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The River Wharfe and Verbeia, Celtic Goddess

Pr. Breeze Andrew Charles
University of Navarre-Spain
abreeze@unav.es
0000-0003-1894-1960

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Abstract: *The Wharfe is a river of Yorkshire, in northern England. It was known to the Romans as 'Verbeia', also used of their fortress in what is now the town of Ilkley. Although 'Verbeia' is surely Celtic and ultimately gives the modern hydronym 'Wharfe', its meaning has been obscure. Comparison with other Celtic forms yet suggests the sense 'Powerful Striker, she who is Strong in Hitting'', with 'ver' as an intensive prefix and 'beia' related to British and Irish words for 'axe' and the like. The pagan Celts worshipped rivers as goddesses; the Wharfe is a formidable stream, liable to dangerous floods; the name hence indicates a female deity regarded with awe, whose name survives to this day on a Roman altar in Ilkley Museum.*
Keywords : *Celtic, River, Names, Britain, Romans, Paganism.*

ملخص: "وورف" (**Wharfe**) هو نهر بـ "يوركشاير" ـ شمال انجلترا ـ وكان معروفا لدى الرومان باسم"Verbeia"، واستخدمت هذه الكلمة للتعريف بقلعتهم فيما يعرف اليوم بمدينة "إلكلي"(**Ilkley**). وعلى الرغم من أن كلمة "Verbeia" هي قطعا سلتيكية الاصل وتأخذ في النهاية الاسم المختصر المعاصر"وورف" (**Wharfe**)، إلا أن معناها غامض، وتفضي مقارنة هذه الكلمة مع أشكال كلمات سلتيكية أخرى إلى معنى"المهاجمة القوية، تلك القوية في الضرب"، مع "ver" كبادئة مكثفة و "beia" المتعلقة بالكلمات البريطانية والإيرلندية والتي تعني "الفأس" وما شابه. كان السلتيك الوثنيون يعبدون الأنهار كآلهة، و "وورف" (Wharfe) هو جدول هائل في عرضة للفيضانات الخطرة، فيشير الاسم بالتالي إلى إلهة ينظر إليها بالرعب، والتي لا يزال اسمها إلى يومنا هذا متواجدا في مذبح روماني بمتحف " إلكلي"(Ikley).
الكلمات المفتاحية: سلتيك، أسماء الأنهار، بريطانيا، الرومان، الوثنية.

The River Wharfe flows sixty miles from near Beckermonds, passing Bolton Abbey, Ilkley, Otley, Wetherby, Tadcaster, and Nun Appleton before meeting the Ouse near Cawood, south of York. Two great poets have described it. In 'The Force of Prayer', Wordsworth related a Bolton Abbey legend of the narrow but dangerous channel of the Strid.

Corresponding author : Breeze Andrew Charles

The pair have reached that fearful chasm,
How tempting to bestride!
For lordly Wharfe is there pent in
With rocks on either side.

Doom results.
The boy is in the arms of Wharfe,
And strangled by a merciless force;
For never more was young Romilly seen
Till he rose a lifeless corse.

Thirty miles downstream, a gentler Wharfe appears in Marvell's 'Upon Appleton House' as home to the 'modest halcyon' or kingfisher.

The viscous air, wherese'er she fly,
Follows and sucks her azure dye;
The jellying stream compacts below,
If it might fix her shadow so;
The stupid fishes hang, as plain
As flies in crystal overta'en;
And men the silent scene assist
Charm'd with the sapphire-wingèd mist.

