

ART ANCIENT



IRON AGE GOLD BROOCHES WITH LINKED CHAIN

La Tène III, c. 80-20 BC

Cast, twisted and filigree gold

Length of longest brooch: 10.3 cm

Weight: 125 g

PROVENANCE

British private collection, 1940s, thence by descent

Surpassing even the British Museum's Winchester Hoard in technique, design and configuration, the present Iron Age gold brooches are an exquisite and unparalleled example of gold-working from late Iron Age Britain. On account of their opulence and extremely high gold content, they were no doubt made for a member of the ruling elite. Preserved in exceptional condition, and exhibiting an outstanding and enigmatic example of ancient craftsmanship.

A unique set of Iron Age gold brooches, consisting of two coiled spring type fibula brooches; with internal cord, the bows of both brooches ribbed, the catch-plates with applied filigree within the open sections. Both extant brooches joined by loop-in-loop chains to a central pendant, itself with helicoid wire and filigree decoration. On the pendant, two of the circular elements have gold foil domes at the centre, another two open.





1 The Battersea Shield, Iron Age, 350-50 BC, La Tène, found in the River Thames, Battersea. British Museum, 1857,0715.1



La Tène Culture and Iron Age Britain

Throughout the course of the first millennium BC, a new civilisation emerged from the headwaters of the Danube River, erupting in all directions across Europe. Known to the Greeks as *Keltoi*, they are known today as the Celts.¹ Described as 'the first Europeans', at the height of their expansion during the Iron Age, they spread from the central plains of Asia Minor in the East, to the British Isles in the West. As bearers of La Tène culture (c.450 BC - 1st century AD), they enriched the British artistic and cultural landscape through their expertise in advanced metalwork, creating intricate weaponry, exquisite jewellery, and decorative objects bearing elaborate designs and motifs. At the same time, Iron Age Britain also benefitted from cross-channel trade, which brought to its shores a variety of goods, as well as political ties and kinship. Developed further following Caesar's conquest of Gaul in the mid-50s BC, these networks brought all manner of products to Britain. First century AD writer Strabo lists ivory bracelets and necklaces, amber gems, glass vessels and pottery among those objects imported to Britain, while exports included cattle, gold, silver, and iron as well as slaves and hunting dogs.² Inherently an agricultural society marked by a strict hierarchical structure, Iron Age Britain was also a prosperous and vibrant land with flourishing craftsmanship, active trading networks and a rich cultural identity.

A Masterpiece of Ancient Craftsmanship

The present brooches are an exquisite and unmatched example of gold-working from late Iron Age Britain. Indeed, the decoration shows advanced metalworking unparalleled in extant examples from this period. The ornate scroll of beaded wire filigree that adorns the catchplate on both brooches is a particularly ambitious design, likely inspired by Mediterranean techniques. Exceedingly rare on gold objects in pre-Roman England, other brooches from the period display simple, geometric incisions cut into the plate itself.³ The connecting chain, constructed by a loop-in-loop technique, and pendant with the helicoid wire are further examples of intricate metalworking rarely seen in Iron Age Britain, inspired by the fashions of Etruscan and Phoenician jewellery.⁴ Furthermore, the combination of three chains, three brooches (the end of the third chain likely once held a third brooch) and a pendant in a single piece of jewellery is unique, and possibly reminiscent of Hellenistic and Roman body-chains, which consisted of four chains joined to a decorated pendant. Indeed, the present pendant was also perhaps once adorned with further embellishment, such as pearls, coloured glass or even coral inlaid into the top and middle recesses.⁵

The brooches' exquisite decoration and unique configuration suggest that they were likely made in a Mediterranean workshop and later brought to England, either through Celtic trade with the empire or via migration from France, driven by the violence of Caesar's Gallic Wars.⁶



