

A toponomastic contribution to the linguistic prehistory of the British Isles¹

Richard Coates

University of the West of England, Bristol

INTRODUCTION

This is a philological paper about some of the earliest linguistic evidence for human habitation in the British Isles. Its theme has not been thought up as a plank in an argument for some preconceived theory of settlement history, though its implications for (pre)history must be addressed in due course when the philology has been allowed to speak for itself. The data consists principally of island names without any obvious or any firmly established etymology, and analysis of these is followed by a short foray into the topographical vocabulary of the Celtic languages. The paper does

¹ This paper is a development of one read at the 23rd International Congress of Onomastic Sciences, Toronto, 17–22 August 2008, and I am grateful to the editors of the *Proceedings* (2009), Wolfgang Ahrens, Sheila Embleton, and André Lapierre, for permission to re-use some material. A version was also read at the Second Conference on the Early Medieval Toponymy of Ireland and Scotland, Queen's University Belfast, 13 November 2009. It also covers a small part of the ground of my unpublished paper, 'On a recent view of the linguistic prehistory of Europe', read at the Linguistics Association of Great Britain conference, University of Sussex, Brighton, April 1996. I am grateful for magnanimous comment on the ideas by Theo Vennemann, given in the face of nearly twenty years of scepticism on my part about his broader theses. I am indebted and grateful to Paul Tempan for sight of two pre-publication articles of his, on the discovery that we are working with similar ideas, and for his help with obtaining, understanding and evaluating certain Irish sources; and also to George Broderick, both for sight of work which was at that point unpublished and for comments. Further valuable comments were made by a *Nomina* reviewer. Thanks are also due to Tony Oliver for permission to use his image of a Totronald Stone.

not embody a claim that all mysterious material must come from a single linguistic source; and not all mysterious island-names have been dealt with. There is no discussion of, for example, *Rathlin* (Mac Gabhann 1997, 282) or *Achill* (*Acaill*), *Wight* (Romano-British *Vectis*; Rivet and Smith 1979, 487–89), *Bass* (*Rock*), *Skye* (Romano-British *Scitis*; Rivet and Smith 1979, 452), *Lewis* or *Fetlar*, the first element of *Shetland* (earlier *Hetland*; Jakobsen 1936, 127–28) or Adomnán's *Sainea* (*insula*) (Watson 1926, 91), all examples of names arguably not originally formed in any of the historic languages of the British Isles or at any rate not fully understood, but about whose origin the drift of this paper implies no particular claim. The article may be controversial.

THE STIMULUS FROM OTHER DISCIPLINES

Whilst this paper has not been conceived in support of any particular theory of settlement history, we need to present as a backdrop the state of current beliefs about population movements in those remote times. The history of scholarship in this area, and about possible non-Indo-European aspects of Celtic, has recently been the subject of wide-ranging survey papers by McCone (2005) and Broderick (2010); what appears below was written independently of both, and prior to sight of either, but some points in relation to which they are specifically mentioned have been incorporated since the initial draft.

It is commonly accepted that the final glacial advance of the last Ice Age in the British Isles was during the very cold event called the Younger Dryas (Oppenheimer 2006, 151–55). This was the culmination of the Devensian (in the Alps called the Würm) glaciation, about 12,800–11,500 years before the present and therefore ending by about 9,500–9,000 BCE. The glaciers of the Loch Lomond Readvance covered much of southern Scotland and northern England and left the remainder of Britain and Ireland under cold desert or tundra conditions, along with the exposed floor of what is now the North Sea (Coles 1998; Gaffney et al. 2007). At this period, the region now occupied by the islands is believed

to have been uninhabited, though the area is known to have been peopled previously, at various times in the Upper Palaeolithic before the Loch Lomond event, for example by people bearing the Creswellian culture. These earlier, pre-glaciation, inhabitations are assumed to be of no relevance for the present work.

Stephen Oppenheimer (2006) presents a synthesis of convincing genetic evidence that, after the Younger Dryas, Britain and Ireland were resettled by modern humans mainly emerging from the Ice Age refuge of the Iberian peninsula from about 10,000 years ago onwards. These people(s) had a Mesolithic material culture. Oppenheimer's view is consistent with the archaeological evidence adduced by Barry Cunliffe (1997; 2001), which is interpreted as showing that a succession of material cultures, including those of the Neolithic megalith-erectors responsible for monuments in Brittany and the islands such as Carnac, the menhir of Er Grah (Locmariaquer), Newgrange, Callanish, Avebury, and Stonehenge, spread up from the south along the Atlantic coast to the British Isles. The route may have been maritime or terrestrial, and what alternatives were available depends on the date. We know that the land-bridge joining Britain to the continent was not finally broken till about 6,500 BCE. Before that, people and their artefacts could have arrived by either land or sea, and after that only by sea. No position is taken here on Oppenheimer's other claim that there was an influx of people from the east during this period, though in my view there is no linguistic evidence to support it.

Those who headed north as Europe warmed up must have spoken some language or languages. We have no historical knowledge of this period, of course, but we do have some epigraphic knowledge of the languages written in the Iberian peninsula before the beginning of the Roman empire (fully set out in Untermann 2001), and that knowledge may act as a proxy for an understanding of the local cultures of the first

millennium BCE. Some linguists group together these mostly poorly-evidenced and incompletely-understood languages, Tartessian,² Iberian, Lusitanian, and Celtiberian (of which the second may have been, and the fourth was, Celtic) as *Palaeohispanic*, a term intended to exclude the late-arriving colonial and economic languages, namely Punic, Greek and Latin. It has been suggested elsewhere (Coates 2009) that the relatively little which is known about the Palaeohispanic languages and about their contemporary, Aquitanian (effectively the ancestor of Basque), offers no insight into the toponomastic prehistory of the British Isles, and all of these languages can therefore be regarded as irrelevant here except insofar as any of them might have been directly ancestral to Insular Celtic. It is interesting that the existence of Celtiberian is consistent with ancient Irish stories in *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* ‘Book of the Taking of Ireland’ (‘books’ 2 and 8) about Gaelic migration from Iberia, the so-called ‘Milesian’ invasion (Macalister 1938–56; on the relevant archaeology see Cunliffe 1997, ch. 7), though it is debatable what the linguistic impact of an invasion of male warriors might have been (as also observed by Mac Eoin 2007, 117). Direct migration from Iberia to Ireland is also indicated by a recent archaeological study of edible snail populations (Grindon and Davison 2013), and there are other such biological hints.

Iberia was also home to the colonial and economic languages mentioned above, in the centuries immediately before and after the turn of the first millennium CE:

North-West Semitic (NWSem; represented by Late Phoenician, in the form of Punic), in some colonies of Carthage, e.g. Cartagena, Ibiza, Málaga, and Cádiz, on Mediterranean coasts; inscriptions are

² John T. Koch has recently (2009) argued that Tartessian was in fact Celtic.

found even after the year zero, e.g. on coins (Jiménez Díez forthcoming);

Ancient Greek, in some colonies on the Mediterranean coast, e.g. Ampurias, Hemeroskopeion (?Alicante), and Zakynthos (Zakantha; Sagunto);

Latin, which eventually occupied almost the whole of Iberia.

These languages may open explanatory possibilities where Palaeohispanic and Aquitanian do not.

An insistent question underlying all discussions of the linguistic prehistory of the islands is whether any pre-Celtic language(s) were Indo-European or not. There is little prospect of deriving any relevant information from historical sources as such (as opposed to linguistic forms in those sources). But compensating inferences may also be made from toponymy, in the broadest sense. Most scholars accept that the ancient river-nomenclature of the islands includes a strong Indo-European component which Nicolaisen (2001), following Krahe (1963), calls ‘Old European’, and this component is further analysed by Kitson (1996). Most scholars also accept that most, if not all, of pre-Roman Britain and Ireland spoke some variety of Celtic (*pace* Oppenheimer 2006, ch. 7; for a still-controversial variant of the standard view which does not affect the prehistoric period under discussion here, see Schrijver 2007). It is still uncertain whether all the evidence for Pictish indicates that it was a Celtic language or not (for a survey, see Forsyth 1997). There are certainly non-Celtic or doubtfully Celtic place-names recorded from (especially) northern Scotland (Nicolaisen 2001, ch. 9, esp. 244–45), but whether these might usefully be called Pictish or not is a controversial and for the present unproductive matter.

A pivotal rhetorical role in discussions of prehistory is sometimes accorded to Ivernian or Ivernisc, said to have been spoken in Ireland well into historic times and alluded to in Cormac’s glossary (*Sanas Cormaic*, ninth/tenth century: Meyer 1912; Russell 1988), but this language is not

fully recorded and it is evidenced only as a vocabulary source for a formal register of Old Irish. It may have been a P-Celtic language, according to recent thinking, and it cannot safely be concluded that it was non-Celtic. Some scholars of Irish have recently allowed the possibility of the existence of pre-Celtic languages in Ireland, contributing to toponymy, without conceding explicitly that some particular non-Indo-European language might be involved (e.g. Mac Eoin 2007; De Bernardo Stempel 2007, 138; Tempan 2008).

