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Plastered Walls at Rudchester? The Roman Place-Names *Vindovala* and *Nemetovala*

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SUMMARY

The Roman fort at Rudchester, Northumberland, was apparently called *Vindovala* 'white walls'. This suggests the name of the Celtic hillfort and Roman temple at Lydney Park, Gloucestershire, was *Nemetovala* 'walls of the sacred grove, sanctuary walls'.

Rudchester, nine miles west of Newcastle, is the site of a fort straddling Hadrian's Wall, situated at a modern crossroads on the south edge of a plateau some 450 feet above sea level (NZ 1167). The fort, resurveyed and excavated some years ago, had a Mithraeum deliberately wrecked in the early fourth century; to the south-west are remains of a vicus, with a rock-cut cistern.¹

However, what concerns us here is Rudchester's Roman name *Vindovala* (according to the Ravenna Cosmography) or *Vindobala* (according to *Notitia Dignitatum*).² There is no problem with the first element, which is British *Vindo-* 'white', giving Welsh *gwyn*, Cornish *guyn*, Breton *gwenn*.³ But the second has been problematic. Rivet and Smith read *-bala* and not *-vala*, arguing that *Notitia Dignitatum* is more trustworthy than Ravenna; that the root **ual-* 'strong' is unlikely to appear in the form *-vala*; and that 'white strength' is in any case an improbable meaning. They also rule out on palaeographical grounds an emendation to *-vara* (which they think means 'water'). They thus plump for *-bala*, which (citing Welsh *bâl* 'summit') they explain as 'peak', suggesting a possible interpretation 'white peak'.⁴

This last seems dubious. Welsh lexicography shows *bâl* 'peak, summit' unattested before

1788, the word apparently being an invention of the notorious Welsh forger Edward Williams or 'Iolo Morganwg' (1747–1826), a Welsh Chatterton or Macpherson whose fictions still trip up modern scholars.⁵ In the context of Hadrian's Wall, *bâl* thus has no weight. Even the Gaulish gloss *?balma* 'pointed rock, peak' quoted by Rivet and Smith is inconclusive. Rudchester is on a plateau with steep slopes (necessitating change of car gear) to west and south, but it seems far-fetched to call this a 'peak', white or otherwise.⁶

If Welsh *bâl* 'peak' is here irrelevant, we are no better off with Welsh *bal* 'blaze or white spot on the forehead, especially of a horse' (related by some to Breton *bal* and Middle Irish *ball* 'spot').⁷ The apparent cognates of this Welsh word (attested from the fifteenth century) might at first seem to indicate an ancient form. But the work of Vendryes undermines this. He regarded Welsh *bal* as a loan from English *ball* (with the same sense) and Breton *bal* or *baill* as a borrowing from Old French *baille*, Modern French *bai* 'bay tree, laurel'.⁸ These Brittonic words would thus have no link with Irish *bal* 'condition, state; happiness, prosperity, success' or *ball* 'male organ; spot'.⁹ The only hard evidence as regards *Vindobala* would hence be the Gaulish gloss *bala* 'having a white blaze' (of a horse).¹⁰ But there is no reason to think this was a place-name element.

Slightly preferable to Welsh *bâl* 'peak' and *bal* 'horse's blaze' is a third possibility, in Middle Breton *bal* 'steep beach, steep slope' and Cornish *bal* 'mine, copper mine, tin mine', the latter attested in 1748 at Baldue 'black mine' (SW 7743), between Redruth and Truro.¹¹ Yet even these forms (which are poorly

attested) fail to convince. It is true that Rudchester lies above steep slopes. But it is unsound to explain its Roman name by reference to a Middle Breton form which is of unclear semantic development.

