

## North from the Forth

The Ravenna Cosmography is a vitally useful source of information about early British geography. In Scotland it is by far the number-one source of early names, followed by Ptolemy's Geography, with inscriptions and other sources a poor third. Over the whole of Britain its 307 names outnumber those from all other sources combined.

Rivet and Smith (1979) wrote a generally brilliant book about all Roman place names in Britain, which is widely regarded as an ultimate authority, but these authors went seriously wrong over the Cosmography, mistakenly arguing that its manuscripts are badly corrupted. They actually went backwards, on average, from Richmond and Crawford (1949), who wrote the definitive work on the Cosmography, including photos of its three manuscripts.

In reality, the Cosmography's name spellings are at least as reliable as in any other ancient source. Geographical information comes mainly from the order in which names are listed. They track logically across the landscape, often following Roman Roads, or around the coast, as if the unknown author (who worked in about AD 700 at the Gothic-Roman court in Ravenna) was reading them off some tolerably accurate maps. His information seems much like that available to Ptolemy, partly derived from army campaigns quite early in the Roman occupation of Britain.

Our challenge now is to make sense of about 130 Cosmography names in Scotland, relating them to other information, from Ptolemy and Tacitus, from archaeology, and from maps. Among these names is one sequence of 37 names north from the Forth, which starts at the convenient fixed point of [Velunia](#) (Carriden), heads west along the Antonine Wall, then north up the edge of the Highlands and round to Inverness, then comes back south again.

Many of these northern names correspond one-to-one with major Roman forts and camps, whose characteristics fit the likely meanings of their names tolerably well. All sorts of errors could affect name-to-site assignments, and changing one could easily provoke a ripple of displacements along the line. Experienced Romanists may be able to improve the fit to historical information and archaeology, but the essential pattern seems to be well established.

Problems begin when names come back south again below Perth and the river Tay:

[Poreoclassis](#) – [Levioxava](#) – [Cermium](#) – [Victorie](#) – [Marcotaxon](#) – [Tagea](#) – [Voran](#)

Then comes possibly the most puzzling sequence of names in the entire Cosmography:

[Maponi](#) – [Mixa](#) – [Panovius](#) – [Minox](#) – [Taba](#) – [Manavi](#) – [Segloes](#) – [Dannoni](#)

After that the Cosmography leaves Scotland and jumps into a completely different series of English sea-ports.

As this text has evolved those last eight puzzles have gradually been solved (but of course with a note of scepticism because of the ever-present danger of confirmation bias). They have been connected up into coherent geographical sequences and given plausible name explanations. Our best guesses for each name can be looked up individually, and there is still plenty of scope for other people to disagree and comment usefully. The degree of certainty about name meaning and location varies, but in no case does it reach 100%.

The names that come closest to being fixed points of reference are *Poreoclassis*, surely a corruption of *Horrea Classis* beside the Tay at Carpow, and *Victorie*, which surely refers to the big battle at *mons Graupium*, even if the precise site is a bit uncertain. After that, a lot depends on name meanings, but disappointingly little can be gleaned from the previous writings of skilled linguists.

Much of Scotland and Wales manifestly emerged from the “Dark Ages” speaking Celtic languages. However, attempts to extrapolate from the earliest known Celtic texts back to Roman times 500 years or so earlier regularly fall into a trap of circular logic. This is particularly true of Kenneth Jackson and his followers, whose writings have done great damage to the understanding of Roman-era names in England.

Across Scotland few parallels for the elements in early names are easy to find in dictionaries of Welsh and Gaelic. This can be seen most clearly in the western isles, whose early names are generally accepted as “Pre-Celtic”. Across Scotland more widely, the vast bulk of modern, transparently Celtic names appear to be post-Roman creations (James, 2011), with little connection back to the Roman era.

The way forward with northern names is to focus on real evidence: archaeology, maps, names definitely used across the Roman Empire, and words definitely used in classical times. Theory should take a back seat. That means being careful with linguistic reconstruction: proto-Indo-European roots (generally cited here in the typography of Watkins, 2011) are valuable space-savers if they are based upon multiple language families but theoretical proto-forms in a single language family can be dangerous. Similarly with geographical issues: risky guesses are needed about the former locations of riverbanks, before the effects of siltation, glacial rebound, and human activity.

There is rarely a single, overwhelmingly likely meaning of an ancient proper name. Usually there are several, which need to be ranked for probability, using three main criteria. One is the geography/history/archaeology of a likely site. Second is parallel(s) among other ancient and modern places. Third is treating a series of names as a linked data set; with the Cosmography that usually means taking them as a sequence.

