MIDDLE ENGLISH *SNESS* 'CLUSTER':
MIDDLE IRISH *POPP* 'SHOOT, TENDRIL'

MIDDLE English *bobbe* 'bunch, cluster' is quoted by OED from three north-ern texts *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* the prose *Life of Alexander,* and the *Wakefield Pageants.* In the first the *bobe* (line 206) is carried by the Green Knight hlmself:

> But in his on honde he hade a holyn bobbe,
> ? at is grattest in grene when greuez ar bare.[1]

This holly bob is probably a peace-token, rather than evidence for the Knight's ancestry as an 'old vegetation god'.[2] It contrasts with the *wondere grete bobbls of grapes* (almost too heavy for a man to carry) of the prose *Life of Alexander* in the fifteenth-century 'Thornton Manuscript' (in the library of Lincoln Cathedral), mentioned amongst the marvels Alexander sees in the East.[3] In the Wakefield *Second Shepherds' Play,* the 'bob of cherys' offered to the child at Bethlehem is a marvel of another kind, an instance of midwinter fertility corresponding to the miraculous birth of Christ.[4]

Though OED gives no etymology for *bob,* it compares it with Irish *baban* 'tassel, cluster', Gaelic *baban, babag.* This Celtic parallel is ignored by later writers: Gollancz, Cawley, Onions, Davls, Hoad, and Brown merely describe

---

[1] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* ed. J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon, 2nd edn (Oxford, 1967), 6-7.

[2] J. A. Burrow, *A Reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (London, 1965), 16-17; A. C. Spearing, *The Gawain-Poet* (Cambridge, 1970), 179

[3] On this text, see J. E. Wells, *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English* (New Haven, 1916), 105; H. S. Bennett, *Chaucer and the Fifteenth Century* (Oxford, 1947), 314; *The Oxford Book of Late Medieval Verse and Prose,* ed. Douglas Gray (Oxford, 1985), 462.

[4] *The Wakefield Pageants,* ed. A. C. Cawley (Manchester, 1958), 62, 113.

_____

bob as of unknown origin.[1] Yet a Celtic etymology for *bob* is not to be dis-missed out of hand, even though enquiry should not start with Modern Irish *babán, bobán* 'tuft, bob', itself probably influenced by English bob.[2] We should look instead at Mlddle Irish *papp, popp* 'shoot, tendril', which (like *bob)* is used of plants, especially vines, and which is described by Vendryes a 'terme technique, qui se rattache evidemment au latin *pampinus* «tige de la vigne», mais qui a du subir l' influence d'un mot enfaAntin du type lat. *pappa* «bout de sein, mamelon», *papula* «bouton, pustule»'.[3]

The earliest citation of Irish *popp* in the Royal Irish Academy dictionary is from *The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel,* a ninth-century saga surviving in the Book of the Dun Cow, of *c.* 1100. The reference is to a warning vision of three men in green cloaks, a bowl by the mouth of each, and a sprig of cress *(popp do birur)* in each bowl.[4] A 'homily addressed to kings', perhaps of the late eleventh century, in Dublin, Royal Irish Academy. MS 23. P. 16. the 'Speckled Book' written *c.* 1410 in the Tipperary region, mentions *pappe agus blatha na finemna,* the 'shoots and flowers' of the vine.[5] A pseudo-biblical history in the same manuscript mentions *deis cruithnechta na pupu oen-choire dofhinemain,* a portent of wheat growing on springs of vines, resem-bling *man geseah hwætes eare weaxen on treowum* in the Old English *Martyrology.*[6] Amongst later citations of *popp* in the RIA dictionary is one on the form and shoots of the vine *(fuath finemna ... cona papib)* in the medieval Irish history of Alexander and Philip of Macedon; the context for

_____

[1] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* ed. Israel Gollancz, EETS o.s. 210 (London, 1940), 137; Cawley, 137; *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology,* ed. C. T. Onions (Oxford, 1966), 103; Tolkien and Gordon, 167; *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology,* ed. T. F. Hoad (Oxford, 1986), 44; *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary,* ed. Lesley Brown (Oxford, 1993), 251.

[2] *Foclóir Gaeilge-Béarla,* ed. Niall O Donald (Baíle Átha Cúath, 1977), 73, 117.

[3] Joseph Vendryes, *Lexique étymologique de l'irlandais ancien: Lettres M N O P.* (Paris, 1960), P-4.

[4] *Dictionary of the Irish Language* (Dublin, 1913-76); *Lebor na húidre,* ed. R. I. Best & O. J. Bergin (Dublin, 1929), 239; *Togail Bruidne Da Derga,* ed. Eleanor Knott (Dublin, 1936), 41.

