

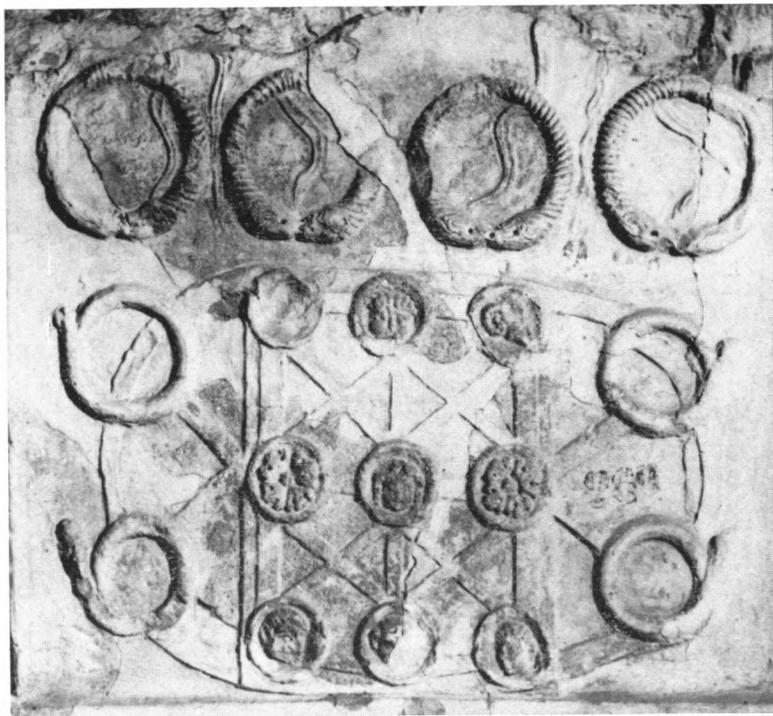
1. The Benwell Torc



2. Tombstone of M. Caelius from Bonn



1. Tombstone of C. Purisius Atinas from Forli (right side)



2. Tombstone from Split (heavily restored)

V

THE BENWELL TORC—ROMAN OR NATIVE?

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DURING THE excavations of 1937 in the Roman fort of Benwell, on Hadrian's Wall, there was found in a building in the *retentura* of the fort a bronze torc which was described and discussed in an earlier volume of these proceedings by the excavator, the late Sir Ian Richmond.¹ The conclusion drawn at that time was that the torc was of Roman not native manufacture and its presence inside a fort explained in terms of its being a military decoration. It is this conclusion which the present article sets out to consider. The reason for doubt about the true origin of the torc is twofold, firstly theoretical and based on what is known of the practice of giving military decorations in the Roman army, and secondly practical, arising out of a study of the artefact itself.

First the theoretical case. The normal military decoration awarded to soldiers of the rank of centurion and below consisted of the *torques*, sometimes alone but more commonly in combination with *armillae* (bracelets) and *phalerae* (embossed discs worn, like medals, on the chest) and also, in the case of centurions, a crown (Pl. I, 2). The practice of giving such awards is well attested in literature and epigraphy but it would appear, on present evidence, that only Roman citizens were eligible to receive them. Thus, generally speaking, legionaries could be decorated but auxiliaries could not. This discrimination was a legacy from the republican period before the *auxilia* developed into a major and regular part of the Roman army and might be thought to be more than a little inequitable at a time when the auxiliary units were bearing the brunt of the fighting in the Empire. However, this being so, it is worth considering in what circumstances a military decoration which by definition was the property of a citizen soldier might come to appear in a fort on Hadrian's Wall which, as is well known, was normally garrisoned by auxiliary troops.

