

Although Ireland was never a Roman province, the ancients were clearly fascinated by this mysterious island beyond their empire. Two geographers of the early first century AD, Strabo and Pomponius Mela, portray it as a cold land inhabited by savages who eat the flesh of their dead fathers and commit incest with their mothers and sisters. However, the vegetation is so lush and tasty that cattle will explode if allowed to graze too long. In contrast to these old wives' tales, the second-century geographer Ptolemy provides coordinates for drawing a surprisingly detailed map of Ireland, with 55 names of tribes, towns, rivers and headlands. This information may have come from merchants, or possibly from Roman expeditions to the island. While no invasion of Ireland is specifically recorded, the Romans had certainly contemplated the idea. Tacitus writes that his father-in-law Agricola, when governor of Britain in the 80s, had hopes of invading the island, which he believed could be conquered with one legion and a few auxiliaries. A few years later, Juvenal boasts, "We have indeed advanced our arms beyond the shores of Iuverna (Ireland) and the recently captured Orcades (Orkney Islands)".

Juvenal's claim was dismissed as poetic exaggeration until archaeological discoveries suggested that the Romans may, after all, have extended their power across the Irish Sea. In 1927 a unique group of burials was unearthed on Lambay, a small island off the coast of County Dublin. The grave goods included Roman brooches and decorative metalwares similar to those produced in northern Britain, probably dating to the late first century AD. These foreign objects do not, of course, prove a Roman presence on Lambay: the Irish archaeologist Barry Raftery plausibly suggests that the burials may represent Britons fleeing reprisals after the Romans crushed a revolt by the Brigantes in the year 74.

The latest find, however, is a potential block-buster. At Drumanagh in County Dublin, trial explorations have revealed traces of a Roman coastal fort on a promontory jutting into the Irish Sea. The 40-acre site is defended on three sides by steep cliffs and on the remaining

side by a system of three earthen ramparts separated by ditches. Coins found at Drumanagh date to the Flavians and early second century, precisely the period in which Tacitus and Juvenal hint at a possible Roman invasion. The strongly defended fort is believed to have accommodated several hundred inhabitants, living in densely clustered huts. Nearby is an excellent harbour which may account in part for the site's importance. An article in the *Sunday Times* for Jan. 21, 1996 describes Drumanagh as a Roman beachhead for military operations in Ireland, and quotes the eminent archaeologist Barry Cunliffe as calling it "one of the most important Roman sites in Europe".

Large-scale excavation has been delayed by a legal dispute between the Irish government and the private owner of the site. Moreover, the jewelry and other artifacts recovered so far are stored in the Dublin museum and have not been made public. In any case, the presence of Roman artifacts on a site does not prove that the people who used them were "Romans". Until Drumanagh is properly excavated and its finds published, we lack adequate criteria to state with confidence whether this is a genuine Roman coastal fortification, or a defended Romano-British trading post, or a native Irish settlement influenced by Roman material culture. If archaeological evidence should eventually support the idea that the Roman army invaded Ireland, we shall be left to wonder why this achievement is not clearly mentioned in our sources. One possible reason can be surmised from Tacitus: if the Romans followed Agricola's advice and attempted to conquer Ireland with only one legion, their invasion may well have ended in an embarrassing defeat.