Rivers called Avon

Avon is a proper name in English but an ordinary word *afon* ‘river’ in Welsh. Therefore many people argue that speakers of Germanic languages (English, Scots, Norse, etc) heard a word like *afon* used by speakers of Celtic languages (Welsh, Gaelic, Cornish, etc) and then turned it into a proper name. This tends to get given a nationalist slant – who are the true inheritors of Iron-Age Britain? Rather silly, not just because semantic flow might have gone the other way, turning a proper name into a general word, but because it diverts attention from the really interesting part. Avon may offer a peek into the distant past, long before the Romans, perhaps even before the Bronze Age.

We need to ask how and when the word *avon* was created. That means investigating where all rivers with names like Avon do (or did) occur and what distinctive features those rivers have in common. But first a bit of linguistics.

The Indo-European root *ap-* ‘water’ has descendants almost everywhere one looks. Best known are the Celtic words for ‘river’: Welsh *afon*, Irish *ab* (hence various forms such as *abhann* and *habhana* related to Scottish Gaelic *abhainn* and *abhuinn*), and Cornish or Breton forms such as *aven* and *avon*. Other words for river include Sanskrit *avani*, Old Prussian *ape*, Hittite *hapa*, and the ending –*appo* on Dutch place names. Further afield lie Persian *Punjab* ‘five waters’, Hindi *Doab* ‘two waters’, the *Abuna* river of ancient Damascus, Sumerian *abzu* ‘deep water’, and ancient Greek *Epirus* possibly from PIE *apero*- ‘shore, bank’. With a different vowel, and possibly from a precursor language or another strand of Indo-European, are –*obαι/-obαι/oivios* ‘river, water’ identified by Villar mainly in Spain, plus Norse *hör* and Gaelic *dh* ‘bay, inlet’. French *aven* ‘sinkhole’ and Germanic words like haven may also be related. Koch (2019) mentions Proto-Celtic *kawno*- ‘haven’.


The Indo-European root *tan-* ‘to pour, to draw water’ (Watkins, 2011:4) showed up in Hittite with initial H, and in other languages with initial S. Hypothetically, this could explain river names that end in –*ana*, such as *Anovaya* (Kintore on the river Dee) or *Sequana* (Seine), or with other vowels (*Matrona, Divona, Alauna, Icauna, Irouva*, etc). In *Anova* the order of elements is reversed from that in *Abona*. Alternatively, the ending –*ona* may simply be adjectival, like English –*en*, to make the core meaning of Avon just ‘watery’. If this conjecture is right, any Avon was just ‘the river’ for a particular area, with people not bothering to give it a more specific name.

The earliest attestation of Avon is a place called *Abona* near modern Bristol, mentioned in two Roman texts. The Ravenna Cosmography listed *Abona* among a series of river estuaries around the coasts of England and Wales that were significant as ports. The Antonine Itinerary referred to *Abone* (presumably locative case of *Abona*) as a way-point on a Roman road, where it brushed against the river Avon some way inland, near modern Bitton. The common claim that *Abona* was at Sea Mills, near the centre of Bristol is probably wrong.

*Abona* seems to have no exact ancient parallels. Possibly closest was *Aponus*, now the hot springs of *Abano*, near Venice, or the little river now called *Avena* in southern Italy. There was an N in the right place in many ancient river names like *Avantia*, such as *Aventio* in Wales, in which names –*antia* probably meant ‘opposite (tributary)’.

In England, the *Abou* river mouth of Ptolemy 2,3,6 was the large Humber estuary. In Portugal, the river *Ave*, which flows 85 km into the Atlantic, was the *Avo* river mouth of Ptolemy 2,6,1, on which Pliny 4,112 located a city *Abobrícia*. Pomponius Mela 3,7 called this river *Avo*, and described its region as Celtic, which fits with modern thinking that the Celtic languages crystallised in Iberia before moving up the Atlantic seaboard into the British Isles. For the wider
Old-European context, see the book *Struktur der Alteuropäischen Hydronomie* by Krahe (1963), which lists 6 ancient river names beginning with Ab-, 17 with Ap-, 24 with Au-, and 19 with Av-.

Trans-isthmus portages, discussed here, were a big interest of the late Andrew Sherratt, an archaeologist who thought hard about the geography of ancient societies, and how individual people and valuable trade goods travelled remarkable distances in the Stone and Bronze Ages. Sherratt’s article “Why Wessex? The Avon route and river transport in later British prehistory” (Oxford Journal of Archaeology 15, 211-230, 1996) is vital reading. It is not online, so ask to see our scanned copy if you cannot get it from a library.

Sherratt argued that the English Avons may once have formed a single conceptual entity, making up a network of transport routes that were important in prehistoric times. Now here is a list of Avon rivers, derived from him and from Ekwall (1928:20-23), an old but good authority on English rivers. Our comments derive partly from Sherratt, partly from experience with other ancient names, and partly from geographical and tourist information on the Internet.

