

### III.

NOTICE OF A WOOD-CARVER'S TOOL-BOX, WITH CELTIC ORNAMENTATION, RECENTLY DISCOVERED IN A PEAT-MOSS IN THE PARISH OF BIRSAY, ORKNEY. BY JAMES W. CURSITER, F.S.A. Scot.

On Thursday, 12th May 1885, some men were cutting peats on ground pertaining to the farm of Howe, Evie, and lying about  $1\frac{1}{2}$  miles south-west of the farm-house, on the border land between the parishes of Birsay and Evie. The ground slopes irregularly to the south-west, and there are only few patches in it where peat is obtained. The district presents a very bleak appearance, there being no houses visible for miles, and there are no tumuli or other prehistoric remains noticeable in the vicinity. The ground is very poor and the little heather upon it short, the bare washed subsoil being most conspicuous. There seem, on the irregular slope of the ground, to be hollows at intervals where alluvial deposit from the higher levels has accumulated, and furnished soil sufficient for vegetable growth. In such depressions the peat has formed, which is in no case deep, and the "bank" where the cutting was going on that day was the deepest that I saw in the course of my inspection, measuring  $3\frac{1}{2}$  feet, and the peat in it very black and hard.

In the course of cutting the peat here one of the men came upon an obstruction, and remarked that "he had surely come upon a piece of wood." He was advised to give it another trial, when the "tuskar" or peat spade broke through a little box, at a depth of  $2\frac{1}{2}$  feet from the surface. The box (fig. 1), which was standing on end upon the subsoil under the peat, is hollowed out of a solid piece of birch (?), and measures  $11\frac{1}{2}$  inches in length by  $5\frac{1}{2}$  inches in breadth and 3 inches deep. It is carved on one end and both sides, the patterns being different on each. On one side and one end (as shown in fig. 1) the decoration is evidently

finished; but on the other side (shown in fig. 2) it seems only partially so, the outlines of the device being traced over its full lengths, and the details wrought in towards one end of the pattern. One of the ends of the box is still in the rough. The lid, which is of thinner wood than

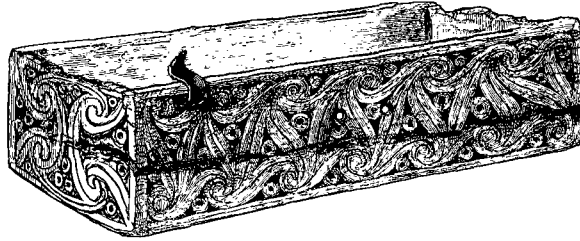


Fig. 1. Wooden Box, with Celtic Ornamentation, found in a Moss in Birsay, Orkney ( $11\frac{1}{2}$  inches in length).

the rest of the box, has suffered most, and only fragments of it have been secured, but enough to show that it has also been similarly ornamented. The carved end of the box is lower than the sides and the other end, indicating that the lid has been a sliding one, pushed in from

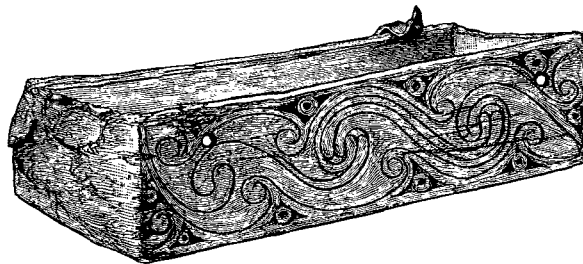


Fig. 2. Wooden Box, with Celtic Ornamentation, found in a Moss in Birsay, Orkney ( $11\frac{1}{2}$  inches in length).

this end, and working in grooves, which are quite discernible in the upper inside edges. There seem to have been two bands, probably of metal, about  $\frac{3}{8}$ ths of an inch wide, and quite thin, crossing over the lid about half an inch from each end of the box, and fixed with a

pin to the upper outside edges of the sides, for strengthening the box and keeping down the lid in its place. In the sides of the box, and also in the lid, are holes into which short thongs of leather have been fixed by tying and knotting. The longest of these remaining is about 6 inches, and the loose ends have been evidently designed for tying, and in some way securing the lid in position.

When found, the box was filled up with a substance described to me as resembling fine decayed straw, among which the contents were imbedded. Unfortunately the box and its contents were taken by the finders to the nearest water and washed, so that I am unable to furnish any positive clue to the nature of this so-called "packing," which, however, I am inclined to believe was simply decayed vegetable matter, as in the heart of one of the soft wood handles which were in the box I found a root of heather occupying the space from which the blade had wasted. The contents of the box consisted chiefly of handles of tools, (about fourteen of them) of different shapes, sizes, and materials, but in appearance mostly resembling modern knife handles and handles of bradawls. They are made of ox horn, deer horn, bone, and soft wood. Some of them are a good deal split up and warped, and only half of one of them was secured, the other half of it I believe to have been lost in the washing process. They have evidently carried metal blades, and some of them two blades—one at each end. In addition to the handles, the box contained a piece of pumice-stone, worn smooth on all sides, a pointed tine of deer horn, a bone pin with a round head, a piece of cut bone, and some scraps of thin leather.

The box has apparently contained the tools of a wood-carver, or some such workman, and the box itself had possibly been intended as a sort of advertisement of the abilities of its possessor. The pumice-stone would doubtless have been used for preparing the surface of the wood before cutting, but all traces of the blades of the cutting tools have disappeared.

There was no appearance of any intentional design of depositing the box where it was found, and the probability is that it had sunk end foremost in the bog when in a soft state. The box and contents when secured by me were splitting and shrinking in drying, I therefore had

them all boiled in a solution of alum, and at once communicated with Dr Anderson, who kindly undertook to have them preserved for me.

It would be interesting to investigate the questions of its probable age, and whether the wood of which it is composed, and the art with which it is ornamented, may not have been of native growth. Trees at one time were very numerous in Orkney, trunks of from 9 to 12 inches in diameter being often found in peat cutting and drainage operations, but there are none of similar dimensions in the islands at present, except such as have been recently planted. Be that as it may, there can be no doubt, from its appearance and from the circumstances in which it was found, that the box is a relic of very considerable antiquity, and one of the oldest, if not the very oldest, specimen of wood carving known to have been found in Scotland. The decoration is purely Celtic, and of the same character as the spiral patterns on many of the sculptured stones of Scotland, which are believed to date from about the eighth and ninth centuries.