

# Why so much Greek?

There appears to be a surprising amount of Greek in the Roman-era names of Britain. Far more than Celtic, for example! Here are some possible reasons for that observation.

1. Ptolemy wrote in Greek. In some cases his spellings appear to be transliterated out of Latin, but in many more cases they look pure Greek. The Ravenna Cosmography is written in Latin but many of its names look as if they have been transliterated out of Greek, suggesting that some of its sources were similar to Ptolemy.
2. Greek may be a surrogate for other languages that have disappeared. Early Greek literacy led to the present enormous size of dictionaries of ancient Greek, which have contributed hugely to reconstructed PIE.
3. Latin is stuffed with Greek loan-words. In some fields, such as seafaring and religion, perhaps half of the Romans' vocabulary is lifted straight from Greek. Maybe the Roman "cultural cringe" led to a fashion for using Greek in other, less well documented domains.
4. Roman aristocrats such as Caesar were taught Greek as their second language. The entire eastern half of the Empire went on to adopt Greek as its main language and at least some of the Roman troops and sailors in Britain might have grown up speaking Greek.
5. Certain classes in Roman society tended to have Greek names and probably espoused Greek culture. Notably they included doctors, scribes, and certain types of slave, so maybe one can generalise to a whole class of "technicians".
6. Romans invaded Britain partly in search of silver. The technology for finding, mining, and smelting lead, to extract its content of silver, was developed at Laurium, near Athens, and was initially a Greek speciality.
7. The prestige language of southern Gaul, around the Rhone, was Greek before Latin took over. Pytheas of Marseille, who visited Britain in about 325 BC was a Greek-speaker. Much of southern Italy used Greek, and the coins of Germanic tribes up the Danube testify to early Macedonian influence too.
8. Parts of Roman Britain appear to have been surveyed in some detail, to allocate land for farming and to raise taxes. The technology used in land surveying and mapping was rooted in Greek mathematics (Gallo 2004).

We would welcome readers' opinions on the relative importance of these factors.

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