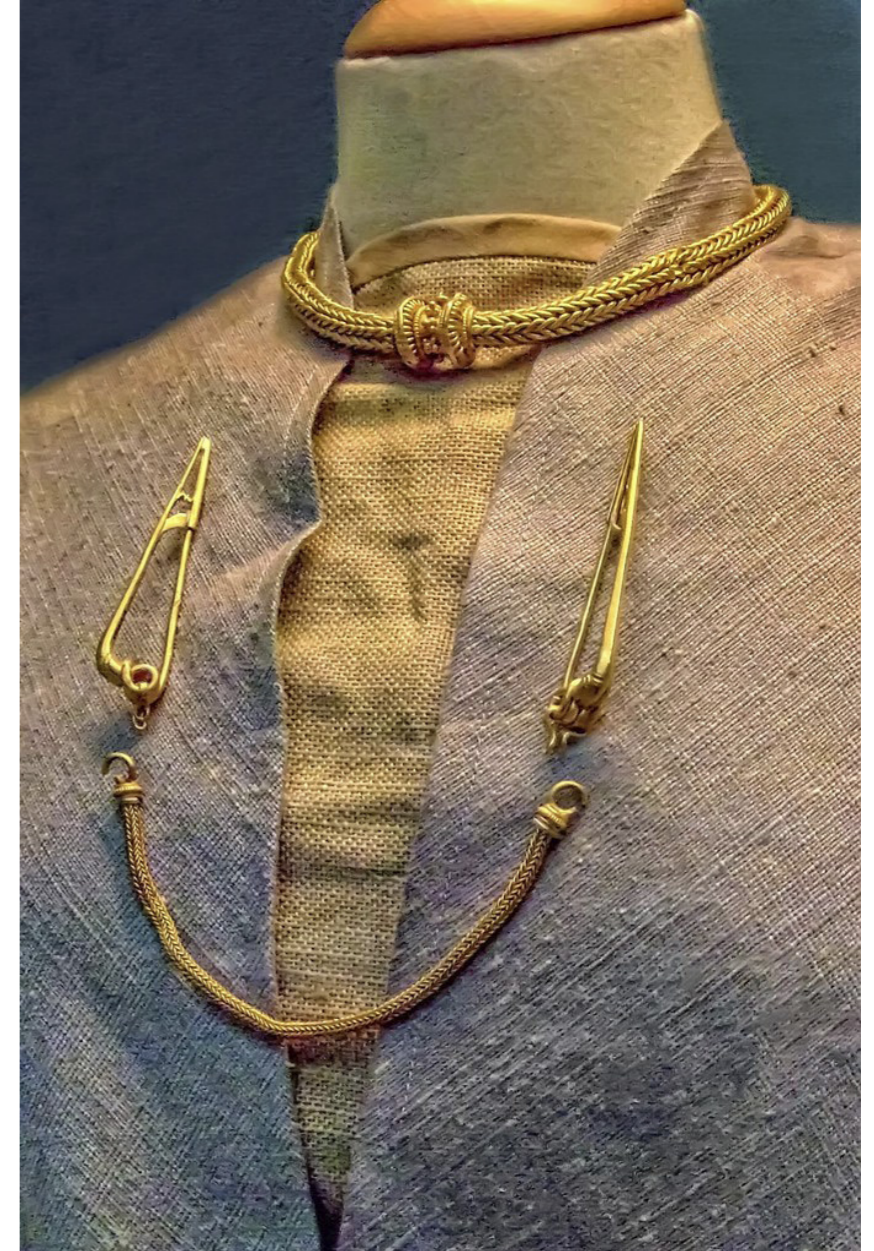


The Winchester Hoard

As one of an exceedingly rare few examples of pure gold brooches from Iron Age Britain, the present example can be compared only with the famous Winchester Hoard. Discovered by a metal detector in a freshly-ploughed field in September 2000, the Hoard is one of the most significant Iron Age treasure finds in Britain, consisting of four gold brooches, with one chain remaining (unattached), two gold necklace-torcs, and two gold bracelets. At the time, they were the most intricate examples of gold Iron Age brooches known, and were swiftly acquired by the British Museum.

However, while the loop-in-loop technique of the necklace-torc and the chain of the Winchester Hoard parallels that of the present example, the present brooches display a more advanced and intricate design, as well as being in a better state of preservation. In particular, the filigree decoration and the unique overall configuration presents an extraordinary example of gold-working from this period unmatched in other examples.

2 The Winchester Hoard, Iron Age, c.75-25 BC, found in Owslebury, Winchester. British Museum, 2001,0901.10.



3 Reconstruction of how the brooches from the Winchester Hoard might have been worn, shedding light on the wearing of the present piece.



