



Summary Report on Ogham Workshop

6th March 2015 – Irish Museum of Modern Art

Introduction

This workshop was planned and organised by Nora White (Ogham in 3D, Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies) and Edel Bhreathnach (Discovery Programme) to gather together experts in various fields relating to ogham to consider the value of 3D scanning and modelling of ogham stones and to consider future directions for ogham studies, including the gathering of information on the inscriptions, the techniques used and the landscapes of ogham. Plans for the workshop coincided with the 'Trove' exhibition at the Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA), which included ten ogham stones from the National Museum of Ireland's collection. IMMA kindly agreed to host the workshop, facilitating a rare and appropriate opportunity of discussing the inscriptions in the presence of a superb selection of ogham stones.

The invited participants included those involved in the Ogham in 3D project at the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, the Discovery Programme and the National Monuments Service. Along with participants from a number of Irish Universities, experts also travelled from Scotland, Wales and Germany to participate. In addition, representatives from the museum sector, the OPW and two professional sculptors were in attendance.

Session 1: The ogham stones included in the Trove exhibition and their archaeological context

The workshop was opened by Professor Liam Breatnach (Director of the School of Celtic Studies at DIAS) in the Garden Galleries. Our first speaker of the day was Fionnbarr Moore (Senior Archaeologist NMS), who introduced each of the ogham stones in the exhibition and set the archaeological context. Fionnbarr's talk was followed by a suitably informal and vibrant discussion, including topics such as the use of various carving techniques and possible functions of ogham stones.

Session 2: Ogham in 3D project update, linguistic and historical perspectives

Following the coffee break, we continued the talks and discussions in the lecture room, which allowed for visual presentations. Chaired by Professor Fergus Kelly (School of Celtic Studies, DIAS), it opened with an update on the progress of the Ogham in 3D project. The Principal Investigator, Dr Nora White, gave a brief background to the project and its main aims, followed by a demonstration of the recent additions to the Ogham in 3D website and an outline of possible future approaches and funding possibilities. Gary Devlin (Geo-Surveyor, Discovery Programme) next demonstrated the capture and modelling techniques used for the Ogham in 3D project, along with the most recent advanced visualisation techniques, showing an example of a 3D model of one of the ogham stones in the exhibition.

A talk on the linguistic perspective was given by Dr Anthony Harvey (RIA, editor of the Dictionary of Medieval Latin from Celtic Sources) entitled 'Gaelic by Nurture, Latin by Nature? Ogham's Linguistic Parentage'. His on-going statistical analysis of ogham orthography suggests the presence of Latin literacy in Ireland, as well as spoken Latin (rather than merely knowledge of the alphabet), by the time of the carving of the earliest extant inscriptions. He also convincingly argues for a development period between the invention of the ogham alphabet and the carving of the earliest surviving inscriptions, which, even given the questionable nature of the conventional dating, suggests the presence of Latin literacy in Ireland considerably earlier than generally accepted.

Dr Edel Bhreathnach followed with a talk on the historical perspective of ogham. She highlighted possible links between population groups/individuals named in ogham inscriptions and peoples mentioned in medieval genealogies.

Session 3: Ogham stones and conservation

After the lunch break we returned to the materiality of ogham stones with a fascinating and informative insight into the conservation of the collection of ogham stones at University College Cork, presented by sculptor and conservator Jason Ellis. Jason's presentation emphasised the difficulty of moving and working with bigger stones and also of the vulnerability of inscriptions and

stones to weathering, accidental damage and neglect, flawed display methods and vandalism.

Session 4: Open discussion

The last session of the day, expertly chaired by Dr Katherine Forsyth, was devoted to an open discussion and topics included:

- Research questions relating to ogham and if/how 3D technology can help
- Funding possibilities and collaborations

Once again attendees participated enthusiastically in discussions. Three main themes emerged:

- (1) the archaeological landscape of ogham
- (2) the technology of ogham (carving)
- (3) the historical/genealogical perspective.

With regard to the archaeological landscape of ogham, there was a general consensus that more information on the archaeological context is needed. For example, excavation at an ogham stone site, where the stone appears to be in its original location and possibly marking a burial, may clarify the question of function, or rather one of the functions, of ogham.

The point of view of the conservator (Jason Ellis) and sculptor (Seighean Ó Draoi) with regard to the carving of ogham inscriptions was especially enlightening. The difficulty in carving on an arris without breaking the stone was one of their main observations. The conclusion that the ogham alphabet was probably invented for use on wood rather than stone was generally accepted. Comparisons were made with carved stones such as the Iron Age Turoe, Castlestrange and Mullaghmast stones, as well as the cross-slab at Riasc. The question of whether ogham stones were carved horizontally or vertically was also considered with the conclusion that the larger ones, at least, were almost certainly carved while vertical. Exceptions were noted, such as the water-rolled stones at Ballintaggart, which appear to have never been standing. This again demonstrated the diverse nature of this monument type. The geology of the stones was highlighted as an important factor that has yet to be fully researched.

The distribution of ogham stones was also a prominent topic, in particular the significance of groups/concentrations and outliers. The possibility of different functions for ogham stones in different places and at different stages of the tradition was acknowledged, as was the unreliability of gaps in distribution maps, which may give a false picture.

Much of the workshop discussions centred on ogham stones in Ireland but as ogham stones are also found in Scotland, Wales, the Isle of Man, etc. and ogham also occurs later in manuscripts, it was proposed that the focus should be on ogham in its entirety – geographically and chronologically.

Regarding the value of 3D scanning, the conclusion was that it should not replace older or more basic techniques, but that whatever techniques are used, the methodology needs to be research led.

Creating a digital record of ogham stones, while desirable in itself, is not enough, we must use technology to help us answer research questions, for example analysing depth of ogham scores to assist in researching the palaeography of ogham.

The discussions finished with a 'wish list' for ogham, which included:

- help with context e.g. excavation at ogham sites
- new discoveries of ogham, particularly on wood
- funding for ogham projects

Regarding funding, possibilities such as Horizon 2020 and HERA were noted but the need to focus ideas, identify collaborators and prepare proposals was stressed. Ideally a number of projects would be necessary to cover the diverse subject of ogham. To start with, it was agreed that an Ogham Studies Network should be set up. Furthermore, creating a Register of Ogham on the Welsh model (on early medieval inscriptions generally), colour coded with regard to vulnerability of the stone/inscription and also dealing with the problem of accessibility, would be most helpful and may have the added benefit of attracting funding.

The following are quotes from participants, summing up their thoughts on the workshop.

Katherine Forsyth (University of Glasgow):

'I greatly enjoyed it and found it very stimulating - not to say exciting as there seems to be a real buzz now about ogham. Of course, a large part of that derives from the Ogham in 3D project!'

Fionnbarr Moore (National Monuments Service):

'I found the day both stimulating and very informative. It was great to get the perspective of artists and sculptors who have worked in stone. It was also good to share the experience of those who have been recording ogham and early inscriptions in Wales and Scotland.'

Liam Breatnach (Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies):

'I found this a very useful workshop and was impressed by the international attendance. It is clear that there is broad support and enthusiasm for further developing the Ogham in 3D Project.'

