COR-

About 18 ancient geographical names in Britain contain an element *cor-*. What did it mean?

One should never assume that any proper-name element, especially if it is only 3 or 4 letters long, meant the same everywhere it was used. Making that mistake is what lies behind a lot of nonsense written about ancient place names. For example, it is often claimed that names beginning with *Catu-* contain a Celtic word related to Welsh *cad* 'battle', whereas mostly it referred to low ground, related to Greek κατα downwards.

It always used to be assumed that Britain's earliest names were created by indigenous Britons who spoke dialects ancestral to the Welsh and Irish that started being written down after AD 600. However, as that little example shows, better guidance often comes from ancient Greek, which was written down from about 800 BC. But let's be absolutely clear that no one knows who created most ancient names. It is important to look at evidence not be dogmatic.

This website confronts a number of short name elements where it is necessary to ask how many distinct roots may be involved. Hence, for example, discussion articles about V-vowel-R and M-vowel-L. Now it is the turn of COR-.

Consider these observed names:-
Coria, Corbridge, Northumberland, on the Tyne near Hadrian's Wall
Κο(υ)ρια, a πολις of the Ωταδινοι, probably Arthur's Seat hillfort in Edinburgh
Κορια, a πολις of the Δαμνονιοι, on the upper Clyde, perhaps near Bothwellhaugh

Current thinking was set out well by Rivet and Smith (1979: pp 317-320). They endorsed an explanation by Kenneth Jackson that there was a British (Celtic) word **corio-* 'host, army', which primarily meant a group of people, a war-band. That got applied secondarily to 'hosting places', influenced by Latin *curia* 'tribal grouping, meeting place, court'.

Forty years on from R&S, it is possible to improve on their analyses of related names:-
Corstopitum was a road junction near Corbridge, not Corbridge itself.
Cordonovis on a Vindolanda tablet is an unidentified location.
CORIONOTOTAE on an inscription is Latin for 'skin-marked' (probably tattooed) bandits.
CURIA TEXTOVERDORUM in an inscription probably referred to a guild of weavers

A tile graffito ***corieltavvorom*** has been misinterpreted because people failed to realise that there was an attested place name *Eltavori*, which evidently had a *coria*, raising our total *coria*-count in Britain to four. The ***Corieltauvi* tribe is fictitious.

I started to question standard thinking about **corio-* only after working on Tacitus' story of *mons Graupius*, because the Cosmography's *Poreoclassis* cannot be the same as Ptolemy's **Ὀρρεα**, a πολις of the Ουενικωνες. When Ptolemy mentioned a πολις in Roman Britain he seems to have meant a native power centre, often a hillfort, as the local equivalent of 'city' around the Mediterranean. No Roman naval storehouse could be in a hillfort!

Then I started to find many of the best potential explanations of ancient Scottish names hiding in plain sight in a Greek dictionary. In particular, the Cosmography's *Coritiotar* (probably Ballantrae, Ayrshire) possibly began with χωριτης 'rural'. If so, maybe the Κοριτανοι (the actually attested name of the people mislabelled as ***Corieltauvi*) were just 'rural'. Could standard thinking – that the primary sense of *Coria* was a group of people – be wrong? Is it just due to "group think" by linguists with a poor grasp of human geography?

Celtic scholars are utterly unanimous on this point. They trace words such as Irish *cuire* 'troop, host' and Welsh *cordd* 'tribe, clan' back to an earlier form that Delamarre (2003:125; 2017:272) wrote as "Gaulish" *corios*, Matasovic (2009:218) wrote as "proto-Celtic" *koryo-*, and Falileyev (2010:16) wrote as *corio-*. Its PIE root would then be **koro-* 'war, army', with many descendants in Germanic languages (e.g. English herald and Hereford), plus a few cognates in other languages, including κοιρανος 'commander'.

The Bible uses χωρια to mean 'lands' belonging to a chief man. Might this be the real origin of *Coria*? Furthermore, Ptolemy's Ὄρρεα is generally assumed to have been transliterated straight from Latin *horrea* 'storehouses'. Might that be the same word too? If so, our British *coria*-count goes up to five.

Storage of a community's food reserve was one of the key responsibilities of ancient rulers, as documented, for example, in ancient Egypt, or in Inca *collcas*. And the Romans conquered more by mastery of logistics than by prowess in battle. The top suspect for the location of Ὄρρεα is a hill-fort, with a "summit enclosure, which is small for the strength of its defences". And Roman Corbridge is usually described as a "supply base".

C/H word doublets are common: English has century/hundred, corn/horn, canine/hound, etc. Some linguists can confidently describe the history of word borrowing between languages that led to them, but I do not want to dig too deeply here for fear of stirring up those who still perceive Welsh *coed* 'woods' (cognate with English heath) in the names Chatham and Penge.

