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CIRENCESTER'S ANCIENT NAME:  
*CORINIUM* OR *CARINIUM*?

**Abstract.** Cirencester, some fifty kilometres west of Oxford, is an English town on the site of a Roman city. Even though its original name (after Ptolemy in the second century CE) was supposedly *Corinium*, giving the *Ciren-* of *Cirencester*, this has never had a satisfying etymology. However, Welsh *câr* 'friend' or Irish *cara* 'friend' may now permit emendation of *Corinium* to *Carinium* 'place of Carinos,' a personal form known elsewhere. It means 'little beloved one, little friend' and is compatible with development to *Ciren-*. If so, the mystery surrounding Cirencester, capital of the Dobunni, will be solved. The first *Carinium* would be the nearby Iron Age citadel of Bagendon Dykes. When the Romans occupied the area, they founded a city five kilometres away, transferring local people to it and applying the name of the old settlement to the new one, as elsewhere in Britain (Colchester, St Albans, Wroxeter). Modern Cirencester will thus (it seems) be called after Carinus or Carinos, an otherwise unknown Briton who occupied land at Bagendon some two millennia ago.

**Key words:** Cirencester; Roman Britain; British-Latin place-names; textual emendation.

HISTORY AND TOPOGRAPHY

Cirencester, a picturesque but somewhat remote town in south-east Gloucestershire, has suffered much from time. In the Roman age it was the second city of Britain, with splendid buildings (long vanished); in the middle ages it had an Augustinian abbey (almost nothing survives); it was long prosperous from wool (the Industrial Revolution killed the trade); it had a canal (closed in 1927) and two railway stations (also closed). Such is political and economic change.

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Still older than the town are nearby Bagendon Dykes, dug out in the first century CE. The stronghold was tribal capital of the Dobunni, a rich and powerful people. They imported marble and other luxuries from the Mediterranean; they minted coins of silver and gold marked with names of their kings: ANTED-RIG, CATTI, COMUX, CORIO, BODUOCUS (Frere 1970). Some of these forms (but not CORIO?) are abbreviated. In the later first century the Romans obliged the Dobunni to abandon their hillfort for a site five kilometres to the south. Their new capital became a flourishing city, as proved by surviving inscriptions, mosaics, and sculpture (Wacher 1974, 289–315). Roman Cirencester, almost as big as Roman London, possessed a forum and basilica second only to those at London, as well as magnificent town houses within its walls (Verey 1979, 78, 96). They have prompted reflections by one archaeologist (Reece 1988). Finds of coins with CORIO allowed another archaeologist to show the Dobunni as controlling the Gloucestershire and north Somerset regions, Cirencester (their *civitas*) being at its centre (Dark 1995, 108).

Once London fell after 449 to the Anglo-Saxons, Cirencester enjoyed an Indian summer as Celtic Britain's metropolis. Its ruler in the late fifth century was (it appears) Ambrosius Aurelianus, who in 493 defeated a Saxon army at Mount Badon, some sixteen kilometres south-south-east (George 2009, 3–4, 144). His victory was crucial. For fifty years it halted Anglo-Saxon encroachments on British territory, and Cirencester remained (amongst other things) a university city, with schools of Roman law and rhetoric where the British polemicist Gildas (493–570) seemingly acquired his command of Latin invective (Breeze 2010, 131–8). Cirencester (like Bath and Gloucester) was eventually captured by the Saxons in 577 (Halsall 2013, 21, 72). It was then that the English wiped out the stain of defeat in 493 at Mount Badon, a battlefield located (despite Professor Higham's denials) at the hillfort of Ringsbury, east of *Braydon* Forest in Wiltshire and seven kilometres north-west of Swindon. Confusion has arisen from the meaningless 'Badonicus' of Gildas's text, surely a scribal error for *Bradonicus*, its first part being Celtic *brad* 'treachery' (Higham 2018, 162).

