Ogam

Languages | Writing | Epigraphy

AELAW Booklet/ ??

OGAM. LANGUAGES, WRITING, EPIGRAPHY

TEXTS

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COVER ILLUSTRATION

Ogam stone from An tSeanchill / Shankill, Co. Kilkenny, discovered 1969. The inscription around the edges reads MAQICUNALIGẸẠṢ | MAQI COILLI| MUCOI COSCỊ|ẸẠṢ ‘of Maqqas-Cunalinga (*Mac-Conlainge*) son of Coilas (*Cóel*) from the sept of Cosca (*Cosc*)’. Photo by N. White.

Introduction

Page 3 bottom right: This book is concerned chiefly with the ‘orthodox’ Irish Ogam inscriptions from the 5th‒7th centuries. The small, but diverse corpus of inscriptions from Scotland is not dis­cussed in detail. References in this book are in the form CIIC X, where X is the number in Macalister 1945. Names in translations will be in two forms: one where they are rendered in their Early Primitive Irish form, the earliest phase of Ogam writing of roughly the 4th and early 5th centuries a.d., as well as in the form in which the names would appear in Old Irish (8th century a.d.). The contrast between them conveys an idea of the transformations that the Irish language had undergone in the interim.

Ogam is the name of a peculiar writing system that was invented to represent the Primitive Irish language. Ogam flourished on standing stones between the 5th and 7th centuries, but it remained in sporadic use afterwards to write Old Irish, the direct descendant of Primitive Irish, and even the Middle and Modern Gaelic languages, on monuments and in manu­scripts. Even today, Ogam serves as a token cultural artifact to showcase, if not to construct, an image of Irishness. In this book, the Old Irish spelling *Ogam* (pronounced [ˈoɣəm], with the sound *g* as in Spanish or in Dutch) will be used. This stands beside the equivalent and more common Modern Irish spel­ling *Ogham* (pronounced [ˈoːm]). In medi­eval texts, spellings such as *ogom* and *ogum* can also be found. The different vowels are just alternative ways of repre­senting the indistinct vowel *schwa* in the second syllable. The word *ogam* can refer both to the peculiar script itself as well as to inscriptions in this script.

The name of the Ogam script recalls that of the medieval Irish mythological figure Ogma, a character of extraordinary strength, who, however, is nowhere in medieval Irish literature linked with the art of writing. Ogma’s name is in turn reminiscent of that of the Gaulish mytho­logical figure Ogmios (Ὄγμιος). He is mentioned by the Greek author Lucian of Samo­sata (c. 125‒after 180 a.d.) as a *psychopompos*, a guide who leads the souls of men through the power of his tongue. Ogmius is also mentioned as a lord of the underworld on two late-antique Latin curse tablets from Bregenz in Austria. The relationship of these figures to the Ogam script remains puzzling. None of them has an obvious connection to writing. It is not even universally ac­cepted that the ancient name *Ogmios/Ogmius* and the medieval Irish name *Ogma* are related. If they are, the equation would constitute strong proof for a pan-Celtic divine figure ‒ about whose character and attributes little can be said, however.

Figs. 1‒2. Bregenz curse tablet (Vorarlberg Museum Bregenz, Austria, Inventarnummer B 30.316).

This small lead tablet in Roman cursive script from the 1st c. a.d., found in the town of *Brigantium* (mod. Bregenz, Austria), contains a curse in Latin. The scribe calls upon the god *Ogmius* to harm all those men who are going to testify in court against a woman called Brutta.

Fig. 3. Albrecht Dürer, Hermes (Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien, Aquarell, 46 (KK 5127 (Codex))).

This watercolour by Albrecht Dürer (1471‒1528), based on Lucian of Samosata’s description of Ogmios, depicts the god as the leader of a group of men who are attached to him by chains that extend from his tongue to their ears. Dürer’s portrayal of Ogmios conforms to classical descriptions of the Greek god Hermes.

The etymology of the word Ogam is disputed. One possibility is to trace it back to Proto-Celtic \**ogmos*. This would be an obvious cognate of Greek ὄγμος ‘furrow, course of heavenly bodies, swathe’ and Vedic *ájma-* ‘course, track’, all going back to Proto-Indo-European \**h2óg̑mo-*. This etymology implies that the Proto-Celtic cluster \**gm* was retained as such in Irish, which is disputed by some scholars ‒ albeit on weak grounds. The underlying root is Indo-European \**h2eg̑-* ‘to drive, impel’. The meaning of the Greek and Sanskrit words can be combined under the primary meaning ‘track, furrow’, which also yields a reasonable seman­tic motivation for the Ogam script. Its letters consist of ‘furrows’ incised into a stone, they are, as it were, the ‘tracks’ that the chisel leaves. If the names of Ogmios and Ogma are connected with this word, which seems suggestive given the formal similarity, they have to be interpreted as adjectives of the meaning ‘having to do with tracks, furrows’. However, this explanation elucidates little of the attributes of the two mythological figures.

Geographic-historical sketch

Approximately 400 Ogams are known from Ireland and from those parts of Britain which had Irish settlements in late antiquity and in the early middle ages. This encompasses not only Scotland and the Isle of Man where Gaelic languages, descended from Primitive Irish, are spoken until the present day, but also Wales, Cornwall and Devon, whose pockets of Irish settlements did not survive the early middle ages.

The geographic distribution of Ogam stones is very uneven, among those countries, and within each of them. In Ireland, which claims the bulk of the inscriptions, there are around 330 stones. Wales has forty, Cornwall and Devon together half a dozen. From England, a single stone is known. In Scotland, six stones are from the traditionally Gaelic-speaking area of Dál Ríata (mod. Argyll), and over thirty from the Pictish kingdoms, mostly from the east coast of Scotland, the Orkneys, and the Shetlands. Some of the latter appear to be non-Irish in language.

In Ireland, Ogams are mainly found in the south of the island, in a wide arch that spans from the south-west, where they are densely clustered in Kerry, along the entire south coast up to Wexford, and extending from there northwards through counties Kilkenny and Kildare, west of the Wicklow Mountains. The Waterford–East Cork area in the south had an old dynastic link with Wales, which suggests itself as a channel of trans­mission for this unique art of writing. In Wales, too, the stones are concentrated in the south-west, but also in the north-west, especially on Angelesey. While the use of Ogam is mainly a cultural trait of certain regions, the distri­bu­tion of the inscriptions depends also on material factors, such as the availability of suitably hard rock that does not splinter on the edges.

The 5th‒7th centuries are the height of the Ogam tradition. Inscrip­tions from this period con­stitute the so-called ‘orthodox’ Ogam corpus, while later stones are not wholly appropriately called ‘scho­lastic’ Ogam, a phase in which the practice comes under manifest influence from Old Irish and younger manu­script writing.

The origins of the Ogam script are obscure. In *In Lebor Ogaim* ‘The Book of Ogam’, an Old Irish treatise on the Ogam alphabet, the mythical character Ogma son of Elatha is credited with its invention: “Now Ogma, a man well skilled in speech and in poetry, invented the Ogam. (This was) the cause of its invention: as a proof of his ingenuity, and that this speech should belong to the learned apart, to the exclusion of rustics and herdmen.” Irrespective of a genuine connection between the words, the name of the Ogam script is evidently reminiscent of the mythical Ogma. Ogma’s father is credited with a speaking name, too. *Elatha* (also *elada*) is an Early Irish word for ‘art, science’.

Apart from this literary fiction, no reliable historical evidence exists about the invention of the script. It is believed that it was invented by someone of Irish back­ground, but trained in Latin writing and with a familiarity with the Latin grammatical tradition. Wales, where most of the British Ogam stones are found and which saw Irish settlements in the late antique period, is a possible region for the cultural transfer, but it is impossible to name any specific place. The position of Irish is almost unique in early medieval Western Europe in that the Irish were the only ones who had to learn Latin from scratch as a foreign language. They were forced to engage in a theoretical way with it, which in turn led them also to reflect upon their own native language. Ogam is probably one result of this process of reflection. Its invention can be under­stood as a response to encountering a tradition of publicly visible monuments with writing on them, a tradition that is deeply engrained in Roman culture. As a consequence of its obscure origins, Ogam cannot be called an autochthonous script of Ireland in the strict sense, although it is clearly a local, vernacular script.

The date of the invention of Ogam is likewise obscure. The *communis opinio* holds that the earliest extant specimens of the script belong to the early 5th or perhaps the late 4th century. Whether this time­frame coincides with the invention of the script, is a different matter. One approach is to make inferences about the time of its invention on the basis of the phono­logical sys­tem that Ogam expresses. The script was evidently created with the sound system of Pri­mi­tive Irish in mind, which it reflects reasonably well, while it is unsuited for the very com­pli­cated phono­logical system of Old Irish of approximately the 7th century onwards. A set of complex orthographic rules is employed to spell the sounds of the Old Irish language, but none of these techniques is observable on Ogam inscriptions. These considerations therefore set the 5th cen­tury as the upper limit for the invention of Ogam. Structural arguments have been put for­ward in support of a date even further back in time. For centuries before the 5th century, the phono­logical system of Primitive Irish underwent only little changes so that Ogam could as well be suited for the langu­age of the 1st or 2nd centuries a.d. as for that of the 4th century.

