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## Irish Treasures: The Broighter Hoard

Written by [Eileen Moylan](#) in [History](#), [Ireland](#)

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Along with the Tara Brooch, the Ardagh Chalice and the Book of Kells, the Broighter Hoard is considered to be one of the most beautiful and historically significant collections of historic artwork (and metalwork, for that matter) in Ireland. I know I've spoken about the Broighter Hoard before but it really does deserve another look. Now given pride of place in the National Museum and lovingly restored to its original glory, this collection of jewellery and ornaments really has to be seen in the flesh to fully comprehend its craftsmanship, elegance and artistry. Like all historical objects, it has a mysterious and intriguing history that's just as interesting as the finished object itself...

### Discovery and Background of the Broighter Hoard

The Broighter Hoard was discovered in 1896 in the townland of the same name, close to the stunning Lough Foyle and the town of Limavady in county Derry. Two farm labourers, Tomas Nicholl and James Morrow,

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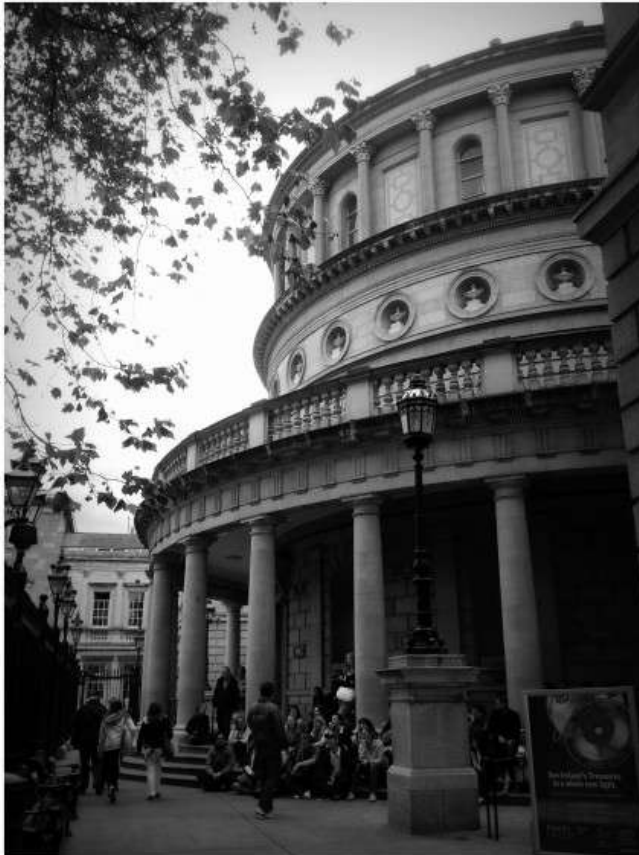
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were hard at work double ploughing a field for local farmer Joseph L Gibson. The process of ploughing back in the 1890s was much more time consuming and arduous than it is now; each man was operating a separate manual plough, one following behind the other so that the earth was turned twice and greater digging depth was achieved. They struck what they thought was a large earth clod buried around 14 inches deep and removed it – as they lifted, its weight made it obvious that it was more than just earth. The two men took it back to Nicholl's home where his maid Maggie washed it in the sink, revealing its golden gleam. She later recalled that they had been coated in some sort of sticky residue, leading to speculation that they may once have been wrapped in some kind of organic material. She also admitted that the likelihood of some of the smaller pieces falling down the drain while she was washing is very high! They alerted the landlord, who sold it to a local jeweller, who sold it to an antiquarian by the name of Robert Day. Day quickly sold it to the British Museum for the hefty sum of £600. Museum officials concluded that since the discovery location would once have been under the waters of Lough Foyle, the hoard was intended as a gift to the Gods.



