

SOME INSIGHTS INTO THE HISTORY OF BRETON CONTEXT AND PERSPECTIVES ON THE GENESIS OF OLD BRETON

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1. Introduction

Breton belongs to the Indo-European language family and is the only Celtic language still spoken on the European continent, in western France, in the western part of present-day Brittany.¹ It has been classified by UNESCO (Moseley 2010: 64–65) as “a seriously endangered language”. Breton as it is spoken in the 21st century is the result of centuries of historical evolution. The following pages present an overview of its history, with a particular focus on its origins, emergence and developments until the 11th century.

Parallels will be drawn between the internal history of Breton and the socio-historical evolution of Breton from the 4th to the 11th centuries. While this comprehensive approach may seem desirable, it involves the use of fragmentary written records to understand its linguistic developments. Understanding the linguistic past is indeed a challenge in that these rare written records do not necessarily reveal the nature of the vernacular language at different stages of its development. As Tim Machan (2022: 73) puts it: “any language history is not a history of what happened linguistically but a history of what survived”.

The approach adopted here seeks to contextualise diachronic developments within the framework of historical sociolinguistic observations in order to understand how internal and external factors interact and contribute to the shaping of

1 Research proposed in this paper has been previously discussed as part of the unpublished PhD thesis (Sollicec 2021), *Distance linguistique et dialectométrie, une application à la langue bretonne. Enjeux, méthodologie et interprétations* [A dialectometric study of the Breton language: issues, methodology and interpretations], Brest: University of Western Brittany. I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Gaëlle Le Corre and Gary Manchec German for their invaluable input and help into making this contribution possible, be it by inspiring, translating, discussing and editing it. Any remaining errors are my own.

a language.² The basic threefold division of Breton into the Old Breton (800-1100 CE), Middle Breton (1100-1659) and Modern Breton (1659 to the present day) periods must be questioned in order to understand the degree of continuity and changes that have been at work during each phase.³ The challenge lies in comprehending the extent to which the different stages of the language are connected, as reflected in the written records. Indeed, the preservation of certain documents in Breton may skew our perspective and analysis by acting as a distorting mirror. Despite the succession of events and periods to be addressed, the history of Breton cannot be described as one of continuous and homogeneous development over time.

The general consensus among linguists is that Breton is a descendant of the Brittonic language and is, in the main, an extension of Brittonic which finds its source on the island of Britain south of the Forth and Clyde from the 1st century BCE onward to the middle of the 6th century CE, a stage that Jackson (1967: 1, n. 1) labelled ‘British’.⁴

Brittany is situated at the crossroads of multiple geographical and linguistic domains, which has resulted in extended contacts with Latin, and the Romance varieties of western France. The sociolinguistic role of Latin in developing hierarchical relationships is reflected in linguistic usage.

The Breton-speaking region, as posited by Gary German (p.c.), functions as a veritable open-air laboratory for linguists, where numerous phenomena of differentiation, convergence, linguistic contact and various issues related to literacy,

2 See the perspectives opened by Trudgill (2011; 2020).

3 For Breton, see Yves Le Berre (2009). For French, see John Charles Smith (2002).

4 Jackson (1967: 1) provides the following timeline for the development of the Brittonic languages: “British” [corresponding to the French term, *brittonique*] is the Celtic language of Britain south of the Forth and Clyde down to the middle of the 6th century; “Late British” presents the latest stage of the language between the mid-5th to mid-6th centuries; “Late West British” is a variety of Late British current in the Midlands and Wales between the mid-5th to mid-6th centuries; “Late South-West British” is a variety of Late British current in Devon and Cornwall between the mid-5th to mid-6th centuries. “Brittonic” is the term applied to British and “neo-Brittonic” languages derived from it, including Welsh, Cornish and Breton. “Primitive Cornish” and “Primitive Welsh” include the phases of the languages concurrent with Primitive Breton, from mid-6th to 9th centuries for Primitive Cornish and up to the late 8th century for Primitive Welsh.

linguistic standardisation and the revitalisation of endangered languages can be observed, within a relatively small geographical area.

This article begins with geographical overview and will then focus on the genealogical relationships between Breton and its Brittonic ancestor as well as other Celtic languages. The subsequent section will trace its diachronic development by focussing first on its emergence, then on the Old Breton period. The primary grammatical developments and characteristics will be examined in the following pages.⁵

2. Geographical situation

The contemporary geographical distribution of the Breton language encompasses the present-day department of Finistère (29) as well as the western parts of the departments of Côtes d'Armor (22) and Morbihan (56).⁶ This geographical area is called Western Brittany or *Breizh-Izel* [ˌbrejˈziːzəl], to which are added speakers who have settled in larger cities such as Nantes, Rennes and Paris (see Figs. 1, 2). At its eastern border, Breton gave way to Romance varieties, including Gallo,

which belongs to the *Oïl* French dialect group. This territory is commonly referred to as Upper or Eastern Brittany. The boundary between these two areas roughly follows a line from Saint-Brieuc in the north to Vannes in the south (more precisely from Plouha to Damgan).

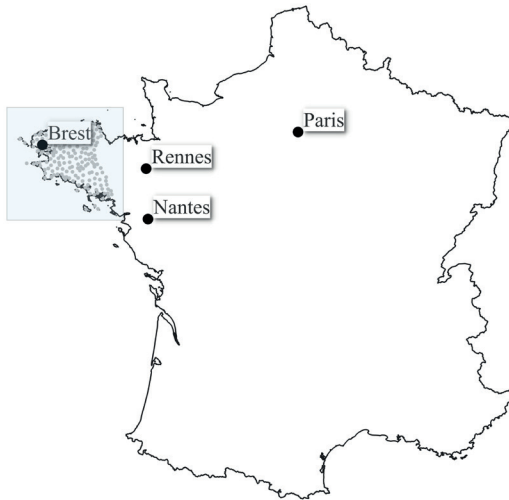


Fig. 1. Breton-speaking area in France.

⁵ For further reading, see more detailed information in Jackson (1967); Schrijver (2011: 1-84) and, to some extent, Favereau (2022).

⁶ I have included the numbers of these departments in brackets throughout the body of this article, listed here according to their alphabetical order: 22 Côtes d'Armor, 29 Finistère, 56 Morbihan, 35 Ille-et-Vilaine, 44 Loire-Atlantique.

The geographical delineation between these two areas underwent continuous modification throughout the centuries, persisting until the 1950s. Brittany experienced a gradual shift towards Old French, the Gallo, a Romance *Oïl* dialect, or French as the vernacular language. The area from which Breton disappeared at some point in the past has been designated as the ‘mixed zone’ by researchers. The following map provides an overview of this evolution (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Breton linguistic frontier and dialects of Western Brittany.⁷

The position of the linguistic border was last explored in the 20th century by Timm (1976: 443–57), and Broudic (1995) subsequently provided a comprehensive overview of the various observations on this subject made over the centuries. However, Jean-Luc Deuffic recounted the case of a nobleman, Alain de Chasteau Tournant, who, in 1451, identified himself as both ‘*Franczois*’ (French) and ‘*Bretonnant*’ (Breton-speaking) despite residing in Guilliers (56), a town located to the east of the linguistic border

⁷ From Tanguy & Lagrée (2002). Map designed by B. Tanguy and F. Broudic.

of that time.⁸ Falc'hun (1981) also demonstrated that a significant number of linguistic innovations originating in the Romance sphere had disseminated into the Breton-speaking area via the road network from the Romance speaking part of Brittany. This finding suggests that from a historical perspective the border did not constitute a hermetic and absolute boundary, but rather marked a transitional zone between Celtic Brittany and Gallo-speaking Brittany. This finding contradicts the hypothesis proposed by the historian Pitre-Chevalier in 1845 who compared this linguistic frontier as a “Great Wall of China” (Le Gallo 1969: 11).

3. Genealogical affiliation of Breton and Brittonic origin

3.1. General context

The ancient Celtic languages Celtiberian (celt1247),⁹ Gaulish (tran1282), Lepontic (lepo1240) and Cisalpine Gaulish (cisa1237) were in use across much of the European continent and are attested in numerous inscriptions dating between the 5th century BCE and the 3rd century CE.¹⁰ The modern living Celtic languages, also known as insular Celtic languages, include Breton (bret1244), which, along with Welsh (wels1247) and Cornish (corn1251), belongs to the Brittonic branch. This is distinct from the Goidelic branch, which includes Irish (iris1253), Manx (manx1243) and Scottish Gaelic (scot1245).

