

Archaeologists discover Roman fort

31 January 2008

University of Exeter archaeologists have discovered a Roman fort in South East Cornwall. Dating back to the first century AD, this is only the third Roman fort ever to have been found in the county. The team believes its location, close to a silver mine, may be significant in shedding light on the history of the Romans in Cornwall.

Situated next to St Andrew's Church, Calstock, the site is on top of a hill in an area known to have been involved with silver mining in medieval times. University archaeologists became interested in the site when they found references in medieval documents to the smelting of silver 'at the old castle' and 'next to the church' in Calstock.

The team conducted a geophysical survey, which clearly showed the outline of a feature that is a very similar shape to another Roman fort recently found near Lostwithiel. They started digging and uncovered the unique and instantly-recognisable shape of a Roman military ditch, confirming their find as a Roman fort.

Dr Stephen Rippon of the University of Exeter's School of Geography, Archaeology and Earth Resources, said: "When I first saw the results from the geophysical survey, suggesting the outline of a Roman fort, I could hardly believe my eyes. As an archaeologist it is so rare to find something so significant, which was previously entirely unknown. It's a very exciting discovery."

The team of excavators, led by University of Exeter research fellow Chris Smart, has also dug up pottery, believed to be from the first century AD. Perhaps the most intriguing finds, though, are the remains of furnaces, possibly related to silver working. The team will now use radiocarbon dating techniques to establish the age of these finds. If they are Roman, this will show for the first time the Romans' interest in exploiting Cornish minerals.

Very little is known about the Roman occupation in Cornwall, so this discovery could mark an important step in piecing together this period of

history. Dr Rippon continued: "The Roman army only stayed in the South West for a few decades after the Conquest, before moving on to Wales. This find could help us to understand whether they were merely keeping watch over the locals, or were actually interested in exploiting commercial opportunities in the region. The discovery could therefore further our understanding of the rich history of mining in the county."

The two other known sites of Roman forts in Cornwall are also in the South East of the county. One was discovered last year near Restormel Castle, Lostwithiel, and the other is at Nanstallon, near Bodmin. Both sites are close to mineral deposits in areas associated with tin mining.

Source: University of Exeter

APA citation: Archaeologists discover Roman fort (2008, January 31) retrieved 15 September 2019 from <https://phys.org/news/2008-01-archaeologists-roman-fort.html>

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