

## ON AN INSCRIPTION IN RUNIC LETTERS IN CARLISLE CATHEDRAL.

THE occurrence of a Runic inscription in any part of our island is always replete with interest both to the antiquary and to the historian. Of Anglo-Saxon Runes, which may be considered as peculiar to this country, we possess some extensive remains—such as the inscription on the cross at Ruthwell, deciphered by the late Mr. Kemble, and the remarkable one on the cross at Bewcastle, which, with the bilingual inscription from Falstone, has been so well explained and commented upon by the Rev. Daniel Haigh in an earlier volume of these Transactions. But the above include almost all our Anglo-Saxon Runes, and it is a matter of wonder to us that more relics of this kind have not been preserved. The fact of the Falstone inscription having been written both in Anglo-Saxon Runes and in Roman minuscules, proves, we think, that at that time the one or the other were becoming obsolete; and there can be no doubt that the Anglo-Saxon Runes were then familiar only to a few, and that ere long these remnants of a heathen period—for such we consider them—went entirely out of use. Rare as are the Anglo-Saxon remains of this kind, it may be safely affirmed that the Runes, indicating the Norse influence in this country, are still more seldom met with. They are, in fact, or at least they were until within the last five years, almost entirely confined to one small island—the Isle of Man—where the Northmen firmly established their kingdom, and have left indelible traces of their presence in the laws and institutions by which the Isle is governed. Beyond the limits of the Isle of Man only one well authenticated inscription in the Norse Runes was known to exist in England and Ireland, and curiously enough this is to be found in Cumberland, upon the font at Bridekirk. Though in Norse Runes, it is not however in the old Norse language, “Norræna tunga,” but in the curious old English of the time of the Conquest. Recently, in 1852, a purely Norse inscription, both in characters and language, was discovered on the south side of St. Paul’s churchyard in London, at a depth of twenty feet below the present surface. It bears the inscription “Konall and Tuki laid down this stone.” The first name is not very clear; it is only written “Kona,” but Rafn insists that the “L” of the succeeding word must be doubled

to complete the name. That such reduplications have occurred we will not deny, but they are very rare, and we would rather avoid having recourse to them to help us out of a difficult reading. The inscription is conjectured to be of about the date 1050, and the whole has reference no doubt to the flat gravestone at the head or foot of which this stone was placed, and on which was sculptured the real name of the deceased. Another Norse inscription has now been discovered, of complete Norse character as regards the letters of which it is formed, but containing one word not exactly reconcilable with the ordinary mode of writing it in the old Norse tongue.

During the recent repairs of Carlisle Cathedral, on removing the plaster and white-wash from the interior of the south transept, the quick eye of Mr. C. H. Purday, the intelligent clerk of the works, caught the semblance of letters on a single stone about three feet from the ground, in the western wall of the transept. On close examination it was found to be in Runic letters, and a copy of these, as correctly as could then be made, was sent to Mr. Albert Way and others. On seeing Mr. Way's copy we at once recognised the inscription as being in purely Norse characters, and without difficulty we read the two concluding words "thesi stain," which confirmed us in our belief that the language corresponded to the character of the Runes. On referring again to Mr. Purday, he with the greatest willingness laboured to perfect the inscription, examining the stone repeatedly by candle light, and each time being enabled to make important corrections. We carefully abstained ourselves from making any suggestions to Mr. Purday, as we wished to have the inscription copied by the accurate eye of a draughtsman, but by one totally ignorant of the characters in which it was written. Mr. Purday's emendations enabled us very soon to master the greater part of the meaning; but two points remained unsettled, and which we were unable to clear up until we had personally inspected the stone. We had made out the words "raitad . . Rynr a thesi stain"—"wrote *Runes upon this stone*"—and we felt sure that the first word beginning with "Tolf" contained the proper name, and that in all probability the gap between "raitad" and "Rynr" should be filled up by the word "thessa" or "thesi," corresponding to the English word "these." On recently inspecting the stone for ourselves, we read the first name without difficulty as it had been read before by others, though we could not reconcile their reading with the copies of the inscription forwarded to us. The whole inscription consists of thirty-three letters as expressed in English characters, and of twenty-four or more letters in the Norse, as many are "associated Runes," the so-called "Binderuner," and the letters  $\tau\eta$  in English are

expressed in Norse by a single character. The inscription runs thus:—

TOLFIHN. YRAITA. THASI. RYNR. A. THISI. STLIN.

