

Roman Leicester, a corrigendum: for 'Coritani' should we now read 'Corieltauvi'?

by R.S.O. Tomlin

Roman Leicester (*Ratae*) was the tribal capital of a *civitas* known to us as the *Coritani*, a familiar name which may have to be corrected because of a new reading of a graffito from the tribal territory. The graffito was inscribed with a nib-like point on the damp clay of a newly-made flanged roofing tile (*tegula*) (Plate 1), part of which was recovered in 1965 during excavation of the Roman settlement of *Tripontium* (Cave's Inn Farm, Churchover, Warwickshire) about fifteen miles from *Ratae* as the crow flies, or two posting-stages according to the Antonine Itinerary. The graffito (Fig. 1) consists of at least four lines of Roman 'cursive' writing, now incomplete, which was first published by Mr R.P. Wright in 1966, who read: [CIV] ITATISCORIELSOLILIOROM [...] [...] NIOM [...] M [...] CESOM. He suggested that it might be evidence of a new tribe in Roman Britain, the *civitas Corielsoliliorum*.² The present writer, however, who has recently examined the various inscribed tiles from *Tripontium*, prefers another reading:

[CI]VITATISCORIELTAVVOROM[...]
[...] NIOM
[...] M
[...] CESAM
[...]

The subscript dots mark letters whose reading is probable. The other letters seem certain, even though fragmentary 'cursive' inscriptions can be difficult since the Romans used a variety of letter-forms which changed in the course of time. Mr Wright has kindly expressed his approval of the new reading. The damaged letter in the middle of the first line cannot be S, since there is no 'tail', but what survives is quite compatible with the two Ts of *civitatis*. The A and V are both late-Roman forms which can be seen, for example, on some of the leaden 'curse' tablets from the hot spring at Bath, and on an inscribed tile found in 1978 at the Roman fort of Binchester.³ Bearing in mind the difficulty of making a curved stroke in wet clay, one can see that both letters are almost of modern form, the A being made with three strokes (unlike the 'open' A of classical 'cursive' writing) and the V with a final downstroke. The A is not an O (the penultimate letter of the first two lines, this final -om being a 'Vulgar Latin' spelling of the classical Latin termination -um). Nor is the V an LI: the writer made the usual 'cursive' L with a diagonal second stroke; and the difference between LI written continuously and V can be seen in the 'cursive' texts just mentioned, for example in the name *Vitalis* in the tile from Binchester.

The graffito therefore seems to be some sort of list under the heading *civitatis Corieltauorum* (to 'correct' the spelling), that is 'Of the *civitas* of the *Corieltauvi*'. *Civitas*, which is conventionally translated 'tribe' or 'canton', in a fourth-century text like this could also mean 'tribal capital' or even 'city' in the wider sense. Unfortunately too much has been lost of the other lines to guess what they contained; they do not look much like the usual tile graffito, personal names in the nominative case, batch-totals, and so on.⁴ But the first

