

Motifs for naming waters
A cultural-historical and linguistic excursion into the world of inland waters, oceans and seas
(The Central European dimension)

Introduction

Hydronyms are part of a cultural landscape respectively of the globe, and they always have been and still have an important function of reference in space. The time layers from prehistoric times up to the present show clearly the manifold denomination motifs. Not only ethnicities and their different languages but also the evolutionary aspects of mankind play an important role and can be followed up to a certain extent also in the hydronymic denominations. In this sense various questions arise, e.g. if the hydronyms mirror special cultural achievements, or more concrete, if they pass on a socio-cultural information of populations in space and time, or – on the other hand - if their names shall be regarded without taking into consideration any connection with human activity. But in the course of the human history denomination acts always happened and still happen. Therefore it is a challenge, to research the various motifs of hydronymic denominations in the context of colonization and the history of discovery. The questions how, why and for what purpose hydronyms were denominated, are these pure economic reasons or are there also other factors behind it, all these questions are necessary to scrutinize. On the occasion of our seminar venue I concentrate my paper on the central European space and will try to understand the various types of hydronymic denominations in the light of their linguistic background and meaning. From the linguistic point of view hydronyms, that is to say the big or main rivers count to the most eldest denominations, the main European rivers and their etymologies can be traced back to Indo-European roots, into times, when mankind colonized the world and began to give up the nomadic life.

We clearly see, that the hydronymic denominations must be researched in the dimensions of time (different time layers have different naming motifs) and space (languages and name systems play an important role), but also in the dimension of the object categories (rivers show another name pattern than oceans).

The following chapters are dedicated to the description of the various categories of waters and the specifics of their denominations.¹

¹ Examples are mainly taken from the central European respectively German speaking countries.

1 Categories of hydronyms

1.1 Rivers – The Indo-European time layer

Central Europe has a dense net of vast rivers which have an important function as traffic routes throughout all times for the transport of goods, people and for military purposes.

The main characteristic of these large rivers is, that most of them bear indo-European names, are linguistically derivatives, and secondly they mostly maintained their names through all the centuries, in contrary to rivers of the second or lower orders which often changed their names or had sectionally names variants; they were denominated in younger times and are mostly compounds with a specific element and a determinative element.

For example: Rhine, Main, Danube (Rhein, Main, Donau).

Rhine/Rhein: a vast river basin with its source in the Grisons in the Swiss Alps, flowing through many countries under all through wide parts of Germany, France and the Netherlands, with the catchment into the North Sea. From the ancient authors we know the Latin form *Rhēnus*, ohg. *Rîn* (both < ie. stem **hrei-* ‘flow’ + suffix *-no* > celtic **Rēnos* [Latin *Rhēnus*] > germ. **Rīnaz*; cf. the city Reins in France and others more). The motive of its denomination lies in the mere fact that it is water in motion (and not a stagnant or slow water).

Danube: In historical times this river had two names for two sections of the river: The ancient Greek denominated the lower course as *Istros* (derived from the Indo-European stem **eis-* /**is-* ‘fast flowing’), originating from the river section at the Iron Gate, a gorge on the Danube River between Serbia and Romania. In the times of the Roman Empire the upper course was called *Danubius*. This name goes back to the Indo-European stem **danū-* ‘river’. This etymon, which contains an object related motive, prevailed and is now used by all Danube countries. For the Greek the special characteristic of the water at a special section was the important observation.

Main: antique *Moenus* (Plinius), *Moino-s*, 1st ct. (C 9th/10th ct. in *Moeno Germaniae amne*), (ie. stem **mein-*/**moin-*/**min-* ‘wet’; river-names containing this etymon are to be found in Europe from Ireland to Poland).²

The three rivers together form one of the most important water ways in Europe combining the North Sea with the Black Sea, the so-called **Rhine-Main-Danube Canal** (or now also called ‚Europe Canal’). Its roots go already back to the 8th ct., when Charlemagne in 792 started the

² See: Dorothea Fastnacht, Die Gewässernamen in den ehemaligen Landkreisen Ebermannstadt und Staffelstein. In: Albrecht Greule, Wolfgang Janka, Michael Prinz (Ed.): Gewässernamen in Bayern und Österreich. 3. Kolloquium des Arbeitskreises für bayerisch-österreichische Namenforschung (Regensburg, 27./28. Februar 2004). Regensburger Studien zur Namenforschung, ed. by Wolfgang Janka und Michael Prinz, Vol. 1. Regensburg 2005, p. 52 ff.

first attempt to bridge the Central European Watershed between the villages Altmühl and Rednitz in Bavaria/Germany, the well known *Fossa Carolina*, as military transport route for the expanding Carolingian Empire to the southeast. But the project failed because of the geologic subsoil, until only in the 20th ct. the navigable waterway was constructed and fills out its function as economic means of transportation.



