Tamesubugus made this

Peter Finn, Archeox Place-Names Group, May 2013

The 1970s excavation of a Romano-British kiln site at the Churchill Hospital, Headington, unearthed an unusual artefact. The find itself was commonplace enough: part of the rim of a *mortarium* or grinding-bowl typical of the homewares produced by the extensive local pottery industry centred on what is now East Oxford, between the first and fourth centuries AD[1].

What is unusual about this potsherd is that it bears an inscription. It provides probably the earliest known piece of language, and the earliest attested place-name, originating in our area – a fragment of local speech from almost 2000 years ago.

Graffito inscribed before firing on the rim of a mortarium *found in Headington (Wacher 1979: 148)*

So what does the writing say? And what can it tell us?

The inscription is in cursive Latin script (as used in handwriting) and may be made out [2] as:

TΛ·MII·SV·BV·GVS·FII·[…]

---

[1] Paul Booth, 'East Oxford and other Roman landscapes of the Thames Valley', presentation to Archeox volunteers, Oxford, 7 June 2011; also Martin Henig and Paul Booth, *Roman Oxfordshire* (Stroud: Sutton, 2000), pp. 118–19. The photograph is from John Wacher, *The Coming of Rome* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), p. 48. There are line drawings in R. G. Collingwood and R. P. Wright, *The Roman Inscriptions of Britain: Volume* 2 (*RIB* 2492–2500) (Stroud: Sutton, 1994). In the series to which the latter belongs, the standard work on Roman inscriptions in Britain, our inscription is RIB 2496.4.

[2] See Shigeharu Ogino, 'Stamped mortaria in the Roman Empire', *Kiyou* (43, 55–109, 2009), p. 68.

Some clues to the conventions of Latin inscriptions in Roman times will immediately help the interpretation: word-division might be sacrificed for 'aesthetic regularity' (hence the dots between letter-groups); the letter 'A' might be written without a cross-bar; there was no separate 'U' and 'V', only the letter 'V'; 'E' could be represented by 'II'; inscriptions tended to follow set patterns; and in the context of manufactured items labelled with the maker's name, one might expect 'FE[…]' to be Latin *fecit* '(he) made (it)'. All this gives us a more intelligible:

TAMESUBUGUS FE[CIT]

The first part seems to be a personal name, *Tamesubugus* – evidently masculine, judging by the *-us* ending (expected to be masculine in Latin) – and the second, 'made it'. The sentence would read 'Tamesubugus made it' or, better, 'Tamesubugus made this'. Tamesubugus was evidently the potter, and appears to have been labelling his work. He was evidently literate enough (in Latin) to do so, and presumably expected his clientele to understand and appreciate this – and hopefully to buy his products. However, while Tamesubugus evidently could write in the Latin language and script, his name is not Latin but Celtic.

At the time of the expansion of Rome, large areas of Europe – including Gaul (now France), Britain and Ireland – were Celtic-speaking. That is, people spoke a range of closely related varieties sharing a common unwritten ancestral form called 'Proto-Celtic' by scholars. This proto-language in turn descended from a still more remote ancestor, 'Proto-Indo-European', which is also the common ancestor of, among others, Latin, the Germanic languages (including English), Greek, the Slavic languages, and Sanskrit and other Indian languages.

As the Romans spread from their base in Italy they took their language with them. In parts of the empire Latin supplanted local languages to become the first language of the populace. However, in mainland Britain Latin never fully took hold; for most people everyday speech remained the local British Celtic language. However, there would have been a lot of bilingualism. Many native Britons would have acquired some competence in Latin – along with other Roman cultural traits – especially if they were engaged in long-distance trade. A special feature of this bilingualism relates to writing, in that writing only ever really took place in Latin. Inscriptions fully or mostly in Celtic languages of the period are very few, with none attested in Britain. What evidence we do have of written Celtic from the period is names.

A typical consequence of bilingualism is that languages influence each other. This was evidently true of Latin and Celtic. In Gaul, for example, the influence of Latin on Gaulish was of such duration and intensity that Latin came to replace Gaulish, albeit with some Gaulish

influence on the local Latin; this gallicised Latin is the ancestor of modern French. In Britain no actual language replacement took place, but we can detect Latin influence on Welsh – the main modern descendant of British – and British influence on local written Latin.

Influence is especially clear in names. In colonial language-contact situations many names in the language of the colonised territory will often be retained. Our written data from Roman Britain show that most place-names and many personal names are British rather than Latin.

