

The Albans of Britain and Ireland

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Albion is a poetic name for Britain, and *Alba* is the name of Scotland in modern Scots Gaelic. That much is familiar to most British people. But the origin and wider context of these names is poorly known and is controversial even among specialists in historical linguistics and onomastics. This article presents a glimpse into the history of the 'Albans' and argues that communities so designated existed not only in Britain and in continental Europe but also in Ireland.

*In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
A stately pleasure-dome decree:
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless to man
Down to a sunless sea.*

Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1797)

The name 'Alban', with its many variations, was widespread across ancient Europe. It denoted regions, tribes, rivers and mountains, and it formed the names of individuals. In Italy, *Albula* is believed to have been an ancient name for the river Tiber, and Alba Longa was a city in Latium conquered by the early Roman kingdom in legendary times. Lake Albano and the Alban Hills are nearby. *Albuna* was the name of a grove and a fountain at Tivoli, just outside Rome, and the sybil Albunea was revered there. In Piedmont is the town of Alba, the ancient Alba Pompeia, and in Novara there is the town of Albano Verellese. On the Ligurian coast there was a chain of towns carrying the same designation: *Albium Intemelium*, now Ventimiglia; *Albium Ingaunum*, now Albenga; and *Alba Docilia*, now Albisola near Savona. There was a river called *Albinia*, now the Albegna, flowing into the Tyrrhenian Sea near the modern town of Albinia. Alba Fucens, a town of the Aequi, is now the town of Massa d'Albe in L'Aquila. A river called the *Albulates* flowed into the Adriatic near Cupra Marittima. There was a coastal village called *Albani* on the Adriatic near Ancona, perhaps related to the Canale Albani which today enters the sea at Fano. Alburnus, now Monte Alburno, is a mountain overlooking the town of Sicignano degli Alburni in the southern part of Campania in Italy, and the town of Albanella is nearby.

In Iberia, a tribe on the northern coast had the Latin name *Albiones*. There was a town in Lusitania called *Alpesa*, now Elvas, east of Lisbon. There was *Alba de Tormes* in Salamanca province, adjoining Portugal, and there was *Albonica*, possibly the modern Anión. This is far from being a complete list.

In France, names of that sort are extraordinarily common. In the south-west, on the Tarn, in a region once known as *Albiga*, there was the Roman *Civitas Albigensium*, now the city of Albi, with the Plateau d'Alban and the Monts d'Alban

round about. The name is repeated across the Massif Central and to the east. The Roman geographer Strabo recorded two neighbouring tribes, the *Albienses* and the *Albioeci*, in what is now the French Alps. Today, we have the Pays de l'Albanais. In northern France, the river Aube was *Alba* in ancient times. The name of the river Aube has the same root. *Saint-Alban* or its equivalent, *Saint-Aubin*, crops up as a placename with great frequency across France: there are well over a hundred examples.

Further east, across the Adriatic, *Albona* was a town in Liburnia and is now Labin in Croatia; and *Albani* was the name of an Illyrian tribe, their capital being Albanopolis: this is the origin of the English name of the present-day nation of Albania. The name can be found as far away as Greece: *Alfeios* is the name of the longest river in the Peloponnese: the river and its eponymous nymph feature in Greek mythology, and it is the magical river Alph of Coleridge's poem *Kubla Khan*.

Above all, we have the Alps. Europe's most prominent geographical feature carries the same name, albeit with the *b* of *Alb-* replaced by a *p*. (Why the *b* became a *p* is a nice question in historical linguistics. Perhaps the Etruscans, who were the predecessors of the Romans in that region, pronounced the name as *Alp-* because the consonant *b* did not exist in their language; and subsequently the Romans took over the Etruscan form of the name.) In the northern Alpine region, in south Germany, we have today the Schwäbische Alb, or Swabian Alps, and the city of Albstadt. Other landscapes in the same part of Germany are the Frankenalb, Baaralb and Hegualb.

