

Roman Routes in South-West Scotland

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It is widely reported that the Ravenna Cosmography is “full of corruptions, with little evident logic in its ordering of names”. That comment, and others like it, is wrong, and must stop being repeated. To prove that point, I focus here on one sequence of 26 names in the Cosmography that can be located on the map by understanding what they mean, as written, and their logical order of listing. This gives useful insight into how the Romans acted in one interesting corner of Britain.

Here are those 26 names:

*Maia Fanococidi Brocara Croucingo Stodoion Smetriadum Clindum Carbantium
Tadoriton Maporiton Alitacenon Loxa Locatreve Cambroianna Smetri Uxela Lucotion
Corda Camulossesa Presidium Brigomono Abisson Ebio Coritiotar Celovion Itucodon*

Anyone can check *exactly* how those names were written in the three surviving manuscripts of the Cosmography, thanks to good photographs in a monograph by Ian Richmond and Osbert Crawford (1949), whose key parts I have posted online at www.romaneraname.com/essays/cosmopix.htm. Despite difficulties in reading medieval handwriting, expanding abbreviations, and adjusting to modern typography, the core spellings of those names are not in doubt.

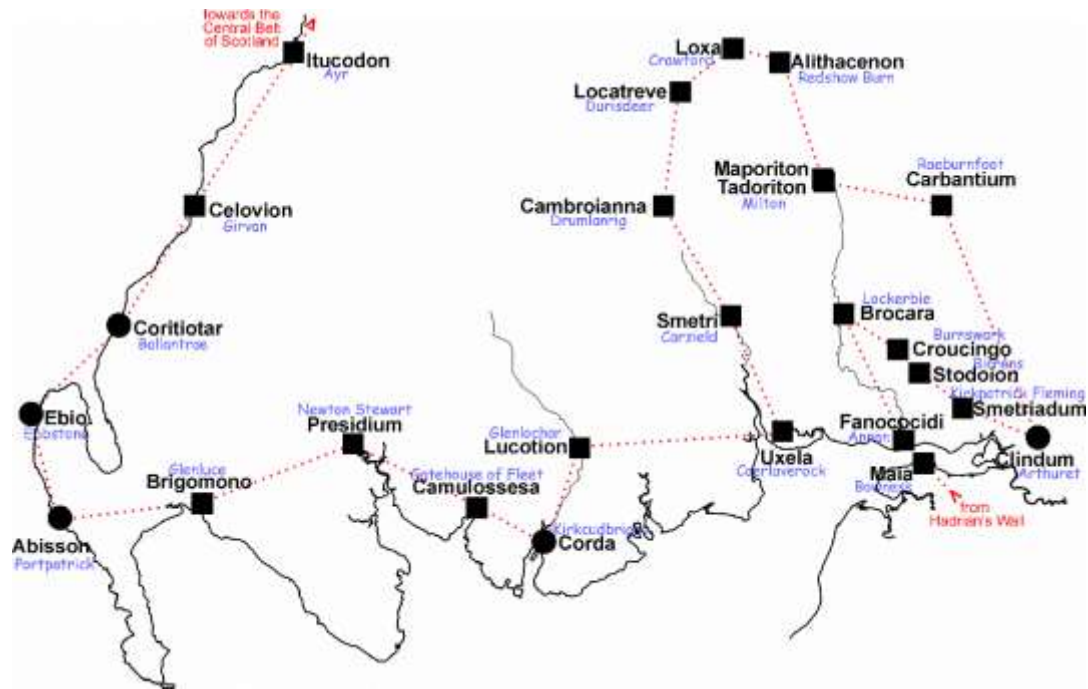
In about AD 700, the north Italian seaport of Ravenna had taken over from Rome as the capital of an empire, which was now Christian and fluctuating between Germanic and Byzantine control. An unnamed monk there seems to have been tasked to extract important names off old Roman maps of much of Europe, perhaps from some imperial archives. The nature and number of those original source documents are unknown, but they were probably centuries old and degraded in places.

