

Ptolemy, Tacitus and the tribes of north Britain

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ABSTRACT

Ptolemy's list of places in north Britain, arranged by tribe, may include both native sites and Roman forts. Unallocated fort names may have been added by Ptolemy to the list of what he thought was the appropriate tribe, possibly not always correctly. Separation of the two groups of names allows a re-allocation of tribal territories to be attempted. While the Caledones gave their name to the land north of the Forth, by the Roman period they may have been pushed back to the Great Glen and the upper glens of the Grampian mountains by later in-comers.

INTRODUCTION

Our knowledge of the names and locations of the tribes living north of the Tyne–Solway isthmus at the time of the arrival of the Roman armies depends primarily upon two sources, Ptolemy's *Geography* and Tacitus's *Agricola*. The campaigns and voyages of Iulius Agricola, governor of Britain from 77 or 78 to 83, 84 or 85, are clearly the main source of information for the latter. Ptolemy used material gathered by Marinus of Tyre, which in turn was probably derived from Agricola's operations in North Britain (Rivet & Smith 1979, 114 & 116). The accounts of both Ptolemy and Tacitus suffer from grave defects. Both are second-hand records in that neither author had visited Britain. This might naturally lead to mistakes. Ptolemy in a way was operating at third-hand, correcting and improving the information already gathered by Marinus (Rivet & Smith 1979, 106). Ptolemy's record also suffers as a result of a basic error whereby Britain north of the Tyne–Solway isthmus is turned eastward through 90°. The major problem in Tacitus's account of Britain is his sparing use of geographical terms, only eight names being mentioned north of the Tyne–Solway isthmus.

THE ANCIENT SOURCES (illus 1)

Ptolemy, *Geography* II, 3, 5–7 (the correct locations are given in brackets):

There dwell on the northern (ie western) side, below the peninsula of the same name, the *Novantae*, among whom are these places:

Lucopibia, Rerigionium.

Beneath them are the *Selgovae*, among whom are these places:

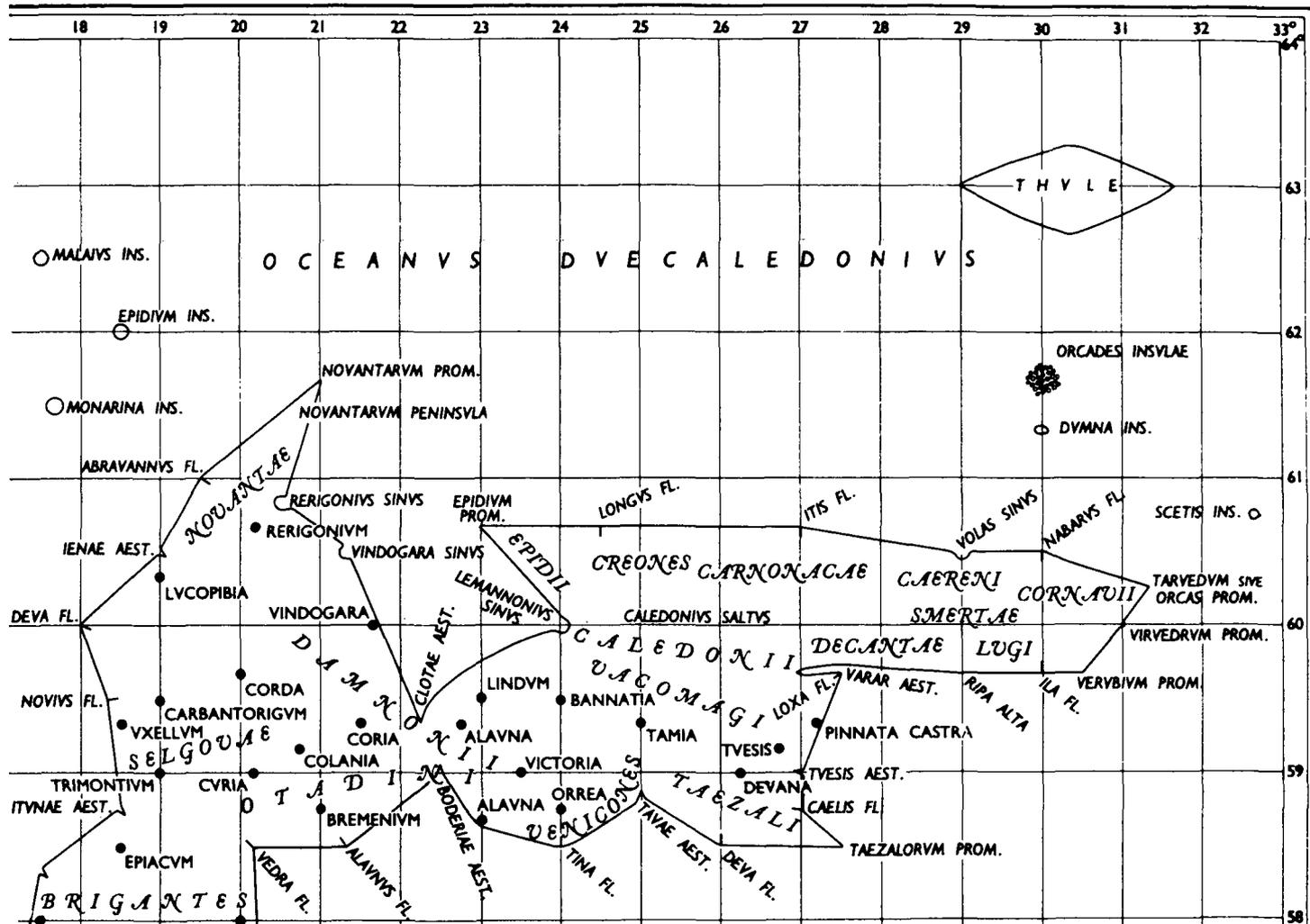
Carbantorigum, Uxellum, Corda, Trimontium

