BIG BLACK BIRDS

Two early British place names begin with *Brano-*. Ptolemy reported that *Branogenium* was a *polis* (native power centre) somewhere in mid Wales. And the *Notitia Dignitatum* described *Branodunum* as a Roman fort of the Saxon Shore at Brancaster on the north coast of Norfolk. To understand what these names probably meant we need to venture into some surprising aspects of ancient history.

Rivet and Smith (1979) explained *Brano-* as a precursor of words for 'crow' or 'raven' in the modern Celtic languages: Welsh *brân*, Irish *bran*, Cornish and Breton *bran*. It is always risky to assume that one name element meant the same in two places, especially as different as these two, but it is even more risky to extrapolate medieval speech back to Roman times.

R&S argued that *bran-* also showed up in some ancient personal names and in some post-Roman place names in France. In so doing, they accepted a theory about religious thinking in Iron-Age and Roman times, which originated with pioneer Celticists such as John Rhys and Henri d'Arbois de Joubainville: that birds scavenging bodies on Iron-Age battlefields were avatars of deities and left traces in ancient names of people, tribes, and places.

Celtic folk tales that mention big black birds, for example about *Brân* the Blessed (=*Bendigeidfran*) in Wales or the *Morrígan* in Ireland, appeared in written form after 1066, but must have circulated in oral form much earlier. Celticists' romantic desire to push that tradition back to Roman times is exemplified by *The Oldest Irish Tradition: A Window on the Iron Age*, by Kenneth Jackson, who heavily influenced R&S.

Unfortunately, most historians no longer accept that Iron-Age deities evolved seamlessly into medieval Celtic heroes (Hutton, 2013:361-370). In other words, texts such as *Mabinogion*, *Historia Brittonum*, or *Historia regum Britanniae* were based on only a limited remembrance of real facts, bulked up with a lot of imaginative fiction. Even though prodigious feats of memory were performed by bards to maintain oral history in pre-literate times (as explained here), almost by definition the advent of writing broke the chain of accurate transmission.

Folklore about ravens existed among North American Indians and in Siberia, as well as in medieval Ireland and Wales. In *Les dieux au corbeau chez les Celtes*, Krappe (1936) argued that ravens' involvement in early mythology, whether associated with the sun, sky, or fire, was due to birds' ability to fly high and see farther than humans. Hence, for example, *Odin's* scouts *Huginn and Muninn* in Norse sagas. Iceland was allegedly discovered after Hrafna-Flóki released hungry caged ravens and watched which way they flew, but that practice was very ancient. Pliny knew about birds' help with navigation, and so did Noah in the Bible.

Svanberg reviewed ravens generally, beginning thus: "The common raven (*Corvus corax*), easily recognisable with its entirely black plumage and heavy bill, is a well-known bird in circumpolar ornithology. It has coexisted with humans since the dawn of humanity and played a significant role in religious traditions and local lore everywhere. This large member of the family Corvidae is an important being as a creator, bringer of culture, trickster figure, or a dangerous bird of omen in folk beliefs and myths all over the Northern Hemisphere."

The word raven, from OE *hræfn*, is onomatopoeic. Like crow, Latin *corvus*, and Greek κοραξ, it refers to the birds' croaking calls. *Ardua ravenatone*, recorded in about AD 700 somewhere in Cornwall, would make sense as 'raven-showing cliffs'. The place name Ravenna has no accepted explanation, even though it was an administrative capital of the Roman Empire before the Goths took over. Ravenna was an important sea port, so a guiding-birds explanation would make sense, but a Germanic word related to raven would need to have been in use earlier than any known texts.

Matasovic (2009:123-4) wrote about Celtic *brano-: "a convincing IE etymology is lacking ... a loanword from an unknown source". He missed plenty of relatives, notably all the words for 'crow' in north-eastern language families (Russian ворон, Lithuanian *vārna*, Tocharian *wrauña*, etc.). Russian linguists envisage descent from PIE *wer[12]- 'to burn', related to English warm. We shall return below to the idea that burning can produce both visible light and dark colours, but first let's deviate onto other words suggested to mean 'raven' or 'crow'.

Ravens in folklore have long preoccupied Celtic scholars. An ancient god *Lugus*, discussed at length by Olmsted (1995:308-317) and Hily (2011), is claimed to lie behind Irish tales about *Lugh* and Welsh tales about *Lleu*. Inscriptions that mention *Lug-* are most common in Iberia (see here about 47 instances) and can sometimes be analysed grammatically as Celtic (Eska, 2006), but in general the evidence for *Lugus* as a pan-Celtic deity is feeble.

