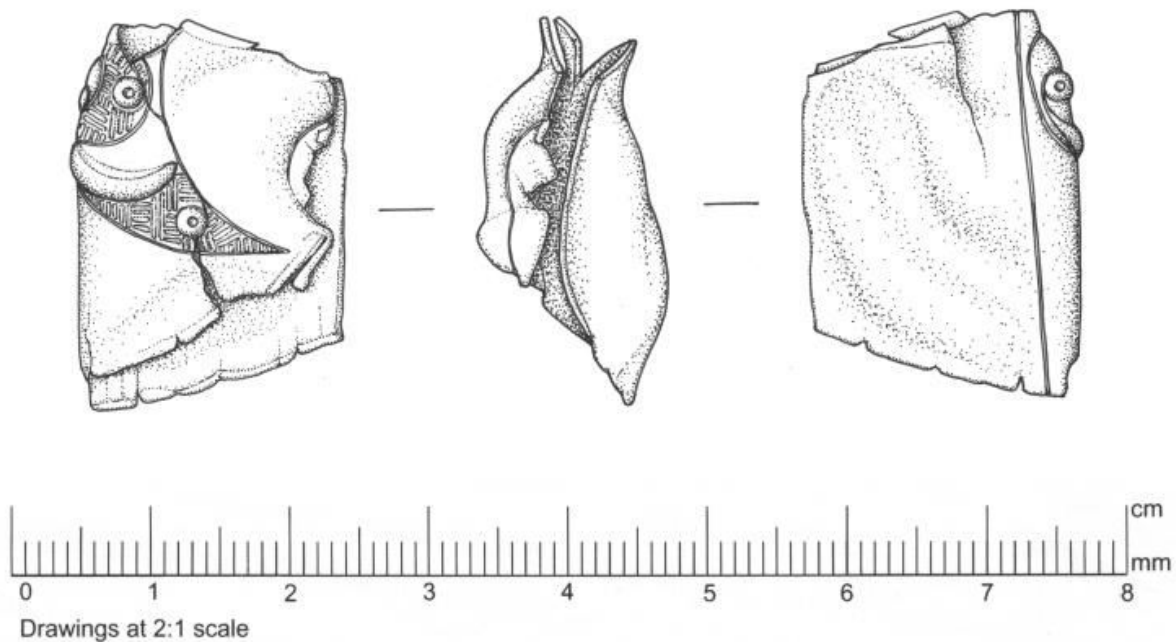


Figure 3: Illustration of the Near Stowmarket terminal fragment by Donna Wreathall (Image © Suffolk County Council Archaeological Service)

The fragment is currently stable and appropriately packed and stored. The finder has added two small wooden dowel rods to stop the fragment from collapsing.

