# PRE-ENGLISH RIVER-NAMES AND BRITISH SURVIVAL IN SHROPSHIRE

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This paper airs some initial thoughts about Shropshire river-names in advance of a fuller treatment in the EPNS survey currently under preparation.[1] The impetus for this first look is the apparent discrepancy between the extent of pre-English survival in the area as described by Kenneth Jackson on the one hand, and as reviewed by Margaret Gelling on the other. In fact it will be suggested that these two great scholars diverge relatively little on the fundamental questions of early linguistic history in the county. There are, however, clear differences of emphasis and detail, and I aim to weigh some of the evidence relevant to them in what follows.

 In 1953, on p. 220 of his monumental *Language and History in Early Britain*, Jackson published a map of British river-names (reproduced as Figure 1 below), which gives powerful visual articulation to the marked increase in survival of such names from east to west across England. Jackson interpreted this as being 'of obvious significance in relation to the Anglo-Saxon conquest' (LHEB, 221). Many modern scholars would be circumspect about implying a direct, and chronologically significant, relationship between military conquest and linguistic transfer,[2] but this

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1.   Margaret Gelling completed six volumes of the survey, covering two-thirds of the county, before her death in 2009. The Universities of Nottingham and Wales have secured a four-year AHRC grant to complete her work in at least four further volumes, to appear between 2015 and 2017. As commonly in EPNS county-surveys the river-names will be treated in detail in the final volume to appear.

2.   It must be noted that the historical framework which Jackson accepted has been subjected to attack from all angles by historians and archaeologists over the last sixty years and there would be little or no consensus nowadays over the points and dates he regarded as fixed. For a survey of criticism of Jackson's work in this context see Sims-Williams 1990, 244, with references that could by now be multiplied many times over.

does not alter the clear and impressive pattern formed by this mappable category of linguistic evidence. It shows that the further west one goes in England, the more communicative intercourse must have taken place between speakers of Old English and British. Since the main lines of the map are hardly in question—even though various specific details can be contested—this conclusion seems to me practically incontrovertible, though it is a point that has often been rather overlooked in modern discussions of the extent of British survival, or otherwise, in early medieval England.[3]
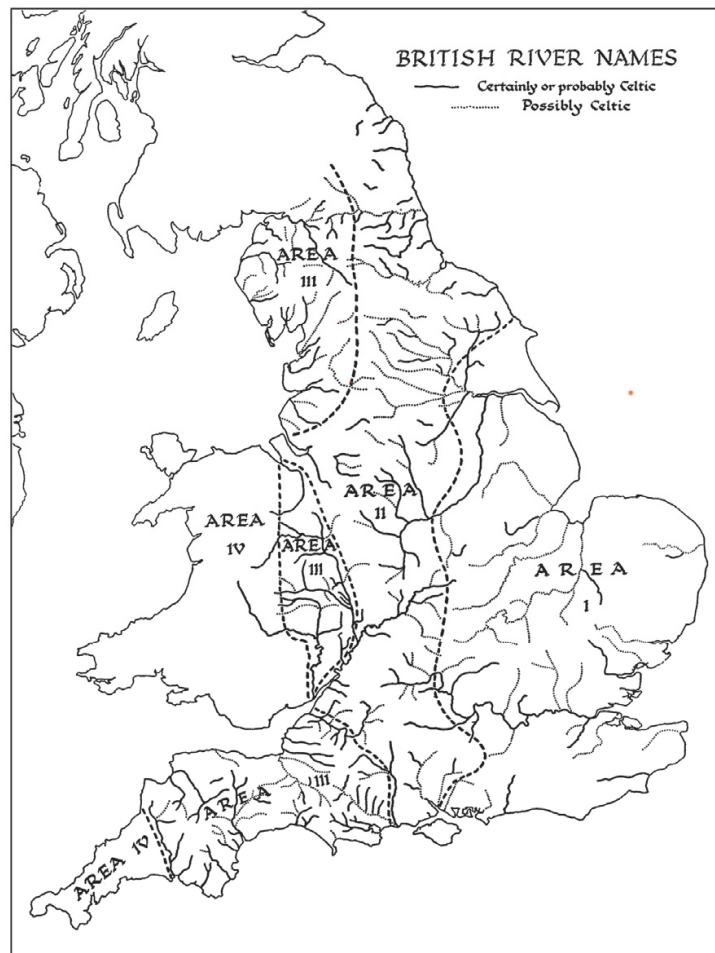


Figure 1. *British river-names* (from the 1994 reprint of LHEB, by kind permission of Four Courts Press).

3.  It is appropriate to note here an article by Yeates (2006), arguing that Jackson's treatment of river-names was seriously flawed. In my view Yeates is correct to draw attention to various complicating factors in the nature of the record, as he is to question aspects of Jackson's historical framework. However, in concentrating on fine details, undoubtedly of great significance to local study, he seems to me to overlook the power and importance of the pattern of survival as a whole. See also Padel's discussion of this paper (Padel 2013, 8–9).

