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**VILBIAM (RIB 154): Kidnap or Robbery?** Paul Russell writes: The earliest curse tablet to come to light at Bath presents one of the more difficult problems of interpretation. In 1880 a tablet was found inscribed with text the first line of which reads JUQIHIMMAIBLIVTIVALO[. It runs from left to right in correct word sequence but the order of letters in each word is reversed. Restoring the text produces an unproblematic line of Latin QU[ I ] MIHI VILBIAM [ INV ] OLAVIT, parallel in structure to numerous other curse tablets at Bath and elsewhere. It follows the usual pattern involving a phrase along the lines of 'whoever has stolen — from me', and goes on to invoke the help of the goddess in punishing them and provides what seems to be a list of suspects. The stolen object is typically the kind of thing one would expect to find in the changing-room of a bath-house — coins, clothes, etc. The one instance of a ploughshare (an unlikely object in a bath-house) presumably shows that the aggrieved victims could call on the goddess to extend her powers to the inhabitants of the neighbouring countryside.<sup>48</sup> This tablet presents a problem in this respect: we would expect *vilbiam* to refer to an object which has been stolen from the baths but hitherto no convincing suggestion has emerged. In the original edition of the tablet in the *Roman Inscriptions of Britain*, it is suggested that *VILBIAM* is a personal name.<sup>49</sup> Tomlin, in his edition of the curse-tablets from Bath, expresses not unreasonable unease about this: 'it is difficult to follow *RIB* in understanding it as a personal name, not just because it is unattested ... , but

<sup>48</sup> Tomlin 1988, II, 148–9 (*Tab. Sulis* 31). I am grateful to Roger Tomlin and Jim Adams for comments on a draft of this note.

<sup>49</sup> Collingwood and Wright 1965, 49 (*RIB* 154).

because no other British curse tablet is prompted by the theft of a woman'.<sup>50</sup> Tomlin (pers. comm.) has communicated to me a further level of unease that a slave owner would refer to a stolen slave-girl by name only; *ancillam* or *puellam nomine Vilbiam* would be more plausible, and even then Vilbia is not the colourless or pseudo-Greek name that so many slaves bear, e.g. Fortunata. Despite these reservations, this has been the consensus even to the extent that the 'theft' of Vilbia now forms a narrative in one of the popular Latin school text-books.<sup>51</sup> However, the difficulties remain: even if the author of the curse is lamenting the loss of a slave rather than a girl-friend, and the occurrence of female as well as male names in the list of suspects might make the former a more likely prospect, the uniqueness of this type of curse remains problematic.<sup>52</sup> Tomlin's concerns were partly allayed in a later note in which he reported the occurrence of the name, Vilbia, in an inscription from Antibes in southern Gaul.<sup>53</sup> However, the issue of the uniqueness of the curse remains, and it seems reasonable to continue to explore other possibilities.

It is suggested here that *vilbia* is a British word for some kind of sharp-pointed object, most closely represented in the later Brittonic languages by Middle Welsh *gwlŷ*.<sup>54</sup> However, such a proposal presents some difficulties since the Brittonic reflexes of *vilbia* seem to have merged with the reflexes of forms in *\*gulb-*. What follows is an attempt to disentangle the two.

