Crogans and Barvas Ware: Handmade Pottery in the Hebrides

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Certain types of pottery from the Outer and Inner Hebrides and areas of the adjacent mainland have been classified over the last hundred years or so as 'crogans' or 'craggans' and 'Barvas Ware'. These terms serve to indicate not only two distinct classes of ceramic material but also that there is a distinction between an old, indigenous tradition of pottery-making and a relatively modern, exotic tradition.

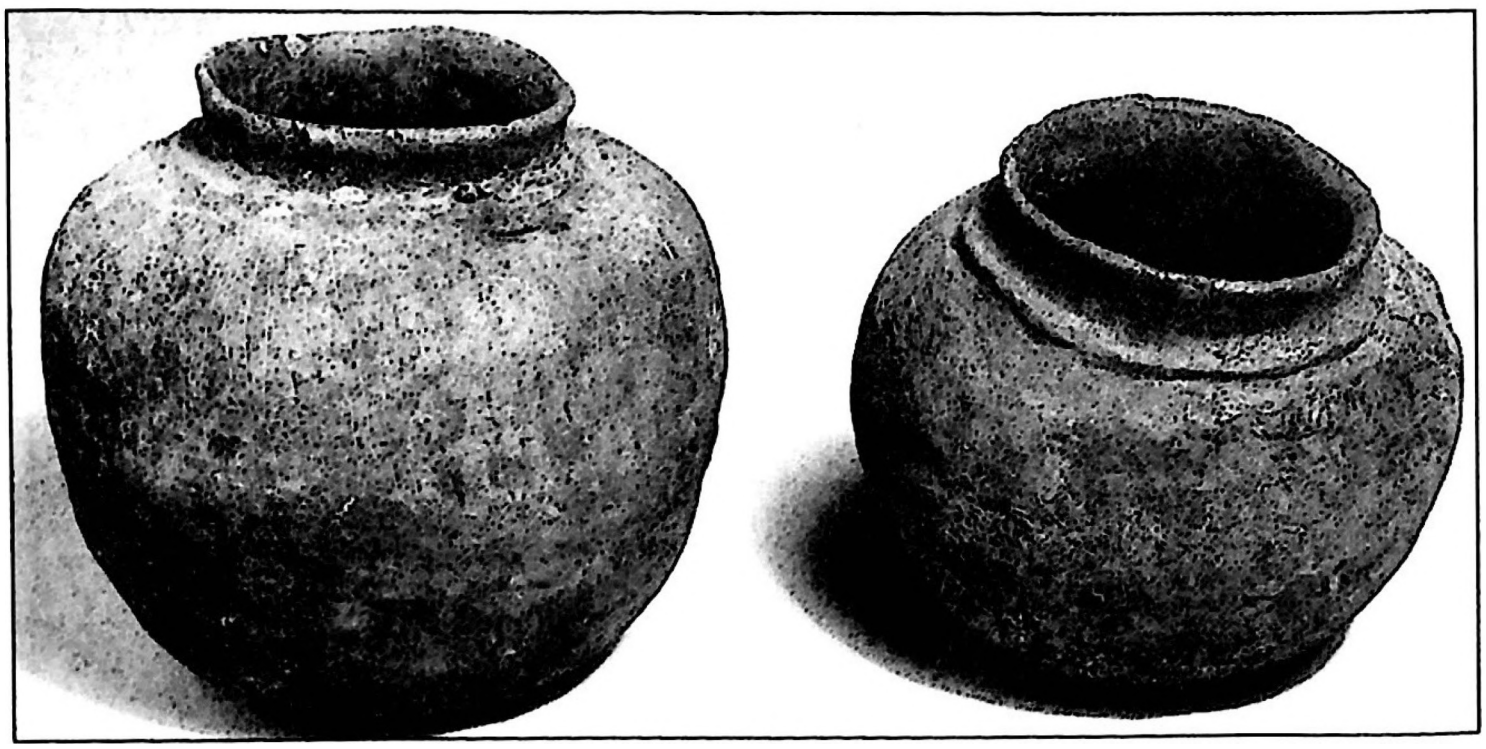
Crogan is a colloquial Gaelic word with a long pedigree; it is used to refer to ancient or modern earthenware jars, unglazed, more or less spherical, handthrown without the use of the potter's wheel and fired in the domestic hearth (Fig. 1). The word is cognate with the English 'crock', found in Old English sources in the form *crocca* (cf. Old Norse *krukka* with the same meaning). *Crogan* is found in Old and Middle Irish texts in the form *croccán*, frequently qualified as *croccán chriadh*, 'clay pot'. The variant *cragan*, also used in some areas, particularly in Lewis, was the term recorded for this pottery, both ancient and modern, by some archaeologists and ceramics collectors in the second half of the nineteenth century (e.g. Smith 1875: 206). Since then, 'craggan' has also been the term commonly used in museum catalogues. The second term, 'Barvas Ware', has been adopted as a generic name for the modern, that is late nineteenth-century and twentieth-century, similarly unglazed, handthrown, domestically fired pottery made presumably in imitation of contemporary, commercially produced pottery, especially cups and saucers, jugs, teapots and sugar basins (Fig. 2).

The production of this imitation ware came to be identified with the township of Barvas on the west coast of Lewis where it was first 'discovered' and publicised by visitors to the island in the 1860s. The survival of handmade pottery techniques in parts of the Hebrides has created considerable interest amongst scholars of the past hundred years, especially when it was first noticed. The prehistoric-looking pots or *crogain* (plural), which were found not only in use but also still being made by some local families, have been brought to people's attention in one or two publications in which, however, their coverage was only superficial. A closer study is needed of this pottery from the Hebrides and especially of the crogan ware, and the purpose of

Fig. 1: Crogan (22 cm high) made in Lewis in the second half of the nineteenth century, showing rounded base and turned-out rim. (Photo: *National Museums of Scotland.*)

Fig. 2: Teaset of Barvas Ware bought in Lewis by a collector *c.* 1910, probably made in imitation of one of the Scottish commercial wares of the period. (Photo: *National Museums of Scotland*, by courtesy of Mrs Thelma Aitken, Lanark.)

Figs. 3 and 4: Two crogans from Callanish, Lewis. The crogan on the left (19 cm high) has simple scratch-mark decoration and fragments of *imideal* (skin cover) and *iall* (thong) round the neck. That on the right (17.5 cm high), strengthened at the shoulder and neck, was referred to as a 'potato pot' when collected in the 1930s. (Photo: *National Museums of Scotland.*)



this paper is to examine them in the context of available background historical information, both printed and oral. Hebridean pottery of the crogan type may throw light on prehistoric pottery sequences as well as on the economy of island life in the past: they are pieces of evidence of material culture too important to be ignored or left unexplained.

The characteristics of surviving examples of crogans are remarkably consistent and faithful to type, which suggests that they represent a practical response to requirements and have been evolved over generations, if not centuries, of manufacture and use. The globular body of the pot is sometimes shouldered: the technique of throwing this shape without a potter's wheel is more difficult, and the quality of the clay and its impurities may often have limited the possibilities of shaping in this way. The height of the pot is generally the same as the diameter: surviving examples are between 10 cm and 36 cm in height. The neck and mouth are narrow and the rim is everted to suit the storing of food: it was said that the narrow opening would take a woman's hand but not a cow's or a calf's muzzle. In use as a storage vessel, a sheepskin covering was stretched over the rim and tied in round the neck with a thong or cord. This type of skin-covering has been variously termed *imideal, craicionn* and *fùileach*. In the Islands, *imideal* appears to be the standard term for the skin-covering over the top of a jar or pail. *Snàthan imideil* has been recently recorded in Lewis for the relatively modern string used to tie on the skin-covering. *Iall* was an earlier term implying a thong made of leather. Such words as *imideal* and *snàthan* or *snàithlean* with their specific meanings would undoubtedly once have been widespread but it is in Lewis that they seem to have survived actively, where the shieling system also happened to survive longest (cf. Carmichael 1941: 83). *Fùileach* occurs more rarely. It has been recorded in Mull with the specific meaning of a sheepskin covering, a term which may now be impossible to corroborate (Campbell 1902: 12).

