

IV.

ON THE OGHAM INSCRIPTIONS OF THE LUNNASTING AND GOLSPIE STONES. BY WILLIAM BANNERMAN, M.A., M.D., F.S.A.Scot.

1. THE OGHAM INSCRIPTION OF THE LUNNASTING STONE.

To anyone desirous of entering upon the investigation of the Scottish ogamic inscriptions, the stone of Lunnasting offers one decided advantage as a starting-point. Its inscription is complete; it is also clearly decipherable. Its difficulties are therefore of a purely intrinsic nature, and are connected, first, with its transliteration, and, secondly, with the interpretation of its meaning.

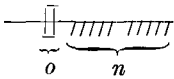
There were many different ways of writing ogams; or, one may say, many different codes of the ogamic cipher, all, however, agreeing in their essential features. The Scottish monuments furnish examples of several codes, and these used in such a promiscuous manner that frequently the same letter is represented in different forms within the limits of a single inscription.

In one code much followed in Scotland, each group of scores was written twice to represent a single letter,¹ and the practice of transliterating these double groups as two letters instead of one has given a certain repellent grotesqueness to the results arrived at, and, in the writer's opinion, has done not a little to retard their study.

In the attempt to read any ogamic inscription, one is at once faced by the question, which is the beginning and which the end, which is the upper and which the lower side of the cipher? There was no uniform usage among the inscription writers. The test lies in the result, and the right way of reading is that by which an intelligible meaning can be arrived at.

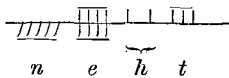
¹ Statements concerning the methods of ogam writing are founded on examination of the plates, reproduced from Irish manuscripts, that are printed in Brash's *Ogam-inscribed Monuments*; to which work the reader is referred.

Accompanying the inscription on the Lunnasting stone is a simple incised cross, and in the attempted reading here offered it is assumed that the side of the inscription nearest to the cross is the upper side, and that the reading is from right to left.



The inscription opens with two groups of five downward scores (the first group being imperfect). These may legitimately be regarded as a single letter of the double-ogam code before referred to, and as representing the letter N. The next letter is O, two scores passing through the line perpendicularly.

The inscription therefore begins with NO, one of a group of "verbal particles" employed as prefixes to certain moods and tenses of Gaelic verbs. If the inscription is Gaelic, the verbal root will be found in the scores that follow, which are:—



These, when read, as before, from right to left, give the word *then*.

It must, however, be taken into account that the particle *no* has the invariable property of modifying the initial consonant of a verbal root which it precedes (Zeuss, *Gram. Celt.*, p. 198), so that *th* represents not the primary but the "infected" form of a letter. Now "Th=D *in statu infectionis*" (Z., p. 72), so that there is full warrant for regarding the root as *den*, from which is formed the verb *den-om*, "facere."

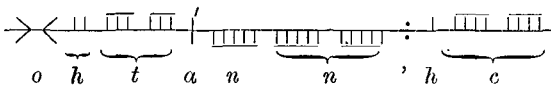
No-then, however, is not a complete word. The particle *no* is the special sign of what are known as the secondary tenses, all of which demand an appropriate ending significant of mood, tense, number, and person.

The context shows that in this particular instance the verb is in the third person singular, präterite, active; the tense ending of which is *ad* (Z., p. 453). The only representation of this in the text of the inscription is the colon-like mark $\text{—}^{\circ}\text{—}$. It is proposed, accordingly, to regard this as a *mark of abbreviation*—a surmise which will be justified

or condemned according as it may be found applicable or otherwise to other situations in which the same symbol appears.

Following the predicate comes the subject FEF—a phonetic spelling of the noun *fedb*, “vidua.” The word is quoted by Zeuss, pp. 46, 1049, 1050, etc. Though now obsolete in the Gaelic of Scotland, it still holds its place in Ireland, and is given in *O’Reilly’s Dictionary* under the spelling of *feab*, or *feadb*.

