

**COMMENTARY: THE KNOWTH OGHAMS
IN CONTEXT**

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A. Classical Irish ogham stones

The classical Irish ogham stones consist of free-standing pillar stones with inscriptions carved along the edge of the stone. They are found predominantly in the south-west of the country (Cork, Kerry and Waterford), although there are also important outlying groups in Leinster and sporadic examples known elsewhere. There are two main types: one consisting of stones of about 1m or so in height; the other a rather smaller group with much taller stones, up to 2m and more in height. These latter stones are often found in prominent locations in countryside: on the sides of valleys as at Ballintermon in Kerry, or at the heads of sea coves as at Faunkill-and-the-Woods in Cork. The editor of the Irish ogham corpus, R.A.S. Macalister, believed these tall stones to be Bronze Age in origin, with the inscriptions being carved at a much later date.⁶⁹

The alphabet that we find on the classical Irish ogham stones is based around four groups of five letters, but it has been slightly modified since its invention. At least three of the symbols do not occur on the classical stones: a single stroke to the left, three strokes crossing the edge of the stone on the diagonal and four strokes crossing on the diagonal. Damian McManus has made the suggestion that this is because the sounds represented by these symbols had died out by the time stones were carved, although, by the time the alphabet key was written down in manuscript form in the eighth or ninth century, these letters were understood as representing H, nG and Z, respectively.⁷⁰ At least two additional letters, or *forfeda*, had also been added to the 4 x 5 alphabet by the time the classical stone inscriptions were carved.

These discrepancies imply that the alphabet was invented some time before the classical stones began to be erected; perhaps, as Anthony Harvey has suggested, as early as the second century AD.⁷¹ Stories in Irish literature, many of them Middle Irish in date, suggest that ogham could be carved on wood, although no example of this process has survived, and it is possible that it was on ephemeral objects such as these that the alphabet first gained popularity.

Exact dating of the classical stones is difficult and contentious, for few are in their original position and none of the standing stones has been excavated in the modern period.⁷² We can, however, subdivide the corpus on the basis of the language used in the inscriptions. This suggests that, as McManus puts it, 'the bulk appear to belong to the Late Primitive Irish period with a substantial but decreasing proportion in Archaic Irish and a very small number in Early Old Irish'.⁷³ Using McManus's own dates for these linguistic phases, the bulk of stones therefore belong to the fifth or early sixth centuries, with a decreasing proportion of later sixth-century date, stretching into the first half of the seventh century. It is notable that the earliest type, or Late Primitive Irish inscriptions, include the Irish word XOI, which has been understood as a translation of the Christian grave formula *hic iacet* 'here lies...'. Continental grave slabs with this formula are used

in the fifth century, and this provides some evidence to support the hypothesis that classical ogham stones may only have begun to be erected in the very late fourth or early fifth century AD.⁷⁴

The purpose of the inscriptions on the classical ogham stones is to identify individuals by name. This is normally given in the genitive case, but in a small minority of inscriptions the name is prefaced by the word ANM, meaning 'name'. One stone, from Inchagoill in Co. Galway, which is written in Latin letters but in the same type of Early Old Irish as is found on the latest ogham stones, prefaces the name with the word *lia* 'stone'. Classical ogham stone inscriptions thus appear to commemorate the name or the memorial of the named individual. Various types of naming formulae are used: the individual may be indicated by a personal name alone; he may be identified as belonging to a community (indicated by the use of the word MUCOL...) or as a descendant of a third party (AVI...). The most frequent formula, however, is the type of naming formula generally found in the medieval annals from the seventh century: personal name and patronymic, or X the son of Y. This occurs in over 50% of the surviving stone inscriptions.

B. The Knowth ogham inscriptions

Five ogham inscriptions are known from the main mound at Knowth: two in the eastern tomb and three in the western tomb (see Figs A1.2:10–14 above). Inscriptions in Latin letters are also known, and on three occasions (Oghams 1, 2, 3 and, respectively, Latin letter Inscriptions {14}, {6}, {15}–{16}), both alphabets are found on the one stone. The inscriptions have been read and commented on by F.J. Byrne, initially in 1969 and again in this appendix.

Ogham 1 (Eastern tomb Orthostat 56; see Fig. A1.2:10 above):

Byrne: ZTALLURZMO – MFNMAM, or MAMQTA – UZRUDDAFZ (read in reverse). He now prefers the reading OMATALLURZMO – MFNMA – M (see above, p.102).

McManus published this inscription as ETLORZGANAU/O, but apparently he had not seen the stone or drawings.⁷⁵

Ogham 2 (Eastern tomb Corbel 41; see Fig. A1.2:11):

Byrne: BREQAI[N] or BREQBILB.

