

A Stone-Laid Trackway and Wooden Troughs, Timoney, Co. Tipperary

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This note records the investigation of the discovery of a stone-laid trackway, two large wooden troughs and a number of worked timbers in a bog in the townland of Timoney, Co. Tipperary. The wooden artifacts were uncovered on 4th June 1958, by two men who were cutting turf on the bog and the find was reported to the National Museum the following day by Sergeant J. McNicholas of the Garda Síochána, Roscrea. The site was inspected on behalf of the Museum by Mr. A. B. Ó Ríordáin of the Irish Antiquities Division and the writer on June 10th and on August 8th, Professor G. F. Mitchell of Trinity College, Dublin, accompanied by the writer, visited the spot to examine the stratigraphy of the bog.

The site lies about four miles south-west of Roscrea, the co-ordinates of the find place on O.S. six-inch sheet 18 of Co. Tipperary being 10.7 cm. from the east margin and 28.3 cm. from the south margin. All the wooden items were found under the trackway but, as they were an obstacle to the cutting of the turf, they had been extracted from the peat and moved a short distance away from where they had been discovered. It was stated that the two troughs were found lying side by side but not touching. Between them were found a number of human bones which included fragments of a skull and pelvis and arm and leg bones.

The Trackway

The trackway ran north-south through the bog. A longitudinal section of it, some 23 m. long, was visible in the side of the cutting made by the turf-cutters. It is possible that a further extension of it lay under the uncut bog to the north of the site. Although no trace of it was discoverable in the cut-away bog to the south, we were informed that lengths of it had been uncovered there during turf-cutting in former years and it was locally believed that it ran through the bog for three-quarters of a mile or more to the firm ground near Corbally. Portion of a trackway formed of timber planks, which may have been a continuation of it, was said to have been uncovered near Corbally many years previously.

The longitudinal section exposed showed that the trackway lay at a depth of approximately 150 cm. below the surface of the bog. No cross section was available for measurement but we were informed that it was about 8 ft. (c. 240 cm.) wide. It was constructed of flat sandstone slabs, in some places laid singly and in others superimposed in as many as five layers to form a stratum about 38 cm. thick. The slabs, which were 2-7 cm. thick, varied considerably in size, the largest measuring about 60 cm. by 30 cm., and although none appeared to have been deliberately trimmed to shape, the majority were approximately rectangular. Dr. J. S. Jackson, then Keeper of the Natural History Division of the Museum, reporting on specimens submitted to him, stated that the slabs were of thinly bedded sandstone. They certainly belonged to one or other of the sandstones of Old Red, Lower Carboniferous or Upper Carboniferous origin but, as they had been leached by water, they lacked

any lithological characteristic which would assist in closer identification. The slabs had been laid on a layer of brushwood which had been spread on the surface of the fen peat, the compressed remains of which were visible in places as a stratum some 5 cm. thick. According to information supplied by the turf-cutters, the trackway was bordered on each side by a line of stakes driven into the peat. These may have been used to mark out the line of the trackway prior to its construction or they may have formed fences to keep animals being driven along the trackway from walking on to the treacherous surface of the bog. On the other hand, they may have played a more structural role in helping to stabilize the trackway when it had been built.

The flagstones were overlain by a layer of fine grey sand about 2 cm. thick but it is uncertain whether this was deliberately spread or whether it derived from the slabs themselves as a result of wear, weathering and leaching. In the vicinity of the place where the troughs were discovered, the sand was covered by a layer of pasty yellow clay about 1 cm. thick, on top of which was a layer, 2 cm. thick, of densely-packed large fragments of charcoal. This was overlain by a stratum, 9 cm. thick, composed of muddy trampled peat with some charcoal intermixed. Extending from this to the surface of the bog was a stratum of unhumified peat, 125-135 cm. thick, with abundant plant remains. Three layers could be distinguished in this stratum: the lowest, 55 cm. thick, of dark brown peat; the middle one, also about 55 cm. thick, of whitish mossy peat; the top layer, 25 cm. thick, of brown peat, partly humified. Although the charcoal spread and the overlying trampled peat indicate some kind of human activity in the area of the trackway where they occurred, nothing was found that would elucidate its nature or determine its duration. Since this activity, by whatever interval, post-dated the construction of the trackway and since the deposition of the troughs and worked timbers, by however short an interval, clearly pre-dated its construction, these latter objects would, on the evidence available, appear to have played no part in that activity.

