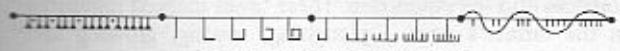
THE ORIGINS OF OGHAM

Much of our present-day knowledge of Ogham comes from the *Book of Ballimote*, written in the fourteenth century, and other manuscripts that were employed in the teaching of medieval schools of classical poetry, and had been compiled from earlier texts and oral records. This material was transcribed by George Calder, a lecturer in Celtic studies at the University of Glasgow, at the beginning of this century and published as *Auraicept na n'Eces* (literally, 'The Handbook of the Learned') or 'The Scholar's Primer'.

According to the Primer, Ogham was devised by Ogma Sun Face, the archetypal Celtic father figure and sun god. "Now Ogma, a man well skilled in speech and in poetry, invented the Ogham. The cause of its invention, as proof of his ingenuity, and that this speech should belong to the learned apart, to the exclusion of rustics and herdsmen."

The word Oghams of Mac Ind Oic and Morann Mac Main with their individual interpretations of the letter meanings are detailed in full in the Primer. Many varying written letter forms of the alphabet are given, presumably devised for secrecy and obscurity or evolved by the different colleges. In some, letter substitutions are made, such as the vowels being replaced by C, C for A, CC for O and so on. In other forms, the letters are drawn in different ways. The following example shows B L F S N drawn in a few of these variations:



The traditional way of teaching Ogham, by question and answer, is also used throughout the Primer. For instance:

"How many divisions of Ogham are there, and what are they?"

"Not hard. Four: B five, H five, M five, A five, besides diphthongs."

The alphabet was also used as a teaching model or mnemonic for learning other facts, as well as being a spiritual guide.

The sacred crane

Another source of the creation of Ogham is examined by Robert Graves in his essay *The Crane Bag*, a result of his long search for the White Goddess. "The Greek mythographers credited a poet of the Trojan war, Palamedes son of Nauplius ('Ancient Intelligence, Son of Navigator'), with having invented such of the letters as had not already been invented by the Triple Goddess. His inspiration came, it is said, from observing a flock of cranes, 'which make letters as they fly'." This is no doubt a reference to the way in which the long legs of cranes cross behind as they fly and with their wings form shapes similar to the Ogham alphabet.

'Crane Knowledge' is, therefore, the secret and hidden knowledge of the Tree alphabet. St Columba was known as a Crane Cleric due to his great wisdom. He had been trained in a Druid college and had learnt all the letters from the chief Druid by eating a special cake each day, each successive cake marked with another Ogham – a pleasant and direct way to absorb knowledge.

Graves goes on to recount a legend from an early Irish text concerning Manannan, the sea god, who possessed a bag formed from the skin of a sacred crane. Within this bag he carried the King of Scotland's shears, the King of Lochlainn's helmet, the bones of Assail's swine, Goibne's smith-hook, his own shirt and a strip from the great whale's back.

The Crane Bag, as we have already seen, refers to the secrets of the Tree alphabet, of which the first 20 letters, with their simple shapes, could be easily formed by the

tions are revealed on the cards in the form of red dots: three dots for Chieftain trees, two for Peasants and one for Shrubs.

The numbers shown on 13 of the cards, indicate the cards and trees that relate to the months of the Celtic year, starting on 1st November (see Chapter 1 for more details). These numbers can, therefore, be used to give an indication of timing in a reading (see Chapter 3). Bardic values were assigned to numbers and these may be of interest to any students of numerology:

1 Unity and purity.

2 Duality and polarity – as above so below.

3 Trinity.

4 Cosmic cube, four square solid.

5 Control of the soul.

6 Time.

7 Lunar, night dreams, fertility.

8 The yearly cycle, purification.

9 Wisdom and knowledge.

10 Prophecy.

11 Maternity and fecundity.

12 Royal or divine purpose.

13 Rebirth and transmigration.

Also incorporated in the design of the cards are the colours associated with the various trees, some of which are given with their Gaelic names:

