RUNIC STONE, FROM CHESHIRE.

ON A SCULPTURED STONE WITH A RUNIC INSCRIPTION IN CHESHIRE.[1]

By PROFESSOR G. F. BROWNE.

When the Institute met at Chester I was allowed to describe the Sculptured Stones of Cheshire at one of the evening meetings. On that occasion I remarked upon the entire absence of Runes on Cheshire stones, and upon a specially interesting set of Sculptured Stones at West Kirkby, in the curious district of Cheshire called Wirrall, between the Dee and the Mersey. As I have within the last week or two seen a Runic inscription in this same district, it seems worth while to communicate the facts to the Institute at its present meeting, at which I am unfortunately prevented from being present by archæological engagements in Scotland. A new and considerable Runic inscription is in itself of sufficient importance to claim special mention ; and the one which I now bring before the Society has another interest, as shewing how far from a simple truth we may be led by a very small incorrectness in detail.

On June 9, 1889, I received from the Rev. W. Dallow, of Upton, near Birkenhead, a letter describing a sculptured stone with a Runic inscription, and enclosing some account of it, with an illustration, communicated by Mr. Dallow to the periodical called *Research*. This account had been sent to Professor Stephens of Copenhagen, who had corrected some of the readings, and referred his correspondent to me.

The runes, as printed by Mr. Dallow in *Research*, are

FOLKWARARDONREC ·· ··

·· WIDDOTH FOTEATHEIEU ·· ··

[1] Read in the Historical Section at the Annual Meeting of the Institute, at Norwich, August 8th, 1889.

Professor Stephens altered this, by the light of the photographs sent to him, to

FOLKWARARDONBEC ·· ··
·· WIDDEATH   FOTEATHEAMUN ·· ··

and suggested the insertion of UN after BEC, about which there can be no doubt, and of IN before WID.   He interpreted it as follows :—

Folcwar, the person to whom the memorial was raised.
Ardon, for Arodon, honoured.
Becun, a monument ;
the lost runes in this line giving the names of the persons who thus honoured Folcwar with a monument.
Inwid, guile.
Deathfote, death struck.
Athe, oath.
Amun, for amunan, to call to mind ;
from which he gathered that Folcwar died a violent death.

My own feeling was that the rune cutters studied simplicity and brevity, and that the out-of-the-way character of a good deal of this interpretation was, on the face of it, a serious objection.   But no one can feel otherwise than most grateful to Professor Stephens, who, with nothing better than a photograph to guide him, will spend any quantity of time on an inscription sent out to him, and, in his desire to give help, will risk ingenious suggestions when he has really not had the one fair chance which is afforded by seeing the stone itself and placing it in various lights.   I am myself under the deepest obligations to Professor Stephens for a personal kindness which seems to have no limits.

One of the Runic inscriptions at Thornhill, near Dewsbury, runs—

Igilsuith araerde aefter Berhtsuithe
Becun at bergi gebiddath thaer saule.
Igilsuith raised in memory of Berhtsuith a
memorial at the mound.   Pray for the soul.

It occurred to me at once that the Wirral inscription had many of the elements of this, and that small changes would assimilate the two closely.   Mr. Dallow, however, of whose kindness and interest from first to last I cannot speak too strongly, reported—correctly, as it proved—that my

suggested emendations were not borne out by the facts. Still, I felt that at least it came very near to

Folc araerdon becun
Biddath fore Atheamun

the *araerdon* being Dr. Skeat's suggestion, and I went to see the stone on July 14, in company with the Dean of Chester. Mr. Webster of Leasowe Bank, about a mile from the Moreton Station, in whose coach-house it lay, received us with great hospitality.

The fragment is a flat stone $20\frac{3}{4}$ in. long, 5 in. wide at one end and wider at the other, and 9 in. thick. The surface has been ornamented with raised sculpture, almost all of which has been broken off; enough is left to show that the pattern consisted of interlacing work, ending in a serpent's head, running parallel with the longer edge of the stone. The pattern shows that the stone has been considerably longer than it now is, and the analogy of other flat Anglian stones of a sepulchral character, *e.g.*, at Thornhill, suggests that it was at least twice as broad as the present broadest part, having two serpent patterns separated by a raised band down the middle of the stone.

