

THE MEANING OF CELTIC *EBUROS

1. Introduction

There is no doubt that Proto-Celtic possessed a phytonym **eburos*. It survives as Old Irish *ibar*, Middle Welsh *efwr*, Middle Breton (*h*)*evor*. Although we lack control over their lexical meanings, numerous Continental Celtic names beginning with *Ebur(o)-* can be connected with this etymon, too. The general assumption is that the original meaning of the phytonym is ‘yew tree’: Sanz *et al* (2011, 450-1), Matasović (2009, 112), Sims-Williams (2006, 78) and Delamarre (2003, 159-60) are some of the most recent proponents of that idea. A notable exception is Dagmar Wodtke (2000), who did not assign a meaning to the proto-form. The aim of this paper is to show that **eburos* did not mean ‘yew tree’.

2. The evidence for **eburos* meaning ‘yew’

The only strong argument in favour of the meaning ‘yew’ is the well attested meaning of the Irish word: OIr. *ibar*, MoIr. and Sc.G. *iubhar* ‘yew’ (*Taxus baccata*). Welsh *efwr*, however, denotes ‘hogweed, cow parsnip’ (*Heracleum sphondylium*), a large perennial umbellifer, while Breton *evor* denotes ‘buckthorn’ (*Frangula alnus*), a woody shrub. There is very little that these three plants have in common botanically. It is not at all clear why we should single out Irish and select the meaning ‘yew’ as the Proto-Celtic meaning.

The Continental Celtic material provides plentiful formal evidence for the presence of **eburo-* in personal names, place-names and, due to a recent find from Spain, a theonym.¹ As usual in such cases, however, the semantic information that is provided by names is non-existent at worst and inferential at best. A case in point is the name *Eburones* of a people that lived in present-day northern Belgium and the southern part of the Netherlands. There is a famous story reported by Caesar which states that after their crushing defeat against Caesar one of the two leaders of the Eburones, Catuvolcus, poisoned himself by ingesting yew.

Catuvolcus ... taxo, cuius magna in Gallia Germanique copia est, se exanimavit
‘Catuvolcus killed himself by yew, which is widespread in Gallia and Germania’ (Caesar,
De Bello Gallico VI.31)

This has been taken as an indication that the Eburones had a special connection with the yew,

¹ Sanz *et al* 2011.

which was formalized in their name.² If *Eburones* meant ‘yew people’, that would certainly make for a nice story, but it is worth stressing that this particular point apparently escaped the storyteller, Caesar, who does not mention the connection explicitly. Furthermore, since the pharmacological properties of yew have presumably always been well known, using it as a poison cannot have been the prerogative of a people whose name contained a word meaning ‘yew’.

Another indication that in Continental Celtic **eburos* may have denoted the yew is derived from the name of the *Auleri Ebuovices*, a tribe of Central Gaul. *Ebuovices* contains the root **wik-* ‘to fight’ as its second member. A similar compound, *Lemovices*, which is the tribe that gave its name to present-day Limoges, literally means ‘Elm-fighters’, where ‘elm’ is not so much the logical object of ‘fight’ as the logical instrument, referring to weapons made out of elm wood. So *Lemo-vices* means ‘those who fight with elm’. Compare also the south Walian *Ordo-vices* ‘those who fight with hammers’ of the Roman period. In this light it seems quite plausible that *Ebuovices* means ‘those who fight with yew’, i.e. with weapons such as bows and spears made out of yew.³ It is difficult to accept anything other than plausibility, however, since the semantic range of words that can be combined with **wik-* is relatively large, cf. *Gabrantowikōn* (a Greek genitive plural, attested for Britain in Ptolemy’s *Geographia*) ‘those who fight like (he-)goats (**gabros*)’, Ogam Irish LUGUVVECCA < genitive **lugu-wik-os* ‘who fights like the god Lugus or like a lynx’, RITUVVECAS < genitive **ritu-wik-os* ‘who fights at a ford’. While one may readily accept that **eburo-wik-* means something like ‘who fights like or with (weapons made of) the **eburos* plant’, the suggestion that **eburo-* in *Ebuovices* means ‘yew’, as in Irish, is no more justified than that it means, say, ‘buckthorn’, as in Breton. The tough but elastic wood of buckthorn is well suited for making arrows. Given the well-known laxative properties of buckthorn bark and berries, one might for a moment even entertain the amusing thought that a person who ‘fights like a buckthorn’ was eminent at instilling fear in his enemy. The idea that Gaulish **eburos* meant ‘buckthorn’ rather than ‘yew’ receives potential support from Gamillscheg’s proposal that the French word for ‘buckthorn’, *bourdaine*, Old French *borjaine* can be reconstructed as Late Latin **ebur-j-ēnā*, which ultimately derives from Gaulish **eburo-*.⁴ The unclear word-formation as well as the early loss of initial **e-* give room for doubt about this etymology, however.

