

## Logboats in history: West Highland evidence

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### ABSTRACT

*This short study re-examines a material culture topic hitherto investigated mainly through archaeology. It is a regional study drawing on lexical and traditional information and adding a dimension to archaeological explanations of the phenomenon of logboats. Modern scholarship suggests that ancient techniques and an ancient boat-type made out of the hollowed trunks of large trees are, according to available evidence and scientific methods of analysis, more modern than ancient. Language and tradition may demonstrably have potential to corroborate this. The significance of terminology and its regional variations is used to exemplify the importance of the concept of Wörter und Sachen or 'words and things' in material culture, a concept that has inspired the collection of dialect vocabularies establishing distribution patterns and linguistic atlases in Europe and especially the Scandinavian countries. Standard dictionaries may often be poor recorders of material culture and this proposition is explored through the subject of logboats.*

### INTRODUCTION

The many examples of logboats discovered on the European mainland and in Britain and Ireland indicate their widespread use over time. By its nature and simplicity, this is a type of artefact which would seem to be prehistoric or associated in the European mind with so-called 'primitive cultures'. As such, it is readily traceable in areas of the world outside Europe such as India, the Far East, the Amazon Basin and the Pacific rim. Detailed research suggests more or less continuous use of such craft, at least on inland waters and river estuaries, from the Mesolithic to modern times and this fact of survival provides a link, though tenuous, with boat-building traditions also of prehistoric Europe. But in spite of being a simple dugout canoe, it was not quintessentially the earliest type of boat and in most areas — at least of Europe — there is sufficient evidence for other early boat types, such as skin boats and coracles, which formerly had a wide and sea-going distribution on the Atlantic seaboard of Europe, and bark boats, which were reputed to have remained in continuous use in Norway into the 19th century. The survival of the coracle or *curach* in Scotland, used for fishing, ferrying and for timber-floating in the Highlands, has been investigated in detail (Fenton 1972, 61–81).

This short study draws together a selection of sub-recent evidence — material, lexical and circumstantial — to enlarge our knowledge of the use of logboats. It is essentially a regional study from the conviction that the particular will add usefully to our general knowledge and that the West Highlands have here preserved archaic features that have been eclipsed elsewhere. Distinctive linguistic and cultural features delimit the area for example as the Central Western

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dialect area of Scottish Gaelic and, as such, *Sprachgebiet* (language area) or *Kulturgebiet* (culture area) (Dilworth 1996, 42). A complicated coastline and large tracts of freshwater lochs (such as Loch Shiel for which discrete and significant evidence survives to be examined below) may not have attracted the due attention of scholars because there have been less reported logboat finds in an area which lies on the northern limits of natural oakwood distribution where such craft could more readily be made and used. There has however been a number of finds in the region which themselves complement historical evidence, and a regional study with relatively detailed and varied source material may therefore contribute ethnological comparanda to a topic that has generally been considered principally and essentially from an archaeological standpoint.

### DISCOVERY AND DISTRIBUTION

Logboats dateable to the Stone Age are better known on the European mainland, the early examples having been found mostly in Denmark, north-west Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium and north-west France. Survival, of course, is conditioned by factors such as the raw material itself — whether a deciduous or coniferous timber — and the conditions of deposit, whether they favoured the preservation of organic materials. Oak is relatively more resistant, though heavier, but other and softer woods such as alder and pine are observable in earlier examples (eg Loch Kinnord logboat) and the use of a Latin substantive *almus* to describe a small craft on the banks of the River Ness in Adamnan's *Life of Columba* must be significant (Anderson & Anderson 1961, 386; see also Earwood 1993, 360).<sup>1</sup> With the development of scientific methods of absolute dating, the research techniques of dendrochronology (or tree-ring dating) and radiocarbon dating have now been applied to logboat finds here and elsewhere in Europe. Middle and late Neolithic examples have been found in Britain, but in the broader context of surviving British logboats, most examples belong to a period AD 1050–1300. In a survey of Irish logboats, detailed analysis of 59 examples showed that prehistoric logboats were rare and that most examples belong to the period AD 1450–1700 (Lanting & Brindley 1996, 85–95). More generally, evidence for Scotland and Ireland suggests a continuity of use into the 17th and 18th centuries. About 150 discoveries of logboats have been recorded in Scotland and 28 examples survive in whole or in part. Many were lost or destroyed after their discovery or were re-buried or sunk in order to preserve them in circumstances where their preservation and conservation would have been too difficult or expensive.