There are a number of possibilities. The equestrian officers who commanded these units were Roman citizens and as such were eligible for decoration, but the awards which they would receive were not the *torques*, *armillae* and *phalerae* of the ordinary soldier but a more prestigious type, *hastae purae* (ceremonial spears), *vexilla* (flags) and *coronae* (crowns of various designs) all normally made of precious metals. Thus an award made to a prefect or tribune would not account for the presence of a military torc at Benwell. There is however the possibility that some of the junior

¹ *AA*⁴ xix (1941), 23-25, pl. II.

officers in an auxiliary unit could have been Roman citizens. Witness, for example, the case of Ti. Claudius Maximus whose claim to fame is that he killed the barbarian king Decebalus in Trajan's second Dacian war.² He began his military service in a legion, *VII Gemina*, was decorated for exploits in Domitian's Dacian war and was subsequently transferred into an auxiliary unit, *ala II Pannoniorum*, in which he remained until he was voluntarily discharged with the rank of *decurio* having, in the meantime, been decorated on two more occasions. There are just two further cases in which awards are known to have been made to men serving in auxiliary units and in both these examples a good case can be made out for the recipient having been a Roman citizen at the time he received his award.³ Both of the cases in question belong to the first century: in one the soldier had probably been transferred, like Maximus, from a legion into the *auxilia*, while the second seems to have continued to serve past his statutory twenty-five years after which he received the citizenship.

The possibility also exists that the non-citizen units in garrison at Benwell may have contained in their ranks some men who were already citizens when they enlisted. The number of men transferring from the legions must always have remained small, but the number of citizens opting to serve in the *auxilia* in preference to the legions must gradually have increased over the years. The reason for this lies in the pattern of recruitment to the Roman army within the frontier zones of the Empire.⁴ The tendency was towards the development of local recruitment and although specific evidence for this happening within the province of Britannia is slender a strong case can nevertheless be made out for it. Why, after all, should Britain differ from the other provinces?⁵ If an auxiliarian, discharged from his unit and given Roman citizenship as his due reward for 25 years' loyal service to the State, settled down in the village outside the fort in which he had served any son he might have might well choose to enlist in the "local" unit. Such a son would be, by virtue of his father's status, himself a Roman citizen and as such would be eligible to join a legion with its greater pay and prestige, but he might well opt instead to serve with his father's old unit. Hence a flow of Roman citizens into the *auxilia*; hence potential recipients for military decorations. However there is no evidence whatever of any soldier recruited as a citizen, *ab initio*, into a non-citizen unit ever receiving such awards. The reason perhaps lies in parity of treatment meted out to the citizen and the non-citizen recruit. Another reason, at least as far as Britain is concerned, is a chronological one. The Hadrian's Wall *vici* began to flourish in the early third century following the Caracallan reorganization of frontier

² M. Speidel, "The Captor of Decebalus, a new Inscription from Philippi", *JRS* LX (1970), 142-153.

³ *CIL* XIII 8503 (Divitia, Germania Inferior); *CIL* III 14453 (Tomi, Moesia Inferior).

⁴ cf. J. C. Mann, "The Role of the Frontier

Zones in Army Recruitment", *V Congressus Internationalis Limitis Romani Studiosorum* (Zagreb 1963), 145f.

⁵ B. Dobson and J. C. Mann, "The Roman Army in Britain and Britons in the Roman Army", *Britannia* IV (1973), 191-205.

control and stimulated no doubt by the fact that a few years previously Severus had given permission for serving soldiers to live with their wives.⁶ It is probably also from this date onwards that the practice of local recruitment gained impetus. The date is significant in yet another respect. The *Constitutio Antoniniana* of A.D. 212 gave Roman citizenship to all freeborn males within the Empire and one of the results of this was that the distinction between legions and *auxilia* as being partly as between citizen and non-citizen troops vanished at a stroke. Were all soldiers now eligible for military decoration? It is surely no coincidence that, for all practical purposes, no military decoration is known to have been awarded after the death of Severus. A system which enshrined the principle of distinction between citizen and non-citizen was ill-fitted to cope with a new era in which every serving soldier was a citizen. For one thing the cost of award would rise sharply, no small consideration if it is true, as has been argued, that one of the motives behind the *Constitutio Antoniniana* was financial. Hence at precisely the period in which the chances of finding a citizen auxiliaryman serving at Benwell are rising, the possibility of that man being awarded a *torques* is completely eliminated.

