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Contents

Short Notices

Reviews

The Portormin (Dunbeath) Runestone

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Abstract

A stone with a short runic inscription was discovered on the beach at Portormin Harbour in Dunbeath, Caithness, in 1996. The find attracted some press attention at the time, but has been largely ignored by the runological community amid doubts over its authenticity. There has, however, been no detailed discussion of the stone in a public arena. A description of the inscription is followed by discussion of several interpretations. There are good reasons for suspecting that the carvings are of modern origin, but the matter cannot be settled with certainty; the case invites comparison with the controversies surrounding runic inscriptions in North America.

Keywords: older runes, Caithness, Scotland, modern runic inscriptions, suspect runic inscriptions, methodology, find report

The find and subsequent examinations

In September 1996 four local schoolchildren found an inscribed boulder on the beach at Portormin Harbour in Dunbeath, Caithness. Having studied the Vikings at school in the previous year, the children were able to recognise the carvings as runic writing. The stone was removed and stored temporarily in a bothy, and is now on display in the Dunbeath Heritage Centre.

The find was reported in the *John O'Groat Journal* (Donaldson 1997) and in the *Caithness Courier* (further information unavailable), with subsequent articles in the former and in the *Northern Times* when the stone was displayed in the Heritage Centre (Mackay 2007; *Northern Times*, 28 December 2007).

Soon after its discovery, the stone was sent away for examination by two research students at the University of Glasgow, Kenneth Brophy

Fig. 1. The Portormin runestone. Photo by the author.

(now a lecturer at the same university) and Andrew Baines (Donaldson 1997). These two were involved in archaeological research in Caithness, though neither was a specialist on the early medieval period. No report on their examination has been published.

The inscription was examined by Prof. Mike MacMahon, also of the University of Glasgow, who has suggested a number of possible interpretations (see below); and by Prof. Ian Kirby (University of Lausanne). To date, the only references to the stone in any academic publication are a brief entry in Blackie and Macaulay (1998, 21 f.), to which Robertson takes exception in his review (Robertson n.d.); and a mention by Kirby (2001). The stone was also examined by Barnes and Page, who regarded it as probably modern (and in any case certainly not Scandinavian) and did not mention it in their published works.

In 2008 Prof. Judith Jesch brought the Portormin find to my attention, knowing my interest in modern uses of runes. I eventually inspected and photographed the stone at the Dunbeath Heritage Centre on 15 August 2011. The following discussion is informed by my conversation with Meg Sinclair, the current head of the Centre, and discussion with fellow runologists — in particular, Prof. John Hines and Dr. Peter Pieper. I am grateful to all of these people, as well as to Prof. Mike MacMahon and to Annette Jones (whose contribution is discussed below), for their time, assistance and insight.

Fig. 2. The inscription. Photo by the author.

Description

The stone is a slab of sandstone, approximately rectangular in shape, measuring c. 95 × 52 × 30 cm (Blackie and Macaulay 1998, 21; see fig. 1). Its edges are rounded by natural weathering, and I see no indications that the stone's surface has been deliberately worked or dressed.

The inscription consists of eight characters, deeply and quite precisely incised, probably with a chisel or other suitable tool. The staves are consistent in size, with a height of approximately 2 cm. The runes form a line slanting down and to the right relative to the top edge of the stone, with the final character slightly lower than the notional line of the inscription (fig. 2). No guide marks or framing lines are visible.

Transrunification and transliteration

The runes are well preserved and present few difficulties to discrimination and transliteration:

1. Double-barred ᚻ **h**. This graph-type is normal in Anglo-Saxon inscriptions by the end of the seventh century (Parsons 1999, 85–87), but is not found in earlier inscriptions in England (Waxenberger 2010, 552). The earliest securely datable example in England is on

St. Cuthbert's coffin (A.D. 698). It is also the usual form of **h** in the "South Germanic" inscriptions of the sixth and seventh centuries.

2. ᛁ **l**. An uneven area near the top of the stave could conceivably obscure the additional twig of ᛁ; but this is unlikely. The irregularity is almost certainly a natural feature of the stone surface.

3. ᚨ **a** (or **æ** if the runes are treated as Anglo-Saxon). The orientation of the twigs is parallel to that of the twig in the previous character, and they are of a similar length (c. 13 mm).