Alongside his map, Jackson wrote a commentary characterising and grouping together particular regions and areas. He allocated 'most of Shropshire', together with 'western Worcestershire, all Herefordshire north and east of the Wye, and Gloucestershire west of the Severn', to Area III:

> Here Brittonic river names are especially common, including often those of mere streams, and the proportion of certainly Celtic names is highest of all.

This contrasted with Areas II and I to the east, where, essentially, fewer and fewer tributaries off the major rivers are expected to bear pre-English names. The Area III he defined also included much of north-west England (across part of which British language is known to have survived until relatively late in the Anglo-Saxon period), and the south-west from the mouth of the Severn down to the River Tamar. (Beyond that river, Cornwall, like Wales, is classed as Area IV, where practically all the river-names remained British.)

For Jackson, then, most of Shropshire sat comfortably within this western zone which, by one fairly objective measure, passed on more British language to English-speakers than did areas further to the east. Yet Gelling, reviewing the British contribution to the county's nomenclature in 1990 in the first volume of the EPNS survey, gave a quite different impression. She suggested (PN Sa 1, xii) that there was a 'paucity of pre-English names' in Shropshire, and (PN Sa 1, xiii) that '[t]here must have been a drastic re-naming of settlements and landscape features after the area became part of the kingdom of Mercia'. Rather than taking its place neatly in a west midland border region characterised by a good degree of British survival, as Jackson had it, Gelling's Shropshire was to be sharply distinguished from Worcestershire and Herefordshire to the south, where she accepted such toponymic survival.

Some of the tension between these points of view can perhaps be resolved if they are set more fully in context. Very simply, Jackson described the survival of river-names, while Gelling was reporting on the whole range of names for settlements and landscape-features. As we shall see below, there may be reasons why different types of name survived in different proportions, and that could certainly help account for the differing emphases. On the other hand, it should be observed that this was not an argument adopted by the protagonists themselves. Jackson specifically proposed that '[o]ther types of Brittonic name fit well enough into this distribution to show that when the material is complete the total result will not differ seriously from that based on the river names' (LHEB, 221), which allowed him to generalise hypotheses

based on the river-name distribution to wider questions of survival. And Gelling, in appealing to the whole range of names, made a point of including rivers: '[s]ome fairly long rivers [in Shropshire] have English names', she proposed, and gave several examples to support her view that pre-English survivals of all kinds are notably rare in the county (PN Sa 1, xiii). Thus both scholars found, or expected to find,[4] a degree of consistency across different name-types, and if we are tempted to explain their starkly differing formulations as being based on divergent name-sets, it should be conceded that this was not how they perceived things.

That said, it was suggested above that on the major questions Gelling and Jackson were not far apart. Remarkably, perhaps, they both drew on the place-name evidence that they had before them to paint a rather similar picture. For Jackson, the survival of British nomenclature in Area III indicated a significant population of British-speakers living on into the epoch of Anglo-Saxon political dominance: 'the new [Anglo-Saxon] settlements', he suggested, 'represent a comparatively thin overlay over a larger [British] population which lived on' (LHEB, 241). And although Gelling took a very different view of the number of pre-English names surviving in Shropshire, she too proposed a model of a resident population that remained but came under the domination of a new Anglo-Saxon elite. Her argument largely turned not on the degree of pre-English survival, but on the formulaic character of English names in the region. These she thought suggestive of administrative bureaucracy: names imposed from above, rather than growing organically out of local usage (PN Sa 1, xiii–xvii; also Gelling 1992, 122–23). Thus both scholars imagined a situation in which, in the generations after Anglo-Saxon military and political conquest, a British-speaking population continued to work the land under English-speaking masters who, in Gelling's formulation at least, had already begun to determine most of the names of settlements and of topographical features.

My purpose here is not to take fundamental issue with this consensus, nor yet to re-examine all of the toponymic material relevant to it. My focus is narrowly on river-names. Was Gelling correct to see pre-English survival in this group as significantly rarer in Shropshire than in other

4. Jackson was conscious that materials were as yet very incomplete, and he explicitly put together his river-name map, based on Ekwall's *English River-Names* (ERN), because '[t]he material for a satisfactory distribution map [of all British place-names in England] does not yet exist' (LHEB, 221). The same could still be said today, though there has been marked progress, particularly in the county-by-county maps appended to Coates and Breeze 2000. Gelling, of course, was writing on completion of a survey of the major names across the whole of Shropshire.

parts of the border region? Or was Jackson correct to characterise most of Shropshire as a 'full' member of Area III, with a markedly high proportion of pre-English river-names? If it is possible to decide between the options, it will be interesting to consider whether and how conclusions about the general language-contact situation in the county might need to be modified.

