

An Example of The Nine Irons from County Clare

JIM HIGGINS

This article discusses an example from Carran, Co. Clare, of an amulet known as 'The Nine Irons'. Hitherto the only set known to survive is one of nineteenth century date from Gleann, Co. Galway. This type of amulet must once have been common, widespread, and current over a long period of time. A medieval date is suggested for the Carran example on the basis of its parallels and features. Other Irish amulets of all periods are discussed briefly, as are British and continental parallels. An attempt is made, using the parallels cited, to explore the origin and date of the Nine Irons type of amulet, and some aspects of its curative and protective functions are briefly touched on.

* * * *

"How many men who should be dead are walking
about this day with the nine irons on a ring"—

Thady, in *Solo and the Nine Irons* by Walter Macken.

The Nine Irons is the name given to a series of small amulets, replicas mainly of items of everyday use which were made to be worn together on a chain or ring as a protection against ill-health and evil. These charms or amulets were made specially for an individual, at least in the case of the only published examples.¹ Hitherto the only known surviving set was that made for an infant named John Joyce at a blacksmith's forge at Gleann, Co. Galway, in 1839, and published by Ó Danachair in 1972.² The purpose of this article is to bring to attention part of another set found recently by the writer in Carran Churchyard, Co. Clare.³

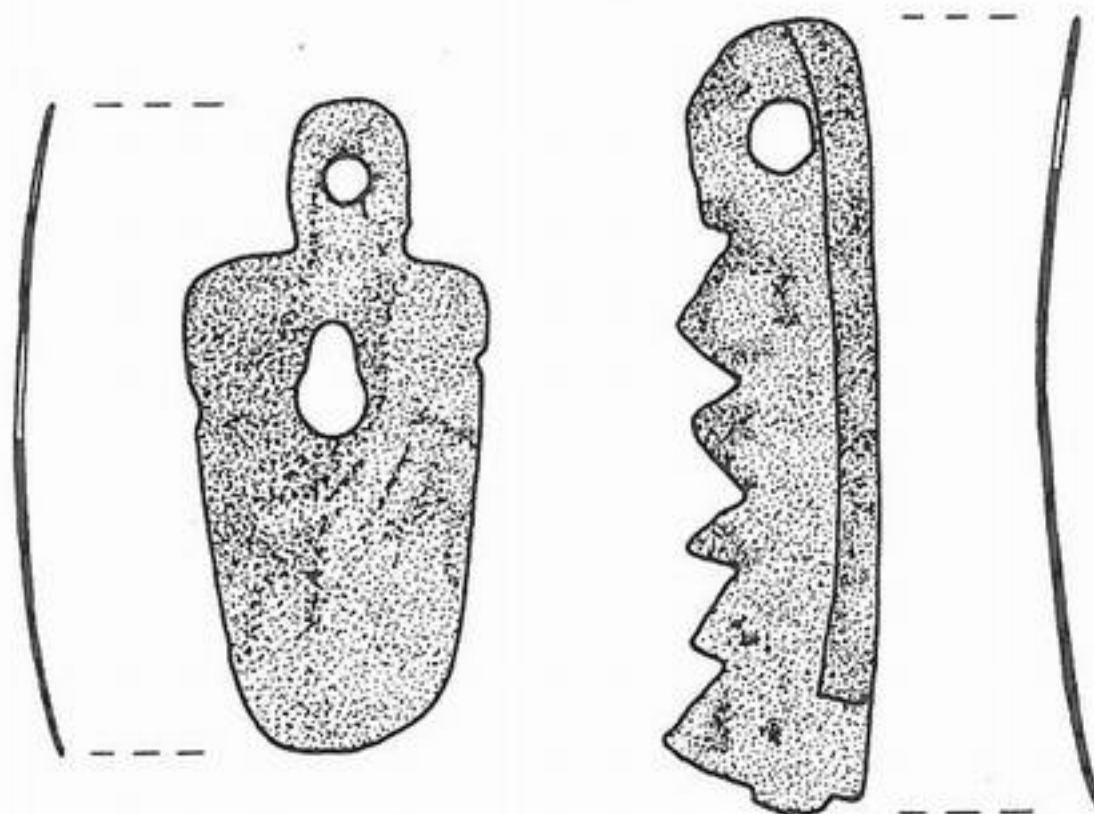
The objects under discussion are two small replicas, one of the blade of a spade, the other of a saw (Illus. 1). Both of these items are also represented among the repertoire of objects found among the Nine Irons which Ó Danachair listed as follows: (1) a cross, (2) a plough coulter, (3) a plough share, (4), a shovel blade, (5) a spade or loy blade, (6) a hatchet, (7) a saw, (8) a flat iron disc said to be a miniature of a baking griddle, and (9) a small shoe nail probably from the shoe of a donkey or small pony.