To the east (ie north) of these are the more northern *Damnonii*, in whose territory are these places:

Colania, Vindogara, Coria, Alauna, Lindum, Victoria

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ILLUS 1 Ptolemy's map of north Britain. Based on the *Map of Roman Britain*, reproduced by kind permission of the Ordnance Survey

The *Otadini* are more to the south (east), and among them are these places:

Curia, Alauna, Bremenium

After the *Damnonii*, towards the east (north) but more northerly (west), from *Epidium Promontory* eastwards (north) are the *Epidii*, after whom further east (north) are the Creones; then the *Carnonacae*, then the *Caereni*; and furthest east (north) and last the *Cornavii*; from *Lemannonian Gulf* to *Varar Estuary* are the *Caledones*, and above them the *Caledonian Forest*, and east (north) of them the *Decantae*, after whom are the *Lugi*, adjoining the *Cornavii*, and above the *Lugi*, the *Smertae*. Below the *Caledones* are the *Vacomagi*, among whom are these places:

Bannatia, Tameia, Pinnata Castra, Tuesis

Below these towards the west (south) are the *Venicones*, in whose territory is this place:

Orrea

More towards the east (north) are the *Taexali* and this place:

Devana.

Tacitus, *Agricola* 10 refers to *Caledonia*; 11 the inhabitants of *Caledonia*; 25 the inhabitants of *Caledonia*, which from the context is situated beyond *Bodotria* (the Firth of Forth); 38 the *Boresti*.

COMMENT

Few of the names listed by Ptolemy can be identified. Trimontium can be equated with the fort at Newstead, at the foot of the (three) Eildon Hills. Bremenium is the Roman fort at High Rochester (*RIB* 1262 and 1270; Antonine Itinerary 464.3). Victoria and Orrea are presumably Roman places, and possibly Pinnata Castra also. Rivet and Smith (1979, 116)

‘assume that the places named in north Britain are most likely to be “Roman” – that is, places which were, or had been, occupied by the Roman army. There is no evidence that Ptolemy names a purely “native” settlement anywhere in Britain’.

The last statement is true, but so is the reverse, that there is no evidence that Ptolemy did not name a purely ‘native’ settlement in Britain. He certainly named non-Roman settlements in Ireland and although no places, either Roman or native, are named north of the Moray Firth (Rivet & Smith 1979, 116) this may be simply because Roman forces had not penetrated there and were consequently unable to name any native settlements within the northern tribes (this may indicate, *pace* Henderson 1984, that Mons Graupius was not fought north of the Moray Firth: it is certainly interesting to compare the level of information on the interior of northern Scotland with that on the interior of Ireland, which is rather better documented).

