



An Academic Report on the Recent Discovery of Cemlyn Bay Roman Fortlet

ABSTRACT

This report details the recent discovery and significance of a Roman fortlet located near Cemlyn Bay, Anglesey, North Wales. It synthesizes available geographical, historical, and archaeological data to provide a comprehensive overview of the site, its context within Roman Britain, and its implications for understanding the Roman presence in the region. The report includes precise location data, a historical overview of Roman Anglesey, and a summary of the archaeological findings that led to the identification of this significant military installation.

The discovery of a Roman fortlet near Cemlyn Bay on the island of Anglesey represents a pivotal moment in the archaeological understanding of Roman Wales. This previously unknown military installation challenges long-held assumptions about the extent and nature of Roman occupation in this remote western outpost of the Roman Empire. This report aims to consolidate the available information regarding this discovery, providing an academic analysis of its geographical context, historical background, and archaeological significance. It will draw upon recent findings and scholarly discussions to present a coherent picture of the Cemlyn Bay fortlet.

2. Geographical and Location Data

The Roman fortlet at Cemlyn Bay is strategically positioned on the northern coast of Anglesey, Wales. Its location, approximately 0.6 km south-west of Cemlyn Bay, on a low hill overlooking the coastline, suggests a deliberate choice for defensive and observational purposes [1]. The site is situated about 1 km from the north coast of Anglesey, specifically to the west of the Penyrorsedd farm in Cemlyn, at an elevation of 34 meters above Ordnance Datum (OD) [1].

Table 1: Approximate Coordinates for Cemlyn Bay and Surrounding Areas

These coordinates provide a general indication of the fortlet's vicinity, emphasizing its coastal vantage point, which would have been crucial for monitoring maritime activity and potentially guiding sea-craft to a safe landing place [5].

3. Historical Context of Roman Anglesey

The Roman presence in Anglesey, known historically as Mona, was marked by two significant invasions. The first, in AD 60 or 61, was led by Suetonius Paulinus, who sought to suppress the Druidic resistance centred on the island. This initial conquest was brutal, as described by Tacitus, involving the slaughter of Druids and the destruction of their sacred groves [6]. However, the Boudican revolt in southeastern Britain forced Paulinus to withdraw, leaving Anglesey largely unconquered.

The second, more decisive invasion occurred in AD 77 or 78 under Gnaeus Julius Agricola. This campaign firmly established Roman control over the island, likely leading to the construction of military installations to secure the newly acquired territory and control the local population [7]. Despite these



historical accounts, tangible archaeological evidence of Roman military sites on Anglesey remained scarce until recent discoveries.

The Cemlyn Bay fortlet, dating to the first century AD [1], aligns with the period following Agricola's conquest, suggesting its role in the early Roman consolidation of power in North Wales. Its strategic location overlooking a potential landing site indicates its importance in controlling maritime access and potentially serving as a logistical hub or watchtower for coastal defence [5]. This discovery provides crucial archaeological corroboration for the historical narratives of Roman military activity on Anglesey, highlighting a more integrated and militarized Roman presence than previously evidenced by archaeological finds alone.

4. Archaeological Findings and Significance

The discovery of the Cemlyn Bay fortlet was initiated by local aerial photographer Mary Aris, who identified a faint circular cropmark on a low hill overlooking the Anglesey coastline [1]. This observation prompted a geophysical survey by the Gwynedd Archaeological Trust, funded by CADW, which provided remarkably clear results [1]. It is important to note that while LIDAR data is available for the broader Anglesey region, the initial outlining and identification of the fortlet were achieved through general geophysical survey methods, specifically those detecting minute changes in the magnetic properties of soil, rather than explicitly stated LIDAR analysis [9].

Key Archaeological Findings:

- **Fortlet Outline:** The geophysical survey unequivocally revealed the outline of a Roman fortlet [1].
- **Internal Structures:** Faint traces of rectangular buildings, most likely barracks, were also identified within the fortlet's perimeter [1].
- **Defensive Features:** The fortlet is notably surrounded by a circular ditch, a feature described as unique in Wales for a Roman military site of this type [1].
- **Dating:** The fortlet is believed to date back to the first century AD [1].

Significance of the Discovery:

This fortlet holds immense significance as it represents the first early Roman military site discovered on Anglesey [1]. Its existence challenges previous archaeological understandings, which had largely failed to locate concrete evidence of Roman military presence on the island despite historical accounts of its conquest. The fortlet's strategic placement, overlooking Cemlyn Bay—a natural landing place on the north coast—suggests a dual function: as a navigational aid for Roman sea-craft and as a fortified position to control the landing area [5].

David Hopewell, Senior Archaeologist for the Gwynedd Archaeological Trust, emphasized that fortlets were typically established at crucial points along Roman roads or as lookout posts [1]. The Cemlyn Bay fortlet's location supports this interpretation, implying its role in a broader network of Roman control and communication. The discovery also opens up the possibility of finding more interconnected Roman sites in central Anglesey, as Roman forts and fortlets were often linked by roads a day's march apart [1].

It is important to differentiate this discovery from a more recent (August 2024) finding of a larger Roman fort in Pembrokeshire, Wales. While both contribute to the understanding of Roman Wales, the Pembrokeshire fort, estimated at 2-3 hectares and capable of housing 500 soldiers, points to a different scale of military engagement and potentially a more confrontational relationship with the local Celtic Demetae tribe [8]. The Cemlyn Bay fortlet, being a smaller installation, likely served a more localized and specific strategic purpose on Anglesey, reinforcing the Roman hold on the island after its conquest.



4.1 Potential for LIDAR Analysis

While the initial discovery and outlining of the Cemlyn Bay fortlet were achieved through traditional geophysical surveys, the availability of high-resolution LIDAR data for Anglesey presents significant opportunities for future archaeological investigation [9]. LIDAR (Light Detection and Ranging) technology can penetrate dense vegetation and identify subtle topographical features that may indicate buried archaeological remains, such as earthworks, ditches, and building foundations. For the Cemlyn Bay fortlet, future analysis of existing or newly acquired LIDAR data could provide a more detailed understanding of its precise morphology, its relationship to the surrounding landscape, and potentially reveal previously undetected associated features or extensions. This non-invasive method could complement and enhance the findings from the initial geophysical surveys, offering a comprehensive view of the fortlet's design and context without the need for extensive excavation.

Conclusion

The discovery of the Roman fortlet at Cemlyn Bay, Anglesey, marks a significant advancement in the understanding of Roman Britain, particularly concerning the Roman presence in North Wales. This fortlet, dating to the first century AD, provides tangible archaeological evidence that corroborates historical accounts of Roman military campaigns on Anglesey, an island previously thought to have limited Roman military infrastructure. Its strategic location, identified through aerial photography and confirmed by geophysical survey, underscores its role as a coastal defensive and navigational outpost. The presence of barracks within its circular ditch further solidifies its identification as a military installation. This finding not only fills a crucial gap in the archaeological record of Roman Anglesey but also suggests a more integrated and militarized Roman strategy in securing the region than previously understood. Future excavations at Cemlyn Bay and further exploration of potential linked sites across Anglesey promise to yield even deeper insights into the dynamics of Roman occupation and interaction with indigenous populations in this historically rich area.