

Rerigonium: a lost ‘city’ of the Novantae

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ABSTRACT

Rerigonium, a place-name in Ptolemy’s Geography, is thought to have been located in the Rhinns of Galloway, but its site has never been identified. There is a strong circumstantial case for regarding the Innermessan area on the eastern side of Loch Ryan as being the likely locus of Rerigonium. Why is this of interest? It is contended that the name, in both the British and Old Welsh forms, indicates an important function perhaps in the pre-Roman Iron Age in connection with the Novantae, as well as the obscure post-Roman entity known as Rheged.

INTRODUCTION

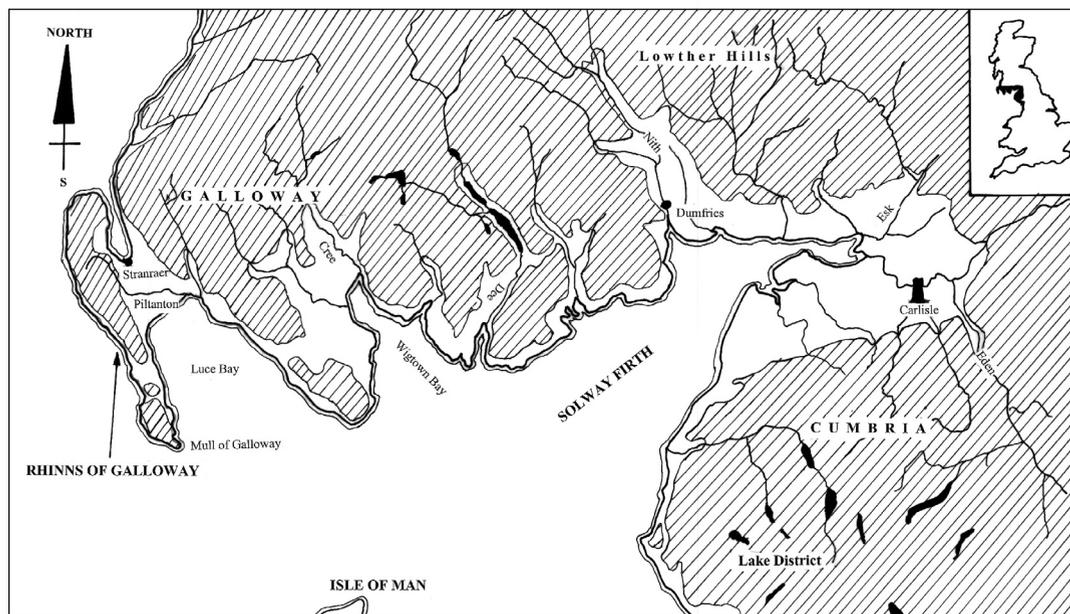
South-west Scotland, especially the Rhinns (sometimes spelled Rhins) of Galloway (illus 1), is an astonishingly rich area for archaeological remains (RCAHMS 1985; 1987). The efforts of a few individuals such as the Reverend George Wilson of the Free Church, Glenluce, or Sir Herbert Maxwell in the late 19th century did much to promote the antiquarian tradition in Wigtownshire. In more recent times, however, the Rhinns has witnessed very little in the way of archaeological research- or ‘rescue’-based investigation, one reason, doubtless, being the strongly rural nature of the economy which generates few archaeological ‘opportunities’ ahead of development proposals. The result is that with the exception of the work of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS), greater effort has probably been expended in the fields of historical and place-name research than in archaeological investigations. The work of the late Daphne Brook, for example, whose numerous publications focusing mainly on place-names in the 1980s and 1990s, together with other scholars including Drs Macqueen, Oram and Stringer, has greatly illuminated a

region with unusually complex linguistic and settlement patterns.

Prominent amongst archaeological research has been work at Luce Sands where the Reverend Wilson played a key part (Wilson 1899). This has significantly enhanced our understanding of coastal, pre-dune settlement in the middle Holocene, while work on Neolithic chambered tombs by the late Professor Stuart Piggott and Lionel Masters (Piggott & Powell 1949; Masters 1973), and more recently on Neolithic ritual landscapes by the Universities of Southampton and Manchester, also represent major steps forward in terms of early human settlement (Cowie 1996; Thomas, pers comm). Invasive archaeological work on later periods, however, has been patchy and relatively little is known from systematic archaeological investigation of the periods from the first millennium BC to the post-medieval period, although the Early Christian stones from Kirkmadrine and related sites have generated much discussion (Gilmour 2000, 116).

