

Speculations on Substratum Influence on Early English Vocabulary: *pig, colt, frog*

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A surprising number of words in the vocabulary of English, as documented in the authoritative *Oxford English Dictionary*, are without satisfactory etymologies. We have no easy overview of this corpus, although computer technology may soon provide one. In the interim, happenstance, hunch, and the discovery of unexpected correspondences still guide the etymological sleuth in lieu of a more rigorous methodology toward undiscovered origins. Among these still-to-be-explained words are isolates, if we borrow a term from the science of languages, which present particular difficulties for the etymologist. The status of isolate in English entails that no attested or reconstructed early Germanic form, e.g., in Old Saxon, is seen as antecedent and none of the likely sources of a later loan, e.g. Old Norse, Norman French, Middle Dutch, offers comparable evidence. Without cognates in other languages, often not part of a word cluster of noun, adjective, and verb, and subject to the shaping influence of the sound system in which they are resident, isolates prompt an appeal to

extra-linguistic paths of inquiry, such as the cultural matrix where the term was first used or specific properties of the thing so designated.

Furthermore, lexicographical conventions often entail that the etymologies of loan words in English are not traced farther than to their immediate source language and culture. While that Middle English vocabulary without Old English antecedents is often projected against the relatively well known backdrop of French and Norman-French, at times even the Old Danish brought to the Danelaw and the future Normandy, and the authoritative historical and etymological dictionaries of these languages, occasional loans from other European languages, which were not part of sweeping, wholesale linguistic change, as occurred with the introduction of French to England, often fare less well. Clearly, in our dictionaries individual English words cannot, like royal pedigrees or, in the current vogue, family histories, be traced back to Adam and his speech, and it seems reasonable to settle for the best available information on the donor vocabulary as found in standard reference works.

Examined in the following are three common English animal names with true or quasi-isolate status and without fully satisfactory etymologies. Selected for study on the basis of contextual qualifiers that they have in common, all belong to the familiar domestic sphere of life on the land. Two of these unexplained words once shared morphological features that may be relevant to questions of register and affect. Perhaps most importantly, for each there is tantalizing evidence of having been assumed by Germanic peoples from adjacent Celtic populations, continental or insular British.

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Pig is one of several common English animal words that are without apparent cognates in other European languages and, as one consequence, are without a satisfactory explanation of origins, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*. As a designation of *Sus domestica*, *pig* is the object of a

recently updated entry in the new edition of the *Dictionary* being published online.¹ The etymological note is ample but inconclusive:

The expected form in Old English would be **picga*, **pigga* ... the word is attested only once in Old English, in the compound *picbred* ... to gloss classical Latin *glans* acorn ... There are strikingly similar forms in Dutch ... also Middle Low German. Further connections have been suggested for a number of these words, but these encounter the fundamental difficulty that it is impossible to know which of the forms is primary (if indeed they are directly related). One possibility is that they might all ultimately show borrowing from a common (perhaps substratal) source. Another possibility is that a pattern of very localized transmission occurred, with widespread variation in form arising as a word which probably had a very familiar, affective character spread from one locality to another as a familiar, household term.

The dictionary's summary conclusion is 'origin uncertain'. *Pig* is not in quite the same lexicographical position as English *dog*, with which it shares morphological features (*OED*: '**picga*, **pigga*, a weak masculine noun corresponding to other animal names, e.g. *docga* DOG *n.*¹') and which is more truly an 'isolate' in English, thought to be without cognates in other European languages.² On the other hand, the range of Germanic cognates of *pig* adduced by the *OED* exhibits considerable variety. Reflexes include Middle Dutch (western Holland) *bagge* (15th century), Middle Dutch (eastern) *pogge*, Middle Dutch *pegsken*, *puggen* (both in *Teuthonista* (1477), Middle Dutch, Dutch regional (Flanders) *vigghe*, early modern Dutch *bigge* (1569), *pigge* (1599), Dutch regional (northern) *pogge*, Dutch *big*, *biggele*, *biggeken*, *biggetje*, all in the sense 'young pig'; also Middle Low German *bachelken*,

¹ *The Oxford English Dictionary [OED]*, Third edition, March 2006, s.v. *pig*; online version June 2012. <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/143654>>; accessed 10 September 2012.

² Now see Savers "The Etymologies of *dog* and *cur*."

baggelken, German regional (Low German) *Pogge*, *Bigg* (all cited from *OED*).

