

They Came From Tiree

by
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CHAPTER TWO ANCIENT TIREE

Stone Age Inhabitants

Sometime between 100,000 and 200,000 years ago a new group among the genus *Homo* appeared in Africa, and it is from this small band that modern humans are descended. It took another 50,000 or 60,000 years, however, before their descendants migrated onto the European landmass from the Mideast and Asia. These people were a hardy, adaptive breed, whose long limbs were more suitable for the tropics than the brutal cold they experienced during the winter months in Europe with its sub-zero temperatures and heavy snowfall. Yet this was nothing compared to the even greater cold that developed about 27,000 years ago. Glaciers pushed south and so much ocean water froze that the Irish Sea and the English Channel dried up and the British Isles joined continental Europe.

When this Ice Age was at its peak some 22,000-17,000 years ago most of the British Isles was covered by an ice cap. The rest of Europe, including northwest France, was a polar desert devoid of people. Humans retreated into a number of refuges. The largest of these covered northeast Europe and extended down to Moldavia. South Central Europe, along with Italy, was also mainly inhabited during this period. The refuge of most importance to our story, however, extended over an area on both sides of the Pyrenees, what we now consider Basque country, and some of north coastal Spain such as Catalonia and Galicia. Genetic studies show that this Southwest refuge contributed most of the people who reoccupied Ireland and the west side of Britain when the world grew warmer, the ice retreated, and man gradually recolonized the territory he had previously been compelled to give up. This first stage of recolonization began about 11,500 years ago in the north of the British Isles and continued in stages into the Neolithic Age in this part of the world. The vast majority of the people who made their way into the British Isles from the Southwest refuge followed the Atlantic coastline northward. Those that were our ancestors probably reached the tip of Brittany and proceed from there up the west coast of Ireland. From there they could have easily made their way into the region that was to become the Western Isles of Scotland, Scotland's north coast, and Orkney. It is probable that man first arrived on Tiree about 9,000 years ago as a nomadic wanderer in search of sea mammals, fish, or birds and not as a permanent settler. Those inhabitants of Tiree who took to domesticating animals and farming the land probably did not do so until 5,000-4,000 BC.

During the early Neolithic Age, or about 4,000-3,000 BC the people of the wide-ranging Atlantic culture, which included the Western Isles of Scotland, began to erect standing stones, stone circles, or henges, and hollowed out cup marking on many large boulders.¹ The Ringing Stone, between Balephetrish and Vaul is famous on Tiree and is an excellent example of a hollowed out cup marking. It is best known in Gaelic as *Clach a' Choire*, but in a 1654 map of Tiree it was shown as Kory Finmackoul, or *Coire Fionn mac Chumhail*, which translates as Cup of Fionn, a mythical Gaelic hero. During this same time the dead were buried in an upright sitting position, but the significance of this custom is lost in time.

¹ Between 2000-1500 BC thirty stone circles, or henges, were built in Scotland, including Tiree, with the most impressive erected at Callanish in Lewis.

Recent DNA analysis of the present British population shows that up to almost 90% of British ancestors arrived in prehistoric times, and three-quarters of these overall were in place before the Neolithic Age, which commenced in this part of the world about 6,000 years ago. There are, of course, variations between the regions, with 88% of the Irish, 81% of the Welsh, 79% of the Cornish, 70% of the Scottish, and 68% of the English arriving long before the first farmers appeared on the scene. Further DNA analysis showed that during the Neolithic Age, which brought the first farmers, that there was only 6-9% intrusion into the Irish gene pool, while there was 6-19% in Scotland. In the Western Isles, which are of most interest in this history, the new entrants came chiefly from Norway, and it is probable that the number of newcomers more resembled the Irish percentage number than not. It is more difficult to estimate the number of new migrants into the Western Isles in the Bronze Age. This commenced about 4,500 years ago and ended with the coming of the Iron Age about 1300 years later. Yet it is thought that during this time frame the number was no more than about 3%. These findings are startling enough for those of us who were taught the conventional view of prehistory, but of even more significance is that there is no genetic evidence all that there was a migration into Europe and the British Isles of any consequence during the Iron Age, which began about 3000 years ago and lasted up to the Roman period.

