

## REVIEW ARTICLE

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*The Language of the Ogam Inscriptions of Scotland*  
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According to some, the ogam inscriptions of Scotland are written in a form of *P*-Celtic. Others have favoured *Q*-Celtic. Moving further afield, Gothic has been proposed; so has Basque, or a language akin to it, as well as an otherwise unknown non-Indo-European tongue. One recent theory apparently posits a 'Sino-Caucasian origin', another a 'Finno-Ugrian connection', while a third claims the inscriptions do not carry linguistic messages at all (Cox, p. 4). To those who find such diversity of scholarly opinion bewildering it will come as something of a relief to learn that the protracted and wide-ranging controversy about the language of the Scottish ogams has finally been laid to rest. In the words of the author of the present book, 'the language of these inscriptions, at least *we now know, is Norse*' (p. 169, my italics).

The inclusive 'we' and categorical 'know' imply something more substantial than the usual rash hypothesis with the power to convince only its originator. Cox's analysis is so compelling, it would appear, that only the stubborn or wrong-headed will seek to challenge his conclusions.

Before showering our congratulations on the author, it is perhaps worth examining briefly how he solved the riddle of these most puzzling of inscriptions. Here, after all, are pieces of writing previously taken as Celtic, Basque, and much else besides, that suddenly reveal themselves as indubitably Norse. How could earlier scholars, certain of them, at least, learned and clear-thinking people, have gone so badly

astray? If the evidence for Norse is as unambiguous as Cox implies, why was such a wide range of other languages suggested – almost everything *but* Norse it would appear?

Part of the explanation may lie with the ogam script itself. Even though in its Scottish manifestations it is apparently always to be read as if written in a horizontal left-to-right direction (that, at least, is the way Cox reads it, though he does not enunciate this as an immutable rule), inscriptions can be approached from either side, making it possible to begin at either end. There is no upside down in ogam: letters are either symmetrical or the inverse of one another (or in one or two rare cases can appear either way up, according to Cox). Worse still, two of the inscriptions analysed take the form of a circle, so that not only can they be read clockwise or anti-clockwise, there is the added freedom of being able to choose where in the circle to begin. It is not least such uncertainty that enables Cox (pp. 21-3) to challenge BENDDACTANIML (supposedly Gaelic *bendacht anim L* 'a blessing on the soul of L.') as a reading of the Buckquoy spindle-whorl, for example, and substitute: AVSALAQETMIQ (supposedly Norse *Ása lagade mik* 'Ása made me').

Ambiguities of the script cannot however be the main reason for the failure of previous workers in the field to see what Cox has seen. Aware of the uncertainties just outlined, they too will surely have pondered the different possibilities – even if they do not always make specific mention of the fact. Besides, Cox's Norse texts most often emerge from the same, or almost the same, readings as those which are said to yield messages in other languages. It is, then, chiefly to the superiority of the author's interpretations of what has been read that we must look for confirmation of his claim to have solved the linguistic riddle of the Scottish ogams.

For a hypothesis to convince, several requirements have to be met. Solid evidence must be brought to bear to show why it is better than previous hypotheses; there have to be objective means of testing the evidence; counter-evidence needs to be carefully considered – and rejected only for clear and valid reasons; and, not least, the hypothesis must be subject to constraints: where anything is possible, nothing is probable.

Cox's interpretations of the Scottish oghams are based on various premises. Chief among these is that the seventeen ogham as well as two 'Roman alphabet' (p. 93) inscriptions discussed are written in Old Norse (defined as 'Old West Scandinavian' of the period '1050-1350'; pp. 5, 160). Being more at home in the Scandinavian than the Pictish field, it is not entirely clear to me why these seventeen have been selected from a corpus of 'over thirty-five' (p. 1). Footnote 13 (p. 5) explains:

Of the ogham inscriptions not discussed in this monograph, some are illegible, and some are so fragmentary that they are unintelligible; the interpretation of the remainder is for the present unresolved.

Is the implication that the discarded inscriptions were not explicable as Norse texts? If so, that raises a further (unanswered) question: does the author consider that ogham was used for writing more than one language in Scotland (as his reluctance to argue that EDDARRNONN is Norse perhaps suggests; p. 66), or is he convinced all the inscriptions will ultimately reveal a Scandinavian pedigree? If the Norse hypothesis is as watertight as Cox maintains, this is a matter of considerable importance for our understanding of the wider social and cultural context in Scotland at the time the inscriptions were carved, and as such deserves proper discussion.

Whatever the author's thinking on the above, the occurrence of Old Norse in the nineteen inscriptions selected for detailed analysis is taken more or less for granted and everything explained in accordance with this fundamental premise. The desired conclusion thus forms the starting-point instead of emerging, as it should, from a rigorous sifting of the evidence. The aforementioned Buckquoy inscription, for example, is said to bear the words *Ása lagade mik* because the ogham characters can be read in a way suggestive of such a text. But there is little attempt to show why this reading is more plausible than the one alleged to supply a Gaelic sequence.

