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FACULTY OF FINE ART PAINTING

THE TREATMENT OF SOME HUMAN FIGURES IN
PREHISTORIC AND CELTIC ART.

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CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.	1
CONTENTS.	2
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS.	3
INTRODUCTION.	4
CHAPTER ONE. Tanderagee Idol.	12
CHAPTER TWO. Boa Island Janus Figure.	20
CHAPTER THREE. A Group of Wooden Carvings including the Ralaghan Figure.	27
CONCLUSION.	43
BIBLIOGRAPHY.	45

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

	Page
Pl. 1. Tanderagee Idol.	13
Pl. 2. Tanderagee Idol, detail of severed arm.	14
Pl. 3. Tanderagee Idol, detail of horns.	16
Pl. 4. Boa Island Janus.	22
Pl. 5. Boa Island Janus, opposite side showing interlacing.	22
Pl. 6. Roos Carr, Showing assembled Figures, Boat and sundry detachable items.	33
Fig. 1. Ralaghan Figure.	29
Fig. 2. Lagore Figure.	31
Fig. 3. Roos Carr, Image 3, showing damage to left side side of face.	33
Fig. 4. Kingsteignton Figure.	37
Fig. 5. Somerset "God Dolly".	37

INTRODUCTION

I first became interested in Celtic idols from seeing two stone heads from a group in the Piltown area in Co. Kilkenny. These idols are located about 40 miles away from my home town, the interesting thing is that these stone heads are part of a group from Kilkenny and are the only other group of idols outside Ulster. I was surprised at this point by how little is known about them. This was further compounded by the fact that there is such a small representation of such idols on exhibition in the National Museum, indeed from an overview of the items represented in the National Museum one could get the idea that our early ancestors were exceedingly given over to the manufacture and craft of personal adornment, where as, this was not the case at all. During the course of researching these idols it has become apparent that they represent the core of Celtic belief and culture. In contrast, the main motivation for the artists seems to have been the veneration of the gods, which carried over into all aspects of their life and artistic expression. Without this knowledge it is impossible for us to understand the origins of our own character and belief system, and how this may manifest itself today. Even now the vast majority of books on the subject of Celtic Art focus on the aesthetic quality of the images giving little indication of the symbolic significance of the motifs and designs.

One could suggest that we know so little about these idols in any case, but should we then deny this important aspect of our history? By using our evermore sophisticated methods of archaeological scrutiny combined with our own vernacular tradition and descriptions from the classical authors, we can get some idea of what life must have been like before

Christianity. At least this would give a better understanding of these early peoples, and put them into a more accurate context.

Ann Ross is one of the best authorities on the religious contexts of the material culture of the Celts. She describes in detail how religion and superstition played a fundamental role in the life of the Celts, and that this is the key to any understanding of their culture. She goes so far as to say that the Celts were more engrossed and preoccupied with this than perhaps any other ancient peoples. The gods which the Celts venerated played a very active role and were constantly to the forefront of their lives. She uses sources from classical literature to illuminate the intensely superstitious character of the Celts who embedded religion into every aspect of daily life, Caesar says: "The whole Gallic people is exceedingly given to religious superstition." (Ross, 1970, p.102) These gods were ever present and were often believed to intrude on their life. They attributed all aspects of daily events to good and bad spirits.

In assessing the priorities of Celtic belief it becomes clear that the head was especially venerated. To the Celts the head symbolized the very essence of being and was the seat of the soul. By possessing someone's head you controlled that person's spirit. In this context the head had an independent existence. We can understand much about the Celts,

.....by considering a symbol which in its way, sums up the whole of pagan Celtic religion and is as representative of it as is, for example, the sign of the cross in Christian contexts. This is the symbol of the severed human head.

(Ross, 1970, p.121)

There is also a more gruesome aspect to the Celtic cult of the head. Like many ancient people the Celts hunted human heads. The warrior classes would sever the heads of their enemies. These would then serve as trophies and were highly valued. Classical writers tell us that during battle the severed heads were carried off as booty by the warriors' attendants whereon they were nailed to their houses. The heads of the more illustrious enemies were preserved in cedar oil and displayed with pride, some were so valued that they would not be sold for their weight in gold.(Cunliffe, 1986, p.824) The most impressive archaeological evidence for this practice is the great temples at Roquepertuse and Entremont where human skulls were displayed in skull-niches.(Ross, 1970, p.122) This tradition is well attested to by numerous historical sources; namely skulls which have been found in Celtic hill-forts, literary comments from the classical authors and Celtic vernacular tradition which has been committed to writing by the early monks. The Cult of the Head seems to be by far the most important of all cults, but there is a good amount of fluidity and exchange between various cults so there were no barriers there to distinguish between them. The severed human head was extremely symbolic for the Celts and was thought to be magical and contain powers from the underworld. The tradition stretched to all parts of the Celtic world. The extent of their veneration for the head manifests itself in all aspects of their art, from horse trappings to coins.

Ann Ross suggests that the head may have already been venerated before the development of Celtic culture. She discusses sun worship and points to the head symbolism in Urnfield and earlier Bronze Age Europe in the form of the head as solar symbol. She also sites Etruscan influence on the early La Tene phase where the symbol of the head represented the

whole warrior. The best example for the marriage of style is a pillar from Pfalzfeld, St. Goar.

The Medium (stone) and the Ropework decoration are obvious Etruscan features, while the blending of foliage and human heads is a persistent La Tene Motif.

(Ross, 1967, p.96)

England also seems to have had a tradition of veneration of the head which is supported by a number of finds, one of which dates back to the eighteenth century B.C.. The most interesting example in terms of tracing an ancestry for the Celtic head cult is a crude head which is dated to the fifteenth century B.C.. The head was found in Mecklin Park, Cumberland, and is associated with a burial as it was found in a Bronze Age cairn. It consists of a pebble of Borrowdale lava which had been pecked away to form square eyes, and narrow slit for a mouth. Facial hair is indicated by a series of fine lines, and these recur on the back of the head to suggest hair.(Ross, 1967, p.100)

The Irish manifestations of the cult of the head are significant. Stone heads form the main body of idols found in Ireland, which gives rise to the fact that this was not purely a continental phenomenon. As well as the idols we have as evidence a number of archaeological remains and numerous descriptions from our own vernacular tradition.

