

People have been fascinated by placenames for centuries. Although they tend to start out as meaningful (Newtown, anyone?), they often change more slowly than languages and preserve old-fashioned forms whose meaning is lost. Who could guess that York comes from a Celtic original, *Eburakon*? And that it refers to a yew tree (*eburos*)? Or, for that matter, that the present name of #Baldock comes from the medieval French name for Baghdad, *Baudac*?

The scientific study of placenames began only about 1900. Before this, people often made wild guesses that involved just about any language (Hebrew and Phoenician were popular) rather than those known to have been used in a particular area. There are five that we know to have been spoken in Britain from prehistory to the present day: a dialect of Celtic known as Brittonic (the ancestor of modern Welsh and Cornish), Latin, Old English (the basis for the English spoken today), Old East Norse (the language of the Vikings, and ancestor of modern Danish and Swedish) and Old French. All these languages have left traces in our English placenames.

When it comes to researching placenames from Roman times, we depend on a limited number of documents and a few inscriptions. The documents include the Γεωγραφικὴ Ὑφήγησις ('World-drawing Guide', generally referred to as the Geography) by Klaudios Ptolemaios (usually Latinised as Claudius Ptolemaeus and Anglicised as Ptolemy), the *Itinerarium prouinciarum Antonini Augusti*, better known in English as the Antonine Itinerary, a map known as the Peutinger Table, an anonymous *Cosmographia* produced in Ravenna around 700 (hence known as the Ravenna Cosmography), and an untitled late Roman administrative text known as the *Notitia Dignitatum* ('List of Official Posts'). Ptolemy lists a people whom he calls Κατυευχλανοὶ (*Catyeuchlani*, a misspelling of *Catuuellauni*), the people of Hertfordshire, Bedfordshire and Huntingdonshire), and names two of their towns. They are Σαλῖναι (*Salinae*, literally 'salt-works', so probably somewhere near the Wash) and Οὐρολάνιον (*Urolanion*, a misspelling of *Uerolamion*), St Albans. Several of the routes in the Antonine Itinerary also name *Uerolamion* and a place twelve Roman miles to the north, *Durocobrius*, which can be identified with Dunstable. The Ravenna Cosmography gives the spelling *Virolanium* for St Albans.

Literary works from the Classical world rarely mention placenames (other than the name of Britain). The historian Tacitus mentions how Boudica sacked *Uerulamion* and Gildas, a British writer who lived about AD 500, describes St Alban as *uerolamiensem*, 'from St Albans'. There is a famous but broken inscription from the Roman forum at St Albans, published in *The Roman Inscriptions of Britain* volume 3 as 3123. Two alternative readings of the two-letter fragment VE could be CATV]VE[LLAVNORVM ('of the *Catuuellauni*') or ...]VE[ROLAMIVM ('St Albans'). A wooden writing-tablet from London refers to *uerolamio*, while a drinking vessel from a burial at Dunstable was donated by DINDROFORVM VE(*rolamiensium*) ('the St Albans carpenters'). In terms of Hertfordshire, that is the total as currently recognised.

However, there is another piece of evidence that has hitherto been overlooked. It was published in *The Roman Inscriptions of Britain* volume 2 as numbers 2411.261 to 2411.263.

Archaeology Tuesdays – The name of Roman Baldock?

It consists of three identical lead sealings, stamped on two faces using the same die, reading C·VIC on one face and SPVS on the other. The dot, better called a medial point or interpunct, was a typical word separator used until the second century. All three were found at Clothall Common in Baldock, two of them in the same pit. They have a hole running through the length and another from one face to the other, perhaps for string or twine used to tie documents into a bundle or to keep wood-and-wax writing tablets closed.



The publication suggests that meaning of the seals is obscure, although the C might stand for Latin *cohors*, a military unit. Given the lack of Roman military activity in Baldock (as in Hertfordshire and Bedfordshire generally), this is a very unlikely explanation. The American Society of Greek and Latin Epigraphy lists over 250 words that C can represent! VIC has 'only' twenty-nine possible expansions, while SPVS seems to be meaningless. This is not going to be an easy riddle to solve.

