

UWTSD An introduction to the Celtic Languages, module ref HPS 4002

Assignment 1 : *Write a brief history of one of the Celtic languages including information about its closest relatives, where we find evidence for the language, the writing systems used, the periods at which it is attested, and whether it survives (or has been successfully revived)*

Assignment date: 25 November 2021

Analysis of the assignment reveals five related areas of interest to which, in this particular case, a response might be a discussion of historical migratory references. The solution which is explored is movement of societies out of Ireland, across the Irish Sea, from predominantly what is now Ulster to the the western Isles of Scotland and the west coastal areas, but also to Isle of Man. A short description of evidence for Irish script in west Wales areas is also called for. Some reference to the legacy of Irish saints in a wider Continental setting is included on the basis of a wider pan-European perspective.

To this end, an attempt will be made to draw some comparisons of Gaelic, or more appropriately 'Irish', to Scots Gaelic and Manx 'Gaelg'. A very brief survey of the Welsh connections, as currently understood by way of archaic ogham script, will also be referred to. To omit this would possibly be overlooking an important facet of the history of west Wales, but also the extent of Irish influence in the period of decline of the Western Roman Empire. Due to the very considerable scope of the assignment, its breadth of potential subject matter for review, a focus on earlier forms rather than a complete history will be the objective.

The genesis of Gaelic, lies, apparently, on the Continent, along with other descendants of an Indo-European prototypical language or language group, as one of the hypothesized linguistic developments. In this case 'Celtic', father to all of the British variations. A clear account of this is laid out in Janet Davies' work, *A History of Welsh*, dealing with origins for Brittonic, a major language competitor to Irish. The case is made for language evolution and diffusion into the British Isles on a westerly trajectory in the centuries before conquest of Britain in the first century AD, i.e. the later Iron Age. [1] An alternative theory might follow the argument that, as Irish and Celtiberian descendants of Celtic are older and less 'innovative' languages, then an alternative route might be considered as an Atlantic seaboard direction from the Iberian peninsula.[2] However, by the time of later Roman occupation of Britain, or shortly after withdrawal, Irish was, it seems, beginning to make inroads eastwards at much the same time as Anglo-Saxon dialects were infiltrating from the northern Germanic areas into what is now east-Anglia and the south east.

Firstly a question: if Scots Gaelic is a kind of implantation from the north-east coast of northern Ireland, what may have been spoken in that area before any assumed Irish colonisation? The major contender would appear to be a British dialect possibly related to the Brithonic underlying a Welsh manuscript such as *Y Gododin*, surviving in early Middle Welsh but possibly drawing on Old Welsh sources, but originating in what is now the Scottish lowlands, possibly in the Edinburgh area or nearby location. [3] Otherwise we are left with a Pictish dialect option, which was submerged in later centuries when the Goedelic kingdom of 'DalRiada' expanded its influence eastwards in the progress towards a

recognisable entity of a unified Scotland. In any case, following similar takeovers of territory in the century following the exit of Britain from the Western Roman Empire, the supplementation of language on the western side of Scotland was apparently well established by the 6th century by reference to the activity of the Irish Saint Columba and the establishment of the religious settlement on the island of Iona after the granting of land to the cleric by the 'Dal', the linguistic and territorial extension of north-east Ireland. The current 'Dail Eireann' of the Republic of Ireland is an obvious recent manifestation of this unifying progress.

Seventh and eighth century Latin accounts of Columba's removal to Dal Riada and detailed activity there as written by his successor Adomnan and also referred to by Saint Bede are written in the clerical *lingua franca* of the period. But another source relating to Columba's life and death comes in the form of what we could expect in terms of spoken Celtic language of the generations following that time : the panegyrist Dallan Forgaill's *Amra Choluim Chilli*, a celebration of the saint, his good works and deep regret of his death. [4] However, even in the hands of an experienced historical linguist the *Amra* might be a complex assignment in terms of presentation into a form comprehensible to the twenty-first century mind. However, a sample of the text follows, and then an admittedly ambitious interpretation and strategy.

