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Some Possible Cases of Celtic Influence in West Germanic Generally

It was first noted by Preusler (1938) that where English is grammatically different from continental West Germanic it is very often similar to Celtic, more specifically to Brittonic (Welsh, Cornish, & Breton), a syndrome that seems more probably due to substratal influence than coincidence. Likewise most of the classic "Ingvaeonisms" have at least a possible explanation in terms of Celtic influence. Yet apart from the work of Schumacher (2009), almost entirely devoted to the existence of /b-/ forms of BE in the present indicative of West Germanic, little has been said on the topic of possible Celtic influences in West Germanic generally.

As for possible historical scenarios for how Celtic influences could spread through West Germanic, by the time of the later Roman Empire most of West Germanic existed in territory that had once belonged to Celtic, the most significant exception being the Saxon/Anglian area of the NE. This state of affairs was largely the result of two expansions, a first expansion into the NW of West Germanic territory on the continent, and a later expansion into the SW. Either of these could have led to Celtic influences getting into West Germanic. Granted that the Celtic of SW Germany belongs to the mists of prehistory, whereas the Celtic of Benelux was apparently quite close to Brittonic, we are on much firmer ground positing influences from the latter than from the former. As for how influences from either source could have become general in West Germanic, including the Anglian/Saxon area, the best possibility appears to be trade contacts along the North Sea coast during the Roman period. Frankish/Christian prestige during the early Dark Ages is probably too late to account for features apparently well-established not much later.

At present there appear to be only two good cases to add to Schumacher's /b-/ forms of E: the creation of case forms for the infinitive or gerund, and the use of the plural stem in the 2ps of the preterite. On the first, there is little to be said. The existence of case forms for the infinitive in West Germanic (Robinson 1992: 150-1) appears to be an innovation, and certainly has analogues in Celtic, which shows great "nouniness" in its infinitives (Lewis & Pedersen 1961: 312). On the second, Cornish and Breton use the same stem (with sigmatic /s/) in the 2ps as in all persons of the plural: Cornish "kersys, kersough" and Breton "quersot, "quersoch" ('you love') (L&P 1961: 295-6). (Welsh apparently leveled out this variation.) Old Irish shows the same phenomenon in its sigmatic preterites, e.g "soersai" ('you[sg] free') and "-suidigser" ('you[sg] place'), where a stem with /-Cs/ is used in the 2ps and all plurals (Thurneysen 1946: 417-8). That this state of affairs is old is suggested by the fact that in Latin, which in its earlier forms was close to Celtic, the perfect endings 2ps /-istii/ and 2pp /-istis/ share a special stem with /-is-/ that once existed in the 3pp: /isunt/ > /irunt/ > /erunt/.

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