

The Cwmdu Pillar Stone: further thoughts on the role of the Rev Thomas Price

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Catacus Stone Thomas Price in Payne's Papers, Powys Archive

This article is a sequel to the paper by Jeremy Bevan on the Catacus stone and associated plaque in the buttress of Cwmdu Church (BS&MF Occasional Paper No 14).

Having read it, I was stimulated to go back to a sketchbook in the Powys archives. This contains notes by Theophilus Jones and drawings by the teen-age Thomas Price, made in preparation for the second volume of *The History of Brecknockshire*. On page 44 of the sketchbook is this rather poor drawing of the stone made by the young Thomas Price. Unusually there are few notes, just a brief description which reads:

Stone in Cwmdu. It was formerly in all probability placed upright it is now thrown down near the lane leading from Gaer to Cwmdu.

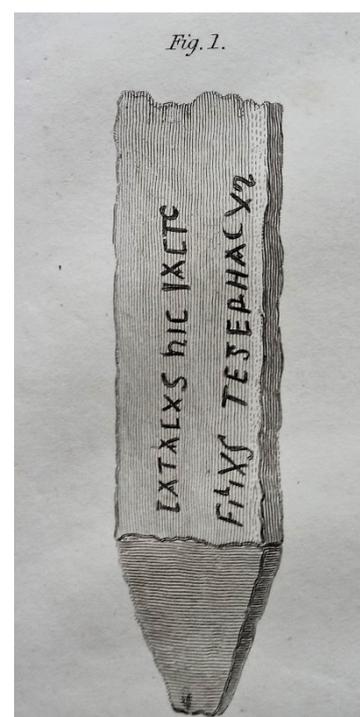
There is also a note of its length (6ft 10in) and its breadth (1 ft).

This sketch was used as the basis for the illustration on Plate 5 in *The History*, made by the professional London-based engraver James Basire. The text in *The History* referring to the stone is worth quoting as it shows much of Theophilus' character, especially his loathing for the casual English tourist:

The first vestige of antiquity I meet with in this wreck of time, is a stone, now thrown down, in a field about half a mile from Tretower, on which is the following Barbaro-British-Latin inscription, in most uncouth characters,

CATACUS HIC IACT FILIUS TESERHACUS.

This stone has been noticed by Camden or rather by one of his editors and a



Detail of Plate 5 from *The History of Brecknockshire: Volume 2* Theophilus Jones 1809

plate of it given; not so the Roman station of Gaer, at about two hundred yards summer westward, which has been completely overlooked and neglected not only by Leland, and by the above author and his commentators, but by the numerous swarms of friends who have been lately blown into the principality, whose acuteness can discern and describe the manners of the country from the occasional behaviour of a landlord or a waiter, its history from the prattle of gossips, travelling on the high road, or sitting at a cottage door and its antiquities from the information of the sextons in the villages through which they fly. (Page 499 Vol 2)

It is possible that, although this stone was not far from Brecon, Thomas Price's sketchbook drawing is a copy of an illustration in Camden's *Britannia*, though I have not been able to find the original in Gough or Gibson's Edition. However to me, the presence of the measurements suggests that this is an original sketch made on the spot by Thomas Price.



Catacus Stone

By 1830 Thomas Price was the Reverend Thomas Price, Rector of Cwm Du. As described by Jeremy Bevan, he was renowned as "Carnhuanawc", historian, orator, and champion of the culture of Cymru. He had been gifted the Catacus stone by the Rev Thomas Lewis of Llanbedr, and when rebuilding his church St Michaels had arranged for the stone to be mortared into a buttress on the south side of the church.



Cwmdu Church

An extra dimension to the story is provided by an unsigned 1833 article in ***The Cambrian Quarterly Magazine and Celtic Repository*** which contains a detailed description how the Catacus stone had been saved from being used as a footbridge and how it came to be built into the church at Cwmdu. There is a detailed and learned discussion of its date and analysis of the inscription. The writer criticises the representation in ***The History*** "as the inscription is there very inaccurately given". He ascribes the date to the late 6th century and notes the use of a corrupt form of Latin and relates it to other examples used in France in the 6th C , comments on the Latinizing of the Welsh word Teyrnoc, muses on the role of the quiescent G , and considers the two candidates for Catacus. He writes: *Who this Cattawc was remains to be ascertained. There were two of the name who are recorded among the ancient British saints:*

Cattwg ap Givynlliw, who lived in the sixth century, and Cattwg ap Brychart in the fifth, and who died in France, probably in Brittany. There were also at least two saints named Teyrnawc about the same period.