The justification for the present starting point [in the circle] is largely that it yields a reading which is suitable in the context and which is paralleled elsewhere; but also because the starting point is just after (assuming the clockwise direction to be the correct one) a character (Char. 12) which gives the impression of having been squeezed in at the end of the inscription when space was limited [p. 21].

Possibly 'a blessing on the soul of L.' is not a message we would expect to find roughly scratched on a spindle-whorl, but the message itself is well attested elsewhere. And although certain problems attend the interpretation of the inscription as Gaelic, they pale into insignificance compared with the difficulties facing anyone wanting to explain it as Norse. It is these difficulties one would have expected Cox to address. Counter-evidence, as stressed above, needs to be considered. Having been considered, it may be found wanting and rejected, but it cannot simply be ignored.

A premise dependent on Cox's initial premise that his nineteen selected texts are in Old Norse, is that those who inscribed them were strongly influenced by runic writing practices. Thus, for example, the use of ogam H for [ɣ] is said to 'derive from runic tradition' (i.e. h for [ɣ]; p. 132), and runic parallels are drawn with the non-representation in ogam of [l] and [n] before [d] and of [ŋ] before [g] (pp. 122-3). Seen in this – and indeed any other – light, AVSA is an unlikely spelling of *Ása* and LAQET an even less likely one of *lagade*. It is true, as Cox points out (p. 24), that runic au is a way of writing [ɔ], i.e. o, the u-mutation product of [a]. Digraphic au is not, however, used for á, whatever its precise value at different times and places in the Scandinavian-speaking world – and at least as far as Norway goes it has been questioned whether the value was [ɔ:] as early as the beginning of the thirteenth century (Halvorsen 1984), the date favoured by Cox for the Buckquoy inscription.

The past tense verb form identified in *lagade* would undoubtedly have been pronounced [layaðɪ] or [layaðe] at the time in question. It could have been written in various ways both in runes and roman script, but none of them at all similar

to LAQET (runic **lahabi, lahaþe, lakabi, lakape, lagabi, lagape**; roman *lagaði, laghaði, lagaðe, laghaðe*). To explain LAQET Cox assumes that ogam, like runic writing of the period, did not necessarily distinguish between voiced and voiceless stops, so that Q may represent [g] (pp. 142-3). He further suggests that 'the dental fricative /ð/ [recte [ð]] had become a plosive' (p. 24), thus T for [d], and that the representation of unstressed vowels was extremely erratic (pp. 139-40, 150), possibly the result of 'a tendency towards vowel reduction and a centralisation of unstressed vowels', thus E for [A] — or perhaps [ə]? The missing 3rd person singular ending *-i* or *-e* is accounted for by the observation: 'words are frequently contracted by means of omission of case endings' (p. 121).

None of this is at all plausible. For one thing, it is highly unlikely that the spirants [ɣ] and [ð] would have become plosives by the beginning of the thirteenth century (cf., e.g., Spurkland 1991, pp. 209-18), so a more likely ogam spelling, following Cox's general analysis, would be \*LAHE (H for [ɣ], and [ð] as usual not marked; Cox, p. 141). Intervocalic [ð] did not in fact normally become a plosive at all but was simply lost (Seip 1955, pp. 273-4; cf. also *nynorsk laga* 'made', not \**lagade*). Cox makes here the simplistic assumption that because in the (late) thirteenth century scribes began to write 'd' for earlier 'ð', there must have been a corresponding phonetic change [ð] > [d]. Weakening of second-syllable [A] in a form like *lagaði* is not to be expected outside south-eastern Norway, and then only after 1300 (Seip 1955, pp. 132-4, 252-5; cf. again modern *laga*), so the E of LAQET can really only be accounted for by the desperate claim that it stands for [A], i.e. for some *unknown* reason the spelling of unstressed vowels is erratic. Widespread omission of case endings, a further *ad-hoc* claim pressed into service *inter alia* as an explanation for the loss of the final vowel of putative *lagade*, is, like much else in this book, a premise dependent on the initial premise that the language of the seventeen ogams is Norse. Those unconvinced by the Norse hypothesis are unlikely to view the need to assume such unparalleled omission as a point in its favour. As if all this were not enough, use of a verb *laga, lave*, etc. in the sense 'make (an object)' is first documented in early post-

Reformation Swedish (and is now no longer part of the standard language); in Danish (and thus presumably also in Norwegian) the usage does not appear before the nineteenth century. Cox cites Torp 1919 and Zoëga 1952. However, the only example provided by the latter is *lagat var drykkju*, an impersonal construction in which *drykkju* 'drinking-party' is presumably dative and the meaning of *lagat* is 'prepared', 'organised'; the former simply suggests, not implausibly, that the modern Norwegian verb *laga* is derived from the noun *lag* 'layer', 'position', 'fellowship', etc. Writers of runes keen to inform the world they had made something used *gøra/gera* (also found in ogam inscriptions, according to the author).