It has been known from the earliest times that speakers of Palaeohispanic, Aquitanian, and the languages mentioned in bold type above, which I will collectively call ‘Southern’, could have had an economic incentive to travel as far as the British Isles. That incentive consisted of metal ores, and with varying degrees of probability they may have taken it up. Latin-speakers were simply the last of the line. Greeks from Massilia visited the islands perhaps in the sixth century BCE (an anonymous sailor, as reported by Avienus, though that has been challenged by Hawkes 1977, 17–25), and in the fourth century BCE (Pytheas, as reported somewhat sceptically by Strabo, Pliny and Polybius).³ The fourth-century historian Ephorus has also left an account of Iberia and the Celtic lands to us, largely copied by Diodorus Siculus,⁴ and Hawkes thinks Ephorus, rather than the Massiliote sailor, may have transmitted certain Insular names to the Greeks. Strabo (*Geography* 3.5.11) says that the Phoenicians used British tin and did commerce with the Cassiterides islands (whose location is controversial but has often been claimed to be Scilly). But using British tin does not necessarily mean that they ever came to Britain; it could have been traded overland by intermediaries in Gaul or Iberia. However, in Elizabethan times, the

³ Relevant texts by these writers are printed in Rivet and Smith (1979, respectively 87–92, 79–80, 82).

⁴ Rivet and Smith (1979, 62–63).

schoolmaster and antiquarian John Twyne (1590) suggested that Phoenician/Punic tin-speculators had indeed reached Britain, bringing the coracle with them. Twyne's biographer calls this 'a notion that beguiled much later generations' (Martin 2004). Whilst there is no archaeological or epigraphic evidence for such a visit, actual colonization is taken as a given by Vennemann (2006, 356–57 and n. 40), and a visitation is not inherently implausible. After all, these great seafarers left the Mediterranean to explore the west coast of Africa, possibly at least as far as modern Sierra Leone (Heidelberg University MS. Codex Heidelbergensis 398, folios 55r–56r; see Harden 1971, 163–68), and there is no reason why they could not have turned to starboard at the Straits of Gibraltar instead and hugged the coast of the Bay of Biscay.

In a conceptually related claim, Vennemann (1998b) has suggested that the ancient name of Ireland *Ivernia/Hibernia* derives from Proto-Semitic **i: weriju:* 'island of copper' (or in his preferred notation +*'y-wr'(m)*); note, however, that Orel and Stolbova (1994, s.v.) reconstruct the NWSem root in a metathetic form as **'ariw-*). His argument is presumably meant to recall the Bronze Age copper mines at Allihies, Co. Cork, though despite this possible factual foundation it has not won wide acceptance. Schrijver's cautious derivation of the name (1995, 288) is the latest in a line tracing it ultimately to Proto-Indo-European (PIE) **piHwerjon-* 'fat (land)' or similar, and this still seems to be the widely preferred solution, despite some acknowledged unclarity ('A [Proto-Celtic] or PIE origin of the formation is uncertain'). Broderick (2009, 165–66) broadly supports Vennemann's idea, and we return to the question below under heading 12.

If there is any substance in the theory that the British Isles were resettled from Iberia after the Younger Dryas, possibly as a chained population movement also driven by the intensifying desertification of North Africa, then our knowledge of these 'Southern' languages represents the only hope of being able to offer any linguistic support to any settlement hypothesis arising from the joint venture involving population genetics, archaeology and Irish mythology. Looking for points

of systematic resemblance between Insular Celtic and ‘Southern’ would be well motivated in the light of these recent advances. We could (as scholars have done since Rhÿs 1890) look for ‘Southern’ traces in the most problematic grammar and vocabulary of the Celtic languages, i.e. that which has been identified as uncertainly Indo-European (as others have done, unsuccessfully, for a relation between Basque and Celtic; Trask 1997, esp. 368–72); and we could look for links between Iberia and the British Isles starting with the most obscure surviving toponyms in the islands. In this paper we will focus on the toponymic task, but the parallel lexical task will not prove irrelevant; nothing much will be said about grammar, because that is beyond the self-imposed brief.

The toponymic task has been attempted directly by Adams (1980, incorporating earlier work, and ranging more widely than names), and in relation first to one name by Coates (1988b) and then to others also by Coates (2009). A major contributor has also been Theo Vennemann (in many articles cited in this paper), as part of his wider project to establish the existence of a ‘Semitidic’ substrate not only in the Insular languages but also in others elsewhere in Europe. Methodologically, as regards our approach to individual names, the work of Vennemann and myself is similar, but we differ in that I do not find myself able to subscribe to his substrate hypothesis, and we also differ about the interpretation of certain names. The toponymic task has been attempted indirectly by others who have cleared the ground by identifying those toponyms which do not appear to have a Celtic, or an Indo-European, origin without proposing an actual source (De Bernardo Stempel 2000; Parsons 2000; Sims-Williams 2000; Isaac 2005).

The toponymic task can be performed in two ways. We could look at the available evidence of the ‘Southern’ languages (Latin and Greek having already been trawled as far as is reasonable, leaving us with Palaeohispanic and Punic, and possibly others beyond Iberia, a possibility which we do not take into account here) and see whether there is anything that illuminates the most problematic place-names; or we could look at the most problematic place-names and see whether anything

reminds us of the minimal ‘Southern’ evidence. In practice, we could do these simple-minded tasks at the same time. But doing them is methodologically problematic: the evidence base at both ends of the task is so small and so semantically restricted that we are unlikely to discover anything systematic, and we are open to the dangers of theorizing on the basis of unsystematizable individual snippets of data. We also need to bear in mind the probability of unknown linguistic changes in the relevant languages between the records of texts and names at different times. Something is known about the history of Aquitanian/Basque (Michelena 1964 and subsequent work; Trask 1997), Punic (Krahmalkov 2000; 2001 [Latino-Punic especially]; Jongeling and Kerr 2005; Jongeling 2008) and of course Greek and Latin, and a fair amount about Continental Celtic (Eska and Evans 1993; Sims-Williams 2006); nothing is known of the development of the other, Palaeohispanic, languages which we have in any case discarded. We need to bear in mind the risk of the obliteration of some sorts of evidence, especially phonological, when a name is adopted and adapted by speakers of another language, meaning here the processes of celticization. The additional risk of distortion because of completely normal folk-etymological, or analogical lexical or morphological, pressures is constantly present.⁵

We could conclude straight away that we are looking for needles in a haystack even though we are unsure exactly what needles look like and suspect that the haystack contains a few things which look a bit like what needles might look like. It would be foolish to expect anything more than some possibilities to emerge from the present paper, and I do not want to raise expectations. We will be dealing with similarities, in the interpretation of which we risk an excessively naïve account of the little

⁵ Vennemann appears to subscribe to the notion that modern linguistic evidence may disguise earlier evidence through wholesale folk-etymology (in one of two senses: Vennemann 1999b).

data we have. But it is a task worth doing. If another discipline (here, genetics, backed to some degree by archaeology, history and mythology) produces a serious hypothesis with linguistic implications, then linguists are right to see what light they can shed on the problem. And our own discipline, independently of the findings in genetics, has come up with a serious proposal: as we have seen, Vennemann has proposed in a long series of articles that the vocabulary of northern European languages has both a Semitic-like (‘Semitic’) and a Basque-like (‘Vasconic’) strand.⁶ Vennemann’s hypothesis (as set out for example in his 1995 and 1998a papers) is at least superficially compatible with aspects of the story told by genetics, archaeology and Celtic mythology. It is against the background of this *prima facie* possibility that I want to explore possible Insular-‘Southern’ relations.⁷

In this paper, I discuss evidence from one category of names in Britain and Ireland—*island-names*—that has proved resistant to analysis or controversial. No other single group of names offers so much dark material as a proportion of the total dataset, though I shall mention other names from time to time, and strike off in a new but related direction at

⁶ More specifically, he believes that Germanic is ‘substratally Vasconized, superstratally Hamito-Semiticized Indo-European’ (Vennemann 2000, abstract). The possibility of a Semitic substrate in Irish was first articulated systematically by Pokorny (1927), following Rhys (1890) and Morris Jones (1900); see also McCone (2005, 412–19). But their conclusions relate almost exclusively to grammar, and there is little suggestion of Semitic substrate lexis in their work, as McCone says forcefully elsewhere (2006, 40).

⁷ However, I see this endeavour as entirely separate from current discussions about the possible influence of Semitic on Celtic and therefore on early English (Vennemann 2001; 2002; Filppula et al. 2008, *sparsim*, and further references there of which the fountainhead is Pokorny 1959, e.g. 161). I have nothing to say about this here, and the present paper should not be taken as indicating an attitude towards it (but see Coates 2010).

the end. A complete onomastic analysis would deal also with unexplained or unsatisfactorily explained river-names (*Humber, Severn, Farrar, Ness*) and personal names and ethnonyms (*Partholón, Deirdriu/-e, Prasutagus; Erdinoi, Gangani, Silures, Icenii*) in the early Irish and Romano-British (RB) record, whether we agree with Nicolaisen or not that some of these may ultimately be non-Celtic Indo-European; and we should also be prepared to consider whether historically unexplained lexical items in Celtic can be etymologized from a ‘Southern’ perspective, a matter to be approached later. But let us start with island-names as a finite and well-defined category.

THE ISLAND MYSTERIES

There are two small sets of difficult island-names each sharing similarities, and these are of particular methodological interest in a study where too much may easily be read into a single name. Here, the default strategy of previous investigators has been to attempt an explanation in terms of known elements in known languages, and that is of course perfectly reasonable: it respects the evidence as we have it. It does not always produce a credible solution, but sometimes it does. The relevance of this section containing datasets 1 and 2 might not be readily apparent after reading, so I justify it here: I have included it as a demonstration that the eventual conclusion of this paper is not based on an attempt to see evidence supporting it in an entire fleet of names, come what may; also as a demonstration that even some of the most difficult names are probably Indo-European; and as a warning that the conclusion is, in the absence of convincingly non-IE patterns in the dataset, necessarily based on the interpretation of a collection of individual names rather than clusters.

