

ART. II – *A Bronze Age gold neckring from Greysouthen, Cumbria*

By S.P. NEEDHAM, BSC., Ph.D., and C. RICHARDSON, B.A., M.PHIL. WITH A
CONTRIBUTION FROM D.R. HOOK, BSC.

A fragmentary gold ornament was found lying on the surface during stone clearance of a recently ploughed field at Greysouthen, near Cockermouth, in August 1991.¹ The object was considered by the finder to be an “old brass harness ring” and it is possible that other items of a similar nature were discovered previously and discarded.² It was eventually brought into Tullie House Museum, Carlisle, for identification on the 20 September 1991, and was transferred to the British Museum for further investigations. The piece turned out to be part of a prehistoric neckring or collar, dating to the Middle and Late Bronze Ages (Pl. I). It was the subject of an Inquest held at Workington, Cumbria, on the 22 May 1992, where it was declared Treasure Trove.

The Greysouthen neckring was acquired by Tullie House Museum, Carlisle, with the aid of grants from the Victoria and Albert Museum Purchase Grant Fund, the National Art Collections Fund, the Friends of Tullie House, and donations from members of the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society.

Context and field survey

The site lies on a slight spur sloping down gently to the south-west, and has only been reclaimed from rough pasture and fell within the last one hundred years. The present topsoil in the findspot field is of no great depth and covers glacial deposits of boulder clay. The number of Neolithic and Bronze Age finds from the locality testifies to the attraction which the higher better drained slopes and ridges held for these early settlers.

In view of the importance of the discovery and the need to carry out fieldwork before crop growth in the re-seeded field obscured any surviving evidence, immediate investigations were instituted. A systematic ground search and metal-detector survey in the vicinity of the findspot was undertaken by the second writer, local volunteers and Carlisle Archaeological Unit,³ while the remainder of the nine acre field could only be subjected to random search within the limited time and resources available. Some fieldwork was also carried out in the adjoining fields. A geophysical survey in the findspot field was carried out by English Heritage in November 1991.⁴ These various operations did not result in any definite signs of prehistoric activity, although two worked flints and a stone spindle-whorl picked up near the original findspot might be contemporary. Aerial photographs of the locality were consulted, but no signs of early habitation were detected. A possible ditch shown up by magnetometer survey was tested by excavation and shown to be a natural feature.

