ARCHAEOLOGY AND FOLK-CULTURE

By IORWERTH C. PEATE

Assistant Keeper in Charge of the Sub-Department of Folk-Culture and Industries, National Museum of Wales

As one whose work has taken him during the last seven years outside the field of prehistoric archaeology to the more entrancing one—at least to a reasonably imaginative Welshman of peasant stock—of Welsh folk-culture, I feel somewhat hesitant in appearing before a society which concerns itself entirely with archaeological research. I am emboldened to do so by the conviction that the study of folk-culture is always a corollary and sometimes a corrective to archaeological research; and I venture to think that the Welsh Folk Collections in the National Museum of Wales at Cardiff have already proved that Folk study in Britain is to take its rightful place in the wider study of Man.

Let me explain my argument by means of an example. I have recently been working on the history of the Eisteddfod in Wales. The Eisteddfod is to-day the most outstanding of the cultural folk-institutions of the Welsh nation. It is the one institution which enables the great body of peasant literary craftsmen to practise their craft. In the Eisteddfod, since 1789 when it became a democratic folk-institution, medals have been offered for literary work. They are indeed the only tangible evidence of the history of this great institution. Now let us imagine that in another two or three thousand years, the archaeologist of the future sets himself to reconstruct the literary history of Wales in the nineteenth century. And let us imagine that the only archaeological evidence left for him would be these silver medals; it is quite a possible situation, for the written or printed word has often an irritating way of disappearing, whilst medals are almost

indestructible. Now the archaeologist I have in mind would build up a theory on the evidence of these medals—and many of us have seen archaeological theories built upon a less certain foundation! He would maintain that the great figures of Welsh literary life were the men whose names appear on the medals. And in almost every case he would be wrong. For all these medallists proved to be third-rate writers, peasant literary craftsmen without a doubt but to be distinguished, as craftsmen are to be distinguished from artists, from the great literary figures of the century, those rare spirits who found no consolation in the glamour of eisteddfodic competition. The medals bear no witness to their work, but folk-tradition gives them their due recognition and the archaeologist's reconstruction could be corrected only by an appeal to that tradition. In the same way, the skeletons of the past become sensitive living creations when the evidence of archaeology is substantiated by that of Folk Study. Folk-memory is a long one and in Wales, at any rate, oral tradition (as well as folk-tradition in its varied material forms) is an element of great importance. Some of our folk tales contain elements dating back perhaps to prehistoric times, the official story-teller—*y cyfarwydd*—being an important figure in Welsh medieval life.

For the study of Folk-Culture, Wales presents a singularly appropriate and compact topographical unit. Wales is a high moorland country, the moorland being roughly in the shape of an hour-glass with three main lowland prolongations of the English plain extending into the waist of the hour-glass and at both ends. In past ages the whole of this region—highland and lowland—has been occupied by the Welsh nation speaking a definite language, that language being in an indefinable way the very basis of its nationality. One of the most significant characteristics of the Welsh nation has been the tenacity with which it has clung not only to its language which is still spoken throughout all its thirteen counties but to its traditional culture. The printed book assumed no important place in its history until the eighteenth century and I have already

stressed the importance of oral tradition as contrasted with the written record. Consequently Wales possessed not only an important body of folklore but also a well-defined cultural life, expressed in its domestic customs and agricultural methods, and, materially, in a wide range of individual furniture, utensils, implements and tools. It is the study of this wealth of traditional lore and material which has been so long neglected.

Sir Cyril Fox formulated an important truth when he summarised the geographical basis of historical development in Britain by stating that "in the lowland you get *replacement*, in the highland *fusion*" of cultures.[1] Sir Cyril referred to this as a tendency and dealt with the whole of Wales—both the tongues of lowland and the high moorland—as part of the Highland Zone. But it has been maintained from time to time by some geographers and archaeologists lacking this wider vision that the two types of topography exemplified in Wales—the highland block and the intrusive lowland—have reacted in different ways to the successive waves of intruders from the south-east. Those of us who know of the remarkable continuity in the life of Wales will agree with Fleure[2] and Fox that this is not so. An appeal to the evidence of Folk-Culture will demonstrate the truth and therefore even in the matter of the general principles of archaeological and historical development, neither the geographer nor the archaeologist nor the historian can afford to neglect this evidence.

