

VII

The Roman Place-names *Arbeia* and *Corstopitum*: a Reply

Andrew Breeze

In a recent paper the writer used Celtic philology to suggest meanings for certain British-Latin toponyms, as follows. Welsh *erfin* 'turnips' suggests *Arbeia* (South Shields) may mean 'stream where wild turnips grow'. Welsh *corfedw* 'small birch-trees' permits emendation of *Corstopitum* (Corchester), accepted by all as corrupt, to *Corsobetum*, understood as 'place of small birches'. Welsh *paith* 'wilderness' allows emendation of *Dictim* (Wearmouth?) to *Pectum*, perhaps meaning 'ravaged place'. Finally, Welsh *merf* 'insipid; powerless' suggests interpretation of *Morbium* (Piercebridge?) as 'place at the weakly-flowing stream'. These explanations are all paralleled by modern place-names in Wales and elsewhere.¹

These conclusions have now been attacked in a paper by Dr. N. Hodgson which accuses the present writer of 'ignorance' of recent work, calls these interpretations 'highly questionable', warns of 'the danger that these suggestions might gain currency and mislead readers', and sets out alternative solutions (which are called 'much more convincing') for two of them. *Arbeia* is referred to *Bet 'Arbaye* 'home of Arabs' in what is now Iraq; the first element of *Corstopitum* is emended to *Coria*, but with no meaning for the remainder.²

What follows replies to this. First, *Arbeia*. It is claimed that 'the only parallel toponyms cited are a stream (*Erfin*, at *Cwmerfin*) in Wales and the Scottish river *Irvine*', and that 'a river name hardly suits the Roman site as South Shields, which lies on a hill-top'. We may reject this. Welsh *Erfin* and Scottish *Irvine* effectively prove that the Celtic root *arb-* (later *erf-*) 'turnip' was a place-name element in Britain; they are substantial evidence for interpretation

of *Arbeia* as 'stream of wild turnips'; their implications cannot be airily dismissed. Nor is it true that hydronyms were not used of Roman camps located by streams. Rivet and Smith note that the suffix *-eia*, used of rivers, is also used of camps by rivers, such as *Tameia* (probably Cardean, Angus) and *Verbeia* (Ilkley, by the Wharfe). The camp at *Arbeia* may thus also have been called after a stream nearby. As regards the sense 'hill-top', the camp at South Shields stood, not on a lofty pinnacle, but a low rise just over 50 feet high. As such it resembled camps at *Danum* (Doncaster), *Deva* (Chester), *Dubris* (Dover), *Gariannum* (Burgh Castle, by the Yare), *Isca Dumnoniorum* (Exeter), *Lagentium* (Castleford), and very many other places. All these lay on hills above rivers; all were named after rivers. Archaeological maps show the Exeter camp on the 100-foot contour, actually higher than the South Shields fort.³ Yet all accept it is called after the river Exe below it. So the view that hydronyms were not used of Roman camps on hills is not tenable.

After that, the 'much more convincing explanation'. This is from a paper by D. L. Kennedy of Perth, Australia. It is agreed that *Arbeia* was garrisoned by men from the river Tigris, Iraq; and Kennedy states that their homeland (under Roman control from 198 to 363) was known in Aramaic as *Bet 'Arbaye* (with long final *a* and *e*) 'home of the Arabs' (*'Arbaya*). Following Kennedy, it is proposed that, when this force was based at South Shields in the late Roman period, it 'may well have renamed the fort upon their transfer there'. Alternatively, 'their unit-title may at some time have described them as Arabs'. It is admitted that *Arbeia* is not called after the unit's official name (*numerus barcariorum Tigriensium*), but

the conjecture is made that it 'could have been a deliberate evocation of the homeland of that unit'. Since this idea is less than compelling, we are referred to *Cilurnum* (Chesters), where Asturian troops from Spain were based from the 180s, linking the camp with the *Cilurnigi*, a people of Asturias. (This is countered below.) Dr. Hodgson's final comment here should be quoted in full. '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 renamed upon the arrival of the *Astures*, as suggested in the case of the Arab unit at *Arbeia*.'

There are five objections here. First, our form is *Arbeia*, not **Arbaia*, which is what we might expect if we had the Semitic name proposed by Kennedy. This difficulty simply cannot be ignored, and we should need evidence from elsewhere for such a sound-change in British Latin. Second, it is admitted that the men of Tigris (perhaps arriving about 300 AD) were not the original garrison at South Shields. Yet the fort must have been called something before that. The suggestion is thus made that the fort was given a new name, which was recognized by Roman officialdom. This is not likely. Change for change's sake is the rarest of military vices; and the need to avoid confusion (as also habit and inertia) means the Roman army's administration would resist attempts to alter the original name of the South Shields camp. Third, even if such a change were made, one would expect it to reflect the formal name of this unit (*numerus barcariorum Tigrisensium*), not *Arbaya* 'Arabs'. If this term gained currency in Britain (and that it did is speculation), it would have no official status. Fourth is the claim of a 'deliberate evocation of the homeland of that unit', which is supported by reference to *Cilurnum*. Whether this is a likely attitude or not, it runs into problems of chronology.

