AFON YSTWYTH AND ONOMASTIC SOUND-CHANGE

Richard Coates

(University of Sussex)

penn gwyr tal being a dely

"best of men, he deserved the fore-end of the bench"
(interpolation in *Gododdin* (*CA* 47))

*

Larry Trask, in his *Dictionary of historical and comparative linguistics* (2000: 238), brings into the canon of ideas a notion first set out cogently by Clark ([1991]/1995: 150-52) and Colman (1989; 1991: 59-67), namely «onomastic sound-change», i.e. one only applying in proper names, or applying in proper names before other lexical material. Such a type of sound change would violate the Mechanical Principle underlying sound-change as conceived by the Neogrammarians (Labov 1994: 603; Trask 2000: 208, 226-27) in that it recognizes that there may be non-phonetic constraints on sound-change, and that there are some such constraints which are not fundamentally sociolinguistic. Onomastic sound-changes need not themselves be regular, i.e. Neogrammarian, in character. Professor Trask has done a service in bringing knowledge of this notion out of the sometimes treacherously marshy field of onomastics, where some historical linguists fear or neglect to tread; it is absent, for instance, from the standard works by Croft (2000), Crowley (1992) and McMahon (1994), and there is nothing resembling it in the earlier books by Hock (1986), Anttila (1989) and Samuels (1972). Trask also interestingly —but without special comment— utilizes the complementary concept of the unexpected retention in some proper names of sounds otherwise lost: [n] is irregularly and puzzlingly retained intervocalically in the Basque derivational suffix **-(g)une* 'interval, space' in some place-names (Trask 1997: 337). In doing this, his work points to the need for further investigation of the relation between historical onomastics and general historical linguistics. This remains to be done. In this paper, in memory of my sadly-missed colleague and friend, "deserving the fore-end of the bench" in the words of the tribute interpolated into the *Gododdin* poem, I have the modest goal of showing how the use of the idea «onomastic sound-change» may help clear up a problem with the origin of a Welsh river-name.

The name of the Ystwyth in west Wales is first recorded in Ptolemy's *Geography* (II, 3, 2; cf. Rivet and Smith 1979: 462) in the following forms in differing

manuscripts: Στονκκία, Στονκία, Σονκκία, Τονκκία, Στονλκία. By common consent, the acute accent is held not to represent reliably the true position of the British stress, and the first of these forms is reckoned to be closest to the etymological form. The etymon was reconstructed as *Stuctia* by Förster (1942: 230), arguing that the <κ> appearing for <τ> is evidence that Ptolemy was using a manuscript written in uncials where <c> and <t> could be easily confused. *Stuctia*, he held, would be a satisfactory source for the modern name. That would mean that the river is called simply by the ancestor of the word *ystwyth* 'flexible, pliant', taken in an extended metaphorical sense, by promotion of a consequent attribute, as meaning 'having bends' (a view accepted by Owen 1998: 5). The garbled form of this name which appears in the *Ravenna cosmography* (108_{29}; Rivet and Smith 1979: 462), *Iuctius*, offers clear support for the emendation to <κτ>. But, in his notes on the form in the *Cosmography*, Ifor Williams asserted that Förster's account raises phonological problems, because British initial *st-* invariably becomes *s-* in Welsh (though not invariably in Cornish; Jackson 1953: 529-34, esp. 531). He therefore suggested that Ptolemy's name-form should rather be reconstructed as *Exstuctia* or *Estuctia*, which removes, or dilutes, the problem by making the *-st-* medial, in which position it *may* remain unchanged (Williams 1949: 36). The *y-* would accordingly be an organic part of the word rather than the result of a phonetic process —but note that at least as a preverb and preposition, *eks-* appears as *ech-* in Middle Welsh, and not with <y> (Lewis and Pedersen 1937: 262), so perhaps Williams thought [ek] would be fully lost by some unspecified mechanism and the *y-* [ə] supplied later by the general rule of prothesis operating in Welsh some time after 1000. This scholarship, bar the last point, is set out anew by Sims-Williams (2000: 7), who is content to accept the name as probably Celtic, and he adds the suggestion that the adjective may have behaved as Williams suggests but that its form then influenced the river-name, as it were by folk-etymology, to produce the anomaly. This suggestion is intended to account for the form of the adjective and to allow the form in Ptolemy to stand without such radical emendation as Williams proposed, but the fact remains that we have <St-> in the first century and the analogical influence on the implied **Suctia* must have been extremely early. Sims-Williams also suggests the possibility of influence from a non-Welsh Brittonic dialect where [st] was not reduced to [s] initially. For reasons best known to themselves, Rivet and Smith simply dismiss Williams's solution, and by implication the difficulty, though it is troublesome enough for Jackson to describe the form *Ystwyth*, if having the origin suggested by Förster, as «a freak» (1953: 533). The fact remains that the longer etymon favoured by Williams sits uneasily with the early evidence from Ptolemy and some such solution as one of Sims-Williams's is necessary to square them. The name is not discussed by Williams in his general book on Welsh place-names (1945), nor by Thomas in the standard work on Welsh river-names (1938), the sole published volume of which is organized on the basis of the *Welsh* suffixal morphology of the names treated and *Ystwyth* does not exhibit any of that.

