

Ravenna Cosmography

ROY CANHAM

THE Ravenna Cosmography, compiled in the late 7th century, and listing the names of countries, towns and rivers of the known world, contains a section on Britain. The 306 place names which relate to this country were derived entirely from Roman sources, uncontaminated by later developments, and can therefore be accepted as a record of Roman Britain, yet made almost three centuries after that phase of our history had ended. This was demonstrated by the late Sir Ian Richmond and O. G. S. Crawford¹, who concluded that the Cosmography was based on road books, in list or map form. The act of compilation presented the Cosmographer with a certain difficulty, in that his intention was a list, wherein names should not be repeated whilst his road-book sources were not subject to the same restriction. The Cosmography, in fact, has a certain degree of geographical continuity, and is not an alphabetical list. But where a road-book would repeat an already quoted name to serve as the starting point for a further route, the Cosmography omits it. A place name is repeated in only two instances, excepting the cases when the same name is used for different towns or rivers. The location of parts of the British section is therefore difficult, understandably so since many of the place names are not recorded in other extant sources.

The first 67 place names cover the south and west of England and South Wales, followed by seven which belong to the South-East Coast, from Pevensy round to Richborough and along as far as Rochester. We then have *Landini*, *Tamese*, *Brinavis* and *Alauna*, after which we find ourselves on a road leading from Wroxeter into North Wales! *Alauna* appears five times in the Cosmography, referring to four different places. It appears twice in the Geography of Ptolemy, but the places which are indicated are clearly in Northern Britain.

The other three place-names do not appear in any other ancient source. *Tamese* is of course familiar to us, akin to *Tamesis*, the River Thames. In the Cosmography British rivers are listed under a separate heading, and *Tamese* we should understand as a settlement, not the river.

Richmond and Crawford, faced with the problem of identifying the road on which these towns occurred, settled for the route running north from Silchester, identifying *Tamese* with Dorchester-on-Thames. The same article contains a valuable commentary upon individual names, in which the inherent difficulty of placing these four names is revealed. Dorchester was known to Bede as *Dorcicceastre*, clearly derived from a Celtic place-name. Just as the Romano-British *Venta* is fossilized in "Winchester," so presumably "Dorchester" preserves the root if its

Roman name. In other words, if Dorchester had been *Tamese* and the Celtic term had remained in use in post-Roman times, we should now know it as "Tamester" or some such form. Identification of *Brinavis* with Woodeaton, though not beset with the crushing difficulty of *Tamese*, was still extremely uncertain. *Alauna* as Alchester was reasonable, since the 12th century form of the name is *Alencestr'*: but it is, as already noted, a common Romano-British place-name. *Landini* could only be accommodated when the situation of the entire set had been chosen and so was declared to be "South of the Thames, on a road leading northwards from Silchester"².

The identification remains an open question. The place *Tamese* must have been on or near the Thames, and so we are dealing with a road along or across the Thames valley. I suggest that the four places may belong to the lower Thames not the middle. The towns which precede these four lie on the road from Kent, heading in this direction but terminating at Rochester. Before making the jump to Wroxeter and North Wales, the Cosmographer perhaps fitted in this group of four places because his text, in which the continuity was attempted, was approaching that part of the Thames Valley in which they lay. A number of settlements are now known in and around the London area, whilst minor roads which may have linked them with the major network are coming to light. An example is the road on the west side of London Airport which appears as a cropmark on aerial photographs, and would have joined the Staines road at Ashford.

In the present state of knowledge, none of the four place-names can be positively identified. There are however good reasons for questioning the accepted location and for considering the lower Thames valley as a possible alternative. Place-name research may eventually come to the rescue. For the present we may note that *Brinavis* means "the place on the brown stream," a suitable epithet for many of our London tributaries which spring from the clays, gravels and sands of the Thames basin. *Landini* is also worthy of reflection. The Cosmography contains many mis-spellings and a riot of case-endings. *Manuloduo* for *Camuloduno*, *Cironium* for *Corinium*. Could *Landini* be a corrupt form of *Londinium*? It would follow on fairly naturally after Rochester. Elsewhere the Cosmographer spells *Londinium* correctly but his source in that case was the Antonine Itinerary. Possibly the word was already corrupt in whatever source he used for these four names, in which case he would not realize that in writing *Landini* he was again breaking his rule of non-repetition.

1. *Archaeologia* 93 (1949) 1-50.

2. *Ibid* 36.