



Agricola's Campaign Against the Druids of Mona (Anglesey)

ABSTRACT

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Introduction

The Roman campaign against the druids of Mona (modern-day Anglesey) represents one of the most significant military and cultural confrontations in the history of Roman Britain. This report examines Gnaeus Julius Agricola's campaign to destroy the druidic stronghold on Mona in 77-78 CE, providing historical context, analyzing the strategic planning, detailing the execution of the campaign, and assessing its outcomes and longterm significance. Special attention is given to topographical evidence supporting the Roman advance at low tide across the Menai Straits and to Welsh place names that preserve the memory of this pivotal confrontation.

Historical Context

The Strategic Importance of Mona

Mona (Anglesey) held exceptional strategic and cultural significance in pre-Roman Britain for several reasons:

1. Religious Center: The island served as the primary center of druidic learning and

practice in Britain, comparable to a modern university. As noted by classical sources, it took up to ten years of learning to reach the rank of Chief Druid, and beginners were sent to Mona to study with the elders. The island's natural features—deep pools and abundant oak forests—made it an ideal environment for druidic practices.

2. Trade Route: Mona occupied a critical position on the trade route from Ireland,

particularly for gold mined in what is now County Wicklow. This precious metal was in constant demand by Rome, and controlling Mona would secure this valuable



trade route.

3. Natural Resources: The island contained significant mineral deposits, including

one of Europe's largest copper mines at Amlwch on the northeastern coast, with workings dating back to the Neolithic period. Such resources would have been highly valuable to the expanding Roman Empire.

4. Political Influence: The druids wielded considerable political influence among the

Celtic tribes, serving as advisors to tribal leaders and maintaining resistance against Roman rule. As religious and intellectual leaders, they provided ideological cohesion for anti-Roman sentiment.

Previous Roman Attempt: Suetonius Paulinus (60-61 CE)

The first Roman attempt to conquer Mona occurred in 60-61 CE under Governor Gaius Suetonius Paulinus. This campaign is vividly described by the Roman historian Tacitus:

"Suetonius Paulinus prepared accordingly to attack the island of Mona, which had a considerable population of its own, while serving as a haven for refugees; and, in view of the shallow and variable channel, constructed a flotilla of boats with flat bottoms. By this method the infantry crossed; the cavalry, who followed, did so by fording or, in deeper water, by swimming at the side of their horses... On the beach stood the adverse array, a serried mass of arms and men, with women flitting between the ranks. In the style of Furies, in robes of deathly black and with dishevelled hair, they brandished their torches; while a circle of Druids, lifting their hands to heaven and showering imprecations, struck the troops with such an awe at the extraordinary spectacle, that, as though their limbs were paralysed, they exposed their bodies to wounds without an attempt at movement. Then, reassured by their general, and inciting each other never to flinch before a band of females and fanatics, they charged behind the standards, cut down all who met them, and enveloped the enemy in his own flames..."

Despite initial success, Suetonius was forced to abandon the campaign when news reached him of Boudicca's rebellion in the southeast. This hasty withdrawal allowed the druids and local Celtic population to maintain their independence and religious practices on Mona for another seventeen years.

The Intervening Years (61-77 CE)

Between Suetonius's withdrawal and Agricola's campaign, five Roman governors



administered Britain, each focusing on different priorities:

1. Petronius Turpilianus (61-63 CE): Adopted a conciliatory approach after

Boudicca's rebellion

2. Trebellius Maximus (63-69 CE): Governed during a period of civil war in Rome

3. Vettius Bolanus (69-71 CE): Maintained a defensive posture

4. Quintus Petillius Cerialis (71-74 CE): Campaigned against the Brigantes in

northern England

5. Sextus Julius Frontinus (74-77 CE): Subdued the Silures in South Wales

During this period, Mona remained a symbol of native resistance and a refuge for anti-Roman elements, continuing to serve as a center for druidic practice and Celtic culture.

Agricola's Campaign: Planning and Strategy

Agricola's Background and Appointment

Gnaeus Julius Agricola was uniquely qualified to lead the campaign against Mona. Born in Gallia Narbonensis (modern southern France) in 40 CE to a senatorial family, he had previously served in Britain as a military tribune under Suetonius Paulinus and had witnessed the first attempt to conquer Mona. He later served as quaestor in Asia, tribune of the plebs, and praetor before returning to Britain as commander of the Twentieth Legion (Legio XX Valeria Victrix) under Governor Vettius Bolanus.