First some terms and methodology. 'British' I have used, in this relatively non-technical paper, as a generalised term for Brittonic Celtic language in its ancient and medieval forms. One of its surviving descendants, of course, is Modern Welsh. In this discussion it is often preferable to speak of 'pre-English' names, however, since this allows us to group together names that are clearly British in character with others which certainly or probably pre-date the Anglo-Saxon conquests, though their linguistic origins are less clear. Two examples which are not taken up below, since the rivers concerned are long and hardly particular to Shropshire, are the Severn and the Teme. The former is demonstrably pre-English because *Sabrina* is attested in Romano-British sources, though it is not well enough understood to be counted as securely British or Celtic (Sims-Williams 2000, 8). The latter is not attested so early, but it clearly belongs to a name-type in *Tam-* and *Tem-* found across Britain, including instances from the Roman period. Again, there remain uncertainties about the ultimate origin, which may well be Celtic, but there is no doubt that the name is pre-English, nor that it was passed on to the Anglo-Saxons by speakers of British.[5] Since our interest here is in the transfer of names to English, we are released from worrying about categories such as 'Old European',[6] or other knotty questions bearing on the ultimate origin of the names in use amongst the British-speaking population.[7]

5.   Recent thinking, citing parallels from Spain, has connected a Celtic *\*tamo-* to an Indo-European root meaning 'cutting, cutter' (Falileyev 2010, 211 and 31, with references); more traditionally English scholars have seen in these names '*m* extensions of the IE root *\*tā/\*tə* "to flow"' (Watts 2004, 604).

6.   It should be remembered that this construct—an Indo-European language pre-dating the 'modern' branches of Celtic, Germanic, etc., and visible in river-names—has grown up, and in some quarters been wholly dismissed, since Jackson wrote. For the hypothesis see Krahe 1964; for a summary of its applicability to Britain see Nicolaisen 1982, with new suggestions in Kitson 1996; for a rejection see Isaac 2005, 189–90, with further references.

7.   Various recent voices have suggested that a significant part of the population of Britain may have been Latin- or Romance-speaking when they encountered the Anglo-Saxons. For extended discussion, and reasons why I find this unlikely,

It should be observed that Jackson, in particular, used rather different notation. His primary interest in LHEB, of course, was in the history of British language, and his river-name map, though an excellent proxy for pre-English survival, is not exactly that. Thus, while he marked many names as 'certainly or probably Celtic', he also used dotted lines to indicate 'possibly Celtic' rivers. It appears (though he seems not to have discussed the point) that this included both pre-English names that may either have a Celtic or a more exotic ancient origin, and names for which the choice appears to lie between a British and an English etymology. An example of the former category in Shropshire is Clun, which is certainly discussed as pre-English in LHEB (e.g. pp. 308–09), though the etymology is not addressed—on the map the river is dotted, as is its probable equivalent in the East Anglian Colne. And a likely example of the latter category is the Shropshire Worfe, which Jackson also dotted. Though he did not discuss the name in LHEB, his opinion was doubtless informed by Ekwall's account (ERN, 471), where Celtic and English explanations were weighed up, and indeed the English was preferred (see further below).

The principal focus of this brief review is the list of rivers in Gelling's summary discussion (PN Sa 1, xiii).[8] She distinguished three types: English coinages, British survivals and Welsh names found in the west of the county which are to be ascribed 'to Wales rather than to Shropshire'. This last category could be controversial: her list includes the Tanat and the Ceiriog, which run principally through Welsh territory, edging Shropshire towards their mouths; but also the Morlas and the Morda which flow almost entirely within Shropshire, albeit the north-western corner of the county—the Oswestry area—which was substantially Welsh-speaking, either continuously or with an early medieval break, until quite recent times. Certainly there is a reasonable argument for considering these as 'Welsh' names rather than British survivals, though this could be the thin end of an awkward wedge: other rivers, such as the Perry and the Clun, also run, for much of their course, through areas that were substantially Welsh-speaking in the medieval

particularly as far west as Shropshire, see Parsons 2011. 'Pre-English' will, however, also do for any such putative Romance-speakers.

8.   See Fig. 2 for the rivers discussed in the following paragraphs. For the purposes of this article I restrict my brief comments to the group Gelling assembled in PN Sa 1, together with a couple of additions from ERN. In covering the material again in 1992 Gelling herself mentioned a couple of other pre-English survivals (Gelling 1992, 66–69, including Dowles as certain and Cantern as possible), and the full EPNS survey will need to consider still others, such as the Unk (ERN, 309).

period. In the EPNS survey all of these names will certainly be included: it is perhaps somewhat arbitrary to sideline some of them from this discussion before it even begins, but since all the names involved are undoubtedly pre-, or at least non-, English, little harm will be done.

