

Isca

At least ten rivers in Britain have names that probably descend from an original form *Isca*. What sets them apart from hundreds of other British rivers is that they might have been used by the Roman navy, the *Classis Britannica*, to transport supplies from the sea to forts while the surrounding territory had not yet been fully pacified. The pattern, once spotted, is very striking, because most of these rivers pass by at least two significant Roman sites.

Usk (S Wales) beside [Caerleon](#) (*Isca*) legionary fortress with riverside wharf, [Usk](#) (*Burrium*) fort, [Abergavenny](#) (*Gobannio*) fort, near [Pen-y-Gaer](#) fort, to [Brecon Gaer](#) (?*Alabum*) fort.

North Esk (NE Scotland) past [Stracathro](#) (?*Iberran*) fort.

South Esk (NE Scotland) from Montrose Harbour (?*Trucculensis Portus*) past [Inverquharity](#) (*Ravatonium*) fort.

Esk (Lothian) beside [Inveresk](#) (?*Panovius*) fort, [Dalkeith](#)/Smeaton camp, [Lugton](#) camp, [Elginhaugh](#) fort, [Eskbank](#) camp.

Esk (N Yorkshire) through [Whitby](#) (*Antrum*) estuary to [Lease Rigg](#) fort.

Esk (Cumbria) past [Ravenglass](#) (*Tunnocelum*) fort and [Hardknott](#) (*Iulioconon*) fort, to [Ambleside](#) (*Glannoventa*) fort.

Esk (SW Scotland) [Gilnockie](#) camp, [Netherby](#) (*Castra Exploratorium*) fort [Broomholm](#) (*Brocara*) fort, etc.

Exe Devon *Axium* estuary past [Topsham](#) (*Termonin*) port to [Exeter](#) (*Isca*) legionary fortress leading to [Cullompton](#) and [Tiverton](#) forts.

Axe (Somerset) past Uphill (?*Alauna*, ?*Ουεξαλλα εισχυσις*) to [Charterhouse](#) (probably not *Ισκαλις*) lead mines and fortlet.

Axe (Devon) [Woodbury Farm](#) (?*Alauna silva*) fort.

Three other minor rivers have potentially similar names but no known Roman installation: Exe Water in Cornwall, Ysgethin on the coast of Snowdonia, and Nant Wysg inland from Aberaeron, Wales. NB Watch out that English Heritage and other websites quote a lot of wrong names for Roman sites, because they do not have the resources to keep up with the latest thinking!

The etymology of *Isca* has been much discussed, especially in the light of similar river names elsewhere in Europe, including [Isar](#) (German Tyrol), *Isara* ([Isère](#), Savoy), *Isara* (Oise, France), [Isarco](#) (Italian Tyrol), [Isel](#) (Austria), [Isen](#) (Bavaria), [Istra](#) (near Moscow), [Ijzer](#) (Flanders), [Ijssel](#) (Netherlands), [Jizera](#) (Czechia), [Yzeron](#) (Savoy), *Ister* ([Danube](#)), [Ισκαμνιον](#) (Ireland), plus other possible examples. As [Delamarre](#) (2003:191) explained, this wide range shows that *Is*- rivers names were pan-European and not distinctively Celtic. The deep PIE root must be **ei-* ‘to go’, which most authors accept developed to **eis-* ‘to move quickly’. None of the *Is*- rivers are especially fast-flowing; maybe they allowed boats to move quickly.

Gaelic *uisce* ‘water’ (as in whiskey) probably came from the same root as water, while *iasc* ‘fish’ probably arose from a root like Latin *piscis* losing its P, but there is no evidence that Gaelic speakers were around in Roman Britain to influence the development of *Isca*. Greek [Ισκαω](#) ‘to go (repeatedly)’, with an SK frequentative suffix on the basic **ei-* root, could describe the pattern of Roman use described above. Actually the best fit to Roman usage is [Ισχυς](#) ‘power, the main body of troops’.

A large fraction of all nautical words in Latin are loans from Greek (such as ship’s captain *ναυκληρος*) but we know of no evidence to support a speculation that Roman navy logistics around Britain was a Greek specialty. And remember, too, that travel routes on foot or by wagon generally followed river valleys.

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