

## Rivers Viewed through Names and Epithets

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### Introduction

There is something fascinating about river names and epithets (characterizing phrases). At one time or another, everybody must have wondered about the meaning of names like Atchafalaya, Irrawaddy, Murrumbidgee, Po, Winnipeg, Yangtze, and Zambezi. Such names roll melodiously off the tongue, and epithets, like “mother of waters,” “the purifier,” “river of fire,” and “scourge of the sons of Han,” conjure intriguing images. But what do the names and epithets mean, and of what relevance are they to hydraulic engineering?

This forum article views rivers through the names and epithets that people have applied to rivers. Though it may seem to be a perspective of little connection to hydraulic engineering, its relevance emerges while looking back—before the advent of hydraulic engineering—to when a river’s behavior was explained in largely metaphysical terms rather than in the hydraulician’s lingo of open-channel flow and sediment transport. Initially, rivers were viewed as a landscape feature that facilitated life and occasionally threatened it. Over time, many rivers came to be viewed as hallowed places, the abode of deities, or even as deities. Indeed, the word “river,” or something about a river, often is at the etymological root of a name by which a deity is known; the Ganges, Rhine, and Clyde are three such rivers. River names and epithets often express a systematic understanding of rivers and their behavior, an understanding that predates hydraulic engineering.

Rivers not only flow through the belief systems of peoples, they also flow through language and are embedded in the names of peoples and places. In an informal and somewhat blithe way, this forum article briefly traces these and other views associated with river names and epithets. This article delves only lightly into the etymological origins of river names. The obscure and largely oral origin of many names makes river etymology an inexact science, with the names of some rivers open to multiple interpretations.

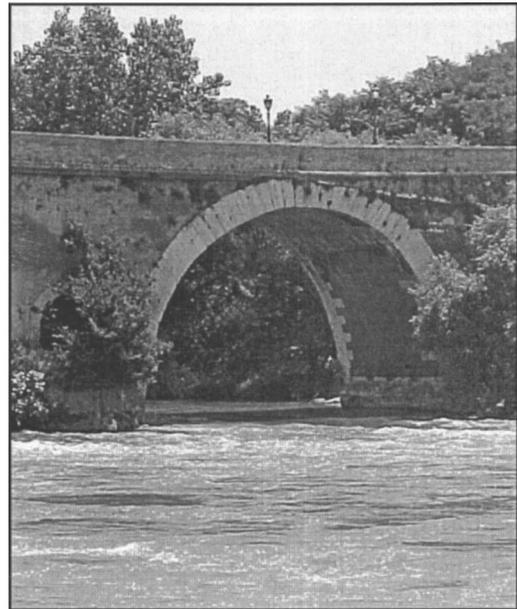
Numerous reference sources were used to gather the river names and epithets mentioned here. Though some references are given, most are not; the full list would extend well beyond the article’s page limit, and make the article a stodgy read. Useful references include Fenimore Cooper (1880); Gilmore (1914); Room (1974); Stewart (1975); Rand McNally (1980); Evans (1981); Brewster (1997); and Kalyanaraman (1999). The Internet is an especially fertile reference source—e.g., [www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org), [www.theoi.com](http://www.theoi.com), [www.geocities.com](http://www.geocities.com), and [www.linguistlist.org](http://www.linguistlist.org).

### A Few Epithets

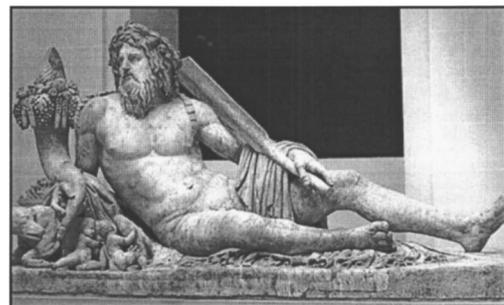
Rivers have been called many things, the more animated of which have endured as memorable epithets expressing respect, though at

times also frustration and even derision. In its own way, each epithet says something about the river’s form, behavior, and function.

