

THE HISTORY OF TIREE IN 100 OBJECTS: no. 89

DEER BONE AWL

This tool – the length of a ballpoint pen and the thickness of your thumb – was found in Balephuill by Morton Boyd in 1995. Probably the best-qualified person in Scotland to do so, he identified the material it was made from as bone from a red deer. The tool is an awl, a bone spike that was used to pierce hide, weave baskets and create patterns on clay pots before they were fired. This particular one used the joint at one end to make it more comfortable to grip tightly. It is likely to be prehistoric, as iron replaced most bone tools around two thousand years ago.

Dr John Morton Boyd, CBE, was a world-famous zoologist who became the Director of the Nature Conservancy Council. Originally from Ayrshire, he studied in Glasgow, where his first research subject was the snail life of the Tiree sand dunes. He maintained this connection with the island for the rest of his life, and his family continues to do so. He was fascinated by islands, in particular the Hebrides. For one project he persuaded the RAF to photograph the gannetry on the cliffs of St Kilda, and then personally counted 44,500 pairs from the resulting images. And walking over the slopes of Ben Hynish, he was the first to realise the significance of the abandoned farm below the Golf Ball. He wrote: 'Beinn Hynish possesses three duns, several field systems of different occupations placed one upon another, stone alignments and green knolls suggesting ancient domestic or ceremonial sites, turf dykes, ruined blackhouse-type dwellings and ditches from the time when the hill was cleared of cottars to create a large sheep farm at Hynish.' It is safe to say he had a keen pair of eyes!

Morton Boyd had been fossicking along the sides of the stream draining *Loch Phuill*. On its south bank below the pump house, fifty metres below the bridge, is a midden (a rubbish dump) containing shells, bones charcoal and pottery. Today's 'stream' *Abhainn Bhì* is in fact largely man-made. In 1768 the surveyor James Turnbull described *Loch Phuill* as 'the greatest loch in the island'. On its north bank at that time was another smaller loch known as *Loch Barapoll*. Turnbull went on: 'If this was drained, which may be easily done, [it] would drain the marshy ground adjoining it and be a great advantage to [the neighbouring] meadow.' By the time the Ordnance Survey came to Tiree in 1878, *Abhainn Bhì* had been deepened and straightened, probably destroying any house site associated with this midden in the process.

Surprisingly, deer bones were actually quite common on Tiree. Euan MacKie discovered over fifty of them during his 1963 excavation of the Iron Age broch at Vaul. This poses the question: how did deer bone get to Tiree in prehistoric times?

Rather than deer carcasses being brought here from Mull, it looks increasingly as though there was a small herd of deer on Tiree. Deer are strong swimmers, and often cross between neighbouring islands. They have not been known to swim more than seven kilometres, however, although it is possible that wind and tide could sweep an animal further than it intended. The shortest distance between Coll and Mull is ten kilometres.

But they did not need to swim. New research has shown that deer were introduced to the Outer Hebrides by man during the Neolithic period: that is 5,000 years ago. And, strange to relate, DNA analysis shows that these Neolithic deer came not from Scotland but from mainland Europe. It is plausible that deer were introduced to Tiree at that time, and it is not impossible that a herd of deer survived on the island for the whole of prehistory – some three thousand years. We should not be surprised by this. Humans have been moving animals around the globe for at least 20,000 years. Tiree's first Neolithic farmers brought their own cattle and sheep with them. And the first Maori settlers arrived in New Zealand around 1280 after an astonishing open sea voyage of some 3,000 kilometres from the Cook Islands with two important animals: their dogs and the Pacific rat, a popular food.

Deer are common on the west coast of Scotland. There are currently over a thousand red deer on the Uists, co-existing, not always happily it has to be said, with the crofters there. Taking into account Tiree's smaller size, an equivalent deer herd on Tiree would number around 300. By comparison, the number of red deer on Rum today is currently 250, while Ulva, an island off Mull a quarter of the size of Tiree, currently has around 400. Any Tiree herd would have been wild, but would have been carefully managed by selective culling and the importation in new bloodlines from other islands. Of course, the landscape at that time was quite different to island we know today. The centre of the island was largely covered in low trees and there was very little peat, meaning that much of inland Tiree was ideal habitat for deer.

This bone tool, picked out of a steam bank and identified by a sharp-eyed zoologist, has opened our eyes to a new vision of the island in the prehistoric period: not so much *Tìr an Eòrna* 'land of barley' as much as *Tìr nam Fiadh* 'the land of deer'.

Dr John Holliday