

The tribes of North Britain revisited

G W S Barrow*

ABSTRACT

The thesis advanced by Mann and Breeze (in volume 117 of these Proceedings) that by the Roman period the Caledones may have been pushed back to the Great Glen and the upper glens of the Grampians is challenged by reference to the work of Watson and Richmond.

Revision is an essential part of the scholarly process, and the apparently strongly revisionist paper on the northern British tribes by Drs John Mann and David Breeze (1987) is refreshing and stimulating. But surely it behoves a revisionist to give due acknowledgement to predecessors who may have already anticipated his conclusions? Moreover, where a hypothesis is argued chiefly on the basis of one line of reasoning, it is all the more necessary to indicate to the reader that other lines of reasoning, as long as these are reputable, have pointed to modification or even alternatives. In connection with the paper of Mann and Breeze I would refer their readers to two highly scholarly and careful reviews of the evidence by, respectively, William Watson (*The History of the Celtic Place-Names of Scotland*, 1926, especially Chapter 1) and Sir Ian Richmond ('Ancient Geographical Sources for Britain north of Cheviot', in *Roman and Native in North Britain*, ed I A Richmond, 1958). Neither of these vitally important works is cited by Mann and Breeze.

It was assumed by both Watson and Richmond that some of the Ptolemaic place-names were likely to be native names for native settlements. Mann and Breeze have usefully proposed that the apparently non-native, ie Roman, names of forts may have been 'tagged on' to a list of tribes at what was thought to be the right place. This would easily allow Ptolemy to err on occasion and allocate a Roman fort to the wrong tribe. Yet we must carefully bear in mind that the possibility, in some instances the ascertainable fact, that Ptolemy could make a mistake is far from proving that he was wrong in any particular instance. Thus, Ptolemy allocates Trimontium to the territory of the Selgovae. The identity of Trimontium with Newstead is accepted by the authors as much as it was by their predecessors, but since its own bearings and its relationship to other Selgovan places point to a location in Dumfriesshire they wish to make this one of Ptolemy's mistakes, suggesting that he ought to have attributed it to the territory of the Votadini. Here they ignore Richmond's careful argument that while Trimontium has the correct geographical relationship to Catterick, the bending of Scotland through 90° has left the other Selgovan names wrongly placed. In any case, both Richmond and Watson had already seen that Trimontium-Newstead would seem more naturally to have lain in Votadinian territory than among the Selgovae. Equally, Watson ('Selgovae, the name of the tribe who occupied

* Dept of Scottish History, University of Edinburgh

Dumfriesshire, and probably a good deal more between the Cheviots and Tweed' (1926, 27–8)) and Richmond (1958, Map 4) were as sure as Mann and Breeze that the Selgovae were settled in Nithsdale and Annandale. On the argument deployed by the latter (1987, 89) they would also have occupied Eskdale, Ewesdale and Liddesdale, as Watson and Richmond believed. Despite the apparent unity of the Tweed–Teviot river system, which urges the allocation of Trimontium to the Votadini, it may be pointed out that early Anglian settlement was evidently discouraged from moving much further west than Selkirk, while medieval administrative arrangements distinguished Berwickshire, Roxburghshire and Peeblesshire, with the 'awkward' Forest of Selkirk in the middle. If the Selgovae were strong and warlike they could easily have held their eastern frontier at the Eildons; if they did, then Richmond's suggestion of Rubers Law for Uxellum ('lofty place') is worth considering. When Mann and Breeze express satisfaction at divorcing the tribal name Selgovae from the modern name of Selkirk and speak of the 'Sel-element in both names' they are dragging in the reddest of red herrings. It has not been usual in recent times to argue in favour of any etymological link between these names. Moreover, there is no 'Sel-element' in either name. The earliest recorded forms of Selkirk, Seleschirche, Selechirche, seem to embody either an unfamiliar personal name or much more probably OE *sele*, 'hall' (no doubt a royal hall) in the genitive case, as in Selsdon (Surrey). The first element of Selgovae is of course not 'sel' but 'selg', 'hunt(ing)' (modern Gaelic *sealg*, Welsh *hela*), and wherever they had their habitations the Selgovae were a hunting people.

