

Typology of Bronze Age wooden containers: new dating evidence from Islay

Caroline Earwood*

ABSTRACT

This short paper offers an analysis of the typology of Bronze Age wooden containers in the light of new radiocarbon dating of objects from Islay, including the earliest known date for a two-piece grooved tub. The objects from Islay and the circumstances of their discovery are described.

INTRODUCTION

In Europe during the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age the range of wooden container types was rather restricted. The most common forms were troughs, dishes and bowls each carved from a single block of wood. These containers were probably used for chopping, mixing and serving food; few appear suitable for food storage. Typically bowls are small, often round-based; dishes and troughs are shallow, ranging from rectangular to elliptical. The lack of clear typological distinction between many of these wooden containers creates difficulties of dating when they are found in unstratified contexts. On the European mainland, many such containers have been found in settlements; in contrast, in Britain and Ireland the majority of wooden objects are from bogs, rivers and lakes. Few such finds have been associated with any dateable material and, therefore, radiocarbon analysis is essential.

From about the mid second millennium BC the range of wooden container types is greater, so that dating on typological grounds becomes a possibility. The most notable change is the introduction of the two-piece container. These vessels, usually tubs or kegs, have a cylindrical body carved from a length of tree trunk or branch. They are fitted with a separate base and sometimes have a wooden lid or cloth covering. Three different methods were used to secure the base in position: pinning, sewing or insertion in a groove cut around the inner circumference of the body. The relatively small number of such containers makes it difficult to identify a chronological development, but the evidence available suggests that pinned and sewn containers generally pre-date those with grooves. The earliest recorded example of a grooved container is the Altanagh tub from County Tyrone, dated to 2550 ± 85 BP (UB-2434), calibrated to 823–408 BC (Williams 1983; Earwood 1993, 57). The development of this new technique did not, however, completely supersede the earlier methods, as one pinned keg and one sewn keg are recorded from the late Iron Age in Scotland (Earwood 1991).

* The Chestnuts, Bank Gardens, High Street, Bishop's Castle, Shropshire SY9 5BQ

FINDS FROM ISLAY

During the 1960s, peat cutting on Islay led to the discovery of a number of finds including wooden containers, pottery vessels, flints and a skeleton. Such finds as have been preserved are now part of the collection of the Museum of Islay Life. Owing to the inadequacies of the relevant records, it is not possible to say exactly how many finds were made, at what time, or by whom. However, it has been possible to establish the circumstances surrounding the discovery of some of the finds.

VESSELS FROM SRATH MOR

In 1963 two wooden containers — a box and a trough — were discovered in close proximity at the same level in the peat at Srath Mor on the northern part of Islay just west of Loch Gruinart (NGR: NR 265 684). The box (IMT 77.64) was damaged when found, but the trough (IMT 77.65) was complete. At the same time, in the same peat bank, a pottery vessel (IMT 77.74) was found. This is now lost, but has been described as a plain bucket-shaped urn, burnt on the outside and partly on the inside (RCAHMS 1984, 57), and allegedly found in association with a skeleton (*ibid*, 16). However, examination of the Museum of Islay Life 'acquisition book' reveals that this particular pot was not found with a skeleton. In fact, it has probably been confused in the records with a similar vessel which was found with a skeleton in 1964 (IMT 77.67; NGR: NR 271 681); the skeleton had been wrapped in a blanket or cloak of leather or fur. Also from the vicinity were found the remains of a probable dugout canoe or coffin; this was reburied. A stone tool (IMT 77.75; now lost) was found inside the dugout. Other finds from the peat cutting include a partly made wooden object which is probably a roughout for a handled bowl or dish (IMT 78.44; exact findspot unknown), and a barbed flint arrowhead (IMT 77.51; NGR: NR 272 682).

