

NOTES

1. *The name of the River Mite*

BY ANDREW BREEZE, M.A., PH.D., F.R.HIST.S., F.S.A.

The Mite is a river of south-west Cumbria. It is located south of the Irt (which runs from Wastwater to the sea) and north of the Esk, flowing parallel to them in a south-westerly direction, and entering the sea at Ravenglass.

The name of the Mite is Celtic, and is shown as such on the ordnance map of post-Roman Britain.¹ Yet its meaning has puzzled philologists. Ekwall (though writing after publication of the main account of Cumberland place-names) does no more as regards etymology than describe the name as “British”, and quote the forms *Mighet* from 1209 and *Mite* from 1292.² Nevertheless, there is a stream in Wales with a name apparently explaining that of the Mite.

The name *Mite* is first recorded as *Mighet*, and this resembles the name of the Mychydd in Glamorgan (around grid reference ST 037866). The Mychydd runs southwards from Tonyrefail (at the south entrance to the Rhondda Valley) to join the Ely River by Llantrisant. The name *Mychydd* was derived by R. J. Thomas (in his great study of Welsh river-names) from Welsh *muchudd* “jet” (earlier *muchydd*). Thomas noted that other Welsh streams have names meaning “the black one”, thanks to the colour of their water or their bed, and he compared the common English stream-names *Black Burn*, *Black Water*.³

The word *muchudd* is now discussed in the University of Wales dictionary, which defines it as “jet; agate; ebony; jet-black”. It is first recorded as Old Welsh *muhid*, a gloss (possibly of the tenth century) on *ebeno* “ebony”.⁴ In the *Mabinogion* romance of Peredur, perhaps of the late twelfth century, the hero compares the blackness of a raven feeding on carrion in the snow “to the hair of the woman he loved best, which was as black as jet (*muchydd*)”.⁵ A religious text in the Book of the Anchorite (copied in 1346) describes the beauty of the boy Jesus, who had “pure glossy-black slender brows, like two couches of the blackest shining jet (*muchud*) that there might be within a huge rock of crystal or the snowiest-white pearl that there could be”.⁶ In the later fifteenth century, the poet Hywel ap Dafydd of Raglan Castle praised the beauty of a nun (she was almost certainly one of the Benedictine community at Usk, five miles from Raglan). Benedictine nuns wore black habits, this nun had fascinating black eyebrows, and Hywel fancifully compares the effect to that of coal or jet (*muchudd*) or “blackbirds before a wave”.⁷

A final comment comes from the dictionary of Thomas Richards (1710-90), perpetual curate of Coychurch, near Bridgend. He observes that “A river in Glamorganshire is called *Muchudd*, because its waters are of a jetty or blackish colour, as flowing from coal-mines”.⁸ They would be full of coal dust. Richards (who lived within seven miles of the Mychydd) here admirably combines lexicography and personal observation.

Like such Cumberland place-names as *Penrith* “Hill Ford”, *Tallentire* “End of the Land”, or *Triermain* “Settlement of the Rock”, the river-name *Mite* derives from Cumbric, a sister-language of Welsh spoken in Cumbria and Strathclyde until perhaps the twelfth century. Cumbric was well described by Kenneth Jackson.⁹ Although we know little of it except what we can deduce from place-names, there is no difficulty in aligning Old Welsh *muhid* with the form *Mighet* of 1209 quoted by Ekwall. The change of the first vowel causes no problem, since we can show that original Brittonic *u* (pronounced as such in stressed Welsh syllables until the sixteenth century) was often substituted in Old English by *i*.¹⁰

Nor does there seem any geographical objection to explanation of the name *Mite* as “jet; jet-black”. Like the Mychydd of Glamorgan, the Mite is in a region once famous for mining. A survival from that period is the Ravenglass and Eskdale Railway (running just south of the Mite), which now carries holiday-makers, but originally brought down lead-ore from Boot. Graphite and coal were also mined locally. It is thus likely the Mite would meet dark rocks in

its course. If local knowledge confirms that the Mite flows over black rocks, or is blackened by the rocks it flows over, the derivation of its name from the Cumbric equivalent of Welsh *muchudd* "jet" will be corroborated.

