

# Early Literacy and Multilingualism in Ireland and Britain

*David Stifter and Nora White, with a contribution  
by Katherine Forsyth*

## 8.1. Introduction

The main focus of this chapter is on the early literate tradition in the Irish language and how this tradition was born in the multilingual interaction with a neighbouring written culture, namely that of Latin in the island of Britain. Since a crucial part of this interaction with Ireland happened through British intermediaries or took place in Britain, both regions of the western archipelago will be considered in this survey, though the very different historical and sociolinguistic scenarios in the two islands necessitates looking at each separately.

In addition to Latin in the specific flavour as spoken in ancient Britain, hereafter referred to as British Latin, the two main languages are Irish and British. Irish (also called Goidelic) and British (also called British Celtic or Brythonic) are two distinct branches of the Celtic branch of the Indo-European languages, the others being Celtiberian and Gaulish (including Lepontic), which died out before the middle of the first millennium CE.<sup>1</sup> However, Irish and Latin cannot be looked at in isolation and aspects of the oldest written stages of other languages will also have to be considered briefly.

This article was written as part of three projects, namely *Chronologicon Hibernicum* (*ChronHib*) which has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No. 647351); *Harnessing Digital Technologies to Transform Understanding of Ogham Writing, from the 4th Century to the 21st* (OG(H)AM), funded by UKRI-AHRC and the Irish Research Council under the 'UK-Ireland Collaboration in the Digital Humanities Research Grants Call' (grant numbers AH/W001985/1 and IRC/W001985/1); and *Early Medieval Irish Latin Inscriptions* (EMILI), funded by a Nowlan digitization grant of the Royal Irish Academy. Section 8.5 contains important contributions from Katherine Forsyth. We are grateful to the editors of the volume for their advice and help.

<sup>1</sup> Celtiberian and Lepontic disappeared around the first century CE, Gaulish probably three or four centuries later. For more information about these languages, see Beltrán Lloris and Jordán Cólera (2020), Mullen and Ruiz Darasse (2020), and Stifter (2020b).

## 8.2. Background and Prehistory

When they come into the light of history around the beginning and in the first half of the first millennium CE respectively, British and Irish appear firmly established as the dominant languages in their islands. The earliest evidence is composed of personal and place-names in classical sources and on Latin and Irish epigraphy. With our knowledge of medieval and ancient Celtic languages and with our tools of comparative linguistics, these names can usually be very easily identified and analysed as Celtic, e.g. the name of the first-century BCE British king *Cunobelinus* ('being strong like a dog') < Celt. *\*kuno-* ('dog') < PIE *\*k̑un-* + *\*beli-no-* ('having strength') from the PIE root *\*bel-* ('strength'), or the Primitive Irish name CATTUVIR ('battle-man') < Celt. *\*katu-* < PIE *\*k̑atu-* ('fight') + *\*ȗiro-* ('man') from PIE *\*ȗiHro-* ('young man').

Any scholarly survey is incomplete and conveys a misleading picture of certainty if it does not address those aspects about which we know nothing. There is indeed plenty in the early history of multilingualism in the western archipelago about which we know next to nothing. While the outlines at least of the linguistic picture in antiquity and the early Middle Ages are clear, the situation in prehistory, even shortly before the dawn of history, is largely unknown. Celtic is a language family which develops out of Proto-Indo-European, an unattested proto-language reconstructed by linguists, which has its roots ultimately in the east of Europe.<sup>2</sup> From this it follows that the language or languages must have been brought to the islands by immigration sometime between the disintegration of Proto-Indo-European as a single language around the middle of the fourth millennium BCE, and the historical period. Opinions are strongly divided as to when this occurred. From a linguistic point of view, on account of the close similarity of the earliest accessible stages of the Insular Celtic languages to their Continental Celtic siblings and to reconstructed Proto-Celtic, their separation cannot have occurred very far back in time.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, a popular hypothesis among archaeologists is that, in the absence of a notable horizon in the archaeological record that would indicate large-scale immigration, an ancestral form of the Insular Celtic languages must have been present in Britain and Ireland at least since the arrival of the Corded Ware/Bell Beaker culture in the third millennium BCE. A variation of that theme is the hypothesis that Celtic developed as a trade or vehicular language along the Early Bronze Age Atlantic

<sup>2</sup> Anthony and Ringe (2015).

<sup>3</sup> Mallory (2013), 261–2. Since all languages are constantly changing and evolving, the observable similarities between these languages is an indication that only comparatively little time can have passed since they separated from another. However, it is not possible to put a precise figure on the duration.

seaboard that stretches from the Iberian Peninsula to the western islands and even further north.<sup>4</sup>

Progress in the palaeogenetic study of ancient DNA (aDNA) has added crucial new arguments to this debate. Geneticists observe a massive influx of populations with presumably Indo-European ‘steppe ancestry’ into Britain and subsequently Ireland in the middle of the third millennium BCE.<sup>5</sup> This apparent early Indo-European immigration into Britain is very unlikely to be the ancestor of the later Insular Celtic languages since it is too early to explain the close similarity of Insular and Continental Celtic languages. It must constitute a sort of *Indogermania submersa*, i.e. lost branches of Indo-European. If such languages were still spoken in the historic period, they have gone unrecorded.

More promising from a comparative-linguistic perspective, albeit still uncomfortably early for the introduction of Celtic, is another wave of DNA that reached southern England from France at the end of the Bronze Age c. 1200–800 BCE.<sup>6</sup> Astonishingly, the genome of this population shows more archaic ‘neolithic’, i.e. pre-Indo-European characteristics, than the earlier immigration in the mid third millennium BCE. If these genomes can be identified with the earliest Celtic speech communities, the implication would be that the Celtic variety of speech resulted from the language shift of local, non-Indo-European population groups in western Europe, probably in the region of modern-day France, to Indo-European, perhaps during the second millennium BCE. This has major ramifications from the point of view of language-contact studies. This scenario would be an obvious candidate for explaining some of the unusual typological structures of the Insular Celtic languages (unusual compared to other Indo-European languages). These could be due to substratal influence from the predecessor idioms when the speakers of those languages transferred some of their speech habits, especially in phonology and syntax, during the shift to their new target language, i.e. Celtic.

While the Celtic languages on these islands are well known from their younger stages (see Sections 8.3 and 8.4), no primary records of the prehistoric languages survive. There is only indirect evidence in the form of layers of loanwords that lack Indo-European explanations, and in the form of etymologically obscure place-names that are suspected of having been borrowed from local non-Celtic languages.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Cunliffe (2018), 54–8; Koch and Cunliffe (2016). These hypotheses, irreconcilable with the linguistic facts, have received detailed criticism from, among others, Sims-Williams (2020), 6–8, and Isaac (2004), 49–52.

<sup>5</sup> Haak et al. (2015); Allentoft et al. (2015); Cassidy et al. (2016); Olalde et al. (2018).

<sup>6</sup> Patterson et al. (2021). This research was only published at the end of 2021 and its full implications and ramifications have not yet been analysed.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Schrijver (2000, 2005b); Van Sluis (forthcoming); Stifter (forthcoming); Broderick (2013).

### 8.3. The Linguistic Situation in Prehistoric and Early Historic Britain

From the known later distribution of languages in Britain and their fates in the long perspective, and from indirect evidence such as inscriptions, it can be inferred that the multilingual situation in Britain must have been complex and, as it were, in flux for an extended period in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages. In the observable early history of the island from the first century BCE onwards, two major turning points of the linguistic situation occurred: the first at the arrival of the Romans in Britain, and the second after their withdrawal and the so-called *adventus Saxonum*.<sup>8</sup>

At the beginning of the first century CE, when the island became more prominent in the Mediterranean field of vision, British Celtic appears to have been the dominant language. It has been speculated that we actually have to reckon with more than one variety of Celtic: one in the east, that was influenced by interaction with Gaulish, and another variant in the west and northwest.<sup>9</sup> Schrijver builds an argument on this division between ‘Lowland Celtic’ and ‘Highland Celtic’, but the evidence for it rests on tiny and scattered information.<sup>10</sup> The prime evidence for Celtic in this period lies in the names of individuals and of population groups reported by classical authors and coin legends, which are consistent with British Celtic.<sup>11</sup>

For the three and a half centuries after its annexation to the Empire (43–c. 410), it can be argued that in numerical terms Celtic probably remained the majority language of the Roman province, though the prestigious Latin superstrate must have exerted strong sociolinguistic pressure on the Celtic vernacular and a form of local Latin may even have become the ordinary means of communication in the cities and in the lowlands of southern Britain (see Chapter 9).<sup>12</sup> The local language seems to have retained a particularly strong position in less accessible areas

<sup>8</sup> See Chapter 1, especially xxx, and 9.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. the statement in Caesar’s *De Bello Gallico* 5.12 that there were contacts between Gaul and Britain in his time. This is possibly borne out by tribal names that are found on either side of the Channel, for instance *Belgae*, *Parisii*, and *Catuuellauni/Catalauni*. For archaeological evidence for the interaction between the Continent and Britain in the third century BCE, see for example Stead (1979); Giles (2012), 19–30.

<sup>10</sup> Schrijver (2014), 30–4. Whether any of the assumed pre-Celtic languages were still spoken in Britain at that time is unknown. The language of the Picts in Scotland has been the object of much speculation, but the current consensus sees in Pictish a northern sibling of British Celtic, essentially one that, by virtue of having stayed outside the Roman Empire, may have been more conservative and less Latinized than the southern varieties. In the case of Pictish, we may not even be dealing with a single uniform language at all, but rather with a rich and complex dialectal continuum. Most information has to be deduced from place-names, in addition to personal names and perhaps a few written traces on ogam stones. See Forsyth (1997); Price (2000), 127–31; James (2013); Rhys (2020a, 2020b); Rodway (2020).

<sup>11</sup> See Cooley (2023) and Mullen (2024b), for the advent of literacy in Britain.

<sup>12</sup> Schrijver (2014), 32–3. For the sociolinguistics of Roman Britain, see Cooley (2023); Mullen (2016, 2024b); also Chapter 9 of this volume.

such as the uplands and marginal regions, for example Wales, Cornwall, and Cumbria. This assumed numerical dominance of British Celtic is not, however, reflected in the epigraphy of the time. Aside from a tiny number of apparently vernacular inscriptions such as two curse tablets from Bath,<sup>13</sup> and possibly two further ones from Uley,<sup>14</sup> literacy during the Roman period was restricted to writing Latin. We see Celtic almost exclusively in the names embedded in Latin inscriptions.<sup>15</sup>

The second turning point for the linguistic make-up of Britain occurred with the withdrawal of Roman forces in the early fifth century and the inward migration of Germanic-speaking groups. These external factors led to changes in the balance of sociolinguistic powers and, in the long term, to a post-Roman language map that was very different from that of pre-Roman Britain. In the early eighth century, i.e. three hundred years later, the Anglo-Saxon historian Bede (*HE* 1.1) speaks of five languages spoken by four nations (*gentes*) in Britain at his time: English, British, Irish, Pictish, and Latin as a supranational language.<sup>16</sup> With five, or potentially even more,<sup>17</sup> languages involved, and without even taking regional variation into account, the question of the relative value attached to the languages becomes difficult to answer.

