
The Bardic Letters

Source: *The Cambro-Briton*, Mar., 1820, Vol. 1, No. 7 (Mar., 1820), pp. 241-246

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COELBREN Y BEIRDD, OR BARDIC ALPHABET*.

<i>Rad.</i>	<i>Der.</i>	<i>Rad.</i>	<i>Der.</i>	<i>Accented Letters.</i>
Λ	Λ	A	á	
∩	∩ ∩ ∩	E	é u ú	
I		I		
◇	◇ V W Y	O	ô w ó y	
∟	∟ ∟	B	b m	ḃ Ḅ
∩	∩ N ∩	P	b ph mh	ḅ Ḇ ḇ
R		Ff		
W	U	M	f	ḿ
<	< K &	C	g ch ngh	ḡ Ḣ Ḅ
<	< & ḥ	G	— ng	ḡ Ḣ Ḅ
>	> U	D	dd n	ḍ ḏ
∩	> ∩ ∩	T	d th nh	ṫ Ṭ ṭ
∩		N		
N	∩	Ll	l	ḷ
∩	∩	Rh	r	ṙ
∩		S		
∩		H		

* The first column in this Cut represents the Old Bardic Letters, both Radical and Derivative, the second gives their corresponding Letters, as far as they can be adapted to them, in the Roman Alphabet, and the last column contains the accented Roman Letters, employed in the Archaicology of Wales to represent the Mutations of the Welsh Consonants, as noticed in the Essay on Initial Mutations in the Eleventh Number of this Work.—Ed.

[↩ To face Page 241.]

THE
CAMBRO-BRITON.

MARCH, 1820.

NULLI QUIDEM MIHI SATIS ERUDITI VIDENTUR, QUIBUS
NOSTRA IGNOTA SUNT. CICERO *de Legibus*.

WELSH LANGUAGE.

—000—

THE BARDIC LETTERS.

FROM the elementary analysis of the Welsh Language, to which the last Essay under this head was devoted, a transition to those symbols, which are employed to represent its articulations to the eye, seems easy and natural. “Words,” says Aristotle, “are the marks of thoughts, and letters of words:” and St. Augustin, pursuing the same idea, observes, “*verba sunt signa audibilia, signa verba visibilia.*” And nothing can be more certain than that this was the natural progress of language: the oral or *audible* first, and then that, which was written or *visible*. The elementary sounds, of which some account has already been given, were supplied by Nature herself as the representatives of ideas in a primitive state of society; but, had human intercourse proceeded no farther than this, it must of necessity have remained extremely rude and imperfect. The same impulse, therefore, that taught man to convey his thoughts to the ear, instructed him also to embody the representations of those thoughts to the eye*. And this he did by resolving his oral language into its original principles, and by assigning to those principles such distinctive characters, whether imitative or symbolical, as natural attributes or arbitrary accidents presented for his adoption †. “The analysis of language into its elementary sounds,” says Mr. Astle in

* M. De Gebelin has upon this subject the following very accurate remark: “L’invention de l’écriture, ainsi que celle de tous les arts, fut de la plus grande simplicité. On vouloit peindre une idée; mais cette idée peignoit un objet. Un n’eut donc qu’à peindre cet objet, qu’à en tracer la figure, et l’idée fut peinte: ainsi on écrivoit par la même moyen qu’on parloit. La nature en fit tous les frais.”—*Moude Primitif*, tom. iii. p. 379.

† See Harris’s *Hermes*, p. 331.

his "Origin and Progress of Writing *,"—"seems first to have led to the invention of symbols, or marks for mental conceptions. This invention must have taken place much about the time that men began to reform the barbarous jargon they first spoke and form a language, for which purpose the knowledge of elemental sounds and their powers was absolutely necessary."

The first mode of writing, therefore, must have been of a very simple character, the letters as well as the thoughts of the primitive race of mankind being purely elementary. Indeed, it is hardly to be doubted, that the first attempt, made by man in this way, was a representation by natural signs of the ideas, which he wished to convey. And it is a remarkable corroboration of this opinion, that the practice of emblematical writing has been found to prevail amongst nations, between whom there never was known to have been any intercourse. The Mexicans, the Chinese, the Scythians and the Egyptians, occupying the most remote extremities of the four quarters of the globe, adopted, and still in a great measure retain, this method of communicating their sentiments to the eye †. But this figurative language, called hieroglyphic and picture-writing, and which may properly be styled imitative, however expressive of those ideas, which had their prototypes in visible objects, must have proved wholly inadequate, in its infant state, to the designation of the abstract conceptions of the mind. The next stage of writing, therefore, was the conversion of these imitative figures into arbitrary symbols by an extension of their representative powers to those distinguishing properties, which belonged to their natural prototypes. Hence a tree may have been employed to denote vegetation or fecundity,—a horse swiftness or strength,—and the sun light, glory, and pre-eminence. And it forms a singular illustration of this hypothesis, that the Hebrew letters have been regarded by many learned writers not merely as arbitrary characters, but as representatives of natural or artificial images. For instance א *aleph* has been considered to signify an ox, ב *beth* a house, ג *gimel* a camel, and ד *daleth* a leaf ‡, of

* P. 18.

