

Iter 13 of the Antonine Itinerary

Drawing straight lines on maps is dangerous. You risk sinking into the swamp of fruit-and-nuttery that surrounds Ley Lines or Astro-Archaeology. To be fair, the men who originally set those hares running (Alfred Watkins with [The Old Straight Track](#) and Gerald Hawkins with [Stonehenge Decoded](#)) were intelligent authors raising interesting questions. More recently, Graham Robb, in [The Ancient Paths](#), has claimed that Celtic Druids surveyed long lines across Europe.

All that explains why I am nervous about suggesting that another Roman road may have run uncannily straight over a distance of 80 miles. Also one should not lightly accuse the standard book on Roman place-names by [Rivet and Smith](#) (1979) of being badly wrong. However, here goes.



Map 1, with colours to indicate elevation from [topographic-map.com](#), shows the straight section of *iter* 13 in the Antonine Itinerary. The two end points, at Monmouth Roman fort and Silchester Roman town, are well established, but where should the four intermediate stops be placed on a modern map 1900 years later? None can yet be located precisely, and the large sizes of my black blobs understate the uncertainties (of a mile or more) in exact locations.

And here is the original information from the Itinerary, set out as a table. Column one shows Roman place names (as written, not shifted into a nominative case) and column two shows the reported distance in Roman miles (1.48 km) from the place above. Columns 3 to 5 show my suggested interpretations. Modern distances are as the crow flies, with little attempt to follow exact paths on the ground.

<u>Roman name</u>	<u>Distance</u>		<u>Marker point</u>	<u>OS position</u>
Blestio	—	—	Monmouth	SO511127
Ariconio	xi	11.5	Blakeney	SO671070
Clevo	xv	15.3	Avening	ST879979
Durocornovio	xxiii	24.5	Wanborough	SU207825
Spinis	xv	15.6	Speen Junction	SU407709
Calleva	xv	16.3	Silchester	SU634624

Considering all the uncertainties, the agreement between Roman and modern distances is very good, provided we make one small adjustment to the data: add a Roman numeral x (shown in red on the map and the table) to make *xiii* into *xxiii*. Loss of a single character during manuscript copying is a common error elsewhere in the Itinerary. This is much simpler than the alternative proposed by Rivet and Smith, that an entire line was lost during copying.

Iter 13 is not the same as Margary road 453, which leads to a Severn crossing between Arlingham and Newnham. That route appears to rest only upon an article by the magnificently named Wellbore St Clair [Badddeley](#) (1930), about “late and secondary” Roman roads, but there is no reason to doubt that people could travel into the Forest of Dean that way, especially in medieval times.

The idea that *Ariconio* was the early iron-making site at Weston-under-Penyard was first spelled out in 1805, but it had been gestating for a century before that as antiquaries started to grapple with the geography of Roman Britain. What made investigators accept that location was the similarity of *Clevo* to **Glevum* (Roman *Glebon Colonia*, now Gloucester). Rivet and Smith (1979) knew that their language advisers could not translate either *Ariconio* or *Clevo*, and that there were problems with the Roman mileages, but still they felt bound by established wisdom. So they suggested that one whole stage had been left out of *iter 13* during manuscript copying. Their proposed restoration of the missing line produced a route looping north via Gloucester.

Here I propose an alternative route, which is geographically much more logical, but not yet defined well enough to suggest precisely where to dig for a Roman road bed. Its logic depends on maps and early place names, which can be checked via hyperlinks to my *Romaneranames* website. Onward links should then lead to background information about each place, linguistic analyses of its name, and parallels elsewhere. Salient details follow here, often skipping over logic that is on the web.

Blestio fort was probably the first Roman outpost beyond the Severn, named because it blazed a path towards Wales like a blister or *βλαστος* (*Blastos*) ‘sprout’. Its marker point from which distances were measured was perhaps outside the fort by the river bridge, where one might imagine seeing a “Welcome to *Blestium*” sign. At the other end of *iter 13*, ***Calleva*** is related to Latin *calvus* ‘bald’ and has relatives in later English place names referring to relatively bare high ground. There too, the distance-zero point might have been outside its town walls.

Ariconio’s initial *Ar-* has at least eight possible meanings to consider. On balance, the best is ‘bend’, as in arch and Latin *arcus* ‘bow’, because modern Arlingham is right where the river Severn executes a horseshoe bend. On the other bank lies Awre, whose name arose by metathesis (dancing consonants) of Old English *arwe* ‘arrow’. One might expect rivers called Arrow (4x in Britain plus 2x Yarrow, with 4x *Arve* or similar in France) to be arrow-straight, but in fact their common feature is to be seriously wiggly.