3. Is there a Celtic **eburos* ‘wild boar’?

Pierre-Yves Lambert⁵ has looked favourably on the old idea⁶ that *Ebuovices* rather than ‘yew’ contained a word for ‘boar’, which is better attested in Germanic (e.g. Old English *eofor*, Old High German *ebur* < **eburaz*). In that case *Ebuo-vices* means ‘those who fight like boars’. Lambert supports that idea by referring to the fact that two coins of the Auleri Ebuovices show a picture of a boar.⁷ While this is an attractive possibility,⁸ it is not entirely convincing: pictures of boars

² E.g. Evans 1967, 347.

³ Delamarre 2003, 199 s.v. *lemo-*, *limo-*.

⁴ Gamillscheg 1969, 136.

⁵ Lambert 1994, 34.

⁶ E.g. Jullian 1920-1926, 35.

⁷ *RIG* IV, numbers 65 and 151.

⁸ See also Sanz *et al* 2011, 451-452.

are so widespread in the ancient Celtic and Germanic world that their appearance on coins of the Ebuovices may well be unrelated to their name.

The idea that Continental Celtic names that contain **eburo-* ultimately refer to boars rather than plants is often referred back to Joseph Vendryes.⁹ Vendryes, however, spelled out rather than embraced that possibility. He reacted to an article by Paul Courteault, who discussed a Latin inscription on an altar found in Bordeaux in 1921.¹⁰ Given its impact on the discussion about the meaning and etymology of **eburos*, it is useful to discuss this altar in some detail. Courteault presents the following reading of the inscription, which is based on autopsy by Camille Jullian:

DEAE TVTEL(a)E BOVDIG(ae)
M(arcus) AVR(elius) LVNARIS IIIII
VIR AVG(ustalis) COL(oniarum) EBOR(aci) ET
LIND(i) PROV(inciae) BRIT(anniae) INF(erioris)
ARAM QVAM VOVER(at)
AB EBORACI AVECT(us)
V(otum) S(olvit) L(ibens) M(erito)
PERPETVO ET CORNE(liano consulibus)

The reference to the consuls Perpetuus and Cornelianus dates the inscription to 237 AD. The dedicant is the Roman citizen Marcus Aurelius Lunaris, who presents himself as *sevir augustalis*, a member of a college charged with the cult of the Emperor, and as an inhabitant of the Roman *coloniae* of York (*Eboracum* = *Eburacum*) and Lincoln (*Lindum*) in the province of *Britannia Inferior*. The dedication is to the goddess *Tutela Boudiga*. Given the fact that the dedicant personifies the link between Roman Britain and the important trading port Bordeaux, *Tutela* is no doubt *Tutela navis*, the divine protector of ships and shipping. She is identified here with *Boudiga*, the Celtic-language equivalent to Victoria, the goddess that personifies Imperial rule and the well-being of the Emperor, an issue close to the heart of this *sevir augustalis*.

The Latin of the inscription contains at least one curiosity: *ab Eboraci* instead of *ab Eboraco* ‘from Eboracum’, which Courteault took as a possible locative¹¹ but which, given the relatively late date of the inscription, may rather be a first sign of the Late Latin loss of the genitive, which led to its hypercorrect use here. The text can be translated as follows: ‘To the goddess *Tutela Boudiga*, Marcus Aurelius Lunaris, *sevir augustalis* of the *coloniae* of York and Lincoln of the province of Lower Britannia, (has given) an altar, which he had pledged when he departed (*avect(us)*) from York. He has made good his promise, of his own free will and because she deserves it’.

So far, the altar provides nothing that is relevant to determining the meaning of Celtic **eburos*, because all that the inscription gives us is the name of York, in the forms *Ebor* and *Eboraci*. The importance of the altar resides in the way in which the provenance (York) and destination (Bordeaux) of the dedicant link up with the sculptured reliefs on either side of the altar. The side panel to the right shows a sitting half-naked horned deity holding an anchor in one hand and resting his other hand on an urn from which water flows. This is the divine river *Garunna*, the

⁹ Vendryes 1923, 476-477.

¹⁰ Courteault 1922.

¹¹ Courteault 1922, 240.

