

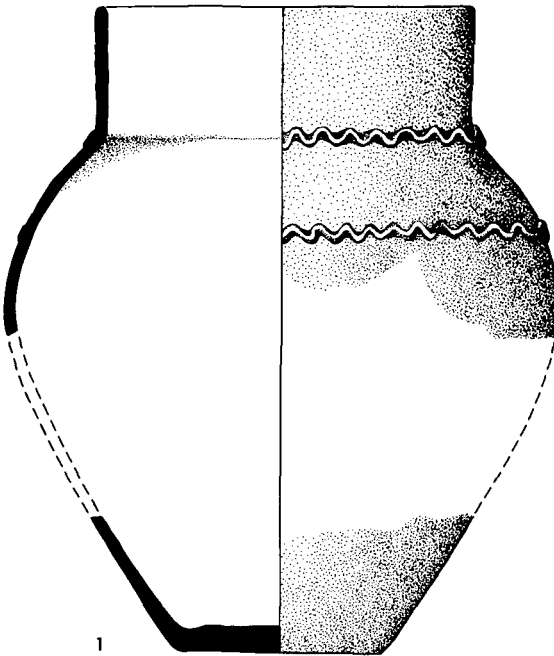
Some objects from peat bogs

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LOCH AN DUIN, NORTH UIST

A large pot and a wooden spoon were found in 1962 by Archibald MacDonald of Trumisgarry while digging peats about 150 yds W of the dun at Loch an Duin, NGR NF 885 737. They lay at a depth of 2½–3 ft (0.76–0.91 m) in a pit 2½ ft (0.76 m) in diameter which had apparently been covered over with turves (*Discovery Excav Scot* 1962, 32). Mr MacDonald presented the objects to the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland (catalogue nos: NMAS GT 1242, pot and NMAS GT 1283, spoon).

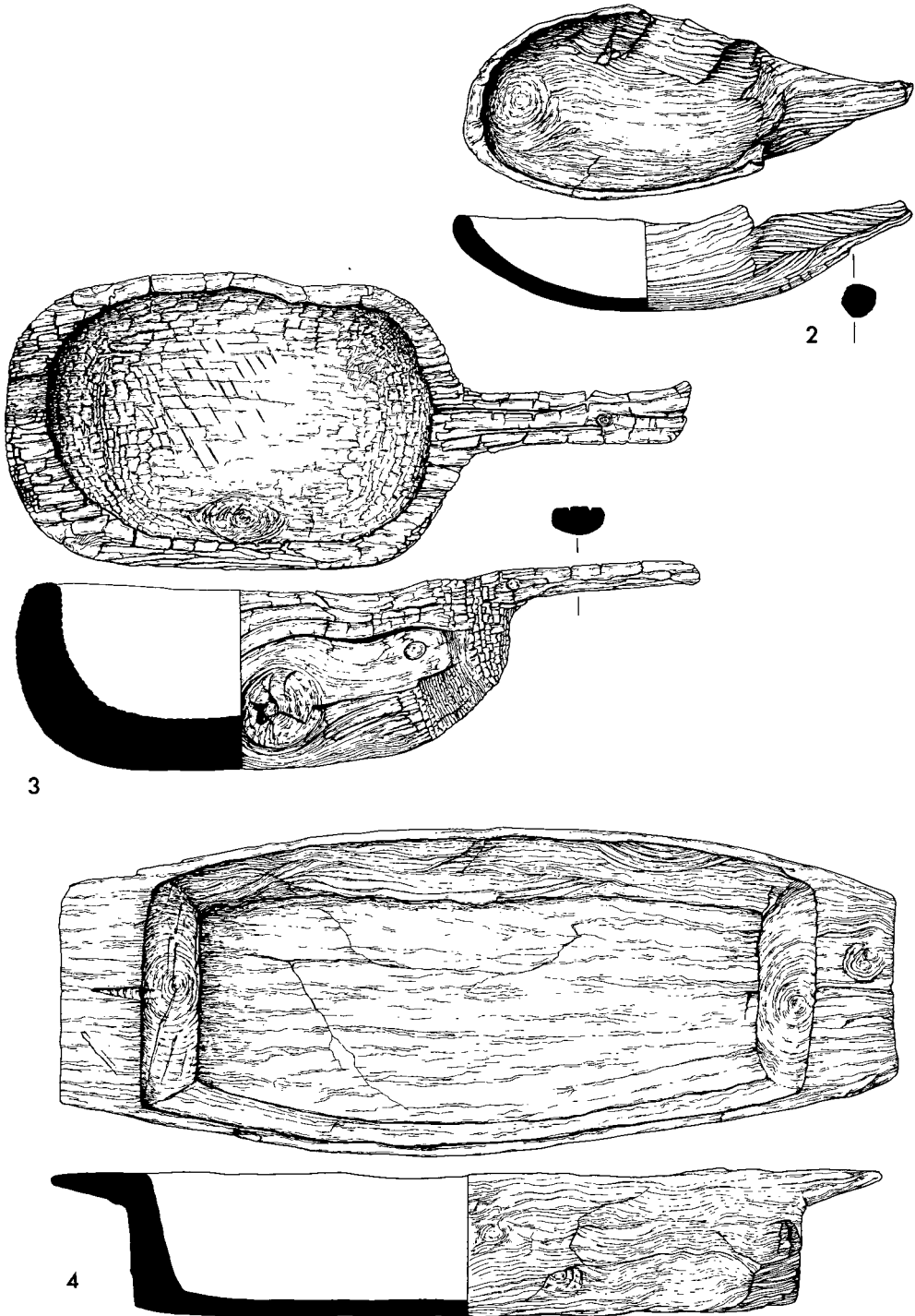
The pot was presumably complete when buried; it has now been restored from the surviving sherds (illus 1). It is made from a weathered coarse brown fabric, the upper part sooted on the outside, and decorated with two applied wavy cordons. The rim diameter is 200 mm, the height around 350 mm.