Our limited understanding of archaeological monuments in the Rhinns is unfortunate, as the work on soils by the Macaulay Institute for Soil Research demonstrates the attractions of the area to ancient people, a point also apparent

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ILLUS 1 The Rhinns of Galloway, location map

in the density of crop- and parchmark sites as revealed by aerial photography especially in the Stranraer isthmus (Cowley & Brophy 2001). Around Craiggaffie, Lochans, Souseat or Fox Plantation and East Galdenoch, for example, are a great many circular, oval and rectilinear ditched enclosures, sometimes with traces of palisades and other internal features such as pits, post-holes and roundhouses, the occasional souterrain, and linear ditches forming parts of field systems (RCAHMS 1985; 1987; Cowley & Brophy 2001, fig 1, 61–2, 69). Together they indicate a substantial expansion of settlement probably in the late first millennium BC and early first millennium AD. Indeed, given that much of the landscape today is under grass, and not particularly receptive to the display of crop- or parchmarks, it is quite possible that the entire isthmus was intensively farmed at this time. There is nothing surprising in this because the isthmus is not only fertile, but it has the notable distinction of being one of the sunniest places in Britain (Smith 1813; Brown & Heslop 1979, 26), an important factor with regard to

land-use and the agricultural economy in pre-improvement days.

The settlement expansion was not confined to the lowlands for the upland areas along the spine of the Rhinns and to the east of Loch Ryan on Several's Moor, Glenwhan Moor and others contain relict landscapes including field systems, house sites and occasional hilltop defended enclosures. While we lack secure chronological markers, and cannot, therefore, assess the degree of contemporaneity of these sites, one wonders whether the upland landscapes represent an expansion on to more marginal lands, and if so, when this took place.

The presence of the Romans in the south-west is clearly attested at Glenluce and further east at Gatehouse of Fleet, while their influence on society could be indicated by the increasing numbers of sites with a rectangular as opposed to curvilinear layout, as well as by numerous casual finds (Hanson 1987, 90–1; Cowley & Brophy 2001, 61; Wilson 2001). However, their impact is scarcely known and is very difficult at present to measure. For later pre-Norman

periods settlement patterns are impossible to assess and there are few identified places aside from Trusty's Hill or Whithorn and a handful of other ecclesiastical sites. Relationships between kings, chieftains or lords with each other, and with the communities they ruled, are far from understood (Brooke 1994; Oram 2000).

In considering early settlement in the Rhinns one approach is to take the case of *Rerigonium*, an enigmatic place-name occurring in Ptolemy's *Geography*, and thought variously to be prehistoric, Roman or post-Roman in date. *Rerigonium* has never been located but there is a good argument for believing that it lay in the vicinity of Innermessan on the eastern side of Loch Ryan. The aim of this paper is to assess the evidence for Innermessan and to consider the merits of other possible locations.

THE SOURCES

One of the prime documentary sources for the geography of Roman Britain is the *Geographia* of Claudius Ptolemaeus, written at Alexandria in the period AD 140–50. In eight books Ptolemy lists a large number of topographic features such as rivers, headlands and other places he described as 'cities' (*poleis* – πολεις) throughout the Roman Empire. Following a prologue, the *Geography* opens with a description of Britain (Book 2), and this has provoked particular debate because the measurements used to locate 'cities' and other features show substantial distortions to the shape of the British Isles as we know it (Richmond 1958; Ogilvie & Richmond 1967; Mann & Breeze 1987; Rivet & Smith 1979). The most recent assessment of Ptolemy is by Strang (1997), on whose work these comments partly rely.

