

What Have the Romans Ever Done For Us? – A Manx Perspective

The early exploration & trade within the Irish Sea and Ireland economic areas

Early maps are known about and it is likely that they date between the 6th and 4th centuries BC (with the best known being Pytheus of Massalia) and the area was explored by both Phoenician & Carthaginian merchants even earlier.

Additionally British traders would have plied the Irish Sea. Whilst Ireland was known for its rich pastures and therefore cattle (which not only produce milk and meat but also, and most important to the Roman military machine, an abundance of leather). The Isle of Man at the time would have a range of metals (Lead, Iron & Zinc) for trade and would be a natural stopping off point for both navigational purposes and adverse weather conditions.

The detail of mapping of **all** of Ireland (east, west, south and north coasts plus details of the interior) contained in the earliest surviving map, that of Ptolemy (circa 150 AD) is significant in that it is of a complete Ireland, not just the East and to an extent north & south coasts. Ptolemy's map is understood to be a copy of earlier maps and this is particularly likely due to the tribal information being almost certainly several centuries out of date by the time of Ptolemy.

Pytheas of Massalia

It is almost certain that Pytheus did not interact with the Irish tribes therefore the tribal data must either predate or narrowly postdate his voyage in and around 325 BC. He may however have circumnavigated the island of Ireland.

The Invasion that never was... or maybe, sort of

By AD 81 Agricola through scouting, potentially dubious trader knowledge and the benefit of a local chieftain was certain enough of the internal political situation and geographical challenges & especially harbours to be able to ascertain the forces needed to conquer and hold Hibernia (Ireland).

He most certainly was not using Ptolemy's map as it was going to be another 60 years or so before it would be published, and therefore likely that it was that of a version of a map produced by Marinus of Tyre or a pre-Marinus map.

One of the operatives involved in these pre-invasion scouting missions was a Greek named *Demetrius*, who is attested in two separate ancient records.

'*Demetrius* said there are many isolated islands lying near Britain that are remote and have few, or no, inhabitants. Some of these islands are named after divinities or heroes. On the Emperor's order he made a voyage for enquiry and observation to the nearest of these islands.'

The Isle of Man is only 12 miles away from what became Scotland at the closest point. Ireland (Hibernia), Wales & England are visible from Snaefell (the only mountain on the Island) on a clear day. The Island could not remain unoccupied because it posed a significant threat as a base for enemy naval forces that could intercept supply convoys, not just in the event of an invasion of Ireland but during the invasion of what became Scotland.

Marinus of Tyre (AD 70–130)

was a Greek geographer, cartographer and mathematician, who founded mathematical geography and provided the underpinnings of Claudius Ptolemy's influential *Geography*.

Additionally he was quoted by Ptolemy "Marinus says of the merchant class generally that they are only intent on their business, and have little interest in exploration, and that often through their love of boasting they magnify distances". So we can only wonder how much use the information gathered from merchants was.... with the exception of navigating to around and in harbours and, of course trading possibilities.

His chief legacy is that he was the first to assign to each place a proper longitude & latitude. He was that well regarded for his advancement o knowledge that a crater on the moon was named after him.

The Island Groupings

Looking at Ptolemy's map we can see, other than England, Scotland, Wales & Ireland two groups of islands. One group comprises Anglesey and two smaller, near barren small Islands off the eastern coast of Ireland, Lambay Island being one (and more of that later). Logically & geographically-speaking the Isle of Man should have been in this group.

The second group is in the proximity of the likely invasion route that Agricola would have taken and are much farther north. It is my considered view that the map indicates not a

true position but its relative military importance in relation to any campaign against what became Scotland and what became Ireland and potentially non-Roman political allegiances. One of these islands have been generally positively identified as the Isle of Man.

Through this assumption it is almost certain that Agricola ensured Roman intervention of the Isle of Man in AD 81, though whether he stayed or not is a different matter. And if any of his forces stayed in what matter did they stay.

The Military Option

Whilst it is possible that Agricola could have ignored the Isle of Man it does lend itself as a possible enemy naval base from which attacks could be made, not only on military & merchant vessels supporting Roman land forces advancing south down the east coast of Ireland, but also any shipping moving directly across the Irish Sea or even to resupply the advanced bases in Scotland.

Trade with the Isle of Man

Bearing in mind the Isle of Man's dominant, or at least central-ish, position in the Irish Sea (and close to Scotland) would it not be reasonable to assume that until Britain came under the Roman sphere of influence that much of it was a major (in ancient terms) trading partner with not only European traders but also, and probably more so, an internal "British" or British/Ireland network and that the Island would be an important part of that network as both a trading partner and a good place to shelter in a storm.

