

3. DISCOVERIES MADE IN 1934 ON KING FERGUS' ISLE AND ELSEWHERE IN LOCH LAGGAN, INVERNESS-SHIRE.

In June 1934, operations by the Lochaber Power Company resulted in the lowering of Loch Laggan by some sixteen feet, thereby exposing a large portion of the bed, on which several finds were made. The following discussion is based on letters to the Museum from the late T. M. Logan, then Factor of the Ardverikie Estate, and Lt.-Col. R. M. Mudie; on a letter to Dr W. Mackay Mackenzie from the late J. M. Corrie, F.S.A.Scot., who visited Loch Laggan in 1934; on newspaper cuttings; and on the smaller finds themselves, generously presented to the Museum by Sir John Ramsden, Bart., of Ardverikie, in 1950.

In the *Old Statistical Account*,¹ the two islands in the centre of the loch are thought to be summer hunting-places of the Kings of Scots when they had their seat at Dunkeld. "On the larger (King Fergus' Isle) are the side walls still remaining of a very ancient building, made of common round stones, but cemented with mortar. This is said to be the place where the Kings retired from hunting, and feasted on their game. In the neighbouring island, which is called Ellan n'Con, or, the Island of the Dogs, and said to be the place where their hounds were confined, is also a wall standing of a similar building."

It is with the larger island that the reports in 1934 deal. Corrie dismisses a suggestion of a crannog. "The island is clearly not artificial, for the castle stands on a rock and the doorway must have been reached by wooden steps." A cutting states: "The door is placed on the top of an almost vertical rock which one can only reach with difficulty. Provision had been made for barring the door with a log let into sockets in the rock at each side." Corrie associated "heavy mortised beams," found "all in the close vicinity of the castle ruins," with "a destroyed pier or with the remains of the castle rather than with a crannog." One heavy beam of black wood, "about one foot square and 20-30 feet long, recesses cut in the end and round holes at intervals of about a foot apart," is recorded by Lt.-Col. Mudie as being close to where he found the piece of carved wood (fig. 2). The wood (HX 277) is Scotch pine (*Pinus sylvestris*); parts of two pierced tracery circles over two shafts of arcading remain, breadth at top 11.5 in. and length 2 ft. 11 in. There are two holes near the top edge and one in the shorter shaft, which has broken at a similar hole. Lt.-Col. Mudie says: "One of the holes had a round peg in it—which is lost." Dr J. S. Richardson thinks it has been a part of a screen or an upper panel of a cupboard door, dating to about 1500. Even allowing for the long immersion and warping in drying, the carving is crude.

Another piece, also Scotch pine² (HX 286), presumably from the island, is oblong 7.4 × 3.45 in. and 0.9 in. thick. Two lines of five holes, averaging 0.5 in. diameter and 0.7 in. apart (also the distance between the lines), run the length of the wood, which has broken off along another line of holes. One face is flat, the other has bevelled edges. There is a small (nail?) hole, 0.5 in. from the unbroken long edge and approximately half-way along it. Dr Richardson considers this to be a part of a drain cover.

According to the *Scotsman* report, excavation showed that "a stone and lime building had been built on top of an older and more primitive dwelling which had apparently been burned." Corrie wrote: "Intermixed with the beams and other remains of the stone and mortar built castle, but again nowhere else, there was an endless quantity of clay wattle, which I find it difficult to fit into the scheme of

¹ *Parish of Laggan, Inverness, III, 151-2.*

² Kindly identified by Dr J. M. Cowan, Assistant Keeper, Royal Botanic Garden.

things. Much of it was heavily fired and many of the beams were greatly charred." He wonders if there has been a clay-built castle, or whether the wattle implies a much earlier occupation.