Beith, white; **Luis**, grey and red; **Fearn**, crimson; **Saille**, 'sorcha', bright; **Nuin**, 'necht', glass green. **Huathe**, purple; **Duir**, black and dark brown; **Tinne** dark grey; **Coll**, 'cron', brown; **Quert**, green. **Muin**, 'mbracht', variegated; **Gort**, 'gorm', sky blue; **Ngetal**, grass green; **Straif**, purple; **Ruis**, red. **Ailim**, light blue; **Ohn**, yellow gold; **Ur**, purple; **Eadha**, silver white; **Ioho**, dark green. **Koad**, many shades of green; **Oir**, white; **Uilleand**, white yellow; **Phagos**, orange brown; **Mór**, blue green.

Now, let us walk slowly through the Celtic forest, pausing before each tree in turn, in order to contemplate each more completely.

BEITH

EVERY YEAR HAS a new start and so does the ancient Celtic year. It begins on the first of November, after the celebration of Hallowe'en, or Allhallows – Samhain, as it used to be known. The Celtic year has 13 lunar months, each called after the name of a tree. The first is the white-stemmed Birch. In Mannin, the Isle of Man, off the west coast of Scotland, criminals were ceremoniously birched in order to drive out any evil influences. This practice has only been stopped in the last few years, but what the modern reformers failed to take into account are the religious and spiritual aspects of birching. The new year could not start until the old one had been finished and all malign influences cast away.

LOOKING INTO THE Celtic forest, one that formerly covered the whole of the United Kingdom, the Birch stands out as a graceful, slender tree with a characteristic white bole. The white indicates cleanliness and determination in overcoming difficulties.

SO, CHOOSING THIS card means that a new start is likely. Before this can be safely embarked upon, however, all old ideas, unhelpful influences and bad thoughts need to be cast aside. In making your spiritual journey with this tree as a guide, remember

BIRCH

to concentrate your mind on the uplifting slender whiteness of the tree, a whiteness that stands out clearly from the tangled undergrowth and confusion of shrubs and thorny bushes that cover the forest floor and, hence, may inhibit an easy journey.

TRAVEL MUST HAVE a purpose, one that should be understood before the journey is undertaken. The image of the result you desire should be held in mind so that no distractions impede progress. If, however, the card is chosen reversed, it is probably not the time to make a start. There may be problems that need to be cleared up before the way is clear and a direction can be established.

FEARN

THE ALDER, LIKE the Willow, is a water-loving tree. Its timber is oily and water resistant and therefore used extensively for underwater foundations: parts of Venice and many medieval cathedrals were built on Alder piling. Bran the Blessed, or Bendegeit Bran, is the god linked with this tree in the Ogham alphabet. He is reputed to have used his body to span the river Linon, forming a bridge to raise his followers above the dangerous waters, as the wood does when used as a building material. Mortally wounded in battle with the Irish, Bran prophesied the events that would follow his death, instructing his followers to cut off his head and carry it with them. They travelled to Harlech, where the head sang for seven years; then to Gwales, the head remaining uncorrupted and prophesying the while. Eventually, they came to rest in London, Caer Llyndain, and buried Bran's head at the White Mount, or Bryn Gwyn, now the site of the Tower of London. It was held that as long as the head remained concealed it would give protection against plague from across the sea. King Arthur, it is said, once dug it up: an unwise action, since the Saxons then invaded the country.

THE NAME BRAN means raven and, to the present day, the memory of the power of Bran's head is

ALDER

preserved in the legend attached to the presence of the ravens at the Tower. They are given special care because of the belief that the realm is safe from attack as long as they remain there. So much so, that when the royal menagerie was transferred from the Tower to Regent's Park in 1834, the ravens were intentionally left behind to respect a prophecy from the past and to enable it to continue into the future.

