

A BRITONNIC ETYMOLOGY FOR *LUCHE* 'THROW'
IN *PATIENCE* 230

Luche is an extremely rare Middle English word. It seems known only from line 230 of *Patience*, where Jonah is tossed into the sea:

Tyd by top and bi to thay token hym synne,
Into that lodlych loghe thay luche hym sone.

That is, 'Quickly by head and toe they took him then, they pitch him forthwith into that terrible sea.'¹ Although editors agree on the translation 'pitch', the origin of *luche* has remained obscure.² *OED* s. v. *lutch* says nothing on etymology, merely noting the word's survival in Yorkshire, and citing a definition 'to lift' from a Sheffield dialect glossary of 1888. *MED* refers to Old French *lochier* 'to shake, hang, nearly fall' and *eslochier* 'to shake down, dislodge'; but it is difficult to accept this, since Middle English normally retains French *o* in borrowings, as in *propre*, *cofre*, *supposen*, *noble*, *rose*, *host*, *rost*, and so on.

¹ *The Oxford Book of Medieval English Verse*, ed. Celia and Kenneth Sisam (Oxford, 1970), 217.

² *Patience*, ed. J.J. Anderson (Manchester, 1969), 94; *Poetry of the Age of Chaucer*, ed. A. C. and J. E. Spearing (London, 1974), 129; *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, ed. M. R. Andrew and R. A. Waldron (London, 1978), 331; *Macmillan Anthologies of English Literature: The Middle Ages*, ed. Michael Alexander and Felicity Riddy (London, 1989), 302.

As no satisfactory etymology for *luce* ‘pitch, throw’ is known, it is worth investigating a link with Welsh *lluch* ‘drift (of snow, sand, etc.); cast or throw, fling’; *lluchio* ‘to throw, cast away, hurl, fling’; and *lluwchio* ‘to drift (of snow), drive (of snow), blow a blizzard; cover (with ashes, dust, etc.); hurl, pelt (with stones, etc.).’¹ These words are closely associated, *lluwch* being a natural development in medieval Welsh of *lluch*.²

The history of the Welsh forms is as follows. The oldest evidence for them occurs in a poem by Cynddelw (fl. 1155-1200) on the warband of Owain Gwynedd (d. 1170), which includes the line *Llary einnyawn lluchdawn llochessid ueirtyon* ‘Generous Einion, showering down gifts, harboured poets’.³ *Lliw lluch Ionawr* ‘the hue of a January snowdrift’, in a poem by Gruffydd ap Dafydd ap Tudur (fl. 1285-1300) requesting a bow, is the earliest instance of *lluch* in the sense ‘drift’; it is odd that the basic meaning ‘a cast or throw, fling’ is unknown before the late nineteenth century, when it is recorded in Gwynedd dialect.⁴ The verb *lluchio* is first attested with the sense ‘to throw, cast away, hurl, fling’ in the Welsh Bible of 1588, where 2 Samuel xvi. 13 contains the phrase *lychiodd lwŌch iw erbyn ef* ‘cast dust at him’ (modified to *fwriai lch* in the 1620 edition); *lluchio* in the sense ‘to cover ground with drifts (of snow, dust, etc.)’ appears earlier in a poem by Tudur Aled (fl. 1480-1526) requesting a horse, a powerful ‘lion’ leaving behind it

¹ *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru* (Caerdydd, 1950-), 2216, 2217, 2232.

² *Breuddwyd Maxen*, ed. Ifor Williams (Bangor, 1907), 15-16; John Morris-Jones, *A Welsh Grammar* (Oxford, 1913), 118; E. P. Hamp, ‘The Allophones of Medieval Welsh [x] and [ū]’, *The Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies*, xvi (1954-6), 284-5; D. S. Evans, *A Grammar of Middle Welsh* (Dublin, 1964), 1-2.

³ *The Poetry in the Red Book of Hergest*, ed. J.G. Evans (Llanbedrog, 1911), col. 1393; *Llawysgrif Hendregadredd*, ed. John Morris-Jones and T.H. Parry-Williams (Caerdydd, 1933), 173.

⁴ J. G. Evans, col. 1254; O. H. Fynes-Clinton, ‘Words in Colloquial Use in the Bangor District’, *The Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies*, i (1921-3), 91-102, at 98; *Geiriadur*, 2216.

llwch o'r rhiw'n lluchio'r heol 'dust from the slope drifting over the road'.¹ Finally, the modified form *lluwch* 'driven snow, snow-drift' occurs in the work of Dafydd ap Gwilym (fl. 1330-60): 'Not white is the foam of lake or snowdrift (*lluwch*) ... compared with the countenance of my darling, by Mary!'.²

Is it phonetically possible to relate Modern Welsh *lluch* [lix] and Modern Yorkshire dialect *lutch* [lutS] ?. There is no problem as regards [l], which in Welsh fully evolved from [l] probably only by the tenth century; while in Old and Middle Welsh the sound represented by *u* was a long central rounded ü, which developed in late British from a long unrounded *u*.³ That is in accord with the form of Middle English *luche* if a loan from Brittonic. As for the *ch* of Welsh *lluch*, this indicates an original British *-cc*.⁴ Because the change *cc>ch* is common to Welsh, Cornish and Breton, it must have occurred before their separation, and thus be no later than sixth century.⁵ The earliest evidence for the change is found in the inscriptions BROHO (...) at Llandysul, twelve miles north of Carmarthen in south-west Wales, and BROHOMAGLI, from near Pentrefoelas, seven miles south-east of Betws-y-coed in north Wales.⁶ Both inscriptions, containig Celtic **Brocco*- 'foremost, keen' with *ch* spelt H, date from the mid sixth century.⁷

A sense 'what is blown by the wind, drift' would easily develop from a word originally meaning 'throw, hurl'. Hence it is likely that Middle English

¹ *Gwaith Tudur Aled*, ed. T. Gwynn Jones (Caerdydd, 1926), 428; *Geiriadur*, 2217.

² *Gwaith Dafydd ap Gwilym*, ed. Thomas Parry (Caerdydd, 1952), 138.

³ Morris-Jones, 13; K. H. Jackson, *Language and History in Early Britain* (Edinburgh, 1953), 305, 480; D. S. Evans, 1-2.

⁴ Morris-Jones, 133; Henry Lewis and Holger Pedersen, *A Concise Comparative Celtic Grammar* (Göttingen, 1937), 53.

⁵ Jackson, 565.

⁶ V. E. Nash-Williams, *The Early Christian Monuments of Wales* (Cardiff, 1950), 100, 125 (where 'Holyhead railway' should read 'Holyhead road').

⁷ Jackson, 566.

A Brittonic Etymology for «Luche»

luce ‘pitch, throw’ is the result of a loan from Brittonic of the ancestor form of *lluch(io)* before *c.* 550, when the geminated stops *cc* still existed in British; that these were fronted in Primitive Old English (compare the palatalized form *crycc* ‘crutch’); and then assibilated in late Old English, giving Middle and Modern English [t*].¹ In other words, *luce* and Yorkshire dialectal *lutch* seem due to English borrowing from Brittonic during the fifth or early sixth century; we may compare *loghe* ‘sea’ which, also in *Patience* 230, is certainly a loan from Celtic. *Luce* and *lutch* are therefore evidence for early Celtic influence on the Anglo-Saxons, perhaps of a military kind. Since a word meaning ‘throw, hurl, pelt’ has obvious implications for fighting, the English may have learnt the word from British allies or enemies.

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¹ Alistair Campbell, *Old English Grammar* (Oxford, 1959), 174-6, 196-7.