Garonne, which symbolizes the town of *Burdigala*, Bordeaux. The side panel to the left shows a wild boar standing on a socle. As Courteault argues, the symbolism of the altar suggests that the boar represents *Eburacum*, York, which makes sense since the name *Eburacum* itself is associated with Celtic **eburos* meaning ‘wild boar’. For the existence of that word in Celtic, he refers to Jullian.¹² However, this is just one of the possibilities entertained by Jullian, who explains *Eburovices* as ‘warriors or descendants’ of either ‘a divine Eburos’, or ‘wild boar’, or ‘yew’. Jullian (*ibidem*) translates the tribal name *Eburones* as ‘Wild Boars’ or ‘Yews’, interpreting the latter as ‘Murderers’, presumably on account of the poisonousness of yew. Given the way in which he presents these possibilities on the page, Jullian appears to prefer the interpretation of **eburos* as ‘boar’ but he does not explain why. However this may be, it is difficult to deny that the Bordeaux altar associates the toponym *Eburacum* with a boar.

Now Vendryes takes issue with Courteault.¹³ He explains correctly that the association of *Eburacum* with a boar, which is plausible, cannot be justified on *etymological* grounds because a Celtic etymon **eburo-* ‘boar’ (rather than ‘yew’) simply does not exist. Subsequently, Vendryes explains that, *if nonetheless* one wishes to connect Celtic **eburos* with the word for ‘boar’ in Latin *aper*, Germanic **eburaz* and Old Church Slavonic *veprъ*, this comes at the price of accepting one of the following two additional assumptions that are required to bridge the formal gap between those forms:

(1) Assume a proto-form **epro-*: **epro-* regularly becomes Celtic **ebro-* according to the rule that Proto-Indo-European **p* becomes **b* before **r*, *l*, as in **piplāseti* > OIr. *-ebla* ‘will drive’, **piprāseti* > OIr. *-ebra* ‘will bestow’.¹⁴

(2) Compare Celtic **eburo-* first and foremost with Germanic **ebura-* < earlier Indo-European **epuro-* rather than with any of the other forms: this comparison will only work if the relation between Celtic **eburo-* and pre-Germanic **epuro-* is the same as in Celtic **gabro-* ‘goat’ and non-Celtic **kapro-* (in Old Icelandic *hafr*, Latin *caper*).

So much for Vendryes’ alleged support for the existence of a Celtic **eburos* meaning ‘boar’.¹⁵ In light of our present knowledge of Celtic historical phonology, however, neither scenario that is supposed to salvage the connection of Celtic **eburos* with the non-Celtic words for ‘boar’ carries much conviction. A proto-form **epros* will regularly yield Celtic **ebros* but not **eburos*, so (1) fails. The argumentation underlying (2) can only be characterized as *obscurum per obscurius*: this opaque and isolated sound correspondence of Celtic voiced to non-Celtic voiceless plosives hardly has the explanatory value required to convince us that **eburos* is a more or less regular Celtic reflex of non-Celtic **epuros*. Moreover, the entire etymon is beset with difficulties because of the impossibility

¹² Jullian 1920-1926⁶, II 35-36.

¹³ Vendryes 1923, 476-477.

¹⁴ I have modernized Vendryes’ reconstructions.

¹⁵ A similarly conditional formulation can be found in Vendryes (1948, 281-282): “Il y avait un dieu Sanglier, dont on possède plusieurs représentations figurées, et dont le nom, s’il ne se cache pas parfois sous une forme *eburo-* (issue de **epro-* et confondue alors avec le nom de l’if, *R[evue] C[eltique]*, XL, 477), était *Moccus*.” Note that Vendryes gives a slightly different account of **eburos* ‘boar’ from that in 1923.

of reconstructing it as anything resembling Indo-European. To begin with, the *a-* or Latin *aper* is problematic, and its only feasible explanation is on the basis of a Proto-Indo-European zero grade **h₁pros*.¹⁶ That means that the Slavic and Germanic forms must be so-called *vṛddhi*-derivatives (with full grade and *o*-stem suffix and meaning something like ‘belonging to a boar, boar-like animal’) of **h₁pro-*. The *v-* in the Slavic form is unexplained: perhaps it was taken over from Proto-Indo-European **wers-* ‘male animal’, which survives in words like Latin *verres* ‘boar’? Nor is it clear why Slavic has *i*-stem rather than *o*-stem inflection. Finally, the medial *-u-* of Germanic **eburaz* lacks an explanation: if anything it seems like a Germanic innovation, comparable to *-u-* in Gothic *miluks* ‘milk’ and in Germanic **alus-* ~ **alis-* ‘ash tree’, rather than a common Celto-Germanic innovation.

