

Highland Boundary Forts

Almost the only source for names of Roman sites on land in Scotland north of the Antonine Wall is the Ravenna Cosmography, which inherently gives no specific indication of location. It merely lists places in an order that seems to make good geographical sense, as if Cosmo (whoever he was) read names off a tolerably accurate map.

Matching names to places therefore amounts to filling in a great big grid of Cosmo names against Roman forts, and marking in each little square the estimated probability that name X belongs to fort Y. Once everything is settled there should be a single path through the grid representing optimum name-to-place assignments, such that all the major Roman forts have names that are at least tolerable linguistic fits to those places' topography or military history.

Obviously there are huge problems in achieving that goal. Is it right to focus only on Roman forts and camps? Have archaeologists found all the main ones? Can we guess which were important enough to get reported to Cosmo and which can be ignored as mere lookout posts? Could two names apply to essentially the same site: e.g. river and fort, or native power centre and fort? Can we be really certain that Cosmo listed names in a good geographical order? Is it right that Celtic etymologies are largely a red herring?

In due course this article will try to show that name-place grid for real, but for now it just serves as a hyperlinkable text to warn readers of the problems and unfinished work in this area.