

CLACH IC CAOILTE & CREAG ASDUINN

In carrying out the research for this book one thing became abundantly clear when examining the Scottish stones of strength. Although historically, the demise of a stone lifting culture can be reasonably put down to the Victorian period it did indeed linger on in some places. North Uist is an excellent example of this, where stone lifting as a part of Gaelic culture existed to as late as the early 20th century. One poignant theme permeates through any conversation with an elderly Gaelic speaking inhabitant of any of the Scottish islands and that is the fact that a stone lifting culture was so well known and participated by the generation of their fathers and grand-fathers.

In this context, a book on stone lifting written in the 1940's would have indeed exposed far more traditional stones as well as highlighting a unique culture. The authors of this work are a generation or two late in obtaining the full picture of traditional Scottish Stone Lifting and this is reflected in the loss of a number of stones with Clach Ic Caoilte being one. The stone still exists, it has not been removed however the locals, aware that such a stone is still there, no longer know it's exact whereabouts. It is neither lost but neither is it known and despite serious attempts to identify this particular stone it is allusive, but it is still there.

Should this degree of uncertainty debar the inclusion of Clach Ic Caoilte alongside the likes on the Inver stone is a question that requires to be addressed by the individual lifter himself but if visiting North Uist, it would be well worth the short drive to Creag Asduinn at Paible, the location of Clach Ic Caoilte. Wander the slopes of Creag Asduinn and search for a suitable stone, lift it and relish the history and mystique of this very special place.



The summit Creag Asduinn now known as Creag Hasten.

The village of Paible is situated on the west coast of North Uist and from the main approach road Creag Asduinn can be clearly seen tucked into the south western section amongst the many farming crofts. The history of the Creag reveals that at one time in the past it was used for Christian worship prior to the building of a church and there are many tales of fairies and goblins frequenting it to such an extent that a local farmer named Angus MacDonald has stated that when he was younger he was frightened to venture anywhere near its flat level summit. What makes the Creag so important is its position in ancient Gaelic folklore which involves the lifting of a stone known as Clach Ic Caoilte.

At the long end of the great world Creag Asduinn was situated in the majestic ocean on the flat plain of the seabed known as An Domhain (the beginning place). This was the home of Manan who was the son of Lir (Lidhir), the king of the sea. One day Manan asked the son of Caoilte (Ic Caoilte) who was a Fomorian (a semi divine race who preceded the Gods) to take the stone of destiny (the Lia Fail) and return it to Tara, the high seat of the Kings in Ireland.

Manan told the son of Caoilte that he should take no longer than one thousand years and one day to return the stone or else there would be consequences. The son of Caoilte began his quest to return the stone to Tara however on his journey, for some reason or another, he became distracted and forgot entirely about his promise to return to Creag Asduinn within the allotted time.

Manan was not pleased when Ic Caoilte returned one year and one day late. He shouted at him telling him that as punishment he had to lift a large stone, shoulder it and then carry it and place it upon the highest spire of his palace. Manan pointed to a large black rock and demanded that the punishment be carried out forthwith. Ic Caoilte approached the stone and lifted it with ease (as they were under water), then shouldered it and climbed to the top most spire of the palace whereupon Manan immediately drained the ocean of water and the true heavy weight of the stone became excessive for Ic Caoilte who dropped it onto the sea bed. He again repeated the task but each time he reached the highest spire, the water was again drained. This continued for exactly one year and one day when Ic Caoilte dropped down dead through exhaustion.

This is the bare bones of the story of Clach Ic Caoilte and Creag Asduinn although there are a number of variances, one such being that the water was not drained but the spires protruded from the water's surface making the task impossible. Another variance involves the length of time of the punishment. Regardless, there is indeed another story as how the Creag became to be placed on North Uist and Gaelic folklore apart there are also references to Creag Asduinn being the great kettle of the Ocean with associations to Thor and Odin.

In so far that the explanation of Creag Asduinn is purely mythical there is indeed a Clach Ic Caoilte and part of its lifting history is known. The MacVicar's were known as an established North Uist family who established themselves on the island in the 15th Century having moved from Kilmun in Argyll. The Clan MacVicar were known for their individual strength and indeed Donald MacVicar was the last person known to lift Clach Ic Caoilte circa 1820.