1. *Man* and *Môn* (the Welsh name of Anglesey)

We need to examine these names in the present context because of Vennemann's (e.g. 1993, 460–68; 1995) attention to a supposed Vasconic root seen in Basque *mu(i)no* 'hill' and *muna* 'slope, bank' appearing in many European place-names. These words are, however, likely to be Romance borrowings in Basque (Trask 1997, 367, following Corominas and Pascual 1984–91, who propose a Romance stem **bunn-*, later developing an initial nasal by anticipatory assimilation; Trask 1997, 140), and if that is the case Vennemann's suggestion that these words may appear in a number of Vasconic place-names in Europe is fatally compromised.⁸

Man and *Môn* have often been confused, partly for phonological and orthographic reasons and partly because the islands share the Irish Sea with each other. Despite massive orthographic variation in the sources, philology demands that *Man* be referred to a British **Manaw(j)ā* (see Rivet and Smith 1979, 410 for a summary of discussion up to that date). Such a form may also be responsible for the name *Manaw Gododdin* (*Manau Guotodin*), an early-recorded district at the head of the Firth of Forth, and for Irish names of the type *Mano* (Loth 1934). There seems no reason to give credit to Pliny's unique spelling *Monapia*. Rivet and Smith refer **Manaw(j)ā* to a root meaning 'high'. It might be cognate with the root of British **monijo-* 'upland' which may also be seen in *Mona*, *Môn*; De Bernardo Stempel (2007, 158) actually suggests that the name of Man means 'the one related to Mona [i.e. Anglesey]'. The relation might be

⁸ I should make it perfectly clear that Vennemann has not uttered an opinion on the two names discussed in this section, and that his views on the elements mentioned are given here to provide a wider context for my remarks. He believes, moreover, that Vasconic influence on these or any other island-names is unlikely, since its speakers in his view 'were no seafarers' (personal correspondence, 18/08/2008).

underpinned by the well-evidenced change of [o] to [a] before a resonant consonant when followed by another [a] (Schrijver 1995, 94–97), and if that is right then the name is Celtic, specifically Brittonic. Rivet and Smith cite continental analogues. Broderick (2006, xi) offers a more cautious ‘Indo-European’ suggestion involving the root **men-* ‘rise’, and Hamp (2003) suggests more specifically for Anglesey **mon-ā* ‘the high one’. These three ideas are compatible (though in part curious, since Anglesey is not literally high at all; presumably Holyhead Mountain/Mynydd Tŵr on adjacent Holy Island, intervisible with Man, was meant).

Verdict: *Man* and *Môn* are probably Celtic, and almost certainly Indo-European even if not Celtic. *Môn* may be British of an archaic (derivational-) suffixless morphological type. No relevant root is known in the Palaeohispanic languages. Indeed neither Iberian nor Aquitanian/Proto-Basque has root-initial **/m/*, and their prehistoric forms would therefore be incapable of transmitting lexemes beginning with */m/* to other languages.

2. *Eilean Arainn* (Isle of Arran) in historic Buteshire, Scotland, an old dative form where the *-n* is part of the inflectional suffix; *Oileáin Árann* (Aran Islands) in Co. Galway, Ireland—base name of the largest island: *Árainn*; *Árainn Mhór* officially, earlier simply *Árainn* (Arranmore) in Co. Donegal, Ireland.⁹

It is very tempting to associate these three island-names with each other, despite the short vowel in the first syllable of the Scottish name as opposed to the long vowel in the two Irish ones. Flanagan and Flanagan (1994, 17) suggest, using a rather careful wording, that the two Irish names embody Irish *árainn* ‘ridge’. Watson (1926, 87) suggests Irish *áru*

⁹ In forthcoming work, Paul Tempan identifies other possible instances and lists earlier published views on their origin.

‘kidney’ for Arranmore in Donegal, citing its shape. The eye of faith could no doubt see reason for both suggestions, but neither ‘kidney’ nor ‘ridge’ is wholly convincing for the Donegal name, and a view from a very high-flying bird’s eye is needed before the island in Bute appears kidney-like. Watson adduces some Welsh names with a historic short vowel, of which one is that of a river, one is applied to two adjacent hills, and one with a diminutive suffix is again a pair of adjacent hills. Owen and Morgan (2007, 17–18) are confident that the hill-names can be derived from a diminutive form *aran* ‘little ridge’ (like others mentioned by Thomas 1938, 180); *Arenig* would contain therefore a double diminutive. The variety of topographical applications is troublesome, as is the phonological disparity. ‘Ridge’ is arguably suitable for Aran and the hill-names in Wales, and a generalized ‘elevation’ word would suit Arranmore, as this stylized representation from the island’s publicity machine suggests:



arainnmhor.com/Arainn_Mhor_Island/Welcome.html

An etymological long vowel is compatible with the Irish names but not the Bute *Arran* and the Welsh hill-names.

Verdict: no single solution seems possible, and the origin of all these names is best left an open matter. Purely (or implicitly) Celtic solutions have been proposed, notably by Ó Móghráin (1944), and also by Ó Máille (1957); Fraser (1992, 9–12) is non-committal. The material does not appear to offer any support for a ‘Southern’ origin.

ISLAND NAMES IN A SEMITIC PERSPECTIVE

Those two name-groups were examined first as the best candidate *groups* for offering possible interpretations of a non-Celtic type.¹⁰ The result was negative, and in the absence of other such groups we are now methodologically compelled to examine singletons, individual island-names which might hold out some promise of revealing their origins through a ‘Southern’ magnifying-glass. What might give us some preliminary confidence that this is worth doing, after the setback of 1 and 2?

3. *Uist*

Over twenty years ago, I suggested in a short paper (Coates 1988b) that there might be an etymological link between Ibiza in the Balearic Islands (Catalan *Eivissa*; *Ebusos* in Manilius and Pliny and *Ebousos* in Didorus Siculus) and the two nearly adjacent Hebridean islands called North and South *Uist* (Scottish Gaelic *Uibhist*, /'iβiʃtʰ/, with characteristic initial stress). I followed Hübner (1905) in the first edition of Pauly-Wissowa, *Real-Encyklopädie* in proposing that *Ibiza* represented a Semitic name possibly meaning ‘island of some fragrant plant, for example balsam or pine’ (cf. the Proto-Semitic root **bšm* ‘balsam’ (Jongeling 2008, 315, 386) and the island-word **’y* mentioned at several points below (Jongeling 2008, 382).¹¹ I suggested that *Uist* had the same origin (not

¹⁰ A perhaps surprising recent addition to the list of Celtic island-names is *Yell* in Shetland (Coates 2007b).

¹¹ See Coates (1988b) for the full argument; the loss of final /m/ is an effect of Greek phonotactics. Sauren (2005, 280, n. 3) translates ‘perfumes, spices’. Cf. also Krahmalkov (2000, s.n.). Note also the alternative Ptolemaic name of the group consisting of Ibiza and Formentera, *Pityussa*, taken to mean ‘Pine Islands’ after Greek *pitúā* ‘pine’; and the argument of Rivet and Smith (1979, 452) that

ruling out the possibility of transfer, i.e. naming-after), and that it gained its modern final /t/ under analogical influence from Old Norse *ívist* ‘inner dwelling’, this form actually being on record (as *Iuist* in *Orkneyinga saga*; Pálsson and Edwards 1978) as the Scandinavian name of the islands.¹² Armed with this hint of a ‘Southern’ origin (to put it no more strongly than that), we shall look closely at some of the remaining obscure names.

It needs to be made very clear what assumptions are being made about the language(s) adduced for comparison with the island-names. I shall use the term Proto-Semitic (PrSem) as a way of characterizing lexical roots without suggesting that the names discussed must go back literally to the date when reconstructed Proto-Semitic was a spoken language. More specifically, the term should be understood, as the default, as meaning the branch consisting of the daughter language, reconstructed Proto-North-West-Semitic (NWSem) and its attested descendants Phoenician and Punic, and understood to be non-dogmatic about the morphology of forms cited where no more detailed hypothetical word-structure is proposed. Where a Semitic element is mentioned as being potentially etymologically relevant, it should be assumed without further qualification, if none is given, that the argument depends on whatever phonological form that element had in one or other of these North-West Semitic languages, even where that form is not available to scholarship; and of course therefore, if we can be sure that some element was absent from (not merely unrecorded in) NWSem, any argument based on it falls by the wayside. I am well aware that lack of specificity about

the unidentified garble *Saponis* in the *Ravenna cosmography* denotes fir or pine in a Celtic language.