The following discussion is guided by three considerations: 1) evidence that *pig* and related were first used of young animals; 2) the *OED*'s suggestion of 'borrowing from a common (perhaps substratal) source'; and 3) its sense of the word possibly having 'a very familiar, affective character spread from one locality to another'. The tacit conclusion from the *OED* entry for *pig* is that the word is without cognates beyond the sphere of western European Germanic languages. This may not be unconditionally the case. Early continental Celtic, in the form of Gaulish, has a number of terms for swine: *banuos* 'young pig', *moccos* 'pig, wild boar', *orco-* 'young pig', *succos* 'pig' (cf. English *sow*), *turcos* 'boar, wild boar'. Of these, the *orco-* form is cognate with Latin *porcus* and Old English *fearh* (whence *farrow*) and illustrates the general absence in Celtic of initial *p-* from Indo-European. However, none of these or their assumed counterparts in Old British (or Brittonic), the Celtic language of pre-Anglo-Saxon Britain, seems a likely direct antecedent of English *pig*.

Yet the idea of a loan from Celtic, in the form of continental Gaulish, to Germanic and thus an 'adstratal' rather than substratal source, may be entertained. We need think only of such loans into Germanic as *Amt* and *Reich* on the one hand, *Eisen*, *Karre*, and *Pferd* on the other to recognize the possible range of cultural exports. *Moccos* 'pig, wild boar', noted above, is found as a theonym in Gaulish inscriptions such as that at Langres and as an element of personal names, e.g., *Cato-mocus* 'Battle-Boar'.³ A Gaulish term designating young swine on the root *mocc-*, conceivably with a diminutive suffix, could have had some of the affect that the *OED* suggests for *pig* and its cognates. English *pig* and its Germanic congeners are,

³ *Dictionnaire de la langue gauloise*, 228, s.v. *moccos*. Some scholars, such as Aldhouse-Green judge that a divine figure, *Baco*, named in an inscription from Chalon-sur-Saône and Eauze, had porcine attributes (38). This opinion is countered in *Dictionnaire de la langue gauloise* in which *bagos* identified as the beechtree (64).

phonologically speaking, not that distant from Gaulish *moccos*, when we consider the point of articulation of the bilabial sounds *m-* and *p-*, and that of the occlusives *-kk-* and *-gg-*. In the original transfer between language families, the initial *m-* could have been misapprehended in the oral environment and then realized as *p-* and *b-* in the various Germanic dialects. Trade in live-stock across the lower Rhine between Celts and Germans can be imagined, although we have little in the way of evidence for such intercultural interaction. The subsequent spread of a *pig* word through numerous Germanic dialects, ultimately also to Anglo-Saxon England, in a variety of forms, among which English *piggy* and Middle Low German *bachelken* mark the extremes, and its emergence as the generic word for swine in English reflect a dynamic that is neither fully documented nor understood. An ultimate Gaulish origin for the English name of *Sus domestica* must then remain a tantalizing speculation.

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Colt, as a term for a young male horse, not only has deep historical roots in English, attested from about the year 1000 in the writing of Ælfric, but has remained unchanged orthographically and, to a less complete degree, semantically.⁴ Yet the clarity of this history is not matched by equivalent insight into the word's origins. The *OED* seems to be stretching to adduce Swedish dialect *kult* 'pig; hardy boy', Swedish *kull*, Dutch *kuld* 'brood, family', and Swedish *kulter*, *kulting*, Danish *koltring* 'big lad'. The *OED*'s summary judgment is 'of obscure origin'.

Although loans from Old French into Old English are rare and in some cases have parallels in British adaptations of their Latin forbears, the

⁴ Ælfric, *Genesis*, xxxii, 15: "Þritig gefolra olfend myrena mid heora coltum..and xx ass myrena mid heora tyn coltun"; *OED*, Second edition, 1989; online version June 2012, *s.v.* *colt*; <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/36638>>; accessed 10 September 2012. The dictionary specifies: 'the young horse is a *colt* to the age of 4, or in the case of a thoroughbred, 5 years, while the young mare is a *filly*'.

evidence of Gallo-Romance is nonetheless of interest in the present case. Old French *poulain*, *pulain* 'foal' and, more generally, 'the young of any animal' has been traced to Latin *pullus* 'the young of animals' and medieval Latin *pullamen* 'ditto'.⁵ Yet, in light of the narrowing of semantics toward the horse, one cannot help but wonder whether there may also have been some substratum effect from Gaulish, since such derivatives of Indo-European **ekuos* 'horse' as Breton *ebeul*, Welsh *ebol* 'foal' (and possibly Irish *echall*) imply an intermediary stage in archaic Celtic reconstructed as **epālo*.⁶

