POLYHEDRON
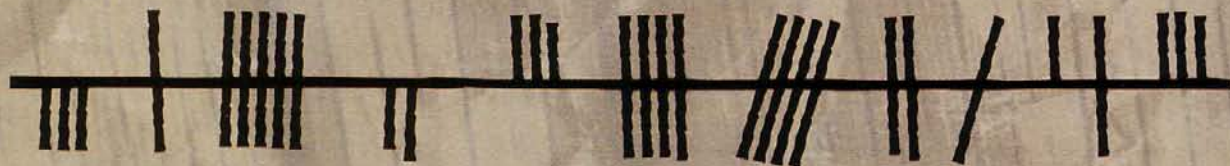
THE RPGA MAGAZINE

RPGA
NETWORK

Talking the Tree Tongue

BY LANCE HAWVERMALE   ILLUSTRATIONS BY CHUCK LUKACS

Fáilte Romhat!

Or . . . "Welcome!" in modern English.

Of the many historic milieus that have influenced the roleplaying community, few have affected gaming campaign settings as profoundly as the era of the ancient Celts. The Celtic tribes, who inhabited western Europe from Italy to Ireland, can claim responsibility for a great deal of current gaming lore, from deities to heroic legends, to an assortment of magical items and spells. Most prominently, however, the Celtic mythos inspired an entire character archetype—the druid— which functions as a character class in many of today's roleplaying games, specifically the druids of DUNGEONS & DRAGONS® and the druidic shamans of *Shadowrun*, as detailed in the *Player's Handbook* and the *London Sourcebook*, respectively. And though the druid of D&D®, *Shadowrun*, and other gaming worlds often bears little resemblance to his historic counterpart, many campaigns still strive to style their druidic orders in a manner consistent with

the druids of old. Such historically-conscious players and gamemasters will find themselves better prepared for this task when they make use of an actual druidic language, as practiced by the Celtic scholars of ages past. Players are encouraged to delve into one of the true mysteries of the Celtic world: Ogham, language of the Irish druids.

Historic Ogham

Ogham (pronounced OH-yam) was a form of written communication practiced only by those druids inhabiting the island of Ireland. The druids themselves, both those on the European continent and the British Isles, were members of a social class responsible for the keeping of laws, the instruction of the lower classes, and the administration of justice. Rather than priests, the druids were philosophers who contemplated the nature of the physical universe and its relationships to the morals of mankind. The druids also were

known as judges, historians, poets, musicians, physicians, and seers.

Due to a rigid theological taboo, the druids on the continent, or Gaulish druids, were expressly prohibited from committing the spoken word to a physical existence. In his chronicles of the Celts, Julius Caesar wrote that the druids "commit to memory immense amounts of poetry, and so some of them continue their studies for twenty years. They consider it improper to commit their studies to writing, although they use the Greek alphabet for almost everything else." Though in many respects Caesar's estimation was an accurate one, his understanding of the complex Celtic belief in Truth was severely limited. In effect, the Celts saw Truth as divine law, and the members of their intellectual caste, or druids, were the interpreters of that law.

The prohibition against writing, as ordained by the Gaulish druids, was rooted in the Celtic philosophy that, "By Truth the earth endures." To the Celts, Truth was the foundation of things both heavenly and temporal. Speaking the Truth often brought about magical effects, as was the case with the Celtic hero Cormac, who allegedly was given a cup which shattered when three lies were spoken over it, and reformed itself when three Truths were told. Druidic teachers

instructed their pupils in "*an Fhírinne in aghaidh an tSaoil*," or "the Truth against the world." As it was an integral component of both their civil and criminal law, the power of Truth affected everyone, from the poorest shepherd to the most esteemed warrior-king. In fact, the Old Irish word for truth is the basis for several terms of modern Irish speech: holiness, righteousness, religion and, above all, justice. Truth, then, was the highest concept of druidic thought.

