

The Etymologies of English *dog* and *cur*

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Terms for canines in the early Irish and Welsh legal tracts are generally compounds, a functional attribute complemented by the base word for dog. On this model, *dog*, an isolate in English, is identified as a loan into Anglo-Saxon from late British, consisting of the adjective *da* 'good' employed as a nominal collective, 'goods, property', plus *ci* 'dog', in lenited form *-gi*. The original function would have been as a guard dog. *Cur* is similarly traced to the interface between Romano-British and Anglo-Saxon culture.

English *dog* as a term for *canis familiaris* is without original cognates in other Germanic languages, where reflexes of *hound* are everywhere evident, and has neither been seen as a putative loan from another European language, be it Celtic, Romance, or non-Indo-European, nor traced back on a solitary path to a known Indo-European root.¹ This isolated status invites speculation that difficult to track factors may have been at work in its history, e.g., one or more of status in a specific lexical register, hypocoristic or pejorative usage, folk etymologizing. More broadly speaking, it may have emerged from cultures in contact.

The Conquest was a turning point in the history of English, but a single attestation in Old English, in the form *docga* (genitive plural, glossing Latin *canum*), relieves us of the need to look for a source or determining moment in Anglo-Norman French or, less categorically, in the similarly inflected Anglo-Norse (if this term be provisionally allowed) of the Danelaw.² Rather than an import, *dog* was an export, along with what seems to have been a type of English dog of a size and

¹The point of departure for this discussion are entries in *Oxford English Dictionary*, in particular the notes on etymology. As other etymological dictionaries regularly call the origins of *dog* and *cur* unknown or uncertain, none is cited here.

²*The Old English Prudentius Glosses at Boulogne-sur-Mer* (1959), No. 724.

build perhaps similar to the powerful boxers and mastiffs of today, if not a breed in the current sense. Thus French *dogue*, German *Dogge*, Dutch *dog*, Danish *dogge*, Swedish *dogg*, Spanish and Portuguese *dogo*, with sixteenth- and seventeenth-century attestations (under slightly differing orthographies and often with the descriptor ‘English’), are all derivative of English.

While a canine type is here designated, the English term seems initially, or at least in Middle English, to have been largely derogative, with an affect much like that of *cur* today. Here we should understand a combination of actual or ascribed attributes, some of which would have been lack of owner, lack of specifically utilitarian qualities, lack of recognized function, and, in a to-and-fro movement of anthropo- and zoomorphism, lack of desirable character traits and moral qualities. A passage from the Middle English *Ancrene Riwele*, dated to about 1225, will illustrate this affective usage, and establish the most proximate link to the single OE attestation, which, it should be noted, is in a glossarial context and thus can tell us little about early affective value. ‘His [the devil’s] teð beoð attrie, ase of ane wode dogge. David i þe sauter celoþ hine dogge ... þe fule cur dogge’ (‘the Devil’s teeth are venomous as the teeth of a mad dog. David in the Psalms called him a dog ... the foul cur dog’; ‘cur dogge’ for the *mastinum* of the Latin source).³ *Middle English Dictionary* summarizes this status, in the entry for *dogge*, as follows: ‘(a) an ordinary dog or cur ... (b) as a term of abuse or contempt: a worthless or contemptible person; wretch, cur.’⁴

Thus, it seems prudent, given the affective values and association, not to dissociate *cur* from *dog*, and it is to the somewhat better attested history of the former word that this note first turns, in order to fill out as fully as possible the background against which to assess *dog*. *OED* calls attention to Middle Netherlands *corre* ‘house or farm dog’ and equivalent Sw. and Norw. forms *kurre*, *korre* ‘dog’ that all seem to reflect verbs such as ON *kurra* ‘murmur, grumble’, Sw. *kurra* ‘grumble, snarl’. The onomatopoetic designation was then intended to identify the animal as a ‘growler’ and a guard function may be assumed. *OED* continues: ‘But no corresponding verb appears in [Old] English, so that ME. *kurre* was prob. introduced from some continental source.’ The dictionary also notes the early association of *kur* and *dogge* (seen above). One might speculate

³*The English Text of the Ancrene Riwele* (1962), 79a.

⁴*Middle English Dictionary* (1952-99), s.v. *dogge*.

that early on perhaps neither was sufficiently well rooted in English vocabulary to stand alone. Anglo-Norman French, with its strong lexical stamp from Old Norse, offers no comparable form, so that we are left with a loan from the Danelaw as most immediate source, with perhaps a loan from Flemish (given migration and trade connections) as second choice and still permitting accommodation in ME in time for the early thirteenth-century attestations.

