

St. Dogmael's Stone – The 'Rosetta Stone' of Ogham Studies¹

Dominique Santos
University of Blumenau (FURB)
dvc Santos@furb.br

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Abstract:

First mentioned in February 5, 1693/4, when it stood in the ruins of St. Dogmael's Abbey, Pembrokeshire, Wales, St. Dogmael's Stone – located today inside St. Thomas's Church – was considered 'The Ogham Rosetta Stone' because it is a Bilingual Stone, which contains the same inscription in two different scripts: Roman Letters and Ogham. This article presents a systematization of the main information related to this monument and an analysis of it, pointing out its importance to the Ogham Studies.

Keywords: St. Dogmael's Stone; Ogham Stones; Late Antiquity.

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When Reverend H. L. Jones presented St. Dogmael's Stone to the public in the 1858 meeting of the Cambrian Archaeological Association, it was attached to a wall adjacent to the vicarage of the local Abbey. Reverend H. J. Vincent found it there, probably put in that spot after it lost the function it had in Late Antiquity, serving as a walkway over a brook near the Abbey, and as doorpost. It seems that, in the same year of 1858, a wall was taken down during a restoration, causing the stone to fall and break in two parts. In 1860, Reverend Vincent agreed to keep it 'in the interior of the church or some other equally safe place' (JONES, 1860, p. 136.). When we visited St. Dogmael's Stone, in 2017, it was inside the church. We are not certain if Vincent put it inside nor when, but it happened before 1917 (VAUGHAN, 1917, p. 17).

Although it became widely known to the public only after 1858, St. Dogmael's stone was mentioned before that time on two occasions. The first, February 5th, 1693/4, in a letter that William Gambold addressed to the Welsh antiquarian and second curator of the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, Edward Lhuyd, when the artifact was in the ruins of St Dogmael's Abbey. The second occasion was in a letter from 1702, by Lhuyd himself, who sketched the stone with its Ogham inscriptions, not well understood in his time. His drafts were, however, unknown until 1859, when Jones found them in Oxford. This means that when Jones presented the stone to the public on the 1858 meeting of the Cambrian Archaeological Association, he did not know of Lhuyd' drawings, found a year later.

According to Macalister, St Dogmael's Stone became known as the "Ogham Rosetta Stone" because it was "one of the first bilingual inscriptions to be found, giving confirmation to the precision of the traditional Ogham alphabet" (MACALISTER, 1945, P. 425-426). Graves, professor of Trinity College, created the term. He received information and drawings of the Stone, as J.O. Westwood did, when Vincent found it. Graves believed St. Dogmael's Stone "was equivalent to the famous Rosetta Stone of the Egyptian hieroglyphic finds, because it contained the same inscription in two distinct characters, one of Romano-Briton origin and another from the secret Ogham culture. This culture has raised a lot of controversy, much theorizing, but is very little understood" (JONES, 1860, p. 128). Westwood repeated the same sentences, and, mentioning Graves, affirmed the Stone was the key for deciphering Ogham, in the same measure the Rosetta stone was for Egyptian hieroglyphs. According to him, Saint

Dogmael's Stone "became famous for being the first stone discovered in Wales in which there is an inscription in Latin that is repeated in Celtic with Ogham characters" (WESTWOOD, 1879, p. 215). In 1861, with permission of the Cambrian Archaeological Association, the Kilkenny and Southeast of Ireland Archaeological Society republished Jones' text, a kind of replica entitled "The Ogham "Rosetta" Stone" (GRAVES, 1861, p. 229), that appeared with an article by Westwood entitled 'Early Inscribed Stones of Wales. The Sagranus stone at St. Dogmael's, Pembrokeshire' (JONES, 1860, p. 133-136). Our reflection on Saint Dogmael's Stone for this edition of Brathair Journal considers and inserts itself in this context.