These findings refute entirely a long held historical belief of an Indo-European migration or invasion of Europe during the second millennium before the Christian Era, since there is no genetic evidence to support this conventional view of events. This means, of course, that there was no invasion of a people called 'Celts' into the British Isles during the Iron Age, and that the vast majority of those ancestors of ours in the Western Isles of Scotland who spoke a Celtic tongue had been in the region of Scotland and Ireland for many thousands of years. It is important to note that the so-called Celtic fringe regions have the highest percentages of the most ancient people of the British Isles, and were the least affected ethnically by later invaders.

The Celts

The conventional view long held by historians was that Indo-European tribes originating the Caucasus began to invade Europe about 2000 BC, overwhelming a less fierce indigenous people in the process. By this time they were to have supposed to have broken into several different groups, such as the Achæans who conquered Greece, later Crete, and other Aegean islands; the Medes, Persians, Cimmerians, and Hittites who completed the ruin of the Assyrian Empire; the Thracians and Phrygians who overran Asia Minor; the Aryans who reached India. The Celts and the Germans were others that were among this group, along with were the Italic speakers who settled in Italy. The geneticists' findings are rewriting this orthodox view of the European past, because there simply is no evidence of any Iron Age invasion of any consequence, particularly of the British Isles.

Neither geneticists, nor linguists can fully explain the spread of Indo-European languages across Europe and the British Isles. Nor can they determine when this began. It has been theorized, however, that what we call Celtic speech was brought to Ireland and the western side of Britain during the Neolithic Age when the first farmers appeared on the scene. There is no proof of this, however, and it could have occurred much, much earlier. These people arriving during the Neolithic Age are believed by some, but not all, authorities to have originated in Anatolia and migrated along the north shore of the Mediterranean into Iberia. They evidently bypassed the Basque country, whose language is not Indo-European in origin, but followed the old route up the Atlantic coast into the British Isles. There is an archeological trail of this migration, which is substantiated by genetic evidence as well. Irish legends, which were once thought more mythology than history, also tell us of six cycles of invasion coming from the Mediterranean area, including that of the last one, the Milesian invasion from Spain, which was concluded 3,700 years ago.

There were relatively few of these new Neolithic migrants coming into Ireland and the neighboring regions across the Irish Sea and very little replacement of the aboriginal stock. If they did bring a Celtic language to the region, its spread can only be explained by the fact that there are a number of examples of language change through acculturation rather than population replacement. The development of the Celtic language in the British Isles and when this occurred is still being debated among linguists, who do not agree to the timing involved.

It would now appear that the conventional belief of a Celtic homeland north of the Alps in Central Europe is false. A people called Celts by the ancients did populate an area in France, south of the Seine and Marne, however, and had expanded into the Iberian peninsula in former times. That they spoke a language akin to modern day Celtic speech does not appear to be in doubt. It was subsequently replaced by a Romance language in Roman time, however, which later evolved into French.

Before the fifth and six centuries AD in the Southern Hebrides its people built small defensive works of stone, called duns, to defend themselves. Ruins of over twenty of these Iron Age fortresses can be found on Tiree. Most were erected on out of the way crags as *Dún nan Gall* on *Ceann a' Bharra*, which is thought to mean the end of Barra-pol. Other examples of these duns on Tiree were *Dún na Cleite*, fort of the pointed hill, at Hynish and *Dún Shiador*, fort of the sheiling, in West Hynish. Some gold was found in the latter fort, which the defenders had evidently buried before they left. Most of these duns were visible from another, and it is believed that warnings of attack could be signaled around the island. These were evidently dangerous times in the Hebrides, which may have caused by population pressures or a worsening of the climate in the region.²

These dun-builders are believed to have spoken a form of Gaelic and had a remote Irish origin. The Irish, however, considered them alien, and called their territory Iardomnan. These 'dun people', who undoubtedly number among the ancestors of the later inhabitants of Tiree, had to contend with the Picts in northern Argyll, but there is little evidence that the Picts had much of a presence in the Southern Hebrides, outside of an occasional raid. A different race first conquered the Orkneys, and then extended their sway into Caithness, Skye, and the neighboring mainland. Their incursions reached into northern Iardomnan and as far south as Tiree, where they built several of their characteristic strongholds, tall towers of stone, called brochs. The builders of these brochs may have had a Scandinavian origin, but this is far from certain.

