

IV.

OBSERVATIONS ON SOME OF THE RUNIC INSCRIPTIONS AT MAESHOWE, ORKNEY. BY RALPH CARR, Esq.

THE NAME MAESHOWE.

In considering what may probably be the origin of such a designation as this for an ancient and elaborate sepulchral mound of a people anterior to the Norsemen in Orkney, and who dwelt there we know not how long, we see at once that the latter syllable is merely the ordinary Norse term applied to sepulchral mounds in general. But this very circumstance may well lead us to surmise that the former one, Maes, not improbably represents the term applied to the barrow by the people, whoever they may have been, who were in the islands when the Norsemen first arrived there. We must therefore look to the Celtic tongues, in the first place, for its meaning. And the first thought which presents itself is that of the well-known Cymro-British, maes, a plain, which enters largely into the toponymic nomenclature of the Cambrian Principality.

But if this Cymro-British element occurred thus in Orkney, we ought to find it applied in many localities on the Scottish mainland, and more particularly to the many alluvial levels denominated carses. And the fact that it is not so found, affords a very strong presumption against its remote and isolated application to a tract of flat coastland in Orkney.

But in the Erse or Irish we find the word mais, signifying *massa acervus*. I cannot for my own part hesitate in believing this to be the

etymon of the first syllable of Maeshowe; and when we know that several promontories of the Orkneys are designated by the Erse or Gaelic term *moul*, it is difficult to resist the inference that, when the Norsemen first showed themselves on those weather-beaten isles, they found there certain inhabitants speaking a tongue approximating to Erse and Gaelic.

And, if I mistake not, the few other remaining traces of Celtic place-names in the Orkneys leave this inference unshaken, so far as they are indicated by the ordinary maps. Yet it is quite possible that a perfect collection and survey of all the designations given to the natural and artificial features of the country, might bring to light Celtic elements of a different character, and at present it is rather our duty to search for evidence than to hasten to conclusions.

Several words and modes of expression in these interesting inscriptions still require elucidation, whilst the two lines constituting No. VII.* have not yet been satisfactorily interpreted, even in their general sense.

It seems to me that light is thrown upon certain terms by parallel or analogous Anglo-Saxon forms or idioms, and being not altogether ignorant of Old-Norse, I have ventured to bring these Runes under the scrutiny of an Anglo-Saxon eye of somewhat long experience, in the hope that from a perhaps untried point of view I might be able, and yet without presumption, to perceive the meanings of some words or turns of expression more clearly than even Scandinavian scholars have yet explained them.

Though it has not yet been in my power to visit and inspect the Barrow of Maeshowe, yet the carefully-executed casts of the Runes, now accessible in the Museum of Antiquities in Edinburgh, have been studiously examined, as well as the lithographed transcripts of the latter.

The first case of doubt that calls for examination is the word *HAUA* in

RUNES II.

THOLFR KOLBAINSSON RUNAR THISAR HAUA. And the following remarks upon it are offered to suggest a possible and even probable signification, without laying any claim to greater certainty.

* The Numbers of the Inscriptions are taken from the work, "Notice of Runic Inscriptions, discovered during recent excavations in the Orkneys, made by James Farrer, M.P. Printed for private circulation. 4to, 1862."

From haugr, a how or barrow, and from the verb hauga, to construct a barrow or grave-mound, a derivative noun of agency or personal association, in the form of haugi or hauga, haur or hauga, might have been regularly formed, in accordance with Old-Norse, or Icelandic, usage and analogy, no less than with Anglo-Saxon. And the term would be used to indicate a person specially concerned with, or associated with, the How.

Nothing is more likely than that a How-warden should be so called;—a man who either assumed, or was charged with, the care of the barrow. Even now, such a person would be called in Northumberland “the howey.” If this be the true account to be given of HAUA, then the translation of No. II. would run :

“Tholf Kolbainson inscribes these Runes,—The How-warden.”

Or in Latin,

“Tholf Kolbainson hasce sculpit runas acervi custos.”

(“acervarius.”)

RUNES VII.