Tolfihn wrote these Runes upon this stone.



The first word, "Tolfihn," consists of seven letters but the last two are expressed by an associated Rune, where the diagonal stroke denoting *n* is placed upon the stem of the preceding letter *h*. In all the copies that had been made for us by Mr. Purday two diagonal strokes had been figured, cutting from left to right through the stem of the preceding letter *i*, the fifth letter in the word. These strokes had ever been a sad stumbling block to our reading, and it was therefore with no small pleasure that we found them on personal inspection to be simply the tool marks left by the dressing of the stone, and that they were prolonged through the stem of the succeeding letter *h* in the most palpable manner. We had read the name at first as "Tolfohn," and it only required this rectification to arrive at the true reading "Tolfihn." After this name we find on the stone two dots or points, denoting the end of a word, and exactly in the position where they might be expected to exist. Following these is the word "yraita," or "yraitad," which we consider to be a Cumbrianism for the Icelandic "ritadi"—"wrote." The addition of the "y" to the word "raita" is in our opinion a provincialism, and we find this corroborated by the inscription on the font at Bridekirk, where the letters indeed are pure Norse, but the language is Anglo-Saxon of a northern dialect. The first line of the Bridekirk inscription runs as follows:—"Ricard he me iwrocte"—"Richard he me wrought." And a similar addition is pointed out by the Rev. Daniel Haigh as occurring in the Life of St. Godric, by Reginald, a work composed in the 12th century. The word "write" is seldom used in the Norse inscriptions scattered over Scandinavia, though "ristadi," or "ritsadi"—cut or carved—is often employed to denote the inscriber of the Runes. The word as it stands in the Carlisle inscription approaches nearly to the broad pronunciation of the English verb "to write" at the present day. It will be seen that we have left doubtful the termination of this word, because the final *a* is associated to the stem of the succeeding compound letter

TH, which two letters are denoted in the Icelandic by a single character somewhat resembling our D. The next word formed our greatest difficulty till our recent visit to Carlisle. Part of the upper portion of the lines here had been injured, and the stone was slightly fractured just where the lines originally had been the weakest. We satisfied ourselves, however, that the word was "thesi" or "THASI," the s and i being here associated together, as is the case also in the penultimate word of the inscription. To this word succeed the letters R.Y.N.R., forming the word "Rynr" or "Runir." Then comes the letter A, which we take by itself as denoting the word "upon" followed by the easily decipherable letters TH. I. S. I. where the s and the r are as before conjoined, as is likewise the case with the first two letters of the succeeding word STAIN which completes the inscription.

It now only remains for us to trace out the purport of this inscription. We have no reason to consider it sepulchral, or commemorative of any deceased person, like the majority of the carefully sculptured stones in the Isle of Man. All that we know is, that connected with Carlisle, or at least with the neighbouring country, there were three or four individuals of the name of Tolfin or Dolphin. One of these, as we learn from the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, was Governor of Carlisle about the year 1092, when William Rufus came into Cumberland and rebuilt, as it is said, the castle of Carlisle, dispossessing Dolphin, who had before governed the country. The name is unquestionably of Norse origin, and is probably identical in derivation with the name Dalgfinnr or Dagfin spoken of in the Orkneyinga Saga as having had charge of the beacon on Fair-isle when Earl Ronald's fleet was expected from Shetland. Possible it is, that Tolfin of Carlisle, proud of his Norse descent, had cherished the memory of his ancestors and their mode of writing, and it may well be, that upon one of the stones lying ready for the building of the south transept of the Cathedral, he may, with the sharp pick of one of the workmen, have inscribed this memorial of his name. Whoever the Tolfin was, he wrote in nearly pure Norse, and in good Norse characters, though the execution of the letters is very slight, as they are merely superficial scratches on the stone, and average about three and a half inches in length. Gaut of the Isle of Man would have been ashamed of such handiwork. The date of this inscription may be of the tenth, eleventh, or twelfth century, and we should think it very possibly contemporaneous with the recorded visit of King William Rufus to Carlisle, when Tolfin was deprived of his dignities and power.

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