The Linguistic Evidence
of Placenames for History

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Sadly, to the memory of Robert Austerlitz

Testimony on placenames illustrates the fact that our inferences based on sound linguistic method can be more informative and solidly based for historians than the data to be gleaned from documentary sources.

Thus the inhabited place (town) called *Chorges* in the canton H.-Alpes (France) is recorded in Roman times (*Itinerary of Cadix, Peutinger Table*, etc.)[1] as *Caturigomago*, which is a perfectly intelligible Gaulish grammatical construction. It is a compound of the Gaulish ethnicon *Catu-riges* 'battle-kings' and the noun (*s*-stem) *magos* 'plain, place'[2] (:OIr. *mag*, Early Welsh *maes* 'plain' < **mages-tu-*,[3] *-fa* 'place' < **-magos*). Thus there is no question of the correctness and nativeness of this appellation as a linguistic fact.

However, it seems probable that the inhabitants did not use this form as the normal name for their town; or at least, if they did, their nearby neighbors who spoke their own language did not. This is in fact what Danzat and Rostaing (1984) partially (but inexactly) imply, and other documentation conflictingly records: "au IV[e]s., le nom de peuple subsiste seul pour désigner le chef-lieu: *mansio Catorigas*"[4] (1984, 333).

The modern name of the place, *Chorges*, actually confirms the last statement. We must reconstruct this placename as **Caòr(V)ges* or **Caùr(V)ges*. The most likely Gaulish form would be **Catù-rīges*. The name is precisely parallel in form to *Bourges* < *Bitù-rīges*, literally 'world-kings'.

Moreover, the linguistic form of this name (a plural ethnicon) is exactly suitable within our experience of Celtic onomastics. In Gaul,

major settled centers were called by the plural of the tribal name belonging to the region: thus *Bourges* < *Bitùrīges*; *Chartres* < (Ptolemy) *Kàrnoutai*;[5] *Langres* < *Lìngones*; *Limoges* < *Lemòvices*; *Périgueux* < *Petrocòriorum*;[5] *Angers* < *Andecàvī(s)*;[5] *Poitiers* < *Pictàvī(s)*;[5] *Rennes* < *Rèdonas*; *Soissons* < *Suēssiònum*;[5] *Tours* < *Tùrones*; *Troyes* < *Trìcassum*;[5] *Bayeux* < *Baiocas* < *Badiòcasses*; *Dreux* < *Drocas* < (Merovingian) *Durocas* < *Duròcasses*; *Vannes* < *Benetis V-*; *Reims* < *Rèmī̄*;[5] *Sens* < *Sènones*; *Amiens* < *Ambiànum*;[5] Avranches < (Ptolemy) *Abrìnkatouoi*;[5] *Arras* < *Atrebàtes*; *Senlis* < **Senvalìctes* < *Silvanectum*;[5] *Châlons-sur-Marne* < *Catalàunos*;[5] *Cahors* < *Cadùrcī(s)*;[5] *Orléans* < *Aureliànorum*;[5] *Évreux* < *Ebròicorum*[5] < **Eburòuic*;[6] *Meaux* < (Strabo) *Meldoi*.

With the element *-rīgo-* we might reasonably expect this combination to represent an ethnicon. Therefore it is perfectly consistent with our major data that the local people called their main center by the plural ethnicon **Catùrīges* > *Chorges*. This habit of nomenclature is clear from what has come down to us from the length and breadth of France.

It is quite possible, of course, that a Gaul explained his town to a Roman as **Caturīgo-magos*. He would have been quite capable of forming correctly such grammatical constructions. In fact, the *only* way to say the name of *Caen* (Calvados) < *Cathim Cadomo* was **Càtu-magos* 'Battle-field' (= Medieval Welsh *katva*, in modern spelling *cadfa*). But it also seems possible that **Caturīgomagos* was more in the nature of a gloss or explication, a rendering that presented the settlement in a terminological form that was familiar to Roman tradition (*Roma*, not *Romani*; *Iguvium*, not *Iguvini*; *Neapolis*, not *Neapolitani*; *Athēnae*, not *Atticī*). The normal Gaulish locution might well have been **Catùrīges* all along.

