

“Songs amongst the Stones”



An exhibition of the archaeology of Tiree

Tiree and Coll Gaelic Partnership, Summer 2000

THE STONE AGE

The First Tirisdich

The first people to come to Tiree arrived soon after the last Ice Age ended nine thousand years ago (7,000 BC) during the period known as the Mesolithic or Middle Stone Age. These first settlers were not farmers but hunter-gatherers with stone tools, living off the land.

The island they came to was very different to the one we know today. The melting ice had built up to a thickness of half a mile over Scotland and pushed sea levels 30 foot higher than they are at present, cutting the island in two. This has left a number of raised beaches, a good example of which can be seen above the loch at Kilmoluaig.



1. Sea levels during the Stone Age.

The first settlers also found an island covered with a scrubby birch and hazel woodland, the remains of which can occasionally still be found. On a visit in 1826, the Rev. Colin Smith of Inverary found the preserved roots of hazel trees on the beach at *Cladach a' Chrògain*, Balephetrish and David MacClouman of *Bail' Ùr* remembers digging up hazel nuts while laying water pipes in the 1960s at *A' Croit Dhubh* on the Balephuill sliabh.

(Cover photograph: *A' Charragh Bhiorach* at Balinoe)

Few human remains from this period have been found on Tiree and it is likely that the island only supported a few families in the summer at a density of about one person per square kilometre. Large piles of discarded limpet shells known as middens have been found on Gunna and in the dunes at Balephuill.



2. Raised beach at Kilmoluaig.

Larger Mesolithic settlements from this period have been discovered at Loch Scrisort on Rum and at Druimvargie near Oban.

The First Farmers

Around six thousand years ago the first signs of farming appeared in Argyll as people learnt to domesticate pigs and cows and sow small fields of primitive barley. This was the start of the Neolithic or New Stone Age.

Although the light soils of Tiree would have been very suitable for early agriculture, no remains from this period have been found on Tiree.

THE BRONZE AGE

The Beaker People

The Bronze Age lasted from 2,500 to 600 BC. Not only were these early farmers using metal for the first time but new styles of pottery appeared with turned out rims known as ‘Beakers’. Numerous remains from this period have been found on Tiree and it is probable that these people were the first to occupy the island in any numbers.

New religious customs also appeared at this time. Solitary standing stones and stone circles were erected and hollowed out cup markings were fashioned on significant rocks, of which the Ringing Stone in Balephetrish is the most famous. The dead were buried sitting upright, either singly or together in large cairns, or cremated with the ashes put in funerary urns.



3. *Cnotagan at Carraig Mhic Eòghainn, Baugh.*

Usually found on prominent rocks inland, cup markings have to be distinguished from the numerous bowl-like *cnotagan* found at *carraigean*, rocks from where people fished around the coast. The latter were used to grind bait, usually limpets and dog whelks. A good example is at *Carraig Mhic Eòghainn*, Baugh.

Cairns (Stone burial mounds)

1. Greenhill.



4. The cairn at Greenhill.

2. **Hough.** 55 metres north of the stone circles there are four possible graves and 200 metres to the north-east are three more. These may be the graves that gave Hough its name, Old Norse *hogr* – a burial mound.
3. **Middleton.** A round stone structure, probably a cairn, was found on the Middleton machair in 1898. It has since been covered by drifting sand.

Cup markings

1. **The Ringing Stone.** This stone was carried from Rum in the last Ice Age and is covered by 53 cup markings. It is said that if the stone is ever struck so hard it breaks, Tiree will sink under the waves. Known today in Gaelic as *Clach a' Choire* or rock of the hollow, it is shown on Blaeu's map of Tiree drawn in 1654 as Kory Finmackoul or *Coire Fionn mac Chumhail* as it would be spelled today.

2. **Cnoc Fhoirneagal.** Ten cup markings.



5. Cup markings at *Cnoc Fhoirneagal*.

3. **Creag na Sgalaig.** Eight cup markings
4. **Catrim.**

Standing Stones

1. **Balinoe.** Now known as *A' Charragh Bhiorach*, the sharp pillar, or *Spitheag an Fhoimheir*, chip of the giant. It is important to remember that the original names of these stones are lost and that the Gaelic names are relatively recent.



6. *Creag an Fhoimheir*, Barrapol.

