

TREE LORE IS WISDOM

FROM  TRANSLITERATION  
TO  TREE-LETTERS:  
THE  GAM ALPHABET



*under the auspices of*  
the **Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids**

# Tree Lore Is Wisdom

## *The Mount Haemus Lecture*

Ladies and Gentlemen, the Mount Haemus Lectures have, since they started in 2000 – under the beneficent auspices of the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids and their own gracious individual sponsor – become something of a tradition. A worthy and in many senses valuable tradition. In fact, if it *hadn't* been regarded as worthy and at least in *some* senses valuable, it wouldn't have become a tradition at all. That is what traditions are all about – what a tradition is *for*.

History attempts to record facts, events and decisions relating to specific times. Tradition represents the way in which people want to remember those facts, events and decisions afterwards – not simply repeating them, but finding ways to add meaning to them, to commemorate them in action or in thought, and to make them influential in their own lives. Tradition can therefore be

- cultural and/or religious,
- national and/or group-oriented,
- gregariously inclusive and/or intensely personal.

Traditions tend also to be enlarged on as time passes. People add elements that are specially meaningful to them or that they associate particularly with one or another major theme within the existing tradition. A tradition can thus grow – and can grow in several different directions at once. Elaboration can be in verbal, ritual, or a combination of forms; the accretions may be imposed for reasons that may be commemorative, intuitive or simply personal and emotional. This is how variations on a tradition become local to individual regions, communities, villages or even just families. Moreover, the rate of a tradition's enlargement can differ in each region, community, village or family. Some people will preserve the tradition unaltered for many years, holding on to it almost as if it were a religious dogma, whereas others will joyfully elaborate on it and incorporate new elements that they wish to be regarded as of basic importance to it. And elaboration in this way is actually much more the norm than is longterm dogmatic preservation. Traditions seldom stay the same for long, anyway, although the basic elements – the core of a tradition – may nonetheless remain pretty static.

This lecture is about a tradition observed by Druids for centuries. And I am talking about at least twenty centuries – at least two thousand years (even if there was some intervening hiatus in time) – going back therefore to an unrealistically ideal age in which peace-loving ecologically-minded Celtic tribes lived in blissfully harmonious coexistence with equally peace-loving and artistic Roman citizens.<sup>1</sup>

It was a tradition that a few hundred years later<sup>2</sup> would see a certain group of still ecologically-minded but possibly rather less peace-loving Celts for one reason or another tack on to it elements of an alphabet of their own devising in order to spell out terse sentences in Early Irish. A few hundred years later still, that alphabet would take on much of the entire mantle of the tradition. It would by itself correspond to a veritable historical reference source to the original tradition and those elements of it that remained relevant and useful even after millennia at a time when daily life in society had become very different..

The tradition was that of tree lore. Tree lore. A love of and respect for trees – for their natural uses and capabilities, for their strengths and their differences, for their looks and for what they could be said to represent as focuses for the forces of nature or of pagan myth or of superstition. Not all Druids are tree-huggers, just as not all tree-huggers are Druids . . . but Druids since Roman times have been known to regard groves – glades within forests, areas shaded by trees, circles of trees around a focal spot (especially a standing stone) – as potentially holy places in which the mysteries of practical Druidism may be reverently taught and learned with personal privacy, as places where gods and ancestors may be approached, may be seen and heard, may even be asked for advice and guidance. It is possible (some might say more than probable, and others might say it goes *without* saying), after all, that the word *druid* itself has an etymological connection with the ancient Greek and common Celtic words for the 'oak tree', and with the English words *tree* and *true* too.

But even as I am stating that, I must at once make something else clear. The *main* subject of this lecture is the tradition that is the tree lore of the Druids. It is a tradition that stems from well before the time any Celts reached Ireland, before the time an alphabet was devised in order to have a form of script to record Early Irish sentences, and before trees were associated with every letter of that alphabet, although I believe the original tradition nonetheless to have been influential all the way along that lengthy timeline. That alphabet, however, currently represents what is perceived as the predominant aspect of that tradition – because the tradition has evolved over time and as it travelled with the different Celtic tribes from central to western Europe (from one region to another, where different trees and other plants grew), the lore associated with the alphabet inevitably became most closely appropriate to *our* history and *our* geographical location.

Having described what this lecture concentrates on, I must also say what it does *not* concentrate so deeply on. Above all, since I have started giving incidental reference to the history and derivations of words, it is *not* intended to be a dry academic linguistic study of etymology and historical phonetics. We *will* be looking at the alphabet from various perspectives – and there *will* be some necessary expression of etymological derivations and phonetic pronunciations. But these are generally matters not just of academic scholarship but often also of academic hypothesis and occasionally academic dispute, and one thing I really do not want to do is waste your time arguing for one point of view or another when to me (and I hope perhaps to you too) the wider issue is more important.

Finally before I really get down to the matter, I want to emphasise that this lecture, as its title suggests, is at least as much about trees as it is about transliteration, and thus presents a contrast. It is about the *constancy* of tree lore through history as much as about the *inconstancy* of language and orthography as retained and evident in tradition over the centuries.

So let us begin at the beginning. The very beginning. *Tree lore is wisdom.*

In fact, for humans, tree lore *is* the beginning, the most ancient form, of wisdom – a form of wisdom humans inherited from anthropoid ape ancestors who weren't even humans, but who lived in trees and are presumed to have come down from the trees to take up a sort of hunter-gatherer existence in extended family groups. These ape-people possessed an ability to distinguish between trees that had different uses – some as food sources, some for fashioning specific but rudimentary tools from. It was, however, their more humanoid but still non-human descendants (such as the Neanderthals) who went on to discover further uses, such as for culinary fires and crafting weapons and constructing shelters . . . and who then graduated to using mostly stone tools, albeit some with wooden hafts securely attached by means of wood-based kiln-fired pitch.<sup>3</sup>

The Wood Age thus turned into the Stone Age. But wood came first, and although skills were required to make and deal with stone implements, it was skills *and knowledge* – overall *wisdom* – that was required in working with trees and with wood. That knowledge, that wisdom, remained an essential part of human culture, human civilisation, for millennia thereafter. With the result that in many languages of the world, words meaning 'wise', 'wisdom', 'knowing', 'vision', 'idea', 'truth', 'inspired genius' and so on tend to be etymologically related to words in their own languages and in others that mean 'wood' or 'tree'.

Now that is something of a sweeping generalisation, but my point is that the notions of 'wisdom' and 'knowing' and 'wood' and 'tree' are so basic to human thought and expression that there must have been words for humans to think them and express them thousands of years before any semblance of language that might in the far distant future come to be classified as (for instance) Proto-Indo-European or even Proto-Nostratic.<sup>4</sup> At a time when tree lore would indeed likely have been an important part of the wisdom of everyday life for everybody.

Likely – but of course no one (including me) can say for sure.

So my sweeping generalisation on the matter is probably a very sensible way to put it, and I'll repeat it. In many languages of the world, words meaning 'wise', 'wisdom', 'knowing', 'vision', 'idea', 'truth', 'inspired madness' and so on tend to be etymologically related to words in their own languages and in others that mean 'wood' or 'tree'. *There is considerable evidence for it in ancient and modern vocabularies* – notably, and in direct reference incidentally to Proto-Indo-European, in Sanskrit. One of the basic word-elements in Sanskrit meaning 'seeing', 'comprehending' and 'recognising' is *vid-*

(which corresponds in English not only to *wit* but also to *idea* and to *vision*). But *vid-* as a word-element is likewise to be found in the early history of the Sanskrit word that is the equivalent of the English word *wood*. This does not necessarily mean that the English words *wit* and *wood* are cognate – in my view they are at the very least akin, although in fact, current theory has it that the Proto-Indo-European etymons (as generally hypothesised at present) are different – but it does suggest a close etymological relationship at some earlier stage.

#### THE WIND

Sanskrit *vatah* '(the) wind'

Old Irish *féth* 'air'

Latin *ventus* 'wind' English *wind, vent*

Latin *vannus* 'fan', English *fan, winnow*

#### blows ...

English *weather* (originally a windstorm)  
German *Wetter* 'fierce wind'

#### ... blows out ...

Sanskrit *vad-* 'sing out', 'proclaim'  
ancient Gk *aeidein* 'to sing', *oidē* 'song'  
English *ode, -ody* (as in melody, etc.)  
Icelandic *Edda*  
Latin *vates* 'poet', 'oracular soothsayer'  
OBOD *ovate*, Old Irish *faith* 'bard'  
archaic English *wood* 'speaking frenziedly',  
'giving divine utterance'  
thus Woden/Wotan/Odin  
German *wut* 'rage', 'fury'

#### ... blows back and forth ...

English (to) *wind, wend, wander, bend*  
English *withe, withy, bind, band(age)*

#### is transparent but can be seen clearly

Welsh *gwynn(edd), gwen(f)* 'shiningly clear'  
Scottish G *ban, fionn* 'shiningly clean', 'white'  
Latin *candidus* 'shining white', 'spotless'  
English *vanish* ('go clear')  
English *white, wheat* (as flour)

#### Sanskrit *vid-* and *ved-* 'to see clearly', 'to know', 'to recognise', 'to understand'

English *wit, wise, video, vision, view, idea, guide, guise, etc.*

#### English *wood* (not only light in colour but the source of tree lore/wisdom)

Sanskrit *vid-* 'wood', 'tree'

Welsh *gwydd, coed*

Irish *fódh, 'wood', 'tree'*

Irish *feda* 'alphabetical letters', 'vowels'

**Illustration 1:** Etymological connections that go towards supporting the associations between clarity of vision, understanding, interpretation in words ... and wood.

The years rolled by.  
Millennia passed. The

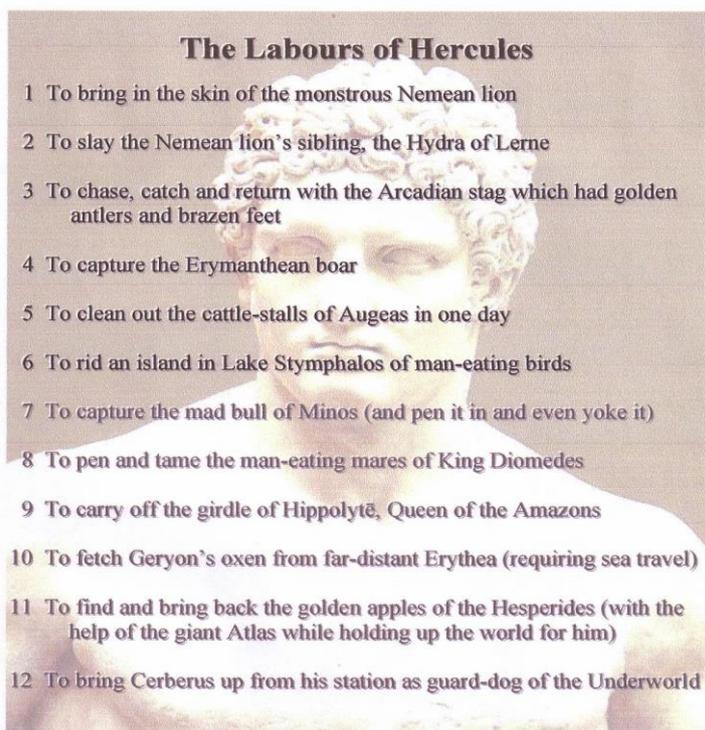
Stone Age was superseded by the Bronze Age and then the Iron Age. And yet tree lore was still of primary importance. Between all the towns and cities of Europe, after all, much of the countryside remained covered in deep, dark forests, and would do for centuries more yet. Meanwhile much of the ordinary appurtenances – the tools and equipment, the fixtures and fittings of daily life – were made of wood, especially furniture and fuel in the household, offensive and defensive weapons of warfare for the military, and the means of transport over land and (particularly) water. But overall, statistically fewer of the population were progressively involved in keeping up to date with tree lore and woodcraft ... which meant that tree lore and woodcraft retained its longstanding association with wisdom but in the eyes of those now less directly concerned began to attract an *additional* mystique, a patina of folk mythology. It was an example of how a tradition begins to enjoy a history of its own quite independent of the possibly very prosaic genuinely historic circumstances from which it stems.

One result was that during the 2nd century AD the Roman author Lucian was surprised to be informed by a Gaulish acquaintance that the equivalent to the Gauls of the Roman folk-hero and semi-deity Hercules (the Greek Herakles) was the god the Gauls called Ogmios.<sup>5</sup> Hercules was, of course, the classic Classical 'strong man', the 'man of the woods' and thus to be considered intimately concerned with tree lore, habitually dressed in a lionskin and wielding an oaken club. He was the 'divine champion' of the Olympian gods (although in fact a fair proportion of the Olympian gods actually joined that pantheon *after* he did, including Zeus himself). The Gaulish Ogmios, on the other hand – while he too dressed in a lionskin, wielded a wooden club, had a bow slung around his neck, and was the 'divine champion' of his own Gaulish pantheon – was the god of eloquence, of fluency and brilliance in speech. So eloquent was Ogmios that his spoken words were like chains of amber and gold<sup>6</sup> that led from his tongue and that attached themselves to the ears of all who listened to him. It was through this sort of metaphorical language that the amused satirist Lucian learned that as far as the Gauls were concerned, the power of persuasive speech (as exemplified by Ogmios) was to them at least equivalent in force to the physical strength of the Graeco-Roman Hercules. Tree lore – wisdom – was becoming associated specifically with communicative skills, with the power of language and passing on knowledge.

And yet ... it is possible that the connection was not quite as surprising as I have suggested.

Hercules is of course most famous for the Twelve Labours he was obliged to carry out for King Eurystheus to atone for the murders he committed in a fit of madness.<sup>7</sup> No ancient Greek writers actually specify the number of his Labours as *twelve*, mind you – the great Homer, for example, lists only one – but for millennia the figure of twelve has been regarded as classic and traditional. What nobody seems to realise today, however, is that the Labours described as undertaken by Hercules – the 'man of the woods' and therefore expert in tree lore, the semi-deity whose own name may or may not

(according to Robert Graves) be etymologically akin to Latin *Querculus* ‘Little oak’, which may also be why he wields an oaken club, but whose name is undoubtedly akin to those of some of the most



**Illustration 2:** The Labours of Hercules, twelve by long-standing tradition.  
Background: *Hercules as a Youth*, Roman, 1st century AD; photo: Ad Meskens

amount of animal ferocity. Definitely a case of bark being superior to bite. Result: one lion down on the job. It was, however, a most peculiar sort of lion – born of the half-woman half-serpent Echidna and half-brother to the chimaera, the sphinx, Cerberus and the hydra of Lerne (the last two of whom also feature in the Labours).

- ***Second Labour: to kill the Nemean lion’s sibling, the hydra of Lerne***

The hydra lived in a swamp near Argos and had nine heads, the middle one of which was immortal. At first Hercules attacked the creature with his club, but each time he struck off one head, two more grew. Eventually, with the assistance of his servant, he burned away all the peripheral heads, caught up the immortal ninth head and buried it under a rock.

The gist of the first part of this story would seem to be that wood makes excellent kindling, and the stronger the wood the better it is to use to make fire. His Finnish birch counterpart Perkele would undoubtedly agree, for birch bark is just about the best kindling there is in any European forest. And after all, fiery heat certainly contributes to *dehydration*. But it is just possible that the notion of cauterizing serious wounds may be intended. At the same time the second part of the story indicates the capacity of a tree’s roots to grow down beside, over and around an object beneath it in the ground, and so render it ineffectual. Now that’s what I call a root meaning.

- ***Third Labour: to capture the Arcadian stag with golden antlers and brazen feet***

It took Hercules a whole year to pursue and catch up with this fabulous animal. Even then he could not simply catch it: he had to wound it with a dart to slow it down enough for him to get close enough to hold it and pick it up to take home alive on his shoulders.

The point of this story is not so much that wood constituted the major component in darts and arrows as that it was from wood that most means of transport were made: carts, litters, travois – and chariots – all of which made it possible to travel with luggage at a much greater speed than ordinarily on foot. In fact, that the stag had golden antlers and brazen feet probably means it was actually a chariot of state, a ruler’s ceremonial chariot made of hard wood and decorated in gold and brass. Truly a hart of oak.

- ***Fourth Labour: to capture the Erymanthean boar***<sup>8</sup>

This was another animal Hercules found difficulty in catching. However, he then chased it into an area of deep snow and successfully wore the boar out, finally trapping it within a net.

powerful deities of the birch-forested northern lands, including Horogalles of the Arctic Saami people and Perkele of the Finns – may have been originally intended to depict Hercules as demonstrating the super-qualities of *oak wood*.

