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### Rothbury, a note on a Northumberland place-name

Christopher Pålsson (pp. 9–11)

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## ABBREVIATIONS OF COUNTIES AND EPNS COUNTY SURVEYS

Co	Cornwall
Ha	Hampshire
He	Herefordshire
K	Kent
La	Lancashire
Nb	Northumberland
Sf	Suffolk
So	Somerset
Wt	Isle of Wight
CPNE	<i>Cornish Place-Name Elements.</i>
EPNE	<i>English Place-Name Elements, Parts 1 and 2.</i>
PN BdHu	<i>The Place-Names of Bedfordshire and Huntingdonshire.</i>
PN Brk	<i>The Place-Names of Berkshire, Parts 1, 2 and 3.</i>
PN Bu	<i>The Place-Names of Buckinghamshire.</i>
PN Ca	<i>The Place-Names of Cambridgeshire and the Isle of Ely.</i>
PN Ch	<i>The Place-Names of Cheshire, Parts 1–5.</i>
PN Cu	<i>The Place-Names of Cumberland, Parts 1, 2 and 3.</i>
PN D	<i>The Place-Names of Devon, Parts 1 and 2.</i>
PN Db	<i>The Place-Names of Derbyshire, Parts 1, 2 and 3.</i>
PN Do	<i>The Place-Names of Dorset, Parts 1–4.</i>
PN Du	<i>The Place-Names of County Durham, Part 1.</i>
PN Ess	<i>The Place-Names of Essex.</i>
PN ERY	<i>The Place-Names of the East Riding of Yorkshire and York.</i>
PN Gl	<i>The Place-Names of Gloucestershire, Parts 1–4.</i>
PN Hrt	<i>The Place-Names of Hertfordshire.</i>
PN Le	<i>The Place-Names of Leicestershire, Parts 1–7.</i>
PN Li	<i>The Place-Names of Lincolnshire, Parts 1–7.</i>
PN Mx	<i>The Place-Names of Middlesex (apart from the City of London).</i>
PN Nf	<i>The Place-Names of Norfolk, Parts 1–3.</i>
PN Nt	<i>The Place-Names of Nottinghamshire.</i>
PN NRY	<i>The Place-Names of the North Riding of Yorkshire.</i>
PN Nth	<i>The Place-Names of Northamptonshire.</i>
PN O	<i>The Place-Names of Oxfordshire, Parts 1 and 2.</i>
PN R	<i>The Place-Names of Rutland.</i>
PN Sa	<i>The Place-Names of Shropshire, Parts 1–9.</i>
PN Sr	<i>The Place-Names of Surrey.</i>
PN St	<i>The Place-Names of Staffordshire, Part 1.</i>
PN Sx	<i>The Place-Names of Sussex, Parts 1 and 2.</i>
PN W	<i>The Place-Names of Wiltshire.</i>
PN Wa	<i>The Place-Names of Warwickshire.</i>
PN We	<i>The Place-Names of Westmorland, Parts 1 and 2.</i>
PN Wo	<i>The Place-Names of Worcestershire.</i>
PN WRY	<i>The Place-Names of the West Riding of Yorkshire, Parts 1–8.</i>

## ROTHBURY

### A Note on a Northumberland Place-Name

Towards the south of Rothbury (Nb) the Tosson and Simonside Hills rise to 1447 ft.; towards the north another ridge reaches just over 1000 ft., so that topographically the village controls, as it were, the narrow pass between the Upper Coquet Dale and the less hilly country farther east, widening and extending down to the coastal plain.

Further, Rothbury occupies a position midway between three Roman roads: the 'Devils Causeway' from *Corstopitum* (between Hexham and Corbridge) on the Tyne to the mouth of the Tweed; the branch from that road in the neighbourhood of Whittingham on the Aln that passed the upper end of the Dale at Holystone and reached the Roman town of *Bremenium* at Rochester in Redesdale, where it also met the 'Dere Street' from *Corstopitum*—a road that crossed the Border near the head of the Coquet.

Because of its topographical situation, the site of the village is a strategic one, which is also suggested by the second element *-bury* (OE *burg*, *burh* 'fortified place, fort, etc.' with the umlauted dat. *byr(i)g*, *byrh*). This is a term 'applied by our forefathers to Roman or prehistoric defensive works, earthworks and the like, as well as to their own forts'.<sup>1</sup> In general, the reference may be to a Roman or other pre-English fort, or to an Anglo-Saxon fort, but 'in many cases *burg* probably denotes a fortified manor, and even a meaning "manor" often occurs'.<sup>2</sup> We may have a case of the meaning 'manor' here, for in a deed from 1205<sup>3</sup> the village is known to have been referred to as a lordship comprising three manors, Rothbury then constituting the centre of the estate.<sup>4</sup> The first recorded date is c. 1125, when it was given as *Routhebiria*.<sup>5</sup>

Although Ekwall is correct in saying that 'it is impossible to

<sup>1</sup> Allen Mawer, *The Chief Elements Used in English Place-Names* (EPNS 1, Part ii), Cambridge 1924, s.v.