So how does this thinking apply to these 15 difficult names? How brave can we be in insisting that names connect up into a geographically coherent path? How brave in suggesting potential meanings from ancient Greek or Old English? How brave in contradicting long-cherished ideas?

As one example of pragmatic iconoclasm, consider one post-Roman place in the Forth estuary: Bede explicitly named *peanfahel* as being in the Pictish language. Most authors confidently translate it as Wallsend, compounded from the Celtic word for ‘end’ seen, for example, in Penzance, plus a derivative of Latin *vallum* ‘wall’. This then passed through a language change from P-Celtic Pictish into Q-Celtic Gaelic, to become modern Kinneil.

What never gets pointed out is an alternative translation of ‘livestock marsh’, compounded from PIE *\*pen-* ‘mud, swamp’ (the root of English fen and possibly pan) plus *\*pek-* ‘cattle’ (said to be the root of Old English *feoh* and Gothic *faihu*). Both analyses raise linguistic issues but Bede’s likely informant was the monastery at Abercorn which would have grazed cattle on its riverside wetland at Kinneil. The take-home lesson is that many languages were potentially in play in this area over the centuries, as the later history of Falkirk, set out by Nicolaisen (1976:9-21), clearly shows.

[Miller \(1885\)](#) laid out a convincing case that a base on or by the promontory now occupied by [Blackness](#) Castle was used by the Romans to supply the Antonine Wall, and was later reported by Bede under the name *Urbs Giudi*. The small harbour in its lee now used by a [boat club](#) was formerly the number-two harbour in all of mediaeval Scotland. This insight got buried under a load of nonsense about Stirling, which was sorted out by [Fraser \(2008\)](#) who clarified other historians’ mentions of this place.

Bede’s *Urbs Giudi* was some kind of native power centre just beyond the eastern end of the Antonine Wall, equivalent to Dumbarton Rock beyond the western end. Fraser (2008)

looked at various mentions of the place in early texts, and deduced an original spelling close to *Urbs Iudeu*, but did not go on to spell out that Latin *judex* ‘judge’ makes best sense as the source of that name.

To a geographer, Blackness looks like an archetypal ancient trading site for merchant ships. Countless such places were based around a promontory or tidal island, such as Tintagel, Cadiz, St Michael’s Mount, Hengistbury, Burgh Island, etc. They all offered a sheltered anchorage, a convenient beach for unloading, and a prosperous hinterland to trade with. Above all they offered protection from violence and dishonesty. Some form of government was generally represented by a local official who enforced the law and collected tolls. It is entirely plausible that such an official or portreeve was called a *judex* in Latin.

No one really knows who created these earliest recorded names. Many commentators assume that the creators were indigenous people, and that they used their native language, which was Celtic. In reality, the key known facts are that: (1) Romans and their Latin language were on top from AD 75 to 163; (2) many Roman soldiers were recruited around the lower Rhine and grew up speaking forms of Germanic; (3) speakers of Scots/Anglian ended up in charge of most land around the Forth.

It is interesting to speculate further, for example about the Pictish language, the arrival of Gaelic and Norse speakers, Roman supply ships crossing the North Sea, Roman Christianity, undiscovered Roman sites and indigenous central places, etc. However, it is hard to make those ideas lead to anything solid and of course the Romans were a mere passing phase in a much longer history of Scotland. Beware linguistic nationalism!

One name, *Manavi*, apparently survived in the [Manaw Gododdin](#), as pointed out by Watson (1926). *Manavi* could mean ‘wetland people’, given that the whole upstream Forth valley used to be surrounded by extensive marshland, but it still does not pin down a precise site. It would also suit Herodian’s account of *Severus* and his son *Caracalla* chasing tattooed barbarians into the woods and marshes of Scotland in AD 208-210, which raises a question whether the eight *diversa loca* come from *Severus*’ campaign.

All the known major Roman forts now seem to have names. Thus, further out along the coast of the Forth, the Roman fort at [Cramond](#) was probably Ptolemy’s *Αλαυνα* (= [Alauna](#) number 6). Some names probably belong to an indigenous power centre. For example, Dunbar is a good fit to RC’s [Rumabo](#), but it has no known Roman fort.

It came as a real surprise that eight baffling puzzles have turned into eight solid suggestions, but there is plenty more left to do. For example, which site earned the name *Victoria*? And further north one must essentially slide a list of names along a list of Roman forts and camps, with possible gaps in both lists, to see what makes the best sense. More sets of eyes looking at early names will be welcome.