

INTRODUCTION

Gary German, Anne Hellegouarc'h and Gaëlle Le Corre

This special issue is the second of a two-volume series, which offers a selection of the various papers given at the Summer School on the Breton language, dedicated to the history and the heritage of Brittany. Since its foundation in 2015, it has been held at the Quimper campus of the *Université de Bretagne Occidentale* (University of Western Brittany) and has been attended by well over a hundred academics, students and language enthusiasts from over twenty countries around the world (Japan, Russia, Bulgaria, Finland, Ireland, Northern Ireland, Wales, Scotland, Australia, the United States, South Korea, England, Germany, just to name a few).

The completion of this project required a significant investment, mainly due to the translation of half of the articles presented in this volume. The translations were carried out by French-speaking editors Gary German, Anne Hellegouarc'h-Bryce and Gaëlle Le Corre.

This second issue is divided into three sections. The first one explores linguistic legacy of Celtic-speaking Western Brittany covering the origins of Breton and its decline. The second theme broached in this volume covers the role of the typically Breton religious practices in teaching the Bible. This acts as a transition to the third section which is devoted to Brittany's cultural and intangible heritage focussing on the way Brittany and its people have been viewed by both the British and the French since the 19th century.

Opening this volume is Tanguy Sollicec's contribution which examines the origins and the development of Old Breton. This diachronic study analyses how the interaction of internal and external sociolinguistic and sociohistorical factors shaped Old Breton until the 11th century. Despite the paucity of available data, Old Breton glosses found in manuscripts written in Latin reveal that Breton clergy were well integrated in the learned circles of the time. In particular, the connection with

the insular Brittonic tradition is patent with close fraternal bonds to the clergy of Cornwall and Wales. The aforementioned sources also indicate that the Old Breton language was representative of a highly refined Brittonic ecclesiastical acrolect. The article explores the genesis of the Breton language, which remained the vehicular language of Western Brittany until the first half of the 20th century.

Erwan Le Pipec's study carries on this linguistic discussion by presenting an overview of the Breton language history and, in particular, its rapid decline during the 20th century. At a time when there were still over a million speakers, it was during the 1950s that intergenerational transmission of the language virtually ceased. In a period of less than fifty years, the numbers of native Breton speakers plunged dramatically. According to the last census conducted by the *Région Bretagne* in 2024, the number of fluent Breton speakers was recorded as 127,000, representing 2.7% of the total population. Erwan Le Pipec provides a detailed account of the evolution of the linguistic situation in Brittany, analysing the factors that contributed to its gradual disappearance and the advent of French as the dominant language. Political, religious and cultural institutions played a pivotal role in the emergence of institutional bilingualism, which subsequently evolved into societal bilingualism in the course of the 20th century.

Yann Celton's article focuses on Brittany's religious past, examining how the *taolennou*, literally meaning "tables", that is, iconographic religious paintings, served as a tool for the dissemination of the Catholic dogma by Breton missionaries between the 17th and the first half of the 20th centuries. This was an aspect of a particularly conservative Breton expression of the Catholic faith that prevailed in Brittany and was a direct product of the Catholic Counter Reformation of the 16th century. This set Breton-speaking Brittany apart from Wales, the other country of Brittonic language whose brand of Christianity was Protestant and non-conformist. The non-conformist religious doctrine advocated literacy and the personal study of the Bible as the only true way to access the divine and gain the salvation of one's soul. By the end of the 18th century, it is estimated that nearly half of the Welsh-speaking population could read the Bible in Welsh.

In Brittany, however, the Catholic authorities opted for a very different centralised approach. The preservation of the unity of Catholic doctrine meant that only one interpretation of the religious texts could be taught. For this reason, the encouragement of literacy and the reading of religious texts in Breton by the population remained marginal, a situation that explains why 90% of the Breton population is still illiterate in their own language (but literate in French!). The dissemination of the Catholic dogma was conducted by itinerant Jesuit priests, whose teachings were based on the religious themes of the *taolennou*. Like stained-glass windows of the churches and Cathedrals of the Middle Ages, the *taolennou* were conceived to teach the Gospel through pictorial images to a largely illiterate, monolingual, Breton-speaking population. Note that one of the *taolennou* presented by Yann Celton, entitled the Map of the Cross, depicts a Protestant pastor as a dangerous heretic who is bound for hell.

The third section of this volume is composed of two articles. The contribution by Anne Hellegouarc'h-Bryce presents an in-depth analysis of the way the French have considered their Breton compatriots. In this article, she presents a very complete panoply of the negative stereotypes and the utter disdain in which the Bretons were held until recently. She examines the evolution of the image of Brittany from the 19th century to the present day, underscoring the dramatic change in the modern perceptions of Brittany and the Breton people, who are now viewed in a very positive light, both in terms of their own self-image and in the way they are now considered by the bulk of the French population. She traces how these depictions differ radically from earlier times, when Brittany and the Bretons were described as both wild and terribly backward.

In his concluding article, André-Yves Bourguès provides an overview of the historiography of Breton hagiography over the past 150 years. He examines how the lives of medieval saints have been interpreted as historical sources and literary works. Previous scholarship has oscillated between traditionalist interpretations, which treat these texts as reliable accounts of Breton origins, and overly critical approaches that dismiss them as largely fictional. The author highlights the limitations of these positions and emphasises the importance of situating hagiography

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within its medieval context. Particular focus is given to the work of François Duine, whose pioneering work emphasised the importance of folklore, myth, and popular tradition. This approach anticipated later interdisciplinary research, but remained overlooked for a long time. Since the 1970s, renewed interest has fostered more balanced methodologies that combine history, philology, and literary analysis. Breton hagiography is now understood as a body of ‘narratives of truth’ reflecting monastic memory and cultural identity, rather than straightforward historical fact. The article advocates a nuanced approach that recognises the richness of these texts at the crossroads of history, literature, and myth.

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