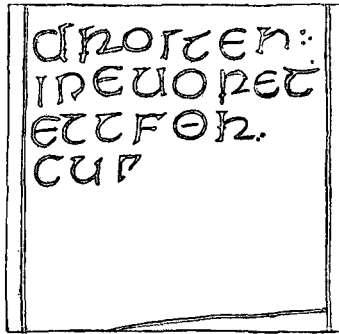


II.

THE INSCRIPTION ON THE DROSTEN STONE AT ST VIGEANS.

By DR WM. BANNERMAN, F.S.A. Scot.

“An incised inscription in Hiberno-Saxon minuscules in four lines, as follows” :—



Such is the account given of it in the *Early Christian Monuments of Scotland*.

Yet, in spite of the style of its lettering, the language is neither Erse nor Saxon. Neither is it Latin, nor Scandinavian, nor Welsh. And truly it is a strange thing that only by such negative evidence we are compelled to the conclusion that the writing is in the Pictish tongue. It is a unique inscription—the sole surviving sentence of what was once the language of Scotland from the Pentland Hills to the Pentland Firth.

While Pictish in literary form is quite lost to us, fortunately the writings of other nationalities have preserved the lists of Pictish kings, many names of persons and of places, and some few words of the general vocabulary. These detached words have not escaped the attention of students; and from their study has arisen an ever-growing conviction that Pictish was certainly a Celtic language, and almost as certainly its affinities were with the Brythonic rather than with the Gaelic branch of

that family. It is now, indeed, a good many years since the late Dr Alexander Macbain, in a tract upon *Ptolemy's Geography of Scotland* (p. 24), held it proved that "the Picts were, as to language, allied to the Cymric branch of the Celtic race," and that in this respect "the Pictish question is settled."

Granted that this opinion is correct, the sentence of our inscription should be found to conform in syntax with the rules of other similar tongues. Further, by analysing the individual words, by disentangling their roots, their inflections, or other component parts, it should be possible with a little thought and trouble to recognise forms cognate with them in their kindred languages, Cymric, Cornish, and Armoric. In short, the methods of comparative grammar should furnish a key to the problem of the Drosten inscription.

The initial difficulty lies in dividing the inscription into its component words. The first word, *Drosten*, is too familiar to admit of doubt; also, it is separated from the context by a quasi-punctuation of three dots in this form :. For the rest of the script, the only reliable guide to the individual words is their sense. There being at the same time no guide to the sense except the words, it may be well understood that the problem, small as it is in extent, is somewhat baffling in character. The solution finally attained is that the inscription divides itself into these words :—

"Drosten ipe uoret ettforus."

For convenience of exposition the word *uoret* may be chosen as a starting-point. The position in logic is this. We assume that *uoret* is a word. It is then incumbent on us to find in one or more of the allied languages the word which the rules of comparative grammar point out to be its homologue. In this way its meaning and its place in the structure of the sentence are ascertained. If the outcome of the process is such as to lend itself to a fitting and rational translation of the whole inscription, there is a high degree of probability that our assumption is right. More than that it is impossible to claim.

Proceeding, therefore, on these lines, we propose to compare *uoret* with the Cornish word *wreth*, and to illustrate the latter by examples taken from the miracle-play of *The Creation of the World* (Whitley Stokes, Berlin, 1863). It is the second person singular of various tenses of a verb signifying to "make," to "do"; and being much in use as an auxiliary, after the manner of the English "do," examples of its occurrence are not hard to find. Thus:—

"Adam, Adam, pandra *wreth*." Line 867.

Adam, Adam, what dost thou?

And again,

"Pan *wreth* * * * * thithi sacrifice." Line 1107.

When thou makest thy sacrifice.

In these instances it is used as a present tense, but in other cases it implies futurity.

"Yn pyttma y *wreth* trega." Line 1722.

In this pit thou shalt dwell.

[Literally, "shalt make dwelling."]

"Na, na, ny *wreth* in della." Line 2014.

No no, thou shalt not do so.

In other instances the termination of the word is expanded, as

"Predery prage na *wreta*." Line 157.

Why dost thou not consider?

