The

# Dunaverney Flesh-hook

a unique symbol of authority from the Bronze Age, 1050 – 900 BC

Loan to the Ulster Museum, Belfast

October 2004 - May 2005

THE BRITISH MUSEUM
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***175 years: from Discovery to Discoveries***

Turf cutting at Dunaverney Bog to the north of Ballymoney, Co Antrim, in 1829 brought to light a curious and splendid antiquity of bronze. Antiquarians at that time knew of no parallel and struggled for the rest of the nineteenth century to understand its age and function. Gradually, however, more examples were found not only in Ireland and Britain, but also along the Atlantic seaboard of the Continent, and it became clear from their style, technology and contexts that they belonged to the Bronze Age. To this day the representation of birds seen on the Dunaverney flesh-hook remains unique in north-west Europe.

Uncertainty in the early years did not stifle interest, discussion and debate and it was not long before the Dunaverney object became one of the most celebrated of Irish antiquities. Surprisingly, however, until recently it had received little detailed study or analysis. Some of the fruits of recent research contribute to the display of the Dunaverney flesh-hook in the Ulster Museum on the 175th anniversary of its discovery.

The implement seems to have suffered some damage at around the time of recovery, for the attachments below the row of water-birds have been repaired with modern solder and two of the rings suspended thereby are also of modern metal. These repairs were made early on, perhaps while still in the private ownership of the Bishop of Down or, subsequently, James Carruthers. On the sale of Carruthers' collection in 1856 the object was purchased by the British Museum, where it has been shown almost continuously ever

since. It may have been events during the 1939-45 war which led to further damage – the breaking open of the loop at the butt end and the loss of the ring it held.

One of the virtues of artefacts recovered from bogs is the otherwise rare survival of organic parts. The Dunaverney flesh-hook had evidently been found intact with its wooden shaft exposed between the three metal portions. It was reported to have been four feet long in total (about 1.2 m) and even the exposed wood was ornate, inset with hundreds of small slivers of bronze in a herringbone motif; these may be seen on the small surviving fragment of oak shaft.

***Age and Function***

For long after its discovery, the date of the hook was the subject of guesswork. One early source hazarded an early Medieval date in the 6th or 7th century AD, but by the early twentieth century it was generally accepted as later prehistoric. Nevertheless, there continued to be differences of opinion as to whether it belonged to the early Iron Age or towards the end of the Bronze Age (then placed around 500 BC). With a century of further research, it gradually became clear that the flesh-hook series in Ireland and Britain began as early as the thirteenth century BC. So it came as no great surprise when recent radiocarbon dating of a tiny fragment of its original wooden shaft placed the Dunaverney example between 1050 and 900 BC, firmly within the Late Bronze Age (*circa* 1150 -800 BC). This was a time of superb bronze-working skills, exemplified above all in the manufacture of complex sheet-bronze cauldrons, embossed shields and, in parts of Ireland including Co. Antrim, in the technically accomplished casting of 'musical' horns.

How the hooks functioned is less satisfactorily resolved. While early fancies that they could have served as balances or for divination can be dismissed, their use as ceremonial goads, for prodding draught animals remains plausible. A consensus in favour of the 'flesh-hook' function during the twentieth century has been encouraged not only by references in the Bible †, but also by the discovery of one with a large cauldron at Feltwell in England. Even so, this hardly explains their ornate qualities, nor exactly how they would have helped in the serving or cooking of food. Whatever its mode of use, it is clear that the Dunaverney instrument was designed to impress, while its peculiarity, the row of birds, suggests a deeper meaning for the Late Bronze Age community around Ballymoney.

† *And thou shalt make his pans to receive his ashes, and his shovels, and his basons, and his flesh-hooks, and his firepans: all the vessels thereof thou shalt make of brass.* Exodus 27:3


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**The British Museum Partnership UK programme and this loan are supported through the generosity of the Dorset Foundation.**



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### *The Birds*

The birds sitting, or floating, atop the shaft are charming characterisations, only slightly stylised. Metal analysis has left no doubt that these were an integral part of the Late Bronze Age object rather than a later addition. Each has a rod beneath it which passes through perforations in the metal ferrules before being coiled round a ring. The perforation would have gone through wood as well and we do not know whether they would originally have rotated as they now do.

The two sets of birds could not be more different from one another. Two birds, presumably an adult pair, occupy the butt end, while a family of five – two adults and three young – glide along the middle portion in an overlapping row. The pair can be identified as corvids, perhaps ravens, the family as swans and cygnets. Instantly they invoke opposites: birds of water versus birds of the air; white ranged against black, fecundity as opposed to death implied by predatory character, birds of the home territory versus those of wild places. It is easy with modern eyes to equate these qualities overall with the forces of good and evil; at the very least they should represent quite distinct supernatural forces in Late Bronze Age cosmology. While we have no comparable evidence from Bronze Age Ireland, it is known that water birds – ducks and geese – played an important part in contemporary central European cults.


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### *Flesh-hooks and Late Bronze Age Society in Co. Antrim*

If it is accepted that flesh-hooks were connected with feasting, it is of interest that this corner of northern Ireland has produced an unusually large number of cauldrons and buckets – as many as eight in a 20 km radius. Horns also cluster here, two having been found in the same bog as the flesh-hook (at Drunkendult) and four in a neighbouring bog (Drumbest). Virtually all of these prestige objects come from bogs, and at the heart of the cluster is the extensive Garry Bog, which encompasses Dunaverney.

Although much of Garry Bog has been drained, ploughed and planted, enough wild parts remain to give some idea of its original appearance – tussocky sphagnum bog with pools of standing water, at least 10 sq. km in extent. Studies of ancient trees buried in the bog suggest that something happened here in the later part of the tenth century BC to cause a temporary deforestation. Whether this was a natural disaster or caused by very much increased human activity associated with agriculture and construction projects is not clear.

The landscape of Bronze Age Ireland was littered with *fulachta fiadh*, special cooking sites that had been used long enough to form monuments of their spent 'fuel' – ash and fire-cracked stones. These sites give witness to a particular socialising context of feasting at designated places, bringing together dispersed farming communities. At such places food was offered in return for allegiance to the distributor, the local chief, as part of the ritual of bonding communities together. In this context, we can understand the potential importance of a flesh-hook, being an instrument of food provision and at the same time a representation of chiefly authority – the power to determine how the produce of the community was dispensed. Rare and visually striking, flesh-hooks would have been emblems of the highest authority in Late Bronze Age Ireland.

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**View of bog vegetation, Dunaverney**