The Welsh Marches
a discussion document inviting comments

The borderlands between England and Wales are where the Romans finally defeated *Caratacus* in AD 51. Cassius Dio and Tacitus described how *Caratacus* started out as a ruler of east-central England based in *Camulodunum* (Colchester) but ended up as a guerrilla leader supported by the *Silures* and *Ordovices* peoples in Wales. Evidently *Caratacus* could speak the languages of east and west Britain as well as Latin.

The key battle has never been definitely located, but the analysis by Burne (1950, available online) seems pretty convincing. Burn focussed on an area south of Shrewsbury, near the Welsh border, where the Roman base at *Viroconium* was 16 km inside England, like "a pistol pointed at the heart of Wales". *Caratacus* put a fortified outpost on Caer Caradoc at SO476952, near modern Church Stretton, Shropshire, about 26 km in advance of his headquarters in another hillfort also called Caer Caradoc at SO310758, north of Knighton, Powys. The Romans quickly overran the forward hillfort, and then marched towards the home base of *Caratacus* who tried to stop them in a proper battle at a defensive line on the southern side of the river Clun, somewhere near SO366796 and a place now called Twitchen.

After that, the Romans captured *Caratacus*' wife and daughter, but the man himself escaped, only for *Cartimandua* to turn him over to the Romans, who paraded him in triumph at Rome but did not execute him. The Romans' flexible, even tender, treatment of some defeated enemies contrasts strangely with their brutality in other areas (the arena, in battle, and in family strife).

All this matters because the place name *Argistillum* evokes the Roman practice of carting off enemy children to be educated and acculturated in Rome. Our modern word guest is confusably close to old words for 'hostage', such as Old English *gisel*. Where, and under what conditions, did *Caratacus'* relatives live after the Roman victory? Would it be a speculation too far to suggest that his wife was a Welsh princess whom the Romans left in place to help maintain peace in mid-Wales and the borders?

Let's look at the sequence of place names in this area supplied by the Ravenna Cosmography, which seems to be reporting names from a relatively early, and very military perspective.

Magnis is generally identified with Kenchester. That name, also shared with the Hadrian's Wall fort of Carvoran, has no clear explanation – possibly some sort of headquarters.

Branogenium could mean 'river source(s)' and therefore be in the headwaters of the Severn, at or near Caersws. Medieval Welsh poetry makes much of Brân the Blessed, allegedly the father of *Caradawg* who was sent to Rome as a hostage for seven years (AD 51 to 58), where he became a Christian and brought the faith to Britain when he returned. This story is most likely to be imaginative fiction woven around an old place name, but maybe some real recollection of Roman times did persist.

Epocessa and *Ypocessa* plainly fit Thucydides' sense of 'outpost for offensive operations'. This does not instantly suggest locations, but they probably occupied good farmland.

Macatonion looks very Greek, based on μαχαω 'wish to fight' from a PIE root that led to the word Amazon. Maybe this name applies to one of Caratacus' bases, or to the key battle site.

Glebon Colonia was almost certainly modern Gloucester, but that makes the Cosmography's track across the map darting from mid-Wales down south-east to Gloucester.

Argistillum appears to mean 'noble hostage place'. If there is any merit in the idea of Caratacus' wife as the Romans' puppet ruler, where might she be based? Some relatively

grand, but not militarily defensible, hillfort near a Roman base is the obvious guess. A site near Tewkesbury now seems most likely, with later Welsh *Arwystli* (some way west) perhaps where she originated and her parents still lived…

Vertis is unlocated, though Worcester is a strong possibility.

Salinis probably meant the salt springs at Droitwich.

In allocating names to places this analysis of potential locations is imperfect and needs improvement. Maybe a local historian, retired intellectual, or young student can do better. That will require reading about everything that archaeology can contribute about this area.

Near *Viroconium* the Romans built a fort at Leighton, and then to the south-south-west were forts at Stretford Bridge and Brandon Camp. Further in that direction was a fort at Walton. To the south-west, several forts were built at Caersws (sometimes described as Llwynybrain). To the west were Llansantffraid-ym-Mechain and Abertanat. In addition, temporary camps probably used in the mid-Wales campaign stretch from *Viroconium* past Upper Affcot, Bromfield, Walford, Brampton Bryan, and Walton, to the fort at Clyro. And the fort at Leintwardine shows up as *Bravonio* in the Antonine Itinerary.