"Pra na *wreta* predery." Line 207.

Why dost thou not consider?

While there is thus exhibited a fairly close *prima facie* similarity between the two words *uoret* and *wreth*, or *wreta*, one circumstance having an important bearing on the case must not be overlooked. It is this. *Wreth* does not exhibit the root form of the word; it is deduced from it by the law of "consonantal mutation" which holds good in Cornish as in other Brythonic tongues. The primary form has an initial consonant, "g," as may be seen from the following examples:—

"Mar *gwreth* naha." Line 667.

If thou dost deny.

"Mar *gwreth* henna." Line 513.

If thou doest that.

"Ha mar *gwreta* bargayne sure." Line 488.

And if thou makest thy bargain sure.

By undergoing still another variation the word becomes *whreth* :—

"Y *whreth* flattra." Line 635.

Thou dost flatter.

There are thus exhibited three variations of the initial consonant of this Cornish word: *gwreth*, the radical form; *wreth*, the form known as the "middle mutation"; and *whreth*, the "aspirate mutation." In the Gaelic branch of the Celtic tongues such mutations are by no means quite unknown; probably, indeed, most of the "mutations" of Welsh grammarians can be paralleled by the changes of initial consonants in Gaelic under the influence of "aspiration" and "eclipsis." But in Gaelic their place is subsidiary, occasionally obscure. In the Brythonic languages, on the other hand, they are an outstanding and essential feature.

It becomes necessary, therefore, to have a clear understanding of the position occupied by the Pictish language in regard to this matter; for the assumption that the Pictish *woret* is cognate with the Cornish *wreth*, presupposes that both languages were subject to the same rule of consonantal mutation. It may, of course, be urged that competent scholars have satisfied themselves that Pictish was a Brythonic language, in which case it was bound to conform to the usages of those languages in this as in all other essential matters. That it did so conform is more than inference, however; it is a fact.

In the *Chronicles of the Picts and Scots*, p. 26, is found the name of a Pictish king, Brude Pont; on p. 397 his name is spelt Bont. Now, B is the middle mutation of the letter P. Again, the name of Cait, son of Cruithne, which appears in this form on pp. 25, 323, 324, is

spelt Got on p. 4, and Gatt on p. 396; G being the middle mutation of C. In the story of the landing in Ireland of the six sons of Cruithne, the name of one of their number is spelt Drostan on p. 30, and on p. 325, Trostan; D being the middle mutation of T. Another of the kings that bore the name of Brude is called the son of Bili on p. 7, and on p. 399 the son of Fle; F being the middle mutation of B.

The corresponding mutation of G is effected by dropping the letter altogether. Thus the Welsh word *gŵr*, "man," becomes *ŵr*, as in Cornish *gwreth* becomes *wreth*. So also in the Pictish chronicle many names are found that appear to be formed by dropping the initial G of the Brythonic prefix *Guor-*; such are *Urpant*, *Urgnith*, *Urcant*. On the other hand, the appellations of *Drest Gurthinmoch*, *Gest Gurcich*, exhibit the prefix in its radical form.

A series of instances like this cannot be explained away as the outcome of casual mis-spelling. It must be due to the influence of grammatical rule, and demonstrates that upon this point of grammar the comparison of *uoret* with *wreth* is a legitimate operation.

The questions that are raised by the further collation of these two words concern themselves with the interchangeability of the vowels *uo* and *w*, and of the final inflections *-et* and *-eth*. The first of these two points, indeed, hardly calls for discussion; it is sufficient to cite the variant spelling of the well-known name *Guorthigern*, *Gurthigern*.

The relation between the respective suffixes *-et* and *-eth*, though in no way obscure, is not devoid of interest. A particle of this nature, whose essential characteristic is the letter *t*, or some modification of it, suffixed to the simple root of a verb, appears to have been in the original Celtic languages the distinguishing mark of the second person singular of the imperfect case active. Such was, and is, its use in the Welsh language. In Cornish, as we have seen, and also in Armoric, its use was not confined to the imperfect tense, it was extended also to the present, although not to the entire exclusion of the form more properly belonging to that situation (*cf.* Zeuss, *Grammatica Celtica*, 1856, p. 499).

