

A 16th or 17th Century Skean from the River Shannon at Corbally, Limerick

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An unusual singled-edged iron sword-like weapon with decorated wooden hilt was found in the River Shannon, near Limerick City. A date in the 16th or 17th century is suggested for it, and that it probably can be classed with the type of Irish weapon called a 'skean' by English writers of that time.

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In August 1979 Mr. Frank Hogan, of Limerick, reported the recent discovery of an interesting iron single-edged sword-like (or long dagger-like) weapon to the National Museum of Ireland; with the report he also sent a fairly accurate drawing (Illus. 1). He had found the weapon while scuba-diving in about 8 to 10 feet of water, "lying exposed on the bottom of a river known locally as 'Corbally River'". Subsequent enquiries revealed that it had been found not so much in Corbally River as in the River Shannon at a place known locally as 'Shannon Fields' in the townland of Corbally, Co. Limerick, and was apparently found "sticking upright in river bottom with handle only showing".¹

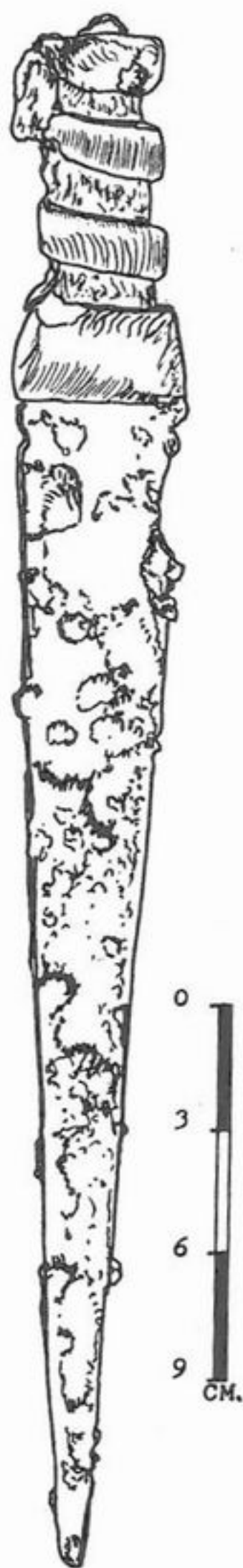
Despite requests for information from experts at home and abroad, no satisfactory answer as to its type, date or country of origin was forthcoming. Indeed, the writer's own opinion at the time, based on a copy of the drawing received by the National Museum, was that it might perhaps be an unusual 19th century Scottish pseudo-dirk derived from genuine dirks of some two or three centuries earlier, and which had perhaps found its way to Limerick as a souvenir. The problem of identification arose because of its length and, more particularly, because of its unusual wooden hilt, the grip of which was apparently carved with a winding raised band. In 1981, however, a single-edged iron dagger with a somewhat similar hilt (minus decoration) was found while diving in the River Corrib, in Dangan Lower, near Bushypark, about two miles upriver from Galway City. Having seen this new find (Illus. 2), it was immediately clear that the Corbally weapon had an Irish parallel, one which because of its overall size, proportions, and shorter blade linked it with 16th or 17th century knife-daggers or skeans from Tonybaun, Co. Mayo, the River Shannon near Athlone, and Ballycolliton, Co. Tipperary² (Illus. 3).

Unfortunately, by the time it was decided to follow the matter up the weapon had just been sent over to Sothebys, of London, for sale by auction; they thought it might be of ethnographical interest, perhaps American Indian. Mr. Hogan fully appreciated the situation and agreed to withdraw the object from the auction and to make it available for acquisition by the Limerick Museum. Thanks to the welcome understanding and kind co-operation of Sotheby's, the object was subsequently added to the collections of the Limerick Museum, where it is registered as LM 1986:27.

