

## NORTHERN STUDIES

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## Venta, Gwenta, Finn, Guen

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This paper is a contribution to the long-standing discussion on the names *Venta* and *Gwent*. Fresh evidence comes from the river-name *Find/Finn*, borne presently by two Irish rivers<sup>1</sup> and formerly in use in about ten other cases. The hypothesis put forward here is that Indo-European \**uentā* produced the Celtic cognates *Venta*, *Gwent*, *Finn* and possibly *Guen* in Brittany, in which the primary meaning was 'water' (or some other liquid), later 'stream' or 'river'.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to the river-names referred to above, *Finn* is attested as a liquid in the following two glosses.

(a) In the gloss *fionn no finn .i. lachd* 'fionn or finn i.e. milk'; *le muic finn (re muic lachdmhair)* 'with a milky pig'.<sup>3</sup>

(b) In the gloss on the place-name *Ail-finn/Ailfinn/Ail Finn*, now Elphin, Co. Roscommon: *Dind ail . . . itá forbrúch intopair . . . nominatur locus Ail-find; de aqua nuncupatur* 'from the rock . . . which is on the edge of the well the place is named Ail-find; it is called from the water [*find* (fair), editor]'.<sup>4</sup>

Irrespective of meaning and of possible scribal errors, the forms *Ail-finn* and *Ailfind* above indicate a compound, accented on the first syllable, but today *Elphin* is stressed on the second syllable, implying a name-phrase instead. In the name-phrase *Ail find*, the second word should take the accent, and, if it were a feminine noun, the syntax would require it to be in the genitive *finne*, which is not found.

It should be made clear that *find/finn* 'river' has largely been overshadowed by *find/finn* 'white' (Modern Irish *fionn*) in the eyes of editors.<sup>5</sup> On the name *Ail Finn* for instance, Stokes has the following: *Patricius uero venit de fonte Alo-find* ' . . . fountain of Ail-find (white rock)'.<sup>6</sup> Many *finn*- compounds have been universally translated as though from *fionn* 'white, fair', but 'water' or 'river' would seem to be more appropriate, as in the compound nouns *finn-airge* 'milch-herd' (better, 'stream milking-place?'), *finnchlesa* 'water-feats' (?), *finnglenn* 'river-glen', *finnloch* 'river-lake' (?).<sup>7</sup>

*Finn* as a river-name is best and longest attested in the Finn River (*Abhainn na Finne*), which flows eastward across Co. Donegal from a lake near the west coast, to Strabane, where the

Finn joins the Mourne River to make the Foyle River. The earliest record of the name is a latinized form of the genitive (singular, feminine). It occurs in the phrase *in valle piscosi fluminis Fendæ* in Adomnan's *Vita Columbae*, dating to about the close of the seventh century.<sup>8</sup> The nominative singular of the latinized form seems to be seen in the form *Fendacuilt* (probably to be read *Fenda Cuilt*), but it remains unidentified and unexplained.<sup>9</sup>

The present hypothesis, then, is that an Irish *finn* 'liquid' and river-name *Finn* might be cognate with Romano-British *Venta*. For that to be valid, it is necessary to consider the development of *nt* in stressed syllables.<sup>10</sup> Indo-European *nt* normally became *t* in Old Irish (Modern Irish *d*) and a preceding vowel might change, in quality or in quantity or in both, as in old Irish *cét* (Mod.Ir. *céad*), Welsh *cant*, Cornish *cans*, Breton *kant*, Latin *centum*, Greek *hekatón*, Sanskrit *satá-m*. In the present context, the original vowels were normally *a* and *e*, with *o* and *u* scarce; the developed vowel in Irish is usually *é*, with *ó* occasionally. So an original *uentā* ought to have become Old Irish *\*fét*. However, there is no trace of such an Irish word: we must ask whether *-nt* could somehow have survived.

Concerning Latin loans to Irish in *nt*, Thurneysen gave the opinion<sup>11</sup> that *nt* did not exist in Irish at the time when the word *cland* 'children' was borrowed from Latin *planta* through Welsh *plant* 'children'.<sup>12</sup> A glance at Old Irish glossaries and word-lists will show that a large number of words in *ent* and *int* are to be found, from all parts of speech. Proper names like *Fintan*,<sup>13</sup> *Hentar*, *Nento*, *Runtar* must go back to the oldest period of Irish, though *-nt-* in these names may sometimes be due to syncope. Again, many verbs whose root ends in *-n* (*ben*, *bruinn*, *glen*, *ren*, etc.) are conjugated with verbal endings beginning with *-t-*, again as a result of syncope. This means that *nt* was heard constantly side by side with *nd* from an early period. It could have facilitated an acceptance of *\*Fent* (from *Uent*), and other exceptions to the development *nt* > *t*, as normal components of the language.