Let us take our reasoning one step further. Dauzat and Rostaing (1984) seem to assume that about the fourth century in many parts of Gaul people took to calling places by their local ethnica. Thus they would have abandoned *Avaricum* for *Bourges*, *Aut(u)ricum* for *Chartres*, *Andemantunnum* for *Langres*, *Augustoritum* for *Limoges*, *Vesunna* for *Périgueux*, *Iuliomagus* for *Angers*, *Limonum* for *Poitiers*, *Condate* for *Rennes*, *Augusta* for *Suessio(nes)*, *Caesarodūnum* for *Tours*, *Augustobona* for *Troyes*, *Augustoduro* for *Bayeux*, *Darioriton* for

Vannes, Durocortorum for *Reims, Agedincum* for *Sens, Samarobriva*
for *Amiens, Nemetocenna* for *Arras, Ratomagos* for *Senlis, Durocatela-*
uni for *Châlons, Devona* for *Cahors, Mediolanion* for *Évreux*. A few
of the pre-fourth century names were clearly Roman creations; there
is no reason to suppose that another name was not current all the
time. A number of these old names are obviously local and descrip-
tive of, e.g., deities and waters (*Vesunna, Devona*) — a familiar
pattern among the Celts; and of natural features or objects (*-riton*
'ford', *-briva* 'bridge', *-magos* 'field', *condate* 'confluence'
(also the name of a quarter of Lyon and wrongly called pre-Celtic by
Dauzat and Restaing [1984, 140]), *-dūnum* fort[7], *-bona* 'habitation',
mediolanion 'of the mid-point of the plain'). In short, there is no
reason for us to suppose that these specific Roman-fashion names
excluded another parallel native nomenclature[8] that (from what little
we can now discern) included calling main places by their character-
izing ethnicity, as with *Durocatelauni apud Catalaunos* (fourth
century) for *Châlons*.

Thus when the Roman influence weakened, the ingrained old
native habit simply took over and became dominant on the map.

This Gaulish nomenclature matches, and would continue in
unbroken cultural succession, the tradition which we know linguisti-
cally from Insular Celtic. The names of the main divisions of Ireland
which we call in English *Ulster, Leinster* and *Connaught* are plural
ethnica in Irish. And early Irish and Welsh regularly rendered names
of nations and regions with the formula 'men of X'. In earliest
Welsh poetry we read *Caint* 'people of Kent', *Cornyw* 'people of
Cornwall', *Iwys* 'men of Wessex', *Lloegyr* 'men of Mercia (?)',
and the only way to say "Wales" was *Kymry*, the plural of *Kymro* 'a
Welshman, (originally literally) *compatriot'.

Plural ethnica formed the normal Celtic nomenclature for major
groups and their territories. This was a natural designation, there-
fore, for a group's habitual seat. Note that the non-Celtic *Toulouse*
did not emerge with the name of the Tectosages, who were probably
its Celtic occupants only for a short period after a long pre-Indo-
European past.

Our linguistic evidence tells us rather plainly what our docu-
ments hint at only feebly.

Notes

1. See Dauzat and Rostaing (1984, 190).

2. Inexactly glossed by Dauzat and Rostaing as 'marché', i.e. 'market'.

3. See Hamp (1972, 1973, esp. 99).

4. "In the 4th century, the ethnic name survives only as the designation of the regional center." The exact case of what looks like a Gaulish acc. pl. in *-as* < *-ns is not syntactically or graphically clear here. The noun *catu-* was certainly originally a *u*-stem (cf. OIr. *cath*).

5. Plurals are given in attested stems and case forms.

6. On the development of *oụi* see Hamp (1986, 47).

7. *duro-* is glossed 'forteresse' by Dauzat and Rostaing, but is rather 'covered, walled town'.

8. This point is touched on briefly by Rivet and Smith (1979, 36).

References

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