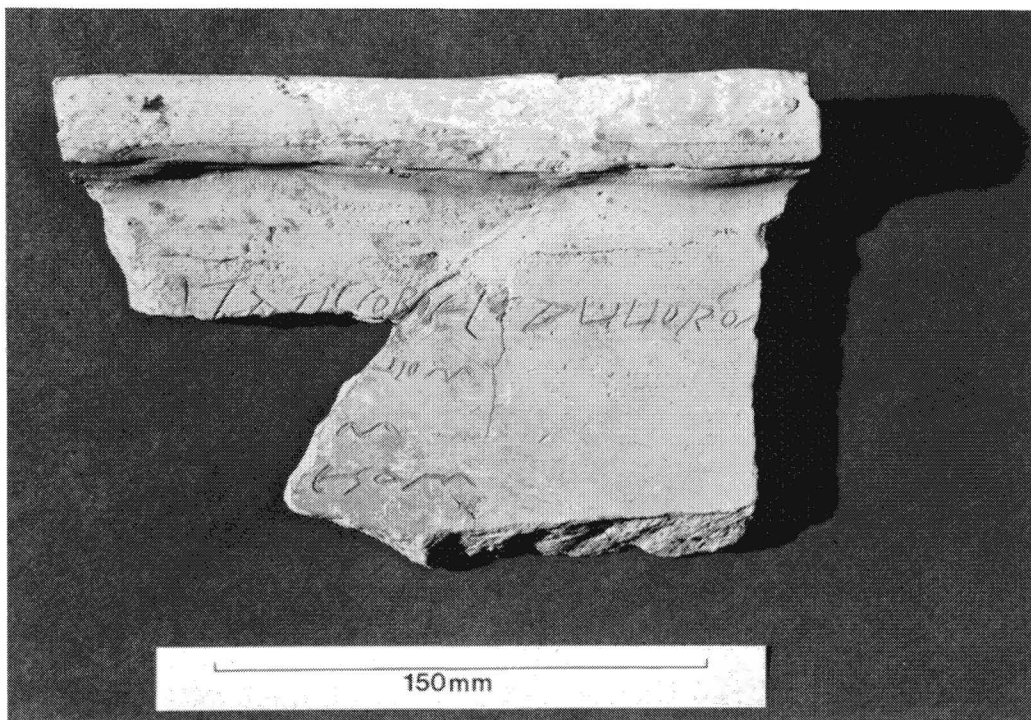


Plate 1
Flanged roofing tile *Tegula*

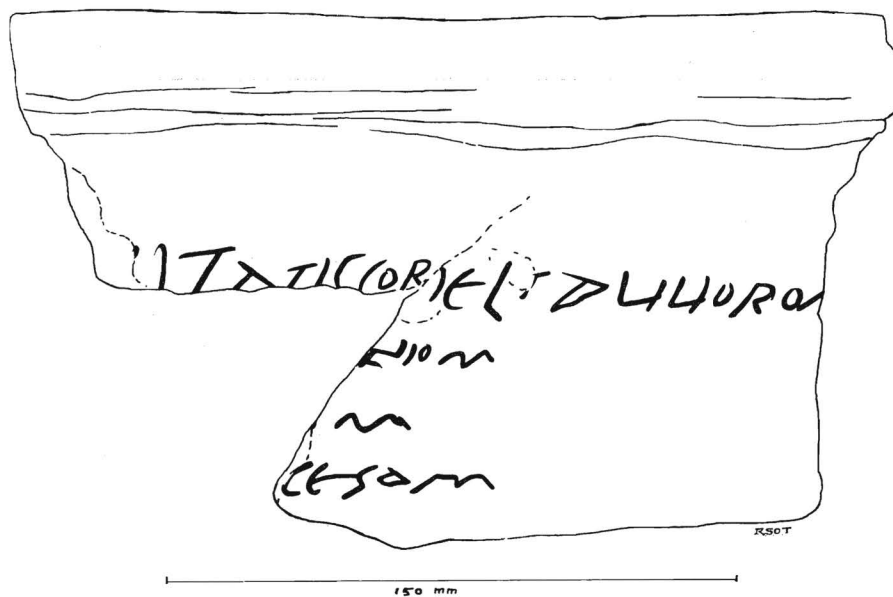


Fig. 1 The Graffito

question raised by the graffito is more rewarding: what, and where, was the *civitas Corieltauvorum*?

'Corieltauvi' are attested only in the territory of the 'Coritani', and it is natural to wonder how they were related. The name 'Coritani' being so familiar, not least as the title of two books, it comes as a surprise to find how poorly attested it is. It is only one of two readings (the other is 'Coritazi') in the medieval manuscripts of Ptolemy's *Geography*.⁵ Ptolemy was a Greek astronomer who compiled a gazetteer of the known world from earlier written sources in the mid-second century A.D., in which places and geographical features are located by their co-ordinates of latitude and longitude. In what is now south-east England and the West Country he locates the major 'cities' of ten tribes, including *Lindum* (Lincoln) and *Ratae* for the *Coritani* (or *Coritavi*). Two of the other nine tribal names are corrupt, which makes one cautious of Ptolemy's orthography but hardly matters otherwise, since the true readings of all nine are confirmed by a variety of other sources, such as inscriptions and coins, the Antonine Itinerary, and writers like Caesar and Tacitus.⁶ Seven of them also appear, usually in a garbled form, in the only source to support Ptolemy's *Coritani* (or *Coritavi*), the *Ravenna Cosmography*. This is an anonymous Latin compilation of the early eighth century whose author listed, carelessly and somewhat unsystematically, place names that he read off maps now lost. He seems to have used two maps of Britain, since he sometimes unwittingly duplicates entries.⁷ Among all these 'cities' (which include rivers and tribes) is *Rate Corion*, which is usually taken to be one of his typical blunders, for *Ratae Coritanorum*, but looks rather different if one examines the whole context of his *Rat(a)e*. This is how it appears in the fourteenth-century Vatican manuscript:

(...) Der	
bentione. Salinas. Condate.	<i>Littlechester Middlewich Northwich</i>
Ratecorion. Eltauori. Lec	<i>Leicester ?</i>
to. ceto. Iacio dulma. Virola	<i>Wall Towcester St Albans</i>
nium. (...) ⁸	

The other two manuscripts of the *Cosmography* divide the lines differently and vary slightly in spelling, but offer substantially the same text.⁹ *Eltauori* has not been identified, but since it is listed between two places only thirty miles apart, Leicester and Wall, it must be sought in the same area.¹⁰ The *Tripontium* graffito, itself from the neighbourhood of Leicester, now becomes a vital clue, since it contains what is virtually the same sequence of letters, -*eltauvor*. When one looks more closely at the enigmatic -*corion* which precedes *Eltauori* in the *Cosmographer's* list, the coincidence with the graffito becomes still more striking.