The location of the stone was known up to the early 20th Century when it was pointed out to Angus John MacDonald who was regarded as the last of the great Gaelic Sennachies (Story Teller). MacDonald was born in North Uist in 1900. He was co-author of a book published in 1984 titled "The Hebridean Connection" which was published privately in the USA and which is in essence a collection of known Gaelic stories, some folklore, some true as recited by MacDonald. As with men of strength, those who could retain the detailed and lengthy Gaelic stories were highly revered in this culture. To be known as a Sennachie was indeed a great honour and MacDonald's book tells of many stories of stone lifting and strength within the Paible area.

MacDonald confirms the Clach Ic Caoilte as a large dark stone situated on the slopes of Creag Asduinn which had been for centuries used as a test of strength for local men.

Returning to the opening preamble about this stone being lost, it is still there but cannot be identified. The pace of change on the island is extremely slow and there would be absolutely

no reason for the removal of the stone from Creag Asduinn and if it had been this would have been known about.

Having examined the texts thoroughly as well as conducting a search of the site at Creag Asduinn it is clear that one would be looking for a large dark stone on the slopes of the hill. It is surprisingly not a particularly large area to cover with the only aspect to consider being the build up of soil over the years. The stone is likely to be partially covered in soil due to the westerly winds blowing sand from the nearby beach which would be deposited on the Creag. Experience dictates that when searching for such a stone, it is more than likely semi buried and in an unusual situation.



Weight would be a consideration but shape would not. This said, there are one or two likely candidates. Sitting on the south western slopes, which is also perhaps the best sheltered area of the Creag from the prevailing winds, a large boulder is situated near to a large outcrop of rock. Its original position was initially difficult to discern as the stone was leaning against the rock to such an extent that it initially appeared that they were joined. Further examination revealed the stone to be separate and not part of the rock. This certainly was unusual and if I was to stone lift on the Creag, this sheltered area would be my preferred choice. The obviousness of looking for a stone on the flat level summit of Creag Asduinn should be weighed up against the fact that the text reference mentions that the Clach Ic Caoilte was situated on the slopes of the Creag.

This stone, perhaps in the region of 350 lbs may not be the stone but then again it might be. There are actually few options but then again, if visited and indeed lifted, local attention may well be drawn to the Brotherhood of the Stone and perhaps some local person may indeed through a quirk a fate say one day “that’s not the stone, it’s over there”. Truth is stranger than fiction and if does happen one day, the lifter who manages to identify the stone and then lift it will be remembered for time ever lasting among the greats of stone lifting and their name would also be etched into Gaelic folklore.

In a strange quirk of association, Angus John MacDonald joined the Kilmarnock Burgh Police in 1926. Some 70 years later I was a Sergeant at Kilmarnock probably locking up the later generations of families known to MacDonald.

As an aside, and to perhaps show some degree of association between the ***Brotherhood of the Stone*** and the ***Sennachies*** of Gaelic culture I find the following oath of the Sennachie extremely poignant and relevant to all stone lifters.

Instruction through vows

To preserve inviolate the history of the fathers

To pass it along without bias by instruction

From mouth to mouth, from knee to knee

The witness and heritage most precious

In the power of the free as opposed to the un-free

Without injury to any person or thing

Without twisting the truth in opposing decit

Without strengthening evil, without weakening justice

So long as the breath is warm and blood in the body

To the awakening of the Fionn

I would like to think that throughout all parts of this book on stone lifting, messrs Crawford, Davis and Martin and have adhered to this vow as indeed all who have had the privilege of lifting a traditional Scottish Stone.

A number of other stones are mentioned within “The Hebridean Connection”, all situated in the Paible area.

It is known that the “Weight of Neil son of Uis” was a local testing stone that for some reason or another was built into the walls of the local school which in now the single shop in the village.

Another stone, associated with Clach Ic Caoilte is known as the “Weight of the plain”. To the east of Creag Asduinn an expanse of flat machair is obviously the plain that is referred to. As to a stone? Angus MacDonald, the local farmer confirms the existence of a testing stone which was lifted by local men many years ago and is situated near to a stone sheep pen.



Again, similar to Clach Ic Caoilte, the Weight of the plain is still there but cannot be identified. Detailed search of this expanse could be rewarded by finding an obvious stone however without local identification it would be a futile exercise.

The Plain from Creag Asduinn

