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Chaceley, Meon, Prinknash, and Celtic Philology

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The names of Chaceley, Meon, and Prinknash have been obscure. Yet the first seems to refer to the wood or clearing of a Briton called Cadui or Cadwy; the second to a stream called ‘flowing one’ by the Britons; while the third apparently contains Celtic elements meaning ‘tree’ and ‘ridge’ with an English suffix meaning ‘ash tree’ or ‘headland’.

Chaceley

Chaceley (SO 8530), a village downstream from Tewkesbury and across the Severn, has a problematic name. It occurs in 972 as Ceatwesleah, where the last element is English leah ‘wood; clearing’. Since Hugh Smith rejected derivation of the rest from *Ceartwe (a personal name he called ‘imperfectly evidenced’), modern opinion has taken the first part as Brittonic and perhaps equivalent to Welsh coed ‘wood’.¹ ‘Brittonic’ refers to languages deriving from British, the Celtic language that divided into later Welsh, Cornish, and Breton. It contrasts with ‘Goedelic’, the branch of Celtic represented by Irish, Scottish Gaelic, and Manx.

The first part is certainly not English. Yet there are difficulties in explaining it from the Celtic for ‘wood’ (which would give -eves- only by assuming a suffix). If we look again at Hugh Smith’s *Ceartwe we find that, although this is unknown in other English sources as a personal name, it is familiar elsewhere as a Celtic one. It is Cado or Cadwy in Welsh, and Cadoc in Old Breton. The most famous person of the name was the son of Gereint, prince of Devon and Cornwall, who makes a semi-legendary appearance in the lives of Celtic saints. The life of St. Carannog describes Cadwy as a contemporary of King Arthur; the 9th-century life of St. Winwaloe calls him ‘king of Britain’. In a later Welsh triad Cadwy was remembered as one of the three men of Britain who were ‘most courteous to guests and strangers’.² As for the name, this is easily related to the Celtic element Cad- ‘battle’, as in Gaulish Catus.³

One would like to link Chaceley with this chivalric figure, but this can hardly be, as his associations were with the West Country. The settlement at Chaceley surely belonged to another Briton of the name. As such it resembles other places in England, such as Catsley (SO 7279) in Shropshire (attested in Domesday Book as the wood or clearing of a man called Cadog), Dewsbury in West Yorkshire (the stronghold of a Briton called Dewi or David), and Brenchley (TQ 6641) in Kent (the home of somebody, perhaps a Cornishman, called Brenci).⁴

So it seems Ceatwesleah or Chaceley was the wood or clearing of a Briton called Cadui or Cadwy. If it was, we solve a problem that has troubled philologists for generations. We also strengthen the evidence for Celtic survival by the Severn, which the English would have reached by A.D. 600, occupying the territory beyond some 50 years or so later.⁵ Professor Coates of Sussex University has mapped out and listed the cluster of British toponyms in the country west of Chaceley. Five miles beyond is low-lying Corse (SO 7826), with a Celtic toponym (cf. Welsh cors ‘marsh, bog, swamp, fen’); three miles further on across the river Leaden (cf. Welsh Ilydan ‘broad one’) is Pauntley (SO 7429), with church and manor house neatly situated in a hollow.
(cf. Early Modern Welsh pantle ‘hollow, dell, small valley’) by the river bank. The name of Chaceley is thus useful information for Celtic survival in early Gloucestershire, where it seems that a Briton or man with a Brittonic name continued to occupy land by the Severn, even after the English conquest.

**Meon**

Meon Hill (SP 1846), three miles north of Chipping Campden, rises nearly some 160 metres above the Vale of Evesham to a flat summit occupied by a hillfort. The name is attested as Mene in 1086 and 1236, Muna in 1159, Mina in 1190, Muena in 1191, and Muene in 1196, all referring to a settlement. (Meon Hall and Lower Meon still exist on the hill’s north-east side.) Ekwall took this as a hydronym, comparing the river Meon in Hampshire and noting that Meon Hill lies between two arms of a north-flowing brook. Coates agrees, suggesting a link with Old Irish moín ‘treasure’, though admitting that meaning and application are unclear for Meon Hill and the river Meon alike.

