

“<sub>T</sub> IS BEITH AND MEANS BIRCH” – AN EXPLORATION OF OGHAM IN  
ONLINE FANFICTION FEATURING KING ALFRED THE GREAT<sup>1</sup>

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ABSTRACT

Through an analysis of three selected case studies, this study unveils how Ogham’s integration into contemporary narratives generates fresh layers of meaning and revitalises this ancient alphabet. The chosen focus on Alfredian fanfiction offers a contextualised exploration of the role of this ancient Irish script in shaping novel interpretations, bridging historical languages with the digital age, and shedding light on how fan communities reconfigure cultural heritage across temporal and geographical boundaries within the dynamic landscape of internet culture. By employing a comprehensive approach, this research elucidates the intricate interplay between Ogham, historical narratives, and contemporary fan creativity, providing valuable insights into how this ancient script sparks innovative meanings and propels narratives within the digital realms of fan culture.

KEYWORDS: Ogham, fanfiction, Alfredism, medievalism, intertextual storytelling

1. Introduction

The digital era has witnessed the emergence of unprecedented modes of cultural exchange and expression, often drawing inspiration from historical artefacts. One such instance is the phenomenon of Alfredian fanfiction, which involves reimagining and retelling stories based on the historical figure King Alfred the Great. Although the historical king Alfred has been dead and buried for eleven centuries, now, at the beginning of the 21st century, the mythical Alfred is very

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much alive and serves as a canvas on which fans rewrite the stories. Intriguingly, some of the fanfictions about King Alfred incorporate Ogham, often as a means of imbuing narratives with an aura of mystique and historical worldbuilding. To comprehensively explore this phenomenon, I will analyse three case studies of Ogham usage within Alfredian fanfiction. These case studies offer distinct perspectives, each highlighting different facets of the integration of Ogham into fan-created narratives.

As noted by Zduńczyk, Rogulska and Sokulski (2022: 20), fanfiction “has been scarcely researched in relation to minority languages and language revitalisation.” This article aims to contribute to this by examining three case studies of Ogham in Alfredian fanfiction. Additionally, this analysis will provide valuable insights into how fan communities are reinterpreting cultural heritage, transcending temporal and geographical boundaries, and forming new traditions in the digital age. This exploration holds significant importance in the context of both cultural studies and the evolving dynamics of fan communities. Firstly, it highlights the adaptability and resilience of historical scripts like Ogham in the face of rapidly changing digital communication paradigms. As contemporary audiences engage with these ancient symbols, they not only pay homage to their historical roots but also reinterpret them, thereby fostering a continuum of cultural evolution. Secondly, the study underscores the transformative power of fanfiction as a creative and collaborative platform within online fan cultures. It sheds light on how fan communities, through their imaginative storytelling, can reframe historical narratives and challenge conventional interpretations, offering fresh perspectives on cultural heritage and identity. Furthermore, this examination serves as a testament to the enduring relevance of history in the digital age, where past and present converge to shape the narratives of the future. As fan communities forge connections across temporal and geographical boundaries, they contribute to the ongoing discourse of historical reinterpretation and the formation of novel cultural traditions, demonstrating the profound impact of internet culture on our understanding of heritage and storytelling.

## 2. Online Fanfiction

The rise of the internet and digital platforms has significantly transformed the landscape of fan culture, giving birth to vibrant online communities and providing outlets for fan creativity (Bury et al. 2013). Websites such as Tumblr, DeviantArt, and LiveJournal played pivotal roles in fostering fandom and serving as hubs for self-expression, including the creation and sharing of fan art and fanfiction during the period of 2010-2020 (Fink and Miller 2014). Fans found various avenues of expression within these online fan communities. While visual fan art held a prominent place, fanfiction emerged as an equally significant form of creative

engagement within fan works. In the context of online platforms, fanfiction took shape not only as standalone stories but also as paratext to accompany the fan works or as reactions and responses to the images created by other users (Fathallah 2017; Hill and Pecoskie 2014). On platforms like Tumblr, fans often utilise fanfiction as a complementary element to the visual fan art they share (Hillman, Procyk, and Neustaedter 2014). Fan artists provide descriptions, backstories, and narrative snippets alongside their artwork, enriching the imagery with written narratives. These paratextual elements deepen the storytelling aspect and allow fans to explore character development, relationships, and world-building beyond the confines of visual representation. Moreover, fanfiction later found its way onto social media networking websites, broadening its reach and accessibility. Platforms such as Facebook and its local variants, like the Dutch website Hyves, became gathering places for fans to share and discuss their written works (Corten 2012). These social media platforms provided spaces for fans to create groups, pages, and events dedicated to their respective fandoms, fostering vibrant communities centred around fanfiction. The expansion of fanfiction onto social media networking sites facilitated further engagement and interaction among fans. It allowed for real-time discussions, feedback, and collaborative storytelling efforts. Fans could share their fanfiction pieces directly with their networks of friends and followers, generating conversations and encouraging participation within the fandom community. The emergence of fanfiction as both paratext and independent narratives, alongside the visual fan art, added a new layer of depth and complexity to fan culture (Hill & Pecoskie 2014). It provided fans with the opportunity to explore the emotional and interpersonal aspects of narratives, develop characters in greater detail, and challenge or subvert established tropes and conventions (Leavenworth 2015, Doble 2020).

Alfredian fanfiction is a distinct subgenre within the broader realm of historical fanfiction. It revolves around reimagining and retelling stories based on the historical figure King Alfred the Great (849-899 CE) and the rich tapestry of historical facts, artefacts, and settings associated with his era. Alfredian fanfiction typically draws from two primary sources of inspiration: Bernard Cornwell's *The Saxon Stories* book series (2004-2020) and the television series *The Last Kingdom*, which is an adaptation of Cornwell's works. One of the defining features of Alfredian fanfiction is its commitment to incorporating historical facts and artefacts into the narrative fabric. Authors of Alfredian fanfiction often immerse themselves in extensive research to ensure historical accuracy, portraying the nuances of the early medieval period, from the political intricacies of the time to the material culture, such as weaponry, clothing, and architecture. This commitment to historical fidelity enriches the storytelling experience and provides readers with an immersive journey into the past. Alfredian fanfiction frequently embraces the concept of crossovers, wherein characters, themes, or

elements from other historical or fictional universes are interwoven with the Alfredian narrative. These crossovers may introduce characters from other historical periods or fictional settings, creating a fusion of diverse story elements. This approach allows authors to explore innovative narratives and challenge the boundaries of historical accuracy while remaining rooted in the foundational Alfredian narrative.

The presence of an extensive corpus of fanfiction featuring the character of Alfred the Great is certainly recognized. Platforms such as Archive of Our Own (AO3) alone boast a staggering 1,587 fanfictions related to *The Last Kingdom*, and an additional 314 centred around *The Saxon Stories*. Moreover, the AO3 currently offers 3,688 fanfictions that take place in the story world of *Vikings*, the other Netflix series in which Alfred the Great plays a role. These statistics represent merely the tip of the iceberg within the expansive world of fan-created content. The internet's boundless expanse houses a plethora of captivating stories that extend beyond AO3, encompassing an array of intriguing narratives waiting to be explored. Within the scope of my academic interest in Alfredian fanfiction, I conducted an extensive exploration across restricted forums, Facebook groups, mailing lists, and Mastodon instances. These digital platforms serve as fertile ground for the creation and exchange of fanfiction inspired by the works of Alfred, where enthusiastic communities unleash their imagination within this literary universe. Notably, my involvement in these communities has led to an intriguing phenomenon: as others discover my active role in curating and archiving Alfredian fanfiction, I receive frequent referrals. This has resulted in a dynamic process wherein my own online domain serves as a tangible representation of the evolution of this particular subgenre. The content provided by others acts as temporal concretions, meticulously documented and published by me, thereby rendering my platform a valuable resource for the preservation of this unique form of literary expression.