In all the insular Celtic languages there are reflexes of an *n*-stem noun based on a root *\*gulb-*: Old Irish *gulba* (*n*-stem) 'beak, mouth, jaw', *gulban* (*o*-stem derived from the original *n*-stem) 'beak, sting', Old Welsh *gilbin* 'point' (glossing *acumine*), and later Welsh *gylfin* 'beak, point, snout', Old Cornish *geluin* (glossing *rostrum*), Old Breton *golbinoc* 'pointed, with a beak' (glossing *ac rostratam*).<sup>55</sup> In both Breton and Irish the word has acquired an extended sense of promontory or spit of land: Old Breton *golban*, Modern Breton *Le Guilvinec*, Old Irish *gulba*. The Brittonic forms suggest a pre-form *\*gulbīno-*, possibly a derivative in *-īno-* of a basic *\*gulbo-* or the like. On the other hand, the Irish forms show both an *n*-stem form, *gulba*, and an *o*-stem, *gulban*. Stüber has suggested that the *n*-stem declension is original and may also be reflected in Old Welsh *gilb* (glossing *foratorium*) and Middle Welsh *gylf* from a nominative *\*gulbī* < *\*gulbū*,<sup>56</sup> the *o*-stem, *gulban*, is almost certainly a secondary development within Irish. The rise of a 'suffix' *\*-īno-* in Brittonic corresponding to a nasal stem declension in Irish can also be seen in Middle Welsh *meheuin* < *\*samīno-* beside Middle Irish *míthem* and Gaulish *\*kamm-ano-* > *\*kamm-īno-* (> French *chemin*, Spanish *camino*, etc.) beside Old Irish *céimm*, etc. and seems to be part of a morphological restructuring of inherited consonant stems in Brittonic.<sup>57</sup>

In addition to the forms containing a nasal, there is some evidence for a form without a nasal extension. The earliest attested is the Romano-British place name *Regulbium* (Reculver, Kent), attested in the forms *Regulbio* and *Regulbi* in the *Notitia Dignitatum*, which seems to contain *\*gulbīo-*, a simpler form of the same element.<sup>58</sup> *Regulbium* would then have been named by reference to the projecting headland, thus <

<sup>50</sup> Tomlin 1988, II, 112–13 (*Tab. Sulis* 4); see also Collingwood and Wright 1995, 759 (addendum).

<sup>51</sup> Schools Classics Project 2001 (*Cambridge Latin Course*, III).

<sup>52</sup> The recent discovery of a legal document concerning a slave-girl indicates at least that slave-girls could be the subject of such discussions (Tomlin 2003).

<sup>53</sup> Tomlin and Hassall 1999, 384.

<sup>54</sup> For tools in curse tablets, cf. Tomlin and Hassall 2004, 336–7, where a tablet from Ratcliffe-on-Soar records the theft of an *ascia* 'axe' and a *sculprum* 'knife'.

<sup>55</sup> For details and earlier references, see Falileyev 2000, s.nn. *gilb*, *gilbin*; Fleuriot and Evans 1985, I, s.nn. *golban portitor*, *gilbin*, *golbinoc*; Jackson 1967, 296; Delamarre 2003, 184, s.n. *gulbion*; Stüber 1998, 110, 112. On the Welsh forms, see Thomas *et al.* 1950–2002, s. vv. *gylfin*; Zimmer 2000, 521. There is an interesting use of *rostrum* in Tomlin 1988, II, 194–5 (*Tab. Sulis* 62) to refer to a thief's mouth; could this be a Latin rendering of the Brittonic idiom?

<sup>56</sup> Another possible Old Welsh instance of *gilb* is found in a dry-point gloss in *Oxonienis Posterior* (Oxford, Bodley MS. 572) glossing *secalium* 'rye'. However, the reading is uncertain, and it is more likely that the form, like almost all the dry-point glosses in this manuscript, is Old English rather than Old Welsh, perhaps *gilp* or *gilm*; see Falileyev and Russell 2003, 96–7.

<sup>57</sup> Stüber 1998, 110, 112; for Gaulish *\*kamm-ano-*, see also Delamarre 2003, 100, s.v. *cammano-*.

<sup>58</sup> For discussion, see Rivet and Smith 1979, 446–7, s.n. *Regulbium*. The former occurs in the text, the latter in the picture, and it is assumed that the nominative was *Regulbium*. However, though many of the names seem to reflect locatives, it is not impossible that some names, e.g. *Anderidos* (Pevensey), are nominatives. If so, *Regulbio* could be a Latinised *n*-stem and might fit better with the other Celtic reflexes of this root.

