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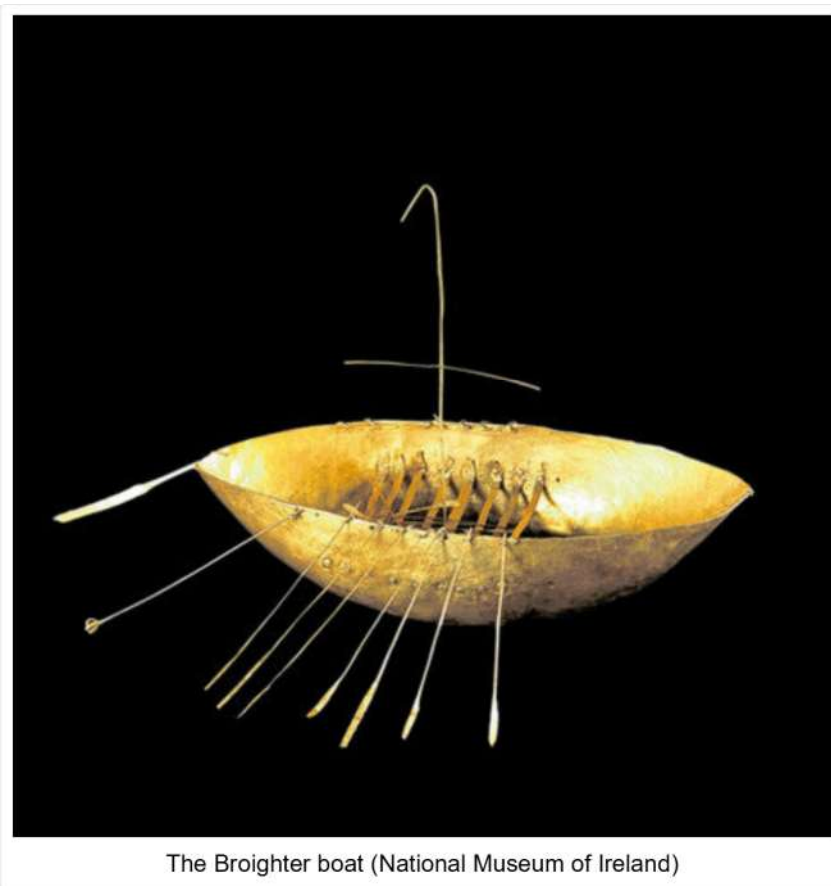
The Brighter hoard

by [Colm](#) on [September 27, 2012](#) in [Archaeology blogs](#), [Irish treasures](#)



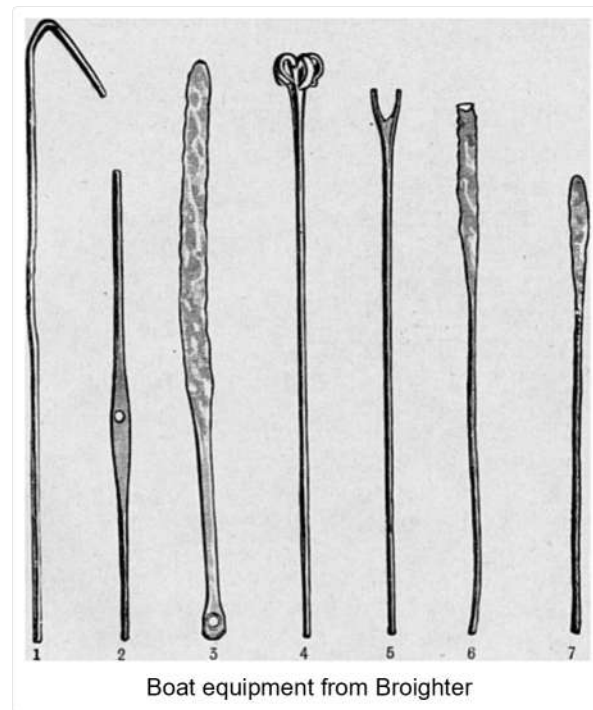
The Brighter hoard (National Museum of Ireland)

The remarkable Brighter hoard, arguably the finest treasure trove of the Irish Iron Age, was discovered on a February evening in 1896 by two Derry men, Thomas Nicholl and James Morrow. They had been ploughing a stubble field adjacent to the shoreline of Lough Foyle when they suddenly hit something hard. On investigation they discovered a number of metal items 'arranged inside one another' (O'Neill 1993, p. 24). Curious to see what these dirt encrusted objects were they brought them home where they were washed over an open sink by the future Mrs. Nicholl (she was then the maid). Unaware that that the dirty objects were made of gold she later admitted that it was possible that some smaller pieces may have washed down the drain! Interestingly she also said that the artefacts appeared to be coated in 'some greasy material' (*ibid*) and this could indicate that they were originally deposited in an organic container, possibly a bag.



The Broighter boat (National Museum of Ireland)

It soon became clear that these initially innocuous looking objects actually represented a gold hoard of stunning quality. In total it contained a model boat, two twisted bar torcs, two necklaces, a beaten bowl and an elaborately decorated buffer torc. The most remarkable piece is probably the small boat. This is a unique find in an Irish context and represents the earliest depiction of a sailing ship from Ireland. Finely crafted, it measures 18.4 cm long by 3.76 cm wide and weighs approximately 85g. The vessel contains benches, rowlocks, two rows of nine oars and a paddle rudder for steering. It also included tools for grappling, three forks, a yardarm and a spear. If it is to scale the model boat would mimic a vessel that measured approximately 15m in length.



The other artefacts from the hoard include a small bowl made from beaten gold that has four rings for suspension . It is likely that this represents a cauldron, an object that could have ritual significance as well as a purely functional use during the Iron Age. The wire necklaces are imports from the Roman world, most likely the Mediterranean region and date from circa the 1st century BC to 3rd century AD. The twisted torcs, although probably of Irish origin are very similar to neck ornaments found in Britain during the 1st century BC. The final artefact, the buffer torc, is a magnificent object and has been described as a masterpiece of artwork in the La Tène style (Waddell 1998, 294). It consists of a hollow tubular neck-ring of hammered sheet gold, with separate buffer terminals held in place with gold pins (*ibid*).



A small number of similar type torcs are known from the continent during the 1st century BC. However, the rich decoration which covers the Broighter neck-ring is of insular Irish style suggesting that it was manufactured locally, possibly by a skilled craftsman with contacts with Britain and beyond. The motifs used on the torc appear to represent stylised birds or horses, while Richard Warner (Ulster Museum) has suggested that some of them may depict sea-horses.



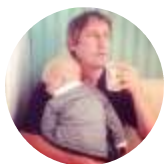
Detail of the buffer torc

The nautical nature of some of the finds from the hoard and its location beside the sea, in an area that may have been submerged in antiquity, has led to some speculation that it represents a votive offering to an underwater deity, possibly Manannán mac Lir. In legend this ancient Irish sea god is associated with Lough Foyle, a large cauldron, sailing ships and a magical horse capable of journeying over land and sea (after Waddell 1998). Is it possible that 2,000 years ago an Irish king placed a bag of golden offerings to appease this ancient sea deity?

by Colm Moriarty

References

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- Waddell, J. 1998. *The Prehistoric Archaeology of Ireland*, Wordwell, Dublin.



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