A number of human skulls of Iron Age date have been found in Ireland. The nature of their deposition suggests acts of ritual or sacrifice. Probably the best known are the human skulls found at the ritual Lake of Loughnashade in Co. Armagh. The association of the severed head and

sacred waters is well supported by a description from an early Irish story from the *Dinoshenchas*. The head of a youth was thrown into a well causing the water to become magically affected, for part of the year, it became salty and bitter and for the rest of the time it was sweet and pure.(Ross, 1970, p.145) The association is further supported by two ancient wells in Duirinish, Skye, England which are named "Well of the Head"(Ross, 1967, P.144)

Secondary deposits in neolithic tombs at Carrowmore, Co. Sligo, consists of skull bones and teeth dated by radiocarbon to the Iron Age. The find prompted the excavator to suggest that "An early Iron Age tradition with deposition of skulls, as sacrifices or burials, cannot be excluded.(Raftery, 1994, p.185) The excavation at Raffin, Co. Meath of a "Monument comparable in function with the great royal centers" yielded a human skull and some animal bones which were deposited in a pit within the enclosure which was marked by a naturally rounded boulder. The skull gave a radiocarbon date of 100 B.C. to 130 A.D.(Raftery, 1994, p.80) This would point to the protective nature of the severed human head which it was believed kept evil from the "fortress or home while ensuring positive good luck and success."(Ross, 1970, p.121)

The Cult of the Human Head is a constant recurring theme in Irish literature. One story which deals with the belief that the head could live on after death is the story *Caty Almaine*, Fergal MacMaile Duin one of the Leinstermen who was slain in battle, where on his head was carried away. Fergal's head is afforded great respect having been washed, the hair braided and combed smooth. A meal is then placed in front of the head consisting of seven oxen, seven wethers and seven pigs. The head

then blushes and opens its eyes and gives thanks for the honour and reverence which have been shown to it.(Ross, 1967, p.157)

In the Irish story "The Tain", the Irish hero Cu Chulainn, had by the end of his exploits, an enormous collection of severed heads to his credit,

.....there he cut down a forked branch with one blow of his sword and fixed it in the middle of the stream so that a chariot could not pass it on his side or on that. While he was thus engaged Eirr and Indell with their two charioteers, Folch and Fochlam, came up with him. He cut off their four heads and impaled them on the four prongs of the forked branch. Then the horses of the four men went towards the host, with their bloodstained trappings. The host thought that there had been a battle in the ford before them. A band went from them to survey the ford; they saw only the track of one chariot and the forked branch with four heads....

(Ross, 1976, p.134)

Celtic deities played a very varied and complex role and so the various cults overlapped giving the deities what ever attributes they needed. We know of the existence of various animal cults which would have been combined with human representation. For instance the Cult of the Snake which is most often seen in the context of anthropomorphic divinities seems to denote protective and healing powers. The Cult of the Ram or Goat were connected with fertility. A good example is a stone head from Corraghey, Co. Cavan which was once a double headed idol, human originally combined with the head of the ram.

By linking the animal image with the human head the intention may have been to combine

the Cavan deity with the god-like qualities of the ram, fertility, no doubt, being included as one of these.

(Hickey, 1976, p.26)

Bears were also venerated by the Celts and seems to have a dualistic symbolism of protection of bears against hunters and hunters against bears. There are three stone bears of Cathedral Hill in Armagh City. Barry Raftery tells us that it is "possible that a Bear Cult existed in the Armagh region, though there is no evidence that bears were present in Ireland at this time".(Raftery, 1994, p.185)

The Cult of the Bull was associated with ferocity, and virility, when the horns of a bull were associated with the human head this symbolized a war deity. The horns enhanced the aggressive nature of the deity. This will be discussed in more detail in the context of the "Tanderagee Idol".

Gods were sometimes depicted with two or three faces. An example of a two faced god will be discussed in the coming pages. A good example of a three-faced head comes from Corleck, Co. Cavan. Early Irish stories make it clear that the number three had a special magico-religious significance.(Hickey,1976, p.18)

There are six major areas of concentration of stone idols in Ulster, three of which are in Co. Armagh. The three other Ulster concentrations are in the Corleck area Co. Cavan, the lower Lough Erne area Co. Fermanagh and the Raphoe area, Co. Donegal. Outside of Ulster there appears to be but one minor concentration of idols, in the Piltown area, Co. Kilkenny.

The idols which I have chosen to discuss represent three different aspects of Celtic iconography. The Ralaghan figure is discussed within the context of a tightly knit group of seven figures from Ireland and England, which span a period of about 2,700 years. Due to this fact we can come to the conclusion that the Celts took on existing symbolism and imagery into their own complex framework of religious iconography. The Janus figure from Boa Island comes from a well attested tradition of Celtic iconography from the continent and relates to a classical type as seen on Roman Coins. This shows a willingness in the Irish artists to combine foreign influences with their own imagery or concerns.

The "Tanderagee Idol" is also well grounded in terms of style and manufacture in Celtic tradition, although it is singular in its narrative depiction and probably represents a deity from within our own pantheon of Gods.

These idols will be discussed in terms on their possible function, origins and similarities here and abroad. The purpose of this is to establish the idols in some kind of cultural framework, and help us to understand their real significance.

CHAPTER ONE

TANDERAGEE IDOL.

A very unusual bust probably dating from the Iron Age, which was brought from Tanderagee to Belfast Museum and has finally made its resting place on Cathedral Hill in Armagh, is the "Tanderagee Idol". Although its original provenance is confused it may be from the vicinity of Newry.(Pl. 1)

The base of the bust is probably flat, the back and sides are formed by a single curve with the apex being at the top of the head. There is no break in the curve to indicate a neck. The face however is worked in several planes with cheeks, nose, brow, mouth and chin protruding at different levels. The right arm emerges from a square boss(probably the end of a sleeve) and reaches across the chest to grasp the left shoulder which is on a different plane to the rest of the arm.(Pl. 2) This is why the left arm is thought to be severed.(Paterson, 1940, p.91) Both hands are almost claw like and the fingers seem to come from the fore-arm rather than the hand. The elevation of the figure is such that it stands at an angle of roughly 60 degrees tilting backwards, possible indicating that the figure has just received the blow, and falls back in pain. A further justification of this theory is supported by a bust from Lurgan which is clearly a fellow of the "Tanderagee Idol", although it is obviously of much later date, the overall style of the piece being clearly Gothic. In all other respects it is an exact copy of the Tanderagee Idol, although in this instance the figure's arm is more clearly severed. This might also explain why the mouth of the "Tanderagee Idol" is wide and open. The mouth is surrounded by what Ann Ross thinks may be a boldly drawn moustache.(Ross, 1958, p.19)



Plate 1. Tanderagee Idol.



Plate 1. Landmark 1901



Plate 2. Tanderagee Idol, (detail showing severed arm)



Plate 3. J. andersonii (detail showing several and)

The cheeks bulge while the nose and what appears to be a helmet are on the same plane. Just above the brow two stumps protrude which could possibly be horns.(Pl. 3)

There are two widely held interpretations for the figure on the basis of its main attributes, namely the severed arm and the horns which protrude from the head or helmet. Local interpretation has it that the figure represents Nuada. Nuada was a king of the Irish race of gods, The Tuatha De Donann.

In the first Battle of Magh Tuiredh, between the Tuatha De and The Fir Bholg, Nuada loses his arm and thus has to relinquish the kingship, because he no longer meets the criterion of physical perfection which was a role of sovereignty. The divine smith/leech Dian Cecht makes Nuada an artificial arm of silver and thus makes it possible for him to resume his power. Henceforth, he is known as 'Nuada argat lamh' (Nuada of the silver arm/hand).

(MacCana, 1983, p.66)

It may be interesting to note that Nuadha Airgedlamh has an equivalent in Wales. This was realised with the discovery at Lydney Park in Gloucestershire of the remains of a Romano-British temple containing dedications to a god Nodons(or Noden), whose name corresponds etymologically to Nuadha.(MacCana, 1983, p.66)



Plate 3. Tanderagee Idol, (detail showing horns)



Plate 2. (continued from page 10)

The obvious syncretism of the Lydney Park cult makes it difficult to assess the significance of the objects found there. Thus some of them would suggest that the god had strong aquatic associations.....