The Cosmography is about average as ancient texts go. It raises plenty of questions about how well name spellings have survived from their earliest sources, but before you repeat that calumny about “full of corruptions” please consider how you might extract names from a battered First Folio of Shakespeare, which is 400 years old today and full of historic language. That would be much like the task assigned to the original compiler of the Cosmography.

What matters here is that the British section of the Cosmography supplies versions for 307 Roman geographical names, more than half of the total 580 or so names that have survived in and around Great Britain. Those numbers constitute manageable data sets, especially in our age of computers, within which we can look for cross-correlations. Some name elements occur often enough that they can be linked with particular features in the landscape, in Britain and sometimes elsewhere.

It soon becomes clear that place names arose in Roman times in much the same way as later, in Anglo-Saxon times. Name-givers had a lively eye for what really mattered, in economic and military terms, for human survival in the landscape. Mostly that meant topography and transport routes, with religion and land ownership less important than is sometimes suggested. A valuable heuristic trick for deciphering ancient names is to think about all the roles of nearby water.

Here is a map of part of south-west Scotland, historically called Dumfries and Galloway, near the Solway Firth. A red dotted line shows the Cosmography’s sequence of listing of 26 names, which are marked by black squares where Roman sites are known from archaeology or by black circles where unknown sites or significant landmarks must be hypothesized. We can imagine the Cosmographer’s finger tracing across his source maps, on a track that only sometimes follows the course of engineered Roman roads, and generally does not cross back over itself. Names in blue are modern.



Here are those 26 names, laid out in a table. The analysis column brutally abbreviates logic that is often quite complex down to only 40 or so characters, while the location column often names a main settlement rather than one or more Roman sites nearby. Each Roman name is hyperlinked to its entry at www.romaneraname.uk, which explains the full logic.

| Roman name | Location | Linguistic and geographical analysis |
|-----------------------------|---------------------|---|
| Maia | Bowness | signal station, compare маяк 'lighthouse' |
| Fanococidi | Annan Hill | red flag station, compare vane + κόκκινος 'scarlet' |
| Brocara | Lockerbie | marsh junction, compare brook & arthritis |
| Croucingo | Burnswark | battle site = 'ring-work cinch' |
| Stodoion | Birrens | στωιδιον 'storehouse' |
| Smetriadum | Kirkpatrick Fleming | <i>smepe</i> 'smooth' + ρυαδος 'fluid' |
| Clindum | Arthuret | road junction, κλινω 'to turn aside' |
| Carbantium | Raeburnfoot | <i>carpentum</i> 'wagon', from <i>carpo</i> 'to gather' |
| Tadoriton | Annan crossing | Daddy + ρυτον 'flowing' |
| Maporiton | Evan Water crossing | son + ρυτον 'flowing', compare Welsh <i>mab</i> |
| Alithacenon | Redshaw Burn | αληθης + κενος = 'really empty' |
| Loxa | Crawford | λοξος 'offset', double road junction |
| Locatreve | Durisdeer? | λοχος + τρεπω = 'ambush turning' |
| Cambroianna | Drumlanrig | καμπη + ροια + ναω = floodplain of river Nith |
| Smetri | Carzield | <i>smepe</i> 'smooth'+ ρεω 'to flow' |
| Uxela | Caerlaverock | 'uphill' = lookout on Ward Law |
| Lucotian | Glenluce | lynxes: λυγχ + ωτιον, bright eyes + ear tufts |
| Corda | Kirkcudbright | <i>chorda</i> 'gut' |
| Camulossesa | Gatehouse of Fleet | 'low hill seat' |
| Presidium | Newton Stewart | 'guard post' |
| Brigomono | Glenluce | * <i>brig</i> 'bridge' + <i>mons</i> 'hill' |
| Abisson | Portpatrick | αβυσσος 'bottomless', sea trench in North Channel |
| Ebio | Ebbstone | ειβω 'to fall in drops', compare Hebrides |
| Coritiotar | Ballantrae | χωριτης 'rural' + ουθαρ 'most fertile' |
| Celovion | Girvan | κελυφιον 'little sheath' |
| Itucodon | Ayr | ιτυς 'rim' + κωδων 'bell' = shape of bay |

How much confidence can be placed in these locations and meanings? If pressed, I would rate these individual name analyses between 20% and 90% reliable – ranging from weak guesses up to near (but not total) certainty. **Uxela** and **Carbantium** are very likely to be correct, because they have near equivalents in Ptolemy's Geography, plus plausible meanings.

