

A Late Medieval Casket from Knockmore, Co. Clare

ETIENNE RYNNE

During the Summer of 1934, a most interesting bronze-bound wooden casket was discovered "in the sixth 'bár' of the bank" in a bog at Knockmore, near Kilmihil, Co. Clare.¹ The object was purchased a year later by the National Museum of Ireland,² where it is registered as acquisition 1935:432.

The casket is made up from six panels of wood³ which are held together by wooden dowels, and strengthened with binding-strips of bronze. The corners are further secured with decorative sheet-bronze angle-strips, only one of which now remains, and the upper ends of the lid are strengthened with ornamental strips of sheet-bronze. In the centre of the lid is a bronze handle, and slightly off-centre on the front panel is a bronze lock — the clasp is missing from the lid. The only non-metal ornamentation is a small and very amateurishly executed interlaced design on the front panel, probably a secondary feature. The box measures 36.8 cm. in length, 9.5 cm. in breadth, and 9.5 cm. in overall height; the panels average about 8 mm. in thickness. (Plate VI:1).

The box: The panels are arranged so that the end-pieces are framed by the ends of the front, back and bottom, while those panels overlap one another at one edge, the lid capping the lot (Fig. 1, A). The lid is attached by seven hinges on the binding-strips, while the rest of the box is held together by tapering dowels averaging under 3 cm. in length⁴ — there is no sign of morticing, rebating, dovetailing, or other carpentry. Apart from the obvious places, there are also two dowels in the upper part of the left end-panel, serving to repair an ancient break (see Pl. VI:1) — the similarity of the dowels used throughout suggests that this repair was carried out by the maker of the casket, indicating that the break occurred either during assembly of the box or within the early stages of its use. The panels are all flat surfaced, but the lid has a gently convex upper surface.

The binding-strips: These are all similar though not all identical, a fact which suggests that they were cut out from a thick sheet of bronze rather than cast. There were seven binding-strips on the lid (the central one, which would have been hinged to the lock's clasp, is now missing), each hinged to the binding-strips on the back of the box. The odd-numbered binding-strips on the box are long and pass right under the casket, extending to the top of the front panel (Fig. 1, A). The even-numbered binding-strips are short, and it takes two to go around the box with a gap between them on the underside. The binding-strips are all attached to the box with round-headed bronze pins through their terminals and through one or more intermediary

¹ O.S. 6-inch sheet 48.

² Department of Education, *Report on the National Museum of Ireland, 1934-35*, p. 24, Pl. 5:2.

³ Identified as of yew (*Taxus*) in 1935, by the late Dr. P. O'Connor, then Keeper, Natural History Division, National Museum of Ireland.

⁴ A few of these are now missing — note the empty dowel-hole in the upper left corner of the box (Plate VI:1).

