

THE PRE-INDO-EUROPEAN SUBSTRATUM IN THE BRITISH ISLES AND THE PRE-URALIC SUBSTRATUM IN FENNOSCANDIA: TRACES OF COMMON ORIGIN

VÁCLAV BLAŽEK

ABSTRACT

Recent genetic studies of Mesolithic hunter-gatherers in Scandinavia reveal that the primary postglacial repopulation originated from Western Europe. This paper tests the hypothesis of a shared migration by identifying linguistic parallels between the Pre-Indo-European substratum in the British Isles and the Pre-Uralic substratum in Fennoscandia, providing evidence for a common origin of these ancient populations.

Shared lexical features between Insular Celtic and Saami are strikingly unexpected. Once Celtic influence on Saami and Saami influence on Insular Celtic—particularly Goidelic—are excluded, the most plausible explanation is a common substratum. This hypothesis finds robust extra-linguistic corroboration in genetic and archaeological evidence for a Mesolithic migration from Western Europe to Fennoscandia immediately following glacial retreat, dated to ca. 11,000 BP. This was swiftly succeeded by a second Mesolithic influx from Eastern Europe ca. 10,200 BP (Günther et al. 2018: 1–6; cf. Mallory 2013: 53). Ireland’s earliest inhabitants arrived ca. 10,000 BP, introducing Mesolithic industries, while Britain’s initial Mesolithic traces date to ca. 11,600 BP, with Late Palaeolithic hunter-gatherers attested as early as ca. 14,700 BP (Mallory 2013: 40, 48).

The following list of 12 lexical comparisons marks the first systematic effort to compile relevant data, though the items vary in semantic reliability. The strongest cases are ## 1, 6, and 12. Comparison #13 involves only Fennic forms and requires separate discussion.

1. Saami: South *aske* ‘moon’ (Lagercrantz 1939: 18, n. 105; Sammallahti 1998: 179) //

Goidelic: Old Irish *ésca(e)*, *éisce* n., later m. ‘moon.’ Matasović (2009: 118–19) connected it with Lithuanian *áiškus* ‘bright’ and Old Church Slavonic *iskra* ‘spark.’

2. PSaami **jōvę* ‘scree, field of jagged rocks’ (Lehtiranta 1989: n. 297) //

Goidelic: Old Irish *aife* ‘slope’ (*DIL* A-108; *LEIA* A-24); cf. Old Irish *aig* ‘ice’ < **jeg-* (Matasović 2009: 435).

3. PSaami **kājpe* ‘chin’ (Lehtiranta 1989: n. 341) //

Goidelic: Old Irish *cab* ‘mouth, muzzle’ (*DIL* C-1; *LEIA* C-1); less probable is the alternative comparison with Old Irish *clab* ‘hair (of the head), lock of hair’ (*DIL* C-174; *LEIA* C-93). In this case the semantic difference is comparable with Germanic **barda-* ‘beard’ vs. Slavic **borda* ‘chin’.

4. PSaami **kēðē* ‘temple’ (Lehtiranta 1989: n. 394) //

Goidelic: Old Irish *cod*, *cud* ‘head’ (*DIL* C-582; *LEIA* C-139).

5. PSaami **kēðkē* ‘stone’ (Lehtiranta 1989, n. 380) //

Insular Celtic: Old Irish *crec*, *creg* ‘rock’ (*DIL* C-513; *LEIA* C-225); Old Welsh (12th cent.) *creic*, Welsh *craig* ‘rock, boulder, stone’ (*GPC*).

6. PSaami **kumppā* ‘wolf’ (Lehtiranta 1989: n. 495) //

Goidelic: Old Irish *cuib*, var. *cuim* ‘hound, wolf’ (*DIL* C-583; *LEIA* C-267)

7. PSaami **lānte* ‘pond, pool’ (Lehtiranta 1989: n. 568); Finnish *lantto* ‘puddle’ was probably borrowed from Saami (Aikio 2009: 260). The origin of the Saami word in Finnish *lansi* ‘low-land, wetland’ or dial. *lanto* ‘low, damp place in terrain’ is not unambiguous—the opposite vector or a common heritage cannot be excluded. //

Brittonic **lindā* ‘lake, pool’ (Matasović 2009: 239–40).

8. Saami: North *liraš* ‘a bird belonging to the genus Totanidae’, Enontekiön *lirāš* ‘common sandpiper’ / Finnish *liro*, *lieru* ‘wood sandpiper / Totanus glareolus’ (*SKES* 298) //

Goidelic: Old Irish *rer* ‘blackbird’ (*DIL* R-48; *LEIA* R-21)

9. PSaami **sēple* ‘slush’ (Lehtiranta 1989: n. 1142) //

Goidelic: Old Irish *slab* ‘mud, mire’ (*DIL* S-255; *LEIA* S-123).

10. PSaami **tāktē* ‘bone’ (Lehtiranta 1989: n. 1219); the comparison with Finnish *tähti*, gen. *tähden* ‘das Übriggebliebene, Aufbewahrte’ is problematic for semantic reasons and the comparison with Hungarian *tetem* ‘Leiche, Leichnam, die irdischen überreste, Gebein,’ Old Hungarian ‘Knochen, Bein; Rippe’ is, by reason of its isolation, not convincing enough to be generally accepted (cf. *UEW* 515–16) //

Goidelic: Old Irish *tec* & *tuc* ‘bone’ (*DIL* S-94, 352; *LEIA* T-38, 106).