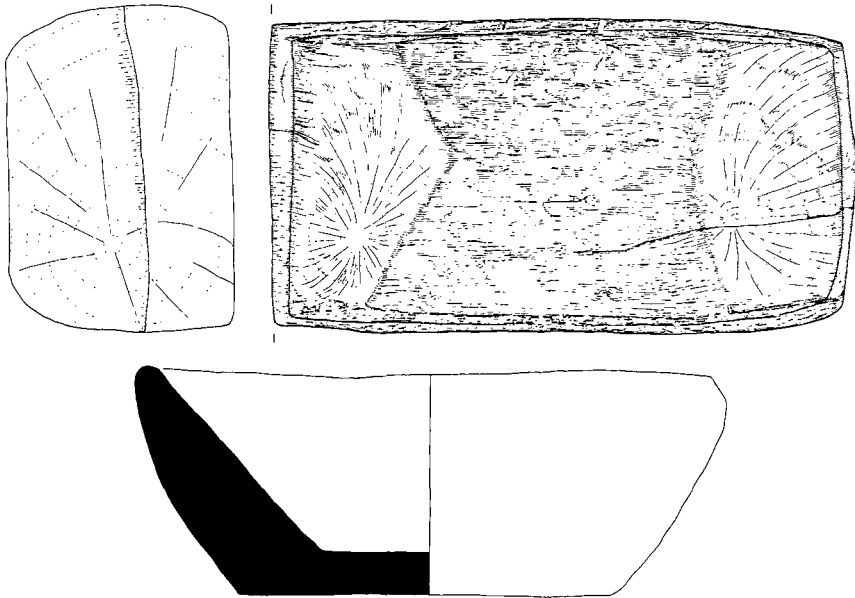
Trough (IMT 77.65) (illus 1)

The trough is the better preserved of the two wooden containers. It is 315 mm in length with a width, near the middle; of 166 mm. The height varies between 120 mm and 125 mm. It is rectangular in shape but with rounded corners. The ends slope inwards towards the base, which is 200 mm in length by 110–120 mm in width. The trough was carved from a whole tree trunk or branch and the sides follow the natural curvature of the tree so that they are not quite vertical. Similarly, although the base is flat on the inside, its outer surface is slightly curved. All the surfaces have been carefully smoothed so that there are no surviving toolmarks. Although the trough is simple in design, no similar examples have been recorded.

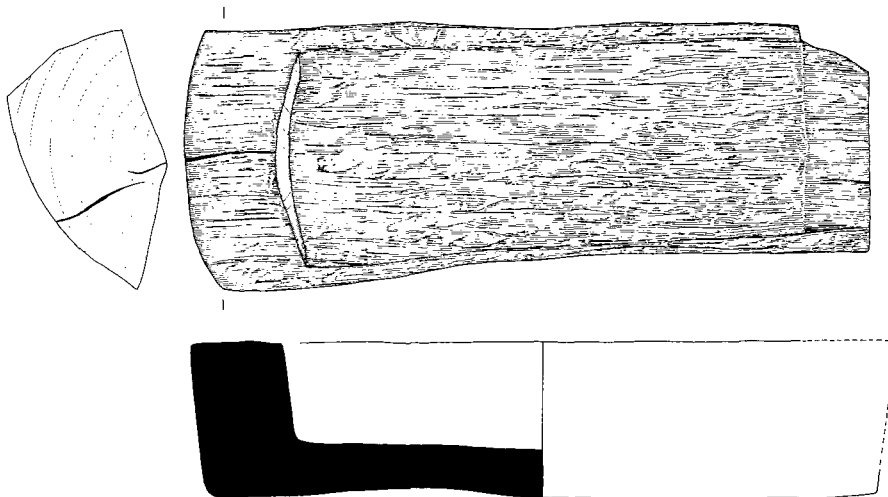
Box (IMT 77.64) (illus 2)

The box is about 370 mm in length with a width of 145 mm. One end is broken although the entire length of the base survives. The vessel was carved from a tree trunk or branch which had been split in half. The ends are much thicker than the rest of the body and the surviving end has the remains of toolmarks indicating that it was hollowed out at this point with a series of downward strokes. The exterior follows the curvature of the tree and has been roughly shaped, probably with an axe. A lid, apparently carved in similar fashion, was found with the base suggesting that this crude container functioned as a box rather than a trough. Unfortunately, the lid (not *illus*) is now in a fragmentary condition.