So the Wharfe is honoured by poets, albeit ones cavalier with the facts. Alicia de Romilly, for example, did not found Bolton Priory ('Abbey' is an error) after her son's fatal attempt to jump the Strid. He was 'still alive in 1154', three years later[1]. As for Nun Appleton, an American scholar thinks that within Marvell's poem, below the 'snaky mirror of the river', the poet metaphorically 'descended like a plummet and almost drowned'[2].[2] More intelligibly, another regards his account there of 'beautiful Isabel Thwaites', allegedly rescued by her lover from Appleton's pre-Reformation nuns, as a means 'of writing Catholic women's communities out of literary history'[3].[3]

We turn from tragic leaps and runaway heroines to the Wharfe's original name, Verbeia. It meant both the Wharfe and Ilkley by the Wharfe, the Romans often using a river-name for a fort, as with Deva 'Dee' for Chester or Isca 'Exe' for Exeter. Verbeia is thus amongst Yorkshire's ancient Celtic toponyms, like Danum for Doncaster, Derventio for Malton (on the River Derwent), Eburacum for York, Lagentium for Castleford, or Olenacum for Elslack, five miles west of Skipton (The last is not Ilkley, despite what is said.) Yet the meaning of Verbeia has been obscure. It requires searching examination.

We begin a century ago with comments on its b and its prefix Ver-. In British (the Celtic language ancestor to Welsh and Cornish) initial b derives from Indo-European bh-, as with Welsh brawd 'brother' (compare Sanskrit bhratar- 'brother') or byrr 'short' (compare Latin brevis). That provides a clue for -beia. As for Ver-, it can be related to the Welsh

[1] Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Yorkshire*, The West Riding, 2nd edn (Harmondsworth, 1967), 98-9.
[2] Anne Cotterill, *Digressive Voices in Early Modern English Literature* (Oxford, 2004), 101.
[3] Jenna Lay, Beyond the Cloister (Philadelphia, 2016), 142, 147.

intensive prefix gor-, equivalent to super- or hyper-, with the sense 'very, exceedingly'.[4] Whatever -beia means, it seems that the Wharfe did it supremely, and with the unpredictable caprice of a goddess, for we know that the Celts worshipped rivers. Writing in early 536, the British author Gildas recalled how Britons in their heathen blindness once heaped honour upon 'mountains, wells, hills, and rivers', with the last 'once destructive, but now made serviceable to man's uses'.[5] [5]We may recall that 'destructive' goddess when we come to the altar of Verbeia preserved to this day at Ilkley.

As for the Indo-European bh- perhaps seen in -beia, it is found in the reconstructed roots bhei- and bhi- 'to strike, to hit'. They leave their violent trace in languages from Hindi to Russian to Irish. In Polish, for example, they lie behind bitwa 'battle', bitny 'valiant', and bicz 'whip', the last borrowed as German Peitsche 'whip, lash' (recorded from the fifteenth century onwards). With a different vocalization is Polish bój 'war'. In other languages the same roots produced German Beil 'axe' and Greek phítros 'tree-trunk; block, log' (which are all cut by axes).[6] More important here are Celtic forms. Sir Ifor Williams drew attention to Welsh erfid 'blow, stroke, thrust', also 'ebb; breakers; stream'. The second element probably relates to bhei- and bhi- 'strike' rather than me- 'to harvest, cut down' (itself, however, certainly attested in the Elmet of West Yorkshire, commemorating Britons who called themselves 'cutters down of many', their foes slain in battle). The roots bhei- or bhi- in any case figure in Welsh bid '(lopped) hedge' and Old Irish benim 'I strike, I cut'.[7] We shall return to these.

On Ilkley and Wharfe, Ekwall more than eighty years ago explained the first as 'clearing or open land belonging to Illica', an Anglo-Saxon. He described any connection with Olecana or the like in Ptolemy's Geography as 'very doubtful'. Wharfe he related to Old English weorpan 'to throw, to twist' and Latin verbena 'sacred bough' (of laurel, olive, myrtle, or cypress). From that he deduced a sense 'winding river', with the same element in Celtic Verbeia.[8] This great Swedish scholar, alas, threw himself into a philological ravine as perilous as the Strid itself. Nothing in Celtic corresponds to English weorpan or Latin verbena. The hydronym will divide as Ver-beia, which makes sense, not as Ekwall's Verb-eia. Despite that, his explanation 'winding (river)' for Wharfe has persisted, total lack of evidence for it notwithstanding.

