A Scandinavian Flint Dagger from Scarriff, Co. Clare

By J. X. W. P. CORCORAN

In 1895 Robert Day published a note on a "Danish Spear-head," as he called it, which was alleged to have been " dug up from the bottom of a dried-up lake at Scarriff, in the county Clare " by a farmer who lived near Tullow (*sic*).[1] The photograph which accompanies the note is that of a dagger. The same object is illustrated in the *Sale Catalogue of the Day Collection*, but is there referred to as a small dagger or knife of Scandinavian type.[2] It was sold for £2 12 0 at an auction held in London by Messrs. Sotheby, Wilkinson and Hodge on May 19th, 1913, presumably to A. Henderson Bishop. The dagger now forms part of the Bishop Collection in the Hunterian Museum, University of Glasgow, where its provenance is recorded as Tulla, Co. Clare.[3] A. Henderson Bishop of Thorntonhall, Lanarkshire, was an active collector and several prehistoric artifacts in his collection, including this dagger, are labelled as having come from Ireland.

In the *Sale Catalogue* the dagger is said to be " Of the utmost rarity and considered by the owner to be the only example of this type found in Ireland." Although Day wrongly identified this object as a Viking spearhead, he recognised that it was of Scandinavian origin and unique in Ireland. He further emphasised that the object was found at the bottom of a dried-up lake. It is not possible to identify the find-spot more precisely and this might cause one to question the accuracy of Day's account, were it not for his insistence that it had not been bought and brought to Ireland by a collector, but that it was dug from the ground. This insistence should counteract absence of any reference to the date of discovery and the curious fact that the dagger was found at Scarriff by a " peasant farmer " who lived at Tullow (*recte* Tulla ?), over 10 miles away.

Although the dagger has been referred to on at least four occasions since its sale,[4] it has not received adequate modern publication in an Irish journal. It is, therefore, justifiable to describe it in more detail than in Day's publication, to publish a drawing of it and to attempt an assessment of its significance against the background of more recent research, and it is considered proper that such an essay should be published in a journal devoted to the antiquities of North Munster.

The dagger (Fig. 1) was made from a large flake of light grey flint, the flake surface (face opposite to that shown in drawing) having less secondary working than the

[1] *JRSAI*, 25 (1895), 176.
[2] *Sale Catalogue of the Day Collection*, (1913), Lot 77, p. 12, pl. III.
[3] Museum accession number, B.1951.2645. Permission to publish the dagger was given by the Court of the University of Glasgow.
[4] R. A. S. Macalister, *Ireland in Pre-Celtic Times*, (1921), 92-3, fig. 11a.
R. A. S. Macalister, *The Archaeology of Ireland*, 1st edition (1928), 43 ; 2nd edition (1949), 112.
J. G. D. Clark, *Man*, 32 (1932), no. 223.
J. M. de Navarro in *The Early Cultures of North-West Europe*, edited by Sir Cyril Fox and Bruce Dickins, (1950), 80, note 1.