A map such as that of South Wales in the fourteenth century by Dr. William Rees[3] in which the intrusive Norman and English culture is indicated in red shows one of the tongues of lowland, to which I have referred, entirely in that colour. Here then is obvious replacement of culture, you will say. But this is not the case. A similar map of Wales in the twentieth century would show the whole country in red. What the

[1] C. Fox: *Personality of Britain*, p. 31.

[2] H. J. Fleure in *Arch. Camb.*, 1923, p. 241.

[3] This is in no sense a criticism of Professor Rees's research. It is, however, an indication of the limitations of the map medium to illustrate factors of cultural significance.

map *does* indicate is an intrusive organization (political, economic, etc.) of society overlying the native culture. And it is significant that although the southern tongue of lowland,—the South Wales sea-plain—particularly the Vale of Glamorgan, was under influences both Norman and (subsequently) English from the twelfth century onwards, Welsh culture in that same lowland region was not replaced during the subsequent eight hundred years.[1] Not only was it not replaced but it actually flourished in some districts right through the centuries. There was no question of replacement and the lowland of Glamorgan gave to Wales in that same period cultural benefits of incalculable value, and during that period the language flourished throughout the area. The intruding Norman became absorbed into Welsh life to become Welsh himself and to speak the language. 'Gerald de Barri' became 'Gerald the Welshman.'

The process of replacement began only in the second half of the nineteenth century when the industrial development of the South Wales coalfield with its attendant influx of thousands upon thousands of non-Welshmen changed not only the character of its population but the nature of its life. But this metamorphosis affected the highlands of the coalfield quite as much as the lowland zone. It was in fact a development which was exceptional in the whole history of social evolution and can be compared only with the phenomenal 'rushes' to the metalliferous regions of Australia and South Africa. And even with such an abnormal influx, the result has been a fusion of cultures rather than a complete replacement of one by another.

We have in Wales therefore a complete cultural unit wherein have been preserved from time immemorial old customs and old traditions, an old language and even old types—all of value, if properly studied, to the archaeologist and anthropologist.

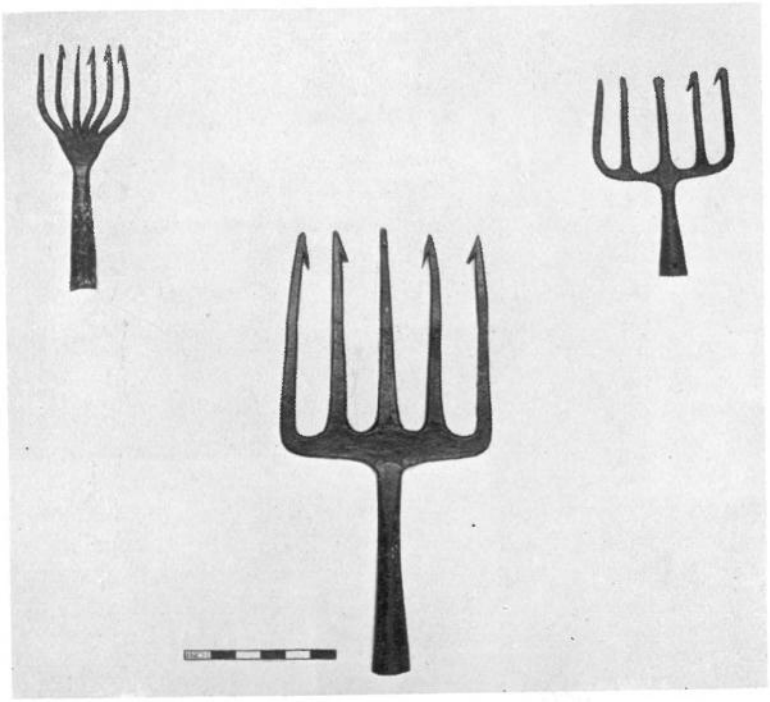
[1] This view has been criticised by some English workers but no criticism of it can be respected unless it comes from scholars with an intimate knowledge of the Welsh language and Welsh culture, for they only can be acquainted with all the data.