3 Hoard L, Snettisham Hoard, in situ after discovery.

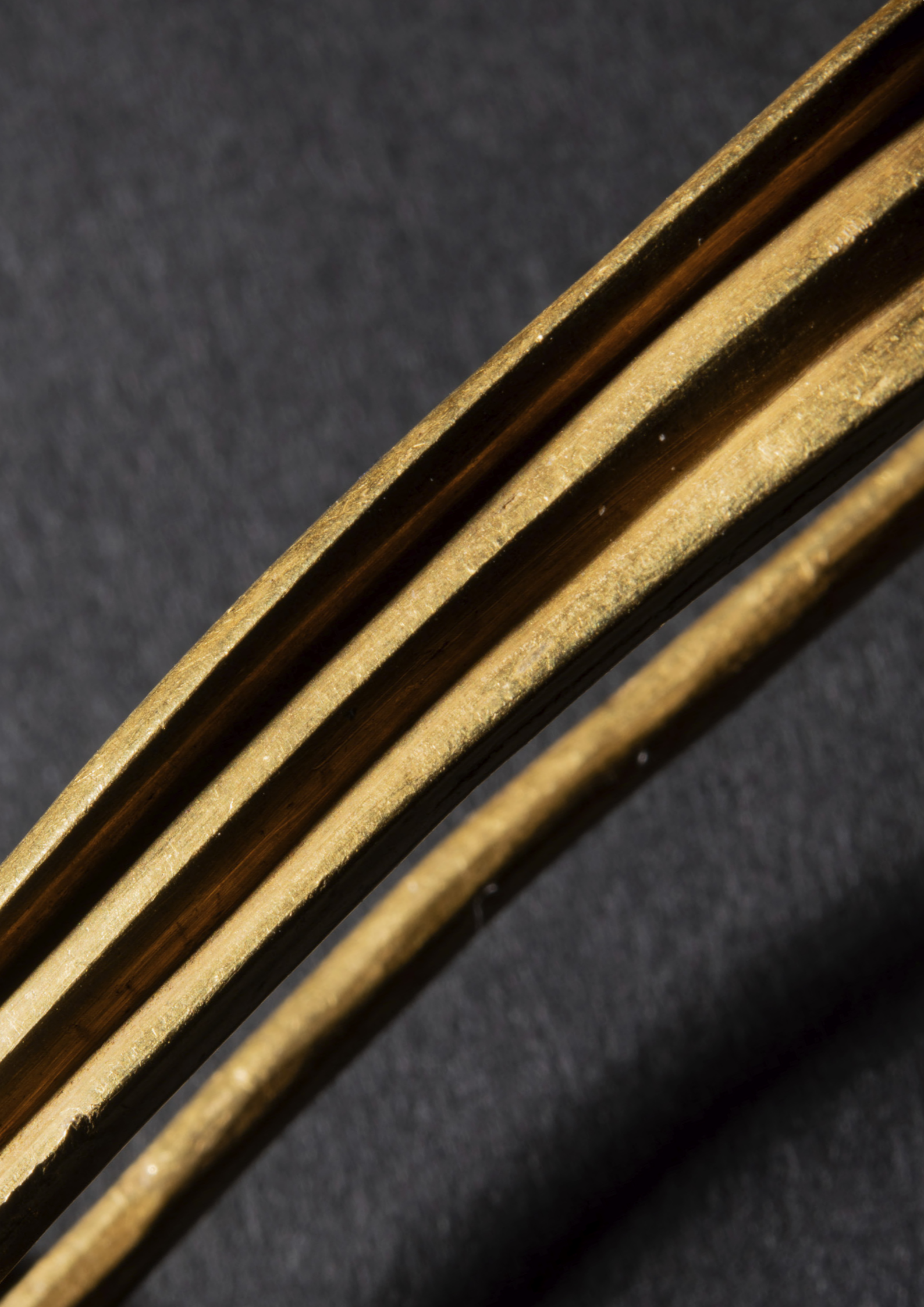


Buried Treasure

While pairs of brooches joined by chains are known from both sides of the Channel from the first century BC, these tend to be silver rather than gold. Indeed, the extremely pure gold used here (upwards of 95.1% in purity) was without equal in northern Europe at the same time. Perhaps explained by its creation in continental Europe and the use of the refined Roman metal, the superb quality of the material is indicative of the socioeconomic status of the jewellery's intended wearer.⁷ Indeed, the high gold content of the present piece would have equated to about 39 Corieltauvi gold staters, an enormous and so far unparalleled value for such an item of jewellery.⁸

Archaeological evidence from the discovery of the Winchester Hoard suggests that similar treasures were deliberately hidden. Buried atop a hill, far from any Iron Age domestic settlements, they were likely concealed in times of turmoil for safekeeping. Given the considerable social and cultural upheaval in the British Isles in the 1st century BC, with Celtic tribes under constant threat of Roman invasion, this is perhaps unsurprising.⁹

Made for a high-ranking noble or member of the ruling elite and perhaps later valued as a source of highly-concentrated wealth in times of hardship, gold brooches such as these would have had a long and complex history.



FOOTNOTES

- 1 P. Ellis, *The Ancient World of the Celts*, New York, 1999, p.9
- 2 Strabo. Geography. IV.5.2-3
- 3 La Niece, S., et al. 'Gold in Iron Age Britain', In Schwab, R. et al., (Eds). *Iron Age gold in Celtic Europe: Society, Technology and Archaeometry*. Rahden, 2018, 407-430.
- 4 Dr. Jack Ogden, 'Report on a set of linked Celtic gold fibulae', *Striptwist Ltd*, 14 June 2019
- 5 Dr. Jack Ogden, 'Report on a set of linked Celtic gold fibulae', *Striptwist Ltd*, 14 June 2019
- 6 Hill, J.D., Spence, A.J., La Niece, S. and Worrell, S. 'The Winchester Hoard: A find of Unique Iron Age Gold Jewellery from Southern England', *The Antiquaries Journal*, 84, (2004): 16
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Based on the respective gold content of the brooches and a Corieltauvi stater.
- 9 Hill, J.D., Spence, A.J., La Niece, S. and Worrell, S. 'The Winchester Hoard: A find of Unique Iron Age Gold Jewellery from Southern England', *The Antiquaries Journal*, 84, (2004): 15. Hill also suggests that they might have been a ritual deposition or spiritual offering.