Noteworthy arguments for an early invention of Ogam is the fact that three letters of the signary, J/H *hÚath*, Gʷ/NG *nGétal*, and ST/Z *Straif*, never occur in the orthodox corpus, as if they had already become obsolete by that time. On the other hand, an extra letter, com­monly transcribed as K, is used in the formula word KOI ‘here (?)’. This word occurs only in inscrip­tions which otherwise show archaic traits. The introduction of an extra letter into an otherwise graphically well-thought-out script could mean that the writing system had already undergone some internal development, which would likewise imply a certain time depth.

However, because of the absence of archaeological evidence, most scholars are re­luctant to go back much further than c. 400 a.d. with the invention of the Ogam script. This is rough­ly the time when Chris­ti­a­nity set foot in Ireland. It is suggestive to find a con­nec­tion between the two events. Perhaps Ogam was devised as a vernac­ular reaction to Latin literacy, which was a pre­requisite for embracing the Christian tradi­tion.

Fig. 4. Silchester, England, CIIC 496 (kept at Reading Museum).

Archaeo­logists have dated this stone from a late-Roman villa to the 4th or early 5th century, which makes it one of the earliest dated stones and which harmonises well with its archaic phonology. It reads TEBICATO[S] [MAQ]I MUC[OI ‘of Tebicatus (\**Tibchad*?) son of from the sept of…’. While the second element of the name *-cato[s]* is the recognisably Celtic word for ‘battle’, *Tebi-* is difficult. If Irish, it would be obscure since it has no correspondence in Old Irish. Alternatively, it has been suggested to be a British Celtic form of Celtic \**teku̯-* ‘to run, flee’, but B instead of expected P would be highly remark­able. The name of Tebicatus’ sept has been lost.

De­spite the celebrated activities of Irish mis­sio­naries and scholars across early medieval Western and Central Europe, there are no Ogam stones on the European continent, although very occa­sionally scribblings in Ogam are found in medieval Irish manuscripts that are today preserved in continental libraries. With few exceptions, Ogam is a chiefly medieval Irish and Scottish pheno­menon. The employ­ment of Ogam as a token pan-Celtic script in marketing is nonsense, as is the notion of Ogam inscriptions in North America.

Ogam stones have often been re-used as building material in younger structures. In the modern period, many stones were removed from their original sites, either at the instigation of antiquarian collectors, or to protect them from the adverse effects of the elements. The largest accessible collection of Ogam stones is in University College Cork, where they are lined up in the corridor of the main building. Many stones are also in the National Museum in Dublin, where, however, most of them are stowed away in stores. Many stones can still be encountered *in situ* in Ireland. They can be very hard to access, for example when they are on private lands. New Ogam stones are discovered every now and then, either in archaeological excavations, or during the renovation of old buildings, such as churches or walls. Newly found stones are often fragmentary and difficult to read.

Fig. 5. An Chreathánach Theas / Crehanagh South, Co. Waterford, CIIC 293.

An Ogam stone in its natural habitat with its guardians. The natural enemies of Ogam inscriptions are erosion through the Insular weather, human interaction, and cows that scratch their backs on the sharp edges (the arris) of the stones. The circle of bare earth around the stone here has been created by cattle walking around the stone and ‒ probably ‒ scratching their backs. The inscription reads VOCAGNI MAQI CUR[I]T ‘of Vocagnas (\**Fochán*) son of Curitas (\**Cuired*?)’.

Since it is not possible to assign dates to rock (unless in geological dimensions), the dating of Ogam inscriptions depends on circumstantial information, such as accom­panying archaeo­logical finds, which are few, or linguistic and palaeographic arguments, which can be circular. Even among the handbooks, the assigned dates can vary con­sid­erably. This is not due to errors of the authors, but this uncertainty is the nature of the data. The dating of individual Ogam stones is, generally speaking, a minefield of palaeography, linguistics, philology, and archaeo­logy.

While there is a large number of dynasties whose names can be recognised on stones in their home regions, very rarely can names on Ogams be identified with historically known indivi­duals. Names of persons who can be matched up with information from annals, genealogies or other historical sources would allow to calibrate the linguistic stages of the lan­guage. One example shall illustrate the issues involved: A stone from Painestown (Co. Meath) mentions Mac-Caírthinn, member of the Leinster dynasty of the Uí Enechglais. A king of Lein­ster and of Tara called Mac-Caírthinn is known from an early genealogical poem. According to the Annals of Ulster, a Mac-Caírthinn son of Cóelub died in a battle at Feimen in 446. It is probable, but not entirely certain that the two historical sources speak about the same person, and that that person can be identified with the recipient of the Ogam memorial. In any case, the 5th-century date of Mac-Caírthinn mac Cóelboth does not harmonise well with the loss of the inflectional ending in the last word of the Ogam inscription.

Fig. 6. Baile Phaghain / Painestown, Co. Meath, CIIC 40; kept at National Museum of Ireland.

This inscription is a palimpsest, written over an even older inscription. It reads MAQI-CAIRATINI AVI INEQAGLAS ‘of Maqqas-Cairatini (*Mac-Caírthinn*) descendant of Ineqaglassas (*Enechglass*)’. The inflectional endings are preserved in the first four words, but the final *-i* has already been lost in INEQAGLAS, which means that the stone does not belong to the oldest stratum. This is a rare example of a stone from the northern half of the island where the Ogam tradition never gained a firm foothold.

Research History

Knowledge of the Ogam script never died out in the Gaelic-speaking world. As a mani­fes­tation of the native intellectual culture, the inscriptions have always been the object of antiqua­rian interest and of private curiosity in Ireland. Medieval scholars produced tracts which teach how to read and write Ogam. From manuscripts like these, modern scholars have been able to derive essential information about the writing system so that it did not have to be arduously deciphered, unlike other ancient scripts.

Fig. 7. *In Lebor Ogaim*, the ‘Book of Ogam’, Royal Irish Academy MS 23 P 12 (Book of Ballymote), f. 170r.

*In Lebor Ogaim* is a tract about the values of the letters and various cryptographic variants of the alphabet. It survives in copies from the 14th to the 17th centuries. This gorgeously illustrated page in the 14th-century Book of Ballymote shows several varieties of Ogam, many of them of an arcane type.

The standard print edition of Ogam inscriptions in Ireland and Southern Britain is *Corpus Inscrip­tionum In­sularum Celticarum* by R.A.S. Macalister 1945; the stones in Britain have seen several new editions since then, most recently by Nancy Edwards. The authoritative modern intro­duc­tion to Ogam is Damian McManus 1991. He discusses the hypotheses about the origins of Ogam, its evolution from a genu­ine writing system to an object of antiquarian interest, and its cultural context. The rich and diverse Scottish tradition of Ogam has received full attention only from the 1990s onwards, especially in the work of Katherine Forsyth.

The most comprehensive digital corpus of Ogam is Nora White’s on-going *Ogham in 3D*, a multimedia data­base hosted by the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies. It uses laser scanning and photogrammetry techno­logy to create 3D images of Ogam stones. The data collection has so far focussed on Ireland, of which *c*. 160 stones have been captured; further work, together with Katherine Forsyth and the present writer, aims at incorporating all inscriptions from Ireland and Britain. More attention will have to be paid in the future to non-orthodox inscrip­tions, that is, to the use of Ogam on material other than standing stones and from the long period after the 7th century, in order to achieve a full picture of its history and of its role as a vernacular writing system.

Fig. 8. Breac-chluain / Brackloon, Co. Kerry, CIIC 173.

Screenshot of a 3D-image from the *Ogham in 3D* database. The website allows the three-dimensional rotation of high resolution images in a web browser (https://ogham.celt.dias.ie/stone.php?lang=en&site=Musaem\_Chorca\_Dhuibhne&stone=173.\_Brackloon&stoneinfo=html3dview). This fragment only contains the middle part of the original inscription MA]Q̣I MUCC̣[OI ‘…of the son from the sept of…’

Language

Ogam is not the name of a language, but of a writing system. The language that is proto­typically written in the Ogam signary is Irish in several of its historical manifestations. Primitive Irish in the Ogam script is the earliest attested representative of Goidelic or Gaelic, one of the four known sub-branches of the Celtic branch of the Indo-European language family. The other branches are Celtiberian, Gaulish (two Old Celtic languages that died out in antiquity), and British, also called Brythonic. Celtic languages attested after the middle of the 1st millennium a.d. are New Celtic languages. Depending on whether a Celtic language is known from before or after that time, its phonology, morphology and syntax, in short, its entire typological make-up, are radically different. Ancient Celtic languages are similar to other old Indo-European lan­gu­ages such as Latin, Greek or Sanskrit. They are fully inflectional languages with a compara­tively free word order, a simple vowel system, and they lack a differentiated system of sibilants.

