The Earliest Place Names of Somerset

Twelve ancient place names in or near Somerset are listed in the Ravenna Cosmography:

Lindinis . Canza . Dolocindo . Clavinio . Morionio . Bolvelaunio .
Alauna . Coloneas . Aranus . Anicetis . Melezo . Ibernio

What did these names mean to people alive in Roman times? And where exactly do they belong on the map?

The Cosmography was written in about AD 700 by an unknown monk in the Roman-Gothic city of Ravenna. Richmond and Crawford (1949) definitively wrote up its British section, with good photographs of its three surviving manuscripts, and they discussed its names with advice from Ifor Williams. The Cosmography was discussed again by Rivet and Smith (1979), with advice from Kenneth Jackson, in their classic book on all the place names of Roman Britain.

There is a common false belief that name spellings in the Cosmography are seriously corrupt. In reality, the Cosmography is no worse than most other ancient texts. This mistake arose from a wider fallacy, that ancient Britons were "Celtic". The Greeks and Romans referred to a whole swathe of north-European barbarians (but not Britons) as Celtic, and historical linguists picked up that term to describe the family of languages that includes Welsh, Irish, and Cornish. Equating those two usages is a huge mistake. Unfortunately, Rivet and Smith did just that, which is why their treatment of the Cosmography actually went backwards, on average, compared with 30 years earlier.

Somerset was not full of Roman military bases, but seems to have settled down very early to peaceful coexistence between local people and retired soldiers. So the Cosmography is by far the main supplier of ancient names there. The critical point about the Cosmography, not properly understood before, is that the order in which names are listed carries useful information. The unknown author was probably not an experienced traveller himself but appears to have copied down names as his finger tracked across some tolerably accurate Roman maps or itineraries. Therefore names are listed in geographically logical sequences that sometimes follow known Roman roads, but almost always trace a path across a modern map that does not self-intersect.

The Cosmography does not show distances and does not always indicate where one series of names comes to an end and a big jump must occur to a different area. When names can be corroborated with other sources, they provide an insight into the variability of ancient spelling habits, but many names are one-offs. Then it is vital to guess what they actually meant back in Roman times, which unavoidably means confronting linguistic controversies.

Much damage has been done by the classic dogma that ancient Britons spoke Celtic, and some truly terrible etymologies are widely believed. Many fine scholars will go to their graves repeating bad logic (for example the 'yew' explanation of *Eburacum*) as sacred truth. Somerset is mercifully free of that sort of nonsense, so it should be uncontroversial to stress that no one knows who created the names that have survived. And no one truly knows how ancient British people spoke among themselves. Anyone who pretends otherwise has overdosed on circular logic.

There is hard evidence for ancient use of Latin (possibly as a second language) in and near Somerset by villa owners, by visitors to Bath spa, and by people living along the Fosse Way. There is a strong presumption that some traders and the technicians involved in lead mining used Greek, and also that some Roman soldiers grew up in Germanic-speaking areas. Celtic

speech survived into modern times not far away in Wales and Cornwall, and it is usually guessed that post-Roman Somerset was a linguistic frontier zone between advancing English and retreating Celtic.

Once all linguistic pet theories are set aside, what can be relied upon as hard data? The word stock of Latin and Greek in Roman imperial times is well written up in dictionaries. So are potential parallels in ancient place names from elsewhere across Europe. The word stock of English, Irish, etc becomes available only centuries later. It can be projected back to Roman times fairly safely if one sticks to general linguistic principles, but doing so on the basis of unfounded theories about ethnicity is positively misleading.

The number-one tool for reaching back safely into linguistic history is a dictionary of proto-Indo-European (PIE) roots, especially Watkins (2011). Then there are computer-searchable dictionaries of individual languages, notably Latin, plus of course numerous books.

Maps, archaeological reports, and historic documents supply candidate sites to fit names. Much relevant background information is hyperlinked by our *romaneranames* website.

For Somerset a key reference is Rippon (2008). On the right is a map (taken from his Fig. 1 on page 89) showing likely river courses and coastlines in Roman times.

