

with the help of
Bryony Coles
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A SPIRIT OF ENQUIRY

Essays for Ted Wright

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ROOS CARR AND COMPANY

Bryony Coles

The Roos Carr figures are well-known, human-like wooden carvings with quartz eyes staring out from poster or book cover, expression blank or enigmatic depending on the views of the beholder. Roos Carr, the place, lies a short distance inland from the Humber and the figures were found here c 1836, in a ditch which is thought once to have been a tidal creek leading to the Humber. But it is not only their find-spot which brings these carvings within the orbit of Ted Wright's Humber fieldwork: the five surviving people have a fine, animal-headed wooden boat at their disposal.

A few years ago, the available information relating to Roos Carr and to other wooden anthropomorphic figures from Britain and Ireland was brought together, along with AMS radiocarbon dates obtained from samples of wood taken from the figures themselves (Coles 1990). Whether or not this exercise left the figures any less enigmatic, it did indicate that all those studied were prehistoric in origin, ranging in date from the later Neolithic to the Iron Age, and a certain similarity of style and purpose was suggested. Since then, several other wooden figures have been drawn to my attention, and a preliminary account of these will be given here, along with some further consideration of the Roos Carr ensemble.

First, the 'new' wooden figures. There are four of these, two extant and two known only from nineteenth century references. None of the four is securely dated, but either the context of their discovery or their appearance, or both, suggest in each case that the figure may have some affinity with the dated prehistoric examples discussed previously. The two which are probably now lost come from Oakhanger Mosses near Crewe and from the peats between Misson and Haxey just off the Isle of Axholme. Of the surviving two, one comes from Ickham near Canterbury and the other from Strata Florida north of Tregaron (fig. 4.1).

Oakhanger

The reference to the Oakhanger discovery was sent to me by Mrs C. Micklewright of Haslington near Crewe, whose letter I quote:

The following passage occurs in a publication of 1856, "Barthomley" by the Rev. Edward Hinchliffe one-time rector of the parish of Barthomley as part of his description of a parishioner, Daniel Stringer, then deceased.

"He was digging, when a young man, in one of the Oakhanger mosses, and, at a great depth, hit upon a wooden figure, rude and grotesque, but complete with eyes, nose and mouth. He concluded it to be an *idol*, and sent it to the British Museum with an account of its discovery, but never learnt whether it arrived safe there."

Sadly, the object is not at the Museum and there is no correspondence about the find in the archives....

Hinchliffe had made reference to Daniel Stringer earlier on, in his account of Barthomley, noting that Stringer was born in 1743. Therefore, if he found the 'idol' when he was a young man, this could have been between about 1760 and 1780, if one allows that a man who lived to be 99, as Stringer did, might in retrospect extend his youth into other people's middle age.

On reading of the discovery, it seemed to me odd for a young peat-digger to decide that a wooden figure properly belonged in the British Museum. However, Hinchliffe's description of Stringer, leading up to the passage quoted above, suggests that he had both initiative and intelligence:

"Daniel Stringer was another worthy of this township... He attained the great age of 99 years; all his faculties being sound to the very last. He was a man, both in talent and information, far in advance of his