The obscurity of the first half of this inscription has perhaps been caused by some of the partly obliterated vowels having become very like the Runic sign for S. There is also, near the beginning, a combination of syllables suggestive of a proper name, and readily misleading the eye from the true reading. And to a Scandinavian the latter is less evident possibly than to an Anglo-Saxon, from the absence of a definite article in a place where in more cultivated Old-Norse it might be looked for.

We find, however, the key to the true reading of this first half-line in its final word, which has been well shown by Dr Charlton to be most certainly FALHI, or falhk, that is, falkhi, falcon. And fortunately there is no great difficulty in identifying the next word behind it, as UKURIR, the possessive pronoun, our, with its masculine nominative termination.

Then if we continue to trace backward by this same inductive method (de noto in ignotum), we come to an unquestionable personal name in URMIR, or URMIR, or ERMINR.

But now, on the principle of kindling the fuel at both ends and leaving the middle to illuminate itself, it is time to look to the beginning.

Glancing over this initial portion, the eye quickly seizes the familiar phrase I RIKIL. The rest is now all plain, and the Runes may be read,

NU ER I RIKIL LIDI ERMIN UKURIR FALHI.

“Now is in the country (of Orkney) Mate-Ermin our falcon.”

“Nunc adest in regno sodalis (sive dilectus) Erminus, falco noster.”

Before we take a step further and look at the second half of these Runes, let us bear in mind that the Old-Norse, or Icelandic language, on the one hand, the Anglo-Saxon on the other, are found to afford continually the means of reciprocal elucidation or correction. In the present instance it chanced that Anglo-Saxon habits of thought led to a different reading of the last five letters of the second half-line, from that which had presented itself to Scandinavian scholars, and simply because it was the first meaning that these same five letters would convey to an Anglo-Saxon, though not the first they would express to a Norseman. And yet it is quite as good Old-Norse to read them OM OTR, as to connect them into one word, forming an adjective comprising a negative particle, and having no obvious aptitude in connection with Kiabik and the intermediate words. But the sense is perfect if we read OM OTR:—

KIABIK VIL SAEHIA IE OM OTR.

“Kiabik will tell you about Ottar,”

or “about the otter.”

If OTR is a proper name, then it may be intended to designate another falcon called, like the first, after some friend or person of distinction who may have been the donor, or at least a former possessor of the bird. But the omission or absence of the definite article, and above all at the conclusion, and where space was perhaps wanting, is not decisive against the claims of a real otter or *Mustela lutra* to the honours of Kiabik's recital. These keen and sagacious animals are quite capable of domestication, and of being rendered as serviceable to their masters, under water, as the falcons were in the air.

Kiabik was doubtless the menial falconer. The intent of the inscription was, we may infer, to make known the long-expected arrival in Orkney of a staunch and favourite tiercel, or male, of the ger-falcon, from Iceland or Norway.

In closely literal Latin;—

“Dicebat Orcason in runis quas inscripsit;
nunc adest in regno dilectus ille Ermin, falco noster:
Kiabik autem referet vobis de Ottare” (sive “de lutra.”)

Or again, a little expanded, and in metre, for the original has a certain measured cadence and a semblance of alliteration; as

Orcasonr sahthi 'a runon——thaem ir han ristu
Nu er i riki —— ——lid Ermin uk'rer falki
Kiabik vil saehia————ir om otr.

Considet advectus bene nostro in litore falco
Erminius; socii, vos quoque scire velim!
Lætor enim Orcasius, runasque incidere curo;
Pluraque de lutrâ Kjâbicus ipse feret.

Or much better, in old English and in congenial rhythm,

Orcason here sayeth,—In runès he writeth,—
Ha! Now in the land is—Litl Erm ourè falcon:
Kiabik wille saye you—o' th' ottre!

RUNES VIII.

This interesting inscription may perhaps be read,

INGEBORG HIN FAHRI ÆHKIA.
MORHK KONA HAFER GARIT LUTRIN HER MIHKIL OFLATE.

Ingeborga pulcra vidua,
Tenebrarum Domina hanc demissè se gerentem magnificam auguravit futuram.
Ingeborg the fair widow;
The Mirk-Queen hath here decreed the depressed to become greatly exalted.