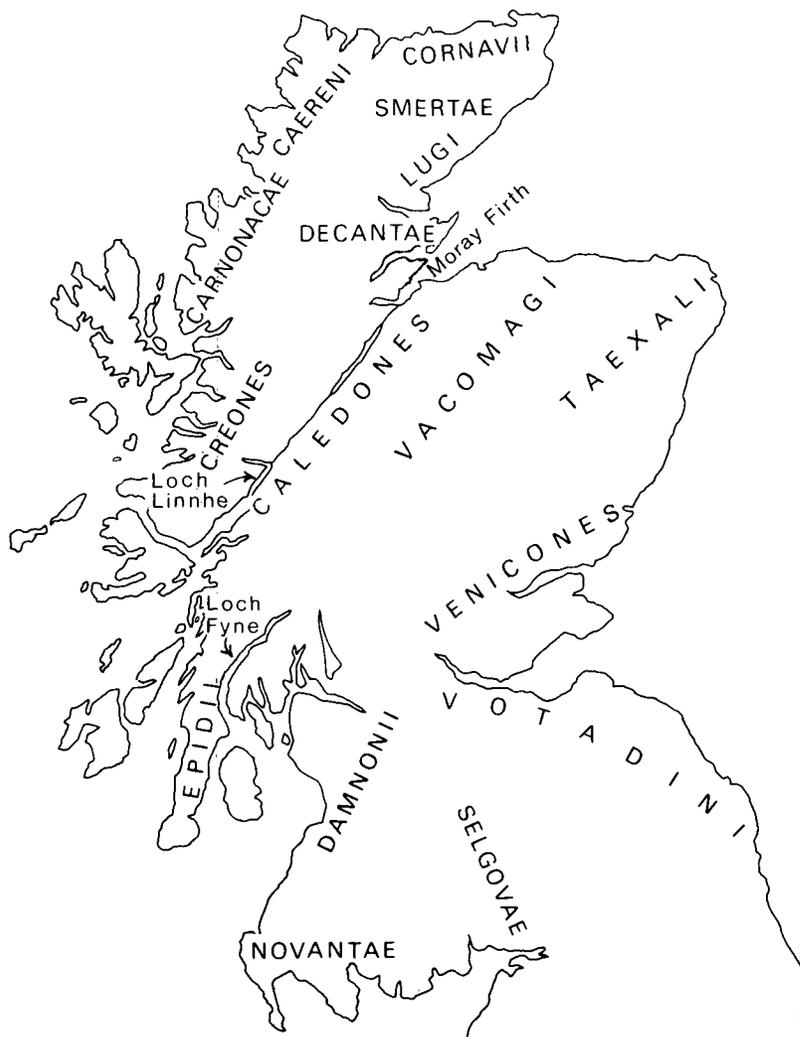
The possibility that some names are native places and others Roman forts opens up the question of the source of the primary information. Ptolemy may have had two lists: one of tribes with native places within their territories, the other of Roman forts. The information for the two groups will have been gleaned at different times; the tribal and native place-names during the advance northwards and the information on forts during the subsequent consolidation (Tacitus, *Agricola* 22 emphasizes the distinction between these two activities by remarking that in the third season of campaigning Agricola even had time to build forts). Nevertheless the activities of Agricola are presumably responsible for all of this knowledge – of tribal and native place-names, the geographical names and the forts at least as far north as the Tay: *if* Victoria refers to the Roman victory at Mons Graupius this place-name may possibly date slightly later, and the same may be true of Pinnata Castra if this is a fort and not a camp. Rivet and Smith (1979, 121) suggest

‘that Ptolemy located the tribes merely by reference to their administrative centres (whether in the military or in the succeeding civilian phase) and that the tribal names, when written on the original map, attracted to themselves all the places in their areas when the co-ordinates were read off’.

thus creating an opportunity for error. In Northern Britain this hazy knowledge of tribal boundaries may have been compounded by the existence of two lists of names. It is possible that Ptolemy simply tagged the unallocated fort names on to the list of what he thought was the appropriate tribe. Thus Bremenium was assigned to the Votadini and Trimontium to the Selgovae, etc. However, he may not always have been correct. In southern England Ptolemy certainly seems to have been mistaken in placing *Aquae Calidae* (Bath) in the territory of the Belgae rather than the Dobunni (Rivet & Smith 1979, 121 & 256).