<sup>2</sup> E. Ekwall, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names*, 4th ed., Oxford 1960, p. 75.

<sup>3</sup> D. D. Dixon, *Upper Coquetdale*, Newcastle upon Tyne, 1903, p. 452.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. also A. H. Smith, *English Place-Name Elements* (EPNS XXV–XXVI), Cambridge 1956, Part 1, pp. 58 ff.

<sup>5</sup> E. Ekwall, *op. cit.* p. 393.



decide in each case what is the exact meaning of the word',<sup>6</sup> the second element of Rothbury presents few difficulties etymologically. It is derived from OE *-byrig* (inflected form of *burg*). There is, however, no general agreement as regards the first element. Lindkvist takes it to mean 'red' and derives it from OWSc *raudr*.<sup>7</sup> Mawer, however, argues that hybrid formations consisting of a Scandinavian first element (other than a personal name), which was never naturalised, and an English second element are 'improbable except in a district where a mixed Anglo-Scandinavian speech prevailed'.<sup>8</sup> But this objection is not so much concerned with the derivation from *raudr* as it is with Lindkvist's interpretation that the first element stands as a modifier, giving a meaning 'red fort' or 'at the red fort'. On the basis of his argument, Mawer considers the element to be used as a nickname giving 'Rauði's (the red one's) *burh*' instead.<sup>9</sup> Thus, the argument is not whether or not a derivation from *raudr* should be accepted, but rather how it should be interpreted. Though offering many difficult problems, a group of names around Rothbury, including Rothbury itself, suggests, according to Mawer, 'very definitely a Scandinavian settlement in the fertile valley of the Coquet'.<sup>10</sup> This reflects the Scandinavian settlement pattern in Northumberland, with its concentration in the heart of the country and, generally, in the fertile river valleys, but with no trace of any general settlement of the countryside—at least as far as can be seen from place-names.

Ekwall, on the other hand, explains the name as 'Hrōpa's *burg*'. Here the connexion with 'red' has been abandoned, but in suggesting a personal name as a likely explanation (OE *\*Hrōþ(a)*, *Hroda*), he stands pretty close to Mawer from a structural point of view. It may also be noted that, just as he appears to reject a possible Scandinavian derivation for the first element in Rothbury, he does not interpret the other three names Snitter, Tosson, and Cartington in the group of names around Rothbury mentioned above as being Scandinavian in

<sup>6</sup> E. Ekwall, *op. cit.* p. 75.

<sup>7</sup> H. Lindkvist, *Middle English Place-Names of Scandinavian Origin*, Uppsala 1912, p. 158.

<sup>8</sup> Allen Mawer, *The Place-Names of Northumberland and Durham*, Cambridge 1920, p. xxii.

<sup>9</sup> Allen Mawer, *op. cit.* p. 169.

<sup>10</sup> Allen Mawer, "The Scandinavian Settlements in England as Reflected in English Place-Names", *Acta Philologica Scandinavica*, 7, 1932-3, pp. 1-30.

origin. In spite of Ekwall's suggested etymology, I do not think it necessary to reject the connexion with 'red'.

The importance in place-name studies of examining the topographical situations of the names under discussion is well understood, and Rothbury's position has been mentioned above. A connexion between *rauðr* or *rauði*, as a first element of this name, and the topography as described above cannot be reasonably thought of, however. Mawer also states that 'there is, so far as we can see now, no justification for calling Rothbury "red" '.<sup>11</sup> Thus, it would seem that a link is missing. I now venture to suggest, however, that topography can in fact be used to supply this missing link as regards the name of Rothbury, too. It is a striking fact, for example evidenced from a number of quarries in the vicinity, that the bed-rock in the area is red, and this is a characteristic feature of the local topography. It would seem, therefore, that the red bed-rock around Rothbury may supply the missing link for a derivation from *rauðr* ('red') and that the name most likely means 'the red fortification, fortified manor, manor' or the like, regardless of whether the designation is taken to imply that it was actually constructed from red rocks or that it was simply situated in an area characterised by its red bed-rock generally. Hence, there does seem to exist some justification for 'calling Rothbury "red" '.

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<sup>11</sup> Allen Mawer, *The Place-Names of Northumberland and Durham*, p. 169.