An inscription at Thurstaston Hill

A rejoinder to O'Neil's note

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I should like to thank Jim O'Neil for his interesting note regarding my report on 'An inscription at Thurstaston' in the MASJ Journal, Volume 8, and to thank the Editor, Philippa Tomlinson for giving me this opportunity to reply to Jim O'Neil's critique.

O'Neil suggests that the inscription is modern and therefore probably a hoax. His main reason for these views appears to be based on taking the 2nd and 3rd lines of the transcription out of context and then extrapolating dates of the 20th century. This approach is unsound, since account must be taken of *all* the inscription before reaching any conclusion. Of lines one and four O'Neil says 'I cannot suggest any alternative meanings' and therefore he presumably accepts my tenet that these are personal and masons' marks respectively.

Both personal and masons' marks were in current common usage from early medieval times to the middle of the 17th century. Considering the 2nd and 3rd lines in this context one would surely expect any predetermined numbers such as dates to be expressed in Roman numerals, though even if this were the case, the 2nd and 3rd lines would still not be compatible with the 1st and 4th, since in this period dates were not indicated by the use of three numbers as in the modern way. More typically they were given by reference to the nearest feast or holy day followed by the number of years of the current King's reign and his name.

To agree with O'Neil, one would have to assume that the 2nd and 3rd lines are not contemporary with the 1st and 4th, or that if it was a hoax, the perpetrator was knowledgeable about the history of personal and masons' marks but unaware of the contemporary way of expressing dates. Neither of these assumptions seems realistic.

Turning now to the actual dates proposed by O'Neil, that is 29/9/1972 and 1/1/1973, several others have suggested dates for these lines, including the author. However, any attempt to translate the symbols into numbers is entirely dependant upon the values given initially to the symbols and any result is therefore predetermined by this choice. For example, the author produced dates of 19/7/1087 and 1/1/1088 by using values of the dot as one, vertical and cross bars as five, and the dot within the circle a circle as one thousand. These values are just as tenable as O'Neil's but produce very different results.

Looking at the initial values chosen by O'Neil, I would agree that the dot probably represents one. His statement that the vertical bar 'must represent ten' is based on the existance of 'two complete vertical rows of five dots without a bar through them'. I cannot see any reason why this means that the vertical bar 'must represent ten'.

His consideration of the dot within a circle illustrates the fallibility of choosing initial values. For example, he first cites the dot within a symbol as an early Roman symbol for 100 and then finds he already has a symbol for 100 in his application of the decussare principle of a horizontal line multiplying the vertical bars. Solution?— simply call the dot within a circle 'one thousand' and the desired result is obtained.

The best that can be said after all this is that the 2nd and 3rd lines probably represent some numbers. It was to illustrate this, that I drew an analogy with the known recording system used in the Mayan Codex. Incidentally, O'Neil's statement that Mayan Codex used 'horizontal strokes' is both irrelevant and incorrect. The bars could be either horizontal or vertical, see Thompson (1960) for a comprehensive study of Mayan hieroglyphic writing.

In conclusion, it will be seen that allocating dates to the 2nd and 3rd lines is fraught with problems and probably irrelevant, since this interpretation is incompatible with lines 1 and 4 anyway (see above).

Looking now at O'Neil's questioning the survival of the inscription. He records that he and Jenny Whalley spent some time carving a similar inscription on the same rock and dating it. This method is not a quantifiable way of assessing the hardness of rock. The resistance of rock to erosion is not exclusively a function of hardness, but is also related to the degree of protection afforded by adjacent features such as turf, trees and other rock features. O'Neil has again taken one aspect out of context and reached a conclusion without due consideration for the others. He further records that he and Jenny Whalley 'reckoned it would be possible to carve the inscription in about an hour ... suggesting that it is relatively recent'. I cannot see why the time taken to carve the inscription should have any bearing on its antiquity. I am not convinced by O'Neil's case for a hoax.

References

Beazley F.C. *Thurstaston* 1924, Liverpool: Edward Howell Ltd

Thompson J.E.S. 1960 *Maya heiroglyphic writing* University of Oklahoma Press.

[Editor's note: the opinions of these two authors are entirely their own! Further ideas on the interpretation of these inscriptions are most welcome—they will be published in the Newsletter.]