



Figure 4. The Valley Rock Fountain and statues of Knox, Melville and Henderson with Snowdon House beyond (from Rogers, 1876, author's collection).



## **BURIED TREASURE: A MAJOR IRON AGE GOLD HOARD FROM THE STIRLING AREA**

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### **Discovery**

On 28th September 2009, David Booth went on his first expedition with his newly-bought metal detector. Only seven paces from his car, his machine registered a signal. As he dug he saw the gleam of gold. He had just found Scotland's most important Iron Age gold hoard – a discovery of European importance. This short article gives an interim account of what we know now, and what we hope the find will tell us as research progresses.

### **The hoard**

The find consists of four gold torcs (Plate 8). These are neck ornaments dating to about 300-100 BC, towards the end of the Iron Age. Each has a story to tell. Two of them are made from fine twisted ribbons of gold, a style known as ribbon torcs (Plate 9). This creates a dramatic visual impression using only a small amount of gold, but is surprisingly difficult to make – it is hard to get an elegant regular twist. On one torc, the ends are curved into hooks which would lock together to hold it when it was worn, the terminals formed into small knobs. The other has disc terminals, but these are less hooked, and it would have been open when in use. They have a very small diameter; if they were worn round the neck, they would only have fitted women or youths, but it is also possible that they were worn as arm ornaments.

There has been a lengthy academic debate over such ribbon torcs, and especially over their dating. For a long time they were thought to be Bronze Age in date, but with hints that they could be later. This find provides emphatic confirmation that this style of tightly-twisted ribbon torc is Iron Age in date. Such torcs are found in both Scotland and Ireland, showing the connections between these two countries. The small knobbed terminals of one torc are common in Scottish finds, but the disc terminals are much more unusual, and have Irish parallels; it may have been an import.

The third torc is more exotic. It survives in two fragments which join to form half of a tubular torc (Plate 10); the other half would have made up a complete circle. A sheet of gold was hammered into a curved cylinder, with the outer surface beaten up into a complex and highly decorative shape comprising three rows of mushroom-like designs. The design was probably hammered out from the sheet while it was flat; it was then bent into a tube, perhaps over a soft core of wax or resin, and the decorative detail was then worked into the surface.

This torc takes us far beyond Scotland – this is a style well-known from south-west France, from the area around Toulouse. It dates most likely to the 3rd century BC, and shows the wide-ranging connections which were available at this time. We do not yet know if it was an import, or was inspired by these French torcs but made more locally. Remarkably, the publicity around the Stirling hoard has brought another of these torcs to light – two fragments from another half-torc which had been in a safe in the National Museum of Ireland since the 19th century, and assumed to be a recent ethnographic object. It is very similar indeed to the Stirling example. Future work will involve analysing the gold and studying the manufacturing techniques to see if the Scottish, Irish and French finds were all made in the same workshops, or if the island ones were locally-made versions. Whether import or inspiration, they remind us of the long-range contacts available to at least some people at this time.

The final part of the hoard emphasises these connections across Europe even more strongly. It is made from twisted gold wires which have been braided together into a flexible rope-like hoop to fit round the neck, with the ends forming loops (Plate 11). This is a style of torc well-known across Iron Age Europe, with close parallels in particular from East Anglia. What makes it exceptional is the decoration. Gold discs were soldered into the loops, with spirals of gold wire and pyramids of small gold balls soldered onto them. To either side of the loops, further spiral gold wires and balls are attached, while a fine chain links the two terminals. These techniques of filigree (wire-work), granulation (the small balls) and chain-making are alien to Iron Age traditions. They are much more characteristic of the Mediterranean world, from workshops in Greece or Italy.

There is no other torc quite like this from the rest of Europe. This fusion of Iron Age and Mediterranean styles is remarkable. Does it represent a craft-worker from the Mediterranean, plying their trade north of the Alps among powerful chiefs? Was it a special commission, or a gift from a group with Mediterranean links to further-flung compatriots? Is it the work of someone who had seen Mediterranean material, and wanted to try their hand at this new-fangled technology? These are questions which only future research can answer, but it shows the connections across Iron Age Europe, long before the Roman period: some people in the Forth valley were well-connected in the Iron Age, and tapped into European fashions.

### **Compare and contrast**

The mixture of material in the Stirling area hoard is remarkable, but it has similarities to other finds. Ribbon torcs are a well-known (though not a common) type from the Forth northwards, while a very few other hoards in Scotland and Ireland have material from a mixture of sources. But the Stirling find changes our view of gold in the Iron Age. Previously, researchers have been rather blinded by the quantity of gold coming out of East Anglia, from sites such as Snettisham; the rest of Britain has seemed very impoverished by comparison. Our find not only redresses the balance, but by confirming that