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# СООБЩЕНИЯ

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## **DOUBTS ON IRISH *IUBHAR* 'YEW TREE' AND *EBURACUM* OR YORK**

York, a cathedral city in the north of England, was the *Eburacum* or *Colonia Eburacensis* of Roman Britain. Its name has usually been explained from Irish *iubhar* 'yew tree' (or alternatively from Welsh *efwr* 'hogweed') and so 'place where yew trees grow'; or else as containing the British(-Latin) personal name *Eburus* plus the suffix *-aco-*, and so 'estate of Eburus' (with commentators wavering between the two). The author provides an overview of the etymological interpretations suggested in literature and adduces arguments in favour of the second explanation. The yew tree (*Taxus baccata*) is typically found in dry woodland and scrub, often on chalk. It hates wet soil, which York has in plenty, for it occupies a low-lying site at the junction of the Rivers Ouse and Foss. Damp and subject to flooding, York is no place for yew trees. A direct link with yews may be rejected and a sense 'estate of Eburus' accepted with confidence, even if *Eburus* (somewhat confusingly) itself meant 'he who lives by a yew tree'. The implications of topographical factors for the name of York may be recalled on other dubious etymologies in Watts's 2004 dictionary, including 'port with deep water' for Dunwich, 'water, pool' for London, 'fort of a breast-shaped hill' for Manchester, or 'fork, watershed' for the Isle of Wight.

**Key words:** British toponymy, Celtic, York, *Eburacum*, yew trees, estate names, etymology.

### **1. Introduction**

York (SE 6052), in northern England, is a city with two thousand years of history: Roman, Anglo-Saxon, Viking, medieval, Georgian, Victorian, and twentieth-century. In 71–74 CE the Romans built a fort there; it is mentioned in Icelandic saga; it has northern Europe's largest Gothic church; in the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was important for railways

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and chocolate; it is now a university town and tourist centre. Despite the city's excellent museums and wealth of historic buildings, the derivation of its British-Latin name *Eburacum* has been uncertain. Discussion since 1885 shows scholars undecided between 'place of yew trees' and 'estate of Eburus'; yet ecology will resolve the matter, because York's riverside location is unsuitable for yew trees. It thereby shows how attention to geology and botany can provide solutions to place-name problems.

## 2. Aspects of York's History and Geography

The English provincial town of York was in Roman times a city of imperial significance. The sources indicate its remarkable early history, as well as geographical reasons for its military and commercial status, together accounting for the name *Eburacum*. The location, between the rivers Ouse and Foss, was unhealthy. Sanitation and water-supply were ever problematic. Edward II (d. 1327) allegedly described York as smelling worse than anywhere else in England; map-records of a burial-ground (between the city walls and station) for Victorian cholera-victims show things as no better five centuries later [Anon., 1954, 405]. Another map indicates the wider context. A glacial ridge running east-west across the Vale of York allowed the building of roads which connected with Roman highways going north-south on either side. The latter, following the contours of hills to east and west, skirted the ancient marshlands of the River Ouse and its tributaries [Anon., 1956]. Waterlogged and foggy, the site of York yet had vital strategic importance.

Hence the events set out in a reference book. The Romans established a fortress between Ouse and Foss in 71–74 CE; the city became capital of Lower Britain (as proved by an inscription); the Emperor Severus died there in 211; by 237 it was one of Britain's four *coloniae* (another inscription records trade links with Bordeaux); Constantine the Great was in 306 there proclaimed Augustus; by 314 it had a bishop [Richmond, 1970]. History has left its museums packed with altars, coffins, tombstones, building inscriptions, glassware, pottery, and objects of metal, bone, and jet [Pevsner, 1972, 73]. Mention in an archaeological analysis of floods up to the 35-foot contour has other implications [Wacher, 1974, 156–177]. York's quays, far from the coast, were still almost at sea-level. The consequences were known to an irreverent fourteenth-century versifier, writing in a mixture of English and Latin, and characterizing York for rubbish, pigs, mud, and rats, as well as lampreys, broth, salt, and salmon [Breeze, 2008, 35]. One notes the rats. Filthy cellars and drains made York a paradise for them, and the very opposite for yew trees.