    The origin of this name could clearly tolerate a review. Schrijver (1995: 415-30) has done a careful reanalysis of the descendants of Common Celtic initial **st-* in British. He concludes convincingly that there are more reflexes of Celtic **st-* having

the modern form *yst-* than has hitherto been believed, and to that extent Förster's solution of *Ystwyth* gains support (as noted also by Sims-Williams). He believes that forms beginning with *s-* are generalizations of a postvocalic allomorph of the relevant words, and those with *st-* (later *yst-* in Welsh) generalizations of a postconsonantal one, the original alternation being grammaticalized (in a way similar to what has happened in the case of lenition) and then given up in favour of a levelled unitary form of each relevant word: all this happening in Brittonic times. This analysis is formally ingenious and commands respect. It preserves the semantics of the now-traditional solution. However, whether 'flexible' is semantically appropriate as a river-name, through being taken as implicating 'winding', may be questioned; there are enough primary words for the topographical characteristic 'meandering', such as *cam* and *crwm*, whose ancestors certainly were deployed in river-names (Thomas 1938: 46, 106-7, 184), without relying on the metaphorical application of one applying primarily to materials. Even if *ystwyth* is root-related to Old Irish *stúag* 'arch' and *túag* 'curve' as Sims-Williams suggests, these forms differ from it in ablaut-grade and offer no firm support for a topographical meaning for the British word. We return to the question of the meaning below.

An alternative solution to the name *Ystwyth* can be proposed, though it offers a theoretically interesting difficulty itself which the notion of onomastic sound-change can address. The base of the name may be the ancestor of adjectival *twyth* 'strong, forceful', cognate or etymologically identical with a noun of the same form currently meaning 'spring(iness), elasticity'. The river-name may be **Su-tuct-* '[prefix with a positivizing sense] + strong'. I follow Schrijver (1995: 162-64) in taking the original form of the initial element to be **su-* not **so-*, and in assuming its normal development to Welsh *hy-* to be due to the normal pretonic reduction in the Brittonic languages rather than to the special type of reduction affecting proclitics, and prefixes related to proclitics, postulated by Jackson (1953: 656-59); **su-* was never used as a clitic (Schrijver 1995: 163 and fn. 1). This form **Su-tuct-* is identical to what must be presumed as the source of the modern adjective *hydwyth* 'elastic', but unlike in the case of *ystwyth* we have clear evidence within Brittonic for a meaning with direct hydrological applicability, 'strong'. *Hydwyth* is found from the 13th century, and is glossed 'grymus, nerthol, cadarn [i.e. powerful, strong, etc.]' in *GPC* (where *ystwyth* is tentatively compared). Rowland (1990: 585) prefers to regard its meaning as uncertain, but she notes that its derivatives generally have to do with intensity, hardship and violence, and that it collocates with *carrec* 'rock' in the Llywarch Hen cycle. Its appearance in this 9th-century poem (Williams 1953: 203-4) means that the word is ancient, and it also appears in the language of the Gogynfeirdd (poets of the early second millennium); it is thus not simply a historic-period construct using traditional principles of word-formation. If my suggestion is correct, the vowel of the initial syllable must have been lost, unusually, in the river-name, though not in the corresponding adjective. As we noted at the outset, there is evidence for changes of a reductive type affecting proper names only (cf. for instance Clark [1991]/1995, Colman 1989 and 1991: 59-67, and for some discussion of the information-theoretic basis for the phenomenon see Coates 1993: 17-19 and notes 15, 16); and ultimately the idea should be connected to the finding by neuropsychologists that proper names can form a psychologically discrete

category, at least in subjects with certain pathological conditions (see e.g. Semenza and Zettin 1988, Semenza 1997).