Many river epithets refer to a physical attribute, such as the color and quality of a river’s water. Before King Tiberinus of Alba Longa drowned in it and then arose as the river’s eponymous deity, the Tiber River was known as the Albula, in reference to the whitish color of its sediment load. The Romans of old used the epithet “flavus” (“tawny”) for the Tiber; the epithet continues these days when contemporary Romans refer to the Tiber as the “the blonde river” (Fig. 1) The highly acidic and red-hued waters of Spain’s “crimson river,” the Rio Tinto, prompted the Phoenicians to call it the “river of fire.” In later years, the Moors referred



(a)



(b)

**Fig. 1.** (a) The Tiber River’s whitish sediment load drew the epithets Albula, flavus (tawny), and the blonde river; (b) statue of Father Tiber in reclining pose with cornucopia, as typical of a Greco-Roman river god



**Fig. 2.** The Mississippi River, Iowa [Messipi (*Big River* [?]) or Mee-zee-see-bee (*father of waters* [?])]. River-name etymology, like river hydraulics, is not always an exact science.

to it as the “river of sulfuric acid.” For hundreds of years, the river’s banks were a substantial source of gold, silver, and other minerals. Thanks to the popularity of a waltz, the Austrian reach of the Danube River is often dubbed the “Blue Danube,” though the river usually has a grayish brown hue along its course. The waltz began as a choral piece written by an appreciative Viennese policeman lauding electric street-lighting and thus the work of river hydraulicians in utilizing river flow for generating hydroelectric power.

By virtue of peoples’ dependence on rivers, many rivers have been characterized in terms of a nurturing parent. China’s Huang Ho (Yellow River) and Chiang Jiang (the lower 500 km of which is named the Yangtze River) have each been called China’s “mother river.” India’s Ganges River is sympathetically known as “mother Ganges” and as “India’s mother.” The Yalung Tsangpo (the upstream reach of the Brahmaputra) is “Tibet’s mother,” the Mekong River in Thailand has the maternal epithet “mother of waters,” and the Volga is Russia’s “mother Volga,” while the Oxus River (now Amu Darya) was the “mother of Bactria.” Some rivers are simply named “mother,” such as the Marne and Madre Rivers. Burma’s Irrawady is a “father of waters.” The Thames below Oxford, United Kingdom, is often referred to as “father Thames.” Italy’s Tiber River had the nickname “father Tiber” (Fig. 1).

Mud, floods, shifting channels, and pollution have caused rivers to be characterized in less benevolent terms. The propensity of China’s Huang Ho (Yellow River) to flood earned it several woe-filled epithets: “China’s sorrow,” “the ungovernable,” and “scourge of the sons of Han.” It was during the Han Dynasty (203 B.C.–260 A.D.) that people’s dependency on the Yellow River and its floodplain substantially increased. The Jamuna River, the broad braided channel of the Brahmaputra through Bangladesh, is considered to be “a crazy old woman” by many people who live precariously along the river’s banks and on its ephemeral islands. Time has not been kind to Poland’s Vistula, once the “Queen of Polish rivers.” Lately, some people are calling it “an aging queen” owing to the ravages of pollution.

The Mississippi River, like many large rivers, has mixed epithets. The river was dubbed “the father of waters” by early French explorers in the 1700s, apparently a misinterpretation of the Algonquin name meaning “big river” (Fig. 2). Among early African-Americans, and now by theatergoers and numerous writers, the river sometimes has the poignant epithet “old man river.” Mark Twain (1883) rather grandly called the Mississippi and its watershed the “body of the nation.” Earlier, in 1542, the Spanish explorer Hernando De Soto (Smith 1968) called it Rio Grande, because he thought that it was big. The English naval officer and

novelist Frederick Marryat (1836) was unimpressed by the Mississippi’s muddy waters, and contemptuously called the river “a great sewer.” Another English novelist, Charles Dickens (1842), rather snootily called it “an enormous ditch...running liquid mud.” An itinerant Englishman, John Burns, is reported to have said in 1852, “I have seen the Mississippi, that is muddy water; I have seen the St Lawrence, that is clear water; I have seen the Thames, that is liquid history” (ODQ 1980). Mark Twain (1884) even remarked, “a man that drunk Mississippi water could grow corn in his stomach, if he wanted to.” The Mississippi’s sediment load made the river hard to control. In a dinner speech, which the New Orleans *Picayune* newspaper (in February 1878) billed as “A Talk upon the Great Father of Waters,” noted river engineer James Eads characterized the Mississippi River as having an “instinct for self-preservation that is common to the whole animal kingdom.”

