

An exploration of Menapia in Wales

The site of the original town of Menapia is at Whitesands Bay in Pembrokeshire near the cathedral city of St. David's. Today there is nothing identifiable to see, although its existence is well-documented in many sources. It represented later the westernmost extension of the great Roman road, the Via Julia Maritima that travelled from Caerleon, via Cardiff, Cowbridge, Neath and Carmarthen. It was also the termination of another major Roman road, the Via Flandrica (Fordd Flenning) (1). Sections of the route between St. David's (Whitesands Bay) and Carmarthen have recently been identified. It also travelled to intersect with the north-south Roman road, Sarn Helen (2).



Proposed route from St. David's (Whitesands) to Carmarthen and Sarn Helen (Google Earth)

The remains are now entirely covered by sand dunes known as the Burrows, and a golf course. It is possible that the great dune system also conceals the remains of the early Christian community originally founded by St. David before it was moved inland to the valley of the Alun (3). The adjacent wide bay is also known as Porth Mawr, the great port that formed a link through St. George's Channel across the Irish Sea to the Irish town of Menapia at Wexford, and the other destinations of this tribe of seafarers and traders.



Whitesands Bay



The Burrows sand dunes above the bay



1888 Ordnance Survey map of Whitesands Bay

The area was very exposed to attacks. A son of the usurping Vortigern, Pascentius allied himself with Gillomanius, king of Ireland, and launched an attack on Britain. After they landed at Menapia, the news led Uther Pendragon to march his force to meet them in battle, and he defeated them, killing both leaders, and the survivors fled to their ships in retreat.

The area around St. David's attracted many attacks subsequently. In AD808, city and cathedral were reduced to ashes by West Saxons, in AD911 utterly destroyed by Danes and once again in AD982 by Geofrid, son of the Danish king Harold (4).

We can consider what Menapia would have looked like by looking at contemporaneous structures in both iron age habitations and the concept of the fortified town, or oppidum.



Iron age village



Fortified town

While considering how it might have looked, there may be a parallel with Dinas Dinnle, a large hill fort in north Wales, built in a similar position on sandy easily eroded soil, facing sometimes fierce on-shore winds. This site has been excavated, and as typical of iron-age

structures made substantively of timber and thatch, only the low walls of the round houses remain.



Dinas Dinlle – The exterior



The interior

Porth Mawr - The Great Port

Looking at the sandy expanse of Whitesands Bay today, it is hard to imagine a safe harbour. With predominantly onshore winds and a soft shoaling sandy beach, only flat bottomed ships could be pulled ashore to safety. With no functioning keels, a lack of upwind capacity did not make for great voyaging ships.

How could it have looked two thousand years ago? Post-glacial rebound after the last ice age has the effect of Scotland rising while England and Wales fall, causing a rise in sea level and an inland shift in coastlines.

1. The Gough Map

Said to be the earliest most accurate map of Britain, it was named after Richard Gough who had acquired it from the estate of the antiquarian Thomas Martin in 1774 and bequeathed to the Bodleian Library in 1809. It is thought to originate from the thirteenth or fourteenth century. Compared to all previous maps it contains accurate details of towns, roads and distances (Wikipedia).



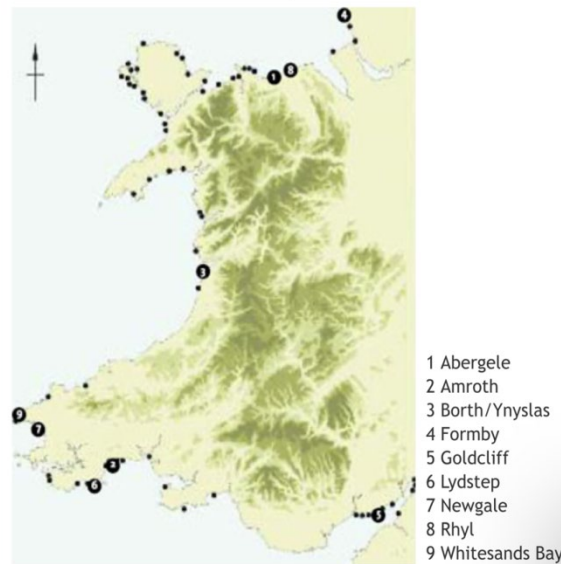
It can be seen that the coast of southwest Wales was very different from today. Even without sophisticated surveying equipment it seems unlikely that the coves, bays and inlets