As regards the Hampshire Meon, Rivet and Smith emend the 8th-century Ravenna Cosmography’s Maina (variant Mavia) to Moína, comparing Gaulish Moenus (the river Main of Germany) and Middle Irish Main and Maoín (from *Moína), now the Caragh river of Kerry. They also refer to the Miño river, ancienly Minus (now forming the north frontier of Portugal), and the Polish rivers Miń and Mińka. They take the root as probably Celtic *mei-* (cf. Latin meo ‘I go, pass’), with a sense ‘to go’ (hence ‘moving one, fast-moving one’).

Two points may be made here. First, although Irish moín perhaps has a Brittonic cognate in Welsh mwyn ‘benefit, advantage, value, profit; treasure, wealth’, this is uncertain. In any case mwyn is not recorded as a place-name element, so can probably be ruled out as regards Meon Hill. (Coates’s Irish river might relate rather to Middle Irish moín ‘dumb, silent’, but this is still less relevant in the present context, as it has no known Brittonic cognate.) Second, Rivet and Smith’s case for the river Meon needs slight qualification as regards Meon Hill. This has a stream on its slopes, but small and not fast-flowing. Another approach to the problem, using Welsh evidence, seems secure.

The obvious Welsh analogy for Mene, Muna, Mina, and Muena in early sources is Menai, the name of the straits separating the island of Anglesey from the mainland. The earliest attestation seems to be in a poem, nominally of the 6th century (though Professor David Dumville shows good reasons for dating it to the 9th) praising a Powys king’s aggressions against his neighbours, which included ‘An expedition beyond Menai (Menei)—the rest was easy; / Battle in Crug Dyfed—Aærl on the move.’ Aæarl was a 6th-century king of Dyfed, and Crug Dyfed is perhaps Banc-y-Warren (SN 2047), an ancient tumulus outside Cardigan. More secure for early spelling is Mene (for Menei) in the 9th-century Historia Brittonum (chapter 75). As well as the Menai Straits there is a stream called Menai, attested in 1332 as Menei and running past Pant-y-defaid (SN 4344) in Ceredigion; another Menai flows near Abergynolwyn (SH 6706) in south Gwynedd; and the river Mynian (SJ 0851) of south Denbighshire has been taken as ‘little Menai’. Yet another stream is called Menei in the 12th-century Book of Llandaff: it seems to be the brook (now renamed) entering the Wye at Aberfrwrdd (SO 3509), Monmouthshire. Wendy Davies regards it as the river Monnow at Monmouth town (SO 5113), but this seems unlikely.

So it is clear that Menai was used of small streams through the whole of early Wales. As regards etymology, Sir Ifor Williams proposed a link with the Welsh verb-nouns myned ‘walk, go’ and tremwynu ‘walk, wander’. The sense would thus be ‘one that moves’ (with cognates in Latin meare ‘to move’ and Russian minovat ‘pass by, be over’) and hence little more than ‘stream’ or ‘flood’.
The forms *Mene, Munna*, and so on for Meon in early Gloucestershire therefore suggest an etymological link with the Menai Straits and various obscure streams in Wales. *Mene* would originally have referred to the brooklet rising by Meon Hall and flowing northwards past Lower Meon to Lower Quinton and beyond. If so, we could rule out a link with Irish *moin* ‘treasure’. The forms would bring us back (by evidence from medieval Wales rather than ancient Europe) to Rivet and Smith’s association of the Hampshire Meon with the Celtic root *mei-* ‘move’ in Welsh *mynd*, cognate with Latin *meare*.