Gelling's list of Shropshire's pre-English river-names looks very judicious. The early credentials of the Roden are secured by its attestation in a derived settlement-name, *Rutunio*, recorded in the Antonine Itinerary compiled around 300 A.D.[9] Cound is a representative of a familiar type in Britain—a Romano-British derivative of one of them, *Cunetione*, a settlement on the Wiltshire Kennet, is also attested.[10] Clun is similarly one of a widespread group, probably incorporating, as noted above, the River Colne in Essex. These are not attested from the pre-English period, but no one doubts their pre-English character and *Colaunā* is generally considered to share a suffix with the demonstrably ancient *Alaunā*.[11] Tern is surely the *Tren* of early Welsh poetry, with a straightforward etymology in Welsh *tren*, 'strong, powerful', and a doublet in Carmarthenshire.[12] Perry, which looks identical to Peover in Cheshire in its earliest forms, also appears to have an obvious congener in Welsh *pefr*, 'bright, clear, beautiful'.[13] The *Neen* of Neen Savage, Neen Sollars and Neenton—the river has now become the Rea, replaced by Old English *æt þære ēa*, 'at the river'—looks identical to the major

9.   ERN, 344–45; PNRB, 448; LHEB, 554, 677; cf. discussion of Rodington in PN Sa 1, 250.

10.   ERN, 99, 225–28; PNRB, 328–29; LHEB, 332, 676; PN Sa 1, 102.

11.   ERN, 87–90; LHEB, 309; PN Sa 1, 91. The existence of a medieval Welsh form *Colunwy*, of the Shropshire Clun, appears to point to an independent non-English development (LHEB, 382). *Cair Colun* for Colchester in the ninth-century *Historia Brittonum* may also be noted, though Colchester, a Roman *colonia*, offers problems (see Carroll and Parsons 2007, 101–03 for discussion).

12.   ERN, 400–01; Thomas 1938, 125–26; PN St 1, 21. LHEB does not comment on this name: the river-name map seems to show it dotted as 'possibly Celtic', perhaps reflecting doubts about the identification of Welsh and English forms. On the Welsh side, however, the identification of *Tren* with Tern, treated in the poetry as the old eastern border of Powys, is 'universally accepted' (Rowland 1990, 576; also Koch 2013, 255).

13.   ERN, 322–23; LHEB, 281; PN Ch 1, 33. In both Cheshire and Shropshire the Old English *ēa*, 'river', was appended. If this is not just a coincidence it might be suspected that *ēa* could have been 'encouraged' as a replacement for a British suffix, such as those mentioned below, note 25. There appears to be no straightforwardly equivalent river-name involving *pefr* in Wales, but see Watson 1926, 452 and Nicolaisen 2001, 211 for recurrent Peffer in Scotland.

Nene of the south-east midlands, which has universally been regarded as an ancient name.[14]
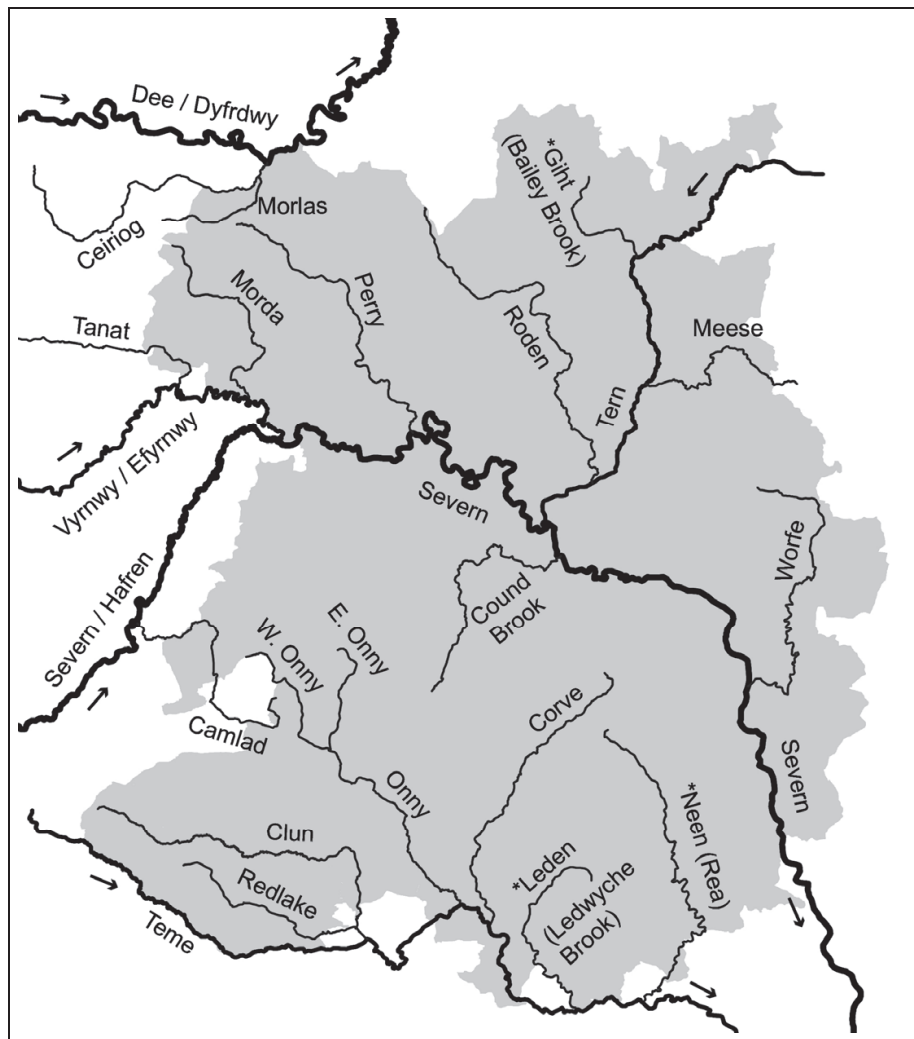