There remains however just one period prior to the abolition of military decorations when citizen troops were in evidence at Benwell. A legionary vexillation was stationed there at some time during the reign of Antoninus Pius forming perhaps a care and maintenance garrison in the years between 142 and 158 when Hadrian's Wall had been abandoned in favour of the Antonine Wall.⁷ The milecastles and turrets were abandoned, for the Wall was now defunct as a controlled frontier line, but some at least of the forts continued in use.⁸ The evidence for the legionary garrison at Benwell is provided by an altar dedicated to Jupiter Dolichenus by a centurion of legion *II Augusta* for the welfare of Antoninus Pius.⁹ In theory then the Benwell torc could have been awarded to him or one of the men under his command, and entering into the realms of fantasy one might even suggest that it was won during the campaigns which preceded the move forward into Scotland!

Finally there remains just one more way in which the Benwell torc could be seen as Roman and military, and this stems from the practice to which Richmond alluded of giving auxiliary regiments honorary titles. Individuals within the unit might not be decorated but the unit as a whole might be. There is a variety of different titles which could be given but the one which is relevant in the present context is *torquata*, that is decorated with a *torques*. Eleven units in the whole of the Empire throughout the Roman period are

⁶ *Herodian* III.8.5.

⁷ J. P. Gillam and J. C. Mann, "The Northern British Frontier from Antoninus Pius to Caracalla", *AA*⁴ xlviii (1970) 9.

⁸ B. R. Hartley has suggested an alternative date, c. 159/60-163, in "The Roman Occupation of Scotland: the Evidence of Samian Ware", *Britannia* III (1972), 39, 41.

⁹ *RIB* 1330.

known to have received this appellation, and two of these units were stationed at one time or another in Britain. The *ala Petriana* was *bis torquata*;¹⁰ it is known to have been in garrison at Stanwix, a fort which took its name from the unit stationed in it. The *ala Gallorum et Thracum Classiana*, also *bis torquata*, is attested in Britain on two diplomas dating to the years 105 and 122;¹¹ it is not known where it was stationed. As a quingenary *ala* it could, in theory, have fitted into Benwell but there is no evidence that it ever did. Indeed it is quite possible that still within the second century it was transferred to Germany.¹² The garrison attested at Benwell in the *Notitia Dignitatum* is the *ala I Asturum* which was already there in the early third century.¹³ An unnamed cavalry unit is attested at Benwell in the 180s,¹⁴ while the *cohors I Vangionum* is attested by an altar and a tombstone,¹⁵ both of probable second century date. Furthermore it is entirely uncertain whether any actual physical award accompanied the granting of the honorary title. The most plausible interpretation is that the standard of the unit was adorned with the *torques* in the same way that the standards of the praetorian cohorts in Rome were adorned with crowns of various types in commemoration of battle honours. The form of the Benwell torc, described below, certainly precludes its being a decoration of this type, there being no trace of any device by which it could have been attached to a standard; indeed such an award, if it ever existed, is more likely to have been of gold or silver than of bronze. Nor is it conceivable that such a decoration would be casually lost. There is no evidence to suggest that honouring a unit with the title *torquata* involved the award of the *torques* to every soldier serving in that unit at the time, and any personal reward which they might have received is more likely to have come in the form of a donative or increased rations. Such is the theoretical case for the Benwell torc being Roman and military.

A study of the object itself has led different scholars to diametrically opposed opinions. Richmond supposed it to be the product of a Roman military workshop. On the other hand it has appeared independently on two distribution maps of native torcs in northern Britain.¹⁶

It is convenient to repeat at this juncture the description of the torc given in the original publication. "Just over half of the circlet consists of a plain strip (of bronze), bordered by a double flange; the rest, worn to the front, was decorated with bronze beads of cruciform pattern, threaded on a tube and kept apart by collars. Two beads on one side and one on the other

¹⁰ *CIL* XI 5669=*ILS* 2728 add. In *RIB* 957 (Carlisle) it is simply *torquata*.