If, then, at Meon Hill we have the same element as at the Menai Straits, Nant Menai in Gwynedd, Abermenai in Ceredigion, and so on, we would have a simple name meaning ‘mover; stream’ borrowed when the English occupied the Vale of Evesham area after about A.D. 500. This derivation should hence interest archaeologists and others as indicating a persistent British presence on the Gloucestershire–Warwickshire border, perhaps on the site of Meon Hill and Lower Meon. The editor of this journal tells the writer that though Meon Hill is now in Warwickshire, it was in Gloucestershire until 1935, when the parish of Quinton was transferred from one county to the other. Its name certainly links it with Gloucestershire (rich in Celtic toponyms), and not with Warwickshire (poor in such). The Welsh evidence also tends to confirm Rivet and Smith’s explanation of *Meon* in Hampshire, though we need not think of the river there as fast-flowing.

**Prinknash**

Prinknash, four miles south-east of Gloucester, is famous for its medieval hunting-lodge (rebuilt by the last abbot of Gloucester), which in modern times has housed a community of Benedictine monks. Yet its name, pronounced ‘Prinnage’, has puzzled scholars. It occurs in 1121 as *Prinkeness*, the last element being taken as English *asb* (the tree). The rest has seemingly remained obscure.

Given this difficulty, the first part may perhaps be Celtic, with an English suffix. This should cause no surprise. The names of both Gloucester and Cheltenham are such linguistic hybrids, with their last part English, but their first part Brittonic. If so, the first element at Prinknash would be equivalent to Welsh *pren* ‘tree’. This has been found elsewhere in England, as at Pimperne, ‘five trees’ (Welsh *pump* *pren*), in Dorset. It certainly occurs in the Scottish place-name elements *prim*, *pirn*, *prin*, and *pren*. These occur at Primrose (second element *rbh* ‘moor’) in Lothian, Borders, and Fife; *Trepren*, ‘homestead of (the) tree’, now Traprain, in Lothian; *Pryntayton*, ‘tree of (the) smallholding’, now Pirntaiton near Stow, in Lothian; and Prittonan, ‘tree of the marsh’, in Borders. Another example may occur at Prendergast, situated by a prominent hill on the English border and apparently meaning ‘homestead of the tree by a block-shaped hill’.

Pirntaiton in Lothian and Prittonan in Borders suggest the first element of *Prinkeness* ‘Prinknash’ means ‘tree’. As for the second element, this would be Brittonic *cein* ‘ridge’, as in Middle Welsh *kein* ‘back, ridge’, Old Cornish *cein* (glossing Latin *dorsum* ‘back’), Modern Cornish *cein* ‘back, ridge’, and Middle Breton *queyn* ‘back’. Welsh *cein* has been obsolete in ordinary speech for nearly a thousand years, but survives in the name of Ceinmeirch ‘ridge of horses’ south of Denbigh. It also provides the name of Sir Gawain’s horse Grynoilet (originally *Keinaled* ‘hard back, firm back’; a steed that would not toss his rider even in danger). In Cornwall the village of Kenwyn is situated on a *ken wyn* or white ridge that looks down on Truro.

Together, these Welsh, Cornish, and Breton forms allow us to derive the name of Prinknash from the equivalent of Welsh *pren* ‘tree’ and *kein* ‘ridge’. This meaning seems confirmed by local topography, Prinknash being on the slope of the Cotswold escarpment, which rises to form
a prominent wooded ridge. This was surely known to the Britons as the ‘tree ridge’ (unlike other ridges which had lost their forest cover). As for the last element here, although Ekwall’s link with ash is possible, it may relate rather to English ness ‘cape, headland’, referring to one or both of the spurs of land that overlook Prinknash Abbey from the north-east and south-west.

If the above reasoning is correct, then, it explains an enigmatic English place name; provides evidence for British survival after the English seized Gloucester in 577; reveals another Celtic toponym in Gloucestershire; and confirms the wooded nature of the area in pre-English days, so that it would always have been a good place for hunting.

Notes


5. Jackson, Language and History in Early Britain, 204, 240.


9. Coates and Breeze, Celtic Voices, English Names, 300, 338.


15. Thomas, Enwa Afonydd a Nentydd Cymru, 29–30; Williams, Enwa Lleodd, 43; Wendy Davies, The Llandaff Charters (Aberystwyth, 1979), 110.


20. Ibid. 295, 354.


