

Further to Avidic

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## Further to Avidic: ‘Geese’ in Insular Celtic\*

David Stifter

**Abstract:** It is argued in this article that words for ‘geese’ in the Insular Celtic languages, e.g. Old Irish *géd*, Welsh *gŵydd* ‘goose’, and Old Irish *giugrann*, Welsh *gŵyran* ‘wild goose’, etc., go back to reduplicated formations \**giγðo-* and \**giγurano-*. The structure and phonology of these words do not conform with those of words inherited from Indo-European. Instead, they may be loans from a lost prehistoric language of western Europe that has been suspected as the source of other vocabulary connected with the natural world.

The Old Irish word for the ‘goose’ is *géd*. Albeit not attested in manuscripts from the Old Irish period as such, it is found in texts that can be safely ascribed to it. Significant forms, cited from [dil.ie/25495](http://dil.ie/25495), point to a masculine *o*-stem:<sup>1</sup> nom.sg. *gēd* (*Scéla Cano* 686, *Sanas Cormaic* Y 686), gen.sg. *geóid* (Hib. Min. 66.11), nom.pl. *geoid* (CIH i 238.29, legal commentary), nom.du. *da gedh* (CIH i 192.14, legal commentary). Even the vocative is once found: *a gheoidh* (IT iii 103 §193). In most varieties of modern Gaelic, the final *-d* has regularly become silent, the Early Irish alternation of the stressed vowel *é~éoi* has been abandoned in favour of invariant *é*, and a more regularised nasal formation has been adopted for the plural, i.e. Standard Modern Irish *gé*, pl. *géanna* (see Wagner 1982: 109–113 for other plural formations in the various dialects). These modern forms are of no concern for the present study.

The word has easily recognisable cognates in British: MW *guit*, ModW *gŵydd*, OCorn. *guit*, MCorn. *goydh*, MBret. *goaz*, ModBret. *gwaz*, all ‘goose’ and feminine. As usual, the very divergent plural formations of the British languages, e.g. W *gŵyddau*, Bret. *gwazi*, *gwaied* etc., have no diachronic significance. In medieval texts, the word receives an onomatopoeic explanation. Cormac Úa Cuilennáin says *gēd nomen de sono factum* ‘*géd*, the name is made (= derives) from the sound’ (*Sanas Cormaic* 686;<sup>2</sup> echoed in *Auraicept na nÉces* 1698). This onomatopoeic tradition

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<sup>1</sup> The quotes follow the conventions of eDIL.

<sup>2</sup> URL: <http://www.asnc.cam.ac.uk/irishglossaries/concordances.php?main=9&cpFamily=sc&display=fulltext&readingID=17672#17672> (visited 8.4.2020).

is continued in the modern period by Lockwood (1981: 184–185) who considers the call, “urkelt. \**gēd*”, as the basis of the name. This explanation ignores the diachronic and synchronic phonology.

The reconstruction of a pre-form can be tackled more systematically. The correspondences between the consonants among the two branches of Celtic, i.e. OIr. *g* ~ Brit. *g* and OIr. *d* ~ W *dd*, Corn. *dh*, Bret. *z*, are in accordance with the established rules of comparative phonology. However, the relationship between the vowels is more difficult. The British forms appear at first glance to show the normal reflex of Proto-Celtic \**e*. However, in Irish this should correspond to an inflection nom. \*\**giad*, gen. \*\**gēid* (this fact is ignored in Lockwood’s proposal cited above). One could hypothesise that the *é* had been generalised to the entire paradigm from pre-palatalised contexts such as in the genitive; Schrijver (1995: 220) suspects that *gēd* has its unexpected vowel from the semantically related *géis* ‘swan’. However, both explanations run counter to the ordinary behaviour of Old Irish. The paradigmatic alternation *ía* before non-palatalised consonant ~ *é* before palatalised consonants, which survives as a synchronic rule even into the modern language, is so deeply entrenched in Irish grammar that it is hard to believe that it would have been abandoned in favour of the rarer pattern *é*~*éoi*.

A more interesting solution for this problem can be found when one takes the attested paradigmatic alternation of *gēd* seriously. OIr. *é* before a non-palatalised consonant, alternating with the diphthong *éoi* before a palatalised consonant, is indicative of a long vowel that arose during the Primitive Irish period by compensatory lengthening of a short vowel when a fricative (*γ*, *χ*, *δ*, *θ*) had been lost after it (GOI 37, McCone 1996: 122–124, 138). While this alternation is common before the continuants *l*, *r*, *n*, it does not normally occur before other consonants, in particular not before sounds such as *d* that would have been stops in Proto-Celtic. The corollary of this is that the sound that followed the lost fricative, which appears as *d* /*δ*/ in Old Irish, must have been a continuant itself at the time of compensatory lengthening.

Since any dental fricative would have become delenited before the following *d* /*δ*/, and *χ* would have been voiced, the only fricative that suggests itself is *γ*, i.e. lenited *g*. Phonotactically the sequence \**-γδ-* cannot be inherited in Irish: diachronically speaking, and under normal circumstances, Irish fricatives are allophones of the respective Proto-Celtic stops in leniting contexts, but Proto-Celtic \**-gd-* forms precisely a non-leniting context. By this phonotactical reasoning, a Primitive Irish word with the sequence \**-γδ-* must be a loan from another language. Since this sequence

has, to my knowledge, no exact parallel elsewhere in the Insular Celtic languages, I assume that it behaved like the much more common clusters of fricative with resonant, i.e.  $*-V\gamma\delta- > *-V\delta-$ , like  $*-V\gamma R- > *-VR-$ . As for the quality of the vowel before it, only *i* is possible from the point of view of the British words according to Schrijver (1995: 355–359).  $*-e\gamma-$  would be slightly easier for Irish, but  $*-i\gamma-$  will do if one assumes that *é* arose through lowering before a back vowel, for example in the nominative singular, and that this variant was then generalised in the entire paradigm, replacing expected  $*\acute{i}ui$ . Generalisations of this type among compensatorily lengthened vowels are common in Old Irish, e.g., nom. *muinél* ‘neck’ regularly  $< *moniklos$ , but gen. *muinéoil*, not the expected  $*muiniuil < *moniklī$ .

