

LINGUISTIC STRATA IN ANCIENT CANTABRIA: THE EVIDENCE OF TOPONYMS

LEONARD A. CURCHIN
UNIVERSITY OF WATERLOO (CANADÁ)

RESUMEN: Un análisis detallado de los topónimos de la Cantabria antigua impugna la idea de una substancial presencia preindoeuropea o vasca en esta región. Fuera de un número limitado de nombres romanos, testimonio de un nivel débil de romanización, la clasificación lingüística de los topónimos se divide casi igualmente entre el céltico y una lengua indoeuropea no céltica, de la cual ignoramos su identidad.

SUMMARY: A detailed analysis of place-names in ancient Cantabria disproves the idea of a substantial pre-Indo-European or Basque presence in the region. Apart from a relatively small number of Roman names, indicative of a weak degree of romanization, the linguistic affiliation of toponyms is almost equally divided between Celtic and a non-Celtic Indo-European language which remains unidentified.

It is an unfortunate fact that, apart from the accounts of Augustus' campaigns in 26-19 B.C., the ancient sources have left us no narrative history of Cantabria. In particular, there is a paucity of information about the sequence and interaction of the various ethnic and linguistic groups that populated this region, leaving doubt as to whether the dominant language was Iberian, Basque, Celtic, or some earlier Indo-European (henceforth IE) tongue. While nineteenth-century scholars such as M. Assas and A. Fernández Guerra believed that the Cantabrians were Celtic, P. Bosch Gimpera considered them an Iberian enclave within the Celtic block, and J. Caro Baroja identified them as an autochthonous, pre-Celtic people¹.

On the other hand, we have a substantial amount of geographic information, in the form of place-names preserved in Pomponius Mela's *Chorography*, the elder Pliny's *Natural History*, Ptolemy's *Geography*, the Antonine and Ravennate itineraries, and occasional other literary and epigraphic

¹ For discussion and bibliography of this controversy, see J.M. Iglesias Gil, "Cantabros" in *Las entidades étnicas de la Meseta Norte de Hispania en época prerromana*, ed. J.M. Solana Sáinz (Valladolid, 1991), 41-57.

sources. Such toponyms can be of tremendous importance in understanding the cultural history of a region. But the subject has been inadequately explored and is fraught with problems, both in the correct form of the names and in their etymology. As Tovar rightly noted, “Mucho nos queda aún por saber de la toponimia cántabra”². This article provides a fresh examination of the toponyms of this region, home in antiquity to the Cantabri and Varduli (Fig. 1), the only two maritime peoples in the *conventus Cluniensis*³. Conclusions will be offered as to the linguistic makeup of the study area⁴.

A preliminary word is in order about the basic structure of these place-names. Toponyms may be either monothematic (e.g. *Dracina*) or dithematic, composed of two stems (e.g. *Tenobrica*, from *teno-* plus *briga*). Although both stems in such a name usually belong to the same language, we also encounter hybrids; for instance, in names like *Octaviolca* and *Flaviobriga* we have an initial Latin element added to a Celtic one⁵. Such bilingual compounds are significant evidence for the assimilation of successive language groups.

We should perhaps begin with the name *Cantabria* itself. Tovar, followed by Solana Sáinz, opted for the root **kanto-* “stone”⁶. However, this is not securely attested in ancient times; it is a Romance root of uncertain origin, perhaps pre-Roman⁷. Considering Cantabria’s geographic location on the edge of the Bay of Biscay, the more likely root is Celtic **canto-* “rim, border”, which is also the root of the toponym Cantium in Britain⁸. The name **Vardulia* (medieval Bardulia) does not appear as such in classical sources, though Hydatius (*Chron.*, 171) refers to “Vardulliarum loca maritima”⁹. In any event,

² A. Tovar, *Cantabria prerromana: o lo que la lingüística nos enseña sobre los antiguos cántabros*, Madrid, 1955, 38.

³ Pliny, *Naturalis Historia* III, 27.

⁴ Research for this project was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Council of Canada. Much of the research was conducted at the Centro de Estudios Históricos (Madrid), Cardiff University and the University of Wales at Aberystwyth, all of which I thank for access to their excellent libraries. Thanks also to research assistants Thomas Edward Butcher and Margaret McCarthy.

⁵ P. Sims-Williams, *Ancient Celtic place-names in Europe and Asia Minor*, Cambridge, 2006, 2 note 5 would count such names as Celtic.

⁶ Tovar, *Cantabria prerromana*, 18; J.M. Solana Sáinz, *Los cántabros y la ciudad de Iulio-briga*, Santander, 1981, 24.

⁷ J. Corominas, *Breve diccionario etimológico de la lengua castellana*, 3^a ed., Madrid, 1973, 127.

⁸ D.E. Evans, “Some Celtic forms in *cant-*”, *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies* 27, 1976-78, 243-245; A.L.F. Rivet and C. Smith, *The place names of Roman Britain*, London, 1979, 298-299.

⁹ Cf. L. Sagredo San Eustaquio, “Los várdulos y Vardulia. Su nombre y evolución”, *Durius* 5, 1977, 157-166.

the etymology of the Varduli is in question. Caro Baroja, based on the form *Bardyetai* which Strabo (III, 4, 12) says is the earlier form of *Bardyloi*, proposed a root **bard-*, comparing the Illyrian personal name Bardylis¹⁰. However, Greek “b” often represents “v”. Villar and Prósper derive Varduli from an IE hydronymic root **ward-*, which would also be the origin of the French river-names Gard, Gardon and Gardonne¹¹.

