TACITUS, PTOLEMY AND THE RIVER FORTH

The publication in 1979 of Rivet and Smith's *Place-Names of Roman Britain* put the study of British-Latin toponyms upon a new footing.[1] Yet many problems remain, as discussion in the last few years has shown.[2] What follows thus looks at one particular high-profile crux, that of *Bodotria*, given by Tacitus as the name of the River Forth. The form, well-known to classicists (since it appears in his *Agricola*), also occurs with marked variants in Ptolemy's *Geography* and the Ravenna Cosmography.

Rivet and Smith presented the evidence for it as follows. Tacitus mentions the *Bodotria* three times (*Agricola* 23.1, 25.1, 25.3), always in this form. But Ptolemy refers to it as *Βοδερία* (2, 3, 4), variant *Βογδερία*, while the Ravenna Cosmography (108/32) calls it *Bdora*. Nobody has managed to reconcile the forms (though all have a sequence B, D, R, A), and there is no agreement on meaning (Rivet and Smith gave varied derivations without preference for any). Yet two etymologies deserve mention. The first adduces the root **boud-* 'victory, excellence'. This is familiar from Queen Boudica, 'victorious one' (with long *i*), who is styled 'Boadicea' (with the improved but still incorrect reading 'Boudicca') below Thomas Thornycroft's statue of her by Westminster Bridge. However, Rivet and Smith described a sense 'victory' river as unconvincing, since it does not account for that persistent R. The second is W. J. Watson's link with Irish *bodhar* 'deaf; stagnant (of water)', here with the sense 'silent river'.[3]

This needs fuller discussion, since it has Watson's considerable authority behind it. Yet it is also unsatisfying. Deafness and muteness are not the same. If the Forth were thought of as a silent river, we should expect a name like that of the Mydan, a Carmarthenshire stream (SN 7832) two miles from Llandovery (Welsh *Llanymddyfri*, 'church by waters'), explained as a dialectal variant of Welsh *mudan* 'little dumb one, little silent one', where *-an* is a diminutive suffix.[4] Watson himself referred elsewhere to the River Balvag as 'little dumb one' (NN 5520) in alluvial flatlands of Perth and Kinross, and to Awin Vallo 'silent river' in the Isle of Man.[5] Watson argued further that Ptolemy's name for the Forth, *Βοδερία*, survived at the hamlet of Aberbothrie (NO 2446) in eastern Perth and Kinross (nowhere near the Forth), which he understood as 'river-mouth of the deaf one, the noiseless stream', taking Gaelic *boidhre* as translating a Pictish original of similar meaning. He also noted Auchivarie or *Achadh Bhoidhre* (NN 2993) in desolate Glen Gloy, south of Fort Augustus.[6] But this latter means 'field of a deaf woman' (*buidhre, bodhaire*) and so is irrelevant here. As for Aberbothrie, it is dangerous to argue as Watson does for three reasons: Ptolemy's forms are not entirely to be relied on; a translation in the ninth century from Pictish (a language of which almost nothing survives) to Gaelic multiplies hypotheses; and, most fundamentally, Watson could cite no hydronym known to

[1] A. L. F. Rivet and C. Smith, *The Place-Names of Roman Britain* (London, 1979).

[2] R. Coates and A. Breeze, *Celtic Voices, English Places* (Stamford, 2000); D. N. Parsons and P. Sims-Williams (edd.), *Ptolemy: Towards a Linguistic Atlas of the Earliest Celtic Place-Names of Europe* (Aberystwyth, 2000); J. de Hoz, E. R. Luján and P. Sims-Williams (edd.), *New Approaches to Celtic Place-Names in Ptolemy's Geography* (Madrid, 2005); P. Sims-Williams, *Ancient Celtic Place-Names in Europe and Asia Minor* (Oxford, 2006).

[3] Rivet and Smith (n. 1), 269–71.

[4] R. J. Thomas, *Enwau Afonydd a Nentydd Cymru* (Caerdydd, 1938), 77–8.

[5] W. J. Watson, *The History of the Celtic Place-Names of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1926), 211.

[6] Watson (n. 5), 435–6.