¹² Bennett et al. (1990, 289), citing Wilkins (1984), have noted pine (*Pinus sylvestris*) from the archaeobotanic record of peat-bogs in South Uist, even though this tree is now extinct in the Western Isles.

morphology could lead us into the potentially sterile territory of root-etymology, overlapping the zone characterized by Voltaire's famous (if apocryphal; Considine 2009) jibe about consonants counting for very little in etymology and vowels for nothing, but I take the risk of presenting a set of data whose cumulative rather than item-by-item relevance can be assessed, reducing the risk of a false positive but not eliminating it.¹³

4. *Iona*

Iona (more correctly *Ioua*; Old Irish *Í*, sometimes spelt with a decorative initial <H>), site of the sixth-century monastic foundation of Columba at the south-western tip of Mull in the Inner Hebrides, has a name of unknown origin. It can scarcely mean 'yew' as Watson (1926, 89) suggests, unless the name was copied from elsewhere; there is no evidence on this well-excavated island for yew at any period, and it has always been notoriously barren. Sauren (2005) documents an epigraphically well attested Punic word, the most usual variant of whose base-form he analyses as 'y, meaning 'island, isolated place'. Sauren notes that the word appears in royal correspondence of Rib-Addad from

¹³ The caution with which this paragraph is formulated alerts to two difficulties: firstly, treading on ground which is not the writer's area of specialism; secondly, the quite significant differences of opinion on certain topics within the relatively small body of experts in this area, including the imputation of eccentricity to some particularly imposing works. There is also sometimes a disconcerting lack of congruity between apparently authoritative sources; for example the otherwise established 'island'-word seems absent from the Afro-Asiatic resources Orel and Stolbova (1994) and Militarev (2006). No attempt has been made to harmonize differing transcription systems used by different Semiticists. I proceed with as much caution as I can muster, intending that the positions espoused reflect the most widely-held current opinions of Semiticists. I do not court the charge of eccentricity for its own sake.

the Phoenician city of Byblos as *iw* (2005, 279–80, quoting the form from Moran et al. 1987; morphology unclear to me), which if it authentically represents PrSem brings us somewhat closer to the name of Iona as known to history.

Although there is little indeed to go on phonetically, it is not beyond possibility that this root is what is represented in *Ioua*: ‘the island (*par excellence*)’. If the form *Ioua* contains, morpholexically speaking, more than *Í* does, rather than simply a now-silenced root-integral /w/, then perhaps it is a lost second element. In several places, Vennemann has suggested other island-name etymologies with the structure PrSem *’y + xxx, i.e. with a generic-first structure, which does not appear to be *a priori* unreasonable, whether eventually shown to be correct or not.¹⁴ A risk to be aware of is that of projecting the religious pre-eminence of the island back into pre-Columban times as justification for a simplex name applied *par excellence*; but then St Columba may have chosen (or have been granted) the island precisely because of some earlier sanctity.

5. *Seil*

An island called *Sóil* is recorded in the Irish *Book of Leinster* (Watson 1926, 41). This is generally acknowledged to be the one called in modern Gaelic *Saoil* (English *Seil*), in the Inner Hebrides. No etymology has been proposed, as far as I know, but it seems worth comparing the ancestor of Arabic *sāhil* ‘coast’, PrSem root *’šhl, with the well-known specifically NWSem rounding of *[a:] responsible for the Irish form, perhaps with

¹⁴ A general issue—and indeed risk factor—to be aware of is that the surviving Punic inscriptions would be broadly incomprehensible without some prior knowledge of Hebrew and Aramaic. Specifically, the Punic word for ‘island’ was recognized as such because the word is much more commonly attested in Biblical Hebrew. Some ‘knowledge’ of Punic is therefore projected back from later states of Semitic, though that does not make it indefensible in itself.

the diphthong created by consonantal elision ultimately identified with OIr <ói> from PIE **ai*. This is not as fanciful or redundant, semantically, as it might sound; Seil is the closest of all the Inner Hebrides to the mainland, and it is linked to it by Clachan Bridge (built in 1792–93), which the local tourist office claimed, until the opening of the Skye Bridge in 1995, to be the only bridge in the world over the Atlantic Ocean (as illustrated below). A name meaning ‘coast (island)’ is hardly unreasonable in the circumstances.



Clachan Bridge

<en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clachan_Bridge>



The Atlantic Ocean from Clachan Bridge

<en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clachan_Bridge>

6. *Islay*

The name *Islay* in the Inner Hebrides is of doubtful Celticity (see Watson 1926, 86–87, who offers some problematic comparisons). It appears as *Ile* or *Ila* in ancient Irish literature, as *Ilea insula* in Latin, and in modern Gaelic it is *Eilean Ìleach*. Here, too, with only a single consonant to play with, there is little to go on. One might consider the unexplained name of the ancient town of *Ilipa* near Seville in Tartessian territory, suggesting that the *-ip-* in this might represent the only securely identified suffix in that language, and that we are therefore dealing with a root of the form **il-* in both cases; but there is no strong reason to do so. Let us take into account the notable and ancient European propensity to regard lands and islands in the west—real or otherwise—as sacred in one way or another (e.g. Elysium; Plutarch’s Fortunate Isles; the Celtic Otherworld

represented by Tír na nÓg, Mag Mell and Annwfn; Avalon; Diodorus Siculus's Hyperborea; Scilly;¹⁵ Anglesey; Blasket; the cemetery islands (*reilig*) in the Bristol Channel), and observe that Islay is the westernmost in its sector of the Inner Hebrides. Following through the hints of Semitic naming above, we should therefore not rule out a connection with the root of the divine word or name seen in Phoenician 'l. The second syllable in the modern name might be attributable to an extended form of this root comparable to those seen in Hebrew 'Eloah, Biblical Aramaic 'Ēlāhā and Arabic Aḷlāh (< PrSem *al-'ilāh) 'the god, God', reduced in the absence of stress in Gaelic and therefore different in outcome from that of the stressed */a:/ argued to be possible in the case of Seil. Maybe here too we have survival of the generic */y/ in initial position, and merger of the adjacent similar vowels, thus 'island of the god'.

7. Mull

Mull is probably recorded in the *Ravenna Cosmography* as *Malaia*, and in Ptolemy's *Geography* as *Maleos*. Watson (1926, 38) gives a convincing phonological account of the development of the modern form in Gaelic, *Muile*, and thus English *Mull*, from some such form. He offers a Celtic etymology from a root meaning 'praise', backed by a rather strained metaphorical speculation about an application of this root in the sense 'lofty'. De Bernardo Stempel (2007, 153) suggests the meaning is 'the evil one' (< presumed Common Celtic *ml-yo-s), which is formally acceptable, but she offers no motivation. If these suggestions are considered semantically somewhat contrived or undeveloped, it is worth reserving consideration for the PrSem *mlh 'salt': cf. Hebrew *mallûah*, a salt-marsh plant (?marsh *mallow*, to which this word is evidently related through Latin *malva*; perhaps Ptolemy's form, and indeed Ravenna's, is

¹⁵ As suggested by Thomas (1985, 170–72) on the basis of archaeological evidence.

for earlier Greek **Malewos*). Whilst Mull is not archaeologically known for sea-salt production, it certainly has saltmarsh (Gillham 1957), which is the prerequisite for the industry. Several such marshes on Mull are mapped by Burd (1989), though none is a large one, and the presence of small areas of saltmarsh in the Western Isles is not unusual.

We should not overlook the phonologically interesting PrSem root reconstructed by Orel and Stolbova (1994) as **malaw-* ‘desert’, but its credibility here depends on what sorts of agriculturally useless terrain the term could denote at the relevant period, and in what areas.

8. *Scilly*

It has been suggested by Rivet and Smith (1979, 459) and Thomas (1985) that the island-name *Scilly* could be related to that of the deity *Sūlis* commemorated in *Aquae Sulis* (Bath), but the Classical sources are united in showing <i> in the initial syllable, and this <i> is too early to reflect the Brittonic change of [u:] > [i:]. Vennemann (1999a, 40–42) has proposed instead that this name, which has a very diverse and inconclusive record of spellings, might be compared with a putative PrSem root **s-l-* meaning ‘rock, cliff’, as seen in Hebrew *sela*’ (cf. Orel and Stolbova 1994, **sulVh-* ‘wall’; Militarev 2006, entry 1347, PrSem **šalh/*šulh-* ‘wall’).¹⁶ With mean sea level in the Western Approaches as it is at present, Scilly has plenty of rocks, but not much notable cliff except on the northern fringe. Some time ago, when considering the name of The Solent (Coates 1988a), I evaluated some of the same evidence without finally coming to this conclusion. But once we have taken the step of deciding to examine evidence suggesting the presence of PrSem more inclusively, we should not rule out this possibility *a priori* for *Scilly*. If the idea is valid, the name could be that of the prehistoric single

¹⁶ Coates (1988a) discussed this element in relation to a possible non-IE etymology for the waterway known as *The Solent* before opting for an IE solution.

island out of which most of the islands of the present archipelago have evolved, originally denoting its most striking feature, namely the now barrow-clad lowish hills which end in the cliffs of the northern coasts of the most northerly islands in the group, Bryher, Tresco, and St Helen's.

We should not overlook that the name of the Punic site known to the Romans as *Zilis*, *'šlyt* (Jongeling 2008, 319), modern Asilah, Morocco, with possibly suffixal *-t*, offers a parallel which is perhaps formally even more acceptable because of the universal front vowel in the record in the first syllable. Solá-Solé (1958, 11) suggested that the correct reading is in fact *'slyt*. This name has been interpreted as 'fishery'.