\**(p)ro-gulbiom*.<sup>59</sup> In addition to *gylf* ‘sharp-pointed instrument, bird’s beak’, etc., Middle Welsh also has *gwlf* with a complicated technical sense: ‘one of the ends of a bow (sometimes tipped with horn) having a groove or notch cut into it to provide a firm seat for the end of the bowstring; slot or notch of the arrow which holds it in position on the bowstring while it is being aimed; bill, beak; mouth, slit, notch’.<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, it has been suggested that related forms may be attested in continental sources.<sup>61</sup> Dottin quotes *guvia* with variants *gubia*, *gulbia*, and *gulvia* in Isidore, *Etymologiae* 19.19.15, but Lindsay prints *guvia* with no variants, suggesting that the variants quoted by Dottin are in inferior manuscripts.<sup>62</sup> It occurs at the end of the section on tools and so could plausibly be the same word. However, it has the air of an afterthought as it is simply listed without comment or etymology; it is difficult therefore to be clear about its form and origin. A similar form is found in Vegetius, *Ars mulomedicinae* I.26.2, ‘componis pedem ad gulbiam’,<sup>63</sup> the context is treatment of splayed and infected hooves and *gulbia* here seems to mean ‘gouge’ or some similarly pointed object used to dig out the infected parts of a hoof. It has been thought to be Gaulish.<sup>64</sup> This or another veterinary text may be the source both for the word added in Isidore and for a similar word quoted in a medieval Latin–Greek glossary (misleadingly entitled *Glossae Servii Grammatici*): *guluia podoglifn* where the Greek form may represent *ποδογλυφεῖν* or *ποδογλυφεῖον* which seems to mean ‘to carve or hollow out a foot or hoof’ or, if the noun, ‘an instrument for doing that’.<sup>65</sup> The source of this material has been subject to some discussion and it seems that one important centre of dissemination of these bilingual Latin–Greek/Greek–Latin glossaries in the Carolingian period was at Laon, and it is possible that, if this word was Gaulish in origin and absorbed into Gallo-Latin, it could have been incorporated into the glossary tradition in Gaul.<sup>66</sup> However, it is difficult to fix the original form of the word. The attestations are consistent with an original *gulbia* /gulb/- undergoing phonological change to /gulv/- and then to /guv/- or from /gulb/- to /gubb/-, but the textual evidence remains unclear. There is also some uncertainty about the Romance reflexes of this word, but it has been suggested that French *gouge* may be a reflex, and it is possible that Italian *sgorbia* and Spanish *gubia* are as well.<sup>67</sup> But the links are uncertain, often depending on a similarity of form and meaning but without fitting into regular phonological developments.<sup>68</sup> As a way of getting around the phonological difficulties, Pokorny even suggested that forms such as *gubia* were the outcome of confusion between two forms, *gulbia* and a Celtic *uobia* < \*uo- ‘under’ + *bia* ‘cutting’; this, however, seems to be multiplying entities unnecessarily, as there is no other evidence in Celtic for \**uobia*.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Rivet and Smith 1979, 446–7, s.n. *Regulbium*.

<sup>60</sup> Thomas *et al.* 1950–2002, s.v. *gwlf*.

<sup>61</sup> For discussion and further references, see von Wartburg 1928–61, IV, 322–4; Corominas and Pascual 1980–91, III, 255.

<sup>62</sup> Dottin 1920, 261, s.v. *gulbia*; Lindsay 1911, 19.19.15.

<sup>63</sup> Lommatzsch 1903, I.26.2; see also Ortoleva 1996. The text, however, is not secure; the best witness has *ad cubiculum*, and *ad gulbiam* (or *ad gubbiam*) is only found in the late medieval and humanistic tradition where it is followed by an ungrammatical *et*. I am grateful to Vincenzo Ortoleva for this information; he suggests (pers. comm.) that we might read *ad gulbiculum*.

<sup>64</sup> Dottin 1920, 261, s.v. *gulbia*.

<sup>65</sup> Goetz 1888–1923, II, 522.46.

