

# An Inscribed Stone Axehead from Gorteen, Co. Clare

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An interesting axehead (Fig. 1, upper), now in the possession of Mr. Christopher J. O'Grady, 18 Ardeevin Court, Lucan, Co. Dublin, was found by him in 1978 while examining an area of previously disturbed ground in the townland of Gorteen, Co. Clare.<sup>1</sup> Its findplace was within a circular platform, twenty-one metres in average diameter, which rises to a height of fifty centimetres above the level of the surrounding field. In

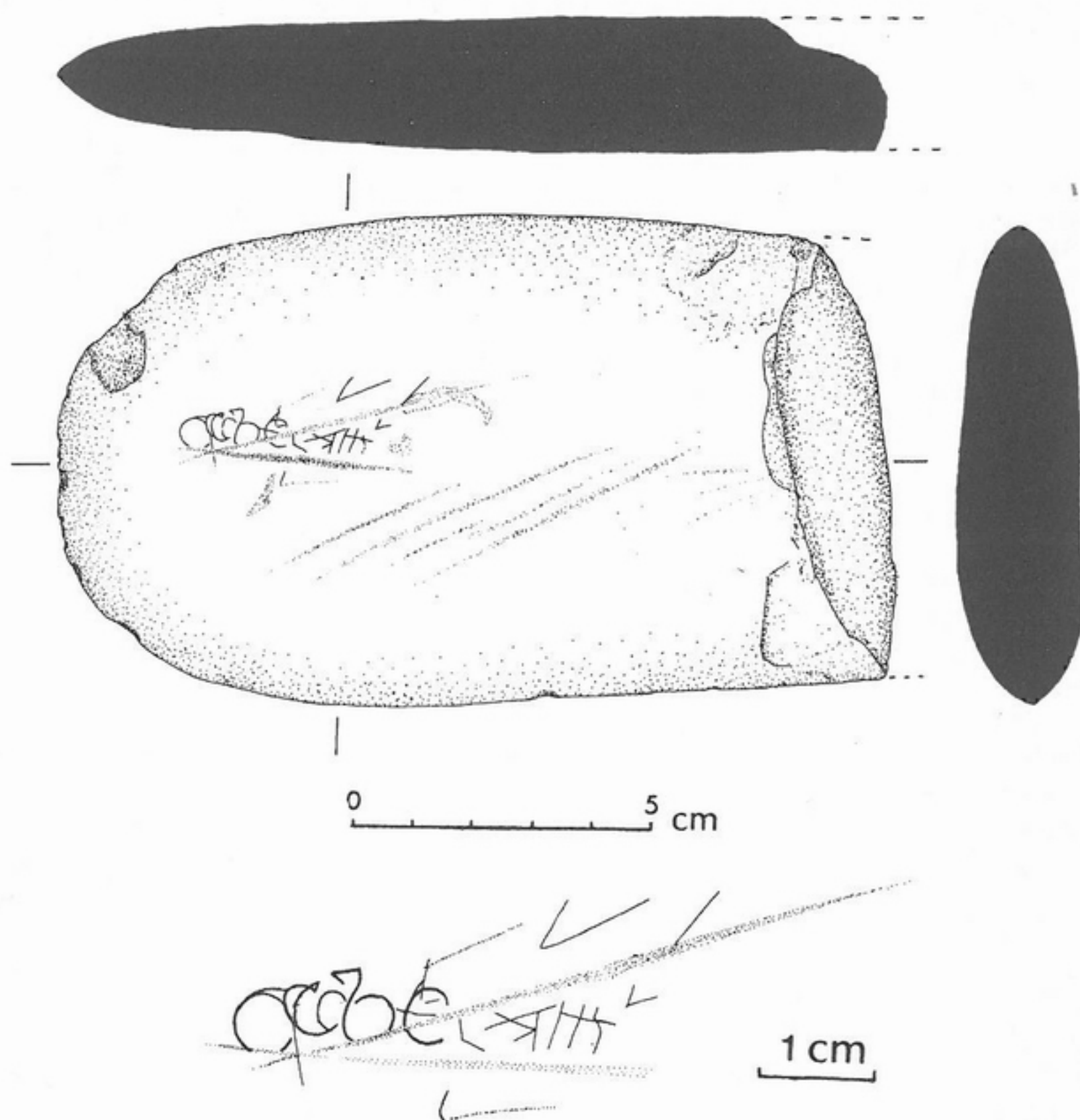


Fig. 1. Inscribed stone axehead from Gorteen, Co. Clare; *Below*: inscription.

<sup>1</sup>Td. Gorteen; par. Ruan; bar. Inchiquin; Co. Clare; O.S. 6-inch sheet 18 (80 mm. from northern margin, 271 mm. from western margin).

places large rounded stones protrude through the grass and appear to delimit an edge. The site itself is on the brow of a low rise with a good view on the north and west across open countryside to the Burren uplands.