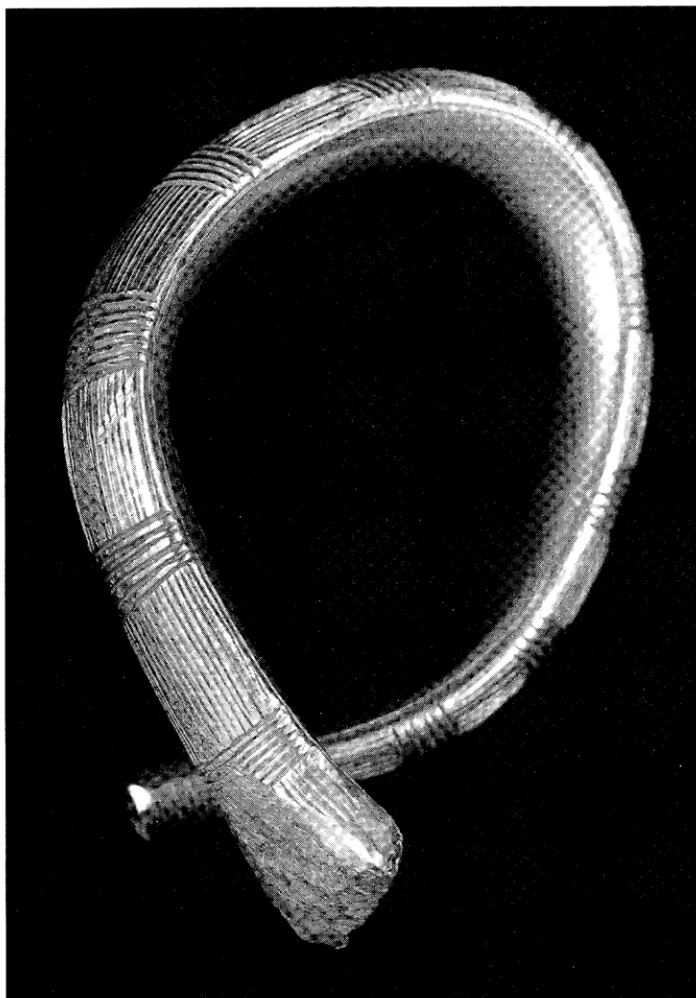


PLATE I. The Greysouthen neckring fragment: side view. Photo: British Museum Studio.

Description

The object was fashioned from a bar of pointed-oval section. One end is broken and the bar tapers steadily towards the other end, which retains an original terminal, very slightly expanded but still oval in shape. Its end is plain but bears many hammer marks. The piece can be regarded as part of a neckring or collar, which would have been approximately twice the extant length, or a little longer. The rather irregular coiled shape seen now is due to damage since its use as an ornament.

The inner face of the bar is plain, whereas the outer face is completely filled with 24 alternating panels of closely-set longitudinal and transverse grooves (Pl. II & Fig. 1), the latter often being slightly skewed from perpendicular. The field of decoration

is bounded on either side by a single linear groove more or less following the apices of the pointed-oval section. The execution of the decoration, which is incised, is not especially regular in spacing, alignment or strength of groove. The transverse bands comprise between five and seven grooves generally, or eight at the terminal, the longitudinal sets between 18 and 28. There are frequent "over-runs" in which the tails of longitudinal grooves impinge on the transverse bands. In fact it would appear that the latter elements were executed, or at least finished, after the former.

The broken end has been chopped through from both sides simultaneously, giving it a strong tapered profile. This was probably achieved by first hammering to thin the bar, then cutting it with a bronze tool against the corner of an anvil stone. This has resulted in multi-faceted bevels which carry rather coarse striations, presumably derived from the tools used. There is a certain amount of minor surface damage in the form of scratches and indentations all over the object, some probably being ancient and others undoubtedly due to plough damage.

Dimensions

Max. diameter (as-found) 71.5 mm; max. bar width 15.5 mm; min. bar width 9.4 mm; max. bar thickness 8.8 mm; min. bar thickness 5.8 mm. Weight: 186.3 grams.

Analysis by Duncan Hook

The neckring was analysed semi-quantitatively by X-ray fluorescence (XRF) using a system similar to that described by Cowell.⁵ The analysis was undertaken at an area which had undergone recent damage, in the hope that any potentially unrepresentative surface metal had been removed. The neckring was found to contain 82% gold, 15% silver and 4% copper. The analysis has a precision (i.e. a measure of reproducibility) of approximately $[\pm] 2\%$ for gold, $[\pm] 10\%$ for silver and $[\pm] 20\%$ for copper. Reliable figures for the accuracy of the analysis (i.e. how close the quoted figures are to the "true" composition) cannot be quoted because of the possibility that some unrepresentative surface metal still remained at the point of analysis.

Discussion

The gold fragment from Greysouthen can be compared with a range of gold and bronze neckrings, or collars, in later prehistoric Europe. The swollen bow is a recurring feature of such ornaments, as is the geometric design, although motifs can be diverse. Oval cross-sections as found on the Greysouthen piece, are fairly frequent. This generic series covers a long timespan and more detailed comparisons are necessary in order to place the object more precisely. No exact match has so far been found for the decoration, although two other gold neckrings in the British Isles have more elaborate geometric ornament similarly divided into panels by transverse bands of grooves. These finds, from Ickleton, Cambridgeshire,⁶ and Downpatrick,