Julius Caesar's observation was based upon the druidic tenet that Truth was the Word, and the Word was sacred and not to be profaned. The druids maintained that all things were brought into being by giving them a name; such was the power of the Word. The Egyptians held similar beliefs. It was said that Ra, god of the sun, created himself from Nothingness by calling out his own name. In both Old and Modern Irish, the term for "name" is *ainm*. Not coincidentally, this is also the word for "soul." So to prevent the degradation of Truth, the spoken tongue of the Celts was never committed to paper or etched on stone. For writing purposes, the Celts made use of Greek, Latin, and Etruscan letters. Hence the utter absence of a unique written language amongst the continental Celtic tribes.

However, the druids of Ireland held no such reservations about writing.

Letter	Ogham name	English name
B	Beth (BEH)	birch
L	Luis (LWEESH)	rowan
N	Nion (NEE-uhn)	ash
F	Fearn (FAIR-n)	alder
S	Saille (SAHL-yuh)	willow
H	Huath (Hoo-ah)	hawthorn
D	Duir (DOO-r)	oak
T	Tinne (CHIN-yuh)	holly
C	Coll (CULL)	hazel
Q	Quert (KWAIRT)	apple
M	Muin (MUHN)	grape vine
G	Gort (GORT)	ivy
Ng	Ngetal (NYEH-tl)	reed
St	Straif (STRAHF)	blackthorn
R	Ruis (RWEESH)	elder
A	Ailm (AHL-m)	silver fir
O	Onn (UHN)	furze
U	Ura (OO-rah)	heather
E	Eadha (EH-yuh)	poplar
I	Idho (EE-yoh)	yew

The Ogham Alphabet

Sometimes Oghams lie on the side. This is usually in manuscripts.

B L F S N H D T C Q

M G NG Z R A O U E I
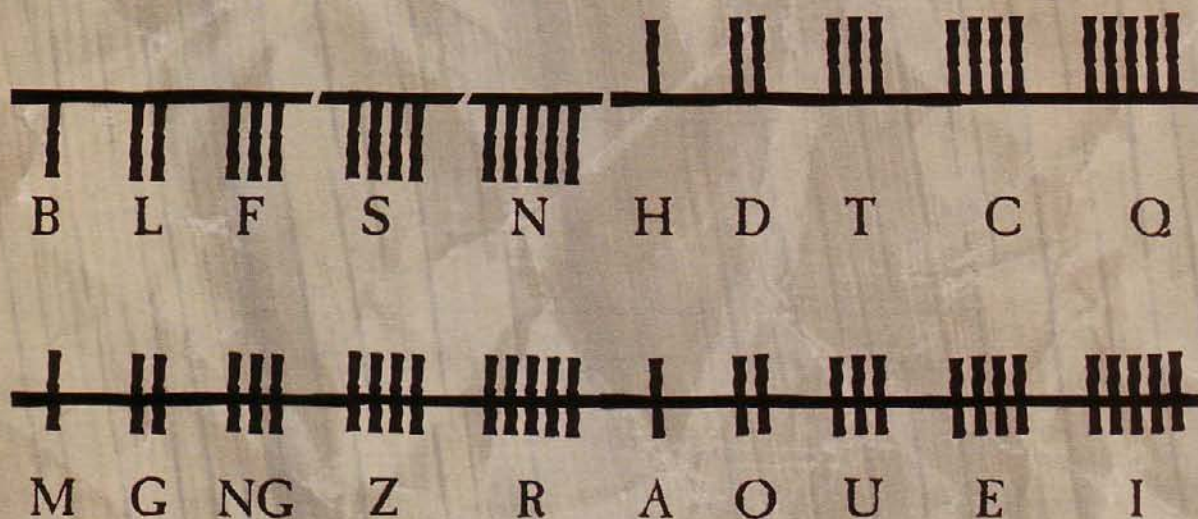
This is the vertical way of writing Oghams.