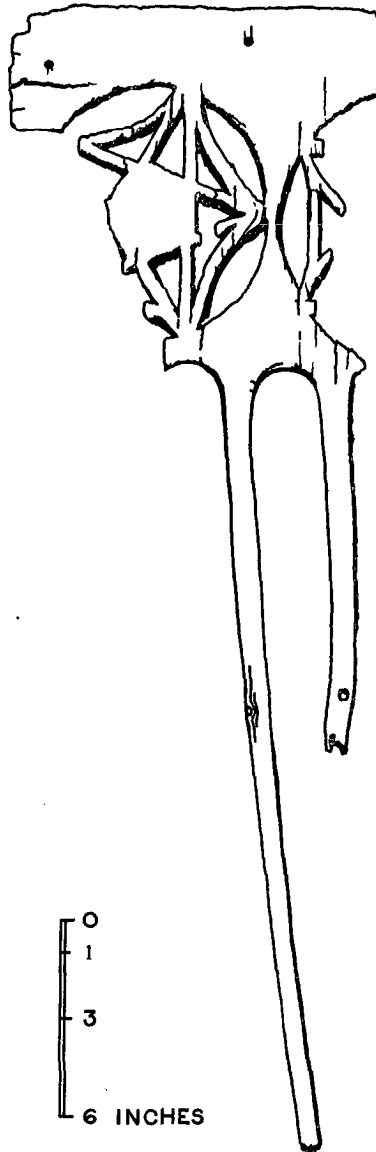


Fig. 2. Carved wood from King Fergus' Isle (HX 277).

Six pieces of burnt daub (HX 278) are now in the Museum, the largest 3.5×3.0 in. and 2.2 in. thick. One side is flat and there are semi-cylindrical impressions, averaging 0.8 in. diameter, in the other, indicating that they have surrounded wattles.

The cutting continues: "The stone and lime building is comparatively recent. A roof covering of shovel-shaped turves fixed down with wooden pegs can still be seen, and men's, women's, and children's brogues show that the inhabitants had reached the stage of dressing leather." Pieces of four sewn leather shoes have been preserved (HX 280, 1-4). (1) A sole, length 5 in.; (2 and 3) two soles, both incomplete and probably a pair, lengths 6.1 in. and 6.5 in.; (4) part of the upper of a lacing shoe, length 9 in.

The *Scotsman* concludes: "Fragments of clay vessels, wheel-turned; a wooden dish, shaped like a three-legged pot; a wooden vessel, with a long handle, and logs which seem to have formed part of a palisade complete the discoveries to date." All that remains of these is a sherd of buff-coloured, wheel-turned medieval pottery (HX 279), 0.5 in. thick, with transverse ridges on the inner side. Two edges are fire-blackened.

Cloth fragments now in the Museum probably come from King Fergus' Isle, but are not mentioned in the letters or cuttings. A piece of brown woollen cloth (HX 282), 7 × 4.5 in., has two sets of three narrow, darker stripes, intersecting at a corner. Mrs Grace M. Crowfoot has kindly reported as follows on the weave: "Tabby, irregular. Count about 8 × 8 per centimetre. Yarn Z spun. Stripes 5 dark and 5 light threads in warp and weft." A light brown fragment (HX 283), about 9 in. long, was examined by the Shirley Institute (British Cotton Industry Research Association), who reported that it was "probably linen, but could be hemp or nettle which have similar cross markings." Mrs Crowfoot reports that the count is 10-11 × 12-13 per cm., and that the thread is Z spun.

Mr Logan reported the finding of "an old built boat (now in pieces)" on King Fergus' Isle. Four pieces of it reached the Museum (HX 281, 1-4).

(1) May be a patch; it is almost square with one wavy edge, 7.6 × 7.2 in. and 0.6 in. thick, thinning to the wavy and opposite edges. There are three 0.3 in. square holes along each of these sides, one containing the head, 1 in. square, of a hand-made iron nail.

(2) A strip 2 ft. 6.3 in. long and 0.45 in. thick in the centre (fig. 3).

(3) A plank, 3 ft. 5.8 in. long, 5.9 in. broad at the unbroken end, and 0.8 in.

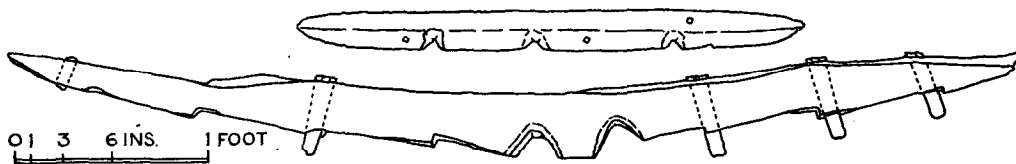


Fig. 3. Wood from the boat found on King Fergus' Isle: (upper) HX 281 (2); (lower) floor timber, HX 281 (4).

at thickest; there are 0.3 in. square nail holes along both edges, some with the remains of nails; nailed to the broken end with a 1.8 in. long nail is a similar plank 1 ft. 7.5 in. × 4.1 in.; between them is a matted fibrous caulking.