Aside from a handful of 1st- and 2nd-century geographical names, Irish is attested in writing from the 5th century a.d. Therefore a brief period of the transmission of Irish falls before the cut-off point for New Celtic, making it effectively the only Celtic language to straddle both Old and New Celtic. The most strik­ing feature of the early language is the retention of fully func­tional inflectional endings. The early period (4th‒6th centuries) is traditionally called Primitive Irish. This is followed by Archaic Irish or Early Old Irish in the 7th century, and Old Irish in the 8th and 9th centuries. Ogam inscriptions of the orthodox tradition belong to the Primitive and Archaic Irish phase. Inscrip­tions from later phases (Old, Middle and even Modern Irish and Scottish Gaelic) are under the manifest influence of manuscript-based writing. They are well documented and described elsewhere.

Phonology

Ogam inscriptions are famous for preserving, like snap-shots, the profound changes that the langu­age underwent from the 5th to 7th century, during the ‘classical’ period of Ogam use. The sound system of the earliest phase is radically different from that towards the end of that period. Therefore it is useful to distinguish between Early Ogam Irish at the beginning and Late Ogam Irish when the language had become very close to Old Irish.

Early Ogam Irish had fourteen consonant phonemes (plus maybe three marginal phonemes in brackets; see table \*\*), and ten vowel phonemes. In addition, there were three diphthongs, *ai̯*, *oi̯* and *au̯*. The number of consonant letters in Ogam corresponds closely to the con­sonants of Primitive Irish. With the exception of glides and fricatives, all consonants can occur as geminates, but this cannot be represented in the Ogam script. Even if the consonant signs repre­sent the language of this time fairly well, the vowel signs do not. Only five letters are used for the ten vowels since no graphic distinction is made between short and long vowels. Therefore Ogam cannot be called a perfect writing system.

Table 1 Consonants of Early Primitive Irish

plosive nasal fricative glide liquid

bilabial b m w

dental t d n l r

alveolar s (z)

palatal j

velar k g (x ɣ)

labiovelar kʷ gʷ

Table 2 Vowels of Early Primitive Irish

front back

close i iː u uː

mid e eː o o:

open a a:

Towards the end of the Primitive Irish period, this system had been transformed into the complex system of the 45 consonants of Old Irish (table \*\*\*). The number of vowels remained relatively stable, with 10 main vowels and a small number of marginal vowel phone­mes (table \*\*\*), plus around a dozen diphthongs. However, the script is not designed to express the phono­logically crucial distinctions in the late Ogam consonant system, such as the oppo­si­tion between fricatives and plosives, geminated sounds, or the distinction between ‘broad’ and ‘slender’ consonants. ‘Slender’ means that a consonant is palatalised, i.e. a brief [j]-like sound (the sound of *y* in English *year*) follows it. It is evident that the set of Ogam letters best reflects the stage of Primitive Irish before the rise of the dichotomy between neutral and palatalised consonants, and before the phonemi­cisation of lenition. Lenition is the ‘relaxed’ pronunication of a con­sonant; very often it means turning a stop into the corresponding frictaive. In other words, Ogam must have been created before the soundchanges of apocope (the sweeping loss of almost all final syllables; approximately 500 a.d.) and syncope (the loss of many internal unstressed vow­el; approximately mid-6th century) led to the pro­liferation of Irish consonant phonemes. This is corroberated by the fact that the oldest inscrip­tions dis­tin­guish correctly between the two letters Q vs. C for the Proto-Celtic sounds \**ku̯* and \**k*, which very soon afterwards fell together in­discriminately as /k/. In inscriptions from the 6th century onwards, the two are hope­lessly con­fused.

Table \*\*\* Consonants of Old Irish

plosive nasal fricative liquid

labial p b pj bj m mj β̃ β̃j f β fj βj

dental t d tj dj nː n nːj nj θ ð θj ðj lː l lːj lj rː r rːj rj

alveolar s sj (= ʃ?)

velar k g kj gj ŋ ŋj x ɣ xj ɣj

glottal h

Table \*\*\* Vowels of Old Irish

front back

close i iː (y) u uː

eː

mid e (œ) ǝ o o:

(ɛː)

open a ɑ:

Lexicon

It is fair to say that for information about the lan­guage other than phonology, Ogam inscrip­tions of the orthodox tradition are underwhelming. They consist almost exclusively of personal names, the vast majority of which are masculine. The inscriptions contain no verbs, no adjec­tives, nor any other parts of speech, with the sole exception of KOI, probably meaning ‘here’, on early stones in Ireland. Even generic nouns are a rarity. Apart from the formulaic word for ‘son’ in many permutations, only around a dozen nouns are found (see table \*\*\*). Of these, ANM, KOI and all the words that are only attested once are confined to Ireland. On the other hand, due to the fact that stones in Ireland are never dedicated to women, INIGENA ‘daughter’ occurs only in Wales.

Table \*\*\*: List of generic nouns on Ogam stones

ANM ‘name’ or ‘soul’

ATAR ‘father’ (1×)

AVI ‘grandson’

CELI ‘client’

INIGENA ‘daughter’ (1×, only found in Wales)

KOI ‘here’

MAQQI ‘son’ (many variants)

MUCOI ‘from the sept’

NIOTTA ‘nephew’

QRIMITIR ‘priest’ (1×)

TRIA ‘three’ (1×)

VELITAS ‘poet’ (1×)

Fig. 9: Cill Maoilchéadar / Kilmalkedar, Co. Kerry, CIIC 187.

The inscription begins with the noun *anm* whose interpretation is not secure. It could either cor­re­spond to Old Irish *ainm* ‘name’ or *animm* ‘soul’. Accordingly the inscription ẠṆM MẠỊLE-INBIR/ MACI BROCANN can be understood ‘name’ or ‘soul of Maila Eniberi (*Máel Inbir*) son of Broccagnas (*Broccán*)’.

All words on Ogam inscriptions are in the genitive, indicating ‘of’ who the stone is. A large portion of the names are compound names of the inherited Indo-European type. That means that they consist of two lexical elements, of which the first typically qualifies the second, e.g. ERCAVICCAS ‘fighter (\**u̯ik-*) for Erc (a divinity?)’ or SALICIDUNI ‘willow (\**salik-*) fort (\**dūno-*)’. A different, apparently ‘non-Indo-European’ type are those bimembric names where the first element belongs to a small class of generic nouns and the second, in the genitive case, depends on the former, e.g. NETA-SEGAMONAS ‘warrior (\**nēt-*) of Segamū (a divinity?)’ or MAIC-BROCC ‘son (\**maku̯ku̯o-*) of the badger (\**brokko-*)’. Simple names that consist of a single lexical item, e.g. RODDOS ‘red one (\**rōdu-*)’ or TOVISACI ‘leader, prince (\**tou̯issāko‑*)’, and hypocoristics formations, such as BAIDAGNI ‘little idiot (\**bai̯t-agno-*)’ or CONANN ‘little dog (\**kun-agno-*)’, can be found as well.

Fig. 10. Airghleann / Arraglen, Co. Kerry, CIIC 145.

The inscription reads QRIMITIR RONANN MAQ COMOGANN ‘of the priest Ronagnas (*Rónán*) son of Comogagnas (*Comgán*)’; the commemorated man’s vocation is underlined by the prominent cross. QRIMITIR is a loan from Latin *presbiter* ‘priest’, which, via a complicated sequence of sound substitu­tions and changes, ended up as Old Irish *cruimther* [ˈkruβ̃ʲθʲər].

Morphology

Ogam inscriptions allow insights only into the endings of nouns in the genitive singular. In order to give an adequate picture of the variation over the entire period, it is best to show three stages of the development for each ending. Stage 1 reflects the earliest phase around the year 400 a.d. when all inherited sounds are still retained. Stage 2 is an inter­mediate stage, tentatively dated towards the end of the 5th century, after the loss of final conso­nants. The latest Stage 3 corresponds to the situation in 7th-century Old Irish, with complete attrition of all inherited final syllables except those where a long vowel had been shielded by a consonant.

Table \*\*\* The genitive singular of the stem classes attested in Ogam inscriptions:

stage 1 stage 2 stage 3 Proto-Celtic

*o*-stems -I -Ø -Ø < \**-ī*

*ā*-stems -IAS/-EAS -IA/-EA -E < \**-ii̯ās* << \**-ās*

*i̯o*-stems -I -I -I < \**-ii̯ī*

*i̯ā*-stems -IAS/-EAS -IA/-EA -E < \**-ii̯ās*

*u*-stems -OS -O -O/-A < \**-ou̯s*

*i*-stems -OS -O -O/-A < \**-oi̯s* (?)

