THE HISTORY OF TIREE IN 100 OBJECTS: no. 879

CNOTAG or KNOCKING STONE

This lovely knocking stone has been lent to An Iodhlann by Iain and Sheila MacKinnon, Barrapol. Unusually, it has been fashioned from soft red sandstone, rather than the hard grey Lewisian gneiss we are so used to on Tiree. It is likely, therefore, to have been brought to the island by humans, although pieces of sandstone from the mainland were found in Balevullin by a geologist in 1994, deposited by the last glaciers to cover Tiree 17,000 years ago.

Cnotagan or knocking stones were once found in virtually every house in the Highlands, an essential part of subsistence agriculture. Usually lasting for generations, they often became family heirlooms, regarded as lucky charms. There is a beautiful one outside a house in Caolas, and many survive as drinking vessels for poultry. The original cereal, grown on Tiree for six thousand years, was an old form of barley known as bere. This is still grown in Orkney. It has a particularly tough outer husk surrounding a layer of bran, which in turn envelops the grain itself. The oat grain, introduced around the time of the Vikings, is similar although its husk is thinner. Grain was put into the *cnotag* and pounded or hummeled with a pole to break down the husk and make the grain more digestible for humans and livestock.

The commonest way to turn a sheaf of barley into food on Tiree was something called 'graddan'. This involved, rather alarmingly, setting fire to the 'beard' of the barley and waiting until the husk had burnt off before smothering the flames and grinding the toasted grain in a stone quern, as witnessed on Tiree by Martin Martin in 1695: 'The ancient way of dressing corn, which is yet used in several isles is called *graddan*, from the Irish word *grad* which means 'quick'. A woman, sitting down, takes a handful of corn, holding it by the stalks in her left hand, and then sets fire to the ears; she has a stick in her right hand…beating off the grain at the very instant when the husk is quite burnt ... The corn may be so dressed, winnowed, ground and baked within an hour after reaping from the ground.' This wasted a lot of the straw, and threshing by hand was encouraged once most households on the island had access to a dry barn.

As well as being ground to make meal for baking, barley was often added to what we would call today stews. This account comes from Shetland: 'Thickening for broth or soup was made by drying a few handfuls of well-dressed bere and putting them into the knocking stone with a little warm water to be dehusked with a mallet. The husks were floated off by steeping in water, and the grain left round and whole, an earlier

equivalent of milled pearl barley. A great quantity of husks was left in the bere, and when the broth was boiled these rose to the top. A band of straw was placed round the mouth of the pot, in which the husks partly stuck. At the proper moment, it was whisked across the mouth of the pot, and so skimmed off most of the husks. This 'knockit-corn' could also be mixed with boiled kale or cabbage to make a substantial meal.' Much beer was brewed on Tiree in the days before tea, and the malting process started with putting the barley through the knocking stone. Cattle were also sometimes fed barley grain, digesting it better after it has been hummeled in a *cnotag.*

The word *cnotag* is also used on Tiree and Barra for bait holes, *tuill-sòill*. These are often found at *carraigean*, the rock fishing points around the island. Shellfish, usually limpets or mussels, were pounded on the rocks and then spat out in a fine mist over the surface of the water to attract small fish. Over the years, small hollows developed. Interestingly, the Gaelic word for mashed bait, *sòll* (*soe* in Shetland), comes from the Norse word *sáð* 'to sow or spread seed'.

As you wander the shoreline and fields of Tiree, keep an eye out for these characteristic hollows in the rock. A lot of work went into making them!

Dr John Holliday