Divergent opinions have been offered about the precise fate of Latin as a living language in Britain, and in Wales in particular, after the influx of Germanic language. The stylistic quality of the Latin that high-status early medieval authors were able to achieve cannot serve as a guidance for the fate or the standard of the language at large. These authors received their excellent command of the language over years of schooling. The lapidary inscriptions, which are virtually the only direct evidence for the languages in the so-called ‘Dark Ages’, therefore play a central role in answering this question.<sup>18</sup> A striking feature of their Latin is the grammatically faulty language—faulty from the point of view of endings expected in classical Latin. Especially in the bilingual Latin–Irish stones from Wales, there is very often a genitive case where a nominative would be expected in standard Latin. For example, the ogam inscription TRENAGUSU MAQI MAQITRENI (‘(stone) of Tréngus, son of Mac-Thréuin’) (W-PEM-004 = CISW P12 = CIIC 428)<sup>19</sup> conforms to the normal and syntactically correct Irish formula of expressing all names in the genitive. The Latin counterpart TRENAGUSSI FILI MACUTRENI HIC IACIT is asyntactical in Latin and could have resulted from transference of the Irish to the Latin formula by speakers with little competence in the latter.

<sup>13</sup> Tomlin (1987); Mullen (2007).

<sup>14</sup> A. Mullen (pers. comm.).

<sup>15</sup> See Russell and Mullen (2007–).

<sup>16</sup> See Ní Mhaonaigh (2021).

<sup>17</sup> If we allow for the possibility of locally very confined ‘hidden’ languages.

<sup>18</sup> See n. 56. See Charles-Edwards (2013), 116–91, for their wider historical context. Their linguistic evidence for the development of the British languages is studied by Sims-Williams (2003).

<sup>19</sup> Reference to ogam inscriptions will be with OG(H)AM sigla and CIIC number.

Linguists have interpreted this data in opposing ways, depending on their theoretical framework (see also Chapter 9). For scholars looking at it within the framework of classical Latin, the faulty grammar is evidence for the rapid loss of language competence soon after the Roman period, and the inscriptions are the product of people without any real knowledge of Latin.<sup>20</sup> Others, looking at them through the lens of diachronic variation and language-contact studies, interpret the same evidence as proof that the language was still spoken as a local vernacular language, at least by some people. What strikes us as ‘bad’ would in fact reflect the natural Latin development in Britain.<sup>21</sup> A different approach is taken by Harvey who, by studying systematically the vocabulary of the medieval Latin-language literature of Wales, concludes that the language enjoyed a tenacious hold on early medieval Celtic Britain for several centuries and that the possibility should be entertained that the language, Cambro-Latin, continued in active use for much longer than usually believed.<sup>22</sup>

In Wales, the pre-Roman vernacular language remained, or became, the established standard language of the country after the demise of Latin,<sup>23</sup> while in the rest of the former province of Britannia varieties of Old English ousted any rival idioms in the long term.<sup>24</sup> Only on the margins of the Anglo-Saxon sphere did older languages manage to hold on for a while: Cumbric, closely related to Welsh, seems to have survived in Cumberland until the twelfth century; Cornish in Cornwall is comparatively well documented from the early modern period until it died out in the eighteenth century, only to be revitalized in the twentieth century.<sup>25</sup> The expansion of Anglo-Saxons also prompted an emigration of speakers of Old British languages from Cornwall and Devon to neighbouring Armorica, most heavily c. 450–c. 600.<sup>26</sup> Those settlers renamed the region *Britannia*, i.e. *Breizh* in the local language, *Bretagne* in French, *Brittany* in English. This set another scene for multilingual interaction between varieties of British and Romance.<sup>27</sup> When these languages finally come fully into the light of documentation, they are already internally differentiated: Welsh, Breton, Cornish, and to the degree that we can say anything about them, Cumbric and northern British.<sup>28</sup> No fully attested form of British serves as the ancestor of all the younger languages, unlike Old Irish which is the most ancestral, common stage of all known Gaelic languages. Breton is internally very strongly differentiated into mutually

<sup>20</sup> For example Adams (2007), 616–20.

<sup>21</sup> For example Schrijver (2014), 34–48; Charles-Edwards (2013), 110. <sup>22</sup> Harvey (2015).

<sup>23</sup> On the shifting balance between the different languages in Wales, see also Charles-Edwards (1995); Sims-Williams (2002).

<sup>24</sup> The varieties of Anglo-Saxon speech themselves came repeatedly under external pressure: from the ninth century onwards Anglo-Saxon dialects were heavily influenced by Old Norse, and since the end of the eleventh century by Norman French.

<sup>25</sup> For Cornish, see Payton (2000); for Cumbric, Price (2000), 109–26.

<sup>26</sup> Minard and Koch (2006).

<sup>27</sup> For early Brittany, see Brett, Edmonds, and Russell (2021).

<sup>28</sup> See Schrijver (2011).

incomprehensible dialects. It has been speculated that influences from surviving Gaulish speech communities and from Romance communities were responsible for the emergence of the dialects of Breton, but this is difficult to demonstrate.<sup>29</sup> Perhaps the emigrants already brought some dialectal distinctions to the Continent.

Like the Germanic languages, Irish in Britain is the language of later-Roman and early-medieval immigration. While Irish colonial activities led to the lasting establishment of Gaelic speech communities in northern Britain, those in the south left no traces beyond the early Middle Ages. Their presence can be mainly deduced from the distribution of ogam inscriptions, monolingual and bilingual, mainly in parts of southern Wales and in Cornwall and Devon. These will be the focus of Section 8.5.<sup>30</sup>

#### 8.4. The Linguistic Situation in Prehistoric and Early Historic Ireland

In so far as it is knowable, the contrast between the—ostensibly simpler—linguistic situation in Ireland at the dawn of history and that of Britain is striking. All we can see is Goidelic, a separate branch of the Celtic languages that in Ireland is represented by Irish. Although there must have been non-Goidelic languages in prehistory, any direct evidence is lacking. Native sources from the seventh century onwards make no reference to local languages other than Irish in late antiquity or in the early Middle Ages. Notwithstanding occasional names that resist analysis, and loans from Latin, the earliest epigraphic sources from Ireland, the ogam inscriptions, basically preserve names that can be understood as Celtic. Nevertheless, several hypotheses about more complex scenarios even for the historical period have been put forward.

The presence of speakers of British Celtic languages on the island has been postulated on the basis of the fact that several tribal names recorded in Ptolemy's *Geographica* (second century CE) have parallels in Britain or Gaul and/or contain the sound *p*, a sound that was alien to Irish at that time.<sup>31</sup> For instance, the *Manapii* in the southeast of Ireland recall the *Menapii* in Belgium; the *Brigantes* have a corresponding population group in Britain. From the naïve point of the traditional distinction between *q*- and *p*-Celtic languages, names with *p* appear to attest to the presence of *p*-Celtic varieties.<sup>32</sup> However, alternative explanations are possible. The names could be *q*-Celtic formations that were transmitted to

<sup>29</sup> Falc'hun (1977); Fleuriot (1980), 51 ff.; Ternes (2011), 439–45. See Chapter 5 for the possible survival of Gaulish in areas such as Brittany.

<sup>30</sup> For evidence for Irish settlements in Wales, see Dillon (1977); Swift (2007); Wmffre (2007).

<sup>31</sup> See Toner (2000) for the Ptolemean evidence from Ireland.

<sup>32</sup> For example O'Rahilly (1946), 85–91. This has been rejected by Greene (1966), 132–4.

Ptolemy via the mediation of *p*-Celtic speakers who replaced the foreign sounds by the corresponding ones of their own language.<sup>33</sup> For example, *Manapii* could be the British pronunciation of Irish \**Manak<sup>ui</sup>*, a name that is in fact reflected in its *q*-Celtic form in the modern place-name *Fir Manach/Fermanagh*. The name of the *Cruithin* in the northeast of Ireland is the equivalent of *Priteni*, an ancient name for the Britons, and it is at least possible that this community was linguistically British. Their name disappears from the historical sources only in the eighth century. According to the radical position of Schrijver, Goidelic was itself only a sub-branch of British Celtic that was ‘*q*-ified’ under the substratal influence of a non-Celtic population when the language was brought to Ireland very late in history, namely in the first century CE.<sup>34</sup>

Another indicator of possible hidden complexity is the fate of Irish in the early period itself. Primitive Irish of the fourth century resembles Old Irish of the seventh century as much,<sup>35</sup> or as little, as Latin resembles French, even though only three centuries separate the two stages. Through the lens of language-contact studies, the massive typological and structural transformation in such a short period can be interpreted as the result of a rapid shift of large population groups to a new language across three generations, without proper acquisition of the target language in the first generation. If this hypothesis is correct, the very fact that such a shift occurred speaks to the relative prestige of the languages involved. The shift, and the transformation of Irish, may have been accelerated by natural disasters as, for example, documented in the mid-sixth century (the Annals of Ulster speak of a famine in 536 and of epidemics in 549, 554, and 556). This great upheaval of the phonological system of Irish forms part of a much larger areal, almost *Sprachbund*-like phenomenon. Structurally similar transformations affected languages in the entire northwest of Europe during the middle of the first millennium CE, including the Germanic and some Romance languages.

What language(s) those populations spoke before they shifted to Irish is unknown, but it has been argued that a small group of loanwords in Irish with initial *p* that cannot be shown to originate in any of the known European languages of the time come from a pre-Celtic language on the island. Since Irish acquired the sound *p* only in around the sixth century CE, the loans cannot have entered earlier than that and the pre-Celtic language must have been spoken as late as the middle of the first millennium CE, if only in a geographically and socially marginal position.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Toner (2000), 73.

<sup>34</sup> Schrijver (2015), 72–87

<sup>35</sup> Traditionally, the following periods of Early Irish are distinguished (after Stifter 2009, 55–6): Primitive Irish (fourth–sixth century; only attested in ogam inscriptions); Early Old Irish or Archaic Irish (seventh century; the beginning of the manuscript tradition); Old Irish (eighth–ninth century); Middle Irish (tenth–twelfth century). Everything after 1200 counts as Modern Irish.

<sup>36</sup> Schrijver (2000, 2005b). Schrijver (2005b), 137, very tentatively points to a remote region in Co. Mayo and Galway that could have formed the residual area of speakers of that language.



