

-acum

An enormous number of place names in France descend from earlier forms that may have ended in *-acum* or *-iacum*. French Wikipedia has an informative [article](#), which lists many example names and shows maps of how these names evolved into a wide range of later forms in different regions.

This summary in English of current French thinking is based on some text by Andrew McKenzie:- The suffix *-acum*, when added to a noun, gave a meaning of ‘place associated with the noun’. So, for example, *Aurelius* + *acum* gave *Aureliacum* (Aurelius's place), leading to modern Aurillac and Orly. And so on. The suffix *-acum* didn't just become *-ac*, but a large number of different endings, depending on the language and dialect of the region. Strewn about France and its neighbouring countries are endings like:

-at (*Royat*, Puy-de-Dôme)

-aix (*Vilpaix*, Allier)

-ai (*Tournai*, Belgium)

-ay (*Bavay*, Nord-Pas-de-Calais)

-aye (*Bouaye*, Loire-Atlantique)

-ieux (*Messimieux*, Ain)

-ecques (*Ecquedecques*, Nord-Pas-de-Calais)

-ex (*Thônex*, Switzerland)

-y (*Fleury*, numerous communes all over; *Bréquigny*, part of *Rennes*, Ille-et-Vilaine)

-ago (*Asiago*, the Italian city with the famous cheese)

McKenzie viewed *-acum* as an adjectival ending (a bit like *-ic* in English), which “came from the Gaulish language, a Celtic language spoken in what is now France before the Romans conquered the place.” A totally different view comes from Michael Goormachtigh, in a forthcoming book, which essentially suggests that “Gaulish” and “Celtic” are red herrings, based on obsolete dogma, full of circular logic, like so much other nonsense written about [Celtic toponymy](#).

Here in the *Romaneranames* website, we are concerned with names actually attested in Roman times, mainly in Britain. The vast majority of those names refer to human geography: local topography, military control, economic activity, and water as a means of transport or a flood risk. Assertions of ownership, by an emperor, local bigwig, or invading tribe do exist, but they are rare until after the end of Roman imperial control.

It seems plausible that many post-Roman place names were created after *-acum* had lost an original topographical sense and had become just a fashionable add-on to new place names. Compare the use of *-gate* and *-ville* in recent years. Or of *-ton*, *-ham*, and *-ley* in medieval names. Or the way that *wíc/vicus* lost its original meaning of ‘exchange’ and degraded into not much more than ‘village’.

Maybe *-acum* was a pan-European word, not something that developed in languages close to ancient Irish and Welsh and was then donated to other Indo-European languages. That might explain why Iberia (thought to be where Celtic languages developed) seems to show no evidence for *-acum*, and Ireland and Wales show little.

The original source of *-acum* may be the PIE root [*ak-](#) ‘sharp, acute, angular’, which was very productive and had descendants in almost all known Indo-European languages, including:

Greek [ἀκμή](#) ‘point’, [ἀκίς](#) ‘needle, splinter, arrow, etc’

Latin [acer](#) ‘sharp’, [acus](#) ‘needle’; [ocris](#) ‘rugged mountain’

Old English *ecg* ‘edge’; German *Eck* ‘edge’, *Ecke* ‘edge, corner’

Old Irish [ochair](#) ‘edge, border, rim’; Welsh [eithin](#) ‘gorse’

Russian [острый](#) ‘sharp’; Sanskrit *ásra* ‘corner’; Tocharian *ak* ‘end’; etc; etc.

Its widespread sense development towards metaphorical sharpness or sharp objects in the natural world can be illustrated by the English words *acid*, *acanthus*, *acme*, *acne*, *acute*, *mediocre*, *oxygen*.

In Roman Britain we have 6 *-acum* names that are clearly angular:

[*Bravoniacum*](#) (Kirkby Thore) a Roman fort at the apex of marshy ground.

[*Eburacum*](#) (York) a Roman fortress nestled in the confluence of two rivers.

[*Επιακον*](#) (Whitley Castle) a lozenge-shaped Roman fort on the edge of hills.

[*Galacum*](#) – location uncertain, but probably at the apex of the river Wyre

[*Sulloniacis*](#) (Brockley Hill) on Watling Street at the apex of the Silk Stream.

[*Vagniacis*](#) (Springhead) a Roman settlement at the apex of the river Ebbsfleet.

Plus 3 that are debatable:

[*Bremetenacum*](#) (Ribchester) may contain Latin *tenax*

[*Καρνονακαι*](#) tribe in northern Scotland may contain Greek words for ‘ram fleece’.

The suffix *-ca*, e.g. in [*Isca*](#) (many), [*Evidensca*](#) (Berwick-on-Tweed), and *Οβoka* (river Liffey at Dublin) may mark angular river estuaries, but may come from a word related to gape.

In Britain, some modern names on the western (Celtic) side may come from earlier *-acum* forms, now represented by *-iog* etc, regarded as banal adjectival endings, as in France. Examples include [*Brycheiniog*](#) (*Brecknock*), [*Ffestiniog*](#), [*Botallack*](#), and Kenidjack. On the eastern (Germanic) side, few names are currently suggested to have originally contained *-acum*; not even by Margaret Gelling! Many names end or ended in *-dge*, *-eg*, *-ecg*, *-ay*, etc, which might repay investigation. Obvious suspects include Bungay, Frenchay, Harnage, and Cressage, where most have existing etymology guesses in books to be considered, and there is great danger of circular logic if one goes looking for an angular shape.

Examining the local topographies of all 400 or so candidate names for *-acum* origin listed [here](#) in Wikipedia would be an immense job, since so much has changed over the centuries in drainage, tree cover, urbanization, etc. Here are a few samples that I have looked at already:

They serve mainly to show why French investigators have failed to discover any pattern so far!

Last edited by Anthony Durham 8 January 2024. This text is in a very preliminary state, and is made available on www.romaneranames.uk to invite comments and suggested improvements.