4. ᚠ **f**. The twigs are straight and parallel to one another, and do not quite meet the vertical.

5. This character could be either ᚷ **g**, or ᚾ **n** with a strongly overcut cross-stroke. The two lines are similar in length (21 and 18 mm) and cross at the midpoint. The shorter of them is close to vertical, being approximately parallel to the stave of no. 4. Ambiguity between the graphemes **g** and **n** is not uncommon in inscriptions using older runes (compare, e.g., Dischingen bow fibula A, KJ 155; Weimar bow fibula II, KJ 147).

6. ᚲ **k**, with full character height (17 mm). The bottom stroke is slightly overcut, and slightly curved. "Full-height" forms of ᚲ are attested on the Belland runestone (KJ 83); on one of the rune-inscribed bones from the lower Weser (Pieper 1989, 116 f.; Nedoma 2004, 325); and on the Charnay fibula (KJ 6). In the "pre-Old English" inscriptions (i.e., those dated before c. 650), **k** is represented by the graph-types ᚴ (Chessell Down pail and scabbard mount; Waxenberger 2010, 49–55) and ᚩ (Watchfield purse mount; Waxenberger 2010, 119–22), while ᚲ is not certainly attested at all (it might possibly be present on the Loveden Hill urn—see below). In Anglo-Saxon inscriptions after c. 700 (Parsons's "post-reform" period), all of these have been displaced by ᚳ **c** (although ᚴ does appear as a cipher character in the cryptic text on the Franks Casket). On the Continent, ᚲ is the dominant form throughout the period of use of the script, with the "roof" form ᚩ also attested. The older form may have been known to some scholars after it fell out of use, but there is no evidence for this. It does not appear in any of the manuscript lists of runes compiled by Derolez (1954); the nearest examples I have been able to find in the *runica manuscripta* are forms of **t** resembling a reversed number 7 in the "Arabic" alphabet of Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Lat. MS 14436 (early eleventh century) and Vienna Nationalbibliothek MS 751 (mid-ninth century; Derolez 1954, 201, 257, 260). Neither of these

alphabets bears much resemblance to any known set of epigraphical runes. One of the alphabets in *De Inventione Litterarum* (recorded in a number of manuscripts and possibly representing a text originating in the eighth century) has ⟩ as the third letter, with the value *g* and the Hebrew letter-name *gimel* (so the character is perhaps supposed to represent the Hebrew letter ג). Throughout the manuscript tradition, runes equivalent to the roman letters <c, k> are variants of ᚲ and ᚴ.

Annette Jones at the University of Nottingham suggested a possible alternative reading of this character, noting Bammesberger's interpretation of a similar form on the Loveden Hill urn as a symmetrical form of the *u*-rune cut at an oblique angle (Bammesberger 1991, 125–28; Jones, unpublished notes). This character in the Loveden Hill inscription has also been read as ᚲ **k/c** (Odenstedt 1980, 30; Page 1999, 180; Parsons 1999, 55, 57). If we are dealing with **u** on Loveden Hill, perhaps the similar form on Portormin might be **u** as well. However, whereas the Loveden Hill example — whether interpreted as **k** or as **u** — is at an oblique angle relative to the neighbouring signs, Portormin l is not: it seems most reasonable, therefore, to transliterate it as **k**.

7. ᛚ **l**. The stave is inclined more to the right than that of the previous **l** (no. 2).
8. **o** (or **œ** if the runes are to be classified as Anglo-Saxon). The left "leg" is slightly shorter than the right, but the identity of the character is unambiguous.

The full sequence, then, could be transliterated as **hlafgklo** or **hlafṇklo** (older runes) or **hlæfgclœ** or **hlæfṇclœ** (Anglo-Saxon runes). The combination of graph-types favours the former: the inscription contains both double-barred ᚻ and the older form of **k**, ᚲ in its full-height variant ᚲ. These co-occur on the Continent (e.g., in the futhark on the Charnay fibula, KJ 6), but not in England. The text does not contain any of the diagnostically "Anglo-Frisian" or Anglo-Saxon runes (e.g., ᚪ ᚫ ᚣ).