McManus published this inscription as (B)IEQB(H)IE/S, but again apparently had not seen the stone or drawings.

Ogham 3 (Western tomb Orthostat 28; see Fig. A1.2:12):

Byrne: BREQBOIS.

Ogham 4 (Western tomb Orthostat 30; see Fig. A1.2:13):

Byrne: QHMTIFMIOE, or TOIMTIFMAN (read in reverse).

Ogham 5 (Western tomb Orthostat 41; see Fig. A1.2:14):

Byrne: MLAHH, or BBADM (read in reverse); and U and I.

As drawn, the Knowth ogham stones do not appear to make sense. The sole possible exception to this is Ogham 1, where Byrne has suggested that, if one interpreted the second four-stroke Z as two separate two-stroke Gs, one would arrive at TALLURGG. This, he points out, is probably the same word as the name Talorc, or Tallorg, the name of Pictish kings noted in the *Annals of Ulster* under 653, 657 and 782. Many other Picts held the same name,⁷⁶ as did, as Byrne notes above, at least two Irishmen: Talorc mac Cellaig of the Síl nÁedo Sláine, whose death notice in 888 identified him as *leth-rí Desceirt Breg* ‘joint-king of southern Brega’,⁷⁷ and Tolorg mac Allailed, who was killed by the Vikings of Lough Ree in 844.⁷⁸ Against this hypothesis, however, one must note that there is no gap between the four strokes of the Z on Ogham 1 as there is, for example, in the two LLs that precede it. Secondly, even if one identified Talorgg within the inscription, it would be surrounded by other letters that do not appear to make sense.

Apart from those at Knowth, there are a small number of oghams in the Irish corpus that do not appear to make sense, and these are generally termed ‘scholastic’ or, less frequently, ‘cryptical’.⁷⁹ McManus provides a definition of the characteristics of scholastic oghams as follows:

In general, scholastic may be understood to mean that the grammar and orthographical convention (in particular the use of *hÚath* with the value *h*) together with some features of the outward appearance of these oghams such as their use of a stemline, of long scores of equal length to the consonants for vowels, the frequent use on hard materials of the first supplementary letter for E (but not for K), the appearance of an arrowhead to indicate the direction of writing and to separate words or names—derive from MS usage and do not continue the earlier genre in a direct line.⁸⁰

On these criteria, the Knowth oghams could be classified as scholastic but they lack many of the diagnostic features. On Oghams 2, 4 and possibly 5 the single stroke character running to the left (otherwise known as *hÚath*) does occur, but since we cannot reliably understand the inscription, we cannot tell whether it was intended to represent *h* or not. In all five instances, the inscriptions are given a stem line; but there is no evidence of an arrowhead, of the supplementary character for E, or of symbols used to indicate word division. It is possible that in Ogham 5 the vowel strokes are the same length as the consonant strokes, but the inscription is too fragmentary to be certain of this. On the other Knowth inscriptions, the vowel strokes are shorter than those of the consonants.

Macalister lists stones that he identifies as ‘scholastic’ from Aultagh (Co. Cork), Glenfahan (Co. Kerry), Ardcanaght (Co. Kerry)

and Ardywanig (Co. Kerry).⁸¹ Of these, only the last seems close to the Knowth oghams in having a stem line but no other ancillary features, and Macalister notes that it is no longer extant. All four do, however, share a Knowth feature not listed by McManus: the fact that the oghams are carved across the face of the stone rather than along the edge, as in the classical type.

This is a feature that is also known on ogham stones from Scotland, where there are numerous examples. Perhaps the closest to the Knowth oghams are those at Blackwaterfoot on Arran, where two ogham inscriptions are carved on the walls of a natural cave (one of which includes the rare four stroke Z as in Knowth Ogham 1), and at Lochgoilhead in Argyll, where the carving occurs in conjunction with an inscription in Latin letters.⁸² Other Scottish examples of oghams carved across the face of the stone include Abernethy, Ackergill, Birsay 1 and 2, Brandsbutt, Burrian, Cunningsburgh 2 and 3, Dunadd, Formaston, Latheron and Pool. In addition, Scottish oghams are almost invariably connected by a stem line,⁸³ as is the case with the Knowth inscriptions.

Thirdly, the strokes to the left and the right of the stem line of Knowth Ogham 1 are not perpendicular to the line but slope fairly heavily. This also is a feature of the oghams we find in Scotland, but is not a feature of the classical Irish oghams. It is the most common arrangement of consonantal strokes on the Scottish oghams and is found on the inscriptions throughout the distribution of these carvings in Scotland, from Argyll to Shetland. Forsyth has argued that, in addition, there is a consistent pattern whereby strokes that in the classical style run to the left of the edge, are invariably sloping backward in Scotland, while consonant strokes that classically run to the right always slope forwards.⁸⁴ This is the same arrangement as is found on Knowth Ogham 1. Sloping consonants are not visible on the other Knowth oghams.