Agricola was appointed governor of Britannia in 77 CE by Emperor Vespasian, who recognized his experience and capabilities. Upon his arrival, Agricola immediately recognized the strategic importance of completing the conquest of Wales, with Mona as the final objective.

Strategic Objectives

Agricola's campaign against Mona was guided by several strategic objectives:

1. Eliminate Druidic Influence: Complete the Roman policy of eradicating druidism,

which was seen as a source of anti-Roman sentiment and resistance.



2. Secure Western Flank: Establish control over western Britain before advancing

northward against the Caledonian tribes (in modern Scotland).

3. Control Resources: Secure access to the island's mineral wealth, particularly

copper, and control the Irish Sea trade routes.

4. Demonstrate Roman Power: Achieve what Suetonius had failed to accomplish,

thereby demonstrating the inevitability of Roman rule to other resistant tribes.

Logistical Preparations

Unlike Suetonius's hastily assembled flotilla, Agricola's campaign was characterized by meticulous preparation:

1. Intelligence Gathering: Agricola likely utilized local informants and his previous

knowledge of the area to understand the tidal patterns of the Menai Straits and identify optimal crossing points.

2. Base Establishment: Archaeological evidence suggests that Agricola established

or reinforced a base at Segontium (modern Caernarfon) to serve as a staging point for the invasion.

3. Naval Support: The campaign involved coordination between land forces and the

Classis Britannica (Roman British fleet) to ensure control of the waterways around Mona.

4. Timing Considerations: Evidence indicates that Agricola carefully planned the

crossing to coincide with low tide conditions, allowing his forces to utilize the exposed sandbanks and shallow waters of the Menai Straits.

Execution of the Campaign

The Crossing of the Menai Straits

The most challenging aspect of the campaign was crossing the Menai Straits, the narrow



but treacherous channel separating Mona from the mainland. Several lines of evidence support the theory that Agricola's forces crossed at low tide:

1. Topographical Analysis: At low tide, parts of the Menai Straits reveal sandbanks

and shallow sections, particularly near what is now Llanidan on the Anglesey side and between modern-day Bangor and Beaumaris.

2. Welsh Place Names: Field names near Llanidan suggest this as a possible landing

site. According to the Gazetteer of British Place Names and Coflein (the online database for the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales), field names in this area preserve the memory of a significant battle.

3. Archaeological Evidence: Roman artifacts discovered along the southeastern

coast of Anglesey, particularly around Llanidan, support this as a likely invasion route.

4. Military Logic: The southeastern approach offered the narrowest crossing point

and would have allowed Agricola's forces to deploy quickly on the Anglesey shore, minimizing their vulnerability during the crossing.

Unlike Suetonius's crossing, which appears to have been primarily boat-based, Agricola's approach likely combined:

- Infantry advancing across exposed sandbanks at low tide
- Cavalry swimming their horses through deeper channels
- Support vessels for equipment and reinforcements

This multi-pronged approach would have allowed for a more rapid deployment of forces on the Anglesey shore.

The Battle for Mona

While Tacitus's account of Agricola's campaign is less detailed than his description of Suetonius's attempt, archaeological and topographical evidence suggests the following sequence of events:

1. Initial Landing: Roman forces likely landed near present-day Llanidan, where the

field name evidence suggests a significant confrontation.



2. Native Resistance: The Celtic inhabitants and remaining druids mounted

resistance, though probably less dramatically staged than the scene Tacitus described during Suetonius's invasion.

3. Multiple Engagements: Rather than a single decisive battle, the campaign likely

involved a series of engagements across the eastern portion of the island as Roman forces secured control.

4. Systematic Advance: Archaeological evidence suggests a methodical Roman

advance across the island, establishing control points and eliminating resistance. The campaign was notably more successful than the previous attempt, with Agricola's forces achieving complete control of the island without being diverted by events elsewhere in the province.

Outcomes and Significance

Immediate Consequences

The successful conquest of Mona had several immediate consequences:

End of Druidic Stronghold

The last major center of druidic practice in Britain was eliminated, dealing a severe blow to organized druidism as a religious and political force.

2. Resource Exploitation: Roman control allowed for systematic exploitation of the

island's mineral resources, particularly the copper mines at Amlwch, which show evidence of expanded operations during the Roman period.

