A gente Anglorum appellatur: The Evidence of Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* for the Replacement of Roman Names by English Ones during the Early Anglo-Saxon Period

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Abstract

Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica* contains unnoticed evidence for the processes of transition from Roman to Anglo-Saxon toponymy in early Anglo-Saxon England. Bede uses two different formulas to specify that place-names are English: *a gente Anglorum appellatur* ('called by the people of the English') and *lingua Anglorum* ('in the language of the English'). The first phrase is used exclusively of places whose English names show phonetic continuity with Roman ones; the second with a more heterogeneous group which mostly does not show phonetic continuity. This demands explanation. The explanation suggested here is that major places (likely to be spoken of throughout a whole *gens*) enjoyed greater stability of nomenclature than

minor ones.

Infamously, the contact between English and the languages of late Roman Britain (Brittonic and Latin) had a small impact on English, with the number of early Brittonic and Latin loan-words being small – and the number of prefixes borrowed being zero (Wollmann 1990; Coates 2007: 177–81). Even so, the prevailing assumption among archaeologists and, latterly, historians, is that migration to Britain by Germanic-speakers is entirely insufficient to explain the spread of English following the collapse of Roman rule in the region: it is simply too hard to envisage enough people crossing the North Sea to explain the substantial continuity evident in farming and settlement (see Higham 2007) – and even if this were possible, it now seems clearly at odds with the evidence for continuity in the genetic make-up of Britain's populace (see Richards, Capelli and Wilson 2008).

Accordingly, linguists have started to find models for the spread of Old English which do not involve large migrations: the lack of clear contact influence from Brittonic and Latin on our attested Old English is not

generally now seen as incompatible with the idea that Old English was adopted without massive demographic change (see for example von Tristram, ed., 1997–2003; for a dissenting voice, Coates 2007). It has proved hard convincingly to identify distinctively Celtic influence on English grammar, but it also now seems that we should only expect this in circumstances of prolongued language-contact with large numbers of bilingual children: the adoption of languages by adult non-native speakers tends rather to lead to changes which are generic to adult language-learning and not distinctive to particular substrates, and the development of English during the medieval period indeed exhibits these shifts (Trudgill 2010; Lupyan and Dale 2010). In any case, where contact varieties emerged as English expanded in Britain, it is easy to suppose that, were their distinctive features even of the kind that would appear in the textual record, these were at least partly assimilated to more conservative, prestigious varieties long before they had any chance to be recorded – we perhaps even have a hint of such a process in the Brittonic loan-words *luh* ('pool') and perhaps *carr* ('rock'), attested outside place-names only in Northumbrian Old English (Bosworth and Toller 1898: s.v. *luh*; Cameron et al. 2007: s.v. *carr*), and subsequently displaced by etymologically Germanic words such as *brim* and *stan*.

My concern in this paper, then, is a section of the Old English lexicon where the lack of Celtic influence is still causing consternation: place-names. The lexicon of Anglo-Saxon place-names underwent much the same

shift as the common lexicon: the vast majority of place-names in England can be etymologised as English. As leading toponymists have recently emphasised, this situation has yet to be convincingly accounted for by models other than a major demographic shift: there are important examples of languages spreading while assimilating a substantial substrate of earlier place-names, whereas such examples as have been adduced of languages spreading without major influence from local toponymy have involved major demographic shifts (Coates 2007; Padel 2007). However, a spate of new work has begun to respond to these problems. Some of these approaches are more convincing than others. Stephen Oppenheimer, making a case on genetic evidence for demographic continuity but accepting the premise that place-names must change slowly, made a bold but unevidenced argument for a substantial Germanic-speaking population in Britain centuries before the end of Roman Britain (2006). This inspired Goormachtigh and Durham to re-etymologise many of Kent's Roman place-names as Germanic, regrettably, however, without recourse to linguistically rigorous argumentation (2009). But strong arguments have been made for greater linguistic continuity in the other direction: in some areas, significantly more p-Celtic names survived into the Anglo-Saxon name-stock than was once recognised (e.g. Fox 2007; Coates and Breeze 2000, representative of many subsequent notes by Breeze in particular). Although these make a significant difference to our perception of a few regions, however, they do not revolutionise the overall picture. Extensive translation,

or folk-etymologisation, of Brittonic place-names into English has long been mooted, though hard evidence is thin on the ground (Smith 1980; Higham 1992: 202-203; Hough 2004; Fox 2007: §23). And evidence is emerging that renaming of places could take place despite demographic continuity: the eleventh-century expansion of English rule into Wales presents at least one area which saw wholesale renaming of places into English despite stability of settlement and the majority of free households remaining ethnically Welsh (Lewis 2007: 134-136), which could offer a model for earlier processes.

