

The Erstfeld gold hoard: a new approach

(Ἀχελῷος ?)

Andres Furger



IMPRINT

20. 2. 2026

Copyright
Andres Furger
9 rue verte
F-68480 Oltingue
www.furger.eu
andresfurger@me.com

This is the English translation with
minor changes and small
additions vis-à-vis the German
version of the paper published in
in 2025 under the title
«Der Goldschatz von Erstfeld:
Neuer Ansatz».

Proofreading: Julie Cordell

INHALT

A. Research history	4
B. Change of perspective	7
C. The Reuss River	9
D. The mystery of the discovery and a comparison	12
E. Iconographic references to the theme of water	14
F. On Achelous	17
G. And the torcs 1, 2 and 3?	26
Bibliography	31
Summary	32



The Erstfeld gold hoard, discovered in 1962 and weighing a total of 640 grams, consists of the following seven objects:

- 1 and 2 Pair of torcs with pictorial friezes**
- 3 Torc with pictorial frieze and pecking bird**
- 4 Torc with depictions of bulls**
- 5 and 6 Pair of single-knot arm rings with mirror-image meander patterns**
- 7 Double-knotted arm ring with figurative depictions.**

Torcs 1 to 3 show a pattern of intertwined figures that is unique in Celtic art and therefore difficult to interpret.

The ensemble dates from the 4th century BC. Today, researchers interpret it as a votive offering on the Gotthard route heading south.

In the following, the find is interpreted in connection with its location on the Reuss river as it flows from the mountains.

Following this approach, a new interpretation is proposed for the iconography of rings 4, 5, 6 and 7. This is followed by a discussion of the possible imagery on torcs 1 to 3.

A. Research history

Archaeological research into the early Celts faces a number of challenges. These include the interpretation of valuable hoards and figurative representations in Celtic art.

Both of these challenges are present in the case of the 4th century BC gold hoard discovered in 1962 in Erstfeld at the foot of the Gotthard massif. This is also reflected in the turbulent history of the find's discovery and subsequent research. Despite some progress, important questions remain unanswered to this day (p. 6). The main reason for this is well known: there are no written records of Celtic culture and religion. This leaves plenty of room for interpretation.

The seven rings were discovered by chance on 20 August 1962 above the village of Erstfeld. They were taken to Zurich to the Swiss National Museum, where the leading archaeologists took charge of the find. Emil Vogt and René Wyss subsequently interpreted the hoard as a spontaneous hiding place for a merchant who had got into difficulties while travelling through the Gotthard Pass. For this reason, no further investigations into the circumstances of the find were carried out. As far as possible, this was rectified in 1990 at the Swiss National Museum (Furger 1991).

In 1991, as director of the Swiss National Museum, I entrusted Martin Guggisberg with new research, primarily on the pictorial content, deliberately choosing a specialist in the field of classical archaeology. In his habilitation thesis published in 2000, 'Der Goldschatz von Erstfeld - Ein keltischer Bilderzyklus zwischen Mitteleuropa und Mittelmeerwelt' (The Erstfeld Gold Treasure - A Celtic Image Cycle between Central Europe and the Mediterranean World), he also dealt with the history of research in detail, which is why it is not repeated here (2000, 11ff.).



One of the two discoverers, Virgilio Ferrazza, recreates the discovery in the sandpit at the Swiss National Museum in Zurich in 1990. (Author's archive)

In 1990, the archaeologist Felix Müller dated the find to around 300 BC, which was corrected by Guggisberg (p. 28). In 2014, the author attempted to place the find in the broader historical context of the Reuss Valley in Uri and postulated a connection to the Gotthard massif, where the Reuss has its source. In the following, the focus is no longer on the mountains but on the valley, and the find and its iconography are reinterpreted against this backdrop.

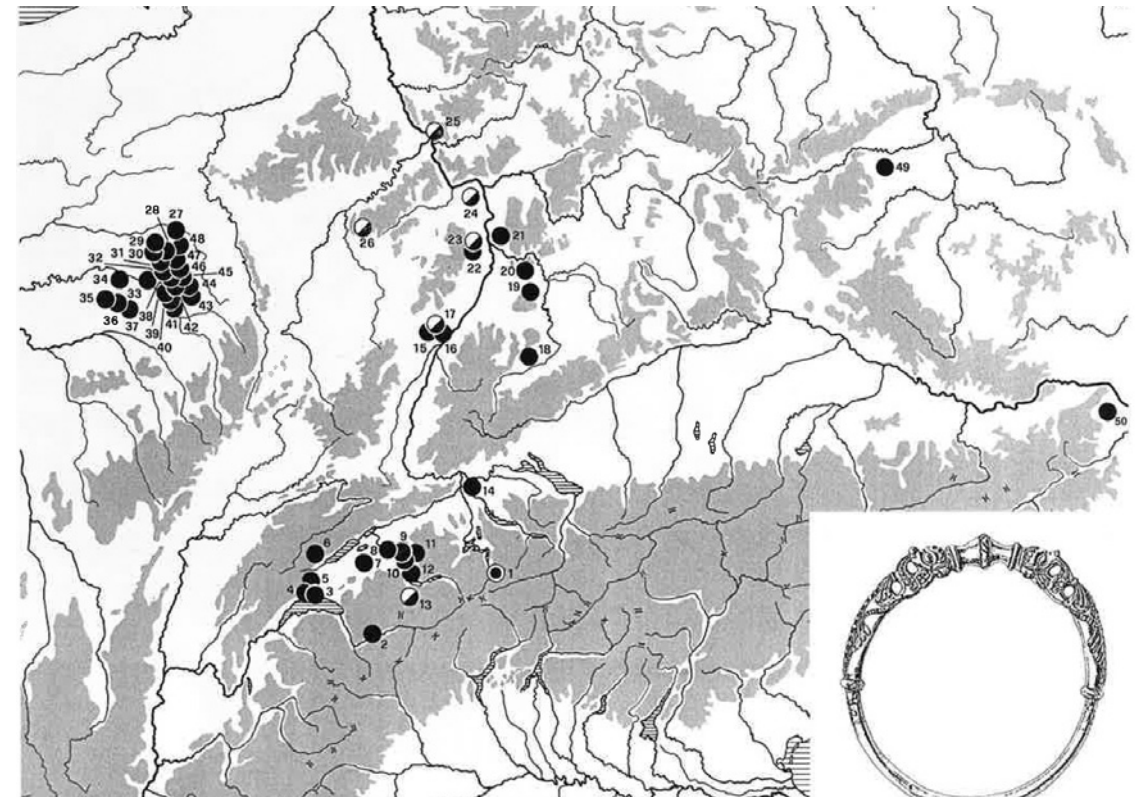
Guggisberg's important findings

Guggisberg's research made a decisive contribution to the interpretation of the find. Detailed technical examination of the rings, which were found in perfect condition, revealed that they were a 'closed ensemble of works'. Apparently, the four torcs, which were identical in size and weight, were made for a specific event. Guggisberg suggests that they may have been an offering to a deity by the regional Celtic aristocracy.

Guggisberg also confirmed the now prevailing interpretation of the hoard as a consecration find, namely as a sacrificial act prepared well in advance (2000, 268). The seven rings were most likely produced and deposited as part of a joint commission (2000, 263).

According to Guggisberg, rings 5 and 6 fit 'effortlessly into the stylistic landscape of the Swiss Early La Tène culture' (2000, 166). The fertile Swiss Plateau was a core area of the early Celts. Guggisberg devoted a lengthy chapter to the early style between Lake Geneva and Lake Constance (2000, 152ff.). Guggisberg suggested two regions of the Swiss Mittelland as the area of origin and production: 'On the one hand, the cultural landscape between Bern and Thun, which, according to the numerous burial sites and the wealth of grave goods found in the graves, was one of the most prosperous centres of the north-western Alpine early La Tène culture, and on the other hand, the region around the northern end of Lake Zurich.'

Guggisberg emphasised the strong Mediterranean influences on Celtic art within the broader context. Graeco-Etruscan goldsmithing and the pictorial references to the art of the Italic-Etruscan region played a decisive role 'in the formulation of Celtic iconography' (2000, 120ff.277).



Torc 4 from Erstfeld belongs to the so-called Petschaftshalsringe. According to Guggisberg, this early La Tène type is concentrated in the Swiss Plateau between Lake Geneva and Lake Zurich, as well as in Champagne. A similar, but not quite as significant picture is drawn by the distribution of single-knot arm rings, to which arm rings 5 and 6 from Erstfeld typologically belong. (Guggisberg 2000, fig. 120)

Mistress of Animals?

Archaeologists are usually very cautious when it comes to interpreting complex images and shy away from making assumptions. Guggisberg deserves great credit for putting forward his own concrete interpretation of the images, particularly those on the friezes on torcs 1 to 3 at Erstfeld, and for providing detailed reasons for his conclusions. Among other things, he commented (2000, 256ff.):

‘In light of these limitations, the following observations on the pictorial friezes of Erstfeld should be understood merely as an attempt to shed light on the iconographic context of these compositions rich in figures, in the hope of contributing to a more nuanced understanding of Celtic imagery and its iconographic roots.’

The main result of Guggisberg's extensive and meticulous research into the image content was to explain the cycles on rings 1 to 3 with the theme of Mistress of Animals (2000, 258ff. and 2010). In doing so, he linked up with a depiction of this theme on the well-known hydria from Grächwil.

The iconography of rings 4 and 7, which plays an important role in the following, was dealt with less extensively by Guggisberg. In the subsequent discussion, they are instead placed in the foreground, in the sense of a supplement to previous research.

Two important unanswered questions

Despite all the progress made by researchers at the end of the 20th century with regard to the Erstfeld hoard, important questions remain unanswered. In the author's opinion, these revolve around two important sets of questions which are discussed below:

1.

Is the Erstfeld site actually connected to the Gotthard route to the south? Shortly after the discovery, this interpretation arose in connection with the sober interpretation of the site as a merchant's emergency hiding place. This interpretation prevailed until around 2000, even after the find was no longer interpreted as a merchant's hiding place (Guggisberg 2000, 273ff.).

Is this assumption still tenable, or is it an uncritical retrojection from a modern perspective onto pre-Christian times? (It is well known that the Gotthard Pass was and is associated with a national myth in Switzerland).

2.

If the rings were made for a lengthily, pre-planned ritual deposition of the ensemble at the foot of a prominent rock in Erstfeld, as Guggisberg has argued, why is it so difficult to establish any connection between the proposed imagery on the rings and the site where they were found? This must have been a kind of sacred site dedicated to one or more deities or divine beings, as was customary in ancient times.