#### 'CORINIUM': A PROBLEMATIC FORM

Now for Cirencester's name. The British-Latin form, given by Ptolemy as *Corinium*, figures too as corrupt *Cironium* in the eighth-century Ravenna

Cosmography (Ekwall 1936, 103). Cirencester being the capital of the Dobunni, there is no link with any other tribal nation in pre-Roman Britain. Claims to the contrary have merely got in the way of a rational derivation. Nor does the toponym relate to the Antonine Itinerary's *Durocornovium* (a settlement near Wanborough, five kilometres east of Swindon). As for the element *Ciren-*, Kenneth Jackson (modifying a suggestion of Max Förster) rightly saw it as due to change not in Brittonic but Old English. Specifically, he thought that hypothetical Primitive Welsh *Corin* was borrowed by Primitive Old English as *Curen*, which became *Cyren* and then the recorded form *Ciren* (Jackson 1953, 665 n. 1). Margaret Gelling was yet unconvinced, noting how "philologists are not in complete agreement" here (Gelling 1970, 74–5). There may be a clue in Welsh *Ceri*, which occurs as Cirencester's name in a life of King Alfred by Bishop Asser (d. 909), and (as mutated *Geri*) in *Armes Prydein* 'The Prophecy of Britain,' a political poem of late 940 (Williams 1972b, 42).

At this point, an excursus to the Adriatic. A parallel to *Corinium* in the English Cotswolds is described, a little unexpectedly, in Polish. Fifty kilometres east of Zadar (on Croatia's southern coast) is Karin, a small place on the Sea of Karin. During Roman times it was the *oppidum* of *Corinium* in the territory of the Corinienses; within three kilometres of modern Karin survive (at Miograd) ruins of its triangular fort, as also "resztki amfiteatru i innych budynków" (Kaczmarczyk 1976, 162–3). *Corinium* in Illyria has been taken as proof for *Corinium* as Roman Cirencester's correct name.

Back in Britain, puzzlement over *Corinium* continued. Margaret Gelling called it one of the "unsolved mysteries" of Roman Britain's toponymy, the form perhaps belonging to "a layer of place-names older than the use of Celtic speech" in Britain (Gelling 1978, 37). Even Rivet and Smith could give no final meaning. They cited Ifor Williams of Bangor on the place-name *Ceri* or Kerry (east of Newtown in Powys, east-central Wales), as also Welsh *ceri* 'medlar-tree; kernels, seeds,' together with a supposed mention of *Cair Ceri* 'Cirencester' in a list of 'Twenty-Eight Cities of Britain' added to the ninth-century *Historia Brittonum*. They thought a reference to a tree possible, citing *Aballava* 'apple orchard,' a Roman fort on the Solway Firth west of Carlisle (in northern England). As for CORIO on coins of the Dobunni, they took it as the name of a king (not a place-name) in abbreviated form (Rivet and Smith 1979, 321–2). It should be distinguished from *Corinium*, a toponym. Although lacking conclusions, Rivet and Smith's account remains clear and valuable.

It contrasts with outdated comments on *Corinium* in the territory of the *Cornovii* (which it was not) and therefore meaning ‘place of the “promontory dwellers”’ (Field 1980, 51). Also illogical is the statement that the origin of *Corinium* is “uncertain” because “no early forms of the name have been recorded” (which ignores Ptolemy) and because “there are no similarly named places for comparison”; which ignores Karin in the former Yugoslavia (Room 1988, 88–9). Help comes from Richard Coates’s observation, in a paper on *Londinium* or London, that the sole British toponym with the same termination is *Corinium* (Coates and Breeze 2000, 27). We shall argue that a personal name and an ending meaning ‘settlement’ occur in both. Not helpful at all is Dr Parsons, who refers to *Corinium* as “very difficult” and (despite its structure) perhaps even pre-Indo-European (Parsons 2000, 169–78). In the English Place-Name Society’s dictionary, *Corin-* is termed an “unknown element” (Watts 2004, 158). Although linking it with *Corinium* or Karin in Croatia, Professor Sims-Williams is unsure whether the British form was Celtic at all (Sims-Williams 2006, 205).

