

Welsh and Celtic Place-Names HPCS5017: Assessment 1 (40%)

Write an essay characterising the Celtic place-names known from ONE of the following areas: (i) the European Continent, (ii) modern England, (iii) modern Scotland.

Your essay should be of no more than 1,500 words. You should consider some or all of the following topics: types of name, geographical distribution of Celtic names, the nature of the sources, the relationship of Celtic names to names in other languages. Comparisons or contrasts with the other areas you have studied will be welcome but should be kept very brief: the focus should remain on the one chosen region.

The objective of this essay is to characterise the Celtic place-names of modern England. To be able to do so, it is necessary to look at the historical and linguistic aspects that have shaped place-names in modern England. The earliest record of place-names in England was made by Pytheas of Massalia, an ancient Greek scholar and polymath born circa 350 BCE.¹ He is credited with discovering Britain and its inhabitants, the Celts, during a sea voyage that he undertook to find the source of valuable materials, such as tin etc. The documented record of his voyage was lost but later scholars were able to use the co-ordinates that survived to create a map of an island that they called Britannia. Pytheas identified 3 place-names viz. Orkas (the Orkney Islands) at the very north, Berlerion (now known as Lands End) in the south west and Kantion (Kent) in the south east, all of which are accepted by modern scholars as being Celtic and as evidence that a Celtic language was spoken in Britain at the time of Pytheas' voyage.

However, it is highly probable that one or more languages existed in Britain prior to that spoken by the Celts, but this cannot be proven, and that the place-names recorded by Pytheas, as many others in England, could predate the Celts and have their origins in an even earlier language.

Languages are never static and undergo many changes over time. These changes are often reflected in place-names which then form a record of that linguistic change. Language shift can occur for several reasons including economic, political and cultural. After Pytheas' voyage, Britain was subject to invasion and subjugation by many outsiders over an extended period of time. Each of these invaders affected some form of change in the existing Celtic place-names. The first notable influence was the Romans who, under the Emperor Claudius, invaded Britain in 43 CE taking control of most of what is now England, Wales and southern Scotland. They brought with them the Latin language and an influence that lasted until they left in 410 CE. The Romans were meticulous in their record keeping and administration, which left a valuable insight into place-names during their occupation. By the year 200 CE,

¹ <https://www.worldhistory.org/article/1078/on-the-ocean-the-famous-voyage-of-pytheas/>

the geographer Ptolemy² had recorded hundreds of placenames and tribal names which, along with the coordinates he collected, allowed for a detailed map of Britain to be constructed. As a rule, the Romans did not alter the existing Celtic place-names although some may appear with a Latin ending in Roman records. Even when the Romans created a new place-name it would usually be Celtic in type. For example, Branodunum, which was a Roman fort in Norfolk. The '*Bran*' part comes from the Celtic word for crow, and '*dunum*' which appears in Vulgar Latin borrowed for the Welsh *dinas* meaning 'fortress; town; city'. Both elements also appear often in mainland Europe, e.g. Braine (Aisne, France) is derived from *Bran*; Thun (Berne, Switzerland) is derived from *Dunem*.³ Branodunum was later renamed to Brancaster by the Anglo-Saxons.

After the departure of the Romans in the 5th century CE, the next major influence to arrive on British shores were the Anglo-Saxons. They were a Germanic people from several tribes located from modern Scandinavia to what is now the Netherlands. They brought with them their own language, which, from the period starting with the invasion up to the Norman Conquest, is known as Old English. The feast of information that the Romans left regarding place-names was followed by a famine during the early Anglo-Saxon period with very little documents either being created or surviving. Later, around 700 CE, Anglo-Saxons documents showed that a significant number of place-names had been altered or renamed to Old English. Many of these Anglo-Saxon names still exist as modern names in England. What happened to the indigenous Britons when the Anglo-Saxons arrived is not clear. Of the original indigenous Celtic people, some may have been assimilated into the new culture and language. Others may have been driven out, travelling west across Britain to Wales and Cornwall where the Celtic language is still alive in Wales and only died out in Cornwall two hundred years ago. It is possible that there was no westerly migration and the Celtic place-names in that area exist simply because they belonged to the original indigenous Celtic population of that area.

