ROYAL RYCLAND

Rotaburh – the Story of King Rota and his Fortress

Paul Wiggin

The homeland of the Germanic tribe of Angles in the C5th was Angeln, situated in the middle of the Jutland Peninsula with Jutes to the north and Saxons to the south. The Angles claimed ancestry to a powerful King of Angeln called Woden who lived in the second century AD on the island of Fyn near the east coast of Jutland in the Baltic Sea. Under King Woden's rule, the settlement of Gudme on the Island of Fyn prospered and developed for several generations. Gold coins, jewel encrusted weapons, gold and silver trade goods, and bog sacrifices have revealed the importance of the community.

Map of the Jutland Peninsula and the Island of Fyn.

According to tradition, King Woden was a great poet and held in high esteem as it was believed that he could converse with the gods and interpret the meaning of events. He had the authority and wisdom to govern the community and to direct the rites of worship, sacrifice and burial. The era of Woden became known as ‘the days at the beginning of time’ and he was credited with establishing the traditions associated with the people of this period. It is not surprising therefore, that over time and with the oral traditions telling epic stories about Woden, he was elevated to the status of a god.

Representation of Woden, the first King of the Angles. The wheel represents the circle of life over which Woden held power and authority.

The god Woden was often associated with war and battle. Warriors would invoke his name before the fight for guidance, strength, and success. They believed that it was important for warriors to show bravery and to fight valiantly so that if they were slain on the battlefield, they would be led to Valhalla (the hall of the heroic dead) by Woden himself.

Woden was also seen as a master of strategic warfare and depicted wielding a spear which was reputed to have the power to pierce through any enemy and to determine the fate of battles. He was cunning and intelligent, with the ability to devise military plans that would lead to victory by outmanoeuvring the enemy. As a result, many leaders and Kings would call upon the god Woden to give them his skills, bless their campaigns and to help secure victory on the battlefield.

Perhaps the symbol most commonly linked to Woden is the raven. Ravens were typically seen as messengers (often associated with the dying on the battlefield) and portents that could be interpreted by invoking the god Woden. Traditionally, Woden is said to have two ravens; Huginn (thought) and Muninn (memory) who fly around the world to gather information for him. This connection to ravens highlights his role as a god of wisdom and foresight.

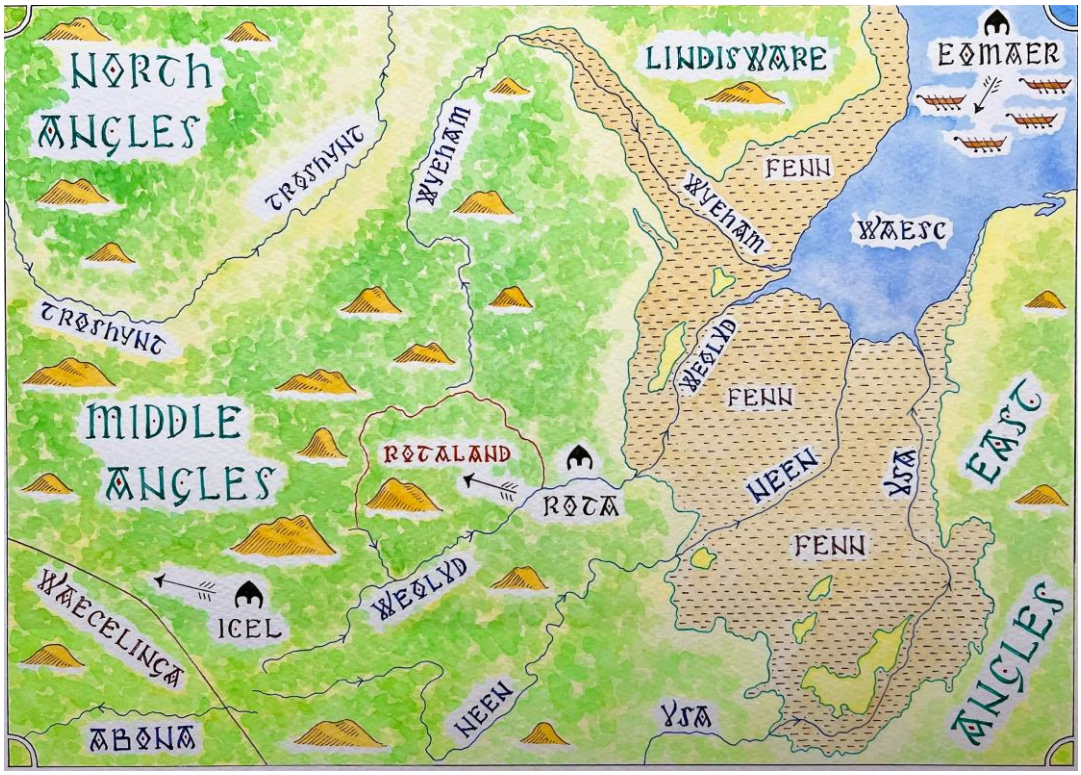
A typical clinker-built rowing boat used by the Angles.

