

Fermanagh

a story in **100** objects



Crevinish Logboat

by **Brian G. Scott**

The landscape of County Fermanagh is dominated by water – rivers, lakes and, of course, Upper and Lower Lough Erne, and the old saying ‘In the summer Lough Erne is in Fermanagh, and in the winter Fermanagh is in Lough Erne’ typifies the county (Muhr 2014, 17). While horse-riding or horse-drawn vehicles would have been one form of transport, by far the more important is likely to have been water-borne, although our knowledge of the craft that plied the rivers and lakes of Ireland is very sketchy (Scott *et al.* 2011, 100 and 105 note 31). We have no archaeological evidence earlier than the early modern period for native Irish skin-covered or plank-built vessels from the county, but instead there are significant survivals of the logboat, or *cot*, fashioned from a single tree-trunk. From the work done by Malcolm Fry (2000), we know that this type of craft was in use from the time when the first settlers reached Ireland after the Ice Age, in the Mesolithic period. But the earliest evidence from Co. Fermanagh comes from a cot found at Rossfad townland in Lower Lough Erne (*ibid.* 50, no. 6), and which has a calibrated radiocarbon date of 3500–3350 BC, firmly in the Neolithic period. The other dated examples from the county, spanning the Bronze Age through to the post-Mediaeval period are:

- Lough Neely, Derrybrusk townland, two cots dated 1210–940 BC and 1260–1000 BC – Late Bronze Age (Fry 2000, 110–111, nos 104 and 105);
- River Tempo, Killynure Bridge, dendrochronological date 429_±9 BC – Earlier Iron Age (Fry 2000, 119, no. 115);

- Lower Lough Erne, Crevinish Bay, dated AD 10–340 – Later Iron Age (Fry 2000, 77–78, no. 49);
- River Sillees, Carr townland, dated AD 1440–1620 – post-Mediaeval ((Fry 2000, 84, no. 59);

In addition, we have the evidence provided by the drawing of the Siege of Enniskillen Castle in 1593. In this, the English soldier and surveyor John Thomas illustrated cots being used both to transport supplies to the English camp (Plate 1), and to ferry pikemen and musketeers for their assault on the castle (Plate 2).



Plate 1 Cotts being used to transport supplies for the camp of the English besieging Enniskillen Castle in 1593 (extracted from *BL Cotton Augustus I. ii. 39*: reproduced by kind permission of the British Library, London).



Plate 2 Cotts transporting English soldiers in the assault on Enniskillen Castle in 1593 (extracted from *BL Cotton Augustus I. ii. 39*: reproduced by kind permission of the British Library, London).

A reconstruction of a logboat with a sail, not dissimilar to the Crevinish example, was carried out in 1995. Given that we look at logboats through modern eyes, and do not have

the depth and breadth of experience in their sailing of our ancestors, the modern version handled reasonably well (Plate 3).



Plate 3 Sailing a modern replica of a logboat, not dissimilar to the Crevinish (no. 49) example.

The two largest logboats in the north of Ireland – amongst the largest in the British Isles – come from Crevinish Bay in Lower Lough Erne (Fig. 1: Fry 2000, 77–78, nos 49 and 50), with no. 49 dating to the Later Iron Age. Both of the Crevinish logboats are over 10m in length (no. 49 at 10.5m and no. 50 at 16.15m), while the fragmentary remains of a third (*ibid.* 79, no. 51) from the same location measured 8.5m; all were made from oak. Crevinish no. 49 is likely to have had a removable mast, and it has transverse ridges spaced along its lengths. These ridges could have acted as bracers for the feet of paddlers or rowers. Fry (*ibid.* 78) estimated that if this vessel originally had a side of 50cm average height, it would have been capable of transporting a load of some 1 tonne with a freeboard of 25%, a not insignificant capacity. Grooves at one end of the surviving timber indicate that boat may have had a removable transom (stern).

