

## I.

NOTICE OF A FRAGMENT OF AN OGHAM-INScribed SLAB FROM  
SHETLAND. BY GILBERT GOUDIE, F.S.A. Scot.

As is now well known, the special area of this remarkable class of monumental inscriptions is Ireland and Wales. Beyond these purely Celtic districts the known examples are extremely rare, and they are confined to places now or formerly under influences of the Celt. Of these examples the Scottish mainland has furnished five, the Orkney Islands one, and Shetland four. These Shetland Oghams are, the Bressay Stone, the St Ninian's Stone, the Lunnasting Stone, and a small fragment from the parish of Cunningsburgh.<sup>1</sup> All these stones are in the Museum.

A fifth specimen is now before us from the same quarter. It was found close by the burying-ground surrounding the ancient and long-disused church of Cunningsburgh, and the finder is the Rev. George Clark, Free Church minister there, who has been so successful in unearthing other remains of a former civilisation on the spot.<sup>2</sup> Mr Clark placed the stone in my hands some years since, shortly after its discovery, but I have been unable to bring it under the notice of the Society until now. Another and smaller fragment, found at the same place and about the same time, is still in his possession.

Unfortunately, all that is left of the present stone is a mere fragment—one end of a slab of grey sandstone, the original size and form of which cannot now be determined. The general effect of the fracture is to leave

<sup>1</sup> The Bressay Stone is described in the *Proceedings of the Society*, vol. xii. p. 20; the St Ninians and Lunnasting Stones formed the subject of a notice which I communicated shortly after their discovery, *Proceedings*, vol. xii. p. 20. The fragment from Cunningsburgh consists of only two letters.

<sup>2</sup> A Rune-Inscribed Stone (*Proceedings*, vol. i. (New Series), p. 165); Stone Cup and Stone Celt (Paper by Professor Duns, F.S.A. Scot., vol. iii. (New Series), p. 241).

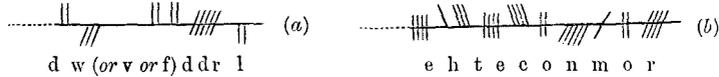
an irregularly triangular piece measuring 13 inches in length by  $7\frac{1}{2}$  inches in breadth at extreme points, and about  $2\frac{1}{2}$  inches in thickness. The inscription is clearly cut, and for most part well preserved, a few only of the letters being doubtful. It consists of two inscribed lines, the *fleasy* or stem-line of the one being incised on the broad surface, while the natural angle is used as an imaginary stem-line for the other, as is almost invariably the case in the Irish examples. The digits or scores forming the letters are of the ordinary kind, vertical or oblique to the stem-line, as in the alphabetic scales in the *Book of Ballymote*. Another example from Shetland, the Lunnasting Stone, shows a conglomeration of consonants, with an almost entire absence of vowel characters; but in the present case the vowels are clearly-formed scores, somewhat shorter than the consonants, crossing the stem-line vertically as in other Scottish examples, and not dots or notches, as is the prevailing form of the vowel characters in Ireland. In the only known specimen from the Orkney Islands (the Burrian Stone), in the stone from Lunnasting in Shetland, before referred to, and in the smaller fragment from Cunningsburgh, already in the Museum, the scores forming each separate letter are "tied," or bound together, at the extremities, seeming, in that respect and otherwise, to indicate a local style known nowhere else. The present fragment is destitute of that peculiarity; hence it might be regarded as possibly earlier than those examples.

The obstacles to the satisfactory rendering of an inscription in Oghamic characters are well recognised. They arise from the uncertainty as to the language or archaic form of dialect in which it is expressed, and from arbitrary variations in the characters employed, and in the powers attributed to them. Some time after the stone came into my possession I sent a rubbing and a careful transcript of the lettering to Professor Rhys of Oxford, and he favoured me with his views in the following letter:—

ST GERMAINS, OXFORD, Nov. 13, 1880.

DEAR SIR,—I am very sorry to say I cannot assist you in any way in making anything out of the Ogham. First of all, there is a difficulty as to the direction of the reading. Looking at the inclination of the digits, I am inclined to think

that the two lines read in the same direction, and that the one is not a continuation of the other round the top of the stone. Further, I should take it that the natural fleasg is to be read first, and as the reading is usually from left to right, only one position of the stone would satisfy these conditions, thus:—



Instead of the latter part of (a), I should suggest . As to (b) I

should regard *eh t e* as the end of some word which might be either Teutonic or Celtic; if the latter, it would be more usually written with *ch* for *h*. The character is very unusual, and I suppose here it stands for a mutilated . The nearest name to Connmor associated with Scotland would be *Cennmor* or *Ceanmor*; but Connmor is itself a name which occurs in Cornwall as *Cunomori*, and in modern Welsh as *Cynfor*; in modern Gaelic it ought to be *Connhor*, but I am not aware that it occurs. However, that is no proof that it was not in use in Scotland and Ireland. If the name is either meant for *Cennmor* or *Connmor*, then the inscription is probably later than the ninth century, and the same thing is also suggested by the artificial fleasg; in fact, I should not be surprised if it turned out to be of the time of the Norsemen, and written in Norse. However, the data are far too scanty for one to speak with any certainty. . . .—I remain, yours very truly,

JOHN RHYS.

