

Celts in the Baltic?

Much ink has been spent on arguing that some Iron Age tribes living beside the Baltic Sea spoke a Celtic language. Particular attention has focussed on the *Cimbri*, who migrated south from an original homeland in Denmark some time around 120 BC, joined up with other tribes including the *Teutones*, and came into conflict with the Romans, who finally defeated them at the battle of *Vercellae* in 101 BC.

For a digest of information about the *Cimbri*, see the website of Faux (2009), which is strong on the historical long view and on genetics, but weak on linguistics and on sea level changes. Most historians and linguists, including Celtic specialists such as Koch (2006), now accept that the *Cimbri* were Germanic, largely because there are no Celtic-seeming place names around the Baltic, and perhaps because ancient authors described them as tall, fair-haired and blue-eyed.

The name *Cimbri* almost certainly means fierce warriors, which was exactly how they were known to the Romans. Despite a superficial similarity to Celtic words like *cymru* and Cumbria, *Cimbri*'s closest relatives can be found in Germanic languages: the surname Kemp and the archaic English words *kemp* and *kemper*, defined by the OED as meaning "a big, strong, and brave warrior or athlete", with cognates in German, Danish, etc.

It is hard to know which language the name *Cimbri* was actually coined in. The modern Danish region of Himmerland is thought to preserve the name of the *Cimbri* after the classic Germanic sound changes of C to H and MB to MM. In that case, why did English preserve an initial K sound in its related words? And how is *Cimbri* related to militaristic words like *campaign* or German *Kampf*, which are generally thought to descend from Latin *campus*? Or to ancient personal names like *Cimbaules*, or place names like modern Cambrai?

Pliny cited one word from the Cimbrian language, *morimarusa*, which he translated as *mortuum mare* (dead sea). This word cannot easily be explained in a Germanic language, where the root *mor* means marsh or mountain, but fits better with Celtic, for example modern Welsh *môr* (sea) and *marw* (dead). So, for example, Sims-Williams (2006) labels *morimarusa* as "clearly Celtic".

However, the best fit is actually in Slavic, where *morimarusa* means "sea of frost": compare for example modern Russian *more мороза*, Slovak *more mrazu*, or their analogues in other modern Slavic languages. Bogusławski (1889) noted how in Polish *morze mrazy* (frosty sea) was better than *morze martwe* (dead sea). Pliny himself mentioned how parts of the Baltic Sea ice over in winter, frost is a frequent theme in Slavic and Germanic folklore, and Russian *мороз* (frost) may be related linguistically to a root *mor* (death, sickness).

Another Baltic coastal tribe from whose language just one word survives was the *Aestii*. According to Tacitus' *Germania*, the *Aestii* collected amber and called it *glesum*, and had customs and clothing much like their Suebian (Germanic) neighbours, but their language more resembled that of Britain. Judging by the words of Tacitus (AD 98), Jordanes (after AD 450) and Wulfstan (before AD 900), the *Aestii* lived near the mouth of the river Vistula (in modern Poland), just south-west of the main amber deposits in Samland (near modern Kaliningrad). Over the centuries this area has variously been politically Slavic, Germanic, or Baltic. Modern Estonia and Estonian are unrelated.

Most scholars would probably follow Gimbutas (1963) and guess that the Aestian language was Old Prussian, an extinct Baltic language related to Lithuanian, and that the Romans were a bit vague about the sound of a language they could not understand. Tacitus was well aware of the ethnic complexity of *Britannia*, where his father-in-law Agricola was governor, but close reading of his text does not greatly help. His phrase *lingua Britannicae* puts language in the singular and calls it British, rather than the *Gallica* (Gaulish) used just a few paragraphs away about another tribe.

Maybe what Tacitus was really describing, rather than a Celtic enclave beside the Baltic, was a Germanic tribe who spoke like the *Belgae* present in *Britannia*. The name *Aestii* looks Germanic ('east'), and resembles old names of the Vistula Lagoon in Anglo-Saxon (*estmere*) and Lithuanian (*Aistmarės*). Aestian *glesum* is essentially the same as Latin *glæsum*, which

the Oxford English Dictionary considers to have been adopted from Old Teutonic and to be related to Old English *glær* and modern English glass, etc.