*n*-stems -ONAS -ONA -ON < \**-onos*

cons.stems -AS -A -Ø < \**-os*

Case endings other than the genitive singular are extremely rare. The *o*-stem genitive plural is attested once in TRIA MAQA (stage 2) ‘of the three sons’. Possible examples of the nomina­tive singular are INI­GENA (*ā*-stem; stage 1 or 2), unless it reflects an archaic genitive in \**-ās*, and perhaps TRE­NAGUSU (*u*-stem; stage 2), unless this is an unusual spelling for the genitive in ‑O(S). A very small number of inscriptions appear to be in the dative case, i.e. dedicated to the recipient, e.g. BIGU MAQI LAG[ ‘for Bec, son of of Lag[‘ (MAQI ‘son’ is in the genitive, however).

Fig. 11. Baile an tSagairt / Ballintaggart, Co. Kerry, CIIC 160.

This is the only inscription dedicated to three recipients, who in fact are not named individually: TRIA MAQA MAILAGNI ‘of the three sons of Mailagnas (*Máelán*)’. CURCITTI ‘of Curcitias (\**Cuircthe = Cuirche*?)’ on the back of the stone seems unrelated to the first text.

Despite their meagre content, Ogam inscriptions are of unique importance as they are the only written docu­ments from a crucial period when Irish developed from a tradi­tional Old Indo-European into a modern Celtic language. Even though not more than three centuries separate the two stages, 5th-century Primitive Irish in Ogam script resembles 8th-century Old Irish as much, or as little, as Latin resembles French. It is unknown what trig­gered the massive trans­formations in such a short time; language contact and the rapid shift of large populations from one language to another may be factors. But these changes did not happen in a vacuum. Struc­turally similar transformations af­fect­ed all languages in North-West Europe around the middle of the 1st millennium a.d. It is a lucky coincidence that the Ogam script was devised shortly before this great upheaval of the phonological system, when the lan­guage was still an ancient Celtic langu­age in sounds and forms. Some of the most important changes are reflected directly in the Ogam inscrip­tions, which allows us to arrange them in relative chronological periods. A good illustration is the Proto-Celtic name, in the genitive case, \**Lugudikos* ‘pointing to (the god) Lug (?)’, of which the following successive Primitive Irish stages are attested:

1. LUGUDECCAS (CIIC 263, Aird Mhór / Ardmore, Co. Waterford)

2. LUGUDECA (CIIC 286, Cill Ghruabháin / Kilgrovan, Co, Waterford)

3. LUGUDEC (CIIC 4, Kilmannia, Co. Monaghan)

4. LUGUDUC (CIIC 108, Cill Chuilinn / Kilcullen, Co. Cork)

Some of the most important Irish sound changes, especially those affecting vowels, can be observed here. The first form retains the entire final syllable, but compared with Proto-Celtic, the ending *-os* has become *-as*, and short *i* has been ‘lowered’ to *e* before the *a* of the following syllable. In the next stage, final *-s* has been lost via the intermediate stage *-h*, while in stage 3 the entire final syllable is gone. The spelling in the fourth stage indicates that vowels in unstres­sed syllables had lost their original values and had acquired the unspecific value *schwa*.

Other crucial changes, especially those of consonants, can only be inferred indirectly. At the same time as the changes in the vowels above, consonants were lenited (e.g. \**g* became \**ɣ*) and palatalised (e.g. \**ɣ* became \**ɣʲ*), for which Ogam has no way of representation. This name fin­ally appears in 8th-century Old Irish as *Luigdech*, the genitive of *Lugaid*, additionally showing the effects of syncope, i.e. the loss of a vowel in the middle of a word. Syncope is not attested in Ogam for this name, but it is amply found in other names.

Fig. 12. Baile an Reannaigh / Ballinrannig, Co. Kerry, CIIC 148‒154.

Six Ogam stones were uncovered on a single spot by a storm in 1782. The names show very archaic phonology and morphology with fully retained endings, e.g. CIIC 154, CUNAMAQQI CORBBI MAQQ[I MUCCOI DOVVINIA]S ‘of Cunamaqqas Corbas (*Conmac Corb*), son of from the sept of Dovvinia (*Duibne*)’, or CIIC 151, BROINIONAS ‘of Broiniu (\**Broíniu*)’. They are probably among the earliest extant specimens of the Ogam script. Their current arrangement is modern.

Syntax

Because of their restricted content, Ogam inscriptions reveal next to nothing about the order of elements in the sentence, apart from the fact that dependent genitives follow their head nouns. This conforms with the word order of later Irish.

Fig. 13. Gort na Cloiche / Rockfield, Co. Kerry, CIIC 244.

This comparatively long inscription reads COILLABBOTAS MAQI CORBBI MAQI MOCOI QERAI ‘of Coelabuts (*Cóelub*/*Cóelboth*), son of Corbas (*Corb*), son of from the sept of Ceras (*Cíar*)’. The name of the ancestor, QERAI, corresponds to OIr. *Cíar* ‘dark brown, black’, the eponym of the *Cíarraige* ‘kingdom of (the descendants of) Cíar’, anglicised *Kerry*. The spelling with Q is hypercorrect for \*CERAI and presupposes knowledge of *dathogam* ‘colour Ogam’, one of the playfully erudite varia­tions on the names for the letters. The ending -AI is peculiar to Ogam inscriptions; it is not clear to what Old Irish inflectional ending it corresponds.

Fig. 14. Kilmannin, Co. Mayo, CIIC 4; kept at the National Museum of Ireland.

This stone bears two inscriptions, one on each side. Inscription 1 LUGADDON MAQI LUGUDEC ‘of Lugaidu (*Lugáed*), son of Lugudecs (*Lugaid*)’ is a typical representative of the transitional phase between the retention of final syllables in Early Primitive Irish and the subsequent reduction of vowels in unstressed syllables. Re­vealingly, the only word with full retention of the old ending is the formulaic word MAQI. Both father and son share the name element LUG-, the name of the god Lug. The inter­pretation of inscription 2 DDISI MO[...]CQU S(?)EL ‘of Disias (?) from the sept of Sel (?)’ is unclear.

Languages other than Irish

A number of puzzling inscriptions from Scotland may contain Ogams that are not in Irish, but in a local language. Although the reading of the letters causes no problems beyond the ordinary, they defy interpretation. It is suspected that some of them are in the Pictish language, an ancient and early medieval language spoken in Scotland, perhaps a member of the British-Celtic language family.

Fig. 15. Brandsbutt Stone, Inverurie, Aberdeenshire, Scotland.

This richly decorated stone bears the perfectly legible inscription IRATADDOARENS, whose inter­pre­tation, however, remains obscure. Since it is accompanied by two Pictish symbols, a crescent and v-rod and a serpent and z-rod, it is natural to think of the Pictish language. It has been suggested to be a corruption of Ethernan, the name of a 7th-century saint and missionary among the Picts. This name occurs in more recognisable form on several other Ogam inscriptions from Pictland.

Latin linguistic influence

Direct influence of Latin on the Irish language of the inscriptions is slim. Irish did absorb many loanwords from Latin, especially after Christianity was introduced in the 4th and 5th cen­turies. This had little effect on the naming system, the dominant linguistic domain on Ogam stones, which stayed thoroughly native in the early period. Only about a dozen Latin loan names occur on the stones in Ireland, that is only *c*. 3% of the inscriptions. The names *Colm* and *Col­mán*, borrowed from Lat. *columba* ‘dove’, are among the most popular in medi­eval Ireland. The latter is found in the forms COLOMAGNI, COLMAN and perhaps CALU­MANN on Ogams. Nine Latin names are found on stones in southern Britain, the area that had been part of the Roman Empire, which means that their relative frequency is six times higher than in Ireland.

The only generic word that is borrowed from Latin and that occurs on an Ogam stone is QRIMITIR ‘priest’, ultimately going back to Latin *presbyter*, but passing through an inter­mediate Vulgar Latin stage \**premiter*. A very uncertain case of a lexical loan is the name CORBIMAQI (OIr. *Cormac*). It has been suggested that the verbal stem *corb-* is borrowed from Lat. *corrumpere* ‘to corrupt’, but this is far from certain.

Fig. 16. Lamóg / Lamoge, Co. Kilkenny, CIIC 36.

The severely damaged inscription reads SEVERRIT[ ̣ ̣ MAQI]/ [RO]TTAIS ‘of Severit… son of Rotias (? *Roth*?)’. The name of the person is probably borrowed from Latin *Sēuērus* ‘severe’. The father’s name is supplied from another stone.

Writing

Ogam is a unique script in that it is three-dimensional and consists of the most basic, almost ornamental signs con­ceivable, namely strokes and notches, which are arranged along the edges (arris) of stones. The script is uniform in its graphic inventory. There appears to be no early period of experimen­tation or internal development, as is typical of other writing sys­tems. This uniformity from the earliest time points to the creation of Ogam as a single event by one ingenu­ous and original inven­tor. The only features that show variation in the orthodox Ogam corpus are the size, width and strength of the strokes and, some­times, the direction of writing, but in what way this variation correlates with different periods or places is not clear yet.

