

## I.

AN OGAM INSCRIPTION AT ABERNETHY, 1895, By THE RIGHT  
HON. THE EARL OF SOUTHESK, K.T., LL.D., F.S.A. SCOT.

*Introductory Notice.*—In the *Scotsman* of January 30th, 1895, there appeared a letter from the Rev. Dugald Butler, M.A., minister of Abernethy in Perthshire, reporting the discovery of an inscribed tablet in the churchyard of that place,—“a sculptured stone . . . [about] 19 inches in length, 13 in breadth, 4 in thickness,” which was exhumed “a little north of the foundation-wall of the ancient Celtic church [demolished in 1801], about 4 [5] and a half feet under the soil, very near the spot where a sculptured stone with excised cross was found a year ago.” This newly discovered stone, continued Mr Butler in the same narrative, offers interesting traces of primitive art, bearing on its face an inscription in Ogam, accompanied by symbolic devices, consisting of a crown-like object above the groups, and a bird below them (see the diagram on p. 249).

A few days after this discovery, the stone was sent for inspection to the Museum of Antiquities in Edinburgh, where, owing to peculiarities to be presently discussed, doubts arose as to the character of its inscriptions, which, if not fictitious, appeared to have been tampered with in modern times.

For a few days more the stone remained in Edinburgh, from which place Mr Butler, with a courtesy which I gratefully acknowledge, was good enough to forward this relic to myself, inviting my opinion in regard to it, and in several letters very amply supplying me with information to assist the inquiry.

With these aids and advantages, I have considered the question in all its bearings, and have devoted many hours to a study of the stone; but I regret to find myself still unable to arrive at any certain conclusions, and my only course is to set down what I have heard, seen, and noted in the matter, without expressing an opinion on either side.

*Narrative of the discovery.*—The stone was found on Tuesday, January 29th, 1895, in the situation already described, by the sexton

and his son, who were opening a grave in the churchyard at Abernethy, in presence of one spectator—Mr Marr, the discoverer, some five years ago, of an Ogam-bearing fragment, and another ancient fragment inscribed with a representation of the crucifixion. The soil, on which the men were working with pick-axes, could not have been recently moved, being “as hard as a rock” from long-continued frost; it bore no traces of disturbance, and, as far as known, had not been moved for any purpose within the memory of man; an interment, however, had taken place some fourteen years ago in a contiguous grave, which since then had been undisturbed. On reaching a depth of five and a half feet (as the sexton states) the stone was noticed, lying among boulders supposed to belong to the ruins of the old church, and so tightly packed with earth that it was difficult to raise it from its bed. The inscribed face lay downwards, and the right edge, which was overgrown with short green moss, was in touch with the adjacent grave, and near to the coffin. “Each [of the three men] saw the stone in its position when buried in the soil, and helped to unearth it.”<sup>1</sup>

A messenger was then despatched to Mr Butler, who at once went to the churchyard. On his arrival he found the Post-master and the Parochial Board Inspector—who had arrived immediately after the discovery—engaged with the finder in clearing the stone from earth and scrubbing it over with a wet brush. “I at once saw the bird-symbol,” writes Mr Butler, “the crown-symbol, and the central line of Ogams.” After this, the stone was taken to the Parochial Office, and

<sup>1</sup> *Extract from Letter to Rev. D. Butler from Mr James Bennet, Parochial Board Inspector, Abernethy, dated March 6th, 1895:—*

“I was not present when the stone was unearthed, but was shortly after, and as I thought it was a genuine sculpture, I sent for you. In the lair where it was found the gravedigger had broken through what looked to me like an old foundation, principally of rubble, with lime. This rubble, so far as my memory serves me, was on both north and south sides of the lair [that was] being dug, and on the north side, where the stone was found, the edge or side of a coffin of a recent [some fourteen years ago, as since explained] burial, a little below the rubble building, was exposed to view. It was possible the stone may have been standing on its edge, with the green portion of the stone next the surface: this is the only way the growth of greenness can be accounted for. There have been some stones found, on the same line, north and south from this, about which there is no doubt they are ancient.”

there, continues Mr Butler, "unknown to me, it was again scrubbed, and the inscription run over with the finger-nail of the finder." On the following day, in Mr Butler's absence, "a gentleman came from Dundee to take a rubbing from the inscription for Dr Anderson." Shortly afterwards, as mentioned, the stone was sent to the Edinburgh Museum, whence, after it had been inspected, Mr Butler, being then in Edinburgh, was good enough to send it to the present writer, who has returned it to Abernethy, where it now rests.