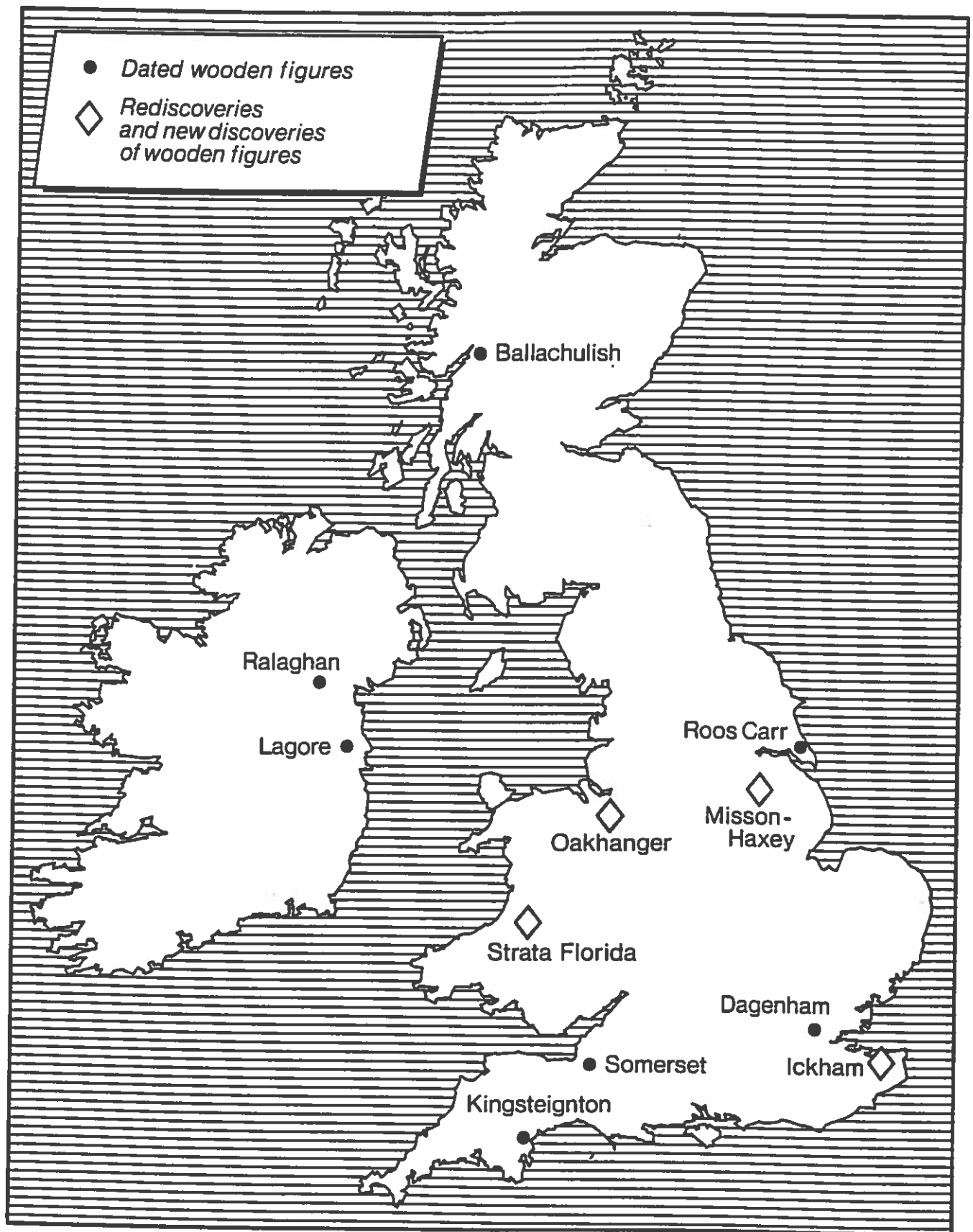


Fig. 4.1 Discoveries of wooden anthropomorphic figures from Britain and Ireland.

own class, and only wanted education and opportunity to become a distinguished character. He was a tall, fine-built fellow, and, in youth, must have been extremely good-looking. He was a miller and small farmer; and, sometimes, stole a few sly hours from his business, to perpetrate a little poaching. One of his hands bore a fearful mark of his propensity. A long time ago, the land about Manneley Mere, for many acres, was covered with rushes and high sedges, and was, of course, a favourite resort of wild fowl. Here Daniel used to have a little clandestine sport; and once, when there in search of it, a flock of wild-geese rose with loud screams before him; he fired, the gun burst in his hand, and shattered several of his fingers. His observation of passing events and social progress was uncommonly acute: nothing seemed to have escaped him, and this made his conversation both interesting and instructive. "I went", said he to me, "with many others to stare and wonder at the making of the new-cut (the canal), and what a great and useful undertaking we thought it, never to be beaten by any other; but I have lived to see the making and opening of a railway, which beats all that has ever been done yet. I expect it will make a great change wherever it goes." His mind penetrated beyond the mere surface of the work, and already foresaw, what people in his class would little think of, the gigantic strides which civilization would take by its help, even in the most retired and backward spots of England."