B. Change of perspective

The location of the find on the Gotthard route, one of Europe's most important north-south connections today, has had a strong influence on the interpretation of the hoard from the outset - and continues to do so today. In the Historical Dictionary of Switzerland (HLS), the entry for Erstfeld in Chapter 1 (The Gold Treasure of Erstfeld) written by Felix Müller states:

'Among several interpretations (including a merchant's depot), the one that currently finds the greatest acceptance is that of a cult-motivated votive offering for safe passage across the Alps.' However, the same encyclopaedia states under the keyword Gotthard Pass that it only gained greater importance as an Alpine crossing point from around 1200 AD onwards. Furthermore, 'there is insufficient evidence from Roman times to prove that there was a permanent flow of traffic over the Gotthard Pass from Leventina to Lake Lucerne'.

Guggisberg described Vogt and Wyss's interpretations as a 'fateful turning point', but nevertheless attributed an important role to the location of the find at the 'access to the Gotthard Pass' (2000, 17, 231ff. and 273ff.). Certain evidence for an early Gotthard route, including bypass routes, was only briefly discussed (2000, 13). The well-known fact that the southern expansion of the North Alpine Celts was underway at the time contributed to the idea that the gold find was located on an important Celtic route to the south. Guggisberg 2000, 277: 'Is it perhaps connected with the crossing of the Alps by a Celtic warrior group, or does it serve as a symbolic sign of dominion (...)?'. The location of the Erstfeld find has also been cited as an argument for the existence of the Gotthard route in Celtic times, a circular argument!

Was there actually a frequently used crossing over the Gotthard in ancient times? A sober assessment of the facts leads to a negative conclusion. Even the Celtic finds at Arbedo near Bellinzona cannot serve as key evidence for early use of the Gotthard, because the routes via Lukmanier and Splügen also pass through there.

Above all, unlike other passes such as the Great St Bernard or Julier, there are no finds from pre-Christian times on the actual route between Amsteg and Arbedo. This is despite the fact that much more construction took place on the Gotthard in the 19th and 20th centuries than on other Swiss passes (defensive structures, railway lines and roads). Even the latest construction work since 2000 (wind farm near the hospice, etc.) has not significantly changed the findings.

Conversely, since 2000, significant new finds have been made on other Alpine passes to the south. These include the Septimer Pass, where Celtic coins have also been found (Zanier 2025). New investigations at Schnidejoch and Lötschen Pass (Martin Bader et al. 2015) point in a similar direction.

This new situation confirms a fact that has been known for some time: before the era of roads (before 1801), the Alps away from the Gotthard Pass were accessible to the south via various routes using mule tracks. These included the passes from the Bernese Oberland via Grimsel and Gries (Bronze Age finds) or Albrun (Roman finds), as well as from Lake Walen via the Grisons passes Lukmanier, Splügen and Septimer. There were therefore several routes across the Alps to northern Italy for the Celts of the Swiss Plateau.

The discovery site in a remote valley

So, if the location of the Erstfeld hoard at the foot of the Gotthard route is not the reason why the ensemble was deposited at this site, what is? What remains is the interpretation of a consecration to mountain gods, which I myself have advocated (Furger 2014), namely at the threshold between the space that was still familiar and accessible to the people of that time and the beginning of the harsh and inaccessible mountain world.

The following sections propose a new approach: a complete paradigm shift regarding this threshold situation. Strangely enough, probably due to the fixation on the famous Gotthard Pass, little attention has been paid to the northern direction, i.e. down to the Swiss Plateau. This is despite the fact that Guggisberg was able to establish that the Erstfeld rings are likely to have had close ties to the Celts of the Swiss Plateau. This should be 'seriously considered as the place of origin of the Erstfeld gold works' (2000, 270f.).

If the Reuss Valley in Uri is no longer regarded as an access route to the Gotthard route, from the perspective of the Swiss Mittelland it was, until pre-medieval times, nothing more than an extremely remote, probably sparsely populated Alpine valley. It was mainly accessible by water via Lake Lucerne. There were dangers lurking along the way. Even today, Lake Uri is known for high waves in certain weather conditions (föhn).

The section of the Reuss flowing through the canton of Uri is still considered to be unpredictable. Every decade, it flooded the plain between Erstfeld and Flüelen, sometimes turning it into a lake, and this continues to happen to some extent today. This is also the reason why the paths used to run along the slopes and not at the bottom of the valley.

There must therefore have been a very specific reason in Celtic times to seek out this remote location and deposit valuable goods there.

As already mentioned, at Erstfeld, the once wild Reuss left the inhospitable, rugged and formerly inaccessible gorge and mountain world and meandered from there as a sizeable river into the plain of the Urner Reuss Valley (today with several cubic metres of water per second). In this sense, the Erstfeld site along with the valley known as the Klus could have been understood as a kind of source of the Reuss as a river. Accordingly, in a broader sense, the Erstfeld hoard find could be understood as a source or water hoard (see also p. 33).

The Reuss was and is not just any body of water, but the second most important river in the Swiss Mittelland after the Aare (p. 10). This bears emphasis when considering the following.

C. The Reuss River

The site near Erstfeld is located at the northern foot of the Gotthard massif. In ancient times and in the Middle Ages, this heart of the Central Alps was considered the highest point of the Alps and was known as the water tower of several major rivers: the Rhine, Rhone, Ticino, Aare and Reuss.

The site is located in the Reuss Valley in the Canton of Uri. Above Erstfeld, the valley is dominated by the Schöllenen Gorge, which is deeply carved into the rock and for a long time could not be bridged. Below it, the Reuss flows through the flat valley floor into the southern arm of Lake Lucerne, known as Lake Uri. It is the lake's main tributary.

The Reuss flows from Lake Lucerne (now in Lucerne) into the flatter Mittelland and joins the Aare east of Brugg as its largest tributary. The Aare itself flows into the Rhine a little further downstream.

The black line on the right of the map marks the Reuss catchment area. It extends far into the Gotthard massif in the south.
(WikiCommons)



Significance of the Reuss for the Swiss Plateau

The Erstfeld site is located on the upper reaches of the Reuss, which may have been called Sila in ancient times. The ancient name of the Reuss is undocumented. Today, it is the fourth largest river in Switzerland and the largest tributary of the Aare, which flows into the Rhine at Koblenz with about 50% more water than the Upper Rhine. From a hydrological point of view, the Upper Rhine, which is now considered the source of the Rhine, is only a tributary of the Aare, not the other way round. The Aare and Reuss were therefore probably perceived by the population of the Swiss Plateau as the source rivers of the Rhine.

The Aare, Reuss and Limmat, together with their tributaries, supplied and continue to supply the crops of the entire western Swiss Plateau with water and guarantee the fertility of the soil (map on the right).

Why this excursion into hydrology? Because, according to the latest research, the population behind the Erstfeld find, with its aristocracy and priesthood, came from this very same Swiss Plateau (see p. 8).

In ancient times, rivers were revered as divine not only because of their ever-flowing nature, but above all because they ensured the fertility of the fields. For this very reason, certain river deities were considered not only gods of water, but also gods of fertility. It is also well known that in Celtic times, waterways were more important for transport than roads, unlike in Roman times.

Guggisberg interpreted the rings as a donation from members of 'the regional Celtic aristocracy' of the Swiss Plateau, who travelled to the Reuss Valley in Uri to lay down the rings (2000, 277). If we follow this line of thought further, we must ask ourselves which route they took.



© ensi.ch/de/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2011/09/einzugsgebiete

The catchment areas of the Aare, Reuss and Limmat rivers.

The answer is simple and clear: They took the same routes as did all travellers heading for Gotthard did until the early 19th century, namely by water from one of the northern docks on Lake Lucerne to the mouth of the Reuss at the southern end of Lake Uri (map p. 11). This was followed by the overland route along the edge of the Reuss valley or, if necessary, by flat boats on the Reuss itself. (Until the Middle Ages and probably until the 19th century, the upper reaches of the Reuss were seasonally navigable as far as Erstfeld).



The exact location where the gold rings were found in the Reuss Valley in Uri

Seen from the Swiss Plateau, Lake Uri and the adjoining Reuss valley jut out like a wedge deep into the foothills of the Gotthard massif. The gold rings were found at the furthest point of the upper course of the Reuss, where it was possible to travel far into the mountainous landscape on, or alongside the river from Lake Lucerne (see also p. 33).

D. The mystery of the discovery site and a comparison

The isolated location of the Erstfeld rings remains a mystery. This is even more true of the discovery itself. The rings were found in a niche or cavity in a rock formation. This was the conclusion drawn by a careful reconstruction of the discovery in 1990 in a sandpit by one of the finders at the Swiss National Museum in Zurich (see p. 4). The interviews revealed that the exact location of the find was the top of a smaller block below a large rock, which can be understood as a landmark. This was 70 metres above the valley floor of the Reuss on the northern slope above the present-day village of Erstfeld. Excerpt from Furger 1991, 17:

Nachdem V. Ferrazza und sein Bruder 7–8 m Hangschutt im Rüfental abgetragen hatten, stießen sie auf einen großen Steinblock von ca. 70 m³ und am Fuß desselben auf einen – offenbar ausgebrochenen – kleineren Stein. Beide mußten entfernt werden. Nach einem kurzen Disput hob G. Ferrazza zuerst mit der Baggerschaufel von hinten den flachen, ca. 1 x 1 m messenden Felsblock von ca. 70–80 cm Dicke an, der im Gespräch wiederholt als «Tisch» beschrieben wurde. Dort, also talwärts, stand auch sein Bruder Virgilio: Beim leichten Anheben resp. Wegdrehen dieses flachen Steines rutschten «die sieben Stücke gerade vor meine Beine». Die sieben Goldringe seien dicht übereinander gelegen «wie ein Stapel Bierdeckel», der kleinste Ring unten, der größte oben. Zuerst dachte Ferrazza an Trachtenschmuck und wusch einen der Armringe in einer nahegelegenen Pfütze. Bei diesen Bewegungen rutschte ein Niet aus der Halterung, den er anschließend trotz Suchen nicht mehr finden konnte. Nachdem die Ringe tagsüber in der Werkzeugkiste aufbewahrt worden waren, wurden sie abends mit nach Hause genommen und später dem Schweizerischen Landesmuseum übergeben.