The detailed classification of Celtic languages remains a subject of debate, particularly with regard to the relationship between ancient and modern languages. While it is an established fact that modern languages are continuations of one or more ancient languages, the exact nature of this link remains a matter of debate (Koch 1992, Matasović 2007a and 2007b, Schrijver 2009). The question that arises is the development of the insular group opposed to the continental one (McCone 2006). An alternative view has been proposed, whereby Brittonic and Gaulish are grouped together in a single Gaulish-Brittonic group distinct from Goidelic branch

⁸ See Deuffic 2025 for further information.

⁹ This code, as well as the following ones, is a unique identifier attributed to a specific language variety by the database Glottolog (<https://glottolog.org>, last accessed 10 March 2025). It is intended to avoid any confusion and to associate each language, whatever its stage, with a range of references and resources.

¹⁰ See Beltrán Lloris and Jordán Cólera (2017), Alex Mullen and Coline Ruiz Darasse (2018) and David Stifter (2020).

(Koch 1992). Brittonic is often regarded as being relatively close to Gaulish, or even an extension of it across the Channel (Delamarre 2018: 5). Alongside this genealogical perspective, Matasović (2007a and 2007b) postulates that these two branches acquired common features through linguistic contact due to their proximity and regular exchanges over several centuries.

Conversely, linguistic contact also influenced the development of several Celtic languages, most notably Welsh and Irish during the early Middle Ages. A related question is whether Gaulish left any traces in Breton during the same period, particularly in connection with the so-called Breton migrations (see section 4.1). It has been suggested that late Gaulish dialects of the Armorican peninsula may have been assimilated into the Brittonic variety that gave rise to Breton, a hypothesis advanced by several scholars primarily on the basis of their genetic proximity.

However, the date of the extinction of Gaulish is still debated between those who believe it disappeared early (3rd or 4th century AD) (Blom 2009, 2011, 2023) and those who believe it survived until the 6th century (Kerckhof 2018: 31). The late period of Gaulish is difficult to apprehend because of the scarcity of documents and vague references by authors of late antiquity or the early medieval period. This makes it difficult to determine exactly when Gaulish disappeared.

Certain linguistic features of Breton may be explained by a possible sporadic Gaulish influence. However, the extent of this influence remains limited, as indicated by the list of features compiled by Fleuriot (1978a: 75–83; 1980: 61–63) and discussed by Doorn (2016: 17–19). For instance, the case of [ʃ] resulting from the palatalisation of the <sk> group may support this hypothesis, as does the term *tach* (‘nail’) (from Gaulish *tasco* (‘stake’)). Such an evolution is noted by Fleuriot (1978b) in the Western Romance domain with the term “*nâche*” corresponding to the Breton *nask* (‘cow shackle’).

Another feature concerns the Gaulish <s>, which comes from the Proto-Celtic <ks> and remains unchanged in certain Breton words, in contrast to the regular changes to [x] or [h]. Thus, **uksello* (‘high’) becomes *uhel* in Breton, retaining the same meaning. However, we also find the place names *Uzel*, *Usselles*, and *Eusa*

(Breton for *Ouessant/Ushant*). On the other hand, *a-us* ('above') may be observed alongside *a-uc'h* in south-western Cornouaille (Fleuriot 1978a).

Another point concerns the Breton vocalic system. Gaulish has a high vowel [y], whereas Brittonic has [i]. Both of these sounds stem from the Proto-Celtic [u:] (Fleuriot 1980: 69). The Gaulish root *dūnon* (meaning 'hill fort') is found in place names such as *Verdun*, but in Brittonic it becomes *din*, as in *Dinan* or the Brittonic name for Edinburgh, *Din Eidin*. In Breton, however, we find realisations with <u> rather than <i>:

- brug* ('heather') from Gaul. *bruca*;
- rusk* ('bark') (i.e. French *ruche* ('hive')) as opposed to Welsh *rhysg* ('bark');

Perhaps the most notable example is *druz*, meaning 'fat', which Deshayes believes was borrowed from Breton into Romance languages and originated from Gaulish (Deshayes 2003). In Breton dialects, the two vowels can also alternate, as seen in *kulañ/kilañ* ('to retreat') and *war-gul/war-gil* ('backwards movement').

Fleuriot (1980: 71–72) also notes the frequent loss of the [w] sound between vowels in Gaulish, or its change to [v]:

- iouinco* ('young') > *ioinco*;
- taruos* ('bull') > *tarvo* and *taro*.

He draws a parallel between this phenomenon and the treatment of the Breton [v] derived from the Brittonic lenis [w], noting that *avel* ('wind') gives *awel* in Trégor and *avel* in Léon, but *a-el* in the Cornouaillais dialects. Fleuriot (1985) wondered whether these particular realisations might be an echo of a distant Gaulish influence.

While direct Gaulish influence on Breton is difficult to establish, a possible Gaulish substratum can nevertheless be envisaged that would result in the late survival of Gaulish in the Armorican peninsula.

3.2. Brittonic: overview of phonological changes

From the mid-5th century to the 6th century CE, a series of changes took place in Brittonic, leading to the gradual development of the ancestors of the (neo-)Brittonic languages between the 8th and 11th centuries, including Breton, which emerged in continental Armorica during the 5th and 6th centuries (Jackson 1967: 1, n. 1). This variety, along with Cornish, was part of the south-western Brittonic group prior to the final differentiation between these two dialects in the 12th century. This group was distinct from the western Brittonic group, from which Welsh emerged in the 8th century CE.

The period during which Brittonic underwent transformation corresponds to the phase that began with the withdrawal of the Roman administration from the island of Britain, leaving it to restructure itself politically and culturally from the beginning of the 5th century CE onwards into a number of principalities. At the same time, Germanic groups from the northern coast of present-day Germany settled in the area and established the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.

Jackson (1953, 1967) and Schrijver (2011) provide a comprehensive overview of the linguistic developments of Brittonic that led to its profound restructuring. Some of these changes had a long-term impact on the structure of the Brittonic languages, such as the loss of case endings giving rise later to consonantal mutation systems in all the Celtic languages, including the Goidelic languages. The extent of the change was so profound that Jackson (1953: 690) considers that “we can be fairly sure that Vortigern [i.e. a speaker of Early Brittonic] around 450 could not have understood Aneirin [i.e. a speaker of Late Brittonic] around 600”.

Our knowledge of Brittonic comes primarily from reconstructions based on comparative studies of Welsh, Cornish and Breton grammar and phonology. Place-names and personal names in Latin documents also serve as a significant source of information (Jackson 1953). Inscriptions dating from this period complete the picture. The documentation for understanding diachronic developments remains limited, since “up to the early eighth century A.D., the surviving written evidence is extremely scanty” (Schrijver 2011: 3).

The consonantal system of Brittonic systematically contrasts a lenis allophone and a fortis allophone for most phonemes, with the former being realised as lax and probably short, and the latter as tense and probably long (Jackson 1953: §93; §131; Jackson 1967: § 418, Martinet 1952). This feature indicates a correlation between the length of vowels preceding consonants and the duration of consonants themselves. Jackson (1953: §35) posits that the establishment of this new system occurred towards the end of the 6th century CE. The diachronic developments specific to the different types of consonants vary according to their status.

During this period, the lenis consonant [Σ]¹¹ in initial position changed to [h] around 600 (Schrijver 1995: 377). Jackson describes this [Σ] sound as a lenis [s] with a reduced sibilant dimension, which changed to [h] during the 6th century CE (Jackson 1967: §433):

-Brit. **senti* ('path, way') > OB. *hint* > MoB. *hent*, Welsh *hynt*

However, as demonstrated by Fleuriot (1980: 73–75), certain Breton words do not follow the development of Brittonic and align themselves with the treatment of Gaulish, as in the case of the Breton *sil* ('filter') (Welsh *hidl*). The Gaulish *sena* ('ancient') probably gave *sun* in Breton, as in *enez Sun* or *Sein* in French (island of Sein) while the Brittonic regular form is *hen*. It is interesting to note that the realisation of the medial¹² demonstrative deictic *-se* still varies regularly in Breton today: *an dra-se* and *an dra-he* ['nahə] ('that', lit. 'this thing') (Fagon 2004).

