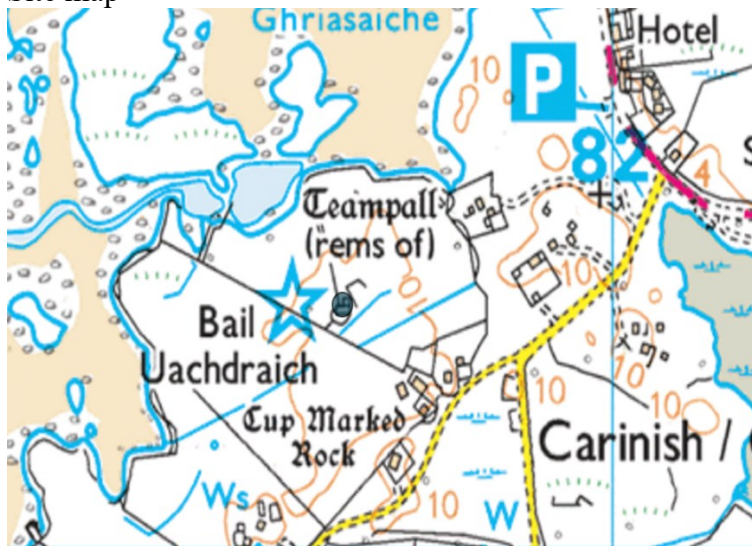


Teampull na Trionaid

Mary Harman photographed many Archaeological and Historical sites on North Uist in the 1970s. In 2019 I was given the opportunity to catalogue her photographs and to digitise them for CEUT. This article looks at the sites around Teampull na Trionaid, Cairinis, North Uist.

Site map



<https://canmore.org.uk/site/search/result?NUMLINK=10265&view=map>

Aerial view of Teampull na Trionaid and Teampull Clann a'Phiocair



HES 8.8.2017

<https://canmore.org.uk/site/10265/north-uist-carinish-teampull-na-trionaid>

Twin churches lie at this site on a rise on a promontory at Cairinis overlooking the narrow sea channel and sands, Otir Mhor, to the west.

Teampull na Trionaid, an important pre-Reformation (Augustinian) church, is attributed in

the Book of Clan Ranald to Beathag, daughter of Somerled. Somerled was a 12th C Norse-Gaelic Lord who created the Kingdom of Argyll and the Isles. The church is dedicated to the Holy Trinity and was built on an earlier site about which we know nothing. The church was enlarged by Amie MacRuari in the late 14th C and became an important seat of Learning. There is documentary evidence that the church was decorated with many sculptures of angels, armed men, and animals similar to those at Rodel, Isle of Harris. The church had a spire on the east gable with the figure of a giant (fomhair) with three heads on the top.

Where are these sculptures? Has anyone seen them? Can you identify any of these in any older buildings and walls on North Uist?

The second building adjoining the first, Teampull Clann a'Phiocair, (a'Bhiocair) was built later and it may or may not have been a church originally. Its walls lie unchanged from when they were first built. This structure is rectangular with steeply pitched gable ends. Aumbries (recesses) lie in these gable walls (see photo).

Many members of the MacPhiocair Clan lie buried within the walls. There is also a burial ground that lies out with the churches.

Mary Harman took many detailed photographs of the site in 1975.



Mary Harman's photograph of Teampull Clann a'Phiocair shows the steeply pitched east gable wall with two aumbries.



Mary Harman's photograph (1975) of the West end of Teampull na Trionaid showing gravestones.

In 2012 Middle Iron Age pottery sherds were excavated nearby indicating an Iron Age settlement in the area.

On the summit of a nearby rocky hillock, Cnoc nan Aingeal, 300m NNE of Teampull na Trionaid at Cairinis, a small cairn of stones lies, 4.8m in diameter and 0.8m high, with possible traces of kerbing on its SE side (Canmore 10263) This may be a Bronze Age Kerb Cairn. Canmore documents a possible a second cairn to the East. (Canmore 279393)

Two further grass-covered cairns are found on the tidal island of Garbh Eilean Beag, N. of the Cairinis. The larger measures 5.5m in diameter with a height of 0.9m. The smaller measures 2.6m in diameter and is 0.4m high (Canmore 10267).

A cup marked stone is located at NF 8170 6017 (Canmore 10289). Pear-shaped, and lying NE/SW it measures 1.7m long x 1.1m wide. Towards its SW end lies a large single cupmark. Subsequent investigations by Scottish Rock Art Project (ScRAP) question as to whether this is a prehistoric cupmark or simply a geological change.



