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PROBABLE AND POSSIBLE CELTIC NAMES IN NORTH HOLLAND: *HUISDUINEN, TEXEL, DEN HELDER, HELSDEUR*

The paper focuses on the probability of the Celtic substratum hypothesis in the toponymy of North Holland. Agreeing that the most north-western tip of the Netherlands is an unlikely place to look for Celtic toponyms, the author suggests that the name *Huisduinen* relates to the same group of names of which *Heusden* is the most common representative, and which appears to have a Celtic etymology. Thus making it a tempting task to look at a few other names in the same area. As the area lost most of its population in the 4th century AD and became repopulated in the 5th century, language shift offers a possible scenario for a change from Celtic to Germanic with remnants of a Celtic substratum surviving up to the present day. In the same period, the landscape involved saw radical changes as well. In earlier publications it has been suggested that the medieval name *Uxalia* may be Celtic. Here it is suggested that this name may originally refer to the present-day island of Texel and not — as it later did — to the neighbouring island of Vlieland. A Celtic etymology is also proposed for the names *Helsdeur* and *Den Helder*, which — if accepted — have related etymologies. The name *Helsdeur* refers to the deepest part of the strait between the mainland of the province North Holland and the island of Texel. The lack of early attestations of this name is explained by suggesting its probable taboo status. This hypothesis is supported by a series of relevant examples of taboo place names in the maritime context.

K e y w o r d s: Celtic, Germanic, Dutch, historical geography of the Netherlands, North Holland, geographic terms, taboo names, substrate toponymy.

In the far north of the province North Holland in the Netherlands lies *Den Helder* (earlier, until 1928, formally *Helder* and informal *de Helder*). Originally, this used to be a small community of fishermen and pilots, but the town gained prominence in the late 18th century when a tidal harbour was created for seagoing vessels. It became even more important after Den Helder became the main naval port of the Dutch fleet. During the early Middle Ages, the main settlement in the area was not Den Helder, but the neighbouring *Huisduinen* which may have been founded in the 8th century. The place name *Huisduinen* is older than the present-day village which once had a predecessor further to the west that was then submerged by the North Sea.

During the Early Middle Ages, the Dutch west coast was protected by a line of low dunes — the so-called Older Dunes — interrupted only by the estuary of the Meuse and the estuary of the Rhine (near Katwijk, west of Leyden) and a few smaller creeks. The northern tip of North Holland consisted of tidal mudflats more or less like the modern Waddenze with just south of the present-day Den Helder — a small “island” which was flooded only at exceptional high tides. The present island Texel did not exist as such, except for the southern part which consists of a conspicuous hill of boulder clay.¹ This hill is the most north-western outlier of a row of similar moraines deposited during the Saale glaciations about 150.000 years ago which crop up as the old core of the (former) island Wieringen, the (former) island Schokland (a World Heritage Site), and hills in the southern parts of the province Friesland with Roode Klif (Frisian *Raeklif* ‘red cliff’) as the best known landmarks.

As the earliest known forms of the name *Huisduinen* are identical with the earlier attested forms of the name *Heusden* elsewhere in Belgium and the Netherlands, a similar etymology for these names is more than likely. The earliest attested form of *Huisduinen* is *Husidina* (between 918 and 948, copy late 11th c.) while the earliest attestations for *Heusden* read *in Husdinio* (between 929 and 962; in the Belgian province of Limburg) and *Hysdene* (between 1108 and 1121, copy mid 13th c.; province North Brabant).² The present form *Huisduinen*, which can be understood as ‘house-dunes,’ should then be taken as the result of a popular etymological reanalysis of the name which was no longer semantically meaningful. The place name *Heusden* occurs (with variants) in several instances in the Netherlands, Belgium, and northern France. Elsewhere I argued the origin of this name to be Celtic **coslo-dūnon*, meaning something like ‘hazel-hill,’ ‘elevation covered with hazel trees’ [Toorians, 2011].

Strictly speaking, it is possible that, in fact, these place names are not Celtic as such, but the result of an early loan which lived on as an appellative in Archaic or Old Dutch and survived in place names only. Comparable are medieval Latin *brogilus*

¹ For maps, see [Vos et al., 2011]. The most detailed description of the geology and historical geography of the relevant area offers Schoorl [1999].

² For more forms and a more detailed discussion of the linguistic development see [Toorians, 2011]. The basic works of reference for early attestations in the Low Countries are [Künzel et al., 1989; Gysseling, 1960].

