

# The ogham-inscribed spindle-whorl from Buckquoy: evidence for the Irish language in pre-Viking Orkney?

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## ABSTRACT

*On the basis of a detailed re-examination, a new interpretation is offered of the text of the ogham-inscribed spindle-whorl excavated in 1970 from Buckquoy, Birsay, Orkney. Far from being in unintelligible non-Celtic Pictish, the text appears, it is argued, to be in Old Irish. The whorl provides, therefore, important evidence for knowledge of the Irish language in Orkney in the pre-Viking period. The implications of, and a possible historical context for, this Irish influence are discussed.*

## INTRODUCTION

The spindle-whorl was discovered by Anna Ritchie in 1970 during her rescue excavation at the Point of Buckquoy, Birsay, on Mainland Orkney (NGR HY 243282). It was described and illustrated in her excavation report (Ritchie 1977, 181–2, 197 fig 8 no 84, 199 pl 13a, item 84 in the catalogue of finds) with a detailed discussion of the inscription by Kenneth Jackson (Jackson 1977) and of the geology of the stone by G H Collins (Collins 1977). The inscription has been further discussed in two unpublished MLitt theses (Padel 1972, 73–5; Holder 1990, 66–70) and by Dr Ritchie herself (1983, 62,65). Along with all the other finds from the Buckquoy excavation, the ogham-inscribed whorl is now in the Tankerness House Museum in Kirkwall (ref no 1976.56).

## THE SITE

The threatened site, known locally as Sinclair's Brae, was a long, low mound (20 m long, maximum height 0.5 m), truncated at one end by coastal erosion (Ritchie 1977, 174). Ritchie estimated that, by 1970, at least half the original site had been lost over the encroaching cliff. Ten weeks of digging revealed a series of farmsteads, dating from the seventh century to the 10th, built and re-built one on top of the other. The Buckquoy excavation proved seminal, for it provided the first identified example of a distinctively Pictish house-type, of cellular form, which subsequent discoveries have shown to have been widespread (Ritchie 1977, 174, 175, 182–3; Morris 1991, 72).

In the absence of other clear indicators, the remains were interpreted on the basis of the contrasting and distinctive house-types. Ritchie identified two major phases (I–II) of Pictish

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occupation, followed, after a period of disuse, by three phases (III–V) of Viking settlement. The Viking occupation appears to have been short-lived because the site was ruinous by the time it was used for an isolated burial, datable on coin evidence to the third quarter of the 10th century (Ritchie 1977, 190–1).

The inscribed spindle-whorl was discovered immediately outside the south-west entrance to the main hall of house 4 (*ibid*, 181). This structure, which has been described as having a ‘distinctly anthropomorphic air’ (Ritchie 1983, 56), is perhaps the most sophisticated example yet uncovered of the Pictish ‘figure-of-eight’ house-type. It differs from the older cellular type in having its cells arranged in a linear plan, not set in a circle round the central area of the house. Not enough is known about Pictish domestic structures to date this type closely (Ritchie 1977, 182–3). A similar, though simpler structure at Coileagan an Udal, North Uist, was dated by its excavator between the seventh and ninth centuries (Crawford 1974, 9). Figure-of-eight-shaped houses made of wattle have been excavated more recently at Deer Park Farms, Glenarm, County Antrim (Lynn 1989), which calls into question the assumption that this type of dwelling is necessarily diagnostic of Pictish inhabitants.

Most of the artefacts found in the pre-Norse layers at Buckquoy were of simple types common in various parts of north-west Europe in this period, though the painted pebble was recognized as being diagnostically Pictish (Ritchie 1972). The ogham was also listed as a characteristically ‘Pictish’ item, without reference to the emphatically Irish background to the script (McManus 1991). The possible Irish connotations of the Buckquoy inscription are discussed more fully below.

The settlement at Buckquoy was not itself of high status (Ritchie 1983, 54) but its position at the north side of the strategically important Birsay Bay, very close to the tidal islet of the Brough, give it an importance beyond its size. The name derives from the ON *bygg-kvt* ‘bere quoy’, ie barley enclosure, and is a reminder that, traditionally, the soils of Birsay were considered the most fertile of mainland Orkney (Ritchie 1977, 174). The animal bones recovered in the excavation indicate a mixed farm with an emphasis on the pastoral, especially cattle (*ibid*, 191). Ritchie has put forward the persuasive idea that Buckquoy was ‘the home farm for the inhabitants of the Brough’ (1985, 198).

The Bay of Birsay is one of only three sheltered bays on the west coast of the mainland of Orkney and is ideal for fishing (Ritchie 1977, 174). More importantly, perhaps, it is, as Ritchie has pointed out, particularly well suited for boats setting out to the Hebrides or Ireland (1983, 47).

#### DATING

The discovery of an ogham inscription in the course of an archaeological excavation conducted to modern scientific standards raised the exciting possibility of the first absolute dating of an ogham inscription. Sadly, however, very little dating evidence had survived for any, bar the final, stage of activity at Buckquoy, and in the report it was the ogham which was used to date the context, not vice versa (Ritchie 1977, 192). The inscribed whorl was recovered from the second of the Pictish phases of occupation (*ibid*, 181). Unfortunately there was nothing to allow the close dating of either phase. Only 27 artefacts and some pottery sherds were found in the Pictish levels. These artefacts were, in the main, simple domestic items such as bone pins, a comb, and a spoon, none of which is closely datable (*ibid*, 179).

The lack, until recently, of properly excavated ogham inscriptions has made it impossible to construct an accurately datable typology. On the basis of certain assumptions about the relationship between the forms of the script used in Ireland and in Scotland, and on the basis of the art

historical dating of the slabs on which some inscriptions appear, it has been customary to assign most so-called ‘Pictish’ oghams to the eighth or ninth centuries, with simpler ones perhaps slightly earlier (Jackson 1955, 139). Since the script of Buckquoy is not typologically the most simple, Jackson’s dating of the inscription to the eighth century was in keeping with general opinion at the time. Ritchie used his date to assign phase II to the eighth century and phase I to the seventh. While the other finds are not incompatible with this dating, they could be older. In the interim since Jackson gave his opinion, however, radiocarbon analysis of the contexts of ogham stones excavated at Pool, Sanday and the Brough of Birsay has stretched the chronology of Orkney ogham back to the sixth and seventh centuries, and thereby thrown open the question of dating all the Scottish oghams, including the whorl (Hunter 1990, 185; C Morris, pers comm). It would be rash, however, to place too much emphasis on these new radiocarbon dates in advance of final publication of the excavations concerned.

A *terminus ante quem* for the abandonment of the farmstead, and therefore the deposition of the ogham, is provided by the conventional date of the beginning of Norse settlement in Orkney, c 800. It has been assumed that sites in and around Birsay would have been settled early on, since Birsay was an important centre in the Pictish period (Ritchie 1983, 47). If one accepts this, and allows ‘a brief interval, perhaps half a century’ (Ritchie 1985, 194), for the ruins to develop, the conclusion is that the buildings fell out of use in the mid-eighth century. In recent years, however, authors have come to admit that there is ‘as yet no firm local, historical or archaeological evidence’ for the date of the *landnám*, and that c 800 ‘is not a comfortable assumption’ (Bigelow 1992, 10; see also Morris 1985, 210–13). While raiding bases might indeed have been established at the beginning of the ninth century, permanent settlement may not have got underway for at least another generation (Crawford 1987, 40–2). The Life of St Fintan paints a picture of an Orkney still Pictish in the 840s (Thomson 1986; Löwe 1986). There is no independent dating for the Viking phases at Buckquoy, instead these are retrospectively dated from the burial (phase VI) in the ruins of the last farm, which can be securely dated to the mid- to late 10th century (Ritchie 1977, 190–1). Thus, while Ritchie’s relative chronology for the site is inherently plausible, both upper and lower limits for the Pictish occupation are fluid. Jackson’s dating of the ogham may well be correct, but cannot be relied on without independent corroboration. The form of the script used is compatible with any date from the seventh century to the 11th. We fall back, then, on a chronology based on the interpretation of the history of the site. This can provide a date no more refined than the seventh, eighth, or early ninth century.