I will quickly run through Hercules’s first six Labours, interpreting them in this way to show you what I mean.

- ***First Labour: to bring in the skin of the monstrous Nemean lion***

The lion was terrorising the Valley of Nemea. Hercules found to his dismay that neither his great club nor the darts he hurled at the lion had any effect, and was obliged to close with the huge animal and strangle it with his bare hands.

This story is meant to reflect the awesome brute strength of a tree, sufficient to withstand any

Slats and strips of hard-wood bark can be fashioned into very effective snowshoes that spread one's weight more widely across a soft surface. No such equipment for the poor old boar – that must have made him wild. The 'net' used by Hercules would surely likewise have been a pen of woven withy hurdles in an oaken frame.

- ***Fifth Labour: to clean out the cattle-stalls of Augeas in one day***

King Augeas of Elis kept 3,000 oxen in stalls that had not been mucked out for 30 years. Hercules was given the task of cleaning out the entire byre in one day. To do it, he temporarily diverted the rivers Alpheus and Peneus to run straight through the stalls, which were thus washed clean in a very short time.

You may well think that this story is nothing but a load of, er, *bovine ordure*, but it demonstrates the power of wood – in the form of hard-wood trunks and branches – to create extremely efficient dams, dykes, weirs and breakwaters. Beavers could tell you all about it, only they're usually too busy.

But the tale has an unpleasant postscript. Given the task by Eurystheus to carry out as part of his penance, Hercules nonetheless demanded a reward from Augeas – one tenth of all the oxen – for performing it successfully. Augeas at first agreed, but then found out that Herakles was under obligation to do it anyway, and refused to allow Hercules to take one single ox. It was a decision that much later was to cost him his life and the life of his sons.

And the meaning behind that is that trees don't forget. Everything they do and feel is recorded in the rings laid down annually by the outer tissues. (Indeed, by the beginning of the twenty-first century the science of dendro-chronology may be said to have become a valued method of archaeological research.) Be especially nice to trees from now on: in time they may be able even to spell your name.

- ***Sixth Labour: to expel the man-eating birds from an island on the lake near Stymphalos***<sup>9</sup>

The birds had claws and beaks of bronze, they used their own feathers as arrows, and they ate human flesh. (For some reason, people like to tell me that this description reminds them of certain schoolteachers, home-security salespeople or parents-in-law that they have known. I don't understand the comparison, myself.) Hercules startled them all into flight with a deafening rattle partly made of bronze, whereupon he shot them down with arrows.

Yet again the fact that wood constituted the major component in darts and arrows is secondary. This time the real meaning is surely the noise-making propensity of hollow tree-trunks, rattles, castanets, drums and other percussion instruments, especially with metal strikers, and especially in combination with an acoustic sound-chamber. Perhaps there is also the suggestion of the ear-splitting roar of Perkele's lightning-bolt shattering a tree from tip to ground. Few other forms of really loud noise were commonly to be heard in those early days of Hercules, after all.

Some sources claim that the rattle was made entirely of bronze, although all sources say it was presented by Athena to Hercules – and Athena is closely associated with the olive tree and the wood of the olive (like that of its relative, the ash) is as particularly dense as the wood of the oak is particularly strong: the woods are especially useful for this purpose in combination.

I think you've probably got the point by now. Or you never will. These stories can all be said potentially to demonstrate the power of oak wood – but also, as stories, to constitute powerful lessons *about* wood in general. Lessons that can be communicated: taught and learned. Information important enough to deserve passing on to posterity. *Information very similar to the type associated with the letter-names allocated to the characters of the ogam alphabet* – as we shall see later. It is the very essence of tree lore.

Furthermore, the association by the Romans of the Graeco-Roman Hercules and the Celtic Gaulish Ogmios is extremely significant to the subject of this lecture – Hercules as a primary example of a well-known figure at the centre of a tradition apparently focusing on tree lore and woodcraft, and Ogmios as a continental European forerunner (if not actually by the end a contemporary) of the very similarly named Irish Ogma. For it was Ogma, 'the son of creative practical knowledge' (Ogma mac Elathan), who was regarded by the Irish as a mythical hero and semi-divine 'strong man' for more than six centuries before being credited – as late as during medieval times in the manuscript work generally known in English as *The Ogham Tract*<sup>10</sup> – with also being the originator of the near-eponymous ogam alphabet. Yet even in *that* attribution he had competition.

We shall be returning to Ogma in that particular connection in due course.

First, though, there was another, very important, property that pertained to both Hercules and the Gaulish Ogmios . . . and that is also relevant – if perhaps less closely – to the initial uses of the ogam alphabet. Both Hercules and Ogmios were *psychopomps*: they conducted the souls of the newly dead to the Place of the Dead (Hades, the Underworld, the Otherworld, Sheol, Annwn, the Afterlife – call it what you will, as long as you don't think of it as Hell).

Hercules	Ogmios
Greek/Roman divine 'champion' strong man, dressed in lionskin, with club and bow – arrow	Gaulish divine 'champion' strong man, dressed in lionskin, with club and bow + arrow
<i>Hēraklēs</i> = 'Glory of Hera'. Hera the goddess of death who was the lifelong curse of Hercules <b>psychopomp</b> in a secondary sort of way (no 'binding' attribute), but thus linked to the three worlds (of the gods, of living humans, of the Dead)	(a) god of death bestower of divine curses <b>psychopomp</b> with eloquence as his 'binding' attribute thus linked to the three worlds (of the gods, of living humans, of the Dead)
<i>Hercules</i> possibly akin to Latin <i>Querculus</i> 'Little oak' the Labours possibly suggestive of qualities of oak wood no suggestion of eloquence	no direct wood/tree connection but eloquence/speaking associated with wisdom/tree lore and as psychopomp linked with notions of the World Tree

**Illustration 3:** The many similarities between Hercules and Ogmios.  
Background: genuine lionskin pelt; photo: Pinterest.

If this doesn't sound much like the Hercules you've long known and admired from a wary distance, it is not too surprising. He is only rarely described in Classical texts as a psychopomp, and then almost entirely by implication alone. Even his Olympian colleague Hermes is slightly more often and slightly more pointedly regarded as fulfilling the task than Hercules – whereas the lugubrious ferry-boatman Charon is much more notorious for it (and in a distinctly mercenary terrestrial fashion he required payment for it). But there *are* a number of myths that detail Hercules's *other* visits

to Tartaros, and of course his Greek name – *Hēraklēs*: 'Glory of Hera' – links him inseparably with the formidable goddess Hera, initially a goddess of death.<sup>11</sup> Ogmios, on the other hand, was *the* psychopomp of the Gaulish pantheon *and* a god of death. He conducted the souls of the dead down to the Underworld – and was able simultaneously to comfort and reassure with his ultra-fluent eloquence the troubled minds of the souls he was escorting. In fact, it was his eloquence that enabled him to do it: the words were part of the job.

For each of the two, being a psychopomp – and so constituting a direct link between the celestial (the world of the gods), the terrestrial (the world of living humans) and the Underworld (the world of the Dead) – contributes in a different way to the main theme of this lecture.

As the embodiment of tree lore, possibly himself representing the spirit or nature of the oak tree, the tree regarded by Greeks and Romans as the 'great' tree of their culture (for Zeus/Jupiter himself was associated with and could be symbolised as an oak), Hercules could be seen also as an equivalent of what is now known as a World Tree – a notional link between the three worlds, often visualised as a massive tree that reached up into the heavens, was based solidly on the ground, but also extended deep below the Earth's surface into the depths where the Dead were thought to live. It is a construct common to many cultures,<sup>12</sup> but known particularly for featuring prominently in Old Norse mythology, in which the World Tree was the extraordinary ash tree<sup>13</sup> that was 'the Fearsome One's Steed' Yggdrasil [*Oog-dra-sil*] and the Fearsome One was Odin.

Conversely, it was as a god of eloquence and communication, of giving people information they wanted to hear and needed to know, *and with specific links to human death*, that Ogmios may have contributed to the founding of some of the traditional mythical elements that came to belong later to the Irish Ogma and by that association to the devising and initial use of the ogam alphabet.

But let's pick up on the World Tree aspect a little more. For perhaps most evidently of all in the Old Norse culture, the World Tree has connotations of eloquence and communication, of learning what it is necessary to know. It is another link between tree lore and wisdom. The Old Norse World Tree also symbolised the possibility of *timelessness* and *permanence* in the face of the ceaseless passing of perceived time by humans and the impermanence of material things as readily visible in everyday human experience. And it symbolised this by being the source of wisdom – ash tree lore – from which

### THE WIND

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blows ...

English *weather* (originally a windstorm)  
 German *Wetter* 'fierce wind'

... blows out ...

Sanskrit *vad-* 'sing out', 'proclaim'  
 ancient Gk *aeidein* 'to sing', *oidē* 'song'  
 English *ode, -ody* (as in melody, etc.)  
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 archaic English *wood* 'speaking frenziedly',  
 'giving divine utterance'

thus Woden/Wotan/Odin  
 German *wut* 'rage', 'fury'

... blows back and forth ...

English (to) *wind, wend, wander, bend*  
 English *with, withy, bind, band(age)*

is transparent but can be seen clearly

Welsh *gwynn(edd), gwen(f)* 'shiningly clear'  
 Scottish G *ban, fionn* 'shiningly clean', 'white'  
 Latin *candidus* 'shining white', 'spotless'  
 English *varnish* ('go clear')  
 English *white, wheat* (as flour)

Sanskrit *vid-* and *ved-* 'to see clearly', 'to know', 'to recognise', 'to understand'  
 English *wit, wise, video, vision, view, idea, guide, guise, etc.*

English *wood* (not only light in colour but the source of tree lore/wisdom)  
 Sanskrit *vid-* 'wood', 'tree'

Welsh *gwydd, coed*  
 Irish *fóda* 'alphabetical letters', 'vowels'

the Fearsome One, the Boss Man, Odin, could 'learn the runes'.

Tree lore, and the learning of the runes, with which Odin (otherwise Wotan or Woden) was linked even through his name.

Learning the runes was a painful process. To do it, Odin had temporarily to become part of the World Tree by transfixing himself with a spear and hanging himself upside down on it. Only by doing so could Odin take onto himself the Tree's knowledge – learn the runes – and become linked not only to the

**Illustration 4:** How Woden/Wotan/Odin is related etymologically to tree lore – which is why he had to 'learn the runes'.

three metaphysical worlds (the heavens that were the abode of the gods, the Earth that was the home of living humans, and the Otherworld that was the Place of the Dead) but linked also to a mode of 'being'

## TREE LORE

Odin (Yggr 'the Fearsome') affixed himself to the World Tree Ygg-drasil and by doing so

linked the three worlds of the gods, of living humans, of the Dead and learned the runes learned how to read and write

which made it possible

- to absorb all of human history that had ever been recorded (to be informed of the past, and in many million times more detail than any oral historian or harp-strumming bard could relay to you).
- to comprehend the current world (to be aware of the present, and in many million times more detail than any oral geographer, naturalist or anthropologist could relay to you), and
- to speak to those yet to be born (and know that in the future you, individually, will have a chance to be heard even if you are no longer physically there yourself).



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**Illustration 5:** The linking of the three worlds, as symbolised by the World Tree, and as implying the power and permanence of the written word.

Image: Yggdrasil, Peter Crawford online blog: *Occult History of the Third Reich*.

- to speak to those yet to be born (and know that in the future you, individually, will have a chance to be heard even if you are no longer physically there yourself).

Tree lore, wisdom, by becoming the way in which knowledge can be shared timelessly by means of reading and writing, had thus freed itself from any need to rely simply on human memory and the oral repetition of facts and stories learned by rote, sometimes through training over many years.

Timelessness is also potential permanence – something inscribed, written down, may be recorded forever – even independently of the language it is written in. The *constancy* of tree lore, wisdom, the ability to read and write, is thus in absolute contrast to the *inconstancy* of the language in which it is read (which is always changing, often very rapidly) and the script in which it is inscribed or written (which changes more slowly but adapts to changes in language and additional cultural influences).

You know, we still even today celebrate the effect of tree lore – the wisdom of plant life as revealed in human arboriculture, agriculture and horticulture – in the words we use in English to describe our literary capabilities. A book is for example made up of *leaves*, and each page – with its text area within which horizontal lines of text run from top to bottom like a wire trellis – commemorates the fact that the word *page* itself is derived from the Latin word for a trellis on which vines (or in Britain more probably runner beans) may be grown. A book is described as that because the original ‘books’ were planed sticks (or tablets) of beech wood . . . and our modern word *book* closely echoes the Anglo-Saxon word for the beech tree. A verse in a poem or in the Bible is so called because it is the equivalent of a horizontal row in a vertical set – like the *transverse furrows* in a ploughed medieval field occupying the customary rectangular 10 acres – furrows where the earth has been inverted and thus lies *inverse*.

But to return to historical times and the Old Norse deity Odin, it is interesting that Odin’s heyday – a time when the Old Norse culture apparently accepted that *wisdom* involved ‘natural’ tree lore associated with the ‘acquired’ ability to read and write – fell pretty well precisely half-way between the time Ogma was initially revered by the Celts who were becoming the Irish, and the time Ogma was hailed as at least partly the inventor of the ogam alphabet (which by then had actually existed, with minor changes every now and then, for virtually all the time in between). [See *Illustration 7.*]

It therefore behooves me to link the tree lore that was associated by the Romans with the Celtic Gauls but was in some way likely to be inherent in their understanding of their own hero-deity Hercules, together with the charismatic eloquence and linguistic ability of the Gaulish Ogmios, *and* the fact that both Hercules and Ogmios were psychopomps, with the later – but not that much later – Irish Ogma. What additionally and in particular I must do is to demonstrate that the tradition evident in Graeco-Roman culture and in Gaulish society continued in some way reasonably seamlessly as the tradition in which Ogma came to prominence, the ogam alphabet was devised, and that same tradition was further enlarged so that the ogam alphabet itself became the focus of tree lore.

So let’s take a look at Ogma.

As the mythical hero of the Irish, Ogma was one of the principal military leaders of the Tuatha Dé [Jay] Danann – people themselves later regarded as semi-divine – and was at one point specifically described as their ‘champion’, using an Irish term that equates literally to ‘strong man’. A bold warrior, then, Ogma took part in both of the two Battles of Magh Tuired (sometimes anglicised to Moytura), the first against the distinctly human Fir Bolg, the second against the at least partly supernatural Fomorians. It is all one with Ogma’s heroic and semi-divine mystique that although he is said to have been slain during the second battle, mythical accounts tell how he, his brother The Dagda and his half-brother Lugh nonetheless *after the battle ended* pursued the Fomorians to recover the harp belonging to The Dagda’s favourite musician.<sup>14</sup>

It is mainly his power as a divine champion and his implied involvement in the devising of the ogam alphabet that make Ogma comparable with the equally Celtic god Ogmios, encountered by the Romans as a Gaulish deity some centuries earlier. You might well think that the names Ogma and Ogmios themselves are fairly indicative of the continuance or perhaps expansion of a single tradition over years, decades and centuries between Roman times and Early Irish times across Celtic-dominated territories (and I hope that what I am about to say may increase the force of that suggestion in the minds of my listeners). But the fact remains that some notable linguistic and mythological historians [such as Rudolf Thurneysen, scholarly Swiss author of the 1909 classic reference work translated into

English as *A Grammar of Old Irish*] have decided that the mythical personages of Ogmios and Ogmios have little or no genuine connection, and that any resemblance is either coincidental or fanciful.

Instead, it has been suggested that the name Ogmios merely reflects an unusual Early Irish word meaning something like ‘inscription’ or ‘scribing with a sharp point’ – and there is some etymological evidence that tends towards upholding this possibility. A characteristic of the ogam alphabet is that it is inscribed along a single line, like a straight furrow . . . and the ancient Greek for a straight line (and a furrow) is *ogmos*. Yet that was partly why it made such perfect sense to the intellectually Greek-speaking Romans for the earlier Gaulish god to be called Ogmios, for Greek *ogmos* ‘a straight line’ is an immediate derivative of the verb *agein* ‘to draw’, ‘to drive’ or ‘to lead’ – and the god Ogmios was depicted as leading people, drawing a line of people on the chains of amber and gold attached by his eloquence to their entranced ears, willingly to the Place of the Dead. Perhaps I should also point out that Ogmios too was a leader, and that the lines he drew or led were those of the forces of the Tuatha Dé Danann at the battles of Magh Tuired.

