

Divination I

Kirk S. Thomas

ADF Member no. 2296

Clergy Training Program; Generalist Study Program

Question #1: Name and briefly describe three methods of divination techniques appropriate for use within the context of an Indo-European culture. (Minimum 100 words each.)

OGHAM – The Ogham, based on an ancient writing system in ancient Ireland, involves the use of a letter set, with each letter or symbol representing a specific tree, bush or vine. These symbols can be drawn or etched into pieces of wood or stone, or may be found on card sets. Each tree has a specific meaning taken from Irish lore. Many of these meanings can be found in a 1917 book, "The Scholar's Primer".¹ Examples of these tree symbols are the Oak (Duir), meaning solid protection, doorway to the mysteries and strength;² Vine (Muir), meaning prophesy;³ and Apple (Quert), a choice of youth and beauty.⁴

RUNES – Runes are the alphabet of the early Germans and Norse peoples, with Odin being the reputed discoverer or inventor of the script. Before the conversion, these peoples saw runes as representing both learning and magic lore.⁵ Their magical use is expressed in the Edda, where Odin says, "Do you know how to engrave runic characters, how to explain them, how to prove their virtue? If we see a dead man, and hanging aloft upon a tree, I engrave runic characters so wonderful, that the man immediately descends and converses with me..."⁶ In fact, Odin's sacrifice of hanging on the World Tree was specifically done to learn the secret of the runes. In the poem *Havamal*, Odin is depicted as saying,

"They helped my neither
By meat nor drink.
I peered downward,
I took up the runes,
Screaming, I took them –
Then I fell back."⁷

Now runes are used for divination, by the casting of lots or chips inscribed with the runic letters, or spread out like a tarot spread, with each letter having a specific meaning.⁸

AUGURY – Augury is essentially the practice of taking casual occurrences in nature as indications of the nature of an upcoming event, whether favorable or unfavorable. In practice, this could be almost anything, from seeing an animal crossing your path to encountering a favorable or unfavorable person, to getting up on the wrong side of the bed!⁹

In Scotland, omens of these kinds were taken very seriously. To call after a person setting out on a journey was to doom the expedition. To hear a golden plover at night was an omen of death. Cock crowing before midnight meant that there would be upcoming news.¹⁰

Modern seers take these natural phenomena into account during ritual. At Sonoran Sunrise Grove, for their first public ritual, a great phenomenon occurred during the Opening of the Gates section. The sky had been overcast and threatening, but as the Gates opened, the sun slipped from behind the clouds, illuminating the Rincon Mountains in the east, and a huge rainbow appeared. Birds then flew circles clockwise around the henge. This was taken by all to be an incredibly good omen.

Question #2: Give three specific examples of divination within one Indo-European culture. (Minimum 100 words each)

In Ireland, there were a variety of divination techniques that could be used.

OGHAM – The ogham is a writing system that existed in ancient Ireland, involving lines cut into wood and stone, with cross hatchings indicating various sounds. In the story of Cu Cuhulainn striving to fend off the army of Medb and Ailill, he is said to have cut down an oak tree in their path where he writes an inscription in ogham script instructing the invading army that no one should pass the oak until a warrior should leap across it in a chariot. This led to the loss of thirty horses.¹¹ This script was not used, however, in the creation of documents until the Christian era, and seems to have been only carved on grave monuments at first, at least based on the archeological evidence. However, there is evidence of the drawing of lots in the early medieval period that were inscribed with some sort of writing, perhaps (probably?) ogham. In *Cain Adamnain*, a method of establishing the guilt of a person is stated as, "To divination and the lot they pay as much attention as anyone: the method of drawing lots is uniform. A branch is cut from a nut-bearing tree and divided into slips: these are distinguished by certain marks and spread casually and at random over white cloth..."¹² While there are a number of ogham sets, each symbol or letter of the ogham script represents not only a sound, but a specific 'tree' (which includes bushes and vines). The meaning of each letter can be based on the associations with each tree, which Robert Ellison, for example, has based on the *Scholars Primer* of 1917, by George Calder.¹³ There is also a card set that can be used now for divination using the ogham, called "The Celtic Tree Oracle", which may be used in similar ways to tarot.¹⁴ Others cut or draw the ogham letters on bits of wood and use them by drawing lots.

