

A wooden bowl from Loch a 'Ghlinne Bhig, Bracadale, Skye

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with contributions from J Barber, C Earwood, R Miket & D Roberts

ABSTRACT

The wooden bowl from Loch a 'Ghlinne Bhig, Skye, is described and compared with the bowl from Talisker, Skye. Both are similar in design and technology and radiocarbon dates place their manufacture sometime in the first to second centuries AD. Comparisons are also made with other wooden vessels from Scotland and Ireland.

INTRODUCTION

D Roberts & R Miket

In 1982 this Society was informed of the recent discovery of a wooden bowl on Talisker Moor, Isle of Skye (Barber 1982). Around the same time a second bowl was found only a few kilometres away, although a decade intervened before *Dualchas* (Skye and Lochalsh District Council's Museums Service) became aware of the discovery. As a result, the opportunity to establish the precise findspot and possible context for the vessel was lost. Indeed, all that is known now is that the vessel was discovered sometime between 1979 and 1981 while cutting a forestry road northwards from the Struan/Portree hillroad (B885) between Loch a 'Ghlinne Bhig and the River Snizort (approximately NG 4144). For 10 years the bowl lay in the offices of the Department of Agriculture & Fisheries in Portree until donated to the Museums Service through the kindness of A Henry (*Dualchas* Accn No 1990.7).

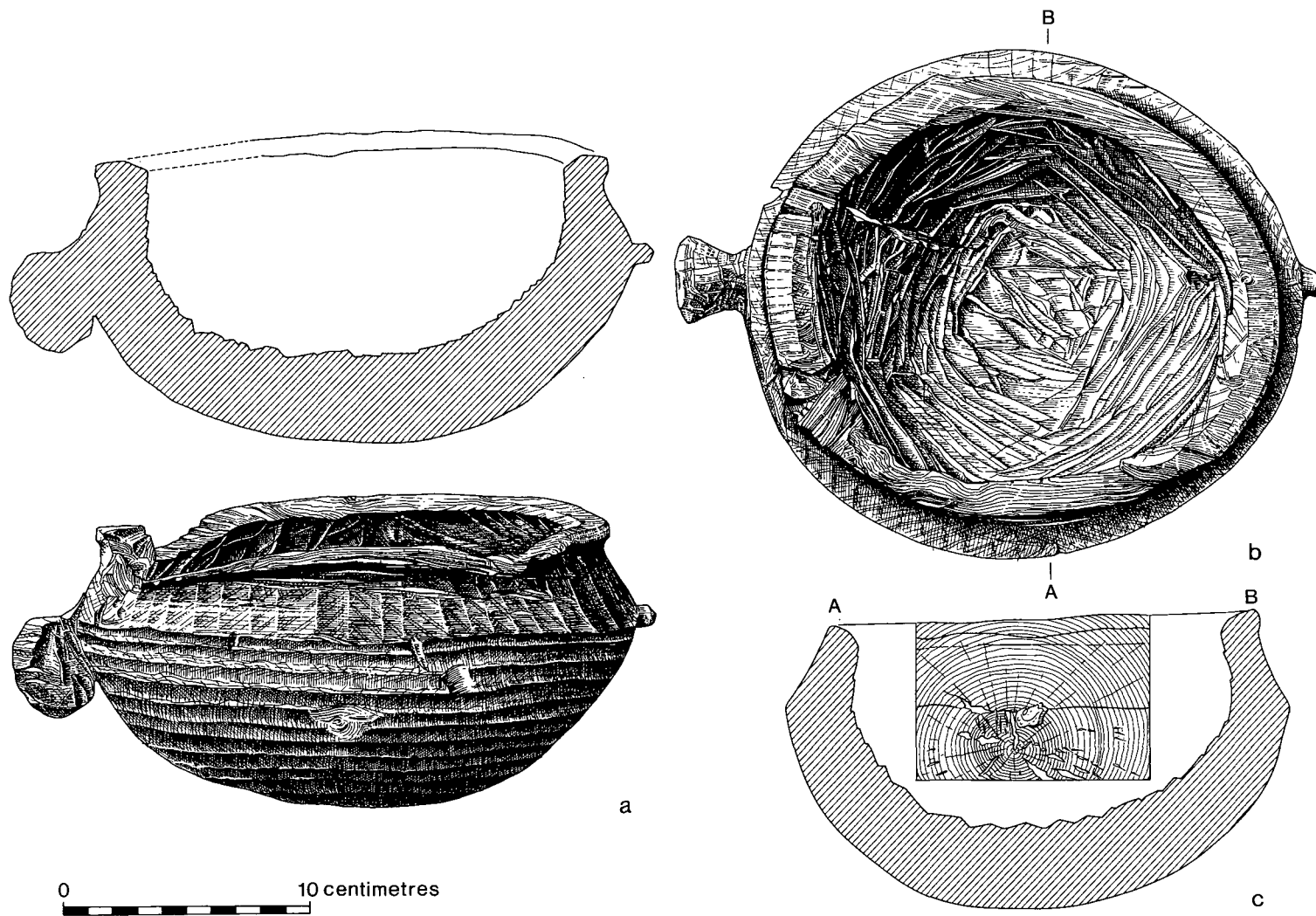
THE BOWL (illus 1 & 2)