Of the surviving examples of crogan ware in museum collections, some are ornamented and some are plain. Ornamentation, when it occurs, is simple, often haphazard, consisting of a series of incised lines either in parallel or converging and diverging (Fig. 3). Raised ornamentation is rare on crogans although an example of one from Callanish, Lewis, now in the National Museums of Scotland, has a horizontal raised band between the shoulder and the neck of the pot; this, however, may represent simply an attempt to strengthen the wall of the jar in the area on which pressure is applied (Fig. 4). Raised ornamentation on Barvas Ware is common but in no way functional and was presumably a device to beautify the pottery for sale.

The base of the crogan is generally rounded, recalling the shape of Neolithic pottery, and emphasising the spherical appearance of the pot. Some have a semi-rounded base which makes them more stable, although when in use in the fire for cooking the fully rounded shape would have been more efficient. To many Gaelic

speakers, the proverb *Seasadh gach soitheach air a mhàs fhëin,* 'Let every vessel stand on its own bottom' (Nicolson 1881: 345), must have seemed ironic, or even paradoxical, since their most familiar vessels could not stand on their own without support. But if the vessel was placed in the peat fire, or in the fine peat ash moved to one side for the purpose, the pot would stand upright in it and the heat would be distributed evenly through the walls of the vessel. Another Gaelic proverb alludes to this: *Ardan na poite bige, cha tig e seach an luath,* 'The pride of the wee pot won't go beyond the ashes' (Nicolson 1881: 45).

Crogans and Barvas Ware have attracted the attention from time to time of topographical writers, museum curators and archaeologists, ceramics collectors and a few of the general public. The earliest specific literary references to crogans in the late seventeenth century describe their manufacture and use in just those places where we know that they were last made and used. This is hardly an accident of history but rather a testimony to the suitability of the local clays and the long-term localisation of the traditions of pottery production. For most people in the Hebrides, of course, the pottery was an unremarkable and commonplace aspect of everyday life, as early writers on Hebridean life convey. By the early nineteenth century, references to it suggest that it might have seemed unusual by mainland standards. By the late nineteenth century, crogans and Barvas Ware had become well established in the public notice and from the range of written contemporary comment, attitudes to the pottery ranged from amused scorn to genuine interest, from regarding it as a crude oddity to judging it to be a rare and fascinating local variant of Scottish material culture (e.g. Fig. 5).

The early scholarly interest of the 1860s was not followed up, and both the archaeological and the historical potential of this material have consequently never been realised. Our comparative wealth of surviving Hebridean pottery has therefore received scant attention, probably because it is neither archaeology nor history: it is too recent to be considered an archaeological source and in most instances it is not old enough to be obviously historical. Although the National Museums have a good collection of this material, it has rarely been displayed. Perhaps also the scholar has been deterred because much of the supporting evidence and explanation of the pottery is part of an oral tradition in a language other than English.

Whether recovered through excavation or 'thrown up' by the erosion of settlement sites, pottery is archaeology's most common detritus in the Hebrides, as elsewhere. For the many sherds and fragments of handthrown unglazed ware, fired to a red or brown finish at relatively low temperatures, proper identification and dating is difficult, if not impossible. This applies particularly to much that is already stored in our museums. Other than for such distinctive material as the Late Neolithic 'grooved ware' and 'beakers', Roman wares or medieval green- and brown-glazed, conventionally decorated, wheel-turned pottery, interpretation from the primary evidence of site or stratum is fraught with difficulties. Most of these

types of pottery have been found in the form of sherds in the Hebrides, but otherwise much of the mass of pottery fragments found in the Hebrides has been laid aside as more or less unrecognisable and unclassifiable (e.g. Anderson 1890: 138-9).

Generally, the archaeologist labels the 'undiagnostic' sherds as, say, 'Bronze Age' or 'Iron Age'—the periods which have enjoyed most attention—or as recent 'craggan' material. Effectively, this tends to produce a notional gap of anything up to fifteen hundred years for which no interpretation or explanation can be offered. The pages of our archaeological journals bristle with such unanswered problems.Evidence now emerging suggests nonetheless that a well-developed pottery tradition did exist in the Hebrides during the Iron Age and probably in later periods, and also—both from historical evidence and from the knowledge of generations still living—that simple functional pottery was being produced from the sixteenth or even fifteenth centuries into the twentieth.

The reorganisation of available historical data and the retrieval of oral information must have potential, therefore, for the explanation of at least some archaeological problems. If such information can be brought together, it might be possible to show some continuity between prehistoric times and the twentieth century. One example of the questions raised by discoveries of excavated pottery material in the Hebrides will suffice. Excavations on the so-called 'Pygmies Isle' site at the Butt of Lewis were reported in the *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* in 1904 by the Highland historian, William Cook MacKenzie. Investigators (his own term) had dug up the floor of the ruined building and had found, apart from bones and peatash, some pieces of handmade unglazed pottery which were lying in the same stratum 'between the upper layer of loam and the lower of sea-sand'. He described some of this pottery as being of a style and colour 'somewhat resembling the old croggans' (MacKenzie 1904-5: 252). Dr Robert Stevenson, reviewing these pottery finds in the *Proceedings* in 1945, pointed out that one of the decorated sherds was a very good example of Neolithic ware, that three of the other sherds had similar Neolithic style of decoration, but that the piece of slightly flattened base mentioned in the original account was of a quite different, and more recent, fabric (Stevenson 1945-6: 141). Given the proper analysis of crogan material, it should be possible to fix this pottery more precisely in time and space, to discover when the piece was made and where and perhaps even by whom.

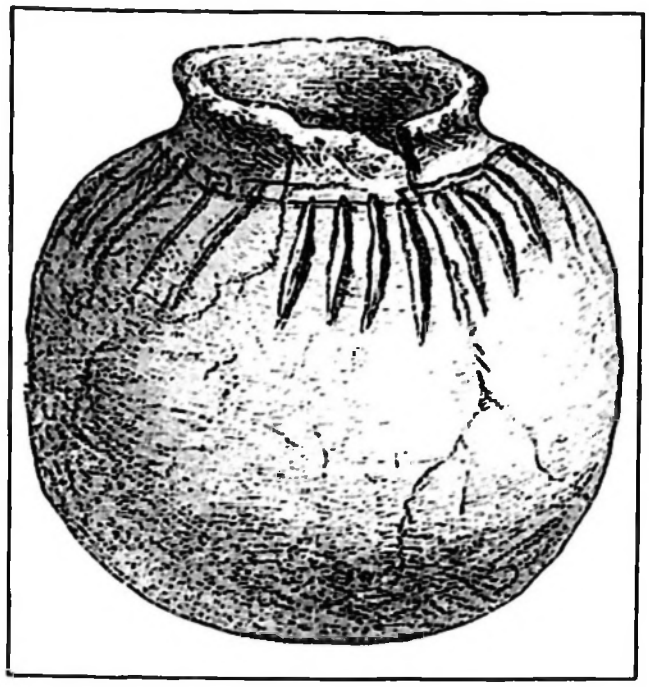
More recent excavation-reporting has shown a sharper awareness of the chronological hiatus. In an excavation on Barra, for example, 'craggan' pottery material in a dun site of Iron Age date was assigned tentatively but realistically to a recent period, in this instance to the seventeenth or early eighteenth centuries (Young 1955-6: 296). Decorated pottery of a crude type which might have been assumed to be of Iron Age date has been excavated in a medieval and post-medieval castle site at Breachacha, Coll, stratified with imported glazed, wheel-turned ware