## 3. Discussion of *Eburacum* and York

Despite its insanitary location, the *colonia* of *Eburacum* prospered. Its name is thus well-attested, with the first informed discussion of it influencing all later writers

[Bradley, 1885, 379–396]. Ekwall (who set out the process whereby *Eburacum* became *York*) summarized its proposals on the Gaulish personal name *Eburus* ‘he of a yew tree’ and Gallo-Latin *eburus* ‘yew’; he was unsure whether the toponym was due to a Briton called *Eburus* or to conspicuous yew trees [Ekwall, 1936, 519]. The dilemma has remained unresolved.

Sir Ifor Williams saw the form in other terms. Welsh *-awg* or *-og* is used to designate places where some plant or other grew in profusion, as at Clynnog Fawr (near Caernarfon, north-west Wales), a locality of conspicuous *celyn* or holly. Because Welsh *efwr* means ‘cow parsnip, hogweed’ (*Heracleum sphondylium*), a member of the umbellifer family, Sir Ifor proposed this argument. If holly grew at Clynnog, then cow parsnip or hogweed would have grown at York or (in Welsh) *Efrog* (< *Eburacum*); he further noted the Irish cognate of *efwr* as *iubhar* ‘yew tree’ and how this gives a name to Newry, Northern Ireland [Williams, 1945, 50]. There is more information in the University of Wales dictionary’s entry for *efwr* ‘cow parsnip, hogweed’; it lists the Breton cognate *evor* ‘alder buckthorn, black alder’ (*Frangula alnus*), as also British Latin *Eburacum* or York and the Gaulish toponyms *Eburobriga*, *Eburodunum*, *Eburomagus* [GPC, 1950–2002, 1173]. The implication is clear. For Ifor Williams, York had hogweed in abundance.

Kenneth Jackson cited Williams’s work, yet preferred the interpretation ‘estate of Eburos’ on the model of Gallo-Latin *Juliacum* (giving modern French *Juillac* or *Juillé* ‘estate of Julius’), with *-acum* representing a reconstructed Celtic suffix *-acon*, which he described as common in Gaul but rare in Britain [Jackson, 1953, 39]. Elsewhere he noted (rather differently) how virtually no other British toponym in *-acum* has come down to the present, with the implication that country estates in Britain did not survive the barbarian invasions as ones in France did. As soon as these ‘Romano-British country estates’ were abandoned in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, their names were lost, whereas those of towns often survived into English, the invaders learning them from Britons living “within or in the neighbourhood of the ruins” [Jackson, 1954, 66].

Despite researches by Ifor Williams and Jackson, Ekwall’s etymology for *Eburacum* in his dictionary’s final edition was (with the conservatism natural to reference books) exactly the same as in the first [Ekwall, 1960, 545]. More up-to-date is Ellis Evans’s admirable account of the Gaulish personal name *Eburus*. It includes references to York (represented by *Eboracum* in Ptolemy and *Eburacum* in the Antonine Itinerary and Ravenna Cosmography), as also citation of Ifor Williams on the root as originally meaning ‘yew tree’; its use in later Brittonic of alder trees or hogweed would be a subsequent development [Evans, 1967, 346–347].

Margaret Gelling of the English Place-Name Society took another tack. She at first sided with Jackson on *Eburacum* as ‘estate of Eburus’ or (less probably) ‘yew-tree estate’ [Gelling, 1970, 197]. Eight years later she stated with characteristic (if misplaced) assurance that the sense is probably ‘yew grove’; although the sense ‘estate of Eburus’ is possible, she cited Jackson on this as being less likely, because toponyms in *-acum*

are “rare in Britain, though very common in Gaul” [Gelling, 1978, 40]. We make a distinction. What Jackson wrote was this. Almost no place-names in *-acum* survive in modern British topography. There are two possible reasons: that the element was rare in Celtic Britain, or that it was not rare, but was used of minor places only, their names being lost in the chaos of the Anglo-Saxon invasions. If the latter is correct, the rarity of *-acum* will be more apparent than real, and we need waste no time on relating York to yew-trees. We can see it instead as where Eburus the Briton owned land. It resembled many other British-Latin toponyms which vanished in the post-Roman period.