The axehead was found inside a stone setting located to the north of the platform's centre. Four stones of this setting are partially exposed, two on the southern side and one on each of the western and northern sides; the eastern edge of the setting, if it had one, is not clear. The length of the exposed portion of the southern side is 1.55 m. and the western is 1.28 m.; the northern side is too indistinct for measurement. The side stones are narrow with an average thickness of about 12 cm. Approximately 15 cm. below the top of these stones, and within the setting, is a small area of flat stones, now less clear because of grass growth. It was among these flat stones that the axehead was found. At the time of discovery Mr. O'Grady noticed some small bones, from what appeared to be an infant, in and around the stones. However, the relationship between the setting and the area of small stones is undetermined.

The axehead is polished and the cross-section is an elongated oval. Portions of the sides are damaged and the butt end is missing. There is a slight curvature on the long sides and the edge is well defined although parts of it are fractured, showing that it had been used. The greater part of the surface is covered with a fine black patina. Dr. Grahame Nevin, Ulster Polytechnic, has identified it from observation with a hand lens as a fine-grained igneous rock, probably felsite. It was most likely a glacial pebble in origin. Max. length 139 mm.; max. width 82 mm.; max. thickness 22 mm.

A series of light scorings and scratch marks are cut through the patination (Fig. 1, below). In one place the letters A, B, C, followed by a series of scratches, can be distinguished. The letters are in Irish uncials and were incised with a sharp pointed instrument, most likely a stylus. The A and B are the best defined letters and are boldly cut. The C has a clear serif but all three letters have been damaged by subsequent scorings. On both the lettered face and the obverse there are a number of regular incised strokes consisting for the most part of elongated V's, and towards the fractured butt end on the obverse is a very worn U-shaped scratch. These lightly incised strokes display a heavy down-stroke and a correspondingly light up-stroke in a fashion typical of scribal practice. The cursive nature of these fine strokes, taken together with the uncials A, B, and C, strongly suggests that the axehead was used by a scribe as a practicing surface.

The date of the letters is difficult to determine in the absence of a clear context. The cursive uncial script developed about the beginning of the eighth century and the following two centuries was the period of its greatest usage, but it remained in use as a display script throughout the medieval period. The axehead itself is presumably of Neolithic or Early Bronze Age date, for although axeheads are occasionally found in Early Christian habitation contexts, such as at Cahercommaun, it is unlikely that they would be manufactured so late. This axehead, then, provides an unusual example of the re-usage of an antiquity in ancient times.

The usage of stone axeheads as 'motif-pieces', while rare, is not unknown. In her recent study, O'Meadhra includes a stone axe from Mullaghoran, Co. Cavan, which is decorated with incised and chip-carved interlace.<sup>2</sup> She also includes an example which may be either an axehead or a whetstone from Culbane(?), Ballynease, Co. Derry, which is decorated

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<sup>2</sup>Uainín Ó Meadhra, *Early Christian, Viking and Romanesque Art Motif-Pieces from Ireland*, Stockholm 1979, No. 133, pp.25 and 97, figs. 418 and 421, plate 55.



with a triquetra, spiral and knot-motifs.<sup>3</sup> This latter has a similarity to the engraved plaque from Culbane published by Hawkes.<sup>4</sup> Scribal motif-pieces are comparatively uncommon, but a parallel is to be found in a now lost example from Nendrum.<sup>5</sup> This is a sliver of stone lamina on which the letters B, C, D, and M are present.

Mr. Patrick F. Wallace, of the National Museum of Ireland, has kindly drawn my attention to an inscribed scrap of leather from his excavation at John's Lane, Dublin, and has allowed its publication prior to his own report. The piece (Fig. 2) is curved, with a draw-string, and may have formed part of a pouch or similar container. On discovery it