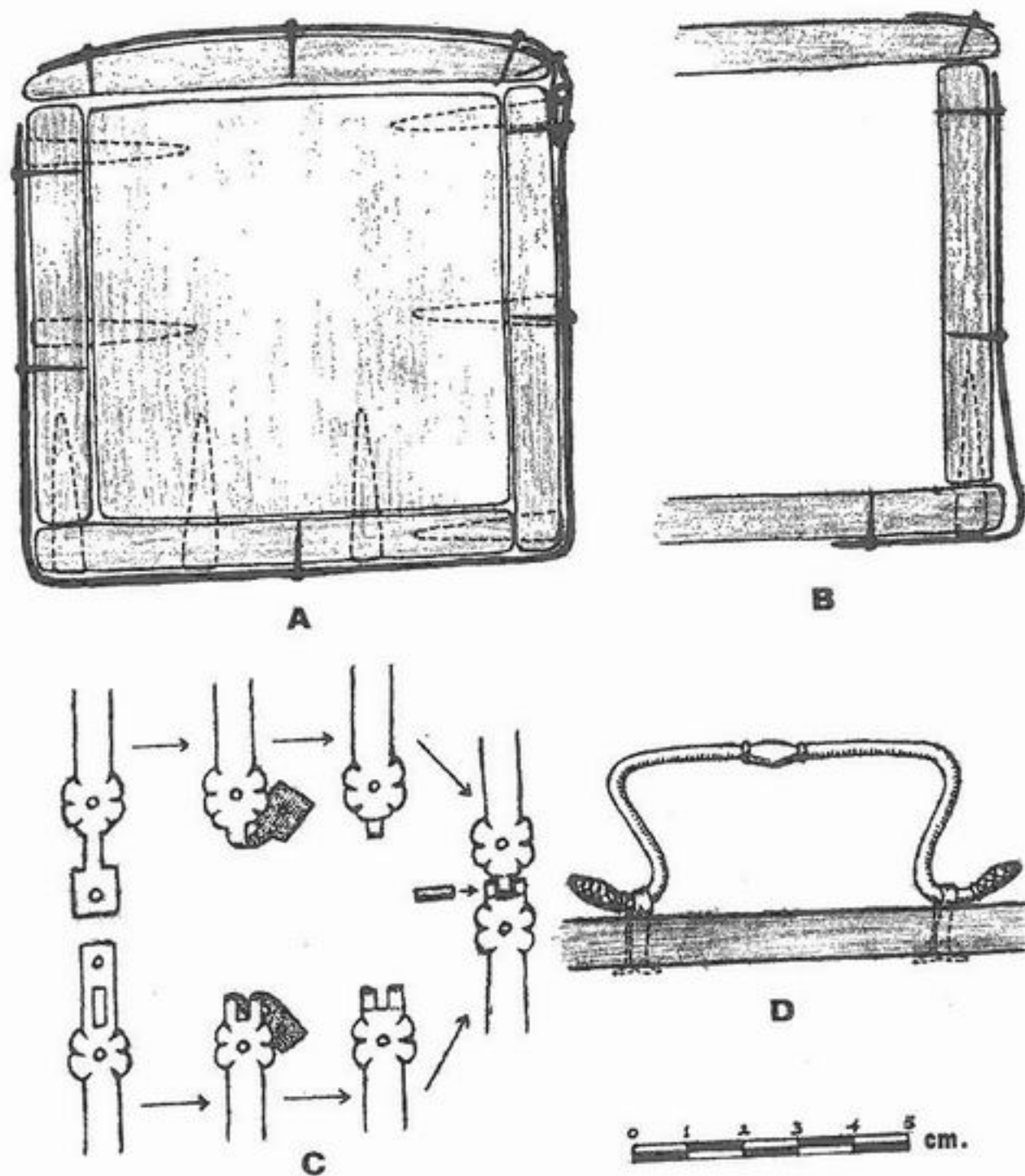


Fig. 1. The Knockmore Casket : **A**. Cross-section through one end, showing dowels and binding-strip (projected) ; **B**. Longitudinal-section through one end, showing dowel (projected) and binding-strip ; **C**. Method by which the hinges were made ; **D**. Handle, showing method of attachment.

points along their lengths. These intermediary points and most of the terminals are petalled expansions; the exceptions are the terminals of the shorter binding-strips which are disc-like (apart from one of the central strips which has an undifferentiated end) on the underside of the box, and also the frontal terminals of the two long strips on either side of the lock which do not expand but are instead rebated, as if originally intended to bear some separately-made terminal decorations (Pl. VI:2).

The binding-strips on the two end-panels display a minor but significant difference from the others in that they do not bend at right-angles around the bottom edge of the box, but first bend slightly outwards before bending under the box. This feature⁵ results from the fact that the end-panels are fitted into the area framed by the edges of the front, back and bottom panels, and thus tend to be slightly recessed (Fig. 1, B).

The hinges linking the lid to the box are made by folding in the ends of the binding-strips where required, and attaching them together with bronze hinge-pivots (Fig. 1, C).

The angle-strips and lid end-strips : Although only one of the four corner angle-strips, that on the rere left corner, now remains, traces of the former presence of the others show them to have been very similar to it. It was cut out from a piece of sheet-bronze, the long edges with a zig-zag or dog-tooth outline. The end-strips on the lid were likewise cut out from sheet-bronze, but with one long edge straight and the other crenelated. Both the end-strips and the angle-strips were attached to the box with round-headed bronze pins.