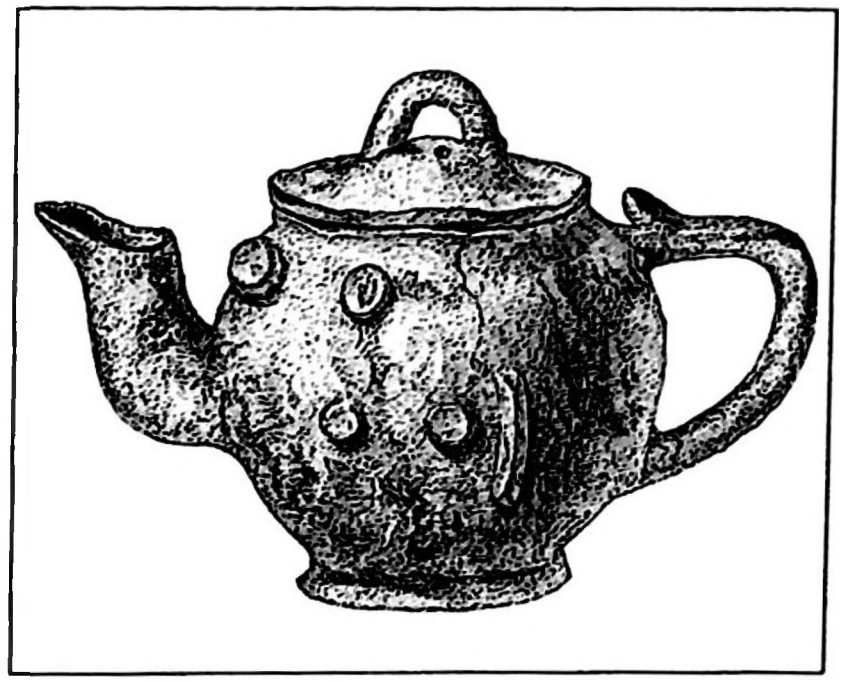
(Turner and Dunbar 1969-70: 182-5). The castle developed from a fifteenth-century tower-house, and continued in occupation in different phases into the nineteenth century. Crogan pottery was present in all deposits over the period of four centuries. Its close association with imported wheel-turned pottery at Breachacha seems to point to its being used in that particular social milieu, as well as in more modest circumstances as might be inferred from Hugh Miller's lyrical account of the discovery of the pieces of crogan in 'The Cave of Francis', *Uamh Fhraing*, where the population of Eigg was massacred by the MacLeods in the sixteenth century (Miller 1874: 24).

After the 'discovery' of Hebridean (crogans and Barvas Ware) pottery in the 1860s, some accounts of it were published up to the time of the First World War. With one or two exceptions, the descriptions concentrate on its distinctly odd appearance by generally accepted standards, and also on the nature of its manufacture. They seem to sound a note of curiosity or sometimes condescension, typical of the self-confident late Victorian age that delighted in discovering colonies of primitive peoples who might be considered as worthy of patronage, philanthropy, charity or firm evangelisation and missionary zeal. That curiosity was, of course, heightened when the objects of charity or mission were located not in the South Seas but within a day's journey of Britain's centres of civilisation.

From the middle of the nineteenth century improved communications by sea and rail brought tourists in increasing numbers to the Hebrides. Scholars and archaeologists mingled with the sportsmen and the curious among the new moneyed classes. The formation of the MacBrayne company after 1851 made the Hebrides accessible from the Clyde, and as the railway network expanded, steamer services linked up the railhead ports of Oban, Mallaig and Kyle of Lochalsh with the Long Island. Many of the new types of visitor found much to interest them in the way of prehistoric remains, and 'Notes' and 'Comments' articles on these began to appear in the press and archaeological journals. Some of these articles were given a new dimension, consciously or unconsciously, through the influence of developing disciplines such as Folklore Studies and Anthropology. The new breed of scholars in the field in the late nineteenth century studied and collected material culture of indigenous and aboriginal people, whose tools and techniques seemed to differ little from those used by Mesolithic and Neolithic man as revealed by his archaeological remains (e.g. Mitchell 1897-8b: 182).

The survival of 'the past in the present' in nineteenth-century Scotland inspired a book by that name and also laid the foundations of the ethnological collections of the National Museums. The author and architect of this work, Dr, later Sir, Arthur Mitchell, travelled widely in the Northern and Western Isles in his capacity as Deputy Commissioner in Lunacy in Scotland. Mitchell went into the field and identified, described, drew, measured and published what he regarded as primitive survivals. In Lewis, Mitchell travelled with Captain Frederick William Leopold





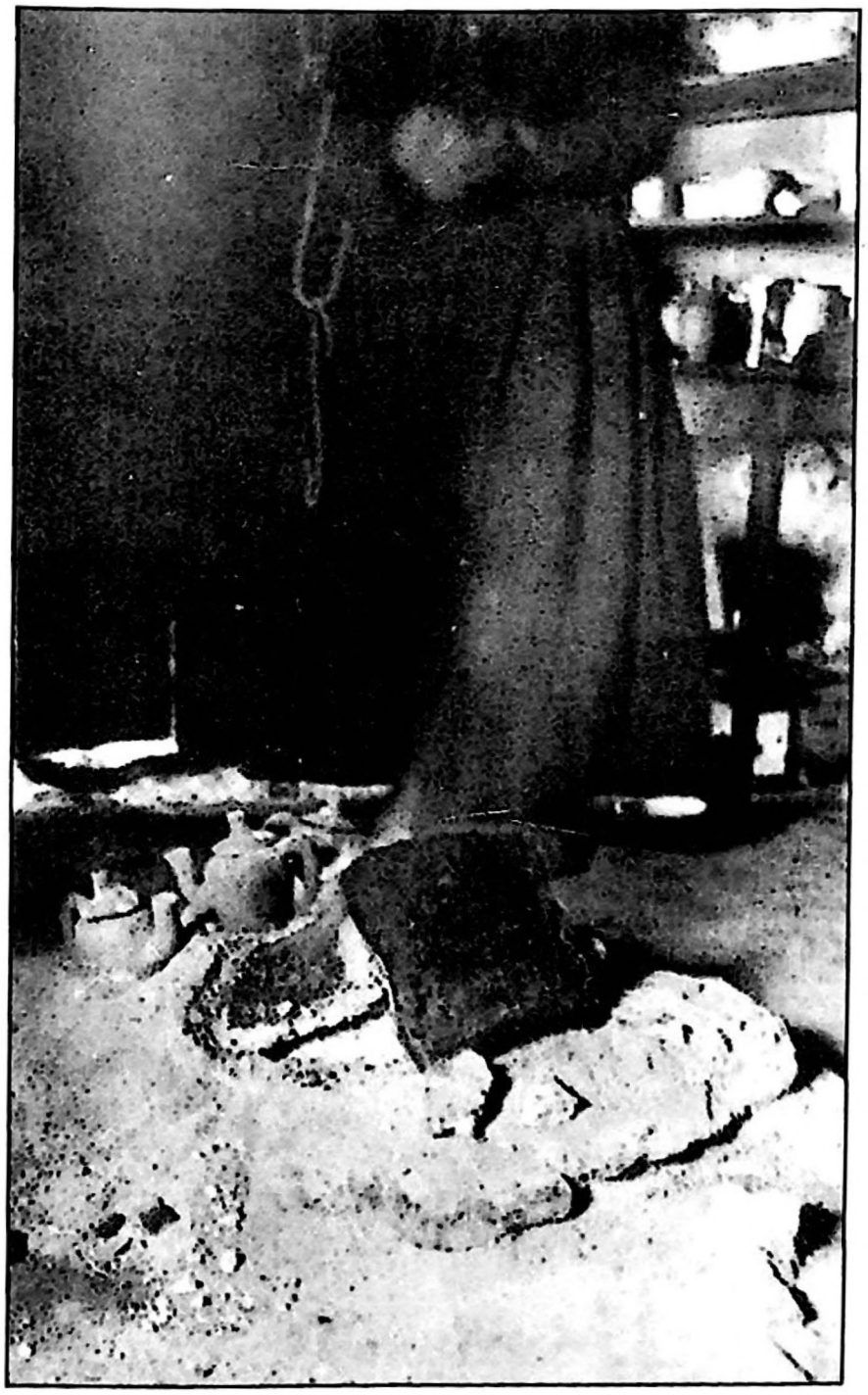
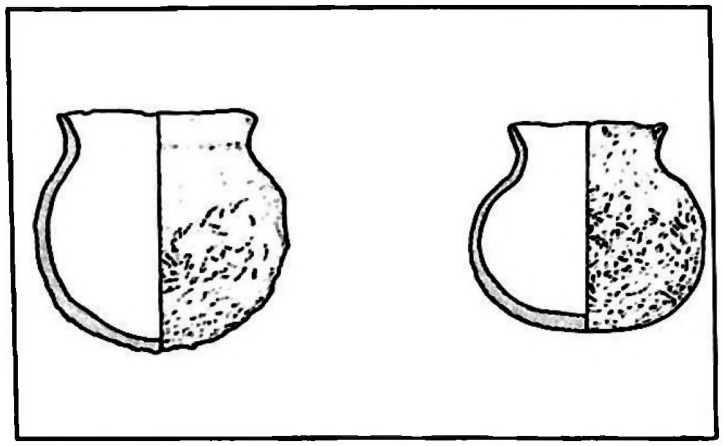