were all missed in the days when sailing was so important for trade and transport. Indeed the non-existence of Cardigan Bay has given support to existing rumours of a great sunken land off the west coast of Wales.

2. Sunken forests

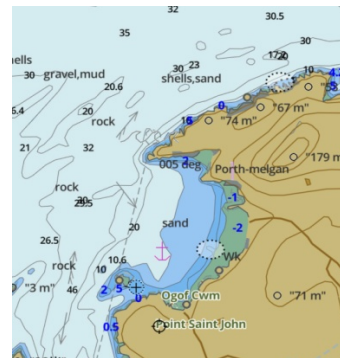
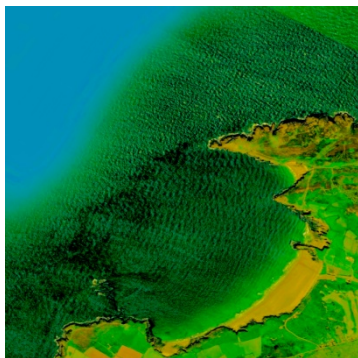
The Welsh coastline has many areas of sunken forests, confirming that the land boundaries extended much further than those seen today.

The distribution of ancient submerged forests in Wales



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At low tides at Whitesands Bay the remains of a forest can be seen (shown on Ordnance Survey 1st edition mapping) extending for some 365m north-south. Samples from such forests have been dated to between two and five thousand years ago and consist of stumps of birch, fir, hazel and oak trees. Flints have been found below the peat and the bones of deer, auroch and brown bear have been found within it. In February 2024 a set of low spring tides coincided with an exposure of an expanse of submerged forest below the mean low water mark and some 65m west of that marked on the OS map.



The Great Port today: Google maps image and current nautical chart

Clearly a barrier existed between this and the present beach, and this could have offered a sheltered anchorage for sea-going ships.

3. St Justinian.

According to legend, Justinian was a Breton noble who came to Pembrokeshire in the sixth century to live on Ramsey Island as a hermit. St David visited him and was so impressed by his holiness he invited Justinian to become his confessor. He also made Justinian the Abbot of the monastery on the mainland. However, Justinian did not think David's monks lived strictly enough, so he took himself back to Ramsey with a few monks to live a more austere life. Craving solitude, Justinian took an axe to the land bridge which at that time joined the island to the mainland, leaving only the rocks now known as the Bitches. The monks he took back with him rebelled and killed Justinian, cutting off his head. According to one legend, the saint was so angry, he picked up his severed head and walked back across the water, landing at St Justinian's harbour! The holy well there reputedly sprang up where he laid his head down. He was said to have been buried in the chapel there, although his bones were later moved to the cathedral.



Seascape illustrating how a continuous landmass could form a southern breakwater for a harbour (Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority)

Putting these together, the picture of a safer harbour at Whitesands Bay that could include a sheltered anchorage can be inferred.

The Menapians

The Menapians started as a Celtic seafaring people situated round the low-lying coastal areas of Belgium and the Netherlands. Such coastal tribes were first recorded in a 6th century BC survey of coastal travel, now lost but cited by a Roman pro-consul named Festus Rufus Avientus who compiled his own coastal survey in the fifth century AD, revealing that people classifiable as Celts were living in those areas. Both Hecataeus of Miletus and Herodotus similarly made mention of such tribes, both writing in the fifth century BC. These seafarers, in addition to exploration and trade, established colonies in many regions,

including Brittany, Ireland, the Isle of Man (old Monopia), and south-west Wales and Anglesey (remembered today as Ynys Mon, Menai Straits).