Source: <http://www.fen-net.de/er/stadtteile/kanal/bilder/99g.jpg> (09042012)

Rhine-Main-Danube Canal



[Wikimedia Commons](#), read 20022012

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All three river names have a mere general motive, referring to the condition, such as ‘wet’ or being in motion (‘flowing’, ‘river’). Most indo-European river names (or old European hydronyms) contain rather unspectacular motifs describing various conditions or qualities of water.

The question is do they already mirror a special cultural activity?

See some other selected examples³:

Eisack (South Tyrol): ie. **eis-* ‘fast flowing’ (antique **Īsaros*); *Ijssel* (Netherlands)

Seine (France): **Sequ-ana* < Latin *sequi* ‘to flow’

Thames (England): Middle English *Temese*, derived from the Celtic name for the river,

Tamesas (from **tamēssa*), recorded in Latin as *Tamesis*, the name probably means ‘dark’.

Schelde (Belgium): the etymology is not sure, it is either celtic or German (probably germ.

**skald-* ‘shallow’ [Caesar: Latin *Scaldis*]).

Maas (Belgium, Netherlands): Caesar *Mosa*, celtic origin? (*Maastricht* = trajectum ad Mosam)

Mosel = ‘little Maas (kleine Maas)’ (with Latin diminutive suffix *-ella*)

Lech (Tyrol, Germany): ie. **leik-/lik-* ‘curve, bend’

³ Examples are taken from: *Altdeutsches Namenbuch. Die Überlieferung der Ortsnamen in Österreich und Südtirol von den Anfängen bis 1200*. Ed. by Austrian Academy of Sciences. Vienna 1989 ff.; Hans Krahe, *Unsere ältesten Flussnamen*. Wiesbaden 1964; Wikipedia ‘River Thames’ (09042012).

Tulln (tributary right to Danube): ie. **tu-l-* ‘swell’ (+ suffix *-ina*)

Traisen (tributary right to Danube): ie. **trāgh-* ‘vivid water’

Melk (tributary right to Danube): ie. **mad-* ‘wet’ + suffix *-ika*

A first – maybe not satisfying - answer to the above raised question is, that in indo-European hydronyms the specific quality of the water finds its expression, is it a navigable river, or a dangerous river (‘vivid water’, ‘fast flowing water’ etc.). But its very early recording can also be interpreted as a sign of importance, broad knowledge in those days and of the extension of the river. It is noteworthy that these names show no reference to a certain ethnic group or territory.

1.2 Rivers of minor extension – The German and Germanic time layers

Names of hydronyms in these time layers refer mostly to the second or lower orders of the river catchment areas; the names are mainly compounds with a generic element; the most frequent generic elements in German and in the Germanic dialects are: *-bach* (brook, stream), and *-ach(e)* (< ohg. *-aha* ‘river’) being the elder one. The specific elements show already a special activity of communal life.

Some selected examples:

Innbach (tributary right to Danube): secondary word formation with the specific element *-bach* (originally: ie. **en-/*on-* ‘water’)

More examples with the specific element *-bach* can only be found in smaller water systems:

Marbach (south of Vienna): ohg. *marcha* ‘border’

Mühlbach (many hydronyms with this name all over the German speaking countries): ohg. *mulî* ‘mill’

Salzach (province Salzburg): had three names in the course of history: (1) 746-747 *fluvius Ivarus* (ie. **ieu□-/*iu□-* ‘to blend’ [sand blended water]); (2) 788 (C 12th ct.) *fluvius Igonta* (= *Isonta*, ie. **eis-* ‘vivid water’); (3) ohg. *-aha* ‘river’ and ohg. *salz* ‘salt’ (referring to the salt mines on the near Dürnberg).

Fischa (province Lower Austria, tributary right to Danube): 805 (C9th ct.) *Abraham caganus baptizatus super Fiskaha*; ohg. *fisc* ‘fish (water)’.