Fig. 5: Crogan (20 cm high) from Barvas, early nineteenth century, collected by Dr (later Sir) Arthur Mitchell in 1860, as illustrated in his book, *The Past in the Present* (1880). The style of the engraving might have been suggestive of the primitive and exotic, to the Victorian mind.

Fig 6: Teapot (14cm high) made in Barvas *c.* 1860 and bought by Dr Arthur Mitchell as illustrated in *The Past in the Present* (1880). It was described there as imitating Staffordshire pottery, but was probably influenced, rather, by lowland Scottish wares.

Fig 7: Barvas Ware teapots newly fired in peat on a central hearth, in Barvas, Lewis, 1907. On the dresser behind the figure, two more teapots can be seen together with factory-made pottery. Above the fire, the *slabhruidh* (pot links and hook) can be seen. (Photo: *Mrs E. C. Quiggin, by courtesy of Edinburgh Central Library, I. F. Grant Collection.*)



Figs. 8 and 9: Two small crogans. That on the left (11 cm high) contained the seventeenth-century coin-hoard found near Stornoway. That on the right (9 cm high) was found in sand-dunes. Both show the marks of grass temper or of sitting in the grass in the unfired state.

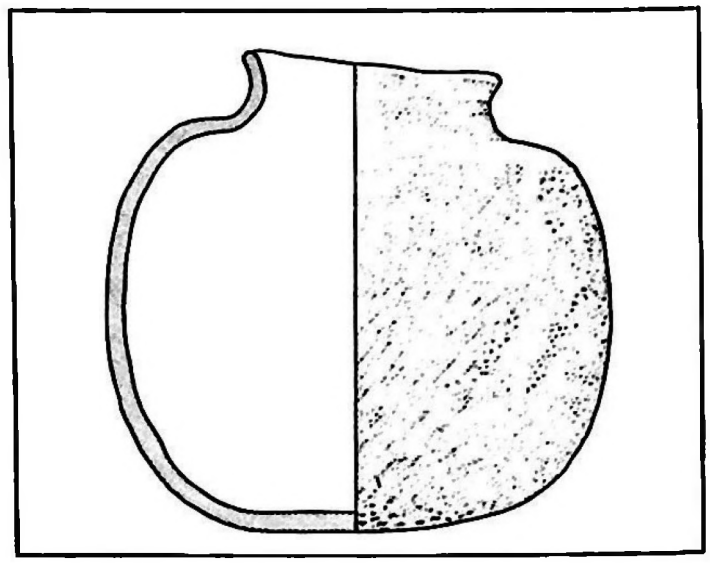


Fig. 10: Crogan (24 cm high) of nineteenth-century date from Lewis, showing characteristic profile and asymmetric shape, the marks of scraping down from the final stages of manufacture before firing, and the slight scar left by a fastening at the neck.

Thomas, then on the Admiralty survey of the coasts of Orkney, Shetland and the Hebrides. Thomas himself was a Corresponding Member of the Society of Antiquaries at the time and a prolific contributor to the Society's *Proceedings*. Thomas tended to concentrate on houses and shielings, and Mitchell on goods, chattels and tools such as ploughs, spinning and weaving instruments, querns, mills and pottery. The latter made the first collection of crogans and Barvas Ware, which he presented to the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland.

In the second of his Rhind Lectures, delivered to the Society of Antiquaries in 1876, and subsequently published as the second chapter of his book *The Past in the Present*, Mitchell described his 'discovery' of both crogans and Barvas Ware:

> When I visited the Island of Lewis in 1863, I had the advantage of the company of Captain F. W. L. Thomas. In driving from Uig to the village of Barvas on the west coast, we passed a stone-breaker sitting at the roadside eating his dinner out of a vessel which struck us as remarkable. We found it, on closer examination, to be even a stranger thing than it seemed to us, as we first caught sight of it. We waited till the stone-breaker had eaten its contents, and then we carried it off; but we had acquired little information regarding its history, because the stone-breaker and we had no language in common.
>
> Before reaching Barvas we had a detour to make and some business to transact. When we got there, we found that our acquaintance of the roadside had preceded us. He had hurried home to tell of the profitable sale he had made, and while our horse was feeding, we were visited by many people carrying vessels like the one we had bought, and offering them for sale.
>
> They are called *Craggans*, and we learned that, at a period by no means remote,

> they had been made in many of the villages of the Lewis, though at the time of our visit their manufacture was chiefly, if not entirely, confined to Barvas (Mitchell 1880: 25-6).

When they returned by arrangement after two days, Mitchell and Thomas were shown by a Mrs MacLeod her traditional pottery-making methods. They were told that it was women's work to make the pottery. She had also prepared for them (apparently being 'proud of her skill and anxious to display it') the rustic versions of commercial pottery, teacups, teapots, milk jugs and sugar basins. These imitative objects they subsequently dubbed 'Barvas Pottery' and 'Barvas Ware'; and this type of pottery, sold as souvenirs, continued to interest tourists and scholars for the next half century or so (Fig. 6).

