

Ogam *P

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1. The Position of Pictish Ogam

While Irish ogam (or ogham) is much better known, it is necessary in the reconstruction of ogam *P to delve into the Pictish ogam as well. The position of the Pictish language has traditionally been subject to debate. While Macalister (1940) considers it to be not only non-Celtic, but even non-Indo-European; Jackson (1955: 155) believes that there were two different groups — one in southern Scotland that he considers Indo-European and one in northern Scotland that he sees as the residue language of Bronze Age peoples. Most recent scholars, however, agree with Forsyth (1997) and classify all of Pictish as Brythonic Celtic.

The basic problem of the Picts and Pictish, as detailed in Wainright (1955) and in many sources since, lies in the fact that we have very few inscriptions in the language itself. Moreover, the inscriptions we have are in the form of Pictish ogam, which is frequently problematic (see Forsyth 1996). Indeed, it is the peculiarities of ogam inscriptions in Pictland that convince Jackson that one group of Picts did not speak an Indo-European language at all and that persuade Cox (1999) to interpret the same inscriptions as being Old Norse.

The earliest attested form of this writing system — be it in Irish or Pictish — consisted of strikes across or emanating from the vertical edges of stone monuments in Britain and Ireland beginning in the fifth century. Typically, it was inscribed from bottom to top, leading to the traditional rendition of the signary in table 1.

𐌒 N /n/	𐌑 Q /k ^w /	𐌓 R /r/	𐌔 I /i/
𐌕 S /s/	𐌘 C /k/	𐌚 Z /t ^s /	𐌛 E /e/
𐌗 F /w/	𐌙 T /t/	𐌜 GG /g ^w /	𐌝 U /u/
𐌛 L /l/	𐌚 D /d/	𐌞 G /g/	𐌟 O /o/
𐌞 B /b/	𐌟 H /h/	𐌠 M /m/	𐌡 A /a/

Table 1: The Ogam Alphabetic Signary

The conventional Roman representation is given to the right of the sign with a capital letter, and the broad phonetic values are largely those determined by McManus (1991: 36-39 — with one adjustment, Z, reflecting ongoing research). Broad notation (slashes) is used simply because the phonetic detail is not at issue (nor ought this to be confused with the phonemic representation of any school).

Regardless of the various theories of the origin of ogam and the nature of Pictish ogam inscriptions, several Pictish names stand out in the inscriptions rather clearly, and these names are definitely Brythonic Celtic, related with names in Britain and with cognate names in Gaelic (compare Forsyth 1996, Cummins 1999).

In asserting that Pictish is in fact Brythonic Celtic, we are assuming two developments in the history of the Celtic languages. First is the disappearance of Indo-European /p/ (once again, in broad phonetic notation), as in Old Irish *athir* ‘father’ corresponding to Latin *pater*. This proceeded through stages first with the change from /p/, possibly through /φ/, to /h/ or /χ/, and then finally to null (McCone 1996: 44; Lewis and Pedersen 1973: 27). Second is the development within this newly defined Celtic group of a new /p/ from /k^w/, as seen in such correspondences as Middle Welsh *pym* ‘five’ and Old Irish *cóic* (compare Latin *quinque*). Among the Insular Celtic languages, this latter change defines the Brythonic (including Pictish) languages and serves to distinguish them from the more conservative Goidelic of Irish.

As in all instances of linguistic diversification, we must recognize that there was a great deal of dialect diversity among the Celtic languages throughout the entire region of Western Europe and in Britain and Ireland themselves. Evidence of original /p/ in place names in some dialects identified as Celtiberian (Rankin 1987: 24) and a mixture of /k^w/ and derived /p/ on the Coligny Calendar and throughout Gaul and Spain (see Rankin 1987: 14, 23) indicate that the dialect situation was quite fluid.

Perhaps the most obvious aspect of the ogam signary in table 1 is its rather transparent source of origin — some sort of tally system (compare, for example,

Gerschel 1962, McManus 1991:14-15).

2. The Phonetic Basis of the Ogam Signary

One of the most strongly held tenets in the study of ogam is that the various columns were arranged in accordance with phonetic principles (see McManus 1991: chapter 3; Ziegler 1994:15; among many). Of course, these principles would not necessarily have adhered to our current view of phonetics; but they would have proceeded within the system along rational, impressionistic, sound-related parameters.

The motivation for ogam's appearance on stone monuments has been seen as an imitation of Roman grave markers (Swift 1997: 46-47). Although once somewhat strongly held, the idea of a direct influence by such Roman grammarians as Donatus on the phonetic array of the system now appears doubtful both from the array itself (McManus 1991: 28) and from considerations of dating (Stevenson 1990: 165). We must also bear in mind that while our earliest physical evidence of ogam is found on these stone monuments, the signs had already been incised for some undetermined length of time on wood, which has long since decayed.