The monument we are examining is a tall, flat, rectangular pillar that narrows from the base up, reaching its narrower width at the top (see Figure 1). Its dimensions are 210 centimeters in height; 49.5 cm wide at the base, 21.5 cm wide at the top; 21.5 cm deep at the base and 16cm deep at the top (EDWARDS, 2007, p. 460). It is a dolerite, a stone with a dark color and fine grain. As we already mentioned, it is currently incomplete, broken in two parts, supported by a metal rod to keep it upright. It rests against the Western wall of nave of St. Thomas's Parish Church, in Saint Dogmael's, Pembrokeshire, Wales (SN 16394589), a location with easy access to the Irish Sea. It is also possible to notice in the monument two holes through which it attached itself to another object, functioning as the post for a farm gate. The first hole over the letter "S", in the beginning of the Roman inscription, the second near the base, relatively close to the end of the same inscription. The second letter "A" of the Ogham inscription is damaged by an incision on the stone (EDWARDS, 2007, p. 460).

It is not possible to give an absolute chronology to Saint Dogmael's Stone, only a relative one, for all the dating methods used in Archeology, such as Dendrochronology, Thermoluminescence, Radiocarbon, and others, cannot promote close results in this case. Therefore, Geology (and its ramifications, such as Petrology) and Linguistic History are the sciences that offer the best results. We can adopt the classification proposed by Katherine Forsyth, even though she created the system to date Ogham Stones from Scotland; it is adequate for the context. We can consider the monument to be her Type-1 (over the stem line) (FORSYTH, 1996, p. li). It is also possible to accept the proposed classification by Nash-Williams (1950): Group I, simple inscribed stones (V-VII A.D.). Other two possible classifications, first from Jones, who presented more specific – even if still relative – dates, considering the stone as produced around the

years 400-533 (JONES, 1860). Second, from Kenneth Jackson, who also presented a more specific dating, but with less temporal spacing than Jones. According to him, the stone would date between the years 466-533 (JACKSON, 1953).

It is also possible to verify chronology related to the monument by examining its inscriptions. We can date the language, even though the phrases are not long, both in Ogham and in Roman characters. That is what Patrick Sims-Williams does, for example. According to him, the inscriptions on Saint Dogmael's Stone might belong to what he calls "Briton Period" 1, 1-12 or 1-13, depending on the admitted vocalic composition, if it is significant or not. If it is not, what will decide between the periods 1-12 or 1-13 is if the U for the pretonic /u/ > ö/ is significant. Regarding the Irish, it belongs to the "Irish Period" 14-15 (SIMS-WILLIAMS, 2003, p. 360, n. 449/384). Nancy Edwards (2007, p. 462) suggested the 5th century, or the beginning of the 4th century. It is a monument, therefore, that belongs to Late Antiquity and, in this work, we will treat it as such.

Figure 1 – Saint Dogmael's Stone



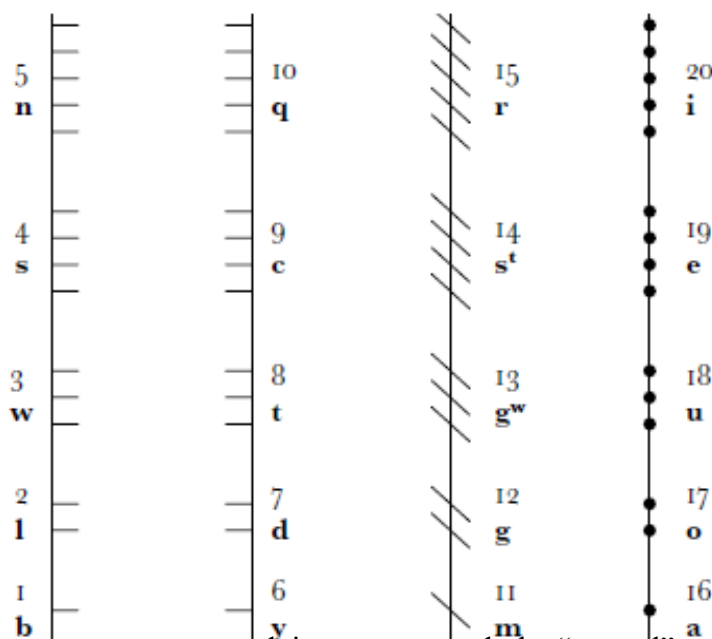
Source –Saint Dogmael’s Stone Figure 1 (left), copyright Dominique Santos; Figures 1.1 e 1.2 (center), Nash-Williams (ECMW, 1950, p. 211-213, Inscription 384, and also Pl. IV e Figure 240); Figure 1.3 (right), Macalister (1945/1996, p. 425-427, Inscription 449).

