

## L-vowel-V

An element *Lav-* shows up in the Romano-British place names [Aballava](#) ([Burgh-by-Sands](#) fort), [Durolevi](#) (probably near Halesworth), [Lavatriis](#) ([Bowes](#) fort), [Lavobrinta](#) ([Caer Gai](#) fort), and possibly [Galava](#) (Cartmel). With a vowel E, *Lev-* shows up in [Durolevum](#) ([Ospringe](#)), [Leviodanum](#) (probably Bertha, near Scone) and [Levioxava](#) (probably Perth).

Many river names across Europe begin with L-vowel-V, or something phonetically similar. Since river names are often well-conserved over the centuries, it is reasonable to suspect that there was a single, ancient L-vowel-V word that contributed to the names of a wide variety of rivers and to Roman installations on their banks. But what did it mean?

This article explains that that putative ancient word referred to a pair of lips around a river or, in modern parlance, a **bottleneck**, though sometimes slit or slot might be a better translation. Laying out all the evidence will take several pages, which must start with linguistic issues. That means examining, and largely rejecting, other possible etymologies.

Proto-Indo-European (PIE) roots are cited here in the simplified form of [Watkins](#) (2011). The letter shown here as V can also appear as B, W, F, or P, and the vowel varied widely, depending on grammar and linguistic environment. Skilled philologists are welcome to improve my analyses, but note that the key insights come from maps, not dictionaries.

One widely repeated idea to explain L-vowel-V names was advanced by [Watson](#) (1926: 432-3) and endorsed by [Nicolaisen](#) (1976: 228) and by [James](#) (2020) for some names in Scotland: *Labhar* (Lawers Burn) at NN684395, *Uisge Labhair* (Levern Water) at NN425702, Burn of Aberlour at NJ260427, and a few others. They suggested that these names referred to ‘noisy burns’, because of Welsh [llafar](#) ‘loud, resounding’, Irish [labar](#) ‘talkative, boastful’, and Breton [lavar](#) ‘speech’. This sense of moving lips is not peculiar to Celtic languages: consider Dutch *labben* ‘to gossip’, German *labern* ‘to talk at length’, English blabber, and Homer’s *λαβρος* ‘furious’. Like Latin *labia* and *labrum*, they descend from PIE *\*leb-* ‘lip’. Gaelic speakers may indeed interpret some rivers that tumble over rocks as ‘talkative’. Rivers called *Laber* in Germany, too. And *Λαβηρος πολις* (*Laberos* city, possibly at the Hill of Tara in Ireland) was famous for gift of the gab. However, L-vowel-V names cannot in general be explained by talkative rivers.

There seems to be nothing already in print that convincingly explains the generality of L-vowel-V names, so here are some words beginning with L to consider. They include these PIE roots: *\*leuə-* led to Latin *lavo* ‘to wash’ and to *Λουεντινον* gold mine in Wales; *\*leubh-* ‘love’ led to *lief* and *belief* in English; *\*leip-* ‘sticky’ may be the source of *leave* as well as *lipid*; *\*lep-* ‘to peel’ may be the source of Old English *læfer* ‘rush’ and of *laver* (seaweed); *\*el-* ‘red-brown’ led to Welsh *llwyf* ‘elm’ and might apply to water colour. Or these Latin words: *levo* ‘to elevate, lighten’ led to *levee* ‘embankment’, but may be distinct from *levo* ‘to smoothe’; *laevus* ‘left’ and its Indo-European cognates have no agreed etymology; *labes* ‘sinking in, subsidence’ and *labor* ‘to fall’ are related to English *lapse* and to Sanskrit *lamba* ‘hanging down’; *caleo* ‘to be warm’ is related to obsolete English *lew* ‘warm’; *libonotos* ‘south-west wind’, from Greek *λιβος*, from an ancient Egyptian word, might be relevant to Ptolemy’s *Λιβιον* in the west of Ireland.