9. *Ebudae* (*Hebrides*)

In the same article (1999a, 46), Vennemann also suggests a PrSem origin for the ancient name of (some of) the Hebrides (*Ebudae*), involving the plural of the generic **'y* we have seen previously (**'yym*)¹⁷ and a specifier related to one of two PrSem roots of the form **pʰd*, namely 'lamb' and 'fear'.¹⁸ He avoids the difficulty of the general loss of prehistoric **/p/* in the borrowing Celtic languages by proposing that **/m-p/* is rendered by Ancient Greek <β>, and that a reflex of this is what surfaces in the attested forms. This seems to rely heavily on the inverse analogy of Modern Greek spelling conventions, where /b/ is rendered <μπ>, and for me it undermines the proposal. Formally, the same result could be got by taking the /b/ to result from a generalized early Old Irish eclipsis (prehistoric nasalization resulting in voicing), but that depends on the idea that when Gaelic speakers encountered the Hebrides they

¹⁷ I owe to an anonymous colleague the observation that the final *-m* in *'yym* is a marker found specifically in Phoenician, Hebrew and Akkadian.

¹⁸ The PrSem **paḥ(i)d-* 'hip, thigh' reconstructed by Militarev (2006, entry 142) seems unlikely to be relevant here, and is in any case absent from the evidence for North-West Semitic.

retained an initial /p/ in the local name which followed the plural generic, and treated it morphophonemically in a way analogous to native words with initial /t/ and /k/. But this is chronologically impossible, since *Ebudae* is recorded long before eclipsis (fifth–sixth centuries CE) could have affected the name. It is clearly semantically and toponomastically attractive to consider a possibility including a word for ‘lamb’, viewed in the light of the various Scandinavian ‘sheep islands’ of the north and west, such as the *Faroes*, *Fair Isle*, and more than one *Soay* and *Lambay*, the Gaelic *Eilean nan Caorach* ‘island of sheep’ in Durness, Sutherland, and the English *Sheppey* in Kent, not to mention a number of island allusions to goats.¹⁹ But if *Ebudae* is evidence for such an etymology, the needs to be accounted for within PrSem, or by simple Greek sound-substitution of [b] for PrSem *[p], and the jury is out.²⁰

De Bernardo Stempel (2007, 155) suggests instead that the name is a modification of *Epidion*, an island-name in Ptolemy’s *Geography*, but like Vennemann she has to resort to the unmotivated early phonetic development [p] > [b] (i.e. not a process akin to systematic early Brittonic lenition) to account for it.

¹⁹ *Ramsey* (Pembrokeshire) seems to have an origin in a personal name, not *ram* (Charles 1938, 32; Owen and Morgan 2007, 406–07).

²⁰ One might compare the /b/ found in Latin *Britannia* and some Greek analogues with etymological /p/ in Welsh *Prydain*, but this would require the existence of */p/ in the source language which evidently therefore did not share phonological characteristics with Goidelic. I make no precise suggestion about what mechanism or route of transmission might have been involved in such a borrowing in either case, *Britannia* or *Ebudae*, or about whether it might be the same in both cases.

10. *Thanet*

Vennemann (2006) explores the possibility of a PrSem origin for *Thanet*, at the north-eastern tip of Kent. I previously noted (Coates 2000, 32–39) that such a possibility was suggested in the past (Henning 1925), but did not pursue it, in a paper whose main topic was the alternative recorded name for Thanet, *Ruoihin* or the like, and in that paper I also argued against previously-suggested Celtic etymologies. Vennemann’s more detailed work on this suggests that I may have missed an opportunity. He concludes that the name enshrines that of the Phoenician goddess Tinnit (Jongeling 2008, 379) with the name vocalized in the traditional way as *Tanit*, and offers analogies for the appearance of her name in an island-name and without a generic, citing Coates (2000, 35) for some philological detail. He suggests that the now widely accepted reconstructed form *Tinnit* may be related to an earlier form vocalized like *Tanit* by regressive vowel-assimilation, and cites analogues. He quotes Krahmalkov (2001, 35–36) as saying that ‘[p]retonic reduction was characteristic of the construct noun’, though without saying how plausible it would be for the name of a goddess to appear in the construct state (i.e. approximately as the ‘possessed’, like *top* in the phrase *the top of the mountain*). Bearing in mind that the name of the Assyrian analogue goddess appears in Greek as *Tanaïs*, he feels confident in asserting that the relevant etymological vowel in the Punic name is <a>, and that this is what appears in the name of Thanet.²¹ The word for ‘island’, ’y, already

²¹ Vennemann acknowledges (2006, 365–68) an unpublished suggestion by Peter Schrijver (in a personal communication to Vennemann, 2005) that a good case can be made for the <o> in the Ptolemaic spelling of the island-name (*Toliatis*, i.e. *Tonatis*) being taken at face value, since there is a later Brittonic and Gaulish sound change unrounding [o] before [a] as the later spellings require. This would make the spelling-record completely coherent, according to Schrijver. But there is an evident transmission error in Ptolemy’s form, <AI> for <N>, and this necessarily weakens the credibility of the first vowel <o>, which is unique in the

noted elsewhere, remains implicit in the attested forms. He cites parallel theophoric island-names elsewhere in the Punic world.

11. *Sark*

In work on the ancient names of the Channel Islands (Coates 1991, 73–76), I regarded the ultimate source of *Sark* as unknown. But its early attestations suggest a root which could be rendered in documentary Latin as **Sarg-*. One might compare the PrSem verbal root **šrq* ‘redden; rise (as of the sun); east’ (cf. Modern Arabic *šarq* ‘east’). *Sark* is the easternmost, and outermost, island of the geological group of which Guernsey is the largest.

12. *Éire*²² and *Britain*

Probably the most tantalizing pair of island-names in this selection is the one consisting of those of the two main islands in the archipelago. They may indeed be a pair rather than a random twosome. In the face of the fact that there is no universally agreed Celtic interpretation (also Broderick 2009, 153–54, 157–58), Vennemann (1998b) proposes, as noted above, that the ancient name of Ireland *Ivernia/Hibernia* derives from PrSem **i: weriju:* ‘island of copper’ (or in his preferred notation + ‘y-wr’(m), though note that this Semitic term appears to be Akkadian only (PrSem **w/?VrVw/y-*; Militarev 2006, entry 1427)). Broderick (2009, 160) recalls that Kurt Sethe, in a note in Schulten (1950), suggested a relation between transliterated Coptic *πίθραν* ‘tin’ and at least one variant of the traditional name of Britain (*Prydan*, presumably

record. Having said that, though, I must also acknowledge that Schrijver’s reasoning is correct if the <o> is not erroneous.

²² I do not deal here with the vexed question of the relation between this name and a presumably related one with initial *Í-* (see for instance Isaac 2009; Broderick 2009, 153–54).

meaning the British stem **Pritan-*). Broderick articulates fully the suggestion that *Britain* is to be interpreted as ‘island of tin’ in some Hamito-Semitic language (which we label here PrSem). Copper + tin, of course = bronze, which relates directly to one of the main purposes of pre-Iron Age long-distance trade. I do not repeat his argument fully here, but on this basis Broderick suggests that both names may have been Semitic in origin. The most attractive feature of his argument is their semantic congruity: the materials they denote are mutually relevant in a way which makes a shared source more likely. I have only one reservation: namely that, even if **Pritan-* (and more indirectly *Britain*) and *πίθραν* are related, it is impossible to be certain whether Britain bears a name meaning ‘tin [place]’ of PrSem origin, or whether the Coptic word means ‘British [metal]’ and is therefore a borrowing from some Insular language. Nonetheless it is clear that Broderick’s suggestion should not be casually dismissed.

13. *Bute*

This island-name is discussed in a section devoted to Celtic lexis below.

14. *Thule*

A weak root-etymological possibility to explain the name of this far northern, perhaps imaginary, land, is a connection with PrSem **tl* ‘become dark, shaded’ (Huehnergard 2000), which could be understood as an obvious reference to the long winter nights emphasized along with long summer days by Pliny the Elder in his *Natural history* (4,16).

EVALUATION

I must emphasize again at this point that observations 3–12 taken together (with or without 13 and 14) do not amount to a proposal with worked-out ethnological or historical consequences. They are suggestive juxtapositions of some ancient and modern island-names with some

ancient roots, in some instances with account taken of their inflected forms. In some of the cases dealt with so far, the morphology of the suggested original name is not fully elucidated. But there are hints of a philologically consistent account. None of the lexical content proposed in these constructions is onomastically outrageous. The denotata suggested are: island, coast, cliff, an aromatic tree, a marsh-plant implying the presence of salt, a compass-point, culturally significant metals, and divine words/names for which river-names derived from Celtic like *Dee* ‘goddess’ or *Boyne* ‘white like a cow’ might be adduced as partial analogues. Quite a lot of this content can be tied to geographical or cultural realities, as spelt out in detail above. As regards onomastic elements and syntax, it might be inferred that some of the names originally contained, or still contain a reflex of, a generic elsewhere rendered *’y ‘island’ in a head-first structure (*Uist*, *Iona*, *Éire*, and perhaps *Islay*). There are some hints of contact effects in the phonology, though of an unsurprising kind, given what we know about the segmental inventory of Common Celtic (Lewis and Pedersen 1937, part I), viz. the non-transfer into Celtic (elision) of PrSem **h* (*Seil* and perhaps *Ebudae*) and PrSem final **h* (*Islay*), the substitution of /s/ or /s’/ as appropriate for PrSem **š* and **ś* (*Seil*, *Sark* and probably *Uist*), and the elimination of a PrSem uvular(ized) consonant in favour of a plain one (*Sark*, perhaps *Thule*). In one name (*Seil*), it is possible to see a rounding of the PrSem vowel */a:/, and in one further case where rounding might be expected, we can suggest that its absence is due to the position of stress in Gaelic (*Islay*). A direction is emerging: with whatever diffidence these onomastic suggestions are put forward, Proto-Semitic at least provides a worthwhile point of comparison for some of the most difficult names in Insular toponymy, and I shall suggest below some further evidence that points in the same direction. The claimed celticity of Bute will be reviewed below with the result of allowing it to take its place as 13 above.

