

An Early Celtic Spanish-North Munster Connection

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In January 1969, during a discussion at a conference entitled "Problems of the Iron Age in the Irish Sea Province" held in Cardiff under the auspices of the Council for British Archaeology, I mentioned, *inter alia*, that I believed that there was a Hallstatt period iron spearhead from Co. Limerick. The spearhead was subsequently referred to in the summarising address at the closing of the Conference, and mentioned in the published report on the Conference proceedings.¹ The result is that my belief has entered the archaeological literature, but without any further details concerning its identification or the grounds for suggesting such a date for it—frequent verbal requests for this information, and the exciting new views recently being put forward for the Irish Iron Age (see below) encourage publication of this note.

The spearhead in question is excellently preserved (Fig. 1). It has a long, well-forged, slender socket which is decorated with inlaid horizontal and vertical bands of poor gold arranged into five zones of ornament. It has no rivet/peg-holes, and at present contains a portion of wood (*Quercus*, oak; identified by Dr. P. O'Connor, former Keeper, National History Division, National Museum, 25/6/1951) which is to all appearances quite modern and not part of the original spearshaft. The blade appears short in proportion to the length of the socket, but this is only relative, this being, in fact, the longest known Irish iron spearhead. The blade is gently shouldered and has a prominent midrib which is grooved, giving it a three-ribbed effect. It measures 51.1 cm. in total length; the blade is 25.5 cm. long and is 3.9 cm. in maximum width.

This spearhead is one which has fluctuated in and out of the Irish archaeological literature, being at first accepted as belonging to the La Tène period of the Irish Iron Age² but later generally being dropped altogether as being most likely an ethnological import in recent times.³ It is the unusual, unique in Ireland, spearhead found when making the Limerick Waterworks between Castleconnell and Limerick City, and discovered later "doing duty as a poker in a country cottage!"⁴ It belonged for a time to the Revd. L. J. R. M. Hewson, M.A., being recorded as in his private collection in 1906;⁵ in 1908 he allowed the National Museum of Ireland make a replica of it for their collections;⁶ later it was sold to W. Sinclair, of Nassau Street, Dublin, from whom it was purchased in 1919 for the, then, princely sum of £50 by the National Museum.⁷

¹ Leslie Alcock, in C. Thomas (ed.), "The Iron Age in the Irish Sea Province", *CBA Research Report 9*, London 1972, p. 105.

² First published as such by E. C. R. Armstrong in *J. Roy. Soc. Antiq. Ireland*, 53 (1923), 20, plate I, no. 1.

³ R. A. S. Macalister, for example, accepts it as La Tène in the first edition of *The Archaeology of Ireland* (London 1928, p. 154, fig. 9n) but omits mention of it in the second edition (London 1949). It is briefly included in J. Raftery's *Prehistoric Ireland* (London 1951, p. 194, fig. 223), and is almost dismissed, as a "possible example" of an Iron Age spearhead, in M. Herity and G. Eogan's *Ireland in Prehistory* (London 1977, p. 236).

⁴ Macalister, *loc. cit.*

⁵ W. Ridgeway, *The Early Age of Greece*, vol. II, Cambridge 1931, p. 537, fig. 39.

⁶ Registered as S.A.23:1908; a note in the Museum's Register refers to it as "Late La Tène, like examples in North Germany".

⁷ Registered as S.A.1919:1.