There is a collection from this date of Celtic forms from ver-, as well as those from hypothetical bhei- or bhi- 'strike'. The first has cognates including German über and English over, as well as Latin super- and Greek hyper-. The second appears in Old Irish benim 'I strike' and Old Breton etbinam glossing Latin lanio 'I tear to pieces, rend, mangle, lacerate'.[9] Sir Ifor Williams saw the latter root once more in gomynu 'hew; kill', used of Madog, hero of a British attack on Catterick about the year 600, who 'cut down (gomynei) like rushes the men who did not flee'.[10] The element evidently possessed a savage force.

[4] John Morris-Jones, A Welsh Grammar (Oxford, 1913), 128-9, 267-8.
[5] W. J. Watson, The History of the Celtic Place-Names of Scotland (Edinburgh, 1926), 425.
[6] Alexander Brückner, Slownik etymologiczny jezyka polskiego (Kraków, 1927), 25.
[7] Canu Llywarch Hen, ed. Ifor Williams (Caerdydd, 1935), 72-3.
[8] Eilert Ekwall, The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names (Oxford, 1936), 250, 487.
[9] Henry Lewis and Holger Pedersen, A Concise Comparative Celtic Grammar (Göttingen, 1937), 26, 38.
[10] Canu Aneirin, ed. Ifor Williams (Caerdydd, 1938), 2, 72.

Now for a surprise. In Wiltshire is the River Ray (with Old English ea 'river'), formerly called Worfe or Wurf. It rises near the village of Wroughton (its old name there preserved), and flows north across flatlands west of Swindon to meet the Thames. It has been seen as a namesake of the Wharfe, with the sense 'something which twists and turns'. [11] But this creates a problem. For the Wharfe we offer a meaning 'great striker, supreme cutter'. That hardly suits the Ray, a sluggish stream. It leaves a choice. Either the Wiltshire stream's original name was not Celtic, and really was from Old English weorpan (giving Modern English warp 'twist out of shape'), meaning 'winder, twister'. Or we accept that the Britons were obsequious river-namers, bestowing inflated terms on modest streams. The latter solution is implied by, for example, the Brent of Middlesex, unimpressive but still regarded by British pagans as a goddess, 'she who is exalted'. As for Welsh forms in reconstructed bhei- or bhi-, they now appear in the University of Wales dictionary, as do those from ver-. Amongst the former are bid 'quickset hedge', bidog 'dagger', bwyall 'axe', cymynu 'cut down, hew, fell; kill' (cited with Middle Breton kemener 'cutter, tailor'), and perhaps gomynu 'hew down, strike, kill'.[12] Kenneth Jackson of Edinburgh initially followed Ekwall on our Yorkshire and Wiltshire river-names as identical and having an element Verb- related to Latin verbena 'sacred bough'.[13] He had doubts later on. But few noticed them.

Verbeia the goddess was acknowledged by Sir Ian Richmond under the breezy comment for Roman Britain that 'Godlings there were in plenty.' He mentions her as a watery divinity, along with Mars Condatis at Piercebridge and Chester-le-Street (both places having a watersmeet).[14] As concerns Ilkley, an archaeological map shows Ilkley as the sole place where the Roman road from York to the Preston region runs alongside the Wharfe.[15] Military language has to be clear. Ambiguity costs lives. Verbeia thus meant one fort only, that of Ilkley, making it an apt place to worship the nymph of the river. Hence the gritstone altar set up by Clodius Fronto, Prefect of the Lingonians, with an inscription (635 in Collingwood and Wright's catalogue) beginning VERBEIAE SACRUM, 'Sacred to Verbeia'.[16]

In this context, Hugh Smith's account of Wharfe for the English Place-Name Society repays careful reading. It contains both a flaw and a solution to that flaw. Smith observed that Old Norse hverfi 'bend, crook' has modified an older form, very probably that of Verbeia, tutelary goddess. He then spoke of a hypothetical British root uerb- 'wind, turn' and so 'winding river'. Yet, after citing Gaulish names in Verb-, he admitted that the root uerb- 'and derivatives of it are not, according to Professor Jackson, found in the Celtic languages'.[17] The implication is arresting. Smith, after Ekwall, continued to render Verbeia as 'winding one' from a reconstructed Celtic root uerb- otherwise unknown in Celtic. He maintained a position after admitting that there were no grounds for it. This is not rational.