Mitchell's interests and turn of phrase are important pointers to contemporary ideas, and this 'discovery' of crogans and Barvas Ware and also its subsequent neglect are symptoms of wider prevailing ideas and attitudes. His lectures reveal that he and Thomas were examining contemporary observable phenomena which could be deemed to throw light on prehistoric material and techniques. Mitchell developed his view of the pottery as he collected more of it and placed it in the National Museum of Antiquities for posterity. His implied viewpoint, which was more anthropological than archaeological in that it rested on assumptions such as the continuity, inheritance and unbroken succession of the particular phenomenon of the making of crogans, was expressed succinctly in terms of their

> . . . archaic character chiefly in respect of a certain rudeness in their form and purpose, but they are in reality not archaic, having all been made and used in this country by persons of this time. They have therefore been called neo-archaic, and the study of them throws light on the study of many objects which are really archaic' (Mitchell 1897-8b: 181).

Mitchell undoubtedly impressed his listeners: in a Presidential Address to the Inverness Scientific Society in the following year, the Inverness architect, Alexander Ross, summarised the gist of Mitchell's case, saying:

> In many respects the science dealing with ancient remains was going through a transition phase, for the ordinarily received classification had been rudely shaken by the lectures of Dr Arthur Mitchell, who had shown that the rudest manufactures and implements might co-exist with the most advanced art' (Ross 1875-80: 49).

This is not the place to try to describe or explain the history of archaeology, but reference should perhaps be made to the quickening of pace in archaeological studies in the second half of the nineteenth century, owing to the enormous influence of Darwinian theories of evolution and progress. The theory of evolution was not Darwin's own invention, but the publication of *The Origin of Species* in 1859

made an impact on the popular as well as on the scholarly mind, and took the ideas on evolution out of the narrow battle of Christian orthodoxy against science. It is not without significance that the sub-title of Mitchell's Rhind Lectures was 'What is Civilisation?'. His theory was that evolution and progress took place unevenly; that men co-existed in different stages of 'civilisation' from the primitive to the sophisticated, although their powers of intellect might well be similar. Hence, although Mitchell could not converse with the roadman from whom he bought Barvas pottery in 1863 because of the language barrier, he recognised his qualities and similarly the intelligence of the maker of that pottery who, for all her primitive material culture, was 'full of shrewdness, a theologian in her way, well versed in church quarrels and in the obligations of the Poor Law, and quite able to become well versed in a score of other things if the need and opportunity had arisen' (Mitchell 1880: 32).

After Arthur Mitchell's early essays, little effort was made further to record or investigate the Hebridean crogan ware, even for comparative purposes. The keepers of the National Museum of Antiquities such as that great pioneer keeper, Joseph Anderson (in office from 1869 to 1913), directed their energies and interests elsewhere, and his successors in office were more interested in Roman archaeology in accordance with the intellectual fashion of the day (cf. Anderson 1890: 138). The results have been twofold: in the first place, much ethnological information which could have been recorded in the field at that time cannot now be recovered, and in the second, little care was taken to record information in the catalogues and to classify the pottery itself. Although the crogans and Barvas Ware were correctly accessioned in 1863, they were wrongly described in the printed Catalogue of 1892. This initiated an unfortunate process of cumulative error in cataloguing which has been allowed to continue unchecked as the pottery collections of the National Museums have grown, and which is now being rectified while it is still possible to gather the remaining oral information about the pottery in the field.

Crogans and Barvas Ware did, however, catch the attention of ceramics collectors after the publicity that it received from Mitchell and his colleagues. The pottery's inclusion in the large two-volume work, *The Ceramic Art of Great Britain,* published in 1878, played an important part in this. The author, Llewellyn Jewitt, who was also a well-known tourist-guide writer, explained that his first source of information on handmade Hebridean pottery was a Scottish archaeologist (Jewitt 1878: 522-23). Barvas Ware continued to be made in some quantities until the time of the First World War, a trade sustained, according to a parliamentary report of 1902, by 'curio hunters'. It was advertised for sale in the national press, it sold in Stornoway, and it was sent for national exhibition in Edinburgh in 1908 and Glasgow in 1911. When the Cambridge Celtic scholar Edmund Crosby Quiggin spent two months learning Hebridean Gaelic in Lewis in 1907, his young wife—it was in fact their honeymoon—was able to photograph, despite the obvious technical

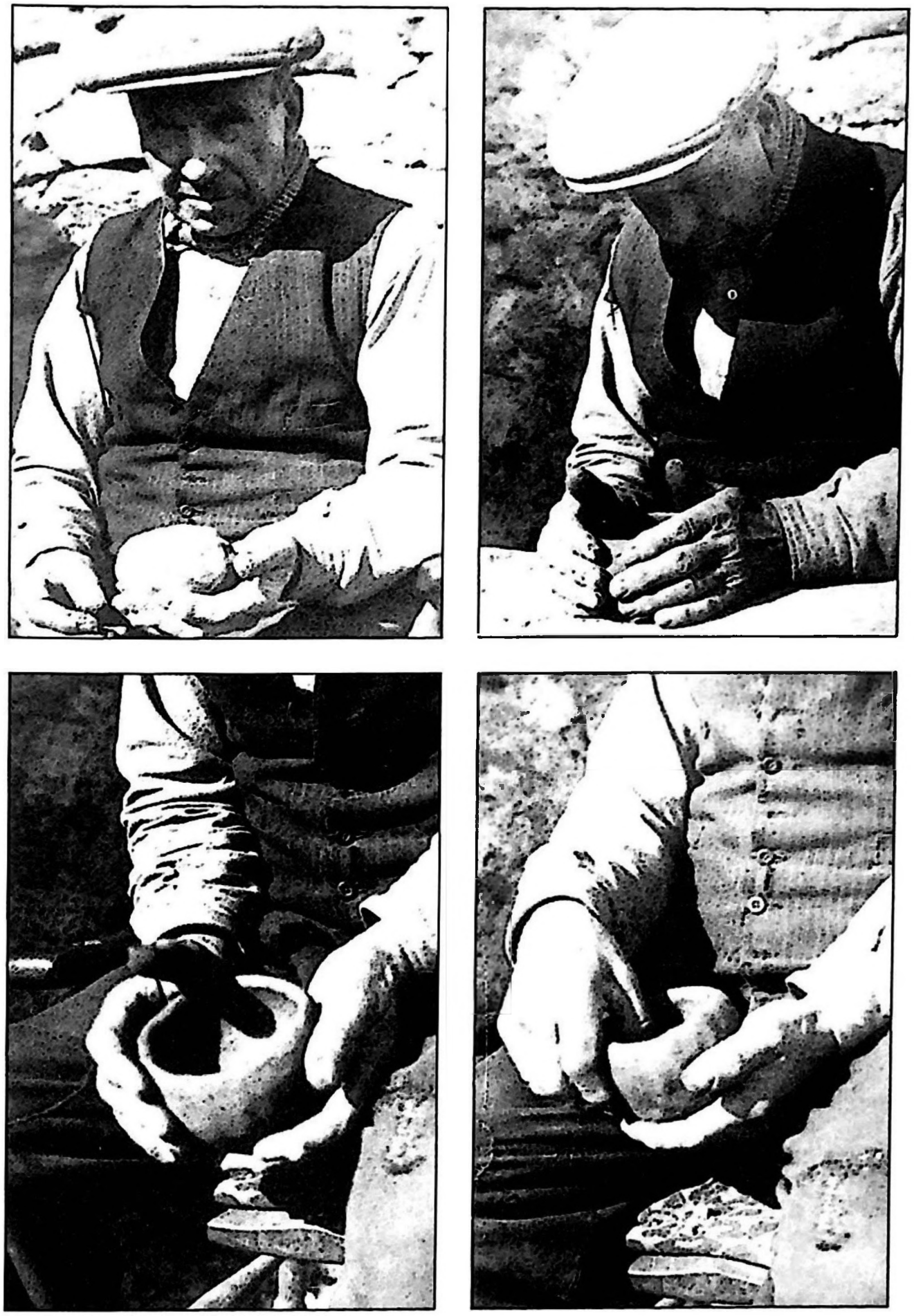


Fig. 11: Hugh MacNeil of Balevullin, Tiree, demonstrating in 1942 stages of making a small crogan. His mother, Flora MacKinnon (*c.* 1840-1920), was one of the last crogan-makers in Tiree, and had inherited the tradition from her own mother. (Photos: *by Mr George Holleyman, Brighton, by whose kind permission they are reproduced here.*)