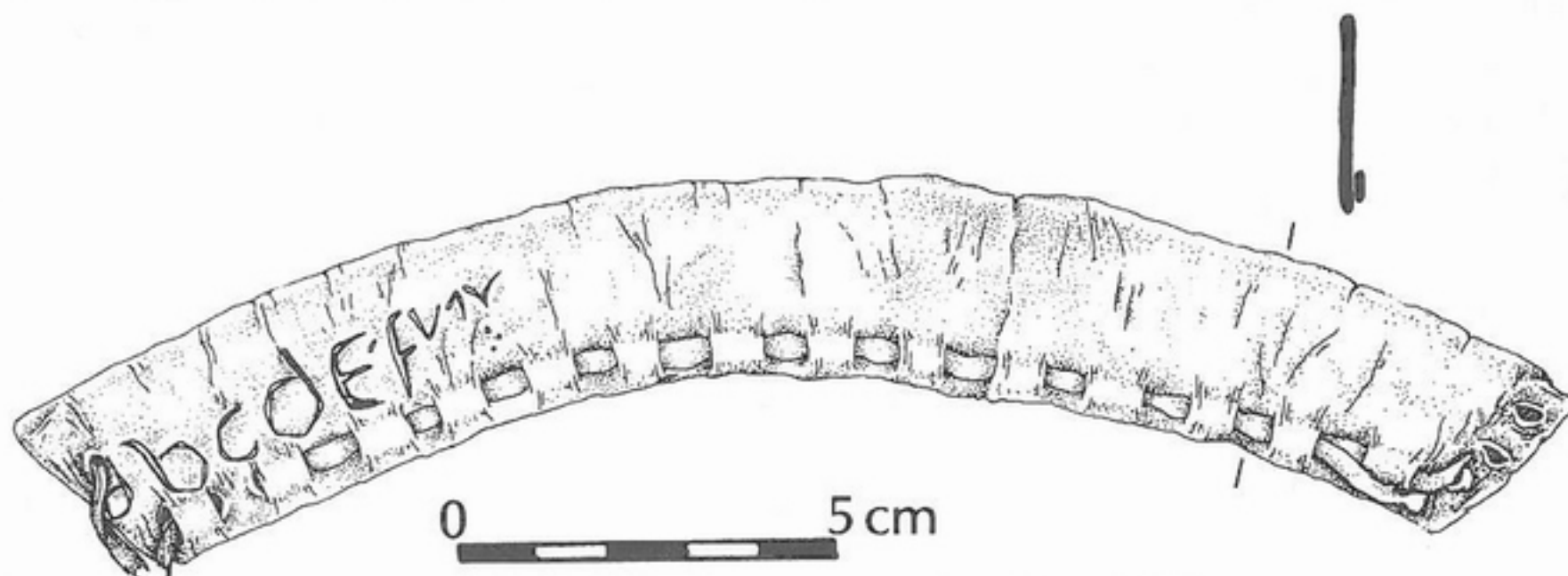


Fig. 2. Inscribed leather strap from John's Lane, Dublin.

measured 22.7 cm. in length, and averaged 3 cm. in width and 2 mm. in thickness, but during conservation it shrunk fractionally. Its registration number is E173:4365. The exterior is smooth and is incised with the uncial letters A, B, C, D, E and F, which were executed with a pointed instrument, as is clearly evident at the beginning of the C and E. Portion of the A is missing, having been cut off when the draw-string was added; the F is unfinished and is followed by two short V-strokes. The D is upright and formed with a single stroke unlike the B and E which are of two strokes. The piece was found in a context of c. 1100.

The style of the Dublin script contrasts sharply with that of the Gorteen axehead and is not as balanced nor as confidently formed. The Dublin script is unusual, although the minuscular A, the upright D and the open E are to be found individually in manuscripts and on Early Christian cross-slabs. Indeed, the style resembles Macalister's alphabet I which he regarded as ninth century at Clonmacnoise.<sup>6</sup> There is no exact parallel, however, and the possibility remains that the Dublin piece was influenced by a non-Irish script. The resemblance of the letters C, D, and E with those of the Bayeux Tapestry may be noted,

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.* No. 13, p. 31, plates 3-4; see also *J. Roy. Soc. Antiq. Ireland*, 60(1930), 77. Mr. Gabriel Cooney, M.A., has drawn my attention to the inclusion of "a large stone celt" (= axehead) displayed in the Archaeological Court of the Great Exhibition held at Dublin in 1853, with "a few letters of the common Irish character" on it — *J. Roy. Soc. Antiq. Ireland*, 2(1852-53), 282.

<sup>4</sup>C. F. C. Hawkes, "Engraved Plaques of Clay-Slate from the Bann Diatomite", *Ulster J. Archaeol.*, 4(1941), 19-22, at p. 19, fig. 2.

<sup>5</sup>Ó Meadhra, *op. cit.* No. 157, p. 106, plates 51 and 52; see also H. C. Lawlor, *The Monastery of Saint Mochaio of Nendrum*, Belfast 1925, p. 144, plate XII, no. 108.

<sup>6</sup>R. A. S. Macalister, *The Memorial Slabs of Clonmacnoise*, Dublin 1909, p. 80.

for instance. Nonetheless, it is almost certain that the Dublin piece was inscribed within Dublin itself.<sup>7</sup>

There is less certainty about where the Gorteen axehead was inscribed. Whether the field in which it was found is the place where the scribe worked or not is unknown. The field is known locally as *páirc na cille* which would seem to indicate the former existence of a church, although it may refer to nothing more than the burial of infants there in comparatively recent times. The possibility remains, however, that the axehead was picked up during the Early Christian period and used by a scribe attached to an ecclesiastical site at Gorteen.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Three further inscriptions from Dublin, two of them in Anglo-Saxon capitals, have been published by Elizabeth Okasha in H. Bekker-Nielsen, P. Foote and O. Olsen (eds.) *Proceedings of the Eighth Viking Congress, Aarhus, 24-31 August 1977*, Odense 1981, pp. 45-51.

<sup>8</sup>I am indebted to Mrs. Mary Finn and Mr. John Aboud for the accompanying drawings.