Now, the name of our potter is particularly interesting for at least two reasons. First, it appears to incorporate an important place-name (East Oxford's oldest) – that of the River Thames. Second, it has been proposed that before the conquest, different stretches of the river had been different names – the form ancestral to *Thames* being applied upstream of Westminster, and that ancestral to *London* downstream. The evidence of our potsherd, found three miles from the river, suggests at least that the upper Thames was indeed referred to using the *Thames*-word before AD 400[3].

So, how is our potter's name to be translated? The best explanation is that *Tamesubugus* is composed of two elements in British Celtic, together yielding the meaning 'Thames-Dweller'. The second element is a bit problematic, however. *Tamesubugus* is a Latinised form; the likely underlying form, which must be reconstructed, was British **Tamēsu-bogios*, presumably 'Thames-Dweller', although perplexingly the second element **-bogios* appears to have meant 'breaker' or 'striker'; perhaps it was a warrior's name [4].

---

[3] The argument here is simplified from Richard Coates, 'A new explanation of the name of London' *Transactions of the Philological Society* (96, 2, 203–29, 1998), who includes further references.

[4] Note that: (1) reconstructed linguistic forms are conventionally indicated using a preceding asterisk; (2) the second vowel in **Tamēsu-* was *ē* – long *e* (we know long and short vowels existed in both Latin and British but were not indicated either in Latin writing or in Celtic words represented in Latin, such as names. The length-mark is usually supplied in technical descriptions). The analysis is based on material in Paul Russell and Alex Mullen, *Celtic Personal Names of Roman Britain* (Cambridge: Dept of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic, University of Cambridge, 2007; www.asnc.cam.ac.uk/personalnames/; accessed 24 May 2013), and in correspondence between Keith Briggs and Richard Coates, 'Re: Thames at Oxford', *The English Place-Name List*, 29–30 November 2007 (https://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/cgi-bin/webadmin?A2=EPNL;8165fadb.0711, accessed 24 May 2013). 'Thames-Dweller' is the meaning ascribed in Henig and Booth, *Roman Oxfordshire*, pp. 118–19. Briggs suggests some alternative explanations: one involving a British second element *bug(io)*- 'blue(-eyed?)', the other an overall form like **Tamiso-bogios* 'sieve-breaker' – 'sieve' referring to a Romano-British pottery colander, with the name possibly applied to an incompetent potter! See also Anthony Birley, *The People of Roman Britain* (Berkeley/Los Angeles CA: University of California Press, 1980), pp. 131–3, and Birley's review of RIB Vol. 2 (1994), *Journal of Roman Studies* (85, 312–13, 1995), p. 312.

The archaeologist Anthony Birley notes that a fair few Roman graffiti in Britain are of personal names – usually indicating ownership but occasionally makers of *mortaria*. Indeed, we know the names of at least 250 potters working in Britain in Roman times – mostly makers of mortaria active during the first to second centuries. They include some fine examples of Celtic compound names, such as *Setibogius* and *Tamesubugus*. He says RIB 2496.4 *Tamesubugus fecit*, a 'delightful specimen' of graffiti, provides a rare example of a late named potter, and comments that the name's first element is eminently appropriate for a potter working in the Thames valley[5].

The *Thames*-name is one of the earliest attested for the British Isles[6]. Modern forms with *Th-* (but always pronounced with initial /t-/) derive from an erroneous belief that the name had Greek origins. However, all earlier forms had *T-*, going back via Middle English *Temse* (1381) and Old English *Temes* (843) to the first known reference, by Caesar himself, in 51 BC, as *Tamesis* – or more accurately *Tamēsis*. This Latinised form likely derives from British **Tamēsā*, probably meaning 'the dark one', from a Proto-Celtic root **tam-* 'dark'.

The Indo-European root of this latter form yields other, related words in Celtic and other IE languages. Welsh retains names for several important localities in England – including the Thames, whose Welsh name is *Tafwys*. Despite its initial appearance, the latter form is a direct descendant, via regular sound change over 2000-odd years, of British **Tamēsa*. Related forms include Proto-Celtic **temeslos* yielding Irish *teimheal* and Welsh *tywyll* 'darkness'; other Irish forms *tement* 'dark' and *teimen* 'dark grey'; Latin *tenebrae* 'shadows'; Slavic words for 'dark' such as Russian *tyómno* (earlier **tyémno*); and Sanskrit *támas* 'darkness' and *tamasá-* 'dark', clearly related to the river-name *Tāmasā* 'dark one' – referring to a tributary of the Ganges.