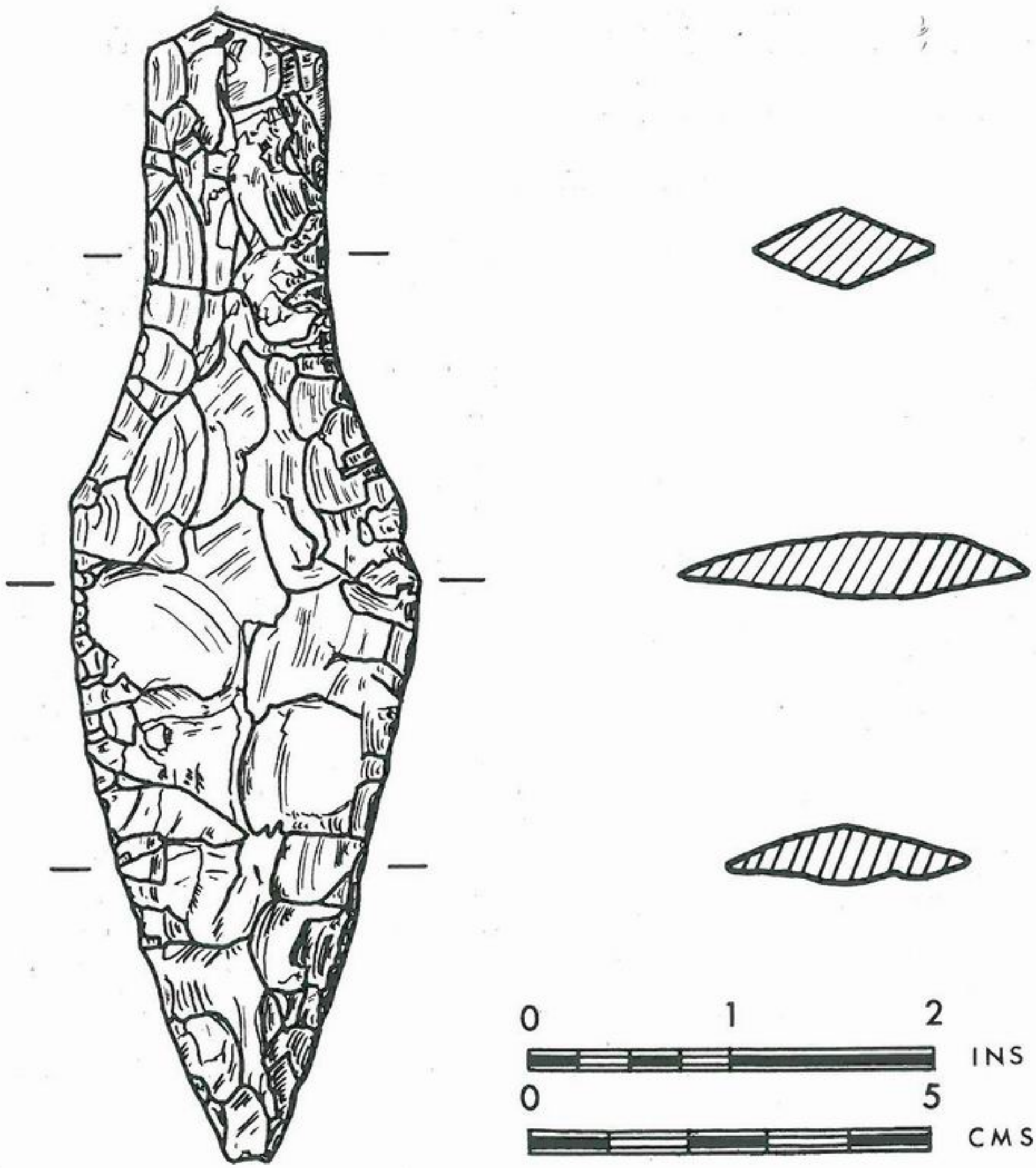

FIG. 1. Flint dagger from Scariff, Co. Clare. $(\frac{1}{1})$

opposed face. Seen in profile the dagger has a slight curve, a little more pronounced at the hilt and tip of the blade. Both surfaces have irregularly arranged shallow flaking, rather crudely executed in places, with little retouching. The edges of both blade and hilt were pressure flaked and are sharp. The dagger as a whole is well proportioned.

The hilt has a pointed oval cross-section, its width remains constant at 2.3 cm. (0.9 in.) and its greatest thickness is 1.1 cm. (0.45 in.). In plan the upper part of the hilt is gabled. Although rather short, the hilt fits comfortably in the hand. There is no evidence that it was ever bound with thongs of leather or similar binding. The upper part of the broad blade has a flattened elliptical cross-section with a greatest thickness of 8.5 mm. (0.32 in.), immediately below the rounded shoulders. Near the tip it thickens slightly to an almost triangular cross-section. Its greatest width is 4.3 cm. (1.7 in.). The tip is broken and the present length is 14.2 cm. (5.6 in.).

The dagger from Scarriff approaches most closely to Forssander's type VI, defined as having a hilt of round or somewhat oval cross-section and a blade whose greatest breadth occurs a short distance from the hilt. Shoulders tend to be rounded or angular and the hilt frequently narrows slightly towards the blade, the greatest breadth of the former occuring either at the top of the hilt or about halfway down.[5] The Clare dagger has all these characteristics except the narrowing of the hilt. While it does not approach in delicacy of flint working technique some of the better Scandinavian examples, it may be confidently accepted as a representative example of type VI.

Scandinavian flint daggers have been found in large numbers, frequently in association with other artifacts and as grave furniture, mainly in Denmark, southern, western and central Sweden, southern Norway, northern Germany, and some also reached Central Europe. The known distribution of similar daggers in Britain is restricted to twelve examples found in the eastern counties of England, from Yorkshire to Kent, and all casual finds.[6] Types I and VI predominate, marking the beginning and end of Forssander's typological sequence, but there is one example each of types IV and V, the so-called fish-tailed daggers which are skeuomorphs of early metal types. Whereas the six finds of type I are scattered thinly but widely from Yorkshire to Kent, those of type VI were found only in Kent and Suffolk, two in each county. These twelve are geographically the nearest finds of Scandinavian flint daggers to Ireland but their predominantly eastern distribution in Britain does not offer any indication of a route by which a similar artifact might have reached Co. Clare. The most westerly example in Britain, a type I dagger, was found near Wakefield, east of the Pennines, while, as has been shown, the four type VI daggers found in Britain came from the south-east of England.

