

# Ogham Divination

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In another Irish tale, Tochmarc Etaine, 'the Wooing of Etain,' a Druid named Dalan used a method of Ogham divination to find where the God Midir had taken Etain. He cut four wands of yew on which he inscribed three Oghams, and used them to find the "eochra ecsi ('keys of divination')," which enabled him to discover that she had been taken to the Sidhe-mound of Breg Leith, where Midir dwelt (11). Other Irish sources refer to the use of four Ogham-inscribed yew-wands or a single wand with four sides being used in divination. The number four may be significant because of the division of Ogham letters into four groups. According to the Roman historian Tacitus, a similar method of divination was in use in Germany in the 1st century CE (12). He describes how the Germans would:

"cut off a branch of a nut-bearing tree and slice it into strips; these they mark with different signs and throw them completely at random onto a white cloth. Then the priest of the state, if the consultation is a public one, or the father of the family if it is private, offers a prayer to the gods, and looking up at the sky picks up three strips, one at a time, and reads their meaning from the signs previously scored on them. If the lots forbid the enterprise, there is no deliberation that day on the matter in question; if they allow it, confirmation by the taking of auspices is required."

We have clear evidence for the magical and divinatory use of the Ogham alphabet from the insular literature of medieval Ireland. It may be that such esoteric uses were influenced by contact with Rune-using Viking raiders and settlers who came to Ireland in increasingly large numbers from the 8th century onwards. If the esoteric use of Oghams was increased or inspired by such contacts this might explain why the Ogham alphabet ceased to be used for memorial inscriptions after the 8th century although its use continued in the Bardic schools of Ireland until the early modern period. Perhaps it became too secret for use on public memorial-stones.

Much of our knowledge about the meanings attributed to the Ogham alphabet comes from a compilation known as The Scholar's Primer (Auricept na n-Eces) which records some of the teachings of the Bardic colleges of medieval Ireland (13). Versions of this text are found in the 12th century Book of Leinster, the late 14th century Yellow Book of Lecan and The Book of Ballymote. The oldest sections of the Primer may be as early as the 7th century, but the bulk of it seems to have been written in the 10th. Included in it are two lists of phrases linked with the letters of the Ogham alphabet. The second phrase list is attributed to the pagan Irish God, Mac ind Oc, 'Son of the Young.'

The 'B' group:

b, beith, birch - faded trunk and fair hair

l, luis, rowan - delight of eye

f, fearn, alder - shield of warrior-bands

s, saille, willow - hue of the lifeless

n, nion, ash - checking of peace

The 'H' group:

h, huath, hawthorn - pack of wolves

d, duir, oak - highest of bushes

t, tinne, holly - (The Primer gives the word trian for this letter, but no associated phrase. Trian means 'a third,' or 'a good portion.' Ed.)

c, coll, hazel - fairest of trees

q, quert, apple - shelter of a hind

The `M' group:

m, muin, vine - strongest of effort

g, gort, ivy - sweeter than grasses

ng, ngetal, broom - a physician's strength

st, straif, blackthorn - strongest of red

r, ruis, elder - intensest of blushes

The `A' group:

a, ailm, silver fir - loudest of groanings

o, onn, furze - helper of horses

u, ura, heather - in cold dwellings

e, eadha, aspen - distinguished wood

i, idho, yew - oldest of woods

The phrase-Oghams of the god Mac ind Oc are as follows:

The `B' group:

b, beith, birch - most silvery of skin

l, luis, rowan - friend of cattle

f, fearn, alder - guarding of milk

s, saille, willow - activity of bees

n, nion, ash - fight of women

The `H' group:

h, huath, hawthorn - blanching of face

d, duir, oak - carpenter's work

t, tinne, holly - fires of coal

c, coll, hazel - friend of cracking

q, quert, apple - force of the man

The `M' group:

m, muin, vine - condition of slaughter

g, gort, ivy - (the Primer gives the words med nercc, meaning `abundance of mead.' Ed.)

ng, ngetal, broom or reed - (the Primer skips this letter. Ed.)

st, straif, blackthorn - increasing of secrets

r, ruis, elder - redness of faces

The `A' group:

a, ailm, silver fir - beginning of an answer

o, onn, furze - smoothest of work

u, ura, heather - growing of plants

e, eadha, aspen - synonym for a friend

i, idho, yew - most withered of wood

At some point a further five letters were added to the Ogham alphabet. These represented diphthongs as follows:

ea, ebad, eclampsia (or aspen)

oi, oir, spindle tree

ui, uilleann, ivy (or woodbine or honeysuckle)

io, pin, pine (or gooseberry)

ae, emancoll, witchhazel

None of these diphthong letters appear on the Ogham stone inscriptions, so we may assume that they were added some time after the 8th century.