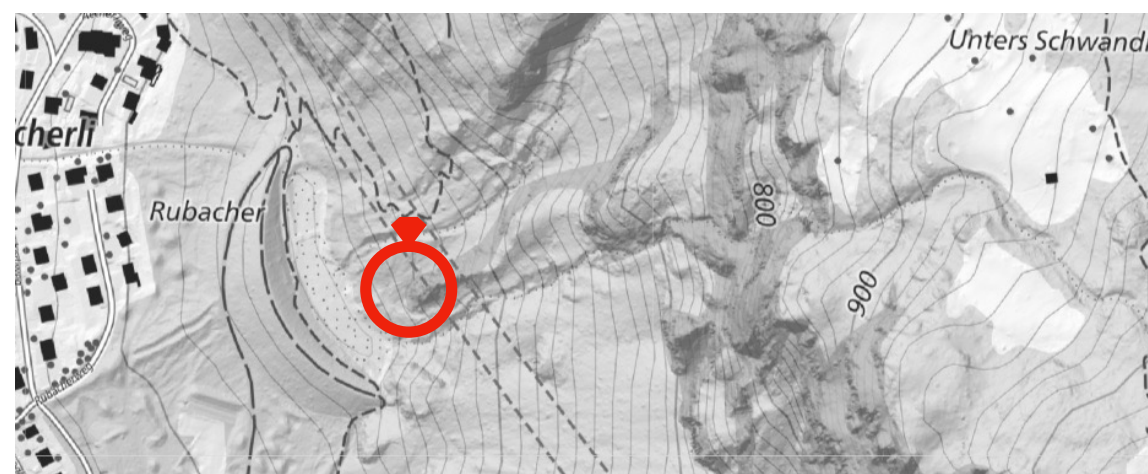
Diese Schilderung ist insofern interessant, als demnach die Goldobjekte im horizontalen Spalt zwischen dem grossen markanten Felsblock und dem kleineren Ausbruch niedergelegt wurden. Zweitens ist bemerkenswert, daß offenbar der Niet so lose in einem der Armringe saß, daß er sich durch die einfachen Waschbewegungen lösen konnte. Alle Ringe sind sonst komplett erhalten und zeigen keine Spuren längerer Benützung; sie sind «wie neu» dem Boden übergeben worden.

There is no comparison from the Celtic region to the present find situation that could facilitate its interpretation. And there probably never will be! Quite simply because the discovery is based on the unbelievable coincidence that, during the weeks of excavation work to remove metres of rubble from the slope, a second man was

standing next to the excavator bucket at the very moment when the smaller block mentioned above was struck. Therefore, we must continue to puzzle over why one or more deities were once worshipped in such an inhospitable, seemingly godforsaken pile of rocks.

So far, researchers have offered few suggestions to explain the find in a slope furrowed by small valleys, through which mudslides (rüfen) still descend into the valley today. (Today, they are intercepted by the arched catchment wall above the town of Erstfeld, which can be seen on the map below.) In the past, the deposits from the debris cone would have merged with the scree of the meandering Reuss river (see also p. 33).

The boulder on the slope mentioned above offered some protection from rüfen. Nevertheless, those who made the offerings had to expect that the deposit they had laid down would be covered by debris. (When it was discovered, several metres of slope debris lay on top of the rings.) Was this precisely the intention? Just as offerings at river deposits were swallowed up by the stream?





Natural sanctuaries of the nymphs

The discovery described on p. 12 is reminiscent of sacred sites as they are known from ancient Greece, especially the sanctuaries of nymphs worshipped in secluded natural surroundings. Hans Peter Isler wrote (1970, 35): 'The sanctuaries are modest, not temples, but only sacred areas, natural caves or niches in the rock, sometimes artificially arranged, such as the Ilissos cave.' Nymphs could be transformed into stones or rocks. Homer, *Iliad* XXIV 614-619: ἐν Σιπύλῳ, ὅθι φασὶ θεῶν ἔμμεναι εὐνᾶς/νυμφῶν, αἳ τ' ἄμφ' Ἀχελώϊον ἐρρώσαντο, ἔνθα λίθος περ ἐοῦσα θεῶν ἐκ κήδεα πέσσει. ἀλλ' ἄγε δὴ καὶ νῶϊ μεδώμεθα δι'ε γεραιᾷ/ σίτου· ἔπειτ' αὖτε φίλον παῖδα κλαίοισθα. In the translation by Roland Hampe, Stuttgart 1979: 'Somewhere now in the rocks, high up on lonely mountains, on Mount Sipylos, where they say that divine nymphs camp, dancing around Achelous. There, transformed into stone, she still feels the suffering inflicted by the gods.'



In nymph sanctuaries, several deities were often worshipped together. In my opinion, this should also be considered for Erstfeld. (Also because of the composition of the objects, with different 'sets' of neck rings and arm rings, p. 26.) In Greek mythology, nymphs, like the sirens to be discussed later, stood between this world and the next and were considered companions of the river god Achelous, who, according to Apollonius of Rhodes and Ovid (*Met.* 14, 87), was their father. Even Plato mentions nymphs in *Phaedrus* as daughters and companions of Achelous (263d: 'ΣΩΚΡΑΤΗΣ. Φεῦ, ὅσῳ λέγεις τεχνικωτέρας Νύμφας τὰς Ἀχελώϊου ...'). Like the sirens, nymphs were also called Achelousids (Ἀχελωίδες) because of their ancestry.



Above: Altar relief from the second half of the 4th century from Megara. Depicted are: Hermes, three nymphs and the human-headed sacred Achelous as a bull. The inscription reads: "Ἑρμοῦ καὶ Νυνφῶν ἱερὸν σεμνὸ τε Ἀχελώϊο". Typical features of the head of Achelous are his flowing beard, short horns and pointed ears. (Metropolitan Museum, New York)

Middle: Altar relief from the same site. Above a table with an Achelous mask, a gathering of gods floats with Zeus in the centre. (Berlin, Collection of Classical Antiquities)

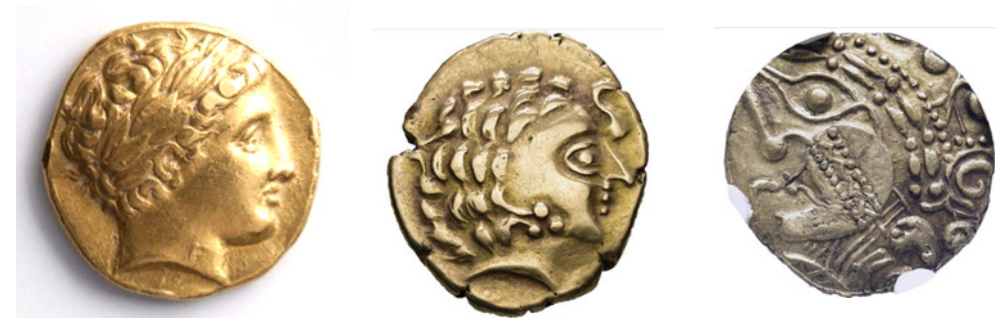
Bottom: Achelous as a bull with a nymph holding on to his horn with one hand. (Carnelian from the second half of the 4th century BC in a modern gold version in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna)

E. Iconographic references to the theme of water

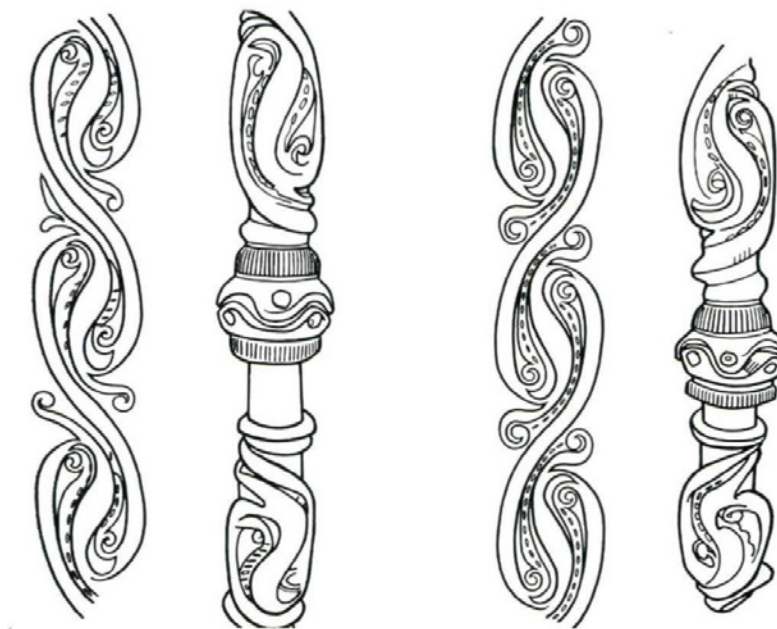
The iconography of all seven Erstfeld rings has not been definitively deciphered. This is likely to remain the case, as the interpretation of Celtic artworks has long been associated with fundamental problems. In addition to the lack of written sources from the Celts themselves about their mythology and religion, there is also the peculiarity of their art. It certainly depicted classical models, but these were so heavily altered over time and space that the images can no longer be interpreted, in the absence of any links, with certainty. This is illustrated by the example of the Philipian stater shown at the top right. If intermediate links such as the specimen shown in the middle were not known, one would no longer dare to identify the coin image on the right as a depiction of the Macedonian ruler Philip II (* around 382 BC; † 336 BC).

This comparison illustrates the degree of difficulty that also applies to the interpretation of the Erstfeld rings. Nevertheless, attempts should continue to be made. In the following, the search will focus on references to the theme of water in the hoard found near the youthful Reuss river. First result: the sculptural, circumferential decoration in the style of the 'running dog' on arm rings 5 and 6 shows a rounded form of the classical meander. This is known to symbolise flowing water. (This is also shown in the image on p. 17 below).

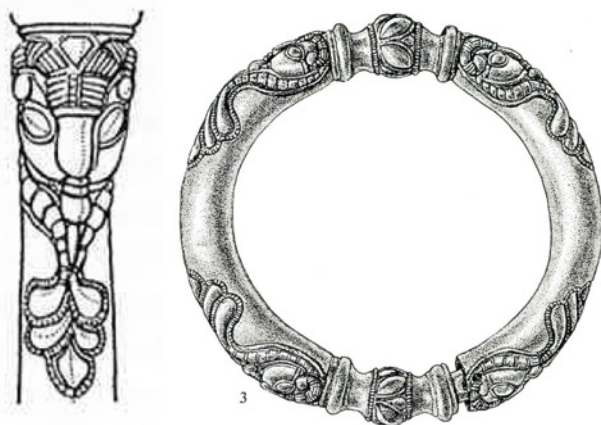
On p. 26ff., the figurative representations on the other rings from Erstfeld are compared with possible models from the Greek Mediterranean region. According to Guggisberg, the seven rings were produced as an ensemble. However, their images appear so different that the question arises as to whether they were dedicated to different deities at the same time, as was the case in the aforementioned nymph sanctuaries.



