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Ogam, cryptography and healing charms in the nineteenth century: observations on ‘The Minchin Manuscript’

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Abstract

Ogam is well known as a writing system invented for the Irish language and used extensively for inscriptions on stone monuments across Ireland and Britain between the late fourth and seventh centuries. Although the script has primarily been examined in the context of early medieval archaeology and epigraphy, its long afterlife as an integral part of Irish manuscript culture from the medieval to modern periods has also been acknowledged. The present contribution seeks to add to the existing scholarship on manuscript ogam by discussing the transmission of ideas about the script as a cryptic device into the nineteenth century, with a particular focus on a recently discovered notebook, National Library of Scotland (Edinburgh) Advocates' Manuscript 50.3.11 (or ‘The Minchin Manuscript’), which consists almost entirely of healing charms written in ogam.

Introduction

Ogam is well known as a writing system invented to represent the Primitive Irish language and used extensively for inscriptions on stone monuments across Ireland and parts of Britain that had Irish settlements (including

[1] This article was written as part of the project *Harnessing Digital Technologies to Transform Understanding of Ogham Writing, from the 4th Century to the 21st* (OG[H]AM), funded by UKRI-AHRC and the Irish Research Council under the ‘UK-Ireland Collaboration in the Digital Humanities Research Grants Call’ (grant numbers IRC/W001985/1 and AH/W001985/1) and based at the Universities of Glasgow and Maynooth (https://ogham.glasgow.ac.uk/; accessed 27 October 2023). Earlier versions of its contents were presented to the annual Tionól of the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies in November 2022; the Department of Celtic Languages and Literatures at Harvard University in March 2023; the International Congress of Celtic Studies at Utrecht University in July 2023; and the Leiden Summer School in Languages and Linguistics in July 2024. We are grateful to the audiences at those events for their feedback, as well as to John Carey, Katherine Forsyth, Fintan Keegan, Andrea Palandri, Paul Russell and anonymous reviewers two and three for their invaluable help and suggestions. All errors are our own.

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what is now Scotland, the Isle of Man, Wales, Cornwall and Devon) between the late fourth and seventh centuries.[2] In this three-dimensional format, the script consists of strokes or scores arranged along the edges (arris) of stones and occasionally portable objects; the letters are arranged in four groups (sg. *aicme*, pl. *aicmi*), each of which is characterised by a specific type of stroke that occurs one to five times, depending on the letter. The first three groups all consist of consonants denoted by strokes that are either perpendicular to the right or left of the stone edge or transverse across it, while the fourth group consists of vowels represented by perpendicular strokes across the stemlines (see Table 1). Letters that were added subsequently to the inventory are called *forfeda* (sg. *forfid*).[3]

Recent research on ogam distinguishes four distinct periods in the usage of the script. So-called 'classical ogam' of the fifth to seventh centuries, now attested almost exclusively on stone objects, is usually regarded as representing the core and first major flourishing of the ogam tradition and corresponds linguistically to the stages of Primitive Irish (fourth–sixth centuries) and Archaic or Early Old Irish (seventh century). This was followed by 'reformed ogam' from the eighth century through to the early modern period, when the script was drawn into the orbit of monastic learning and ogam became heavily influenced by the Latin-script-based medieval Irish manuscript tradition. This second period of 'reformed ogam', which is found both in manuscripts and on stone monuments or portable objects, is marked by linguistic and palaeographical features such as a radically different orthography, the reinterpretation of the value of individual signs, and manuscript-inspired discourse markers (e.g. word spacing and feather marks to indicate the beginning of texts). The third period is known as 'antiquarian ogam' and is mainly attested in manuscripts written in Modern Irish by scholars in Ireland up to the middle of the nineteenth century. In many of these manuscripts, illustrations of ogam are found in the context of tracts on grammar or 'exotic' alphabets, suggesting that the continued use of the script in this period was closely tied to ideological concerns regarding the study of languages in general and the preservation of the Irish language in particular. The fourth and final period, since the latter part of the nineteenth century, is termed 'revivalist ogam'; this marks the ornamental use of the script on modern buildings or public and private artwork (as well as its inclusion in Unicode in 1999) by virtue of its role as a conspicuous token of Gaelic culture and Celticism. Revivalist ogam is typically

[2] Key studies of the script are Damian McManus, *A guide to ogam*, Maynooth Monographs 4 (Maynooth, 1991) and David Stifter, *Ogam. Language – writing – epigraphy* (Zaragoza, 2022).

[3] On the grammatical basis for this grouping, see David Stifter and Nora White, with a contribution by Katherine Forsyth, 'Early literacy and multilingualism in Ireland and Britain', in Alex Mullen and George Woudhuysen (eds), *Languages and communities in the late and post-Roman western provinces* (Oxford, 2023), 203–35: 215–18.

TABLE 1—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.

		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	G^{W} (NG)	*ngétal* ‘wounding’
	ᚎ	S^{T} (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, E^{A}	*ébad* ‘aspen, elecampane’?
	ᚖ	O^{I}	*ór* ‘gold’
	ᚗ	U^{I}	*uilleann* ‘elbow’
	ᚘ	Φ, IO, I	*iphín* ‘gooseberry’?
	ᚚ	P	*peith* ‘?’
	ᚙ	CS, X, AE	*emoncholl* ‘twin hazel’

used to represent either Modern Irish or other languages, especially English.[4]

Although ogam has to date been primarily examined from the perspective of early medieval archaeology and epigraphy, its long afterlife as an integral part of Irish manuscript culture from the medieval to modern periods has

[4] This periodisation of ogam is set out in Stifter, White and Forsyth, ‘Early literacy’, 218–21 (§8.5.1). See also David Stifter, Katherine Forsyth, Deborah Hayden and Nora White, ‘The periods of ogam usage’, *OG(H)AM* project blog, published 20 December 2023: https://ogham.glasgow.ac.uk/index.php/2023/12/20/the-periods-of-ogam-usage/ (accessed 4 January 2024).

also been acknowledged.[5] The present contribution seeks to add to the existing scholarship on manuscript ogam by discussing the transmission of ideas about the script as a cryptic device into the nineteenth century, with a particular focus on a recently discovered notebook, National Library of Scotland (Edinburgh) Advocates' Manuscript 50.3.11 (hereafter NLS Adv. MS 50.3.11 or 'The Minchin Manuscript'), which consists almost entirely of healing charms written in ogam.

Manuscript ogam and cryptography: sources and context

Many of the earliest attestations of manuscript ogam take the form of scribal signatures or marginalia in sources like the ninth-century codex known as the 'Stowe Missal' (Royal Irish Academy [RIA] MS D ii 3 [1238]) or the heavily glossed copy of Priscian's Latin grammar in St Gall, Stiftsbibliothek MS 904, which was written by Irish scribes in 850–1 and subsequently brought to the continent.[6] Most such attestations appear to represent little more than casual script-switching, perhaps for the amusement or distraction of an individual scribe. It is clear, however, that the use of ogam in many early manuscript sources developed in tandem with discussions of alphabets and grammar. The popularity of the script in later Irish manuscript tradition owes much to the text known as *Auraicept na nÉces* ('The Scholars' Primer'), a compilation of commentary on rudimentary linguistic concepts such as letters, syllables, metrical units and stylistic devices for use in poetic composition.[7] Parts of the *Auraicept* have been dated on linguistic grounds to around the eighth century, but it is probable that the majority of the text's glossing and commentary was added between the ninth and twelfth centuries and the work now only survives in manuscripts of the late-medieval period.[8] The prologue to the *Auraicept* sets out an origin legend for the Irish language in which it is claimed that, ten years after the dispersal of the languages from the Tower of Babel, the Irish scholar Fénius Farsaid was asked by the school in Egypt to create a language from the best parts of all the languages then in existence—an endeavour that resulted, according to the text's scholiast, in *Goídelc* ('Irish'). This particular spin on the linguistic origin legend recounted in Genesis 11: 1–9 is a typical manifestation of a

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5 See e.g. McManus, *Guide*, chapters 7 and 8, and Erich Poppe, 'Writing systems and cultural identity: ogam in medieval and early modern Ireland', *Language & History* 61/1–2 (2018), 23–38.

6 On the ogam notes in these sources, see McManus, *Guide*, 132–3.

7 George Calder (ed.), *Auraicept na nÉces. The scholars' primer* (Edinburgh, 1917).

8 Anders Ahlqvist, *The early Irish linguist. An edition of the canonical part of the* Auraicept na nÉces*, with introduction, commentary and indices*, Commentationes Humanarum Litterarum 73 (Helsinki, 1983). For more recent discussion concerning the dating of the commentary to this text, see e.g. Nicolai Engesland, 'The intellectual background of the earliest Irish grammar', *Journal of Medieval History* 47/4–5 (2021), 472–84 and Deborah Hayden, '*Auraicept na nÉces* and the *Art of Medicine*', in Franck Cinato, Aimée Lahaussois and John Whitman (eds), *Glossing practice: comparative perspectives* (Lanham, MD, 2023), 113–35.

much broader literary phenomenon whereby medieval Irish scholars attempted to graft their own language and history onto the authoritative framework of biblical narrative.[9] It also had the advantageous implication, however, that Irish did not originate in the sin of pride which led to the building of the Tower, thus serving to establish the superiority of that vernacular over all other languages.[10]

The claim made in the *Auraicept* concerning the linguistic superiority of Irish is reinforced elsewhere in the text by the inclusion of ogam symbols and letter-names alongside alphabet tables for Hebrew, Greek and Latin, which were commonly identified in the medieval period as the *tres linguae sacrae* ('three sacred languages') by virtue of the biblical account of their inscription on the cross of Christ (John 19:19–20).[11] In keeping with the origin legend outlined above, one of the text's commentators went so far as to suggest that not only was the Irish grammarian Fénius Farsaid himself responsible for discovering the alphabets of both the sacred languages and of ogam, but also that ogam was more 'exact' than the other three because it was invented last:

> *Is e in fer cetna tra Fenius Farsaidh arainig inna ceithri aipgitri-sea.i. aipgitir Ebraidi ⁊ Grecda ⁊ Laitinda ⁊ in beithi-luis-nin in ogaim ⁊ is airi is certiu in dedenach.i. in beithe air is fo deoidh arricht.*
>
> Now Fenius Farsaidh is the same man that discovered these four alphabets, to wit, the Hebrew, Greek, and Latin alphabets, and the Beithe Luis Nin of the Ogham, and it is for this reason the last, to wit, the Beithe is more exact because it was discovered last.[12]

The inclusion of ogam symbols in early discussions of alphabets and grammatical learning such as the *Auraicept* may, in turn, have played a role in the subsequent use of the script for cryptographic purposes. This development is most vividly evidenced by the manuscript known as 'The Book of Ballymote' (RIA MS 23 P 12 [536]), written around the end of the fourteenth century, where a copy of *Auraicept na nÉces* is juxtaposed with the *Lebor Ogaim* ('The Book of Ogam').[13] The latter text illustrates over

[9] On which see e.g. John Carey, *The Irish national origin-legend: synthetic pseudohistory*, Quiggin Pamphlets on the Sources of Mediaeval Gaelic History 1 (Cambridge, 1994). Other recent discussions of medieval Irish learned interests in universal history and the integration of Ireland in this scheme are Elizabeth Boyle, *History and salvation in medieval Ireland* (London–New York, 2021) and Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, 'Universal history and the Book of Ballymote', in Ruairí Ó hUiginn (ed.), *Book of Ballymote*, Codices Hibernenses Eximii 2 (Dublin, 2018), 33–50.

[10] Thomas Charles-Edwards, 'The context and uses of literacy in early Christian Ireland', in Huw Pryce (ed.), *Literacy in medieval Celtic societies* (Cambridge, 2006), 76.

[11] See Robert E. McNally, 'The *tres linguae sacrae* in early Irish bible exegesis', *Theological Studies* 19/3 (1958), 395–403.

[12] Calder, *Auraicept*, pp. 88–9 (ll. 1132–5). This passage is cited and discussed by Roisin McLaughlin, 'Fénius Farsaid and the alphabets', *Ériu* 59 (2009), 1–24: 2.

[13] This tract begins on fol. 167v of the manuscript and is immediately followed by a copy of the *Auraicept*, which begins in the middle of fol. 170v. The manuscript can be viewed in

100 different 'alphabets', most of which are variations of the standard ogam alphabet or other kinds of cryptic devices.[14] Many of the variant forms of ogam cited in the *Lebor Ogaim* do not occur outside of this source, and it is not always clear what practical use they might have had. It is probable, however, that they point to a broader interest in cryptography or secret communication that can ultimately be traced to much earlier ideas about the exclusivity of literate knowledge. It is claimed in the preface to the tract, for example, that the ogam script was invented by the mythical Ogma, who designed it 'as a proof of his ingenuity' (*derbad a intlechta*) and so that it might be a mode of communication belonging only to the learned:

> *Ogma didiu, fer roeolach a mberla ⁊ a filidecht, is e rainic int ogam. Cuis airic derbad a intlechta ⁊ co mbeth in bescna-sa ic lucht in eolais fo leth, sech lucht na tirdachta ⁊ na buicnechta.*
>
> Now Ogma, a man well skilled in speech and poetry, invented the Ogham. 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 herdsmen.[15]

There is a striking parallel for this passage in the Latin grammatical works of the seventh-century scholar Virgilius Maro Grammaticus (a figure of possible Irish origin),[16] who sought to explain the rationale behind scrambling words, syllables or letters by invoking the words of his teacher, Aeneas, as follows:

> *O fili,* inquit*, ob tres causas fona finduntur. Prima est, ut sagacitatem discentium nostrorum in inquirendis atque inueniendis his quae obscura sunt adprobemus; secunda est propter decorem aedificationemque eloquentiae; tertia ne mistica quaeque et quae solis gnaris pandi debent, passim ab infimis ac stultis facile reperiantur [...]*
>
> My son [he said], words are scrambled for three reasons: first, so that we may test the ingenuity of our students in searching out and identifying obscure points; secondly, for ornamentation and reinforcement of speech; thirdly, lest mystical matters which should only be revealed to the initiated be discovered easily by base and stupid people [...][17]

As Vivien Law has demonstrated, Virgilius Maro's explanation that words might be scrambled both for the purpose of edification and for the concealment

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the *Irish Script on Screen* database: see https://www.isos.dias.ie/RIA/RIA_MS_23_P_12.html (accessed 4 January 2024).