Here, however, I explore another model (not mutually exclusive of the others mentioned): the idea that place-names in large parts of Britain shifted only gradually to English, but that the shift nonetheless occurred (at least in those elevated sections of society to whose usage our sources attest) largely before the time of our earliest documentation (cf. Higham 1992: 200, building on Cox 1975-76: 55-57; Baker 2006: 178, 183; Probert 2007: 232-233). By definition, this theory is hard to substantiate. Elsewhere I have shown that although English place-names were very stable during the second millennium AD, there is evidence for greater instability in the place-name stock earlier in Anglo-Saxon culture, and argued that early medieval Wales, despite exhibiting linguistic continuity from pre-Roman times right through the early Middle Ages, nonetheless provides a model for a culture with a very unstable place-name stock, which could perhaps be applied to England in the prehistoric centuries following Roman rule (Hall

forthcoming). This provides some underpinning for the theory of a gradual but fairly swift transition from etymologically English place-names could have more to do with endemic instability in place-naming than with demographic change (tackling, for example, some of the assumptions of Padel 2007). In this article, I suggest that some slight but direct support for this hypothesis is afforded by Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, completed around 731 (quotations from Colgrave and Mynors 1991). Bede's place-naming as a whole has received little study since a burst of energy in the late nineteen-seventies, when a clutch of studies emphasised between them the sophistication of Bede's Latin toponymic vocabulary, its correlations with Old English toponymic vocabulary, some small but important hints that Bede had more access to Roman names than had been realised, and evidence that Bede was sensitive to historic Roman associations for places (Cox 1975-76; Smith 1979; Campbell 1979; Smith 1980). There is, however, more to be done with his evidence (cf. Hall 2010: 50-51).

A priori, from a variationist perspective, we might expect the replacement of one place-name with another to begin with the introduction of a variant name; this would then compete with the older name until eventually the new one became dominant. Even if the old name was in one language (in this case Latin or Brittonic) and the new name in another (in this case Old English), it would be startling if speakers of the incoming language coined a new name for a place before they had so much as heard

the local name – and accordingly, the desire to imagine in what

circumstances people might fail entirely to adopt local place-names partly

underlies the old preference for the 'fire and sword' model for explaining

the dominance of etymologically English place-names. However, Bede does

offer one clear example of variation between old and new names in his

mention of Roman Verulamium (now St Albans):

(1)   ciuitatem Uerolamium, quae nunc a gente Anglorum

Uerlamacaestir siue Uaeclingacaestir appellatur (*HE* i.7)

'the city of Verulamium, which is now called *Uerlamacæstir*

or *Uaeclingacæstir* by the English'

Quite how Bede knew the Roman name of Verulamium is unclear: Rivet

and Smith suggested the rather vague agency of "ecclesiastical tradition,"

Gildas's mention of St Alban as "Verolamiensem" ('Verolamian') being a

known datum point (1979: 498). At any rate, Bede's text shows that the

Roman name *Verulamium* had been adopted as the basis of an Old English

name *Uerlamacæstir*, through compounding with the generic element

ceaster 'old Roman fortification.' The form is attested again as

Verlamcestre in the tenth-century *Verlamcestre gesta*. However, Bede also

shows that Verulamium had acquired another Old English name,

Uaeclingacæstir, attested later in the Anglo-Saxon period as

Wætlingaceaster (Gover et al. 1938: 86-87; Coates 2005: 169). The origin

of this name is problematic and by 1007 it was in any case being supplanted by yet another name, St Albans (cf. Watts 2004: s.v.). What is important here, however, is that Bede's evidence demonstrates that Verulamium's Roman name was not simply erased by a new English name, as we might otherwise have supposed: the Roman name was adopted as *Uerlamacaestir*, but supplanted by a competing form (*Uaeclingacaestir*). Although this process resulted in discontinuity of names, it indicates that the discontinuity did not come with the emergence of English as the dominant language in eastern England: Roman names might have been perpetuated in Anglo-Saxon culture, with their subsequent replacement reflecting gradual (and perhaps endemic) toponymic change rather than a failure to borrow names at all.

