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The Rivers Boyd of Gloucestershire and Bude of Cornwall

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Many English place-names are of Celtic origin, like Carlisle, London, Thames, or York. Much progress has been made in recent years on their derivation. But there is still plenty to do. This note deals with one problem, that of the names of the river Boyd near Bath and the river Bude in Cornwall. It argues that their names are from a Celtic form meaning ‘virtue, special quality’, probably because their water was thought to have healing powers.

The river Boyd runs southwards from near Chipping Sodbury for seven miles, joining the Avon between Bath and Bristol, by a disused railway embankment (at O.S. Nat. Grid ST 6868) near Bitton (= the *tun* or farmstead of the Boyd).¹ It has a Cornish namesake in the river Bude, flowing eight miles from near Jacobstow to enter the Atlantic at the town of Bude (SS 2106), called after it. The settlement of Bude is attested in 1400 as *Bude*, the river Bude in 1587 as *Bedewater*, with normal development in late Cornish of *u* to *i* (often spelt *ee*). Here original *u* allows links with the Boyd, recorded in the 10th century as *Byd*. Oliver Padel relates both names to Welsh *budr* ‘dirty’, though admitting this is ‘very uncertain’ since neither shows *r*, and was echoed by the late Victor Watts.² *Budr*, giving a sense ‘dirty river’, can certainly be ruled out. What seems the correct meaning is far more interesting.

Boyd and *Bude* surely derive from Celtic **boud-* ‘victory, excellence’. This root is familiar to millions thanks to Queen Boudica ‘Victorious One’ (with long *i*), shown in defiant mood by Westminster Bridge, where she and her daughters ride their war-chariot in Thomas Thornycroft’s statue. The inscription on the plinth calls her ‘Boadicea’, with the better but still incorrect reading ‘Boudicca’ (one day the correct form *Boudica* may be added).³ In Old Irish the Celtic root **boud-* is represented by *búaid* ‘victory; gift, special virtue, advantage, profit’, giving Modern Irish *bua* ‘victory; talent; virtue’.⁴ In Brittonic it gives Welsh *budd* ‘profit, gain, booty, riches; blessing, favour, advantage, benefit’, *buddsodd* ‘investment’, and *buddugol* ‘winning, victorious’; it also gives Old Breton *bud* (glossing post-classical Latin *bradium* ‘prize of victory, palm’ from Greek *brabeion* ‘prize in the games’).⁵ Yet the Cornish cognate of these is unrecorded. Hence the failure so far to explain the names of the Bude in Cornwall and the Boyd, formerly in Gloucestershire, thereafter in Avon, and now in the administrative unit of South Gloucestershire.

However, the Irish, Welsh, and Breton forms quoted above allow a derivation for our West Country streams. The sense would not be ‘victory’. That does not suit two minor rivers. They would rather be streams of ‘virtue, special quality’. So much is shown by Scottish and Irish hydronyms. The evidence comes from the *Buadhnat* of Arbuthnott (between Montrose and

1. Richard Coates and Andrew Breeze, *Celtic Voices, English Places* (Stamford, 2000), 364.
2. O.J. Padel, *A Popular Dictionary of Cornish Place-Names* (Penzance, 1988), 60; *The Cambridge Dictionary of English Place-Names*, ed. V.E. Watts (Cambridge, 2004), 97.
3. K.H. Jackson, *Language and History in Early Britain* (Edinburgh, 1953), 306; A.L.F. Rivet and Colin Smith, *The Place-Names of Roman Britain* (London, 1979), 269–71.
4. Joseph Vendryes, *Lexique étymologique de l'irlandais ancien: Lettre B* (Paris, 1981), 107.
5. *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru* (Caerdydd, 1950–2002), 345.

Stonehaven), the *Buadhchúg* by Loch Carron, wells called *Tobar nam Buadh* on St. Kilda and Barra, and *Abhainn na Buaidhe* or Bow River in Ireland. These were discussed long ago by Watson. Arbuthnott (NO 8074), formerly Aberbuthnot, is the mouth (*aber*) of the brook once called *Buadhbnat* 'little triumph, little virtue', which Watson called 'a holy stream possessed of healing power'. The *Buadhchúg* 'little one of virtue' near Lochcarron (NG 9040), by Kyle of Lochalsh in the West Highlands, was also 'a sacred stream of power'. On St. Kilda and Barra the wells called *Tobar nam Buadh* 'well of virtues' had curing properties. In Ireland *Abhainn na Buaidhe* 'river of virtue' (Bow River near Newry) protected cattle from disease for a year, if they passed through its water on May Day.⁶ It is likely the early Britons also knew the Boyd and Bude as rivers of 'virtue', with water of medicinal power. There seems no phonological objection to this etymology, since Jackson accepted the vowel of 10th-century *Byd* as representing late British long *ü*, from long *u*, from original British *ou*.⁷

If the Boyd and Bude are rivers of 'virtue' or 'blessing, favour, benefit', this solves a philological problem and provides new information on Celtic folklore. These streams would be considered to have healing qualities and were probably regarded as sacred. They were thought to cure human illnesses, and perhaps also those of flocks and herds.

So the above etymology leaves a task for researchers in Gloucestershire and Cornwall. Those with access to hydrological surveys will be able to state whether the Boyd and Bude contain minerals that cure disease. This seems likely for the Boyd, four miles from Bath, famed for healing waters. As for the river Bude, the farm of Penhallym (SX 2197) at the head of one of its tributaries can be explained as 'head of the salty stream' (cf. Cornish *bolen* 'salt').⁸ That indicates special chemical make-up. If scientists can show that beneficial minerals occur in the water of these rivers, it will effectively prove the derivation proposed here. There is also a task for folklorists. If traditions of cures from bathing in or drinking the Boyd and Bude survived into recent centuries, they will also support the arguments set out here.

In short, explanation of the rivers Boyd and Bude as having names related to Welsh *budd* 'benefit, profit' apparently solves a linguistic problem, underlines Celtic survival in these regions, and even casts light on early British medical practices (for both man and beast?), popular belief, and religion. The last of these may survive in archaeological record, if the sick came to their waters at special places, or left objects to solicit or give thanks for cures effected by these rivers. Such remains occur at known Celtic sanctuaries associated with springs, wells, and rivers, including Bath itself and *Aquae Arnemetiae* (Buxton, Derbyshire), which latter was sacred to the goddess Arnemetia 'dweller by the sacred grove'.⁹ If such remains turn up by the Boyd or Bude, it will show how philology can help the advance of archaeological science.

6. E.I. Hogan, *Onomasticon Goedelicum* (Dublin, 1910), 132; W.J. Watson, *The History of the Celtic Place-Names of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1926), 446.

7. Jackson, *Language and History*, 310–11.

8. A.C. Breeze, 'Elvan Water, Clydesdale', *Trans. Dumfriesshire and Galloway Natural Hist. and Antiq. Soc.* 76 (2002), 108–9.

9. Anne Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain* (London, 1974), 46–59; Rivet and Smith, *Place-Names of Roman Britain*, 254–5.