This can be compared with crudely made boxes of later Bronze Age date from Killymoon, County Tyrone, and Kilmoyly, County Kerry, the former originally containing a gold bracelet



ILLUS 1 Trough from Srath Mor (scale 1:4) (*Museum of Islay Life: IMT 77.65*)



ILLUS 2 Box from Srath Mor (scale 1:4) (*Museum of Islay Life: IMT 77.64*)

and dress fastener (Armstrong 1933, 33; Raftery 1970, 169–70; O’Riordáin 1946, 161; Raftery 1940, 56–7; Earwood 1993, 41–2), and also a Neolithic box from the Sweet Track, Somerset, which may once have served as a container for a stone axe (Coles & Coles 1986, 62; Earwood 1993, 41–2). A radiocarbon date of 3310 ± 40 BP (OxA-6900), calibrated to 1510–1260 BC (Stuiver & Kra 1986) was obtained for the Srath Mor box and demonstrates that any apparent typological similarity between such crude and simple containers is merely the result of their having the same broad function.



ILLUS 3 The tub and pottery vessel from Allt Garadh Ealabais with the trough from Srath Mor (© Frank Newall)

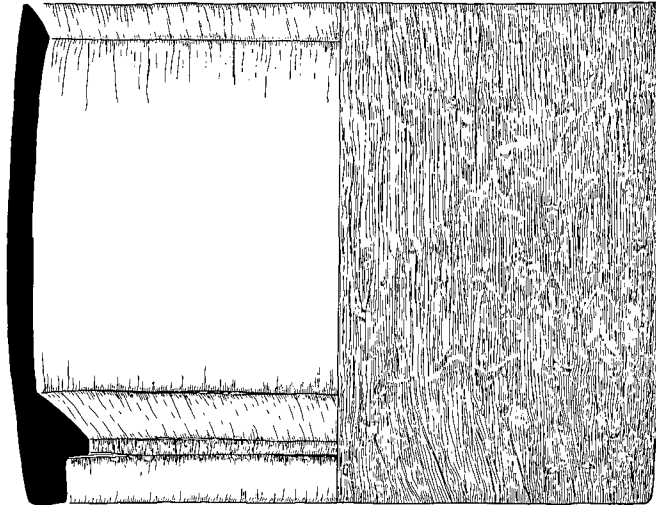
VESSELS FROM ALLT GARADH EALABAIS

Another group of artefacts was also found in Islay in 1963, this time in a peat cutting at Allt Garadh Ealabais, about 2 km north of Srath Mor (NGR: NR 2775 7065). Although there are variant records of the circumstances of the Allt Garadh Ealabais find, the finder reported the discovery of two wooden vessels — a platter and a tub — and one pottery vessel (DES 1963, 18–19, nos 1, 2 & 8). The pottery vessel was described as a bucket-shaped pot of gritty, grey-black ware with a thick yellow slip and a flat inbevelled rim (rim diameter 8.5 inches/209 mm; basal diameter 5.75 inches/146 mm; height 11.35 inches/275 mm) (illus 3). Although this entry in *Discovery and Excavation in Scotland* describes several other items — including four troughs and a digging stick — these were probably not found at Allt Garadh Ealabais.

Investigations in 1993 confirmed the presence of old peat cuttings at Allt Garadh Ealabais. A substantial depth of uncut peat (1.65 m) covers a layer of *in situ* tree roots and brushwood (*Betula sp* and *Salix sp*), resting upon a further 0.55 m of peat, which in turn overlies white sand. These former woodland remnants are most probably the origin of the ‘horizontally arranged birch wood’ previously reported in 1963 (DES 1963, 18–19). There is no evidence of any structure or settlement connected with the find-spot and the burial of the three containers in peat appears to have been a deliberate event.

Wooden tub (IMT 77.264) (illus 4)

The tub from Allt Garadh Ealabais has near vertical sides which are fairly uniform in thickness except at the top and bottom where they are markedly thicker. It is 200 mm in height with a rim diameter of 260 mm. The exterior surfaces are covered in numerous shallow toolmarks about 15 mm in width. Inside the tub, the lower part has been cut to form a wide flange; underneath this the wooden base would have been fitted. The base was still present when the tub was found, but it is now lost and no record was made of its shape. No dowel holes are apparent, although it may be



ILLUS 4 The tub from Allt Garadh Ealabais (scale 1:3) (*Museum of Islay Life: IMT 77.264*)

possible that small holes could have been obscured by conservation of the vessel. The body of the tub would have been carved, with a small axe or gouge, from a short length of tree trunk.