WASSAIL BOWL FROM EWENNY, GLAMORGAN

Photo : National Museum of Wales

PLATE II.

To face page 215.



WELSH FISH-SPEARS OF NINETEENTH-CENTURY DATE

Photo : National Museum of Wales

It is beyond the scope of my present subject to make any further reference to linguistic problems, but I would suggest in passing that two tasks which lie before the students of Welsh are those of compiling a linguistic atlas which will help to solve many problems of racial distribution and to rescue from the dialect-vocabularies all the technical terms relating to the various crafts, agriculture and domestic life. Instances of such terms still in use but dating back many centuries and obsolete in the written language are still common.

Let us direct our attention to some of the instances by which the national Welsh folk collections illuminate the study of archaeology. I must emphasize that the folk material in Wales is national only in so far as types have been modified and developed to suit Welsh conditions. Most of the material is not peculiar to Wales but belongs to the far wider tradition of European peasant culture.

In the field of Welsh folklore much might be said but I must content myself with a brief reference to three exhibits. The first is the *Mari Lwyd*—a custom which still survives in Glamorgan. The *Mari Lwyd* consists of a horse's skull and jaws sheeted and adorned with coloured ribbons, papers and streamers. This was carried on a man's shoulders at the head of a procession during Christmas and New Year festivities. The bearer of the head, working the jaws by means of a wooden handle, was led from house to house and at each house a request for admittance and for permission to sing was proffered in extempore verse which followed traditional rules. The occupants of the house also replied in verse, and a rhymed dialogue of set type, ending with the admission of the party, ensued.

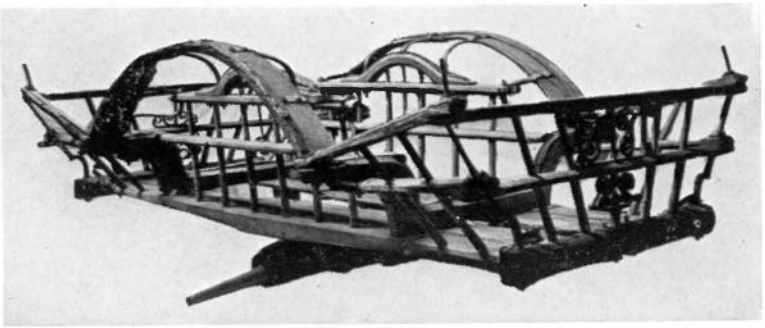
There seems no reason to doubt that the custom, which survives, in this form, in south-east Wales only is a survival of a pre-Christian tradition and is related to allied forms such as the Hooden Horse of Thanet, the Sailor's Horse of Minehead, the Hobby Horse of Padstow, the Bull's Head of Tetbury, the Wiltshire Bull's Head or 'wooset,' the Old Hob of Cheshire and the Hobby Horse of Kerry, Ireland. Similar customs are found in Sweden, Norway and Denmark,

Germany, Rumania, the Pyrenees, Switzerland, Poland and even in Java. The custom doubtless represents a widespread folk ceremonial which had its origin in prehistoric times. In Medieval Wales it was probably linked up with the miracle-plays and acquired the name *Holy Mary* (*Mari Lwyd*).