Only the two items mentioned above were found, and there was no trace of anything else, such as a ring which may have attached them together. The finds were made in loose disturbed soil and the cause of this disturbance may have been either the digging or the cleaning of a nearby grave (several had recently been cleaned at the time of the discovery) or the churning up of the ground in the immediate vicinity of the finds. Though no other finds were made despite a careful search, some small quantities of oyster shells and animal

¹Ó Danachair (1972), 472-473.

²*Ibid.*, (1972), 471, 476.

³Td. Carran, Par. Carren, Bar. Burren, Co. Clare (O.S. 6-inch sheet 9 (30.3cm. from northern margin and 18cm. from eastern margin). See Cunningham (1978), 35-36 for a general description of the site.



Illus. 1. Miniature iron spade-blade and saw from Carran, Co. Clare.

bones were present in the area, 7.2 metres to the north of the north-western corner of the church, where the find was made.

When found both objects were in a rusty condition, and each was apparently cut out from a thin sheet of iron, then carefully shaped, perforated and finished off.

The spade, or rather the spade-blade, is 4.6cm. in length and 2.1cm. in maximum width, and is likewise cut out from a 0.3mm. thick sheet of iron. It is roughly trapezoidal in shape and has a short tang above the shoulders of the blade. This tang is 1.1cm. long and has a circular perforation considerably smaller (3mm. in diameter) than that on the saw. Another irregular, roughly pear-shaped, perforation some 7mm. in maximum length is roughly centrally placed about three-quarters of the way towards the point of the blade. In both cases the areas round the perforations have been smoothly filed. The tip of the blade is slightly rounded and two slight notches, probably accidental flaws, occur on the sides of the blade. The spade-blade is slightly curved in longitudinal section.

The saw measures 5.7cm. in length with a maximum width of 1.5cm. It is damaged at the narrower end and has a jagged edge in that area which suggests that it was originally somewhat longer. At present it has five teeth which are irregular in shape and vary slightly in size. These teeth seem to have been first cut out with a chisel and then filed into shape. No handle as such is represented but instead there is a roughly semi-circular end with a perforation, 5mm. in diameter, through the centre. Whether this hole has been punched or drilled is difficult to know. The back of the saw has a slightly convex curve and the metal has been folded over in this area to produce a strengthening band, varying from 3mm. to 5mm. in thickness.

Miniature replicas and objects of every-day use or of objects which had a symbolic significance can be found from all periods and almost all cultures. Some objects when made in miniature or replica form had a symbolic significance⁴ while the object itself has simply a practical function. Other objects were purely symbolic and had no practical use at all.⁵

⁴The Mycenaean double-headed axe and various forms of the wheel are examples of this; see Walters (1929), 47 for instances of such objects.

⁵'Decorative' or symbolic forms such as the trinskele and the swastika are examples of this, and were used by various cultures as part of amulets or charms over a long period and over a wide geographical area.