The challenge now is to match up ancient names to ancient sites, in much the same way as a scientist would try to get the best fit of a theoretical curve to observed data points.

Before homing in on those dozen Cosmography names, let's ask what information about ancient names has survived in other sources.
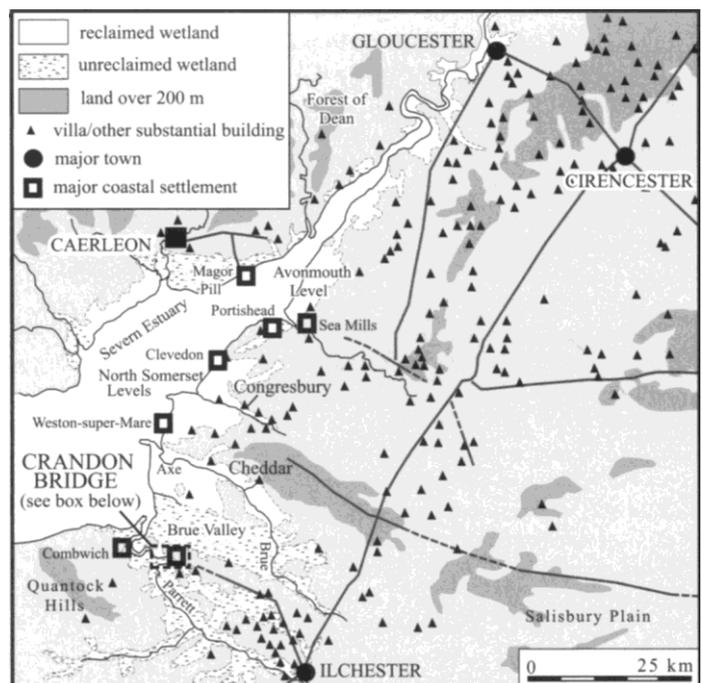
Aquae Sulis and Υδατα Θερμα obviously refer to the hot springs at Bath. The town seems to have grown up in Roman times, with little evidence of any previous importance. Ptolemy called it a πολις of the *Belgae*, surprisingly far west for people whose heartland was in northern Gaul. And it is at least curious that the main responsibility of the goddess *Sulis* was σύλη 'right of seizure or reprisal'.

VEB is inscribed on many lead ingots apparently produced by the Mendips lead/silver mines around the small Roman fort at Charterhouse. The simplest explanation is PIE **webh-* 'to weave', whose English descendant web (how VEB would have been pronounced) could describe the visible pattern in a landscape caused by veins of lead ore reaching the surface.

Ptolemy's **Ουξελλα εισχυσις** was probably the estuary of the Somerset river Axe, which was wider and longer in Roman times than now. This location wins over the Bridgewater Bay mouth of the Parrett and Brue because the Brean Down promontory and/or the Uphill suburb of Weston-super-Mare at the river mouth fit the likely meaning of *Uxela* 'high point'.

Ptolemy's **Ισκαλις** was a πολις (i.e. a substantial native settlement) with a name apparently related to a river originally called something like *Isca*, which is probably now the Parrett. Charterhouse (Rivet & Smith's guess) does not really fit that profile, and a better guess is

[Ham Hill](#), possibly the largest hillfort in Britain, among the headwaters of the river Parrett. Its central-place function was taken over by Ilchester Roman town a short distance away.

Lindinis has long been confidently identified with Ilchester, even though there is no really solid proof for this location. However, Ilchester was the only sizeable Roman town in the Somerset/Dorset border area, and the key ancient crossroads for the whole big peninsula of south-west England, situated at the head of the flood-prone Somerset Levels. *Lindinis* was thus a twin of *Lindum* (Lincoln) at the other end of the Fosse Way. The element **lind-* naturally meant something like 'flowing' (a verbal participle from PIE **lei-* 'to flow') and may well be the parent of Old Frisian *lind* and Welsh *llyn* 'pond, lake'.

