

The long journey of a surname to his part of the world

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■ The French word *nape* meaning tablecloth links with the Latin word *mappa* meaning map - maps were once drawn on cloth like the one pictured.

Picture: STEVE ADAMS

Charles Napier has written to the EDP asking about the origin of his surname, which he believes has an interesting and ancient history. Well, he's certainly right about that!

In medieval England, if you had the name Napier that was because you were a naper. This term was derived from "nape" – a word we had borrowed from Old French – which meant tablecloth. "Nape" has now been lost in English, but we do still have the related form napkin: nape plus the originally Flemish diminutive -kin.

The corresponding French diminutive form was *naperon* – a "little cloth". This was a borrowed into English as *napron*; and eventually "a napron" became 'an apron'.

So a naperer was a person whose job it was to take care of the table linen: the corresponding Old French word was *napier*.

The question then is: where did the Old French word *nape* come from? Well, everyone agrees that it goes back to Latin *mappa*, meaning cloth or napkin. I say "everyone agrees" because it is actually rather odd for a Latin m-sound to turn into a French n, but that is clearly what

happened. *Mappa* also meant map in Latin, because maps were originally drawn on cloth, so it was the source of our word *map*, too.

But where did Latin *mappa* come from? The Roman rhetorician Quintilian wrote that it was a word which the Romans borrowed from Punic. We have to accept what he says because we don't have any other evidence for it. But Punic was the colonial dialect of Phoenician which was spoken in ancient Carthage, in North Africa. And Phoenician was a Semitic language which was originally spoken in the area where modern Lebanon now is.

We don't know a great deal about Punic, but Professor Geoffrey Khan, Regius

Professor of Hebrew at Cambridge, tells me that Hebrew and Phoenician were very closely related languages, and that there actually was an old Hebrew word *mappa* which meant "cloth, napkin". So Quintilian was probably right.

We can suppose, then, that the word *mappa* left its original home in the Middle East some time in the 800s BC, when some Phoenicians departed to found Carthage. It then embarked on a very long journey – in different guises such as "map, nape, apron, napkin, naperer" – via North Africa to Europe where, three thousand years later, in 21st century Norfolk, it still survives in the form of Mr Napier's surname.