Ogmios	Ogma
Gaulish <b>divine ‘champion’</b> <b>strong man</b> , dressed in lionskin, with club and bow + arrow <b>charismatic leader</b> (eloquence as essential attribute)	Irish <b>divine ‘champion’</b> <b>strong man</b> , warrior in battledress and fully armed <b>charismatic leader</b> of military warriors into combat
<b>god of death</b> bestower of divine curses <b>psychopomp</b> (eloquence as ‘binding’ attribute,	<b>a hero who died but became divine</b> no particular divine powers <b>not a psychopomp</b> (but alphabet later referred to him perhaps a reflection of <b>supposed</b> <b>verbal fluency</b> , and initial inscriptions in the alphabet specifically <b>three-world oriented</b> )
<b>time-bound relevance to the three worlds)</b>	
<b>face ‘be-sunned’</b> (= smiling brightly? = darkly tanned?)	<b>‘sun-face’</b> (= smiling brightly?)

**Illustration 6:** The many similarities between Ogmios and Ogma.

There is an even better-attested connection between Ogmios and Ogma, however. In the Irish texts, a common epithet used of Ogma’s appearance is ‘sun-face’ (*grianaineach*), which has most often been interpreted as meaning ‘smiling brightly’. Roman commentators on the Gaulish depictions of Ogmios centuries earlier all stated that the face of Ogmios also had something of the sun in it, although different English translators of their comments have offered interpretations varying from ‘smiling brightly’ to ‘sunburnt

over many years to a darkish tan’. But in both cases this curious and otherwise obscure connection with the sun is unaccompanied by any further aspect of solar mythology.

One great difference between Gaulish Ogmios and Irish Ogma, though, is that one of Ogmios’s main duties was to act as psychopomp, and his eloquence was primarily aimed towards executing that duty with care and sympathy. Being a psychopomp thus involved a facility with words but also, in the culture of the time, suggested a connection with divine wisdom linking the three worlds – the world of the gods, the Earth of living humans, and the Place of the Dead – in the manner of the World Tree. The divine wisdom that stemmed from tree lore. Ogma was *not* a psychopomp . . . and, conversely, was initially credited with very little by way of literary associations, although the alphabet that he was much later said to have devised (unless it was someone else called Fenius Farsaidh) *was* nonetheless in use at the time of his greatest mythical fame.

There are two very good reasons for this peculiar discrepancy, both of which reasons together in my view very adequately make up for any effective difference between Ogmios and Ogma, and demonstrate that the tradition bound up in the former continued on but in slightly adapted form as bound up in the latter. Moreover, it is just the kind of adaptation that you might expect from a tradition that is evolving over time and being applied to a people for whom the culture is also evolving.

The reasons are, first, that the Gaulish tribes had very little experience or truck with any form of writing, and the later Irish initially had even less; and, second, that the form of writing that was eventually introduced by the Irish (somewhat halfheartedly referred to Ogham's name centuries later still) was specifically limited to inscriptions concerning the recent dead, or for current generations to keep in mind and pass on to future generations – inscriptions that also echoed the divine wisdom of the psychopomp linking the three worlds, referring to the past, the present and the future with the same formality and significance as Odin's runes were intended to.

The Gaulish tribes in Roman times seem to have steered as clear as they possibly could from writing anything down at all. It wasn't because they didn't know what writing was or what it could be used for. It was just that for generation after generation they had preferred to rely totally on the *oral* transmission of information. Teachers taught by speaking face to face with their pupils, and pupils learned by hearing and repeating and in turn passing on the information to others, using exactly the same words themselves. Naturally, the words were easier to remember if they were couched in a slightly different form from ordinary speech – rhythmically, poetically or even accompanied by some musical instrument, for example – and the best and most successful teachers were those who were trained and able to adopt such a style or practice as would assist in this memorisation. It was this special kind of eloquence, which meant that listeners would hang on every word uttered, that was particularly admired by the Gauls – this kind of eloquence that had the power to make people *want* to listen and follow. This was the eloquence of Ogmios, whose words were thought to keep his hearers in willing chains, bound to him by a force equal in power to the physical strength of Graeco-Roman Hercules.

Julius Caesar himself personally noted<sup>15</sup> that in Druid society very little was actually written down – although when there was a real need for it (perhaps for the purposes of a commercial contract), the Druids were perfectly capable of writing and did so in their own language but using the Greek alphabet in transliteration because at that time they had no alphabet of their own. A century later, the Roman general Paulinus, then in charge of the all-too successful military operations against the Druids in Anglesey and the occupation of what is now southern Cheshire, noted<sup>16</sup> that those Britons he called the Trinovantes and the Iceni [Ee-kay-nee] had progressed to using the (Latin) roman alphabet when writing, but still had no alphabet of their own.

Wisdom might be tree lore, and might be attained by being able to read and write (which relieved a pupil from the potentially strenuous mental effort required in memorising what could otherwise simply be looked up in a reference work), but information properly memorised is available as long as one's memory lasts, which may be a lifetime – and is thus available more quickly than information that has to be looked up. Most of us remember our times-tables from learning them by rote at primary school. Few of us remember so well the dates of kings and queens and battles that we spent many hours revising from history books for tests at secondary school.

But there came a time, some three centuries after Paulinus finally defeated Boudicca and the Iceni [Ee-kay-nee], when even the Celtic people who at that time had migrated through Britain to Ireland felt the need to be able to define the passing of history by making positive and deliberate use of an inscribed record in an alphabet that had in fact been created for the purpose probably as early as in the 1st century AD,<sup>17</sup> but that been kept very private.

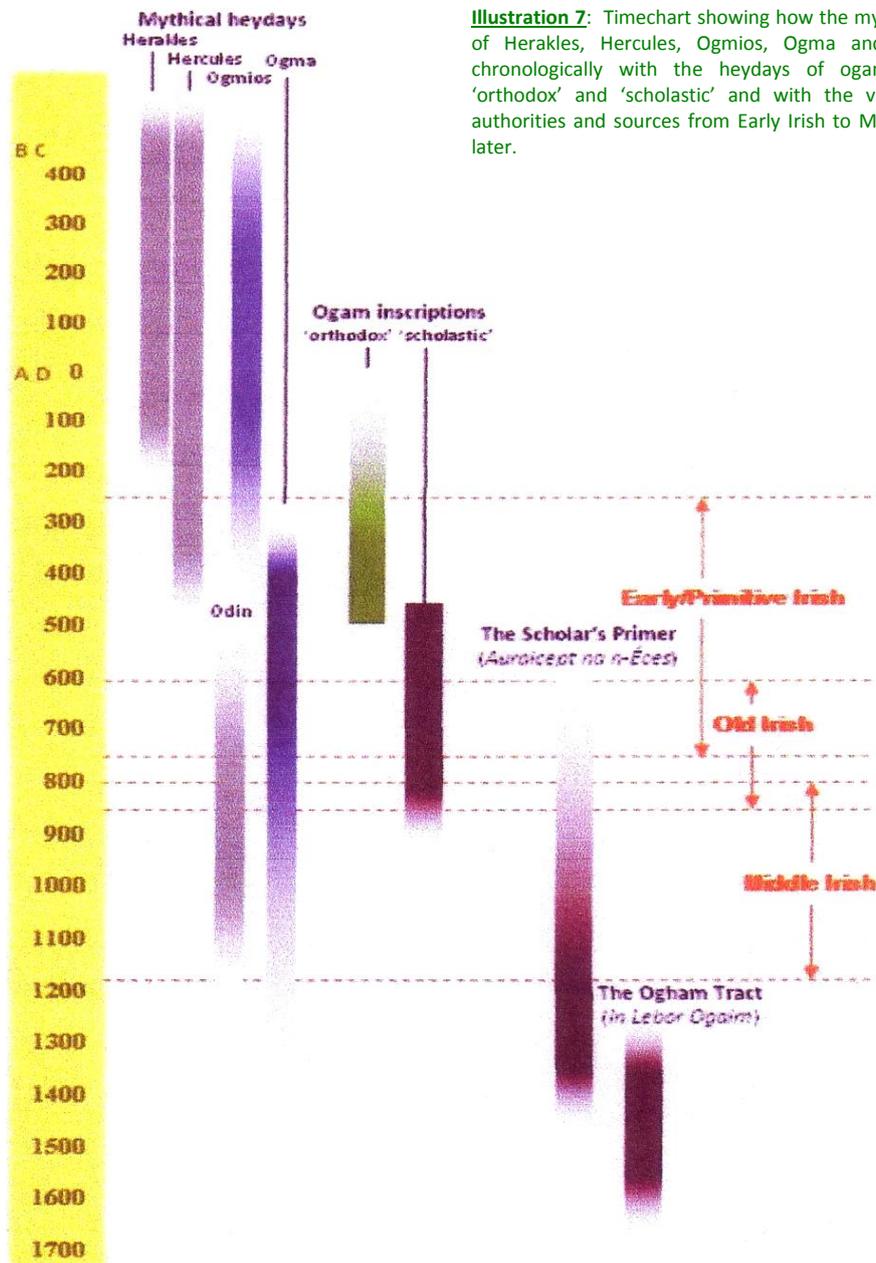
The perceived need to make more public use of it was at least in part a reaction against the considerable and increasing cultural encroachment of the social lifestyle encouraged by the rapid advance in Ireland of the Catholic Church – for which reading and writing in Latin was a standard asset that had additional connotations of intellectual, moral and spiritual status. Not that there was in general any spirit of competition, at least at the beginning. Latin was the language of learning for Church purposes, and oral teaching in Irish remained the medium for learning and passing on everyday secular information, including the traditional myths, stories, histories, genealogies and poetry. The evidence for this careful separation between the two overlapping cultures – the Roman Catholic Church with its reliance on the Latin language in spoken and in written form, the Irish-speakers otherwise retaining their oral-only traditions as much as possible – ironically comes almost entirely from communities of Irish extraction living in and around Britain as semi-Christianised expatriates.

But by the middle of the 5th century AD and looking ahead, Latin as spoken and written in Britain and Ireland was already a dying language. It was not changing with the times, as indeed even Irish was. Much of what had been the secular and violent Roman Empire moreover was pretty well also gone, and

there were other foreigners that looked ready, able and willing to step into the scene, some of them using other alphabets that they might wish to foist upon the Irish more forcefully than the Romans and the Catholic Church had. These in particular included Germanic types from what is now Scandinavia and Germany, already seeking to gain political and territorial influence in southern and eastern parts of mainland Britain.

I'd like to believe, however, that there was a much more pressing local circumstance that required a drastic cultural change involving the more public introduction of an independent alphabet. Irish communities were now much larger than previously, yet more scattered than previously. They tended to live in extended family groups, but there were lots of different families within any particular area. Accordingly, there was a greatly increased need for signposts of all kinds – particularly denoting the ownership of property and territory, and marking family graves. Such signposts could not be put up in Latin (which would suggest the involvement of the Church and its hierarchy) – and as far as transliterating Irish into the roman alphabet, there were now many words *and especially names* in Irish that were not so easy to represent accurately using the Latin letters and the sounds at that time allocated to them.<sup>18</sup>

## Ogam timeline



**Illustration 7:** Timechart showing how the mythical heydays of Herakles, Hercules, Ogmios, Ogmia and Odin fit in chronologically with the heydays of ogam inscriptions 'orthodox' and 'scholastic' and with the various written authorities and sources from Early Irish to Middle Irish and later.

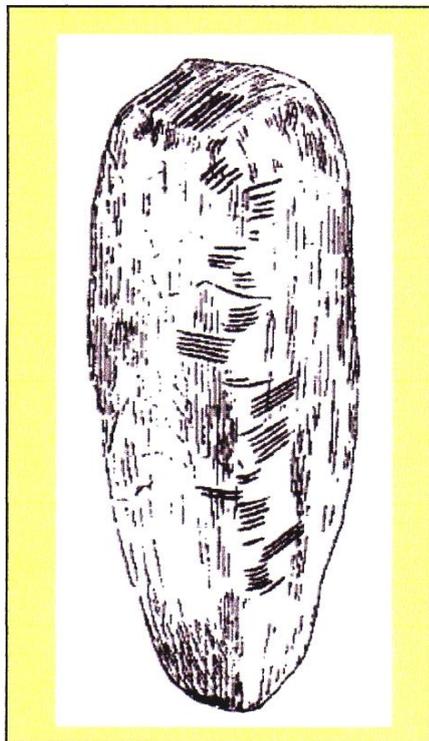
Above all, territorial boundaries and personal names for commemoration by future generations were the specific province of tree lore, of the wisdom founded on the link between the three worlds – the worlds of the gods, of living humans, and of the Dead, representing the past, the present and the future – as symbolised by the World Tree, and as might have been retained in residual pan-Celtic folk memory as having in former times (in fact undoubtedly less than 300 years earlier) been the concern of the Gaulish psychopomp Ogmios.

Now to use an alphabet that would resolve this crisis would in fact correspond to adapting a tradition that already existed. For the Irish it would emphasise the continuance in a more useful form of the outward expression of tree lore while reaffirming their own Irishness in an increasingly Latinate environment. It should nonetheless remain an alphabet used *only* for the proposed restricted purposes within the adapted tradition. Ogam would thus – at least for the time being – not be intended for ‘literary’ use, not for any casual or leisure purpose, and certainly not for entertainment: only for public and commemorative inscriptions. Tradition would be upheld, even if adapted.

Of the around 380 examples of ‘orthodox’ ogam inscriptions in Early or Primitive Irish (330 of them in Ireland) that have been collected and dated to between the fourth and the sixth centuries AD – that is, before the ‘scholastic’ ogam inscriptions in Old Irish on vellum or parchment which date from between the sixth and the ninth centuries – *all* of them are incised in solid stone monuments, and by far the most of them consist largely of personal names and family connections, either as a headstone to a grave, as a memorial to a local hero, or as a boundary marker displaying property ownership. It is certain that many more such inscriptions were incised on wooden markers and monuments that have not survived the test of time and weather.

## Ogam inscription

in ‘orthodox’ ogam on what once was a 5th-century standing stone on the Isle of Man



**The inscription reads:**

**BIFAIDONAS MAQI MUCOI  
CUNAFAL[LI ... ]**

**‘Bivaidu, son of the tribe of  
the Cunava(l)s ...’,**

**and the stone represents either  
a commemorative monument to  
a tribal hero or his headstone.**

**The stone was unearthed  
during an excavation in the late  
summer of 2006 by members of  
the Channel 4 archaeological  
*Time Team* programme at  
Ballaqueeny, in the far south  
of the Isle of Man.**

**The ancient Irish tribal name  
Cunava(l) [*con* ‘hound’/‘wolf’ +  
*g(h)al* ‘valour’] has since become  
the well-known Irish and Scottish  
surname Connell(y) and the Manx  
surname Cannell.**

**Illustration 8:** A classic example of an incised ogam stone. Illustration 12 presents a picture of the same stone, but also shows how the ogam inscription may be deciphered letter by letter.

Line drawing from Wikipedia Commons. Inscribed name ‘Bivaidu’ (not ‘Bivaidonas’) from Channel 4 website and others.

From the fourth to the sixth century AD, then, the Irish retained the tradition associated with the ogam alphabet, but culturally they couldn’t help but find themselves increasingly integrating the use of Latin (especially, again, in their expatriate communities in Britain, particularly in Wales). During the early years this integration took the form of incorporating single Latin words within their ogam inscriptions

on stone, and after the sixth century and into medieval times it took the form of Latin phrases and even whole sentences while the material they were writing the inscriptions on was parchment.

So, for example, in the approximately 40 ogam inscriptions found in Wales that date from between the fourth and sixth centuries, many of the personal names in earlier instances are themselves Latinised or distinctly of Latin origin, whereas in instances dating from towards the end of that period a high proportion of the entire inscription is actually in Latin. Wales is the original location of the only ogam inscription that names an individual who can be historically identified – Vortepor, ruler or ‘protector’ of Dyfed in the early sixth century (better known in Welsh as Gwrthefyr) the ‘tyrant of the Demetians’ denounced by the monastic scribe (later Saint) Gildas in his *De Excidio Britanniae*.<sup>19</sup> And furthermore, Wales is the location of (to date) the only ogam inscription known to commemorate a woman.<sup>20</sup>

It was in any case quite a number of centuries before the practice of carving ogam inscriptions on stone was discarded in favour of writing ogam in manuscript on vellum, although by that time writing on vellum (and even incorporating illustrations) was very well established as the standard way for Catholic monks to reproduce authoritative and supposedly permanent texts not only on ecclesiastical subjects but concerning history, geography, nature, agriculture and anthropology – all subjects that had in Ireland been formerly taught and learned only orally. And of course, over that time the Irish language had also changed markedly.

What did the ogam alphabet consist of? What did it look like? Most of you probably know that pretty well already, so I am going to look briefly at the basic facts and concentrate more on my own comments.