Figure 2. *Shropshire river-names*

The remaining two instances perhaps admit of a little more doubt. The Ledwyche Brook is, in its recorded forms, apparently a back-formation from one or other of the two settlements called Upper and Lower Ledwyche, in which the second element is presumably Old English *wīc*, 'specialised farm'.[15] That the first element of the name, *Led(e)*-,

14.   ERN, 299–300; PN Sa 1, 219; LHEB, 332 (apparently accepting the pre-English nature of the name, though noting 'the etymology is not satisfactorily established'). Coates (2005, 316–18) discusses '[i]ts no doubt ancient name', suggesting a British solution either equivalent to modern Welsh *annwyn* 'unpleasant' or, with a cunning change of prefix, a similar formation meaning 'very pleasant'.

15.   PN Sa 1, 172. Gelling observed that there is no evidence that Upper and Lower Ledwyche, which are some three miles apart, ever belonged to a single unit,

represents the original river-name is not unlikely; that it should represent an earlier *Leden*, with *n* lost before *w*, is then a good suggestion, since such a name is recurrent and is readily derived from British *\*litano-*, Welsh *llydan*, 'broad'. Ledbury, on the Leadon in Herefordshire, shows an equivalent loss of *n* before a consonant.[16] Lastly, a little more hypothetical again, but still with some claim to probability, comes *Giht*, another lost river-name which Gelling identifies in the parish-name Ightfield, and thus apparently to be identified with the stream now called Bailey Brook by the source of which Ightfield stands (PN Sa 1, 162–63). Another lost *Giht* is found in Islip in Oxfordshire (the river is now the Ray, just like the Rea above), and has been considered pre-English and plausibly compared with the Ieithon in Radnorshire and the Ythan in Scotland.[17] No alternative English explanation is obvious.

Of the relatively long rivers with English names that Gelling mentions, one, the Meese in the north-east of the county, appears straightforward. Again the river-name is recurrent, and in this case a word of suitable form is also found in a number of compound-names in Anglo-Saxon charters, as *Meosbroc*, *Meosden*, etc. For all of these, Old English *mēos*, 'moss, ?bog', looks a reasonable base.[18] The two other instances she gives may be less compelling, however. Following Ekwall, the Corve is taken to contain the Old English *\*corf*, 'cutting, pass' found in Corfe Castle, Dorset.[19] There are, however, several problems. Ekwall himself did not think that Corve could be an original river-name but must originally have applied to the valley, Corve Dale, and subsequently transferred to the river by back-formation. This is not an entirely comfortable hypothesis, as Ekwall acknowledged: 'The early occurrence

so she preferred to see them as independent instances of the river-name plus *wīc*. This circumstance is slightly awkward, and one does wonder whether an original river-name with a suffix (?perhaps the *-ig* discussed by Thomas 1938, 180–97) could have encouraged the development of what look like names in *wīc*.

16.  For the group of names, including Ledbury on the Leadon, see ERN, 241; also LHEB, 672–73. Ekwall does not connect Ledwyche Brook (ERN, 246), but as Gelling observes (PN Sa 1, 172), this appears to be because he wrongly accepted an early form *Lotwys* as a spelling of this name, when it belongs elsewhere (PN Sa 1, 187, on *Lutwyche*).

17.  ERN, 209; Watson 1926, 211; Morgan 1998, 63.

18.  ERN, 280–82; EPNE, II, 38. My thanks to Ann Cole, who has a study of this element in hand: she tells me that she is unhappy with the precise sense of these glosses, but agrees that we are dealing with a related word in the semantic range 'moss, bog, swamp'.

