

AN IRON TORC FROM SPETTISBURY RINGS, DORSET

By C. F. C. HAWKES

As a pendant to Mr. Colin Gresham's paper on the Iron Age hill-fort of Spettisbury Rings, Dorset, published last year in this *Journal* (Vol. xcvi, Pt. 1, 114-131), this note is written to record an unusual—possibly unique—object from the site in the British Museum, which was stored in a place unknown to me when Mr. Gresham was at work on the rest of the Spettisbury collection. It is a large torc of wrought iron (Fig. 1), no. 13 in the series given to the British Museum in June 1862 by J. Y. Akerman, from the find made in cutting into the ditch of the fort for the Central Dorset Railway in 1857. It was recorded by Akerman, when exhibiting the finds to the Society of Antiquaries and quoting the report on them made for him by a Mr. Thomas Olinthus Donaldson, as 'a twisted iron pot-handle with eyes.'¹ There is a pot-handle or bucket-handle, with untwisted stem and hooked ends, in the collection also (Mr. Gresham's Pl. vi, 6 and p. 123), and the twisted object was regarded as a variant of this, since there was little reason at the time for recognizing it as really a torc. Indeed, it was not until 1933 that Mr. E. T. Leeds drew attention to the type of torc with twisted stem and loop ends as particular to the Early Iron Age in this country, in his publication of the electrum torcs of this form from Ulceby, Lincs., and the more elaborate and massive gold one from Needwood Forest, Staffs., in the Royal collection, deposited at the British Museum in 1936 by King Edward VIII.² Mr. Leeds pointed out as contemporary the corresponding form with untwisted stem and ends hammered into flat plates, exemplified from an inhumation-grave at Yarnton, Oxon,³ and from Winslow, Bucks.⁴ As

¹ *Proc. Soc. Antiq.*, 1st series, iv (1857-9), 190.

² *Antiq. Journ.*, xiii, 466-8 with Pls. lxxx-lxxxi; *B.M. Quarterly* xi, 3-4, with Pl. ii c. The Clevedon torc (*B.M. Iron Age Guide*, 150-1, Fig.

175) is a variant with ornamental 'buffer' terminals.

³ Evans, *Ancient Bronze Impts.*, 380, Fig. 470.

⁴ *Archaeologia* xi, 429, with Pl. xix, 3; *V.C.H. Bucks.* i, 187.

examples of the primary type one may mention two miniature torcs or bracelets of gold, not quoted by him, with twisted stem and loop ends just like the first Ulceby specimen, one from Cross, near Axbridge, Somerset,¹ the other from Clench Common, near Devizes, Wilts.² The Spettisbury example is just an enlarged version in iron of identically the same type.

Bent as it is at present, with the loop ends 4.9 in. apart, its greatest external breadth is 8.3 in.; the greatest depth, measured from the tip of the loop ends, is 6 in., so that it would fit a fair-sized neck, being presumably secured by a thong or other fastening at

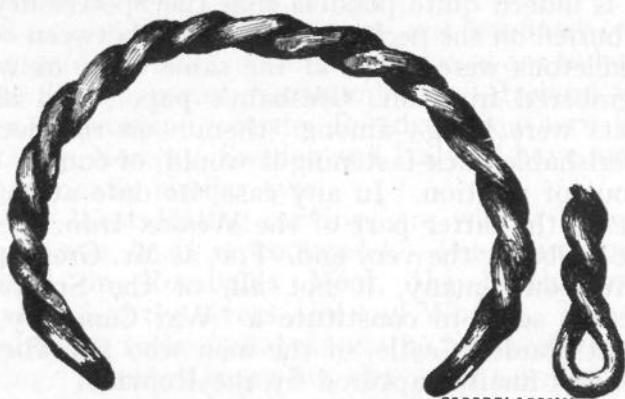


FIG. 1. IRON TORC FROM SPETTISBURY RINGS ($\frac{1}{3}$)

the back. It is made of a single hoop of wrought iron, 0.35 in. in diameter, doubled upon itself to make a semicircle, and finished by twining the two halves together to make the twisted stem and the two loop ends. It is somewhat rusted, but like the rest of the Spettisbury iron is in moderately good condition; so preserved, it weighs a little over 14 oz., or just 400 grammes. This is a formidable weight for the neck. The most massive of the contemporary gold torcs, that

¹ British Museum (Greenwell Collection).

² *Devizes Mus. Cat.* ii, ed. 2 (1934), 205, Fig. 34a; *Wilts Arch. Mag.*

xlii, 70 (on loan to the British Museum from the Wiltshire Archaeological Society).

from Needwood Forest, weighs 363 grammes. But greater size is natural with a non-precious metal, and that iron was esteemed for personal adornment where gold could not be come by is suggested by the plain iron neck-rings found on inhumed skeletons of this period, one at Arras in East Yorkshire, another cited from Dorchester, Dorset, a third at Ham Hill, Somerset; and in a hoard at Rudbaxton, Pembrokeshire.¹ That the same held good later in Scotland is attested by the remark of Herodian,² that in the time of Septimius Severus the northern Britons adorned their loins and necks with iron, considering it an ornament and sign of wealth, as other barbarians consider gold.

It is indeed quite possible that the Spettisbury torc was buried on the neck of a corpse, for between 80 and 90 skeletons were found at the same time, as will be remembered from Mr. Gresham's paper, and all the objects were lying 'among' them: on the decay of its perishable back-fastening it would, of course, easily get out of position. In any case, its date at this site must be the latter part of the Wessex Iron Age, and quite probably the very end. For, as Mr. Gresham has pointed out, many, if not all, of the Spettisbury skeletons seem to constitute a 'War Cemetery,' like that at Maiden Castle, of the men who fell when the place was finally captured by the Romans.

¹ All cited by R. A. Smith, *B.M. Iron Age Guide*, 149-50; Ham Hill example figured, *Proc. Somerset Arch.*

Soc. xxxii (1886), 'Excursion to Hamdon Hill,' Pl. iii, 2, and p. 31.

² *Hist.* iii, 47.