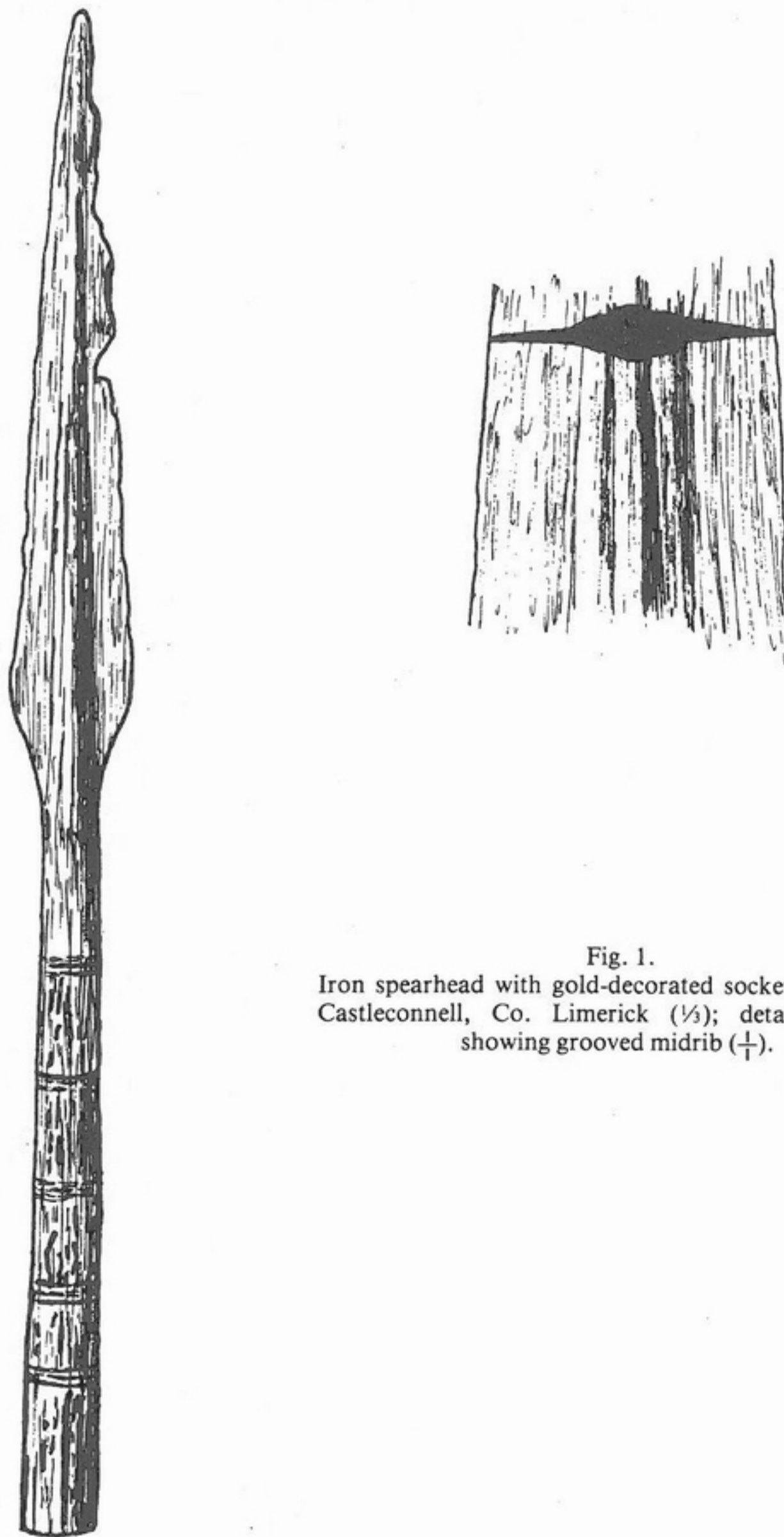


Fig. 1.
Iron spearhead with gold-decorated socket, from near
Castleconnell, Co. Limerick ($\frac{1}{3}$); detail of blade
showing grooved midrib ($\frac{1}{1}$).

When undertaking detailed research on Irish iron weapons some twenty-five years ago, I was totally unable to find any parallel whatsoever for this spearhead, despite a thorough search through Irish and British collections and also despite an examination of most of the spearheads exhibited in museums throughout continental Europe; neither amongst the European nor ethnographical collections were spearheads with similar longitudinally-grooved midribs encountered, even ignoring the long decorated socket.

The search for parallels was never dropped, however, and, in 1967, on checking up on antenna-hilted swords of the continental Hallstatt period, I encountered a closely related spearhead found in Grave 1,060 of Zone V of the necropolis of La Osera, Chamartín de la Sierra (Avila), in north-central Spain.⁸ This spearhead⁹ has a leaf-shaped blade and no decoration on its long socket, but it does have the very distinctive (diagnostic?) triple-grooved midrib. It is some 10cm. shorter than the Irish spearhead, but with it was found another somewhat similar but not identical spearhead (its blade has single ribs on either side of a normal midrib) which is only 5 cm. shorter than the Irish one. Also found in the same grave was an antenna-hilted dagger with finely decorated hilt and scabbard. The whole association has been dated by the excavator to the fourth century B.C.¹⁰

