

## The Ogham Alphabet

The discovery in China recently of an ancient script from 5000 years ago reminds us of how fascinating ancient writing, like hieroglyphics, is to modern readers. Ireland, too, has its ancient alphabet, not as old as hieroglyphics or the Chinese script, but very old, indeed. It is called the Ogham Alphabet.

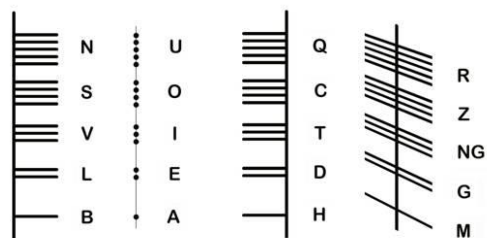
As a writing system, the Ogham Alphabet has been called by some scholars as inefficient, monotonous, complicated, awkward, cumbersome, ambiguous, impractical and even barbaric. Of course, other scholars have great respect for Ogham (pronounced with a silent "gh"; alternately spelled *ogam*). For example, Damian McManus in his book *A Guide to Ogam* calls the Ogham script "as sophisticated and efficient ... as one could create." This essay will explore what is known and what is unknown about this ancient Irish script.

The Ogham Alphabet was inscribed on pillars of stone. The Ogham stones available to scholars for study clearly support the interpretation that Ogham was a monument script, that is, a script used to memorialize a dead person. A typical example of a translated Ogham stone inscription is this one from a stone on Inchagoill Island, Galway: **The stone of Lugnaedon son of Limenuch.** Another possible use of Ogham on stone posts is as a boundary marker. Since burials were often on the border of properties, an Ogham stone inscribed with a name might serve a complimentary purpose as a memorial stone and a boundary

marker. The Ogham script is ideally suited for chiseling into hard materials like stone or wood. Although there is speculation that Ogham was used on wood, no evidence of wood engraved with Ogham script exists.

Ogham's "letters" are lines chiseled into stone posts, as can be seen in pictures of Ogham stones in this essay. The vertical lines in the graphic to the left represent the edge of the stone post (the stemline). To illustrate: An Ogham "B" is a single line chiseled into the stone post to the right of the stone post's edge. A "Q" is five chiseled lines to the left of the stone post's edge. The Ogham "G" would be two diagonal lines across the edge of the post. Note how pre-historic this most unusual alphabet looks on an actual stone from County Monaghan shown in the graphic on the facing page. But Ogham is not from the Stone Age, but a Christian era creation.

### A Key to Ogham Inscription



┆	B	
┆┆	L	
┆┆┆	F	┆ M
┆┆┆┆	S	┆┆ G
┆┆┆┆┆	N	┆┆┆ NG
┆┆┆┆┆┆	H	┆┆┆┆ Z
┆┆┆┆┆┆┆	D	┆┆┆┆┆ R
┆┆┆┆┆┆┆┆	T	┆┆┆┆┆┆ P
┆┆┆┆┆┆┆┆┆	C	
┆┆┆┆┆┆┆┆┆┆	Q	

The writer of an Ogham inscription needed tools, such as a hammer and chisel, to inscribe an Ogham message into the stone. The message, as pointed out, was typically a short memorial to a person which gave Ogham its identification as a "memorial script." The reader of the script had to know its twenty character alphabet; had to recognize that the placement of the chiseled lines either to the left of the edge of the post or to the right of the edge or across the edge (the stemline) identified the consonants of the Ogham alphabet; had to know that the vowels were holes punched into the stemline itself; and had to read the message vertically from bottom of the post to the top of the post. The reader of this article with our horizontal orientation and our recognizable

Roman alphabet will ask the same question which archeologists and linguists have asked: Why did Ireland needs such a cumbersome alphabet?

It is correct to call Ogham an Irish alphabet. Although artifacts of stone pillars with Ogham script are found in Wales and Scotland, Ogham is probably a south of Ireland creation. Most of the four hundred surviving Ogham inscribed posts are found in Kerry, Cork and Waterford. Although the Roman alphabet was in use in Ireland when Ogham was created, probably between 300 AD to 400 AD, Ogham did not evolve from any other alphabet; indeed, its creators seem to have given Ogham to Ireland fully developed. K.H. Jackson hypothesizes that Ogham was created in the 4<sup>th</sup> century by an Irishman who had attended a Roman grammar school, someone fluent in Latin. Ogham can claim to be the earliest attempt to put Primitive Irish into a written form. Thus, if an Ogham inscription were to be read aloud, the reader would be speaking Irish. The Irish language in the early Christian era was a spoken, not a written language. Irish remained exclusively oral until the 12<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. Written Irish Gaelic at that point in history and forward became the language of a great literature, including *The Book of the Dun Cow* and the rich heroic literature preserved in the oral tradition and ultimately transcribed into Irish by Monks.