Celtic variations of the Philipian stater: model from the 4th century BC and later Celtic adaptations. (Author's archive)



Sketches of the decorations on arm rings 5 and 6 with their sophisticated mirror-image representations of a meander pattern. (Swiss National Museum, Zurich)



Depictions of Achelous?

As part of the new approach to understanding the Erstfeld find in connection with the Reuss river in a threshold situation, a comparison was made with possible exponents from the Greek-Etruscan afterlife on the subject of water. This brought Achelous into focus, firstly because he was considered the river god par excellence in antiquity (p. 20) and secondly because he was a deity for whom there is much pictorial evidence from the time when the Erstfeld gold rings were created.

Accordingly, Achelous must have played an important role among the southern neighbours of the Celts. This raised the question: are there depictions on the Erstfeld rings with possible connections to Achelous? A comparison most likely leads to the figures on torc 4 and knot arm ring 7. Guggisberg interpreted the hybrid creature visible on the torc (picture above) as a bird-cow (albeit 'not with satisfactory certainty') and the one on the arm ring (picture centre) as a calf (2000, 209ff. and 256ff.).

In my opinion, there are equally good reasons to interpret these figures as bulls with feathered snake bodies and thus as Celtic interpretations of Achelous representations, as presented on p. 19 ff. This includes the bull's head on neck ring 4 featuring human eyes, short horns and ears (albeit in an inverted configuration). This is exemplified by the comparison with the Etruscan gold pendant from the 5th century BC in the Louvre, illustrated on p. 17. The bulbous nose, which also appears on the arm ring, is reminiscent of the Etruscan depictions of Achelous on p. 19.

Arm ring 7 from Erstfeld, shown below, features four very similar masks. The photograph in the middle shows two small protrusions on the forehead that can be interpreted as small horns. Especially with their long beards, the sculpturally carved masks show certain similarities with the iconography of Achelous. This is shown in the reproduction of a mask after Guggisberg at the bottom left. Interestingly, he himself described these as similar to masks that are now clearly regarded as representations of Achelous (p. 16). The faces merge into the rounded shaft of the rings. As mentioned above, one of the characteristics of Achelous was his ability to transform into a snake. This was also true of other river gods and symbolised the eternal flow of water.

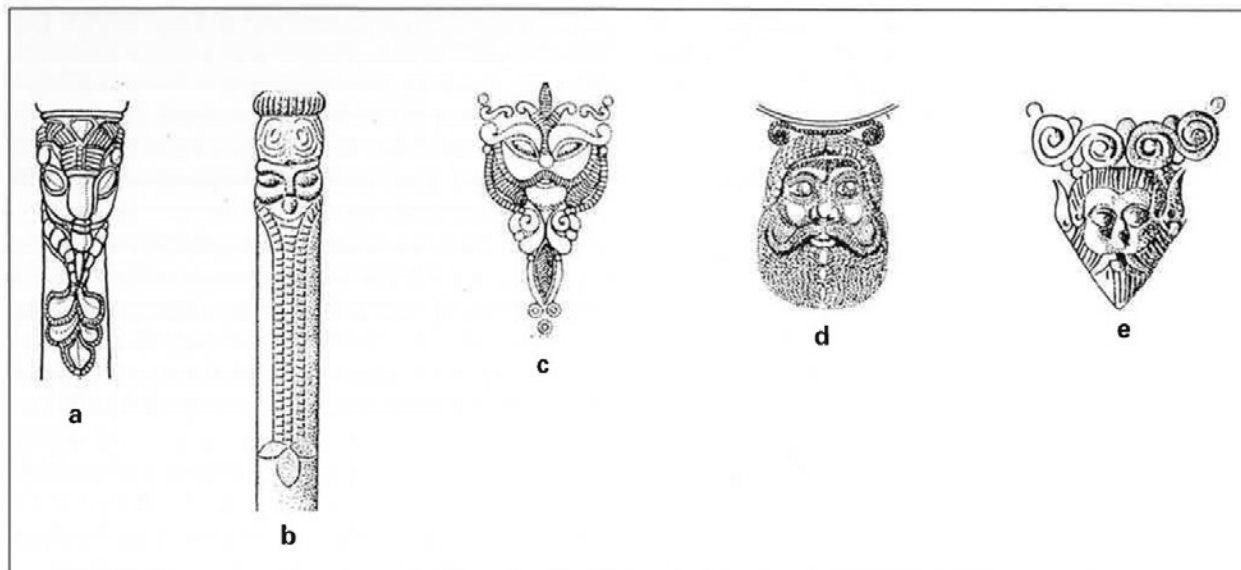


Abb. 236. Die Masken des Armring E7 (a) und verwandte Darstellungen der keltischen und etruskischen Kunst. b Ihringen; c Rodenbach; d Vulci; e Weiskirchen.

Key artifacts?

In his figure 236 (reproduced here on the left), Guggisberg has illustrated figurative parallels to the masks of arm ring 7 from Erstfeld (a) and drawn far-reaching conclusions from them (2000, 211f.). Together with other authors, he described masks b to e as the heads of satyrs or of Silen. Figure d comes from a gold finger ring, which is shown enlarged below. This ring is a good example of how differently researchers interpret images. It comes from Vulci and is dated to the 5th century BC (Metropolitan Museum of Art).



The illustrations on the left clearly show long ears on either side of the face. These are missing from sketch d. For this reason, the two masks are now considered to be representations of Achelous. This is also consistent with the flowing beards, which are very similar to the one on the following page. In the case of depiction e from Weiskirchen, there is also some evidence to suggest that it is a representation of Achelous; the same applies to Guggisberg's key piece of evidence, b, with the long beard. In this case, a reassessment based on the original finds would be appropriate (cf. p. 25). Conclusion: key pieces of evidence for Etruscan parallels to the depictions at Erstfeld which possibly belong to the Achelous milieu!

The carnelian set into the ring shown on the left has a bird, which Guggisberg classified as a parallel to the small bird in the centre of neck rings 1 and 2, carved into it. Since the masks on the finger ring have been attributed to Achelous, one could also think of a nymph or siren.



Following Guggisberg, could this also be the case for the central bird on the Erstfeld torcs 1 and 2? This small bird, placed between the pistils on torcs 1 and 2, seems somewhat inserted; in contrast to the other figures, it is not depicted in profile but from above. Interestingly, it is missing on torc 3.

F. On Achelous

In 1970, classical archaeologist Hans Peter Isler published his dissertation entitled 'Achelous - A Monograph', in which he compiled the then known depictions of Achelous from the Greek and Etruscan regions and evaluated them in connection with literary traditions. The origin of the 'man-bull images', as Isler calls them, lies in the Orient; they were adopted in Ionia in the 7th century BC. He describes Achelous as the giver of fertile water and crops, as well as the 'god of farmers' and 'father of the most famous springs' (1970, 110ff.).

Achelous or Acheloios (Ἀχελῷος/Ἀχελῷος) appears alongside Okeanos in the Iliad as a water god around whom the nymphs dance. He was considered a 'deep-flowing ruler' 'from whom all streams and all floods of the sea, all springs of the earth, and bubbling wells flow' (24, 616 and 21, 194/5). Achelous or Acheloon (Ἀχελῷον) was also considered a kind of synonym for pure and flowing water (Isler 1970, 109 and Pancioni 2019, 27 after Euripides). There are numerous literary traditions referring to Achelous as a river and water god, but mostly in the form of later excerpts from writings by older authors. Many literary sources have recently been well compiled in Pancioni 2019.

The many pictorial references to Achelous come mainly from Greece, southern Italy (coins) and the Etruscan cultural area. In addition, there is some evidence from Celtic sites (p. 24f.). Isler distinguished between two main forms of representation: Achelous in battle with Heracles and Achelous on votive images. These begin in the 5th century BC with Achelous with the body of a bull and a human head, later often depicted as a bearded head in a rock cave (Isler 1970, 30). Most of the reliefs come from caves.

According to Isler, these votive offerings are always dedicated to several deities in addition to Achelous (1970, 33f). As already mentioned, the cult of Achelous and the nymphs was often situated in sacred areas, natural caves or niches in the rock. Isler comments (1970, 43): 'The preserved votive reliefs depicting Achelous in the form of a man-bull, mask or human are, like the nymph reliefs, consistently Attic or derived from Attic types. Apart from the classicist replicas, they were made between the late fifth and early third centuries.'

The many pictorial references to Achelous from the Etruscan cultural area (unfortunately many from illegal excavations) show that Achelous was worshipped there in a similar way to in Greece. The cult of Achelous seemingly spread quite quickly to Etruria in the 5th century BC and persisted there for a long period of time.



Achelous as a gold pendant, circa 480 BC, probably from Chiusi. (Musée du Louvre)

Pictorial evidence of Achelous from the Greek region

Achelous was originally the personification of the river Achelous. He is usually depicted with long hair, a distinctive moustache and a thick beard flowing with water (Sophocles, *Trachiniae* 9-14). Just as a river constantly changes its course, Achelous can also transform himself, often from a bull into a snake. This is shown in depictions of the aforementioned battle between Achelous and Heracles (p. 20). According to Greek mythology, Achelous desired the beautiful Deianeira, but this brought him into conflict with Heracles. A fight ensued, during which Heracles broke off one of Achelous' horns. In exchange for Amalthea's (cornucopia) horn, Achelous finally got his horn back. This legend changed constantly over time, but continued to resonate into Roman times.

Left: Bas-relief from the 3rd century BC depicting Zeus, Hermes and Heracles, with the face of Achelous at the bottom left. (National Archaeological Museum, Athens)

Below: Large marble head from Marathon, circa 525-500 BC. (Collection of Classical Antiquities, Berlin State Museums)





Visual evidence of Achelous from the Etruscan region

There is some visual evidence of Achelous in Etruscan culture, which is known to have had a strong influence on Celtic culture – on imported vessels, but also in the form of original creations. Isler wrote about the numerous depictions of Achelous in Etruscan art (1970, 120):

‘However, so many images of Achelous (...) have been preserved that it is inconceivable that the motif was copied for purely decorative purposes.’

The well-dated objects from Etruria depicting Achelous date mainly from around 500 BC. Isler had already noted that most of the small bronze objects with Achelous motifs originate from Etruria (1970, 53), rather than from western Greece. These are mainly parts of tools or vessels, jug handles and the like, including many products from the workshops of Vulci and Tarquinia (1970, 55).

Achelous protomes from the Etruscan region often have a triangular shape with a distinctly pronounced nose, as illustrated by the objects shown on the left.

