The Language of the Birds

"The reader (of ‘La Vraie Celtique et la Cromlech de Renne-les-Bains’) needs to speak the language of the birds, to understand the word games of the phonetic cabala, and to know how to read the stars. He must question the Tarot and the Zodiac to discover the secret of Arcadia, hidden by the Cromlech of Rennes-les-Bains."


The language of the birds is the tongue of Secret Wisdom, embracing Cabala, Astrology, Alchemy and Tarot. Its vocabulary is myth, and symbolism is its grammar.

Before there was written language, religion and law were transmitted orally, each narrator adding and amending as thought fit. The invention of writing offered the facility for keeping records and provided a means of secret communication, spelt out by letter or symbols, chipped on stone or pressed into clay. The contents remained the same, knowledge was still transcribed into ritual, poetry, magic and myth.

The Zohar states that God made the World through the Hebrew alphabet, which is a way of saying that letters served as shorthand symbols for the stages of creation. The three mother letters represented the three highest Sephiroth of the non-manifest triangle of the Cabalistic Tree of Life, Kether, Chokmah and Binah, to which were attributed the elements of air, fire and water. The seven double letters (double because each had both a hard and a soft sound) were allied to the seven Sephiroth of the lower triangles of manifestation - Chesed, Geburah, Tiphareth, and Hod, Netzach, Yesod - plus the pendant Sephira Malkuth. Their symbolism included the then known planets (Jupiter, Mars, Sun, Venus, Mercury, Moon, Earth). The twelve single letters corresponded to the Zodiac.

Eliphas Levi, the most prolific and original of the 19th century French occultists, was the first person to ally the Cabala to the Tarot. The twenty-two paths between the Sephiroth were allocated to the cards of the Major Arcana. The four suits of wands, cups, swords and discs reflected the four cabalistic worlds: Archetypal (intuition), Creative (intellect), Formative (learning), and Material (action). The numbered cards 1-10 of the Minor Arcana were equated with the symbolic meanings of the ten Sephiroth, and the four picture cards of each suit represented the equal-armed cross created by the junction of the two pillars supporting the Tree of Life, which were not good and evil, but male
and female, positive and negative, light and dark, action and reaction. At the centre was the holy Sephira of Tiphareth, the point of perfect balance, harmony and beauty; the mystic rose that held within its seed-pod generations of future blossoms.

Writing was a sacred art: alphabets were not just collections of letters, but calendars, calculators, compendiums of facets of nature and concepts of divinity. Initiates had to be familiar with one hundred and fifty Ogham alphabets. In order to preserve secrecy they would write in code, using more than one alphabet, and would sometimes further confuse matters by the transposition of letters, writing backwards, or in a foreign language. Robert Graves in his grammar of poetic myth, ache White Goddess, quotes an example of an encoded message: a poet asking another "When shall we meet again" might receive the answer "When the brown-plumaged rook perches on the fir below the fortress of Seolae, that would spell out CRAS - the Latin for "tomorrow".

Graves describes how the alphabetic calendar was divided into thirteen months of twenty-eight days, each represented by a consonant, with one day left over. The vowels were allocated to the five stations of the Great Goddess - birth, initiation, coronation/marriage; repose, death/rebirth.

Probably the best known of the Oghams is the Celtic Tree alphabet (Beth-Luis-Nion: birch, rowan, ash), but there were others - numbers, colours, jewels, stars, god-names. The Book of Ballymote lists a bird Ogham: According to the Fables of Caius Juliius Hyginus, Mercury invented the alphabet by watching cranes, because "cranes make letters as they fly". The secrets of the Beth-Lius-Nion alphabet were kept in a crane-skin bag.

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- **Winter Solstice**
  - A: Aithircleog
  - Lapwing

- **Spring Equinox**
  - O: Odorscrach
  - Cormorant

- **Summer Solstice**
  - U: Uiseog
  - Lark

- **Autumn Equinox**
  - E: Ela
  - Whistling swan

- **Winter Solstice**
  - I: Illait
  - Eagle
The extra day December 23rd was the day of sacrifice and regeneration, when the King of the Year was crowned and given eagle's wings. Its letter was probably I or II, lolar the eagle.

Birds were commonly used for divination, auguries being read from their patterns of flight or through the entrails of sacrificial victims, and/or were sacred to specific gods or goddesses: among them dove, swallow, robin, quail, raven, falcon, ibis, nightingale, goose. The Koran says that the lapwing was the repository of Solomon's mysteries, and the book of Leviticus lists it among the royal birds, which also include eagle, griffon, cuckoo, swan, kite, raven, heron and the pious pelican. The poetic meaning of the lapwing is "disguise the secret" because she hides her nest so successfully. Some say that Solomon invented the language of the birds, and the lapwing was the first to use it. The cuckoo perpetually calls "Where? Where? Where is my love?"

Zeus incarnated as swan and eagle, Horus was hawk-headed, and Thoth, the Egyptian god of magic, wears an ibis mask. In early Arthurian sagas, Gawain the Green Knight is called Hawk of May. The owl was the symbol of wisdom, sacred to the goddess Athene, Pasiphae and Bloduwedd, the bride of Gwydion, who was turned into an owl. As Circe, the witch, her bird is the falcon. She is also the long-legged crane, fishing the shallows for the divine child who floats on water in his ark of rushes. The Holy Spirit that descended at Pentecost, pictured in Christian iconology as a dove, bestowed on initiates the gift of tongues.

The dove was sacred to both male and female deities: to Hercules as shepherd and to Zeus as herdsman. The Great Goddess was worshipped with doves at Heiropolis, Crete and Cyprus, and in western Arcadia her stable holds a black dove. It was said that her black doves flew from Egyptian Thebes to Dodona in Epirus, where the temple was dedicated to Zeus and the moon-goddess Dione or Diana, and nested in the oracular oak trees of the sacred grove. The black-dove priestesses, chewing on hallucinogenic acorns, translated the oracles, so both literally and poetically the priestesses spoke the language of the birds.

According to Apollonius Rhodias, Jason's ship The Argo, was built of oak from the sacred oak grove at Dodona. The figurehead could speak, and guided the Argonauts on their quest for the Golden Fleece, so naturally she also spoke the language of the birds. Argo is a gloss on the word argot meaning slang or dialect, and jargon is the specialised speech peculiar to specific sects or subjects.

In the Oxford English Dictionary jargon is also listed as the name of a "smoky kind of zircon". There is a legend that when Lucifer fell, a jewel tumbled to earth from his crown and became the Holy Grail. Was this gem a "smoky zircon" or jargon, representing the language of angels and the birds, and that the quest, whether for Holy Grail or Golden Fleece, was in fact a search for the Secret Wisdom?

Alchemy has no regular vocabulary, but uses bird symbolism. Initiates say "Vulcan (the secret fire) induces the birds to fly", which indicates that sublimation is taking place. The pelican shows that distillation is in progress, and successful sublimation is symbolised by the eagle.
According to the Zohar, the earthly Paradise was called “The Bird's Nest”. The Messiah would reveal himself in Galilee. A star of all colours would appear in the East, the power of the Messiah would be made manifest, and the Messiah would enter his place, The Bird's Nest, where angels would offer him gifts. The Bird's Nest occupies the central Sephira, Tiphareth, on the branches of the Tree of Life, where the phoenix's egg will hatch.

http://www.innerlight.org.uk/journals/Vol24No4/langbird.htm