In short, it is simpler and better to read not *Vindobala*, but *Vindovala*, where the second element can readily be linked with Welsh *gwawl* 'wall, rampart; limit, boundary'. This is a familiar form. It figures (as *Guawl*) in the ninth-century *Historia Brittonum* as the name of the Antonine Wall in Scotland, and is a known cognate of Old Irish *fál* 'fence, hedge, enclosed space'.¹² It also occurs in the Welsh political poem *Armes Prydein* 'The Prophecy of Britain', written in late 940. The unknown poet foretells that the Welsh will repossess lands 'from the Wall (*Gwawl*) to the Forth' (the Antonine Wall, not Hadrian's).¹³ Another reference occurs in the twelfth-century *Four Branches of the Mabinogi*, where Rhiannon tells her lover Pwyll how to outwit a rival who has the ludicrous name of *Gwawl fab Clud* ('Wall son of Clyde'), alluding to the Antonine Wall, which terminated on the Clyde at Dumbarton Rock, capital of the North Britons.¹⁴

Hence *Gwawl* (< British **ual-*, with long *a*) is a recognized form in early Brittonic. In Welsh it is feminine; its Irish cognate *fál* is an *o*-stem masculine, but seems originally to have been a neuter, as we have an archaic plural form *fala* in the Irish laws.¹⁵ This may point to an interpretation of *Vindovala*, not as a singular, but as having a neuter plural ending in long *a*.¹⁶ The meaning of *Vindovala* would, then, be 'white walls' or 'white ramparts'.

'White walls' is a suitable name for a fort; and there seems archaeological evidence for such a name. Excavators have found traces of both plasterwork and whitewashing at sites on Hadrian's Wall.¹⁷ Their work suggests the 'white walls' at Rudchester need not be the ramparts, but could be those of the important administrative buildings within. Such a name would also be curiously paralleled at Whitchester (if this means 'white camp'), a farm less than a mile north-west of the fort.¹⁸ But this

interpretation does raise a problem in **Nemetobala*, a place recorded by the Ravenna Cosmography (as *Metambala*) from the Monmouthshire-Forest of Dean area. The form here is difficult, but Rivet and Smith follow Richmond and Crawford in taking the first element as British **nemeto-* 'sacred grove'. The second they take as 'pointed rock, peak' (cf. eighteenth-century Welsh *bâl* above), translating the whole as 'grove hill' or 'hill sanctuary', and regarding it as perhaps the famous fourth-century Roman temple within an Iron Age hill-fort at Lydney Park, Gloucestershire (SO 6102). Yet they are careful to state there is no certainty here.¹⁹

Now, the difficulties of *-bala* set out above apply as much to **Nemetobala* as they do to *Vindobala*. It may be noted that the hill fort and temple at Lydney Park lay on a flat-topped spur of land 250 feet above sea level, which it might be exaggerated to call a 'peak'. So there seem grounds for emending **Nemetobala* to **Nemetovala*, invoking the confusion (common in *Notitia Dignitatum*) of Vulgar Latin *v* and *b*, as seen in the Rudge Cup's *Aballaba* for *Abalava*, or Ravenna's *Caleba* for *Caleva*.²⁰ If we do this, we can translate **Nemetovala* as 'walls of the sacred wood' or 'sanctuary walls'. Such a translation strengthens identification of the place as the Lydney Park hill-fort, which had earth ramparts, and was in a sacred woodland place (the area is still thickly wooded). Anne Ross (who reproduces Sir Mortimer Wheeler's reconstruction of the temple at Lydney) speaks of this major cult centre as rededicating a 'sacred Iron Age' site, with its cult of the god Nodens-Mercury exploiting 'a pre-existing sanctity'.²¹ This comment she makes without knowledge of the Roman name proposed above; which would yet be fitting for such a place.