C. Dating evidence for Knowth oghams

The normal dating criteria for classical Irish oghams is the style of language used, but this method cannot be used in the case of the Knowth oghams since they are not clearly written in Irish and cannot easily be understood, Byrne's interpretations notwithstanding. Scottish oghams, many of which are also incomprehensible, have been broadly dated by Forsyth 'from perhaps the sixth century to the tenth', but she adds that 'the bulk...date to after the main period of orthodox ogham inscriptions in Ireland'.⁸⁵

In the absence of the normal dating criteria, one is thrown back onto what Forsyth has termed the 'palaeography of ogham', or characteristics of slope, spacing and relative length that might offer some guide to classification.⁸⁶ The most obvious of these features at Knowth is the stem line, which is found on all five ogham inscriptions. McManus identifies the stem line as a post-classical or 'scholastic' feature in Ireland, but work

in Britain has produced two examples of this feature, both of which come from excavated contexts and both of which show early dates.

The first is the ogham-inscribed slab from Pool, in Orkney, which was found in 1984 in a secondary context, incorporated into a rectangular courtyard. The seven phases of occupation on the site were identified through radio-carbon and artefact typology. The stone was found in a courtyard dated to the fifth or early sixth century, where it was laid face down as one of the flags in the flooring, and this provides a *terminus ante quem* for the stone.⁸⁷ The inscription on this stone is incomprehensible, but it shows vowel strokes that, although longer than the average Irish vowel stroke, are still shorter than the accompanying diagonal strokes.

The Pool ogham is written horizontally across the face of the stone. This is not the case with the second early example of ogham with a stem line from the Roman site of Silchester. In this instance, the pillar is a rounded one, and the inscription runs vertically in two lines up the pillar; thus, it may be that it was the absence of a clear edge that drove the carvers to create a stem line. There is nothing in the language of the Silchester inscription to preclude an early date. Archaeologically, the stone was found closing a shallow well that appears to have been opened in the fourth century. The stone is of local type and may originally have formed part of a structure erected around the end of the first quarter of the fourth century. It would seem to have been deposited in the well in the later fourth or early fifth century.⁸⁸

In Ireland, there is no example of a stemline for an ogham inscription that can be dated as early as this. A stone from Maumanorig in Co. Kerry has a stemline that runs along two sides of the stone, forming half of a square enclosing a Maltese cross. The Maltese cross may be of sixth- to eighth-century date,⁸⁹ while the inscription begins with the word ANM, showing that it must be at least of the intermediate type, belonging to the Archaic Irish phase, as defined by McManus. The second half of the inscription is incomprehensible.

Another example of an ogham inscription with stemline has been found carved onto a grave-slab at Clonmacnoise. If one reads it in the opposite direction to that suggested by the incised arrowhead it reads BOCHT, the Irish word for 'poor'. It may have been intended to be read in conjunction with a Latin letter inscription, *Colman*, on the same slab. A famous Clonmacnoise ecclesiastic, Conn na mBocht, died in 1030, leaving numerous sons who held various offices in the church; it is possible, therefore, that this ogham inscription should be broadly dated to the eleventh or even twelfth centuries. Stemlines are also found on the silver bossed penannular brooch from Ballyspellan in Co. Kilkenny that has been dated to the second half of the ninth century and possibly the early tenth,⁹⁰ and on the Killaloe cross that may belong to the 'later Viking age' in Ireland.⁹¹ Thus, the existence of a stemline *per se* does not allow one to suggest a close dating for the Knowth oghams.

An alternative dating criterion may be the existence of the character *hUath* (or single stroke to the left) in Knowth Oghams 2, 4 and 5. As

already noted, this character does not occur on the classical Irish stones, but it does occur on the Colmán BOCHT slab, where it clearly must be transliterated as 'h'. The character also occurs twice on the Ballyspellan brooch (where it also clearly means 'h'), as well as on an undated hanging bowl from Kilgubbin East in Co. Kerry. There are also examples of hÚath meaning *h* from *Codex Bernensis* 207 and *Codex Sangallensis* 904, dated to the eighth/ninth and ninth century, respectively.⁹²