The tub has recently been radiocarbon dated to 2990 ± 45 BP (OxA-6901), calibrated to 1400–1090 BC (Stuiver & Kra 1986). It is closely similar to two containers from Lough Eskragh, County Tyrone, one of which is dated to 2690 ± 80 BP (UB-1472), calibrated to 1062–761 BC (Collins & Sealy 1960; Williams 1978). The better preserved of these is slightly taller than the Allt Garadh Ealabais tub, being 272 mm high with a diameter of 203–240 mm. The base, which is dish-shaped, fits below the flange and is pinned in place with wooden dowels. It is likely that the Allt Garadh Ealabais tub had a similar base.

This tub from Allt Garadh Ealabais is now one of the earliest known examples of a two-piece container in Britain or Ireland; only the sewn tubs from Wilsford are of comparable date, with a calibrated range of 1515–1400 BC (Ashbee *et al* 1989, 66, 68–71). At present, insufficient examples of either type are known to make it possible to establish which method was the earlier. Sewn bark containers are recorded from the Neolithic and Bronze Age periods (Earwood 1993, 42–5) and it may be that this technique was copied or transferred to carved two-piece containers. No examples of pinned containers, whether of splitwood or carved, are known before the second millennium BC.

Platter (not illus)

Recent information from the finder confirms that the second wooden vessel was a platter or shallow dish. Evidently this was in a fragmentary state; it was c 1 inch deep (25 mm) and was incised with parallel lines around the circumference. The whereabouts of this vessel are now unknown.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Research for this article was grant-aided by the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland and Glasgow Archaeological Society. In addition I should like to thank the following bodies for their help and

co-operation: the Islay Estate Company, the Museum of Islay Life, Glasgow Museums, and the National Museum of Scotland, in particular Alison Sheridan for her support and encouragement. The wooden containers from Islay form part of the collection of the Museum of Islay Life, Port Charlotte, Islay.

REFERENCES

- Armstrong, E C R 1933 *Guide to the Collection of Irish Antiquities: catalogue of Irish gold ornaments in the collection of the Royal Irish Academy*. Dublin.
- Ashbee, P, Bell, M A & Proudfoot, E V 1989 *The Wilsford Shaft 1960–1962*. London.
- Coles, B & Coles, J 1986 *Sweet Track to Glastonbury*. London.
- Collins, A E P & Sealy, W A 1960 'Structures and small finds discovered at Lough Eskragh, Co Tyrone', *Ulster J Archaeol*, 23 (1960), 25–37.
- DES 1963 Council for British Archaeology. *Discovery & Excav Scot 1963*, 18–19.
- Earwood, C 1991 'Two early historic bog butter containers', *Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, 121 (1991), 231–40.
- Earwood, C 1993 *Domestic Wooden Artefacts in Britain and Ireland from Neolithic to Viking Times*. Exeter.
- O'Riordáin, S P 1946 'Prehistory in Ireland 1937–46', *Proc Prehist Soc*, 12 (1946), 142–71.
- Raftery J 1940 'Hoard of gold objects from Co. Kerry', *J Cork Hist Archaeol Soc*, 45 (1940), 56–7.
- Raftery, J 1970 'Two gold hoards from Co. Tyrone', *J Roy Soc Antiq Ir*, 100 (1970), 169–74.
- RCAHMS 1984 Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland *Argyll 5: Islay, Jura, Colonsay and Oronsay*. Edinburgh.
- Stuiver, M & Kra, R S (eds) 1986 'Calibration Issue, Proceedings of the 12th International 14C conference', *Radiocarbon*, 28 (2B) (1986), 805–1030.
- Williams, B B 1978 'Excavations at Lough Eskragh, Co. Tyrone', *Ulster J Archaeol*, 41 (1978), 37–48.
- Williams, B B 1983 'A wooden bucket found near Carrickmore, Co. Tyrone', *Ulster J Archaeol*, 46 (1983), 150–1.