RIVERS AND OTHER FEATURES

Aturia flumen. This river, mentioned by Mela (III, 15) and forming the boundary between Cantabri and Autrigones, is an excellent example of scholarly discord on Cantabrian toponyms. Campi3n interpreted the name as Basque, from *ate* “mountain pass, defile” plus *ur* “water”¹². Pokorny made it Illyrian, while Garvens invoked an Iberian hydronym **tur* (even though Cantabria is well outside the Iberian zone)¹³. Schulten proposed emending Mela’s reading “Aturia” to “at Uria” and identifying it with the modern Oria¹⁴. Villar construes Aturia as IE **ura* “river” preceded by a proper name, therefore “the river Ata” (not otherwise attested)¹⁵. He further claims that the word *ata* on a Celtiberian inscription is the name of a city¹⁶, which would provide a toponymic parallel if such a city really existed. In a later interpretation, Villar takes Aturia as IE **ati-/ato-* “beyond, on the other side of”, plus **ura* “river”. Although the meaning “beyond the river” makes no sense for the river itself, Villar argues that the name Aturia would have originally referred to a city beside the river, adding: “Que el r3o y la ciudad ribereña intercambien sus nombres es cosa corriente”¹⁷. Again, no such city is attested. However, the

¹⁰ J. Caro Baroja, “Organizaci3n social de los pueblos del norte de la Pen3nsula Ib3rica en la Antigüedad”, *Legio VII Gemina*, Le3n, 1970, 41.

¹¹ F. Villar and B.M. Prósper, *Vascos, celtas e indoeuropeos. Genes y lenguas*, Salamanca, 2005, 479-480; E. N3gre, *Toponymie g3n3rale de la France*, I, Gen3ve, 1990, 45-46.

¹² A. Campi3n, “Sobre los nombres de la antigua Baskonia”, *Revue Internationale des 3tudes Basques* 2, 1908, 755-756.

¹³ J. Pokorny, “Zur Urgeschichte der Kelten u. Illyrier”, *Zeitschrift f3r Celtische Philologie* 21, 1938, 151; F. Garvens, *Die v3rromische Toponymie Nordspaniens*, diss. M3nster, 1964, 181.

¹⁴ A. Schulten, *Iberische Landeskunde I. Geographie des antiken Spanien*, Strasbourg/Kehl, 1955, 363.

¹⁵ F. Villar, *Indoeuropeos y no indoeuropeos en la Hispania prerromana*, Salamanca, 2000, 198.

¹⁶ F. Villar, *Estudios de celtib3rico y de toponimia prerromana*, Salamanca, 1995, 58-59; cf. J. Untermann, *Monumenta linguarum Hispanicarum, IV. Die tartessischen, keltiberischen und lusitanien Inschriften*, Wiesbaden, 1997, 554-556.

¹⁷ Villar and Prósper, *Vascos, celtas e indoeuropeos*, 35.

existence of a hydronymic root **atur-* is suggested by the ancient river-name Aturus (modern Adour) in southern Aquitania¹⁸, as well as such modern river-names as Aire, Yères and Arrou. Nègre characterizes this root as “préceltique”, but the Gaulish personal names Aturia, Aturio, Aturo etc. suggest we may be dealing with a Celtic element¹⁹. There are no secure attestations of Atur-personal names in Spain; the two cited by Albertos Firmat are misreadings.

Deva flumen (Ptolemy, II, 6, 8). This is clearly Celtic, from **deiwo-* “divine, goddess”. Rivers were regularly thought of as minor deities. For instance, there were two rivers Deva in northern Britain, both still known as Dee²⁰.

Magrada flumen. This toponym (Mela III, 15) may be formed from the Celtic roots **mag-* “field” y **ratis* “earthen wall, fortified settlement”. Very similar is the Old Irish toponym *Mag Ratha* (“field of the fort”) and the river *Mag Raithin*²¹, which presumably flowed past a fortified settlement.

Namnasa flumen. A river named by Mela (III, 15), its etymology is unclear. There is a Namnatus Portus attested by Avienus (*Ora maritima* 449) on the east coast of Spain, which is neither a Celtic nor Mediterranean name²², and a Gaulish tribe Namnetes.

Nerva flumen. Attested by Ptolemy (II, 6, 7), it has variously been characterized as Illyrian, Celtic or pre-Celtic²³. But the likeliest root is IE **ner-* “under, on the left, north”. Since this river (modern Nervión) flows northward into the Bay of Biscay, it could indeed mean “north”, as is presumably the case with the Galician people the Neri. A bishop Nervatius is recorded at the XVI Council of Toledo in A.D. 693, but his name is likelier derived from the Latin cognomen Nerva.

Sauga flumen. This is the reading of all the principal manuscripts of Pliny, *NH* IV, 111. The variants *Sanda* and *Sanga* are due to early editors and should be rejected. The name is Indo-European, from the series Sabo-/Savo-/Sau-²⁴, probably from IE **seu-* “squeeze out, obtain liquid”. It may thus have been

¹⁸ A. Holder, *Alt-celtischer Sprachschatz*, I, Leipzig, 1896, 279-280.