(MacCana, 1983, p.66)

Also relevant to this point, especially in light of the human skulls found in the ritual lake of Loughnashade in Armagh of Iron Age date, is the fact that the god smith Dian Cecht who fashioned Nuadas silver arm was also connected with the cult of healing springs. In "The Battle of Magh Tuiredh", a paramount battle in Irish Mythological traditions, Dian Cecht is said to have sung incantations over a well into which he then cast the mortally wounded, so that they arose again as whole as ever.(MacCana, 1983, p.32)

The other important aspect of the idol is the horns which protrude from the helmet. Horns do not specifically denote the god Cernunnos as many war deities were also represented with horns. Cernunnos (the horned or peaked one) was one of the most important gods of the Celts. In fact he is probably the one who is depicted more than any other god from the entire Celtic world. The earliest known representation of Cernunnos dates back to the 4th century B.C. at Camonica Valley in northern Italy. These early people depicted their gods on local rocks. One of these carvings shows a tall antlered figure wearing a long garment and wearing a torc on each arm. He is accompanied by a small devotee as well as a horned snake. Cernunnos's role seems to have been seen as lord of the beasts, the best example of this being an inner panel on the Gaudestrup Cauldron, which dates to the second century B.C..

The suggestion that the Tanderagee figure may be Conal Cernach seems to be yet another possibility. Conal is one of the leading figures in the Ulster Cycle. Ann Ross speculates on the fact that Conal Cernach may be a literary representation of Cernunnos, indeed one would expect Cernunnos to find his way into the literary tradition of Ireland. Ross goes on to point to what appears to be a rather irrelevant episode in the old Irish tale "Tain Bo Fraich". In the story Conal travels over seas to attack a fortress guarded by a terrible serpent, but in the event the serpent leaps tamely into Conal's girdle and to quote the text "neither did harm to the other." Ross refers this incident to statues of Cernunnos from Sommerecourt and Autun, showing the god feeding ram headed serpents which encircle his waist.(MacCana, 1986, p.40)

Horns by themselves(either antlers or bulls horns) were a powerful symbol usually used to enhance the gods image, adding a powerful zoomorphic dimension. All indications of the "Tanderagee Idol" would point to the fact that this was indeed a war deity. The association of bull horns and war is well attested to by multiple examples of La Tene armour; including bull horned helmets which were found at the Arch at Orange, very similar to that worn by the figure accompanying the Sky God on the Gaudestrup Cauldron.

The "Tanderagee Idol" does not have any easy parallels in Ireland. On the basis of style we can find some common threads. The idol's rectangular mouth with ridged lips can be paralleled on the head of Killadeas, C. Fermanagh. The crudely carved fingers of the "Tanderagee Idol" are much the same as the Sun God which is also at Cathedral Hill, Armagh. More common similarities are in England and Europe. The

emphasis on the head and hands of the idol is well paralleled on the Holzgerlinger Janus. In both sculptures the fingers seem to come from the arm rather than the hand giving the hands a clawlike appearance. The noses on both figures have been treated in the same manner both being flat and wide.

The vestigial horns on the idol can be more closely paralleled in England than any where else, namely several stone heads from Carvoran and Chesters, and a concentration of heads in Cumberland. A more aggressive example of the horned iconography is found at Maryport. These examples are often nude, brandish knobbed spears, rectangular shields and are ithyphallic.(Green, 1994, p.96)

Although the exact origin of the "Tanderagee Idol" is confused it is important to note the fact that it was found somewhere in the vicinity of Armagh. There seems to be a concentration of Iron Age heads in the north of the country, many of them in Armagh. This concentration would point to a probable head cult in the area, especially given the fact that Emain Macha was the royal seat of Ulster and that the site of Cathedral Hill was a main pagan cult center.

CHAPTER TWO

BOA ISLAND JANUS FIGURE.

Another striking figure from the north of the country is the Janus figure from an ancient churchyard at Caldragh, Boa Island, Co.

Fermanagh. (Janus strictly means a two-faced figure but can refer to two figures back to back much the same as the Holzgerlinger Janus) The emphasis on the arms, legs and head make it an easy parallel to the Tanderagee Idol and one could not say that it was less menacing. (Pl.4) Although the Boa Island figure now stands in a Christian grave yard it is very "Celtic" in appearance. The Janus head is well attested to in Celtic imagery in Britain and on the continent. (Hickey, 1976, p.17)

There are three idols from the lower Lough Erne area which are of possible pre-Christian date. (Rynne, 1972, p.85) What sets these idols apart from other idols in Ireland is that they do not depict severed heads. The best known of the three is the afore mentioned idol from Boa Island .

The second idol is from an ancient graveyard on Lustymore Island which has been re-erected along side the Boa Island figure. (Rynne, 1972, p.85) It is thought that this figure may also have been a Janus squatting figure - but on careful examination of this extensively damaged piece Etienne Rynne could find no evidence to support this claim. He does however think it may be from the same school of carving and possibly even be by the same sculptor. (Rynne, 1972, p.86)

The third piece from this group is much more problematic in terms of dating the sculpture. It consists of a head carved in high relief on a thick

slab of stone in the church yard at Killadeas, Co. Fermanagh.(Rynne, 1972, p.86) The problem is that there are other carvings on the slab. An ecclesiastical figure with a bell and crozier is notable, which Rynne dates as probably 9th or 10th century.(Rynne, 1972, p.86) What could possibly establish this figure as pre-Christian other than that it does not depict an ecclesiastic is the fact that the mouth is a rectangular opening bordered by a ridge similar to that of the "Tanderagee Idol" rather than the pouting mouths of the 9th /10th century as visible on the Christian sculptures at nearby White Island.(Rynne, 1972, p.86)

The Janiform idol from Boa Island consists of two almost identical figures back to back.(Pl. 4.) The figure is 73cm high and is 45cm and its widest point.(Kelly, 1989, p.292) The figure terminates just below the waist, "There is some evidence that there was a tenon on the base of the stone and that it could have been fitted onto another stone."(Kelly, 1989, p.292) The head is large and triangular and dominates the figure. The head sits on the body and the points of the chin are parallel with two pencil-like crossed limbs. Helen Hickey has suggested that one of these limbs (on one-side) terminates in what she thinks may be a foot. This suggestion contrasts with the more widely held view that these limbs are crossed arms.(Hickey, 1976,p.17) If this were true it would give the idol the so-called Buddhic posture in which Cernunnos is so often depicted. On the opposite side there is what is taken to be a phallus just below where the arms cross.(Hickey, 1976, p. 17) The figure is encircled by a large belt which runs the four sides of the rectangular stone. Another unusual aspect of the figure is a linear pattern carved on one of the narrow sides of the stone between the two heads.(Hickey, 1976, p.17) It may be there to represent hair, but on the other hand one would expect it to appear on the other side also.(Pl. 5) The large eyes are surrounded by a



Plate 5. Boa Island Janus Figure, (side view showing interlacing)



Plate 4. Boa Island Janus Figure, (showing opposite side)



Plate 5. Boe Island (same view showing interacting)



Plate 4. Boe Island (same figure, showing opposite side)

distinct ridge which works its way down the face to form a long narrow nose in low relief. The pointed oval mouth is surrounded by what is thought to be a pointed beard, which gives the head a triangular appearance. The tongue slightly protrudes on one side.

