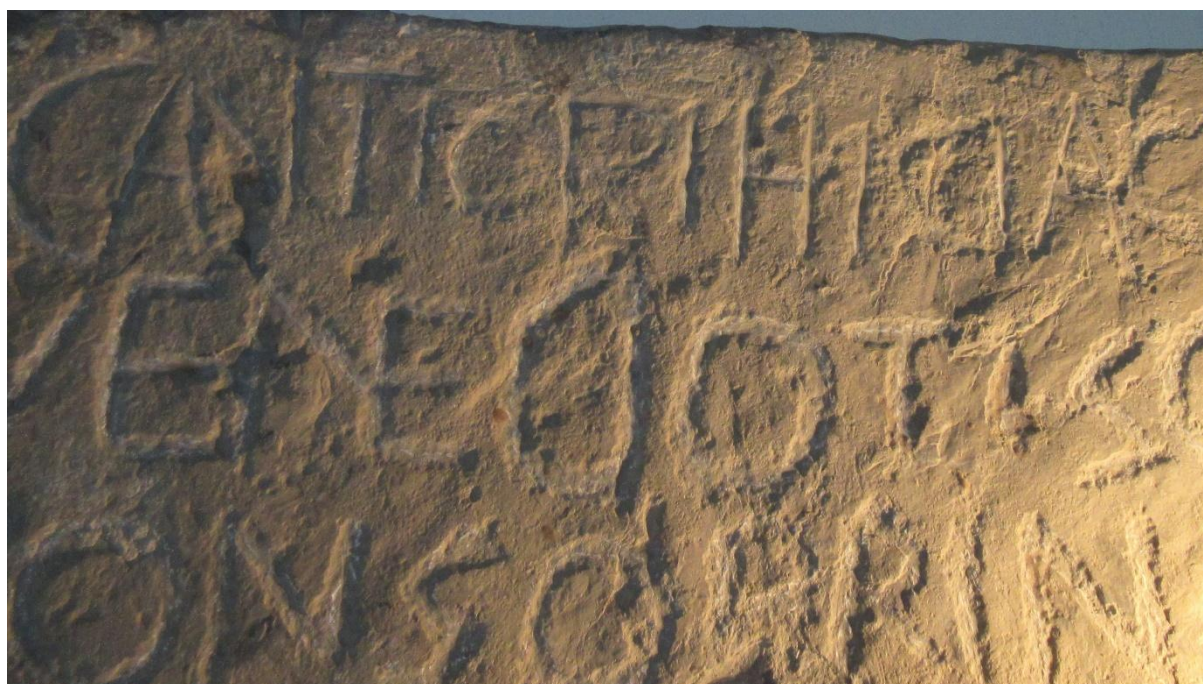


How linguistics can help the historian: Part III



Curmudgeonly Carolingians

In the first two instalments we looked at what we can deduce by excavating a word down to its original meaning, and also by seeing what language it is in (its ‘archaeological context’ context, if you like). Linguistics enables us to go further, by investigating (as it were) what material it is made of. The reference here is to the individual sounds in a word, and how those sounds are spelled when the word is written down. Exactly because these matters border on the abstruse, it is precisely these that, when systematically decoded, can produce the most revealing historical insights. Several such insights can be gained in connection with the fate of a figure at the medieval Carolingian court who was known as Cadac Andreas, or ‘Battling Andrew’. As this was an Irishman, it seems appropriate enough to introduce him on this particular website; a fully annotated version of what follows was published in the journal *Classics Ireland*, 9 (2002), pp. 19-27.

This man Cadac Andreas came from Ireland to the royal court of Charlemagne probably sometime around the turn of the ninth century, and had the misfortune that his time there coincided with that of Theodulf of Orleans. Theodulf was a writer skilled in poetic forms and a learned theologian, and was the second most distinguished scholar at the court after Alcuin. One particular poem he wrote runs to 244 lines, beginning with praise of the emperor and his family and turning to pithy word-pictures of about a dozen of Theodulf's fellow courtiers, among whom was the Irishman in question. Against him, Theodulf mounts a clever satirical attack. Here are the relevant lines of his poem (readers who have not studied Latin need not worry, as an English rendering follows immediately):

*Hic poenasue dabit fugietue simillimus Austro,
Utque sit hic aliud, nil nisi Scottus erit.
Cui si litterulam, quae est ordine tertia, tollas —
(Inque secunda suo nomine forte sedet:
Quae sonat in 'caelo' prima, et quae in 'scando' secunda,
Tertia in 'ascensu', quarta in 'amicitiis';
Quam satis offendit; pro qua te, littera salui,
Utitur) — haud dubium quod sonat, hoc et erit!*

... a passage that has been translated along the following lines ...

