**Ballachulish Moss Figure**

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The Ballachulish Figure is an almost life-size humanoid wooden figure, found in 1880 during peat cutting in advance of building work at Ballachulish Moss, Lochaber. It was discovered at the base of a peat bog, lying face down on the gravel of an old raised beach 120m from the shore of Loch Leven. Carved of a single block of alder, at the time of its discovery it stood to almost five feet tall. It was interpreted as female. She had a large, heavy and oval-shaped head with inset quartz eyes, large ears, a distinct nose and mouth and a round chin, but no breasts. Outlined on her body were arms starting halfway round her back, hands and fingers. Her trunk was straight and continued into separated legs which joined into a pedestal base. This had a rectangular hollow carved into the front of it. An early photograph suggests that she was holding objects. Remains of hurdles under and above the figure, perhaps from a container, or perhaps part of a shrine.

The figure was initially thought to be of early Scandinavian origin, but has since been radiocarbon dated to 728-524 cal BC, making the figure of Early Iron Age date. The figure’s purpose is unknown, and it has been suggested that she could have been a fertility goddess or linked to the crossing of dangerous straits between Loch Leven and the sea, which Ballachulish overlooks. Due to the lack weathering of the figure, it was suggested by Coles (1990) that the figure may have been deliberately disposed of in a way reminiscent of human bog-burials rather than simply toppling over and being subsequently buried by peat.

Whatever the Ballachulish figure’s mysterious purpose, she is unique to Scotland, and remains one of few anthropomorphic figures and possible self-representations of prehistoric people in Scotland. There are only a handful of wooden figures found in Britain and Ireland, of which six were identified and discussed by Coles in 1990, including the Ballachulish figure. These were all radiocarbon dated to between the Bronze Age and Iron Age. Little could be learnt from such a small number of figures about their function within societies who made them, but based on the dating, Coles surmised that these insular examples were loosely related to each other and set apart in several respects from Continental examples of wooden figures.

The Ballachulish moss was the subject of an environmental investigation and limited trial trenching in difficult conditions (Clarke 1998). These revealed multi-period use of the moss, including some worked timber from the Bronze Age. There is scope for more detailed investigation.

The Ballachulish figure is today on display at the NMS. She has shrunk, twisted and distorted significantly since her discovery due to early conservations problems and subsequent transport to the museum in 1880. She can be seen in her original state however in an early photo, taken shortly after her discovery ( available on the NMS website; see link below). Even in her altered state, however, the Ballachulish Figure is an impressive sculpture of considerable national importance.

**Further information**

<https://www.nms.ac.uk/ballachulishfigure>

<https://her.highland.gov.uk/Monument/MHG4306>

[Christison, R. 1880-1881 'On ancient wooden image, found in November last at Ballachulish Peat- Moss', *Proc Soc Antiq Scot* 15, 158-178.](https://her.highland.gov.uk/Source/SHG1315)

Clarke, Ciara 1998 ‘Investigations at North Ballachulish Moss. Final Report. Report no. 424’ (Centre for Field Archaeology report, attached to MHG18008).

[Coles, B 1990 'Anthropomorphic wooden figurines from Britain and Ireland', *Proc Prehist Soc* 56, 315-333.](https://her.highland.gov.uk/Source/SHG185)

IMAGE: request old photo