¹⁹ Nègre, *Toponymie générale de la France*, 31; M.L. Albertos Firmat, *La onomástica personal primitiva de Hispania Tarraconense y Bética*, Salamanca, 1966, 42; L. Weisgerber, *Rhenania Germano-Celtica. Gesammelte Abhandlungen*, Bonn, 1969, 141 note 175.

²⁰ Rivet and Smith, *Place names of Roman Britain*, 337.

²¹ E. Hogan, *Onomasticon goedelicum locorum et tribuum Hiberniae et Scotiae*, Dublin/London, 1910, 528.

²² A. Tovar, *Iberische Landeskunde III: Tarraconensis*, Baden-Baden, 1989, 189.

²³ Pokorný, “Zur Urgeschichte der Kelten u. Illyrier”, 144; Schulten, *Iberische Landeskunde*, 362.

²⁴ Villar, *Indoeuropeos y no indoeuropeos*, 317.

formed from **sau-ika*. Parallels include the place-name Savia in northern Spain and Pannonia, and the river Sauconna (Saône) in Gaul.

Saunium flumen. The text of Mela (III, 15) suggests this river lies between the rivers Salia (modern Sella, in eastern Asturias) and Deva (in western Cantabria); however, there are no significant rivers in this zone²⁵. The traditional identification with the modern Saja would place it east of the Deva. Like the Sauga (above) it could belong to the IE series Sabo-/Savo-/Sau-, with secondary suffix *-(e)n-* and adjectival ending *-(i)yo*²⁶. But an attractive alternative is suggested by Cornish *sawn* “cleft, gully” (incorporated in the Cornish toponyms Zawn and Sowans Hole), Breton *saon* “valley”, related by Padel to Welsh *safn* “mouth”, Middle Breton *staffn* “palate”, from IE **stHm(n)-* “mouth”, Greek *stoma*²⁷. Welsh *safn* refers mostly to animal and human mouths, but does occur in toponyms such as Maes-y-Safn (a lead mine) in Denbighshire and Graig Safn-y-coed in the Elan valley. A personal name Saunus or Saunius (“Turpilla Sauni f.”) is attested in Sevilla province (CIL II, 1302).

Tamarici Fontes. The name of these springs (Pliny, *NH*, XXXI, 23) is related to the river-name Tamara in Galicia (and to the tribe Supertamarici who lived there) and rivers Tamara and Tamesis (modern Thames) in Britain. There is controversy as to whether such names come from IE **tem(e)-* “dark” or IE **ta-* “to melt, flow”²⁸. The latter seems more appropriate to a hydronym, though the *-m-* is not easily explained. However, as Kitson has recently pointed out, rivers like the Thames have muddy sections which might well be described as dark²⁹. As an alternative, Villar has advocated the IE root **tem-* “to cut”, since rivers cut through the landscape³⁰. In any event, the root of this toponym is IE.

Vindius mons. Mentioned by Ptolemy (II, 6, 20), Florus (II, 33, 49) and Orosius (VI, 21, 5); it means “white mountain”, from Celtic **windo-* “white”. There are numerous Vindo- toponyms in Britain, as well as Vindeleia in the Ebro valley and Vindinum in Lugdunensis (Ptolemy II, 8, 9).

²⁵ Schulten, *Iberische Landeskunde*, 361.

²⁶ A. Meillet, *Introduction à l'étude comparative des langues indo-européennes*, Alabama, 1964, 261-262.

²⁷ O. Padel, *Cornish place-name elements*, Nottingham, 1985, 205; cf. E. Hamp, “Welsh *safn*, Breton *staon*”, *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies* 30, 1982-83, 44-45.

²⁸ Rivet and Smith, *Place names of Roman Britain*, 465.

²⁹ P.R. Kitson, “British and European river-names”, *Transactions of the Philological Society* 94, 1996, 90.

³⁰ F. Villar, “El hidrónimo prerromano *Tamusia*, modern *Tamuja*”, *Hispano-Gallo-Brittonica. Essays in honour of Professor D. Ellis Evans*, Cardiff, 1995, 266-277.

TOWNS OF THE CANTABRI

Amaia. This town on the Peña Amaya (Burgos) is attested only in late sources (Braulio, *Vita S. Aemiliani* 9 (16); Johannes Biclaensis, *Chronica* 32)³¹. It appears to come from the same IE root (**amma* “mother”, cf. the related feminine name Ammaia) as Ammaia in Lusitania, with simplification of the geminate *mm* to *m* (cf. the spelling of the personal name Amaius in *AE* 1967, 153). The *-ia* suffix comes from the IE adjectival ending *-(i)yo* (see above on river Saunium). A personal name Amainius is attested at Sasamón (*CIL* II, 5812) and at Villalazán (*HEp.* 10, 2000, 630) but may be a derivative of our toponym Amaia rather than an independent parallel.

Aracelum. So called by Florus (II, 3, 50), it corresponds to the *Aracelitani* in Pliny (*NH* III, 24) and Hydatius (*Chronica* 128). It also appears as *Araceli* in the Antonine Itinerary (455, 3) and in the corrupt form *Racilium* in Orosius (VI, 24, 5). It seems to come from Celtic **ar(a)-* “raised” (cf. Araducca in Galicia, Arabriga in Lusitania) plus **celo-* “hill”, cognate with Greek *kolonos* “hill”, Lithuanian *kálnas* “mountain”, therefore “high hill”.

