

Dunum

At least 59 ancient place names have survived containing an element *dunum*, which meant something like ‘fort’ or ‘walled town’. Tables at the end of this article list 18 places from Britain and 41 from elsewhere across Europe whose early names contained *dunum* (or similar). But where did *dunum* come from, and how did it evolve after Roman times?

An ancient Celtic word **dūnon* can be reconstructed from Irish *dún* ‘fortress’ and Welsh *dinas* ‘fortress, town, city’, plus numerous modern place names from Dundee to Dinorwig. Latin texts started mentioning place names containing *dunum* after Caesar marched into Gaul. To understand these two pieces of history (and not jump to false conclusions about the prevalence of Celtic speech across ancient Europe) we need to look at the wider picture.

Dunum was part of the “extended Latin” vocabulary used to create early place names across the Roman Empire. This is proved by names such as *Caesarodunum* and *Augustodunum*, plus the wide distribution of *-dunum* names across Europe. Yet *dunum* does not appear in standard Latin dictionaries. Many other languages show a similar situation, where words that manifestly helped to build place names do not appear in dictionaries built from texts.

The Germanic languages have two types of word apparently related to *dunum*. The English words *down* and *dune*, plus *-don* in place names, meant ‘hill’, with an obvious Continental cognate in the name *Dunkirk*. The English word *town*, plus *-ton* in place names, originally meant ‘enclosure’, judging by cognates such as Dutch *tuin* ‘garden’ and German *Zaun* ‘fence’, but that may be a bit of a red herring since these words may have developed from a root unlike *dunum* and only converged with it later.

Margaret [Gelling](#) (1984:140-158) was sure that in English names *dūn* meant “hill with a summit that is suitable for a settlement-site”. Even though most such names were created before AD 730, at places where people must have lived since deep in prehistory, only the ‘hill’ meaning was appropriate, with no possibility that there ever was an enclosure. So what looks like one core word has developed three distinct senses inside Britain: low hill, fenced enclosure, and defensive walls.

The etymology and inter-language lending history of *dunum* are far from certain, but majority opinion tends to follow Calvert Watkins in reconstructing a PIE root **dheu-* ‘to close, finish, come full circle’ and therefore to suggest that **dhuno-* originally meant ‘enclosure’. If that is correct, one Latin descendant is *funus* ‘funeral, burial’ and one Greek descendant is *θάνατος* ‘death’. This D/F/TH consonant change may seem surprising, but it is actually fairly regular, and suggests that the common ancestor existed deep in prehistory.

A common link between death, burial, hills, forts, and enclosures can be found in a curiously neglected work [The Circle and the Cross](#) (in two volumes fully available online [here](#)) by Hadrian Allcroft (1927,1930). He noticed that early churchyards tended to be roughly circular and enclosed with walls or revetments (what archaeologists call [peristaliths](#)) that were not defensive. This led him to explain at length how the common place-name element *crug/cruc/crich*, often translated ‘mound’, came from the same root as *church*, *kirk*, *circus*, (hay)rick, and ring.

Evidently, across much of prehistoric Europe people felt that, when an important person died, it was right and proper to build a mound over the body and to surround it with an enclosure in stone, timber, or ditch-and-bank. Over the millennia and across a continent the ring-word developed a range of senses and physical realisations for Allcroft to recognise, but the mound-word has been protected from rational analysis by Celticist doctrine.

Presumably this burial practice was part of the cultural package that spread PIE speech out of its Pontic steppe homeland ([Anthony and Ringe, 2015](#)), to set beside the better-known drunken feasting plus guest/host and violence/protection relationships. It follows that **dhuno-* existed long before Celtic languages had differentiated and there is no good reason for deciding which language family donated *dunum* into Latin. It could have been influenced by [δυναμις](#) ‘power, might, strength’, because Greek was the second language of top Romans such as Caesar, and because the famous early (about 500 BC) “Celtic” fort at [Heuneburg](#) shows signs of having employed a Greek architect. Furthermore, *dû* meant ‘hill’ in Semitic languages such as [Akkadian](#), and there is even an [argument](#) that the letter D originated from pictograms of a hill.

So what can be deduced from the observed *dunum* place names? Here is a list of all 18 from Roman-era Britain:

Name	Where	Built by	Environment
Axelodunum	?Wigton	Romans	flat agricultural land
Branodunum	Brancaaster	Romans	coastal fort
Cambodunum	Slack	Romans	fort on platform by river
Camulodunum	Colchester	locals	enclosure on small hill
Camulodunum	?Hawksclough	locals	enclosure on small hill
Καμουλοδουνον	?Huddersfield	locals	big hill-fort
Δουνιον	?Hod Hill	locals then Romans	big hill-fort by river
Δουνον κολπος	?Ravenscar	Roman	coastal lookout station
Leviodanum	?Bertha fort	Romans	?flat riverside fort
Lugunduno	?Old Durham	?Romans	flat riverside fort
Margidunum	East Bridgford fort	Romans	flat agricultural land
Μαριδουνον	Carmarthen fort	Romans	river marshes
Milidunum	?near Totnes	?	?
Moridunum	?Sidbury Castle	locals	hill fort
Ρηγοδουνον	Elslack fort	Romans	low ground by stream
Segedunum	?Wallsend	Romans	or possibly South Shields
Serdunum	Wallsend fort	Romans	slope down to river
Uxelodunum	Stanwix	Romans	bank overlooking river

(Rejected: **Sorviodunum*, as a mistaken reinterpretation of *Sorbiodoni*; also DVN on a coin.)