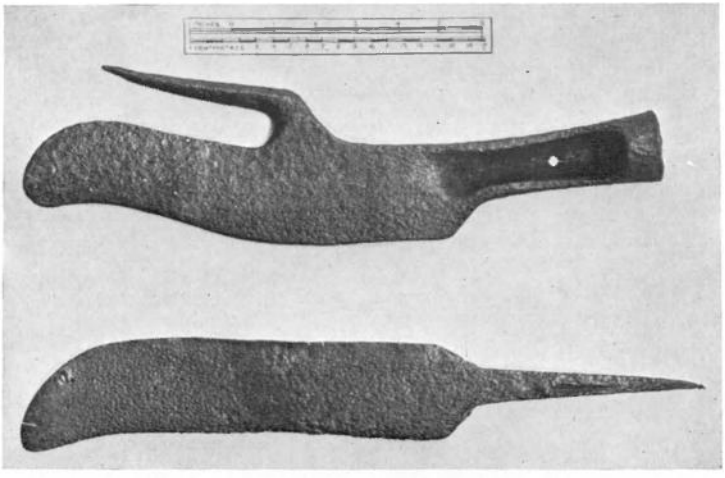
Another specimen illustrating the survival of folk-tradition of an even more remarkable character is provided by a wassail bowl of early nineteenth century date made at the Ewenny Pottery, Glamorgan (Pl. i). In its present condition it is badly damaged. The lid, however, was originally surmounted with a figure of Spring, inscribed, around which were grouped the representative life of the countryside—plant and animal—directed upwards towards this central and dominating figure. These wassail bowls, often associated with the *Mari Lwyd*, were used in ceremonies in early January and representations such as are seen on this bowl indicate the survival of ceremonies originally intended to ensure the rebirth of nature in spring. 'Led astray' to quote Frazer, 'by his ignorance of the true causes of things, primitive man believed that in order to produce the great phenomena of nature on which his life depended he had only to' initiate them by magical means. It is an interesting survival.

Another folklore specimen of interest to archaeologists is the cornmaiden. A specimen in the Welsh collection comes from the upper Severn valley on the borders of the English Plain, but various forms of it occur in west and south Wales where it is also known as the Reaping Mare and The Witch. It represents the last tuft of corn left in the reaping, cut by competitors in an elaborate ceremony and hung in the farmhouse until the next harvest to ensure a fruitful harvest the following year. This again is a variant of a widespread custom, a study of which would probably throw light upon some distributions.

The outdoor life of the Welsh peasantry presents several features of interest in this connexion. Trapping and fishing supply us with several primitive survivals. In the Laugharne district of Carmarthenshire there

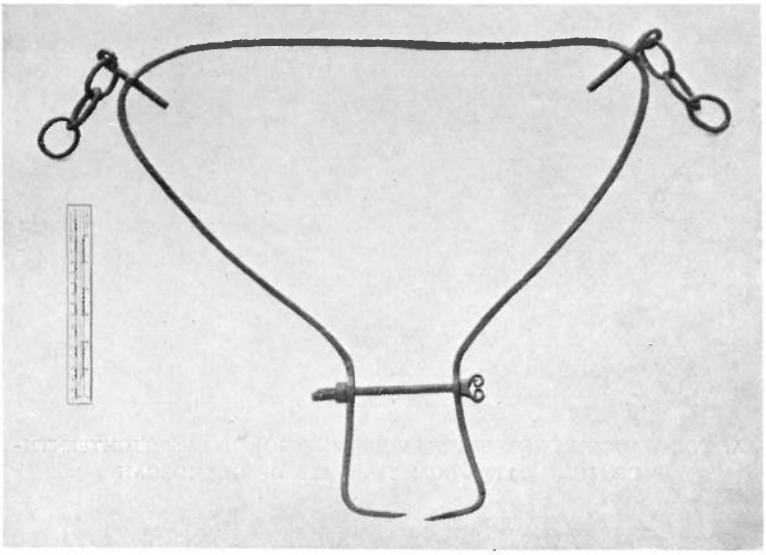


A. OX-WAGGON (WHEELS AND POLE MISSING) OF LATE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY DATE FROM THE VALE OF GLAMORGAN

