The Impetus for Ogam and the Issue of Celticity

Toby D. Griffen
Southern Illinois University Edwardsville

In recent research (Griffen 2002, 2003a), the date for the origin of the ogam signary has gradually been moved back. First, the development of ogam was seen to have taken place long before the script was displayed on stone monuments (which were probably erected in imitation of Roman grave markers). Next, it was seen to have preceded regular trade contact between the Greeks and the Celts of Western Europe.

Now, an examination of even more ancient archaeological evidence places the impetus for the development of ogam so far back that we find ourselves in a quandary as to the very cultural basis for Celticity.

The Age of Ogam

In Griffen 2002, *P was reconstructed as the antecedent of H in the ogam signary, as shown in figure 1. This reconstruction was based upon the phonetic structure of the signary's array and comparative evidence among Irish ogam, Pictish ogam, and Latin.

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

Figure 1: The Ogam Signary

In the structure of the array (reading each column from the bottom), the vowel column begins with the logical entry point into the vowel triangle within the oral cavity – A. From this point, we can proceed into the cavity in logical stages first in the back – from O to U – and then in the front – from E to I. This symmetrical, articulatorily-based progression is matched in the first and third (consonantal)

columns by labial consonants – B and M – which also represent the most logical entry point into the oral cavity for consonants. Moreover, the B introduces the "soft" column with the lenis labial and the M introduces the "complex" column with the complex, nasal labial. Within this framework, H is totally anomalous, for it contradicts the pattern established in the other columns, as it introduces the "hard" column from an inconsistent position and manner. *P, on the other hand, fits the pattern precisely both in "order" and in "series."

Comparative evidence corroborates the *P in this position. Indo-European */p/ changed in Celtic through /χ/ to null. Thus, the Latin root *nepot-* 'nephew, grandson' corresponds in Pictish ogam to NEHT- with the intermediate fricative and in Irish ogam to NET- with the null realization. This firmly establishes the historical roots of H in *P, and it demands that the *P be in the original array of the ogam signary.

Then in Griffen 2003a, an examination of the interaction between the ogam signs based upon tally markings and the Greek system of representing numbers by letters suggested that the two systems were most likely related through some cultural interaction. The Greek system developed in the sixth century BCE evidently as a result of the influence of the ogam letter-*per*-number system on the primitive Greek acrophonic number designations. This timing would correspond quite conveniently to the establishment of the Greek colony at Massilia (Marseilles) around 600 BCE and the opening of regular trade with the western Celts.

The important point in this for the dating of ogam is the fact that at the time of contact, the array had to have been well established both in its numerical and in its linguistic functions. Indeed, evidence from the Celtic or Celtic-influenced dialects of Lepontic and Ligurian shows that the subsequent shift from /k^w/ to /p/ had already occurred even in these areas, so the initial shift from /p/ to /χ/ or null must have been completed for quite some time. This moved the date for the establishment of the ogam signary with its original *P to some point before the seventh century BCE, quite possibly back into the second millennium.

The Impetus for Ogam

At last, we can lay to rest the old notion that ogam was some sort of cipher based upon Latin or Greek (for example, Macalister 1937 – compare McManus 1991: 31). The findings do, however, introduce two new questions: (1) What was the impetus for this tally-based alphabetic system of writing; and (2) where did the system originate? In order to address these questions, we need to leave the Mediterranean and shift our attention to the physical archaeological evidence that we have from the area that was or was to become "Celtic" Europe.

The key to answering these questions necessarily lies in a time before the inception of the system itself, and this draws us inexorably back into the Megalithic. Since we have no writing from the Megalithic period in Western Europe, we shall have to examine the logical source for graphic representations – the art. Let us therefore turn to the definitive compendium on the subject, Elizabeth Shee Twohig's *The Megalithic Art of Western Europe* (1981).

In her analysis of Megalithic art from the Iberian Peninsula, Brittany, and the "British Isles," which perhaps we ought now to designate simply as the "Isles" (compare Davies 1999: xxii), Twohig identifies a number of design types, or motifs, that could have evolved into some sort of writing system. Of course, since the ogam signary was quite transparently developed from a tally system, the graphic representations we are interested in are specifically those that could have provided an appropriate basis for the counting of tally marks. In figure 2, we find Twohig's "principal motifs in Iberian megalithic art" (1981: 23). Of these, several would appear to be amenable to the type of counting of tally marks that could have evolved into ogam script. For example, the triangles and V's of motif 3 do indeed provide the basis for number and column differentiation that could have provided the impetus for ogam, and the same could be said of motifs 4 through 6. As for motifs 7 through 9, these appear to be sun and moon symbols that are found frequently throughout the world. As the first radial-line motif (motif 7) is in fact found in the Cretan Linear A and B counting systems (see Ifrah 2000: 179), it could conceivably be a source for the process of tallying that resulted in the development of ogam. However, these designs are not very well developed in this region.

