

X.—THE FLETCHER STONE.—BY K. G. T. WEBSTER, B. A.,
YARMOUTH, N. S.

(Read 11th January, 1892.)

THE Fletcher Stone was found by Dr. Richard Fletcher, a retired army surgeon, on his place near the town of Yarmouth. As nearly as I can ascertain, this was eighty years ago*. Soon afterwards copies of it were sent to savants in different parts of the world, and many theories formed to account for its curious markings. Sir Daniel Wilson received a fac-simile of the inscription in 1857 from Dr. G. J. Farish; and he refers to the stone in his "Prehistoric Man;" and, at greater length, in a paper read before the Royal Society of Canada in 1890. The N. S. Historical Society has had the stone under consideration, and they also forwarded a copy to the learned President of Toronto in 1886. It was the subject of a paper by Mr. H. Philips, before the American Philosophical Society in 1884. A Yarmouth *Herald* of July, 1884, gives a cut of it; and the New York *Herald* for July 27, 1890, has a copy of the inscription accompanying an article which claims for it Carian origin.

The stone is the common rock known as county stone,—quartzite, I presume. It measures about 31x20x13 inches; and has been split from the parent boulder where a thin vein of quartz traversed it. One side is thus left quite level, and tolerably smooth, excepting for a bit of raised jagged edge. A good idea of its appearance may be obtained from the cut which illustrates Sir Daniel Wilson's paper, in Vol. VIII of the Transactions R. S. C. The plaster-paris cast which I have present shows the exact size and shape of the characters. They are thirteen in number, and extend in a line almost across the flat side of the stone. The end of the inscription is shown by a faint period. One can notice how the characters become shallower towards this end, as if the cutter was getting tired; and larger, by a natural tendency.

*Sir Daniel Wilson in his paper "Vinland of the Northmen," Vol. VIII of the R. S. C.'s Proceedings and Transactions, quotes Dr. Farish as writing him in 1857, that the stone had then been known upwards of forty-five years. The present owner of the stone, Samuel Ryerson, Esq., corroborates this.

There has been some confusion as to the exact place where the stone was found ; and I shall therefore describe it particularly. It was on the west side of Yarmouth Harbour ; at the foot of a hill on the east side of a small cove, into which runs a stream from a marsh about a mile long, called the Chegoggin Flats or Salt Pond. An old road, traces of which may yet be seen, used to run around the foot of this hill, and cross the bar at the mouth of the stream. The stone lay a few steps to the east of the road*, on the north-west slope of the hill. I have by me a rough sketch of the harbour, which shows the place clearly.

Of course many conjectures have been made to account for the extraordinary inscription on the stone. It has been ascribed to everybody who could have been in Nova Scotia, from the Phœnicians to Bill Stumps.

The writer of the article in the *New York Herald* holds that the Fletcher Stone inscription, as well as many others which have been found along the Atlantic coast, is the work of Carian sailors in the Phœnician navy, who visited America, it is supposed, seven or eight centuries before Christ. But we possess almost too few data to judge of this hypothesis ; the Carian alphabet that we have is only a tentative one, and the cuttings on the Yarmouth stone do not agree with this much better than with the Runic.

Neither our Indians nor the Esquimaux, who may once have inhabited Nova Scotia, are known to have any inscriptions at all similar to this ; and we may, I think, dismiss them from our discussion. The cuttings are not smooth grooves in the stone, but appear to have been made—to use Dr. Farish's words—“with a sharp pointed instrument carried on by successive blows of a hammer or mallet, the effect of which is plainly visible.” Probably only a metal instrument could have been used in this way and with the effect which we see ; and this precludes the possibility of Indian or Esquimaux origin. The fact that the stone shows the same peculiarity now that it did when Dr. Farish wrote, thirty-five years ago, is worth noting ; for it proves that the inscription has not been seriously tampered with—that, in spite

*Mr. Chas E. Brown.

of the cleaning out with spikes and the paintings it is said to have received at the hands of eager photographers, it is still the same.