B A Crone & J W Barber

RAW MATERIAL

The bowl has been fashioned by hand from a section of an alder tree (*Alnus glutinosa*), at least 200 mm in diameter. It was carved from the trunk in such a way that the grain of the wood lies roughly parallel with the plane of the rim and the centre of the tree passes through the bowl at the

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ILLUS 1 (a) profile; (b) interior; (c) cross-section showing alignment of grain

level of the carination (illus 1c). A very knotty piece of wood was used and it may be that part of the vessel's marked asymmetry was caused by the need to avoid the more problematic knots.

The maximum dimensions of the bowl, at the carination, are 198×215 mm narrowing to an oval rim of 147×166 mm, internally. It is 113 mm high from base to rim with a carination 75 mm above the base. After it was found the bowl had been allowed to dry out naturally and part of its asymmetry must be attributable to this. However, the possibility that the bowl was never truly circular cannot be ruled out.

EXTERIOR OF THE BOWL (illus 1a)

In profile, the bowl is shallow and round-bottomed with a pronounced carination narrowing to an everted rim. Its exterior is relatively well finished.

At the level of the carination a short stud, carved in relief, protrudes 7 mm from the surface of the bowl. It is roughly rectangular in cross-section and measures 10×8 mm. Diametrically opposite this is a lug, the upper surface of which also lies on the level of the carination. The lug is 33 mm long and narrows to a distinct waist. It is 35 mm wide, narrowing to 20 mm at a point 10 mm from the surface of the bowl. The outer face of the lug is an oval, 35×39 mm, with the longest axis in the vertical plane. The bottom of the lug is cut back sharply in a V-shape. Cutmarks encircle the junction of the lug and bowl, indicating the process of its manufacture. The shape of the lug was clearly designed for ease of handling and fits snugly between thumb and forefinger.

The carination is quite pronounced but its position varies in height around the circumference of the bowl. It is not possible to estimate the extent to which this is due to distortion from drying. The surface of the bowl below the carination has been carefully worked. Shallow grooves, approximately 8–10 mm wide with concave cross-sections less than 1 mm deep, are arranged parallel with the carination and cover the greater part of the vessel below it. The ridges between the grooves have been smoothed and this may have been a deliberate part of the design.

The bottom of the bowl is completely smooth and there are no toolmarks visible on it. This part of the vessel is encircled by an oval compression-mark which measures approximately 160×145 mm and lies roughly concentric with the perimeter of the bowl. This mark could have been created by placing the bowl within a metal ring. The ring has cut into the bowl at several points on its circuit. There are two further small compression-marks lying within the oval. One is an incomplete circle some 75 mm in diameter, lying completely eccentric to the centre; the other consists of a short arc, concentric with the centre.