† The learned author of the "Divine Legation of Moses," p. 97, observes, with reference to this extraordinary coincidence, that "all barbarous nations, before the invention of letters, made use of hieroglyphics or signs to record their meaning," and, in addition to the instances recorded above, he mentions the Indians, Phœnicians, Etruscans, and Ethiopians.

‡ It deserves to be here noticed, that *dalen* is in Welsh the word for a leaf. The Hebrew *daleth* signifies also a door or table, or, abstractedly, a flat surface.

which objects, as well as of others, the Hebrew letters are thought to have been originally actual delineations*. Another remarkable elucidation of this theory may be found in the old names of the Irish letters, which, in number eighteen, are, with the exception of two or three only, also the appellations of different trees distinguished by various properties. And it is certain, that most ancient languages present an extraordinary connection between trees and letters, and such, as could never have been the result of mere accident †.

From the imitative and symbolical styles of writing the next transition was to arbitrary characters of the most simple description. Or, to speak more accurately, the symbols, which had been borrowed from the images of nature or art, were gradually simplified until they preserved at last nothing more than the mere outlines of their original forms. This, as already observed, is presumed to have been the case with the Hebrew letters: and if, as some have imagined, the delineations of trees were ever used to constitute an alphabet, their transformation into characters of the simplest nature would, upon the same principle, have been a work of no difficulty.

But, whatever was the origin of the arbitrary signs, now used in writing, it is to be ascertained from a variety of evidence, that the first alphabets, known to Europeans, presented, for the most part, an apparently inartificial series of lines and angles. Such

* See some ingenious observations on this subject in Mr. Davies's "Celtic Researches," p. 332 *et seq.*

† Mr. Davies in his work, cited in the last note, enumerates many examples of this strange coincidence. Among these are the words *Gwydd* and *Feadha* in Welsh and Irish, and several words in Hebrew and other languages, indicating the correspondence alluded to between letters and trees. Yet some of Mr. Davies's remarks on the ancient Druidical Tokens, and particularly on the old Bardic poems with reference to this subject must be acknowledged to be too hypothetical.—In addition to what he has advanced on this curious point it may be noted generally, that præternatural qualities were ascribed to several trees from the earliest times. Thus we have the Tree of Knowledge in Scriptural History, and the celebrated Grove of Dodona in the Heathen world, the trees of which were presumed to be endowed with prophetic powers, and thence called *προσηγορῆαι καὶ μαντικαὶ δρυεὶς*. The celebrated laurel of Apollo is also styled *μαντικὸν φυτόν*, and by Claudian *venturi præscia laurus*. And Æschylus in his *Agamemnon* makes Cassandra describe her laurel garland as one of her "prognosticating symbols." All these instances and many others, that might be selected, unite in proving the remarkable agency of trees, in one way or other, in the first diffusion of knowledge amongst mankind.

were, generally speaking, the Runic characters and the Pelasgic or Etruscan, which latter are considered by many writers to have been the primitive letters of Europe*. At least they are known to have been in use among the Greeks in very early ages. And, if any may dispute the palm of antiquity with them, it must be those, of which it now becomes the business of this Essay to give some account.

It has often been made a subject of controversy, whether the ancient inhabitants of this island were acquainted with letters before their intercourse with the Romans. And, if the question have reference to the people generally, it ought perhaps to be decided in the negative. But we have the authority of Cæsar himself for saying, that letters were known in his time to the Druids and other members of their Institution. His words on this subject are, “Magnum ibi numerum versuum ediscere dicuntur. Ita-
“que annos nonnulli videnos in disciplinâ permanent; neque fas
“esse existimant ea literis mandare, quum in reliquis ferè rebus,
“publicis privatisque rationibus, Græcis utantur literis †.” From this passage it is evident, that a knowledge of letters was common to the members, even the pupils, of the Bardic Institution: otherwise, the prohibition, implied in the expression of *neque fas esse existimant ea literis mandare*, would be wholly without a meaning †. But so far is this from being the case, that Cæsar expressly informs us, that the Druids, on ordinary occasions, actually made use of a character, which he calls Greek. And the restraint, imposed on the Bardic pupils or *awenyddion* in this respect, he ascribes, with his usual sagacity, to the proper cause, a desire, in the first place, to prevent the regulations of the order from being divulged, and, in the next, to promote that exercise of the memory, inseparable, as before observed in the course of this work, from the principles of the Druidical system.

Cæsar’s testimony, then, is decisive as to the use of letters amongst the Druids even before his acquaintance with them. And,

* See Mr. Astle’s “Treatise on the Radical Letters of the Pelasgians.” These he computes at 12, and the whole alphabet at 16.

