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Carpow bank logboat - River Tay, Perth and Kinross





Creation and discovery

Next time you walk past a large tree think about how you would go about turning it into a logboat. Around 3,000 years ago people living close to the River Tay chose a large oak tree and cut it down, they shaped the log and hollowed out the inside. In this way they made themselves a logboat, around 11 metres long, which is roughly the same length as two large cars end to end.

But this boat leaked and had to be repaired at least twice to stop the water getting in! Unfortunately, it still leaked and it ended up sinking, or was abandoned and became an archaeological site. It sat in the intertidal mud of Carpow Bank, just downstream from where the River Earn enters the River Tay. In its final resting place the logboat was covered by estuarine mud and was preserved in the wet, muddy environment.

What happened when the logboat was rediscovered in August 2001? The people who rediscovered it reported it to the McManus Museum in Dundee, a foresight which initiated a chain of events that eventually led to the excavation and lifting of the logboat in 2006. Once excavated it was analysed to establish its age, form, functions, stages of construction and repairs, and to gain insights into the lives of the creators of this Bronze Age boat. It became the focus of a 4 year research project, which led to the publication of a great book by David Strachan, the Manager at Perth and Kinross Heritage Trust (Strachan 2010).

Creating a logboat takes skill, craft, an eye for straight lines, knowledge of the natural resources available and experience of the waters that the boat will be used in. Cutting down a tree and shaping it into a logboat would have taken a communal effort and may have taken up to three weeks full-time labour to complete. Perhaps a family elder was the one who decided which oak tree to cut down, or was it a young person who had had enough of their old family boat and wanted to build their own? From analysis of the Carpow logboat we can begin to reconstruct the 'life' of the tree and develop stories of the people who used it to navigate the waters of the Tay and Earn rivers.

The preserved logboat has a number of clues that can help the archaeologist to understand how it was made and what tools were used. The boat is made up of two main pieces of wood: the tree trunk that formed the hull and a transom board, which blocked the stern (blunt) end of the boat. Bronze Age tools, such as bronze axes and adzes, with blades of around 5 centimetres in width, would have been used to cut and shape the logboat. The marks that these tools leave on the timber can help us to understand how the boat was constructed. For example, the tool marks on the transom are well-preserved and analysis by a specialist indicated that some of the work was probably undertaken from left to right. This logboat has had two transoms, which indicates that one was not enough to keep the water out and the users had to construct a second transom to plug the leaks.





Context and function

So how does the Carpow logboat fit with other Scottish logboats and how does it move our understanding forwards about water craft on the River Tay? The Carpow boat means that there are now around 160 logboat finds from all over Scotland. Many of these were discovered during loch drainage and 'improvement' works in the 18th and 19th centuries and unfortunately few have survived. Some of the surviving boats have been dated using radiocarbon techniques and the dates range from around 1,000 years ago to around 4,000 years ago. The Carpow boat was also radiocarbon dated, to around 3,000 years ago and that date makes it the second oldest logboat in Scotland. Given the date and its location we can begin to reconstruct aspects of the environment in which it was used and what it was used for. For example, the size of the boat and the shape of the hull suggest that it wasn't very stable and certainly would have been safest when used in inland rivers, rather than further out to sea, where the conditions would have required a more stable boat. Because of its size it could have been used to ferry people around, but also livestock and produce, such as animal hides or carcasses. In addition, a logboat could also enable people to fish in different parts of the river system.

As you can see, just one large tree provided people in the past with a method of travelling around the rivers Tay and Earn, and it also enabled archaeologists to reconstruct past lives from 3,000 years ago. The logboat will go on display again from 21 March 2017 at Perth Museum and Art Gallery.

Reference

Strachan, D. 2010 Carpow in Context: A Late Bronze Age Logboat from the Tay, Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, Edinburgh.

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<https://canmore.org.uk/site/196138/carpow-bank>
<http://www.scottishheritagehub.com/content/case-study-carpow-log-boat>
<http://www.pkht.org.uk/index.php/projects/carpow-logboat/>



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