The following list gives all the insular *Venta*-names known to me, together with other relevant information, particularly in regard to rivers, and a water-course is identified in the case of each of the sites (b)-(e). It seems self-evident that any Roman site must have been chosen with an eye to the necessity of a reliable water supply; in many cases, a river or stream could have been the most convenient answer to such a need. Nor would it have been unusual for the site to adopt the name of such a river.

*Venta*.

(a) *Bannaventa*. Information incomplete (it has been identified with the Roman settlement at Whilton Lodge, Northamptonshire).<sup>14</sup>

(b) *Glannoventa*. Site of a Roman fort, east of Ravenglass, Cumberland, on the south bank of the River Mite, where the estuaries of three rivers (Esk, Irt, Mite) meet.<sup>15</sup>

(c) *Venta Belgarum*, referred to as *Venta* by Ptolemy.<sup>16</sup> The site of Winchester city, built on the banks of the River Ichen. The Welsh name is *Caer-went*, also found as *Caerwynt*, in which *-wynt* 'wind' is a mistranslation, according to Williams.<sup>17</sup> He also interpreted *gwent* as 'maes/field', a meaning which, in addition, applies to the Welsh forms below, and has now found its way into the dictionaries. Holder gives the following under this name:<sup>18</sup> gen. sg., *episcopus Ventae*, adjectival forms, *Daniele Ventano* and *civitati Ventanae*; A.D. 731, the date given, seems to apply to all three.

(d) *Venta Icenorum*, referred to by Ptolemy as *Venta*.<sup>19</sup> The site of a Roman *oppidum* near Caistor, south of Norwich. The map shows the River Tas at fifty yards from the site; the editor's note in the *Geographia* states *nunc Caistor ad Wensum fluvium prope Norwich* (p. 100b).

(e) *Venta Silurum*. Site of a Roman *oppidum* at Caerwent, Monmouthshire; see under *Gwent*, below.<sup>20</sup> Not in Ptolemy's *Geographia*, but Müller, in his edition of Ptolemy, states 'Alia Silurum urbs est in Venta Silurum . . . hodie Caer-Went'. Holder refers to it as *pagus in Guenta provincia*.<sup>21</sup>

For 'market-place' as a meaning for *venta*, and consequently for *gwent*, as also Spanish *venta* 'hostel', see *Celtic Review* 10 (1916), 282ff., from J. B. Johnson's *Place-Names of England and Wales*. The simplex *Venta* with the addition of a tribal name in (c), (d), and (e) lends some support to the suggestion that these were all places of importance in pre-Roman times, possibly in origin sacred sites, and the venues of periodic tribal gatherings similar to the Irish *aenach*.

*Gwent*.

This section deals with the site of *Caerwent/Venta Silurum* and related toponyms from associated areas, especially the river. At present, *Neden* (*Neder*, *Nedern*) is the name of the stream which flows by Caerwent and Caldicot to the Severn estuary. According to Thomas, the stream flows 13 miles only from source to estuary, but it has three other names in addition to *Neden*:<sup>22</sup> *Trogi* (< *Torogy*), *Nant Caerwent*, *Caldicot Pill*. Thomas also cites the

following quotation from Lhuyd's *Parochialia*: 'The river near Kaerwent a diving river. It sinks onely in dry summers above Lhan Melin and then the Fish are exposed to the crows.' From Arthurian sources the name *Duëlas* is instanced as the name of the river by which Caeruënt stood, interpreted by Cross as Celtic *Dubglas* 'blackish-blue';<sup>23</sup> better Welsh *dulais/dulas* ('stream' or the like). All four words contain *glais/glas* 'watercourse' and are well-known in English in the place-name *Douglas*. Variants of the same words occur in many places from Scotland to Brittany.

This section is concerned with the name *Gwent* itself and related names.