ISLAND-NAMES AND OTHER NON-IE EVIDENCE

15. *Coll*

The island of Coll in the Inner Hebrides is recorded twice as *Colosus* in Adomnán's *Life of Columba* (Sharpe 1995; cf. Watson 1926, 84–85). Any form with an intervocalic [s] is a problem to explain in Celtic, and Watson accordingly suggests it might be pre-Celtic, therefore somehow bypassing the loss of [s] in Celtic. Accepting the danger of identifying this form naïvely with Greek *kolossós* ('giant figure', of uncertain origin, not originally Greek; see most recently Lindner 2003, 107), we should firstly note that, helpfully, an original */ss/ would not disappear in Celtic as a singleton medial */s/ would, and we should secondly by no means rule out the possibility that there could have been a large standing stone of humanoid or at least personifiable shape here, even if now destroyed, as there still are on other Hebridean islands such as North Uist and Lewis. There are at present two medium-sized stones, the Totronald Stones (personified in Gaelic as *Na Sgeulaichean*, 'The Storytellers'), five ft and six ft tall. These underline the possibility of lost earlier stones of such a type even though they are themselves not exactly convincing as human figures (RCAHMS 1980). The actual spelling in Adomnán, with one medial <s>, suggests that this is not a simple instance of an obscure name being associated with a well-known word in the classical tradition and spelt accordingly. It probably does not represent the Latin adjectival suffix *-osus* because Adomnán does not use the form adjectivally in the relevant passage.

The name could have been given at any time when *kolossói* were a well-known feature of Hellenic and therefore Mediterranean culture, perhaps, more interestingly, by speakers of an unknown language in which the ancestor of the word was a native term, or one into which the word had been borrowed. That does not rule out Punic transmission. This suggestion leaves the island-name without a generic, but there is no shortage of other islands in the Western Isles whose current names have

no apparent (surviving reflex of a) generic term: Seil, Lewis, Rum, Eigg and Mull, for example.



One of *Na Sgeulaichean*.
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Coll is often, and traditionally, explained as deriving from Gaelic *coll* ‘hazel’, despite Watson’s resistance. It is true that hazel is a component of the native flora of certain islands in the Inner Hebrides (Gilbert 1984; Coppins, Coppins and Quelch 2002), but the modern word alone does not fully explain the form of the name in the *Life of Columba*.

SOME WIDER RAMIFICATIONS: CELTIC LEXIS

It is time to take stock. As noted earlier, there is no evidence for any Palaeohispanic impact on island nomenclature, except to the extent that the ‘Southern’ presence of Q-Celtic Gaelic may itself represent a strand of such evidence if it arrived in the islands from Iberia. We have also seen that the same island nomenclature offers no support at all for

Vennemann's Vasconic hypothesis, but Vennemann himself would not expect his Vasconic herdsmen to be involved in the naming of island habitats (personal correspondence, 18/08/2008).²³ A Semitic contribution to the toponymy of Britain and Ireland has been suggested on purely philological grounds. There is some further tantalizing evidence beyond what I have presented here which suggests that a Semitic connection should not be dismissed out of hand, and which tends to make the suggestions above less incredible. Beyond the small fistful of singleton island-names just presented (Uist, Iona, Seil, Islay, Mull, Sark, and perhaps Scilly, *Ebudae*/Hebrides, Thanet, Éire and Britain), there are further hints of contact with Semitic, this time in the common topographical and habitative vocabulary of Celtic and other place-names of the Celtic-speaking lands.²⁴

The Proto-Celtic **ros-* is semantically problematic, having the meanings 'promontory' and 'moor' (Padel 1985, 199–203). Within Indo-European, a single possible Indic cognate has been suggested (Sanskrit *prasthas* 'plateau', = lit. 'that which stands forth'). But the first of these senses, which seems to be the earlier (in each of Irish, Welsh and Cornish), invites comparison with PrSem **ra's̥* also meaning precisely 'headland, promontory', in the specifically NWSem form with a backed, rounded and raised vowel (Phoenician **rōš* 'head, headland'; cf. Jongeling 2008, 405); cf. the note on Seil above whose suggested

²³ For completeness' sake, I should draw attention to the Iberian anthroponymic and toponymic element *urke, orke-, urka* identified by Untermann (1998, 77, 81) as possibly comparable with the first element of *Orkney*, but this resemblance is the only one that can be derived from his list and its apparent presence could therefore be put down to chance resemblance.

²⁴ Schrijver (1997 and 2005) suggests some lexis of possible non-IE origin in European languages including Celtic, but concentrates on the phonological characteristics such a language may have had, rather than on the question of identifying one.

etymology may call for the same rounding of */a:/ (but here from earlier */a'/).²⁵ It is conceivable that such a borrowed word may have been influenced by, and merged formally with, a distinct Celtic word having an original short vowel, since the vowel in the ‘promontory’ word was originally short in Celtic.²⁶

²⁵ This idea has been published recently independently by Vennemann (2006, 349–50 and notes), picking up earlier work by Henning (1925). Tempan (2008; 2009) has independently suggested the alien origin of Irish *ros*.

²⁶ The long vowels heard in the modern English place-names *Roos* (parish, Yorkshire East Riding) and *Roose* (Dalton-in-Furness, Lancashire) might be seen as offering difficulties. They seem to be late developments within English, because spellings implying a short vowel appear earlier in the record of both names (Smith 1937, 56; Ekwall 1922, 202). It is hard to imagine that the Yorkshire place could have been Brittonic-speaking late enough to show Brittonic lengthening of short stressed vowels (in the sixth century). Both places are close to, but not on, their respective counties’ coast, and both could be considered as ‘moor’ names rather than as ‘promontory’ ones. *Roos* was a Domesday manor out of which several holdings have been carved, and it does not sound like typical moorland: ‘[t]he parish comprises by measurement 2324 acres, of which two-thirds are arable and one-third pasture; the surface is undulated, and the soil a clayey loam, with gravel’ (Lewis 1848, s.n.). Neither does it have any special prominences, though it is in Holderness, fairly close to Spurn Head, so it is possible, and attractive to suppose, that it preserves the pre-English name of, or a word for, the entire Holderness peninsula including Spurn, whose topography has no doubt changed profoundly in two millennia through coastal erosion on its east and cyclical tidal deposit and scour on its south. On the other hand, in the far north of the parish there is an area called *The Furze*, which was common pasture, suggesting moor after all. *Roose* has no importance now except as a suburb of Barrow-in-Furness, but it was a Domesday manor. Ekwall (1922, 202) says: ‘[t]he hill N.E. of *Roose* may well once have been a moor, i.e., a hill covered with furze and heather’. As with *Roos* in Yorkshire, we may be dealing here with an original name for a whole peninsula, this time Furness. Whatever the case, it was apparently named by contrast with adjacent *Leece*, from Brittonic **lis* ‘court’, though it was evidently later understood as ‘Leighs’, which is Ekwall’s

Another height-word in Semitic is **rām*²⁷ as in the modern place-names *Ramat Gan*, Israel, and *Ramallah*, Palestine (PrSem root **rwm*). It has been cautiously suggested that this might be seen in the Cornish place-name *Rame* which may allude to the conspicuous conically-shaped hill on a headland in this parish guarding the entrance to Plymouth Sound, whose modern pronunciation can be explained in terms of local English dialect conditions (Coates 2006, 7–8). The same root might be seen in a vocally different form in the name of the island of *R(h)um* (recorded in the *Annals of Ulster* ostensibly in 677 in the genitive form *Ruimm*), whose name is not satisfactorily explained. Mac an Tàilleir (2003) is willing to call it ‘pre-Gaelic’ in defiance of a *prima facie* formal case for Gaelic *rùim* ‘space’ (whose relation to Old Norse [ON] *rúm* ‘room, space’ is unclear) and of an earlier Indo-European proposal by Stokes, quoted by Watson (1926, 95, n.3). Rum happens to have mountains among the highest anywhere in the Western Isles except the Cuillins group on Skye and Ben More on Mull, including therefore the highest non-Cuillin peak except the latter. (Rum’s is Askival, 2664 ft, 812 m.) Haswell-Smith (2004, 138–43) agrees that *Rum* is ‘probably’ pre-Celtic, but notes that alternative suggestions have included Old Norse *rúm-øy* ‘wide island’ (with the generic vanished from the record; not compatible with its appearance in the *Annals of Ulster*) or Gaelic *ì-dhruim* ‘isle of the ridge’ (also falling foul of the spelling in the early record; dismissed already by MacBain 1922, 77). In any case, it is difficult to think of Rum as ‘wide’ since it is mountainous from every

interpretation of the name’s origin (1922, 209). *Leece*, like *Roose*, has an etymologically expected long vowel, because anglicization of the area no doubt occurred later than the Brittonic lengthening, but that makes early spellings of *Roose* suggesting a short vowel problematic.