THE RAVEN WAS respected as a bird endowed with the powers of prophecy. Many birds were used by the Druids as a means of divination by interpreting their movements and calls. But the raven was held to possess particular oracular strength due to its alert, intelligent and knowing air. The Alder can help you, through the choice of this card, to find spiritual protection in disputes, as Bran, after the battle, offered protection to his followers and their place of rest; also, oracular strength, as he spoke and instructed them on their travels and future actions.

CHOSEN REVERSED, THIS card signifies a lack of, or an unawareness of the need for, protection in areas of dispute. Oracular guidance is being offered.

STRAIF

THE BLACKTHORN IS a wintery tree. The fruits, known as sloes, ripen and sweeten only after the first frosts. The white flowers open early, often before the leaves appear. A cold spring was traditionally known as 'a blackthorn winter'. Black-barked and with vicious thorns, the Blackthorn forms dense thickets when given the opportunity to spread. The Gaelic word 'straif' has links with the English 'strife'. The wood of the Blackthorn is that traditionally used for the Irish cudgel, or shillelagh; the thorns, those used in witchcraft to pierce wax images.

BLACKTHORN IS THE card that represents the strong action of fate or outside influences on your life and journey, that which has to be obeyed. You may feel that you have no choice, however unpleasant, but to let events take you over, forcing you down a harsh, unavoidable path. Unexpected change or the ruining of your plans can be daunting, but you must accept that there are sometimes issues to face and decisions to make that are inescapable. However, just as the same glass can be seen to be half empty or half full depending on your perception of it, so, on your spiritual journey, a hard, disruptive period can be entered into in a negative, harmful way or a positive, beneficial way.

BLACKTHORN

IF YOU PERSIST with a negative viewpoint, trying to cling to your old ways and facing difficulty with resentment and stubbornness, you will only damage yourself in the end. On the other hand, you can accept immutable events willingly by conquering your resistance and drawing on spiritual strength, and so become able to recognize a new direction or opportunity as it emerges from the chaos, and work with it. In due course, you should then realize that although your life or yourself may have altered drastically, you have, nonetheless, safely emerged into a new, fulfilling phase, cleansed and renewed in the process.

THERE IS NO reversed position for this Ogham card. Accept that what will be may be hard. Also, that a winter of discontent can lead to a fruitful change and a new flowering, if you have the strong and determined vision to see the possibility and willingly travel towards it.

Ruis

Folklore holds that it is unlucky to use Elder wood for a child's cradle, which should always be made out of Birch for a new start and inception. In the Ogham calendar, the Elder rules the thirteenth month. This is, in fact, a short three-day period, a 'make-up' month, ending in Samhain, the last night of the year and now known as Hallowe'en. The new year, on the 1st of November, and the month of the Birch follow on after. The Elder, with its distinctive, easily hollowed, pithy stems, is a tree of regeneration. It regrows damaged branches readily and it will root and grow rapidly from any part.

The island of Anglesey, Mona, was known in pre-Roman times as Mona mam Cymru (meaning, Anglesey the Mother of Wales). This was because it was flat, mild in climate and fertile. It fed the rest of the country and was the granary or bread basket that provided nourishment. It is also remembered as the site of the massacre of the last of the Druids by the Romans. Although they fought fiercely and fanatically, few escaped and their power and leadership were effectively at an end. The Celts were such fearless warriors because of their belief in the Cauldron of Rebirth; by immersion in the Cauldron they would be restored to life and strength, enabled to return to the

Elder

fight time after time until their battle was won.

This ogham card is linked to the eternal turnings of life and death, birth and rebirth. It represents the end in the beginning and the beginning in the end; life in death and death in life; the casting out of the devils of the old year and the renewal and creativity of the new; the timelessness of the cycle by which the fading of old age is always balanced by the new start of birth.

This card has no reversed position. The circle will always turn afresh, change and creativity arising from the old and bringing about the new. All is continuously linked as phases of life and experience repeat themselves in subtly different forms, leading always to renewal.