Given the total absence of evidence for the existence of Celtic **eburos* ‘boar’ apart from the Bordeaux altar, and given the formidable problems that would confront a connection of Celtic **eburos* ‘boar’, if that existed, with its non-Celtic counterparts, it is prudent to stick to what we do know, viz that Celtic **eburos* was a phytonym, and to apply Occam’s razor in order to establish that it was *only* a phytonym.

That leaves us with the Bordeaux altar. Since it dates from the third century, when free traffic of speakers not only of Latin and Celtic but also of Germanic (and many other languages) across much of the Empire would have been possible for many generations, it is conceivable that the homonymy of the Celtic phytonym **eburos* and the Germanic word for ‘wild boar’ would have fed the imagination of people to such an extent that they could easily associate Celtic names containing *Eburo-* with the meaning ‘boar’ and reinterpret those names accordingly, in the same way that later on Celtic *Eburācum* was reinterpreted as Old English *Eofor-wīc* ‘boar-town’ and subsequently as Old Norse **Jófur-wík* (> York).

4. Irish

At this point in the argument, it is still very much an open question whether the phytonym **eburos* originally meant ‘yew’ or not. The next step is to subject the etymon to closer scrutiny, in the hope of tracing back the semantic history in greater detail. Let us begin with Irish.

OIr. *ibar* (m, o) means ‘yew’ and compellingly goes back to a proto-form **eburos*. *DIL* lists a number of instances in which *ibar* is qualified by a genitive and denotes different plants:

- *iubhar beinne* or *craige*, lit. ‘mountain *ibar*’, is the evergreen conifer juniper (*Juniperus communis*)
- *iubhar thalmhain*, lit. ‘earth *ibar*’ denotes a kind of spleenwort (*Asplenium*), an evergreen fern
- *iubhar sléibhe*, Modern Irish *iúr sléibhe*, literally means ‘mountain *ibar*’ and denotes the labiate perennial wood sage (*Teucrium scorodonia*); this plant is evergreen unless cut back by sharp frosts
- It is not clear exactly which plant is denoted by *iubar lena* lit. ‘meadow *ibar*’ but the suggestion provided by ‘yew’, ‘juniper’, ‘spleenwort’ and ‘sage *vel sim.*’ is that it likewise

¹⁶ Schrijver 1991, 29, 31.

denoted a plant that usually remained green during winter. Its Latin equivalents (*Ballsamita*, *Gamandrie* in *Archiv für celtische Lexikographie* i 335 § 74. *Pursibatium*, *Timus*, *ibid* i 334 § 30) may point to a labiate plant.

Iubhar lena occurs embedded in the following series: *.i. bilur Muiri .i. fraech .i. ibur lena .i. fochluc* ‘Mary’s watercress, heather, field *ibar*, *fochluc* (an unknown kind of edible aquatic plant like watercress)’.¹⁷ Again the suggestion is of a series of rather different plants whose sole resemblance to one another is that they appear to be winter-green plants. This is ethnobotanically interesting because it indicates that to the medieval Irish the most striking property of *ibar* was its evergreen nature, which allowed them to label other plants with that same property as *ibar* as well. At the same time, the Irish motif of winter-greenness presents a problem to the etymologist, for the cognates of *ibar* in other Celtic languages and elsewhere in Indo-European do not denote evergreen plants, as we shall see in a moment.

5. Welsh

Middle and Modern Welsh *efwr*, North Welsh *ewr* (masculine and collective) denotes ‘hogweed, cow parsnip’ (*Heracleum sphondylium*). Middle Welsh examples are almost completely limited to the genre of nature poetry (references are to manuscripts, which are abbreviated according to the conventions of *GPC*).

C.30.44 *cev ewur* ‘cow-parsnip is hollow’ (description of winter)¹⁸

T.21.5 *pan yw keu efwr* ‘why cow-parsnip is hollow’¹⁹

R.1032.30 *melyn eithin crin ewur* ‘the gorse is yellow, the cow-parsnip is withered’²⁰

R.1035.35-6 *chwec ewur chwerthinat tonn* ‘sweet is the cow-parsnip, laughing is the wave’²¹

The poem from the Llywarch Hen cycle about the names of his fallen sons contains a powerful image, which evokes the similarity of six feet high, withered cow-parsley stems standing in a meadow along a river to the skeletal remains of a group of perished warriors (C.40.11-13):

Handid haus im achuison / oe adav ar lan awon / y gid a llv ewur lluydon
‘Complaints are easier for me / because of his being left by the bank of the
river / with a host of withered cow-parsley’²²

While *efwr* is the exact formal counterpart of Irish *ibar*, the semantic difference between the two is formidable. Hogweed is a perennial umbellifer that sends out long hollow flower stalks, which form a conspicuous aspect of fertile moist meadows both in summer and in winter.