There are also parallels for such a loss of a vowel giving rise to consonant clusters in Welsh, though not such as to produce the particular cluster *(-)st-*, so the change appears to be sporadic. The process and its outcome are however easy to understand and motivate in general phonetic terms. The parallels are set out by Lewis and Pedersen (1937: 76-77) and Jackson (1953: 687-89). The feature common to the lost vowel in the forms discussed there and to the postulated **Su-tuct-* is immediately pretonic position, and in a general sort of way this licenses my suggestion here. But no precise parallel for the loss of the vowel in a prefix such as **su-* has been discovered. The problem of the date of the loss in this name —late enough for the resultant cluster to avoid reduction to [s] (which occurred probably B.C.E.), apparently early enough to register in Ptolemy (early second century C.E.), and certainly early enough to allow the prothesis of *y-* before the resultant cluster (?eleventh century)— has no ready resolution beyond an appeal to a reductive sound-change operating in a proper name before other comparable instances in lexical words. On this account, the homophony of the river-name and the lexical item *ystwyth* 'flexible', if this is from **ex-(s)tuct-*, is an accident of phonetic change. But both words seem likely to be derivatives of the same root **tuct-* with different prefixes.

The matter of which form and which sense appears in the river-name might be settled by a direct appeal to geography. Is the Ystwyth really winding or strongly flowing? The two characteristics are hydrologically incompatible, or rather inversely related, at a single location because rivers wind when the vigour of their flow is reduced. (On the physical mechanisms, see Stamp 1960: 39-40, or any good textbook.) In its lower course across the alluvial floodplain at Tan-y-bwlch (barely 2 km long), once freed from the confines of its valley, it is only moderately winding and with no signs of oxbow formation on the maps available to me. (This is to some extent subjective, but compare the great meanders of the lower courses of the Dyfi, Tamar, Parrett, Cuckmere and Tees.) Although the Rheidol, in its upper reaches, is one of the several claimed as the fastest-flowing river in Wales, by the time it reaches the sea its flow is insufficient to clear the sandbar at the harbour where it meets the sea without assistance, i.e. at the place now called Aberystwyth, and the Ystwyth was diverted into the Rheidol's mouth in the late 18th century to provide the necessary scour (Wood 1978: 63). Before this, the Ystwyth debouched into Cardigan Bay on a line projected roughly westward from its course just upriver from the northward diversion. The fact that it was diverted at all suggests it was perceived as having a strong flow, because the new cut lengthened its course along the floodplain, and this was evidently not seen as an obstacle to its ability to scour the harbour; it could flow without its depositing large amounts of silt along its new nearly level course and therefore choking itself (though nowadays the lowest reach requires intervention to keep it straight).

It is generally recognized that, by what might be called Nicolaisen's Law (Nicolaisen 1976: 173-76), the most durable names in a river-system attach to the larger and more important watercourses, i.e. those nearest the sea and forming the "stem" of their system if one were to diagram it. Assuming then that the ancient

name of the Ystwyth was first applied to the river's lower reaches belowest its lowest tributaries, the twin characteristics of (1) a perceived ability to keep open a lengthened channel and still scour a harbour, and (2) a short floodplain, possibly previously drowned, favour an interpretation 'strongly flowing' over 'having bends'.[1] Its valley upstream from the floodplain is not straight, but that is dictated by landform, and is therefore a dependent characteristic unlikely to give rise to the name; it is not a matter of classic estuarine meandering, and winding because of valley walls does not appear appropriately described by a term whose literal meaning is 'flexible'. Above this section, much of the river is relatively straight (even allowing for modern interference) because it follows the line of the Ystwyth fault (mentioned by Cave and Hains 1986: 105).

