

## KEIL CAVE, SOUTHEND, ARGYLL: A LATE IRON AGE CAVE OCCUPATION IN KINTYRE

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BETWEEN 1933 and 1935 Mr J. Harrison Maxwell carried out a series of excavations in the Big Cave at Keil Point, Kintyre. Since the published accounts of these excavations are not readily available<sup>1</sup> and as Mr Maxwell has recently presented a number of the relics to the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland (see p. 266 *infra*) it has seemed desirable to prepare this short paper describing and illustrating all the finds from the site and to discuss their significance. It should be stressed that the conclusions about the site and the finds are only tentative. Mr Maxwell has also kindly made unpublished material available to the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland during the preparation of the Kintyre volume of the forthcoming *Inventory of Argyll*, and a full account with reports on the animal bones from the site has been deposited in the archives of the National Monuments Record of Scotland.

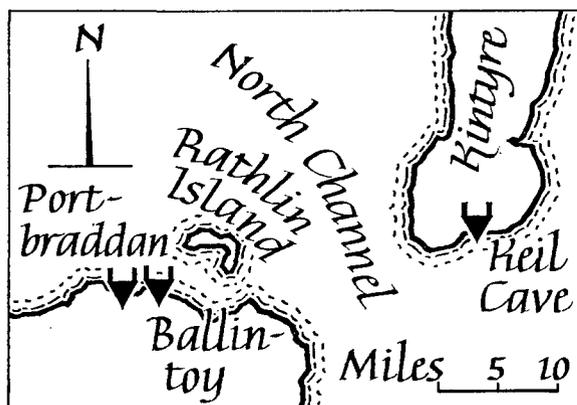


FIG. 1

The Big Cave at Keil Point<sup>2</sup> is the largest of a series of caves in this headland at the southern tip of Kintyre (fig. 1) with Carskey Bay to the west. The cave measures about 15 ft. in breadth, about 70 ft. in length and between 18 ft. and 30 ft. in height. In the course of excavation several trenches were dug into the deposit which had accumulated on the bed-rock floor. This deposit was found to measure 10 ft. at its deepest near the mouth of the cave, and to consist of three main layers, the lowest of

<sup>1</sup> *The Glasgow Herald*, 22nd December 1933;  
*The Campbeltown Courier*, 14th April 1934, 28th April 1934, 1st September 1934, 8th September 1934;  
*The Glasgow Herald*, 28th September 1935. These are included in the documentation deposited in the National Monuments Record of Scotland.

<sup>2</sup> N.G.R. NR 671077.

which was an accumulation of sea gravel in which there were some large natural boulders. The uppermost layer, which was about 3 ft. in depth and consisted of earth and stones, was barren of prehistoric finds. Between these two strata there was an occupation horizon about 3 ft. thick which yielded a considerable number of relics. A section through these deposits was drawn after the 1935 season and a copy of this has been deposited with the National Monuments Record of Scotland. The section shows that one of the two fragments which seem to belong to the same bone comb (fig. 2, 2) was found towards the top, the other fragment at the base of the occupation layer, suggesting that the whole deposit has been considerably disturbed by intermittent occupation of the cave over an extended period. No convincing structural remains were discovered, but reference must be made to Mr Maxwell's original reports for a detailed description of the various trenches excavated. The debris of occupation consisted of the bones and teeth of sheep, ox, horse, pig or boar, deer as well as patches of shell midden. The finding of lumps of iron slag and wood charcoal in positions 'from 6 in. to 5 ft. in depth in many parts of the cave'<sup>1</sup> suggests that the cave has been used for iron smelting throughout its occupation, and Mr Maxwell also records that 'a hundred years ago there was a smithy at the front and an illicit still at the back'.<sup>2</sup>

The catalogue of finds, which appears in the Appendix (p. 108 f), lists first the material in the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland in the order of their accession numbers HM 353-73<sup>3</sup> and then the objects from the Campbeltown Museum. The numbering of this list relates to fig. 2 and Pl. VI, 1 and 2.