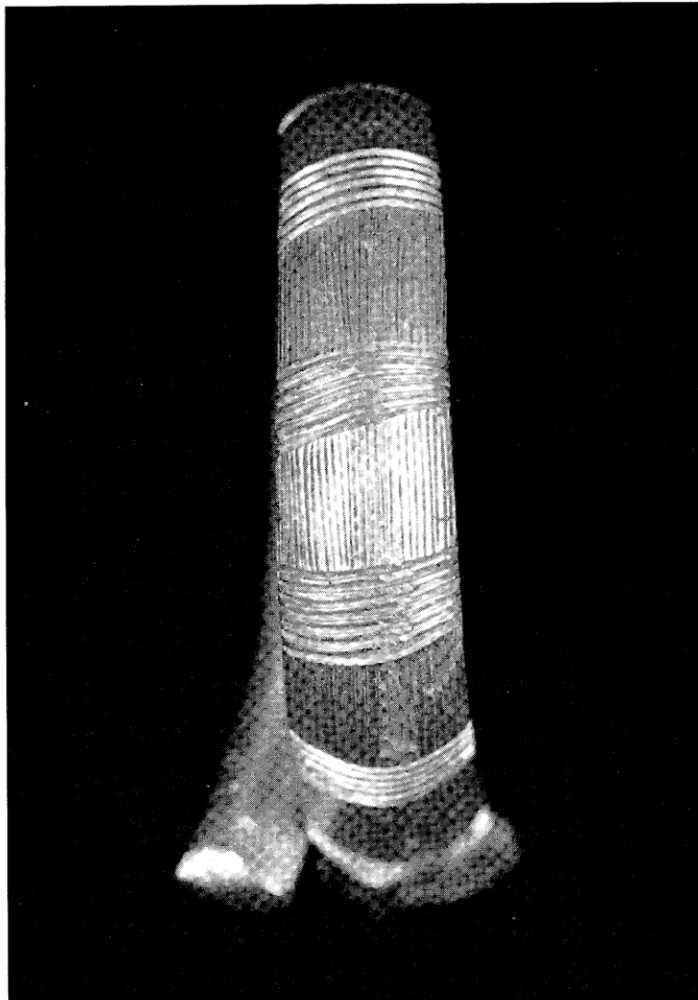


PLATE II. The Greysouthen neckring fragment: decorated external face.
Photo: British Museum Studio.

Co. Down (hoard no. 1),⁷ also have a bar which is thickest at the centre and of oval cross-section. The terminals on the Ickleton piece are, like the surviving Greysouthen terminal, only slightly expanded, but they are round rather than oval. A small group of gold neckrings in France, mainly from the north-west, includes examples with comparable decoration and form, and they seem likely to belong to the same family.

The dating of this series is made more difficult by the lack of associations with other diagnostic objects, thereby forcing reliance on stylistic considerations. Longworth favoured a 10th century BC date for the Ickleton example, although he allowed the possibility of a currency continuing later.⁸ Eogan, on the other hand, has

