

Assignment One – Welsh and Celtic Place Names (HPCS6017) - Heidi Wyldewood (2110492)

An essay of 1500 words characterising the Celtic place-names known from modern England

In his *Geographica*, Ptolemy recorded many Celtic place names of Britain during the second century AD.¹ That, and the 'Antonine Itinerary', written during the Roman occupation, provide some of the earliest systematic documentation of toponyms for an England whose borders were not established until the early Middle Ages, when the spoken language of the population was also wholly transformed by the Anglo-Saxons.² Today however, it not just English that is mediated via its place names.³ The Romans, Vikings and Normans all imparted their influence too, but Celtic remains the earliest linguistic stratum to be revealed and understood from a minority of place names in England, although it is acknowledged that some undeciphered terms may be older still.⁴ These Celtic traces are mostly Brythonic, apart from a few Goidelic outliers, their evolution tracked through the likes of monastic or legal charters to modern day usage.⁵

York (Yorkshire) is one such place whose etymological history bears out the challenges presented in this detective process. The Celtic name *Eborakon* ('yew tree estate' or perhaps 'estate of a man called Eburos') was first recorded in its Latinised version *Eboracum*, which was reinterpreted as a combination of the former name with the English suffix *-wic*, *Eoforwīc* or *Eoforīc* (wild boar town), in Anglo-Saxon times due to their misunderstanding of the original meaning.⁶ Then later under Danish influence became *Jórvík*.⁷ This example's two possible meanings also demonstrate the main types of Celtic toponyms: geographical designations or descriptors and personal or tribal names denoting forms of ownership or boundaries, although few names present with components linked to habitation in England.⁸ A minority of place-names were also linked to deities, indicating local sacred practice: Colchester (Essex) formerly as *Camulondunum* (fortress of Camulos) and Bath (Somerset) as *Aquae Sulis* (waters of Sulis).⁹

¹ Alastair Strang, 'Explaining Ptolemy's Roman Britain', *Britannia*, 28 (1997), 1-30 (p. 1-3) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/526763>> [accessed 30th October 2023].

² Kenneth Jackson, 'On Some Romano-British Place-Names', *The Journal Of Roman Studies*, 38.1 and 2, (1948), 54-58 (pp. 54-58) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/298171>> [accessed 24th October 2023]. For the tenth century unification of 'England' see Marc Morris, *The Anglo-Saxons: A History Of The Beginnings Of England*, (UK: Penguin Random House, 2022), pp. 247-251.

³ O. J. Padel, 'Brittonic Place-Names In England', *Perceptions Of Place: Twenty-First-Century Interpretations Of English Place-Name Studies*, ed. by Jayne Carroll and David N. Parsons (Nottingham: English Place-Name Society, 2013), pp. 1-42 (p. 1).

⁴ A.D. Mills, *A Dictionary Of British Place Names*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) p. xv-xviii. For earliest understood linguistic stratum see Margaret Gelling, *Signposts To the Past: Place Names And The History of England*, pp. 19-20.

⁵ Mills, *A Dictionary Of British Place Names*, p. xv.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 518.

⁷ British Library Board, 'The Anglo-Saxon Origins Of The English Counties', *Medieval Manuscripts Blog*, 3 January 2019 <<https://blogs.bl.uk/digitisedmanuscripts/2019/01/the-anglo-saxon-origins-of-the-english-counties.html>> [accessed 28th October 2023].

⁸ Mills, *A Dictionary Of British Place Names*, p. xv. For lack of habitation components see Padel, 'Brittonic Place-Names In England', p. 16.

⁹ Andrea Bölcskei, 'Traces Of Ancient Celtic Religiosity In The Place Names Of The British Isles', *Proceedings Of The 11th Conference Of The Hungarian Society For The Study Of English*, ed. by Veronika Ruttkay and Bálint Gárdos, HUSSE, Budapest, 2014, pp. 103-112 (p.107).