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[11] J. E. B. Gover, Allen Mawer, and F. M. Stenton, The Place-Names of Wiltshire (Cambridge, 1939), 9.
[12] Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru (Caerdydd, 1950-2002), 277, 357-8, 774, 1459.
[13] K. H. Jackson, Language and History in Early Britain (Edinburgh, 1953), 282.
[14] I. A. Richmond, Roman Britain (Harmondsworth, 1955), 197.
[15] Map of Roman Britain, 3rd edn (Chessington, 1956).
[16] R. G. Collingwood and R. P. Wright, The Roman Inscriptions of Britain: Inscriptions on Stone (Oxford, 1965), 212-13.

[17] A. H. Smith, The Place-Names of the West Riding of Yorkshire: Introduction, Bibliography, River-Names, Analyses (Cambridge, 1962), 143-4.

So much appears when we look at those Gaulish instances. All then becomes clear. The first part of, for instance, VERBRONARA on an inscription from Vaucluse is not 'Verb-' but the intensive prefix ver-, as with Vercingetorix 'great king of heroes', the warrior leading the revolt against Caesar in 52 BCE.[18] The implications for Verbeia are obvious. One may add that Ekwall's objections of 1936 to Ilkley's being the Olenacum of Ptolemy were by this time shared by archaeologists. Frere thought Olenacum more likely to be Lancaster, and certainly not Ilkley, because Olenacum was a cavalry fort and Ilkley was much too small for that.[19]

As to what the divine Verbeia was like, there is evidence in a comprehensive study. Other streams in Britain were worshipped as female divinities. There are the Dee 'Goddess' of Cheshire and also Aberdeenshire; the Clyde 'She Who Washes, She Who Purifies' of Glasgow; the Mamma 'Mother' (now with the English name 'Medlock') of Manchester; the Brent 'She Who is Exalted' of Brentford. From Ireland come legends of the Boyne and Shannon as goddesses. No surprise, then, to find an altar at Ilkley in honour of Verbeia. It is linked with a local relief 'showing a goddess grasping serpents', although what they might mean is unclear. There is yet reason to associate Verbeia with fertility and (on analogies from Wales and Ireland) magic powers over the outcome of battle. This despite reference to Verbeia as perhaps related to Irish ferb 'cattle', and so 'goddess of cattle', on the analogy of the Boyne in Ireland.[20] We dismiss that etymology, Goedelic ferb having no known cognate in Brittonic. If, on the other hand, Verbeia instead meant 'great striker, powerful hitter', there is more to it than a torrent sweeping away man or beast. It will denote a goddess of war, like Aeron, goddess alike of the River Ayr in Scotland and River Aeron in Ceredigion (mentioned below). When Clodius Fronto, Prefect of the Lingonians, stepped forwards to his altar and burnt incense, what he sought from the goddess was, above all, victory in battle.

On the name of Ilkley, Margaret Gelling called it 'unexplained' in 1970, although noting a possible derivative from Olicana, Frere's objections notwithstanding.[21] Eight years later she was bolder, mentioning 'objections' to equating the two.[22] Then came Rivet and Smith's great book, wherein they rejected Ptolemy's reading Olicana as corrupt, preferring Olenacum and taking it as Elslack, the fort at Ilkley being too small for the garrison allocated to it. On Verbeia itself they pointed out that -eia indicates a river, as with the Seteia (¿better, Meteia ‘reaper, one that cuts down’?) or Mersey and Arbeia 'wild-turnip stream' at South Shields (which some Tyneside archaeologists unwisely link with a garrison of 'Arabs'). Unfortunately, Rivet and Smith still accepted Ekwall's interpretation 'winding one', despite Jackson's 1962 warning on verb- as unknown in Celtic.[23] Their disbelief in Olicana = Ilkley was published too late to reach Field's dictionary, although he acknowledged 'difficulties in the identification'.[24] Irish forms from the Indo-European roots bhei- or bhi- were then set out

