THE DOWRIS HOARD

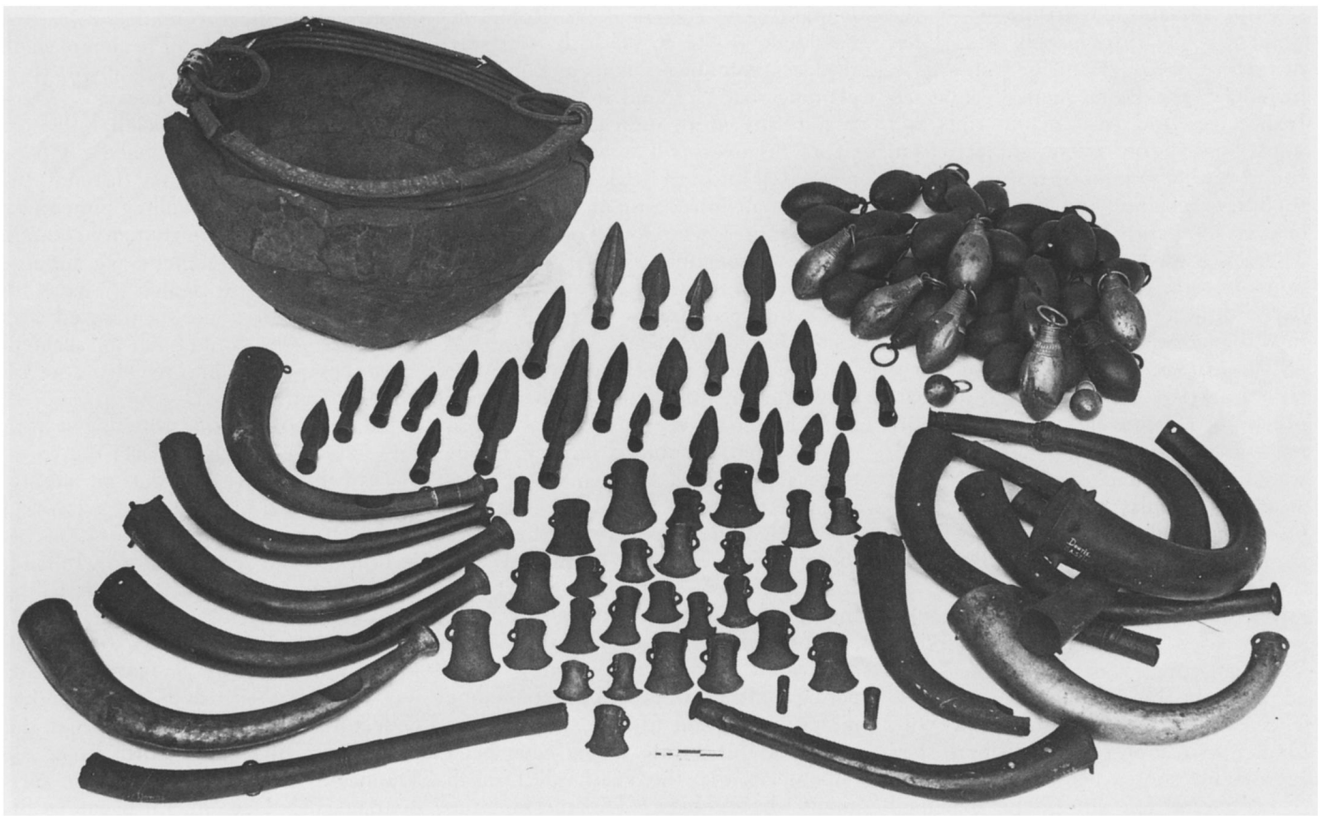
The Dowris hoard is the largest collection of Bronze Age objects ever found in Ireland. Had it been discovered today, instead of sometime in the 1820s, it would make headlines as big as those of the finding of the Derrynavlan Chalice, not only for the size and number of objects, but for their artistic value. "There was at least a horse-load of gold-coloured bronze antiquities..." explained Thomas Cooke of Parsonstown (as Birr was called at the time). The hoard in fact contained some 200-300 pieces, now split between the National Museum in Dublin and the British Museum. Large trumpets of different types, javelins, axe-and-spear heads, pendulous ovoid objects known as crotals – over thirty of these – at least one cauldron, a large bucket and other pieces of unworked bronze; a mysterious collection that takes one back to the legends of witches' cauldrons, magic horns and spears.