The best account of *Eburacum* is (of course) by Rivet and Smith, who set out attestations of the form, amongst them EBORACI on an inscription (published in 1921) at Bordeaux, and EBOR[ACENSIS] on the coffin of Verecundius Diogenes, buried at York. As to what it meant, we are told either ‘place of yews’ or ‘estate of Ebuos’ with a preference for the former, because (according to Jackson) “the formation signifying ‘estate of’ was rare in Britain” [Rivet & Smith, 1979, 355–357]. As noted, Jackson in 1954 put it differently, proposing that there may have been villas in Britain with a personal name plus *-acum*, but that these forms disappeared when British rural estates (unlike Gaulish ones) were deserted by their owners.

Later writers show no advance on Rivet and Smith. Field took York as ‘Ebuos’s place’ *tout court* [Field, 1980, 193–194]. Room, with habitual absence of logic, related *Eburacum* to *Ebuos*, rendered ‘yew man’; he added that this Briton no doubt had “an estate among yew trees or containing yew trees” [Room, 1988, 407–408]. Room resembled those who think Shakespeare was so-called because he loved to shake spears. Mills has “‘estate of a man called Ebuos’ or (preferably) ‘yew-tree estate’” [Mills, 1991, 377]. Translations of the Bordeaux inscription and ones from York now appear in a convenient handbook [Ireland, 1996, 176, 217]. Richard Coates opines that *-acum* is more than “a true habitative suffix” on the grounds that it is “attached to a plant-name in *Eburacum*” [Coates & Breeze, 2000, 4–5]. Whether that is so is, naturally, the problem investigated here.

Thereafter we find stasis or even regress, some recent writers lacking the assurance of their predecessors. David Parsons calls *Eborakon* “intelligible” and yet neglects to state how he understands it [Parsons, 2000, 174]. The English Place-Name Society in its dictionary comes down for York as a place of yew-trees, while admitting “estate of Ebuos” as an alternative [Watts, 2004, 711]. Pierre-Yves Lambert, making interesting comments on *ebur-* and *Évieux* (in east Normandy), relates *Eburacum* to yew trees [Lambert, 2005, 224–225]. Patrick Sims-Williams lists *Eburacum* under the heading *eburo-* ‘yew’ with Old Irish *i(u)bar* and Welsh *efwr* [Sims-Williams, 2006, 78]. But *efwr* does not mean ‘yew’ (which in Welsh is *ywen*, plural *yw*). We close with Alexander Falileyev and a certain failure of nerve. He glosses Continental Celtic *eburo-* as ‘kind of plant, bush, or tree’ and cites Oliver Padel for Cornish *evor* (in toponyms) as “some kind of plant” [Falileyev, 2010, 18]. It is time to leave this cavern of uncertainty for the light of day.

#### 4. The Ecology of Yew Trees

In none of the above does one recall any remark on where yew trees grow. On that subject we learn from a unique volume how “wild yew prefers the good drainage of chalk and limestone; it prefers on the whole a clean and cheerful scenery”; it can be found (sometimes making up entire woods) on chalk uplands in the southern English counties of Surrey and Dorset and Hampshire, near Chichester in Sussex, and on the limestone of Cheddar Gorge in Somerset or Gordale Scar in west Yorkshire [Grigson, 1955, 31]. It favours, in other words, “dry woods and scrub, rarely forming pure woods on chalk in the South” and so away from running water [McClintock & Fitter, 1956, 289]. In Continental Europe it is found with other damp-shunning species in southern Scandinavia, Central Europe, and the mountains of the South, its habitat being defined as “deciduous woods, beech-with-fir woods, mixed mountain forests where winters are mild” [Schauer, 1982, 290].

