University of Massachusetts Amherst

From the Selected Works of Joel M. Halpern

Fall November, 1950

Ireland the Pre-Historic El Dorado

Joel Halpern

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J. M. HALPERN
90 CENTRAL BLVD.
MT. VERNON, N. Y.

IRELAND—THE PREHISTORIC EL DORADO

By JOEL MARTIN HALPERN

All too often in discussions of the development and utilization of the world's mineral resources there is a lack of perspective from the long range point of view. For frequently the findings of history and especially archaeology are not taken into account. The phenomena of the exploitation of unrenovable natural wealth for the benefit of man are at best evanescent events in that continuous stream of happenings called human history. The fact that the desire for gold and its recognition as a standard of high value are as old as recorded history is rightfully taken for granted by the overwhelming majority; but few appreciate the significance of gold in the pre-historical period. We are all familiar with at least the bold outlines of the story of the exploitation of gold in California, Ontario, the Yukon, parts of Latin America, and South Africa, to name only the most prominent. These were relatively brief periods of feverish and speculative development in which all concerned tried to get the maximum profit, in the shortest time with a minimum of effort and risk.

The development of gold production in Ireland was of an entirely different type, for it lasted for a comparatively long period and it occurred at a time when Western European civilization was much cruder and simpler than today. Archaeologists have divided human pre-history into several stages, namely the Paleolithic (Old Stone Age), characterized by the use of crude chipped stone implements; the Neolithic (New Stone Age), identified with the invention of agriculture, and the domestication of plants and animals; and lastly the Era of Metals, subdivided into Copper, Bronze, and Iron Ages. Commencing with the Age of Iron we have the beginning of recorded history.

The period during which the development of the gold resources in Ireland occurred and consequently the one with which we will be most concerned was the Bronze Age. It is very difficult to give precise dates to these periods but

as an approximation we can say that this period had its beginning in the British Isles about 1,700 B.C. Shortly after this the region around the Wicklow Mountains in southern Ireland, near what is now Dublin, began to come into prominence. In the sands and gravel of the streams that drain these mountains the gold was obtained which when turned into useful and decorative articles by Irish smiths was exported over much of northern and western Europe. The assertion sometimes made that Ireland was the prehistoric El Dorado of the west is based largely on archaeological evidence so it is best to examine first this evidence in the form of artifacts and to see to what extent it substantiates the claim.

One of the most important factors in this regard is the concentration of tombs in the vicinity of Wicklow. This distribution, according to the famous British archaeologist, V. Gordon Childe, is explicable only on the basis that the concentration of population in this area must have been due to the presence of gold.

Scattered throughout Denmark, Sweden, Central Germany, Bavaria, Brittany, and Scotland have been found various gold ornaments and gold decorated implements that have been directly traced to Irish origin. The gold definitely came from Ireland, there is no doubt of that;

IRISH GOLD LUNULA
(C. F. C. Hawkes—Prehistoric Foundations of Europe to the Mycenaean Age.)

the smiths and miners who produced and exported these gold objects, however, most likely originally came to Ireland from the Iberian peninsula. Many of these ornaments show Iberian influence in their design and workmanship. A good example of this was the lunula, a crescent-shaped collar of sheet gold whose artistic inspiration is definitely traceable to continental origin.

The earliest gold objects were made by beating out ingots of gold into thin sheets, cutting these up and decorating them by twisting or incising the surface. In the beginning these gold jewels were rather large and fairly solid; as time went on and the gold began to give out the jeweler's contained less gold and became more hollow. To supply the demand for Irish gold regular trade routes were established, with amber, among other things, being obtained from the region around the Baltic Sea, while tin came from Cornwall. This development of creative work in gold was paralleled, contemporaneously only in Hungary and Siberia.

These Irish goldsmiths turned out a large variety of work. They produced

boxes overlaid with gold, conchal buttons, sceptre stones, daggers, all ornamented with gold, hilts were decorated with tiny gold nails in geometric patterns. Halberds and axes were also decorated with gold. As for jewelry, they produced earrings and the lunulae already mentioned. These lunulae have been found in north-west France, Wales, Belgium, Hanover in Germany, and Denmark besides Scotland and Cornwall in the British Isles.