Though at times marking borders and barriers between people, rivers are paths connecting people. The Rhine and Danube, once delineating the northern extent of the Roman empire, are now “international waterways.” The Mekong, which flows through six countries, is known as “the Danube of the East.” The Congo (Zaire) River is “central Africa’s highway.” The explorer and missionary David Livingstone (1865) wrote of the Zambezi River as “God’s highway.” The Mississippi has been referred to as “the great road,” and “a public highway.” The Platte River (Nebraska), a river of central importance in the western expansion of the United States, became the “Great Platte River Road.” The Platte was first regarded as a disappointment. The American author and travel-book writer Washington Irving (1835) characterized the river as “the most magnificent and useless of rivers.” Though wide, the river’s shallowness and shifting sand dunes severely limited its use for riverboat navigation west of the Missouri River. The river’s sand dunes and its shimmering waters caused the early explorer Charles Fremont (1843), and others, to call the Platte the “Coast of Nebraska.”

By facilitating the commerce of goods and ideas, rivers gather people. Communities commonly arose at river crossings of fords, and are named accordingly (for instance, Stratford and Madrid). The Potomac River, by virtue of having its bed in Washington, D.C., has been labeled “the nation’s river.” The epithet is apt, as Potomac means something like “gathering place” or “market place,” in the tongue of the Patawahkeme Indians who lived along it (Fig. 3).

New epithets continue to be voiced. The Danube and the Mekong Rivers recently were each characterized as a “river of cooperation,” a resource to be shared by many countries. With the gathering growth of cities along its course, the Rhine these days is

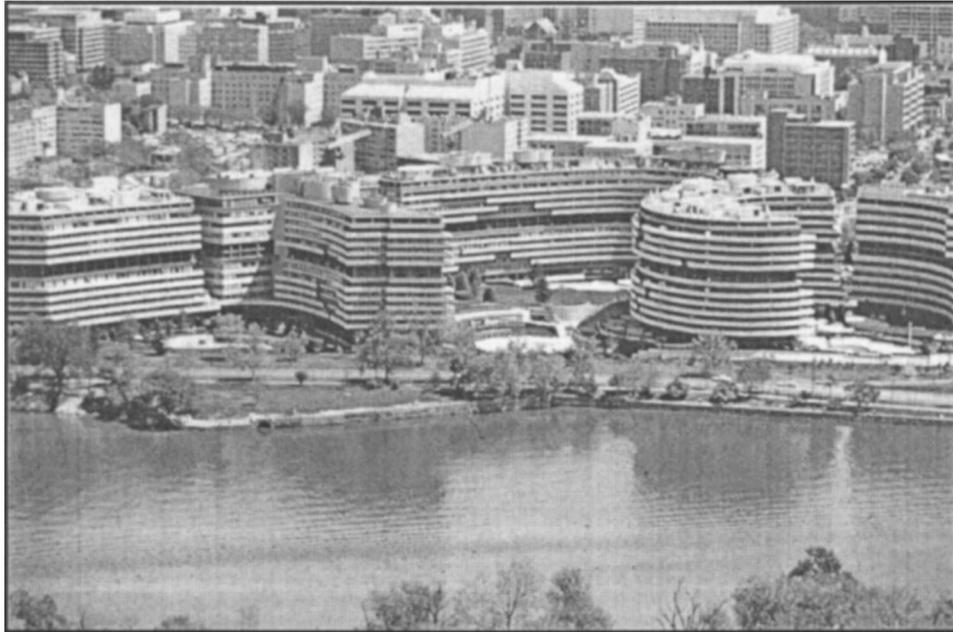


Fig. 3. The Potomac (gathering place, or market) River, Washington, D.C.

becoming characterized as a “mega-city river.” A recent Web site characterizes the Mississippi River as a “river of song,” in recognition of the flow of music from the people who live along its banks.

