

An Etruscan Solution to a Celtic Problem

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Abstract: *It is argued that what used to be called "P-Celtic" arose because Etruscans could not pronounce properly the Indo-European languages which they encountered in and around Italy. Etruscan influence can neatly explain not only the phenomenon of P-Celtic but also the corresponding phonological transition in Oscan and Umbrian. This scenario tends to support a relatively short timescale for the dissemination and diversification of the Western Indo-European languages.*

Although today they are spoken only by small communities on the north-western fringes of Europe, the Celtic languages were once a very important section of the Indo-European language family and were distributed across a wide swath of Western and Central Europe, at one stage extending as far east as Galatia in western Anatolia. A peculiarity of the Celtic languages is that, in some of them, a reconstructed Proto-Indo-European (PIE) labiovelar consonant, conventionally written as k^w , developed into a *qu* or hard *c* (*k*) sound. In others, however, the same original k^w developed into a *p*. The former have been known as "Q-Celtic" languages, and the latter as "P-Celtic" languages. For example, the interrogative pronoun "who" had the PIE form k^wos and led to the Modern Irish *cé* but to the Welsh *pwy*. Irish is Q-Celtic, but British (or "Brittonic"), whence Welsh, is P-Celtic.

The distinction between these two branches of the Celtic languages was first noted by John Rhys and was a cornerstone of the prehistories of Ireland and Britain which were presented by Eoin MacNeill (1919) and by Thomas O'Rahilly (1946). Nowadays, MacNeill's and O'Rahilly's versions of prehistory are considered outmoded and in many ways erroneous, and the terminology of "Q-Celtic" and "P-Celtic" has become unfashionable. One problem is that the term "Celtic" itself lacks an agreed definition, being used variously to denote linguistic, ethnic and cultural categories, so that it is not clear what sort of common origin, if any, might underlie the so-called "Celtic" languages. Another problem is that some linguists – such as Cowgill (1975) and Schrijver (1995), as mentioned by Blazek (2005) – are inclined to make light of the Q/P division and instead consider a more meaningful division of the Celtic languages to be between an "insular" branch and a "continental" branch, the former grouping Irish

and Brittonic together while the latter includes both Gaulish (P-Celtic) and Celtiberian (Q-Celtic). The insular/continental division has been supported by Forster and Toth (2003) on the basis of a phylogenetic network analysis, but Gaulish was the only continental Celtic language included in their analysis. They estimated that the insular and continental branches of Celtic diverged from one another at 3200 ± 1500 BC.

On the other hand, Starostin (2004) has recently given some support to the Q/P division of the Celtic languages, estimating glottochronologically that proto-Celtic speech divided between Q-Celtic and P-Celtic at approximately 1100 BC. If we accept the usual "family tree" analogy with biological evolution, and therefore take the view that the Celtic languages have arisen by treelike divergence over time from a common ancestor, then Starostin's views are in conflict with those of Forster and Toth.

A basic question is one of randomness vs. causation. Should the $k^w \rightarrow qu$ and $k^w \rightarrow p$ developments be regarded as arbitrary random alternatives? Or should one of them be considered to be the "natural" development, the other occurring only if caused by particular local circumstances? It should be noticed that the $k^w \rightarrow p$ development is found not only in certain Celtic languages but also in some of the Italic languages, notably Oscan and Umbrian, demonstrating that the Q/P division should not be regarded as just a Celtic phenomenon. Also, the $k^w \rightarrow qu$ development occurred in the great majority of other Indo-European languages including Germanic, Latin, Hittite, and all the *satem* languages (Balto-Slavic and Indo-Iranian), strongly suggesting that $k^w \rightarrow qu$ was the more natural process.

Welsh and Breton are the only living P-Celtic languages today, and both certainly arose from the Brittonic of two thousand years ago. Although Forster and Toth (2003) and proponents of the "palaeolithic continuity" model such as Alinei (2003) would argue for a local insular development rather than migrations from the continent, it is more than reasonable to regard Brittonic as an export from Gaul, brought to Britain by invading elites during the last half-millennium or so before Christ. Gaulish arose from the La Tène culture which followed the Hallstatt culture of West-Central Europe which is usually considered to have been at its height in about 800 BC. This is the traditional view of Iron-Age Celtic origins, and suggests that P-Celtic speech originated early in the first millennium BC in the core Hallstatt territory, i.e. in the areas of Austria and South Germany north of the Brenner and Resia Passes. Lepontic, slightly to the southwest, was also of P-Celtic type (Schmidt 1993).