2. Barrapol. Now known as *A' Charragh*, the pillar stone, or *Creag an Fhoimheir*, rock of the giant.

3. Caolas.



7. Standing stone at Caolas.

4. Hough. Two partial stone circles can still be seen.



8. Stone circle at Hough.



9. Location of archaeological sites.

THE IRON AGE

Men of Iron

Twenty-five fortresses from the Iron Age (600 BC – 400 AD) survive on Tìree. It is likely that these were unsettled times caused by a worsening of the climate, a growing population, thinning of the first farmed soils and the availability of new iron weapons.

These fortresses, all now called *dùn* in modern Gaelic, are classified either as:

Forts: large enough to hold a community of 30-40 people;

Dùns: small, made to shelter one family;

Brochs: the skyscrapers of Iron Age Tìree, with double-skinned walls containing a staircase and guard cell, and standing around 25 feet tall.

The forts and duns had simple defences and usually stood on inaccessible crags away from their accompanying farms, as at *Dùn nan Gall* on *Ceann a' Bharra* or *Dùn na Cleite* in East Hynish.

The brochs, virtually impregnable, took much more skill and labour to build but could be sited on gentler terrain nearer cultivated land. They were probably a later development.

Many of these fortresses were visible from each other and warning of attack may have been passed from one to the other. We can therefore deduce that some sort of political federation or grouping may have existed at that time on Tìree.

Dr MacKie, the archaeologist who excavated the broch at Vaul, estimates that the population of Tìree in the Iron Age could have been around 1,500. It is extraordinary to think that the population then was possibly twice what it is today!

Forts

- 1. Dùn Bhaile Phèadrais.** The original fort was 46 metres in diameter. Martin Martin who visited Tìree in 1695 called this fort Dun Taelk. Much of this fort was destroyed by the World War II stone quarry.
- 2. Am Barradhubh, Hynish.** Little is left today.

3. **Dùn na Cleite.** On the south side of *Lag na Cleite* (Happy Valley), this fort occupied one of the most inaccessible rocks on the island and was defended by a maze of walls.
4. **Eilean nam Bathadh.** At the tip of *Ceann a' Bharra*.
5. **Dùn nan Gall.** This translates as 'fort of the strangers', named centuries later by Gaelic speaking islanders when it was occupied by Viking raiders.



10. *Dùn Bhaile Phèadrais.*

Duns

1. An Dùn, Balephetrish.
2. Dùn beag, Vaul.
3. An Dùnan, Salum.
4. Dùn beag a' Chaolais, Caoles.
5. Dùn Sgibinnis, Ruaig.



11. *An Dùnan*, Salum, showing causeway to shore.

6. **Dùn Odair, Soay.** This remote site may have had a connection with *Clann 'ic Odrum an Ròn*, a family of pirates based on Heisker.

7. **Dùn Ghot, Gott.** The modern boundary between Scarinish farm and the Glebe runs right through this site.



12. *Dùn Ghot*.

8. **Dùn Hianais, Heanish.**

9. **Dùn an t-Sithein**

10. **Dùn Ibrig, Baugh.** This name is derived from *borg*, the Old Norse word for fort, suggesting it may have been used in later times by Viking raiders.



13. *Dùn Ibrig.*

11. **Dùn Cheann a' Bhàigh, Kenovay.** Most of the stones for this fortress were taken to build an estate boundary wall in the 19th century.



14. *Dùn Cheann a' Bhàigh.*

12. **Dùn Shiadar, West Hynish.** It is said gold is buried here. Sands, an archaeologist who visited in 1882, said:

“These duns are all connected with Ossian’s heroes, and I have had some difficulty in convincing the people that I am not in search of gold. There is a rhyme which says that Fionn left his gold in Dùn Shiadar.”

A fragment of this poem was recorded from Donald Sinclair (*Dòmhnall Chaluim Bàin*) of Balephuill:

*“Tha mo bhàta ’sa gun iarrainn,
 ’S bidh i bliadhna gun dòigh,
 ’O nach maireann na Fiantaich,
 A dh’ fhàg a feud air an t-òir.
 “My boat is without its keelstrap,*

*And it will be a year out of commission,
Since the late Fenians left watch on the gold.”*

- 13. Dùnan Nighean, Balephuill.** Tradition has it that a group of nuns was cornered here and slaughtered by the Vikings. There is also said to have been an escape tunnel out of the dun.



15. Dùnan Nighean, Balephuill.

- 14. An t-Eilean Dubh, Kenavara.**

- 15. Dùn Haingis, Greenhill.** There are seven graves beside the dùn believed to be those of sailors who drowned when the *Artois*, commanded by a Captain Edwards, was wrecked on this coast around 1830.