The name is given to the original tribal areas, but the first place name was given to Menapia, now Wexford, eastern Ireland, recorded by the Greco-Roman polymath Claudius Ptolemy in AD150, who despite living in Alexandria, north Africa, created many maps through second-hand accounts from travelling sailors (5,6,7). This was founded around 216BC, about 162 years before their collapse on the continent. A second Menapia was created in south-west Wales (8), known to the Romans as Menevia, and sometimes referred on later maps as the Roman Menapia station. This raises the interesting question as to when it was established.

Thoughts on the Welsh Menapia

Ptolemy's "Prima Europe Tabula," a map of the British Isles from his "Geographia," is the earliest surviving geographical record of Wales. His map did not identify a Welsh Menapia, although a prominent headland to the south was named as Octapitarum point. Ptolemy's map provides limited details about Wales, focusing on key geographical features and a few settlements, rather than a detailed depiction of the entire region. The map is a significant piece of early cartographic history, providing insights into how the British Isles were understood and represented in ancient times. It lists three settlements, two peninsulas, and five rivers. Could he have missed hearing about the Welsh Menapia? While the Menapians were established traders, how much did they have contact with Ptolemy's travellers?

Ptolemy's maps were created from information supplied by others; sailors, navigators and travellers. It is said that he based much on the now lost work of another cartographer, Marinus of Tyre (AD70-130). The first recorded traveller to Britain from the Old World was Pytheas of Massilia (Marseilles) in 325BC; a skilled navigator who discovered sea ice, the arctic, the Baltic Sea and described the 'Midnight Sun' (Much to be read on Wikipedia). A periplus is a manuscript document that lists the ports and coastal landmarks, in order and with approximate intervening distances, that the captain of a vessel could expect to find along a shore.

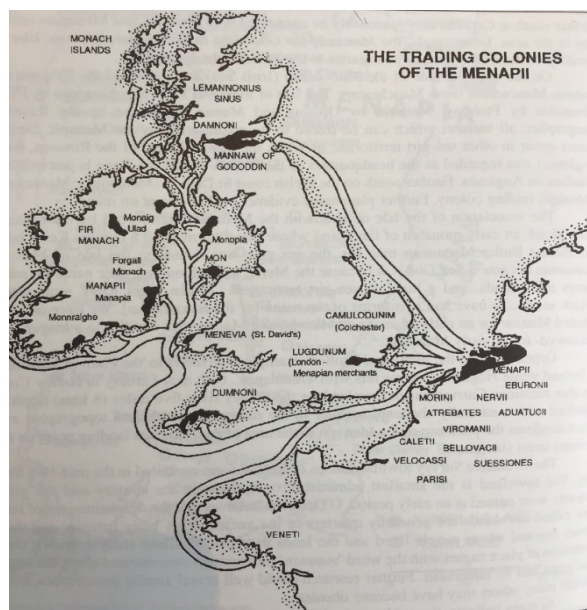
O'Rahilly (9) estimated that Ptolemy's map was based on information that was possibly 200-400 years out of date. It is reasonable to claim that the Welsh Menapia, establishing a trade route across St. George's Channel came into existence within a few hundred years of the Irish one, and it is therefore quite possible that it was not recorded by earlier voyagers.

History of the Menapians

In 55BC, the original homelands were invaded by the Tencturi and Usipetes who were under pressure from the more powerful Suebians (10).