In fact the hoard has now been dated, both by the working of the metal and by the combination of objects found, to about the eighth century BC, the later days of the Bronze Age. Already in Europe the new technology of iron was advancing, sweeping in ripples to the North and West. In Greece pre-history was giving way to the light of historic times and Homer in his epics looked back on the lost romance of Bronze Age battles. But in Ireland the Bronze Age had not yet passed away and precious objects such as these were used still, and deposited in great hoards in the bogs, perhaps before epic battles, which were to last here in the farthest West for another thousand years.

In the 1820s, the 3rd Earl of Rosse acquired many of the Bronze Age objects found in a great hoard near Birr. A century later this valuable, historic collection was sent to the National Museum of Ireland for safekeeping and is still there. The present **Countess of Rosse,** wife of the 7th Earl relates the story of this extraordinary hoard.

The finding of the hoard has never been fully clarified. Even the year of its discovery is still not known exactly, and already, twenty years later, when Cooke read out a letter to the Royal Irish Academy, there was confusion and speculation. Thomas Cooke himself was an enlightened man, an 'antiquarian' and a friend of such learned figures as George Petrie, and the Reverend Dr. Robinson, then President of the Royal Irish Academy. He was a solicitor by profession and at the time of the discovery was living in one of the neat new Regency houses in Cumberland Square in Birr. He was in the process of forming a large collection of 'antiquities': coins, medals, bronze tools and weapons, the nucleus of a small museum. It was natural that he was among the first to hear of the find at Dowris near Whigsborough, four miles away on the edge of the bog to the north of the town.

Thomas Cooke was also a keen local historian and at the time he was in the process of publishing a book of his researches. It came out in 1826 and was called *A Picture of Parstonstown*. He dedicated it to the second Earl of Rosse whose son, later to build the biggest telescope in the world, was also a keen anti-



General view of all the material

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quarian. However, he made no mention in his book of the great discovery at Dowris. How he came to hear of the hoard or how he himself came to acquire a share of the treasure still remains unknown. However, one way or another he did, and no doubt the negotiations that followed were hardly of the sort to have been committed to paper. As he later said, "having a desire to preserve the antiquities of the country I did not rest until I became possessed of several of the articles found". However, the greater part of the hoard (apart from some pieces which may well have been sold or been otherwise disposed of by those who dug them up) came into the possession of 'that scientific nobleman' the Earl of Rosse. Once again the date and details of the transaction remain unrecorded.

The first mention of this amazing archaeological find in print was an article in the *Dublin Penny Journal* of 1833. It is signed "P" which stands for Petrie. Later, however, Thomas Cooke mentioned that he wrote the piece himself, which perhaps he did, with Petrie editing it. Petrie was one of the great scientifically-minded Irishmen of the time; he can perhaps be called the father of Irish archaeology and, as well as this, he edited the *Penny Journal*, collected Irish music and Irish manuscripts and wrote essays on every subject from round towers to military history. He was the son of a painter and among his other talents he painted very well himself. There is a wash drawing of Birr Castle done by him in 1820 for the Earl of Rosse who had recently completed improvements there, turning his old-fashioned castle back to front so that it faced the park. Petrie painted it in its newly crenellated elegance with a carriage in front of the door. In the hall, sometime not long afterwards, the Earl arranged a display of the bronzes of the Dowris hoard, hanging crotals and trumpets on either side of the front door.