During the 5th and 6th centuries AD, the germanic Angles journeyed across the southern North Sea from Angeln to Britain during the Migration Period. It is thought that the Angles used fast rowing vessels, similar in design to the Nydam boat, to travel to Britain to gain access to their new homeland.

The King was probably involved in blessing the voyages, interpreting omens and maintaining a powerful authority over the seafarers as they travelled to find land in Britain. He may well have viewed the newly settled Angle land in Britain as part of his kingdom and possession.

A practical consequence of successive generations of Angles migrating to the new land, was that there were less people left in Angeln for the King to rule over. The reduction in population created a growing risk from other tribes taking advantage of this weakness and potentially taking control of the Kingdom. It is highly likely therefore, that at some point, the king decided there was a better opportunity for him to rule a larger, New Angeln if he relinquished his current kingdom in Jutland and travelled to Britain to claim the country for himself and his descendants.

The tipping point came in about 510 A.D., when King Eomaer decided to lead a full-scale migration of most of the remaining Angles to Britain. The Wash had already been established by the Angles as a key entry point into Britain as it provided four navigable rivers into the heartland of the new Angles- land (England), and it is here that King Eomaer probably arrived.

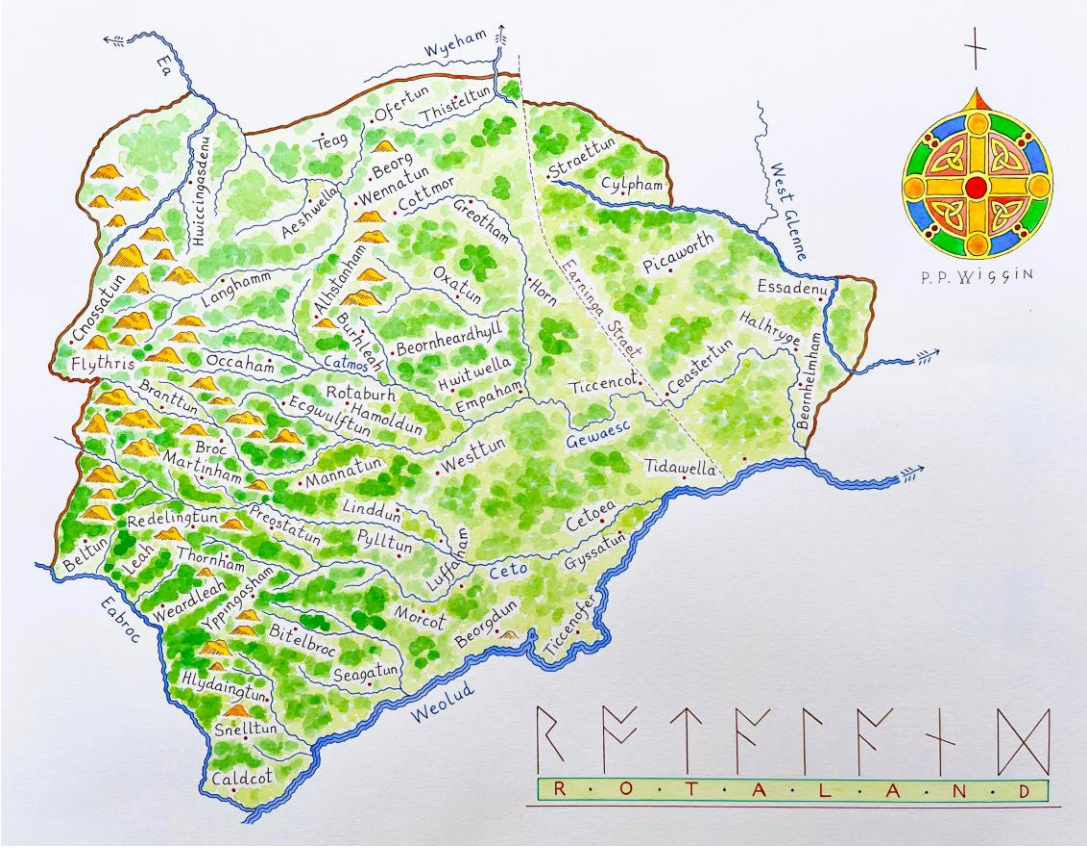


Map to show the colonisation of New Angeln: Angles-land (England) in C6th.

The Romans had maintained an Empire through military might and organisation, with armies that could be quickly deployed across Britain along the network of straight roads that had been built. In contrast, the Germanic Angles greatly valued riverways for travel as they used rowing boats, and it seems reasonable to suggest that the wooden Roman bridges, including the one near present day Stamford, were destroyed early on to ensure that the four main rivers: Welland, Witham, Nene and Ouse were kept clear for boat travel from the Wash. By removing the wooden bridges, the Angles had also produced identifiable areas of land, with rivers as boundaries, which would become useful as small Angle kingdoms started to emerge in the early C6th.

