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Cheese and Butter in Old English Town Names¹

Abstract: The etymology of words for foods and beverages like cheese and butter, coupled with information about how these words have spread over time, can give us information about how the products themselves have been produced in different areas and by different peoples. Words for common food products like bread/loaf, meat/flesh and beer/ale are common in most Germanic languages, and several of these words have also been loaned into Finnic and Slavic languages.

However, the situation for words for dairy products such as cheese and butter is different, with greater variation not only within the Germanic languages but within all of Northern and Central Europe. The words in English, German and Dutch are derived from the Latin words *caseus* and *butyrum*, while the corresponding words in Scandinavian, i.e. *ost* and *smør*, respectively, have developed from old Indo-European roots.

In England we find a number of old Anglo-Saxon towns with names containing the words cheese and butter; in particular, those ending in *-wick* point to a location of production and/or trade of dairy products, e.g. *Cheswick*, *Chiswick*, *Keswick* and *Butterwick*. These towns, of which there are 10-11 ‘cheese’-towns and 5 ‘butter’-towns, are all located in the eastern and northern part of England. Interestingly, it is in the western half we find the oldest and most traditional types of cheeses, like *Gloucester*, *Cheddar* and *Cheshire*.

This could suggest that when the Anglo-Saxons settled in Eastern and Northern England in 6-800 AD, they encountered only little dairy activity. So new settlements, which particularly focused on production of cheese and butter according to their own traditions, could be named accordingly. However, in the western parts the local population still produced traditional cheeses, probably based on old Roman ways of making cheese, so here there was no impetus to name new towns after this activity.

Keywords: dairy products, cheese and butter, Anglo-Saxons, Britain, place names

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***Cheese* ‘сирене’ и *butter* ‘масло’ в стари английски имена на градове**

Резюме: Етимологията на думите за храни и напитки като *сирене* и *масло*, съчетана с преглед на разпространението на тези думи през времето, може да ни даде информация за производството на самите продукти в различни региони и от различни народи. Лексеми като *bread/loaf* ‘хляб’, *meat/flesh* ‘месо’ и *beer/ale* ‘бира’ са често срещани в повечето германски езици, а някои от тях са били заети във фински и в славянски езици.

Случаят с наименованията за млечни продукти като *cheese* ‘сирене’ и *butter* ‘масло’ обаче е различен. При тях се наблюдават по-големи вариации не само в рамките

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на германските езици, но и в цяла Северна и Централна Европа. В английски, немски и холандски език те произлизат от лат. *caseus* и *butyrum*, докато съответните наименования в скандинавските езици, т. е. *ost* и *smør*, са се развили от стари индоевропейски корени.

В Англия се откриват редица стари англосаксонски градове с имена, съдържащи *cheese* и *butter*. Конкретно тези, завършващи на *-wick*, сочат за място с производство и/или търговия с млечни продукти, напр. *Cheswick*, *Chiswick*, *Keswick* and *Butterwick*. Всички те (10-11 „града за сирене“ и 5 „града за масло“) се намират в източната и северната част на Англия. Любопитното обаче е, че най-старите и традиционни видове сирена произхождат от западната половина, като Gloucester, Cheddar и Cheshire. Ето защо се предполага, че когато през 600-800 г. от н. е. англосаксонците се заселват в Източна и Северна Англия, те намират там неразвито производство на млечни продукти. Така новите селища, където в съответствие с поминъка на заселниците започва да се развива производството на сирене и масло, получават и съответните наименования. В същото време в западните части местното население продължава все така да произвежда традиционни сирена, вероятно по стари римски технологии, затова тук няма основание нововъзникналите градове да носят имена, отразяващи тази дейност.

Ключови думи: сирене, масло, ойконими, заселване на англосаксонците

Cheese and Butter in Old English Town Names

1. Germanic words for *foods, cheese and butter*

Information about the development and spread of the main Germanic words for food and beverages can help us understand how and where the foods themselves were produced.

Words for common foods like *bread/loaf*, *meat/flesh*, *beer/ale* and *milk* are generally shared in

Germanic languages eg Old High German: *brōt/(h)leib*, *maz/(fleisch)*, *bior/alo* and *miluh*, and in Danish *brød/lev*, *mad/flæsk*, *øl* and *mælk*. These words may also be found as loanwords in neighbouring languages, eg in Russian *hleb* ~ a loaf (of bread), *myaso* ~ meat and *moloko* ~ milk.

However when it comes to dairy products like cheese and butter we find more diversity. In English and German we have *cheese* and *Käse* plus *butter/Butter*, in Danish we have *ost* and *smør*, and in Russian *sir* and *maslo*. The west germanic words are loan words from latin (*caseus* and *butyricum*, while the words in the other languages are inherited indoeuropean words.

The early germanic tribes, the Germanii, were farmers and cattle and sheep were important. There can hardly be any doubt that milk and milk products were an essential part of their diet and obviously they would have a full vocabulary for products and processes related to milk and dairy products. None the less – during the first centuries following the Roman expansion and the establishment of the frontier along the Rhine, the tribes along the border borrowed and adopted a number of latin words, not only for new products but also for well known products like cheese and butter. We will not go into details with the reasons for this, but by the 4th and 5th century words derived from *butyricum* and *caseus* had replaced the indigenous Germanic words, so when the Anglo-Saxons and other Germanic tribes began migrating to England around AD 500 and onwards these words were clearly part of their vocabulary.