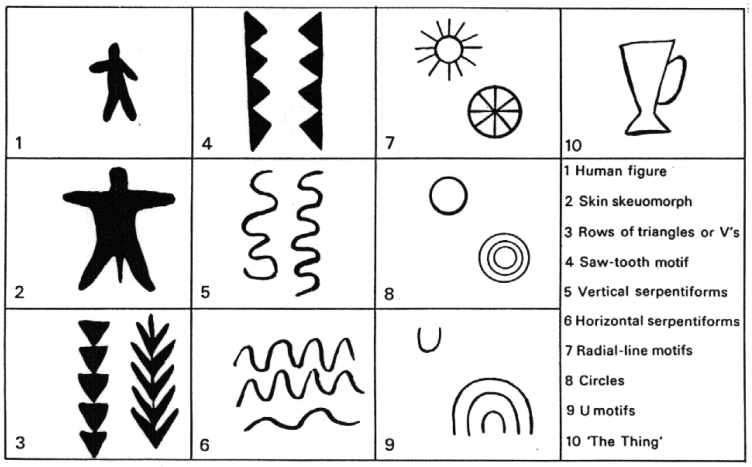

Figure 2: Motifs from Iberian Peninsula (after Twohig 1981: 23)

Turning our attention to figure 3, Twohig's "principal motifs of passage grave and related art in Brittany" (1981: 54), we find fewer motifs that could provide the tally base for ogam. The cross of motif 5 appears to be a dead-end, and motifs 3 and 4 are also rather limited. Once again, we find countable wavy lines in motif 11, although the arrangement would make them appear more like representations of water than tally markings. Finally, while the lines on motif 10 could hold some promise, the complicated nature of the buckler base rather limits this design as well.

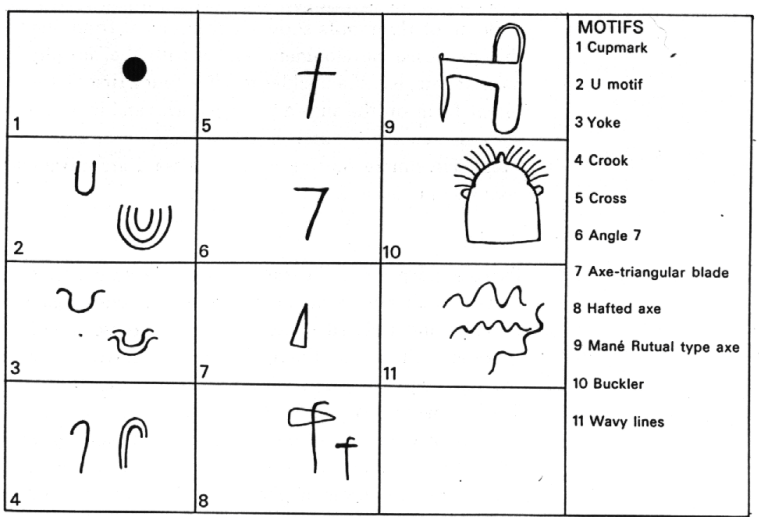

Figure 3: Motifs from Brittany (after Twohig 1981: 54)

The motifs from Ireland and Britain in figure 4 (Twohig 1981: 107), on the other hand, abound in countable lines. Certainly, the solar and lunar motifs 1 through 5 show more variation than do those from the Iberian Peninsula and Brittany. Most importantly, though, motifs 6 through 10 provide very promising bases for the simple tallying of lines that could have developed into ogam. Indeed, motif 6 and especially motif 7 already bear a striking resemblance to the system that would later define the ogam script.