Λουγον was a word for raven in the dialect of the founders of *Lugdunum* (Lyon), according to Pseudo-Plutarch in *About Rivers* (VI,4) of about AD 150. That author is not highly regarded, but his stated etymology must have come from somewhere. Various artefacts associated with *Lugdunum* show a bird at the feet of a *genius loci* figure (as discussed here or here, with example photos here and here), of which some may be ravens, not eagles or storks.

Pokorny (1960:232) wrote "it is very likely that *Lug* originally meant 'the black one' (= the raven)", and his PIE dictionary suggested a root *lū-g-* 'black, swamp', which is not widely accepted. Was Strabo's Λουγεον marsh (near Trieste) λυγαιος 'gloomy' rather than related to λευκος 'light, white' or λακκος 'pond'? Was it related to Old Irish *loch* 'dark, black' not *lóch* 'bright' or *loch* 'lake'? Pseudo-Plutarch told a strange story, that a fish occurring near *Lugdunum* called κλουπαῖα was white during the waxing of the moon but completely black during the waning. Does all this hint at some confused, ancient ideas about black and white?

Irish *badb* or *bodb* is dictionary-defined as 'name of a war-goddess; hooded crow; scald-crow (in which form the goddess appeared)' or 'deadly, fatal, dangerous, ill-fated'. Heijda (2007) concluded that *bodb* meant 'crow' before becoming the attribute of a deity, but claims that it formed part of names recorded in Roman times are unconvincing. *Boduognatus* led the *Nervii* against Caesar, but that tribe were more Germanic than Celtic. ATHVBODVAE on an inscription is claimed to have lost an initial C (for example by Olmsted, 1994:411), even though the original publication explicitly said that it had not. BODVOC, written on some early British coins attributed to the *Dobunni* (?*Bodunni*) tribe near Bristol, may come from the PIE root *bhed-*, which led to Norse *boð* 'battle', a descendant personal name *boðvarr*, and possibly to the word booty. In an as-yet unpublished article (ask for a copy if interested) we discuss the possible meanings of *Boudicca* (not 'Victoria').

Now back to ancient *bran*. Historical linguists have not warmed to the idea that it is related to English brand. They are not so much worried by the wide range of vowels involved, or the metathesis (shift of R around a vowel), as by uncertainty about its PIE root: was it *bhreuə-* 'to boil, bubble, burn', or *g^wher-* 'to heat', or *wer-* 'to burn'? Linguists are addicted to divergent evolutionary trees with regular sound rules, whereas geographers happily explain confusing proper names by mixed societies, convergent evolution, and/or folk etymology.

Branta is the scientific name for a genus of waterbirds with dark plumage, including the Brent Goose. The earliest recorded use of *brent* or *brant* for birds was in 1544, but cognates in other Germanic languages hint at an origin at least as early as Celtic *bran*. Words such as German *brennen* or OE *beornan*/byrnan 'to burn' go back to the earliest written records, including Gothic *brannjan* and *brinnan* from before AD 400.

However, there are some real difficulties. For example, where does OE *brant* 'high, deep, steep' fit in? It would suit Ptolemy's Γαβραντουικων harbour bay, near the steep cliffs of

Flamborough Head, but the closest parallel in date and spelling is an early Germanic word similar to Gothic *gabrannjaidau* 'burned'. Maybe *brant* came from an altogether different *brégan* 'to terrify'? It is alarming how many geographical names beginning with BR- are problematic. And what about Aristotle's βρένθος water-bird?

Brand in Germanic personal names, such as the Goths *Brandila* in AD 525 or *Hildebrand* in early legends, is usually explained as meaning 'sword', which could flash like a flame. This can be extrapolated back (just as easily as Celtic *bran*) to the two men called *Brennus*, who led smash-and-grab raids into early Rome (387 BC) and Greece (280 BC). Evidence for other names containing *bran* in early Celtic territory is thin.

Inscriptions at Rome supply a *Branchus* and a *Branito* of uncertain ethnicity. Caesar mentioned a tribe of *Brannovices*, often translated as 'raven fighters', upon the probably-wrong assumption that *–vices* came from the same root as victory, not from *vicus* 'Romanised administrative subdivision'. *Brandobrici* on an inscription from Lugrin (by Lake Geneva) seems to be a tribal name. Gaulish coins marked *Eppvdvno* produced by the *Eburovices* in Normandy allegedly also show *Brano*, though not visibly on the only online photo we know.

