

A Research Framework for the Archaeology of Wales: Medieval

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Introduction

This paper updates the research framework for the medieval period in Wales (c. AD 1070 - 1539), following the conference held in 2010. The framework has developed over several stages. The medieval period was initially examined in 2001 (Davidson 2003), following which four regional frameworks were compiled, to be summarised in 2005 for all of Wales (Austin 2004). The framework was re-examined in 2009 by David Longley, and the results for the medieval period made available in 2010 (Longley 2010a). These papers made many valuable comments on the current state of medieval studies, and few if any of the issues that were raised have been adequately resolved in the intervening years. This paper supplements rather than replaces those earlier studies and provides an update following the conference discussions. It is accompanied by an updated bibliography for the period 2005-2012.

Medieval archaeology cannot be easily divorced from the study of the medieval period undertaken through other disciplines (Andersson *et al* 2009, 27). Advances in historical understanding and the improved availability of historical source material (e.g. Pryce 2005; Smith 2009) can influence archaeological interpretation, or encourage re-interpretation. The combined study of archaeology and history is most clearly witnessed in county histories (Griffiths *et al* 2008), though also in architectural and building studies (Suggett 2005; Robinson 2006; Turner and Johnson 2006). Techniques borrowed from historical geography are now well integrated into archaeological studies, many overlapping with landscape studies (Bezant 2009) and settlement morphology. However, Austin (2005) rightly draws attention to the danger of allowing archaeological interpretation to be too heavily influenced by models originating from other disciplines, and he argues for a more archaeologically based approach, which he terms 'biographies of place', and in particular more detailed and focused excavation.

The thematic study of specific site types, whether (for example) of castles or monasteries, is a necessary precursor to wider interrelated studies. All sites operated within complex spatial, social and economic environments, and it is easy to lose sight of these relationships when concentrating on a specific theme. Both church and lay lords owned land and estates, operated within social hierarchies, undertook building programmes and were responsible for technological advances. High and low status settlements were mutually dependent. Archaeology can help tease out the inter-relationship of settlements, their morphology and hierarchy, together with their evolution and change. Increased understanding at this level feeds back into more detailed thematic studies, in the quest for both more empirically derived models and social explanations. Chronological and thematic divisions are necessary aids to understanding and study, but the divisions, such as those used below, need to remain flexible, so as not to constrain understanding.

One final point. Many of the references listed at the end of this paper focus on local and regional studies. But there is a need too for national assessments and overviews. In this respect we seem to lag behind the other countries within the British Isles. By way of example, in Oliver Creighton's important study of medieval elite landscapes (2009) his discussion of deer parks draws attention to specific parks in England, Scotland and Ireland. Wales is identifiable only by its omission, demonstrating that there is still much to do

Settlement

Rural settlement and associated land use

The completion of the Deserted Rural Settlement project, undertaken by the four Welsh Archaeological Trusts and funded by Cadw (Roberts 2006), provided a new platform for the development of rural settlement studies. This has yet to be fully taken advantage of in terms of further regional studies, though the overwhelming message to emerge was the need for more detailed settlement excavation combined with wider landscape study (Austin 2006). One of the disadvantages of the DRS project was that, through its own remit, it concentrated on deserted settlements with upstanding remains, and these inevitably occur more frequently in marginal upland Wales, leaving lowland Wales less well studied. Silvester and Kissock (2012, 168), in a recent overview, draw attention to this gap in our knowledge, but also identify the need for further detailed excavation. It is of interest that few rural medieval settlements are found whilst carrying out extensive watching briefs along pipelines or roads within lowland areas, which superficially, at least, implies less desertion and more continuity on lowland sites.

Our understanding of territorial organisation through the identification of cantref, commote, maenol and tref has increased through recent studies (Longley 2010b; Bezant 2009), but much remains to be done to understand differences within Wales as reflected within medieval sources, including the definition, growth and decline of maenor/maenol and the usefulness of the multiple estate model (Jones 1998; Charles-Edwards 2013, 282-92; Barnwell and Roberts 2011), and how these historical models might be manifested archaeologically. There is little doubt that models of territorial organisation were adapted to fit a polity that was itself under constant change, but the extent to which these changes influenced the archaeological record has been little explored.

The themes which emerge from recent literature are, firstly the paucity of excavated evidence which has resulted in a lack of understanding of the nature and chronology of rural settlement, and secondly the concentration on 'point data' to the detriment of the landscape dimension in settlement studies. Longley (2010) in his conference paper also drew attention to the importance of hierarchical relationships. The location of regional centres in the form of *maerdrefi*, or demesne farms and their related courts (*llysoedd*) were examined intensively for north-west Wales some twenty years ago, but this work is only now being followed up elsewhere in Wales.

The next stage is identifying the relationship between regional hubs and related settlements, the patterns of roads and fields, the location of mills. That is, the identification on the ground of the landscape described in the 13th and 14th-century medieval extents. Two recent landscape studies go some way towards meeting this aim, and explore the relationship of site, landscape and territorial organisation (Bezant 2009 and Comeau 2010). Both of these studies refer to the relationships between settlement patterns and tenure, and draw attention to the current lack of recognition of tenurial patterns as archaeological remains. A warning is sounded, too, that the better understood models from north-west Wales may well not hold for other areas of Wales.

This all points to the need for targeted excavation of a variety of settlement types, combined with wider interdisciplinary studies to place settlements within their geographical and chronological contexts, and the need to examine the cross-over from deserted sites to those with long-term continuity of occupation.