16. Dùn Haingis.

- 16. Dùn Boraige Mòire, Balevullin.**



17. *Dùn Boraige Mòire.*

17. Dùn Boraige Bige, Balevullin. Known locally as *Dùn Mhic 'Ille Mhaoil* after a Balevullin man, MacMillan, who collected seaweed there.

18. Dùn Beannaig, Balevullin.

Brochs

1. Dùn Mòr Bhalla. (see overleaf)

2. Dùn Mòr a' Chaolais. A traditional story links this broch with the well-known *Blar nan Sguab*, Battle of the Sheaves. The last time the Vikings invaded Tiree they came ashore at *Port Bhiostadh*, The Green. They were met by a group of islanders busy harvesting who fought them off with the only weapons they had, the sheaves in their hands. They sent one of their number called *Caoilte na Feinne* to *Dùn Mòr a' Chaolais* where their weapons were hidden. It is said *Caoilte* could run so fast that he seemed to have three heads, so high did he lift his feet. He returned with the arms, the Viking raiders were slain and buried at *Lag nan Cruachan*, Cornaigmore.

This broch is also featured in the story of the piper and the cave at *Ceann a' Bharra*. This local version of a traditional tale told all over Europe has the piper and his dog enter cave *Uaimh a' Ruith* on the north side of *Ceann a' Bharra*. People could follow the sound of his music until he reached *Druim nan Uamh*, the ridge of caves, in Scarinish. Here they heard the tune change to one called "*If only I had three hands, two for the pipes and one for the sword.*" The piper never returned but his dog escaped from *Dùn Mòr a' Chaolais* with all its fur singed off. This broch is called Dun Kiffil on old maps.

Dùn Mòr Bhalla

The Vault broch is the only prehistoric structure on Tiree that has been properly excavated. Euan MacKie, a young archaeologist from Glasgow University, came to Tiree looking for suitable sites.

At first he selected an area in the sand dunes at Balevullin. However, the factor of the day, Mr MacLennan, was worried that erosion would spread from the dig over machair that had been known in the 1930s as the ‘Sahara Desert’ and would not allow the dig to go ahead there. The project was moved to the broch at Vault where the 9th Duke of Argyll had partly cleared overlying debris in 1880.

“So I had to go down there to speak to him and he wasn’t very encouraging about the project . . . he said he couldn’t allow any digging in Balevullin because it was grass-covered sand and there might be a danger to the cattle from the trenches. He didn’t seem to be open to argument so I said, well, there is this other site at Vault which I’d quite like to work at if I can’t work at Balevullin and he said, “Yes, that’ll be alright”, so . . . again by a fluke we went to what turned out to be a phenomenally interesting broch site.”

Dr Euan MacKie



18. Volunteer diggers.

(Courtesy of Dr Euan MacKie)

The excavation took place over three summers from 1962 to 1964. At its peak the digging party, who camped on the beach below the broch, numbered 34 including a cook and a driver. The work, which cost around £1,500, was largely financed by the University.

“It was a camping dig, of course, because I hadn’t got a great deal of money for the first season. I think I had £300. It seems incredible now! With that I had to take equipment to the island, but beyond that I could hire a big marquee and buy food for everybody but they had to bring their own tents.”

Dr Euan MacKie

Three trenches were dug outside the broch. Inside the walls, the turf was stripped back and a huge layer of rubble was removed. This was largely done by Danny Gillespie, Hugh MacKinnon of Ruaig and the late Neil MacDonald, Crossapol.



19. The dig at Dùn Mòr Bhalla. (Courtesy of Dr Euan MacKie)

“So what you can see now is quite an impressive structure. I think it’s six feet high inside but at the time it was completely full of rubbish right to the brim and higher up. A mound of stone, really such a huge amount of stone, was removed and thrown down the side of the knoll.”

Dr Euan MacKie

“We know how difficult it was dragging the stones around because, although the men were digging in the middle and shifting the huge stones, we were shifting quite a lot of heavy blocks of stones ourselves. There was what was known as the ‘heavy squad’ who were called for every now and again. We had to leap out of our trenches, you see, and put planks down in the appropriate places and the ropes round the big stones and drag them away which was really very exhausting if you had to do it very often, and to think that people had had to build the broch this way and, unlike us, had to make the planks and the rope before they started . . . you got lost in admiration and really a sort of compassion. Life must have been so hard.”