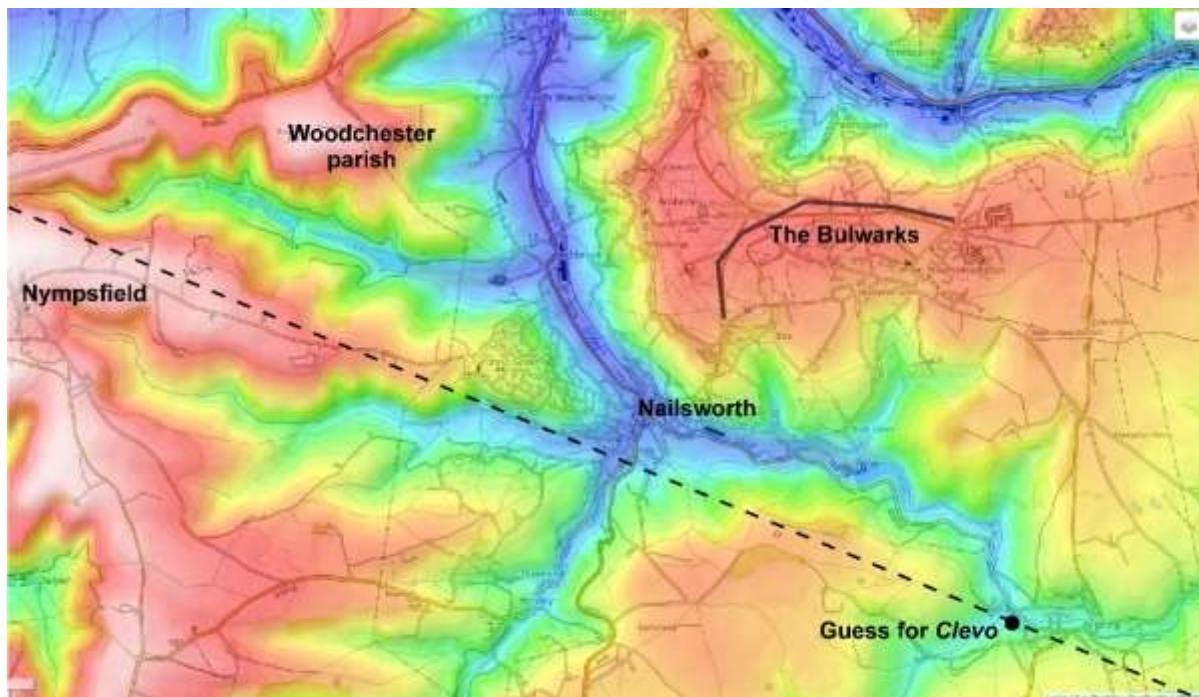
The ending *-conio* appears to indicate a river harbour, being related to Latin *coeo* ‘to come together’ and *cuneus* ‘wedge’, like modern cone. It also shows up in [Viroconium](#), upstream on the Severn, where the name’s first element resembles French *vire* ‘turn’ and English *veer*, referring to the river’s serious meanders near there. A dozen other places where a Roman road met a river have an element K-vowel-N (or similar) in their name: examples include Kenchester, Kennetpans, Kenninghall, Knettishall, Coneygar, and *Cunetio*, plus Coundlane on the Severn.

Forest of Dean iron-makers surely needed a port to shift their heavy product, but the banks of the Severn and the courses of its feeder streams have shifted so much over the centuries that there is no obvious location for *Ariconio*. In general, ancient river ports lay up a creek off the main channel, so a good guess is up Brim’s Pill towards Blakeney, whose church is where I mark *Ariconio* on the map. Once again, the site of *iter 13*’s Roman ferry port might easily be over a mile away.

Clevo is very similar to the Roman name of Gloucester, *Glebon Colonia* etc, so it would help to know what ancient **Glevum* meant, and why its vowel E later changed to O. The distinctive landscape feature of Gloucester is that multiple channels of the river Severn merge into a single channel. Therefore *Clevo* can plausibly be attributed to an ancient root **gleubh-* ‘to tear apart, to cleave’, with clove among its many descendants.

For *Clevo*, my best guess for a point on the map to fit *iter 13*’s mileages is the church at Avening, but once again the Roman site could lie at least a mile away. It is even possible that the name has survived to this day, as a calque translation, at nearby Nailsworth. Its first element comes from Old

English *nægel*, a translation of Latin *clavus* ‘peg, small stake, locking bar’, which may have been used as a geographical term, judging by other places in Roman Britain: [Clavinio](#), [Olcaclavis](#), [Clausentum](#).



That whole area of the southern Cotswolds, where it is crossed by *iter* 13, contains many clues to the activities of ancient people, including megaliths such as Hetty Pegler’s Tump and the Tingle Stone. Map 2 zooms in, with colours from [topographic-map.com](#) to indicate elevation and a dashed line for the hypothetical route. Nympsfield owes its name to a lost *nemeton* (sacred place set aside for the gods), with parallels galore across Europe, including [Vernemetum](#), [Nemetotatio](#), and [Medionemeton](#) in Roman Britain. [Woodchester](#) is famous for its Roman villa with a fine mosaic. And there is a huge post-Roman dyke known as The Bulwarks.