[14] The text accompanying the different varieties of ogam illustrated in the tract has been edited and translated by Calder, *Auraicept*, 301–13.

[15] Ed. and trans. Calder, *Auraicept*, 272–3.

[16] On this, see Michael Herren, 'Some new light on the life of Virgilius Maro Grammaticus', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 79C (1979), 27–71.

[17] *Virgilius Maro Grammaticus, Opera omnia*, ed. Bengt Löfstedt (Munich, 2003), 213; Vivien Law (trans.), *Wisdom, authority and grammar in the seventh century: decoding Virgilius Maro Grammaticus* (Cambridge, 1995), 83. This parallel was previously noted in a blog for the OG(H)AM project published on 29 June 2022: see Deborah

of 'mystical matters' resonates with ideas expressed by earlier figures such as the fifth-century bishop of Lyon, Eucherius, who argued that the purity of the sayings in the Scriptures should be 'hidden from the eyes of the vulgar horde and covered with the veil of modesty' (*a promiscuis cunctorum oculis abdito suo quasi quodam velamina pudicitiae contegeretur*) because they sheltered celestial mysteries.[18] The revelation of such mysteries was, of course, the ultimate aim of the kind of scriptural exegesis that could only be carried out by a select group of educated, literate scholars. It has been argued that the work of Virgilius Maro Grammaticus had a considerable influence on other aspects of the grammatical teaching set out in the Irish grammar *Auraicept na nÉces,*[19] and it is thus perhaps not surprising to find that the preface to the *Lebor Ogaim* likewise echoes ideas expressed in his Latin text. More generally, however, assertions of the kind found in these two sources serve as a reminder of the very limited extent of literacy in Ireland during the medieval period, when even very basic grammatical learning was the preserve of a small and privileged élite.

Although the cryptographic teachings of the *Lebor Ogaim* appear to have been circulating at least two centuries before the Book of Ballymote was written,[20] the contents of the tract seem to have been of particular importance for the reception of the writing system in the late-medieval and early modern periods, when its use is frequently attested in texts not concerned specifically with grammar or language. One interesting but hitherto largely unnoticed aspect of this tradition is the use of ogam by Irish medical scribes.[21] For example, the Connacht physician Conla Mac an Leagha, writing around the turn of the sixteenth century, repeatedly switched between Roman and ogam script when copying a now fragmentary treatise on uroscopy that is preserved in RIA MS 24 B 3 (445). This section of the treatise is concerned with the diagnosis of medical conditions by examining the contents of urine. The scribe does not appear to have been using ogam to encrypt information of a particularly delicate nature, however, but rather seems to have been

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Hayden, '*In Lebor Ogaim*, "The Book of Ogam"', https://ogham.glasgow.ac.uk/index.php/2022/06/29/in-lebor-ogaim-the-book-of-ogam/ (accessed 17 June 2024).

[18] Law, *Wisdom, authority and grammar*, 94–6, quoting Eucherius, *Formulae spiritalis intelligentiae*, ed. J. P. Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, 50.727.

[19] See, for example, the comments in Calder, *Auraicept*, xl–xlv.

[20] For this argument, see Patrick Sims-Williams, 'Byrhtferth's ogam signature', in Tegwyn Jones and E. B. Fryde (eds), *Essays and poems presented to Daniel Huws* (Aberystwyth, 1994), 283–91.

[21] This and other ogam material noted in this section from eighteenth and nineteenth-century manuscripts in the collection of the Royal Irish Academy has been presented as an online blog for the RIA in Deborah Hayden, 'Ogam script in the RIA Library collections', 3 May 2022: https://www.ria.ie/news/library-library-blog/ogam-script-ria-library-collections (accessed 17 June 2024).

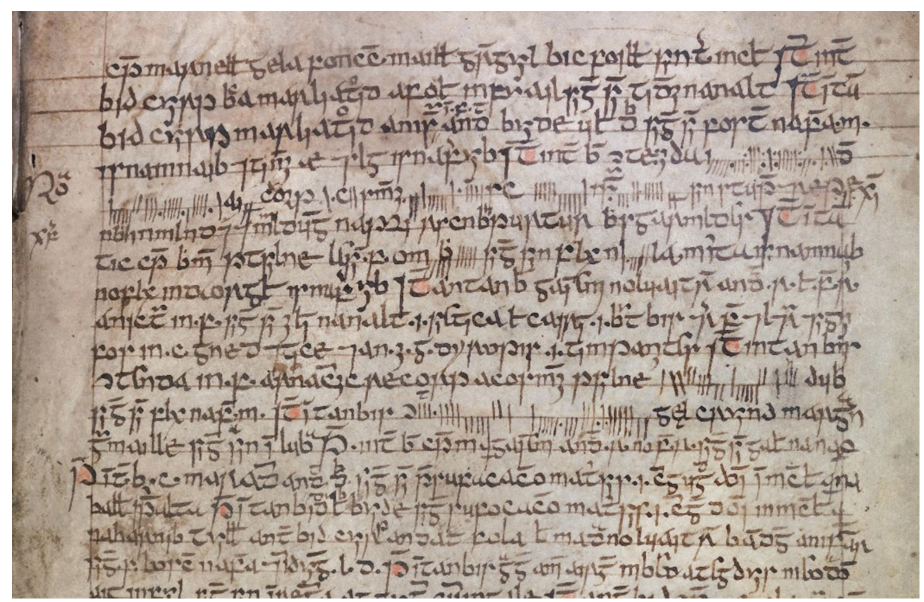

Fig. 1—RIA MS 24 B 3 (445), p. 31: a fragment of a treatise on the contents of urine written in Roman and ogam script by the medical scribe Conla Mac an Leagha. Image courtesy of the Royal Irish Academy.

switching scripts in a more casual manner, sometimes in the middle of a word or phrase. Thus, the ogam in lines 11–12 of the page illustrated in Fig. 1 above occurs within an explanation of the signs of a flux of menstrual blood, but only the first 10 letters of the phrase AG DUL A NDAT*h* ('changing to the colour [black])' have been rendered in ogam script.

In another medical manuscript written in 1512 (King's Inns Library MS 15), Conla Mac an Leagha's brother Máel Eachlainn, who was *ollamh* to the two Mac Donnchaidh lords in Ballymote and Tirerrill, Co. Sligo, signed his name in ogam on two separate occasions.[22] That Máel Eachlainn may have been motivated to do so by an interest in secret writing more generally is evidenced by the fact that he also used other ciphers elsewhere in the same manuscript: for example, on fol. 106v he signed his name in so-called *ogam consaine*, a frequently attested code using Roman letters wherein vowels or diphthongs are replaced by certain combinations of consonants. On folios 67v and 112v, moreover, he added signatures in two other common ciphers (likewise in conventional Roman script) whereby each letter

[22] For transliterations and discussion of these signatures, see Paul Walsh, 'An Irish medical family – Mac an Leagha', in Colm Ó Lochlainn (ed.), *Irish men of learning. Studies by Father Paul Walsh* (Dublin, 1947), 206–18 and Deborah Hayden, 'Ogam script in Irish medical tradition', *OG(H)AM* project blog, published 24 March 2023: https://ogham.glasgow.ac.uk/index.php/2023/03/24/ogam-script-in-irish-medical-tradition/ (accessed 17 June 2024).

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is to be read as the one after or before it in the alphabet.[23] Both of the letter-substitution ciphers in question were circulating in Insular manuscripts by at least as early as the twelfth century, as is demonstrated by their inclusion in a table of 'runic, cryptographic and exotic alphabets' in Oxford, St John's College MS 17, a collection of computus and related materials written at the Benedictine monastery of Thorney Abbey in Cambridgeshire.[24]

These examples of manuscript ogam and related ciphers in medical sources can be added to the evidence that has been previously advanced regarding the popularity of cryptographic practices in late medieval and early modern Irish manuscript tradition. As Erich Poppe has recently observed, ogam continued to be part of a vibrant tradition of language analysis long after its use for monumental purposes had ceased, and this 'constant reminder of the existence of a specific alphabet and writing system for Irish, which was characteristically different from the alphabets of other languages' served to establish the script as 'a vital emblem of Irish cultural and linguistic identity.'[25]

Ogam in the nineteenth century

The cultural symbolism of ogam did not wane with the advent of the modern period. Scribal activity continued to form an important part of cultural production in Ireland up to the first half of the nineteenth century, and the occurrence of ogam writing in many handwritten books of Irish-language prose and poetry produced during this period testifies to the perceived significance of the script in the context of literary and intellectual pursuits, as well as of Celtic Revivalist efforts. One example of this later phase of ogam is found in Maynooth, Russell Library MS C 45 (3 B 14), a paper manuscript containing a collection of poetry and Fenian literature. Near the end of the manuscript, on page 66, the scribe—who identifies himself as Séamas Ó Glosáin, writing in Herbertstown, Co. Limerick on 27 September 1811—attempted to transliterate an Irish colophon into ogam before providing a key to the script (Fig. 2). In so doing, however, he misread and confused several letter-forms.[26] The influence of the normal manuscript tradition of Irish

[23] Walsh, 'An Irish medical family', 211–12.
[24] For a comprehensive study of this manuscript, see 'The Calendar and the Cloister' website https://digital.library.mcgill.ca/ms-17/ (accessed 17 June 2024); the alphabet table is found on fol. 5v. This codex is the source of ogam writing discussed in Sims-Williams, 'Byrhtferth's ogam signature' (see above, n. 20).
[25] Poppe, 'Writing systems and cultural identity', 35.
[26] He systematically used ᚄ (S) for R and ᚍ (G^W) for S; other letters, underlined in the transliteration, he confused occasionally.

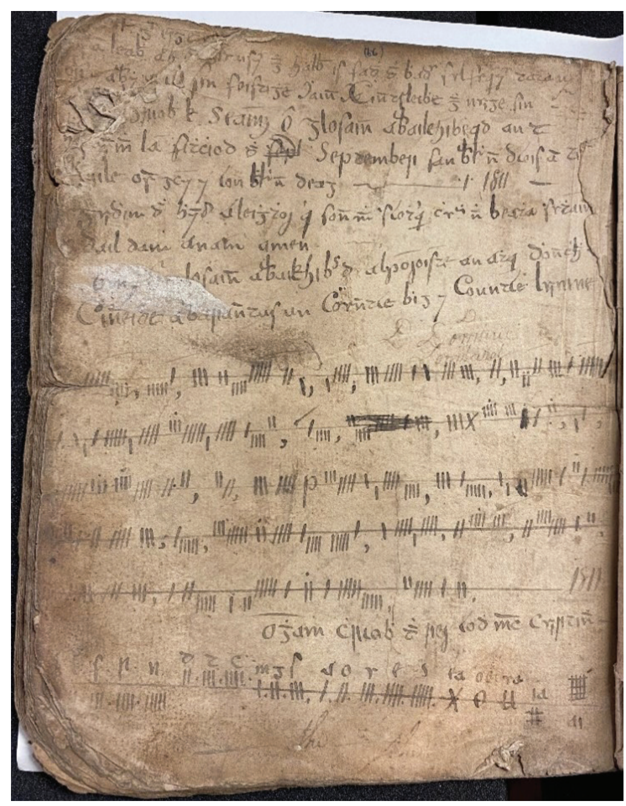

Fig. 2—Russell Library MS C 45 (3 B 14), p. 66, written by Séamas Ó Glosáin in Herbertstown, Co. Limerick, on 27 September 1811. Image courtesy of the Russell Library, Maynooth.

can be seen in the use of superscript dots above the ogam letters to indicate lenition. The ogam passage can be transliterated as follows:

> AIR, NA, SGRIOḂ, BE [*recte*: LE], SEAMUS, O, GLOSAI[N]
> A, MBAIBE [*recte*: MBAILE] ṪIBEARD, ? AR, ~~DREAS~~, SE^{A}ĊTṀAḊ, BA [*recte*: LA],
> FIṪĊEOD, DO, SEpTEMBER, SAN, MBLIAḊAI[N]
> DAOES, AN, TIĠEARNA, MEBE [*recte*: MILE], OĊT, OCEAD [*recte*: GCEAD],
> [A]GUS, AONBLIAȮAIN [*recte*: AONBLIAḊAIN], DEAG.

This is normalised as:

> *Arna scríobh le Séamus Ó Glosáin i mBaile Hibeard ar seachtmhadh lá fichead do September san mbliadhain d'aos an Tighearna míle ocht gcéad agus aonbhliadhain déag.*
>
> Having been written by Séamus Ó Glosáin in Herbertstown on the twenty-seventh day of September in the year of the Lord 1811.

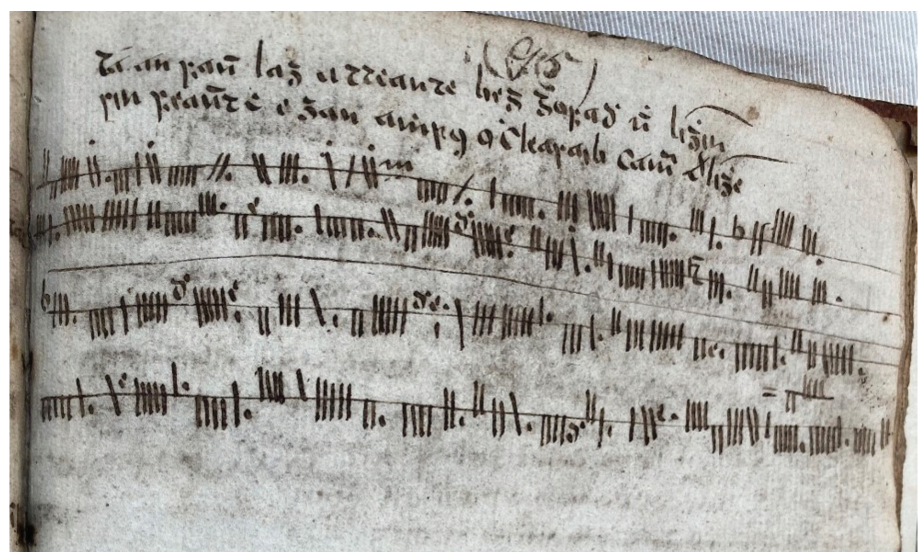

Fig. 3—RIA MS 23 K 3 (68), p. 95. Image courtesy of the Royal Irish Academy.