Thereafter appeared a full and serious study by Richard Coates, which should be consulted, even if we disagree with its findings. It says this. The English cannot have borrowed the name as Primitive Welsh *Cerin-*, because that hypothetical form would (as Jackson noted) result from Welsh internal *i*-affection in about 700 CE, long postdating Cirencester’s capture in 577. After reviewing various opinions, Coates proposes that Ptolemy’s *Corinium* should be taken as corrupt; that the Ravenna Cosmography’s *Cironium* is (despite the text’s notoriously poor state) preferable; that it may be interpreted in the light of Old Irish *cíar* ‘dark’ as referring to a river (the nearby Churn); and that Old Welsh *Ceri* is “suspicious” and “hardly an authentic reference to Cirencester” (Coates 2013, 81–91). For all his ingenuity, one agrees with almost none of this. It is not obvious that the British-Latin form referred to a river; Old Irish *cíar* has no known cognate in Brittonic; *Corinium* should be referred to Bagendon Dykes, a man-made structure; Welsh *Ceri* is not easily dismissed; and so on. Another approach is needed. We do, however, accept his premise that *Corinium* is corrupt, but emend it in a simpler way.

#### PTOLEMY’S *CORINIUM* AND OTHER BRITISH TOPONYMS

The question is this. Do we read *Corinium* after Ptolemy or not? Ptolemy is routinely granted an undeserved textual authority, like other ancient

authorities; even if for Ptolemy (one of the world's great scholars) the fault lies less with him than with his scribes. Careful reading of Rivet and Smith soon shows that. The general unreliability of our texts can be demonstrated from one toponym in the Antonine Itinerary, which at the same time permits a solution for Cirencester.

The Antonine Itinerary (third century CE) mentions a road station on the highway leading north-west from London to Wroxeter. It was located at Dropshort, in the parish of Little Brickhill, east of Bletchley and south of Milton Keynes, Buckinghamshire. Its British-Latin name is usually given as *Magiovinium* (Rivet 1958, 146, 168). Finds from the Roman period began in the eighteenth century; scientific excavations followed in the twentieth (Pevsner 1960, 189). But the name has lacked a proper derivation. It yet has the same structure as *Corinium* and *Londinium*. We infer that it is (a) corrupt; (b) certainly British; and (c) contains a personal name. We may thus emend it by reference to British and Welsh, bearing in mind that the elements could be in reverse order. So much is shown by British *Maglocunos* 'Princely Hound' and *Cunomaglos* 'Hound Prince,' the former giving Welsh *Maelgwn*, the latter *Cynfael* (Williams 1972a, 10). The best-known Maelgwn is the tyrant of Gwynedd (= north-west Wales) denounced by Gildas, "najstarszy kronikarz brytyjski," in the year 536 (Potkowski 1973, 9–112). *Maglocunos* or Maelgwn helps explain *Magiovinium*, permitting emendation of meaningless *Magio-* to *Maglo-*. As for the element *-vinium*, it surely represents British *vindo-* (giving Welsh *gwyn*) 'white,' so that the meaning of restored *Maglovindium* is 'place of Maglovindos "white prince".'

Two monuments in Wales prove that. One of them is at Llanilltern, nine kilometres north-west of Cardiff. It has an inscription of about 600 CE reading *VENDUMAGLI HIC IACIT*, '[stone] of Vendumaglus. He lies here,' where the first term would give (unattested) Welsh *Gwynfael* (Koch 2007, 173). The other monument is in North Wales, at Gwytherin (nineteen kilometres west of Denbigh), and has an inscription of similar date reading *VINNEMAGLI FILI SENEMAGLI*, '[stone] of Vinnemaglus son of Senemaglus,' with exact Old Breton equivalents (*Uuinmael*, *Uuenmael*) noted for the first form (Sims-Williams 2013, 322). Vinnemaglus 'white prince' son of Senemaglus 'old prince' in North Wales and Vendumaglus in Glamorgan together allow emendation of *Magiovinium* to *Maglovindium* or Dropshort, Buckinghamshire. A Briton called Maglovindos evidently owned land there. With a name meaning 'white prince,' he would be a man of rank. In a similar way, *L(l)un-* 'shape' in Old Welsh and Old Breton personal names implies that the

capital city of *Londinium* or London was ‘place of Londinus,’ a Briton whose name meant “little shapely one, little well-formed one,” as suggested in a Polish journal (Breeze 2014, 311–23).

#### CORINIUM OR CARINIUM?

That clears the ground for *Corinium*. If *Londinium* or London is ‘place of Londinos’ and *Magiovinium* or *Maglovindium* is ‘place of Maglovindos,’ then *Corinium* would be ‘place of Corinos.’ But no such name is known. The nearest equivalent is Celtic-Latin *Carinus*, its first part being *car-* ‘beloved one; friend,’ a common Celtic element. The second is *-in-*, a well-known diminutive suffix. Implication: we scrap unmeaning *Corinium* and emend it to *Carinium* ‘settlement of Carinus “little friend”.’ The advantage of *Carinus* (actually recorded) over *Corinus* (recorded nowhere) is obvious. It may also be easier to explain the development *Carinium* > *Cirencester* than *Corinium* > *Cirencester*. Does the hypothesis tally with facts in philological handbooks?