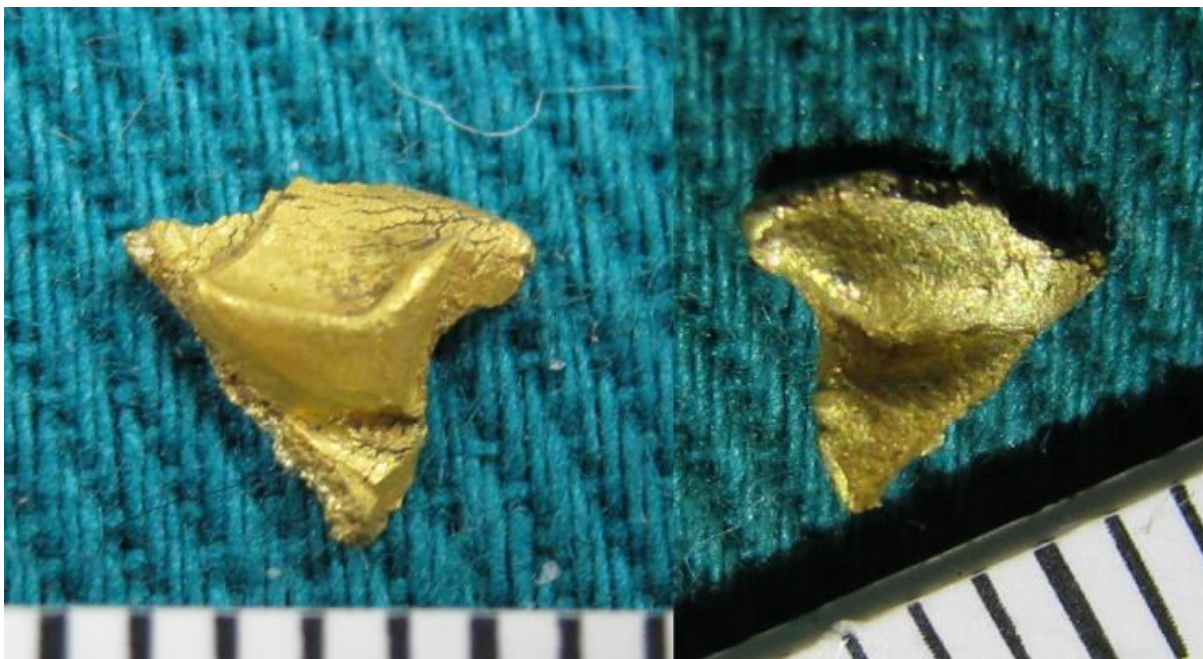


Figure 4: Detached torc fragment, front (left) and back (right) (Image © T. Machling & R. Williamson)

Description:

The find comprises a large decorated piece of gold alloy torus torc terminal (Figs. 1-3) and a smaller piece (Fig. 4), detached when the fragment was examined by the British Museum in 1996. This appears to represent the upper left portion of a torus torc terminal (Fig. 5).

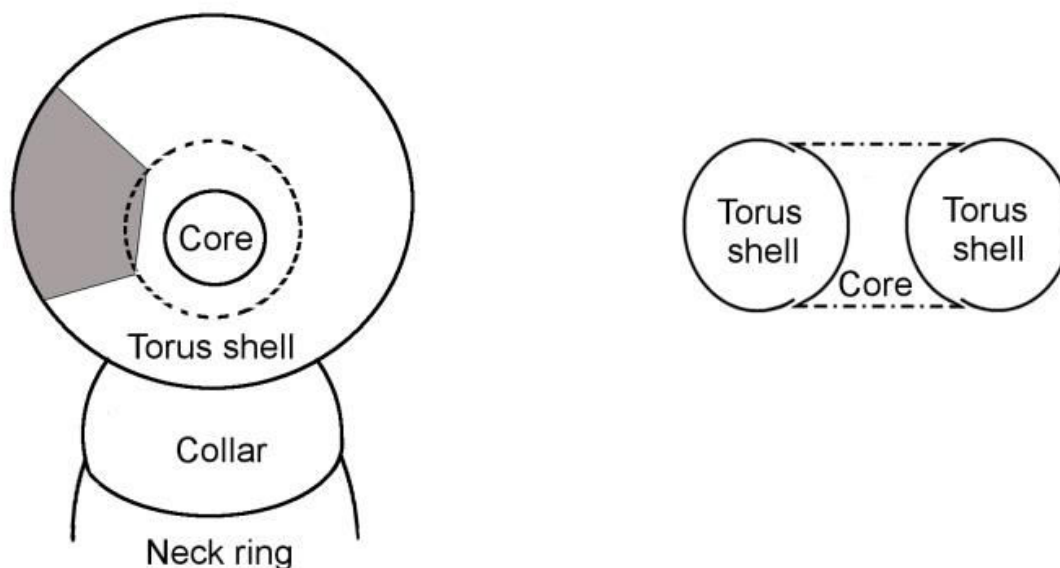


Figure 5: Illustration of a torus torc, with the portion represented by the Near Stowmarket fragment shaded grey (Image © T. Machling & R. Williamson)

The total weight for both pieces is 7.6g. The larger fragment measures 27.6mm x 21.4mm x 13.3mm and comprises a flattened section of outer torus shell and core. The smaller piece measures approximately 5mm x 5mm and was originally attached close to the roundel on the face of the terminal. The terminal is made from sheet gold (between 0.6-0.8mm thick) and, from surface pXRF, has a gold content of c.60% (Lili Carter, *pers. comm.*). It was constructed using the sheet 'torus and core' method (Machling & Williamson 2018).

