

Notes and News

EARLY MEDIEVAL INSCRIPTION AT HOLCOMBE, SOMERSET (Fig. 1; Pl. v)

The E. Capital of the S. porch doorway of Old St Andrew's church, Holcombe, Somerset (N.G.R. ST 6688 5072) includes an inscription set inversely on one face of a block of coarse oolitic limestone. The inscription ante-dates the mid 12th-century capital which has been cut from the inverted block. A pre-Conquest date has been favoured by those who have previously examined the stone,¹ but its possible context has not been fully discussed.

THE INSCRIPTION (Fig. 1; Pl. v)

Analysis of the text is problematical as it is incomplete, and some letters are damaged or deteriorated beyond recognition.

The following is a reconstructed reading of the inscription:² transcription dots on the line indicate letters missing; subscript dots indicate uncertain letters; dots at mid line indicate stops; and letters which, though missing, can be restored, are indicated by square brackets.

+ P R O T R ... or + W R O T R ...
. A T ꝥ R ... or . A T ꝥ ꝥ ... or . A T ꝥ F ...
... E I E L . A U ... [H A N]
C : P E T R A

Line 1: The first letter is a P, or possibly an Anglo-Saxon *wynn* or W.

Line 2: The fourth letter is a P with a cross bar and long vertical stroke, possibly a chi-rho. The final complete letter is either an F, R, or P.

Line 3: The former existence of letters preceding the extant examples is uncertain due to the secondary use of the stone, although it is likely that some scar might have survived. The fifth letter is too damaged to read. The last letter is also damaged, but is possibly an U.

Line 4: The last letter is uncertain.

The lettering of the inscription places it in a pre-Conquest context. Some of the letter forms, the C, I, O, P, R, and T, are more or less derived from Roman capitals. These forms are not very diagnostic, particularly in their present condition, and could turn up on inscriptions in either an early medieval Celtic, Anglo-Saxon or 11th-/12th-century context. Of the other letters the L might be derived from Insular half-uncial scripts; the A could derive from either uncial or Insular half-uncial. On palaeographical grounds the inscription could therefore be either Anglo-Saxon or Celtic.

Line 1: Watkin read the first letter as an OE (Old English) *wynn*, and considered that the stone recorded the consecration of the church by 'Wrotard' (line 1), a name which he equated with *Hrothweard*, Archbishop of York in the early 10th century.³ He postulated that this event was a by-product of 'Wrotard's' attendance at the Exeter Council of Easter 928. Dr F. Colman considers that association with the first element of *Hrothweard* is pushing all sides of the evidence, on epigraphic, orthographic and phonological grounds, too far, and association with a particular historical character is even more dubious.⁴ It is true that Searle listed only



FIG. 1

Holcombe inscription (stippling denotes erosion)

one *Hrothweard*,⁵ but this is not to say that numerous unrecorded namesakes, important or otherwise, did not exist during the Anglo-Saxon period. As a personal-name element *Wrot-*, or even *Wroht-*, are not implausible, but Dr Colman can trace no known OE names with this as an undisputed element. If the initial symbol is a P then the form is unlikely to be an OE name as the initial P is very rare in native OE words. Alternatively, this first line might be pure Latin, for example, *protr[axit]* 'drew' or *pro Tr ...* or *pro tr ...* 'on behalf of/in front of Tr ... / tr ...'. Word division is not improbable, despite the absence of punctuation marks (as in line 4). If the line begins with a Latin *pro* then there are several Old Welsh (henceforth OW) names beginning in *Tr-*, for example, *Triphun* (later *Tryffin*).

Line 2: A chi-rho is unlikely in the middle of a text.⁶ If the fourth letter represents *per*⁷ as for example in *perp[etuus]*, it seems likely that there is a word-break between it and the preceding letter T since *-tp-* is rare in both Latin and OW. The combination *-at-* could be Latin, for example, a verb in *-at* or *-a(vi)t*, or there are several Welsh names ending in *-at*, for example, OW *Acgarat*, *Guriat*, and *Eldat*, or containing *-at-*, for example, **-catu-* 'battle' as in OW *Briacat*. If the fourth letter is a P, rather than a chi-rho, then the succeeding letter is most probably an R. There are a few OW possibilities in *Pr-* for example, *Protec*, or if the P represents a contraction (i.e. from *per*, *por*, or *pro*), for example, *Peretur*.