In an unpublished set of notes on the inscription, MacMahon identifies a number of circular marks which might be text dividers, and accordingly he proposes a transliteration **:h:lafn·klo**. To me it seems more likely that these marks result from natural weathering: the surface of the stone is pitted and contains numerous circular depressions of similar size and shape to those observed between the characters (see fig. 2).

Interpretation

MacMahon (unpublished notes) advances a number of interpretations, all of which require some emendation of the text (since it does not appear to be meaningful without some such emendation), and all of which link the text with Viking Age Old Norse language. The interpretation which drew most attention in press reports is based on the suggestion that the second character should be ᛦ **r** (i.e., that **l** is the result of carver error; MacMahon does not claim that the additional strokes necessary to produce **r** were ever present). If this is the case, and if no. 5 is **n**, then the whole sequence could be transliterated **h⟨r⟩afn̩klo** and interpreted as Old Norse (hereafter ON) *Hrafn kló*, a personal name plus byname 'Hrafn Claw' (or as a compound 'raven claw', with *hrafn* taken literally). It is this which led to the "Harry Potter and the Viking Rune-stone" headline in the *Northern Times* (Ravenclaw being the name of one of the four houses in the fictional Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry in J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* books). This connection must be coincidental, even if the inscription is modern (the find predates the publication of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* in 1997; on the question of authenticity, see below). The popularity of this interpretation in the press is no doubt influenced by the Harry Potter resemblance; and also perhaps by the use of a raven as a county emblem of Caithness (used in the emblem of Caithness County Council before its incorporation into Highland in 1975).

Hrafn kló is certainly a plausible piece of Old Norse. *Hrafn* is a common element in Scandinavian names, and MacMahon notes that *Orkneyinga saga* mentions an individual named *Hákon kló* 'Hákon Claw' (Finnbogi Guðmundsson 1965, ch. 33, 54, 56, 104; cf. the translation in, e.g., Pálsson and Edwards 1978).

If the language of the text is Old Norse, then the use of older runes (including double-barred **h**, a graph-type unattested in Scandinavian inscriptions of any period) is unusual: a Norse personal name written by a non-Scandinavian carver using Anglo-Saxon or Continental characters is certainly not an impossibility, but it is a curious phenomenon. If the text belongs to the sixth or seventh centuries, which would be consistent with the set of characters, the contemporary Scandinavian form of the 'raven' word would be **hrab(a)naᴿ* < Proto-Germanic (hereafter PGmc) **xrabnaz* (cf. Järsberg, KJ 70, **harabanaᴿ**, with an additional epenthetic vowel); a form like Viking Age *hrafn* would not be expected in this period. The Järsberg stone, which does not show syncope, cannot be dated archaeologically (Runenprojekt Kiel database); Krause and Jankuhn (1966, 158) dated it c. 500–50, but on questionable grounds.

Another possibility is that the language of the inscription might be Old English (or, if it was made before c. 650/700, pre-Old English). If we allow the emendation of the second character to **r**, then the sequence could represent Old English (hereafter OE) *hræfn* 'raven' as easily as ON *hrafn*. The unemended sequence **hlɑf** calls to mind OE *hlāf* 'bread', although the vowel in this word is OE /ɑː/ (< PGmc */ai/), which would normally be written using the rune ᚨ. There is certainly some variation between <a> and <æ> spellings in Old English manuscripts, and there is at least one apparent case of **ɑ** where we would expect **æ** in an Anglo-Saxon runic inscription (Mote of Mark **aþili**; Waxenberger 2010, 88). A sequence on the Loveden Hill urn, **hlæ∗** (Waxenberger uses a mixed transliteration and transrunification, **hl**ᚨ[.]), has been interpreted as *hlāf* (Odenstedt 1980, 30; for more detail and other interpretations, see Waxenberger 2010, 156).

There are no instances of *hlāf* spelled with <æ> in the Dictionary of Old English online corpus, except in the compound *hlǣfdige* 'lady', where <æ> represents the *i*-umlaut of /ɑː/ > /æː/. This clearly does not apply in the present inscription: the spelling **hlæf** would be irregular, perhaps simply the result of carver error, and I find it extremely unlikely (though not completely impossible) that *hlāf* was intended.