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mean 'deaf one, silent one'. So it is likelier that the original Pictish term at Aberbothrie meant 'dirty stream' (this part of Perth and Kinross is low-lying), and has been misinterpreted over twelve centuries. Aberbothrie hence offers no secure basis for interpretation of *Bodotria* or Βοδερία as 'deaf river, silent river'. If anyone wishes to cite Watson's explanation of *Tava* or *Tavus* 'Tay' (in Tacitus, Ptolemy and the Ravenna Cosmography) as 'silent river', we may answer that the Tay (like the Taw of north Devon, Ravenna's *Fl. Tabo*) is not silent, and Ekwall and Nicolaisen were surely right in explaining its name as 'flowing one, river'.[7]

Since this paper was written in 2004 and accepted for publication, Graham Isaac's account of the hydronym has been published. He says this. He refers to Rivet and Smith, who 'list and superficially discuss extensive speculations to establish the Celticity of this name'. Poor Rivet and Smith, to be patronized by Dr Isaac. He then (rightly) dismisses etymologies linking the forms with *Forth* (and its Middle Welsh equivalent *Gweryt*); British *boud-* 'victory'; and Welsh *byddar* 'deaf'. He cites Professor Peter Schrijver of the University of Utrecht for 'derivation from **boutria*, on the assumption that the Tacitean form *Bodotria* is the best (with a sort of dittography, for **Botria*). But this still leaves the other transmitted forms isolated.' He therefore informs the reader that 'the extant facts dictate classification as "not obviously Celtic or Indo-European". The form in question is apparently the pre-Celtic name which was replaced by Celtic **Uoretia*.'[8]

This paper set out to show that it is nothing of the kind; but how do we progress? A suggestion here worth looking at was made by Johan Kaspar Zeuss (1806–56), who linked *Bodotria* (for which he proposed the reading *Bodortia*) with Middle Irish *búaidrid* 'disturbs; stirs up, muddies, makes turbid (of water)' and Welsh *budr* 'filthy, dirty'.[9] The sense would be 'dirty river'. It is a pity this was overlooked by Rivet and Smith, because (with modification) it provides the key to an answer, as we shall see (and, as noted above, has been suggested in a slightly different way by Professor Schrijver). On etymology, Vendryes derived Irish *búaidrid* 'disturbs' and Welsh *budr* 'dirty' from an Indo-European root referring to dung or filth, with unsavoury reflexes in many languages, including Sanskrit *guváti* 'dung', Old Church Slavonic *govino* 'filthiness', and Armenian *ku* 'dunghill'. More specifically, Vendryes derived the Irish and Welsh words from **boud-ro-*, formally close to German *Kot* 'dung' and Old English *cwead* 'filth'.[10]

Reconstructed **boud-ro-* offers a solution. The middle part of the Forth winds through Flanders Moss, a formidable obstacle that has determined Scotland's history. Duncan observes that 'Britain is divided from east to west by the basin of the Forth, with its associated moss, impassable until the eighteenth century. This basin acted as a barrier between human societies from an uncertain prehistoric time until the end of the first millennium A.D.'[11] Dickinson said more. The Firth of Forth and waist of land between Stirling and Loch Lomond kept invaders to the south. It fixed the site of the Wall of Antoninus, the northern limit of Northumbria, and the farthest occupations of Edward I and Edward III. Vital here was the frontier of 'Flanders Moss, the carse of the Forth and Endrick', which 'was undrained and impassable until the eighteenth century, and must be passed either at the western end by Drymen and Aberfoyle or at

[7] Watson (n. 5), 51; Rivet and Smith (n. 1), 470.
[8] G. R. Isaac, 'Scotland', in de Hoz et al. (n. 2), 189–214.
[9] J. K. Zeuss, *Grammatica Celtica* (Berolini, 1871[2]), 22.
[10] J. Vendryes, *Lexique étymologique de l'irlandais ancien: Lettre B* (Paris, 1981), 108.
[11] A. A. M. Duncan, *Scotland: The Making of the Kingdom* (Edinbugh, 1975), 1.

