

A Characterisation of the Celtic Place-names of Modern England

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This essay will aim to provide a characterisation of the Celtic place-names known from modern day England, creating a brief but relevant and effective overview of the main factors involved when examining Celtic place-names.

When considering Celtic place-names in England, it is crucial to understand the historical background of the locations that they occur. Whilst the existence of a Pre-Celtic language is not in doubt, for it must have had a predecessor. Debate is ongoing amongst scholars as to where exactly this fits on the Indo-European language tree, with the majority tending towards a Proto-Celtic theory.¹ Indeed, if we were able to delve further into the past the language may not even have been Indo-European at all.² This makes things extremely difficult for the place-name analyst to track names further back in time than the Roman period as there is simply insufficient evidence to do so.

Due to this uncertainty and lack of material surrounding Pre-Roman Celtic language combined with a surge of official documentation that went together with Roman rule. Classical sources in Latin or Greek are utilised for the study of Celtic place-names in England and provide our oldest attestable names. Our earliest knowledge comes from Pytheas of Marseilles who, astonishingly, seems to have circumnavigated the British Isles around 320 BC.³ Indirectly from Pytheas work we learn the name *Pritani* to describe the inhabitants of the island of *Albion*, *Pritani* being cognate with the Welsh word for Britain, *Prydain*. It is the Roman post-conquest sources however that give us the richest data on the Celtic place-names of England from this time.

As a general rule the Romans assumed the place-names of the localities they had conquered, England is no exception, as can be ascertained from the sources. Giving credence to a Gallo-Brittonic⁴ theory, similar names to those that were extant in Gaul and elsewhere on the continent can be seen in England from Roman records. These have evidently been adopted and carried forward into Romano-British society from the Celtic speaking native population. Within these records we find recurring names such as *Mediolanum* which appears over forty times across Europe, famously preserved in the name of the city Milan.⁵ Certainly not as famous is its identification in England of Whitchurch, Shropshire.⁶ This word is created from two Celtic words conjoined to make a compound word, a common way in which Celtic place-names appear to be coined. In this case, *medio*, meaning mid⁷ and *lanum* 'plain, level ground' to give a name meaning middle of the plain.⁸ A curiosity of Celtic place-names in England is

¹S.Zimmer 'The Celtic Languages' in *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia*, ed. By John T. Koch (Santa Barbara, Denver and Oxford: ABC-CLIO 2006) p371.

² M.Gelling 'Signposts to the Past' (Chichester: Phillimore, 1988) p.19.

³ B.Cunliffe, 'The Extraordinary Voyage of Pytheas the Greek' (London: Penguin Press 2001) p.vii..

⁴ J.T.Koch, 'Gallo-Brittonic' in *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia*, ed. By John T. Koch (Santa Barbara, Denver and Oxford: ABC-CLIO 2006)pp791-792.

⁵ A.L.F Rivet And C. Smith 'The Place-Names of Roman Britain' (London: Book Club Associates 1979) p415.

⁶ Ibid p.416.

⁷ Ibid, p.415.

⁸ Ibid p.416.

the tendency for the qualifying element of the name to be in the first position in disparity with modern Welsh, explained in Padel's quote below:

Names composed of two elements are usually true compounds, having the qualifying element in first position as in the Germanic languages, for example Malvern 'bare-hill' (Wo), Candover 'fair-waters' (Ha), Lich(field) 'grey-wood' (St). These compounds stand in contrast with the name-phrases which provide the overwhelming majority of place-names in all the Neo-Celtic regions (Wales, Cornwall, Brittany, Ireland, much of Scotland, and the Isle of Man), and which have the generic element in first position, and the qualifying one second.⁹

This is an archaic change, thought to have happened around the 5th century in the Celtic languages and can aid with the dating of words.¹⁰

The overwhelming majority of Celtic place-names in England are concerned with topography as is the case in the example, but there are also instances of folk-names and habitative-names.¹¹ Deities are also reflected, again revealing parallels to the continent. *Lugudunum*, known to us today as Lyon was a recorded name in Northern England and obviously has similarities with *Luguvalium*, modern Carlisle. Both names contain the element 'lug' being 'associated with the mouse-god Lucotios.'¹²

Even in cases where the Romans founded a particular community, they seldom coined Latin names, there are however exceptions to the rule. A handful of settlements in England have Latin or partially Latin names. Some examples of these are 'Cataractoni' for modern day Caterick, and 'Caesaromago' for Moulsham. This example is particularly interesting as it includes the Brittonic second element of 'magos', plain or field with the Roman name of Caesar to make Caesars field.¹³

The Roman names attested tend not to provide a full reflection of the place-names of Britain at that time. They mainly offer administrative records or routes that were of particular importance to the Roman infrastructure and system of government. As such, they contain names of larger settlements or places of strategic importance. These are useful as they can be adapted into maps, as is the case with Ptolemy's itinerary,¹⁴ to create a helpful and credible modern source.