[5] *The Passions and the Homilies from Leabhar Breac,* ed. Robert Atkinson (Dublin, 1887), 159; J. F. Kenney, *The Sources for the Early History of Ireland: Ecclesiastical* (New York, 1929), 739-40

[6] J. E. Cross, Portents and Events at Christ's Birth: Comments on Vercelli V and VI and the Old English Martyrology, *Anglo-Saxon England,* ii (1973), 209-20, at 218; Martin McNamara, *She Apocrypha in the Irish Church* (Dublin, 1975), 18.

popp here thus resembles that of *bobbis* in the Thornton Manuscript *Life of Alexander.*[1]

There seems no semantic reason why Middle Irish *popp* 'sprig, shoot, tendril' should not give Middle English *bobbe* 'bunch, cluster'. As regards phonology, it should be noted that primitive Old Irish had no *p,* and in loan words substituted *c* for it. Hence Old Irish *casc* 'Pascha, Easter', *corcur* 'purpura', etc. Even when *b* + *h* > *p* in native Irish words, so *p* in loanwords could be retained, its pronunciation still caused some difficulty, so that in initial position it was not clearly distinguished from *b-.* Thus we have ninth-century glosses *bóc* for *póc* 'kiss' (in the St Gallen Priscian) and *bellec* for *pellec* 'small bag' (in the Karlsruhe Priscian).[2] The RIA dictionary entry for *p* lists other such confusions between initial *b* and *p* in Old and Middle Irish. It also notes this phenomenon in Modern Irish, citing the dictionary of the Clare schoolmaster Peter O'Connell (1746-1826; see *DNB),* who described *p-* for *b-* as a colloquialism. Ħ his account of Goedelic dialects, O'Rahilly described the feature as characteristic of modern Manx and Scottish Gaelic, as also of Ulster and Mayo Irish.[3]

But if we are to present a convincing case for Irish *popp* > English *bobbe,* we must show evidence for *p-* > *b-* in medieval Irish. Such evidence exists. One example is *bellec* < Latin *pellicium* or *pellicia* 'leather bag'.[4] In the transferred sense 'bridle bit' this occurs in the eighth-century *Cattle Raid of Fróech (beilge oir* 'golden bridle-bits'),[5] The twelfth-century *Colloquy ot the Ancients* also mentions bridles of silver with golden bits (*co mbéilgibh óir fris).*[6] Other possible instances are *blae* 'open space, green' and *bláesc* 'shell'. *Plae* and *blae* have been derived from Late Latin *plagia* (in Gregory of Tours), giving French *plage,* Spanish *playa* 'beach'. *Plae* is cited by the RIA dictionary from a ninth-century hymn to St Bridget by Broccan, and the

---

[1] Cf. Robin Flower, *The Irish Tradition* (Oxford, 1947), 137.

[2] Henry Lewis & Holger Pedersen, *A Concise Comparative Celtic Grammar* (Göttingen, 1937), 62; Rudolf Thurneysen, *A Grammar of Old Irish* (Dublin, 1946), 570-1; K. H. Jackson, *Language and History in Early Britain* (Edinburgh, 1953), 125-7.

[3] T. F. O'Rahilly, *Irish Dialects Past and Present,* 2nd edn (Dublin, 1972), 148-9.

[4] Joseph Vendryes, *Lexique étymologique de l'irlandais ancien: Lettre B* (Paris, 1981), 30.

[5] *Táin Bó Fraích,* ed. Wolfgang Neid, 2nd edn (Dublin, 1974), 2.

[6] *Silva Gadelica,* ed. S. H. O'Grady (London, 1892), i. 99; cf. ii. 107.

glossary of Cormac, king-bishop of Cashel (d. 908), while *blae* figures in two texts in the Book of the Dun Cow: *The Wooing of Emer,* where Cú Chulainn boasts he was not brought up *for blaí óerirlainde* 'on the floor of a front yard' by some peasant, and *The Sick Bed of Cú Chulainn,* where Fand the fairy sings of how she saw him driving a splendid course in his chariot over the plain *(álaind lúadam lúades blaí)*.[1] Although Olmsted has challenged the derivation of *blae* from *plagia,* it remains a posslbility.[2] *Bláesc* 'shell', compared with Welsh *blisc, pilscyn* 'shell (of nut or egg)', Middle Breton *plusquenn* 'rind (of an apple)', Modern French *éplucher* 'to peel' (from Gaulish), is more problematic.[3]