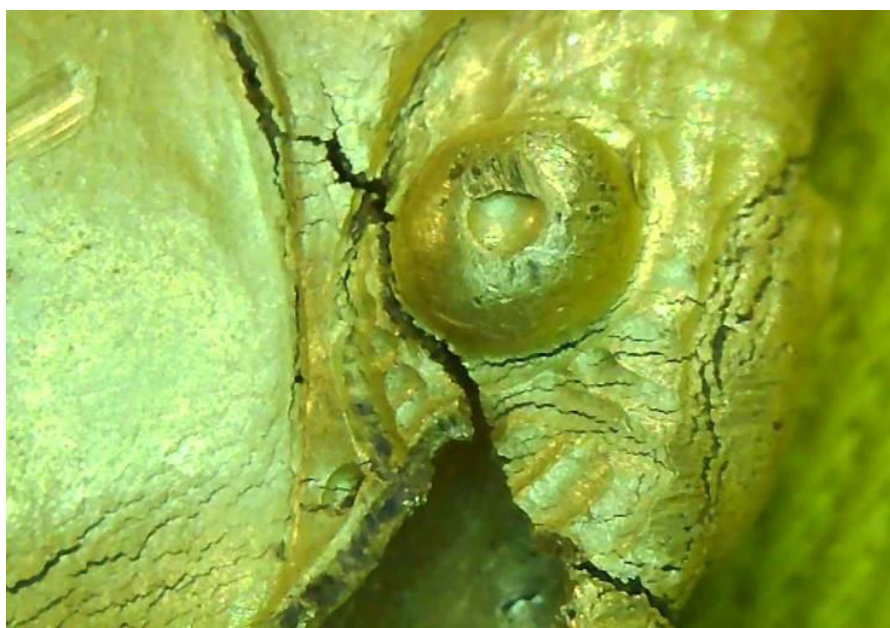


Figure 6: Close up of gold overworking (Image © T. Machling & R. Williamson)

The gold is extremely poorly preserved and would appear to have been overworked – and additionally leached whilst in the ground (Fig. 6). It is possible that some of the stress cracks visible may result from the dismantling of the terminal in antiquity, which appears to have been carried out in a rushed and violent manner (see below).

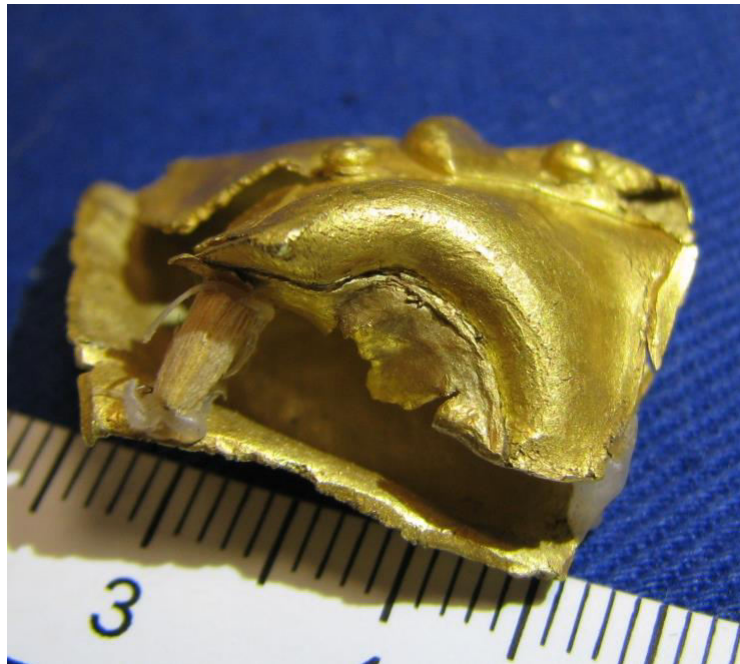


Figure 7: Terminal core (Image © T. Machling & R. Williamson)

The core/torus shell seam can be clearly seen on the front face and shows that the core was attached over the torus shell (Fig. 7), as has been previously recognised on the Netherurd and Snettisham Great torcs (Machling & Williamson 2020b).