### A Little Etymology

Many names began as short, laconic epithets expressing something about a river’s appearance, or acknowledging a river as a central feature of some local landscape. In the beginning, many rivers were named simply “river.” The names Indus and Ganges are derived from Sanskrit words meaning river and “stream,” respectively. Other well-known rivers with names meaning simply river are Rhine, Avon, Danube, Dniester, Dnieper, Don (Russia and Scotland), Donau, Gambia, Hatchie, Niger, Para, Senegal, Tyne, and Zaire. The Nile, which means river, has etymologic connection to Egypt through its Greek name “Aigyptos,” which evidently meant “flat river.” Another region named for its flatness is Nebraska (“flat water” to the Oto Indians), the Nebraska River subsequently becoming the Platte River, thanks to the French.

Numerous rivers are named for a distinguishing physical trait. The epithets “big,” “grand,” and “long” are commonly included in river names. There are at least five rivers in the United States that are called “Grand River” (not including the Rio Grande). The melodic syllables in the names of some rivers amount to nothing more than big, grand, or long river in a local language,—e.g., Mississippi (North America), Ta Ho (China), Ob (Siberia), Quadalquivir (Spain), Yukon-na (Northwest America), Zambezi (Africa), Murrumbidgee (Australia), Chao Phraya (Thailand), and Paraguasso (South America). China’s Yangtze River is interpreted variously as big river or “long river.” The most likely interpretation of Jordan is big river (in a mix of the elements, including “dan” meaning river).

The names Atchafalaya and Susquehanna mean essentially “long river.” Similarly, the name Connecticut stems from an Indian word (Quinnehtukqut) meaning “beside the long tidal river.” “Small” rivers can also be found, e.g., the Withlacoochee. The

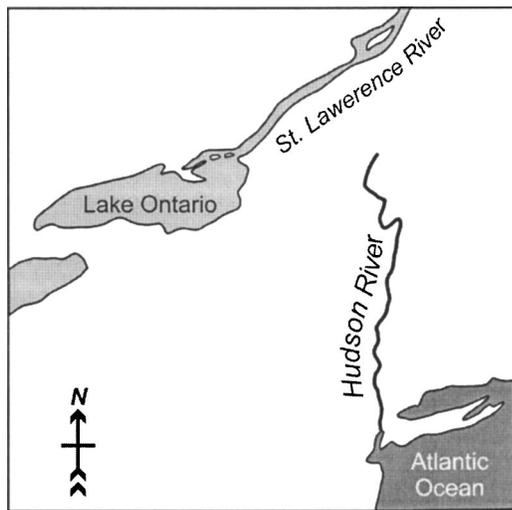
Sapporo River, in Hokkaido (Japan), derives from an old Ainu name meaning “big-in-drought,” suggesting a river that maintains its flow even in dry weather. Similarly, the Yarra River in Australia is the “continuously flowing” (in Australian Aboriginal).

Arguably, the ancestral or protoname of most rivers is simply river or big river. The fact that many rivers are (were) called big, long, or “swift” river in a local language suggests the early parochialism of life centered near or on the banks of a particular reach of river. Often the name river stuck, though occasionally some rivers got renamed to commemorate an eminent person or a “deity,” such as the Mackenzie or St. Lawrence, or an event, such as the Peace River (originally the big river to the local Indians). The Hudson River was a big river (as well as about 20 other names—e.g., “River of the Manhattans” and “the North River”) before becoming the Hudson (Fig. 4).

Various forms of swift, “flowing,” and “good water” are common. Wisconsin’s Neenah River is “flowing water” (in Winnebago), as is New Zealand’s Waikato (in Maori). Burma’s Irrawady is “fast flowing.” Canada’s Saskatchewan is the “swift current.” The Walla Walla in Washington and Oregon is the “little swift river.” An early Indian name given to the St. Lawrence River (Canada and United States) is “the river that walks.” The River Somme, whose name evokes somber memories of World War I, actually means “tranquil river” in a Gaulish dialect. Japan’s Yodo(-gawa) River is “dead water” river, apparently reflecting the sluggish appearance of water at the confluence of the river’s three tributaries. Taiwan’s Chishui and Tanshui Rivers are the “torrent” and freshwater” rivers, respectively.