Hence arises some possible ambiguity regarding the tense of *uoret*; but it is of academic rather than of practical interest.

The variations of this tense-ending in the different Celtic languages are these:—In Cornish, *-eth*; in Armoric, *-ez*; in Early Welsh, *-ut*; in old Gaelic, *-atha*. The verbal root being also subject to modification in the several languages, the ultimate forms of the complete word show a good deal of divergence among themselves; and this is rendered the more striking in consequence of the actual substitution of the letter *n* for *r* in the case of Welsh and of Gaelic.¹ Their points of similarity and difference may be readily seen in the following table:—

UORET—TABLE OF COGNATE WORDS.

Language.	Root.	Suffix.	Word in middle mutation.
Pictish	gnor	et	uoret
Cornish	gwr	eth	wreth
Aarmoric	gr[o]	ez	rez
Welsh	gwna	ut	wnaut
Gaelic	gni	aiha	...

From this point the problem presented by the inscription becomes less indeterminate in its character. For, the grammatical relations of *uoret* being determined, the quest necessary to the interpretation of the preceding word, *ipe*, becomes much narrowed and facilitated. Two guiding considerations emerge. In the first place, whatever be its meaning, it belongs to the limited class of words that govern the middle mutation of a following verb. In the second place, it occupies a position that is usually filled by one or other of the "pre-verbal particles." These, it

¹ In Old Welsh there are survivals of the original root, *gor*. The late Professor Strachan, in his *Introduction to Early Welsh*, p. 92, records a pretty complete preterite tense derived from that root, of which the third person singular, *goruc*, may be taken as typical; and he remarks that "the *gwnaeth* forms encroach at the expense of the *goruc* forms." In Gaelic, also, the change is perhaps more apparent than real, for the word *gniomh*, "action," derived from this root, is commonly pronounced *gree-ov*.

may be permitted to explain, constitute a group of words peculiar to the Celtic tongues, highly idiomatic in their use, untranslatable, and now all but meaningless even in the languages of their origin. Among them is one, unrepresented in Gaelic, which in old Welsh and in Cornish takes the form of *y*, *yd*, *it*, or the like, and *ez* in Armoric. Concerning its origin the Welsh grammarian Rowland ventures the following significant speculation: "The oldest forms of these particles" (*y* and *yr* of modern Welsh) "seem to have been *yd* and *ydd* (= Lat. *id*, Eng. *it*), which are probably old pronouns standing as nominative to a suppressed inflection of *bod*, 'to be'" (*Welsh Grammar*, Wrexham, 1876, p. 207). If this surmise is well founded, *ipe* as a verbal particle finds a ready explanation. For, given an original combination of the roots, *it*—*be*, nothing is more to be expected than the coalescence of the consonants *t* and *b* to form the single letter *p*. In this way, for example, the familiar word *aper*, *aber*, the "mouth" of a stream, literally the "in-bringing" of the water, is derived from the coalescence of *at*, a preposition cognate with Latin "ad," and *ber*, a root cognate with Latin "fer-o" (Zeuss, p. 169).

It is noteworthy also, that as parts of the verb "to be" bring about middle mutation, or lenation of the following consonant (Strachan, *op. cit.*, p. 15), so too the particle *ipe* exhibits the same property—a property which the corresponding Welsh particle has long lost, but which it retained at the time when that language was first committed to writing. "There was a period in Welsh when the particle was *ydd* before vowels, and *yd* with lenation before consonants" (Strachan, p. 54).

The remaining word, *ettforcus*, occupies two lines of the inscription, but it does not fill them. The first line contains the letters *e t t f o r*, succeeded by a blank space which might contain two letters more, and the rest of the letters, *c u s*, are carried forward to the succeeding line. There arises consequently an appearance of disjunction between the two parts of the word, which seems, however, to be fallacious. It is worthy of remark that there is a similar space after the completed word *Drosten* in the opening line, which is filled in with three dots . . ., whereas in the case of the incompleting word *ettfor* these are wanting; but it would be

hard to say whether this difference of treatment is meant to have any signification or not. The real and effective reason for regarding *ettforcus* as a single word is that it makes the inscription intelligible.