At much the same time, a "P-Celtic" form of speech also existed in south-central Italy. The languages concerned – broadly, the Sabellic languages, including Oscan and Umbrian – are usually classified as Italic, not Celtic, but the differences between Sabellic and Hallstatt Celtic in about 800 BC

may have been relatively small. As an example: the numeral "four" was *petor* in both Oscan and in Gaulish, and today is *pedwar* in Welsh.

So, why should $k^w \rightarrow p$ have occurred when and where it did? Is it really reasonable to regard the $k^w \rightarrow p$ transition as an example of the sort of arbitrary linguistic diversification which calls for no special explanation? Until recently it was impossible to answer these questions convincingly, but the situation has been changed by the powerful case made by Beekes (2003) that the Etruscan language was brought to Italy from north-western Anatolia about 1200 BC. It is not novel to suggest that Etruscan may have Anatolian affinities, but Beekes' work has raised the idea from the level of a likelihood to that of a near-certainty and has pinned down the historical context of the migration. Considering also the results from genetic studies of Tuscans (Piazza 2007) and their women (Achilli 2007) and their cattle (Pellecchia 2007), it can now hardly be doubted that Etruscan people, language and culture were brought to central Italy from Anatolia. The date of migration was about 1200 BC in the standard chronological framework, but might have been considerably more recent if one were to adopt the radical "new chronology" suggested by scholars such as Rohl (2007) which places the fall of Troy in about 864 BC.

Sandwiched between the Sabellic and Hallstatt areas, of course, was the region which came to be dominated by the Etruscans. The most economical explanation for the $k^w \rightarrow p$ transition is, therefore, that it took place as a result of Etruscan influence. There is no reason to suppose that any Indo-European language anywhere else displayed the $k^w \rightarrow p$ transition, except in some cases in Greek. The normal transition, $k^w \rightarrow qu$, occurred everywhere else across the Indo-European world, giving *inter alia* proto-Irish-like languages across France and the British Isles, Celtiberian in the Iberian peninsula, and languages like Ligurian, Quariatic, Venetic and Liburnian to the south-west and south-east of the Alps. Latin and its neighbour Faliscan, exceptionally, emerged as $k^w \rightarrow qu$ languages in spite of being embedded in the Etruscan zone of influence.

It is impossible to say with certainty how the Etruscans pronounced their language at the time of their migration from Anatolia to Italy, since most of the surviving epigraphic evidence about Etruscan dates from much later times. However, Watkins (2001), albeit on the basis of Hattic and Hurrian, concluded that in ancient Anatolia the labiovelars were restricted to the Indo-European languages. It is generally accepted that Etruscan in Italy did not possess the PIE k^w sound. Nor did it possess the "qu" into which PIE k^w regularly developed in Latin and in many other Indo-European languages – this *qu* was a single consonant, not just a k-w concatenation (Sturtevant, 1939). It is suggested, therefore, that PIE k^w was pronounced as a *p* to Etruscans for want of any more natural way in which they could articulate it.

Even the “w” (approximant) sound may have been lacking in early Etruscan; at any rate, it appears not to have had a distinctive sign in the Etruscan alphabet. The Etruscans borrowed the word *vinum* (“wine”) from Latin, but they may have pronounced its initial letter more like a “f” than the “w” of the Romans. Likewise, the Etruscan word transcribed by modern scholars as *vers* (“fire”) might have been related to, and pronounced like, the first syllable of the Latin *fervor* (“violent heat”). Furthermore, the bilabial “ph” (IPA Φ) sound may also have been outside the Etruscan repertoire: Hönigswald (1941) felt that for this reason the Greek *Aphrodite* was rendered into Etruscan with a hard *p* instead of the *ph*, giving the month-name which was borrowed into Latin and has come down to us as April. These are minor points, but they bolster the argument that Etruscans would have had little choice but to pronounce PIE k^w as *p*.