A relatively large number of logboats is known for Scotland with its comparatively extensive peat and wetland conditions and a national survey and gazetteer of logboat discoveries has been published (Mowat 1996). This shows a distribution mainly in central and south Scotland with clusters of finds in the Firth of Clyde and Dumfries & Galloway. Typically, they are associated with inland waters and the best available timber resources. They seem to have been normally made of oak and, though dependent also on good tools and techniques, they have mostly been found in areas of abundant natural oakwoods that may have formed a climax vegetation. The significance of these circumstances is well exemplified further north in the case of Loch Laggan, a large freshwater loch in a deep glaciated valley in which seven or more logboats have already been discovered and it has been suggested that there may be many more still to be found. These vessels are almost certainly medieval rather than prehistoric (Maxwell 1951, 160–5; Mowat 1996, 62–5).

## WEST HIGHLAND EXAMPLES

In terms of material culture, logboats begin to match the known distribution of crannogs which also in the North and West Highlands can demonstrate in many instances a continuity of occupation and use into the 17th and 18th centuries. An impression may be gained from the literature that logboats enter the scholarly frame as coincidental addenda to crannogs; there are many published examples. Land improvement in the Aros district of Mull in the late 1860s led to the discovery of ‘an artificial island’ in Loch na Mial. The laird, Farquhard Campbell of Aros, described a canoe discovered simultaneously in the mud ‘of black oak, 17 feet in length, and 3½ feet beam, quite fresh and sound’. Among other and smaller ‘canoes’ was more modern detritus: ‘Three boats, of modern clinker-built construction, of whose history none of the natives had any knowledge, were also found’ (Campbell 1870, 465). Silence on the side of the local folk may have been a necessary expediency but it is noteworthy that the laird had interrogated them about the finds and that oral tradition appeared to be silent.<sup>2</sup>

The excavation of a crannog in the northern end of Loch Treig in the Braes of Lochaber in 1933 in connection with the hydroelectric scheme revealed two wooden vessels. The larger, 4.8 m in length, is an undoubted logboat and is displayed in the West Highland Museum. The second object in this context, only 1.67 m in overall length, has been identified as a bog-butter trough with its shaped ends described as handles. It is made of oak and bears toolmarks of a character associated with the adze. It is proportionately long and narrow and its identification is by no means conclusive. Analysis and interpretation in this context might usefully focus on the method of manufacture, and the style and proportions of the vessel. It has been suggested that if it were not a portable food trough it may have been a child’s logboat. Its overall shape is curiously reminiscent of a punt with its flat bottom and squared-off ends (Ritchie 1942, 57–9; Mowat 1996, 28, 85).<sup>3</sup> Highlighting the difficulties of interpretation, another commentator has observed shrewdly on this item that ‘even where dimensions correspond, objects with very little difference of design may sometimes be used for quite different purposes. Kneading-troughs, watering-troughs, canoes, cradles, and even coffins may grade into one another without sharp lines of demarcation’ (Sayce 1945, 106; see also Earwood 1993, 355–6).

The crannog from which the two vessels came was the focus of a considerable oral tradition in the Braes of Lochaber. It was in a stretch of water known as *an t-Eadarloch*, formerly separated from the north end of Loch Treig by a small channel and a gravel spit, itself referred to as *an Déabhadh*, where the substantive used as a place-name described a dried-out but still soft crossing-place between the two lochs. The crannog, significantly, was called *Eilean Tigh na Slige*, suggesting continuing use as a dwelling. Local tradition concerning the site was recorded importantly in the 19th century by Donald Campbell Macpherson (1838–80) of Bohuntin, Lochaber, a scholarly man writing under the pen-name ‘Diarmad’. Tradition described it as a place of refuge but also as a strategic site used by the MacDonnells of Keppoch for holding councils and feasts. It was referred to as *Tigh nam Fleadh* (ie ‘the house of feasts’ or the Feasting House, in accordance possibly with literary panegyric codes) in the long and complex Lochaber poem, *Oran na Comhachaig*, of c 1600 when its customary use was evidently still recent (‘Diarmad’ 1876, 331; Rankin 1958, 129). Coincidentally, a ‘rowing song’ or *Iorram*, recorded in the 19th century in the Braes of Lochaber told of *An Gaol Rosadach*, ‘The Forbidden Love’:

*’S truagh nach robh mi le m’ ghaol,  
Ann an eilean nan craobh,  
Gun duine ’nar taobh ’s an uair sin.*

*Ach coit an da ràimh,  
'N deis a snaidheadh o'n tàl,  
De'n darach nach cnàmh an cuan e* (Macpherson 1868, 33)

[Pity I was not with my love  
In the island of trees,  
Without then another beside us.

But a small boat with a pair of oars,  
After its shaping with the adze,  
Of the oak that the ocean seas will not consume.]

We may assume from this extract a meaning of logboat for the Gaelic *coit* although the caveat should be made that terminology may not generally be so exact. An association of the logboat with inland insular dwellings and strongpoints is strengthened by a tradition recorded by Alexander Carmichael in the Uists in the early 1870s (*Inverness Courier*, 11 February 1875). In order to leave his island *dùn* in Benbecula unscathed and thereby avoid the 'Banshee's' prediction of his death on the causeway, a medieval chieftain of Clanranald had the small boat prepared for his escape — *chuireadh a' choit air doigh* — where it is significant that the narrator has chosen the word *coit* from an available glossary rich in terms for the material culture of boats. Colloquial Gaelic is generally specific in its material terminology but this may be poorly recorded in the available dictionaries.

The crannog site at Arisaig, revealed by the drainage of Loch nan Eala about 1856, consisted of a huge timber raft which included 'two great logs . . . nicely rounded off at the end, and a hollow was scooped out in the wood', and it has been suggested that these may have been worked but unfinished logboats (Mapleton 1868, 518; Mowat 1996, 82). Local tradition recalled that this was a dwelling of Clanranald chieftains who were able to fish the waters of the loch from the windows of the house, a structure which was customarily referred to latterly as the *Tigh-chrann* or 'House of tree-trunks' (Blundell 1911, 360; see also 'Diarmad' 1876, 331).

## TERMINOLOGY, WORDS AND THINGS

James Logan (1794–1872), the Highland historian and antiquarian, travelled in the Gaidhealtachd in the 1820s to collect material for his *Scottish Gael* first published in 1831. He recorded:

Coit, an obsolete term for a tree, is the name which the Highlanders apply to the simple vessel formed of a hollow log. It was also called amar, literally a trough, both appellations being in use by the Irish and Scots. When Dr Macpherson wrote, about fifty years since, a few were still to be seen in some of the Western Isles. (Logan 1876 II, 186)

The Gaelic *coit* is well attested in the dictionaries; it is now generally defined perhaps ambiguously as a small boat used on inland waters. It is included in the Gaelic wordlist of 1741 published by the Gaelic poet and schoolmaster, Alexander MacDonald, where as *culaidh no coitte*, it was described as 'boat or coble' and was being considered not so much synonymous as comparable with the small, flat-bottomed type of craft implied by 'coble' (MacDonald 1741, 110). The word is also common in Irish Gaelic where it described a small boat used in inland waters for which