Dr Andrew Breeze points out in correspondence that the notion of 'strong' or 'powerful' appears to be encoded in Brittonic river-names, though not with current lexis (there are no instances of *cryf*, *grymus*, *cadarn* or *nerthol*). He notes that Williams believed (1945: 41) that at least some river-names in *Cad-* contain not a reference to battle but the element serving as the base of *cadarn*, and that Thomas (1938: 125-26) draws attention to the Carmarthenshire *Tren* and the Staffordshire *Tern*, which he holds to contain obsolete *tren(n)* 'powerful' (cf. the surviving Modern Welsh comparative *trech* 'stronger, dominant'). If names containing *garw* 'rough' and *caled* 'hard', or derivatives of them, carried an etymological sense 'strong', as Breeze (1999 and 2004) and Thomas (1938: 55) respectively have suggested, then we can be sure that the sense 'powerful, strong' was well represented in Brittonic hydronymy, and that he sense ascribed here to *Ystwyth* is onomastically plausible in Wales.

Dr Breeze also points out that the word *ystwyth* occurs in the works of the 6th/7th-century poet Aneirin, though with the sense 'agile, nimble' rather than 'winding' (Williams 1938: 172, note to line 396), and he infers the possible suitability of the term in that sense, a different extended sense, for the fast flow of the river. The proposed etymon **su-tuct-* in the sense '"positively" powerful' or the like, would describe the same characteristic, and, if 'agile' is the relevant sense of *ystwyth* rather than 'winding', the dynamics of the river cannot be used to decide between the two etymologies discussed here, except by relying on intuitions about how river-flow characteristics are likely to be encoded lexically.

---

[1]   It is no longer possible to tell for sure whether the estuary of the Ystwyth was in early historic times drowned like those of the Dyfi and Mawddach, but the event concerning the glut of fish recorded in 1206 in *Brut y tywysogion* (Williams 1860: 262-3) might suggest it was; an unusually large shoal of fish making its way up a set of meanders might seem less plausible. «Ac yna y rodes Duw amylder o byscawt yn AberYstwyth yn gymeint ac nabu y kyfryw kynno hynny» ('And then God bestowed an abundance of fish in the Ystwyth estuary, so much that nothing like it had happened before'). Perhaps to take this as meaning 'in the Ystwyth estuary' rather than 'at Aberystwyth' (i.e. at the original site of the castle-town) is an overinterpretation, but they seem likely to amount to the same thing. The modern town of Aberystwyth bears its appropriate name, 'mouth of the Ystwyth', by a double historical accident: the original Norman castle was built at the old mouth of the Ystwyth in the early 12th century; a new castle was built near the mouth of the Rheidol in 1277 and the name of the previous settlement was transferred there; and finally the Ystwyth was diverted to catch up with the place bearing its borrowed name.

The challenged solution to the problem of this river-name and the one offered for the first time here both require special pleading of some sort. The challenged one requires us to allow a particular resolution of a morphophonological anomaly or the analogical influence of an adjective on a root-related name with doubtfully relevant semantics, at an extremely early period in the history of British, and to allow a geographically non-obvious name for the river. The alternative one presented here requires us to accept the possibility of a phonetically credible onomastic sound-change in a word probably with appropriate semantics, and a geographically acceptable characterization of the river. My vote goes to the latter.

Acknowledgements

References

Anttila, R., 1989, *Historical and comparative linguistics* [2nd edn.]. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins (Current Issues in Linguistic Theory 6).

Breeze, A., 1999, "Some Celtic place-names of Scotland including [...] *Girvan*". *Scottish Language* 18, 31-51 [at 48-9].

—, 2004, "The river Garw of Gramorgan and Gara Water, Devon". *Journal of the English Place-Name Society* 36, 23-4.

Brut y tywysogion. See J. Williams ab Ithel 1860.

CA. See I. Williams 1938.

Cave, R. and B. A. Hains, 1986, *Geology of the country between Aberystwyth and Machynlleth*. London: HMSO (British Geological Survey memoir for 1:50000 geological sheet 163 (England & Wales).

Clark, C., 1991, "Towards a reassessment of "Anglo-Norman influence on English place-names" [i.e. Zachrisson 1909 and subsequent work]". In P. Sture Ureland and G. Broderick (eds.), *Language contact in the British Isles: Proceedings of the Eighth International Symposium on Language Contact in Europe, Douglas, Isle of Man, 1988*. Tubingen: Niemeyer, 275-95. Reprinted in P. Jackson (ed.), 1995, *Words, names and history: selected papers of Cecily Clark*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 144-55.

Coates, R., 1993, "Language in the landscape: place-naming and language change". Brighton: University of Sussex (Cognitive Science Research Report 295).

