

Alauna

Alauna is one of the commonest ancient names in Britain and on the Continent. It appears to be an adjective that served primarily as a river name, applied secondarily to forts and settlements near the mouths of those rivers, and to people and gods from there.

The adjective-forming ending *-auna* might be related to “Gaulish” *onno*, which [Endlicher’s Glossary](#) translated as Latin *flumen* ‘river’, and to Latin *unda* ‘wave’ and to PIE **(s)nau-* ‘to flow’ and to the *-na* endings of rivers (notably *Matrona*=Marne, *Sequana*=Seine), springs (e.g. [Divona](#)), or goddesses (e.g. Roman *Bellona*).

Initial *Al-* came from PIE **al-* ‘to grow, to nourish’, whose many descendants include Latin *alo* ‘to nourish’ (hence *alumna* ‘foster daughter’), various Germanic words such as Old English *alan* ‘to produce’ and Gothic *alandis* ‘nourished’, and Celtic words for ‘brood’ such as Irish *ál*.

The essential meaning of ‘**nourishing river**’ is so clear that one must wonder why some linguists make such heavy weather of it, not much improving on Ekwall (1928:6-8), who wrote:

“As regards the etymology of the stem *Alaun-*, all that can be said with certainty is that it must be an old British stem, or it would not have been so widely spread or so diversified in meaning. It is hardly probable that it originally denoted a deity and that other applications of the stem developed out of that. Nor is it probable that the various meanings had their starting point in the use of the stem as a river-name. More probably we have to assume a stem with a meaning that rendered it apt to be used in forming names of rivers, deities, persons. Some meaning such as ‘holy’ or ‘mighty’ would give a suitable starting-point.”

Delamarre (2003:37) explicitly suggested *rivière abondante en poissons* but dutifully reported (like R&S, Falileyev (2010:6), and others) that **albho-* ‘white, gleaming’ and **al-* ‘to wander’, related to Latin *ambulo* ‘to walk about’, have also been suggested. Nicolaisen (2001:240) explicitly called *Alauna* “pre-Celtic” and invoked **el-/*ol-* ‘to flow, to stream’.

Past discussions of *Alauna* have rarely asked what characteristics distinguish an *Alauna* river from an *Isca*, *Navis*, Avon, Leven, Tay, Thames, etc. [Lacroix](#) (2005: 220-4) listed about 30 place names in France that may descend from *Alauna*. Most are in the former province of *Celtica*, situated where an ancient road crossed a small river, places where thirsty travellers, men and beasts, could find water. All Germanic languages have words for ‘eel’, with early spellings similar to *al*, which Watkins (2011:23) generalised to PIE **el-³* ‘fish’. Possibly the most direct way to extract food from a river is to catch fish, which early people did most successfully with [fishing weirs](#), especially on rivers with salmon and trout runs, and by trapping [eels](#). That is why the following text highlights evidence that *Alauna* rivers seem to be relatively small and rich in fish.

1. *Alauna*, at position 118 in the Ravenna Cosmography, was probably the Roman fort at [Maryport](#) NY039372, on the river [Ellen](#) which is gentle for Cumbria and has salmon and trout.
2. *Alauna* is at position 78 in the Cosmography, where its track executes a big jump from [Brinavis](#) (Brentford) to [Utriconium Cornoviorum](#) (Wroxeter). Out of several candidate places close to that line, the strongest is probably Alcester, Warwickshire, with a confluence of the rivers now called Alne and Arrow, an important crossroads, a Roman fort, and a Roman walled town, clustered around SP088572 ([Booth](#), 1994). Less likely is the Roman town at Alchester, Oxfordshire, at SP57242025, near modern Bicester, beside a [floodplain](#) more than a serious river. Also possible is the [Greensforge](#) complex of Roman forts and camps around SO863886, by what is now a [canal](#) leading to the Severn.
3. *Alauna*, at position 263 in the Cosmography, among its tour of harbour estuaries, was somewhere in East Anglia, perhaps beside the former Roman fort at [Walton Castle](#). On a modern map one tends to notice the combined estuary of the Orwell (leading to Ipswich) plus the Stour (towards Manningtree) or the estuary of the Debden leading to Sutton Hoo. However, the main [Roman harbour](#) (perhaps where North Sea vessels docked, paid customs duties, and transhipped goods into river craft) was a smaller inlet between the two. Serious coastal erosion around there destroyed Walton Castle off Felixstowe only in the last 300 years or so, but also probably another Roman fort on the West Rocks off Harwich. Only a tiny vestige of that presumptive *Alauna* now