Some L-vowel-V words definitely have contributed to place names. Old English *laf* ‘remnant’ and its Danish suffix cognate *-lev* ‘inheritance’ are in many names. Old English *lawerce* ‘laverock, skylark’ is in *Laverstock*, *Caerlaverock*, etc. [Delamarre](#) (2018) spotted Gaulish *\*Lip-* ‘to leave’ in the tribal name *Lepontii*, which probably shows up in [Duroliponte](#).

The best discussion of river names in England is still the book by Ekwall (1928). On pages 234 to 277, he mentioned, often in passing, a remarkable number of rivers whose names begin with L that are worth looking at. In particular, he noted three called Leven in England, plus one in Scotland, three called Llyfni or Llynfi in Wales, and some others whose modern spellings conceal an origin like Leven. He discussed PIE *\*lei-* ‘to pour’, often extended with B (as in libation) or similar (as in Welsh *llif* ‘to flow’), but then swerved away towards a letter M (as in Latin *lima* ‘file’). This idea has been expanded by [James](#) (2010), who described PIE *\*(s)lei-* as a “slippery customer”.

A crucial observation to break the linguistic stalemate is that [Leven](#) is the name of the river outflow from Lake Windermere and of the river outflow from Loch Lomond. Many other L-vowel-V rivers turn out to be lake-drains, too:-

- [Levern Water](#) is the outflow from Long Loch, SW of Glasgow.
- The [Leven](#) in Fife empties Loch Leven into the firth of Forth
- The Llyfni in Snowdonia is the outflow from [Llyn Nantlle Uchaf](#).
- The Llynfi (AD 1191 *Leueni*) drains [Llangorse](#), largest natural lake in Wales.
- The Leven in east Yorkshire drains the [Leven Carrs](#), now a wetland not a lake.
- [Lavery](#) Burn in south Ayrshire drains Drumlanford Loch
- The [Lavant](#) (AD 890 *Labanta*) drains a lake, the Lavantsee, in Austria.
- The [Lambro](#) (Pliny’s *Lambrus*) drains two lakes (Alserio and Pusiano) in Italy.

Ten instances of an L-vowel-V river draining inland lakes are too many to be a coincidence, but there are also coastal seawater inlets with a narrow outlet to the wider ocean. Loch Leven, in western Scotland, is a particularly clear example, and so is Beaulieu Firth (near Inverness), whose river was previously *\*Lovat*, according to Ekwall. In Cornwall, the Luney (AD 1317 *Lyfny*) forms a lake before it drains into the sea. The [Lavan Sands](#) are extensive tidal mud flats at the north-east end of the Menai Straits. Even Liverpool may fit the pattern.

Lake-drains cannot be the whole story. Further investigation shows that a very common geographical feature associated with L-vowel-V names is some kind of bottleneck, but what constituted the “lips” and what was in the bottle? Since Ekwall’s time, historical understanding has developed greatly, and the Internet now makes a vast amount of information available to anyone, anywhere.

The river [Lavant](#) in Sussex is interesting. The dialect word [lavant](#) ‘intermittent stream’ probably arose from the place name (and did not give rise to many L-vowel-V names, as I used to think). Lavant is at the apex of a  $\Lambda$  of low ground on the north side of Chichester. It sits by the river Lavant, a winterbourne that is feeble in the summer, in a low valley through the South Downs. In the modern landscape this is an unimpressive bottleneck, but many centuries ago it seems to have been a fortified gateway through the [Devil’s Ditch](#) along the Downs, which is Iron-Age (pre-Roman) in places, but was analysed by [Storr](#) (2018) as defending the Chichester area against attack from the north during post-Roman warfare.

The key lessons to draw from Lavant are: (1) that the physical geography of a bottleneck can be quite gentle and hard to recognise in the modern landscape, and (2) that the socio-political context in which a name was coined may be long in the past. One must look at information from history and archaeology, as well as at maps. Aerial 3D views, as provided by Google Earth, can be particularly useful. Take [Lavatis](#) Roman fort, for example. It made everyone think of water (as in lavatory) and of the adjacent river Greta. However, an aerial view along the main road there (now the A66) towards Stainmore Pass shows that the fort controlled a bottleneck in one of the key travel routes on land between England and Scotland.