By comparison, flint chisels, axeheads and adzeheads of Scandinavian type have a wider distribution in Britain than have the Scandinavian flint daggers. The westernmost find is that of a square-sided chisel from Brownslade in Pembrokeshire.[7] A stone

[5] J. E. Forssander, " Der ostskandinavische Norden während der ältesten Metallzeit Europas," *Skrifter utgivna af kungl. humanistika Vetenskapssamfundet i Lund*, 22 (1936), 123, abb. 23.
P. V. Glob, *Danske Oldsager, II, Yngre Stenalder*, (1952), 123-5, no. 514.
[6] S. Piggott, *PPS*, 4 (1938), 101-3, with references.
[7] R. E. M. Wheeler, *Prehistoric and Roman Wales*, (1925), 56, fig. 19.

axehead and adzehead of apparent Scandinavian type from Co. Wexford have recently been recognised.[8] A possible route by which the latter may have arrived in Ireland is suggested by the flint chisel from Brownslade, a square-butted stone axehead from Maindu Camp, near Newport, Monmoutshire,[9] a flint axehead from Wimbourne, Dorset,[10] a flint axehead from the Isle of Wight[11] and thence to the main concentration of Scandinavian flint finds in south-eastern England.[12]

Recognition of an axehead and an adzehead of apparent Scandinavian type in Ireland is of value in suggesting possible contacts with Scandinavia during the Neolithic, an hypothesis perhaps supported by the occurrence of possible Scandinavian traits in Neolithic pottery from north-eastern Ireland.[13] Axeheads and adzeheads of this type, however, were current in Scandinavia mainly during the Middle Neolithic[14] whereas the flint daggers date mostly to the Late Neolithic. Type VI, of which the Clare dagger is an example and coming at the end of Forssander's sequence, has frequently been found in association with metal artifacts even with a rapier.[15] The type clearly remained in use during the early part of the Scandinavian Bronze Age.

It is difficult, therefore, to account for the occurrence of this dagger at Scarriff, a point so far from the main continental and British distribution. In attempting to define a context in which it might be placed, it is, perhaps, not inappropriate to refer to the wedge-shaped chambered cairns of Co. Clare. It seems probable that some of these were in use when Beakers were current in Ireland,[16] which would mean that they may have been in contemporary use with the dagger. In Co. Clare, at least, these chambered cairns are mainly confined to soils more attractive to pastoralists than to crop-raisers,[17] a fact which may reflect a local manifestation of a widespread tendency in temperate Europe, at a time when the Neolithic was giving way to the Bronze Age, for pastoralism to increase in importance. This tendency was frequently accompanied by the appearance of new burial rituals in which single burial replaced the older collective burial traditions of the Neolithic. In areas where wedge-shaped cairns are found, it may, however, be supposed that collective burial practices continued, perhaps contemporaneously with single burial practices. Not uncommonly single burials were accompanied by weapons or other symbols of prestige, including daggers, sometimes of metal but frequently imitated in flint. Such daggers are common in the Late Neolithic of Northern Europe and flint daggers, though of a different type, are known from Beaker contexts in Britain.

It is not suggested that the Scarriff dagger provides evidence of settlement in Munster at this time by Scandinavian pastoralists. Its existence, however, reinforces evidence of some slight contact, perhaps very infrequent, between contemporary cultures of similar type. Other evidence for contact between Ireland and Scandinavia

[8] J. X. W. P. Corcoran, *JRSAI*, forthcoming.
[9] Wheeler, *op. cit.*, p. 56, fig. 18.
[10] C. M. Piggott, *Proc. Dorset Arch. and Nat. Hist. Soc.*, 77 (1945), 28.
[11] J. X. W. P. Corcoran, *Proc. Isle of Wight Nat. Hist. and Arch. Soc.*, vol. 5, part 8 (1963).
[12] S. Piggott, *op. cit.*, p. 81, fig. 16.
[13] S. Piggott, *Neolithic Cultures of the British Isles*, (1954), 188-9, 320-1.
[14] C. J. Becker, *Aarbøger for Nordisk Oldkyndighed og Historie*, (1957), 1-37.
[15] Glob, *op. cit.*, p. 124, no. 514 ; Forssander, *op. cit.*, pl. XLVIII.
[16] R. de Valéra and S. Ó Nualláin, *Survey of the Megalithic Tombs of Ireland : Volume I, County Clare*, (1961), 113-4.
[17] *ibid.*, p. 112.