At around 700 we find the first anglo-saxon mentioning of butter and cheese (in the Laws of Ine, king of Wessex from 688 to 726), and from the following centuries a number of other texts mention such products, see Fig. 1.

Language/Area	Cheese	Butter	Time/Context
Old English Wessex	cesa(s)	buteran	Laws of Ine (688-726)
Old English Hampshire	cysa		Fee to be paid at the death of Bishop Denewulf in Winchester (908)
Old English Hertfordshire	cysa		Fee paid to the monastery St. Alban, Hertfordshire. Late 10th century
Old English Hertfordshire	cys-wyrthan*	butan/ buteran	Payment to a cheese maker (<i>cys-wyrthan</i>) at an estate. 10-11th century*
Old Saxon	k(i)ēsi	butere	
Old High German	chāsi		
Old Frisian	zise	bouter	

*cheese producer

**Rectitudines Singularum Personarum*

Fig. 1. Words for cheese and butter in Old English and continental Germanic languages

The word for cheese is spelled in different ways, *cysa* and *cesa* as shown here, and also *ciese*. The word for butter is more consistent. Cheese and butter were important products for the Anglo-Saxon settlers, and aside from the above mentioned references from the literature we can also gain some knowledge about the role of milk products by looking at place names in the Anglo-Saxon area.

2. Early Anglo-Saxon place-names with *butter*

When a locality is given a name derived from *butter* we are faced with some uncertainty as to the reason for this. If it is the name of a natural location, a field, a stream, a wet area it may refer to either the color – maybe a meadow with many yellow flowers, an area with good grazing so the cows give rich milk. If it is the name of a muddy stream, it may refer to a yellowish, muddy color, and a small, rounded hill may resemble a clump of butter. It may also refer to a village where much butter is produced or just a wealthy village. Examples are *Butterwick*~butter town, *Buttermere*~butter lake and *Butterknowles*~butter hill. Sometimes, however, we may be misled as also the viking name *Boter* or *Buter* has been used in naming localities.

Aside from *butter* also the word *smear* (*to smear*) may have been used, sometimes in areas with Scandinavian settlers as the word for butter in Scandinavian languages is *smör*. In Ireland we have the town *Smerwick*, which was founded by the vikings.

We will here mainly look at town names based on *-wick*. The ending *-wick* is generally used for a farm, small village or a manor producing something, maybe cheese, maybe barley, maybe fish and we will look at this a bit later. There are 6 towns in England called *Butterwick*, see Fig. 2.



Fig. 2. English town names based on *butter*

Except for the one in Dorset to the south all are located in the northeastern part of England.

3. Early Anglo-saxon place-names with *cheese*

There are about 10 English town names in which the word *cheese-* is used and half of these are mentioned in written sources either before 1086 or in the Domesday Book prepared by Wilhelm I (Wilhelm the conqueror) in 1086.

Details are shown in the Fig. 3:

Town name	Earliest form / year	Meaning	Locality
Cheswardine	Cisworde / 1086 DB	Cheese producer	Shropshire
Cheswick	Chesewic(?)/ 1208	Cheese farm	Northumberland
Cheswick Green	Chesewych / 1200-tallet	Cheese farm	Warwickshire
Chiswick	Ceswican / ~1000	Cheese farm	London/Middlesex
Chiswick End	Chesewic / ~1260	Cheese farm	Cambridgeshire
Dunkeswick	Chesuic / 1086 DB	Lower Cheese farm	Yorkshire W.R.
East Keswick	Est(e) Chesinc / 1086 DB	East Cheese farm	Yorkshire W.R.
Keasden	Kesedene / 1165-1240	Cheese valley(?)	Yorkshire N.
Keswick	Kesewik / 1240~1276	Cheese farm	Cumbria
Keswick (by Bacton)	Kesewic / 1086 DB	Cheese farm	Norfolk
Keswick	Casewic / ~1150-1275	Cheese farm	Norfolk

Fig 3. Old English town names based on *cheese*

Most of these names have the form of *Cheswick* or *Chiswick*, where the first part of course is 'cheese' and the second part – 'wick' – is used widely for a small settlement, trading post, production unit, or farm typically in association with a bigger estate or manor. There are more than 300 town and village names in England with *-wick* as second part, all of which are of anglo-saxon origin.

A couple of the names stand apart: *Dunkeswick*, where the first part *dun-* is derived from *down-*, meaning *lower*, or *down from*, thus setting it apart from nearby East Keswick and Cheswardine. The name *Cheswardine* consists of 'cheese' and *-wardine*, a word derived from Old English *wyrthan*, to produce, as discussed above. Finally we have the name *Keasden*, which is supposed to be *cese + denu*, i.e. cheese valley.