11. PSaami **vēvlē* ‘hole in skin’ (Lehtiranta 1989: n. 1381; Lagercrantz 1939: n. 1001); cf. Koltta *veu’l* ‘loop, sling’ (Itkonen 2011: 738) //

Brittonic **ueḷā-* > Middle Welsh (14th cent.) *gwefl* f. ‘lip (of an animal)’, pl. ‘jaws’, Cornish *gwelv* ‘lip,’ Middle Breton *guefl* ‘mouth’ (Matasović 2009: 419 adds, in addition, Old Irish *bél* m. ‘lip’).

12. PSaami **vōjve* ‘liver’ (Sammallahti 1998: 179); the initial **v-* can be prothetic, cf. PSaami **vōlē* ‘down’ (Lehtiranta 1989: n. 1432) vs. Fennic **ala* ‘lower,’ etc. (UEW 6). It means, **vōjve* can be derived from Pre-Saami **ajvi* //

Insular Celtic: Old Irish *óa* f. gl. ‘iecur’, dat.pl. *óeib*; Middle Welsh *ahu*, *auu*, *afu* m. & f.; Old Cornish *au*; Middle Breton *auu*, Breton *avu* m. ‘liver’ (Matasović 2009: 49: **auV-*?).

13. Fennic **suti* ‘wolf’ > Finnish *susi*, gen. sg. *suden*, ill.sg. *suteen*, nom.pl. *sudet*, Estonian *susi*, Livonian *su’ž*, pl. *sudùD* (SKES 1129–1130) //

Goidelic: Old Irish *sod*, *sad* f. ‘bitch, she-wolf’ (*DIL* S-323; *LEIA* S-161).

CONCLUSION

This preliminary list demonstrates that the British Isles and Fennoscandia preserve traces of a distinctive Mesolithic substratum. The semantic range of the compared lexemes—spanning hunting, gathering, and basic environmental features—aligns closely with a pre-agricultural cultural horizon. The primary aim of this study is to stimulate further interdisciplinary research into these ancient linguistic layers.

REFERENCES

- Aikio, Ante. 2009. *The Saami Loanwords in Finnish and Karelian*. Ph.D. thesis: Faculty of Humanities of the University of Oulu.
- Aikio, Ante. 2012. “An essay on Saami ethnolinguistic prehistory.” In: *A Linguistic Map of Prehistoric Northern Europe*. Helsinki: Suomalais-Ugrilaisen Seuran Toimituksia / Mémoires de la Société Finno-Ougrienne 266, 63–117.
- DIL* = *Dictionary of the Irish Language. Based mainly on Old and Middle Irish materials*. ed. by E.G. Quin et alii. Dublin: Royal Irish Academy (Compact Edition) 1998.
- GPC* = *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru / A Dictionary of the Welsh Language* 1–4. R. J. Thomas et alii, eds. Cardiff: University of Wales Press 1967–2002.
- <https://welsh-dictionary.ac.uk/gpc/gpc.html>.
- Günther, Torsten, Malmström, Helena, Svensson, Emma M., Omrak, Ayça, Sánchez-Quinto, Frederico, Kılınç, Gülşah M., et alii. 2018. “Population genomics of Mesolithic Scandinavia: Investigating early postglacial migration routes and high-latitude adaptation.” *PLoS Biology* 16(1), 1–22.
- Itkonen, Terje I. 2011. *Wörterbuch des Koltta- und Kolalappischen*. Helsinki: Lexica Societatis Fenno-Ugricae XV.

- Lagercrantz, Eliel. 1939. *Lappischer Wortschatz*, I-II. Helsinki: Lexica Societatis Fenno-Ugricae VI.
- Lehtiranta, Juhani. 1989. *Yhteissaamelainen sanasto*. Helsinki: *Mémoires de la Société Finno-Ougrienne / Suomalais-ugrilaisen seuran toimituksia* 200.
- LEIA = Vendryes, Joseph. 1987. *Lexique étymologique de l'irlandais ancien*, Lettre C, par les soins de E. Bachellery et P.-Y. Lambert. Dublin: Institute for Advanced Studies – Paris: Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique.
- Mallory, James P. 2013. *The Origins of the Irish*. London: Thames & Hudson.
- Matasović, Ranko. 2009. *Etymological dictionary of Proto-Celtic*. Leiden – Boston: Brill.
- Sammallahti, Pekka. 1998. *The Saami Languages*. Karašjohka / Karasjok: Davvi Girji.
- SKES = *Suomen kielen etymologinen sanakirja*, I-VII. Y.H. Toivonen et al., eds. Helsinki: Lexica Societatis Fenno-Ugricae XII,1–7, 1955f.
- UEW = *Uralisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*. Károly Rédei et al., eds. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó 1986–88.

Václav Blažek
Department of Linguistics and Baltic Studies
Masaryk University – Brno
Czech Republic
blazek@phil.muni.cz