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A Note on the Ogham Inscription from Buckquoy, Orkney

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I tentatively propose a new Gaelic interpretation of an *ogham* inscription on a spindle-whorl from Buckquoy in Orkney. In this interpretation, the spindle-whorl would be a gift from a man to a female spinster.

This short note concerns a circular *ogham* inscription on a chalk spindle-whorl excavated in 1970 from Buckquoy, Birsay, Orkney, belonging, perhaps, to the eighth century, although dates in the seventh or early ninth century should not be ruled out (Forsyth 1995: 678–9; Forsyth 1996: lxvii, 37, 162–3; cf. Padel 1972: 11, 27). Kenneth Jackson (1977) and Oliver Padel (1972: 73–5) read it as (e/)TMIQAVSALL(c/q), and consequently added it to the undeciphered corpus of ‘Pictish’ inscriptions (cf. Morris 1995: 20).¹ However, Katherine Forsyth has shown that it should be read in the opposite direction, giving the reading ENDDACTANIM(v/lb), with no real indication of where the inscription begins (Forsyth 1995: 684–5, 687; Forsyth 1996: 167–71, 175; cf. Jackson 1977: 221). This she interprets as BENDDACTANIML, i.e. Gaelic *bendacht* [for] *anim L.* ‘a blessing on L.’s soul’, using a formula which is ubiquitous in the medieval Roman-alphabet inscriptions of Ireland (Forsyth 1995: 688–9; Forsyth 1996: 160–86; Forsyth 1997: 36), and which occurs once in an eleventh-century bilingual ogham/runic inscription from Killaloe, Ireland (McManus 1991: 130; Forsyth 1995: 689). This looks basically plausible. However, some aspects of her analysis do not seem entirely satisfactory. The

lack of the preposition *for* is disturbing. Of course a variant of the formula with an archaizing independent dative is not out of the question, although unparalleled (Forsyth 1995: 689; Forsyth 1996: 178).² Additionally, the abbreviation of the subject's name in this way is unique in early insular Celtic inscriptions (Forsyth 1995: 690), although there are comparable runic examples from England (Page 1973: 172). Thus, I feel that it is worth revisiting the alternative reading **ANIM VENDDACT**, suggested to Forsyth by Paul Russell (Forsyth 1996: 177).

Forsyth is cautious about explaining **VENDDACT** as a personal name containing **windo-* 'white, bright'. The reasons she gives for this caution (Forsyth 1996: 177) are based on a misunderstanding of the etymology and subsequent development of this element, and thus are in fact illusory.³ There is, nonetheless, an apparent problem: the Gaelic reflex of **windo-*, represented by Old Irish *find* < Primitive Irish **windah*, does not show lowering of /i/ to /e/, impeded, according to standard doctrine (e.g. Thurneysen 1946: 46; Schrijver 1991: 21; Schrijver 1995: 29; Schrijver 1997: 44; McCone 1996: 55, 110; cf. Rhys 1879: 161–2), by /nd/. Note, however, that Sabine Ziegler (1994: 119; cf. Sims-Williams 2003: 40, 76–7, 300, 310) suggests that lowering *did* occur in this position in Primitive Irish, with the form *find* being due to subsequent raising in auslaut. If this be the case, compound names in *Find-* must have been reformed analogically due to the semantic transparency of the first element. At any rate, whatever the explanation, the Irish ogham inscriptions show plenty of examples of **VEND-** beside only one doubtful example of **VIND-** (Sims-Williams 2003: 76–7; cf. Rhys 1879: 115). Brittonic forms in **VEND-**, **VENN-** are also extant: these could contain the feminine form *gwen* < **windā* (which can occur even in men's names, e.g. Old Welsh *Guengat* (Lloyd 1888: 47; cf. Davies et al. 2000: 180; Sims-Williams 2003: 40–1, n. 111)), or they could be orthographical, either under the influence of Vulgar Latin *e* for *i*, or due to ancient Celtic confusion of *e* and *i* before nasal + stop, perhaps visible in numerous examples of names in *Vend-* from Roman Britain and from the Continent (Sims-Williams 2003: 40, 76–8, 96; cf. Dottin 1920: 297; Evans 1967: 392–3; Sims-Williams 2006: 257; Delamarre 2007: 194; Raybould and Sims-Williams 2009: 25; Falileyev 2013: 147–8). Of course, some of these names may not contain **windo-* at all, but some other element – perhaps **wendo-* 'a single hair' (Middle Irish *find*, *finna* (Matasović 2009: 413; cf. *DIL*, s.v. *finna*))?⁴

