

OG(H)AM:

Harnessing digital technologies to transform understanding of ogham writing,
from the 4th century to the 21st century

Factsheet

Dates: 1 August 2021-31 July 2024

Website: <https://ogham.glasgow.ac.uk> (available soon)

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Funders: [Arts and Humanities Research Council](#) and [Irish Research Council](#), under the '[UK Ireland Collaboration in the Digital Humanities Research Grants Call](#)' (grant numbers AH/W001985/1 and IRC/W001985/1)

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Co-Investigator: [Deborah Hayden](#), Associate Professor in Early Irish, Maynooth University

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Partner organisations: School of Celtic Studies of the [Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies](#); [Discovery Programme](#); Museums: [British Museum](#), [National Museums of Scotland](#), [National Museum of Ireland](#), [National Museum of Wales](#); [Manx Museum](#) (and in collaboration with [Ulster Museum](#)). State heritage agencies: [Historic Environment Scotland](#), [Cadw](#), [Manx Heritage](#); [National Monuments Service of Ireland](#).

Overview: The project will harness digital tools from different fields to transform scholarly and popular understanding of ogham—an ancient script unique to Ireland and Britain. This project provides the long-awaited opportunity to complete the corpus of ogham-inscribed Irish stones begun by the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies [Ogham in 3D project](#) (2012-15, 2016-17; created by White with our partner organisations, the Discovery Programme, and the Irish Government's National Monuments Service) and to extend it to include oghams in all media, including the many outside the Republic of Ireland.



*Digital scanning of Ogham stone, Lugnagappul, Co. Kerry
(Image: Nora White).*

Ogham is highly unusual among world writing systems (for overviews see: Stifter *Ogam. Language | Writing | Epigraphy* [= AELAW Booklet], Zaragoza 2022, and McManus *A Guide to Ogam*, Maynooth 1991). It entirely lacks iconicity: like a barcode, it consists solely of a succession of straight lines. It is read vertically and is usually written in three dimensions across the edge of a solid object (using letters which consist of bundles of one to five short parallel lines, their value depending on their position relative to a baseline). The script's heyday was the middle of the 1st Millennium CE, but knowledge of it never died out. Texts written in this ingenious script are significant to historical linguists as the earliest evidence for the Gaelic languages. The short title of the project, OG(H)AM, reflects that the script is known both as *ogam* (the Old Irish form, pronounced ['oɣəm]) and *ogham*

(the Modern Irish form, pronounced ['o:m]), with the former being more common among linguists, the latter, among archaeologists (N.B. Both forms are also widely (mis)pronounced as ['ogəm]).

The project will digitally document all c.640 examples of ogham writing in all media, from its origin (probably in the fourth century CE) until the dawn of the modern revival c.1850. It will build on the success of the 'Ogham in 3D' website, which covers c.25% of surviving ogham and provides detailed supporting information, photographs, and 3D models. The project will upgrade the database's data and metadata, enhance its searchability and accessibility, and greatly expand its thematic, chronological, and geographical scope by including oghams from the whole island of Ireland (i.e. including Northern Ireland) and from outside Ireland. The latter—from Scotland, Wales, Man, England, and Continental libraries—comprise almost a third of the total surviving. The project will also move beyond stone monuments to include portable objects, graffiti, and manuscripts. By compiling a comprehensive, multi-disciplinary database of each ogham, it will be possible to apply new multidisciplinary analyses to this often widely dispersed and physically remote material.

One of the aims of the project is to encode ogham inscriptions and their supports using open, transparent and sustainable methods. We will engage with other current European epigraphic projects (e.g. [AELAW](#), [INSCRIBE](#), [Ancient Images 2.0](#), [Rune.db](#), [Runor](#), [RIIG](#), [LatinNow](#)) and the global [EpiDoc](#) community to ensure high degrees of interoperability and consistency of standards.

The project aims to document in 3D all ogham in the collections of the national museums with the support of state heritage agencies in the four countries (see project partners). Additional joint fieldwork in all six nations (e.g. to fully document all examples in Scotland and England) will allow us to more than treble the number of 3D models available to nearly 80% of the corpus. Kasten and White will work with the Discovery Programme to evaluate different methods of 3D recording and visualization. We will conduct analyses based on the new documentation, using analogue and new digital techniques. Kasten will build on the work of Laila Kitzler Åhfeldt (Swedish National Heritage Board) to refine new methods of groove analysis (to identify the work of individual carvers and the contemporaneity (or not) of bilingual carvings) and digital reconstruction of worn detail. Stifter will conduct computational, corpus-linguistic research to identify linguistic changes and provide fine-grained chronological, and perhaps geographical, distinctions. Forsyth and White will seek to establish a typology of ogham palaeography, exploring the interaction of material, carving technique and script. Hayden will focus on ogham in medieval and early modern manuscripts. Through these interdisciplinary approaches, we aim to generate a more comprehensive understanding of the origin, development and changing historical and cultural contexts of the ogham script.

The enduring social value of ogham is reflected in its increasing popularity for decorative, symbolic, and creative functions. The project will support this use of ogham in contemporary culture by responding to the need for authoritative guidance on writing accurate and authentic ogham, and by working with artists and designers to inspire new and innovative applications and artistic responses.

Outputs:

- Online database of all 640+ oghams, with 3D models of majority
- Published corpus: Ogham in National Museum of Ireland
- Published Corpus: Ogham in the Isle of Man
- Articles on each specialist approach
- Workshop 1 – Epigraphic Digital Editions
- Workshop 2 - 3D Recording
- Workshop 3 - Ogham in the context of world writing systems
- Engagement with artists & designers
- Schools' workshops
- Project website with monthly blogs and 'Ogham of the month' feature