## The original 20 Irish Gaelic alphabetical symbols

non-phonetic presentation

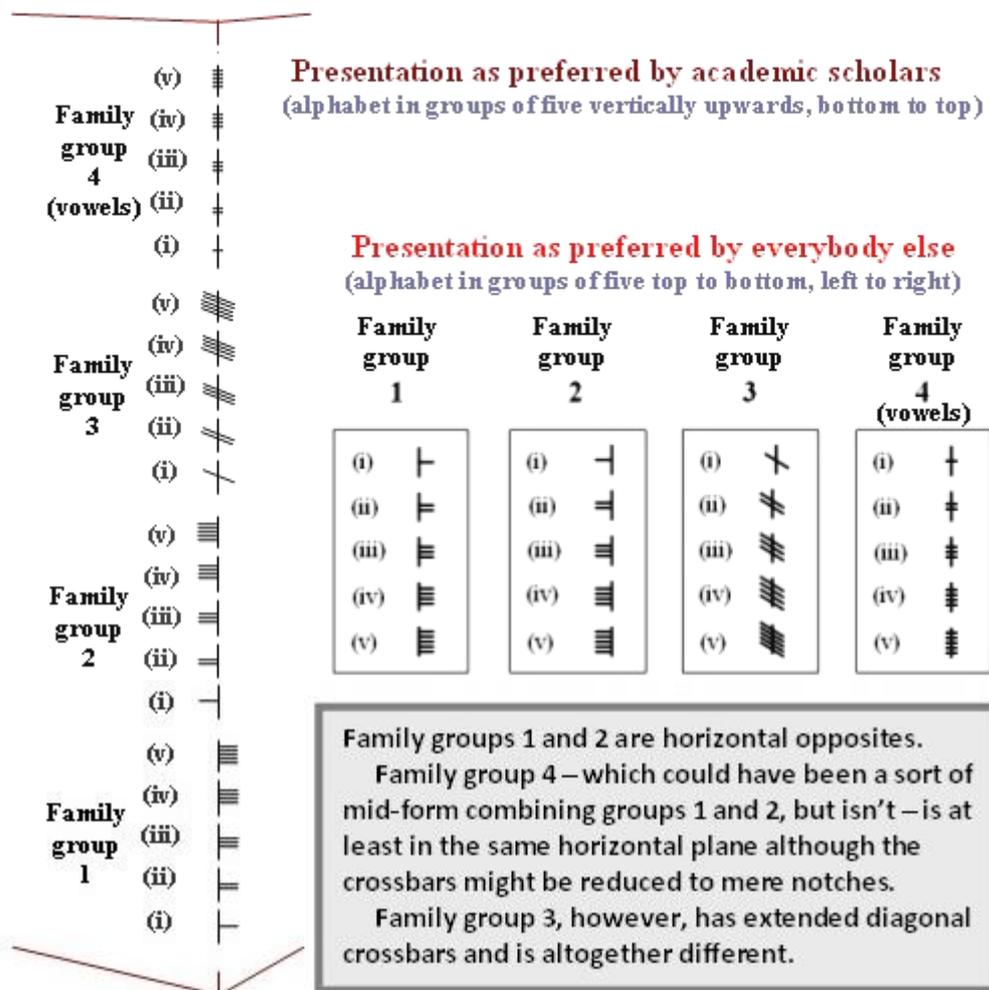


Illustration 9: Two contrasting presentations of the ogam symbols – the academic (left) and the intuitively obvious (above).

Let's start with the symbols used to represent the 20 sounds judged by speakers of the language at the time to be sufficient for full phonetic reproduction of Early Irish. Looking at the symbols by themselves, without any consideration whatever of accompanying sounds, there is very evidently some mathematical logic in their arrangement. The symbols are arranged in groups of five, all of them centred on a single vertical line (or edge), and within each group there is a progression of from one to five crossbars (even if in one group the crossbars may be reduced to mere notches, and in another the crossbars are extended to left *and* to right). The mathematical logic in it is conspicuously visible, does not imply any form of arithmetical or computational function, and plainly adds a beneficial sense of visual orderliness that is virtually unique to an alphabet used over several centuries.

Moreover, the grouping in fives assists in memorisation (which was of course the main method of learning in Early Irish culture), especially when one of the groups was designated to accommodate all the ordinary vowels. Apart from any other mnemonic method, such memorisation of the 20-symbol alphabet in five internally sequential groups can be referred to the fingers of the hands and the toes of the feet.

Two out of four groups (specifically the first and the second) are visually horizontal opposites. And a third – presented as the fourth – may at a very early stage once actually have combined them before being reduced in the dimension of width. If this latter was ever the case, it would suggest an original set of symbols totalling only *three* groups of five, implying *either* a smaller overall range of phonemic sounds in the language to be represented *or* that the vowels might formerly have been deemed not to require representation at all (as in early Hebrew script).<sup>21</sup> In that case, in turn, what is now represented as the third Family group comprises a set of five symbols added as an extra.

The symbols of the group presented as the current third group are certainly different, in particular featuring crossbars that are diagonal and extended to a length longer than in the other groups. It would, however, have been impossible to construct *that* third group *without* visibly changing the format yet still retaining an ability to distinguish between symbols along a continuous 'line' that was in fact no more than the squared-off edge of a stone. Furthermore, the format of symbol introduced for that group created a model for yet another additional group (in which the diagonal crossbars could have been represented in the opposite diagonal direction) should additional phonemic sounds require accommodation within an enlarged alphabet in the future.

In the event (as you know), more sounds *were* deemed to require symbols and more symbols *were* added – another complete group of five overall – but at different times and involving changing pronunciations (which was happening over the centuries also to a few letters even within the original 20). So there was no real orthographic alphabetical organisation in these 'extras' (despite the fact that by then the alphabetical letters themselves could be described as *fedá* 'letters' – a word that is a direct derivative of *fíodh* 'tree' – and these were simply *for-fedá* 'further letters', the derivation proving yet again the strength of the tradition relating the alphabet to trees and wood).

So how were the phonemic sounds used in speaking the Early Irish language allocated across the 20 symbols devised for them? If there was a visibly logical orderliness in the grouping of the symbols, was there any form of logical orderliness in the allocation of the sounds to the symbols, either individually or in groups?

The answer is: apart from the separation of the vowels into a group of their own, not evidently. And even within the group of five vowels, except that three back vowels (in no discernible order) come before two front vowels (in no discernible order), there is no logical sequence there either.

Now my personal experience when I have said this in the past is that I know I will all too immediately have a set of vociferous Irish linguistic scholars on my back, insisting wrathfully that 'the order of the letters in the ogam alphabet is fixed and has always been'.<sup>22</sup> But that is not only untrue, it is irrelevant. It is untrue since it could only have been *after* the allocation of the phonemes to the symbols *and after they were then taught in that order* that the order became fixed. It is irrelevant because it doesn't answer the question *why* the consonants were allocated in that order in their groups or *why* the vowels were allocated in that order in their separate group, even if they all became fixed in their places afterwards.

It is the logic inherent in the orderliness of the arrangement of the symbols and their grouping in progressively sequential fives that would have facilitated the memorising of the letter-names as allocated. Once the symbols had each been named *and learned by name* – then, and only then – they were indeed ‘fixed’ in the order the symbols appeared in the alphabet.

And yet . . . And yet I may not actually be being 100-per-cent accurate myself. There might in fact just be some logic in the positioning of a few of the letters because of their initial phonemes – but only with reference to other alphabets. For instance, the first consonant in the alphabet is the equivalent of our letter B, which is also the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet. I’m sure you’ll recall that the Hebrew alphabet was linked by *The Ogam Tract* with the devising of the ogam alphabet by Ogma’s opposite number, Fenius Farsaidh,<sup>23</sup> whose first name *Fenius* may or may not mean ‘the Phoenician’. It was the Phoenicians whose alphabet is in genuinely historical fact believed to be partly or wholly a predecessor of the Hebrew, Greek and Latin alphabets. Moreover, B would be the first letter of our own alphabet in English if all the vowels were relegated to a group after all the other letters. And in our own alphabet, A is the first vowel.

Merely as an interesting comparison, I might also point out that our own alphabet, the ABC, is often regarded as having a fixed order – but it is an order in which there would seem now to be no comprehensible logic involved. We don’t even lump the vowels all together at the end. On the other hand, there are many other European languages in which the alphabets used are nominally the same as ours but that actually contain more or fewer letters, and in some of them (such as the Scandinavian tongues) there *are* ‘extra’ vowels in the alphabet as learned in schools, and those vowels *are* lumped together at the end.

So what were the letter-names allocated to the symbols, and did the names they were given help to memorise them in their newly fixed order?

The ogam letter-names were certainly unlike our modern English names for the alphabetical letters. They were not merely the required phoneme plus a vowel sound as prefix or suffix and otherwise meaningless, unless incidental homophones of existing words. The ogam letter-names were actual words, each beginning with the required phoneme, each fairly terse (one or two short syllables), and mostly words in common usage.

Many Irish linguistic scholars regard this as a defining characteristic of ogam – one that particularly differentiates the alphabet from (for instance) the large number of modern alphabets which do not use words as letter-names. The scholars tend to forget that especially since the advent of radio messaging, alphabets using words and names to define letters have proliferated all over the world among police forces, the emergency services and the military, and now constitute a relatively common phenomenon. To use words as ogam letter-names might have been unusual, but unique even in its time and region it actually was not, either. The contemporary alphabet called Futhark also had letter-names that were reasonably common words and names and was used in northern and north-western Europe by the early Vikings and the Anglo-Saxons.

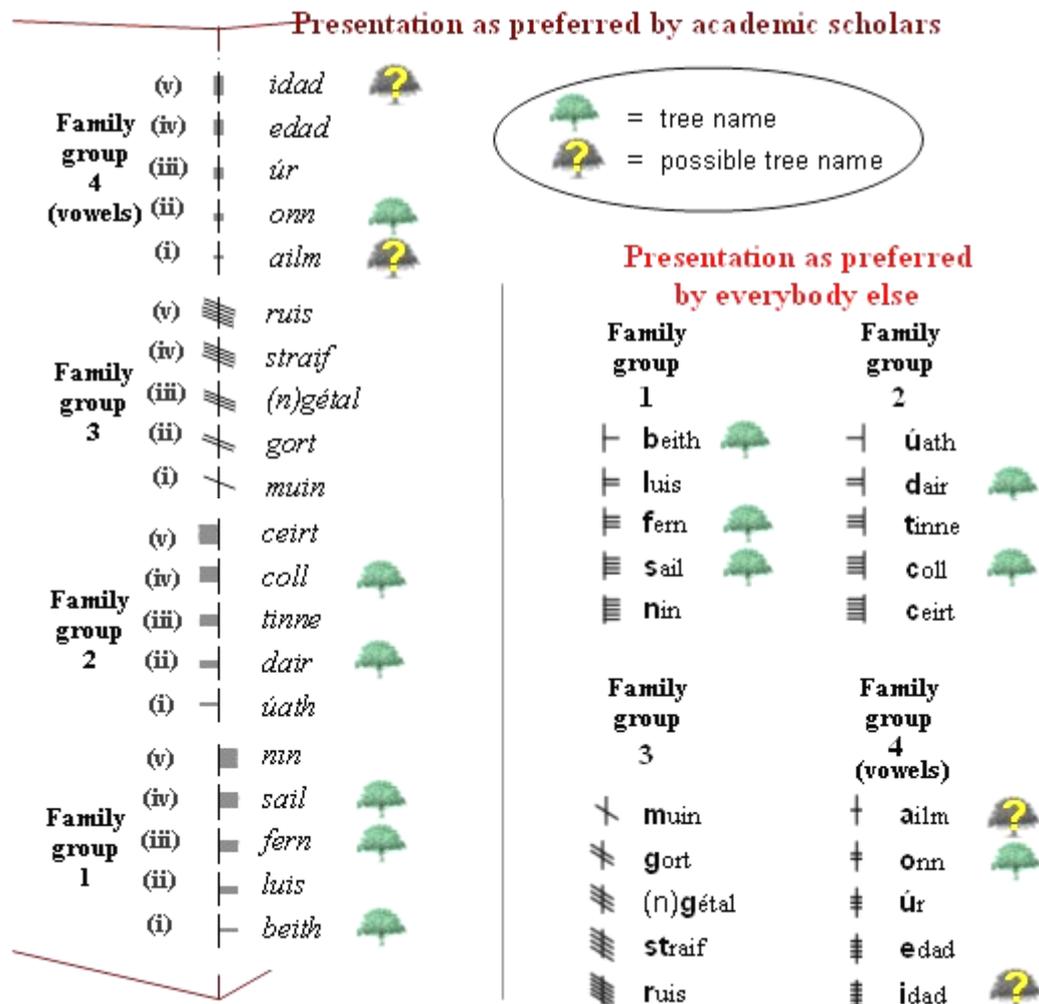
I have even heard it said that Irish linguistic scholars tend to see in the words selected as ogam letter-names *and* in their positioning in the alphabet, a formality and a sonority that has a mystique suggestive of an acrostic poem (that is, a poem in which the first or last letter of each line when read vertically downwards reads a word or a name or a significantly meaningful message).<sup>24</sup> This is a delightfully Irish idea, a literary idea, an idea that has vivid bardic overtones – overtones also reminiscent of an orally-based tradition – overtones of ancient tree lore.

But much more prosaically, among the original ogam letter-names there were six words that *were* words for trees (and two more that might have been words for trees), and three of them were located in the first five of the alphabet, and so might well in any case have reinforced the tradition that the alphabet was part of the continuing tree lore that reading and writing and fluency with words was already associated with. (If the two possible tree names are counted in, there are also three tree-names in the fourth Family group, that of the vowels.)

So strong was this association that it seemed quite natural in medieval times for the editors of *The Ogham Tract* to state categorically that *all* the letters could *by tradition* be closely identified with trees or with other forms of plants, and to include very brief reminders of those identifications (albeit

sometimes in rather cryptic form) in the form of the kennings of the Briatharogaim (which we come on to shortly). This despite the fact that of the original 20 letter-names, between 12 and 14 of them (i.e. between 60 and 70 per cent of them) were *not* tree-names.

## The original 20 Irish Gaelic alphabetical symbols with letter-names



**Illustration 10:** Two contrasting presentations of the ogam symbols together with their letter-names – the academic (left) and the intuitively obvious (right) – also showing which of the letter-names were the names of trees ... or might have been meant as the names of trees.

In fact, in the original 20-letter ogam alphabet there are possibly at least as many examples of the influence of foreign alphabets on the letter-names as there are tree-names (which is presumably why the egregious Fenius Farsaidh had alternatively to be brought into the matter in *The Ogham Tract* as a supposed witness to the aftermath of the constructing of the Tower of Babel). Of the names of the 20 original ogam letters, certainly six of them can be reasonably related fairly directly following standard etymological practice to the names of letters in the Greek and Hebrew alphabets.

I must emphasise that the evidence is in the *names* given to the letters in each alphabet, *not* the symbols attached to the names, and that these names would seem to derive from an identical source even though in Greek they may have been adopted as no more than names and mean nothing specifically otherwise, whereas in (Semitic) Hebrew *the same names* represent Hebrew words of reasonably common usage and mostly ordinary meanings that equate directly with equivalent (Semitic) Phoenician words. The transference of these names into Irish would thus appear quite possibly to have resulted from conscious

and deliberate alliteration and assimilation based on a remarkably high level of historical learning . . . or be amazingly coincidental.

## Inter-alphabetical letter-name correspondence

Roman alphabet letter	Greek	Hebrew	Ogam
<b>a</b>	<i>alpha</i>	<i>aleph</i> 'ox'	<b>aim</b>
<b>b</b>	<i>bēta</i>	<i>beth</i> 'well-founded house'	<b>beith</b>
<b>e</b>	<i>ēta</i> (H)	<i>heth</i> 'window'	<b>edad</b>
<b>i</b>	<i>iōta</i>	<i>yodh</i> 'hand'	<b>idad</b>
<b>n</b>	<i>nu</i>	<i>nun</i> 'fish'	<b>nin</b>
<b>r</b>	<i>r(h)ō</i>	<i>resh</i> 'head'	<b>ruis</b> (earlier: <i>rudsti-</i> )

### possible additions:

<b>d</b>	<i>delta</i>	<i>daleth</i> 'door', 'tent-flap'	<b>dair</b> (earlier: <i>darek-</i> )
<b>w</b>		<i>waw</i> 'hook'	[cf <b>(h)úath</b> ]
<b>st/z</b>	<i>zēta</i> (Z)	<i>zayin</i> 'weapon'	[cf <b>straif</b> ]

**Illustration 11:** Possible linguistic connections between Greek, Hebrew and ogam alphabetical letter-names, presumably through a process of assimilation.