Having committed himself to leaving the Kingdom of Angeln behind, (this would be taken over later by the Danes), Eomaer seems to have entrusted military leadership only to his relatives. Using family bonds to ensure loyalty, may in part have reflected the erosion of authority and influence the Kings of Angeln had on the east Angles (East Anglia) who had begun the process of establishing their own separate kingdom at this time. Icel, a son of Eomaer, probably followed the River Welland and travelled inland using the Roman Watling Street to provide open access to the Midlands where the Saxon and Angle settlers were beginning to converge in the early C6th. Icel was to become the founder of the Iclingas clan and the ruler of a Middle Angles kingdom.

It is thought that other small Angle kingdoms were founded by close relatives of King Eomaer. Rota was one of these, perhaps another son. Rota and his warriors travelled along the River Welland until they reached an old Corieltavi kingdom. Rota claimed this land as his royal possession and created a Middle Angles Kingdom which was to be called Rota's land, or as we know it today, Rutland.



Map of the Middle Angle Kingdom of Rota – Rotaland

Boundaries were very important to the Angles as they defined territory for emerging kingdoms as well as minimising disputes of ownership. Natural borders were most commonly used by the Angles. They included rivers, streams and hills. Other dividing lines included ditches such as the Foss Dyke which the Romans had built to connect the River Trent to the River Witham and which a group of Angles used to define the part-boundary of their new kingdom Lindisware: Lindsey. Rota's land also used natural boundaries to define the extent of its territory; the River Welland marked the South-East border of Rotaland, the Eye Brook river and Jurassic hills defined the westerly edge, and the West Glen river provided the eastern boundary. All three rivers led to The Wash.

The northern boundary of Rotaland was the most varied. Instead of using the ridgeway along the top of the River Welland watershed as the natural border, the kingdom extended further north to include the N-S escarpment formed by the Inferior Oolite limestone. This was probably to take advantage of the strategic views that the ridge offered across Melton Vale as well as to access the valuable ironstone deposits. The additional land at the northern part of the Kingdom included the source of the rivers; Eye and Witham. Both rivers flowed into territory settled by other Angles, so the inclusion of the source of the rivers within the kingdom, suggests Rotaland held a wider authority.

Apart from the inclusion of Stamford, Knossington and Flitteris, the boundaries of Rotaland appear to be similar to those of present-day Rutland. The source of the River Gwash (Gewaesc) was Knossington (Cnossa). Like other rivers, the source seems to have held great significance to the Angles and may have been part of their religious worship. It seems reasonable to suggest that the whole of the river Gewaesc, including the source, should be part of Rotaland.