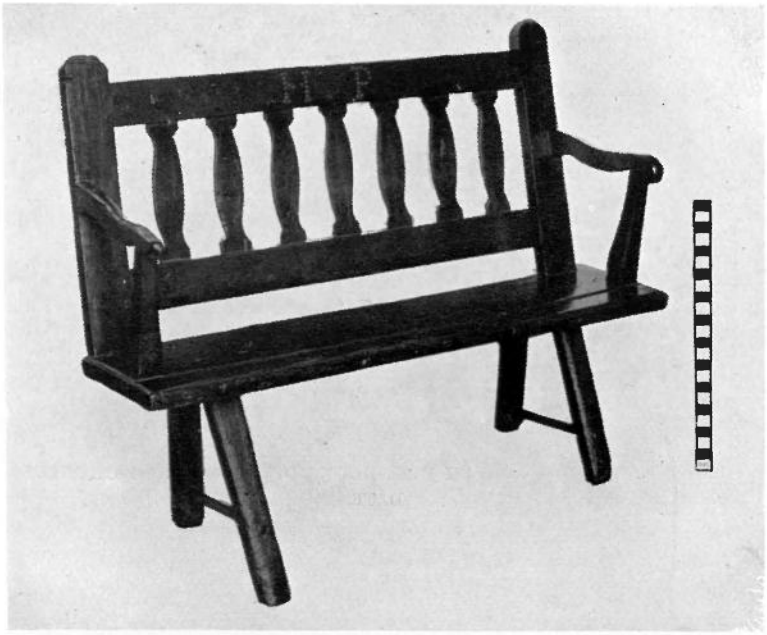


B. TWO TYPES OF WELSH BILL-HOOKS OF NINETEENTH-CENTURY DATE

Photos : National Museum of Wales



A. IRON BULL-HOLDER OF EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY DATE FROM BRECKNOCKSHIRE



B. OAK BENCH OF EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY DATE. WELSH

Photos : National Museum of Wales

are still used thorn fish-hooks attached to horse-hair casts. Brecknockshire and Glamorgan provide us with nineteenth-century examples of salmon spears (Pl. ii) which can be compared in detail with examples found at La Tène and other similar sites. Eel-traps[1] made of basket-work are still to be found in the Severn district. There are illustrations of similar traps in medieval Welsh manuscripts and in the Luttrell Psalter. They are also found as far afield as Madagascar and the American continent.

British coracles are mentioned by several of the classical writers such as Caesar, Pliny, Solinus and Lucan and several descriptions of them appear in medieval Welsh literature. They are still made and used on the Tywi and Teifi and on the Dee and in the Bewdley district of the Severn. The method by which they are constructed is an interesting one. The shape of the gunwale is marked on the ground with pegs ; ash rods are then placed in the ground ; slender hazel rods are next used to weave the gunwale against the ground. The upright rods are then bent over and their ends forced into the ground on the other side. The shaped coracle is now weighted to help it to set in position ; the skeleton is now complete. It is next covered with canvas and the rods are hammered down to stretch the canvas which is finally coated with pitch or tar. The coracle is now ready for use and is carried on the shoulders and manipulated on the water with a paddle.

The history of agricultural implements in Wales tells the same story of cultural continuity. Reference may be made in the first place to specimens illustrating transport. One of the most primitive types of sled[2] is still used in the most difficult country in Glamorgan, even for hay-harvesting. A development, wherein the whole body of the sled slides along the ground, in effect a slide-car, is in common use in north and mid Wales and another development—the wheelcar used particularly in Radnorshire—may be related to the wheeled slidecar. The waggon, of course, used to be

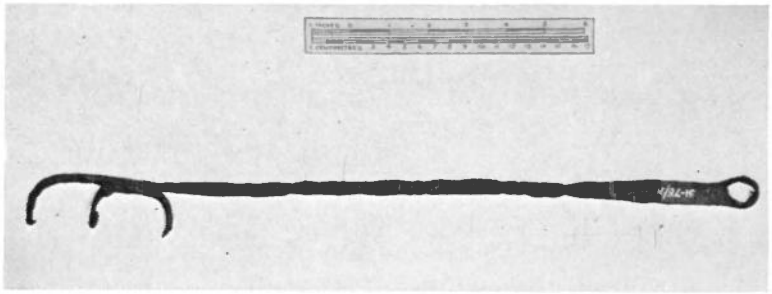
[1] *Man*, xxxiv, pp. 153–4.

