

# A Hadlber from Clounloun Bog, Co. Clare

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A copper (or bronze ?) halberd, found in 1914 in Clounloun Bog, near O'Callaghan's Mills, Co. Clare,<sup>1</sup> was acquired by the late Colonel William Audrey Bentley, of Hurdlestown House, Broadford, Co. Clare, on the 10th of May 1922.<sup>2</sup> The following year

Col. Bentley published a short descriptive note on the halberd, but no illustration, in the *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*.<sup>3</sup> The halberd never left Broadford, where it is now kept in private possession, except for a brief period recently when it was being recorded by the National Museum of Ireland.<sup>4</sup>

The halberd (Fig. 1), in excellent condition, measures 30.5 cm. in overall length and 7.1 cm. in maximum width (at the junction of the blade with the hafting-plate). The long blade is asymmetrical, one side-edge being almost straight and the other concave. The point is rounded and the flattish midrib, averaging 6.5 mm. in thickness and 1.3 cm. in width, is gently curved. The cutting-edges, which are still quite sharp, are bevelled and have two very shallow but noticeable grooves running parallel to them. The rounded hafting-plate is slightly shouldered and originally had three rivet-holes. The latter were for thick rivets and it was probably their removal in antiquity which broke the central rivet-hole and slightly cracked the other two. A straight but oblique line was scored on either face of the halberd at the widest part, *i.e.* across the junction of the blade with the hafting-plate. These lines are scored through the patina and are obviously modern, but were apparently made before Col. Bentley acquired it.<sup>5</sup> They do not indicate that a handle was present at the time of discovery, since not only were all the rivet-holes obviously damaged in antiquity but the patination of the halberd is consistent throughout.

In dealing with this type of weapon in Bronze Age Europe, the late Professor Seán P. Ó Ríordáin referred to Bentley's published note, but wrongly assigned to it a somewhat similar specimen from Clonloghan, also in Co. Clare, a halberd of his Type 5.<sup>6</sup> Dr. Peter Harbison,

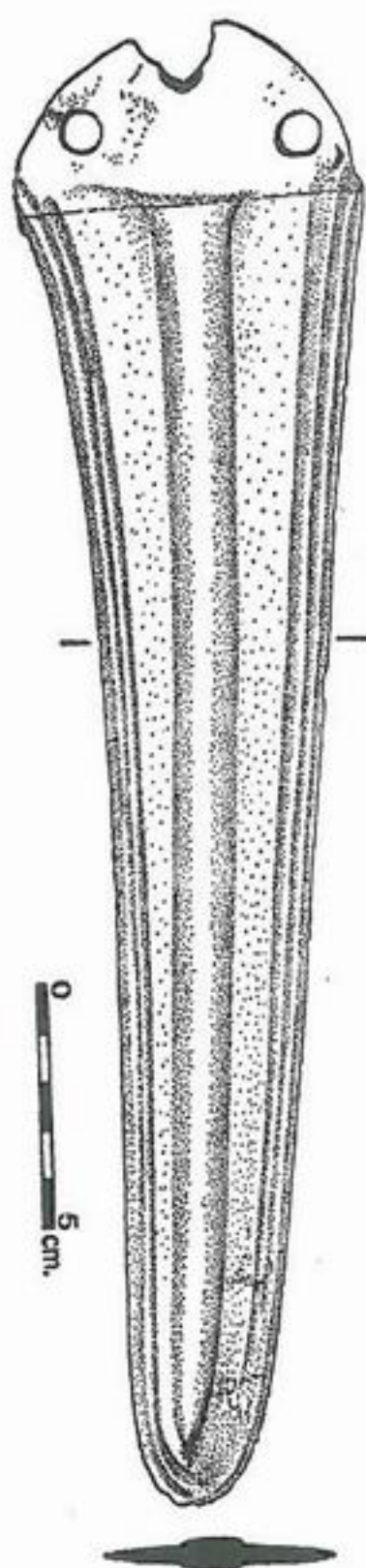


Fig. 1



in his recent authoritative work on Irish halberds, includes the Clounloun Bog specimen in his Type Cotton.<sup>7</sup>

The halberd, in its variety of forms, is found over wide areas of Europe, and this has led to a multiplicity of suggestions as to its origin. Since, as yet, the halberds in no one area of Europe can be shown to be appreciably earlier than those in all the other areas, nor do satisfactory prototypes exist to form the basis of the whole European assemblage, the origin of the halberd is still somewhat uncertain.<sup>8</sup> It has been variously suggested that the halberd was used as a weapon, as a ceremonial object, or as a tool or implement. The grave-goods of the Early and Middle Bronze Age include daggers, but never halberds, a point which would perhaps seem to weigh against the halberd being a weapon; one of the better arguments in favour of the halberd being suitable for use as a weapon is the strong handle of the halberd from Carn, Co. Mayo, which, when found, "was as thick as a modern pick-axe handle."<sup>9</sup> The presence of two sharp cutting-edges and the stout midrib, as well as the poor quality and appearance of some specimens, seem to argue against a ceremonial purpose for the halberd, though in this regard the two miniature halbered pendants from Wessex<sup>10</sup> must not be forgotten. The suggestion that they may be implements or tools is weak, since with the double-edged blade hafted at right-angles to the handle their function as such would be a mystery. The precise use of the halberd is, therefore, not yet known.