Above: Bronze attachment from Tarquinia in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

Below: Antefix in the collections of the Villa Giulia, Rome.



Heracles' battle with Achelous: example of a scene from Greek mythology found in Etruria

It is well known that many red-figure vessels with mythological depictions originate from the Etruscan region. These include the scene shown on the left on a stamnos in the British Museum from around 530/500 BC, which comes from the necropolis of Caere (Cerveteri).

The scene attests to the popularity of the legend of the battle between Heracles and Achelous in Etruria. Achelous is depicted here with a scaly and feathered snake body. In the wrestling match, Heracles breaks off one of Achelous' horns.

Pictorial representations of the battle between Achelous and Heracles mentioned by Sophocles, which was about the beautiful Deianeira, increased significantly at the end of the 6th century BC. At the same time, Etruscan representations of the same battle scene began to appear, in which Achelous is also grabbed by the horn by Heracles (Isler 1970, 22).

Florian Pancioni has compiled and commented on other similar scenes in ancient artworks (2019, 98ff. and 209ff.). He concludes (2019, 102 and 113):

'Achelous is very likely the most frequently depicted river god in antiquity, from the Archaic period to the 2nd and 3rd centuries BC.'

'Achelous, the river god par excellence, is very likely the most frequently depicted Greek river god in antiquity.'



Further pictorial evidence

Impressive depictions of Achelous on various shields from Tarquinia dating from around 500 BC, can be found in the Vatican Museums. One of these, with inlaid eyes, is shown on the left. Here, the long flowing beard symbolising a river is particularly clear.

The bronze bull with the head of Achelous shown at the bottom left was on sale in 2023 and unfortunately has no provenance.

Under Roman influence, depictions of Achelous once again became more realistic. This can be seen in the pendant on a gold chain from the 3rd century BC in the Museo Nazionale di Villa Giulia (bottom left) and the appliqué from the 1st century BC in the Museum of Saint-Germain-en-Laye (bottom right).



Visual evidence of Achelous in the Celtic region

large bronze cauldron of Etruscan or Greek origin was found in a 5th century BC chariot grave discovered near Troyes in 2014. Four ring handles depicting Achelous are attached to the cauldron. This is the best evidence of the occurrence existence of the god Achelous in the Celtic region. The vessel comes from Lavau (Aube), the Moutot archaeological site. The arm ring shown on p. 28, along with a second arm ring and a 580 -gram torc torque (picture below), all made of solid gold, come from the same grave.

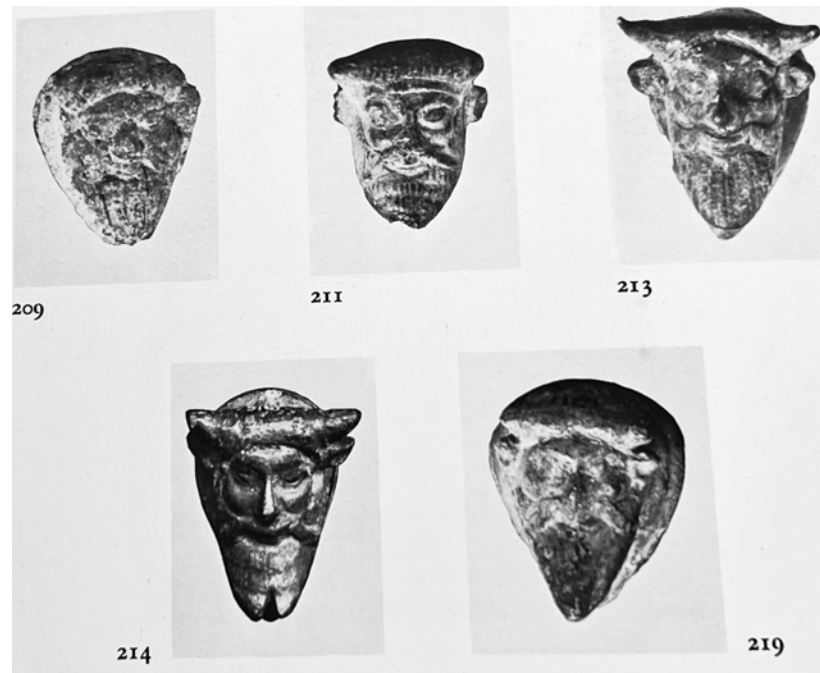
How did Achelous end up on a vessel used to mix wine and water? A good explanation for this can be found in Isler's work. In 1970, he wrote about Achelous and the myths of the cornucopia (1970, 115 with note 170/171):

,The reference to the agricultural world, to the fertility brought about by water, is clear. Achelous, the giver of these fruits, thus has his place alongside Dionysus, the giver of wine, and also alongside Demeter. Dionysus himself, or at least figures with Dionysian names, Melampus, Staphylos or Kerasos, invented the mixing of wine with water. Acheloian water was used for the first mixture.'

That is, the aforementioned Ἀχελῷον.

If I understand correctly, according to literary sources, mixing wine with water was also referred to as 'in the manner of Achelous,' as Aristophanes puts it (... ἥτειρεν γάρ τοι μ' οἶνος, οἷς πόμα μίξας Ἀχελῷω; Pancioni 2019, 27f.) Further analysis by experts, particularly in the field of ancient history, would also be warranted in this case.





Satyroi or rather Achelooi?

The two masks depicted at the top left on a bronze handle have, because of their pointed ears, previously been interpreted as a pair of satyrs due to their pointed ears. Comparison with the new find from a Celtic grave - see p. 22 - raises the question of whether Achelous might also be depicted here. This is suggested by the shape of the snout, the long beard, the volute-shaped horns, similar to those on the finger ring on p. 16, and the context of the find. These are the handles of a two-handed stamnos, i.e. a wine vessel, found in the Celtic burial complex at Weiskirchen Altrier (Echternach district, drawing Musée National d'Histoire et d'Art Luxembourg).

Similar fittings have been found quite frequently in Etruria and are well compiled by Isler in 1970 on his plate XVIII (excerpt in the middle). Unfortunately, most of them are without precise provenance; however, similar fittings also come from Capena and Tarquinia.

The 3.9 cm high mask shown below, the attachment piece of the handle of a jug, is of unknown origin (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Antikensammlung). The attachment has already been interpreted as a Celtic interpretation of a representation of Achelous (ed. Meinrad Maria Grewenig, Die Kelten - Druiden. Fürsten. Krieger. Exhibition catalogue. Völklingen 2010).

None of these objects are directly related to hoards such as the one found in Erstfeld, but rather fit into the theme of enjoying wine mixed with pure water. However, they show that Achelous, as the god of water, had a certain significance in early Celtic culture and, according to Moutot's find, had been known to the Celtic elite since the 5th century BC (p. 22).



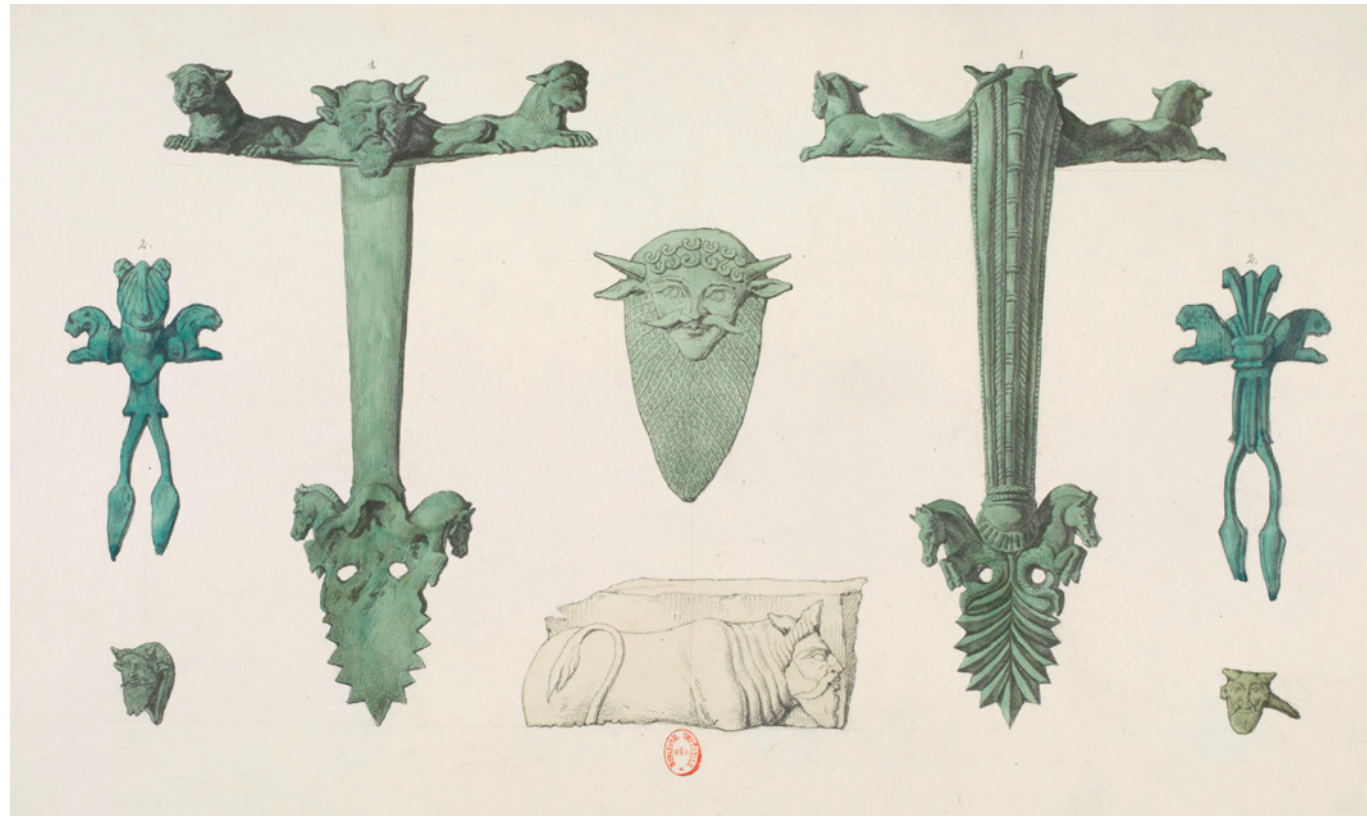
Echoes of Achelous motifs?

Most of the depictions of Achelous found in Etruscan and northern Alpine regions date from the 5th or 4th century BC. After that, there is again increased evidence from the Roman period (cf. p. 23). This raises the question of further evidence from the intervening period.