The Euphrates River, bordering Mesopotamia (“the land between rivers”), apparently means “sweet-water” river in Syrian, an appealing name for a river in an otherwise arid region. The earlier Persian name for the river was “very broad river.” The Oxus River (“sour” river in Greek) bounded the eastern extent of the Persian empire. The Yarlung Tsangpo is pure “snow water from mountains” in Tibetan.

Many river names are epithets that note local physical features, such as the color of a rock (e.g., the Yellowstone and Blue-stone Rivers) or the color of water in sunlight (e.g., the Green



**Fig. 4.** The Hudson River, once the “Grootte Riviere,” “Noordt Riviere,” “River of the Manhattans,” and other names before being named for Hudson (a near mythical figure)

River). A river’s sediment load commonly is conveyed figuratively by the river’s name. Rivers named Rio Puerco (“dirty river”) are quite common; there are two in the United States. China’s Yellow River is, of course, well known for its very heavy sediment load. The Big Sandy, a tributary of the Ohio River, is well named for the amount of sand it transports. Another Ohio tributary, the Wabash, is the “white river.” Alaska’s Susitna is “sandy river.” The word “Colorado” is from the Spanish words for color and red, from which it may be inferred that the river was heavily sediment laden when the earliest Spanish explorers saw it. Other rivers, such as Venezuela’s Orinoco (“clay river”), Vietnam’s Yuan Ho (“red river”), Canada’s Red and Winnipeg Rivers (“little muddy water”), Italy’s Rubicon (“reddish”), Mississippi’s Homochitto (“not-so-big red river”), Montana’s Milk, South Africa’s Orange, and Turkey’s Kızılırmak (red river), bespeak the sediment loads carried by those rivers. Taiwan’s Choshui (Chi) River is a “turbid-water (stream).” Wyoming’s Powder River is named for a reach whose black sand resembled gunpowder. From its upper reaches to Yibin, the Yangtze is called the Jinsha (“golden sand”) river. The Niobrara, a tributary of the Missouri River, is an approximation of its Omaha name, meaning “spreading river,” descriptive of the river’s widening over sandbars in its lower course.

Different reaches of rivers have been known by different names that reflect various traits, as is the case for the Missouri River. During the 1700s, the French had picked up the name Missouri from a tribe of Illinois Indians, who used it when referring to a neighboring Siouan tribe on the lower course of the Missouri River. The name meant something like “those who have canoes,” or “place of big canoes.” Other tribes acquainted with the river had their own names for it. For example, the Omaha Indians, living in the Omaha area further upstream, called it “smoke river,” a name descriptive of the wispy clouds of fine sand and silt, blown by the summer south wind from the bars exposed at low flow. The drifting sand clouds appeared like wisps of smoke; the Omaha reach flows through loess-soil country. The Dakota Indian name of the river Minishoshe) essentially means “muddy water.” These days, it is commonly understood that Missouri means muddy water.

As mentioned for the Rio Tinto, various natural chemicals can

color river water, notably tannic and humic acids from decaying vegetation. Organic acids usually darken water, as is reflected in the names of rivers such as the Rio Negro (a tributary of the Amazon), the Black River, and the Suwannee River (the “crooked black river”). Salt is a common chemical in water, to the extent that the water of some rivers (notably the Salt River or Rio Salado) is not readily potable. Air entrained into fast-flowing water leads to white water, as in Ohio’s Whitewater River. Sometimes the organic material is a little smelly, as in Mississippi’s Noxubee (“smelly”) River. The Chicago River is the “urinating animal” river, thanks to stinky vegetation along its marshy channel (if one Algonquianist is to be believed). There also is a Perfume River (Vietnam’s Huong Giang River), which has fragrant flowers along its channel.