Only slightly more straightforward are the four lines of ogam on page 95 of RIA MS 23 K 3 (68), written in Clare and Tipperary around 1824 by Seaghan Ua Hethir (John Hehir). Here the scribe has copied four lines from the poem 'An Clampar' by Tomás Ó hAllmhuráin in the script, using a very phonetically oriented orthography (Fig. 3):[27]

DLIĠ.FAĠNO. GU. ṀAĠmNA. AN. URAN. TA. bOCT.
TA. RIONT· LeS. AN. GLIďRe. DUṀ.DANAṚhU. DOCT.
bU. SAIďRe. LUM. LIďe.· MUIH· FA. DUILe. NA. DOṚ.
NA. MeIH· SA. CHIL. SO. DOM. SďDA. AGe. CLUGAN.NA.NO=LC

Interest on the part of nineteenth-century scribes in the specifically cryptic dimension of ogam is evidenced in RIA MS 23 C 18 (493), a miscellaneous collection of Irish lore compiled by Mícheál Óg Ó Longáin (d. 1837).[28] On p. 124

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[27] We are grateful to Síle Ní Mhurchú for identifying this stanza and pointing us to the edition of the full poem in the *Historical Irish Corpus 1600–1926* (http://corpas.ria.ie/index.php?fsg_function=3&fsg_id=2207; accessed 2 January 2024). The stanza in question is edited there as follows: *Dlighe foighde go bhfaighaimíd an fhoireann 'tá bocht/'Tá ag rainnt leis an gcladhaire dubh danardha bocht,/Badh shaidhbhre dhúinn luighe amuigh fá dhuille na dtor/ 'Na 'san gCill seo d'ár saighdeadh ag cloiginn na n-olc.* The date of the poem is given in the *Corpus* as 1844, however, which does not accord with the dating of the RIA 23 K 3 manuscript to the first quarter of the nineteenth century; the question requires further analysis.

[28] On the Ó Longáin family of scribes and nineteenth-century scribal culture in Ireland more generally, see especially Pádraig Ó Macháin and Sorcha Nic Lochlainn (eds),

of this manuscript, Mícheál signed his name three times beneath a list of Arabic and Roman numerals (Fig. 4):

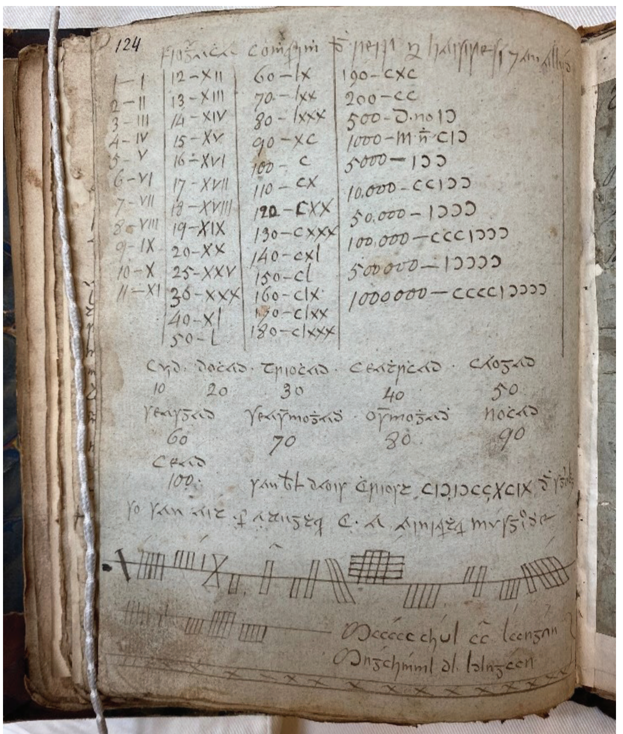


Fig. 4—RIA MS 23 C 18 (493), p. 124. Image courtesy of the Royal Irish Academy.

This nineteenth-century attestation of the script is of interest for its inclusion of three particular types of cipher that are often found together in illustrations of ogam script from sources of this period. Mícheál Óg's signature is first given in 'traditional' ogam (frequently termed *ogham craobh* or 'branching ogam'), although here it takes a somewhat distinctive form, also found in some late-medieval monumental inscriptions from Scotland, in which the strokes of a single letter are connected or 'bound' at the ends with a horizontal stroke through their distal tips.[29] At the end of the second line of ogam Mícheál Óg then wrote his name two

Leabhar na Longánach. The Ó Longáin family and their manuscripts (Cork, 2018); Meidhbhín Ní Urdáil, *The scribe in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Ireland: motivations and milieu* (Munster, 2000) and 'Ogham Órdha in den späteren irisch-gälischen Handschriften', in Stefan Zimmer, Rolf Ködderitzsch and Arndt Wigger (eds), *Akten des zweiten deutschen Keltologen-Symposiums* (Tübingen, 1999), 149–62.

[29] On this form of the script, see Katherine Forsyth, 'The ogham inscriptions of Scotland: an edited corpus', unpublished PhD thesis, Harvard University, 1996, xxxiv. Katherine Forsyth informs us that there are at least eight examples of bound ogam in Scotland, from Abernethy and Inchyra (both on the Tay), via Dyce (Aberdeenshire), up to Orkney (Birsay, Burrian) and Shetland (Lunnasting, Whiteness, Cunningsburgh), as well as at Speke Keeil

more times. The first of these signatures is in so-called *ogam coll*, a cipher in conventional script in which vowels (which would be represented by one to five translinear strokes in traditional ogam) are instead written with one to five *c*s. This code appears to derive from one of the variants of ogam from the *Lebor Ogaim*, where it is referred to as *coll ar guta* ('C for a vowel').[30] The third signature in Mícheál Óg's notebook is in the aforementioned code known as *ogam consaine*: in accordance with a key to this latter cipher given on the preceding page of the manuscript, for example, the Í in Mícheál's forename is represented by the letters NG, while the diphthong EA is replaced by the doubled consonant MM.[31]

A more elaborate example of the three ciphers in question is found in RIA MS 23 K 34 (622), a collection of genealogies written in the nineteenth century by an unknown scribe. One section of this manuscript provides keys to *ogam craobh*, *ogam coll* and *ogam consaine* along with didactic poems in Irish on the use of each variety and introductory notes in English. The scribe then copied out the Pater Noster and Ave Maria in *ogam coll*, followed by the formula for general confession in *ogam consaine* (Fig. 5).

This example demonstrates that the use of ciphers in manuscripts of this later period was not always limited to brief signatures or colophons, but in fact could also be employed for much lengthier texts. It is not clear why *ogam coll* and *ogam consaine* were employed more frequently by scribes of the late-medieval to modern periods than other ogam variants set out in the *Lebor Ogaim*, but they certainly seem to have formed an important part of later antiquarian uses of the script.

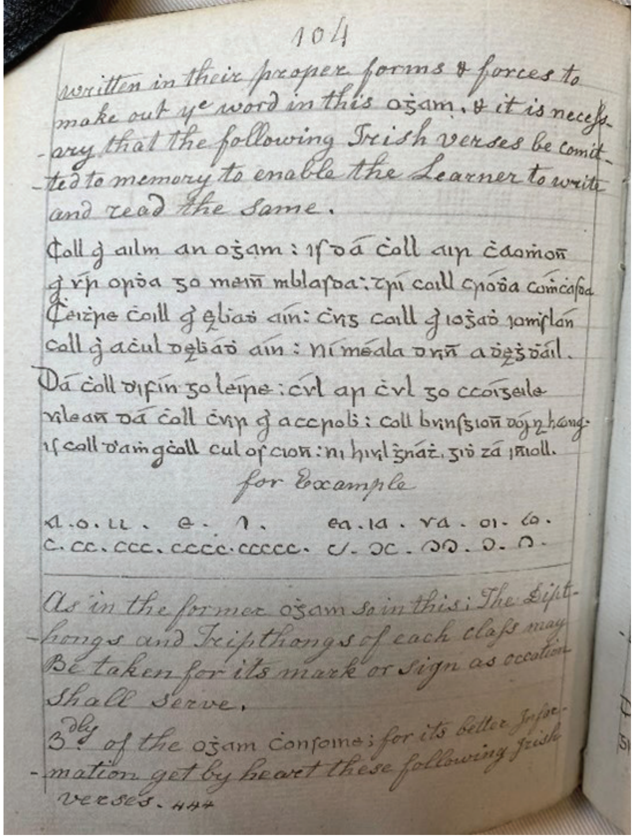
The 'Minchin Manuscript'

The cryptic use of ogam in nineteenth-century Irish scribal culture might justifiably be said to have culminated in the example that is the main focus of this study. National Library of Scotland (Edinburgh), Advocates' Manuscript 50.3.11 is a 66-page notebook dating to the nineteenth century and consisting of healing charms and prayers for a variety of ailments. It is a remarkable example of the development of cryptographic practices in this later period since, with the exception of a single page at the end, its contents are written entirely in ogam script. Some preliminary observations on this manuscript and its wider intellectual

on the Isle of Man. A form of bound ogam is also included as one of the numerous varieties of ogam in the Book of Ballymote, fol. 170r. The inscription from Whiteness has been suggested to be from the tenth century. Thus a tradition of at least nine hundred years links the medieval stones, via the learned manuscript tradition exemplified by the Book of Ballymote, to Mícheál Óg Ó Longáin's use of the device in the nineteenth century.

[30] For discussion of another example of this cipher from the sixteenth-century manuscript known as the 'Book of the Dean of Lismore' (NLS, Advocates' MS 72. 1. 37), see Poppe, 'Writing systems and cultural identity', 23–4. For the illustration of the cipher in the *Lebor Ogaim*, see Calder, *Auraicept*, 307–8 (no. 48).

[31] There are numerous examples of this cipher in Irish manuscripts of earlier centuries as well; for discussion, see Douglas Hyde, 'Aguisín II', *Lia Fáil* 4 (1932), 170–3.



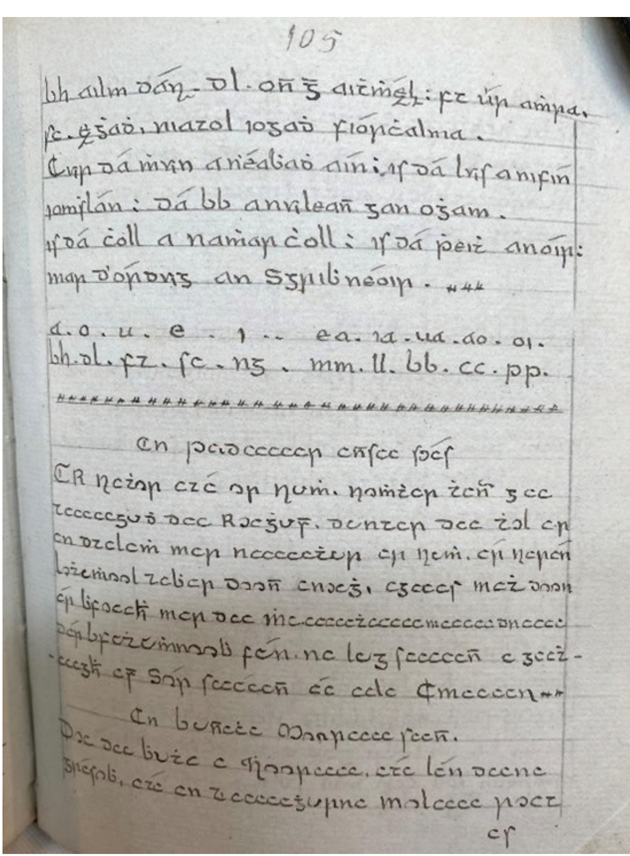


Fig. 5—RIA MS 23 K 34 (622), pp. 104–5 (explanation of *ogam coll* and *ogam consaine* and the Pater Noster in *ogam coll*). Image courtesy of the Royal Irish Academy.

context were published in 2019 by John Purser, after Meg Bateman had recognised the manuscript's significance and had drawn his attention to it. A full transcription and translation of the source, as well as a more detailed investigation of its contents, is still a desideratum.[32] The remainder of this discussion seeks to make progress in this regard by providing editions and translations of select passages from the notebook, as well as a more nuanced analysis of the cryptographic practices evidenced on its final page. This work has been facilitated by the digitisation of the manuscript in March 2022 as part of the OG(H)AM project.[33]

The date of the manuscript in question, which, following a suggestion by Katherine Forsyth, will henceforth be referred to as 'The Minchin Manuscript' for reasons outlined below, can be established from the cover page of the first

[32] John Purser, 'The cryptic background to the ogam manuscript NLS Adv. MS 50.3.11', in Meg Bateman and Richard A.V. Cox (eds), *Cànan is Cultar/Language and Culture. Rannsachadh na Gàidhlig* 9 (Isle of Skye, 2019), 291–306. A full transcription and translation of this source is currently underway as part of the OG(H)AM project.

[33] The manuscript images are not yet available online, but we are grateful to Ulrike Hogg at the National Library of Scotland for both arranging the timely digitisation of the manuscript and for providing a PDF version of the images.