One example may be found: In the case of the torc from Frasnes-lez-Buissenal (probably from the 2nd century BC), the question arises as to whether its masks, which bear similarities to those on torc 4 from Erstfeld, should be interpreted as stylised representations of Achelous. The torc was discovered in Belgium in 1864 near a ravine and a spring (picture above). In addition to the location of the find, the bull-like nose and the two volutes above the head, similar to those on the finger ring on p. 16, could also indicate a reference to Achelous. However, this raises an old problem: Certain Celtic interpretations are so peculiar that they can no longer be traced back to a specific model with any certainty. This was illustrated with an example on p. 14.

Unfortunately, this article cannot go into further detail on questions relating to more recent objects with possible references to Achelous. This also applies to the related topic of sacred worship and the corresponding iconography of rivers in Roman times. For example, the Rhine, like other rivers in Gaul and Germania, was often visualised in Gallo-Roman interpretations as a bearded figure with two horns, called 'Rhenus bicornis'. This is shown on the well-known 2nd-century tomb in the Landesmuseum Bonn (picture below).

Rhenus was described by Martial (10, 7) as 'Nympharum pater amniumque', i.e. father of the nymphs.



Ancient finds depicting Achelous, including the handle of a jug or hydria from Vulci dating from the 5th century BC (Muret, Jean-Baptiste. *Monuments antiques dessinés par J. B. Muret*, tome III. pl.16. - Bibliothèque nationale de la France, Paris)

Arguments for interpreting the Erstfeld hoard in the context of the river and water god Achelous

Our starting point is the site where the Erstfeld gold treasure was found lies between the inhospitable mountains of the Gotthard massif and the valley floor of the Reuss, which is accessible from Lake Lucerne. Its location at the threshold of the Reuss, where the mountain stream becomes a river, is likely to have been the primary reason for the hoard being deposited at this spot.

This point of departure leads to a new interpretation of the masks on rings 4 and 7 as possible Celtic representations of the river god Achelous (Ἀχελῷος). Achelous was widely worshipped and depicted in Etruscan culture and religion, which had a significant influence on the early Celts, at the same time as the Erstfeld find. Sirens and nymphs, also known as Achelous' progeny (Ἀχελωίδες), were considered to be his daughters. In the funeral customs of the early Celts (Latène A), vessels and utensils imported from the south played an important role in connection with a kind of symposium. This included pure water mixed with wine, also called Acheloon (Ἀχελῷον). The image of Achelous was well known among the Celtic elite.

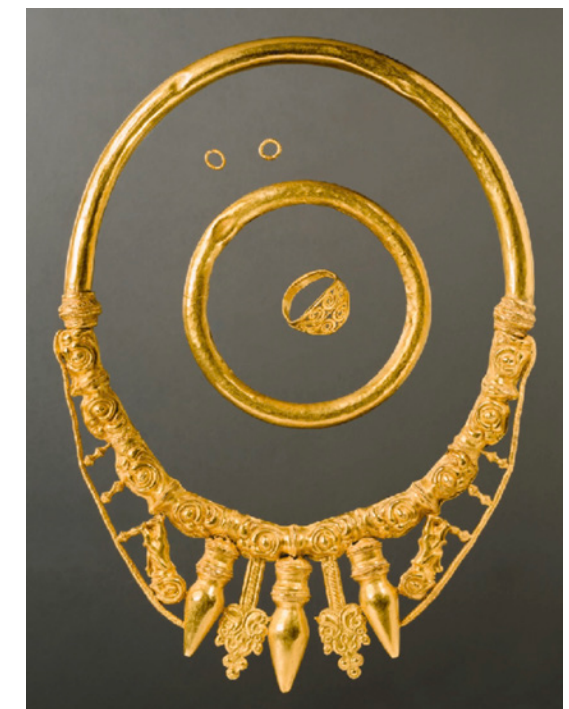
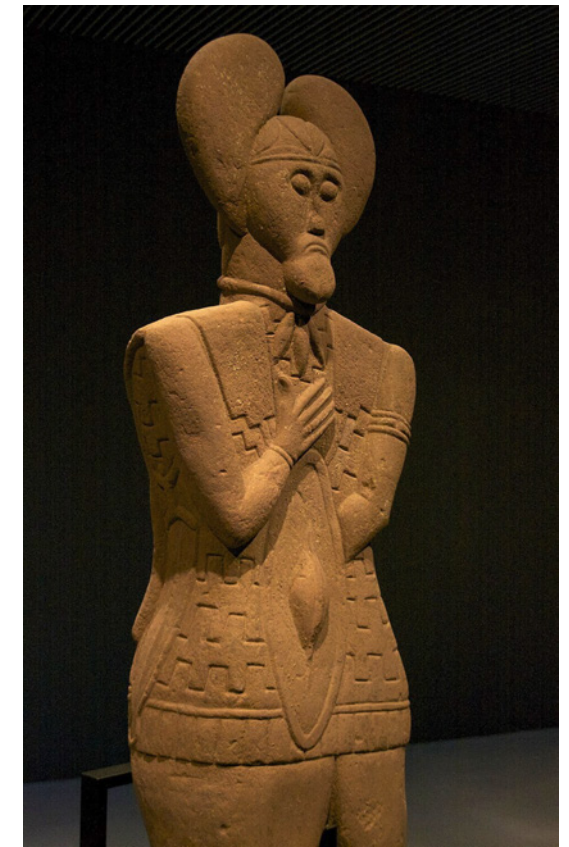
G. And the torcs 1, 2 and 3?

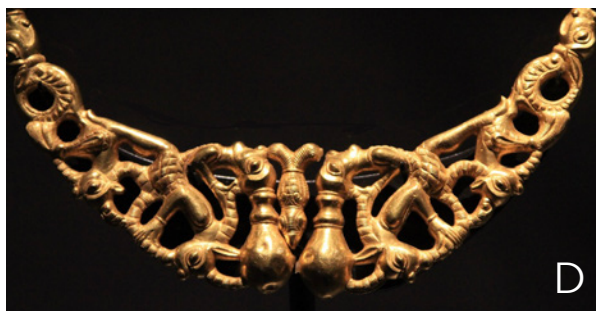
The four objects from Erstfeld discussed so far that relate to the theme of water, torc 4 and arm ring 7, as well as the pair of arm rings 5/6, may be understood as a 'set', especially since the figure on the right wears a combination of a torc and three arm rings. The three remaining objects, torcs 1, 2 and 3, show hardly any iconographic references to the four rings discussed. (Unless one were to bring certain attributes of the figures still to be discussed, such as long ears and beards, into play, which, however, seems too speculative.) Torcs 1, 2 and 3 do, however, have one obvious thing in common: friezes with a similar set of figures. Their iconography will be discussed below.

Since Guggisberg's thesis in 2000, not only has the aforementioned complex at Moutot been augmented with good comparative objects to the Erstfeld find (p. 22), but the evaluation of the 'Fürstengrab 1' (Prince's Tomb 1) at Glauberg in Hesse has also progressed. A torc similar to the Erstfeld rings 1 to 3 (picture below) and a life-size statue bearing the insignia of the person buried there (picture above) were found there. It probably once crowned the burial mound around 450/400 BC. The statue proves once again that the friezes on the torcs can also be read in reverse, as usually depicted today. It is well known that double readability is a feature of Celtic art. The statue, crafted in a simple style, shows the deceased in full warrior's armour with a breastplate, shield and sword, as well as a 'leaf crown'. In addition, there is the aforementioned ring on the right arm, a pair of arm rings on the right upper arm and a torc around the neck. The gold torc found in the grave, shown at the bottom right, was apparently the model for the one around the statue's neck. (The torcs 1 and 2 from Erstfeld just like the one from Glauberg can be opened, turned around and closed by swivelling the smooth half using a ball joint and plug closure.)

The original torc and its image on the Glauberg statue form the starting point for a new possible interpretation of the frieze of three torcs from Erstfeld (p. 27f.), which differs from that of the four rings 4 to 7. This divides the seven-piece find from Erstfeld into two groups with different contextual references. Even if the Erstfeld hoard is a workshop ensemble, this does not mean that the rings were commissioned solely for the purpose of consecration to a single deity. Furthermore, the nymph sanctuaries at the same location, which were used for comparison, were used to make sacrifices to various divine beings (p. 13).

As aforementioned, the discovery process in Erstfeld in 1962 was accompanied by extreme coincidences. It cannot therefore be ruled out that other, smaller objects were destroyed unrecognised in the immediate vicinity.





The pistils on the rings as relevant symbols

The golden torc from Glauberg (A) features club-shaped extensions in the centre of the decorated half, similar to the Erstfeld rings 1 to 3. As Guggisberg noted, this motif is also well known in spherical, teardrop or pointed variants of other early La Tène period gold rings. One could also refer to them as pistils, in reference to the botanical forms of flower or fruit clusters called spadix. Gold rings sometimes feature up to five of these (Besseringen), with three on the Glauberg ring (A) three and two on the Reinheim arm ring (C: three below the mask, two above, and in between a small bird similar to the one on neck rings 1 and 2 from Erstfeld!) and two on the Erstfeld torcs 1 to 3 (D), as well as on the Moutot ring (p. 22).

The image of the original torc on the Glauberg statue (B) reflects a contemporary Celtic view of this object as a special insignia: it is - similar to the Reinheim arm ring - not so much that the neck ring itself that is emphasised, rather the three oversized pistils depicted on the statue! They were obviously imbued with a specific message. The warrior's outstretched right arm also seems to point to them. Applied to the Erstfeld rings 1 to 3, this means that the two pistils in the centre are to be understood, as they are positioned within the rings, as a 'relevant symbol', as O.-H. Frey put it, for the Glauberg ring (2019, 26). Do the rings, with their depictions, in a sense glorify the ascent of the deceased or venerated deities to a higher status, symbolized by the pistils? The torc from Glauberg and the Erstfeld rings 1 to 3 share a common compositional design: - The side friezes create a tension arc towards the central pistils with the associated figures. In the case of the Glauberg ring with bars, struts and figurative inserts, and in the case of the Erstfeld torcs 1 to 3 with artistically better executed, organically attached figurative interlacing (see p. 28). They are thus reminiscent of a sculptural narrative form from antiquity, the friezes in the pediments of Greek temples. From the 6th century BC onwards, battles between gods were depicted in these tympanums. In principle, this also includes the gable decoration of the Parthenon from the 5th century BC (below is a possible reconstruction of the west gable with Athena, the olive tree and Poseidon in the centre).