In the same way that the Romans and Anglo-Saxons came to Britain and left their legacy in place-names, so too did the Vikings bring Old Norse, and the Normans bring French which also influenced place-names in Britain. All the above-mentioned invaders brought with them western European languages that were related to each other at some point in history. Later, as shown by the diagrams below, these languages were to develop and split into distinctive new languages but even up to the 5th/6th centuries Brittonic and Goidelic Celtic languages

² Rivet, A. L. F. (Albert Lionel Frederick), and Colin Smith, *The Place-Names of Roman Britain* (Book Club Associates, 1981) p.103

³ Rivet, A. L. F. (Albert Lionel Frederick), and Colin Smith, *The Place-Names of Roman Britain* (Book Club Associates, 1981) p.274

were similar to each other. This gives rise to an anomaly in which some place-names appear to be Celtic (which in fact they are) but they were imported during the Viking period from Irish Celtic and are therefore Goidelic in origin and would not have existed during the time of the Roman invasion. One example of this is Liscard in Cheshire, meaning court on the rock and coming from the Celtic 'lis' (court) + 'carreg' (rock).

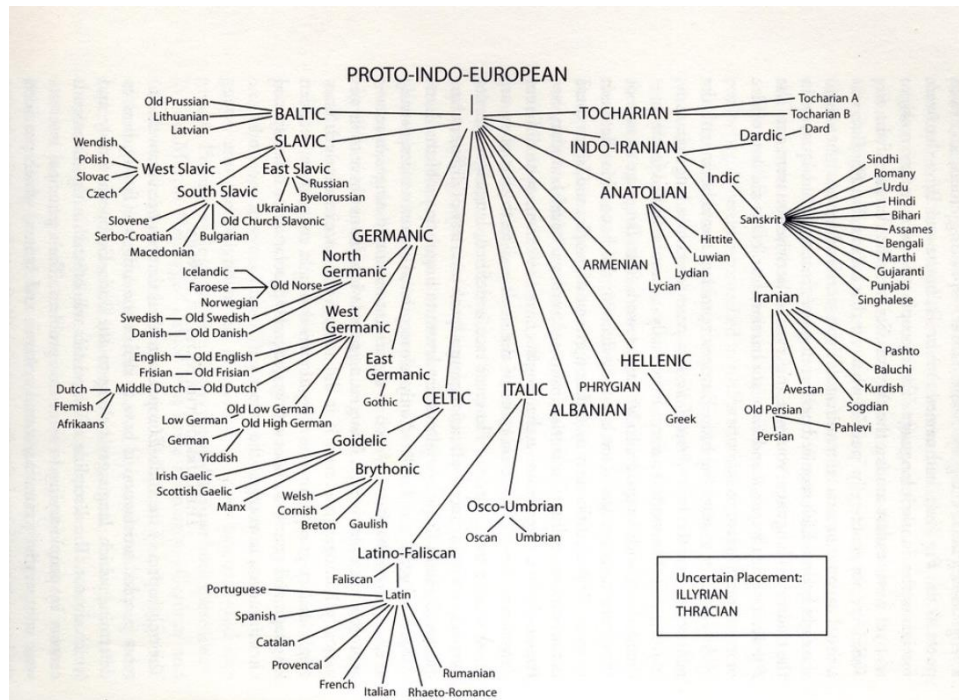


Diagram showing the Proto-Indo-European language tree

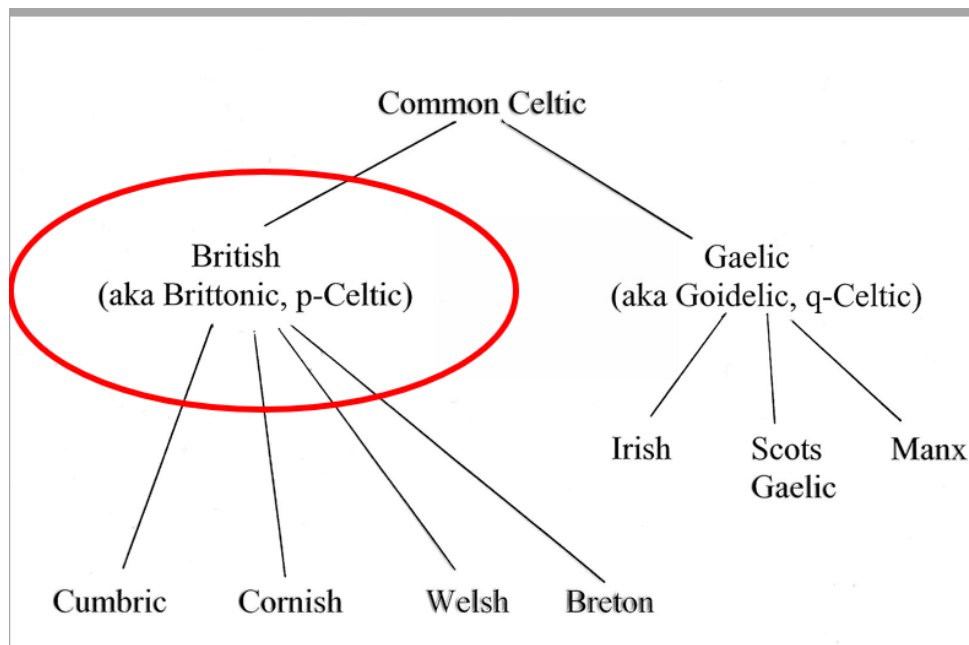


Diagram showing the evolution of Common Celtic into various distinctive languages. Source: Moodle Welsh and Celtic Place-Names HPCS5017

River names are also a good source of information and form part of place-name studies. Throughout Britain, the majority of rivers have names which are Celtic or Celtic in origin with later changes applied by subsequent dominant languages. This may be because they are potentially less politically important than the names of settlements or fortifications and so avoided being given completely new names. Rivers have provided key transport links for a very long time and may have bypassed change as they are intrinsic to the local communities and passed on from one culture to another. Smaller rivers have less changes than larger ones, perhaps because they were not so important to the functioning of the local communities. What is noteworthy is the fact that the more westerly rivers have undergone less name change, supporting the idea that invaders from the east pushed the indigenous Celtic speaking to the western areas of Britain. This is well shown in Kenneth Jackson's map from the 1950's shown below.



Jackson divided his map into 4 areas:

- Area 1 – Is a large area in the east of England. Here the surviving Celtic names are generally only the larger water courses e.g. The Humber