(4) A curved beam, 5 ft. 3 in. long and 4 × 2.3 in. in cross-section (fig. 3), notched and with round wooden pegs in it. An iron nail, 1.9 in. long, and part of the head of another are also in the Museum (HX 284-5).

Photographs of the wood were sent to the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, and Mr George Naish, Assistant Keeper, reports: (4) "is a floor timber, notched to fit across the keel plank (which suggests an early date) and over the planks to which it has been attached by tree nails. I suggest a keelson lashed

above (of course this can only be a guess). . . . The pegs seem very irregularly spaced." The planking, (3), is "probably from near one end of the boat." The "use or position" of (2) "can now only be guessed at." It may be another plank, broken lengthways. Mr Naish suggests a date between c. 700 and 1500, early rather than late. "The square-sectioned iron rivets are characteristic of early construction and appear in the 1415 *Grace Dieu*."

Two pieces of wood with notches similar to (4) were found in peat on the Island of Eigg and are now in the Museum (see *P.S.A.S.*, XII, 594-6, figs. 16 and 17, and Shetelig, *Viking Antiquities in Great Britain*, II, 179, and fig. 87).

Also among the small finds is about 2 ft. 2 in. of matted hair yarn (HX 287), which is probably caulking from the clinker-built boat. Professor James Ritchie of the Department of Zoology, University of Edinburgh, made casts in celluloid of the hair-strands and compared them with a considerable selection of different hairs, e.g. human, red deer, cattle and sheep. "It is certainly not deer hair [this was suggested in the newspaper cuttings] . . . it agrees most closely in respect of size and the minute scaling of the surface with the hair which I obtained from a young Highland ox. I think you can be safe in saying, therefore, that the material is the hair of Highland cattle, and I think the indications, shown by teasing a part of the rope . . . are that the hair may have been shorn from the animals."

Dug-out Canoes.

Besides the finds on the island, the cuttings say that five dug-out canoes were found, four of fir and one of oak. The find spots of only two are given in the 1934 accounts. Logan writes that "A dug-out coracle (now in two parts and very frail)" was found on King Fergus' Isle, and Lt.-Col. Mudie that one was found at the extreme eastern end of the loch, "near where the Pottack runs into the loch." Since 1934 the loch-level has been lowered on several occasions, and three canoes have been seen. In August 1948 Mr I. D. West, of Edinburgh, reported that he had seen the remains of a canoe, approximately 30 feet long, in the sand at the eastern end of the loch, south of the Pottack burn. This may be the one Lt.-Col. Mudie saw. In 1949 Mr R. B. K. Stevenson saw one on the south shore, just east of King Fergus' Isle (Nat. Grid ref. 27/500873). Also in 1949 the late Mr B. M. Peach, Civil Engineer of the British Aluminium Company, found "the undoubted remains of a canoe bottom" in a bay on the north side, about $1\frac{1}{4}$ miles from the eastern end (Nat. Grid ref. 27/520890). "The dimensions were 14 ft. 6 in. long by 2 ft. 6 in. to 1 ft. 5 in. wide, and the timber was oak, 1.5 to 2 in. thick. The condition of the wood was much too tender to allow of its being removed."

Mr Peach found the canoe bottom when looking unsuccessfully for the largest of the 1934 canoes which was uncovered in the same day (Pl. XVI). This was described in the cuttings as "in almost perfect preservation when it was first uncovered." "It showed signs of a figure head and the socket at the stem where the steering-oar rested. Even a patch that had been applied by its prehistoric owners was plain until it began to moulder in the open air." Corrie gave its length as 37 ft. 7 in. Mrs Enid Grant, F.S.A.Scot., who is making a study of dug-out canoes, informs me that it is the second largest of the hundred or so found in Scotland, and is among the most perfect examples; the Loch Laggan group is the largest from one loch.