It may, however, be argued that we are scarcely justified in assuming that mork is only another form of myrk, darkness (the final r being cast out in composition);—and I must admit that my own thoughts suggested also mörk kona, *silvarum femina*, the woman of the woods and wilds,—some poor Celtic captive who had acquired the character of a spaewife. But against this are the emphatic particle *her*, here—that is to say, in the dark and haunted How; and the fact that the Old-Norse myrkr or myrk has passed into the Danish and Swedish mörke, in the same sense of darkness.

The Mirk-Queen would be the female sprite supposed to inhabit the

gloom of this mysterious chamber within the barrow of Maeshowe. All such barrows were believed to be haunted, and sometimes defended, by supernatural beings.

The verb *luta*, to loot, or bow down the head, might supply like others a verbal noun of agency, *lutari*, one who louts, who bends low, and in a secondary sense one who is either downcast and depressed, or submissive and tractable. And like other such verbal nouns in Icelandic, as in English, it might include the idea of feminine agency though masculine in form.

Since this short suggestion of the above as a possible reading was written, the following fuller examination has seemed necessary, in the hope of offering a better :—

The second portion of this inscription hardly indeed admits of being read and interpreted with any assured exactness, not that its words fail to convey a meaning, but because the letters may be read differently, and so as to form very different words. To begin with, the runic sign for *g* and for *κ* is one and the same, so that the first two words may either be read *MORG KONA*, many a woman or lady,—or *MORK KONA*, the Mirk-Queene, or female spirit of the darksome interior of the How.

In the next place, a large and tortuous flaw of the stone, which is exactly shown upon the plaster casting, traverses one of the characters, in such a manner as to cause a word to have been read and copied as *FARIT*, which seems to have been intended for *GARIT*.

And this, if it be so, will not indeed invalidate the interpretation given in Denmark and Norway; but as the word *GARIT* is one of very various power and idiomatic use, it opens the door to other possible readings of the next word, besides those which had at first presented themselves. And not only does this following word contain runes which may stand either for *u* or *ʏ*, for *τ* or *ϑ*, but there is much uncertainty whether the important consonant *κ* is present or not, and by which of two vowels it is succeeded, and whether even, if the *κ* be discarded, we ought not to admit an *s*.

Yet instead of dismissing the whole inquiry, when so much is uncertain, let us rather see how many readings can be entertained, and allow them to come successively under the impartial examination of any who may be curious in the matter.

The investigation may not be altogether barren, even though its direct object be not attained.

First, then,—still retaining the band-rune TR,

MORK KONA HAFIR GARIT LUTRI IN HER MIHKIL OFLATE.

Tenebrarum domina fecit huc pronam introgredi valdè arrogantem.

The Mirk-Queene caused a very proud personage to creep in hither.

If we reject the band-rune, we then have the readings communicated by the Scandinavian interpreters, and exhibited in Mr Farrer's beautiful book on *Maeshowe*.

Yet if instead of FARIT we read GARIT, it is our business to see whether such a change may not render further inquiry requisite.

It seems to me that at least three readings must be considered.

MORK KONA HAFIR GARIT (H) LUT SIN HER MIHKIL OFLATE :

Ingeborg, pulchra vidua ;—

Tenebrarum domina hic sortem auguravit planè magnificam.

Ingeborg the fair widowe ;—

The Mirk-Queene has here bespoken her a splendid destiny.

MORG KONA HAFIR GARIT (H) LUT SIN HER MIHKIL OFLATE :

Ingeborga, pulchra vidua ;

Multa fœmina hic sortem impetravit sibi magnificam.

Many a dame has here secured very splendid prospects.

MORK KONA HAFIR GARIT LUTIN HER MIHKIL OFLATE :

Tenebrarum domina hic prædixit incurvatam multò splendidiorẽ futuram.

The Mirk-Queene has destined the prostrate here, to become very exalted.

There is also the possibility of LYDI IN HER, people in here, indefinitely. But *hlut sinn, sortem suam*, is more probable.

RUNES IX.

THORNY SAERTH.

In Irish and in Gaelic, *sagart*, from the Latin *sacerdos*, is the common term for a priest. Thorny must have been conversant with Celtic countries either by education in the Christian seminaries of Ireland or of Iona, or by missionary labours among the Celts. For his Celtic title as Priest

had come to be appended as a surname. The *g* in *sagart* is, I believe, sometimes but little heard in pronunciation. The Anglo-Saxon word is *sacerd*, and this again would readily slide into *Saerth*.

