

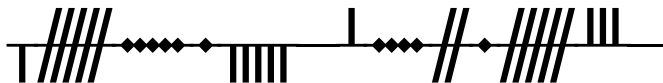
Ogham

Contributed by Brian P. Hegarty Jr.



Ogham (pronounced “OH-um”) is an alphabet which was traditionally used to write Primitive Irish 1600 years ago and is the earliest known form of Goidelic (Gaelic) languages. It is known only from fragments inscribed on stone in the Ogham alphabet across Ireland and western Great Britain beginning in the 4th century, around the time period of St. Patrick. It is impossible to accurately translate all names, words and phrases into Primitive Irish and then into Ogham. For this reason, modern Irish (Irish Gaelic) is used instead.

Ogham stones are among Ireland’s most remarkable national treasures. These perpendicular cut stones bear inscriptions in the uniquely Irish Ogham alphabet, using a system of notches and horizontal or diagonal lines by scoring the stone to represent the sounds of an early form of Irish language. The stones are inscribed with the names of prominent people and sometimes tribal affiliation or marking geographical territories. This is an example of what Brian Hegarty would look like on a vertical stone using the Ogham alphabet (to save space it’s written horizontally here):



Ogham was never used for extensive writing. Before the advent of Christianity in Ireland, very little writing was done at all, with everything from genealogies and histories to poetry and folklore being transmitted orally.

Celtic languages have evolved over many centuries and are usually divided into two groups: continental and insular. Unfortunately, continental Celtic languages, such as Gallic, are now extinct while insular Celtic languages, such as Irish, appear to have migrated from the European continent to Britain and to Ireland at an unknown time.

Family tree of the Celtic languages:

Primitive Irish (300 AD) first ogham inscriptions appear

Old Irish (500 AD) first manuscripts appear

Middle Irish (900 AD) Irish migration to Scotland and Mann begins

Early Modern Irish / Classical Gaelic (1200 AD)

At this point the two insular Celtic languages are split into two branches: **Goidelic (Gaelic) and Brythonic.**

Goidelic (Gaelic):

Irish (aka Gaelic or Irish Gaelic in the United States)

Scottish Gaelic (aka Gaelic)

Manx (aka Manx Gaelic outside Isle of Man)

Brythonic:

Welsh

Cornish

Breton

There are some similarities between languages belonging to these two branches. But a speaker of modern Irish and a speaker of modern Welsh, most likely will not be able to understand each other. However, a speaker of Scottish Gaelic and a speaker of Irish would have a better chance of understanding each other.

In the time period before *Early Modern Irish*, there was no such thing as a linguistic division. The Gaelic language was the same or very similar in Ireland, Scotland and Manx. Gaelic was just a language of multiple dialects for the Irish, Scottish, and Manx. The term Irish came into use, in the twentieth century, as an ethnic identifier to unify the various ethnic/dialect groups that were living in Ireland at the time. Irish Gaeilge (pronounced gael-ga) and Scottish Gaidhlig (pronounced gal-lick) are Gaelic languages but could be considered dialects (instead of separate languages).

Even though English is the predominant spoken language, Irish is the first official language in the Republic of Ireland. It is a regional language in Northern Ireland. It is also an official language of the European Union. Irish is taught as a mandatory school subject in all state schools in the Republic of Ireland. There has been a significant rise in the past few years of *Gaelscoileanna*, which translates as Irish-language schools. These are schools in which Irish is the language of communication and instruction. *Gaelscoileanna* are found in both urban and rural areas and have led to the rise of a new generation of urban Irish-language speakers.

There are three main **Irish** Gaelic dialects: Munster dialect (spoken in south of Ireland, in counties as Kerry, Cork and Waterford), Connacht dialect (spoken in Connemara and Aran Islands in the west coast of Ireland, as well as Galway, Mayo and Sligo), and Ulster dialect (spoken in Donegal and Northern Ireland). There seems to be Urban Irish dialect emerging, traditionally spoken outside the traditional *Gaeltachtaí* Irish speaking regions, primarily in cities. There is no such thing as the “best” dialect but the national school’s teach the Munster dialect as the standard.