The spelling **klo** ~ **clœ** is very unlikely to represent OE *clā* ~ *clawu* ~ *clēo* 'claw' < PGmc *klēwō; although if the final rune is allowed to stand for (pre-)OE /o(ː)/, the sequence could represent an unattested cognate of ON *kló* (< PGmc *klōwō); if this existed in Old English, we would expect the form *clō ~ *clōwu. No word *clĕ (regular West Saxon *clĕ) is attested in Old English.

If **hlɑf** and **klo** (or **hlæf** and **clœ**) are words, the character between them (**n** or **g**) remains unaccounted for. However we read the ambiguous fifth character, it does not yield a plausible Germanic word of any kind without emendation.

None of the interpretations discussed here is entirely satisfactory. It should be added that MacMahon also considers an interpretation based on a right-to-left direction of reading (**olkṇfalh**) or **olkgfalh**); however, since all of the asymmetrical characters face to the right, it is more likely that a left-to-right reading was intended.

Context and the question of authenticity

Perhaps the most pressing question surrounding this inscription is that of whether or not the inscription is "genuine" — or better, the question of whether or not it is modern (we should refrain from labelling an

inscription as a fake or a forgery unless there is some indication that the carver's intention was to deceive). Following the example set by Prof. Henrik Williams in his studies of the American runestones, I endeavour to view the evidence as dispassionately as possible. It should be stated at the outset that there is at present no known scientific method for dating carvings on stone, and other types of evidence must therefore be relied on.

Location of Dunbeath

The most immediate cause for suspicion is the location of the find: Dunbeath is in the far north of Scotland, far outside Northumbrian territory, and much further north than any other known find-site in Britain of an inscription using older runes or Anglo-Saxon runes, so the appearance of an apparently early runic text in Caithness is surprising. This strangeness, taken together with the lack of any archaeological context for the find, led Barnes and Page to the view that the inscription was likely to be modern (Barnes, email 9 September 2011).

In defence of a non-modern origin, it is worth recalling that although the location seems rather remote and isolated now, Dunbeath in the early Middle Ages was connected with larger networks of religious communities and intellectual culture. Excavations close to Dunbeath at Chapel Hill, Ballachly (National Grid Reference ND 1138 3295) indicate the probable presence of a monastic community as early as the seventh century (Banks and Hooper 1998; Laing 2007; 2009a; 2009b; 2010; RCAHMS online; Saunders 2009); and some 50–60 miles down the coast is the ecclesiastical centre of Portmahomack, which by the eighth century had connections with Northumbria, and possibly with Continental Europe as well (Laing 2006, 323; Woolf 2007, 36 f.; Carver 2004, 2008). That some member of this or another Pictish religious community might have learned the runic alphabet through contact with Northumbrian monks—or that a Northumbrian who knew the script might have travelled to northern Pictland—is not inconceivable. The fondness of early medieval scholars for archaic and exotic alphabets is well known, and exemplified in the inscriptions on the Hackness cross: as well as inscriptions in roman letters and ordinary Anglo-Saxon runes, this monument bears what appears to be a text using a variant form of "twig-runes", and possibly another using an alphabet based on or inspired by ogham. Neither of them has been satisfactorily read or interpreted (see Derolez 1954, 140–42; R. I. Page in Lang 1991, 136, 139).

All of this is pure speculation, however; we have no positive evidence to support such a hypothesis, given the absence of other non-Scandinavian runic inscriptions in this region (the closest site associated with Anglo-Saxon runes is Lindisfarne). Roman and ogham script were both known in the area in the early Middle Ages; the Celtic Inscribed Stones Project database includes two ogham inscriptions from Caithness, one of them at Latheron (about 4 miles from Dunbeath).

<center>Type of runes</center>

As noted above, the combination of graph-types present in the inscription is most consistent with the Continental or "South Germanic" inscriptions, although we could be dealing with Anglo-Saxon runes with a curiously archaic or foreign l. This set of characters is probably sufficient reason to rule out the possibility of a Viking Age or medieval Scandinavian origin: some Scandinavians were able to read the older runes during the Viking period (older runes are found on the ninth-century Rök stone, Ög 136), but it is unlikely that knowledge of this type of script was widespread. The two known runic inscriptions in Caithness (Sc 11 Thurso I; Sc 15 Thurso II) were both produced in the late Viking period, most likely in the eleventh century (Barnes and Page 2006, 243, 251) and — as one would expect — use younger Scandinavian runes. If the Portormin inscription were made by a Scandinavian during this period, it would be extraordinary for him or her to have used archaic runes rather than contemporary ones. Robertson (n.d.) makes a similar point, and goes so far as to assert that the Portormin inscription is "a fake, written perhaps by a fan of The Hobbit". ᚷ