[2] For a treatment of the whole subject see *Antiquity*, 1931, pp. 185–199 : ' Sleds, Carts and Waggons.'

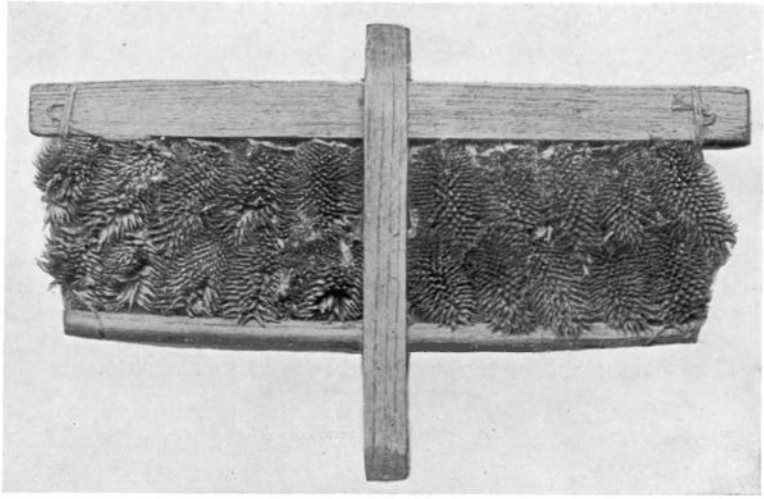
far commoner than it is to-day in the lowland districts. The two types, that of the long, narrow-bodied Mediterranean ox-waggon, adapted for Welsh conditions and the four-wheeled Teutonic horse-waggon developed to a high pitch of perfection were formerly both found in the Vale of Glamorgan. The ox-waggon (Pl. iii A) illustrated dates to the second half of the eighteenth century, while the bow-waggon, of beautiful proportions and design is still occasionally to be seen.

Space does not allow me to deal with the various farming implements still found which throw light upon our past history. But mention must be made of two types of bill-hooks (Pl. iii B). One is reminiscent of the Early Iron Age types, while the spiked variety, used almost exclusively for hedging, seems to be related to the fifteenth-century guisarme. Again, anyone familiar with Welsh sheep-shearing methods will recognise in the common type of shears an implement which can be paralleled in finds from many prehistoric sites. Finally in this connexion, the tradition of the toothed flint sickles and similar iron types, well known to students of, for example, the Central European lake-shore dwellings was continued until the nineteenth century in Wales in the toothed sickle once in general use in various districts. A bull-holder of eighteenth-century date with spikes for the nostrils (Pl. iv A) is a specimen which might very likely have prehistoric prototypes but I know of none. I should be grateful for information from any of my readers.

In conclusion we may turn to some aspects of indoor life. Here there still linger unconsciously traces of an ancient art. The bench illustrated (Pl. iv B) of eighteenth-century date, with its splats cut in asymmetrical curves, remind one of a notable feature of Keltic art. The common trivet forms are equally interesting when compared with early types, while the pothangers bring forcibly to one's mind an early type from La Tène. Attention may be drawn also to the coiled lip-basket work formerly made in most Welsh districts. The baskets are made of coiled straw bound together with strips of bramble bark. And one

