XVII.—*On the Ogham Inscription from the Island of Bressay, Shetland,* 1853. *Read before the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, April 6th,* 1853.

IN the few remarks we have to make on the remarkable monument of early Christian times now before us, we cannot lay claim to any originality of research. Our acquaintance with the peculiar character inscribed on this stone is indeed so limited, that we confess this to be the first and only Ogham monument that we have ever seen, and all the information that we have gleaned regarding the language and date of these characters and carvings has been derived from the writings of the more modern Irish antiquaries. We have been especially assisted by the perusal of two small, and we believe scarce, pamphlets on Irish Oghams, presented to us by the author, the Rev. Charles Graves, D.D., of Trinity College, Dublin. From this eminent archæologist, we may, it is said, soon expect to have a complete work on this ancient form of cryptic writing. We have purposely delayed reading this paper for the last six months, in the hopes of receiving the translation of the inscription from Professor Graves, as we had sent to him, in September last, accurate gutta percha casts of the Ogham characters on this stone, but from that time to this we have heard nothing more. We must therefore content ourselves for the present with the information we can obtain from the two pamphlets above alluded to, and the

illustrations we have gleaned from the other works on Irish antiquities within our reach. Many of the earlier archæologists of Ireland have maintained that the Ogham character is one of extreme antiquity, that it existed long previous to the introduction of Christianity into that country, and perhaps preceded even the establishment of the Christian religion in Judea by our Blessed Lord. They believed that it was derived from the Phœnician, one of the earliest written languages of the East; but a momentary comparison of the Phœnician with the Ogham alphabet, will convince any reasonable person of the great dissimilarity that exists between them. Gradually, however, the pretensions of the Irish antiquaries have become more moderate, and the impression has continued to gain ground, that these monuments are not of heathen origin, but date from a period subsequent to the establishment of Christianity in Ireland in the fifth centnry of our era. The Christian character of these Ogham stones is, as Dr. Graves observes, sufficiently proved by the following well ascertained facts:—

"Many of these Ogham stones are marked with crosses, often of very antique forms, and to all appearance as old as the inscriptions themselves. Many stand in Christian cemeteries, others in the neighbourhood of cells and oratories. Some are still called after ancient saints, though the inscriptions on them do not exhibit the names by which these saints were ordinarily known. Again, some of the inscriptions prove beyond all doubt that the persons whose work they were, were acquainted with the Latin language. Like many of the very ancient sepulchral monuments of Wales and Cornwall, the Ogham stones in general bear either a single proper name in the genitive case, or the proper name accompanied by the patronymic, the names themselves being such as are continually met with in documents relating to the early history of the Christian church in Ireland."

In the churchyard of Kinard, in the county of Kerry, there is a stone inscribed with a cross, and bearing on it also the name of "MARIANI," in the Ogham character. Now the word "Marianus," which is equivalent to the Irish "*Maolmaireo*," is unquestionably Christian, and cannot have pertained to heathen times. Another stone, at Emlagh, near Dingle, bears the name of "BRUSCCOS," an ecclesiastic contemporary with St. Patrick.

It will be observed that the name on the Kerry stone is from a Latin, and not from an Irish derivation. In Wales, Cornwall, and elsewhere, pillars and stones have been repeatedly met with, bearing rude Latin

inscriptions of a similar kind, but expressed in Roman letters. Thus, in Cornwall we find one—

VINNEMAGLI
SASRANI, FILI CUNATAMI.

It seems that the word *petra* or *monumentum* was here understood; and the same occurs in the Latin name on the Kerry stone, which is in the genitive case. It is not probable that the Latin language was known in Ireland before the arrival of the Christian missionaries, and we are therefore we think fully justified in referring the Kerry stone to a period not antecedent to the middle of the fifth century. On some of the Irish Ogham stones rude crosses are plainly cut, and at times more elaborate ornamentation is employed, closely resembling that exhibited on the stone before us. Several Ogham inscriptions have recently been discovered in Wales, and are described by Mr. Westwood in the Journal of the Archæological Association; while, within the last two years, at least three have been found in Scotland—one at Newton, in Aberdeenshire, one at Golspie, in Sutherlandshire, and a third in the county of Forfar. We shall now proceed to say a few words on the Ogham alphabet and mode of writing, as far as we have been able to master the difficulties of a language with which we were previously unacquainted.

