

The 28 Cities of Britain

In the early AD 500s Gildas wrote that ‘Britain has 28 cities’ (*Britannia ... bis denis bisque quaternis ciuitatibus ... decorata*). Around AD 830 the [Historia Brittonum](#) (HB) picked this up as *viginto octo civitates* and proceeded to supply names for those cities. Some HB manuscripts add 5 more cities to make 33.

Ever since then, historians have tried to identify those names with known sites across Roman Britain, spurred on by a persistent belief in cultural and linguistic continuity between Iron-Age Britain and mediaeval Wales. The result has been a terrible mess, and most name-to-place allocation lists posted on the Internet have little value. However, two recent articles have cleared up much of the mess.

Keith [Fitzpatrick-Matthews \(2015\)](#) delved into the background of HB to establish how these names were most likely spelled before they diverged in the various manuscripts that have survived. His preferred spellings appear in column 2 of the table below.

Then Andrew [Breeze \(2016\)](#) suggested how those name spelling should be emended (column 3 in the table below) and where they belong on the map. Breeze is on his home ground, deploying a deep knowledge of mediaeval Celtic texts, and it makes a happy contrast to our usual criticisms of his analyses of Roman-era names to approve most of his conclusions. The endnotes below merely suggest a few changes and supply some hyperlinks.

Breeze explains that HB’s compilers were churchmen for whom a *civitas* was a ‘city’ if it had a bishop not because it was a Roman town or administrative centre. So those 28 names mostly fit relatively minor places in south-east Wales, typically with a monastery or a warlord’s base. Names mentioned elsewhere in Britain were ecclesiastical sites.

The take-home lesson is that early Wales, just like early England, had no privileged insight into the lives and language of Roman Britain. Churchmen had access to less historical information than one might guess (notably texts by Caesar, Gildas, and Bede) and they had only a vague idea what went on in Roman towns and forts.

The historical value of HB has been much debated. If it was indeed compiled in north Wales, details of these 28 cities must have come from “foreign correspondents”, one of whom seems to have known Herefordshire well. The PhD [thesis](#) of Dumville (1975) is now available in full online, containing texts of the main versions.

	HB archetype	As emended	Modern name	Roman
1 ¹	<i>cair guorthigirn</i>	<i>Guorthigirn</i>	Craig Gwrtheyrn SN4340	(<i>Vortigernus</i>)
2 ²	<i>cair guintguic</i>	<i>Guintguic</i>	Winchester/Southampton	Venta Belgarum
3 ³	<i>cair mincip</i>	* <i>Mingui</i>	Monmouth/Chepstow	Blestio
4 ⁴	<i>cair ligualid</i>	<i>Ligualid</i>	Carlisle	Luguvalium
5 ⁵	<i>cair meguaid</i>	* <i>Medcaut</i>	Lindisfarne	(<i>Medicata</i>)
6 ⁶	<i>cair colun</i>	* <i>Clut</i>	Dumbarton	Demerosea
7 ⁷	<i>cair ebrauc</i>	<i>Ebrauc</i>	York	Eburacum
8 ⁸	<i>cair custeint</i>	* <i>Custenhin</i>	Welsh Bicknor SO5917	(<i>Constantius</i>)
9 ⁹	<i>cair caratauc</i>	<i>Caratauc</i>	Caradog SO5527	(Caratacus)
10 ¹⁰	<i>cair graut</i>	* <i>Dougarth</i>	Doward SO5516	—
11 ¹¹	<i>cair maunguid</i>	* <i>Fauguid</i>	Hereford	—
12 ¹²	<i>cair lundein</i>	<i>Lunden</i>	London	Londinium
13 ¹³	<i>cair ceint</i>	<i>Ceint</i>	Kent	Cantium
14 ¹⁴	<i>cair guirangon</i>	<i>Guiragon</i>	?Worcester	? Vertis
15 ¹⁵	<i>cair peris</i>	* <i>Pouis</i>	?Dinas Powys ST1571	—
16 ¹⁶	<i>cair daun</i>	<i>Daun</i>	?Jarrow or Cardiff	Dano or Tamion