- Area 2 – This is the midlands and southern half of England where pre-English names appear in more of the tributaries
- Area 3 - Is the southwest of England, the counties that have a border with Wales and the northwest of England where the smaller streams retained their Celtic names
- Area 4 – Is covers both Wales and Cornwall where most rivers and streams have Celtic names

There are two further categories of Celtic names which have survived in Modern England. The first of these is Roman settlements (like Brancaster – see above) that survived into Anglo-Saxon and are used in Modern England. The other category is that of natural features such as woods, rivers and hills which are outside of the Roman towns. Very few natural names survive that relate to natural names. There are two possible reasons for this, firstly it may be that the Anglo-Saxons did not use the British settlements after they invade. Secondly, it might be due to the fact that the Britons named their settlements after natural features.

An interesting side-effect that comes from the layering of one language upon another is the tautologies that appear in place-names. This is a good indication that the later languages did not understand their predecessors. Some examples of this are the river *Avon* which cognates with the Welsh for river, *Afon*; The place-name *Chetwood* in Buckinghamshire, comes from the Welsh word for wood *coed* followed by the English word for wood *wode* added. Effectively this reads as ‘Wood-wood’

In conclusion, Celtic place-names in modern England can be characterised as being completely unchanged; modified by the additional of Roman endings being added to the original Celtic word; being pseudo-Celtic, these are the new place-names created by the Romans based on Celtic words and forms of place-names; Celtic names that have been modified by such endings a ‘castor’, which is the Old English word for town and finally the ‘faux’ Celtic names that are not indigenous to Britain but were brought to England during the Viking era and are based on the Irish Celtic (Goidelic) language. Where and the frequency in which Celtic place-names survive is related to geography, they are seen more frequently in the eastern parts of England which reflects the impact that layers of invasion and subjugation in eastern England had on the Celtic language. Finally, they remain very visible in the names of rivers and waterways but even here there is a fading out of frequency from west to east England. Celtic place-names in modern England still survive in surprisingly large numbers, they may not always be obvious due to the changes imposed on them by language shift but they remain.

Bibliography

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