

Tiree has rock art!

I wonder what images “Tiree Rock Art” conjures in your mind? Buffalos and antelopes running across deep cave surfaces, like in France? Painted pictures on rocks? Well, most Scottish rock art isn’t quite like that. It’s usually cup-like depressions in the rock, sometimes associated with rings or grooves. These are “pecked” out using another stone as hammer, to loosen the particles of rock and create a cup. Although it’s hard to be sure, the experts date this rock “art” to the late Neolithic or early Bronze Age, about 4500 years ago. So, they’re really old, probably the oldest known archaeological features on the island.



Some typical cups on a rock panel. This is what Tiree rock art looks like!

The most impressive rock art on Tiree is the ringing stone on Balephetrish beach. The deeply indented cups all over the upper surfaces on this granite glacial erratic have produced a stone that is unique in Scotland.

If only we knew what the cups were for! There are lots of theories with no real way of knowing which theory is right. Some suggest they were astronomical or astrological guides. Others, that they were maps. Maybe they were used in ceremonies. Or, maybe just doodling. We just don’t know.

Although the ringing stone is the most famous rock art on Tiree, six other cup-marked stones have been identified in the past. These are at Dun Chaolais, Cnoc Fhòirnigail and Heylipol. Other cupped stones have been recorded in the past, but poorly described, so now no longer locatable.

In 2017, a group of amateur archaeologists from the North of Scotland Archaeological Society came to visit Tiree. One of the group, John, is an expert on Scottish rock art. John and his wife met by chance a relative of theirs who happened to be holidaying on the island at the time. She said, *come and have tea in my holiday cottage*. After tea, John popped over the fence at the back of the cottage to look at an interesting rock outcrop. It turned out to have 13 cups on it. This was a completely new and undiscovered piece of rock art on Tiree. So, the whole NOSAS Tiree Rock Art Project was born. What serendipity!