The Troughs

Trough 1 (Fig.1; Pl. I, 1 and 2)

This, which was hollowed out of a single length of oak,¹ was almost rectangular in plan and flat-bottomed externally and internally. It was 230 cm. long, 25 cm. deep and averaged 34 cm. in height. It was 43 cm. wide at one end, 47 cm. at the other and 49 cm. in the middle. Externally, the two ends and one of the sides were vertical; the other side sloped outwards slightly from bottom to top. Internally, the trough was also rectangular in plan but the interior faces of the ends sloped outwards appreciably, leaving the hollow longer on top, where it measured 196 cm., than at bottom, where it measured 187 cm. The side which sloped outwards externally had a corresponding slope on its interior face but the face of the opposite side was vertical, both sides being 4 cm. thick with a slight outward bevel on their upper edges. The ends were very much thicker than the sides, one being 18 cm., the other 14-15 cm. Near one of the upper corners of one end there projected horizontally an approximately cylindrical lug, 6 cm. long and 5.5-7 cm. in diameter (Fig. 1, B). It was of one piece with the trough and was situated at a depth of 9 cm. below the upper edge and at a distance of 8 cm. from the adjacent vertical edge. On the same

¹ Identification of wood by Miss M. J. P. Scannell, B.Sc., Natural History Division, National Museum (now of National Botanic Gardens, Glasnevin, Dublin).