To understand the inscriptions of the monument we are examining, we need to know what an Ogham stone is and how the Irish script worked. The name Ogham is used by scholars to refer to stone monuments erected in several places around the Irish Sea (the current Irish Republic, Isle of Man, Wales, England, and Scotland), the only type of material dated in late Antiquity. The first thing we must remember about Ogham was that it was used to write in other hard surfaces besides stone, such as bones (like the objects from Tyllycommon or Bac Mic Connain), horns (as the ones found in Weting, Nortfolk), brooches (like the one from Ballyspellan), besides several manuscripts.

If we were to name Ogham with similar terminology we use to name our own writing in English or Portuguese – the alphabet or the ABC – it could be called Beith Luis Nin, name obtained from its sequence of letters. However, even though the literature of the area (SANTOS, 2016), sometimes refers to Ogham as an “alphabet”, it is more adequate to refer to it as a script.

It has twenty characters (Feda, in Irish) in total, representing both vowels and consonants, divided into groups (Aicmí, in Irish), and each group corresponds to five characters.

Figure 2 – Ogham Script
Source –The *Ogham* alphabet (CHARLES-EDWARDS, 2000, p. 165).



During the period when the monument we are studying was erected, the “natural” border of the stone was kept, being interpreted as a “line”, where the desired markings

should be inserted. The amount of markings made over this “line”, as well as their positionings and direction, determined which character it was. In the last image, we could observe that the first *aicme* corresponds to the consonants “b”, “l”, “w”, “s” e “n”, a notch for “b”, two for “l” and so forth. After that, in the opposite direction, different from the first *aicme*, we have the consonants “h/y”, “d”, “t”, “c”, and “q”. The next *aicme* contains the consonants “m”, “g”, “gw”, “st”, and “r”, in the same amount of five, but not following a direction to the left or to the right; the characters are made over the line, diagonally. The last *aicme* represents the vowels: one dot for “a”, two for “o”, three for “u”, four for “e”, and five for “i” (THURNEYSSEN, 2003; SANTOS, 2016).

We do not know when or how Ogham was created. There are suggestions that vary from the 1st century for the conception of the Script (CARNEY, 1975, p. 53-65), or the 2nd century for its use (HARVEY, 1990, p. 13-14), going up to the 4th century, this date being the most common in the work of the specialists of the field.

The stones that are bilingual/biliterate, containing inscriptions in Ogham and in Roman Letters, are related to the presence of Irish colonizers in Britannia. The divergence lies only in the matter of the origin, with three possible hypothesis. In the first hypothesis, Ogham would have been created in what is modern Wales and then moved to Ireland; afterwards it was brought back to Britannia by colonizers after a period of interruption of these epigraphic activities. The second hypothesis argues that, after being created in Britannia, the tradition was taken to Ireland, but without any interruption of the epigraphic habit in its place of origin – even though there was no generation of bilingual/biliteral stones: this was done in a posterior time, in the context of colonization, when the Irish dominated the Irish Sea. In the third hypothesis, the Script was conceived in Ireland, after the Irish came in contact with the language of the Romans, and desired to create graphic systems to represent their own linguistic representations (in special the sounds of the Irish language). Later, it would have been taken to Britannia, which would know this new form of writing only after it received several waves of Irish colonization in Late Antiquity

Whatever the most plausible hypothesis, the bilingual/biliteral stones with this complex process of dual writing and cultural interchange (ranging from the last Roman period in Britannia to the Scandinavian invasions) would have been raised by Irishmen interested in preserving their traditions, but also sharing in Roman culture. They used, therefore, the Ogham Script created by the Irish, either in Britannia or in Hibernia. After

all, as we mentioned earlier (SANTOS, 2016), Ogham was a response to Roman epigraphic habit, having in mind the sounds of the Irish language. It is the Irish equivalent of Roman epigraphic writing (McMANUS, 1991).