Here we come back to the supposedly 'immaterial' question of the name of Chesters before the Asturians arrived. Now, military sites must have names. In Roman times these generally came from some visible local feature. The claim

that the *Cilurnigi* of Asturias lie behind *Cilurnum* is philologically weak (especially given the existence of Old Welsh *cilurnn* 'bucket') and involves the renaming of a strategic site, a change that the Roman high command would be unlikely to regard with enthusiasm. The remark that we do not know what Chesters was called before the 180s, when the Asturians arrived, is thus irrelevant. It must have been called *something*. And it was most likely to have been called after a nearby landmark. The view that this fort may have been renamed, as that at South Shields may have been renamed, merely explains the unknown by the unknown. We need indisputable evidence for the derivation of British-Latin toponyms from foreign tribal names before confidence can be placed in this argument.

The fifth point is more general. The place-names of Roman Britain are overwhelmingly Celtic. Examples include *Blatobulgium* or Birrens (cf. Welsh *blawd* 'flour', *boly* 'leather bag'), *Bravoniacum* or Burwens, Cumbria (cf. Welsh *breuan* 'quern'), *Bremenium* or High Rochester (cf. Welsh *brefu* 'roar', applied to a torrent), *Calleva* or Silchester (cf. Welsh *celli* 'grove'), *Deva* or the Dee (Welsh *dwyes* 'goddess'), *Letocetum* or Old Wall, near Lichfield (Welsh *llwyd* 'grey', *coed* 'wood'), *Pennocrucium* or Penkridge (Welsh *pen* 'head', *crug* 'hillock'), *Regulbium* or Reculver (Welsh *rhy* 'great', *gylfin* 'beak, bill'), and very many others. There is thus an intrinsic likelihood that *Arbeia* is also Celtic. Yet we are told, in a paper which shows no knowledge of Celtic philology, that a proposed Celtic etymology for *Arbeia* is 'highly questionable' and that a Semitic one with no parallel whatever in early Britain is 'much more convincing'. This is improbable. As for the further claim that *Arbeia* is represented by Leland's (factitious?) *Caer Urfa*, this is dealt with below.

After *Arbeia*, *Corstopitum*. This must be corrupt. Rivet and Smith hence emended to *Coriosopitum*, with British *coria* 'hosting-place' as a first element. But they could not explain *-sopitum*. Here the present writer suggested a simpler emendation to *Corsobetum*, with a proposed sense 'place of small birch-trees'. This

is rejected by Dr. Hodgson, not on textual or philological grounds, but because of the toponym *Coria* in Vindolanda tablets, on which we are told 'This *Coria* is almost certainly Corbridge, and no contribution to the debate on the Roman name of this site which does not take this evidence into account can be taken seriously.'

There are three things to say here. First, we do not actually know the *Coria* of the Vindolanda tablets, though certainly meaning 'meeting place, hosting place', was Corchester, which lay fourteen miles east of the camp. The writer makes this statement with care, since it runs counter to most archaeological, epigraphic, and historical opinion in Britain. Nevertheless, the common belief that the *Coria* of the tablets was Corchester does not seem based on any indubitable fact. (It may be convenient to believe that it was, but the convenience of a belief is not the same as its truth, as Housman noted.) There is reason rather to identify it with *Curia Tectoverdorum*, in the immediate vicinity of Vindolanda. So much is shown by an altar (*RIB* 1695) found in 1835 at Beltingham, two miles south-east of the fort. Its inscription refers to CURIA TEXTOVERDORUM, and Rivet and Smith felt sure this was near Vindolanda.⁴ What must have happened is this. The editors of the Vindolanda tablets, knowing Rivet and Smith's emended form *Coriosopitum*, have therefore identified it with the *Coria* of their tablets.⁵ We are then told that the present writer's *Corsobetum* can be rejected, since *Coria* 'was' Corbridge. But to accept that *Coria* can be identified with Rivet and Smith's emended form *Coriosopitum* (which they offered with all scholarly caution) and then say the form *Coriosopitum* is surely correct, since it is confirmed by *Coria*, is to argue in a circle.

There is a second objection against taking the first element of *Corstopitum* as *Coria*, rather than identifying it with *Curia Tectoverdorum* (one of various *Coria* sites in North Britain). It leaves the rest of the name unexplained, when emended *Corsobetum* 'place of small birch-trees', paralleled by many toponyms in Britain, does explain it. This goes against a principle of textual scholarship (also set out by Housman)

that emendations which make sense of our forms are preferable to those that leave them unintelligible.

A third point may be made on *Corsobetum*. Hodgson describes the process by which it is arrived at as 'by no means straightforward'; an odd remark, since this emendation of *Corstopitum* involves less change than does Rivet and Smith's *Coriosopitum*. It needs merely the deletion of one letter (*t*) and alteration of *pi* to *be*. Occam's razor is valid for textual criticism as elsewhere: in matters of emendation, the simpler the better.