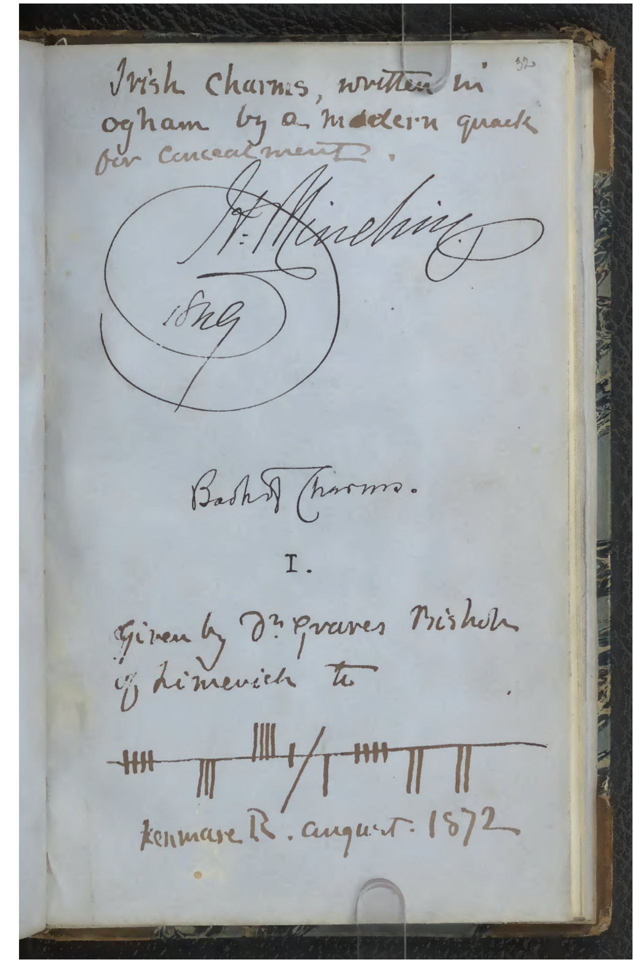

Irish charms, written in
ogham by a modern quack
for concealment.
1849
Book of Charms.
I.
Given by Dr Graves Bishop
of Limerick to
August. 1872

FIG. 6—NLS Adv. MS 50.3.11, fol. 32r. Image courtesy of the National Library of Scotland.

of the two sections into which its contents are divided (fol. 32r; see Fig. 6).[34] At the top of this page, written in the hand of the antiquarian and folklorist John Francis (J.F.) Campbell (1821–85), are the words 'Irish charms, written in ogham by a modern quack for concealment'. This is followed by the signature of one 'J.I.(?) Minchin', the date 1849 and the words 'Book of Charms. I'. Below this, J.F. Campbell has added that the manuscript was 'Given by Dr Graves Bishop of Limerick to', followed by what was presumably intended to be his own signature

[34] The number of the folio is a result of the fact that the two halves of the manuscript were bound out of order.

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in ogam script; the latter can be transcribed as 'E F CAMBELL'.[35] The final line gives the date and place of bequeathal as 'Kenmare R. August 1872'.

Written vertically on the verso of this page (fol. 32v; see Fig. 7) is a key to the script, above which Campbell has added the note 'Key written by Bishop Graves when he gave me the book'.

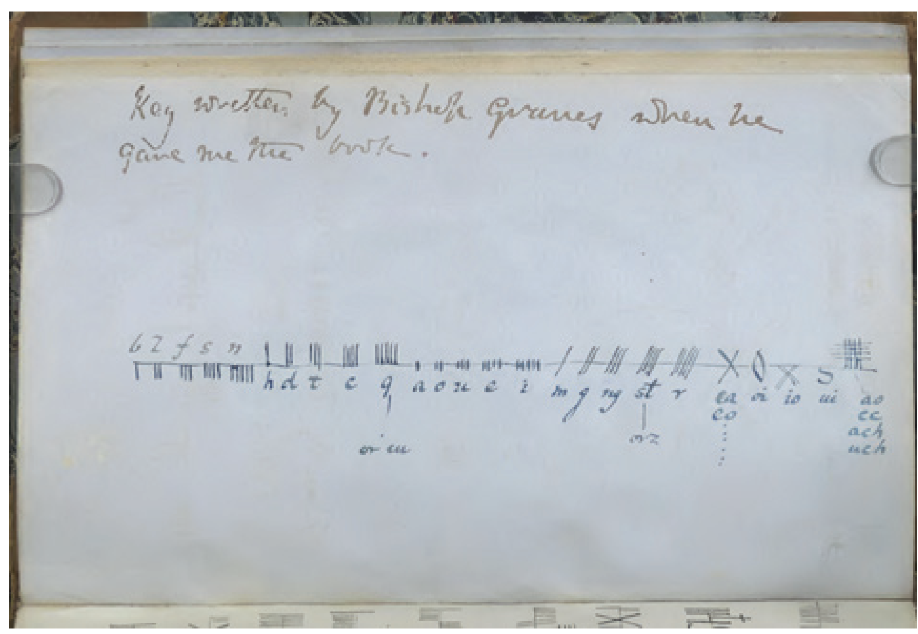

FIG. 7—NLS Adv. MS 50.3.11, fol. 32v, moved horizontally. Image courtesy of the National Library of Scotland.

Purser has observed that 'The Minchins were a Tipperary family of protestant, possibly Germanic stock, and their religion and various estates in the area may explain how the manuscript came into the possession of Bishop Graves of Limerick.'[36] No further particulars regarding the identity of the 'Minchin' who signed the book in 1849 have been established, and it is unlikely that this was the same individual as the one who was responsible for writing the charms in ogam. A close examination of the different hands, especially on the initial pages, may help to shed more light on the roles of the various people, most likely all men, who were involved in the production and the transmission of the manuscript. In the following, reference will be made to the foliation that is pencilled in small numbers in the top-right corner of the odd pages of the bound book. Apart from seven empty pages at the beginning and seven at the end, the bound book consists of 20 pages

[35] The first letter E could be a mere error for I, namely writing one stroke too few; alternatively, it could be an attempt by Campbell, the Scottish Gaelic version of whose name is *Iain Frangan Caimbeul*, to adapt his first name to the Irish language context of the manuscript, namely *Eoin*.

[36] Purser, 'The cryptic background', 300.

of originally loose notes of unruled paper, followed by two notebooks of 34 and 32 pages, most of which were ruled by hand. Each of the two notebooks is enclosed in a cover that is partly written on. Altogether there are 94 pages that need to be considered.

The foliation runs from 1 to 51 and follows the order of the pages as they are bound now, not the original order in which the ogam manuscript was written. The first three empty pages of the book, and the final three empty pages after fol. 51, are unfoliated and unpaginated. The main ogam section of the manuscript (= hand O) occupies fols 14r–30r (33–65) and 33r–48v (1–32); fol. 30v (66) is taken up by special codes and ciphers that will be the subject of the detailed study in the final part of this article. Fol. 31 (without pagination) is empty and fol. 32 (without pagination) will be discussed below. The folios before 14r have no pagination. After the empty fols 1 and 2, writing starts on fol. 3r. A note in Campbell's very distinct and easily recognisable hand (= hand C) reads 'Interpretation of some of the headings of the Charms. by the man who gave the collection to Bishop Graves. From this it appears that these are Cures for diseases and such like J.F. Campbell'. This note is indeed followed, on fol. 3v, by the table of contents, which occupies most of the pages until fol. 11v. *Pace* Campbell, this is not an 'interpretation of some of the headings', but rather a transcription of the titles of the charms in the main ogam part of the manuscript, where they are usually marked out by an X on the margin, followed by their page number. In fact, these sixteen pages of the table of contents feature two different lists of headings (hereafter called A and B), in two slightly different styles (= T^A and T^B; T stands for transcriber), alternating with each other page-wise, but most certainly written by the same person. The formal difference between T^A and T^B is due to the different writing tools used. The ink of T^B is much fainter than that of T^A, and occasionally one gets the impression that text has been deleted.

While T^A mostly fits sixteen headings into a page, T^B, using double line spacing, typically only has eight headings per page. List A consists of 59 headings, List B of 58. Each heading receives a line, the beginning of each heading is typically written in capitals, while small letters are used for the rest. In many entries in T^A, word separation is introduced retroactively by adding vertical strokes, while in other headings word separation is done by spaces. From the fact that the transcriber often did not recognise word boundaries in Irish, it can be deduced that he was not identical with the ogamist of the manuscript who manifestly was a native speaker of the language. In T^A, lenited consonants, which are indicated by superscript dots in the ogam, are likewise indicated by dots over the Roman letters, whereas in T^B the lenition dots of the ogam text are ignored. Furthermore, T^B is littered with errors: ogam ᚅ N is systematically misread as 's', ᚄ S as 't', and ᚃ F as 'n', and the transcriber was apparently unfamiliar with the value of several *forfeda*. The impression cannot be avoided that List B is

an earlier attempt by the transcriber, who, after having realised his many mistakes, then decided to create a second, better, but still not fully flawless list, namely what is called List A here. List A was furthermore subjected to copy editing when somebody else, who was patently competent in Irish and trained in the Gaelic scribal tradition (= hand G for Gaelic), went through the list again and introduced a number of corrections. Since these corrections are particularly frequent on the first two pages of List A, fols 7v and 6v, it is possible that the corrections were made page-wise as the transcription was progressing, and that the transcriber became more competent thereafter. Perhaps the vertical strokes that serve as word dividers were introduced by G as well.

The pages that contain the two lists of headings are out of order in the book; Table 2 clarifies the order in which the pages have to be read. A close transliteration of the two lists is provided at the end of this article in Appendix 1.

The two lists are followed on fol. 12r by a transcription in Gaelic script, undoubtedly by G, of the cryptic Irish text on page 66 of the manuscript. To this has been added in the top margin the English note 'Written in cipher at the end' in what looks like Campbell's untidy hand C, but using black instead of his usual brown ink.

After an empty page, fol. 13r bears the signature 'J.I. Minchin 1849' in the upper half and the title 'Book of Charms. II.' approximately in the middle of the page, both written with several flourishes. As noted above and illustrated

Table 2—Summary and reading order of the transcriptions of charm headings in the Minchin Manuscript (NLS MS 50.3.11)

fo.	*List A*	*List B*	
3v	A.5		
4r		B.1	
4v	A.4		
5r		B.4	
5v	A.3		
6r		B.6	
6v	A.2		
7r		B.8	
7v	A.1		
8r			Empty
8v		B.7	
9r			a line by G
9v		B.5	
10r			Empty
10v		B.3	
11r			one line in T^A
11v		B.2	

in Fig. 6, a similar title page for 'Book of Charms. I.' in the same style is found on fol. 32r. This display script is rather similar to the notes 'End of Book I.' and 'End of Book II.' in List A (fols 5v and 3v; see Appendix 1). It is therefore suggestive to think that the words on fols 13r and 32r were also written by hand T.

In addition to the title, fol. 32r also contains the notes by Campbell in Roman and ogam script, while fol. 32v contains the key to the ogam script, written in Roman letters by Bishop Graves (= hand B for Bishop), accompanied by a note by Campbell (Fig. 7). The main point of the foregoing discussion is that the notes of the manuscript in Latin script are written by at least four hands. These are as follows:

- Bishop Charles Graves' Hand B in the key to the ogam script on fol. 32v;
- Several notes in Hand C, which is that of J.F. Campbell;
- Hand G, which is that of a speaker of Irish competent in the Gaelic script, and who is perhaps also the scribe of the ogam section of the manuscript, i.e. hand O;
- Hand T, the role and identity of which remains to be determined.

From Campbell's remark on fol. 3r it follows that the transcriber T was not Bishop Graves. This is corroborated by T's unfamiliarity with the ogam script, especially in the earlier List B, an unfamiliarity that would be totally out of character for Graves. T's use of Roman, not Gaelic, letters to transcribe Irish indicates that he was steeped in English, not Irish education, and that he did not form part of the Gaelic scribal tradition. The mechanical transcription of Lists A and B, with no attention to the meaning of the text, adds to the impression that T had no knowledge of the Irish language. This virtually rules out the possibility that T is the same person who wrote the ogam part of the manuscript, as well as the sporadic parts in Gaelic script. It is suggestive to think that T is the 'J.I. Minchin', who left his signature on fols 13r and 32r, a suspicion further substantiated by the similarity between these signatures and the notes on fols 3v and 5v. The Minchins were a Protestant, English family. The approximate profile of T deduced from his scribal habits agrees well with such a background.

A brief examination of some of the scribal features of the main part of the Minchin Manuscript will serve to illustrate that, although the entire text of the notebook is written in ogam, it is otherwise a typical product of the scribal culture of the period. The ogam script is regular and neat throughout, usually with 10 lines to a page but occasionally 11 or 12. The manuscript as a whole contains at least 59 separate charm texts, and these are distinguished by headings typical of those found in medicinal indications, i.e. ᚐᚏ… (*ar x*, 'for [or against] x'). The identification of these headings without the aid of a full transcription is for the most part straightforward, given that the scribe consistently writes them either on a separate line or indents the line at which the charm begins.

There are only a few instances in the main text of the manuscript where Roman letters are used. For example, the scribe wrote a Christogram at the beginning of a charm on page 33 (corresponding to the start of the manuscript

as a whole), and on two occasions the article form *na* is written in Gaelic letters slightly above a line of text, seemingly because it had accidentally been omitted from the main line of ogam script by haplography.[37] Frequent use is also made of punctuation marks as well as marks of suspension and lenition, which become more regular in the later parts of the manuscript. This can be illustrated by the text of the *Super Petram* charm for toothache in Fig. 8 (page 22 of the manuscript; discussed further below), where we find the suprascript *punctum delens* written over consonants in the first line, a suspension stroke indicating a double NN in the second line, what may be intended as a semi-colon or colon in the third line, a hyphen-like mark to show that a word has been split over lines 4 and 5, and a full stop at the end of the charm.

There are several errors of spelling that were probably inadvertent mistakes on the part of the scribe rather than intentional obscurantisms. These frequently take the form of an incorrect number of strokes, such as in the second charm in the collection (for toothache), where the final letter of what was clearly intended to be the word *agus* ('and')—normally represented in ogam by four strokes below the stemline—is instead written as three strokes below the stemline (the letter F).[38] Similarly, the final element of the Irish saint's name 'Colum Cille' in the second charm of the collection is spelled CNLLE, with the vowel I (normally five strokes through the stemline) written as N (five strokes below the stemline).[39] This latter example demonstrates that spelling mistakes are not merely confined to writing one too many strokes here and there, but also occasionally resulted from a confusion of symbols from different letter-groups in the ogam alphabet. Another example of this occurs in a blood-staunching charm on page 11, where the word COSC ('restraint, prevention') is written as COCG. In ogam, the letter S is written as four strokes below the stemline, while C is written as four strokes above it.