None of that sounds like the ooze and dirt and mud and (former) stench of York. There is a further test. The yew is a conspicuous tree, dark and with red berries containing a poisonous seed. It readily designated places, so that in southern England are villages called *Ewhurst* (Hampshire, Surrey, Sussex), *Ewshott* (Hampshire), *Iwode* (Hampshire), and *Uley* (Gloucestershire), in all of which the element *iw* ‘yew’ can be discerned; in the northern county of Lancashire is *Yewdale* ‘yew valley’ [Gelling, 1984, 96, 222]. There is an obvious exercise for toponymists and ecologists. Plot these locations on a geological map, and the yew tree’s avoidance of wetlands will be evident. The technique can be used elsewhere. The Polish for ‘yew’ is *cis*, with cognates in Russian and other Slavonic languages. Near Opole in south-west Poland is the town of Cisek, explained (as ‘place of yews’) with a warning (vital in the context of York) that similar toponyms may be due, not to the presence of yew trees, but to someone known as *Cis* [Rospond, 1984, 58]. A carpenter of that name is known as early as 1136, in a papal bull listing 410 Polish toponyms and personal names, the oldest substantial evidence for that language [Wydra & Rzepka, 1984, 21]. Cisek in Silesia has (one remembers) a namesake in Ulster at Newry, where the English form represents Irish *an thúr* ‘the yew tree’ [McKay, 2007, 116]. The above place-names will in turn have equivalents in the rest of Europe, as also the Himalayas, Sumatra, China, Japan, Canada, Florida, and Mexico, all of them regions where the yew can be found. It is clear that a monograph could be written on toponyms from ancient times to the present which apply to locations where yew trees grew.

#### 5. Conclusion

*Eburacum* or York will, however, not be one of them. A humid site rules out association with yew trees, which are intolerant of poorly-drained soil. So the difficulty raised by Bradley in 1885 can be laid to rest. When Roman troops built a fortress between Ouse and Foss in the late first century, they did this, not on a site where there were yew trees, but on land which had belonged to *Eburus* or *Eburos*, an otherwise unknown

Briton whose name (meaning ‘he of a yew tree’) has by the accidents of history become that of an English city, the ducal title borne by the British monarch’s second-eldest son, and the state and city of New York, USA.

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**ЗАМЕЧАНИЯ ОБ ИРЛ. *IUBHAR* «ТИСОВОЕ ДЕРЕВО»  
И *EBURACUM*, ИЛИ ЙОРК**

Йорк, город на севере Англии, в Римской Британии именовался *Eburacum*, или *Colonia Eburacensis*. Латинское название города объясняется либо через ирл. *iubhar* 'тисовое дерево' (иногда, впрочем, через валл. *efwr* 'борщевик'), т. е. как «Место, где растут тисовые деревья», либо через британско-латинское личное имя *Eburus*, чья комбинация с суффиксом *-aco* может пониматься как «Земельный участок Эбуруса». Комментаторы традиционно колеблются между этими двумя версиями. Автор статьи предлагает обзор предложенных в научной литературе этимологических интерпретаций и приводит аргументы в пользу второй версии. Тис (*Taxus baccata*) обычно произрастает в сухих лесах и подлесках, часто в известняковой почве. Тис не любит болотистые почвы, которыми богат Йорк, находящийся в низине, в месте слияния рек Уза и Фосс. Это сырой и подверженный наводнениям город. По мысли автора, на этом основании прямая связь с тисами должна быть отвергнута, а интерпретация «Земельный участок Эбуруса» может быть принята с высокой степенью уверенности, даже если сам антропоним *Eburus* (пусть и не вполне понятным образом) подразумевал «Того, кто живет у тисового дерева». Топографический фактор, работающий для античного названия Йорка, может быть релевантным и для других сомнительных этимологических интерпретаций в словаре Уотса 2004 г., таких как «Глубоководный порт» для Данвича, «Вода, бассейн» для Лондона, «Форт на холме в форме груди» для Манчестера или «Водораздел» для острова Уайт.

**К л ю ч е в ы е с л о в а:** британская топонимия, кельтские языки, Йорк, *Eburacum*, тисовое дерево, названия земельных наделов, этимология.

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