National Museum of Ireland

However, the story of the Broighter Hoard's discovery doesn't end there. In 1897, one year after the British Museum's claim to the Hoard, world renowned archaeologist Arthur Evans published a paper on the collection, bringing it to the attention of the masses. The Royal Irish Academy launched a court case disputing the British Museum's claims and ownership, believing that they were buried with the intention of being recovered and should be declared as treasure trove instead. It was a convincing argument, especially considering that the items were packed closely together, a sure sign that they were buried. The counter argument was that the items had imagery related to the sea (a sea horse image on the torc and the boat itself) and was placed with nearby sea shells, and was buried extremely close to, if not in the sea. Arthur Evans had also described it as 'votive' in his paper, i.e. valuable objects placed in a sacred place in a bid to win favour with supernatural forces – usually placed as a thank you after a specific event which the gods were thought to have orchestrated.

After a legal battle that lasted several years, the courts decided that the hoard was treasure and not a religious offering, and by default not automatically owned by the crown. The Royal Irish Academy took the hoard back to Dublin in 1903 to be housed in what is now the National Museum of Ireland, despite efforts to find somewhere closer to its original location. Many years later, they eventually admitted that it is equally possible

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## New Men's Jewelry

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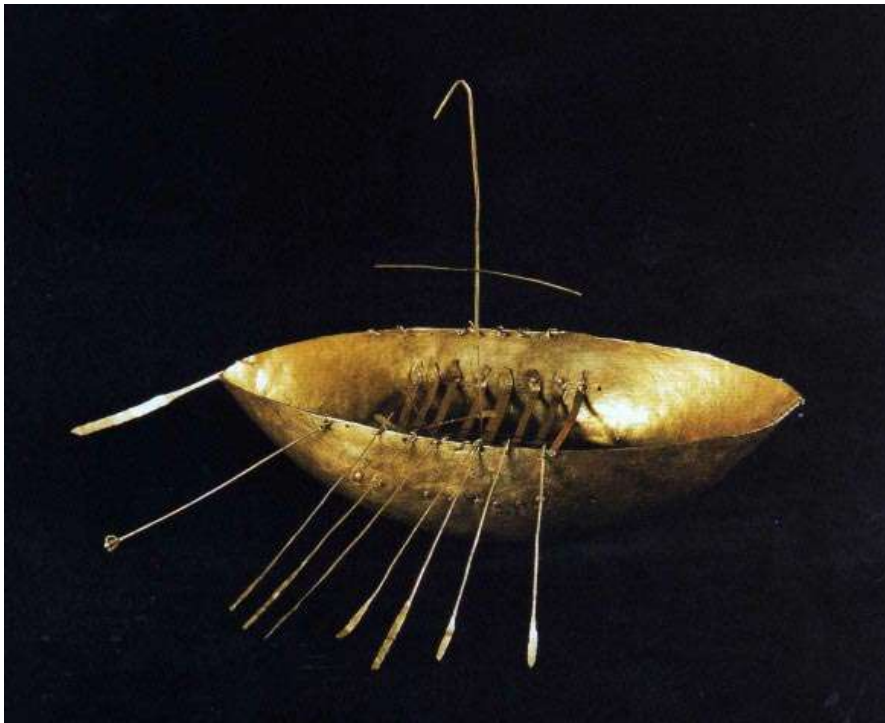
to have been an offer to ancient Celtic gods as buried treasure. Oh well! A replica of the hoard is now kept at the Ulster Museum in Belfast, while the boat was commemorated on both Irish and British pound coins and on Irish postage stamps between 1990 and 1995.

### Construction and Uses of the Broighter Hoard

The Broighter hoard is constructed entirely from gold, all with the same metallurgical character. The styles and decorations vary significantly between each item of the hoard so it is thought that some pieces may have been imported. It is also entirely likely that some of the items have been modified or completely melted down and remade.

### Items of the Broighter Hoard

The Broighter Hoard consists of the following items; A miniature gold boat with oars, a paddle rudder, and various other small crafted boating tools, an ornately decorated torc, a gold cauldron, two chain necklaces, and two bar torcs. The torc in particular is widely regarded as one of the finest examples of Irish La Tene style metalwork.