In the present century there has been a good deal of speculation about the origins and uses of the Ogham alphabet. Among the more outlandish ideas are those of Dr. Barry Fell in his book, *America BC*, in which he claims to have identified a 17-letter Ogham inscription in Maine dating from c. 3000 BCE. I have heard others suggest that the script dates back to c. 5000 BCE. All of the so-called Ogham inscriptions from these early periods that I have had the chance to examine have turned out to bear very little resemblance to Irish Oghams. Some of them seem to be aimless doodles, a few may be attempts at counting, or representations of fish-bones or other skeletal structures, but none of them are Oghams.

Several modern Druids have tried to construct workable systems of magic and divination based on the Ogham script. Most of these attempts owe a good deal to Robert Graves' extraordinary book, *The White Goddess*, which weaves a complex web of symbolism around the Ogham alphabet (14). Liz and Colin Murray were certainly influenced by Graves when they produced their Ogham divination card set, *The Celtic Tree Oracle* (15). Kaledon Naddair of the Edinburgh-based College of Druidism (see *Druid Directory*) also draws inspiration from Graves for his books and wall charts based on the Ogham alphabet and relating it to the Celtic calendar, animal lore and so on. Mark Graham of the Charnwood Grove of Druids (see *Druid Directory*), Nigel Pennick (16) and others use Ogham divination sets in which each letter is carved on a slip of wood of the appropriate tree. These are stored in a bag or pouch and drawn at random.

After this article appeared in *The Druids' Voice*, I received the following suggestions (from Graeme K. Talboys) as to how the Irish Ogham divination system using four yew-wands might have worked:

"They may have been used in relation to or cast upon a cloth marked out with 'Fionn's Window.' How they fell would then indicate what was sought.

"They may have been carefully crafted in pentagonal section. Each side would represent one of the oghams in a particular group, the four wands containing all twenty original characters. Each time they are cast on a flat surface they will land on a particular face - that being the one to be read. The position of each stick would also be relevant - the direction they point, their position within a given area, whether one crosses another, and so on.

"There may have been a method analogous to methods of consulting the I Ching. The yew wands would have been cast a set number of times, each cast building up to a set of oghams that could then be read. Perhaps one cast indicated which of the many oghams was relevant. Further casts may have indicated past, present and future influences or courses of action.

"This is all speculation of course. It is just that these methods have been used elsewhere and in other systems. The recent archaeological finds just outside Colchester that are probably related to a Druid include two sets of metal wands (four copper and four iron) which may have served a similar divinatory purpose."

Shortly after receiving this letter from Graeme I was browsing the web when I came across a site put together by American Druid, Searles O'Dubhain, on which he talks about a method of Ogham divination involving casting staves onto a cloth marked with Fionn's Window. This kind of synchronicity often seems to crop up when one is onto something.

From the evidence of the surviving literature, it seems likely that there were several variations on Ogham divination, just as there were several variations on spoken Ogham. The use of yew-wands is a common factor linking some of the accounts. If, as one source has it, there were four wands, we may speculate that each wand may have had one of the four original groups of Oghams carved on it. And if, as another source has it, they were four-sided we might assume that each letter was carved on a different angle, with one angle bearing both the first and last letter of each set of five. When cast, each wand would then show either two or three letters. If, however, the wands were three-sided, then only the uppermost angle would be read, showing either one or two letters. Another source suggests that only one wand was drawn at random from a bag to make each divination. This would certainly simplify matters when it came to interpretation. Whatever the method of drawing or casting the wands, when read in conjunction with the Ogham letters in Fionn's Window, the range of possible combinations is enormous.

The question then becomes, how does one interpret the resulting Oghams? For the Germanic Runes there are surviving poems that give reasonably complete, fairly practical meanings for each of the letters. For the Ogham alphabet, we have the two phrase-lists given above and the lists of other meanings given in the *Scholar's Primer*. Are these enough to enable us to recover the 'keys of divination?' It should be possible to draw up a table of correspondences of the type beloved of a certain school of tarot buffs and most Golden Dawn influenced Kabalists from the data given in the *Primer*. If anyone would like to do this, I'll add the results to this page. Your local library should be able to get you a copy of George Calder's translation of the *Primer*. See Note 6 below for publication details. Meanwhile, if you would like to experiment further, using the information already contained on this site, here's a picture of Fionn's Window, from the *Scholar's Primer*:

I suggest drawing or embroidering the Window on a piece of cloth about 24 inches square, though I guess a paper print-out would work too.