Argenomescum. This city of the Cantabri (Ptolemy II, 6, 50) probably belongs to Pliny’s Orgenomesci (*NH* IV, 111)³². The name derives from IE **ar(e)g-*, Celtic **arg-* “to gleam”. A possible parallel for *-mescum* is provided by the Celtiberian suprafamilial name Mesicum at Uclés, Cuenca³³.

Attica. This place-name in Orosius (VI, 21, 5) resembles Attacum in Celtiberia (Ptolemy II, 6, 57). These toponyms, like the Celtiberian suprafamilial name Atticum attested at Segovia (*CIL* II, 2734), are formed from the personal name Atto with suffix *-iko-/-ako-* (Curchin 1997: 261)³⁴. Compare the island Atica, modern Hédic, in Gaul (Antonine Itinerary 510, 1).

Bergida. Mentioned by Florus (IV, 12, 49), it is obviously a different place from Bergidum Flavium in Asturias (Ptolemy II, 6, 28), though from the same IE root, **bhergh-* “high, mountain”.

Cam(b)arica. Ptolemy (II, 6, 50) gives the spelling *Camarica*; the Ravennate itinerary (308, 15) reads *Cambracum*. The probable root is Celtic

³¹ For Johanees Biclaensis, I follow the paragraph numbering in K.B. Wolf, *Conquerors and chroniclers of early medieval Spain*, Liverpool, 1990, 68.

³² On the confusion of /a/ and /o/ in classical writers, see Villar, *Indoeuropeos y no indoeuropeos*, 373-378.

³³ M.C. González Rodríguez, *Las unidades organizativas indígenas del área indoeuropea de Hispania*, Vitoria/Gasteiz, 1986, 131.

³⁴ L.A. Curchin, “Celticization and romanization of toponymy in central Spain”, *Emerita* 65, 1997, 261.

**cambo-* “crooked” (Old Irish *camb*), paralleled by Cambetum in Galicia and the British toponyms Cambodunum, Camboglanna, Camboritum, ultimately from IE **kam-er-* “to bend”³⁵. A personal name Camaricus is recorded at Cervera de Pisuerga (*HEp.* 2, 1990, 611 = *AE* 1990, 559) and a suprafamilial name Cambaricum in Salamanca and Toledo provinces³⁶.

Concana (Ptolemy II, 6, 50). This town presumably belongs to the Concani, a Spanish people mentioned by Horace (*Carm.* III, 4, 34) and Silius Italicus (III, 361). Birkhan, followed uncritically by Rivet and Smith, invoked a Celtic root **konko-* “horse” on the basis of Old Irish *cuing* and such personal names as Congonius³⁷. But *cuing*, from **ko(m)-yung-i-*, means “yoke”, not “horse”³⁸, and Birkhan’s **konko-* is a ghost-word. The likeliest root is rather the o-grade of IE **kenk-* “to gird, enclose” with IE secondary suffix *-no-*, therefore “enclosed place”. A goddess Ucellasica Concanauna is attested in northern Italy (*CIL* V, 5584 = Dessau, *ILS* 4822).

Dracina. A settlement listed in the Ravennate itinerary (308, 13), it is clearly related to Gaulish *drageno-* “thorn” (Old Irish *draigen*, Cornish and Middle Welsh *draen*), from IE **dher(e)gh-no-*³⁹. Therefore understand **Dragina* “place of thorns”. A parallel toponym *Dracuina* is found in Raetia (Ptolemy II, 11). In Lusitania there was a tribe *Dragani* (Avienus, *Ora maritima* 197), possibly from the same root⁴⁰, though I would prefer to relate it to IE **dragh-* “rough, ragged”⁴¹, the “rough men”.

Iuliobriga. Attested by Pliny (III, 21), Ptolemy (II, 6, 50) and inscriptions (*CIL* II, 4192, 4240). A major city of the Cantabri, it combines the Roman imperial name *Iulius* (no doubt in connection with the subjugation of this region by Augustus) with Celtic *briga* “hill-fort”.

Moroeca. The root of this town of the Cantabri (Ptolemy II, 6, 50) is surely Celtic **mor(i)-* “sea” (Gaulish *mori-*, Welsh and Cornish *mor*). Toponyms from

³⁵ J. Pokorny, *Indogermanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, Bern/München, 1959, 525; Rivet and Smith, *Place names of Roman Britain*, 292.

³⁶ González Rodríguez, *Las unidades organizativas indígenas*, 126.

³⁷ H. Birkan, *Germanen und Kelten bis zum Ausgang der Römerzeit*, Wien, 1970, 426-431; Rivet and Smith, *Place names of Roman Britain*, 314.

³⁸ J. Vendryes, E. Bachellery and P.Y. Lambert, *Lexique étymologique de l'irlandais ancien*, Dublin 1959, C-273.

³⁹ Pokorny, *Indogermanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, 258; P. Schrijver, *Studies in British Celtic historical phonology*, Amsterdam/Atlanta, 1995, 135.

⁴⁰ So A. Carnoy, “Éléments celtiques dans les noms de personnes des inscriptions d’Espagne”, *Le Muséon* 26 (n.s. 8), 1907, 36.

⁴¹ S.E. Mann, *An Indo-European comparative dictionary*, Hamburg, 1984-87, 202.

the same root include Morodon (Galicia), Aremorica (Gaul), Moridunum (Britain). The ending represents a theme *-oi-* with adjectival suffix *-iko-*⁴².