Without other evidence, however, one would hesitate to consider *Uerolamium~Uerlamacæstir~Uaeclingacæstir* a paradigmatic case, not least because, according to Coates (2005), the name *Verulamium* was transmitted to Anglo-Saxons directly from British Latin, without the intermediation of Brittonic, which is unusual; and because of the exceptional longevity of Roman-style life in the city (Baker 2006: 25-31). But I suggest that Bede does provide, indirectly, a little more evidence for such processes of variation and change. *Uerolamium* is one of six occasions in the *Historia ecclesiastica* when Bede gives English equivalents for Roman Latin place-names, the other five being:

(2)   ciuitas quae dicitur Rutubi portus, a gente Anglorum nunc

corrupte Reptacaestir uocata (*HE* i.1)

'the city which is called *Rutubi portus*, now by corruption

called *Reptacaestir* [Richborough] by the people of the

English'

(3)   ad Ciuitatem Legionum, quae a gente Anglorum Legacaestir,

a Brettonibus autem rectius Carlegion appellatur (*HE* ii.2)

'to the City of Legions, which is called *Legacæstir* [Chester]

by the people of the English, but more correctly *Carlegion* by

the Britons'

(4)   in ciuitate Dorubreui, quam gens Anglorum a primario

quondam illius, qui dicebatur Hrof, Hrofaescaestrae

cognominat (*HE* ii.3)

'in the city of Dorubreuis, which the people of the English

call *Hrofaescaestrae* [Rochester] after a one-time leader of

theirs who was named Hrof'

(5)   in ciuitate Uenta, quae a gente Saxonum Uintancaestir

appellatur

(*HE* iii.7; cf. iii.23, iv.15, v.23)

'in the city of Uenta, which is called *Uintancaestir*

[Winchester] by the people of the Saxons'

(6)   ad ciuitatem Calcariam, quae a gente Anglorum Kaelcacaestir

        appellatur (*HE* iv.23)

        'to the city of Calcaria, which is called *Kaelcacaestir* [?

        Tadcaster] by the people of the English'

To these we might add Bede's reference to Carlisle in chapter 27 of his

earlier prose *Vita Cuthberti*, mentioned in the *Historia ecclesiastica* only by

its Roman name *Lugubalia* (iv.29):

(7)   ad Lugubaliam, quae a populis Anglorum corrupte Luel

        vocatur (Colgrave 1940: 242)

        'to Lugubalia, which is, by corruption, called *Luel* by the

        people of the English'

The form *Luel* is also found in Bede's written source, the anonymous *Vita*

Cuthberti, but *Lugubalia* is not (Colgrave 1940: 117, 122 [iv.5, iv.8]).

        Bede consistently introduces the vernacular forms of these Roman

names by the formula *a gente Anglorum appellatur* ('called by the people of

the English') and close variants. This formula is used only of these names.

The names themselves are also connected by the fact that in each case, the

Old English name is, as with *Uerolamium~Uerlamacæstir*, a reflex of the

Roman name. It is also worth noting that five of the seven have direct phonetic reflexes in modern English (*Reptacaestir*~Richborough, *Legacæstir*~Chester, *Hrofaescaestrae*~Rochester, *Uintancaestir*~Winchester, and *Luel*~Carlisle).

The names just listed contrast with a second group of names, which are introduced with another formula, *lingua Anglorum appellatur/uocatur* ('called in the language of the English'). These are of more diverse etymologies; I present them in four groups which make it easier to follow my interpretations of the attestations below:

Group 1

(8)   in loco ubi usque hodie lingua Anglorum Augustinaes Ác, id
         est Robur Augustini ... appellatur (*HE* ii.2)
         'in the place which to the present day is called *Augustinaes*
         Ác, that is Augustine's oak, in the language of the English'

(9)   vocatur locus ille lingua Anglorum Hefenfeld, quod dici
         potest latine Caelestis Campus (*HE* iii.2)
         'In the language of the English, that place is called *Hefenfeld*,
         which can be called heavenly field in Latin'