At one stage in Forgaill's elegy, he uses what appears as a musical metaphor to describe the passing of Columba and the effect on society: 'Is crot cen cheis'... like a crot (crwth, chrotta) without application / performance. In other words, a silent crwth. [4] As a matter of fact, undertaking an attempt at syntactic or semantic explanation of a passage such as this might be further facilitated by reference to comparison with an alternative manuscript source dealing with the same sentiment. Fortunately we can attempt this by reference to the a similar passage where the idea is elaborated on and expanded into the meaning or explanation 'Ceis ainm do cruit bic i comaitect cruite more hi comrinm'... ceis, a name [expression] for a small crwth accompanying [complementing] a large crwth together sounding [sounding together presumably harmoniously]. [5]

This attempt exposes the inherent difficulty for the student in coming to terms with sources of this age from a stance of English or Welsh contemporary educational background. Differences in spelling of identical nouns might suggest various stages in language development. But a detailed description of this is beyond the level of comprehension of this author at this point of time. Nevertheless, utilizing the example above, It is possible to theorize and detect some commonality between languages perhaps dating from a kind of mother-tongue hypothesis as for example aligning with the theory broadly explained by the split of 'Indo European' into south European from Iranian-Indic dialects resulting in a separate range of sub-language variants such as Celtic and Italic. So the old Irish 'bic' and 'more' and the contemporary Welsh 'bach' and 'mawr' are fairly obvious cognate examples. But we can also see a link with Italian forms 'poco' and 'maggiore'. A substitution of a similar-sounding consonant, e.g. 'p' for 'b' or shift in vowel phones, 'a' replacing 'o'.

Notwithstanding any language similarities between the language Columba knew in Ireland and the kind of British dialect common with the tribes to the east of Dal Riada, the position of Columba expecting a Gaelic-only experience during his diplomatic journeyings from Iona for example up the Great Glen, confirms the limitations of the Gaelic influence at this time, as

apparently Columba's biographer Adomnan believed that Columba required the skills of a translator when confronted with an audience with men like Bredei, Pictish power-broker of the time. [6] However, re-emergence of power within Dal Riata under Cinaed Mac Ailpin (Kenneth) after subsequent overlordship by Pictland (Pictia) meant an eventual concept of a greater Gallic environment of the kingdom of Alba from the mid 9th century. As with other geographical areas, we can trace a large number of Irish place name indicators outside the original confines of the Dal Riada subsequently.

Early indication of written Gaelic in Scotland dates from around the 1100's, occurring as marginalia in the MS known as *The Book of Deer*, consisting of secular details concerning land grants to the monastery. [7] Locating Gaelic in early-dated manuscript sources in Scotland is less fruitful by comparison to Irish sources. A source such as an 11th century psalter located now in Edinburgh University although named the 'Celtic' psalter in the library indexation, the text is Latin. [8] Similarly, a psalter referred to as the 'Cathach of Saint Columba' dating from the 6th century, although using a writing scriptorial style referred to as Irish insular majuscule, is, again exclusively Latin.[9] Ecclesiastical Latin dominated the Gospel manuscript scriptoria, a fundamentally international language spanning the known world. Fortuitously, the ability of scribes to develop bilingualism as a normal adjunct to the scribal regime is attested by the Gaelic super-Latin glosses existing in manuscripts associated with European monastic communities. Useful additional material for lexicography and semantics without doubt, assisting the later scholarship relating to Old Irish.

In comparison to Continental voyages, Gaelic in the Isle of Man might be considered a consequence of being an offshore Island, and of course we could say the same with regard to Britannia. We might therefore ask as to what influences have been evident over the past two millennia. For example, a well known medieval manuscript chronicling some of Man's history, *The Chronicles of the Kings of Mann* is as much concerned with the surrounding kingdoms as with Man itself. [10] Furthermore, as with other islands within the whole of the British Isles, evidence is found in Man, for example in archaeological monuments, for migration from Norway. And so it might be expected that Gaelg competed with old Norse and absorbed some facets and loanwords. An interesting composite monument which perhaps consummates all such influences is found in the churchyard of Saint Michael at the village of Kirk Michael. 'The Cross of Mal Lumpkin' appears to represent Christian conversion via a large ornate cross exhibited alongside what some authors have described as pagan symbolism, a bardic representation (of a harp recital ?) and on the obverse a long inscription of a Scandinavian runic type together with a basic ogham alphabet and inscription in the ogham script.[11] Such variety is not unusual in memorials in other western areas of Britain. Scandinavian and other intrusions whilst not particularly converting the morphology of such a language branch, might however influence the pronunciation, eventually leading to unintelligibility between two versions of a prototype. By comparison with Scottish Gaelic and modern Irish, the Gaelic of Man now appears to be quite distinctly different. [12]

The same might be said of recent comparisons between Irish and Scottish Gaelic. The Scottish government appraisal of the two languages was summarized recently as follows:

'There are some disputes as to whether or not Irish and Scottish Gaelic are different languages or if they are simply different dialects of the same language. The distinction between a language and a dialect is typically drawn at the point when speakers can no longer understand each other. The general consensus however is that Irish Gaelic and Scottish Gaelic have enough differences to be considered a different language. Visually both look similar in the same way that visually Spanish and Portuguese share similarities. When spoken they sound very different and there are certainly enough differences to consider them as different languages' [13]

Having said this, it could be added that some of this apparent difference may well be the result of orthographic review. The source above goes on to further comment: '... there are also a lot of major spelling differences in both languages. A lot of this stems from the reform and simplification of Irish spelling which started in the 1950's. This eliminated a lot of silent consonant combinations in Irish that Scottish Gaelic has kept. [14]

Phonetics or pronunciation can inevitably play a major role in language change. This has apparently been the case between the three dialects. Although it might be added that areas such as Donegal are closer in terms of attempts at mutual comprehensibility to Scottish speakers. Succeeding centuries of increasing pressure on such languages from the east of course results in an almost monoglot anglicisation rendering such relics as the Mal Lumpkin memorial probably novel and strange to the contemporary mind. The demise of Manx Gaelic in the 1970's was on one hand possibly understandable but on the other a signal to revive a rich heritage almost lost to history. Such a move at revival was established in 1992 in the form of the Manx Language Unit with an aim for some activity in the education system. Prior to this various interests had been active throughout the 20th century. Approximately one hundred years earlier the Manx Language Society became a reality. Similarly a continued resurgence of interest in Gaelic in Eire followed the struggle for cessation from United Kingdom domination in the early 20th century. But of course this was based upon a living language tradition current in the largely rural environment outside the Dublin orbit. On a greater Ireland or reunification perspective, the recent moves towards greater usage has been seen by the proposals for an Irish Language Act within the political environment of Northern Ireland. Probably more importantly, resurgence in the field of preservation of historic early manuscript resources has taken place by way of investment in the early literature and conservation undertaken by way of financial input by the grants of money made available to Trinity College, Dublin early manuscript archives by The Bank of America resulting in a possibly overdue substantial review and conservation of unique manuscript sources and wider acknowledgement of their importance and availability for study via facsimile digitization projects. [15]

Finally, briefly reviewing Irish language intrusions into west Wales and Cornwall, some further retrospective linguistic comparison is necessary. For example, in *Archaeologica Britannica*, the polymath Edward Lhuyd advanced theories as to how language had arrived and developed within the British Isles. Fundamentally, a familiar expression when considering the major distinguishing factors for split off into one of the Gaelic dialects or a

Brythonic type is whether we are considering a Brythonic 'p' Celtic tongue, or Goidelic / Gaelic 'q' an alternative to that consonant, to put matters simplistically. The common ancestor of both are referred to by Kenneth Jackson as 'Common Celtic', itself descending from a conjectured 'Indo-European'.^[16] This differentiating process can be noted on selected extant archaeological monuments predominantly in the Pembrokeshire and Cardiganshire (Ceredigion) areas of west Wales. And as an example we can briefly consider patrilineal inscriptions a short distance from the Newport Pembrokeshire bay and estuary, a convenient location for cross-channel migration. In the case of an Irish 'ogham' (Irish monumental script) at the local church, at Nevern, we find a monument with a complete large Latin commemoration on the whole visible area, the *facia*, one might say. However, etched up the left side corner runs a good example of Irish ogham commemorative script. And so the Latin 'MAGLOCUNI FILI CLUTOR--' prominently displayed is given its equivalent version with the ogham script reading: 'maglacunas maqi clutar'.^[17] This manifestation of the predominance of the 'Q' in this and many other such inscriptions as opposed to the 'B' seen in the 'map' or, by mutation, 'mab', Cymric / Brythonic filial equivalent terminology. An obvious example of the latter is prominent in the medieval Welsh folk-tale collection title, *Mabinogi*, concerned with youth or youthful exploits, some of which are actually set in the same county as the Irish script above and serves to emphasize a kind of duality of cultural inheritance in this area of Wales.