Amongst the topographic locations referred to are the '*Novantarum peninsula*' and the '*Novantorum promontorium*' referred to together (*Geography* II, 3.1) and usually identified as the Rhinns of Galloway and the Mull of Galloway respectively (illus 2). These are geographical

names which identify the Rhinns as being the territory of the Novantae, a large tribe or tribal confederation about whom very little else is known. The tribal name is also obscure and has been suggested as meaning 'new' or 'fresh' or alternatively 'lively, vigorous folk' (Watson 1926, 27; Rivet & Smith 1979, 425).

The next entry refers to '*Rerigonius sinus*' where the adjective refers to a curved feature such as a bay, a gulf or sea loch. Many authors believe that this description refers to Loch Ryan, which is indeed curved and is the only candidate before Irvine Bay (*Vindogara sinus*) further north in Ayrshire (Richmond 1958, 150–2; Rivet & Smith 1979, 133, 502; Strang 1997, 21). Slightly further on, in the section dealing with peoples and places (*Geography* II, 3, 5–7), are the Novantan 'cities' of *Rerigonium* and *Lucopibia*, the latter being provisionally identified as Gatehouse of Fleet (Rivet & Smith 1979, 138–9). Although the site of the former is not known, the place-name is identical to the gulf or bay referred to earlier and must surely be located somewhere on the shoreline of the loch.

Ptolemy is the only source for *Rerigonium* during the period of the Roman occupation of Britain. Strang has been able to reconstruct Ptolemy's map of Britain using known place-names superimposed on the Ordnance Survey maps, and by an analysis of the scales and rotational displacements apparent from the latitudes and longitudes of known places (1997). Although there are some unexpected results, insofar as south-western Scotland is concerned he proposes no changes with regard to Gatehouse of Fleet (*Lucopibia*) and a location near Stranraer for *Rerigonium* (ibid, 21). Some writers (Rivet & Smith 1979; Wilson 2001, 76) have also suggested that Ptolemy's river *Abravannus* was the Water of Luce, but in a recent paper Dr Andrew Breeze (2001) has argued that the Piltanton Burn is a more plausible candidate (illus 2). The other river in the far south-west is the '*Iena aestuarium*', which Breeze regards as the mouth of the Cree.

The *Geography* was not intended as a definitive account of Britain (Rivet & Smith 1979; Strang 1997). As he states in Book I, Ptolemy was not concerned with the precise location and depiction of places or other features, nor with their status, as this fell outside his remit, but with the overall picture. Even so, we may take it that whatever he may mean by the use of the word ‘*poleis*’ (cities), the place-names mentioned enjoyed a status above that of the simple farmstead, and were regarded as having some substance either within the context of the Roman military occupation or of ‘native’ society, or both. However, it is difficult to determine what factors led to some places being included and others left out. A surprising omission, for example, is that of *Luguvalium* (Carlisle), an important fort established under Cerialis which rapidly acquired an annexe, *vicus* and other ‘official’ functions, eventually becoming the *civitas Carvetiorum* (McCarthy 2002a). Its name, as we know from writing tablets attributed to the mid-80s (McCarthy 1991, 14, fig 7), had been in use for at least 40 to 50 years by the time Ptolemy compiled his great work.

Insofar as locations were concerned Ptolemy relied on astronomical data, through the use of the astrolabe, together with distances calculated using a gnomon. This inevitably led to errors, but he seems to have been content with inaccuracies to within a quarter of a degree (or 16.5 Roman miles). His sources included travellers’ accounts, but, in the case of Britain, internal indications suggest that he also relied substantially on an earlier geography by Marinus of Tyre, probably compiled in the reign of Trajan. Marinus’s *Geography* has not survived. The places referred to, and the omission of Hadrian’s Wall, which had only just been commissioned at the time he was writing, suggest that Ptolemy’s, and Marinus’s, sources belong to the late first century AD, perhaps the governorship of Agricola or his immediate successors.