The origin of the figure from Boa Island is extremely complex in terms of gauging any kind of function or reading. This is not helped by the extensive damage on the lower half. We can however discuss the main attributes and piece together what little we know from Ireland and the Continent.

Between the two heads is a socket-like hollow (length 21.6cm; width 8.8cm; depth 12.7cm) which may have held a leaf crown to encompass both heads. Alternatively it may have held a carving of antlers or horns.(Hickey, 1976, p.18) There are good examples of both types of headgear on Celtic idols in England and Germany. The best example appears on the Gundestrup Cauldron which portrays Cernunnos with antlers and is seated cross legged. This type of head gear was frequently used by the Celts to denote a divinity. Du Noyer made a pencil sketch of the idol in 1841 and on the back of one of these sketches "Du Noyer recorded that a local informant remembered seeing a piece of stone set in the top hollow which he took to be a small cross"(Hickey, 1976, p.17)

The more widely held interpretation for the hollow/socket is that it was a container for libations. The only other head known in Ireland with a libations hollow in the top is an unprovenanced head near Armagh.(Rynne, 1972, p.86) There are however quite a number of examples in Britain and on the Continent. The best examples are the "Corstopitum 'Maponus' Head" and a three faced head from Sutherland,

both are from England.(Rynne, 1972, p.86) Worth mentioning also are stones scattered all around Ireland called "Bullan's" or "Rock Basin's" which were also believed to have held libations.(Ffrench, 1912, p.9) Usually Bullans stones are hollows which have been cut into undisturbed rocks or sunk into the walls or caves, the average diameter being about 14 inches.(Ffrench, 1912,p.2) Wakeman tells us that they were in some way associated with pagan sepulchral rites.(Ffrench, 1912, p.2) They are usually found near ancient church sites. Ffrench goes on to point out that the early missionaries would establish their churches on or near pagan sites.(Ffrench, 1912, p.4)

The fact that the Boa Island figure is Janiform has certain complex connotations. The Janus form could be a reflection of the Celtic belief that the twins enjoyed special divine protection.(Ross, 1967, p.112) The Janus head is an important aspect of the idol especially in light of the exaggeration of the size of the head which enhances the overall potency of the idol. Another reading could be that by duplicating the features one could intensify the power of the figure thus enabling them to see in both directions at the same time, perhaps viewing the underworld and the world of mankind.(Ross, 1986, p.123) Although the Cult of the Janus was well established in Celtic belief it must have received fresh stimulus from the Roman Cult of Janus, which had almost the same function except that the deity was often seen as a gatekeeper looking forwards and backwards at the same time.

The belt is also an important aspect and would again make a parallel with the Janiform figure from Holzgerlinger.(Hickey, 1976, p.17) The belt is commonly depicted on Celtic imagery and is usually associated with a war deity. Georges Zarnecki discusses the symbolic reference to power -

strength of the belt in "Belts of Strength".(Zarnecki, 1963, p.60) In the case of the Boa Island figure Helen Hickey tell us that

The belt must have been a symbolic emblem of the god-hero, perhaps related to its practical function of holding weapons and possibly skull trophies

(Hickey, 1976, p.17)

Taking into consideration that the lower part of the figure is extensively damaged and that Helen Hickey is the only writer to determine the maleness of the idol, one could give the figure a new perspective. There may be good evidence to suppose that the idol on Boa Island could represent the Irish Goddess of war, Badhbh.(Irish raven or hooded crow) The name Boe is said to derive from Badhba.(Hickey, 1976, p.17)

Carrion birds associated with goddesses are significant: the symbolism of these creatures is complex and seem to involve the dual imagery of death and flight, lower and upper worlds. So, like the snake, regeneration and rebirth may be symbolized. There is the added concept of the winged soul, often thought of in those terms after it leaves the body's confines at death. Certainly, there is sometimes a very close association between bird and goddess, culminating perhaps, in the winged nature of the divinity herself. Of interest in this connection is the Irish vernacular tradition of

transmogrification of the goddess to a raven or crow, seen in the case of the battle-raven Badb Catha; it may be that the Celtic coins bearing the images of ravens riding on the backs of horses may represent a similar war-raven theme.

(Green, 1989, p.26)

If one were to accept this interpretation and the idol did represent Badhbh it would explain many of the peculiar attributes of the idol. The exaggeration of the head could be seen as the transmogrification from human to bird. The belt would also correlate as the belt of a war goddess, the pointed chin to that of a beak. The socket could have held the wings of a bird. The Janiform aspect of the idol would then represent two beings in one entity.

CHAPTER THREE

A GROUP OF WOODEN CARVINGS INCLUDING THE RALAGHAN FIGURE.

Among the many pieces of worked wood which have survived from prehistoric Ireland and Britain there are a very small number which have been carved into the appearance of a human figure. The half-dozen or so finds made since the 1840's have long been treated as a group. But their impact on the archaeological literature has been slight despite the interest in their subject matter, and it can be argued that the reason for this lies in the prehistorian's frequent neglect of wood in favour of stones and metals and, more significantly perhaps, in the almost complete absence of evidence to date the wooden carvings. There have however been developments in techniques of dating small organic objects in recent years, namely radiocarbon dating using Accelerator Mass Spectrometry and dendrochronology.

This group of icons serves to remind us of what once must have existed in wood. In contrast to the stone idols this group of icons do not depict the harrowing or grotesque beings we have seen. Instead they are sensuous and refined in their manufacture. One of the best examples of this type of idol is a figure found in Ireland, Co. Cavan, known as the "Ralaghan Figure", which is now in the National Museum of Ireland.

There are, in all three, figures from Ireland of prehistoric date. Two of them are included in this group. The third idol from Corlea, Co. Longford does not correspond with the rest of the group as it is more

crudely worked and it is impossible to tell whether the figure is zoomorphic or anthropomorphic(Rahtery, 1994, p.186)

This group must be a small representation of what must have once existed in wood and although the two Irish figures pre-date the arrival of the Celts there is much evidence to suppose that the tradition continued. A Celtic woodland sanctuary near Massalia is described by a first century Roman poet Luccin:- "And there were many dark springs running there, and grim-faced figures of gods uncouthly hewn by the axe from the untrimmed tree-trunk, rotted to whiteness".(Rahtery, 1994, p.186)

RALAGHAN:

In 1930, Alfred Mahr published a report on the wooden figure which came from the Ralaghan peatbog in the parish of Shercock, Co. Cavan. (fig.1). It is not clear exactly when the figure was found. Mahr noted only that it was found by turf cutters under 3-4 feet of peat, and he gave a brief description of the carving which he had identified as being made from yew wood. Like most of the figures in this group, it was carved from a complete roundwood stem with the pith running down the vertical axis from the top of the head. Although the outer surface of the wood is much cracked, the figure does not seem to have distorted much since discovery.(Coles, 1992, p. 320). The carving measures 1135mm in height and is much the same width from head to hips, with little or no differentiation of neck, arms, waist or buttocks. The pubic area is quite well defined and has a central hole. The legs though not separated are shapely and end in feet with a spike that once fitted into a square pedestal, now lost.(Cooney, 1988, p.10)

