

III.

A RUNE-INScribed STONE FROM BIRSAY, ORKNEY.

By HUGH MARWICK, F.S.A. Scot.

On the 24th of May last year (1921) I was spending the day—Empire Day—at Birsay, the north-western extremity of the mainland of Orkney. As the tide was suitable, I took advantage of the occasion to make a first visit to the “Broch” in order to see the ruins of the old church there. The “Broch of Birsay” is a small tidal island, rising precipitously from the sea in high cliffs on the west and north sides, but sloping down gently towards the south-east corner, where it is separated from the mainland at high water by a channel three or four hundred yards in width. At low water, however, this channel ebbs dry and, though walking is extremely difficult, it is possible to go across dryshod. On the point of the Broch nearest the mainland are still to be seen the remains of the old broch which has given the island its name. Immediately behind these stands the ruined church with its adjoining churchyard wall and other ruined buildings. Dietrichson (v. *Monumenta Orcadica*, pp. 55, 56, and 81) was quite sure that he saw the ruins of beehive cells; these ruins are on the slope above, not many yards outside the churchyard walls.

The church walls are now, for the most part, almost level with the ground, but it is still easy to distinguish the main outlines—the nave, the chancel, and the semicircular apse, which is very remarkable in an Orkney church. As the place has been so fully described both by Dryden and Dietrichson, there is no need to say much here. One change, however, must be noted, as it seems to have taken place since Dietrichson's visit in 1900. Both he and Dryden state that on the north side of the chancel there was a small window, just a little above and to the west of an ambry. Though the ambry is still *in situ*, the place where the window should be is now a plain wall, and there is no appearance of a window even built up. Hence it would seem that this north wall of the chancel had been altered quite recently. This had probably been done in order to make a better windscreen for people taking shelter there or for the sheep that pasture on the isle.

The wall here is only about 5 feet in height above the surface outside, and it is the highest portion of church wall now standing.

I had not much time at my disposal, but, as I suspected this church to have been originally an old Celtic foundation, I had a hasty look round to see if, by chance, I could find any traces of Celtic workmanship on the stones about. As I was passing on the outside of the part of the wall already referred to, my eye was caught by a longish, narrow stone lying horizontally in the wall about a foot above the ground. I noticed that the margin of the stone, to the extent of about an inch in width and half an inch in depth, seemed to have been chiselled away all round, so that the face of the stone presented to me seemed to stand out in relief. I at once suspected that this was an artificially dressed stone, and, with Celtic ideas still running in my head, I bent down to see if I could detect any traces of Ogam script. On peeping in at the upper surface—mostly hidden beneath the stones built on the top of it—I seemed to see traces of letters. I then noticed that the stone was lying quite shallow in the wall, and, when I tried to lift it out, it came away quite easily without disturbing the rest of the building at all. To my great surprise, I then saw before me a row of Norse runes.

On my informing Mr Stanger of Walkerhouse, the proprietor of the island, of my discovery, he very willingly fell in with my suggestion to offer the stone to the Scottish National Museum of Antiquities. It is thus due to his kindness and courtesy that the stone is before you to-night.

As I have just mentioned, the runes were on the upper face of the stone—hidden beneath the stones built on the top of it. Consequently, the stone had been built into the wall where I found it *after the runes had been inscribed*. Though the upper part of the wall where I found it seems to have been altered recently, there are various reasons against assuming that it has been disturbed where this stone was lying. On the inside of the wall, at the same height, the ambry is still undisturbed. Then, again, had this stone been handled in recent years, surely even the most careless worker must have noticed the runes and have thought them curious enough to preserve. But, most convincing of all, had these runes been exposed anywhere about the church at all, it is inconceivable that men like Dryden and Dietrichson, not to mention others, would not have noticed them. We may safely conclude, then, that the stone had lain for centuries in the place where I discovered it.

The two names of the church confirm this. Since Dr Barry's time it has generally been referred to as St Peter's Church, but on an old map

or sketch appearing in Low's *Tour* it is designated St Come's Church. Whether this name points to St Colm or St Columba matters little at present. The name suggests that the later church has been built on the site of an earlier one in which this stone had probably a much more prominent and honoured position. As to what that place may have been I can offer no conjecture. It is very probable that there was a primitive church here prior to both, and, in any case, it is almost certain that the stones for the church have been taken from the ruins of the adjacent broch. In fact, the proximity of the broch was probably one determining factor in the choice of site first of all.

The stone (fig. 1), which seems to be a kind of sandstone, is about 2 feet 10 inches long by 6 inches broad and 4 inches thick. It was built on its edge into the wall, with the "raised" face outwards. My friend Mr T. S. Peace, F.S.A. Scot., to whom I showed the stone, was of opinion

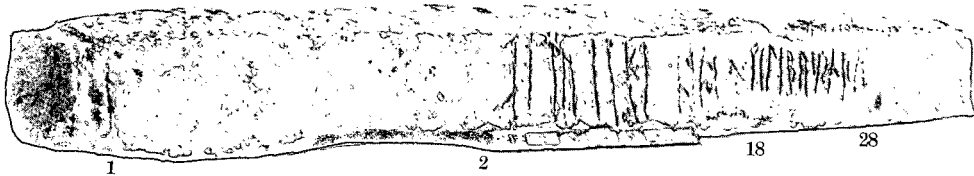


Fig. 1. Runic Inscription from Birsay.

that this strange appearance was due to weathering. Though his opinion on such a technical point is of great weight, I am still of opinion that it is the result of human workmanship.