On the other side of that Pass, in Cumbria, runs the river [Lyvennet](#), finally joining the river Eden near [Bravoniacum](#) Roman fort. The river itself offers no obvious reason for an L-vowel-V name, but the area was strategically important, judging by the battle in the huts of *Brewyn* mentioned by a Welsh [poem](#) in the Book of Taliesin.

The river [Llynfi](#), which flows to the Bristol Channel via the Ogmore, also makes one wish that stones could speak, because that area is rich in historical puzzles. See about the [Aventio](#) harbour estuary and about [Kenfig Castle](#), Wales' answer to Pompeii.

Many languages, but especially Welsh, have a feature that mystifies English speakers – lenition, whereby an M changes to a B. Ekwall touched on it while discussing river names beginning with L on the western side of Britain, because some scholars suggest that L-vowel-V names started out as L-vowel-M. For example, the AD 810 *Historia Brittonum* wrote *Lemn* for what is now the Leven outflow from Loch Lomond. However, there is ample evidence for V or B in names from Roman times.

[Levefano](#) was the Roman Rhine-frontier fort at *Arnhem-Meinerswijk*, in the Netherlands. Its name, essentially ‘lips of the fen’, referred to the way that one channel of the Rhine delta needed to squeeze through fractionally higher ground there, causing water to pond into marshland upstream. Near there is the famous Bridge Too Far, where the Allied defeat in 1944 was largely due to soggy ground in that area being impassable to tanks.

[Durolevum](#) (Ospringe, Kent) was a rest stop on the Roman main road (Watling Street) through Kent. It actually lay at a crossroads (the *Duro-* part) but its *-levum* ‘lips’ part was several miles away, at the edge of the Thames estuary, where marshes (now bounded by Faversham Creek and Oare Creek) flowed through a shared bottleneck.

[Durolevi](#) is not definitively located by the Cosmography, but the presumption is strong that it was the Blythburgh estuary, plus its neighbours at Minsmere and Dunwich, which in Roman times were inside “lips” that have since been smoothed out by erosion and siltation.

[Levioxava](#) was probably at or near modern Perth, where the river Tay flows through a gap between Kinnoull Hill and Moncrieffe Hill. This is an interesting area, full of under-exploited Roman names and little-researched hill forts, with the correct meaning of *-oxava* still uncertain. [Leviodanum](#), a little way upstream, is essentially a suburb of modern Perth.

[Lavobrinta](#) was probably Caer Gai Roman fort, beside Bala Lake in north Wales, situated between one of the rivers called Lliw and one of the rivers called Llafar.

In Ireland, \* $\Lambda\alpha\beta\rho\omega\nu\alpha$  (*Labrona*), the likely origin of Ptolemy's  $\Delta\alpha\beta\rho\omega\nu\alpha$ , fits the river Lee near Cork, which passes through several lakes and tight bottlenecks. Scholars have been reluctant to acknowledge how many early names around Ireland look as if they were created using Graeco-Roman nautical terminology.

Dublin's river [Liffey](#) opens into a C-shaped bay, evidently well-known to Ptolemy, who called the river mouth  $\text{O}\beta\kappa\alpha$  (*Oboka*), which sounds amusingly like Spanish *boca* ‘mouth’ given an Irish tinge with initial O’. He called the flanking headlands  $\text{E}\delta\rho\upsilon\nu$  (*hedru* ‘base for ships’) and  $\Lambda\upsilon\mu\nu\upsilon\nu$  (like a word for ‘harbour’).

The river [Lièpvrette](#) in Alsace flows out of the Vosges in a deep valley, passing Lièpvre (AD 777 [Lepraha](#)), to debouch into the Rhine floodplain between clear “lips” of hills above Chatenois and Scherwiller.

[Leipzig](#), Germany, shows a particularly clear example of a river wetland squeezed down between “lips” of higher ground. Its name is said to come from the same origin as [Liepaja](#),

Latvia, where a coastal lake drains into the Baltic through a narrow channel. Also [Lipetsk](#), Russia, where a lake reservoir helps to control river floods.