## THE OGHAM-INSCRIBED SPINDLE-WHORL

### DESCRIPTION (ILLUS 1 & 2)

A chalk/limestone spindle-whorl incised on one face with ogham arranged round a circular stem.

**Material:** ‘A fine-grained cream coloured sandy limestone, with quartz grains up to 0.5 mm in diameter’ (Collins 1977, 222).

**Dimensions:** 36 mm diameter, 10 mm thick.

**Condition:** Intact and in good condition, inscription well preserved.

A spindle-whorl is a heavy ring, in this case a perforated stone disc, attached to the pin of the spindle to give it the necessary weight and momentum for spinning thread by hand. A total of six spindle-whorls were recovered from Buckquoy, all of very similar size and shape, though made

from a variety of materials (Ritchie 1977, nos 82–6). None of the others is marked or decorated in any way. The two examples from phase II (nos 83 & 84) were both made of chalk ‘presumably chosen for its creamy colour and tractable nature’ (*ibid*, 181). Geological analysis of the three limestone whorls showed them to be ‘made from closely similar rock type, varying only in detail’ (Collins 1977, 222). Collins concluded that they ‘could well have been made from chalk pebbles, obtained from local glacial deposits’ (*ibid*, 223). Several other chalk/limestone whorls are known from Orkney, including one from the Broch of Lingrow (NMS GE11; MacGregor 1974, 92) which is made from very similar rock to that of no 84 (Ritchie 1977, 181). The likelihood that the whorl was made from locally obtained stone is important because it implies the ogham was carved in Orkney rather than that the whorl was, say, imported from Ireland ready-carved.

Ritchie was surprised that so few spindle-whorls were recovered from Buckquoy and concluded that any sheep at the site were kept more for their meat and hides, a view supported by the evidence of sheep bones recovered. None the less, the presence of the ogham inscription on no 84 would seem, she felt, ‘to imply that the whorl was special to its owner’ (*ibid*, 182).

## THE INSCRIPTION

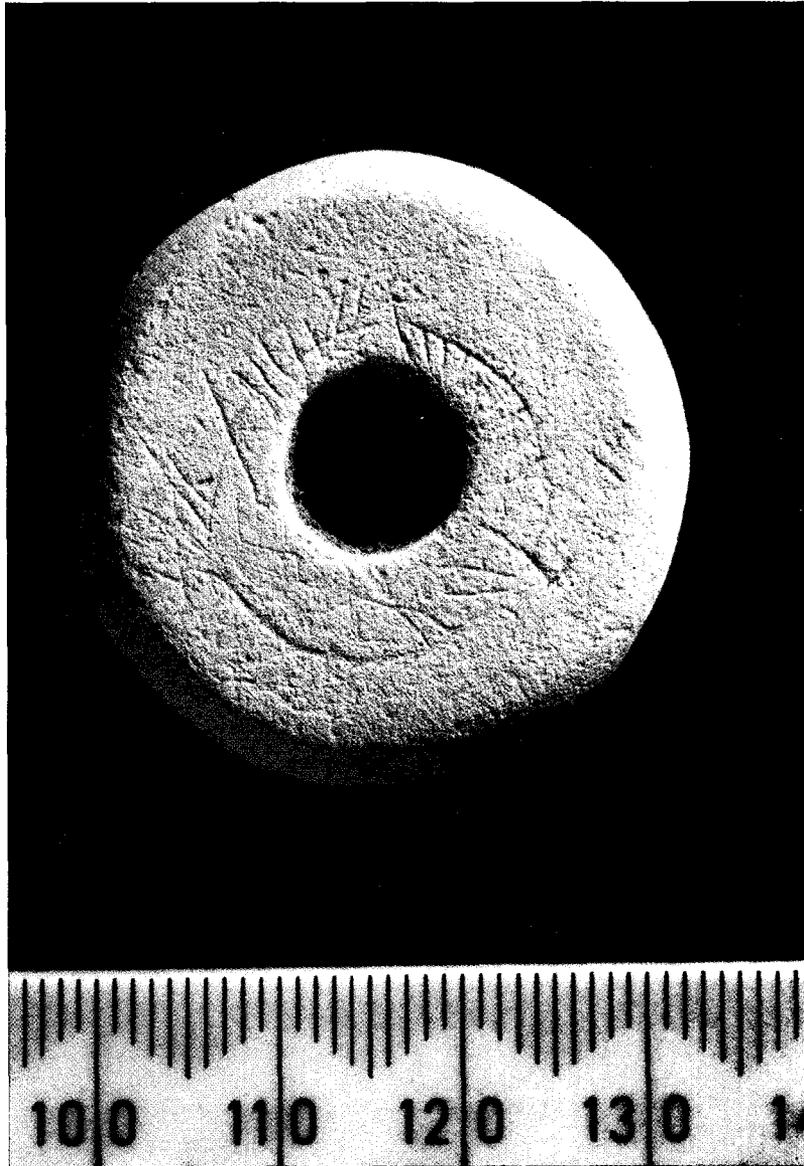
### *Carving technique*

The ogham inscription was lightly, though clearly, incised with a fine sharp blade. Such a text would be easily and quickly produced on as workable a medium as chalk and can have taken no more than a few moments to carve. The inscription is complete and well preserved. Jackson remarked that ‘almost every stroke is quite clearly made out when the whorl is held to a strong light at an angle and examined with a magnifying glass’ (Jackson 1977, 221). The carving is most readily seen on the photograph of the whorl taken under magnification by the Institute of Geological Sciences (illus 1). For further written descriptions see Jackson (1977) and Padel (1972).

A close examination of the photograph reveals a zigzag line (illus 2) traced very lightly across the surface between the perforation and the stem-line. It underlies the first two strokes of letter 12 and re-crosses under the stem just before letter 3 (see illus 2 for key to numbering). This feature appears not to have been noted before, but evidently is prior to the ogham. The strokes are less substantial than those of the ogham and there is no confusion between the two. The sweep of the stem-line away from the perforation may have been to avoid this zigzag, but in any case the stem is fairly haphazardly placed.

The stem-line, which is c 120 mm long, was incised only once and not re-cut on top of the subsequent letter-strokes. This is most clearly seen in the case of letters 5 and 11 (A & M). The individual letter strokes are c 3–4 mm in length, with 5 mm for the serifed A and 12 mm for the M, and were carved with one knife-score each. There appears to have been no re-cutting or augmentation of strokes (though see discussion of 7 & 12).

The spacing of letter 9 (N) requires some explanation. The second and third strokes are full-length, parallel, and spaced and sloped as one might expect. The first, however, is at an eccentric angle, meeting the second in a point at the stem. Even more strangely, the fourth and fifth are squeezed into the inadequate space before 10, cramped to such an extent that the final stroke intersects with the following stroke well below the stem. This indicates that 10, or at least its first stroke, must have been carved before 9, or at least its last two strokes. This is puzzling since it would imply that the letters were not carved in the sequence in which they were to be read. If the carver was copying a circular model he or she might start at any point, especially if he or she was



ILLUS 1 Inscribed spindle-whorl from Buckquoy, Orkney (*Crown Copyright: Institute of Geological Sciences, NERC*)

not fluent in ogham, but surely it would have been apparent by the last stroke of 8 that space was running out and *all* the letters of 9 would need to be tightly spaced. That this was not done implies an alternative explanation.