ILLUS 1 Pot from Loch an Duin, North Uist (scale 1:4)

Such large jars with long straight or slightly everted rims and with occasional applied cordons have been found in the Outer Isles in published stratified contexts at A'Cheardach Mhor, South Uist (Young & Richardson 1960, 154–6), Dun Cuier, Isle of Barra (Young 1956, figs 7–12) and Dun Carloway (Tabraham 1977). These groups are later than 'decorated' wheelhouse ware but precede

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ILLUS 2 Wooden objects: 2, Loch an Duin, North Uist; 3, Cheese Bay, North Uist; 4, Durness, Sutherland (scales 2 & 3, 1:3; 4, 1:6)

the Norse incursions of the 9th century. A date between the 5th and the 7th or 8th centuries AD has been suggested (Close-Brooks 1977, 166–7).

The large wooden spoon or ladle is now 196 mm long, the bowl 135 mm long by 85 mm wide (illus 2, 2). It appears to have shrunk sideways so the bowl may originally have been rounder, and part of the handle is missing. The wood has not been identified as it would have meant removing a large sample from the object. The spoon can be dated to the 5th–8th centuries AD by its association with the pot.

CHEESE BAY, NORTH UIST

A wooden scoop was found by Mr M D MacLennon about 4 ft 6 in (1.37 m) deep in a peat bank on his croft at 5 Cheese Bay (c NF 959 736) in 1974 or 1975. It was purchased by the National Museum in 1978.

The scoop (illus 2, 3) has survived in quite good condition despite drying without treatment. It is now 290 mm long overall, the bowl itself 200 mm by 13 mm wide. The handle seems too small for the bowl, even allowing for shrinkage, but possibly part of it has flaked off. No precise parallels for this scoop are known to the writer. The wood has been examined by Theo Skinner of the National Museum's Conservation Laboratory. He reports that the wood has deteriorated and is difficult to identify positively, but is either *Picea* sp (Spruce) or *Larix* sp (Larch), most probably *Larix* sp.

DURNESS, SUTHERLAND

An oak trough containing bog butter was found in 1969 near Durness at approximately NC 387 368 by Martin McKay and John Campbell when cutting peat. The finders gave it to the National Museum; its catalogue no is NMAS SHC9. The trough (illus 2, 4), which was found waterlogged and lifted in pieces, has been successfully restored in the laboratories of the National Museum using the acetone-rosin method (Bryce *et al* 1975, 42, pls 16–17). The trough was cut from one solid log of wood, and now measures 730 mm long and 285 mm wide. The end walls are thick, but the side walls and the base are thin and only about 10–15 mm thick. The trough is slightly rounded in cross-section (*ibid*, pl 17). The bog butter found in it survives as an irregular pitted lump some 340 mm long.

One-piece wooden troughs of this simple rectangular shape with two flat lug handles seem to have been in use over a very long period of time. Similar troughs, as yet unpublished, were found in a Dark Age context at Loch Glashan Crannog, Argyll (Scott 1961). They also occurred in the pre-Roman Iron Age at Glastonbury, Somerset (Coles *et al* 1977, 16). Another trough of unknown age was found at Lochlee Crannog, Ayrshire (Munro 1890, 411–13, fig 143).

It has long been recognized that the fatty substance commonly known as bog butter was buried in peat to preserve it. The substance itself could be either butter or some other form of animal fat such as tallow, though the frequent presence of hairs has been thought to show that it was in fact butter that had been churned in a skin. Chemical analysis cannot distinguish between butter and other fats that have been buried for a long time, since these materials, when buried in wet, anaerobic conditions change to adipocere. (Macadam 1882; Thornton *et al* 1970, with an analysis of the Durness 'butter' in tables 1 & 2).

Bog butter is often found in tall kegs (Macadam 1882, 220–1, fig 1). However, a wooden 'dish' of bog butter found at Midton near Poolewe, Ross-shire (Macrae 1894) seems to have been a handled trough of roughly similar size and shape to that from Durness. There is also a rectangular trough of bog butter, without handles, from Gunnister, North Yell, Shetland, now in the National Museum (catalogue no NMAS SHC 6). The date of these specimens is unknown.

NOTE ON THE PRESERVATION OF WET WOOD

It seems certain that many more waterlogged objects are found in peat cutting than ever get recorded. Wooden objects in particular, if lifted and dried, will usually shrink away to something unrecognizable. We are extremely fortunate that the finders of the objects described here took the trouble to recover them and have them identified. It cannot be stressed too often that wood found in a wet condition must be kept wet until it can be got to a museum laboratory equipped to deal with waterlogged wood. The best way to do this with a small object is to put it into a tightly closed plastic bag or box, or with a larger object to encase it in polythene sheeting. Wet wood is soft and fragile, and needs to be packed round carefully to support it during travel.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks are due to all the finders, to Marian O'Neill for the illustrations of the wooden objects, and to Helen Adamson for showing me the Loch Glashan troughs in Glasgow Art Gallery and Museum.

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