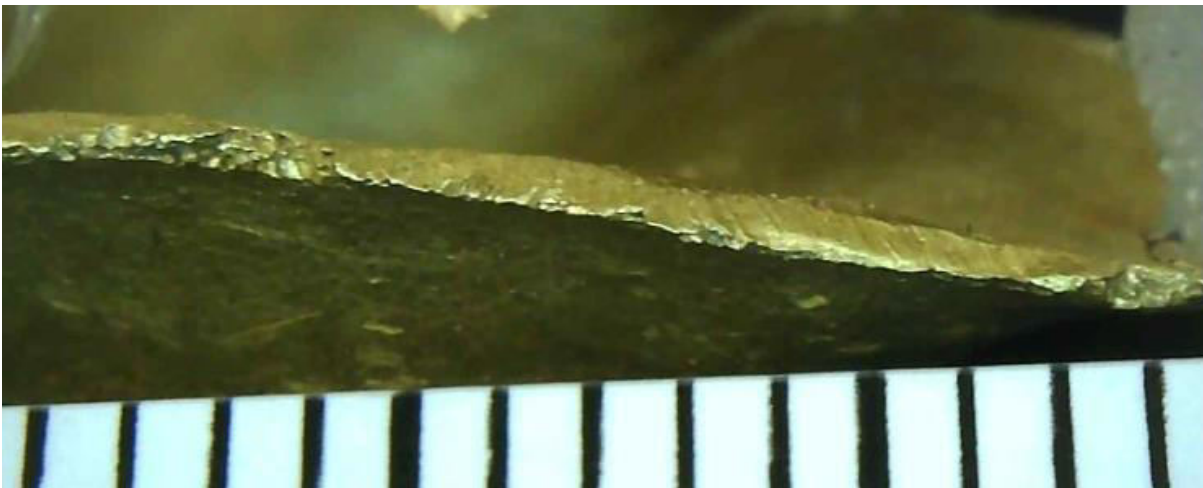


Figure 8: Cut edge of the torc terminal sheet (Image © T. Machling & R. Williamson)

It was not possible to see if the seam is visible on the front interior but is not visible on the back interior, possibly because the cut on the back was made above the core seam line. The section has been cut from the terminal with a sharp, thin, blade (Fig. 8) and there is a further aborted c.21mm fine cut on the rear of the piece (Fig. 2).

However, on the front face of the core, the ragged sheet edge in the core area (Fig. 7) would suggest that the dismantling of this terminal was more manual in its final stages:

perhaps once cut across the torus to provide a partial 'orange segment', the fragment was then pulled manually from the core to release it. The visible strain and opening that can be seen on the exterior torus/core seam, and perhaps even the flattening of the piece, would support this interpretation.

Having measured the dimensions of the piece and the distance from the core seam to the tooled line on the top of the terminal piece (c. 21mm), we believe the Near Stowmarket terminal, when complete, would have been very similar in size to the Netherurd and the Snettisham Great torc terminals. The measurement from core seam to tooled line on the Netherurd terminal is c.23mm. As such, dimensions for the Near Stowmarket terminal are likely to have been similar to the Netherurd and Great torc terminals (Netherurd terminal dimensions: 61.6mm x 52.9mm x 28.6mm; Great torc terminals: 63.9mm x 54.1mm x 29.1mm and 66mm x 55.3mm x 28.8mm). If the weight approximation is the same then, according to the weight of the Netherurd terminal being 114g, the Near Stowmarket find represents approximately 1/15 of a complete terminal, by weight.