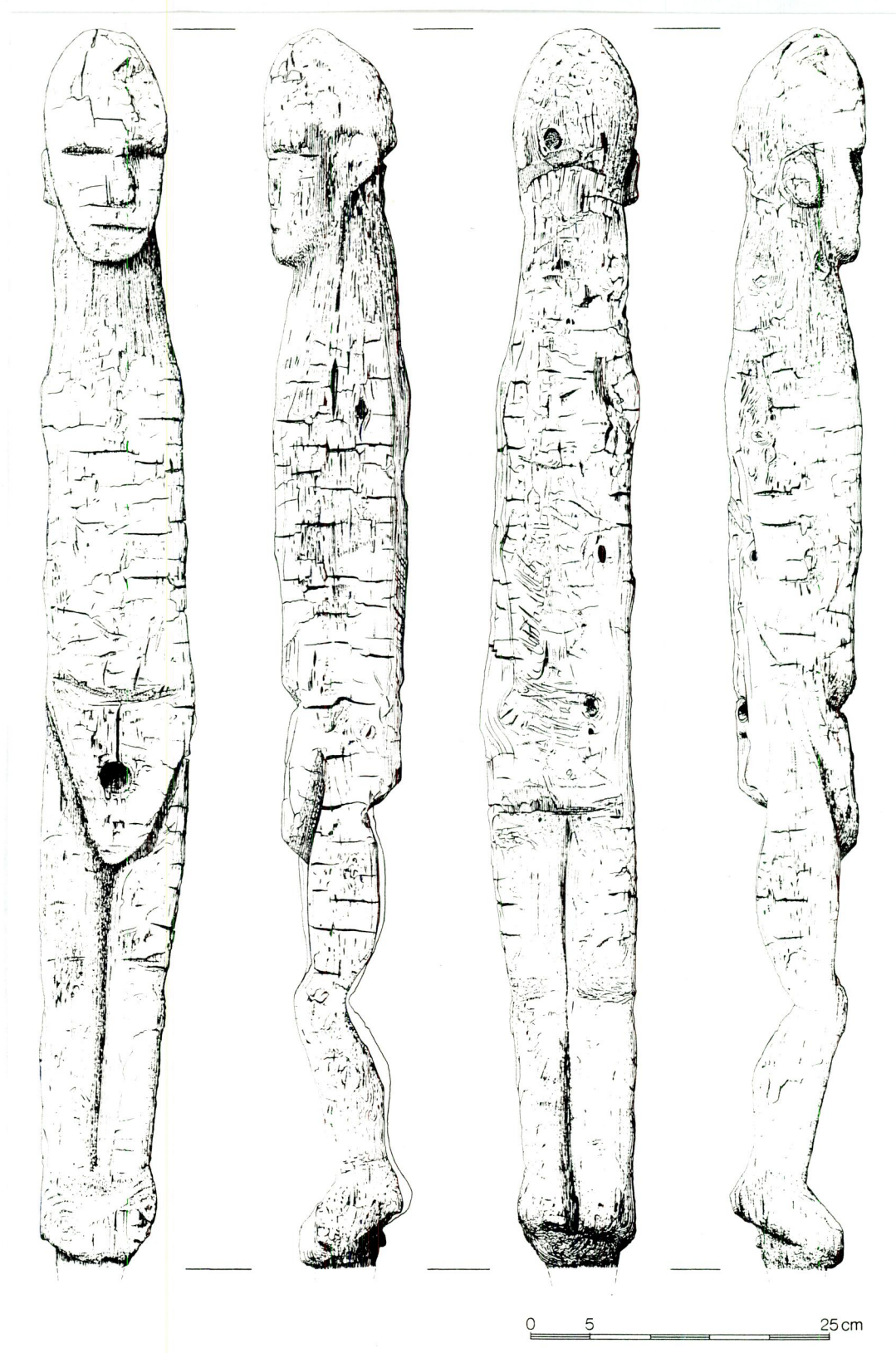


Figure 1. Ralaghan Figure.



Figure 1. Rajabpur Tiger

The Ralaghan figure has strongly incised facial features, despite the surface crazing facets, (marks made by the tool which carved the wood). The left eye is higher and less clearly cut than the right eye, the nose is off center and there is possible damage to the left side of the face. In profile the head appears to have hair or a helmet and a strong chin or possibly a beard. As said above the face is asymmetrical. This asymmetry is continued in the definition of the pubic area, which begins higher upon the right than the left. The carving of the legs show slight differences for example there is a flattish left foot and the right foot is more rounded. The pubic hole has been gauged out rather than drilled, and it is carefully placed central to the trunk though not to the asymmetrical pubic triangle. Close examination of the hole shows that it widens within the body of the figure, especially below the lower lip, and on the floor of the hole there is a small patch of white granular material possible quartz. The top of the hole originally had a small dent or bevel in its edge, slanting inwards. This is now partly disguised by a crack in the wood. (Coles, 199, p.322)

LAGORE:

The next figure from Ireland which is included in this group is from Lagore, Co. Meath. In 1934, Hencken discovered a wooden figure during his excavation at a crannog. Hencken published the figure in his 1950 excavation report, but did not discuss it. Exactly where it was found is not certain, but it came from a sandy layer in the north-west sector of the site, and thus possibly from occupation debris within the perimeters of the settlement. The figure was carved from a radially split chunk of oakwood (fig.2). The Lagore figure is much simpler in manufacture and almost devoid of features, yet instantly identifiable as