Mary Harman (1974)

<https://canmore.org.uk/site/10289/north-uist-carinish-teampull-na-trionaid>.

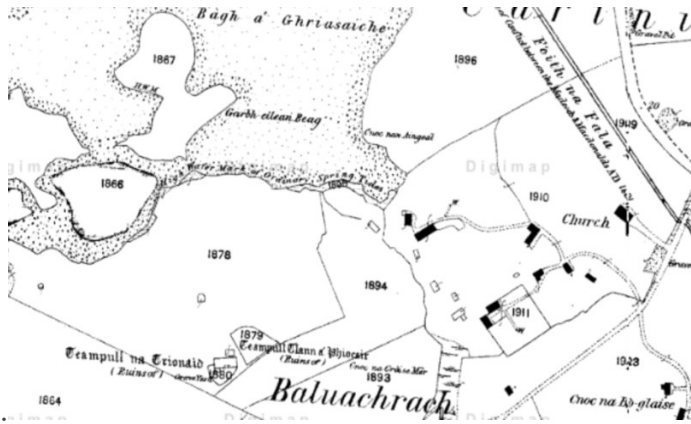
Nearby, at NF 8144 6012, lies a well, Tobar na Trionaid, historically associated with the church complex. It is now a marshy area (Canmore 10266).

Beveridge (1911) documents the remains of the base of a Medieval Cross at NF 8177 6027, E. of the churches (Canmore 10282).

The Battle of Cairinis (1601) was the final battle of a feud between Clan MacLeod of Dunvegan and Clan MacDonald of Sleat.

The Clan MacLeod chief sent his cousin Domhnall Glas MacLeod and a raiding party to seize belongings and stock from the MacDonalds of North Uist. The MacDonalds had put these into sanctuary at Teampull na Trionaid. Donald MacIain 'ic Sheumais of Clan Ranald, gathered 12 men and walked to Carinish from Eirisgeigh to assist the MacDonalds. They successfully surprised the raiders who were routed towards Baile Sear. It is said Donhnall Glas MacLeod was killed at 'Stricken Slope'. The sands between Cairinis and Baile Sear became known as Oitir Mhic Dhòmhnuaill Ghlais.

Heads of the dead were placed in the Teampull na Trionaid windows. The marsh beneath the battle site ran with blood and was called the 'Marsh of Blood' or Feith na Fala (Canmore 10272).



Feith na Fala is marked on 1880 OS map <https://digimap.edina.ac.uk/roam/map/historic>

Nearby sites:

A Neolithic Stone Circle, Loch Na Boganaich (Canmore 10249) lies to the East of Cairinis, beyond which lies a Chambered Cairn, Caravat Barp (Canmore 10254), probably Bronze Age.

On the coast South of Cairinis lies the site of a Bronze Age hoard of four bronze spearheads found in 1975 by two boys at the Bay Craavat (Canmore10192). How exciting a find was this? Who were these boys? They reported the finds to a Schoolmaster. Who was he? They play an important part of the history of Cairinis. The spearheads are in the National Museum of Scotland.

Conclusion

What looks like a simple knoll over flattish land next to the sea has thousands of years of history within its soil. Cupmarked stones are a form of Prehistoric Art found on the Atlantic seaboard of Europe. If this is a cupmarked stone, it may date to the Neolithic (4,100 BC – 2,500BC). It needs further assessment. Several cairns that cannot be dated lie to the North of the Church.

The Kerbed Cairn dates to the Bronze Age (2500BC-800BC) and the Iron Age pottery sherds date to 800BC - 400AD. So, there is good evidence that people lived in the area from the Neolithic onwards.

This evidence is backed up by the nearby presence of the Neolithic Stone Circle of Loch Na Boganaich and a Chambered Cairn of the Bronze Age.

The presence of these early finds around Teampull na Trionaid is evidence the area was used in the prehistoric period before the building of the Early Medieval Church and subsequent structures of the Teampull na Trionaid complex. The early Christian building was built in sight of the earlier Stone Circle and Chambered Cairn which were built on higher ground.

Was this intentional linking of early Medieval sites to special important sites of the past?

The Battle of Cairinis occurred here. This is supposedly the last site of a bow and arrow battle in Scotland and it is thus a very important site. This site alone should merit further archaeological investigation and better signposting for visitors.

References

Canmore <https://canmore.org.uk/>

Norman MacLean [Available from] <https://tracscotland.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/The-Battle-of-Carinish.pdf> [Accessed 9.July 2022]