Decoration:

On the face, the torc has been decorated (Fig. 1) in the 'Snettisham Style' (Jope 2000): what survives would appear to be a representative section of a crescent shaped zone of decoration which would have covered the upper 2/3 of the terminal face (Figs. 5 & 11). Punched tooled lines can be seen in the zones, infilling between raised relief crescentic lentoids (there is also a crescentic lentoid on the small fragment) and a roundel with two raised dummy rivets within.



Figure 9: Decoration on the Near Stowmarket, with single extended line to be seen just below right dummy rivet (Image © T. Machling & R. Williamson)

There is also a single raised dummy rivet in the zone closest to the crescent 'point'. The dummy rivets all have only one punched dot on their top which is unusual, three being seen on each of the dummy rivets on the Snettisham Great, Newark, Netherurd and Sedgeford torcs. The tooled line around the roundel is tooled anti-clockwise which is similar to Netherurd, Newark and two of the Sedgeford roundels, but dissimilar to the Great torc, where all the roundels are tooled clockwise (Machling & Williamson 2018, 391).

The tooling within the zones is regular and ordered and in general follows a pattern of groups of parallel lines, arranged in sections perpendicular to each other. As such it does not resemble the 'Newark-Netherurd pattern' seen in the torcs of that name (Machling & Williamson 2018, 394).

However in style, tool size, achievement – and the use of a single longer tooled line which breaks the general pattern (Fig. 9) – it does resemble the tooling seen on the Sedgeford and Snettisham Great torc terminals (Fig. 10), with an occasional, longer, single tooled line also being seen on both of these torcs.



Figure 10: Tooling on the Sedgeford (left) and Snettisham Great torc (right) showing an extended single line between groups of tooled lines (Image © The Trustees of the British Museum)

The crescent shaped decorative panel is best paralleled by the torcs from Ipswich, Suffolk (Brailsford & Stapley 1972) and in particular by Torc 3 from that site (Fig. 11). However, the apparently cast (N.B. We have not seen these torcs yet, and so the manufacturing method is currently unconfirmed) Ipswich torcs are of a different manufacturing method to the sheet torus torc seen here.

