

A DISPUTED EARLY-MEDIEVAL INSCRIBED STONE FROM BARRY, VALE OF GLAMORGAN (Figs. 14–17)

During excavations by Glamorgan-Gwent Archaeological Trust in 1988, a stone with various incisions and scratches was found (Figs. 14–15). Some of these incisions resemble runic and ogam characters.¹ The excavation was at Atlantic Trading Estate, Barry (Vale of Glamorgan, formerly South Glamorgan) around 10 km SW. of Cardiff (NGR ST 134 672). The site is at the south-western (seaward) end of a short peninsula that juts out into the Bristol Channel near the mouth of the River Severn. Excavation concentrated on a mainly Bronze-age settlement by a natural beach harbour and a nearby late-Roman and early-medieval cemetery where 45 burials dating from the late 3rd century to the late 6th century were excavated.² The latest phase of activity on the settlement site consisted of some stakeholes and pits which produced no dating evidence apart from being characterized by a lack of prehistoric material. The excavator, one of the present authors, felt that they could indicate some sort of early-medieval activity or settlement, but this opinion is disputed by other GGAT archaeologists.³ One of these pits produced the stone that is the subject of this note. The stone had broken and collapsed into the pit which was filled with burnt material. The stone itself also has darker scorched areas on its face. The feature was interpreted as a hearth and it might be suggested that the stone served as a 'hotplate' for baking.

The ten fragments of stone join to form an apparently virtually complete roughly oval slab of fine-grained reddish sandstone 0.52 m × 0.30 m, and around 35 mm thick. One side has been worked flat and smooth, the other left rough. A series of scratches and marks are visible on the smooth face of the stone: two areas are of particular interest.

Near the middle of the smooth side of the slab are a series of rather hesitant incisions that are about 1 to 2 mm wide and less than 1 mm deep (Fig. 16). It should be noted that these incisions look somewhat less clear to the naked eye than they appear on the drawing and in the photograph. The incisions cut through the darker burnt surface of the slab. Two of the 'characters' of this 'inscription' could be interpreted as runes, perhaps † or ‡ and ʞ or ✱.

Readings of 'liki' or 'æji' might therefore be possible if these were read as Anglo-Saxon runes. A reading as **liRi** might be possible if these incisions were read as Scandinavian runes. Given the extreme uncertainty of the inscription one hesitates to attempt much in the way of interpretation but some of these transliterations are at least phonologically plausible. If nothing else the incisions seem intended to *look like* runes.

By the edge of the slab there are a series of six notches that resemble an ogam inscription (Fig. 17). The burnt area of the slab does not extend this far so it is not possible to know if these incisions cut through the burnt surface of the slab. They are more obviously cut as opposed to scratched like the runic letters and they are up to 4 mm wide

¹ We are grateful for the comments of Michael Barnes, Ray Page, Jan Ragnar Hagland and Judith Jesch who examined the stone, particularly the possible runes, on 1.12.98. The discussion in this note of course represents the views of the present writers. [It should be noted that none of these experienced runologists were convinced that these really are traces of an early-medieval runic inscription after personal examination of the stone. *Ed.*]

² *Medieval Archaeol.*, 31–33 (1987–89), *Medieval Britain and Ireland* in 1986 (no. 310), 1987 (no. 326) and 1988 (no. 299).

³ Pers. comm. Gareth Dowdell, GGAT, 23.2.98. It should also be mentioned that Gareth Dowdell and others at GGAT are also sceptical about the identification of these possible inscriptions.