As the ogham is relegated to a corner position, almost out of sight, it should not imply some kind of subservience. This was the only practical method for inscription of this communication style on the particular medium chosen. Although possibly insignificant to the Latin speaker of around the time of its conception, to an Irish migrant or second generation of such it would have been possibly of equal validity if not more important, as the number of similar relics scattered in the adjoining areas indicate a kind of migrant community fanning out from the coast into the countryside tracing approximately the course of the Roman road across south-west Wales into the Breconshire (Brycheiniog) landscape (the A40 trunk road). In another case a short distance from the Newport Bay site, we find something even more intriguing in what can be summarized as a spear-like standing stone (a 'menhir') with an inscribed wheeled cross in the centre, no Latin inscription, but an incisive confirmation of the Irish nationality or patrilineal connection running up the left side: 'nettasagri maqi mucoi briaci' (possibly understood in translation as 'Nettasagrus son of the kinship of the Briaci.^[18]

As might be expected, such archaic monumental dedications raise a number of questions as to purpose in the first place. For example, 'why a seemingly alien method of writing rather than a normal alphabet?' But of course the ogham method is predominantly a stone memorial, outdoor style of communication, which does have a later parallel form in the script of the Roman alphabet. Such examples can be detected in the *Leinster Genealogical Verse*, series of short epigraphic dynastic or patrilinear dedications associated with the Irish south east directly opposite the west Wales coastal belt, a predominant target for societal expansion.^[19] Indeed, further research is probably called for in terms of compilation of a network of such kinships in the west and south Wales regions, acting as a kind of post-Roman hegemony in a similar way as did the Dal Riada in west coastal areas of Scotland.

In conclusion, the foregoing has attempted to relate an account for the dynamics associated with what could be described as a Dark Age Irish diaspora and one particular descendant of the Indo-European 'family' of languages in confrontation to others, a relatively short sea crossing away, in a world where the militaristic control of the Western Empire had waned. And of course we can possibly detect a fairly complex series of developments within the language itself. Ironically, the reverse also occurs in the sense that the once minority Old English in eastern Britain eventually spreads across the Irish Sea in its later manifestations from the centuries following the Norman intrusion into Ireland to influence later literary traditions, as was the case for example with twentieth century authors writing in Anglo-Welsh genres.

Notes

- 1 Janet Davies, *The Welsh Language: A History*, 2nd ed, 2014, (Cardiff: University Press, 2014) pp. 2 - 5
- 2 Andrew Currie *The Linguistic Celts* [online distance learning lecture] HPCS 4003 *The Early Celts units 5 + 6* (UWTSD November 10th, 2021)
- 3 National Library of Wales *The Book of Aneirin*: an indication of the apparent foreign nature of the Irish emigres is suggested by the fact that throughout *Y Gododin*, army conscripts are listed from most British areas at that time but 'Gwydel' (Goidel) indicating a Gael or a region such as Argyll is not included, at a time when Columba was establishing his mission
- 4 Oxford, Bodleian Library, MJS Rawlinson B 502, f 54 r
- 5 Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 23 E25, cap 16
- 6 Kathryn Forsyth, Language in Pictland: spoken and written. in: Nicoll, E.H. and Forsyth, K. (eds.) *A Pictish panorama: the story of the Picts*. (Glasgow: Pinkfoot Press, 1995) pp. 7 - 10
- 7 Kenneth H. Jackson, *The Gaelic Notes in the Book of Deer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972)
- 8 Edinburgh, University of Edinburgh MS 56
- 9 Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 12R
- 10 London, British Library, MS Cotton Julius A vii, Cronica Regum Mannie et insularum
- 11 Catalog #104: P.M.C. Komode, *Manx Crosses* (London: Bemrose & Sons, 1907)
- 12 http://en.wikipedia.org/Manx_language/vocabulary (accessed 2/11/21)
- 13 <https://www.nztinternational.com> (accessed 27/10/2021)
- 14 *ibid.*
- 15 <http://tcd: 'The Early Irish Manuscripts Project' The Bank of America, Merrill Lynch Inc.> (accessed 3/11/21)
- 16 Kenneth H. Jackson, *Language and History in Early Britain: a chronological survey of the Brittonic languages, from the first to the twelfth century AD* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 1953) pp. 3 - 4
- 17 Site visit by author, 15th October 2021, St Brynach's Church, Nevern Pembrokeshire to review the rapidly fading inscriptions
- 18 Site visit by author, 15th October 2021 Saint Davids Church,, Bridell, Pembrokeshire, ditto
- 19 John T. Koch *Old & Middle Irish* (online distance learning lecture) HPCS 4002 , An Introduction to the Celtic Languages unit 8 (UWTSD November 23rd, 2021)

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Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 12R ('The Cathach of Saint Columba')

Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 23 E25 ('Lebor na Huidre' or 'Book of Dun Cow')

London, British Library, MS Cotton Tiberius D iii, *Vita Sancti Columbae*

London, British Library, MS Cotton Julius A vii, *Cronica Regum Mannie et insularum*

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