OHN

THE FURZE IS a yellow-flowering shrub growing profusely on moorland and commonland. It chooses for itself a position far away from other trees where it can bask in the sun. However, although the Furze bears its densest golden covering in spring and early summer, there is, in fact, no month throughout the year when it is totally devoid of blooms; a touch of colour always appearing somewhere among the dark green spines. The flowers are rich and plentiful in pollen and nectar, giving off a strong, sweet scent of honey in the warmth of the sun, providing rich rewards for the gathering bees which stock and replenish their combs and hives. The Fire Festival the Furze is particularly associated with is Lugnassadh, at which time it possesses a strong value, linking the inner and outer worlds with richness and fulfilment.

CHOOSING THE FURZE card indicates a gathering together of sweetness and value, or a skill at collecting. It means either that circumstances around you on your path through life are gathering together toward a goal or destination you require, or that you will be enabled to collect together for yourself the elements you seek in order to attain such an end: like a magpie seeking here and there for the golden treasure it wants to add to its valuable store.

* OHN = Golden pipes 3 Heu as Shown by Connection To Lugnassad.

FURZE

ALTHOUGH JUST APPARENTLY a common lowly bush, the Furze in the Ogham alphabet is, according to Brehon Law tree order, a Chieftain. It therefore ranks among the highest echelon, along with the Alder, Ash, Oak, Hazel, Vine, Ivy, Blackthorn, Yew, Mistletoe (Heather) and Beech and it is, therefore, a precious guide to your spiritual journey.

IF THE FURZE card is reversed, the gathering together, or collecting, of things of value to your progress is not yet complete. The time of fulfilment is when all has come together sweetly.

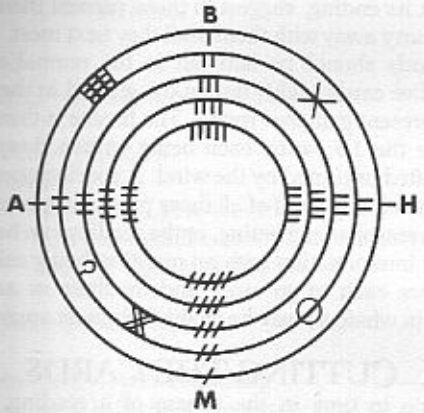
Crone version, Gawain achieves the Grail quest and restores to life the dead King-Guardian. The Celtic Cauldron similarly restores the dead, fertilizes the land, and its milk produces rebirth and regeneration; the Earth is herself a Cauldron.

According to the *Book of Conquests,* a later retelling of the earlier mythical history of Ireland, the people known as the Fir Bolg were defeated by the Tuatha De Danann at the First Battle of Mag Tuireadh. The Tuatha were the gods of the Celts, skilled in poetry and possessed of many magical skills. They came from the sky where they had dwelt in the four castles, or cities, of Falias, Finias, Gorias and Murias. These mark the points for the other four cards in each of the three circles.

Together, these five magical castles, or abodes of the spirit, protect and guard the five points on each of the circles of existence on which the cards are recorded. These five points also embody the four elements: Earth in the North, Fire in the South, Air in the East, Water in the West, and the quintessential Centre. In the form of the pentagram, this concept is also embodied. The upright pentagram with a point at the top symbolizes the supremacy of the spiritual and divine over the world of matter, shown by the other four. It is said that the Druids had pentagrams on the soles of their sandals, so leaving a trail of blessings wherever they passed.

FIONN'S WINDOW

Finally, we have the Ogham meditation mandala – Fionn's Window, named after Fin, or Fionn, the legendary Finn MacCoul, who was an Irish hero as well as being a Druid. This is the equivalent of a Tibetan mandala (a graphic representation of the universe), or diagram of the psychic cosmos, in the form of a meditation.



APPENDIX TWO: THE CELTIC CALENDAR

What is first dark then light?

What must not be done between November and April that may be done between May and October?

Where is Belinus linked in all this and why does he add up to 365?