¹⁷ *Archiv für celtische Lexikographie* i. 334 § 30.

¹⁸ Jackson 1935b I.15.2; Jackson 1935a B.14.2; Jacobs 2012.

¹⁹ Haycock 2007, 117 line 139 + note.

²⁰ Jackson 1935b II.9.2; Jackson 1935a, D.9.2; Jacobs 2012.

²¹ Jackson 1935b, VI.10.2; Jackson 1935a, H.10.2; Jacobs 2012.

²² Williams 1935, VIII.4; Rowland 1990, 413 (text), 473 (translation, here reproduced).

There is an unexpected twist to the lack of correspondence between Welsh and Irish. The Modern Irish name for hogweed is *feabhrán*. It does not occur in medieval Irish and its origin is unknown. The diminutive ending *-án* is common in Irish plant names. If we assume that the initial *f* is secondary, as so often in Irish (e.g. Modern Irish *fáinne* ‘ring’ from Old Irish *áinne*), we are left with a basic noun **eabhar* that is strikingly similar to W *efwr*. Yet it cannot reflect **eburos* according to regular Irish sound changes. This suggests that **eabhar* is a medieval borrowing from Welsh *efwr*.

6. Breton

Middle Breton *heur*, Modern Breton *evor*, *ivor* (collective) means ‘(alder) buckthorns’ (*Frangula alnus*). The Vannetais dialect has a form *ivo* ‘id.’, which for unknown reasons lacks the final *-r*.

Middle and Early Modern Breton sources are lexical:²³ Middle Breton *Nomenclator* p. 104: *heur* Lat. *alnus*, *heur du* Lat. *alnus nigra*. This indicates a meaning ‘alder’ rather than ‘buckthorn’, which given the similarity of their leaves is not surprising (this feature is also expressed in the Modern English name, alder buckthorn). The Early Modern dictionary of Le Pelletier (1752) lists *evor*, *envor*, *efor*, *evo*. The Vannetais dictionary of L’Armerye (1744) on p. 35 has *ivo* ‘buckthorn’. Modern Breton shows the varieties /*evor*/, /*ivor*/, /*ivu*/ and, with secondary *gw-*, /*gwevr*/.²⁴ The development *e > i* and the loss of final *-r* in some of these forms is unexplained. Middle Breton *h-* is not pronounced and non-etymological (as in e.g. *ha* ‘and’).

Buckthorn is a large deciduous shrub that produces bunches of small greenish flowers, which develop into berries that turn red and finally black. Buckthorn shows no obvious resemblance to yew or hogweed, either in appearance or in its uses.

7. Continental Celtic

As already noted, a Continental Celtic element **Ebur(o)-* is frequent in onomastics. Because they have little to add to the discussion about the etymology beyond what has already been explained in sections 2 and 3, I shall limit myself to giving a few examples.

Personal names: from Spain, especially in the area of the Vettones: *Ebureinius* (El Raso, Candeleda, Ávila), *Eburianus* (Duratón, Segovia), Gsg. *Eburi* (Villamesías and Puerta de Santa Cruz, Cáceres); perhaps in the unclear Celtiberian compound *Ebursunos*.²⁵ Gaul: Εβουρος,²⁶ *Eburius* (CIL XII 4154 [Calvisson], 617 [Bordeaux]), *E[b]uria* (CIL XII 4733 [Narbonne]), *Eburila* (CIL XIII 1228 [Bourges])

Tribal names: *Eburones* (approximately present-day Brabant and Limburg, Netherlands and Belgium), *Aulerci Eburovices* (central France), as discussed.

Place names: *Eburo-briga* (Avrolles, Yolles, France), *Eburo-dunum* (Brünn, Germany; Yverdon, Switzerland; Embrun, Hautes-Alpes, France; perhaps also Brno, Czech Republic), *Eburo-magus* (Bram, Aude, France), *Eburo-brittium* (S-W Portugal). The early British Celtic names *Eburācum*

²³ GIB 789-790.

²⁴ Favereau 1993 s.v. *evor*.

²⁵ Wodtko 2000, 103.