Fortis consonants undergo systematic lenition in medial or final position (Martinet 1952). This phenomenon appears to have emerged in the second half of the 5th century CE as an extension of apocope and syncope (Schrijver 2011: 31). This lenition also occurred in frequent environments, causing initial consonant alternations through sandhi, which preceded the mutations of modern Brittonic languages (Jackson 1967: §421).

11 "Brit[ish] lenis -s became [...] a perhaps lisped sound, Σ, in which the sibilant character was later very slight, and which afterwards ended by becoming *h*." (Jackson 1967: 318, §436).

12 In languages which feature a three-way distinction for demonstrative, the medial category refers to the elements near to the person who is spoken to ('the addressee').

Alongside the spread of lenition, a phenomenon of spirantisation may be observed. It affected voiceless aspirated stops in final position after a vowel followed by a liquid, the voiceless aspirated stops *p [p:^h], *t [t:^h], *k [k:^h]:

-*brokkos* > **b:rokoh* (lenition) > **b:roko(h)* > Middle Welsh *broch* ('badger'), MoB.

broc'h (same meaning).

-Lat. *corpus* > **khorphoh* (lenition) > **khorfo(h)* > Middle Welsh *corff* ('body'), MoB.

korf (same meaning) (Schrijver 2011: 32).

In addition, the geminate consonants PP, TT, KK,¹³ when situated in medial and final positions and preceded by a liquid, undergo spirantisation and become [f], [θ] and [x] lenis, respectively. This process is illustrated in the following examples (both from Jackson 1967: §434):

-*cattos* [KaTTos] ('cat') > **caθ*, MoB. *kazh*

-*mercces* [MerKKeSS] ('girl') > **merx*, MoB. *merc'h*

Concurrently, the voiced geminate consonants BB, DD, GG change to their simple lenis equivalents b, d, g:

-**aBBeros*/**aBBerā* ('estuary') > MoB. *aber* [a:ber] (same meaning) with a long vowel, rather than **aver* if it had been a simple lenis (Jackson 1967: §434).

Koch (1989) gives a detailed presentation of these developments. As Schrijver (2011: 32) notes, interpretations and explanations of this phenomenon vary among authors.¹⁴ The consonant clusters [kt] and [pt] become [xt], before [x] vocalises to [i].

-Lat. *septum* ('seven') > [sex'tan] > OB. *seiθ* > MoB. *seizh* (Jackson 1967: §227.3).

In parallel, the system of initial mutations was established. The alternation of consonants in initial position is determined by the grammatical context in which the

13 In order to render the distinction between fortis and lenis consonants (long and short), Jackson established the convention to note the former with upper case characters and the latter with lower case characters. I follow Jackson's conventions in my contribution, see Jackson (1967: 12).

14 For a more detailed summary see the presentation by Iosad (2005).

units in question are used. These mutations are organised in several classes: lenition, spirantisation, provection and leniprovection, according to rules specified in various works on Breton grammar. We will briefly present the first two, and direct the reader to a detailed description by Favereau (1997: §§312–342).

To this must be added the nasalisation of voiced stops, which has only been retained in Welsh. In contrast, provection is only attested in Cornish and Breton. It was not until the 17th century that the result of these changes began to be reflected orthographically in Breton texts.

The phenomenon of spirantisation is particularly noticeable after the possessives *ma* ('my'), *he* ('his, hers'), and *o* ('their'). Each of the following units will undergo initial consonant change if it begins with the voiceless plosive [k], [t] or [p]. Thus, giving the following in modern Breton:

- ki* ('dog') → *ma c'hi* [mə 'hi:] ('my dog')¹⁵
- ti* ('house') → *he zi* [i 'zi:] ('her house')
- penn* ('head') → *o fenn* [o 'vɛ:n] ('their head')

The result of these mutations is not, strictly speaking, the result of spirantisation. This development followed the second historical lenition (also called secondary lenition), not systemically across the Breton-speaking domain,¹⁶ which caused the voiceless consonants, resulting from the mutation, to become voiced at a subsequent period.

It should be noted that singular masculine or plural feminine nouns beginning with [k] undergo spirantisation, resulting in the following forms in contemporary Breton:

- ki*, *ur c'hi* ('dog, a dog') [ki, ʊr 'hi:]
- kazh*, *ar c'hazh* ('cat, the cat') [ka:z̥, ar 'ha:z̥]

15 The Modern Breton phonetic transcriptions here and after are transcribed in Northern Cornouaillais Breton (centre of the Finistère département). Some slight differences in realization could appear however in Breton vernaculars, especially for rhotics.

16 A large region in the Southeastern Cornouaille and surrounding Morbihan did not undergo this change (German 1984, 2007).

The phenomenon of mutations stems from an external sandhi effect that was later grammaticalised. In this case, the proximity of a word in Late Brittonic beginning with a voiceless stop (k, t, p) and immediately preceded by an *-r* produces a gemination of these consonants and, in fact, their spirantisation according to the model mentioned above, in the second half of the 6th century CE. This explains certain features of modern Breton:

- war-zu* ('towards'), from *war* ('on') + *tu* ('side') < **war ttoibon* [war TToibon] (Jackson 1967: §318).
- leur-zi* ('floor') from *leur* ('ground') + *ti* ('house') (Favereau 1997: 159–60, §339).
- dour zomm* ('hot water') from *dour* ('water') + *tomm* ('hot'). (Idem)

Koch (1967: 126–28) discusses the reasons for these developments and offers an alternative explanation. He considers them to be the result of univerbation, a phenomenon whereby two units are morphologically assimilated into a single unit.

Lenition is the most common form of mutation and can be triggered in several contexts, such after the verbal particle *a* preceding the verbal form itself, the second-person singular possessive *da* 'your' and third-person singular possessive *e* 'his', the definite or indefinite article when the noun that follows it is a singular feminine noun or a plural masculine noun, etc. It applies primarily to the following sounds according to the model indicated:

- [k] → [g] *kador*, *ar gador* ['ka:doʁ, ar 'ga:doʁ] ('chair, the chair')
- [t] → [d] *taol*, *an daol* [tɔ:l, ɛ̃n dɔ:l] ('table, the table')
- [p] → [b] *poan*, *ar boan* [pwã̃, ar bwã̃] ('pain')
- [g] → [h] *gawr*, *ar c'hawr* [gaʁ, ar 'haʁ] ('goat, the goat')
- [gw] → [v] *gwech*, *ur wech* [gwɛʃ, ʁv 'vɛʃ] ('time, once')
- [d] → [z] *dorn*, *da zorn* [dɔʁn, da 'zɔʁn] ('hand, your hand')
- [b] → [v] *bazh*, *ur vazh* [ba:ʒ, ʁv 'va:ʒ] ('stick, a stick')
- [m] → [v] *mamm*, *e vamm* [mãm, ɛ 'vãm] ('mother, his mother')

Jackson posits that the origin of consonant mutations can be traced back to contexts in which lenis consonants were found in initial position within a phrase preceded by a word ending with a Brittonic vowel (e.g. a possessive) or by the consonant

-*r* followed by a lenis consonant (Jackson 1967). In such cases, the phenomenon of internal lenition is extended by the realisation of external sandhi, which subsequently became grammaticalised. Jackson (1967: §424) gives the following examples:

- Brit. **tǣ piscis* ('thy fish') > MoB. *da besk*¹⁷
- Brit. “**uor baRRŭ*” ('at the summit') > MoB. *war-varr*

The disappearance of unstressed syllables corresponding to case markers following a phenomenon of apocope (see below) explains why the qualifying adjective changes after a feminine noun:

- Brit. **casticā uindā* (lit. 'mare white') > MoB. *kaseg wenn* with a lenis -*w*.

In the case of the masculine, the fortis consonant will later change to <*gw*>¹⁸:

- Brit. **marcos uindos* (lit. 'horse white') > MoB. *marc'h gwenn* (Jackson 1967: §424)

The Brittonic stress system had a substantial impact resulting in apocope at the end of the 5th or middle of the 6th century CE (Jackson 1953). This resulted in the loss of all unstressed final syllables, which typically carried case ending markers. For instance, Brit **mer'cedes* ('girls') becomes *mer'xed* in Brittonic and *mer'xed*, in Old Breton, which in turn became *'merxed* in Middle Breton, Modern Breton *merc'hed* (Jackson 1967: §125, Schrijver 2011: 41).