The reference to *The Hobbit* is not particularly helpful, and if the inscription is modern, I see no reason to point to Tolkien as a source of inspiration: in *The Hobbit* (1937), the author transliterates modern English text with consistent use of ᚩ for <o>, while ᚷ is used for <ee> (e.g. ᚩᚷᛏ = *feet*). He distinguishes between <c> and <k>, using the normal Anglo-Saxon form ᚳ for the former, and a variant of this form for the latter. The older ᚲ does not appear in this work in either half-height or full-height forms. The system of runes (*Cirth*) used for the writings of the Dwarves in *The Lord of the Rings* is Tolkien's own invention; although many of the characters have familiar shapes (and the system does contain a grapheme l with full character height), the relations between grapheme and sound are unconnected with any historical form of runic writing. If the Portormin inscription is transliterated using Cirth values, it reads **ētdgzstu** (if no. 5 is ᚷ), **ētdglstu** (if no. 5 is ᛏ) or **ētdgḷhstu** (if no. 5 is ᛏ; Tolkien 1954–55, Appendix E,

represents it as **lh**, presumably a voiceless /l/, hence the transliteration **l̥**). None of these is meaningful in any modern European language, nor (I suspect, though I am not certain) in any of Tolkien's languages.

Content and execution of the inscription

The difficulties of interpreting the text do not in themselves argue for or against a modern origin. The runological community is familiar with "genuine" inscriptions which defy interpretation and which may not be linguistically meaningful, and on the other hand with modern inscriptions both meaningful (e.g., Waukegan horn) and meaningless (e.g., Maria Saaler Berg bone). A useful parallel is the Heavener runestone in Oklahoma, a large sandstone slab bearing a short inscription in older runes (eight characters, coincidentally the same length as the Portormin inscription) which is almost certainly modern. The Heavener inscription, like the Portormin one, is quite easy to read, apart from a single ambiguous character (it can be transliterated **gṇomedal** or **gl̥omedal**), but not easy to interpret (Farley 1993, 217–45). The Heavener characters are much larger (ranging from 16 to 24 cm in height) and more widely spaced (Tompsen 2011, 10–16): the inscription was clearly made to be visible to the passer-by. The same cannot be said for Portormin.

   The execution of the inscription must also be considered. The characters are carefully incised, well formed and regular in height: this inscription appears to have been done by someone with appropriate stone-cutting tools and some competence in their use. This being the case, even if the inscription is modern I think it unlikely that it is the work of its discoverers, who were aged between 9 and 11 years at the time (Donaldson 1997). That said, it is worth noting the recent claim by Everett Brown of Providence, Rhode Island, that he carved the Narragansett inscription in 1964 at the age of 13, a claim which has however been disputed (Church 2014a; 2014b).

Condition and location of the stone

When I visited Dunbeath to inspect the stone, my first impression was that the edges of the cuts were surprisingly sharp. MacMahon (unpublished notes), on the other hand, is of the opinion that the weathering on the carvings is comparable to that elsewhere on the stone (with the implication that it is not modern).

   Nan Bethune, head of the Dunbeath Preservation Trust at the time of the discovery, noted the likelihood that the stone had fallen to the beach,

having formerly been on top of the cliffs (Bethune, unpublished notes). Her reasons for thinking that this is the case were, primarily, the fact that several blocks of polystyrene were found below the stone when it was removed from the beach. The cliffs are known to be unstable, and there are historical records of landslides in the area. A block of similar size to the runestone was monitored, and within six months had been undermined by the sea and fallen to a spot close to that where the runestone was found. If it is the case that the stone had originally been located on top of the cliff, this does not really help us to determine whether or not it is modern. It is, however, consistent with a hypothetical scenario in which the inscribed surface was protected from the elements and only uncovered when the stone fell from above; and the purpose of this speculation seems to have been to explain the surprisingly good physical condition of the inscription.