The present locations of other objects from the site are uncertain, but the most important of these, a bronze penannular brooch (fig. 2, 24), has been drawn approximately to scale from a photograph. The ring measures 1.3 by 1.2 in. and the hooped pin is 1.9 in. long. The ring terminals are described as solid trumpet-shaped with beading at the base.<sup>4</sup>

This assemblage of material is without parallel in SW. Scotland and differs completely from Iron Age/Dark Age finds from excavated sites in Kintyre. In order to suggest a date for this exotic collection of finds, comparisons must be made further afield and, because of this, any estimate of the chronological limits of the occupation of the cave must remain approximate. The bone weaving-tablet belongs to a class not otherwise represented in mainland Scotland, and the closest parallels geographically come from the Roman site at Corbridge.<sup>5</sup> An example from the Forum at Wroxeter, also with radial wear marks, was found on the original floor of East Room B, a situation which suggests a date in the middle of the second century A.D.<sup>6</sup> Miss Henshall lists only one other certain example from a non-Roman site - that from Wookey (Somerset). The series of combs also stands somewhat apart from those found in Scotland although the simple double-sided comb (fig. 2, 3) might be compared with two wooden combs from the crannog on Ledaig Moss (Argyll).<sup>7</sup> This is

<sup>1</sup> *The Campbeltown Courier*, 1st September 1934.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, 14th April 1934.

<sup>3</sup> This has been drawn from the Accessions Book with Mr Stevenson's kind permission.

<sup>4</sup> *The Campbeltown Courier*, 1st September 1934.

<sup>5</sup> *PPS*, xvi (1950), 148 ff. and No. 161 in list.

<sup>6</sup> Atkinson, D., *Wroxeter*, 1942, 231, pl. 51, C 187.

<sup>7</sup> *PSAS*, x (1872-4), 82.