The handle (Fig. 1, D) : This is solid and rod-like, apparently not cast but beaten into shape from a thick, narrow, strip of bronze. The centre and ends of the handle are thicker. The central thickness is faceted and bordered at either end by a collar-like moulding, while the ends of the handle are likewise collared and are decorated with scored criss-crossing lines (producing a superficial resemblance to a snake's head). The handle is attached to the lid of the box by two narrow strips of bronze, used in the manner of staples.

The lock (Pl. VI:2) : The mechanism is now missing, but the key-pivot and the casing remain. The casing was made by hammering it out from a single piece of sheet-bronze, and it has a fancy border cut into fleur-de-lys type projections at the corners and midway between them. Round-headed bronze pins pass through these projections, attaching the lock to the box. One side of the centrally-placed key-hole is damaged, but its original shape is clear : a circular opening around the key-pivot with a narrow parallel-sided opening beneath, to allow the barrel and bit, respectively, of the key enter the lock. In the upper right corner of the casing is an approximately T-shaped opening made for the insertion of the staple of the now-missing clasp. The whole lock is not centrally placed on the front of the box, but slightly to one side. This is so that the clasp (which was hinged to the end of the now-missing central binding-strip on the lid) would close over the T-shaped opening.

The interlaced design (Pl. VI:3) : The execution of this design is of extremely poor quality, being lightly and unevenly scratched into the surface of the front panel between the second and third binding-strip (counting from left to right). Not really interlace, it consists of a very debased design comprising two tightly interlocked multi-strand links. It measures 2.1 cm. by 2.4 cm. in overall height and breadth respectively.

⁵ More pronounced in the binding-strip on the right end of the box (see plate-reference in footnote 2) than in that on the left end of the box (see Plate VI:1).

Discussion

This wooden box belongs to a well-known class of Late Medieval casket or chest, often made of wood but also made of ivory, bone or even of leather. The type was perhaps most common in Spain, Italy and France, but is also known from elsewhere including Britain, most notably from the Scottish Highlands, an area with which Late Medieval Gaelic Ireland was closely involved. Not only are actual caskets known from Scotland, but they are frequently depicted on the well-known series of West Highland graveslabs of the time,⁶ notably on a slab from St. Oran's, Iona,⁷ and on one from Keills, Knapdale,⁸ on both of which carvings the caskets' mountings are still clearly discernible. Though the Knockmore casket seems to be the only Irish example so far recorded, there undoubtedly were many others in use in Ireland during the Late Medieval Period, but these have either not survived or have not yet come to notice. However, a bronze bind-strip from the end of a casket of the type under discussion has recently been found during the excavations at Clontuskert Abbey, near Ballinasloe, Co. Galway,⁹ and further study of bronze mountings from excavations and in museum collections may yet produce evidence for others.

It is not easy to provide exact dates for caskets of this general type. They seem to range from perhaps as early as the thirteenth through to the seventeenth century, though most of them probably can be dated to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Their use is uncertain, but most caskets of this type probably served as trinket-boxes, or for the safe keeping of jewels, seals, documents, keys etc.

The scratched design on the front panel of the Knockmore casket is most probably secondary to the completion of the work, though not necessarily by very much, and it may represent an attempt at decoration (or merely a doodle?) by the casket's owner rather than by its maker. It is not easy to date precisely, though multi-strand interlace is a characteristic feature of 'Celtic' art as revived in Late Medieval Ireland and Scotland, a time when interlocked pairs of links became a very frequently used art-motif.¹⁰

⁶ These slabs have often been published, notably in J. Stuart, *Sculptured Stones of Scotland*, vol. II, Aberdeen 1867; Capt. T. P. White, *Archaeological Sketches in Scotland: Kintyre*, Edinburgh 1873; Capt. T. P. White, *Archaeological Sketches in Scotland: Knapdale and Gigha*; J. Drummond, *Sculptured Monuments of Iona and the West Highlands*, Edinburgh 1881; R. C. Graham, *Carved Stones of Islay*, Glasgow 1895; and W. D. Lamont, *Ancient and Medieval Sculptured Stones of Islay*, Edinburgh 1968.