The next we hear of the Dowris hoard is in 1848, when it led to a ponderous Victorian controversy among the learned men of the Royal Irish Academy. The Earl of Rosse (or his son Lord Oxmantown soon to be third Earl), had presumably shown his treasures to one of his guests. The guest, who remained anonymous, had wondered why so little

Bronze trumpets, end-blow type.

was known about these objects and decided to air his knowledge on the subject. (Had he not read the *Penny Journal?*) The Reverend Dr. Robinson, President of the Royal Irish Academy, read a communication from him complaining that "I found it impossible to acquire any information as to the locality of its discovery till now. It had been purchased for Lord Rosse about 16 years since by an inhabitant of Parsonstown; but the men who found it, with that strange suspiciousness that is such a peculiar feature of the Irish peasant, had made him promise to keep the details secret during their lives..."

The correspondent then went on to speculate, the first of many such speculations, about the reasons for the deposit of this hoard of objects in their hiding place in the bog. "The most obvious hypothesis respecting this curious assemblage of objects is that they were the property of some individual who concealed them in the bog, perhaps on the approach of a predatory party, and perished without recovering them." He speculated further that they were perhaps "the stock of a travelling merchant...", and further still that the origin of the bronze might have been Phoenician, that the Tuatha de Danaan might have been Phoenician, the travelling merchant too perhaps?

The repercussions of this reached Parsonstown. Lord Rosse's feelings were unrecorded, but at Birr work on the giant telescope was at its height and the response was left to Thomas Cooke. In December the following year Cooke sent a letter to the Reverend Dr. Robinson and it was read out by the Secretary of the Royal Irish Academy to the members. The letter starts in humble vein and suggests that he only writes "...in order to correct a few trifling mistakes and inadvertencies". He describes, for the first time the place and circumstances of the find. "They were accidentally dug up by 2 persons, one of whom Edward Hennessy, now deceased, was at that time sportsman to Mr. Drought of Whigsborough. The other man is living yet. They were at that time trenching potatoes in that part of Whigsborough known by the name of Derreens and which lies between Whigsborough paddock wall and the water known by the name of Lough Cour." Then, getting into the argument more deeply, he described the relics in his own possession and "with great diffidence would venture to dissent from the opinion expressed by the reverend and learned divine." He then set out to demolish all the speculations and arguments previously put forward. He became increasingly less diffident, especially over the Phoenicians. He totally dissented "from the hypothesis that they formed the stock in trade of a travelling Phoenician or other itinerant foreign merchants... if, for the sake of argument, we suppose such a peripatetic dealer to have inadvertently got himself entangled in a quagmire, how could such an accident have compelled him to abandon his ware altogether."

No final conclusions were drawn from these arguments, but at least the existence of the Dowris hoard as an important archaeological treasure was now in the open. Sadly, Thomas Cooke's collection did not long remain in Ireland. Cooke was an old man and in failing health. Much of his collection, including the Dowris pieces, was sold to the British Museum in 1859. Thus the hoard was split by the Irish Sea. One other collector acquired a small number of the objects as gifts from Lord Rosse or Thomas Cooke. This was the great antiquarian H.Q. Dawson, the Dean of St. Patrick's. On his death in 1840 the Royal

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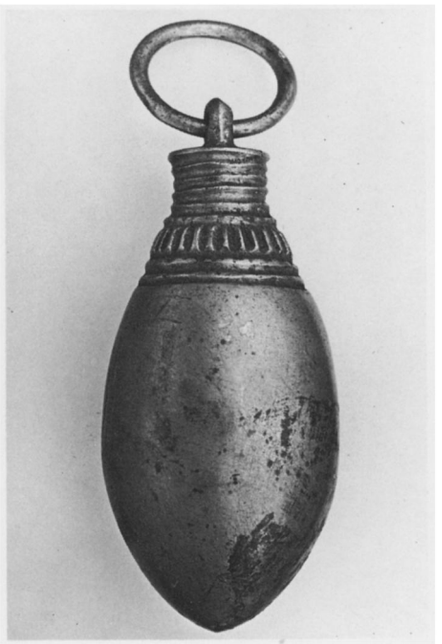
Irish Academy acquired these pieces: 2 trumpets, 6 ovoid crotals, 2 smaller more spherical crotals, a gouge and 4 spearheads.