The parallel second and third strokes of 9 appear firmer than the other three. They are accurately sloped and, if one ignores the first, fourth, and fifth strokes, are nicely spaced relative to the letters on either flank. Could it be that, having completed the text, the carver realized he or she

had carved two strokes where five were needed and squeezed in the first, fourth, and fifth strokes as best they could? Perhaps closer examination of the depth of individual strokes, and therefore the pressure with which they were cut, might be instructive. Miscounting strokes in this way is the kind of slip that even an experienced oghamist might make and need not imply that the carver was following an exemplar he or she did not understand.

Several features combine to give the Buckquoy ogham a cursive appearance. These are, principally: the stem is not equidistant from the perforation all way round; the parallelism of component letter-strokes is maintained only erratically; there is disparity in the length of strokes both within and between groups, and the letters are unevenly spaced (note especially the cramping of 9 and 12/1). These are the kind of features often attributed to ignorant copying by an illiterate carver, yet the perceived shortcomings of the Buckquoy ogham are not blunders due to miscomprehension. Since the legibility of ogham depends entirely on layout and spacing, one cannot help feeling that someone not fully comfortable with the script would have taken more care to lay it out properly. While the use of exemplars is highly likely in grand monumental ogham epigraphy, such as at Brandsbutt (Aberdeenshire), Whiteness (Shetland), or Dupplin (Perthshire), the texts of which are carved with special, labour-intensive carving techniques, it seems scarcely appropriate for a casual and cursive text such as Buckquoy. No special equipment or carving ability would have been required to scratch such an inscription, anyone who could write could have carved it. While it can never be proven, I feel the features mentioned above are most naturally explained in terms of a text carved straight onto the whorl by the person who composed it.

### *The reading*

Provided the curve is in keeping with the scale of the lettering there is no particular difficulty in reading a circular ogham, that is, as long as one knows where to start and in which direction to go. Indeed, a circular stem seems a very natural arrangement of a type II ogham (ie one with draw-in stem-line)<sup>1</sup> on a disc: much more obvious than, say, the peculiar configuration on the Ennis bead (CIIC 53).

Since ogham always reads from left to right (whether horizontally or vertically), the point at issue is: does one stand, as it were, at the centre and look out, thus reading clockwise, or stand on the perimeter looking in, and read anti-clockwise. If one were keen to preserve the convention of reading vertically *up* the left, then one would adopt the former stance. This appears to be the direction of the Logie Elphinstone ogham as indicated by the slope of the letter-strokes. Both Jackson and Padel preferred to read the Buckquoy ogham in this direction, too, though the slope of the Buckquoy letters unequivocally indicates that it should be read *anti*-clockwise. Padel attempted to establish a pattern for the direction of reading circular oghams (1972, 13–15), but, since the wheel oghams in the Book of Ballymote are quite different in character, the only true parallel is the circular ogham from Logie Elphinstone, which reads clockwise. If anything, the Buckquoy ogham should set the precedent for the much more inscrutable Logie Elphinstone ogham, but there is no need to set the authority of one against the other, since the letters of each slope in opposite directions and leave no room for doubt.

Jackson recognized that the M (11) was, as would be expected, diagonal to the stem-line, but, because he was convinced that ‘the other strokes are evidently all intended to be at right-angles to it’, he was not sufficiently sensitive to the pitch of the letters – ‘most are in fact more or less at right-angles to the point where they reach the line’. The few which he conceded were ‘more sloping’ could be explained, in his opinion, by the distorting effect of a circular base-line (Jackson

1977, 221). A close examination, however, reveals that *all* of the b- and h-*aicme* consonants are oblique.<sup>2</sup> Compare, for instance, letters 4 and 5 (DA). There can be no doubt that the slope is deliberate – across any individual letter-group the stem is so short as to be, in effect, straight – but this sloping is exactly what one would expect.

The sloping of b- and h-*aicme* consonants is a widespread feature of type II inscriptions in Scotland. Although the gradient may vary, the incline is always in the same direction relative to the direction of reading, ie with the proximal end further ‘forward’ than the distal. Placed next to one another, a correctly orientated B and H will form an arrow-head which points in the direction of reading. The pitch of m-*aicme* consonants, which slope left-to-right (up) across the stem, is not diagnostic since their outline is maintained even if the inscription is inverted, and read back-to-front. B- and h-*aicme* consonants, however, would, in such circumstances, point the wrong way. Even if the slope of consonants were not sufficient to indicate the direction of reading the Buckquoy text, further, unequivocal evidence is provided by the seriffed A. This *forfid*<sup>3</sup> appears on five other Scottish ogham inscriptions *always* with the serif on the right/lower distal end. There can be no doubt that Buckquoy is to be read anti-clockwise with the b-surface nearest the perimeter.

In Irish, *dessel*, ‘sun-wise’, ‘right-hand-wise’, means by extension ‘lucky’, ‘favourable’, ‘propitious’, (*Dict Ir Lang* s.v.), and a similar semantic association is reflected in other Celtic languages. Given this well-attested preference for motion in a sunwise direction it might at first glance appear surprising that the Buckquoy text reads anti-clockwise, but it is all a question of perspective: though the text runs anti-clockwise, to read it one must turn the whorl clockwise. Thus as the spinner spins her yarn, and the spindle turns sun-wise, the text passes legibly, if at speed, before her eyes. The presence of the pin would in any case make it exceedingly awkward to carve and read the text if it ran in the opposite direction, if, that is, one assumes the inscription was carved while the whorl was still in use for spinning.

The only remaining question is where to start. Circular texts in any script are not a common feature of Insular epigraphy. Where they occur their layout is usually a result of the shape of the objects on which they are carved, for instance, rings, coins, seals and stone fonts. The most common device for indicating the starting point of a text is the small square cross (eg the Aldborough sun-dial: Okasha 1971, 47). Occasionally spacing is used to indicate word-division (eg the font from Partrishow, Cardiganshire: CIIC 988), but quite often the text is continuous and the inscriber relies on the skill of the reader in discerning where to start (eg the Attleborough ring (Norfolk): Okasha 1971, 49–50). Since circular texts are usually short, this is rarely a problem.

There are marked differences in the spacing between the various letters of the Buckquoy ogham, and it might seem logical to start after one of the larger gaps, 5/6 and 1/2, ie at C or N. In both cases, however, the resulting text is unintelligible, and it seems more likely that the variation is merely the result of the casual way in which the text was carved.

In most cases it is obvious where an ogham text begins, but in some type II Irish oghams, whether manuscript (St Gall Priscian) or epigraphic (eg CIIC: 27 Ballyspellan brooch, 54 Killaloe slab, 52 Tullycommon bone, 749 Colman Bocht slab, Clonmacnoise), a non-phonetic character is used to indicate the starting point and direction of reading. Both Padel and Jackson interpreted Buckquoy’s letter 1 (×) as an instance of this ‘feather-symbol’ or ‘feather-mark’. Yet a preliminary survey of Irish epigraphic and manuscript oghams showed that in every case the ‘feather-mark’, perhaps more aptly labelled ‘arrow-mark’, is shaped > or →, never × or ⇘ (Brash 1879, 322–3). There are two Scottish examples (from Shetland) of inscriptions beginning with × (Lunnasting and Cunningsburgh 3), but in both cases it seems preferable to take the character as the first *forfid* and accord it its usual phonetic value (/e/). There are no Scottish examples of a >

or  $\rightarrow$  shaped directional indicator. It appears, therefore, that 1 is to be taken as /e/. This interpretation is based on its unambiguous shape, but has the added advantage of removing an otherwise unfeasible cluster of consonants.