difficulties then of using a camera in a windowless interior, some newly fired teapots on a central hearth in Barvas (Fig. 7). Thereafter, interest in the pottery waned and the archaeologist Dr E. Cecil Curwen commented in 1938: 'With a branch of Woolworths established in Stornoway it is not altogether surprising that in 1937 the writer failed to trace a single specimen of Barvas Ware in the island—apart from what was already in the Callanish Museum' (Curwen 1938: 282). Curwen did not seem to be aware that the continuing manufacture of Barvas pottery was not so much a symptom of deprivation as he suggests (since it was not being made for local use), but was rather a practical response to the odd trade which had developed between the 1860s and the First World War.

Now, in the second half of the twentieth century, crogans and Barvas Ware have passed out of use and are no longer made. The term *crogan* has itself survived in active use in colloquial phrases, mainly to describe food containers such as preserve jars, for example *crogan sioraip, crogan silidh, crogan trèicil* and *crogan meala* demonstrate. The term *crogan* has also commonly been applied to stoneware jars of a standard mass-produced type, that is, cylindrical containers with a slipware glaze finish. These have always had the same style of everted rim as the traditional crogan on which a soft or loose cover could be tied. Jam and preserves were sold until recent years in these jars, which, having been fired at a very high temperature, were tough and durable and could be used for many years for jam-making and for storing other foodstuffs. By extension, the term was used for other forms of food containers: for instance, Donald MacIntyre of South Uist and Paisley referred in one of his songs to *briosgaidean is feòil nan crogan*, 'biscuits and tinned meat' (MacMillan 1968: 291, 397).

The same term, *crogan*, or *cragan*, was used in vernacular Gaelic to describe unglazed earthenware dug up from early settlements or Neolithic burials (e.g. Thomas 1886: fol. 2f). Two accounts, one early nineteenth century and one mid-twentieth century, describe the circumstances of loss and discovery by which *crogain*-like vessels were preserved from an earlier age. The 'Morrison Manuscript', compiled in the early nineteenth century by Donald Morrison, *An Sgoilear Ban*, describes how a MacLeod chieftain of the early seventeenth century buried a treasure of gold in the island of Lewis: the treasure in 'a blackened clay pot' was dug up in 1813 (Macdonald 1975: 32). The same source describes a find of silver in Lewis in 'a black pot' but there is no information on the age of this material (*op cit.*: 78). A clay vessel discovered by chance in the grounds of Stornoway Castle in 1954 contained a hoard of coins, the dates of which suggest burial about 1670 (Kerr 1954-6: 222-3). The crogan (Fig. 8), approximately 11 cm in height and 11 cm in diameter, is in every respect similar to the later crogans whose manufacture we are able to document. This example suggests that at least from the seventeenth until the twentieth centuries therefore, the style and technique of manufacture remained unchanged. This archaeological evidence also provides important confirmation that

Martin Martin's contemporary references in fact relate to crogans as we know them from surviving nineteenth-century examples (MacLeod 1934: 85-6).

The method of making crogans, whether it was the survival of a prehistoric technique or not, has been recorded in some detail in several sources since its first description in 1764. The Reverend Dr John Walker, the 'Moderate' minister and botanist, then described the process of pottery-making in Coll in his report to the Annexed Estates Commissioners (McKay 1980: 171). The clay was dug, usually by hand, from the glacially deposited beds of boulder-clay, and kneaded by hand or beaten with a stick to reduce it to a plastic state, or as one commentator described it in 1833, 'as smooth as glazier's putty' (Cameron 1845: 134). It was formed into a vessel with the fingers, on the ground or on a board, and then left to dry out and cure for a day or two either in the sun or by the hearth (e.g. Fig. 10). For crogans with a narrow mouth, a stick could be used to scrape down the inside, and the very thin walls of many surviving crogans suggests that some such simple spatula was used (e.g. Fig. 11). When it had dried, the vessel was placed in the fire and peats were built up round it and filling it, forming a simple kiln. In Tiree, dry whin and seaweed were said to have been used for firing (Fleming 1923: 205). While the earthenware was red hot, the fire was moved away from it and fresh, skimmed milk was poured into and over the pottery. Accounts differ as to the exact details of this part of the process, but it was said to be done in order to prevent the crogan from being too porous: it put a simple waxy glaze on the finished surface (McGregor 1879-80: 146; Mitchell 1880: 26-8).

The value of clay deposits in different colours and consistencies in areas such as Lewis was long recognised. Tradition today describes how it was used for house-building by bedding stones in the clay as a form of mortar, to which burnt shells might be added as a lime or calcareous element. Before the state-instigated house improvements of the present century, clay was often used for making the floors of houses, and was the favoured material for a smooth threshing floor in the small Hebridean barns as well as in barns on the mainland.

Elsewhere in Scotland there is some evidence of small-scale industry based on local clay deposits, before the Industrial Revolution overtook it. In describing the soils of the Forth basin in the late eighteenth century, an agricultural writer commented: 'In many places, the clay is excellently fitted for making bricks, tiles and a coarse kind of crockery ware' (Belsches 1796: 15). The development of brick and tile works on clay deposits was common in South and East Scotland but rare in the Highlands and Islands. There were exceptional cases. A brick and tile works was established at Garrabost in Lewis in the 1840s as part of the estate improvements of the incoming landlord, Sir James Matheson: about £6,000 was expended on it but it proved to be a costly failure (Macdonald 1978: 41-2). This small industry used the same red clay that had customarily been used for making crogan pottery. The parish minister referred to this tradition in 1833, immediately prior to the setting up of the

brickworks: 'Of the red clay, the indigenous islanders make vessels called Craggans, in which they keep their milk and carry water from the springs' (Cameron 1845: 117).

Although this craft was carried on in each generation by only a few families in the Hebrides, and the products mainly used for domestic purposes, it was not to be regarded as contemptible. The pottery was practical, and suited the economic requirements of time and place, and was a necessity in an age when the Hebrides were suffering severe economic decline. At the same time there were traditions of artistry and higher status that could indicate a decline in the social scale. A song composed about 1875 praises a locality in Point, Lewis, well endowed with its own natural resources of clay, water and fuel, and seems to suggest an aristocratic background for such Hebridean pottery:

> *'S chreadh dheanadh cupan gu deoch thoirt do'n rìgh*
> *R'a fhaighinn an taobh Cnoc Chusbaig.*
> [And there is clay to make a cup fit for a drink for a king,
> To be found beside Cnoc Chusbaig] (MacKenzie 1936: 27).

Another Gaelic praise-song, from Islay, makes a similarly prestigious reference, in that a man of aristocratic lineage is praised in a conventional fashion for his ability to turn the clay into fine red cups (Campbell and Collinson 1969: 146). Good pots were, in fact, admired; a nineteenth-century Lewisman described how the well-formed and well-finished crogans were passed round from house to house to be admired (Thomas 1866: fol. 3). Confirmation of such social attitudes is provided by the occurrence of pottery and crogan ware in the houses and castles of medieval clan chiefs or heads of kindred, indicating that the praise was more than simply literary hyperbole (e.g. Turner and Dunbar 1969-70: 182-5).