Regarding the figural friezes on torcs 1 to 3

Guggisberg has examined the technical process of creating the figural friezes in more detail. According to his findings, the figures were first carved separately and then assembled into a single piece. For torc 3, he created the exploded view reproduced below right to illustrate the process (2000, Fig. 60). It is natural to interpret the three figures according to their development (bottom right image with added A, B, and C):

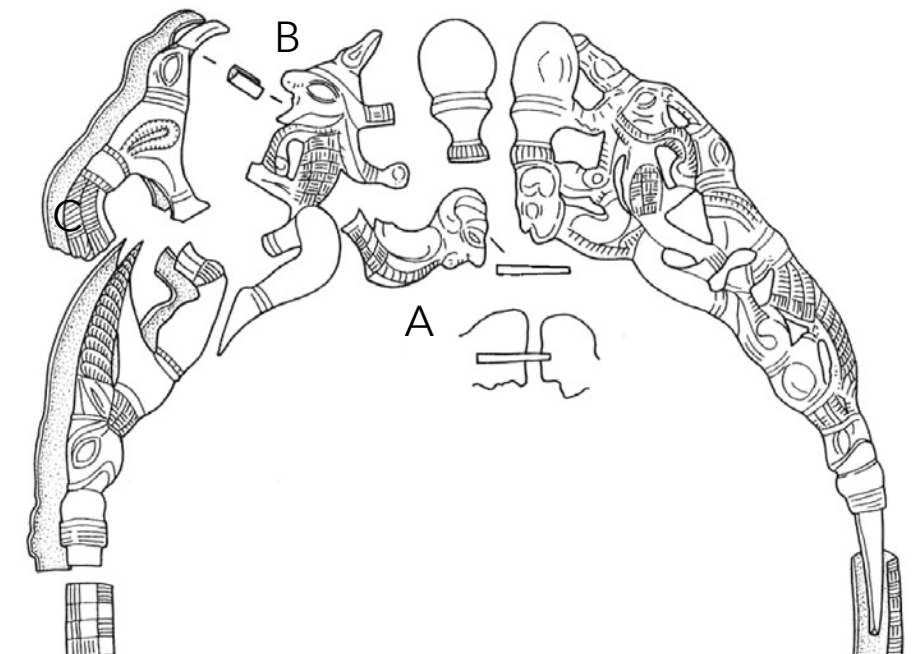
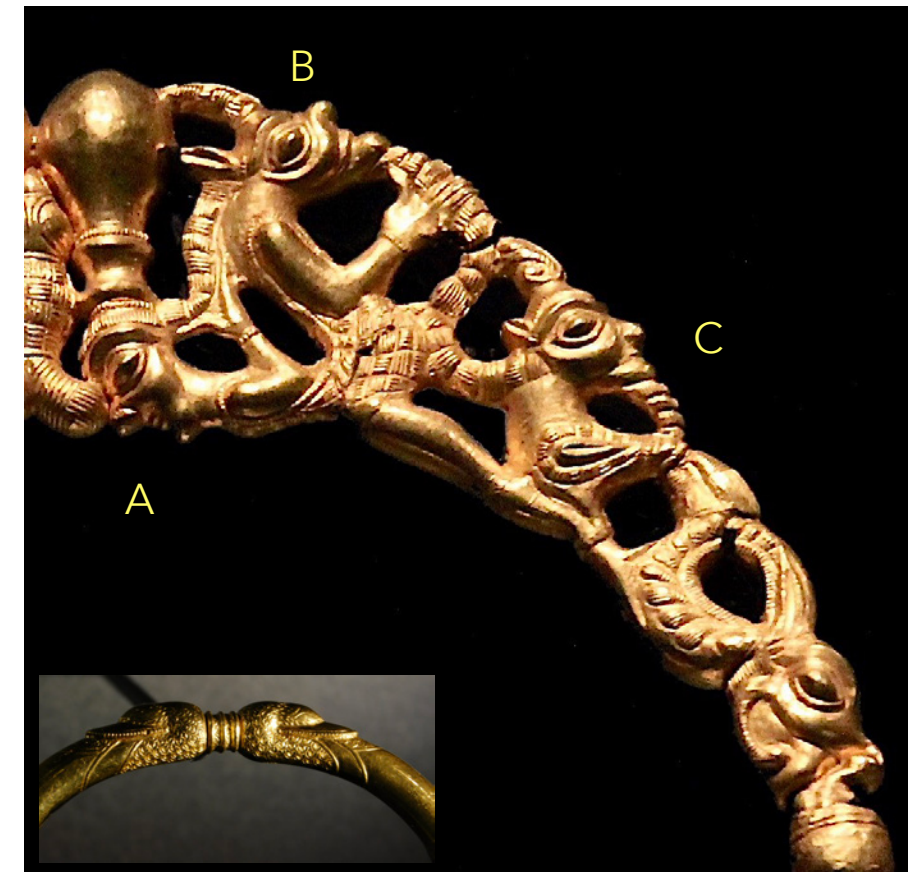
A, the central figure with a pistil on top and looking towards the wearer;

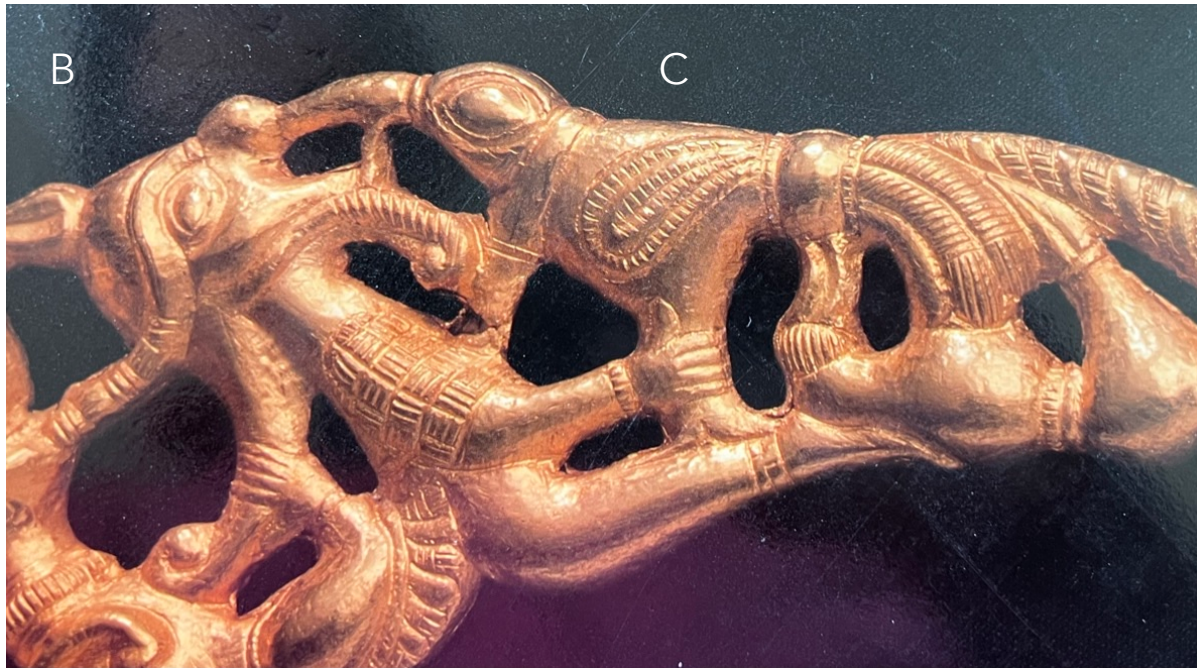
B, its conjoined twin with legs, helmet, and looking away from the wearer; and

C, the large bird.

The twin pair A/B appears in a similar form on both torc pair 1/2 (top image) and ring 3 (bottom image). The large bird C is depicted somewhat differently: on torc 3 in an aggressive pose with a bird's head, and on torc pair 1/2 with anthropomorphic features and in a defensive position (foot on the neck).

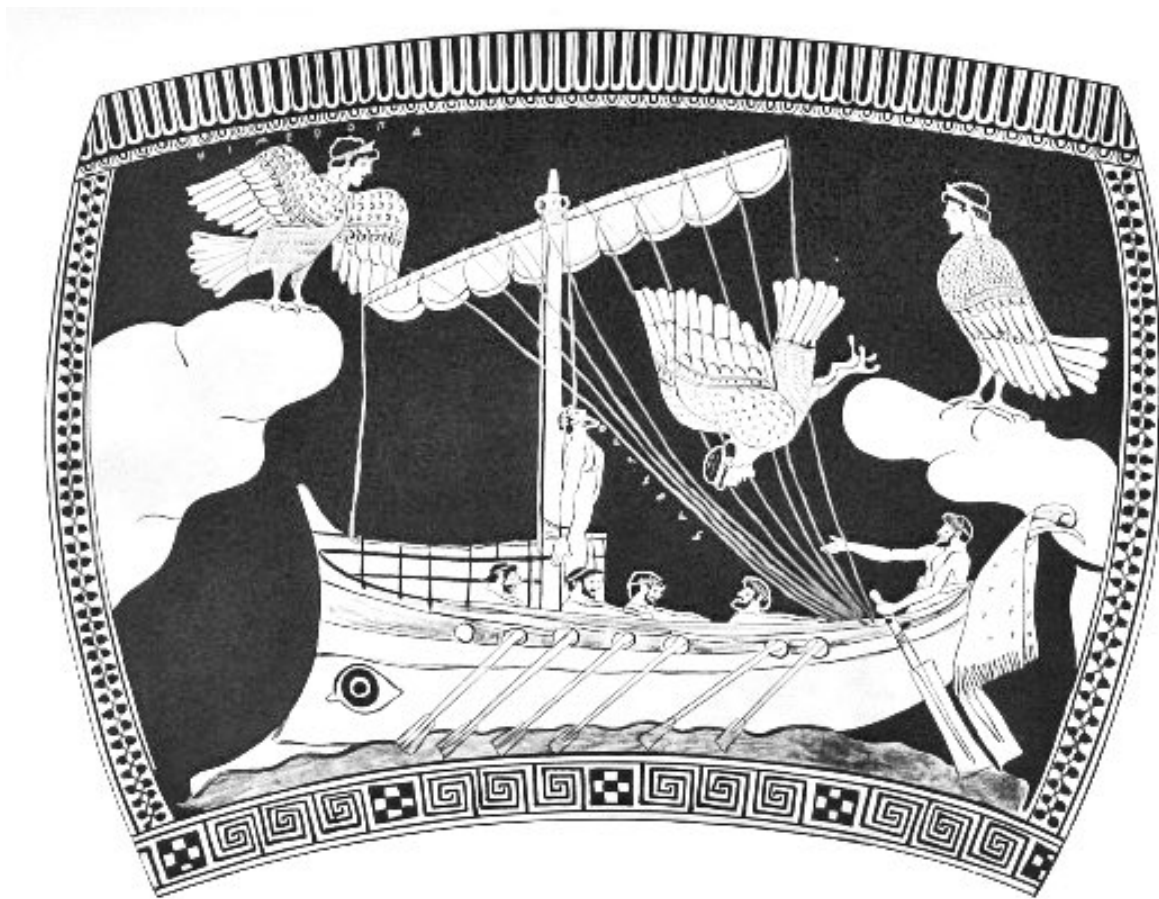
However difficult it may be to interpret the three interconnected figures between the central axis and the serpent-dragon, they nevertheless convey, as a whole, the impression of a dynamic story full of transformations and battles. In this way, they recall the conflicts between heroes and deities in their mutable forms which occur in Greek mythology and art and are preserved in detail. According to pictorial evidence found in northern and central Italy, such legends were received in the Etruscan world (p. 20). This also included iconographic programs from the epics of Odysseus, Heracles, and Achelous with their companions.