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the eastern end when the hills north and south of Forth almost meet at the rock of Stirling Castle'. [12] Running through the quagmire of Flanders Moss, the Forth might thus naturally be called the 'dirty one'. Even below Stirling it ran past marshes and extensive tidal flats. These were also a barrier, as the Forth often flooded its banks at high tide until embankments were built in modern times.[13] The alluvial plain of the Forth is still flat, so that viewers downstream to this day see Stirling Rock rise like an island from the carselands.[14] Together, these features reinforce a meaning 'dirty river' for *Bodotria* in Tacitus.

The names of various Welsh streams support this etymology. They include *Budrellach* (now obsolete) 'dirty one' in Pembrokeshire, *Cachan* 'dung stream' in Monmouthshire, *Budrog* (also obsolete) 'dirty one' in Denbighshire, *Logyn* (brooks in Powys, Dyfed, and Glamorgan) 'filthy one', and *Dulais Fisweiliawg* 'dung-stained black stream', a tributary of the Tywi, Carmarthenshire. Like them in Ireland is the Cockow 'dung stream'.[15] But two rivers *not* relevant here are the Boyd near Bath and Bude in Cornwall. Oliver Padel and the English Place-Name Society link them to Welsh *budr* 'dirty', though admitting this is very uncertain, since all forms lack *r*.[16] We may disregard them. These rivers are related to Welsh *budd* 'gain, advantage', from the root **boud-* 'victory, excellence' mentioned above with Queen Boudica. The Boyd and Bude were so called because of the medicinal powers of their waters (the Boyd here resembling the therapeutic springs at Bath four miles away).

An explanation relating the Forth to Common Celtic **boud-ro-* 'dirty' thus seems cogent, particularly as it is supported by *Budrellach*, *Budrog*, and the names of other Welsh streams. Yet what was its form? How do we reconcile *Bodotria* in Tacitus, Ptolemy's *Βοδερία*, and the Ravenna Cosmography's *Bdora*? Now, all copies of *Agricola* go back to a unique original (now lost) written in Germany soon before 850 and apparently seen in 1455 at Rome (but soon afterwards disappearing).[17] *Bodotria* is thus known from one text alone, copied nearly eight centuries after Tacitus was alive. It may hence be more corrupt than we imagine, as certainly seems the case with his *Mons Graupius*.[18] In this context 'Boadicea' in other manuscripts of Tacitus for original *Boudica* is pertinent, showing scribal disarray in vowels and diphthongs, when consonants stand firm. If we can emend 'Boadicea', we can emend *Bodotria*. Here Vendryes's **boud-ro-* allows a solution, especially in the light of Rivet and Smith's comment on B, D, R, A in all witnesses. A name **Boudra* 'dirty one' makes good sense for the Forth, with notorious morasses in its mid-part and alluvial flats on its estuary. We may add that the British diphthong *ou* by the time of Tacitus and Ptolemy was becoming a long close *o*, giving **Bodra* 'dirty one'.[19] With scribal metathesis, this is what the Ravenna Cosmography actually has. As regards *Bodotria*

[12] W. Croft Dickinson, *Scotland from the Earliest Times to 1603* (Oxford, 1977[3]), 1.

[13] K. H. Jackson, 'The sources for the Life of St Kentigern', in N. Chadwick (ed.), *Studies in the Early British Church* (Cambridge, 1958), 273–357, at 306–7.

[14] K. H. Jackson, 'Bede's *Urbs Giudi*: Stirling or Cramond?', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 2 (1981), 1–7, at 5–6.

[15] Thomas (n. 4), 5, 44, 96

[16] O. J. Padel, *A Popular Dictionary of Cornish Place-Names* (Penzance, 1988), 60.

[17] D. Schnaps, 'The lost and found manuscripts of Tacitus' *Agricola*', *CPh* 74 (1979), 28–42; C. E. Margia and R. H. Rogers, 'A tale of two manuscripts', *CPh* 79 (1984), 145–53; G. Magnaldi, 'Suetonio, Tacito e il codice Hersfeldense', *Prometheus* 23 (1997), 119–44, 229–46.

[18] A. C. Breeze, 'Philology on Tacitus's Graupian Hill and Trucculan Harbour', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* 132 (2002), 305–11.