Here, Gaulish equine terminology will be of interest, although some shadings of meaning are doubtless lost: *marcos* 'saddle horse', *caballos* 'draft horse' (e.g. plowhorse), *epos* 'horse in harness' (e.g., pulling a war chariot), *cassica* 'mare', *mandu-* 'pony', *ueredos* 'courser', Late Latin *paraueredus* 'palfrey'.⁷

The majority of future Germanic settlers in Celtic Britain may not have had the means to import horses by sea and local animals would surely have been taken as plunder, otherwise appropriated, or bought. Draft animals for farm labor and personal transportation must have been among the most important for many settlers. Young horses and oxen may have been preferred for trade, since they could be broken in under the precise conditions, e.g., harness type, in which they were intended to work. Local terminology for such young animals could have been part of the transfer, initially via an extemporaneous trade pidgin. In the absence of written evidence, we can only speculate the degree to which Gaulish taxonomy and terminology was represented in the Brittonic of pre-Anglo-Saxon Britain, but the presence of a form **kappal-* with a consonantism differing from

⁵ *Le Trésor de la langue française*, s.v. *poulain*. For important cultural considerations, see Pinault.

⁶ *Dictionnaire de la langue gauloise*. An equivalent listing for Old Irish horse words runs to some 20 terms and expands the categories above; *Dictionary of the Irish Language*.

⁷ *Dictionnaire de la langue gauloise*, s.v.v., in particular *marcos*.

Gaulish *caballos*, is judged likely, on the basis of terms in Welsh and Cornish. We may then speculate on a Brittonic **kappal-*, complemented by a diminutive suffix with a *-t-* element.⁸ In the centuries between the Anglo-Saxon invasion and the age of Ælfric, this loan word, originally a semi-technical term in the communications between Celts and Germans, could have evolved into the form *colt*. This development, too, is speculative. *Colt* would have joined, but also have been semantically distinct from, Anglo-Saxon *fola* 'foal', and *eoh*, *hengest*, *hors*, and *mearh* 'mare', to designate an important commodity of exchange in early medieval Britain.

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The *Oxford English Dictionary's* entry for *frog* as a designation of the common amphibian, *Rana temporaria*, was last revised in December, 2011, and the accompanying etymological note illustrates the many advantages of the online medium and format in its fullness, historical depth, peripheral detail, controlled but generous speculation, in addition to the perspicuity we have come to associate with the editors of the dictionary.⁹ This said, the section on origins could eliminate some of the repetition inherent in the blog-like accretion of commentary. It calls attention to the entry for *dog* that was cited earlier in this essay and begins as follows:

Ultimately related to Old English *frosc* frosh n.¹ and its cognates in other Germanic languages ... , although the nature of the relationship is uncertain; the present word was probably originally an alteration of *frosc* as a result of association with *dogga* dog n.¹ and other words

⁸ On the archaic Celtic diminutive suffix *-at-*, see Thurneysen (174, par. 273.3); see further *Lexique étymologique de l'ancien irlandais*, C-33-34, s.v. *capall*. While it is generally accepted that Gaulish *caballos* was loaned into Latin, whence its further spread among the Romance languages, the word's ultimate origin may well lie in the Middle East and beyond; *Dictionnaire de la langue gauloise* (96).

⁹ OED, s.v. *frog*, n.1 and adj.; online version December 2011. <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/74855>>; accessed 15 December 2011.

denoting animals which are listed at that entry, in which the geminate consonant perhaps originally had a hypocoristic motivation.

An added caution: 'other explanations are perhaps possible'.

The earliest attestation leaves no question that *frogga* was an integral element in the vocabulary of Old English. In reference to the plague of frogs in Exodus 8: 1-14, we read in Ælfric: 'Moyses ðurh Godes mihte awende eal heora wæter to readum blode, and he afylde eal heora land mid froggon'.¹⁰ The *OED* divides words for a frog with initial *fr-* in Old English and other Germanic languages into four groups, which may be exemplified by 1) Old English *frosc* (also *frox*, cognate with Middle Dutch *vorsch*, *versch*, *vorsche*, Middle Low German *vrosch*, *vorsch*, *vors*, Old High German *frosc*, Old Icelandic *froskr*, etc.); 2) modern English *frog* (which 'could show an alteration or variant within Old English of *frosc*, probably by association with the group of words denoting animals'); 3) Middle English *frūde* 'frog, toad', and 4) Old Icelandic *frauke*, 'which probably shows a derivative of the forms under 3)'. There have been attempts to link all four groups of forms, but, in the opinion of the dictionary, none has been wholly successful. To go a bit beyond the dictionary's presentation, the presumed Indo-European root of the Germanic *frosc* words is *(s)preu- 'to leap, hop'.¹¹

