

## The Cwmdu Pillar Stone and Associated Plaque: Statements of Identity

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In this day, when so many people urgently wish to define themselves and seek after identities, it can be interesting to see how people before us have understood and sought to define themselves, and even create a legacy by leaving a memorial.



The Pillar Stone,  
St Michael's, Cwmdu

In the buttress to the south aisle of the church of St Michael in Cwmdu is an ancient 'pillar stone' or 'menhir'. That it was set there in 1830, we may be sure, for there is a brass plaque next to it, commemorating the occasion. This paper looks at both the stone and the plaque.

### The Pillar Stone

The stone is inscribed in two lines and reads quite simply:  
CATACVS HIC IACIT FILIUS TEGUERNACVS  
Which means: Catacus here lies, son of Tegernacus.

V. E. Nash-Williams, in his book *The Early Christian Monuments of Wales*, dated the stone to the 6<sup>th</sup> or early 7<sup>th</sup> century<sup>i</sup>. Other authors concur with this view as does T. M. Charles-Edwards in his definitive account of 2014<sup>ii</sup>. With

little else surviving from that period of time in the vicinity, it is worth studying the words carefully in order learn something of this place in antiquity.

The names Tegernacus and Catacus are both Brythonic, that is 'ancient Briton', but the rest is in Latin and the formula is self-consciously Roman. A pure Brythonic inscription would put the father's name in the genitive case, *e.g.* Catacis Tegernaces, that is, Catac (*of*) Tegernac. Whoever wrote this, therefore, wanted to appear Roman! The inscription is the Christian Roman formula, 'hic iacit' (here lies), which in 4<sup>th</sup> century Italy replaced the earlier pagan formula, 'diis manibus' (to the shades *i.e.* to/for the shades of the dead). 'The shades' are the spiritual residues of those who went before; like the souls in

Hades, or the 'familiar spirits' of a family or place. So, whoever wrote this did not wish to appear as a pagan.

Let us now consider the spelling. 'Hic iacit' is not classical Latin; it is 'common Latin' of the kind that was used in Gaul (now France), as well as Britain. A classical author would have written 'hic iacet'. So the spelling may reflect Latin that was spoken in that area rather than Latin learned from a book.

To summarise, while the names are Brythonic, the inscription is in vernacular Latin: perhaps representing a culture in which both languages were known, and in which, Latin was the more prestigious.

The writing on the stone, the epigraphy, recalls a classical Roman style, but with rustic or informal features, occasional cursive and Grecian style letter forms<sup>iii</sup>. This could represent possible reintroduction of epigraphical culture from Gaul after the collapse of the Roman empire, for the last legions were withdrawn from Britain by 410 AD, more than 100 years before this was written. It suggests that an angular majuscule handwriting was still practised (that is, angular capital letters, with most writing done on wax tablets with a sharp stylus), and that there was a widespread memory of spoken Latin. The cursive letter forms could represent a growing familiarity with penmanship, that is, handwriting being done with pen on some form of paper or parchment.

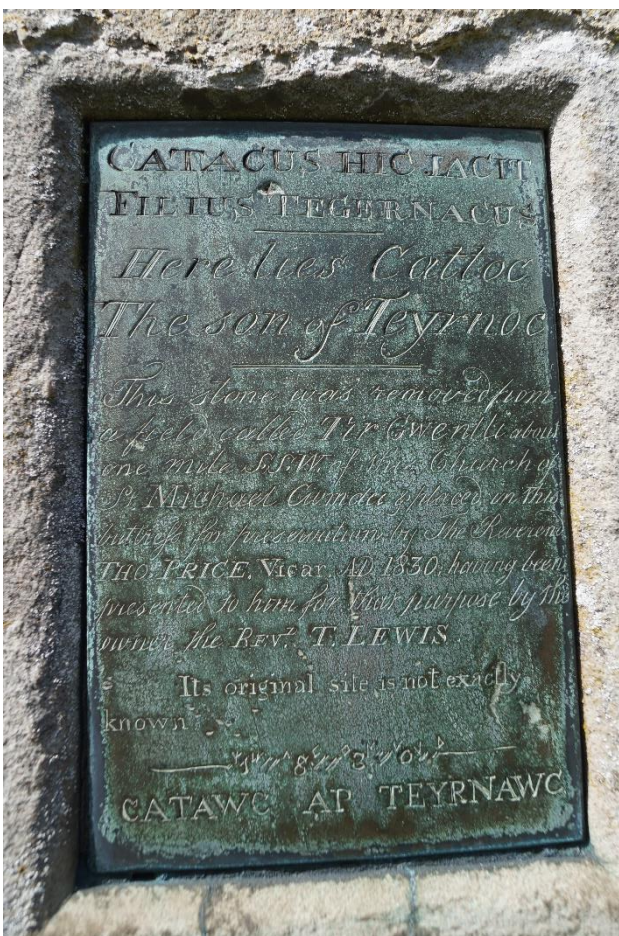
Inscribed stones like this tend to appear near Roman roads, suggesting that, when they were created, these roads were still being used: thus, the Roman road up the Usk Valley might have still been in use at this time. Most of the people being commemorated are known only by their names. But of those who have been identified all have been rulers of some sort, and, perhaps rather curiously, seem to be claiming legitimacy for their rule by appealing to a Roman lineage or a Roman-appointed office. So, it would seem that that Catacus and Tegernac were of the ruling class in the area, having adopted some sort of inherited Roman mantle of authority<sup>iv</sup>.