In the large canoe was found a wooden bowl, now in the Museum (HX 276, 1-7). Corrie says it was incomplete when found, and it has warped badly and split into seven pieces on drying. It is made from one piece of wood, with a

narrow everted rim and a pierced vertical handle at one end (there may have been one at the other). Miss A. S. Henshall has kindly drawn a reconstruction of the bowl (fig. 4, 1), on the assumption that it was originally round, and turned, approximately 5.5 in. in diameter. She has also drawn for comparison two other bowls in the Museum collection. ME 64, 6 x 2.5 in. deep, was found with fragments of several others in a moss near Ardgour House, Inverness-shire, and presented to the

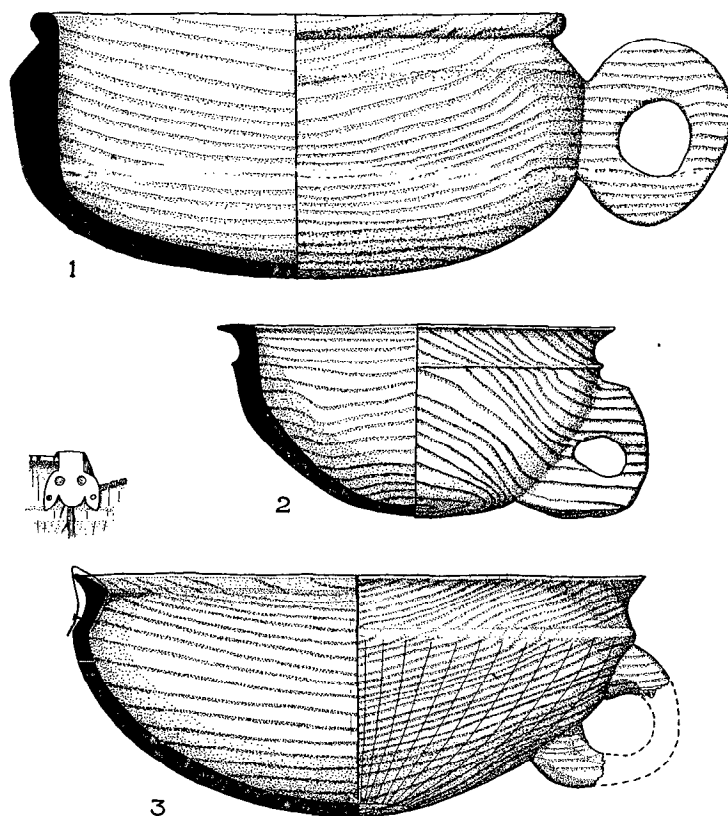


Fig. 4. Reconstructions: (1) Bowl found in the canoc, (HX 276); (2) bowl from moss near Ardgour House (ME 64), with detail of its clasp; (3) bowl found in Dalvaird Moss, Glenluce, Wigtonshire (ME 70).