This phenomenon affected all Brittonic dialects without exception. Consequently, the accent invariably fell on the final syllable, and Brittonic lost the case system that had previously characterised it. A tendency towards syncope, undoubtedly linked to the previous one, also led to the loss of the vowel within the non-initial syllable that preceded the stressed syllable (Jackson 1967 §442):

¹⁷ See below the abbreviation for the different language stages mentioned in this article: ProtoC. refers to Proto-Celtic, Brit. refers to British, i.e. the Celtic language spoken in Britain that evolved later into Brittonic in the 6th century, Lat. Latin, OB. Old Breton, MB. Middle Breton, MoB. Modern Breton.

¹⁸ This illustrates the velarisation phenomena which is discussed in section 4.2.2.

Brit. **brass-isamos* ('the greatest') > **brasihavoh* > **brashav* > MB. *brashaff* > MoB. *brasañ* ['bra:sa] according to Schrijver (2011: 12).

3.3 Grammar

The definite article is realised as /in(:)/ before the noun.¹⁹ However, it remains infrequent in Old Breton glosses. In contrast to other Celtic languages, Breton also has an indefinite article, which was formed from the numeral "one" according to a common process of grammaticalisation (Kuteva & *al.* 2019: 299–301).

The gender system continued to differentiate between masculine and feminine, yet the neuter gender disappeared. The numerals two, three and four have distinct forms for the feminine and masculine, a feature still in use in Modern Breton.

The category of number is divided between singular and plural; the old dual form survived only in a few terms referring to paired elements of the human body. The noun determined by a numeral does not agree with it and remains in the singular form. The plural form was frequently derived from the singular through vowel change or the addition of a suffix with different allomorphs. The following are among the most common realisations:

- *-ion* /jon/ (< Brit. nominative plural **-jon-es*),
- *-et* /ed/ (< Brit. nominative plural *-et-es*),
- *-ou* or *-iou* /(j)ou/ (< Brit. nominative plural **-jowes*).

Brittonic languages are notable for their use of collective nouns (Irslinger 2009). Singular forms are derived from collective nouns by adding the suffix **-in*: for masculine nouns and **-en*: for feminine nouns – MoB. *-enn* (Schrijver 2011: 43). However, this distinction subsequently disappeared in Breton due to the merging of *i* with *e*.

Schrijver (2011: 56) hypothesises that the verbal system of Brittonic is a simplified version of that of insular Celtic, as evidenced in Old Irish. He provides a comprehensive presentation of the verbal paradigms attested in both Old Welsh

¹⁹ The form *ir* present in Old Welsh is not attested with certainty in OB (Fleuriet 1964a: 271–273). The *-r* form of the article appears only in the 16th century and never completely took root in south-central Cornouaille where *an* is still the rule before bilabials and velars (German 1987: 157–168).

and South-Western Brittonic. It is from this period onwards that verbal nouns can be observed, in which the verbal stem is followed by the morphemes *-im* /iĩ/, *-om* /oĩ/, *-am* /aĩ/, *-at* /ad/, *-ec* /eg/, or *-Ø*.²⁰

As with nouns, adjectives in Brittonic made a distinction between feminine and masculine forms; a distinction that would later disappear. The superlative marker **-hāṽ* (< Celtic **-isamos*), noted by the sequence of letters *-ham*, is suffixed to the adjective itself (cf. Schrijver 2011: 12). The comparative is constructed with the addition of the suffixes *-ax* or *-ox*, which became *oc'h* in Modern Breton. The first form has been retained in Welsh and probably derives from the second, which is predominant in contemporary Breton dialects. Nevertheless, some Breton varieties currently use *-ax* for the comparative. The form *-ox* comes from Celtic **-jos*, via Brit. **-os-V(C)* (Schrijver 2011: 44). Several series of pronouns have been identified for this particular period. Demonstrative pronouns are realised as **hun*:

- in the masculine singular (< Brit. **hundoh* < **sondos*), **hon*:
- in the feminine singular (< Brit. **hondā* < **sondā*), and **hin*:
- in the neuter singular (< Brit. **hondon* < **sindon*).

The masculine and feminine demonstratives are associated with deictic markers in Breton, resulting in the current forms *hemañ*, *homañ* (proximal) and *hennezh*, *honn-ezh* (medial). The neuter form is also observed in the Middle Breton deictic adverb *henn* (Schrijver 2011: 53).²¹

The paucity of surviving complete sentences from this period has resulted in a limited comprehension of Brittonic syntax (Schrijver 2011: 72) which is why Fleuriot (1964a: 411) relies on Old Welsh data to gain an insight into it.

The verb is regularly placed at the beginning of the sentence, even though it may be preceded by a subject or a complement (Fleuriot 1964a: 411–12). Schrijver (2011: 72) mentions that the determination of the noun seems relatively identical to what is attested for the following periods.

20 For further discussion in Modern Breton, see Falc'hun (1948: 121–28).

21 See also *Devri* dictionary, s.v. *henn* at <http://www.devri.bzh/dictionnaire/h/henn/> and *betek-henn* at <http://www.devri.bzh/dictionnaire/b/betek-henn/> (last accessed 30th April, 2025).

3.4 Brittonic and Latin

While the extent to which Latin played a role on the island of Britain remains a subject of debate among specialists, there is a consensus that it held a relatively significant position, particularly in the south-west for some authors (Parsons 2011, 2023; Schrijver 2009: 194–97, 2011: 3). In the context of linguistic contact, many terms of Latin origin entered the Brittonic lexicon during the 4th and 5th centuries CE, and some Latin texts produced on the island of Britain reveal a Celtic influence (Darling 2024).

The loanwords in question thus undergone the phonetic changes of the period. For instance, the Latin *corpus* ('body') became Modern Breton *korf*, the Latin *cenā* ('supper, dinner') became Modern Breton *koan*, *tabula* ('board, tablet, game table') became Modern Breton *taol* ('table'), and the Latin *ostrea* ('oyster, mussel, shellfish') became Modern Breton *istr* ('oyster').

Le Dù (2013: 315–17) provides details about the various phonetic changes to which these borrowings have been subjected. They highlight the importance of Latin on the island of Britain during the Roman occupation. Some terms replaced those of Celtic origin or formed doublets, thereby taking on a particular semantic value. For example, the Brittonic languages adopted a form derived from the Late Latin *piscātu* ('fished'), to refer to the noun *fish*, which in Modern Breton became *pesk* ('fish', singular, *pesked*, plural), whereas a Celtic form would not have had an initial *p*-, such as *iasc* in Irish. The Latin *solidus* ('gold coin') resulted in *saout* ('cows, cattle') alongside the regular plural form *bioù* (Le Dù 2013: 315). Approximately 500 Modern Breton lexemes are of British-Latin origin (Loth 1892, Haarman 1973).

4. Old Breton

Old Breton corresponds to the state of the language between the 9th and 12th centuries and is known mainly from written glosses in Latin language manuscripts. Our knowledge of Old Breton owes much to the work of Fleuriot (1964a, 1964b, Fleuriot & Evans 1985). However, due to the close structural similarity between Old Breton and Old Cornish, these two varieties are now considered to belong to the same group of Brittonic languages, that is, Old South-West British (abbreviated to OSWBr) or South-West Brittonic (Schrijver 2011: 4). This period drew to a close at the end of the 11th

century with the end of Viking occupation of the Breton peninsula. Giraud de Barri²² (c. 1146–c. 1223) highlighted at that time the great similarity between Breton, Cornish and Welsh.

4.1 Historical and Cultural Context

Old Breton marked the stage following the emergence of a Neo-Brittonic dialect on the European continent during the Early Middle Ages, between the 5th and 6th centuries. This period saw the continuation of the diachronic developments previously mentioned. These developments coincided with a period of migration from the island of Britain to the European continent, at a time when the structures of the Roman Empire were undergoing profound reconfiguration. The historical context remains difficult to grasp due to the paucity of contemporary sources, to the extent that Coumert (2010: 15) considers that “the birth of continental Brittany is an enigma”.²³

A number of scenarios have been advanced to explain this new situation. From the 6th century onwards, continental authors used the term “*Britannia*” to refer to the western part of the Armorican peninsula in addition to the island of Britain, to which this name had previously been reserved (Brett 2011; Guy 2014; Lunven 2016: 338; Brett, Edmonds and Russell 2021: 72–79).