Finally, Hodgson observes that *Arbeia* and *Coria* have apparently survived into modern times as Leland's *Caer Urfa* and *Corbridge/Corchester* respectively. With the latter there is no great problem, though it may be observed that *Cor-* can hardly represent an equivalent of Welsh *cors* 'fen' (unlike, for example, the Gloucestershire village of Corse) for the following reasons.⁶ The Welsh word derives from Common Celtic **kork-s-* or **koruk-s-* (cf. Old Irish *curchas* 'reed').⁷ It is true that Celtic *ks* after a consonant in some cases became *ss* at an early date.⁸ But it would probably be unwise to invoke this as regards *Corstopitum*, with a proposed reading *Corssobetum* 'birch-tree marsh' (attractive though this might be for Corchester's position by reclaimed meadows), or a more archaic *Corcsobetum* 'birch-tree marsh', since, whereas *corfedw* 'small birches' is easily found in Welsh, this writer knows of no instance of *Cors-bedw* 'Birch Marsh'.

Caer Urfa is another matter. This form cannot derive from *Arbeia*. Leland is no authority for early Celtic names in England, least of all when his *Venantodunum* (Huntingdon) shows him making one up (as Camden pointed out).⁹ *Caer Urfa* could in any case not represent *Arbeia*, where we should expect raising of the initial vowel to give *Erf-* (but in no circumstances *Urf-*).

The paper here replied to ends with yet another warning, alerting readers to the dangers of a 'narrowly philological approach' to British-Latin toponyms. Whether this is so, or whether we need rather a warning against the warner, the reader may determine. We may go

further. As this writer has discovered from his publications, although there are many experts in Britain on archaeology, epigraphy, the classical languages, and history, there are few indeed who can analyse with competence the place-names of Roman Britain. The reasons for this are obvious. It is not that the subject is difficult. It is no more difficult or mysterious than the study of Classical Greek or Latin. It is because analysis of these place-names requires understanding of the Celtic languages (especially Welsh), and such knowledge will always occupy a marginal place in British academic life. Hence (despite the magnificent pioneering work of Rivet and Smith) the unsatisfactory discussions in standard works of *Alabum* or Llanfair-ar-y-bryn, *Arbeia* or South Shields, *Abravannus* or Piltanton Burn, *Cicucium* or Brecon Gaer, *Corieltavi* (a people of the Leicester region), *Corstopitum* or Corchester, *Dictim* or Weymouth, *Durnovaria* or Dorchester, *Durotrages* (a people of the Dorset region), *Graupius Mons* (a corrupt form) or Bennachie, *Lagentium* or Castleford, *Lavobrinta* or the Severn, *Lutudarum* or Wirksworth, *Mamucium* or Manchester, *Margidunum* or Castle Hill, *Morbium* or Piercebridge, *Nemetovala* or Lydney, *Nidum* or Neath, *Portus Adurni* (which is corrupt) or Portchester, *Trucculensis Portus* (perhaps in Skye), *Varis* or St Asaph, *Vedra* or the Wear, *Verubium Promontorium* (again, corrupt) or Noss Head, *Vindogara* or Troon, *Vindovala* or Rudchester, and *Virvedrum Promontorium* or Duncansby Head. For these a knowledge of Welsh provides etymologies,

improved readings, or locations. In short, the patient work of Welsh scholars in the twentieth century allows the solution of many British-Latin place-name problems (some of which have puzzled scholars for centuries), to say nothing of place-names on the Continent and personal names and related forms in inscriptions and other written matter from Britain; but only, of course, by those who are willing to learn Welsh.

NOTES

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

² Nick Hodgson, 'The Roman place-names *Arbeia* and *Corstopitum*: a rejection of recently suggested meanings', *AA*⁵, 30 (2002), 173–4.

³ Aileen Fox, *South-West England 3500 BC–AD 600*, Newton Abbot (1973), 167.

⁴ A. L. F. Rivet and Colin Smith, *The Place-Names of Roman Britain*, London (1979), 329.

⁵ A. K. Bowman, 'The Roman Imperial Army', in *Literacy and Power in the Ancient World*, ed. A. K. Bowman and Greg Woolf, Cambridge (1994), 109–25, at 110, gives the main references.

⁶ Richard Coates and Andrew Breeze, *Celtic Voices, English Places*, Stamford (2000), 298, and cf. Richard Coates, 'The Significances of Celtic Place-Names in England', in *The Celtic Roots of English*, ed. Markku Filppula et al., Joensuu (2002), 47–85.

⁷ Joseph Vendryes, *Lexique étymologique de l'ancien irlandais: Lettre C*, Paris (1987), 296.

⁸ K. H. Jackson, *Language and History in Early Britain*, Edinburgh (1953), 535.

⁹ Rivet and Smith, 514.