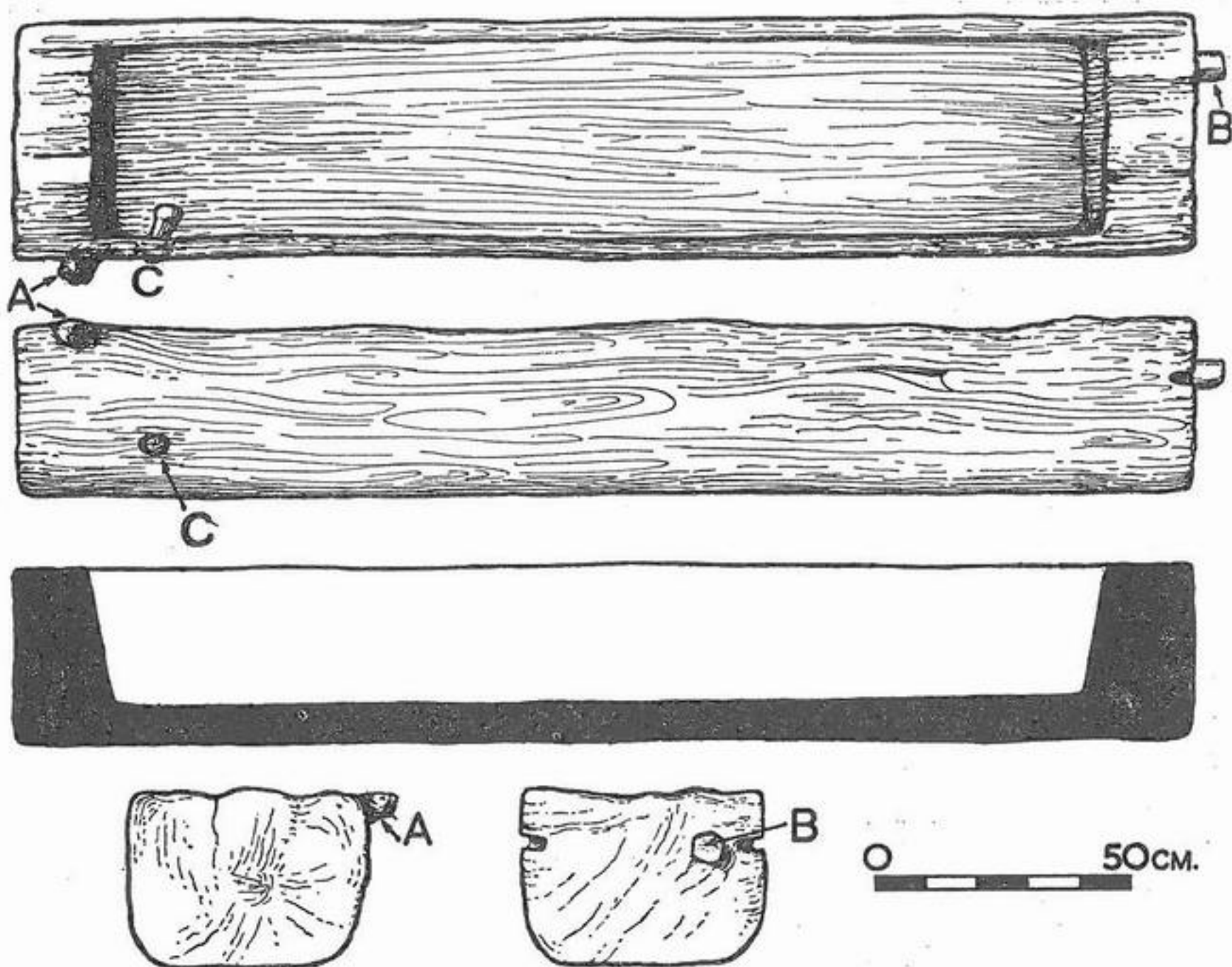


Fig. 1. Timoney, Co. Tipperary. Trough 1: plan; side elevation; longitudinal section, and elevations of both ends.

level as the lug, a horizontal groove, 10 cm. long and 3 cm. deep, was cut into the corner of the trough, making an angle of 45° with the end and the adjoining side. A similar groove was cut into the opposite corner of the trough at the same depth below the upper edge. What might be interpreted as a second lug was situated near the other end of the trough, on the side farther from the first lug (Fig. 1, A). It projected immediately below the upper edge at a distance of 10 cm. from the end. It was 5 cm. long, of irregular outline and measured about 7 cm. across. It is possible, however, that it was a knot which it was felt more prudent to leave protruding rather than attempt to cut it down flush with the surface for fear of splitting the side of the vessel. An irregular hole, 10 c. long, in the same side of the trough which was situated 10 cm. below the upper edge and 62 cm. from the opposite end, may have been caused by the loss of a knot. At a distance of 25 cm. from the end of the trough opposite that with the lug, a hole, 6 cm. in diameter and 7 cm. long, was bored through the side at its junction with the bottom (Pl. I, 2; Fig. 1, C). It sloped downwards slightly and on the inside of the trough it was plugged with a spigot 13 cm.

long, the portion of which that projected into the interior of the trough was approximately oval in section and measured 8 cm. by 5 cm. There can be little doubt that this hole was provided to enable the liquid contents of the trough to be drained off through it when the spigot was withdrawn.

The two slots in the corners of one end were, probably, intended as finger-grips to facilitate moving the vessel. If the projecting lug on the same end had been intended to serve a similar purpose, it would either have occupied a central position or have been accompanied by a second lug near the opposite corner. As no trace of such a companion was visible and as, in any event, the length of the lug (6 cm.) seems too short to have permitted it to function as an effective hand-grip, its purpose must remain problematical. It is interesting to note that lugs of this type were present on a large trough, 12 ft. long and 3 ft. wide, hollowed out of a single length of oak, which was found in a bog in Ardragh townland, Co. Monaghan. It was published in 1845 by Shirley who described it as a boat. His illustration depicts a trough of semicircular section with two thick vertical ends, from one of which two round lugs project horizontally near the upper corners with a single one projecting from the centre of the other end, all three being situated at about the same level a short distance below the upper edge of the trough.² Wakeman, publishing a find from Rossorry townland, Co. Fermanagh, described it as part of a boat hollowed out of a length of timber, having at the remaining end two "handles" which would have been useful in the portage of the craft from one sheet of water to another.³ Although he claimed that the object was "almost precisely similar" to the Ardragh trough, the Rossorry specimen is, in fact, neither a boat nor a trough but the chute of a horizontal mill.