What of the second element? The abstract-noun suffix **-ak-t-* which gives Old Irish *-acht*: Welsh *-aeth* (Thurneysen 1946: 167–8; de Bernardo Stempel 1999: 334–5; Zimmer 2000: 553, 555, 576) is extremely rare in personal names, despite Forsyth (1996: 177),⁵ but Irish ogham **GOSSUCTTIAS**, **GOSOCTEAS**, **GOSOCTAS**, Old Irish *Gósacht*, *Gúasacht* (i.e. *gúasacht* ‘danger, peril, difficulty; fear, anxiety’) could be relevant here, despite the different vowel (MacNeill 1909: 358; Thurneysen 1946: 452; Ó Corráin and Maguire 1990: 115; McManus 1991: 108; Ziegler 1994: 185).⁶ However, neither Irish ***findacht* nor Welsh ***gwynnaeth* ‘whiteness’ is attested.⁷ Otherwise, could it be connected with **-ag-t-* the past participle of **-ag-* ‘to go’, cf. Gaulish *Ambactus*, *ambactus* ‘servus’, Middle Welsh *Amaethon*, *Cynaethwy* (?), Old Irish **ACTO**, *Acht(án)* etc. (Evans 1967: 90, 128; McManus 1991: 106; Ziegler 1994: 122; Delamarre 2001: 35; Delamarre 2007: 209; Irslinger 2002: 245; Sims-Williams 2003: 178, 192; Cane 2003: 162; Meid 2005: 163; Falileyev 2007: 17; Falileyev 2013: 6; Falileyev 2014: 121, 136; Salinas de Fría 2013: 29–33; Wodtko 2013: 222)? Another possibility is the ancestor of Welsh *aeth* ‘pain, pang, grief; fear’: Old Irish *écht* ‘slaying, slaughter’ < **anx-tu-*, probably seen in Middle Welsh *Elaeth* (Sims-Williams 2003: 179, n. 1083; Cane 2003: 19, 162).⁸ At any rate, I think that **VENDDACT** could be an otherwise unattested Celtic name.⁹ However, the lack of a genitive form in the inscription is a stumbling block to reading this as Gaelic **ANIM VENDDACT** ‘soul of Findacht (*vel sim.*)’ (Forsyth 1996: 177).

However, another possibility suggests itself to me. There is plenty of evidence for modern use of *anam* ‘soul’ as a term of endearment in Ireland and Scotland (see Dinneen 1927: 43; Mac Airt 1956; Thomson 1961: 35), comparable to Middle Welsh *eneit* ‘soul’, by extension ‘friend’ (*GPC s.v. enaid*). The earliest Gaelic examples of which I am aware are from the late twelfth- or early thirteenth-century *Acallam na Senórach* (e.g. Dillon 1970: ll. 11, 71, 130 etc.), but note the diminutive form *anamán* in a tenth- or eleventh-century poem (Murphy 1956: 37.10d).¹⁰ Could we then understand the Buckquoy inscription as Gaelic ‘to/from Findacht, a friend’ or some such? Both nouns would be independent datives. A further possibility occurs to me. *Anam*, when used as a term of endearment, can be preceded by *m’* < *mo* ‘my’ (e.g. Dillon 1970: l. 71). The occurrence of *to*, *do* ‘your’ (abbreviated to *t’* before vowels) beside *mo*, *m’* in hypocoristic names in the insular Celtic

languages is well documented (see, e.g., Vendryes 1936; Evans 1970–2: 426; Jenkins and Owen 1984: 107; Zimmer 2007: 455–6). Rolf Baumgarten analyses these forms as having the force ‘X that you are’, i.e. ‘(dear) X that you (truly/uniquely) are’ (Baumgarten 1989: 102–5). Cf. Hiberno-English ‘your man’ calquing Irish *mo dhuine*. Could we here have T’ANIM as a variant of attested *m’anam*? In that case, the personal name would be **VENDDAC**, i.e. the attested *Findach* (O’Brien 1962: 643).¹¹