R
Z
NG
G
M

N
S
V
L
B

Q
C
T
D
H

I
E
U
O
A

I
E
U
O
A
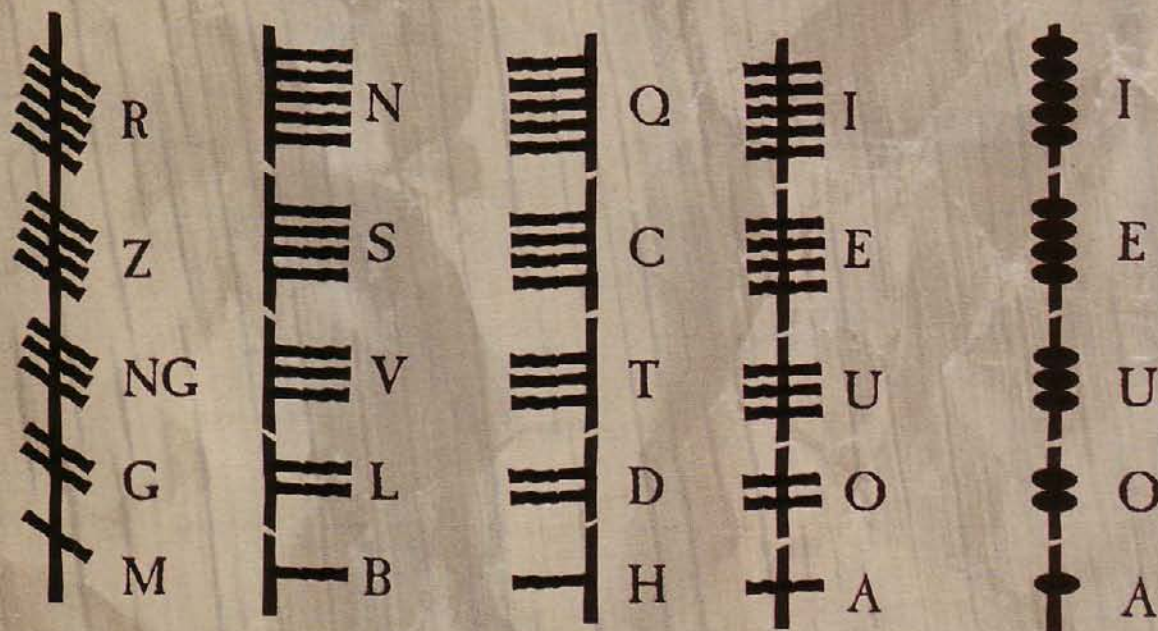
Sometimes vowels use dots rather than lines intersecting the vertical axis.

New D&D Magic Item:
Pantograph of the Ard-Ollamh

The first Ard-Ollamh, or Chief Poet, invented this item to assist him in the copying of sacred Ogham texts into tongues more widely understood, such as Common. The *pantograph* is a drawing instrument consisting of four lightweight wooden bars joined in the shape of a parallelogram and hinged so as to be extensible. By placing one arm of the *pantograph* on the original Ogham document and uttering the proper command phrase, the item moves its opposite arm to render a duplicate document. The *pantograph* pens the original text verbatim, save that the second text appears in Common (or any language of the DM's choice). Speaking the reverse of the command phrase enables the copying of Common texts into Ogham. The *pantograph of the Ard-Ollamh* inscribes one page per minute, to a maximum of 30 pages per day. Magic writings cannot be copied in this manner.
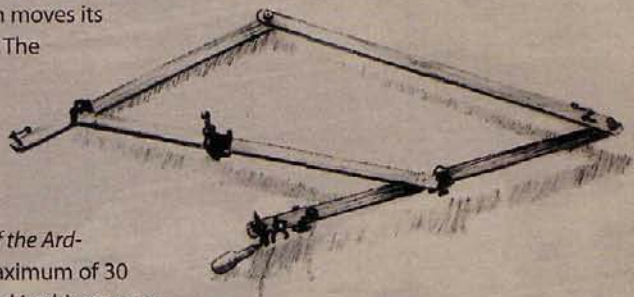
Caster Level: 3rd; *Prerequisites:* Craft Wondrous Item, comprehend languages; *Market Price:* 1,000 gp; *Weight:* 2 lb.