Although *Alba* names were, and remain, so widespread, it is not certain what they actually meant. It is often claimed that the word arose from a Proto-Indo-European root (*albho*) meaning 'white', and that it is likely to be true. In Latin, *albus* meant 'white' and *albulus* meant the whitish colour of running water. But, in its wider usage, *Alba* seems to have had a more profound meaning than that. There were numerous *Alba* names in Gaul, personal names as well as placenames, but the usual word for 'white' in Gaulish was *uindos*, with the alternative word *albios* being used only in a religious or mythic sense in the opinion of Xavier Delamarre, a leading scholar of the Gaulish language. *Alba* seems to have been used to designate places of spiritual and heavenly significance. Possibly the term spread originally as part of a theological revolution involving purification, the divinisation of sky and water, the dedication of sanctuaries, and female intercessors such as the nymphs, the sybils, and mythological characters such as Alpheisiboea the mother of Adonis. Also among those whose speech eventually developed into the Germanic languages, the concept of *Alba* involved semi-divine beings. Through Germanic culture the word evolved into the English 'elf', and the idea of an esteemed elf-counsellor has come down to us in the name of everybody called Alfred.

THE BRITISH ISLES

The great geographer of the Classical World, Ptolemy of Alexandria, listed the names of all the peoples, countries, lands, promontories, seas, major rivers and islands of the world known to him. He naturally included the two islands whose names may be translated as 'the British island of the Albans' and 'the British

island of the Ivernians'. The adjective 'British' applied equally to both islands. The two islands were sometimes distinguished by the terms *Britannia Magna* and *Britannia Parva*, 'Great Britain' and 'Little Britain'.

What did 'British' mean? Before the rise of the Roman Empire, militaristic Iron-Age entrepreneurs gained power in mainland Europe. When they visited the islands, they encountered people who retained a more ancient culture and philosophy and who valued the creative arts. So they called them by a name which meant 'the creators' or 'the craftspeople': in Gaulish it was something like *Priteni*. This name was picked up by travellers from the Mediterranean world well before Ptolemy's time, the capital *P* came to be pronounced as a *B*, and via Latin it eventually gave the modern *British*.

The term *Priteni*, and developments of it, continued to be used to describe the ancient inhabitants. But in the Irish language it took a different form, the corresponding Irish word being *Cruithin*. The initial letters differed between *P* and *C* because of how an early Indo-European consonant developed differently as the various languages evolved. However, as incoming dynasties achieved power in Ireland, the term *Cruithin* gradually ceased to be applied to the Irish population in general but was used to refer only to some of the original population-groups which remained outside the new political order. It became a faintly derogatory term for those who had been left behind by the march of history. Still, at the same time, there remained a folk-memory of a time when, it was imagined, creativity and artistic skills had flourished in Ireland before the hard men of the Iron Age had imposed themselves on the island. The people of that remote time were remembered not as *Cruithin* but under another name which meant much the same thing: *Tuath Dé Danann*, which should probably be translated as 'People of the God of the Arts'.

It is worth reiterating that the term 'British' was originally applied to the inhabitants of both Ireland and Great Britain. Both, in early times, were 'British' islands. Ethnically, the Irish are as 'British' as the English. In fact more so, because of the diluting effect of the later Germanic immigrations which gave England its name.

Distinguishing the two British islands from one another, Ptolemy referred to Ireland as 'the Ivernian British island' because there was a prominent south-coast tribe known in Latin as the *Iverni*, and in later Irish as the *Érainn*, who would have been familiar to mariners from the mainland of Europe. Ptolemy also recorded an estuary *Iernus*, now Kenmare Bay, and a nearby town *Ivernis* (or *Iernis*). The estuary became *Inber Érannan* in Old Irish. Eventually, the whole island took its name by extension from the *Iverni*.

Following the same pattern, it is to be expected that the 'Alban British island' was so-called because of a tribe called the *Albiones* who lived somewhere on the south coast. However, Ptolemy did not include them in his list of British tribes. Presumably the *Albiones* of Britain were submerged in the political tumult of the Iron Age: by the time Britain became a Roman province, the *Albiones* were practically forgotten.

BRITAIN

So, we must ask ourselves what additional evidence there might be for the existence, in pre-Classical times, of a tribe of Albans on the south coast of Britain, or indeed anywhere in Britain. The question is difficult because the ancient name 'Alba', or 'Alban', generally developed into different forms with the passage of time. Often, the *b* evolved into a different labial consonant such as *w*, or was elided altogether giving something like *Allen*. Adding to the difficulty, there may be confusion with names having a superficial similarity, starting with *Al-*, but having quite different origins. For example, the river Aln in Northumberland was recorded by Ptolemy as the *Alaunus* in Latin, with a nearby town *Alauna*, and the name is believed to have nothing to do with 'Alban'. Instead, it comes from another root to do with 'nourishing' and which led to modern words like 'alimentation' and 'alumnus'. But the matter is not clear-cut: it is possible that the name of an earlier 'Alban' town and river was reinterpreted under Roman rule because there was a Gaulish deity called *Alaunus* who had become well-known by then. When the real meaning of an ancient name has been forgotten, it is not unusual for it to be shoehorned into a different but more meaningful form for a younger generation.