- (a) *Gwent*, possibly the early name of the River Neden, also the early name of a large adjoining area, Latinized *Wencia* and *Guenta*; see *Venta* (e), above.
- (b) *Coed Gwent*, *Wentwood*, a large wood dividing the province into two cantreds.
- (c) *Gwent Iscoed*, *Nether Went*, *Wencia Inferior*, 'Gwent below the Wood', towards the Severn estuary.
- (d) *Gwent Uwch Coed*, 'Gwent above the Wood', the uplands to the north of the province.
- (e) *Dwywent*, *Diu Went*, the two cantreds into which the province was divided, the same as (c) and (d) above.
- (f) *Blaenau Gwent*, the uplands in the north of the province.
- (g) *Caer Gwent*, now *Caerwent*, *Karwent*, etc.; see *Venta* (e), above.
- (h) *Cas-gwent*, *Casgwent*, *Caswent*, *Castell Went*, Welsh names for Chepstow; in these names, *Gwent* refers to the province.

There are also the following unidentified names, in which *-went* might stand for *gwent* 'river, stream'. Under the influence of the name *Gwent*, (a)-(c) have been explained as 'maes' [field] by Williams,<sup>24</sup> as indicated below; the remainder are unexplained.

- (a) *Arddunwent* 'maes/field'; *Arddun* is a female personal name.
- (b) *Cadwent* 'battlefield'; I suggest that 'battle river' is possible, since rivers are often boundaries where two forces might contest a crossing.
- (c) *Llinwent* 'flaxfield'; since flax is also connected with rivers and streams for retting, 'flax stream' may also be a consideration.
- (d) *Gosgyrnwent*, unexplained.
- (e) *Kilwentford*; *-ford* is hardly Welsh *fordd* 'road', so if it is English *ford*, it matches (*g*)*went* 'river' quite well.
- (f) *Teirwent* 'three Gwents'; hardly 'three parts of Gwent' after *Gwent* (e) above, but an unusual topographical feature like three rivers could well evoke a toponym.

- (g) *Ynys Gwent*; unexplained, but *ynys* 'island' suggests that 'river' would not be amiss as a meaning for *gwent*.

#### *Guen.*

It seems possible to trace a connection between the development of *Finn/Gwent/Venta* suggested above and the Breton language. As mentioned above, *fionn* 'white' displaced \**finn* 'river' almost completely in Irish. A similar change has happened in Breton, in the case of *gwenn* 'white' and \**guen* 'watercourse'; the position becomes still more confused, if *gwin* 'wine' is considered. Trépos, who used place-name material consistently to illustrate his work, has pointed out the following.<sup>25</sup>

- (a) *Guen*-names, which if the first element is interpreted as 'white', would seem to be accompanied by an unsuitable qualifier: *Quengo* (*go* < *kozh* 'old') and *Vencam* (*cam* 'curved'); also some cases, like *Quenven* < *guen* + (*g*)*wenn*, *Venguen* < (*g*)*wen(n)* + *cuen/gwen(n)*, are interpreted to make *Quen*- and *guen*- mean 'white'.
- (b) *Guen* cannot mean 'white' when qualified by a personal name, as in *Quengaradec*; *Gueno*, *Guenno* and other forms of the Breton personal name (*gwenn* 'white') appear in Breton place-names, but not as qualifiers of *Guen*.
- (c) *Guin* (< *guen*) has been interpreted as 'wine' in *Kerquingoh* (*goh* < *kozh* 'old'), *Mezcouen* (*mez* 'field'), etc.

If *guen* developed from \**venta*, it lost *t* as compared with Welsh *Gwent*. Analogy, as mentioned by Jackson, would account for that, since *Venta* and *Gwent* were names connected with places of importance over a long period.<sup>26</sup> Breton had no part in such a context. In other cases, loss of final *t* became common in Welsh (*cant/can*, *cynt/cyn*, *ariant/arian*, etc.), but in Welsh *gwynt*, Breton *gwent* 'wind', the *t* is preserved to the present day. Assimilation of *nt* to *nh* is normal, however, in the Welsh polysyllables *Gwenhwys* 'man of Gwent' and *Gwenhwysseg* 'Gwentian dialect'.

GALWAY

#### NOTES

This is a revised version of the paper delivered on 28 March 1987 at the XIXth Annual Conference of the Council for Name Studies held at the University of Nottingham.