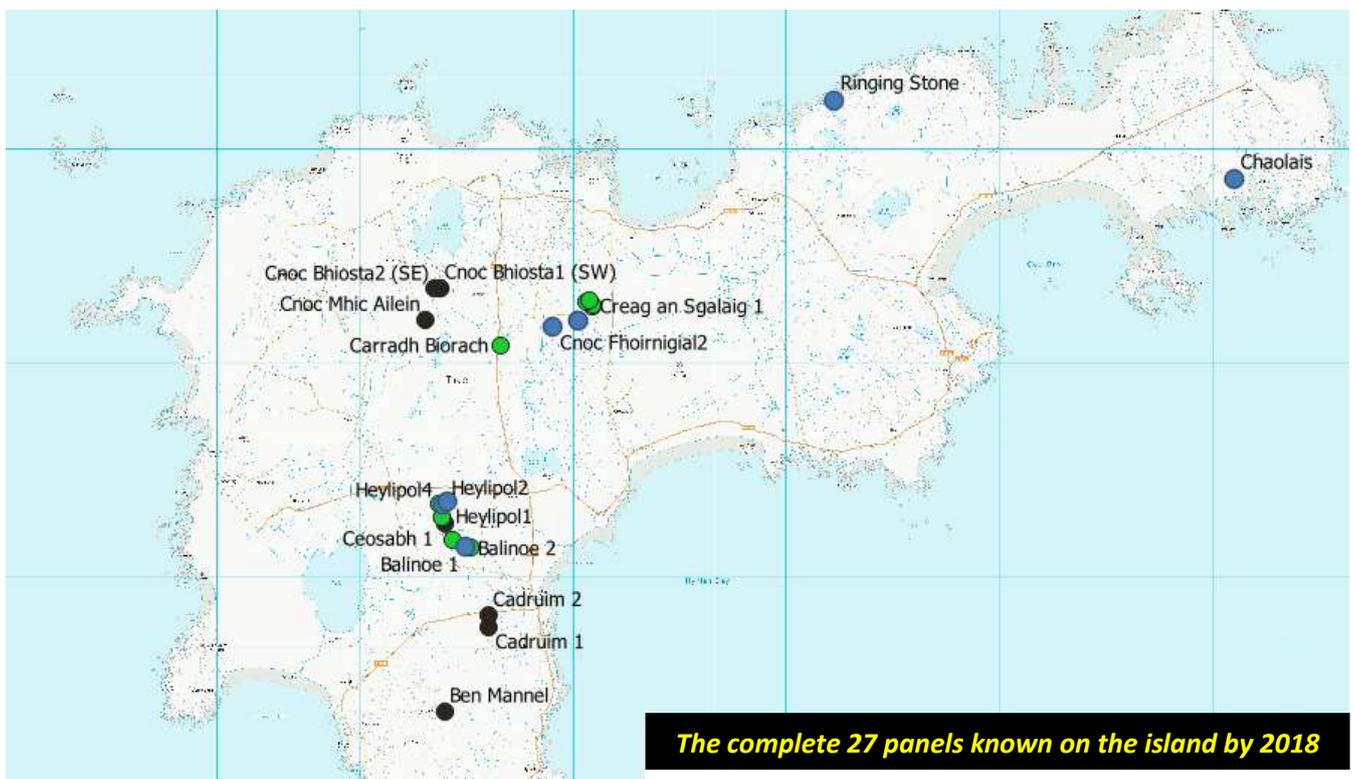


The cups stand out more when they are marked by yellow beads!



Over the course of the following week, the group systematically searched the central part of the island and found nine more rocks with cup marks on them. They tended to be on the tops of the cnocs, or rocky promontories, which the island has a lot of. By investigating the cnocs, the group found this simplified the discovery of new sites.

Excited by this discovery of new sites, NOSAS decided to come back again the following year, 2018, this time assisted by resident Tiree amateur archaeologist Dr John Holliday. Again, more rock art was discovered. It seemed wherever we looked there was rock art. At the end of the survey in 2018, the NOSAS team had identified a total of 20 new panels of rock art. All the “art” was simple cups with none of the rings, grooves or lines seen in other parts of Scotland, eg Dumfries or Kilmartin Glen. Interestingly, the rock art panels are mainly found in a line of outcrops stretching north-south on the western part of the island, as shown on the map. We don’t know why...



All the Tiree rock art has been recorded according to the guidelines of the Scottish Rock Art Project (ScRAP, www.rockart.scot) which is both researching Scotland's rock art and also ensuring that it is surveyed and recorded according to modern guidelines. Those guidelines include not only taking a series of photos of each panel but also putting some of those photographs through a 3-D computer technique called photogrammetry. This produces a moveable 3-D image of each panel. For example, the images below try to show the same piece of rock, which has four cups on it, put through the photogrammetry process.



A panel with four cups: straight photograph



The same area, on a straight 3-D model

These four cups are part of the rock art on Cnoc Fhoirnigial 1a, towards the north of the island. The 3-d image can be seen at: <https://tinyurl.com/y8fdha4o>.

The ScRAP research will attempt to answer some of those tricky questions about rock art, like:

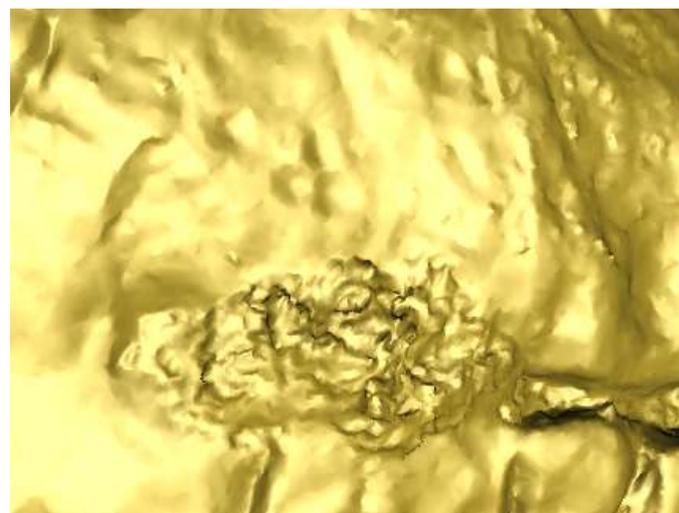
- Does the rock art tend to face one direction more than another?
- Is there a pattern or potential meaning in the arrangement of the cups?
- Is one geological rock used more than another?
- And, a lot more unanswered questions about this enigmatic form of pre-historic art.

Where can I see some rock art?

Perhaps the best place to start is the ringing stone on the north coast (NM 02680 48690) which can be approached by walking in from either Balephetrish in the west, or Vaul in the east. It's not like any of the other rock art on Tiree, and some doubt how old it is, but it is very impressive!

A more typical example of Tiree rock art is in the north of the island at Cnoc Bhiosta. There are two panels behind a cottage, NH 97130 46048 and NH 97065 46062. These rocky outcrops have numerous simple cups on their upper surfaces.

And, if those panels whet your appetite, there is a lot more information about rock art generally, and Tiree rock art in particular, on the ScRAP website: www.rockart.scot.



The 3-D model adjusted to show more detail. The cups can now be seen more easily, above the grass