With the exception of the fact that they are written entirely in ogam, the nature of the Minchin Manuscript charms themselves is largely in keeping with what we might expect to find in a manuscript source of the nineteenth century. Nicholas Wolf has recently noted that 'Of 177 charm examples in nineteenth-century texts that have been found to date, 147 have been identified in terms of their theme, and of these 93 (or 63 percent) have a specific medical theme as opposed to a non-medical theme or a more generalized protective purpose.'[40] Among the most common ones Wolf cites are charms for toothache, fever and bleeding.[41] The charms in the Minchin Manuscript

[37] See the headings on pp. 25, l. 1 (which can be transliterated as ARHA [na] NAOD*h* AN*N* SO, 'a prayer for pangs here') and 26, l. 2 (ARHA [na] NAOD*H*, 'a prayer for pangs').
[38] NLS Adv. MS 50.3.11, p. 2, l. 1.
[39] NLS Adv. MS 50.3.11, p. 1, l. 9.
[40] Nicholas Wolf, 'Nineteenth-century charm texts: scope and context', in Ilona Tuomi, John Carey, Barbara Hillers and Ciarán Ó Gealbháin (eds), *Charms, charmers and charming in Ireland. From the medieval to the modern* (Cardiff, 2019), 103–15: 109.
[41] Wolf, 'Nineteenth-century charm texts', 110.

have a similar profile: at least five cures in this collection are said to be for 'toothache', although there are several others with less explicit headings (for example, 'a charm for "pangs"') that could also have been intended for toothache specifically.[42] At least four of the charms in the collection are for staunching blood;[43] five are for securing love;[44] four are for fever;[45] and several others are for minor ailments or injuries like sprains, sore breasts, or the removal of a thorn.[46] Only three of the Minchin Manuscript charms have thus far been identified as dealing with a non-medical theme or with problems not affecting humans: namely, one charm for an ailment afflicting cattle and two for encouraging the production of butter.[47]

It is worth noting, however, that Wolf did not include the Minchin Manuscript in his corpus of nineteenth-century charm-texts and therefore the addition of some 59 further examples from our notebook represents a significant figure.[48] The same author also noted that many of the charms in his corpus circulated in mixed volumes containing a variety of literary and religious material:

> 45 per cent [of the sources] featured charms presented by their scribes intermixed with secular and religious material (usually verse), 26 per cent among purely secular literary items and 13 per cent interspersed among purely devotional content. Only one [source] (National Library of Ireland MS G 373, a volume written by Éamonn Ó Mathghamhna of County Cork in 1828) is devoted exclusively to medical material, and while two (Royal Irish Academy MSS 918 and 921, a County Cork manuscript written by Edmund Morton in 1818–40 and an 1857 County Clare manuscript written by John Lysaght, respectively […]) are almost entirely made up of charms, even in this latter case the addition of literary bookends in the text before and after the charms make the manuscripts a mixed presentation of cures and literature.[49]

This profile, Wolf argued, suggests that the survival of charm-texts in nineteenth-century sources 'was not enabled by the production of pure charm

[42] See further the discussion below.

[43] These begin on pp. 9, l. 10; 10, l. 8; 17, l. 10; and 18, l. 11.

[44] These begin on pp. 12, l. 10; 13, l. 5; 54, l. 7; 55, l. 8; and 57, l. 1.

[45] See p. 9, l. 6; p. 11, l. 4; and p. 31, ll. 1 and 11.

[46] A charm for sore breasts is found on p. 5, l. 5, and charms for removal of a thorn are found on pp. 22, l. 7 and 23, l. 3.

[47] The charm for cattle is on p. 25, l. 11, and those for butter on pp. 28, l. 3 and 29, l. 2.

[48] See Wolf, 'Nineteenth-century charm texts', 112–13, for a list of the manuscript sources used for his corpus. This includes manuscripts preserved in the National Library of Ireland, University College Cork Library, Mount Melleray Abbey Library, Cambridge University Library and the Franciscan Library, Killiney (now held at the archives of University College Dublin).

[49] Wolf, 'Nineteenth-century charm texts', 111–12.

manuals by the practitioners themselves, but rather by the written recordings of external observers of the charm practices', whose interest in charms was only one aspect of more wide-ranging literary and religious concerns.[50] While the anonymity of the scribe of the Minchin Manuscript hinders any certain conclusions regarding the ultimate aim of recording such a large corpus of charm material in a single notebook, it is worth noting that the manuscript in question stands apart from these other contemporary sources in more than its script alone, since (with the exception of the final page) its contents consist exclusively of charms.

A case study: toothache charms in the Minchin Manuscript

It is clear that most, if not all, of the charms in the Minchin Manuscript fit comfortably within the common characterisation of modern Irish charms as being 'very much like orthodox prayers in form and content.'[51] Several of the charms in the collection use first-person forms or refer to Christ or various saints, and most end with invocations of the Trinity and a final 'Amen'. Many of the entries are also versions of charms that had a broad distribution in many European linguistic traditions. For example, pages 19–22 of the notebook contain a sequence of four charms, all of which are variants of the widespread and popular charm for toothache known as the *Super Petram*, which had spread throughout Europe from at least the tenth century; Barbara Hillers has noted that the *Super Petram* is 'one of the three most common narrative charms in Ireland, and is found in both the Irish- and English-language traditions.'[52] Unlike in many modern charms, no saint appears as intercessor in this case: rather, Christ himself acts as healer and is addressed directly, and the desired cure is effected by evoking a narrative of how Christ himself healed the tooth of St Peter.[53] Different variants of the charm depict St Peter as sitting in different places; as Hillers has observed, this is usually a stone (with most English-language versions specifying a marble stone), but some versions state that the saint is sitting 'in a desert' or 'by a river', often understood to be the River Jordan.[54] The following version of

[50] Wolf, 'Nineteenth-century charm texts', 112.
[51] Wolf, 'Nineteenth-century charm texts', 108.
[52] Barbara Hillers, 'Towards a typology of European narrative charms in Irish oral tradition', in Ilona Tuomi, John Carey, Barbara Hillers and Ciarán Ó Gealbháin (eds), *Charms, charmers and charming in Ireland. From the medieval to the modern* (Cardiff, 2019), 79–102: 86.
[53] Joseph Flahive, 'A toothache charm in a manuscript fragment of John Lysaght', in Ilona Tuomi, John Carey, Barbara Hillers and Ciarán Ó Gealbháin (eds), *Charms, charmers and charming in Ireland. From the medieval to the modern* (Cardiff, 2019), 117–29: 120.
[54] Hillers, 'Towards a typology', 86–7. For a recent discussion of the River Jordan as a biblical symbol of cleansing, regeneration and rebirth, see François Quiviger, 'From sign to embodiment: the River Jordan and the representation of water in western art 400 – *c.* 1500', in Marilina Cesario, Hugh Magennis and Elisa Ramazzina (eds), *The elements in the medieval world: interdisciplinary perspectives* (4 vols, Leiden, 2024), vol. 2: WATER, 167–95.

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the *Super Petram* charm from the Minchin Manuscript seems to belong to this last category (see Fig. 8):[55]

> Do t*h*uad*h* Peadar go sruh hOrhalan, hāine
> Crīost os a c*h*oin*n*e. Crēad sin ort
> a P*h*ea[d]air air an tig*h*earna: ō a hig*h*-
> ear{n}a mfiacail atā tin*n*, ēirg*h*e a P*h*ea-
> dair agus bī slān, nī husa ab*h*āin ac*h*(h)
> a mairion[n] beod*h*. Amen.
>
> Peter went to the River Jordan,
> Christ came up to him. What ails you,
> O Peter, said the Lord: Oh, O Lord,
> my tooth is sore. Arise, Peter,
> and be well: not just you, but
> anyone who lives. Amen.

This text bears comparison to variants of the *Super Petram* charm collected in Donegal, Meath and Galway during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as illustrated by the following three examples:

> **I.**
>
> Shuidh Peadar ag Srúth-Orla
> Agus tháinig Íosa os a chionn
> 'Goidé sin ort a Pheadair?'
> 'Ó Íosa! M'fhiacal atá tinn!'
> 'Éirigh suas, a Pheadair, agus bí slán
> Ná ní bheidh an ortha agus an déideadh
> In aon cheann amháin.'
>
> Peter sat by the River Orla
> And Jesus came upon him
> 'What is wrong with you, Peter?'
> 'O Jesus! My tooth hurts!'
> 'Get up, Peter, and be well!

[55] NLS Adv. MS 50.3.11, p. 22, ll. 1–6. In the transcription, lenition marked by a suprascript dot in the manuscript is expanded as 'h' in italics; macrons are used to indicate unmarked vowel-length; and punctuation is as given in the manuscript. Square brackets [ ] are placed around missing letters, while round brackets ( ) indicate letters that are extraneous and should be omitted in the reading. For a close transliteration of this charm following the principles developed in the OG(H)AM project, see Appendix 2. Regarding the dialectal profile of this short text, Andrea Palandri kindly informs us that the forms *thuadh* (= normalised *chuaigh*), *hāine* (= *tháinig*) and *ēirghe* (= *éirigh*) in the charm are orthographic ways of reflecting pronunciations that are typical of what can be called the 'central schwa belt' in Irish dialectology, encompassing the North Tipperary–Offaly–Laois–North Kildare region. The spelling *sruh* (= *sruth*) is an indication that the text was not written in the south-west part of Ireland, where *sruch* could be expected. These observations accord with the fact the Minchin family held possessions in Tipperary.

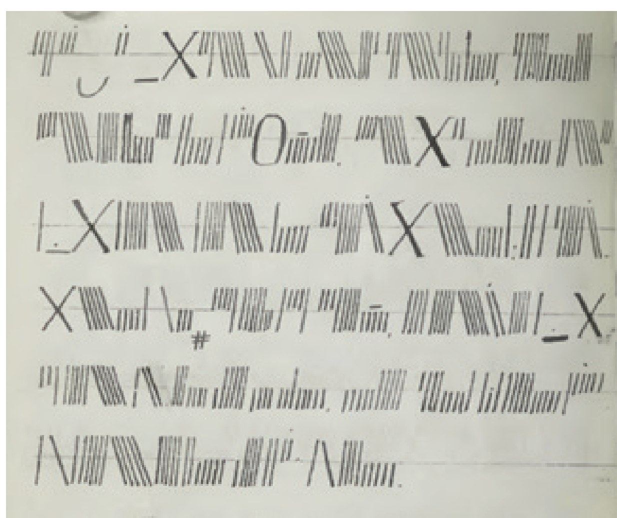

Fig. 8—NLS Adv. MS 50.3.11, p. 22 (toothache charm). Image courtesy of the National Library of Scotland.

For the charm and the toothache
Shall not go in the same head together.'[56]

II.

Ag so Órrtha an Déidigh.
Bhí Peadar aig sruth Iórdain. Thainic Íosa os a cheann. 'Go dté sin ort, a Pheadair?' 'Atá m'fíacail-sa tinn.' 'So órrtha dhuit-se, Pheadair, agus dod fhíacail tinn, agus ní bhíaigh an órrtha agus an déideadh a n-áon cheann.'

Here is the Toothache Charm.
Peter was at the River Jordan. Christ came up to him. 'What ails you, Peter?' 'My tooth is sore.' 'Here is a charm for you, Peter, and for your sore tooth, and the charm and the toothache shall not be in one head.'[57]

III.

Chuaigh Peadar go sruth Fuarlán,
Tháinig Críost ós a chionn
Céard sin ort, a Pheadair?
Ó, mo fhiacail atá tinn.
Éirigh, a Pheadair agus bí slán,
Ní tusa ach fearaibh Fáil,
Aon duine ghéillfeas nó a déarfas an ortha,
Ní bheith i ndiaidh na hortha doigh in aon déad amháin.
In ainm an Athar, an Mhic, agus na [sic] Spioraid Naoimh.
Áiméan.

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[56] NFC S 1047:6; Co. Donegal (cited with translation in Hillers, 'European narrative charms', 87).

[57] RIA MS 3 B 39, p. 184 (cited with translation in Flahive, 'Toothache charm', 122).

Peter went to the River Fuarlán,
Christ came up to him.
'What ails you, Peter?'
'Oh, my tooth hurts.'
'Get up, Peter and be well,
Not you alone but together with the men of Ireland,
Any person who believes in or says the charm,
After the charm, there will be no pain in any tooth at all.
In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.'[58]

In the Minchin Manuscript, three other cures for toothache immediately precede the example cited above, two of which are also versions of the *Super Petram* charm. The third text in this series of four charms, however, differs from the others in that it instead invokes the biblical figure of Abraham and an apocryphal account of his meeting with Christ:[59]

Tar liom air an slānaig*h*heoir, le hAb-
raham, go Slīabh Abuim; nī f*h*ēadaim air Abr-
aham, ōir atā dēadug*h*ad*h* orm. Gaib*h* lin*n*, gaib*h*
lin*n* a c*h*lēirig*h* na mbriahra mbin*n*.
Atā cruib*h* cromm camm air c*h*nāib*h* lomm l-
eaca mo c*h*in*n*.[60] Ordui(i)m air Crīo-
st, le hAbraham, gan an arha agus an dēad-
ug*h*ad*h* do b*h*eih a n-ineac*h*t ort. Amen.

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[58] Learaí Ó Fínneadha, *Ó Bhaile go Baile*, ed. M. F. Ó Conchúir (Indreabhán, 1993), 90 (our translation).

[59] NLS Adv. MS 50.3.11, p. 21. For a close transliteration, see Appendix 2.

[60] These lines are composed in a sophisticated syllabic metre. The fact that *cromm*, *camm* and *lomm* are spelt with double *mm* instead of single *m*, which is the usual practice otherwise, is an indication that this quatrain may have been taken from a written, older source that adhered to Early Irish spelling conventions. The quatrain probably pre-existed before it was integrated into this charm. If aphaeresis is applied to the pretonic *a-* of *atá* in line b, the syllabic count becomes $4^1\ 7^1\ 4^1\ 7^1$, which represents a *dían*-type of metre (cf. Gerard Murphy, *Early Irish Metrics* [Dublin, 1961], 50–1). With minor normalisations, the stanza can be written thus:

Gaibh linn, gaibh linn,
a chléirigh na mbríathra mbinn.
Atá cruimh cromm camm
ar chnáimh lomm leaca mo chinn.

