

### III Loca

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PTOLEMY used the word *polis* in his (so-called) *Geography* to indicate places of all kinds, not merely cities but also forts and villages. In similar fashion, the Ravenna Cosmographer used the word *civitas* to indicate not only cities but also forts and villages. Thus in the heading to the section on Britain he writes:<sup>1</sup>

*In qua Britannia plurimas fuisse legimus civitates*—one manuscript, P, adds *et castra*. After the list which follows, which covers south-west England, we have:

*Iterum juxta super scriptam civitatem Scodiorum est civitas quae dicitur . . .* He here lists civil and military sites in the rest of England and Wales, up to Hadrian's Wall. The latter is introduced by:

*Iterum sunt civitates in ipsa Britannia*, where the forts of Hadrian's Wall are followed by forts and sites in southern Scotland. Then we have (again):

*Iterum sunt civitates in ipsa Britannia*, with what purports to be a list of forts on the Antonine Wall. After this we have:

*Iterum est civitas quae dicitur . . .*, heading a list of sites north of the Antonine Wall.

The Cosmographer, as Rivet and Smith make clear, often mis-read the map from which he was working, but (again like Ptolemy) his main interest was in the map rather than in conveying precise information about the sites indicated.<sup>2</sup> The Cosmographer mixed up tribal and river names with place names in an incoherent fashion, calling all the places he thought he was indicating, indiscriminately, *civitates*. However, before he passes on to rivers, we have something different:

*Sunt autem in ipsa Britannia diversa loca . . .*, followed by a list of eight names.

It is reasonable to ask, why not (if the word *civitas* means so little to him) *diversae civitates*? Does the word *loca* have a specific meaning? If this is no more than just a list of odd places which he had omitted to mention in their proper place, why use the word *loca*?

The word *locus*, meaning place, has two plural forms. The first form *loci* seems to be used in ordinary circumstances, meaning merely "places". But *loca* seems to mean "places related to each other", or "places with something in common". Thus Livy (10, 15, 4) uses the form *loca* of military outposts forming part of a coherent system. Closer to home, we find Ammianus (20, 1, 1) using the term with reference to hostilities by the Picts in A.D. 360: they destroyed *loca limitibus vicina*. This clearly refers to some particular sites near the frontier, presumably to the north of the frontier line itself.

These *loca* could be some or all of the outpost forts north of Hadrian's Wall—Netherby, Bewcastle, High Rochester and Risingham. The latest pottery from these sites is consistent with an abandonment in the 360s A.D.<sup>3</sup> The fact that coin finds do not go down to such a late date is not necessarily proof that they had been abandoned earlier than the 360s.

These forts in the third century housed scouts (*exploratores*), as is clear from the name given to Netherby in the *Antonine Itinerary* (467.1), *castra exploratorum*, and from inscriptions found at High Rochester (*RIB* 1262, 1270) and Risingham (*RIB* 1235, 1243). The function of these scouts was clearly to range far and wide over the area north of the Wall, gathering information to pass on to military headquarters. Now this is precisely the function assigned by Ammianus (28, 3, 8), writing

of the mid-fourth century, to the men he calls *areani*:

(Theodosius) . . . *areanos genus hominum a veteribus institutum, super quibus aliqua in actibus Constantis rettulimus, paulatim prolapsos in vitia a stationibus suis removit: aperte convictos, acceptarum promissarumque magnitudine praedarum allectos, quae apud nos agebantur, aliquotiens barbaris prodidisse. id enim illis erat officium, ut ultro citroque, per longa spatia discurrentes, vicinarum gentium strepitus nostris ducibus intimarent.*

"(Theodosius) . . . removed from their posts (*stationes*) the *areani*, an organization of men set up in the past (about whom we said something in recounting the actions [in Britain] of Constans), but who had gradually fallen into corrupt ways. They were now clearly convicted of having betrayed to the barbarians what was happening on our side of the frontier, induced by the receipt or the promise of booty. For their duty should have been to range far and wide over long distances, to find out what conspiracies were forming among the neighbouring peoples, and to pass on the information to our military commanders."