RUNES X.

THORER FÁMETR.

The last Rune in Thorer's appellation of *Fámetr*, was found by me, on carefully inspecting the cast at Edinburgh, to be a band-rune of *TR*, not simple *R*, as it had been read. *Fámetr* means one who is sated, or satisfied with few things, with less than others, a moderate, ungrasping, temperate man. All honour to him who had earned such a title in those times: *Pauco-satur, moderatus*.

I have now, however, discovered from Mr Farrer's and Mr Petrie's admirable transcript of the Runes, that the first character in this inscription has by myself and others been entirely misread. It is not *TR*, but *P*, as may be seen by the distinctive line below preserved in the transcript. But this is not all. Another line, preserved at the head of the second Rune in the following word, shows that it stands not for *o* alone, but for *ok*. Now *FOK* is snow-drift, and *meiddr* is the participle *hurt* or *stricken*, from *meida*, to hurt, *Fok-meiddr* is therefore snow-stricken. But what is *porrir* or *porir*? We have it still in our own expression *purblind*. Here it stands as the byname of this northern Hannibal, his real name being omitted.

PORIR FOKMEIDDR,

"Parblindy the snow-stricken."

And beside him is a quadrupedal likeness of perhaps an ancestor of our Skye-terriers, by which, doubtless, he was led from place to place. The inscription may be represented in Latin by *LUSCINUS, NIVE-LÆSUS*.

RUNES XII.

TOTAR FÍLA.

Totar the fooler or jester; *Totar scurra*. From the noun *fífl*, *fatuus*, proceeded the verb *fífla*, to befool, or to play the fool; and hence would be formed in the regular manner a personal noun of agency, *fífla* or *fíla*, meaning a buffoon or professional banterer and jester. Similar derivations are common enough in the living popular speech on either side of

the Border; and such a byname as Fooley would be readily assigned to any one who deserved it by his buffoonery.

In the Orkneyinga saga we find five or six bynames thus formed, chiefly terminating in *a*, but also in *i*. Thus Kolbeinn Hruga (in Latin *Kolbeinn accumulator*), but in plain Scottish and English Kolbein, the rigger, the rogue. Aulver Rósta, Aulver the brawler; Erik Spáki, Erick the cautious, the pawky; Kulfr Skurfa; Eysteinn Glumra, or the thunderer. Such words in *a* may sometimes be regarded as indeclinable adjectives formed from nouns.

RUNES XIII., XIV.

This inscription is an animated defence of the Jerusalem pilgrims against the imputation cast upon them in No. XX.

THAT MAN SAT ER IKI GÆNHIAT.—FE VAR FORT ABROT;
 THIRIMNAUDOMS VAR FE BROT FORT, HÆLTER AN THAIR IERSALA
 MEN BURTU HAUG THANA ÆMROSTITH:
 ÆHI, IMILI AV VILFOKS ÆMURUM.

“That maun be sooth that’s not gaynsaid!”
 The treasure was carried away,—
 Of a certainty it was carried away,—
 Before The Jerusalem-men most miserably broke this Howe,
 Alas! amid the wild-folk’s lamentations.

“Verum putatur quod non negatur.”
 Ablatus fuit thesaurus,—
 Proculdubio ablatus fuit priusquam
 Hierosolymitani infregere tumulum tristissimè;—
 Eheu, inter lamenta indigenarum.

RUNES XIX., XX.

On looking at the transcripts of the Runes of Nos. XIX., XX., (having previously merely seen the interpretations sent from Denmark and Norway, and also Dr Charlton’s), I was gradually led to read them very differently from any of these, and from the other readings and renderings exhibited in Mr Stuart’s “Notice of Excavations at Maeshowe.” They begin—

SIA HOUHR VAR FYRLATHIN HÆLLR LOTHBROKAR
 ----- SYN(D)AR HÆN(D)AR

and the first five words are of themselves extremely easy to read and translate. They are as manifest to an Anglo-Saxon as to an Icelandic student, and signify

“The how was a forsaken vault¹ (or cavity),”

and then follow three words, which the idiom of the Old-Norse language points out to be all in the genitive plural, but truncated of their final vowel *a*, because here not heard in pronunciation.

