

## Lavo-

An element *Lav-* shows up in *Aballava* ([Burgh-by-Sands](#) fort), *Durolavi* (probably near Halesworth), *Durolevum* ([Ospringe](#)), *Lavatris* ([Bowes](#) fort), and *Lavobrinta* ([Caer Gai](#) fort).

It is almost certain that *Lav-* meant some kind of river, but what type of river? There are two main candidate explanations: one is a “Celtic” word for ‘talkative’ or ‘noisy’; the other is a Latin-influenced meaning of ‘intermittent’ or ‘likely to rise’. To decide among them, we must try to find all possibly parallel geographical names.

Ancient possible parallels include:

[Velabrum](#) was a low swampy valley in Rome, subject to inundation from the Tiber.

Ptolemy’s [Λευφανα](#) or [Λεφανα](#) was located by Kleineberg et al (2010) at modern Hitzacker, in Germany, where the river [Jeetsel](#) joins the Elbe: “Historically, when the Elbe rose too high, it would flood the Jeetsel, which flowed ‘backwards’ and flooded the surrounding area.”

The Peutinger Tables’s [Levefanum](#) was a port on the Rhine at Dorestad, noteworthy for discovery of Roman-era timber river-edging, and for the possibility that *fanum* relates to *fen* rather than meaning ‘temple’.

Ptolemy’s [Λαβρωνα](#) river in the south of Ireland, was probably a scribal error for [Λαβρωνα](#). It is now the river Lee, with a history of flooding.

Ptolemy’s [Λαβηρος](#) in Ireland was [possibly](#) the [Hill of Tara](#), which has plenty of springs, interpreted as holy wells, but no river.

Ptolemy’s [Λιβνιον](#) river mouth in Ireland was probably at Clew Bay, a low-lying area with lots of little rivers and a substantial flooding risk from high tides.

Ptolemy’s [Λαβερνις](#) is commonly identified with Labares, upstream from the [Villaviciosa](#) estuary in northern Spain.

[Labricinensi](#) or [Labrocinensi](#) were people in France who probably lived around La Chaise-Gajan near Lavardin and the river *Anisola*.

A river \**Labarus*, is sometimes inferred from a mention in poetry by [Silius Italicus](#) of two personal names *Labarumque Padumque*, where *Padus* is the river Po. This is sometimes identified with the river *Lambrus* mentioned by Pliny

Possible modern parallels include:

The river [Laver](#) in north Yorkshire feeds into the Skell and then into the Ure at [Ripon](#), which “has the worst gypsum-related subsidence in England” and “a subsidence event occurs approximately every year” because the underlying geology includes water-soluble gypsum.

The [Lavant](#) in Sussex is a [winterbourne](#), a stream that is dry in the summer. It exists as an ordinary lexical word, too, since (for example) [Gilbert White](#) reported that “the land-springs, which we call *lavants*, break out much on the downs of Sussex, Hampshire, and Wiltshire”.

The Hampshire [Lavant](#) at SU711382 is also a winterbourne. The [Lavant](#) in Austria had a variable flow rate, before substantial human modifications.

The river [Lovat](#) in Bedfordshire was first recorded as *Lovente*, just like the Sussex Lavant. Ekwall (1928) cited other rivers across Europe with names similar to Lovat, including in Scotland, Cornwall and Belarus, and also a Lavric in Worcestershire.

The [Lavan Sands](#), extensive tidal mud flats in the Menai Strait, are next to Beaumaris with its Norman French Name

In Bavaria, seven rivers are called [Laber](#). Possibly related is the [Lièpvrette](#) in north-east France. Wales has one river [Llafar](#) near Caer Gai, another [Llafar](#) in Snowdonia, and allegedly others.

Watson (1926: 432-3) analysed Scotland's *Labhar* (Lawers Burn) at NN684395, *Uisge Labhair* at NN425702, Burn of Aberlour at NJ260427, and two instances of *Labharag* that we cannot locate, as being 'noisy burns'. There is also a Lavery Burn at NX267786. Other names that caught our eye include Caerlaverock in Dumfries, Laverley in Somerset, Lavenham in Suffolk, and Laverstock in Wiltshire.

The most often cited explanation for these names is that they refer to a 'babbling brook' or 'noisy stream' and come from a Celtic word related to Welsh *llafar* 'loud, resounding', Old Irish *labar* 'talkative, boastful', and Breton *lavar* 'speech'. It is entirely possible that Gaelic speakers now interpret the names that way, but that offers no help in explaining early Lab- or Lav- names, since Gaelic speech did not penetrate far into Scotland until well after Roman times, judging by the way that Roman-era names for the western islands are not continuous with Saint Columba's names for the same islands. While researching these river names we fully expected to find waterfalls or rocky stream beds to fit this model, but one by one we found evidence for great variability in surface-visible flow. For example, the river Greta by *Lavatrix* is famous for disappearing partly underground in the summer. Also, the 'talkative' sense is not distinctively Celtic: compare Dutch *labben* 'to gossip' (also used in English by Chaucer, though it survives in modern English only as blabber), German *labern* 'to talk at length', and Homer's λαβροϛ 'furious'. Latin *labrum* 'lip' is a particularly good cognate.

*Lavant* 'intermittent stream' is the key to the mystery. It illustrates how a generic word with a specific geographical meaning can get turned into a proper name, much like *rythe* begetting Ryde or *duver* begetting Dover (to cite two examples from our own experience), where one can get confused by the earlier attestation of the proper name. Linguists seem uncomfortable with the etymology of *lavan*. Obvious it goes back to Old English *lafian* 'to lave, sprinkle water, pour out' but how does it relate to Latin *lavo* 'to wash'? Better parallels in Latin may be *labes* 'sinking in, subsidence' and *labor* 'to fall', which is related to English lapse and to Sanskrit *lamba* 'hanging down'. What really matters, of course, is how early river-namers perceived the root *lav-*. Our best guess is that they applied it to any water-course whose level could vary dramatically, whether that was due to extra high tides or rainfall, or to a large fraction of the flow happening underground.

Several other possibilities needed to be considered and largely rejected. They include:

- Latin *laevus* probably contributed to the Cosmography's *Leviodanum* and *Levioxava*.
- Old English *laf* 'remnant' and its Danish suffix cognate *-lev* 'inheritance' are common in place names.
- Old English *laefer* 'rush' probably descends from PIE *\*lep-* 'to peel' and came to apply to a wide variety of water plants, from yellow iris to laver seaweed.
- Obsolete English *lew* 'warm', and Latin *levis* 'not heavy' or 'smoothe'.
- The northern English word laverock (skylark, OE *lawerce*); think "lark ascending".

We leave to others the task of sorting out all the deep etymologies involved and conclude by stressing how modern people, who live in a world full of artificial drains, find it hard to understand the wetter landscape in which ancient people lived. Roman soldiers and indigenous Britons had an extensive vocabulary for different types of watercourse and of soggy ground, which is only just starting to be unravelled.

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