



**The Coolnashanton  
(‘River Erne’) Trumpet**  
By Richard Warner



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### **Summary.**

Wooden and bronze trumpet (or horn), with decoration.

Date: Early Medieval, probably 8th- or 9th- century AD.

Present location: National Museums of Northern Ireland, accession number BELUM:A9637.

Find-place: originally the River Erne between Coolnashanton townland and Cleenish (island); dredged from the river in 1956.

Main reference: Waterman 1969.

Best published illustration: Waterman 1969 fig. 1.

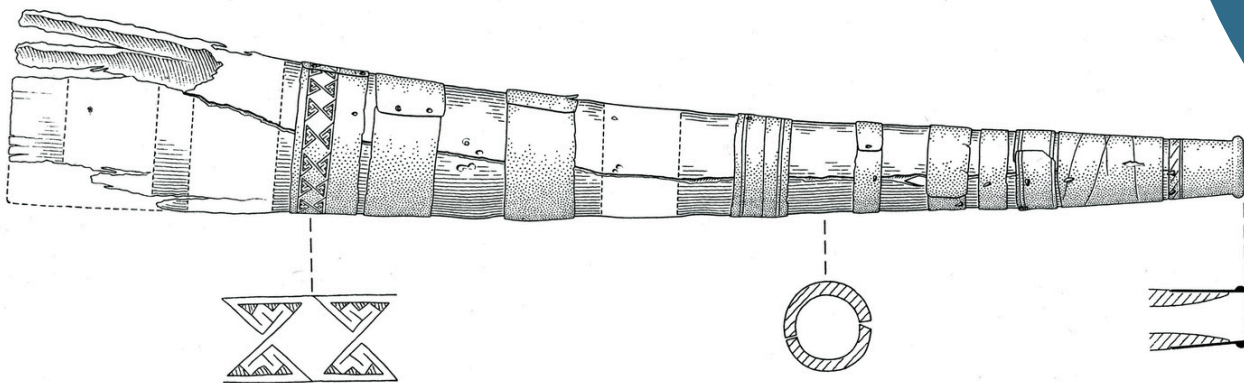
Also known as: the 'River Erne horn'.

Dimensions: length 58 cm; diameter expands from 2.5 cm at mouthpiece to 8 cm. at open end.

## Description (from Waterman 1969)

‘The horn consists of a wooden tube, shaped from a solid piece of yew, to which a mouth piece and mounts of bronze are attached by rivets.... The bronze mouthpiece has a moulded orifice and is accommodated in a rebate so that it lies flush with the surface of the wood tube.... Originally twelve bronze mounts were set out along the length of the tube, of which three are missing.... The surviving mounts are made from lengths of thin bronze sheeting, 1.2-5.0 cm. in width, the ends of which are overlapped. Originally these lapped ends had been secured presumably by soldering.... subsequently, however, it became necessary to fasten the mounts to the wood by means of rivets [which] are fashioned from folded lengths of sheet bronze, bent to the form of an angular tube about .05 cm. in diameter, one end of which is twisted together into a point; the protruding heads of the rivets have been hammered over in a very rough-and ready manner.

Of the surviving mounts, all save one are in position as found. The eighth mount from the mouthpiece had become loose, being no longer secured by rivets which had either broken off or fallen out; but it is shown in the illustration in the approximate position it originally occupied, now marked by its impression on the surface of the wood.... Four of the mounts have a simple ornament of engraved lines and the mouthpiece, at the end opposite the orifice, has a border of oblique incisions. The mount nearest the wider end of the wooden tube is distinguished by a band of fret-pattern.’



**Drawing of the Coolnashanton trumpet (from Waterman 1969; copyright Ulster Archaeological Society; Drawing by D.M. Waterman).**

## Find circumstances

This bronze-bound wooden trumpet was found in dumped material that had been dredged from a channel of the River Erne between Coolnashanton townland and Cleenish in 1956. Because the material was dumped on the shore in Coolnashanton, the usual practice has been followed here in naming it after that place. Although it was clearly lying in the bed of the Erne when found, its hitherto popular name of the ‘River Erne horn’ is far too uninformative to be continued. The trumpet was conserved in the British Museum laboratory and in the joint laboratory of the Ulster Museum, Queen’s University and the Archaeological Survey.

## Discussion

Although most writers have referred to this object as a 'horn', the researcher who has most thoroughly studied these objects has suggested that its relative straightness makes the term 'trumpet' preferable (Downey 1997, 304). This term that is, therefore, used in this report, although 'horn' remains acceptable for non-technical use.

This particular instrument was made by splitting a piece of pre-shaped yew lengthwise, hollowing each out and putting them back together again – holding them tightly with the bronze bands (Waterman 1969; Purser 2002).

Two other Irish bronze-bound wooden trumpets are known, neither as fine as that from Coolnashanton. The nearly 2-metre long trumpet from Bekan, Co. Mayo (Waterman 1969) was bound with a long spiral strip of bronze and has been dated by radiocarbon measurement to the Early Medieval period, as has a rather less ornate trumpet from the River Bann.

The most interesting early illustration of trumpets being played is in the splendid, coloured frontispiece of a Psalter produced in Canterbury in the 8th, or possibly 9th, century AD (Nordenfalk 1977, pl. 32). It shows king David, playing a harp, and accompanied by (among others) four wind-musicians. Two are playing curved horns, and two long, almost straight trumpets. The latter instruments are strikingly similar, indeed one would have to say identical, to the Coolnashanton trumpet. They are clearly made of wood bound with wide bronze bands, and have bronze mouthpieces. To add to the similarity a line of fret-work bordering the illustration is precisely the same as the fret pattern on one of the Coolnashanton trumpet binding strips.

The Canterbury Psalter was produced in a Saxon milieu, but does not imply a single cultural background (Saxon) for the elements of the illustration. The art on such manuscripts is often called 'insular' or 'Hiberno-Saxon', as the influences that were at play are a mixture of Irish and English.



The trumpets, therefore, are as likely to represent Irish as Saxon instruments and likenesses can be found on Irish high-crosses. What this illustration tells us, better than we could have hoped for, is that such instruments played a part in the important activities, whether entertainment or ritual, of the Irish and Saxon upper classes (kings, bishops and the like) in the Early Medieval period.

Downey (1997) has given us in great detail the Old-Irish textual references to what he calls 'lip-blown aerophones' (trumpets and horns) that illustrate their enormous significance, and versatility, in entertainment, ritual, warfare, travelling, assembly and so on in Early Medieval Ireland. However, we have some difficulty in providing a specific reason for the use, and loss, of the Coolnashaton trumpet. It was clearly a valuable possession and it must be assumed that its loss in the river Erne was an unwonted, and much regretted, accident. Opposite the point where it was found is Cleenish (island), on which was a monastery traditionally founded by St Sinell in the 6th or 7th century. It is, however, not attested in the contemporary annals until 1100 when its foundation was attested ('In this year the church of saint Sinell of Cláininis was founded'). A couple of 12th-century carved stone crosses on Cleenish support this late date (Hamlin 2008, 331-2). Bourke has suggested (2014) that it might have been used to call the boatman who would have ferried visitors to Cleenish across the River Erne, but I am inclined to think that an accident befell an unfortunate musician on his way to the monastery to perform for the abbot.

This essay was originally written as part of the Fermanagh: A Story in 100 Objects project, funded by The National Heritage Lottery Fund and Esmée Fairbairn

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