Maia has a nearly certain location, at the western end of Hadrian's Wall, but until now its meaning was unknown, along with the reason why the Cosmography lists another *Maio* just along the coast. Derivation from proto-Indo-European (PIE) **ma-* 'to wave' suggests that multiple signalling stations guided Roman ships into the Solway estuary from the Irish Sea. Linguistic parallels from Greek colonies around the Black Sea include маяк (*mayak* 'lighthouse') on a map of southern Ukraine.

Fanococidi has been explained, probably wrongly, as a *fanum* 'shrine' at Bewcastle. There is no doubt that a god *Cocidius*, whose name makes sense as an adjective based on **coc-* 'red', like blood, was worshipped by Roman soldiers. But that references a very ancient dyeing technology, pre-dating any distinctively Celtic speech, and around the Solway there is good evidence for soldiers from around the lower Rhine, who would have been Germanic speakers. Ancient *fano-* might then be related to modern English fen, but a better parallel may be vane, hinting at a red Roman military standard serving as a signal to incoming ships.

That hypothesis about *Fanococidi* unlocks a credible path for the Cosmographer's finger tracing over his source maps. From then on the investigation comes down to working out what place names might have meant to their creators and where they best match the local situations of candidate sites. Relying heavily on linguistics may make readers nervous, but we have no choice because other Roman textual sources contribute nothing directly useful.

It is right to feel nervous about focusing heavily on name meanings, because top linguists have an atrocious track record at locating geographical names in Roman Britain. The influence of several senior academics has been particularly pernicious, suckering innocent archaeologists and historians into believing some shoddy logic. What went wrong?

Most ancient place names are compounds of several elements, which were once ordinary words or grammatical affixes. For example, the present 26 names contain at least 40 distinct elements, whose ancient meanings we would like to know. Without hard evidence about the languages used, we cannot expect exact translations of name elements, and must settle for "parallels", related words to supply approximate meanings.

With a little knowledge about the oddities of ancient spelling and handwriting, it is easy to find **Corda** and **Presidium** listed under *Chorda* and *Praesidium* in a big Latin dictionary, which has been available since 1879. Computerized searches through the Internet allow even a relative ignoramus (such as me) to track down Latin words and proper names that contributed to more than a quarter of Britain's early geographical names known from Roman times. It is appalling how many name analyses, in what one might call "extended Latin", top linguists have failed to find. How could so many clever people be so blind?

The problem arose from the widespread belief that Britain's earliest inhabitants were "Celtic", even though classical authors were clear that Celts lived on the Continent, not in Britain. So investigators have hunted for name-element parallels in dictionaries of Welsh, Irish, and Breton, even though those languages were not called Celtic before about AD 1700, and are not attested in writing until long after Roman control of Britain ended.

Most historians would guess that indigenous Iron-Age people in Dumfries and Galloway spoke a language related to old Welsh, with some admixture of old Irish. However, among the 40 or so Roman name elements there, at most three have good parallels in medieval Celtic. More elements look Germanic, perhaps due to Roman soldiers recruited around the lower Rhine. It looks as if the locals were not much consulted about names that the Romans wrote down.

We could also enquire how many name elements seem generally European, best pursued via a PIE dictionary, and how they passed into the name-building vocabulary of the Roman Empire. But that would distract from the elephant in the room – Greek words written in Roman letters. Seven names end in *-on*, and 23 name elements can be quickly looked up in an online dictionary of ancient Greek. No amount of quibbling can shake that core observation and it needs an explanation.