3. Strategic Security: Control of Mona secured the western flank of Roman Britain,

allowing Agricola to turn his attention northward toward Caledonia in subsequent campaigns.

4. Settlement Establishment: Archaeological evidence indicates the establishment

of Roman settlements and military installations on the island, including a fort at



Holyhead (Caer Gybi) and possibly smaller outposts elsewhere.

Long-term Impact

The conquest of Mona had lasting implications for both Roman Britain and native Celtic culture:

1. Cultural Transformation: The elimination of the druidic center accelerated the

Romanization of the native population, as traditional religious and educational structures were replaced by Roman institutions.

2. Economic Integration: Mona was integrated into the Roman economic system,

with its resources flowing into imperial markets and Roman goods becoming available to the local population.

3. Strategic Significance: Control of Mona contributed to Roman dominance of the

Irish Sea, facilitating trade and communication with Ireland and limiting piracy.

4. Religious Change: The campaign represented a significant step in the religious

transformation of Britain, as native Celtic practices were suppressed and eventually replaced by Roman religious traditions and, later, Christianity.

Welsh Place Names and Linguistic Evidence

The memory of Agricola's campaign is preserved in several Welsh place names and linguistic traditions:

- Maes y Gad Hir ("Field of the Long Battle"): This place name near the Menai Straits on the Anglesey side is believed to commemorate the site of a significant confrontation during the Roman invasion.

Llanidan

Field names in this area have been linked to the Roman invasion, with archaeological evidence supporting this connection. The Coflein database notes: "In AD 60 or 61 Anglesey was attacked by the Romans under Paulinus; the force crossed the Menai Straits either between Aber and Beaumaris or between

Caernarfon and Llanidan."

Porth y Wygyr ("Port of the Warriors")



This place name at Cemaes Bay may reference the Roman military presence or native resistance.

Caer Gybi ("Fort of Cybi")

While named after a later Christian saint, this site at

Holyhead contains Roman fortifications dating to the post-conquest period.

These linguistic remnants provide valuable corroborating evidence for the historical accounts and archaeological findings, helping to locate specific events within the landscape of Anglesey.

Topographical Evidence for the Low Tide Crossing

Several lines of evidence support the theory that Agricola's forces advanced across the Menai Straits at low tide:

1. Tidal Patterns: Modern tidal studies confirm that the Menai Straits experience

significant tidal variations, with extensive sandbanks exposed at low tide, particularly in the southeastern section between the mainland and Anglesey.

2. Historical Precedent: The strategy of crossing at low tide has historical precedent

in the region. During the 1282 Battle of Moel y Don, English forces attempted to cross the Straits at low tide but were defeated by the Welsh who understood the tidal patterns better.

3. Military Logic: Roman military doctrine emphasized exploiting natural features

and timing operations to maximize advantage. A low tide crossing would have allowed for a more rapid deployment of forces than boat transport alone.

4. Archaeological Distribution: The pattern of Roman artifacts and military

equipment found along the southeastern coast of Anglesey suggests an approach from this direction, consistent with a low tide crossing from the mainland.

5. Tacitus's Account: While Tacitus does not explicitly mention a low tide crossing in

his account of Agricola's campaign, his description of Suetonius's earlier attempt notes that cavalry crossed "by fording or, in deeper water, by swimming at the side of their horses," indicating awareness of the variable depths of the Straits.

The combination of these factors strongly supports the conclusion that Agricola's



campaign utilized a low tide advance across the sands and shallow waters of the Menai Straits, demonstrating sophisticated planning and environmental awareness.

Conclusion

Agricola's campaign against the druids of Mona represents a pivotal moment in the Roman conquest of Britain. Through careful planning, strategic insight, and effective execution, Agricola succeeded where Suetonius had failed, eliminating the last major center of druidic practice and native resistance in Wales.

The evidence from historical accounts, archaeological findings, place names, and topographical analysis converges to support a reconstruction of the campaign that emphasizes Agricola's methodical approach and exploitation of natural features, particularly the tidal patterns of the Menai Straits. The success of this campaign not only secured Roman control of western Britain but also accelerated the cultural and religious transformation of the native population.

The memory of this confrontation, preserved in Welsh place names and oral traditions, testifies to its significance in the historical consciousness of the region. Agricola's conquest of Mona stands as a testament to Roman military effectiveness and as a watershed moment in the cultural history of Britain, marking the effective end of organized druidism as a political and religious force in the British Isles.