The prevailing and most widely accepted explanation for this phenomenon is that it was the result of a population movement from the island of Britain. This movement occurred within the broader context of the great migrations that were transforming the human geography of the declining Western Roman Empire. The sources pertaining to this phenomenon are largely of a late nature, starting from Gregory of Tours reporting the presence of Bretons on the Continent at the end of the 6th century and accounts in hagiographical texts from the 9th century of saints having crossed the Channel to settle in Brittany. They thus reflect the prevailing ideas of the time regarding the origin of the Bretons. The only contemporary evidence from the island is provided by a few lines from a sermon by Gildas in the 6th century CE, suggesting that the *Britanni* fled to Armorica to escape the Saxons.

22 Also known under the name *Gerald of Wales* or *Giraldus Cambrensis* in Latin.

23 Initial text: “[l]a naissance de la Bretagne continentale est une énigme”.

The significance and precise nature of this population movement are difficult to assess. Some have considered it to have been so significant that it enabled these newcomers to establish their political, religious and cultural structures in Armorica. However, archaeological research has not confirmed such upheavals in the material cultures of this period (Giot 2003; Brett, Edmonds and Russell 2021: 45–52, 64–65). Having said that, the absence of a correlation between population movements and archaeological evidence is also observed in contexts that are better documented historically, such as the Scandinavian invasions of France in the Middle Ages (Carpentier 2017).

Irrespective of the circumstances that precipitated the changes that took place in the 5th and 6th centuries CE, the presence of British Celtic groups can be seen in the toponymy of the area (place names beginning with *plou-*, *lan-*, *gui-* or *loc-*).²⁴ This presence is also attested by the inscriptions in Old Breton on the stela in Goméné, Lanrivoaré, Louannec and the inscription at Lomarec in the parish of Crach (Bernier 1970; Wendy & al. 2000), as well as references in the lives of saints about their origins on the island of Britain and their lives on the Armorican peninsula.

From the 7th century onwards, the Bretons established in Armorica expanded their territory eastwards which led to direct numerous armed conflicts with the Franks.²⁵ Loth (1883) draws a geographic frontier which separates place names ending in *-ac* from those ending in *-é*. It is sometimes interpreted as evidence of the eastward expansion of Breton-speaking populations. Both suffixes evolved from the Latin *-iacum* borrowed from Gaulish *-ācon*, denoting a place name. The suffix *-ac* results from an evolution through Breton while *-é* underwent an uninterrupted Romance treatment. The density of their respective distribution suggests what were the dominant linguistic practices at that period.

This territorial expansion was accompanied by the establishment of centres of power in Rennes and Nantes, in Romance-speaking territory. These centres subsequently fell under the cultural influence of the French royal court (Humphreys

24 *Plou-* comes from the Latin *plebs* and refers to early parishes, *lan-*, corresponding to the Welsh *llan*, denotes a hermitage, a place dedicated to a saint, and *guic-*, derived from the Latin *vicus*, indicates a market town or village. *Loc-* from the Latin *locus* refers to a space dedicated to a saint.

25 Gregory of Tours (c. 538–594) gives an account of some of these events in his *Historia Francorum*.

1991, German 2008, Broudic 2017). The Viking raids during the 10th century weakened the political autonomy of the Breton Kingdom, resulting in the integration of the western part of the Armorican peninsula into the Capetian cultural and political sphere. Indeed, the cultural and economic centres represented by the abbeys of Landévennec, Saint-Gildas de Rhuys and Redon were prime targets of the Vikings. Consequently, these establishments were abandoned and the monks who occupied them took refuge in Gaul, where the Breton elites became acculturated (Brett, Edmonds and Russell 2021: 203–207). They then adopted their customs and thus abandoned Breton as their mother tongue. The last ruler of the Duchy of Brittany who was fluent in Breton was, it appears, Alain Fergant (died in 1119).

The Early Middle Ages were characterised by the emergence of new linguistic practices throughout Europe. Old Breton was part of a Brittonic linguistic sphere stretching from Dumbarton, Strathclyde, in the north of Britain to Guérande in the southeast of Brittany, within which it constituted a single dialect according to Fleuriot (1987). This area, like the remainder of Western Europe, witnessed the establishment of Latin as the language of reference, serving as the language of the sacred, of writing and of knowledge, and as the language spoken by the ruling classes (Grévin 2012). During the 9th century, vernacular languages began to be used in writing, particularly in regions outside the Romance-speaking area. They appeared in epigraphic contexts, in the form of short passages interpolated within Latin manuscripts or, above all, in glosses (Gautier 2021). Concurrently, the scriptural practices associated with Old Breton perpetuated the insular tradition (Schrijver 2011: 11).

These short passages document this stage of Breton, alongside toponyms and anthroponyms, as they appear in Latin texts from this period (Bauer 2008). These texts are mainly charters that record various legal acts concerning abbeys and were collected (or copied) in works known as cartularies. The cartularies containing the most notable Old Breton elements are those of Landévennec, Redon, Quimperlé and Quimper (Schrijver 2011: 11). However, no continuous text in Old Breton has survived. Dumville (2005) pointed out that documents containing Old Breton glosses could be manuscripts of Breton origin that had been transported to other centres of learning, or notations that were sometimes made on non-Breton manuscripts.

The circulation of these works and people testifies to the integration of Breton religious circles into the Carolingian intellectual networks of the time.

The linguistic landscape of the Armorican peninsula was not monolithic at this time, as highlighted by several factors. For instance, Fleuriot (1958, 1980) identified ancient Romance pockets in Breton territory where the use of Late Latin may have persisted. The so-called mixed zone (see Fig. 2) comprised populations that were predominantly of non-Breton origin, alongside Breton-speaking communities (Fleuriot 1980: 166). The same author also notes the presence of place names that underwent a Romance evolution in Western Brittany, citing examples such as Séné, Berné and Bubry in Morbihan (56). He also identifies a Romance enclave in the Morlaix region (29), in the Taulé-Carantec peninsula (cf. Loth 1883). Fleuriot concludes that the Latin-speaking population was particularly dense there. He identifies other enclaves of this type in the south and south-east of Western Brittany, but does not specify their locations. Vallerie (1995: 530) supplements this overview with a study of Breton toponyms adopted in French.²⁶ Fleuriot (1980: 88–89) also examines terms of Romance origin that were integrated into Breton, perhaps via the Latin-speaking populations possibly still present in the western part of the Armorican peninsula. Regarding the so-called mixed zone, Fleuriot (1980: 95–96) notes the coexistence of different linguistic practices in close proximity from an early period.

Early Breton Armorica appears to have been a multilingual area (Gaulish, Vulgar Latin, Latin and Brittonic), before becoming predominantly Breton-speaking in its western regions. Such a diverse linguistic landscape was relatively common in the early Middle Ages (Grévin 2012: 23, 33).

4.2 Structure of Old Breton

From a linguistic perspective, Old Breton can be considered to continue the developments of Brittonic as previously described. In the earliest phase of Old Breton, primary stress was placed on the final syllable. However, in all neo-Brittonic

26 However, it could be difficult to deduce the linguistic practices of populations solely from place names, even if a toponym is a clue. A town named *Lemberg* in German, *Lwów* [lvuf] in Polish, *Львов* [Lvof] in Russian or *Львів* [Lviv] in Ukrainian, currently in western Ukraine (Lviv), shows that the link between toponym and linguistic practice is not always obvious.

languages, with the exception of the Vannetais dialect, the tonic stress shifts once again towards the penultimate syllable, returning to the position it occupied before the fall of the final syllable in Brittonic. Jackson considers that this change took place in the 11th century, but some authors consider an earlier date, circa 900, at least for Welsh (Jackson 1967: §125).²⁷

4.2.1 Vowels

A chain shift seems to have taken place during the Old Breton period, resulting in a different system than the one adopted by Welsh at the time. Schrijver (2011: 20–21) gives a detailed presentation of this. The main features include:

- the merge of /e/ with /e/,
- /y/ and /ø/ which assimilated with /ø/ and which evolved later in /e/ in MB. and MoB. /, mainly in the final syllables
- Brit. **dyn* ('man, person') > OB. *don* /d:øn/ > MB and MoB. *den*
- Brit. **mynið* ('mountain') > OB. *monid*, *mened* /mønið/ > MB and MoB. *menez*
- ProtoC. **nouijos* ('new') > Brit. **nowið* > OB. *nouuid* /nøwið/ > MB. and MoB. *nevez*
- *u and *ɔ go to /y/ and /œ/ respectively:
- OB. *lon* /lœn/ (full) > MoB. *leun* /lœ:n/

These series changes lead to an evolution of the vowel system (Table 1):

Front		Back	
- round	+ round	- round	+ round
i ɪ e	y ø œ		u o
		ɑ	

Table 1. Vocalic System of Old Breton (Schrijver 2011: 21)

Generally speaking, vowels tended to move forward. Close central vowels disappeared. Later, /ɪ/ and /e/ were assimilated into /ɪ/:

²⁷ For a different position, see Schrijver (1998-2000) and Sims-Williams (2017: 364).