This is the situation when a new ‘player’ appeared on the scene, but one that was neither a substrate nor a superstrate, but an adstrate, namely Latin. The historical context of the Irish language is almost unique among the non-classical languages in early medieval western Europe in that the country in which the language originated, Ireland, was never subject to Roman rule.<sup>37</sup> This is not to say that there was no early interaction with the Roman world and with Latin. Indeed, there was constant and increasing interaction throughout the entire ancient and early medieval period. Scant archaeological evidence even attests to a small-scale Roman presence in Ireland. Very early loanwords such as *ingor* (‘anchor’) < non-classical Latin *ancura* also give evidence of prehistoric exchange before the much broader influx of Latin borrowings into Irish from around the fourth century.<sup>38</sup> From the fourth and fifth centuries the contacts intensified in two ways. On the one hand, Irish raiders and settlers expanded across the sea into Britain and established settlements in the west of the island. In that sense, some speakers of Irish were part of the Roman Empire. The other, much more consequential, interaction was the arrival of Christianity in the fourth or fifth century.

In view of the invisibility of any other local language on the island in our documents, the default assumption has to be that monolingualism was the norm in early medieval Ireland for the vast majority of the population. This does not exclude a limited amount of bilingualism in special cases, for example in the case of merchants and clerics who were in exchange with Britain or other parts of Europe. Some inferences about language contact and, consequently, bilingualism or even multilingualism can be made on the basis of loanwords. In addition to the large number of Latin loanwords, a corpus of slightly over forty loanwords from British Celtic has been identified in the Goidelic languages, chiefly pertaining to aspects of daily life.<sup>39</sup> These loans may have originated among the Irish settlers in Wales, or in Scotland through their interaction with northern British populations. Interactions between Irish and British ‘saints’ left their imprint rather in the form of British-Latin loanwords. There are hardly any Anglo-Saxon loans in Old Irish, despite Irish missionary activities in Northumbria, dynastic relationships, and political interactions between the two countries. In the seventh century several monasteries were established throughout Ireland specifically for Anglo-Saxon monks to study in the island. These include Mag nÉo na Saxan (‘Mayo of the Saxons’) in Co. Mayo and Rath Melsigi in Co. Carlow. The number of

<sup>37</sup> Johnston (2013), 14–16.

<sup>38</sup> Raftery (2005), 175–80; Freeman (2001), 1–13; Johnston (2013), 10–11; see O’Sullivan et al. (2013), 249–55, for archaeological evidence for contact with the classical world. The classic treatment of Latin loanwords in Old Irish is McManus (1983); see also Fomin (2018), 159. Fomin (2018) sees an earlier and deeper influence of Latin on Ireland and Irish, but his conclusions derive partly from too uncritical an acceptance of early dates for certain pieces of Early Irish literature.

<sup>39</sup> Loanwords among the Insular Celtic languages are collected in Bauer (2015). Entirely anecdotally, we have the impression that Scottish Gaelic has a higher rate of British loanwords, probably from the time when northern varieties of British were still spoken in Scotland in the Middle Ages.

Germanic loanwords increases only with the incursions of the Vikings in the ninth century.

The chief manifestation of bilingualism that we know about in Ireland before the Viking period beginning in the ninth century relates to Latin in its British guise. Lacking any local substrate of Latin on which to build, the Irish found themselves in a situation where they had to learn Latin from scratch. Latin bilingualism was accordingly intimately tied to literacy. The Irish learners had to engage in a reflective way with the foreign language. This in turn made them reflect theoretically upon their own language, with a number of diverse, and far-reaching, consequences, besides the opening up of the language to a continuous influx of Latin loanwords. One consequence is the invention of the ogam script (see Section 8.5), which presupposes a knowledge of Latin. Another consequence is the ‘invention’ of glossing Latin texts in the vernacular. While adding interlinear or marginal comments to a manuscript was a long-established practice, the Irish are the earliest known group for whom these comments, the technical term for which is ‘glosses’, are not in Latin, but in their own language. With the emigration of Irish scholars to the Continent from the seventh century, this practice spread to other vernacular languages in Europe, boosted by the cultural momentum of the Carolingian Renaissance.<sup>40</sup> The fact that the glossing was done in the vernacular and that a huge corpus of native Old Irish grammatical terminology exists, created after the model of Latin,<sup>41</sup> shines indirect light on the fact that Irish played an important role even in classroom discourse.

Latin was probably mostly an *instructed language* in Ireland, less a *language of instruction* (except, perhaps, for the teaching of Latin itself). Its knowledge was school-based. Although British Latin had become the language of written expression with Christianity, it cannot be assumed that for its Irish practitioners Latin was ever anything other than a technical and prestigious foreign language. It is conceivable that a large portion of the people—fundamentally clerics—who learned Latin in monastic schools did not necessarily attain a high enough proficiency to communicate comfortably in it. The written evidence is only representative of the literate elite, for instance Adomnán of Iona (c. 628–704). Real fluency in Latin may have been the preserve of a small group among the educated religious elite. Very little can be said about lay society, but in the early Middle Ages Latin literacy is not likely to have been widespread outside monastic settings and educational contexts.

Literacy takes a twofold shape in Ireland. Its earliest manifestation is in the form of inscriptions in the native ogam script, predominantly surviving on stone

<sup>40</sup> Blom (2017), 19. The Old Irish glosses, mainly of the eighth and ninth centuries, are edited in *Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus* (Stokes and Strachan 1901–3). Bronner (2013) is a complete catalogue of all Old Irish language remains in contemporary manuscripts. Most of these texts are commentaries and notes on Latin works.

<sup>41</sup> Ahlqvist (1993).

monuments from the fourth century CE onwards.<sup>42</sup> Ogam epigraphy is perhaps indirectly modelled on Roman memorial stones and very occasionally contains Latin names, but it is exclusively in the Irish language in Ireland. Ogam literacy, however, goes beyond the island of Ireland to include Britain and is treated in greater depth in Section 8.5. Literacy in Roman letters is slightly younger. It is intimately linked to Christianity and begins to spread with it from the fifth century.

The literary, in contrast to the literate, tradition commences slowly in the fifth and sixth centuries, at first exclusively in Latin, with only sporadic instances of Irish, mostly in the form of personal names and place-names. The earliest datable texts in Ireland other than epigraphy are the fifth-century writings of St Patrick.<sup>43</sup> In addition to saints' lives, the Irish produced and copied instructional literature, biblical commentaries, Latin grammars, canon law, handbooks of penance, devotional hymns, and computistical texts. While first the recipient of learning, during the sixth and seventh centuries Irish monasticism spread through Christian Europe bringing with it Hiberno-Latin literacy. The earliest surviving manuscript sources (sixth–ninth century) contain extensive evidence for knowledge of, and use of, Latin in Ireland. These include the *Cathach* or *Psalter of St Columba*,<sup>44</sup> the famous *Book of Kells* and the *Book of Durrow*, as well as other, less well-known, gospel books, such as the *Codex Usserianus Primus* and the *Book of Dimma*.<sup>45</sup> The Springmount Bog writing tablets, discovered in 1914 in Co. Antrim in Northern Ireland and now in the National Museum of Ireland, date to late sixth/early seventh century. These six wooden wax tablets contain the Vulgate text of Psalms 30–32 and are the earliest examples of Irish handwriting in the Latin script known as Insular minuscule.<sup>46</sup>

From approximately the middle of the seventh century, written literature in the vernacular language develops, and with it Old Irish as a written standard language. The crucial step was the establishment of a commonly accepted orthographic method for encoding the language. The principles underpinning the rather unusual spelling rules of Old Irish<sup>47</sup> derive from the post-Roman pronunciation of Latin in Britain.<sup>48</sup> This is in stark contrast to the British-speaking

<sup>42</sup> Harvey (1987b).

<sup>43</sup> See <https://www.confessio.ie/#>. Like the vast majority of early-medieval Irish literature, Patrick's writings only survive in manuscripts that are many centuries younger than their original composition [accessed 24 June 2023].

<sup>44</sup> Royal Irish Academy MS 12 R; <https://www.ria.ie/cathach-psalter-st-columba> [accessed 24 June 2023].

<sup>45</sup> Trinity College Dublin MS 58 (*olim* A. I); MS 57 (*olim* B. 61); MS 55; MS 59 (*olim* A. IV. 23); <https://www.tcd.ie/library/early-irish-mss/> [accessed 24 June 2023].

<sup>46</sup> Charles-Edwards (2002).

<sup>47</sup> For instance, using the letters *p*, *t*, *c* to write the sounds [b d g] word-internally, and using *b*, *d*, *g*, *m* to write the voiced fricatives [v ð γ ỹ] in the same position.

<sup>48</sup> Harvey (1989, 1990); Ahlqvist (1994). For the Old British context of this, see Schrijver (2011), 17–40.

countries, where the vernaculars were elevated to the prestige of commonly written languages only much later. Despite the occasional examples of short texts in Old Welsh and Old Breton writing in the ninth and tenth centuries,<sup>49</sup> it is not before the High Middle Ages that full-fledged literacy sets in in Wales, and still later in the case of Breton and Cornish.<sup>50</sup>

By the ninth century writing in Irish had become so ordinary that vernacular literacy took over from Latin as the primary medium of writing in many genres. This is, for example, manifest in the Irish annals, where entries written entirely in Irish become more dominant from the 810s. Across the early Middle Ages, then, several shifts in literacy can be observed in Ireland. The early post-Roman period saw Irish only in ogam script on stone monuments, running parallel to Latin script and language in early manuscripts from the fifth century. From the seventh century, the Irish language in the Latin script started to appear in manuscripts, but also on inscribed stones (mainly grave-slabs; see more on this in Section 8.6). Irish became dominant from the ninth century. However, Latin and Irish coexisted as written languages. The Irish never ceased to produce material in Latin and in a combination of Latin and Irish. For instance, Latin discourse particles (e.g. *dixit*, *finit*, *iterum*, etc.) continued to be used in otherwise Irish texts for a long time. It is fair to say that literacy and literature in Ireland were almost always bilingual, but the relative prestige of the two involved ‘players’ was constantly fluctuating.<sup>51</sup> Most importantly, the Irish language was never overtaken by Latin, but became the dominant language of literary sources.

### 8.5. Ogam in Ireland and Britain

The earliest epigraphic remains of the Irish language survive in the form of short inscriptions on stones and, in much smaller numbers, on *instrumenta* from the late fourth century onwards. They are a prime piece of evidence for multilingual interaction—or the absence thereof—of the Irish in Ireland and in Britain. They are written in the singularly original ogam script that consists of strokes and notches arranged along a stem-line.<sup>52</sup> Ogam is most commonly found on the araises of objects, typically on standing stones, and usually going from bottom left upwards and then down to the right bottom. Slightly under 500 ogam stones are

<sup>49</sup> In fact, many of the extant Old British glosses seem to have arisen in a multilingual context with a strong, if not dominant Irish element.

<sup>50</sup> See Schrijver (2011), 5–11 for the scarce written sources of Old British languages.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Bisagni (2013–4), 15–16.