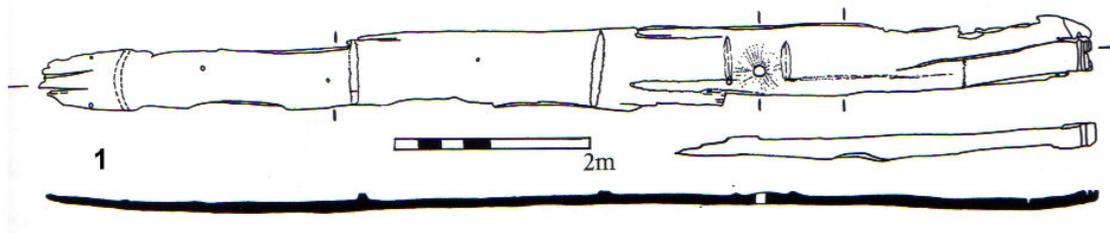


Fig. 1 Logboat no. 49 from Lower Lough Erne at Crevinish, (after Fry 2000).

Boats of this size represent a significant allocation of resources of time and tools on the part of the builders, and again are indicators of the importance of these vessels as a means of transport on the lakes and waterways of the county (McHugh and Scott 2014, 134–136). But it is not only the effort of making the logboat, but also the selection of the right tree, its felling, shaping and transport to the desired location that has to be taken into account (Figs 2–11: after Goodburn 2010). In addition, there would have been a need to procure the relevant tools – both of metal and wood – probably also ropes and smaller logs to be used as rollers.



Fig. 2 Selecting the tree

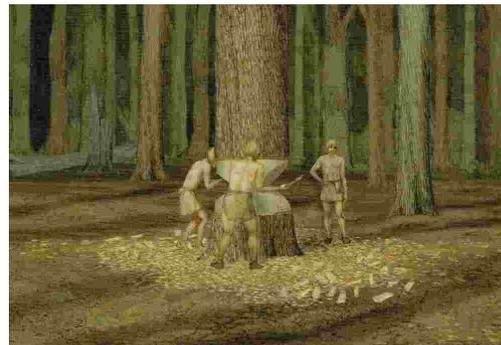


Fig. 3 Felling the oak

This implies a community capable of organising itself to do the heavy work of felling and dressing the tree and manoeuvring it while it was being worked, and getting the finished boat to the water. Experimental reconstructions have shown that the level of skill, fitness and motivation of the building team would have been important, since the early stages of the work are almost as heavy as breaking stone using hand-tools, so rest days and/or a large rotating work force are a given.



Fig. 4 Dressing the trunk



Fig. 5 Splitting off the bark, sapwood and surplus heartwood from what will become the bottom of the boat.

The 10.5m oak trunk required for Crevinish no. 49, with its diameter of some 1m would have weighed around 9 tonnes, a considerable mass which, when hollowed out, would have reduced to somewhere in the region of 1.8–2 tonnes. The number of man-hours required for such an undertaking is difficult to gauge with any degree of accuracy, although the work of experimental reconstruction work of the Carpow, Perth and Kinross (Goodburn 2010) and Hasholme, Yorkshire (Millett and McGrail 1987) boats shows that it would have been significant. Millett and McGrail (*ibid.* 131) offered an approximation of 70–80 man days to produce the 12.78m Hasholme boat, while Goodburn (2010, 113) suggested that a team of 10 would have completed the main stages of forming the c. 11m Carpow boat in around 3 weeks, with a smaller team then doing the fine finishing.



Fig. 6 Finishing the bottom and lower sides: trimming and smoothing with adze and axes.

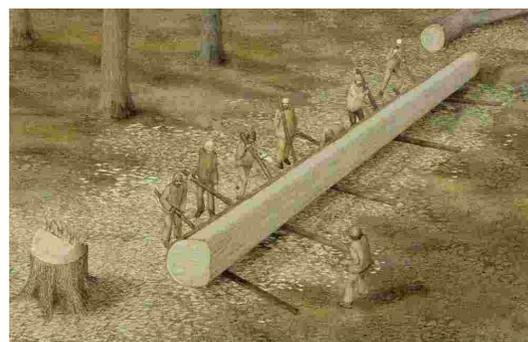


Fig. 7 Rolling the developing logboat onto bearer logs as rollers using poles and wedges.

But felling a suitable tree, dressing it, and rolling the half-worked trunk weighing perhaps 3–4 tonnes once the main work on the underside was done, further manipulation to

expose new working areas and, finally, transport to the water when the work was complete would have required upwards of 10–12 persons at any one time.