(Hinchliffe 1856, 116-117)

All that Hinchliffe writes of Stringer adds credence to the account of the Oakhanger Mosses 'idol' and its despatch to the British Museum. Like Stringer, we do not know if it reached its destination as nothing more has been heard of it. Could it lurk in some forgotten corner? It seems not. On the basis of the information available I would accept the Oakhanger figure as genuine, and possibly the first wooden anthropomorphic carving to be recognised as an antiquity: the discovery took place half a century or more before the Roos Carr figures were found in 1836. The brief description of where the Oakhanger figure was found, in the mosses and well below the surface, sounds not unlike the context of discovery of the Ballachulish or Ralaghan carvings, and 'a wooden figure, rude and grotesque, but complete with eyes, nose and mouth' could refer to either Ballachulish or Ralaghan or any of the Roos Carr figures, all of which have eyes and nose and mouth. The dated figures with definite mouths all belong to the first half of the 1st millennium BC, those which are older or younger having a rudimentary mouth or no mouth at all.

Misson-Haxey

The account of the Misson-Haxey discovery was provided by Rick Turner of CADW, as follows:

I promised you information concerning another wooden idol from peat. On rereading the reference it may not be relevant but this is it. Peck, W. 1815 *A Topographical Account of the Isle of Axholme* Vol. I, 8, (Doncaster):

"In August 1802, a statue of oak, black as ebony, about two yards high and carved in the habit of a Roman Warrior, was found several feet deep, between Misson and Haxey; one hand held an arrow and a bow was slung over the shoulder. This account I received from a person who saw it exhibited; another informed me there was an inscription, which I have not been able to procure. The statue was claimed by a variety of workmen who were digging at the time and in consequence of passing through many of their hands is now become mutilated".

This suggests the genuine discovery of a wooden figure deposited in wet conditions where peat formed. The details indicate a carving which differs from the prehistoric examples from Britain and Ireland principally through being clothed. There are, however, clothed figures of late prehistoric date from the continent, for example the massive wooden figure from Geneva which has been dated by dendrochronology to the final century BC (Mottier 1976 in Deyts 1983, 178-179). If we take Peck's account at face value and assume the figure was 'carved in the habit of a Roman warrior', deposition in the early centuries AD would be most likely. The peats around the Isle of Axholme have yielded various objects over the centuries, having been drained and 'improved' over many generations. Among these are several bog bodies (Briggs and Turner 1986, 186-187). It is just possible that the life-size Misson-Haxey figure was deposited in the course of activities similar to, or connected with, the deposition of bog bodies, as suggested previously for the Ballachulish figure (Coles 1990, 331).

Strata Florida

Much of the information about the third 'new' discovery, including its present location, has also been provided by Rick Turner. The figure in question was published in *Archaeologia Cambrensis* for 1903 (vol. III, 6th series, 284-286) as follows:

"WOODEN FIGURE FOUND AT STRATA FLORIDA, CARDIGANSHIRE - the remarkable carved wooden figure here illustrated belongs to the Rev. D.L.Davies, Vicar of Talgarth, and was exhibited by him when the Association visited his church during the Brecon Meeting in 1902. It is stated to have been found at Strata Florida, Cardiganshire. Mr. C.H.Read, F.S.A., of the British Museum, to whom the figure has been shown, expresses an opinion that it is of foreign origin, probably North American."

The figure was illustrated with front- and side-view photographs that show a dumpy battered body with a large head and carefully shaped legs and feet but no arms. The overall effect of the carving has some similarities to both Kingsteignton and Lagore (Coles 1990 figs. 7 and 9), although the Strata Florida figure is distinguished by its shiny surface. It was this last characteristic perhaps which suggested a North American origin to Read.