During the late Bronze Age the Irish goldsmiths at last learned to use solder, which had been employed by Oriental jewelers since as early as the third millennium B.C. They also learned to use alloys of gold and silver, as well as of gold and copper.

In the 18th and 19th centuries there was some gold mining in this area. According to J. M. Maclaren even as early as 1765, Gerald Boate, in his "Natural History of Ireland" mentions the occurrence of alluvial gold in some areas. In 1795 the discovery of gold attracted wide attention and there was a rush of peasants to the area. The government soon took over but later abandoned the project,

Gold Cup, Rillaton, Cornwall

(British Museum)

which was later taken up by several commercial companies. The total output since 1795 has been about 8,000 oz. but the parent veins have never been located. The largest nugget, found in 1795, weighed 22 oz.

The streams in which the gold is found run through an area of lower Silurian grey, green and dark slates and sandy shales. There is a black sand associated with the gold and it is composed mainly of magnetite, ilmenite, hematite, iron pyrites, cassiterite, galena, wolfram, molybdenite, copper pyrites and oxides of manganese. The gold of these stream beds is generally in fine grains, assaying about 90% gold with 5-8% of silver with small amounts of iron and copper with silica sometimes present.

It is interesting to see how closely interrelated all the sciences are with discoveries in such widely separated fields as archaeology and mineralogy often having a direct effect on each other. Often by connecting and interrelating the discoveries and researches in two fields of learning results can be obtained which are beneficial to both branches of knowledge concerned.

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Wants Micro-Mount Articles!

Editor R & M:

The "Micro-Mounter" column has forced me to start a micro-mount collection. How about more articles in the micro-mount line?

Frank W. Smythe, M. D.
Memphis, Tenn.

September 3, 1950

Glad to Hear It!

Editor R & M:

Am enclosing \$6.00 for a two year renewal of subscription. I do not want to miss a single issue!

Ada E. Smith
Monterey, Calif.

October 12, 1950

Ward's Featured in Collier's

In the September 2, 1950, issue of COLLIERS appears a most interesting story about Ward's Natural Science Est., Inc., 3000 Ridge Road E., Rochester 9, N. Y.

The story was written by James Poling and is titled, "What do you collect—Butterflies or Hippo Skulls?" It deals with Ward's various departments of natural history but the feature of special interest to our readers is the section devoted to mineralogy. A very fine picture, in color, of our friend, David Jensen, appears on page 29 and captioned, "David Jensen, chief mineralogist, at a rock-covered desk. When a laboratory ordered a specimen of a rare mineral he located it after a search through three continents."

Five pictures, 3 in color, illustrate this most interesting article which appears on pages 28, 29 and 55. A good picture of Dr. Dean L. Gamble, president of Ward's Natural Science Est., shown inspecting a mastodon leg bone in the hayloft of the company barn, appears on page 28.

All friends of Ward's should try to obtain a copy of this issue for their files. If your newsstand is out of them, you might get a copy from the publishers, Crowell-Collier Publishing Co., Springfield, Ohio. (Current copies are 15c each but back copies might be more).

Publicity Appreciated

Editor R & M:

May I take this opportunity to thank you for the grand publicity you so generously gave the Los Angeles Lapidary Society this past year. We realize that compiling a journal of such fine quality as the ROCKS AND MINERALS is a big job and are especially grateful for your splendid service.

For the September, 1950, the following newly elected officers were installed: Mr. Norman Cupp, President; Mr. Ham Hamilton, 1st Vice President; Mr. Ben Beery, Second Vice President. Miss Marguerite Wilson, Secretary and Mrs. Claire Schroeder, Treasurer. As in the past the retiring president becomes corresponding secretary in charge of publicity. It is my earnest desire to comply with the requirements of your publication in the hope that we may send you material sufficiently interesting to be worthy of space in ROCKS AND MINERALS.

I should be pleased to learn from you the set-up most likely to be published by your staff, your deadline and any suggestions that you might give me that would assist in accomplishing this purpose.

I am looking forward to this assignment with anticipation and any comments or criticisms you make will be heartily appreciated.

Vic Gunderson,
Corresponding Secretary-Publicity Chm.
Los Angeles Lapidary Society
Los Angeles, Calif.

September 14, 1950