In the context of this article, it is essential to distinguish Alfredian fanfiction from other forms of historical fanfiction. Not all stories set in the broader historical contexts of *The Last Kingdom*, *The Saxon Stories*, or related series like *Vikings* are categorised as Alfredian fanfiction. Alfredian fanfiction specifically centres on the character of Alfred the Great and his era, delving into his life, reign, and the historical events that shaped his time. While related historical series may share temporal or geographical settings, Alfredian fanfiction maintains a distinctive focus on this historical figure. Moreover, it's worth noting that Alfredian fanfiction extends beyond the confines of particular fandoms. While *The Last Kingdom* and *The Saxon Stories* serve as primary sources of inspiration, the allure of King Alfred's character and the historical richness of his era have led to the emergence of Alfredian fanfiction in various online communities and platforms. As a result, numerous examples of Alfredian fanfiction can be found

outside of dedicated fandoms, showcasing the enduring fascination with this historical figure and the versatility of Alfredian narratives.

### 3. Methodology

The analytical framework of this article is rooted in close reading and thematic analysis, to examine three specific case studies within the realm of Alfredian fanfiction: “Learning from the past” by TheAncientScribe, “An Rí Cogaidh agus an Sagart Gaelach: Scéal Grá na Máighdean Íseal faoi Mháigic Ogham” by Aisling O’Malley, and “Alfred y Abigail: Dos secretos” by corasketches. Close reading, a foundational practice in literary analysis, forms the cornerstone of this study’s methodology. It involves an examination of the selected fanfictions, paying attention to the text, structure, and thematic nuances. This method allows for a deep exploration of the narrative strategies employed by fan authors to mobilise Ogham within the stories. By delving into the minutiae of the texts, including character interactions, dialogue, and descriptive passages, this study aims to unearth the intricate ways in which Ogham contributes to the advancement of the narrative. Thematic analysis complements the close reading approach by facilitating the identification and categorization of recurring tropes and subtropes within the selected fanfictions. This method entails the systematic extraction and examination of themes and motifs present in the narratives, shedding light on how Ogham intersects with broader narrative elements. By categorising and analysing these thematic patterns, this study seeks to unravel the nuanced strategies employed by fan authors to leverage Ogham in crafting engaging and immersive narratives. Central to the analysis are the tropes and subtropes present in the selected fanfictions. Tropes are recurring narrative conventions or thematic elements that serve as building blocks for storytelling. This study identifies and analyses the tropes employed by fan authors within the Alfredian fanfiction genre, emphasising how these tropes are used in conjunction with Ogham to propel the narrative forward. The examination extends to subtropes, which are nuanced variations or subcategories of broader tropes, providing additional layers of thematic depth and complexity. A pivotal aspect of the analysis is the role of Ogham as a narrative device, exploring how Ogham is woven into the fabric of the narratives, its functions, symbolism, and impact on character development and plot progression.

The selection of a limited number of case studies within the corpus of Alfredian fanfiction is a deliberate choice aimed at facilitating a focused exploration of Ogham’s role in generating novel meanings within the context of a particular fandom. While acknowledging the broader spectrum of fanfiction employing Ogham, this article endeavours to provide a comprehensive and illustrative examination of this intriguing intersection of a historical script and

contemporary digital storytelling. The rationale behind this is multifaceted and seeks to strike a balance between depth and breadth of analysis, allowing for a more detailed and nuanced investigation of the utilisation of Ogham within Alfredian fanfiction. This selective approach offers the opportunity to unveil the intricate creative nuances associated with the incorporation of Ogham into narratives, offering a richer understanding of its role in crafting stories. The intent of this study is thus not to provide an exhaustive survey of all Ogham-related fanfiction within this expansive domain. Instead, it aims to focus on a set of representative case studies that highlight diverse approaches to Ogham usage, serving as examples to illuminate the multifaceted ways in which this ancient script is deployed.

While recognizing the existence of Ogham-incorporating fanfiction in various other fandoms, the decision to focus on Alfredian fanfiction is rooted in several key considerations. Firstly, the historical significance of King Alfred the Great and the rich cultural tapestry woven within the world of *The Last Kingdom* offer a unique backdrop for exploring the multifarious dimensions of Ogham integration. The convergence of history and fiction in this particular context allows for a deeper investigation into how Ogham contributes to the creation of novel meanings, enriched by the historical authenticity of the setting. Furthermore, the focus on Alfredian fanfiction maintains thematic coherence throughout the article. By immersing ourselves in the specific milieu of this fandom, we can draw more meaningful connections between Ogham's utilisation and the character of Alfred the Great as portrayed within this particular cultural narrative. This thematic consistency enhances the depth of our analysis, affording a more profound exploration of the intricate relationship between Ogham, historical scripts, and contemporary digital storytelling.

At the present moment, the corpus Alfredian fanfictions containing Ogham I could find consists of 11 fanworks (cf. Table 1). Three of those 11 were selected for in-depth analysis: “Learning from the past” by TheAncientScribe, “An Rí Cogaidh agus an Sagart Gaelach: Scéal Grá na Máighdean Íseal faoi Mháigic Ogham” by Aisling O’Malley, and “Alfred y Abigail: Dos secretos” by corasketches. The selection of these particular fanfictions was guided by several reasons, each contributing to the depth and breadth of the analysis. One crucial criterion for the selection of these fanfictions was the pivotal role played by Ogham within the narrative. In these chosen stories, Ogham is not merely mentioned or referenced in passing; it is woven into the very fabric of the plot and serves as a central element that propels the story forward. This deliberate integration of Ogham as a driving force in the narrative allows for a more profound exploration of how this ancient script generates new meanings within the context of Alfredian fanfiction. It sheds light on the ways in which fan authors utilise Ogham as a powerful tool for storytelling, historical resonance, and worldbuilding.

Another significant factor contributing to the selection was the representation of multiple languages in the chosen fanfictions. While English serves as a dominant language in fanfiction research, these selected stories introduce linguistic diversity by incorporating languages such as Irish and Spanish. This linguistic variance offers a unique opportunity to examine how Ogham is utilised and interpreted across different linguistic and cultural contexts, although the scope of this article allows for only three texts to be analysed, it provides tentative insights into the transcultural adaptability of Ogham and its capacity to resonate with audiences beyond the confines of the English-speaking fanfiction community. Furthermore, the selection of fanfictions in languages other than English allows for the exploration of diverse cultural perspectives. These stories not only contribute to a richer tapestry of fanfiction but also offer fresh vantage points on how Ogham is perceived and employed within distinct cultural frameworks. The examination of these narratives provides a more comprehensive understanding of the global reach and interpretive flexibility of Ogham in the realm of fanfiction. In addition to the above reasons, these three fanfictions were chosen as representative samples from the larger corpus. They showcase a range of thematic elements, character interactions, and narrative styles present within Alfredian fanfiction, ensuring a well-rounded and holistic examination of Ogham’s role in this particular fandom. The rationale for selecting these case studies is thus partly rooted in their exemplification of prominent tropes within the Alfredian fanfiction genre. By selecting these specific fanfictions for analysis, this article aims to delve deeply into the intricate relationship between Ogham and Alfredian fanfiction, demonstrating how this ancient script contributes to the creation of novel meanings while simultaneously embracing linguistic and cultural diversity within fan-created narratives.

Alfredian fanfiction, like much of contemporary fan-created content, predominantly circulates in the dynamic and sometimes ephemeral spaces of the internet. Given the transient nature of online content, this article adopts a proactive approach to preservation. Copies of the selected fanfictions are securely archived on a dedicated domain to ensure their stability over time, solidifying their place in the digital landscape. This approach recognizes the importance of safeguarding these fan-created works for future analysis and research, acknowledging the role of these narratives in the ongoing discourse of historical reinterpretation and creative expression.