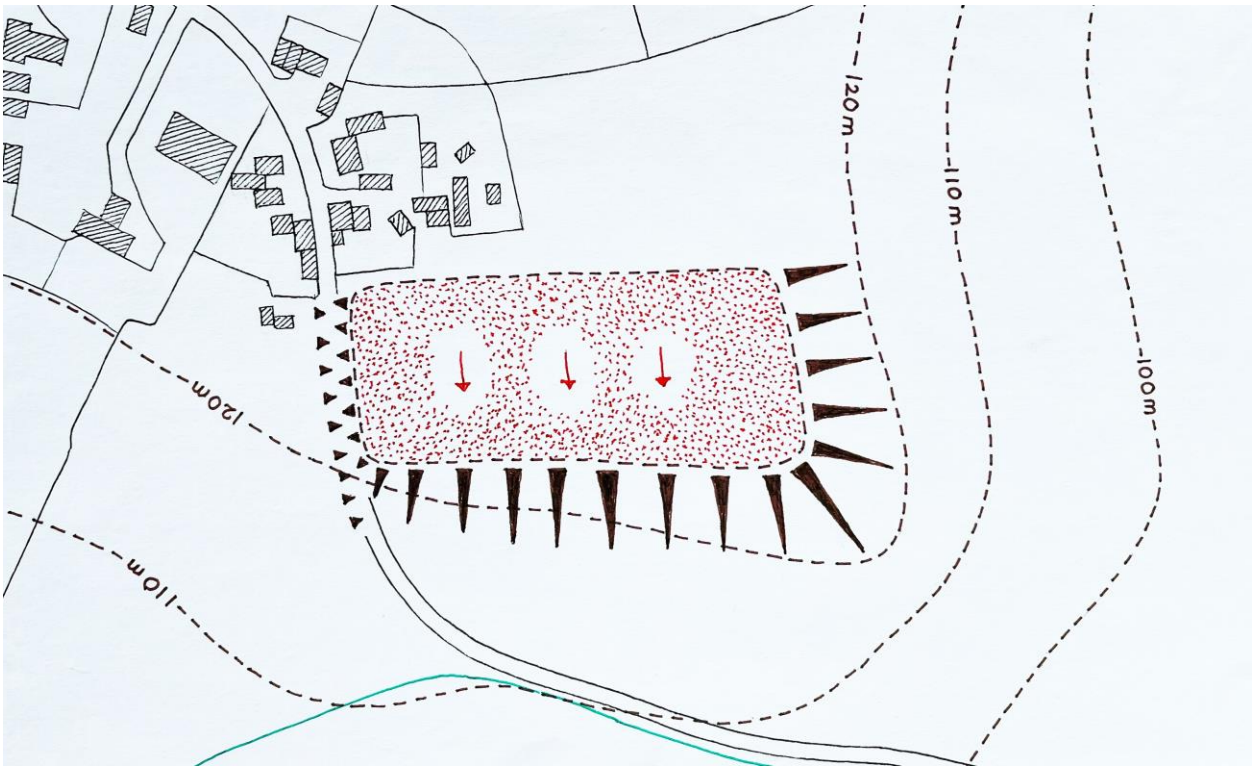
Fliterris (Flythris- the area of brushwood-covered land of disputed ownership) was the land next to the River Gwash, running from present day Knossington in Leicestershire, into Rutland. Disputes connected to the boundary between Leicestershire and Rotaland focused on this area in the later part of the Anglo-Saxon era, but Cnossatun was still held as part of the Royal Dower in Rotaland by Queen Edith until 1075 AD.

A representation of C6th King Rota

Rota found that his kingdom was rich in resources: springs emanating from the hills to the west and north with streams of clean freshwater flowing eastwards. There were large areas of thick woodland which were home to numerous wild animals. Settlers were found in hillfort estates and farm settlements located at regular intervals along streams and rivers with a mix of different types of people absorbed into the Angles way of life.

Boggy clay land was dominant in the west of the kingdom and drier limestone to the east with ironstone layers that were being smelted to make weapons and tools. Near the centre of Rotaland was a prominent hill (Hambleton Peninsula today), surrounded by dense forests and with a hillfort manor giving good look-out views across the surrounding lands.

