

Sitomagus – Suffolk's Lost Roman Town Located

The lost Roman town of Sitomagus is quoted in Antonine Itinerary IX and was clearly located somewhere in Suffolk. The Antonine Itineraries listed official routes in the Roman Empire and these are dated to either the 2nd or 3rd century AD. They were not the shortest route between places but rather appeared to involve ensuring certain towns were visited – perhaps for mail delivery or collecting taxes. Itinerary IX gives the position of Sitomagus as 32 miles from Venta Icenorum (Caistor St Edmund, south of Norwich) and 22 miles from Combretovium (Coddensham, North-west of Ipswich).

Over the years there has been much speculation as to where it was located. Suggestions have included: Peasenhall, Yoxford, Saxmundham, Knodishall, Wenhaston, Thetford, Ixworth, East Green and Dunwich, with the latter perhaps the favourite. All have their advocates and it was likely one of them was going to be correct but which was it?

What was missing was a comprehensive Roman road map for the area so distances could be calculated accurately. Without that then trying to locate Sitomagus would be highly speculative and all those options were still possible.

I have spent the last 5 or 6 years finding Roman roads around the country using LiDAR imagery. This comprises high precision height data produced by laser scanning the ground from aeroplanes. The use of LiDAR data to reveal archaeological remains, and Roman roads in particular, has been a great success throughout the country. The raw LiDAR data is freely available from the Environment Agency and much of Suffolk now has excellent coverage.

For my LiDAR investigations in Suffolk, I started in the east of the county as four Roman roads head that way without having a known destination. Perhaps this was a clue to where Sitomagus could be located. I filled in some of the gaps in

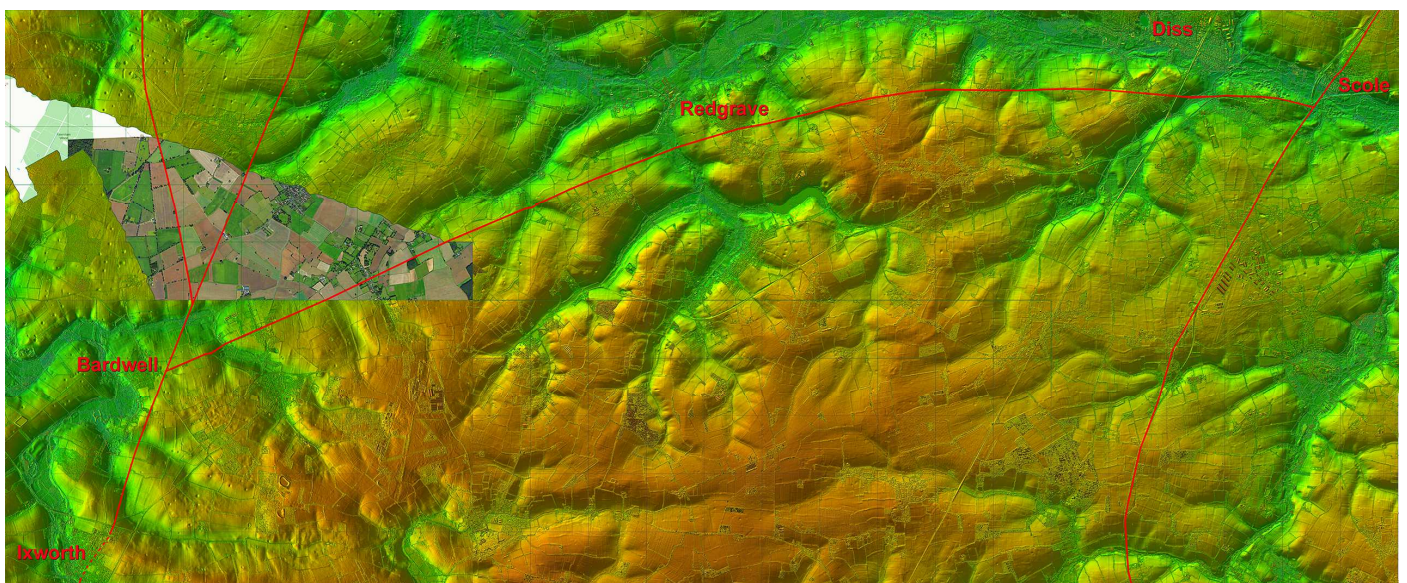


Figure 1: A LiDAR image showing the route of the newly discovered Roman road between Ixworth and Scole. There is currently a small gap in the LiDAR data which has been filled with an aerial photograph.

these roads but could not solve the puzzle of where they were heading.

So I turned my attention elsewhere and traced the other Roman roads of Suffolk. It was when looking at the LidAR imagery of the Peddars Way road north of Ixworth that I noticed a previously unrecorded Roman road branching off it at Bardwell. I was able to follow this to the Roman town of Scole (near Diss). What I had found was an unknown road linking Ixworth to Scole, the significance of which escaped me at the time.

I had also looked at a Roman road south-south-east from Ixworth, which was known sporadically but with many gaps. I was able to prove a through route to where it joined another Roman road at Bildeston. The latter road was an east-west route connecting Long Melford to Coddtenham. Coddtenham! That was Combretovium listed in the Itinerary. The penny finally dropped. There was now another route from Caistor to Coddtenham via Ixworth and known precisely with no speculation needed. But what were the mileages? I couldn't believe the answer: Caistor to Ixworth = 32 miles and Ixworth to Coddtenham = 22 miles. Ixworth fitted exactly with Iter IX – the distances were spot on.



Figure 2: Roman Road map of East Anglia with the Roman roads shown in red. The route of Itinerary IX that matches the distances in Itinerary IX is highlighted in yellow.

Ixworth sits at an important Roman road hub and evolved from an early Roman fort into a small settlement or town – just the place an itinerary would visit. There have been many Roman finds here including a water tower. The Roman settlement area is mostly south of the river but there have been finds on the north side too. There was also a villa north of the river. This site fits the bill in significance of size and importance plus, of course, we now know that it matches exactly the distances listed in Iter IX. So there can be little doubt that Ixworth is the lost Roman town of Sitomagus.

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