Strata Florida, the Valley of the Flowers, consists now of the ruins of a once-fine Cistercian abbey, built beside

Afon Teifi. At first sight, this would appear to be where the figure was discovered and the valley of the Teifi at this point provides possible, although not ideal, conditions for the deposition and survival of a wooden object in undisturbed wet conditions. Some distance downstream, however, Afon Teifi flows into the Tregaron complex of raised bogs and here, just on the northern edge, was built Strata Florida railway station in the mid-nineteenth century. Peat cutting took place around the edges of the bog and the Manchester to Milford Haven railway line was laid across it, both activities giving opportunity for discovery of the wooden figure. Strata Florida railway station provides an altogether more likely context than the abbey (and, in its own way, no less romantic): an active peatbog was a suitable location for deposition, as for Ballachulish and Ralaghan and possibly Oakhanger, and the bog would be an ideal medium for the long-term preservation of the carving.

The area of bog immediately by Strata Florida railway station is known as Gors Dol-fawr and here, in 1891, a bog body was found (Turner *pers. comm.*; Briggs and Turner 1986, 187 no.48). Tanned skin and bones survived of an apparently decapitated man; the remains were subsequently buried in the neighbouring churchyard of Ystrad Meurig. The possible affinity of the Ballachulish and Misson-Haxey figures with bog bodies has been noted above. If the Strata Florida figure is genuine, deposited in antiquity in Gors Dol-fawr, and if the body found there in 1811 was also deposited in antiquity, and in some way ritual given its decapitated condition, there is then some strengthening of the tenuous link between wooden anthropomorphic figures and bog bodies.

But is the figure genuine? It is now held at Carmarthen Museum where it was found in the stores in the 1970s, with no documentation to show when or how it was acquired by the Museum (Chris Delaney *pers. comm.*) but it is undoubtedly the same carving as that illustrated in *Archaeologia Cambrensis*. At first sight (pl.4.1, 4.2), the figure appears tiny, highly polished and with a delicate, expressive face compared to the previously-studied carvings. On closer examination, various similarities to the known prehistoric group become more apparent. At the time of writing, it is not possible to say if the Strata Florida figure is a British antiquity or an ethnographic import, but it is sufficiently intriguing to warrant a brief description and discussion of the possibilities.

The carving stands 129mm high, 40mm maximum width at the hips, 32mm from front to back of head and 18mm from front to back of hips. It was made from a half or two thirds stem of roundwood with pith that can be traced from top back of head and down the centre left of the trunk to the left groin. The flat back of the figure may be a split radial surface but the front flatness of the trunk was achieved by carving. Growth rings can be seen on the head and left cheek in particular, various small knots indicate the position of side branches, and one branch looks to have been trimmed off the top of the head. Small facets and knife marks are evident under the chin and on

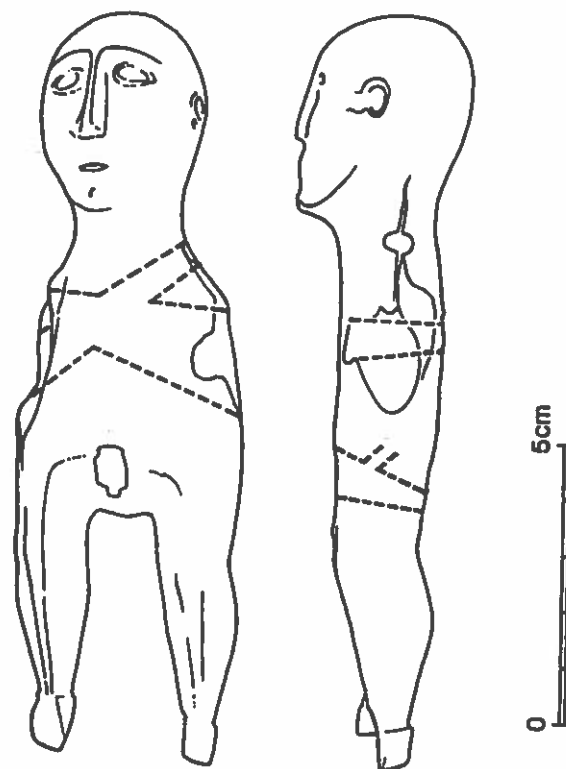


Fig. 4.2 Sketch of Strata Florida figure to illustrate arrangement of holes.

the shoulders and groin and around the openings of various holes made through the body. The head and legs have smooth, highly finished surfaces in contrast to the trunk.