Whether this scenario is correct or not, impressionistic assessments of weathering are not at all reliable for assessing the age of carvings on stone. Despite my initial impression, I am not satisfied that the edges of the runes on the Portormin stone are obviously sharper than, for example, those on the Hogganvik runestone, which has been dated to A.D. c. 350–400 (Knirk 2011, 30 f., 37 f.). This stone seems to have lain for a long period with the inscribed surface facing down, which would have protected the carvings from the elements and may explain their remarkably good condition. Then again, the Hogganvik stone is composed of augen gneiss, a much harder stone than that of Portormin. A better comparison would be the Pictish carved slab found at Ballachly (see above), which is on display in the Dunbeath Heritage Centre. It appears to be made from the same, or a similar, type of sandstone, and when I examined it, the edges of the carvings seemed to me to be smoother than those on the runestone; but I am far from convinced that my impressions are accurate, or that the apparent differences imply that the Portormin runestone must be modern.

As a cautionary note, it is remarkable how often weathering is invoked in defence of stone carvings whose authenticity is disputed. Arguments of this sort have been presented as evidence against a modern origin for many of the North American runestones; the Kleines Schulerloch cave inscription, which remains controversial (see the series of five contributions to Bammesberger and Waxenberger 2006); and a runestone in Småland (Sm NOR1994;25 Markaryd), which is almost certainly modern and was probably made as recently as 1960 or 1961 (Knutsson 1996; Ogemark 1996). Impressionistic observations about such things as erosion, flaking or lichen growth would appear to have limited value as evidence for or against

the authenticity of an inscription. Genuinely scientific investigations may be more trustworthy, if they are properly carried out and their findings presented in sufficient detail to be repeatable and falsifiable. In the famous case of the Kensington runestone, the geological examination by Scott F. Wolter in the early 2000s concludes that the carvings must be more than 200 years old (and infers, since there were no Scandinavian migrants in Minnesota in the eighteenth century, that they must be medieval); but neither Wolter's report nor the responses to it by professional geologists have been published (Williams 2012, 11 f.). As stressed at the beginning of this discussion, there exists no reliable scientific method for dating carvings on stone, or for authenticating them.

We could obtain more trustworthy data on the sharpness or otherwise of carvings by laser scanning or other objective measurements; but these would not necessarily resolve the issue. They would enable us to compare the relative degree of weathering between, say, the Portormin runestone and Pictish carved stones from the same area, but the results of any such measurement could still be interpreted in different ways. As far as I am aware, the only physical test conducted on the stone is an ultraviolet fluorescence test performed by Kirby in 2000 and mentioned in several publications (Kirby 2001; 2003, 539). Although he gives no details of the procedure in these articles, it is the same technique used by Pieper during his and Kirby's investigations of American runestones (Kirby 2007; Pieper 2007). This type of test depends on the premise that stone which has been worked recently will fluoresce brightly under ultraviolet light; according to Kirby (2007, 95), fluorescence will be seen with inscriptions made as long ago as the early twentieth century, but not if they are older. Pieper has pointed out that the results can vary depending on the type of stone (pers. comm., 16 March 2012). His earlier use of this technique on subfossil bone found that artificial markings ceased to fluoresce after two weeks or so (Pieper 1989, 90 f.). Kirby's reporting of his methodology and findings is far from satisfactory. An examination of this sort can only be considered reliable evidence if it is conducted by someone with appropriate expertise, and is published in a proper scientific manner with a detailed account of the methods used.

Summary and conclusion

For an inscription like this, which cannot be (or, at any rate, has not been) dated in any independent or objective way, it is impossible to come to a firm conclusion about whether or not it is modern. The investigator must

instead make a "best guess" using the available evidence, and it seems to me that the balance of probabilities favours a modern origin. For the inscription to have been made in the early medieval period, it would have to be exceptional with respect to both the location and the set of characters used.