The Irish sagas clearly reveal a distinctive druidic alphabet—Ogham—amongst the Celts of Ireland, with inscriptions dating back to the first and second centuries CE. The sundry Irish myths find heroes writing poetry in Ogham, warriors issuing Ogham challenges as inscribed on sacred sticks, and druids etching incantations on headstones and magic staves, always in cryptic Ogham. The *Book of Leinster*, 1150 CE, contends that Ogham sagas of the fifth and sixth centuries were inscribed on wands of hazel and aspen and gathered in great libraries known as *Tech Screpta*. Over the years, the wealth of the *Tech Screpta* was lost, some texts burned by Christian zealots, others simply eroded by time and the elements. At least 369 Ogham inscriptions have been found to date, most in Ireland, but also several scattered about Wales, Cornwall, and Scotland. Seeing this heavy geographic concentration, any reference to a druidic tongue refers specifically to the druids of Ireland, who made ready use of Ogham to record history, instruct their pupils in music and natural law, and pass along the wisdom of their forefathers.

According to a medieval text known as the *Book of Ballymote*, Ogham was created by Ogma Sun-Face, god of eloquence and learning, and thus somewhat of a patron for the druids, who were the intellectual caste in the Celtic social structure. Ogham has been called the "tree alphabet," due to the fact that each Irish letter is named after a certain tree. Each tree was believed to bear a host of magical properties and herbal ingredients.

When the *Book of Ballymote* was compiled by Maghnus Ó Duibhgeánnáin in the year 1390 CE, a treatise on Ogham was included, accompanied by an alphabet key. Scholars later used this text as their principal source for deciphering the pictograms they encountered on grave markers and standing stones on the British Isles. The letters of Ogham were formed by grouping together a series of dots and dashes, much like modern-day Morse code. Though consonants were always represented as dashes, vowels were often marked with smaller dots. Regardless of the writer's choice of dot or dash, each letter was marked along a vertical axis, and read from bottom to top.

In manuscript form, the Ogham letters would occasionally be written from left to right, as per traditional English. For example, the following Ogham script reads, "Fáilte Romhat," or "Welcome."

Ogham in Game Play

Aside from the transient thrill of being able to transcribe their spell lists into actual Ogham, D&D druids and *Shadowrun* druidic shamans can now make use of an individual archetype-based language, while gamemasters can use Ogham to further enlighten the setting of their campaign worlds with an element of historic fact. Ogham inscriptions can be distributed as player handouts. *Shadowrun* shamans might receive their traveling instructions in the ancient tongue, while mundanes might be forced to consult a druidic contact after finding an obelisk carved with quatrains of sacred Ogham poetics. Druids in the D&D game system automatically begin play with this tongue, as mentioned in the *Player's Handbook*. Druids in *Shadowrun* learn the tree tongue by spending language skill points, just as they would with any other language, although locating an appropriate instructor might prove difficult, given the insular nature of most druidic circles. Incidentally, finding a skillsoft formatted for Ogham in Seattle of 2061 CE might be an adventure unto itself!

Ogham doesn't have to exist only as a written language. Though it might be difficult to translate the symbols of Ogham into a purely vocal context, the tree tongue lends itself readily to sign language. By using four fingers of one hand to represent the various Ogham letters and the opposite palm as the vertical "baseline," druids can effectively communicate simple somatic messages. At the GM's discretion, players may be permitted to know at least two forms of Ogham, the written and the physically signed.

There are several ways to introduce Ogham into the ongoing campaign.