²⁷ The root is given as **rVyVm-* in Militarev (2007, entry 1179, evidenced in e.g. Ugaritic and Hebrew, though the Hebrew daughter has alternating /w/ for the second consonant).

angle and has no ‘width’ distinct from its ‘length’: it is subcircular, or in Whitley Stokes’s view rhomboid.²⁸ This configuration also rules out a single perceptually dominant ridge. I therefore follow Mac an Tàilleir. Perhaps whilst */a:/ may generally give Celtic */o:/ (see Seil above and *ros-), it is conceivable that it was raised to *[u:] in the borrowing process where an original [w] followed. Paul Tempan suggests in correspondence (26/06/2010) that the name of Ram Head near Ardmore, Co. Waterford, may be analysed in the same way. Its Irish name is *Ceann* or *Carraig an Ráma*, and the final element has no known early forms and no known Irish etymology (Power 1907, 68). The headland is a less dramatic formation than the others mentioned here, to judge by photographs I have seen, but by compensation it is the extreme south-eastern tip of Ireland and therefore a landmark of the greatest conspicuousness and importance.

Neo-Brittonic */bod- ‘dwelling’ (Welsh *bod*, Cornish *bos*; British */bot-) can be compared directly with PrSem */but- ‘hut’ (Orel and Stolbova 1994, s.v.) and, as a feminine noun, it is consistent with a Proto-Celtic */butā. Padel (1985, 25) suggests that the Brittonic word denoted or connoted a dwelling-place of humbler status than */treβ-, the standard word for ‘farm’ or ‘village’ in the Neo-Brittonic languages. *Botis*, the name generally taken to be that of the island of Bute in the *Ravenna Cosmography* has been analysed by Rivet and Smith (1979, 273) as being root-identical with the ‘dwelling’-word. A case can be made on formal grounds, and ‘dwelling(s) island’ might imply an entire territory marked by a difference of status expressed in building technology, or simply naming from a, or the, prominent settlement. On the grounds of a formally strong phonological similarity here, *Bute* is allocated a place in the candidate list at 13 above.

²⁸ As cited from his suggestion (Stokes 1890, 413) in Watson’s footnote mentioned in the text above.

The much-discussed OW *cair* ‘fort’, (later) ‘village’, Cornish *ker* ‘univallate curvilinear hillslope enclosure; village’, Breton *kêr* ‘village’ (Padel 1985, 51), still has no generally accepted explanation. Schrijver (1995, 447–48) suggests a connection with Old Irish *cathir* (genitive singular *cathrach*) ‘fortress, fortified town’, which is semantically beyond reproach but phonologically difficult despite the similarity being ‘too striking to be accidental’: the loss of [θ], or its transmutation into [j], remains unexplained. Derivation from Latin *quadra* ‘square’ (Pokorny 1949–50, 135) suffers from essentially the same phonological difficulty, as well as a semantic shift that is not outrageous but requires some justification. James (2007–) derives *cair* from a British **cagrā*, making it root-cognate with Welsh *cae* ‘field’, reviving an earlier suggestion by Loth (1903, 299), who had acknowledged its provisional status, remarking: ‘Je ne vois aucun moyen sûr de se tirer d’affaire avec *caer*’.²⁹ The suggestions of Loth and Pokorny were characterized by Padel (1985, 50) as the best suggestions available at the time of writing for a ‘difficult’ derivation. Whilst I am fully in sympathy with the drive to provide a Western etymology, given the lack of agreement and for the purposes of the present context the word can be compared with the PrSem root **kpr* ‘village’ (not recorded in NWSem, but cf. Ancient Hebrew *kāpār* (bound form *kəpar*), Modern Hebrew and Syriac *kfar*, Arabic *kafr*, Huehnergard 2000, *kpr*²; Orel and Stolbova 1994 give a base **kap-* ‘house’),³⁰ with regular pan-Celtic loss of /p/ from a form like **/kapir/*, **/kaper/*. That would, of course, continue to leave it isolated from Old Irish *cathir*.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The suggestions in the previous section of the paper, like the earlier toponymic ones, are advanced with all due caution. It is possible, of

²⁹ ‘I can see no sure way to avoid trouble with *caer*.’

³⁰ Seemingly absent from Militarev (2006).

course, that resemblances between Insular toponymical and topolexical material on the one hand, and firmly-established PrSem lexical roots on the other, are coincidental, but for me, there are too many to dismiss those resemblances casually. In a small way, the suggestions also display phonological consistency, especially as regards the possible treatment of */a:/ and the treatment of non-plain (i.e. uvular and other emphatic-series) consonants (they are lost if they are back fricatives and de-emphasized, i.e. de-uvularized, if they are plosives). The range of voiceless fricatives and affricates is reduced. But I have touched only lightly on the question of how PrSem consonant phonemes might have been represented in Celtic. The mentioned possibilities should be treated with caution, of course, because they reflect back, in part, the constraints of phonological plausibility I imposed on myself when searching PrSem sources. There may be inconsistencies in the implied phonological development of some of the items discussed here (as implicitly in *Rame* and *Rám* vs. *Rum*), but need not be if one allows for alternative vocalizations of the root, for either lexical or grammatical reasons. There is hardly anything that can be said on the basis of this evidence about vowels, or about morphology, that of Semitic being of course typologically quite different from that of Indo-European. All that remains is the possibility of glimpsing through a glass darkly the lexis of a language used in the British Isles in periods of settlement more remote than we can see through the lens of the known languages of the area.³¹

³¹ In making the suggestions in this paper, I commit myself to no other aspect of any 'Semitic' hypothesis than those specifically mentioned. I am not a Semiticist, and have relied throughout on others' accounts of Semitic roots and their meanings, aware that, in some cases, scholars' reconstructions of the same root have differed and that they have been transcribed, and perhaps even vocalized, in different ways. I have not attempted to standardize their systems of representation; that is a matter for the specialists to reconcile (cf. note 11 above). Note the very interesting recent paper by Mac Eoin (2007) suggesting that a

In making all these suggestions, I have proposed or implied no particular cultural context except the general probability of the settlement of the British Isles from the south, and deduced from evidence the possibility that one linguistic strand in that settlement might be represented by North-West Semitic with no detailed regard for the reasons that might have taken it there.³² But we cannot leave this important issue up in the air.

The main aim of this paper has been to allow a modest amount of obscure data to speak for itself, from a purely linguistic perspective and with only limited amplification. But it is difficult to leave an argument which carries unexplored implications for prehistoric population movements or trading relations hanging in the air. At very least, we must think about what sort of contacts might have left place-names for major territorial units—*islands*—for their successors of other linguistic stocks to use, yet no recognizable archaeological traces and, so far as is known, no record of other aspects of their language (e.g. a community writing or speaking it). If we accept that the suggested evidence for the use in the

language substratal to Irish must have had intervocalic /f/. This suggestion is incompatible with that language's being PrSem at the stage of phonological development suggested by the evidence presented here.

³² That is, nothing is concluded about whether PrSem might be substratal, superstratal or adstratal to the familiar languages of the islands. Further to my note 4, 'Vennemann appears to subscribe to the notion that modern linguistic evidence may disguise earlier evidence through wholesale folk-etymology': if one starts with that perspective, one may doubt the acceptable Celtic solutions available for such names as *Eigg* from Ir. *eag* 'notch', *Hinba* (= ?Jura) from Ir. *inbe* 'incision' (Watson 1926, 85 and 82–83), and *Ériu* (Ireland) ultimately from PIE **piHwerjon-* 'fat (land)' (Schrijver 1995, 288 and predecessors). For the last of these, as noted under point 12 in the main text, Vennemann (1998b) has counter-proposed an origin in PrSem **'y-wr'(m)* (? = **'iy-weri'um*) 'copper island', which might or might not suggest that he regards the modern form of the name as having been subjected to IE/Celtic folk-etymology.

British Isles of a Semitic language is valid, it is logically possible that the islands were populated by speakers of a Semitic or Semitic-like language who were linguistically overwhelmed but some of whose toponyms were accepted by their conquerors or absorbers. This is the point at which the inconclusive wider arguments about a Hamito-Semitic substratum in Celtic could plug in, but whilst the argument for such influence has been widely touted it has not generally been thought convincing enough to become orthodoxy (*pace* Vennemann and his predecessors, and those who have believed that such an influence on Celtic may have been transmitted on to English). In any case, the possibility of PrSem influence on Celtic is logically distinct from that for the use of PrSem in the islands, because PrSem influence on Celtic could have taken place in Iberia, meaning that we would still lack an explanation of how PrSem place-names got into the British Isles except, perhaps too implausibly, by wholesale transfer (naming-after). An alternative scenario would allow PrSem adstratal influence on established Celtic populations, for example with Phoenician/Punic traders as the bearers. This possibility runs into the evident difficulty that a presumably transient population must have left its names for some of the major topographical features of the area and that these were taken up by the inhabitants and used in preference to their own names for them.³³ Sims-Williams (2011, 280, n. 16) downplays any such difficulty, emphasizing that even if *Ériu* were of PrSem origin, that need not imply a settled presence of speakers of this language in Ireland.

³³ Broderick (2010) does not regard this possibility as problematic: ‘... it would be reasonable to expect that such prospectors and traders would have named the principal landmarks in their own language, and if they had settled in any numbers to exploit the mineral resources of Ireland and Britain, that their names for such prominent geographical features as bays, promontories, islands, mountains, etc, that served as landmarks might well survive to become incorporated within the later Celtic languages’. But his scenario is equivocal between mere trading and settlement.

