

The History of the Ogham Language: Its Roots, Writing System, and Survival

Ogham is one of the most distinctive and enigmatic writing systems to emerge from early medieval Europe. Used primarily in Ireland and parts of Britain between the 4th and 7th centuries CE, it represents the earliest written form of the Irish language. Unlike contemporary scripts such as Latin, Greek, or Runic alphabets, Ogham consists of linear notches and strokes arranged along a central axis, usually the edge of a standing stone. These inscriptions serve as a vital linguistic and historical record, providing insights into tribal structures, territorial divisions, and cultural identity.

The Ogham script stands out due to its unique structure, its connection to oral tradition, and its role in marking political or burial sites. Despite its eventual decline with the rise of Latin literacy and manuscript culture, Ogham has persisted in various forms, surviving in medieval Irish manuscripts and even experiencing a modern revival.

Ogham is generally believed to have originated in the late 4th or early 5th century CE, likely as a means of writing Primitive Irish. The exact origins of the script remain debated, but some theories suggest influence from Latin, Greek, or Runic alphabets. Scholars have proposed multiple theories regarding Ogham's creation, with several scholars proposing that Ogham developed as a response to Roman and Latin influences, forming a uniquely Irish script that would provide a secretive method of communication for users.^{1 2} One such indicator is the fact that ogham has five vowel symbols, although Gaelic has ten such sounds, leading scholars to believe that the Latin alphabet, which also uses five vowels, was an influence on the invention of the system.³

A minority of scholars suggest that Ogham may have borrowed elements from Runic alphabets⁴ or even Greek script, which were known to early Irish traders, or even that Ogham may have evolved from an earlier tally or marking system used by the Irish on wooden staves^{5 6}, although both these hypotheses have limited proponents, with most favouring the Latin influence theory. A now rejected theory from ogham scholar R.A.S Macalister suggested that Ogham was developed as a cryptic script, arguing the arrangement of Ogham is not arbitrary but follows a carefully structured and systematic pattern that suggests an origin tied to the mnemonic traditions of the Irish druids using finger signals.⁷

Ogham's linguistic relatives can be found in Old Irish c. 6th–10th centuries CE, a more developed stage of the language used in Ogham, appearing in manuscripts such as the *Book of Kells* and *Book of Armagh*, and the Brythonic languages – The Celtic languages of Britain, including Welsh, Cornish, and Cumbric, which share historical links with Irish. Some Ogham inscriptions in Scotland would also suggest that Pictish, a now-extinct language, may have been written using the Ogham system.

¹ James Carney, "The Invention of the Ogom Cipher." *Ériu*, 26 (1975), pp. 53–65 (pp. 62–63).
<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/30008108>> [Accessed 07 Mar. 2025]

² MacNeill, Eoin. "Archaisms in the Ogham Inscriptions." *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy. Section C: Archaeology, Celtic Studies, History, Linguistics, Literature*, 39, (1929), pp. 33–53. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/25515945>> [Accessed 07 March 2025]

³ Catherine Swift, "The Story of Ogham" *Historytoday.com* <<https://www.historytoday.com/story-ogham>> [accessed 10 March 2025]

⁴ Klaus Duwel, *Runenkunde*, 4th edn (J.B. Metzler, 2016)

⁵ Joseph Vendryes, "L'écriture ogamique et ses origines," *Études celtiques*, 4.1 (1941) 83–116 (pp. 110–113)
<<https://doi.org/10.3406/ecelt.1941.1180>>

⁶ Thurneysen., R "ZUM OGOM," *Beiträge Zur Geschichte Der Deutschen Sprache Und Literatur (PBB)*, 1937.61 (1937) pp. 196–197 <<https://doi.org/10.1515/bgsl.1937.1937.61.188>>

⁷ R.A.S Macalister, *The Secret Languages of Ireland* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press. 2014) pp. 27 - 36

The Ogham alphabet consists of 20 core characters, divided into four groups (aicmí), each containing five letters:

Beith-Luis-Nin (B-L-N-F-S)

H-D-T-C-Q

M-G-NG-Z-R

A-O-U-E-I (*Vowels*)

Each letter is formed by one to five strokes or notches, arranged in relation to a central stem line. In most inscriptions, this line is represented by the edge of a stone, but in later manuscripts, it appears as a drawn guideline. As Irish phonetics evolved, scribes introduced forfeda, an extra set of characters that allowed for additional sounds. These were mostly found in manuscript traditions rather than stone inscriptions.