The condition of the carving is generally good, although there is a bad split down the left centre back, near the pith, and there has been damage to both shoulders. Since 1903, when the right foot was already missing, the left foot has been lost as well and the surface exposed is rougher and less polished than the other surfaces exposed by damage (e.g. right foot, left shoulder hole), suggesting that these other areas of damage occurred before discovery, or that the wood was treated in some way before the left foot was lost.

The Strata Florida figure has a large head relative to its body, three-dimensional and relatively naturalistic with carefully-carved eyes, nose with nostrils, ears, mouth and chin. The armless trunk, by contrast, is a slab or rectangle of wood lacking human features and distinguished chiefly by the complicated arrangement of holes drilled through it. From part-way down each side of the trunk a hole passes diagonally through the body to exit at the side of the neck, and these two holes must cross each other. Another hole passes from front to back of the left shoulder, intersecting with the left diagonal hole, and rising from front to back. A fourth, pubic hole slants down through the body to exit at the back just above the base of the trunk, and a few millimetres in from the front of this pubic hole a further hole has been drilled through its roof up into the core of the trunk. Fig. 4.2 attempts to illustrate the disposition of these holes.

There is a small metal pin at the lower end of the right shoulder hole, which may or may not be contemporary with the carving, and what are probably small drilled holes on the front and back of the trunk near the left shoulder may have been made for similar pins, with the remnant of a pin possibly surviving on the front.

The legs, like the head, are three-dimensional and carefully executed, and a ridge around the ankle suggests the feet may have been carved as shod but they are now too damaged to be sure.

Although the naturalistic head of this figure distinguishes it from the Roos Carr group, it could be argued that it is no more different than Lagore with its featureless face. There is some similarity in a) the general idea of detail for head and legs but not for trunk, b) an armless trunk with holes, and c) a pubic hole but no obvious indication of the intended sex of the figure.

The presence of the metal pin, incidentally, does not rule out a prehistoric origin since the bulk of dated figures were carved after metal came into use in north-western Europe. The pin could be contemporary with the carving, or it could be modern, inserted after discovery.

Two steps could be taken to illuminate the origin of the carving, sampling it for identification of the wood species and sampling it for AMS dating. Neither is really justified until the possible ethnographic sources have been more fully investigated. So far, no ethnographer has made a positive identification of the style of carving. One intriguing possibility is that the figure is indeed North American in origin, as Read suggested, but of some antiquity and an early import to Wales during the active monastic life of Strata Florida abbey. As for prehistoric analogies, there are resemblances to the figures on the Gundestrup cauldron and to various of the small bronze figures of northern Europe.

Ickham

The fourth find (fig.4.3) comes from a site near Ickham in Kent. It was drawn to my attention by John Price of the Ancient Monuments Laboratory. Peter Clark of the Canterbury Archaeological Trust (who has recently taken on responsibility for the publication of the site) has informed me that the figure was found, unstratified, with material that was predominantly late Roman in date - but all of the material has still to be studied, and no conclusions should be drawn as yet regarding the date or the context of the wooden figure.

The figure was carved out of maple wood (ident. Jacqui Watson, Ancient Monuments Laboratory), apparently from roundwood. It survives at c. 325 mm high, about the size of Kingsteignton or the Roos Carr figures. It has stick-like arms in the Ballachulish style, although with more pronounced shoulders. The legs were apparently splayed, more akin to Broddenbjerg (Coles 1990, pl.31b) than to any of the British or Irish examples. The lower torso is too damaged to identify the intended sex of the figure unless, and again like Broddenbjerg, the 'leg' is a penis.

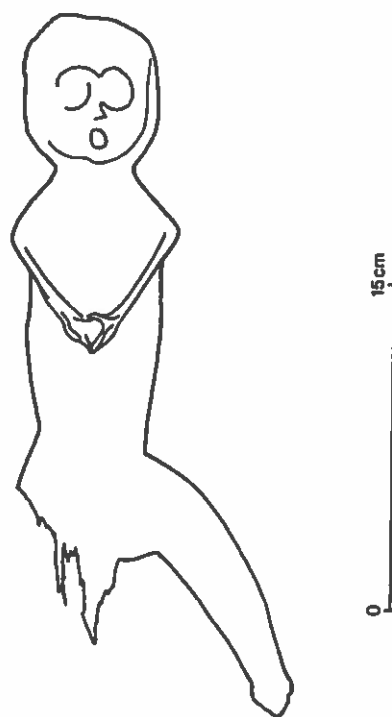


Fig. 4.3 Sketch of Ickham figure.