Line 3: This line includes the second possible Anglo-Saxon element within the inscription, *Eiel-*, which according to Feilitzen is synonymous with *Æthel*.⁸ Dr Colman⁹ draws attention to several Anglo-Saxon examples of this variant on a very common prototheme, that is, with *E* instead of *Æ* and/or *i* instead of *th*, for example on coins of Edward the Confessor: *Eielpine*, Tamworth mint, Oxford mint; *Eielric*, Hereford mint; *Æielred*, Canterbury mint.¹⁰ Her impression is that such forms are late, especially with the *i* for the *th*, but she quotes an early example, *Eilred*, on a late 8th-century 'styca'.¹¹

The sequence *-eie-* is an unlikely one in Welsh, although in view of the occurrence of *[D]eniēl* in inscription IV at Wareham Lady St Mary,¹² an unexpected but probably authentic spelling for the more usual *De(i)niel* 'Daniel', *[D]e[n]iel* or *[Den]eiel* should also be considered here. Of the fairly numerous OW names which begin in *El-*, several conform to

the *El.a.* formula, for example, *Elhaearn*, *Elian* and *Elias*. If this word-break is correct then the EI could be Latin *ei*, or if Welsh, the termination of a Welsh name, or of a Latinized Welsh genitive or Latin genitive. There is the very remote chance that it might stand for *[n]ei* 'nephew, younger male relation', or the barbarous Latin spellings *[av]ei* or *[fil]ei* (classically *avi* and *fili*). There appear to be no obvious names in *Iel-*.

Line 4: It is reasonable to restore here *[han]c petra[m]* 'this stone', but there is the slight possibility that this is OW *Petr* 'Peter'. The former of course indicates that the rest of the inscription was also in Latin.

Professor W. Gillies considers that the number of Welsh possibilities in this inscription is sufficient for a 'Celtic' origin to be considered fairly seriously.¹³ Certainly, the present form of the stone itself does nothing to contradict this view. The inscription was obviously cut into a well-prepared smooth face (it is impossible to comment on the original form of the rest of the stone). Most Celtic inscriptions were cut upon a substantial piece of stone, either natural or roughly hewn, generally large enough to assume a monolithic character, but occasionally pieces of dressed Roman masonry were reused. The Roman villa at Holcombe¹⁴ would have been a potential quarry. Another purely distinctive feature of Celtic inscriptions is that their inscriptions often run vertically downwards, although the presence of more than one line of text is rare.¹⁵ Possibly the wide margin to the left of the Holcombe text hints that it was originally of this form. Likewise, the rather informal layout of the text, with wandering letters of different sizes, weighs in favour of a Celtic origin.

The Anglo-Saxons were not politically and militarily dominant in Somerset until towards the end of the 7th century,¹⁶ but Professor A. C. Thomas does not doubt that until then the British church persisted in this area.¹⁷ The combination of Celtic names with a Latin inscription, but Anglo-Saxon in date, is not unknown, five examples existing in Lady St Mary's church, Wareham.¹⁸ All five are memorial stones, attributed to dates from the 7th to the early 9th century, and commemorate people with Celtic names.

If the Holcombe inscription is Celtic then it is one of about fifty inscribed stones in SW. Britain which are believed to date between the beginning of the 5th century and early in the 9th.¹⁹ There is a group of these inscriptions in N. Devon and SW. Somerset, most notably the Caratacus Stone,²⁰ to which the Holcombe inscription is an outlier; the Wareham group is probably distinct.²¹ As at Holcombe, Dr C. A. R. Radford has noticed the sporadic appearance of letter forms derived from bookhands amongst the otherwise Roman lettering of this group.²² The possible presence of a monogrammatic form of the chi-rho, in line 2, would suggest a 6th-/8th-century date range.²³

If Anglo-Saxon in origin, presumably the inscription performed either a memorial or dedicatory function; the probable mention of the stone itself in line 4 of the inscription perhaps weighs in favour of the latter alternative. Dr J. Higgitt listed, amongst other examples, ten potential pre-Conquest dedicatory stone inscriptions.²⁴ Dr E. Okasha listed only eight examples and claimed that there is no set Anglo-Saxon dedication formula,²⁵ but Higgitt observed that the inscriptions do indeed contain similar and/or common elements.²⁶ In common with some of these inscriptions, the Holcombe inscription has an introductory cross, perhaps personal names and a possible invocation to Christ. Lacking, or no longer extant, however, are many other elements such as the dedicatory saint, the date of dedication (day, month and year), and any mention of the church. In fact, the few elements which are present at Holcombe could equally well fit onto a memorial stone. Such a memorial would not appear to fall into any of Dr Okasha's three categories of formulae and would, therefore, be of her miscellaneous variety.²⁷