This man shall pay his penalty or flee like the south wind;
however different he may try to be, he is nothing but a *Scottus*.
If you take away therefrom the letter which is third in the alphabet —
(and which happens to stand second in that, his designation (i.e. *Scottus*):
the letter that in *caelo* sounds first, and which in *scando* comes second,
third in *ascensu*, fourth in *amicitiis*; the letter that he stumbles upon often
enough; in place of which he presses into service the letter standing for *saluus*)
— then, without doubt, what he says he will also be!

Can we see what Theodulf is saying? If from the term *Scottus* (meaning a Gael, a speaker of Irish) we remove the letter *c*, then we get Battling Andrew's pronunciation of the word. Unfortunately for him, making this change in Latin

had the same effect as taking the *c* out of ‘Scot’ in English — the man was a sot, and his pronunciation meant that he called himself one. But what general peculiarity of his speech led him to commit this particular embarrassing solecism?

If we analyse Theodulf’s criticism carefully, we can see that Andrew’s actual fault was not so much that he failed to pronounce the *c* in *Scottus*, but rather (and this comes to the same thing following an *s*, as in that word) that he sounded the *c* as if it were (another) *s* - in other words, as what we call ‘soft *c*’ when it occurs in English words like ‘celestial’ and ‘ascent’ (to use examples related to those given in the poem). Now, readers who do happen to have studied Classical Latin at some stage will know that, in that language, the letter *c* was always pronounced as a hard [k] sound — so at first sight one might think that Theodulf was mocking Andrew for not being aware of this. However, given his date and location we know that Theodulf would himself have pronounced a Latin *c* before front vowels (that is *ae*, *e*, *i*, *oe*, and *y*) in the non-Classical, soft fashion that resembles *s* (so this would have applied in the poem’s words *caelo*, *ascensu* and *amicitiis*). No difference from Andrew there, then. But before the other, so-called back vowels (that is *a*, *o* and *u*), Theodulf’s Latin *c* would have continued to have its Classical pronunciation, sounding — as in English before these vowels — just like a *k*. In the poem this would have applied to *scando* and, crucially, to *Scottus* itself. What Andrew is being mocked for is pronouncing *c* in a soft fashion in all environments, including these, and so saying [sando] and [sottus]. Why did he do that? Modern scholarship has tended to go astray on this question ...

The West-Brit syndrome — twelve hundred years ago!

trean le ruaman gaoitne, gur bnuair se buille tubaisteach sa gcloig
orm. Thit mé i laige ón mbuille sin ach sul má cailleadh na céad
fad orm chuala mé scread uaidh:

“*Nommen tuum,*” ar seisean, “*Jacovus O’Donnell est.*”

Jacovus O’Donnell? Bhí an dá fhocal seo ag gliogaireacht i
cheann nuair a tháinig mothú aríst ann. Fuair mé mé féin sínte a
leataobh ar an urlár, mo bhríste, mo ghruaig agus mo phearsa uil
maos ó na slaoda fola albhí ag stealladh ón scoilteadh a bhí déan

... because the modern scholars responsible have tended to assume that Andrew’s problem was something to do with his having had an Irish accent. But closer inspection shows that this cannot be right. First of all, within their own language the Irish were perfectly capable of managing a *k*-type pronunciation before back vowels. Plenty of Irish vernacular words that reach us from before Andrew’s time show this, such as *cam* (meaning crooked), *cosc* (prevention), *scáth* (shade) and so on, all spoken as if spelled with a *k* (readers will be able to think of further examples for themselves). But also, then as now, the Irish even had the hard sound before front vowels: the *c* is pronounced like a *k* in venerable Irish words such as *ciall* (meaning sense) and *sciath* (shield), and always has been. Why should this not have applied to their Latin as well? At the time when Latin was first introduced into Ireland — that is, hundreds of years before the Carolingian period which we have in mind now — all of its occurrences of the letter *c*, no matter the position, had still enjoyed their original, Classical, hard pronunciation. As there was no subsequent softening of the corresponding sounds in the Gaelic vernacular of Ireland (unlike what happened before front vowels on the Continent, affecting the pronunciation of people like Theodulf), there is no reason to suspect that anything changed in

Ireland later. All the evidence is that in Carolingian times a literate, Latinate Irishman would still generally have pronounced all instances of the Latin letter *c* in a rather Classical manner, retaining the hard sound [k] not only in words like *Scottus* and *scando*, but also in all the items in the poem where Continentals like Theodulf had moved on to using a soft sound (as in *caelo*, *ascensu* and *amicitiis*). So why do we find Andrew doing the exact opposite?

The answer is somewhat revealing, and tells us a lot about individuals' unconscious attitudes towards being Irish: Andrew's own, but also that of at least one modern scholar who has analysed this poem. We shall pursue this in the next instalment; in the meantime, thanks once more for reading — and do get in touch with the author (A.Harvey@ria.ie), at the Royal Irish Academy's Dictionary of Celtic Latin project (yes, still busy drafting, in spite of the lockdown!)