The letters are arranged in four groups for which the Old Irish term *aicme* [akʲmʲe], plural *aicmi* [akʲmʲi], is used. *Aicme* means ‘race, family, tribe; genus’, but here it is used in the sense of ‘class’. Each class is charac­terised by a specific type of stroke or notch which occurs one to five times, depending on the letter. The first *aicme* has strokes per­pen­di­cular to the right of the edge, the second *aicme* trans­verse across the edge, and the third per­pen­dicular to the left. There is grammatical thinking behind this arrangement since all vowels are grouped together in one *aicme*, the notches, where­as all consonants are represented by strokes. Within the consonant *aicmi* it can be noted that the first *aicme* contains many con­tinuants, whereas dentals and voice­less gutturals are all in the third *aicme*, and voiced gutturals in the second *aicme*. In this way it is very well suited to give unambiguous expression to the consonant clusters of early Primitive Irish.

Fig. 17. Domhnach Mór / Donaghmore, Co. Kildare, CIIC 26; kept at the National Museum of Ireland.

This rare example of an Ogam stone from the middle part of Ireland was found at the site of an early medieval church near Maynooth. It mentions NETTAVRECC [KOI?] MAQI MUCCOI TRENA­LUGGO ‘of Neta-Vraicas (*Nad-Fráech*) [here] son of from the sept of Trenalugus (*Trénlug*)’.

The alphabetic character of the Ogam script, i.e. one letter corresponds to one sound, betrays the Latin alphabet as its model. However, the letters are not simply the Latin letters transposed into a cipher of notches and strokes. Instead, their values seem to be the result of a proper analysis of which sounds need to be expressed in the target language. Latin letters for sounds that are lacking from Primitive Irish, such as P or X, have been discarded, while for pho­nemes of Primitive Irish, which are not adequately repre­sented by a single letter in the Latin script, separate signs have been created in Ogam.

The basic meaning of the Old Irish word for ‘letter’, *fid* [fʲið], plural *fedae* [fʲeðe] or *feda* [fʲeða], is ‘tree, wood’, and the letter names famously have a penchant for trees. This has led to specu­la­tion about the arboreal origins of the script and a connection with druids (the word \**druu̯id-* itself has been analysed as ‘tree-knower’). However, the preponderance of tree names may just be coin­cidence. Some names refer to items that certainly have nothing to do with trees, and for others ‒ those marked by a question-mark in table \*\* ‒ the assumed arboreal meaning is only supported in late glossaries where it may be a learned conceit. Those words do not occur in ordinary usage for the trees they purport to signify. In the native grammatical tradition, a huge variety of other Ogam names are known where the letters are thematically grouped, e.g. pig Ogam, Ogam of water bodies, fortress Ogam, and many more.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | transliteration | traditional name |
| *aicme* 1 | ᚁ | B | *beith* ‘birch’ |
|  | ᚂ | L | *luis* ‘rowan’? |
|  | ᚃ | V (F) | *fern* ‘alder’ |
|  | ᚄ | S | *sail* ‘willow’ |
|  | ᚅ | N | *nin* ‘ash-tree’? |
|  |  |  |  |
| *aicme* 2 | ᚆ | J? (H) | *úath* ‘whitethorn’? |
|  | ᚇ | D | *dair* ‘oak’ |
|  | ᚈ | T | *tinne* ‘holly, elder’? |
|  | ᚉ | C | *coll* ‘hazel’ |
|  | ᚊ | Q | *ceirt* ‘apple-tree’? |
|  |  |  |  |
| *aicme* 3 | ᚋ | M | *muin* ‘vine’? |
|  | ᚌ | G | *gort* ‘ivy’? |
|  | ᚍ | Gʷ? (NG) | *ngétal* ‘wounding’ |
|  | ᚎ | ST (Z) | *straif* ‘sulphur, sloe’? |
|  | ᚏ | R | *ruis* ‘elder-tree’? |
|  |  |  |  |
| *aicme* 4 | ᚐ | A | *ailm* ‘pine’? |
|  | ᚑ | O | *onn* ‘ash’ |
|  | ᚒ | U | *úr* ‘heath’? |
|  | ᚓ | E | *edad* ‘aspen’? |
|  | ᚔ | I | *idad* ‘yew’? |
|  |  |  |  |
| the *forfeda* | ᚕ | K, EA | *ébad* ‘aspen, elecampane’? |
|  | ᚖ | Ó | *ór* ‘gold’ |
|  | ᚗ | UI | *uilleann* ‘elbow’ |
|  | ᚘ | IO, I | *iphín* ‘gooseberry’? |
|  | ᚚ | P | *peith* ‘?’ |
|  | ᚙ | CS, X, AE | *emoncholl* ‘twin hazel’ |

Table \*\*\*: The Ogam alphabet and the traditional letter names. The values as understood today are given in the transliteration first, followed by the traditional values in parentheses.

Fig. 18. Cluain Mhic Nóis / Clonmacnoise, Co. Offaly, decorated cross slab 152.

This memorial stone for the cleric *Colmán* illustrates the existence and use of the Roman script and the Ogam script side by side with each other. To the Roman inscription *Colman*, the adjective BOCHT ‘poor, wretched, miserable’ has been added in Ogam, but in the Old Irish spelling. The arrow indicates the end of the Ogam text.

To see the Primitive Irish phono­logical system through the Ogam script, one has to go behind the medieval Irish letter names. An instructive case is ᚃ to which medieval scholars assigned the name *fern* ‘alder-tree’ and the value *F*. However, the sound [f] developed out of the older sound [w] (traditionally written \**u̯* in reconstructions) only in the 6th century after the loss of final syllables. For Ogam, which is older than that, the earlier value has to be assumed, and modern scholars therefore transcribe the letter as *V*. Another case is ᚍ *ngétal*. The tra­di­tional name suggests that the letter represents the sound [ŋ] or the sound group [ŋg], the nasalisation of [g]. But the Ogam system does not otherwise recognise mutated variants of con­sonants, only the radical sounds, i.e. only the historically original stops, but not their relaxed ‘lenited’ variants nor the ‘nasalised’ variants, when the stops had merged with preceding nasal sounds. The ety­mology of *(n)gétal* ‘killing’ < Proto-Celtic \**gu̯antlo-* reveals that the letter must have origi­nally expressed the voiced labiovelar [gʷ] (written \**gu̯* in reconstructions), which existed as a separate phoneme beside the plain velar [g], before falling together with it in the 6th century, just like Primitive Irish [kʷ] did with [k]. The letter *ngétal* is not attested in suf­fi­ciently old inscriptions to demonstrate its postulated original usage beyond doubt. The internal logic of the writing system is the best proof for this solution.

The matter of the letters traditionally transcribed H and Z is even less clear. Modern scholars have suggested the sounds [j] or [h] for H and [st] for Z, but since they do not occur in orthodox inscriptions, their original values cannot be verified. Their traditional names *húath* and *straif* may be due to antiquarian attempts at rationalising the system. One can even toy with the idea that they were inserted into the scheme to fill the grid of 4×5 letters, but that they were never meant to be used for actual writing.

This makes it even more surprising to find an extra letter, standing outside the neat 4×5 grid, that occurs already in very early inscriptions. It takes the form of a large X that cuts across the arris, i.e. ᚕ and is usually transcribed as K; it occurs chiefly in the formula word KOI, probably ‘here’. One wonders why the scribes did not simply use the Ogam letter C ᚉ that is otherwise assigned to the sound [k]. Perhaps the initial of KOI was always lenited to [x], and the creators of the inscriptions wanted to give expression to this fact? But [x], the lenited variant of [k], occurs frequently in many other words where it is written with C. The rationale for K remains a mystery for the time being.

In younger inscriptions, it was also used in names, alternating with C, and in the ‘post-ortho­dox’ period it even assumed a vocalic value. In that later period, more signs were added to the Ogam signary. They are called *forfeda* [ˈforfʲeða] ‘extra-letters’, singular *forfid* [ˈforfʲið]. Some of them were created to cater for bi-vocalic spellings of the younger stages of Irish. Unlike the original *aicmi*, vowels and consonants are mixed in the *forfeda*. Their obscure names and their shapes ‒ far removed from the laconic elegance of the original set ‒ give evidence that the *forfeda* are an intrusion into the system. They are rarely found on actual stones, but rather belong to the antiquarian tradition of the middle ages.

A feature that has not found a satisfactory explanation so far is that word-internal consonant signs are often doubled. This doubling of letters has nothing to do with geminate, i.e. doubled sounds in the language. Occasionally there seems to be a correlation between this doubling and lenited sounds, even though such an orthographic rule seems counterintuitive.

Fig. 19. Cill Bheanáin / Kilbonane, Co. Kerry, CIIC 241.