The stem of the Buckquoy ogham is not a seamless ring, like that of Logie Elphinstone, but rather a looped line with two distinct ends. These overlap slightly, just above 1, and it would seem natural to take this break in the stem as the start of the text. This leaves the problem of the relationship of 1 to the rest of the text, because it is out of alignment with the other characters, and lies outside (below) rather than on the stem. Strictly speaking, the first letter after the break in the stem is 2, but a close examination shows that 1 is in fact attached to the stem. The left-hand end of the stem curves down slightly and meets the upper left arm of the *forfid* just above its intersection. It is as if 1 was indeed sitting on the tip of the stem, but that the whole thing had been bent down 90°. There is ample space for 1 to sit on the stem between the break and 2 and there is no obvious reason why it should be suspended from rather than intersected by the stem.

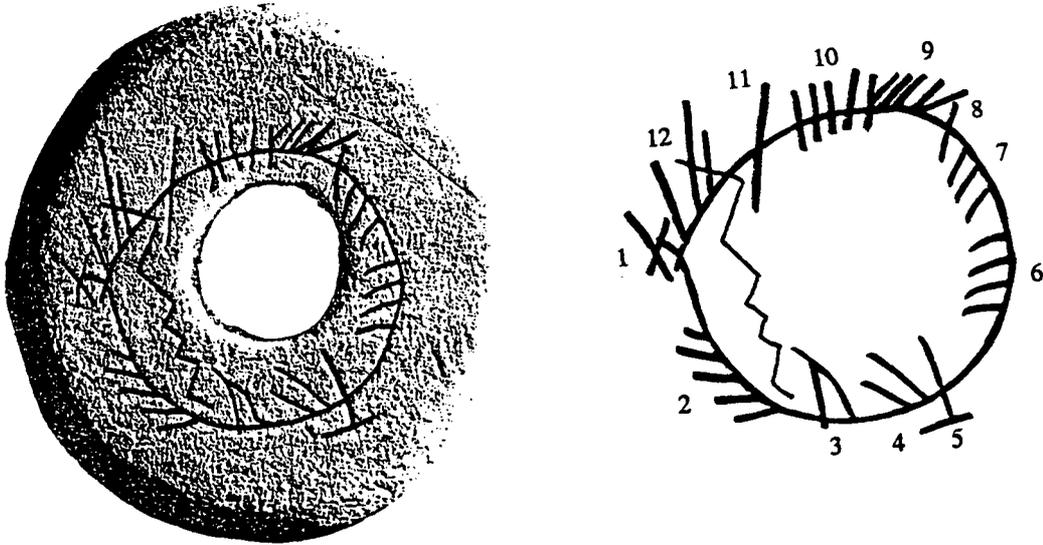
The precise arrangement of strokes in this portion of the text is not easy to rationalize, however one chooses to interpret it. It is clearly confused to some degree – the final stroke of 12 is hard-up against the  $\times$ -*forfid* and partially, but not unequivocally, differentiated from the first two strokes of 12. Why the large gap before 2? Why the intersection of the two ends of the stem and the placing of 1 on a different alignment? Oliver Padel suggests to me that the curling-out of the stem is a deliberate device to show the start of the inscription (*pers comm*). While this is without parallel, certainly it is a possibility.

The palaeographical conventions of ogham have to be deduced solely from observation of the extant inscriptions. Since there are relatively few post-seventh-century examples and these are heterogeneous, it is sometimes difficult, in analysing variations in individual inscriptions, to differentiate the deliberate and telling from the incidental and insignificant. This is particularly true of informal inscriptions such as Buckquoy, where the difficulty is further compounded by the virtually unique circular arrangement of the text. Generally, unambiguous mistakes are rare, but it would be foolish, either to see errors everywhere, or to deny that they ever happen; a corrected mistake is the obvious explanation of the configuration of Buckquoy 9. If one were prepared to accept the possibility of another mistake, or at least a change of plan, a possible explanation is suggested by the observation that the two ends of the stem overlap to form a little cross. Perhaps, having quickly cut the stem, the ogham-carver was struck by this x-shaped intersection and decided to press it into service as an  $\times$ -*forfid*, but, having cut the rest of the letters, concluded that this device was not sufficiently unambiguous and added a separate  $\times$  (1), putting it to the side to avoid it being interpreted as a second E.

Balancing the demands of an unforced interpretation of the carving against plausible readings of the text is the epigrapher's perennial problem. We might feel intuitively that the beginning and end of the text should coincide with the break in the stem, but given the obvious casualness with which the inscription was carved, the poor spacing of the letters and the fact that at least one mistake was made and corrected, how much confidence can be placed in such a hunch? If an intelligible reading is provided by starting with the stroke before 1 to what extent should this be allowed to influence our interpretation?

For the sake of convention only and without prejudice to the final reading, I take the  $\times$ -*forfid* as the first letter and read anti-clockwise, as follows:

- 1 A small cross below the line, consisting of two short lines intersecting more or less at their mid-point, the angle between the upper two arms being more than 90°, joined to the tip of the stem as described above. This character, the  $\times$ -*forfid*, appears on a total of seven Scottish



ILLUS 2 The ogham inscription with key to numbering

oghams including Buckquoy, although it is in the initial position only on Lunnasting and Cunningsburgh 3, both from Shetland. In both cases the letter is followed by TTE, and, even though neither text has been satisfactorily interpreted, given the apparent avoidance of double letters in word-initial position, it seems preferable to take the symbol as having its normal phonetic (vocalic) value /e/. Above the *forfid*, the stem curves round sharply, crosses its other end, then starts its circuit. There is a generous gap before the next letter. Jackson described it as sufficient for five strokes, although I doubt it could have taken more than two, properly spaced. Given the comfortable spacing of the next few letters, it need not be considered remarkable and is certainly no bigger than the gap after 5.

- 2 Five strokes to the right of the stem, sloping forward: N. The first stroke is somewhat doubtful, being faint and at a slightly greater angle than the rest (making due allowance for the curve of the stem).
- 3 Two strokes to the left of the stem, sloping very slightly forward: D. These two are roughly parallel for most of their length but converge at their distal ends. According to Jackson, they do not join. The first stroke appears to over-shoot the stem very slightly. There is a line, like a bind-stroke, which continues well beyond the end of the first stroke.<sup>4</sup> Jackson dismissed it as 'a fortuitous scratch', but it is possible that it is indeed a bind-stroke, similar to one found on the Burrian stone which has a single curved line to do duty for the bind-stroke and the final letter-stroke of the group.
- 4 As above: D. These two are slightly closer together than the previous pair, and at a sharper angle to the stem.
- 5 A single long stroke almost perpendicular across the stem with a horizontal line across its lower distal end – the so-called 'serifed A'. This letter is clear and definite. Padel thought the serif unusually long. There follows a generous gap, the largest in the inscription.
- 6 Four strokes to the left of the stem, sloping forward with constant gradient: C. Jackson described the second stroke as crossing the stem slightly.

- 7 Three strokes to the left of the stem, sloping forward with increasing gradient: T. Padel saw a very short possible score just after these but decided it was probably not part of the letter. It should be noted that there are a number of nicks and scores in the surface of the stone which are clearly just casual damage.

This first half of the text takes up two-thirds of the stem, thus, although the first seven characters are very comfortably spaced, the next six are rather cramped.

