ROMAN FORT ENVIRONS PROJECT EXCAVATION AT LLANFOR 2006

INTERIM REPORT

G1632

Report number : 680



Ymddiriedolaeth Archaeolegol Gwynedd Gwynedd Archaeological Trust

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Prepared

By

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For Cadw

Cover: High res survey and excavation trench: field boundaries edited out

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1. INTRODUCTION

The excavation at Llanfor represents one of the final parts of a 7 year long project examining the environs of Roman forts in north-west Wales. The project has formed part of Gwynedd Archaeological Trust's Cadw Grant aided programme of work over this period and has been expanded into a Pan Wales initiative. The project has utilised geophysical survey to examine the environs of all of the suitable forts in the county. Its principal aim was scheduling enhancement and management of the sites. The project has also generated a considerable amount of new data and can be seen as one of the most important pieces of research into Roman Wales in recent decades.

The geophysical results from Llanfor are of particular significance. The fort is unlike the usual auxiliary forts in the region and is thought to date from one of the two invasions of Wales. It is also of a type that has not been recorded before in any detail in Wales or elsewhere. It appears have been constructed entirely of wood and contains very little evidence for rebuilding. It therefore seems likely that it was a short lived campaign base. It seems most likely to belong to the early Frontinian campaign c. A.D.74 but could be argued to date from Paulinus' earlier campaign. The results have been published in Britannia (Hopewell 2005) and have been greeted with much academic interest. The fort is now seen as being crucial to our understanding of the Roman invasions of Wales. Unfortunately the dating of the fort is still entirely hypothetical as no finds have been recovered from the site.

2. METHODOLOGY

The aims of the excavation were to a) recover datable material from the site in order to set the previous work in its correct historical context and b) to assess the fragility of the site. Large-scale excavation was clearly not an option within the framework of the project so the assessment was designed to maximise the recovery of information while minimising the impact on the archaeological resource. A trial excavation within the fort, while most likely to produce datable material, could have a negative impact on potentially complex stratified archaeology. Experience has shown that small-scale trenches can rarely give a good impression of larger structures. It was therefore decided that a trench across the defensive ditches would stand a good chance of producing the necessary material without compromising the stratigraphic integrity of the monument. Furthermore if this was excavated at the north of the fort it could demonstrate the relationship between the fort and a large temporary camp there. An area of detailed geophysical survey would allow the trench to be positioned with great accuracy, again minimising disturbance. The excavation would also provide information about the depth of topsoil and extent of plough damage in the area and allow environmental sampling to take place. The excavations were supervised by the writer and carried out by Roland Flook and George Smith from Gwynedd Archaeological Trust and John Burman from Merioneth Geophysical Survey Team between the 23^{rd} and the 30^{th} October 2006.

An area of fluxgate gradiometer survey was carried out at high resolution (0.5m traverse interval and 0.25m sample interval) over the northern defences. Additional survey was carried out when time allowed and on a voluntary basis. This expanded the area to 160m x 100m covering a significant area in the north of the fort. The results are included in the current report in order to locate the excavation but are not discussed in detail. The data has been integrated into the previous surveys and will be used to enhance the interpretation of the site in the forthcoming publication of the revised edition of *The Roman Frontier in Wales*.

The topsoil was stripped from an area of 18.0 m x 4.5m using a minidigger. This was cleaned by hand and all features in a 1.5m wide strip on the western side were fully excavated. A written, drawn and photographic record was kept of the excavations. The site was backfilled when the works were completed and the turf re-laid by hand.

3. RESULTS

Fig. 1 shows the results of the high resolution geophysics and the location of the excavation. Figs 2 and 3 show the results of the excavation, the numbers on the plan and section are the context numbers that are referred to in the text.

The natural subsoil (25) consisted of very loose coarse gravel probably of fluvioglacial origin which contained frequent large cobbles at a depth of around 1.5m. Overlying this was a very variable deposit (18) consisting of clean gravel and silty clays that appeared to be entirely natural in origin. There was, because of the small area of excavation, no opportunity to study this context in detail so its origin was not conclusively proven although it clearly predated the Roman features on the site. Two small gullies (26 and 28) and a buried horizon of bright orange-brown soil at the north of the site were presumed to be part of the same series of deposits. A periglacial origin seems to be most likely. The plough soil was found to be typically 0.2m to 0.3m deep with a lower topsoil horizon between 0.1m and 0.2m deep present over all but the ramparts.

The marching camp defences (slot 4)

The earliest Roman feature was a roughly U-shaped slot (4) 1.0m wide and 0.7m deep. This contained a uniform silty-clay fill (24) and corresponded to the defences of the large marching camp detected by the geophysical survey. It was clearly too small to be a defensive ditch and is best interpreted as a palisade slot that has been somewhat truncated by ploughing.

This was almost certainly truncated by the outer ditch (5) of the fort. The relationship was not clear because the upper fills of both features were almost indistinguishable from one another. Careful examination of both sections and the area in plan strongly suggests, but does not conclusively prove, that this interpretation is correct. This initially seemed to contradict the geophysical survey results where the slot appears to cross ditch 5. Examination of the profiles of the two features shows that they are both of similar depth and that ditch 5 is relatively wide and shallow where slot 4 is steep sided. The base of slot 4 will therefore be present, even when the rest of the feature is cut, for almost the entire width of ditch 7 and could thus be detected by the gradiometer.