THE COLIGNY TABLET

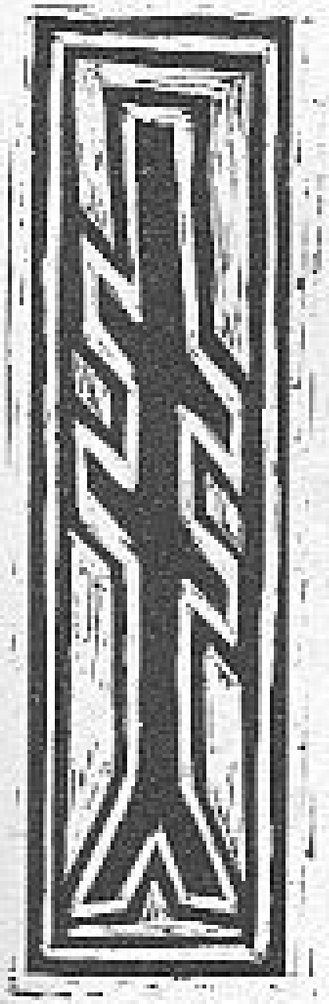
In 1897 a fragmented bronze calendar dating from about 50BC was discovered in Coligny, France. It appeared to be the remains of a Romanized Gaulish model of a Celtic lunar and solar calendar system.

It displayed a cycle of approximately five years on 62 tables. Unlike our present-day calendar, which is largely the creation of Pope Gregory based on the earlier Julian calendar of Julius Caesar, this system used the accurate period of the moon's orbit around the Earth (the lunar month) to measure the passing of time. Each lunar month corresponds to 29.53 days. In this Gaulish model, the month was divided into two 15-day periods – the probable origin of the phrase *quinze jours* – meaning 15 days, the French equivalent of the English fortnight.

A solar year, the time taken by the Earth to circle the sun, or one revolution of the sun about the Vernal Equinox, is nominally 365 days (actually 365.242 days – hence our adjustments by leap years every four revolutions). Twelve revolutions of the moon, however (ie. 12 times 29½ days), equals only 354 days. It was therefore necessary with the Coligny calendar to make two adjustments: first, using alternate months consisting of 29 and 30 days; second,

Gort Ivy

(Hedra helix)



The ivy is an extremely hardy plant and can grow to a great age. When this happens, the trunk can be as wide as a foot in diameter. The plant will grow out in all directions, climbing up any vertical surface and out over all flat planes in a tenacious manner.

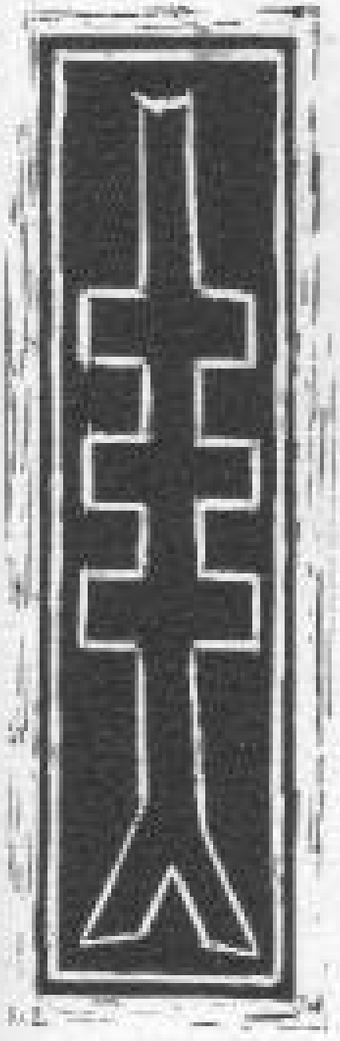
The ivy is especially seen as a sign of femininity in the British Isles. The archaic carol "The Holly and the Ivy" refers to the eternal conflict between the sexes—the holly being a strongly masculine tree.