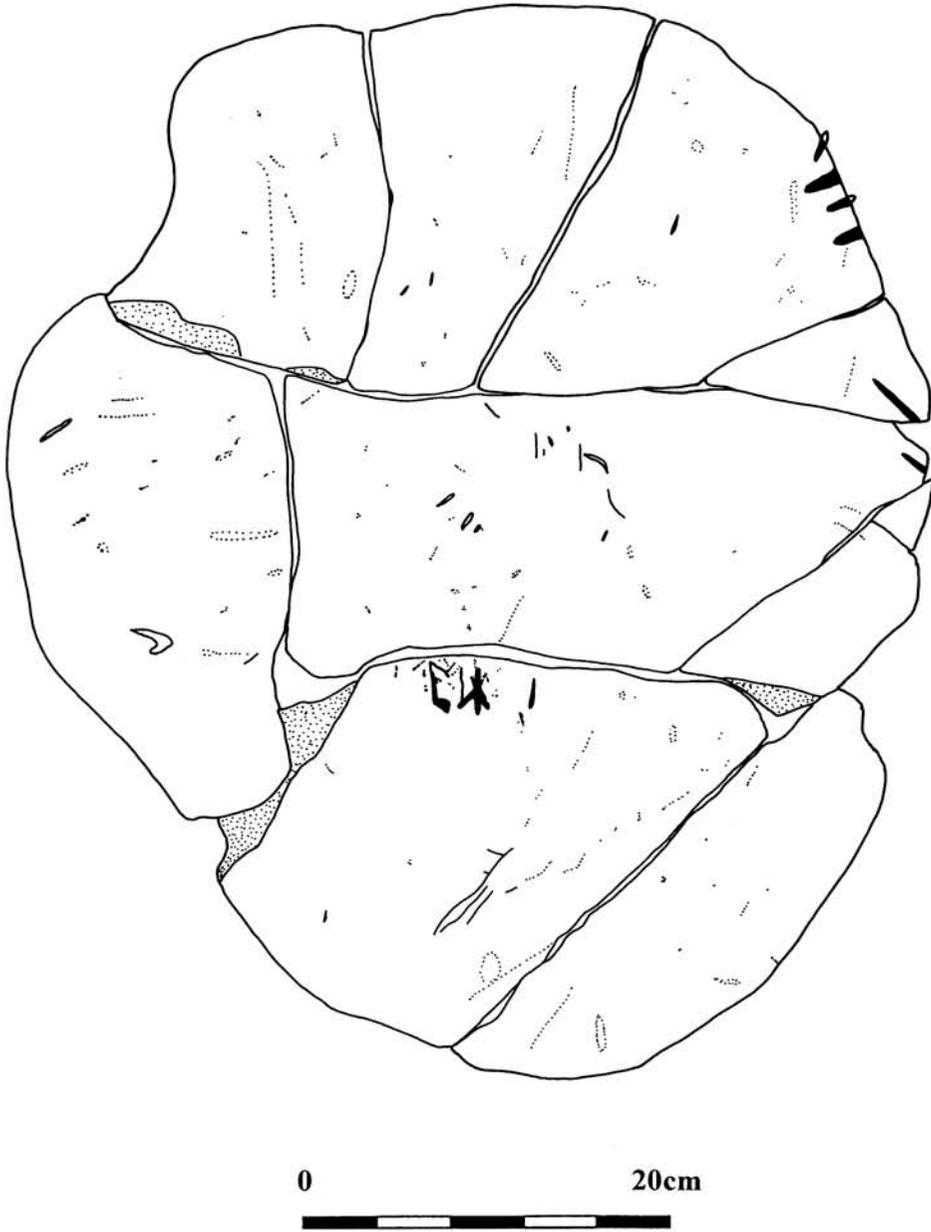


FIG. 14
Atlantic Trading Estate, Barry, Vale of Glamorgan. Stone with possible inscriptions. Scale 1:4

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FIG. 15

Atlantic Trading Estate, Barry, Vale of Glamorgan. Stone with possible inscriptions. Scale 1:4. *Photo: Maggie Cox (MoLAS)*

and 3 mm deep. They do seem to respect the fundamental mechanism of ogam — that is to say notches relative to a perpendicular ‘stem-line’, here the edge of the stone. Two of the notches cross over the edge on to the side of the stone whereas the other four stop neatly on