[Jim Storr](#) has shown that in Dark-Age fighting almost all important Roman traveling routes in Britain were blocked with long ditch-and-bank fortifications. The Bulwarks look as if they are defending territory around Stroud (occupied in Roman times by people called [Dobunni](#), but later called *Hwicce*) against aggressors, who would have been west Saxons moving up from the Thames in a push towards Gloucester.

Dark-Age dykes suggest that a Roman travel route was nearby (not necessarily intersecting), but they can also explain why a road’s physical structure was not maintained. The next leg of *iter* 13, east of the Cotswolds, crosses territory that was much fought over. According to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, a battle at *Deorham* in AD 577 gave the west Saxons control over Bath, Cirencester, and Gloucester. Modern historians still argue over the location of *Deorham*.

Durocornovio was the *Duro-* ‘central place, transport hub’ of some people called [Cornovii](#). Tribal names are often misrepresented as markers of ethnic identity, whereas they mostly just described the inhabitants of a particular geographical area. In this case the reference is to a bendy river, something like **coro-navis*, which might be the modern Churn through Cirencester, or, more likely, the whole drainage basin of the upper river Thames. Rivet and Smith guessed that *iter* 13 passed through Nythe Farm, north-west of modern Swindon, but the Roman route towards Silchester appears to run further south, through Old Swindon, and passing beside an ancient stone circle, discovered in 1894.

A river name Dorcan, traceable back to the AD 900s, might preserve a memory of the Roman name *Durocornovium*, in much the same way as Dorchester-on-Thames (just 25 miles away) might

preserve a lost name like [Duronovaria](#). As a spot to mark on the map and fit the mileages of *iter* 13, I have chosen the church at Wanborough, whose burial ground is shaped rather like a Roman camp, on top of a hill that might have been a sighting point for laying out the road. Once again, the true Roman-road rest stop might be a mile away, or more.

Spinis obviously looks like Latin *spina* ‘thorn, or similar-shaped object’, but the modern place called Speen is more than 5 km east of where *iter* 13’s mileage figures indicate. At that location two Roman roads merged into one, as shown by some work a century ago by OGS Crawford and others. There is nothing conveniently marked on the map there, between Wormstall and Sole Common, so I have named it Speen Junction.

In conclusion, some questions. Is it coincidence that this route lines up so straight between the two main Roman iron-working areas of the Kentish Weald and the Forest of Dean? Or that extending it would reach the gold mines of Pumsaint? Can anything be read into its bearing, angled north of west by as much as midsummer noon is above midwinter noon? Was *iter* 13 really the first line of Roman military communication across the river Severn, so that its extension, bent south towards Usk and Caerleon, came after the fort at Monmouth?

I have never knowingly set foot in this region, and this article originated by serendipity. An ongoing research project into the geographical names of Roman Britain reached the elements *Vindo-* and *Venta*, whose core meaning turned out to be ‘valley bottom’, i.e. the floodplain of a meandering river, which creates flat land on which people can best grow crops and raise cattle. One among hundreds of names containing that element is Ptolemy’s [ΟΥΕΥΛΚΟΥΕΣ](#) (*Wenicones*) people, who lived primarily around the river Tay, below Perth. That is what prompted a critical look at *Ariconio*.

Also, this article is accidentally forced to anticipate some of what will go in a later, longer article. Useful lessons can be learned from surveying all places across the Roman Empire where a particular name element was used, and looking for any common feature in their local topographies. Such work leads to a depressing conclusion: historians and linguists have done a lousy job with hundreds of geographical names that have survived from Roman times.

Try doing statistics on a reference book, such as Rivet and Smith (1979). Notice how historical linguists can almost always suggest a meaning for an ancient place name if archaeology has already established its location. It would be contentious to spell out where those meanings are balderdash and irrelevant to my statistical point. What matters is how often the academic “establishment” has used a name’s meaning to show where to look for it – almost never. The extent of that failure has been concealed by the huge amount of nonsense that is regularly repeated as dogma.

Four types of intellectual laziness have bedevilled the study of ancient names:

1. claiming, without solid evidence, to know who created those names;
2. over-estimating how many places were named from persons and gods;
3. not facing up to the inherent fuzziness of the evidence; and
4. not looking closely at maps.

Time will tell if this article has risen above average, by finding a real signal among all the noise. It has described a route, not a road, thereby laying down a challenge for those who are expert at finding physical evidence of Roman highway engineering. At the very least, it points to some attractive places to take country walks and for armchair Lidar warriors to look at. Happy hunting!

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