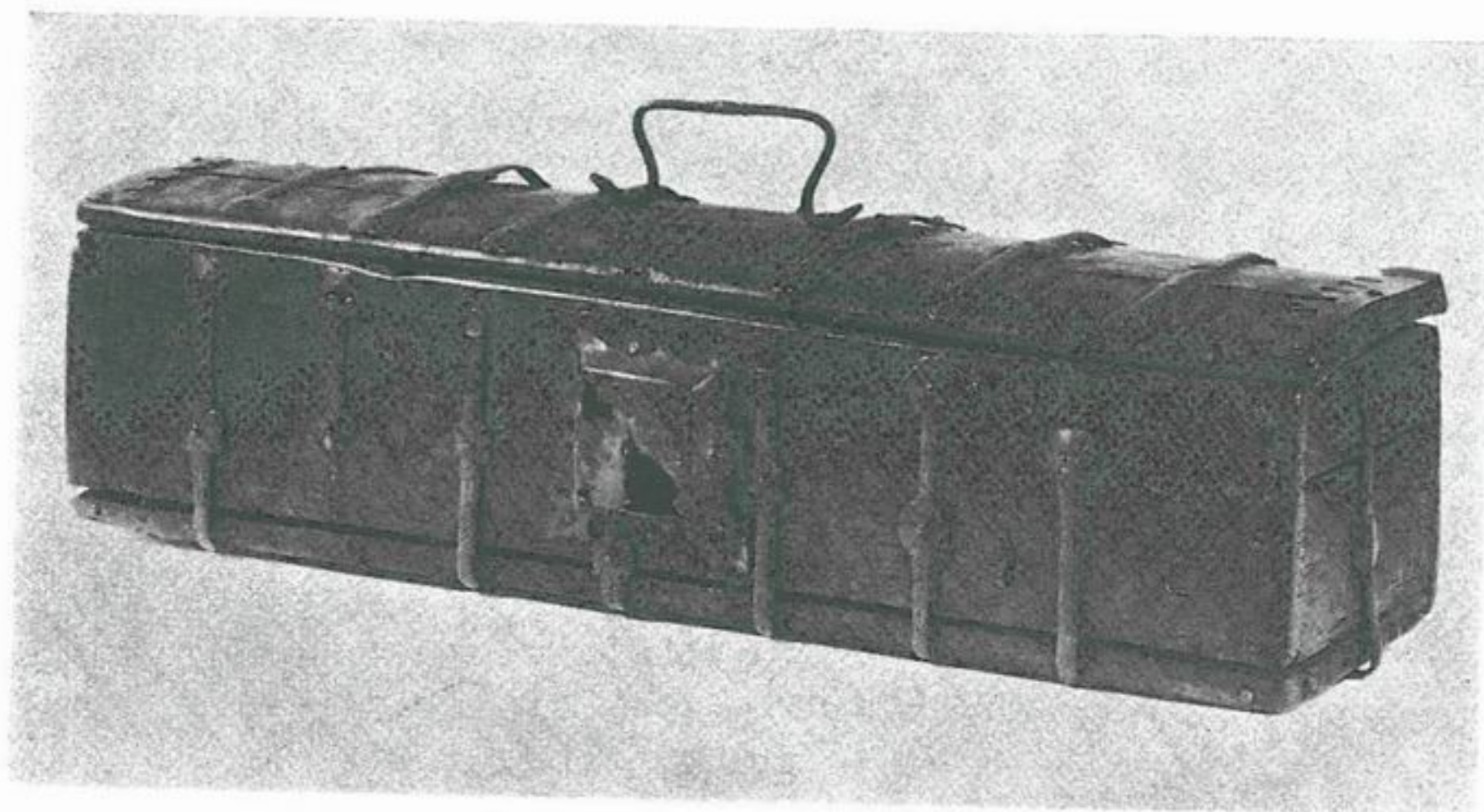
⁷ J. Drummond, *op. cit.*, Pl. XXVII:2.