Features of channel shape and roughness are also caught in names. There are numerous Rock and Rocky Rivers, including Tallahatchie River (“river of rocks”) and the Dza-Chu (river of rocks, the Tibetan reach of the Mekong river). Also, there are several Crooked Rivers, including the Cuyahoga River, the Manistee River, the Weweantic, the Tennessee (“crooked ears”) River, and the Suwannee River (crooked black river). There are several Meandering Rivers (e.g., in Tasmania and Alberta), and even a Straight River (in Minnesota). The word “meander” originates from the Menderes River in Turkey. There is a Deep River, a High River, and several Shallow Rivers. The Merrimack River is a “deep place” river. One interpretation of the name “Po,” of northern Italy, is that it stems from Bodinicus, a latinized Ligurian word possibly meaning “bottomless.” The Po River seemed a deep river to early people living along its banks. The Tigris River likely stems from “river with high banks” (in Sumerian). The Monongahela River, a tributary to the Ohio River, is the “river with sliding banks.” The Ohio and its principal tributary, the Allegheny River, are each a “beautiful river.” Early French travelers in the region viewed both rivers as a single river, which they dubbed “la belle riviere.”

Waterfalls are a feature of some rivers. Ohio’s Hocking (“gourd”) River evidently looks like a gourd at its falls. In Massachusetts, the Wampanoag Indians named the Quequechan “fall” River, a name that over time was anglicized as Fall River. To be sure, there is the Niagara (“thundering waters” or “the strait”) River.

Often, the land around a river came to be called river. The names of at least seven countries, for example, essentially mean river, or some derivative thereof: India, Egypt, Jordan, Gambia, Nigeria, Senegal, and Zaire. The names of five South American countries stem from local river names: Argentina, Chile, Peru, Paraguay, and Uruguay. In the United States, the names of at least 15 states coincide with the names of a major river or water sources, including Alabama, Arizona (“little spring” in a local Indian language), Arkansas, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Illinois, Mississippi, Missouri, Nebraska, Ohio, Oregon, Tennessee, and Wisconsin. The naming of regions for rivers (and rivers after states) implies peoples’ connection to rivers.

## Deities and Dragons

The life-and-death power of rivers, along with the varied dispositions of rivers, led peoples around the world to view and explain rivers as deistic figures whose moods and deeds were responsible for river form and behavior. For instance, the nourishing arrival of the Nile River’s annual flood facilitated irrigated agriculture, and usually was a joyous occasion described as the “arrival of Hapi.”



Fig. 5. Ganges (stream)—goddess and river

As god of the Nile, Hapi evidently was more worshipped than Ra the sun god.

Rivers flow extensively through Hindu, Buddhist, and Persian belief systems. The Vedas, written 4- to 5,000 years B.C., refer frequently to rivers, of which seven have come to be regarded as holy rivers: Ganga, Jamuna, Godavari, Sarasvati, Narmada, Sindhu, and Kaveri. These Vedic rivers embody life's fundamental element, water, and were elevated to become female goddesses. The most holy and ancient of them is a river that once flowed but then dried up, its water diverted possibly owing to local tectonic shifts. That river is the Sarasvati River ("many lakes," in Sanskrit). It is the senior goddess of water, as well as of fertility, wealth, and knowledge. The Ganga (Fig. 5) and Yamuna (possibly "twin river" in Sanskrit) are twin river goddesses that merge at their confluence. As goddesses, they differ in character just as they differ in the stability of their channels and flows, and in the sediment loads each conveys. India's Brahmaputra River ("son of Brahma") has been a river of central importance to people along its banks. In Tibet, the Brahmaputra's Tsangpo reach is the "purifier," its water cold and clean; pureness was perceived (like cleanliness) as being close to godliness. Anahita was the major Persian goddess of the Oxus River, a river that rose in the Pamir Mountains and flowed northwest to water Central Asia near Samarkand.

Greek mythology is rife with river deities, including Maiandros of the Mendares River. He was one of 3,000 Potamai (rivers) whose parents were the Titans Tethys (goddess of groundwater) and Okeanus (the great freshwater river that encircled the earth). The Potamai include Meles, the river that flowed through Homer's hometown, and which is said to be the mythical father of Homer. Various charming nymphs aided Maiandros to beget smaller tributary rivers. However, it is evident from early folklore that the people who lived near Maiandros viewed the river warily: "The stream of Maeandrus wanders deceptively over the Phrygian plain and itself conceals the direction of its flow" [Propertius, c. 1st Century B.C. (Goold 1990)]. "And they say that lawsuits are brought against the god Maiandros for altering the boundaries of the countries on his banks" [Strabo, c. 1 B.C.–1 A.D. (Jones 1969)]. Lawsuits and rivers are old acquaintances.

