NOTES ON THE OVERCHURCH RUNIC STONE.

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THE great difficulty which the writer of this paper labours under is the fact that it follows and is supposed, in some humble manner, to supplement the valuable paper of Professor Browne, B.D., of Cambridge University.

First, a word as to how and where this Runic sepulchral stone was discovered. As these words may meet the eyes of others to whom our locality may not be clearly known, it may here be stated that that part of Cheshire, styled the Wirral, is an oblong district between the Dee and the Mersey, starting from Flookersbrook just outside the city of Chester, and washed on the north-west by the Irish Sea. The old church of Overchurch stood two miles from the Leasowe embankment, midway between the villages of Upton and Moreton. The old graveyard still exists in the private grounds of George Webster, Esq., a few yards from the high road. Here, a church is supposed to have been in existence at the time of the Norman Conquest,

when the Dooms-day Book was drawn up. How often it was rebuilt we do not know, but in Mortimer's *Hundred of Wirral* it is described as " having had pointed arches of peculiar elegance, richly decorated with chevrons and Saxon mouldings," and "as being for many years in a state of progressive decay." In 1709, the steeple became injured and the parishioners were allowed to sell two out of the three bells to defray expenses of repairs, as only fourteen families in the parish were able to give any contributions.

In 1813, the church fell down, or was blown down, and Bishop Law gave due permission to remove the débris, and re-erect it in a more suitable spot at the west end of the village of Upton, on the left-hand side of the road to Greasby. As to the former church, our oldest villager informs me that it had benches for about one hundred and fifty, a clay floor, an oak pulpit, a stained glass window, and a bell, and was served monthly by a clergyman from Wallasey.

It is to be noted that an old silver communion cup, given to this church in 1618, by Sir Charles Bold, Kt., of Upton Hall, is still preserved at Upton. It bears the inscription: "Carolus Bold filius Petri Bold de Upton Armigeri dedit hunc calicem Ecclesie ibidem Eodemq. tempore dedit illis Bibliam, 1618."

I have tried in vain to discover to what saint Overchurch was originally dedicated, as there seems no tradition of any annual "wake," or fair, which is often a good clue to the feast of the patron-saint of a parish church.

In June of 1887, this rather unsightly little whitewashed church was taken down, and all stones showing any ornamental carving were purchased by a gentleman in the neighbourhood. This church had not been used for service since the late Mr. Inman built a fine new one some twenty-five years ago. Being informed, therefore, by the man

who had orders to take it down, that one of the stones contained a strange inscription, I went to see, expecting to find some Latin epitaph of by-gone days. To my surprise the curious characters were Saxon runes. This heavy fragment of sandstone measures about twenty-one inches by ten, and is nine inches thick. On the upper side is an elegant interlaced ribbon-pattern, similar to those on the stones now preserved from the weather in the "hearse house" at West Kirby, and a few lines are cut on the small end, at that corner where the Runic inscription begins. This latter is carefully cut in two rows, divided by a line, and is clearly incomplete, as the stone is abruptly broken off at the right-hand side, and, judging from the pattern carved on the upper, would have extended to at least four or five more letters. This valuable stone seems to have been hidden in the church walls for centuries, with the runes turned inwards. Therefore, the characters had to be carefully cleansed from mortar, and though the first two at the beginning of the second line are gone, the only wonder is that the others are as clearly and sharply cut as they are. It is certain that there was not a third line, as is proved from the state of the stone, which shows no mark of a chisel.

Rûn is the Teutonic for mystery. As masonic Pagan signs, used by the early Scandinavians, they were tolerated by the Church when she evangelised those nations; but after Christianity had become firmly rooted, their use was probably discouraged, and they are said to have been forbidden under ecclesiatical censure at the Council of Toledo. It should, however, be stated that Professor Stephens, the great Runic authority at Copenhagen, denies this theory about runes. Making careful sketches of the inscription and other parts of the stone, I sent them to Professor Stephens, in Denmark, who evinced the liveliest

interest in the discovery, and declared the stone to be of inestimable value.   Still the runes were so far unintelligible. Last summer, however, photography came to our aid, when the matter grew clearer, and the learned doctor, after examining my two photographs under a strong lens, drew this conclusion:—

FOLCWAR   ARDON   BECᴠɴ   .   .   .
Folcwar   honoured tomb . . .

ɪɴWID   DEATH   FOTE   ATHE   AMUN   .   .
guile   death-footed   oath   call to mind .

Still, the whole inscription being so fragmentary, this interpretation was not deemed entirely satisfactory.