There can be no doubt that the Ogham characters are a species of cryptic writing, like the sacred hieroglyphics of the Egyptians, and that the characters were repeatedly modified and changed, according to the humour of the inscribers. Fortunately, some essays on Ogham writing have been preserved in MSS. of very early date. Thus, in the Book of Ballymote, written about the year 1370, the key to the ordinary Ogham is given, and along with it seventy or eighty other forms of ciphers exhibitng the various modifications to which it was subjected. The Book of Lecan, written about 1417, contains a copy of the Uraicept, a grammatical tract which Professor Graves thinks may be as old as the ninth century, and in which are many passages relating to the Ogham alphabet, all agreeing, as regards the powers of the characters, with what is laid down in the treatise on Oghams in the Book of Ballymote.

The common Ogham alphabet (*Ogham Craobh*), or "the branching Ogham," is formed, like the Scandinavian Runes, of a number of branching strokes, of which the power is indicated by their position in reference to a central stem line. This stem line is usually formed by one of the angles of the stone on which the inscription is cut, or sometimes by a central line drawn down the middle of the flat surface of a slab, as in the Caller inscription given by Ledwich. In the Bressay stone the letters are cut on the edge of the slab, but as the material is soft (the common chlorite slate of the country), the sharp angles have been rounded off, and the central line has been drawn down the middle of the rounded edge. The reading of the inscription then depends on the position of the letters in reference to this central line.

"The inventors of the Ogham alphabet gave to its letters the names of trees or plants, and the Irish name for this alphabet is, like the Greek, derived from its first two letters; b, the first letter, bearing the title of *beith*, the birch tree, and l, *luis*, the quicken. In the Irish treatise above referred to, the letters are all called trees *(feada)*, the consonants are side trees *tao bomma)*, and the dipthongs over trees *(forfeada)*. The continuous stem line is termed the ridge *(druim)*, and each short stroke perpendicular to it, a twig *(fleasg)*."

The formation of the Ogham characters indicates a division of the alphabet into groups, each containing five letters, and each group is named after its first letter. Thus, the letters B F L S N form the B group (*aicme* B), etc., etc.

That the Ogham alphabet, as now presented to us, is the work of a grammarian, and that consequently it is not a genuine primitive alphabet, is sufficiently shewn by the separation of the letters into vowels and consonants, which does not occur in the primitive alphabets.

The connection of the Ogham with the Runic alphabets has been vigorously denied by those Irish antiquaries who maintain the genuine primitive character of this cryptic writing. The relation between the two was long ago maintained by a learned Iceland writer, Gisle Brynjulfsen, of Holum, in Iceland, who, in his Periculum Runologicum, states that many of the the Irish Oghams are derived from Runes of so late a date as the Anglo-Saxon period. The ancient Runic alphabet was, like the Ogham, commonly divided into three groups of letters *(ätter)*, and there were also an infinite number of cryptic alphabets, many of which are noted in Bryn-

julfsen's treatise above referred to. All these cryptic alphabets were founded on this principle, that the symbol for any letter, indicated, on the left hand of an upright stem, the group to which the letter belonged, and on the other side of the stem, the number of strokes or twigs denoted the exact position of that letter in the alphabet. The alphabet given by Liljegren, in his Runlära, (*p.* 50), exhibits this principle, and it is the same as that on which the Ogham alphabet is formed. Some of the old Runic inscriptions were written from a depending stem line, with strokes branching out on either side. Much evidence in favour of the connection of Ogham writing with Runes, is to be gathered from the works of the earlier Irish grammarians. Among the Ogham alphabets in the Book of Ballymote, there are two Runic alphabets tolerably correctly written, one is called *Ogham na Loochlannach*, the Ogham of the Men of Lochlin, and the other is termed the *Gallogham*, or the Ogham of the Foreigners; and along with this last are given the Icelandic names of the letters. Some most curious evidence in reference to this point was recently discovered by Mr. Eugene Curry, the eminent Irish archæologist, in a MS. in the library of Trinity College, Dublin. It contains fragments of a short poem, furnishing rules for the construction of a Runic Ogham, and followed by the alphabet itself, written in full Ogham characters. In the last line we read—

> " Hither was brought in the sword sheath of Lochlan's king,
> The Ogham across the sea ; it was his own hand that cut it."