*Arguments against the Inscriptions.*—1. In general character these inscriptions resemble no existing example. The stem-line, exactly one foot in length, is horizontal, and as straight as if run on a ruler, instead of being irregularly hand-drawn and vertical, as in practically all similar cases.<sup>1</sup> Nothing resembling the arcs on the line, or the crown and bird above and below it, occurs elsewhere. The symbols, both in style and character, are unlike any that are found on the sculptured stones of Pictland, though the Ogam are framed on Pictavian models. The letters are practically all vowels, and seem to yield no definite meaning. On no explanation can the legend be viewed as embodying proper names in the manner of all other Ogam epitaphs. 2. The workmanship is suspicious. Some of the lines and scores are mere scratches, such as a common iron nail might produce, while some, rather deeper, are square at the top, as if cut with a small gouge or chisel. Two (accidental?) nicks made by the same instrument appear to the left of the N formed letter below the crown. 3. The fresh whiteness of the lines and scores is so glaring that, for the most part, as they now appear, they cannot but be modern—sometimes altogether so, sometimes as regards their interior surfaces. The hardness of the stone ("sharp silicious grit," as I am informed) proves that the clearing of the scores by wet brush and finger-nail could not have affected their interior surfaces, nor could these processes have left any markings on

<sup>1</sup> The only examples within my recollection of Ogam on a horizontal stem-line are these: 1. One word, in company with a Hiberno-Roman inscribed name, on a stone at Clonmacnois (Stokes, *Chr. Ins.*, vol. i. pl. ii.); 2. A few groups on small objects (Brash, *Og. Mon.*, pl. xli.); 3. A few brief inscriptions in MSS. (Brash, *do.*); 4. An Ogam fragment, of some three letters, found at Abernethy about five years ago. All these, from their style, are of late origin.

such a material. As the lines have unquestionably been more or less lately retouched with hard instruments, it is clear that an unknown person at an unknown time has tampered with the inscriptions, and doubt is cast upon the whole; for either the stone was buried somewhat recently after renovation of its lines, or the full story of its treatment after the present unearthing remains to be told. 4. The presence of moss growing on an edge of the stone shows that that part of it must have been not long ago exposed to the air. Such vegetation could not exist on a stone that had been buried for centuries. 5. The whole design is suspicious. The neatly balanced arrangement; the affectation of novel Ogam forms (the arcs—suggested perhaps by diphthong characters in the Ballymote “key”) amidst commonplace groups; the easy symbolism of the crown and dove; the triteness of the initial capital beneath the crown;—all are suggestive of modern forgery.

*Arguments in favour of the Inscriptions.*—1. The inscription is much later than any other lapidary Ogam yet discovered. The horizontal stem-line and the style of the scoring suggest familiarity with manuscripts, on the engraver's part. 2. Granting—what cannot be denied—that, as a whole, the surface of the work is modern, granting that it is mostly impossible to judge how far the lines are new and how far they are restorations of older lines, there yet remain some cases (to be presently specified) where the old graving can be distinguished from the new.

3. The moss appeared only on the stone's edge, where it approached a coffin in the adjacent grave, and it has been suggested that some chemical action may have generated the growth. The soil, I am informed, is not a clay, though it was hard and firm when excavated. 4. The stone may have been found, and the inscriptions retouched for examination when the old church was demolished in 1801, then thrown aside and buried with other fragments among the ruins. But after ninety-four years' burial could the restorer's work appear so fresh? Farther, would any one have troubled himself over the inscriptions at a period when antiquities were little cared for and Ogams practically unknown? Questions hard to answer. Even in 1801, it is possible that, from mere curiosity, some one might have cleaned out the scores and

figures, and not unfaithfully refreshed their lines. These, however, are mere surmises, and the mystery seems likely to prove insoluble, for the character of those concerned in the present case frees them from all suspicion of concealment or duplicity; and, were it otherwise, their unacquaintance with recondite antiquarianism forbids the idea of forgery on their part. 5. If this work is fictitious, one question strongly suggests itself,—The forger having knowledge enough to frame so plausible an imitation, why did he fail to better it by the easy process of following the style and plan of authentic inscriptions? If he sought for effect, why refrain from composing a sensational legend, illustrated with mystical symbols, instead of running vowels in an improbable sequence, and portraying common forms of almost laughable simplicity? 6. On ordinary lines the legend seems meaningless, but it may be mediæval and non-Celtic, and, as might be shown, not beyond an explanation that would fairly account for some of its peculiarities.