The discovery of this Spanish parallel raises the question as to how it got to Ireland, and why to North Munster—it would be unreasonable to suggest that it is of Irish manufacture, and even the strange circumstances of its discovery hardly indicate that it is a recent importation. Early Celtic links with Spain have sometimes been mooted, even in ancient times—the *Lebor Gabála*, written down in the eighth century, brings the Goidelic invasion, led by Míl Espáine (derived from *Miles Hispaniae*, 'the soldier of Spain'), from that country. Others have suggested a Spanish origin for the construction of *chevaux-de-frise* in Ireland, as at Ballykinvarga, Co. Clare, and Dún Aengusa, on the Aran Islands, and although Harbison in a recent re-assessment of *chevaux-de-frise* in Europe¹¹ has discounted any direct Spanish-Irish connection in this regard, the question remains open. Indeed, in recent lectures¹² my colleague Dr. Seamas Caulfield, of University College, Dublin, has come out in favour of a Spanish-Irish connection.

Dr. Caulfield's views are most interesting in that he argues with much justification that the Iron Age may have been introduced into Ireland in at least two waves, the first being a non-La Tène Iron Age arriving in south-western Ireland from Iberia, and the second being a La Tène Iron Age arriving in north-eastern Ireland via Britain.¹³ Recent work on the linguistic side tends to support a Spanish-Irish connection, as does Dr. Caulfield's own work on stone querns.¹⁴ More recently still, in *Actas del II Coloquio Lenguas y Culturas Prerromanas de la Península Iberica* (Tübingen, 17-19 Junio 1976), Salamanca 1979, pp. 225-235 (particularly pp. 228 ff.), Dr. Harbison has discussed in some detail the

⁸E. Cabré de Morán, "Notable Espade de Antenas de la Osera", *Congressos Internacionales de Ciencias Prehistoricas y Protohistoricas, Actas de la IV Sesión, Madrid 1954, Zaragoza 1956*, pp. 753-758.

⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 753-4, fig. 1, left and right (on p. 758).

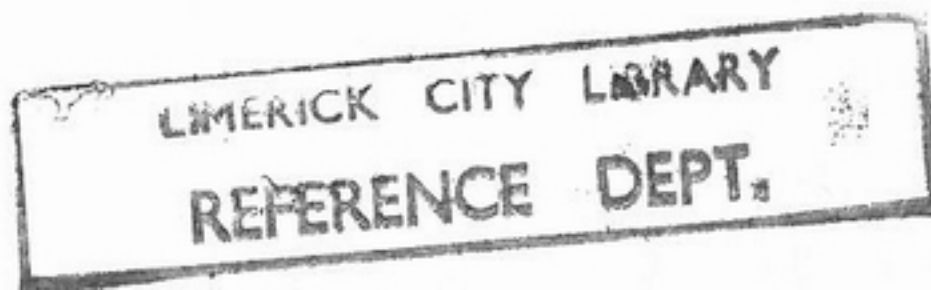
¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 757.

¹¹P. Harbison, "Wooden and Stone *Chevaux-de-Frise* in Central and Western Europe", *Proc. Prehist. Soc.*, 37:1 (1971), 195-225.

¹²E.g. "The Celtic Problem in the Irish Iron Age", a lecture read to the Sixth International Congress of Celtic Studies, held in University College, Galway in July 1979, and "Early Iron Age Ireland", a lecture delivered at the Conference on *Pre-Christian Ireland* held in Ennis in March 1980.

¹³Dr. Caulfield is publishing these theories in the forthcoming *festschrift* in honour of Professor M. J. O'Kelly, *Irish Antiquity*, due to appear in 1981.

¹⁴S. Caulfield, *J. Roy. Soc. Antiq. Ireland*, 107 (1977), 104-138.



possibility of an Early Iron Age Spanish "invasion" of Munster, reaching, however, more negative than positive conclusions.

Accepting, however, Caulfield's ideas, it will be appreciated that the iron spearhead from near Castleconnell assumes no little importance in providing yet another significant link in the story of the introduction of the Celtic culture into Ireland.

Note added in press

See C. Doherty, *J. Roy. Soc. Antiq. Ireland*, 110 (1980), 76 for reference to recent research on Ptolemy's Map (c. 130-180 A.D.) by Professors James Tierney and Francis John Byrne, both of University College, Dublin, which has shown that: "There would appear to be two distinct elements in the make-up of the map. One relates to the north-eastern part of the country and the other to the *south-western*. This information.... was almost certainly obtained from Irish, British, *Spanish*, and Gaulish merchants". (Italics mine—E.R.).