

NOTES.

1. CELTIC CARVED BOX FROM ORKNEY.

The only 8th to 10th century A.D. wood-carving from Scotland, an oblong box found in Orkney nearly seventy years ago, has most generously been gifted to the National Museum of Antiquities by Mr J. Henderson Bishop, F.S.A.Scot. The *Proceedings*¹ contains a good account of its finding in a bog in the parish of Birsay, 1½ miles SW. of the farm of Howe, Evie, and Mr J. W. Cursiter, F.S.A.Scot., in whose collection it then was, illustrated the carved sides and gave a brief description of its contents. However, as was shown by the photograph published by the Royal Commission,² the old engravings do not give an altogether adequate impression. Fuller description and illustration is warranted, particularly of the tool-handles and the lid, with a discussion of some of the other features. Earlier Scandinavian analogies to the box itself have also to be noted.

The box measures 11·5 by 5 by 3 ins., and is cut out of a solid block of alder.³ Two long sides and one end are decorated in a manner that is obviously related to our Early Christian monuments, but is not exactly paralleled.

One side is chip-carved with two horizontal rows of running S-curves linked by sinuous leaf-shaped forms in a zigzag,⁴ and in each intervening space there is a roundel, usually with a hollow centre. The movement of the flat-relief scrolls is brought out by incised median lines. The other long side has incised decoration in a triple breaking-wave pattern consisting of large S-curves with smaller scrolls above and below (a type not listed by Romilly Allen). Round the edges are chip-carved spandrels which contain roundels. Two of the main "waves" have median lines that form "mushroom" terminations, while the third has not, though one of the lines from the second "wave" forks as if to run into the third. The consequent unfinished appearance was noted by Cursiter. Yet the third "wave" in relation to the smaller scrolls leaves rather less room for median lines than in the other cases; so it may be that the carver decided not to complete the pattern owing to a slight error in spacing. But more probably he was not averse to making his design asymmetrical and indeed the smaller scrolls curve in different directions. Incidentally the design is a purely linear one and is not incomplete in the sense of requiring more chip-carving.

The end is somewhat restored (though Cursiter's prompt alum-treatment saved the box and its contents from serious splitting or distortion). It has a chip-carved design—four swelling C-curves⁵ from whose interlocking ends long leaf-shaped curves escape diagonally to each corner. Median lines again impart movement.⁶ Roundels in threes and ones occupy the interspaces.

The box is grooved on three edges, and cut away on the fourth for the sliding lid (also of alder) which, as noted in 1885, must have been held down by two metal bands ½ in. wide, crossing near either end: depressions for the ends of the bands

¹ xx, 47-50.

² R.C.A.M. (*Orkney*), No. 126 and fig. 247.

³ Wood identifications for this note were kindly made by Mr P. S. Green, B.Sc., F.L.S., Royal Botanic Garden.

⁴ Cf. Allen, Romilly, *E.C.M.*, pattern No. 1063; he cited no example from Celtic Art.

⁵ Allen, Romilly, *cit.*, No. 1053.

⁶ Cf. the design on the Crescent symbol on the Skinnet Stone, Caithness: *E.C.M.*, III, 32.

are clearly visible, with a pinhole in the centre of each. The bands had, however, been replaced in antiquity, and presumably after a period of use, by leather thongs as shown in Pl. XL. Part of one, .5 in. wide, is in position in Cursiter's engraving, and there is a fragment from its other end, .35 in. wide; both pieces taper to .1 in. to fit into holes in the sides. The remaining end of the other thong does the same. It is 7 ins. long, at most .2 in. wide, and bent where it fits over the edges of the box.

Another indication that the box was not new when sunk in the bog is given by the small holes in the lid, which Cursiter thought were for securing it to the sides of the box; possibly he imagined that they were along the edges. However,

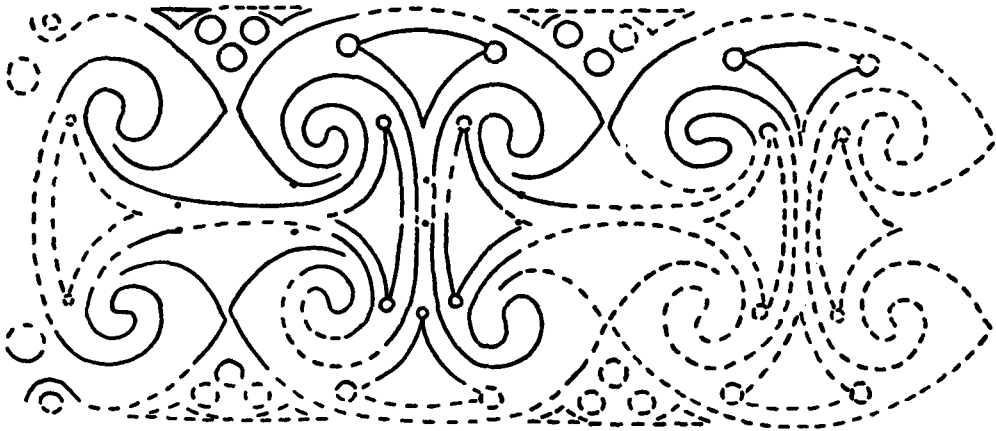


Fig. 1. Pattern incised on the lid of the Birsay box, restored, and small repair holes. ($\frac{1}{2}$.)