Then in 57BC, the homelands were invaded by Julius Caesar. After Ambiorix, king of the Eburones annihilated a Roman legion, Caesar's rapid and violent response led to extermination of the Eburones, and their allies, the Menapians were hunted down. Their 7000 warriors were no match for 18,000 legionnaires (eupedia.com; brewminate.com). Despite what he considered his toughest resistance, a great number were killed, and a diaspora to the colonies was triggered. Later, a wave of immigration from Ireland into Wales was triggered by further conflict (11). Darrell Wollcot (12) describes the arrival in

south Wales of Llyr Llediarth, a Goidelic Celt, guttural of speech, whose descendents include the Welsh contender for the Caratacus who stood against the Romans captured and taken to Rome with his elderly father, son and daughter. His aged father Bran was incarcerated alongside St. Paul, a prisoner between 51-56AD, converted to Christianity and gained the soubriquet 'the Blessed' and known as the first Christian ruler in Britain. By the second century, evidence of Menapians on the continent was scant as those that had survived blended into the general population. Later, in Britain in the third century AD the four sons of King Einudd controlled the coastal periphery of Wales (13). This included Caradog of the Demetae, who it can be argued was the father of Ceris, who became Romanised as Carausius. This would make Carausius a tenth generation Menapian descendent in Wales, born and buried there. Discussion and evidence to substantiate these claims are on my website (14,15).



The trading colonies of the Menapians (Mongan, 1995)

Roman influence in Pembrokeshire

After the final conquest of Wales in AD47, forts and legionary camps were established around the area on a strategic basis. On the approaches were Carmarthen, Neath and Llandeilo, which with Llandovery defended the Sarn Helen road. Luentinum, at Pumpsaint was situated at the junction of Via Julia Maritima and Via Flandrica. The fort Bremia was at Llanio, to the north, again situated on the north-south Sarn Helen road, which led north to the Dolaucothi Roman gold mines where another fort was situated. Another was discovered at Wiston, near Haverford West just to the north of the Via Julia Maritima, and the village of Ambleston, north-east of Haverford West has been identified as Vigesium, also on the Via Julia. The Roman fort found at Menapia in 1852 (see below) presumably was established to protect the sea crossing to the Irish Menapia, which explains why Menapia is sometimes described as a 'Roman station'. Evidence of Roman activity in the fourth century was found in a scattered coin hoard of 112 coins in the present beach area between 1983

and 1996. These were from emperors between Constantine I and Constantian III, spanning AD348-364 (16).

Very recently, a large legionary fort that could house five hundred soldiers was discovered near Llanreithan and the river Solva, strategically placed to control the peninsula. It is yet to be excavated.



A Google Earth view of the recently discovered fort, with an artist's impression of how it looked.

Other archaeological sites in the immediate area

The last possible report of remains of Menapia was in 1911 (17), where in a coastal walking route is written, after passing a Pen Arthur farm, a road is called 'Ffordd Chwech-Erw' or the 'Road of the six acres':

'The road reaches the shore at the northern end of Whitesand Bay, close to the old site of St. Patrick's Chapel which is some twenty paces above the road. On the other side of the road, where a ruined boathouse shows some old walls, began the ancient enclosure of Menapia – the oldest settlement – obviously too near the sea and too tempting for sea pirates to remain long in that situation. The Vale of Alun, the historical or legendary 'Vale of Roses' would easily recommend itself at such time, as the first site proved disastrous'.

Another report from 1852 (18) describes a fortification near St. David's, with the visitor writing:

'My attention was drawn to an earthen fortification, situated upon the hill overhanging the valley of the Alun, at a distance of less than half a mile to the south-west of the cathedral, and which I learned is called Penlan Castle. Its being marked on the Ordnance map as a small square fort seemed to render it deserving of attention in connection with the, as yet, undetermined site of the Roman town of Menapia. It stands exactly upon the top of a very steep slope descending into the swampy valley, and approaching it from St. David's, I found a square enclosure of about forty-seven paces in extent along three of its sides; two of these, being upon the top of the hill are rather strongly fortified with a rampart sloping towards both the inner and outer sides, but no very marked ditch. On the other side next to the valley the rampart is much slighter, the steep slope into the valley forming a sufficient defence.....adjoining to that side there is a small, but very strong and nearly circular fort, of about thirty paces in diameter, formed by a lofty rampart and deep external ditch throughout all its circumference, except the part defended by the hill, which is very steep and where no rampart can be traced, but the slope may have been artificially