Above the carination the neck turns inwards. The neck has been shaped by a series of shallow vertically aligned facets, 12 mm wide and less than 0.5 mm deep. Where the implement used has met the bastard grain around the knot the facets have slewed considerably and the stopping-marks of the former have bitten into the wood just under the lip of the rim.

The rim projects some 5 mm from the top of the inclined neck. It is a flat rim, roughly 10 mm wide, with an internal bevel which varies from 5 mm to 11 mm. This variability is probably due to the fact that the interior of the vessel is unfinished.

INTERIOR OF THE BOWL (illus 1b)

The bulk of the interior has been removed to a depth of 70 mm, leaving a base 43 mm thick. The sides of the bowl, which have not been undercut, are up to 30 mm thick and are clearly unfinished. Rough toolmarks, the edges of which are still crisp and sharp, form a rosette

pattern in the base of the bowl. The wood is still splintered around the toolmarks; it is unlikely that the splinters would have survived if the vessel had been used in any way.

THE DATE

A sample from the bowl was submitted to the Department of Subatomic Physics of the University of Utrecht in the Netherlands for radiocarbon age measurement by accelerator mass spectrometry. The radiocarbon dates were calibrated using software incorporating the Belfast calibration curve (Dalland in press).

The results of the assay are as follows:

CALIBRATED DATE			
SAMPLE NO.	C14 DATE	1-SIGMA	2-SIGMA
UT-1698	1930±50 BP	AD 20–AD 125	30 BC–AD 205

DISCUSSION

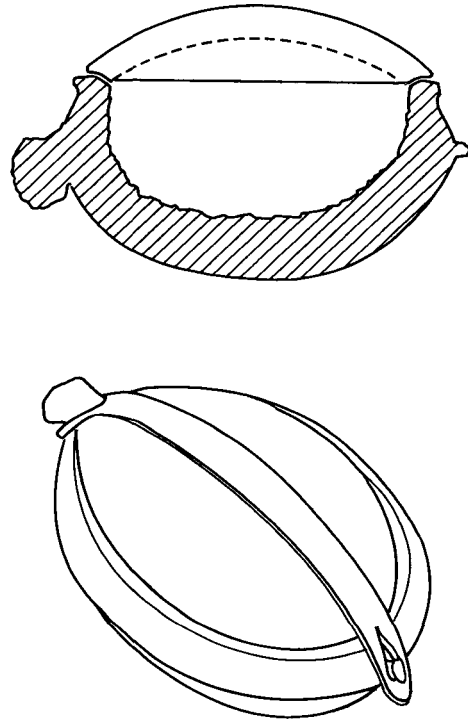
B A Crone

The Bracadale bowl belongs within a group of handled wooden vessels many of which show signs of having been manufactured on a lathe (Earwood 1990a, 25–30). The Bracadale bowl was not lathe-turned but was carved by hand from an alder log. The initial shaping of the bowl from the log would probably have been effected using an axe but the outer surface of the bowl has then been carefully fashioned, probably using a small shallow gouge approximately 10–12 mm wide. The interior of the bowl has been removed using a small wood-axe. The toolmarks on the sides are stepped where the axe has bitten in and the offcut then broken off. In the base the toolmarks are more feathered where the axe has bitten in at a more oblique angle. The most complete of the toolmarks in the interior indicates the use of an axe c 40 mm wide at the cutting edge. From the pattern made by the toolmarks it is possible to envisage the woodcarver bracing the bowl at an angle against himself while removing the sides and then, with the bowl between his knees, chopping away at the base, rapidly turning the bowl at the same time.

The unfinished appearance of the interior contrasts strongly with the finished exterior of the bowl and suggests that the bowl was abandoned before completion. Given that the vessel was never used, the compression-marks on its base may have been caused during its manufacture. They may simply have been caused by a stand (or vice) used to steady the bowl while the interior was being removed. Alternatively, they may have been created during storage of the bowl after its recovery.