from the pattern on the lid and from the uneven spacing of the four pairs of holes themselves (which are only .1 in. across), it is demonstrable that they were made to bind up a split that had developed along the centre of the lid (fig. 1). The lid is now at most .2 in. thick, and was probably never much more, as compared with .4 for the sides of the box, .6 for the ends and .7-.8 for the bottom. It must have shrunk quickly for it shows no signs of preservation treatment. Perhaps $\frac{1}{3}$ of its width has been lost by shrinkage. Each end has broken away, but what remains is in six contiguous pieces, and most of the incised pattern can be reconstructed. It is an elaborate version of Romilly Allen's No. 1054 ("two rows of triple spirals connected by C-curves running horizontally and vertically"), a pattern which he recorded as occurring on numerous 9th to 10th century stones in Scotland, and in Irish MSS. including the Book of Kells. The Birsay version has the outermost C's pointed top and bottom. Curved triangles are inserted, with circles at the corners of their bases, and there is also an outer filling of small triangles and rings. The latter groups of three incised rings echo those chip-carved on the end of the box, and are paralleled by groups found, for example, in the figured pages of the Book of Kells; groups of three simple dots occurred already in the considerably earlier Book of Durrow.

In the centre of one long side of the box there are two holes an inch apart, perhaps for a carrying thong, which may be represented by a fragment 4.5 ins. long, knotted at one end.

The remaining small objects formed the contents of the box when found.

The handles retained no trace of their metal tools, whose nature is uncertain, yet it seems possible that they were wood-carving tools:—

Wood. Fig. 2.1. The first suggests a small adze: a pear-shaped sleeve of hard-wood (unidentified) 2·4 ins. long; the narrow end squared off and containing a tapering slot, ·4 in. wide and ·8 in. deep, at right angles to a perforation through the sleeve for a thin (? metal) shaft; the broad end is decorated with fine incised concentric circles.

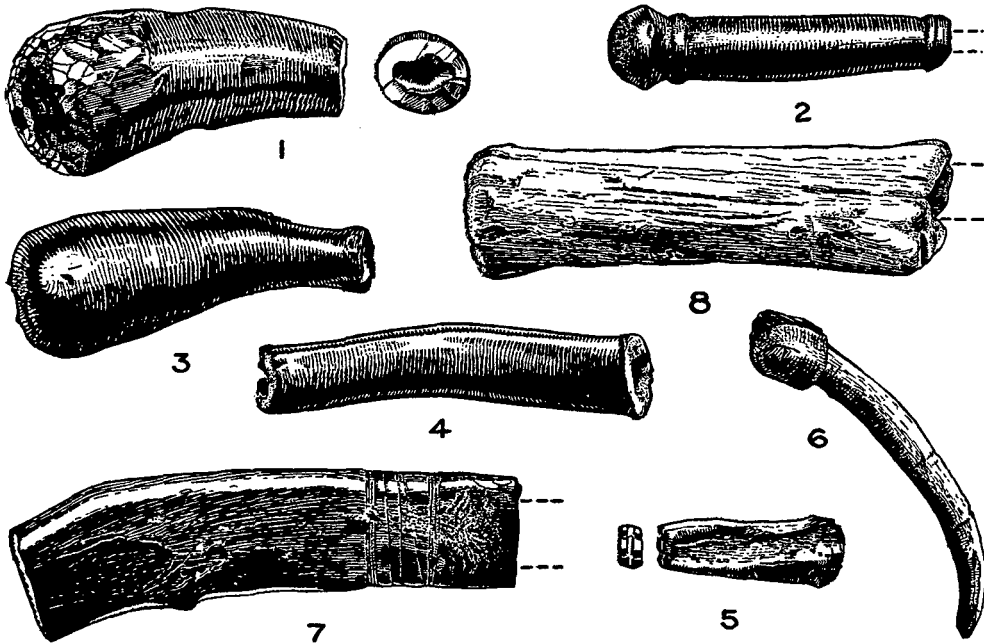


Fig. 2. Tool handles contained in the Birsay box. (3.)