The first of these brochs is *Dún Mòr Bhalla*, the big fort of Vaul. It is believed that the broch was probably built around 60 AD, and perhaps lived in for 200-300 years. It is of double wall construction, 13 feet thick, and 30 feet in height. It contained a stairway, which provided access to two or three floors. The door was of wood, which opened on a pivot controlled from a guard's cell on the right of the doorway. It may at first have been used only as an emergency refuge, but later a central fireplace was added, which would appear to indicate that it became the home of a local headman.³ There is also *Dún Beag Valla*, or little fort of Vaul, which is situated less than a quarter mile from the larger broch.

Another of these brochs was *Dún a' Chaolais*, the big fort of Caolas, which stood on a small hill overlooking Milton harbor. It is referred to as the semi-broch type. It is now much decayed, but portions of several concentric walls of the fort proper can still be seen on its southeast side. Beyond the fort proper, on its southern side, the remains of a small circular wall is still visible.

We think of Tiree today as being in a remote location, but this was not the case in its early history. Sea routes had provided the chief means of transportation between communities throughout prehistoric times, and Tiree, lying as it was between Scandinavia and Ireland, was always part of a lively commercial scene. A few of its people were traders and seamen no doubt, but the majority was engaged in agriculture and herding. What they did not produce, such as metal weapons, was probably gained through the barter of grain and hides.

Tradition names 498 AD as the beginning of the invasion of the Southern Hebrides and Argyll by the *Dál Riata*, who were a Gaelic speaking people from Ulster but it is likely that they had made earlier incursions and even settlements before that date. In two hundred years or less they had established their kingdom of Dalriada, which included the western seaboard and isles, and stretched from Loch Carron in the north and as far east as Drum Alba. These Irish invaders were part of a larger group called Scotti, who were able to impose their Celtic language and culture upon the land that

² An old Irish poem, written before 800 AD, tells that King Labraid Longsech "razed eight towers in Tiree, and destroyed eight strongholds on the Island of Skye.

³ Dr. Euan MacKie of Glasgow University supervised an archeological dig at this site over three summers from 1962 to 1964. It took him ten years to complete his study and publish his results. Two skeletons were found in this broch. The first, who appeared to have had his skull broken by a sword, came from the Viking period (800-1200 AD), while the second likely died in the Middle Ages.

came to be named for them, although it is probable that their number never was reached 10% of the population. Ethnically the Scotti were little different, however, from the inhabitants of the Western Isles and northwestern Scotland, and as such left no significantly different DNA markers among the populace.

The coming of the Dalriadic Scots also brought Christianity to the Hebrides. St. Brendan the Voyager built a church on Tiree in 514 at a place called *Bledach*, which probably was the introduction of Christianity to the island. There is a rock in Vul called *Creag o' Briundainn*, or Brendan's Rock, which may have been the site of this church.

St. Columba and twelve companions settled on Iona to found a monastery in 563. Not long afterwards the saint came to Tiree to build a monastery called *Mag Luinge*, which loosely translated means 'the plain of the boat'. Its site cannot be determined, but it is believed that it was either at the graveyard in Soroby or somewhere around the old chapels at Kirkapol. This monastery was important in its time, because it received men paying a penance. One example is a man named Librán, who was sent to *Mag Luinge* for seven years. The monks of this monastery must have farmed as part of their duties, because it is known that St. Columba directed them to send "a fat sheep and six pecks of corn" to a man in Colonsay. There are several local traditions regarding visits of St. Columba to Tiree, and a round hill near *Beinn Gott* is known as *Cioch Choluim Chille*, or St. Columba's hill. *Mag Luinge* was destroyed by fire in 673, but was rebuilt.

Comgall, the famous Pictish saint, also built a monastery on Tiree. Local tradition holds that it was sacked by Picts, and that St. Comgall brought down a curse upon the raiders, which blinded them and brought about a wind which wrecked their boats. It is said he later restored their sight and permitted them to go home. Artchain, another monastery, was also founded by a monk called Findchán. The exact locations of these monasteries are in question, but it is known that *Teampall Pháraig*, or St. Patrick's Temple, on *Ceann a' Bharra* and *Cnoc na h-Anaid* in Caolas were monastic sites.