19.  ERN, 96–97; PN Sa 1, 98–99 on the derived Corfham. Gelling noted here that '[t]he loss of the pre-English name for this major river is surprising'.

of the name [Corve] and the fact that it seems to enter into a number of place-names [e.g. Corfham and Corfton, which are both found in Domesday Book] may seem to tell against connection with Corfe' (ERN, 96–97). The hypothesis is not strengthened by the subsequent addition of what could be a much earlier record of the name, explicitly denoting the river, than any that Ekwall knew.[20] Nor are matters helped by the observation that the only other evidence for Old English *corf seems to be found in a tight cluster in Dorset and Somerset—there is nothing other than this instance to suggest that the word was ever used outside a local south-western dialect.[21] And, most importantly, it has not previously been noted in this connection that there is a Welsh stream-name of comparable form, the Corf, a tributory of the Llyfnant in Ceredigion.[22] Moreover, an equivalent *corf*, 'saddle-bow', recorded by the *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru*, is accorded a range of transferred senses that might well suit a river-name, encompassing boundaries and 'wooded precipice by a river'.[23] Whatever the sense here—and the possibilities need more work—the existence of that parallel, combined with doubts about the applicability of the Old English word, must leave this at best an uncertain instance of an English river-name in Shropshire.

There are questions also about Gelling's other example here, the Onny. This has long been taken as a derivative of British *onn-*, Welsh *onn*, 'ash-trees', which has been considered topographically appropriate. Gelling, however, found problems with this. She argued in particular that the run of spellings collected for the EPNS survey pointed clearly to a single *-n-*, which did not suit the British etymology, and she suggested

20.    PNSa 1, 99. The document, from the so-called Testament of St Mildburg, is Sawyer no. 1799, Finberg 1972, 147–48 (no. 428), 202–03. If genuine, it would be datable to 674 × 704. It should be observed, however, that Gelling cautioned against taking the name-forms in the Testament at face value, arguing that some spellings—and perhaps some names—may be due to the late eleventh-century compiler (Gelling 1992, 71; also PN Sa 1, xiv). It might be noted that even this late a date would be much the earliest direct reference to the River Corve.

21.    Gelling 1984, 88; Gelling and Cole 2000, 102–03.

22.    Wmffre 2004, 1239 (on the stream) and 1184 (on a derived place-name Bwlchcorf, involving Welsh *bwlch*, 'gap, pass').

23.    Wmffre (2004, 1184) assigns the sense 'ravine' to south-eastern Welsh, but thinks that a transferred topographical 'saddle-bow', referring to the shape of mountain, may be more appropriate for the Ceredigion river. He also (2004, 1232) suggests an association with *Carfan*, a recurrent river-name in Wales, which has been thought perhaps to make reference to boundaries (Thomas 1938, 49). Both *corf* and *carfan* are thought to be ultimately related to Latin *corbis*, 'basket'; and 'frame', 'side of a frame' are senses that might possibly be linked either to boundaries or to steep topography.

instead an Old English alternative in *āna*(*n*) *ēa*, 'single river', which would refer to the fact that the Onny has two equally sized headwaters, now the River East Onny and the River West Onny, meeting a little to the west of Onibury. The idea is that the two headwaters becoming one could be the salient feature, just as she had earlier argued that instances of *ān-stīg*, in place-names of the type Ansty, meant 'single path', reflecting a convergence of routeways. A major difficulty here is that Gelling herself came to reject her earlier interpretation of Ansty place-names,[24] which rather leaves the river-name hanging without context—I am not aware of comparable hydronyms elsewhere. There may also be a question-mark over the formal development. Gelling asserted that the stressed vowel of *āna* would be shortened, and of course vowel-shortening is widespread in place-name compounds. In this case, how-ever—before a single -*n*- and a vocalic syllable—it would seem far from inevitable, and if Gelling's etymology were correct we might well have had modern \*\*Oony or \*\*Wonny! In the recorded forms there is no clear indication that the vowel is anything but short throughout, which is one point in favour of the traditional interpretation in *onn*, however the single -*n*- of the spellings is to be accounted for. Another must be the range of parallels. Ekwall (ERN, li) lists more than a dozen British river-names derived from trees or vegetation and there are plenty more in Wales and Cornwall. Amongst them are what look like close parallels for the Onny, the Onnwy and Onne (or Onneu) in Breconshire and the Inny in Cornwall.[25] There are undoubtedly still questions to consider, about that single -*n*-, and about the form of the suffix in the various names, but it does seem to me that in view of the parallels, and the problems that

24. Gelling and Cole 2000, 66–67: 'This suggestion has not met with general acceptance…and it should probably be abandoned'.