Amongst the incomprehensible inscriptions from Scotland, *hÚath* occurs frequently. In her catalogue, Forsyth lists examples from Ackergill, Altyre, Birsay 3, Bressay, Cunningsburgh 2, Formaston, Golspie, Inchyra and Lunnasting. Of these, Altyre, Bressay, Formaston Inchyra and Lunnasting show the double *hÚath*, which is also found on Knowth Ogham 5.⁹³ The most securely dated of the Scottish inscriptions is Birsay 3, found in excavation in 1980. The stone had been re-used in an area paved with large sandstone flags and was sealed by a rubble spread; calibrated radiocarbon dates for this context were in the region 560–769.⁹⁴ The cross slab at Bressay includes a word *datrrr*, normally understood to be the Norse word *dottir*, and the art work has been dated by Robert Stevenson to the late ninth or tenth century.⁹⁵ Other Scottish stones with the *hÚath* symbol include the Pictish symbol stones of Ackergill and Inchyra, a Class II symbol-inscribed cross slab at Formaston and a Class III cross-slab from Altyre.

The evidence of Birsay shows that, as an ogham character, *hÚath* was probably being carved in Scotland from before the seventh century, while the evidence from Bressay and Altyre shows that it may have continued to be part of the carvers' repertoire throughout the period in which Scottish oghams were carved.

D. Conclusions

The Knowth oghams show a number of features that are hard or impossible to parallel in Ireland, and their closest links appear to be with the Scottish ogham corpus. This includes the choice of location for the inscriptions, whereby the carvings on the orthostats and corbels of the two Knowth tombs seem best paralleled by the Blackwaterfoot carvings from a cave in Arran. It also covers features such as the stem-line, the sloping consonants and the widespread use of the *hÚath* character, all of which can be paralleled in Scotland. In Ireland, the stem-line is known from a small number of undatable stones, as well as from oghams of ninth-century date and later. The sloping consonants do not appear to be a feature of the Irish material, although further work on the classical stone corpus is needed to confirm this. Finally, the *hÚath* character is not visible in the classical Irish stone corpus but is found from the late eighth and ninth century, where it can be transliterated as *h*.

The excavated evidence from Pool and Birsay in Orkney make it clear that one cannot simply extrapolate from the Irish material to assume that these features of the Knowth oghams must indicate a late

date. The Pool stone, from a secondary context dated to the late fifth or early sixth century, shows a stem-line; while Birsay has produced an *Úath* character from before the seventh century. It is, therefore, impossible to make categoric statements as to the likely date of the carving of the Knowth oghams. Having said which, the close parallels with the Scottish oghams might perhaps favour a later rather than an earlier date for the Knowth inscriptions, when connections between Ireland and Scotland, especially northern Scotland, are much better documented in our surviving sources.

Perhaps the greatest importance of the Knowth inscriptions lies in their incomprehensible status. On similar stones from Scotland, incomprehension has always been understood as being a consequence of inscriptions that represent an otherwise largely unknown Pictish language.⁹⁶ This claim has been disputed in more recent years, with attention being drawn to those features of Pictish that show parallels with British Celtic.⁹⁷ The existence of inscriptions from Knowth, carved in similar style to the Scottish stones and equally incomprehensible, throws up the possibility that it is our transcription systems that are at fault rather than the original carvers. Either we assume that Pictish-speaking Scots crawled up the passageways of Knowth to carve words in their own language, or we must conclude that the carvers were using a transcription system that is different from that used on the classical Irish stones.

The possibility of alternative transcription systems is highlighted by the existence of a text, *In Lebor Ogaim*, in which over 100 different ogham 'alphabets' are listed. These include a wide variety of cryptic oghams in which either the character carries its standard meaning but is misplaced in the sequence, or ogham characters are given new values. Yet a third possibility is the *ogam uird* or 'ogham of order', in which the letters of the name to be written appear in ogham in alphabetic sequence, e.g. BNRA for BRAN. Reference to cryptic devices such as these, as well as to multiple ogham alphabets, are known from at least the Middle Irish period.⁹⁸

References to the use of cryptic oghams are also found in Irish saga. In *Longes Chonail Chuiric*, for example, Conall Corc arrives in Scotland from Ireland with an *ogam fortgithe*, or cryptic ogham, inscription on his shield. This calls on the reader to kill the bearer. Fortunately for Conall Corc, however, he had previously saved the life of the king of Scotland's *fili* 'poet'. This man read the inscription, but in gratitude to Conall Corc gave the king a false account of what the inscription said.⁹⁹ Clearly, the author of this saga envisaged a situation in which knowledge of cryptic ogham alphabets was shared by a small group of elite practitioners on both sides of the Irish Sea.

As yet, no attempt has been made to try and explore the evidence for these cryptic ogham alphabets in any systematic way,¹⁰⁰ but it is possible that analysis of the evidence for these non-standard ogham alphabets may eventually unlock both the mysterious inscriptions of Knowth and their Scottish counterparts.