With the ordering of the ogam signary in conjunction with the tally system, it should be rather clear that the phonetic value of each sign would already have been

in use as a mnemonic device for identifying the value. That is, a reference to † would have been made by using a word beginning with A /a/, and a reference to † by using a word beginning with M /m/, and so forth. In fact, there are sets of words and kennings that were used in just this manner. Such sets would have been quite necessary for those changing the tally system into an alphabetic signary, so that others could readily understand which sound was being signaled. For example, one of the later kenning systems in *Auraicept na n-Éces: The Scholars' Primer* involved color, as follows:

Group B, i.e., *bán* white, *liath* grey, *flann* red, *sodath* fine-coloured, *necht* clear.

Group H, i.e. *huath* terrible, *dub* black, *temen* dark grey, *cron* brown, *quiar* mouse-coloured.

Group M, i.e., *mbracht* variegated, *gorm* blue, *nglas* green, *sorcha* bright, *ruadh* red.

Group A. *alad* piebald, *odhar* dun, *usgdha* resinous, *erc* red, *irfind* very white. (Calder 1917: 291)

While it is generally assumed that the ogam system of writing developed in Ireland, no stone inscription there contains the sign † or H (nor Z — Macalister 1945: v; and some contend that GG occurs too infrequently for precise phonetic determination — Gippert 1990: 291). The word usually associated with the sign H is the Old Irish *hÚath* ‘hawthorn’ in which the initial /h/ had already been reduced to

null. In all such cases as that of the mnemonic word, the reflex of /h/ would have been a silent grammatical entity and would not have been represented in the writing. Certainly as regards this sign, the phonetic value associated with the tally mark necessarily predates Irish.

3. The Reconstruction of Ogam *P

One word associated as a kenning with ᚠ H is Old Irish *úath* ‘fear, horror’ (compare also Merony 1949: 28) corresponding to Latin *pavēre* ‘to be terrified’, a point made by Peter Schrijver and reported by McManus (1991: 37). McManus, however, dismisses the speculation that H might have been derived from /p/, as that would have represented a linguistic situation much too early for the monumental inscriptions. On the other hand, the monumental stone inscriptions followed a tradition of unknown duration in which the ogam inscriptions were, once again, carved on now-perished wood.

That ᚠ originally represented the sound /p/ is precisely what is argued here both from the internal structure of the ogam signary itself and from comparative evidence of Irish and Pictish (see also Griffen 2002).

*3.1 Internal Evidence for *P.* Let us begin with an examination of the sounds in the

ogam signary's array. Starting with the vowels, we note that the base value of the fourth column is A. The next two signs proceed quite rationally up in the back of the oral cavity from O to U. We then change to the front of the oral cavity and proceed in precisely the same manner from E to I. The idea that the first two values "above" the base value progressed in one manner and that the next two progressed in another, but related manner is by no means new, having been pointed out, for example, by Carney (1975: 54-61). As shown in table 2, the A represents an extreme and unique position of articulation and the only point at which we may enter the vocalic triangle in the oral cavity in such a way as to effect the pattern in which two values follow two values.

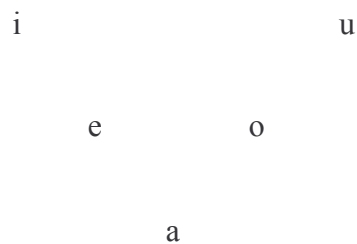


Table 2: The Vocalic Triangle

The consonantal base values in the first and third columns are B and M,

respectively, both produced at the labial position of articulation. Parallel with the A in the vocalic column, these signs thus provide an articulatory base position that may be considered as a logical entry point to the oral cavity. This is one reason for reconstructing the value of † as *P — now all of the base values are phonetically consistent in a means that could have occurred to intelligent people at the time, as they represent impressionistically identifiable positions.

Proceeding up the columns, we find that the *P is indeed a valid fit. Apparently, the consonants were grouped by a perception of “hardness” and “complexity.” The B column starts with the softest, most liquid pair and ends with somewhat harder continuants (with each pair marked or “complicated” by a retraction of the tongue for the second member — a further movement away from the labial base position). The M column starts where the B column leaves off, with the nasal continuant relating to the voiced stop by complexity, which is made more complex in the continuant off-glide; and likewise, the single affricate is complicated in the continuant trill. The *P column also starts where the B column leaves off — with a voiced stop which is hardened to the homorganic voiceless stop. Within the column itself, the same pattern continues with a voiced stop hardened to its homorganic voiceless counterpart; and the next voiceless stop is complicated with the off-glide.

At this point, the soft labial B introduces the soft column, the hard labial *P

introduces the hard column, and the complex labial M introduces the complex column, just as the base vowel A introduces the vowel column. This reconstructed *P thus fits the phonetic valuation of the system in a precise and highly consistent pattern; the H or null value, on the other hand, clearly does not fit at all. Indeed, *P provides a consistent base value for its column, as it serves as a basis for the progression up the column — in modern terminology, it shares “distinctive features” both within its “order” and within its “series,” lending much support to the systematic arrangement of the signary itself.