About 40% of all European halberds come from Ireland. Harbison has classified these into four groups which he terms Types Carn, Cotton, Clonard, and Breaghwy, there being 48, 89, 14 and 14 examples in each respectively; there are also eleven specimens of anomalous or indeterminate type. He considers Type Carn, a straight midribbed halberd, to be the earliest Irish type<sup>11</sup> and a development of the halberd idea as introduced, probably from Germany. The largest Irish group, Type Cotton, which includes about half of the known Irish specimens, is considered to be a local variant of Type Carn. Type Cotton is describable as a copper, or sometimes bronze, halberd with an asymmetrical blade, curved midrib, and with three thick round-headed rivets arranged in a triangle on a rounded hafting-plate. The Clounloun halberd clearly fits into this group.

The distribution of Type Cotton halberds is not confined to any one area in Ireland, although somewhat denser in the Central Plain; some 42 examples, or just less than 50% of the known examples of this type, are, however, unprovenanced. Some Type Cotton halberds are also known from the Highland Zone of neighbouring Britain.

Halberds of Type Cotton have been found in only three reliably associated discoveries in Ireland. These are the hoards found at Hillswood, Co. Galway, Cotton, Co. Down, and Frankford, Co. Offaly, none of which contained pottery. The Hillswood Hoard consisted of two halberds of Type Carn and five of Type Cotton. The Cotton Hoard consisted of three halberds of Type Cotton. Only the Frankford Hoard, where a Type Cotton halberd was associated with four axeheads (and part of a fifth) of Types Lough Ravel and Ballybeg, and a dagger of Type Corkey, is informative as to dating, though not to such a degree as to allow for any close dating.<sup>12</sup> From present evidence it would appear that Irish halberd production may be dated to Harbison's Frankford/Killaha/Ballyvalley period,<sup>13</sup> corresponding to the Bush Barrow phase of the Wessex Culture which dates between about 1700 and 1550 B.C. The three phases of the Frankford/Killaha/Ballyvalley period may be distinct and successive. If this is so, then the Frankford phase should date to the earlier years of the period, as also should halberds of Type Cotton.



We can conclude therefore, that the Clounloun Bog halberd, a specimen of Type Cotton, was made in Ireland during the earlier part of the period between 1700 and 1550 B.C., though the purpose for which it was made must remain somewhat of a mystery.

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<sup>1</sup> Tds. Clounloun More and Clounloun Beg; Par. Clonlea; Bar. Tulla Lower; Co. Clare; O.S. 6-inch sheets 35 and 43.

<sup>2</sup> The label attached to the halberd has on one side Col. Bentley's descriptive note (see fn. 3) and, in his handwriting, the statement that it was "received 10th May 1922."

<sup>3</sup> *JRSAI*, 53 (1923), 201.

<sup>4</sup> I am deeply grateful to the National Museum of Ireland for kindly providing the illustration accompanying this note, and also to Mr. Etienne Rynne, M.A., M.R.I.A., Department of Archaeology, University College, Galway, for considerable help with the preparation of the text for publication. I am also very grateful to the present possessor of the halberd for access to it and for permission to publish it.

<sup>5</sup> Col. Bentley (*op. cit.*) mentions that the halberd has "the straight line to fit the handle."

<sup>6</sup> "The Halberd in Bronze Age Europe," *Archaeologia*, 86 (1937), 309, no. 106, fig. 50.

<sup>7</sup> "The Daggers and the Halberds of the Early Bronze Age in Ireland," *Prähistorische Bronzefunde*, VI:1 (München 1969), 42, no. 202—the Bentley reference is given, but is erroneously attributed to the late Father Patrick Power.

<sup>8</sup> The information concerning halberds which will be found in this note is almost entirely based on Dr. Harbison's work, mentioned above.

<sup>9</sup> Information from Mr. Etienne Rynne, who was told this in 1961 by Mr. Austin Cunney, Corrower, Ballina, Co. Mayo, who was closely associated with the discovery of the Carn halberd.

<sup>10</sup> F. K. Annable and D. D. A. Simpson, *Guide Catalogue of the Neolithic and Bronze Age Collections in Devizes Museum*, Devizes 1964, p. 46, no. 180 and p. 47, no. 200.

<sup>11</sup> A radiocarbon date of 1050 $\pm$ 140 B.C. was, however, obtained from the handle of the actual halberd from Carn [see *Radiocarbon*, 3 (1961), 34] which, if correct, would place the type very late in the series.

<sup>12</sup> P. Harbison, "The Frankford (Birr) Hoard Reconsidered," *CLAJ*, 16 (1965-68), 85-90.

<sup>13</sup> P. Harbison, "The Relative Chronology of Irish Early Bronze Age Pottery," *JRSAI*, 99 (1969), 63-82, especially pp. 65-70.