<sup>52</sup> *Ogam* is the medieval form of the name, pronounced [ˈoʊəɪm]. The modern form *ogham*, pronounced [ˈo:m], is also in scholarly and popular use. Stifter (2020a, 856; 2020c, 84–6) suggests that the name *ogam* may have originally referred to the ‘furrows’ or ‘tracks’ left by the engravers on the objects. He also discusses various alternative explanations of the word.

extant today, plus around two dozen portable objects.<sup>53</sup> Around 400 stones are known from Ireland, especially clustered in the south in counties Kerry, Cork, and Waterford. In Wales, which has around forty, the stones show a concentration in those areas in the southwest that were occupied by the Irish in late antiquity and in the early Middle Ages,<sup>54</sup> namely Pembrokeshire, Breconshire, and Carmarthenshire. Cornwall and Devon together have half a dozen, and a single, very early stone is known from Silchester in England, as well as three inscribed *instrumenta*. Approximately forty stones are known from Scotland plus ten *instrumenta*, to which can be added three sites with graffiti.

As a graphic system, ogam is among the most abstract and non-iconic writing systems ever devised for human communication. The letters consist of bundles of one to five identical straight parallel strokes, arranged in four classes or groups (Old Irish *aicme*, pl. *aicmi*). Each class is characterized by a specific location relative to a stem-line, which is either notional (when the inscription is in 3D along the axis of the object), or drawn-in (when written in two dimensions across the face of the object). There is evidently grammatical thinking behind the arrangement of the script, since all vowels are grouped together in one *aicme* (short notches in the earliest variant), whereas all consonants are represented by strokes. It is widely believed that the grouping of ogam letters is based on Latin grammarians' classification of Latin letters into vowels, semivowels, and mutes.<sup>55</sup> However, as in the choice of letters (see below), there may be a more sophisticated decision behind the—ostensibly puzzling—grouping into *aicmi*. The distribution of sounds between the three consonantal *aicmi* is neither random nor due to natural phonetic classes, but may reflect an attempt to maximally differentiate glyphs in writing. Consonants that most commonly occur in clusters have been assigned to different *aicmi*, while consonants that hardly ever occur in contact with each other are grouped into a single *aicme*.<sup>56</sup>

Because of the degree of design that must have gone into this, it is widely agreed that familiarity with the Latin grammatical tradition was an essential factor for the creation of ogam. It was one of the results of the linguistic reflection that Irish scholars engaged in as a consequence of learning Latin as a foreign language. The chosen values of the letters seem to be the result of a phonological

<sup>53</sup> The ogam inscriptions known in the mid-twentieth century were collected in *CIIC*. The early medieval inscribed stones of the former Roman province of Britannia are edited in *CISW I–III*, superseding the earlier collections in Nash-Williams (1950); Okasha (1993); Thomas (1994). The stones in Scotland, which diverge from the other traditions in many respects, are collected in Forsyth (1996). The chief digital edition is *Ogham in 3D* (White 2013), which uses 3D-technology to record the objects. Older, but now discontinued digital collections are *TITUS Ogamica* (Gippert 2001) and the *Celtic Inscribed Stones Project (CISP)*; Davies 2002). Ogam has seen a number of relatively recent corpus studies, especially McManus (1991); Ziegler (1994); Sims-Williams (2003). Forsyth (2006) and Stifter (2020a, 2022) provide overviews of scholarship, with an emphasis on linguistic aspects. The *BabelStone Blog* (West 2008–) offers useful information about the inscriptions and their supports in Britain.

<sup>54</sup> Dillon (1977).

<sup>55</sup> Thurneysen (1937), 202–3.

<sup>56</sup> Forsyth (forthcoming).

analysis of the target language, tailored towards the phonological profile of Primitive Irish before the rise of the dichotomy between the neutral and palatalized consonant series, and before the phonemicization of lenition.<sup>57</sup> Letters of the Latin alphabet which represent sounds that are unnecessary for Primitive Irish, such as P or X, have been discarded, while letters such as Q and G<sup>w</sup> have been created for Primitive Irish phonemes that are not adequately represented by a single letter in the Latin script. Although ogam reflects the consonantal phonology of its target language at the time of its creation very well, the grammatically crucial distinction between long and short sounds cannot be graphically expressed. The letters bear names according to the acrostic principle. A sub-group refers to natural objects and phenomena such as trees, but there is no uniform underlying system, and some names are apparently meaningless.<sup>58</sup>

The Latin model shines clearly through the structure of this writing system. The very fact that ogam is organized as an alphabet is proof that it was not invented from scratch. Alphabetic writing is not a natural way of encoding language—ideographic writing and diverse forms of syllabic scripts are much more common ways of creating writing systems. It can even be argued that the concept of alphabetic writing arose only once, namely in eighth-century archaic Greece, from where it spread rapidly and successfully across the entire Mediterranean world.<sup>59</sup> In any case, ogam must have been created on the model of an alphabetic script and the Latin one was the only available model in the area. There are other features of the script that mirror Latin writing: it is not possible to distinguish long from short vowels; although writing consonants double is very common in the inscriptions, this is avoided at the beginning of words;<sup>60</sup> and inscriptions have a dextroverse orientation, i.e. are to be read from left to right, and not the other way round.

In its core graphic inventory, namely the 4 × 5 basic signs, the script is uniform throughout its history (Fig. 8.1). Under minute scrutiny, however, occasional traces of experimentation can be discovered already in the earliest period, even though it is not possible to arrive at a coherent big-picture view of the internal development of the writing system at that time. Already the earliest witnesses contain extra letters (*forfid*, pl. *forfeda*), whose purpose may have been, it has been argued, to render lenited consonants and [p], a sound that was foreign to Primitive Irish.<sup>61</sup> From their shape it is evident that they are additions to the

<sup>57</sup> The emergence of so-called palatalized consonants and lenition (variants of consonants that are pronounced in a more ‘relaxed’ fashion) are important sound changes that affected Irish roughly in the sixth century, after the invention of ogam, and that radically transformed the character of the language. Even though the ogam script stayed in use, it could no longer adequately represent the sounds of the language after the operation of those changes. See Stifter (2020a), 866–7.

<sup>58</sup> McManus (1988); see also McManus (1986).

<sup>59</sup> See the thoughts about the development of alphabet writing in Diringer (1949).

<sup>60</sup> Harvey (1987a). <sup>61</sup> Sims-Williams (1992).

		transliteration	traditional name
<i>aicme 1</i>	┐	B	<i>beith</i> ('birch')
	π	L	<i>luis</i> ('rowan?')
	π	V (F)	<i>fern</i> ('alder')
	π	S	<i>sail</i> ('willow')
	π	N	<i>nin</i> ('ash-tree?')
<i>aicme 2</i>	┐	J? (H)	<i>úath</i> ('whitethorn?')
	┐	D	<i>dair</i> ('oak')
	┐	T	<i>tinne</i> ('holly, elder?')
	┐	C	<i>coll</i> ('hazel')
	┐	Q	<i>ceirt</i> ('apple-tree?')
<i>aicme 3</i>	f	M	<i>muin</i> ('vine?')
	#	G	<i>gort</i> ('ivy?')
	##	G <sup>w</sup> ? (NG)	<i>ngétal</i> ('wounding')
	###	ST (Z)	<i>straif</i> ('sulphur, sloe?')
	###	R	<i>ruis</i> ('elder-tree?')
<i>aicme 4</i>	-	A	<i>ailm</i> ('pine?')
	+	O	<i>onn</i> ('ash')
	+	U	<i>úr</i> 'heath?'
	+	E	<i>edad</i> ('aspen?')
	+	I	<i>idad</i> ('yew?')
the <i>forfeda</i>	⋈	K, EA	<i>ébad</i> ('aspen, elecampane?')
	◊	Ó	<i>ór</i> ('gold')
	⊔	UI	<i>uilleann</i> ('elbow')
	⊗	IO, I	<i>iphín</i> ('gooseberry?')
	⊖	P	<i>peith</i> ('?')
	⊗	CS, X, AE	<i>emoncholl</i> ('twin hazel')

Fig. 8.1 The ogam alphabet and its traditional letter names. The values as understood today are given in the transliteration first, followed by the traditional values in parentheses.

elegant core system, and this could perhaps be regarded as evidence for a greater age of the script than is usually assumed. The most common among these extra signs is ⋈, traditionally transcribed K, but perhaps meant for the velar fricative [x]. However, evidence for their originally intended values is thin on the ground and no uniform system developed out of this. After ogam had become the object of vernacular antiquarian study and speculation in the eighth century, the characters were reinterpreted. The traditional ogam spelling system was replaced by one that serves as a cipher for Old Irish manuscript spelling. Signs that clearly had been intended for consonants originally, but whose meaning was no longer understood, were reassigned vocalic values in order to cater for the Old Irish language, which had evolved a long way from the Primitive Irish of the earliest ogam inscriptions. For instance, ⋈ was assigned the new values É, EA, EO and it was given the name *ébad*. Other major changes are the shift from writing vowels as distinct dots or short strokes on the stem-line to perpendicular strokes, matching

in length the consonant strokes, and the introduction of literacy aids such as ‘feather marks’ to indicate the direction of writing. Practices arising in the scrip-torial tradition of writing ogam in manuscripts in turn influenced the writing on objects in the later Middle Ages. Scribes in Scotland, especially in Shetland, were particularly inventive as regards graphic experimentation with the ogam inventory.<sup>62</sup> It is hoped that further progress in understanding the palaeography of the ogam script will be made in the OG(H)AM project.

### 8.5.1 Periodization of Ogam

Four more or less distinct periods of ogam usage can be distinguished in history, with the invention of the writing system constituting, as it were, ‘Period 0’.

*Period 0.* Due to a lack of historical sources, the date and circumstances of invention are shrouded in darkness. Inferences about its origin are only possible from the character of the script itself and from the geographical distribution and the dates of the earliest inscriptions. There are a handful of directly dateable objects, but the dating of ogam inscriptions mostly depends on circumstantial information, such as accompanying archaeological finds, which are few, or on identifying the named individuals with historic persons, which has proved difficult. Moreover, we can only operate with the surviving texts on more durable material. If there had been an earlier tradition on perishable supports such as wood, this is by necessity lost to us. The most common method of relative dating is linguistic, i.e. inferring an approximate date from the changes that are reflected in the language. This can be circular, since some of the changes have in turn been dated on the basis of ogam inscriptions. Palaeographic considerations come into play chiefly for the bilingual inscriptions in Wales that also have a Latin text. The earliest dates that archaeology has produced are assigned to the late fourth century, namely for the Silchester stone from a villa in Hampshire (E-HAM-001 = *CIIC* 496), for an unedited small stone from the royal site of Raffin, Co. Meath (I-MEA-007), and for an unedited bronze votive plaque from Newgrange (I-MEA-010), part of a much larger collection of objects that includes Roman finds. It is noteworthy that two of the oldest dated objects have a Roman connection. The conservative estimate is that the invention of the writing system took place not much earlier than this in the fourth century. However, structural arguments for an earlier invention, perhaps as early as the first or second century CE, have been put forward.<sup>63</sup>

It is likely that the invention of ogam was a single event in history, created in a stroke of genius by a single individual who was familiar with Latin writing and

<sup>62</sup> Forsyth (1996), xlii–lx.