The main rhyme is between lines b : d (*binn* : *chinn*); line a (*linn*) participates in the main rhyme, while line c (*camm*) forms half-rhyme with it. Lines c and d (*cromm* : *lomm*) add internal rhyme. Alliteration is found in lines b (***b**ríathra m**b**inn*) and c (***c**ruibh **c**romm **c**amm*; with interlocking complex alliteration between ***cr**uibh **cr**omm* and ***cro**mm **ca**mm*); line d has mirroring alliteration (***ch**náimh **l**omm **l**eaca **ch**inn*); and lines c and d are connected by linking alliteration (***c**amm* : ***ch**náimh*). Lines a (***l**inn **l**inn*), b (***ch**léirigh*) and d (***ch**náimh **l**omm **l**eaca **ch**inn*) add to the overall interlaced alliterative structure of the quatrain. Andrea Palandri draws attention to the conservative spelling *cruibh*, which may suggest a region of origin north of a line from south-west Clare to Waterford, south of which *cnuimh* is common.

'Come with me', said the Redeemer to Abraham,
'to Mount Abuim(?)';[61] 'I cannot', said Abraham,
'for I have a toothache'. 'Go with us, go
with us, o cleric of the sweet words.
There is a bent, crooked worm on the bare bone
in the cheek of my head'. 'I command', said Christ
to Abraham, 'that the charm and toothache not be together on you'.
Amen.[62]

This example attests to a widespread and long-standing belief that toothache was caused by a worm (*croimh* or *cnuimh*) burrowing under or above the tooth.[63] A parallel for the encounter between Christ and Abraham in the context of a cure for toothache, moreover, is found in two charms from the Scottish Highlands published by Alexander Macbain in the late nineteenth century. One of these includes the following passage:

Thuirt Abraham ri Iosa Criosd,
'S iad a' falbh air sliabh Bheitris,
'Cha'n urrainn mise coiseachd
No mairceachd leis an deideadh.'
Thuirt Iosa Criosd ri Abraham:
'Cha bhi chroimh sin anns a cheann sin: -
Mach an deideadh! Mach an deideadh!'
Da uair an deigh cheile.
Fios air neamh is fios air talamh,
Fios aig do righ air do ghalar;
Croimh is deideadh chuir fo'n talamh.

Abraham said to Jesus Christ
As they walked on the slope of Bethris:
'I have not the power of walking
Or of riding because of toothache.'
Said Jesus Christ to Abraham:
'Toothworm will not be in that head;
Out the toothache! Out the toothache!'
Twice repeated after another.
He [the King] has knowledge of heaven and earth,

---

[61] The identification of the placename intended here is uncertain, but the second element may be a corruption of 'Abimelech', one of the kings to whom Abraham is said to have fled in Genesis 20:1–16. In two parallel charms cited below from the collection of Alexander Macbain, the placename is given as 'Sliabh Bheitris'.

[62] NLS Adv. MS 50.3.11, p. 21, ll. 4–11 (our translation).

[63] For discussion of this theme in relation to the Old English charming tradition of the early medieval period, see Wilfrid Bonser, *The medical background of Anglo-Saxon England. A study in history, psychology and folklore* (London, 1963), 277–81.

> Your King has knowledge of your disease,
> Toothworm and toothache to be placed under earth.[64]

It may be no coincidence that Peter and Abraham are the biblical figures who feature in these toothache charms. Both are known through stories in which they are given orders (by God and Jesus respectively). Abraham serves as a model of unfaltering obedience, in that he is prepared to first leave his country (Genesis 12:1) on God's command, and then to sacrifice his own son Isaac (Genesis 22:2). His erstwhile hesitation in the charm deviates therefore slightly from his biblical behaviour. Peter gives up his profession as fisherman when told by Jesus to follow him (Matthew 4:19). The two figures may thus have served as models for the patients to whom charms such as those in the Minchin Manuscript were addressed, who may not always from the outset have been convinced of the efficacy of those cures. In other words, the subliminal message may have been that, just as Peter or Abraham, who gave themselves over to the belief in the truth of the divine words, patients will eventually experience the beneficial effects of the charms.

The cluster of four charms on pages 19–22 of the Minchin Manuscript are not the only cures for toothache in that source. For example, the text of the first two charms, which are described in a heading as cures for 'pangs',[65] indicates that the ailment in question was understood to be toothache.[66] The first (which begins with the Christogram noted above) invokes John the Baptist, who is said to have been given the charm by Christ, while the second attributes the charm to Colum Cille.[67] This Irish saint is invoked in two other charms, one for the removal of a thorn and the other for various types of pangs or pain, while St Brigid is called upon in two prayers for *drochshúil* ('weak eyesight' or 'the evil eye') and in one for a stitch.[68] Future study of these other entries will no doubt provide further insight into their place within the tradition of nineteenth-century Irish and European healing charms.

A cryptic mystery: the final page of the Minchin Manuscript

In the absence of any clear information regarding the author of the ogam charms in the Minchin Manuscript, the question of the scribe's intentions in

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[64] Alexander Macbain, 'Gaelic incantations', *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness* 17 (1890–1), 222–66: 254–5 (with some modifications to the translation); a second example of this particular *historiola* follows on 255–6.

[65] The heading in question can be transliterated as ARHA NA NAOGHUR LEANUS (p. 1, l. 1).

[66] The full text of these charms is not yet certain and therefore will not be discussed in detail here.

[67] NLS Adv. MS 50 3. 11, p. 1, ll. 2–3 and 2, l. 9.

[68] The invocations in charms for *drochshúil* occur on pp. 30, l. 3 and 33, l. 8, and Brigid's name is again found in the prayer for a stitch on p. 24, ll. 1–2.

recording so much material in this script is difficult to answer with certainty. Purser had suggested that 'If the kind of concealment in this manuscript […] seems somewhat gratuitous, we should remember that until recently doctors' prescriptions were often written out in Latin and were intended for decipherment by the chemist only.'[69] It is possible that a similar motivation underlies the creation of the Minchin Manuscript, i.e. an idea that healing charms of this kind merited concealment because they fell outside contemporary perceptions of 'orthodox' medicine in some way. The length of the notebook and the careful precision with which the script has been written suggest, however, that the author was engaging in a very deliberate and premeditated act of scribal and cultural transmission. The final page of the manuscript clearly indicates, moreover, that any practical motivations that might have underpinned the composition of the notebook were accompanied by at least a degree of fanciful experimentation with cryptic script systems.

Page 66 of the Minchin Manuscript (fol. 30v) is the only page in the body of the manuscript to be written in a script other than ogam. It is made up of four formally distinct sections (see Fig. 9), which, although written in different codes, are connected in content, as will emerge in what follows. Section I (lines 1–4) consists of four lines of unusual symbols in an obscure cipher at the top of the page. They are followed by six and a half lines encoded in *ogam coll* in regular Gaelic letters (section II; lines 5–11). In the last line of this section, the cipher abruptly switches to *ogam na consaine* in the middle of a nominal phrase (section III; lines 11–12); this cipher takes up one and a half lines. The bottom line is written in ordinary manuscript ogam (section IV; line 13), identical in style and execution to what has gone before in the first 65 pages of the Minchin Manuscript. The ogam reads CRIOĊ FU$^{\mathrm{I}}$NIM '(the) end, I end' (without word separation).

The final part of this article will be concerned with explaining the process of cracking the code of the first four lines in section I, a code whose nature was obscure and unknown initially. Perhaps because of a very superficial likeness, Purser had called these characters 'runes',[70] but runes they are not, although, as will emerge below, Anglo-Saxon runes may have provided the model for the cipher.

The present account deliberately follows the bottom-up route of the actual decipherment, and not a retrospective top-down approach that would start with the solution. Retracing the steps that were taken in order to make sense of the four lines is intended to serve the purpose of providing a model for tackling similar texts in other codes. Sections II–IV in *ogam coll*, *ogam na consaine* and plain *ogam* were consciously ignored in the early steps of the process of decipherment since it was *a priori* unknown if and what relationship they

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[69] Purser, 'The cryptic background', 302.
[70] Purser, 'The cryptic background', 301.

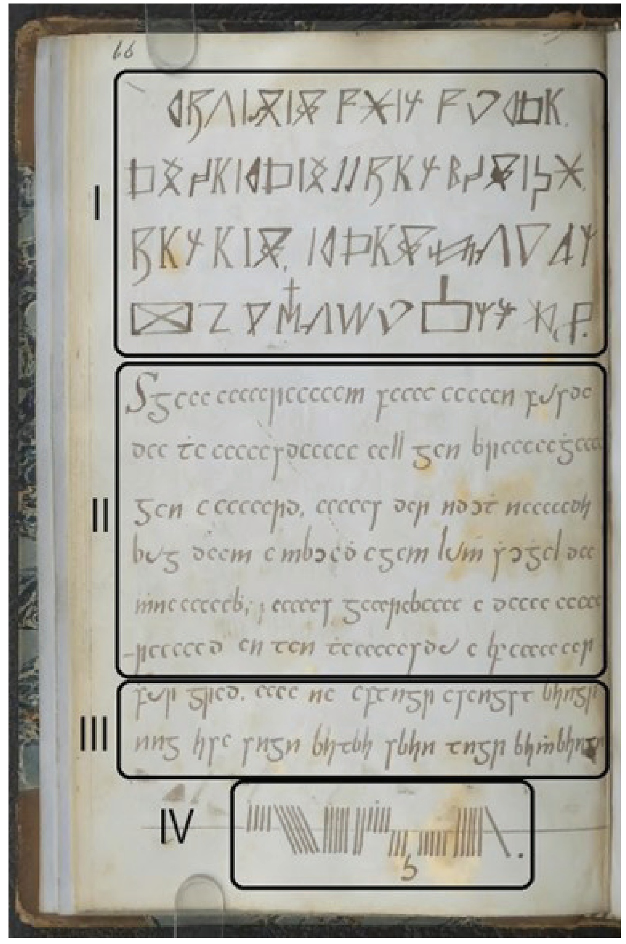

Fig. 9—The four sections of different ciphers on page 66 of the Minchin Manuscript.

had with section I. The intention was not to be prejudiced in the decoding of this passage, but to approach the cryptic passage solely on its own terms. For this reason, sections II–IV will also be discussed only later here.

In order to facilitate the discussion of the cryptic text, every symbol in section I will be referred to by an unambiguous identifier or index number that indicates the line and the position within the line (see Fig. 10). For example, the very first symbol, which looks like a reversed D, has the identifier I.1, while the symbol in line 4, which has the shape of a quadrangle with an ascending pole, has the identifier IV.8.

The following working hypotheses served as a starting point to crack the code:

1. Since the rest of the manuscript is in Irish, this text is in Irish, too.
2. The limited number of different glyphs (31) and their simple shapes suggests that it is an alphabetic writing system.

[149.157.61.209] Project MUSE (2025-02-13 15:41 GMT) Maynooth University

3. The recurrence of some characters with no obvious mathematical pattern suggests that it is a meaningful text, not just a collection of isolated characters or a randomised text.
4. The occasional spaces between the characters serve as word boundaries.
5. The horizontal sign III.12 that is markedly different in character and orientation from the rest is probably a punctuation mark or serves a similar function as a *ceann faoi eite* in Irish manuscripts.
6. Likewise, the double strokes II.10 are a suprasegmental sign, maybe indicating two halves of a poem.
7. The geometric appearance of some of the characters in lines 3 and 4 after the ostensible *ceann faoi eite* (III.12) is noticeably different from that of the characters before. There is no overlap between the signs that appear in the two parts. The second part is therefore potentially a different cipher, independent of the first part.
8. Since the manuscript is a collection of charms, this is also a charm.

The last three of these eight working hypotheses turned out to be wrong, but even those wrong assumptions helped in deciphering the text. The errors that the scribe had made in encoding his text curiously counterbalanced the errors made in the process of decoding.

Through purely structural reasoning, it was possible to arrive at the provisional identification of three letters. The starting point was the speculation that the simple single strokes (index numbers I.4, 6, and 10; II.5, 8 and 17; III.5 and 7) were the letter I, mirroring—in a rather uninspired way—the identical glyph in the Latin alphabet. The distribution of this character in relation to the endings of words (indicated by the spaces) corresponds to what can be expected for *i* as a marker of palatalisation in Modern Irish. Under the assumption that this is a charm, it could be

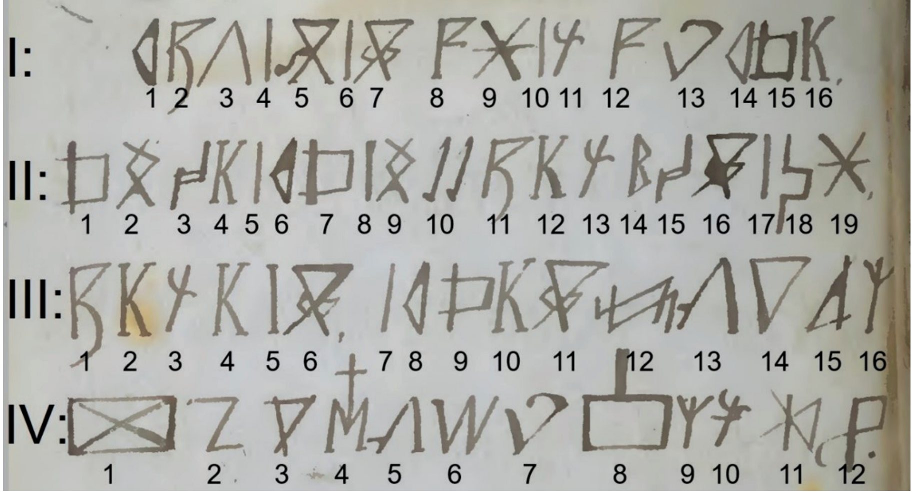

Fig. 10—The four lines of the Minchin cipher with index numbers for each character.

expected that first-person-singular verbal forms were used, especially at the beginning of the text. The combination of these two hypotheses automatically led to the identification of the letters at the end of the first word (I.6–7) as the verbal ending of the first-person singular -*im*, or more precisely -*iXim*, with a predesinential letter (I.5), provisionally marked with *X,* that looks somewhat similar to the one identified as M (I.7). It could be speculated that the graphical variation between I.5 and I.7, if they should represent the same letter, was due to the scribe's inexperience in the early stages of practicing the cipher. The ending -*im* also occurs in letters III.5–6, and the very last letter (III.11) before the provisionally identified punctuation (III.12) is also an M. Since *m* more commonly follows a vowel than another consonant in word-final position (only *l*, *r* and, very rarely, *dh* can precede *m* in that position), it is plausible that letter III.10 is a vowel. The same letter also precedes the ending -*im* in the penultimate word (III.4) and is frequent elsewhere (I.16; II.4, and 12; III.2). In view of the typical orthographic structure of Irish words, the vowel A suggested itself as the most likely candidate for this glyph. The comparatively high frequency of the letters A and I throughout the text agree with their expected distribution in Modern Irish, predicated by the well-known orthographic rule *caol le caol*, *leathan le leathan*.