Ptolemy's Λεφάνα (*Lefana*) was at modern Hitzacker, Germany, where the river Elbe historically used a tributary, the [Jeetzel](#), as a sort of buffer lake.

In any investigation like this there is a danger of cherry-picking evidence and self-delusion. That is why this hunt for L-vowel-V names has erred towards being exhaustive and exhausting. So, for the record, here are some names for which there is no instantly obvious and compelling evidence for an ancient bottleneck derivation.

The Cumbria river Lyne, which flows into the Esk and then the Solway Firth was clearly called *Leven* (or similar) around AD 1100.

The river [Laver](#) in Yorkshire flows “through a narrow wooded valley, before broadening”. [Velabrum](#) was a low swampy valley in Rome, subject to inundation from the Tiber.

Ptolemy's Λαβερνίς may be Labares, on the [Villaviciosa](#) estuary in northern Spain.

[Labricinensi](#) or [Labrocinensi](#) people in France.

The river Lippe (Roman [Lupia](#)) joins the Rhine at Wesel.

The river Llynfell is upstream of Port Talbot.

All the best stories need a surprise ending, and this one has a beauty. I am writing this close to a perfect L-vowel-V site, which I never previously noticed during hundreds of journeys past, on foot or on wheels. [Lewisham](#) is bounded on the north by a confluence of the river Quaggy into the river Ravensbourne, squeezed between Lewisham Hill and Loampit Hill, which is now obscured by a messy roundabout and concrete canyons going up near the railway station. Books currently explain Lewisham (AD 918 *Lievesham*) as derived from an unattested personal name \**Leofsa*, related to the attested name *Leofa* ‘beloved’. This looks suspiciously like the common tendency of place-name researchers to invoke personal names when they really do not have a clue, and reinterpretation is also possible.

What tips the balance towards a topographical explanation for Lewisham is [Lewes](#) in Suffolk, which is notorious for flooding. [Forsberg](#) (1997) wrote an entire book about the name Lewes, and spelled out that “the name *Læwe* instead derives from the rare Old English word *lǣw* (‘wound, incision’), and ... Lewes overlooks the narrow, steep-sided ‘gash’ where the River Ouse cuts through the line of the South Downs” (quoting Wikipedia). The rare English word *lew* can be translated ‘weak’, while Anglo-Saxon *lǣw/léw* is translated as ‘injury, mutilation’ by [Bosworth-Toller](#) and *lǣwe* as ‘mutilated, weakened’.

I think that Forsberg (and the Cambridge Dictionary of English Place-Names) are correct and that *lǣw* was an Old English successor of the L-vowel-V element in Roman names. To call a narrow pass between hills and/or the wetlands of a river a ‘cut’ or a ‘gash’ seems entirely reasonable, but to go on and liken it to a human vulva, would now be considered in poor taste. Ancient people were not so prudish. Witness the many medieval places with cunt ‘water channel’ in their name. Or the Roman name [Cunetio](#) and the dozens of later K-vowel-N places where a Roman road met a river wharf.

My best guess to explain the underlying linguistics is a collision between two ancient words, represented in Latin by [labia](#) ‘lips’ and [labo](#) ‘to totter, waver’. Neither has a secure Indo-European etymology, but they do share a common semantic sense of two-ness (which has not been picked up by the Leiden etymological dictionaries of Latin and Greek): two lips or wavering between two positions.

One final insight from geography may help. [Axium](#) in the *Cosmography* (probably one of two rivers in south-west England called Axe) draws attention to the fundamental nature of Latin [axis](#) ‘axle’, which was having two ends, not a shaft around which wheels rotate. See

[here](#) about ancient words and names containing AX that are inherently double-ended, one of which was Homer's [αξινη](#) 'double-headed battle axe'. That weapon, which has since been widely adopted as a cultural symbol, had another name in Greek. That was [λαβρυς](#) (*labrys*).

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