O'Rahilly saw it as a survival in Irish from Ivernian, a hypothetic pre-Goedelic Brittonic language in Ireland. But Vendryes comments that the different forms, 'exposé à des accidents variés', allow no sure etymology.[4] As regards non-initial *p > b,* we are on firm ground with the entries in the RIA dictionary for *píb* < Latin *pipa* 'pipe', the variant *pobul* < Latin *populus* 'people' (cf. Modern Irish *An Phoblacht* 'The Republic'), and the variant *puball* < Latin *papilio* 'tent'. The last figures in the Borders place-name *Peebles,* of Cumbric origin, but first attested in a Gaelic version as *Pobull.*[5]

Yet the most conclusive evidence for the existence of *bobb as a variant of popp giving English bobbe is early Irish bobba, a variant of popa (< Latin papa) 'master, sir'. The RIA dictionary gives two instances of *bobba,* in the 'Tripartite Life' of St Patrick written *c.* 900 (where it is used in address to the

---

[1] Best & Bergin, 119, 311; *Compert Con Culainn,* ed. A. G. van Hamel (Dublin, 1933), 28; *Serglige Con Culainn,* ed. Myles Dillon (Dublin, 1953), 21; T. P. Cross and C. H. Slover, *Ancient Irish Tales,* 2nd edn (Dublin, 1969), 158, 191.

[2] Vendryes, *Lettres M N O P.* P-10; Vendryes, *Lettre B,* 55.

[3] *The Poetical Works of Dafydd Nanmor,* ed. Thomas Roberts (Cardiff, 1923). 190; *Delw y Byd,* ed. Henry Lewis & P. Diverres (Caerdydd, 1928), 116; *Llyfr Blegywryd,* ed. S. J. Williams & Enoch Powell (Caerdydd, 1942), 3; *Ystorya de Carolo Magno,* ed. S. J. Williams. 2nd edn (Caerdydd, 1968), 29; Vendryes, *Lettre B.* 56.

[4] Cf. T. F. O'Rahilly, *Early Irish History and Mythology* (Dublin, 1946), 205-7; D. H. Greene, The Making of Insular Celtic, in *Proceedings of the Second International Congress of Celtic Studies* (Cardiff, 1966), 123-36, at 133-4; Vendryes, *Lettre B,* 56.

[5] W. J. Watson, *The Celtic Place-Names of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1926), 383; Jackson, 553; Vendryes, *Lettres M N O P.* P-9, 12, 17; *The Names of Towns and Cities in Britain,* ed. W. F. H. Nicolaisen (London, 1970), 149; A. A. M. Duncan, *Scotland: the Making of the Kingdom* (Edinburgh, 1975), 64: G. W. S. Barrow, *The Anglo-Norman Era in Scottish History* (Oxford, 1980), 33.

---

saint), and in the text of *The Cattle Raid of Cooley* in Dublin, Trimity College, MS H.2.16, the fourteenth- and fifteenthcentury Yellow Book of Lecan, where Cú Chulainn uses it to his charioteer.[1] If *bobba* for *popa* existed, it is likely **bobb* for *popp* did too. This would enable us to derive Middle English *bobbe* from *popp* with confidence. Like *malt (<mart)* 'ox fattened for slaughter' in *Sir Tristrem, raith* 'three months' in *Cursor Mundi, car (<cerr)* 'left' in *The Awntyrs off Arthur,* and *skeyne (< scían)* 'knife' in docu~ents as remote from the Celtic fringe as the Cely letters, *bobbe* would be a medieval English borrowing from Goedelic.[2] Since *bob* 'bunch, cluster' remains characteristic of Scots English, and is still (according to *OED)* the name in Scotland for a nosegay, posy, or small bouquet of flowers, the Celtic etymology proposed here should cause no surprise.[3]

Andrew Breeze

University of Navarre, Pamplona

* † *

---

[1] Cf. *Táin Bó Cúailnge from the Yellow Book of Lecan,* ed. John Strachan & J. G. O'Keeffe (Dublin, 1912); Kenney, 24, 342-4; *Bethu Phátraic* ed. Kathleen Mulchrone (Dublin, 1939); Vendryes, *Lettres X N O P,* P-4.

[2] Cf. Vendryes, *Lettres M X O P.* M-21; *The Awntyrs off Arthure at the Terne Wathelyn,* ed. Ralph Hanna (Manchester, 1974), 138; *The Cely Letters 1472-1488,* ed. Alison Hanham, EETS o.s. 273 (London, 1975), 277.

[3] For a further early sense of *bobbe,* 'grub or lava of a fly or beetle used for bait' (which *QED* attests only from 1589), see *A Treatise of Fysshynge wyth an Angle (c. 1420)* in Gray, 150.