Proceeding to resolve this word into its component parts, one is struck with the agreement between the first syllable, *ett*, and the Welsh prefix *et-*, *ed-*, which has the same signification as the Latin *re*, "again." This prefix is represented in all the Celtic languages. In Gaelic it is *aith*. In the Celtic names of the classic writers it is *ati-* or *ate-*, as in *Atebod-u-s*.

If *ett* be thus a prefix, the next syllable, *for*, may be expected to represent the root proper. In seeking a clue to its meaning, one is again struck with the similarity between *ettfor* and the common Welsh word *edifar*, "penitent"; in old Welsh *etiuar*. The associated noun, *edifeirwch*, "repentance," connects the root with the verb *ffeirio*, "to turn," in English, "to veer." It will be observed that in this series of words the letter *f* varies in value as the letters *f*, *v*, and *w* do in English; but in Cornish it reaches a farther and final degree of attenuation. It undergoes complete elision; and, the vowels being concomitantly shortened, the word *edifeirwch* becomes a dissyllable, *eddrack*, *eddrag*, *yddrack*, or the like. Most frequently used as a noun, this word also serves for an adjective, as in *ny vyth eddrack*, "he will not be repentant" (*Creation of the World*, line 717). While, therefore, *eddrack* as a noun is fairly comparable with the Welsh *edifeirwch*, on the other hand, *eddrack* as an adjective may no less fairly be brought in line with the Gaelic *aidrech*, *aithreach*, "repentant." The Cornish word also exhibits a variant form, *yddrage* (*Creation*, line 2043), *edrege*, which Zeuss (*Gram. Celt.*, p. 872) considers equivalent to the old Gaelic *aithirge*, "penitentia." It may be doubted whether the final *e* is of quite the same value in the Cornish as in the Gaelic word; but that the two words are practically homologous is not open to dispute. In the relation of *aithirge* to other words in the Gaelic tongues is found the final solution of the Pictish word *ettforcus*. *Aithirge* in modern Irish is written *aithrigh* (*O'Reilly's Dict.*, *sub voce*); while both in Irish and in Scottish Gaelic

the usual form of the word is *aithreachas*, which etymologically is an abstract noun formed from the adjective *aithreach*. By analogy *ettforcus* may be resolved into its elements:—*Ett*, the prefix; *for*, the root; *ec*, adjectival suffix; *us*, suffix converting the adjective into an abstract noun.

ETTFORCUS—TABLE OF COGNATE WORDS.

Language.	Prefix.	Root.	Suffixes.	
			1	2
Pictish	Ett	for	c	us
Old Welsh	Eti	uar
Modern Welsh	Edi	far
Welsh	Edi	feir	wch	...
Cornish	Edd	r	ack	...
	Ed	r	eg	e
Old Gaelic	Aith	ir	g	e
Modern Gaelic	Aith	r	igh	e
Gaelic	Aith	re	ach	as

To recapitulate, the inscription consists of the words *Drosten, ipe uoret ettforcus*, which may be parsed and construed as follows:—

Drosten.—The vocative case of the personal name *Drosten*; perhaps more correctly written *Trosten* in the nominative case.

Ipe.—A pre-verbal particle, synonymous with the Welsh *yd*, followed by the root of the verb *bod*, “to be,” and governing the middle mutation of the succeeding consonant. It is capable of being rendered in English by such periphrasis as “it is the case that,” but it is best left untranslated.

Uoret.—The second person singular probably of the imperfect tense of a verb whose root is *gur, gor*, “to work.” Its initial consonant is in middle mutation.

Ettforcus.—Accusative case of an abstract noun meaning “repentance.”

Thus ends our investigation of this sentence of a forgotten language. Word by word, almost letter by letter, we have tested it by comparison

with the other tongues to which it is allied. It may be that we have not been able to avoid error, even grave error; but we have aimed at accuracy and believe that we are not far from truth in translating the inscription as,

DROSTEN, THOU WROUGHT'ST REPENTANCE.