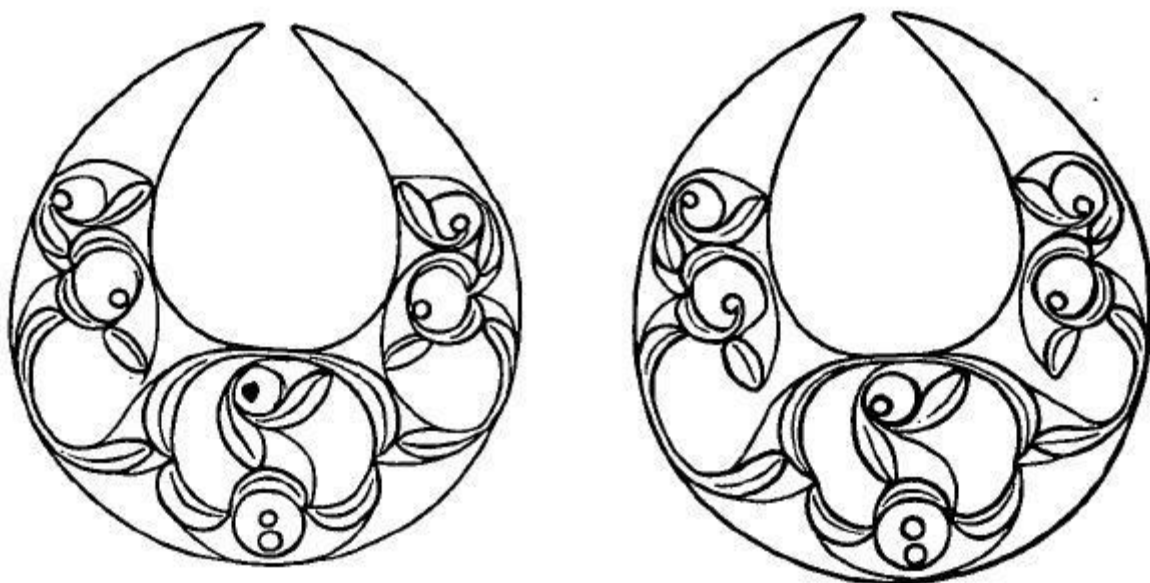


Figure 11: Decoration on Torc 3 from the Ipswich hoard (from Brailsford & Stapley 1972)

Evidence for the Netherurd and Newark torcs being by the same maker/ finisher, and yet the former being sheet and the latter a cast/hammered hybrid (Machling & Williamson 2020b), would not rule out the same workshop/maker for the Ipswich and Near Stowmarket torcs despite their apparently different manufacturing techniques. Whatever the case, the crescent design, unparalleled in any torc from beyond Suffolk, may hint at a local decorative style.

Interior:

On the interior of the fragment the dummy rivet buttons and crescentic lentoids can be clearly seen in opposite relief (Fig. 12). There are also traces of the exterior tooled lines. The entire interior surface is mottled, with the interior opposite relief of the dummy rivets and lentoids not exhibiting the precision that would be expected had the torc been decorated from the interior, using the repoussé technique.