Ogham was frequently used alongside other scripts, particularly Latin, as seen in bilingual inscriptions. Nancy Edwards, an archaeologist specialising in early medieval Wales, describes a striking example of this multilingualism:

We can see multiculturalism, for example, on the stone from St Dogmaels, which is written in two different alphabets: the Ogham alphabet, which is for writing primitive old Irish and the Latin alphabet, which gives the same inscription in Latin. What we can see here is that the stone commemorates – it was probably the gravestone of, Sigrani or Sigranus, son of Cunotamus. The inscription is bilingual. Sigranus was, in fact, an Irish name and Cunotamus a British name, indicating this mixture of identities.⁸

Ogham inscriptions are predominantly found in Ireland, though some occur in Wales, Scotland, and England. Most are memorial stones, containing names of individuals and their kin. Notable Ogham Stones include:

The Dunloe Ogham Stone (Co. Kerry, Ireland) with the inscription reading *MAQI-DECCEDDAS AVI TURANIAS* ("*Of the son of Deccedd, descendant of Turanis.*") and is most likely a territorial marker identifying lineage.

The Ballinrannig Ogham Stone (Co. Kerry, Ireland) with the inscription reading *ANM MAQI MUCOI NETA SEGAMONAS* ("*The name of the son of the tribe of Neta Segamon.*") which is a possible reference to an ancestor or deity.

The Penbryn Stone (Wales) is an inscription from early medieval Wales, written in Latin, showcases identity manipulation in post-Roman Britain, similar to what may have occurred with Ogham inscriptions. Nancy Edwards describes this practice:

More interesting and more complex, perhaps, is the stone from Penbryn. This, as you can see, is only written in Latin, but it has an added dimension. It commemorates Corbalengus. It says 'Corbalengus (here) he lies, an Ordovician'. Now the name Corbalengus is an Irish name,

⁸ Nancy Edwards, *Early Medieval Wales – a Matter of Identity*, *Thebritishacademy.ac.uk* <<https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/podcasts/10-minute-talks-early-medieval-wales-a-matter-of-identity/>> [accessed 08 March 2025]

indicating his Irish identity, but it's followed by *iacit*, the formula *hic iacit*, indicating that he was a Christian. This is a formula that came in from early medieval Europe in the latter part of the fifth century. Perhaps most interesting is the word *Ordovs* – he was an Ordovician. This indicates the manipulation of the past, because the Ordovices were a pre-Roman grouping of people in Wales, in central Wales and towards the north, in the pre-Roman period. What appears to be happening here is that this identity is being reworked and resurrected, in the post-Roman period, as part of a British identity.⁹

This manipulation of ethnic and political identity is also evident in Ogham inscriptions, where Irish rulers sought to reinforce their legitimacy through historical and mythological references.

While most Ogham inscriptions are found in Ireland and Wales, evidence of the script has also been discovered in Scotland, Cornwall, Devon, and even the Isle of Man. The Scottish Ogham inscriptions present significant interpretive challenges due to their fragmentary nature and linguistic uncertainties. As Katherine Forsyth notes:

Scottish oghams present difficulties of interpretation because many are fragmentary and weathered, the value of some supplementary characters is not certain, orthographical conventions are imperfectly understood, the language of the texts (Goidelic/Brittonic) is not always known, word-division is rarely indicated, often the kind of text to be expected is not known. More texts can be interpreted than previously thought, practical problems go a long way to explaining why others resist interpretation.¹⁰

This highlights the linguistic complexity and variability of the inscriptions, as well as the interaction between Irish and Pictish traditions in early medieval Scotland and suggests that Ogham was adopted and adapted by non-Irish-speaking groups, demonstrating its influence beyond Ireland.

Ogham inscriptions in south-west England (Cornwall and Devon) provide further evidence of its use outside Ireland. Some scholars argue that these inscriptions reflect Irish settlements and trading links with Dumnonia, the Celtic kingdom in that region.

A unique feature of Cornish Ogham inscriptions is that some are carved onto the flat face of stones rather than the edge, mirroring Pictish traditions.

As Katherine Forsyth observes, while both Irish and Scottish Oghamists worked within a single tradition, they influenced each other through innovations in letter usage and orthography:

Irish and Scottish oghamists were working within a single tradition, innovations, such as additional letters, were passed back and forth. In some instances, the orthography used in Scotland diverges from that of contemporary Ireland, e.g., perpetuation of older orthographical conventions (simplex/geminate consonant distinction), innovative use of 'H'. A key difference is that post-classical ogham in Ireland had only marginal status, whereas in post-seventh century Scotland, ogham was a prestige script used on grand public monuments such as cross-slabs.¹¹

⁹ Edwards, *Early Medieval Wales – a Matter of Identity*

¹⁰ Katherine Stuart Forsyth, *The Ogham Inscriptions of Scotland: An Edited Corpus* (Massachusetts: Harvard University, 1996) p.6

