

An exploration of Menapia in Ireland

Claudius Ptolemy, the Greco-Roman polymath who lived in Alexandria in the second century, as well as his interests in mathematics and astronomy created a series of maps, known collectively as the Geographia. He never travelled; his maps were drawn secondhand from reports from mariners and adventurers who were sailing and trading in those areas. Around AD150 he created a map of Ireland as part of a British series, the *Prima Europe Tabula*. On this was identified the town of Menapia, a homeland to the original tribe from the Low Countries, i.e Belgium and the Netherlands, who traded widely and also established colonies and trading posts in Brittany, Anglesey, west Wales at St. David's and the Isle of Man.

Most sailors at the time travelled close to the coasts, and on longer crossings relied on celestial navigation. Recording details to the level seen, without recourse to any modern instruments that we now take for granted, was remarkable. Some errors, such as a much more southerly position for the Isle of Man, are easily forgivable.

This Menapia, now corresponding to the modern town of Wexford, and with the later establishment of the site in west Wales, are the only sites given this name.



Ptolemy's Map of Ireland AD150

The Irish Menapia

In 2022 through instinct and intuition, Reilten Murphy identified the remains of a promontory hill fort within the centre of Wexford (1). Of necessity for this paper I am including her full description and rationale for her assumptions.

My 'newly discovered' promontory is shown on a map of Wexford dated 1764 and printed in Billy Colfer's book 'Wexford: A Town and its Landscape'. This finger of land - its outline is now muffled by reclaimed land, housing, and roads - is clearly visible on the map, identified as an area of open land on which sits the barracks. I have two advantages over this early map, one is a lifelong curiosity about archaeology and the other is a vivid imagination: it was an easy step to move from actual promontory to proposed promontory fort.

To one end of this promontory stands the Barracks, on the site of Wexford's 13th-century castle; this, it has been claimed, was preceded by Norse occupation of the site; but such was surely preceded in turn by something still earlier to take account of the views across to the River Slaney and Wexford's natural harbour. At the other end is the Faythe, with possible earthworks under Saint Michael's graveyard, and a slight rise suggesting a processional walkway leading from Swan View Terrace right down to the far end of the triangle. The trees are planted on top of the rise, which is visible in the Lawrence Collection photographs of the Faythe.



Looking at the map let us begin at 'A' and proceed to 'B'. We have begun in the garden of Castle House, as it is called in the map; Taylor's Castle is its local name - the old Farmers' Co-Op is another name - throughout the 1800s this eight-bedroomed house was called variously Castle Hill, and Castle House. Its final inhabitant Charles Taylor called it simply The Castle; it is, peculiarly, a house with no particular name. Situated at the top of Barrack Street/ Castlehill Street/ Kevin Barry Street, the majestic Castle House is described in about 1840 as being in an inferior position for a building of its size. Looking at maps, it becomes obvious that this Castle House, which now has an entrance off Parnell Street and a beautiful c1840 wall to its south, previously entered via the Faythe. Castlehill Street/ Kevin Barry Street/ Barrack Street ran all the way down the hill without a break - but even on the earliest 1800s map that I could find, those comparatively modest houses had tiny back yards only

a few feet from the rear of Castle House. Peel them away completely and the house commands views in every direction. A bowling green and House can be dated back to about 1630 but I have not yet got further back. We can get an idea of the ground level of Castle House by peering in through its Parnell Street entrance. Then, holding that level in mind, we can look in at the Barracks and compare the two levels: I think they are similar, I think our promontory fort was quite flat.

To get an idea of this height above sea-level, I recommend a real visit to the nearby terrace at Fishers Row which overlooks the sea at about the same level as Castle House.

The perimeter then breaks to allow Parnell Street to join Trinity Street - both reclaimed from the sea in the early 1800s. Parnell Street is entirely artificial - its slope is made by pulling down the loose high land of the bowling green and patting it into shape to form a slope - like a giant child adjusting a sandcastle: is it any wonder that the street took such damage in the 1970s during the construction of main drainage? If we pop the bowling green back into place, we can walk comfortably along the sea edge and can look to see what it was that is called a bowling green. The name suggests a flat place, and the same Wexford Independent says it was big enough for soldiers to use it for their military exercise. Was it an enclosed space repurposed as a bowling green by Wexford Castle's inhabitants when bowling greens were fashionable in the time of the last King Charles? Was it perhaps, part of an ancient earthworks?