It remained for Professor Browne, of Cambridge, who, along with the Dean of Chester, paid a special visit to the stone in last July (1889), to give us the final elucidation, which I believe is now universally accepted by scholars as the true one :—

FOLCÆ   AREARDON   BECᴠɴ   .   .
People (body-guard) reared   a tomb . .

ɢɪ*B*IDDATH   FO*T*   ATHELMUND.
Bi*d* ye   for   Athelmund.

The letters underlined, B and T, are unfortunately mistakes by the "cutter," who is supposed to have been somewhat illiterate.   This name Athelmund is almost unique, we find only one mention of it in the Saxon *Chronicle* in the year 800.   "In this year, the Aldorman Æthelmund rode over from the Hwiccas (Worcestershire), at Cynemderesford (Kempsford), when the Aldorman Weohatan met him with Wiltshire men, and there was a great fight, and both the Aldormen were slain."

If the name were Athelm, we have another entry in the Saxon *Chronicle* which may possibly allude to him.

In 892 Alfred's great army included the Aldormen Æthelred, Æthelm, and Æthelnoth, which were engaged in fighting the East Anglians, who were driven back until "they arrived at a desolated city in Wirrall, which is called Legaceaster (Chester). Then could the force not overtake them before they were in the work, &c." The "work" means here the city walls.

As to the age of this Runic stone, I can hardly agree that it is seventh century. It is a not uncommon fault with us to put things too early. Miss Stokes, who is a very great living authority on Irish archæology, in her recent work, *Early Christian Art in Ireland* (p. 125), questions many of the dates given by Professor Stephens, who ascribes many old Northern crosses, Bewcastle, Ruthwell, &c., to the year six hundred. She proves this fact by comparing the elaborate pattern on the latter cross to the rude outlines on the coffin of St. Cuthbert, which is by all admitted to be seventh century.

It seems certain that the early Irish missionaries mainly taught us our art, and were in the first ages of Christianity far advanced in decoration, as shown by that elegant profusion of interlaced patterns found on their stone monuments, metal works, and rich illuminations. (The book of Kells, and others.)

But to return to our Overchurch stone. Here we have an ancient "Bidding-stone," or "Bid-stone," asking a prayer of the passer-by for the soul of some Saxon warrior, or priest, who lay interred beneath. After a lapse of so many centuries, it is well-nigh impossible to discover whence the stones were procured wherewith the old church of Overchurch was built, and, therefore, we shall never find out whence this Runic slab was taken, and—unrecognised—built into the walls. That it was in its day (seventh century) an important though rude monument, marking

the last resting-place of some great Saxon, there can be but little doubt; and it would, indeed, be curious if it gave its name to the chief hill in the neighbourhood, Bidston Hill, from whose quarries the materials came, likely enough, for building Overchurch. In old documents, we find Bidston Hill spelt variously Bideston, Bydeston, and Bydestone. The Saxon verb biddan, "to bid, ask, pray," enters into many old English words, *e.g.*, bedel, a beadle, one who calls to prayer, a crier; bedesman, one who prays for another. Inside the small but elegant chantry of Prince Arthur, in Worcester Cathedral, these "bedesmen" are seen sculptured with their strings of *beads* in their hands.

Were this valuable old stone only complete, there would be at least four or five more runes in each line (as already stated), and these would probably tell us the title or condition of the deceased. By referring to the history of the period, there is reason to believe that Athelmund was a Saxon soldier or officer. About the year 625, Cadwalla, king of Gwynedd (as North Wales was then styled), bearing great hatred towards Edwin, King of Northumbria, led an army against him, and the rivals met near Morpeth. In the fierce battle which followed, Cadwalla was thoroughly beaten, but managed to rally around him sufficient men to beat a safe retreat across the Mersey and the Dee, and so into his Welsh kingdom. Edwin pursued him over hill and dale, and finally besieged his enemy in Puffin Island, off Anglesey. Now, in the skirmishes which occurred in this retreat of Cadwalla across our Cheshire Wirral, soldiers were likely to fall belonging to either army. If, therefore, Athelmund, in the Saxon ranks of King Edwin, so fell, and departed in that " noble peace " signified by his name, what more natural than that his fellow-comrades, or "body guard" (as "folcæ" strictly means), should have this Runic epitaph cut, before retiring across the Mersey into the

Strathclyde. Northumbria was then but recently evangelised by St. Paulinus, the first Archbishop of York; and thus, to those who can find "sermons in stones," this old and rudely adorned monument proclaims the faith of him who lay beneath, in the touching appeal—"Pray ye for Athelmund!"

In conclusion, if it seems to the general reader that undue importance has been given to this Runic "find," it must be remembered that such stones are rare in Europe, and very rare in England; and, owing to their destruction, are not found in the northern countries, where they most abounded. This is the first Runic inscription ever found in Cheshire.