MUTE STONES WITH MUCH TO SAY: a review article

DÁIBHÍ Ó CRÓINÍN *


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Charles Thomas is that rara avis, an archaeologist who is equally at home with medieval texts (in Latin and the vernaculars of these islands), and who also has a sound historical sense. He is also unusual in that he writes in elegant and intelligible prose, and explains technicalities without feeling the need to write down to his readers. This has been a feature of his work since The Early Christian Archaeology of North Britain appeared over twenty-five years ago, and anyone who has ever heard him lecture will know that the style is the man. This latest book from his pen is the annotated text of three from a series of four lectures which he gave in the University of Glasgow (the other appeared in print elsewhere) on the subject of the inscribed memorial stones from Demetia (south-west Wales, modern-day Dyfed) and Dumnonia (Devon, Cornwall, and part of Somerset), dating from c. AD 400 to c. AD 600. This is Thomas-country par excellence, and no other scholar knows these stones and the landscape in which they are found better than he. But the book in fact deals with a far wider area of interests than the title would indicate, since his subject-matter also includes the Irish settlements in Britain and the relationships between the two islands throughout the early medieval period.

Professor Thomas’s starting-point is simple: the stone inscriptions are the single most important body of contemporary written evidence for the period from the fifth to the seventh century in western British history. From this corpus of material he makes a bold attempt to trace the principal factors that led to cultural change in those parts (the most important change for him being conversion to Christianity). The agencies for these changes he sees in the Irish settlements in Britain together with less-well attested contacts with mainland Europe, and the trail of changes he seeks to uncover in the names, datings, and innovations of the ogam inscriptions, which innovations are taken to indicate cultural borrowings. In the pursuit of this trail he offers many thought-provoking hypotheses — not all of which will necessarily find favour, either with his archaeological confrères or with Celtic scholars or medieval historians. For example, Thomas argues (p. 4) that within south-east and south-west Wales, Christianity survived ‘without any real hiatus’ from the fourth century into the fifth and beyond; romanitas (in culture and language) extended as far as Carmarthen in the west (Moridunum), and fourth- and fifth-century Irish settlers in what became Pembroke and coastal Cardigan adopted both romanitas and the Christian faith of their host country.

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Professor Thomas has based his analysis of the inscriptions on the pre-supposition ("a proposition ... that may seem to run counter to received views", p. 13) that what he terms "personalizing" stone memorials was "a fashion that may have been shaped in Ireland [my italics] before it ever became an aspect of British post-Roman Christian activity". This clearly sets on its head the theory first propounded by the late Kenneth Jackson, the great Edinburgh Celtic scholar, (and accepted by most other Celticists since then), that ogam was a writing system invented in Britain (by Irish people who had contact with Latin), then brought to Ireland. It also faces some formidable linguistic difficulties, for example, in the fact that many of the British stones preserve bilingual (Latin/ Irish) inscriptions, where Irish ogam inscriptions do not. He quotes with approval Jackson's view that "there is no reason to suppose that there was anything about the ogam script essentially repugnant to Christianity" (p. 72), but he clearly has qualms about where the new theory is leading him. He acknowledges, for example, that if the stone in Bridell (Pembrokeshire) really is c. AD 420 x 430 (as he would put it), "it should, on balance, be regarded as non-Christian". The inextricability of the logic leads Thomas then to posit an origin and date for the invention of ogam earlier than most scholars would propose: "An informed guess ... would be that the use of ogam was firmly established [my italics] by the latter part of the fourth century, could well have been current in the earlier part, and could have been invented c. AD 300 (or even before)" (p. 33). Only in this way, it seems, is it possible to argue (p. 72) that "it would be insupportable to pose an absolute link between paganism and the use of ogam". For if ogam really was invented c. AD 300, then — unless we are prepared to contemplate an established Christianity in Ireland by that same date — there is no way of getting around the fact that the memorial tradition (in Ireland, at any rate) was de facto pagan in origin and remained so for at least a century, until the formal introduction of Christianity in the early fifth century.

But if ogam was invented in Ireland c. AD 300, where did this take place? — "Do we have in mind nothing less than a Roman-controlled trading-establishment near the outflow of one or other of the large [Irish] rivers ...?" (p. 34). If this smacks rather uncomfortably of the hare-brained "Romanisation" theories currently in vogue amongst some Irish archaeologists, readers should not fear that Professor Thomas has fallen prey to them. While he does call for a repeat of the Royal Irish Academy's very successful and fruitful 1974 colloquium on Hiberno-Roman contacts, he saw for himself at the Archaeology Ireland symposium on this subject recently held in Dublin how hopeless is the current state of Irish archaeology in this field.

The necessarily subtle interpretation of inscribed stones in terms of their religious connotations is achieved (pp. 68-70) by Professor Thomas through a classification system that categorises inscriptions by type: (a) ogam only inscriptions; (b) bilingual inscriptions; (c) Roman-letter inscriptions ("of A filii B"); and (d) stones with hic iacit formulae. These categories are argued to represent a chronological sequence, with the latter stones showing obvious continental (Christian) influence. Thomas is good on the subject of the use of inscriptions with names (though it might be suggested — if the idea is to approach their interpretation con brio — that the Nevern (Pembrokeshire) stone with the inscription VITALIANI EMERETO (in Latin) and VITALIANI (ogam), rendered "V., who has attained (his just reward)" might just as easily be understood to say that Vitalianus was a native of Mérida in Spain — not altogether impossible, given what we know of a British presence in Galicia in the sixth century!).

