

Bann- in Early Names

Six place names from Roman Britain began with *Bann-*:

[Bannoalum](#) was probably the fort at Templeborough near [Wincobank](#) hill fort.

[Banna](#) = the fort at [Birdoswald](#) on [Hadrian's Wall](#).

[Bannaventa](#) = the settlement at Whilton Lodge near [Borough Hill](#) forts, Daventry.

[Βανντία](#) was probably the [Dundurn](#) hill fort with Roman [Dalginross](#) fort 7 km away.

[Bannavem taburnae](#), the birthplace of St Patrick was probably near Dumbarton.

[Bannium](#) was in south Wales, probably a day's journey from Caerleon.

And also [Gobannium](#) = Abergavenny Roman fort

Standard books about place names explain *Bann-* as Celtic, related to words in modern Celtic languages spelled *ban*, *bann*, *beann*, *benn*, etc that mean an object sticking up or out, most commonly a peak or summit but also a horn. For example, Scotland has hundreds of mountains with Gaelic names containing *beinn* or *bhein*, including the one anglicized as Ben Nevis. A proto-Celtic root **bando-* 'peak, top' has been inferred from the modern Celtic words (Matasovic, 2009) and traced back to PIE [*bend-](#) 'spike, needle, etc' (Pokorny, 1959).

Thinking about this throws up a series of questions:

1. If the primary sense in Celtic was 'prominent, high up', how does that differ from PIE **bha-* 'to speak' and its Germanic successors such as English *ban*, or the other **bha-* 'to shine' and its successors such as Old Irish *ban* 'white' or English *beacon*? Do we dare to overrule the Celtic **bend-* etymology and promote **bha-* instead?
2. If proto-Celtic **bando-* developed to Welsh and Irish words that mean 'horn', how does that differ from proto-Germanic **bainan* 'bone' and its successors such as Old English *ban* 'bone'?
3. Are Germanic *pin*, *pen*, *penis*, etc really the only cognates of **bando-*? Does bone really have no cognates outside Germanic? Claims that a PIE root had descendants only in Celtic and Germanic need to be regarded suspiciously.
4. Welsh/Cornish/Breton *pen* 'head' and Gaelic *cenn* are said to be a P-Celtic/Q-Celtic pair, but what is their deeper etymology and are they really distinct from *pinnacle*, *penis*, etc?
5. Where do words such as English *bane* and *fen*, Icelandic *beinn* 'straight', French *bain* 'bath' (from Latin *balneum*, perhaps originally **badneum*), or Gaelic *bannock* (from Latin *panis* 'bread') fit into the picture?
6. About 50 small bronze disks, probably apothecaries' weighing pans, marked *BANNA* or *BANNA F(ecit)* have been found across western Europe. A few similar names (*Bannus*, *Bannaeus*, *Bannonius* etc) have also been reported in ancient epigraphy.
7. Where do Irish *gobann* 'smith', and inscriptions mentioning *Cobanno*, *ΓΟΒΑΝΟ*, *Goban*, and *Xuban* fit in? They resemble the title [župan](#) 'administrator' used across much of central and south-eastern Europe, allegedly shortened to make *pan* mean 'Sir'? Are they related to Sanskrit *gopa* 'herdsman, guardian, king'.
8. Does Greek *βαννυσος* 'artisan' suggest that **bann-* was an early word, possibly from the Middle East, for skilled craftsmen?
9. How about ancient deities with names possibly associated with whiteness and derived from PIE **bha-* 'to shine'? Iberia had *Bandus* and *Bandua*. Thrace had a goddess *Bendis* or *Bendida*. Italy had the *fons Bandusiae* spring mentioned by Horace. The Irish river Boyne was associated with a goddess *Boand*.

Bannus was Latin for 'legal proclamation' (as in the *banns* of a marriage), but it was recorded only after the classical period, probably from [Germanic](#). In eastern France, where Germanic languages formerly met Latin in Frankish territory around the Vosges mountains, *ban* in place names means a piece of territory. This sense developed from the authority (*seigneurie banale*) exercised over that territory by its lord or religious institution. In much of south-east Europe, [ban](#) meant a ruler personally. Its etymology has been much discussed – possibly from Slavic, Turkish, or Persian – but its likely descendants appear in Romanian, Hungarian, Greek, and Mongolian, plus place names such as Banja Luka.