"CARTA DE PERSONALIDAD DE LOS ÁRBOLES"

ARBOL	OGHAM	ELEMENTO	RANGO	PERSONALIDAD OPUESTA	DEIDADES	EQUIVALENTE EN TAROT
ROBLE (Duir)	D	FUEGO	*Jefe*	PATERNAL/dominante	Belinus	*El Emperador*
ALDER (Fearn)	F,V	FUEGO	*Jefe*	AMBICIOSO/impulsivo	Bran	*Fuerza*
ESPINO (Huatha)	H	FUEGO	*Campesino*	APASIONADO/despiadado	Rhiannon	*Juicio*
ACEBO (Tinne)	T	FUEGO	*Arbusto*	DECIDIDO/insensible	Cu Chulain	*El Carro*
TOJO (Ohn)	O	FUEGO	*Zarza*	PRÓSPERO/vano	Llew	*El Sol*
ABEDUL (Berth)	B	AIRE	*Jefe*	FELIZ/inmaduro	Mabon	*La Estrella*
FRESNO (Nuin)	N	AIRE	*Campesino*	ENCANTADOR/egocéntrico	Gwydion	*El Mundo*
SERBAL (Luis)	L	AIRE	*Arbusto*	ESPIRITUAL/fanático	Math	*El Jerofante*
JUNCO (Ngetal)	N,G	AIRE	*Zarza*	ADAPTABLE/indeciso	Arianrhod	*Rueda de la Fortuna*
BREZO(Ur)	U,W	AIRE	*Zarza*	RELAJADO/superficial	Bloddwedd	*El Tonto*
MANZANO (Quert)	Q	AGUA	*Jefe*	MATERNAL/dejado	Cerridwen	*La Emperatriz*
SAUCE (Saille)	S	AGUA	*Jefe*	SABIO/amargo	Epona	*La Luna*
ÁLAMO (Eadha)	E	AGUA	*Campesino*	CUIDADOSO/inseguro	Llyr	*La Torre Caída*
AVELLANO (Coll)	C,K	AGUA	*Arbusto*	GENEROSO/engañoso	Branwen	*Las Sacerdotisas*
PARRA (Muin)	M	AGUA	*Zarza*	SIMPÁTICO/dependiente	Brigantia	*Los Amantes*
PINO (Ailim)	A	TIERRA	*Campesino*	RELAJADO/introvertido	Kernunos	*El Demonio*
TEJO (Ioho)	I,J,Y	TIERRA	*Campesino*	CONSTANTE/sanguíneo	Samhan	*Muerte*
ENDRINO (Straif)	ST,Z,SS	TIERRA	*Arbusto*	HONESTO/engañoso	Taliesin	*Temperancia*
SAÚCO (Ruis)	R	TIERRA	*Arbusto*	INTELIGENTE/desgraciado	Morrigan	*El Ahorcado*
HIEDRA (Gort)	G	TIERRA	*Zarza*	AMBICIOSO/perezoso	Ogmios	*Justicia*
MUÉRDAGO (Uchelwydd)	/ | \	(La sexta noche)	?	*Inmanifestado*	(El Fantasma)	*El ERMITAÑO está solitario*
HAYA (Phagos)	|	(El Eclipse)	?	*Umbral*	(Janus)	-
DONDIEGO DE DÍA (Tagiys)	ᘓ	(El Amanecer)	?	*Umbral*	(Manawyddan)	-
ZAPALLO (Pympes)	△	(El Ocaso)	?	*Umbral*	(Huon)	-

Ur Heather

(Calluna vulgaris)



Red heather at midsummer is a sign of passion and is associated with the mountains and with acts of passion. The white heather is a protection against acts of passion and is considered a lucky sign. Both are attractive to bees and are thus associated with the sovereign work of the spirit and with vigorous activity.

Heather grows widely over the land in Ireland and Britain. In Wales "heather ale" is brewed as a restorative—and it would seem that such brews have their origins in very archaic periods when such drinks had a sacred purpose.