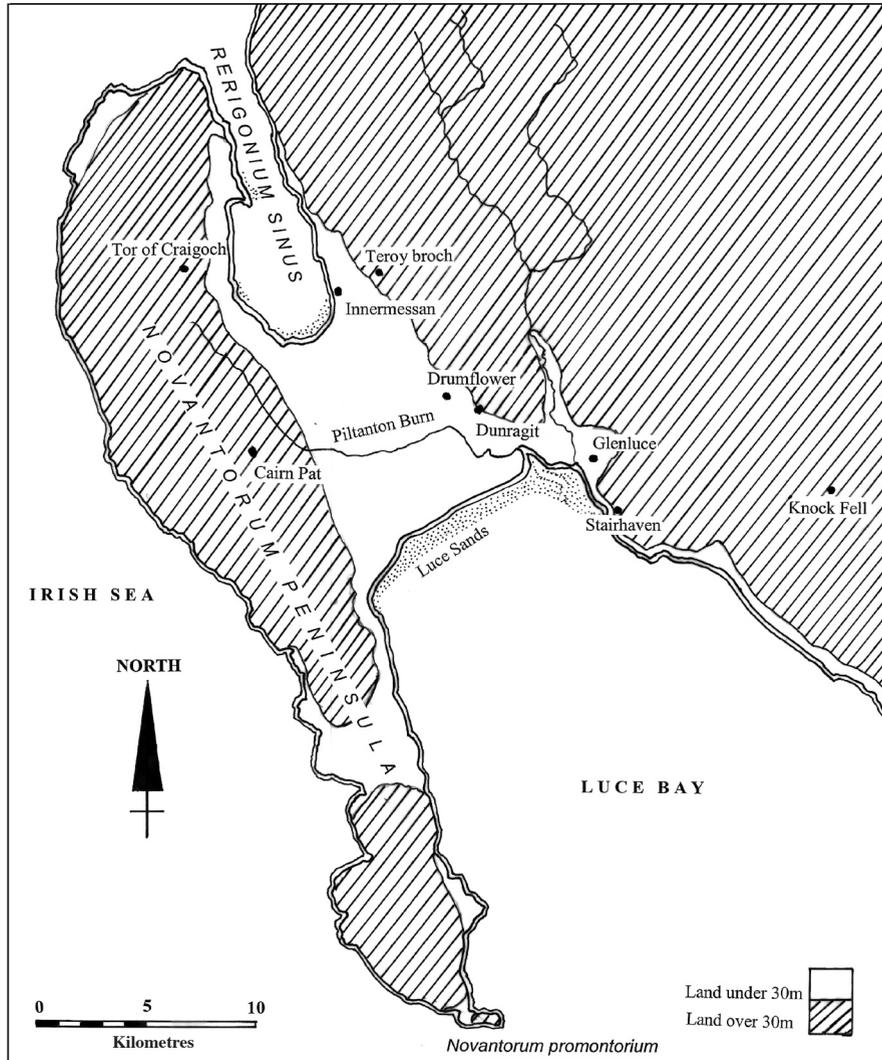
Another source, the Ravenna Cosmography, mentions a place known as *Brigomono* (=high hill). Both Rivet & Smith (1979, 447) and

MacQueen (2002, 94) believe that this was the same place as *Rerigonium* on linguistic grounds. This is possible, but the name *Brigomono* is not very specific and could just as easily refer to a hillfort such as Cairn Pat or the Tor of Craigoch (illus 2). Frere also dismisses Rivet and Smith’s attribution as being unlikely and suggests Arthur’s Seat, Edinburgh, as an alternative location for *Brigomono* (Frere 2001, 290), while Brooke identified it with Menybrig, Leswalt (Brooke 1996).

Rerigonio means ‘very royal place’ and is derived from the British *rorigonio* (*ro* = very; *rig* = king or royal). In Early Welsh versions it appears as *Penrionydd* or *Rhionydd* which could mean the headland or promontory of Ryan, but an alternative translation might be the chief place of Ryan. Taliesin has ‘*kaer rian*’, the fort of Ryan (Agnew 1893, ii, 244–5; MacQueen 2002, 90), and the Triads refer to it as one of the three national thrones of Britain, one stating that Arthur was ‘the chief lord of *Penrionydd* in the north, and Cyndern Garthwys (Kentigern), the chief bishop and Gurthmwl Guledic, the chief elder’ (Watson 1926, 34). Watson was in no doubt that *Rerigonium* (British) and *Penrhyn Rhionydd* (Old Welsh) are one and the same, and that they are manifest in the name Ryan. For Watson *Rerigonium* was in the northern arm of the Rhinns peninsula.