Trough 2 (Fig. 2; Pl. I, 3 and 4)

One end of this trough was exposed during the turf-cutting carried out in the previous year and was, unfortunately, cut off. One of the sides had also broken away, taking with it a sliver of the bottom. Notwithstanding these mutilations, it was apparent that the vessel was of an exceptionally high standard of workmanship. It was rectangular in plan and excavated out of a single piece of oak. The bottom was flat, internally and externally, and the remaining side and end vertical. Externally it was 44 cm. wide and the extreme length of the surviving portion of the bottom was 157 cm. What remained of the side was 139 cm. long and 4 cm. thick. The bottom was 8 cm. thick and about 36 cm. wide internally. In height, the trough measured 28 cm. externally and 20 cm. internally. The end was 16 cm. thick, with a complex asymmetrical recess cut into its upper surface (Fig. 2, a). This had a uniform depth of 2.5 cm. and consisted of three interconnected rectangular areas, the middle and largest of which extended to the end-face of the trough. In the centre of each of the smaller areas was a hole, 2 cm. in diameter and 1 cm. deep, while at a distance of 4 cm. from the outer edge of the middle area was a larger hole, 2.5 cm. in diameter and 4.5 cm. deep, adjoining which and nearer the outer edge was a pair of small holes, 1.5 cm. in diameter and 1 cm. deep.

The features of this recess and, indeed, its very presence are difficult to explain. It cannot have been intended as a mortice to house the tenon of an upright mounted

² Shirley, Evelyn Philip. *Some Account of the Territory or Dominion of Farney in the Province and Earldom of Ulster*, London 1845, p. 209.

³ *J. Roy. Soc. Antiq. Ireland*, 12 (1872-73), 16-17.