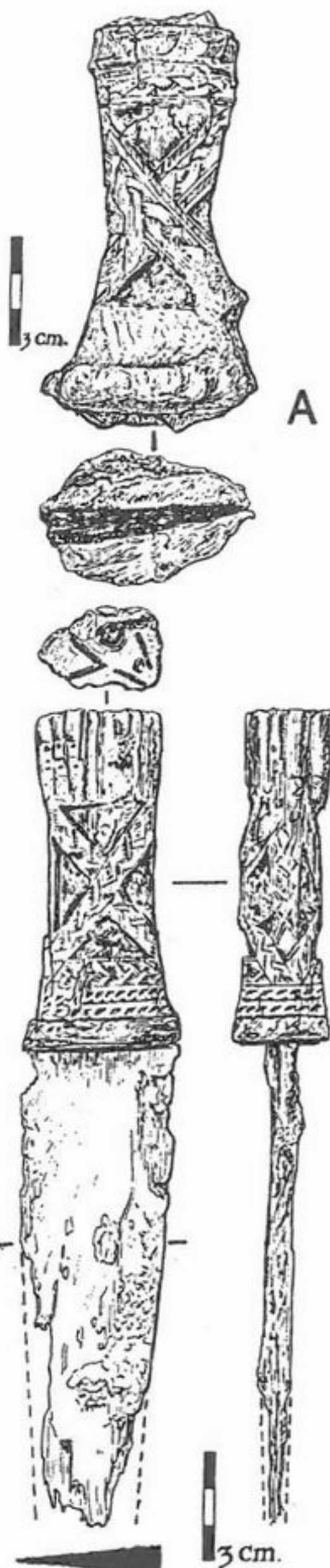
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¹Par. St. Patrick's; Bar. Borough of Limerick; O.S. 6-inch sheet no. 5 for Co. Limerick (61.7cm. from western margin; 33.2cm. from southern margin).

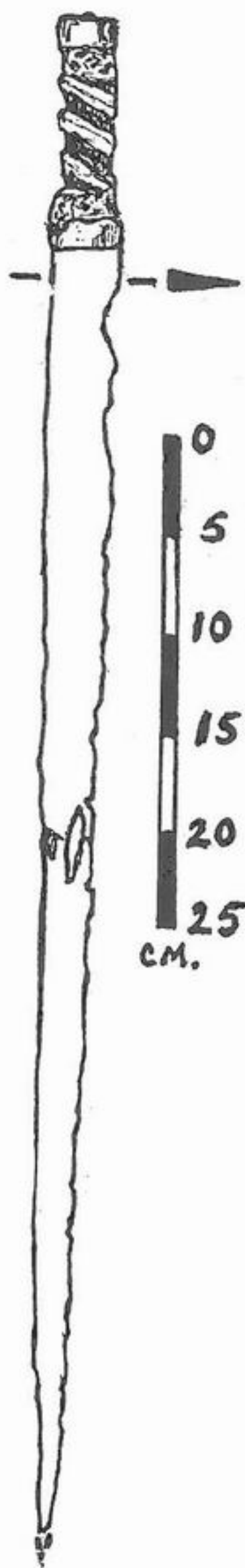
²E. Rynne, "Three Irish Knife-Daggers", *J. Roy. Soc. Antiqs. Ireland*, 99(1969), 137-143.