The hypothesis that the *Aestii* were Germanic can be broadened to suggest that in Roman times all the coastal peoples around the North Sea and round into the Baltic spoke similar languages. On the Continent, those languages would later be called Low German, Frisian, Dutch, etc, while in Britain they would be a hypothetical substratum (Belgic, Icenic, proto-English, or whatever) upon which Anglo-Saxon would later build.

The strongest argument in favour of this idea is not historical, linguistic, or genetic, but cultural: the lifestyle of coastal people changed very little between the age of Stonehenge and the age of steam. Small boats were the heavy lorries of the ancient world, carrying basic commodities up even the tiniest of creeks, right to the doorstep of individual farms and settlements. Iron-age boatmen may not have had the compass or efficient sails, but they were perfectly capable of carrying any cargo anywhere that there was money to be earned.

Even if ancient traders and fishermen crossed from Britain to the Continent, or from the North Sea to the Baltic, only a few times in their lives, they would still be far better travelled than most farmers. The mental attitude that goes with frequent travel is quite different from the mental attitude of a farmer, while the perils of seafaring tend to make sailors feel closer to other sailors than to their inland neighbours. A common culture around coasts does not necessarily imply a common language, but only a generally accepted way of communicating. And for an ancient precursor of Seaspeak a good candidate is some early Germanic language.

There is no obvious way of proving this idea, but it does serve to focus attention upon ancient trade patterns as a fundamental driving force for language change. Among all the cargoes moved by ships in northern waters (tin, fish, furs, etc) one of the earliest and most valuable was amber, which is often claimed to be represented in place-names from the Brenner Pass to Ravensglass.

In fact, amber has a wide range of names in different languages. Some allude to its ability to burn (like German *Bernstein*), some to where it was mined (like Polish *jantar*), some to its ability to hold an electrostatic charge (like Greek *ἤλεκτρον* or Persian *karabe*), and some probably come from an Arabic word meaning ambergris (like English amber). Danish *rav* is one of the few Indo-European words that do not fit in these four categories.

The amber trade was driven by “pull” from the Mediterranean rather than “push” from the Baltic. So did pioneer traders find their way towards the primary source of amber from the Black Sea direct to Samland, via the rivers of eastern Europe: Dniester, Dnieper, Danube, Vistula, Oder, etc? Or did they follow the river Elbe, navigable almost from the Alps to the North Sea, beside which much archaeological evidence for early amber trade has been found? Or did amber seekers beachcomb around the western seaboard of Europe?

It is noteworthy that Latin *glaesum* also shows up in the writings of Pliny, Florus and Solinus as the name of an island *Glaesaria*, generally considered to have been one of the Frisian islands off the Danish North Sea coast. By Roman times *Glaesaria* must have been a trading depot, connected to the Baltic coast either by sea around the tip of Jutland or by land across the base of the isthmus.

The most valuable product to trade into the Baltic was salt. The limiting resource for ancient humans to survive there was not food itself (because herrings, cattle, pigs, and cabbages were abundant) but salt for preserving food during the winter. The Baltic is too low in salt and too far north for coastal salterns, and around it are no natural brine springs. Salt-producing sites controlled by Celts (Hallstatt, Alsace, etc) were not well-placed to send it to the Baltic, while the salt mines of Poland may not have started sending salt down the Vistula towards modern Gdansk until after Roman times.

According to current linguistic opinion, Indo-European languages had not crystallized into separate strands of Germanic, Celtic, Greek, etc at a time when trade routes for amber, salt, and tin were established. The origins of particular languages seem to lie in technological advances that made small populations expand and grow wealthy: the horse for Proto-Indo-European, Hallstatt salt for Celts, and so on. Dare one suggest that the earliest speakers of

Germanic languages specialised in living on and beside cold water, and that their population expanded because they were the master traders of northern Europe?

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