To an old Norseman the foregoing context would at once show the genitival character of these words, and the unessential final vowels would be left out. But the question remains: What do they import?

Ragnar Lodbrok obtained his byname, which conveys a stronger meaning than the more produceable one of shaggy-breeched, commonly given to it, from being a northern Esau or Orson. It signifies *hirsutie braccatus*; or, as we may venture to express it in old English, shag-behosed. When the appellation was conferred upon him, there is little doubt but that, in admiration of the Scottish garb, he had appeared among his countrymen in the kilt, and that their keen wit marked him ever after with an appropriate byname. But what can the term mean here?

To make out this we must look forward and examine *SYNAR HÆNAR*, which are (coming after *FYRLATHIN HÆLLR*) plainly genitive plurals. The most essential word to determine is that which must be the leading substantial term, *hænar*. Hitherto it has been construed as a feminine pronoun, *her*, or *of her*, and as representing *henner*, *ejus*, feminine.

But as such it has no antecedent, for from the very nature of things *lodbrokar* cannot be one. *Hænar*, however, may very easily stand for *hændar*, or *hændara*, *jaculatorum* “of lance-casters.” But *synar* cannot be what it has been rendered. Yet it may very well be in like manner an imperfect spelling of *syndar*, or *syndara*, the *d* after *n* being often suppressed in pronunciation, as in the Danish, Scottish, and Northern English, and this word would mean *natatorum* or *natantium*, swimmers. And the three words taken together, namely, *LOTHBROKAR’ SYNDAR’ HÆNDAR’* would be in English,—of shag-behosed swimming harpooners,—*jaculatorum natantium hirsutie braccatorum*. And they point to a race of kilted

¹ *Hœlr*, doubtless the same as *hœllir*, *caverna*, a cave, natural or artificial.

harpooners, who, leaving their boats on approaching the marine animals, swam forward to inflict the deadly harpoon-cast.

Now, had the words of the first line in XIX. and the first in XX., thus interpreted, constituted the whole inscription, I could not have felt anything like the confidence I do feel in the soundness of the present interpretation, though I was led to it by the words themselves, and by no previous theory whatever.

But let us see what the next lines say. We are reading the lines in the order followed by Munch and Rafn, with the improvement adopted by Dr Charlton, to which we shall presently come. The second line in XIX. and the second in XX. stand thus, as I read them, keeping as in one word eight characters that have been divided into two.

THEIR VORO HVATIR SLYTUORA—^(o)MÆN SÆM THEIR VORO
FYRI SIDR.

Had we found SLYTBAKRA instead of the present word, the sentence would have been at once read with what I believe to be its true meaning, namely,

“They were adventurous whalers, that were they for the south.”

But in reality SLYTUORA has just the same sense, unless that perhaps it applies more especially to the old males, or bull-whales.

Úr or uri was the great northern bison or urus; Sletbakr was the appellation given to the smooth-backed or great bearded whale, *Balæna mysticetus*, in contradistinction to the fin-back and grampus. Thus the term SLYTUÓR, or smooth-bull, is equivalent to a longer and more cumbersome word SLYTBAKÚR, or smoothback-bull; whether applied to the old male of the Greenland whale, or to all his tribe. Our sailors still speak familiarly of the bull, the cow, and the calf-whales.

In this instance the vowel of the genitive plural has been inserted, obviously because it was necessary in pronunciation. SIDR has hitherto been translated as if it were SIR, Latin *sibi*; but the band-rune DR is clearly shown by Dr Charlton in his engraving.

In the last clause we detect the national self-complacency of the Norsemen, even whilst they bear honourable and willing testimony to the remarkable prowess of the Celtic, or rather, let us say, the Gaelic

whale-harpooners, for they were pronounced to be gallant and dexterous for southern men, the achievements of the Norsemen themselves being of course superlative.

UTNORTHE IR FE FOLHIT MIKIT
THÆT VAR JORSALAFARAR BRUTU ORKOUH LIFMIDS ÆLIA
JARLS

LOEFT ER HER VAR FE FOLHIT MIKIT. RÆIST
SIMON SIHRY UR RONISEYE
SIHRITH.