logboat may be inferred in most instances, but as a generic it could also latterly refer to flat-bottomed, planked boats of various types (McCaughan 1978, 6). One authority concluded on the basis of an extensive search of the literature that the identification of *coit* with the dugout canoe was beyond all doubt (Lucas 1963, 58). Old and Middle Irish citations define it as a boat or 'skiff' and Adamnan's apposition of *scafis* with *curucis* introduces a probably significant material and technical distinction (Anderson & Anderson 1961, 454). The Highland Society dictionary of 1828 defines *coit* as 'a small fishing boat used on rivers', comparing it again with 'coble' (Highland Society 1828, 257). The dictionaries of Armstrong (1825) and MacLeod & Dewar (1831) respectively add more to the concept with 'small boat, coracle, canoe' and 'small fishing boat, a kind of canoe used on rivers' (Armstrong 1825, 135; MacLeod & Dewar 1831, 170). MacAlpine (1831) with an Islay bias describes it as 'punt or small boat' and Dwelly (1901), to a large extent summarizing his lexicographical precursors, concludes with 'small fishing boat, canoe, coracle, punt'. Carmichael adds *coitealan* to the glossary for 'an exceptionally small boat'; there is also a clear inference of this being a poor sort of boat (Carmichael 1971, 46). The word is known in West Coast place-names such as *Tigh a' Choit* (an inn in Cowal where a small boat ferried folk across a river), *Allt na Coite*, *Rudha a' Choite* and *Tor a' Choite* (with differing genders) where locally small boats are assumed (eg Gillies 1906, 91, 151). In the last example at the head of Loch Shiel, local information has been emphatic that this was an old or old-fashioned boat (NGR: NM 9085 8055).

Whereas the word signifies a small boat in the earlier sources, later usage in poetry and song is often derogatory. The *coit* often represents in conventional terms the very worst option at the other end of the scale from the lordly galley and occurs frequently in waulking and rowing songs:

*Chan e an coite chaol chorrach*  
*Chuireadh sogan air t' inntinn*  
*Ach long mhòr nan trì chrannag.* (Craig 1949, 56, 57)

[It is not the narrow shaky canoe  
 That would put delight in your mind  
 But the great three-masted vessel.]

The *coit chaol chorrach*, with adjectives no doubt chosen for alliterative effect, clearly becomes a conventional and proverbial reference in the 17th and 18th centuries for a meaner type of craft. The 'MacLeod's Prayer', recorded in South Uist and Barra in 1873 by Alexander Carmichael, wishes a catalogue of disaster and misfortune on their enemies of Clan Donald including broken planking in a wild sea and a narrow unstable canoe: *Clann Domhnaill air bhordach briste . . . coit chaol chorrach* (Carmichael 1941, 356). In a curious song of tribute to Kenneth MacKenzie, Earl of Seaforth, the Keppoch bard, *Iain Lom*, parodies the chieftain's ability to triumph and overcome adversity by *inter alia* suggesting that he would sail to Brahan on a 'sound deep black canoe' — *coite dubh dìonach domhain* (Mackenzie 1964, 122). In a MacKenzie song, *Moladh Cabar Féidh*, 'In Praise of the Deer's Horn', a classic example of clan panegyric in which the bard celebrates triumphantly the rout of enemies such as the Munros, the status and the typology of the *coit* can be inferred. The indication of a wholly inadequate craft is extended by the description of it as *mosg*, a word recorded in 1842 in wooded Arisaig for a rotten tree (MacEachen 1842, 262):

*A' tearnadh o na sléibhtean,  
 Gu rèilein 's gu cladaichean  
 Dh'èigh iad port, 's gun d'fhuair iad coit,  
 'S bu bheag an toirt mar thachair dhoibh;  
 Ciod e 'n droch rud rinn am brosnach,  
 Le 'n cuid mosg nach freagaradh. (Donullach 1821, 94)*

[Running down from the hills,  
 To the low ground and the seashores,  
 They shouted out the summons and they got but a canoe,  
 What is the bad thing that the waters did  
 With their bit of rotten tree that would not fit the task.]

A letter recorded as being in the Dunrobin Library, written in 1798 by Dr John Bethune (1746–1816), then minister of Dornoch, bears comparable information:

In the West Highlands of Ross-shire, where I was born, the *Courich* was very commonly used, and I have known some People who had seen it, tho' it had been disused before my time. In my Day it had given place to a sort of Canoe called *Ammir*, ie Trough. This was nothing more than the hollowed Trunk of a great Tree; and even this, I believe, is now laid aside. I have been a Passenger crossing a River in the *Ammir* tho' I did not much covet the Situation. It was also employed in fishing the Rivers, and in it I have seen the fearless and dextrous Highlander, from his ticklish footing, flinging the Spear out of his hands to a considerable distance, and arresting the Salmon which was darting along with great Swiftness! The man standing in the *Ammir* holds the Oar by the middle; and with it, paddling on each Side, alternately, proceeds with Surprising velocity. (Joass 1881, 179–80)