Various cultures have used the same or similar symbols in charm and amulet form at various stages, and very probably with different significance or meaning being attached to them. In the following discussion of the parallels for the Nine Irons, therefore, the writer has tried not to concentrate simply on isolated examples, but rather has tried to find parallels for the Nine Irons as a whole.

The tradition of making and wearing protective or curative charms and amulets of symbolic forms (which may serve the dual purpose of being symbolic and decorative) is found in most cultures and in Ireland, as elsewhere, examples can be cited for most periods. The instances which Ó Danachair cites are mainly from the historic periods and no actual examples of artifacts are discussed. It may be relevant, therefore, to look briefly at some examples of amulets and such objects as occur in Ireland specifically, as well as at contemporaneous examples from elsewhere so as to put the Nine Irons, or more specifically the use of amulets and charms, into an overall context.

In Ireland, as elsewhere, small replicas of tools occur in Neolithic contexts, especially in Passage Tombs.⁶ Similar examples to these occur in Breton passage tombs⁷ especially those of the Morbihan area. A variety of forms including axeheads, pestles, pestle-hammers or pendants, and lenticular pendants can be identified. Whether these were always worn as amulets and/or protective charms⁸ is hard to know: some are perforated for suspension, others are not. A miniature stone axehead of greenstone has also been found in the River Avon in England.⁹

The tradition of the use of amulets is well attested in Bronze Age Ireland, as is evidenced by the many crescentic and heart-shaped *bullae* of gold found here.¹⁰ A small axehead, of 'ingot' type, miniature in size, though not necessarily a pendant or amulet since it is not perforated for suspension, from Dundrum, Co. Down, is catalogued by Harbison in his corpus of Irish Early Bronze Age axeheads.¹¹ By far the most interesting group of Bronze Age objects which may have been amulets which form part of a late Bronze Age hoard are those from the vicinity of Strangford Lough, Co. Down.¹² These are five miniature gold palstaves and a gold disc, all of which had perforations for suspension. These objects were found along with a twisted ribbon-torc, a cup-headed pin and an Early Christian Period pin. Though this assemblage has been deemed unacceptable as a hoard, it has been suggested that "the torc and perhaps the gold disc and cup-headed pin be in themselves genuine antiquities (the latter two probably tampered with after finding). At any rate a gold find of some sort was probably made to the north-west of Strangford Lough."¹³ However, the find is no longer available for study.¹⁴ Miniature axes, as we shall see, frequently occur as amulets. Large numbers of amulets occur in European Hallstatt contexts, including axeheads, and these have been discussed by Pauli.¹⁵ A small socketed

⁶See Herity (1974), 126-127, Pl. 92, Figs. 132-133, 140, 142-144, and 146-147.

⁷Herity (1974), *op. cit.*, p. 129, Fig. 95, 5; see also p. 197, Fig. 132.

⁸Some could simply be decorative. It is sometimes very difficult to distinguish between the function of small objects which were intended to be worn, though in some cases the evidence for magico-religious or protective usage can out-weigh the possible decorative function.

⁹Annable and Simpson (1964), 85, No. 20.

¹⁰Armstrong (1920), 43-44, 92-93, and Pl. XIX.

¹¹Harbison (1969), 22, No. 455, Pl. 17:25.

¹²Jope (1966), 42-43, especially 43, and Fig. 28A. See also Macalister (1914), pp. 176-187, and Macalister (1949), pp. 163-164.

¹³Jope (1966), 43.

¹⁴*Ibid.* (1966), 43, footnote 141.

¹⁵Pauli (1975), where references are given.