The functional necessity of nomenclature for navigation is seen in the high representation of rivers, hills, woods, marshes, and rocky outcrops in early place-names.¹⁰ Owing to the longevity of rivers as recognisable and unchanging barriers or conduits, most of their names are Celtic in origin, such as the Thames, the Teme, the Tame, and the Tamar stemming from **tam-* (dark) or **tā-* (flow turbidly), and some early river name forms also indicate their deification as a feminine presence: Brent as *Brigantia*, the Eye as *Cuda*, and the Warfe as *Verbeia*.¹¹ Local names of larger waterways were those mostly likely to be adopted by newcomers and, even if a rapid erasure of the vernacular tongue followed, were stable over time.¹² Additionally, where there was more integration between newly dominant English speakers and local populations the more likely smaller rivers and streams were to retain their Brythonic names.¹³ This pattern is born out for Celtic place-names in England overall, with the density increasing to the west and north-west, and Cornwall is unique in its complete retention of Brythonic toponyms.¹⁴ Celtic hydronyms are found to be incorporated into nearby place names too; Warenford (Northumbria) and Wheelock (Cheshire) illustrate this.¹⁵ Water related names, such as **iska* (water, fish) in Axminster or Exeter, or **dubr-* (water) in Dawlish (Devon), Dewlish (Dorset) and Dover (Kent), are also common near rivers.¹⁶

Other topographical examples include Andover (Hampshire) from **onn* (ash tree) + **dubr-* (waters); Mable (Worcestershire) from **mamm* (breast-like hill) ; Malvern (Worcestershire) **mel* (bare) + **brinn* (hill); Morchard (Devon) from **mōr* (great or big) + **cēd* (wood or forest); the various Nymptons (Devon) from **nimet* (holy place or sacred grove); and Ross (Northumbria) from **ros* (moor or healthy upland).¹⁷

The main forms of Brythonic toponyms are *simplex*, containing a single element, like Penn (Buckinghamshire) from **penn* (hill or headland), or compound, containing a qualifier (noun or adjective) followed by a generic (noun) like the phrase name Penkridge (Staffordshire) from **penn* + **crug* (tumulus on a hill or headland).¹⁸ The switch to generic followed by qualifier is generally considered to be a later compound form, but this is not always the case, see the generic *duro-*

¹⁰ Gelling, *Signposts To the Past*, p. 90.

¹¹ Simeon Potter, 'Cheshire Place Names', *Transactions Of The Historic Society Of Cheshire And Lancashire Journal* 106 (1954) 1-22 (p.5) <<https://www.hslc.org.uk/journal/vol-106-1954/attachment/106-2-potter/>> [accessed 20th October 2023]. For *Tame* see Mills, *A Dictionary Of British Place Names*, p. 456. For *Brigantia* see Bölcskei, 'Traces Of Ancient Celtic Religiosity', p.104-105. For *Cuda* see Stephen Yeates 'River-Names, Celtic And Old English: Their Dual Medieval And Postmedieval Personalities', *Journal Of The English Place-Name Society* 38 (2006) 63-81 (p. 67). For *Verbeia* see Andrew Charles Breeze, 'The River Wharfe And Verbeia, Celtic Goddess', *Revue Tradition Et Langues* 17.1 (2018), 8-16 (pp. 11-13).

¹² David N. Parsons, 'Pre-English River-Names And British Survival In Shropshire', *Nomina* 36, pp. 107-123 (p. 107-108). For river name stability see Bethany Fox, 'The P-Celtic Place-Names Of North-East England And South-East Scotland', *The Heroic Age: A Journal of Early Medieval Northwestern Europe*, 10 (2007) <<https://jemne.org/issues/10/toc.html>> [accessed 30th October 2023].

¹³ Parsons, 'Pre-English River-Names And British Survival In Shropshire', p. 107-108.

¹⁴ Gelling, *Signposts To The Past*, p 90. For Cornwall see Joanne Pye, *Cornish Place-Names In The Landscape*, (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Exeter, 2018), pp. 24-25.