Most stones bear a single inscription. Occasionally there are two inscriptions, but stones with three like this one are rare. Although the inscriptions were possibly created separ­ately, they are not inde­pend­ent. They are connected by the name of an individual called Baidagnas (*Báetán*) who is the recipient of inscription I, on the right angle: B[AID(?)]AGNỊ ṂAQ̣I ADDỊLONA ‘of Baidagnas (*Báetán*) son of Adilu (\**Aidliu*)’. It is reasonable to assume that he is commemorated as ancestor in text II on the left angle: NAGỤN[I(?)] M[U(?)]C̣[O(?)] B[AI(?)]D[A]N[I(?)] ‘of Nagunias (\**Nugne*?, for *Mugne*?) from the sept of Baidagnas (*Báetán*)’. The third text remains obscure, bar the mention of the last name: NIR[???]MṆ[I]DAGNIESSICONIDDALA/ AMIT BAIDAGNI ‘…of Baidagnas (*Báetán*)’. The fact that it is unusually written across the face of the stone indicates its late addition.

Onomastic Formula

In its basic form, the onomastic formula on Ogam stones is very simple. It records the name of an individual, the recipient of the inscription, who is practically exclusively male. His name is typically followed by a generic noun that indicates his relationship to an ancestor, followed by the name of that ancestor. All of the words are in the genitive case. Over half of the inscrip­tions (*c*. 240) contain the kinship term ‘son’. Depending on the age of the stone, this can be written in a variety of ways: MAQI is the oldest spelling, but MAQ with loss of the ending is found on later stones, as well as MAC, showing the change of the labiovelar sound *ku̯* (written with the letter Q) to plain guttural *k* (written C). The scribes’ imperfect knowledge of older stages of the language can also give rise to the hypercorrect spelling MACI. In all forms, the second consonant can also be written double, allowing for eight different spelling variants of this single word. In Old Irish, the form is *maic* or *maicc* (*mac* in the nominative). While in later Irish, as well as in Modern Ireland, names with *Mac* (or *Mc*) function as surnames, in Early Ireland, where family names were still unkown, they refer to the father of the indivual.

Fig. 20. Cilgerran, Pembrokeshire, Wales, CIIC 428.

Most Ogam stones in Wales are bilingual. This here reads TRENAGUSU MAQI MAQITRENI ‘of Trenagussus (\**Tréngus*), son of Maqqas-Treni (\**Mac-Tréuin*)’ in Ogam. The Latin formula is slightly more elaborate, albeit grammatically flawed: *Trenegussi fili Macutreni hic iacit* ‘of Trenegussus son of Macutrenus lies here’. The compound name of the son TRENAGUSU contains the same element (OIr. *trén* ‘strong’) as the name of the father MAQITRENI, whose name in turn contains *mac* ‘son’ as a proper name element. The stones in Wales show less variation in the types of affilia­tion than those from Ireland. Predominantly, they record son-father relationships.

Fig. 21. Clárach an Teampaill / Churchclara, Co. Kilkenny, CIIC 28.

It is not uncommon for Ogam stones to be repurposed as building material, like here as a window sill in the ruins of a medieval church. The partly restored text reads TAṢ[EGA]GN[I]| [MAQ(?)]| Ị MUC[O]Ị MAC̣[O]Ṛ[BO] ‘of Tazgagnas (*Tadgán*) son of from the sept of Maqqas-Corbi (*Mac-Corb*)’.

The basic formula has many variations. Less frequently, instead of the father, the grandfather or a distant, possibly mythological, ancestor is indicated by the element AVI ‘grandson, de­scendant’. This corresponds to OIr. *auë*, *ua* and the Modern Irish family name element *Ó*, *O’*. Another common element, often immediately following MAQI, is MUCOI. This is probably identical with *moccu*, which was archaic already at the time of the earliest Old Irish texts. While *mac* and *auë* are parentilic terms that stress individual ancestors, MUCOI/*moccu* is a gentilic term of the meaning ‘from the family or sept of’, a formula in which the kin-group is emphas­ised. The shift between the two systems of indicating ancestry is believed to have occurred between the 7th and the 8th centuries, but MAQI is preponderant already in the early Ogams. Some stones commemorate the ANM of the dead person. This word corresponds either to OIr. *ainm* ‘name’ or *animm* ‘soul’. Beside these most common types, there are also single name inscriptions with no accompanying formula word.

Table \*\*\*: Variants of the onomastic formula

X MAQI Y ‘X son of Y’

X MAQI MUCOI Y ‘X son of from the family of Y’

X MAQI Y MUCOI Z ‘X son of Y from the family of Z’

X KOI MAQI MUCOI Y ‘here is X son of from the family of Y’

X MUCOI Y ‘X from the family of Y’

X MAQI Y MAQI MUCOI Z ‘X son of Y son of from the family of Z’

ANM X MAQI Y ‘name/soul of X son of Y’

ANM X ‘name/soul of X’

X AVI Y ‘X descendant of Y’

X MAQI Y AVI Z ‘X son of Y descendant of Z’

X CELI Y ‘X follower/devotee of Y’

X NIOTTA Y ‘X nephew of Y’

Women in Ogam inscriptions

Ogam inscriptions illustrate neatly the difference between grammatical feminine gender (of names) and biological female sex (of persons). Only two of the over 400 stones, both in Wales, were erected unam­bi­guously as memorials for women. AVIT­TORIGES is reco­gnisable as female by the fact that the commemorated person is called INIGENA ‘daughter’. In the case of VELVORIA, the Latin version calls her *filia* ‘daughter’. A possible third example from Wales is too damaged for a meaningful analysis.

Fig. 22. Eglwys Cymmin, Carmarthenshire, Wales, CIIC 362.

The use of Irish INIGENA (OIr. *ingen*) and of Latin *filia*, both ‘daughter’, leaves no doubt that this is the rare example of an Ogam stone dedicated to a woman. Highly unusually, the individual name of the woman is mentioned last in the Irish text INIGENA CUNIGNI AVITTORIGES ‘of the daughter of Cunignas (*Cuinén*), of Avitoria’. The Latin version *Auitoria filia Cunigni* means the same, but the individual name occupies the expected first place in the formula.

In Ireland, all the individuals for whom the stones were erected are male. However, this does not mean that no female, let alone feminine names are attested. On Irish, but not on British, Ogam stones, feminine names appear sometimes in the formula of sept names, possibly refer­ring to female eponyms. One such name is DOVINIAS (OIr. *Duibne*) on a series of stones from the *Corcu Duibne* in Kerry, a region that still bears her name (*Corkaguiny*). Another is ERCIAS who occurs half a dozen times in the bi-membric personal name MAQI-ERCIAS ‘son-of-Erc’ (OIr. *Mac-Ercae*); however, in sept names in the Old Irish period, the masculine variant *Uí Eirc* is found. Since actual female persons, i.e. either as recipients or as named mothers, are so rare, it seems more likely to regard these names as those of mytho­logical figures rather than that of genuine prehistoric ancestors, unless Irish society had moved abruptly from a matrilinear to a patrilinear system just a few generations before the invention of Ogam.

Finally, there is a small group of Irish male names that behave grammatically as feminines, for instance GOSSUCTTIAS and GOSOCTEAS (OIr. *Gúasacht* ‘danger’), or CUNALEGEA (OIr. *Conlang* ‘dog leap’).

Fig. 23. Ráth Cruachan / Rathcroghan, Co. Roscommon, CIIC 12.

The name of the father MEDVVI in VRAICCI MAQI MEDVVI ‘of Vraicas (*Fráech*) son of Medvas (\**Medb*)’ is blatantly masculine, but from the medieval literary tradition the name is best known as that of a female character, namely that of the mythological figure of Queen Medb of Connacht. VRAICCI corresponds to the name of the hero Fráech or Fróech who in the tale *Táin Bó Froích* ‘The Raid of Fróech’s Cattle’ wants to marry Queen Medb’s daughter. It is intriguing to find two names closely associated with the literary landscape of Connacht in the very centre of its royal fort, even though their relationship is at odds with that known from heroic sagas.

Epigraphy

The strokes and no­t­ches of the Ogam script are engraved on the edges (*druimm* [drumʲ] ‘ridge, back’) of objects, typically of standing stones. Several words are used for the stone: *lië*, *ail*, *coirthe*, *gallán*, *cloch*. When edges are missing, occasionally a straight line or an imaginary line can serve as a substitute edge. In general, the inscriptions run from bottom left upwards across the top and then down to bottom right again along the arris of the stone, but occasional vari­ations on this disposition are found. The tool with which the inscriptions were made was prob­ably called *slegíne* or *slegín* ‘little javelin’. Since the inscriptions occupy precisely that part of the stone that is most vulnerable, the texts are very often weathered, and letters are difficult to read or have been lost. One feature that is particularly astonishing in com­parison with the mediterranean epigraphic tradition is the fact that the stones are usually not prefashioned, but they are usually written on in the form in which they had been found.

The primary function of Ogam inscriptions was commemorative. Literary sources mention Ogams in connection with burials; bilingual stones in Britain often contain the funerary formula *hic iacet* ‘here lies’ in the Latin version. The fact that all known Ogam inscrip­tions are individu­al pieces supports this idea, too. If their pri­mary func­tion had been to demonstrate the power of living people, one might expect at least some individuals to be named more than once. However, due to the absence of systematic excavations actual burials linked to Ogam stones are missing.