No account of crogans would be complete without considering the functions of the pottery in relation to elements of diet. In spite of the vagaries of climate, parts of the Hebrides were of relatively high fertility, especially in the late medieval period. Here, as elsewhere in Scotland, oat and barley crops were of prime importance in feeding the population. In the historical period, therefore, the main constituents of diet, apart from dairy products, have been oatmeal, barley meal, fish and, less frequently, meat. Domestic cooking utensils were few, but pottery vessels must have been common at least in some areas. There were two ways in which they were used for cooking: the pot was placed in the fire itself of stones heated in the fire were put into the pot to boil the contents. Crogans were probably also used in the process of 'graddaning' to dry or parch the grain. This process of drying grain in the house hearth was known as *earraradh*, as opposed to *ealchadh* which described the process of drying grain in the kiln. A Gaelic song collected in Lochaber in the middle of the nineteenth century refers to the three processes of grain drying,

implying that there was a marked difference in quality between kiln-dried grain, *ealchadh*, burnt grain, *gradan*, and parched grain, *earraradh* (Macpherson 1868: 116-17; for further details, see Fenton1982: 85-106). A Gaelic song collected in Lochaber in the middle of the nineteenth century implies such differences in quality between the three types of dried grain

The late seventeenth-century Skyeman, Martin Martin, remarked on the fine red clay in Lewis and on the pottery vessels made by the local women, 'some for boiling meat, and others for preserving their ale, for which they are much better than barrels of wood' (MacLeod 1934: 86). The Reverend John Lane Buchanan, a Church of Scotland missionary minister in the Western Isles in the 1780s, observed that the islanders made a kind of coarse crockery ware which was used for boiling water and for dressing victuals (Buchanan 1793: 112). The storing of ale in pottery containers must have been common while ale was the commonest drink in the Highlands and Islands (e.g. MacLeod 1934: 295). It may be no accident that the phrase *crogan leanna* is still current in Gaelic though most frequently used now to refer to disposable metal beer and lager cans.

Dairy products such as milk, butter and cheese were a vital element in Highland and Island diet. Much of the work of butter- and cheese-making was carried on when the cattle and sheep were on the hill grazings in the summer months. While the menfolk stayed in the farming or crofting townships to cultivate the arable crops in the summer months, the womenfolk and children occupied the shielings in the moors and hills to look after the animals. It has been mentioned above that the shieling system survived longest in Lewis which was also one of the last areas in which pottery vessels were made and used.

A plentiful supply of containers for milk, butter and cheese was essential for the shieling economy. Wooden vessels have been commonly used in the last hundred years or so, and the more modern shieling huts were built with recessed stone shelves to keep wooden containers cool. Hardly any shieling sites have been excavated so it is not possible to assess confidently the importance of clay vessels for dairy products. Tradition describes the crogans being used to transport milk and butter from the shieling to the township across the moor, loaded in a creel on the woman's or child's back and wrapped in damp moss to keep them cool and safe from damage (Mitchell 1880: 46-7; Ross 1875-80: 92). The term *crogan ìme* for a butter container is still in common use; and the phrase *blas a' chragain* is based on the experience that the contents, such as butter, at the bottom of the crogan acquired a sour taste from the earthenware and were rancid. The idiomatic phrase *ghabh e blas a' chragain dheth,* for example, indicates that the subject has tired of the object or it has gone sour on him. Organic residues in pottery and the tainting of food have been described elsewhere (Cheape 1988: 22-3).

Wooden containers of staved construction, or carved out of the solid, became common in the Highlands in the eighteenth century and the former, craftsman-

made type, rapidly acquired prestige value. This is reflected in an account of the dairy work on the West Highland estate of Gairloch at the turn of the nineteenth century, in which 'coarse earthenware' had been supplanted by wooden dishes, churns, pails and casks. This was on an improved farm with a herd of sixty cows and followers which were sent to the shielings during the summer. The implication may be that the small crofters had still been using clay vessels here around 1800, even though the area was better wooded than the almost treeless islands (Mackenzie 1922: 14).

Before such later forms of wooden staved vessels came to be commonly used for churning, during the eighteenth century, for example, skin bags or clay vessels were used as churns in many areas of the Highlands. These older methods lingered on until between the wars in some parts where wood was less abundant or where economic circumstances prevented the acquisition of such craftsman-made gear. One or two examples of clay churns have survived, such as those in the Glasgow Museums and Art Galleries and the National Museums of Scotland. One of these, from the island of Coll, measures 36 cm in height and 33 cm in diameter (Mann 1907-8: 326). Although these churns appear to be the largest of surviving Hebridean crogans, they are otherwise similar in shape and characteristics to the crogans except for a deliberately formed perforation in the side, as in the example from Coll. These holes were presumably necessary for the escape of the gases generated after the churning was begun. The method was partly to fill the vessel with milk, to tie a cloth or piece of skin tightly over the circular mouth and to rock the vessel backwards and forwards until the butter was made. A late eighteenth-century account from Skye describes the work as occasionally taking up to nine or ten hours (Mitchell 1897-8a: 16). This was a task generally performed by women and, characteristically, was accompanied by song to lighten the task. (A short account of butter-making in Melness, Sutherland, about 1870, describes a sheepskin bag containing the milk being thrown from one to another in the 'ceilidh house' until the butter formed [Gow 1981: 385]).

Crogans were used undoubtedly also for milking, although this is a detail which is barely recorded in historical sources. The few references which we have derive from Tiree where the making of pottery survived until the mid-twentieth century (Fig. 10), the quality of the clay deposits there approximating to good china clays. These describe their former use as 'milking pails', and their residual use in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in the treatment for tuberculosis which was then rife in island communities. For this, small globular clay vessels were being made, into which milk was drawn directly from the cow; they were then warmed in the fire and the milk given to consumptives. Milk treated in this way was known as *bainne gun ghaoth*, or 'milk without wind' (Mitchell 1880: 28). This description was almost certainly not folkloristic fancy and was confirmed by the memories of an older generation in the 1970s when recorded by the School of Scottish Studies.