#### 4. Ogham

Ogham, an early medieval alphabet predominantly employed to transcribe the early Irish language (O’Kelly and O’Kelly 1989), occupies a distinctive position in the realm of historical scripts. Characterised by a series of horizontal or

diagonal lines and notches inscribed onto the edges of standing stones, Ogham offers a unique form of written expression, often running from left to right (Macalister 2014 [1937]). As noted by Damian McManus (1986: 6), “the use of the written word at the time in question was not as common or as widespread as it is today, and the orthography was more fluid and changeable than is that of Modern English”. Although Ogham finds its primary association with early Irish linguistic traditions, Ogham’s historical journey is marked by intriguing twists and turns, revealing a rich tapestry of cultural and linguistic evolution. Ogham’s origins are intertwined with the ancient practices of Celtic divination, in which patterns formed by sticks thrown upon the ground were interpreted as messages from the Otherworld. This system of divination gradually evolved into a script employed for inscribing messages on stone monuments. Ogham’s versatility is reflected in its multifaceted use, ranging from marking territorial boundaries to recording personal names and commemorating the deceased (McManus 1988). The earliest extant Ogham inscriptions trace their roots back to the 4th century CE, providing a tantalising glimpse into the script’s historical timeline. Notably, Ogham continued to be used in Ireland and Scotland until the 8th or 9th century CE, underscoring its enduring legacy (O’Kelly and O’Kelly 1989). This persistence, however, eventually yielded to the dominance of the Latin alphabet following the Christianization of Ireland in the 5th century. Despite this transition, Ogham maintained a sporadic presence in various contexts for several centuries, hinting at its cultural resilience and adaptability.

Beyond its historical role, Ogham holds a symbolic significance deeply intertwined with Irish identity and heritage. Its enduring appeal transcends mere historical interest, with Ogham finding expression in various artistic and cultural contexts throughout the centuries. As a symbol of cultural pride, Ogham continues to captivate contemporary imaginations, serving as a bridge between ancient traditions and modern interpretations. Scholarly inquiry into Ogham is not without its challenges. The corpus of Ogham inscriptions presents a complex puzzle, with questions surrounding the linguistic affiliations of Pictish language(s) posing particular challenges (Forsyth 1998, 2000, 2006). While some assert that these inscriptions predominantly represent non-Celtic or even non-Indo-European languages, others contend that certain inscriptions should be construed as Gaelic, while others are attributed to the Brittonic language group (Rodway 2020). This debate reflects the intricate nature of Ogham’s linguistic heritage, as scholars grapple with the elusive meanings of these ancient inscriptions. Ogham stands as a testament to the intertwined evolution of script, language, and culture. Its journey from a divinatory tool to a written script, its enduring usage, and its symbolic significance underscore its enduring relevance. While challenges persist in interpreting certain inscriptions, the allure of Ogham as a unique form of expression remains undiminished, serving as a bridge



connecting us to the rich tapestry of Ireland’s cultural and linguistic heritage. A clear indicator of how Ogham transcends media, countries, and centuries is its presence in 21st -century arts and crafts. One way in which Ogham has been incorporated into modern-day art is through tattoos. Many people today choose to get Ogham tattoos as a way of connecting with their Celtic heritage or as a symbol of their love for Ireland. Ogham tattoos often feature a person’s name or a meaningful phrase translated into the Ogham script and written in a stylized manner. In addition to tattoos, Ogham is also featured in modern artwork and graphic design. For example, artists might create illustrations or digital designs that incorporate the Ogham alphabet in a creative and visually striking way. Some artists might also use Ogham-inspired patterns or motifs in their designs, such as knotwork or spirals, which are often associated with Celtic art. Ogham also appears in contemporary literature and storytelling. For example, writers might create stories or poems that incorporate the Ogham alphabet or draw on Celtic mythology and folklore. Similarly, artists might create their own interpretations of Celtic legends or characters and include the Ogham alphabet as a way of adding authenticity or depth to their creations. Strongly inspired by Romantic representations of a Celtic past, creative people are constantly creating new drawings and stories on the internet, in which the Ogham alphabet plays a role. A large part of this practice takes place in the realms of fan works.

One of the ways in which Ogham is used in contemporary fan works is to create a sense of authenticity and historical continuity. By using Ogham in this way, artists create a sense of depth and richness to the show's mythology, evoking the idea of an ancient and mysterious culture. Another way in which Ogham is used in contemporary fannish creations is to express cultural pride and identity. For many Irish people, Ogham is a symbol of their unique linguistic and cultural heritage, and using it in fan works is a way to celebrate and honour that heritage. In this sense, Ogham becomes a tool for cultural preservation and resistance against the homogenising forces of globalisation. At the same time, Ogham’s presence in contemporary fan works also creates new meanings and traditions. By using Ogham in unexpected ways, artists are able to reinterpret and reimagine its significance. For example, in some fanart, Ogham is used to spell out modern words and phrases, subverting its traditional association with ancient history and instead using it to create a playful and irreverent tone. In addition, Ogham's presence in contemporary fan works creates new opportunities for dialogue and exchange between cultures. As Ogham is increasingly used in non-Irish contexts, it becomes a bridge between different cultural traditions, sparking conversations and exchanges that may not have occurred otherwise. While Ogham's origins, purpose, and meanings continue to be subjects of scholarly debate and interpretation, its adoption by modern neo-pagan and New Age communities has contributed to a rich tapestry of interpretations that may diverge from its original

use as a writing system. In the context of fanfiction and other contemporary creative works, Ogham's associations with magic, divination, and mystical symbolism likely contribute to its allure. The ambiguity and mystique surrounding Ogham can add depth and intrigue to narratives, as it taps into a sense of ancient wisdom and mysticism that resonates with both creators and audiences. For example, the word "ura" and its associations with passion on some neo-pagan websites illustrate how contemporary interpretations may differ from historical ones. Such variations are part of the ongoing dialogue and reinterpretation of Ogham's meanings.

### 5. Alfredian fanfiction

Alfredian fanfiction falls into the realm of online intertextual storytelling, a form of narrative creation and sharing that takes place in digital spaces, particularly on the internet. It involves the use of existing texts, often from various sources such as books, movies, TV shows, or other media, as reference points or source material to create new narratives or stories. In this context, "intertextual" signifies the relationship between these new narratives and the pre-existing texts they draw upon. Creators in online intertextual storytelling remix and reinterpret elements from existing texts. They may take characters, settings, plotlines, or themes from original works and put their own creative spin on them. Online intertextual storytelling often involves a community of creators and consumers who actively engage with and contribute to the narrative. This can include fanfiction, fan art, fan videos, and collaborative storytelling projects. These narratives are typically shared and distributed through digital platforms and online communities. Popular platforms include fanfiction websites, social media, and forums dedicated to specific fandoms. Online intertextual storytelling is closely tied to fan culture. Fans of a particular media franchise or work often engage in this type of storytelling as a way to express their love for, critique, or expand upon the original content. In some cases, online intertextual storytelling may extend across multiple media forms, creating a transmedia narrative experience. This can include fan-created websites, podcasts, or even alternate reality games that add layers to the story. Online intertextual storytelling, such as for example in Alfredian fanfiction, is a dynamic and participatory form of narrative creation that leverages the internet's collaborative nature to reinterpret and expand upon existing narratives, often within specific fandom communities. It's a creative and interactive way for fans and creators to engage with their favourite stories and characters while contributing their own unique perspectives and narratives to the larger cultural conversation.

Alfredian fanfiction centres on the reimagining of the historical figure of King Alfred, the king of Wessex from 871 to 899 CE, who is renowned for his defence

of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of southern England against the Danes, and his epithet “the Great” reflects his accomplishments. He was the first king of Wessex to call himself “King of the Anglo-Saxons” and was recognized as a learned man who encouraged education, improved the legal system, and reorganised the military structure of his kingdom (King 2018). Alfred’s piety has led to his association with the biblical King David, as well as to his veneration as a saint in some Catholic traditions, although he was never officially canonised (Taaffe 1907). Throughout history, Alfred has served as a mirror of the *Zeitgeist*, the defining spirit or mood of the particular period in which he was written about, inspiring people to great accomplishments (Parker 2007). This tradition of storytelling surrounding Alfred the Great has been coined “Alfredism” by Barbara Yorke (2017) to describe the reputation and public image of King Alfred from the post-Conquest period to the present day. Many entertaining tales have emerged about King Alfred, such as his disguise as a minstrel to infiltrate a Danish camp or as a kitchen boy to a Saxon housewife, where he may or may not have burned some cakes.