[19] K. H. Jackson, *Language and History in Early Britain* (Edinburgh, 1953), 313.

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in Tacitus, this can be taken as having acquired by scribal error the *-tria* of a Latin feminine noun like *patria*, not to be expected in Celtic. Ptolemy's Βοδερία would thus be closer to our posited **Bodra*, with *e* presumably due to svarabhakti between *d* and *r*. The long *o* of **Bodra* would then have been shortened to the short one of Βοδερία, on which Watson based his etymology in *bodhar* 'deaf', rejecting on formal grounds that of Zeuss, who had cited Irish *búadarthae* 'muddied, turbid' with *ua* from original long *o* (this last being a natural description of water, as in a ninth-century Milan gloss on those who drink *din tsruth buadarthu* 'from the muddied stream'of the Septuagint version of the Psalms, as opposed to the pure springs of the Hebrew text).[20]

If we can thus restore the name of the Forth in our sources as **Bodra*, with the meaning 'dirty (river)' in allusion to swamps by it, this retains the consistent B, D, R, A of the classical texts while providing an original that scribes might distort. Corruption probably began with **Bodria*, proper and other nouns in *-ia* being common in Latin, but unlikely for a British hydronym. We may compare the Clota or Clyde, Coccuveda or Coquet, Deva or Dee, Isca or Exe, Mama or Medlock, Nida or Neath, Sabrina or Severn, Tava or Tay, Vedra or Wear and so on, all ending in *-a* and not *-ia*.[21]

As regards the Forth, therefore, editors of Tacitus may now choose to read *Bodra* 'dirty river' in their text. They can rule out *Bodotria*, which nobody has made sense of and which is surely corrupt. They may reflect too on the obstacle that the marshes of the Forth were for Agricola on his northern campaigns of 83 and 84, as they were in 1072 for a later general, William the Conqueror. Avoiding Stirling Rock, William took his troops in by the Fords of Frew (NN 6696), called *na Friùthachan* in Gaelic, which are 8 miles upstream from Stirling. They are the first point above Stirling where the Forth can be forded. An English chronicler thus referred to them as the 'Ford' (an expression that Professor Swanton of Exeter mistranslates as 'Forth').[22] Like Agricola, the Conqueror also took care to send a fleet up the east coast of Britain as he advanced northwards by land.

So it seems *Bodotria* in Tacitus, Βοδερία in Ptolemy, and *Bdora* in the Ravenna Cosmography can be derived from original *Bodra* meaning 'dirty (river)'. *Bodra* would derive from **Boudra*, from **boud-ro*, from a root **g^{w}eudh-* common to Celtic and Germanic. If correct, this provides an improved reading for our texts; allows an emendation for maps of Roman Britain; brings home some of the problems Agricola faced in his assault on the north; and vindicates a suggestion made over a century and a half ago by Johan Kaspar Zeuss (and now also put forward by Peter Schrijver of Utrecht).

Two final notes. First, if this emendation in Tacitus is sound, it resembles others in his work. 'Boadicea' is *Boudica* 'victorious one'; 'Galgacus' is *Calgacus* 'swordsman' (cf. Old Irish *colg* 'sword'), chief of the Caledonians; *castris Antonam* is *cis Trisantonam* 'this side of the river Trent', as proposed by Bradley in 1883; and *mons Graupius* may be *mons Cripius* 'cock's-comb mountain' (cf. Welsh *crib* 'comb; bird's crest; ridge') or Bennachie, an Aberdeenshire massif with five aligned peaks.[23] In each case emendation is supported by reference to Celtic philology.

Second, *Bodra* proposed above has nothing to do with the modern name *Forth*.

[20] Vendryes (n. 10), 108.
[21] Coates and Breeze (n. 2), 79–80.
[22] Watson (n. 5), 52–3, 349–50; *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, tr. M. J. Swanton (London, 1996), 208.
[23] Watson (n. 5), 55–6; Rivet and Smith (n. 1), 96, 97.