On the whole, these places seem to be Roman defensive structures, even when they were built beside (or inside) native hill-forts, with names applied in Roman times, not before. The obvious exception is *Camulodunum*, but even so its coins date from after Caesar’s rampage through Gaul. The twelve distinct first elements are rather like *dunum*: a pan-European mixed bag, whose meanings can all be guessed, but which cannot be pinned down to the dictionary of a single language family. And here are *dunum* places elsewhere across Europe. Our work on this list, to go back to sources and to expunge circular logic, is incomplete, but it already goes beyond the list in [Sims-Williams \(2006\)](#), whose distribution map is on p329.

Ancient	Modern	Area	Notes
Lugdunum	Saint-Bertrand-de-Comminges	Aquitania	Ptolemy Strabo,
Σεγοδουνον	Rodez	Aquitania	Ptolemy Peutinger
Arialdunum	in Andalusia	Baetica	Pliny
<i>EST###DUNENSIS</i>	in Andalusia	Baetica	CIL 2,1601
Σεβενδουνον	?	Catalonia	Ptolemy (or ..ελλο..)
Καλαδουνον	?Vilar de Perdizes	Portugal	Ptolemy

<i>Dunense Castrum</i>	?Dun-sur-Meuse	Belgica	?
<i>Lugdunensis</i>	?Laon	Belgica	doubtful
<i>Noviodunum</i>	Pommiers	Belgica	Caesar 2,12
<i>Virodunum</i>	Verdun	Belgica	IA, ND, NG
<i>Acitodunum</i>	Ahun	Celtica	Peutinger
<i>Augustodunum</i>	Autun	Celtica	
<i>Caesarodunum</i>	Tours	Celtica	
<i>Exolidunum</i>	?Issoudun	Celtica	?messy
<i>Lugdunum</i>	Lyon	Celtica	many
<i>Noviodunum</i>	Nevers (on Loire)	Celtica	Caesar 7,55
<i>Noviodunum</i>	?Neung-sur-Beuvron	Celtica	Caesar 7,12&14
Νοιοδουνον	Jublains	Celtica	Ptolemy
<i>Uxellodunum</i>	Vayrac	Celtica	Caesar 8,32&40
<i>Vellaunodunum</i>	near Montargis	Celtica	Caesar 7,11
Εβουροδουνον	Brno	Czechia	also Ρεβουρόδουνον
Καρροδουνον	Rymarov	Czechia	Ptolemy 2,11,29
Μελιοδουνον	Pisek	Czechia	Ptolemy 2,11,14
<i>Lopodunum</i>	Ladenberg	Germany	Ausonius , stone
Λουγιδουνον	Krosno Odrzanskie	Germany	Poland
Σεγοδουνον	Bad Wimpfen	Germany	Ptolemy
Ταροδουνον	Riegel	Germany	or Ταρούδωνον
<i>Eburodunum</i>	Yverdun	Helvetia	TP, inscriptions
<i>Minnodunum</i>	Moudon	Helvetia	
<i>Noviodunum</i>	Nyon	Helvetia	on Lake Geneva
Δουνον	Dinn Riogh	Ireland	Ptolemy
<i>Noviodunum</i>	near Zagreb	Pannonia	
Καρροδουνον	Gradina	Pannonia	Ptolemy ?where
<i>Arandunum</i>	nr Calvisson	Provincia	inscription near Nimes
Καμβοδουνον	Kempton	Raetia	Ptolemy, AI, TP, ND
Καρροδουνον	Gauting, Bavaria	Raetia	Ptolemy 2.12.8
<i>Parrodunum</i>	Burgheim	Raetia	ND
<i>Noviodunum</i>	Isaccea	Romania	TP ND
<i>Luguidunec</i>	Nostra signora di castro	Sardinia	AI
Καρροδουνον	Zarnowice	Sarmatia	near Dacia P 3.5.30
<i>Singidunum</i>	Belgrade	Serbia	AI, Ptolemy, Scordisci

Rejected: **Melodunum*, as a mediaeval reinterpretation of Caesar's *Metiosedum*; and many possible presumed -*dunum* places in the list of a hundred candidates by Lacroix (2003: 126-130) with no ancient attestation, which include several claimed **Lugdunum* successors.

On the whole, these European names seem broadly similar to the British ones listed above, with only weak linkage to Celtic speech in terms of geography or of first-element roots. When the Romans expanded north of the Alps they evidently encountered tribal power centres not adequately described by existing Latin words for fortified places: *oppidum*, *castrum*, *castellum*, *burgus*, *moenia*, *urbs*, etc. It is entirely possible that Romans picked up the precursor of *dunum* from Celtic speakers, but they might also have done so from speakers of Germanic, or other long-lost dialects.

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