

# Judges

a discussion document, inviting comments

The Ravenna Cosmography mentions a place [Dannoni](#) somewhere on or near the river [Forth](#). There may be parallels for this name in one or possibly two places called [Dano](#), plus the [Δανωνιοι](#) people. And various roots that appear to have contributed to later English place names can be illustrated by modern Danube, damned, dene, Denmark, and den.

None of these parallels seems to provide a convincing explanation, so how about the personal name Dan? Nowadays Dan is usually short for Daniel, which is Hebrew for ‘God is my judge’. In the Old Testament [dan](#) meant ‘judge’ and [dannani](#) meant ‘he has judged me’. Also *Dan* the son of Jacob founded a [tribe](#) that gave its name to a [place](#) in northern Israel beside the river Jordan.

[Endlicher’s Glossary](#) stated unequivocally that *dan* meant ‘judge’ in Gaulish as well as in Hebrew. The implication is that in AD 800 on the Franco-Belgian border *dan* formed part of proper name(s) but was no longer a word in current use, yet monks could understand its meaning because they knew the Bible.

Delamarre (2003:135) defined Gaulish *danos* or [dannos](#) as ‘magistrate’, drawing attention to numerous ancient personal names: *Dannomarus*, *Dannotalus*, *Dannorix*, etc. The elements that combined with *danno-* prompted Delamarre to offer an alternative definition as [curateur](#), a word whose Roman original meant a senior civil servant, a superintendent, someone who took charge of something. An analogous word whose meaning has subtly changed over the centuries is caretaker, so that [Caratacus](#) was probably also someone who took care.

All this makes excellent sense for *Dannoni*, because Bede’s [Historia 1,12](#) mentioned *urbem Giudi*, which was *in medio* of the Firth of Forth, and has been much discussed ever since. By far the strongest candidate for its location is [Blackness Castle](#), at NT055802 ([Miller, 1885](#); [Fraser, 2008](#)). The anchorage in its lee (now used by a boat club) was the number-two harbour of mediaeval Scotland and probably served the Romans as a supply base for the eastern end of the Antonine Wall.

Throughout the Empire, most Roman forts were beside small-boat-navigable water, but Roman waterborne logistics had to step up a gear for serious campaigning in early Scotland. Hence the storehouse at Carpow, and significant ports likely at Cramond and Camelon, plus (hypothetically) Stirling and Montrose. Blackness has no known Roman installation or strategic position, so it would have been an essentially civilian port. Such a trading place would later often be called a *wic* because it was outlying, and be administered by an official called a portreeve who collected tolls, etc.

Maybe such an official was installed by the Romans at Blackness and called a [judex](#) ‘judge’ (literally ‘law-sayer’). After the Roman army departed, the *judex* might have evolved into a local chieftain, in much the same way as archaeologists suggest happened at [Banna](#) (Birdoswald) on Hadrian’s Wall, or as is suggested for Saint Patrick’s family around Dumbarton at the other end of the Wall. Romans were in charge of the Forth valley between about AD 70 and 165, and then came back for Septimius Severus’ campaigns in AD 211, adding up to more than enough time for several generations of the local elite to learn Latin and Roman habits. By Bede’s time in AD 730 Latin would have decayed enough for *judex* to become *Giudi* and then all the other observed spellings in *Nennius* etc.

Jackson (1953: 345-7) documented how modern Welsh [udd](#) ‘lord’ and elements of names such as Idris and Griffith arose from something like *\*iud* in Old Welsh. The simplest way to explain this is a loan from Latin *judex*, but for no obvious reason [James](#) (2014: 2,220) prefers

to invoke independent descent inside the Celtic language from an Indo-European word for movement – not convincing.

The deep etymology of *Dan-* names is probably best left to specialist historical linguists, because of Hebrew *dan* and because there are possible confusions from multiple PIE roots, including those that led to theme and doom. Our best guess is that *\*danos* began like PIE *\*da-* ‘to divide’, because a judge is someone who decides, i.e. cuts through a dispute. For the *-nos* part, there seems to be no consensus on its PIE root, but [Briggs](#) (2011) called it “a widespread and very ancient IE suffix that, when applied to deities or rulers, signified ‘master/mistress of’ the preceding element in the word”.

Searching in epigraphic databases for people with *Dan-* names reveals several potters in south-central France who were called *Dano-something* plus various Greek-sounding names ending in *-danus*, such as [Dardanus](#) and [Eridanus](#). This prompts another sceptical question: should ancient river names that began with *Danu-* (modern Danube, Dnieper, Don, etc) continue to be explained with a PIE root *\*da-* ‘to flow’, or would *\*da-* ‘to divide’ be better? That would certainly fit the Yorkshire river Don, with its two exits into the Trent and the Ouse. Other *Danu-* rivers have major deltas.

The really interesting question is what happened to *\*dannos* ‘magistrate’ after Roman times. Celtic scholars have not obviously identified a descendant, and neither thane nor thank seems relevant. However there is an obsolete English and Scots word [dan](#) ‘Sir, Master’. This adds to the count of early names in south-east Scotland containing elements with potential Germanic parallels that seem to outrank any Celtic parallels so far offered. Other examples include: [Velunia](#), probably a command centre for the Wall; [Voran](#) ‘in front’; [Manavi](#) begins like man; later [Peanfahel](#) was explicitly described as Pictish by Bede, and is normally analysed as Celtic for ‘end of the wall’ but could also be early Germanic for ‘cattle marsh’.

One Latin gloss on *danno* was [flamen](#) ‘priest’, who was necessarily the sort of person whose authority rested largely on sacred taboo, even if (like a [Judge](#) in the Bible) he was not averse to wielding a cudgel. It is often suggested that the Romans failed to conquer all of Scotland because it had many small political units rather than a few major kingdoms to be taken over.

At or before AD 370 there was extensive settlement in Scotland by Frisians. The evidence was laid out by [Skene \(1862\)](#), citing names that include Muirnguidan, Comgalls, Fidra island near North Berwick, and (on the other side of Scotland) Dumfries. Skene regarded the *Historia Brittonum*’s report of the arrival of Saxons in the north (as well as in Kent) as based on real events: ‘Otha and Ebissa arrived with forty ships ... sailed round the country of the Picts, laid waste the Orkneys, beyond the Friesian Sea, and took possession of many regions, even to the Pictish confines’.

When Septimius Severus campaigned in Scotland up to AD 211 (as described by [Cassius Dio](#)) his troops suffered heavy casualties and must have included many auxiliaries who were, in modern terms, Dutch, Belgian, or Low German. Severus “forced the Britons to come to terms, on the condition that they should abandon a large part of their territory... [but when they] ... again revolted, he summoned the soldiers and ordered them to invade the rebels’ country, killing everybody they met”.

So when the Frisian coast across the North Sea started being seriously flooded after about AD 250 people there would have found it logical to migrate to the Fife/Lothian area around the Firth of Forth. Old soldiers would have known that it was somewhat depopulated and they would have observed [raised beaches](#) as visible evidence that the Scottish coast was rising due to isostatic rebound and less liable to flooding.

It follows that some degree of continuity between Roman times and the multi-ethnic mix ([Pictish](#), Gaelic, Roman, Frisian, Anglian) of Bede's times is entirely plausible around the Forth. Maybe therefore a *\*danos* or a *judex* symbolised retention of consensual small government rather than violent kingdom-building.

Last edited by Anthony Durham, 2 March 2018