

Ogham stones – a uniquely Irish monument precariously standing between pre-history and history

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Stone monuments continued to be an important part of the Irish landscape from prehistory into the early medieval period, culminating in magnificent high crosses of the 9th century. This continuity is particularly evident in the frequent re-use of earlier stone monuments for ogham inscriptions. Although ogham is found at a wide variety of site types (ecclesiastical sites, souterrains, standing stones, stone pairs, etc), it does not appear to occur at sites that did not already have some significance. Furthermore, the same range of sites is used throughout the period that ogham was used for monumental purposes.

Inscriptions on ogham stones constitute the earliest surviving written form of Irish in a unique script designed especially for the language. Questions such as why, for whom and when are difficult to answer today, but we do have some clues to help us: many of the ogham stones are found at or near ancient territorial boundaries, later manuscript sources tell us that ogham stones were treated as witnesses in disputes of land ownership, the inscriptions themselves contain names of probable leaders, tribal names are also sometimes included. Although ogham stones are generally dated to between the 4th and 7th centuries, the application of ogham to stone may well have begun earlier. While a rough chronology of the surviving inscriptions is achievable on linguistic grounds, accurate dating is not.

This paper will focus on these questions as well as the involvement of people with ogham stones from their first application to stone, up to the present day.