It seems that Rota used this central estate as his initial base as it was strategically positioned. The fortified settlement was located on a hill that was like an island, surrounded by the Catmos River to the north and the Gwash to the south. The thick Upper Lias clay created a natural defense of boggy land with dense woodland that was difficult to penetrate and home to wild animals such as lynx and wolves. Having surveyed his new land and secured authority over his people, Rota set about creating a new place of residence fit for an Angle King – Rotaburh, the fortress of King Rota.



Map of Rotaburh.

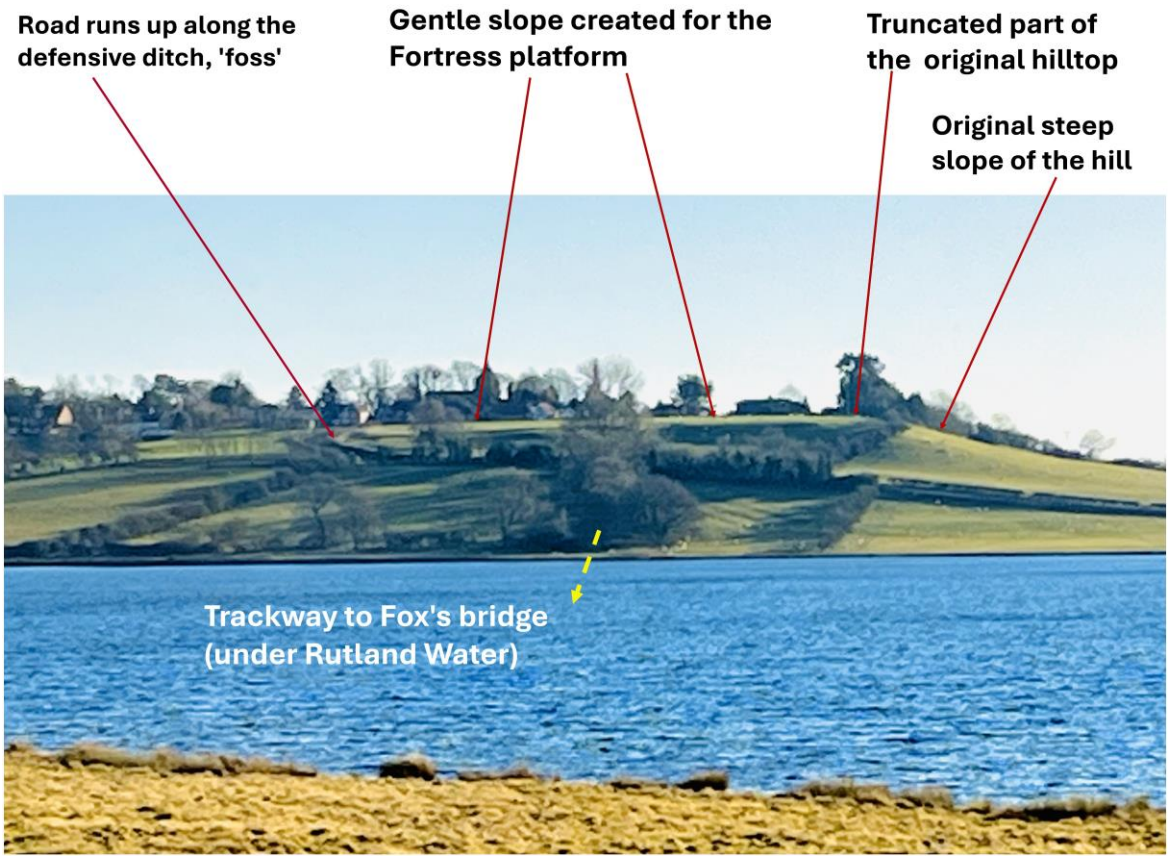
Location of the fortress platform at the edge of Hambleton village today.

(Present day buildings in Hambleton are shown with hatched shading, contours are in metres and shaded triangles mark the steep defensive slopes on three sides of the fortress platform).

