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Thoreau's burning of shells to obtain lime; relevant to German name Steinbrenner (burner of stones) and Malayalam name Kakkattukuzhy (burner of shells)

Gerald Cohen

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COMMENTS ON ETYMOLOGY

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THOREAU'S BURNING OF SHELLS TO OBTAIN LIME;
RELEVANT TO GERMAN NAME *STEINBRENNER* (BURNER
OF STONES) AND MALYALAM NAME *KAKKATTUKUZHY*
(BURNING OF SHELLS)

Gerald Cohen

PRELIMINARY REMARKS

In Cohen 1990 and 1991 I presented information of a student at my campus (George Carini) pertaining to the burning of limestone to obtain lime, which provides the rationale behind the German name *Steinbrenner*.

In Cohen 2009 I presented information of a faculty member at my campus (Kakkattukuzhy M. Isaac) about the origin of his first name. He comes from India, and Kakkattukuzhy is a Malayalam name pertaining to the burning of shells (to obtain lime).

Two years ago a student I spoke briefly with mentioned Thoreau's burning of shells to obtain lime, and here now is the information he kindly provided me. Afterwards for easy access I reprint the items on Steinbrenner and Kakkattukuzhy.

THOREAU ON BURNING SHELLS TO OBTAIN LIME

Thoreau (2004: 236) says: 'I was surprised to see how thirsty the bricks were which drank up all the moisture in my plaster before I had smoothed it, and how many pailfuls of water it takes to christen a new hearth. I had the previous winter made a small quantity of lime by burning the shells of the *Unio fluviatilis* [fn. 45], which our river affords, for the sake of the experiments; so that I knew where my materials came from. I might have gotten good limestone within a mile or two and burned it myself, if I had cared to do so.' [fn. 46].

fn. 45: 'Common freshwater river mussel (family Unionidae) to which Thoreau referred in "Natural History of Massachusetts." That common mussel, the *Unio complanatus*, or more properly *fluviatilis*.' [W: 5:129]

fn. 46: 'Limestone was mined in the Eastbrook area north of Concord.'

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REPRINTS

NOTE ON THE NAME *STEINBRENNER*

[*Comments on Etymology*, vol. 18, no. 4, 1990, p. 35,
and then in Cohen (1991: 151)]

Steinbrenner is transparently a German name meaning 'stone burner.' A check of Brechenmacher 1847 reveals that the burning concerned limestone and that the name dates from 1572.

Limestone, it turns out, is burned to yield lime for commercial use. A ceramics engineering student at my campus [George Carini] informs me that lime has long been used in making cement, brick,

and pottery stoneware. And he kindly drew my attention a passage of general interest in Brown (1917: 3):

‘From the very earliest times lime has been the fundamental ingredient in cementitious building materials. It is only within the last 150 years, however, that the value of argillaceous substances with lime has been fully recognized in the production of a strong, reliable binding agent.

‘Mr. John Smeaton in 1756, when seeking the most suitable material to use in the building of the Eddystone Lighthouse, demonstrated the fact that limestone containing clay, when burned and ground, possessed the property of hardening under water...’

And on a general note: What role might science/engineering play in etymology? I assume the role would be that of providing background information, as here. How extensive might this role be? And is there any chance that science/engineering information might actually clarify an uncertain etymology or two?

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- Brown, William Alden 1917. *The Portland Cement Industry*. NY: Van Nostrand.
- Meade, Richard K. 1926. *Portland Cement*. Easton, Pa.: The Chemical Publishing Company, pp. 6-7: the invention of Portland Cement (involves burning).

MALAYALAM NAME *KAKKATTUKUZHY* AS A ROUGH
PARALLEL TO GERMAN *STEINBRENNER*

[*Comments on Etymology*, Dec. 2008/Jan. 2009,
vol. 38, no. 3-4, pp. 5-6.]

Gerald Cohen

I have a university colleague whose name is Kakkattukuzhy M. Isaac, and recently I asked him the origin of his first name. He replied that it's from Malayalam, and a bit freely, expresses 'the burning of seashells in a pit to produce quick lime.' Specifically:

kakka: seashells

attu: process

kuzhy: pit (alternate meaning: ditch) where the process is carried out.

Besides being interesting in itself (are other Malayalam names this creative?), the name struck me as being a parallel to the German name *Steinbrenner* (literally: stone burner). Limestone is burned to yield lime for commercial use, and Malayalam *Kakkattukuzhy* expresses the same idea as German *Steinbrenner*, but with seashells rather than stone.

I sent Professor Isaac a draft of this item, and he replied: 'Thanks for your effort. ...I hope members of my clan won't take issue with my interpretation of then name.'

If they do, I will ask Professor Isaac for permission to present any alternative interpretations in *Comments on Etymology*.

Incidentally, Professor Isaac's colleagues call him by his first two initials: KM.

[Update, May 2015: A year or two after this item first appeared, I asked Professor Isaac if his relatives had a differing interpretation

of the name, and he replied that they were fine with what he wrote.]

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