One of the maps used by the *Cosmographer* identified tribal capitals like Leicester both by name (e.g. *Navimago* for *Noviomago*, Chichester) and by the name of the tribe (*Regentium*).¹¹ It seems to have been textually corrupt, crowded, and difficult to read. Some place-names, especially tribal capitals because of their length, were evidently divided between two lines on the map, since the *Cosmographer* sometimes gets them wrong. Thus he writes *Ventaslurum* for *Venta Silurum* (Caerwent) and *Ventacenomum* for *Venta Icenorum* (Caistor St Edmund), one word instead of two.¹² More often, however, he makes two place-names out of one, for example *Duro averno* and *Cantiacorum* (Canterbury) or *Utriconion* and *Cornoviorum* (Wroxeter).¹³ So it may be suggested that when the *Cosmographer* came to *Ratae* on his map, what he saw was something like this:

RATECORION
ELTAVORI.

The coincidence of the letters -*ORI*- in the same position in both lines suggests two further possibilities: either the writing on the map was so cramped and uneven that the *Cosmographer* was not sure whether -(I)ON was the end of the first line or the second; or

his eye slipped from the -OR- of *RATECORI* to -OR- in the line below, making him add the final -ON to the wrong line of his transcription. He was perfectly capable of either mistake. In 'Vulgar Latin' spelling, therefore, whether it was his own or his map's, the Cosmographer ought to have read:

RATECORI

ELTAVORON.

In classical Latin this would be spelt: *Rat(a)e Cori | elta(u)vor(um)*.¹⁴

Even the unamended text of the Cosmography is much closer to the *Tripontium* graffito than it is to Ptolemy's *Geography* (whether we read 'Coritani' or 'Coritavi'). If one emends the text in this plausible way, the correspondence between Cosmography and graffito is perfect. In any case, the graffito is the best witness we have. Both Ptolemy and the Cosmographer were using earlier written sources which were themselves at least one stage removed from local oral testimony, and the transmission of their texts was peculiarly liable to textual corruption since they contained material unfamiliar to their copyists which could not be checked. The *Tripontium* graffito, on the other hand, is a local, contemporary document which survives at first hand. Its writer was literate: his handwriting may be untidy, but it is consistent and assured, unlike the clumsy capital letters of many Romano-British graffiti; his 'Vulgar Latin' spelling of -om for -um, interestingly enough, only reflects local pronunciation; and in fact he increases our confidence by the bold double V of *Corieltauworum*, since in 'Vulgar Latin' a double V is often contracted to a single V. Ptolemy's 'Coritavi' (which should surely now be preferred to 'Coritani') is presumably an example.¹⁵ It should also be seen, like his 'Simeni' for 'Iceni', as another example of the *Geography*'s misrepresentation of a tribal name. The true form survives in a strange conjunction of sources, a tile-maker in late-Roman Britain and a cleric in Byzantine Italy: it is not 'Coritani' or 'Coritavi', but 'Corieltauvi'.¹⁶

Notes

- 1 This note is based on one which will appear in *Antiquaries' Journal* LXIV (1984), whose conclusions are summarised in *Britannia* XIV (1983), 349-50. I am grateful to Alan McWhirr and the Hon. Editor for their invitation to submit my case to the latter-day Corieltauvi. I also gratefully acknowledge my debt to Professor A.L.F. Rivet and Professor Colin Smith for their invaluable comments and *The Place-Names of Roman Britain* (1979), which is cited below as *P.N.R.B.*
- 2 *Journal of Roman Studies* LVI (1966), 223, no. 33 with plate X.7 (from which it appears that an uninscribed portion has since been lost). Another fragment, which reads [...]ML[...], originally published as *Britannia* IV (1973), 333, no. 35(b), may belong to the fourth line. Mr Wright's reading has been republished and discussed in M. Todd, *The Coritani* (1973), 40; A. McWhirr (ed.), *Roman Brick and Tile* (1979), 238, 246; *P.N.R.B.*, 320, s.v. *Coria Soliliorum*; J.B. Whitwell, *The Coritani, some Aspects of the Iron Age Tribe and the Roman Civitas* (1982), 55
- 3 *Britannia* XIV (1983), 336, nos. 3, 4, 5 and 7 with figs. 33, 34, 35, 36 and 38; *ibid.* X (1979), 347-8, no. 20 with fig. 24
- 4 See R.S.O. Tomlin, 'Graffiti on Roman bricks and tiles found in Britain', in A. McWhirr (ed.), *Roman Brick and Tile* (1979), 231-51
- 5 *Geography* II, 3, 11 = *P.N.R.B.*, 143
- 6 For Ptolemy see *P.N.R.B.*, ch.3. The nine tribes are the Catuvellauni ('Catyeuchlani'), Iceni ('Simeni'), Trinovantes, Dobunni, Atrebatas, Cantiaci, Regni, Belgae, Durotriges, Dumnonii; sources for each will be found in *P.N.R.B.* under its entry in the alphabetic list of names (237f.)
- 7 *P.N.R.B.*, ch.5
- 8 Ravenna Cosmography ed. Schnetz (1940), p.106, lines 46-50 = *P.N.R.B.*, 207, whose identifications are adopted here (but see n.10 below), including that of *Lactodurum* (Towcester) for *Iacio dulma*