²⁶ RIG II.1 G-88, Saint-Rémy-de-Provence.

(York, UK; consistent *-o-* in Roman inscriptions presupposes a spoken Latin form, not surprisingly for a Roman *colonia* and legionary fortress) and *Eburo Caslum* (Ravennas, to be read as **Castellum*, exact location unknown, Southern Scotland or Northumberland) belong to this group.²⁷

Theonym: a Roman altar dedicated to a divinity *Eburus* recently surfaced in Spain (Cuevas de Soria).²⁸

As stated earlier, none of these names offer the semantic information required to pin down the exact meaning of the phytonym **eburos*. Ironically, the only information about what it meant in Continental Celtic does not derive from Continental Celtic itself but from Germanic: the element *eber-* in Modern High German *Eber-esche* ‘rowan, mountain ash, *Sorbus aucuparia*’ is isolated in Germanic and was probably borrowed from Continental Celtic. Its earliest attestation is 15th century: *eber-boum*.

8. Proto-Celtic. The formal reconstruction as Proto-Celtic **eburos* does not present any problems, so the discussion centres around the meaning of this form. As we observed earlier, the semantic difference between Irish, Welsh and Breton is considerable. With the available evidence, the following reconstruction can be attempted. What the tall perennial ‘hogweed’ and the shrub ‘buckthorn’ have in common is the fact that they have clusters of small greenish to white flowers. The rowan, indirectly attested for Continental Celtic in German *Eber-esche*, *eber-boum*, has umbel-like heads of small white flowers (superficially like the true umbels of hogweed), which are followed by red berries, while the buckthorn has red, later black berries. Since the only features that link buckthorn (Breton) and rowan (Continental Celtic) on the one hand, and yew (Irish) on the other, are that they are large plants carrying berries, that feature combination probably goes back to the semantics of Proto-Celtic **eburos*. The feature of having umbel-like heads of small whitish flowers is present in hogweed (Welsh) and rowan (Continental Celtic), and with a little bit of fantasy also in buckthorn (Breton), but definitely not in yew (Irish). There are no phenotypical characteristics that link hogweed (Welsh) to yew (Irish). Hence the weight of the evidence is rather against Proto-Celtic **eburo-* meaning ‘yew’ or ‘hogweed’ because on that basis it is difficult to explain the others as derived meanings. The evidence rather is in favour of it denoting a shrubby plant with umbel-like clusters of whitish flowers which are followed by berries. On the basis of the latter, the meanings ‘hogweed’ (large plant with white flowers in an umbel), ‘buckthorn’ (woody plant with berries) and ‘rowan’ (woody plant with white flowers in an umbel and berries) can all be derived. The meaning ‘yew’ is the real outlier. In the absence of other phenotypical and technological similarities, ‘yew’ can be linked to the other meanings on the basis of its red berries (technically: arils), whose flesh is edible, in contradistinction to the highly toxic seeds. In respect to fruit colour, edibility and tree-like habitus, ‘yew’ is closer to ‘rowan’ than to ‘buckthorn’.

All this leads to the following scenario. Proto-Celtic **eburos* probably denoted ‘rowan, *Sorbus aucuparia*’. This may be preserved in Continental Celtic on the evidence of the Germanic loan *eber-boum*, *Eber-esche*. In Insular Celtic, a new word for ‘rowan’ was adopted: Old Irish *cáerthann*,

²⁷ Sims-Williams 2006, 78; Rivet - Smith 1979, 357.

²⁸ See the edition by Sanz *et al* 2011, who speak out in favour of a meaning ‘wild boar’ on pages 451-452. I am indebted to Professor David Stifter for drawing my attention to this inscription.

Middle Welsh *kerddin*, Modern Breton *kerzhin*.²⁹ This set **eburos* free to be used for other plants: ‘buckthorn’ in Breton because it too is woody and has berries; ‘hogweed’ in Welsh because of the similar inflorescence; and ‘yew’ in Irish because it has red edible ‘berries’.

The use of ‘rowan’ in place names is as self-explanatory as the use of any other tree name in that function. Its use in personal names can be compared to the Ogam Irish name MAQI CAIRATINI, MAQI CARATTINN ‘Son of Rowan’. In traditional popular beliefs of northern and central Europe, rowan was regarded as protective against lightning and evil forces.³⁰

9. Latin

Proto-Celtic **eburos* ‘rowan (?)’ does not have a persuasive etymology outside Celtic. Pokorny suggested that it reflects an earlier **erbuo-*, which he compares with an Indo-European root **erb^h-* meaning ‘brown’.³¹ The connection is completely arbitrary.