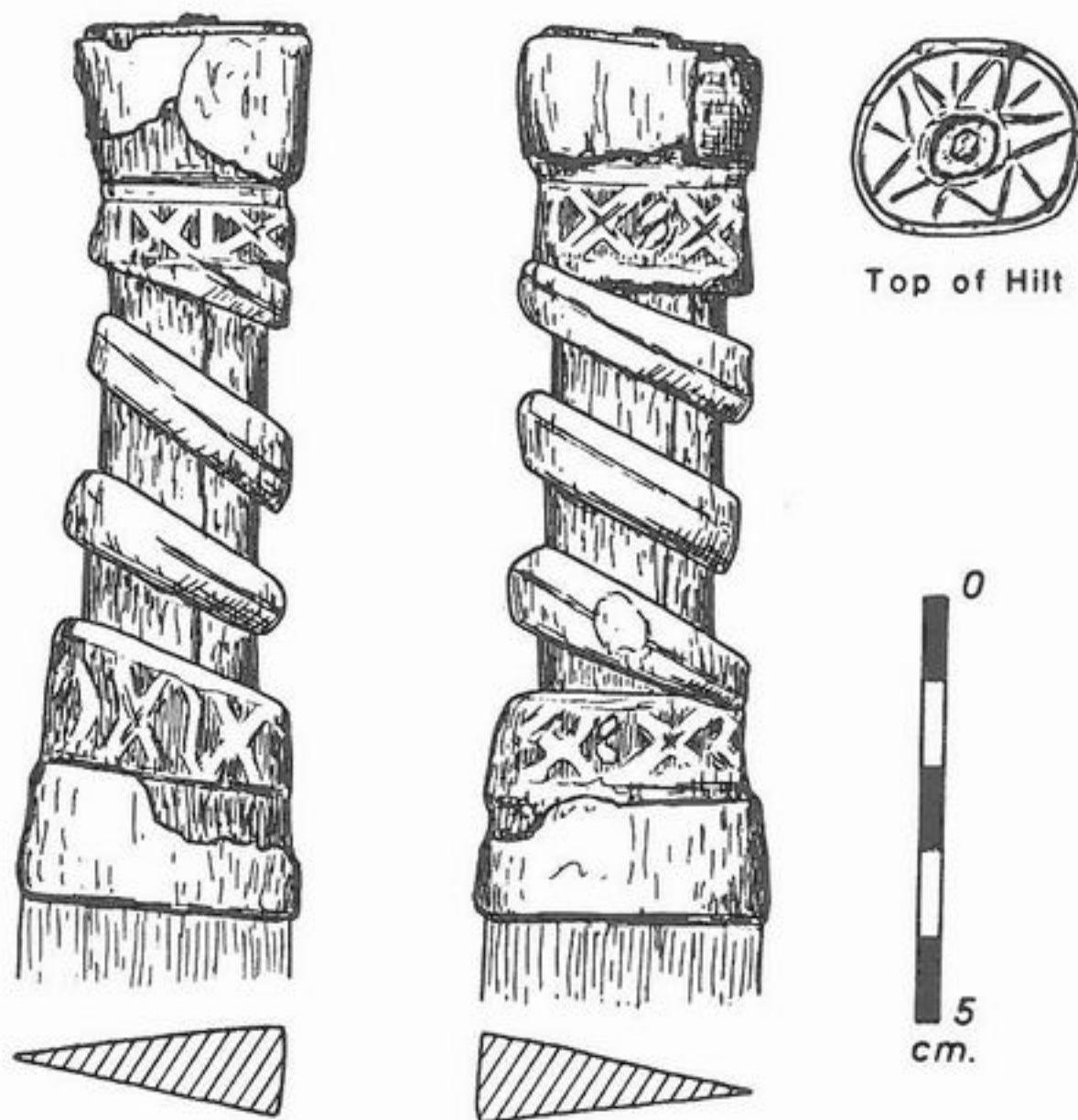
Illus. 2. Iron skean or knife-dagger from the River Corrib, near Galway City.



Illus. 3. Three iron skeans or knife-daggers: A. Tonybaun, Co. Mayo; B. River Shannon, Athlone; C. Ballycolliton, Co. Tipperary.



Illus. 4. Iron skean from River Shannon, Corbally, Limerick.



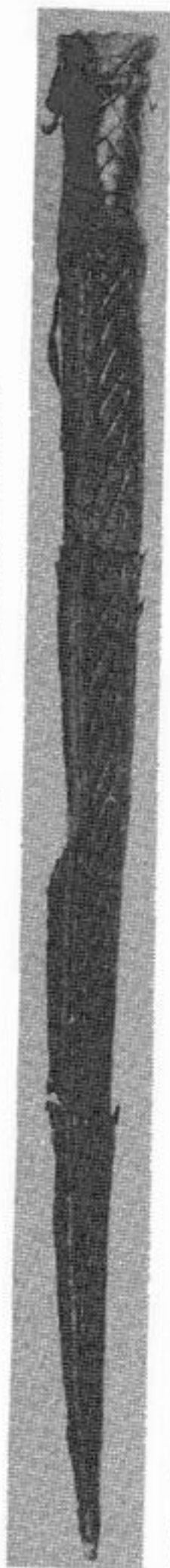
Illus. 5. Wooden hilt of skean from River Shannon, Corbally, Limerick.