Intriguing as this all is, it represents something of a digression, however, and has little to do with the ongoing tradition of tree lore represented in and by the ogam alphabet.

But before we get on to the final dramatic change in the way the tradition of tree lore was upheld – before we leave the subject of the original ogam alphabet as a way of representing Early Irish – we must very briefly examine the method and practice by which it was inscribed.

## Ogam inscription decoded

in 'orthodox' ogam on a 5th-century standing stone on the Isle of Man

I	
O	
C	
U	
M	
I	
Q	
A	
M	
S	
A	
N	
O	
D	
I	
A	
F	
I	
B	

**The text reads:**

**BIFAI DONAS MAQI  
MUCOI CUNAF[A LI ... ]**

**'Bivaidu, son of the tribe  
of the Cunava(Is) ...',**

**and the stone represents  
either a monument to a  
tribal hero or his head-  
stone.**

**In the customary  
fashion the inscription  
uses one edge (*druim*)  
of the stone as the central  
line of the inscription,  
which starts at the  
bottom, comes up, and  
goes over the top,  
following the same edge.**

**The name *Bivaidu*  
may possibly have meant  
'princely'.**

**Illustration 12:** A classic example of an incised ogam stone.

Line drawing from Wikipedia Commons. Inscribed name 'Bivaidu' (not 'Bivaidonas') from Channel 4 website and others. Possible translation 'princely': Old Irish *fiùbhaidh* 'prince', 'worthy leader'.

Ogam inscriptions were made (as 'orthodox' ogam) on a selected or carefully shaped piece of stone which had a straight edge, and were carved vertically upwards over the top and down the other side, using that edge (*druim* 'ridge', 'spine', sometimes spelled *droim*) as the constant line through which the crossbars of the ogam symbols were inscribed. This is an almost unique method of inscription, but the fact that it is primarily for carving into stone may account for it. It takes time and effort to make an inscription in stone. Starting the inscription at ground level on an edge that continues up to the top, over the top, and down the opposite side, allows the greatest amount of room for the inscription. (Starting at the middle of the *top* and proceeding down one edge to the bottom on that side would give you only half the space.)

Once ogam inscriptions began to be made on vellum and parchment (in the 'scholastic' form), they also changed from being written vertically upwards to being written horizontally from left to right, as Latin and Greek, and as was the Roman Catholic monastic practice.

And so the years – the decades, the centuries – roll past. The Irish language itself develops. Linguistic development is so great and so rapid that further letters are introduced into the alphabet, and the pronunciation of some of the original letters is formally altered to conform with contemporary speech modes. The fundamental connection with trees and tree lore is not forgotten but becomes more of a background – a background that is more important to some than to others. Inscriptions on stone are abandoned altogether, in favour of writing on vellum/parchment – as has meanwhile become the norm for texts meant to be studied or learned.

But the connection with tree lore is (as I say) never forgotten. Indeed, it receives more emphasis as representative of the physical world of everyday human experience while the connection with the worlds of the now pagan gods and the now non-Christian Place of *all* the Dead (the ancestors, whether good or evil) are further and further pushed into the background by Church morality, which reveres only One God and foresees only a blissfully numinous spirit Heaven or an everlastingly excruciating bodily Hell as possible alternatives in an afterlife.

The belief is asserted with more and more confidence that the ancients meant *all* of the letters of the ogam alphabet representing tree lore to have a direct connection of one kind or another with one form of plant or another. There is, after all, some excuse for this – and it is also something memorable that can be taught and learned *and* that is historic and particularly Irish.

**This belief in turn becomes the tradition**, and a tradition that some feel is necessary to keep up. That is what happens with traditions – they are what people *want* to make of the past. To encourage this, the tradition is itself written down, both historically and contemporarily, as 'the tradition' . . . including a reference to plant life for virtually all letters of the ogam alphabet (whether named originally for a tree or not). From now on in history – and from now on in this lecture – *this* is the tradition of the ogam alphabet, the tradition that stems from tree lore and that reaffirms it (albeit in something of a new guise).

So let's take a look at the trees and other forms of plant life selected in medieval times as supposedly appropriate to the ogam alphabet. It is certainly an eclectic selection.

We might in particular note that there are some surprising omissions in the list of *trees* involved. There is no box, chestnut, beech, elm, mulberry, plane, sycamore or walnut. The only conifers are the two 'possibles', and otherwise there are no cedars, cypresses, firs, hemlocks, junipers, larches [the name of which is actually cognate with the Latin for 'oaks'] or spruces. Why not? Why are other forms of plant included instead? Why is the only fruit tree an apple tree? What happened to the cherry, the plum, the apricot and indeed the pear tree from which the partridge may be plucked at Christmas time? And of course there are many other fruits that do not grow on trees – a lot of different berries, for instance.

If we are lovers of nature and followers of tree lore, we must wonder why some trees, some plants, but not others, have been included. All these are *as Irish as they are British*. Can it really be only a question of what was immediately visible outside the Irish alphabet editor's window at that moment in time?

I hope you are not expecting me to answer that question.

## The Tree Alphabet ‘by tradition’

	letter-name	original tree	later tree ‘by tradition’	later bush/plant ‘by tradition’	not any plant
<b>Family group 1</b>	<i>beith</i>	<b>birch</b>	birch		
	<i>luis</i>		<b>rowan</b>		
	<i>fern</i>	<b>alder</b>	alder		
	<i>sail</i>	<b>willow</b>	willow		
	<i>nin</i>		<b>ash</b>		
<b>Family group 2</b>	<i>úath</i>		<b>hawthorn</b>		
	<i>dair</i>	<b>oak</b>	oak		
	<i>tinne</i>		<b>holly</b>		
	<i>coll</i>	<b>hazel</b>	hazel		
	<i>ceirt</i>		<b>apple</b>		
<b>Family group 3</b>	<i>muin</i>			<b>vine</b> (or blackberry)	
	<i>gort</i>			<b>ivy</b>	
	<i>ngéal</i>		<b>broom</b>	(or fern)	
	<i>straif</i>		<b>blackthorn</b>		
	<i>ruis</i>		<b>elder</b>		
<b>Family group 4 (vowels)</b>	<i>aim</i>	(pine?)	(pine)		
	<i>omn</i>	<b>[ash]</b>		<b>gorse/furze</b>	
	<i>úr</i>			<b>heather/heath</b>	
	<i>edad</i>		<b>aspen</b>		
	<i>idad</i>	(yew?)	(yew)		
<b>Forfeda</b>	<i>ebad</i>		(aspen)		
	<i>óir</i>			<b>spindle</b> (or ivy)	
	<i>uilleán</i>			<b>honeysuckle</b>	
	<i>iphin</i>			<b>gooseberry</b>	
	<i>emancholl</i>				<b>‘like C’</b>
	<i>beith bhog</i>				<b>‘soft B’</b>

**Illustration 13:** Table showing how ‘tradition’ was extended. There were between six and eight tree-names among the original letter-names of the ogam alphabetical letters. To these, a further nine or ten tree-names were added quite a lot later but ‘by tradition’, plus six or seven names of different plant types. Finally, two were added that were never really intended to refer to any kind of plant but were strictly phonetic interpolations.

Pretty well every entry on this list, now written down as ‘traditional’, was accompanied by reminders in the form of ‘kennings’, a number of which were (presumably deliberately) cryptic. Yet surely the fact that the list is as diverse as it is must mean that there was a genuine point to be made about each entry – some wisdom, some practical information that had to be remembered, some technical quality or need for discernment or skill. *These are forms of plant life that embodied tree lore* – and the kennings in turn mostly present and reinforce that tree lore.

The kennings together are known as Briatharogaim or ‘word ogams’, and it should help me in this that many of you will already have some knowledge of the kennings, their meanings and their importance. You know, then, that there are two major *literary* sources for the kennings – *The Ogham Tract* and some manuscripts from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries – and three different but associated *mythical* sources to which these kennings are ascribed. Purportedly these mythical sources are:

- Angus Og (Mac ind Óg, son of The Dagda and the river goddess Boann; nephew of the god Lugh),<sup>25</sup>
- the legendary hero Cúchulainn, son of the god Lugh and the mortal Deichtine (herself the granddaughter of Angus Og),<sup>26</sup> and
- the first-century AD Brehon judge<sup>27</sup> and expert on Irish kingship Morann mac Moín (also called Moran mac Maein).

The three lists of kennings are, unexpectedly, quite different in their own ways, although in all three of them the entries seem to rely on a poetic measure of just two long syllables, either or both of which may be broken into one stressed and one unstressed syllable, the whole seeming somewhat terse in modern eyes and ears. The Angus Og series has in addition a complex pattern of alliteration between adjacent entries such that the first letter of the last word of one entry is repeated as the first letter of the first word of the next. Curiously, two out of the three entries against each letter-name tend to reflect each other yet be different from the third – but it is not the same two each time.

But it is what the entries *say* that is important. I apologise if I am labouring the point somewhat, but I do feel it necessary to emphasise that the kennings which were in relatively late times applied to and described the letters of the ogam alphabet effectively frame what was tree lore at the (comparatively recent) period they were written. The sort of information they constitute a telling glossary of is the sort of information that nonetheless goes back millennia – for example to the mythical tales of Hercules, though no longer so concerned with aspects of the gods above or the souls of the dead below – of Hercules’s *Labours*, therefore, that tell us so much about the qualities of wood and the uses that it can be put to.

Let’s take a closer look at the kennings of at least the first few letters of the ogam alphabet. Regrettably – well, it’s regrettable as far as I’m concerned – we haven’t got time to go right through the entire alphabet. But it shouldn’t matter if we don’t, for my main point is to demonstrate that it is in and through the kennings (and their usually very prosaic relevance to everyday life in historic times) that tree lore resided and still resides. If I can show that with a few examples, that point is sufficiently made with reference to all the rest that you can look up for yourselves in your own time.

So we’ll start at the beginning, with the letter-name that corresponds to the English letter B (and that might therefore be described in certain circles as ‘the B-word’).

As you are by now well aware, in the ogam alphabet this letter already has the name of a tree – although it may well do so only as an assimilation to the Early Irish word for ‘birch’ from some word in another language and another alphabet from which the ancient Greeks got their *beta* and the Hebrew scribes got their *beth*, neither of which had anything to do with trees. But even if the ogam letter-name actually has nothing to do with earlier foreign alphabets and was quite coincidentally selected also to be the name of the first letter of the ogam alphabet, there are some salient points to be made.

First, it is evident that the Irish word for the ‘birch’ is conspicuously close enough in linguistic form to be potentially akin to, if not cognate with, the basic Proto-Indo-European etymological sources of words for ‘tree’ and ‘wisdom’ that we have looked at before – which would seem to make it eminently suitable as a word to begin an alphabet of words by tradition associated with tree lore as wisdom.

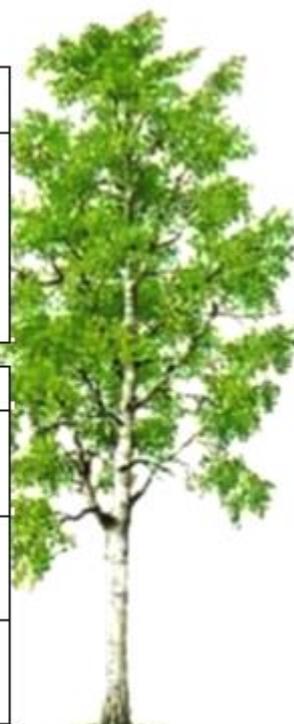
Second, that the birch tree had a pre-eminent position in more than one aspect of Celtic arboreal craftsmanship is further evident in that Latin historians record how Gaulish carpenters and construction engineers used birch sap as the basis for the pitch or tar by which they created solid attachments between wood and wood, or wood and metal. So much so that in modern English it is the old Celtic word for the birch that is the ‘bit-’ of *bitumen* – just as it is the old Celtic word for the oak (*dair*) and the use of its sap that some centuries later and slightly further north-west gave rise to the English word *tar*.

We should at the same time perhaps keep in mind that in current English ‘birch’ is the name of a whole family of trees which includes all the various different types of birch plus the alders and the hazels, whereas the Early Irish name of the ogam letter refers at most to the silver birch [*Betula pendula*] and/or to the white birch [*Betula pubescens*], also known as the downy birch.<sup>28</sup>

## B

ogam symbol and name	etymology	associated plant 'by tradition'
 beith	Old Irish <i>bethe</i> ‘birch’ Welsh <i>bedw</i> ‘birch’ – but possibly included in the ogam alphabet by assimilation of letter-name from an earlier source	<b>birch tree</b>

Briatharogam kennings	apparent meaning (McManus)
(The Ogham Tract) Morann mac Moin: <i>féochos folichain</i>	<b>withered foot with fine hair</b>
(The Ogham Tract) Mac ind Óg: <i>glaisem cnis</i>	<b>greyest of skin</b>
(16th-/17th-century MSS) Con Culainn: <i>maise malach</i>	<b>beauty of the eyebrow</b>



**Illustration 14:** B for *beith* and *birch*.

Silver birch pic by Collingtree Church of England School, Collingtree, Northamptonshire: Google images.

So on looking at what the kennings in *The Ogam Tract* can suggest to us, we may note that both of the kinds of birch tree indicated by the name of the ogam letter are tall and slender and have white bark streaked with grey, as may be implied by the second kenning. Meanwhile as for the first kenning, the bark at the base of the trunk of the *silver* birch tends to develop dark cracks, possibly suggesting a ‘withered foot’, and it is the silver birch that in its habitat is by far the more dominant species. Yet it is the *white* or *downy* birch that has hairy shoots particularly appropriate to that kenning as translated.

In any event the fact that the downy birch is strongly implied here (by name and recognisably by both kennings) as at least partly an intended reference makes utter nonsense of the insistence by some modern authorities that a different ogam character later in the alphabet should be referred to instead as the downy birch.<sup>29</sup>

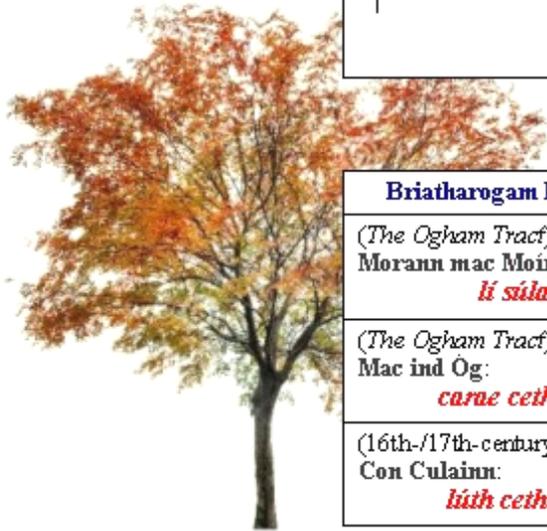
Cúchulainn’s third kenning is unusual in that in this case it reflects neither of the other two kennings except by suggesting a physical description, which it does in a somewhat anthropomorphic fashion. It is, however, the downy birch that at the top has the more regular rounded (eyebrow-like) profile, whereas the silver birch is known for its tall, rather pointed straightness.

One last thing. In view of the vast number of useful properties that birch wood and birch bark and even birch sap are famous worldwide for, and in view of the further fact that such properties are made much of when they relate to other trees and plants featured in the ogam alphabet and its associated traditions, it is extraordinary that the kennings for the birch here seem so restricted to simple physical description. Perhaps such advantageous properties were in those early times just taken for granted to the extent it was thought completely unnecessary to mention them – and it has to be said that much the same surprising lack of information occurs again later in respect of the kennings referring to the equally (if not more) significant oak tree. In context, it is disappointing, though.

The next letter-name is the one that corresponds to the English letter L.

# L

ogam symbol and name	etymology	associated plant 'by tradition'
 <b>luis</b>	? Old Irish <i>luise</i> 'blaze', 'flame' (cf <i>leus</i> 'torch' and Latin <i>lux</i> 'light') ? Mid Irish <i>lus</i> (earlier <i>lubs-</i> ) 'herb', 'plant with useful properties'	<b>rowan tree</b>



Briatharogam kennings	apparent meaning (McManus)
( <i>The Ogham Tract</i> ) Morann mac Moin: <i>lí síla</i>	<b>lustre of the eye</b>
( <i>The Ogham Tract</i> ) Mac ind Og: <i>carne cethrae</i>	<b>friend of cattle</b>
(16th-/17th-century MSS) Con Culainn: <i>lúth cethrae</i>	<b>sustenance of cattle</b>

**Illustration 15:** L for *luis* and rowan.  
Rowan tree pic by Oaks Primary School, Ellesmere Port, Cheshire, website.

Unusually, the Old Irish kennings that go with this letter-name may be thought individually to relate not to the tree with which the name is 'by tradition' associated but to one or other of the etymological sources most commonly referred to. Those sources are Irish words for 'blaze' or 'flame' (possibly akin to the Latin word *lux* and the English word *light*) and for 'medicinal herb' or 'psychotropic plant' (and undoubtedly cognate with the English word *leaf*).