AUGURY – Augury, the system of finding meaning in natural occurrences, was very heavily used. The mind would need to be in a receptive state, and the flight of birds, particularly the wren, raven and crane would be significant. As the hare was the last animal to bolt from the burning stubble of a crop field, burned after harvest, it was seen to be a sort of 'phoenix' and observations were taken to see how and where the animal bolted. Indeed the Briganti Queen Boudicca released a hare, after rousing her troops before battle with the Romans, to discover the outcome of the campaign.¹⁵

IMBAS FOROSNAI – This is a technique often used by Bards to discover a poem, and in the Irish tale, *Tain Bo Cuailgne*, when Fedelm admits to knowing the technique, Medb asks Fedelm to "look" for her to discover the outcome of the Queen's undertaking.¹⁶ Cormac's *Glossary* describes the technique as a process of revelation brought on by mantic sleep.¹⁷ The process appears to have been one where the seer or bard would first chew a piece of the meat of a pig, dog or cat and place it behind the door. He would then call to the Gods and then chant over his palms so that his sleep would not be disturbed (it is unclear whether it is the Gods or the people watching over him that are supposed to keep him from turning over in his sleep). Then he would lie down in a dark place (presumably near the chewed meat), place his palms on each of his cheeks, and go into trance for periods possibly lasting as long as three days.¹⁸ When the first light of dawn would hit his face, he would suddenly have his inspiration.

Question #3: Discuss both the role of seers within at least one Indo-European culture and the relationship of seers to other members of the society, including in that discussion how seers or visionaries would have supported themselves or how they would have been supported by their people. (Minimum two paragraphs)

Snorri Sturluson, in the *Prose Edda*, wrote about a specific type of divination practiced through the good offices of the Vanir Goddess Freja. This technique was taught by her to the Aesir. Called *seidr*, this technique would be performed by a priestess called a *Volva*. This technique required the building of a lofty platform on which the *Volva* sat, the singing of many spells and the falling into a state of ecstasy that would enable her to have her visions. Sometimes she would be supported by a large company who would act as chorus and chanters. In dress and technique she would act like a shaman, and would take trance journeys to discover the answers to the questions asked.¹⁹

The *Volva* and her company would travel around the countryside visiting farms and settlements where great feasting would occur in connection with the divination ceremonies. One can only presume that the *Volva* would be fed and housed, which may have been her main support, at least during the traveling time. As the questions asked would be primarily about planting and harvest, and the futures of the young men and women, these questions would be of considerable interest to

the communities. It can probably be assumed that everyone was happy to have the *Volva* come to visit, and that hospitality would be gratefully extended.²⁰

Question #4: Identify and describe one Indo-European method of divination to which you find yourself attracted, including in the description the source culture and your source of information about the system that you have chosen. (Minimum 300 words)

The Indo-European divination system I'm attracted to is the Ogham. It first seems to have appeared in the 2nd or 3rd centuries c.e., about two centuries before the first Ogham stones appeared.²¹ This form of writing was in use in Ireland until at least the 7th century c.e. for stone inscriptions, and much later in manuscripts. There is even evidence of Ogham writing using the Pictish alphabet, but these have yet to be translated.²²

The sources I have been using for the Ogham are "The Druid's Alphabet" by Robert Ellison, "Celtic Tree Mysteries" by Steve Blamires and "The Celtic Tree Oracle" by Liz and Colin Murray.

The Ogham is an alphabetic type of writing made up of cross marks on a line, usually, and they don't resemble the letters of the other alphabets of the time, such as the Greek and Roman. Each symbol is called a "few" (pl. "fews"), and there are five of them in a group called an "aicme" (pl. "aicmes"). While there were only four aicmes originally, the introduction of Greek diphthongs required the addition of a fifth aicme called the *Forfedá*.²³

Each few is associated with a specific tree, bush or vine. The divinatory aspects of the system are based on mythological meanings of the trees, etc. For example, the 4th few of the 1st aicme, *saille* (which is Irish for the Osier Willow), might have meanings such as, "hue of the lifeless, i.e., hue of the dead, for denial, so that he is not living but dead", and "activity of bees, for its bloom and for its catkin", or "the color of a lifeless one, i.e., it has no color owing to the resemblance of its hue to a dead person", or "mysteries and water related subjects, feminine attributes."²⁴ These meanings come from old literature and even from the personal interpretations of modern writers, such as Mr. Ellison.

