

THE INSCRIBED STONES IN THE VICARAGE GARDEN, TAVISTOCK.¹

BY REV. D. P. ALFORD, M.A.

(Read at Barnstaple, July, 1890.)

To find sermons in stones probably requires a certain moral fitness and readiness to be taught; but it needs only a small mental equipment to learn from them important lessons in history—lessons in the history of the earth's crust, as they lie in their natural state and place; lessons in the history of the human kind when once the hand of man has touched them.

The only records for the earliest local history of Tavistock must be sought in stones. It is a pity that we have no more than a few carved stones to suggest the beauty and grandeur of the Abbey Church, which must have been the pride and glory of the Tavistock of the middle ages. But as to our earliest and darkest history, we may well be thankful for the light that chipped and inscribed stones have thrown upon it. First as to chipped stones. Flint flakes collected by Mr. Alexander near Princetown, and now in the Library museum-room, tell of a time when this country was occupied by a primitive people, who had not learnt the use of metals, and used flint instead, for knives and arrow-heads. These Neolithic people, or folk of the new stone age, were probably at one time the occupants of the whole land, having conquered the cave-dwellers of the first stone age. They were here long before the Celts crossed the Channel, possibly before Great Britain and Ireland were separated from the Continent. These were the Kynetes of Herodotus, the Iverni or Iberii of later writers. They were connected with the

¹ The substance of this paper was given in an address to the members of the Devonshire Association in the Vicarage Garden, 31st July, 1889.

Finns on one side, and with the Basques of the Pyrenees on the other. Their language lingered in parts of Ireland and the Highlands of Scotland, at least until the time of Columba, A.D. 563. Ireland owes to them its name of Ierne, and very likely much of the readiness and vivacity of its people.

These Iverni were conquered by the Gaels, the first great division of the Celts. In their turn the Gaels were conquered and driven westward by the Cymry or Britons, the second great division of the Celts. Most of the Gaels sought new homes in Ireland and the mountains of Scotland. But some still held their own in these western parts of Britain, and would seem to have strengthened themselves against their Cymric invaders by coalescing with the native Iverni, whom they had previously conquered.

The inscribed stones in the vicarage garden are taken to prove that such a settlement of Gaels occupied the country about Tavistock some time after the Roman invasion. For, in the first place, such stone monuments were the distinguishing mark of the Gaels, whilst the Cymry preferred barrows or mounds of earth; and, in the second place, the words and letters show that these stones were inscribed after the Gaels had learnt from their Roman conquerors, the Latin language and the Roman alphabet. Moreover, as there is no cross on any of these stones, they were probably first set up before the Gaels had embraced Christianity. They may therefore be probably as early as the second or third century; that is, fifteen or sixteen hundred years old. If so, they were inscribed when the amalgamated races of Gaels and Iverni were scattered over the neighbourhood in rude villages or cantonments; and the only township on the Tavy, if there was any at all, was the circular enclosure on the old Exeter road, which, being more carefully *stockaded* after the English invasion, has given us our English name of Tavistock.

Our first inscribed stone was removed in 1780 from the pavement in West Street, and used as a bridge over the mill leat at the head-weir. In 1804 Mr. Bray, afterwards vicar of Tavistock, had it placed in the garden of the Abbey house, where the Bedford hotel now stands. In 1818, when the present vicarage was built for him, Mr. Bray had the stone set up in the place it now occupies at the south-west corner of the house. The inscription is in Latin, and means, "To the memory of Nepranus, son of Conbevus." Unless, indeed, as Professor Sullivan suggests in his article on Celtic literature in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, the word "*fili*" is not the Latin for "son," but the Gaelic for "bard." The Professor

seems to stand somewhat alone in this suggestion; but it is at least a pleasant thought, that these stones show the reverence felt in earliest times for inspired singers, and that Mrs. Bray and William Browne, the Elizabethan poet, had predecessors in the art of romancing here on the banks of the Tavy, at the very dawn of our civilization.

