

Minding Your P's and Q's or Why Porcom is a Headache

Today we'll take just a little dip into the history of Gaelic which starts about 5000BC so fasten your seatbelts.

5000BC is roughly when the first IndoEuropeans start invading Europe (invading because we know there were people here before then). Amongst this lovely bunch of hooligans from the steppes of Central Asia was a group which settled on the northern edges of the Alps. The Celts. Although they weren't really know as the Celts back then and the two earliest "celtic cultures" that we know are often called the Hallstatt and the La Tène Cultures. Irrespective of the name calling issue, this bunch does well and by the 3rd century AD they have established quite a track record: they muscled the Etruscans out of most of northern Italy, had taken over most of Gaul and large swathes of the Iberian peninsula, Southern Germany, the British Isles, parts of modern day Slovenia, Bulgarian, Romania and Hungary, a fair chunk of land in central Turkey(!), sacked Delphi in 279BC and Rome itself in 390BC.

It's from the greeks that the Celts get their name incidentally. The historian Hecataeus describes them as Keltoi, the meaning of which can't be ascertained for sure, but seeing they sacked Delphi, it can't have meant anything nice.

After that, they slip a bit though. Rome takes Transalpina back in 192BC and gradually take over ... well ... most of Europe really and the decline of the Celts had begun.

So what about the language? Patience! The main thing that distinguished the Celts from other IndoEuropeans in terms of their language was the loss of IndoEuropean **p**. Pardon? Well, IndoEuropean (which is not recorded, but reconstructed based on what we know of its daughter languages) seems to have had an elaborate system of stops, 12 actually:

p	t	k	k ^w
b	d	g	g ^w
b ^h	d ^h	g ^h	g ^{wh}

Now we come to Celtic, very old Celtic that is. They decided to drop the entire set of aspirated voiced stops and make do with just 8 stops:

p	t	k	k ^w
b	d	g	g ^w

Now, one thing you need to know here about that little superscript w is that it represents something called labialisation. It means that you round your lips when making that sound, like in the English word 'quick' which is [k^wɪk]. This is important why? You'll see. Next, for whatever reason, Late Common Celtic drops **p** and says **k** wherever there was a **p** before. It just does. That leaves us with:

b	t	k	k ^w
	d	g	g ^w

Now things get interesting because this is roundabout the time when Goidelic (grandparent of Irish, Gaelic and Manx) split from Brythonic (grandparent of Welsh, Cornish, Cumbric and Breton) put in for a divorce. Over a **p**. What happens is that Brythonic takes the **k^w** sound and turns it into a **p**. That works because labialisation is made with the lips and there seems to have been a struggle between the labial nature of the **w** and the velar nature of the **k**. It appears that the lips won and the **k** bit was assimilated into a **p**. It's like the word 'immigrate' which comes from **in-migrāre** where the **n** has been assimilated into an **m** because it is immediately followed by one.

Goidelic on the other hand would have none of it and stuck with the lost p. Out of sheer spite, it merged the labial series with the plain stops though: k^w merged with k and g^w with g .

So we have the following:

Goidelic				Brythonic			
	t	k		p	t	k	
b	d	g		b	d	g	g^w

This is the reason for a great many things. For example, it is the reason why Goidelic is sometimes referred to as Q Celtic and Brythonic as P Celtic. It's based on the development of the Indo-European word for 5, $penk^we$ which in Q Celtic becomes $cóig$ (remember, it dropped p) and in Brythonic $pimp$ (which kept p). Which explains the P but not the Q. Well it does because in Manx $cóig$ is spelled $queig$.

So what else does it explain? Well, it explains why modern Brythonic languages have a gap, ie no (historic) $[k^w]$ sound and why they have $[p]$ where modern Goidelic languages have a $[k]$:

	five	fish	head	sense	who	wool/feather
Origin	IE. $penk^we$?	?	?	IE. k^wos	Lat. $plūma$
Gaelic	$cóig$	$càch$	$ceann$	$ciall$	$có$	$clòimh$
Irish	$cúig$	$cách$	$ceann$	$ciall$	$cé$	$clúmh$
Manx	$queig$	$cagh$	$kione$	$keeaill$	$quoi$	$clooie$
Welsh	$pump$	$pawb$	pen	$pyll$	$pwyl$	$plufyn$
Cornish	$pypm$	$peub$	$penn$	$poell$	piw	$pluvenn$
Breton	$pemp$	pep	$penn$	$poell$	piv	plu

It also explains some lovely loanwords like $Càisg$ for Easter which is derived from ecclesiastical Latin $Pascha$ (cf Sp. $Pasqua$) or even the twice borrowed $Patricius$ who shows up as earlier $Cadrach$ and later as $Pádraic > Pàdraig$.

It also makes for a headache because modern Irish and Gaelic, as we have just seen, do not retain the k^w sound but sometimes borrow words from English which has k^w . How to borrow? Do you borrow the sound k^w and change the set of sounds in these languages or do you adjust to Irish/Gaelic spelling or come up with your own word? Tricky one. Traditionally the second option seems to have prevailed - Irish borrowed Quaker as $Caecar$ and Gaelic turned a quadruped into $ceithir-chasach$. But of lately words like $quinín$ 'quinine' have showed up in Irish and Gaelic now boasts $cuaraidh$ 'quarry' and $cuòta$ 'quota'. Really tricky one.

So what on earth then is $porcom$? Well, in the mesopotamian clay table of Ashur-Bannipal ... just kidding. There is a 3rd century inscription in Lusitanian, a language which was spoken in the west of the Iberian peninsula, which is generally described as Celtic which goes: $OILAM TREBOPALA INDI PORCOM LAEBO$ etc etc. The tricky bit is that it translates as "a sheep to Trebopala and a pig to Laebo" ... and as we all know the great clue to something being a Celtic language is the loss of p , yet here we have $porcom$ 'pig' ... The answer? We don't know actually except that there may be a questionmark over Lusitanian being a Celtic language. If you find out, publish and you'll be famous!

Oh, and in case this kind of thing fascinates you, we've done you a little picture of what happened to two words - hundred and five - all the way from Indo-European down to over 50 modern Indo-European languages as a pdf [here](#).