It will be noted that the *OED*'s collection of relevant evidence does not extend to Latin or the Romance languages. Latin *rāna*, which may ultimately be traced to a reconstructed Indo-European root *reh₂(i)- or *rak-snā- meaning 'to roar, bellow', generated a diminutive *ranunculus*, from which Old French *raine* 'frog' is descended.¹² In the seventeenth century it would appear to have been replaced by *grenouille*, which has a complicated

¹⁰ Ælfric, *Homilies*, 12, 111.

¹¹ *Lexikon der indogermanischen Verben* [LIV], s.v. *preu¹ 'springen'; *Indogermanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* [IEW], II.845f., s.v. *preu- 'springen'.

¹² *Etymological Dictionary of Latin*, s.v. *rāna*; *Französisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, [FEW] 10.53, s.v. *rana*.

history of its own but is far from English *frog*. Other language ‘families’ such as Greek, Baltic, and Slavic seem too remote to have affected words brought by the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes to Britain, one of which was most likely *frosc*. Nor have the Celtic languages been judged to offer any evidence of relevance. Old Irish *rána* seems loaned from Latin *rāna* but *fróg* (supposedly < English) and *lafan* are also found. Welsh *broga* is judged a loan from Middle English *frogge*; *llyffant* is also found. Breton has *gleskr* and *skignan*, and Cornish *quylkyn*.

The recovered vocabulary of Gaulish has no term that has been identified as meaning ‘frog’, although *craxantos* is proposed for ‘toad’. Nor does the evidence of recorded French dialect, which might show the traces of Gaulish, have any frog-words remotely suggestive of the English term. Inscriptions from Gaul have, however, preserved the word *srogna* identified as meaning ‘nose, nostril’.¹³ Through the transformation *srV-* into *frV-* (an evolution figured in Gaulish as **srognā > *ðrognā > *frognā*), *ffroen* emerged in Welsh and *fron* in Breton with this same meaning, ‘nose, nostril’, while Irish continued with *srón* ‘nose, nostril’. Gaulish **frognā* is the antecedent of Old French *froigne* ‘frowning, sullen face’ and various dialect terms, *frognon* ‘snout’, *freugnot* ‘muzzle’.¹⁴ The ultimate source of these forms is posited as Indo-European **srenk-/sreng-* ‘to snore’, a root represented only in Celtic and Greek (e.g., Old Irish *srennin*, Greek *rhénkō* ‘I snore’). In a familiar designation, the nose is then the ‘snorer’.¹⁵ In Old French *froigne* ‘frowning mien’, the image is seen to have shifted from the source of the sound to the face in general. Here may be noted the curious coincidence that Scots Gaelic has *ran* for ‘frog’ (< Old Irish) but a near homonym *rán* with the meaning ‘roar, bellow’ (cf. *rànaiche* ‘roarer, bellower’; Old Irish *rannán*,

¹³ *Dictionnaire de la langue gauloise*, 281, s.v. *srogna*.

¹⁴ *FEW* 3, 816; *froigne* was borrowed into Middle English as *froune*, whence modern English *frown*.

¹⁵ *IEW*, II.1002, s.v. **srenk-* ‘snarchen’; the root is not noted in *LIV*.

possibly a kind of cry or noise), as if some reflex of Indo-European **reh₂(i)-* or **rak-snā-* ‘to roar’ were still in play.

It is proposed, on the evidence from Gaulish, that a nominal reflex of the Indo-European root **srenk-*, in a form close to **frognā* and with the meaning ‘snorer, croaker’, existed in Brittonic. As a term for the frog, it would have been based on the creature’s particular vocalization.¹⁶ Clearly, at some distant remove, almost all animal names single out some distinctive, real or perceived, characteristic in the creation of metonymical designations. Here, it would be sound (we may recall Latin *rāna* as ‘the bellower’). British *frognā*, ‘the croaker’, may have been perceived by Germanic settlers as an element of a subaltern vocabulary, recognizably close to Germanic *frosc*, ‘the hopper’, but assigned, perhaps through a process of hypocorism like that suggested by the *OED*, to a familiar register, e.g., children’s language or the language used with children, as a kind of double diminutive, both the (subaltern) Britons’ and children’s names for little animals (cf. later English’s *froggy*). It is possible that by this time the allusions to locomotion and vocalization had been lost in the two languages, Anglo-Saxon and Brittonic. The loan would have occurred before any reduction in the British form as seen in Welsh *froen*, i.e., with the *-g-* retained, which could, in turn, have encouraged an association with other Old English animal names ending in a terminal geminate (cf. the recorded genitive plural *docga*, noted above).¹⁷ To summarize and to group

the western European derivatives of Indo-European **srenk-/srengh-* ‘to snore’ by semantic focus, we have Gaulish **frognā* (<**srognā*), Old Welsh *froen*, Old Breton *froan* (but Irish *srón*) – all = ‘nose, nostril’ – French dialect

