



Alauna (Maryport) Roman Fort: Archaeological and Military-Historical Report

ABSTRACT

The fort occupies a sandstone ridge 45–56 m above sea level, with commanding views over the coastal plain, the Solway Firth and south-west Scotland. The position allows observation of sea routes and land movement along the coast.

1. Location, Landscape and Strategic Setting

Roman name: Alauna (also rendered Alavna).

Modern location: Maryport, Cumbria, on the Cumbrian coast overlooking the Solway Firth and the mouth of the River Ellen.

Topography: The fort occupies a sandstone ridge 45–56 m above sea level, with commanding views over the coastal plain, the Solway Firth and south-west Scotland. The position allows observation of sea routes and land movement along the coast.

Frontier context: Alauna formed part of the Cumbrian coastal frontier – the western extension of the Hadrian's Wall system. Together with mile fortlets and towers along the shore, it helped to secure the western flank of the Wall and to control movement by land and sea.

Communications: A Roman road linked Alauna south-eastwards to Derwentio (Papcastle) and on to Luguvalium (Carlisle), tying the fort into the broader road network of north-western Britannia. Other routes, both land and maritime, radiated along the coast towards other forts and anchorages.

2. Chronology and Development

2.1 Foundation and Hadrianic Phase (c. AD 120–140)

Archaeological and epigraphic evidence indicates that Alauna was founded during the reign of Hadrian, probably in the 120s AD, broadly contemporary with the construction of Hadrian's Wall. Building inscriptions record the involvement of detachments of Legio II Augusta and Legio XX Valeria Victrix in constructing the fort. This reflects the common pattern in which legionary specialists built permanent bases later occupied by auxiliary units.

The earliest fort appears to have been slightly larger than the later Hadrianic fort whose ramparts still define the site. This suggests at least one early construction or re-planning phase before the fort settled into its more familiar layout.

2.2 Second-Century Rebuilding and the Antonine Period

In the mid-second century, fresh building inscriptions under Antoninus Pius show auxiliary cohorts undertaking substantial works. This phase coincides with the advance to the Antonine Wall in Scotland (c. AD 142–160) and the subsequent retraction back to Hadrian's Wall. Throughout these frontier shifts



Alauna remained garrisoned, its role adjusting as the formal frontier line moved north and then south again.

2.3 Third-Century Activity and the Crisis of Empire

Inscriptions from the third century mention Legio XX Gordiana, indicating continuing imperial investment at Maryport even during the politically unstable Crisis of the Third Century. Alauna's position guarding coastal communications and anchoring the western flank of the Wall made it strategically valuable as rival emperors vied for control of Britain and the Rhine frontier.

2.4 Fourth-Century Use and Late Roman Reorganisation

Late Roman pottery and other finds from features associated with the famous altar pits demonstrate activity into the later fourth century. While the details of the final phases are imperfectly understood, Alauna appears to have remained occupied as part of a reorganised late Roman frontier, supplying and coordinating troops along the coast and inland. Its occupation likely ended only with the gradual withdrawal of imperial authority from Britain in the early fifth century.

3. Fort Layout and Surrounding Settlement

Overall plan: The fort is approximately square in plan, with an internal area around 140 m by 140 m. A substantial turf and stone rampart were fronted by multiple defensive ditches, particularly prominent on the north side. Gates pierced the walls on all four sides, aligned with the internal street grid and the principal roads leading to and from the fort.

Internal buildings: Although much of the internal layout is known only from geophysical survey and limited excavation, Alauna would have contained the standard suite of Roman fort buildings: the principia (headquarters building), praetorium (commandant's house), barrack blocks, horrea (granaries), workshops and stables for the mounted component of the garrison. The scale of the fort suggests room not only for a cohort but also for stores and administrative facilities supporting the wider coastal system.

Vicus (civilian settlement): A substantial civilian settlement developed outside the north and north-east sides of the fort. A Roman road runs from the north gate, flanked by stone buildings interpreted as houses, workshops and possibly inns. Geophysical survey has revealed rectilinear plots, trackways and small enclosures extending over several hundred metres, indicating a sizeable community of traders, craftsmen, families and labourers linked to the military presence.

Harbour and coastal installations: The fort's ridge-top position is close to the shore of the Solway Firth, and there is evidence for a causeway or route leading down towards a probable anchorage or small harbour. From here supplies and personnel could be moved by sea along the coast, reinforcing Alauna's role as a logistical hub as well as a defensive strongpoint.

4. Garrison Units: Who Was Stationed at Alauna?

Alauna's inscriptions and altars provide a rich record of the auxiliary units and officers who served there over time. Several cohorts and a cavalry unit are securely attested.