(10)   in castro quodam quod lingua Anglorum Cnobheresburg, id

est Vrbs Cnobheri, uocatur (*HE* iii.19)

'in a certain fort, which is called *Cnobheresburg* in English,

that is the citadel of Cnobherus'

Group 2

(11)   in loco qui sermone Pictorum Peanfahel, lingua autem

Anglorum Penneltun appellatur (*HE* i.12)

'in a place which in the language of the Picts is called

Peanfahel, but in the language of the English *Penneltun*'

(12)   monasterio quod uocatur lingua Anglorum Bancornaburg ...

de monasterio Bancor (*HE* ii.2)

'a monastery which in the language of the English is called

Bancornaburg [Bangor Iscoed]'

Group 3

(13)   in loco, qui lingua Anglorum Denisesburna, id est Riuus

Denisi, uocatur (*HE* iii.1)

'in a place which in the language of the English is called

Denisesburna [Rowley Burn], that is the stream of Denisus'

(14)   in loco qui lingua Anglorum nuncupatur Maserfelth (*HE*

iii.9)

'in a place which in the language of the English is called

Maserfelth'

Group 4

(15)   iuxta ciuitatem quae lingua Anglorum Tiouulfingacaestir

uocatur (*HE* ii.16)

'alongside the city which in the language of the English is

called *Tiouulfingacaestir* [Littleborough]'

(16)   in ciuitate quae lingua Saxonum Ythancaestir appellatur (*HE*

iii.22)

'in the city which in the language of the Saxons is called

Ythancaestir [Bradwell-on-Sea]'

(17)   ad ciuitatulam quandam desolatam ... quae lingua Anglorum

Grantacaestir uocatur (*HE* iv.19)

'to a certain small, deserted town ... which in the language of

the English is called *Grantacaestir* [Cambridge]'

One might suggest simply that the fact that the *Historia ecclesiastica* is in

Latin, but contained non-Latin names, is sufficient motivation for Bede to specify that a name was in the *lingua Anglorum*. A desire to mark code-switching is surely the reason for stating that the Irish place-names *Rathmelsigi* and *Mag éo~Muig éo* (iii.27; iv.4) are in *lingua Scottorum*, and this is presumably true also of Theodore's record of the Synod of Hatfield, quoted by Bede, which includes the phrase "in loco, qui Saxonico uocabulo Haethfelth nominatur", 'in the place which is called by the Saxon word *Haethfelth*;' iv.17.[1] But Bede's text is full of English place-names, and unsurprisingly he did not normally pause to specify that a name was English, so there are probably special reasons for doing so in most if not all of the cases just listed.

In group 1, the simplest explanation is that Bede specified that the names were *lingua Anglorum* because he then went on to gloss the vernacular name in Latin, using the phrase to signal the switch between English name and Latin gloss.[2] Group 2 comprises the two occasions in the *Historia ecclesiastica* on which Bede explicitly gives an English alternative to a Celtic name: here he clearly used the phrase *lingua Anglorum* to indicate that the places were also known by a name in another language. Reasons for using the formula are less obvious for groups 3 and 4, however. Here Bede neither states alternative place-names nor mentions non-English names. Nevertheless, I suggest (with Baker 2006: 247) that he specified the names to be English because they were known to have or to have had non-English names. In the case of group 3, the alternative names would

presumably have been Brittonic, and the evidence is merely conjectural: for this reason, I leave these names aside here.[3] In group 4, however, we know that the three places named *lingua Anglorum* had been Roman places, and so did Bede, since he called them *civitates* (or, in the case of Grantacaestir, *civitatula*), a term which Campbell has shown to indicate a Roman heritage in Bede's Latin (1979: esp. 41; cf. Blair 2005: 250-251). We can add that *Tiouulfingacaestir* had had the Roman name *Segelocum*; *Ythancaestir* is an Anglicisation of the Roman name *Othona*; and the story mentioning *Grantacaestir* is about a stone-robbing expedition to the Roman settlement at Cambridge, where the previous existence of a Roman name was self-evident, and the Roman name had been *Duroliponte* (Rivet and Smith 1979: 453, 434-435, 351-352, respectively). It is unfortunately not clear whether Bede knew the Roman names for these places but chose not to state them, or whether he did not know them and merely knew or surmised that they must have existed, but we might at least conclude that he chose to imply that their English names were not their only ones.[4] It is also worth adding that few of Bede's *lingua Anglorum* names seem to have survived into the present toponymicon (*Grantacaestir*~Grantchester; perhaps *Cnobheresburg*~Burgh Castle; plus the Celtic, but not the English, forms of *Peanfahel*~Kinneil and *Bancor*~Bangor Iscoed).