1. The Finn River, Co. Donegal, and the River Finn, which enters Sligo Bay at Buninna (*Bun Fhinne*).
2. Cf. Bann, Co. Antrim, etc., and Bandon River, Co. Cork, Irish *banna*, which are based on *banna* 'a drop', later *bainne* 'milk'.

3. The O'Clery glossary, s.v.; see *A Dictionary of the Irish Language, Based Mainly on Old and Middle Irish Materials* (Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, 1913-76), s.v. 2 *finn*, where the gloss is described as 'perhaps doubtful'.
4. Whitley Stokes, *The Tripartite Life of St Patrick* (London, 1887), I, 96; compare Mac Carthy, 'On the Tripartite Life of St Patrick', *Transactions of the Royal Irish Academy*, 29 (1889), vi, 195, where Stokes's reading is amended to 'from the rock . . . the place is named *Ail*; *find* it is called from the water'.
5. The adjective *find/finn* 'white' (Modern Irish *fionn*, where the final consonant-cluster is velar), is also commonly used as a proper noun, with the genitive (masculine) *Finn*, where *-nn* is palatal. But there is also *Find/Finn*, a feminine river-name (Modern Irish *Finn*, where the final cluster is palatal), genitive *Finne*.
6. Stokes, *op.cit.*, ii, 314.10.
7. All from *RIA Dictionary*, s.v. 1 *finn* 'white'.
8. *Adomnan's Life of Columba*, edited by A. O. and M. O. Anderson (Edinburgh, 1961), 534-35 and n. 8. The Andersons translate the name as '(of the ) white goddess', a compound of *fend* + *dē*, 141-42.
9. Edmund Hogan, *Onomasticon Goedelicum* (Dublin, 1910), 409, from the Book of Lecan, fol. 99.
10. Similar changes affect *nc*, but they are not relevant here.
11. Rudolf Thurneysen, *A Grammar of Old Irish*, translated by D. A. Binchy and O. Bergin (Dublin, 1946), 567.
12. Stokes thought that *cland* 'plant' was a loan from Latin, but that the other *cland* 'children' could have been a genuine Celtic word (*Tripartite Life of St Patrick*, 643b). However, Thurneysen treats the two as one word, 567.
13. A contemporary of Éire, Banba and others, connected, in the Book of Invasions, with the first invasion of the Gaels. He may be connected with *find* 'river', since in folklore he was said to have survived the Flood. For *-an*, compare the place-names *Cruachan* 'hill', *Leacan* 'flagstone'. T. F. O'Rahilly, *Early Irish History and Mythology* (Dublin, 1946), 319 n. 1, quotes Kuno Meyer as suggesting that *Fintan* was from *\*Vindo-senos* ('white-haired and old'), but would himself prefer *\*Vindo-tenos*, where the second element may be a form of *tene* or *ten* 'fire'. A similar series of names, *Finnén*, *Fin(n)tén*, *Findech*, apparently derived from *\*finn* 'water', are to be read as palatal throughout, except for the final consonant in each case.
14. A. L. F. Rivet and C. Smith, *The Place-Names of Roman Britain* (London, 1979), 262-65.
15. *op.cit.*, 367.
16. *op.cit.*, 492.
17. Spurrel's *English-Welsh Dictionary*, edited by J. B. Anwyl (Cardiff, 1916), 376b; Ifor Williams, *Enwau Lleoedd*, 3rd edition (Lerpwl, 1969), 42.

18. A. Holder, *Alt-celtischer Sprachschatz*, 3 vols (Leipzig, 1896-1907), III, 174.
19. Rivet and Smith, *op.cit.*, 492.
20. *op.cit.*, 493.
21. *Claudii Ptolemaei Geographia*, edited by C. Müller, 2 vols (Paris, 1883-1901), I, 101b; Holder, *loc.cit.*
22. R. J. Thomas, *Enwau Afonydd a Nentydd Cymru* (Cardiff, 1938), 123.
23. Cross, *Revue Celtique* 31, 417 n. 1, quoting *Revue des deux Mondes*, 107 (1891), 848, etc.
24. Williams, *Enwau Lleoedd*, 42.
25. P. Trépos, *Le Pluriel breton* (Brest, 1957), 99-100.
26. K. H. Jackson, *Language and History in Early Britain* (Edinburgh, 1953), 496.