1. **Shakespeare’s Avon** rises in the middle of England (near Naseby and Bannaventa), flows mainly through Warwickshire, past Stratford and Evesham, into the Severn at Tewkesbury. Actually the Avon looks like the more important tributary, since it continues the direction of the Severn (Sabrina) from the Bristol Channel, and allowed small sea-going boats to access a big population in middle England, whereas the upper Severn curves into north Wales, offering a travel route towards Chester and the Irish Sea.

2. The **Bristol Avon** begins near Malmesbury and flows through Wiltshire and Somerset, by Bath, near Abona and Bristol, and into the Severn Estuary.

3. The **Hampshire Avon** flows past Salisbury into Christchurch Harbour (Cunia), with an important Bronze-Age and Iron-Age seaport in the lea of Hengistbury Head.

Sherratt explained how Avons 2 and 3 together made up a transport route across the isthmus of south-west England bypassing the difficult long sail around Lands End. A range of possible portages linked their headwaters, in the midst of which sat Stonehenge and its ritual landscape. Current thinking suggests that megalithic culture pre-dates the arrival of languages differentiated into Celtic or Germanic. Back then, metals from the west of the British Isles probably flowed mainly via south coast ports across to Brittany and then to the Mediterranean. In the Iron Age, trade reorientated towards the North Sea, so portages to the Thames became more important.

4. The **Devon Avon** rises near the edge of Dartmoor and flows south into a broad estuary squeezed between Bantham Hams, where much evidence has been found for a post-Roman emporium, and Brug Island, which is a strong candidate to be the Ictry of Diodorus Siculus where tin was carried across a causeway to a tidal island to be traded across to Gaul, and also maybe Sarna of the Ravenna Cosmography. This Avon’s valley is one of several possible routes for exporting tin mined on Dartmoor.

5. The **Little Avon** flows out of the Cotswolds into the Severn near Berkeley. This much-altered river used to be navigated well inland to Newport and several Wicks.

6. **Avon Water** in Hampshire is quite a small river and its name may be relatively modern.

**In Wales**

7. The **Afon Lwyd** or Grey Avon flows from the Brecon Beacons past Blaenavon and Pontypool to join the Usk at Caerleon (Isca Augusta). This river exemplifies a theory, explicitly rejected by Ekwall (1928), that all Avons were once some kind of adjective-Avon.

8. The **Afan** flows through Cwmfan to the Bristol Channel at Aberavon, beside Port Talbot.

**In Scotland**
9. The Linlithgowshire/Stirlingshire Avon, south of the river Forth, was a key travelling route inland, into what is often suggested to be the heartland of the Ὀταδηνοί. Near its mouth, Blackness was the number-two port of mediaeval Scotland.

10. Avon Water rises on a watershed of the western Scottish borders, near Loudoun Hill Roman fort (possibly Duabsisis), flows for a while parallel to Roman road 79b of Margary (1973), and then bends north to reach the Clyde at Hamilton.

11. The river Awe offers one of the key routes into the interior of Scotland north of Glasgow, from the Atlantic past the Isle of Mull and Oban, and up towards Loch Awe. Nowadays the river Awe looks misleadingly placid and navigable thanks to a hydroelectric barrage, but the A85 road shows the essential travel route.

12. An Avon flows from Loch A’an in the Cairngorms to join the Spey at Ballindalloch, offering a minor travel route.

In Ireland
13. The Avonbeg (‘little Avon’) flows from the Wicklow mountains south of Dublin, to join the Avonmore (‘big Avon’) also flowing from those mountains, to create the Avoca, named, almost certainly wrongly, from Ptolemy’s Ὀβοκα. All of the Avoca is navigable in a small boat.

14. The Awbeg is a small tributary of the Blackwater in County Cork.

Also-rans
15? Avening in Gloucesstershire may preserve evidence of an ancient route from the Severn to the Thames, roughly similar to the Stroudwater Navigation, which now survives only in fragments and the river Frome to Framilode.

16? Avenbury in Herefordshire, a village mentioned in Domesday Book, hints that its river was once called Avon. That river, now called Frome, feeds into the Lugg, then the Wye, and finally the Severn.

17? Auenes broc is an unidentified stream mentioned in a charter S573 somewhere near Corfe in Dorset. Maybe the river now called Corfe was originally an Avon, but the biggest river nearby is the Frome.

18? Avene at the end of Old English charter S175 (partly translated here) of AD 814 was apparently a general word for ‘river’ referring to the Cray (bounds decoded here). Ekwall (1928:22) described Afene as the oblique-case version of Old English Afon, using a capital A, apparently unaware that this was centuries earlier than any attestation of Welsh afon ‘river’. Ekwall listed four other hints at similarly lost river names.

19? Avill in Somerset was Avena in Domesday Book

20? Aven in Brittany

21? Duroaverno Cantiacorum in the Ravenna Cosmography is usually explained as containing an element *vern, but the balance of attested spellings points rather to a name element (not necessarily a river) more like *arven. The modern river there is called Great Stour, one of five rivers in Britain called Stour.