4.1 Cohors I Hispanorum Equitata

The First Cohort of Spaniards (Cohors I Hispanorum equitata) is the best-attested early unit at Maryport. It was a part-mounted cohort of around 500 men, combining roughly 380 infantry with 120 cavalry. The cohort is named on numerous altars, particularly the Jupiter altars, and appears to have been the principal garrison for much of the second century.



Commanders of this unit named on the inscriptions include men such as Marcus Maenius Agrippa, who later commanded the British fleet (Classis Britannica), and Lucius Antistius Lupus Verianus, a prefect hailing from Sicca in North Africa. Their careers show how service at Alauna formed part of an empire-wide officer network, drawing individuals from Italy, Africa and Gaul to a distant Cumbrian coastal town.

4.2 Cohors I Delmatarum

In the Antonine period the First Cohort of Dalmatians (Cohors I Delmatarum) is also attested. This was an infantry cohort of around 500 men originally recruited from the Delmatae of the Dalmatian coast (modern Croatia). Its presence at Maryport is recorded on altars dedicated by its commanders to Jupiter and other deities.

4.3 Cohors I Baetasiorum Civium Romanorum

Another unit known from the inscriptions is Cohors I Baetasiorum Civium Romanorum, an infantry cohort recruited from the Baetasii of the lower Rhine, later granted Roman citizenship (CR). Dedications by its officers, including Ulpius Titianus and Titus Attius Tutor, underline Alauna's continuing role as a posting for continental troops and ambitious officers.

4.4 Ala II Asturum

By the early third century the garrison appears to have included Ala II Asturum, a cavalry ala originally raised in Spain. A mounted unit of this kind was well suited to patrolling the long coastal frontier, relaying messages and providing rapid response to incursions by land or sea.

4.5 Changing Garrison, Constant Role

Although the specific units changed over time, Alauna consistently hosted specialist auxiliary cohorts, often with a mounted component. These troops maintained the garrison, patrolled the coast, escorted convoys and ships, and formed part of the broader military presence in the north-west of Britannia.

5. Function and Role in the Frontier System

5.1 Western Sea Defences and Control of Movement

Alauna's primary function was to anchor the western flank of the Hadrian's Wall frontier as part of the Cumbrian coastal defences. From the fort and associated towers and mile fortlets, soldiers could observe shipping on the Solway Firth, watch for enemy raiders or smugglers attempting to bypass the Wall, and monitor movement across the coastal plain. Patrols moved along the shore and inland roads, linking Maryport to other forts and watchpoints.

5.2 Supply Base and Administrative Centre

The scale of the fort and the size of its vicus suggest that Alauna functioned as more than a routine outpost. It likely served as a supply depot and administrative centre for the Western Sea Defences, collecting and distributing provisions, equipment and pay. Its probable harbour and well-developed hinterland of farms and enclosures reinforce this interpretation. Maryport appears to have played a key role in feeding and equipping forces along the Cumbrian coast and contributing to the wider logistics of the northern army.

5.3 Integration with Local Communities

The fort did not exist in isolation. Nearby Romano-British farmsteads and settlements show evidence of close economic ties with the garrison. Agricultural producers supplied grain, livestock and other goods,



and in return received Roman pottery, tools and access to new markets. Alauna thus sat at the centre of a military–civilian landscape where Roman and native interests intersected, sometimes uneasily but often in mutually beneficial ways.

6. Religious Life and the Maryport Altars

6.1 The Jupiter Altar Series

Alauna is world-famous for its exceptional series of altars, especially those dedicated to Jupiter Optimus Maximus. Around twenty-two or more Jupiter altars from Maryport are known, forming the largest single group of Roman military altar stones from any site in Britain. Most were dedicated by the commanding officers of the garrison on behalf of their units.

These altars are remarkably informative. They record the names and origins of officers, the units they commanded, and the emperors under whom they served. They also highlight the rhythm of the military religious calendar: many scholars interpret the altars as annual dedications, perhaps associated with the renewal of the soldiers' oath of loyalty at the start of the year or with key imperial anniversaries.

6.2 Why So Many Altars – and Why So Well Preserved?

Several factors explain both the number and condition of the Maryport altars:

- Repeated dedications: Over decades, successive commanding officers set up new altars to Jupiter and other deities, creating a cumulative series of monuments that tracked the garrison's history.
- Late Roman reuse and burial: Excavations in the early 21st century revealed that many altars had been reused as packing and ballast within large late Roman timber structures north-east of the fort. Once those structures went out of use and their post-pits were backfilled, the altars lay buried and protected from weathering and stone-robbing.
- Antiquarian collection and on-site curation: From the late 16th century onward, the Senhouse family, landowners of the site, collected altars and inscribed stones found in their fields. Rather than being broken up for building stone, the altars were preserved on the estate, later forming the core of the Senhouse Roman Museum collection.