The best-known 'Alban' location in Britain is surely the city of St Albans in Hertfordshire. Unfortunately, the uncertainties surrounding the saint's legend, including the point that he might not have lived in that place, if indeed he ever existed, make it impossible to draw reliable conclusions from that.

In Hampshire there is a river Allen. It rises near the village of Martin and runs south-eastwards, and there is an Allenford where it is crossed by a road. The river might once have been *Alban*, but, in the absence of supplementary evidence, it cannot be ruled out that the Hampshire Allen got its name in some other way.

In Dorset, there is a river Allen which runs southwards from a hamlet called Monkton up Wimborne through the village of Wimborne St Giles and down to Wimborne Minster close to where it joins the Stour. These placenames suggest religious establishments, and it is likely that Monkton up Wimborne and Wimborne St Giles were so named because they were ecclesiastical properties under the control of Wimborne Minster. How did Wimborne get its name? The most likely scenario is that (a) the river was originally 'Alban' and had become *Alwyn*, or something similar, by early medieval times; (b) the Old English 'borne', simply meaning a small river, was suffixed to the name, giving *Alwynborne*; (c) the first syllable disappeared, leaving, in effect, 'Wimborne' as the name of the Minster; and meanwhile (d) *Alwyn* persisted as the river-name, becoming 'Allen'. The possibility that the Dorset Allen was originally 'Alban' is strengthened by Wimborne Minster's long ecclesiastical history, granted that the name 'Alban' had sacred connotations. But this explanation of how the name evolved is not uncontroversial among placename specialists.

Further to the west, near Truro in Cornwall, there is another river Allen whose waters eventually flow to the sea via the river Fal. Close to the source of this Allen is a church of St Allen, said to have been dedicated to a 'St Alunus' of dubious historicity. It is possible that we have here another Alban/Alwyn/Allen of ancient vintage.

Another placename of interest is St Alban's Head on the Purbeck coast in Dorset. The name is generally considered to be a later corruption of 'St Aldhelm's Head', after the Aldhelm who became Bishop of Sherborne early in the 8th century. But that theory is open to challenge: it is possible that the headland was St Alban's before the time of Aldhelm, was relabelled at the time when enthusiasts were dedicating numerous churches in the region to the celebrated St Aldhelm, and then later relapsed to St Alban's because of local vernacular memory.

To summarise so far: the rivers Allen in Hampshire, Dorset and Cornwall, and St Alban's Head, may represent a continuation of the name of Ptolemy's tribe of *Albiones*.

In Wales, northern England and southern Scotland there is an abundance of river-names which are superficially *Alban*-like. In Wales, there are rivers called *Alun*, *Alwen*, *Alaw* and *Alan*. In Northumberland, besides the Aln which has already been mentioned, there is a river Alwin (whence Alwinton) and an Allen (whence Allendale). Elsewhere in England there is an Alne in Warwickshire, which joins the Arrow at Alcester, and an Ellen in Cumbria, which runs to the sea at Maryport.

In the Scottish Borders there is a river Ale (originally Alne) which joins the Teviot at Ancrum, and an Allan Water which joins the Teviot at Newmill-on-Teviot near Hawick; the Teviot is a tributary of the Tweed. Further north, in Scotland, there are two rivers Almond: one which runs into the Firth of Forth and another which runs into the Tay; and there is another Allan Water which passes through Bridge of Allan and then goes into the Tay. In the west of Scotland we have Elvan Water and Allander Water, both running into the Kelvin which is a tributary of the Clyde. (It is possible that *Kelvin* is itself another name of this type: it could be parsed in Old Irish as *Cáe Albhine* or *Cáel Albhine*, 'the course of', or 'the narrow' *Albhine*; the Irish river-name *Albhine*, now the Delvin, is mentioned further below.)