Bone. Fig. 2.2. Carved cylindrical handle with a knob and carved moulding at the butt, and at the other end a triple moulding and a small round hole for the tool. Length 2·35 ins.

Fig. 2.3. Irregular pear-shaped handle, 2·5 ins. long, has a round hole for a tang at the narrow end.

Fig. 2.4. Smooth rounded handle 2·7 ins. long, flattened on one side; has at either end a large round hole.

Fig. 2.5. Wedge-shaped object, possibly of antler, 1·35 ins. long (broken), the narrow end ·3 × ·15 in. carved into 6 small rectangles.

Antler. Fig. 2.6. Peg 2·9 ins. long with dome-shaped head.

Two tines, points cut off, 3·15 and 3 ins. long, ·8 and ·7 in. at thicker ends, which have circular holes.

Imperforate tine 3·6 ins. long, the tip sharpened to a knife-like edge (point missing).

Rough rectangular strip of cut antler 3·75 × 1 × ·25 ins.

Horn. Fig. 2.7. Knife-handle 3.5 ins. long, at most .9 × .5 in. thick, the butt-end curved; near the other end, which is split, a broad band of binding has left impressions.

Straight knife-handle, 3.5 × .6 × .4 ins., with binding impressions an inch from the split end.

Part of a knife-handle.

Wood. Fig. 2.8. Six complete or fragmentary wooden handles, rounded in section, the largest of willow (the others probably similar): 3.4 × 1 × .6 ins., perforated at both ends; 2.3 × .6 × .5 ins.; 2.1 × .4 ins.; 3.2 × .3 ins., perforated at one end; 2.7 × .4 ins.; 2.4 × .25 ins.

Pumice. Lump rubbed smooth, 2.5 × 2 × 1 ins.

Leather. Three-inch fragment of thin leather strap, .7 in. wide, crossed by slits: possibly for retaining blades.

Analogies to the Box.—A very curious discovery in a long cist grave near the Round Tower at Dromiskin, Co. Louth, provides a partial and miniature analogy to our box.¹ A box less than 2.5 × 2 × 1 ins., cut out of yew, was closely fitted into a small solid stone box and lay by the skull. Both boxes had sliding lids and the wooden leather-covered lid was crossed by two bronze straps (as at Birsay), one of which concealed a catch. Inside was a broken ring-headed pin, suggesting a late date in the "Early Christian Period".

Though ancient sliding-lid boxes do not seem to be known otherwise in the British Isles, a number of examples have been found in the Scandinavian countries. Dr O. Klindt-Jensen of the National Museum, Copenhagen, has most kindly supplied references to half a dozen, whose date ranges between the 3rd and 6th centuries A.D. They vary in length from 13 to 16 ins. One of them is decorated with dot-and-circle ornament up the short edges,² the smallest (of yew) has quite elaborate geometric chip-carving,³ and one (ash), of which there is only the lid, has incised circles combined with part incised, part red-painted chequer patterns and lines.⁴ In discussing a small one with early runes, A. Bæksted says: "The type . . . is the same as . . . known in Scandinavia as very common rustic love-tokens especially in the 18th and 19th centuries. . . . Both old and more recent boxes have probably had no particular function except as receptacles for small trifles".⁵ Bæksted suggested that one of the Vimose boxes was for dice and playing pieces.

It is tempting to identify the Birsay box as a Scandinavian type of article introduced by the Vikings, though made locally and decorated by a Celtic craftsman. The date of the Dromiskin box would suit, though it might have been old when "enshrined" in stone. But the tiny wooden box inside the Monymusk Reliquary, which has, however, a roof-like lid, reminds us that there were certainly boxes cut out of solid wood in Scotland by A.D. 700, and Dr E. Vogt writes that there are late Bronze Age solid-wood boxes from Swiss lakes, checked for fitted but not sliding lids.⁶

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¹ *J.R.S.A.I.*, VII (1862-3), 199-206, and LIII (1923), 175. I am indebted to Mr A. T. Lucas, National Museum of Ireland, for this information.

² Engelhardt, C., *Vimose Fundet* (1869); also Müller, S., *Danmarks Oldsager* (1895), No. 483, and Brønsted, J., *Danmarks Oldtid* (1940), III, 211.

³ Rygh, O., *Norske Oldsager* (1885), No. 180 (Akerhus, Norway).

⁴ Kungl. Vitterhets Akademiens *Handlingar*, 59 (1945), 84 (Halland, Sweden).

⁵ *Acta Archaeologica* (1947), 203 (Zeeland).

⁶ Van Muyden and Colomb, *Antiquités lacustres* (1896), pl. 36, 3.