¹¹ Forsyth, *The Ogham Inscriptions* p.5

By the 7th century CE, the Latin alphabet had largely replaced Ogham as the dominant writing system in Ireland and other Celtic-speaking regions. The decline of Ogham was driven by several interconnected factors, including religious transformation, changes in literacy practices, and socio-political shifts, all of which significantly impacted the necessity and function of Ogham inscriptions. Christian missionaries, particularly those associated with St. Patrick's mission in the 5th century CE, promoted Latin literacy and manuscript culture, and with the growing influence of the Church, the Latin script became the preferred method for recording religious texts, laws, and historical chronicles. As Christian monasteries flourished across Ireland, Ogham was increasingly seen as a relic of a pre-Christian past, overshadowed by the Latin alphabet's wider acceptance and adaptability. The establishment of monastic centres such as Clonmacnoise, Kells, and Glendalough led to the production of illuminated manuscripts, including the famous Book of Kells and the Book of Armagh. These texts recorded laws, religious teachings, and genealogies—functions that were once performed by Ogham-inscribed stones in earlier centuries¹². Since parchment and vellum manuscripts were easier to transport and store than large standing stones, Ogham became less practical for everyday use.

Ogham inscriptions were often used for boundary markers, territorial claims, and memorial stones, particularly in early Irish and Welsh societies however as political structures evolved—with the rise of centralized kingdoms and shifting land ownership patterns—the need for Ogham as a territorial marker diminished. Additionally, as Ireland and parts of western Britain became more integrated into broader European trade and diplomatic networks, Latin became the language of officialdom, education, and record-keeping.

By the 9th and 10th centuries CE, Ireland and Britain faced new cultural and political pressures from external groups such as the Anglo-Saxons and Vikings. The Anglo-Saxons, who used the Latin alphabet, further reinforced the dominance of Latin-based writing, while Viking raiders and settlers in Ireland brought Norse influences, contributing to the decline of traditional Irish inscriptions and monumental texts.

Despite its decline in practical use, Ogham did not disappear entirely. Rather, it was preserved through the efforts of Irish scholars and scribes, who continued to record and study the script in later medieval manuscripts. One of the most significant records of Ogham is found in the Book of Ballymote (c. 1390 CE), a medieval Irish manuscript compiled by scribes of the Mac Fhirbhisigh family. This manuscript contains detailed information on Ogham, including lists of Ogham characters and their meanings, alternative versions of Ogham alphabets (such as cryptic forms) and the association of Ogham letters with trees (a concept linked to medieval Irish poetry and mythology).¹³

Additionally, Ogham references appear in The Yellow Book of Lecan (c. 14th century CE), which includes further variations and symbolic interpretations of the script.¹⁴ The continued study of Ogham by medieval Irish scholars suggests that the script was regarded as an important aspect of Ireland's heritage, even after it had fallen out of everyday use. It may have been preserved for esoteric or scholarly purposes, possibly linked to early Irish law, cryptographic writing, or bardic traditions.

Rather than simply vanishing, Ogham transitioned from an active inscriptional script to a subject of scholarly study and preservation. Its survival in medieval manuscripts ensured that later generations

¹² Carol Ann Farr, *The Book of Kells: Its Function and Audience* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998)

¹³ R.A.S Macalister, *The Book of Ballymote: A Collection of Pieces (Including Ogham Texts) on Irish History, Genealogy, and Mythology*. (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1915).

¹⁴ R Atkinson, *The Yellow Book of Lecan: A Collection of Pieces on Irish History and Genealogy*. (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1896)

could access and interpret the script, eventually leading to its revival in the modern era. Today, Ogham is recognized as a unique cultural and linguistic artifact, offering insights into early Irish society, language, and identity.

Ogham has seen a resurgence in modern Irish nationalism, archaeology, and popular culture. Ogham is often used in jewellery, tattoos, and signage, and is most widely associated with the movement of Neopaganism, having been popularised by Robert Graves in his book *The White Goddess*¹⁵. His complex argument of an ancient peoples spreading religious beliefs to Hebrews, greeks and celts and eventually becoming the practices and language of the druids has been discredited, including by Macalister on who's work he had based and expanded his theory from, but continues to be embraced by adherents of the neopagan movement.

Ogham remains one of the most enigmatic and distinctive writing systems of early medieval Europe and as the earliest recorded form of the Irish language, it provides invaluable insights into Celtic identity, linguistic evolution, and cultural heritage. While its usage declined with the spread of Latin literacy, its survival in manuscripts and modern cultural revivals ensures its continued significance.

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¹⁵ R Graves, *White Goddess*, (London:Faber & Faber, 1961) pp. 61, 123

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