References

- ¹ *Britain in the Dark Ages*, 2nd edn (Southampton, 1966).
- ² *The Place-Names of Cumberland*, ed. A. M. Armstrong *et al.*, (Cambridge, 1950-2); Eilert Ekwall, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names*, 4th edn (Oxford, 1960), 328.
- ³ R. J. Thomas, *Enwau Afonydd a Nentydd Cymru* (Caerdydd, 1938), 64.
- ⁴ *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru: A Dictionary of the Welsh Language* (Caerdydd, 1950-), 2499.
- ⁵ *Historia Peredur vab Efrafcw*, ed. Glenys Goetinck (Caerdydd, 1976), 30; A. C. Breeze, *Medieval Welsh Literature* (Dublin, 1997), 92.
- ⁶ *Ymborth yr Enaid*, ed. R. I. Daniel (Caerdydd, 1995), 17; cf. A. C. Breeze, *op. cit.*, 104-8, and R. I. Daniel, *A Medieval Welsh Mystical Treatise* (Aberystwyth, 1997), 22.
- ⁷ Dafydd ap Gwilym, *Fifty Poems* (London, 1942), 136, 137; A. C. Breeze, *op. cit.*, 144.
- ⁸ *Geiriadur*, 2499.
- ⁹ K. H. Jackson, "The Britons in Southern Scotland", *Antiquity*, xxix (1955), 77-88, and his "Angles and Britons in Northumbria and Cumbria", in *Angles and Britons* (Cardiff, 1963), 60-84.
- ¹⁰ John Morris-Jones, *A Welsh Grammar* (Oxford, 1913), 13; K. H. Jackson, *Language and History in Early Britain* (Edinburgh, 1953), 675; D. Simon Evans, *A Grammar of Middle Welsh* (Dublin, 1964), 1-2.

2. *Reputed dew pond on Helsington Barrows, near Kendal (SD 488894)*
BY JOHN MARSH

There is a large depression west of the footpath that leads from the road to Brigsteer village from Kendal. This is National Trust land and the footpath is the route along Scout Scar. The depression has been pointed out by guides and teachers for some years as a good example of a roadside dewpond at the top of a steep hill, even though it never retained water.

Mr J. Atkinson ex of Fallen Yew, Underbarrow has described to the writer how and when this "pond" was constructed. During the second world war there was a training camp for Bren gun carrier crews nearby and Mr. Atkinson watched whilst two carriers dug the hole by corkscrewing on one track to make a "hull down" defensive position. There are other similar "dew ponds" on the route into Kendal which might also have been constructed by this method.

3. *A medieval seal-matrix from the Cumberland Infirmary, Carlisle*
BY PHILIP CRACKNELL

In 1991 Carlisle Archaeological Unit carried out an evaluation on behalf of the Northern Regional Health Authority at the Cumberland Infirmary, Newtown Road, Carlisle, in advance of a major redevelopment of the western part of the present site. A full archaeological excavation of an area west of Ward 21 and north of Clift Street took place between September 1992 and January 1993 (grid reference NY 3858 5615); the evaluation and excavation were both carried out under the direction of Paul Flynn. A second phase of evaluation and excavation was completed during 1997, under the direction of Richard Barkle.

The 1992-3 excavation revealed a palimpsest of ditches, gullies and postholes, together with substantial areas of cobbled yards. The earliest period of activity comprised remains of at least five round-houses forming part of an unenclosed settlement lying on the crest and the north-facing slope of the ridge. There were no associated finds. A second period of settlement can be dated to the Roman period. The settlements in both periods probably represent small farming communities.¹

The subject of this note, a seal-matrix, was found in 1992 in a thick deposit of ploughsoil overlying the site, which produced some 490 fragments of medieval pottery dating to the twelfth-fourteenth centuries. The excavation produced no evidence for medieval structures.

Description

The lead, almond-shaped matrix is slightly concave in profile, but was originally flat (Fig. 1, 1). A terminal at one end projects above the rear face, allowing the matrix to be held firmly while an impression is made. An incised line runs around the edge of the matrix, broken at the bottom. Below this is a Latin inscription, running anticlockwise and retrograde, made up of letters ranging between four and six millimetres in height. A second, continuous, line forms the lower border for the inscription. The central area is decorated with two six-pointed stars, on either side of a crescent. The impression (Fig. 1, a) reads:-

+ S · MATILD · FIL · AL · DE · IRT ·

S(igillum) Matild(a) Fil(ia) Al(an) de Irt(on)

Seal of Matilda the daughter of Alan of Irton.²

Length 53 mm; width 27 mm; thickness 1.5-4.5 mm; thickness of projection 10.5 mm.

