

Haplography in the runic inscription on the Overchurch stone

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The Overchurch Stone,¹ found in 1887 at Upton (Wirral) and now on permanent loan in the Williamson Art Gallery & Museum (Birkenhead, Nr Liverpool, GB), bears an Old English runic inscription in two lines.² In spite of some damage to the stone, at least 32 runes can be reliably identified and transliterated in two lines.³

folcæarærdonbec

biddapfoteæpelmun

On the basis of what we know from other memorial inscriptions, the following individual Old English word units may be distinguished:

folcæ arærdon bec // biddapfote æpelmun

The first line probably ended in *becun*, *becon* or *becn* ‘sign, monument.’ The incomplete name at the end of the second line is likely to have been *Æpelmund*,

¹ Page notes that the stone was “presumably designed for a grave.” The inscription, in two lines, is on one side of the stone. The stone is not undamaged: “Workmen re-using the stone cut away one edge and with it the ends of both lines of text” (Page 1999, 142). A detailed description of the stone and its inscription is given in Page 1959, 285-89.

² A plate of the inscription is available in Bammesberger 1991, Plate 2.

³ The date of the inscription cannot be established with any precision. Dahl indicated it by “(?) c 900” (1938, 6); see also Page 1959, 289.

and *biddaþ* in the beginning of the line was probably preceded by a prefix *gi-*. The sequence *fote*⁴ in the second line is assumed to have been cut erroneously for *fore*.⁵ The two lines have been edited as two separate clauses:

folcæ arærdon becu // gibiddaþ fore æþelmundæ.

Elliott translated as follows: ‘the people erected this monument; pray for Æthelmund’ (1989, 95).⁶ Page’s translation differs in details: ‘the people (host?) raised a monument. Pray for Æþelmu<d>’ (1999, 142).⁷

A major problem for the linguistic analysis is presented by the fifth rune in the first line. The final *-æ* in **folcæ** is very hard to account for if *folcæ* functioned as the subject of the clause.⁸ In order to solve this difficulty I suggested more than thirty years ago that *folcæ* represents the dative singular of *folc* (Bammesberger 1991, 130). Page assigned ‘a prize of ingenuity’ to the suggestion (1999, 142 n. 8). Nevertheless a considerable difficulty remains that I could not solve then, but for which I would like to submit a possible solution now. While I do believe that the sequence *folcæ* is to be parsed as dative singular of *folc* and means ‘for the people,’ syntactically the problem remains that the clause seems to lack a subject. That the subject could be ‘unexpressed’ or perhaps silently understood as ‘we’ or ‘they’ are at best doubtful proposals. When the runic inscription was commissioned we definitely assume that a grammatically correct sequence was intended. But what ended up on the stone may be due to an error in transmission consisting in haplography, also called ‘eye-skip.’⁹ The following points can be submitted in this context.

⁴ With regard to *fote*, Page noted “there is no doubt that this is an error for the preposition *fore*” (1995, 332).

⁵ The formula ‘pray for X’ is found in the inscription of the Lancaster Cross: *gibidæþ foræ cynibalþ cupbere* ‘pray for cynibalth, cuthbereht’ (Page 1999, 143).

⁶ For a detailed account of the Overchurch stone and its inscription, see Elliott 1959, 140–47.

⁷ The parenthesis in Page’s translation ‘(host?)’ at 142 is evidently meant as a precision, as at 55 he simply offered ‘people.’

⁸ Dickins notes that *æ* in *folcæ* “is perhaps a blundered or damaged character abandoned by the carver” (1932, 19).

⁹ Haplography (eye-skip) and other types of errors occurring in Old English manuscripts are discussed in Orchard 2003 at 44–46.

The subject of the clause has been recognised in the word representing ‘people.’ If we assume that *folcæ* means ‘for the people’ then it follows that the underlying version could have consisted of *folc* (nominative plural)¹⁰ followed by *folcæ* (dative singular). For the first line we can consequently assume the following original wording: *folc folcæ arærdon becun*. In the sequence (without spaces between words) *folcfolcæarærdonbecun*, the eye ‘skipped’ from the first <f> to the second, and the four letters <olcf> were omitted. The emended text for the first line of the inscription may be restored as follows: *f[olcf]folcæarærdonbecun*. The line means that the tribe members (of Æthelmund), namely his surviving family,¹¹ raised the monument for the people (in general), i.e. for the public to see. The second line contains the invitation for prayer: *gibiddaþ fore æþelmundæ* (imperative) ‘pray for Æthelmund.’ It is conceivable that *arærdon becun // gibiddaþ fore æþelmundæ* represents an alliterating line traditionally used for commemorating important persons. The initial two words *folc folcæ* can be interpreted as a kind of *titulus* meaning that Æþelmund’s followers had this monument erected for the people in general who passed by.¹²

References

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¹⁰ OE *folc* is a neuter *a*-stem like *word* ‘word,’ and the nominative and accusative plural are unchanged. The word is frequently attested in Old English: *folc* in plural function is found at *Beowulf*, lines 1422 and 2948.

¹¹ This may be intended by Page’s translation ‘(host?)’ (1999, 142).

¹² Elliot considers the possibility that Æthelmund was “a brave thane who may have fallen fighting against Scandinavian invaders at the end of the ninth century and who was honoured by his followers with this runic request for prayer” (1959, 147).

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