If the above reasoning is sound, we can take Rudchester's ancient name as *Vindovala*, with a likely meaning 'white walls'. Similarly, Ravenna's *Metambala* could be read as **Nemetovala* (emending the form proposed by Richmond, Crawford, Rivet, and Smith), perhaps the name of the hill fort and temple at Lydney Park in Gloucestershire, which can be taken as

meaning 'walls of the sacred wood' or 'sanctuary walls'. If so, interpretation of *-vala* as 'walls' here would be apt. Rudchester and Lydney Park were both major defensive sites; a reference to 'walls', whether to ramparts or other structures, would thus make sense.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- ¹ M. C. B. Bowden and K. Blood, 'The Roman Fort at Rudchester', *AA* ⁵, 19 (1991), 25–31.
- ² A. L. F. Rivet and Colin Smith, *The Place-Names of Roman Britain*, London (1979), 500.
- ³ *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru*, Caerdydd (1950–), 1770; D. Ellis Evans, *Gaulish Personal Names*, Oxford (1967), 387 and n. 4; Rivet and Smith, 500; Richard Coates and Andrew Breeze, *Celtic Voices, English Places*, Stamford (2000), 356.
- ⁴ Rivet and Smith, 500.
- ⁵ Cf. A. C. Breeze, *Medieval Welsh Literature*, Dublin (1997), 79; 'Pictish Chains and Welsh Forgeries', *PSAS*, 128 (1998), 481–4; and 'The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle for 893 and Buttington', *Sayce Papers*, 6 (2000), 47–50.
- ⁶ Ellis Evans, 148.
- ⁷ *Geiriadur*, 250.
- ⁸ Joseph Vendryes, *Lexique étymologique de l'irlandais ancien: Lettre B*, Paris (1981), 11–12.
- ⁹ Vendryes, 11–12.
- ¹⁰ Ellis Evans, 148.
- ¹¹ Ellis Evans, 148 n. 9; O. J. Padel, *Cornish Place-Name Elements*, Nottingham (1985), 15.
- ¹² *Geiriadur*, 1605; Ellis Evans, 270 and n. 4.
- ¹³ *Armes Prydein*, ed. Ifor Williams, Dublin (1972), 66; A. C. Breeze, 'Armes Prydein, Hywel Dda, and

the Reign of Edmund of Wessex', *Études celtiques*, 33 (1997), 209–22, at 214.

¹⁴ *Pwyll Pendeuic Dyuet*, ed. R. L. Thomson, Dublin (1957), 34; A. C. Breeze, *Medieval Welsh Literature*, 69, 98.

¹⁵ *Dictionary of the Irish Language*, Dublin (1913–76), s.v. *fál*.

¹⁶ Cf. Henry Lewis and Holger Pedersen, *A Concise Comparative Celtic Grammar*, Göttingen (1937), 166.

¹⁷ J. G. Crow, 'Construction and Reconstruction on the Central Sector of Hadrian's Wall', in *Roman Frontier Studies 1989*, ed. Valerie Maxfield and Brian Dobson, Exeter (1991), 44–7, and his 'A Review of Current Research on the Turrets and Curtain of Hadrian's Wall', *Britannia*, 22 (1991), 51–63, at 58–9; P. T. Bidwell, 'The Exterior Decoration of Roman Buildings in Britain', in *Architecture in Roman Britain*, ed. P. Johnson and I. Haynes [CBA Research Report 94] London (1996), 19–29; P. T. Bidwell and C. Watson, 'Excavations on Hadrian's Wall at Denton', *AA* ⁵, 24 (1996), 1–56, at 23–6, figs 18–20 (references kindly supplied by R. N. Bailey).

¹⁸ R. N. Bailey suggests a link by reflection of the same phenomenon rather than translation, though a sense *white* 'dry' at Whitchester is possible. Cf. Allen Mawer, *The Place-Names of Northumberland and Durham*, Cambridge (1920), and A. H. Smith, *English Place-Name Elements*, Cambridge (1956), which are not at hand in Pamplona.

¹⁹ Rivet and Smith, 424.

²⁰ Rivet and Smith, 30, 493.

²¹ Anne Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain*, London (1974), 69, 230–3; cf. also P. J. Casey and B. Hoffmann, 'Excavations at the Roman Temple in Lydney Park, Gloucestershire', *The Antiquaries Journal*, 79 (1999), 81–143.