Having walked past the bowling green, we arrive at the Barracks and can easily continue round the outside of its high wall enclosure where the sea lapped against the base of this steep hill long ago – see page 76 of Billy Colfer's 'Wexford: A Town and its Landscape' for his lovely painting of Wexford Castle which stood on this site. As we round the top of the hill to where we join Barrack Street, we shall take a break at point 'B'.

Hop with me to point 'E' at the top of the map. We are standing on Main Street with our backs to Boylesports Bookmakers - and the sea - and are facing the exit of Stonebridge carpark just beside 'The Sky And The Ground' pub. We are, in fact, standing on the old stone bridge. Look right and see how the land slopes up Main Street, left and it bumps along to cross King Street and to meet Barrack Street which slopes steeply up. Let the town dissolve, let the years peel back, let even the stone bridge beneath our feet disappear, leaving us hovering in a gap between two rocky outcrops looking up a valley where the Bishopswater River now flows mainly underground. But back then, long, long ago, might the river have met the sea at this gap in the rocks, and backfilled to become a lake? The Vikings settled on Bride Street to our right - were they lakeside dwellers and did they bring their longship into the lake to moor at their doorstep? But where is this lake now - well, the land is flat within this valley (or so it seems to me) and I suggest that the lake silted up, perhaps due to the building of the stone bridge - because surely a stone bridge would be unnecessary once the area had become firm?

Let us return to 'B' and proceed to 'C' at The Folly. A steep hill (with Bishopswater River or my lake) would have been its boundary long ago - that the hill is steep, is clear when we get to Lambert Place (Bunker's Hill in local memory). Lambert Place connects the top of Parnell Street down to King Street and was constructed after Parnell Street. Some more houses on Michael Street bring us as far as a gap known locally as the Folly, called Mill Road on this map of 1881: Folly House still exists.

*In 'The Story of Wexford Town', Monica Crofton suggested that the name Folly might be Irish for 'walls', and as I think Swan View Terrace at 'D' respects the line of ancient ramparts, it all fits nicely together. At a mid-point of Swan View Terrace, the raised processional walkway marches off down the Faythe to the far point of its peculiar triangle. Archaeologist Dr. Ronan O'Flaherty pointed out to me that the name 'Faythe' which comes from the Irish *faithche* means a 'green', and specifically the green in front of a dwelling place or a fort. He also advised that the triangular character of the Faythe does call to mind the shape of early Iron Age processional ways.*

Did anyone live at the Faythe long, long ago before the Vikings? It seems that at least three people did: two buried in urns and, presumably, the one who buried those urns so carefully. Where did I encounter this Beckett-like trio? The 'Wexford Independent' of May 20th, 1840, tells us that a "man digging in his garden in the Faythe last Friday uncovered two flat stones surrounded by many smaller

ones placed edgewise. On removing them two urns were discovered containing on the top ashes of a fine and perfectly dry kind and filled with particles of calcined bones and wood.... The urns were of unbaked clay, nearly all of one shape and bell-mouthed, about 21 inches by 9, and destitute of any ornament. On exposure to the air, and rain falling at the time, but more particularly to the contact of ignorant curiosity, they have nearly crumbled to pieces....” Within just a week this “Pot of Gold”, this cist burial - after so many years in the ground - had crumbled away. (Note: A burial type typical, of Menapians)