Hercules was an early river-controller. According to myth, he wrestled the river (and minor god) Acheloos, who had taken on the guise of a bull, and tore a horn off Acheloos. Soon thereafter Acheloos' horn evidently became the horn of plenty [cornucopia, as seen in Fig. 1(b)] associated with the provenance availed by river-water irrigation. Greek rivers were sometimes considered as lusty, bullish deities. Hercules and Acheloos at the time were

wrestling for the favors of a local maiden. Acheloos apparently had earlier fathered the alluring, but deadly, rock-perched sirens.

Rivers named after the many Celtic deities, especially river goddesses, abound throughout Europe. For example, the names of Britain's Severn, France's Seine, Germany's Ruhr, Ireland's Boyne, and Switzerland's Aare Rivers stem from the names of Celtic river goddesses associated with those rivers (Sabrina, Sequanna, Rauria, Boann, and Arnemetia, respectively). Poland's Vistula River stems from Asto Ilunno, a Celtic goddess of rivers and fertility. The Rhine River is named for the goddess Rhenus, whose name in turn essentially means river. The Clyde River, an important Scots river, seemingly is named for its goddess Clota, the "washer," or "strongly flowing one." Britain gets its name from Ritona, or Brittae, tribal variations for the name of the Celtic goddess of fords and crossings. The Celts had innumerable deities, including Condatis, the god of river confluences.

In North American mythology there is Hiawatha ("maker of rivers"); a child of sun and earth, he features in the lore of the Iroquoian and Algonquian tribes.

Then, there are the Dragon Rivers. For over 4,000 years throughout much of Asia, the dragon has been a deity symbolizing power and nobility. In several belief systems, it is the deity primarily responsible for water, and dragons were believed to reside in rivers. The dragon was the divine bringer of rain. Severe floods and droughts were attributed to somebody having upset the river's dragon. Consequently, the names of many rivers refer to a dragon: dragon is "Lung" in Mandarin Chinese, "Long" in Vietnamese, and "Zhug" in Tibetan. There are quite a few Dragon Rivers and streams (e.g., the Zhugqu in Tibet). Among the many dragon rivers and streams in China, there are the "Hidden-Dragon" (Cang-lung) River, as well as the "Yellow-Dragon" (Huang-lung) and "Black-Dragon" (Hei-lung) Rivers (Fig. 6). Dragons also are associated with China's Huang-Ho, Yangtze, and Zhujiang (Pearl) Rivers. The lower reach of the Mekong River, at its delta where it divides into nine channels, is the Nine Dragons (Cuu Long) River. There also is a "Nine Dragons" River in China's Fujian Province. The number nine has special significance, as the dragon itself is an amalgam of nine parts, including those from camel and clam.

## Rivers in Names and Language

Peoples' dependency on rivers is apparent in the mixing of the word river with language itself, and with the names applied to



**Fig. 6.** The Hei-lung Jiang (Black-dragon River), China

peoples. The word “anglicized,” just mentioned, relates to the English language, which in turn relates to the Angles, a people who migrated to what now is called England but who once lived in a region of Europe named Angel, which in old *Angl-ish* meant “river bend.” Therefore, it could be said with a bit of a stretch that this paper is written in a form of “river-bendish” (English) language. Speaking of bends, the word “creek” (a very small river) derives from the Old Norse word “kriki,” meaning “bend.”

The word “river” itself has an interesting etymology. It stems from the Latin root, *rivalis*, which means “stream.” The same root led to the word “rival.” Indeed, arguments over water use are nothing new. Though the etymology is a bit tenuous, letter sequences *s-t-r* and *s-r* sometimes appear in ancient names for rivers (such as the Ister, the Thracian name for the Danube) and can be interpreted as stream.

As yet a further etymological stretch, it could be claimed that Indians and indigenous peoples etymologically are “river peoples,” because the word “indus” means river. A similar claim could be argued for Iberians, the inhabitants of the Iberian peninsula (Spain and Portugal), because the peninsula was named for its largest river, the Ebro River, which the Romans called the Iberus. The Ebro (from river in early Basque) was for many years a frontier between Rome and Carthage. The names of many groups of peoples relate to rivers. For example, the Yuma Indians of Arizona literally are the “sons of the river” Indians.