The part of the face that is inscribed measures about 25 inches, and may best be considered in three sections. At the extreme left we see a faint stroke, but nothing else. From 1 to 2 (Section I.) nothing is discernible; weathering has obliterated all. From 2 to 17 (Section II.) we see plain indications of lettering, but only one or two runes can be deciphered with any certainty. Section III., however (18 to 28), is all beautifully distinct, with the exception perhaps of 18, of which the top is rather blurred, and which might be read as K but is almost certainly F. I transliterated this section as FILIBUSRYRU, but, as I could not think of any satisfactory translation, I sent rubbings to Professor A. Bugge of Christiania (son of Sophus Bugge, the great authority on runes), and Professor Baldwin Brown of Edinburgh, who, along with Mr Bruce Dickins, M.A., is at present engaged on a Corpus of British Runes. I have not yet heard from Professor Bugge, but Mr Dickins has most kindly suggested a very probable and ingenious interpretation. The short stroke used for S suggested to me that this was the ordinary twelfth-century type of runes, and hence I read

No. 26 as Y, thinking that the carver had found, after cutting the upright stroke, that the tail of the preceding R had left him no room for A and had consequently written f . Mr Dickins, however, thinks that this symbol should be read as Æ , and would then divide the letters thus: FILIBUS RAE RU, which gives a familiar runic formula—FILIBUS RAE[IST] RU[NAR], *Philippus carved (these) runes*. Though somewhat unimpressive, this, by its very conventionality, carries with it conviction to my mind. Philippus is not unknown as a Norse name; among others there was a man of that name who married Sverre's daughter, and was for a time the king of the Baglers in Norway. But, in any case, an apostolic name need cause no surprise in connection with an early church site.

The elucidation of Section II. is still more difficult. This appears to be altogether different in type:—

1. The strokes are longer—going right across the face of the stone.
2. They are also broader and shallower—as if another kind of tool had been used.
3. The most of Section III. is very much more distinct.

Now if one letter here and there varied in distinctness that might be accidental. But the whole of Section II. tends to be indistinct, while the whole of Section III. is remarkably plain. This fact tells so strongly against any theory of accident of weathering, that I regard Section II. as altogether prior in date to Section III.

Hints from the letters themselves seem to confirm my conclusion. No. 17 is extremely indistinct, and at first I noticed only λ . Close inspection now makes me practically certain of a circle above. It is very elusive to catch, but certain lights show it. Thus we have O —the older type of O or OE (as on the Ruthwell cross, etc.). Then, again, No. 9 is very obscure, but we may note the suggestion of a reversed wen, W , which points, moreover, to the Anglo-Saxon type of runes.

I shall now add a few notes on the individual letters, but I fear they are too far defaced for any convincing reconstruction.

- No. 1. A mere stroke.
- „ 2. Very faint stroke, with possible suggestion of the N rune.
- „ 3. Stroke barely visible if at all. There is, however, the trace of a curve making the letter into a f orn (th).
- „ 4. Appears to have two oblique dashes on the left, but the lower one belongs, I think, to the preceding letter. Perhaps T.
- „ 5. K or M?
- „ 6, 7, and 8. Three strokes—tops wanting. No. 6 may be T and 7+8=U.
- „ 9. Reversed wen? W ?

- No. 10. I think certainly I.
 „ 11. I think certainly B. There is a fairly clear trace of the foot
 of the letter.
 „ 12. K?
 „ 13. ?
 „ 14, 15, 16. All very obscure.
 „ 17. I think O. If no circle above, the two strokes would be very
 like the A on Bridekirk font, etc.

If, then, as I suspect, we have here two separate inscriptions—of different dates and different type,—this stone would appear to have an accidental interest quite out of proportion to its intrinsic value. That, however, is an extremely technical question, and must be decided by skilled runologists. In itself the stone is not without interest, seeing that, apart from the famous carvings in Maeshowe, the five letters in Twig runes found a few years ago on one of the standing stones of Stenness, and the small sandstone disc at Skaill, Sandwick, no other rune-inscribed stone has, to my knowledge, been hitherto reported from Orkney.

Postscript.—Since writing the above I have been in communication with Professor Magnus Olsen of Christiania—the chief Norwegian authority on runes. From my rubbing (handed over to him by Professor Bugge) he deciphered the word *Filipus* also. I then sent him two photographs of the inscription, but he writes me that he does not like to hazard any further interpretation at present, *i.e.* until he has an opportunity of viewing the stone itself.