17 ¹⁷	<i>cair legion</i>	<i>Legion</i>	?Chester	Deva
18 ¹⁸	<i>cair guricon</i>	* <i>Guidcon</i>	Wroxeter or TrellechGrangeSO4901	Viroconium or —
19 ¹⁹	<i>cair segeint</i>	<i>Segeint</i>	Caernarfon	Seguntio
20 ²⁰	<i>cair legion guar uisc</i>	<i>Legion guar uisc</i>	Caerleon	Iscae Leg. II Augusta
21 ²¹	<i>cair guent</i>	<i>Guent</i>	Caerwent	Venta Silurum
22 ²²	<i>cair briton</i>	* <i>Vyrtin</i>	Carmarthen	Μαριδωννον/Muriduno
23 ²³	<i>cair lerion</i>	<i>Cerion</i>	Much Dewchurch SO4831	—
24 ²⁴	<i>cair draithou</i>	<i>Draithou</i>	Trevelgue Head	—
25 ²⁵	<i>cair pensa vel coit</i>	* <i>Pentaloch</i>	Kirkintilloch	? Medionemeton
26 ²⁶	<i>cair urnach</i>	<i>Urnach</i>	?	—
27 ²⁷	<i>cair celemion</i>	* <i>Cel Einion</i>	Llandogo SO5204	—
28 ²⁸	<i>cair luit coit</i>	<i>Luit coit</i>	Lichfield	Letoceto
29 ²⁹	<i>Cair Guorcoc</i>		? duplicates 18 ?	
30 ³⁰	<i>Cair Merdin</i>		?duplicates 22?	
31 ³¹	<i>Cair Ceri</i>		?duplicates 23 or Cirencester?	? Corinium
32 ³²	<i>Cair Gloiu</i>		Gloucester	Glevum
33 ³³	<i>cair Teim</i>		?Cardiff	Tamion

Geographical names mentioned in this list with recognisable Roman-era names are Caerleon, Caernarfon, Caerwent, Carlisle, Kent, Lichfield, London, Winchester, and York, plus possibly Carmarthen and Gloucester. Notice the absence (at least in Breeze’s analysis) of the commonly cited Cambridge, Chichester, Colchester, Exeter, Leicester, Lincoln, St Albans, etc. In no case do HB’s spellings hint at an original “Celtic” form from which the Romans derived their spelling. Rather they suggest that HB’s compilers and copyists were native Welsh speakers struggling with unfamiliar Latin or English names deformed by time and distance.

There are surely mistakes in this document, last edited by Anthony Durham, 14 February 2020. Please suggest corrections and improvements. You may copy it freely, provided you acknowledge its source as www.romaneranames.uk.

¹ This base of Vortigern is near Llandysul and the river Teifi upstream from Cardigan, likely to have ruled the rich farmland of Pembrokeshire and the gold mines at Pumsaint. A surprising location for someone alleged to have invited Hengest and Horsa into Kent. It is debatable whether there were zero, one, or two real-life instances of [Vortigern](#), whose name is widely believed to be Celtic for something like ‘great ruler’ but also looks suspiciously close to Latin [vertigo](#) ‘revolution’, especially in the earliest [spelling](#) [Vertigernus](#).

² Notice the ending *–guic*, equivalent to English *wic*, which at that time often meant ‘waterside trading place’, as at *Hamwic* downriver at Southampton. It appears to survive as the Winchester suburb of Weeke (1279 *Wyke*). *Venta Belgarum* probably originally referred to a nearby [hillfort](#), before the Roman settlement. The first church there was built about 650 for St [Birinus](#). A Saxon [monastery](#) started at Winchester well before 961.

³ Ekwall (1928) explained *Mingui* (river Monnow) as ‘Little Wye’ (where *Min-* is from PIE **men-* ‘small’). The *–cip* part hints at a word related to English cheap meaning ‘market’ seen in Chepstow at the river mouth. Breeze rejects Latin *municipium* as the name source.

⁴ Jackson (1953:39) appears to have originated the untenable belief that an original British personal name **Luguvalos* led to Roman *Luguvalium*. It seems more likely that *Ligualid* was an imperfect remembrance of the Roman form. If *–lid* is significant it has various possible explanations including OE *hlid* ‘gate’.

⁵ *Cudbert episcopus obiit in insula Medcaut* (HB 65) in AD 687 is the basis for suggesting that Lindisfarne monastery was known as a [Medicata](#) ‘healing’ place, which got Welshified into *Medcaut*. Roman [Olcaclavis](#) was probably in that area.

⁶ In HB’s day the kingdom of Strathclyde had not yet been overthrown by Vikings, so Dumbarton has a strong claim to one of the names in this list. This must be one of Breeze’s weakest emendations, overruling the idea of F-M and others that *Colun* came from Latin *colonia* and referred to Colchester.

⁷ Breeze repeats the old nonsense that *Ebur* came from a Celtic name for hogweed/alder/yew. *Eburacum*, from Latin *ebur* ‘ivory (boar’s tusks)’, became Anglian in character and political control long before HB was written, though its name *Eoforwic* came later.

⁸ Breeze is surely right to overrule F-M and locate this name in a bend of the river Wye, by Offa's Dyke, at an early bishop's seat. Now not even a church is there, but its putative site is surrounded by a round churchyard wall of a type discussed by [Allcroft](#).