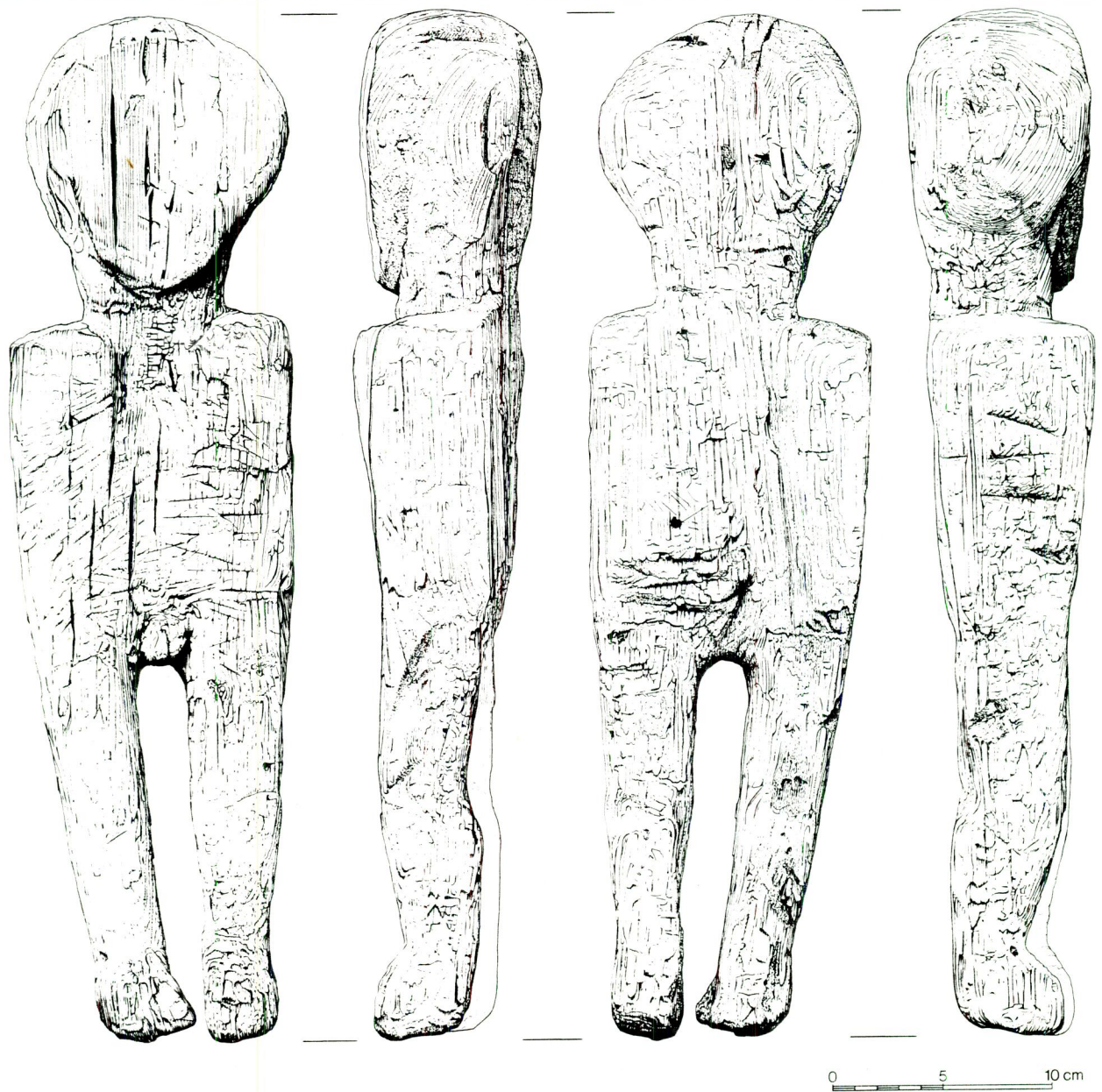


Figure 2. Lagore Figure.



Figure 2. 1900-1901

anthropomorphic in appearance. It has a large head with a concave face which is entirely without features except for a slight pointed chin. There is a neck and wide square shoulders from which the trunk tapers straight down to the feet. On the back of the body there is an indication of a spine which runs down the right-hand side of the trunk and the right leg. On the front, there is a hollow under the chin where the surface of the wood is rough in contrast to the rest of the figure. The trunk is otherwise featureless except for a slight pubic bump which may have been intended to represent male genitals. The legs taper slightly from the knees to the stubby feet.

Despite its lack of features, the whole figure has been carefully and deliberately carved, and well finished apart from the hollow under the chin. The rim of the face and the genitals are polished, as if worn by frequent touch. From head to foot, the carving is consistently asymmetrical, and it is only the twist of the right foot which is due to recent mending rather than to the grain of the wood and the carver's deliberate intention.(Hencken, 1950, p.105)

The five remaining finds which comprise this group are from England. The most artistically defined and complex is a find from Roos Carr.

ROOS CARR:

There are six main elements to the Roos Carr carvings, and various detachable items(Pl. 6) making this find the most complex of the group. The boat-like piece which is zoomorphic forms a base with room for a group of four anthropomorphic figures: there may have been a second

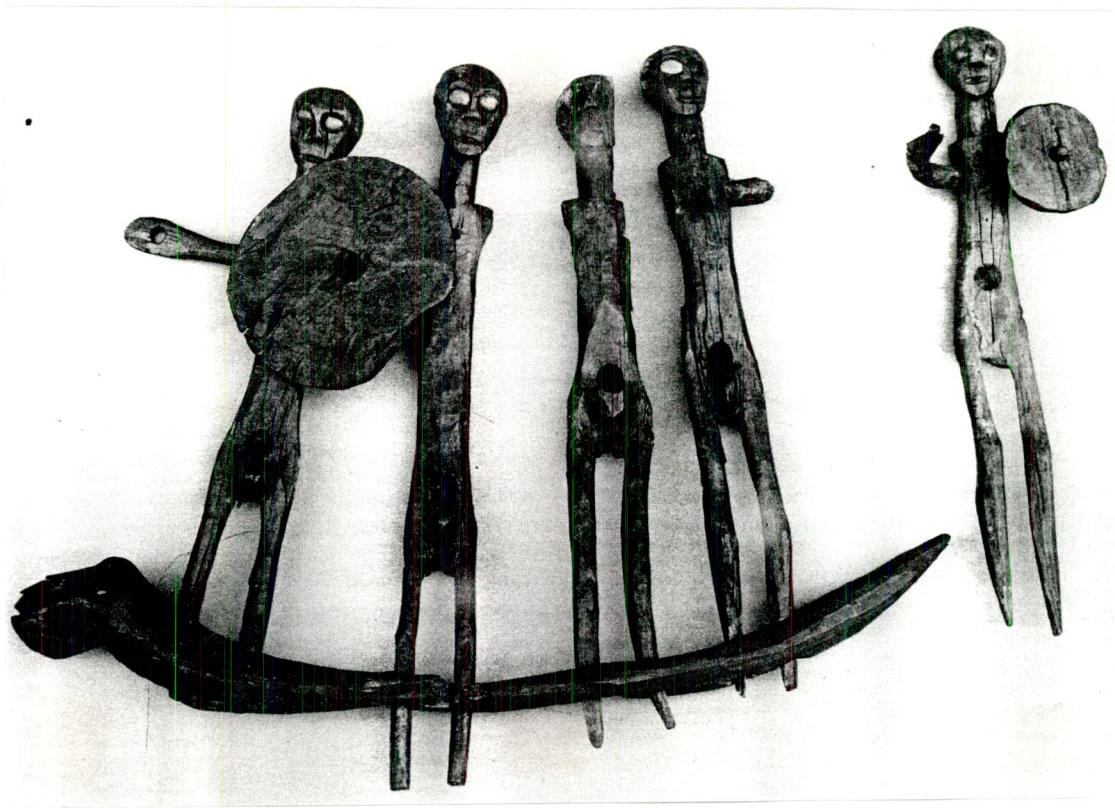


Plate 6. Roos Carr, (figures and boat)



Figure 3. Roos Carr, (image 3, showing damage to left side of face.)



Figure 3a. Root Cuts (Hinges and Pops)



Figure 3b. Root Cuts (Hinges and Pops) showing damage to left side of Root

The boat has a slightly upturned stern or tail and a well carved animal head for its prow. Along the length of the boat there are four pairs of holes into which the figures legs are placed.

The five human-like figures each consist of head, neck, trunk and two legs, with drilled holes at the shoulder that probably once held separately worked arms. Each figure has a centrally placed pubic hole, which possibly once held a separately carved penis. The area around the pubic hole is well defined and looks very similar to the Ralaghan figure. All five images conform quite closely to the same pattern, with slight deviation. Some of the figures carry detachable shields. Two of the figures have particularly well shaped thighs, knees and calves, most of the figures have worn appearance. One of the figures has suffered severe damage to the left side of the face, probably in antiquity. (Lindqvist, 1942, p.237) All figures have inserts in the eye socket which were of quartz except two which had limestone inserts in the right eye sockets but not in the left.