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The bulk of the book is taken up with the interpretation of the Demetian stones, with their record of Irish (Déisi) occupation of the region from c. AD 450-500 and beyond, and (pp. 257 ff.) the Dumnonian ones — the ‘Mute Stones’ of the title. The evidence for Demetia in the fifth and sixth centuries rests entirely on the 60-odd stones — though Thomas does argue for a rather strained interpretation of the 12th-century Life of St David by Rhygyvarch as being based on a genuine reminiscence of 5th-/6th-century historical events — together with the embarrassingly scanty evidence of Gaulish, Mediterranean, and North African pottery (‘actually only a few finds’, ‘odd sherds’, ‘tiny pieces of Merovingian glass’, etc.). But within these constraints Thomas shows, in his treatment of the Idnert stone at Llanddewibrefi, just what can be achieved. [In fact, since this book appeared, its author has produced an even more startling analysis of the same inscription in Peritia, 10 (1996), 136-183, which revealed a hitherto unsuspected sophistication that has obvious and profound implications for the history of the early Church in Wales.]

Demetia has the famous inscription MEMORIA VOTEPORIGIS PROTICTORIS (which Thomas rather surprisingly says records ‘an otherwise unattested Irish name’, p. 82), a striking witness to the success of the Munster Déisi in seizing and retaining that area. Thomas is good on the text known as The Expulsion of the Déisi and related materials, including the tantalising entries in the Glossary of Bishop Cormac of Cashel († 908) with the names of two strongholds (‘enclosed defended homesteads’) occupied by the Irish in Wales: Dind Tradui (convincingly identified as Moel Trigarn (Pemrokeshire), and Dind map Lethain (west Cornwall). It is not so clear, however, how this conquest was achieved: was there no Roman or local opposition?; the subject is not really discussed.

Where Professor Thomas breaks really new ground is in his discussion (pp. 113 ff.) of Brycheiniog (Brecon/Brecknock), and his demonstration of the way in which a relative dearth of inscriptions (17 only), when judiciously analysed, can be made to offer a variety of new inferences, which allow ‘an outline history of Brycheiniog, 450-600, to be set out here and now for the first time’. He combines with this the evidence of two medieval texts, De Situ Brechentiauc and Cognacio Brychan (what he terms ‘The Brecon Documents’), the first of which he argues to date from c. AD 586, and the second ‘at least two centuries later’. On the evidence principally of the names that these texts preserve, Thomas reconstructs a sequence of kings and relates their activities to the evidence of the stones. The discussion is a bravado performance — though whether textual scholars will follow him back into the sixth century is another matter! Along the way there are inscriptions commemorating individuals such as Optimus, Resteuta, Tigernus, and — intriguingly — Potitus, which Professor Thomas says was ‘hardly a widespread name’ (p. 302 n.39), but which we know was the name of St Patrick’s grandfather. There is much else here besides that would merit detailed study by Irish historians.

Professor Thomas’s discussion of post-Roman Dumnonia (pp. 209 ff.) emphasises, inter alia, how little evidence there is for the existence (or perhaps survival) of Roman Christianity in either Demetia or Dumnonia (though see his earlier statement, p. 4, cited above!); in his view, Dumnonian rulers became Christians ‘at some time after AD 500’. It is a pity, therefore, that the discussion should be crucially dependent on a 7th-century dating of the Life of St Samson of Dol. The most recent editor of that work has come down (again) for a 9th-century dating, which would be the one preferred by the majority of historians. Thomas sees the ‘habit of epigraphy’ spreading southwards from Demetia to Dumnonia as part of a
late-5th/early-6th-century migration of Irish-led groups of ‘land-exploiting aristocracy’ (p. 308) which saw the conquest, settlement, and Christianising of that region as a result: ‘In AD 500, Cornwall was barely Christian’ (p. 306). That said, the evidence of placenames hardly supports his theory: of the eleven ‘reasonably certain’ monasteries discussed, seven (perhaps eight) have names in Lan-, while the nomenclature of ecclesiastical settlement is equally unpromising: *merihker*, *eglæs*, and ‘the rare loanword *mynster*’, all suggest that they owe nothing to Irish practice or influence. Equally, the rather minimalist interpretation of Aldhelm’s famous letter to the Dumnonian king Gerontius (Geraint), dated AD 705, hardly seems ground enough for stating that ‘the seventh-century author of the Life of the sixth-century man Samson may have known that Dumnonia, or at least Cornwall, had no bishops’ (p. 310). On the other hand, there is no gainsaying the fact that one of the ‘Mute Stones’ (with the inscription *DRVSTANVS ... CVNOMORI FILIUS*) is probably the earliest evidence for the existence of the name Tristan (the story of *Tristan and Yseult* is not attested in manuscript sources until the ninth century).

Professor Thomas has, in this book, produced another thoughtful and thought-provoking contribution to the history of these islands in the twilight period between Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages. Besides its 300-odd pages of text (with copious illustrations, maps, and line drawings) there is also an appendix, with a handlist and concordance of the Dumnonian inscriptions, plus notes to the text and a (surprisingly brief) bibliography. The book is well produced and reasonably priced — a blessing in this inflationary age. There is apparently another book from his pen about to appear, with much in it to set his colleagues talking, and yet another has been commissioned, promising still further ‘revelations’. If this present book is anything to go by, we should be in for interesting times!