during the Early Bronze Age is based on the distribution of metal types, particularly that of decorated flat bronze axeheads and metal halberds with wooden hafts, both of probable Irish manufacture, which have been found in Scandinavia.[18] It has even been suggested that the import of Hiberno-British axeheads into Scandinavia was responsible for the origin of local metal-working.[19] There are few such axeheads known from Munster, despite the occurrence of copper deposits in the province. On the contrary, their main concentration is in the east of the country and the majority of stone moulds used in their manufacture have been found in the north-east.[20] This may imply that extraction of metal, (the best-known prehistoric copper mines in Ireland are in the south-western corner of the country) and the manufacture of artifacts from it were carried on by different groups within the country. It must be allowed, however, that excavation of wedge-shaped cairns and other sites in Munster might alter this picture.

Distribution of metal halberds of Irish type in Scandinavia during the Early Bronze Age follows a similar pattern to that of the decorated metal axeheads.[21] Only one example has been found in Co. Clare, and that a type 5 halberd from Clonloghan.[22] Scandinavian finds normally belong to type 4 and an unlocalised example of that type was found in the Shannon[23] at no great distance from copper deposits near Lough Derg.

It has similarly been suggested that the distribution of gold lunulae supports this evidence of contact between Ireland and southern Scandinavia.[24] In this connection reference may be made to two found in Co. Clare,[25] and three similar artifacts from Denmark.[26] Although the latter may be local copies of Irish models, rather than imports from Ireland, they do, nevertheless, reinforce evidence of contact.

The flint dagger from Scarriff is important in that it is, to date, a unique find in Ireland, as Day so rightly emphasised.[27] Absence of Scandinavian artifacts in Ireland dating to a period when Irish metal objects were reaching Scandinavia has frequently been commented upon. In this there is a considerable contrast between Ireland and the Wessex Culture of southern England which imported amber of probable Baltic origin. It has been suggested that skilled metal-workers, as well as their finished products, travelled from Ireland to Scandinavia.[28] Were this so it would be more easy to understand the almost complete lack of Scandinavian artifacts of the period in this country as the connection would not have been simply one of normal trade contact.

[18] B .R. S. Megaw and E. M. Hardy, *PPS*, 4 (1938), 272-307.
S. P. Ó Ríordáin, *Archaeologia*, 86(1937), 195-321.

[19] Forssander, *op. cit.*, p. 178.

[20] R. F. Tylecote, *Metallurgy in Archaeology*, (1962), 112.

[21] Megaw and Hardy, *op. cit.*, fig. 7 ; Ó Ríordáin, *op. cit.*, figs. 58 and 59.

[22] Ó Ríordáin *op.cit.*, no. 106.

[22] *ibid.*, no. 52.

[24] G. Coffey, *The Bronze Age in Ireland*, (1913), 50-5.

[25] E. C. R. Armstrong, *Catalogue of Irish Gold Ornaments in the Collection of the Royal Irish Academy*, (1920), 55, no. 25, pl. V, 28.

[26] E. M. Hardy, *PPS*, 3 (1937), 465.

[27] Macalister has suggested that a flint artifact of unknown Irish provenance, now in the National Museum of Ireland (reg. no. W. 385), may be a dagger of Scandinavian type. This object, illustrated full size in Macalister, *op. cit.*, (1921), 93, fig. 11 and in W. R. Wilde, *R.I.A.Cat.*, (1857), 14, fig. 6, is too small to be so described and, from Wilde's description, is more likely to be related to plano-convex knives.

[28] J. M. de Navarro, *op. cit.*, pp. 79-85.

It is unfortunate that the Scarriff dagger cannot be placed more firmly into an archaeological context, but its discovery in Munster provides the first fairly clear evidence of possible reciprocal movement between Ireland and Scandinavia. Such a movement may have begun in the Neolithic, as shown by the axehead and adzehead from Co. Wexford, and continued during the Bronze Age. Such a reciprocal movement may have been associated with a search for copper, although evidence is not available either for large-scale or for regular traffic. Irish smiths working in Scandinavia would have had a supply closer to hand in the form of ingots imported from Central Europe,[29] but it is not impossible that from time to time supplies from that source were not available and recourse was had to Irish ores, despite the long voyagewhich that would have entailed, a hypothesis which future metallurgical analyses may help to prove or disprove.

[29] *ibid.*, p. 85.