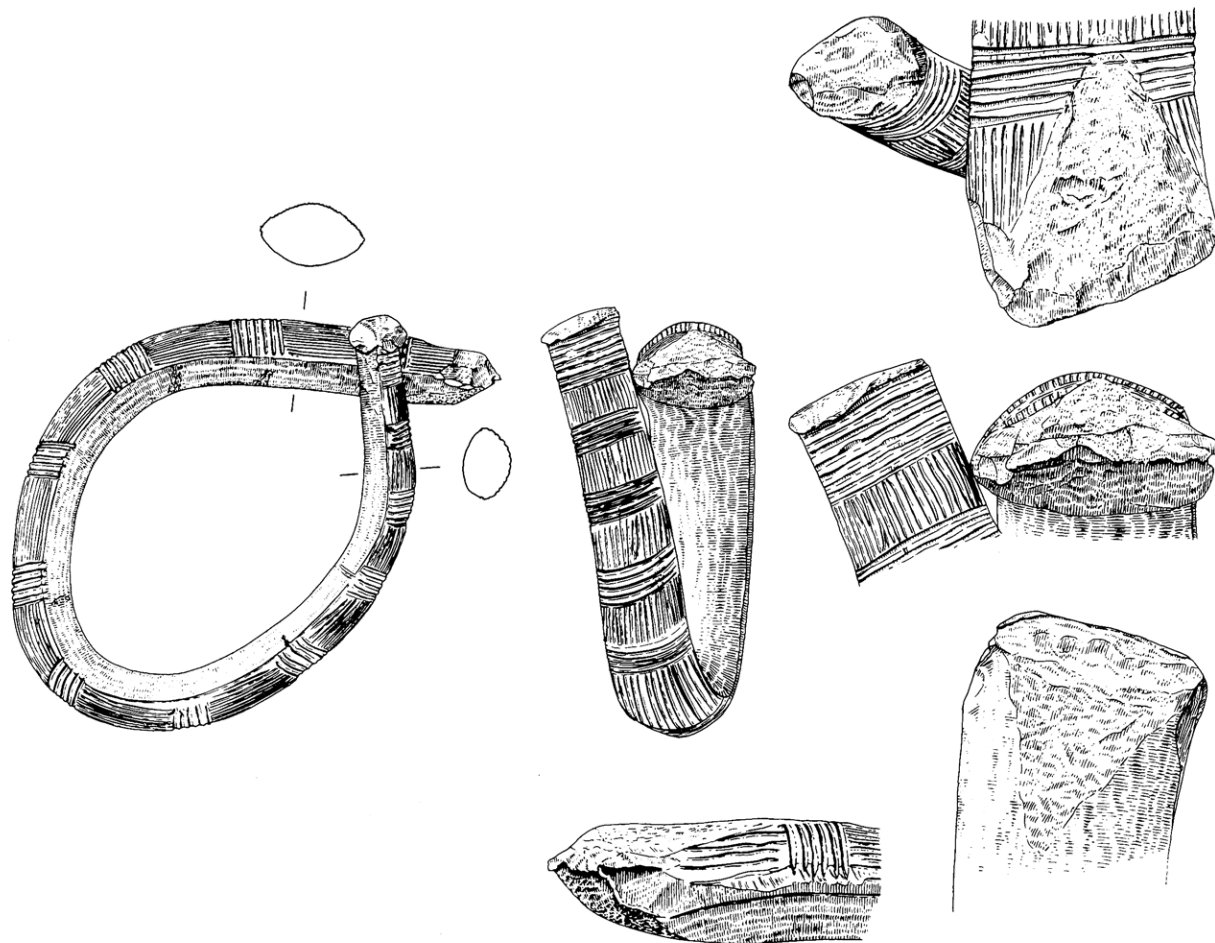


FIG. 1. the Greysouthen gold neckring. Scale 1:1 with detail views (right) at 2:1. Drawing by Stephen Crummy.

placed the Downpatrick find in his Bishopsland phase, spanning the 13th–10th centuries BC.⁹ Unfortunately, the eleven associated bracelets in the Downpatrick no. 1 hoard are all of simple types thought to belong more generally to the Middle and Late Bronze Ages (*c.* 1400–700 BC). The French parallels are attributed by Eluère to the period before 1200 BC,¹⁰ although earlier Briard had been inclined to a date around 1200–1000 BC.¹¹

It is difficult to reconcile these different date ranges for an apparently interrelated group of gold neckrings in the north-west of Europe. It seems most likely that they belong to a more limited timespan somewhere within the period 1200–900 BC. However, this does beg the question of their relationship with the much more common flange-twisted torcs dating to within the same period.¹² One possibility is that these were successive types, the thick bar neckrings being a short-lived type following after the demise of flange-twisted torcs. This will be difficult to determine as long as associations are lacking, but it is of interest that in parts of Ireland the torc was replaced by a totally new neck ornament – the gorget.

The precise significance of the Greysouthen find is difficult to consider in the absence of any information on its context, in particular whether it was an isolated piece or was associated with other material. Should other pieces come to light, then it is probable that we are dealing with a scattered hoard. While some of the damage inflicted on the neckring is modern, the severing of this fragment from the complete neckring and the coiling of the fragment were almost certainly carried out in antiquity. One reason for this kind of damage, would be that the redundant ornament was being broken up ready for melting down by a Bronze Age smith, although we should note that ritual “killing” of objects is sometimes invoked to account for such damage. There is certainly a striking similarity between the treatment of the Greysouthen piece and that of its parallel in the Downpatrick hoard, but this does not give preference to either one of the explanations offered.