DESCRIPTION

The weapon is 66.5cm. in total length, the blade being 56.2cm. long and 5.2cm. wide at the shoulders where it is 1.2cm. thick (Illus. 4). When found there were traces on one face of the blade, at a point 2.8cm. below the hilt, of what may have been remains of scabbard-mouth, perhaps of a bronze(?) ferrule about 1cm. wide, though these were not as definite as indicated on Mr. Hogan's drawing (Illus. 1). These slight traces disappeared during the object's expert conservation (by Mrs. Christina Haywood, Dublin) which was completed in May 1987. Also evident when Mr. Hogan did his drawing was a chape or scabbard-tip of what appeared to be very decayed leather,³ bound with what were apparently bronze wires. Unfortunately, however, this had already been lost when I first saw the weapon after its return from London and before its conservation, my note made at the time stating that the "last 7.4cm. at point is corrosion-free and appears as if it had been protected by something when in ground". The blade was badly corroded and almost broken across about halfway along its length.

³In Mr. Hogan's opinion, though the National Museum thought it might be of wood.

Illus. 6. Leather sheath for a single-edged weapon, Kilcumber, Co. Offaly.
(Photo: Nat. Museum of Ireland)



The 10.3cm. long wooden hilt (Illus. 5) is carved deeply, providing a 4mm. deep and 8 or 9mm. wide spiralling groove resulting in a raised band of similar width; the band is decorated with a lightly scored central line. Above and below the spiralling band and groove is an encircling band of raised Xs alternating with raised vertical, broken or angularly bent ridges. Both ends of the grip are bound by iron ferrules, both now much corroded but averaging about 1.6cm. in width. The conservation work revealed that the upper ferrule, that at the 'pommel' end, was at some time apparently repaired by a thin roughly rectangular plate 1.7cm. long by 1.5cm. wide.

The hilt is retained by a small washer-like piece of iron, apparently affixed to the end of the tang. The wood around the washer is scored with zig-zag, arrow-like lines; at its top the hilt is 2.9cm. in diameter (including the ferrule).

DISCUSSION

Long, slender, single-edged weapons were worn for the most part by civilians during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in Britain, and into the sixteenth century in Ireland.⁴ The unusual, deeply carved hilt of the Corbally weapon makes it difficult to classify among the better-known long single-edged weapons of the period and, as already mentioned, links it more closely with some shorter dirk-like knife-daggers from Ireland. These may well be the type of Irish weapon usually termed a *skean* (Irish *scian*, a knife) by the English during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a term which can still be usefully applied in distinguishing them from the related Highland dirk. Though hardly a dagger or knife in the normal sense of the terms, the Corbally weapon is sufficiently closely related in its hilt to belong to the same general class and, therefore, to be likewise classified as a *skean*. The rather simple and nondescript decoration of the hilt is not closely indicative of date or origin, though it is more likely to be late than early during the general period in question.

While it is regretted that the chape-like scabbard-tip of the Corbally *skean* is now missing, its former presence is useful in confirming the use of scabbards with such weapons, at least with the longer versions. A somewhat similar blade found in the River Corrib at Townparks, Galway City, indirectly indicated that it was sheathed when lost,⁵ while a fine leather sheath for a long single-edged weapon was found about three feet deep in a bog at Kilcumber, Co. Offaly.⁶ This latter sheath (Illus. 6) is 56.4cm. long and is decorated along its length with a band of tightly woven multi-strand interlace. The nature of the interlace indicates a date late in the Late Medieval period, most likely in the early sixteenth century,⁷ for it, and it may therefore provide a rough idea of the general appearance of the complete Corbally sheath.

⁴E. Rynne, *J. Galway Archaeol. Hist. Soc.*, 39(1983-64), 14.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 14, Fig. 5; Nat. Museum reg. no. E29:7 and 7a.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 14, fn. 21; Nat. Museum reg. no. 1947:286.

⁷E. Rynne, *this Journal*, 14(1971), 40.

Acknowledgements

The writer has much pleasure in acknowledging here his sincere gratitude to Mr. Frank Hogan, the weapon's finder, for his full and unstinted co-operation in the matter; to Miss Felicity Nicholson, and Messrs James Hodges and Oliver Forge of Sotheby's for their understanding and assistance in facilitating the return of the weapon to Ireland; and to Mr. Larry Walsh, Curator of the Limerick Museum, for his unfailing help and interest throughout. I also wish to thank Mr. Peadar O'Dowd for the drawing of the River Corrib dagger (Illus. 2).