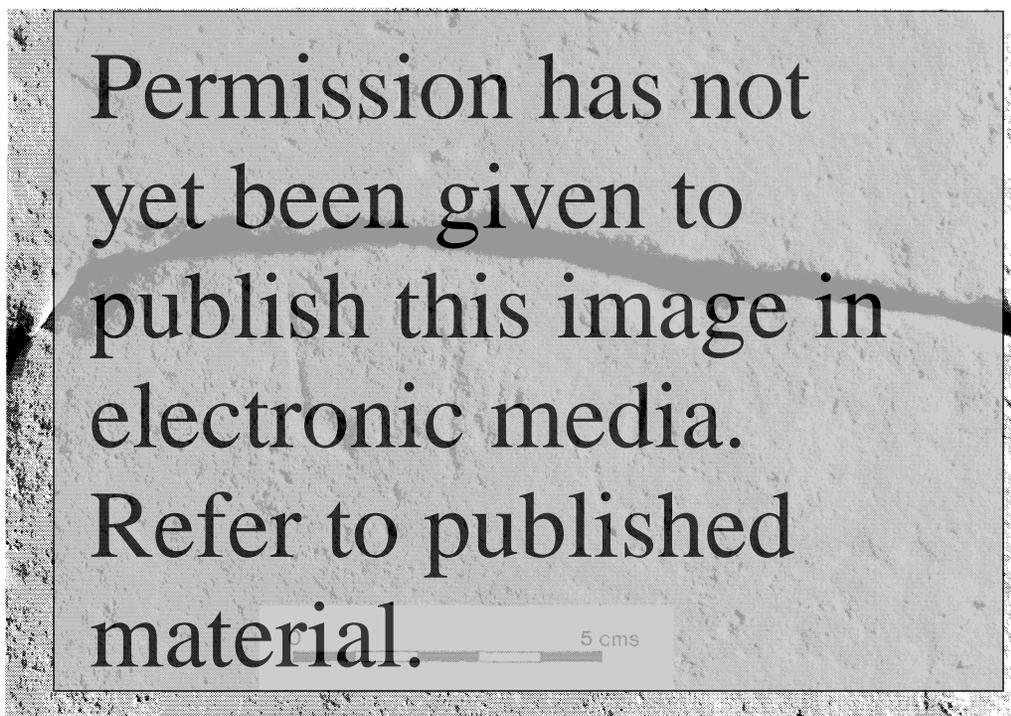


FIG. 16

The suggested runes. Scale 4:5. Photo: Maggie Cox (MoLAS)

the edge of the stone. Once again these incisions seem intended to *look like* 'classic'⁴ ogam even though they do not seem to have any obvious linguistic meaning.

There is no immediately obvious context for the possible runic inscription since runic inscriptions in Wales are rare, whether of Anglo-Saxon or Scandinavian origin. The one known Anglo-Saxon runic inscription from Wales is a single runic letter on a 9th-century Anglo-Saxon inscribed ring from Llysfaen (Aberconwy and Colwyn, formerly Clywd).⁵ However Wendy Davies has charted political and military relations between the Welsh and Anglo-Saxon kingdoms which might provide a 'cultural background' for an Anglo-Saxon runic inscription in Wales.⁶ She notes that although there were English military raids in South Wales throughout the early-medieval period, relations included periods of political co-operation in the late 9th and 11th centuries. If the incisions on the Barry stone are Anglo-Saxon runes, they should date from between the late 6th and the 9th or 10th centuries to accord with both the dating of the use of the runic script and the chronology of relations between Wales and Anglo-Saxon England.⁷

⁴ 'Classic' ogam consists of notches relative to the edge of a stone whereas later 'scholastic' ogam has notches relative to a separately incised 'stem-line': in the latter case both stem-line and notches are incised on the same flat face of the stone or object. D. MacManus, *A Guide to Ogam* (Maynooth, 1991), 128–30.

⁵ E. Okasha, *Hand-list of Anglo-Saxon non-Runic Inscriptions* (Cambridge, 1971), 98–99; R. I. Page, *An Introduction to English Runes* (London, 1973), 26 and 30.

⁶ W. Davies, *Wales in the Early Middle Ages* (Leicester, 1982), 112–16.

⁷ Page, *op. cit.* in note 5, 21; R. I. Page, *Runes* (London, 1987), 32–42.