Gold ornaments from the Bronze Age period in Cumbria are rare.¹³ The closest recorded finds geographically to the Greysouthen piece, are a twisted armlet from Eaglesfield, possibly Bronze Age, found in the nineteenth century and now lost,¹⁴ and a penannular armlet found at Aspatria in 1828.¹⁵ In part Cumbrian gold ornaments betray an Irish influence, this probably results from a generalised sphere of cultural interaction embracing Ireland and much of highland Britain during the Bronze Age. Although comparative material suggests that it belongs to a widespread type, perhaps implying non-local contacts, it is by no means impossible that this Greysouthen ornament was produced in the Cumbrian region.

Notes and References

¹ The precise locations and other “sensitive” details relating to the discovery are lodged in a restricted access file at Tullie House Museum, Carlisle.

² Resulting from various conversations with the landowners, Colin Richardson discovered that at least “two similar rings and a bar-shaped object” had turned up. One of these rings may well be the present neckring fragment, since a ring collected from the same field a few years earlier had been “thrown to the edge!”. Subsequent ploughing or harrowing may have transported this ring to the present findspot.

³ Colin Richardson would like to thank Neil Marshall and Geoff Harney of Carlisle, for their painstaking

efforts in the detector surveys, and Mike McCarthy and Paul Flynn, Carlisle Archaeological Unit, for their assistance on site.

- ⁴ The writers would like to acknowledge the prompt response by Dr A. David and his colleagues from the Ancient Monuments Laboratory, English Heritage, in carrying out the geophysical survey at such short notice.
- ⁵ Cowell, M.R., "Energy dispersive X-ray fluorescence of ancient gold alloys", in T. Hackens and H. McKerrel (eds.), *X-ray microfluorescence analysis applied to archaeology*, PACT vol. 1 (Strasbourg, 1977), 76–85.
- ⁶ Longworth, I.H., "The Ickleton Gold Neckring", *Antiquaries Journal*, 52 (1972), 358–363.
- ⁷ Eogan, G., *The hoards of the Irish Later Bronze Age* (University College, Dublin, 1983), 34–5, 225, fig. 9 A12.
- ⁸ Longworth, I.H. *op.cit.* (1972), 363.
- ⁹ Eogan, G. *op.cit.* (1983), 6–7.
- ¹⁰ Eluère, C., *Les ors préhistoriques. L'Age du Bronze en France*, 2 (Picard, Paris, 1982), 152.
- ¹¹ Briard, J., *Les Dépôts bretons et L'Age du Bronze Atlantique* (Rennes, 1965), 146.
- ¹² Eogan, G., "The associated finds of gold bar torcs", *Journ. Royal Soc. Antiq. Ireland*, 97 (1967), 129–75; Needham, S.P., "The Penard-Wilburton succession: new metalwork finds from Croxton (Norfolk) and Thirsk (Yorkshire)", *Antiquaries Journal*, 70 (1990), 253–70.
- ¹³ Fell, C.I., "Bronze Age connections between the Lake District and Ireland", *CW2*, xl, 118–30; McK.Clough, T.H., "Bronze Age metalwork from Cumbria", *CW2*, lxix, 1–39; Taylor, J.J., *Bronze Age Goldwork of the British Isles* (Cambridge U.P., 1980).
- ¹⁴ Dickinson, W., "On and off the Roman Road from Papcastle to Lamplugh Woodmoor", *CW1*, iii, 343; Fell, C.I. *op.cit.* (1940), 124. Since this particular twisted gold armlet from Eaglesfield was never examined by any knowledgeable person at the time of its discovery and no illustration survives, there is some doubt as to its date. The original reference refers to it being "of Roman workmanship!"
- ¹⁵ Way, A., "Ancient Armillae of gold recently found in Buckinghamshire and in North Britain: with Notices of Ornaments of gold discovered in the British Isles", *Archaeological Journal*, vi (1849), 59–60; Fell, C.I. *op.cit.* (1940), 124, Pl. IV, 1.