Fanfiction narratives developing around a fictionalised Alfred are mostly based on his character in the Netflix series *The Last Kingdom*, which is a historical drama set in the late 9th century. In this fanfiction, creative fans rewrite stories about King Alfred in a way that reinterprets his character and his historical context. Fanfiction often takes the form of intertextual storytelling, in which various elements from different sources are combined to create a new narrative. In the case of Alfredian fanfiction, this new narrative aims to present a version of Alfred that resonates with contemporary audiences and speaks to their private as well as political concerns, for example by having the king approve acts of bisexuality (Mussies 2019) or make a case against Brexit (Mussies 2021b). Most of the fanfiction featuring King Alfred is politically left, progressive and feminist (Mussies 2021a). As a reaction to this, the corpus sporadically provokes extreme right-wing comments or even rewritings (Mussies 2022). A surprising recurring element in Alfredian fanfiction is the use of Ogham.

The exploration of Ogham within Alfredian fanfiction holds paramount importance as it signifies a cultural crossroads where historical narratives intermingle with contemporary fan creativity. This engagement with Ogham, an ancient script deeply rooted in Celtic heritage, adds layers of cultural authenticity and resonant context to these narratives. Ogham’s inclusion also bears symbolic significance, serving as a marker of cultural pride and recognition within fan communities. Moreover, Ogham’s distinctive visual characteristics evoke a sense of mystique and historical depth, enriching the immersive quality of the narratives. Importantly, this exploration encourages novel interpretations of historical scripts and artefacts, illustrating the dynamic nature of cultural heritage in the context of modern storytelling. Ultimately, the integration of Ogham in Alfredian fanfiction facilitates a dialogue between the past and the present,

showcasing how historical scripts continue to inspire and shape contemporary cultural expressions in the digital age.

## 6. Technical Adaptations of Ogham in Alfredian Fanfiction

The utilisation of Ogham within the realm of Alfredian fanfiction constitutes a multifaceted phenomenon that involves technical adaptations spanning various modes of representation. This section aims to dissect the technical strategies employed by authors to incorporate Ogham into their works, ranging from Unicode-encoded characters to visual images and textual approximations. In the contemporary digital landscape, Unicode has emerged as a standardised system for encoding characters from various writing systems, allowing for cross-platform compatibility and consistent rendering. Authors of fanfiction often deploy Unicode-encoded Ogham characters, drawn from the Unicode block specifically designated for representing Primitive Irish language inscriptions as codified in the Ogham script. The integration of these characters into the textual fabric of fanfiction narratives serves the dual purpose of historical authenticity and accessible digital communication. By employing Unicode, authors signify their commitment to preserving the historical integrity of Ogham while harnessing the capabilities of modern technology to disseminate their narratives.

The incorporation of digital images depicting Ogham inscriptions stands as another pivotal technique within Alfredian fanfiction. Authors draw upon the expansive resources available on the internet, accessing images that range from photographs of Ogham inscriptions sourced from repositories like Wikipedia to digitally created renditions generated using tools such as graphic design software. These images serve as multimodal supplements that augment the textual narrative, imbuing it with visual authenticity and encouraging reader engagement. The juxtaposition of textual description and visual representation invites readers to partake in the act of decoding, thereby fostering an immersive and participatory reading experience. A distinctive feature of the digital era is the convergence of diverse modes of communication within a single medium. Authors of fanfiction often employ textual approximations and digital signifiers to evoke the presence of Ogham. For instance, the use of “--/--” to replicate the linear composition of Ogham characters reflects an ingenious adaptation of the limitations of conventional keyboards to convey the essence of an ancient script. This technique not only underscores the ingenuity of fanfiction authors but also accentuates the symbiosis between historical sensibilities and contemporary technological constraints.

## 7. Meanings of Ogham in Alfredian Fanfiction

In Alfredian fanfiction, Ogham is used in different ways depending on the specific tropes of the story. For example, in stories that portray Alfred as a wise father or teacher, Ogham may be used to represent his knowledge and wisdom. In stories that feature healing women, Ogham may be used to represent the healing power of nature. In romantic or erotic stories, Ogham may be used to symbolise the connection between the characters and the supernatural world. Ogham is often used as a symbol of the supernatural and spiritual world of Celtic customs. In this context, Ogham might also be linked to the concept of *Deus ex Machina*, which means “god from the machine.” This literary device refers to a sudden and unexpected event or character that comes to the rescue of the protagonist and resolves the story’s conflict. Sometimes Ogham is described in detail in the stories, sometimes it is actually inserted into the story as a Unicode character or picture, and in other cases, Ogham is only hinted at or implied. An example of the latter is a rewriting of the Irish mythological tale *Tochmarc Étaíne*, in which Alfred takes the place of the druid Dalan. As such, in the contexts of Alfredian fanfiction, this use of Ogham seems to be very similar to the insertion of other symbols, for example from Judaism (Mussies 2023a), or from what seems to be Anglo-Saxon runes (comp Düwel & Nedoma 2023), as exemplified in the story “To become þin rice” (2023) by amazinguwu.<sup>2</sup> Fans of the reimagined King Alfred are crossing borders of time and space to form new traditions through reiterating as well as changing elements of the heritage of Ogham. Overall, 21st-century internet culture is revitalising and creating new meanings for this early medieval alphabet within the tropes and subtropes of Alfredian fanfiction.

Tropes are recurring storytelling devices or motifs used in literature, film, and other forms of media. In fanfiction, tropes are often used to create familiar scenarios or plot devices that fans of a particular fandom may enjoy. A few examples of common tropes in fanfiction that are also present in the fannish reimaginings of King Alfred are AU, H/C, fix-it, lovers, time-travel and crossovers. AU means Alternate Universe. In an AU fic, the author reimagines the world of the fandom in a different way. For example, a King Alfred AU might explore what would have happened if he had never become king, or if he had made different decisions during his reign. H/C stands for Hurt/Comfort. Also known as “whump”, this trope involves one character being injured or emotionally distressed, and another character coming to their aid and providing comfort. It’s a popular trope in many fandoms, especially those with a lot of

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<sup>2</sup> Found on Tumblr [deleted since]. Republished at <http://martinemussies.nl/web/to-become-thin-rice/>.

action or drama. In fanfiction featuring King Alfred, the examples of Hurt/Comfort can be divided into two subcategories. In many stories, the king is presented as an almighty comforter, which might have erotic connotations as well (Mussies 2024). In other narratives, it is the king himself who is hurt and needs to be comforted. Examples of these stories can be found in the “healing women” type (Mussies 2021a). In a Fix-It fic, the author sets out to “fix” something that happened in the canon that they didn’t like. For example, as *The Last Kingdom* is overwhelmingly heterosexually oriented, many authors have rewritten the stories around King Alfred adding non-heterosexual storylines (Mussies 2019). The Enemies to Lovers trope involves two characters who start out as enemies, but over the course of the story, they develop romantic feelings for each other. It’s a popular trope in many fandoms, especially those with a lot of romantic tension and often overlaps with the Fix-It homosexual insertions, for example in narratives in which Alfred might find himself drawn to a Viking warrior who he was previously at odds, such as in the fanfictions in which King Alfred has a sexual relationship with Uhtred of Bebbanburg. As the name suggests, in a time travel fic, one or more characters travel back or forward in time and experience events that have already happened or will happen in the future, which is the case in many (alter) ego insertions in Alfredian fanfic, in which the fans travel back in time to meet the King (and often start a romantic and/or sexual relationship with him). A crossover fic combines two or more fandoms into one story. In the case of Alfredian fanfiction, there are many narratives combining characters and other elements of *The Last Kingdom* and *Vikings*, for example by pairing King Alfred with Viking queen Lagertha or with princess Gisla.