THE LOCATION OF THE TRIBES (illus 2)

Separation of the list of 'tribal' names into two categories and the release of the fort names from tribal territories allows a reconsideration of the location of the tribes. Uxellum in the territory of the Selgovae ought to lie close to the mouth of the Nith ($18^{\circ}30'$, $59^{\circ}20'$ and $18^{\circ}20'$, $59^{\circ}30'$ respectively). Carbantorigum and Corda lie to the east (ie north on correcting Ptolemy's 90° turn); they thus may



ILLUS 2 The proposed location of Ptolemy's tribes in north Britain

both lie in Nithsdale or Annandale. It would make sense in terms of human geography if Trimontium in Tweeddale did not lie within the territory of the Selgovae as this valley forms a distinct entity looking eastwards and not to the south or south-west. The uplands forming the watershed between the Annan and Tweed basins were (and are) sparsely populated while many cross-dykes control the passes at the headwaters of the river Tweed (Barber forthcoming). Thus the Selgovae could have occupied *either* Tweeddale or Annandale and Nithsdale, but are unlikely to have occupied both areas. The relationship between Uxellum and the mouth of the Nith would appear to pull the Selgovae into Dumfriesshire, an area well populated in the Iron Age.

It has been suggested (Breeze & Dobson 1987, 45–6) that the Brigantes occupied the lower Annan valley. This is argued on the basis of the existence of outpost forts to the north of Hadrian's Wall, planned, it would seem, from the first, and a dedication to the goddess Brigantia at Birrens (RIB 2091). The purpose of these forts is not definitely known: it can only be surmised. Troops could have been stationed there to protect those members of the Brigantes cut off from the rest of the province by the construction of the Wall. Alternatively, the purpose of these units may have been simply to provide advance warning of any impending attacks on the Wall. However, it might be thought that this function would normally have been carried out by scouts. The inscription, although dedicated to Brigantia, may not have been erected in Brigantian territory. The dedicator was an architect, probably from York, and thus may have become a devotee of Brigantia while stationed at the latter place. A parallel for a dedication to a tribal goddess in another tribal territory can be found in Germany. In the territory of Cologne are a series of dedications (mostly by soldiers) to the goddess Sunuxsalis, who had nothing to do with that area, being the goddess of a tribe living further west around Aachen. Thus neither the outpost forts nor the dedication are proof that the Brigantes stretched north of Hadrian's Wall. Nevertheless, even if they did there would be no problem about one populous tribal territory touching another, and thus the possibility that the northern fringes of the Brigantes lay north of the Solway cannot be ruled out. Finally, divorcing Tweeddale from the Selgovae would remove the link between the tribal name and the modern name of Selkirk. The Sel- element in both names would be reduced to a coincidence and no more.

The Novantae lie to the west of the Selgovae, one of their place-names, Rerigonius, being tied to the Rerigonian Gulf, presumably to be identified with Loch Ryan. The peninsula of the Novantae ought to be the Rhinns of Galloway, and the cape of the Novantae the Mull of Galloway. Thus the Novantae would occupy the area now known as Galloway, but nothing further east.

The Votadini are more difficult. Coria appears to lie in the southern part of their territory and Alauna north of the Forth, if indeed it is not a repeat of the Alauna listed under the Damnonii (Rivet & Smith 1979, 245). All that can be said is that they appear to lie along the east coast. If they stretch from north Northumberland to the Forth or beyond, and thus include the Tweed basin, then Trimontium ought to lie on their territory. In later centuries part of their territory appears to have lain north of the Forth: that is if the name Clackmannan retains reference to the Manau Gododdin (Rivet & Smith 1979, 509; Steer 1958, 107). Thus it may be that in the late first century the tribe did stretch beyond the Forth.

