

An inscription at Thurstaston Hill

A re-interpretation of the second and third lines

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Volume 8 of the *Journal of the Merseyside Archaeological Society* included a short note by John Evans entitled 'An inscription at Thurstaston' in which he postulated that this inscription could be masons' marks and could be several centuries old, its survival being due to the rock being harder than the surrounding areas, and the relevant part of the common being unfrequented.

Jenny Whalley and I visited the site on 8th November 1992.

The sandstone in the area shows indications of quarrying, both in the way the outcrops are shaped and in the loose rocks in the undergrowth. Beazley (1924) records that quarrying was banned as from 15th December 1883.

We tried roughly copying the inscriptions further down the same piece of rock (and carefully dated our scratches 1992!) and found it to be quite soft. We reckoned that it would be possible to carve the whole inscription in about an hour. This also suggests that it is relatively recent.

Evans also stated that there are traces of dots on either side of the vertical bars, showing where a group of five were joined up. We could not see these traces.

I cannot suggest any alternative meanings for the first and fourth lines, but would propose the following interpretation of the second and third lines.

I shall begin with four assumptions: that the symbols were carved from left to right; that the dot represents the basic unit (one), that each symbol retains the same value throughout and that the inscription is exactly as the maker intended, that is, there are no uncorrected errors.

The vertical bar

This I cannot accept as representing five. If it did, then why are there two complete vertical rows of five dots without a bar through them? One row may have been accidentally missed, but not two rows, with one of the short diagonal strokes between them.

The bar must represent ten, from which it follows that whoever carved them already knew the total number he was going to carve before he began, because it is not possible to cover two vertical rows of five dots with just one vertical stroke, and the first group includes nine dots in two rows.

Digression

The layout of the numerical symbols in the second and

third rows has similarities to the Mayan system, which, however, used horizontal strokes and dots. It was *not* a 'purely positional' system, but also had additive characteristics (*Colliers Encyclopaedia* 18, pages 9 and 12).

The dot-in-a-circle symbol was used by the Romans to signify 100, before the system of letters was fully developed.

In addition to its more well-known use for tallying, Karl Zangemeister suggested in 1887 (Smith, *History of Mathematics*, 2, 56) that the decussare principle, where a line is drawn across another line or symbol, may have been the foundation for some of the letters used in the Roman system. Briefly, this principle states that a crossing line multiplies any number by 10.

The vertical bars crossed with a horizontal bar

If we accept the possibility of a decussare symbology, then the Thurstaston inscription would represent $9 \times 10 \times 10 = 900$, not 10×10 or 10×5 .

The dot in a circle

If we also accept that the crossed bar was used for 100, then there is no need for another different symbol for 100, although there IS a need for a symbol for 1,000. I therefore suggest that the dot in a circle represents 1,000.

The short diagonal lines

These are simply to mark each separate number.

Interpretation

There seem to be three possible meanings for these numbers:

1. A tally of something such as materials or workmen. This can be discounted due to the actual layout of the symbols; how would a tallyman have known that he would have only needed 9 units in the first group rather than a whole 10, and how would he have known to use the symbol for 1,000 at the start of the group?
2. It was intended as a permanent, total, record of something important enough to inscribe it in stone. This seems to beg the question of an earlier, running, tally, no longer extant, which seems unlikely.
3. The meaning that seems most likely is that the second and third lines of the inscription are dates. In current English terminology this would give us 29/9/1972 (29th September 1972) and 1/1/1973 (1 January 1973).

As I feel it highly unlikely that this is modern 'vandalism', mainly because it is far too cerebral for your everyday run-of-the-mill vandal, it seems to come down to just one possibility.

Could it all be a hoax?—and are we the victims?