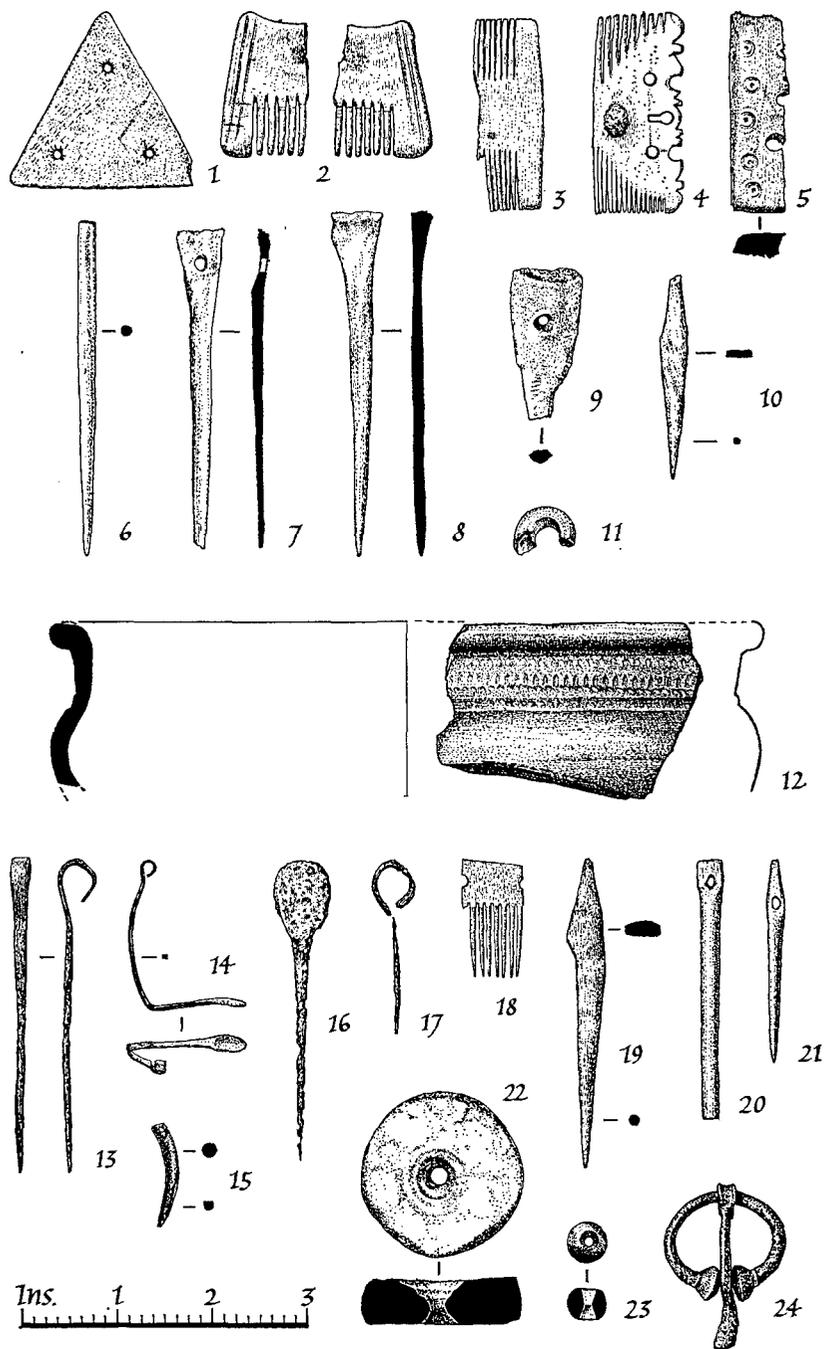


FIG. 2. Finds from Keil Cave, numbered as in Catalogue

the least distinctive of the Keil examples and, as a type, it has a very long currency. The simple linear decoration of fig. 2, 2 might be likened to that on the combs from Balevullin, Tiree,<sup>1</sup> where a group of combs again distinct from the long-handled 'weaving comb' type was found, and on one of them a grooving round the teeth is also visible. But the similarity is not close enough to imply that they are contemporary and the associated finds from Keil suggest a later date than Balevullin. On the other hand, although the bone work from Dun Cuier, Barra,<sup>2</sup> would seem to be later than the Keil material, the similarity of a number of bone pins<sup>3</sup> is worth noting, however simple the type is. The fragment of a composite comb (fig. 2, 18) is almost identical to a bone fragment discovered on a sand-dune site near Stornoway, Lewis, in association with pottery which has been compared with material from souterrains and cave sites in N. Ireland.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, the double-sided comb with an elaborately carved end has been compared with combs found on Roman sites in Eastern England<sup>5</sup> and the imitation samian sherd and the toilet instrument are also of Roman origin.

The penannular brooch is likened by Mrs Fowler to her A2 type, common at Traprain Law, Newstead and the forts on Hadrian's Wall.<sup>6</sup> The iron racquet-headed pin does not seem to have any close parallels and most of the other objects are not sufficiently distinctive to be helpful in suggesting a context or date for the assemblage. Even in the case of those objects which have closely dated analogies on Romano-British sites, the range of dates is extensive. The weaving tablet, for example, belongs to a group current in the second century A.D., if not earlier, while the context of elaborately decorated combs similar to fig. 2, 4 seems to be somewhat later, possibly the third and fourth centuries. It is, moreover, unlikely that the colour-coated Roman sherd could have been brought to Keil before the middle of the fourth century, for although sherds of a similar ware have been found on two other sites in Scotland, Elie (Fife)<sup>7</sup> and Traprain Law,<sup>8</sup> in neither case is it possible to be certain about their context. Vessels similar to the Keil Cave fragment in fabric and profile occurred at Richborough, Kent, in a fourth-century deposit,<sup>9</sup> and seem to be an exclusively southern manufacture. Analogous material has been noticed in late occupation levels of Roman forts in Wales, including Caernarvon,<sup>10</sup> where the fort continued to be occupied well into the second half of the fourth century.

All these objects could have remained in use for a considerable period of time and, in fact, Mr R. B. K. Stevenson has noted that the bone pins with perforated triangular and rectangular heads (fig. 2, 7 and 20) would not be out of place in the tenth century.

Some force is given to this later dating by comparison with a series of caves and rock shelters on the North Antrim coast at Ballintoy and Portbraddan (fig. 1). The reports on the excavations of these caves, very reminiscent of Mr Maxwell's account

<sup>1</sup> *PSAS*, xcvi (1962-3), 163 f., fig. 2, 9 and 11.

<sup>2</sup> *PSAS*, lxxxix (1955-6), 316, fig. 13, 1-4.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, fig. 14, 27, 28 and 33.

<sup>4</sup> *PSAS*, lxxiii (1938-9), 55 ff., fig. 1.

<sup>5</sup> *PPS*, xxi (1955), 287. Mr G. S. Maxwell has drawn my attention to two such combs from railway excavations in York, now in the Yorkshire Museum.

<sup>6</sup> I am indebted to Mrs Fowler for her opinion on this piece. *ibid.*, xxvi (1960), 152.

<sup>7</sup> *PSAS*, xxxv (1900-1), 281 ff.

<sup>8</sup> *PSAS*, l (1915-16), 94 f., fig. 18, 8 and 9, fig. 20, 1. *ibid.*, lv (1920-1), 201.

<sup>9</sup> Bushe-Fox, J. P., *Richborough* 1, 89 ff.