‘(separate, fenced-in) piece of land’ and Old Dutch (and Franconian) *apa* ‘running water; brook’.³ As a parallel, Dutch knows the Germanic toponyms *Hazelberg* and *Hazeldonk* ‘elevation grown with hazel trees’ as well, and it is unclear whether this is a mere loan-translation or that both Celtic and Germanic formations once existed side by side. That the place names *Coudun* and *Colembert* in northern France came into existence as Germanic names based on a borrowed **coslo-dūnon* is far less likely, but even there, the collocation might be a borrowing from Celtic (Gaulish) into early medieval Romance. Absolute certainty about the language in which these place names were coined is thus not possible, but a Celtic substratum can hardly be doubted.

A frequently raised objection to *Huisduinen* as a Celtic place name is its geographical position in the far north-west of the Netherlands. Linguists and historians in general often appear unwilling to accept a linguistically Celtic substratum in the Netherlands (if at all), to the north of the central river area. In fact, this opposition frequently leads to circular reasoning and, if we accept that *Heusden* (and its French counterparts) is of Celtic origin, there is no good linguistic reason for not accepting that *Huisduinen* belongs to the same group of names.

It would, of course, strengthen the case if we could identify more Celtic place names in the same north-western area and, in fact, this seems a real possibility. One instance discussed before is a name which occurs in variant forms in relatively late sources.⁴

3 rd quarter 13 th c.	<i>Wexalia</i>
1322	<i>Wexel</i>
1336–1339	<i>terre Wexalie</i> (twice)
1337	<i>Wexalie</i>
1440	<i>Woxalia</i> (changed in the manuscript in <i>Uxalia</i>)
1482	<i>Wuxalioe</i>

This name is generally accepted as an earlier name for the island Terschelling (Frisian *Skylge*, *Skylgerlân*). This identification may be correct geographically, but as the topography of the area changed considerably since the beginning of the Christian Era, it is possible that, if the name is really old, it moved east with the dunes and the mud-flats in the Wadden Sea (Dutch *wad*, pl. *wadden* ‘tidal mud-flat(s)').

Earlier I suggested that the form *Uxalia* is old indeed [Toorians, 2000, 77–78]. Amongst other attested forms, it is the *lectio difficilior*. It is likely that the medieval author who corrected this form in 1440 had an earlier exemplar before him, and although we cannot know how old this was, it seems to have been older than the earliest attested form from 1322. Thus, the form *Uxalia* might suggest an etymology from Gaulish *uxello-*, *ouxello-* ‘high, elevated’ (Old Irish *úasal*, Welsh *uchel*). In combination with

³ For a discussion of *apa* see [Toorians, 2016].

⁴ A detailed discussion of these names and their sources in [Blok, 1974].

the (Middle) Dutch preposition *te(r)* ‘on (the)’ this might have given rise to the name *Texel*, *Tessel* (*Tessel*, [təsəl], is the spoken form for both orthographies, though [təksəl] is accepted as well), the present-day name for the island north of Huisduinen and Den Helder (but see below). That this combination of the preposition with a borrowed *uksel-* (vel sim.) ever existed is beyond proof, but with a reference to popular etymology, it might have helped to trace the source of the present Germanic name *Texel* (related to Latin *dexter* as explained below).

Texel now is the most south-western island in the range of Wadden Islands stretching eastwards towards the Jutland Peninsula. In fact, a name like ‘elevation, height’ would perfectly fit the boulder clay hill which forms the geomorphological core of the island. The hill raises about fifteen metres above sea level and is known as *Hoge Berg* ‘High Mountain’. That fifteen metres is considered high is not strange in view of the flat, low-lying nature of the Dutch landscape.

The objection that in the 14th-century sources the names listed above appear to refer to the island of Terschelling may not carry much weight when we consider the huge changes in the topography of the area during the early Middle Ages in combination with the sparse population. And the alternative interpretation relating the name *Texel* to Middle Dutch *tesuwe* (Old High German *zeso*, Gothic *taihswa*, Latin *dexter*) ‘right hand side; south’ need not conflict *per se* with my derivation from Gaulish *uxello-*. When the early medieval repopulation of the Northern Dutch coastal area indeed took place from east to west along the coast — as archaeologists believe it did — Texel was indeed the ‘southern’ (more precisely south-western) land and, at that time, it still formed part of what is now the northern tip of North Holland.⁵ Thus, the Germanic (Frissian) denomination ‘southern’ may well have replaced the older ‘high’ (and may have also merged with it formally by way of folk etymology). The earliest attestations of the name date from the 8th century (*Thesla*; 10th century *Texle*).⁶