Ireland (Hibernia)

In addition the (reported) Roman coin finds in the Island have been suggested to be as a result of trade and the finds' dates cover nearly 3.5 centuries. of course this is mostly conjecture, based on the meagre finds. Certainly Ireland had at least a trading interaction with Romans – and this is ascertained by: -

1. The reported use of information gathered by (Roman) merchants, in particular the various ports [presumably mostly along the east coast]
2. A significant range of Roman artefacts spread across Ireland, though the heaviest concentration is on the central sector of the east coast
3. In support of this is the recently discovered, but not excavated promontory 'Roman fort' or fortified trading station at Drumanagh fifteen miles north of Dublin

The Brigantes

It is possible that the Isle of Man was inhabited by or had strong connections with the Brigantes as both central Britain and the part of Ireland opposite was inhabited by the

Brigantes, albeit one "Hibernian" in nature. However the Brigantes were frequently at odds with the Romans... Graves of British Brigantes, including their distinctive weaponry, have been unearthed at Lambay Island (just off the coast of Hibernia) so it is quite likely that there was some interaction between the two groups of Brigantes.

The Brigantes & Rome

Whilst the Brigantes were allies of Rome numerous rebellions later in the 1st and into the 2nd Century AD puts the Isle of Man potentially squarely at odds with Rome, should the Brigantes occupy or re-occupy the Isle of Man or indeed the Romans may have occupied to prevent its use by the Brigantes with whom they had significant trouble.

The Irish Threat

So would the Isle of Man then lend itself to invasion as part of Roman suppression of this rebellious tribe on mainland Britain? It is unlikely that the Isle of Man would remain truly independent even prior to the Roman invasion of Britain and after it could be a last outpost of the British Brigantes or a forward base of the Irish Brigantes, once the Romans finally gained the upper hand. In any event the Isle of Man was a threat to the western flank of mainland Roman Britain should it be in non-friendly hands and in addition it could be used as part of an early warning system.

If this is the case then it is more that probable that the Isle of Man was not safe for any Brigantes and therefore the Romans had or regularly did raid or occupy the Island and be able to control through direct action or alliance any and all occupation.

In any event raiding of the English coast during Roman times did take place and indeed there is "historical" evidence that this did happen. Certainly Ireland had a thriving slave trade, albeit it mostly internal until probably 3rd Century AD.

Invasion of Hibernia and/or British Island Groups by Rome

Of course had there been an invasion of Ireland (and this theory is becoming less unpopular) it is almost certain that the Isle of Man would have been invaded and presumably occupied in some form. Additionally it is more likely that it was invaded as part of a Roman preliminary pre-invasion/naval security action by Agricola.

The Irish Freebooters

It is commonly accepted that on the withdrawal of Roman forces from Britain that the Isle of Man was taken over by incursions from Ireland in addition to several Irish "priests".

Known Roman finds: on the Isle of Man (Monapia)

1. bronze of Tiberius [14-37AD] minted at Alexandria found in quarry at Glen Auldyn [SC4393].
2. *sestertius* of Trajan [98-117AD] found in 1950 under Monk's Bridge [SC2770].
3. *denarius* of Trajan [101-2AD] found in 1942 at Scouts' Glen, Onchan [SC4078].
4. coin of Antoninus [138-161AD] found on Douglas beach [SC3875].
5. bronze of Septimius Severus [193-211AD] found in 1889 at Santon [SC3172].
6. coin of Maximian [286-305AD, 307-308] found at Colby Glen [SC2370].
7. bronze of Constans [337-350AD] found in 1951 at Noble's Hospital, Douglas [SC3875].
8. Not listed is the votive altar & coins (of Germanicus and Agrippina) [not mentioned above] found in Castletown in 1826 which dubiously was that they were supposedly brought over in "1726". There was no consensus in the 19th century even. There was also a suggestion that it had been a religious site as early as Roman times.
9. It should be noted that the coins are mostly found on the East coast, but from north to south and the coinage dates from 14 AD to 350 AD. This is a big spread unless some of the early coins were likely to be still in circulation in later times. They could of course be the remnants of Irish hordes, though this would mean a Brigantes occupation throughout some or all of the Roman occupation of Britain.
10. There are stories from the 19th century of silver coin hordes being melted down and many items taken into private collections.
11. Note that there are no horde finds of Roman artefacts
12. Newcastle-upon-Tyne (near Hadrian's Wall) has less Roman coin finds (7), though it is true that some areas do have a lot more. Mind you it probably depends on the quantity of archaeological investigation in the area.

Lack of Roman Sites on the Isle of Man

1. Further to a certain Bishop's decision nearly two centuries ago that the Romans didn't land on the Island for any other reason than occasional trade the promoted opinion is that "the Romans didn't come to the Island". This didn't meet with universal opinion then and it shouldn't now. But it has. It is easier.
2. Let's look at some of the likely sites (a reported Roman Camp in the NW of the Island was washed away long ago [possibly at Blue Point where the Royal Harbour was in later times?])