25. For the Breconshire names see Thomas 1935, 38–39; he suggests the suffix in both was originally -*wy*. A different British suffix is proposed for the Shropshire name (ERN, 310, LHEB, 612; on the suffix in general see ERN, lxxvii–lxxviii, Thomas 1938, 127–28). This latter suffix does seem to be found in the Cornish Inny: Padel (1985, 174) suggests the base is a plural form of the tree-name (cf. Welsh plural *ynn*), though *i*-affection caused by the suffix perhaps offers an alternative. Ekwall suggested that the ending of the Shropshire Onny might alternatively represent OE *ēa*, 'river', and Gelling (PN Sa 1, 227) felt that the spellings supported this interpretation. The River Ann in Hampshire (ERN, 15–16) looks like an instance of an unsuffixed river-name from British \**onn*-. A further parallel would be a River Onny in Herefordshire (ERN, 310), but John Freeman kindly tells me that he thinks this is a ghost, originating in a duplication of the Shropshire Onny by Saxton. The Herefordshire river labelled *Oney* by Saxton is clearly the Pinsley Brook, which has a good medieval pedigree.

attach to the alternative English hypothesis, the balance of probabilities
should currently lie with the British interpretation.

In sum, therefore, Gelling's claim that Shropshire has a significant
number of sizable English-named rivers needs reappraisal, since two of
her prime examples are doubtful. At this point we might turn back to
LHEB to see what Jackson made of the group. Unfortunately, since he
provided no lists of the names included on his map, and the scale of the
map is very small, it is impossible to be entirely sure which rivers are
intended in every case. But the major rivers Severn, Dee and Teme locate
the boundaries of Shropshire clearly enough, and—from a combination
of the mapping and his comments in the text—it is possible to suggest
that the rivers he includes here as 'certainly or probably Celtic' are Perry,
Roden, Cound and Onny, while Clun, *Neen* and Tern are dotted,
denoting 'possibly Celtic'. From Gelling's list the *Leden* and the *Giht* are
not included, and nor is the Corve, for which a case has begun to be
made above. In other words, one could argue that reappraisal of this part
of Jackson's Area III suggests that if anything there may be *more* pre-
English survivals than he shows.

Before rounding up it should be noted that there have been a few other
suggestions of sizable English-named rivers in Shropshire, and it is
worth considering whether these support Gelling's point better than her
own favoured examples. Ekwall listed, in addition to the Meese and the
Corve, which have been treated above, the Rea, the Worfe and the
Redlake (ERN, lx).[26] Shropshire actually has at least two examples of
Rea,[27] which, as noted above, owe their origin to the particularization of
the Old English generic term for 'river', with misdivision taking in part
of the definite article. We have seen that Rea is now the name of the
*Neen*. Rea Brook is a distinct watercourse which joins the Severn at
Shrewsbury: it was formerly the *Meole*.[28] This certainly involves

26.   Though favouring the English interpretation noted above, he classified Corve
as a back-formation rather than a primary English river-name.

27.   Ekwall listed three (ERN, 336–37), but the second, 'seemingly an old
alternative name of Cound Brook', appears to be in some doubt, since a lost
settlement *Rea*, which Ekwall cited as part of his evidence, was assigned by Gelling
(PN Sa 2, 71) to Westbury parish on the Rea Brook (which is a distinct example).
There is no trace in Gelling's treatment of Leebotwood (PN Sa 2, 155–57) of the
*Ree*-forms which Ekwall attributed there—Leebotwood is on the Cound.

28.   This name, which survives in those of the settlements Cruckmeole and Meole
Brace, was itself assigned an Old English origin by Gelling, who derived it from OE
*meolu*, 'meal', with reference to a cloudy appearance (PN Sa 1, 202–04). She also
proposed that Coleham might contain, in another instance of *Colaunā*, the original
pre-English name of the stream (PN Sa 4, 49–50). On the other hand, Ekwall offered

replacement by English, and there is no doubt that it is an interesting phenomenon, but where the earlier names survived into the record and can themselves be classified (pre-English in the case of *Neen*, uncertain in that of *Meole*), we are dealing with a rather different category than the evidence sought here.

The Worfe is associated by Ekwall with a hypothetical Old English *wōrig*, 'wandering' (ERN, 470–71); Gelling proposed instead a derivative of Old English *wyrgan*, 'to strangle', Modern English *worry*, noting (quite rightly) that the river is 'exceptionally convoluted' (PN Sa 1, 326–27). We have seen, on the other hand, that Jackson marked this as 'possibly Celtic', and Ekwall drew attention to possible Celtic comparanda (ERN, 471). It seems to me that so far we lack any certainty or clear parallels for the name. The association of its convoluted shape with 'worry, strangle' is intriguing, but might be more convincing if the cognates of 'worry' meant 'loop' or 'knot' rather than 'throttle, kill by violence' (OED s.v.).