If this repopulation of the coastal area came with a language shift, *Uxalia* lost its meaning (became opaque) and may — as a name — have moved to some other sand dune which, amidst the tidal flats, became an inhabitable, or at least usable, place. Later this name was again replaced by the present *Terschelling* (Frissian *Skylge*). This latter name means ‘at (or near) the divide, the border,’ referring to the Vlie, the strait separating the islands of Terschelling and Vlieland, and, in ancient times, the estuary of the river running through the Flevo Lake (the predecessor of the Zuiderzee, now IJsselmeer). Vlieland and Texel became separate islands since the 13th century.

The name of the island *Ameland* has a “Celtic ring” as well, but leaves much grounds for uncertainty. The earliest attested forms are *Ambla* (between 819 and

⁵ Parts of the area were depopulated during the 4th and early 5th century AD. Texel was repopulated relatively late, during the second half of the 5th century. See [Koning, 2018; Woltering, 2017, 288; Nieuwhof, 2016, 95–96].

⁶ See [Künzel et al., 1989], s.v. *Tessel*, with etymology from Germanic **tehswa-* ‘right side; southern.’

ca. 825, copy between 1150 and 1158), in *Ambulum* (probably between 825 and 842, copy between 1150 and 1158) and *Ambulon* (1st half of the 11th c.). This is taken to be an *l*-suffix derivation of a water name *amba which can be compared to Celtic *ambe* ‘water, river,’ Germanic *ama- ‘natural stream’ [Berkel, 2017, s.v. *Ameland*; Blok, 1974, 181, 183–184]. However, the origin and even the existence of this etymon is very uncertain.⁷ Thus, it is hard to decide which etymology for the name *Ameland* is correct and in as much impossible to substantiate the idea that such an etymology would be Celtic.

Yet, there is another name — or rather a couple of names — direct to the south of Texel and adjacent to Huisduinen, for which a Celtic etymology suggests itself. The strait separating Texel from the North Holland mainland is called *Marsdiep*. Originally, this was a stream coming from a peat bog near the bolder clay hill Hoge Berg on Texel to the south-east. It is first mentioned in a charter from (probably) the early 9th century, preserved in the *Codex Eberhardi*, also known as *Traditiones Fuldenses* and written between 1150 and 1158:

“Ego Gerwic de Fresia trado sancto Bonifacio ad Fuldense monasterium terram iuris
mei iuxta fluvium Maresdeop et quicquid proprietatis habui sive in agris vel pratis, silvis,
domibus vel mancipiis” [Dronke, 1844, 49].⁸

With the All Saints’ Flood, a storm surge which took place in 1170, the North Sea broke through the coastal dunes at a weak spot between Huisduinen and Texel, tapped into the *Maresdeop* and connected with ‘Flevo Lake’ which till then had been a sweet water, inland lake. Thus, this flood initiated the Zuiderzee, now IJsselmeer.⁹ The deepest part of this strait lies to the north-west of Den Helder and reaches a depth of about 45 meters. This part of the *Marsdiep* is also known as *Helsdeur*, which is a very telling name in Dutch, translated as ‘hell’s door.’

This latter interpretation may well be due to popular etymology and a Celtic etymology for *Helsdeur* poses no apparent problem. The name may well be from a Celtic (Late-Gaulish to be precise) **hel-doro*, a compound of **hel-* ‘(coastal) swamp; estuary’ and **doro-* ‘door; mouth of a river.’ The first member of this compound occurs in *Helinium*, the name of the estuary of the Meuse on the late antique map known as *Tabula Peutingeriana* [Schrijver, 1995].¹⁰ The second occurs in this form in Endlicher’s Glossary, a short list of Gaulish words with Latin glosses compiled in the early

⁷ It is rejected by [Zair, 2012, 34]. See also [Scheungraber & Grünzweig, 2014, s.v. *Amisi*,] (rejecting the etymon) and [Toorians, 2008, 171].

⁸ “I, Gerwic of Friesland, transfer to Saint Boniface in the monastery of Fulda the land that is under my jurisdiction near the stream of the Marsdiep, and all I had in possession either fields or meadows, forests, houses or serfs.”

⁹ For a description of the process see [Jager & Kikkert, 1995]. For the storm flood see [Buisman, 1995/1, 360–362].

