

V.

CANOES, COFFINS, AND COOKING-TROUGHS.

By R. U. SAYCE.

Read February 24, 1945.

In a very interesting paper on the Loch Treig crannog (vol. lxxvi, 1941-42), Professor James Ritchie described a hollowed out tree-trunk (*v.* Pls. XV and XVI), which, he suggests, may have been a roughly shaped boat intended for floating earth and stones from the shore for the building of the crannog. In discussing the purpose of other hollowed logs he rightly says that "Similarity in design, where the sizes are so different, need not indicate similar purposes." We may add 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.

In the Manchester Museum there is another hollowed log the purpose of which is uncertain. Dr J. W. Jackson has given me the only reference to it that I have been able to gather:—

"Barton-on-Irwell. Hollowed log (? coffin), now in the Manchester Museum, Owens College, found in July 1889, in the Trafford Hall cutting of the Manchester Ship Canal, about six or seven hundred yards east of Barton Bridge. Information of Mr E. Ward, F.R.M.S." ¹ The two photographs (Pl. VI) and the diagrams (fig. 1) make it unnecessary to write a detailed description. The log shows some contortion which probably took place during drying. There is a hole through the side, which seems to be due to the removal of a knot. The V-shaped channel at the narrow end appears to have been caused by the accidental breaking away of a piece of the wood. One end of this log is thicker than the other; this could be explained by the wood being knotty, and by a large bough having branched

¹ *Trans. Lancs. and Chesh. Antiq. Soc.*, vol. x., 1892, p. 249.

off here and so diminished the diameter of the rest of the trunk. The sloping ends inside the trough show adze-marks. The Manchester log is bigger than the one from Loch Treig.

For further comparison I should like to draw attention to another

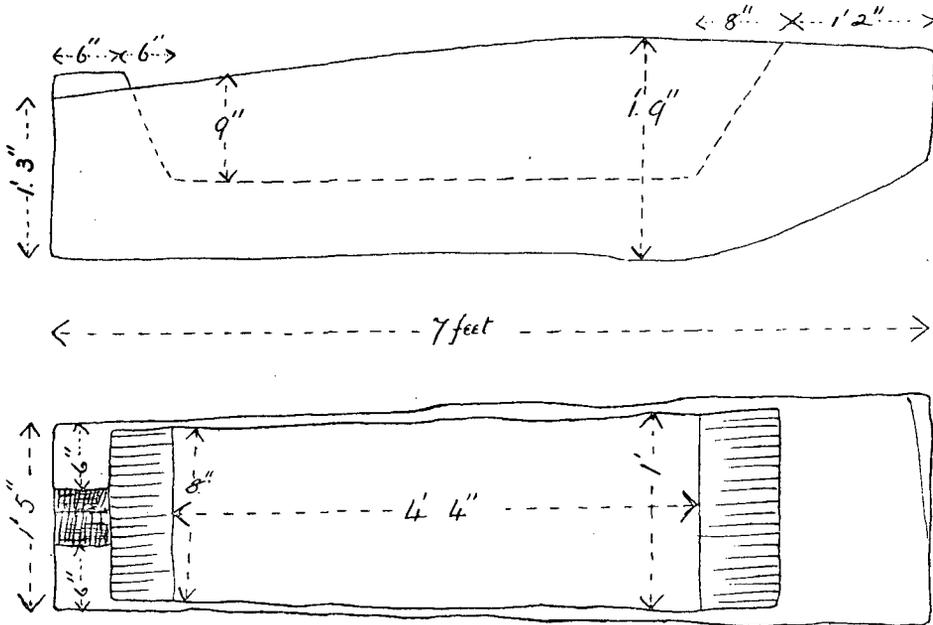


Fig. 1. Hollowed log from the Manchester Ship Canal.

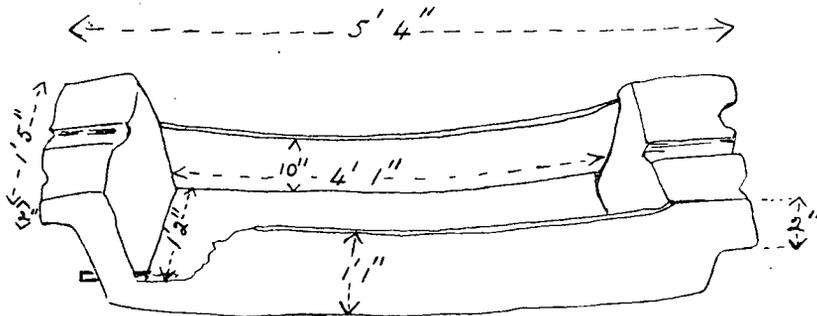


Fig. 2. Hollowed log from River Esk in Western Cumberland.

hollowed log (fig. 2), which resembled the Scottish specimen more closely in dimensions and design. It is referred to as an oak-trough, and is described in the *Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archæological Society Transactions*, volume viii, 1886, pp. 267-268. The Society has kindly given



Hollowed log, Manchester Ship Canal.