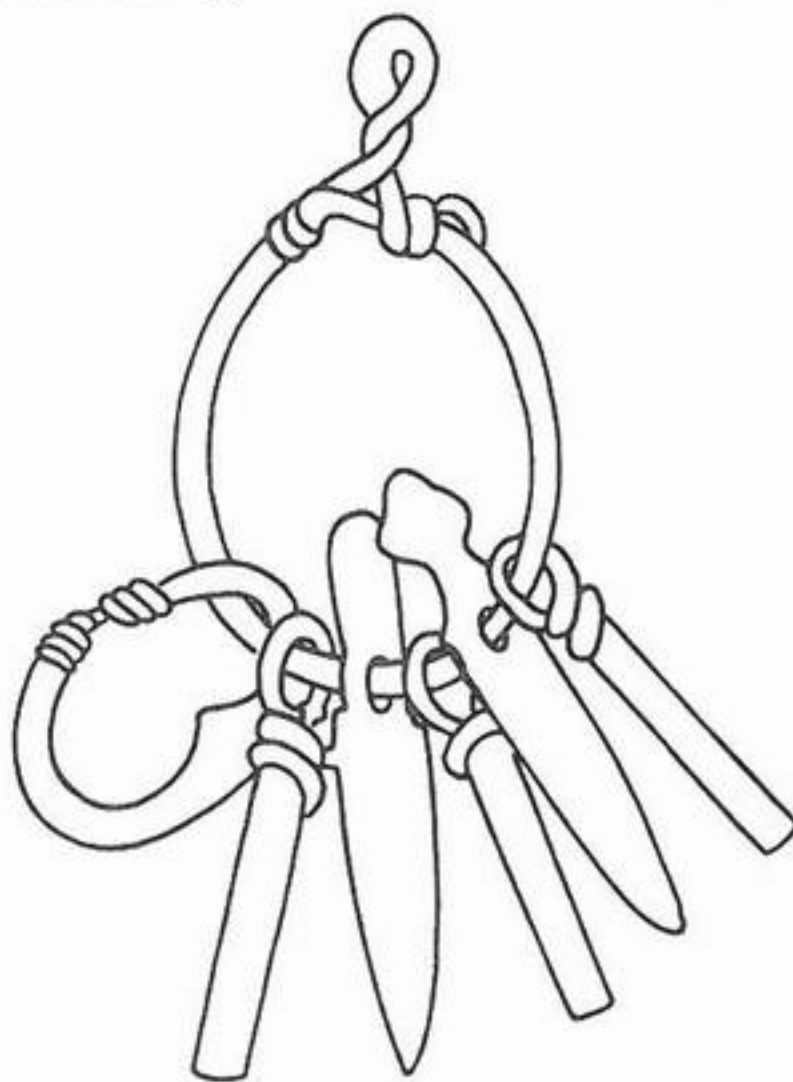
axehead also occurs in a Hallstatt context from Janjevo, Czechoslovakia.¹⁶ It is only 13cm. long, has an outsize loop and may be an amulet, or a non-functional 'decorative'/'ritual' object.

In Iron Age, Gallo-Roman and Romano-British contexts miniature replicas of objects, including wheels, shields, daggers, and suchlike, are common. Perforated examples used as amulets or charms also occur. Individual unperforated miniatures or shields and daggers occur, and are sometimes found in great numbers, for example one hundred and thirty shields and one hundred and seventy daggers deposited as an *ex voto* offering came from the *fanum* at Mouzon in France.¹⁷ A corpus of the Romano-British amulets and miniature objects from the South-East of Britain has been compiled by Green.¹⁸

In Iron Age times amulets in the form of miniature tools and other such objects were common over much of Europe, and large numbers of Celtic amulets have been found mainly in burial contexts and occasionally as stray finds. These occur in a wide area across France, Belgium, Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and occasionally in northern Italy. These amulets are normally found strung together with beads of glass on necklets, or sometimes loose or on small rings. Openwork triangular and rectilinear bronzes, bronze discs and rings, axeheads, shoes, wheels, human figures, and pieces of scrap metal all occur in miniature, as do stone axeheads and beads, and boar's tusks.¹⁹