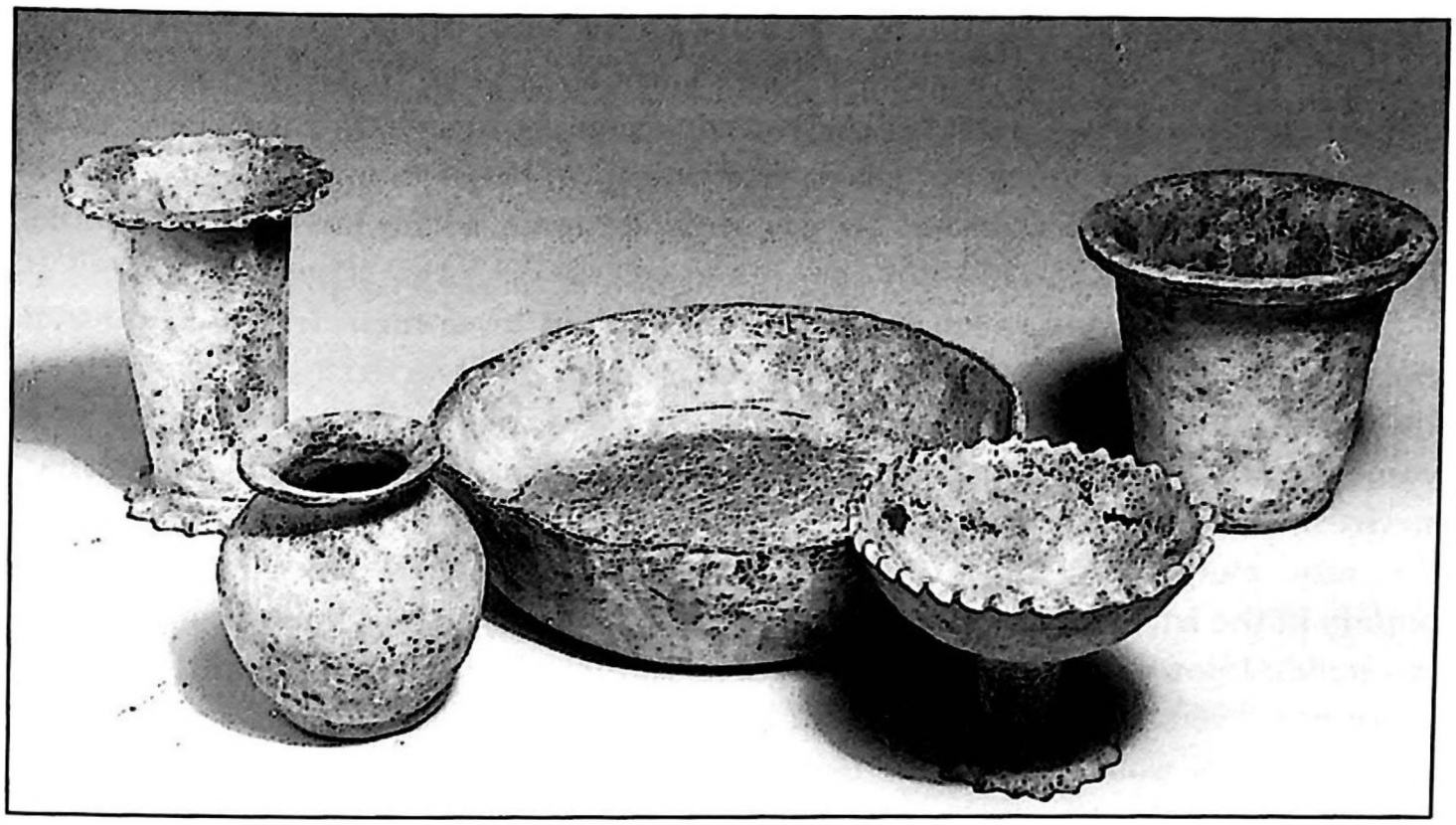


Fig 12: Set of Barvas Ware made in 1935 by Mrs Catherine MacLean, Brue, Barvas, for A. D. Lacaille(Wellcome Institute). The cream-coloured milk glaze is still prominent on these unused pieces. Mrs MacLean (Catriona Mhurchaidh Dhomhnaill Iain 'ic Iomhair) inherited the tradition of pottery-making from her mother, of Park, Barvas, who was probably the last person to be involved in the making of Barvas pottery on a large scale. (Photo: *Natioal Museums of Scotland.*)

Possibly owing to the lapse of time, 'milk without wind' was then sometimes described as a mild dietary cure rather than a specific (Sinclair 1971: 28; Cameron 1845: 134). The properties of warm milk in crogans are also praised in fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century descriptions (Gillies 1911: 20; Thomas 1879-80: 391).

Apart from the storage of liquids such as water, milk and ale, crogans were used for preparing and keeping fish oil for lighting. The process was described as it existed in Skye in the 1820s when flat-based crogans holding three to four gallons were used. When the creels of fish were brought up from the boats on the beach, the women gutted them and threw the livers into crogans where the mixture was left to decay into a partially liquid state. They then put the decayed livers onto the fire to dissolve them completely, poured off the pure liquid oil into another crogan, and threw away the refuse. The oil was described as being dark like port wine, but thin and effective. It was put into the lamps with a wick made of the pith of rushes (MacGregor 1879-80: 145-6).

Crogan pottery was not a unique survival on Europe's north-western seaboard. Similar traditions survived to be recorded in Brittany and Denmark, for example, with curious elements both of comparison and contrast. The black ware of Denmark, the so-called 'Jutland pots', were made in most parts of the peninsula, but survived until the twentieth century in western Jutland only. As with crogan pottery

and Barvas Ware, their manufacture was always the work of the womenfolk. They were also formed by hand without a potter's wheel, scraped down and smoothed with simple tools and were slowly dried outside or on the hearth. But they were fired in a sealed kiln, not a fire of peat or turf: this gave them their distinctive black colour rather than the reds and browns of earthenware which has oxydised while firing (Steensberg 1939: 113-146).

In all these accounts, a keynote is the role played by women. In the same way that certain tasks in the family and in the community were the exclusive province of the womenfolk, the making of crogans and Barvas Ware was always carried out by women, a fact given specific mention in 1695, and as true when a potter made what might have been the last crogans and Barvas Ware to order in 1935 (Fig. 12). Common elements in the historical sources are that only a few families made pottery in the Islands, that it was the preserve of the women, and that the technique was handed down from mother to daughter. In the same way as the extemporising of song and verse in the *orain-luaidh* or chorus songs, the making of crogans was an art and skill of women which has been disregarded, or under-valued; there was no term in Gaelic for the women crogan-makers (e.g. MacDonald 1741: 53). Their numbers were probably never significant. Although the first-hand descriptions, by visitors, of pottery-making in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries do consistently suggest that the numbers of women potters had dwindled (implying that there were once many of them), this goes against the evidence that their number in fact was always relatively small. Where there were good deposits of clay, a local family would maintain the art through successive generations from mother to daughter, supply generally being sufficient to satisfy demand, until the domestic revolution of the nineteenth century introduced alternative utensils.

Today, crogans and Barvas Ware are appreciated in museums by archaeologists and historians as manifestations of a continuity from a past revealed otherwise only by the excavator's trowel. They are now only curiosities in the islands where they were made. *Crogain* have been transformed in speech into items of our disposable culture, and the 'clay cups fit for a royal table' fossilised as an image in song.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Any work which purports to take a retrospective glance at aspects of Scottish tradition from a modern standpoint and neglects the word of mouth must surely be the poorer for it. The accumulation of material on which this article is based has been helped immeasurably by advice and information sought from and generously given by the following people to whom I wish to record my grateful thanks: the late Mr Donald Macdonald, Mr Alex Murdo Morrison, Rev. William Matheson, the late Mr John A. Smith, the late Mr Eric Cregeen, Mr George Holleyman, Dr Margaret Mackay, Miss Morag MacLeod, Mr Graeme Cruickshank, Professor Alexander Fenton, the late Dr R. B. K. Stevenson, Mr George Dalgleish, Mr Trevor Cowie, Mr A. D. Cameron, Mr Iain MacDonald, Mrs Roderick MacDonald, Mrs Betty MacRae, Mrs Mina Smith, Miss Joan MacKenzie, Miss Hope MacDougall, Mr James Shaw Grant, Mrs Rosemary

MacKenzie, Mr Donald Mackay, Miss Anne MacSween, Mr Patrick Topping, Dr Jessie Sym, Mrs Thelma Aitken and Mr Alasdair Begg.
For the illustrations, I wish to thank Mr Anthony Shearman, City Librarian, Edinburgh Central Library, and Mr Ian Larner and Miss Doreen Moyes of the National Museums of Scotland. I would also like to thank Miss Helen Jackson of the National Museums for her drawings of crogan pottery (Figs. 8, 9 and 11).

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