- 8 A single stroke across the stem: A. This stroke is of very similar length to those of 10 and substantially shorter than 11, so there is no doubt that it is a vowel. It occupies the middle two-thirds of the ogham band<sup>5</sup> and appears to slope very slightly backwards.
- 9 Five strokes to the right of the stem, sloping forward at markedly different angles: N. The second and third strokes almost meet at the stem, and the final stroke intersects the first stroke of 10 and thus fails to reach the stem. The form of this letter has been discussed in detail above; there is no justification in taking it as 2+3.
- 10 Five strokes fairly perpendicular across the stem: I. Though the individual strokes are a little straggly, they are all more or less parallel, of similar length, and spaced as widely as 2, 6, and 7.
- 11 A single long stroke obliquely across the stem, sloping forwards: M. This is the longest stroke of all, about double the length of the preceding vowel-strokes, and very firmly sloped. There follows a generous gap, perhaps left to avoid the end of the underlying zigzag.
- 12 Three strokes to the right of the stem, sloping forwards. The first two are exactly parallel and very tightly spaced, the third follows at a slightly more gentle gradient after a larger gap. There is some doubt over whether these should be taken as a single group of three strokes, in which case it represents F (or V), or as two separate letters, 2+1: LB. Elsewhere in the text the component strokes of individual letters are generally evenly spaced, but in contrast there is considerable variation in the size of the gaps between letters. The interval between the second and third strokes of 12 is comparable to that between 4/5, 7/8, and 8/9. There is no gap at all between 9/10. The ogham text does not appear to have been carefully laid out; if the carver was running out of space this may have been the maximum spacing possible. There is certainly a larger gap between the second and third strokes than between the third stroke and the intersection. Furthermore, the second stroke is far longer than the other two. This may be nothing more than a slip of the blade, but, if intentional, might be intended to differentiate two closely packed though separate letters of the same *aicme*. On balance I would prefer to take 12 as two separate letters (cf. Holder 1990), though Jackson and Padel took it as one.

This gives the following reading:<sup>6</sup>

ENDDACTANIM(f/lb)

In essentials this is in agreement with Holder's more tentative reading – E(s/n) DDACTA(n/lv)IM(v/lb) – and the possible variant passed over by Jackson and Padel – (e/)(s/n)DDACTANIMV; their preferred reading was (e/ )TMIQAVSALL(c/q).

### *Form of script used*

The Buckquoy whorl is inscribed in a simple type II ogham script with the incorporation of the two *forfeda* most common on Scottish oghams – × (/e/) and the serifed A ⊥. The serifed A occurs on six other Scottish ogham stones: Birsay 1, and Burrian (Orkney), Lunnasting (Shetland),

Latheron (Caithness), Golspie (Sutherland) and Formaston (Aberdeenshire). The  $\times$ -*forfid*, which is found on numerous Irish pillars inscribed with type I ogham, is used on Burrian (three times), Newton, in Aberdeenshire (once), Golspie (twice), Cunningsburgh 3 and Lunnasting (once each at the beginning before TT), and at Formaston (twice). All the consonants of the Buckquoy text are sloped. The vowels, with the exception of the two *forfeda*, consist of perpendicular strokes across the stem, taking up, perhaps the middle two-thirds of the ogham band, though the variation in length of individual strokes makes it difficult to be accurate on this last point. Within letters, the strokes are fairly parallel and evenly spaced. Substantial gaps are left between all letters, not just successive ones of the same *aicme*. If the suggested reading is correct, there is no attempt at word-division.

In general terms the script is very similar to that on the cross-slab at Latheron, which has the serifed A and consonants which slope, though not as consistently as Buckquoy. The other ogham-inscribed cross-slab from Sutherland, Golspie, is also similar in script to Buckquoy, but has angled vowels, and letters which are not so generously spaced. The Buckquoy script is simpler than those used on the three Birsay stones. Birsay 1 has the serifed A and sloping vowels, but, like Golspie, has angled vowels. Birsay 3 is written with bound letters. The Burrian ogham provides an example of the final stroke of a letter group being a continuation of the bind stroke, and it is possible that Buckquoy's 3 is an attempt at such a letter, but equally it may be a mere slip of the blade.

The only exceptional aspect of the Buckquoy ogham is that it is carved on a circular stem-line. This, however, does not affect the aspects of the script mentioned above. Changing the shape of the stem is one of the ways to create a cryptic ogham mentioned in the Ogham tract in the Book of Ballymote (Macalister 1937, 48), although, interestingly enough, a circular stem is not given as an example. While the only other instance of a circular ogham, Logie Elphinstone (Aberdeenshire), may indeed be cryptic, there is nothing enigmatic about Buckquoy. The use of a circular stem is an obvious solution to the practical problem of fitting the text to the object and is, in a sense, comparable to the 'up-top-down', or boustrophedon, arrangement on the oldest Irish pillars. There is no need to assume influence between Logie Elphinstone and Buckquoy, in either direction. The circular stem is a simple innovation which may have arisen independently in different areas. The fact that the two are read in opposite directions, and are very different in length and in context, is sufficient to suggest that there is no direct relationship between the two.

## THE TEXT

### *Interpretation*

For the reasons given above, eTMIQAVSALL(c/q), the favoured transliteration of Padel and Jackson, is based on an incorrect reading of the text and must be rejected. There is slight doubt over letter 12 (probably LB, but could possibly be interpreted as F or V), but the rest, ENDDACTANIM-, is secure. The only other doubt is over where to start. Though Jackson did in fact give ENDDACTANIMV as one of his eight alternative readings, he rejected it as 'wholly unintelligible and cannot be Celtic', so strong was his conviction about the nature of Pictish. In conclusion he stated himself to be 'content to write off this inscription as unintelligible, like all the other "Pictish" inscriptions' (Jackson 1977, 222). It is simply not true to say that all Pictish inscriptions are unintelligible. Although a number do continue to resist interpretation, eg Brandsbutt and Logie Elphinstone (Aberdeenshire), I have tried to show, following Padel (1972), that many, eg Latheron, and Ackergill (Caithness), and Scoonie (Fife), contain recognizable Celtic personal-names (Forsyth 1996). I have argued against Jackson's hypothesis of a second,

non-Indo-European Pictish language (Forsyth, forthcoming 1997) and prefer to view the not inconsiderable difficulty of many Pictish inscriptions as an inevitable result of trying to interpret inscriptions (which are often damaged) in P-Celtic language which is otherwise only minimally attested. The proportion of doubtful or disputed Anglo-Saxon runic inscriptions, as given by Page, is a forceful reminder that epigraphic opacity is not an exclusively Pictish phenomenon (1973; 14–15).

Irish-speakers were moving into Pictland from the earliest days of the Dál Riadic settlement, just as Norse-speakers did towards the end of the Pictish period; at certain periods bilingualism was probably common. It should not surprise us then that the extant inscriptions reflect this complex linguistic situation, most famously in the ogham-inscribed cross-slab from Bressay which incorporates words of Gaelic and Norse origin (Jackson 1955, 142). Ogham is merely a script. Although invented to represent the sounds of Irish, demonstrably it was adapted, in ways not yet fully understood, to render Pictish. The use of the ogham alphabet should not then necessarily imply anything about the language of a text, except that it is unlikely to be Latin. (There exist a very few manuscript examples of ogham used to write Latin, but these are scholarly curios: McManus 1991, 133.) For this reason I object to the division of Scottish inscriptions into ‘Pictish’ and ‘Irish-looking’ (Jackson 1955; 1983; Padel 1972). The labels ‘Pictish’ and ‘Irish’ should be applied only with respect to the language of the text, if it can be discerned. In my opinion, the palaeographic features on which the conventional division is made are a reflection of the date of the inscriptions concerned, not their ethnic milieu.