So, it appears probable that Etruscans turned PIE k^w into *p*. In fact we have a possible example of the PIE consonant k^w developing into *p* in a word borrowed into Etruscan: *pupluna* was apparently a common noun (“people”) as well as the name of the Etruscan coastal city now known as Populonia. The Latin *populus* is considered to be a borrowing out again from the Etruscan *pupluna*. (Either Etruscan did not possess the “o” sound, or its alphabet did not discriminate between “o” and “u”.) Etruscan *pupluna* is likely to have been a more ancient borrowing into Etruscan from an IE language earlier than Latin, with *puplu-* coming from the PIE root k^wok^wlo- , a variant of k^wek^wlo- , “wheel”. One may ask how the semantic shift from “wheel” to “people” could have occurred: a clue, perhaps, is that k^wek^wlo- is a reduplicated form of PIE k^wel- (“turn”, “revolve”) from which, by a different route through Latin, we get words like “culture” and “colony” (Köbler, 2000). Moreover, in Greek we have *kuklos* (“circle”, “wheel”), which, as in English, could mean a circle of people; it could also mean a place of assembly or the wall around a city (Liddell and Scott, 1885). The etymological details are not completely certain, but the example of *pupluna* supports the notion that PIE k^w gave Etruscan *p*.

It is not an unusual phenomenon for the pronunciation used by a culturally-dominant minority to be picked up, consciously or unconsciously, by the dominated majority. It is suggested that this is why “P-Celtic” and the Sabellic languages underwent the $k^w \rightarrow p$ transition. It is difficult to overstate the cultural impact of the Etruscans on their neighbours in and around Italy. The scenario is that Etruscan migrants, possessing Iron-Age technology and relatively sophisticated military organisation, took possession of Etruria and imposed their language on the previous inhabitants. Later, they expanded their territory northwards and southwards. Across the Alpine region, Etruscan-derived alphabets came into use for inscriptions in languages including Raetic, Lepontic and Venetic, as well as in the region to the south where

the Sabellic languages were spoken. This does not necessarily mean that the Etruscans achieved the military conquest of such a large area, but it implies a powerful cultural influence which reached the Hallstatt area and possibly even further north. Archeologists have long been aware of Etruscan influence on material culture in the Hallstatt and La Tène areas (for example, Cunliffe 1994). A nice individual example is the Etruscan-style bronze flagon that was found at Castaneda in southern Switzerland, inscribed using an Etruscan-derived alphabet (Whatmough 1936). In fact, Etruscan-based alphabets were adopted in all the areas where the local Indo-European languages underwent the $k^w \rightarrow p$ transition.

With such a powerful Etruscan influence on the Hallstatt and La Tène cultures, one might expect to find loanwords from Etruscan in P-Celtic languages. An example may be the Gaulish deity-name *Esus* or *Aisus*, likely to be a borrowing from Etruscan *ais*, "god".

A broader implication of all this is that there may have been relatively little variation across the Celtic and Italic language groups prior to the influence of the Etruscans. Western Indo-European speech at the start of the Iron Age would have been more homogeneous than is normally recognised, making it less plausible that the first dispersal of Indo-European languages in the West occurred as long ago as the Neolithic Revolution as Renfrew (1987) and, say, Gray and Atkinson (2003) would have us believe.

In conclusion: the significance of the Etruscans in the development of European civilisation has probably been underestimated in the past. They brought the Iron Age to Italy and to the Celts, who in turn took it westwards into France and the British Isles. The Roman conquest of Gaul and Britain can even be regarded as a mere repetition of what Celtic surrogates of the Etruscans had already achieved some centuries earlier. The purpose of this paper has been to argue that the Etruscans also left a linguistic mark across Western Europe and to explain the previously-mysterious division between "P-Celtic" and "Q-Celtic". The most striking phonological difference between Irish and Welsh is a consequence of how proto-Celtic was pronounced by the influential Etruscans.

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