The use of *amar* for logboat may reflect a regional or dialectal variation since the theatre is here a more northerly one. The word defines as trough or channel and none of the Gaelic dictionaries attributes 'boat' to it. It may be significant that the citations for *amar* effectively lie outside the main distribution of the old natural oakwoods and that the primary meaning of *amar* belongs to a different material and technology; the working of pine on this scale for example would probably have produced a different kind of vessel.

Definition and the attribution of meaning may necessarily still be a subjective art and none of the dictionaries includes *currach fiodha*. This was recorded about 1840 for a logboat found in draining operations in Loch Chaluim Chille in Trotternish, Skye, in 1763. While it was recognized by the informant who had been born in the 1770s that *curach* referred to a craft of wattle and hide construction, the qualifying *fiodha* for wood or timber was used deliberately to imply a solid dugout boat which in this case was 'about 14 feet long and 3 feet broad'. Further explanation was offered by John MacDonald whose father, *Donnchadh Ceannaich*, had helped with the raising of the logboat: it was 'supposed to be the *birlinn* which was used as a ferry-boat between the monastery and the shore' (Jolly 1876, 554–5). *Eilean Chaluim Chille* was a tidal island with the remains of a building reputed to be a chapel.

## THE SURVIVAL OF TRADITION

Miss Jane MacDonald of Dalilea in Moidart, contributing information to the *Inverness Courier* (3 January 1861) on 'the appearance and adventures of Prince Charles Edward of the '45'',

describes the complexion and colour of hair and eyes of the Prince as they appeared in a portrait then in Dalilea House. She betrays her own sentimental and romantic loyalties in concluding: ‘The face is beautiful but not the least effeminate, his eyes are very beautiful and expressive “softly dark and darkly pure”.’ She continued:

While on the subject I wish to bring under your notice, ere it falls into oblivion, an episode hitherto unknown in the Prince’s adventures. My grandfather John Macdonald furnished Home the historian with most of the particulars of the Prince’s escape. The manuscript was confided to Sir Evan Macgregor and has been lost; but there is a shorter manuscript in Dalelea House, where he says Prince Charles was for some days hiding at Coranatuert, on the banks of Loch Shiel. The cave he occupied is about four miles from this house. Macdonald of Dalelea and Lockhart and some others were with him. The Argyle Militia patrolled all round the Loch, and broke the boats, for fear of his escaping or crossing the Loch. In this emergency, his followers felled a large oak, and hollowed it with axes and fire, and at midnight, put the poor Prince prostrate in it and swam across the loch with the rude boat tied to them. They could not row it for fear of being heard. It was sunk at Camus Blain near Polloch, since that night till six years ago. Mr Hope Scott’s gamekeeper, Black John, who is a great antiquarian, floated it, and brought it here. General Ross, Glenmoidart, saw it here, and fancied it, and he has it now at Glenmoidart. The grandson of the man who made that sort of canoe is still alive, and remembers the names of all the parties who were with the Prince. Such devotion deserves to be recorded.

The manuscript account by John MacDonald of Borrodale ‘A true and real state of Prince Charles Stewart’s miraculous escape after the battle of Culodden [*sic*]’, now in the collections of the West Highland Museum, Fort William, does not in fact mention this episode and in the absence of the longer manuscript to which attention was drawn, corroboration is unobtainable (see also SRO GD 50/227). While not inherently improbable, doubts must be cast on the account since the otherwise well-documented and researched itinerary of Prince Charles Edward Stuart does not include the sojourn in a cave above Loch Shiel or a crossing of the Loch from north to south during his weeks and months as a fugitive. The facts were also respectfully but specifically discounted by Father Charles MacDonald, the parish priest at Mingarry, whose historical and genealogical study of Moidart published in 1889 contributes so much to the history of the district. The essence of his response however reveals that logboats were still a fact of life in the area and the tradition is still a vital one for its accompanying detail:

The present writer was often assured by the best informed among the older Moidart gentlemen, now gone, that the vessel in question belonged to a kind used for domestic purposes alone, and was quite common at one time in almost every Highland household of the better class. (MacDonald 1889, 195)

Historical detail and local tradition suggest other candidates for escape in the ‘large oak’ such as the wounded Cameron of Locheil in hiding on the small *Eilean Mhic Dhomhnaill Dhuibh* (Bell 1898, 288–9). Doubtless government forces were taking steps to render the boats on Loch Shiel unusable for security purposes, and it is significant that the Argyle Militia have been singled out as the devils of the piece since tradition in the area is unanimous in attributing all ills and misfortunes arising from the army of occupation in the West Highlands to Clan Campbell troops.

If, as is clear, logboats were still a well-known form of transport, it must have been a natural expediency resorted to by local folk at the time when there was a clear need for a small fishing or ferry boat.<sup>4</sup>

In an area as large as Loch Shiel and its catchment, it may be surprising that logboat finds to date are rare. Sometime between 1895 and 1905, a logboat was discovered at Acharacle during drainage work instigated by the minister, the Revd Neil MacKinnon, 'at the top end of the glebe, near the school'. No contemporary record was kept of the discovery but the boat was later described as being 'narrow, about twelve to fourteen feet in length [about 4 m] and carved from a single piece of wood'. The discovery attracted local attention for some days after which it was said that the minister sent it away to a museum although there is no documentary trace of this or of the boat (NMRS 1976 MS/47/1).

## CONCLUSION

Our knowledge of logboats derives from a complex of interrelated circumstances such as a landscape of inland and relatively sheltered waterways for which a small rounded vessel with a low freeboard was an adequate form of transport, extensive wetland and peat cover with its possibilities of preserving organic materials and an availability of raw materials in the woods of the west coast. Logboat technology, modest though it is, continued in use well into the 18th century in Scotland, offering the paradox (at least for the European mind) that a prehistoric phenomenon may also be a modern one. Research also suggests that these west coast woods, especially within territorial entities such as 'Clanranald's country' on the western seaboard, were carefully husbanded for uses such as boatbuilding and this purpose would have included modest dugouts, which required in fact large mature trees, as well as the larger galleys (Cheape 1993, 56). The evidence of the living language, its regional variations, its literature and traditions extends the chronological and cultural significance of logboats to convey a general if sometimes shadowy impression of a prehistoric craft surviving in the West Highlands — especially in the 'rough bounds' of Moidart and Arisaig — into the 18th century and into living memory.

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## NOTES

- 1 Adamnan's narrative of this incident includes two further words standing for inland waterways' craft, *navicula* and *caupallus*, which would repay analysis for further inferences for material culture. A text such as this, standing between classical and medieval Latin, may variously record vernacular as well as Vulgate forms; also the respective terms may have been deliberately chosen by the author and reflect more particularly forms and shape rather than materials, and *caupallus* must be etymologically linked to the later 'coble'.
- 2 Rev Dr Archibald Clerk (1813–87), minister of Kilmallie, recorded traditions of a crannog site at the head of Loch Oich in a manuscript notebook now in the collections of the West Highland Museum, Fort William. This was the house of a minor Lachaber chieftain, Donald Mór MacMhuilcein, forced to take the name of Cameron by a rapacious chief of the Camerons of Locheil in the 16th century. Clerk added



the note: 'Very many oak beams and two canoes were dredged out of Loch Oich in 1842. One of the canoes is in the Museum in Inverness' (Cheape forthcoming).

- 3 Intriguingly, Clerk's manuscript notebook in the West Highland Museum includes accounts of the origins of a local Lochaber family, the Mac 'ill 'onies, with the tradition that the first of the name '... was cast ashore on the beach at Corpach, Moses-like, in a coffer' (see Cheape forthcoming).
- 4 The recounting of circumstantial detail of logboat manufacture in Moidart including the trunk of a large oak, handtools and the use of fire suggests a familiarity with ancient technique. Examples show how fires would have been lit along the top of the trunk section, the charred wood chopped out and the process repeated.

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