It must be emphasised that the rivers mentioned above are not intended to be a complete list: there are other minor watercourses with similar names. There are severe difficulties in disentangling genuine Albans from rivers with different etymologies: in the scholarly literature, plausible etymologies having nothing to do with Albans have been proposed for many of those river-names. It is not easy to disentangle 'Alban' river-names from a large class of other names beginning with *Al-* or *Alm-* which Hans Krahe, in 1964, drew attention to as part of an 'Old European hydronymy', examples being the Yealm (earlier Alma?) in England and the Aumance (Almantia) in France. In fact, *Al* may simply have meant 'river'. Such names have been discussed by Alan James in *The Brittonic Language in the Old North* (updated 2023; available on the website of the Scottish Place-Name Society, spns.org.uk). If we are looking for traces of 'Alban' as the name of a tribe, or of a tutelary deity, or of a territory, then river-names alone are hardly sufficient. (Likewise, the occurrences of *borne* or *bourne* in English river-names do not tell us that there was a tribe or a god of that name – although they are useful evidence of the arrival of an Anglo-Saxon-speaking population.) It remains the case that the strongest evidence for 'Albans' in Britain is Ptolemy's name of the *Albiones*, almost certainly a south-coast group.

IRELAND

The situation in Ireland is very different. There are clear indications that there were Alb-people in Ireland. The archaic records include the name of a mythical individual called *Alb* (or *Albu*) among the progenitors of the kings of Leinster, and a region known as *Mag Albe* (or *Mag Ailbe*), the 'Plain of Alb'. Today there is a parish of Moynalvy, which is the same name, near Maynooth. In ancient times *Mag Ailbe* seems to have covered a very large area including the modern counties of Carlow, Leix, Meath and Kildare, and parts of Kilkenny, Offaly, Longford and Dublin. So, *Mag Ailbe* corresponded to the region of east-central Ireland which was blessed with the richest farmland and included the traditional power-centre of Tara. Furthermore, *Albhine* (or *Albine*, or sometimes *Ailbine*) was the old name of the river Delvin which, before entering the Irish Sea, flows between the Counties of Meath and Dublin.

What we find, then, is that a large part of east-central Ireland was strongly associated with the name *Alb* in very early times. It is also preserved in the name of an ancient Irish tribe, the *Delbhna*. This has the prefixed preposition *di-* or *de-*, meaning 'of' or 'from'. The tribal name *Delbhna* is a plural genitival or adjectival form: it just means 'the people of the territory of Alb', which is to say, 'the Albans'. The prefix is not unusual and occurs in some other ethnonyms: for example we have the *Dicalydones* of Scotland (mentioned as such in a 4th-century Latin reference), the Gaulish *Diablintes*, and possibly the *Decantae* of Scotland. Many Irish personal names begin with the same prefix.

Evidently the *Delbhna* began their history in the valley of the river Delvin which runs into the sea 30 km north of Dublin, but with the passage of time they lost control of the lands on the east coast and moved to the west. Today, there is a town of Delvin in County Westmeath about 60 km inland. The group divided into several sections which settled at half-a-dozen different locations stretching from east to west across Ireland's central belt from the Boyne Valley (*Delbhna Mor*) to the Galway coast (*Delbhna Tira da Locha*). This kind of fragmentation, with movement away from Ireland's east-coast power-centre, is exactly what one expects for an ancient and once-respectable lineage which was overtaken politically and found itself subject to new dynasties during the medieval period.

While *Mag Ailbe*, *Delbhna* and *Albhine* are ancient names, and are forms of *Alb*, the etymon seems to have no obvious meaning in the Old Irish language except insofar as *Albu* (later *Alba*) was the name of the island of Britain and ultimately of Scotland. *Alb* does not seem to be a native Irish name.

These considerations lead irresistibly to the conclusion that 'Albans' were not originally present in Ireland but that the name was applied to settlers from Britain who settled in the Plain of Allen in prehistoric times. Unsurprisingly, there is no reliable historical account of such a prehistoric incursion of British settlers into the Dublin area. But Irish mythology preserves stories about a succession of prehistoric foreign invaders, so it is far from implausible that some folk-memory of the Alban incursion lingered on.

One or two linguistic details should be mentioned here. One is that *Alb/Albu* appears to have been originally an a-stem noun, with genitive case *Albe* or *Ailbe* (cf. *tuath*, 'people', with genitive *tuathe* or *tuithe*). However, at a later stage,

Albu with the meaning of 'Britain' came to be declined as an n-stem noun, with genitive case *Alban* (perhaps influenced by *Mumu*, 'Munster', with genitive *Muman*; and *Ériu*, 'Ireland', with genitive *Éren*). Note that *Alba* was not a term for Britain in Latin. (*Alba* exists in Irish as a loan from Latin, but only as the word for an alb or chasuble, brought with the spread of Christianity.) It is very likely that the name *Alba* for Britain entered the Irish language from Brittonic.