We cannot absolutely rule out the possibility that the inscription is "genuine" — that is to say, one can devise a scenario in which some individual who knew this particular version of the script, with its unusual form of **k**, was living in the Dunbeath area in the early Middle Ages (perhaps in the seventh or early eighth century) and made the inscription, which may then have been covered until relatively recently. This scenario, however, requires a substantial degree of special pleading, whereas a modern origin is much more easily accounted for. The proficiency of the carving makes it seem unlikely (though not necessarily impossible) that the children who discovered the inscription made it. Bearing this in mind, and taking Kirby's fluorescence test at face value, it would be reasonable to speculate — although it must be stressed that this is mere speculation — that the inscription may have been made in the second half of the nineteenth century, when there seems to have been something of a fashion for creating "ancient" inscriptions (whether as deliberate hoaxes, out of antiquarian interest or for simple amusement). Barnes and Page mention two inscriptions in Scotland from this period, at Glamis (Angus) and Oykel Bridge (Ross and Cromarty), which were erroneously reported as genuine for some time after their discovery. The Ring of Brodgar, a prehistoric stone circle on Orkney, also bears nineteenth- and twentieth-century graffiti (mostly non-runic), and it is possible that the "twig-rune" inscriptions on two of the stones — one of which is now lost — are also modern (Barnes and Page 2006, 28, 40–43, 161–66).

As has been remarked by some of the colleagues with whom I have discussed the Portormin inscription, it is prudent to exercise especial caution when dealing with an inscription in older runes, particularly when the inscription is on a stone with no decoration or other carvings, and lacking any archaeological context. Modern pagans and amateur enthusiasts tend to focus their attention on the older futhark as the "original" or most ancient form of runic script; and it is not uncommon for amateurs to mistakenly associate these runes with the Vikings. A recent example, shown to me by Profs. Michael Barnes and Judith Jesch, is a rock inscription reported in north-east Caithness by the journalist Noel Donaldson, which bears the name of Sveinn Ásleifarson (who lived in the twelfth century, and is mentioned in *Orkneyinga saga* as owning land in Caithness) in older

runes: **swïnaslïfarson**. The use of ↲ **ï** for ON *ei* might have been inspired by the hypothesis that the original value of this rune was early PGmc */ei/ > */iː/ (Krause and Jankuhn 1966, 5, citing Jungandreas 1935, 106; Mees 2011). Far from being an obscure idea known only to philologists, anyone acquainted with modern popular and pagan literature on runes (e.g., Blum 1982; Thorsson 1984) will know this rune by the name *eihwaz* or *eiwaz* (also *iwaz* in some places). I must add that, despite the scepticism expressed above about arguments based on weathering, in this case the cuts look so extraordinarily sharp and fresh that there can be little doubt that they are not only modern but very recent.

Bearing this last point in mind, we should perhaps be a little more suspicious of the full-height **k** in the Portormin inscription: although this graph-type is attested in a few older inscriptions, it is very natural for a modern carver with limited knowledge of the script to make the character the same size as the other runes. We can see this phenomenon on another American runestone, found at Shawnee, Oklahoma, which is probably a nineteenth- or twentieth-century production. It is a small piece of reddish sandstone bearing a short inscription in older runes, **mïdok**, with full-height **k** (Farley 1993, 234–36).

The runological community has in general been dismissive of suspected modern inscriptions, for various reasons. In the first place, most runologists are interested principally in the languages and cultures of pre-modern periods, to which more recent texts obviously have little relevance. Secondly, academics are understandably wary of being taken in by a deliberate hoax, and often wish to avoid drawing attention to an inscription which is *fälschungsverdächtig* (suspected of being a forgery). Thirdly, the prudent academic may prefer to avoid becoming entangled in controversy which can be extremely vitriolic, as a casual web search for material on the Kensington runestone will illustrate; and academic scepticism may well meet with suspicion or even outright hostility (see Williams 2012, 9).

Despite these concerns, modern inscriptions — or inscriptions suspected of being modern — deserve serious study by scholars with specialist skills, so that the evidence for or against a modern origin can be evaluated with care and rigour. The practical and methodological challenges of establishing whether or not an inscription is modern are instructive in themselves, and can help us to develop more critical approaches to dating and the assignment of provenance when studying older inscriptions.

If the Portormin inscription was made in the nineteenth or twentieth

century, it nonetheless remains a valuable part of the local history of Caithness and a proper object of study for runologists. Modern runic writing is still runic writing, after all, and is of particular value to those of us interested in medievalism and the modern performance of ethnic/national identity and heritage. A modern inscription invites the same general historical questions as a medieval one: Who made it, when, how, and for what purpose? What was the creator trying to communicate, and to whom?

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