The Angle groups of the C5th and C6th often used their leader's name to identify the estate or homestead. Examples include Luffenham, 'the settlement associated with Luffa', and Oakham, 'the estate associated with Occa'. Over time, mainly from the C8th onwards, many of these settlement names were replaced by endings of 'ton', e.g. the village of Ayston today was originally called Thornham, 'the estate associated with Thor'.

This change of settlement name also happened with Hambleton. As with many places, we do not know the original name of the pioneer Angles settlement on the hill, but the later name of Hambleton gives us information about where Rota located his fortress.

Hambleton is split into two words: Hamol = Old English for maimed and Dun = hill. 'The settlement on the maimed hill in open country'. When we view Hambleton hill today, we can see that it has been truncated, 'maimed' on the west side.



Photograph showing the cut-off hill of Rotaburh at Hambleton village today.

Top - Illustration of King Rota's completed C6th fortress

Bottom - View of Rotaburh Hill today from the Rutland Water cycle path

The concept of truncating a hill to create a base for a fortress, required huge vision, worthy of a powerful Angle King, and a workforce to carry out the hard manual labour of quarrying hundreds of tons of Northampton sandstone with basic iron tools to do the job. The work was most likely carried out by slaves, requisitioned from the existing Angle estates by the King for the purpose of creating a flat surface to the hill, gently sloping downwards to the north. As with the other Iron Age hill forts, the main purpose of the slope was strategic, to enable the greatest possible view of the surrounding countryside in order to give early warning of danger. The impressive size of the fortress, prominently positioned on the hilltop in 'open country', also allowed the King's power to be displayed visibly for miles around.

Rota's fortress is mentioned in the name Burley. In Old English, Burley is translated as: Burh = fortified place and Leah = woodland clearing. 'Clearing in the wood near the fortified place'. By combining the two words of Burh and Leah, the Angles gave a clear indication that the fortress is linked to the woodland - the timber from the trees was used to build the fortress, and this left a clearing in the wood.

Burleah was on the opposite side of the Catmos river to Rotaburh and it seems likely that the timber was carried the short distance from the woodland to the construction site by cart across Fox bridge. It is estimated that eighteen oak trees were needed to build an Angles house so it is reasonable to suggest that a small forest would be needed to create a Royal fortress.

Aerial view to show the extent of Rota's fortress. Courtesy: www.earth.google.com

On the west side of the fortress hill, the slope is steep and chosen as a natural defense against any enemy attack. The geology of the location is that of younger Northampton sand ironstone lying above the older Upper Lias clay. Where the sandstone outcrops against the underlying clay, water seeps out, onto the ground making the clay boggy and ideal as an added defensive measure. (This geological boundary can be seen today as holes, dug by rabbits, into the dry sandstone that lies above the clay).

Waterholes for a variety of uses were created at intervals down the slopes by digging deep depressions into the Upper Liassic clay which would then retain water due to its impermeability.