Question #5: Briefly describe the symbology and specific symbols of your chosen method of divination including the method of application of the system. (Minimum 100 words overall description plus at least one sentence or line per symbol)

Using "The Celtic Tree Oracle" by Liz and Colin Murray means divining by use of Ogham cards. Another method would be to put the Ogham letters on small sticks or wooden disks. Cards or disks would then be chosen and the meanings reviewed. The Murray's suggest some card spreads²⁵, but as long as the intent is clear, any arrangement would work. In ritual work, where taking the omen is required, I usually draw three cards, one each for the Ancestors, Nature Spirits and Deities. Or I could assign the three cards to the past, present and future. One thing, however, is that when you use the cards, there is both an upright and reversed meaning, something not normally found with the sticks or disks.

Below I shall list the names of the fews in Irish and English and a short meaning of the upright card that I got from the Murray's system. This is only the beginning of my studies of the Ogham – I suspect that I shall change or modify these meanings over time:

Beith (Birch) – A new start is likely.

Luis (Rowan) – This few means protection and gaining control of the senses.

Fearn (Alder) – Spiritual protection in disputes and oracular strength come with this few.

Saille (Willow) – The female side, which when combined with the male, brings spiritual balance.

Nuin (Ash) – This shows a universal comprehension of how all things, earthly and spiritual, are connected.

Huathé (Hawthorn) – This card indicates cleansing and chastity, a period of restraint or keeping to oneself.

Duir (Oak) – You will be secure and strong in your pursuits. Strength, and the ability to overcome and to survive.

Tinne (Holly) – Balance and directness, unity.

Coll (Hazel) – Intuition and the power of divination.

Quert (Apple) – The beauty of life and youthfulness, or the Otherworlds.

Muin (Vine) – Prophetic powers, binding.

Gort (Ivy) – The search for the self, soul searching – the spiral dance.

Ngetal (Reed) – You are aware of the great outside and can find order where others find chaos.

Direction.

Straif (Blackthorn) – There are strong, outside influences on your life that must be obeyed, forcing you down a harsh, unavoidable path.

Ruis (Elder) – The eternal turnings of life, death and rebirth, the cycle of life.

Ailim (Silver Fir) – There is a clear-sighted progress of strengthening and healing from lessons learned in life, both past and present.

Ohn (Furze) – This means a gathering together of sweetness and value, or a skill at collecting.

Ur (Heather) – This means contact with the world of spirit for inner healing.

Eadha (White Poplar) – This is the card of the fears and doubts of the impossible odds you must overcome, but also spiritual guidance.

Iofo (Yew) – Direct contact with the past, renewing spiritual strength – rebirth.

Koad (Grove) – Knowledge and comprehension – the sacred place where all is linked and becomes clear.

Oir (Spindle) – Completion and repayment without evasion.

Uilleand (Honeysuckle) – The ability to distinguish what is false and what has real worth on your spiritual journey.

Phagos (Beech) – Look to the past for guidance and to discover lost wisdom.

Mór (The Sea) – Hidden knowledge, available when the moon and sea are full.

Question #6 – Describe the results of three divination performed by you. These divinations may be text assisted. (Minimum 100 words each)

I do a full, personal ritual each week. In it I also do a divination. I usually alternate between the Murray Ogham deck and the Druid Animal Oracle. For the purposes of this question, though, I'll stick to divinations I did using the Murray deck. I pull three cards, one each representing the Ancestors, Nature/House Spirits and Deities. This is expanded from my journal.

27 April, 2005 –

Ancestors – MOR (The Sea) – Hidden knowledge

Nature Spirits – FEARN (Alder – reversed) – lack of protection in areas of dispute

Deities – AILIM (Silver Fir) – Clear-sighted progress

I have just returned from Trillium, and Desert Magic is soon to come. I'm feeling a bit overwhelmed at the moment. While I know just what I need to do to prepare for Desert Magic, and am doing it (the Gods are helping, apparently), I do feel that there are things I don't know. I'm also wondering if I'm going to get many votes as VAD, since no one else is running anymore. I need a mandate! The Omen is pretty clear that this is where I'm at right now. The Nature Spirits say that I'm a bit short on protection, so I guess I'll do an armoring.