Recent excavations (1980) at an Iron Age cemetery at Bettystown, Co. Meath, have revealed a burial with a series of amulets and two iron penannular brooches which were found on the neck.²⁰ The 'locket' from the Iron Age burial at Carrowbeg North could likewise be interpreted as an amulet of some sort.²¹

In Viking contexts miniature objects such as Thor's Hammer are very common, and the symbol was reproduced in various media.²² Other objects occur, however, which are grouped together on a ring in the same way as the Nine Irons, for instance the series of amulets or charms from Öland (Illus. 2) which have been identified as a 'Ring, real size, with charms representing a sword, a spear-head and &c., and some Arabic coins.'²³



Illus. 2. Miniature iron tools from Öland, Sweden (after Du Chaillu).

¹⁶Anon., *Die Hallstatt Kultur Frühform Europäischer Einheit* (Exhibition Catalogue), No. 2.6-12.

¹⁷Frézoules (1971), 277-390, especially p. 281, Pls. 9 and 10.

¹⁸Green (1975), 54-70. See also Walters (1929), 47, Fig. 36, No. 141, and Fig. 47, No. 139, for examples of Classical Greek and Roman boars and for double axes.

¹⁹A corpus of those amulets has been published by Pauli (1975).

²⁰The excavation report of this site by P. Kelly is forthcoming. It has been referred to briefly by Raftery (1981), 192.

²¹Willmot (1938-39), 121-140 and Raftery (1981), 187 and Fig. 40:13.

²²See examples in Graham-Campbell and Kidd (1980), 88-89, Fig. 44 and 45; the latter example combines a Christian Cross with a pagan Thor's Hammer. See also Graham-Campbell (1980), 182-184; I am thankful to Mr. P. Holland for this reference. Other examples in Thunmark-Nylen *et. al.* (1981), 272.

²³Du Chaillu (1889), Fig. 1041.

Another example from Sweden is illustrated by Graham-Campbell (1980), though its exact provenance is not given. According to Graham-Campbell "This silver amulet from Sweden consists of a ring from which are suspended miniature weapons and tools of unknown significance: two swords, three staffs and a strike-a-light or fire steel". The similarity of this to the Öland example is striking, and both seem to involve the same basic idea as the Irish Nine Irons, though the same range of specific tool forms are not involved.

Christian 'charms' or amulets of a sort have been in use from Early Christian times on through the Medieval period and beyond. Ampullae, or small flasks with loops for suspension, are common in Britain and on the continent. "At Canterbury they are filled with water from Becket's well, the water of which was, it is said, tinged with the martyr's blood, and elsewhere they might be used to contain holy water or consecrated oil".²⁴

Amulets have survived in a variety of forms down until recent times in Ireland, including small slate examples from the Aran Islands and elsewhere.²⁵

Though Ó Danachair cites many written sources and folk traditions which attest the use of the Nine Irons and similar charms and amulets,²⁶ at the time at which he was writing the Gleann set was the only one known to survive, and no parallels were sought for it among other artifacts. The sources he cites are mostly, but not all, late. Sir William Wilde, writing in 1857, noted that the use of the lucky horse-shoe fastened to the door along with the "seven blessed irons" formerly hung around children's necks were then common in Ireland.²⁷ An early nineteenth century medieval text compiled from both medieval learned works and popular tradition gives a cure for epilepsy: "and go to the son of a son of a blacksmith and have made a plough-share and a coulter and hang these about his neck. . . ."²⁸ The same remedy is recommended for fits or starts in the sleep.²⁹ The Nine Irons are used to defeat the efforts of a butter-stealing hag in a piece of Co. Leitrim folklore.³⁰ Ó Danachair also discusses the power of individual items found among the Nine Irons (plough-share and coulter, axe, saw and horse- or donkey-shoe nail) in warding off or combatting evil, witches, fairies and other evil spirits.³¹