While the evidence for a tie to some other Germanic language is compelling, the simple phonetic contours of *cur* oblige us to at least note in passing Celtic words such as Gaulish *caerac-* ‘lamb’, Old Irish *cáera* ‘sheep’.⁵ Yet Middle Welsh gives evidence of this root only in the word *caeriwrch* ‘roe-buck, roe-deer’, perhaps best understood as ‘ram-like deer’, and *dafad* is elsewhere the common term for sheep (cf. Breton *dañvad*).⁶

Medieval Irish and Welsh law tracts have provisions for dogs. Distinctions among functions and what we might provisionally call proto-breeds in the Irish legal tradition have been reviewed by Fergus Kelly.⁷ Here, both these canine duties and the various linguistic means by which the function is associated with a ‘dog’ word are of interest. The simplex term in Irish is *cú*, cognate with Old High German *hunt*, Eng. *hound*, and Latin *canis* (although the latter has a complex history). The *árchú* (< *ár* ‘slaughter’ + the lenited form of *cú*) was a large and

⁵*Dictionnaire de la langue gauloise* (2003), 97, s.v. *caerac-*; *Lexique étymologique de l'irlandais ancien*, (1959-), fasc. C, 8-9, s.v. *caera*.

⁶Welsh *corlan* ‘sheepfold’ is explained by the authoritative *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru: Dictionary of the Welsh Language* as a compound of *cordd* ‘multitude, troop’ and *llan* ‘enclosure’, yet the former is principally used in reference to human numbers, more specifically an armed troop; *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru: Dictionary of the Welsh Language*, ed. R. J. Thomas (Caerdydd: Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru, 1950-2002; 2nd ed., ed. Gareth A. Bevan and Patrick J. Donovan, 2003-), s.v. *caeriwrch*, *corlan*. Still briefly with Gaulish *caerac-* and Irish *cáera* ‘sheep’, Pokorny associates these with a range of words most readily exemplified by Latin *caper*, Norse *hafr*, OE *hafer*, OIr. *gabor*, all ‘goat’; Julius Pokorny, *Indogermanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, 2 vols (Bern: A. Francke, 1959-69), I.529, s.v. *kapro-*. It is not unusual for terms for animals to cross species boundaries, and we shall see other kinds of boundaries crossed in the following. My thanks to Michael Weiss for comments on Celtic words for ‘sheep’. Welsh *corgi* (*cor* ‘dwarf’ + *ci* ‘dog’, in lenited form *-gi*) interacts with English *cur* in later texts, but can not be seen as its origin, principally because of the unmotivated loss of the function word *ci* ‘dog’ that such an explanation entails.

⁷Fergus Kelly, “Dogs”, in *Early Irish Farming* (1997), 114-21; *Dictionary of the Irish Language* (1913-76).

powerful attack animal kept to guard property and persons, but possibly also used in man-hunts. Comparable in function, if not size and ferocity, was the *cú chethardoruis* ‘dog of four doors’, which guarded the farm or manor house, the sheepfold, and byres. A generic term for a hunting dog was *mílchú*, literally ‘(wild) animal dog’ (cf. the differently composed compound *cú selga* ‘dog of the chase’). In the terminology for herd dogs, the base concept is represented by *conbúachaill*, where *con-* is an inflected form of *cú* paired with *búachaill* ‘herdboy’. It was employed with qualifiers such as *mórchethrae* ‘of large livestock’, *láeg* ‘of calves’, and *cáerach* ‘of sheep’. A discrete terminology existed in Old Irish for pet dogs or lapdogs, e.g., *orcae*, *oirce* and *messán* ‘little pet, favorite’. There also seems to have been canine situations and attendant terminology much lower on the social register, e.g., *cú otraig* ‘dung-hill dog’ and *cú chrumdumai* ‘dog of the maggot-heap’, at home on simple farms. Welsh had a counterpart to Irish *conbúachaill*, although the order of the elements in the compound is reversed: *bugalgi*, where *gi* is again the lenited form of *cí* ‘dog’. Other functions are also paralleled, e.g., *gellky* ‘staghound’, *mylky* ‘greyhound’, *bytheiatgi* ‘hunting dog’, *olreat* ‘tracking dog’, *costoc* ‘guard dog’, *coluyn* ‘pet dog’, *anulkun* ‘favorite dogs’.⁸

What is striking is that the notion of a ‘dung-hill dog’ is also reflected in Welsh, although the terminology is quite distinct from the Irish seen above. Here it will be useful to cite these terms in their legal context and also note ongoing associations in the English of Wales. *Aillt* was one of three terms for unfree persons, roughly ‘farmer’.

Coluyn mab eyllt, iii.k’ (un werth a’e costauc tom: pa gy bynnac a uo y uab eyllt, un gerdet yu a’y gostauc tom. Costauc tom, pyeyffo bynnac, ket boet brenhyn byeyffo, iii.k’ yu y werth).⁹

⁸A *Glossary of Medieval Welsh Law* (1913), s.vv.

