

XI NOTES, 2005

1. THE ROMAN PLACE-NAMES *ARBEIA* AND *CORSTOPITUM*: A RESPONSE TO THE RESPONSE

N. Hodgson

Dr A. Breeze has replied¹ to my rejection² of his original suggestion³ of meanings for these two names. One could go on for ever spilling ink on a topic like this, so I will try to answer some of his points as briefly as possible. What I objected to was the advancing of name-meanings on purely philological grounds while ignoring other evidence. This included, in the case of Corbridge, the presence of an important military base named *Coria* in the Vindolanda tablets, generally identified with Corbridge (and incompatible with the form *Corsobetum* proposed for Corbridge by Breeze).

The response includes the desperate speculation that the *Coria* of the Vindolanda tablets is Beltingham, where an altar inscribed *curia Textoverdorum* has been found. Of course there is no indubitable proof that the *Coria* of the tablets is Corbridge. But *Coria* occurs in the tablets in a series of contexts (still not discussed in the response) which show that it was a military base, capable of holding much of the Vindolanda unit on detachment a long way from home and the seat of a high ranking Roman officer with whom the Vindolanda prefect corresponded, as well as being a place vibrant enough to attract soldiers on leave.⁴ This cannot be Beltingham, which is only two miles from Vindolanda and where no Roman military site is known.⁵ To invent a Roman military base to support a philological argument is hardly to subscribe to the razor of Occam that Dr Breeze himself invokes.

For *Arbeia*, Breeze proposed 'stream of wild turnips'. The alternative that I raised was David Kennedy's suggestion that the name is a non-Celtic import, and means 'the place of the Arabs', referring to the attested late-Roman

unit, the 'Tigris Boatmen'. Again, my point was not that Kennedy's suggestion can be proved, any more than can the philological deduction (the turnips), but simply that it ought to have been considered, and that it might be considered preferable to the 'turnips' interpretation. To address some of the points in the response: if South Shields was to be named after a river, as at Exeter and Ilkley, we ought on those analogies to expect it to be named after the Tyne, rather than some other stream whose main characteristic was wild turnips. There are exceptions to the Celticity of Romano-British place-names (*Trimontium*, *Castra Exploratorum*, *Victoria*, *Pinnata Castra*, *Horrea Classis*) and there is no reason why *Arbeia* need not be one. If *Arbeia* is really the original Celtic name, why does it not appear in any source earlier than the *Notitia Dignitatum*? The judgement that the Roman military establishment would not have allowed name changes is subjective and refuted by the numerous examples of forts coming, later in their history, to be named after their units (collected by Kennedy, cited in my paper, and ignored in the response). Worry over possible confusion did not prevent the Romans changing the name of *Londinium* to *Augusta* (a non-Celtic name) in the fourth century.

On Breeze's technical point, a claim that *Arbeia* could not possibly give rise to *Urfa* (an apparent derivative of *Arbeia* recorded by Leland) because its initial 'A' would give 'E' rather than 'U': this only has force if we accept the *a priori* and simplistic assumption that Leland's form of the name preserves a Celtic form that was derived neatly from the Roman period original. But rather than reconstructing the original form of the name, Leland recorded

the name as reported verbally to him in the sixteenth century.⁶ Innumerable things may have affected the transmission of the name besides Celtic phonology, and the post-Roman name is likely to have been consolidated in a Germanic context, as the site became an Anglo-Saxon centre by the seventh century. Leland himself may have been an untrustworthy source from time to time, but it is rash to imply that nothing he said was ever of any historical value.⁷

In short I would be very unhappy if 'stream of wild turnips' was accepted as the last word on the meaning of the name of Roman *Arbeia*/South Shields, and equally so if the possibility of the link with Leland's *Urfa* was considered disproved. I hope I have shown that it would be absurd if *Corsobetum* was to gain exclusive currency as the Roman name for Corbridge. The reader must now judge how economically, and with what grasp of the wider archaeological and historical sources, these suggestions have been advanced and defended.

NOTES

¹ A. Breeze, 'The Roman place-names *Arbeia* and *Corstopitum*: a reply', *AA*⁵, 33 (2004), 61–4.

² N. Hodgson, 'The Roman place-names *Arbeia* and *Corstopitum*: a rejection of recently suggested meanings', *AA*⁵, 30 (2002), 173–4.

³ A. Breeze, 'The British-Latin place-names *Arbeia*, *Corstopitum*, *Dictim*, and *Morbium*', *Durham Archaeological Journal*, 16 (2001), 21–5.

⁴ *Tab. Vindol.* 154.7: a total of 337 troops and two centurions absent, having been detached to *Coria*; 175.3 and 176.4: soldiers ask permission to go on leave to *Coria*; 611b.i.5: Haterius Nepos, probably commander of the *ala Petriana*, writes in the hope that Flavius Genialis, the prefect at Vindolanda, 'will come to *Coria*'; 670: addressed to a cavalryman at *Coria*, who is expected to be travelling to Catterick, on a direct route from Corbridge, but certainly not from Beltingham. It will be clear that none of these references to *Coria* would allow Beltingham to be identified.

⁵ The two altars from Beltingham could, as has often been suggested, have been brought from nearby Vindolanda or may mark the site of a shrine at a native meeting place.