⁸ *Ibid.*, Pl. LVIII:1; T. P. White, *op. cit.* (1875), 91, Pl. XXXVI:2.

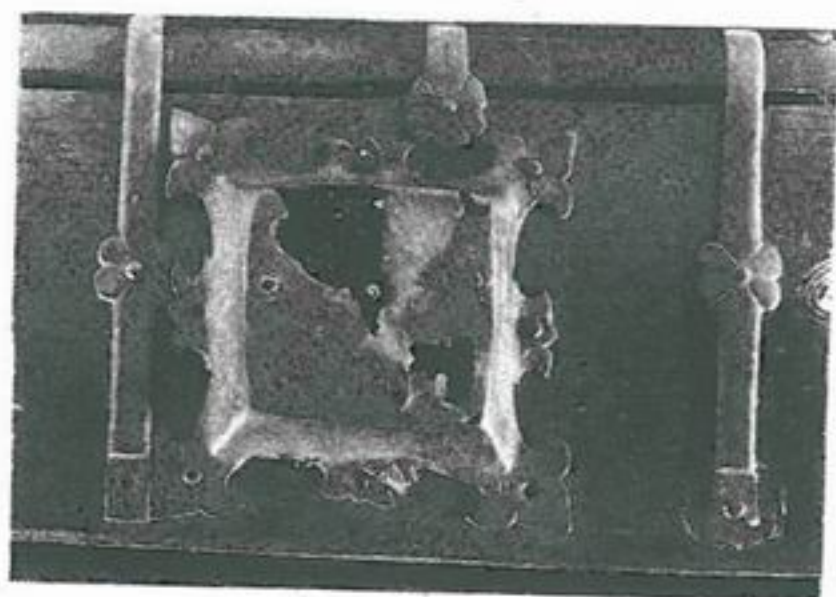
⁹ Nat. Mus. Ire. reg. no. E 99:144. I am grateful to Mr. Thomas Fanning, M.A., Asst.-Inspector of National Monuments, for permitting me to mention this discovery in advance of its publication in the full excavation report.

¹⁰ Many examples could be quoted, including, perhaps, the multi-strand designs on the slab from Reask, Co. Kerry, now kept in Adare Manor (see this *Journal*, pp. 27-28 and Fig. 1, B on p. 26)

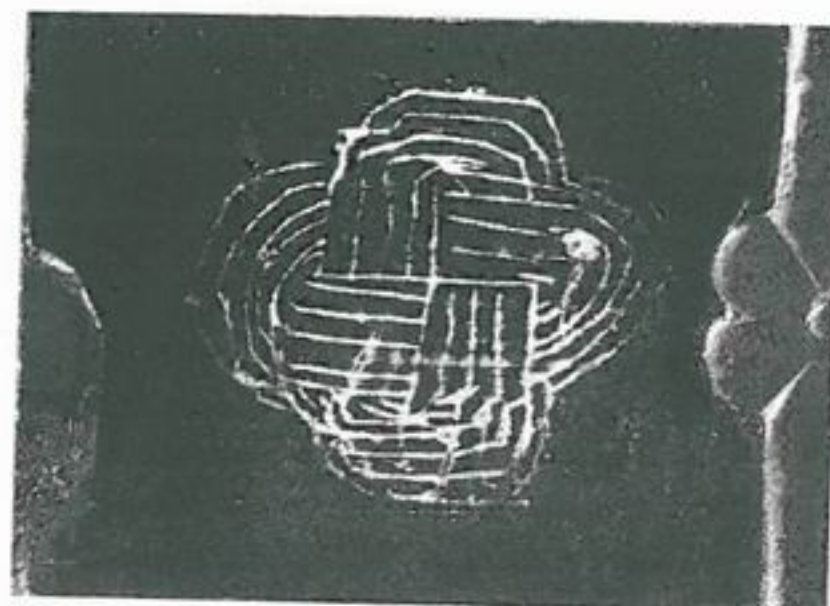
PLATE VI



1. Oblique general view



2. The lock



3. The interlaced design

Late Medieval wooden casket from Knockmore, Co. Clare

(Photos: National Museum of Ireland)