Since ogham was invented by the Irish, the use of the script in Scotland can be taken as a reflection, ultimately, of Irish influence, although how long direct Irish associations persisted is not clear. Some Scottish epigraphic oghams exhibit a number of features also found in later Irish manuscript oghams (Sims-Williams 1992), suggesting that ogham in Scotland was not an isolated development following a one-off introduction. Rather, it appears that Scottish oghamists were part of a common tradition of continued ogham use, in which innovations passed back and forth across the Irish Sea. Most of the extant ogham inscriptions from Pictland can be shown to be written in a language other than Irish, but, given the ecclesiastical associations of literacy in the period, and the major role played by the Irish in the early Pictish church, we must always bear in mind the possibility that a newly discovered text is in Irish. It is my contention that the Buckquoy ogham is just such an inscription.

If one is prepared to begin with the stroke before 1, then the reading BENDDACTANIML suggests itself. This I would segment BENDDACT ANIM L, which I take to be Old Irish *bendact anim L*, ‘a blessing on the soul of L’. According to this new interpretation, BENDDACT is Old Irish *bendacht*, ‘a blessing’, from Latin *benedictum* (*Dict Ir Lang*; Vendryes 1959 s.v. *bennacht*; Thurneysen 1946, 450 §727), and ANIM, Old Irish *anim*, ‘soul’ (Vendryes 1959 s.v. *anim*; *Dict Ir Lang* s.v. *ainim(m)*; Thurneysen 1946, 214 §333). As it stands *anim* could be nominative, accusative, or dative singular, as attested in the Old Irish Glosses, but in the current context is most likely to be dative or accusative (see discussion below). This word is not to be confused with Old Irish *ainm* ‘name’, which occurs, in its older form ANM, on a number of classic ogham pillars in southern Ireland (McManus 1991, §118 6.27), and which continued to be used in a technical sense in the Irish phrase *ainm n-ogaim* ‘funerary inscription in ogham’ (*ibid.*, 154 §8.8).

The spelling *anim* is relatively straightforward, though as accusative or dative it alternates in the Glosses with the forms *anmuin/anmain* (Thurneysen 1946, 214 §333). BENDDACT for *bendacht* is perhaps more interesting. The gemination of consonants is a much discussed feature of ogham orthography (McManus 1991, 124–6 §6.30; Harvey 1987a), and is particularly common in Scottish ogham. To the extent that it can be determined, there is an apparent tendency for non-

initial D to be doubled in Scottish ogham texts (exceptions being Blackwaterfoot 2, Latheron, Lochgoilhead) though whether this had phonetic significance is unclear. If it were thought that the Buckquoy text perpetuated aspects of the traditional ogham orthography, DD could be taken as indicating (non-lenited) /d/, on analogy with CC and TT representing (non-lenited) /k/ and /t/ (McManus 1991, 125). Similarly, single C for /x/ could be an example of the same geminate/non-lenited-simplex/lenited distinction. However, as McManus has pointed out to me, there are numerous parallels for such spellings in Old Irish manuscript orthography, and it is equally possible that the Buckquoy ogham is merely a cipher for the manuscript spelling. In Old Irish the spelling *ct* is ‘not infrequently represented’ *cht* (Thurneysen 1946, 21 §28), and *bendact* is attested in the Glosses (Strachan & Stokes 1975: Wurzburg 19b15) and on one roman alphabet inscription (CIIC 868).

### Discussion

The formula *bendacht for anim N.*, ‘a blessing on the soul of N.’, is well attested in the Irish epigraphic record, mainly on recumbent cross-slabs (eg. *bendacht for anmain N.* CIIC 551, 933, 935; *bennacht for anmain N.* CIIC 916, 917). Other related forms are *ben[dach]t Die for an[main] N.* (CIIC 529) and *bendacht ar N.* (CIIC 586, 958). Of particular interest is the example from Lemanaghan, County Offaly (CIIC 868): *bendact for an[mai]n ailbertig* – with *c* for /x/, as appears, *mutatis mutandis*, in ogham at Buckquoy. All of these are written in the roman alphabet, but there is a single, very late, example of the use of the formula in an ogham inscription – the 11th century, bilingual, runic-Norse/ogham-Irish slab from Killaloe (CIIC 54) which has *bendacht [ar] N.*, with the first E spelled with the ×-*forfid*: B×NDACHT.

In all these examples *anim* is in the accusative, governed by the preposition *ar* or *for*, the latter occasionally abbreviated, as on CIIC 529, 916, and 917, to *f* (Thurneysen 1946, 162 §251). The omission of the preposition from Buckquoy therefore demands an explanation. Epigraphers are usually quick to identify grammatical and other ‘errors’ in the inscriptions they study (see Macalister’s attempt to ‘correct’ Pictish grammar, 1940). The Buckquoy oghamist was certainly casual; it could be that he or she was careless or ignorant as well. With further study, however, it often turns out to be the epigrapher who is ignorant, and ‘bad’ Irish should be invoked in this case only once all other possibilities have been exhausted. In fact, there is an alternative explanation.

In his discussion of Archaic Irish, Greene confirmed that ‘the elimination of unnecessary particles is one of the outstanding features of the archaic style’, which he says ‘accounts for the consistent use of the independent dative where Old Irish would require a preposition’ (1977, 19). Thurneysen makes brief mention of the prepositionless dative in his *Grammar of Old Irish*, characterizing this nominal construction, which is attested in certain Irish legal texts and paralleled in Gaulish inscriptions, as ‘archaic and extremely rare’ (Thurneysen 1946, 162 §251). If Buckquoy’s *anim* were in the dative case, then we might have here an example of the ‘independent dative’. The extreme rarity of this construction in Old Irish warrants caution, as McManus has reminded me, yet archaic syntax would not be out of keeping with a seventh- or eighth-century date for the Buckquoy whorl. However, as relics of an earlier period of the language, ‘archaic’ features continued to be used in Old Irish as a stylistic device (Breatnach 1984, 458–9). This need not, of course, rule out an early date for our text, especially since a heightened literary register is unlikely in a casual epigraphic context such as this. None the less, an independent dative, if indeed that is what it is, need not necessarily indicate an early date, and thus the text cannot be dated on the basis of syntax alone.

A possible objection to the reading BENDDACT ANIM L is that the use of an initial letter, in this case L, to represent a personal name is unprecedented in a Goidelic context at this period. In the ogham tradition, as in the runic, each character was identified by a meaningful name on the acrostic principal. The letter-name for ogham L was *luis*, though there is some doubt whether this is *luise/loise* 'flame, blaze' or *lus* 'plant, herb' (McManus 1991, 36). Later glossators identify *luis* as a tree, either the rowan or elm (McManus 1988, 150). Rune-writers exploited the letter-names to great effect in writing riddles in which the runic character was made to stand for its name (Page 1973, 203–11), but there do not appear to be any examples of such a conceit in the ogham corpus. *Luis* is not attested as a personal name, so 'L' would have to be interpreted as a straightforward abbreviation of some other personal name.

The concept of abbreviation of divine names and epithets was well known from the use of the *nomina sacra* but does not seem to have been extended to profane personal names. To establish this beyond doubt, however, is not easy since there are few close comparisons. Irish personal names are too varied for a comprehensive system of abbreviations such as was used in Roman epigraphy. For this reason the contexts in which it would be possible or appropriate to abbreviate a Goidelic personal name are limited. Unless there is some cryptic intent, a personal name is likely to be abbreviated only if the identity of the individual is obvious and widely known. Perhaps the most usual circumstance is the marking of ownership on a personal belonging. Most of the extant, non-monumental, insular inscriptions are on objects of great value, usually highly-accomplished pieces of secular or ecclesiastical metalwork such as brooches, weapons, and shrines. One would not expect the names of the owners, patrons, makers or commemoratees to be abbreviated on such formal, in some cases public, items inscribed with posterity in mind. It is instead on *instrumenta domestica*, transient and of little economic value, that one might expect to find the initials of an owner or maker. But, of course, such objects are rarely preserved in the archaeological record. Though there are no clear examples from Celtic-speaking areas, the corpus of Anglo-Saxon runic inscriptions includes a handful of examples of objects inscribed with a single letter, or a pair of letters, most readily interpreted as owner's marks (the wooden York spoon, the Sleaford brooch, the Willoughby-on-the-Wolds bowl, mentioned by Page, 1973, 172).