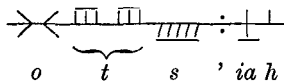
The combination of the consonants *db* is not a very common one, but it certainly possessed the phonetic value of the aspirated *b*, or English *v*. This much may be gathered from the names *Medb*, *Bodb*, *Fidba*, well known in Irish mythology, and familiar in English guise as *Meave*, *Bove*, *Feeva*. Instances are not lacking where the letter *f* was employed to indicate this sound, as, for example, when *far*, *farn* are written for *bar*, *barn*, “your.” With these before us it seems justifiable to regard *fef* as a phonetic rendering of *fedb*, or as O’Reilly spells it, *feab*.



This is the longest but by no means the most difficult word in

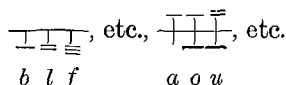
the inscription. Reduced to the ordinary writing, it resolves itself into *Ch’nmatho*, obviously the regularly formed genitive of the familiar name Kenneth, *Cinnad*. The initial consonant is aspirated; and the colon-like mark of abbreviation indicates that the reader must supply the vowel *i*, *io*, *ai*, *oi* according to his ideas of orthography.

In two other points the reading here submitted differs from that given in *The Early Christian Monuments*. What is here transliterated as *a* —+ is there rendered *m* —+; and the final letter here rendered *o* —+ is there rendered *e* —+ (probably with some reference to the diphthong ogam for *ea*).



In this word lies the chief difficulty of the inscription. The first letter is *h*. The next is a score passing perpendicularly

through the line like the vowel *a*; but it is clearly differentiated from that letter by a cross score at its lower end, so that it resembles an inverted capital T. No marking exactly resembling it seems to be known among the various codes so far as the twenty regularly formed letters are concerned. It is most nearly approached in the code represented as follows:—

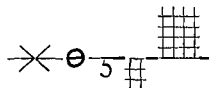


Here the letter *b* resembles the ogam of the inscription, excepting that the upright stroke does not pass above the line. Apart from that, the situation is one where the letter *b* is inadmissible; for the preceding letter is *h*, and it must be followed by one or other of the vowel sounds.

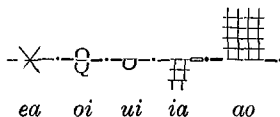
A more promising solution lies in the consideration of what may be called the additional ogam symbols which represent the five diphthongs.

As the ancient alphabet, called the *Bobel-loth*, or *Beith-luis-nion*, ends with an enumeration of the five diphthongs, so also the ogam alphabet ends with five symbols representing them. For it is upon the *Bobel-loth* that the ogam system is founded; the number of the letters and their order are alike in both.

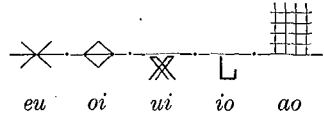
O'Donovan [*Irish Grammar*, p. xlviii] gives the following representation of these diphthongs, and states that they are based respectively upon the vowels *e*, *o*, *u*, *i*, and *a*.



O'Brien, in his *Irish Grammar*, p. 202, writes them thus:—

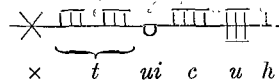


The following is one of the renderings given in Brash's *Ogam-inscribed Monuments* :—



In the writer's opinion the \perp inverted T of the Scottish monuments is a form of the *i*-diphthong, which might be represented in writing by any one of the combinations *ia*, *io*, *iu*.

Proceeding upon this assumption, we are able to effect the transliteration of the word under discussion, and to give it intelligible alphabetic shape as *h-ia'sto*. The letter *h* is, of course, a mere breathing introduced to obviate the hiatus between the two open vowels. The difficulty lies in expanding the abbreviation of which the colon-like mark is the ogamic symbol. It is a simple matter to supply the appropriate inflectional ending to a verb, or an omitted vowel of a well-known personal name; but where, as here, it is the root of the word that is abbreviated, the interpretation can hardly rise above the level of plausible conjecture. The best guess that the present writer is able to suggest would make the fully expanded word read *iaidnasto*, the accusative plural of a verbal noun based on the root *fiadnaisse*, "testimony," "witness." Regarding the disappearance of the aspirated initial *f* from such words, O'Donovan writes thus (*Grammar*, p. 50):— "In ancient manuscripts the quiescent *f* is frequently omitted altogether, which often causes great obscurity. . . . This omission of the radical letter is called, in Cormac's *Glossary*, *diened tosaig*,—*i.e.* initial decapitation, or apharesis." A very apposite illustration may be cited from the *Book of Deer*, p. 95, where we read *n-a-iaidnaisse*, "in witness hereof."