But as sources for the letter-name these Irish words remain conjectural – and in any case there is a much greater probability that the kennings are *not* intended to refer to possible etymologies but refer instead to the tree that is 'by tradition' associated with the letter-name: the rowan.

Now the rowan has its own historic connections with tree lore, especially in the Old Norse culture within which the god Odin was obliged to make such an effort to learn the runes, for it was specifically on *rowan* staves that runes were formally carved,<sup>30</sup> and the word 'rune' in Old Norse actually meant 'mystery' or 'secret' (and was a word borrowed by the neighbouring Finns and Lapps in their otherwise unrelated language to mean 'poetry', 'verse'). It is with this background that all over north-western Europe the rowan has long been connected in the popular mind with arcane and potentially dangerous mysteries, particularly with either casting spells or conferring protection from such magic. Above all, the rowan tree is said simply by its presence to be supremely efficient at protecting people and animals from lightning strikes and flashes that temporarily blind the eyes.

This is held, perhaps rather curiously, to be the meaning implied by the first kenning – that the unbearably bright light of lightning may instantly be deflected from damaging the eyes of a person travelling through a storm if there is a rowan tree near by. (In Finland, this power of deflection is said by some to be in the gift of the rural goddess Rauni, whose name may actually be cognate with the word *rowan*, and whose caring guardianship is signalled after the lightning has passed by the appearance of the rainbow.)

The same property may also be regarded partly as the meaning implied by the second kenning, for – truthfully or otherwise – north European folklore apparently has it that a rowan tree in some out-of-the-way spot within or overhanging a cow-byre affords some protection for the penned animals from a lightning strike . . . or indeed from any form of magical enchantment intended for some reason by local witches to harm them.

But cows are, on the other hand, hardly likely to be delighted, much less be invigorated, by such an occasional defensive measure, whereas they might regard the rowan as their supportive ‘friend’ if they made it part of their diet. And in consuming the tree’s bright red berries – using them for ‘sustenance’, as described by the third kenning – they can do just that. The rowan tree is of the rose family, and rowan berries are tasty morsels for all grazing animals – although potentially toxic to humans unless cooked to remove traces of prussic acid. Furthermore the leaves are highly attractive to browsing animals (especially red deer), and when within reach provide a pleasing alternative for cows to the monotony of chewing and re-chewing and re-re-chewing grass.

But there is more to the second kenning than is immediately evident in the Old Irish words for ‘friend of cattle’, *carae cethrae*. Among the primary purposes of the kennings it is presumed that they are reminders of the tree lore behind the letter-names, after all. And these word are both phonetically very close to, very reminiscent of, the Old Irish for ‘berry’, *cáer*, and the Early Irish for ‘rowan tree’ *caerthann* (modern Irish *caorthann*, Welsh *cerddin*), itself literally ‘the berry tree’. Interestingly, the Old Irish for ‘berry’, *cáer*, is not only thought to be etymologically akin to, if not cognate with, ancient Greek *keras*, German *Kirsche*, English *cherry*, but known to be also cognate with Old Irish *caoir* ‘blaze’, ‘flame’ – a linguistic alternative to the Old Irish *luise* proposed as one of the two most likely possible etymological origins for the traditional letter-name.<sup>31</sup>

Having gone back to which, I may now go on to say that although raw rowan berries may be toxic to humans, with careful preparation rowan berries can nonetheless be used to make wine, a type of cider, a type of ale and a strongly alcoholic spirit, any one of which would no doubt – in words highly suggestive of that first kenning – bring a light to the eye of those looking forward to consuming it. This is one of the most potentially popular aspects of woodcraft and tree lore to be retained by modern society, although it hardly counts as providing ‘sustenance’ as such for humans.

The next ogam letter-name corresponds to a word that in Old Irish and in modern English begins with the letter F.

## F

ogam symbol and name	etymology	associated plant 'by tradition'
 <b>fern</b>	Early Irish <i>fern</i> ‘alder tree’, ‘of alder wood’ Welsh <i>gwern</i> ‘alder tree’ French <i>verme</i> ‘alder’ (but cf also Old Irish <i>fern</i> ‘good’ and Old Irish <i>fer</i> ‘man’)	<b>alder tree</b>

Briatharogam kennings	apparent meaning (McManus)
(The Ogham Tract) Morann mac Moin: <i>airenach fian</i>	<b>vanguard of warriors</b>
(The Ogham Tract) Mac ind Og: <i>comét lachta</i>	<b>milk container</b>
(16th-/17th-century MSS) Con Culainn: <i>dín cridi</i>	<b>protector of the heart</b>



**Illustration 16:** F for *fern* and the alder tree.  
 Alder tree pic by science.all.com website (Google images).

As is the case with the tree-name allocated to the consonant B-for-birch, the ‘traditional’ association related to the consonant F is to the tree the letter is actually named after: the alder. However, unlike the B-word, the word *fern* cannot be reconciled etymologically with the name for the equivalent consonant in the Greek or Hebrew (or any other influential) alphabet, and as an alphabetical letter-name would

thus seem to be entirely Irish in source, relying only on the sound of its initial consonant. This strongly suggests that the original Early Irish word – the tree name very familiar to Irish-speakers at the time – was specifically and deliberately applied to the ogam letter as *its* name. It is a difference in background alone that might in its way have acted as an incentive to those interested to seek more tree connections to letter-names which otherwise had much more obscure origins.

The Old Irish word *fern* meanwhile seems by itself to have had connotations of straightness and linear strength, in that the word became an alternative expression in Scottish and Irish for the mast of a ship, and derivatives in Scottish, Irish and Welsh were used to describe an axle or a spindle. Moreover, exactly as the special properties of the birch – possibly because they were so well known as to be taken for granted – did not feature in the kennings of that letter, as we might today have expected, similarly particular qualities of the alder are also evidently ignored in the kennings connected with *fern*.

Two out of the three kennings (as shown on slide 16) probably refer to the same property of the alder tree and its wood, although the similarity of the interpretation may not be immediately obvious. The third kenning appears to describe a completely different but equally standard use for alder wood. Both described properties and uses are historically amazingly apt, albeit little in evidence in everyday life in Britain and Ireland today.

The first and third kennings are most likely to refer to the use of alder wood in the shields of ancient warriors from early Greek through Roman to Anglo-Saxon and Viking times. The shields were, after all, the ‘vanguard’ – the front line, the first line of attack and of defence, affording as much protection as possible to the bodies and minds (the ‘hearts’) – of warriors in battle. Over those many centuries shields were for the most part constructed of horizontal three-ply wooden planking involving two sheets of alder sandwiching a sheet of oak. The sandwich was glued together and reinforced by metal studs each side of a solid metal boss to which the iron handgrip was attached on the inside. The oak in the middle conferred strength and impenetrability. The alder wood prevented the whole thing from splitting when struck with a pointed or sharp implement, since the grain in the alder is particularly fibrous and resilient. To complete it, and perhaps to try to hold it all together if it was badly damaged in battle, the shield might have a further ‘skin’ of leather stretched over the outer alder layer.

In respect of the second kenning, making wooden buckets, tubs and churns for containing and transporting milk or water was from early medieval times the job of a ‘white cooper’, of whom there would probably be at least one in every village. (This explains what might otherwise be the surprising frequency in England of the surname Cooper.) Such containers would, like shields, normally be made of two different types of wood – a hard but smooth wood for the straight staves up the sides, and a softer but equally smooth (‘white’) wood for the hoops that would go around the outside and hold the thing together. Obviously, the choice of wood to use would depend on what was locally available. In England, oak would certainly be first choice for the hoops, but alder might well equally be first choice for the staves. Wooden buckets and tubs are now rare in Britain – but they remain very popular in northern Europe and Scandinavia (especially for use in saunas).

The fourth ogam letter is the equivalent of S.

The etymology of Early Irish *sail*, Latin *salix*, can in no way be referred simply to a hypothetical Proto-Indo-European etymon, because there is too much earlier and associated linguistic history to be accommodated in what is the intricately related origins of such apparently diverse English words as *sallow*, *helix*, *volume* and *willow*. There is a lot more to it than that. Suffice to say (and it *must* suffice here to say), the underlying meaning is ‘to go up and come down’ and applies to other English words meaning rising and ascending, or spinning up and over, such as *saltation*, *assault*, *fold*, *vault*, *whelk* and *waltz*.

The willow tree was, presumably, so called because as a tree it grew upwards and at some point stopped getting any higher but spread outwards and then downwards, thus in a way spinning or rolling over on itself. It is one of the most famous properties of the willow tree that it should be pendulous, turn over on itself and ‘weep’ down towards the ground or, especially, over water (which is even more suggestive of weeping).

But how many people notice that ‘pend’ – to hang down – is a combination of ‘to wind’ and ‘to bend’, both of which are associated with our very first etymological reference to ‘wood’ and ‘wisdom’ (see Illustrations 1 *and* 4), to tree lore?

## S

ogam symbol and name	etymology	associated plant 'by tradition'
 sail	Early Irish <i>sail</i> 'willow tree' mod Irish <i>sáileóg</i> , Welsh <i>halyg</i> , Latin <i>salix</i> , ancient Greek <i>helikē</i> , akin to ancient Greek <i>helix</i> and ultimately to Latin <i>volv-</i> 'roll over', 'twist around', and thus English <i>willow</i>	willow tree



Briatharogam kennings	apparent meaning (McManus)
(The Ogham Tract) Morann mac Moin: <i>li ambí</i>	pallor of a lifeless one
(The Ogham Tract) Mac ind Og: <i>liúh bech</i>	sustenance of bees
(16th-/17th-century MSS) Con Culainn: <i>tosach mela</i>	beginning of honey

**Illustration 17:** S for *sail* and the willow tree.  
 Willow tree pic by 123rf.com website (Google images).

Let's look at the kennings. The first brings us directly to a very obvious cognate of the Latin *salix* in English, and that is the word *sallow*. Now *sallow* is not only an old dialectal term in English for the willow tree but also describes a colour between yellowish pink and light grey that might be distressingly apt as the 'pallor of a lifeless' person, a corpse. A good deal less morbidly, the bark of the white willow *Salix alba* is the primary source of salicylic acid, or aspirin, which as a medication might in fact restore some colour to the cheeks of those who feel wan and lifeless. Even more than this, however, salicylic acid is a natural exfoliant that is an important ingredient in a number of treatment therapies for severe acne, helping to clear away dead skin cells from blocking pores, reducing unsightly lesions and thus assisting in rejuvenating facial skin, restoring it to a healthy colour.

The second and third kennings remind us how significant the contribution of bees and their honey was to the good life in most of Europe before technological improvements and New World sources turned sugar into a commodity available relatively cheaply and in bulk. It must for example be remembered that the *first recorded mention* of cultivated sugar in English dates from the late thirteenth century and the reign of King Edward I. Even then it was a further 450 years before the kitchen tables of the politically great and good in Britain were bedecked with a sugar loaf that could be broken down and used for the sweetening of the food and drink offered to their favoured guests. For ordinary folk, honey remained the staple sweetener century after century until at least the 1800s.

But in what way might the willow tree provide bees with 'sustenance'? Well, the willow is a major source of pollen for bees and is the *only* pollen-producing plant in Britain and Ireland that consistently produces pollen between mid-February and mid-May – by the end of which time the cereal grasses and the nettles have begun their long summer pollen-producing season. Willow flowers are a particularly rich source of nectar, both male and female flowers possessing one nectary, and in some varieties actually possessing more than one. But it is *sustenance* because the honey made by bees from willow plants is usually *consumed by the bees themselves* before they go on to use the pollen from other plants later in the season to make honey that may be collected by anthropoid apiarists. Which particularly explains the third kenning. Only when the bees have had their own sustenance from the beginning of the honey do they then – at the beginning of what will be *extra* honey for storage as the hive develops – create enough to make it worthwhile for other larger, greedier animals to steal.

The fifth letter in the ogam alphabet is the equivalent of the letter N.

We have already noted that a completely different ogam letter is given the name of the ash tree in Early Irish. We should perhaps note that the *modern* Irish word for the ash tree is again a completely different and unrelated word. It is surprising how some of these things change in time whereas others stay recognisably the same for centuries – and it may have something to do with the connotations of the word itself changing over time as well. In this case that could well explain why the Early Irish name for the ash tree was later applied to a different letter – presumably because by the time Early Irish had turned into Old Irish, the word no longer specifically meant ‘ash tree’.

We should now note – with the greatest possible respect – that both of Professor McManus’s<sup>32</sup> submissions as possible etymological sources of the letter-name are acknowledged to be tentative, and that although both are currently accepted and commonly quoted, there is no more than merely semantic background evidence that either is relevant at all. In any case it would seem that by ‘loft’, the excellent professor apparently does not mean an attic or upper storey but actually has something more like ‘loftiness’, ‘vertical height and space’, in mind [as in Welsh *nen* ‘roof’, ‘heavenly vault’]. It has been further suggested that the openness and visual space implied may or may not correspond in fact to the notion of ‘beauty’ in the third kenning.

Yet because one possible literal meaning of this letter-name is ‘forked branch’, and because the inscribed ogam letters might be said in form to resemble forked branches stemming from a single tree-trunk, it is certainly not impossible that the letter-name *nin* may itself correspond to a general term for any of the alphabetical letters or indeed to a byword for the ogam alphabet as a whole. This is quite often in turn suggested to be why the ogam alphabet came to be known not by the first three of its letters as the roman alphabet is known as the ABC, but by the first, second and *fifth* of its letters – the equivalent of BLN – supposedly thus meaning ‘the B-L-alphabet’. It has alternatively been proposed, however, that pronouncing the letters BLN with their original names in Early Irish is not far off tersely running through the first five letters consecutively (B-L-F-S-N) anyway.

## N

ogam symbol and name	etymology	associated plant 'by tradition'
 <span style="font-size: 1.2em; margin-left: 10px;">nin</span>	? Old Irish <i>n̄n</i> ‘forked branch’ ? Old Irish <i>n̄n</i> ‘loft’ – but merely suggested by Prof. Damian McManus (1988) with the note that it represents the letter <i>n̄</i> and may have the general meaning ‘letters’	ash tree

Briatharogam kennings	apparent meaning (McManus)
<i>(The Ogham Tract)</i> Morann mac Moin: <i>costud side</i>	establishing of peace
<i>(The Ogham Tract)</i> Mac ind Óg: <i>bág ban</i>	boast of women
(16th-/17th-century MSS) Con Culainn: <i>bág maise</i>	boast of beauty



**Illustration 18:** N for *nin* as a later name for the ash tree; *onn* was the Early Irish name. Ash tree pic by kentonline website (Google images).

Saying which, let us look at the kennings supplied for this letter. The first suggests that the ash tree has something to do with the ‘establishing of peace’. Certainly in Irish mythology, an ash wand is symbolic of the power of healing, and a means of channelling useful magic or illusion, both of which might lead

to at least temporary peace of mind for those suffering in body or spirit. Yet because fine-grained ash wood was in particular use also as handles for spears and similar shafted weapons, the forceful wielding of ash-handled weapons might be said additionally to resolve conflicts and thus in a rather directly confrontational way to establish peace. The particularly tight-grained wood of the North American white ash (*Fraxinus americana*) can even be used to make a fearsome clubbing weapon or mace despite its comparatively light weight – a lightness which of course is an additional advantage to the user when agility in arm movement is of the essence, and which also explains the popularity of the wood’s use in baseball bats.

To some extent the establishing of peace might also be said to be the domain – and therefore the ‘boast’ (as posited by the second kenning) – of women who, after all, generally have the good sense to leave any actual fighting to men. It was also women who traditionally were wise in the arts of healing. At the same time, the ash tree was reputed to have a special arboreal beauty among the trees in a wood, such that for a woman to be described as ‘an ash in a forest’ might correspond to describing her as a veritable Aphrodite among her less spectacularly endowed (but no less divine) peers. In this way, the third kenning suggests that the beauty in the eye of the beholder is that either of a notably handsome woman or of the spectacularly fine tree that is the ash.