increased. One part of this round fort intrudes considerably, by its curved form, into the above mentioned square enclosure, and thus the two present the singular fact of forts of totally different form attached to each other. The question is now raised as to which of these camps is older, for few will consider them of equal antiquity. In answer, it may be remarked, that if the square was removed, the circular enclosure would remain perfect, but the destruction of the circle would leave the square camp open upon one of its sides. To the opinion that the circle is of older formation than its neighbour the square, and that the formers of the latter took advantage of the side of the circle to constitute one side of their enclosure there are several objections, First, if the builders of the square fort attached their defences to the circular fort, they probably would have made an opening from the one into the other, but none such exists. Secondly, the circle quite overlooks the square, which is thus commanded by it. Thirdly, if the circle is of more recent formation, its builders might well consider the existence of the square of no consequence for their ditch not being interfered with by it, the strength of their post is in no way weakened by its presence. It will be generally conceded that the square fort is in all probability a work of the Romans and the circular one of some Celtic chief; and if the Britons continued to form circular fortifications after the departure of the Romans, this may be the fort of the heathen chief recorded as having given so much trouble to the founders of St. David's.'



Today: Google Earth image, the preserved ring ditch of the round fort and the square area within the other.

All of these structures were contemporaneous with the existence of Menapia.

The Christian community of Saint David

St. David, (cAD500-589) the titular saint of Wales, was the son of Sandde ap Cedig ap Ceredig ap Cunedda, and his mother was Non, daughter of Gynyr of Caer Gawch in Pembrokeshire. He was born at the place now named St. David's, according to Leland (19) in (*Hen Mynyw or Old Menevia*) and baptised by Albeus, Bishop of Munster. During his religious education, a colleague was St. Teilo who became the second Bishop of Llandaff. Teilo was hosted at the court of king Aircol Lawhir in Penally and his sister married Budic II of Brittany, founding a religious dynasty (20).

David established a monastery at Menapia but under pressure from an Irish pirate Boia who occupied a hill fort, Clegyr Boia, (whose history goes back to Neolithic times) nearby, moved inland to the Valley of Alun and rebuilt in the Valley of Roses (21, 22). The medieval Cathedral that stands today is built on that site, and the bishopric of Menevia continues to this day.



Clegyr Boia Hillfort (RCHMW, Dr Toby Driver)



The river Alun at St. David's cathedral



The general area showing course of the Alun and relationship to Whitesands Bay

The river Alun flows to the sea at the little harbour of Porthclais, where the largely intact old harbour wall was thought to have been built by the Romans (Wikipedia.)



The harbour entrance at Porthclais

Tracing the Menapian footprints

It is clear that the Menapian colonisers have left much in present day Ireland (23). From the term Fir-Bolgs used by the Irish bards to the present folk memory names in Wexford today (Menapia Motors, Menapia Properties, Menapia Athletic Club, for example), and their worship of the Sea-god Manannan, verbal derivatives for places such as Fermanagh and Monaghan and family names such as Monaghan, Mongan, Manahan, McGuire and Mangan persist (7). An example of a sea-going vessel, associated with Manannan, the Broighter Boat, found on the shores of Lough Foyle, is preserved in Dublin's National Museum.

Genetic research leading from continental Menapian descendents to Fermanagh has identified a member of the Maguire family in the same genetic tribe. The most emblematic family of that county (Maguire or McGuire or Mac Guire) is placed in the Menapian clade Z16340 which is now (2016) defined as the R1b1a2a1a2c1b1a ISOGG (International Society of Genetic Genealogy).

This proves that the, 'Fir Manach', 'the men of the Manaig' (Menapii of Ptolemy's Geography) occupied this area before the Maguires (24).

The presence of this family under Z16340 confirms their Menapian origin and also legitimises the narratives of Ptolemy.

The settlement of the Isle of Man (Monopia) would also have been Menapian (some Manx have Norse Viking ancestry but the Vikings came to Man in the 9th century when Irish Menapii descendants had colonized the island more than five centuries before).