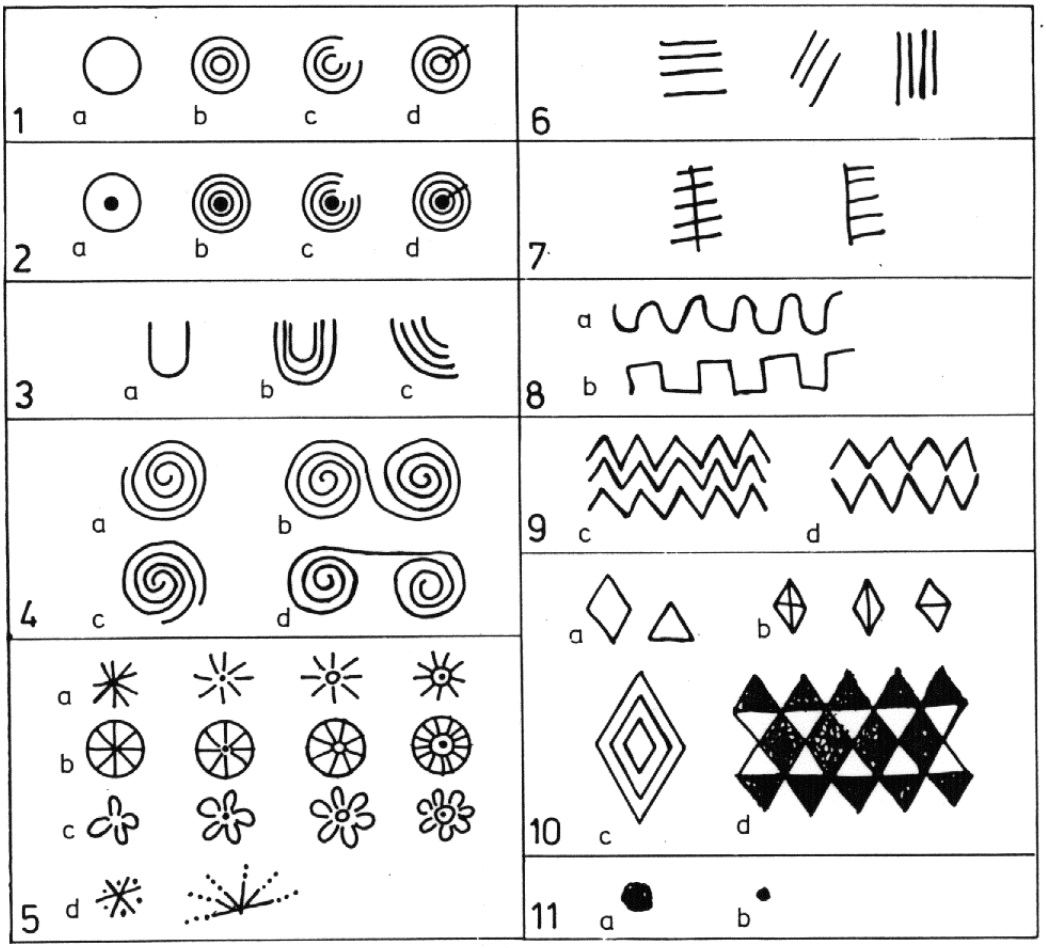

Figure 4: Motifs from Ireland and Britain (after Twohig 1981: 107)
1, Circle: a, single; b, concentric; c, pennannular; d, with radial line. 2, Circle with central dot as 1. 3, U motif: a, single; b, boxed; c, arcs. 4, Spiral: a, single (clockwise); b, double; c, running; d 'spectacle' or 's'. 5, Radial: a, with lines; b, lines and outer circle; c, with 'petals'; d, with dots between or at ends of line. 6, Parallel lines. 7, Offset motif. 8, Serpentiform: a, typical; b, squared. 9, Zigzag: a, parallel; b, apex to apex. 10, Lozenge/triangle: a, plain; b, divided lozenges and triangles. 11, a, Cupmark; b, dot.

Thus it would appear most likely that the motifs from the Isles could have provided the impetus for ogam. Moreover, this point of origin becomes even more obvious when we compare Twohig's distribution of the motifs, as in figure 5 (Twohig 1981: 137). As we look across the bottom of this bar graph at the various

motifs, we notice that the figures with lines most accommodating to some form of tally notation are those on the right. Here the appropriate motifs from the Isles clearly show predominance. Moreover, the Megalithic artists from Ireland and Britain actually appear to have avoided motifs that were not adaptable to tally marking.

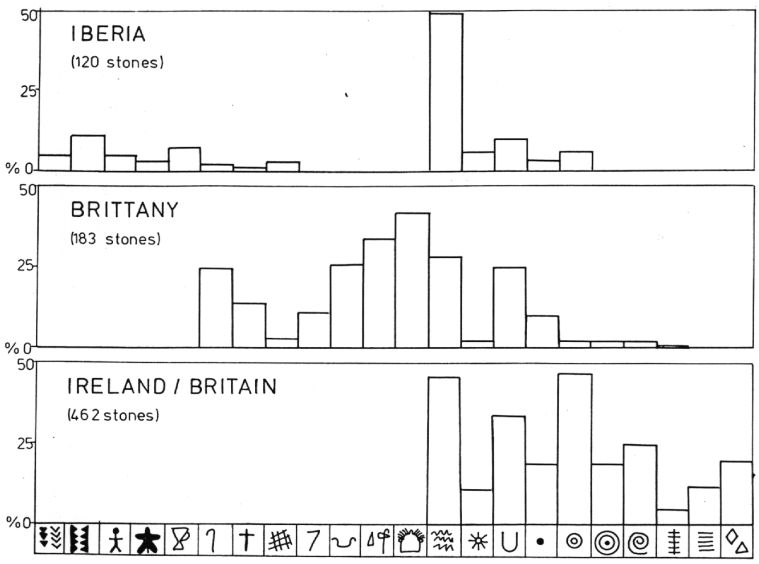

Figure 5: Distribution of Motifs (after Twohig 1981: 137)

What this means is that in their use of design motifs, the passage-grave and megalith builders from the Isles were quite obviously predisposed to working with designs that would support the type of line tallying that would later develop into the ogam system of writing. Indeed, the parallel lines and, to an even greater degree, the offsets transparently prefigure the ogam signary.