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permission for the drawing to be reproduced. Fig. 2 is a tracing of that illustration. The trough was found in gravel, 6 feet 3 inches below the surface, about 25 yards from the River Esk in West Cumberland, and approximately 20 yards above it. It had been cut out of the bole of a tree. "In one corner, near the bottom of the hollow, is a hole pierced through the end of the trough, in which was a spigot or plug, the thick end of which was to the outside. In the centre of the upper surface at each end is a hollowed channel apparently for overflow. Traces of two stone drains were found, one leading to the trough and the other away from it." The projection at both ends are said to have been 2 inches thick.

The projections at the ends of the Loch Treig and Eskdale logs need an explanation. They would have been useful if the logs had had to be lifted, but I cannot see in either specimen anything that could have been used in hauling it as a kind of sledge. The Samoyed-Ostyak dug-out sledge and the Finnish built-up boat-shaped sledge have holes at the fore end for the attachment of ropes.¹ No one would have wanted to lift the Eskdale trough very often to empty liquid from it, because this could be done by removing the spigot. Is it possible that there may have been some need to lift it and carry it with its contents? There is very little to guide us. When a scent is giving out, it is well to lift the hounds and make a good wide cast, even at the risk of starting a fresh quarry. It is possible that we may find a suggestion in Eire, though, owing to present difficulties, I must go there by way of Wales.

In *Archæologia Cambrensis*, 1906, pp. 17-35, there is a paper by T. C. Cantrill and O. T. Jones, entitled "A Note on the Discovery of Prehistoric Hearths in South Wales". It deals with the heaps of burnt stones that are fairly common in Wales near to streams and especially to good springs. As is well known, the stones are thought to have been heated in a fire and dropped into water to boil it and to cook food. It is the container that concerns us, though the evidence concerning it does not come from Wales. The writers quote two Irish publications, one of which I have not been able to find in Manchester, and which might take some time to obtain.

John Quinlan published a paper on "The Cooking-places of the Stone Age in Ireland",² in which he described examples in County Waterford and County Cork. Wherever a strong spring develops into a rivulet a cooking place generally occurs near by. It is usually hemispherical in plan with the opening toward the stream. Across the opening a trough was placed; into it was put water and the meat to be boiled. In one instance burnt stones were found in the trough. Quinlan mentions that at one site which he investigated at Clonkerdon, County Waterford, the whole mound with the hearth and trough had a diameter of 52 feet.

¹ Gösta Berg, *Sledges and Wheeled Vehicles*, Stockholm, 1935.

² *Journ. R.H.A.A.I.*, Series 4, vol. vii. (1885-6), p. 390.

There is a still earlier paper by William Hackett,¹ who refers to these heaps of burnt stones in Kilkenny and says that such mounds are known in County Cork as "folach fia," and in Tipperary as "deer-roasts". On exploration some of these heaps are found to contain in the centre a wooden trough, some 6 feet long, formed of a hollow tree or planks, the use of which was manifestly to boil water by passing heated stones through it in rapid succession. Professor S. P. O'Riordain, who was so good as to look up Hackett's paper for me, has written to say that there appears to be no good description of the troughs from deer-roasts, but that Hackett, after describing a trough made of boards that was found at Middleton, County Cork, goes on to say:

"The average dimensions of the troughs already found may be given as 6 feet long, 2 feet broad and 1½ feet deep except the hollowed tree trunks which are sometimes longer and narrower."

I regret that at present I cannot find more details of these cooking-troughs, but we shall have to keep them in mind when we are considering the uses of hollowed trunks. The date of the Irish deer-roasts has not been established. A mid-nineteenth century reference to a "druidical ring" of two or three circles having been built on a heap of cinders is too vague to help much, but it probably points to a fair antiquity. I have found flint flakes that had been struck off beach pebbles in heaps of these burnt stones in the moorlands of Central Wales. Such heaps appear to be quite common in the North. Mr A. O. Curle refers to "the numerous heaps of burnt broken stone to be found throughout the Shetland Islands, and to a less extent elsewhere." They are frequently found adjacent to water.² There is a full discussion of these heaps of burnt stones in the *Inventory of Ancient Monuments (Orkneys and Shetlands)*, which it is hoped will soon be published. I am indebted to Mr A. Graham for these Scottish references.