Reasons why the alleged personal name was abbreviated in the Buckquoy text when the rest was written out might be the obvious lack of space (if the individual was well known to all the inhabitants of the farmstead, to give it in full might have been considered superfluous), or perhaps the Irish-speaker who carved it was unsure how to commit an unfamiliar native name to writing. Of course, an abbreviated message inscribed on a gift provides a shared understanding between giver and recipient thereby enhancing the intimacy of the bond between them, and this may be sufficient explanation of itself. An appropriate analogy might be a locket engraved with a sweetheart's initials.

On the semantic level, one might object that 'a blessing on the soul of N.' is an essentially commemorative phrase and as such scarcely appropriate for a spindle-whorl. Certainly all the examples of *bendacht ar/for* cited thus far occur on funerary monuments. The formula, however, was not restricted to gravestones: Macalister read *bendacht ar Artgal* on the Cross of Kells (CIIC 586); in metalwork, the mid-11th century Stowe Missal Shrine (CIIC 932) has *bendacht Dé ar cech anmain as a háirilliuth*: 'God's blessing on every soul according to its deserts'. These are commemorative or dedicatory without being funerary, as are the occurrences of the formula in the scribal colophons of manuscripts. An example of the latter with Scottish provenance is the colophon to the Gospel extracts in the Book of Deer (Cambridge University Library MS.I.i.6.32). Written in the same hand as the main text it is to be dated to the ninth century. It asks of the reader a *bendacht f[or] anmain in trúagáin ro-d scríbai*: 'his blessing on the soul of the poor wretch who has written it' (Jackson 1972, 8; Stuart 1869, lx, 89).

The examples are all public texts on high status items, written, clearly, with posterity in mind and thus still rather far from the informal domestic object from Buckquoy. Perhaps a closer parallel is provided by the inscribed pebble found in 1822 in a grave at Temple Breacan, Na Seacht dTeampaill, Inis Mór, Aran Islands (CIIC 532; Higgins 1987, 23, 26–7, 137–9, 268–9, fig.1, plate 54). The black limestone pebble, 75 mm in diameter, was lost for many years and was known only from drawings. It was then widely interpreted as a stone lamp, and thus appeared to provide a cognate example of a domestic implement inscribed with a dedicatory text. A few years ago, however, it was re-discovered in the National Museum of Ireland, enabling the most recent writer to rule out this explanation (Higgins 1987, 26). Instead it belongs to a class of ‘decorated pebbles’ of uncertain (probably religious) use. The circular inscription in Insular minuscule reads *+or(oit) ar bran n-ailither*, ‘a prayer for Bran the pilgrim’ (Macalister 1949, 6, 202–3 ill.). This formula, *Or(oit) ar/do*, is by far the most common of Irish roman alphabet inscriptions and is found widely, though not exclusively, on funerary monuments. According to Higgins, the Temple Breacan stone ‘has all the signs of wear from use and handling to suggest that it had a previous function’ (1987, 23), yet the fact that it was discovered in a grave does cloud the issue somewhat; it is unclear whether the inscription had been present while the item was in use, or was carved expressly for deposition in the grave. Whatever the precise interpretation, the existence of another informal, portable, personal belonging inscribed with a formula that is more familiar from grave slabs makes the Buckquoy whorl seem less exceptional.

### *Parallels*

A number of inscribed spindle-whorls have been recovered from Insular and Continental excavations. Such an intimate and personal item might be considered particularly suitable for inscribing, though the surprising frequency with which inscribed whorls are recovered may be due, perhaps, to their relative durability, coupled with the ease with which they were lost, rather than because they were particularly favoured for inscriptions. Historically and cross-culturally, spinning is an activity most closely associated with women, opening up the possibility of interest, or even skill, in literacy on the part of women. The spindle-whorl texts vary widely in length, complexity and meaning. Most simple are those that carry merely a personal name, presumably that of the owner. An example is the seventh- or eighth-century Anglo-Saxon jet spindle-whorl from Whitby Abbey inscribed with three runes, *Wer* (Peers & Radford 1943, 74), which has been interpreted as a (male) personal name (Page 1973, 171–2). Next is the writer/maker formula – for instance, another rune inscribed spindle-whorl, this time from the Northern Isles (exact provenance unknown), which reads ‘Gautr wrote the runes’ (NMS BE 360; Liestøl 1984, 232). Personal belongings, especially tools and weapons, are sometimes inscribed with talismanic or protective inscriptions, whether pagan or Christian. Scottish examples would be runic futhorks, such as the seal’s tooth from Birsay (Liestøl 1984, 232; Curle 1982, 59–60, illus 37), or the St Ninian’s Isle chape (Small *et al* 1973). The Buckquoy whorl may fall into this category, as might the pseudo-ogham-inscribed whorl from Burrian (MacGregor 1974, 91, fig 18). A fourth category, though attested much earlier, shows that such inscriptions may have a ludic rather than strictly practical or talismanic function. These are the corpus of Gaulish-, Gallo-Latin-, and Latin-inscribed whorls from eastern Gaul (Whatmough 1949; Lambert 1994, 122–5). Meid has interpreted these texts as subtly, or more directly, erotic messages, from implied male speakers, addressed to young women. As such he characterizes them as reflecting ‘spinning room amusements’ (Meid 1992, 52–4, ill.). According to Lambert such objects, bearing ‘des souhaits ou des compliments amoureux’, were given ‘en cadeau par des galants dont les intentions sont claires’ (1994, 23). The fact that whorls

were made by men and given to women, especially sweethearts, in other cultures too, is indicated by a Norse example in Reykjavík Museum, *Thorá mig frá Hruna* 'Thora owns me, from Hruni' (referred to on NMS label for spindle-whorl BE 360). The Christian sentiment of the Buckquoy whorl is a long way from the double-entendres of the Gaulish carvings but it is not inconceivable that 'L' was a man (an Irishman ?) who inscribed the Orkney spinster's whorl in the hope of future remembrance. Page gives as an alternative interpretation of the *wer* of the Whitby spindle-whorl the northern form of West Saxon *wær* 'token of friendship' (1973, 171).

All of these comparanda are examples of inscriptions carved while the whorl was still in use for spinning. In more recent times, however, former spindle-whorls were used in the Scottish Gàidhlicheachd as charms (John MacInnes, pers comm). It is possible that the Buckquoy text relates to a time when the whorl had ceased to be used for its primary function and had taken on talismanic significance. There are no explicit early medieval references to whorl-charms, but Adomnán provides seventh-century evidence of the use of pebbles as amulets. In *Vita Columbae* he referred first to a small, unspecified *benedictio* ('object that has been blessed'), which was housed in an inscribed box, and, once dipped in water, was used to cure a broken hip (VC ii.5 p.103 n.134), and to a piece of rock salt blessed by the saint which was hung on the wall above the bed of an invalid (ii.7 p.105). Most relevant to Buckquoy is the *lapis candidus*, 'white stone', which was taken from a Scottish river, blessed and used to work cures among the heathen Picts. Adomnán has Columba say, *Signate ... hunc candidum lapidem, per quem dominus in hoc gentili populo multas egrorum perficiet sanitates*, 'Mark this white stone. Through it the Lord will work many cures of the sick among this heathen people' (VC ii.33). Though *signate* doubtless means mark with the sign of the cross, is not the Buckquoy spindle-whorl a white stone, marked with a Christian message ? Though there is considerable doubt about the interpretation of the ogham on the famous Ennis bead (CIIC 53), it should be noted that it was believed to be of assistance to women in labour, and efficacious in the treatment of eye complaints (Brash 1879, 321; see Meaney 1981 for a discussion of Anglo-Saxon curing stones).