On this showing, I cannot see that Cox has produced evidence likely to persuade fellow scholars that a Norse interpretation of Buckquoy is more plausible than a Gaelic. Dispassionate consideration of his claims reveals severe problems he fails to discuss – perhaps because they are inconvenient, possibly because he knows too little of Scandinavian philology.

The charitable reader may well wonder whether the author's treatment of this particular inscription is not an aberration – the weak link in an otherwise taut chain of proof. I can state quite categorically that that is not so. On the contrary, it provides an apt illustration of his whole approach. Further examples should remove all doubt.

The Auquhollie inscription's ...QAQUUT and Logie Elphinstone's QUQVT do not at first glance appear promising recruits for Cox's Norse campaign. But in no time both are massaged into *ek hjogga út*, said to mean 'I inscribed (this)' (pp. 56, 75). I will not weary the reader with the tortuous and implausible sequence of postulated omissions and sound-character correspondences that lead to this interpretation. It will be enough to point out that *hjogg-* is a rare analogical past singular root, found occasionally in fourteenth-century Norwegian diplomas (the common West Scandinavian form is *hjó*), while a phrase *\*hoggva út* seems to be unknown in Old Norse (modern Norwegian *uthogging* 'carving', *uthoggen* 'carved', to which Cox refers, are almost certainly Germanisms).

The transformation of Golspie's ALLHHALLORRED-DMEQQNIVVARRC-RR (where '-' denotes an illegible character) into the Norse memorial inscription *Hallgeirr lá rétt mik en ívarr gerði* 'Hallgeirr set me up and Ívarr made (me)' (pp. 45, 115-17) requires us to accept, *inter alia*, that intransitive *lá* could be used in Old Norse for transitive *lagði* (*liggja* for *leggja*, claimed to be a present-day Bergen usage, is offered as the only parallel; p. 46), that a verb meaning 'laid' would be chosen to describe the raising of a stone, and that a memorial inscription would fail to mention the deceased and address its audience in the 1st person.

The Gurness knife handle is also alleged to sport a memorial inscription (unlikely as it may seem). The memorial bit runs INEITTEMUN, claimed to represent Old Norse *innan ettermun* 'in memory' (pp. 33-4). The word *ettermun* is furnished with an asterisk indicating that it is not actually attested in Norse. It is said to be compounded of the preposition *etter* 'after' and noun *mun* "'mind, heart; longing; pleasure; advantage" etc.' (p. 34). Ignoring the anachronistic assimilation [ft] > [t:] in *etter* (Old Norse *eptir*, *eftir*), as well as the uncertainty whether ON *munr* (not \**mun*) is one word or two – and recognising that Old Norse possesses a verb phrase *muna eptir* 'keep in mind' – we might almost allow ourselves to be persuaded. But what sort of construction is this? *Innan*, in origin an adverb meaning 'from within', is also used as a preposition, mostly followed by the genitive, with the sense 'within', referring both to location and time. It is inconceivable it could ever have been coupled with \**eptirmunr* to mean 'in memory'. The usual way of saying 'in memory of' in Scandinavian commemorative inscriptions is simply *eptir* 'after'. Old Norse does have a phrase *til minningar* + genitive 'in remembrance of', but I would be surprised to see this in an epigraphic context.

Once again one wonders whether faulty analyses such as these reflect crude manipulation of the data or plain ignorance. On the whole, I suspect the latter since ignorance seems well represented elsewhere in the book. Thus, the misconception that the language of the Pool inscription can be treated as Old Norse, even though an archaeological dating to

the sixth or even late fifth century is tentatively accepted (pp. 37, 163-4), must surely arise from too scanty an acquaintance with the fundamentals of Scandinavian language history. Lack of knowledge also appears to underlie the treatment of verb-subject-object word-order in Old Norse as an aberration (pp. 156-7). And it is unlikely that anyone conversant with recent runological research would advance the view that runic writing in general was linguistically conservative (p. 159). In his brief discussion of the occurrence of weak verbs in Norn (p. 24) Cox appears totally at sea. Verbs of the *kasta* type, with past tense *-að-* in Old Norse, are confused with weak verbs as a class, and the avowal made: 'I have not come across examples of the past tense of weak conjugation verbs in Norn'. We need, however, look no further than the *Hildina* ballad to find examples of weak pasts of different types, e.g. *spirde* 'asked', *vilda* 'would', *swara* 'answered', *lava* 'promised'.