- **melin* ('mill') > OB. *milin* /mɪlɪn/
- OB. *hint* ('path') > MoB. *hent*

Old Breton, like other Brittonic languages, had numerous diphthongs, not all of which are easy to identify from the sources (Schrijver 2011: 23–29, Fleuriot 1964a: 55–84). Many of these diphthongs subsequently disappeared. For example, /ai/ became /e/ in a pretonic context in the 11th century (Jackson 1967: §§230–231).

- Brit. **magno* ('stone') > OB. *maen*, *men*

4.2.2 Consonants

Several phenomena can be observed during the Old Breton period.

Initially realised as a weak velar spiral /ʒ/ before becoming an occlusive, the letter <g> came to stand in front of *W fortis (Jackson 1953: §49, Jackson 1967: §617, Fleuriot 1964a: 90–91).

- Brit. **uassq* ('man, servant') > OB. *uuas* > MB. *guas*, *goas* > MoB. *gwaz*

A similar phenomenon occurred with Latin borrowings:²⁸

- Lat. *vērus* ('true') > OB. *guir* > MB. *guir*, *guyr* > MoB. *gwir*

Jackson (1953: 389) posits the 9th century as a probable date for Breton. In contrast, Fleuriot (1964a: 91) proposes the early 9th century, while Sims-Williams (1991: 72) maintains it developed during the late 8th century.

In Old Breton, as in other Brittonic languages, we note the elision of the letter <g> (pronounced /ʒ/) in final or intervocalic position, which can lead to the appearance of a diphthong resulting from the contact of the two vowels it separated (Jackson 1953: §76, Fleuriot 1964a: 124):

28 Jackson describes this phenomenon for the Brittonic languages as the velarisation of initial fortis *W for words from the Celtic stock and the Latin loans as well. Interestingly, a similar phenomenon, described as a fortition however, is attested in Western Romance languages in the adaptation of Germanic loanwords. One can then contrast Fr. *guerre* (from Frankish **werra*) and Engl. *war* for instance.

- Brit. **troget* ('foot') (cognate of Ancient Greek τροχός²⁹ ('wheel')) > OB. **troed* > MB. *troad* > MoB. *troad*
- Brit. **tegos* (house) (cognate of Ancient Greek τέγος (roof)) > OB *tig* in *bou-tig* ('stable', lit. 'cows-house') > MB. *ty* > MoB. *ti* ('house') (Hughes 2015)
- Brit. **magestu* ('field') > OB. and MB. *maes* > MoB. *maez* ('outside, countryside')

The consonant system was reorganised following the changes that occurred in the 5th and 6th centuries. The following table provides an overview of the distinctive features that constitute this phenomenon (Table 2).

Stops			Fricatives			
[- voice]		[+ voice]	[- voice]		[+ voice]	
[fortis]	[fortis]	[lenis]	[lenis]	[fortis]	[lenis]	
[aspiration]					[- nasalisation]	[+ nasalisation]
<i>p^h:</i>	<i>b:</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>f</i>		β	<i>ṽ</i>
<i>t^h:</i>	<i>d:</i>	<i>d</i>	θ	<i>s</i>	ð	
<i>k^h:</i>	<i>g:</i>	<i>g</i>	<i>x</i>		ɣ	

Resonants		Glides	
[fortis]	[lenis]	[fortis]	[lenis]
<i>m</i>		<i>w:</i> > <i>gw</i>	<i>W</i>
<i>n:</i>	<i>n</i>		<i>j</i>
ɲ(ç)			<i>H</i>
<i>l:</i>	<i>l</i>		
<i>r:</i>	<i>r</i>		

Table 2. Old Breton consonants (adapted from Schrijver 2011: 33)

The system remained relatively stable between the 7th and 11th centuries. The fortis marker <: > is used to distinguish consonants derived from geminates in Proto-Celtic, in contrast to consonants derived from lenition.

29 A deverbal form of the verb 'run'.

4.2.3 Grammar

As previously outlined in the opening of Section 4, the grammar of Old Breton is part of the development of South-Western Brittonic.

An analysis of Old Breton material reveals the following paradigm (Table 3) for independent personal pronouns, the pronouns which are generally placed before conjugated verbal forms:

		singular	plural
1.		OB. <i>me</i> — MB. <i>me</i>	OB. <i>ni</i> — MB. <i>ni, ny</i>
2.		OB. <i>ti, ti & de</i> — MB. <i>te</i>	OB. <i>hui</i> — MB. <i>huy</i>
3.	Masculine	OB. <i>em</i> — MB. <i>eff</i>	OB. <i>i, hi</i> — MB. <i>y</i>
	Feminine	OB. <i>hi, i</i> (double form <i>hehi</i>) — MB. <i>hy</i>	

Table 3. Paradigm of independent pronouns in Old Breton and Middle Breton (Fleuriot 1964a: §116)

The association of the forms of this paradigm with a precise syntactic function is not systematic, as shown by the following example, where the independent pronoun functions as an object:

(1)	<i>aruuoar-t hui</i>		
	<i>aruuoar</i> bewitch	<i>-t</i> PRET ³⁰	<i>hui</i> 2PL.OBJ
	‘He bewitched you’ [glos. of Lat. (qui) <i>uos fascinavit</i>] (Ibid., 75)		

(2)	<i>it duc em</i>		
	<i>it</i> PTCL.VERB	<i>duc-ø</i> porter-ø	<i>em</i> 3SG.M.OBJ
	‘[it] carries it’ (Ibid., 280) ³¹		

30 The meaning of the glosses is detailed in the abbreviations section at the end of this contribution.

31 In the textual context of the gloss, this sentence means ‘the sun brings the day with him’ (i.e. the day ends at sunset).

This association between independent pronouns and object function is still maintained in certain imperative forms in contemporary Breton, where these pronouns are cliticised as in example (3) below:

(3)	<i>Lezit-eñ!</i>	
	<i>les-t</i> leave-2PL	<i>'eō</i> 3SG.M.OBJ
	'Leave him [alone]!' (Favereau 1997: §247)	

Unlike in later periods, independent pronouns in Old Breton are not associated with the subject function, and so verbal syntagms corresponding to the so-called impersonal conjugation type, i.e. composed of an independent subject pronoun followed by the verbal stem and a possible time and/or mode marker, are not yet attested in this period.

The verbal noun morpheme forms attested in OB. are mainly *-im* or *-om* (Fleuriot 1964a: 311). They evolved respectively into *-iff* then *-iñ* and *-*off* then *-o* as in OB. *dipr-im* 'to eat', MB *dibr-iff*, MoB. *dibr-iñ/debr-iñ*. The verbal phrase is structured as follows:

- optional preverbal element (particle or relative)
- verbal stem
- person, tense and mood inflections, often combined (examples 4 and 5).

(4)	<i>gruiam</i>	
	<i>grui</i> sew	<i>am</i> 1SG
	'I sew' [gl. from Lat. <i>suo</i>] (Fleuriot Ibid).	

(5)	<i>troe-at</i>	
	<i>troe</i> move	<i>-at</i> 3SG.PRET.PASS
	'it ran/moved' (Fleuriot 1964b: 229b, Bauer 2008: 49) ³²	

32 The verbal form *troeat* comes from the OB. gloss '*ir loc it troeat*' completed by the following words in Latin '*mane sol p(ri)mo equinoctii loco*' (Angers 477, f° 69b, hand A) meaning: "**the place** where the sun **used to move** in the morning at the first place of the equinox" (Breton words in bold) in the context of a calendar explanation. For an analysis of the verb form, see Lambert (2012: 277).

The verbal phrase is sometimes preceded by an element that functions as a relative pronoun.

