

I.

FURTHER NOTES ON ANCIENT WOODEN TRAPS—THE SO-CALLED
OTTER AND BEAVER TRAPS. BY ROBERT MUNRO, LL.D.,
F.S.A.Scot., AND PATRICK GILLESPIE, Esq.

The first general account of these curious objects was published in my *Lake-Dwellings of Europe* in 1890 (pp. 179–184), an abstract of which appeared in the reports of the British Association for the same year. On the 12th of January 1891, I read at this Society a paper on these traps, giving a detailed account of the discovery, structure, and distribution of all the specimens then known to me throughout Europe. From the publicity thus given to these objects others soon came to light in various parts of Europe, the upshot of which was that, in 1897, I wrote a complete monograph on the subject entitled “A Strange Chapter in Comparative Archaeology” (*Prehistoric Problems*, pp. 239–286). In 1917 I had occasion to give an address on Comparative Archaeology to the Dumfriesshire and Galloway Natural History and Antiquarian Society, in the course of which I referred to the ancient traps as an excellent illustration of the theme of my discourse, and summarised the result of researches up to that date in the following remarks:—

Shortly after my attention was directed to these traps I collected notices of nine or ten of them, all of which had been dug out of peat-bogs at different times and in widely distant localities. Since then many more specimens have come to light throughout Western Europe. The conjectural functions assigned to them are fanciful to an unusual degree. Two or three found in North Germany were described as otter- or fish-traps. A specimen turned up by a peat-cutter in North Wales was regarded by a high authority as a musical instrument. One from Ireland was held to be a fish-trap, a pump, a cheese-press, and a machine for moulding peats. In Italy three newly discovered specimens were described as models of prehistoric boats. Carl Deschmann, Curator of the Laibach Museum, labelled the two in his keeping as *Biberfalle*, because in the lake-dwelling near to which they were found there was a profusion of the bones of the beaver, but none of the otter. Other writers regarded these objects as traps for catching wild ducks. In Ireland, which has now yielded eleven specimens (see figs. 1 and 3), no remains of the beaver have been found in its post-glacial deposits, so that the beaver-trap theory cannot apply to the Irish machines. At the present time (1917) the recorded number of these traps amounts to forty-one, and their geographical distribution

embraces Carniola, Lombardy, Germany (several localities), Denmark, Wales, and Ireland (three localities).

These machines are so alike in their structural details that they must have been constructed on a uniform plan. Briefly, this consisted of a prepared block of wood, two or three feet in length and perforated in the middle by an elongated aperture (figs. 1 and 2). Into this aperture a valve, movable on projecting pivots at one side, was ad-

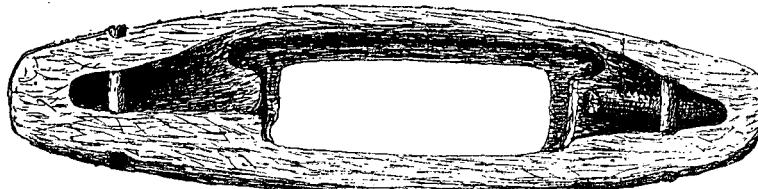


Fig. 1. Wooden Trap found in a Bog at Clonetrace, Ireland. (Univalvular.)

justed, so that when the aperture was open the valve stood at right angles to the surface of the machine. Over the valve an elastic rod stretched along the whole length of the machine, so arranged as to have a to-and-fro movement at each end. When the valve was open the elastic rod was forcibly bent upwards and backwards, and to keep it in this position a bit of stick was inserted to which the bait was attached. When an animal pulled the bait the bit stick gave way

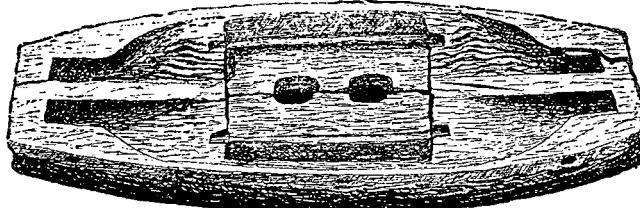


Fig. 2. Wooden Trap found in Laibach Moor, formerly a lake. (Bivalvular.)

and the valve closed with a bang, caused by the pressure of the elastic rod, and thus caught the otter, or beaver, or duck by the neck. Looking at the *modus operandi* of these ingenious contrivances, I find that they are divisible into two categories, according as the aperture is fixed with one (fig. 1) or two valves (fig. 2), the latter being simply a re-duplication of the parts of the former. It is somewhat significant to find that all the traps hitherto discovered within the British Isles, twelve in number, were univalvular, while on the Continent only one, now preserved in the Museum of Danzig, belonged to this category.

In the month of February 1919 I had a communication from

Mr Patrick Gillespie of 82 Fenchurch Street, London, drawing my attention to a rubbing from a stone monument at Clonmacnois, Ireland, showing a stag, apparently trapped in some kind of wooden structure, and suggesting that the machine might be one of the so-