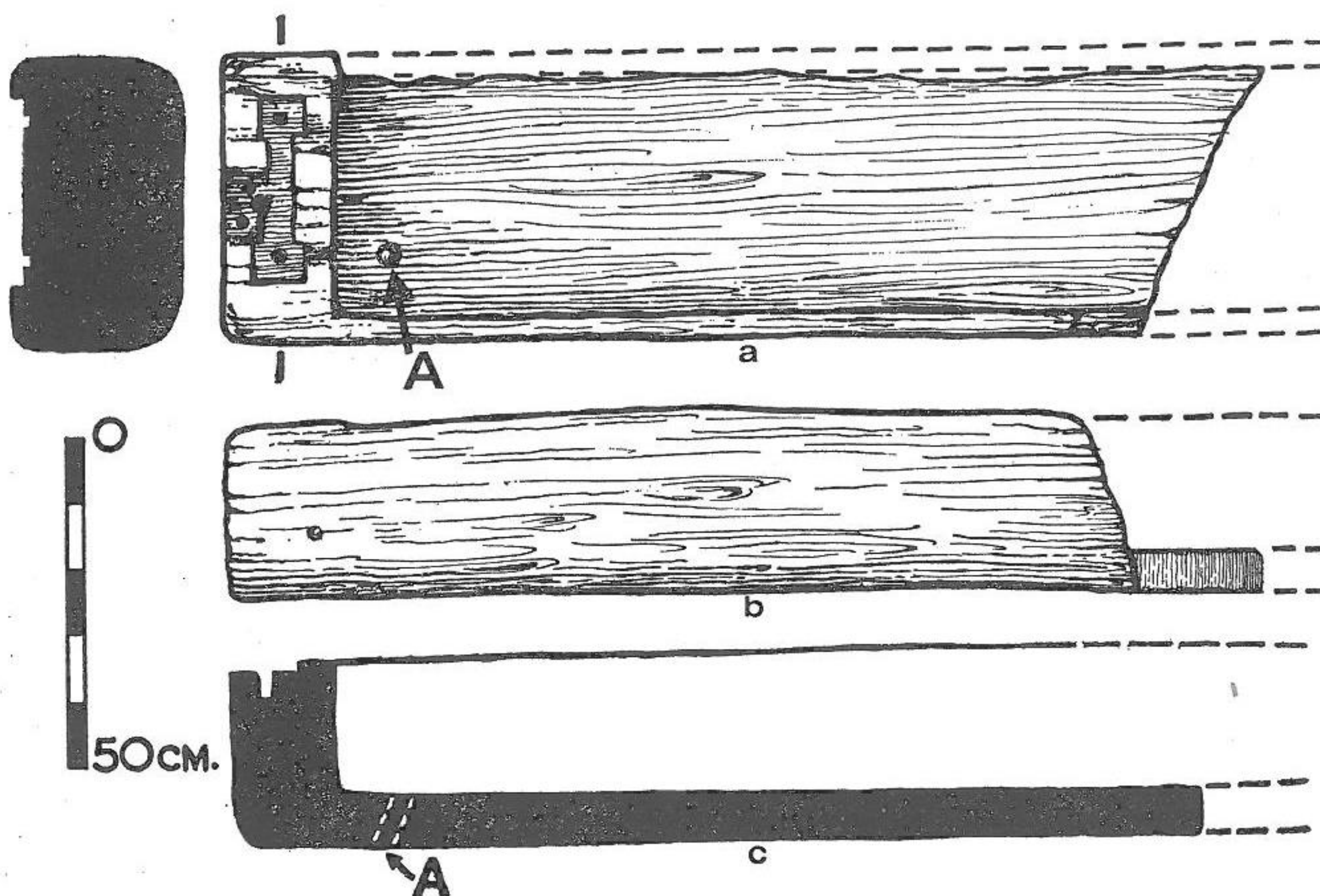


Fig. 2. Timoney, Co. Tipperary. Trough 2: plan (a); side elevation (b); longitudinal section (c).

on the end of the trough since it is too shallow to have provided stability for such an upright, even if it were possible to supplement the tenon with dowels fixed in the holes. Even if a credible function could be assigned to an upright located in this position, it is impossible to understand why it should have been considered necessary to furnish it with so complicated a tenon. Neither is it reasonable to interpret the recess as a device to hold a lid in place by acting as the receiver for a matching projection on the underside of the lid. Even if it were known that the other end of the trough had a similar recess, it would still remain extremely improbable that receivers of such elaboration would have been provided when the same result could have been achieved by means of a nipple on the underside of the lid engaging in a hole in the end of the trough. Moreover, the lids of the large chutes—which, like the troughs, were hollowed out of barks of wood—that directed a jet of water on to the wheels of horizontal mills were invariably seated on an interior ledge a little below the upper edge of the chute. Such indications as there are for the date of the troughs place them somewhere in the Early Christian Period, to which also belong those horizontal mills that have been dated, so that a ledge rather than the engagement of a projection in a recess seems the method more likely to have been adopted to hold a lid in place if the trough were to be equipped with one. A further objection to this interpretation is that it fails to account for the series of circular holes in the

floor of the recess. Another explanation is suggested by the manner in which the recess opens on to the vertical end-face of the trough. This may imply that the opening housed a flat length of timber, one end of which stretched beyond the edge of the trough, the other end extending to the inner margin of the recess and having expansions that fitted into the rectangular areas on either side, the whole held firmly in its seating by treenails driven into the two holes in the expansions and the three near the outer edge of the recess. Although this interpretation accounts for the presence of the holes and for the opening of the recess on to the end face of the trough, as well as suggesting that the complexity in plan arises from the provision of lateral expansions to afford an extra rigid anchorage for the embedded end of the projecting timber, there is nothing to indicate how long the latter might have been or what purpose it could have served. In view of the difficulty of attributing any probable function to this feature, it is all the more regrettable that the other end of the trough was destroyed without record since some of the uncertainty might have been eliminated if we knew whether or not it had a similar recess.