¹⁰ Critical about this etymology is Falileyev [2011].

9th century: *Doro* : *osteo*.¹¹ My suggestion is that **hel-doro* > *Helsdeur* was originally the name of the weak spot in the dunes — probably a creek — between Huisduinen and Texel where in 1170 the sea broke through and tapped into the *Maresdeop*. The place name (*Den*) *Helder* may reasonably easily be derived from **hel-doro* as well.

A serious objection to this suggested etymology is that no early attestations of *Helsdeur* or, for that matter *Den Helder*, are known. *Helsdeur* occurs in 1815 on the earliest (military) topographical map, and it is mentioned several times by A. van Rhijn in his description accompanying a hydrographic map of the area [Rhijn, 1841, 7–8, 12, 17]. Van Rhijn uses the name as a matter of fact without any suggestion that it was new or strange to him. Nonetheless, no attestations prior to the 19th century seem to occur. The earliest known reference to *Den Helder* is earlier and dates from 1577. It is found on a map as *de Helderbuyert* ‘the Helder-quarter’. From 1621 the name is *Helder* [Berkel & Samplonius, 2006, s.v. *Den Helder*].

In the eyes of Dutch toponymists, this lack of early attestations completely undermines my suggestion of a Celtic origin for the name *Helsdeur*.¹² Does it? In comparative linguistics long periods of time without attested forms can be, and are, bridged by etymologies firmly embedded in a combination of facts and reconstructions from closely related languages. Thus, my suggestion is not more “lacking” than, for instance, the reconstruction of Proto-Indo-European etymologies for parts of the Albanian lexicon [cf. Demiraj, 1997]. Furthermore, I believe that a case can be made to explain, or at least, to make suppositions on why the name *Helsdeur* was never put to paper until the 19th century, even though it did exist for several centuries before. The idea is that as the name of the deepest and most dangerous part of the Marsdiep it may have been a taboo word.

The occurrence of taboo words and names is well attested in anthropology and it is also well known that seafaring was, and still is, surrounded by taboo customs. A well-known example of taboo (and euphemism) in Indo-European languages is the replacement of PIE **h₂éḱtos* ‘bear’ (Greek ἄρκτος, Latin *ursus*) in a number of Indo-European language groups by euphemistic forms with meanings like ‘the brown one’ (as English *bear*), ‘(honey) licker,’ or ‘hairy, shaggy.’ A likely instance of a taboo name in relation to the sea is the ancient Greek name for the Black Sea, Πόντος Αξεινός (*Póntos Áxeinos*), ‘Inhospitable Sea.’ This name is first attested in Pindar’s *Pythian Ode 4.263* (462 BC) and is considered to be derived from Scythian *axšaina-* ‘dark, unlit’ which was (through popular etymology) replaced by Greek Αξεινός ‘unfriendly, inhospitable.’ According to Strabo (*Geographia* 7.3.6; 14.1.6.) the Black Sea was named so “because

¹¹ For a discussion of the glossary, see [Toorians, 2008, 177–178] (with an interpretation of the name *Quortolodora*, an unidentified place near Antwerp). See also [Toorians, 2005]. The Proto-Celtic form **dworestu-* is irrelevant here as early medieval names would certainly not be coined in Proto-Celtic. Germanic is unlikely since Old Dutch (as well as Proto-Germanic) had *duri* (pl.) ‘doors’ (10th c.).

¹² I discussed my suggestion concerning *Helsdeur* with colleagues in the digital ‘Netwerk Naamkunde’ in February 2017.

of its wintry storms and the ferocity of the tribes that lived around it, and particularly the Scythians, in that they sacrificed strangers, ate their flesh, and used their skulls as drinking-cups” (translation cited from [Jones, 3, 189]). After the people from Miletos established cities along the Black Sea coasts the name was changed to Εὐξεῖνος Πόντος (*Eúxeinos Póntos*), ‘Hospitable Sea.’ These first Greek colonies were founded from 675 BC onwards.