- 9 The pages of the three MSS relating to Britain are reproduced in *Archaeologia* XCIII (1949), plates II-X. The Vatican and the Paris MS (thirteenth-century) are written in double column (but with different line-divisions) and place a stop after each place-name; the Basle MS (fourteenth/fifteenth-century) is written across the page in a single column and begins each place-name with a capital letter. The errors in word-division noted here (see nn.12 and 13) are corrected by *P.N.R.B.* but occur in all three MSS and thus go back to the archetype and, presumably, to the Cosmographer himself
- 10 *P.N.R.B.*, 468, s.v. **Tamus*. Professor Colin Smith, who noted the coincidence between the text of the Cosmography and my reading of the *Tripontium* graffito, informs me that he would now withdraw the identification proposed in *P.N.R.B.* of *Tamus* with *Eltavori/Eltanori*: 'while at the time it seemed logical to think this *El-* name another mistaken *Fl-* (river) name, in line with several others in this text, it is now clear that this must be abandoned and that *Eltavori/Eltanori* must be considered as part of the name of Leicester'. *Eltanori* was read by Richmond and Crawford (*Archaeologia* XCIII (1949), 18), but in their commentary (*ibid.*, 33) they printed *Eltavori*. Schnetz read *Eltauori*, noting only that previous editors had read *Eltanori*. It can be seen in *Archaeologia* XCIII (1949), plates II (third column, line 19), IV (second column, line 14), and VIII (lines 15-16), that the Vatican and Basle MSS read *Eltauori*, and that in the Paris MS *u* and *n* are often almost indistinguishable. However, other place-names where *u* is correct are also written with an *n*-like *u*; and the distinction seems to be that the scribe of the Paris MS finished the first stroke of *u*, but not of *n*, with a serif to link it with the second stroke (somewhat in the manner of the *V*s in the *Tripontium* graffito), and began the second stroke of both *u* and *n* with a serif that often extended indifferently as far as the first stroke, whether of *u* or *n*. Thus it would seem that Schnetz was right to deny the 'variant' *Eltanori* any MS authority
- 11 ed. Schnetz, p.106, line 20 = *P.N.R.B.*, 206, duplicated by *Noviomagno* without tribal name only three lines above, and thus an example of the Cosmographer's incomplete integration of two maps (see *P.N.R.B.*, 200)
- 12 ed. Schnetz, p.106, line 22 = *P.N.R.B.*, 206; *ibid.*, p.106, line 54 = *P.N.R.B.*, 208 (corrected to *Venia Cenomum*)
- 13 ed. Schnetz, p.106, line 36 = *P.N.R.B.*, 207 (corrected); *ibid.*, p.106, line 40 = *P.N.R.B.*, 207 (corrected). cf. also *Branō* and *Genium* for *Branogenium* (Leintwardine), *ibid.*, p.106, line 27 = *P.N.R.B.*, 207; *Bresnetenaci* and *Veteranorum* for *Bremetenacum Veteranorum* (Ribchester), *ibid.*, p.107, line 7 = *P.N.R.B.*, 208 (corrected), etc.
- 14 For the 'Romance speech habits' of the Cosmographer see *P.N.R.B.*, 200f., which notes that *-on* forms occur only in his place-names, not in his narrative prose. Although this can be explained, one cannot be sure that he introduced all the 'vulgar' spellings himself: *e* for *ae* is very common in the epigraphy of Roman Britain (see *Britannia* II (1971), 220), and the *Tripontium* graffito now provides examples of *-om* for *-um*
- 15 'Coritavi' was preferred by G.B. Grundy in his edition of Murray's *Small Classical Atlas* (1904)
- 16 The etymology of 'Leicester' remains a mystery. I leave it to philologists to say whether *civitas Corieltavorum* could have become *Legorensis civitas* by 803 (see K. Jackson, *Language and History in Early Britain* (1953), 45, who posits **Ligora*)