¹¹ Attested as *bis torquata* on *CIL* XI 6033. For the date of its sojourn in Britain cf. *CIL* XVI 51 (A.D. 105) and 69 (A.D. 122).

¹² G. Alföldy, "Die Hilfstruppen der römischen Provinz Germania Inferior", *Epigraphische Studien* Bd. 6 (1968), 18.

¹³ *Not. Dig. Occ.* xl. 35: *RIB* 1334, 1337.

¹⁴ *RIB* 1329.

¹⁵ *RIB* 1328, 1350.

¹⁶ Jean Burns, "Two Beaded Torcs in Tullie House, Carlisle", *CW*², lxxi (1971), fig. p. 49; R. B. K. Stevenson, "Metalwork and some Other Objects in Scotland and their Cultural Affinities" in (ed.) A. L. F. Rivet, *The Iron Age in Northern Britain* (1966), fig. 4.

were attached by a tube to the flanged segment. The remainder, of which five out of about fourteen remained, had been threaded on to a separate tube, terminating in iron pins or tangs, intended to clip into the tubes carrying the beads attached to the main segment and thus to fasten the collar about the neck of the wearer. The collar is just a shade larger than the 17-inch size." (Pl. I, 1.) It belongs to a class of object, the beaded torc, whose distribution is markedly northern, the most southerly outlier coming from Perdiswell near Worcester.¹⁷ The class can itself be subdivided into two categories, the one in which the beads and spacers are not strung but are cast as a single piece, the other in which the beads are separate the one from the other and are strung on to a metal tube or rod. The Benwell torc is unique in that the beads are strung on to a hollow bronze tube ending in iron tenons.¹⁸ A date-range for these torcs is suggested by the Roman material with which several of them were associated and which indicates a time span from the second half of the first century A.D. into the middle of the second, the strung type being earlier than the cast which probably developed from it. The method of closure on all these torcs appears to be the same (though not all the known examples are complete) and consists of a mortice and tenon joint held together by the natural elasticity of the metal of which the objects are made. The beads themselves are commonly globular or disc-shaped though the finest example of a beaded torc, that from Lochar Moss (Dumfries), has elaborate melon-shaped beads.¹⁹ There is no exact parallel to the cruciform beads of the Benwell torc, the closest analogy being the vertebra shaped pieces of the Perdiswell torc (Pl. III, 1),²⁰ in which the beads are strung on a strong iron wire and divided by spacers. The neck-ring of the Perdiswell torc is missing. The flat flanged design of the neck-ring of the Benwell example is paralleled by both the Lochar Moss torc and that from Mowroad, near Rochdale, in Lancashire.²¹ This latter example exhibits a further similarity to that from Benwell in that part of the beadwork is attached to the neck-ring: in the majority of cases all the beadwork is separate. The neck-ring of these beaded torcs is commonly decorated. Chevrons, zig-zags, curvilinear designs and similar decorative devices are used to relieve the starkness of the metal hoop though the herringbone design which appears on the ring of the Benwell torc does little to soften its appearance. It is, as Richmond observed, "designed like a girder, in a manner devoid of all artistic feeling". It is largely this starkness and insensitivity of the Benwell torc which led Richmond to suggest that it was the product of a Roman military workshop. Not that the native origin of the other beaded torcs to which ours is typologically similar has ever been seriously

¹⁷ The ensuing discussion of beaded torcs owes much to the work of Mrs. Jean Ward (Burns) *o.c.* fn. 16.

¹⁸ This point is Mrs. Ward's, made to me by letter.

¹⁹ *Archaeologia* XXXIV (1852), Pl. XI, p. 86.

²⁰ *Archaeologia* XXX (1844), fig. p. 554.

²¹ *Archaeologia* XXV (1834), 595.

impugned:²² it is the treatment rather than the form which was thought to point to its Romanity.