Together, these processes mean that Maryport preserves a coherent and unusually complete series of military dedications, providing a near-continuous epigraphic record of the fort's religious and command history.

6.3 Diversity of Cults

Although Jupiter predominates, the Maryport inscriptions also invoke other deities and divine powers: the genius of the place, Fortuna (good fortune), personifications such as Roma, and gods associated with healing or warfare. Local deities like Belatucadrus appear alongside more widely worshipped Roman gods. This mixture reflects the cultural diversity of the garrison and the overlapping religious worlds of soldiers, officers and local civilians.

7. Civilian Life and the Local Economy

The vicus and its surrounding fields show that Alauna was at the heart of a complex civilian as well as military community. Traders and craftsmen provided goods and services to the garrison: metalworkers, leatherworkers, builders, innkeepers and merchants would all have operated from premises along the main vicus street. Families of soldiers, unofficial partners, children and local Britons lived in and around the settlement, blurring the line between military and civilian space.



Field systems and enclosures around the fort suggest a mix of small-scale agriculture and livestock keeping close to the settlement, with larger farms in the wider hinterland. Evidence from nearby farmsteads indicates that surplus produce flowed into the fort, while Roman goods—especially pottery and small metal items—circulated back into the countryside. Maryport thus formed a local economic node within wider regional and imperial supply networks, connected both by road and by sea.

8. Alauna and the Wider Story of Rome and the Northern Tribes

In the broader theme of 'Tribal Conflicts – Roman Responses', Alauna represents the maritime and logistical dimension of the northern frontier. The Cumbrian coastal system was designed to prevent northern and Irish groups from bypassing Hadrian's Wall by crossing the Solway Firth or landing further down the coast. From Alauna, mounted patrols and small naval craft could monitor this watery frontier, intercept raiders and smugglers, and support operations inland.

At the same time, the auxiliary cohorts stationed at Maryport were themselves drawn from peoples who had once been enemies of Rome—Spaniards, Dalmatians, Baetasii, Asturians—now incorporated into the imperial system and deployed to guard another province's frontier. Their yearly dedications to Jupiter and the emperor, recorded on the altars, symbolise both the integration of these communities into the Roman military and the ongoing need to reaffirm loyalty at the edges of empire.

Alauna therefore serves as a case study in how Rome combined military force, religious symbolism, economic integration and logistical planning to manage a vulnerable flank of its northern frontier.

9. Present Archaeological Status and the Senhouse Roman Museum

The fort platform at Maryport survives today as an area of pasture with visible rampart and ditch lines. Geophysical survey and limited excavation have demonstrated that substantial buried remains of buildings and streets survive within the fort and vicus. The site is protected as a Scheduled Monument.

Adjacent to the fort stands the Senhouse Roman Museum, housed in a former Victorian drill hall. The museum contains the internationally important collection of altars, inscriptions and sculptures from Alauna, many of which were recovered by the Senhouse family from the 16th century onwards. The collection includes the famous Jupiter altar series, dedications by named officers and units, and carved reliefs illustrating aspects of military and religious life.

The combination of a largely intact fort, a well-mapped vicus and a rich epigraphic collection makes Maryport one of the key sites for understanding Roman military religion, coastal defence and frontier society in Britain.

10. Summary for Research Notes

Why Alauna was built: Alauna (Maryport) was established in the early second century AD as part of the Hadrianic reorganisation of the northern frontier. It anchored the western end of the Hadrian's Wall system, guarded the Solway Firth against seaborne threats, and served as a supply and administrative hub for the Cumbrian coastal defences.

Who was there: Over the course of two and a half centuries the fort housed a succession of auxiliary units, including Cohors I Hispanorum equitata, Cohors I Delmatarum, Cohors I Baetasiorum Civium Romanorum and Ala II Asturum. Their officers came from across the empire, while a sizeable civilian population of traders, craftsmen, families and local Britons lived in the surrounding vicus and farms.



What went on there: Daily life at Alauna combined routine garrison duties—patrols, guard duty, training and maintenance—with the specialised tasks of coastal defence, supply organisation and harbour management. The garrison monitored shipping on the Solway Firth, escorted convoys, and interacted closely with local producers. Religious life centred on repeated dedications to Jupiter and other deities, recorded on a unique series of altars which, thanks to late Roman reuse and later antiquarian collecting, survive in remarkable numbers and condition.

Significance: Alauna stands as a key example of Rome's maritime frontier strategy, illustrating how military power, religious practice and local economies were woven together to secure the western flank of the northern frontier.

11. Selected References (for Harvard-Style Citation)

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