

THE HISTORY OF TIREE IN 100 OBJECTS - no. 2

SADDLE QUERN

This large stone was found in a garden in Moss and is now on display in An Iodhlann. It's a saddle quern, used for grinding grain, and these are found all over the world. Indeed, I found one in the Australian Western Desert that had been used in the last century by the Pintupi people I was working for. Saddle querns were first used on Tiree in the Neolithic period, about 6,000 years ago, when the early farmers began to grow barley in small fields. I have seen them in Baugh, Kirkapol and Vaul, and one was dug up in my back garden in Balephuil. If you find one, you can be fairly sure there was a Neolithic or Bronze Age farm right there.

A saddle quern is in two parts: the bedstone, which was a piece of local rock, too heavy to move very far, and a rubber or handstone, which was pushed up and down the groove. Experiments have shown that a saddle quern can produce fine flour from grain, the main disadvantage being that it can hold only a small amount of meal at a time, making using one a slow business. Going from evidence from different cultures around the world, grinding was mainly women's work. The improved round rotary quern was introduced from Europe in the Early Iron Age, around 500 BC. Indeed, an early example was found by Ewen MacKie in *Dùn Mòr Bhalla* at Vaul. Rotary querns are five times as quick, and the best stones, being lighter, were often imported from Norway. Many houses on Tiree have rotary quern stones lying whitewashed at their front doors.

Interestingly, this one has been broken at the side. It's made of gneiss, which is a very strong rock. It is hard to imagine it breaking naturally, and it may have been broken deliberately. This would have been an effective way of attacking your enemy, because it would have taken years of use to get a replacement to the most effective shape.

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