The theory which ascribes these glyphs to the Northmen is less improbable than this, and particularly tempting. Soon after it was known beyond reasonable doubt that the Northmen discovered America five centuries before Columbus, which may be said to have been established by the Society of Northern Antiquaries in 1837, this inscription was affirmed by many to be their work. Mr. Henry Philips, in a paper read before the American Philosophical Society in 1884, completed this Norse hypothesis by giving a translation of the inscription, which he pronounced to be genuine Runic. Mr. Philips made it—*Harkusson men varu*, "Haka's son addressed the men." He found the name, or one very like it, in the account of Thorfinn Karlsefne's expedition (1007), in which very expedition they came to a place where *a frith penetrated far into the land. Off the mouth was an island past which ran strong currents; which was also the case further up the frith.* Now Yarmouth Harbour answers in some degree to this description; and if no serious objections could be made to Mr. Philips' translation, one could hardly help accepting the Norse hypothesis as something more, as fact; and certainly this would be an eminently satisfactory explanation. But unfortunately most serious objections are taken to this translation—indeed I do not know if it is endorsed by any Norse scholars of repute. On the contrary, Sir Daniel Wilson says of this inscription—"it neither accords with the style or usual formulas of Runic inscriptions, nor is it graven in any variation of the familiar characters of the Scandinavian futhork." And if the translation does not hold, the identification of Yarmouth as the place mentioned goes for nothing, for it requires considerable straining, as we shall see, to make Yarmouth Harbour agree with the description; and there are scores of places both north and south of it which would answer far better.

Mr. Geo. S. Brown in his history of Yarmouth,* supporting Mr. Philips' hypothesis, attempts to show in greater detail from the narratives of the Northmen's voyages, the probability of their

*Yarmouth, N. S. A Sequel to Campbell's History, Boston, Rand Avery Co., 1889, pp. 17-24.

having landed at Yarmouth. Mr. Brown identifies both the place in Vinland where Lief wintered, and the frith or fiord of Karlsefne's—two different places—as Yarmouth! We know that they are two different places from the descriptions; and because we are told that a party set out from Karlsefne's fiord, and went north to find Vinland, Lief's wintering place.*

In order to examine them, it will be necessary to take from the narratives what gives us any clew to the locality.† Lief (c. 1000) sailed from Greenland to Helluland, which was a snowy country with a plain near the shore, and mountains further inland; thence seaward to Markland, a flat wooded country with stretches of white sand; then seaward again for two days with the wind northeast, to an Island which was north of the mainland; they sailed west through the sound, past a cape jutting north, to a place where there were flats at low tide; here a river from a lake a short distance off emptied; they took their vessel up the river to the lake and wintered there; this place they named Vinland. Another account says that the Island was east of the main, and that they sailed east past a cape jutting northeast. Mr. Brown takes an account the same as this latter, excepting that it gives their course as west instead of east, like the first account. "Lief," says Mr. Brown, "shaped his course from Newfoundland, last seen by Biarne; then passing, through the straits of Belle Isle, he discovered Prince Edward Island; thence, standing out to sea to the eastward of Cape Breton he came to the Gut of Canseau, which he entered; and thence sailed westward along the coast, wintering perhaps at Yarmouth."‡ Let us look at this. Granting that Helluland may be Newfoundland, and not Labrador, yet passing through the strait of Belle Isle is certainly very little like putting to sea, as the narratives say they did; and it would suppose the Northmen to have turned right back on their course; unless indeed they had happened to strike exactly at the mouth of the narrow strait, which is improbable. Markland is taken to be Prince Edward Island, tho' we are not told that it is an island: and it would as likely

*Laing's Sea Kings of Norway, I. 5. Longman, Brown, Green and Longman, London, 1844.

†Taken from Laing's Sea Kings of Norway, I. 5.

‡The Sequel, p 21.

have been mentioned to be one as Cape Breton. From here the Northmen put to sea again, and sailed two days with a north-east wind, till they came to an island; i. e., according to Mr. Brown's interpretation, they sailed away from P. E. I., to the eastward of Cape Breton—almost a northeasterly course, and one not apt to be taken in a northeasterly wind by Viking ships. From the eastward of Cape Breton, the Northmen are said to have reached Yarmouth, *via the Strait of Canso*—to say the least, an extremely improbable route. We must admit the inadequacy of this attempt to identify Yarmouth or its neighbourhood as Lief's Vinland.