<sup>63</sup> Harvey (2001); (2017), 59.



grammatical theory. Because of the chronological coincidence, there may also be a connection with the arrival of Christianity in Ireland.<sup>64</sup> A region for the natural meeting of Irish language and Latin learning would be the west of Roman Britain, where Irish settlements had been established in late antiquity. The bilingual ogam inscriptions in the west of Britain could thus be viewed as a response to being confronted with a tradition of public written monuments, a tradition that is deeply engrained in Roman culture.

However, there are also arguments that speak against Wales and for Ireland as the cradle of ogam. In sheer numbers, the monuments in southern Ireland, including those with very early linguistic features, outweigh those in Wales several times over. For southern Britain, Ziegler assigns 15 of the 44 ogams to her earliest period; Sims-Williams, more cautiously, counts 12.<sup>65</sup> The percentage of stones with early features can therefore hardly be called as impressive as one would expect if Britain had been the cradle of ogam. If ogam had been imported into Ireland from Britain, the question could be asked why the dominant format there—bilingual epitaphs in Irish and Latin—was so completely ignored on the other side of the sea. It is hard to conceive how one of the distinctive features of ogam, the convention of verticality, could have first arisen in the context of Roman epigraphy that is exclusively horizontal. Conversely, it is easy to see how the external model of ogam would have influenced the local Latin epigraphy in Wales to become vertical itself.<sup>66</sup> What is more, it is probably just a modern misconception, suggested by their sheer numbers, that ogam pillars represent the earliest type of use of the script. From a functional perspective, the available formulae are much more diverse in Ireland than in southern Britain. Biodiversity is typically much greater at the point of origin than in those regions to which species spread, as it were, by colonization. If it is legitimate to use this analogy, Ireland must have been the starting point and southern Britain is a region into which the tradition spilt over.

On balance, therefore, an invention in Ireland appears more likely. One possible scenario is that it was exported from Ireland to Wales, Cornwall, and Man, but only with a fraction of its formulaic richness. One region in the south of Ireland, namely the Waterford–East Cork area, may have had an old dynastic link with Wales.<sup>67</sup> This suggests itself as a channel of transmission for the art of writing. It looks as if the practice arrived early in Wales and was quickly combined with the local tradition of Latin epigraphy. The practice stayed for a few generations so as to witness some of the important changes of the language, but then disappeared fairly soon again. Unlike Ireland, there are no ogams with manifestly late, i.e. Old Irish linguistic and orthographic traits.

<sup>64</sup> Swift (1997).

<sup>65</sup> Ziegler (1994); Sims-Williams (2003).

<sup>66</sup> K. Forsyth (pers. comm.).

<sup>67</sup> See Charles-Edwards (2000a), 163–4.

*Period 1 'classical ogam'.* The fifth to seventh centuries are usually regarded as the core of the ogam tradition. Traditionally this is labelled the 'orthodox period', but in order to avoid the impression that texts after that period are 'unorthodox', we call it the 'classical period', in the sense of the first major flourishing of the tradition. Notwithstanding the practical difficulties in dating individual inscriptions, it is likely that most of the extant corpus in Ireland, and apparently all of the monuments in southern Britain, belong to this period of ogam usage. Some of the stones from Gaelic Scotland, Man, and Pictland also belong to this period, but in all three areas ogam continued to be used monumentally for several further centuries (to the tenth or even eleventh century). Linguistically, classical ogam spans the Primitive Irish stage (fourth–sixth centuries) of the development of the Irish language, and Archaic or Early Old Irish (seventh century)—two stages of the language that are drastically different from each other typologically and grammatically. If the stones from Pictland are in a form of Pictish, that language would also be recorded in ogam.

*Period 2 'reformed ogam'.* The period from the eighth century onwards throughout the Middle Ages and the early modern period is often called 'scholastic' ogam, as if the practical use of the script had ceased and it had become the object of learned interest alone. But not only had ogam always been a scholarly phenomenon, it is becoming more and more evident that the tradition was kept alive both in scriptoria and outside them. Nevertheless, with the 'explosion' of Irish monastic learning, ogam was drawn into this orbit and many practical aspects of ogam writing became heavily influenced by, or identical to, the Latin-script-based Old Irish manuscript tradition. This is most evident in the radically different orthography, but also in the reinterpretation of the value of individual signs, and in manuscript-inspired discourse markers such as feather marks to indicate the beginning of texts, or in word spacing. We propose the term 'reformed ogam' for the period when manuscript spelling practices replaced the classical ogam orthography, without wanting to create the impression that the script was now confined to a two-dimensional medium. Still, the number of objects—monuments and *instrumenta*—in Ireland is small compared to that of the first period, whereas in Scotland and the Isle of Man ogam epigraphy flourished and expanded during this period. In Scotland especially, the inventory diversified in the shapes of the letters and in the attested formulae. The languages recorded in this period are Old, Middle, and Classical Modern Irish as well as Scottish Gaelic, and perhaps Pictish in Scotland.

*Period 3 'antiquarian ogam'.* Knowledge of the ogam script never died out in Ireland. Therefore, unlike other ancient writing systems, it did not have to be deciphered by modern scholars. The medieval learned tradition of Ireland produced tracts on ogam which preserve information on how to decode them, so that even after the end of independent Gaelic culture in the middle of the seventeenth century, there were scholars in Ireland up to the middle of the nineteenth

century who could read or produce ogam inscriptions. They are few in number and they are typically in Modern Irish.

*Period 4 'revivalist ogam'.* The active use of ogam was never entirely abandoned and continues up to the present day. With the revival of Irish language and culture from the end of the nineteenth century and with the beginning of the academic study of the 'Celtic' past, ogam came back prominently into the public eye. As a conspicuous token of Gaelic culture and Celticism, it has occupied a small but important niche in the cultural consciousness of twentieth- and twenty-first century Ireland. It is, for instance, found on private and public buildings, and with the digital revolution and its inclusion in Unicode in 1999, ogam can now also be used for computer applications. It is characteristic of the use of the script in the revivalist period that it is practically never used for the language it was originally designed for, namely Primitive Irish, but chiefly for Modern Irish and for other languages, especially English.

### 8.5.2 Functions of Ogam Inscriptions

In sheer numbers, the best-attested function of ogam inscriptions is commemorative, probably accompanying burials. Medieval literary sources do mention ogams in connection with burials, but in the absence of modern excavations of ogam stones and their contexts in Ireland, no direct archaeological evidence for this has yet been found. However, bilingual ogams in Britain provide crucial support in that they often feature the Latin funerary formula *hic iacit* ('here lies'), e.g. Latin TRENACATVS IC IACIT FILIVS MAGLAGNI ('Trénchad lies here, son of Málán') beside the Irish version TRENACCATLO ('of Trénchad'; with the spelling mistake L!) (W-CGN-001 = CISW CD26 = CIIC 353). Although classical ogams never contain verbs, the Latin formula finds a functional equivalent in the formulaic use of KOI ('here'). It is only used on early stones in Ireland, for example the very early BROINIENAS KOI NETTA-TTRENALUGOS ('of Broíniu, here, (son) of Nad-Trénlug') (I-COR-071 = CIIC 120), but never in Wales. This looks like Latin influence across the sea on the epigraphic formula used in Ireland.

Since burials are typically on boundaries of kin-land in Ireland, ogams also serve as demarcations of land and as legal documents of power claims. The stones themselves are occasionally secondary usages of pre-existing prehistoric monoliths, i.e. of monumental objects that already served as markers in the landscape. Examples of both occur in Scotland and Wales, too.

One feature that is striking in contrast to Mediterranean epigraphy is the fact that ogam stones are rarely pre-fashioned. Very often they are inscribed in the form in which they were encountered on the spot. If Roman epigraphy were the primary inspiration for ogam, the question arises why its most obvious advantage, namely making use of the prominently visible, large, and empty surface, was

deliberately ignored. The edges of stones are their most vulnerable parts, and letters incised there are easily lost through weather and other adverse factors. On the other hand, the long-term durability of the stones over centuries may not have been a prime concern for the original carvers.

Even though ogam on stones (pillar stones, slabs, etc.) dominates numerically in the surviving corpus, the nature of the script—incisions along a stem-line or a sharp edge—and the fact that the letters are called *fedae* ('woods, trees'; sg. *fid*) in Old Irish hints at the possibility that the script may have originated as marks to be carved into wood. It is easy to incise notches along edges of sticks with a small knife. Historical sources do not tell us if familiarity with the ogam script had to go hand in hand with knowledge of Latin writing. Occasional references in the narrative literature to the use of ogam by 'ordinary' people could be interpreted as hinting at a more widespread knowledge among people without Latin education.<sup>68</sup> However, since none of those texts are earlier than the eighth century, after the heyday of committing ogam to stones, it is possible that such depictions owe more to antiquarian imagination than to genuine collective memory.

Whatever the original domain of ogam may have been, the fact remains that the number of extant ogam inscriptions on portable objects is small in comparison to the stone monuments. Currently, slightly over two dozen small objects with sometimes only fragmentary text are known from Ireland and Scotland, including four stray finds hailing from England. None are known from Wales. In Ireland, these objects date from both the classical period and the later, reformed period of ogam use. Only one of the portable ogams from Scotland has been dated (fifth–sixth century). These objects fulfil very diverse functions: there are, for example, objects associated with weaving, knife-handles, brooches, and antler pieces.

Ogam is evidently best suited for three-dimensional writing and was not designed for the two-dimensional page. However, the 'gravitational pull' of the culturally dominant medium vellum proved inescapable, and the script did eventually cross that divide as well. Manuscript ogam comes in two forms: in practical use as marginal notes, and as the subject of scholarly treatises. The earliest examples of the former, around half a dozen, are in manuscripts from the eighth to ninth centuries. Perhaps they had a cryptographic purpose, when, for instance, a scribe left the personal comment *LATHEIRT* ('hangover') (St Gallen, Stiftsbibliothek, Codex Sangallensis 904, p. 204). Whether the marginal use continues an even earlier practice is impossible to say due to the lack of surviving older manuscripts. Ogam as a writing system is the subject of grammatical reflection in Old and Middle Irish texts such as *Auraicept na nÉces* ('The Scholars' Primer') or *In Lebor Ogaim* ('The book of ogam'). In the latter, it is presented in

<sup>68</sup> See the collection of examples in McManus (1991), 153–61.

the context of other ‘cryptic’ writing systems, such as runes. Clearly, even in Ireland ogam must already have been perceived as something ‘exotic’ within mainstream scholarly business at the time.