There are various points here. They include the effects of *i*-mutation, both in English and Welsh; the element *car-* in proper nouns; and popular etymology. Lewis and Pedersen indicated how *Corinium* and *Carinium* would alike give (unattested) Welsh *Cerin* through internal *i*-affection in Primitive Welsh. Its effects on preceding *a* and *i* are shown respectively by Welsh *Ebrill* ‘April’ from Latin *Aprilis* and Welsh *melin* ‘mill’ from Latin *molina*, these Latin words being borrowed in Roman times (Pedersen and Lewis 1937, 56). No objection, then, to a reading *Carinium* and not *Corinium*. As for *Car-* in names of people, it is ubiquitous, with Welshmen called *Câr*, *Caradog*, *Caron*, or *Ceredig*; so, too, is the diminutive suffix *-in*, with Welshmen called *Aneirin*, *Celynnin*, *Elffin*, *Erbin*, or *Taliesin* (Thomas 1938, 133, 198). In *Ceredig* the effects of umlaut are again visible, as in common nouns like Welsh *mererid* ‘pearl,’ *selsig* ‘sausages,’ or *cegin* ‘kitchen,’ respectively from Latin *margarita*, *salsicia*, and *coquina* (Lewis 1942, 2, 4). Jackson had an acute observation here, on how a similar development in Old English predated the one in (seventh-century) Welsh or (eighth-century) Cornish. Hence *a* (not *e*) for the Devon hydronym *Tavy*. The English occupied west Devon in the early eighth century, “after the Anglo-Saxon umlaut was complete, but before affection had occurred in the British dialects,” so that the English borrowed the form with its unaltered Celtic vowel (Jackson 1954, 61–82).

Sound-changes are one thing. Proposed *Carinium* will yet have no credibility unless a personal name *Carinus* or *Carinos* can be produced. Continental forms are here revealing. Amongst thousands of examples, there is not a single *Corinus*; but there is *Carinus*. It occurs various times, together with the commoner simple form *Carus* and such variants as *Carius*, *Carillus*, or *Diocarus*. In contrast is *Corinus*. It is unknown, unless it appears in a fragmentary *Corin*[-; even so, forms in *Cor*- are not frequent, and it has been doubted whether they are Celtic at all (Evans 1967, 160–5, 338–9). Other sources underline the extreme frequency of the element *car*- ‘to love’ in the Celtic languages, where it leaves a mark on maps of Britain with the Welsh county of Ceredigion (Cardiganshire), supposedly called after Caratacus, its fifth-century king (Vendryes 1987, 36–8). Further east in Wales, near the boundary with England, is Kerry or Ceri, Powys, where *Ceri* means ‘land of Câr,’ an ancient local magnate (Owen and Morgan 2007, 206). Back on the European Continent *car*- also occurs in toponyms, even if the element is “possibly of various origins and different meanings” (Falileyev et al. 2010, 13).

British place-names and other expressions in *car*- inspire confidence. The preferred reading for Cirencester must be *Carinium* ‘place of Carinus, settlement of Carinos.’ If it is objected that *cor*- occurs in early inscriptions from Wales and Cornwall, as with CORBALENGI on a standing-stone near the coast of Ceredigion, we can reply that he will have been an Irishman (Charles-Edwards 2013, 176). No significance for Carinos, man of the Dobunni. Their tribal name (one may add) apparently means ‘Bitterns.’ The bird was presumably their emblem. The bittern is a marsh-bird more often heard than seen, because it has a famous booming call, as implied by words for it in many languages, as with Welsh *bwn*, Irish *bonnán*, French *butor*, or Polish *bąk* (Breeze 2016, 315–19).