Branderix, on a lead curse tablet found in the south of France and probably from the first century AD, was described as Celtic for 'raven king' by Delamarre (2003:85) and Mees (2009:106). It contains an incantation *bregissa branderix drondo gines drondo metis* (followed by some Latin), repeated three times with slight spelling variations. This makes best sense in Germanic, perhaps due to the *Cimbri* and *Teutones* who migrated south around 107 BC. All its non-Latin text has good parallels in Germanic, for example OE: *bregan* 'to terrify', *brand* 'fire', *dran* 'drone', *gin* 'abyss', *metod* 'destiny'.

Up to this point there seems to be no good reason to believe that (a) *Bran-* was distinctively Celtic or (b) it always meant 'raven/crow'. Being unkind, one might even suggest that Celticist writings on the subject are a hindrance to be waded through, not a help. But what about place names? The idea (accepted by R&S) that several mediaeval place names in France retained a memory of Gaulish **brano-* is spelled out most fully by Lacroix (2007:110-113). Britain has many names of this type, with a wide range of spellings, notably Brampton and Brompton, which are usually explained as built from OE *brom* 'broom', many with a late vowel change from O to A.

Broom is a mysterious word, with no agreed deep etymology outside Germanic languages. It covers a wide range of plants including those now commonly called brambles or gorse as well as true broom. Gorse fixes nitrogen and can survive on poor soil, if it is well drained. A preliminary investigation into names like Brampton and Brompton (a juicy research project for an MA student!), whose early forms often began with *Bran-* or *Brun-*, suggests that they tend to occur just outside Roman army sites, possibly hinting that scrubland encroached on former pastures during the post-Roman population decline. Or maybe gorse's yellow flowers inspired the name, as in the Romanian word *brânduşa* 'crocus' (see pp 361-379 here).

So why did *Branodunum* begin with *Brano-*? It seems unlikely that mariners there would have needed navigation help from birds, though maybe the raven idea could be salvaged if a large seal colony along the coast provided plenty of carrion for scavengers. Seahenge, near Branodunum, contained an upside-down oak-tree stump at its centre, which archaeologists think might have served as an excarnation platform, on which dead bodies could be exposed for scavenger birds to pick bones clean.

Place-name dictionaries use broom to explain the successor place name, Brancaster, and gorse bushes are prominent on the higher ground behind the fort, Barrow Common. In Roman times that type of vegetation might have been more extensive, extending even down

to the coast, which probably then did not have such extensive saltmarshes and fringing islands as now. A similar, thorny explanation may apply to *Gabrosentum* in Cumbria.

However, there is still no convincing semantic link between dark-coloured birds, flashing swords, and gorse bushes. A possible solution lies in the word burn. The Oxford English Dictionary discusses the dual meaning of this word at length, including: "A connexion is often assumed between [the noun meaning 'spring, fountain' and the verb 'to be on fire'] on the supposition that the root had originally the wider sense 'well up, be in commotion', applicable to water as well as to fire, but of this there is no actual evidence."

This interpretation of *Brano-* would allow *Branogenium* to be explained as the source(s) of the river Severn, but it is less than ideal for *Branodunum*, where at present no stream or spring is visible near the fort. The Roman garrison would have needed a lot of fresh water (in a fort situation that was unusual in not being beside a fresh-water river) and presumably got it from one or more springs near the fort analogous with those along the coast at Wells-next-the-Sea. An alternative explanation via gorse bushes might invoke the colours of the vegetation or perhaps Roman fires serving as navigation markers.

The history of colour words is full of surprises for a modern person, and another very peculiar word is brown. As Biggam (2010) explained, brown is "the classic case of an Old English colour word denoting, apparently, both bright glinting metal and dark hues". She went on: "my own suggestion is that *brūn* originated, in Proto-Indo-European or earlier, as a FIRE word ... and that its semantics do indeed involve both BRIGHTNESS and DARKNESS."

That theme of white turning black showed up in many ways across ancient societies. The classic example is when Tacitus (*Germania*, 43) described how a subset of the *Lugii* tribe, the *Harii* ('army', like OE *here*), using black shields and dyed bodies, would "choose pitch dark nights for their battles ... no enemy can endure a sight so strange and hellish".

The wider Indo-European context was explored in *Le Chasseur Noir* by Vidal-Naquet (1991), usefully summarised online here. He was struck by the way blackness showed up in Greece, in names such as *Melanthos* and *Melanion*, but especially in the clothing and behaviour of *Ephebes* and *Kryptoi* (adolescents learning to be warriors, rather like sneaky night-time Boy Scouts). He drew parallels with the war-bands of unmarried adolescents, known all over the world, including the Germanic *Männerbunde*.