The fort ditches

The trial excavation investigated all three fort ditches. The innermost was found to be a major defensive ditch and the outer two to be smaller ditches. There was a 2.0m gap between the inner and central ditch and a 2.6m gap between the outer two.

The inner ditch (7)

This was 3.5m wide and 1.7m deep (from the top of the subsoil/buried soil). The profile of the upper 1.0m was in the form of a shallow V. The lower part was steep-sided and flat-bottomed with a cleaning slot intermittently present. The lower 0.7m was filled with gravel (17). It quickly became obvious, as the excavation proceeded, that any steep-sided cut into the coarse gravel subsoil (25) would have been inherently unstable. The gravel contained very little silt or clay and although well packed was very loose. It appears that attempts to keep the lower part of the ditch open were abandoned. This was allowed to fill with gravel (17) and the ditch was subsequently maintained at a depth of 1m with a shallow profile. Four amphora sherds and two abraded coarseware sherds were recovered from the gravel. A thin layer of red clay (29) was found to coat much of the gravel sides of the re-profiled ditch. This could not have been precipitated onto the sides because the subsoil is very free draining and there would have been no accumulation of water. It seems likely that the clay had been deliberately added, as a lining, in an attempt to halt the erosion of the gravel. The erosion seems to have made the ditch significantly wider than its original cut and clay from the edge of the rampart (3 and 27) had begun to slump into its northern side.

The ditch was subsequently backfilled with a dump of mixed clays, soils and turves (16 and perhaps 8) that was probably derived from the levelling of the ramparts when the fort was abandoned. A single sherd of coarseware was recovered from this context (16).

The middle ditch (6)

This was 2.0m wide and 0.9m deep, with a shallow V profile and a pronounced ankle-breaker or cleaning slot. The lower 0.2m of the ditch was filled with gravel (14 and 15) eroded from the sides and the upper part with mixed clay (10-12) that appears to represent backfilling with rampart material. A single sherd of coarseware was recovered from this context. The fills of the north side of the ditch were cut by a square-sided linear cut (13) of unknown function that did not extend across the width of excavation trench.

The outer ditch (5)

This was of a similar scale to the middle ditch being 2.4m wide and 0.8m deep with a shallow V shaped profile. The lower 0.25m was filled with gravel (20) eroded from the side and the upper part with a dump of mixed clays and silts (22 and 23), again representing backfilling with material from the ramparts.

The rampart (2 and 3)

A 0.2m deep layer of hard red clay extended across the northernmost 4.5m of the excavated area. This was, in places, sealed by a thin layer (maximum 0.15m deep) of hard grey clay. These deposits presumably represented the base of the rampart. The rampart ran up to, and appeared to have begun to subside into, the edge of the inner ditch (7). This, as noted above, was probably a result of a widening of the ditch due to erosion of its sides. A 1.5m wide strip of the hard clay was excavated revealing a bright orange/brown buried soil. There were no signs of postholes suggesting that the rampart had been revetted with turf.

Dating

The pottery was examined by Dr Peter Webster of Cardiff University and was found to be insufficient to produce a definitive date. There were four Dressel 20 south Spanish olive oil amphora sherds which were common throughout the first and second centuries. The coarseware was in poor condition. The sherd from context 16 could be a copy of a samian form 37 bowl which would indicate a Flavian or later date due to the dating of the samian original.

Environmental sampling

Samples were taken from ditch 7 and the buried soils by Astrid Castledine. These are currently awaiting examination.

4. DISCUSSION AND SUMMARY

The excavations provided a good assessment of the defences of the fort. The earliest feature was almost certainly the marching camp, the defences of which consisted of a simple palisade. This was cut by the defences of the fort. Three ditches were present, a deep inner ditch and two smaller outer ditches that would have acted as obstacles as opposed to major defences. The garrison clearly had major problems keeping the ditches open due to the continual erosion of the loose gravel subsoil. This may have been a factor in the decision to build the later auxiliary fort of Caer Gai on higher ground 8km to the south-west. The defences were slighted on the abandonment of the fort, the rampart being used to backfill the ditches.

The excavation failed to produce definitive dating evidence. The sherds recovered would not be out of place in a Flavian foundation (Webster, see above) but more extensive work is clearly required before the fort can be set precisely in its historical context.

The relatively shallow topsoil typically 0.2m to 0.4m deep suggests that the site is vulnerable to damage by all but the shallowest of ploughing. The ramparts are probably the area of the site that are closest to the surface and may still be undergoing some erosion. The two geophysical surveys in 2002

and 2006 produced identical results (albeit at different resolutions) suggesting that the current agricultural regime is having little impact on the interior of the fort.

A revised and expanded report suitable for publication will be prepared when the environmental samples have been processed.

5. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks are due to the landowner, Mr Robin Price, for permission to carry out the excavation, to Dr Peter Webster for examining the pottery and to all who worked on the excavation.

6. REFERENCES

Hopewell D 2005, Roman Fort Environs in North-West Wales Britannia 34 237-242









Fig. 1 Llanfor gradiometer survey: Grey-scale plot showing high resolution survey and position of excavation trench.







Fig. 2 Llanfor: North-east facing section through fort and temporary camp defences



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