Subtropes are more specific variations of a broader trope, which can add more nuance and complexity to the storytelling. They are often used to further categorise fanfiction and can be helpful for readers looking for a particular type of story within a broader trope. For example, the Enemies to Lovers trope has several subtypes, including Forced Proximity (two characters who are forced to spend time together, often in a confined space, which leads to them developing romantic feelings for each other), Slow Burn (a gradual build-up of romantic tension between two characters over a long period of time, which can create a satisfying payoff when they finally get together), and Mutual Pining (two characters who are secretly in love with each other but are afraid to admit their feelings). The main difference between a trope and a subtype is the level of specificity. Tropes are broader storytelling devices that can apply to many different stories and fandoms, while subtypes are more specific variations of those broader tropes that add more nuance to the storytelling. Ogham is used in three different subtypes of Alfredian fanfiction: Alfred as the wise father/teacher, the healing women in an Alfredian context, and the (alter) ego-inserting romantic/erotic stories. In the trope of Alfred as the wise father/teacher,

Ogham is often used as a tool to impart wisdom and guidance to the characters. For example, in the fanfiction “Alfred’s Legacy” by Yonit Mishor, Alfred teaches his son Edward the meaning of the Ogham symbol “ura,” which – according to the fan text – represents patience and endurance (whereas various pagan websites cite it as meaning passion). Edward later uses this knowledge to overcome a difficult challenge, showing the importance of learning from the wisdom of one’s elders.<sup>3</sup> Our first case study “Learning from the past” by TheAncientScribe is an example of this first subtrope. In the healing women trope, Ogham is often used to represent the connection between the physical and spiritual realms. In the fanfiction “The Medicine Woman” by Lady\_Dora, the protagonist Aethelflaed uses Ogham to communicate with the spirits of nature and learn about the healing properties of plants. In one scene, she recites the Ogham symbol “Beth” while harvesting a particular plant, which is said to have powerful healing properties.<sup>4</sup> Our second case study “An Rí Cogaidh agus an Sagart Gaelach: Scéal Grá na Máighdean Íseal faoi Mháigic Ogham” is another example of this subtrope. In the ego-inserting romantic/erotic stories trope, Ogham is often used to add a sense of mystery and otherworldliness to the romantic encounters between characters. In the fanfiction “The Ogham Bride” by Fenris\_Wolf, the protagonist Lady Eadgyth discovers a mysterious Ogham inscription on a tree in the forest. She later meets a mysterious man, who introduces himself as Bivaidonas, son of the tribe Cunava, but turns out to be King Alfred. He teaches her the meaning of the symbol, which leads to a passionate and mysterious romantic encounter. Our third case study “Alfred y Abigail: Dos secretos” by corasketches is an example of this subtrope. In all of these examples, Ogham serves as a powerful tool for evoking a sense of ancient wisdom, mysticism and spirituality in the world of Alfredian fanfiction. Whether used to impart knowledge, connect with the spiritual realm, or add mystery to romantic encounters, Ogham is a versatile and evocative symbol that adds depth and meaning to the intertextual storytelling around King Alfred and his world.

#### 8. Case study 1: “Learning from the past” by TheAncientScribe<sup>5</sup>

The first case study is entitled “Learning from the past” and published under the pseudonym of TheAncientScribe. It is a work of fanfiction that highlights the value of curiosity, learning, and the pursuit of knowledge. The story is about a non-canonical character named Baddo. Historically, this might be inspired by Queen Baddo (also known as Bauda), a 6th-century Visigoth queen consort, who

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<sup>3</sup> Republished at <http://martinemussies.nl/web/alfreds-legacy/>

<sup>4</sup> Republished at <http://martinemussies.nl/web/the-medicine-woman/>

<sup>5</sup> Republished at <http://martinemussies.nl/web/learning-from-the-past/>

was married to King Reccared the First (Mussies 2023b). Baddo is the only Visigoth queen consort to have autographed sanctioned state and church documents, implying her involvement in politics and her authority over the government. Baddo's lineage was first written about by Isidore of Seville, who attests to the fact that Liuva II, born in 583 or 584, had a commoner mother who was one of Reccared's concubines. Many scholars believe that the mother of Liuva II was queen Baddo, making her the only known Visigoth queen consort to bear a royal son. Her influence over politics and the government cannot be ignored.

In the fanfiction narrative, Baddo approaches King Alfred and shows him the stone with strange markings on it that she found in the forest. This action demonstrates Baddo's curiosity and intelligence, as well as her eagerness to learn new things. King Alfred is impressed by her passion for learning and agrees to teach her Ogham, which indicates that he values and supports education. As they sit in the royal library, King Alfred patiently teaches Baddo about the Ogham alphabet, providing specific examples such as the meanings of three of the runic letters:

┐ is Beith and means birch,  
 ≡ is sail, meaning willow,  
 ≡≡ is ruis, for the colour red...

This is an example of King Alfred's knowledge and expertise in the subject, as well as his willingness to share that knowledge with others. Baddo's fascination with the intricacies of the Ogham alphabet and her eagerness to learn are highlighted in this section, as she asks many questions and practices writing the letters. She quickly becomes skilled at writing Ogham and is grateful for King Alfred's guidance and knowledge, which shows her respect for him as a teacher and mentor.

"Learning from the past" reflects the cultural importance of literacy and education in Anglo-Saxon society, as well as the value placed on curiosity and exploration. Baddo's desire to learn about the Ogham alphabet is presented as a positive trait, and her journey to seek knowledge is portrayed as an adventure filled with obstacles to overcome. The story presents King Alfred as a wise and knowledgeable ruler who values education and is willing to share his knowledge with others. This reflects the historical reputation of King Alfred as a patron of learning and literacy. The use of the Ogham alphabet, an ancient Irish alphabet, in the story is an interesting choice. While the Ogham alphabet was used to write Old Irish, it was not used in Anglo-Saxon England, where the Latin alphabet was used. However, the use of the Ogham alphabet in the story adds an element of mystery and exoticism to the tale.

Overall, the story of Baddo is a well-crafted work of fiction that highlights the importance of curiosity, learning, and the pursuit of knowledge, while also



reflecting cultural values and historical figures. In addition, this story exemplifies the trope. The theme of a young, beautiful girl learning runes from the scholar King Alfred recurs in many stories. For illustration, “The Redheaded Artist and the King’s Lessons” by Scarlett Inkwell is another example, with a very similar narrative. In this story, King Alfred teaches an original character by the name of Maeve the Ogham alphabet along with the Anglo-Saxon Runes as part of her education. This serves to deepen her understanding of ancient languages and writing systems, as well as to emphasise the importance of written communication in history. The inclusion of the Ogham alphabet specifically adds a Celtic element to the story, which helps to expand the cultural scope beyond just Anglo-Saxon England. This is also reflected in the red hair and the name of the female protagonist: Maeve (sometimes spelled Maebh or Medb) is of Irish origin. The name is derived from the Gaelic word “Medb,” which means “intoxicating” or “intoxicated.” Just like Baddo, Maeve has mythical/historical connotations, as Maeve is typically associated with the legendary queen of Connacht in Irish mythology, Queen Maeve. In Irish mythology, Queen Maeve was a powerful and charismatic figure who was known for her beauty, intelligence, and warrior-like qualities. She was a fierce and independent ruler who was determined to assert her dominance over the men in her kingdom. Her story has inspired many works of literature and art, and her name has become associated with strength, beauty, and feminine power. In the context of the story, the name Maeve serves to underscore the protagonist’s artistic and creative qualities, as well as her strong and independent spirit, in a similar way as the name Baddo in “Learning from the past”.

9. Case study 2: “An Rí Cogaidh agus an Sagart Gaelach: Scéal Grá na Máighdean Íseal faoi Mhágic Ogham” by Aisling O’Malley<sup>6</sup>

The second case study under consideration is a work written in the Irish language. Its title, *An Rí Cogaidh agus an Sagart Gaelach: Scéal Grá na Máighdean Íseal faoi Mhágic Ogham*, can be translated as “The War King and the Gaelic Priest: A Love Story about a Low Virgin under Ogham Magic.” It is worth noting that the translation of the term “Mhágic” may require further examination, as it deviates from the more commonly used Irish term “draíocht” for magic. Additionally, the word “maighdean” presents an interesting linguistic challenge as it can be translated as both “maiden” and “virgin” within the Irish language, as seen in phrases -*An Mhaighdean Mhuire* (The Virgin Mary) And -*Maighdean óg* (Young Maiden). The choice of “virgin” is inferred from the contextual

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<sup>6</sup> Republished at <http://martinemussies.nl/web/an-ri-cogaidh-agus-an-sagart-gaelach-sceal-gra-na-maighdean-iseal-faoi-mhagic-ogham/>

description, which portrays the character as a nun. The idea of a “low” virgin might suggest that she is gentle and modest. This ambiguity in translation underscores the complexity of language and cultural nuances within the Irish context. Furthermore, it raises questions about the translator’s choice and the potential impact on the interpretation of the text.