⁹*Lyfr Iorwerth* (1960), par. 133, 88.

An *aillt*'s pet dog [is worth] fourpence, the same value as his dunghill cur: whatever dog an *aillt* has, it is of the same progress as his dunghill cur. A dunghill cur, to whomsoever it belongs (even if it belongs to the king), its value is fourpence.¹⁰

The Welsh phrase *gostauc tom*, here 'dunghill cur', can be broken down as follows: *gostauc* < *costog* 'house' (< British **kustāko*), short for *costowci*, where *ci* = 'dog', to which *tom* 'dung heap' has been added. The Irish phrase, we recall, is *cú otraig*, where the second element is *otrach* 'dung, dung pile'.

On a point of detail the relevant Irish law tract reads as follows:

7 is iat-so na trī coin i tabarr smacht cen eneclainn .i. cū
iiii dorais ... 7 conbūachail ... 7 cū otraig, in cū
crumdum ī-sēic .i. culēn beg nō co ngaba gnīmrad.

And these are the three kinds of dog for which a fixed fine is given, without taking honour price into account, i.e. the dog of the four entrances ... and the herding dog ... and the dog of the dunghill, that is the dog of the wormhill, i.e. a small pup until it begins its work.¹¹

The two first-named dogs have specific functions, while the third is not an adult animal. Kelly notes that the reference to a pup is a later commentary on the base text and is not supported elsewhere. It may well be that such yard dogs did not have a function as specialized as hunting and herding animals but nonetheless had a natural role as guard dogs, alerting the household to the presence of strangers or predators.¹²

Taking my cue from 1) the pattern of word formation for these various 'dog' words (functional attribute + *cú/ci*), 2) Welsh *costog* 'house, house dog', 3) early Welsh glossing that translates *ci tom* as 'a curre', and 4) later Welsh lexicography that equates *costog* in this sense with *corgi* and glosses these with

¹⁰*The Law of Hywel Dda* (1986), 181. The slightly repetitive phrasing is due to later commentary on a base text.

¹¹Irish text from *Corpus Iuris Hibernici* (1978), 107.32, as quoted in Liam Breatnach, "On the Glossing of Early Irish Law-Texts, Fragmentary Texts, and some Aspects of the Laws Relating to Dogs" (1996); Breatnach's English translation follows.

¹²Kelly, 116, n. 92.

‘mastiff, house-dog, watch-dog; cur, mongrel’,¹³ I propose that English *cur* had its ultimate origin in a Romano-British compound of Late Latin *curia* ‘court-yard, farm-yard’ and British *ci*, in lenited form *-gi*.¹⁴ This compound would have yielded **curyg* in Late British (cf. **Maglo-ki* > MW *Meilyg*).¹⁵ The Late Latin and Late British *u* vowels would have been long, while the *u* of English *cur* is short, and in some texts is followed by a double *rr*: *curre*.

Since we have no ready explanation for this shift in vocalism, we must consider the possibility that the ME word *cur* had a hybrid origin, in part in a descriptive term assumed from British into Old English with some of the affective value of ‘common yard dog’, in part in an onomatopoeic Norse term that spread from the Danelaw. The hypothetical coalescence in English of *curyg/corgi* ‘yard dog’ and *kurre* ‘guard dog’ < ‘growler’ would then exhibit a significant fall in register, when it surfaces in our earliest written sources as *cur* with its negative associations. Can a presumed south-eastern English ethnic snobbishness — here toward British yard dogs and Norse snarlers — be invoked? Yet for western and northern Britain, Thomas Bewick’s plate from 1790, which represents the Cur Dog as ‘a trusty and useful servant to the farmer and grazier’, shows that a high degree of functionality was long associated with the word *cur*.¹⁶

Another possible origin for *cur* may be considered, reflecting a process of abbreviation and substitution elsewhere attested in the Celtic-speaking lands of the British Isles. Just as Welsh *costowci* ‘house dog’ could be shortened to *costog* (with the affect perhaps of “housie”), or the Church’s *osculum pacis* could be adapted and adopted in vernacular secular contexts as Irish *póg* ‘kiss’, *cur* may be a familiar British form for a noun phrase that originated in British Latin as *canis curialis* or *canis curiae* ‘yard, estate dog’. Despite the economy of this solution to the problem of the origin of *cur*, the total lack of evidence and the absence of any comparable form from other parts of the Roman Empire oblige us to leave this etymology in the realm of

¹³*Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru*, s.v. *costog*, *costowci*; the dictionary also cites a sixteenth-century gloss: “korgi ne gostoc : a curre dog”; William Salesbury, *A Dictionary in Englyshe and Welshe* (1547).