Cox's use of secondary literature strengthens the sense one gets of a scholar rather out of touch. That he ignores the existence of my own modest efforts (1994; 1998) is perhaps of concern chiefly to me. More worrying is the kind of unawareness that leads him to rely on various of Magnus Olsen's interpretations in *Norges innskrifter med de yngre runer* (e.g. those involving the assumption of heavy abbreviation) which today are considered far-fetched even by the charitable.

That *The Language of the Ogam Inscriptions of Scotland* is undermined in a variety of ways by the distance between the author and his subject matter is not, as the reader will have gathered, its only failing. The lack of rigour already seen in his interpretations of individual inscriptions pervades the book. Only a few examples can be given, but they will suffice to illustrate the tendency.

The reading of the last two characters of the ogam inscription on the Newton stone is governed not, as it should be, by what can be seen, but by textual exigency (pp. 78-9). This is to confuse observation and interpretation, a serious failing in an epigraphist.

Discussion of the representation of consonant quantity in



the Scottish ogams (pp. 126-8) is based on what is called 'traditional Old Norse orthography', by which seems to be meant either manuscript or (modern) standardised orthography, or a mixture of both. But that ignores the input of the runic tradition on which such reliance is placed elsewhere in the book. While consonant length was normally indicated by gemination in Old Norse manuscripts it was seldom marked in runic inscriptions (and then only in the high and late Middle Ages under the influence of roman alphabet writing). In using traditional Old Norse orthography as the standard against which to evaluate spelling in the Scottish ogams, the author seems to be ignoring or to have forgotten the thrust of his earlier argumentation.

The statement (p. 152): 'on the whole, given the particular problems regarding the representation of unstressed vowels §24.29, case inflexion and/or endings are either correct or absent' is an astonishing sleight of hand. What §24.29 tells us in effect is that the unstressed vowels of Old Norse can appear in almost any vocalic guise in ogam. For a language where case endings rely chiefly on the three-vowel system *-a, -i, -u*, the existence of a rule that says: 'ignore vowel differences' will of course mean that most of the endings not 'absent' are 'correct'. But what price such correctness? In entering this world of fantasy and circularity the author rejects one of the requirements (set out above) of any hypothesis that is to convince: that it should be subject to constraints – to control mechanisms. Where every difficulty is met by an *ad-hoc* 'explanation' called into being solely to get round the difficulty, we are dealing with scholarship no longer but with authorial whim. That may be enough to persuade the gullible or seekers after reassurance, but it is out of place in an academic context.

In the foregoing I have concentrated on linguistic matters. That is because Cox himself mostly ignores the wider ramifications of his hypothesis. It will not do in a study such as this, however, to treat language in isolation from other aspects of society. Norse ogams in the north-eastern part of Scotland presuppose the existence of an influential group of Norse settlers in the area. Who were they? What other traces

of their activity have they left? The best the author can do is this (p. 167):

It may be that the inscriptions are a sign of the prestige if not the size of a Norse-speaking presence, whether permanent or transitory, in the North-East and East of Scotland, which has otherwise not been documented.

And what of the art that adorns many of the stones on which the 'Norse' ogams are found? Scholars have up to now accepted it as Pictish and dated it c. 650-1000. If Cox were by any chance right, it would either have to be declared entirely unrelated to the inscriptions or redated to the period 1050-1225 and branded Norse. Since it is clear he cannot be right, these considerations hardly matter. He presumably believed himself right, however, and believing so, ought to have given the problem more attention than the few vague and inconclusive remarks offered on p. 169.

For a book containing such a wealth of detail, there are remarkably few slips or printing errors. James Knirk will be surprised to find himself renamed John (p. 6), there is a mistake in the sequence of runes reproduced in note 8 on p. 14, [f] > [ð] (pp. 132-3) should be the other way round, FRELSARAN IESVM (in roman letters in an Icelandic inscription of 1681) does not mean 'the salvation of Jesus' but 'the saviour Jesus' (p. 159), but these minor errors and a few more like them were all I could find.

I return finally to what I consider the fundamental weakness of *The Language of the Ogam Inscriptions of Scotland*: its lack of intellectual rigour. We saw above that the Golspie inscription ALLHHALLORREDDMEQQNIV-VARRC-RR was made to yield the implausible Norse text *Hallgeirr lá rétt mik en ívarr gerði*. Using the same methods as Cox, I can extract the following (implausible English text): *Hateful! Horrid! Mick never cared*. Like Cox, I assume omission of initial H, erratic representation of vowels, occasional inversion of the ogam characters (yielding L for D in initial ALL-), D for [t], HH for [f], the omission of inflexional endings, perhaps the odd dash of local

pronunciation – and there you are!

'Methods' such as these are little better than no methods at all.

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