

Assignment 1 – HPCS 5017 – Welsh and Celtic Place Names.

Zen Redgrave - 1903175

An essay characterising the Celtic place names of modern England

Introduction

This essay will look at the types of Celtic names used within modern England and how they have carried over from earlier history when modern English as a language was not in use.

To begin with the essay will look at the Celtic names as noted in Roman literature before looking at specific examples of how the Celtic name is now presented and used in modern English.

For the purposes of this essay we will ignore the debates about what is ‘Celtic’, as put forward by academics such as Malcolm Chapman, John Collis, and Sims-Williams.

Background

Written records from Britain which document Celtic language and place names are scarce. However, we can see from records written by Pytheas, a Greek astronomer and mathematician, who conducted an exploratory voyage from Massalia circa 325BC¹ that knowledge of Britain existed. It is the case that there are only fragments of the original work which are extant, and that the records are passed on via the work of other classical writers such as Eratosthenes of Alexandria, who’s own work ‘Geography’ is extant only in fragments and is relayed itself via the works of Strabo.² It is also worth noting that although these fragments provide a date for Celtic within Britain, the fact that it is fragmentary in it’s nature means that we must rely on later works and transcriptions which can be subject to transcription errors and misinterpretation.

The importance of this lies in the traceability of a name to provide a chain of evidence as to the true nature and meaning of the name and to allow for the name to be determined as Celtic. It is the case that the further the lineage of a name can be traced back in time, the greater the certainty that can be derived as to whether or not the name is Celtic in origin or is derived from a different language. In this way we can mitigate for transcription and interpretational errors that may exist within documents. This becomes even more important when we consider that the origins of Celtic language can be traced back to common ancestor languages of Proto Indo-European and that Celtic language is on the same family tree branch as Italic (Latin) language, as demonstrated in 1861 by August Schleicher³ and subsequently revised by J.P Mallory in 2013.⁴ This commonality of the ancestor languages can provide some explanation for the

¹ Cameron McPhail, ‘Pytheas of Massalia’s Route of Travel’, *Pheonix – Classical Association of Canada*, 68.3/4, (2014), 247-257 (p.247).

² Ibid.

³ John Koch, ‘Celtic from the West meets Linguistics and Genetics’, in *Exploring Celtic Origins*, ed. by Barry Cunliffe and John Koch (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2021), pp 19-37 (p.22).

⁴ Ibid.

transcription errors. From the 14th century onwards, the documentation becomes more reliable, and Dr David Parsons has stated that if a particular name cannot be traced further back than the 14th century, then it may not be possible to actually prove that the name is Celtic.⁵

We need also to look at how place names could be classified to gain an understanding about their origins. If we look at the Antonine Itinerary, a Roman work for the emperor Antoninus, we can find lists of place names throughout Britain. Although there are what appear to be errors when overlaying the place names with current mapping, as noted by A.L.F.Rivet,⁶ it still provides a useful source of place names that existed at the time.

In her book 'Signposts to the Past', Margaret Gelling notes that of the 111 place names listed in the British section of the Antonine Itinerary of which there are 79 "for which more or less firm etymologies are available"⁷, whilst also noting that 12 of these have either Latin, or at least partially Latin names.⁸ It is interesting to note the small proportion of Latin names that were recorded within the Itinerary, as it would indicate that the Romans were using more localised British names for the stop-off points on their routes.

Gelling breaks these down into further classifications to show that of the 67 remaining names 34 are topographical in nature i.e. represent the physical features of the area; 18 have as part of their name a reference to a fort, a town or another building; 5 have a personal name and a suffix to form the overall name; 4 have their names formed from an activity; and 6 cannot be classified.⁹

Examples of these classifications are shown below.

Topographical

Bremetonnaci – Believed to be derived from *Bremtona* (meaning roaring river) with the additional suffix derived from *aco* meaning place of.¹⁰

Segeloci – Believed to mean *vigorous pool*, it may have referred to where a road crossed what we now know as the river Trent.¹¹

Uxacona – From *uxo* (meaning high) with suffixes added to form the whole name. This particular place is where Watling Street crests a hill.¹²

Conovio – Deriving from a word meaning *the reedy one* with an additional suffix, it refers to what we know today as the river Conway.¹³ We can see the origin word exist today in the Welsh word Cawn, although this also shows what is believed to be a spelling mistake within the Itinerary, changing 'can' to 'con' as pointed out by Gelling.¹⁴

⁵ David Parsons, *Welsh and Celtic Place names* [Lecture to B.A. Celtic studies Year 2] HPCS5017: *Welsh and Celtic Place names*. (University of Wales Trinity St David, 20th October 2021).