¹⁶ Schrijver proposes a Primitive Celtic form **srognā* or **srongnā*, cites Middle Welsh *froen* and Middle Breton *froan* among other forms, but does not consider the possible emergence of a term for the frog (441-42).

¹⁷ While attracted to the *OED*’s idea of a leveling and clustering function through, or resulting in, final consonant gemination in some Old English animal names, the author has pursued another line of speculation (“The Etymologies of *dog* and *cur*”).

frognon 'snout', *freugnot* 'muzzle', Old French *froigne* 'frowning, sullen face', and, closer to the root signification but still with an extended meaning, the putative British **frognā* 'croaker, frog'. One further result is English *frog*, incorporating the semantics and some of the phonology of Germanic *frosc*.

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The discipline of etymology still bears a strong trace of the nationalism that informed the study of European vernaculars in the nineteenth century. But as the monolithic Indo-Europeans and their lexical roots become even more of a bloodless abstraction, the interaction between Celtic and Germanic, British and Anglo-Saxon, on the soil of Britain, perhaps even more challenging to reconstruct, should surely command our present attention. Recent studies of medieval British languages (Latin, English, French, Cornish, Welsh) reveal no less the permeability of individual languages than the bi- and polylingualism of most speakers, who might reserve one language or another for specific subject areas, kinds of interactions, language communities (among which family) but were nonetheless describing a single, relatively integral British reality, albeit with the possibility of assigning differing affective colorings.¹⁸ This same kind of thinking must be applied to what once would have simply been called the sub-stratum effects of Celtic on Germanic in Britain, especially in light of recent research suggesting a much less aggressive land-taking by the Germanic immigrants and a less than wholesale relegation of speakers of British to the western hills and moors.¹⁹ The time seems ripe for a thorough

¹⁸ See, for provocative, comparable theses, Rothwell and Butterfield. The permeable interface between British Latin and the various British vernaculars is well illustrated by the presence of lightly Latinized local terms in all kinds of utilitarian British documents; see *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources*.

¹⁹ As advanced, for example, in Fleming; for the treatment of another isolate with a similar origin, see Sayers, "Problems with the Etymology of English *bird*." For a representative sample of studies dealing with Celtic Britain in the era of the Anglo-Saxon invasion and subsequent emergence of Old English, see the essays in *The Celtic Root of English* and books and articles by Breeze, Coates, German,

review of the early English vocabulary of the farm, field, and pasture from the perspective of the earliest cultural and economic interaction of German and Celt in the isle of Britain.

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ABSTRACT**Speculations on Substratum Influence on
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Three English animal names, *pig, colt,* and *frog,* all without fully satisfactory etymologies, are selected for study on the basis of contextual qualifiers that they have in common. All belong to the familiar domestic sphere of life on the land. Two of these unexplained words once shared morphological features that may be relevant to questions of register and affect. Strikingly, for each there is tantalizing evidence of having been assumed by Germanic peoples from adjacent Celtic populations. *Pig* is traced to Gaulish *moccos* and the amply documented material and cultural exchanges across the Rhine between Celts and Germans. Among the descendants of the adapted term would have been an Old Saxon form that developed as Old English *picga*. *Colt* represents a more direct transfer in Britain, again possibly of a trade commodity, between the invading Angles and Saxons, and the resident Britons, who spoke a Celtic language, Brittonic. Gaulish *caballos* suggests a starting point for a hypothetical Brittonic equivalent, *kappal-*, complemented by a diminutive suffix with *-t-*. *Frog*, it is proposed, originated in a Brittonic agent noun meaning ‘croaker’, related to Gaulish *frognā*, Welsh *ffroen*, and Breton *fron*, ‘nose, nostril’, that coalesced, semantically and phonologically, in Britain with Germanic *fros*, whose literal meaning would have been ‘hopper’.

Key Words | English etymology, lexical loans, colt, frog, pig