The inscriptions that use Ogham as Script present a series of formulae, as we can see on Table 1. They represent personal names, ancestry, or some sort of tribal affiliation. Fionnbarr Moore explains that these formulas appear in a specific number: X MAQI Y, in English ‘X son of Y’; X AVI Y, where AVI means grandson; X MAQI MUCOI Y, in this case, MAQI means ‘descendent’ and MUCOI might be related to some ancestral deity. Another frequently seen word is the Irish term ANM, meaning “name of”; some stones also have inscriptions containing the term KOI, meaning “here”, equivalent to the Latin expression *Hic Iacit (Iacet)*, here lies. Another important word is CELI, as in the formula X CELI Y, that means “X follower of Y”. These terms can be combined to generate bigger formulae, such as X MAQI Y MUCOI Z; X KOI MAQI MUCOI Y (MOORE, 2010). In several instances there are no formulae, just names inscribed in an isolated way (McManus, 2006).

Table 1 – Ogham Formulae

	FORMULAE	TRANSLATION
1	X MAQQI Y	X son of Y
2	MUCOI	Posterity of/descendant from
2.1	X MAQQI MUCOI Y	X Son of the posterity of Y
2.2	X MAQQI Y MUCOI Z	X Son of Y Posterity of Z
2.3	X KOI MAQQI MUCOI Y	Here lies X son of the Posterity of Y
2.4	X MUCOI	X of the Posterity of
2.5	X MAQQI Y MAQQI MUCOI Z	X Son of Y son of the Posterity of Z
3	ONE NAME INSCRIPTIONS	
4	ANM	Name
4.1	ANM X MAQQI Y	Name X son of Y
4.2	ANM X	Name X
5	AVI	Descendant/Grandson of
5.1	X AVI Y	X Descendant / Grandson of Y

5.2	X MAQQI Y AVI Z	X son of Y Descendant/Grandson of Z
6	KOI	Here Lies
6.1	X KOI MAQQI MUCOI Y	Here lies X Son of the Posterity of Y
7	CELI	Client/Follower
7.1	X CELI Y	Client/Follower of Y



Source –Inspired and reformulated from the work of Damian McManus (1991, p. 52)

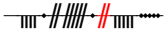
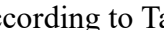

Saint Dogmael’s Stone belongs to this context of production of bilingual/biliterate stones in Late Antiquity, containing formulae like the ones mentioned. The inscriptions in the monument have been interpreted differently (the ones highlighted in red): the Latin is read as “SAGRANI[F]ILI | CVNOTAMI” (JONES, 1860; RHYS, 1873; ALLEN, 1896; MACALISTER, 1945; NASH-WILLIAMS, 1950); or SAGRANI[FILI CVNOTAMI (EDWARDS, 2007). The Ogham, in its turn, has been interpreted as SAGRAMNIMAQICVNATAMI /  (JONES, 1860; BRASH, 1869; RHYS, 1873; ALLEN, 1896) or SAGRAGNIMAQICUNATAMI/  (MACALISTER, 1945; NASH-WILLIAMS, 1950; EDWARDS, 2007).

There are, therefore, two scripts in the inscriptions, Ogham and Roman Letters. It is also possible to know the two chosen languages to write the sentences: Latin, in Roman lettering, and Irish, in Ogham. After these readings, we can interpret that the names present in the inscriptions are “Sagramnus”, “Sagragnus” or “Sagram”, and “Cunatamus”. The first is considered as “possibly Irish”, according to Sims-Williams (2003). According to Charles Thomas (1994, p. 75) it is definitely Irish. Sims-Williams (2003) interprets the second name in the same way, as “possibly Irish”, but Jackson (1953, p. 644 e 670), Thomas (1994, p. 75 e 86) and Ziegler (1994, p. 160) do not agree. Their interpretations suggest the name belongs to the variant of Celtic languages spoken in Britannia, that is, the Brittonic branch, and consider it Old Welsh.

