

11. AN INSCRIPTION FROM ALTYRE.

The sandstone pillar shown in the accompanying measured sketch by J. B. Cameron of Gordonstoun School, Altyre, has long been known to antiquaries from the plate in Stuart's *Sculptured Stones of Scotland*, and the description in Romilly Allen's *Early Christian Monuments of Scotland*. It stands in a field near Altyre House, on the eastern side of the drive to Forres. It is agreed that it was brought thither from the Laich, probably about 1820. According to divergent accounts, the bringer was the contemporary laird of Altyre or his brother, Major Cumming Bruce of Dunphail—it is not unlikely that both had a hand in the business. It appears to have owed its transfer to its suitability as a rubbing-post for cattle,

¹ *Arch. Ael.*, (4), xxviii (1950), 177 ff.

² See above, 245.

³ Smellie, *Account of the Institution of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* (1782), 41.

⁴ Stuart, *Caledonia Romana* (1852), 260 n.; *P.S.A.S.*, I (1854), 72, LVIII (1924), 329, LXXXIV (1950), 150 f.

⁵ *Annual Register*, 1803, p. 378; *P.S.A.S.*, LII (1918), 260, LXXXIV (1950), 151.

⁶ *Hist. Mss. Commission Report*, x, Appendix 1, 130; *P.S.A.S.*, LII (1918), 263.

a service it in fact performed for nearly a century, fortunately without appreciable damage to its inscribed surface; it is now fenced in. In this charmingly bucolic context it would be churlish to complain that no record was kept of the provenance of the pillar, or of its siting or setting.

In the Laich traditions on this subject have varied, and counsel has been darkened by confusion of this pillar with the monument believed to have been erected to commemorate the victory of king Duncan, aided by Macbeth, over Thorfinn near Burghsea (Burghead) in A.D. 1040—a variant version gives the victory as won by Malcolm II over Camus the Dane. This account of the history of the pillar at Altyre is now finally discredited; as we shall see, it must be dated a good two centuries earlier than the time of Duncan and Macbeth. Even with the kind help of Sir Edward Dunbar and Michie Anderson, F.S.A.Scot., I have failed to find any fresh evidence on the provenance of the pillar, and am content to quote (from Allen) the considered opinion of the late H. W. Young, F.S.A.Scot., of Elgin, a skilful and careful antiquary, that it was taken to Altyre "from the college field at the village of Roseile." From Roseile it is about 2 miles to Burghead, amply attested as a Pictish settlement, and Burghead itself may well be the ultimate source of the "Altyre" pillar.

Stuart quotes Rhind, *Sketches of Moray*, for the statement that "there appear to be faint marks of Runic knots" (*sic*) "on this stone, or other carvings," and adds "the marks of ornament seem now to have disappeared." It was probably this quotation that moved a former Keeper of the National Museum of Antiquities, J. Graham Callander, to visit Altyre; the only record of his visit is a note in his handwriting on the margin of the copy of Allen in the Library of the Museum—"this stone has an Ogham inscription, much defaced. J. G. C." Callander's note caught the eye of the present Keeper, R. B. K. Stevenson, who in his turn visited the pillar and confirmed Callander's observation. It remained for me (exercising the prerogative of a Governor) to call up a task force of masters and boys from Gordonstoun School, Altyre, have the thick coating of lichen which concealed and preserved the inscription removed, and beat out an impression of it.

The total height of the pillar is given by Stuart as 15 ft.; slightly over 11 ft. appear above the surface of the soil. It is 34 ins. wide and 7 ins. thick, and waisted as shown in the sketch. The cross in front, shown complete on Stuart's plate, is still partially preserved; of a cross on the back all that remains is part of the vertical beam. The crosses, carved in half-inch relief, have bevelled borders. The inscription, on the slightly recessed flat of the undressed left side, is 49 ins. long, and reached up to a point 5 ft. from the summit. My facsimile drawing, shown in the illustration, is made from the impression (the stone itself is in a bad light); its objectivity is guaranteed by the absence of any temptation to theorise about Pictish words or Ogamic forms. The "lettering," by Pictish standards, is fairly well preserved; I have stippled areas where the surface appears to me to have been impaired since the characters were carved, and where bars or parts of bars may or may not have vanished. The carving is rude in the extreme, and here and there I may have mistaken accidental chisel marks or surface irregularities for cut bars. A considerable number of punched cavities or dots, which appear to bear no relation to the characters and are probably due to the exuberance of an amateur new to the chisel, have been omitted from the drawing. The impression is now in the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland. A horse-shoe shaped marking, low down on the back of the stone, may not be ancient.

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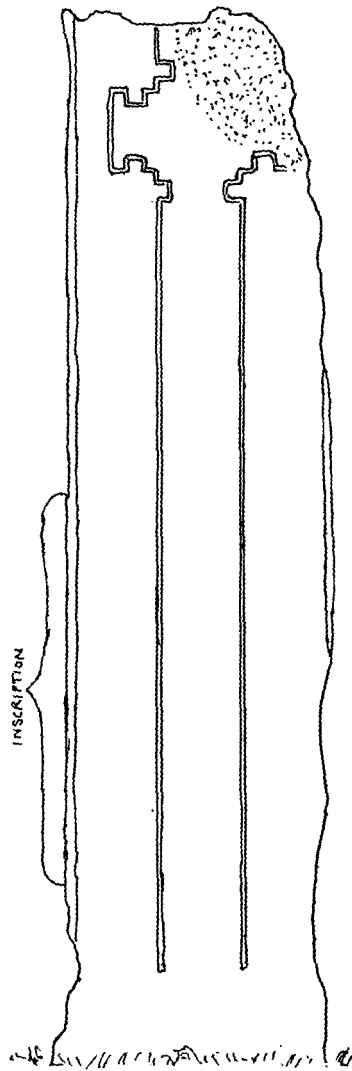


Fig. 14.