1 June, 2005 –

Ancestors – DUIR (Oak) – Solid protection, strength, doorway to the mysteries.

Nature/House Spirits – IOHO (Yew) – Rebirth and everlasting

Deities – FEARN (Alder) – Oracular strength and protection

Woof! My first private ritual omen since becoming Vice Archdruid, and it's fabulous! Boy, I needed that. I have solid protection from my Ancestors, the Nature/House spirits point to a rebirth for me (new beginnings – how appropriate!) and the Gods give me strength and protection. Woof! This couldn't be better. So now I guess I have to live up to it! Hmm. The Ancestors say something

about a doorway to the mysteries. Maybe it's a kick in the pants about that ritual that I keep meaning to write, with the removal of Christian baptism and a death and rebirth experience. I've got to stop procrastinating on this one.

23 July, 2005 –

Ancestors – COLL (Hazel – reversed) – There is a blockage in my intuition.

Nature Spirits – SAILLE (Willow) – The feminine side needed for balance.

Deities – OIR (Spindle – reversed) – Happiness can only be found as a result of our best efforts.

Uh oh. I've been feeling a bit lost as far as my VAD duties go. The spirits seem to be saying that the only way I can release this creative blockage I'm feeling is by looking to my feminine side and working harder. Can this be? I realize now that I need to come up with a project, a goal as VAD. Just reacting to events isn't enough – I need to be proactive. The feminine side indicates my more touchy-feely talents rather than administration. I need to let go and *feel* what is needed instead of trying to be too logical.

Question #7: Discuss your view of the purpose of divination. (Minimum 100 words)

For millennia, men and women have wanted to know the future, to be armed against possible calamity as well as to know the most auspicious times to start new projects, thus ensuring success. The ancients needed to know if the season was well enough advanced to trust in planting their crops, they needed to know if a trading journey would be successful, and they wanted to know who would marry whom. We, today, are no different. Though we live in our protective cocoons of house and car, we still feel the insecurity of life. Divination gives us hope, it gives us purpose and it gives us strength. And it also gives us a glimpse into the divine connectedness of the universe.

Question #8: Discuss the relative importance and effect of divination within your personal spiritual practice. (Minimum 100 words)

Divination has become quite important to me in the last couple of years. One example I can give is when I was asked to run for the position of Vice Archdruid. My first reaction was, "No way!" But as I thought about it on a long drive to visit the Protogrove in New Mexico the next day, I became much less sure. I called the Chief of the Seers Guild and asked her opinion. She advised me to do a rite in the Stone Circle and cast the Omen with the intent of finding out what the Powers wanted me to do. She also suggested that I use a symbol set that I was unfamiliar with, so that I would be bound by what I read in the book about each drawn symbol. This was my introduction to the "The Celtic Tree Oracle." The ritual was sandwiched between two huge rainbows which arched over the Circle, and the Omen itself told me to get out of my own way, do as I was told, and get on with the grand circle of life. I took this to mean that I had to run (but not win necessarily). This particular Omen had a profound effect on my life.

I now pay much closer attention to the Omens I receive in my weekly rituals. Often they clarify thoughts that I have that need attention, or they point out some problem that may be forthcoming. Sometimes they just reflect some anxiety that I am going through. But taking the Omen has become quite important, and sometimes can be a bit scary, for me. The Gods can be harsh taskmasters.

Question #9: Discuss your view and understanding of the function of the Seer within ADF. (Minimum 100 words)

The Seer has both public and private functions in ADF. The private function can be the giving of readings and advice to members. But the Seer's primary function is found within group ritual. That is the function that I will be addressing.