What is noteworthy in all this for researching place-name change is that the two formulas used by Bede to specify that a place-name was English do not seem to be deployed simply for stylistic variety. In the first

place, the formulas are the only phrases used by Bede to specify that a name was English, and if variety had been Bede's goal, he could have used numerous alternatives, including phrases along the lines of *Saxonico uocabulo nominatur* used by Theodore and *sermone Scottico*, which Bede himself used when talking about the Irish monastery of Inisboufinde (*HE* iv.4). Moreover, there is a correlation between the nature of a place-name and the formulaic phrase which Bede used to introduce it:

- When Bede gives an English form for a stated Roman name, he always uses the formula *a gente Anglorum appellatur*, and the English name is invariably derived phonetically from the Roman one. In most cases, the modern name is a lineal descendant of this Old English name.

- When he specifies that the name of a Roman site is *lingua Anglorum*, he does not give a Roman name, and an etymological link is apparent only in the case of *Othona~Ythancaestir*. Most *lingua Anglorum* names have since been lost.

This patterning seems to me to be significant, and whether or not the explanation of it in this paper is accepted, I think explanation is required.

Explanation itself is not, however, easy. It seems unlikely that there is a direct causal connection between the formula used by Bede and whether

or not he states a Roman name – this would be implausibly arbitrary. Nor, for all Bede's linguistic acuity, is an English place-name's etymological relationship to a Roman name likely to have been his criterion for using the formulae in question: besides the issue of arbitrariness, *Ythancaestir* would in this reading have been mis-categorised, while Bede does not seem to have realised that *Hrofaescaestrae* derived from *Dorubreuis*, since he etymologised its first element as being an English personal name. Moreover, he almost certainly inferred the Latin place-name *Ciuitas Legionum* from the English and Welsh forms rather than actually knowing it.[5]

My best suggestion is rather that Bede tended to associate a English place-name with a whole *gens* (and hence the formula *a gente Anglorum appellatur*) when he thought that anyone in the *gens* might be expected to use it, and merely with a *lingua* (and hence the formula *lingua Anglorum appellatur*) when the place-name existed in the language of the *gens*, but was too little used for it to be claimed that the whole *gens* used it. The point can conveniently be exemplified from southern Finland, with its two sets of vernacular toponymy, Finnish and Swedish. I might say, regarding Finland's capital city, that "I went to Helsinki, which the Swedes call *Helsingfors*," since most Swedes might be expected to refer to Helsinki fairly often. But, regarding a small Finnish town, I would say "I went to Uusikaupunki, which in Swedish is called *Nystad*;" I would not say "I went to Uusikaupunki, which the Swedes call *Nystad*," because it is unlikely that most Swedes ever refer to it. In this reading, places whose English names

were used, in Bede's reckoning, *a gente Anglorum* were well-known places. The fact that such places were usually ones whose Roman names were known to Bede, and invariably ones whose names in Old English show phonetic continuity with the Roman names, would in this reading correlate with the places' fame, as would the names' frequent survival into modern English.

How does this exploration of Bede's phrasing help us to understand the Roman place-names of Anglo-Saxon England? If my interpretation is correct, it allows us to correlate the borrowing of the names of Roman *civitates* into English in the early Anglo-Saxon period with how well known the places were in Bede's time, the early eighth century. This is consistent with a wide range of other evidence which I have elsewhere used to show that in early medieval England and Wales, more important places had more stable names (forthcoming). And the correlation between a place's importance and the stability of its name might elucidate the processes whereby the Roman toponymy of Britain was lost during Anglicisation. One way to explain the correlation would be to argue that only the names of well-known Roman places were borrowed into English during the fading of Roman culture in England, and that these places remained well-known into Bede's time, while the names of less major Roman places were never transmitted. However, the example of *Uerolamium~Uerlamacæstir~Uaeclingacæstir* and the greater loss since Bede's time of his *lingua Anglorum* names suggests a slightly different