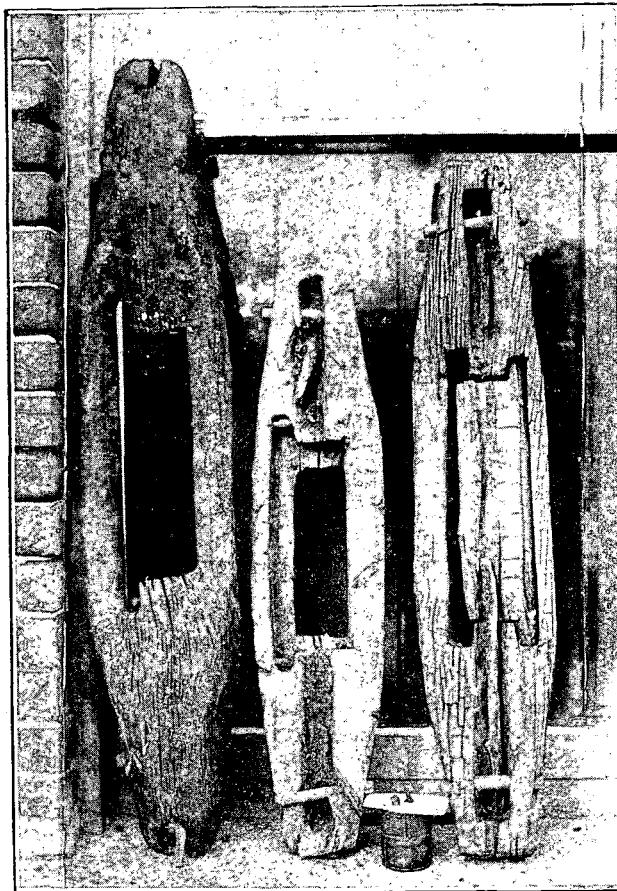


Fig. 3. Three Traps from Nine found in Larkhill, Ireland. (Univalvular.)

called otter or beaver traps. On looking at the reproduction of the Clonmacnois sculpture in the volume of the Society's *Proceedings*, I at once saw that there was some foundation for Mr Gillespie's suggestion. So I asked him to write a short note on the subject, and that I would bring it before the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, along with some comments of my own on these mysterious machines. The

supposed functions assigned to them by their respective discoverers have been so different that their use in capturing deer is not so *outré* as many of the uses already attributed to them. At any rate, the stag sculptured on the Clonmacnois slab is evidently trapped by the foot in an elongated hole in a wooden structure which looks like the valve of one of the famous wooden traps, now so abundantly found in Ireland. If a deer put his foot into the aperture of one of these traps and could not extricate it, the animal would be so hampered that the huntsman would have no difficulty in capturing it. But the question is, What would induce a deer to put his foot in such a hole? At Larkhill Bog there were nine traps arranged in a circumscribed group from 1 to $1\frac{1}{2}$ foot apart from each other. But it is not suggested that the object of this grouping was to place so many traps on some favourite spot which deer frequented on the chance that one of the herd would accidentally get caught.

Fig. 3 is a photographic view of three of the Larkhill group, the largest of which is 4 feet long and 9 inches wide in its greatest width, and containing a rectangular aperture measuring 17 inches by 5 inches. It is the under side of the trap which is here exhibited in order to show the marked bevel all round the aperture, which seems to be a common feature in these machines. The upper surfaces are, however, seen in the other two traps figured, and both show their valves, one closed and the other open, together with some remains of the elastic rods, which, it is stated, were made of hazel-wood.

The following is Mr Gillespie's communication on the subject:—

NOTE ON THE SCULPTURED FIGURE OF A STAG ON A CROSS SHAFT
AT CLONMACNOIS, IRELAND, IN RELATION TO THE ANCIENT
WOODEN OBJECTS KNOWN AS OTTER OR BEAVER TRAPS.

In the volume of *Proceedings* of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland for the years 1890-1891 there was published by Dr Robert Munro, the Secretary, a notice regarding certain wooden machines found in peat-mosses and old lake bottoms in Ireland, Wales, and on the Continent. After describing, with full illustrations, the specimens which had at that time been discovered, the Doctor discussed the many theories put forward as to their use, but, while inclining to think they were otter traps, he left the question practically open and to be settled by future finds or by possible historical evidence.

It is some years since I read this paper, but whilst glancing lately



Fig. 4. Cross-slab at Clonmacnoise showing figure of Stag in left-hand panel.

at the illustrations of Irish sculpture in an article by J. Romilly Allen, published in the *Proceedings* of the Society for 1896-1897, I noticed on p. 310, on a cross shaft at Clonmacnois (fig. 4), the figure of a stag with its foreleg caught in what is described in the context as a "rectangular frame or hobble." This hobble at once struck me as being so very like the traps described in the paper referred to, both as regards shape, apparent size, and even in the detail of the depression shown in the rubbing of the shaft, that the question at once presented itself—Are all these objects, wherever found, not simply deer traps of a kind known and used in Ireland at the time of the cross carving at Clonmacnois, which is considered, I believe, to be about the eighth or ninth century, A.D.?

In favour of this view, it may be remarked that deer have been, and probably still are, captured in the far East by means of traps made on the same principle, but of bamboo and with quite different details, and further, to account for the usual finding-places of the traps, that they would naturally be set about the usual drinking-places of the deer, and possibly under water for concealment, thus becoming covered and preserved by the deposit of peat.

Whether the evidence of the Clonmacnois stag is strong enough to justify the conclusion that the objects in our Museum called otter traps are really deer traps, is a question to be decided by archaeologists competent to judge; but should the answer be in the affirmative, it might be of importance as supplying an approximately dated horizon for the level at which such objects are or may later be found in any particular peat-moss or deposit.

This would help in estimating the age of articles found below or above this horizon, and might also throw some light on the geological history and age of the deposit itself.

At the suggestion of Dr Mupro, I have put on record the existence of the Clonmacnois carving (in its relation to the traps) and the conclusions to which, to me, it appears to lead, in the hope that they may interest members of the Society and lead to further inquiry.