Harry Kelly, one of the volunteer diggers

Digging went down to 15 feet using tiny trowels to pick out the small fragments of pottery, bones and other small finds.

“The earth in Scotland tends to be very heavy. You see these lovely English digs on chalk and particularly American digs on sand where they use huge trowels and they just brush it over the sand with a gentle movement. Not in Scotland! In Scotland you dig your trowel into this wet clay and pull, you know, and it’s hard on the wrists and hard on the hands, they can be quite sore at the end of a day’s hard digging.”

Harry Kelly

Each piece was put in numbered bags and taken to the Hunterian Museum in Glasgow for analysis. Some material was sent as far as Tokyo for dating. Over four thousand pieces of pottery alone were collected and such was the complexity of the site that it took Dr MacKie ten years to complete the research and publish the report. After the dig, turf was laid over the Iron Age floor.

“Until he got to know the crowd who came back year after year, he was very aloof, very much the Director, and I think that was probably a good thing. When you have a dig with forty people, you really can’t be very friendly with them. When the group was smaller and he knew them better, he was just leader of the group, you know, but yes, he was excellent . . . I can’t find fault with him at all, he didn’t put a foot wrong . . . he was very much the boss . . . he knew what he wanted and he was going to get it, but he was going to get it pleasantly . . . he was a very good Director.

“We spent a lot of time fighting the cows. The cows on Tiree are awful, the most vicious cows in Scotland. They damaged the Land Rover . . . they used to stand knee-deep in the water, eating seaweed and looking at you maliciously for a chance to come out and eat your tent. They stole people’s jerseys and ate them, but the classic one was when we had a telephone between the site and the camp and it broke down one day. And the boy I’d sent to look at it didn’t come back and I went looking for him and found him pulling the cable from the stomach of a cow who had bitten through it and then couldn’t stop eating.

“I remember there was one crowd who were holidaying on the island who appeared, it must have been one evening when nobody was up at the site, and painted slogans on the broch, farcical political slogans, you know, ‘Scotland for the Scots’, ‘Go Home English’, that sort of thing. Which, of course, we had to wash off. People were really furious about that . . . they were holiday-makers.”

Harry Kelly

“To me also and certainly to most of the people from the South, Tiree was just an utterly amazing and exotic place and the dig turned out to be incredibly productive as well. Nothing went wrong at all, really, it was a wonderful time.”



20. Inside the broch.

(Courtesy of Dr Euan MacKie)

“Great! We loved it. I think everyone who went loved it, the island, the people, the site, the finds, yes, the company. It was super, it really was . . . Dùn Mòr Vault turned up trumps in every sense . . . it’s still amazingly the only fully excavated, fully published broch in the western Isles . . . even after nearly forty years, Dùn Mòr Vault . . . That’s quite something really, I think . . .”

“Leaving aside Central America, it still, after all this time and doing a number of other Iron Age digs, it still seems the ‘jewel in the crown’, if you like, the brightest, the best, but I think partly that’s because it was new and everything went right and the amount of information that came out was phenomenal, you know, and it was just a fantastically lucky choice for my first dig.”

Dr Euan MacKie

Dr MacKie’s interpretation of his findings were as follows:

- The first building on the site was a wattle and daub hut which seems to have burned down around 400 BC.
- The broch itself was probably built around 100 BC. The double wall was 7-9 metres high, 3-4 metres thick and contained a staircase leading to two or three galleries or levels. It seems likely at this stage to have been used only as an emergency refuge for the local people.

- The knoll on which it is built is quite uneven and to construct a tower of this height required considerable engineering skill and probably needed specialist builders from outside the island who had built other brochs.
- Inside the broch at first was a stone-lined water tank and drain and probably a raised wooden floor. The entrance passage housed a pivoted wooden door which was controlled from a guard cell on the right of the entrance passage.
- Some burnt cereal grains were found during the excavation, both loose and imprinted on the pottery as it had baked. These were all six-row barley with very few weeds showing that these early farmers managed very well without modern pesticides!
- Relatively little tree pollen was found suggesting much of the island's hazel scrub had been cleared.
- However, some pieces of charcoal were recovered including pieces of hazel, willow, oak, alder and birch, which were probably all growing in small amounts locally. One piece of spruce, at that time not found in Britain, had probably come ashore as driftwood from America. Some reeds had also been cut and laid on the floor.
- 1,557 bones were dug up, most of which were from domesticated animals. These included sheep (66%), cattle (18%), as well as dogs, seals and a goat.
- The first sheep to be domesticated in Scotland were similar to the Soay sheep now to be found on St Kilda. Cattle would have been much smaller than they are today, a third of the size of today's beasts. Many red deer bones were also found but these would have been killed on Mull or the mainland.
- Shag, puffin and domestic geese bones were also discovered as were the shells of limpets, whelks and crabs.
- Many other objects were also carefully trowelled out during the dig. These included bronze and silver rings, stone counters for a game, hammerstones, a rotary quern for grinding corn, quartzite strike-a-lights, antlers, boar tusks, a Viking bone comb, dice and a piece of Roman glass.