As mentioned, we visited the Stone in 2017. After examining the inscription in person and later the videos and photos produced on location, we believe possible to make a choice of one of the readings of the Latin text presented above. For some reason we cannot understand, all the authors who tried to decipher the inscription before 1950

(JONES, 1860; RHYS, 1873; ALLEN, 1896; MACALISTER, 1945; NASH-WILLIAMS, 1950) were not certain if the eight letter was actually an “F”, and therefore registered it as “SAGRANI[F]ILI | CVNOTAMI”. They left it in in brackets to mark the doubt. Nancy Edwards examined the inscription in her 2007 work, saw this letter clearly, and therefore wrote “SAGRANIFILI CVNOTAMI”. That was also what happened to us. It is possible, even in the images, to detect this letter in the inscription.

The Ogham Script is more challenging. While some read it as meaning the name “SagraMni”  (JONES, 1860; BRASH, 1869; RHYS, 1873; ALLEN, 1896), others understood it as “SagraGni”  (MACALISTER, 1945; NASH-WILLIAMS, 1950; EDWARDS, 2007). We must determine, then, if the sixth incision (from the base to the top) contains one (letter “M”) or two notches (letter “G”). In this case, we cannot affirm with precision the number of notches; when the stone broke in two parts, this was one of the affected areas. Regardless of that, after the analysis made on location and the later examination of images from other researchers and our own videos, we are inclined to accept the second interpretation.

These issues notwithstanding, the most important factor of the inscription of Saint Dogmael’s Stone is the correspondence between the two texts, which made easier the interpretation and understanding of the Ogham Script. We can perceive, when examining the inscriptions, the bilingual and biliteral aspects of this dual writing process. It happens in the names (SAGRANI/  e CUNATAMI/ , respectively), but also in the formula, of Number 1 type, according to Table 1 presented above: “X MAQQI Y” (although in the monument we analyzed there was no duplication of the letter “Q” in Ogham (). A proposed translation to English of the text content of the Stone, considering both the Latin and the Irish, would be “Memorial/Stone of Sagramnus/Sagragnus/Sagram, son of Cunatamus”.

Sagragnus/Sagramnus/Sagram, the son, has an Irish name, while the father, Cunatamus, has a Brittonic name. According to Charles Thomas, this might suggest an interethnic wedding between Irish migrants or colonizers and the local population (THOMAS, 1994, p. 74). This would mean that three cultures or identities (Irish, Welsh, and Roman), and their possible combinations (Cambrian-Roman; Roman-Briton; Hibernian-Roman; Cambrian-Hibernian) would be manifested in these inscriptions of Saint Dogmael’s Stone.

Final considerations

The discovery, or rediscovery, of Saint Dogmael's Stone, at a time when researchers already had a deeper understanding about the Ogham Script, enlarged our repertoire related to the inscriptions that used this graphic system. It was possible to establish a comparative system between different inscriptions, what led to a greater understanding of this group of signals developed to represent the sounds of the Irish language in Late Antiquity, aiming to give to this language a similar status to Latin. It worked as an important symbolic system for the elaboration of epigraphic messages. Because of the correspondence between the inscriptions in Ogham and Roman Letters, and because of almost identical sentences written in two languages spoken in the region of the Irish Sea, Latin and Old Irish, the monument in question, as we have seen, became known since the times of Graves as the "Rosetta Stone" of Ogham studies. Many other bilingual inscriptions were found after this one, in Wales, Cornwall, and the Isle of Man, with variations in formulae and messages. That allowed us to understand some of the interchange and connections between Hibernia and Britannia in Late Antiquity, showing how the region of the Irish Sea, at the time, was multicultural and had several possible social and cultural relations. Saint Dogmael's Stone was the key that opened the way for such perceptions.

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