Fig. 15.

The lettering of the Altyre inscription is in the main quite clear, though weathering and other causes have obscured some of the letters, as indicated in Sir William Calder's drawing. The base-line is distinct throughout, and there appear to be traces also of a top line and a bottom line respectively above and below, as if as a guide to the engraver for the tops and bottoms of his notches; though if so, his chisel has overrun them a number of times.

The first letter is plainly A, followed by two equally plain Ms; then an A, the upper part of which is a little indistinct. The next two are each the five diagonal strokes of Q, though the third and fourth strokes of the first Q are not very clear. The first stroke of the first Q might be thought to continue below the line, but closer inspection suggests that this is accidental. Next comes apparently an A, but it is not very clear, and is scarcely traceable below the base-line; however, the fact that it is perpendicular suggests it is a vowel. After this there are two diagonal strokes, sloping from left to right, the first crossing the base-line and the second not; and a perpendicular crossing the base-line. It is difficult to know what to make of the first of these three; if it had been perpendicular it would have been an A, in which case the second stroke would be H; if it had been diagonal but not prolonged below the base-line the first two strokes together would be D. Perhaps prolongation was a mistake. In either case the third stroke is no doubt A; but the first two must be read either AH or D. Next come two Ls and an M, followed by a V in which the engraver seems to have made things a little more decorative by turning the first and third strokes outwards at their tails. This is followed by a B (an apparent prolongation above the base-line is probably no part of the letter), and then the three strokes of a V, the third of which is faint. Next an M, and then something which is perhaps not a letter at all, or if it is one must be an A. An A and two Hs are clear after this, followed by two Rs, which are also pretty clear on the whole, and then an A. Two Ss succeed; the first is damaged, and it is not absolutely plain whether the mark above the third stroke is intentional or not, but it can scarcely be meant as part of the letter since it does not continue the third stroke in a straight line, and in any case if we read LMB instead of S (that is, if we take the third stroke to be meant to cross the base-line) the whole letter would be abnormally crowded. After this the engraver has carved a letter with curved lines instead of straight; in spite of the diagonal angle, a vowel is probably intended, as in the similar S-shaped stroke of the twelfth letter of the Latheron inscription. The lower part of the first two strokes is damaged, but there are evidently three; therefore it is U. If it were a consonant of the M-series it would be NG, but NG is in any case very rare in Ogams. Finally, there are two distinct Ds and an S.

The reading of the whole is therefore

AMMAQQAHAHLLMVBVMA(?)AHHRRSSUDDS or
AMMAQQADALLMVBVMA(?)AHHRRSSUDDS.

What the interpretation may be is another question. Like all "Pictish" Ogams, it is a great mystery, apart from the fact that as in several others we seem to have the Primitive Gaelic *maqg*, "son," near the beginning.¹ The preceding and following should therefore be names, "*Am* son of *Aahall* . . ." ² or "*Adall*. . . ." No name *Am* is known to me, but little is known of Pictish personal names. The

¹ On the probable reason for the presence of a Gaelic word here see *The Problem of the Picts* (ed. F. T. Wainwright, Edinburgh, 1955), 140; and on the obscure "Pictish" inscriptions, *op. cit.*, 138-42.

² There is of course no means of telling how long the second name is and where it ends.

notion that it might be the Old Irish (and presumably Old Gaelic) verb-form *am*, "I am," must be ruled out, not indeed on grammatical grounds but because such a formula would be entirely without parallel in Ogam inscriptions anywhere. The second name is equally unknown, and where it ends and the rest of the inscription begins. If this Ogam were considerably older than it is likely to be, one might read the Primitive Gaelic form *maqqa* here, which would then give the possibility of taking the next name as Gaelic *Dall*, the familiar adjective *dall*, "blind," used as a personal name, as in the modern surname Dall. Objections to this¹ are that in that event one would expect to find the case-terminations of the two names as well as of the word for "son" (certainly *Dalli*, then, for the second, whatever the genitive of "Am" may have been, and that in all Ogams old enough for the case-ending to be visible the whole phrase "X son of Y" is in the genitive, therefore *maggi* here, not *maqqa*. How far any of this can be pressed in the case of a "Pictish" Ogam is of course another matter—names may not have had case-terminations in Pictish at the time when they still had them in Gaelic; and the anachronism of forms with terminations and forms without is familiar in Irish Ogams. It is perhaps rather more serious that no instances of case-endings have been traced in Ogams in Scotland, and that in these Ogams the word for "son" appears to have been in the genitive, as in Ireland.² Hence the possible interpretation "Am son of Dall ('Blind')" may be just worth mentioning, but is little more. The rest of the inscription is impenetrably obscure, and will remain so until a future Ventris or Chadwick provides the key to the "Pictish" Ogams.

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