WHAT WAS RERIGONIUM?

The place-name clearly implies an elite site with royal or chieftainly connections which continued to have resonance in the sixth and later centuries AD. However, neither Ptolemy nor other sources offer any real clue as to what kind of place *Rerigonium* was, beyond the description *polis*, a word often applied indiscriminately to a variety of places. A number of scholars (Rivet & Smith 1979, 447; Hanson 1987, 90, 106) believe it to be a Roman fort, but given its meaning, date, and occurrence in later texts, other options also need to be considered.



ILLUS 2 Map locating key places in the text

First, the fact that the name occurs in Ptolemy does not, in itself, mean that it was occupied by the Romans, although it may very well have been. It merely tells us that Ptolemy, and presumably his sources, believed it to be of sufficient importance to merit mentioning within their terms of reference. More important is the point that his sources are almost certainly late first century AD in date, and this encourages belief that, as with other places referred to,

such as Newstead (*Trimontium*), it *already* had an important function. If this is the case it is reasonable to infer that a pre-Roman origin for *Rerigonium* is possible.

Daphne Brooke referred to an *oppidum* (Brooke 1994, 3, 5), but despite extensive survey work and aerial photographic cover by the RCAHMS (1985; 1987), no evidence for an *oppidum* in the sense of the term used elsewhere either in England or the continent has emerged

anywhere in the Rhinns. If, by *oppidum*, Daphne Brooke simply meant a hillfort, a number of examples can be cited in the Rhinns and Machars, although none is especially large.

Alternatively, given the possibilities for beaching shallow craft around Loch Ryan and Luce Bay, *Rerigonium* could be envisaged as a form of entrepôt for trading activities in the Irish Sea, perhaps comparable with the late Iron Age site at Hengistbury Head in Dorset, or possibly Meols in the Wirral. Loch Ryan and Luce Bay offer particularly good possibilities for beaching flat-bottomed craft, while other bays, as at Portpatrick, could have accommodated keeled vessels with a deeper draft.

It may also have been a Roman fort, perhaps with naval connections in view of the proximity of the sea to most places in the Rhinns, and in the context of Agricola's circumnavigation of Scotland and his visit to Ireland. Roman installations are known at Glenluce, Gatehouse of Fleet and further east. The strategic importance of the Rhinns peninsula to the northern frontier of Roman Britain, with its safe anchorages at Loch Ryan, Luce Bay and numerous smaller bays, is evident. It is a very short journey away by boat from the Cumbrian coast, as well as from Man and Ireland.

The idea that *Rerigonium*/*Pen Rhionydd* was one of the three thrones of Britain as stated in the Triads may encourage belief that it may have been an Early Historic citadel, comparable with others in the Atlantic seaways and with Trusty's Hill near Gatehouse of Fleet. The writer has argued elsewhere that the Rhinns, and possibly the Machars, may have been the original core of the kingdom of Rheged (illus 2) and thus a successor to the Novantae (McCarthy 2002b).

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

None of the above possibilities is mutually exclusive and *Rerigonium* could have combined several or all of these functions. There is very little archaeological evidence capable on its

own of shedding further light on its location and nature. The enclosed hilltop sites at Cairn Pat and Tor of Craigoch dominate the Stranraer isthmus and Loch Ryan, but apart from the configuration of the earthwork defences, which suggests multi-period occupation, perhaps extending into the pre-Roman Iron Age, they are not particularly remarkable and nothing more is known. Neither are there any concentrations of Iron Age metalwork discoveries, as there are further east in Dumfriesshire (McCarthy 2002b), but this may be because there has been a general lack of excavation on sites of the Iron Age and first millennium AD.

