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The Roman place-names *Arbeia* and *Corstopitum*: a rejection of recently suggested meanings

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A recent paper by Dr. Andrew Breeze about certain Roman place-names of northern Britain, suggests that *Arbeia* means ‘stream of wild turnips’, and that *Corstopitum*, emended to **Corsobetum*, signifies a ‘place of birch seedlings’.¹ Within the last few years, however, an important suggestion and newly published evidence have shed light on both of these names, associated respectively with the Roman sites at South Shields and Corbridge. Ignorance of this recent work renders the newly suggested meanings, derived on purely philological grounds, highly questionable, and there is a danger that these suggestions might gain currency and mislead readers who are unaware of the other evidence available.

Dr. Breeze sees *Arbeia* as a river or stream name (-*eia*) with a reference to ‘wild turnips, rape’ (*erfin*), the British root *Arb-* giving *Erf-*. The only parallel toponyms cited are a stream (*Erfin*, at *Cwmmerfin*) in Wales and the Scottish river Irvine. In passing it may be noted that a river name hardly suits the Roman site at South Shields, which lies on a hill-top, the Lawe. In fact, a much more convincing explanation has been advanced by D. L. Kennedy. He has argued that the name is connected with the garrison placed at *Arbeia* by the *Notitia Dignitatum*, namely the ‘Tigris Bargemen’, *numerus barcariorum Tigrisiensium*.² The stretch of the Tigris from which the *barcarii* would have been recruited was under Roman control from the eastern victory of Septimius Severus in 198 until the surrender of territory by Jovian in 363. This area was known in

Aramaic as *Bet Arbāyē*, ‘the home of the Arabs’ (*Ārbāyā*). *Arbeia* could therefore mean *Ārbāyā*, ‘the place of the Arabs’, a direct reference to the Tigris Bargemen who may well have re-named the fort upon their transfer there in the late-Roman period, or whose unit-title may at some time have described them as Arabs. The recent excavations at South Shields have shown that the fort there was indeed re-planned for a new unit, perhaps the *barcarii Tigrisienses*, in the late-third or early-fourth century.³

Kennedy was able to cite numerous military bases in the Roman empire where part of the unit name became the place name, for example *Astura* (Zeiselmayer, Noricum) from *cohors I Asturum*. *Arbeia* is not derived from the unit name as we have it, but it could have been a deliberate evocation of the homeland of that unit. A possible parallel may be found on Hadrian’s Wall at Chesters. The recent discovery in north-west Spain (Asturias) of an inscription referring to a hitherto unknown people called the *Cilurnigi* has been taken to suggest that the toponym *Cilurnum* at Chesters, rather than having a local topographical explanation, may be a deliberate naming of the site after the recruiting area of unit stationed there from the 180s: *ala II Asturum*.⁴ That the *Astures* were not the first garrison of Chesters is immaterial, for there is no source to reveal what Chesters was called before the 180s, and the place could have been re-named upon the arrival of the *Astures*, as suggested in the case of the Arab unit at *Arbeia*.

Indeed a prime virtue of Kennedy’s suggestion is that it gives a possible explanation of

why the name *Arbeia* occurs only in the late-Roman *Notitia Dignitatum*, when one would expect to find this important military site in more than one source. If *Arbeia* was a late coinage associated with the late-Roman garrison, we might expect a previous name of the place to appear in sources reflecting the earlier period: Kennedy suggested the *Horrea Classis* of the Ravenna list,⁵ although there are other possibilities.

In the case of *Corstopitum* (long recognised as a corrupt form) Rivet and Smith had suggested a restoration of **corio-* or **coria-* followed by an ethnic name in the genitive plural: 'There may well have been. . . a former hosting-place at Corbridge, converted in Roman times into the centre of a *pagus*, called **Coria* plus whatever ethnic name we care to devise from *-stopitum* or *Lopocarium*'.⁶ Dr. Breeze's paper asserts that this should be rejected in favour of **Corsobetum*, 'place of the small birches', concluding that this 'would mean. . . that there is no reason to think Corchester was a *pagus* centre of the Brigantes'. The process by which **Corsobetum* is reached is by no means straightforward, and the writer is not able to produce any parallel place-name constructions. But the argument need no longer detain us, for it takes no account of the discovery at Vindolanda, since Rivet and Smith wrote, of writing-tablets which vindicate their deduction of the Roman name of Corbridge, at least in its first element. A strength-report of the 90s of the first century records that 337 members of the Vindolanda garrison *cohors I Tungrorum* were outposted 'Coris' – 'at *Coria*'.⁷ The name also occurs in a number of addresses on the Vindolanda documents and in an unpublished writing-tablet.⁸ This *Coria* is almost certainly Corbridge, and no contribution to the debate on the Roman name of the site which does not take this evidence into account can be taken seriously.

Both *Arbeia* and *Coria* seem to have survived into modern times, the former being recorded

as *Caer Urfa* by Leland, and the latter apparently being preserved in Corbridge/Corchester. There has been no attempt to show whether these later forms support the proposed re-interpretations of the names.

Place-names of the Roman period often present gross difficulties, and philology can have a great contribution to make in their elucidation, as Rivet and Smith's dissection of *Corstopitum* demonstrated. The cases above, however, illustrate the danger that can lie in taking a narrowly philological approach and in failing to take full account of all of the topographic, archaeological, and historical information (which in the case of Roman names has the potential to come from any part of the empire) that may have bearing on the name of a place.⁹

NOTES

¹ A. Breeze, 'The British-Latin Place-Names *Arbeia*, *Corstopitum*, *Dictim* and *Morbium*', *Durham Archaeological Journal*, 16 (2001), 21–5.

² D. L. Kennedy, 'The Place-name *Arbeia*', *Britannia*, 17 (1986), 332–3.

³ P. Bidwell and S. Speak, *Excavations at South Shields Roman Fort*, vol. 1 [Soc. of Antiqs. of Newcastle upon Tyne, Monograph 4, 1994], 33–42.

⁴ C. Fernández Ochoa and A. Morillo Cerdán, 'Cilurnum and *Ala II Asturum*. A new epigraphic document relating to the Spanish origin of a military toponym in Britannia', in W. Groenman-van Waateringe *et al.* (eds.), *Roman Frontier Studies 1995: Proceedings of the XVI International Congress of Roman Frontier Studies*, Oxford (1997), 339–41.

⁵ Kennedy, *Arbeia* (note 2), 333.

⁶ A. L. F. Rivet and C. Smith, *The Place-Names of Roman Britain*, London (1979), 323.

⁷ A. K. Bowman and J. D. Thomas, *The Vindolanda Writing-Tablets* (Tabulae Vindolandenses II), London (1994), no. 154 and esp. p. 96.

⁸ A. R. Birley, 'The Vindolanda writing-tablets', in P. Bidwell (ed.), *Hadrian's Wall 1989–1999: a summary of recent excavations and research*, Carlisle (1999), 37–47, esp. 44–5.

⁹ I am grateful to Paul Bidwell for discussing the contents of this note and making a number of helpful suggestions.