The meanings attributed to the Ogham letters in the *Scholar's Primer* are mainly based on lists of words beginning with the same initial letter as the Ogham. This being the case, it would be possible to arrive at an English-language Ogham by creating similar lists, as we have already seen with the English Tree Ogham given above. To take another example, the *Primer* contains a Bird-Ogham, listing the Irish names of birds beginning with each letter of the Ogham alphabet. This could be adapted into English as follows:

## B - Blackbird

L - Lark

F - Finch

S - Swallow

N - Nightingale

and so on. This suggestion may outrage some Celtic purists, but it would certainly make things easier for the one or two members of the Druid community who may be unfamiliar with medieval Irish!

## OGHAM MAGIC

The first written message in Ogham was said to have consisted of seven strokes, each representing the letter B, carved on a single birch rod. As we have seen, the letter B is called beith in Irish Gaelic, meaning `birch'. This message was for the God, Lugh of the Long Arm, who interpreted it to mean that his wife would be carried off seven times into Sidhe mounds, or into another country, unless she was protected with birch (9).

In the Tain Bo Cuailgne, `the Cattle-Raid of Cooley,' the mythical Ulster hero Cuchulain left a warning for the approaching army of Connacht in the form of an oak-sapling, twisted into a hoop and secured with a wooden peg, on which he carved Oghams. He then placed the hoop around the top of a standing stone. He did all this standing on one leg and using only one arm and one eye, a posture frequently adopted by Otherworld beings and Druids in Irish literature. When the Connacht army, led by Cuchulain's childhood friend Fergus mac Roich, found the hoop, Fergus read the message on the peg. It said "Come no further, unless you have a man who can make a hoop like this with one hand out of one piece. I exclude my friend, Fergus." Fergus then showed the hoop to the Druids of Connacht and chanted: (10)

"This hoop: what does it mean to us? What is the riddle of the hoop? How many men put it here? A small number? A multitude? Will it bring the host to harm if they pass it on their way? Druids, discover if you can the reasons it was left here." The Druids answered: "It was a great champion made it and left it as a trap for men, an angry barrier against kings - one man, single-handed. The royal host must come no further, according to the rule of war, unless you have a man among you who can do what he has done. This is the reason, and no other, why the spancel-hoop was left."

Cuchulain later left a similar Ogham message on the fork of a tree, which he cut with a single sword-blow and planted in the middle of a river. On this occasion, the message was reinforced by having the severed heads of four Connacht warriors hung on the fork of the tree.

## OGHAM SPEECH

Irish Bardic texts provide evidence for the use of Ogham in magic and divination. Ogham was supposed to have been invented by the Irish God, Ogma Grianaineach, `Youthful (?) Sun-Face,' "as a proof of his ingenuity, and that this speech should belong to the learned apart, to the exclusion of rustics and herdsmen." Ogma is an incarnation of the Celtic young Sun God. Note that Ogham is referred to here not as an alphabet, but as a form of speech for the learned. Ogham as a form of speech was certainly known to Irish Bards of the 12th century, and seems to have been related to a type of speech called Shelta, still in use among Irish gypsies in the 1890s. Neither appears to have been a true language, but seems to have consisted of ordinary Irish words disguised in various ways, such as adding letters or syllables, changing initial letters, or reversing whole words (7).

Below are the Ogham letters, along with their tree-names in Irish and English. The names in brackets are suggested equivalents for use in an English version of the spoken Ogham back-slang, inspired by the work of Dylan ap Thuin,

Archdruid of the Insular Order of Druids (8). The simplest method of creating a spoken Ogham is to select a single tree name and insert the name each time it appears in speech in place of its initial letter. Thus using the word *sallow* in place of the letter *s*, the phrase "Listen, I must say something" becomes "Lisallowten, I musallowt *salloway* *sallowomething*."

The `B' group:

b, beith, birch [birch] l, luis, rowan [larch] f, fearn, alder [fir, or fern] s, saille, willow [sallow] n, nion, ash [nut, or nettle]

The `H' group:

h, huath, hawthorn [hawthorn] d, duir, oak [durmast] t, tinne, holly [trefoil] c, coll, hazel [cedar, or crabapple, depending on whether the `c' is soft or hard] q, quert, apple [quince]

The `M' group:

m, muin, vine [mistletoe] g, gort, ivy [gorse] ng, ngetal, broom or reed st, straif, blackthorn r, ruis, elder [rowan]

The `A' group:

a, ailm, silver fir [apple, or ash] o, onn, furze [oak] u, ura, heather [ulmus] e, eadha, aspen [elder] i, idho, yew [ivy]

As some English letters and sounds aren't represented in the Ogham alphabet, the following could be added for the purposes of the back-slang:

j [juniper] k [kelp] p [pine] th [thorn] v [vine] w [willow, or witchhazel] x [xylem] y [yew] z [zinnia]

From:

<http://www.druidorder.demon.co.uk/ogham.htm>