Our second inscribed stone in the south-east corner of the garden was brought there by Mr. Bray in 1831, as a gift from Sir Ralph Lopes. It was then lying in the village street of Buckland Monachorum; but in 1804 it had been one of the supports of a blacksmith's shop near the church there. This inscription is also in Latin, and means, "To the memory of Sabinus (or Sarinus) son of Maccodechet." Here we have first, the test word for Gaelic occupation, *mac* for *son*; then the name *Dechet*, which abounds in suggestions of the greatest interest. This patronymic Maccodechet, spelt in various ways, is found in Anglesea and in the south of Ireland. The word *Dechet*, Professor Rhys contends,¹ is not Celtic at all, but probably a name of the god-ancestor of these Iverni, of whom I have spoken. Names of places, the shape of skulls and hints from old chronicles, all point to the intermingling of the Gaels with these earlier occupants. Professor Rhys thinks we have an example of this intermingling in our Maccodechet inscription. The name of the god-ancestor Dechet, or Decet, is found also in the Decantæ of the north of Scotland, and in the Decanti of North Wales. Dechet was therefore the ancestor of one of the most important tribes of these early settlers; and when they amalgamated with the Gaels, they clung to the name they held in such reverence. They were proud still to call themselves "sons of Dechet"; but they were content to do so in the language of their former masters and new allies, and thus they became "Maccodechets." If this theory be true, our second inscribed stone tells us of three successive conquests of the land, Ivernian, Gaelic, and Roman. If we add to these the Britonic, English, Danish, and Norman, we have a rough picture of our country from the earliest times down to the eleventh century, as seven waves of invasion poured in upon it.

Our third inscribed stone, near the bridge over the canal, was found by Mr. Bray in 1804. It was then used as a gatepost in a field between Buckland Monachorum and Roborough Down. After the Maccodechet stone had been removed to the vicarage garden, Mr. Bray tried to secure this

¹ *Celtic Britain*, p. 262.

one also. But his efforts were in vain, although Miss Emma Buller² kindly acted as negotiator, and offered a good price for it. In 1868, however, the present Duke of Bedford, then Mr. Hastings Russell, was able to get possession of the old gatepost in exchange for a new one; and thus, Dr. Tancock being the vicar, the third inscribed stone was set up in its place in the vicarage garden beside the other two. The Latin inscription here is, "To the memory of Dobunnus Faber, son of Enabarrus." Because *faber* is the Latin for a smith, Mr. Bray³ suggests that this may be the tombstone of a smith of the tribe of the Dobunni, a Britonic and civilized people on the borders of Wales. It is perhaps just possible that a stranger might have been thus honoured by the more backward Gaels, for his skill in making swords and spears of some new and improved fashion. Just as a white man, for his skill in fire arms, might be made a chief among the Red Indians. Mr. Bray's other hint, that the "G. C." at the back may stand for Galba Cæsare, is far more improbable than that Dobunnus Faber may mean a smith of the Dobunni.

But the most interesting thing about this third stone is the Ogham inscription on its edge. This was only discovered by Professor Fergusson in 1873. Dear old Mrs. Bray could not be persuaded that there was any such inscription, on the ground, so natural for a loyal wife and sister to adopt, that neither her husband nor her brother, who were both learned archæologists, had ever observed it. But this is easily accounted for. The Ogham marks are on the edge of the stone, which must have been embedded in hedge or bank when it stood as a gate-post; for they are on the opposite side from the iron hooks on which the gate was hung; so that, until it was removed to its present place of honour, not the keenest archæological sight could have detected its Ogham secret. Besides, the markings are so little obvious that the stone had occupied its present open position for five years before they were recognized. Then, as Professor Fergusson tells us, in his monograph on the subject, read before the Archæological Society of Dublin, whilst he was examining the Maccodechet stone which had been the object of his mission to the vicarage garden, the sharp eyes of Mrs. Fergusson discovered the Ogham at the left-hand corner of this Enabarrus stone. Now, when it has been once pointed out,

² Miss Emma Buller, with unabated life and spirits, was present in the vicarage garden when this address was given in July, 1889, and said she was authorized to offer a guinea for the stone.

³ *Borders of Tavy*, i. 322-325.

any one can see it; but especially when the evening sun falls across the stone, and brings out the shadows in the markings. Like other Oghams, our stone is biliteral; that is, it has the same inscription in the Latin and Ogham characters. It thus enabled Professor Fergusson to find the Ogham B, which he had long been in search of. Professor Rhys thinks that Ogham was probably invented by a Gaelic native of South Wales, and spread thence into the south of Ireland, and into Devon. The only other Devon Ogham is the Fardel stone, now in the British Museum. The Irish Oghams show they are of Christian times by their wording, or the cross carved upon them. The Scotch seem to be much later than the Irish. Our Devon Oghams are most likely considerably earlier than either the Scotch or Irish. Possibly Ogham writing was invented to be used as a cipher, in days of trouble and persecution; but its origin and its purpose are amongst the many questions about which the doctors differ, on which, therefore, the unlearned may be well content to suspend their judgment.

These few notes will, I venture to hope, make it clear that there are some historical lessons, and many hints and suggestions, to be learnt from the three Inscribed Stones in the Vicarage Garden at Tavistock.