The Damnonii have an abundance of place-names on their territory: five in all, minus Victoria. These places stretch from Vindogara, which ought to lie beside the gulf of Vindogara (21°20', 60° and 21°20', 60°30' respectively), to Alauna and Lindum north of the Forth–Clyde isthmus. It seems unlikely that one tribe occupied this large area, since in the middle lie not only the Campsie Fells and Kirkpatrick Hills, but also the boggy valley of the river Kelvin and the mosses of Stirlingshire, all areas largely devoid of population in the Iron Age (Breeze 1985, 225, *illus* 2). The possibility of a mistake here must be considered: perhaps Ptolemy (or a later scribe) omitted a tribal name and Alauna and Lindum lay within the territory of a more northerly tribe (Breeze 1982, 32).

North of the Forth, along the east coast, lie the Venicones and the Taexali, the later related to the promontory of the Taexali, either Kinnairds Head or Rattray Head.

The place-names of the Vacomagi apparently straddle the Highlands, stretching from Angus to Moray. It is highly unlikely that they covered this vast area since it is cut in two by the unpopulated mountain range of the Mounth. The Vacomagi ought to lie on one side or the other. The inclusion of Tuesis in their list, which ought to lie on the river Tuesis, generally identified with the river Spey, must pull their territory north of the Mounth on to the south shore of the Moray estuary (26°45', 59°10' and 27°, 59° respectively). The location of the places Bannatia and Tameia, however, suggests that the tribe's territory stretched a considerable distance up the Spey Valley. Pinnata Castra is near Tuesis, and must also lie on the Moray Firth (Mann 1968, 307).

The Caledones are specifically located by Ptolemy. They lie between the Lemannonian Gulf on the west coast and the Varar estuary on the east. The latter is to be identified with the Moray and Beaully Firths. The former ought, from its position in Ptolemy's list, between the Clyde and Kintyre, to be Loch Fyne or possibly Loch Long. However, it has been argued that Ptolemy may have been confused by two sources into stretching the Caledones to the Lemannonian Gulf rather than the mouth of the river Longus, which should be Loch Linnhe (Rivet & Smith 1979, 141). The Great Glen runs from Loch Linnhe to the Beaully Firth, and this is where the Caledones are generally located by modern scholars. Hind (1983, 375) commenting that 'the land could not support a population that would be able to lead so powerful a confederacy as that which opposed Agricola' therefore located the Caledones along the southern and eastern edges of the Highland massif, from Loch Lomond to the Moray Firth. Support for this location of the Caledones is claimed in the modern place names of Perthshire: Dunkeld, Rohallion and Schiehallion (Jackson 1954, 14–16; Hind 1983, 376). Further, Hind sees the Vacomagi, Taexali, Venicones and possibly the Damnonii as 'part of the Caledonian grouping of tribes', ie part of the Caledonian confederacy.

There is, however, a distinction between the way Ptolemy refers to the Caledones and the manner in which Tacitus, and other early writers, mention Caledonia. To Ptolemy the Caledones are a people, but to Tacitus Caledonia is a region, apparently indeed the whole of Britain north of the Forth–Clyde isthmus. Tacitus refers to *Caledoniam incolentes* (Agricola 25) or *Caledoniam habitantium* (Agricola 11). This careful avoidance of Caledones needs to be explained. Furthermore, when this tribe is mentioned by Ptolemy, it is carefully distinguished from the Decantae and other northern peoples on the one hand and from the Vacomagi, Venicones and Taexali on the other. Caledones therefore cannot be explained as a group name for these peoples. They must be a distinct people. When Jackson (1955, 135) asserts that Caledonia 'cannot be proved to be Celtic and may therefore very possibly be pre-Celtic' it seems reasonable to suggest that the pre-Celtic Caledones, who had given the country its name, had been pushed back by Celtic invaders – Venicones, Vacomagi and Taexali – so that while in 'popular' usage Caledonia survived, the tribe of the Caledones sank into comparative insignificance (cf Mann 1974, 36). They thus may well have been restricted to the more barren lands of the Great Glen, and possibly the upper glens.

One final point may be made. It is by no means certain that Ptolemy listed all the tribes of northern Britain. Tacitus's Boresti certainly seem to have escaped his notice, and there may have been more. He also demonstrably made mistakes elsewhere. Ptolemy's *Geography* thus should not be accepted as either correct or complete.

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This paper is published with the aid of a grant from Historic Buildings and Monuments (SDD)