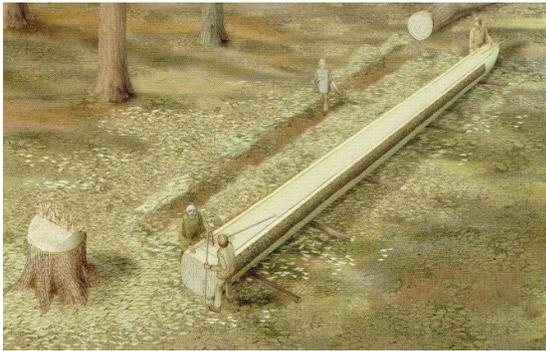


Fig. 8 Marking out the shape.

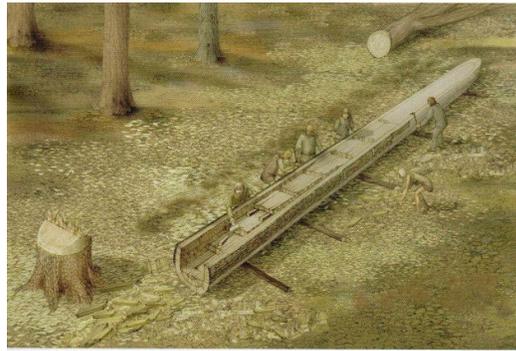


Fig. 9 Hollowing out using the groove-and-splinter method

Once the underside was shaped, experts in ancient and early woodworking agree that the hollowing out of the logboat was done by cutting V-shaped grooves into the surface, and then using hammers and wedges to split off the wood.



Fig. 10 Thinning out the hull and dressing the inside of the boat. Note the grooves for the insertion of the transom at the open end.

Finally, grooves would have been cut into the open end (Fig. 11), and the transom inserted and sealed with some form of caulking.

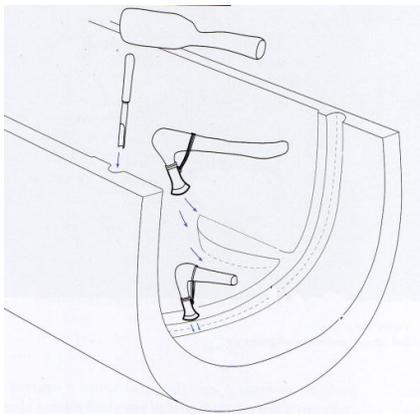


Fig. 11 Finishing off the interior of the boat and cutting the grooves for the transom (after Goodburn 2010).



Plate 4 Lifting the Crevinish boat for conservation (© NIEA).

Co. Fermanagh has produced a few examples of the sorts of tools that would have been used in logboat construction in the Late Bronze and Earlier Iron Ages, but because iron corrodes so readily, we have not yet found any iron implements of the period in the county. But it is likely that tools like gouges would have looked the same in iron as in bronze. Elsewhere in the north of Ireland there are socketed axes forged in iron, copies of Late Bronze Age types, similarly a few small axes and tools exist from Iron Age contexts throughout the island.