This narrative explores the relationship between King Alfred of Wessex and the nun Modwen, following the ‘slow burn’ subtrope of the Enemies to Lovers trope. The name Modwen/Modwenne/Modwenna occurs more often in Alfredian fanfiction (Mussies 2021a). It is predominantly associated with Ireland, and there are many connections between King Alfred and Ireland (Wehlau 2011). For example, some historical accounts suggest that King Alfred received a substantial portion of his education during his sickly childhood and early youth in Ireland. According to Mooney’s *A History of Ireland* (1853), during this period, the young king was sent to a religious lady named Modwenna in Ireland for healing when he fell ill. It is worth noting that Modwenna was also the name of a seventh-century nun and saint in England who founded Burton Abbey in Staffordshire and was revered for performing holy miracles. It has been reported that Modwenna sought King Alfred’s assistance when her abbey was in danger of collapsing.

The narrative is set during the Viking invasions of England, and the king seeks to learn the Ogham alphabet to communicate with his allies secretly. Modwen is a skilled scribe who teaches him the Ogham alphabet, and over time, the two develop a deep affection for each other that transcends their differences in social status and worldview. The story portrays a transformational journey for both Alfred and Modwen. Alfred, who initially sees Modwen as weak and superstitious, gradually recognizes her inner strength and intelligence. He also discovers a deep spiritual connection to the Ogham alphabet, which Modwen teaches him to use for mystical purposes. Modwen, on the other hand, learns to assert herself and express her feelings, ultimately making the first move in their relationship. Thus, this story’s central theme is the transformative power of love, which can overcome social and cultural barriers and transform individuals’ perspectives. The story also suggests that the Ogham alphabet has mystical properties that can be used for spiritual purposes, highlighting the importance of ancient knowledge and traditions. The story is written in a narrative style, with vivid descriptions of characters, settings, and events. The characters’ inner thoughts and feelings are revealed through their actions and interactions, creating a nuanced and complex portrayal of their relationship.

A close-reading of this fanfiction reveals an interesting facet regarding the author’s proficiency in the Irish language. It appears that the author may not be a native speaker or writer of Irish, as evidenced by certain linguistic choices and deviations from standard Irish terminology. This observation bears significance

for the fanfiction itself. The nuances of a language, particularly in a literary context, can significantly impact the authenticity and resonance of a narrative. When an author utilises a language not native to them, it can introduce idiosyncrasies and inaccuracies that might not align with the expectations of fluent speakers and readers. This is exemplified in the following passage:

Bhí sí freisin ina scríobhaí cumasach a bhí tar éis bheith toilteanach teangaog Ogham a mhúineadh do Alfred, a bhí ag súil úsáid a bhaint as an ngéagaog seo le cumarsáid rúnda a dhéanamh lena chairde. [She was also a talented scribe that was willing to (speak Ogham to?) teach Alfred the Ogham language, he hoped to use this language to communicate secretly with his friends]

The story is in a strangely non-standard Irish. Perhaps the author is a student of Irish, and the use of translation software or AI cannot be ruled out (Mussies 2023c). Especially the use of the word “teangaog” and “ngéagaog” in the original translation raise questions about linguistic accuracy. Teangaog is not an Irish word, it might be a typo from ‘teanga’ (‘tongue, language’) combined with the “og” from Ogham. The word “ngéagaog” (properly cited as “[g]éagaog”) is also not a commonly used word for language in the Irish language, that would typically use the word “teanga”. Such linguistic deviations might affect the reception and interpretation of the fanfiction among those familiar with the Irish language. In the fragment cited, it is unclear whether it is about ‘willing to speak Ogham’ and/or ‘willing to teach the Ogham language’, as ‘a bhí tar éis bheith’ is past perfect.<sup>7</sup> Native speakers and enthusiasts may be sensitive to these departures from linguistic conventions, potentially influencing their overall assessment of the work’s authenticity and cultural resonance.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, it prompts discussions about the motivations and intentions of the author in choosing to write in Irish and the impact of these choices on the narrative’s portrayal of Irish culture and language.

Still, the narrative itself holds considerable appeal and interest. Initially, the Ogham only represents a practical tool for communication for King Alfred, as he “hoped to use this language to communicate secretly with his friends”. This resonates with theories by academics like Carney (1975) and MacNeill (2014 [1931]), who claim that Ogham was initially developed by Irish scholars or druids for political, military, or religious purposes as a cryptic alphabet that was intended to be impenetrable to those who only read Latin alphabet. But the fanfiction employs the Ogham alphabet as symbolism to convey deeper meanings and themes. In the narrative, Alfred learns from Modwenna that the letters can also

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<sup>7</sup> The author is very grateful to the anonymous peer reviewer who pointed this out.

<sup>8</sup> An alternative phrasing of the section might be “Ba scríobhaí cumasach í freisin a bhí sásta ogham a labhairt (or: “(an) teanga ogham a mhúineadh”) chun an teanga a mhúineadh do Alfred, Bhí súil aige an teanga seo a úsáid chun cumarsáid rúnda a dhéanamh lena chairde”.

be used as a means of invoking and channelling energy to effect change in the world. The gentle nun uses the Ogham letters in a way that symbolises the power of spiritual practices and the ability to tap into forces beyond the physical world. So Alfred learns and discovers its mystical properties and its potential for spiritual growth and enlightenment. His journey with Modwen represents a shift in his worldview from a strictly practical, materialistic perspective to a more spiritual one. Additionally, the Ogham serves as a symbol of the connection between Alfred and Modwen. They share a common language and a common purpose in their study of the Ogham, and it becomes a source of bonding and intimacy between them. As such, the use of the Ogham alphabet in this story is twofold. First, it represents the idea that there is more to life than the physical realm and that spiritual practices can lead to personal growth and enlightenment. Secondly, it also represents the power of language and communication in forming connections and fostering intimacy between people.

Despite deviations from standard Irish language usage and potential indications of non-native authorship, the story woven by Aisling O'Malley is captivating and thought-provoking. The thematic exploration of a love story involving a war king, a Gaelic priest, and a low-ranking virgin under the enigmatic influence of Ogham magic provides an intriguing backdrop. The narrative engages readers through its exploration of complex characters and their interactions, delving into themes of love, secrecy, and the interplay between Irish folklore and history. Furthermore, the narrative's allure lies in its ability to transcend linguistic intricacies. While language authenticity is undeniably important in the portrayal of Irish culture and heritage, the story's compelling plot, character development, and the interplay of historical and mythological elements offer readers a rich and immersive experience.

#### 10. Case study 3: "Alfred y Abigail: Dos secretos" by corasketches<sup>9</sup>

The third case study is written in Spanish and features a non-canonical character by the name of Abigail. With the risk of 'reading into the text', in the context of Alfredian fanfiction, I think that this name was not selected arbitrarily (see also Mussies 2023a). Given its etymological roots, the name "Abigail" probably holds a deliberate significance. Originating from the Hebrew term "ab," denoting "father," and the Hebrew root "g-y-l," signifying "to rejoice," the name Abigail presents a range of potential interpretations, encompassing "the delight of my father" and "a wellspring of joy." In Biblical terms, Abigail is a woman who appears in the First Book of Samuel. She was the wife of Nabal, a wealthy but harsh man who insulted David, who at the time was fleeing from King Saul.