[18] D. Ellis Evans, Gaulish Personal Names (Oxford, 1967), 119-20, 121-2, 279-80.
[19] Sheppard Frere, Britannia (London, 1967), 230-1.
[20] Anne Ross, Pagan Celtic Britain (London, 1967), 21, 217, 232, 345.
[21] Margaret Gelling, 'Ilkley', in The Names of Towns and Cities in Britain, ed. W. F. H. Nicolaisen (London, 1970), 113.
[22] Margaret Gelling, Signposts to the Past (London, 1978), 60.
[23] A. L. F. Rivet and Colin Smith, The Place-Names of Roman Britain (Princeton, 1979), 430-1, 493.
[24] John Field, Place-Names of Great Britain and Ireland (Newton Abbot, 1980), 89.

with Welsh and Breton cognates; Middle Irish bíth 'act of striking, act of wounding' reminds us of their associations with war.[25]

A popular dictionary by Adrian Room shows that he had woken up to some of Rivet and Smith's warnings on Olenacum, as we now render it, and not 'Olicana'; he did not, however, notice their arguments against Ilkley. Failing likewise to notice Jackson's strictures on verb- as non-existent in Celtic, he repeated Ekwall's discredited etymology for Verbeia as 'winding'.[26] Mills's Oxford dictionary similarly takes Wharfe as from that (non-existent) Celtic term 'winding', but at least gives Ilkley as a purely English form.[27]

Anne Ross referred in a later study to the relief of Verbeia found at Ilkley, where the goddess 'holds a serpent in either hand', and related it to archaic traditions of St Brigid wherein 'a serpent plays a central role', the Irish saint having aspects of a Celtic goddess.[28] Wharfe is noted as lacking the initial g- that British ver- eventually gained in Welsh, Cornish, and Breton; the river-name will have been borrowed by English in the fifth or sixth century, before that change took place.[29] In the same year David Parsons described Ptolemy's 'Olicana' as perhaps Elslack, but with the form a 'very difficult' one.[30] If Dr Parsons refers to Olenacum in the corrupt reading 'Olicana', he will find it difficult. Had he accepted the better reading supplied by Rivet and Smith, he could have explained it as 'estate belonging to Olenus', a Briton with a name perhaps linked to Welsh olwyn 'wheel' (and so perhaps meaning 'wheelwright'). We know of others with that name. Tacitus has a story of a centurion called Olennus, who got into hot water with natives in the Low Countries (the result being fatal for some of his men).[31]

The English Place-Name Society's new dictionary is not new in much that it says. It cautiously describes a link between 'Olicana' and Ilkley as 'in doubt'. Rivet and Smith's preferred reading Olenacum is thus again ignored. Worse is its derivation of Verbeia and Wharfe from a Celtic root verb 'winding' (otherwise unknown, need one say?) or else from a British cognate (equally unknown) of Irish ferb 'cattle'.[32] Kenneth Jackson might just as well have kept to himself the doubts cited by Hugh Smith in 1962. Not even the Society of which he was President takes notice of them. For a different style of contorted logic we have Professor Sims-Williams of Aberystwyth. He first relates Verbeia to Irish ferb 'cow: hind', so that the river-goddess would be one of cattle. He then excludes Verbeia from terms beginning ver- as it is 'clearly of the wrong structure'.[33] Let us speak clearly. Irish ferb 'cow; hind' having no known cognate in Welsh or Cornish, we need not relate it to Verbeia. If, however, the form is read not as Verb-eia but Ver-beia, one can immediately relate it to Welsh and Cornish terms and offer the meaning 'powerful hitter'.

