

A Research Framework for the Archaeology of Wales Early Medieval

1. Introduction

The early medieval period in Wales embodies a process of fundamental social, political and economic transition from which – in language, human landscapes, culture and belief - the recognisable beginnings of Wales itself first emerged.

While the broad outlines of that story have traditionally been – correctly or otherwise – stitched together from scant historical sources, the independent archaeological investigation of the early medieval era remains relatively little developed. Perhaps surprisingly, post war archaeological developments such as the systematic use of aerial photography, new dating techniques, palaeo-environmental studies and the growth of metal detecting have not significantly impacted on the available resource of early medieval archaeological data in Wales. Even the exciting excavation work that has been done in the last 40 years (e.g. ranging from the contrasting settlements at Dinas Powys, Llangorse crannog, and Llanbedrgoch to ecclesiastical/cemetery sites such as Capel Maelog and Capel Fraid) has served more to point up the inadequacies of our wider knowledge than to inform a rounded archaeological picture of the period (although certainly demonstrating the archaeological potential for such broader insight).

It is against this background that the research agenda has been developed – in essence, while there is a pressing need for a coordinated plan of study, the existing state of knowledge means that the agenda must still accommodate some fairly basic questions.

2. A Provisional Research Agenda

2.1 Themes

- Settlement Archaeology
- Economy, Land-Use and Exploitation of Natural Resources
- Ecclesiastical Sites and Cemeteries
- Social and Cultural Continuity, Change and Conflict

2.2 Current Weaknesses

- Over-reliance on limited number of possibly atypical (high status) excavated settlement sites, with little understanding of overall settlement context or patterning
- Poor archaeological evidence for cultural patterns/population shifts suggested by historical record (Irish settlement in the SW, Viking incursions, Mercian/Anglo-Saxon settlement in the east)
- General lack of archaeological evidence for the character and development of ecclesiastical sites and the original context of surviving monuments such as inscribed stones
- Poor understanding of the extent of continuity from settlement/political/economic patterns of Late Roman to EM and from EM to medieval period (e.g. do medieval llysoedd/maerdrefi have EM origins?)
- Lack of an integrated picture of the economic and subsistence context of the period or of the wider EM environment

2.3 Research Questions

- What was the character and organisation of settlement in the EM period, and the relationship between high status and other categories of site?
- How do EM settlement patterns relate to those of the preceding Romano-British and subsequent Medieval periods?
- What was the pattern of relationship/interaction between different political and cultural groups in the EM period (including the extent and influence of incursion/settlement by incoming Irish, Viking and Anglo-Saxon groups)?
- What was the character of EM ecclesiastical sites, and how did the built landscape of early Christianity emerge and develop in the EM period?
- What was the detail and nature of EM patterns of industrial activity, exchange and trade?
- What was the wider environmental context of the EM landscape?

2.4 Approaches

2.4.1 *Analytical background*

- Improve site identification and models for EM site recognition
- Establish potential EM components of existing 'Prehistoric' and 'Medieval' sequences
- Exploit existing data resource by facilitating publication of outstanding backlog of EM excavation work

2.4.2 *Data handling and management of the potential EM archaeological resource*

- Exploit planning archaeology to develop geographical coverage of known EM sites
- Develop contact with metal detecting groups and use Portable Antiquities Scheme to facilitate new site identification

2.4.3 *New research work*

- Target specific landscapes/existing known sites for detailed survey/research
 - Continuing excavation of known sites where partial excavation has already occurred
 - Targeted excavation of other areas where EM remains are likely or known (e.g. domestic sites in the vicinity of ecclesiastical sites, early English settlement suggested by place-name evidence)
 - Pro-active survey/evaluation programmes of possible EM settlement foci (backward projection from later cantref, commote and parish boundaries)
- Develop research linked with study of other periods (Prehistoric/Medieval) where continuity to/from EM period is likely
 - Undertake area excavation of 'Prehistoric' enclosure/hillfort sites where EM occupation is likely (e.g. multivallate promontory forts in the SW)
 - Excavation on Llysoedd/Maerdrefi sites to establish evidence for/nature of EM origins

- Undertake modern archaeological excavation of late Roman settlement/military sites
- Develop (in tandem with other periods) programme of EM palaeo-environmental research
 - Develop EM components of environmental survey work in areas with high potential (e.g Severn tidal zone, Offa's/Wat's dykes)
 - Develop programmes of palaeo-environmental research to geographically tie into known areas of EM settlement activity
- Follow recommendations of Cadw/Welsh trusts EM ecclesiastical sites research project
 - Survey/evaluation of possible ecclesiastical sites suggested by historical evidence
 - Sample excavation of curvilinear church yards for dating/structural evidence
 - Archaeological exploration of areas around in-situ inscribed stones
- Develop research into the processes of interaction between different cultural/political groups
 - Develop research recommendations of Cadw/CPAT short dykes project
 - Programmes of survey and excavation to build on existing Offa's Dyke Project work
 - Pursue identification of Viking and Anglo-Saxon artefacts types/site identification (portable antiquities scheme etc.)

Note – This draft version of the agenda had not been ratified by other EM group members at the time of the September 4th 2004 seminar meeting, and may therefore be subject to some further revision.

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