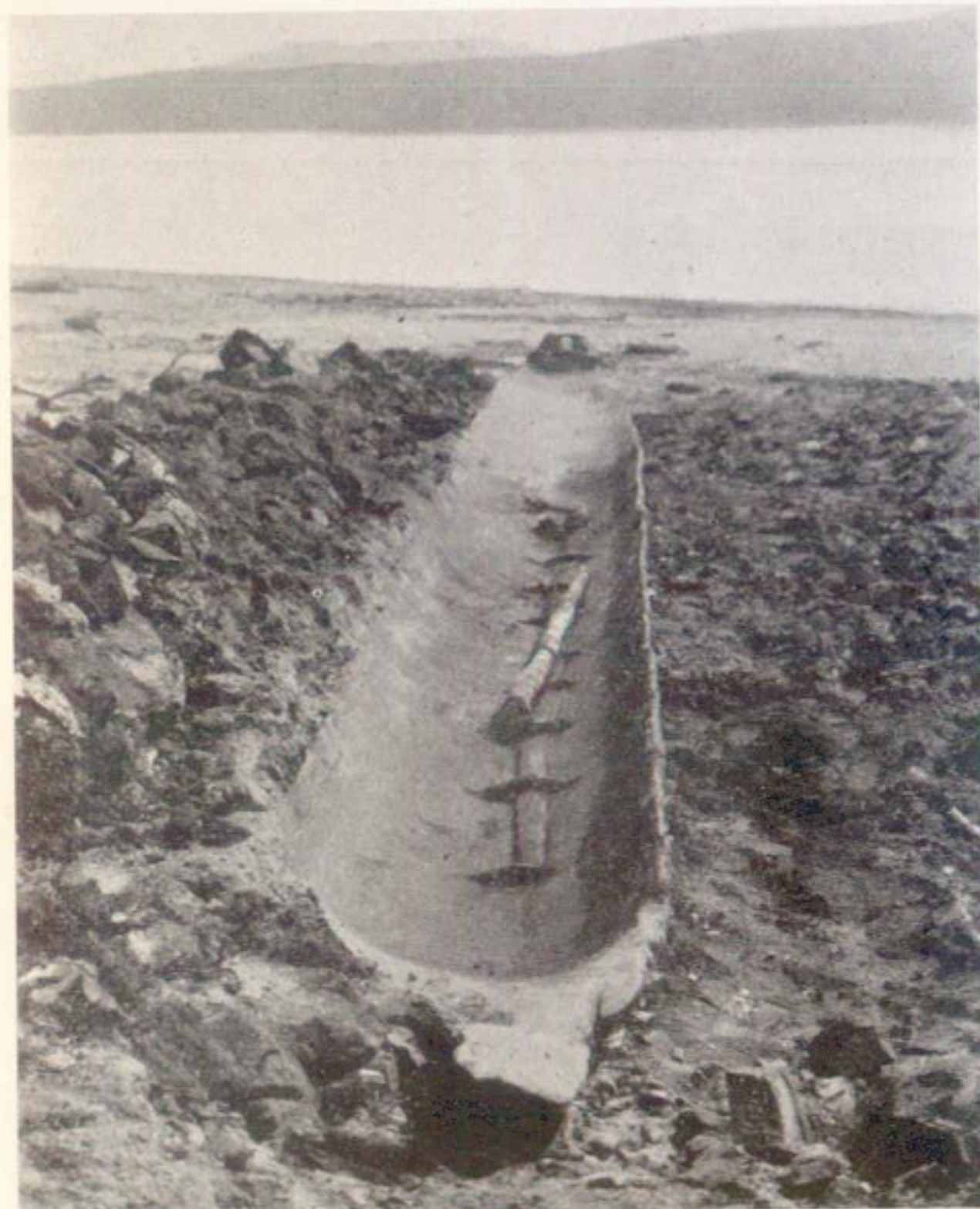
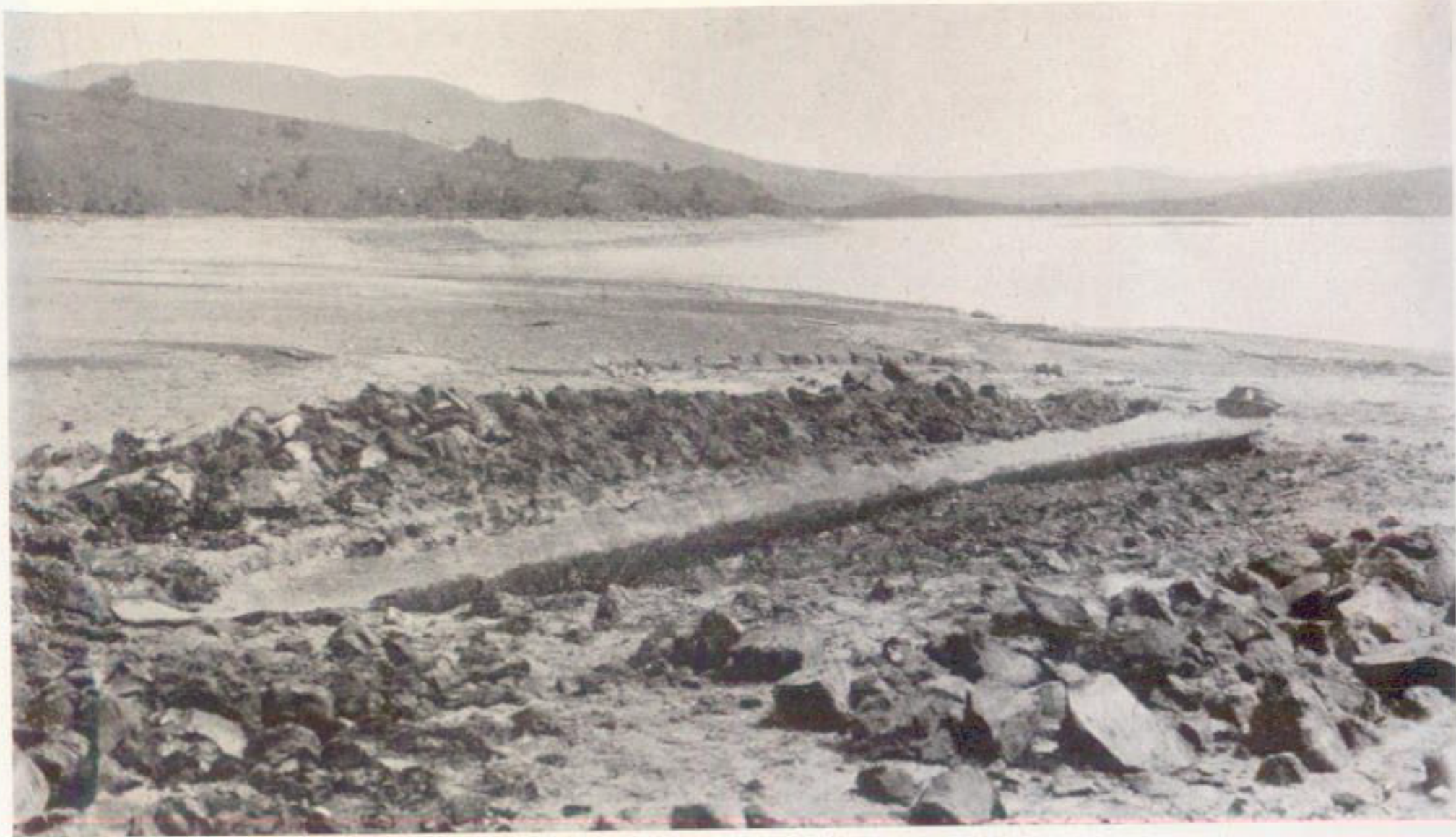
Museum in 1871.¹ It has had a similar vertical handle (now broken) at one end, and at the other there is a neatly made bronze clasp, secured by one rivet, over the rim (see detail, fig. 4, 2). The entry in the *Proceedings* says it was "mended with two bronze clasps secured by small rivets." One of the small fragments from the same find, ME 68, has a similar handle, but set horizontally. Another, ME 66, 10.1 in. long, approximately 7.5 in. broad and 4.5 in. deep, is crudely cut from the solid, has no rim left, one vertical pierced handle and part of another at the opposite end. Another cup (fig. 4, 3), ME 70, was found "under a large wooden dish" in

¹ *P.S.A.S.*, IX, 220-1.

Dalvaird Moss, Glenluce, Wigtownshire.¹ It is 4·5 in. long, and approximately 2·5 in. wide and 2 in. deep. Again there is a vertical pierced handle at one end and a narrow everted rim. Mr M. Y. Orr, late of the Royal Botanic Garden, says that the wood of the Loch Laggan bowl "most nearly resembles that of the birch. The state of the material after immersion and years of drying have so distorted the structure of the wood that identification was only possible by maceration and examination and comparison of the individual tissue elements with those of birch." This could not be done with the other bowls illustrated without injuring them, but Mr Orr thinks that they also are of birch.

A similar bowl (9·5 in. long) is illustrated in fig. 144, no. 34, on p. 211 of the 1863 edition of the *Catalogue* of the Royal Irish Academy's Museum (now in the National Museum of Ireland). Sir William Wilde drew attention to its resemblance to bronze vessels in that collection, notably no. 37, fig. 413, p. 534. The lathe-turned wooden bowls found in Irish crannogs² have ring bases and no handles.

STUART MAXWELL, *Assistant Keeper of Museum.*



LOCH LAGGAN: Two views of largest canoe.

[Photos: J. M. Corrie.]