

Archaeological Survey at Pen Bryn Yr Eglwys, Carmel Head, Anglesey, North Wales

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Summary

This is a report to present a drawn earthwork survey undertaken in June 2009 at Pen Bryn Yr Eglwys, Carmel Head, Anglesey, North Wales.

Introduction

Pen Bryn Yr Eglwys is a low lying earthwork on the north-west coast of Anglesey, North Wales. Two interpretations of the earthwork have been proffered: the first is that it is a small church, the second that it is a roman watch tower. The name (Pen = head, Bryn=hill, Eglwys= church) indicates an association with the foundation of a church. Documentary research has demonstrated that the land once formed part of the Mynachy estate which was held by Cistercain monks from Aberconwy.

The visible earthworks at the site may however have a more ancient origin and it has been suggested that they represent the remains of a third century Roman watch tower associated with Caer y Twr watch tower on HolyHead Mountain (Crew 1980/1981). It has been postulated that these two sites form part of a larger system of stations lining the North Wales coast (Dark 2002, Arnold & Davies 2000, Livens 1981, Mason 2003, White 2007). Livens associates the site with twelve other coastal sites, some of which have been destroyed by quarrying in the recent past. Pen Bryn Yr Eglwys is one of the most promising of the surviving suggested sites.

Site Location, Topography and Geology

Pen Bryn Yr Eglwys is located on the north western coast of Anglesey (Figure 1). The underlying geological make up of this area is bed rock of a crystalline type known as 'gneiss'. This forms part of the rare "Carmel Head Thrust". The site itself is situated on an raise appropriately 81 meters above sea level. Ground cover is rough grazing with gorse

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bushes and rocky outcrops. This land is currently used by a tenant farmer for the grazing of cattle and sheep.

Archaeological & Historic Back Ground

Roman Evidence

In 1980 a sketch survey of the site was conducted by Peter Crew. It was concluded that Pen Yr Bryn Eglwys represented a Roman watch tower operating in conjunction with Caer-Y-Twr, Holyhead mountain and Caer Gybi, a fourth century fortlet in Holyhead. These structures were built to defend against the barbarian attacks mentioned by Ammianus Marcellinus. It has been suggested that these watch towers are elements in a larger signalling system heading east to Chester. Hen Waliau, Caernarvon is thought to be a later edition to the Roman defences and would point to a need for coastal fortification (Crew 1981b).

In December 2008 Gwynedd Archaeological Trust was commissioned by Cadw to conduct a general site survey. This concluded that the size and alignment of the surviving remains are unlikely to be those of a church (GAT pers com).

Circumstances of the project

Of the thirteen watch tower sites suggested by Livens (1981) Pen Bryn Yr Eglwys represents the best above ground survival. It is the only site to have direct visual association with the only confirmed watch tower site at Caer-Y-Twr on Holyhead mountain. The excavation of Pen Bryn Yr Eglwys and its confirmation as a Roman military structure would act as a firm basis from which to re-evaluate the plausibility of a coastal signal system in use though out the Roman and Post -Roman period. A number of sites will be considered including the 13 suggested by Liven. This investigation will include documentary research (as some of the sites no longer exist) and field survey with the possibility of excavation.

Methodology

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The investigation will adhere to the IFA standards and guidance for the archaeological investigation and recording of standing buildings or structures

Analytical drawing

Based on suitable scaled base drawing or photogrammetric plot but showing relative phasing and stratigraphic analysis of the structure, for example on changes in materials, butt joints, key joints, mortar, surface treatments or other constructional details. May comprise sections, elevations, details and plans (IFA 2008).

Site survey

Scaled survey showing buildings, structures or complexes in their local setting, including significant locational features, such as plot boundaries, undertaken by hand-measured survey or by electronic data collection (IFA 2008).

Appropriate plans and sections will be made at 1:50, 1:20 & 1:10 Scale and a photographic record of the investigations and individual features will be prepared. Panoramic photographs will be taken at set level to give a 360 degree view of the landscape and appropriate features.

Results

The results showed a roughly square earthwork measuring approximately 13m by 11m with a surviving height of approximately 0.80m. The south west corner was overgrown with gorse bushes which obscured the earthwork. However a site visit in December indicated that it is similar to the other visible parts of the bank. In the south east corner of the earthwork there is a stone clearance cairn. To the north west there is a pronounced indentation which could be indicative of an entrance. The large spread of remains could indicate a rubble spread, possibly protecting archaeological deposits. Internally there is a large pit in the North East corner which possibly indicates robbing or some unrecorded exaction.

Discussion

Comparisons with the Caer-Y-Twr watch tower (5.45m squared) show that Pen y Bryn Egwlys (13m by 11m) is a much larger site, comparable in size with the watch tower sites

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of the Gask Ridge (Figure 3). The Gask Ridge sites have surviving external wall circuits of 10m by 10m, and usually have an internal arrangement of four or six post holes (Hanson & Friell 1995).

The exposed position and height of Pen Bryn Yr Egwlys gives it a clear line of sight to both Caer Gyby and Caer-Y- Twr to the south west and along the coast in the North west . Inland there is a good view of Parys Mountain which is a suggested site of Roman industrial activity.

The morphology of Pen Bryn Yr Egwlys earthwork corresponds to known watch tower sites and locations. It is hoped that excavation will provide a clear understanding of the chronology of the site, its functions and use.

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