*Analysis of the Inscriptions.*—No. 1. Arc of circle, below stem-line, inscribed with three dots. No. 2. Arc of circle, above stem-line, apparently inscribed with three dots, but they are not very clear. No. 3. Arc of circle, above stem-line and near centre of groups, inscribed with one dot. No. 4. A. No. 5. U. An angled vowel, but the first score is nearly straight. No. 6. U. Might be NG, but (on analogy of Pictish inscriptions) the slant is insufficient, and though the “key” sanctions this NG group, it occurs in no example known to me. Might be ABHA, the central score being broken, but spacing, group-character, and general considerations discourage such a rendering. No. 7. A. The “refresher” has not marked this score, and it is barely visible. It shows (faintly) under a strong light, and the space seems to require it. Nos. 8, 9, 10. OHA. Angled scores. The lower central score standing nearly midway between the two central upper scores, it is hard to say whether these numbers should not be read as AHO. A dot or point above the line follows here, and a corresponding hollow beneath the line may perhaps be the remains of another dot. Nos. 11, 12, 13. AHO. The lower strokes of No. 13 are doubtful, for scarcely any depression exists beneath the modern scratchings. On the whole I accept them, on grounds of probability. Nos. 14, 15. A,O. Angled

vowels on a separate stem-line. Possibly U, but the spacing is in favour of division. An unrefreshed curved line continuing the upper line of the third score suggests by its direction the idea of a leaf-shaped enclosure of this independent part of the inscription ; it is more probably an accidental mark.

No. 16. A seven-rayed Crown. Has been thought to represent the sun, but in that case the body would be round, or at least its convexity would turn upwards. The four central rays seem to meet at the points in pairs, forming leaf-shaped figures, but the terminal lines that produce

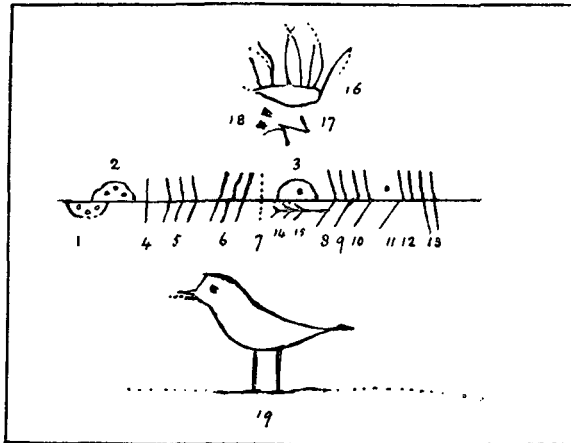


Diagram of Inscription and Symbols on Stone found at Abernethy, 1895.

this effect are modern scratches, as likewise is a faint outer line designed to give the right-hand ray a similar appearance. This crown is shown in perspective, and looks modern ; some of its lines, however, are older than the restorations near them. No. 17. N or Z. A capital letter beneath the crown, very doubtful and not well defined, being perhaps a mere fracture refashioned. No. 18. Two modern, square-headed indentations formed by a small gouge or chisel, the same that has been used in cutting the heads of scores in group No. 6. It is hard to account for these marks : they seem to be intentional, but form no part

of a device. No. 19. A Bird. Might be meant for the Christian dove, but more resembles a crow or a sea-gull. The restorer has substituted a scratch for the real beak, which is just above it, and he has omitted to refresh the eye. The actual legs are hard to determine, as likewise the ground-line beneath, which (if existent) is not above 3 inches long, though the restorer's scratches extend it widely on either side.

*Summary of the Legend.*—AU UA [AO] OKA AHO.

*Conclusion.*—The object under consideration bears no resemblance to any Ogam relic in Ireland, England, or Wales. Its letter-forms are Pictavian, but not so its symbolism, which rather approximates to the Mithraic, Gnostic, or Semi-Christian type. Its text, moreover—seemingly meaningless if viewed either as Celtic record or modern forgery, the preponderance of vowels forbidding the supposition that common words are indicated in it either by contraction or initialling—undoubtedly bears a likeness to some of the Hebrew-gnostic legends of Alexandrian origin. But though numerous Mithraic remains of the Roman period have been found in Britain, we could not assign the present inscription to so early a date, for it is evidently later in style than any of the Ogam legends of Pictavia, some of which almost certainly belong to the eighth or ninth centuries.

It might, nevertheless, be a product of that mediæval revival or survival of Gnosticism, examples of which abound in the form of inscribed rings and other talismanic objects, and occur among the marks of ancient and modern Masonry. Whatever the date of his work, the inscriber seems to have had some acquaintance with Gnosticism and Ogam-writing as well as Christianity, but to all appearance he has used his knowledge incongruously, the legend being confused and the symbolism dubious; while the Ogams, besides being ill-cut, and strangely jumbled in groups 6, 8, 9, 10, are drawn horizontally, manuscript fashion, instead of vertically, are arranged on a ruled stem-line, and are of a mixed type and crowded character, which neither please the eye nor compare satisfactorily with any authentic example.

Under the circumstances of doubt and difficulty yet attaching to these inscriptions, it would be idle to attempt an interpretation of the legend. I will merely, in conclusion, point out that each main section of it

(accepting No. 7 as a score) reads forward and back—AU UA—OHA AHO. This, taken with the rest, goes far to indicate that the inscriber, whether ancient, mediæval, or modern, worked not entirely at random, but with a certain definite intention, whatever might be his object and design.