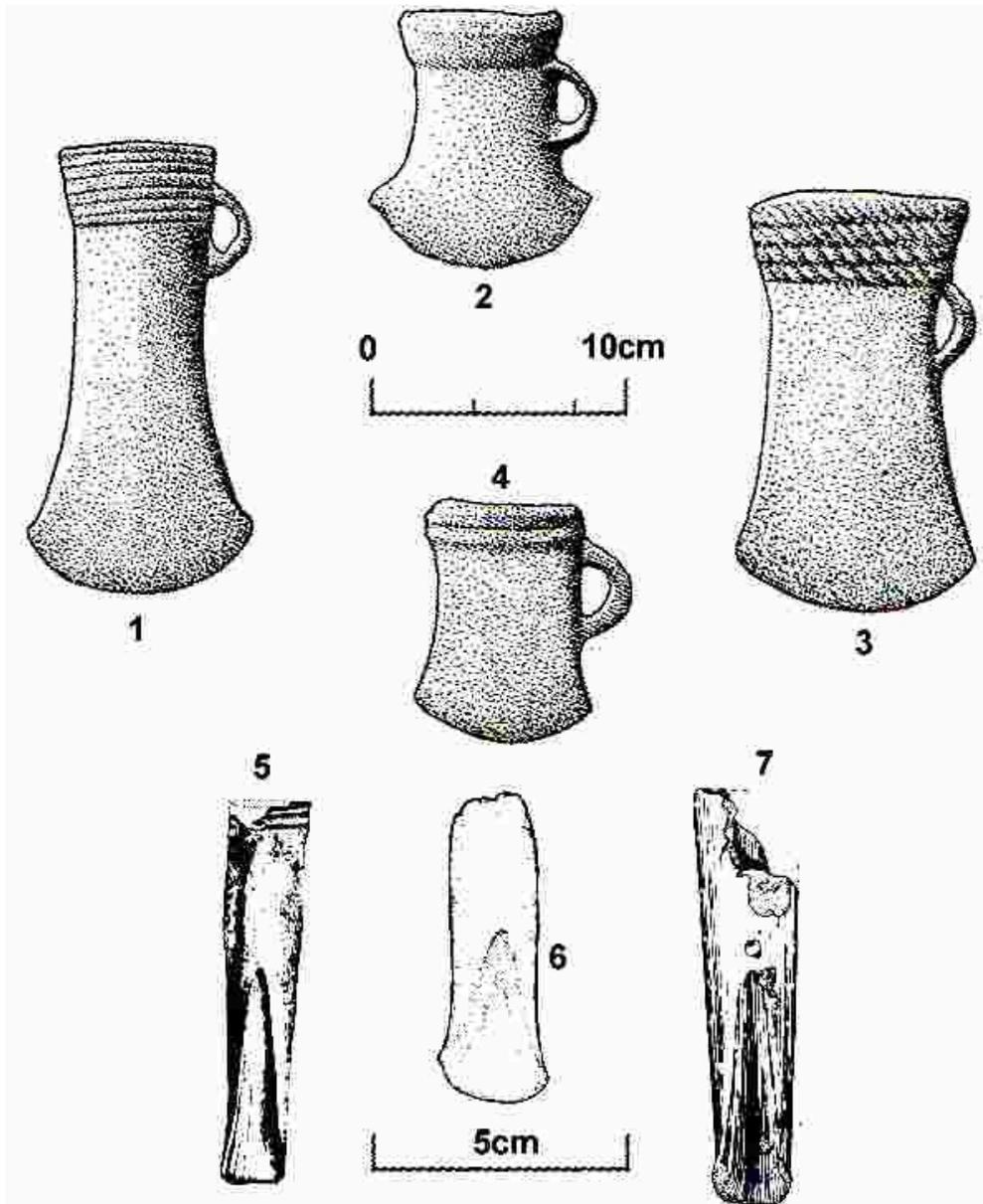


Fig. 12 Examples of the types of Late Bronze Age tools found in Co. Fermanagh, that could have been used in the making of boats like that from Crevinish: 1 Kilmalanophy, 2 Belleek, 3 Lough Erne, 14 Belleek, 5 Killycreen West, 6 Boa Island, 7 'Co. Fermanagh' (after Foley and McHugh 2014).

We have no way of gauging the survival rates of such boats at any period, but if the estimate of a working life of 25–30 years is in any way accurate, we can glimpse from the Crevinish boat, a continuity of communities making and using these craft in Co. Fermanagh throughout prehistory, including the whole of the Iron Age.

Even though the Iron Age in Co. Fermanagh is poorly represented in the archaeological assemblage, the Crevinish boat shows us that there were communities capable of organising a significant amount of effort to produce vessels like this. They obviously had a need for water transport, for fishing, possibly even for warfare, and to this end brought together the resources of manpower to carry out the work and the metal tools needed for it. The metal tools had to be acquired either by purchase from other groups, or smithed from iron smelted elsewhere. And, of course, the work force had to be fed! So even though there are very few artefacts of Iron Age date from the county, and only a handful of sites of definite Iron Age date, we can see in the production of logboats evidence for an active and thriving community during the period.

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'Fermanagh: a story in one hundred objects' is a project involving people from the local community, historians and students from the University of Ulster.

Supported by the Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund, this project is part of our 'Fermanagh Heritage Gateway' activity programme. The research project tells aspects of Fermanagh's diverse history through the selection and interpretation of one hundred key objects. Objects are locally important as well as of wider international significance.

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