Fig. 24: Fánchill agus na Coillte / Faunkill and the Woods, Co. Cork, CIIC 66.

The name MAQI DECCEDDAS AVI TURANIAS ‘of Maqqas-Deceddas (*Mac-Deichet*), the grand­son of Turania (*Tornae*)’ may be identified with Mac-Deched mac Cuirp mac Aí mac Tornae in the genea­logies from a sept, the Uí Thornae, who trace themselves back to a female ancestor TURANIAS (OIr. *Tornae*). Meas­uring 4.7 metres, it is the highest known Ogam stone, at the same time also one of the earliest by the evidence of the language.

Ogams are sometimes secondary uses of existing pre­his­toric monoliths, i.e. of monu­mental objects that had already served as territorial markers in the land­scape for generations, if not for millennia. Newly created Ogam stones, that is, ones that do not use pre-existing mono­liths, are usually smaller. Conversely, Ogam stones themselves could secon­darily serve as demarcations of land boundaries, as references to such a practice in law texts show. Even as funerary monu­ments the stones must have demonstrated aspirations for dynastic power and hegemony.

Ogam is not well suited for manuscripts or other flat carriers of text. Only very rarely are Ogam inscriptions found on portable objects, such as knives, a pearl, a comb or other bone and metal items. Maybe Ogam was used on woo­den sticks (*menac*; *flesc*) for purposes other than funerary inscriptions but little of that sort remains in the archaeo­logical record. Odd references to such a practice in Irish narrative literature have been regarded as antiquarian fiction. For instance, at the end of the fictional tale *Imm­ram Brain* ‘The Sea-Voyage of Bran’, after arriving at the coast of Ireland, Bran and his crew were not allowed to touch the ground of Ireland. The story tells how they had to recount their adventures from their boat and people at the beach recorded their story in Ogam. The author of the tale may have made up this ‘documentary’ use of Ogam by projecting the function of Roman writing, be it on wax ­tablets, be it on parchment, onto Ogam in prehistoric Ireland.

Fig. 25: Buckquoy, Orkney Islands, kept at Orkney Museums in Kirkwall.

Scotland boasts of a variety of objects that bear Ogams, such as this spindle whorl that was found in 1970. The reading BENDDACT ANIM L ‘a blessing for the soul of L’ is one of the few Ogam texts that do not spell out a name, perhaps due to the lack of space on the small object.

Fig. 26: Broch of Gurness, Orkney Islands, kept at National Museums of Scotland (no. X.1997.290).

The Gurness knife with a bone handle was used sometime between the 5th‒8th-centuries. The handle bears the Ogam inscription IN[…]IT[…]TEMOMN MATS, the meaning of which is unclear.

Being inherently unsuitable for the recording of longer texts, i.e. texts that consist of more than three or four words, it is no surprise that the Roman al­phabet was eventually adopted and ad­apted for writing the Irish language, when literate culture on a broad scale took hold in Ireland as part of Christian culture. Nevertheless, odd examples of Ogam can even be found scribbled into manuscripts, written for the amusement of the scribes and as a distrac­tion from their tedious scribal tasks. These scholastic Ogams no longer continued the orthodox tradition with its obso­lete orthographic rules for the sound system of early Primitive Irish. In the medieval, antiquarian practice, the very different spelling system of Old Irish in the Latin script is adhered to, trans­literated into Ogam letters. Tell-tale signs are the use of the letter *h* to indicate lenition and of the vowel *i* to indicate palatalisation, two writing practices that are alien to orthodox Ogam. In scholastic Ogam, the direction of writing can be indicated by an arrow. Vowels, which are notches on the stones, are commonly replaced by transverse perpendicular strokes.

Fig. 27. St. Gallen, Switzerland, Stiftsbibliothek, Codex Sangallensis 904, p. 204.

Scribes frequently left personal comments on the margins of manuscript pages, unconnected with the surrounding text. Here, a note in Ogam letters has been added at the top of Priscian’s Latin grammar, written *c*. 850. The scribe considered it wise to conceal the lament about his physical state in a writing system that other people could not decipher. The Ogam says in Old Irish LATHEIRT‘intoxica­tion, hangover’, which gives a rare glimpse into the private life of the scribe.

Bilingual Ogams

Of the c. 330 known stones in Ireland, only three or four are bilingual in Irish and Latin, but bilingual only in the sense that they contain inscriptions in the two lan­gu­ages. In fact, there does not appear to be a connection between the texts.

Fig. 28: Cill Fhine Chormaic / Killeencormack, Co. Kildare, CIIC 19; kept at the National Museum of Ireland.

The Ogam in this bilingual stone seems to be an early inscription: OVANI AVI IVACATTOS ‘of Ovanas (*Omun*), grandson of Ivacatus (*Éochad*)’. The Latin text probably reads IVVERE DRVVIDES. The second word is the plural ‘druids’. The first word is notoriously problematic. If the fifth letter is R, the inscription says ‘the druids helped’, but N has also been suggested, in which case it means ‘the young druids’. The texts in the two languages appear to be unrelated. Since there is no tradition of dedicatory inscriptions in Ireland, it has been suspected that the Latin inscription was commissioned by some­one from outside Ireland, possibly from Britain.

Ireland and the Isle of Man contain also a few, late stones from the 11th and 12th centuries that combine the use of runes and Ogam. Apart from these sporadic examples, bilingual Ogam stones are exclusively found in Wales and other parts of Britain, reflecting the multi­lingual milieu in which they were produced.

Fig. 29. Cill Dalua / Killaloe, Co. Clare, CIIC 54.

On the prominent front of this fragmentary stem of a cross, dated to around 1000, a Viking put a runic inscription in Old Norse: (Þ)URGRIM RISTI (K)RUS ÞINA ‘Thórgrímr carved this cross’. The Middle Irish text BEANDACHT (AR) TOROQR(IM) ‘a blessing on Thórgrímr’ is on the left side. Its layout follows scholastic practice, its spelling conforms to Middle Irish orthography. The photo shows the side with the Irish text, the drawing shows both inscriptions.

The Ogam inscriptions in south-western Britain belong to the early period of Ogam writing. Just under fifty such stones are known from what formed part of the Roman province of Britan­nia; only five of these are mono­lingual Irish. The others usually contain Latin or perhaps Old British versions of the Irish text. Where the Irish part of a bilingual inscription is shorter than the Latin, one may suspect that the Latin is primary, in that the prestige language gets the promi­nent position. But this is not the case for all bilinguals in Britain. Sometimes it cannot be told which version is a trans­lation of the other; and sometimes the Latin is shorter than the Irish. In a few cases, the two texts do not seem to be related to each other at all, but this impression may be due to the fragmentary state of some of the texts.

Endings of words are mostly preserved on British inscriptions, which indicates that most were written before apo­cope, the loss final syllables, in the 6th century. It appears that an Ogam writing standard was well established by the time of these inscription: sometimes the Latin part shows more pro­gres­sive linguistic features than the Ogam part, such as MACVTRENI with confusion of Q and C in Latin script vs. the conservative Ogam spelling MAQITRENI. Occasi­onally, names display unex­pected endings, as if the non-classical inflection of the Latin influ­enced the Irish.

These texts give evidence of the desire to present the native Irish language on an equal foot­ing with the prestige language Latin. If the scribes had engraved the native name formulae in Latin letters, the Irish texts would have hardly looked any different from the Latin, exept for the formula word MAQQI. The use of the ‘exotic’ Ogam letters maximises the contrast between the two languages.

Fig. 30. Llandeilo, Carmarthenshire, Wales, CIIC 433.

Ogam ANDAGELLI MACV CAVETI ‘of Andagellas (\**Indgell*?) son of Cauetas (\**Cuäd*?)’ matches Latin *Andagelli iacit fili Caueti* on this bilingual stone. Together with two mono­lingually Latin stones it allows establishing a small family tree. Anda­gellas’ brother is com­me­morated in the inscription *Coimagni fili Caueti* ‘of Coimagnas (*Cóem­án*) son of Cauetas (\**Cuäd*?)’ from the same place (CIIC 434); his son’s stone survives in near­by Maenclochog in Pembrokeshire, namely *Curcagni fili Andagelli* ‘of Curcagnas (*Cor­cán*) son of Andagellas (\**Indgell*?)’ (CIIC 441).

Scotland did not belong to the Roman Empire. Ogams were created by early medieval Irish settlers and by native Picts during the second half of the 1st millennium and even later. Their much greater variation in style and genre goes beyond the focus of this book and therefore will not be discussed here.