Leitha (tributary to Mosoni-Duna in Hungary): 833 (C 12th ct.) *in provintia Auarorum in loco qui dicitur Litaha*; ie. **lei-/*loi-* ‘slimy’ (refers to the loamy soil), over a Gothic form **Lidahwa* > ohg. *Litaha* > nhg. *Leitha*

Names of these categories transmit already a specific function in the economic life (*Mühlbach*, *Salzach*) or a territorial function (*Marbach*), or pointing to the geologic conditions (*Leitha*).

From these names we receive informations about a community with a special economic and cultural system.

2 Lakes

Some examples from Austria:

Aber- or **Sankt Wolfgang-See** (lake in the so-called Salzkammergut in Upper Austria and Salzburg):788 (C 12.JhM) *Abriani lacum ... piscatio atque venatio*; composed of the specific element ‘lake’ (ohg. *sêo* ‚lake‘) and the personal name (it is not sure if this name is of German or other origin) *Aparin*.

Mondsee (lake in Upper Austria): 736/37–48 (C 9.JhII) *Illor villas cum campis, pratis, silvis ad Lunelaco*; 771 (C 9.JhII) *ad monasterium beati Mihhaelis, qui situs est ad Maninsee*; ohg. *sêo* ‘lake’ and ohg. *mano* ‘moon’; a metaphoric denomination after its specific crescent-shaped form.



Source: TVB Mondsee - Irrsee (Flickr: Mondsee Panorama 1) [CC-BY-2.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0>)], via Wikimedia Commons (09042012)

Atter- or **Kammersee** (lake in Upper Austria): 798-814 (C 12.JhE) *super lacum Atersê*. Ohg. *sêo* = lat. *stagnum* ‚lake‘, and ie. stem **adro-* ‚watercourse‘, this etymon refers to the river *Ager*, which flows out of the sea.

Neusiedler See (lake in the Province Burgenland and in Hungary; magy. *Fertő-tó*): 1074 *usque ad eum locum, qui terminus est inter Litaha et Vertowe*. Magy. *to* ‚lake, inland lake‘ and magy. *fertő* ‚marsh, swamp‘. The original motif once again gives us information about the natural surroundings. Only in modern ages the name formation changed and the motif ‚near by the village Neusiedl‘ replaced the old name. Maybe that it was caused by the language change to German. A similar denomination is valid for the **Lake Balaton** (germ. Plattensee), Hungary’s largest lake, derived from the old Slavonic *balta* (>*blat-na*) = marsh.



File:Lake Neusiedl and Hansag 1783.jpg Aus Wikimedia Commons (Map by Johannes Hegedüs showing Lake Neusiedl, contiguous with the extensive Hanság swamp extending eastward from the southern end of the lake (09042012).

Bodensee (the most western lake in Austria, belongs to the three countries Austria, Germany and Switzerland): 833-834 (C 10.-13th ct.) *Brigantino lacu*; 833-834 (C 10.-13th ct.) *lacui qui Rheno interfluente ... qui alio nomine iuxta Grecam ethimologiam Potamicus appellatur*; 10.JhA (to 839) *in Alamanniam iuxta lacum Briganticum*: the name of the lake varies in

different time layers: (1) derived from the town of Bregenz (here in latinized form), (2) historical Carolingian palatinate *Potamico* (the present village *Bodman* lies on the west shore of the see in Germany) – *Potamicus* is based on greek *potamos* ‘river’, that is the river *Rhine*, which flows through this lake.

The name motif actually fits into the old European hydronymic system, today displaced by a popular etymology, germ. *boden* = ‘bottom’.

Chiemsee (lake in southeast Bavaria/Germany): name after the historical landscape called *Chiemgau* around the village *Chieming*, coined at the end of the 8th ct., based on a celtic personal name *Chemus*. That is to say that the lake received its name from the village.

The same is true for the German name of the **Genfer See** (engl. **Lake Geneva**) (in historical sources *lacus Lemannus* [Cesar, De bello Gallico]; but nowadays three names exist: Lac Léman, Lac de Genève and Lac de Lausanne).⁴

3 Oceans and Seas

The **Atlantic Ocean** (short form: **Atlantic**), is the second largest ocean. Its name comes from the Greek *Atlantis thalassa* (= sea of the titan *Atlas*). In the Greek mythology *Atlas* (one of the Greek gods) carries the heaven vault on its shoulders at the most western point, as seen from the Greek empire. *Atlas* was attributed with great strength, therefore his name has been elected for this ocean.⁵

Parts of the *Atlantic Ocean* are the *North Atlantic* and the *South Atlantic*, both are younger denominations.