Like the first trough, this one also was provided with a drainage-hole, but at a different point. It was 3 cm. in diameter and 7 cm. long and pierced the wood at a slight inclination from the vertical at a distance of 7 cm. from the intact end of the vessel and 8 cm. from the remaining side (Pl. I, 4; Fig. 2, a, A). If the holes were for draining off liquid, it is likely that the troughs were mounted on supports clear of the ground. This would have been desirable even if the object was merely to get rid of the liquid and essential if the aim was to recover the liquid for subsequent use. The fact that the holes in both troughs are situated close to one end strengthens the supposition that they were for draining the vessels since this could be done most efficaciously if they were set at a tilt with the bottoms inclined downwards towards the holes. Nothing in the circumstances of the find afforded any clue about the use to which the troughs might have been put. It seems to the writer that they would have been uncomfortably narrow for personal bathing, but it is possible that they were used for some such purpose as steeping grain to prepare malt for brewing ale.

Channelled Beam

The items found below the trackway with the troughs included two fragments of channelled beam which may have been parts of a single timber or portions of two similar beams. Both were worked to a rectangular section and were about 20 cm. wide and 25 cm. thick. The larger piece was 355 cm. long, the smaller 100 cm. A channel, 8 cm. wide and about 13 cm. deep, which ran from end to end of each fragment, had been cut into one of the narrower faces. The channel, the bottom of which was slightly rounded, was not symmetrical about the median line of the face of the beam, being about 7 cm. distant from one edge and about 4 cm. from the other. A similar asymmetry is characteristic of many of the channelled sleeper-beams in the horizontal mills of the Early Christian Period. Both of the Timoney fragments belonged to the foot- or sleeper-beam of the wooden wall of a building or enclosure. The channel held either the ends of a series of contiguous upright planks, as occurred in a house of mid-eleventh century date discovered in the excavation carried out by the National Museum at Christ Church Place, Dublin, or the edges of a series of horizontal boards, as occurred in a horizontal mill at Morett, Co. Laois, investigated in 1952.⁴ It is, however, extremely probable that the former method of construction

⁴ *J. Roy. Soc. Antiq. Ireland*, 83 (1953), 16-17 and 22-23.

was used since boards laid horizontally in the channel would have been held in position by housing their ends in slots in upright posts and there were no traces of mortices interrupting the channel at intervals to receive the tenons of such uprights.

Miscellaneous Timber Fragments

Of the other fragmentary timbers extracted from the peat in the neighbourhood of the troughs, the largest was part of a plank 40 cm. wide and 5 cm. thick. It was 75 cm. long, one end being squared and tolerably intact, the other broken in an irregular fracture. Approximately 4 cm. from the intact end, it was pierced by two holes, 3 cm. in diameter, one of which was 3 cm. distant from the adjacent side, the other 17 cm. from the opposite side. The remaining items consisted of five fragments of planks or boards and three pieces of rectangular section which had been cut to a rough point at one end and appeared to have been the lower ends of stakes. They were 10-20 cm. thick; one being 65 cm. long and 25 cm. wide, the second 35 cm. long and 20 cm. wide and the third 120 cm. long and 18 cm. wide.

Stone Ball

The only other artifact discovered at the site was a stone ball which was found lying on the flags of the trackway. Although the surface is faintly faceted, the shape approximates closely to a sphere with an average diameter of 6.9 cm. It is of fine-grained quartz sandstone, probably from the Castlecomer plateau.⁵ The faceting of the surface suggests artificial rather than natural rounding. It resembles a stone cannon ball or one of the older type of "bullets" used in the bowling game called "long bullets" which was played along roads in Co. Armagh.⁶ In view of the thickness of peat overlying it, it is improbable that the trackway was in use later than the close of the Early Christian Period and, consequently, the object cannot be interpreted as a cannon ball if it was in primary association with the trackway. The chance that it would have come to rest on the trackway from an original position on the surface of the bog seems extremely remote. Although the playing of long distance bowling was practised in recent times only in Cos. Cork and Armagh, there is evidence that it was a popular pastime in many parts of the country in the nineteenth century and it may, therefore, have a long history here despite the fact that the data adduced about it so far do not date earlier than the beginning of the eighteenth century. If this is the case, the ball might be a "bowl", but in the present state of knowledge any interpretation of it must remain highly speculative.