survives, as the small valley and stream known as The Dip, in Old Felixstowe. This location resembles Lepe, Hampshire (possibly *Regno*) and Portskewett, Monmouthshire (probably *Iupania*) in that a Roman road ended at a small river inlet that has since largely vanished. Descendants of an original name *Alauna* may include the stream (of unknown original name) whose valley is now occupied by Alton Water reservoir beside Alton Hall, on the Harwich side, and Alderton (Domesday *Alretuna*) on the Felixstowe side.

4. Αλαωνου ποταμου εκβολαι river mouth of Ptolemy 2,3,4 (at coordinates 17°40' 52°40', see [Stückelberger et al.](#)) maps to somewhere around Bridgwater Bay, in north Somerset, where the modern river [Brue](#) is flanked by the Axe and the Parrett, but the whole pattern of water courses has been much altered, both in Roman and in Norman times (Rippon, 2007; [Williams](#), 1970:70). All the Somerset Levels used to be rich in eels and had many mediaeval fish-trap weirs. *Alauna* at position 32 in the *Cosmography*, must have been on those waterways, but there are multiple candidates. [Alstone](#) is near the modern mouth of the Brue (where there would have been a small creek in Roman times), and [Alhampton](#) is at its other end on the tributary river [Alham](#), near the Fosse Way. Probably too far away are [Aller](#), well south near the Parrett, and Alcester, formerly called [Alyncester](#), in Dorset, next to Shaftesbury in the valley of the Stour. Most likely is probably [Allerton](#) (several modern place names, *Alwarditona* in Domesday Book) around ST401512, where streams tended to flow northwards toward the Axe in Roman times, like the later Pilrow Cut.

5. *Alauna* at position 187 in the *Cosmography* was probably also the Αλαωνα of Ptolemy 2,3,10, at 20°20' 58°40', a *πολις* of the [Ωταδηνοι](#), at number 79 of [Kleineberg et al.](#)'s list. This would fit the Roman fort at [Low Learchild](#), Northumberland, on the river Aln above Alnwick, at NU101123. [Marx \(2013\)](#) disagreed with this location but did not suggest an alternative. The [Aln](#) is a small river with a good run of trout and salmon.

6. Αλαωνου ποταμου εκβολαι, of Ptolemy 2,3,6, 21°40' 58°30', is at number 55 in the list of [Kleineberg et al.](#), who placed it at the mouth of the river Aln. Marx (2013) later preferred the mouth of the Tweed, but that does not seem entirely convincing. The [Tweed](#) ranks among the very top salmon rivers in the world.

7. Αλαωνα of Ptolemy 2,3,9, 22°45' 59°20' was a *πολις* of the [Damnonii](#). At number 75 in the list of [Kleineberg et al.](#), its coordinates point to the region of Stirling (Marx, 2013). R&S suggested that the name survives in Allan Water and therefore suggested the Roman fort at Ardoch. Allan Water rises in the Ochil Hills near the likely location of [Graupius Mons](#), then flows through Dunblane and Bridge of Allan to join the river Forth near Stirling. There is no single hillfort or concentrated archaeological evidence of native settlement that demands to be this Αλαωνα *πολις*, but candidates include [Gowan Hill](#) (by Stirling Castle), [Abbey Craig](#) (under the Wallace Monument), Ardoch, Dunblane, and [Dun Knock](#). Another attractive possibility is the [Castle Craig](#) hillfort (now destroyed) at NS912977, above Tillicoultry, maybe hinting that the river now called Devon, past modern Alva, used to be an *Alauna*. Maybe the distinct river Black Devon, through modern Alloa, was also. Nevertheless, the best guess for this Αλαωνα is Cramond, near Edinburgh, where there was a [Roman fort](#) at NT190768 beside the river Almond, plus [evidence](#) of human habitation stretching back thousands of years. This fort would otherwise have no name and it yielded an [inscription](#) mentioning ALATERVIS. Bad pollution has limited fishing on the Almond.