Objects dating to between the late first and the later fourth centuries AD have been found at a number of places (Hunter 2001; Wilson 2001). The objects from Wigtownshire include glassware bangles, beads and vessel fragments; Roman coarse pottery, samian ware and some fine-wares (Nene Valley products); metalware including copper alloy brooches, an ingot, torc, patera, and toilet instruments. An iron axe and hammer heads, an iron finger ring, an iron dish, an adze, nails, querns and a leather shoe amongst other objects have also been discovered (Wilson 2001). The majority of these are low-value items of a kind that would be expected at any northern military site, and they could have been the subject of exchange with soldiers on either side of the Solway Firth, if not at *vici* on or near Hadrian's Wall. The most numerous category of objects is Roman coins, chiefly found in possible hoards. The largest collection is from the Piltanton Burn south-east of Dunragit, where three groups totalling over 1,000 coins have been reported by a metal detectorist (John Pickin, pers comm). The presence of coins does not, in itself, tell us anything about exchange mechanisms, as they could have been hoarded for purposes other than their monetary value, but, with the other miscellaneous finds from the Luce Sands, there is a suggestion here of a settlement located at the head of Luce Bay, perhaps also linked with the east-west Roman road attested on aerial photographs at Drumflower near Dunragit.

WAS *RERIGONIUM* AT INNERMESSAN?

There is a consensus that *Rerigonium* or *Penrionyd* was located near Loch Ryan. In the absence of more specific place-name or documentary references, the Roman road at Dunragit and Drumflower offers scope for speculation. The terminus of this road has not yet been identified, but it is oriented in the general direction of Stranraer where, despite a number of developments in and around the town over the past 200 years, no casual finds of significance with regard to the late Iron Age or Roman periods have been reported, and there is no particular reason to believe that it overlies the remains of *Rerigonium*.

However, there is a local tradition that *Rerigonium* was at Innermessan, only 3km to the north-east of Stranraer (illus 2). It is recorded in the Ordnance Survey Name Books of 1849, and it was referred to by Sir Andrew Agnew (1893, i, 7) whose family had held the lands there until 1723. *Rerigonium* and Innermessan continued to be equated in the 20th century, as for example, during field trips of the Dumfries and Galloway Natural History and Antiquarian Society (M'Conchie 1932, 189). Other local antiquaries believed it to be at Cairnryan (Thomas 1876, 217), doubtless meaning Caer Ryan which, as Agnew pointed out, is not the same as Cairnryan which is a modern village (1893, ii, 245).

These are emphatically traditions and not evidence. No corroborative evidence was cited in support of the idea that *Rerigonium* and Innermessan were one and the same, and the local tradition may have originated with General Roy in the 18th century (Richard Oram, pers comm). Nevertheless there are interesting indicators pointing to the significance of this location. These include the discovery of an unusual and important object, the mouth-piece of a Late Bronze Age trumpet, in 19th-century excavations (Maxwell 1889, 224), as well as an aerial photograph showing a Roman fort or camp (Strang 1997, fn 64), a motte, the focus of the barony and the burgh, in the possession