There can be little doubt that this article is written by the Rev Thomas Price himself, a conjecture reinforced by his criticism of his own teenage drawing! His authorship is confirmed when the last paragraph of his article includes this unusual invitation;

Should any of our readers who may chance to visit the celebrated vale of Crickhowel, in South Wales, feel an inclination to examine this very interesting ancient British monument, we have the pleasure of informing them that they may now extend their excursion through the beautiful valley of Cwmdy to the banks of the Wye, along the new road lately opened through that country; for which the Principality is indebted to the munificence and public spirit of John Hotchkis, Esq., of Lanwysc villa, Crickhowel, who almost entirely at his own expense began and completed this undertaking. Thomas Price certainly had a particular interest in this new road and had attended a dinner given in honour of Mr Hotchkis, at which he was himself toasted as a key supporter. In replying to this honour, Price stated that he had *“attended the committee road meetings, and assisted, as far as lay in his power”* (Monmouthshire Merlin 1832).

The Cambrian Quarterly article also contains a representation of the stone and any doubt that Thomas Price is the author is eliminated when we find the same illustration included in an essay authored by Thomas Price that he submitted to the *Abergavenny Eisteddfod* in 1838 entitled *“On the influence which the Welsh Traditions have had on the Literature of Europe”*



Inscription on Catacus Stone in Cambrian Quarterly Magazine 1833

The Bardic Letters on the Plaque and Thomas Price as Engraver

In his article, Jeremy Bevan drew attention not only to the stone but also to the little engraved bronze plaque beside it. He considers that this was the work of two hands; one person engraving the majority of the text and, at a later date, a second person engraving the last few lines. Jeremy Bevan's remarkable achievement was to note that the marks above the date in this bottom section of the plaque are runes of a type named the Coelbren y Beirdd (English: 'Bards' lot'). Translated from the runic script, they spell out 'yma gorwedd' which together with the inscription below - CATAWC AP TEYRNAWC' - provide a Welsh version of the inscription on the stone.



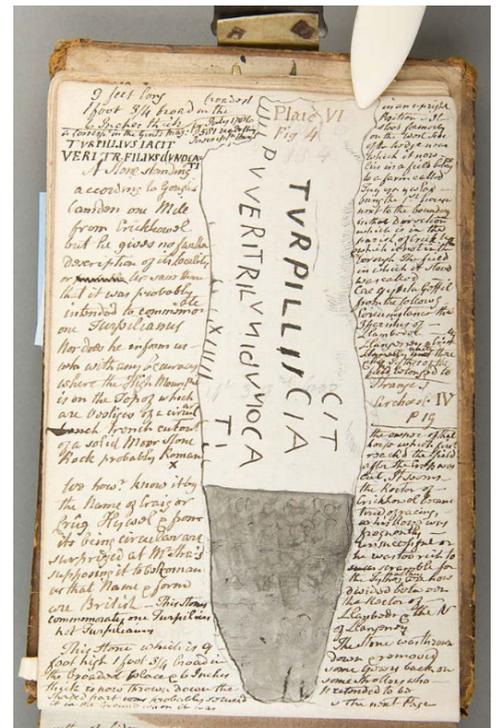
Detail of the lowest quarter of the commemorative Plaque on Cwmdru Church Wall

I would argue that all the engraving was most probably the work of the Reverend Thomas Price himself and carried out as one piece of design. Undoubtedly, he had the necessary skill: in *The Literary Remains of Thomas Price* (1854) collected and edited by Jane Williams, she records that "*he had once' been apprenticed, at his own desire, to a line engraver*", and how "*he engraved on coins*". Equally important, it does not seem likely that the inscription would have stopped three-quarters of the way down the plaque, leaving an awkward space below it.

It must be said that Thomas Price and his circle had long had their doubts about the precise detail of the Coelbren y Beirdd. Thus Price's mentor, Theophilus Jones had written to Edward Davies as early as 1804 "*I fear you have been imposed upon ... as to the Coelbren y Beirdd . I am very much mistaken if that alphabet is not the manufacture of Ned Williams (Iolo Morganwg)*". And in 1840 Thomas Price himself wrote to Jane Williams saying "*I have doubted the antiquity of his system How all this I thought to be the mere production of the leisure hours of old Iolo Morganwg, or some other person in modern times.*"

Nevertheless, I am sure Jeremy Bevan is right to see the inclusion of runes on the Cwm Du inscription as a measure of Thomas Price's interest in creating a Welsh cultural identity. Price may well have been thinking of other local stones with both Latin inscriptions and Ogham or runic marks notched into them and with both giving the same information. A good example would be the Turpillius stone in Crickhowell and now at the Brecknock Museum at y Gaer. Thomas Price had sketched it as a young man; a sketch which like his drawing of the Cwm Du stone was then engraved for the *History of Brecknockshire*.

Moreover, despite well-founded doubts as to its authenticity, "the Coelbren proved too important to lose and became a symbol of Bardic and national enthusiasm, appearing on gravestones and monuments such as the inscribed circle of stones left to commemorate eisteddfodau." (Mary-Ann Constantine, *The Truth Against the World*, 2007).



Turpillius Stone by Thomas Price in "Payne" Sketchbook, Powys Archive