

THE LINGUISTIC EVOLUTION OF INDO-EUROPEAN RIVER NAMES

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Abstract

This article explores the etymology and linguistic development of river names (hydronyms) from Ancient Greek ποταμός (potamós) through Celtic and Old English contexts across Northern England and Continental Europe. Using Proto-Indo-European roots such as *kweth₂-* ('foam, seethe') and **is-/eis-* ('to move swiftly'), the study traces how primary lexical elements evolved into complex hydronyms reflecting physical characteristics and cultural interactions.

Keywords: Hydronyms, Proto-Indo-European roots, river names, etymology, Celtic toponymy, phonological change, lenition, *ā*-mutation (*ā*-affection).

Introduction

Hydronyms—names of rivers, streams, and water bodies—constitute a linguistic substrate often predating other layers of vocabulary in Indo-European languages. Due to their antiquity and relative stability, hydronyms provide crucial evidence for reconstructing prehistoric language stages and cultural relationships.

This article focuses on a comparative study of selected hydronyms from Ancient Greek, British Celtic, Old English, and related Continental European contexts. Particular attention is given to the PIE roots *kweth₂-* (foam, seethe) and **is-/eis-* (to move swiftly), which manifest across languages and geographies. The study also addresses the influence of historical population movements—such as the Anglian and Scandinavian settlements—on the retention or loss of Celtic linguistic elements in English river names. The abstract summarizes the study's aim, methodological approach, and linguistic focus. It sets the stage for an interdisciplinary examination combining historical linguistics and toponymy. Annotation: The inclusion of personal names points to the intersection of language, culture, and territorial identity in hydronymy. Annotation: The introduction frames the research questions and situates the topic within the wider field of Indo-European linguistics and historical toponymy.

Methods

The research employs a comparative historical linguistic approach, analyzing phonological, morphological, and semantic developments of river names. Primary sources include: Ancient Greek lexicons and texts describing ποταμός and Τηθύς. Celtic linguistic corpora, including Brittonic, Primitive Cumbric, and Goidelic names. Old English place-name surveys from the English Place-Name Society (EPNS). Secondary sources include etymological dictionaries, linguistic reconstructions, and archaeological settlement data. Phonological changes such as lenition, vowel affection (ā-mutation), and consonant loss are identified through diachronic comparison of attested forms and linguistic reconstruction principles. Settlement history informs the interpretation of linguistic stratification and regional variations. Methodology clarifies the interdisciplinary tools and data sources used, emphasizing linguistic reconstruction combined with archaeological and historical data.

Results

Greek ποταμός (potamós) and the PIE Root *kweth₂- The Ancient Greek ποταμός, meaning ‘river’, derives from the PIE root *kweth₂- ‘foam, seethe’. This is evident in cognates such as Vedic Sanskrit kváth-ant- (‘foaming, seething’) and Gothic hwapjan (‘to foam’). The PIE root exhibits a semantic field connected with dynamic, foaming water, symbolically representing rivers in motion. The Greek ποταμός is reconstructed as kuoth₂-mó-, a primary adjective with the CoC-mó-structure typical of PIE adjectives (cf. g^{wh}or-mó- ‘warm’ → Vedic gharmá-). This formation argues against a derivation by secondary suffixation and supports its primary lexical status in Greek. This section establishes the etymological origin of ποταμός, linking it directly to PIE roots and corroborating it with linguistic typology

British and Continental Hydronyms from *is-/*eis- and Related Roots

River names Esk in both Northern England and Continental Europe (Isar, Isarn, Iserna) derive from the PIE root *is-/*eis- meaning ‘to move swiftly’. The British form Iscā shows a k-suffix extension (eis-kā), reflecting Proto-Indo-European morphological processes. The parallel development of Ure (from the root without suffixation) and Roman-era names such as Isurium further confirm this lineage.

Similarly, names such as Tame and Tyne trace back to roots *tā* (‘to flow’) and **tei-/ti-* (‘to melt, flow’), respectively, demonstrating wide Indo-European continuity in hydronymic semantics.

Celtic Influence and Sound Changes in Northern English Hydronyms

The river-names corpus in Northern England, especially Cumberland and North Yorkshire (NRY), contains a mix of Brittonic, Primitive Cumbric, and Goidelic elements. Cumberland shows more linguistic diversity, including names with the element *poll* (‘pool, pit’), reflecting possible PrCumb or Goidelic influence. Phonological processes such as lenition are documented—for example, intervocalic /t/ > /d/ in Eden (Ituna > Idon) and /b/ > /v/ in Knavren Beck (bryn > vryn). The less common lenition of /m/ > /v/ appears in the name Seven (sumina). Another relevant sound change is *ā*-mutation, where vowel quality in the penultimate syllable changes influenced by final /ā/, seen in Esk (Iscā) and Eden (Itunā). The lexical elements of these names often reflect natural features (color, shape, wood type), such as *duŕ* (‘water’), *cēd* (‘wood’), and *dūß* (‘black’). This section details how phonological developments within Celtic languages shaped the current forms of hydronyms, linking linguistic evolution to geographic distribution.

Personal Names in Hydronyms Several hydronyms incorporate Brittonic and Goidelic personal names, often of Latin origin, showing cultural and linguistic contact. Examples include :Meriaun (possibly from Latin Marianus), Merchiaun (from Latin Marcianus), Cambán (from Goidelic *cambo-* meaning ‘crooked’). Such names likely originated from landowners or local leaders, immortalized in river names through time.

Discussion

The findings illustrate that hydronyms are a linguistic window into ancient Indo-European worldview, where the dynamic qualities of rivers (foaming, flowing swiftly) were embedded in root morphemes like *kweth₂-* and *is-/*. The Greek *ποταμός* offers a classic example of a primary adjective rooted in physical observation, while British and Continental hydronyms show parallel conceptual metaphors. The survival and variation of Celtic hydronyms in Northern England correlate strongly with historical settlement patterns. In Cumberland, the relative

paucity of later Anglo-Scandinavian settlement allowed a richer Celtic linguistic substrate to endure, whereas in North Yorkshire, thorough Anglian and Scandinavian colonization led to reduced Celtic toponymic presence. Phonological evidence such as lenition and ā-mutation provides a timeline for linguistic shifts from early British through Brittonic to Cumbric stages. The presence of Latin-derived personal names in hydronyms underscores the complex cultural layering during Roman and post-Roman eras. The discussion synthesizes linguistic, historical, and cultural data, interpreting hydronyms as reflections of both natural environment and human history.

Conclusion

Hydronyms preserve ancient Indo-European linguistic roots and cultural meanings related to rivers as dynamic, life-sustaining forces. Greek, Celtic, and Old English river names share common roots but diverge through phonological and morphological evolution influenced by settlement and language contact.

Future research integrating archaeology, historical linguistics, and advanced phonological modeling will further illuminate the complex interplay of nature, language, and culture in hydronymy.

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