

Lugu- and Leuco-

Many ancient proper names began with *Lug-*, *Leuc-*, or similar forms. Delamarre (2007) listed 18 “Celtic” personal names beginning with *Luc-*, 14 with *Lug-*, 11 with *Leuc-*, 8 with *Louc-*, and 3 with *Lux-*. Checking that list against Clauss-Slaby’s epigraphic [database](#) and other sources could probably expand that list up to a hundred ancient individuals.

Ancient places named [Lug\(u\)dunum](#) have been much discussed. France had three definite early examples:

- Lyon, capital of Roman *Gallia Lugdunensis* (Caesar’s *Celtica*), where the modern city is on flat land overlooked by a big hill beside a confluence of the rivers Rhone and Saône;
 - Laon, in Roman *Belgica*, whose *montagne couronnée* overlooks the *plaine Champenoise*, and which is top candidate to be *Lugduno* in the [Endlicher Glossary](#);
 - Mont-Laiü by St Bertrand de Comminges, in Roman *Aquitania*, where the Λουγδουνον κολωνια (Ptolemy 2,7,22) [border post](#) overlooked a flood plain of the river Garonne.
- 19 more French places listed by [Lacroix](#) (2007:157-164) may have been called **Lugdunum* (though often only after Roman times). They too were generally prominently visible, and tended to lie near ancient tribal boundaries.

[Lugduno](#) in the Netherlands is now under the North Sea 300 metres off Katwijk. Ptolemy’s Λουγδουνον was probably modern [Krosno Odrzańskie](#), at the confluence of the rivers Bóbr and Oder. In Britain, [Lugunduno](#) was possibly near Durham. There are well established locations for [Luguvalium](#) (Carlisle) and [Leuca](#) plus *Leucarum* (Loughor near Swansea), but only plausible guesses for [Leucomagno](#), [Leugosena](#), [Λουκοπιβια](#), and [Lucotion](#). The common feature among these places seems to be a wide field of view across sandbanks, rather than great height.

It is tempting to see the same sense in modern British names such as Looe, plus the river Lugg and the Isle of Wight local word luck ‘pool of water left among the rocks by the receding tide’. Old English *leah* was defined by Gelling and Cole (2003: 237-242) as ‘forest, wood, glade, clearing, later pasture, meadow’. It became one of the commonest elements in English place names: Lee, Lea, -ley, etc.

Everything mentioned so far can reasonably be traced back to PIE **leuk-* ‘light, brightness’, which has descendants in most Indo-European languages (such as Lucifer, leukocyte, and lightning). With geographical names the key idea seems to be open visibility more than light colour (chalk, snow, etc). For forms containing a letter G the best parallel seems to be early German *luogen* or dialectal *lugen* ‘to look, to show’, cognate with the English word look.

Celtic scholars are reluctant to accept this analysis, partly in order to claim all the early *Lug-/Leuk-/etc* names as linguistically Celtic, but mainly to suggest that an ancient god [Lugus](#) evolved into Irish *Lugh* and Welsh *Lleu*, as discussed, for example, [here](#). Actually there is little evidence of genuine religious continuity from Roman (pagan) times into literate (Christian) Irish or Welsh societies, as distinct from reinvention on ancient models or persisting social structures (Hutton, 2013:361-370). One might as well argue for a spiritual link between Roman Mars and modern Saint Martin in the Fields!

The case for an ancient god *Lugus* was discussed at length by [Olmsted](#) (2019:315-323). *Lugus* is attested particularly in inscriptions from Iberia analysed by [Eska](#) (2006). It is inherently reasonable that there were ancient gods of light, or of light places, and that divine names could form the basis of personal names. But did gods give names to light places, or did light places give names to gods? We favour the latter possibility.

That *lugen* parallel implies that early man perceived looking as an active process projecting out from the observer, rather than as a passive process receiving light from the environment. This is not as daft as it might seem. As a matter of biology, the internal image of the world seen by a human brain is a heavily interpreted construct, very different from a photograph. And modern physicists insist that nothing exists until it is observed.

There are many more complications, such as the pottery marked [F LUGUDU](#) made near St Albans, where an ancient trade name (“Lyonnaise style”) seems more likely than another place called *Lugdunum*. And the difficulty in distinguishing English place names based on *leah* from ones based on low ground and lakes/lochs etc also existed in the ancient world, because Strabo mentioned a marsh called [Λουγγεον](#) near Trieste.

A competing etymology comes from the idea of binding people together. [Woodhuizen](#) (2012) noted that Lycia, Λυκία in Greek, was a league of cities, and suggested that several peoples had analogous names, including the [Λουγιοι](#) in north-east Scotland, another Λουγιοι in Germany/Poland, and the Λουγιονοι in north-west Iberia. PIE dictionaries currently show [*leugh²](#)- ‘oath’ as a separate root from [*leig-](#) ‘to bind’ but they may belong together.

The Endlicher Glossary’s translation of *Lugduno* as *desiderato monte* has puzzled commentators who failed to realise how close in meaning Latin [lugeo](#) ‘to mourn’ comes to [desidero](#) ‘to miss’. The PIE origin of *lugeo* is uncertain: De Vaan (2008) favoured [*\(s\)leug-](#) ‘to swallow’ over [*leug-](#) ‘to break’, without even mentioning [*leugh¹](#)- ‘to tell a lie’. Perhaps it relates to the practice, across ancient Europe, of gathering in circles around burial mounds situated for maximum visibility on hills, discussed at length by Allcroft (1927, 1930).

Early monks loved making puns based on etymological analyses that would not always fit modern thinking. A monk could easily have analysed *Luguvalium* as Latin for ‘mournful farewells’, noticed the similarity of *Camlann* to [Camboglanna](#) and of *Avalon* to [Aballava](#), and transposed the story of Arthur’s death from the Humber estuary up to Hadrian’s Wall. The essential point to notice is just how little was known in early mediaeval times, even by the most educated men, of their pre-Christian past.

Clearly there is no single explanation for *Lug-/Leuk-/etc* names that will satisfy everyone. We suspect that historical thinking about ancient religion has been distorted by romantic nationalism. Ideally, the word Celtic should be banished from the discussion. Surely the psalmist was right with “*I will lift up mine eyes to the hills*”.

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