

The lost hoard of gold objects from Coul, Islay, Argyll

by D V Clarke

In his Rhind Lectures for 1882 Joseph Anderson drew the attention of the antiquarian world to a hoard of gold armlets found just over one hundred years previously on the farm of Coul, Islay, Argyll. His comments, at least in the published version (Anderson 1886, 213), were brief and indicated that the source of his information was a letter to the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland together with a sketch showing the form of the armlets. Subsequent commentators have contented themselves with a reference to Anderson's remarks (e.g. Callander 1923, 164; Coles 1960, 93) without facing up to the admittedly daunting task of searching the Society's uncatalogued collection of letters. Since Anderson provided no useful information about how the letter might be located and because it has now come to light it seems worthwhile to publish its contents fully for the first time. The hoard is by far the largest assemblage of late bronze-age goldwork presently recorded from Scotland and is equalled only by the Law Farm hoard of middle bronze-age date.

The letter was written by Robert Ballingal, who is not recorded as a Fellow, to the Secretary of the Society (at that time John Stuart and John Alexander Smith shared the office) and is dated 14 September 1866. It reads:

Sir. Enclosed I beg to hand you a figure and description of a curiosity I found here in the house of an Islay gentleman in whose possession it still remains. Would you kindly say if it is of any antiquarian value & what it is and oblige Sir

your mo obed serv
Robt Ballingal

The accompanying note, on which are the two drawings here reproduced at the same size (fig 1a), reads:

In the year 1780 there was ploughed up on the farm of Coul in the island of Islay a number of rings of gold (36) the 3 dozen being all looped on to one – in a bunch – the only one in existence now – is figured above – No I being its present shape – twisted and broken – in ascertaining the quality of the metal – No II represents the figure of those originally found – the size of the button or thick ends $\frac{1}{4}$ of an inch – the wire $\frac{1}{8}$ th of an inch – the size is about 6 inches round.

Little comment is required on these statements except to note that they contain more information than Anderson published and that the measurements given suggest that the drawings were intended to be life-size. They are crudely executed in ink although on the same page there is a pencil sketch showing a single terminal rather thicker than the ink ones suggest; it is not, however, certain that this is the work of Ballingal and it has, therefore, been omitted from fig 1. In either case the drawings confirm previous interpretations of the form of the armlets.

Dr Joanna Close-Brooks has kindly drawn my attention to the possibility that a broken armlet in the National Museum's collection is the surviving example from Coul. This armlet (cat no. FE 52) has hitherto been provenanced only as from the Western Isles but it has several

features which suggest that we are here dealing with the same armlet: it is broken midway between the terminals, the thickness of the rod is a fraction less than $\frac{1}{8}$ inch (3 mm), and the diameter of the terminals is $\frac{1}{4}$ inch (6.5 mm). All of this accords well with what is known of the Coul armlet and the existing pieces are shown in fig 1, b in a position similar to the earlier drawings. This procedure has left a gap between the two broken ends which is wholly notional since there is every reason to suppose that the two ends joined to form a penannular armlet with the terminals more widely spaced, but it does allow the best comparison with fig 1, a I. Such discrepancies as exist can

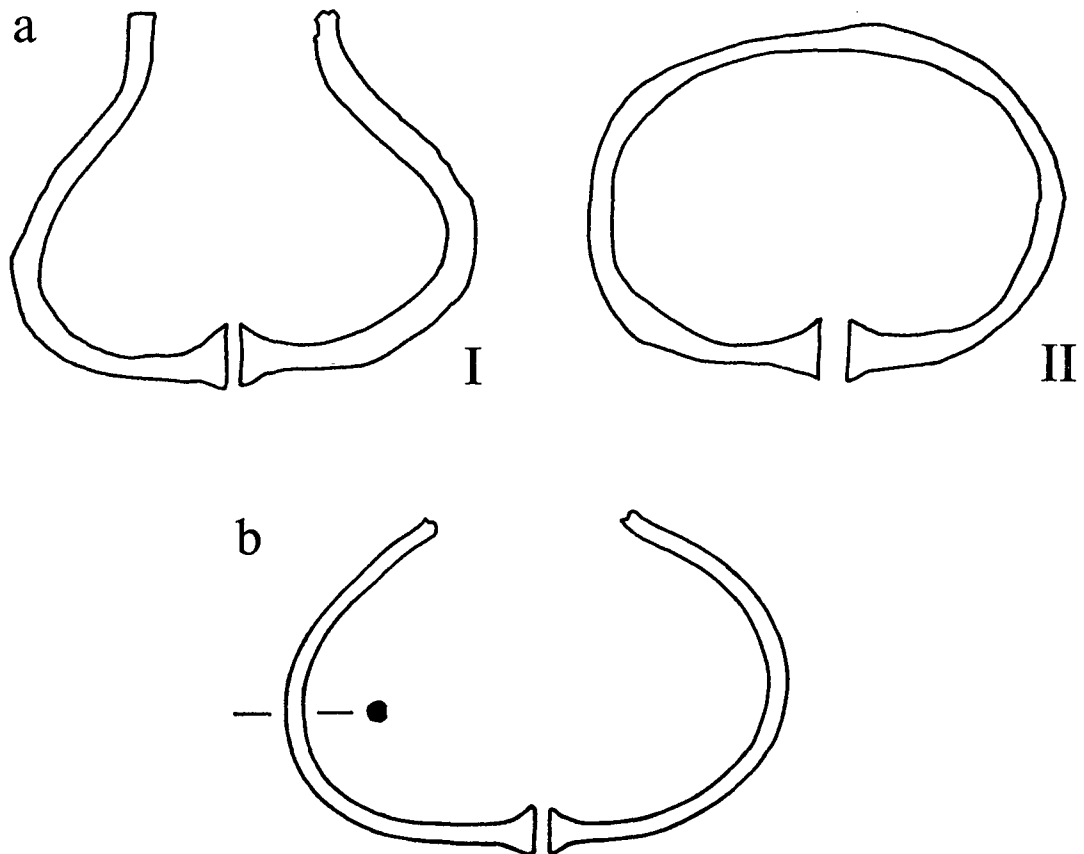


FIG 1

be explained by its subsequent history. Anderson noted the Western Isles armlet without connecting it with the Coul find, describing it as 'recently sold to a jeweller in Edinburgh' (1886, 213). It was acquired from this jeweller by the National Museum in 1883 for £6 10s (*Soc Antiq Scot Minute Book*, Purchase Committee, 14 April 1883). The presence of a jeweller in the chain of ownership helps to explain the alterations compared with Ballingal's drawing since it was common practice among jewellers acquiring such objects to 'restore' them as far as possible to their original shape – perhaps the most spectacular example of such work is the reconstruction of the Broughter Boat by a Dublin goldsmith (Armstrong 1920, 27). Some features remain on the fragments which could be indicative of re-shaping. Thus, although certainty is impossible, there are strong reasons for supposing that the armlet previously described as from the Western Isles is the sole remaining example from the Coul hoard.

REFERENCES

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