While monasteries in Ireland identified themselves with particular tribal groups, and even warred with each other in some instances, St. Columba distanced himself from such discord. The result was that there were no feuds between monasteries in Scotland, and the land knew a period of peace that was not soon duplicated. Since the tribal leaders of the society had little or no interest in assuming any administrative duties, the church stepped in to fill this gap. It dispensed medical care, organized communal husbandry, provided food in times of poor crop yields, and administered the Law of Adomnan. This last was a code of laws composed by Abbot Adomnan, the famous biographer of St. Columba, who, when he failed to convince all his brethren to accept the authority of Rome, retired to Ireland. There he put in writing a number of laws that were endorsed by the assembly of Tara in 697.

The Norse

There was one last major addition to the culture of the Hebrides, and that came from the fierce Norseman, who, beginning in 794, came to pillage and destroy. The monastery of Iona was sacked in 795, and the Viking raids increased in number and intensity throughout the first half of the 9th century. At first the Norsemen were satisfied to limit their incursions to the summer months, carrying off their loot and slaves, and returning home in the winter. Toward the end of the 9th century, however, more and more began to winter in the isles and built small forts to protect themselves. There were at least six of these on Tiree, most of which can be traced by their *-brig* place-names. One example is *Cnoc Eibrig* in Baugh and Port Eibrig celebrates that name today. Another is fore-mentioned *Dún nan Gall*, a ruin of a fort in Barapol, which has a purely Gaelic name, which means stronghold of the foreigners. It is probable that the Norse captured this fort from the island's defenders and used it as a foothold to completely reduce Tiree.

There is reason to believe that Tiree was not easily subdued by the Norse however. There is a legend that was still told on Tiree up until a few years ago of a raid by the *Lochlannoch*, or Norsemen, which was crushed by the islanders. According to this tale the Norsemen landed on the north side of Tiree to kill and plunder, but were met on the shore near Kilmoluag by the island's defenders. It was harvest time and the men of Tiree were caught without their weapons, but resourcefully slew the enemy with sheaves of corn while waiting for their arms to be brought up.

Tiree was called *Tyrvist* by the Norse and its obvious fertility soon attracted Norse farmers, who settled among the cowed populace. Tiree and the neighboring isles probably fell back into paganism once again during this period, but Gaelic-speaking natives survived alongside the new settlers. The impact that the Norse had on the region is very apparent from the several hundred words of Norse derivation in the Gaelic language of the Western Isles, as well as the many Christian names and surnames that originated in Scandinavia. Nordic place-names are common throughout the Hebrides, attesting to the Norsemen who settled in the area. In Mull one half of the place-names are of Norse origin, and there are more Norse place-names than Gaelic on Tiree. Scarinish, Heanish Baugh, Hough, Barapol, Hynish, Mannal, Gott, Soroby, and Heylipol are Norse. Many others, such as Cornaigbeg, and Balephetrish, are a combination of both Norse and Gaelic. Grianatobht in Baugh, which is derived from the Norse *grian* (sunny) and the Gaelic *tobhta* (ruin) also indicate a bilingual population. Over time the descendants of the original Norse settlers embraced Christianity and names, such as Kirkapol, or church farm, Crossapol, or cross farm which testify to their conversion from paganism.

Many of the Gaelic words that have a connection with the sea, such as terms for anchors, rudders, boats, and such are of Norse origin. The war-galleys, or birlinns, of the island clans also clearly evolved from the sleek longboats of the Vikings.