The case of Uxellum brings us to the point raised earlier about lines of argument. Mann and Breeze virtually ignore the arguments from language which are the lifeblood of toponymists – save that they allow the identity of Rerigonium Sinus with Loch Ryan. (Incidentally, Watson and Richmond both place the Novantae firmly in Galloway, the former explaining that the river-name Novius (Nith) was not necessarily linked geographically with the etymologically-connected tribal name Novantae, although the river Nith does in fact rise in Galloway.) By making little of the philological evidence they are led into what is surely a mistaken argument with regard to the Votadini spilling across the Forth. As Watson long ago pointed out (1926, 103), Manau Gododdin was so called to distinguish it from the other Manau, the Isle of Man. Consequently, although Clackmannan was the 'stone of Manau', the epithet does not mean that this place north of Forth was in Votadinian territory. In fact, it is most likely to have been in the land of the Maeatae (Miathi), an important tribe which Mann and Breeze, dealing as they are with Tacitus and Ptolemy, do not mention. Again, ignoring the linguistic evidence, Mann and Breeze pay no attention to the strong probability that the Alauna ascribed by Ptolemy to the Votadini is related to the river name Aln. Ptolemy's Alaunus must be the Northumberland Aln, and if Alauna was not in the Aln valley it might have been in that of the Ale Water, Roxburghshire. There seem no serious grounds for putting the Votadini north of the Forth. Equally, Mann and Breeze ignore Watson's argument for identifying Damnonian Alauna with Ail Cluade or Alclut, ie Dumbarton, as they ignore Richmond's equation of Vindogara Sinus with Irvine Bay and Vindogara itself with whatever fort lay at the western terminus of the Roman road running from Castledykes towards, and presumably beyond, Loudoun Hill. It does not stretch belief that a single tribe occupied the easily traversed territory from Kyle to the lower Clyde and even the Lennox, taking in Ayr, Irvine, Glasgow and Dumbarton.

In locating the Vacomagi unequivocally along the southern shore of the Moray Firth, and especially in the valley of the River Spey, Ptolemy's Tues(s)is, Mann and Breeze are surely right to overrule Ptolemy's co-ordinates for Bannatia and Tam(e)ia, thus avoiding the extreme improbability accepted (reluctantly?) by Watson, namely that the Vacomagi were settled both north and south of the Grampians. Like them, Richmond rejected a tribe straddling the

Mounth, but put the Vacomagi in Strathmore, well known to the Romans, rather than in Moray. We cannot as yet be sure that he was wrong.

The authors devote little space to the Ptolemaic distribution of the tribes to the north of Glen More and the Moray Firth, but here again their indifference to philological and toponymic evidence allows them to plot the Smertae (1987, 88) far to the north of the Strath Oykell-Strath Carron district where (between Carron and Oykell) is Carn Smear, spotted by Watson long before 1926 (1926, 17)¹. The most drastic revisionism offered by Mann and Breeze concerns the Caledonians, whom they would pen up in 'the more barren lands of the Great Glen' (1987, 90), squeezed between the Creones on the west and the Vacomagi of Moray. It is a conspicuous feature of the map constructed by Mann and Breeze that no tribes are shown in the highland glens of Perthshire, Stirlingshire and Dunbartonshire, or even in the Braes of Angus. At one time so widespread and powerful that they gave their name to the country north of Clyde and Forth, the pre-Celtic Caledones (Caledonii) had been pushed back well before the late first century AD, by the Celtic invaders – Vacomagi, Venicones and Taexali – and 'sank into comparative insignificance'. Yet we are asked to believe that despite the insignificance of the Caledonians by the time the Romans came on the scene it was their name which Tacitus's sources applied to northern Scotland, their name which was given to the central highland forest (Ptolemy, Pliny and others), and their name which has been transmitted across the intervening 19 centuries in the Perthshire place-names Schiehallion and Dunkeld. Mann and Breeze say nothing of the Ptolemaic name for the western ocean, Duecaledonius (unlikely to perpetuate the name of an insignificant people), nor do they mention the chief Lossio Veda, described as Caledonian and memorialized at Colchester in a third-century inscription (*RIB*, no 191). Incidentally, Lossio's ancestor, Vepogenus, had a P-Celtic name; and two other reported Caledonian names, first-century Calgacus and third-century Argentocoxus, are Celtic – although Mann and Breeze would presumably argue that these two were not personally Caledonian but merely inhabitants of Caledonia. A more serious objection to their downgrading of the Caledonians is the use by Ammianus of the term Dicalydones, 'double Caledonians', as late as the later fourth century to describe half the population north of Forth and Clyde, when on the Mann-Breeze hypothesis they ought to have been long forgotten. Finally, we have to account for the fact that a conspicuous cluster of P-Celtic place-names in *aber*, 'confluence', is to be found in Glen More, precisely where Mann and Breeze wish to concentrate the Caledonians whose migration thither they predicate on the presumption that this tribe were not Celtic speakers. Revisionist arguments will surely need to be more persuasive than this before we remove the Caledonians from the country where their peculiar mountain of Schiehallion and peculiar fortress of Dunkeld are still to be found.

NOTE

- 1 But after 1904, since the sections on Kincardine parish in William Watson's *Place-Names of Ross and Cromarty*, 1–22, 273–4, published in that year, do not include Carn Smear.

REFERENCES

- Mann, J C & Breeze, D J 1987 'Ptolemy, Tacitus and the tribes of northern Britain', *Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, 117 (1987), 85–91.
RIB Collingwood, R G & Wright, R P 1965 *The Roman inscriptions of Britain, I: Inscriptions on stone*. Oxford.
 Richmond, I A 1958 'Ancient geographical sources for Britain north of Cheviot', in Richmond, I A (ed), *Roman and native in north Britain*, Edinburgh, 131–55.
 Watson, W 1926 *The history of the Celtic place-names of Scotland*.