What are we then to make of these seals? The first thing to note is that a lead seal, made using the same die in all three instances, was probably an official issue of some sort. We have already ruled out the military explanation, so in what circumstances would a

government department or similar entity put out a document needing to be sealed? How we might explain them depends on how we choose to expand the abbreviation C·VIC.

Some years ago, I suggested in print (always a hostage to fortune!) that it might stand for C[uria] Vic[...], ‘the assembly of Vic...’, with Vic... as the lost name of Roman Baldock.

Alternatively, we might expand C... Vic[anorum], ‘of the townspeople of C...’, where C... is the town’s name. Both these solutions leave SPVS unexplained. For this reason, I have given up on that explanation.

Might it be that SPVS contains the ancient name of Baldock? Although this seems plausible at first sight, we need to think of what language that name would have first been coined in. The answer has to be Brittonic, as the settlement was founded in the decades around 100 BC, when the locals spoke that branch of the Celtic language group. In that case we have a problem. Although the Proto-Indo-European language had words beginning *sp-*, it developed into *f-* in Brittonic. No words beginning in *sp-* exist in any of the ancient Celtic dialects, so SPVS cannot be an abbreviation for the Brittonic name of Baldock.

The clue came quite serendipitously, in realising that the modern name Hitchin is not Germanic, and thus not from old English. Place-name experts have been puzzling over its meaning for centuries. The Swedish scholar Eilert Ekwall suggested almost a century ago that the name of the River Hiz is the clue. He compared it with the Modern Welsh *sych*, which means ‘dry’, and suggested that the town was named from the river, pointing out that some Celtic words beginning with *s-* now begin with *h-*. Unfortunately for his argument, *sych* (from Brittonic **siccōs*) is not one of them. If the river really had derived from this word, the town would now be called Sitchin. We also know that the name, first recorded in the seventh century as the name of a people, not a town or a river.

In Brittonic, there was a special grade of *s* that did develop over time into *h*. Thus the ancient name of the River Severn, *Sabrina*, became *Hafren* in Welsh. So to explain Hitchin, we need to find a word that originally had initial *s-* that became *h-*, and which also had *-cc-* in the middle. There is indeed such a word, **succos* in Brittonic, *hwch* in Welsh. It means ‘pig’. While this doesn’t sound like a name that people would want, we need to look at how other Iron Age peoples in the British Isles gave themselves names.

Thus we find that the people of the Llyn Peninsula in Gwynedd, the *Cancani*, were the ‘pony people’ and the *Caireni* of Sutherland were the ‘sheep people’. These people perhaps prided themselves on their breeds of these animals, so why not the people of the Hitchin area? The archaeology of Baldock bears this out. In most places in southern Britain, the emphasis on animal husbandry was on cattle, but in northern Hertfordshire, it was on pigs. Far from being an insult, being known as the *Succīi*, ‘the pig people’ or ‘the pig-breeders’, was an expression of local pride.

In this roundabout way, it becomes possible to understand what SPVS means. We can divide it *S(ucciorum) Pus(...)*, ‘Pus... of the *Succīi*’. There are records of several Celtic names beginning *Pus...*, and many Brittonic placenames incorporate personal names. Names such as Pusa, Pusilla, Pusinna, Pusintulus and Pusio (not all necessarily Celtic, as some could be Latin in origin) could underly the ancient name of Baldock. We could be looking at

something like **Pusinn̄ion*, **Pus̄ionacon* or something like that. While we haven't got the full name, it's almost within reach.

What the seals tell us is that the *Curia Vicanorum Succ̄iorum Pus...ensis*, 'the council of the townspeople of *Pus...* of the *Succ̄ii*', issued the documents that these seals attached to. They show that the *vicus* – the lowest grade of self-governing settlement – had its own curia – a citizen assembly – representing the local people – the *Succ̄ii* – based in their principal market town. They fell within the larger unit of the *Catūellauni*, based at *Ūerolam̄ium*, but maintained their self-identity past the collapse of Roman rule in the fifth century and into the early medieval period as the *Hicce*. In a way, that identity remains with the fiercely proud 'Hitchinites' of today.

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