Ogma, the inventor of the Ogham alphabet, is said to have been one of the Tuath de Danann. The Ogham alphabet seems therefore to have been constructed by persons acquainted with the later and more developed Runic alphabets, such as were used by the Anglo-Saxons.

The exact period when intercourse began between Ireland and Scandinavia is unknown; but there is good reason for supposing that before the year 800, the Northern Vikings visited Ireland. In this way the Ogham characters may have been introduced from Scandinavia; but we cannot, for reasons before stated, allow that this cryptic writing existed in Ireland previous to the establishment of Christianity there in the fifth century of our era. We regard the period of the use of Ogham characters in Ireland as extending from the seventh or eighth centuries to the eleventh or twelfth,

and it is now ascertained that much intercourse took place during that period between Ireland and the Western and Northern Isles of Scotland.

From the middle of the fifth century to the close of the eighth, Ireland, says Dr. Daniel Wilson, was among the most civilized and prosperous of the nations of Europe. In the middle of the sixth century, a small colony of Irish Scots settled in the southern parts of Argyleshire, and founded the kingdom of Dalriada, which gradually increased in power, till in 843, the whole of Scotland was united under the rule of a Dalriadic king, Kenneth McAlpine. The Christian Faith had been introduced into Scotland by St. Ninian or St. Ringan, in the early part of the fifth century. In the middle of that century, St. Servan was sent by St. Palladius to the Northern Isles to preach the Faith to the inhabitants of Orkney and Shetland. St. Kieran and St. Columba, the apostles of Christianity in Scotland, both came from Ireland. Before the ninth century no record exists of the visits of the Northmen to the shores of Orkney or Shetland, but soon after that period the Vikings overran the Northern Isles, and so completely established themselves there, that these islands remained appended to the crown of Norway till the year 1468. In Orkney and in Shetland, in Sutherland, Caithness, and the Western Isles, the names of places and families sufficiently attest the prolonged rule of the Scandinavians, while the memory of the Irish missionaries who preceded them, is only preserved in these parts by a few scattered traditions, and by such names as Ringinsey, the old name for Ronaldshay, and the numerous islets and isles bearing the appelation of Papa, from the *Papæ,* or Irish priests, who were settled thereon. The dominion of the Norsemen in the eastern parts of Scotland was but transitory, and few or none are the marks now remaining of their dominion there. The pillars and sculptured stones, so abundant in Angus, Aberdenshire, and elsewhere, and all bearing certain resemblances to the sculptured monuments of Ireland, are, in our opinion, unquestionably to be referred to the early Irish missionaries, at a period antecedent to the inroads of the Danes. It must not be forgotten that on three or four of these, Ogham inscriptions have been recently discovered.

The Bressay stone was found on the north-eastern side of the island of that name, at the ruined church of Cullensbro, which is remarkable as

having been a cross kirk, with transepts, a rare form among the humble religious edifices of Shetland.

The stone is about five feet long by two feet broad at the top, and it gradually narrows to about eighteen inches at the bottom. It is a slab of chlorite slate, about two inches in thickness. Being carved on both sides, it has evidently been a headstone, and was intended to be set upright in the churchyard.

On the more elaborately sculptured side, we observe, at the very top, the figures of two monsters, with a human body in their jaws, and below these is a cross, composed of interlacing tracery, of the kind that has been termed the Runic knot, but which is constantly observed on the Irish crosses, on the Anglo-Saxon monuments, and on the monoliths before alluded to as occurring in the eastern parts of Scotland. Beneath this cross are the figures of two bishops or abbots, with their crosiers, and a person on horseback between them. The figures of a lion and a bear or wild boar are seen below.