How would this fit with comparable inscriptions? I am unaware of any other ogham inscriptions on spindle-whorls, although a spindle-whorl inscribed with ‘ogham-like’ marks was discovered at Burrian, North Ronaldsay, Orkney (MacGregor 1972–4: 92; Forsyth 1996: 509–10; cf. Padel 1972: 15).¹² We do have some runic inscriptions on insular spindle-whorls, however. A Norse runic inscription on a spindle-whorl discovered somewhere in the Northern Isles of Scotland (exact provenance unknown) reads *Gautr reist rúnar* ‘Gautr wrote the runes’ (Liestøl 1984: 232; Forsyth 1995: 691; cf. Padel 1972: 15). An Old English example from Whitby reads *Wer*, probably a male personal name (Page 1973: 171–2). Spinning is an activity which is historically associated with women, so it is surprising to see these male names on spindle-whorls. Perhaps they were given as gifts by the named men to female spinsters. An alternative interpretation of the Whitby inscription, ultimately rejected by R. I. Page, might support this idea: it could be a common noun *wer*, a northern form of West Saxon *waer* ‘token of friendship’ (Page 1973: 171). Katherine Forsyth (1995: 692; 1996: 182; cf. Padel 1972: 15) discusses a Norse example of an inscribed spindle-whorl, now preserved in Reykjavik Museum, given as a gift to a woman from a man (*Thora mig frá Hruna* ‘Thora owns me from Hruni’). Note also the corpus of spindle-whorl inscriptions in a mixture of Gaulish and Latin from Roman Gaul (specifically from what is now eastern and east central France).¹³ Wolfgang Meid (1994: 53) describes them as follows: ‘These short texts are, either in a subtle or in a more direct way, erotically suggestive. They are, as a rule, addressed to young women; the implied speakers are, of course, young men.’¹⁴ We have corroborative evidence from other languages, then, of the inscription of spindle-whorls by men as gifts for female spinsters. Therefore, my interpretation of the Buckquoy inscription would not be unprecedented.

The question of the linguistic affiliation of the ‘Pictish’ *ogham* inscriptions has yet to be settled. They have largely defied elucidation, and a number of

scholars have concluded that they are evidence for a non-Indo-European Pictish language (e.g. Rhys 1892; Rhys 1898; Macalister 1940; Jackson 1980; Padel 1972: 37–40; Padel 2015, 165–6; Isaac 2005: 78; Sims-Williams 2012: 431). This has been challenged by Katherine Forsyth, in the light of recent opinion that the only language spoken in Pictland in the ancient and early medieval eras was a Brittonic Celtic one, ultimately supplanted by Gaelic (e.g. Smyth 1984: 46–53; Foster 1997: 7; Koch 2003: 76; Fraser 2009: 52–3; Driscoll 2011: 252). Nonetheless, none of the inscriptions has proved amenable to a Brittonic analysis, despite some overoptimistic statements to the contrary (see Rodway forthcoming). However, Forsyth has analysed some of the other putatively Pictish inscriptions as Gaelic, most promisingly that at Dunadd (Forsyth 2000; cf. Forsyth 1996: 227–42). The latter, despite having been previously analysed as Pictish, is of course in the heart of Gaelic Dál Riata, so, if Gaelic, it can be straightforwardly excised from the Pictish corpus. The others, in Forsyth’s analysis, would reflect Gaelic influence in Pictland, and should be seen as outliers of the small corpus of Gaelic *ogham* inscriptions from Argyll. They should not be seen as evidence in favour of the long-discredited notion that the Pictish language was closely related to Gaelic. The Buckquoy inscription, being on a portable object, could have been carved any distance from the find site. However, it seems likely that the stone used was local (Collins 1977; Forsyth 1995: 680, 693; Forsyth 1996: 164, 184). Thus, if accepted as being a Gaelic inscription, it has nothing to tell us about Pictish, but it may be indicative of a Gaelic presence (perhaps ecclesiastical) in Orkney in the pre-Viking period (Forsyth 1995; Forsyth 1996: 183–5).¹⁵