22? Ingaevones and Istaevones were Germanic peoples in north-west Europe.

Conclusions
There is a hard core of Avon rivers (numbers 1, 2, 3, and 4) that were attested (in a range of spellings) from the earliest Anglo-Saxon charters, around AD 700. Their earliest forms listed by Ekwall (1928: 20-23) tend to contain a vowel E (in Afene, Avena, etc) more often than O.
As far as I know, none of the other Avons are attested that early, nor were any of the Celtic words like Welsh *afon*. Those first four seem to share the importance for early trade discussed by Sherratt.

Avons 3 and 4 must have been active travel routes (whether in boats on the water, or in boots on the land beside) around 2500 BC, in an era when big stones were being erected at Stonehenge and little stones were being picked up on Dartmoor to turn into tin for making bronze. Avons 1 and 2 manifestly extend the travel-route essence of 3 and 4, and might have got named later. Maybe Beaker People encountered an existing word like Avon or maybe they created it afresh. Either way there is no direct evidence for how people spoke back then, or what they called rivers, though it seems most likely that local languages were already Indo-European but not yet distinctively Celtic (in the modern linguistic sense) or Germanic.

There also seems to be no direct evidence on when the other dozen or so Avons might have got named. It is tempting to perceive their heartland in Roman times as lying around the river Severn. On the English side lived the Dobunni ‘two basins’ people, who later evolved into the Hwicce (possibly the ‘outliers’). On the Welsh side lived the Silures (probably the ‘alliance’). There is no really convincing evidence on which language(s) served to create names such as Abona in this area. However, there is plentiful archaeology for Roman villas, whose owners presumably took pride in speaking Latin, even if they grew up in areas where the Roman army recruited and had other native languages.

Postscript

Some writing by Celtic scholars has been distinctly unhelpful. Take, for example, this hypothesis about the river Boyd, which joins the Bristol Avon at Bitton, the likely location of Abona. Breeze wrote ‘Boyd and Bude surely derive from Celtic *boud- ‘victory, excellent’”, missing a critical point that the river Boyd has a history of running a yellowish-red colour downstream from the Wick Golden Valley Ochre Works. In the light of Old Irish boidmis ‘July’ and the buide conaill ‘yellow plague’ of AD 534 and later, any linguist should be familiar with PIE *bdyo- ‘gold, yellow’ and its descendants such as Irish buide ‘yellow’ and, and Latin badius ‘brown’, which led to English bay = chestnut brown, the colour of a horse.

Many river names are based on colours, some obviously such as Rio Tinto, some misunderstood such as the Dubglas site of battles attributed to Arthur by the Historia Brittonum. It is only a presumption that ochre beside the Boyd was mined in Anglo-Saxon or Roman times because recent mining will have destroyed all evidence of earlier mining. However, whenever rivers have an orangey colour to their water and/or orangey deposits around their banks it is a sure sign that deposits of iron-rich minerals have been disturbed in geologically recent time.

Another piece of Celticist over-claiming concerns the river name Frome, of which five instances are known, and three of them are associated with former *Avon names. Bishop Asser, King Alfred’s biographer, explained how a Welsh speaker like him might interpret several English place names, including Frome, but that was probably in a spirit of ecumenism, rather than based on real etymological insight. Nevertheless Ekwall (1928:169) thought that Aberffrav in Anglesey (Aberfrau in 1191) came from the same root. However, he did note that Welsh ffraw ‘brisk, lively’ is not appropriate for the sand-clogged estuary next to Aberffrav, and that its likely PIE root *(s)p(h)er- ‘to spread’ does not suggest a natural meaning for the rivers Frome.

Ferguson (1852) listed a slew of Frome-related river names on the Continent, including Bramau (Holstein), Pfreimd (Czechia), Prüm (Rhinelan), Prims (Saarland), and ancient Pyramus (Anatolia), probably descended from PIE *bhrem- ‘to growl’.

Perhaps the best explanation of Frome is the simplest. OE *from (or freom) meant ‘rich, abundant, excellent’ (besides prepositional ‘from’ and adjectival ‘firm, stout, bold’). It probably descends from the same root as Latin fruor ‘to enjoy’, said to be PIE *bhrug- ‘agricultural produce’, which also led to the work brook.
Regardless of how the name Frome arose, its meaning to Anglo-Saxons was clear: the river was kind to them. The hypothesis that Frome arose as a Welsh word cannot be ruled out, but it is unnecessary.

One final piece of scepticism. The extent to which rivers are associated with deities is often overstated. The ending –ona contributed to many ancient proper names, for cities (e.g. Verona), goddesses (e.g. Dodona) and/or their associated springs and rivers (e.g. Axona). See Alauna about the alternative spelling –auna and its possible link to a separable word for ‘river’.

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