On the other hand, the resulting lack of local geographical and habitative names, that would undoubtedly have been in use, rarely appear to us via Roman sources unless they are major well-known landmarks. Farms, streams, hills and features on a local scale have a tendency to be absent.¹⁵

Surviving Celtic names in England today can show the influence of centuries of language change, whether that be Latin, English, Norse or French. Population shifts and cultural

⁹ O. Padel 'Brittonic Place-Names in England', in *Perceptions of Place* ed. BY J. Carroll and D.N. Parsons, (Nottingham, 2013) p.12.

¹⁰ Ibid p.12.

¹¹ A.D.Mills, 'Oxford Dictionary Of British Place Names' (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1991) p.xix.

¹² Rivet, 'Place Names Of Roman Britain' p.402.

¹³ Gelling, 'Signposts To The Past' p.32.

¹⁴ Rivet, 'Place names of Roman Britain' p.107.

¹⁵ Padel, 'Brittonic Place-Names In England' p.9.

transformation also leave their mark. This outside influence further aids to alter the composition of names from their original forms. In addition to the compound words discussed above there are also mixed compounds such as 'pendle hill' Welsh 'pen' and English 'hill' and 'breedon' Welsh 'bre' and English 'dun', both having the same meaning.¹⁶ This demonstrates that by the time that the English word was added the original Celtic element was no longer intelligible. This is not to say that this was always the case as the Celtic part being present at all points to a time of mutual intelligibility.

Single word place-names are fairly common in the Celtic place names of England,¹⁷ although as Padel points out another peculiarity is the noted absence of names containing the suffix 'āco-, Welsh -og, Cornish -ek'¹⁸ usually meaning 'growing with' or 'abounding in'.¹⁹ Again exceptions apply, an example being Eboracum, modern York. 'Eburo' was yew²⁰ so an interpretation of 'place abounding in yews' would seem to fit, although it could also relate to a personal name as the 'āco' suffix was 'used in Gaul to denote property' so could alternatively yield 'estate of Eburos.'²¹

What cannot be doubted is the Saxons eventual settlement of most of what is now modern-day England with a gradual, progressive take over in an East to West orientation. This is backed up by the place-name evidence, with original Celtic place-names having their lowest distribution in the East of England.²² The correlation is clear to see in Kenneth Jackson's much cited river map²³ which gives the impression of four zones, with the prevalence of Celtic place-names decreasing Westwardly. An interesting point noted by Gelling is the tendency of Celtic place-names where they do occur in England to form groups or clusters,²⁴ a possible indication of Celtic language survival within isolated pockets.

Further West, a greater number of minor topographical elements carry Celtic names which is indicative of the language surviving for longer periods in these places. Border counties such as Shropshire where Welsh was spoken as recently as medieval times display this, along with Cumbria's ability to sustain its own language well into the Middle Ages.

There is a definitive reduction in the amount of Celtic place-names the further East and South in England one travels. This is the result of the historical Westward incursion of the Anglo Saxons and displacement or indeed, destruction of the pre-existing Celtic settlements. While the number of instances where Celtic place-names occur increases to the West, especially in the border counties, it must be remembered that even in these locations they constitute a comparatively small number of today's place-names, except for certain areas where Welsh was spoken until relatively modern times.²⁵

¹⁶ Gelling, *'Signposts To The Past'* p.92.

¹⁷ Padel, *'Brittonic Place-Names in England'* p.14.

¹⁸ Ibid p.14.

¹⁹ Ibid p.14.

²⁰ Rivet, *Place Names Of Roman Britain* p.356.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Padel *'Brittonic Place-Names In England'* p.10.

²³ Gelling, *'Signposts To the Past'* p.89.

²⁴ Gelling, *'Signposts To The Past'* p.90.

²⁵ Padel, *'Brittonic Place-Names In England'* p.11.

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