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Watson derived this from Common Celtic **Uoritia* 'slow-running one', which later writers in part accept.[24] Yet there seems a simpler solution. The Welsh knew the Forth as *Gweryd*, the exact cognate of *Forth*. *Gweryd* is also a common noun meaning 'earth, soil, mould, humus, sward, land; clod, sod', while Old Breton *gueretreou* 'lands of humus' glosses *sirtium* 'of sandbanks, of quicksands'. In this context *Gweryd* makes sense as the original name of Flanders Moss, made up of spongy earthy humus. If so, a regional name would have became a river-name, much as *Liffey*, originally meaning the plain west of Dublin, became used of its main river.[25] This explanation accords with references in early Celtic sources.[26]

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[24] Watson (n. 5), 52–4; T. F. O'Rahilly, *Early Irish History and Mythology* (Dublin, 1946), 528–9; Rivet and Smith (n. 1), 270.
[25] F. J. Byrne, *Irish Kings and High-Kings* (London, 1973), 150.
[26] Watson (n. 5), 52–4; I. Williams (ed.), *Armes Prydein* (Dublin, 1972), 67; M. O. Anderson, *Kings and Kingship in Early Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1973), 146, 242; J. Bannerman, *Studies in the History of Dalriada* (Edinburgh, 1974), 85; R. Bromwich (ed.), *Trioedd Ynys Prydein* (Cardiff, 1978²), 501.

A FORGOTTEN SOPHIST

An inscription from Lindus on Rhodes, published by C. Blinkenberg in 1942, has the following text (to which I have added accents, breathings and punctuation):[1]

Λίνδιοι καὶ οἱ μάσ[τρ]οι
Τιβέριον Κλαύδιον Ἀντίπατρον
[Μνασ]αγόρα Πάγιον, τὸν ἱερέα τᾶς Λ[ινδίας]
[Ἀθα]νᾶς καὶ τοῦ Διὸς τοῦ Πολιέως κα[ὶ Ἀρτά-]
[μι]τος Κεκοίας, τριηραρχήσαντα, ἱερατεύσα[ντα]
τῶν αὐτοκρατόρων, γυμνασιαρχήσαντα, ποιη[σάμε-]
νον τὰν θέσιν τοῦ ἐλαίου ἐπὶ μῆνας δεκατρεῖς, ἀ[γω-]
νοθετήσαντα τοῦ ἱεροῦ τοῦ Ἁλιέων ἀγῶνος, ταμ[ι-]
εύσαντα, πρυτανεύσαντα καὶ πρεσβεύσαντα, τειμα-
θέντα τρὶς ὑπὸ τοῦ δάμου τοῦ Ῥοδίων καὶ τοῦ Λινδίων,
ἐν προεισφόραις καὶ ἐπιδόσεσιν π<λ>είοσιν γενόμενον,
χοραγήσαντα δίς, ἱερωνήσαντα, ἱερατεύσαντα τῶν
μυστηρίων τοῦ Βάκχου Διονύσου, κατασκευάσαν-
τα ἐκ τῶν ἰδίων τὸ ἱερὸν τοῦ Ἀσκλαπιοῦ ἐν τᾷ πόλε[ι]
μετὰ τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ Κλαυδίου Διοκλείδα κατερε[ι-]
φθὲν ἐν τῷ σεισμῷ, καὶ πολιτευσάμενον τ[ὰ]

[1] I have used the following abbreviations: Blinkenberg = C. Blinkenberg (ed.), *Lindos: fouilles et recherches, 1902–1914: Inscriptions* (Berlin–Copenhagen, 1941); *Bull. ép.* = 'Bulletin épigraphique', appearing annually in *REG*, cited by year and number of item; Morelli = D. Morelli, *I Culti in Rodi*, *SCO* 8 (1959); Puech = B. Puech, *Orateurs et sophistes grecs dans les Inscriptions d'époque impériale* (Paris, 2002); Robert, *OMS* = L. Robert, *Opera Minora Selecta* (Amsterdam, 1969–90). Inscription: *I. Lindos* no. 449. J. and L. Robert, *Bull. ép.* (1942), 115 (p. 348), commented on the inscription and noted τὸν σοφιστάν in line 18; cf. also L. Robert, *Documents d'Asie Mineure* (Paris, 1987), 99–100 (*BCH* 1978). I am grateful to Glen Bowersock for his advice.

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