While the parallels among artifacts and in literature and folklore discussed above are close in some few cases, and while the tradition of making and using these amulets is well attested in the sources just discussed, very close or exact parallels are rare. The Gleann and Carran sets of Nine Irons do, however, have one very close parallel with another artifact, namely a chain of gold from Szilágysomlyó, in Hungary³² (Illus. 3). This gold chain has a series of tools and ornaments attached singly or in pairs through small rings. Forty-four miniature copies of tools and five decorative pendants with ornament based on vine leaves are attached, and the charm also bears a ball of rock crystal bound with gold strips and bearing a pair of panthers. Tools connected with agriculture, fishing, industry, hunting and warfare are included, and the object is part of a treasure of late fourth or early fifth century date.

The tools which can be easily identified include a hammer, an anvil, pincers, what may

²⁴Ward-Perkins (1940), 261; for discussion and illustrations see pp. 261-264 and Pl. LXXIII.

²⁵Rynne (1979-80), 78-83, Figs. 2 and 3.

²⁶Ó Danachair (1972), 473-476.

²⁷Wilde (1857-63), 126, footnote.

²⁸"An Seabhac" (1939), p. 165.

²⁹*Ibid.*, p. 171. The same remedy is suggested for whooping cough in more recent County Tipperary tradition, see Ms. 7, p. 225 in the Dept. of Folklore, University College, Dublin.

³⁰Duncan-Leland (1893), 181.

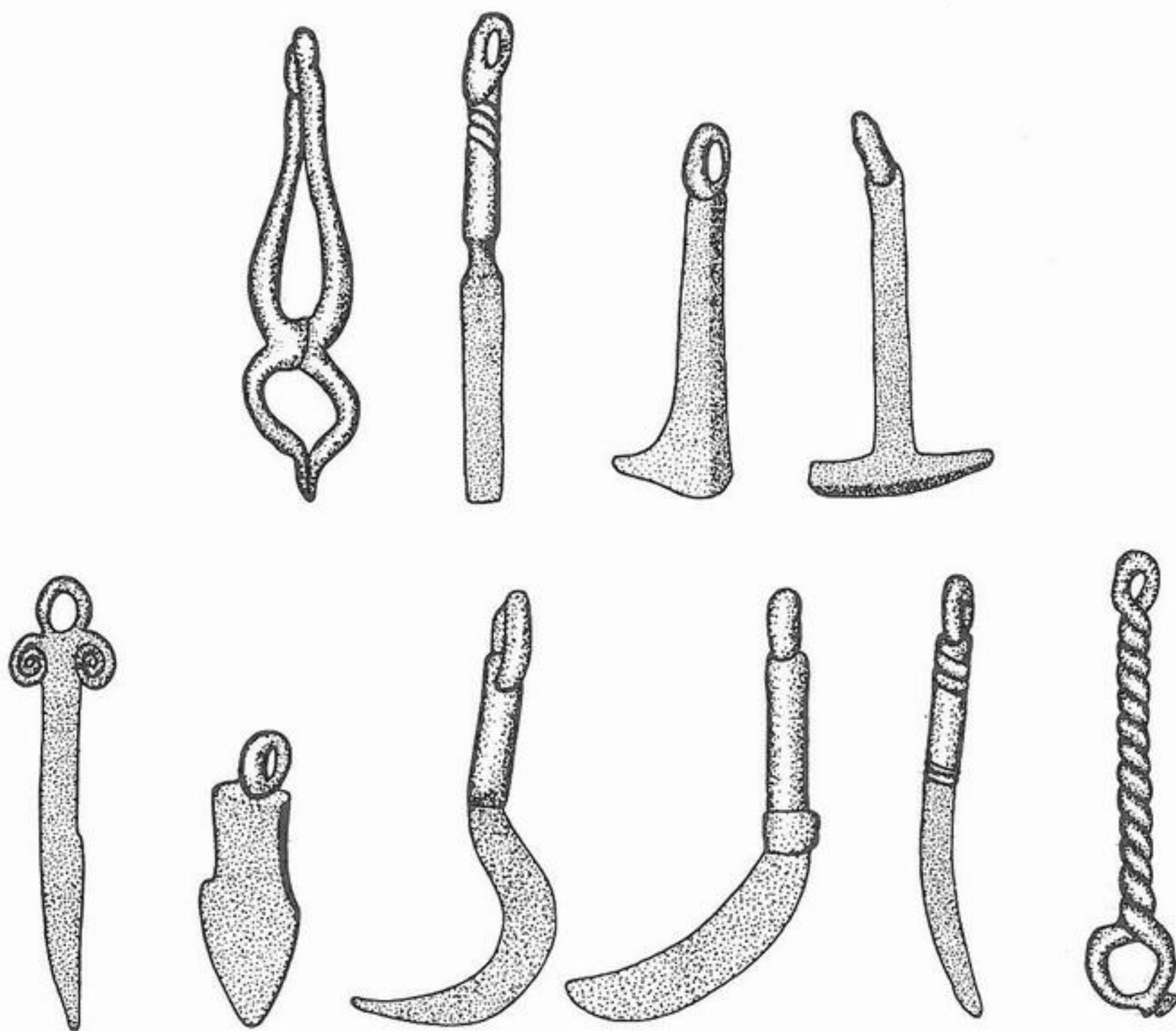
³¹Ó Danachair (1972), 474-476.

