Isca

At least eight rivers in Britain have modern names that may descend from an original form *Isca*. The most striking feature they have in common is flowing past multiple Roman sites, so they would almost certainly have been used by the Roman navy, the *Classis Britannica*, to transport supplies from the sea to those forts.

Usk (S Wales) beside Caerleon (*Isca*) legionary fortress with riverside wharf, Usk (*Burrium*) fort, Abergavenny (*Gobannio*) fort, near Pen-y-Gaer fort, to Brecon Gaer (?*Alabum*) fort.

Exe Devon *Axium* estuary past Topsham (*Termonin*) port to Exeter (*Isca*) legionary fortress leading to Cullompton and Tiverton forts.

North Esk (NE Scotland) past Stracathro (?*Iberran*) fort.

South Esk (NE Scotland) from Montrose Harbour (?*Trucculensis Portus*) past Inverquharity (*Ravatonium*) fort.

Esk (Lothian) beside Inveresk (?*Panovius*) fort, Dalkeith/Smeaton camp, Lugton camp, Elginhaugh fort, Eskbank camp.

Esk (N Yorkshire) through Whitby (*Antrum*) estuary to Lease Rigg fort.

Esk (Cumbria) past Ravenglass (*Tunnocelum*) fort and Hardknott (*Iuliocenon*) fort, to Ambleside (*Glannoventa*) fort.

Esk (SW Scotland) past Gilnockie camp, Netherby (*Castra Exploratorium*) fort Broomholm (*Brocara*) fort, etc.

NB Watch out that English Heritage, Ordnance Survey, and many websites quote wrong names for some Roman sites, because they do not have the resources to keep up with the latest thinking.

These are all middle-sized rivers, in the Roman military zone, which begin in high ground but then flow fairly gently towards the sea. Other minor rivers that have potentially similar names but no known Roman installation include: Ysgethin on the coast of Snowdonia, Exe Water in Cornwall, Escley Brook in Herefordshire, and Nant Wysg inland from Aberaeron, Wales. The argument that two rivers called **Axe** started out as **Isca* may be wrong, as explained in detail here.

Most attempts to explain the name *Isca* start with the Usk, which is in Wales, inspiring the (unconvincing) idea in Wikipedia and elsewhere that a word like Welsh *pysg* 'fishes' (a loan-word from Latin *piscis*) became like Q-Celtic Irish *iasc* 'fish' by losing initial P (a process discussed by Hickey, 1995:5). Many distinguished scholars, with huge expertise in historical phonology, have struggled to reconcile Old Irish *easc* 'water', Welsh w*ysg* 'path', Greek πιδύω 'to gush', etc with the observed names, as Williams (1990) summarised.

This kind of thinking tends to fail for two main reasons. First, European river names are often very old (Peust, 2015) and probably arose before Indo-European languages split into well-defined families. Secondly, many names have been re-interpreted over the centuries as the prevailing language around them changed. Observed changes include calque translation, phonetic adjustment, and misinterpretation or "popular etymology".

Delamarre (2003:191) noticed that the ancient *Isara* (now the Oise, France) has many parallels across the Continent, including the, *Isara* (Isère, Savoy), Isar (south Germany), (Isarco Italian Tyrol), Ijzer (Flanders), Jizera (Czechia), and Yzeron (Rhone tributary). He commented that *Is-* river names were pan-European and not distinctively Celtic. Examples include Ijssel (Netherlands), Isel (Austria), Isen (Bavaria), *Istra* (near Moscow), *Ister* (Danube), Ισαμνιον (Ireland), Itz (Germany), and Иж (2x in Russia).

It seems wise to follow Delamarre in deriving *Is-* rivers from the deep PIE root **ei-* 'to go', which many authors think developed to **eis-* 'to move quickly'. Most *Is-* rivers are not

especially fast-flowing, and are relatively small, but they are significant transport routes, on foot beside their banks if not in boats. Notice, for example, how the Isar and Isarco together mark a key ancient trade route from the Danube up to the Brenner Pass then down towards the Adriatic, as one might perhaps expect from PIE *ar- 'to fit together'. The Isère and Yzeron almost form another pair on either side of the Rhone.

This analysis outranks derivation from PIE *weis- 'to flow', which led to words such as viscous, and to a host of river names across Europe such as Weser, Vistula, Wash, and Wear. Loss of initial W was a pronounced feature of Greek (which supplied Latin with much of its nautical/nauticus/ναυτικος terminology) and possibly led to English words such as ooze and river names such as Ouse.

Was *Isca* really a marker for Roman logistics? *Isca* names apply to quite a small fraction of the total number of British rivers. Just think how many other ancient river names occur in enough instances to be recognisable as whole classes, typified by *Alauna*, Avon, *Cunetio*, *Deva*, Don, Humber, Lavant, Ouse, Stour, Thames, Tyne, etc.

What was the particular appeal of the name *Isca* to the Roman navy? Did Latin hisco 'to open, to gape' fit the viewpoint of an offshore ship's captain choosing which river to sail up? How about Greek ισχυς 'power, the main body of troops'? Did Celtic sailors use precursors of the Irish words esca 'bog' or uisce 'water'? When did reinterpretations set in?

Many PIE roots might have contributed to *Isca*, but *ei- 'to go' seems the best candidate, ahead of *es- 'to be' and *gʷem- 'to come', followed by the -SK frequentative suffix, not in Pokorny's PIE dictionary but discussed by Zerdin (1999) and by Ringe and Eske (2013:170). Latin had the two elements separately as eo and –sco, while Greek had them together in ισκω, with two meanings, one of which was 'to go (repeatedly)'. On balance, therefore, it seems reasonable to guess that *Isca* did mean something like 'regular travelling route'.

The most *Isca*-like names on the Continent seem to be Yssche/Ijse (Belgium), Isch (Saarland), Ischer (Alsace, into the Rhine), and Eschensiepen (near Wuppertal). Also the Iskar in Bulgaria. Then there is a whole class of river names that resemble Ptolemy's Ισκαλις (probably Ham Hill hillfort in Somerset), which include the Ischler Achen in Bavaria (*Iscala* in 984) the Ischl in Austria (*Iscalam* in 1000). The name Isle in Somerset may formerly have applied to much of the river now called Parrett (Ekwall, 1928:215-6), a name which may have begun as Old English for 'travelling route'.

It is noticeable that these mostly come from an area that the Romans (after Julius Caesar) called *Germania*, not *Celtica* or *Belgica*. Many of the Roman troops who conquered and garrisoned Britain, notably the 2nd Augustan Legion, spent time in regions where the name *Isca* may have been used. Did they bring the name into Britain with them or did the Romans preferentially penetrate up rivers with an ancient history as travel routes?

Ptolemy explicitly named Ισκαλις as a πολις, which in Britain probably meant a hillfort not a Mediterranean-style city, but it was presumably named from a river *Isca*, which is perhaps what is now called the Parrett, plus its tributaries called Isle.