This is ***NOT*** to say that ogam was invented by the megalith builders of the Isles. Rather, these people most likely developed the design motifs that would first evolve into an appropriate tally system and then, through this tally system, supply the impetus for the subsequent development of the pattern of graphic representation found in ogam. Nonetheless, this does rather firmly indicate that the place of origin for the ogam script was the Isles.

This alone does not, however, entirely rule out even more ancient influences. After all, many of the signs in the script of the Vinča culture (see Winn 1981) also depended upon the number of lines per sign – to include parallel lines and offsets. Certainly, such practices could have provided some contributory impetus for the

development of ogam; or perhaps they may have had some reinforcing influence. As Paliga (1989) demonstrates, there was a cultural continuum between the "mega" inhabitants of western Europe and the "urbian" inhabitants of southeastern, or Old Europe.

To be sure, however, a direct Vinča influence would not appear to be likely at this point. For one thing, the Vinča script was already a linguistic writing system (see Griffen 2003b) and would have been more suitable for borrowing as writing. Moreover, the date for this script is rather too early. Nevertheless, we ought not to rule out entirely the possibility that at least the concept of writing may have lingered in Europe between the period of the Vinča inscriptions and the introduction of the Classical alphabets.

The Issue of Celticity

With the likelihood that ogam developed from the design motifs of the Isles, the question naturally arises as to whether ogam really was a "Celtic" invention. This depends upon a far more basic question: Is "Celtic" limited to Iron Age speakers of an Indo-European language, as though these speakers invaded in massive force and annihilated all that had come before them; or does it apply as well to those who created the base culture upon which this Iron Age society was superimposed and through which it often and extensively expressed itself? And if the latter, how far back are we willing to recognize this culture as being "Celtic" before the Iron Age?

If we take into consideration the work of such archaeologists as Christopher Hawkes (1973), then the matter of when the culture that produced ogam became Celtic may be seen as one of "cumulative Celticity." That is, there are a number of different factors from language to personal ornamentation and home construction that we may use to identify the Celts as a cultural group. How many of these factors must necessarily be present to classify the group as Celtic; and do some factors override others, no matter how numerous and prominent those others may be?

Even if we remain within the traditionally dominant field of philology, however, we still find ourselves in a very nebulous situation. Philologists define people by the language they speak and by the language they write. The evidence indicates that the impetus for the ogam signary came from motifs of Megalithic art consistent with those in the Isles and that it had already been in place long before people known to be speaking Celtic languages inhabited these islands. This was, after all, the last area to be exposed to the "Celtic culture," perhaps as late as the sixth century BCE (see, for example, Cunliffe 1997: 146). Unless Indo-European Celtic had already been introduced far earlier than linguists generally accept (for example, Beekes 1995 – but see Renfrew 1987, Gimbutas 1997),

"Celtic" writing was at some point different from "Celtic" speaking.

Even in philology, we must eschew artificial restrictions that result from taking one period of a continuous culture and treating it as if it were an isolated totality. For example, by concentrating on significant grammatical, regional, cultural, and genre distinctions, we could readily separate New High German language and literature from Old and Middle High German. Would we then be justified in restricting German as a whole only to the past six or seven centuries, with no recognition of a preexisting, broader German cultural continuity?

Nor do we have a clear geographic and ethnic distinction between pre-Celts and Celts. For example, the adoption and adaptation of the Minoan writing system by the Mycenaeans and of the Phoenician by the Greeks involve a transfer of technology from one distinct culture to another. In the case of ogam and the Celts, however, there appears to be far greater evidence of a continuum.

The extremely long cultural continuity from Megalithic art to Celtic script thus compels us to go beyond the traditionally overriding, yet now problematic field of philology. Language, art, religion, social structure, tools, affiliations, and a host of other considerations contribute to the determination of Celticity. Only in a more balanced approach can we reevaluate the entire body of evidence to find the point at which the cumulative effect of this evidence may call for the designation "Celtic." Such a reevaluation is necessary, even if this lead to Iron Age, Bronze Age, and perhaps even Neolithic "Celtic"– or if it lead to the removal of the designation, should it become too cumbersome.

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