⁶ A. L. F. Rivet and K. Jackson, 'The British section of the Antonine Itinerary', *Britannia*, 1 (1970), 34-82.

⁷ Margaret Gelling, *Signposts to the Past*, (Chichester: Phillimore, 1988), p.38.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Margaret Gelling, *Signposts to the Past*, (Chichester: Phillimore, 1988), p.39.

¹¹ Margaret Gelling, *Signposts to the Past*, (Chichester: Phillimore, 1988), p.41-42.

¹² Margaret Gelling, *Signposts to the Past*, (Chichester: Phillimore, 1988), p.42.

¹³ Margaret Gelling, *Signposts to the Past*, (Chichester: Phillimore, 1988), p.43.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Buildings

Durocornovio – Derived from the tribal name *cornovii* with the prefix *Duro* meaning a walled town.¹⁵

Duroverno – As seen above we have *Duro* again but this time with the suffix *verno* (derived from *uerno*) to give the overall name of ‘walled town by the alder swamp.’¹⁶ Again, as with Conovio, we can see that the origin word has passed down into modern Welsh as Gwern. This also shows potential sound changes and spelling changes that can occur over time.

Personal names

Luguvalio – Using the personal name derived from *Luguualos* and the suffix *io*.¹⁷

Sulloniacis – Again we can see the suffix derived from *aco* meaning place of with the prefix of a personal name derived from *Sullonios*.¹⁸

Activity

Bovio – from *bou* meaning cow with the suffix *io* to give cow place.¹⁹

Gobannio – derived from *gobann* to mean a blacksmith and again followed with the suffix *io* to give a place of the blacksmith.²⁰ With this name we can see another sound and spelling change that has happened over time whereby *gobann* has become Gafenni, showing that the o & b have changed both sound and spelling to become a & f in modern Welsh to denote the river Gafenni and the town of Abergavenny in Monmouthshire.

What we can see from these examples is how the overall name can be broken down into common suffixes with a prefix that is in some way descriptive of either a geographical or topographical feature, or of a particular building, or an element of a river, or perhaps making reference to a specific person. What this appears to indicate is that the Itinerary was intended as a map to aide journey planning, by listing stopping places and the distances between them, whilst at the same time being sufficiently descriptive of the place that navigation may have become easier. These descriptions along with the distances between them may then have allowed travellers or troop commanders to know where they were and how long it may take to get to the next settlement.

However, what we can also see is that these specific names have not survived in the forms stated into modern usage, and that on occasions some of the names that have carried into the modern usage have experienced both sound and spelling changes. This however merely emphasises the need for traceability in written records to be able to be more confident in determining whether or not a specific name is Celtic in it’s origins or whether a different

¹⁵ Margaret Gelling, *Signposts to the Past*, (Chichester: Phillimore, 1988), p.46.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Margaret Gelling, *Signposts to the Past*, (Chichester: Phillimore, 1988), p.48.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Margaret Gelling, *Signposts to the Past*, (Chichester: Phillimore, 1988), p.49.

language has been used to rename a place or indeed provide the original name for a location or feature.

Word count: 1435

Bibliography

Gelling, Margaret, *Signposts to the Past*, (Chichester: Phillimore, 1988)

Koch, John, 'Celtic from the West meets Linguistics and Genetics', in *Exploring Celtic Origins*, ed. by Barry Cunliffe and John Koch (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2021), pp 19-37

McPhail, Cameron, 'Pytheas of Massalia's Route of Travel', *Pheonix – Classical Association of Canada*, 68.3/4, (2014), 247-257

Parsons, David, *Welsh and Celtic Place names* [Lecture to B.A. Celtic studies Year 2]
HPCS5017: Welsh and Celtic Place names. (University of Wales Trinity St David, 20th October 2021)

Rivet, A. L. F and Jackson, K, 'The British section of the Antonine Itinerary', *Britannia*, 1 (1970), 34-82