Divine gift: Just as Ogma delivered the secret of his language to his people, any one of the druidic totems of the *Shadowrun* universe could grant a favor to the high-ranking initiate of its order. In a D&D campaign, this favor could come from any suitable deity, such as Beory or Obad-Hai of the Greyhawk® setting, or Oghma of the Forgotten Realms®. It would then be the responsibility of the high priest to disseminate this tongue throughout the ranks of the brotherhood, while ensuring that it remained protected from the secular world. This would add several new possibilities for adventure within a druid-oriented campaign.

Discovery: A group of wandering druids, perhaps the player characters themselves, finish a long and arduous mission in the name of their order. As a reward, they uncover a ring of standing stones or a bundle of wooden rods on which the secret of lost Ogham has been

carved. In this instance, the players become the ultimate agents of Truth as they endeavor to spread the Word to their druidic brethren, while safeguarding it against those who would defile it.

Initiation: As part of his struggle to gain the higher ranks of shamanic ability, the *Shadowrun* initiate might be sent upon an Astral quest, during which he recovers the secrets of Ogham—if he survives! A druid from an D&D setting might undertake a *quest*, as per the spell, to accomplish a similar goal.

Invention: Under careful guidance by the GM, a character might be allowed to "create" the language of Ogham. That is, the PC spends game time and considerable nuyen or gold pieces to personally invent Ogham in much the same manner as a character researching a new spell. The GM might also require the player to possess certain scholarly and specialized skills, such as history or linguistics.

Deus ex machina: The easiest method of placing Ogham into the campaign is simply by gamemaster decree. One day the language is nonexistent, and with the coming sun, *voila*, Ogham appears. Though perhaps the least realistic of the gamemaster's options and certainly the most contrived, this is also the quickest way to insert Ogham into the campaign without introducing additional gaming material.

The ultimate breadth of Ogham in game play is left the purview of the gamemaster. Certainly all druidic spell formulae will be transcribed in Ogham, regardless of whether that transcription appears as a tangle of information in the Matrix or as graven pictograms on a staff of sandalwood. Historically, Ogham was chiefly used to record the deaths of kings, heroes, and other personages of note. Because of the natural limits of a "dot-and-dash" language, it is doubtful that Ogham was ever used to describe complex human emotions or other amorphous concepts such as dreams, aspirations, and spirituality. All of the extant Ogham inscriptions are merely chronicles of important dates, wars, migrations, and the lineage of kings. In a game setting, however, Ogham can be as vital and dynamic a tongue as the campaign requires.

MODERN OGHAM

Today's Ogham is a working and viable language, thanks to the efforts of linguistic scholars around the world. The International Standards Organization (ISO) is continuously working toward a modern, universally accepted Ogham. Hundreds of additions and corrections have been made throughout the years so that Ogham can accommodate modern demands. A new level of complexity has broadened the scope of the language to satisfy today's phonetic requirements. Computer keyboards now can be configured to an Ogham format as easily as French or Japanese! Several Ogham fonts currently are available to enhance word-processing programs, with many offered as free downloads from certain Internet sites. There might soon come a day when Ogham is even offered as a second language in universities across the globe. This would have come as no surprise at all to the ancient druids, who would have seen it as the natural progression of the wisdom of the Word. ❧

Further Reading

Blamires, Steve. *Celtic Tree Mysteries: Secrets of the Ogham*. Llewellyn, 1997.
Chadwick, Nora K. *The Druids*. Cardiff: U Wales P, 1996.
Ellis, Peter Berresford. *The Druids*. London: Constable, 1994.
Green, Miranda. *Dictionary of Celtic Myth and Legend*. London: Thames & Hudson, 1992.
Nicholas, R. *The Book of Druidry*. London: Aquarian, 1990.

Finally, excellent Ogham Web sites can be found at the following addresses:
members.aol.com/irishdremr/oghami ntro.htmlrabbitmoon.home.mind-spring.com/asw/
uoguelph.ca/~bmyers/druid.html