Ocella. This toponym, cited by Strabo (III, 4, 3), appears to come from Celtic **ocelo-* “promontory” (cf. Curchin 1996: 46)⁴³. There are toponyms Ocelum in Galicia, Britain and Cisalpine Gaul; also towns Ocelodurum (“promontory hill-fort”) and Albocela (**albo-ocela* “white promontory”) among the Vaccaei. However, Ocella is also attested as a Latin cognomen: the quaestor L. Livius Ocella, honoured by the Segobrigenses and Suessetani (*CIL* VI, 1446), may have been the father of Livia Ocellina, stepmother of the future emperor Galba (Suetonius, *Galba* 4).

Octaviolca. Ptolemy (II, 6, 50) attests this Cantabrian town. The element *olca* is Celtic for “ploughed field” from IE **pelk-* “to turn”. Probably related are the *castellum* Olca in Galicia (*HEp.* 6, 764), the mint Olkairun in the Ebro valley, and the Olcades, a people of the southern Meseta. The element *Octavi-* is Latin, either meaning “eighth” or referring to Octavian, conqueror of Cantabria in 26 BC, who had only recently (27 BC) begun to be called Augustus.

Portus Blendium. This toponym preserved by Pliny (IV, 111) contains Latin *portus* “harbour”. *Blendium* has been interpreted as genitive plural of an ethnic name **Blendii*, presumably the same people as the Plentuisoi, a Cantabrian tribe mentioned by Strabo (III, 3, 8)⁴⁴. However, the genitive plural of **Blendii* would be **Blendiorum*; *Blendium* presumes a nominative **Blendes*, which could be a latinized simplification of an indigenous name such as **Blenduesoi*. A likely root for this ethnonym is IE **bhlendh-* “reddish” (whence French *blond*), seen also in the personal names *Blendo*, *Blendea*⁴⁵.

Portus Victoriae. This is another harbour on the bay of Santander (Pliny IV, 111). The name is purely Latin, no doubt referring to the Roman victory over Cantabria. A city *Victoriacum* is attested in the Ebro valley in the Visigothic period⁴⁶.

Sandaquitum. A town located *iuxta Oceanum* in the Ravennate itinerary (308, 16). The second element is perhaps IE **akua* “water”, therefore “(town) on the water of (the river) Sanda”? However, the meaning of Sand- (unless related to Gaulish names like Santones, Santinius) is completely unknown, and there is no reliably known river Sanda (see above on the river Sauga). A divine

⁴² U. Schmoll, *Die Sprachen der vorkeltischen Indogermanen Hispaniens und das Keltiberische*, Wiesbaden, 1959, 55, 58.

⁴³ Cf. L.A. Curchin, “Five Celtic town-names in central Spain”, *Habis* 27, 1996, 46.

⁴⁴ Cf. Solana Sáinz, *Los cántabros y la ciudad de Iuliobriga*, 31.

⁴⁵ Pokorny, *Indogermanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, 157; Albertos Firmat, *Onomástica personal primitiva*, 55-56.

⁴⁶ Tovar, *Iberische Landeskunde III*, 376.

name Sandaquinus recorded epigraphically at Areniega (Álava) is clearly related⁴⁷.

Tenobrica. Located *iuxta Oceanum* by the Ravennate itinerary (308, 14), this toponym bears the Celtic element *briga/brica*, perhaps preceded by IE **teno-* “to stretch, extend”, cf. Cornish *ten* “stretched”, Latin *tentus*⁴⁸; therefore, “extensive hill-fort”? However, *Teno-* does not appear to be a participial or adjectival form (unless we understand **tenno-* from **tento-*). Instead, the likeliest etymology for *Tenobrica* is “hot fort” or “fire fort” (a hilltop site from which fire signals are sent, cf. Old Irish *tene*, Welsh *tân* “fire”) from Celtic **tep-no-* “hot”.

Vadinia. This Cantabrian city (Ptolemy II, 6, 50), which gave its name to the Vadinienses (frequently attested in epigraphy⁴⁹) probably derives its name from IE **wadh-* “to go, wade”, **wadho-* “passage, ford”, whence Latin *vadum*, Germanic *wada* “ford”⁵⁰, referring to a river-crossing. A less likely alternative is to see it as cognate with Greek *ouadas* “earth”, Old Irish *úath* “land”, of uncertain origin⁵¹. In my view, the personal names Vado, Vadinus are likelier to derive from **wadh-*, with respective meanings “wanderer, traveller” and “dweller near a ford”, than from **(a)ued-* “water” as Albertos proposed⁵².

Vellica. Ptolemy’s spelling (II, 6, 50) is correct; the form “Villegia” on the first Astorga tablet should be discarded, as the document is now considered false. The apparent root is Celtic **wel-* “to choose, wish”, **wello-* “better”, with Celtic adjectival suffix *-ico-*. The meaning would be “chosen place”, “wished-for place”. Possible parallels include Veleia (Italy), Veleia/Beleia (Ebro valley), Veluca (Celtiberia) and Vellaunodunum (Lugdunensis). A suprafamilial name Vellicum is attested at Monte Cildá (*CIL* II, 6297), and a cognomen Vellicus at Mértola, Portugal⁵³.

