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Ekiurid's *Celtica lingua*: An Ethnological Difficulty in *Waltharius*

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STUDENTS of the ninth- or tenth-century Latin epic poem *Waltharius* have long been puzzled by a phrase used to describe the language of one of the hero's opponents.¹

On his flight from hostageship at Attila's Pannonian court, Walthari of Aquitaine is intercepted in the Vosges, en route for home with his betrothed, the Burgundian princess Hiltgunt, by Gunthari, king of the Franks, and twelve chosen warriors who wish to relieve Walthari of his stolen Hunnish treasure. Gunthari sends eleven of his men, of topographic necessity one by one, against Walthari who kills each in turn.

The fourth of these warriors is introduced thus by the poet (line 756): 'En a Saxonice oris Ekiurid generatus'. Scholars have not hesitated to translate *a Saxonice oris* as 'from Saxony', taking *orae* as 'lands' rather than 'shores', silently invoking the figure of *pars pro toto*. But, as George Fenwick Jones pointed out in 1974,² it is worth dissenting from this unanimity of translation, both on general grounds and because a more literal rendering may encourage the recognition of a solution to the next difficulty which the text presents. For the moment, then, we may recognize Ekiurid as having been brought up in a region which could be described as 'Saxon shores'.

Approaching Walthari, Ekiurid addresses him in two remarkable sentences which I give here in translation:³ 'say whether you, damned one, deceive us by aerial phantoms. You seem to me indeed to be

¹The standard edition is that of Karl Strecker, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Poetae Latini Medii Aevi*, 6, Part 1 (Weimar, 1951). For an English translation, see H. M. Smyser and F. P. Magoun, Jr, *Survivals in Old Norwegian of Medieval English, French, and German Literature, together with the Latin Versions of the Heroic Legend of Walter of Aquitaine* (Baltimore, 1941), pp. 111–45. For discussion of the dating of *Waltharius*, a controversial subject, see P. Dronke, 'Waltharius-Gaiferos', *apud* Ursula Dronke and Peter Dronke, *Barbara et Antiquissima Carmina* (Barcelona, 1977), pp. 27–79, especially 66–79; his arguments for an early-ninth-century date seem strong. ²The *Celtica Lingua* spoken in the *Saxonice Oris*: Concerning *Waltharius* vv. 756–780', *Germanic Review*, 49 (1974), 17–22. ³This rendering is an updated version of that given by Smyser and Magoun, p. 129.

a woodwose, familiar in the forests'. Ekiurid suspects, or decides to taunt Walthari, that he is a phantom, a manifestation of the devil.⁴

Two entirely different interpretations of Walthari's laughing response are possible. We read (lines 765–70):

'Celtica lingua probat te ex illa gente creatum
cui natura dedit reliquas ludendo praeire.
At si te propius uenientem dextera nostra
attingat, post Saxonibus memorare ualebis
te nunc in Vosago fauni fantasma uidere.'⁵

Smyser and Magoun, seemingly detecting a sense of whimsy and blarney about Ekiurid's words, caught this spirit and translated as follows:

'Thy "Irish brogue" proves that thou art begotten of that tribe which nature has granted to excel all others in being comic. But if our right hand touches thee, coming nearer, thou wilt be able to tell the Saxons that thou didst on this occasion see the spirit of a woodwose in the Vosges.'⁶

On its own terms this seems to be an excellent interpretation of the passage. There are, however, two notable difficulties inhibiting acceptance of such a version.

The first of these problems is Ekiurid's *Celtica lingua*. Rather than translate it literally, scholars have sought more convoluted explanations. Karl Strecker's blunt but despairing note has summed up their attitude: 'Die Stelle ist schwer zu verstehen'.⁷ The most popular rendering has been 'Kauderwelsch', that is, 'gibberish',⁸ a variant of which Smyser and Magoun have picked up in their translation. This still leaves open what needs to be established, whether it is gibberish because Ekiurid speaks a Saxon dialect unintelligible or barbaric in the opinion of the hero⁹—who is latinate in the poem but presumably perceived by a contemporary audience as a speaker of Old High German¹⁰—or because of what he has actually said. The two could be combined if High German attitudes to Saxons then were what they are to East Frisians today.