BALLACHULISH:

The Ballachulish carving was unearthed on the west coast of Scotland, it was found lying face down under a sort of wickerwork in a peatbog. It is almost life size and is the only one in the group which is larger than the Ralaghan figure. It had a large heavy head, inset quartz eyes, a straight trunk with arms, hands and fingers outlined on the body and possibly some indication of a shoulder strap and nipples. The pubic area was outlined and marked with a central vertical incision. The separated legs were joined at the lower end in a pedestal base. The carving has shrunk, twisted and distorted considerably since its discovery. Early photographs

show that the left eye may have been smaller than the right, and there was slight damage to the left side of the head.

DAGENHAM:

This figure was discovered in the Dagenham marshes downstream from London on the north bank of the Thames. About 20 foot below the ground surface workmen unearthed a carved wooden figure. Recent examination shows that the figure was made from a complete roundwood stem, at least 30 years old, with the pith running from the crown of the head through the vertical axis.(Coles,1990, p.320) The head is large in proportion to the rest of the body. The face has a flattened surface with the nose left proud and vertical. The sockets for the eyes are cut out ovals. The right socket is deeper than the left. There is a rough, shallow cut for the mouth, no ears and no indication of hair. The figure has a neck, pointed sloping shoulders and trunk, there are no arms or arm holes. The waist and buttocks are shown and there is a central pubic hole which was cut as a vertical oval like the eyes. The legs are straight and footless. There is also damage to the front left side of the face. The deliberate difference in the carving of the eyes is carried through in other features of the body. The left shoulder is higher and narrower than the right and the left leg slightly thicker than the right.(Coles, 1990, p. 321)

KINGSTEIGNTON:

The figure known as the "Kingsteignton Idol" was found near the banks of the river Teign in south Devon(fig. 4). The exterior of the carving is worn and weathered and was carved from a complete roundwood stem of oakwood. The long thin body is topped by an elongated neck and a large

head complete with hair or helmet. Eyes, nose and chin are lightly but effectively indicated. The long neck has a hole drilled through it, possibly for the insertion of detachable arms. The trunk is straight and the figure has square shoulders. The legs are short and end in stubby feet. The buttocks have been carefully carved as has the erect penis.(Coles, 1990, p.325)

SOMERSET LEVELS:

The last figure to be discovered is from Westhay in the Somerset Levels. It was found in 1966 and is now known as the "Somerset God Dolly". The figure measures 16 cm in height, and is clearly human and hermaphroditic in character (fig. 5). The head is represented by a knob of wood beneath which is a slight thinning and grooving for the neck. The trunk is thick, from it projects two flat breasts and an asymmetrically - placed phallus which directly underlies the left breast. Down the back of the figure is a deep groove, and similar splitting is visible down the left side of the trunk. The figure was carved from a large piece of ash, without utilizing a side branch for the phallus. The scars on the wood show little signs of smoothing through handling. The figure was deposited upside down between two superimposed trackways of late neolithic date. The legs are thought to have been broken off.(Coles, Hibbert, 1988, p.254)

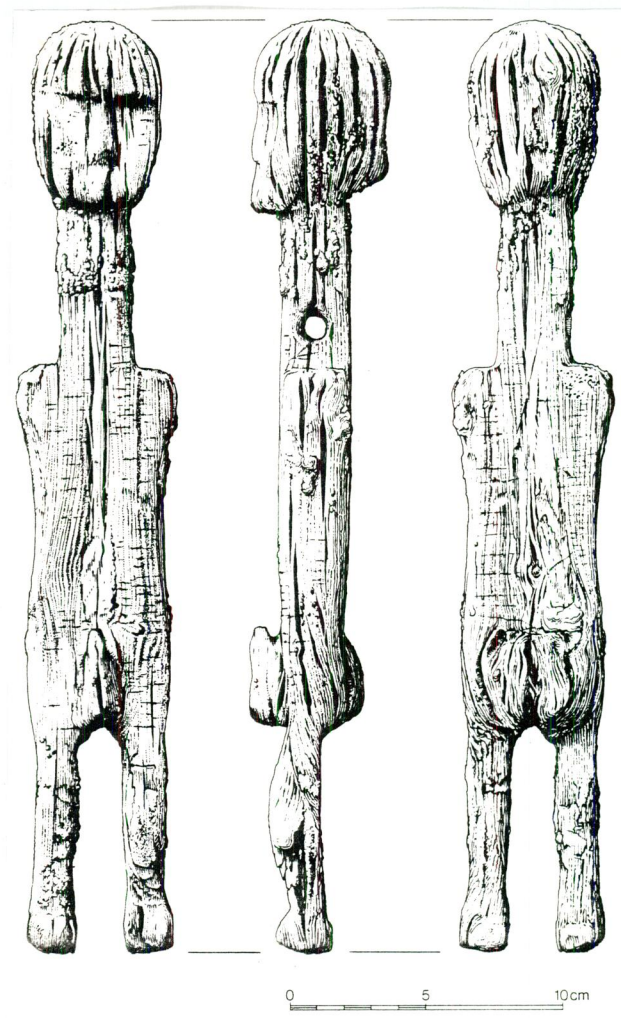


Figure 4. Kingsteignton Figure.

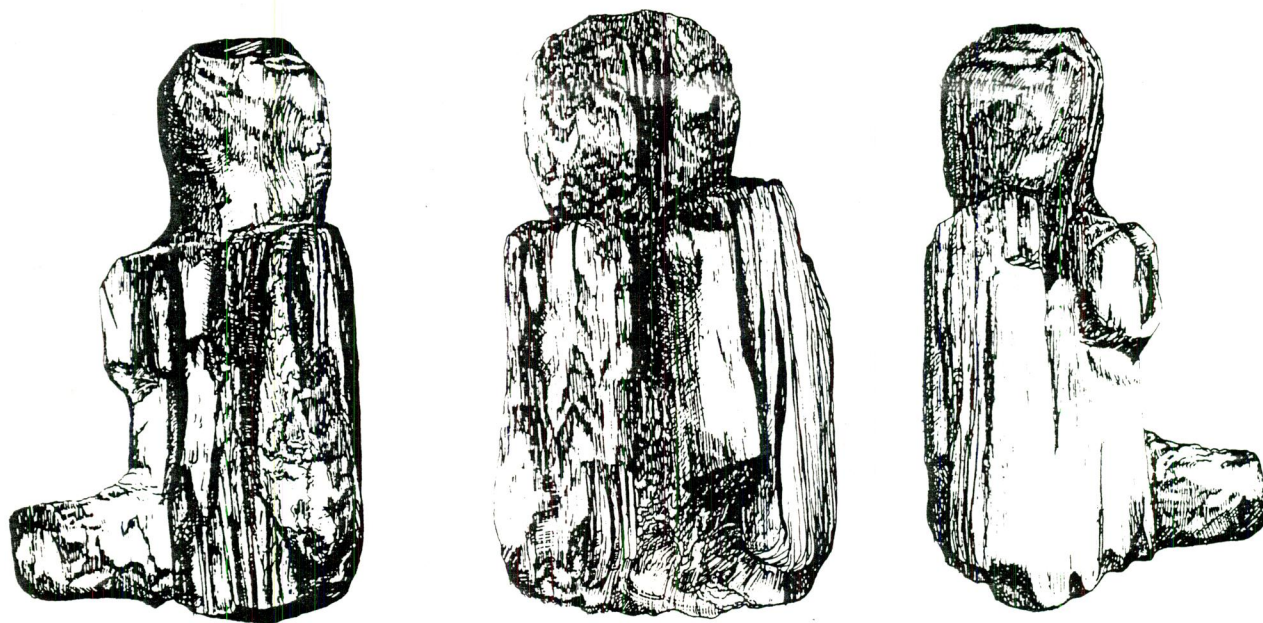


Figure 5. Somerset "God Dolly".