Possible locations for Roman sites

Castletown (previously Rushen or Russen or similar)

1. So we have a possible Roman temple (to the God Jupiter by all accounts) although little more than hearsay, yet with attested finds.
2. We have a Medieval castle situated in Castletown".
 - That castle was built in stages and indeed is reputed to have origins in the 10th Cent AD.
 - A castle is built on a good fortifiable site and any previous fortifications will disappear under the new.
 - To prove a Roman fortified settlement was located in is virtually impossible. The castle site and the temple site are in close proximity.
 - A Roman Votive Altar was found on site as were Roman coins.
 - We have a port site reputedly surrounded by bog and in sight of the best landing spot until modern times at Ronaldsway.

Maughold Churchyard

- It was suggested in 1912 that a Roman Fort was located in and around Maughold Churchyard and this was generally ridiculed and in its place it was suggested that the wall, some of which were 6 feet wide at the base and surrounded by a moat (according to early 19th century eye-witness reports). was the remains of a 6th or 7th Century Monastery: -
 - Fantastic. Where better to place a monastic settlement than in a ruined or semi-derelict fort or fortified location? It was the site of a later successful defensive action against Vikings.
 - How many monks will be available to build a monastery with a perimeter wall 6ft at its base and a significant [reputedly 12'/3.5m] moat (filled in in 1825) to boot?
 - At least several Viking/Anglo Saxon swords & daggers were found in the churchyard..... in the 19th century excavations and goodness knows how many during burials. Is this more likely to indicate a (fortified) monastery or a fortified settlement – it was called a "city" which could indicate a site with ecclesiastical buildings at least (which there are).

Ganseey Point Promontory

In many ways similar to the possible 'Roman fort' or 'Fortified Trading Post' at Drumanagh (thought to be almost certainly of Roman construction). It is the "right shape".

A view using near infrared imagery



A view using Google Earth



Kallow Point (Port St Mary) Promontory

Larger than Gansey it does have its own harbour, the status of which is hard to ascertain, but it would be protected from bad weather.



A view using Google Earth

Douglas

It is likely that Douglas had Iron Age sites (I would suggest The Priory, Belmont Hill & Castle Hill as being two sites) and, should the Romans have either invaded or indeed settled there is the possibility of Roman construction long destroyed by 19th Century builders in Central Douglas, or destroyed by earlier farming.

Braddan

Well there is 10 acres of largely uninvestigated ancient ruins, a small portion of which are classified as Medieval. The outlines can still be seen.

Research

Because of the lack of sites from any period prior to the English Civil War as well as coastal erosion in the north of the Island (there is a casual historical reference to a "Roman Fort" in the north-west of the Island but there was also known to be a large port on the northern coast which has all but disappeared) it is difficult to know where to start.

I would suggest further research to look at likely defensive points and joining up the dots that we do have to provide a greater understanding of the history of the Isle of Man before, during & immediately after the Roman occupation of mainland Britain.

Certainly more work could be carried out at Maughold Churchyard and the surrounding area. LiDAR could be used [the Island has been fully mapped but the data is not free] as well as Ground Penetration Radar (GPR).

Did the Romans ever come to the Isle of Man?

It seems to boil down to 5 options, based on the limited facts we have: -

1. **No** – they never came here whatsoever in 3 centuries, protected by Manannan's Cloak! This seems the most unlikely of all the options, but quite popular.
2. **Yes** – they probably visited to trade but that was about it. Trading would presumably be near centres of civilisation or good beaches (such as Ronaldsway – the preferred site in later times) or harbours, yet still near civilisation centres. This is not an unreasonable option, especially if you accept the conjecture that the strongest firm evidence of Roman occupation was brought here from England (with absolutely no explanation as to why or by whom).
3. **Yes** – they probably visited to trade and maybe carried out limited military operations, such as in AD 81, most likely to curtail piracy/military activity in the area (and this was probably more a mere naval presence in the area, landing as required but with no permanent base).
4. **Yes** – they obviously did have at least one base (Castletown principally) on the Island, though not necessarily at the same time. It is logical, though by no means certain that they have a signal tower in the north of the Island for some or all of the period.
5. **Yes** – the Island was occupied by the Romans to allow control of the Irish Sea by denying it to others. This would, at various phases of the Roman occupation of Britain, have been almost a necessity. It would also tie in with the use by the Romans of the Drumanagh promontory fort in Ireland (and perhaps others not yet confirmed/discovered. This is the second most unlikely option, though it was suggested as a possibility in 1912, but largely ridiculed. Of course had there been an invasion of Ireland it is almost certain that the Isle of Man would have been invaded and presumably occupied in some form.

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