⁹ This [site](#), also on the Welsh side of the river Wye, near Ross-on-Wye is obviously a weak identification, yet still plausible. *Caradoc* was a popular name in early mediaeval Wales, applied to many sites, and only distantly related to the historical *Caratacus*.

¹⁰ The obvious focus here is [Little Doward hillfort](#), another site beside the river Wye, apparently defending Welsh lands from encroaching Mercia. Other mediaeval sources describe hostility between Welsh and English Christians.

¹¹ Breeze is happy to interpret *Maunguid* as corrupted from *fauguid* 'beech wood', pointing to the early bishopric at Hereford, yet another site on the Wye.

¹² The Welsh form was apparently taken from English. In the 800s London had a bishop, but was not a political capital. Notice the non-use of the Roman formal name *Augusta*.

¹³ Notice the name of a region, Kent ('edge, rim'), not the city of Canterbury (Roman *Durovernum*). Other places with similar names include edges such as Kintyre and putative river harbours with names like Kennet.

¹⁴ *Cair Wyragon* meant Worcester in the 1300s. HB names *Gueagon* in the supposed genealogy of rulers of Mercia two generations down from *Woden*. The pseudo-historian Geoffrey of Monmouth used *Gwyrangon* as the name of a ruler of Kent who interacted with Vortigern. Breeze offers a possible Celtic etymology, but Germanic *were-ang* 'water meadow people' seems preferable.

¹⁵ Dinas Powys [Castle](#), between Cardiff and Barry in South Wales, may have been the base of a post-Roman warlord, with a name derived from Latin *pagus*. However, [Skene \(1861\)](#) suggested that *peris* was derived from *Frisii* Frisians, of whom there was a colony from Hengist's time, around Dumfries, and also a Roman auxiliary unit at Housesteads. That would make *cair peris* most likely Caerlaverock = Roman *Uxela*/Ουξελλοβ.

¹⁶ Breeze prefers emendation to **Tam*, like the *Cosmography's Tamion*, referring to the river Taff through Cardiff, but Bede's monastery at Jarrow on the river Don tributary of the Tyne seems more likely.

¹⁷ Chester is said to have been a bit of a dump at the right period for the *Historia*. A puzzle.

¹⁸ Breeze overrules majority opinion in favour of *Viroconium/Wroxeter* and pulls this name also into south-east Wales, to a location west of the river Wye and north of Tintern Abbey.

¹⁹ *Segeint* is also mentioned in HB para 25.

²⁰ Welsh [gwar](#) = 'over'.

²¹ Roman *Venta* also contributed to name 2.

²² Breeze overrules majority opinion that this was Dumbarton, on the grounds that people there called that site *Alt Clut*, already needed to fit name number 6. Debatable.

²³ No actual person called *Cerion* is known.

²⁴ Irish sources mention *Din Draithou* and *Dind Tradui* in south-west Britain, and Jackson drew attention to Welsh [traeth](#) 'beach', so Breeze looked for a coastal fort with prominent beaches. He picked Trevelgue Head, near Newquay, but without explaining why he rejected [Tintagel](#) or Padstow and [The Rumps](#) fort.

²⁵ Some HB manuscripts contain a gloss, probably added in about 1200, which says that the Antonine Wall ran *usque ad ostium fluminis Cluth et Cair Pentaloch, quo murus ille finitur* 'to the mouth of the river Cluth and *Cair pentaloch*, where this wall terminates'. The modern name Kirkintilloch is a calque (literal translation) from P-Celtic into Q-Celtic, where Gaelic [tulach](#) means 'hillock'. It lies in the middle of the Wall not the end.

²⁶ *Wrnach Gawr* was a giant in Welsh folklore. Presumably some disused hillfort was associated with him in much the same way as so many prominent landmarks have had the name of Arthur attached.

²⁷ The Book of Llandaff mentions *Llanenniaun*. *Enniaun* was probably a Welsh version of Roman [Annianus](#). A [stone](#) at Margam commemorates *Enniaun*, and see [here](#) and [here](#) about his association with Llandogo.

²⁸ Roman *Letocetum* ('happy valley' not 'grey wood') evolved into Lichfield, with its monastery and cathedral.

²⁹ 5 extra names are present mainly in the [Vatican](#) manuscript. Presumably they were added by a Welshman, up to a hundred years later than the primary version, to satisfy a misreading of XXVIII as XXXIII.

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³² HB 49 mentions *Glovi*, probably [derived](#) from the name of Gloucester, as an ancestor of Vortigern.

³³ Many river and place names around Britain may embody a root *Tam-*, notably the Teme.