Having thus provisionally identified the most common vowel signs, a rough syllabic frame had been established and a picture started to emerge as to which characters were likely to be consonants and where the remaining vowels might be found. Other observations did not lead to the identification of specific letters but added to the overall structural appreciation of the text. A sequence of three word-initial letters is repeated in positions II.11–13 and III.1–3 in two immediately adjacent words. This led to the hypothesis that they form a *figura etymologica*, since the second instance looks like a word with the verbal ending -*aim*. *Figurae etymologicae* are a common stylistic device in Irish, whereby an abstract noun serves as the object of its own verb. This hypothesis was ultimately disproved, since it emerged in the end that the scribe had made a writing mistake, and the second word was not even a verb. Furthermore, two characters, which by their position in the provisional syllabic grid are best identified as consonants, recur three times as a pair (I.14–15, II.6–7, III.8–9). Common combinations of two characters in Modern Irish orthography are, for instance, the digraphs for lenited sounds with *h* as the second element, but many other possible combinations exist besides this.

Progress in the decipherment stalled after the initial identification of the three letters A, I, and M, but then chance came to our aid. During an online seminar, Paul Russell showed in passing an image of the 'Alphabet of Nemniuus', an obscure writing system ascribed, in one of the four manuscripts in which it is transmitted, to an early Briton called Nemniuus, perhaps to be identified with Nennius, the author of the *Historia Brittonum*. This provided the decisive impetus

to solve the mystery of the cipher on the last page of the Minchin Manuscript.[71] The alphabet of Nemniuus survives in four copies in early medieval manuscripts from Britain, one of which (O) probably dates to 817.[72] It is essentially a Latin alphabet in which the Roman letters have been replaced on the graphic level by new, imaginative glyphs that are occasionally reminiscent of Anglo-Saxon runes. The core alphabet is extended by ten characters for diphthongs. Derolez was of the opinion that the entire glyph-set of Nemniuus was formally derived from an Anglo-Saxon *futhorc*.[73] Where the names of the letters, which are mentioned together with the glyphs in two of the manuscripts (O and T), can be interpreted in a meaningful way, they are manifestly Old Welsh, but Derolez thinks that they are translated from or inspired by the Old English names for the letters of the *futhorc*.

Comparing the provisional identifications of the three letters A, I and M in the Minchin Manuscript with those in the Alphabet of Nemniuus results in a perfect match. Furthermore, a number of other glyphs in the Minchin text have manifest similarities in some copies of the Alphabet of Nemniuus.

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[71] On the Alphabet of Nemniuus, also called 'Nennian Alphabet' or 'Nemnivus's Alphabet', see René Derolez, *Runica manuscripta. The English tradition* (Brugge, 1954), 157–9. On the attribution of the *Historia Brittonum* to Nennius, see most recently the discussion by Ben Guy, 'The origins of the compilation of Welsh historical texts in Harley 3859', *Studia Celtica* 49 (2015), 21–56: 50–2.

[72] Paul Russell has kindly shared his information about the Alphabet of Nemniuus with us, which we reproduce here. The manuscripts containing the alphabet are as follows:

O: Oxford, Bodleian Library, Auctarium F. 4. 32, fol. 20r (*Liber Commonei*; *s*. ix) (Derolez, *Runica manuscripta*, 157–9; facsimile in Richard W. Hunt, *Saint Dunstan's Classbook from Glastonbury. Codex Biblioth. Bodleianae Oxon. Auct. F.4.32* (Amsterdam, 1961); digital image: http://image.ox.ac.uk/show?collection=bodleian&manuscript=msauctf432).

T: London, British Library, Cotton Titus D. xviii, fol. 7v (*s*. xv[1]) (Derolez, *Runica manuscripta*, 335–43; George Stephens, *The Old-northern runic monuments of Scandinavia and England*. (4 vols, London–København 1866–1901), vol.1, 114 [item 53].

J: Oxford, St John's College MS 17, fol. 5v (cols. 9–10) (1110×1111) (Derolez, *Runica manuscripta*, 26–34; facsimile in George Hickes, *Linguarum Veterum Septentrionalium Thesaurus* (Oxford, 1703–5), I Tab. 2, no. 11 (poorly copied); Stephens, *Runic monuments*, vol. 1, 110 [item 41]; digital images: http://www.sjc.ox.ac.uk/444/Manuscripts.html; http://digital.library.mcgill.ca/ms-17/index.htm).

G: London, British Library, Cotton Galba A. ii (*s*. xi–xii) (Derolez, *Runica manuscripta*, 34–52; lost in the Cotton fire, only in facsimile in Hickes, *Thesaurus*, I Tab. 6, no. 10; Stephens, *Runic monuments*, vol. 1, 109 [item 36].

O and T contain the letter names, on which they agree almost completely. Only O also contains an aetiological tale about how the alphabet was created. It tells how the Briton Nemniuus extemporated a British alphabet in response to an Anglo-Saxon scholar who had taunted him for the lack of erudition among the Britons. Given this pseudo-historical context, it is conceivable that the alphabet served a parodistic purpose. As far as we are aware, the Alphabet of Nemniuus was never used for writing a text except for the four lines in the Minchin Manuscript.

[73] Derolez, *Runica manuscripta*, 158–9.

However, there is no exact correspondence between all characters in our text and those in the Alphabet of Nemniuus. Its four copies differ from each other in more or less important details. The one that shows the greatest overlap with the Minchin Manuscript text is the one in the oldest manuscript, O. In the following, reference will therefore only be made to this version. In most cases, the characters show tiny differences in their shapes, for instance the letters B (which lacks the middle thorn), D (which lacks the middle stroke), and H (which faces the other direction). For several letters, the scribe either used another source for the alphabet that has not been identified yet, or he himself added an extra flourish to the model in the Alphabet of Nemniuus (for instance in S, F and L), or he made up his very own glyphs, as with G and R. John Carey (personal communication) makes the attractive suggestion that the Minchin scribe added extra strokes to the letters F and G in the Alphabet of Nemniuus in order to reduce ambiguity with A and N, with which they are rather similar in the original source.[74]

Given our limited knowledge of the background to the Minchin Manuscript, only some conjectures can be offered as to how its scribe, who in all likelihood lived in south-west Ireland during the nineteenth century, became acquainted with the Alphabet of Nemniuus and how the formal divergences between the source script and the one in the Minchin Manuscript can be accounted for. One possible path of transmission could have been through a printed book. Paul Russell (personal communication) draws attention to the fact that on 21 June 1650, Gerard Langbaine sent a letter to James Ussher, the Archbishop of Armagh, reporting the alphabet of Nemninus [*sic*] which he had found in an Oxford manuscript (then MS NE D. 2. 19, now Bodleian MS Auct. F.4.32). This letter was published by Richard Parr in 1686.[75] Russell suggests that Parr's version might be the ultimate source of knowledge about the Alphabet of Nemniuus in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Ireland. However, even though Parr's letters N and S look a little bit more like those in the Minchin Manuscript, Parr's Y is very far removed from that in manuscript O and in the Minchin Manuscript, which resemble each other very closely. It is possible that the scribe of the Minchin Manuscript had access to a hitherto unidentified further copy of the Alphabet of Nemniuus.[76] Whatever this model was, it has to

[74] On the other hand, in the case of M and R the Minchin scribe seems to have gone the exactly opposite way.

[75] Letter CCLIII in Richard Parr (ed.), *The life of the most reverend father in God, James Ussher, late lord arch-bishop of Armagh, primate and metropolitan of all Ireland. With a collection of three hundred letters* (London, 1686), 551–3. Also edited in Charles R. Elrington, *The whole works of the most Rev., James Ussher* (17 vols, Dublin, 1847–64), vol. 16, 149–52; Elizabethanne Boran, *The correspondence of James Ussher 1600–1656* (3 vols, Dublin, 2015), vol. 3, 975–7 (letter 561) and Appendix 2 (p. 1172).

[76] John Carey (personal communication) wonders if Edward Lhuyd, who knew manuscript O (cf. *Archaeologia Britannica* [London, 1707], 226), may have corresponded with Roderick O'Flaherty about the Alphabet of Nemniuus.

Table 3—Synopsis of the alphabetic letters occurring in the Minchin Manuscript with those in Oxford, Bodleian Library MS, Auctarium F. 4. 32, fol. 20r and in Parr, *Life of the most reverend father*, 552.

	Minchin MS	*Nemniuus O*	*Parr 1686*
A			
B			
C			
D			
E			
F			
G			
H			
I			
K			

(*Continued*)

TABLE 3—(*Continued*)

	Minchin MS	*Nemniuus O*	*Parr 1686*
L			
M			
N			
O			
P			
Q			
R			
S			
T			
V			
X			
Y			
Z			

be assumed that the Minchin scribe or his source made deliberate changes to the character shapes in this model.

Whatever the immediate source of its knowledge for the Minchin scribe may have been, inserting the alphabetic values of the close and near matches between the Minchin text and the Alphabet of Nemniuus produced the following provisional reading of the first three lines. In cases where no exact match could be found, a question mark was used instead:

SGUI?IM FEIN FEUSDA
DOHAISDIO?GANBHMIYE
GAN AIM, ISDAM

Although meaningless at a first glance, it is still evident that the intended language is Irish. What is more, these lines bear a notable resemblance to the text in *ogam coll* and *ogam consaine* directly underneath the cipher on page 66 of the Minchin Manuscript, a text that had until then not been taken into account for the purpose of cracking the cipher. It is therefore apposite to give a transcription of those eight lines now:

Sguirim fein fe͡asda
do ṫaisdioll gan ḃriġe
Gan aird, is dar ndoiṫ nidh
be͡ag dom a mbiaḋ agam le͡am ṡoiġal do
ṁnaiḃ; is gurabe a dei
-rid an tan ṫaisde͡a a bfior
ḟe͡ar graḋ. uċ na cuir ceist air
ni he sin ata san tir aṁain.

The comparison of the two versions of the same text led to the identification of character I.5 as R, and to the realisation that II.10, which had been taken as a single, composite character, is in fact a double L. A number of observations about the orthographical practice in the coded texts emerged as well. Vowel length is generally not indicated. The scribe's treatment of lenition is remarkable. Unlike in the text in *ogam coll* and *ogam consaine* underneath and in the ogam section of the manuscript, lenited consonants are not indicated by superscript *puncta* in the Nennian cipher. In the case of lenited *b*, the scribe writes BH as per the modern practice. For lenited *t*, he writes H, as was common in the early nineteenth century and as is commonly the case in the ogam section of the Minchin Manuscript. For lenited *g*, the scribe used the letter Y in BHRIYE (for *bhríghe*), whereas he uses *ġ* in the version in *ogam coll*.

The most remarkable aspect of this short text, however, is that the scribe was evidently led astray himself by the very cipher that he was using. In the first word, he uses two fairly similar glyphs for I.5 R and for I.7 M. From the last word of the second line, he confuses the two. The glyph, which he originally introduced for M, he now uses consistently for R. For the word *aird*, he not only used the M glyph for R in III.6, but he also forgot to write D. In this way, the first-person singular ending *-aim* appeared in the text, where the scribe actually

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meant *aird*. It is ironic that this serious spelling error was crucial in correctly identifying three letters. It seems that the scribe quickly lost interest in his experiment, because the text breaks off soon thereafter in the middle of a phrase. The scribe then added a couple of other Nennian letters that he had not used so far, some of them rather strongly modified compared with the model in O, as if he wanted to prove that he was aware of those extra characters, too. The sequence of letters from III.12 to IV.12 does not form any meaningful word.

The final page 66 of the Minchin Manuscript can thus be transcribed in its entirety as follows:

1. sguirim fein fe͡asda.
2. do haisdioll gan bh{r}iye.
3. gan ai{r}[d]. isda{r} // eu? ? ? eí
4. p? z ? ? eu? uult? ea q eí ? x oe[77]
5. Sguirim fein fe͡asda
6. do ṫaisdioll gan ḃriġe
7. Gan aird, is dar ndoiṫ nidh
8. be͡ag dom a mbiaḋ agam le͡am ṡoiġal do
9. ṁnaiḃ; is gurabe a dei
10. -rid an tan ṫaisde͡a a bfior
11. ḟe͡ar graḋ. uċ na cuir ceist air
12. ni he sin ata san tir aṁain.
13. CRIOĊFCU$^{\mathrm{I}}$NIM.

The identification of the encoded passage itself was kindly made for us by Fintan Keegan. It is a variant of the final stanza of the text *Mac na Míchomhairle* 'The ill-advised son', a popular moralistic tale of the eighteenth century.[78] The fact that this stanza concludes the tale may have suggested it to the scribe as something fitting for the last page of the Minchin Manuscript. It can be translated as:

> 'I cease now from travelling without substance, without significance;
> and it seems I have had enough of women for my life,
> and that they say when their truly loved man dies:
> "Ah, don't ask about him, he is not the only one in the land."'
> END—I END

Conclusions

In this article, we hope to have been able to show that, instead of disappearing together with the epigraphic habit of 'classical ogam' by the eighth century,

[77] Letters whose value cannot be determined on the basis of the manuscripts of the Alphabet of Nemniuus are represented by question marks.