TABLE 1

FIGURE	WOOD SPECIES	HEIGHT(mm)	CURRENT LOCATION
Roos Carr Figure 1-5 Boat-Base	Pine Pine	350-400	Town Docks, Museum, Hull.
Kingsteignton	Oak	340	Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter.
Ballachulish	Oak	1480	Royal Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh.
Dagenham	Pine	495	Colchester and Essex Museum.
Ralaghan	Yew	1135	National Museum of Ireland, Dublin.
Lagore	Oak	470	National Museum of Ireland, Dublin.
Somerset	Ash	160	Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge.

TABLE 2

FIGURE	YEAR OF WOOD DATED BY RADIOCARBON (B.C.)
Kingsteignton	426 - 352
Roos Carr	606 - 509
Ballachulish	728 - 524
Ralaghan	1096 - 906
Lagore	2135 - 1944
Dagenham	2351 - 2139

When examining these idols as a group, certain unusual traits start to become recognizable as common to all. There is the addition of quartz to the figures, either as insets for the eyes, or in the Ralaghan example, it is inserted into the genital area. There is damage which has occurred in antiquity to the left side of the figure especially around the eye. The sexual ambiguity of the carvings is also a common trait.

Whether the figures were meant to represent male or female it would seem very possible that the idols were in some way connected with the fertility rites, especially given that the pubic area received so much attention and care when carved. Helen Hickey, tells us that the Ralaghan figure was found at the foot of the Thaghart Mountain ".....which is remembered as the site of an ancient Lunasa harvest festival, it may have come from a sanctuary on top of the mountain." (Hickey, 1976, p.21). Raftery suggests that the figures may once have stood upright like a totem pole. He links this theory to the belief that the central oak post in the Phase 4 structure of Navan Fort once stood as the focus of cult activities.

As said the carvings exhibit a degree of sexual ambiguity, which is noted by Megaw in his comment on Ralaghan: "The present figure has been considered by some to be male but the neatly drilled hole in what appears otherwise to be a well defined vulva surely does not prevent a female interpretation. (Megaw, 1970, p.226) The "Somerset God Dolly" is clearly hermaphrodite having a penis and breasts. Dagenham, and the Roos Carr figures have all been identified as male, but none has a definite penis like those of Kingsteignton or Lagore. Instead they have a hole, for the insertion of a phallus which itself is ambiguous. In this context the widening of the hole within the Ralaghan figure and the quartz granules inside seem very odd. Perhaps the figures were meant to represent both male and female depending on the context or ritual to be performed; male, with a separate penis sticking out from the hole, or female, with genitals for intercourse or for giving birth. The Ralaghan figure and the quartz granules inside it suggests that this might have been the case.

The symbolism of quartz could support the above interpretation. The Calibrated radiocarbon dates obtained for the wooden figures span a long period in terms of human generations, nearly 2,700 years, (Table 2) and yet there are so many common traits in terms of style and symbolism. In this context the addition of quartz to the figures as eye inserts or in the case of Ralaghan in the pubic hole is remarkable. We know that the people of the Irish Neolithic period believed that quartz had special magical properties and that the stone was especially associated with energy.

The best example of this is the great megalithic tomb, Newgrange, which is situated in the Boyne valley in Co. Meath. A large quantity of quartz stones were found around the circumference of the mound. In

reconstruction of the tomb the outer surface was inlaid with quartz creating a sort of pebble dash effect. Seeing that quartz in such large quantities could only have been retrieved some 70 miles away, in Co.

Wicklow, we can be sure that the stone was an important aspect of the function and symbolism of the great tomb. The fact that the figures span a period of time which stretches almost as far back as the Irish Megalithic tombs to after the arrival of the Celts suggests an ancestry of ideas of symbolism. Could the magical symbolism of quartz have been carried down through the centuries, manifesting itself in the figures as eye inserts. This could be the case as the Celts believed that the eyes were the window to the soul. In the case of Ralaghan, quartz would have heightened the potency of the fertility symbolism.

Examination of the figures has revealed a further common feature linking the idols. A number of them are carved to be asymmetrical and a number have been damaged on the left side of the face, in particular about the eye. The fact that the figures are asymmetrical seems to have been deliberate at the time of carving. For example, Ralaghan has uneven eyes and is asymmetrical from head to toe, as are most of the others.

Deliberate damage to the left side of the face in antiquity is evident in the Dagenham figure, Ralaghan, Ballachulish and one figure from Roos Carr.(Fig. 3) The Dagenham face at first had a shallow left eye, after which the left side of the face was torn, removing most of the eye.

This treatment is similar to wooden votive images found at the sanctuary of Fontes Sequanae, in Burgundy. We know that empirical eye-medicine was practised here, hence a lot of the images which have been found represent various eye afflictions and the asymmetry of these figures

seems to correspond with the group from Ireland and England,(Green, 1989, p.160)

In Norse Mythology there is one character whose attributes suggest a possible derivation from whatever the wooden carvings symbolized. This powerful and prominent god gave up an eye in order to see into the future and changed sex on occasion to outwit others. His name was Odin.(Dumezil, 1973, p.204) There could be a link between Odin and the group of wooden figures.

CONCLUSION

We can see from the discussion of these idols that the artists and culture which they came from was not concerned with classical proportions or true anatomical representation. Certain aspects of the body were emphasised to increase the symbolism and power of the divinity concerned and the iconic proprieties coupled with the overall design of the idols was paramount. For instance there can be no doubt that the emphasise on the head and severed arm of the Tanderagee Idol are very symbolic and important to the reading of the figure also the Janus aspect of the Boa Island figure, coupled with the exaggeration of the head is very important.

Due to the difference in handling and refinement of the wooden carvings it would seem likely that the symbolic reference of wood had a different divine significance. We know for instance that the oak tree was totem of Lugh, who is the eponymous God of the Mid Summer festival, Lughnasa. This period was generally seen as a suitable time to marry as food was abundantly available and it was the least demanding time of year. The fact that the wooden figures span such a long period of time, attests to the continuity and concerns of these early peoples, both here and in England. The addition of Quartz to the figure either as eye inserts or in the genital area is also significant and may serve to remind how important the gift of sight and reproduction would have been.

These idols must be a small representation of the many figures which would have once existed. There is little we can say for definite about the figures as we know about the complex frame work of symbols within which they exist. The only thing with certainty we can say, is that they

are the only key to understanding the past and at this point they seem to pose more questions than answers.

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