

Who spoke Welsh?

A contribution by John Askew

Foreword

In my youth It was common to picture the post-Roman scene in terms of marauding Saxons driving the indigenous Celtic (and Welsh, as I shall dub Brithonic-Celtic speaking) Britons westward until the surviving remnant took refuge in the mountains of Wales. The ethnic cleansing model has been dropped in more recent years, but the assumption that the dominant native language was Welsh remains.

In part this follows from the persistence of identifiably Welsh place names, for example those in the vicinity of Wareham noted by Bellows⁽¹⁾, but poses two questions for Dorset in particular which were raised by Groube and Bowden⁽²⁾. Why have only a handful of such names survived, and why did the influx of a relatively small number of Saxons completely eradicate the language which had survived a long period of Roman rule. Modern genetic research in particular leads us to a possible, though radically different, explanation, which I outline in the hope that fellow members may care to contribute their expertise on the subject. This especially relates to the linguistic studies, which I cannot begin to evaluate.

Historical background

Tacitus, in the *Agricola*⁽³⁾, notes that the Silures, of South Wales, were ethnically distinct from the Britons to the east – “...the swarthy faces of the Silures, the tendency of their hair to curl ...all lead one to believe that Spaniards crossed in ancient times and occupied the land.” – an observation that accords well with genetic results. This, alone, should have cast doubt on the ethnic cleansing model. But are there any clues to language?

Tacitus again, in the *Germania*⁽⁴⁾, notes that the Aestii (who occupied⁽⁴⁾ an area on the Baltic coast north of Kaliningrad (formerly German speaking Königsberg) spoke “...a language approximating to the British.” This does not appear to be widely cited, despite the fact that the area was well known to Roman traders as a major source of amber, on the origin and properties of which the author expands. A possible clue to its neglect comes from a note by Mattingly, the translator of the version from which we quote: “Anderson denies that the language of the Aestii can have been like the British, but can we be so sure? The Anglo-Saxon language swallowed up the British, almost without leaving a trace. This would have been much more intelligible if British was like some German dialects”.

Linguistic evidence

Oppenheimer⁽⁵⁾, though mainly concerned with genetic evidence also addresses the question of the origins of Old English, and concludes that rather than being a later development of Saxon, was in fact an earlier branch of the Germanic family of languages, predating the ‘Anglo-Saxon invasion’ by several thousand years, and that this was the language of the Britons at the time of the Claudian invasion. He goes on to note that there are few Welsh

place names in southern England recorded by Ptolemy in his second century map of the country in support of his – and our – language hypothesis. Some caution is appropriate, in that many of the names of Iron Age settlements, or, indeed, the settlements themselves, have not survived. It may be more appropriate to look at other landscape features. Indeed, the examples cited by Bellows, to which we alluded earlier, are of this kind: for example Gore Heath (as in *Gor* = great or main).

Genetic evidence

Analysis of genetic data is a relatively new tool, and I am not clear how far the details of Oppenheimer's thesis can be regarded as established. Looking at mutations of specific genes he seeks to date settlement patterns, and thus to determine the direction, as well as the sequence of migrations. The picture that he paints (reproduced below for convenience) is too detailed to summarize briefly, but emphasises the stability of the gene pool in Britain following recolonization after the last Ice Age, initially from a refuge in the general area of the Basque country. In his view, this migration in the Late Upper Palaeolithic still accounts for some 50% of our genetic inheritance. Mesolithic influx of maternal lines he places at 22%. There is an intriguing detail, in that this flow, progressing from the Iberian peninsula through Britain, Doggerland (the dry land now covered by the North Sea) and progressing along the Baltic coast to the area which we identified with the Aestii, where its frequency rises to around 20% , around twice that in Britain. Such a concentration suggests that this was an early colonisation of that area. These results, if generally accepted, would rule out massive displacement of an indigenous population by Angles and or Saxons, and would resolve the question of why the small Saxon influx to Dorset (which is supported by the genetic data) caused the native language to be totally displaced.

Why Welsh?

It does, however leave us with the reverse problem: if the native language was predominately Germanic, why the Welsh survivals? Here we proffer a radical suggestion. Was it a widely used language of religion, learning and diplomacy, parallel to the later use of Latin?

Which brings us to the Druids. Suetonius⁽⁶⁾ records that Augustus had prohibited Roman citizens in Gaul from taking part in the 'savage and terrible' Druidic cult, whilst Claudius abolished it. The Roman government of Britannia appears to have effectively wiped it out by its assault on Anglesey, which appears to have been the cult centre. The picture painted by Julius Caesar⁽⁷⁾ only a century earlier was more nuanced. It is true that he is the source of the description of their sacrificing people by burning them inside wicker men (not implausible, and the practice of burning people for religious reasons did not die out with the Druids, though in the same book he describes elks with no joints in their legs that rested by leaning on trees). He goes on, however, to describe a learned class in society, exempt from taxes and military service, maintaining an extensive body of knowledge through oral tradition requiring up to twenty years study, who not only conducted religious ceremonies but taught astronomy, geography, history, science (the nature of things) and law. They ruled on wrong doing within tribes and arbitrated in inter-tribal disputes. He was speaking about their role in Gaul, but was clear that their religious centre was in Britain. There are clear parallels with the role of

the later Roman, and perhaps even more the Irish, church and their successor universities. Use of a special language to distinguish the religious and secular elite has a long history: the use of Greek in Rome, the Latinized clergy and gentry in England. They, and indeed the rest of the Gaulish elite, were literate, using the Greek alphabet, but did not seek to record their knowledge in written form.