This difficulty could probably be resolved if the semantic devel-

⁴There seems to be a clear suggestion of this in the speech (lines 790–804) of the next attacker, Hadaward, which begins, 'O serpent, adroit in guile and wilful in deceit, wont to conceal thy limbs with a scaly covering and like a snake gathered in a single coil, thou dost avoid so many weapons without a wound and in unheard-of fashion dost mock poisoned arrows!' (Smyser and Magoun, p. 130). ⁵Strecker, p. 55. ⁶Smyser and Magoun, p. 129. ⁷Strecker, p. 55, n. 1. ⁸Jones ('Celtica Lingua', p. 18) misunderstands 'Kauderwelsch' and gets into difficulties as a result. ⁹Jones, pp. 18–19, reports expressions of such opinions. ¹⁰ibid., pp. 20–22.

opment of Latin *Celticus* were better understood.¹¹ Could the author of *Waltharius* actually have classified as 'Celtic' Irish, Welsh, Cornish, and Breton? The classical equation was *Celticus* = 'Gaulish'. That the latter classification was still possible in respect of the ancient world is demonstrated by the words of another Carolingian poet, Heiric of Auxerre. In his account of St Germanus he writes:

Urbs quoque prouectum meritisque et nomine sumpsit
'Augustidunum' demum concepta uocari,
'Augusti montem' transfert quod Celtica lingua.¹²

But we can have little assurance that the same kind of identification could have been made for the neo-Celtic cultures of the early Middle Ages. Another line of argument would see *Celticus* coming to mean 'Romance'. This would suppose that, as G. F. Jones put it,¹³ 'the word *celticus* . . . went through the same semantic changes as did the [Germanic] word *walhisk* > *welsch*'.¹⁴ But this usage of *Celticus* is uncertainly attested.¹⁵ Finally, we might see *Celtica lingua* as having lost any strict ethnic significance, meaning instead either 'blarney' or 'high style'/'fancy diction' or just plain 'gibberish'. But, again, supporting examples are difficult to come by.¹⁶

The second difficulty turns on the phrase *ludendo praeire* (line 766), referring to a characteristic of the *gens* from which Ekiurid stems. Ekiurid's people may have excelled others in 'playing' — especially, in most scholars' view, verbal play. But, as G. F. Jones has pointed out,¹⁷ there is no other evidence that this was a Saxon characteristic; if it is to be taken as a Celtic habit, it might be thought primarily Irish, but no one would now take seriously the suggestion that Ekiurid should be seen as a speaker of Irish.¹⁸ A quite different interpretation was put forward by Paul von Winterfeld who took

¹¹Despite consultation of all the considerable number of Latin dictionaries available to me, I have been unable to gain enlightenment on this point; even the citations from *Waltharius* and Heiric go unreported in these books. ¹²*Vita Sancti Germani*, 1.351-53, edited by Ludwig Traube, *Poetae Latini Aevi Carolini*, III, MGH, *Poetae Latini Medii Aevi*, 3 (Berlin, 1896), p. 448. There is no reason to assume a borrowing from *Waltharius*: cf. Dronke, 'Waltharius-Gaiferos', pp. 74-75, with whom I agree on this point (although, as will be seen, I dissent—with regret—from his interpretation of the passage). It seems incredible that this borrowing could ever have been suggested. The ancient usage is still found employed naturally in the fifth century (see n. 26 below), though in that case with strongly pejorative connotation. ¹³'Celtica Lingua', p. 17. ¹⁴But I see no reason to suppose that it did so develop. ¹⁵It seems to have been the idea of M. Wilmotte, 'La Patrie du Waltharius', *Revue historique*, 127 (1918), 1-30, at p. 28(-9), n. 1. ¹⁶According to Jones ('Celtica Lingua', p. 18), San-Marte went so far as to translate *Celtica lingua* as 'Rot(h)wälsch', 'thieves' talk'. ¹⁷*ibid.*, p. 19. ¹⁸This was suggested by Wilhelm Lenz, *Der Ausgang der Dichtung von Walther und Hildegunde* (Halle a. S., 1939), p. 19 (quoted by Jones, p. 18 and n. 4).

ludendo to mean 'lying', 'deceiving', or the like;¹⁹ this explanation deserves the most serious consideration—which it has hardly received. Ekiurid's would then be the most perfidious, rather than the verbally most dextrous, people.

It is possible that a solution to all these difficulties may be found if they are taken together. There are two admissible interpretations of the *Saxonicae orae*. The 'Saxon shores' might be those of England, in which case Ekiurid would have fled to the Continent: the poet tells us that 'on account of the murder of some chief there, [he] had fled as an exile'.²⁰ In that case his *Celtica lingua* would be Brittonic, whether Welsh or Cornish.