### The Boat

The Boat is the most unique item in the hoard and unlike any other metal object made from precious metals from this time period. It is the earliest depiction of a sailing ship from Ireland and shows just how advanced the civilisation was at this time. This delicate model measures only 18cm long and 7.5 centimetres wide, and weighs just 85g – if it was to scale, it would be a replica of a boat around 15m in length with a full sail and mast. When the two ploughmen hit the objects with their ploughs, the boat took the brunt of the damage, and required painstaking restoration work. Its design shows remarkable attention to detail and accuracy, including all the necessary items for a fully functioning boat such as a bench, 2 rows of 18 oars, a paddle rudder for steering, tools for grappling, forks, a yardarm and a spear. If you believe the theory that the objects were used as an offering, then it is highly likely that they were intended for the Celtic sea god Manannan mac Lir, who was associated in Irish legends with Lough Foyle, sailing ships and a magical horse capable of journeying over land and water. An important fact to note is that Manannan was in fact a mythological figure, so during the court case, it was concluded that since he was not an ‘official’ ancient god, the hoard could not be awarded in favour of the crown.



*Trinity Knot Tie Pin*

*Silver Claddagh Design Tie Pin*

## New Ladies Jewelry

*Silver Claddagh Bracelet*

*Silver Celtic Torc Bracelet*

*Silver Ogham 'Sonas' Bracelet*

*Silver Ogham 'Sonas' Pendant*

*Silver Celtic Triskel Pendant*



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### The Torc

The Broighter torc is the other most dazzling item of the Hoard. [Torcs](#) were jewellery items worn by the Celts around the neck, often as ceremonial items for battles or rituals. They were shaped like a ring with a small open section which was positioned at the throat. [Wearing a torc was a symbol of strength, status and wealth](#), and the more elaborate the design the more powerful the wearer was. Measuring 19cm in diameter, this torc includes buffer terminals on each end held in place with gold pins, and is a hollow tube of gold. The open section has sophisticated fastening mechanism – so in fact this particular torc could be completely closed around the wearer's neck. The fastener is a mortise and tenon mechanism, i.e a hinge and a T-shaped piece that fits into the hollow centre of the tube. A section can then be turned which captures the "T", keeping the device closed.





The torc is beautifully decorated with three different techniques. First, leaf and plant designs have been created all along the outside by hammering back the surrounding gold. Next additional pieces such as the buffer terminals and other raised sections of decoration were soldered onto the piece, before finally incising the remaining background with geometric curves. The design and construction of the torc is unlike anything else seen in Ireland, but it is similar to objects found in Britain around the same time period. The plant decorations are definitely in line with Insular Irish art, so the torc was most likely crafted by a local who had contacts in Britain and further afield. There are also depictions of animals including stylised birds and horses, which have been construed as being sea-horses to keep the sea-faring theme begun with the boat alive.

### Smaller Items

The other items in the hoard included a small bowl made from a single sheet of gold. Measuring 9cm in diameter and 5cm in depth, it once contained four suspension loops on the outside to allow it to be hung from a hook and carried, although only one of these survives now.

The two chain necklaces were made using a loop-in-loop technique and include clasp fasteners. One chain is 40cm in length with a triple chain design, and the other is shorter but with a more complicated construction. They are similar in design to Roman and Etruscan examples from the same period, and the construction technique likely spread from there across the continent (the technique appears to have originally emerged from the Middle East).

The hoard also includes two much more simple torcs made from single twisted bars of gold, again in the style typical in Britain at the time. One is an unbroken ring with a diameter of 18.5cm, while the other is semi-circular – part of the ring is missing, so it is not known whether it would have been closed or open. They feature hook-in-loop fastenings and were most likely either imported from south eastern England or possibly originated in one of the main craft centres of Ireland such as Clonmacnoise.

The items are all an estimated 3000 years old, but that is where the concrete facts end. Theory upon theory has been thrown around by historians; some say the items may have been thrown overboard from a ship into the lough as an offering to a celtic sea god, others say they were placed in the water as part of a seaside spiritual ceremony, and of course, plenty of people still adhere to the story that they were buried temporarily for safe keeping and never recovered.



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