The final cross indicates the end of the inscription, the last word of which is *hucuit*. This is compounded of the preposition *hua*, "from,"

“out of,” and *cuít*, “a part” (*Z.*, p. 616), and is thus the exact equivalent of the Latin phrase *ex parte*.

The inscription therefore reads:—*Nothenad fef Chinnatho h-íadnasto hucuit*, “[Has literas] fecit vidua Kennethi testificantes ex [sua] parte.” “The widow of Kenneth made [these as] testimonials on her part.”

Hence it appears that the stone is a simple memorial stone, probably marking the grave of the man whose name it bears. It may be presumed from his being a married man that he was a layman, not a cleric.

The language of the inscription is Gaelic, the tongue of the Dalriadic Scots. It would, however, be unsafe to attach much importance to this fact as an indication of the political allegiance of the islands whether to Dalriada or to Pictavia. At the same time it definitely fixes the date of the stone as anterior to the conquest of the Shetland islands by the Norsemen. It was in the closing years of the eighth century that the Vikings began to raid in the Western seas, and they had long been absolute masters of the Northern Islands before these were definitely annexed to the Crown of Norway by Harald Harfagri in the year 872.

The chief interest of the inscription lies, however, in the following points:—First, that it creates a presumption that the other ogamic inscriptions of Scotland are also Gaelic; second, that the inverted T ogam, \perp , represents a diphthong based on the vowel *i*; third, that the $\overline{\cup}$ ogam is a diphthong based on the vowel *u*; fourth, that the colon-like mark is not a mark dividing one word from another, but is a sign of contraction.

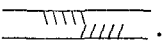
These are conclusions that will prove to be of service in dealing with other and perhaps more important inscriptions.

2. THE OGAMIC INSCRIPTION OF THE GOLSPIE STONE.

In the usual form of ogamic writing the letters are distinguished by their position with reference to a single stem-line. One group is traced from the line downwards, another from the line upwards, the third crosses the line obliquely, the fourth crosses it at right angles; the fifth group consists of certain peculiar forms representing the diphthongs.

None of these letters call for special remark except the second *o*. It is formed of two angulated lines with the angles towards each other. It is important to note that this is so, and that we are not dealing with an ogam of two lines intersecting like the letter X, which stands not for the vowel "o" but for the diphthong "ea."

The interpretation of *do-ro-lan* is sufficiently easy. Apart from any other reason, its grammatical form indicates that it is a verb. It is resolvable into three component parts:—(1) the prefix *do*, used in the same way as its cognate Latin form "ad"; (2) the root *lán*, "full," cognate with the Latin "plenus"; and (3) interposed between them in accordance with Old Gaelic idiom the verbal particle *ro*, the mark of the præterite tense. The verb *do-lán* I have not met with elsewhere, but its meaning cannot differ greatly from *for-lán*, which is glossed "abundavit" in Zeuss, p. 434. If, however, the verb be in agreement with the plural noun *iadla*, it should be, not *do-ro-lan*, which is the third person singular, but *do-ro-lansat*, the third person plural. This consideration is of assistance in reading the scores that follow. They

are written thus:  .
s a c

In *The Early Christian Monuments* these are interpreted as two groups of strokes, the first drawn from the upper line at somewhat of an inclination, the second drawn from the lower line with an opposite inclination, and in such manner that the last stroke of the first group and the first stroke of the second meet at their extremities. In this case they would represent the letters *n.g.*, a most improbable combination, being one to which the Gaelic tongue is specially averse (Zeuss, p. 52).

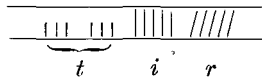
On the other hand it is equally probable that the two coalescing lines represent an angulated vowel-stroke like those of the preceding vowel *o*, when the reading becomes, not *n.g.* but *sac*.

The completed verb is therefore *do-ro-lansac*, whereas in strict grammar it ought to be *do-ro-lansat*. How this divergence may have

arisen, whether from some peculiarity of local dialect or from simple misspelling, can only be matter of conjecture. That it is of such moment as to quite vitiate the otherwise obvious meaning, I do not for my part believe.