Veseiasueca (Pliny IV, 111). This town has several possible etymologies. It could come from IE **wes-*, Celtic **weis-* “to soak, flow” (Sanskrit *uisá*, Welsh *gwy* “water”, the latter occurring in such river-names as Wye and Edwy); or from IE and Celtic **wesu-* “good, worthy” (Old Irish *uisse* “fitting, just”,

⁴⁷ J.M. Blázquez, *Diccionario de las religiones prerromanas de Hispania*, Madrid, 1975, 146-148.

⁴⁸ Pokorny, *Indogermanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, 1065.

⁴⁹ E.g. J.M. Iglesias Gil, *Epigrafía cántabra*, Santander, 1976, n.º. 90, 105, 129, 137. See also M.G. Martínez, “Los vadinienses”, *Boletín del Instituto de Estudios Asturianos* 40, 1986, 125-150.

⁵⁰ Pokorny, *Indogermanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, 1109.

⁵¹ Vendryes, Bachelery and Lambert, *Lexique étymologique*, U-11.

⁵² Albertos Firmat, *Onomástica personal primitiva*, 241-242.

⁵³ J. d’Encarnação, *Inscrições romanas do Conventus Pacensis*, Coimbra, 1984, n.º 115.

Illyrian personal name Veselia “happy”) from which we get the personal names Bellovesus, Sigovesus⁵⁴; or from IE *wes- “to stay, dwell”. There is a town Vesontio (Besançon) in Gaul. However, the second element is clearly Celtic *sweco- “sweet, fragrant” (from IE *swek- “to smell (good)”: Welsh *chweg* “sweet”, Breton *c’hwezh* “odour”), which fits best with Celtic *weis-; therefore, “sweet-flowing” or “fragrant-watered” as the name of a town. On *sweco- referring to water, cf. the Old Irish river Suca⁵⁵.

TOWNS OF THE VARDULI

Alba. Ptolemy (II, 6, 65) records this town, whose name comes from IE *albho-, Celtic *albo- “white”. There are numerous parallels, including another Alba (in the Conventus Carthaginiensis: *Itinerarium Antoniniani* 404, 7), Alba Longa (Latium), Alba Helvorum (Narbonensis), and rivers Alba in Lugdunensis and the Conventus Tarraconensis.

Flaviaugusta. A romanized name, attested in an inscription from Tarragona (*CIL* II, 4196). Obviously contracted from *Flavia Augusta*, it is perhaps the same place as *Flaviobriga*.

Flaviobriga. This was a Roman colony in the territory of the Varduli, according to Pliny (IV, 110), though Ptolemy (II, 6, 67) attributes it to the Autrigones. The Latin name Flavius, indicating a colonial grant by Vespasian, is attached to the Celtic word *briga*.

Gabalaeca. Listed among the Varduli by Ptolemy (II, 6, 65), it clearly consists of Celtic *gabalo- “fork” (Gallo-Roman *gabalus* “javelin, gallows”, Old Irish *gabul* “forked branch, bifurcation”, from IE *ghabolo- “fork”) plus a suffix *-aika*. The town must have been sited at a fork in a road or river. Cf. Trigaboloi (“three forks”) on the river Po (Polybius II, 6, 11), the Old Irish river Gabal and the Gabali of Aquitania⁵⁶. A suprafamilial name *kabelaikiskum* (Gabelaeciscum?) is recorded on the third bronze tablet from Botorritha⁵⁷.

Gebala. Despite a superficial resemblance to Gabalaeca, the root of this town (Ptolemy II, 6, 65) appears to be IE *ghebhel- “head, gable”, whence

⁵⁴ X. Delamarre, *Dictionnaire de la langue gauloise*, 2^o ed., Paris, 2003, 318.

⁵⁵ E. Hogan, *Outlines of the grammar of Old-Irish*, Dublin, 1900, 134.

⁵⁶ Hogan, *Onomasticon goedelicum*, 432; J. Whatmough, *The dialects of ancient Gaul*, Cambridge, 1970, 363.

⁵⁷ Untermann, *Monumenta linguarum Hispanicarum IV*, 594.

Greek *kephalê* “head, top, extremity”, German *Giebel*⁵⁸. It should refer to a site on a summit or headland.

Menosca. Both Pliny (IV, 110) and Ptolemy (II, 6, 69) mention this town on the Bay of Biscay. Although Schmoll considered it Basque, the likeliest root is IE **men-*, Celtic **meino-* “small” (Old Irish *menb*, Welsh *mein* “small”, Latin *minus* “less”), plus the IE suffix *-sko-*⁵⁹. The meaning then is “Smalltown”. A different possibility is suggested by Welsh *maen*, Cornish *men* “rock”, possibly related to Old Irish *maigen* “place”, all ultimately from **magno-* “big”⁶⁰; but despite the Cornish example, we would expect in ancient Spain a form *Magnosca* or *Mainosca*, not *Menosca*.

Morogi. Listed among the Varduli by Pliny (IV, 110), it may be identical to Ptolemy’s *Moroeca* of the Cantabri. In any event, it comes from the same root.