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9 Republished at <http://martinemussies.nl/web/alfred-y-abigail-dos-secretos/>

Abigail, who was wise and beautiful, interceded on David’s behalf and prevented him from taking revenge on her husband. After Nabal’s death, David married Abigail. This reinforces the connection of King Alfred to King David. The narrative follows the main character, Alfred, who is studying history and geography with Abigail under the tutelage of Father Godwin. Alfred finds Abigail’s smile warm and captivating and struggles to maintain his composure in her presence. During one of their study sessions, Alfred feigns illness to take a break from their studies and Father Godwin suggests they take a walk outside. Abigail and Alfred take a walk in the castle gardens where Abigail shows Alfred a secret spot. The story ends with Alfred correcting Abigail for addressing him as “my lord” and asking her to call him by his name. The story’s main theme appears to be Alfred’s infatuation with Abigail, evident in his descriptions of her physical attributes, particularly her smile. The author uses vivid imagery to convey Alfred’s admiration for Abigail’s beauty and grace. The story also touches on the class difference between Alfred and Abigail, as she addresses him as “my lord,” indicating her inferior social status. The author employs simple language, making the story easy to follow, and the dialogue is natural and believable. The story lacks a clear conflict or resolution, but it serves as a character study of Alfred, as the author seems to focus on Alfred’s internal struggle and his inability to express his feelings for Abigail. Using effective imagery and characterization to convey Alfred’s feelings for Abigail, this story provides an insightful glimpse into Alfred’s character and his emotional state.

The word Ogham is mentioned once in this story, in the line “Son piedras Ogham y se usan para predecir el futuro”, which translates to “These are Ogham stones and they are used to predict the future.” This use of Ogham stones for divination suggests a connection to ancient Celtic mysticism or folklore. The practice of using Ogham for divination is not uncommon in modern neo-pagan and New Age spiritual traditions that draw inspiration from Celtic spirituality. In the following section of this fanfiction, Abigail explains more about the Ogham stones to Alfred, and tells him how they are used to predict the future. She reveals that she learned how to use them from Saskia, a woman who used to live with her father when she was a child. Abigail tells Alfred that she found the stones in Saskia’s room when she was younger, and that Saskia promised to teach her how to use them when she grew up. She also explains that the stones predicted that Alfred will become a king and that a significant event will break the line of his brother’s life, which she believes means that he will die. The fact that Abigail is using Ogham stones to predict the future suggests that she is knowledgeable about traditional folklore and practices. This detail also adds to the sense of mystery and magic of this fanfiction. Abigail’s story about Saskia, the woman who lived with her father, also adds to the intrigue of the narrative. It raises questions about why Saskia was a prisoner, how she earned Abigail’s father’s trust, and what

happened to her. The fact that Saskia taught Abigail how to use the Ogham stones implies that she was knowledgeable about the supernatural and may have had a mystical or magical quality herself. Overall, the addition of Ogham to the story adds depth by introducing a mystical element and providing some backstory for Abigail. It also raises questions and hints at the possibility of further revelations later in the narrative.

## 11. Reflections

In analysing the three case studies, a consistent thematic undercurrent emerges - the Ogham alphabet serves as a potent symbol within the narratives, embodying mystery, ancient wisdom, and a connection to the spiritual or supernatural dimensions of the stories. This recurring motif manifests despite the historical disconnect between the Ogham script and the fanfiction's settings. It is precisely this historical incongruity that adds a layer of depth and intrigue to the narratives, as the Ogham script becomes a bridge between the contemporary fanfiction worlds and the age-old, enigmatic Celtic traditions. In each case, the Ogham script acts as a literary vehicle that transcends its historical context, seamlessly integrating itself into the stories' fabric. Furthermore, these case studies collectively underscore several profound implications for the revitalization of Ogham as a cultural and literary element. Firstly, they demonstrate the remarkable adaptability of this ancient script within modern creative contexts. The fact that fanfiction authors can employ Ogham to symbolise deeper layers of meaning, spiritual growth, and interpersonal connections is a testament to the script's enduring relevance. It highlights the script's versatility as a narrative device, capable of morphing to suit contemporary storytelling needs while preserving its core aura of mysticism and wisdom. Secondly, these case studies emphasise that Ogham's revitalization extends beyond mere historical rediscovery. It showcases Ogham's capacity to thrive in new cultural spaces, particularly within the realm of digital fan culture. This not only introduces a wider audience to Ogham but also reinforces its significance within contemporary storytelling practices. Ogham's presence in fanfiction aligns with broader trends in cultural revitalization, where ancient symbols and traditions are repurposed to resonate with modern sensibilities. In conclusion, these case studies collectively draw attention to the enduring adaptability and richness of Ogham as a literary device. They shed light on its capacity to transcend historical confines, infusing narratives with a sense of depth and intrigue. Moreover, they underscore the ongoing cultural significance of Ogham by demonstrating its capacity to find a place within modern storytelling practices, particularly in digital fan culture. In essence, Ogham's revitalization is not just a journey into the past; it is a dynamic evolution that reimagines its role in contemporary cultural landscapes.

These three examples of Ogham in fanfiction unveil the versatility of this ancient Irish alphabet in storytelling. Whether used as a tool for education, a symbol for spiritual growth and connection, or a means of divination, Ogham adds an element of mystery and intrigue to the narratives in which it is featured. This is exemplary for other examples of the corpus of Alfredian fanfiction in which Ogham plays a role. In “The Message” by K.A. Storm, King Alfred uses Ogham to communicate with a saint. This use of Ogham is interesting because it reflects the reality of early medieval communication across linguistic boundaries. In this story, Alfred is seeking guidance from a saint, but the saint speaks a language that Alfred does not understand. To overcome this language barrier, Alfred carves his message into a piece of wood using Ogham. The saint is then able to read the message, understand Alfred’s request, and provide guidance in return. Another example is “The Secret of the Stone” by Byrne, in which an Ogham inscription on a stone leads Alfred to a hidden treasure. In this story, Alfred comes across an old stone with an Ogham inscription on it. Using his knowledge of Ogham, he is able to translate the inscription, which leads him to a hidden treasure. This use of Ogham reflects the important role that inscriptions played in early medieval culture. Inscriptions on stones and other objects were used for a variety of purposes, including marking boundaries, commemorating individuals, and recording important events. Next to these examples, there are many instances in which Ogham is used in a romantic context to express love and devotion. This use of Ogham reflects the importance of language and literature in expressing emotion and connecting with others. The use of Ogham in Alfredian fanfiction highlights the role that cultural traditions and customs play in romantic relationships. Ogham was not commonly used in Anglo-Saxon England, so its use in this story reflects a blending of cultural traditions and an appreciation for the richness and diversity of different cultural practices. Additionally, the use of Ogham adds a layer of depth and complexity to the story, emphasising the importance of language and literacy in early medieval culture. The use of Ogham in these new stories adds depth and complexity to the characters and the world they inhabit, emphasising the importance of language and literacy in shaping cultural traditions and connecting with others.

When comparing the use of Ogham in Alfredian fanfiction which attestations in other fandoms, several differences are noticeable. Take for example Part 17, “Whispers”, of the ongoing Game of Thrones fanfiction “Fire and Ice: A Song of Love and Adventure”, in which an author under the pseudonym of “WesterosWanderer” mentions Ogham as well.<sup>10</sup> “Fire and Ice: A Song of Love and Adventure” is steeped in tropes characteristic of epic romance and adventure narratives. It intertwines the lives of Jon Snow and Daenerys Targaryen, two