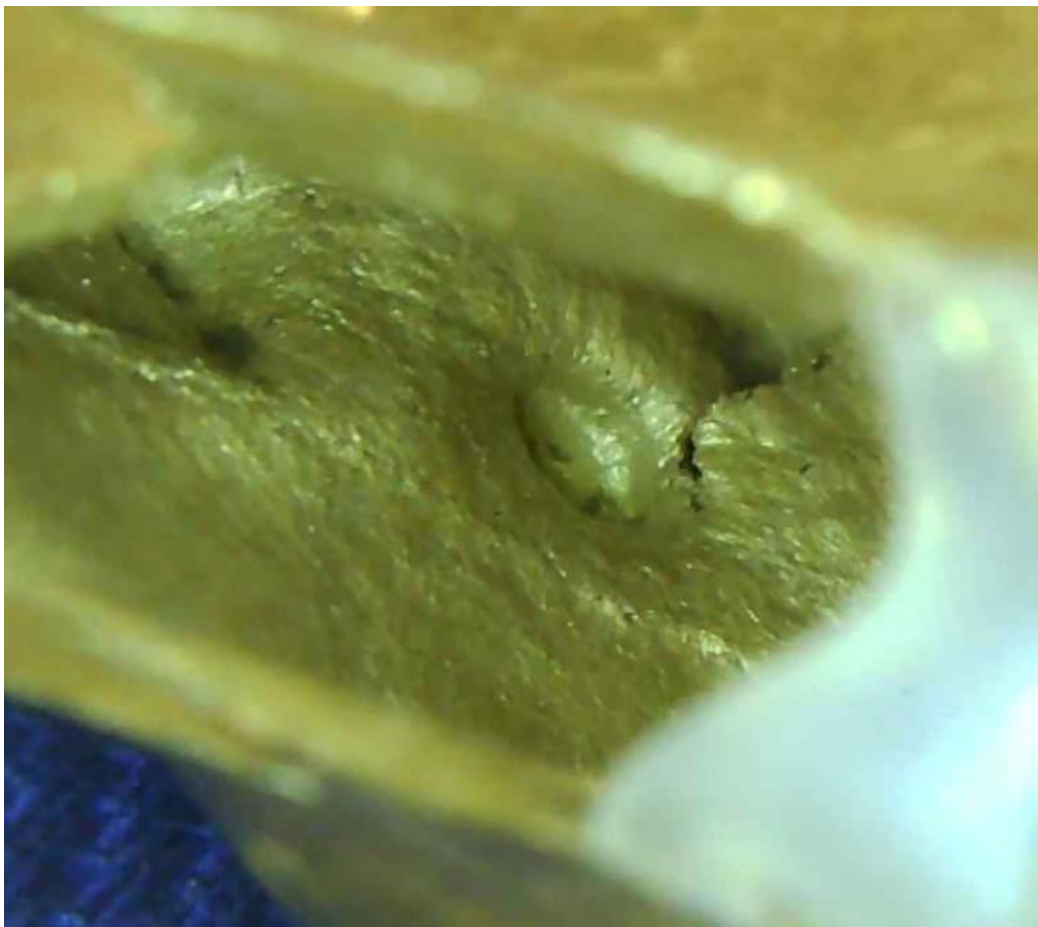


Figure 12: Interior of torc fragment showing opposite relief of dummy rivet (Image © T. Machling & R. Williamson)

The evidence seen on the interior of the Near Stowmarket terminal, like that seen on the interiors of the Clevedon and Netherurd terminals (Machling & Williamson 2019), would support the theory that the relief work and decoration of sheet torus torcs was largely carried out from the exterior.

Destruction:

As mentioned above, the stressed nature of the gold, the torn core sheet edge and the strained and opening core/torus shell seam may point to a rapid and brutal fragmentation

of the original terminal. The aborted cut seen on the rear of the fragment might suggest a further division of the gold was planned but then abandoned, as this cut appears to have been made only after the original cut towards the core was made (Fig. 13).

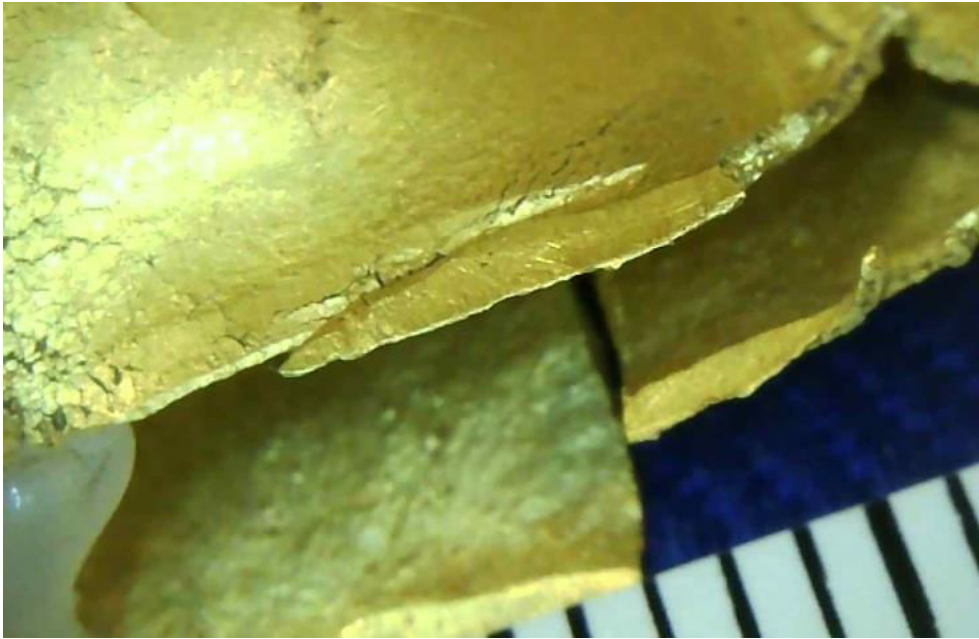


Figure 13: Cuts to the terminal shell (Image © T. Machling & R. Williamson)

Why and when this torc was cut up is uncertain, however, the Iron Age Snettisham hoards contain a number of torc pieces, including one piece of sheet with concentric circles (Fig. 14) that may have originated from a sheet torus torc.

The precise reasoning for the fragmentation of torcs at Snettisham is uncertain and has been suggested to be symbolic/ritual in nature. However, our recognition of possible goldsmiths' 'swatches' of wire examples and alloy component groups within the hoards might suggest that there was a more practical element involved, alongside the ritual deposition.