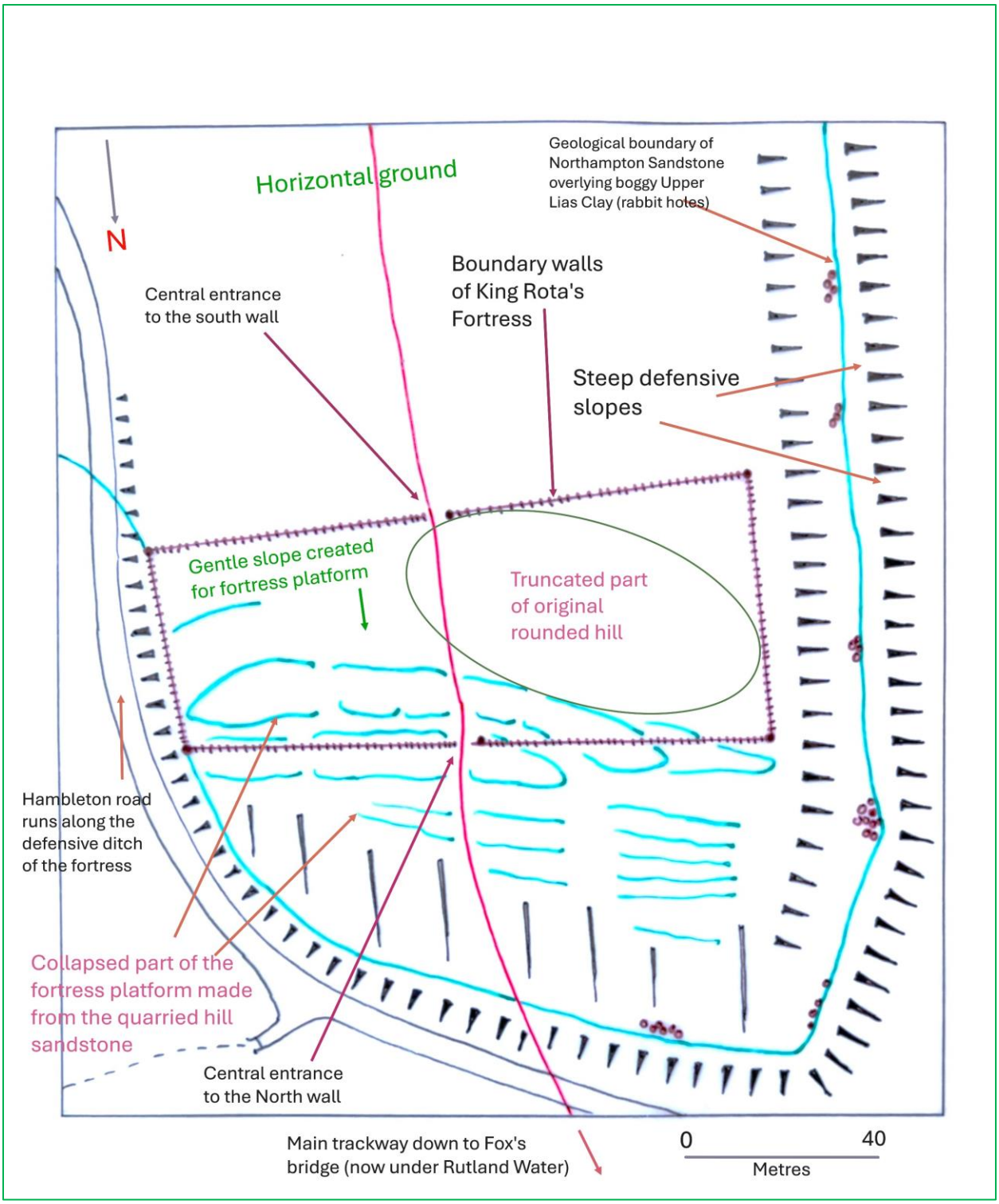
View of Rotaburh from the SW, flanked by ridge and furrow fields and a water hole.

The hundreds of tonnes of Northampton sandstone that were removed from Hambleton hilltop, were then deposited further along the hill on the east side to infill the gaps and to extend the fortress platform so that a gently sloping surface, about the size of a modern-day football pitch, was created. It is probable that any ironstone, quarried along with the sandstone, was taken off-site and used for iron working. (Small pieces of this ironstone can be found today along the main trackway leading down from the fortress platform to the Catmos River.