The foregoing comparative-phonological reasoning leads to the reconstruction of the preform  $*gi\gamma\delta o-$ , from which all Insular Celtic words can be derived (thus already VKG I 102, IEW 407). Descriptively, this reconstruction has a reduplication  $*gi\gamma-$  in the initial syllable. In the attested languages, this reduplication is no longer visible in the surface form, but has disappeared through regular processes.

$*gi\gamma\delta o-$  is reminiscent of another Insular Celtic word for an anserine, namely OIr. *gigrann*, *giugran*, *gigren*, W *gŵyran* ‘wild goose’, OBret. *goirann* ‘goose’ and the place-name *Caer Gurannet* in the 11<sup>th</sup>-century Cartulary of Landevenneg. The Asturian ethnonym *Gigurri* in ancient Hispania looks astonishingly similar, but whether it is etymologically related, meaning the ‘goose-people’ as a theriophoric designation (Bascuas 2002: 129–130), or whether it is just a chance similarity, is unclear. The words are best traced back to a common preform  $*gigurano-/gi\gamma urano-$  (Schrijver 1995: 358). Irish continues this without further ado, except for the hapax variant *gigren* (*Thes.* ii, 47, *Philargyrius* gloss 78) which, if it is not just a chance misspelling, attests to a variant  $*gi\gamma ureno-$  or  $*gi\gamma erano-$ . For British, we have to assume that the middle *u* of  $*gi\gamma urano-$  was syncopated (the nature of this syncope will be illuminated below) and that the resulting group  $-i\gamma r-$  was subsequently treated like in words where it was inherited. Hamp 1979 takes a basically similar approach, but his preform  $*gigeran-$  for the Irish word, which ignores the *u*-infection of the common form *giugran*, has to be rejected. For British, he sets up a preform  $*gigran-$ , but he does not specify its relationship to the pre-Irish reconstruction  $*gigerano-$ . Vendryes (1907: 140–141) explains the word as a reduplicated formation of an onomatopoetic root  $*greu-$  ‘to shout’, ultimately derived from a simple root  $*ger-$  ‘to shout’. Like in the case of  $*gi\gamma\delta o-$ , where the unusual phonotactics are in my eyes evidence for a loan, it is the unusual correspondence between the

reconstructable stems *\*giγur-* and *\*giγr-*, which does not follow a known morphological pattern, that points to a loan from a third language.

When the two words *\*giγdo-* and *\*giγurano-* are confronted, similarities appear: 1. both refer to types of geese and 2. both start with the reduplicated syllable *\*giγ-*. This has been compared with reduplicated terms for the 'goose' in other European languages, but the formations quoted in IEW 407 are of the type *\*gaga-* or *\*g<sup>h</sup>ag<sup>h</sup>a-* with the vowel *a*. However, *\*giγ-/giyu-* with the vowel *i* is exclusive to the Insular Celtic languages. Ultimately, the reduplication may be onomatopoetic in all languages, but this is only a psychological parallel, not a genetic one, and the formations are independent of each other. In this context, it needs to be stressed that Breeze's (2006: 44) comparison of the Celtic geese-words with the British ethnonym *Gangani* is formally impossible and adds nothing to the explanation of the word.

The semantics and the phonology of the two reconstructed terms calls to mind a hypothetical prehistoric language of western Europe, postulated by Peter Schrijver 1997, for which he used the name 'language of the birds' names', and for which I jokingly introduced the shorter designation 'Avidic' (Stifter 2010: 155). For the sake of convenience, I will keep that shorter name. Both *\*giγdo-* and *\*giγurano-* are evidently birds' names. One foreign sound that Schrijver postulated for Avidic is *δ*. In some western Indo-European languages this sound is represented in loans by *δ*, in others by *r*. Schrijver himself explains this as a sound substitution in the recipient languages, but perhaps it actually reflects an original allophony in the donor language. It is noteworthy in this context that the first sound following the internal *γ* in the goose-words is once *δ*, once *r*. Another morphophonemic phenomenon observed for Avidic is that in the same etymon vowels are sometimes syncopated, sometimes not. Schrijver ascribes this behaviour, which, for want of a better word, looks like a kind of *ablaut*, to the presence or absence of a word-initial *a*, which he regards as an article. Again something approximately similar can be seen in the goose-words: once the *γ* is followed by a vowel, once not, although in this case no initial *a* is involved. Finally, Schrijver postulates two fricative sounds for Avidic, *χ* and *δ*. If the language has a voiceless tectal fricative *χ* and a voiced dental fricative *δ*, it seems natural that the phonemic system will also have had a voiced tectal fricative, i.e. *γ*.

I therefore conclude that *\*giγdo-* and *\*giγurano-* are loans from a lost substrate language, perhaps from Schrijver's Avidic. Perhaps it was originally a single etymon *\*giγ(u)δ-* 'goose' which was borrowed in two *ablaut* variants which then became specialised in meaning.

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