In manuscripts from the modern period, especially in grammatical and medical texts from the fifteenth century onwards, ogam figures regularly as a signifier of traditional erudition.<sup>69</sup> Medical manuscripts constitute a large portion of this. The total number of currently known short ogam entries in manuscripts is around one hundred. The culmination is 1849, when an entire manuscript with healing charms was composed in ogam letters in Co. Kerry, now known as the ‘Minchin Manuscript’ and kept at the National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh, Adv. Ms. 50.3.11.

### 8.5.3 Linguistic Aspects

The language that is prototypically written in ogam is Primitive Irish (fourth–sixth centuries CE). Ogam inscriptions are effectively the only source of knowledge about the Irish language for the crucial period around the middle of the millennium when Primitive Irish was transformed from a traditional Old Indo-European language with stable lexical stems and inflectional endings into a modern Insular Celtic language with a drastically reduced word-final inflection and word-initial and internal alternations instead, i.e. Old Irish (seventh–ninth centuries). It is a lucky coincidence that the ogam script was devised at a time when the language still closely resembled other ancient Celtic languages, and that this writing system continued in use while some of the most decisive changes, such as apocope (reduction and loss of final syllables), syncope (loss of medial vowels), and vowel changes, affected the language. These are directly reflected in the early ogam inscriptions. While the earliest inscriptions contain the full endings as in the name LUGUDECCAS (I-WAT-002 = *CIIC* 263), with only minimal change from reconstructed Proto-Celtic *\*lugudikos*, later examples show reduced internal vowels and loss of final syllables, e.g. LUGUDUC (I-COR-057 = *CIIC* 108), ultimately resulting in Old Irish *Luigdech*.

At the same time, concomitant phonological developments such as lenition and palatalization, which are equally distinctive as phonological features of the typological transformation of Irish, cannot be represented in ogam, but must be inferred indirectly. It is conceivable, for example, that in the above-cited examples the consonants were already lenited in both cases, and additionally palatalized in the second, i.e. [*ʲlʷyðɛx*] and [*ʲlʷyʲəðʲɛx*]. The Old Irish form also displays syncope [*ʲlʷyʲðʲɛx*]. Occasionally, the Latin version of the bilingual Welsh stones

<sup>69</sup> Deborah Hayden (pers. comm.).

displays more progressive features than the ogam part. Examples are Latin SAGRANI, which shows the loss of \*g that is still written in Irish SAGRAGNI ('of Sárán') (W-PEM-001 = CISW P110 = CIIC 449); and in the case of Irish MAQITRENI it is only the corresponding Latin spelling MACVTRENI (W-PEM-004 = CISW P12 = CIIC 428) that reveals that the archaic sound \*kʷ had already lost its labiality and had merged with \*k, and that the medial vowel had become an indistinct schwa. The divergence between the two versions demonstrates that even at that time a standard of writing ogam had already imposed itself, a standard that must have been taught in one way or another.

The sequence of directly observable linguistic changes allows us to define relative chronological periods in the evolution of Primitive Irish. Ziegler suggests four periods (indicated by Roman numerals).<sup>70</sup> Sims-Williams operates with a more fine-grained system of fifteen stages, each corresponding to an important sound change, but he, too, groups them into four broad periods, albeit not corresponding exactly to Ziegler's.<sup>71</sup> A note of caution regarding the reliability of those periods has to be sounded in so far as the scribes of the monument were well aware that words could be spelt in more archaic ways than they pronounced them themselves, and they made frequent and more or less successful use of making the texts they were writing look more archaic than they were. Pseudo-archaisms of this sort distort the overall dating of the stones more towards the past. In the case of the bilingual inscriptions from south Britain, it is conceivable that the use or retention of overt endings may have been reinforced by the Latin versions of the inscriptions.

Ogam inscriptions in Ireland consist almost exclusively of personal names in the genitive singular. The basic formula records the name of a male individual, followed by a patronymic, i.e. the name of the father or, more rarely, of the grandfather or a further-removed ancestor. The two names are usually separated by the word MAQQI ('son') in numerous variant spellings, or AVI ('grandson, descendant'), and they are optionally followed by the formula word MUCOI that indicates the kin group. A typical inscription looks for example like CATTUVVIRR MAQI RITUVVECAS MUCOI ALLATO ('of Cathair son of Rethach from the kin-group of Allaid') (I-KER-122 = CIIC 250). In most cases, the presence of the formula word MUCOI triggers the suppression of the name of the father. Occasionally, the patronymic slot contains more than just one name.

<sup>70</sup> Periods according to Ziegler (1994), 25–6, and their distinctive sound changes: I 'Primitive Irish' (400–500; lenition, raising/lowering); II 'Archaic Irish' (500–50; reduction of final syllables, VXR > VR); III 'Early Old Irish' (550–700; syncope); IV 'Old Irish' (700–900; weakening of internal and final syllables). The descriptive names for the periods, which Ziegler borrowed from historical stages of the Irish language, are partly at odds with the current periodization of Early Irish, for which see, for example, Stifter (2009), 55.

<sup>71</sup> Main periods after Sims-Williams (2003), 322–46: 1–5 fifth century; 6–7 early sixth century; 8–14 early to mid-sixth century; 15 mid-sixth century onwards. Sims-Williams applies his periods only to the ogam inscriptions in Britain.

More details in the form of appellative nouns are very rare. If they are found, they typically specify the social position of the dedicatee, e.g. QRIMITIR RONANN MAQI COMOGANN ('of the priest Rónán son of Comgán') (I-KER-013 = *CIIC* 145). Sometimes the inscriptions are restricted to the recipient himself and no ancestor is named, e.g. LUGUTTI VELITAS ('of Luchtae (?) the poet') (I-KER-123 = *CIIC* 251) or only the individual name is mentioned, e.g. CRON[A]N ('of Crónán') (S-ARG-002 = *CIIC* 507).

Ogam inscriptions in the south of Britain adhere fundamentally to the same pattern, although the amount of formulaic variation and the number of generic nouns is much more limited. Single names (20, almost half!) and son–father relationships or tribal affiliation (17) preponderate, for example on one of the rare monolingual stones from Wales: NETTASAGRI MAQI MUCOI BRIACI ('of Nad-Sáir son of from the kin of Briäch') (W-PEM-006 = *CISW* P5 = *CIIC* 426). To judge from the fact that endings tend to be preserved, the south British texts belong largely to the earlier part of the classical period. This is unlike Ireland, where many names on ogams are endingless, which means that they must have been created after the apocope of final syllables in the sixth century.

#### 8.5.4 Sociolinguistic Aspects of Ogam

The value of the information that ogam inscriptions offer about multilingualism differs hugely among the major regions: Ireland, southern Britain, Scotland, with the Isle of Man perhaps as a fourth mini-region. It is smallest in Ireland, where ogam stones contain very little evidence for bilingualism at all. Of the 400 stones, only two inscriptions are bilingual in the sense of providing texts in two different languages ('bi-version bilinguals'). The Irish part of the bilingual from Colbinstown (I-KDE-001 = *CIIC* 19), OVANI AVI IVACATTOS ('of Ovanas (Úaman?) grandson of Éochad'), belongs to an early period on account of the fully preserved endings and the unaffected vowels. Structurally, this text is otherwise unremarkable, but it is unclear how it relates to the notoriously difficult Latin part. The most commonly accepted reading, IVVERE DRVVIDES, seems to mean 'the druids helped'. However, the fifth letter is not fully legible. Instead of R, the reading N has also been suggested, in which case it could be interpreted as 'young druids'. Since there is no tradition in Ireland for erecting Latin dedicatory inscriptions, it has been suspected that the Latin text was created by someone from outside Ireland, possibly from Britain. It is not certain if there is any connection between the two texts at all.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>72</sup> It is hoped that 3D groove analysis to be undertaken as part of the OG(H)AM project will clarify whether the Irish and the Latin text could have been written together.

One very late ogam inscription from Ireland, the Killaloe cross (I-CLA-004 = *CIIC* 54), is paired with an Old Norse text in runes. It dates to the eleventh century, long after the classical phase of ogam epigraphy. In this case, the two texts clearly belong together as a unit since they complement each other in content. The Norse text on the front side of the base conforms to a typical runic producer formula (Þ)URGRIM RISTI (K)RUS INA ('Thórggrim sculpted this cross'). The Irish text on the side does not contain one of the traditional ogam naming formulae, but it gives a formula that may imitate the contemporary Irish Latinate inscriptions (see Section 8.6), namely a request for a blessing for a person: BÉANDACHT [FOR] TOROQR[IM] ('a blessing on Thórggrim'). The relationship between the two versions resembles that of the Latin–Irish bilinguals in Wales: from the physical arrangement it is evident that the Irish is subordinate to the Norse, even though Irish must have been the dominant language. The orthography follows the conventions of manuscript-based Middle Irish (period 2 in Section 8.5.1).

The last item to be mentioned, technically not a bilingual, but a bigraphic text, is an Irish cross-slab from Clonmacnoise (I-OFF-002). Underneath the personal name COLMAN ('Colmán') in Latin letters has been added the ogam BOCHT ('poor'). A date as late as the eleventh century has been suggested,<sup>73</sup> but the orthography would allow anything from the eighth or even seventh century. It is a rare example of the deliberate use of both writing traditions in a single epigraphic text. Several features set it apart from the classical tradition and associate it with reformed manuscript-style ogam: the orthography is Old Irish, a stem-line has been drawn, and a feather mark is present, although against the direction of reading.

Foreign influence is also very limited among Irish personal names. Although a large number of Latin loanwords entered Irish in the fourth and fifth centuries, this had little effect on the naming system of the laity, which stayed thoroughly native in the early period. Accordingly, only about a dozen borrowed Latin names occur on the stones in Ireland (c. 3% of the inscriptions). The only generic noun that is borrowed from Latin is QRIMITIR ('priest'), ultimately going back to Latin *presbyter*. In comparison, ten Latin names are found on stones in southern Britain, which means that their relative frequency is six times higher than in Ireland. For instance, in a short bilingual inscription from Cornwall, the two Latin words INGENVI MEMORIA are exactly mirrored in the ogam version IGENAVI MEMOR ('(to the) memory of Ingenuus') (E-CON-002 = *CIIC* 466), with both the noun and personal name being Latin loans into Irish.