“Northwestward is much treasure hidden.
It was the Jerusalem-pilgrims (who) broke the Orkhow in the mid life
of Jarl Ælly.

When here lifted was much hidden treasure.

Writes

Simon Sihry from Ronaldsey.
Sihrith.”

SALIR SA ER FINA MA THAN OUTH HIN MIKLA.

“Happy is he who may find that great treasure.”

(Meaning that said to be concealed to the north-west.)

The participle LOEFT is the same as the more commonly written lopt, lifted; whereas ‘left’ would be leifit. Lifted is here precisely *asportatum*. And it shows the antiquity of the Scottish legal phrase of “lifting money.”

The whole inscription would read in Latin:—

Fuit hicce tumulus derelicta quædam caverna

jaculatorum natantium, hirsute-braccatorum.¹

Erant hi audaces balænarum insidiatores, imò erant pro meridie.

Alicubi, caurum versùs, latet infossa ingens pecunia.

Hierasolymam peregrinantes fuerunt, qui Orco-tumulum rupere, florente Ællyo Comite

Quùm quidem pecunia multa dehinc sublata fuit, quæ sepulta lituerat.

Inscribit Simon Sihry à Roiniseye,—Sihrith.

Felix qui inveniet thesaurum illum ingentem.

O-Conacan abstulit nummos ex hoc tumulo.

From this inscription we learn that the Celtic people, who were inhabiting Orkney until driven out by the Norsemen, wore no trews or breeches, and that their nether limbs were hirsute; hence it is evident they were

¹ Hoc est, solo cincticulo Celtico, hirsutièque induti.

a kilted race, and of the Gaelic stem. They were expert in the use of the harpoon, whilst swimming from their boats to attack cetaceous animals. They were daring and successful in slaying the great bearded whale, and, as has been suggested, possibly the walrus. To them, and not to any earlier race, was the erection of Maeshowe attributed by the Norse writer of these runes.

Much treasure had been found in the how and carried away by the Norsemen, although the tumulus had been "forsaken" by those of the race to whom its origin was attributed. Hence we may infer that the treasure deposited there was for sacred purposes,—for the benefit of the dead,—and not such as could be withdrawn in times of danger.

We may further infer, that a successful whale fishery had been a leading cause of the existence of sufficient population and wealth upon the islands to account for such a structure as Maeshowe, and for the other marvels of these ancient people; and that the isles were not the mere sepulchres of Sutherland or Ulster, as I for one had been disposed to think not improbable. Lastly, additional probability accrues to the Gr. *ορυξ*, Lat. *orca*, and Gaelic *orc*, a whale, as the etymon of Orkney, whilst a people using that term were there in the time of Mela, at the beginning of our era.

RUNES XXII.

BÓD HRODKIL SVOR OENGOLOENSKU.

Marriage Rokil swore to the Englishwoman.

Nuptias Rokil Anglæ juravit.

These runes are in great part Anglo-Saxon, and are inscribed in a beautiful feminine hand, indubitably that of an Anglo-Saxon lady, who, willingly or unwillingly, had been conveyed to Orkney by the Norse invaders of her country.

It is an old story briefly but clearly told.

The two first characters of the man's name are in a coarse male hand. They are either a falsification, or an honest restoration after an erasure.

RUNES XXXII.

The inscription here, divided into two parts by the figure of a compli-

cated knot skilfully designed, is quite unintelligible if read from left to right. But if we try it from right to left the difficulty vanishes, and we find it to be,—

THISSE SLI (SLIT). Hoc solve—Undo this.

We have before us, therefore, a riddle-knot, which had doubtless often afforded amusement to the Norsemen and their fair dames and damsels in hours of winter leisure.

Mr STUART, in reference to the preceding communication, said it was remarkable that the Norsemen, who were so much given to the inscription of runes on stones in their own country, had left no such mark of their occupation in Sutherland, Caithness, and the Orkneys, except at Maeshowe; and it added to the interest which we must feel for that singular monument.

The thanks of the meeting were voted to Mr CARR for his valuable paper.