In Wales, the diocese of Menevia is still in evidence today, and in St. David's itself we can find the Menevia Beauty Spa. To my knowledge, no search for the R1b1a2a1a2c1b1a marker has yet been carried out here. I could also theorise that the Menapian genes found in Brittany, rather than from direct early colonisation, could have been taken there in the fourth century by Cynan Meriadoc of Llydaw, north Wales when he took troops there and his son became known as the founder of Brittany (20).

History tells us that St. David himself, Bishop Asser (adviser to King Alfred of Wessex, died AD909) and the local historian Richard Fenton (1747-1821) were born at St David's. Several historians claim that usurping emperor Carausius was born there too. In view of the two ambiguous accounts of Aurelius Victor and Eumenius a hundred years after his death, this consideration of the early Menapian colonisation of Wales and Ireland and the diaspora

resulting from Caesar's and other invasions of their original homelands and the fact that he was buried in north Wales supports the claim that he was indeed British.

Conclusions

What conclusions can we draw? Firstly, that Menapia existed, derived from and trading across the sea with its Irish partner before the Roman occupation, and then in a time when the Romans demanded a lot of security. Was this needed? With the newly discovered legionary fort in the area, it is of note that all four sons of Einudd had a major Roman camp nearby 'to keep an eye on them'. (Segontium for Cernwy, Chester/Deva for Degonnwy in Llydaw and Caerleon/Isca Silurum for Siluria. The Demetae seemed generally to accept Roman rule and cooperate. Carmarthen became a '*civitas*', or administrative centre, with a grid system of streets and an amphitheatre, Latin was spoken by the upper classes, and the ruling families left in place as long as cooperation with taxes and contributing men as soldiers continued.

If Carausius was indeed from these parts and the son of Caradog ap Einudd, may he have been associated with the Celtic fort described above?

John Pitts, April 2025

Footnote

How do we know where Carausius came from?

We do not have reliable sources where we can triangulate and confirm with confidence. A single source, taken as authoritative, can be passed on and on without challenge or question. The 'traditional' and much repeated view is that he came from the tribal homeland of the Menapian tribe around the modern Netherlands. This is because around AD 400, Aurelius Victor, from north Africa, later an Urban Prefect in Rome and Governor of Upper Pannonia, described Carausius as a 'citizen of Menapia'; the only time this attribution was made and appearing as a placename. With Alexandria having the greatest library in the world, perhaps he had access to Ptolemy's map and was describing Wexford? Around the same time, Eumenius, a panegyricist, described Carausius as 'an alumnus of Batavia' (the Roman term for the land around the Scheldt estuary). This term, which translates to 'an old boy of...' can be interpreted as a descendant who has moved away and is quite compatible with being from a family settled in one of their colonies around the time that the Menapians as a tribe were fading from history. This view was not challenged until writers such as the now partially rehabilitated Geoffrey of Monmouth started to consider a British origin. Between the 14th and 18th centuries, more opinions arose, with some authors, for example, such as William Campbell, John Rhys, Gilbert Stone and Hugh Williams agreeing that a British or Welsh origin was at least plausible. The work of Darrell Wolcott of the Center for the Study on Ancient Wales, cited here, by creating chronologically stable pedigrees from fragments of documents, gives strong support to the Welsh claim.

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Possible origins of Carausius in the literature

Traditional/most quoted	Britain	Ireland	Wales
Aurelius Victor, 4 th century	Geoffrey of Monmouth, 12 th century	Jean Tristan 17 th century	William Stukely, 18 th century
Eumenius, 4 th century	John of Fordun, 14 th century	Walker, 17 th century	Bertram, 18 th century
Eutropius, 4 th century	Hector Boethius, 15 th century	Bergaro, 17 th century	Wolcott, 20 th century
Orosius, 4 th century	Zabarella, 17 th century	Claude Genebrier, 18 th century	Pitts, 21 st century
Bede, 7 th century	Campbell, 19 th century	Rhys, 19 th century	
Nennius, 9 th century	?Casey, 20 th century		

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