This letter, for which I have to express my best acknowledgments to Professor Rhys, exhausts almost all that need be said on the subject. I took occasion, however, to mention the inscription to Professor Mackinnon, and also to Mr G. M. Atkinson, London, the editor of *The Ogham-Inscribed Monuments of the Gaedhül in the British Islands, &c.*, whom I have long known as a laborious worker in this field. Professor Mackinnon agrees with Professor Rhys in the opinion that the termination (EHT E) is not a recognisable Celtic form, either ancient or modern; and Mr Atkinson's views on the whole rendering correspond so closely with those of Professor Rhys, already given, as to make it

unnecessary to print his letter, which otherwise should have been given in full. The fact is, that the reading of the characters admits of but slight diversity of opinion beyond conjectures as to what the few partially defaced or missing strokes may have originally been. For instance, the first remaining character  $\text{||}$  (D) of the line (a) is doubtful. It is close to the fracture, and would rather seem to be the termination of a letter consisting of more numerous scores. At the characters  $\text{\\||}$  (D D) further on in the same line the surface of the stone on the lower side has scaled off, so that it is doubtful whether the scores in both cases may not have been carried across the line, and also whether there may not have been another character in front of them in the apparent hiatus after  $\text{|||}$  (W). Both

Professor Rhys and Mr Atkinson surmise that the prolongation of the scores may have been the case with the second character, and consequently suggest  $\text{|||}$  (O) instead of  $\text{||}$  (D). In the same way, the surface is abraded at the terminal letter rendered  $\text{||}$  (L) of the same line (a). For this the letter  $\text{|||}$  (N) is suggested, supposing three additional scores. On a careful study of the stone, traces of two of these additional scores can be made out. It might therefore be read  $\text{|||}$  (S). The rendering of the second line (b) admits of no doubt. The characters are perfectly clear throughout.

As regards the general result, it may be stated that both lines of the inscription are imperfect, terminal; while the first (a) cannot be deciphered with certainty from defacements. The well-preserved clearness of the second line (b) is marred by doubts as to the linguistic quality of the remanent portion of one of the words— $\text{FHTE}$ . While this presents difficulties from the point of view of Celtic scholarship, it seems to me that the objection applies equally to any interpretation based on the analogy of the Norse. I cannot detect any resemblance readily recognisable through the medium of that language; and cannot therefore concur with Professor Rhys in his suggestion that the stone may be

assigned to a later date than the ninth century on the supposition of the language being Norse. The pity is that the portion left to us is so merely fragmentary that certainty on all these points is unattainable. And the uncertainty is increased by an additional character  $\overline{\text{III}}$  (s), visible only

in certain lights, which I find on the end of the stone as an apparent continuation of the line (b), and which escaped notice when the rubbing and transcript were sent to Professors Rhys.

Having on a former occasion attempted to determine the approximate age, and to point out the special significance of these Shetland relics, found as so many waifs far away from the primal seats of Celtic culture in Ireland, I shall only say in a word that they may be accepted as memorials of an early Christian age in the northern islands, if not from a time prior to the invasion of the pagan Norsemen, more than a thousand years ago, certainly as survivals into the Norse age from the religion and culture which the Norse superseded.

At the same time, in the case of the stone at present under consideration, while it may be of comparatively late date—the tenth or eleventh century,—there is in itself nothing absolutely at variance with the possibility of its having come down from an earlier and pagan period. If, as early Irish records would lead us to infer,<sup>1</sup> writing in Oghamic characters was in use among the Celts of Ireland before the spread of Christianity in that country, it is not improbable that the practice would also have extended to the Celts in Scotland, from whom it might have been communicated to their pagan congeners in the northern isles. But, from the stone in question having been found on a sacred site of great antiquity, and from all the considerations otherwise connected with it, the propriety of ascribing to it a Christian origin would seem scarcely to admit of doubt. In Oghamic remains it is the exception to find trace of anything bearing any religious significance. And in the present case there is apparently little more than the name of the person commemorated, in the usual

<sup>1</sup> *Book of Leinster*, the tale “*Tain Bo Chuailgne*”; Tract, the “*Battle of Gabhra*”; MS., *Leabhar-na-h-Uidhre*; *Book of Lismore*, &c.

way. And that name is one that is readily recognisable as the Celtic Ceanmor.

A somewhat curious circumstance, having a bearing upon the subject of this paper, may be mentioned in conclusion. The natives of the district in which this stone was found, and one of whose early residents it may be assumed as commemorating, are noted for characteristics of temper, character, and perhaps also physique, which distinguish them from the body of Shetlanders generally, and have given rise to surmisings that theirs is a different race origin. I am informed by Mr Bruce, younger of Sumburgh, that some short time since the Anthropometric section of the British Association desired a set of specimen photographs of types of native Shetlanders for the purpose of comparison on their own special line of investigation. Seventeen such photographs were sent by him in reply to their request, including those of three natives of Cunningsburgh, and these last were all pronounced to be *Celtic!* The rest, of varying physiognomy and complexion, though mostly fair, were unmistakably Scandinavian. According to this view, therefore, the present Ogham-inscribed Stone from Cunningsburgh is not the only relic from the Celtic age in that district that has come down to the present day.