Later in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, five additional characters were added to Ogham and the expanded alphabet became usable as a manuscript alphabet, that is, a horizontal script on paper. However, the 7<sup>th</sup> century was a turning point in the use of Ogham. As Karl S. Bottigheimer points out in *Ireland and the Irish*, Ogham lost out to Latin as Ireland became more Christian. The Church's



emphasis on the Scriptures gave Latin great stature in Ireland which promoted Latin's study and use. The monasteries were places where reading and writing in Latin were the norm, excluding all other languages. *The Book of Kells*, created in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries, illustrates the primacy of Latin in the monasteries. Ogham was replaced on memorials by conventional Latin script on flat lying stones rather than on standing posts. This change suggests an increasing literacy in Latin in Ireland.

Research in Ogham started in 1785 with the discovery of the Mount Callan stone in County Clare. Like the recent discovery of a new Chinese script and the discoveries of hieroglyphics and Linear B, Ogham set archeologists and linguists on the search for the history and meaning of this mysterious script. Linear B is the subject of a recently published account of the breaking of the Linear B code. *The Riddle of the Labyrinth* by Margalit Fox uses a detective story style to describe the work of the three main detectives working on the mystery of the script found in Crete in 1900, a script older than the time of Homer. Finally, early in the 1950s, Linear B was deciphered.



Hieroglyphics, the script of the ancient Egyptians, was, like Ogham, inscribed on slabs of slate but also on tombs and temples. Hieroglyphics' famous Rosetta Stone helped scholars decipher the ancient Egyptian language. The Rosetta Stone was discovered in Egypt in 1799 by Napoleon's soldiers. Made available to all scholars, the Stone led to the decipherment of hieroglyphics by the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Ogham, like hieroglyphics and Linear B and, no doubt, the newly discovered Chinese script, still holds many secrets. Why did Ireland need a script different from Latin? There are theories attempting to answer this question but no certainty. One school of thought is that

the creators of Ogham wanted a script which could be used to conceal secret messages from those literate in Latin. Another proposal advanced by E.J. MacNeill is that Ogham is a cipher designed as a rebuff to Rome, a deliberate anti-Rome sentiment. An ancient Irish cryptic language can remind us of the use of a hybrid Irish Gaelic created by the prisoners in the H-block prisons of Northern Ireland during the Troubles. Called the "Jailtacht," the

language of the Republican prisoners helped to keep their secrets from the jailers. This Irish dialect still survives. Similarly, American Forces in WWII used "Windtalkers," Native-American speakers of the ancient language of the Navajo people, to send secure messages during the Pacific Campaign. However, there are no artifacts extant to support Ogham as a code language, even though some scholars support this speculation.

Was Ogham's creator sensitive to the needs of a pre-literate people who were skilled with tools but not with language? As Damian McManus puts it, "Why, where, and by whom the Ogam alphabet was invented is not known." The mysterious nature of the Ogham Alphabet has left it as an open subject for research, piquing the imaginations of scholars and speculators. It will not surprise the reader that some writers have ascribed Ogham to the Druids, another mysterious subject, in Cisalpine Gaul in 500 BC. The Celts, too, another culture from ancient Europe, are attached to Ogham by some speculators. Dr. Barry Fell of the Epigraphic Society calls Ogham a Celtic alphabet, more ancient than Christianity. He reports on evidence of Ogham's use in the American West. Closer to the consensus of a 4<sup>th</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> century origin for the Ogham Alphabet is Professor James Carney's speculation on a 1<sup>st</sup> century creation. Carney also supports Ogham as a cryptic, coded language.

Those four hundred Ogham posts will undoubtedly continue to be studied and speculated upon, as with Linear B, hieroglyphics, and the newest old script available, the 5000 year old Chinese script.

(Written by John Walsh, September 2013)

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