¹⁵ Mills, *A Dictionary Of British Place Names*, pp.483 and 494. For a discussion of Wheelock see Potter, 'Cheshire Place Names', p.5.

¹⁶ Mills, *A Dictionary Of British Place Names*, pp. 149-159.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 13, 316, 334, 351 and 395.

¹⁸ Pye, *Cornish Place-Names In The Landscape*, p.39. For Penn and Penkridge see Mills, *A Dictionary Of British Place Names*, p. 365.

(walled town or fort) presenting first in early names, therefore is not a reliable dating method.¹⁹ Other compounds include personal names along with a suffix which are rarer in England, such as Uriconio (town of Virico) now Wroxeter (Shropshire) and Sulloniaciis (estate of Sullonios); and hybrids which, like Brewood (Staffordshire) from Celtic **brez* (hill) + Old English *wudu* (wood); Branxton (Northumbria) from Celtic *Branoc* (personal name Branoc) + Old English *tûn* (farmstead); and Mansfield (Nottinghamshire) from Celtic **mamm* (breast-like hill) + Old English *feld* (field), are never devised initially as such, but comprise earlier Celtic names and later additions of non-Celtic elements.²⁰ Tautological hybrids arise from a lack of understating the earlier place-name: Chetwode from Celtic **cēd* (wood) + Old English *wudu* (wood) and Breedon on the Hill from Celtic **brez-* (hill) + Old English *dun* (hill) + Modern English hill.²¹

Not all the Brythonic elements are pre-Roman either, some are found to have emerged later in the chronology near the Welsh or Cornish borders, as demonstrated in Devon by the ecclesiastical **lann-* (church enclosure) in Landkey and Landcross and, unusually, a habitation term **tref-* (farm) in Trellick, Trebick and Treable.²² It is also worth noting that although Latin had little impact on place-names beyond centralised towns or officialdom, because it remained largely a language of administration or education during the Roman occupation and again later in the Middle Ages, some loanwords made their way into what became Welsh, and are therefore found in some place-names in England. Tarvin (Cheshire), for example, appears to be rooted in a Brythonic word for boundary, found in modern Welsh as *terfyn*, but there is a question mark over whether that was originally a borrowing from the Latin *terminus*.²³ A few Goidelic toponyms created by tenth century Viking activity, such as Liscard and Arrowe, are found in the Wirral Peninsula.²⁴

In summary then, place names in England that have in the past evidenced, or currently bear, Celtic elements are predominantly of topographical origin, including a high proportion of river associated names, rather than personal names or habitations. Nearly all are Brythonic, not Goidelic. The density of occurrence is overall greater in the west and north and many Celtic traces are partially obscured by Latinisation or Anglicisation, or the elements are found today as part of hybridised compounds.

¹⁹ Fox, 'The P-Celtic Place-Names Of North-East England And South-East Scotland'. For *duro-* see A. L. F. Rivet, 'Celtic Names And Roman Places', *Britannia* 10 (1980) pp. 1-19, (pp. 16-17) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/525666>> [accessed 1st November 2023].

²⁰ Gelling, *Signposts To The Past*, p. 19. For hybrids see Fox, 'The P-Celtic Place-Names Of North-East England And South-East Scotland'. For Brewood see Mills, *A Dictionary Of British Place Names*, p. 75.

²¹ Mills, *A Dictionary Of British Place Names*, pp. 74 and 111.

²² Richard Coates and Andrew Breeze, *Celtic Voices English Places: Studies Of The Celtic Impact On Place-Names In England*, (Stamford: Shaun Tyas, 2000), p. 375.

²³ Mills, *A Dictionary Of British Place Names*, p. 452. For Latin *terminus* see University of Wales, *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru / A Dictionary Of The Welsh Language* (2023) <<https://welsh-dictionary.ac.uk/gpc/gpc.html?terfyn>> [accessed 1st November 2023].

²⁴ Potter, 'Cheshire Place Names', pp. 2-3.

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