Figure 14: Fragment from a possible torus torc terminal with concentric ring decoration (BM 1991,0501.7) (Image © The Trustees of the British Museum)

Other finds of fragmented torc pieces – usually wires – from across the country have similarly ambiguous contexts. As such, the cutting up of the Near Stowmarket terminal could be seen to be either the result of some kind of ritual/symbolic practice or as a piece of gold, cut up for bullion or recycling. At present, we just cannot say. It is also difficult to ascertain whether the fragment was lost or purposefully deposited, although the location of the find, and the absence of any other Iron Age material in the vicinity, may point to the former.

There is also nothing concrete to suggest that the cutting up of this torc happened in the Iron Age, and we must remain open to the possibility that this was carried out at a much later date, perhaps in another period entirely. However, currently we cannot be certain.

Initial thoughts:

The rediscovered Near Stowmarket torc is an important find. Being only the third similarly decorated, sheet gold, torus torc known in the UK – alongside the Snettisham Great torc and the Netherurd terminal – it has a lot of information to give. Even within the slightly larger group of high craft quality gold torcs – which includes the two torcs above, along with the Sedgeford, Newark, Grotesque torc and the Clevedon terminal – it is only the seventh known example. For Suffolk, this is the only torc find to have occurred outside of the Ipswich hoard.

Provisional results have shown a manufacturing relationship with other gold sheet torus torcs, with decorative parallels perhaps showing a regional style in the vicinity of Suffolk. Although the torc is damaged, this in many ways has added to its importance as it has allowed us, for the first time, to carry out a close examination of the interior of a sheet gold terminal. What this has shown is that our preliminary thoughts (Machling & Williamson 2019) regarding the method of externally, rather than internally, creating relief and decoration on torcs appears to be correct. In addition, the ‘torus and core’ sheet manufacturing method has, once again, been proved to be the method of choice for the construction of high craft quality gold sheet torcs (Machling & Williamson 2020b).

A number of theories can be posited as to how the torc came to be in its final location: the absence of other Iron Age finds from the vicinity, and its fragmented form, would suggest that it was a random deposition, and not part of a torc hoard. The weight of the item, within the realm of that used for Iron Age coinage, might suggest it was cut up to be recycled, however, the cutting, using a sharp, thin bladed, knife – as opposed to chisels or shears – is unusual and might suggest recycling in a later, post Iron Age, period. We will continue to research this torc but, for now, the information it has given adds greatly to our knowledge of torus torcs in the UK and Ireland. An important find indeed.

Acknowledgments:

Our thanks go to Julia Farley for the original tip off about the existence of the torc. We would also like to thank Faye Minter and all at Suffolk County Council Archaeological Services for offering a meeting space and being so generous with their time. Faye Minter, Tim Pestell, Jude Plouviez, Glynn Davies and Ben Paites are thanked for their help and advice in tracking down the finder. With thanks to Lili Carter for the pXRF results and to Donna Wreathall for the wonderful illustration of the find. And last, but certainly not least, great thanks must go to the finder of the torc, who retained this wonderful item for so many years and who also kindly allowed us access to the torc to record it, and gave us permission to publish the same.

References:

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Postscript:

We are sure there are other torcs/pieces of torc out there somewhere and we would be happy to record any in a similarly confidential manner as we have done in this case. Please contact us, in complete confidence, if you know of any other finds that could be of interest to our research.

We will be writing up the torc for academic publication in due course but, in line with our collaborative and open research ethos, wanted to share the details of this important find in the public domain as soon as possible.

In addition, by publishing the initial details of this new torc online, we are not restricted by costly image rights issues or the number, or colour, of images that we can display. Unfortunately, in many academic journals, the inclusion of high numbers of images is not possible or, where it is, the high cost of image rights and colour reproduction limits what can be produced, especially for those, like us, who are without research funding.

by Tess Machling & Roland Williamson, Sunday 2nd February 2020.