We could perhaps argue that these exonyms were the ones transmitted to other cultures by the traders, and that they then filtered back into local native usage in waves from more prestigious later ‘Southern’ cultures, a possibility which Broderick (2009, 167, points 5–7) suggests.³⁴ But what would serve very well as an analogy would be the discovery of names genuinely left on conspicuous geographical entities, especially coastal ones, by more or less transient populations, in a context where long-settled populations were the norm.³⁵

The existence of such a name-set can be demonstrated, though the circumstances of its genesis do not match precisely what is known of the situation in prehistoric times. I know of no detailed study—in fact I do not believe it has ever been remarked on before—of the Scandinavian place-nomenclature which survives in the inner Bristol Channel and the Severn estuary, but this is a situation where the settled local population is universally believed to have spoken English and Welsh in their historic settings, and where there is no evidence in the local dialects for Scandinavian loanwords beyond those found generally in varieties of the two languages in England and Wales (Smith 1964–65, IV, 44). Smith either does not record, or does not comment specially on, any of the names discussed below: a body of names formulated in Scandinavian, a

³⁴ We cannot do much with the logical possibility that any PrSem names represent Punic rationalizations of still more obscure native local names. The evidence presented should give us confidence that the vocabulary of the names in question and the words analysed have a sufficiently non-random similarity to PrSem etyma, across a data-set of restricted denotational range, to reduce this possibility.

³⁵ It is a moot point whether it is appropriate to compare the names left by imperial powers which have stuck to places as diverse as *Côte d’Ivoire*, *Islamabad*, *Port Moresby* and *Tripoli*, where the traders, religionists and settlers left their languages (French, Arabic, English, Greek) as a major, and demonstrably continuing, part of the local linguistic ecology. But *Indonesia* (Greek/Latin) and *Lagos* (Portuguese) might be useful, though not straightforward, comparators.

language spoken in the region only by people documented as raiders and traders, a few of whom may have become settlers no little distance away. These names are coastal, and in some cases denote local features where actual Scandinavian settlement is unthinkable, such as rocks in the sea. Let us list and discuss these names.

Firstly, we need to note the existence of three Scandinavian settlement names close to the inner Severn Sea (by which I mean further up-channel than Pembrokeshire where there is a cluster of such names indicating compact settlement). The first two are in historic Glamorgan and the third in historic Monmouthshire: *Homri*, in St Nicholas, in the Vale of Glamorgan north of Cardiff, *Womanby* in St John, Cardiff, and *Lamby*, at the mouth of the Rumney river and now in east Cardiff (Charles 1938, 158, 163, and 240–41).³⁶ These, with their Scandinavian specifiers combined with the characteristic element **bȳ-* ‘farm, village’, are genuinely in an extreme minority, and, not being adjacent to each other, it is doubtful whether they can be viewed as forming a cluster. But there is other very solid evidence of toponymic influence in the wider surrounding area, which needs some discussion.

The island of Flatholm, in St Mary’s parish, Cardiff, Glamorgan, is sometimes said (e.g. Watts 2004, 232) to contain Scandinavian *floti* ‘fleet’ plus *holm* ‘small island’ (on the basis of the spellings *Flotholm* recorded in 1375, *the Floteholmes* 1387; Charles 1938, 163, though Charles took the view that it contains ON *flatr* ‘flat’; but note the lexical expression *flota-hólmr* ‘an isle’ in Cleasby-Vigfusson). Watts links the

³⁶ The situation of Lamby (locally *The Lambies*), currently an open area at the mouth of the river Rumney/Rhymni, suggests that the second element might be Scandinavian **ey-* ‘island’, but the record of spellings assembled by Charles (1938, 240–41) makes it clear enough that we are dealing with a **bȳ-*, thus ‘long farm’, if this is the same place. *Homri* is ‘Horni’s farm’ or ‘horn farm’ and *Womanby* is ‘houndsman’s farm’, according to Charles (1938, 158, 163).

name with the incidents reported in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, when a Viking fleet was starved out of the island (917, A version; the other versions say Steepholm). Flatholm is indeed relatively flat, by marked contrast with its English neighbour Steepholm. Whichever story we prefer, its name is of Scandinavian origin. The name of Steepholm has an English first element and presumably dates from a period when *holm* was borrowed into English in a range of senses (Smith 1956, I, 258–59), therefore by itself offering no evidence for Scandinavian in the region. There is a collection of shoals, reefs and banks in the Severn estuary which, despite the lateness of their first records, appear to have unmistakably Scandinavian names; that is, they contain elements which I have not found reported in regional English or Welsh lexis, but only in names. These include, far up the Severn and up to fifteen miles from the Cardiff area:

Gruggy (in mid-Severn in Redwick, not in Smith 1964–65), cf. ON *grugg* ‘mud; dregs’, *gruggótr* ‘muddy’: seemingly Scandinavian **Grugg-ey-* ‘mud island’;

Leary Rock (in mid-Severn in Aust, Smith 1964–65, III, 129 (from 1830)), cf. ON *leirr*, another word for ‘mud’: seemingly Scandinavian **Leir-ey-* ‘mud island’;

The Scars, cf. ON *sker* ‘rock, skerry’ (in mid-Severn in Redwick, not in Smith 1964–65).

We also find, rather more surprisingly, that some shoreline features have names formulated using Scandinavian elements. Perhaps the most striking is that recorded as *dumble*, *dunball* and the like in several places on the shoreline of the Severn upriver as far as Rodley (Smith 1964–65, III, 205) and in the Taff estuary, where it names the outermost reach of tidally flooded land (i.e. not permanent saltmarsh; discussed fully in Coates 2007a, where it is interpreted as Scandinavian for ‘mallard’s

abode or lair'). Another near-certainty is *Guscar Rocks* (Woolaston, not in Smith 1964–65), in which the second element is beyond reasonable doubt *sker* (see *The Scars* above; 'goose rock', Scandinavian **gás*, assimilated to OE *gōs*?).³⁷ Charles (1938, 125–26) interprets *Mumbles* (Oystermouth, Glamorgan) as containing ON *múli* 'promontory' as its second element, and Coates (2007a, 64, image 72) sees Scandinavian **haug-* 'mound' or **havuð* 'head' in Howe Rock, off the end of Brean Down, Brean, Somerset. (The lost *Meles* in Margam (Glamorgan; Charles 1938, 137) is convincingly from Scand. **mel-* 'dune', but in an English or probably Norman French plural form, which therefore does not guarantee Scandinavian origin of the name.) Birnbeck Rock/Island, Weston-super-Mare, Somerset, has no known early spellings, but its name may be viewed as containing Scandinavian **bekk-* in the sense 'bench' attested in literary Old Norse but otherwise not identified in English place-names, whatever the first element might be; no other suggestion is in play. A pier was built linking the island to the mainland in 1867 (as originally proposed in 1845), and the original landform is not easily recoverable.³⁸

³⁷ The one restraining factor is the existence of the place, originally a farm, called *The Scarr* in the inland parish of Newent (Smith 1964–65, III, 179). However, it seems possible that this is a recent name; it is not recorded before 1779 and appears alongside two others for the same place in Rudge's epitome of Sir Robert Atkyns' county history (Rudge 1803, 36). In any case, it is not maritime.

³⁸ It is not inconceivable that *Birnbeck* is for Old Irish **berna bec(c)* 'little gap', perhaps metonymically for the narrow tidal channel separating Birnbeck from the end of Worlebury Hill, even though lenition of the adjective appears to be absent; but note that the one indisputably Irish name in Somerset, *Beckery*, a monastic establishment near Glastonbury, is from the syntactically different *Bec-Ériu* 'little Ireland' (Ekwall 1960, 33).

A reviewer of this paper has suggested that these Scandinavian names may have persisted into the Middle Ages and beyond through being reinforced by Bristol Channel traders based in originally-Scandinavian Dublin, and even into the age of rutters and coastal charts. I freely accept this possibility, but the evidence for the continuity of the relevant names and vocabulary into the usage of any such traders, in dialect or on early maps, is lacking.

Most of the names in this group should be treated with caution because of their late attestation, but there seems to be a consistent pattern for which any other systematic explanation is at least equally difficult. Here we have evidence of a toponymic layer which has been taken up by a settled community from a visiting community involved in trade in the broadest sense, even if only piracy. The Scandinavians eventually must have put down roots which found toponymic expression in the three Glamorgan villages mentioned above, but the other names just listed do not form a natural hinterland or sphere of influence of those villages, and yet they seem to be names taken over as such from the visitors. The history of this process is one which remains to be written. In that sense, this name-set can be compared with the one which is central to this paper, although I acknowledge immediately that the sets are of a different order of prominence in the toponymic landscape of their respective periods. Nevertheless, the Scandinavian evidence shows that it is possible for economic visitors to give topographical place-names to a people speaking a different language, and for those place-names to stick without evidence of the visitors' language becoming part of the local ecology. From that perspective, then, the possibility of adstratal PrSem influence on Celtic-speaking communities in the British Isles in the later first millennium BCE is one to be reckoned with, and should not be dismissed out of hand or from an entrenched viewpoint.

RECAPITULATION

It is best to set out finally, once again, the limits of what is proposed. The textual and philological evidence is restricted, and not always straightforward to interpret or uncontroversial. But what there is is compatible with the position that:

1. a small but not negligible number of the anciently recorded names of some of the larger islands of Ireland and Britain are of Proto-Northwest-Semitic origin, and that the suggestion that they are should not be dismissed out of hand;
2. it is defensible to interpret the existence of such names in the light of known and reasonably supposed incidents in the prehistory of the islands and of known analogies to their patterning.

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