Apart from mentions in such early archaeological books as John Evans *Bronze implements of Great Britain and Ireland*, and G. Coffey's *Bronze Age in Ireland*, little is heard of the Dowris hoard for more than half a century. The Earl's bronzes continued to hang in the hall at Birr Castle. In 1920, however, a bad fire broke out in the library of the castle and spread to the hall where it destroyed, among other things, the great tapestries that hung there. The then Earl of Rosse, great-grandson of the builder of the telescope, was a boy at the time of the fire. His father had died in the First World War and he himself was away from Ireland. The 1920's being troubled times, the agent, Mr. Garvey, was understandably worried about the Dowris bronzes. These valuable and historic possessions were now fire-blackened, but otherwise unscathed. He sent them for safe keeping to the National Museum, which had already acquired those of Dean Dawson's collection from the Royal Irish Academy.

What, indeed, was the hoard? Why, and by whom, had this large number of selected objects been abandoned in a bog? At least now we know, thanks to extremely detailed comparative study made especially on the cauldrons, by Professor Hawkes and Miss M.A. Smith, and on the horns by J.N. Coles, the approximate date of the deposit (though even here, with no record of the excavation we cannot be sure whether all were deposited at one time or some individually). Speculation as we have seen, began immediately and archaeological research can at least be said to have progressed some way from the last century's 'itinerant Phoenician'.

The Dowris hoard is one of many such hoards of this period, which in Ireland was a time of great commercial activity. Trade, flourishing with northern Europe and far beyond, brought with it skill in metal-working and gold craftsmanship. Hoards are found going back to the second millennium, and later, into the Iron Age and historic times; however, during the late Bronze Age, there are no less than 161 hoards recorded and several of these contain 100 or more objects. Professor George Eogan, in his



Crotal

book *Hoards of the Irish later Bronze Age* has recently made a comprehensive study on the phenomenon of these hoards. He lists over 150, giving details of the objects found, including, of course, that of Dowris. Some of the hoards are very specialized, containing, for instance, nothing but tools, and in one instance nothing but carpenters' tools, while on the other hand some contain nothing but gold and jewellery. Were these specific hoards then made especially to be deposited in this way, perhaps the 'grave goods without a grave' of some revered craftsman? Indeed metal-workers were deeply important, as often in more primitive societies today. The smith god occurs in every mythology.

One can speculate that, just as the smiths themselves may have been held in awe, the objects they made were magical, bringing supernatural connotations to us today. The cauldrons for instance: witches' cauldrons of a later date, but earlier a gift fit only for princes as in Homer, or brimming over endlessly as in Irish mythology. Archaeologically, Irish cauldrons of the eighth century BC have parallels as far east as Mycenae and Urartu. But, like the magic spears and horns of bronze, they have passed now into fairy-tales, appearing as shadows of their former selves stretching forward to us from their past, and the religious ceremonies, rituals and battles in which, perhaps, they were once used.

Outside Ireland, especially in northern Europe, archaeological research has turned to the large hoards of the period and concluded that some of them were places of ritual deposition, now known as *opferplatzen*. As the hoards are often found in deep bogs or rivers, it is thought that they may well have been laid down as part of some mystical act. In Ireland well over half the hoards of the eighth-ninth century, especially large ones such as Dowris, have been found in bogs, lake shores and other wet places – a percentage even higher than in northern Europe. It is indeed hard to imagine these most precious possessions being haphazardly abandoned in time of trouble. We can only conjecture what pressures and anxieties surrounded the group of men gathered on the edge of wild bog-lands as at Dowris, what deaths, defeats or invasions brought them together to cast away their riches. Perhaps indeed such hoards reflect acts of propitiation to the gods at death or battle and perhaps, like Arthur's Excalibur, the spears and trumpets were to return again in time of need.