Site context INF B 29; small find no. Pb 3.

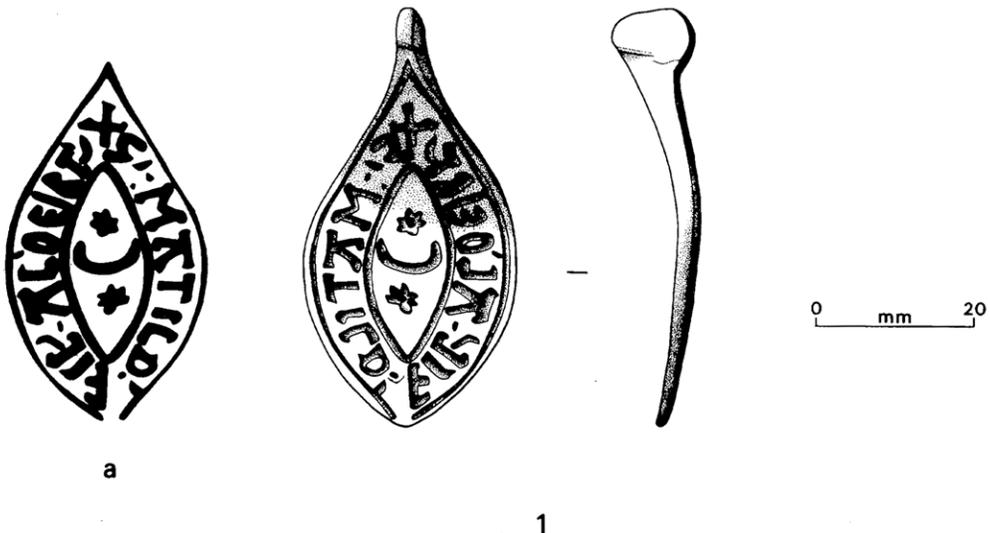


FIG. 1. 1: lead seal-matrix from the Cumberland Infirmary, Carlisle; a: matrix impression. Scale 1:1. Drawing by P. Moore.

Comment

The matrix is a common medieval form, termed Species I by Rigold.³ This type of seal-matrix is made of lead or a lead alloy, always named, flat and circular, occasionally elliptical, or more often of the “pointed oval” (almond) shape. It is worth noting that, of the Species I matrices, the majority of seal-holders using an oval form were women. The type can be dated, through a combination of archaeological evidence and sealed documents, to the period from the late twelfth to the late thirteenth centuries, and seldom afterwards. One matrix illustrated by Rigold is a good parallel for the present example, both in form and in the style of lettering, and is dated to the first half of the thirteenth century.⁴

In support of this date, an article by the Rev. S. Taylor on the Irtons of Irton Hall states that an Alan and German de Irton were fined three marks in the Lancashire hundred of Lonsdale in 1246.⁵ The Irton family was established at Irton, near Ravenglass, from the early

thirteenth century for at least six and a half centuries. During the fourteenth century they became, partly through astute marriage, important landholders in Cumberland. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries various members of the family held such positions as Sheriff of Cumberland and Lieutenant of Cockermouth Castle. They certainly held property and land at, among other places, Ravenglass, Santon, Waberthwaite, Gosforth and Bassenthwaite as well as Lonsdale, but do not seem to have any direct territorial links with the Carlisle area. The pedigree is headed by Thomas de Irton (*fl.* 1225-50) and Alan and German may well have been his younger brothers. German had a son Hubert and grandson Ives de Irton who occurs in *c.* 1275. Bruce Jones has suggested that the presence of Matilda's name on the seal might imply that Alan's line came to an end with her.

Notes and References

- ¹ P. Flynn and R. Barkle, forthcoming: "A Romano-British 'native' settlement at the Cumberland Infirmary, Carlisle".
- ² Thanks are due to Bruce Jones for the reading of the inscription given here.
- ³ S. E. Rigold, 1977: "Two common species of medieval seal-matrix", *Antiquaries Journal* 57, 324-9.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, Fig. 2, 4.
- ⁵ Thanks are due to Bruce Jones for tracking down the information on Alan de Irton in Rev. S. Taylor, "The Irtons of Irton Hall", *CW2*, xli, 72-122 (see p. 75).