Canza looks like a Vulgar Latin version of **Cantia*, which has an excellent parallel in QUANTIA on a gold coin minted around AD 600 at *Quentovic*, a trading place with strong links to Britain, on the river Canche in France. *Canza* probably survives in the modern name Quantock Hills (first recorded in *Cantucuudu* in charter S237 of AD 682) manifestly from the 'edge' root that led to Kent, Kintyre, etc, plus an *–uc* diminutive ending. *Cantuctune*, mentioned in King Alfred's will, is usually taken to be modern Cannington, whose ancient port area at Combwich might suit *Canza*. However, a case could be made for *Canza* lying further inland, so somewhere near modern Bridgwater or even Taunton cannot be excluded.

Dolocindo would make good sense at Crandon Bridge, a Roman-era port now silted up some distance from the river Parrett, because Rippon (2008) described it as a "trans-shipment port where goods brought by road and river through Somerset were loaded onto larger vessels that could cross the Bristol Channel". *Dolo-* probably came from PIE **delə-/*dol-* 'to divide', which is a common element in later place names (albeit with a variety of spellings across the whole of Britain), related to modern English dole, meaning to share out resources, especially beside a river. Dolemeads beside the river Avon at Bath is a good example. It was tempting to relate the *–cindo* part to altered river courses, because of *Cunetio*, next to modern Mildenhall, whose ending came from *halh* 'nook' or 'river meadow' (Gelling, 1984), written as haugh in northern England and translated as *dail*, *dalloch*, etc in Gaelic areas. However, a better guess is probably that the *-cindo* part is related to *scindo* 'to cut apart' (from PIE **skei-* 'to cut') or Old English *cinan* 'to split into pieces'.

Clavinio appears to begin like PIE **klau-* 'hook', which gave rise to words such as Latin *clavis* 'key' and English claw. Several Latin nouns ended in *–inium* and so did towns such as *Londinium*. Other possible relatives to consider, and mostly reject, are Latin *glaeba* 'land, soil', along with English clay, glue, and clump, plus French *écluse* 'lock', English sluice, and Somerset dialect clyse or clow. The closest parallel in ancient names is *Olcaclavis*, probably in similar marshy territory near Lindisfarne. Clavelshay is unlikely to be relevant. It was tempting to propose a location on the Roman road along the Polden Hills, through the middle of the Somerset Levels, perhaps in the vicinity of Shapwick, famous for its hoard of Roman coins. However, the most likely location is actually a settlement now lost to the sea in Bridgwater Bay, off the Steart Peninsula. Since Roman times coasts around the Severn Estuary have "retreated by up to 800m" (Rippon, 2008).

Morionio begins like PIE **mori-* 'body of water'. Celtic scholars confuse matters by pointing to Welsh *môr* 'sea', but actually **mor-* in ancient names generally referred to marshes and other forms of inland water rather than to the wider sea. The most likely location is the very prominent Brent Knoll, topped by a fort with possible Roman archaeological traces. It used to be surrounded by marshes, which were reclaimed in Roman times. On its south side was a river recorded after Roman times as *Siger*, a name that might mean something like 'holder'. It originally carried the flow of the river Brue, a name first attested in charter S236 as *briuu*, which looks suspiciously like the ancient element **briva*

commonly mistranslated as 'bridge', but more likely to come from PIE *bhru- 'brow' (see under *Durobrivae* and *Durocobrivis*). The name Brent probably belongs among the brim/brink/brow cluster of 'edge' words and also occurs by the Thames at Brentford, possibly originally *Brinavis*.

Bolvelaunio contains a second element **vellaunus*, well known to mean something like 'commanding' (though for years it puzzled scholars unwilling to recognise its survival in Germanic languages), and which showed up in *Velunia* on the Antonine Wall and possibly **Velunion* on Hadrian's Wall. It could fit Glastonbury Tor, around which (and a chalybeate spring) an early Christian monastery grew up and became a major local landowner. Initial *Bol-* matches PIE **bhel-* 'to swell', as in ball, bole and bowl, but was that up or down? In later English place names Bol- had a sense of 'rounded hill', but in the Somerset Levels a sense of 'bowl' cannot be ruled out.