To my knowledge, it has not yet been observed that semantically and formally Celtic **erbuo-* links up much better with Latin *ebulus*, *ebulum*, which means ‘dwarf elder, danewort’ (attested since Cato). Danewort (*Sambucus ebulus*) is a close cognate of the shrubby elder (*Sambucus nigra*), from which it differs by being a herbaceous perennial, which dies down every winter, and in that it forms dense stands. Incidentally, those characteristics as well as the presence of divided, pinnate leaves and its preferred habitat of fertile, moist soils link it particularly with hogweed (Welsh *efwr*). Like most of the Celtic words, *ebulus* denotes a large plant with umbel-like heads of small whitish flowers which are followed by red, then black, berries.

Formally, Lat. *ebulus* is usually reconstructed as **ed^h-lo-*, however, and connected with the synonymous Gaulish *odocos* attested in Marcellus of Bordeaux (*Med. Lib.* 7.13). This usually is an unreliable source for Gaulish but in this case the existence of the word is confirmed by Latin glosses *odecus*, *odicus* and by the West-Germanic loan from Gaulish, Old High German *atuh*, Old Low German *aduk* ‘danewort’ < **oduk-*. Spanish *yezgo* ‘danewort’ points to an alternative form **eduko-*, however, which occurs as *educu* in Latin glosses. This probably is a cross of Gaulish **odokos* with Latin *ebulus*, for which another example is the Latin gloss *ebucone*.³² The semantic connection of **odokos* with *ebulus* is semantically flawless but formally this is an intrinsically weak root etymology.

Lat. *ebulus* and *odocos* are further connected with Balto-Slavic **edli-* ‘spruce, fir’ in e.g. Czech *jedle*, Russian *el*, Lith. *ėglė*, OPruss. *addle* (Walde-Hofmann 1938 I 389). The comparison is semantically strained. More importantly, the Balto-Slavic forms are more attractively connected with the root **ad-* in Lith. *adyti* ‘to darn’, *ādata* ‘needle’ (cf. Derksen 2008, 139).

André (1985, 193) follows Brüch in suggesting that Gaulish *odocos* may rather belong to the root **od-* ‘smell’ (Lat. *odor* etc.) than to Lat. *ebulus* on account of the unpleasant smell given off by the leaves of danewort. Modern Irish has a probable cognate of this Gaulish **od-* in *odbrán*, an

²⁹ On these forms, see Schrijver 1997, 305-306.

³⁰ Bächtold-Stäubli - Hoffmann - Kraye 1927-1942 s.v. *Eberesche*. See further MacKillop 1998, 330-331 on supernatural uses of rowan reported in medieval Irish literature.

³¹ Pokorny 1948-1949, 251. For the root, see Walde-Pokorny 1927-1932 I 146.

³² Walde-Hofmann 1938 I 388.

alternative name for cow-parsnip: it is a diminutive in *-án* based on a lost noun **odbar*, which itself reflects **od-V-ro-* and contains the vegetable suffix **-Vr(o)-* (see 10).

These plausible alternatives to the traditional etymology of *ebulus* open up the possibility of connecting *ebulus* with Celtic **eburo-*. Both can be reconstructed as (Italo-Celtic) **eb^huro-* or **eburo-*. Latin *-l-* instead of *-r-* may be due to the influence of other plant names, such as *populus*, *opulus*, *corulus*. No further etymology is available (Albanian *bërshën* ‘stinking juniper’ allows too many possible reconstructions³³ to be a reliable cognate).

10. Word-formation

Celtic **eburo-* is one of a number of phytonyms that contain a vegetable suffix **-Vr-*:

- (1) Irish *curar*, Welsh *cylor(enn)*, Breton *keler(enn)*, *coloren* ‘pignut’ < **kururā*
- (2) Irish *biror*, Welsh *berwr*, *beryren*, Breton *beler(enn)*, Gallo-Latin *berula* ‘watercress’ (*Rorippa sp.*) < **beruro-*; this is probably cognate with Latin *ferula* ‘plant of the family *Apiaceae*, with a long stem’, and with Irish *ber*, *bir* ‘water’, *topur*, *típra* ‘source, well’ < Proto-Indo-European **b^her(u)-* ‘to gush, boil’ (?)
- (3) Irish *semmar* ‘clover’ < **selimmVrā*, cf. Old Norse *smári* < **smāi-r-* or **smē-r-*; cf. also unrelated Germanic **klaib-ra-* beside **klaiwa-* ‘clover, Klee’.³⁴
- (4) Modern Irish *feabhrán* ‘cow-parsley’, *odhrán* ‘cow-parsley’, as discussed earlier.