See www.romaneranames.uk/essays/whygreek.pdf for a discussion of nine possible reasons for so many Greek-seeming names. Maybe Roman commanders, such as governor Agricola, had specialist cartographers, trained in the eastern Mediterranean, on their staff. Maybe Greek is a surrogate for other languages that have disappeared. And think about particular individuals: cartographers such as Ptolemy, or navigators such as Pytheas, or officials such as Demetrius of Tarsus.

Every one of these 26 names has an interesting story to tell, but there is space here to discuss only a few. You can look up each name on my website www.romaneranames.uk, to see the sort of lateral thinking sometimes needed to understand names. That site is constantly updated in response to well-argued suggestions, so if you can improve any of its logic please get in touch.

Croucingo describes a ring-work fort (with the *crou-* part related to Welsh *crug* ‘mound’ and English church) enveloped by Roman siege works (the *cingo* ‘to surround’ part). Only quite recently has Burnswark been recognized as the site of a genuine battle. The same site may also show up in the Antonine Itinerary as *Blatobulgio* (literally ‘bloody hill’), often misidentified because of a mistaken Celtic parallel.

Tadoriton and **Maporiton** are a father-and-son pair of nearby river crossings, which can be located very precisely, where a Roman road continued in use until quite recently. The names have parallels in modern Welsh *tad* ‘father’, *mab* ‘child’, and *rhyd* ‘ford’, but *tado-* is just the universal babble word Daddy, Welsh *mab* and the divine child *Maponos* have no clear roots, and the idea that ancient **ritu-* meant ‘ford’ is probably wrong. As written, *-riton* matches Greek *ρῦτον* ‘flowing’.

Ebio is the only name out of 26 that has survived into modern times, at the Ebbstone, a tiny offshore pinnacle of rock. That sounds ridiculous until you think about early navigators in the North Channel, off a lee shore where the sea is too deep (around the Beaufort Dyke) to let down an anchor – hence the name *Abisson*. Being related to Greek *εἰβω* would also sound odd but for the well attested *Εβουδαί* (hence modern Hebrides) and the notion of islands scattered like droplets.

It would be silly to claim that all my name analyses (meaning and location) offered here are flawless. They result from nearly ten years of reading avidly about Roman activities in Dumfries and Galloway, not from ever setting foot there or being formally taught historical linguistics. Still, to paraphrase Samuel Johnson, these Roman names may not have been solved perfectly, but it is surprising to see them solved at all.

And now here is a list of 26 more Roman names that lay nearby, mostly on the coasts of Scotland and Cumbria, all hyperlinked to background information. They serve partly to show that I have not cherry-picked evidence, but mainly to recruit fresh eyes to look at the many intriguing puzzles and to help build up a fuller picture of Roman activity near the Solway.

[Aballava](#), [Αβραουαννου](#), [Anava](#), [Axelodunum](#), [Bdora](#), [Blatobulgio](#), [Bribra](#),
[Castra Exploratorum](#), [Congavata](#), [Αηουα](#), [Επιδιοι](#) etc, [Ιηνα](#), [Ιτουνα](#), [Λουκοπιβια](#),
[Luquvalium](#), [Maromago](#), [Μορικαμβη](#), [Νοουανται](#) etc, [Νοουιου](#), [Novitia](#), [Olerica](#),
[Περιγονιον](#) etc, [Σελγουουαι](#), [Tunnocelo](#), [Ουανδογαρα](#) etc, [Ουξελλον](#)

The main purpose of this article is to stress that that unknown Cosmographer in Ravenna was not a sloppy incompetent but an honest toiler who has left us valuable geographical information. His work fills in parts of the Roman map of Britain that other sources do not touch. The logic deployed here for Dumfries and Galloway also works well in the West Country, around the Severn, beside the Irish Sea and its islands, in north-east Scotland, and where many Roman roads end at England’s harbours.