Alauna in the Cosmography naturally evokes Ptolemy's Αλαυνου ποταμου εκβολαι river mouth, whose coordinates point somewhere in north Somerset. Rivers called *Alauna* tended to be (1) quite small, (2) rich in fish, and (3) liable to leave descendant place names. This could fit many watercourses in the Somerset Levels. The lower river Brue was substantially re-routed around 1200, in a landscape much altered by reclaiming of marshes from Roman times onwards; see Rippon (2007). The overall effect of these changes was to direct water flow towards the west, into the sea via previously small creeks, instead of north, into the river Axe. Post-Roman names mentioned in connection with these works include *Siger*, Fishlake river, and the Pilrow Cut. Candidates to be the Cosmography's place called *Alauna* include: (1) Alstone, near the modern mouth of the Brue; (2) Allerton Moor (etc), east of Brent Knoll; (3) Alhampton, at the other end of the river Brue, near the Fosse Way, on the tributary river Alham; (4) Aller, well to the south near the Parrett, and (5) Alcester, formerly called Alyncester, in Dorset, next to Shaftesbury in the valley of the Stour. So it seems fair to guess that *Alauna* was a common ancient name, which (rightly or wrongly) made Anglo-Saxons think of eels and fish-trapping weirs. Number 2, around Stone Allerton and Alston Sutton, would give the best (non-intersecting) track for the Cosmography sequence of names. Allerton was *Alwarditona* in Domesday Book, usually attributed to an *Ælfward*, but *Alauna* seems just as good.

Coloneas (or *Colonias*) obviously refers to a Roman *colonia*. Somerset and surrounding counties were full of Roman villas, but the most likely location is at Congresbury, which was up a river Yeo directly across the Severn from the big Roman base at Caerleon. Nearby was a hillfort beside which Roman remains were found, with a Roman villa, and pottery kilns (such as this) (Rippon, 2008). The name Congresbury has prompted much speculation. Saint Congar resembles the mythical Wihtgar in the Isle of Wight and looks suspiciously like advertising by the monks of Wells akin to "Arthur's grave" at Glastonbury. Early forms, such as *Cungaresbyrig* make best sense as a compound of *Cun-* 'river harbour' (from a sense of cone and/or channel) as at *Cunetio*, hence the local Kent Road, plus *gar-* ('angular point' or gore, as at Gariannonor), and *byrig* 'city'. All that, plus modern flood risk maps, point to a serious Roman port town at Congresbury.

Aranus is the best reading of Cosmography manuscripts (not *Aramis* favoured by Rivet and Smith). This resembles Latin *aranea*, 'spider', which fits with VEB discussed above to make the lead mining site of Charterhouse (with a small fort and a possible amphitheatre) an obvious guess for this name.

Anicetis was a Latin version of ἀνίκητος 'undefeated' (=*invictus*). *Anicetus* became a common personal name, which shows up on inscriptions across the Empire. Of the four inscriptions from Britain, one was an altar to *Sulis* at Bath by *Q Pompeius Anicetus*, who

might have owned an estate. In an area rich in Roman villas that does not suggest a particular location. Tacitus mentioned two individuals named *Anicetus* active around AD 60, one a freedman and one an admiral, which makes a military site worth considering. The huge hillfort of Cadbury Castle was probably in the wrong location to be relevant and it is hard to see it being named 'undefeated' in Roman times, except ironically. That leaves the *Anicetus* who was bishop of Rome in the AD 160s as a possible parallel. Hence our best guess that a Greek-named freedman who made money from the Mendip lead mines was the ultimate founder of Wells Cathedral.

Melezo took a long time to work out, but finally the penny dropped. Shaftesbury, Dorset, is a rare example in Britain of a true hilltop settlement, which is exactly what *Melezo* meant. It has no known Roman site, but the adjacent name Alcester is suggestive, and its history goes back to King Alfred. The strikingly rectangular platform on which the historic core of Shaftesbury sits and the curious way that the straight Roman road from London to Exeter vanishes in the ridgeway zone around Shaftesbury present a real challenge to archaeology.