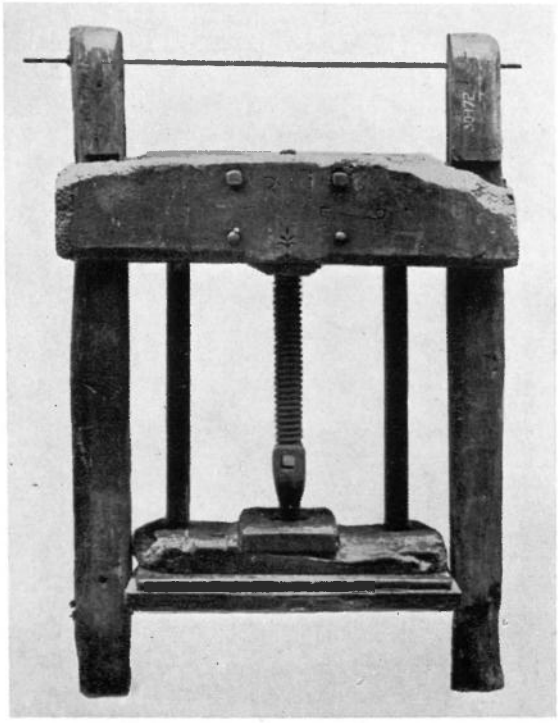


A. CAULDRON MEAT-HOOK OF NINETEENTH-CENTURY DATE FROM MONMOUTHSHIRE



B. HAND WOOL-CARDER MADE OF TEASELS INSERTED IN A WOODEN FRAME. NINETEENTH CENTURY. FROM STROUD, GLOUCESTERSHIRE (IDENTICAL WITH SPECIMENS USED IN MERIONETHSHIRE IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY)

Photos : National Museum of Wales



WOODEN CLOTH-PRESS DATED 1759 (WITH LATER IRON SCREW) USED UNTIL *c.* 1930 AT PENMACHNO, CAERNARVONSHIRE

Photo : National Museum of Wales

would like to mention also the west Wales wooden piggin in which the staves are bound with a band of oak very cleverly interlocking at the ends.

But perhaps one of the most interesting survivals is the cauldron meat-hook which has not yet disappeared from some districts in West Wales.[1] Those of the Early Iron Age are well known : compare with them a nineteenth-century country-made example from Monmouthshire (Pl. VA).

Finally, a word about rural crafts. The likeness between the turned bowls and ladles made by the west Wales turners,[2] and those from the Central European lake-shore dwellings is now probably too well known to need any further elaboration, although there are several interesting lines of research in this direction. In the Welsh weaving industry again teasel-carders (Pl. V B) have only recently gone out of use and there are medieval references to the growing of teasels in gardens in Wales for this purpose. Indeed, they are known in Wales as ' the carder's plant.' The practice of using them is doubtless an ancient one. In conclusion, one may draw a parallel between the type of cloth-press illustrated in a mural decoration at Pompeii and that in use down to recent years in the Welsh countryside (Pl. vi).

You will realize, I am sure, that all I have done is to refer almost at random to a number of specimens of cultural interest in Wales, of which there are prehistoric prototypes. They must be looked upon only as indications of a wealth of similar material. When our study of Welsh folk life and of the spoken dialects (as contrasted with literary Welsh the study of which has already reached a high stage of perfection) is more complete, it is probable that the evidence gained will throw much light upon various aspects of prehistoric distributions. For such a study, we in Wales are particularly fortunate in that, as I have already stressed, our nation is one which clings to its old traditions, in a region geographically homogeneous.

[1] The writer is indebted to Mr. J. R. Gabriel, of Caerleon, for this information.

[2] See a paper by the present writer in *Studies in Regional Consciousness and Environment* (Oxford, 1930).

It is my hope that the work already accomplished will in due course lead to the establishment of a Welsh national field-museum, in which folk-culture may receive adequate expression. For at the moment nothing can be collected which will not fit into a moderate-sized gallery. I hope also that it will be an incentive to the initiation of similar work in other parts of these islands, for, look upon it as you will, the past lives in us and no archaeological research can be completely satisfactory until this truth in all its implications is realized and acted upon.