Do the sirens leave a trail?

While it is difficult to attribute the figures on Erstfeld's torcs 1, 2, and 3 to a specific action, the scene on torc 3 with the large bird C (drawing on p. 28 below and image above) seems quite clear: It aggressively places its long beak on the nose of the helmeted warrior B, who is holding it back with his arms. On torc 3, however, it is fended off. What could the story behind this be? A definitive interpretation is not possible here either, for the reasons mentioned. Nevertheless, the scene could leave a trail, namely to the sirens of ancient Mediterranean mythology. Guggisberg already referred to the bird depictions, which also appear in a similar fashion on torcs 1 and 2, as sirens or harpies (2000, 24f. and 176ff.).



Sirens (Σειρῆνας) are known as death demons, primarily from an episode in the *Odyssey*, and according to pictorial evidence, they were also known in Etruscan times. They lived on an island and waited for their human victims in a meadow filled with piles of bones and dried skins. When a ship passed by, they lured the sailors with their song onto cliffs and thus to their deaths. The cunning hero Odysseus famously averted the danger by binding himself to the mast of his ship and was able to continue his journey.

According to other sources, sirens are highly complex beings whose myths vary considerably across time and space. What all the accounts have in common is that they moved between this world and the afterlife.

Above: Detail from torc 3 of Erstfeld.

Below: Sirens and Odysseus' ship. Redrawing of a depiction of a red-figure stamnos, circa 480/470 BC. The vessel was found in Vulci. (British Museum)

Further progress through an interdisciplinary approach?

Some time ago the comparison of archaeological finds of precious metal torcs with corresponding passages in literary sources revealed the special significance of such objects for heroes and gods of antiquity (e.g., Guggisberg 2000, 263ff. and Furger 1982, 33ff. in connection with the torcs of Saint-Louis). Regarding the iconography of the Erstfeld torcs 1, 2, and 3, and in connection with the comparisons made on the preceding pages, two additional questions arise:

1. Could the ring with two or more pistils (spadices) have had a special significance as a status symbol in the Early La Tène period? In terms of symbolic content, perhaps comparable to the crowns of the nobility in the Middle Ages with their points?
2. Can the network of figures in Erstfeld torcs 1, 2, and 3 be explained by episodes in literary heroic epics that culminate in a kind of ennoblement or divine elevation?

Figure B is clearly wearing a helmet (p. 28). Along with Figure A, it wears a short doublet with shoulder straps. This is reminiscent of the leather or textile armor of the statue from Glauberg (p. 26). Therefore, this figure is also a warrior. Did this warrior face dangers, represented by the siren-like birds C? Did he overcome these dangers and thus rise to the status of a hero, symbolized by the pistil-like headdress of Figure A?

The Erstfeld friezes as a reflection of a heroic epic?

The final word on such a hypothesis has not yet been spoken. So, what next? It would be worthwhile for experts to systematically re-examine relevant literary sources from classical antiquity with regard to the Erstfeld friezes.

This raises the question of whether one should go further and include Irish legends. This undoubtedly has a speculative aspect, especially since over a thousand years separate the period under discussion from the written record of Old Irish legends, which only appeared in the Early and High Middle Ages.

From the perspective of an archaeologist and cultural historian who also works in other disciplines, it would nevertheless be worth exploring. For example, the analysis of functional features of Celtic chariots using this approach has yielded results that have gained recognition in the research community (Furger 1993 and Müller 1995).

There are indeed connections, albeit in a preliminary form, between ancient heroic sagas such as the Odyssey and Irish legends. These connections point to the continued influence of ancient mythological content within Celtic culture. In the Immram Bran, King Bran is lured to the land of the elves by a woman, sails on in search of an otherworld, and endures numerous trials and adventures similar to those of Odysseus. Irish mythology, particularly the Ulster and Finn cycles, features heroic tales of conflicts and confrontations with supernatural creatures, embedded within the Celtic worldview with its own deities and heroes like Cú Chulainn.

Some of his deeds bear similarities to the adventures of Heracles. In the Táin Bó Cúailnge the central text of the Ulster cycle, armed heroes wear torcs as symbols of bravery and nobility. These torcs are considered outward signs of their high status and their proximity to gods and divine beings.

Conclusion: The iconography of the Erstfeld rings will continue to occupy scholars.

Bibliography

Frey 2019

Otto-Herman Frey, Der Goldschmuck aus Grab 1 vom Glauberg – Deutung und Bewertung der Fundstücke. In: A. G. Posluschny, C. Dobiat, U. Recker, V. Rupp (Hg.), Glauberg. Betrachtungen zur frühkeltischen Lebens- und Vorstellungswelt. Festgabe zum 90. Geburtstag von Prof. Dr. Otto-Herman Frey, Glauburg 2019, S. 23-33

Furger 1982

Andres Furger, Der "Goldfund von Saint-Louis" und ähnliche keltische Schatzfunde. In: Zeitschrift für Schweizerische Archäologie und Kunstgeschichte 39, 1982, 1ff.

Furger 1991

Andres Furger, Das alte und das neue Bild helvetischer Vergangenheit. In: Andres Furger und Felix Müller (Hg.), Gold der Helvetier, Keltische Kostbarkeiten aus der Schweiz. Katalog zur Ausstellung des Schweizerischen Landesmuseums (1991, 13ff.)

Furger 1993

Andres Furger, Nachbau eines essedum im Schweizerischen Landesmuseum. In: Zeitschrift für Schweizerische Archäologie und Kunstgeschichte, Band 50, 1993, 213 - 221).

Furger 2014

Andres Furger, Der keltische Goldschatz von Erstfeld – Entdeckungsgeschichte und Fundort
E-Paper A10 unter furger.eu

Guggisberg 2000

Martin A. Guggisberg, Der Goldschatz von Erstfeld. Ein keltischer Bilderzyklus zwischen Mitteleuropa und der Mittelmeerwelt (2000)

Guggisberg 2002

Martin A. Guggisberg, Keltisches Gold für die Götter der Alpen? In: L. Zemmer-Plank (Hg.), Kult der Vorzeit in den Alpen (2002) 547ff.

Guggisberg 2010

Martin A. Guggisberg, The Mistress of Animals, the Master of Animals: Two Complementary or Oppositional Religious Concepts in Early Celtic Art? In: The Master of Animals in Old World Iconography (Hg. D.B. Counts und B. Arnold 2010)

Hofstetter 1990

Eva Hofstetter, Sirenen im archaischen und klassischen Griechenland (1990)

Isler 1970

Hans Peter Isler, Achelous - Eine Monographie (1970)

Müller 1990

Felix Müller, Zur Datierung des Goldschatzes von Erstfeld UR. In: Jahrbuch der Schweizerischen Gesellschaft für Ur- und Frühgeschichte 73/1990

Müller 1995

Keltische Wagen mit elastischer Aufhängung: Eine Reise von Castel di Decima nach Clonmacnoise. In: Trans Europam, Festschr. M. Primas (1995) 265-275.

Pancioni 2019

Florian Pancioni, Les dieux-fleuves dans le monde grec (Grèce, Grande-Grèce, Sicile, Asie mineure) : mythes, cultes et représentations (2019)

Wyss 1975

René Wyss, Der Schatzfund von Erstfeld - Frühkeltischer Goldschmuck aus den Zentralalpen (1972)

Zanier 2025

Werner Zanier (Hg.), Das römische Militärlager auf dem Septimerpass in Graubünden (Schweiz) (2025)

Summary

This paper culminates in three conclusions:

1. The Erstfeld hoard is to be understood in connection with the Reuss River (not in connection with the Gotthard route).
2. The iconography of the Erstfeld torc 4 could represent the river god Achelous.
3. The interweaving figures on Erstfeld torcs 1, 2 and 3 culminate in the central pistils as relevant symbols. As with similar rings, they lead to a better understanding of the stories behind them.

1. Until now, the early Celtic gold hoard from Erstfeld, dating from the 4th century BC, has been interpreted as a votive offering associated with the crossing of the Gotthard Pass. As this assumption is no longer tenable, a different approach is proposed: The offering took place at this location because the Reuss mountain stream emerges from the rugged mountains through the narrows of the Erstfeld valley and from there meanders broadly into the flat valley floor accessible from Lake Lucerne. The Reuss is the waterway that flows through a significant portion of the Swiss Plateau, fertilizing the land.

2. Within the framework of this new interpretation, the follow-up questions arises regarding connections to the themes of river and fertility. These themes were embodied by the river and water god Achelous (Ἀχελῷος), widely venerated, particularly during the 5th and 4th centuries BC, in the Mediterranean-Greek and Etruscan cultural spheres. Recently, examples of Achelous depictions have even emerged from the early Celtic region. Achelous' attributes were a human face with a long beard as a symbol of water, small ears and horns, and a bull's body that could transform into a snake. Against this backdrop, the bull-like masks visible on the Erstfeld torc 4 are proposed as masks of Achelous (top image).

3. Finally, the three Erstfeld torcs with pictorial friezes (lower image) are compared with similar gold rings. The result is that figurative friezes culminate in the central pistils, the relevant symbols. The following question, almost implying a hypothesis, may be thus posed: Do the intertwined figures reflect stages of an epic leading to heroic status?





Addendum: The discovery site according to an aerial photograph from 1931

View from an altitude of 500 meters overlooking Erstfeld, the Reuss River, and Lake Uri. The red discovery site lies just above a light-colored area, apparently the remains of a mudslide from the water-bearing stream next to which the gold hoard was sacrificed.