Roos Carr

The five Roos Carr figures and boat are currently (summer 1993) undergoing treatment at Doncaster Museum's Conservation Laboratory, where I have been able to examine them thanks to Helen Cox, Conservator, and Andrew Foxon, Curator of Archaeology at Hull City Museum where the figures usually reside. The main objective of the conservation exercise is to prevent any further deterioration of the carvings, but it seems likely that in the process something will be learnt of earlier attempts at conservation and manipulation of the figures for museum display, and new information may emerge about the original carving and putting-together of the pieces. The Figures (pl.4.5) are numbered here as in Coles 1990, from 1 on the left to 5 on the right.

At the time of writing, the work is at an early stage but already Dr Allan Hall (York Environmental Archaeology Unit) has identified the wood of Figure 1 as yew not pine, and as all the original wood has the same outward appearance it is likely that yew was used throughout. It was previously suggested (Coles 1990) that the Figures had been wrongly assembled, and this now seems all the more likely. Figures 1 and 2 share certain features which are not found on Figures 3, 4 and 5, such as nostrils (pl.4.3). Figures 3, 4 and 5 all have legs which are pointed at the end and which have a calf bulge below the knee whereas Figures 1 and 2 have straighter legs, probably originally cut square across the end for Figure 2 but recently cut across for Figure 1 so that one cannot tell what the original end was like. Comparing the legs of the Figures with the spacing of the boat holes, it seems likely that Figures 3, 4 and 5 were the original crew, along with another Figure now missing, and Figures 1 and 2 belonged to a separate ensemble. Figure 3 would fit at the head end

of the boat, facing in the opposite direction to the way Figure 1 was forced into it for display, and Figure 5 would fit at the tail end, with Figure 4 somewhere in between (the foot-holes are fairly heavily damaged and repaired in the middle of the boat, and it may not prove possible to determine whether Figure 4 belongs nearer the head or the tail).

Figure 5, the one which came much later to Hull Museum than the others, has the remains of a thin layer of what is probably adhesive in its empty left eye socket, and a small amount of similar looking material in its mouth (pl.4.4). Helen Cox's present work may determine whether this is ancient or modern. If the former, there is a possibility that Figure 5 at least had a mouth inlay (white ?) as well as stones for eyes.

Most of the Figures have liberal amounts of red sealing-wax-like material, especially around the arm-holes, and this is more likely to be recent than ancient, as is the adhesive used to mend arms and legs and boat-base. There are also rather more modern nails inserted into the Figures than was previously noted. Full details should be available once the present treatment is completed.

Discussion

It is promising that further finds of wooden figures have come to light in recent years. Even if it is too early, or information is too scanty, to be sure of their provenance and date, the range of prehistoric anthropomorphic wooden carvings seems likely to be extended, and I am all the more convinced that there are other figures, thought of as 'old dolls' or, more likely, as ethnographic imports, which closer examination would show to be probably indigenous and prehistoric. There will always be a problem with ancient wood used in recent times for carving, but it should usually be possible to distinguish carving carried out on green wood from that carried out on bog-oak or its equivalent.

As for the purpose or purposes of the carvings, I have previously made some guarded suggestions (Coles 1990, 332). A slightly different light is perhaps thrown by the following quotation:

Bor's sons [Odin, Vili and Ve ...] were walking by the sea-shore, and came upon two logs. They plucked them up and shaped them into human beings. The first gave them breath and life, the second understanding and motion, the third form, speech, hearing and sight ... From them descended the races of Men...

(Snorri's *Prase Edda*, trans. R.I. Page 1990).

There is a certain attraction in the possibility that Roos Carr and company show us how our prehistoric predecessors visualised their own forebears.

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