A rather different explanation for the three kennings is suggested by *The Scholar’s Primer*, which declares that the ‘establishing of peace’ in the medieval household required a husband to ensure that the household’s weaving loom – made principally from ash wood – was properly constructed, balanced and maintained by him<sup>33</sup> for the use of his wife, so that she was thereby enabled to weave the best, the daintiest cloth and clothing in the district, which was the prize ‘boast of women’ and their ‘boast of beauty’. This is so far removed from life as we know it today that it is difficult to believe that it ever was any more than contemporary monkish folklore.

Much of the information available about the next ogam letter-name is conjectural. It is not known for certain even what the pronunciation was of the phoneme the name began with in Early Irish, now represented either as H or as U. The etymology of the name is unknown too, although several possibilities have been put forward, the most commonly cited one by *The Scholar’s Primer*. It is therefore a relief to be able to say that the kennings do at least make some sense in relation to the type of tree that is ‘by tradition’ associated with the letter-name: the whitethorn or hawthorn. There is tree lore to be passed on.

## hÚ



ogam symbol and name	etymology	associated plant ‘by tradition’
húath	? Old Irish <i>úath</i> ‘fear’, ‘terror’ ? Old Irish <i>uath</i> ‘poetry’ – other suggestions have been made, none historically convincing, partly because even the Early Irish pronunciation is undetermined	<b>whitethorn hawthorn</b>

Briatharogam kennings	apparent meaning (McManus)
( <i>The Ogham Tract</i> ) Morann mac Moin: <i>condál cían</i>	<b>assembly of packs of hounds</b>
( <i>The Ogham Tract</i> ) Mac ind Og: <i>bánad gnúise</i>	<b>blanching of faces</b>
(16th-/17th-century MSS) Con Culainn: <i>ansam aílche</i>	<b>most difficult at night</b>

**Illustration 19:** hÚ for húath as a name applied ‘by tradition’ to the whitethorn or hawthorn. Hawthorn tree in flower pic by Robert O’Brien, [textastreeplanting.tamu.edu](http://textastreeplanting.tamu.edu) website.

In hypothesising a possible derivation for the letter-name corresponding to 'fear' or 'terror', *The Scholar's Primer* then goes on to elaborate on it in the words of the first kenning. Fear and terror was thus evidently implied by the image of an assembly of packs of hounds – and presumably in a way more fearsome and more terrifying than a single pack of hounds would have been. The whole point of using hounds was of course always principally to inspire fear and terror in the quarry being hunted through the forest by the hounds' owners and handlers, so driving the quarry into headlong flight and leading to a protracted and exciting chase. But fear and terror would additionally be occasioned to the peasants, villagers and rustics who likewise resided in the forest and whose lives and livelihoods might be severely jeopardised through the sport legally enjoyed by visiting nobility and their retainers.

The 'blanching of faces', as described by the second kenning, may represent the medieval rural belief that bringing hawthorn blossom into a house would encourage illness and in time lead to a death in the family. It was a superstition based largely on a smell – a smell that is genuinely exuded by hawthorn blossom once kept indoors, and that is offensively similar to the stench of decay and death. Only in the twentieth century was this unpleasant odour traced to the presence in hawthorn blossom of trimethylamine, which is indeed one of the primary chemical substances formed in decaying animal tissue.

Perhaps connected with this apparent link with death is the Scottish folkloric belief that the hawthorn bush may be a marker for the portal or gateway to the Otherworld, a boundary to the world not only of the ancestors but also of the fairies. The hawthorn is certainly throughout Britain by far the most common tree or bush used in boundary hedges – indeed, the 'haw' of hawthorn is actually another form of the word *hedge*.

In Ireland, however, hawthorn bushes tend to grow more often as 'lone bushes' in the landscape, that is, separate and isolated from other plants.<sup>34</sup> With their long and potentially painful thorns, they are dangerous enough to blunder into and try to force your way through even in daylight, but the penalties can be truly gory at night-time if you don't see their low outline in the dark. And this may correspond to the warning implicit in the third kenning, 'most difficult at night' – and to the hawthorn's description as 'unloved' in the account of *The Battle of the Trees*. On the other hand, something else that might well seem 'most difficult at night' is to keep warm while trying to sleep. Hawthorn sticks make excellent firewood, burning slowly but giving off a good amount of heat.

All three kennings thus suggest a danger or problem to be avoided or overcome – at the least, a challenge to be met.

And yet, on a completely different plane there is another possible interpretation that ties together all three kennings, and does so with due deference to Celtic mythology and to all aspects of tree lore.

The Glastonbury thorn reputedly 'planted' by Joseph of Arimathea in the first century AD while he was 'on Tor' there from the Holy Land, was a hawthorn tree. But it was a hawthorn tree of a very special kind. It had the unique ability to put out clusters of shining white flowers not just in late spring but also in the dark days just after midwinter. In that time of very low visibility, the flowers might appear like little white lozenges on a matt black background . . . like the backs of a pack of hounds in a dark, dark wood. Like, for instance, the backs of the baying hounds that belong to Arawn, ruler of the Otherworld, as driven by the black-visaged King Gwyn ap Nudd at the dead of a midwinter night across the sombre Welsh mountainsides together collecting the souls of those mortals whose faces are in death also whitening in the darkness. (In the equivalent Nordic myth the part of King Gwyn is played by our old rune-mate, the god Odin, and the ominously grim mountains are those of the glacial Frost-Giants.)

Now I am not saying that this rather fanciful exposition deserves any more attention than the distinctly prosaic and practical interpretations I have offered for the kennings up to this point, but the fact is that in its attention to the details of nature, its reference to the operations of divinities, its description of topographical landscapes and its mention of the dead and of the afterlife, it is altogether a microcosm of tree lore, of wisdom that spans and encompasses the three worlds and is timeless and yet permanent.

My point is that all the kennings – *all* the kennings associated with *all* of the ogam letters, no matter how long ago or how recently that association was made – together represent not only an excellent example of the entire centuries-old tradition of tree lore, they represent (in themselves and in the

current modern interpretations of them) what is the latest most up-to-date state-of-the-art form of that tradition. The ancient and particularly Celtic tradition that wisdom begins with *words*, because words when put together fluently and powerfully comprise information about anything and everything that can be usefully learned. Information about the operations of the gods and the deeds and intentions of ancestors past. Information about the present – what is happening now, where it is happening, how it is happening, and even why it is happening. Information about what is known of the future and that can be passed on to the future and will be passed on to the future as something important enough to be remembered for generations. Important enough to be commemorated as tradition . . . and perhaps in time to change, as tradition, as people want their tradition to change and adapt.

This is the tradition that the Romans became aware of thanks to their contacts with the Celtic Gauls and their acquaintance with the god Ogmios. This is the tradition that in the next millennium became associated with the ogam alphabet – only it wasn't called the ogam alphabet at that stage – which continued the theme of the passing on and commemoration of useful information: information that was practical and learnable and yet had resonance with the past, the present and the future. This is the tradition that in the next millennium adapted the theme further, and resorted to using the ogam alphabet only as a basis, a framework, on which tree lore could be hung – a glossary of technical terms to which 'reminders' in the form of kennings could be attached to more detailed information not just about trees and other plants but about how that information applied to social and cultural life in Ireland (and parts of Wales, Scotland, England and the nearby islands) of the time.

It is this stage of the tradition that druidry celebrates today. And druidry is right to celebrate it, even if the information it embodies mainly concerns social and cultural life of a few centuries ago now. There is some marvellous history in it. It is a tradition, however, that in this currently celebrated form actually has far less to do with the ogam alphabet *as an alphabet* than it used to. Of course it does. The tradition has adapted and moved on, as traditions do. Tree lore has nonetheless continued, thanks to the kennings, now involving more attention to those aspects that relate to the social uses of trees and plants, and less attention to those aspects of mythical and metaphysical forces and the afterlife that society and culture have likewise largely abandoned.

## D

ogam symbol and name	etymology	associated plant 'by tradition'
 <b>dair</b>	Early Irish <i>dair</i> , <i>dár</i> 'oak tree' ancient Greek <i>drys</i> 'oak tree' Welsh <i>derw</i> - 'oak tree' Old English <i>træow</i> 'tree' akin to modern English <i>træe</i> and connected with <i>druid</i>	<b>oak tree</b>

Briatharogam kennings	apparent meaning (McManus)
<i>(The Ogham Tract) Morann mac Moin:</i> <b><i>ardam dosae</i></b>	<b>highest tree</b>
<i>(The Ogham Tract) Mac ind Og:</i> <b><i>grés soir</i></b>	<b>handicraft of a craftsman</b>
<i>(16th-/17th-century MSS) Con Culainn:</i> <b><i>slechtam soire</i></b>	<b>most carved of craftsmanship</b>

**Illustration 20a:** D for *dair* and the oak tree, actually associated more with ancient Gaulish and British druidry than with Irish Celts. Academic scholars tend to maintain that the word 'highest' in the first kenning does not necessarily mean 'tallest'.

I have presented a few examples of this revised tradition – and there are many others I could go on to present. I could, for example, say that the kennings for the ogam letter named after the oak are disappointingly prosaic, and merely describe the tree as 'highest' (perhaps, though, in the sense that an altar, a priest or a king may be 'high') and the tree most commonly favoured in their craft by wood-

carvers. Hercules would have been considerably deflated by this comparatively mundane characterisation.

On the other hand, the kennings for the ogam letter 'by tradition' associated with holly (but with no etymological connection whatever with holly) indicate more of the specialist uses that holly wood, twigs and leaves were put to in olden times. One main use of the wood was in overlapping strips to

form the waterproof lining of an outdoor cooking pit in which whole chunks of animals would be boiled for their meat. The meat and the water would be placed in the pit when still cold, while rocks were heated up in a fire near by.

The wood used to heat the rocks would also be holly. When very hot, the rocks would be levered into the water in the pit, the meat would thereupon be boiled – and the wood in the fire would have become re-usable as charcoal, highly valuable in the making or repairing of any wood-and-metal tool, weapon or cartwheel consisting of up to 33% iron. This rather loose connection between holly and wheels may or may not be figuratively represented by the use of holly leaves and berries in festive wreaths (in which the actual holly content is quite often, coincidentally, around 33%).

## T

ogam symbol and name	etymology	associated plant 'by tradition'
 <b>tinne</b>	Early Irish <i>finnæ</i> 'shaped metal', 'iron bar', 'ingot' English <i>tin</i> – but probably ultimately from a Gaulish/Comish root, from which Latin derived <i>stannum</i> 'tin'	<b>holly</b>

Briatharogam kennings	apparent meaning (McManus)
( <i>The Ogham Tract</i> ) Morann mac Moin: <i>trian roith</i>	<b>one of three parts of a wheel</b>
( <i>The Ogham Tract</i> ) Mac ind Og: <i>smiur gúaile</i>	<b>marrow of charcoal</b>
(16th-/17th-century MSS) Con Culainn: <i>trian n-aim</i>	<b>one of three parts of a weapon</b>

**Illustration 20b:** T for *tinne* associated 'by tradition' with the holly bush but in fact the same word as English *tin*, according to Eric Partridge in his etymological *Origins*.

But why go on any further? I think I have made my point.

In the days when the kennings were written, they were aspects people might need only the slightest hint of to remind them all about. It was traditional knowledge – knowledge that everybody had and that everybody *needed* to have in their daily lives. We need *different* knowledge in our daily lives now, and actually a lot more of it, which is why many of us carry with us an auxiliary electronic memory or the means of instantly accessing that sort of memory. It is *tradition* that endeavours to ensure that the old knowledge that is no longer so immediately useful (if it is useful at all) remains accessible in a similar (if comparatively vestigial) way. And it is something to be proud of. It is part of our history – part of everyday life for our ancestors over centuries and even over millennia. And just as we like to believe that Druids were long ago in the forefront of the effort of maintaining the tree lore and woodcraft and promoting an overall love of nature, we can take great pleasure and gratification from the fact that modern druidry is still in the business of maintaining that lore and promoting ecological care and concern.

The ogam alphabet may not have been a 'tree alphabet' when it started, and may indeed be somewhat poorly described as such even now in that not *all* the letters of the ogam alphabet are linked to arboreal plants, but it has from the very beginning and in a fundamental way deserved to be described as '*the tree alphabet*'. Hopefully it will go on being so described as long as druidry itself continues to be a force for the maintaining of such an environmentally important historic tradition.

But you must expect it to adapt and change in perception and even in commemoration . . . because that is what traditions do.

## Endnotes

- 1 The Romans were, however, peace-loving only as long as they were in militarily enforceable control of the peace. They might even be described as equally ecologically-minded – except that they required others to recognise their right to the ownership and to the proprietorial use of all elements of the local ecology.
- 2 No one knows precisely when the ogam alphabet was devised, but it had already been in use for at least one century before the 4th century AD, which is the date of the first well-attested ogam inscriptions (O’Kelly, *Early Ireland*, 1989: 250). Evidence for this comprises the ‘letters’ in the alphabet that relate to phonemes that were already obsolete in Early Irish (the actual pronunciation of two or three of which still remains uncertain today). One commentator (Carney, *The Invention of the Ogham Cipher*, 1975) suggests that the date of devising may even have been as early as the 1st century BC. In any case, the alphabet did not come to be named ogam or necessarily associated with the hero-deity Ogmia for a millennium or more thereafter.
- 3 That the Neanderthals (in particular) cooked their food over wood-fuelled fires, used wood to build shelters and make crude spears and shields, and even discovered how to fashion handles for stone implements out of wood that could then be attached to the implements using resinous pitch, was confirmed by research following excavations carried out in England during 2011 by an archaeological team from the University of Boulder, Colorado.
- 4 Many linguistic scholars today seem almost obsessed with the idea that Proto-Indo-European ‘etymons’ – hypothetical roots defined by experts and consisting largely of a consonant and a vowel and perhaps another consonant or consonantal combination – represent an infallible guide to prehistoric forms of Indo-European languages. They thus ignore the fact that PIE roots were only first seriously considered in the mid-1980s and remain by definition hypothetical and based on a supposed standardisation of language in a supposed specific area at a supposed specific moment in ancient history. They also seem to ignore the even more pertinent fact that citing a Proto-Indo-European root of a specific word by itself says very little about the word, and even less about *why* the word came to mean what it does and how it therefore relates to other words which are associated with the same or very similar roots and which may yet have widely divergent current meanings.  
Moreover, it is now pretty widely accepted that Proto-Indo-European is just one group of (still only hypothesised) historical linguistic bases in what some authorities currently call the EurAsiatic macrofamily of languages (which includes the Uralic and Altaic language so-called families, both of which contain languages that are much more loosely connected with each other than those in the Indo-European language family). And even then, the EurAsiatic macrofamily is now considered by many highly respected linguistic historians (listed online in Wikipedia – although that need not be regarded as a recommendation) again only to be one macrofamily of perhaps four (including Afro-Asiatic, Kartvelian and Dravidian) in the Nostratic superfamily of languages.
- 5 Lucian (AD c.120–192) was born and wrote mainly in the important Roman town of Samosata, on the bank of the River Euphrates in what is now south-eastern Turkey (and at a point that is at present part of the site of – and submerged within – the Atatürk Dam). A satirical writer, his conversation with the Gaulish contact is recorded in his *Prolalia Heraklēs*, ‘Early Hercules Gossip’, a story that essentially made fun of Gaulish beliefs mostly by comparing artistic depictions of the Graeco-Roman Hercules and the Celtic Ogmios..
- 6 Amber and gold, a precious ‘stone’ and a precious metal, valuable for their rarity but also because they could be relatively easily worked or shaped into trinkets or ornaments. From an ancient Roman point of view, however, the nearest major sources of both were concentrated in what was or had been Gaulish territory.
- 7 Few bother to remember that the murders committed by Hercules were those of his wife Megara, and their daughter and son, whom he loved dearly and would never voluntarily have harmed had he not been under the baneful influence of the mighty goddess Hera, a lifelong enemy (see Endnote 11 below). Hercules actually despised King Eurystheus, who was his cousin, but dutifully carried out the

Labours for him in genuine remorse – and as he was instructed to by the Delphic Oracle of Pythia, priestess of Apollo.

8 The Erymanthian boar was so called because it lived on the slopes of Mt Erymanthos, fourth-highest mountain on the Peloponnese peninsula of Greece, on the border of two regions in ancient times called Achaea and Elis. It was Elis – of which Augeas was king – where Hercules's *next* Labour was scheduled to take place.

9 Stymphalos is now called Stymfalia, a village in a mountain valley in the north of the Peloponnese peninsula. In ancient times the region was a hotbed of the worship of the goddess Hera, who was worshipped there in a triple form now more often associated with Celtic mythology. The association with Hera is highly relevant (see Endnote 11 below).