<sup>10</sup> Wheeler, R. E. M., *Segontium*, 165 ff., Nos. 35-40.

of the work at Keil, as well as the finds, offer some interesting similarities. There is what is described as part of a two-sided bone comb from the Potters' Cave,<sup>1</sup> a double-edged bone comb with broad teeth on one side and narrow teeth on the other and scratched central decoration from the Boat Cave, Boheeshane Bay,<sup>2</sup> both from the Ballintoy region, and a composite bone comb from the Portbraddan Cave.<sup>3</sup> In complete contrast to Keil, the major part of such Irish cave material is pottery, in a style allied to East Ulster Ware (or Souterrain Ware), and there is good evidence to suggest that these caves are Dark Age in date and, apart from the geographical link and the type of site involved, are more closely related to Dun Cuier than to Keil.

It seems likely to the present writer that the cave occupation started about the third or fourth century and continued possibly only seasonally, or intermittently in some other way, into the following centuries. Indeed in view of the abundance of iron slag recorded and the unusual range of the finds it could even be suggested that the cave was used by an itinerant tinker or group of smiths, and the Antrim caves might be similar staging posts of rather later date.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It would not have been possible to write this short account without the help given to me by Mr J. Harrison Maxwell, and he has kindly read over the text. Mr R. B. K. Stevenson and Miss A. S. Henshall have greatly assisted not only in providing the catalogue of the finds in the charge of the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland but also with much helpful advice. Mr E. McKiernan kindly made the facilities of the Campbeltown Museum available to me. Professor Piggott provided me with information on Yorkshire cave sites. Mr G. S. Maxwell has contributed those sections dealing with the Roman finds, and Mr R. B. Warner of the Ulster Museum provided documentation on the Irish sites mentioned. I have greatly benefited from the assistance of colleagues from the Commission, particularly Mr I. G. Scott, who prepared the drawings, and Mr G. B. Quick and Mr G. Nicol, who provided the photographs.

#### APPENDIX

##### *Catalogue of Finds*

###### *Bone*

1. Triangular tablet, probably for tablet weaving, 1.75 by 2 in., one corner broken, near each corner a perforation with faint radial wear-marks (Pl. VI, 1).
2. Two end fragments of a single-sided comb, 1.5 by 0.9 in., 1.4 by 1.05 in., the back concave, two incised lines across the ends on each face, parts of two rivet holes, iron-stained, and the mark of a lengthwise back-plate.
3. End fragment of a double-sided comb, 1.9 by 0.7 in.
4. Complete tooth-plate from the end of a similar comb, 2.05 by 0.95 in., with remains of an iron rivet; the teeth graduated in length, the side edge decorated with cut-away nicks and U-shaped recesses; inside the edge two circular and one key-hole-shaped perforations.
5. Rectangular fragment of cetacean bone, 2 by 0.6 in., 0.25 in. thick, two original edges, two

<sup>1</sup> *Irish Naturalists' Journal*, v (1934-5), 105.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, vi (1936-7), 37 ff.

<sup>3</sup> *UJA*, 3rd ser., vi (1943), 48, fig. 6, 1.

broken perforations in line lengthwise, one surface smooth and decorated by rows of dot-and-circles, the other face cut, rebated at the broken end.

6. Pin, head cut straight across, 3.4 in. long, polished by use.

7. Pin, flat square-ended head perforated, tip broken, 3.25 in. long.

8. Pin, similar, no perforation, intact, 3.55 in. long.

9. Head of massive pin, square with perforation, broken across shank, 1.5 by 0.7 in.

Four splinters, one end pointed and worn by use, 2.15, 2.85, 2.9, 2.1 in. long. The last is fig. 2, 10. Similar pointed at each end, 3.35 in. long.

Heavier bone trimmed to a point for use as an awl, tip broken, 3.2 in. long.

Three shafts, the ends broken, worn by use, 3.9, 3, 2.6 in. long.

#### Stone

Disc of pink-buff sandstone, ground smooth, diam. 2.3 in., 0.3-0.4 in., thick vertical sides.

Small scraper, grey flint, brown patina, 0.7 by 0.7 in.

Chip of grey flint, utilised round one end, 1 by 0.45 in.

Box of pieces of flint.

#### Glass

11. Half a ring of translucent yellow glass, diam. 0.66 in., 0.3 in. thick.

#### Campbeltown Museum

##### Pottery

12. Rim fragment of a wide-mouthed bowl in hard orange fabric with a brownish-red slip; the exterior of the neck exhibits an irregular roulette decoration, and there is distinct evidence of abrasion on the rim and lower edge of the fragment. This piece belongs to a class of late-Roman pottery which imitated samian vessels in fabric and form. Although common in the Midlands and SE. England, it is rare on sites in Scotland. Date: probably fourth century A.D.