Here then, 1,500 years ago, a British ruler wanted to leave a memorial, identifying himself by his own and his father's names, and proclaiming his Roman culture and Christian faith, invoking the legitimacy of these for his status and actions—a clue to his language, his ancestry, and his position in society. And that society was one that looked back to Rome and was basically Christian, not pagan, in outlook.

The Plaque that records the Preservation of the Stone

The plaque beside the stone is almost as interesting as the stone itself, telling us much about another person, time and place that is very different from that of Catacus



CATACUS HIC IACIT  
 FILIUS TEGERNACUS  
 Here lies Cattoe  
 son of Teyrnoc

This stone was removed from  
 a field Tir Gwenni about  
 one mile SSW of the church of  
 St Michael Cwmdu & placed in this  
 buttress for preservation by the Reverend  
 THO. PRICE, Vicar, AD 1830 having been  
 presented to him for that purpose by the  
 owner the REV.<sup>D</sup> T LEWIS.

Its original site is not exactly  
known.

Y W ^ C O M V J D  
 1 8 3 0

CATAWC AP TEYRNAWC

The Reverend Thomas Price (1787 - 1848) was a remarkable man, also known by his Bardic name: *Carnhuanawc*. He was one of the new order of bards, The Gorsedd, that (formed by antiquarians and scholars) emerged out a mixture of enlightenment curiosity and love of discovery, mixed with Romantic nationalism and creativity. He was also the vicar of St Michael's in Cwmdu, having previously been vicar in St. Elli parish



church, Gilwern. He made name for himself as a writer, poet, and antiquarian, and was interested in what he would have seen as his country's ancient heritage in this inscribed stone. He was a pioneer, and the careful recording and preservation of this stone were part of his examination of Wales, of Welshness, Welsh language, and of the history of Britain.

What is curious about this plaque is the repetition of the date. You will see in the illustration how the date is embedded in the text, and then repeated underneath.

But careful observation of the engraving reveals that the engraver who did most of the writing is not the same as the one who did the second date. Most of the engraving is neatly done by a professional engraver, with steady hand, smooth curves, and straight lines, forming neat, uniform letters. The second date is done somewhat roughly, with jagged, broken curves, and somewhat haphazard flourishes. Moreover, there are rough hatchings around the numbers, and some uneven marks above them. The first of these marks is fairly clear and looks like a rune, that is an ancient Nordic letter of the kind designed to be cut across the grain of wood. Careful examination reveals that all the marks in this upper row are, in fact, runes of a type named the Coelbren y Beirdd (English: 'Bards' lot')



The Reverend Thomas Price

that was created in the late eighteenth century by the literary forger Edward Williams. He is better known as Iolo Morganwg, the founder of the Gorsedd of Bards, and the contentious colleague of Thomas Price and the other Welsh antiquarians who together revived the National Eisteddfod, with Abergavenny as one of the leading venues.

This new runic alphabet consists of forty letters that resembled Ancient Greek or North Italic alphabets, and, like Nordic runes, could be carved on four-sided pieces of wood and fitted into a frame he called a 'peithynen'.



specifically for Welsh, allowing Welsh sounds to be accurately and simply written without recourse to diphthongs or clusters of letters, or changing sound rules; rather as the Cyrillic alphabet works better for Slavic languages like Russian and Bulgarian than the adapted Latin alphabets of Polish and Czech.

Together with the rest of the inscription, they read 'yma gorwedd CATAWC AP TEYRNAWC', a Welsh version of the inscription on the stone. Note the modernised spellings of the names: the middle unstressed vowel and the final unstressed -os have been lost, Tegernacos becoming Teyrnawc (or Teyrnoc).

Thus, this whole exercise is one of rediscovering and working out Welshness, with the intention of developing its culture, and consequently generating confidence in the identity of Wales. Thomas Price was creating a physical memorial of himself, reinstating the memorial of his ancient forbear, Catawc ap Teyrnoc, and leaving a cultural legacy for his people.

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<sup>i</sup> Nash-Williams, V E; 1950; *The Early Christian Monuments of Wales*; University of Wales, Cardiff.

<sup>ii</sup> Charles-Edwards T.M; 2014; *Wales and the Britons: 350-1064*; Oxford University Press.

<sup>iii</sup> Angular Greek styled letter A; V has forked serif; F g h n r t all in half uncial (curved letters, suited to a pen on paper) style. The rest are formal Roman capitals, majuscule.

<sup>iv</sup> It may be noted that this could be the same Tegernacus, son of Marti, whose stone was at Cefn Brithdir, near New Tredegar.