10 *The Ogham Tract* is in Irish called *In Lebor Ogaim* ('The Book of Ogams') and is comprised mainly of three manuscripts – one fourteenth-century, one sixteenth-century and one seventeenth-century – plus odd fragments in the British Library, which together seem to have been the primary basis for training in all the diverse forms and vocabularies of ogam studied by bardic pupils following a strict regimen over a minimum of three years.

11 That Hera was initially a goddess of death is stated by Robert Graves in his influential work *The White Princess*. However, Hera was more probably one form of the original Great Goddess, apprehended as the Ideal Female, the Wife and Mother, and the Leader and (if necessary) frenzied Defender of the family or the community – a triplicity that corresponds to the Celtic notion of dangerous mythical female trios (see Endnote 9 above). Hera's association with death would surely have had mostly to do with death in childbirth and death in battle between communities. In later Greek times, Hera was reduced to performing a grumpily matriarchal role in the pantheon, and the more violent and warlike aspects were transferred to Pallas (who was even later combined with the much less violent and much more cerebral goddess Athene). It was this form of Hera that was equated with the Roman Juno, while the Roman equivalent of Pallas was the cognately-named Bellona (whereas the Roman equivalent of Athene was Minerva).

It should be noted that although the name Hercules/Herakles is generally translated as 'Glory of Hera', an equally if not more accurate interpretation would be '(Person) picked out by Hera for blatantly public special treatment'.

12 The Norse (northern Germanic) World Tree is by far the best known in English-speaking countries, but other major European cultures that at one time or another have revered a World Tree include the Hungarian, the Finnish-Estonian, and the Latvian-Lithuanian. In Asia, World Trees are represented in Turkic, Hindu, Mongolian and Chinese mythologies, and are also included in the traditions of some scattered (non-Slavonic-speaking) Siberian ethnicities.

The identical concept was furthermore prevalent among many preColumbian Mesoamerican cultures, notably the Maya, the Aztec, the Olmec and the Mixtec, some communities of whom are thought at their ceremonial centres accordingly to have tended four largish trees in a square formation, intended to mark the four 'corners of the world' – i.e. the four cardinal directions. It is not at all impossible that the classic Druidic 'grove' might have originated in a similar fashion, thus corresponding to a separate little 'world' by itself. Druidic ceremonies usually involve some measure of an address to the four cardinal points . . .

13 Until at least the mid-1990s, Yggdrasil was held by all linguists and mythological historians to correspond to the European or common ash tree (*Fraxinus excelsior*). It was only then pointed out that

- some ancient texts (including the Eddas, produced in thirteenth-century Iceland) described it as an evergreen tree – which the European ash is not;
- ash trees are not particularly common in mountainous Norway (but are much better attested as strong, tall, longlived and venerable trees in southern Sweden which is mostly rolling but lake-covered lowland);
- a tree which would fit the bill much more closely would be the European or common yew tree (*Taxus baccata*) – which in Old Norse was frequently called the 'needle ash' (*barraskr*) tree anyway.

Whether Yggdrasil was an ash tree, a yew tree or some other kind of tree makes little difference to this lecture, however, for – as we may already have noted – tree heroes and tree deities were associated by

their venerators with whatever was the tallest, strongest, straightest and/or longest-living tree known to the local culture, and which tree that was naturally depended on latitude, longitude, climate, soil type and any other prevailing factors, including relevant local superstition.

14 The two Battles of Magh Tuireadh, formerly known in English as the Battles of Mag Tuired (in which the Irish place-name means ‘Plain of Towers’), took place between successive waves of Celtic invaders of Ireland. The Fir Bolg – who may or may not have been the Celtic tribe known to the Romans as the Belgae, and who, if they were, in those early days lived in what is now mainly Hampshire, Dorset, Wiltshire and Somerset, with their major city as Winchester [Roman *Venta Belgarum*] – arrived in Ireland first. The Tuatha Dé Danann – who may or may not have been the Celtic tribe known to the Romans as the Dumnonii, and who, if they were, in those early days lived in what is now Devon – then came on the scene and strove in the first Battle of Magh Tuireadh (in what is now County Mayo) to take over their territory. Eventually they managed it, although having to concede certain rights and properties in order to make peace secure.

But the Tuatha Dé Danann were closely blood-related to a third Celtic tribe, the Fomorians, who had in fact resided in Ireland from even before the Fir Bolg, but who had given the Fir Bolg no trouble up to then. Now the Fomorians insisted not only in sharing the spoils of the first Battle but in being the dominant partner in everyday political and social life too – to the fury of the Tuatha Dé Danann, who despite their interrelationship instantly took to regarding the Fomorians not only as rebellious upstarts but as unholy creatures from a hideously subversive Underworld. The Second Battle of Magh Tuireadh (in what is now County Sligo) took place accordingly. The victors were the Tuatha Dé Danann – but at a cost.

The harp seized by the Fomorians and recaptured by Ogma, The Dagda and Lugh is, regrettably, my only excuse for including the fascinating but otherwise not particularly relevant paragraphs above. Nonetheless, the fact that the harp was seen as so essential to cultural life among mighty leaders (such as Ogma) and even gods (such as The Dagda and Lugh) as to require overcoming death to reclaim possession of it, demonstrates the importance perhaps not so much of music as of bardic influence on everyday life and learning in the days when the history of the two Battles was being written down. It connects Ogma with bardic training and presentation, as indeed the (partial) attribution to him of the ogam alphabet was to do a little later.

15 Julius Caesar, *Commentarii de Bello Gallico*, Book VI (40s–50s BC), although at least one critic (Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe: The History of the Druids in Britain*, 2009: 4–5) has claimed that part of Caesar’s agenda in making his comments was to suggest that Druidic society was in some ways advanced and in other ways barbaric, and that it would therefore be no more than an act of altruistic kindness on the part of the Romans to visit the Pax Romana on them, so demonstrating that Roman society was advanced in the ways that the Gauls were advanced, but also advanced in the ways the Gauls were barbaric, and bringing them up to scratch.

16 The words of Gaius Suetonius Paulinus – his name often alternatively abbreviated to Suetonius rather than to Paulinus – were recorded by Tacitus (*Annals*, Book XIV) some decades later, probably from notes left (or dictated verbatim) by Tacitus’s father-in-law, Gnaeus Julius Agricola, who had been a military officer on Paulinus’s staff.

17 See Endnote 2 above.

18 Damian McManus – Professor of Early Irish and Head of the Department of Irish at Trinity College, Dublin – is currently the acknowledged authority on the history and probable social circumstances surrounding the ogam alphabet over the centuries. His classic work, expressed primarily in two books – *Ogam: Archaizing, Orthography and the Authenticity of the Manuscript Key to the Alphabet*, 1988, and *A Guide to Ogam*, 1991 – is particularly informative on the possible etymological derivation of the ogam letter-names, and on the changes in the alphabet as the Irish language itself changed (partly under the increasing linguistic and educational influence of the Roman Catholic Church).

19 It should be emphasised that Vortepor or Vorteporix (even as transcribed into Welsh as Gwrthefyr) would appear to be a solidly Irish name, and that the community in Wales over which he was leader must therefore have had powerful links with communities in Ireland. It should also be emphasised that the title ‘Protector’ he used as leader was a Roman (not a Welsh) title. It is generally therefore assumed that he was brought in from Ireland to command a troop of Irish mercenary warriors

to defend the Welsh community from the contemporary incursions into the area by the forces of King Maelgwn of Gwynedd, the ‘Dragon of the Isle [of Anglesey]’.

20 One half of the inscription, at Eglwyscummin (Eglwys Gymyn), Carmarthenshire, reads: AVITORIGES INIGENA CUNIGNI (‘Avitoriges daughter of Cunignus’), which similarly betrays Irish and Latin influences as well as Welsh, in that ‘Avitoriges’ is a Latinised version of what is probably an Irish (Goidelic) name and ‘Cunignus’ is a Latinised version of the Welsh (Brythonic) name Cynin or Cynan. The other half of the inscription is altogether in Latin – AVITORIA FILIA CUNIGANI – and means the same thing.

21 The suggestion that the symbols corresponding to the ogam alphabet initially consisted of three groups each representing five consonants, and that the vowels were not represented symbolically at all – which is largely the situation as it was in the case of the early Hebrew alphabet – is somewhat surprisingly enthusiastically espoused online by several deeply committed US Christian websites which seem to wish specifically to equate the Hebrew and ogam alphabets historically. (Presumably, they prefer to take literally the medieval Irish notion that ogam was devised not by Ogma but by the sage Fenius [or Phoenius] Farsaidh who arrived at the site of the Tower of Babel at or shortly after its destruction, and learned all he could from the people who had been there to assist him in creating the ogam alphabet.) These US websites certainly make it quite clear that they regard ogam as older by at least two millennia than there is currently any evidence whatever for.

22 No one defends a lost cause more vociferously than the Irish. And good luck to them.

23 See Endnote 21 above.

24 Private correspondence with Dr Rhona Fogarty, Irish linguistic scholar and expert on the history of the ogam alphabet and its use, December 2015.

25 The main mythical connection of Angus Og – the first name also spelled Oingus, Aengus and Aonghus – with bardic Druidry otherwise is through his being regarded as a source of divine poetic inspiration. Songbirds are traditionally held to have perpetually circled above his head, filling the air with delightful sounds. As the Irish might say, he must have been trilled.

26 There is little or no evident bardic connection with Cúchulainn other than that most mythological authorities tend to compare the stories of his violent youth and hectic lifestyle involving amazing feats of strength, sometimes also involving bouts of frenzy, with those concerning the Graeco-Roman Hercules (who, as we have seen, is in turn also comparable in some significant respects with first the Gaulish Ogmios and then the Irish Ogma, both of whom may be said genuinely to have bardic connections).

It is possible, however, that there is a much more definite connection between Cúchulainn and Hercules, remembering that Cúchulainn is not actually a name but a title. At birth, the boy who was to be known far better as Cúchulainn was actually named Setanta (Séadanta). Why was he renamed? Myth has it that he voluntarily, if temporarily, replaced the much-prized guard-dog of the blacksmith in charge of the feasting venue near which he had meant to study warfare, after he had killed the animal in self-defence. He thus became *cú Chulainn*, ‘the dog of Culan’, Culan being the blacksmith.

But this seems horribly contrived when you bear in mind that Setanta’s excuse that he was doing no more than defend himself was accepted by all; that Culan was not the principal guest at the feast even if he was the owner of the dog, and it had been the principal guest’s fault that Setanta and the dog had encountered each other quite unexpectedly; and that *culén* is in any case the Early Irish for ‘young dog’ so that ‘Culan’ might not have been the blacksmith’s original name, if indeed in the original story he was a blacksmith at all.

And there is a much simpler, more ordinary, possible derivation for the name Cúchulainn – one that not only resonates with historic and modern Irish names but that additionally has connotations that demonstrably link with the ancient myth of Hercules.

The well-attested Irish surname Coghlan (and Coughlan, Coughlin, Cohalan, etc.) comes ultimately from the Latin *cucull(an)us* ‘hooded’, ‘wearing a small cape’, although the Latin word itself may be derived from ancient Celtic sources. In English, *cucullus* has become the word *cowl* (Welsh *cwcwll* or *cwfl*). There is no suggestion that Setanta necessarily wore a hood or cowl – but Hercules did. His first Labour was to slay the Nemean lion. When he had done so, he skinned it and wore the skin as outer clothing, the head fitting over his own head as a fearsome-looking hood (albeit described

in many reference works for younger readers as ‘a lionskin cap’) – and this is how he is depicted in many ancient Roman murals and bits of statuary. Because of this, Hercules was duly associated with an entire type of spirit being called by the Romans a *genius cucullatus*. The *genii cucullati* are somewhat mysteriously shadowy figures, and may at one time or another have had connotations of male sexual potency, but coins depicting them have been found in Britain and all over northern Europe, particularly in the Rhineland (Ronald Hutton, *The Pagan Religions of the Ancient British Isles*, 1991: 214–216). A number of the coins have a depiction of Hercules on the other side.

27 Brehon judges were originally men who were familiar with druidic laws and traditions and who might be appointed by their clans to arbitrate between families or individuals, and to settle disputes. This naturally required a judge to be both respected and respectable, responsive and responsible. It required conspicuous learning, wisdom and social nous. The earliest form of such a judge would have been the equivalent of a juridical druid.

Morann mac Moin was the Brehon or Chief Justice during the reign of King Feredach Fionn-Feachtach (14 BC – AD 36), and is said to have been the first to wear the celebrated *Iodhain Morain*, a magical collar which contracted ever more tightly around the neck of the judge if he began to give a false judgement (but which would expand again immediately if the judge just as quickly reversed that judgement).

28 We should be a bit careful with these names even in English: Only in English English (apart from in Welsh), after all, is *Betula pendula* mostly called the silver birch. In American English it is known as the European white birch ... which is unfortunate, because in English English *Betula pubescens* is the white birch. Meanwhile, both trees in any case have alternative names in English English: the silver birch may be described (comparatively rarely) as the warty birch, whereas the white birch may be described (possibly even more commonly) as the downy birch.

Other major European languages may use one or more of these descriptions, or may have an idiosyncratic description of their own:

	<i>Betula pendula</i>	<i>Betula pubescens</i>
English	silver birch, warty birch (In US: European white birch)	white birch, downy birch, moor birch, hairy birch
German	‘drooping birch’, ‘white birch’, ‘sand birch’, ‘warty birch’	‘moor birch’, ‘hair(y) birch’, ‘brush birch’, ‘glass birch’
Danish	‘warty birch’	‘down(y) birch’
Spanish	‘common birch’, ‘European birch’, ‘warty birch’, ‘drooping birch’	‘pubescent birch’
French	‘warty birch’	‘pubescent birch’
Finnish	‘iron birch’	‘sweating birch’
Italian	‘white birch’	<i>Betula pubescens</i>
Hungarian	‘common birch’, ‘warty birch’	‘downy birch’, ‘hairy birch’, ‘smooth birch’
Dutch	‘rough birch’	‘soft birch’
Polish	‘warty birch’	‘downy birch’
Russian	‘drooping birch’	‘hairy birch’, ‘downy birch’
Welsh	‘silver birch’	‘downy birch’

29 That is, that the name of the late addition to the *forfeda* called ‘beith bhog’ or ‘peithboc’ should be interpreted in the spirit of the tradition to mean ‘soft birch’. However, at the time this additional letter was tacked on to the alphabet, *beith* was as much the name of the ogam letter (the equivalent of B) as it was the word for ‘birch’, and its introduction was to bring back into the alphabet the equivalent of P

that had long been missing (but also long used, as in personal names such as ‘Patrick’). Notwithstanding the Dutch description of *Betula pubescens* (see table in Endnote 28), the point was thus not arboreal but phonetic. The added letter should be pronounced as a ‘soft B’ – or P.

The modern authorities who evidently missed this point regrettably included OBOD for a time.

30 As noted online by Paul Kendall of Trees For Life (the award-winning Scottish charity working to restore both the trees of the old Caledonian Forest and the wildlife that lived within it) ... who very carefully does not relate *rowan* and *rune* etymologically.

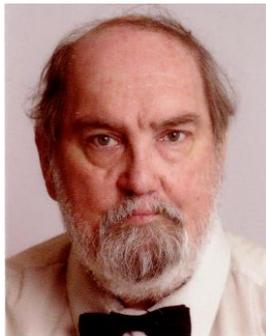
31 Alexander MacBain, *An Etymological Dictionary of the Gaelic Language*, 1896, revised 1911, reprinted by photolitho by Gairm Publications 1982, reproduced online by John T. McCranie, courtesy of San Francisco State University.

32 See Endnote 18.

33 *The Scholar's Primer*, Ogham 279.

34 This according to the indefatigable Paul Kendall of Trees For Life (see Endnote 30 above).

## The author: Mike Darton



Author Mike Darton knows all about centuries-old traditions. His family has been writing, producing, publishing and/or selling literary works for more than 360 years, and he himself – lexicographer, encyclopaedist, classicist, religious historian, musicologist, nature photographer and writer of faintly amusing books on household pets – has valiantly maintained that tradition over what sometimes seems to him like much the same length of time.

Preparing this Mt Haemus Lecture has been a particular pleasure for Mike, however, in that it has involved having to research, explain and present so much information relating to his own special interests. Tree lore is not exactly a well-established academic field, after all, and yet in Mike's happy view it pleasingly combines Celtic languages ancient and modern, etymology in general, the mythology of ancient Greece, Rome and Gaul, metaphysical ideals (including religious and philosophical aspects), the history of human civilisation and social and technological development (including writing), and a deep and admiring respect for nature. Moreover, it does all of this in the sort of detail that only a self-acknowledged pedant like Mike would not only thoroughly enjoy but is hopefully able to render interesting to others.