- Two skeletons, one christened ‘George’ by the diggers, were found by Hugh MacKinnon and Neil MacDonald in the broch. The bones of a large 40 year old man had been gathered together after the corpse had rotted. He seems to have met a violent end as his skull appears to have been broken by a sword during the Viking period around 800 AD. The second body was found under rubble in the broch wall. His legs had been eaten by scavengers. He is likely to have died some time in the Middle Ages.



21. The skeleton found at the broch. (Courtesy of Dr Euan MacKie)

“We found part of a skeleton . . . we lifted a flat stone and there were these human bones and this was, I think, in the afternoon and by that evening the whole island seemed to be aware that human bones had been found. The policeman came and saw it.”

Dr Euan MacKie

- Around the broch itself was a three metre high stone rampart and a platform for a signal fire. Later a central fireplace was added inside the broch surrounded by four whale vertebrae which may have acted as mounts for a spit. During this period the broch was probably used as a home for the local chieftain. Part of the wall contained a cesspit.
- Later still the broch walls were pulled down to near their present height and a round farmhouse built inside them. Whether the stone work was in a dangerous condition, or times were becoming more peaceful, is not clear.

- All in all, the broch seems only to have been lived in for two to three hundred years although the structure continued to be used from time to time by peoples including the Vikings.
- From an analysis of the pottery styles, Dr MacKie believed that those who built and later lived in the broch were the ‘rulers’ and had links with southern England. The local native people lived separately.

An Old Irish poem, written before 800 AD, tells of the warrior *Labraid Loingseach*:

*“ort ocht turu tìre lath,
ort ocht scoru Scithach.*

*he razed eight towers in Tìree,
and destroyed eight strongholds
on the Island of Skye.”*

It is likely that *Dùn Mòr Bhalla* was one of these forts.



22. Dùn Mòr Bhalla in 2001.

Lake Dwellers

The people of Iron Age Tiree also built houses known as crannogs which were protected by water. These may have been a defence against invaders or possibly to keep rats away from corn.

The remains of four have been found on Tiree:

1. **Eilean Aird nam Brathan, Loch Bhasapol.** Island of the promontory of the millstone.
2. **Eilean Mhic Conuill, Loch Bhasapol.** MacConnell's island.
3. **Loch na Buaille.** Loch of the milking enclosure found on Scarinish sliabh. A building connected to the lochside by a four metre long causeway.



23. Loch na Buaille.

4. **Loch na Gile.** Loch of the clefts on the Balephetrish sliabh.

The island where Island House stands may originally also have been a crannog. Similar buildings on the mainland were built around 400 BC. Many were used in unsettled times off and on until the 17th century.

The Underground

Another structure from this period is the souterrain. Similar underground passages on the mainland were built around 200 AD. No-one knows exactly what they were used for. They may have been underground byres or stores or places to hide from raiders. Three have been found on the island:

- 5. Grianal.** A Y-shaped passage was exposed in the 1890s in the sand dunes at the south end of *Traigh Ghrianail*, Greenhill beach. It was 14 metres long, one metre wide and a metre and a half high. Known locally as *An Taigh Falaichte*, the hidden house, it was used for shelter by those collecting tangles on the beach in the last century. It has since disappeared due to erosion.
- 6. Cille Choinnich.** John MacIntyre (*Iain Chailein Mhurchaidh*), the uncle of Colin MacKinnon, Kilkenneth, was ploughing beside the present house in 1918 when he hit a rock. When he lifted it he found another souterrain. It was later covered over.



24. Souterrain at Kilkenneth.
(Courtesy of Colin MacKinnon)

- 7. Còrnaig bheag.** It was reported that Alasdair MacLean of Cornaigbeg opened up a souterrain while ploughing his croft at *Garra' Mhoirein*. He is said to have covered it up quickly so visitors would not trample the field.