The Seer may be the person who leads the People into trance early in ritual, creating a group mind and allowing the people to ground and center. There are two meanings to "grounding", and they are

to 1) connect with the earth so that we may connect with the earth energies, and 2) draining off excess spiritual energy into the ground. At this point in a ritual, the Seer would be grounding the people according to the first definition.²⁶

The other, possibly more important part of the ritual for the Seer, would be the taking of the Omen. In ADF Cosmology, we believe in the concept of reciprocity, that we can form relationships with the powers. We often say that, "A gift calls for a gift." In ritual, we make offerings to the powers and then ask for their blessings or wisdom in return. After all offerings have been made, and before the blessing is asked for, the Seer will perform a divination to discover the will of the Powers. Some Groves ask if the offerings have been accepted. If the answer is no, then more offerings are made and the divination taken again. If after three attempts the answer is still no, then the ritual is usually ended.²⁷ Other Groves, however, ask a different question. They feel that the Powers are always happy to receive offerings and always accept them, so the question becomes, "What wisdom or blessings do You offer to us," or something similar. The Omen is then taken. The divination usually is aimed at discovering wisdom for all those attending, and not just the Grove as a whole.

Near the end of the ritual, usually after the Gates have been closed, the Seer may then ground the people, draining off any unused energy.

Question #10: Discuss the importance and value of divination as it relates to ADF group worship. (Minimum 100 words)

Divination in group ritual is a part of the magical flow of the entire process. Since one of the main goals of group ritual is to allow all attending to commune with the Kindreds, the Powers of the universe, the Seer becomes extremely important. Once the sacred center of the worlds has been established, the goal of ritual becomes one of creating or maintaining our relationships with those Powers, usually through sacrifice and praise offerings. We pour our love, devotion and worship for the Powers into the universe that they might receive them, and then we want to discover what blessings, if any, the Powers offer us in return. The Seer is the one who discovers just what those blessings will be for us all.

The ancients used many kinds of augury to discover the will of the Gods, but they also had a well-defined lore, understood by all. As this is something we still lack, the use of a symbol set by the Seer provides an objective standard that all can see and understand. This only increases the value of the Omen as it can be obvious to all that the Seer is discovering the will of the Powers and not just making things up.²⁸

¹ George Calder, Editor, "Auraicept Na n-Eces – The Scholar's Primer", (Portland, OR: Four Courts Press, Ltd., 1995).

² Liz and Colin Murray, "The Celtic Tree Oracle", (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), pp. 36-37.

³ Liz and Colin Murray, pp. 44-45.

⁴ Liz and Colin Murray, pp. 42-43.

⁵ H.R. Ellis Davidson, "Gods and Myths of Northern Europe", (New York: Penguin Books, 1964), p. 141.

⁶ John Matthews, Editor, "The Celtic Seers' Source Book", from the section, 'On The Ogham Characters' by Edward Ledwick, (London: Blandford, 1999), p. 163.

⁷ Davidson, pp. 143 – 144.

⁸ Diana L. Paxon, "Taking Up the Runes", (Boston: Red Wheel / Weiser, 2005), pp. 1-3.

⁹ Matthews, from the section, 'Augury, Dream and Prophecy' by John Campbell, pp. 106-107.

¹⁰ Matthews, p. 108.

¹¹ Damian McManus, "A Guide to Ogam", (Maynooth, Co. Kildare, Ireland: An Sagart, 1991), p. 157.

¹² McManus, pp. 162-163.

¹³ Robert Lee (Skip) Ellison, "The Druid's Alphabet", (East Syracuse, NY: Earth Religions Press, 2003), p. 1, p. 6.

-
- ¹⁴ Liz and Colin Murray, pp. 21-23.
- ¹⁵ Liz and Colin Murray, p. 14.
- ¹⁶ Matthews, p. 53.
- ¹⁷ Matthews, p. 53.
- ¹⁸ Matthews, p. 47.
- ¹⁹ Davidson, pp. 117-118.
- ²⁰ Davidson, pp. 119-121.
- ²¹ Ellison, p.1.
- ²² Ellison, p. 2.
- ²³ Ellison, p. 7.
- ²⁴ Ellison, PP. 13-14.
- ²⁵ Murray, pp. 76-79.
- ²⁶ Isaac Bonewitz, "Step By Step Through a Druid Worship Ceremony", (August 3, 2005), <<http://www.adf.org/rituals/explanations/stepbystep.html>>
- ²⁷ Ibid.
- ²⁸ Ian Corrigan, "Magical Skills in Druidic Ritual", (August 3, 2005), <<http://www.adf.org/rituals/explanations/magskills.html>>