Ibernio was probably the Roman fort inside the native hill-fort at Hod Hill (possibly Ptolemy's Δούνιον) near the small river Iwerne from Iwerne Minster. Latin *hiberno* 'to pass the winter' was what Vespasian's troops did at places such as Hod Hill for several years after the Roman invasion.

The locations proposed here for the ancient names of Somerset are shown in the map on the right, joined by a line to indicate their Cosmography sequence. It is remarkable that such a complete solution can now be proposed, because the first draft of this article was entitled "The Somerset Puzzle" in anticipation of much more doubt. Indeed, the big danger now is overconfidence, which is why all the evidence and arguments need to be looked at very critically. For example, should *Canza* be further south, even at Taunton, and should *Bolvelaunio* be swapped with *Morionio*?
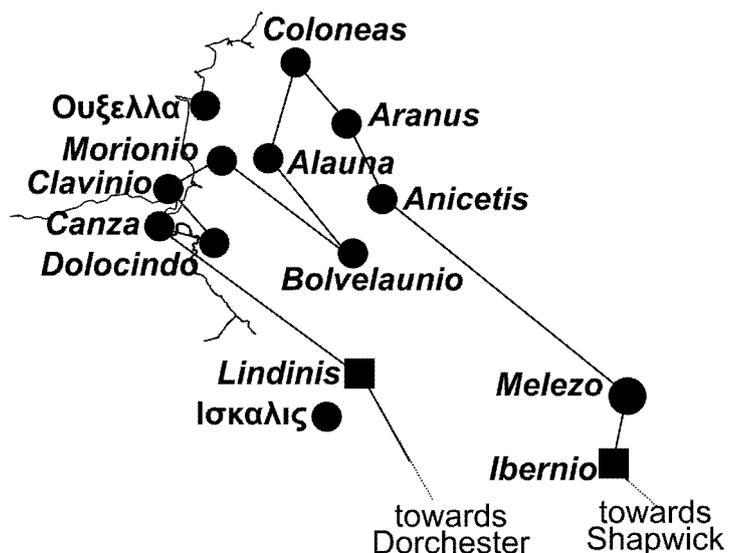
Some of the earliest evidence about post-Roman Somerset comes from charters. For example, at Creechbarrow, around ST246255 near Taunton, charter S237 of AD 682 mentioned (in Latin) 'on the southern side of the river *Tan* to the island beside the hill called *Cructan* in the British language and *Crycbeorh* by us'. *Cruc*, *cryc*, etc, often meant 'burial mound' (Allcroft, 1927, especially chapter 15), but it could just mean 'hill'. Dozens of place names mean much the same as Creechbarrow, but can be hard to recognise because there is no longer a mound, or the hill is unspectacular, or the name has mutated. A good example is Kirkley in Northumberland, which was *Crikelaw* in 1185. Previous commentators seem to have missed PIE *ten- 'to extend', whose descendants include Welsh taen/tan[2] 'spread out'. Does that refer to the elongation of that hill, or to the propensity of the river Tone to spread out and cause floods? Later parallels to *Cructan* may include Kirka Taing in Orkney and various names such as Cruckton.

As for Glastonbury, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle reported that King Ine built *Glaestingabyrig* in 688, a name best explained as from Latin *glaesum-tingeo* 'amber tinge', referring to the

Chalice Well, near the foot of Glastonbury Tor. A chalybeate (iron-containing) spring, with water and associated deposits coloured a bit orange, might have been a focus of pre-Christian religion, a bit like Bath. It escaped the common fate of becoming a spa because in mediaeval times it was built over to provide a water supply for Glastonbury Abbey, then buried under four metres of sediment.

The old explanatory model favoured by historical linguists has been shockingly unhelpful: around Somerset the Welsh and Irish languages supply no more useful parallels than Greek, Dutch, or Sanskrit. Maybe a modern Celtic scholar will be able to go beyond the past efforts of Professors Williams and Jackson. Until that happens, it seems fair to guess that battles such as Dyrham in AD 577 did not fundamentally change Somerset. Life under Roman rule was much like life under Anglo-Saxons and the Church.