³²László (1972), Cat. Nos. 19-21.

be a rasp, a plough-coulter and plough-share, a knife, a ringed object, an object with a long handle and small hooked end, and a pair of reaping hooks of two different varieties. Two axes, a ladder, a pair of shears, two spearheads, an anchor, a trident or fish-spear and a shovel or spade also occur. There are also several other tools which cannot be identified (although one of them may be a saw), and a decorated disc which could be interpreted as a shield, or perhaps as a griddle (as Ó Danachair interpreted a disc from the Gleann Nine Irons).³³ Some of the spiked objects on the Hungarian chain may represent nails or chisels; the 'anvil' also looks like a shoe-nail.

The Szilágysomlyó chain is the only object known to the writer on which virtually all the objects (with the exception of the cross) represented in the Irish Nine Irons are found as amulets. It was obviously meant to be worn, and the similarity between these objects is remarkably close. Obviously both items derive from the same tradition or belief.

The 'griddle' of Ó Danachair's Nine Irons can be paralleled with the decorated disc, perhaps a shield, on the Szilágysomlyó chain. In this context it is also interesting to note that the miniature gold axeheads of the Strangford hoard were likewise accompanied by



Illus. 3. Miniature gold tools from Szilágysomlyó, Hungary (*after László*).

³³According to Ó Danachair (1972), 473, the flat iron disc from the Gleann Nine Irons is "said to be a miniature of a baking griddle".

a decorated gold disc. Whether all the items in this latter hoard were genuine has been questioned, but Jope is of the opinion that at least some of them, including the gold disc, were.³⁴ If the disc is genuine, and if other objects from the hoard (which include later objects like the Early Christian pin) are also genuine, then one wonders on what basis the miniature axeheads were suspected of not being so. However, since the objects are not now available for study we shall never know. Given that the miniature axeheads and the gold disc are perforated they seem likely to have originally been suspended from a chain or ring. Were these items all to be accepted as genuine, then at least some parallels for their form and possibly function (though distant in date and not very close in details) could be cited in the Nine Irons as well as on the Szilágysomlyó chain; the Öland amulets and the 'Swedish' one are remarkably similar in concept to the Nine Irons, and though neither has the wide range of tools that are found on the Irish Nine Irons or on the Hungarian chain the basic concept seems to be the same. In this context it is interesting to note that Morris (1981) favours a Scandinavian origin for the type of separate-bladed shovel of which one of the Carran Nine Irons is a miniature copy.