Armenian folklore (and related traditions in the Caucasus and India) repeatedly mentions "black youth", where Petrosyan (2011:342-360 here) explained how the key Armenian word meant 'burnt, black' or 'matured as a result of thermal treatment'. He wrote that "the blackness/darkness of some traditional young heroes may be interpreted as 'burnt, sooty' and associated with igneous initiatory rituals or be a result of discoloring their bodies with soot".

A British reader instantly thinks of the *Picti* (?painted/tattooed people) plus the *Scotti* (Σκοτιοι 'of the dark') raiders. More generally, the take-home lesson seems to be that darkness shows up in a range of cultural themes, whose ultimate expression varied widely. Focussing on big black birds seems to be just one more example of over-enthusiastic Celtic romanticism. It is tempting just to regard *brano* as related to both 'burning' and 'burnt' (much as Biggam suggested) and as much the same word as Old English *brun* 'brown'.

So where does that leave the place names with which we started? At *Branodunum*, it is hard to imagine the Roman garrison, whatever their native language(s), being especially interested in black birds, or needing to burn signal fires, or wanting to describe themselves as brown. If the name was topographical, maybe it just meant 'brown hill', like hundreds of modern names (Brownhill, Brown Down, Brown Edge, etc), but then one must ask what was perceived as brown in Roman times. And did *dunum* mean 'hill', like English dune and

down, rather than 'fort', that early? The fort itself sat on a slightly higher area of ground (now known as Rack Hill) in a generally flat landscape, with Barrow Common behind it.

For *Branogenium*, Ptolemy's coordinates provide only an approximate location in mid Wales, but his *polis* implies a major native hillfort in a region of high population density. This points towards Cefn Carnedd, on the edge of a flat basin of rich farmland, in the headwaters of the river Severn. Another hillfort is nearby, at Pen y Gaer, with a Roman fort at Caersws in low ground close to the main river confluence. Careful inspection of maps throws up no obvious link with the crow family of birds, nor anything notably brown on black – though there is an undated Black Bridge Lane near the hillfort. See below why our former least-bad guess that *Brano-* there meant 'burn' in the sense of 'spring, river source' has been overruled.

There is a final, surprising twist. One of the key battles of English history took place at *Brunanburh* in 937, when the army of king Athelstan (of Saxons from Wessex and Mercia, plus some Norwegians) defeated a northern coalition (of Scots from Alba, Cumbrians from Strathclyde, and Vikings from Dublin and north-east England). Among many recorded variants of that name were *Brunandune* and *Duinbrunde*, which look suspiciously similar to *Branodunum*. Associated with the battle were the names *Dingesmere*, which begins like *thing*, the Danish word for 'moot assembly' and ends in mere 'lake', *Weondune*, which begins like OE *weoh* 'idol, sacred place' and ends like dune 'hill', *Vínheiði* near *Vínuskóga* (maybe Binchester or Ebchester), and *othlyn* (maybe 'out-lake').

Many historians and linguists have thrashed around unsuccessfully trying to locate that battle, apparently unwilling to accept that Bosworth-Toller (1898) long ago solved the problem with "I think it was on the west of Durham". The Roman main road to Scotland crossed the river Browney (*Brune* in 1190) there, in an area full of modern names such Brandon, Brancepeth, and Broompark. *Dingesmere* is close in meaning to modern Croxdale (beginning like *cruc*, discussed by Allcroft as referring to moot circles, and ending in dale 'low place') near the confluence of the rivers Browney and Wear, with *–mere* referring to the former lakes south-west of Durham artificially created for inland navigation in Roman times, recognised by Selkirk. *Weondune* survives as modern Shincliffe, with first element OE *scín* 'evil spirit'.

Written evidence about *Brunanburh*, mostly set down after 1066, and helpfully presented by this here, do not support most enthusiastically promoted candidate sites, which seem to rest on weak linguistic analysis or a belief that Olaf the Viking brought too many troops from Dublin to stray far from the Irish Sea. "Durham's geographical position has always given it an important place in the defence of England against the Scots." Maybe a military historian can pin down a more exact site than the general Wear/Browney floodplain. Is it outrageous to suggest that Bran- in some later names around might be a marker for coal outcrops?

Finally …

It has taken a long time to emerge, but there is actually a simple explanation that renders much of the preceding discussion irrelevant. Pokorny (1959) lists two PIE roots: **bhren-* 'to bulge, to stick out', with English descendants brant/brent/bront 'steep' and brink; and **bherem-* 'to stand out; brim, edge, hem' with descendants brim, berm, and bramble. Watkins (2011) ignores the first one and spells the second one **bhrem-*. It looks as if a lot of ancient words beginning with BR- referred to something at an edge, and both *Branodunum* and *Branogenium* very definitely stick out at an edge.