Although reused, and its original location unknown, the Holcombe stone may have been associated with the earliest phases of religious use of the site, either Anglo-Saxon or Celtic. There is no other evidence of an early church at Holcombe. One might have expected the survival of other stone examples of Anglo-Saxon literacy from monasteries.²⁸ However, Higgitt has noted that most dedicatory inscriptions, such as this may be, tend to come from non-monastic churches, although this may simply be an accident of survival.²⁹ The principal concern, of the later ones at least, was to commemorate their secular patrons. If the

inscription is Celtic, then a tombstone or memorial are the most likely possibilities, but the little remaining of the text, excluding the possible name elements, does not seem to satisfy any of Nash-Williams's principal formulae.³⁰

This is a fascinating inscription, tantalizingly incomplete. Although the Holcombe stone may be Anglo-Saxon as always previously assumed, it could be Celtic. Its presence possibly exposes the existence of an early Christian church, and its significance, not least as the only possible Anglo-Saxon inscription in the county of Somerset, should not be overlooked.

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SALLY M. FOSTER
University of Glasgow

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¹ D. E. Horne, 'An incised stone at Holcombe Church', *Bath Branch Proc. Somerset Archaeol. Natur. Hist. Soc.* (1908), 149-50; D. A. Watkin, 'Some Archaeological experiences in Somerset', *Proc. Somerset Archaeol. Natur. Hist. Soc.*, 113 (1969), 11-16.

² Notation after Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, *An Inventory of Historical Monuments in the County of Dorset, Volume Two, South-East* (London, 1970), 311.

³ Op. cit. in note 1, 12-13.

⁴ *In litt.*

⁵ W. G. Searle, *Onomasticon Anglo-Saxonicum* (Cambridge, 1897), 303.

⁶ Dr E. Okasha, *in litt.*

⁷ W. M. Lindsay, *Notae Latinae* (Cambridge, 1915), 175.

⁸ O. von Feilitzen, *The Pre-Conquest Personal Names of Domesday Book* (Uppsala, 1937).

⁹ *In litt.*

¹⁰ A. S. Robertson, *S.C.B.I. 2: Hunterian and Coats Collections, University of Glasgow, Part 1* (London, 1961), no. 1057; H. A. Grueber and C. F. Keary, *A Catalogue of English Coins in the British Museum. Anglo-Saxon Series II* (London, 1893), no. 1115; *ibid.*, no. 543; Royal Coin Cabinet Stockholm, no. 23040/432.

¹¹ G. Galster, *S.C.B.I. 4: Royal Collection of Coins and Medals, National Museum Copenhagen* (London, 1964), no. 184.

¹² Royal Commission, op. cit. in note 2, 312.

¹³ *In litt.*

¹⁴ K. Branigan and P. J. Fowler, *The Roman West Country* (Newton Abbott, 1976), 224.

¹⁵ Dr E. Okasha, *in litt.*

¹⁶ P. Rahtz and P. J. Fowler, 'Somerset A.D. 400-700', 187-217 in P. J. Fowler (ed.), *Archaeology and the Landscape* (London, 1972), 189-90.

¹⁷ A. C. Thomas, *Christianity in Roman Britain to A.D. 500* (London, 1981), 270.

¹⁸ Royal Commission, op. cit. in note 2, 310-12 and pls. 165-66.

¹⁹ S. Pearce, *The Kingdom of Dumnonia* (Padstock, 1978), 21.

²⁰ A. Vowles, *The History of the Caratacus Stone, Winsford Hill* (Minehead, 1939).

²¹ Dr E. Okasha, *in litt.*

²² C. A. R. Radford, 'The pre-Conquest church and the old minsters in Devon', *Devon Hist.*, 11 (1975), 5-6; compare the similar development of Welsh inscriptions, V. E. Nash-Williams, *Early Christian Monuments of Wales* (Cardiff, 1950), 13.

²³ A. Hamlin, 'A chi-rho stone at Drumaqueran, Co. Antrim', *Ulster J. Archaeol.*, 35 (1972), 24.

²⁴ J. Higgitt, 'The dedication inscription at Jarrow and its context', *Antiq. J.*, 59ii (1979), 346.

²⁵ E. Okasha, *Hand-list of Anglo-Saxon non-Runic Inscriptions* (Cambridge, 1971), 7.

²⁶ Higgitt, op. cit. in note 24, 346.

²⁷ Okasha, op. cit. in note 25, 8.

²⁸ There are references to inscribed pyramids at Glastonbury: C. Pooley, *An Historical and Descriptive Account of the Old Stone Crosses of Somerset* (London, 1877), 12-14.

²⁹ Higgitt, op. cit. in note 24, 347.

³⁰ Nash-Williams, op. cit. in note 22, 7 ff. and 25 ff.