On the other hand, there was on the Continent (as in Britain in the fourth century at least) an area known as *litus Saxonicum*.²¹ This stretched from the Boulonnais to Poitou, from the Scheldt to the Garonne, but was concentrated in Normandy and Brittany. Whatever the precise signification of the disputed title, *litus Saxonicum*,²² it is clear that Saxons were settlers within the area so designated.²³ And, whatever the doubts about the distribution of Saxon settlement within the *Tractus Armoricanus*, it is certain that the Bessin was at one time a Saxon area. The *Saxones Baiocassenses* are found involved with the Bretons in the second half of the sixth century. And the Saxon background of parts of the area was still remembered in the ninth century, in administrative references to an *Otlinga Saxonia*.²⁴

Such a region, we might then think, could reasonably be described by a ninth-century poet as *Saxonicae orae*. If someone came from that region speaking a *Celtica lingua*, his language would be either Gaulish (if that were chronologically still possible, whether in the

¹⁹*Deutsche Dichter des lateinischen Mittelalters*, edited by Hermann Reich, third edition (Munich, 1922), quoted by Jones, p. 17 and n. 2. ²⁰lines 757–58: '... qui pro nece facta cuiusdam primatis eo diffugerat exul'. ²¹I cannot find the plural form, *litora Saxonica*, alleged by Jones, p. 20. ²²Among the many relevant studies, see Helmut Ehmer, *Die sächsischen Siedlungen auf dem französischen "Litus Saxonicum"* (Halle a. S., 1937); Donald A. White, *Litus Saxonicum. The British Saxon Shore in Scholarship and History* (Madison, 1961); Louis Guinet, *Contribution à l'étude des établissements saxons en Normandie* (Caen, 1967); *The Saxon Shore*, edited by D. E. Johnston (London, 1977); M. Rouche, 'Les Saxons et les origines de Quentovic', *Revue du Nord*, 59 (1977), 457–78; Stephen Johnson, *The Roman Forts of the Saxon Shore*, second edition (London, 1979); Walther Piroth, *Ortsnamenstudien zur angelsächsischen Wanderung. Ein Vergleich von -ingas, inga-Namen in England mit ihren Entsprechungen auf dem europäischen Festland* (Wiesbaden, 1979). ²³I cannot imagine what motivated a scholar such as Gerhard Eis to tell Jones that the Germanic settlers of the *litus Saxonicum* 'were really Franks': Jones, p. 19, n. 18. ²⁴Gregory of Tours, *Historia Francorum*, v.26, and ix.9 and 11, for the sixth century; for the ninth, see L. Guinet, 'Otlinga Saxonia: étude philologique', *Annales de Normandie*, 28 (1978), 3–8.

fifth century of the story or the ninth century of the poet) or Breton.²⁵ We know that Gaulish was still spoken in the Auvergne in the mid-fifth century from a letter of Sidonius to Ecdicius, written in 475:

Mitto istic ob gratiam pueritiae tuae undique gentium confluisse studia litterarum tuaeque personae quondam debitum quod *sermonis Celtici squamam* depositura nobilitas nunc oratorio stilo, nunc etiam Camenalibus modis imbuebatur. Illud in te adfectum principaliter uniuersitatis accendit, quod, quos olim Latinos fieri exegeras, barbaros deinceps esse uetuisti.

I make no mention of the congregation of learning assembled from all parts of the world for the benefit of your youthful years, and that at one time it was due to you personally that the leading families [sc. of Clermont-Ferrand], in their efforts to throw off the scurf of Celtic speech, were initiated now into oratorical style and now again into the measures of the Muses. What chiefly kindles the devotion of the whole community to you is that after first requiring them to become Latins you next prevented them from becoming barbarians.²⁶

If the nobles of Clermont-Ferrand had not yet shaken off Gaulish in the mid-fifth century, it is hardly likely that the whole population of what was to become Brittany had ceased to be Gaulish-speaking by the time of the British immigration. We should imagine continuity there of Gaulish speech, which might have allowed the continuing use of Latin *Celticus* to describe that speech.²⁷

If Ekiurid's *Celtica lingua* was indeed intended to be Gaulish or Breton, we have another point to consider. Ekiurid's name is plainly Germanic. In the ninth century (and perhaps increasingly as it wore on) it was perfectly possible for a Breton to bear a Germanic name;²⁸ but, for the fifth century, such a thing is almost inconceivable. If the poet was thinking of Ekiurid as a Celt, he must then have been allowing the onomastic situation of his own day. But we are unfortunately unable to say whether the poet received the name and the character of Ekiurid from his source, or whether the one part or the other was invented by him. I leave it to others to speculate on these