#### Bronze

13. Ring-headed pin from a penannular brooch, 3.2 in. long. (Mr Stevenson takes this to be a later intrusion and possibly to be a seventeenth- or eighteenth-century piece.)

14. Instrument from a Roman toilet set, a *ligula*, 2.5 in. long, now bent, with a spoon-shaped end, 0.18 by 0.3 in.

15. Bronze fragment, now curved, 1.05 in. long, with a deliberately squared tip, possibly the end of a pin or the tip of a nail.

#### Iron

16. Pin, 3 in. long, with a racquet head 0.8 by 0.6 in. and square sectioned shank.

17. Ring-headed pin with straight shank, c. 1.7 in. long.

#### Bone

18. Central portion of a composite comb possibly made of whale bone, 1.2 in. by 0.65 in., with a notch on each side. There are seven teeth and the stump of an eighth.

19. Awl, 3.15 in. long, one end round in section and the other squared.

20. Upper part of a pin, 2.7 in. long. The perforated head is rectangular and the round shank polished by use.

21. Needle, 2.1 in. long, perforated at its broadest end and worn smooth by use.

Three points with sharpened tips, 4.4, 3.5, 3.35 in. long. (Another, 3.2 in. long, seems to be a more recent piece.)

#### Antler

Two antler cores with cut ends, 7.3 and 2.4 by 2.9 in.

Five tips of tine, two polished by use and one with a black and fire-cracked appearance, 3.5, 2.7, 2.6, 2, 1.9 in. long.

Antler point with sharpened tip, 3.4 in. long.