Notes

- ¹ In this paper, I use **BOLD CAPITALS** for transliterations of ogham inscriptions, **CAPITALS** for inscriptions in the Roman alphabet, and *lower case italics* for forms recorded in manuscripts. For ogham inscriptions, I follow Forsyth’s conventions, as described in Forsyth 1996: lxxxiii (cf. Forsyth 1995: 694, n. 6; Forsyth 2000: 267, n. 2): ‘Uppercase letters reasonably certain. Lowercase letters doubtful. If a reading is uncertain, alternatives are given in brackets in decreasing order of preference, separated by an oblique stroke, e.g. (t/u), most likely – T, alternative reading – U; (/a/h), most likely – no letter, alternative

- reading – A, least likely – H. [...] Underline – two letters in one character compendium, e.g. EA, RR. [...] -] portion of unknown length lost at beginning; [- portion of unknown length lost at end.]
- ² The damaged Kilalloe inscription reads **BENDACHT ... TOROQR ...** McManus (1991: 130) restores ‘with reasonable certainty’ **BENDACHT FOR TOROQRIM** ‘a blessing on Thorgrimr’.
- ³ Note also that her suggestion (Forsyth 1996: 177) that **VENDDACT** could be ‘an archaic form of *Findach*’ is impossible, as the latter name never contained /t/.
- ⁴ For a semantic parallel, see Old Irish PN *Gúaire* < *gúaire* ‘hair, bristles’ (De Bernardo Stempel 1999: 236). The element ‘*wend-* > *wind-* “kin, family”’ mentioned by Mikhailova 2015: 42, referencing Delamarre 2007: 236, seems to be a ghost. Delamarre’s form is *ueni-* > *uini-* (cf. Dottin 1920: 297; Evans 1967: 119, 277–9; Delamarre 2001: 263; Falileyev et al. 2010: 33–4).
- ⁵ Apparently misunderstanding McManus 1991: 108.
- ⁶ And cf. Sims-Williams 2003: 273 on BARRECTI, if this is to be segmented **barro-ekt-* rather than **barro-rektu-* with syncope (Sims-Williams 2003: 18, 130, 273). This would fit Nash-Williams’s fifth-century date for the relevant inscription better than a syncopated form (Sims-Williams 2003: 354), but perhaps, in view of the common occurrence of **rektu-* in Celtic personal names (Evans 1967: 109, 241–2; Ziegler 1994: 225; Koch 1997: 221), ‘it is easier to suppose that there was an early haplography in **Barro-recti* owing to the occurrence of two homorganic consonants’ (Sims-Williams, in Edwards 2013: 413). The following Old Irish female personal names may or may not contain the suffix under discussion: *Ciannacht* (Watkins 1963: 227; a back-formation from the population-group name *Cían(n)acht(a)?*), *Indecht* (O’Brien 1962: 666; cf. *indecht* ‘indiction’ < *indictio* (DIL s.v. *indecht*)?), *Muirecht* (Ó Corráin and Maguire 1990: 140). *Indract*, an Irish saint venerated at Glastonbury, seems to derive, perhaps via Old English **Indrac(h)te*, from Irish *Indrechtach* (Lapidge 1982: 187). On the saint’s name *Attracta* ~ *Adracht* < **ad-drk-to-* ‘the expected one’, see Lambert 2008: 144. For a possible example of Middle Welsh *Gwryaeth* ‘manliness’ (< **Wiro-akt-*) as a personal name, see Jones and Parry Owen 1991: 127.
- ⁷ Note, however, Irish *Finnecht*, the name of a saint and the mother of another, ‘[d]erived from *finn* “fair”’ according to Ó Corráin and Maguire (1990: 102). The <e> is hard to account for, however – should we instead be thinking of a derivative of Latin *vindicta*? Or could it derive from *finnech*, an attested variant