The relationships of Ireland and Britain with Latin are very different, and this becomes even more strikingly evident in other features of the local Irish ogam

<sup>73</sup> Swift (2008), 125.



corpus in Britain that distinguish it from that in Ireland.<sup>74</sup> The most obvious difference of the almost fifty inscriptions in southern Britain (including some *dubia*) is that they are overwhelmingly bilingual, and they thus allow more insight into the multilingual milieu in which they were produced.<sup>75</sup> Only five stones in Wales and a solitary stone in England are monolingually Irish. The others contain Latin (or Old British) versions of the Irish text; only rarely do they differ in content. The relative status of the two languages is expressed directly and indirectly: ogam engravings are by their very nature marginal (namely on the edges of the stones), but they also tend to be shorter and thus convey less information. Leaving aside six unclear or damaged texts, seventeen examples are shorter than the Latin part (often just a single name), while in only fourteen examples are the two parts identical in information. This can be interpreted as reflecting the lesser prestige of Irish, while Latin is more central and occupies the prominent position.<sup>76</sup> Only once is the Irish text longer than the Latin (W-GLA-001 = CISW G86 = CIIC 409). One may suspect that the Latin was typically viewed as the 'original' and the Irish version as an addition. But this generalization does not extend to all Irish-Latin bilinguals. Sometimes the two texts are deliberately aligned with each other. In other cases, it is impossible to decide which version depends on the other, and in a few cases the two texts do not seem to have a relationship with each other at all. An alternative assessment is possible. The two constituent texts of the bilinguals could be meant to reach different audiences: the short Irish version may have been sufficient for the Irish 'in-group', who were familiar with the named individuals and their public roles, while the longer Latin text addressed the out-group, for whom more credentials had to be provided.<sup>77</sup>

Be that as it may, the very fact that those bilingual monuments were created underlines the desire to present the native Irish language on a similar footing to the prestige language Latin. The use of a different script stresses the desire to do so in a way that is as different as possible. If the scribes had incised the Irish name formula in Latin letters, the text would not have looked very different from the Latin version, given the similarities in the endings. Without a tell-tale word such as MAQQI or FILIVS, it would sometimes be impossible to tell which version is which language. The ogam script maximizes the difference between the two.

A small but maybe significant difference between Irish and British monuments is that we do find a tiny number of inscriptions in Britain that are dedicated to women. The best-preserved example is Latin AVITORIA FILIA CVNIGNI, Irish INIGENA CUNIGNI AVITTORIGES ('of the daughter of Cuinén, Auitorigia') (W-CMN-004 = CISW CM7 = CIIC 362), with the word for 'daughter' expressed

<sup>74</sup> See Swift (2007) for a detailed study of the Welsh ogams.

<sup>75</sup> See also Sims-Williams (2002).

<sup>76</sup> This situation is reminiscent of the Gaulish bilinguals from Italy, where such a subordinate relationship is even more manifest by Latin being written above the shorter Gaulish.

<sup>77</sup> K. Forsyth (pers. comm.).

in both languages. In the Irish, the name of the dedicatee is mentioned last, against the exclusive practice elsewhere of naming the individual first. VELVOR[IA] FILIA BROHO[MAGLI] shows the same Latin formula, unfortunately only [...]V[.]R[...] survives of the ogam counterpart (W-CGN-X01 = CISW CD14 = CIIC 349).<sup>78</sup> Probably the same man Brohomaglas/Brocmmál appears together with his wife Cauna in the Latin inscription BROHOMAGLI IATTI IC IACIT ET VXOR EIV{S} CAVNE, but in the corresponding Irish part Macalister could only make out a single [...]R[...] that could form part of the man's name (W-DEN-X01 = CISW D9 = CIIC 401).

In Ireland, all recipients of memorials are male. However, on Irish ogam stones, but not on British, feminine names can appear in the names of kin groups, possibly referring to a female eponymous character. A total of six stones in Co. Kerry mention the kin group of the *Corcu Duibne* (mod. *Corca Dhuibhne/Corkaguiney*), whose name derives from the mythical female person *Duibne*, e.g. MAQQI-ERCIA MAQQI MUCOI DOVINIA ('of Mac-Erae son of from the kin group of Duibne') (I-KER-043 = CIIC 175). The name of the male recipient Mac-Erae is furthermore remarkable in that it also contains a female name element. Literally his individual name means 'son of Erc', *Erc* being another frequently occurring name of a mythical female being.

As in the two inscriptions mentioning the man Brohomaglas/Brocmmál, occasionally several stones can be pieced together to give insight into the social networks of people and into their attitudes towards language. Probably just as important in this respect are those bilinguals which are not there, namely Latin inscriptions that record Irish names, but without an ogam version of the text. They may either give indirect evidence of the disappearance of the language or of its loss of status. The bilingual inscription from Pembrokeshire, Latin ANDAGELLI IACIT FILI CAVETI and Irish ANDAGELLI MACU CAV[ETI] (W-PEM-003 = CISW P22 = CIIC 433) honours 'Indgell son of Cuäd'. Indgell's brother Cóemán, on the other hand, is remembered on a Latin-only stone, namely COIMAGNI FILI CAVETI ('of Cóemán son of Cuäd') (CISW P21 = CIIC 434), which adheres completely to the underlying Irish formula 'X son of Y' in the genitive. Finally, Indgell's son has a monolingual Latin monument as well: CURCAGNI FILI ANDAGELLI ('of Corcán son of Indgell') (CISW P58 = CIIC 441). The reasons for the different treatment remain opaque, but it can be speculated that Indgell himself, or his contemporaries, represented the last generation for which Irish had sufficient status to be used on a public monument. Thereafter, the language sank into oblivion.

Some of the names on ogam stones in southern Britain are in fact British rather than Irish, even if embedded in an Irish formula. For example, MAGLICUNAS

<sup>78</sup> A possible third example is too fragmentary to discuss (W-PEM-015 = CISW P30 = CIIC 439).

(W-PEM-014 = CISW P70 = CIIC 446) corresponds to the well-known Welsh name *Maelgwn*; the expected Old Irish \**Málchú* does not exist. The case of the well-known monument from Castell Dwyran in Carmarthenshire is particularly complex linguistically. The Latin version reads MEMORIA VOTEPORIGIS PROTICTORIS ('to the memory of Voteporix, the protector'). The Old British name *Voteporix* is a compound of \**rīx* ('ruler') and \**uotek<sup>u</sup>o-* ('refuge'; cf. Welsh *godeb* with the same meaning), i.e. 'refuge-ruler'. The ogam text contains only VOTECORIGAS (W-CMN-005 = CISW CM3 = CIIC 358) and is a one-to-one phonetic transposition of the name into Irish, including the automatic substitution of P, which does not exist in Irish, by C, the younger reflex of Proto-Celtic \**k<sup>u</sup>*. However, Irish does not have a reflex of Proto-Celtic \**u<sup>o</sup>-tek<sup>u</sup>o-* ('refuge'). (There is nothing speaking against it having had such a formation in prehistory, but if it did, it was lost without trace.) This means that even though VOTECORIGAS looks like a well-formed Irish name, it is actually artificially created after the British model, revealing linguistic awareness of the sound correspondences between British and Irish. The bilingual stones from Britain are not only used to render the names of genuinely Irish individuals both in their native language and in the prestigious Latin, but the relationship can also go in the opposite direction. Somebody must have regarded it appropriate to convert the name of a high-status British person into Irish. In this way, the question of the relative levels of prestige of the languages becomes more complex. *Voteporix* could even be a British rendering of the Late Latin title *Protector*, in which case the inscription would be not only bilingual but trilingual.

The ogam tradition in those regions of Britain that had never belonged to the Roman Empire, namely Scotland and the Isle of Man, differ profoundly from those in the south in respect to chronology, language, and character. The later-medieval tradition of ogam in Scotland is much more varied linguistically, but assessing multilingualism of the texts runs up against the issue that it is not always clear what the matrix language is in the first place. Around half a dozen inscriptions in Argyll are in an early form of Gaelic and are from the early, classical phase of ogam use, as are several monuments outside this region, including one from Orkney. The latter group's linguistic affiliation is still a mystery, not least because of their occasionally very different orthography. The language of some of the stones could be a mixture of Pictish and Irish or even of Norse and Pictish.<sup>79</sup> This area is usually designated Pictland, and the tradition of writing ogam on stone monuments persisted longer there than it did elsewhere.

In an inscription such as ETTLIETRENOIDDORS (S-PER-003), it is neither clear how many words we are looking at, nor what they mean. EDDARRNONN (S-FIF-001) is a recurring name in Pictland, perhaps *Eternon*, ultimately from

<sup>79</sup> See Rodway (2020), for a critical assessment of the limited value of these inscriptions for our knowledge of the Pictish language; see also Forsyth (1998).

Latin *Aeternus*, but whether it is written in Pictish or in a Gaelicized form is unknown. MAQQ or MEQQ, evidently the word for ‘son’, does occur in several of these stones, but it could either be a borrowed formula word from Gaelic contexts, or it could even be a spelling for British \**map* (‘son’). A stone from Orkney, I[-]IRRANN U[-]RRACT KEVV CÉRROCCS (S-ORK-001), appears to contain a genuinely British phrase ‘I[.]irann made this cross’ (the latter word being a loan from Latin *crux*). Finally, in the case of the stones from Shetland we may even be looking at texts in Norse, e.g. CRROSCC NAHHTVDDADDS DATTRR ANN[-] BENISES MEQQ DDROANN[-] (S-SHE-001). Apart from the obvious Latin loan for ‘cross’, this text could contain the Old Norse words *dóttir* (‘daughter’) and *ann* (‘gave’). The orthography and the letter shapes in some of the Scottish inscriptions are noticeably different from those elsewhere. Graphic gemination of consonants, except in word-initial position, is almost the rule. Inscriptions from Orkney and Shetland not only use *forfeda* more commonly, but also make use of innovative shapes of letters (e.g. a ‘rabbit ears’ sign that perhaps stands for D; angled A; backward sloping undulating I; cross-hatched double R; diamond-shaped O). Word division, basically absent elsewhere, is occasionally marked with a colon (:). Ogam on stones in Pictland is not infrequently combined with Pictish symbols (16 examples) and there is a unique example of a (different) text in the Latin alphabet (language uncertain) accompanying an ogam (S-ABD-001).

The Isle of Man, finally, at the crossroads of Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, overlaid by the Norse-speaking Vikings, is also a perfect melting pot in the ogam tradition. Its eight extant ogam stones show influence of all the neighbouring languages: British and Irish names in Irish formulae, Irish and Latin bilinguals, and Norse and Irish bilinguals with Latin loanwords (*krus* = *crux*) in the Norse.

## 8.6. The Transition to Latinate Writing

With ogam being so inherently unsuitable for the recording of texts that are longer than three or four words, it is no surprise that the Latin alphabet was eventually adopted and adapted to write the Irish language, as soon as a thoroughly literate culture took hold in Ireland as part of Christian culture. The transition in epigraphy lagged somewhat behind this.