In Old Breton, when the antecedent of the relative verb has a subject or object function, the form *(h)a* is used to introduce the relative clause:

- (6) *a dorn*
a *dorn-ø*
 REL thresh (wheat)-3SG
 ‘that threshes wheat’ (Fleuriot 1964a: 277, Fleuriot 1964b: 49)
- (7) *did i(n) seithun a bu [...]*
did *in* *seithun* *a* *bu*
 day in.PREP week REL be.PRET
 ‘[a] day in the week that was’ (Fleuriot 1964a: 277, 1964b: 49)

The function of this relative is systematised in the preverbal position in association with the verb form in later periods. Fleuriot (1964a: 277) observes that this development enables the speaker to place the subject before the verb.

In addition to this relative, the element *it* (also noted as *et*, *id* or *ed*) is derived from the athematic form of the verb ‘to be’ 3SG in the present tense **es-ti* (Schrijver 2011: 68) and changed later into *ez* in Middle Breton. It also precedes the verb phrase, particularly at the beginning of a clause or when an adjunct appears before, as illustrated in examples (2) and (8) (Fleuriot 1964a: §127 IV):

- (8) *amal it dinguinont*
amal *it* *dinguin-ont*
 as, like PTCL.VERB occur-3PL
 ‘as they occur’ (Ibid.: 279)

The element *it* cannot appear in association with the Old Breton verbal copula *is* presented below, as they are mutually exclusive.

The categories of the Old Breton verbal system are distributed as follows (Table 4):

Mood	Tense				Attested Personal Pronouns
Indicative	Present	Imperfect	Preterit	Pluperfect	1SG, 2 SG, 3 SG, 1PL, 2PL, 3PL, IMPS
Imperative					2SG, 1PL, 2PL
Subjunctive	Present	Past			2SG, 3SG, 1PL, 3PL IMPS

Table 4. Old Breton verbal system categories

Middle Welsh shows an identical structure of the verbal system (Evans 1964). Fleuriot (1964a: §133, §141) provides a detailed account of the conjugation marks attested in the corpus of Old Breton glosses. Hemon (1975: §§128, 131) analyses the paradigms of the Middle Breton verbal system, drawing upon the forms attested in Old Breton. Schrijver (2011: 56-74) compares the forms of South-Western Brittonic with those of Old Welsh and traces their specific insular Celtic origins.

The temporal category of the future tense is absent from the Old Breton corpus, as was already the case in Brittonic (Schrijver 2011: 56). In Old Breton, the present subjunctive serves to express future aspect. The subjunctive is also attested in Middle Welsh and Middle Cornish, but its function did not expand as it did in Breton (Fleuriot 1964a: 326–327, §150.II; Hemon 1975: §163).

The conditional does not exist as a distinct mood in Old Breton. However, by comparison with the Welsh and Cornish models, Fleuriot considers that the value of the present conditional is carried by the past subjunctive, while the past conditional is expressed by the pluperfect indicative.

Old Breton is distinguished by a series of inflections for each person, as well as for the impersonal form in each tense, enabling the orientation of verbs to be modified and thus passivised (Lambert 1987: 274–78). Old Breton is characterised by two distinct paradigms originating in Proto-Celtic for the verb ‘to be’. The first is derived from the root **es* and is unmarked. The second is composed of reflexes of the root **bu-* and is associated with habitual tenses (Schrijver 2011: 68). The initial category encompasses the forms *is* (‘is’), and *isi*, as well as *isio* (Fleuriot 1964a: 312). The form *isio* seems to function in relative clauses, in which the invariable relative particle **-jo* is present, and as such can be related to the Old Welsh relative *issi*, *is(s)id*.

The contemporary verb form *zo* (be.EXS) in modern Breton may have originated from this *isio* relative. Despite the absence of an Old Breton equivalent to Old Welsh *issi*, *is(s)id*, the modern forms *siwazh* (‘alas’, lit. ‘which is worse’) and *siken* (‘even’, ‘exactly’, a dialectal variant of *zoken*, lit. ‘which is as much’) indicate that they derive from a form resembling **iso* present at the time (Fleuriot 1964a: 312).

The element *id* or *ed* at the beginning of a clause has a negative form, respectively *nid* or *net*, as illustrated in example (9):

(9)	<i>net gnot da emboles un(an) co(m)mun recdi</i>						
	<i>net</i> NEG	<i>gnot</i> ha- bitual	<i>da</i> PREP	<i>emboles</i> em- bolismic	<i>un(an)</i> NUM	<i>co(m)mun</i> common	<i>rec-di</i> PREP ‘in front of’- 3SG.FEM
	‘it is not usual that a common [year goes] before an embolismic ³³ [one]’ (after Fleuriot & Evans 1985: 524)						

This form later evolved into *ned/nend* in Middle Breton. In the same role, *ni*, *ne*, and *na*, *nac* appear in imperative sentences and subordinate clauses (Fleuriot 1964a: §126).

Despite the limited documentation available, the sentence constituents in the main clause appear to be organised according to the VSO order, a characteristic feature of insular Celtic (see example 2). The following example (10) illustrates a VS order without a direct object.

33 Embolismic, i.e. “an inserted time unit (a day/a month...)”

(10)	<i>rotemdirot uh ham nertou</i>				
	<i>ro-temdir-ot</i> INTENSIFIER-try-PRET.1SG	<i>uh</i> above	<i>ha</i> PREP	<i>m</i> POSS.P1	<i>nert-ou</i> strength-PL
	Lit. 'I devoted myself above my strengths' (i.e. 'I devoted myself with all my strength') (Fleuriot 1964b: 299b–300a)				

The same syntactic order is also attested in subordinate clauses following the verbal particle *it* acting as a complementiser (underlined below in example 11 and in example 8 above):

(11)	<i>is amal it duducer memor</i>				
	<i>is</i> be.COP	<i>amal</i> so.COMP	<i>it</i> PTCL.VERB	duduc-er bring-SUBJ.IMPS.PASS	<i>memor</i> mem- ory
	'It is so that memory should be brought back.' ³⁴				

4.2.4. What were the linguistic practices at the time of Old Breton?

The limited sources available for Old Breton, coupled with the distorting effect of the written word, explain why several points concerning the linguistic practices of this period are still the subject of debate. The main question pertains to the dissemination of Breton among the population living in the Western part of the Armorican peninsula, to the point where it became a vernacular language for the majority of the people. This question is part of the broader issue of Breton migration and its social implications. The contours and internal organisation of this phenomenon remain difficult to grasp. Woolf (2007) proposed a sociolinguistic model for the early Middle Ages in Western Europe to explain the social conditions that enable a new group to adopt a particular language and spread it throughout society, or for elites to adopt the local language. In his view, the indigenous adoption of the language spoken by newly arrived elites took place mainly in societies with weak social hierarchies (Woolf 2007: 117).

³⁴ 'C'est de telle sorte que la mémoire soit ramenée' (translation by Lambert 1987: 276, Fleuriot 1964b: 153a).

The linguistic landscape of the western Armorican peninsula was probably not uniform. It has been hypothesised that Gaulish may have survived late into the early Middle Ages (Falc'hun 1981, Fleuriot 1980, Evans 1990). Alongside the new Brittonic varieties, Vulgar Latin as spoken in Armorica or proto-Old French were also most probably present there in the early Middle Ages, alongside the continued use of classical Latin as a literary, administrative and ecclesiastical language. The distribution of these usages in the Breton context can be also understood through the lens of toponymy. However, it should be noted that the existence of a place-name in a language does not necessarily imply corresponding vernacular usages. The presence of small linguistic islands making use of a language different from that of their direct environment, as mentioned above, suggests a more intricate linguistic landscape at that time (Fleuriot 1958, 1980). The phenomenon of linguistic enclaves was a commonplace in the early Middle Ages, particularly at the interface between distinct linguistic areas.