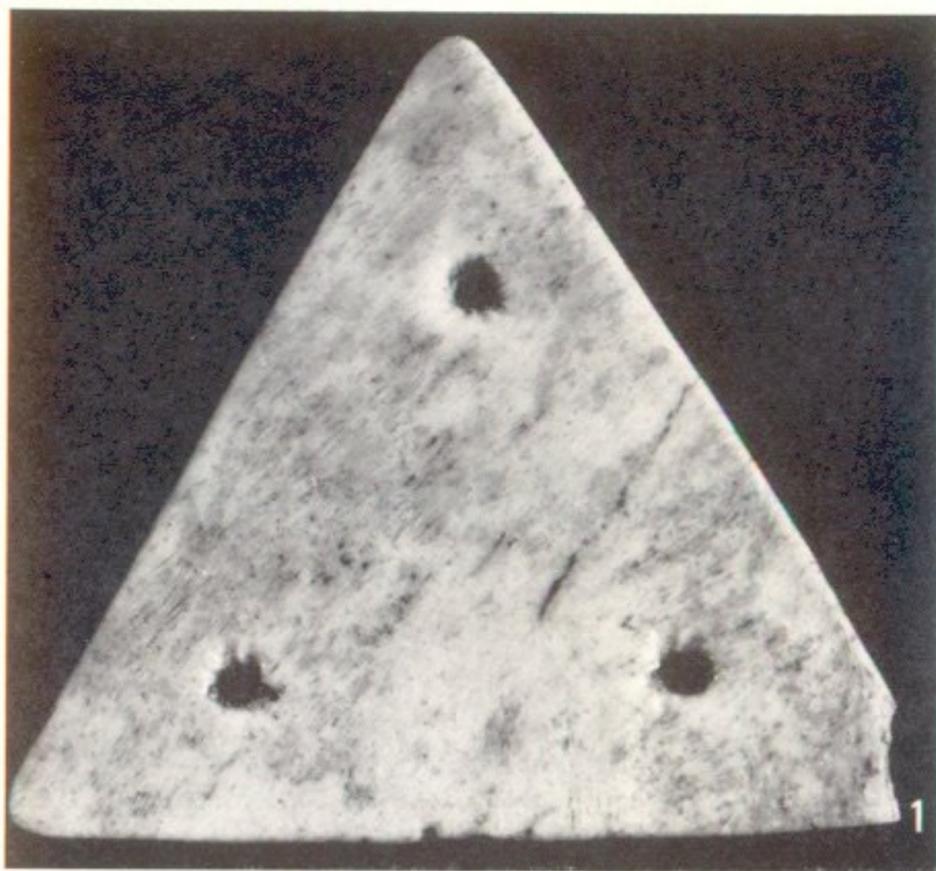
*Stone*

22. Sandstone spindle whorl, diam. 1.6 in., 0.4 in. thick with an hour-glass perforation.

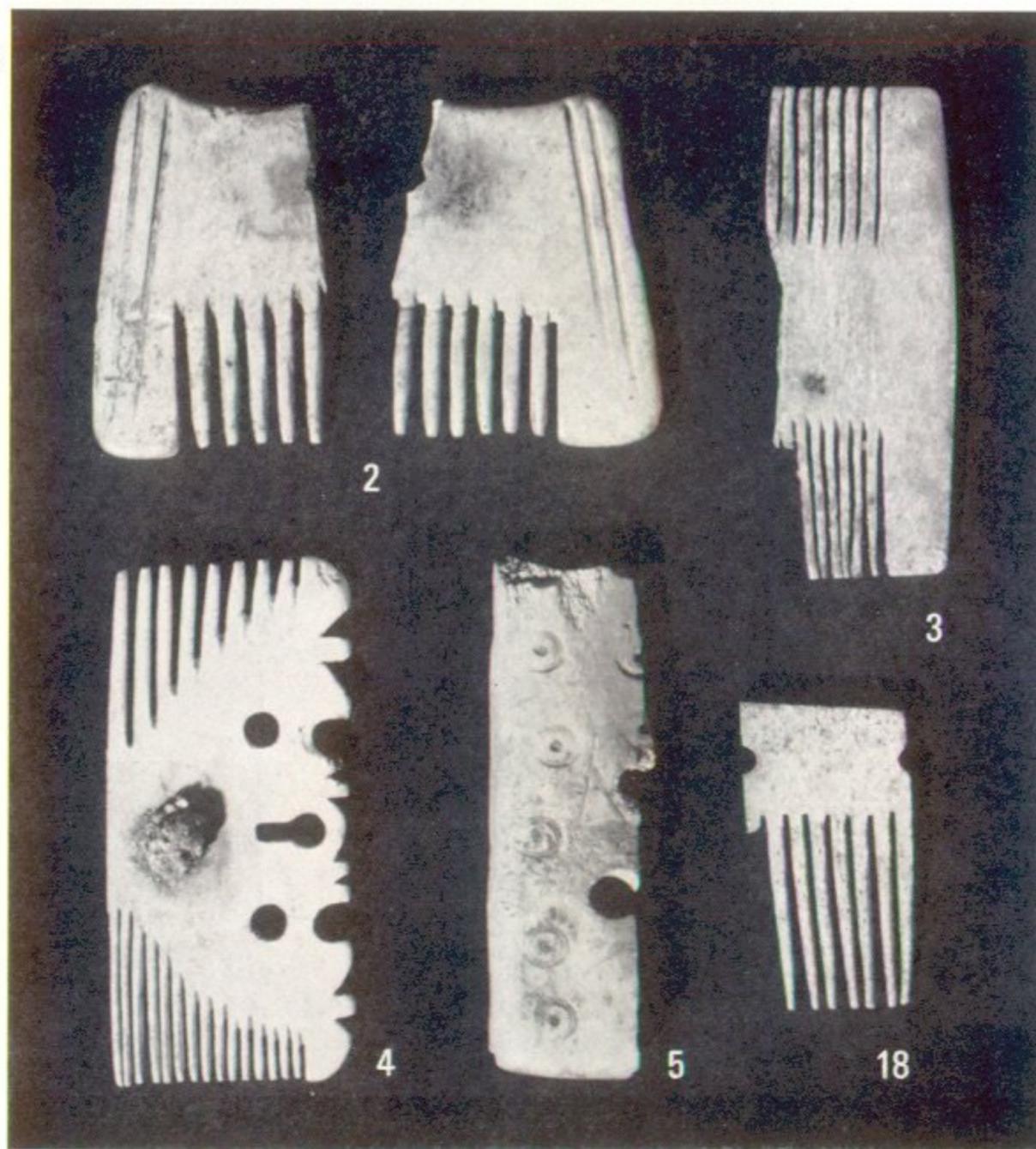
*Glass*

23. Small bead of very devitrified glass, perhaps originally blue and white with a central hour-glass perforation, diam. 0.4 in., 0.3 in. thick.

*The Society is indebted to H.M. Treasury for a grant  
towards the cost of this paper.*



1. Bone weaving-tablet showing faint radial wear-marks



2. Bone equipment, numbered as in Catalogue