

Naming the landscape: How ancient places got their names

by: L.A. Curchin

Ancient toponyms (place-names) allow us to discover how ancient peoples identified their surroundings. Moreover, since toponyms tend to remain in use for a long time, they enable us to see the various languages that were once spoken in a particular region. In some regions, toponyms are the oldest written evidence to have survived from ancient times.

Toponyms may be named after a patron deity, or after a person, such as the town's founder or a prominent individual such as a ruler or provincial governor. In many cases they provide a physical description of the place, which may include its size, height, or soil colour. Some places are named after a type of tree that flourished on the site, like the modern toponyms Oakville and Mapleton. Other names make reference to a river, lake or other water feature that flowed near the town.

Athens (in Greek, *Athenai*), is named for Athena; Olympia for Zeus Olympios ("Zeus of Mount Olympus"), Apollonia for Apollo, Artemision for Artemis, Herakleia for Herakles, Aphrodisias for Aphrodite. The Peloponnese is supposedly named after its mythical founder, Pelops (*Pelops nesos* "Pelops' island"). Philippi is named after Philip II of Macedon, and Demetrias after its founder, Demetrios Poliorketes. Other Greek names are descriptive: Akra Leuke "white cape", Oinoe "wine place", Chalkis "copper place", Chersonesos "peninsula", Emporion "trading post", Euboia "good cattle country", Erythrai "red places", Cynoscephalae "dog's heads", Megalopolis "new city", Neapolis "new city", Kallipolis "beautiful city", Nikopolis "victory city", Heliopolis "sun city".

A Latin toponym may be named after a person: Gracchuris (after Tiberius Gracchus), Caeciliana, Semproniana. It may refer to the place's function: Portus Magnus (large harbour), Praesidium (garrison), or to its facilities: Aquae Calidae "hot waters". The old Latin town Alba Longa means "long hill", the word *alba* coming from the root **albh-* (seen in classical Latin *Alpes* "Alps mountains") rather than from *albus* "white". Tree toponyms are popular, such as Roboretum "oak", Pinetum "pine", Oleastrum "wild olive tree", Lucus Feroniae "grove of (the goddess) Feronia". Some names refer to abstract qualities: Concordia "harmony", Faventia "favourable place", Pax Iulia "peace bestowed by Caesar".

Celtic languages were spoken in much of western Europe, including northern Italy, Gaul, Britain and parts of Spain. Frequently occurring descriptive elements include *sego-* "power", *nerito-* "strength", *vindo-* "white", *medio-* "in the middle of", *eburo-* "yew tree", *briga* or *dunum* "hill fort", *mago-* "field", *lano-* "plain", *rigo-* "king", *treba* "dwelling", *sentu-* "trail", *caito-* "forest", *novio-* "new", *cambo-* "crooked", *nemeto-* "sacred grove". Thus we encounter such names as Eburacum, Sentinum, Vindonissa, Contrebia. By combining two elements, we arrive at such

compounds as Nertobriga, Segobriga, Caetobriga, Cambodunum, Eburodunum, Noviomagus, Rigomagus, Mediolanum, Medionemeton. The divine names Camulus and Lugus are contained in the toponyms Camulodunum (in Britain) and Lugdunum (in Gaul).

The Latin names of Roman emperors can be combined with a Greek or Celtic word to produce a hybrid name: Flaviopolis, Hadrianopolis (Adrianople), Constantinopolis, Augustodunum, Flaviobriga, and so on. Flavius was the family name of the emperor Vespasian.

Perhaps the most interesting toponyms are those that come from an Indo-European (IE) root but are not Greek, Latin or Celtic. This suggests that other IE languages, to which we cannot even give accurate names (though nineteenth-century scholars called them “Illyrian” or “Ligurian”), were spoken in the Mediterranean before the classical languages developed. Thus in Italy we find the rivers Arnus (from IE **ar-* “to move” with suffix *-no*) and Ticinus (from IE **tek-* “to run, flow”). The IE root **ais-* “rapid” is seen in the Italian river names Aesis and Aesarus, as well as in numerous provincial toponyms. Several places in western Europe are named Bergium or Bergidum, from IE **bhergh-* “high, hill”. The cities Dertona (Italy) and Dertosa (Spain) are both derived from IE **dher-* “to hold firm”.

Though not all place-names have a clear etymology, and the meanings of some will remain obscure, scholars continue to study and elucidate their origins. These studies are making it possible to trace the distribution and overlap of various languages in different parts of the ancient world.