The last sentence is a succinct and clear description of the functions of the *exploratores* of the third century. But their work was now being done by *areani*, who were not a formal military unit, as the use by Ammianus of the term *genus hominum* clearly shows. How could this be?

The answer surely is that the *exploratores*, as well as the other garrisons of the outposts—the milliary *cohortes equitatae* and the *Raeti Gaesati*—had all been withdrawn in the quiet conditions on the northern frontier in Britain in the mid-third century, without doubt transferred to reinforce continental armies under dire pressure from barbarians from north of the Rhine and Danube.

Quiet conditions on the northern British frontier came to an end when, in the later third century, Picts from Scotland and Scots from Ireland began to threaten the north, a state of affairs which culminated in the campaigns of Constantius against the Picts, and his victory shortly before A.D. 306 (*Anon. Val. 2, 4*).

Surely it was at this time that the decision was taken to re-establish a scouting force north of the Wall, but instead of stationing units in the outposts, Rome set up bodies of native scouts there, men who very probably received land in lieu of pay. This would explain the lack of fourth century coins in the outpost forts, while at the same time explaining the presence of fourth century pottery.

Thus *loca* could then have been the outpost forts north of Hadrian's Wall. These were certainly "places related to each other", thus justifying the description *loca*. However, for what it is worth, none of the names in the Cosmographer's list recalls in the slightest any of the outposts whose names are known.

An alternative is that the *loca* listed by the Cosmographer, and referred to by Ammianus, were indeed not military sites at all, but another kind of place altogether. We have to turn to Cassius Dio for information on the way that Rome, in order to maintain firm control of barbarians living just outside her frontiers, established recognized meeting places or markets, where these peoples were allowed to meet, usually it appears only at intervals, and only under the supervision of a Roman official: we hear of markets being held only once a month, in the presence of Roman centurions.<sup>4</sup> It was long ago<sup>5</sup> suggested that the Cosmographer's *loca* were precisely this kind of place—exactly the kind of place that would be devastated in the advance of marauding Picts.

The list of names is as follows:

Maponi  
Mixa  
Panovius  
Minox  
Taba  
Manavi  
Segloes  
Daunoni

The list seems to contain references to the Selgovae and the Damnonii, tribes living to the north of the west end of Hadrian's Wall. (*Locus*) *Maponi* could be Clochmabenstane in Dumfriesshire, and there could be a reference to the River Tay (*Tava*): there is no reason why the system should not reach so far north.

One must accept in general Rivet and Smith's strictures on the quality (if that is the right word) of the Cosmographer's work. At the same time his use of the unusual word *loca* surely means that, in his ham-handed way, he was attempting to pin-point on the ground what we can recognize as an important element of Roman frontier control.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The text is conveniently available in Rivet and Smith, *The Place-Names of Roman Britain*, 1979, 205–15.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. Mann and Breeze, *PSAS* 117, 1987, 85–91.

<sup>3</sup>For High Rochester, John Gillam pointed out to me that the pottery probably goes down to c. A.D. 360 (contra Richmond, *AA*<sup>4</sup> XIII, 1936, 182, who argued for A.D. 343), with a slightly later date for Risingham and Bewcastle.

<sup>4</sup>Cassius Dio 72, 2, 4: (Commodus) . . . ordered that they (the Marcomanni) should not assemble often, nor in different parts of the area, but only once a month, and in one place, in the presence of a Roman centurion. Furthermore, they were not to make war on the Iazyges, the Buri or the Vandals. On these conditions he made peace, and abandoned all the forts in their territory, beyond the neutral zone along the frontier (A.D. 180).

<sup>5</sup>Richmond, *Northumberland County History* XV, 1940, 95–7, cf. Crawford and Richmond, *Archaeologia* 93, 1949, 15 and map.