[78] In the edition by Seosamh Watson, *Mac na Míchomhairle* (Baile Átha Cliath, 1979), 150, this last quatrain reads in standardised spelling:
Scoirim féin feasta de mo thaisteal gan bhrí gan aird.
'S é mo dhóigh nach beag dhamh a mbiaidh agam le mo shaol de mhnáibh
's gurb é ní adeirid nuair theastaíos a bhfíorfhear grá,
"Uch! ná cuir ceist air ní heisean 'tá istír amháin."

knowledge of and interest in ogam was kept alive among Irish scholars and intellectuals, not least through an intimate association of this peculiar Irish script with the grammatical and cryptographic tradition. From this grammatical learned context, the script then radiated out into other traditions of learning, such as medicine. Along the way, ogam became what Erich Poppe has described as 'an emblem of the linguistic and cultural identity' of Ireland.[79] This function of the script becomes particularly prominent in manuscripts copied in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

In early medieval manuscripts from the period of 'reformed ogam', Latin (and sometimes Greek) literate tradition is the counterfoil against which ogam served as a symbol of a specifically Gaelic identity. The symbolic role of the script as a marker of cultural identity became increasingly pronounced in later manuscript tradition and was carried through to the period of 'antiquarian ogam' in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when English became the counterfoil. In the Minchin Manuscript, which might be said to represent the curious culmination and possible end point of this antiquarian approach to the script, several strands of Irish vernacular scholarship and tradition are married in a unique and spectacular way. The use of the ogam script combines with a subject matter—charms—that has a documented written tradition of more than 1200 years in Ireland, but that nevertheless had received relatively little attention from modern scholars until recent decades.[80] At the same time, the manuscript illustrates how ogam, even when employed for an ostensibly 'practical' purpose such as the recording of healing charms, cannot be separated from the deep-rooted cryptographic tradition, even as late as the mid-nineteenth century. It is only now, in the revivalist period of ogam, after another interruption of 150 years, that this remarkable document of the Irish manuscript tradition is slowly starting to reveal its treasures.

[79] Poppe, 'Writing systems and cultural identity', 35.

[80] On scholarship relating to charming traditions throughout Irish history and its relationship to work in this area from other linguistic traditions, see e.g. Jacqueline Borsje, 'European and American scholarship on the study of medieval Irish "magic" (1846–1960)', in Ilona Tuomi, John Carey, Barbara Hillers and Ciarán Ó Gealbháin (eds), *Charms, charmers and charming in Ireland. From the medieval to the modern* (Cardiff, 2019), 5–15, and Deborah Hayden, 'Old English in the Irish charms', *Speculum* 97.2 (2022), 349–76: 351–5.

Appendix 1—List of charm headings in the Minchin Manuscript (fols 3v–11v)

In the following, the transcription in two lists A (later) and B (earlier) of the ogam headings of the charms in the Minchin Manuscript is transliterated in Roman letters using diacritic markers to imitate the orthographic habit of the transcriber. The nineteenth-century transcription is found at the beginning of the Minchin Manuscript in hand T, perhaps that of the 'J.I. Minchin' whose signature is found twice in the manuscript. The symbol ‸ indicates that the immediately following letter has been added in superscription.

List A (hand T^{A})

fol. 3v

5

Ċum|daoine|agus|airneis|do
ċongḃail|o|na|ṇaṁad|airfeaḋ
ċeiṫre|huaire|fiṫċeab – 58. [*a crescent is crossed out underneath* ua]
Ndulaċoḋla – 63.

~~End of Book II.~~

fol. 4v

4

Arṫa| do|ṫroiḋid – 43-
Arṫa an|ruaiḋ – 45. [*a crescent is crossed out underneath* uai]
Arṫa an|ḟiaḃrais – 46.
Arta| air| ṫein̄ eas|cin̄ – 47.
Arta_an|ḃorra| ṗiasd – 47.
Arta an| greama – 48.
Arṫa an ḃuile – 49.
– - - …………
Arṫa air mun|fola – 51.
Arṫa air ṡuil |tin̄ – 51.
Arṫa air urċoiḋ – 53.
Arṫa an tein̄e|ḋia – 54.
Arṫa an ġraḋ – 54.
Arṫa ċuir im faoi|ṁullaċ|doċin̄ [– 55]
No mur so – 55.
No murso – 56.
Nomur so – 57.

fol. 5r

3

Arha an[l]iabruis|coinleaċta – [31] [*superscript over the* [l]: ought to be f]
No mur so – 31
Arha| ċum|piañ|do|baiñ tas|lot – [32]

~~End of Book I.~~

Arṫa air ḋroċsuil – 34.
Arṫa na|bpiasd – 35.
Arṫa na|bpiast – 36.
Arṫa air leona – 38.
Arṫa air teiñ ea(s?) ~~ahf~~|croide – 39.
Ċum duine|sabail|o|ḃaṫaḋ – 42.

fol. 6v

2

No mur so – 18
Arha nabfiacaile – 19
Nomur so – 20
No mur so – 21
No mur so – 21
Arha an|deilg – 22
No mur so – 23
Arha air greim no arhuin – 23 [arraing *('pain, stitch in one's side') added in Gaelic script by the corrector, superscript over* arhuin]
Nomur so – 24
Arha na naod‸añso – 25
Arha air|b~~a~~ui~~oi~~lig|batambolgbo – [25]
Arha nanaoḋ – 26
Arha|air|‸theiñios|droma – 27
Arha ċum im|do ċongḃail – 28.
Do congbail – 29.
Arha|anaġaḋ|droċṡuil – 30.

fol. 1

(1)

Arha|na |naoghgur|leanus – 1
Orha|‸air|ur~~q~~choit – 2
No|mur|so – 4
Orha|na|cciochtinn – 5
Orha na naoghaḋ~~t~~ – 6
Orha an leona – 7
Arha af fhiabhraos – 9 [n? *superscript over* f *of* af]
Arha air|fhaol do|chosg – 9

No mur so – 10
Ohra an fiabhrais coi[bs]nlig – 11 [n *written over* bs]
Arha an ghradh – 12
No mur so – 13
Arha anruadh – 14 (Huchobra *or* thichobra?) [ua *added by the corrector*]
Arha air|‸(t)hachta – 15
Arha an achmadh – 16
Arha air fhuil do ~~e~~qchosg – 17

fol. 11r
[*upside down*]
Arha na naog

List B (hand T^{B})
[*For the purpose of comparison, the actual readings of the ogam headings in the manuscript are added in capitals.*]

fol. 4r
[*upside down, the first four lines are very faint*]
Arhana […] [ARHA NA NAOGHGURLE^{A}NUS.]
[Or]ha [..]rur qoit – 2 [ORHA AIR URCHO^{I}T.]
[….] to – 4 [NO MUR SO.]
[Orha n]accioc[h…] – 5 [ORHA NACCIOCH TINN.]
Orha sa saoghat – 6 [ORHA NA NAOGHADH.]
Orha as leosa – 7 [ORHA AN LEONA.]
arha an nhiabhraot – 9 [ARHA AF FHI^{A}BHRA^{O}S.]
arha air nhaoldochotg – 9 [ARHA AIR FHA^{O}L DOCHOSG.]

fol. 5r
[S]o mur to 24 [NO MUR SO.]
Arha {‸na} saodas̄ to – 25 [ARHA‸na NAOḊAN̄ SO.]
Arha airb⊑uiligbatambolgbo – 25 [ARHA AIR ḂU^{I}UILIĠ .B. AT A MBOLG BO.]
[A]rha {‸na} saod – 26 [ARHA‸na NAOḊ]
Arha air heis̄iotdroma – 27 [ARḢ̄A AIR ḢEIN̄IOS DROMA.]
[A]rha cum im do cosgbail – 28 [ARHA ĊUM IM DO ĊONGḂAIL.]
[d]o cosgbail – 29 [DO ĊONGḂAIL.]
[A]rha asagad droct⊑…l – 30 [ARHA ANAĠAḊ DROĊ-ṠU^{I}L.]

fol. 6r
Arta air leosa – 38 [ARṪA AIR LEONA.]
Arta airteis̄eaahncroide – 39 [*a small question mark* ? *subscript under the* h] [ARṪA AIR ṪEIN̄E^{A}AHF CRO^{I}ḊE. *note*: AHF *is error for* S]
Cum d⊑setabail obatad – 42 [ĊUM DU^{I}NE ṠAḂAIL O ḂAṪAḊ.]
Arta do troidid – 43 [ARṪA DO ṪRO^{I}ḊID.]

Arta as r͜d – 45 [ARṪA AN RU^{A}Ḋ.]
Arta as niabrait – 46 [ARṪA AN ḞI^{A}ḂRAIS.]
Arta airteis̄eatcis̄ – 47 [ARṪA AIR ṪEIN̄E^{A}S CIN̄.]
Arta as borra piatd – 47 [ARṪA AN ḂORRA ṖI^{A}SD.]

fol. 7r
no mur so – 55 [NO MUR SO.]
no mur so – 56 [NO MUR SO.]
[N]o so [– 57 NO MUR SO.]
[*here follow 3 lines that are almost impossible to decipher and that do not correspond to any headings between pages 58–62*]
dul aconba – 63 [NDUL A ĊOḊLA; *note:* NDUL *corrected from* NDEB]

fol. 8v
Arta as greama – 48 [ARṪA AN ĠRE^{A}MA.]
Arta as b⊑le – 49 [ARṪA AN ḂU^{I}LE.]
Arta air mus nola – 51 [ARṪA AIR MUN FOLA.]
Arta air t⊑ltis̄ – 51 [ARṪA AIR ṠU^{I}L TIN̄.]
Arta air ur coid – 53 [ARṪA AIR URĊO^{I}Ḋ.]
Arta as teis̄e dia – 54 [ARṪA AN TEIN̄E ḊI^{A}.]
Arta as grad – 54 [ARṪA AN ĠRAḊ.]
Arta crim naoimullac do cis̄ – 55 [ARṪA ĊU^{I}RIM FA^{O}I ṀULLAĊ DO ĊIN̄.]

fol. 9r
[*empty except for a bottom line in the hand of the corrector*]
arha ċum laċa|‸ (t)haḃairt do ḃo <u>agus</u> a c‸uid|ime [– 29; agus *in Gaelic script*] [ARHA CUM LAĊH A HAḂAIRT DO ḂO. AGUS A CU^{I}D IME | DO ĊONGḂAIL.]

fol. 9v
Arha as liabr⊑t coisleacta – 31 [ARHA AN ĿI^{A}ḂRU^{I}S-CO^{I}NLE^{A}ĊTA.]
So mur to – 31 [NO MUR SO.]
Arhha cum pia s̄dobais̄tatlot [– 32] [ARHA ĊUM PI^{A}N̄ DO ḂAIN̄T AS LOT.]

End of Book I.

Arta air droct⊑l – 34 [ARṪA AIR ḊROĊ SU^{I}L.]
Arta sa bpiatd – 35 [ARTA NA BPI^{A}SD.]
Arta sa bpiatt – 36 [ARṪA NA BPI^{A}ST.]

fol. 10v
So mur to – 18 [NO MUR SO.]
Arha sabtiacaile – 19 [ARHA NA BFI^{A}CAILE.]
So mur so – 20 [NO MUR SO.]
So mur to – 21 [NO MUR SO.]

So mur to – 21 [NO MUR SO.]
Arha as deilg – 22 [ARHA AN DEILG]
So mur to – 23 [NO MUR SO.]
Arha air greim so arh…s – 23 [ARHA AIR ĠREIM NO ARHU^{I}N.]

fol. 11v
[*upside down*]
So mur to – 10 [NO MUR SO.]
Ohra as niabhraitcoislig – 11 [OHRA AN ḞI^{A}BHRAIS CO^{I}NLIG.]
Arha as ghradh – 12 [ARHA AN GHRADH.]
So mur to – 13 [NO MUR SO.]
Arha asr…..dh – 14 [ARHA AN RU^{A}DH.]
Arha asr haqta – 15 [ARHA AIR HACHTA.]
Arha as achmadh – 16 [ARHA AN ACHMADH.]
Arhaair nh…ldoqotg – 17 [ARHA AIR FHU^{I}L DO CHOSG.]

Appendix 2—Transliteration of charms 21 and 20

The following is a close transliteration of two charms from the Minchin Manuscript. Every core ogam character is transliterated by an unambiguous Roman letter. The *forfeda* are represented by combinations of a capital letter followed by a superscript capital letter. For instance, the X-*forfid* corresponds to E^{A} in the transliteration. Manifest errors of the ogamist are marked by underscores. The corrected reading is given in the notes.

p. 22 (fol. 43v)

DO ṪU^{A}Ḋ PE^{A}DAR GO SRUH HORHALAN. HAINE
CRIOST OS A ĊO^{I}N̄E. CRE^{A}D SIN ORT
A Ṗ E̲^{A}A̲IR AIR AN TIĠE^{A}RNA: O A HIĠ-
E^{A}RS̲A MF̲I^{A}CAIL ATA TIN̄. EIRĠE A ṖE^{A}-
DAIR AGUS BI SLAN. NI HUSA AḂAIN AĊH
A MAIRION̲ BEOḊ. AMEN.

Notes:
l. 3: *read* ṖE^{A}{D}AIR
l. 4: *read* E^{A}RNA MḞI^{A}CAIL
l. 6: *read* MAIRION̄

p. 21 (fol. 43r)

TAR LIOM AIR AN SLANAIĠHEO^{I}R. LE HAB-
RAHAM. GO SLI^{A}BH ABU^{I}M; NI ḞE^{A}DAIM AIR ABR-
AHAM. O^{I}R ATA DE^{A}DUĠAḊ ORM. GAIḂ LIN̄. GAIḂ
LIN̄ A ĊLEIRIĠ NA MBRI^{A}HRA MBIN̄.
ATA CRU^{I}Ḃ CROM.M. CAM.M AIR ĊNAIḂ LOMM L-
E^{A}CA MO ĊIN̄. ORDU^{I}IM AIR CRIO-
SD. LE HABRAHAM. GAN AN ARHA AGUS AN DE^{A}D-
UĠAḊ DO ḂEIH ANI̲NE^{A}ĊT ORT. AMEN.

Note:
l. 8: either read ANAENE^{A}ĊT (i.e., *i n-aeneacht*) or rather AN[E]INE^{A}ĊT (i.e., *i n-éineacht*), where the letter E is missing.