#### TREATMENT OF RESTORED *CARINIUM* IN ENGLISH

Some problems remain: on CORIO; Welsh *Ceri*; Croat *Karin*; and development from British *Carin*- to English *Ciren*-. However CORIO is to be explained (as an abbreviated form?), there is no necessary connection with *Carinium*. The latter has clear parallels with other toponyms: CORIO does not, at present, have clear parallels with anything. As for Welsh *Ceri* and not the expected *Cerin*, we may discern the workings of folk-etymology. Asser’s

life of Alfred and *Armes Prydein* were written more than three centuries after Cirencester fell to the Saxon in 577. It seems that, *Cerin* having no obvious meaning, its name was modified amongst the Welsh to *Ceri*, the name of different shrubs, including the wild service-tree (sometimes encountered in woods on chalk and limestone), which has berries like those of the rowan or mountain ash, but delicate pink in colour, not red (*Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru* 1950–2002, 467–8). Karin in far-away Croatia requires different treatment. Even if it is a Celtic form, the dialect spoken by the waters of the Adriatic may not have been identical to that of the Cotswold Hills; this interesting toponym in any case needs special discussion by experts in Slavonic.

The fate of reconstructed *Carin(ium)* when borrowed by Primitive Old English is another matter. Cirencester figures in ninth-century prose as *Cyrenceaster* or *Cirenceaster* (Toller 1898, 155). As regards the unstressed vowel, *i* in prehistoric Old English usually became *e*. Compare Old English *gylden* ‘golden’ against Old High German *gyldin* (Brook 1955, 25). For what in Old English would be the stressed vowel, we know that *a* in early Latin loans was modified to the raised sound represented by the letter *ash*; for the name of Cirencester, it would here be raised further by English *i*-affection to give *e*, which was later (after lowering of the unstressed *i* to *e*) broken to *ea*; the *i* of *Cyren-* would thereafter result from palatal influence. This process sounds intricate and confusing. But it has a parallel. Old English *cyren* ‘sweet wine’ has been derived via the unattested forms *cearen* and *cearin* from Latin *carenum* (Campbell 1959, 71, 200–1, 205). If Old English *cyren* ‘new wine boiled down, sweet wine’ can be derived from Latin *carenum*, then the *Cyren-* of *Cyrenceaster* can be derived from emended *Carinium*. For Cirencester (with English *-ceaster* denoting ‘Roman town’) one more complexity was added by the Normans. No equivalent to English *ch* existing in Norman-French or later Anglo-French, the newcomers wrote it as *c* and pronounced it [ts], soon simplified to *s* and sometimes so written. Hence modern *Cirenceaster*, with its first part pronounced [sair-] (Reaney 1960, 199).

With a history displaying Celtic, Latin, English, and French aspects, the name of Cirencester is typical of many British toponyms; and may thus be a subject appropriate for publication in a Polish learned journal.

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STAROŻYTNA NAZWA CIRENCESTER:  
*CORINIUM CZY CARINIUM?*

Streszczenie

Cirencester, leżące około pięćdziesięciu kilometrów na zachód od Oksfordu, jest angielską miejscowością w miejscu rzymskiego miasta. I chociaż jego pierwotną nazwą było ponoć *Corinium* (stąd *Ciren-* w Cirencester), nie było to nigdy satysfakcjonującą etymologią. Walijskie *câr* i irlandzkie *cara* ('przyjaciel') pozwala na korektę *Corinium* do *Carinium* ('miejsce Carinosa'), oznaczającego 'miejsce umiłowanego małego przyjaciela' i spójnego w rozwoju z *Ciren-*. Tajemnica otaczająca Cirencester, stolicę Dobunni, wydaje się zatem rozwiązana. Za pierwsze *Carinium* uznać można pobliską cytadelę Bagendon Dykes. Kiedy Rzymianie okupowali ten rejon, założyli pięć kilometrów dalej miasto, przenosząc tam lokalną ludność i zachowując nazwę starej osady (jak miało to miejsce w innych częściach Brytanii, takich jak Colchester, St Albans, Wroxeter). Wydaje się więc, że nazwę swą współczesne Cirencester zawdzięcza Carinusowi albo Carinosowi, nieznanemu Brytonowi, który okupował Bagedon około dwóch tysięcy lat temu.

*Przekład angielskiego abstraktu  
Kamil Rusiłowicz*

**Słowa kluczowe:** Cirencester; rzymska Brytania; łacińsko-brytyjskie nazwy miejscowości; korekta tekstowa.