Benoît Grévin (2012: 23) reports that: “[i]n the 5th and 6th centuries, the Latin and Germanic-speaking areas interpenetrated on either side of the future linguistic frontier: Latin was still spoken in Trier or Tongeren, Frankish in many villages in northern Gaul.”³⁵ Nevertheless, such a situation evolved over time: “Pockets of Roman or Germanic-speaking populations disappeared on either side of the linguistic frontier that runs from the Vosges to the North Sea. Gradual stabilisation: a Romance dialect (in competition with a Germanic one) was still spoken in *Hunsrück mosellan*³⁶ in the 12th century [...]” (ibid., 33).³⁷

The presence of late Gaulish and/or Vulgar Latin speakers in Western Brittany has parallels in other contexts, between Slavic and Germanic spheres, or in the case of the Greek varieties spoken in southern Italy, some of which have survived to the present day. These linguistic pockets tend to blend into their environment

35 Original text: *[a]ux V^e et VI^e siècles, les zones de langue latine et germanique s'interpénètrent de part et d'autre de la future frontière linguistique : on parle encore latin à Trèves ou Tongres, franc dans maint village du nord de la Gaule.* [All excerpts from Grévin are translated into English by Gaëlle Le Corre].

36 The Hunsrück is a mountainous region mainly located in South-Western Germany (not far from the city of Trier) with a small extension in the Moselle department of Eastern France.

37 Original text: *“Les poches de populations romanophones ou germanophones se résorbent de part et d'autre d'une frontière linguistique qui court des Vosges à la mer du Nord. Stabilisation progressive : on parle encore au XII^e siècle un dialecte roman (en concurrence avec l'allemand) dans le Hunsrück mosellan [...]”*

over time. These examples underline the plausibility of a situation in which various Brittonic, late Latin and hypothetically late Gaulish linguistic communities coexisted in early medieval Western Brittany but also in the mixed zone where Breton was spoken at some extent during the Middle Ages. This is illustrated by the following episode, identified by Fleuriot, in which two Bretons engaged in a dispute with natives from the Redon region (35, south of Rennes):

Risweten and Tredoc [...] perished at Iencglina (Jangland) [...], it seems, denounced by a local man who addressed the Frankish [soldiers] [in 851] with this significant phrase: “si Britones quaeritis”. This suggests that the local people — no doubt Romance-speaking — did not identify with the Bretons around the middle of the 9th century (Fleuriot 1980: 93).³⁸

The sociolinguistic landscape of the Armorican peninsula in the early Middle Ages reveals a multilingual situation that is more complex than it first appears. The Breton context, even if the sources documenting it are limited, saw the cohabitation of various linguistic practices on the same territory. This environment was conducive to language contact.³⁹ However, this multilingual situation was to change radically when the ducal court moved outside the traditional Breton area in the 10th century, following the Viking occupation. This choice resulted in the reorganisation of the hierarchy between the different languages present in Breton territory.

Furthermore, the question of the oral usage of Old Breton at the time arises, as does its corollary, that of the linguistic variation associated with it. At the time, Breton is considered to have been relatively stable. It was the idiom of the clerical and noble elites, and even a *lingua franca* on both sides of the Channel, thus serving as a sort of counterpoint to the present fragmented dialectal situation. It is evident that the sources in Old Breton do not encompass the entire spectrum of sociolinguistic practices during that period.

38 Original citation: “*Risweten et Tredoc [...] périssent à Iencglina (Jangland entre Pipriac et Bain), et non à Peillac, semble-t-il, dénoncés par un homme du pays qui s’adresse aux [soldats] Francs [en 851] par cette phrase significative : “si Britones quaeritis”. Ceci implique que les gens du lieu – sans doute de langue romane – ne s’identifiaient pas aux Bretons vers le milieu du 9^e siècle* (Fleuriot 1980: 93). The full Latin sentence is: *si Britones quaeritis, ecce latitant in paleis* (‘If you’re looking for Bretons, they’re hiding in straw’).

39 For analogous situations in other linguistic contexts, see Rutten, Salmons, Vandenbussche, Vosters (2017: 9–20).

Firstly, there is no evidence of dialectal differentiation in the written documentation of the time, as has been pointed out by Fleuriot on several occasions (1964a: 14, 1964b: 34, 1980: 96–97, 1987: 9). Nevertheless, a number of factors point to the fact that linguistic variation was not entirely absent in this period. Fleuriot, for instance, has identified several hands in the glosses of certain manuscripts, characterised by a number of distinct features.⁴⁰ He interprets this as a potential reflection of the scribes' respective idiolects and a possible different origin. This suggests the possible circulation of clerics and/or works between monastic establishments on the mainland and on the island of Britain. Other facts of variation are revealed in hagiographic documents. Fleuriot (1964b: 15) provides the following quotation from Wrmonoc's 9th-century life of Saint Paul Aurelian: "*Quonoco, quem alii, sub additamento more gentis transmarinae, Toquonocum uocant* 'Some said Conoc and others Toconoc, according to the usage of certain islanders'".⁴¹

These elements suggest that Old Breton sources cannot reflect all oral usage at the time, and that a dichotomy existed between the written word and orality. The former is still accessible through various documents, mainly glosses, while the latter can only be glimpsed at. In addition to the circulation of individuals, this overview of the phenomena of linguistic variation in the Old Breton era inevitably reveals much greater diversity in the use of Old Breton as a vernacular language.

5. Conclusion and perspectives

In the preceding pages, the genealogical links of Breton within the Celtic linguistic family have been traced, with the subsequent emergence of the latter from the Brittonic stage on the European continent into a new language. The phonological evolution is well known and can be compared to parallel developments in Old Welsh and Old Cornish, when differences can be distinguished before the 12th century.

The paucity of data, consisting mainly of fragments of sentences or single words in glosses does not make it possible to get a comprehensive representation

40 Particularly manuscript Angers 477, ms. lat. 10290 of the Bibliothèque Nationale. See Fleuriot (1964b: 27–32).

41 This extract highlights the use of the possessive 2SG *to* before a personal name in an honorific sense. *Toconoc* < **to-Conoc*, leads to the modern Thégonnec (*Tégoneg* in contemporary orthography) to be contrasted with *Connec* attested in the place name Plogonnec.

of Old Breton, most particularly in the domain of syntax. However, scholars have obtained some interesting insights to the development of some features, such as the pronominal system.

These limitations must be understood in the larger context of literacy at the beginning of the Middle Ages, when languages, mostly from outside the previous Roman Empire, started to be used in the glossing of Latin manuscripts, which explains why the early stages of languages such as Breton, Welsh or Irish, have been documented. Conversely, no significant written evidence in Albanian or Basque was found before the beginning of the Early Modern period.

Nevertheless, the presence of Old Breton glosses in manuscripts originating from Brittany or from other locations shows that Breton monks were integrated in larger intellectual networks throughout the Carolingian empire where ideas and people travelled, and texts and books were exchanged.⁴² This, as well as other Latin sources, indicates that Breton was spoken at different levels of society during that period. A thorough re-examination of the Breton sources from a historical sociolinguistic perspective would help to gain a better understanding of the linguistic landscape in which Breton was structured and how Breton speakers interacted with the speakers of neighboring languages.⁴³

The consequences of the Viking raids and occupation on the monastic and intellectual centres in the 9th and 10th centuries, and their subsequent destruction modified the linguistic ecology in which the written Breton language had emerged and developed. Breton ruling elites and monks sought refuge inland in France, where they also became accustomed to new linguistic practices and new cultural models, notably the seeds of chivalric values and the *chansons de geste* in vernacular languages which would later become essential features of the high society of the Middle Ages.

42 For examples about *comput* issues, see Jacobo Bisagni (2020).

43 For a larger picture, see Kleinhenz, Busby 2010 or Grévin 2012. For late medieval Brittany, see Jones 2003.

As a consequence, when viewed from a broader perspective, these recurrent Viking attacks had also weakened the links between Brittany and Wales and Cornwall. Arguably, the 12th century marks the end of the Old Breton period and opens on a profound evolution of the Breton language at all social levels which saw another hiatus in the documentation, as well as a significant transformation of the structures of the language.

Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used for glossing the example according to the Leipzig glossing rules:

1SG 1st person singular

3SG 3rd person singular

2PL 2nd person plural

C consonant

COMP complementizer

COP copula

EXS existential

IMPS impersonal

M masculine

NEG negation

NUM numeral

OBJ object

PTCL particle

PASS passive voice

POSS possessive

PREP preposition

PRET preterite

REL relativizer

SUBJ subjunctive

VERB verb(al)

V vowel

Abbreviations for the different language stages mentioned in this article are as follows:

ProtoC Proto-Celtic
 Brit British
 Lat Latin
 OB Old Breton
 MB Middle Breton
 MoB Modern Breton
 OSWBr Old South-West British

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