In contrast to ogam, the inscriptions in the Latin script in Ireland have seldom received the scholarly attention they deserve as a unique linguistic and historical source. The exceptions to this are publications by Okasha and Forsyth (2001) on the approximately 125 Early Christian inscriptions of Munster, and Ó Cróinín (2013) on the approximately 300 inscribed slabs (of c. 700 cross-slabs altogether) from the important monastic site of Clonmacnoise, which has by far the largest collection of early Christian grave-slabs anywhere in Britain and Ireland. The

relative neglect of the remaining Irish Latinate inscriptions is partially due to the absence of a complete corpus. No modern comprehensive collection has been attempted so far, nor do they have a separate category in the *Archaeological Survey of Ireland*,<sup>80</sup> but come under various monument categories (e.g. cross-slabs, cross-inscribed pillars, and inscribed stones, the majority of which are uninscribed). Their complete, up-to-date geographical distribution has not been mapped. Preliminary work has shown that their number across Ireland may exceed 600, but their distribution is limited and uneven. They tend to be found in clusters and are 'particularly prominent in the Irish midlands and in the colonies of the southern Hebrides; in contrast, they are relatively rare both in the northeast and south of Ireland. Where grave-slabs do occur, very large numbers can be found on individual sites,'<sup>81</sup> such as the 700 from Clonmacnoise (300 with inscriptions) and over 200 from Gallen (15 with inscriptions), both Co. Offaly; over 100 from Iona (Scotland; 9 with inscriptions), 62 (most with traces of inscriptions) from Toureen Peakaun, Co. Tipperary, and 63 (22 with inscriptions) from Inishcaltra in Co. Clare.<sup>82</sup>

Cataloguing of early inscriptions in the Irish language began in earnest in the early twentieth century. In 1903, Whitley Stokes and John Strachan printed the text of ninety-six inscriptions for the entire island.<sup>83</sup> Macalister published his *Studies in Irish Epigraphy* in three volumes around the turn of the century (1897–1907). He followed this with his *Corpus Inscriptionum Insularum Celticarum* in two volumes, covering inscriptions from Ireland, Wales, England, the Isle of Man, and Scotland. Ogam inscriptions occupy the volume published in 1945 and 'half-uncial' inscriptions that of 1949 (with 452 examples from Ireland). This remains invaluable today,<sup>84</sup> though many new inscriptions have since come to light. These important but now outdated print sources form also the core of the Irish Latinate components of the *CISP* online database, which otherwise has a geographically and epigraphically much wider outlook. The Early Medieval Irish Latinate Inscriptions project (EMILI) started in 2021 to create a complete digital database of all Latin-script inscriptions in Ireland.<sup>85</sup>

<sup>80</sup> The *Archaeological Survey of Ireland* (ASI) is a unit of the *National Monuments Service* (NMS). The ASI was established to compile an inventory of the known archaeological monuments in the state. The information is stored on a database and in a series of paper files that collectively form the ASI Sites and Monuments Record (SMR). See <https://www.archaeology.ie/archaeological-survey-ireland> [accessed 24 June 2023].

<sup>81</sup> Swift (1999), 111.

<sup>82</sup> Okasha and Forsyth (2001), 224–329.

<sup>83</sup> *Thes. Pal.* ii. 286–9.

<sup>84</sup> Some of the recorded inscribed stones and fragments have since been lost and these early accounts and drawings are all that remain.

<sup>85</sup> The start-up of EMILI was funded by a 2021 Royal Irish Academy Nowlan digitization grant. EMILI is based in the Department of Early Irish at Maynooth University and the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies. The project aims to develop a free, online, searchable digital corpus, including digital editions, of ultimately all early Irish Latinate inscriptions, primarily on stone monuments, but also a dozen on portable objects of various materials, mainly in the National Museum of Ireland collection. See <https://emili.celt.dias.ie/> [accessed 24 June 2023].

While ogam was still being used and adapted after the seventh century in Scotland, in Ireland there was a move from ostensibly secular ogam-inscribed pillars and standing stones to more overtly Christian epigraphy in the Latin script. Despite their restricted distribution and their limited textual content, it is clear that Irish Latinate inscriptions are inextricably linked with the establishment of Christianity in Ireland. The vast majority occur on cross-inscribed grave-slabs found at monastic sites. A few examples of inscribed stones that appear to be in a transitional style (e.g. *CIIC* 186, Kilfountain, Co. Kerry, and *CIIC* 1, Inchagoill, Co. Galway, see Fig. 8.2) contain text in the Latin insular script but retain features of earlier ogam-inscribed stones, such as the use of unworked upright pillars, as opposed to recumbent grave-slabs, and vertical text as opposed to horizontal. The corpus of inscriptions from Ireland consists of at least 600 such inscriptions in the Latin or Roman script, mainly in a form of insular script generally described as ‘half-uncial’ and dating from around the seventh to the twelfth centuries, but occasionally also in insular minuscule script, for example at St Berriherth’s Kyle.<sup>86</sup> There is also a small number of Latin-language inscriptions including a few bilinguals in Latin and Irish, as well as one in Greek. For example, out of seventy-six



Fig. 8.2 Inchagoill inscribed pillar, Co. Galway (<https://emili.celt.dias.ie/GAL-011>). Image by Digital Heritage Age, CC0. Public Domain.

<sup>86</sup> Okasha and Forsyth (2001), 13.

analysable inscriptions in the Munster corpus, ten are in Latin: five from Tullylease, Co. Cork and five from west Kerry with just *nomina sacra*. One of the latter group also contains the full Latin alphabet (not just the letters used in Irish), occurring alongside the *nomen sacrum*, on a stone from the important early Christian and medieval ecclesiastic site of Kilmalkedar, Co. Kerry.<sup>87</sup> The evidence examined so far for the rest of Ireland suggests a similar pattern in which the small number of inscriptions in Latin generally occur at specific sites, such as Templebreacan (Inishmore), Co. Galway, where four of the eight inscriptions are in Latin or are bilingual in both Latin and Irish. Examples include Latin S(AN) C(T)I BRE(CA)NI ('of Saint Breccán') (EMILI-0013 = CIIC 531) and VII ROMANI ('seven Romans') (EMILI-0016 = CIIC 534) and bilingual OR(OIT) AR II CANOIN ('a prayer on behalf of the two canons') (EMILI-0017 = CIIC 535).

Another major change is the type of inscription and formula used. While ogam inscriptions are memorials with names and patronymics in the genitive case (see Section 8.5), Irish Latinate inscriptions on grave-slabs are thoroughly Christian, asking for a prayer or a blessing for a named individual in the dative or accusative case, rarely accompanied by a patronymic, e.g.:

OR(ÓIT) DO/AR X ('a prayer for/on behalf of X')

Other formulae are less often encountered, e.g.:

BENDACHT AR/FOR X ('a blessing on X')

Inscriptions of this type also occur on a smaller number of portable objects (see Fig. 8.3), most of which also have an ecclesiastical context, such as reliquaries, bell-shrines, book-shrines, croziers, and hand bells.<sup>88</sup> The formula is also found in manuscript sources, for example in the eighth-century *Book of Dimma*<sup>89</sup> at the end of the Gospel of Luke: *oroit do Dianchridiu diaroscribad hic liber et do D[i]mmu+ scribenti amen* ('a prayer for Díanchride for whom this book was written and for Dímmae the writer. Amen'). Very few of the individuals named in inscriptions have been identified, but those who have are generally ecclesiastical personnel with obits in the annals. They are easy to identify as churchmen<sup>90</sup> since there is a very sharp dichotomy in medieval Ireland between native names used by the laity and names of clerics, derived from international Christian tradition

<sup>87</sup> Okasha and Forsyth (2001), 165–9.

<sup>88</sup> Johnson (2020), 155; Michelli (1996).

<sup>89</sup> <https://www.tcd.ie/library/early-irish-mss/book-of-dimma/>. Digitized and available at <https://doi.org/10.48495/9306t370s>. Annotated text available here: [https://chronhib.maynoothuniversity.ie/chronhibWebsite/tables?page=0&limit=0&fprop=Text\\_Unit\\_ID&fval=S0016-3&dtable=morphology&ctable=sentences&search=false](https://chronhib.maynoothuniversity.ie/chronhibWebsite/tables?page=0&limit=0&fprop=Text_Unit_ID&fval=S0016-3&dtable=morphology&ctable=sentences&search=false)

<sup>90</sup> Swift (1998), 110; (1999), 111–18.



Fig. 8.3 Terryhoogan inscribed hand-bell (<https://emili.celt.dias.ie/ARM-001>). Image courtesy of National Museum of Ireland ©NMI.

or containing the elements *máel* ('shorn, tonsured') or later *gilla* ('servant') collocated with the name of a saint. With regard to generally longer inscriptions on mainly eleventh-century reliquaries, Michelli has noted that a distinction appears to be made between commissioners, i.e. high-ranking members of families with connections to the relic, and craftsmen who are generally not given obits in the annals. An interesting observation is that most of the craftsmen appear to have been at best only partially literate.<sup>91</sup>

## 8.7. Conclusion

Britain and Ireland confront us with two closely related Celtic languages whose fates differed fundamentally during the first millennium CE. The question of when and how Celtic languages arrived in these islands has been debated for a long time, but it can be expected that ongoing research on ancient DNA will mean a major game-change in the debate in the coming years.

After the conquest of southern Britain and its annexation to the Roman Empire in the first century CE, British Celtic (and later the individual languages Welsh, Cornish, and Breton) underwent profound structural and lexical influence from Latin. At the same time, British Celtic lost ground first to Latin and, from the fifth century, to the West-Germanic dialects brought by the Anglo-Saxon invaders of Britain. During the provincial period, bilingualism must have been widespread.

<sup>91</sup> Michelli (1996), 5–12.



The dominance of the imperial language was such that no vernacular literacy developed before well into the Middle Ages. Population movements in the wake of the Anglo-Saxon invasion brought varieties of British Celtic to Armorica on the Continent, and movements westwards of populations within the country may have created the context in which grammatical features of the incipient British Romance language were transferred into British Celtic.

While the dominance of Latin was felt on an everyday basis in Britain and thus left indelible linguistic marks, in Ireland the exposure to Latin was of a very different nature. The major wave of influence began several centuries later, around the fourth century, in the wake of the Christianization of the country. As for the Irish language, the influence was chiefly lexical and limited to specific areas of the lexicon. Although the sources only allow us a limited view, it looks as if knowledge of Latin was mostly restricted to clerical circles. Latin never became a spoken language outside of Christian ritual and, unlike Britain, it never occupied specific registers of everyday communication. But there was also a very different kind of influence from Latin in Ireland. First, Latin literacy provided a model for the invention of a native type of writing in the form of the ingeniously idiosyncratic ogam script around the fourth century. This writing system spread to all regions in the western archipelago in which Irish was spoken or where Irish culture exerted influence, namely, apart from Ireland herself, Wales, Cornwall, Scotland, and the Isle of Man. Ogams in each of these regions show their own special types of interaction with the local languages and with Latin. The 'outsider' status of Latin, as it were, meant that for everybody in Ireland who used Latin, it was a foreign, second language. This was conducive to the emergence of literacy in the vernacular language. With a delay of two or three centuries, Latin literacy finally led to the emergence of the manuscript-based Irish literary tradition in the Latin script from the seventh century onwards. The Latin script was germane to the medium of manuscripts, for which ogam was not well suited, but it also largely replaced ogam in epigraphic use in Ireland. Ongoing research projects on ogam inscriptions and on Irish inscriptions in the Latin alphabet will alter the picture of literacy in Ireland and Britain.