It is plausible to assume that their affairs were conducted in Welsh, not least because their last stand against the Romans was in Anglesey. Saint Guthlac (673-714 AD), a hermit in the fen lands, is recorded⁽⁸⁾ as being tormented by what are variously translated from the Latin as 'demons' or 'magicians' who spoke Welsh, which he understood as he had spent time in exile there. Whether these were Druids or supernatural beings is open to debate.

The persistence of Welsh names for rivers, springs and the like has potential religious links, and it would be interesting to see how far other linguistic survivals could be similarly explained.

Finally, what became of the accumulated knowledge? Little, if any, of it seems to have survived in Britain into the Christian era, whereas in Ireland the monasteries are known⁽⁹⁾ to have been centres of learning closely paralleling Caesar's account of the Druids. They documented an oral history which is argued to stretch back beyond 1700 BC and possibly back to the first settlement following the Ice Age. Was the corresponding British knowledge lost with the Roman suppression of the Druids, or was it deliberately censored as being tainted with paganism? Answers on a postcard.....

References

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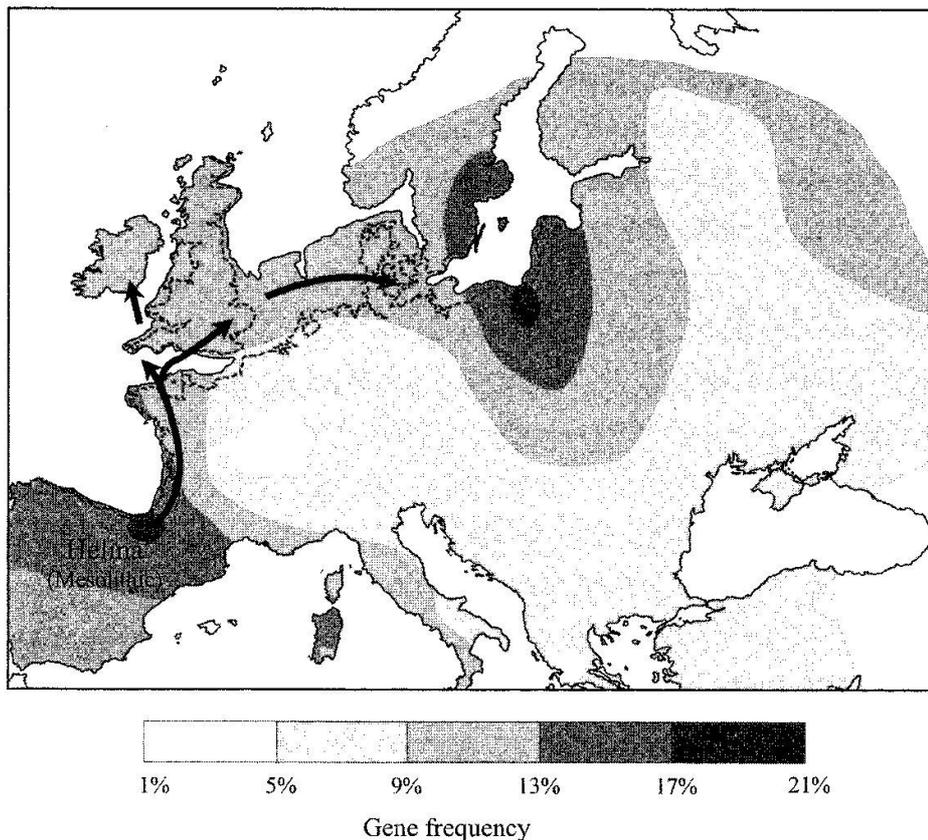


Figure 4.4 Maternal gene flow into the British Isles during the Mesolithic. Gene flow follows the European coastlines, and a founder effect is seen at the end of the trail in the Baltic. (Combined gene frequency of Helina Mesolithic sub-groups H2, H3, H4 and H5a in Europe – arrows indicate direction of gene flow based on the gene tree and geography. Contours follow greater land area resulting from low sea level.)

Figure reproduced from Reference 5 for convenience

Note added 1.12.2012

Edward James in “Britain in the First Millennium” (Hodder 2001) comments on the St. Guthlac episode and quotes M Gelling “Why aren’t we speaking Welsh” (Anglo-Saxon studies in Archaeology and History 6 (1993) p.51) as “...the obscurest question in the whole of English history Why aren’t we [the English] speaking Welsh”