3.2 Comparative Evidence. Not only is the signary better served with the *P than with the H, but the reconstruction of *P fits into comparative evidence from Pictish itself. We must recall though, that the dialect situation among the Celts was not subject to clear geographical divisions reflecting a limited set of variations. Rather, it was a hodgepodge of diversity, in which one dialect might be more conservative than its neighbor in one respect and more innovative in another.

As noted in section 1, Pictish names appear to be Brythonic Celtic, and one of the names that stands out very clearly in Pictish ogam and that is corroborated by the king lists (compare Anderson 1973) is traditionally rendered as NEHT- or NEHHT-, the designation for *Nechtán* (variously spelled). Here the traditional ogam sign † (or

doubled) — H (or doubled) — was definitely used and represented a spirant /χ/ related with the aspirate /h/ both in sound and evidently in the perception of the speakers.

As it were, NEHT- is cognate with the root NET- ‘grandson, nephew, descendant’ found in Irish ogam inscriptions. Of course, both terms call to mind Latin *nepos* ‘grandson, nephew’ with its root *nepot-* (compare McManus 1991:100). Indeed, this was also used by Latinized Celts as a name — compare Cornelius Nepos of Cisalpine Gaul (Rankin 1987: 106). (The name may possibly be related with NETTAS in Gaulish — Evans 1967: 369-70.)

In these three forms, then, we see the historical progression noted in section 1 above, in which Indo-European /p/ (as in Latin) changed first to a spirant that could ultimately be realized as /h/ or /χ/ (as in Pictish) and then to null (as in Irish). The realization of /χ/ in Pictish is quite in accord with more general changes from the Indo-European /p/ before /t/ (compare Lewis and Pedersen 1973: 27); and indeed, where the /t/ followed directly, the /χ/ was retained even in Irish, as in *nechta* ‘granddaughter’ (compare Latin *neptis*). In keeping with the diverse nature of Celtic dialects, Pictish had long retained the reflex spirant but had already changed the /k^w/ to /p/, there being no longer any competing sound.

Insofar as the rendering of the ogam signary is concerned then, Pictish H would

indeed be historically appropriate for the reconstructed *P. The Irish \dagger had lost its pronunciation and the sound /χ/ was represented in appropriate environments as \ddagger or C (or doubled), as we find, for example, in the name CARRTTACC *Carthach* (McManus 1991: 124). On the other hand, Pictish \dagger still represented /h/ or /χ/.

Thus, the comparative evidence verifies the status of H as a reflex of *P in the Pictish ogam signary. In keeping with the structural evidence above, this also requires *P to be in the original alphabetic signary from which the Pictish and the Irish signaries were derived.

4. Conclusion: The Issue of Dating

Both by internal and by comparative methods, then, we can reconstruct *P /p/ for the original ogam signary, as in table 3.

\ddagger N /n/	\ddagger Q /k ^w /	\ddagger R /r/	\ddagger I /i/
\ddagger S /s/	\ddagger C /k/	\ddagger Z /t ^s /	\ddagger E /e/
\ddagger F /w/	\ddagger T /t/	\ddagger GG /g ^w /	\ddagger U /u/
\ddagger L /l/	\ddagger D /d/	\ddagger G /g/	\ddagger O /o/
\ddagger B /b/	\ddagger P /p/	\ddagger M /m/	\ddagger A /a/

Table 3: The Revised Ogam Alphabetic Signary

Besides the reconstruction itself, the establishment of *P in the original signary

also sheds light upon a traditionally difficult issue in Celtic linguistics. Due to the scarcity of writing, precise or even broad dating for sound changes in Celtic has eluded researchers. Indeed, Celtic linguists have generally relied upon “relative chronology” (see especially McCone 1996)

The reconstruction of *P, however, does provide us with a *terminus ante quem*. First of all, as noted above, original Indo-European /p/ changed through /χ/ to null, yielding such correspondences as the Latin root *nepot-* ‘nephew, grandson’ to the Pictish ogam NEHT- and to the Irish ogam NET-. This had to have been completed before most Celtic dialects changed /k^w/ to /p/, leading to such correspondences as Latin *quinque* ‘five’ and q-Celtic Irish *cóic* to p-Celtic Welsh *pym*. If the loss of Indo-European /p/ had not been completed first, Welsh *pym* would have ultimately been realized as **yn*. Thus, the *P had to have been in place for the original ogam signary — well before the development of the p-Celtic languages.

As it were, the Celtic or Celtic-influenced dialects of Lepontic and Ligurian had already completed the second shift by the beginning of the seventh century BCE at the latest (Lejeune 1971: 68-69, Whatmough 1970: 77-80). Indeed, this evidence could well draw us back into the second millennium (Whatmough 1970: 80).

Such an early date has profound implications for the origin of ogam as a Celtic, or perhaps as a pre-Celtic (pre-Indo-European) writing system as well as for the

history of writing. Certainly the old belief that it was somehow a cipher of Latin or Greek is completely untenable (compare Macalister 1937). Moreover, this dating suggests that ogam may have been an independent development.

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