Human Bones

As previously mentioned, a number of human bones, including parts of a skull and pelvis and arm and leg bones, were found on the site. These were said to have come to light between the two troughs which, we were informed, lay side by side

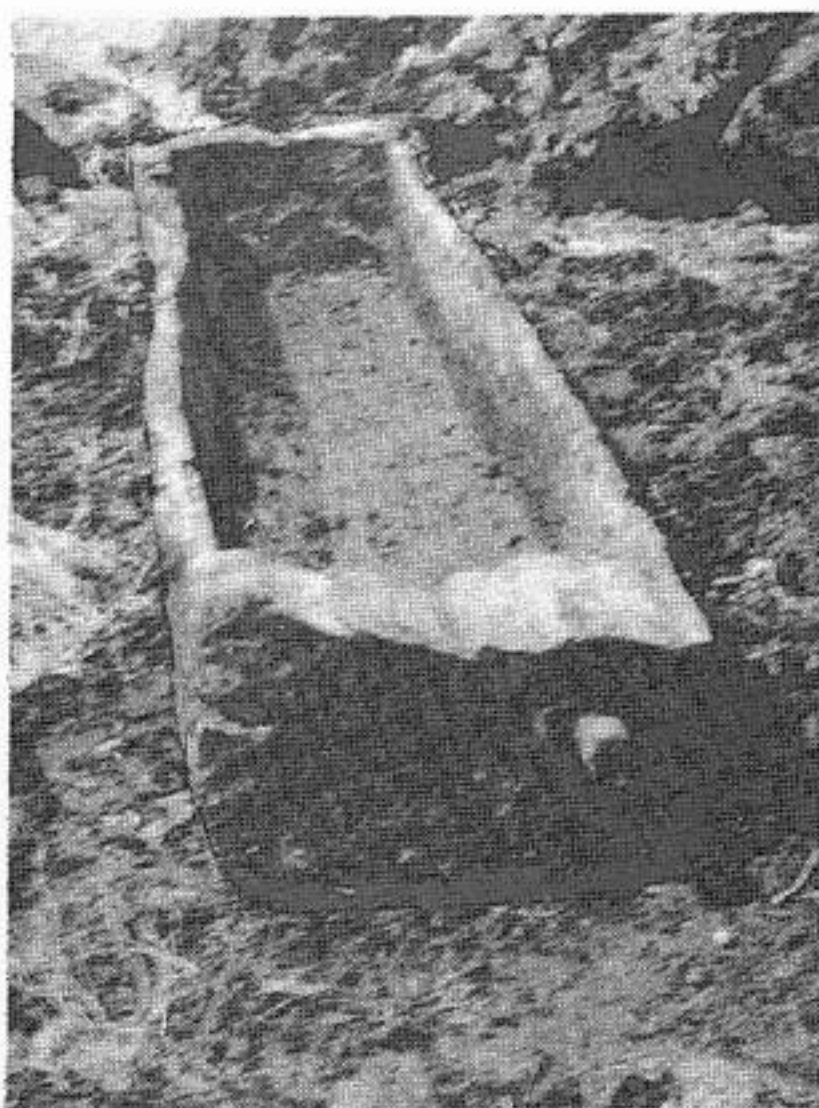
⁵ Identification by Professor G. F. Mitchell, F.R.S., Trinity College, Dublin, to whom and to Mr. A. B. Ó Ríordáin, National Museum of Ireland, the writer wishes to express his thanks for their assistance in the investigation of the site and in the preparation of this report.