The Bracadale bowl is very similar in profile and manufacture to the only other wooden bowl found on Skye, a few kilometres away on Talisker Moor (Barber 1982). The results of a radiocarbon assay on a sample of the Talisker bowl are as follows (calibration method as above):

CALIBRATED DATE			
SAMPLE NO.	C14 DATE	1-SIGMA	2-SIGMA
OXA-3542	1830±80 BP	AD 85–AD 245	AD 20–AD 400



ILLUS 2 Suggested reconstruction of bowl with lid and strap

The radiocarbon dates indicate that the bowls are broadly contemporary. Both are round-bottomed bowls of alderwood with a distinct carinated shoulder narrowing to an everted rim. The Talisker bowl was also carved rather than lathe-turned. It displays the same carefully worked surface with shallow grooves covering the bowl below the carination, details, which, together with the 'gouge'-marks below the grooves, are thought to be ornamental (Barber 1982, 579). The similarity in position and morphology of the grooves on both bowls is such as to suggest that they may be products of the same workshop.

The major difference between the two bowls lies in the design of the handles; the Talisker bowl has two finely shaped flat handles set vertically on the shoulder of the bowl in contrast to the stud and lug of the Bracadale bowl. While the lug is an efficient handle the stud would not have served any function in carrying the vessel. Dr David Roberts has suggested that the idiosyncratic form and arrangement of the stud and lug, in combination with the wide, flat rim, might indicate that the vessel was originally intended to have a lid secured by a simple strap (illus 2).

The bowls are unlike contemporary Iron Age ceramic vessels from Skye, all of which are flat-bottomed (cf Martlew 1985, 44). The difference in materials and shape possibly reflects a difference in function. A round-bottomed wooden vessel is clearly more portable than a flat-bottomed ceramic pot and the design of the Bracadale bowl would lend itself to

being slung over the shoulder or hung from a belt. These bowls have been found in the midst of moorland, seemingly unassociated with any settlement and they may represent equipment lost by an Iron Age farmer while moving about the land.

DATING AND COMPARANDA

C Earwood

The profile of the bowl, with its round base, pronounced carination and everted rim, places it within a category of late prehistoric handled bowls which include both wooden and bronze examples. Some nine wooden bowls are known from Scotland and Ireland. The most skilfully crafted of these wooden bowls is an example from County Armagh, the handle of which is carved in a shape suggestive of a bird's head and which is comparable to that on a bronze bowl from Keshcarrigan, County Leitrim (Jope 1954, 93). Its form is paralleled by other bronze bowls of the late Iron Age, including vessels from the River Bann in Ireland and Lochar Moss, Dumfriesshire (Raftery 1984, 214–23). The other wooden bowls, such as those from Ardour House, Inverness-shire, have simpler ring-shaped handles set vertically on the shoulder (Earwood 1990b; Maxwell 1951, 164).

While the Bracadale bowl displays the same distinctive profile as the other bowls in this category, the handle, which is positioned on the carination, has a quite different form. As described above, the handle bears no similarity to that of the Talisker bowl, the shape of which is paralleled on one of the Ardour bowls and on a number of late Iron Age bowls and dishes from Ireland. The suggested reconstruction of the Bracadale bowl as a lidded vessel has no parallels among other vessels of this period. A bog-butter keg of comparable date from Morvern (Earwood 1991) has a flat lid while the bog-butter dish from Cunnister, North Yell, Shetland, is recorded as having a domed lid (Nat. Mus. Cat. 1892, Accn No ME222); so far, none has been found with possible attachments for a lid.

However, the date of the Bracadale bowl places it firmly within the group of late Iron Age vessels. The bronze examples are considered to date to the first century BC/first century AD (Jope 1954, 93; Raftery 1984, 222–3) while the radiocarbon dates obtained for the wooden bowls from Scotland and Ireland indicate a longer currency, from the second century BC to the third century AD, with one example, from Dalvaird Moss, Dumfries and Galloway, occurring as late as the fifth century AD (Earwood 1990b).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The work was funded by Skye & Lochalsh District Council who also paid for the radiocarbon dates for the Bracadale bowl and the Talisker bowl. The bowl was illustrated by Sylvia Stevenson.

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