- of *finnach* ‘hairy, shaggy’ (*DIL s.v. finnach*)? For Welsh abstract nouns formed from *gwyn* (*gwynder* etc.), see Zimmer 2000: 312. The Gaelic abstract is *finne*.
- ⁸ The Welsh form shows the change /nxt/ > /xt/ > /iθ/ seen in *Seithin* < *Sanctinus* (Jackson 1953: 406; Sims-Williams 2003: 178, n. 1076, 179, n. 1083; Cane 2003: 162). The name would then have to be Brittonic, in which case the **ND** and possibly the **E** would be due to Gaelic influence (see Sims-Williams 2003: 78, 81). For *écht* as the first element in Gaelic personal names, see Ó Corráin and Maguire 1990: 83; Uhlich 1993: 238.
- ⁹ It is tantalizingly reminiscent of *Olfincta*, *Ollfnachta* in the notoriously intractable Pictish regnal list (Skene 1867: 5; Van Hamel 1932: 82), although this is probably to be connected with the Gaelic name *Finnechta*, *Finsnechta* < *fin* ‘wine’ and *snechta* ‘snow’ (Ó Corráin and Maguire 1990: 102), with the prefix *oll-* ‘all’ (see de Bernardo Stempel 2003; cf. Evans 1967: 106, 237–8; Falileyev 2013: 106–7).
- ¹⁰ Cf. Meyer 1910: xxiv; Murphy 1956: 212–15; Carney 1969–70: 304–12 on the date. Cf. the usage of *críde* ‘heart’ as a term of endearment in Irish, extant in poems from the late Old Irish or early Middle Irish period (*DIL s.v. críde* (c)); Baumgarten 1994: 124). The diminutive form *crídecan* occurs in an Old Irish poem, dated to c.800 by Gerard Murphy (Murphy 1956: 112).
- ¹¹ Cf. *Uindacius* from Roman Britain (Delamarre 2007: 200); Middle Welsh *Gwynnog* (Bartrum 1966: 195); Breton *Guenoc*, *Guenec* (Loth 1908: 295–6). Welsh *Gwenog* may be unrelated (Wmffre 2004: 265–6), and note that *Findach* could be a hypocoristic form of *Findbair* (Russell 1990: 18; cf. Russell 2001: 239 on hypocoristic *-ach*).
- ¹² Padel (1972: 15) also mentions ‘a whorl with radial decoration in the Perth museum’. Note also a decorated spindle-whorl discovered at a Viking Age site in Glenshee, Perthshire, in the summer of 2015; according to David Strachan of Perth and Kinross Heritage Trust ‘some of the symbols look like they could be writing, perhaps Viking runes or Ogham inscription’ (reported in *The Courier*, 26 June 2015, <http://www.thecourier.co.uk/news/local/perth-kinross/cryptic-symbols-may-hold-key-to-glenshee-s-viking-age-past-1.886742> (accessed 6 April 2016)).
- ¹³ The Gaulish ones are edited in Lambert 2002: 317–35.
- ¹⁴ Further discussion at Lambert 1994: 122–5; Clackson 2012: 44.
- ¹⁵ I am grateful to Dr William Mahon for discussing this inscription with me, and for providing some of the references in this paper. I am also grateful for the

helpful comments on a draft version of Professor Erich Poppe and Dr David Cram, and of an anonymous reviewer. The views expressed and any factual errors are entirely my own responsibility.

Abbreviations

- DIL* E. G. Quin (ed.) (1983) *Dictionary of the Irish Language Based Mainly on Old and Middle Irish Materials*. Compact edition. Dublin: Royal Irish Academy. Available online at <http://edil.qub.ac.uk>.
- GPC* R. J. Thomas, G. A. Bevan and P. J. Donovan (eds) (1950–2002; second edition, 2003) *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru: A Dictionary of the Welsh Language*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press. Available online at <http://www.geiriadur.ac.uk/>.

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