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PLACE-NAME EVIDENCE FOR THE ETYMOLOGY OF SCOTS *CARSE*

The origin of Scots *carse*, defined as ‘(an extensive stretch of) low alluvial land along the banks of a river’, is described as ‘unknown’ in the second edition of the *Concise Scots Dictionary* (CSD2).¹ The *OED* also states that the term is ‘of uncertain derivation’, but adds: ‘perhaps the same word as *carres*, *carrs*, *cars*, plural of CARR *n.*² fen, low wet land’.² The suggested association with the Norse-derived term *carr* (itself first recorded c1330³) has much to recommend it, as the *OED* goes on to explain:

This suits the sense: the early quotations speak of the *kerss* as full of pools and mires: Trivet describes the Carse of Falkirk in the time of Edward I. as *loca palustria* (Jamieson). The suppression of the vowel of the plural is phonetically regular, and the retention of the (s) sound instead of its change to (z) is seen also in *pence*, *dice*, *mice*, *truce* (the latter also, like *carse*, made into a singular).

Compare also the change of *Pieres*, *Peres* to *Piers*, *Pierce*. The difficulty is that no early examples of *kerris* or *carres* are found in Scots: in Barbour the word is already *kerss*. The Welsh *cors* ‘marsh’ suits the sense, but presents a difficulty in the vowel, as well as in the geographical localization of the word.

¹ Scottish Language Dictionaries, *Concise Scots Dictionary*, 2nd edn (Edinburgh, 2017), s.v. *carse*¹.

² *OED*, s.v. *carse*, n. References are to the online edition at <http://www.oed.com/>.

³ *OED*, s.v. *carr*, *car*, *n.*².

While the earliest citation in the *OED* is dated 1487 (a manuscript of Barbour's *The Bruce*, with the text itself dated *a*1380), *A Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue* observes that the term is found 'chiefly in place-names', and cites place-name occurrences dating from 1292, 1359 and 1362, all with the spelling <cars>.⁴ *CSD2* similarly notes that the term is found 'frequently in place-names' from the late thirteenth century onwards. Additional but later examples have been identified in volumes of the ongoing Survey of Scottish Place-Names, where it is again considered to be 'of uncertain origin'.⁵ All are predated by early spellings of the Carse of Callendar in Stirlingshire⁶ (*Carsach* c.1140, *Karsah* 1147–1152, *Karso* 1223) and the nearby place-name Kersie (*Carsyn* 1195, *Carsin* 1207, *Karsy* c.1150) cited by Reid, who points to the use of the Gaelic locative suffixes *-ach* and *-in* as evidence that the term was used by Gaelic speakers.⁷ Its adoption as a loan word into Gaelic is supported by compounds with Gaelic elements in Galloway place-names, to which he also draws attention. However, no further light is thrown on the origin of the term, and Reid's brief discussion of this issue relies on the dictionaries mentioned above. No etymon is available in the surviving record of Old English, and the term is unrepresented in English place-names.⁸

⁴ *A Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue*, 12 vols (Oxford, 1031–2002), s.v. *cars*, *carse*, n.; available online at <http://www.dsl.ac.uk/>.

⁵ Simon Taylor with Peter McNiven and Eila Williamson, *The Place-Names of Kinross-shire* (Donington, 2017), 649.

⁶ The same feature is referred to as the Carse of Falkirk in the *OED* quotation above.

⁷ John Reid, *The Place Names of Falkirk and East Stirlingshire* (Falkirk, 2009), 93–95.

⁸ There is no entry in Angus Cameron, Ashley Crandell Amos and Antoinette DiPaolo Healey, *Dictionary of Old English: A to I Online* (Toronto, 2018), nor in David N. Parsons and Tania Styles, *The Vocabulary of English Place-Names (BRACE–CÆSTER)* (Nottingham, 2000). A single example of Middle English *kers* 'a fen' is identified as the first element of the Northumberland place-name Caistron in A. H. Smith, *English Place-Name Elements*, 2 vols (Cambridge, 1956), ii, 3, with the comment: 'cf. Scots dial. *carse* "fen, low wet land"'.

During the course of work on a current project funded by The Leverhulme Trust at the University of Glasgow (2016–2019), additional evidence has come to light that may have a bearing on the matter. The project, “Recovering the Earliest English Language in Scotland: evidence from place-names”, is researching place-names in the historical county of Berwickshire in the Scottish Borders in order to investigate the Northumbrian dialect of Old English and the development of Older Scots. Fundamental to place-name research is the compilation and analysis of historical forms, through which it is often possible to trace both the original etymology of the name and its development through time. Of interest here are the earliest spellings of the settlement name Harcarse in the Berwickshire parish of Fogo, which are as follows:

apud harecarres 1182 x 1232 *Melrose Liber* i no. 120

Domino Alano de *Harkarres* 1232 x 1248 *Coldstream Cart.* no. 38

(Dominus) Alano de *Harkars* 1232 x 1248 *Coldstream Cart.* no. 57

(Dominus) Alan[o] de *Harkarris* 1232 x 1248 GD212/2/1 no. 30

Alano de *harecarr*’ 1233 x 1247 *Melrose Liber* i no. 232

campum de *harcar*’ c.1270 *Melrose Liber* i no. 329

Harcaris 1479 *RMS* ii no. 1428

Harcaris 1513 *RMS* ii no. 3857

The first element of the place-name is Old English *hār* or its Older Scots descendant *hare*,⁹ while the second is one of the earliest known occurrences of the term *carse*. Further spellings,

⁹ The Old English term refers to greyish colour, while the Scots reflex may also have developed the sense ‘boundary’. Either meaning would be appropriate to Harcarse, which lies close to the boundary between the parishes of Fogo, Edrom and Swinton. Indeed, Harcarse Hill is over the boundary in Swinton.

together with metadata and additional information, are accessible through a freely available online resource for Berwickshire place-names created by the project at www.gla.ac.uk/reels.¹⁰

It is immediately apparent that, with the exception of the two Gaelicised instances in Stirlingshire, the earliest spellings of Harcarse predate other literary or toponymic occurrences of *carse* by at least fifty years, and possibly by as much as a century. More significantly, they remove the only obstacle to a derivation of the term from the plural form of *carr* ‘fen, low wet land’.¹¹ As noted by *OED* in the extract quoted above, ‘The difficulty is that no early examples of *kerris* or *carres* are found in Scots’. The latter corresponds precisely to the spelling found in the earliest form of Harcarse (*harecarres* 1182 x 1232), while two of the early thirteenth-century forms also preserve final <es> or <is> (*Harkarres* 1232 x 1248, *Harkarris* 1232 x 1248). The Berwickshire place-name spellings thus provide the missing examples to confirm the derivation suggested by *OED*.¹²

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¹⁰ The Berwickshire Place-Name Resource was designed by Brian Aitken and has been populated by the other members of the project team: Simon Taylor, Eila Williamson and myself.

¹¹ *OED*, s.v. *carr*, *car*, n.², gives the etymology as follows: ‘< Old Norse Compare Danish *kær*, *kjær* pool, pond (e.g. *gade-kær* village pond), Swedish *kærr* fen, morass, marsh, moor, Norwegian *kjær*, *kjerr* pool, marsh, wet copse, Icelandic *kjarr* copse-wood, brushwood, *kjarmýrr* marsh grown with brushwood’.

¹² I am grateful to Simon Taylor for his helpful comments on an earlier version of this note.