Dating

While the idea behind the Nine Irons and their form is apparently long-lived, the exact dating of the Carran examples needs to be examined. Though the Gleann example was made in the nineteenth century,³⁵ there are features of the Carran example which would suggest a medieval date for that find. While the saw is too crudely made to betray any diagnostic or datable features, the outline shape, the tang, and more especially the pear-shaped hole in the middle of the blade, can be closely paralleled in medieval separate-bladed shovels of wood. The hole at the top of the tang is also found in some examples, but the hole in the miniature spade-blade from Carran could also have served the practical function of a suspension-hole. The whole outline shape and the positioning of both holes can be closely paralleled in actual examples of medieval separate-bladed shovels.

This type of tool has been dated by Morris mainly to between the tenth and thirteenth centuries, though surviving until the fourteenth century in the Shetland Islands.³⁶ However, there is an earlier Irish example from Moynagh Crannog, near Nobber, Co. Meath, for which the excavator has suggested an eighth century date,³⁷ the latest dated Irish example, from the Dublin City excavations, is of twelfth/thirteenth century date. There are fifteen examples of such implements from Ireland, eight of which come from Dublin while the rest are more widely dispersed, three from Co. Antrim (one from Ballymacaldrack, one from Coleraine, and the third simply provenanced to "Co. Antrim"), and there is one each from Cuilbalken, Co. Roscommon, Kenmare, Co. Kerry, Lough Allen, Co. Leitrim, and that from Moynagh, Co. Meath. The Carran miniature is closest in form

³⁴Jope (1966), 43.

³⁵The Gleann set of Nine Irons was forged in 1839—Ó Danachair (1972), 471.

³⁶Morris (1981), 50-69, especially pp. 68-69. See also Morris (1980), pp. 205-210.

³⁷Bradley (1982), p. 118. Professor Etienne Rynne, University College, Galway, informs me that he believes that a whalebone object of similar type from the Broch of Burrian, in the Orkneys (National Museum of Scotland, reg. no. GB 254), may be a related artifact, thus perhaps bringing the type's origin back several centuries. Professor Rynne also informs me of a similar, but three-pronged rather than bladed, wooden artifact in the Assen Museum, Holland, which would lend support to Bradley's belief that the type is "common, perhaps, to a large part of north-western Europe". Professor Rynne, however, believes that both these Dutch and Scottish objects may perhaps equally have been used in a rake-like as in a shovel-like manner.

to the Cuilbalken,³⁸ Ballymacaldrack³⁹ and Moynagh⁴⁰ examples, each of which has a small hole in the tang as well as a larger hole in the blade.

Though Morris says that "it is not clear where this type of shovel originated", the Scandinavian area is favoured by her as a likely area of origin. This has some significance for the Irish Nine Irons, given the similarities between them and the Öland and Swedish amulets as mentioned above. The Carran Nine Irons may, then, perhaps be dated by comparison with the Irish separate-bladed shovels to somewhere between the tenth and the thirteenth centuries. The Scandinavian amulets, the Hungarian chain, and to some extent the Strangford hoard, all provide parallels for amulets of this type. The form seems to have been current over a very long period and the Gleann Nine Irons seem to be one late survival of the manufacture and use of the amulet. The artifactual evidence, along with the folk lore and literary evidence, all point to the prolonged use of the amulet, or similar ones, over many centuries. The precise origin of the amulet is unclear as elements of the idea and of similar forms were common over space and time. There is some evidence to suggest that a form close to the Irish Nine Irons was known and used in Scandinavia, but the closest parallel by far is the Hungarian chain from Szilágysomlyó, and until further evidence is found the precise origin, if there was just a single place of origin, must remain a matter for speculation.

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³⁸Morris (1981), Fig. 9, No. 11.

³⁹Morris (1981), Fig. 8, No. 9.

⁴⁰Bradley (1982), Fig. 41.

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