⁶ *Ulster J. Archaeol.*, 9 (1946), 58-68.

but not in contact with each other. Although it is not known if all the bones present were recovered and although no data were available about their disposition in the peat, the fact that they comprised significant parts of the head, trunk and limbs justifies the belief that they were the remains of a body which was buried there. The extant information affords no clue to the circumstances under which a body, flanked by two large troughs which were, evidently, regarded as expendable, came to be buried in the bog. As no data about the depth of the body and the troughs below the trackway are on record, it is also impossible to venture an opinion whether the builders of the trackway might have been responsible for the burial or even aware of its existence.

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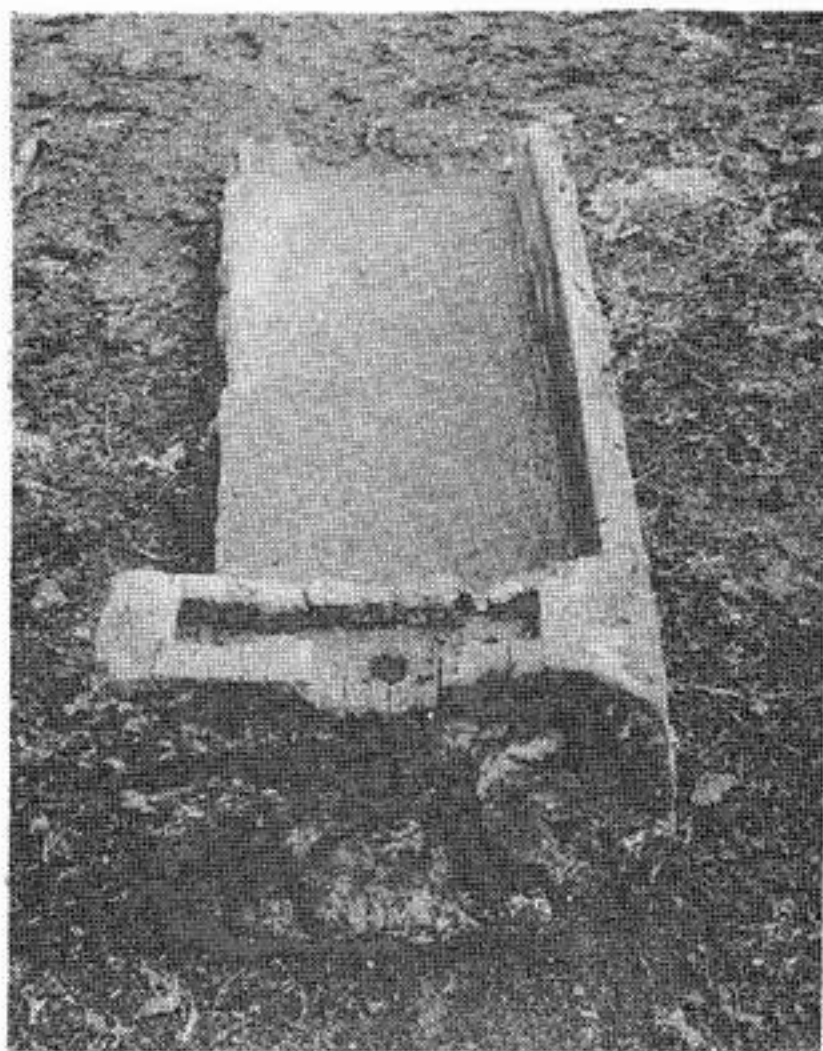
From one whose preoccupation has been with the things used by that great majority whose names are unknown to history, this brief record of a chance glimpse of the work of other nameless men is offered as a token of admiration for Dr. MacLysaght's scholarly contributions to the study of Irish history, genealogy, and surnames.



1. Trough 1: showing projection on end face and angle-slots.



2. Trough 1: showing projection on side and drainage-hole plugged by spigot.



3. Trough 2: showing recess in upper surface on end.



4. Trough 2: showing drainage-hole in bottom.

TIMONEY, CO. TIPPERARY

[Photos: National Museum of Ireland]