### The Whimsical and the Mundane

Part of the fun with river names and epithets is coming across a river named for a whimsical, sentimental, capricious, even manipulative reason. Such names occasionally were given to newly “discovered” rivers, and commonly were applied in an effort to attract people to the land through which the river flows, or to denote some important societal feature such as a mill.

An especially colorful example of a whimsical, perhaps manipulative, naming is the Amazon River. First placed on the map variously as the Maranon River (a local fruit) at its upstream end, and Rio Santa Maria del la Mar Dulce at its downstream end, the river gained its present name from Francisco de Orellano. While traveling down the river in 1541, he had skirmished with several groups of Indians, one of which included about a dozen bellicose women. With an eye for good publicity, and to make his trip seem more amazing, as well as to assuage his indignity at fighting with

women, Orellano reported his skirmish as a battle with Amazons, and announced his discovery of the “river of the Amazons.” The name stuck, thanks to the prevailing European fascination with fantasies about the new world. The name Amazon (Greek for “breast-less”) stems back to Homer’s *Iliad*, written sometime around 800 B.C.

Other fanciful names are the Paradise and Purgatory Rivers, and the Plata and the Piddle Rivers, not to mention the Poudre River, to name just a few beginning with “P.” The Paradise River sounds attractive, until it is learned that the average annual temperature of its watershed is 0°C; it flows between Newfoundland and Labrador. The early travelers who named Colorado’s Purgatory River certainly endured horrible hardship. These days it is a useful river, sustaining irrigated fields and wildlife. The name “Silver River” was wishfully given to the La Plata River by Sebastian Cabot in the late 1520s when he found a group of Indians possessing some silver. Actually, the silver had been stolen from an earlier Portuguese expedition. The river otherwise had no silver or gold to offer. Nevertheless, the name La Plata endured, possibly because it is enticingly redolent of El Dorado (“the gilded one”), a notion much in vogue during the 1500s and 1600s.

The opportunity for whimsy and mundane labeling increases with distance up a watershed. A map reveals many whimsical names for small rivers and creeks. For example, there are the Mad, Bad, Glad, and Sad Song Creeks, as well as, the Hat, Belt, Boot, and Petticoat Creeks, not to mention Promise, Hope, Last Chance, Disappointment, and Sedative Creeks. Evidently as rivers transform into numerous small streams and creeks up a watershed, the sense of awe and dependency diminishes.

### Closing Remarks

River names and epithets have several significances. A name or epithet may characterize a physical trait associated with the mechanics of a river’s flow, such as the amount of sediment conveyed, or flow’s crooked course. While conducting present-day river-engineering activities, it would be wise to be mindful of a river’s name and epithets.

Moreover, the names and epithets applied to many rivers can be interpreted to reflect a sort of metaphysical, protohydraulics system for understanding rivers and their behavior. It is a system of understanding that people could readily grasp, as can be shown by a brief meander through myth and whimsy. And it is a system

that still appeals. For example, in fairly recent times, some rivers have been named commemoratively for a person deemed eminent or almost deistic [e.g., Black Warrior (Tuscaloosa) and Washington Rivers]. Yet other rivers have names expressing a tenet of religion, morality, or government (e.g., Sacramento, Temperance, and Republican Rivers). A name expresses a value and an understanding; something without a name is little valued and likely to not be well understood.

In present-day river engineering, it also might be wise to keep in mind the possibility that some form of deity may still inhabit a river. Roman engineers, in this regard, usually found it prudent to include an appeasing small shrine or inscription on a bridge so that the bridge would not be washed out during flood flow. The main Roman god associated with bridges over rivers was Janus, the two-faced god associated with beginnings and arrivals (the word "initiate" stems from his name). Not so long ago, the poet T. S. Elliot, in his 1910 poem "Dry Salvages," characterized a river as "a strong brown god." Elliot was born in St. Louis, grew up next to the Mississippi River, and understood the importance and potency of a river.

### Acknowledgment

The writer thanks the reviewers of this article. Their suggestions were helpful.

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