The stone was part of the building materials of an unsightly little church, built at Upton, near Birkenhead, in 1813, out of the materials of the old church of Over-church, which fell into ruin about that time. This little church was pulled down in 1887, and the materials were purchased by Mr. Webster. Seeing some remains of sculpture on one of the stones, he had it cleaned, and in the process the lime which had filled the runes on the edge of the stone came out, and thus the presence of the inscription was discovered.

On the edge at the narrow end of the stone there is rudely incised a Romanesque arch. This is very fortunate, for it determines the original position of the stone. It was a recumbent, not a standing stone, with interlaced serpents on the surface, a rude arcade cut on the vertical edge at the head, and an inscription in runes cut on the vertical edge at the side. This would be the south side if the body which it covered was laid facing the east. Presumably large stones were laid in the surface of the ground, over the grave, on which this body stone was in

turn laid, so that it should not sink into the earth. Even so, the vertical edge of a flat stone was not a very permanent place for an inscription, and I do not remember any other runic inscription in Great Britain in that position. The Danish inscription in runes on the well-known stone in the Guildhall Library in London is in the same position relatively to the stone, but the stone was meant in that case to be in an upright position, with the inscription running down the edge.

The Upton inscription is in two lines, one above the other, an incised line dividing the two. Both lines are broken off at the right hand, and the two runes at the left hand of the lower line are defaced. The rest is very legible. The rune cutter began with large letters well spaced, but when he came to the second line he had to squeeze his letters, getting nineteen into the space occupied by fifteen in the upper line.

The inscription had been in almost all its letters correctly read. In three cases I came to the conclusion that the marks had been somewhat misinterpreted, and I read the second *a* in *araerdon* as *ae*, making *araerdon*, the proper Anglo-Saxon form for " they reared " or " erected," while on the other hand I read the *ae* in *widdaeth* as *a*, making *widdath*, and this I could not doubt was meant for *biddath*, the proper Anglo-Saxon form for " pray ye," whether with the prefix *ge* (or *gi*, for both occur) or not. In the same way I read the *a* in *athe* as *ae*. One further change I made, of which the effect did not strike me for two or three days. I read the *a* in *amun* as *l*, and this with the correction in the previous syllables gives *Aethelmun*. It can scarcely be doubted that we have here the name of the person for whom prayer was to be made " Aethelmund."

The *fote* is probably a miscut *fore*. There is on one of the Thornhill stones *aefte* for *aefter*, and when *fote* is written in runes the mistake between it and *aefte* is less startling than that between it and *fore*. Dr. Skeat assures me, however, that *biddan aefter*, " to pray for," is unknown as a construction and must be rejected, while *biddan fore* is natural. The only other emendation, *biddath* for *widdath*, means a much smaller change in the appearance of the rune ; the mistake is one not at all un-

likely to happen. [It is a satisfaction to find, since this was written, that the cast shews clearly what I tried to persuade myself was to be seen on the stone itself, namely, a part of the lower half of the B. The cast, I think, leaves no doubt that the letter was B and not w, ⟨ not ⟩.]

The two lost runes at the beginning of the second line might be the *un* of *becun* or the *gi* of *gibiddath*.

There only remains one difficulty, the letter after *folk*, apparently redundant. I read it as *ae*, not *w*, but a piece of the stone was flaked off and I think it possible that it is a spoiled rune which the rune-cutter has left standing. What else he was to do, if the stone did chip off as he worked, I do not quite know. On the other hand it may have been cut redundantly without being noticed by the rune-cutter at first as a mistake, and then left. My original view was that Folcæ was a plural of Folc, but Dr. Skeat informed me no such plural was known. I accept that as conclusive. Professor Stephens, however, urges that there were in old Northern English many vowel terminations for neuters plural, *æ* among them, and I am disposed to believe that we are meant to read the word Folcæ, and that we have here a form not hitherto noticed; but it is a matter on which I am not competent to form an opinion. However this may be, the whole thing fits so exactly into the shape we are familiar with that I offer without serious hesitation the reading

Folc(ae) araerdon becun
biddath fore Aethelmund (or *munde*)
The people raised a memorial
Pray for Æthelmund.

The name Aethelmund does not appear to have been common. I do not find it in Bede's History. It occurs in the Durham *Liber Vitæ*, in the form Ethilmund, standing fourteenth in the list of deacons, in the original hand, in letters of gold, perhaps of the ninth century. Twenty-six other deacons follow in the original hand, so that Ethilmund is fairly high up in a very early list. It occurs also once among the Presbyters in a later hand and once among the abbots of the third class who were neither Presbyters nor deacons, here again in the later hand.