Portus Amanum (or *Samanum*?). Pliny (IV, 110) tells us that *Portus Amanum* is the previous name of Flaviobriga. *Amanum* has been claimed as Etruscan or Latin⁶¹. A more likely root is IE **am-* “river bed”⁶², to be distinguished from the root **am(m)a* “mother” in the personal names *Amanus/a*⁶³ and *Am(m)aius/a* (see above on *Amaia*). Villar cites hydronyms *Amana* in Britain and Gaul⁶⁴, but these are not attested in any ancient source. There is also a people *Amaci*, of unclear etymology, in Asturias (Ptolemy II, 6, 35). The existence of a modern village and creek *Sámano* near Castro Urdiales led Solana Sáinz to propose that the ancient name be emended to “*Portus Samanum*”, which he interpreted as referring to an otherwise unattested tribe **Samani*, with the meaning “el puerto de los Samanos”⁶⁵. However, as with *Portus Blendium* (see above), a genitive plural *Samanum* presumes a nominative **Samanes*, which is less congruous with *Sámano*. Moreover, the failure of other ancient sources to mention such a tribe argues against this hypothesis. Rather than a genitive plural, this name (if we accept the

⁵⁸ Pokorny, *Indogermanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, 423.

⁵⁹ Schmoll, *Die Sprachen der vorkeltischen Indogermanen*, 64; Villar and Prósper, *Vascos, celtas e indoeuropeos*, 462.

⁶⁰ Vendryes, Bachelery and Lambert, *Lexique étymologique*, M-9.

⁶¹ A. Schulten, “Die Etrusken in Spanien”, *Klio* 23, 1930, 403; J. de Gorostiaga, “Toponimia céltica del País Vasco”, *Boletín de la Real Sociedad Vascongada de Amigos del País* 9, 1953, 215.

⁶² Villar and Prósper, *Vascos, celtas e indoeuropeos*, 436.

⁶³ J.M. Vallejo Ruiz, *Antroponimia indígena de la Lusitania romana*, Vitoria/Gasteiz, 2005, 131; cf. *CIL* VI, 268.

⁶⁴ Villar and Prósper, *Vascos, celtas e indoeuropeos*, 436.

⁶⁵ J.M. Solana Sáinz, *Flaviobriga (Castro Urdiales)*, Valladolid 1977, 9; idem, “La colonia Flaviobriga (Castro Urdiales)”, *Dialoghi di Archeologia* 10, 1992, 299.

emendation *Samanum*) could be neuter singular, either from Celtic **samo-* “summer” or from IE **stHm(n)-* “mouth”; see above on the Cantabrian river *Saunium*. Modern *Sámano* could easily have developed from a neuter *Samanum*.

Segontia Paramica. Since Ptolemy lists this toponym under both the *Varduli* (II, 6, 65) and *Vaccaeii* (II, 6, 49), it is uncertain whether he has made an error, or whether there are two towns with the same name. *Segontia* is clearly from Celtic **sego-* “victory” with IE toponymic suffix *-ntia*, while *Paramica* comes from the indigenous word *paramo* “elevated plain” (*CIL* II, 2660), apparently cognate with Old Indian *paramah* “elevated”⁶⁶. *Paramaecus* is attested as a personal name in Lusitania (*AE* 1985, 528) and as an epithet of the god *Reus* in Galicia⁶⁷.

Thabuca. This name appears, with variant *Abuca*, in Ptolemy (II, 6, 65). One possibility is IE **dhabh-* “to fit together, join”⁶⁸ with suffix *-iko-*, cognate with Latin *fabricatio* “construction”. Another option is the IE hydronym **av-/ab-* plus IE *-uk-*, perhaps prefixed by the IE demonstrative **to*⁶⁹. Possible parallels include the toponyms *Tabucci* in Lusitania, *Tabaniu* (mint) in Celtiberia, *Taburnus* in *Narbonensis*, and the river *Tabulos* in Belgium.

Tritium Tuboricum (Ptolemy II, 6, 65). This name comes (like *Tritium* of the *Autrigones*) from IE **trityos* “third”. Its surname is derived from IE **tubh-* “elevation, hill” with adjectival ending *-iko-*⁷⁰.

Tulonium. Our source for this name is again Ptolemy (II, 6, 65), with one manuscript providing the variant *Tullonium*. While Villar (1993) thinks that all toponyms in *telo-* or *tolo-* are related and come from the IE hydronym **(s)tel-* “to pour, pool”⁷¹, it is logical to connect *Tulonium* with Old Irish *tul* “protuberance, knoll”, Welsh *twlch* “hillock”, from IE **twel-* “swelling, lump”⁷², and to see this name as Celtic. To the root has been added the IE secondary suffix *-en-* and ending *-iyo-*. A divine name *Tullonius* is attested at *Alegría* (Álava), generally regarded also as the site of *Tulonium* (*CIL* II, 2939).

⁶⁶ Pokorny, *Indogermanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, 810.

⁶⁷ J. Arias Vilas, P. Le Roux and A. Tranoy, *Inscriptions romaines de la province de Lugo*, Paris, 1979, n°. 36-37.

⁶⁸ Pokorny, *Indogermanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, 233.

⁶⁹ Villar, *Indoeuropeos y no indoeuropeos* 229; Villar and Prósper, *Vascos, celtas e indoeuropeos*, 432.

⁷⁰ Villar and Prósper, *Vascos, celtas e indoeuropeos*, 476.

⁷¹ F. Villar, “Talabara, Talavera, Toledo”. *Studia Palaeohispanica et Indogermanica in honorem J. Untermann*, Barcelona, 1993, 287-296.

⁷² Pokorny, *Indogermanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, 1081.