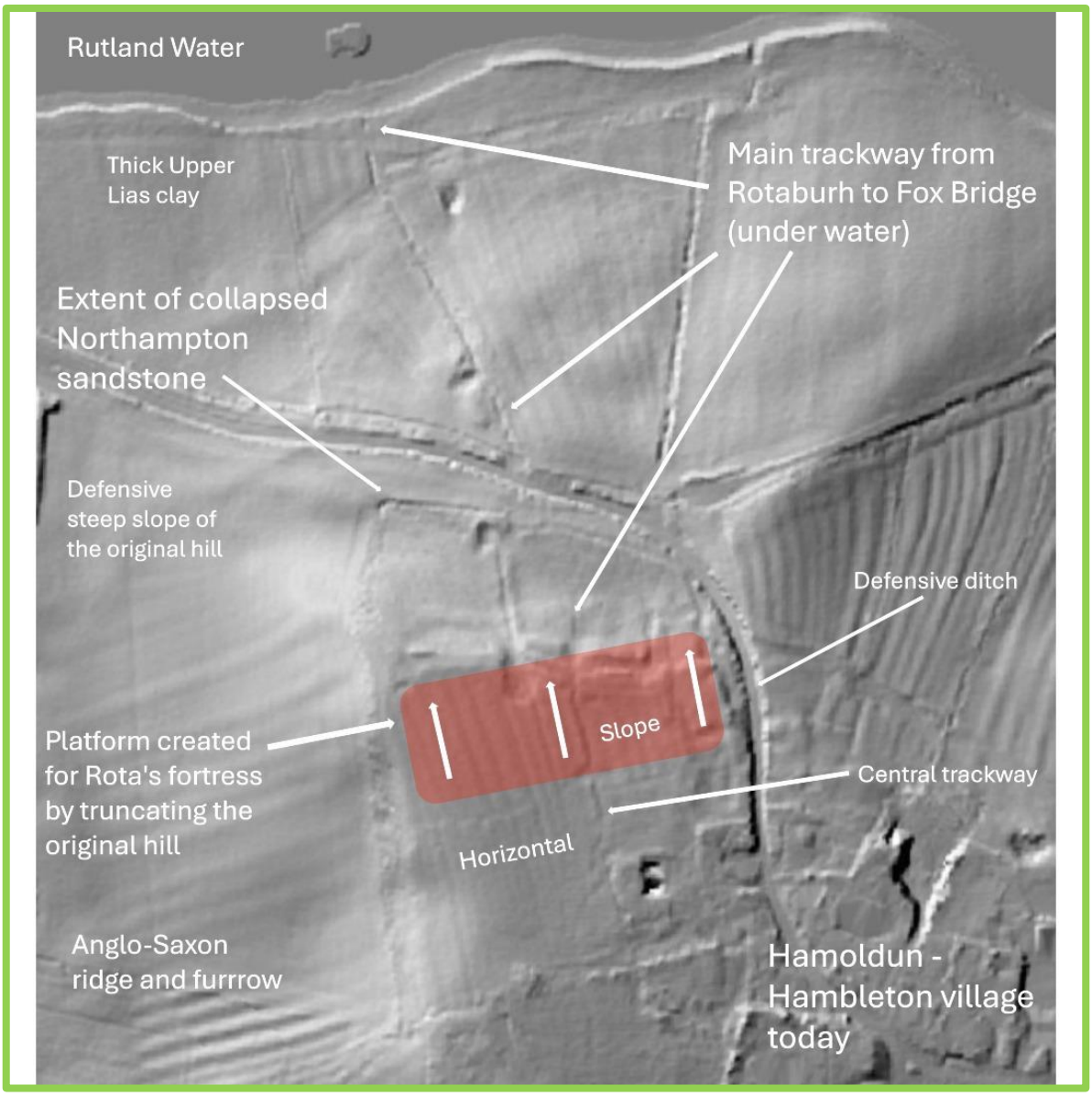
Along the hilltop, a main trackway led south from the fortress to join the main route that led to Egleton, ‘the estate associated with Ecgwulf’. The trackway also ran through the fortress, probably with strong gated entrances on the north and south sides, dividing the fortress roughly into two equal halves. From the northerly gate, the main trackway led down the slope to the Fox bridge that crossed the Catmos, ‘boggy land infested with wild cats,’river. Today this bridge is submerged under Rutland Water.

To compliment the steep natural defense on the west side of the Fortress, a deep ditch was dug on the east side of the hill into the boggy Upper Lias clay. Today, where the Oakham-Hambleton Road takes a sharp right-hand turn and climbs up the final steep slope towards Hambleton, it is following the course of the original ditch (foss) of King Rota's Fortress.

The size of the fortress adds weight to the dynastic status of Rota as a powerful Angles King, descended from Woden, who wielded considerable power and influence. For 1500 years, his name has been attached to the large tract of land with Rotaburh at its centre. No other unit of land of such size in England has been named after one man, the land of King Rota, Rotaland:Rutland.



Interpretation of the aerial view of King Rota's Fortress



Interpretation of LiDAR (Light detecting and ranging) image of Rotaburh

Courtesy: www.lidarfinder.com

Illustration of King Rota

Paul Wiggin, Exploration Geologist

© 2026 Rotaland Exploration Research and Discovery