The Greek consonant χ (*chi*) represents a sound that has disappeared from modern spoken English, but is very much alive in some languages, for example in Gaelic *loch* or German *achtung*. A trace remains in writing, with GH as a vowel modifier in night or borough, but most English speakers are baffled by the complexities of multiple *chi*-like sounds, as in Dutch (van Gogh) or Arabic (Gaddafi). Latin had no direct equivalent of *chi* and generally wrote it as C. Early English generally wrote it as H.

Χωριον 'place, piece of land, field, property, estate' was a diminutive of χωρα or χωρος 'land, country as opposed to town, landed estate', and is probably related to χωριζω 'to separate'. Wiktionary claims that χωρα has no known cognates, but Hesychius of Alexandria, quoted by Allcroft (1927:344-5) wrote that χωρος meant the same as κυκλος 'ring, circle' and στεφανος 'that which surrounds'. So the original sense of χωρος was an enclosure set aside for χορεια 'dancing, any circling motion', etc.

Allcroft went on to list many other "circle words", which include modern English circus, chorus, choir, church, corral, rick, etc. They show up in Welsh place names such as Bangor or Cor Enlli and ordinary words such as *gorsedd* and *gorlan*. Irish *cora* 'stone fence, palissade' shows up in the name Lough Gur. And Russian город 'town' shows up in many place names, such as Novgorod, and Belgrade.

Continental place names commonly cited to sustain the idea of *corio-* as Celtic for 'war-band' are unimpressive. The logic used seems to be conditioned by a romantic belief in France's national origin myth, that most of northern Europe formerly spoke Celtic and really ought still to be part of Greater Gaul.

The *Coriosolites* tribe occupied part of northern Brittany, and prospered on Iron-Age trade with Britain (notably to Hengistbury and the *Durotrages*) until their elite was slaughtered by Caesar (and a huge coin hoard was buried in Jersey). Their tribal religious centre may have been near Corseul, inland from St Malo. A large stone temple, among the grandest in Roman Gaul, was built around AD 70. Pliny (4,18) spelled the name *Coriosuelitae*, indicating a link to *Aquae Sulis* (Bath), whose name is possibly based on **sul* 'column, pillar', from an ancient word for 'tree' (Durham and Goormachtigh, 2021).

Coriovallum obviously ends like Latin *vallum,* 'wall, rampart', appropriate for a physical place, but Delamarre (2017:272) still clings to a Celtic word for 'prince'.

Vocaria (in Peutinger and Ptolemy, probably Treffen in Austria) has been claimed as the home of some people called **Vocorii* and then declared as Celtic for 'two troops', blithely ignoring Latin *voco* 'to call together, convoke'. The *Tricorii* tribe*,* encountered by Hannibal, presumably had three somethings, but it is easier to envisage three physical areas than a small tribe dividing its forces. That doubt holds even more for the *Petrocorii*, in Roman Aquitania, whose local speech in Roman times was probably early Basque, which has an obvious beginning in πετρος 'stone'. One might at least expect enthusiasts for the Celtic word for 'four' to point to something fourfold in the landscape.

Now let's look at other ancient British names that contain *cor-* but not *coria-*.

Corda in the Cosmography was probably at or near Kirkudbright, on the Solway Firth, with an estuary that might have been described by sailors as a *corda/χορδη* 'gut'. Ptolemy's Κορδα was a πολις of the Σελγοουαι, somewhere near Biggar in the Scottish lowlands, where one may suspect the derivative sense of cord like a joining piece of string.

Corsula looks like a diminutive of Latin *corsae*, derived from κορση '(fore)head', which we saw above in *Corstopitum*.

Cornovii is the usually cited name of two sets of people, one in north-east Scotland and the other in the west midlands of England. Ptolemy called them called Κορναουιοι, but other sources show a vowel O. If the name is split *Corn-ovii*, one naturally thinks of Latin *cornu* 'horn', or its Celtic cognates. However, it may be better to divide it *Cor-novii* and to invoke the ancient river name **navis/*novis*. The *Cor-* part might mean 'rocky', but ultimately the most PIE likely root is **(s)ker-* 'to bend, turn', making *Cornovii* the 'bendy river' people. The decisive argument is that there are two attested instances of a crossing (*Duro-*) of a meandering river **Coronavis*: *Purocoronavis* was almost certainly corrupted from **Durocoronavis* at a crossing of the river Neet near Bude in Cornwall; and *Durocornovio* at a crossing of the river Cole near Swindon, Wiltshire.

Κορινιον, a πολις of the Δοβουνοι in Ptolemy became *Cironium Dobuno* in the Cosmography, and is now Cirencester on the river Churn, which is a prime candidate to have been a **Coronavis*, even if a missing line in the Antonine Itinerary causes confusion there.

For the PIE root behind all of these names, as an alternative to PIE **(s)ker-* 'to bend, turn', there is also **gher-* 'to grasp, to enclose', whose many descendants in English include cohort, garth, hangar, horticulture, orchard, etc. Maybe a properly trained historical linguist can be persuaded to look at all the evidence. Until then, my own best guess is that those two roots should either be combined or they collided quite early in human history, at the point where intercommunal violence and defended settlements first arose.

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