

Green Woodworking

Although it is hard to prove, it is likely that through prehistory and well into the Medieval period most woodworking was done with green wood. Green wood is much softer and easier to work than dried or 'seasoned' timber that people generally use today. This was particularly important when most work was done using hand tools and relied on muscle power rather than motors. Using the grown shape of the wood was also important for the same reason.

When working green wood the tree is left growing until you need to create your object, so the wood does not dry out. This means managing your own or local trees was important. Techniques such as coppicing were used to produce good straight branches in trees like willow and hazel. Selective pruning, cutting and cleaning would also have been used to grow shapes and sizes of wood required. For example, the curve of a boat's keel can be made from a single piece if you can produce a branch that has grown to the correct angle.

Planning ahead would have been important, not just a season or two but even over hundreds of years for large building timbers. Managed woodland was thus an important resource which could represent generations of careful work.

Although it may take years to develop very fine green woodworking skills, you can fashion usable objects with very little practice, and thus it seems likely that most basic wooden objects were made by the people who used them rather than by a particular craftsman. More complex objects like boats or buildings do require skill and experience, so may have been the work of specialists.

Wood is an organic material, and therefore rots when exposed to water and air. Very few wooden objects survive in Scotland from prehistory or even the Medieval period. The few objects we do have are usually from very wet places (like the bottom of a loch or a peat bog) where the lack of oxygen prevented the wood from decaying.



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This bowl was found in a peat bog in Bracadale Skye, and clearly shows the tool marks. It was made in the Middle Iron Age, between 52 and 63 AD, and is now in Skye and Lochalsh archive.



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This figure made of wood was found in a marsh at Ballachulish may represent a goddess. It dates to the Early Iron Age



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When they do survive from the past it is often possible to work out how objects were made by looking at tool marks on wooden artefacts. In exceptional cases it is possible to see the types of tools used, and even sometimes the order the craftsmen used them.

Box 2 object sheets: Wooden Cup, Wooden Spoon

Box 3 object sheet: Hurdle

Additional Image: Ballachulish Figure

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