The next word is one of a single letter consisting of a group of straight vowel-strokes. The diagram fig. 48c of *The Early Christian Monuments* exhibits them as six in number. The photographic illustrations, figs. 48A, 48B, clearly show five of them in an unbroken group. Just beyond these five the surface is eroded, and the appearance of a sixth line can be produced only when the figures are viewed sideways. One hesitates to believe that the appearance, such as it is, is not deceptive; for an ogam of six digits would be indeed an anomaly incapable of interpretation. The five strokes represent the vowel *i*. It is the form of the preposition *in*, *i*, "in," appropriate to the position in which it is here placed.

The noun following is fortunately easy to decipher.



First is a duplicate group of three strokes, each drawn from the lower stem-line, representing the letter *t*; then at the corner of the stone a vowel group of five strokes representing the letter *i*; and last a group of five oblique strokes representing the letter *r*. The whole is the word *tir*, the dative singular of the neuter noun *tir*, "land," governed by the preceding preposition *i*.

Of the remainder of the inscription it is impossible to speak with any approach to certainty. It has been partly destroyed by an iron clasp; it has suffered from the weather; and it had never, at its best, been cut with the same care that had been bestowed upon the opening letters. It may with good reason be surmised to stand for some form of the suffixed demonstrative adjective *isin*, or *isiu*, "this." This would agree with the markings as far as they are decipherable, while at the

same time it would conform with the idiom of the language and would complete the sense.¹

The inscription therefore stands thus :—*Iadla dorolansac itirisin.*

In such a sentence, where the apparent subject precedes the verb instead of following it, the real subject of the verb is not the noun but a suppressed relative pronoun. For this reason the meaning is properly rendered in English :—“Idols that abounded in this land.”

Surmises we have had in plenty regarding the meaning of those mysterious symbols depicted on this Golspie Stone and on many others. Here the man who traced them on the stone tells us plainly what he meant by them.

Of those same idols we read in the hymn of S. Patrick (Zeuss, p. 943) :—

For tuaith érend bai temel
Tuata adorta idla
Ni chreitset in firdeacht
Inna trinóite fire.

“Super populum Hiberniæ fuerunt tenebræ, Gentilia adorata sunt idola, Non crediderunt veram deitatem, Trinitatis veræ.”

In the same way the collect for St Moluag’s day recalls that the saint preached in Scotland to a people that walked in darkness, and converted them from the worship of idols to the practice of true religion.

Notwithstanding this denunciation of idol-worship, the early missionaries had no great antipathy to the old gods of the country. They were willing to admit them on terms, as may be seen from the curious verses called the “Girdle of Saint Finnian.” They are printed and annotated by Zeuss, *Gram. Celt.*, p. 933. In these the saint exalts

¹ *Note.*—It has been omitted to take note of a mark below the corner of the stone which resembles an ogam of one stroke drawn from the upper stem-line between the letters *t* and *i*. Its situation alone would make it doubtful whether it belonged to the inscription or was meant to be a decorative return of the beading-line round the head of the stone. As an ogam it would stand for *b*, a letter quite out of keeping with the situation. In the Society’s *Proceedings*, vol. xxxvi., p. 290, Professor Rhys expresses himself as not quite certain that this mark is a part of the legend at all.

his new-found faith and professes the utmost thankfulness for his conversion. At the same time he extols the symbols of his discarded paganism, no longer as objects of worship, but as charms powerful to preserve their wearer in health of body and soul. Five of them he specifies—the goat, sea-weed, heather, the bird, and the serpent. Of the last he writes:—"Evil is the anger of men, pleasant the allurements of women; a girdle of a serpent is my girdle; the serpent is round me so that men shall not wound me, so that women shall not bring me to perdition; it has raised me to the stars, it is about me with power."

To men of this way of thinking it would not look incongruous to carve the cross on one side of a stone and the "idols" on the other.

It is not on such considerations, however, but on the prosaic details of transliteration and grammatical analysis, that the success or failure of this attempted interpretation of the inscription falls to be judged.