### *Historical context*

As a complete, legible but, according to the two authorities, unintelligible ogham, Buckquoy might be considered one of the stronger planks in the argument for a non-Indo-European Pictish language. If it could, however, be proved to be comprehensible, and the proportion of uninterpreted inscriptions thus reduced, the case for non-Indo-European Pictish would be weakened accordingly. Of course, if the ogham is Old Irish, this implies nothing about the nature of the Pictish language, merely that there were Irish speakers in Orkney in the eighth century. Thus, if accepted, the interpretation of the Buckquoy ogham text as a Christian phrase written in Old Irish is an important breakthrough, not only for the linguistic information it provides, but also because of what it indicates about the spread of Irish Christianity to the North.

When discussing external influences on pre-Viking Orkney, commentators have, quite rightly, tended to stress the eastern connections with mainland Pictland and Northumbria (see, most recently, Lamb 1993). The importance of the western seaboard as a conduit for influences from Ireland should not, however, be overlooked. There is documentary evidence for voyages by Irish *peregrini* to Orkney and beyond as early as the sixth century. Both Brendan and Cormac Ua Liatháin, who, according to Adomnán, visited Columba on *Hinba*, came from areas well stocked with ogham stones (VC i.6, ii.42, iii.17), a number of which have explicitly Christian associations. Of those marked with the cross, two refer to ecclesiastics – Arraglen (CIIC 145) QRIMITIR 'priest', Maumanorig (CIIC 193) AILITHIR, 'pilgrim' (though the reading is problematic).

Continued familiarity with the ogham script in the Irish church is suggested by the presence of ogham marginalia in manuscripts of the ninth century and later, written by Irish scribes, not least by the ogham signature in the Stowe Missal (Royal Irish Academy MS.D.II.3 f.11r), of one Sonid who describes himself as *'peregrinus'* (Warner 1915, xlii, plate viii).

Peter Harbison has amassed archaeological and art historical evidence for a long tradition of pilgrimage along a western maritime arc stretching from the far south-west of Ireland to Shetland (1991, 192–4, 221). A spindle-whorl would be an unlikely piece of baggage for a monk on pilgrimage, unless, that is, it was already functioning as a relic or charm. The geological evidence, however, indicates that the Buckquoy ogham was not imported from Ireland, but instead carved locally, the implication being that there were people at Birsay in the eighth century who understood the Irish language, either Irish settlers or bilingual Picts. Orkney was regarded by contemporaries as Pictish territory (Dumville 1976), but it is not inconceivable that there might have been an Irish colony there, as in so many other areas of western maritime Britain. The similarity of house-type at Deer Park Farms, the Udal, and Buckquoy, is just one feature worthy of further investigation in this regard. Not all the Irish speakers need necessarily have been there of their own volition. Adomnán refers to an Irish slave woman, *peregrina captiva*, 'captive exile', in the household of the Pictish king Bridei (VC II. 33), and the Orkney Picts may well have been involved in Irish slave-raiding or trading too.

The Christian sentiment of the Buckquoy text throws interesting light on the current debate over the relative strength of the Irish and Northumbrian contribution to the evangelization of the Northern Isles (Morris 1990, 9). Continuing links between the Irish church and Orkney are demonstrated by the reference in the ninth-century Life of St Fintan of Rheinau (Thomson 1986; Löwe 1986) to an Orcadian bishop, presumably a Pict, who had studied in Ireland in his youth and who could speak Irish to the fugitive Fintan. That he was the only person in the area who could, implies that knowledge of Irish was not widespread in Orkney in the 840s.

It is impossible to evaluate the Buckquoy ogham without reference to the excavated remains on the Brough of Birsay, just a few hundred metres away. Although Buckquoy was a farmstead, not a high status site, its proximity to the Brough means it cannot be disassociated from it. Might the Buckquoy farmers have been monastic tenants of the Brough? Perhaps, although recent interpreters have been turning away from the traditional identification of the pre-Viking structures on the Brough as a monastery (Hunter 1986, 171; Morris 1990, 15; 1993, 287). The ogham text implies no more than that the owner was Christian, certainly it need not imply that he or she was a monk or nun, nor that Buckquoy was an ecclesiastical site. The oghams most closely comparable to Buckquoy, those from Gurness, only 16 km away, from Pool, and from Bac Mhic Connain (North Uist), appear to have no ecclesiastical connotations. They share with the oghams from the Brough itself an informality which suggests that ogham literacy was not highly restricted, or reserved for solemn, formal purposes. It would be wrong, therefore, to assign an ecclesiastical interpretation to the Brough on the basis of the presence of ogham.

## CONCLUSION

In this discussion I have attempted to explain the evidence as best I can, while frankly acknowledging the difficulties in both reading and interpretation. It is a frustrating reality of early medieval Insular epigraphy that vernacular inscriptions which do not conform to a firmly established textual formula rarely yield an utterly unambiguous reading (eg Williams 1949; Clancy 1993). Even the intensely studied runic inscriptions of Anglo-Saxon England, written in a language vastly better attested than Pictish, present numerous difficulties and are much disputed (Page 1973). In the

circumstances it is perhaps unrealistic to expect such an informal ogham inscription as Buckquoy, from a little understood period in the development of the script, to be completely unequivocal. The most I have been able to show is that mine is a possible interpretation. If I have been unable to demonstrate that it *must* be so, then I await with interest a more convincing explanation.

## NOTES

- 1 Type I and type II: This is merely a convenient label for distinguishing between forms of the script without a drawn-in-stem-line (for instance those on which the arris of the stone serves as the stem) (type I) and those, usually across a flat surface, with the stem-line actually drawn in (type II). Type I is the norm on early pillars, type II on later slabs, but there is a degree of overlap and it is not yet clear to what extent the distinction is simply a function of date.
- 2 *Aicme* (pl. *aicmi*): The 20 letters of the original ogham alphabet are divided into four groups (*aicmi*) of five letters each, these are labelled by the name of the first letter in each group, i.e. the *b-aicme* – b, l, f, s, n; the *h-aicme* – h, d, t, c, k<sup>w</sup>; the *m-aicme* – m, g, g<sup>w</sup> (?), st(?), r; the *a-aicme* – a, o, u, e, i [McManus 1991, 3 § 1.4].
- 3 *forfid* (pl. *forfeda*): Over the centuries a number of ‘supplementary letters’ or *forfeda* were added to the original inventory of 20 ogham letters.
- 4 Bind-stroke: In some later type II ogham inscriptions the component strokes of individual letters are joined at their distal ends by a horizontal bind-stroke parallel with the stem. Such bound letters are easier to read since the letters are thus rendered quite distinct.
- 5 Ogham band: The ogham band is the area occupied by the ogham letters. The stem is the mid-point of this ribbon and its outer edge is defined by the distal ends of the longest consonant strokes. A vowel stroke the same length as a b- or h-consonant, placed centrally across the stem, would occupy the middle two quarters of the ogham band, ie one-quarter either side of the stem.
- 6 I follow the convention of transliterating ogham inscriptions in capital letters, giving doubtful letters in lower case, and by enclosing alternative readings in round brackets, separated one from another by an oblique stroke.

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