Toponymic parallels include Tullum Leucorum (modern Toul) in Gaul, Tul Tuinne in early Ireland and Port Tulon in medieval Wales⁷³.

Vesperies. This toponym, known from Pliny (IV, 110), is derived from IE **wespero-* “evening, west” (Greek Hesperides, Latin *vesper*, whence the loan-words Irish *fescor*, Breton *gospër*). It is thus equivalent in meaning to the English toponym Weston (West Town).

CONCLUSIONS

Although Tovar claims that the pre-Indo-European element is important in Cantabria⁷⁴, the study of toponyms reveals no trace of it. The only evidence that Tovar is able to invoke for pre-Indo-European toponymy is modern names (such as Candiano, Candenosa, Gandarilla, Cudon); all the known ancient names belong to Indo-European languages. Similarly there is no evidence for the presence of Basque toponyms in Cantabria in the Roman period. Basque speakers perhaps did not move into this region until a later date; or at any rate, they were not present in sufficient numbers to establish any settlements with Basque names.

The analysis of names suggests the following linguistic categories:

Indo-European (undifferentiated): Nerva flumen, Sauga flumen, Tamarici fontes; Amaia, Argenomescum, Bergida, Concana, portus Blendium, Vadinia; Alba, Gebala, Menosca, portus Amanum, Thabuca, Tritium Tuboricum, Vesperies. Total 16 = 39% of the 41 toponyms.

Celtic or probably Celtic: Cantabria; Deva flumen, Magrada flumen, Saunium flumen, Vindius mons; Aracelum, Attica, Cambarica, Dracina, Moroeca/Morogi, Ocella, Vellica, Veseiasueca; Gabalaeca, Segontia Paramica (the second word is Indo-European but non-Celtic), Tenobrica, Tulonium. Total 17 = 41%.

Celto-Latin compounds: Iuliobriga, Octaviolca; Flaviobriga. Total 3 = 7%.

Latin: Portus Victoriae; Flaviaugusta. Total 2 = 5%.

uncertain: Aturia flumen, Namnasa flumen; Sandaquitum. Total 3 = 7%.

⁷³ Nègre, *Toponymie générale de la France*, 131; C. Marstrand et al., *Dictionary of the Irish language*, Dublin, 1913-76, T-374; J.G. Evans and J. Rhŷs, *The text of the book of Llan Dâv*, Oxford, 1893, 32.

⁷⁴ Tovar, *Iberische Landeskunde III*, 66.

From these figures it can be seen that Latin names (including those compounded with Celtic) comprise only 12 percent of the total, as is perhaps not surprising in this poorly romanized zone. The overwhelming majority of names are Indo-European (39 percent) and Celtic (41 percent, or 48 percent if we include those names compounded with Latin). As García Alonso has suggested, the proximity of Cantabria to the Autrigones, Turmogi and Vaccaeii, themselves largely celticized through contact with the Celtiberians, may account for the strongly Celtic influence evident in its toponymy⁷⁵.

This toponymic study suggests that before the Roman conquest, Cantabria was largely celtophone, though there is also a strong presence of toponyms belonging to a non-Celtic Indo-European language. One approach would be to interpret the non-Celtic toponyms as pre-Celtic and thus residual fossils of an extinct language. However, it is also possible that this non-Celtic language was still current and was spoken alongside Celtic, like the unidentified Indo-European language, remarkably close in form to early Indo-European, that survives on three Lusitanian inscriptions of the Roman period⁷⁶. Whether there was a single pre-Celtic Indo-European language in Hispania, or a number of such languages in different regions, is a matter for further investigation.

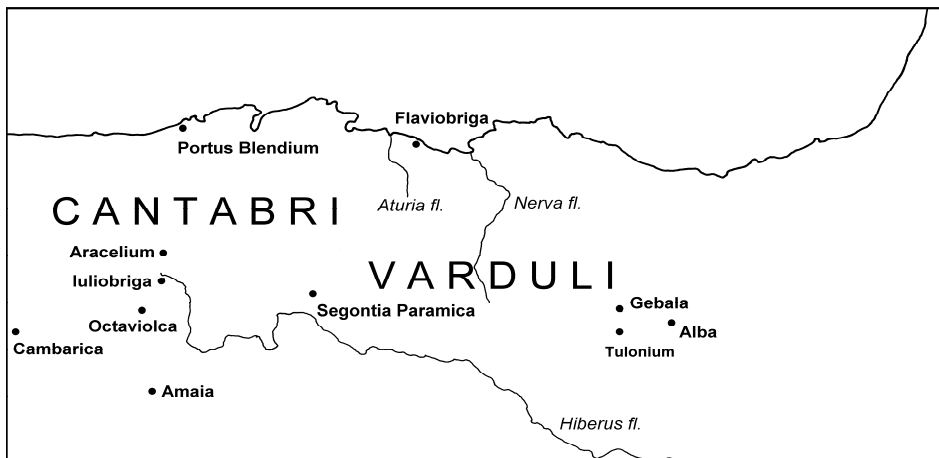


Fig. 1. Map of Cantabria, indicating toponyms of known location.

⁷⁵ J.L. García Alonso, *La Península Ibérica en la Geografía de Claudio Ptolomeo*, Vitoria/Gasteiz, 2003, 457.

⁷⁶ Untermann, *Monumenta linguarum Hispanicarum IV*, 723-758.