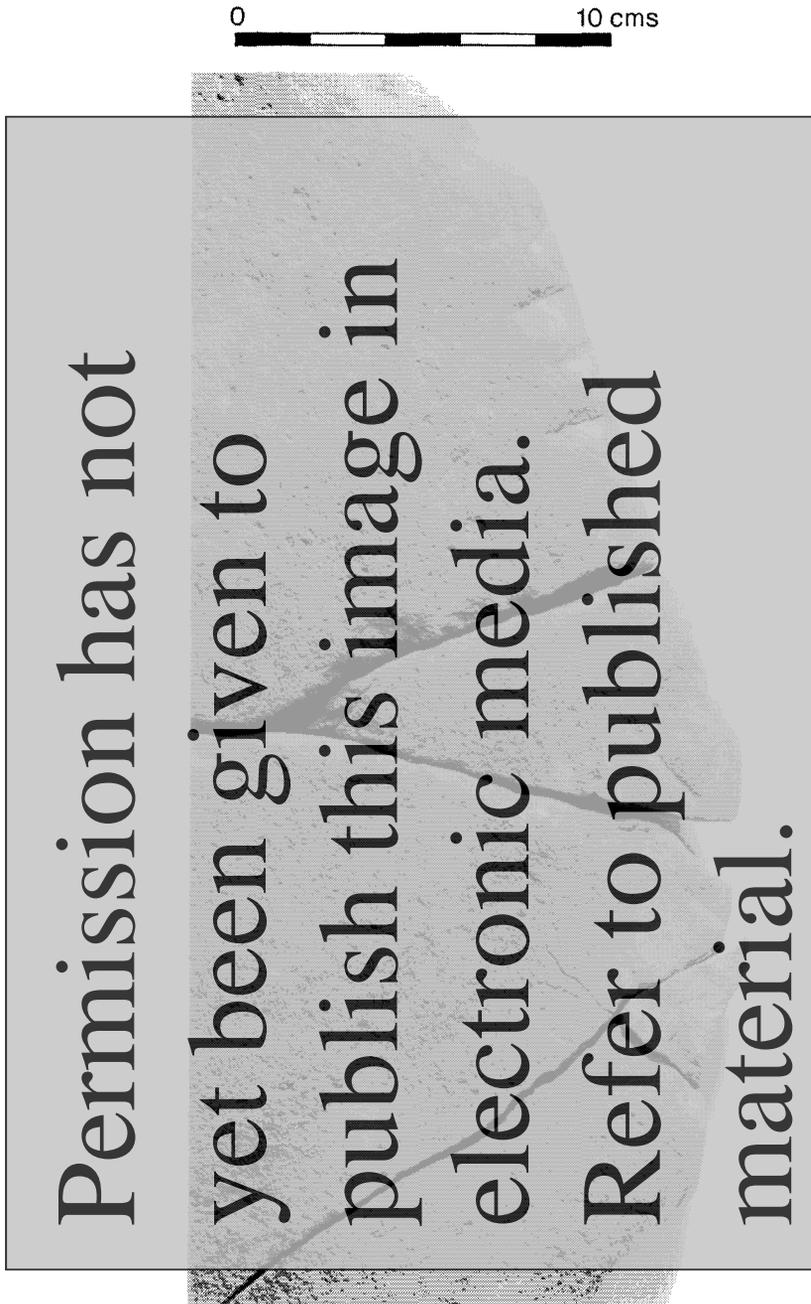


FIG. 17

The suggested ogam characters. Scale 1:2. *Photo: Maggie Cox (MoLAS)*

Turning to the possibility that the incisions are Scandinavian runes, only one certain Scandinavian runic inscription is known from Wales, on a 12th-century cross in Corwen churchyard (Denbighshire, formerly Clwyd).⁸ Interestingly there are records in the Anglo-Saxon chronicle of Viking raids around Barry in the 10th century; later the *Life of St Gwynllyw* describes how, during the reign of William the Conqueror, a group of Orkney 'pirates' raided the saint's church in Newport before stopping on Barry Island.⁹ There are strong suggestions of at least some Viking settlement in this area since there are several Scandinavian place-names along the south coast of Wales; the greatest concentration of such names, however, is to the west in Dyfed.¹⁰ If the incisions on the Barry inscription are read as Scandinavian runes, they should date from between the late 9th and the 11th or 12th centuries to accord with both the dating of the use of the script and the periods of Scandinavian raiding and colonization in South Wales.¹¹

The possible ogam inscription does at least have a more plausible cultural context than the possible runic inscription. The site itself has an early-medieval cemetery and possible evidence of occupation. Other early-medieval settlement has been excavated nearby: the high-status defended settlement at Dinas Powys lies about 5 km north-east, a monastic cemetery that included burials from the late Roman to the medieval period was recently excavated at Llandough (7 km north-east) and early-medieval reoccupation of Roman buildings has been suggested at Glan-y-Môr, around 3 km to the west.¹² This coastal area of the kingdom of Morgannwg (modern Glamorgan) has quite a concentration of early Christian monastic houses.¹³ Although the site is some way east of the main concentration of Welsh ogam inscriptions in Irish-colonized Demetia (modern Dyfed), several inscriptions have been found in Morgannwg.¹⁴ If the incisions are intended as ogam it would suggest a date range of between the late 5th and the early 7th centuries.¹⁵