<sup>66</sup> For discussion, see Dionisotti 1988; Russell 2000. The early manuscript tradition of Vegetius’ *Ars mulomedicinae* may have had at least one representative in medieval Gaul which may have been the source of the glossary entry. The earliest surviving complete copy is Leiden, Vossius MS. Lat. F.71 (copied in 1537), but it is stated in a note (fol. 71v) in that manuscript that it is a copy of a now lost manuscript from Corbie or perhaps Corvey (*Corbiensis*); Lommatzsch 1903, x–xiv, the editor of the text, suggested that the nature of the misreadings and miscopyings indicate that the Corby manuscript was in uncial script; see now Ortoleva 1996, 10, who accepts this, while Reeve 1997, 319, is sceptical. It is, however, worth pointing out that this branch of the tradition does not have this section of text. There is also a sixth-century palimpsest fragment in Skt. Gall MS. 908, fol. 277–92, also in uncial script. For further discussion, see Lommatzsch, 1903, x–xiv, Ortoleva 1996, 12. For general discussion of this text, see also Adams 1995, 88–99.

<sup>67</sup> Lambert, 2003, 198; Delamarre 2003, 184; von Wartburg 1928–61, IV, 322–4; Corominas and Pascual 1980–91, III, 255; Meyer-Lübke 1935, 333 (§3911); Niedermann 1921, 440–1.

<sup>68</sup> Lambert, 2003, 198; Delamarre 2003, 184.

<sup>69</sup> Pokorny 1948–9, 263–4; for such forms in Celtic, see note 72 below.

To summarise: the insular evidence points to an *n*-stem noun based on the root *\*gulb-* meaning ‘point’, etc. The evidence for other declensional patterns is weak; *Regulbium* (only attested in the *Notitia Dignitatum* as *Regulbi* and *Regulbio*) remains a candidate, but the other forms are uncertain. Middle Welsh *gylf* fits into this scenario as a reflex of the *n*-stem nominative *\*gulbī* < *\*gulbū*. On the other hand, *gwlf* is less easy to explain as it is the only clear instance which cannot be derived from an *n*-stem. It could be argued that it arose as a back-formation either from *gylfin*, when that was perceived as a derivative rather than as a declensional form, or from *gylf* which in Welsh terms might have looked too much like a plural. However, if we return to Bath, another possibility emerges. For, working forwards from *uilbia* /*uīlbja*/ into Brittonic, the phonological developments bring us unproblematically to *gwlf* /*gulv*/: as Schrijver has demonstrated, before the loss of final syllables *\*-iā* did not cause vowel affection in Brittonic;<sup>70</sup> the development from /*uī*/ to /*gu*/ is likewise straightforward assuming first the regular assimilation of /*uī*/ > /*uū*/, and secondly the regular velarisation of initial *\*/u/* to */gū/* in Brittonic, both changes being exemplified in Welsh *gwr* ‘man’ from *\*/uīro-* (cf. Old Irish *fer* ‘man’, Latin *vir*).<sup>71</sup> In other words, it is possible that *uilbia*, a Brittonic term for some kind of pointed tool, was in use at Bath in the Roman period. Its reflex may have survived in Welsh as Middle Welsh *gwlf*, but the effect of the sound changes outlined above was to align it with the reflexes of *\*gulb-*. It is striking that Middle Welsh *gwlf* had a specialised sense which is not found with *gylf* and *gylfin*, and it is possible that this may be a distant reflection of its different origin. Such an interpretation also fits the context of the curse tablet (*RIB* 154) where we would normally expect to find a stolen item as the object of *involavit*.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Schrijver 1995, 257–64.

<sup>71</sup> Schrijver 1995, 151–2.

<sup>72</sup> If so, a final thought is raised about the etymology of *uilbia*. Gallo-Latin *uidubium* (> French *vouge*), Old Irish *fidbae*, Old Welsh *uidimm*, Middle Welsh *gwddyf*, which all refer to some kind of tool for cutting wood, go back to a proximate *\*uidu-biō-* ‘wood-cutting’ (cf. Old Irish *fid*, Welsh *gwydd* ‘tree’ < *\*uidu-*; Old Irish *benaid* ‘cut’ with compound verbal nouns in *-be* < *\*-biō-*); see Bernardo-Stempel 1999, 282, n. 22; Uhlich 2002, 423. Even though the first element remains unclear, it is possible that the *uilbia* might contain the same ‘cutting’ element.

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