Colman, F., 1989, "Neutralisation: on characterising distinctions between Old English common nouns and proper names. In G. Barnes, S. Jensen, L. Jobling and D. Lawton (eds.), *Studies in honour of H. L. Rogers*. Special number of *Leeds Studies in English* 20, 249-70.

—, 1991, *Money talks: reconstructing Old English*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter (Trends in Linguistics Studies and Monographs 56).

Croft, W., 2000, *Explaining language change*. Harlow: Longmans.

Crowley, T., 1992, *An introduction to historical linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford U.P.

Förster, M., 1942, *Der Flußname Themse und seine Sippe: Studien zur Anglisierung keltischer Eigennamen und Lautchronologie des Altbritischen*. Munich: Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften (Sitzungsberichte, Phil.-Hist. Abt. 1).

GPC = R. J. Thomas (ed.), 1950-2002, *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru* (4 vols) [1st edn]. Cardiff: University of Wales Press. [2nd edn 2003-].

Hock, H. H., 1986, *Principles of historical linguistics* [1st edn]. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter (Trends in Linguistics Studies and Monographs 34). [2nd edn 1991].

Jackson, K. H., 1953, *Language and history in early Britain.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh U.P.

Labov, W., 1994, *Principles of linguistic change, vol. I: internal factors.* Oxford: Blackwell.

Lewis, H. and H. Pedersen, 1937, *A concise comparative Celtic grammar.* Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht.

McMahon, A. M. S., 1994, *Understanding language change.* Cambridge: Cambridge U.P.

Nicolaisen, W. F. H., 1976, *Scottish place-names* [1st edn]. London: Batsford. [2nd edn 2002].

Owen, H. W., 1998, *A pocket guide to the place-names of Wales.* Cardiff: University of Wales Press and The Western Mail.

Richmond and Crawford. See Williams 1949.

Rivet, A. L. F. and C. Smith, 1979, *The place-names of Roman Britain.* London: Batsford.

Rowland, J., 1990, *Early Welsh saga poetry.* Cambridge: Cambridge U.P.

Samuels, M. L., 1972, *Linguistic evolution: with special reference to English.* Cambridge: Cambridge U.P.

Schrijver, P., 1995, *Studies in British Celtic historical phonology.* Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA: Rodopi (Leiden Studies in Indo-European 5).

Semenza, C., 1997, "Proper-name-specific aphasias". In. H. Goodglass and A. Wingfield (eds.), *Anomia: neuroanatomical and cognitive correlates.* San Diego, CA and London: Academic Press, 115-34.

Semenza, C. and M. Zettin, 1988, "Generating proper names: a case of selective inability". *Cognitive Neuropsychology* 5, 711-21.

Sims-Williams, P., 2000, "Degress of Celticity in Ptolemy's names: examples from Wales". In D. N. Parsons and P. Sims-Williams (eds.), *Ptolemy: towards a linguistic atlas of the earliest Celtic place-names of Europe.* Aberystwyth: CMCS, 1-15.

Stamp, D., 1960, *Britain's structure and scenery* [5th edn]. London: Collins (New Naturalist series 4).

Thomas, R. J., 1938, *Enwau afonydd a nentydd Cymru.* Cardiff: University of Wales Press.
— See also *GPC.*

Trask, R. L., 1997, *The history of Basque.* London: Routledge.

—, 2000, *The dictionary of historical and comparative linguistics.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh U.P.

Williams, I., 1938, *Canu Aneirin.* Cardiff: University of Wales Press. [= *CA*]

—, 1945, *Enwau lleoedd* [1st edn]. Liverpool: Gwasg y Brython. [2nd edn 1962.]

—, 1949, Section III of I. A. Richmond and O. G. S. Crawford, The British section of the Ravenna Cosmography. *Archaeologia* 93, 1-50, at 21-50.

—, 1953, *Canu Llywarch Hen.* Cardiff: University of Wales Press.

Williams. J., ab Ithel (ed.), 1860, *Brut y tywysogion.* London: Public Record Office (Rolls series 17).

Wood, A., 1978, "Coast erosion at Aberystwyth: the geological and human factors involved". *Geological Journal* 13, 61-72.

Zachrisson, R. E., 1909, *A contribution to the study of Anglo-Norman influence on English place-names.* Lund: Lund University (Lunds Universitets Årsskrift (n.f. I, iv, 3). [See bibliography entry for Clark].