'Bi-alphabetical' ogam and runic inscriptions are very rare: three such apparently Scandinavian 11th- or 12th-century inscriptions are known, one from Killaloe in Ireland and two from the Isle of Man.¹⁶ There are however several Welsh stones of probable 5th- or 6th-century date with inscriptions in both Roman script and ogam.¹⁷

The present writers remain perplexed by these 'inscriptions' but continue to believe that they are at least intended to look like ogam or runes even if they do not mean anything in a linguistic sense. Other examples of 'pseudo-ogam' or 'pseudo-runes' have been interpreted as attempts by illiterate or semi-literate people to capture something of the

⁸ R. Moon, 'Viking runic inscriptions in Wales', *Archaeol. Camb.*, 127 (1978), 124-26.

⁹ The Parker Chronicle, s.a. 918; The Laud Chronicle, s.a. 997; G. N. Garmonsway, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (London, 1972), 98 and 131; Davies, op. cit. in note 6, 112-16; A.W. Wade-Evans, *Vitae Sanctorum Britanniae et Genealogiae* (Cardiff, 1944), 184-85.

¹⁰ H. R. Loyn, *The Vikings in Britain* (London, 1977), 150 and map 2.

¹¹ Loyn, op. cit. in note 10, 53-54 and 102-04; Davies, op. cit. in note 6, 117-20; Page (1987), op. cit. in note 7, 53; Moon, op. cit. in note 8; M. Olsen, 'Runic inscriptions in Great Britain, Ireland and the Isle of Man', on p. 154 in H. Shetelig (ed.), *Viking Antiquities in Great Britain and Ireland*, part VI (Oslo, 1954).

¹² N. Edwards and A. Lane, *Early Medieval Settlements in Wales AD 400-1100* (Bangor and Cardiff, 1988), 58-61 and 77-78. Llandough: 'Medieval Britain and Ireland in 1994' (no. 348), *Medieval Archaeol.*, 39 (1995), 287; A. Thomas and N. Holbrook, 'Llandough', *Current Archaeol.*, 146 (1996), 73-77.

¹³ C. Thomas, *And Shall These Mute Stones Speak?* (Cardiff, 1994), 249.

¹⁴ R. A. S. Macalister, *Corpus Inscriptionum Insularum Celticarum* (Dublin, 1945 and 1949), 502; Thomas, op. cit. in note 13, 51-112.

¹⁵ K. Jackson, 'Notes on the ogam inscriptions of Southern Britain', 197-213 in C. Fox and B. Dickins (eds.), *The Early Cultures of North-West Europe* (Cambridge, 1950); McManus, op. cit. in note 4, 97-100.

¹⁶ Macalister, op. cit. in note 14, no. 54; P. M. C. Kermodé, *Manx Crosses* (London, 1907), nos. 104 and 115.

¹⁷ Jackson, op. cit. in note 15.

social status or perhaps the talismanic or even magical functions associated with writing or literacy.¹⁸

Let us conclude with a self-confessed fantasy and make a speculative guess as to the nature of this possible 'bi-alphabetical' stone. Let us suppose that it originally served as a memorial or grave stone in the early medieval cemetery of this site where it was dressed with some sort of attempt at an ogam inscription, perhaps in the 5th or 6th century. It is possible that both the stone and the inscription may have been larger than the surviving portion. Later, possibly in the 7th or 8th century, let us imagine that it was re-used as a hearth stone in adjacent temporary settlement on this site. There, perhaps 'alluding' to the earlier ogam inscription, an individual with some familiarity with runic literacy in Anglo-Saxon England attempted to scratch a runic inscription on the stone. After these intermittent bursts of epigraphic activity the stone collapsed into more than a thousand years of obscurity.

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¹⁸ See Page (1973), *op. cit.* in note 5, 93; Macalister, *op. cit.* in note 14, xi. Several writers have suggested that literacy in ogam or runes would probably carry a certain social status or 'cachet': see for example J. Stevenson, 'The beginnings of literacy in Ireland', *Proc. Royal Irish Acad.*, 89, no. 6 (1989), 143; Page (1973), *op. cit.* in note 5, 117. Talismanic or 'magical' runic and ogam inscriptions are notoriously hard to pin down but an example described by a normally very sceptical runologist might be an inscribed carved bone from Lindholm in Sweden: Page (1987), *op. cit.* in note 7, 29.