explanation. In this interpretation, the names of many and varied Roman places were borrowed into English during the Migration Period. These were liable to be superseded over time, but the more major the place, the less likely it was to change. One mechanism for this might be demographic: the larger the number of speakers who referred to a place, the more would have to switch for a new variant to achieve dominance. An alternative mechanism might be offered by analogy with morphological levelling: as irregular verbs are more likely to be levelled with regular ones if they are seldom used, place-names used relatively rarely by a speech community as a whole might also prove more prone to innovation than place-names used often. Either line of reasoning would need further research – as does place-name change in general (cf. Bowern 2010, 669 on population size). Either way, however, the importance of a place in the eighth century can help explain why it still had an old name without us needing to posit continuity in its fame from the early Anglo-Saxon period right through to Bede's own time; and we might be closer to a model for the loss of Britain's Roman place-names without needing to invoke a massive demographic change.

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[1] *Contra* Blair 1937: 224 (and, tentatively following him, Baker 2006: 247), who suggested that Theodore's phrasing might be evidence for an unstated Brittonic doublet, which is how I read group 3.

[2] Though they are all potentially in variation with non-English names, which is my explanation for groups 2, 3 and 4. *Hefenfeld* lay at the westernmost edge of the earliest traceable phase of Old English Bernician place-names, those in -*ham* and -*ingaham*, to the west of which p-Celtic place-names survive in unusually large numbers (Fox 2007). This perhaps makes it more likely that it should have had a p-Celtic doublet. Indeed, Breeze even suggested that Bede's *caelestis campus* is a British Latin name; either way, his article provides a useful guide to the toponymic problems surrounding *Hefenfeld* (2007). *Cnobheresburg* was a "castrum" and therefore a Roman fortification; if the usual association with Burgh Castle is right, the Roman name was *Gariannum* (Rivet and Smith 1979: 366; for more recent discussion Pestell 2004: 56-57). The meeting at *Augustinaes Ác* involved people "proximae Brettonum prouinciae" ('of the nearby province of the Britons') and happened "in confinio Huicciorum et Occidentalium Saxonum" ('on the border between the Hwicce and the West Saxons'), and thus was at least near to clearly p-Celtic-speaking areas. If the name is to be identified with Aust, which is admittedly unlikely, it is worth noting that Aust is non-English in etymology (Rivet and Smith 1979: 510-511; Watts 2004: s.v.).

[3] *Densisesburna* probably preserves a p-Celtic first element (Cox 1975-76: 44) and seems, like *Hefenfeld*, discussed in the previous note, to have lain on the western edge of the earliest traceable Old English place-names in Bernicia; that said, however, a p-Celtic etymology is not clear from Bede's own interpretation of the name as *riuus Denisi* ('Denisus's stream'). *Maserfelth* is of uncertain location (Clarkson 2006); its obscure first element at least suggests non-Anglo-Saxon etymology, as may its last, which occurs as an epexegetic suffix in a number of Old English loan-names (Lewis 2007: 137-140). The *Annales Cambriae* refer to the battle at *Maserfelth* as *Bellum Cocboy*, with a couple of later references in the same vein which seem to be textually independent, showing that there was a Brittonic name for the site in literary tradition at least (Rowland 1990: 124-125).

[4] Bede seems to have held Roman names in greater esteem than vernacular ones (Hall 2010: 50-51), so if he knew Roman names for these places, we would expect him to give them: indeed, this is supported by my argument here that in specifying the names to be English, Bede was paying due respect to their Roman identity. On the other hand, if Bede guessed that these names had had Roman antecedents simply from the generic element -*cæstir*, he did not present such names consistently: he mentioned the now lost name *Tunnacaestir* (specifying that it was named after a monk called Tunna; iv.22) and *Dorciccaestrae* (Dorchester in Oxfordshire, whose first element is surely etymologically a Roman name; iv.23; cf. iii.7; Rivet and Smith 1979: 513; Watts 2004: s.v. *DORCHESTER Oxon.*) without specifying them to be *lingua Anglorum*.

[5] See the apparently independent arguments of Smith 1979: 6-7 and Field 1999; and Hall 2010: 68-69.