After the Roman withdrawal mainland Britain was invaded again, this time by Germanic-speaking Angles, Saxons and others from across the North Sea. Although this time the language of the invaders did generally win out, British Celtic did leave its mark on English in at least one significant area. The names of most major rivers (and many mountains and towns) are either Celtic or pre-Celtic. The form underlying *Thames* and meaning 'dark one' is one such – apparently an old British river-name element. We have forms taken into English

[5] Birley, *People of Roman Britain*, pp. 131–3, and review of RIB, p. 312.
[6] The discussion of *Thames* and related river-names is based on material in Eilert Ekwall, *Dictionary of English Place-Names* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1974); J. P. Mallory and D. Q. Adams, *The Encyclopedia of Indo-European Culture* (London: Fitzroy & Dearborn, 1997); Coates 'Name of London'; and A. David Mills, *A Dictionary of English Place-Names* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

with -m-, notably: the river-name *Thame*, Oxfordshire (with the town of *Thame* named after it – both near East Oxford); three examples of *Tame* and one of *Team* in northern and central England; and (with an -ar suffix) *Tamar* in Cornwall/Devon. Forms taken into English with a later Welsh-type /-v-/ sound include *Teviot* in Northumbria, *Tavy* in Devon, and *Taf* and *Teifi* in Wales (in Welsh spelling the sound /v/ is represented by *f*, with /f/ represented by *ff*).

Some linguists maintain that while many river-names of northern Europe, including Britain, do clearly derive from Celtic, some must come from a different, lost IE language termed 'Old European'. Linguist Richard Coates proposes an explanation for the name of another important locality, *London* itself, as deriving from an Old European river-name referring to the lower Thames[7].

The English name *London* drives indirectly from the Latin form *Londinium*. This name was applied to a settlement at the north end of a bridge the Roman invaders built, at the site of the later London Bridge. Coates argues that the Latin name for the settlement was derived by the Romans from the pre-existing British name for that stretch of the river, something like British **Lowonidon-*. But what is the origin of the British name? What did it mean?

Before the Roman bridge was built, the lowest crossing point of the wide and untrammelled river was the difficult ford at present-day Westminster, some two miles upstream. The only way to cross the watercourse downstream of the ford – i.e. between Westminster and the mouth of the estuary, 30 miles away – was to go by boat or swim.

Coates notes two cases in England where the name for an estuary differs from that of its feeders – the *Humber*, fed by the Yorkshire *Ouse*, *Trent* and *Don*; and *The Wash* (earlier British **Mētaris* 'still river'), fed by the *Nene*, *Welland* and (*Great*) *Ouse*. He proposes that it is the difficulty of crossing that accounts for the parallel separate naming of the lower Thames and its estuary at an early period: he suggests that British **Lowonidon-* in turn represents a Celticisation of a still-earlier, Old European name **Plowonidā*, meaning probably 'river crossed by boat or by swimming'.

Loss of initial **P-* (**[P]lowonidā*) would be in line with a characteristic early Celtic sound change (compare Irish *athír* with Latin **pater**, Greek **patḗr** and Sanskrit **pitár-**, all from Proto-Indo-European **patḗr** 'father'; in Germanic languages ***p-** changed to **f-**, hence English

---

[7] Based on Coates, 'Name of London' (1998).

father)[8]. Old European **Plowonidā* derived from a compound of two roots: **plowo-* 'ship; swimming'[9] and **nidā* 'river'[10].

Finally, as evidence that the upper Thames was early on called **Tamēsā*, Coates notes that the earliest known reference to the river under that name, in Caesar's *De bello Gallico* (V, 11, 8), is to its inland course – a point some 80 miles from the sea, where the river separated the territory of the Celtic tribal leader Cassivellaunus from other kingdoms. The Thames at Oxford remained an important boundary until 1974.

---

[8] Similarly, English has **f-** in **f**ish and **f**arrow 'pig'; Latin has **p-** in **p**iscus 'fish' and **p**orcus 'young pig'; but Irish (as an example of a Celtic language) has *no* initial consonant in *íasc* 'fish' and *orc* 'young pig'; all these related forms descend respectively from PIE **piḱsḱos* 'trout, fish' and **porḱos* 'young pig, piglet'. An example of **pl-* → **l-* is *Milan*, Italian *Milano*, from Latin *Mediolanum*, this from Celtic **Medio-lānon* 'in the midst of the plain', where Celtic **lānon* can be compared with Latin **p**lānum, both 'plain'. See J. P. Mallory and D. Q. Adams, *The Oxford Introduction to Proto-Indo-European and the Proto-Indo-European World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[9] This ultimately derived from the PIE verb-root **plew-* 'to flow', in turn also the source of English *flow* and *flood*.

[10] Derived from a different PIE verb-root **neid-* also ultimately 'to flow' (the 'river' sense survived in European river-names including *Nedd/Neath* in Wales, *Nida* in Poland, *Nidda* in Germany and *Nied* in Lorraine, France).