Cooking with hot stones probably goes back in these islands into prehistoric times. Shetelig and Falk record that rude vessels of burnt leather occur in Norway "in finds of the older stone age", and that boiling stones of the same period are found on dwelling sites.³ The custom certainly persisted into much more recent times. Keating mentions the use of hot stones in Eire, and "In the French wars of Henry VIII's time some of the Irish troops reverted to the ancient practice of stone-boiling, and cooked meat in water contained in a hide suspended at the four corners, heating the water by throwing into it red-hot stones."⁴ Sir John Sinclair reported that in Shetland, toward the end of the eighteenth century, when milk was being

¹ *Trans. Kilkenny Arch. Soc.*, vol. iii. (1854-55), pp. 59 *et seq.*

² "An Account of the Excavation of a Dwelling of the Viking Period at 'Jarlshof,' Sumburgh, Shetland," *Proc. Soc. Ant. Scot.*, vol. lxxix. p. 284.

³ H. Shetelig and H. Falk: *Scandinavian Archaeology*, p. 310.

⁴ T. C. Cantrill and O. T. Jones, "Prehistoric Cooking Places in South Wales," *Arch. Camb.*, 1911, pp. 253 *et seq.*

churned and the butter was about to separate, the dairy people put red-hot stones into it and churned until the butter floated on top.¹ The Icelanders in the Middle Ages also used hot stones in the treatment of milk.² Burt also has an interesting reference to this method of cooking. He says: 'I have been assured, that in some of the Islands the meaner Sort of People still retain the Custom of boiling the Beef in the Hide; or otherwise (being destitute of Vessels of Metal or Earth) they put Water into a Block of Wood, made hollow by the help of the Dirk and burning; and then with pretty large Stones heated red-hot, and successively quenched in that Vessel, they keep the Water boiling till they have dressed their Food.'³

ADDENDUM.

When the writer was reading the proofs of this paper, he received a copy of *Stavanger Museums Årshefte*, 1939-40, in which Dr Knut Fægri and Dr

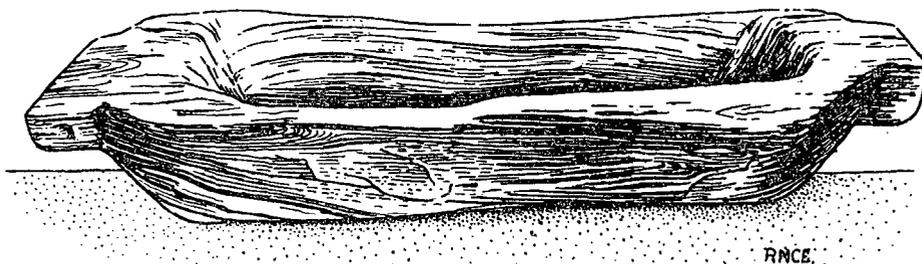


Fig. 3. Wooden trough, Nærbo, Norway.

Jan Petersen describe the discovery of a wooden trough⁴ and a wooden spear 80 cm. below the surface of a bog. My colleague, Dr R. M. C. Eagar, has, at my request, kindly made me a drawing (fig. 3) based on Dr Petersen's photograph. Pollen-analysis seems to point to a date for the trough "between the viking age and the Middle Ages proper." Dr Petersen is inclined, however, on archæological grounds to favour an earlier date and to regard the finds "as remains of sacrifice from early iron age"; but he points out that oblong, steatite troughs of the same form, which are probably copies of wooden prototypes, are known from late Viking times, which would support Dr Fægri's pollen-analytic dating.

The Nærbo trough is much smaller than the Loch Treig and Cumberland specimens, but the resemblance in shape is interesting. The Norwegian example measures 39 cm. long and 13.2 cm. wide on the outside; the inside

¹ *General View of the Agriculture of the Northern Counties and Islands of Scotland*, 1795.

² Shetelig and Falk, *op. cit.*

³ *Letters from a Gentleman in the North of Scotland*, ii. 271-2.

⁴ *Myrfunne Tresaker fra Bø i Nærbo* (with English summaries).

dimensions are 18 by 11 cm. Dr Petersen refers to two similar wooden troughs from the same part of Norway. These are somewhat bigger than the new find, and one has perforations, possibly for carrying purposes, in the projecting ears. He does not quote the dimensions in this paper, but a previous volume¹ gives the outside measurement of one of them as about 50 cm. There appears to be further reference to similar troughs in *Oseberg-funnet*, ii, pl. xi, and figs. 77-79, but I have not been able to consult this work.

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