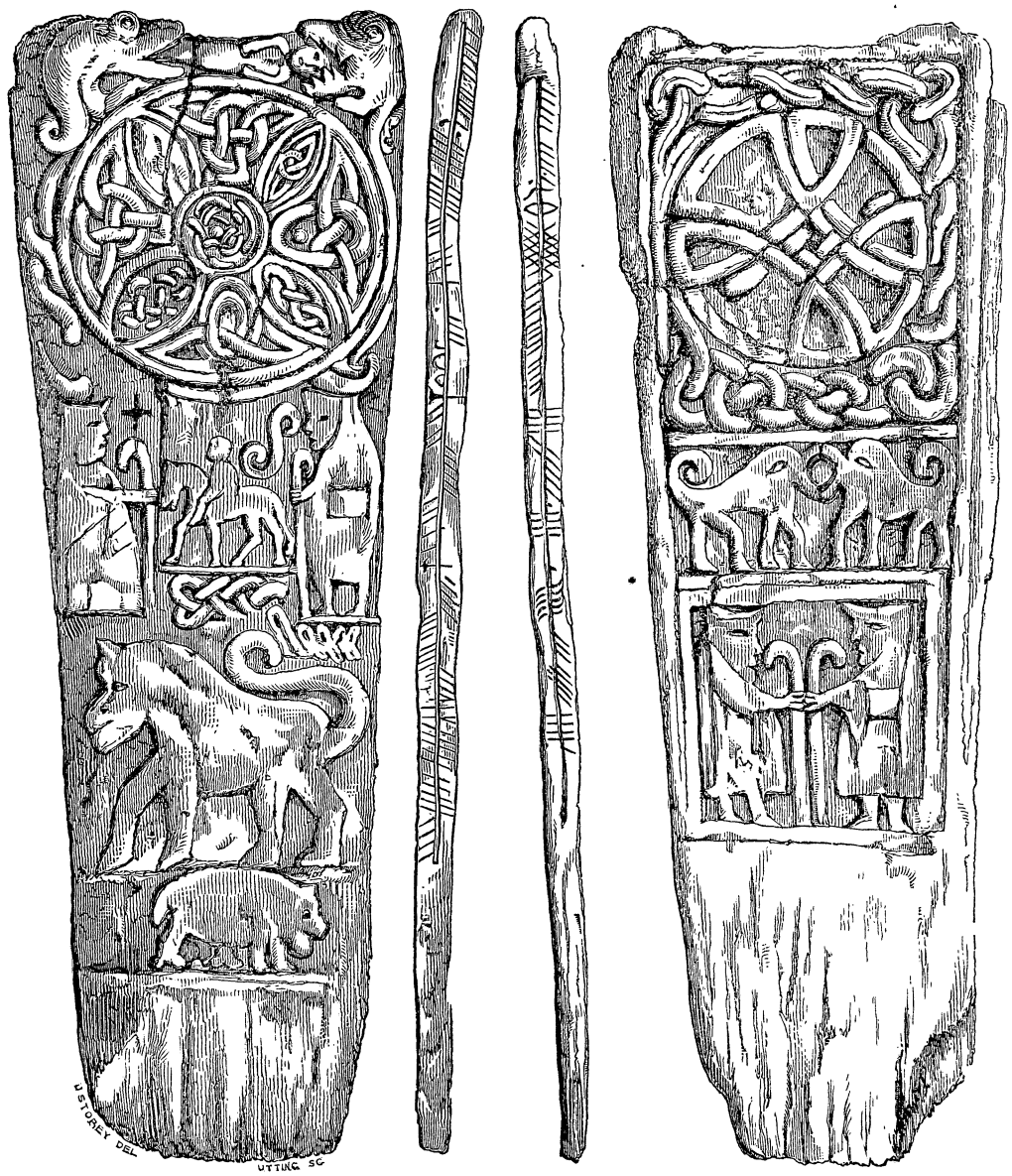
On the reverse we have a well formed interlaced cross, with two animals below it with open mouths, and the figures of the bishops or abbots are repeated.

We cannot pretend to interpret the inscription, for though we have not found much difficulty in tracing out sundry vowels and consonants, our ignorance of the old Irish language must effectually debar us from any attempt of the kind. The interpretation promised to us by Professor Graves has, as is before stated, never come to hand. Professor Graves states, that from the unusually cryptic form of the writing, it presents peculiar difficulties, but that it contains the name of a female.

We do not think we shall err in estimating for this singular monument an antiquity of at least one thousand years; we believe it to have been erected in Bressay before the inroads of the Norsemen in the ninth century, and we may regard it as the most ancient relic now existing of the early Christian inhabitants of the Northern Islands.

The only merit we ourselves can claim, is that of having rescued from oblivion a monument of such undoubted interest and antiquity.

EDWARD CHARLTON.



Headstone with Inscription in Ogham Characters, Bressay Island, Shetland, 1852.