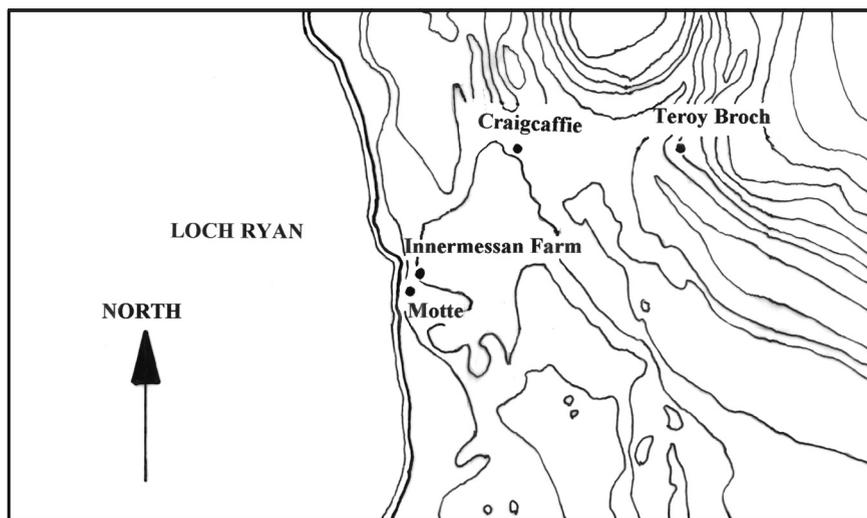
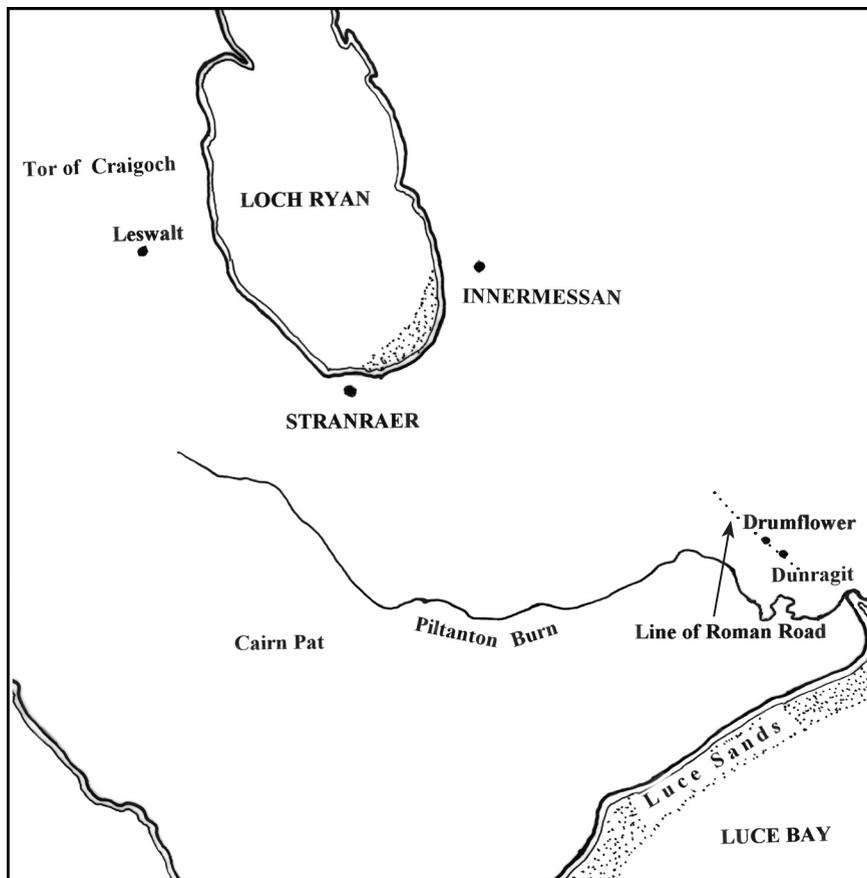
of the Bishop of Whithorn, as well as a later stone castle (M'Conchie 1932, 187–9). Some indication of the scale of the medieval settlement is apparent in 1426 when the Agnews purchased 'tofts, crofts and a mill' lying between 'the torrents in the Barony of Innermessan' (Agnew 1893, 241), while Innermessan was described as 'the greatest town hereabouts until Stanrawer was built' (Symson 1684, quoted in Agnew 1893, ii, 243–4).

Craigcaffie broch at Teroy, about 1.75km to the ENE, also adds to the interest of this area, as well as Craigcaffie Tower. Investigated by Curle, the broch unfortunately yielded few finds and cannot be dated, although in its form and outworks it clearly belongs in the tradition of complex Atlantic roundhouses as does that at Stairhaven, south of Glenluce (Curle 1912, 187; Gilmour 2000, 128).

Although aerial photography has recorded a large number of monuments in the Stranraer isthmus, cumulatively the factors referred to above amount to an unusually important concentration at, or adjacent to, Innermessan, but rarely present elsewhere in the region. Combined with a position close to a projected terminus for the Roman road at Dunragit, they provide a basis for considering that this is where *Rerigonium* was located. That is not to say that the Iron Age, Roman, post-Roman and medieval settlements occupied precisely the same piece of land for it is well established that settlement foci, whilst serving the same area and community, can shift over time, and there are a number of examples of this phenomenon in Dumfriesshire, Kirkcudbrightshire and Cumbria. The Iron Age, Roman and later sites at *Rerigonium/Penrionyd* may have been in slightly different, but possibly adjacent, places within, perhaps, a kilometre of each other.