So which is better, the Celtic topographical sense or the Germanic administrative sense? Or are they the same? Does the proximity of *Bannaventa* to Daventry's stand-out hill set a pattern followed by the other four places in Britain? *Bannoalum*, *Bannavem taburnae*, and *Βανντία* are

adjacent to major hill-forts, but their locations are only guesses and there is a danger of circular logic. *Banna* Roman fort might have grown up over a native fort. *Bannio* in south Wales waits to be claimed by a big native fort!

What about Bann- places elsewhere in Europe? Here follows a partial list, originally drawn up while we were pursuing a (probably wrong) hypothesis that *Bann-* marked a watershed.

**Bannobriga* has been suggested as the original form of several names, notably of three places with names like Bañobre, near Corunna, in Galicia, north-west Spain (discussed by [Cossue](#)). One is where two small rivers flow off a modest hill into a bay off the Atlantic.

Brigobanne, mentioned in the Peutinger Table, was the Roman frontier fort at Hüfingen, in Germany. There is nothing specially high nearby, but the point where two smaller rivers unite to begin the Danube is just 2 km away.

Cantobennici mentioned by Gregory of Tours was by Clermont Ferrand, France's driest major city. It probably refers to a hill off which some small streams run.

Benacus was the Roman name for Lake Garda in Italy, which has a slightly phallic shape.

Bandritum was an ancient name for Bassou, France, with a modest ridge close to the river Yonne.

Lacroix (2005) described how various French dialects used words *bana/banna/bane/bano* to mean 'animal horn', presumed to be inherited from Gaulish. He also listed various place names that may once have started with something like **banno-*, though their earliest recorded forms almost all date from nearly a thousand years after the likely extinction of Gaulish.

Bannes (*Banna* in 909) is in the Champagne-Ardenne region of north-east France. This village is locally unremarkable, but it is on the Langres plateau, sometimes called the water tower of France because from it flow tributaries of the Meuse (towards the North Sea), Seine/Marne/Aube (towards the Atlantic), and Saone/Rhone (towards the Mediterranean).

Beneuvre (*Bennovra* in 1169) lies further south along the main watershed line of France, close to sources of tributaries of the Seine and the Rhone, in the Burgundy region. It sits in a valley below one of many instances of Mont Aigu, possibly a hill-fort site.

Banassac (*Banassacus* 1352, said to match *Bannaciacus* on Merovingian coins) was a site of Roman-era pottery production. It sits in a river valley below some moderate hills.

Baneuil (*Banolium*, 1200s) is on high ground above the river Dordogne. Houzé (1864) explained it with Latin *balneolum* 'little bath'. Much the same may hold for **Banneix** (*Banolh* 1100s).

In the south of France five high points with *bann*-like names really do fit the peak/spur/horn profile. **Banne d'Ordanche** is a prominent extinct volcano in the Puy-de-Dome region.

Montagne de Banne is quite high in the foothills of the Alps. **Les Bans** are among the highest points of the southern Alps. **Mont Ban** is a moderate hill north of Narbonne. **Mont de Ban** is somewhere in the Drome region. But just five names in a region full of hills and mountains is unimpressive. Also, Celtic was only ever one among many languages spoken around there (Latin, Greek, Ligurian, Iberian, Aquitanian). One could even argue that the Cimbri, Vandals, Visigoths, and Burgundians made it a Germanic/Latin boundary zone rather like the Vosges.

In Spain, at Fuentes de Ropel, near Benavente, an inscription in Latin rather like a land charter mentions **Voligobenda**, **Cillobenda**, **Vagabrobenda**, and **Caldobenda**. Their exact locations are unknown, but in that area they could not refer to very high peaks.

To summarise, there seems to be no really conclusive evidence about *banna* in place names. The old casual certainty that it came from Celtic **bando-* is clearly not justified, but our preference for Latin *bannus* is not strong, either.

References

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