11. Breton borrowings

Latin *ebulus* was probably borrowed into Breton as **evl*. This may be represented in Old Southwest British *hob-aubl*, with unclear first element, in the *Leiden Leechbook*.³⁵ **evl* is attested in the Middle Breton singulative /evlenn/: *eulenn* ‘cest vng arbre, Lat. *coluis*’ (*Catholicon* versions a and b); *efflen* plural *effl* ‘poplar, *Populus*’. Modern Breton forms are *elw*, *elo*, *effl* ‘poplars, aspens’. The semantic development in Breton was probably triggered by confusion with a native word for ‘aspens’, which survives in the isolated form Middle Breton *ezlenn* (*Catholicon*, manuscript version) ‘aspens’ < Late Proto-British **aiθn-enn* (compare Welsh *aethnenn* ‘aspens’). A meaning ‘buckthorn’, presumably by confusion with *evor*, is attested for some instances of *elw*, *effl* (Duros 1991, 97).

Modern Breton *evor* ‘hellebore’, Middle Breton *an euor guen* ‘white hellebore, veratrum’ (*Nomenclator* p. 94) probably has nothing to do with **eburo-*. It may represent a garbled form of Lat. (*h*)*elleborus*, whose first syllable was reanalysed and detached as the Romance definite article, while the rest of the word regularly yielded Romance **evor*. Yet unfortunately no such form seems to be attested in Romance.

12. The Celtic word for ‘yew’

If **eburo-* originally denoted the rowan, it is no longer necessary to posit two Proto-Celtic words for yew, **eburo-* and **iwo-* (Welsh *yw*, Old Irish *éó*). The latter means ‘yew’ in all its Celtic representatives and can therefore stand as the only Proto-Celtic word for ‘yew’.

³³ Demiraj 1997, 99.

³⁴ Probably neither of these forms is Indo-European origin: see Schrijver 1997.

³⁵ Falileyev - Owen 2005, 45.

It is probably significant as well as confounding that cognates of **iwo-* in other branches of Indo-European show a similar connection between yew and a tree of the genus *Sorbus*, with clusters of white flowers followed by red berries. Celtic **iwo-* agrees with Germanic **īwā* (e.g. Old High German *īwa*, Old English *īw*, Old Norse *īr*)³⁶ in denoting the yew. But elsewhere the etymon denotes a *Sorbus*:

- Lithuanian *ievà*, Latvian *iēva* ‘rowan’ (*Sorbus aucuparia*; their Slavic counterparts, e.g. Russian *iva*, Serbo-Croat *iva*, mean ‘willow’, possibly on account of the young branches of *Sorbus* and willow being used for wattling) < **(h₁)eiHw-eh₂*³⁷
- Greek ὄνη, ὄξα, οἴνη ‘service tree’ (*Sorbus domestica*) < **(H)oiHw-eh₂*

Note also Latin *ūva* ‘bunch of grapes’ < **(H)oiHw-eh₂* and Armenian *aigi* ‘grape’ < **(H)oiHw-ijeh₂-*, which are semantically connected to the aforementioned words by referring to clusters of edible fruits. Finally, there is Hittite *eyan-* (neuter), which denotes an evergreen tree and reflects **(h₁)e(h₁)i-on-*, without the **-w-* that can be found in the other cognates.

It is possible to assume that the original meaning of this item, ‘yew (berry)’, was preserved at the geographical extremes of the Indo-European world (Hittite and Celtic, Germanic), while central languages innovated by applying the term to other woody plants producing edible berries, but this can be no more than tentative.

In light of the fact that the transition from ‘yew’ to *Sorbus* (or the other way round) apparently occurred twice in the history of the ancient Indo-European languages, there must have been an obvious semantic link between the two. The only link that comes to mind is the edible fruits. That leads us to surmise that eating the fleshy arils of yew fruit, in spite of the high toxicity of all other parts of the tree including the seed itself, was probably a commonplace activity in prehistoric Europe.

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³⁶ Germanic also has a number of unexplained alternative forms, which seem to reflect **ība* (German *Eibe*, Dutch *ijf*), **igwa* (Old High German *īga*, *īgo*), **īχwā* (Old Saxon *īch*, Old English *eoh*). The short **i* of the Celtic form can be explained as shortening caused by Dybo’s rule (Schrijver 1991, 357).

³⁷ Derksen 2008, 216.

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