Examples of more recent cases of taboo place names in a maritime context are given by Christer Westerdahl in the interesting article “The Binary Relationship of Sea and Land” [Westerdahl, 2011, 299–306].¹³ He describes how in Northern Sweden specific categories of names for land features were taboo at sea and, more specific, on Lake Vänern in Sweden. More widely, horses and anything pertaining to a horse was taboo at sea and could not be mentioned. Instead non-taboo words (“noa names,” as Westerdahl calls them) were used. The explanation Westerdahl gives is that in the illiterate, oral society of fishermen novices had to learn to navigate by

...memorizing by way of a combination of names, words, and formulas. <...> In the normal absence of rhyme in the stanzas of the formulas, the dangerous names gave the necessary ‘thrill’ to remember. <...> The young novice is encouraged to pronounce the tabooed names of the important land features of the sea routes and then forced by custom to compensate to his older, more experienced, companions by an offer of some kind to them or to the sea. It is a rite of passage and learning. After this ritual was completed, these tabooed names, not only in their noa disguise, are used in formulas fairly freely and supposedly to good advantage. However, I do not yet understand why sometimes only the taboo name is preserved and sometimes only the noa name [Westerdahl, 2011, 305].

It is the last sentence in this rather long quotation which may give a clue as to why the name *Helsdeur* does not appear in any written source before the 19th century. *Helsdeur* may have been the taboo name as opposed to the noa (non-taboo) name *Marsdiep*. It was known to the mariners and fishermen, but not used “in public” and thus kept out of formal, written sources. This may have changed in the 19th century either through a loosening of the taboo or because religious views and practices changed and made ‘Door of Hell’ a more generally acceptable name for this awe-inspiring part of the sea (the one explanation does not necessarily exclude the other here). If this interpretation is accepted — and by its nature it cannot be proven — the names *Helsdeur* and *Marsdiep* existed side by side through the centuries. The former tabooed, but not unknown, and used only within the closed group of men who took to the sea, the latter in general use and known to mariners and landsmen alike.

Accepting that the name *Helsdeur* lived in the dark for several centuries as a taboo name, it becomes feasible to take Celtic **hel-doro* as the original form which led to both *Helsdeur* and (Den) *Helder*. Originally it would have named a (relatively small) tidal

¹³ Not referring to taboo names, but of fundamental interest is [Westerdahl, 1992].

inlet which in 1170 broke through and separated Texel from the mainland of North Holland. And if *Uxalia* is indeed the older name of Texel (before it became an island, and at that time denoting the boulder clay hill *Hoge Berg*) we seem to have within a few square kilometres in the far north-west of the Netherlands four Celtic names: *Huisduinen*, *Den Helder*, *Helsdeur*, and *Uxalia/Texel*. During the early Middle Ages and following (or in concordance with) the repopulation of the area, the name *Uxalia* moved east to the island Terschelling and Texel was renamed (perhaps partly by folk etymology) ‘southern (island).’

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Лон-оп-Занд, Нидерланды**ТОПОНИМЫ ПРЕДПОЛАГАЕМОГО КЕЛЬТСКОГО ПРОИСХОЖДЕНИЯ
В СЕВЕРНОЙ ГОЛЛАНДИИ:
*HUISDUINEN, TEXEL, DEN HELDER, HELSDEUR***

В статье рассматривается возможность обнаружения кельтского субстрата в топонимии нидерландской провинции Северная Голландия. Несмотря на то что присутствие кельтских географических названий в северо-западной части Нидерландов кажется маловероятным, автор предлагает рассматривать местный топоним *Huisduinen* в контексте других названий, имеющих, по всей видимости, кельтское происхождение, самым репрезентативным из которых является *Heusden*. Это предположение заставляет более пристально взглянуть и на некоторые другие топонимы региона. В IV в. область лишилась почти всего населения, а в V в. снова была заселена. Учитывая этот факт, можно предполагать, что в это время произошла смена языка — с кельтского на германский, причем следы кельтского субстрата вполне могли сохраниться до наших дней. В тот же период произошли радикальные изменения в ландшафте региона. В предшествующих публикациях автора уже высказывалось предположение о возможном кельтском происхождении средневекового топонима *Uxalia*. В настоящей статье выдвигается гипотеза о том, что изначально топоним относился к нынешнему острову Тексель, а не к соседнему острову Влиeland. Автор также предлагает кельтские этимологии для названий *Helsdeur* и *Den Helder*. Топоним *Helsdeur* обозначает наиболее глубокую часть пролива между материковой частью провинции Северная Голландия и островом Тексель. Отсутствие ранних фиксаций этого названия в источниках может быть объяснено его статусом табу-слова. В поддержку такого предположения приводятся типологически релевантные примеры табуирования топонимов мореплавателями.

Ключевые слова: кельтские языки, германские языки, нидерландский язык, историческая география Нидерландов, Северная Голландия, географические термины, табуированные названия, субстратная топонимия.

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