Afterlife

In the post-orthodox period, the script itself, the social contexts in which it is used, and the genres for which it is used, become much more diverse. There lived on in Ireland an awareness of Ogam as an expression of native scholarship, even long after the end of its classical period. The alphabet remained a firm reference point for pro­fessionals in the poetic arts throughout and long after the middle ages. One can encounter it in many shapes and forms. In popular medicine, for example, Ogam letters were believed to be imbued with as much magical power as Latin or Greek letters. A charm against impotence in an early modern medical manuscript gives the instruction ‘to write the name of the man in Ogam on a stick of elm and to beat the man with it’. Isolated specimens of Ogam on sepulchral inscriptions are documented from almost all cen­turies in the modern period. However, its use became especially popular after the Gaelic revival at the end of the 19th century, the inde­pendence of Ireland and the ensuing Gaelic cultural re­naissance in the 20th century, and, with the availability of Ogam for digital media, in the final years of the 20th and in the 21st century. Even today, Ogam is used in private and public contexts, either as symbols of Irish culture, or for alleged magical properties, or for purely ornamental reasons.

Fig. 31. Beallairmín, An Chéim / Belarmine, Stepaside, Co. Dublin, 2009.

This public artwork called *At the Edge of the Wood (Taobh na Coille)* was created by the Irish artist Fidelma Massey for Gaelscoil Thaobh na Coille, the Irish-language school in Belarmine. The sculpture spells the name of the school in Ogam letters. It fuses the idea of the Ogam script with that of the wood in the name of the school.

Fig. 32. Ogam on a Twitter handle, 2021.

The text is in neo-Old Irish: ADRIAN RI DUBGALL ‘Adrian king of the black-haired foreigners’. Adrian Ó Dubhghaill (Adrian Doyle) is a medievalist, Irish linguist and data analyst/programmer. Note the scholastic use of Ogam, exemplified by the arrows as markers of beginning and end of the text, and the spaces between the words.

Fig. 33. Leifear / Lifford, Co. Donegal, 2014.

Erected in the square in front of the County Council and reading DONEGAL CO CL ‘Donegal County Council’, this inscription is in English, using English abbreviations.

Fig. 34. Strand in An Caisleán Nua / Newcastle, Co. Wicklow, 2021.

Two-dimensional graffiti are a popular way of using the script in the 20th and 21st centuries. This one has been executed artistically on a litter box. It reads Modern Irish BRUSCAR ‘litter’.

Census of Inscriptions

Ogam inscriptions are prototypically written on stone stelae, typically ranging from 0.5m to 3m height. Other, portable supports are not so common, but almost two dozen are known today. Occasional Ogam writing in manuscripts has not been systematically counted for this census.

I. Stelae and graffiti

I.1. Ireland: 411 (400 stelae in the Republic of Ireland according to Irish Archaeological Survey + 9 in Northern Ireland)

a. monolingual stelae: *c*. 395

b. bilingual stelae with Latin: 2 + 2 doubtful examples

c. bilingual stelae with Old Norse in runes: 1

d. graffiti: 2

I.2. Wales: 40 (37‒38 dedicated to men, 2‒3 to women)

a. monolingual: 5

b. bilingual with Latin or latinised Old British: 35

I.3. Cornwall and Devon: 6

I.4. England: 1

I.5. Isle of Man: 8

a. monolingual: 5

b. bilingual with Latin: 1

c. bilingual with Old Norse in runes: 2

I.6. Scotland: 42

a. Approximately 10 come from Gaelic areas, the rest from Pictland. Around half a dozen are clearly Gaelic/Irish in language, while the rest could be Pictish or in various mixtures of Pictish, Gaelic and Norse or cannot be assigned to a language at all.

b. graffiti (on cave walls, rock-face, building blocks): 8

c. bilingual stelae with Latin: 4

II. Portable objects (from Ireland, unless otherwise stated):

II.1. Metal

a. bronze bowl: 1

b. silver brooch: 3 (one from England)

c. plaque: 1

(d. lead flask: 1 (18th century!))

II.2. Bone, antler

a. comb: 2

b. die: 1

c. knife handle: 3 (Scotland, one from England)

d. gaming piece: 1 (Orkney)

e. plaque: 1 (Scotland)

f. tine (bridle part): 1

g. sheep bone: 1

II.3. Stone

a. spindle whorl: 1 (Orkney)

b. miniature ogam stone: 1 (England)

c. slab (gaming board, alphabet plaque): 3 (Scotland)

d. ring mould: 1

e. disc: 1 (Scotland)

II.4. Wood

a. weaver’s weft beater and sword: 2

II.5. Amber

a. bead: 1

III. Manuscript Ogam

Texts in the Ogam script, written with ink into manuscripts, have not been systematically surveyed for this census. Currently approximately a dozen examples of varying length from the 8th to the 19th centuries are known. In most cases, only single words or personal names have been written in Ogam, but the recently discovered Minchin Manuscript in the Scottish National Library in Edinburgh consists of 66 full pages of Ogam, written in Ireland in 1849. It is likely that a systematic search will increase the number of manuscript Ogam.

Figs. 35‒36. An Cnoc Buí / Knockboy, Co. Waterford, no. 9.

The stone mason Tom Pollard with the fragment of an Ogam stone that he found in the old church in Knockboy, 14 July 2021. The piece is too fragmentary to permit a proper analysis. The letters could, for instance, read ]VRU[, but other interpretations are possible.

Two Ogam Inscriptions

The Ballyspellan brooch

This silver penannular brooch was discovered in 1806 by a farmer digging in the ground. Apart from the fact that it is on a small, portable object, the Ogam inscription CIIC 27 is also unusual in the arrange­ment of the text in four lines and in containing a number of names. This splendid piece of art has been dated typo­logically to the 9th century. This agrees with the language as well as with the ortho­graphy which both display features of late Old Irish. Arrows indicate the beginnings of words and the direction of writing. With one exception, the letter E is written with the *forfid* ᚕ.

A single hand has carefully incised several names in Ogam onto the back of the brooch: 1. CNAEMSECH CELLACH ‘Cnáimsech, Cellach’, 2. MINODOR MUAD ‘Mín­odor the noble’, 3. MAELMAIRE ‘Máel Maire’, 4. MAELUADAIG MAELMAIRE ‘Máel Úadaig (son of) Máel Maire’. Are they the names of the successive possessors? Some of the names occur in royal pedi­grees of the Osraige, in whose region the brooch was discovered. The names exhibit a number of unusual features: *Mínodor* and *Máel Úadaig* seem to be only at­tested here. *Múad* ap­pears to be an adjec­tive, unless it is meant as an abbreviation for the name *Múadán*. *Cnáim­sech* is a feminine noun of the meaning ‘midwife’ in the modern language, but it can be used as a male name. Are *Cnáimsech* and *Cellach* just mentioned one after the other, or is *Cellach* the father of *Cnáimsech*? In that case his name is not in the expected genitive case but stands in the nominative. There is extensive alliteration among the words.

Figs. 37‒38. Baile Uí Spealáin / Ballyspellan, Co. Kilkenny, CIIC 27; kept at the National Museum of Ireland (No. IA:R89).

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The bilingual stone for Voteporix

The bilingual stone CIIC 358, discoeverd 1895 near the church of Castell Dwyran in Car­marthenshire in Wales, juxtaposes Latin MEMORIA VOTEPORIGIS PROTICTORIS, prob­ably ‘memorial of Voteporix, the pro­tector’, with Irish VOTECORIGAS. The Old British name *Voteporix* is a compound of Proto-Celtic \**u̯oteku̯o-* ‘refuge’ (Welsh *godeb*) and \**rīx* ‘ruler’. The name translates therefore as ‘refuge-ruler’, a ruler who provides refuge or pro­tection. This could be the British translation of the Latin title *Protector*, in which case the inscription would not only be bilingual, but trilingual. It has been suggested to identify this individual with the tyrant *Vortiporius* mentioned around the year 540 in Gildas’s *De Excidio Britanniae*. However, the names are not identical. The latter is consistently written with the preverb \**u̯or-* ‘on, upon’, whereas the person on the stone has the preverb \**u̯o-* ‘under’. Still, a connection between the two men is not ruled out. *Voteporix* and *Vortiporius* could belong to one family who employed similar lexical elements for their names. *Voteporix* could be an ancestor of Gildas’s king, in which case the Ogam stone would date before the middle of the 6th century.

Fig. 39. Castell Dwyran, Carmarthenshire, Wales, CIIC 358.

In the Irish version of the inscription, the name is rendered VOTECORIGAS. Old Irish does not possess a reflex of Proto-Celtic \**u̯oteku̯o-* ‘refuge’. This sug­gests that even though VOTE­CORIGAS looks like a perfectly formed Irish name, it is probably the con­sciously Gaelicised equivalent of VOTEPORIGIS, where each sound of the British name has been replaced by its phonetic equivalent in Irish. This is straightforward expect for /p/, which had to be substituted by /k/ since it was foreign to Irish. The use of the letter C instead of earlier Q places the inscrip­tion after the labiovelar \**ku̯* had lost its labial element in the early 6th century. This reveals linguistic awareness of the sound correspondences between British and Irish and it demonstrates that the bilingual Ogam stones from Wales are not only used to render the names of genuinely Irish individuals in their native language and in the prestige language Latin, but that the rela­tionship can also go in the opposite direction. Some­body must have considered it appropriate to render in Irish the name of a high-status person with a British name. This adds an extra layer of complexity to the question of the relative levels of prestige between the languages.

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