¹⁴*Mediae Latinitatis Lexicon Minus* (1976), s.v. *curia*, 288-90.

¹⁵My thanks to editorial readers of an earlier draft, in particular for pertinent comment on on Late British and early Welsh phonology.

¹⁶Thomas Bewick, *A General History of Quadrupeds* (1790), 286.

speculation.

Now to *dog*. The hypothesis that I advance to explain English *dog* is that British, perhaps in its regional variants, had another term for a farm's guard dog, in addition to the 'curial' dog seen above. It incorporated nominal usage of the adjective *da* 'good' in the otherwise well attested meaning 'possessions, property, cattle, etc'. Among the many noun phrases in Welsh with domestic associations composed on this basis we may note *da bach* 'young cattle, sheep', *da blewog* 'cattle', *da gwlanog* 'sheep', *da byw* 'livestock'.¹⁷ Analogous with such earlier met forms as Welsh *bugalgi* and *mylky*, and Irish *árchú* and *mílechú*, I suggest that *da* 'goods' combined with *ci* 'dog' in lenited form. A compound **dago-ki* from the Romano-British era would give Middle Welsh **deyg*. A later compound, after apocope but before the Old Welsh loss of intervocalic **gh*, would yield *dacci* or *decci* with internal *i*-affection. Old English *dacga*, if related, may reflect consonantal hardening when *gh* came into contact with *k*.¹⁸ Stress would have been on the first syllable, facilitating the adaptation into Old English in the form *docg*.

As in the derivation of *cur* from some phrase with *curia* or *curialis*, we here face problems of vocalism: how to explain the putative raising of *a* to *o*. Jackson called attention to the dearth of evidence of loans from British to Anglo-Saxon — perhaps retentions is a better term — even in such areas marked by linguistic conservatism as place and river names, which he qualified as an "uncertain type of material".¹⁹ Under such circumstances, "regular" patterns of development are difficult to identify. Jackson called attention to the very different sound systems and the tendency of the invaders to substitute their own range of sounds in the few words that were adopted.

We may speculate that few of the immigrant Anglo-Saxons had the luxury of bringing their own dogs from the continent, and that once on the land in Britain they acquired native animals and assumed the native word, but, as in the case of *cur*, with an awareness of its origin in a subaltern or marginalized

¹⁷*Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru, s.v. da*; on compounding and noun phrases in Welsh, see Stefan Zimmer, *Studies in Welsh Word-Formation* (2000). It should be noted at the outset that we have no evidence from British of such compounding with *dago*-.

¹⁸Stefan Zimmer (pers. comm.).

¹⁹Jackson, Ch. 6, "Britons and Saxons in the Fifth to Eighth Centuries", 194-261, at 196, *Language and History in Early Britain* (1953). No treatment of adaptations into English in Schrijver (1995).

community. These designations emerged on the land of Britain from cultures in contact, cultures that did not interact under conditions of parity. Celtic numerical strength could be offset by Germanic elevated social status, economic power, landholding — all the perquisites of membership in a powerful elite.

The etymologies proposed here privilege canine function and status over incidental attributes. While we must admit unresolved problems in the evolution of vowel qualities in these two loans, it may well be that the terms *cur* and *dog* are not off-hand formations based on some isolated bit of canine behavior, such as growling, but are both founded in the more abstract and central notions of property, land owned in the case of *cur*, the stock and other possessions on such land in the case of *dog*. The two terms may never have been in use at a single place and time. Further, OE *hund* must have co-existed with the antecedents of *dog* and *cur*. Basic English canine terminology appears to have been in place by about the year 1000.

While *dog* may be an isolate in pan-European linguistic terms, it was at the heart of an accommodation between resident and immigrant population groups, and, despite the pejorative affect evident in Middle English, established itself over time as the generic term and also as the marked term meaning ‘male dog’, even crossing the species boundary in the phrase *dog fox*. *Cur* exhibits a similar but overall less positive development. Yet in the western and northern areas of Britain it maintained itself as the designation of a drovers’ dog.²⁰ At a somewhat later date than the period here under review the first canine breeds began to emerge and with them a discrete terminology.²¹ Our linguistic evidence suggests that this development, like the origin of two basic terms, was in response to the recognition of a number of discrete functions (hunting, herding, guarding, pet status, etc.) and, naturally, local conditions — deer-hounds in the Highlands, puffin hunters on the cliffs of Cornwall.

²⁰ Today enthusiasts work toward the recognition of the *cur* as a discrete breed; see <http://www.blackmouthcur.com/>.

²¹ Recalling the rendering *cur dogge* of Latin *mastinum* in the first passage cited in this study, the *OED* entry for *mastiff* illustrates the complexity met in the examination of breed names.

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