

Photo by]

[Dr. G. Macnamara

ANCIENT WOODEN DRINKING CUP.



Photo by]

CLOCHAVARRA.

[G. Fogarty, R.N.

ANCIENT WOODEN DRINKING-CUP.

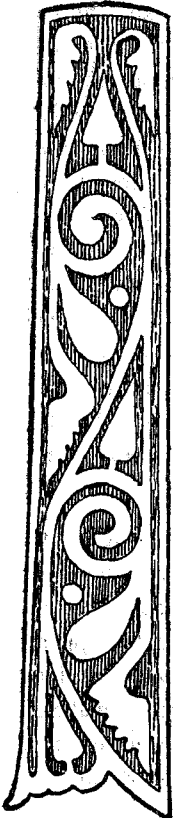
BY DR. GEORGE U. MACNAMARA.

Although during many centuries vessels manufactured out of wood were in constant domestic use in Ireland, and must have existed in enormous numbers, very few of them, I regret to say, have been preserved to our own days. Even the homely *pigín*, so common in the country districts but a few years ago, has already become quite a rarity. The disappearance of wooden articles is clearly due to the perishable

nature of the material of which they were made, and it is highly probable that all very ancient forms of the kind would have long since crumbled into dust were it not for the powerful antiseptic and preservative properties inherent in our peat-bogs, which happily have kept for us many treasures of the past both in wood and metal.

The *methers*, or wooden drinking-cup, here described, is in some respects of special interest, owing to its peculiarly elongated form and the unusual ornamentation on the handle, which useful appendage, contrary to the general rule in vessels of the sort, is single—most specimens possessing two or else four handles attached low down on the sides, which of course made them very convenient and handy for passing around. From their quadrangular shape, it is quite evident *methers* could only be drunk from at the angles.

The word *μεθαρ*, or *μεθωαρ*, is said to be a derivative of *μῆρ*, mead, or metheglin, a well-known drink made from honey. From the earliest dawn of history this beverage seems to have been known to all the peoples of Northern Europe, possibly long before the culture-hero, *Dionysus*, taught the nations of the



HANDLE—FULL SIZE.

Levant the cultivation of the vine. The name, therefore—"a cup for quaffing mead out of"—bespeaks a very early origin for this class of vessel, which was always made out of a single piece of wood.

This particular specimen, which, however, I think is not very ancient, was found about 5 feet below the surface, in Drynagh bog, parish of Rath, midway between Corofin and Ennistymon, by Pat (son of Andrew) Foran, while cutting turf, in the month of May, 1901. It is manufactured out of a solid piece of yew, is $12\frac{3}{4}$ inches high, $4\frac{1}{2}$ inches from side to side across the top, and, if perfect, would hold about a quart. The vessel has a circular base, turned in some sort of lathe, which measures 4 inches in diameter. The bottom is carefully hollowed out to the depth of threequarters of an inch, and has the angle formed between this hollow and the surface on which the cup stands decorated with a continuous set of oblique notches, producing a simple but pretty effect. The circular base, sloping upwards and inwards, is only one inch high, and is marked with plain incised lines. Unfortunately the *sleaghan*, or turf-spade, cut off nearly the whole of one side of the vessel, and, although search was made, the missing piece could not be found. The cup undoubtedly had been in use for a long time before it was lost in the bog, for it shows unmistakable signs of having been mended, or strengthened, just above the handle, by a band of some sort, most likely of metal, to fix which two rivet holes were bored on each of its sides. It was probably carried full of milk or some other liquor, one summer day long ago, to the workers in Drynagh bog, who forgot it when returning in the evening, and so in course of time it got covered with the peat.

In some respects, I think, this mether is unique—at least I know of no other exactly like it—on account of its great height in proportion to its width, and also because it has only one small handle; for if it had a second it would most certainly be found on the opposite side, which is fortunately intact. These peculiarities resulted, I am inclined to believe, not altogether from choice, but because the maker, in order to turn out a vessel of sufficient capacity, was limited in his art by the size and shape of the particular piece of yew he had to work on. The pretty incised design on the handle is exceedingly interesting, and may

afford a clue as to the probable date of manufacture to some of our members learned in the history of early Irish ornament.

Although this cup was certainly one of a kind that was quite common and in every-day use, it manifests a good deal of skill and taste in design, and bespeaks, I venture to say, a considerable refinement and love of the beautiful in the social life of its owners, to whatever period of our history it may belong.