Finally, the Redlake is an intriguing case. It is a tributory of the Clun in the far south-west of the county, another area, like Oswestry, where Welsh was widely spoken in the Middle Ages. Given what has been said, it is certainly surprising to find such an English-looking river-name in such a westerly district. Ekwall, who cited no early forms, took it as a compound of Old English *hrēod*, 'reed', plus *lacu*, 'stream' (ERN, 338). If Gelling had believed this, she might well have mentioned it amongst her significantly English-named Shropshire rivers, but it does not appear in her list, and her unpublished notes suggest why. Though she had no medieval spellings, she had found a nineteenth-century form *Adlake*, and had connected that with Domesday Book *Edelactune*, *Adelestune*, a lost settlement that clearly stands in some relationship to the surviving Adley Moor, near the mouth of the Redlake, just over the border into Herefordshire.[29] Evidence which Gelling did not see now confirms her line of thought: in addition to eighteenth-century instances of *Adlake*, we have *Adelach* ?late 13th, *Adlaggh* 1392, *Elagh* 1629, all specifically referring to the watercourse.[30] Evidently this is identical with the first

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two alternative British suggestions for *Meole* (ERN, 287). I defer consideration of this group of names until the EPNS volume.

29.   Coplestone-Crow 2009, 59.

30.   These three forms are from documents in Shropshire Archives, numbered respectively 5981/B/1/58, 5981/B/1/57 and 2589/D/58. All are listed on the Archives' catalogue, at <http://search.shropshirehistory.org.uk/>, though it should be noted that the readings given here are taken from the manuscripts and not from the catalogue, which is not wholly accurate. I owe thanks to Mr Patrick Cosgrove of

element of the Domesday settlement-name, though exactly how it is to be explained is less clear. Gelling, in her notes, thought that an Old English personal name *Ēadlāc* might have become attached to the river by back-formation. This is conceivable, but persistent early spellings in <ch>, <gh> are unexpected. They are not quite right for *lacu* either, while Old English *lagu*, 'lake, pool', is a rare element not certainly applied to linear watercourses (EPNE, II, 12). On the other hand, a suffix *-ach* is very productive in Welsh stream-names (Thomas 1938, 1–18), though there is no obvious British/Welsh explanation for what comes before. The name calls for more thought and work, and might yet come down on either side of the linguistic divide. It is of interest to note that one feature—the late accretion of *R-*—is conceivably attributable to the Welsh that was spoken on the stream's banks in the medieval and early modern periods: it could be a relic of the Welsh definite article *Yr*.

In sum, therefore, the Meese remains the only 'primary' river-name that we have seen in this review that seems to me more probably than not of English origin. It is noteworthy that this river is in the far east of the county, and actually falls into Area II as Jackson drew his boundary. There are further English possibilities in Worfe, Redlake and perhaps *Meole*, and there are the 'secondary' instances of Rea. In general, however, the predominantly pre-English character of the county's river-names accords very well with Jackson's account.

It remains to consider how this conclusion might impact on a wider hypothesis of linguistic relations. For I tend to accept, with Gelling, that rather few settlement-names in Shropshire appear to be pre-English (at least, outside those far westerly regions where Welsh was spoken for centuries). Her proposal that the recurrence of names such as Aston, Weston, Upton, Newton, Acton, Wootton, Preston is so marked as to suggest an origin 'in the speech of Mercian administrators' (Sa, I, xiv) is an appealing one, not least because it has found support in further work by other scholars. In north-eastern Flintshire, not far to the north of Shropshire, Hywel Wyn Owen (1997) remarked on the number of English place-names recorded in Domesday Book, many of them involving *tūn* and/or Old English personal names, and a high proportion of them since lost. He felt that an original status as administrative labels was a likely interpretation for the names, with the degree of loss reflecting the circumstance that initial administrative control was not reinforced by subsequent English settlement. And for the Oswestry

region, Chris Lewis has argued that the details of Domesday Book itself *demonstrate,* at that relatively late date, 'an English superstructure of lords, manors and place-names overlying a largely Welsh substructure of peasants and farms' (Lewis 2007, 134–36, quotation p. 136).

In tending to accept these indications, however, we should ask whether it is surprising that a high proportion of pre-English river-names survives from an area characterised by Old English settlement-names. Surely it is not. A dominant political minority may well succeed over time in imposing its names on centres of production, trade and taxation, but where a subsistence population remains in place the significant and well-known features that orientate daily life are likely to be more resistant to change. This argument has been used a thousand times before to explain the evident longevity of river-names as a class, which rather sets them apart from other types of name.[31] There seems no reason why that should be any different in Shropshire, and it is with some satisfaction that I conclude by siding with Jackson against Gelling on this point. Though—most appropriately—the fuller hypothesis, with English dominance in settlement-names and pre-English survival in river-names, reflects a neat blend of ingredients that these two scholars have brought to the debate.

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31.   Nicolaisen 2001, 222–26 offers one compelling statement of the case.

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