8. *Alauna Silva*, at position 24 in the *Cosmography*, was probably in Dorset. On the Roman road from Dorchester to Gittisham there were forts at [Woodbury Farm](#), SY298973, near the river Axe and Axminster, and at [Waddon Hill](#), ST44650150, inland from Bridport. The latter site seems more likely, mainly because the river now called Bride was formerly Wooth (Ekwall, 1928:469) whose meaning of 'pleasant' matches *Alauna*; compare *Guedel*, off Brittany, formerly Roman *Vindilis*, now Belle-Île. Also the name Allington, near Bridport, might descend from *Alauna*, the Waddon Hill area is still a bit wooded to fit *Silva*, and a Roman coin hoard has been found nearby. The river name Axe is discussed under [Isca](#) and [Axium](#).

9. *Alone* of Itinerary *iter* 10 seems to be on the Roman road heading north from Lancaster, mostly visible on Lidar maps up to a crossing of the river Bela near Beetham. 18 Roman miles on that route would reach the Roman fort at Watercrock, near Kendal, which already has a convincing Roman name, [Medibogdo](#), while the river Kent may have started with a name like [Cunetio](#). Odd!

10. *Alione* in the *Notitia Dignitatum* might be the same as number 9, or else the fort at [Low Borrowbridge](#), NY60940127, which is linked to a major north-south Roman road (equivalent to the modern M6) as recently clarified by [Lidar](#) work. Ekwall (1928:270-1) struggled to explain the name of the adjacent river Lune and finally suggested an unconvincing Irish parallel. It seems better to accept what he rejected, that an *Alauna*-like name got reanalysed into A-Lune. That would fit: (a) the widespread survival of *Alauna* descendants; (b) the late dates of first attestations of Lune, generally spelled more like *Lōn*; (c) the excellent parallel in English (with equivalents in other Germanic languages) of alone, which began life as all-one but got reanalysed into a-lone; and (d) another parallel in French, which produced the word lute from an Arabic original *al-oud*.

11. *Alunna*, at position 110 in the *Cosmography* is a clear reading of 2 manuscripts (shown [here](#)) while the third is messy but might be *Alicuna*. It was most likely the [Castle Steads](#) promontory fort near Walmersley, Lancashire, at SD79701298, beside the river [Irwell](#), which has recently regained its status of being rich in fish, including salmon.

As always, please note how much uncertainty there is about these locations. Guesses suggested here have improved a lot over several years.

The *Cosmography* also mentions *Alabum* and *Alovergium*.

Rivet and Smith (p243) showed a map of river names that may descend from *Alauna* in Britain: 11 definite plus several probables. Nicolaisen (2001: 239-240) listed other candidates from Scotland and elsewhere. A series of inscriptions (such as [this](#)) dedicated to the *Alounae* were found in southern Germany where the river now called Alz flows out of the lake now called Chiemsee.

Ancient attestations in France mention [Alauna](#) (Valognes, in the Cotentin peninsula of Normandy), *Alounenses* on an [inscription](#) from southern Brittany, and [Alaunio](#) at modern Aulun in the foothills of the Alps, which has been interpreted as a deity name because of an [inscription](#).

The deity [Ialonus Contrebis](#), known from three [inscriptions](#), is probably not related to *Alauna*, but is neatly explained in a throwaway remark by Delamarre (2003:185): “*Ialo-no-* ‘maître du village’ ≈ le nom personnel *Trebo-nius*”. He pointed out that *ialon* ‘clearing’, which evolved to mean plain ‘village’, was one of the most common elements in Gallo-Roman place names and their later descendants. He commented that it was strangely absent from Britain, but did not say that its niche was filled in Britain by [Lug-](#), [Leuc-](#), etc, then by OE [leah](#), leading to countless later names in –ley, etc. Nor did he mention Greek [υαλος](#) ‘crystalline stone’, the root of modern hyaline, with essentially the same root meaning of clear visibility. One starts to wonder about the relative contributions of Greek and Latin to north-west-European vocabulary.

It is unwise to assume automatically that a deity named on a dedicatory inscription had a clearly defined identity in the minds of local people. Often it would be better to think of multiple spirits (ghosts, fairies, ancestors, or whatever) dwelling in particular regions. Among other ancient deity names that might be mundanely descriptive are several rivers with ancient names ending in –na, include *Matrona* (Marne) obviously evoking mothers, and *Sequana* (Seine) possibly descending from Greek [σαγηνη](#) ‘seine net for fishing’.

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