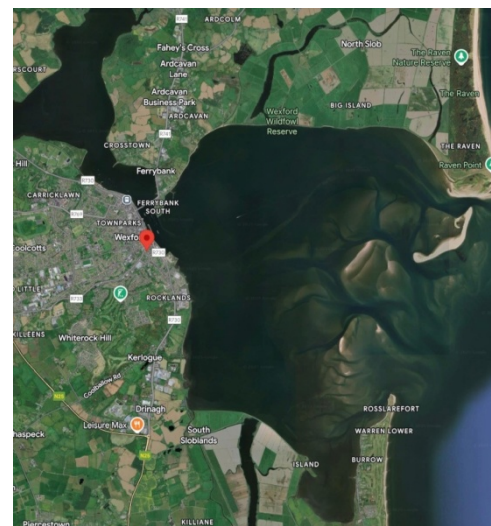
Let us return to our original ‘X’. From where we stand, the bases of headstones in Saint Michael’s graveyard are clearly visible, high up above Michael Street where the ground level is far higher than anywhere else. An entrance to the graveyard is off Kevin Barry Street (Castle Hill Street) and steep steps lead up to the graves. Saint Michael’s church is long gone, but I remember that places dedicated to Saint Michael, tend to be high up and not only is this position high above the sea and surrounding land but if I am correct about ramparts, then this is the highest place at an already high place. It is difficult to see where the church once stood but I wonder if Michael Street is the street which lead from the Faythe to the church for the ordinary folk to attend Mass? The now Kevin Barry Street which joins the easterly end of Swan View Terrace (and is very close to an earlier mapped entrance to Castle House) may have been the entrance to Castle House, the bowling green, and Wexford Castle?

The waterfront area of this town has been changed greatly through land reclamation and building. Furthermore there may have been sea level changes due to continuing post-glacial rebound that has led to rising of land in Scotland and falling in the south of these islands, as can be shown across St. George’s channel in West Wales (2).

Nevertheless, consideration of maps shows that this fort had a commanding position over the harbour. The geography is plain, what is not yet done is an archaeological investigation, but it seems reasonable to claim that what Reiltin Murphy has identified is the Iron Age fort at the centre of the town of Menapia.



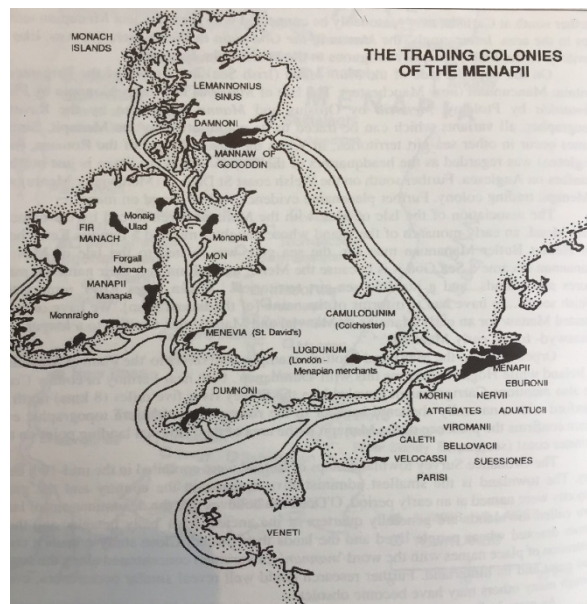
Eighteenth century map of Wexford Harbour (the fort being at the eastern end where the barracks are marked (Colfer (2008)(3)



Google Earth image today showing the position of the fort

Who were the Menapians?

The Menapians were 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 Irish Menapia was founded around 200BC.



Trading colonies of the Menapians (Mongan,1995)

In 55BC, the original homelands were invaded by the Tencturi and Usipetes who were under pressure from the more powerful Suebians (4).

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.

Notes 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 (8) 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. As in Ireland, the Menapians left their mark in history: descendants included fourteen consecutive kings and rulers of Dyfed (9,10), and medieval Welsh nobility (11).

In summary

With the passage of time, population growth, urbanisation, civic development and land reclamation, current evidence is speculative and circumstantial.

We have a confluence of history, cartography, topography, cultural habits, genetics and folk memory that indicates that this site is where Ptolemy's Iron Age town of Menapia was situated. Archaeological exploration at any accessible sites would be welcome, although as typical of iron-age structures made substantively of timber and thatch, only the low walls of the round houses remain and possibly a great hall are likely to remain.

Acknowledgements

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