† Bell. Gall. lib. vi. c. 14. Although Cæsar is here speaking of the Druids of Gaul, his observations apply with still greater force to this country, where, he says on another occasion, the Druidical system had its origin.

‡ Mr. Davies has well observed on this passage, that “Cæsar’s probable reasons for a marked prohibition of letters in a certain case forcibly argue, that our Druid was a master of their import: and this prohibition, being an institute or fundamental part of his law, evinces that such knowledge was not recent.” *Celt. Res.* p. 229.

when he called those letters Greek, there are reasons for believing, that he did so merely from having observed a certain resemblance between the two alphabets. For the researches of some Welsh antiquaries of the present day have succeeded in restoring to light the characters originally used by the Bards. And it is singular, that they comprise, with four or five exceptions, all the old Etruscan or Pelasgic letters, which were, probably, but little different from the Greek characters used in the time of Cæsar, a fact, which may serve at once to confirm his account and to vindicate the genuineness of these Bardic remains.

This curious Alphabet is called, in the language of Wales, *Coelbren y Beirdd*, words, which imply literally the Token-Stick of the Bards, a term derived from the ancient practice of cutting these letters across the surface of small pieces of wood, prepared for the purpose. A similar custom was common, in early times, to other countries; and an allusion appears to be made to it on one occasion by the Prophet Ezekiel*. The letters constituting this Alphabet, according to the delineation given of them in the Grammar prefixed to Mr. Owen Pughe's Dictionary, were in number forty-three. Of these sixteen were radical letters, and the remainder derivations from them, capable altogether of describing all the simple articulate sounds in the language. And for six of these letters there are no equivalent representatives in the modern orthography of the Welsh tongue †.

The most prominent feature of this original alphabet (for such it may justly be termed) is its simplicity, consisting, as it does, of mere lineal and angular characters. And this was, no doubt, owing to the custom of the Bards, already alluded to, of inscribing the letters upon their sticks or *coelbreni*, which made it difficult to represent curves or any other than the most simple marks. But, in their use of these they appear to have arrived at an extraordinary perfection. For, not only had they distinct symbols for

* See Ch. 27, v. 16 and 17. The sticks, used on this occasion by the Bards, were either square or triliteral: the former being adapted to general subjects and poetical stanzas of four lines, and the other to triads or triplets. These sticks were afterwards joined in a frame, which was called *Peithynon* or the Elucidator, an engraved specimen of which may be seen in Fry's *Pantographia*, p. 306., accompanied by explanatory remarks from the pen of Mr. W. O. Pughe.

† Besides the representation of the Bardic Tokens, given in Mr. Owen Pughe's *Grammar*, copies of them are also preserved in Fry's *Pantographia* and in the *Celtic Researches*. In the latter work may likewise be seen a curious comparative table of the Bardic, Etruscan, and other old letters.

those sounds, which are now conveyed to us by double and even treble letters, but their characters for the same letter varied according as it was used to denote a radical word or a mutation*. And from this it has proceeded, that our present orthography is inadequate, as above mentioned, to the representation, in some instances, of these ancient signs.

It would be impossible perhaps to determine at what precise period the Bardic letters grew into disuse. But it may rationally be conjectured, that an intercourse of more than four centuries with the Romans must have occasioned a considerable innovation in their general system. And therefore it is probable, that gradual changes were introduced into the original alphabet, until it finally settled in that form, which was in use on the arrival of the Saxons, and from which the old Saxon characters are considered by many authors of repute to have been borrowed †. The Welsh letters, as now established, were adopted for the most part on the invention of printing; but since that period variations have been made in the representation of two or three of them, which will be explained hereafter. It only remains on the present occasion to remark generally, that the modern Roman alphabet is totally inadequate to the delineation of all the letter-sounds in the Welsh language. In order to supply this defect two or three sounds are, in several cases, appropriated to the same character; and the aspirated and guttural enunciations, with some others, for which the *Coelbren y Beirdd* had independent signs, are now described by two and even three letters, and, in some instances, very imperfectly. This may be partially conceived even by those, who are unacquainted with the subject, when it is known, that no more than twenty of the Roman characters are now employed to distinguish the three and forty symbols used by the Bards, and of which the original articulations are still retained in the language. It is impossible that the old alphabet, so nice in its individual discriminations and so complete in its general arrangement, should meet with adequate justice in such a representation ‡.

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* The Mutations of the Initial Letters, which form so singular and so systematic a characteristic of the Welsh tongue, will be the subject of a future Essay.

† See CAMBRO-BRITON, No. 1, p. 15, and the 1st volume of the Cambrian Register, p. 365.

‡ The Editor has it in contemplation to furnish a *fac simile* of the Bardic Alphabet with one of the future Numbers, in time to be bound up with the present Volume.