⁶ T. Hearne (ed.), *Johannis Lelandi antiquarii. De rebus Britannicis collectanea* (London, 1770), vol. 3, 290; vol. 4, 43; L. T. Smith (ed.), *The Itinerary of John Leland*, London (1964), vol. 4, 94.

⁷ As well as *Urfa*, Leland records two alternative names for the site of the fort at South Shields: *Burgh* and *Cairuruach*. Why would he do this if he was seeking to promote an invented name?

2. CELTS, BEARS, AND THE RIVER IRTHING

Andrew Breeze

The Irthing is a border river. It runs southwards along the boundary of Northumberland and Cumbria before turning west, where, after a thirty-mile course, it enters the Eden four miles from Carlisle. The form of the name has changed little since 1169, when we find it in *Irthintun* 'farm on the Irthing', now Irthington (NY 4961) by Carlisle airport. But the meaning of *Irthing* has been unclear, although all agree the form is Celtic.¹

Yet a solution may be indicated by the Erthig. This is a stream (in coastal uplands south of Aberystwyth) flowing past Mynachty

(SN 5061) into the river Arth. Since *Arth* is Welsh for 'bear', *Erthig* has been taken as 'little bear, bear cub'.² *Irthing*, which has early forms *Irthin*, *Erthina*, and *Erthing*, would also make sense as 'little bear', with a Cumbric diminutive suffix corresponding to Middle and Modern Welsh *-yn* (Old Welsh *-inn*), as in *defnyn* 'droplet' from *dafn* 'drop' or *mebyn* 'young boy' from *mab* 'boy'.³ As the *th* of *Arth* is pronounced like that of English *bath*, but that of *Irthing* like that of *brother*, the process of voicing here would take place after borrowing by English, not before.

The Irthing is merely a tributary of the Eden. Yet it is a powerful river, winding through a desolate moorland of crags and waterfalls; and 'little bear' would suit it as a name, whether or not bears once lived on its banks. But there may be more to the question than that. The Celts thought bears divine. At Bern in Switzerland is a sculpture of *dea Artio*, a goddess of bears.⁴ Another Celtic word for bear, represented by Modern Irish *mathúin* 'bear' (and the surnames *Mahon* and *Mahony*), appears in British *Matunus*, which Rivet and Smith took as a bear-god's name in an inscription (*RIB* 1265) from High Rochester (NY 8398) or Risingham (NY 8986).⁵ Now, Gildas tells us that the pagan Britons considered many rivers and springs as divine, so that 'divine honour would be heaped on them by a people then blind' (*quibus divinus honor a caeco tunc populo cumulabatur*), that is, the sort of thing going on before Coventina's shrine at Carrawburgh.⁶ It may be, therefore, that the Britons in their heathen blindness linked the Irthing with a bear-god.

Celtic respect for bears is in any case shown by personal names such as *Erthgi* 'bearhound', belonging to a warrior who, according to the seventh-century *Gododdin* (laments for North British heroes wiped out in attacking the English at Catterick), 'slashed and pierced with spears'.⁷ Other Welsh poems compare champions to bears. In the fiery 'Prophecy of Britain' of 940, written after Viking humiliation of the English at Leicester, a bard foretells that the Welsh will rush into battle 'like a bear from the mountain' to avenge the blood of their comrades, where they will be guided by Conan, legendary founder of Brittany, and Cadwaladr, seventh-century king of Gwynedd, who are 'two bears to whom daily fighting brings no shame'.⁸

Cumbria was reoccupied by speakers of Cumbric in the tenth and eleventh centuries, with permanent effects on its toponomy.⁹ Yet it is probable that *Irthing* goes back to Roman times and beyond, since river-names change less than others, especially those of large rivers. There is reason, then, to take *Irthing* as an ancient British coinage meaning 'little bear', and perhaps link it with a Celtic cult of bears, evidenced by the Bern sculpture and inscriptions in Britain and Gaul to the bear-god Matunus.

NOTES

¹ A. D. Mills, *A Dictionary of English Place-Names* (1991), 188; Richard Coates and Andrew Breeze, *Celtic Voices, English Places* (2000), 362.

² R. J. Thomas, *Enwau Afonydd a Nentydd Cymru* (1938), 187.

³ John Morris-Jones, *A Welsh Grammar* (1913), 229; Thomas, 198.

⁴ Thomas, 187; Anne Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain* (1974), 434–5.

⁵ R. G. Collingwood and R. P. Wright, *Roman Inscriptions of Britain: Inscriptions on Stone* (1965), 417; D. Ellis Evans, *Gaulish Personal Names* (1967), 231; A. L. F. Rivet and Colin Smith, *The Place-Names of Roman Britain* (1979), 414.

⁶ W. J. Watson, *The History of the Celtic Place-Names of Scotland* (1926), 435–7; and A. C. Breeze, 'Manchester's Ancient Name', *Antiquaries Journal* 84 (2004), 353–7; 'The Rivers Glenderamackin and Glenderaterra, Cumbria', *Northern History* 41 (2004), 385–9; and 'Portus Adurni and Portchester, Hampshire', *Studia Celtica* 38 (2004), 180–3.

⁷ K. H. Jackson, *The Gododdin: The Oldest Scottish Poem* (1969), 121.

⁸ A. C. Breeze, 'Armes Prydein, Hywel Dda, and the Reign of Edmund of Wessex', *Études celtiques* 33 (1997), 209–22, at 213, 214.

⁹ Coates and Breeze, 281–6.