This form of torc is, however, completely unparalleled in a Roman military context. The sculptural evidence on which our knowledge of the physical appearance of military decorations is based shows two major types. One is penannular and made of twisted metal, frequently terminating in snakes' heads (Pl. II, 2). The other, likewise penannular, is not twisted, is sometimes decorated with a punched design and its ends commonly swell out into knobs, occasionally zoomorphic (Pl. I, 2). Rarely do the torcs form complete rings and in all but one of those cases where they appear to do so the sculpture is very stylized and carries little conviction. In only one case is a full ring clearly shown and here the terminals are decorated with rosettes and linked with a hook and eye type fastening (Pl. II, 1).²³

Indeed the Roman torc did not need to fasten or fit snugly around the neck for this is not where it was worn. Military practice was to suspend the torcs (normally awarded and worn in pairs) from the shoulders on straps attached to the cuirass or to the harness holding the *phalerae*—in all pictorial representations of soldiers wearing torcs, *phalerae* too are shown (e.g. Pl. I, 2).

This utter lack of similarity between the Benwell torc and all known representations of military torcs is not of itself conclusive proof that it is not Roman. The reason for this lies in the origin of the torc as a military decoration, for the origin is native. Years before the army evolved a system of military award it became the practice of the soldier to take the torc from around the neck of his slain barbarian foe as both booty and proof of his prowess. This practice is well illustrated by the case of Titus Manlius who, in a Gallic uprising of 361 B.C., slew the Gallic champion, snatched the torc from around his neck and so won for himself and his heirs the *cognomen* "Torquatus".²⁴ It is but a short step from here to the awarding of the torc as an official military decoration and it should not therefore come as any surprise if the military torc were to resemble quite strongly its native prototype. However, this being said, it is nevertheless true that no known well authenticated military torc resembles the beaded torc.

To summarize: the Benwell torc is an example of a well-known type of native artefact, paralleled in most of its individual features but as a composite whole a technically competent but insensitive and unlovely example of its kind. Its findspot, within a Roman fort, can be taken to provide a ready explanation, for the Roman metalworker clearly did not have such a mastery

²² A Roman military origin was suggested for the Carlisle example in the brief note which recorded its discovery but no attempt was made on that occasion to discuss the problem fully: *CW* vi (1881-2), 196-7. In her recent thorough discussion of the origins of this and another example Jean Ward (Burns) comes

down firmly in favour of native manufacture: *CW*² lxxxii (1971), 45-51.

²³ This is the torc depicted on the tombstone of C. Purtilius Atinas (*CIL* XI 624, Forum Livi) now in the Archaeological Museum, Forli.

²⁴ *Livy* VII.7.14.

of design as did his Celtic counterpart. The torc does have its place in a Roman military establishment but its place is a limited one particularly in an auxiliary fort. Moreover a military decoration is a prized possession which is not casually lost. It seems more satisfactory, to the present writer at least, to see this torc as native: the reason for its appearance within a fort can only be conjectured—snatched from a barbarian in war or traded from him in peace?²⁵

Photographs were provided as follows: Plate I, 1 Museum of Antiquities of the University and Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle upon Tyne; Plate I, 2 Rheinisches Landesmuseum, Bonn; Plate II, 1 Georgio Liverani for the Museo Archeologico, Forli; Plate II, 2 Arheoloski Muej, Split; and Plate III, 1 The British Museum.

²⁵ I am indebted to Dr. D. J. Smith for arranging for the Benwell torc to be photographed for me: the torc is housed in the Museum of Antiquities of the University and the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle upon Tyne (Museum Accession number 1956.5.5). The Department of Prehistoric and Romano-British Antiquities of the British Museum provided me with a photograph of the Perdiswell torc which is the property of Miss L. G.

Allies of Cheltenham, on loan to the British Museum. The Directors of the Archaeological Museums of Bonn, Forli and Split kindly gave permission for the publication of the photographs reproduced as plates I, 2, II, 1 and II, 2 respectively. Mrs. Jean Ward (Burns) and Dr. Brian Dobson both read an earlier draft of this paper and made useful comments and emendations which I have gratefully incorporated in the text.