Marginal seas of the Atlantic are:

3.1 Norwegian Sea (Europäisches Nordmeer): between Norway, Spitzbergen and Iceland.

The name exists since the 17th century as an important shipping strait of the North East Passage. It is a rather young denomination with an economic background; the name motif is a matter of orientation.

⁴ I thank E. Calvarin for this expertise.

⁵ Another name from the Greek mythology was dedicated to the term *Tethys Ocean*, a rather young scholarly denomination from the end of the 19th ct. *Tethys* was the sister of the titan *Okeanos*.



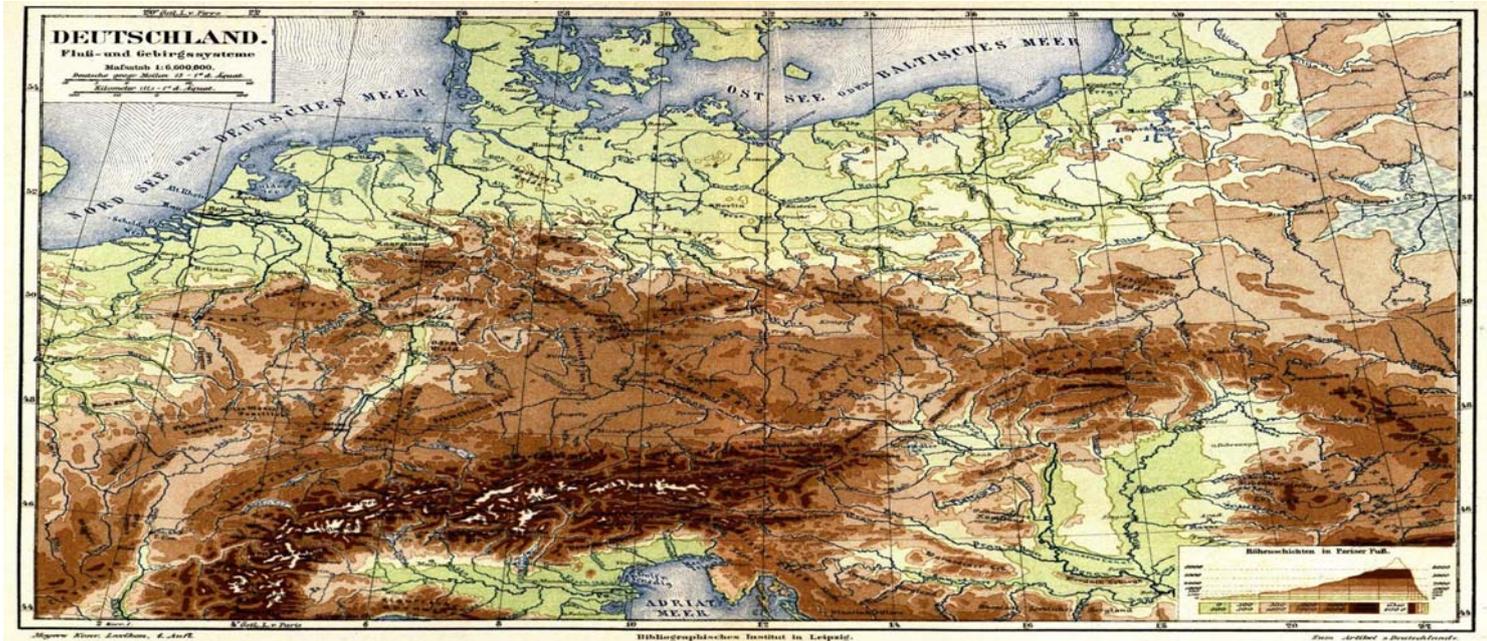
Wikimedia Commons, File:Norwegian Sea map.png

A map showing the location of the Norwegian Sea in the North Atlantic Ocean. Created by NormanEinstein, August 25, 2005 (09042012).

[Northeast of it is the ***Barents Sea*** (as part of the Arctic Ocean): its name comes from the famous explorer Willem Barents, a Dutch navigator in the late 16th ct. (During the Middle Ages: ***Murman Sea*** [city of Murmansk]).