DUNRAGIT AND *BRIGOMONO*

Other possibilities for the location of *Rerigonium* should be mentioned. The place-name Dunragit



ILLUS 3 The area around Innermessan

has been interpreted as the ‘fort of Rheged’, a description that would seem to imply an important function within this obscure kingdom (Watson 1926, 34; Reid 1951; Williams 1987, xl; Brooke 1991, 320). The site is conventionally located at a knoll formerly known as Round Dounan, and lies below the crest of the hillside in the grounds of Dunragit House, but it has few obvious similarities with the topographic characteristics of other potentially royal sites such as Dunadd, Argyll, the Mote of Mark, Dumfriesshire or Dunaverty, Kintyre.

To the south of Dunragit is a large and extremely impressive ritual complex of Neolithic date probably associated with the mound of Droughduil, now demonstrated not to be a motte (Julian Thomas, pers comm). With the possible exception of two roundhouses and a few Roman road quarry pits, recent excavations have revealed no buildings, features or artefacts of a date later than the Neolithic enclosures and associated structures. A short distance away are the findspots of the coins and other objects in the Luce Sands. As at Innermessan, there is an interesting conjunction of indicators of human interest in this particular spot extending over millennia, but in the present context the significance of this is questionable, given that casual discoveries and aerial photographic evidence demonstrate intensive settlement over extensive swathes of land in the Stranraer isthmus. What Dunragit lacks are clear signs of post-Neolithic symbols of power comparable with those at Innermessan. Indeed, the site at Round Dounan has yet to be confirmed as being archaeological in origin.

If links between *Rerigonium* and Dunragit are unsatisfactory, what of that between *Rerigonium* and *Brigomono*? Richmond and Crawford, in their discussion of the Ravenna list, linked the two places and this was accepted by Rivet and Smith but without identifying a modern place-name equivalent (Richmond & Crawford 1949, 174; Rivet & Smith 1979, 447). Daphne Brooke believed that the name Leswalt, a village in the Northern Rhinns

close to the western shore of Loch Ryan, is cognate with *Brigomono* (1996, 116). Brooke argued that Leswalt and the nearby (but lost) Brittonic name, Men-y-brig, formed part of an extensive and valuable estate which was raised to the status of a barony in 1426 (Brooke 1996, 115). According to her, the combination of the place-name generic, Les = *llys* (court), with Men-y-brig, provides a clue to the location of an important place of great antiquity. Men-y-brig and *Brigomono* was the same place but it cannot be equated with *Rerigonium* as Rivet and Smith argued. Brooke simply noted that it could have been a port serving, or associated with, *Rerigonium*. Finally, MacQueen disputed Brooke’s argument by suggesting that the name is later and the *brig*-element, in this instance, is Scots for bridge (2002, 93–4).

Whether or not MacQueen is correct with regard to *Brigomono* is unclear, but Brooke’s point remains of interest because she linked the size and value of the estate with the *llys*-place-name. Although there is little archaeological evidence from the vicinity of Leswalt to argue for its early importance, it does lie directly opposite Innermessan across Loch Ryan and is very close to a defended hilltop, the Tor of Craigoch. That there was a relationship between Innermessan and Leswalt seems very likely.

CONCLUSION

The combination of sources strongly suggests that the lands around Innermessan were of particular importance and interest perhaps from as early as the late pre-Roman Iron Age to the late medieval or early post-medieval periods. Notwithstanding Watson’s belief that *Rerigonium/Rhionydd* are to be located in the northern Rhinns peninsula, the weight of historical and archaeological sources makes Innermessan the most attractive option for the location of Ptolemy’s *polis* of *Rerigonium*. It had the benefit of being located in an expanse

of good well-drained soils and an area enjoying a warm climate and long growing season, the advantages of which the local kings would have been well aware.

Here, in the relatively sheltered waters of Loch Ryan, with easy access to the Irish Sea, the Western Isles, Cumbria, Man and Ireland, as well as good beaching opportunities for shallow-draft vessels, Novantan chieftains and later kings, perhaps even including Urien of Rheged, may have been able to sustain a power-base with ready access, if not periodic control of, the Irish seaways. This, in turn, could have facilitated seaborne ties between coastal kingdoms around the Irish Sea, as well as aiding the economic and religious growth of Whithorn, and conceivably Kirkmadrine, with the continent.

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