²⁵For the Bretons and Saxons as neighbours, see *inter alia* my forthcoming paper, 'On the Dating of the Early Breton Lawcodes', *Études celtiques*, 21 (1984). ²⁶*Epistolae*, III.iii.2-3, edited and translated by W. B. Anderson, *Sidonius: Poems and Letters*, 2 vols (London, 1936-65), II, 12-13. ²⁷On all this see (most recently) Léon Fleuriot, *Les Origines de la Bretagne: l'émigration* (Paris, 1980), pp. 51-97. At the end of his article, Jones touches briefly on the possibility of a Breton explanation (p. 22, n. 28). But he does not develop it, the closing sentence of his paper indicating that he is attached to the unevicenced interpretations of *Celticus* as 'barbaric' or 'Romance [-influenced]'. ²⁸And the Bretons' eastward expansion under their ninth-century rulers would have brought more persons with Germanic names into the Breton-speaking world.

matters and on the literary factors which might have produced this particular passage of the poem.²⁹

A Celt of the Saxon Shore—let us say 'a Breton'—would have at least one other noteworthy characteristic in the eyes of a Carolingian writer. We might call in evidence the *Annales Regni Francorum* for 825:³⁰

Almost all the nobles of Brittany were present at this assembly [at Aachen]. Among them was Wihomarc who by his treachery had thrown the whole of Brittany into confusion and by his senseless obstinacy had provoked the emperor [Louis the Pious] to the above-mentioned campaign. He was finally following saner counsel and, as he said himself, did not hesitate to place himself under the protection of the emperor. The emperor forgave him and, after presenting him with gifts, permitted him to return home with the other nobles of his people. But, *with the treachery peculiar to his nation*, as he had before he broke the faith which he had promised. He did not cease to molest his neighbours with all his energy, burning and plundering, until he was cornered and slain in his own house by the men of Count Lambert.

The only other people to be singled out for particularly hostile comment in these annals is the Saxons. But there is a quality of resigned expectation in the annalist's accounts of their attempts over thirty-three years (772–804) of campaigning to defy Frankish power and authority.³¹ For example, we read s.a. 778:

When the Saxons heard that . . . the Franks were so far away . . . they followed their detestable custom and again revolted . . .

Or at 782:

As soon as [Charlemagne] returned [to Francia], the Saxons, persuaded by Widukind, promptly rebelled as usual.

²⁹I wonder whether, for example, there is any implication that the twelve heroes represent the principal parts of the Frankish kingdom. ³⁰The translation is that of Bernhard Walter Scholz and B. Rogers, *Carolingian Chronicles: Royal Frankish Annals and Nithard's Histories* (Ann Arbor, 1970), pp. 117–18 (cf. pp. 15–16 for comment). For the Latin text, see *Annales Regni Francorum*, edited by Friedrich Kurze (Hannover, 1895), p. 167. ³¹The reviser of the *Annales Regni Francorum*, working apparently after 814, is much more determined about Saxon 'treachery'. Einhard, too, looking back from the reign of Louis the Pious when writing his biography of Charlemagne, viewed the Saxons' determination not to be conquered as 'faithlessness'. The following citations from the *Annales* are from Scholz and Rogers, pp. 56, 59, and 61 (cf. Kurze, pp. 52, 60, and 64). For similar expressions of opinion, see the *Annales*, s.aa. 776 and 794.

Or s.a. 783:

The worthy Lady Queen Hildegard died on April 30. . . . Since the Saxons had revolted again, the Lord King Charles conducted a campaign into Saxony. . . .

The principal difference in the Frankish attitudes to these two neighbouring peoples is to be explained as follows. They considered the Bretons to be dependents of long standing who had nonetheless spent considerable periods of time avoiding their obligations to Frankish rulers and treacherously taking opportunities to rebel. On the other hand, the Saxons were independent and troublesome pagan neighbours whom the Franks had decided to conquer; the Saxons' determination to retain their ancient customs and their independence was to that extent intelligible if nonetheless deplorable in its results and in the long duration of the resistance.

I submit, therefore, that a number of the immediate difficulties of the Ekiurid episode may be solved without great difficulty. We might then translate as follows:

'Your Celtic tongue proves you to be born of that race to which nature has granted [the gift of] excelling others in lying. But if our right hand touches you as you approach, you will afterwards be able to tell the Saxons that on this occasion you saw an apparition of a forest god.'

We must then take it that Ekiurid's remarks have simply been turned back on him by Walthari in a typical manifestation of heroic flyting. Perhaps with regret, we need invoke no spirit of whimsy to explain Walthari's response to Ekiurid's taunt.