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[25] Joseph Vendryes, Lexique étymologique de l'irlandais ancien: Lettre B (Paris, 1981), 27, 32-4, 54.
[26] Adrian Room, Dictionary of Place-Names in the British Isles (London, 1988), 183, 389.
[27] A. D. Mills, A Dictionary of English Place-Names (Oxford, 1991), 186.
[28] Anne Ross, 'Ritual and the Druids', in The Celtic World, ed. Miranda J. Green (London, 1995), 423-44.
[29] Richard Coates and Andrew Breeze, Celtic Voices, English Places (Stamford, 2000), 59.
[30] D. N. Parsons, 'Classifying Ptolemy's English Place-Names', in Ptolemy: Towards a Linguistic Atlas of the Earliest Celtic Place-Names of Europe, ed. D. N. Parsons and Patrick Sims-Williams (Aberystwyth, 2000), 169-78.
[31] Andrew Breeze, 'Ilkley, Elslack, and the Roman Fort of Olenacum', Transactions of the Yorkshire Dialect Society, xxi/104 (2004), 45-8.
[32] The Cambridge Dictionary of English Place-Names, ed. Victor Watts (Cambridge, 2004), 330, 669.
[33] Patrick Sims-Williams, Ancient Celtic Place-Names in Europe and Asia Minor (Oxford, 2006), 120, 322.

As the present century advanced, there was some progress. John Koch's atlas put Olenacum at Elslack and Verbeia at Ilkley without ambiguity.[34] A handbook on Welsh toponymy reminds us of rivers associated not with lowing herds but death in battle. On the Ceredigion coast is Aberaeron 'mouth of the Aeron', a dangerous entity. Aer means 'battle', Aeron 'great one of battle'. The Aeron of West Wales was a goddess of war and had a namesake in the River Ayr, Scotland. These ferocious Amazons guide us away from verb- 'cow, deer?' [35] They allow these conclusions.

Ver- means 'very; great'. The same sense occurs in British-Latin toponyms listed by Rivet and Smith, such as Vernemetum 'the very sacred grove: the great shrine' by Willoughby on the Wolds, near Loughborough, or Virvedrum Promotorium 'very sharp cape' (compare Middle Welsh gwair 'bend' from British vedr-) or Duncansby Head, by John o' Groats. The second element -beia means 'she who strikes, she who beats'. The Verbeia was, therefore, the 'great striker, she who hits powerful blows'. Affable and beneficial in time of peace, Verbeia the Goddess was menacing when enraged and in flood. Her name is far more dramatic than one might think from the 'winding one' of dictionaries. Regarded with superstitious dread, she brought triumphant glory to the fighting men whom she favoured, or bloody defeat and disaster to those who provoked her wrath. Linguistic analysis of Verbeia thus opens a window on the Celts of ancient Yorkshire, on their hopes and anxieties and attitudes to landscape. It has obvious anthropological interest.

In that it resembles Yorkshire's other early toponyms. It is not difficult to show that Isurium Brigantum or Aldborough is 'settlement of Brigantes "exalted ones" on the near side of the Ure', where Ure means 'clean one, pure one' (compare Welsh ir 'fresh' and Irish úr 'fresh, new'). South of the Ure is the Nidd. Disappearing underground on its course, it will be the 'dropper, descender, she who goes down', with the same first element as in Welsh nyth 'nest' (where birds sit down) or English nether. The Aire now has a Scandinavian name from eyjar 'islands'; its original Celtic one is indicated by Lagentium 'place on the river called "Blade"' (compare Welsh llain 'sword, spear') or Castleford. The Calder is the 'hard one, tough one', as shown by Welsh caled 'hard; rough, cruel'. With the Don we have a milder goddess, 'beneficent one, favouring one', as demonstrated by Welsh dawn 'gift, favour; object endowed with supernatural qualities'. When Sir Ian Richmond remarked of Celtic Britain that 'Godlings there were in plenty', he could have added naiads or river nymphs to the tally. Some were kind, some fierce and bloodthirsty. But they were all regarded with awe, as proved substantially by Clodius Fronto's altar and its inscription VERBEIAE SACRUM, 'Sacred to Verbeia', the goddess who was the 'great striker; she of formidable blows', the proud and imperious River Wharfe.

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[34] John T. Koch, An Atlas for Celtic Studies (Oxford, 2007), map 15.3.

[35] Hywel Wyn Owen and Richard Morgan, Dictionary of the Place-Names of Wales (Llandysul, 2007), 1.

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