The accounts of the voyage of Thorfinn Karlsefne (c. 1007) tell us that he sailed past Helluland and Markland; and yet southwest a long time with the land to starboard, till he came to a place where a frith or fiord penetrated far into the land. There was an island at the mouth of the frith, and strong currents ran around it; this was also the case further up the frith. This place Mr. Phillips and Mr. Brown identify with Yarmouth Harbour, on very insufficient grounds. To begin with, Yarmouth Harbour is very small—about two miles long; and nothing but a narrow, crooked channel when the tide is out. This would hardly seem to the Norsemen, used to the grand fiords of Norway and Iceland, as penetrating *far inland*. That it once extended several miles further, to the present Chegoggin River, as Mr. Brown assumes, is the merest supposition; and it would not even then make a respectable fiord. The island around which currents swept is supposed to be Bunker's Island, at the mouth of the harbour. Now Bunker's Island, as a glance at the map will show, is more peninsula than island, and the only place about it where there is any current is at the west end, where the tide waters flow in and out of the harbor. Even here, it is trifling—no more than a fisherman can row his dory against; and compared to that in many Nova Scotian harbours, and to the whirling eddies of the Tusket Islands, a few miles distant, and through which the Northmen would probably pass to reach Yarmouth, it is nothing. The current mentioned as existing further up in the frith is taken to be that at the mouth of the stream which flows

from the Cheggogin Salt Pond—a very insignificant and intermittent one ; and which might not exist at all, if the harbour were stretched to what Mr. Brown gives as its former extent. One circumstance mentioned in the narratives, however, shows pretty conclusively that Yarmouth Harbour could not have been Karlsefne's fiord : a party, sent in a northerly direction from here to find Vinland, Lief's wintering-place, had got a considerable distance on their way, when a westerly gale blew them over to Ireland. Now if one went northerly from the mouth of Yarmouth Harbour, he would go up the Bay of Fundy ; and a west wind would only drive him onto the Nova Scotian side of the Bay. And Ireland is not west of Yarmouth ; but of Labrador, four or five hundred mile further north.

I think, then, we must regard these attempts to show the identity of either Lief's wintering-place, or the fiord, and Yarmouth Harbour, as futile. Instead of the syllogism reading, "It is probable from their narratives that the Northmen were at Yarmouth ; the Fletcher Stone inscription can be made to read so and so in Runes ; there was a man of like name to one mentioned in the inscription, in the expedition, the account of which renders it probable that they were at Yarmouth ; therefore it is very probable that the Fletcher inscription is the work of these Northmen," we should read it—" It is *improbable* from the narratives that the Northmen were at Yarmouth ; the inscription cannot be made to read *anything* in Runes, and therefore, whether there was such and such a man or not, it is *very improbable that the Fletcher Stone inscription is the work of Northmen.*"

The next possible authors of such a thing as this inscription in Nova Scotia would be the French, who passed the Forked Cape, Cape Fourchu, in 1604 ; and who had, before a great many years, a thriving settlement all along the Cheggogin River, only a few miles from the spot where the stone was found. But though possible, it is certainly very improbable that they made the inscription ; and we may, I think, dismiss their claim without discussion.

Then, if we reject the claims of the Aborigines, of the Phœnicians, Northmen and French, we must of necessity attribute the inscription to the later English, for it certainly was not made

without hands. Of course there are many conceivable explanations for the occurrence of such a thing, all more or less unsatisfactory. The least unlikely seems to me to be—that the inscription was cut either by somebody merely for his own amusement; or by some mischievous fellow who wished it to pass for the work of an ancient or foreign people. This is not a satisfactory conclusion—it was going to a great deal of trouble to cut this inscription simply for amusement; and if it is an intentional fraud why was it not made so that some meaning could be taken from it? If, for instance, it was meant to pass for Runes—of course it could not have been at that date, when it was unknown that the Northmen were ever in America—the fabricator would have taken pains to make good Runes, as in the fictitious inscription found on the Potomac in 1867, where the characters were copied from genuine Greenland inscriptions. But, unsatisfactory and incapable of strict proof as it is, I believe this explanation must be accepted as the most probable.