

THE HISTORY OF TIREE IN 100 OBJECTS - no. 19

THE TIREE CRAGGAN

This earthenware pot would have been a common sight in Tiree homes 150 years ago. Or 1,500 years come to that. They were used for cooking food, storing water or milk, and making butter or beer. In fact, before commercial tin ware, iron pans and crockery became available in the shops of the island towards the end of the nineteenth century they were used for everything around the house and farm. These ancient looking pots seem to have survived on Tiree later than anywhere else because of a health belief particular to this island.

They are often called 'craggans', a word derived from the Gaelic *crogan* 'little earthenware vessel', related to the English word 'crock'. They were made from local clay (found more commonly on Tiree than you might think). They were made in the same way prehistoric pots were made. The potter's wheel had been introduced to the mainland as early as the Iron Age, but on the Scottish islands women continued to make undecorated pots the old way without a wheel. They used slabs of clay, which were pressed together after carefully removing any stones and gravel. The pot was then left to dry for between one to three days depending on size and weather, then filled with burning peats and set in a hot domestic fire. Having been fired milk was poured over them to provide a primitive glaze. Craggans could range from small cups a few inches high to those recorded by a 1695 visitor, Martin Martin, who wrote that, 'brewers [on Tiree] preserve their ale in large earthen vessels and say they are better for this purpose than those of wood; some of them contain twelve English gallons.'

Craggans were still being made in Barvas, Lewis into the 1880s. But on Tiree they were manufactured as late as the 1920s by Flora MacNeill, Balevullin, who died in 1922. This long-lasting tradition was probably because small craggans were used here as a cure for TB. Milk straight from a cow was put in the pot and then heated to become *bainne gun ghaoth* 'milk without wind', which was drunk by the invalid. There are some pictures of Flora's son Hugh making a small craggan on An Iodhlann's website. This crude pottery is much rougher than that of the older Bronze Age. It means that if you pick up a piece of broken pottery on the island there is no way of telling whether it was produced in 100 BC or 1850!

[Much of the information here comes from an important paper written in 1947 by George Holleyman. Holleyman was stationed on Tiree for twenty months during the

Second World War and collected traditional objects and photographed many of the older generation].

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