We can see these villages and their location on Fig. 4:



Fig 4. Old English *cheese*-towns

We see first of all that they seem to be concentrated in the northern and eastern part of England, and we also note that the towns furthest to the north and east are spelled with an initial K- which shows that the Vikings arriving there in 9th -10th – century changed the pronunciation from initial 'Ch-' to 'K-'. But overall the location follows neither the old settlement area of the Danish settlers – the Danelagen – nor the boundaries between the early Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.

When we combine the *cheese*-towns and the *butter*-towns this skewed location becomes even more apparent (Fig. 5.)



Fig.5. Cheese- and butter-towns



Fig.6.

As mentioned above the second term – *wic* or *wick* – is quite common in old English place names, about 300 hundred are registered. Of these there are about 40 names where the first part is related to food or farm animals. They are shown on Fig. 6.

We can see that they are concentrated in central and south-western England, thus showing very little overlap with the above-mentioned *cheese-* and *butter-wicks*. This would suggest that we need to look for another explanation for the somewhat uneven distribution of the *dairy-wicks*.

So we turn the question around and then look at the cheese production in England. England is major cheese producing country today, and cheese production was also important during the Celtic period and the subsequent Roman period. According to various Roman sources we know that much cheese was produced around the major cities where Roman legions were stationed.

In Fig. 7 the major, traditional types of cheeses are described:

Name	Locality	Type of cheese	Weight
Cheddar	Somerset	Hard cheese,	18-27 kg
Derby	Derbyshire	Hard cheese, a bit like Cheddar	13-14 kg
Gloucester	Gloucester, Berkeley	Hard cheese	28 kg
Cheshire	Cheshire	Hard cheese, maybe mold	22 kg
Leicester	Leicestershire	Semihard cheese	13-18 kg
Blue Vinny*	Dorset	Semihard cheese with blue mold	6-7 kg
Stilton**	Leicestershire	Semihard cheese with blue mold	6-8 kg
Wensleydale***	North Yorkshire	Semihard cheese with blue mold	4-6 kg
Caerphilly****	Southern Wales	Soft cheese	3-4 kg
Lancashire	Lancashire	Soft cheese	5, 22 kg

Fig.7. Traditional English cheeses

* *Vinny* possibly from Old Eng: *fyne*~moist, molded jf *fynig*~moldy.

** *Stilton* from Leicestershire probably since 18th century.

*** First produced by the Cistercian monks, the founders of the Jervaux Monastery in Yorkshire i, 1156; most likely based on a french recipe from Massif Central – an area already known by the Romans for its cheeses (see Plinius)

**** Produced since early 19th century around Caerphilly in southern Wales.

The location of the traditional cheeses is shown in Fig 8. (from Eekhof-Stork,N. (1977) 'The World Atlas of Cheese', pp 53-63).



Fig.8. Traditional cheeses in England

Some of these are known to have been invented only a few hundred years ago, like Stilton (1720, see Daniel Defoe) and Caerphilly, but even so some of these would most likely be based on old cheese traditions. Some, like Gloucester, we are quite certain has been produced since roman times (*-cester* is from the name Chester, where the 20th legion was garrisoned); this is also the cheese used in the famous annual cheese rolling competition.

In any case the main traditional cheese-producing areas are to the west and I would find it likely that this was also the case one to two millenia ago. If we join those two maps we see that towns with '*Cheese-*' and cheese producing areas only show little overlap. Fig. 9.

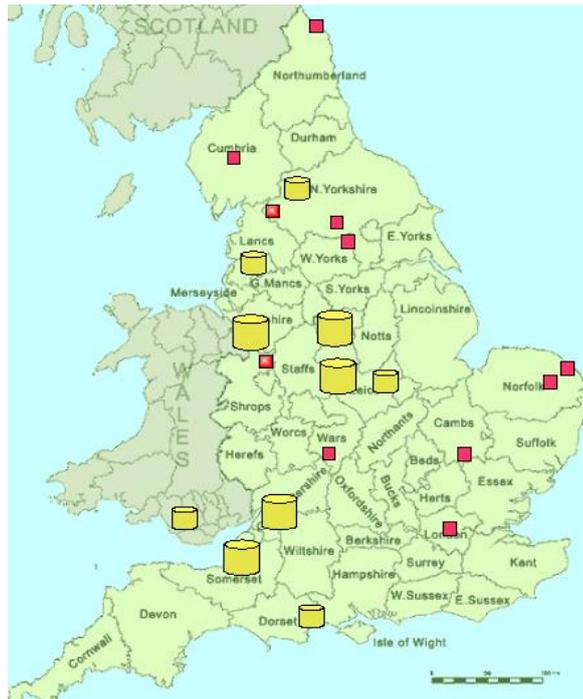


Fig.9. Cheese producing areas and cheese-towns

So is this just a coincidence or may we deduce something. Well, it might suggest that when the anglo-saxon settlers arrived to the Eastern shores they brought their own – simple – cheese technology with them and without local competition it made sense to name specific production farms accordingly. But as they moved on towards the West to the celtic areas they encountered an older and stronger cheese tradition, so there was no reason to set up specific 'cheese' villages. This celtic cheese tradition would then probably be quite old, but influenced by the Roman presence in the same way as it happened on the Continent along the Rhine.