However, another and less romantic possibility may account for the hoard. As has been pointed out, the period of the late Bronze Age seems to have been even richer in hoards of bronze, especially weapons, than any other in Irish or British history. Indeed all the weapons found from this time would be enough to equip a Bronze Age army. The eighth century, just before the arrival of the Iron Age (or the 'Halstatt C people' as they are referred to by archaeologists) saw, in effect, 'an orgy of bronze dumping.' Was the hoard then dumped as obsolete in the face of new technology? This might account for the spears and other small projectiles, but not really for the crotals, nor the magnificent horns.

The Dowris horns it seems never made great music. Even when first made they would never have produced more than one or two notes and perhaps they were used only as a rhythmic accompaniment to singing. Dr. Robert Ball, Treasurer of the Royal Irish Academy in the 1840s tried hard to make more sound but produced nothing more than "a deep bass note, resembling the bellowing of a bull". Sadly, as is quoted by J.N. Coles from the *Ulster Journal of Archaeology* in

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1860, "It is a melancholy fact that the loss of this gentleman's life was occasioned by a subsequent experiment of the same kind. In the act of attempting to produce a distinct sound on a large trumpet...he burst a blood-vessel and died a few days after."

The so called 'crotals' remain as enigmatic as they were when first discovered. The word crotal is in any case perhaps a misnomer. It was used first in an antiquarian sense by Edward Ledwich who wrote *The Antiquities of Ireland* in 1790. He used it to describe some balls found at Slane, which, from his drawings, look totally unlike the Dowris objects, and his descriptions that the crotal "seems not to have been a bardic instrument but a bell cymbal used by the clergy" thus tracing it back to classical times, also appears to bear out the fact that the word crotal was ill chosen. However, for want of any other word for these pear-shaped objects, not quite bells, not quite rattles, too heavy to be a decoration for a horse's bridle or a chieftain's cloak, Thomas Cooke turned to Ledwich, a good antiquarian source, and found the word 'crotal'. Thus from the first, in the *Dublin Penny Journal* of 1833, they became crotals, and crotals they have remained.

Unlike the horns, cauldrons, and other tools, there is nothing with which to compare the crotals either in Ireland, elsewhere in northern Europe, or further to the East. There are 39 crotals, of which half a dozen or so are smaller and more spherical than the others. Only two others are known to exist. One was acquired by the Museum of Exeter. Its site find was, however, never recorded and it has now been given to the National Museum here. The second is in the County Museum of Armagh where it is said to have been found in the ditch of Calhame Fort, Co. Antrim late in the last century. Both are extemely similar in shape and size to the ovoid Dowris crotals. Recently, one of the crotals from the National Museum has been taken North for comparison with the one in the Museum in Armagh where metallurgical tests are being carried out to compare the similarity.

Selection of crotals

An interesting theory put forward by J.M. Coles gives a very different explanation for the crotal than that of bell or rattle and ties it in with the idea of a bull cult widespread across western Europe in the late Bronze Age, originating further East with echoes of Mycenae and the minotaur itself. Together with the horns and their sound of a bull bellowing (as Professor Ball found to his cost) it is suggested they might have represented the bull's scrotum, 'the virility of the beast' in some ritual including perhaps the gelding of the bull calves. Against this it can be pointed out that several of the crotals are more round than ovoid, and one can only hope that further studies will yield an explanation other than that of badly made rattles or bulls' testicles.

Whatever the explanations, the Dowris hoard transports one back in time to the days of Bronze Age warriors, their battles, rituals, and herds of cattle grazing along the banks of the Shannon. There is no doubt, even in the eighth century BC, Ireland possessed the best cattle country in Europe. Let us hope archaeological research will reveal yet more of this golden age of hidden treasure, cauldrons, crotals and cattle herders.

Alison Rosse

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A map showing the exact site of the Dowris material is now in the Library of the Royal Irish Academy, Dublin (Ms. 24 E34).