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10 Republished at <http://martinemussies.nl/web/whispers/>

central characters from the Game of Thrones universe, who are depicted as unlikely yet destined lovers. The fanfiction employs the trope of destined love, a narrative device where two characters, often from contrasting backgrounds or opposing sides, are predestined to fall in love. In this case, Jon Snow and Daenerys Targaryen's union is portrayed as a profound and fated connection. Adventure is closely linked with romance in this fanfiction. The characters' love story unfolds against the backdrop of daring escapades and trials, emphasising their courage and resilience. The narrative backdrop of a chaotic and politically intricate Westeros provides an overarching trope. The contrast between the realm's turmoil and the protagonists' love highlights the redemptive and transcendent power of their relationship. In this fanfiction, Ogham is introduced as an element of historical mystique. Jon Snow references an ancient scroll written in the enigmatic Ogham script, attributing it to the theme of enduring love and fortitude. Ogham, with its distinctively carved lines and notches, is presented as a symbol of timeless wisdom and heritage. Ogham symbolises ancient wisdom and mysticism, creating an aura of historical authenticity within the narrative. It is emblematic of the enduring power of love amidst the temporal chaos of Westeros. The mention of Ogham foreshadows the strength of Jon and Daenerys's love, suggesting that it is a force capable of transcending adversity. It anticipates their unwavering commitment and shared destiny. Ogham contributes to the cultural richness of the narrative, emphasising the diverse linguistic and historical elements within the Game of Thrones world. When compared to the Alfredian fanfictions above, it is evident that Game of Thrones fanfiction uses tropes to create an epic love story within a well-established fictional universe, whereas Alfredian fanfiction similarly employs tropes to reimagine the historical figure of Alfred the Great. However, the use of Ogham in Alfredian fanfiction differs significantly. Alfredian fanfiction employs Ogham as a means to revitalise and reinterpret historical scripts, often using it to evoke a sense of mystique and spirituality. Unlike Game of Thrones fanfiction, which exists within a fantasy world, Alfredian fanfiction grounds its narratives in historical and cultural contexts. Additionally, Alfredian fanfiction is often centred on historical believability and the exploration of Alfred's life and era.

## 12. Conclusions

This article embarks on a journey to unravel the intricate relationship between Ogham, an Early Medieval script used primarily to write the early Irish language, and 21st-century internet culture, as manifested in Alfredian fanfiction. By examining three selected case studies, I aimed to unearth how Ogham's incorporation into contemporary narratives generates novel meanings and breathes new life into this ancient alphabet. The deliberate choice to concentrate



on these specific case studies within Alfredian fanfiction is driven by the aspiration to provide an in-depth and contextualised examination of Ogham’s role in generating new meanings. It allows us to bridge historical scripts with the digital age, shedding light on how fan communities reframe cultural heritage, transcend temporal and geographical boundaries, and forge new traditions within the ever-evolving landscape of internet culture. Through a comprehensive approach, the study sought to elucidate the intricate relationship between Ogham, historical narratives, and contemporary fan creativity, providing valuable insights into how this ancient script generates novel meanings and propels the narratives forward within the digital landscape of fan culture.

While Ogham was not used in Anglo-Saxon England, it has found its way into modern works of fiction set in that time period, including Alfredian fanfiction. In this article, I have analysed three specific examples of Ogham’s use in Alfredian fanfiction, exploring the literary and cultural implications of its inclusion in each story. The case studies discussed use Ogham as an element in distinct ways, to convey different purposes. “Learning from the past” uses Ogham as a tool for education and exploration, “An Rí Cogaidh agus an Sagart Gaelach: Scéal Grá na Máighdean Íseal faoi Mhágic Ogham” by Aisling O’Malley uses Ogham as a symbol for spiritual growth and connection, while “Alfred y Abigail: Dos secretos” by corasketches uses Ogham as a means of divination and adds a sense of mystery to the narrative. As exemplified by the case studies, Ogham is used as an element in various tropes and subtropes within the genre. In addition, the stories often resonate with other subtropes. For example, by the insertion of female characters from vastly different times - Baddo, Maeve, Modwen, Abigail - the authors of Alfredian fanfiction featuring Ogham also add an element of time travel to their stories. A short analysis of “Fire and Ice: A Song of Love and Adventure” from the Game of Thrones fandom highlights the employment of tropes and the utilisation of Ogham to create an epic love story set against the backdrop of a tumultuous world. Comparatively, Alfredian fanfiction employs similar tropes but utilises Ogham in distinct ways to reinvigorate historical scripts and engage with the cultural heritage of early medieval England. Both forms of fanfiction exemplify how fan authors draw upon established themes and symbols to craft narratives that resonate with contemporary audiences while paying homage to the source material.

Overall, the use of Ogham in modern-day art and media demonstrates the enduring appeal and cultural significance of this ancient script, and the ways in which it continues to inspire creativity and imagination today. The technical adaptations of Ogham within the domain of Alfredian fanfiction underscore the intricate interplay between historical heritage and modern digital expression. Through Unicode-encoded characters, visual representations, and textual approximations, authors navigate the complex terrain of historical authenticity,

multimodality, and creative adaptation. This multi-layered engagement with Ogham illustrates how fanfiction serves as a dynamic platform for the revitalization of ancient scripts, propelling them into the digital age while preserving their essence and fostering meaningful connections between past and present. The attestation of Ogham in Alfredian fanfiction however also signifies that this alphabet in 21st century art is not confined to its visual aspect; rather, it engenders new meanings that reflect the concerns and sensibilities of internet culture. Emojis, a hallmark of digital communication, share a kinship with Ogham in their capacity to convey condensed emotions and ideas. Just as emojis often transcend linguistic barriers, Ogham's visual nature allows it to communicate beyond linguistic limitations, appealing to a global audience engaged in the shared culture of the internet.

Alfredian fanfiction adapts an ancient script to a contemporary mode of expression, contributing to the creation of a novel visual language. Ogham's incorporation into Alfredian fanfiction also highlights its adaptability to the digital landscape. Hyperlinks, integral to internet culture, enable readers to access supplementary information about Ogham inscriptions and their historical context, blurring the boundaries between historical and fictional narratives. Furthermore, the act of decoding Ogham inscriptions within the context of digital media mirrors the participatory engagement that characterises internet interactions. Readers become active agents in deciphering Ogham's encoded messages, mirroring the collaborative nature of online discourse. In conclusion, the presence of Ogham in 21st-century fan works reflects the enduring power of this ancient writing system to capture the imagination and inspire creativity. By using Ogham in new and unexpected ways, artists are able to create new meanings and traditions, while also celebrating and preserving their cultural heritage. As Ogham continues to inspire and fascinate, it is likely that it will continue to play an important role in contemporary art and culture for years to come.

With this article, I hope to have made a tentative start in analysing Ogham in contemporary online fannish cultures. Of course this is only one of several avenues for future research into Ogham in contemporary culture. Other potential areas of study about the role of Ogham in digital media include video games, and social media platforms. As technology continues to advance, it will be interesting to see how Ogham is incorporated into different types of digital media and how these new mediums affect the use and interpretation of Ogham. While fan works such as fanfiction have played a significant role in popularising Ogham in contemporary culture, it would be interesting to explore how else it is used in popular media, such as music, film, and television. Another area of study is the use of Ogham in contemporary paganism and spirituality: While Ogham has historical roots in Celtic paganism, it has also been adapted by contemporary practitioners of various spiritual traditions. Future research could explore how

Ogham is used in modern pagan practices and what meanings and associations are assigned to the individual symbols. This also links to issues of Ogham and identity, as Ogham has been used by various groups to signify identity and affiliation, such as in the case of the Irish Republican Army’s use of Ogham on their memorial stones. Future research could explore how Ogham is used by different communities and what meanings are associated with it.

*Table 1. Attestations of Ogham in Alfredian fanfiction as of September 2023.*

<b>Title</b>	<b>Author</b>	<b>Found in</b>	<b>Language</b>
Learning from the past	The Ancient Scribe	October 2022	English
Firefly	alhenam35	December 2022	English
An Rí Cogaidh agus an Sagart Gaelach: Scéal Grá na Máighdean Íseal faoi Mhágic Ogham	Aisling O’Malley	January 2023	Irish
The Message	K.A. Storm	January 2023	English
The Ogham Bride	Fenris_Wolf	February 2023	English
Alfred y Abigail: Dos secretos	corasketches	February 2023	Spanish
Untitled King Alfred fanfiction	officeofbooks	February 2023	English
The Medicine Woman	Lady_Dora	March 2023	English
The Redheaded Artist and the King’s Lessons	Scarlett Inkwell	March 2023	English
The Secret of the Stone	Byrne	March 2023	English
Alfred’s Legacy	Yonit Mishor	March 2023	English

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