One of the more important legacies of the Norse in the Hebrides was their view of land ownership. Under Norse law land was owned by the individual and not jointly by the extended family group, or clan, as was the Celtic custom. The Norse laws of land ownership have prevailed in the Hebrides, supplanting the ancient Celtic form, but a vestige of the older concept remained in the Islands. There is a widely held belief that prolonged occupation of any property gives the occupier and his heirs a right of permanent occupation, but not ownership of it. This concept called *dutchas*, a Gaelic term that defies translation, is the pervasive belief that clansfolk were entitled to a permanent stake in the territories of the clan. This entitlement was extended to the crofter, who occupied only a few small acres at one end of the social scale, and to the tacksman at the other. Admittedly there was a fundamental incompatibility in the right to occupy land forever and the time limitations of a tacksman's lease, which has never fully been resolved. This belief in *dutchas* on the part of the small tenants of Tiree and other Hebrideans exacerbated the bitterness caused by the Clearances. The commission appointed to look into the grievances of the crofters in 1884 took note of this feeling of the tenants that they had an inalienable, inherited right to occupy the land of their forefathers as long as they paid a fair and reasonable rent.

The hold of the Norse in the Hebrides began to be broken in 1156, when Somerled, a Gaelo-Norse chieftain, defeated the king of Man and supplanted him in the region. He was an example of the new line of half Gael and half Norse warriors, many of whom were mercenaries, who came to dominate the leadership of the region. Alexander III, the King of Scots, led an expedition in 1222, which defeated Somerled's heirs, but control of the Hebrides was still disputed by King Haakon of Norway. This was not resolved in Scotland's favor until 1263, when the fleet of the Norwegian king was defeated at the Battle of Largs, which was due more to a storm that wrecked his ships than Scottish arms.

There has always been much speculation about the amount of Norse blood that was introduced into the Hebrides over the long period of Norse rule which lasted almost 400 years. Now thanks to recent genetic analysis we can answer this question to some extent. DNA studies show the Viking intrusion at 20% for the Shetland Islands, 17% for Orkney, 10% for both the Isle of Man and the Oban area, while the Western Isles exhibited 7-8% overall. No specific figure has yet been quoted for Tiree, but 7-8% would appear to be a reasonable figure for our island. Genetics thus explains why the Norse minority was ultimately absorbed, and why the Gaelic language and culture, although modified, continued its dominance in the region.

Somerled's victory over the Norsemen in the twelfth century restored Gaelic rule, but it probably brought little change in the life of the people of Tiree. The chieftain, or headman, of Tiree in this period was probably of both Norse and Gaelic blood, as was Somerled, who, if he was far-sighted enough, merely exchanged one allegiance for another. He and some of his men may have manned some of Somerled's war galleys, but, if so, it is long lost to history. There is no way of knowing the population of Tiree at this period, but an educated guess would put it at 600-800 people. If this is correct the islands could have supplied about 150 fighting men.

After the death of Somerled Tiree became the property of his son, Dougall, and remained in the hands of his descendants, the MacDougalls of Lorn, for a century and a half. During this period Tiree saw the attempt by Haakon of Norway to re-establish Norwegian control of the Hebrides, and was probably plundered by this monarch when he waged war throughout the Western Isles in 1263. It is known that the Islesmen helped to later defeat Haakon at the Battle of Largs later that same year, and it is possible that a contingent from Tiree was among them.

The MacDougalls of Lorn, like many a clan with Norse connections, opposed Bruce in his struggle for the Scottish throne. They mustered 2000 men against Bruce at the Pass of Brander in 1309, where they suffered a grievous defeat. While most of the MacDougall force was probably raised from their mainland territory of Morven and Ardnamurchan, it is known that their chief escaped capture in a war galley. This suggests that at least some Islesmen were present, and perhaps men of Tiree were in arms as well. Whether Tiree played a role in this battle for the Scottish crown or not, the island was certainly affected by the outcome. When Bruce won the kingdom of Scotland he forfeited the MacDougall holdings in Tiree, Mull, Coll, Morven, Ardnamurchan, Duror, and Glencoe. These were granted to Angus Og of Islay, who had led his branch of Clan Donald in support of Bruce. The king formally confirmed this by charter to John de Yle of Islay on June 12, 1343. It was not until 1354, however, that the MacDougalls finally renounced their rights to Mull, 'the free land of the churches of Duror and Glenco', Carnaburg Mor, Carnaburg Beg, Dun Chonnuill, the upper part of Jura, and the island of Tiree, save three unciaes of land closest to Coll. Coll was evidently still retained by the MacDougalls for a brief time, but was in the hands of the Lord of the Isles in 1409, if not before.