3.2 Northsea (former also: ***German Sea***): a marginal sea of the Atlantic Ocean in the northwest of Europe. The former name *German Sea* is already recorded by Claudius Ptolemäus in the 2nd ct. AD as *Germanikòs Ōkeanòs*, passed on to the Romans as *Oceanus Germanicus* or *Mare Germanicum* (then to English *German Sea* [should be: *Germanic Sea*] and from here to *Deutsches Meer* [with a clear political intention], in French *mer*

d'Allemagne). The mhg. term *nortmer* was replaced by the term *Nordsee*, it came via the Dutch term *Noordzee* to engl. *North Sea*, in the 17th ct., which was commonly used by the Hanseatic League (besides the names *Westsea* and *Frisian Sea*).⁶



Meyers Konversations-Lexikon, 1888; Leipzig und Wien, Vierte Auflage, 1885-1892; 4. Band, Seite 801a im Internet seit 2005 (14.2.2012)

The *Skagerrak* and the *Kattegat* are two straits between Norway and Sweden and Denmark. Both denominations are probably of Dutch origin (and as such give evidence of the Dutch as important maritime nation): *Skagerrak* = *Skagen Channel* (from the Danish town *Skagen*). Both names are on maps only around the 18th ct.

⁶ See also: Wikipedia ‚North Sea‘ (09042012).



aus Wikipedia, der freien Enzyklopädie; [Wikimedia Commons](#): Map of the Skagerrak

Urheber: [Maximilian Dörrbecker \(Chumwa\)](#) (09042012)

An inland sea of the Atlantic Ocean is the

3.3 Baltic Sea (German: *Ostsee*): in historical times lat. *Mare Balticum* (Adam v. Bremen) or *Mare Suebicum* (Tacitus). The name points at the geographical direction from the view of Germany. Its very early historical recording (Tacitus) shows the importance of this trade route (amber road).⁷

Baltic Sea map.png (09042012)

⁷ The etymology of this name is not clear, three possible explanations are (I thank Peter Päll for this expertise): (1) *baltas* in the Baltic languages means ‘white’, (2) *balta* in Baltic-Slavic means ‘swamp’; (3) lat. *balteus* means ‘belt’ (cf. Great and Little Belt in Denmark). The name *Mare Balticum* is first recorded by Adam von Bremen in 1075, he possibly invented this name, based on the sea’s shape (Karl Inno, 1976; Inno regards the third option as the most plausible one). The notion of the Baltic states and Baltic languages is only from the 19th ct.



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Map of the Baltic Sea.

Created by NormanEinstein, May 25, 2006.

Bothnian Bay (Gulf of Bothnia) (Swedish: *Bottniska viken*): the part of the Baltic Sea between Sweden and Finland; the name was originally given to the bay (swed. *botten* = ground), and this name was later on transferred to the bordering Swedish landscapes (see *Norrbotten, Västerbotten, Österbotten*).

3.4 Mediterranean Sea (lat. *Mare Mediterraneum*), sea between Europe, Africa and Asia. In the Roman Empire called *Mare Nostrum*. I spoke about it at the seminar in Tunisia.

One part of the Mediterranean Sea is:

Adriatic Sea (between Italy and Croatia/Bosnia/Herzegovina, Montenegro and Albania). The short form is, denominated after the Etruscan town *Adria* (province Rovigo) situated at the catchment of the river *Po*.

File:Adriatic Sea map.png

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A map showing the location of the Adriatic Sea.

Created by NormanEinstein, May 20, 2005.

In Pauly's Realenzyklopädie we can read that in Roman times this sea was called *mare superum*. Originally it denominated only the region directly at the catchment of the river *Po*.

Only later in history the name was extended to the south and comprised the whole sea section between the Strait of Otranto and the Po valley. The motive for this name lies in the ancient importance of the city Adria, and was, one could say, linked with a political claim. At present the originating motive is not more known, people associate this name only with the topographic position and the fine climate there.

As a result one can state, that from the onomastic (and linguistic) point of view the motifs for the names of waters in very early times (see the indo-European time layers) were rather of general nature, not reflecting a political situation or background. Moreover the vast oceans bear metaphorical names which have no specific claim to a specific ethnicity or country. Only in later times of mankind history motifs such as property, economic purposes, political intentions were expressed in or with the denominations. One can also notice that to a certain degree there is uniformity in the motifs between the names of the very old rivers and of oceans insofar that both categories mostly contain general or widely known cultural expressions and/or philosophies, and they transmit us a rather holistic world view. But one can also state that the name-finding acts are by far not closed, economic interests open day by day new options for denominations. It is an evolutionary process going hand in hand with the global political and economic developments.