Another point is that the tribal name *Delbhna* is likely to be connected with an Old Irish noun, *delb*, which has the meaning of 'shape', 'appearance', 'likeness', or 'statue'; or as a verbal noun 'fashioning' or 'composing' (e.g. poetry). It is reasonable to suppose that the noun arose, at the same time as the name, reflecting special skills or qualities of artistic composition which the Alban incomers were deemed to possess. And perhaps it is no coincidence that the names of the Cruithin and the Tuath Dé Danann of Ireland, mentioned earlier, similarly carried artistic connotations.

However, a problem arises because Ranko Matasović, an influential Celticist, took the view (in his *Etymological Dictionary of Proto-Celtic*, 2009) that the Old Irish *delb* descends from a Proto-Celtic *delwa*, descended in turn from a Proto-Indo-European root *del*, 'carve, split'. This notion is incompatible with *delb* arising, in prehistoric Irish, from a prefixed form of the name of the Albans. But the evidence for the existence of the Proto-Celtic *delwa* is not strong, and there is another Old Irish word, *dolb*, 'sorcery, illusion', which may be involved. This is a complex and rather technical issue of which a full discussion would be inappropriate in this article.

Another question arises because at the heart of *Mag Ailbe* is the Hill of Allen, known in Irish by such names as *Carrack na hAlmaine*, *Cnoc Almaine*, *Dún Almhuine*, or simply *Almu*. The Hill of Allen was the residence of the mythical hero Finn mac Umail (or Cumail), leader of the *fianna*. Moreover, it was a sacred hill, a *sid* dedicated to the deity Nuadu. Its name appears, at first sight, to be related to the Old Irish *alam*, 'herd', or 'flock', ultimately from the same root, alluded to earlier, to do with nourishment (alimentation). It would not be unreasonable for the Hill of Allen to be called the 'Hill of the Flock', although that would be a rather pedestrian name for a site of such high cultural significance. More likely, the hill started out as *Cnoc Albaine* (or similar) and became *Cnoc Almaine* by a process of reinterpretation. If that is not the case, then we would have the curious situation of the Hill of Allen and the Plain of Allen having independent etymologies.

Incidentally, in this connection it is worth mentioning that there is a legend that king Lóegaire mac Néill died in the plain of the Liffey between two hills called *Ériu* and *Albu*. For the purposes of the legend, the names of the hills correspond to the two British islands. Edmund Hogan, in his *Onomasticon Goedelicum* (1910), suggests that the hill *Ériu* is Dunmurry (about 3 km north of Kildare town) and that *Albu* is, unsurprisingly, the Hill of Allen.

Another question, of tangential interest, is that of the origin of the name of the celebrated Munster saint Ailbe of Emly. Philip Thornhill has written "it is important in this respect that there is no recorded native Irish reflex of Indo-European *albho-*, 'white', from which *Ailbe* might derive". (*St. Alban and the End of Roman Britain*. The Mankind Quarterly, vol. XLI, no. 1, Fall 2000, p. 22;

available on academia.edu together with a number of other valuable papers by the same author.) In other words, *Alb* does not seem to be an indigenous Irish word, and Thornhill was led to suppose that St Ailbe must have been British. (It is perhaps more likely that the saint's name is the Old Irish word *ail*, 'rock', suffixed by an enclitic form of the verb 'to be'.)

To summarise: in spite of the uncertainties and open questions mentioned above, there is powerful onomastic evidence that migrants from Britain arrived on the central east coast of Ireland in prehistoric times. They called themselves Albans, the name representing perhaps their cultural or religious heritage. We cannot assume that everyone in Britain would have been 'Albans': on the contrary, it is inherently very unlikely that the epithet could have been applicable to the entire population of Britain. However, because of the Albans who migrated to Ireland, the Irish came to apply the name *Alba* to all of Britain.

CONCLUSIONS

Although *Alba* was once the Irish/Gaelic name for Britain as a whole, its meaning narrowed down to designate only the kingdom of Scotland which emerged a millennium ago. So today *Alba* is the Gaelic for Scotland, but, ironically, there is no convincing evidence that 'Albans' ever lived in Scotland. And even if they did, that's not how the country got its name. But Albans evidently lived in central Ireland and in southern England.

This article is a modest contribution to the history of a name which recurs in various forms as one of the commonest place-names or toponyms across Europe. Many questions remain unanswered, both about particular occurrences of the name in Britain and Ireland and, more generally, about the cultural process and chronology of the original dissemination of the name.

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