Key research questions include:

- The identification of social hierarchy
- Differentiating the settlement forms of native Welsh and incoming Anglo-Normans
- The location and distribution of settlement
- Identifying lowland settlements in north and mid-Wales
- The wider setting of settlements within their agrarian landscapes
- Better identification of land use and its pattern throughout the Middle Ages
- Linking settlement type to tenure and social hierarchy
- Architectural development of structures within settlements
- Change and development in settlement across the medieval/post-medieval transition

Earthwork castles

The chronological development of the earthwork castles in Wales, and their adoption by Welsh rulers, remains poorly understood. Phillips (2006) has provided a useful summary of the earthwork castles of Gwent and Eryng, but once again studies need to move beyond simple identification, and into more detailed analysis through excavation and landscape contextualisation. Many of the mounds have no contemporary documentation, and it is often not possible to differentiate between earthen castles built by Normans during early incursions, and those built by Welsh rulers. Their location close to Welsh centres of administration has long been recognised, but the reasons for this correlation in siting are more difficult to identify.

Key research questions include:

- The reasons for location – are they associated with existing focal points?
- The extent to which they were built by Welsh lords following the early Norman incursions
- Their subsequent administrative or military role

- Their impact on the wider landscape, and the creation of planned landscapes around them
- The nature of their construction
- The nature of structural remains associated with both motte and bailey
- Reasons for and timing of their abandonment

Masonry castles

The publication of the excavations at Dryslwyn Castle undertaken between 1980 and 1995 (Caple 2007) makes available considerable new evidence on the use and development of castles by Welsh rulers. The increase in construction of masonry castles in the early 13th century is noted, and their evolution from a combined tradition of Welsh *llysoedd* and Norman motte and bailey castles is discussed. The archaeological evidence for siege warfare at Dryslwyn is exceptionally good. The excavation report and accompanying discussion provide a firm foundation for further work on Welsh castle sites in Wales.

The use of castles as administrative centres of commotes or lordships, adopting the role developed by the *llys* and *maerdref*, requires further research. Whilst there is little doubt the castles were focal points, designed both for defence and as an expression of political and social power, they may not have fully taken the place of the regional administrative governance which relied on the payment of dues to support the circuit of the overlord. Smith (2011, 2012) draws attention to the continued use of the lesser defended *llys* as an administrative base, despite the construction and occupation of castles within the same commote.

The 2007 conference on the impact of the Edwardian castles in Wales (Williams and Kenyon 2010) provides a very useful summary of the current thinking on this subject. Robert Liddiard, in his conclusions for future work, draws attention to the need for wider landscape studies, and further study of the manipulation of the landscape, including gardens and parks. The impact of large population movements, necessary for the construction of the castles, and their impact on technology, including building and architectural design, industry and agriculture, should be identifiable in the archaeological record, but regional and national studies of these impacts are still required. But whether associated with castles or with other higher status sites, designed and elite landscapes have received little attention in Wales in contrast to England (Creighton 2009).

Individual castle studies are now relatively rare, but a recent study of Chepstow castle shows how they can make a considerable contribution to a wider understanding of castle studies, including advances in military architecture, and reassessing chronological and architectural development (Turner and Johnson 2006).

Key research questions include:

- Transition from earthwork castle to masonry castle
- The administrative role of the castle
- The military role of the castle

- The relationship of stone castles with summer grazing pastures
- Occurrence of elite landscapes in association with masonry castles
- The interaction of castles and towns
- The cultural and economic impact of castle buildings programmes, in particular those of Edward I
- The architectural development of native stone castles

Towns

A summary of our current knowledge of the history of towns in Wales largely from a social and cultural perspective has recently been published (Fulton 2012), though it includes a very useful summary of the architectural evidence (Suggett 2012; see also Dyer 2011). The recent programme of dendrochronological dating undertaken in north-west Wales has resulted in a much clearer understanding of the development of urban houses, and also the identification of additional examples. The potential for the survival of medieval houses behind later facades, though always recognised, has received a new boost from this project. However the underground archaeological evidence is much more fragmentary and these results have yet to be synthesised. This is partly because of the dispersed and sparse evidence available, much of it in grey literature. Buried archaeology is our best hope for the identification of pre-1400 town houses, and for identifying the early morphology, growth and development of towns.

The use of urban characterisation, though primarily a management tool, also has potential for identifying both remnants of early settlement patterns and the development of urban morphology. Advances have been made in the mapping of medieval townscapes (Lilley 2010), and there is potential for combining the results with improved mapping with other archaeological disciplines, including characterisation.

It is important to identify areas of archaeological potential, and to ensure these are appropriately managed through the planning system. Recent work in Conwy has demonstrated the survival of significant archaeological deposits, with considerable potential for the survival of buildings and palaeoecological evidence. Interdisciplinary studies, in particular combining characterisation (which involves an understanding of the architecture, historical development and geographical environment) with a better understanding of the buried archaeology, will contribute positively to fill the many current and significant gaps in knowledge.

Key research questions include:

- The identification of areas of high archaeological potential
- The architectural development of town buildings
- The evidence for environmental archaeology
- The development of town plans
- Interaction between town and rural hinterland
- Identification and understanding of town defences

The Church

There has been very little synthesis on church architecture, though useful overviews can be found in the Pevsner volumes, of which, at the time of writing, the Gwynedd volume is the latest (Haslam *et al*, 2009) and a revised Powys is shortly to be published. However, Richard Suggett (2011) discusses several useful aspects of later medieval church building, and draws attention to regional variations, the influence of domestic architecture on church building such as the desire for ornate roofs, highly decorative screens and west towers. The improved chronology through dendrochronological dating has informed a better understanding of architectural development. For example the close dating of the hammer beam roof at Llanidloes (felling date of 1538) reveals church building did not simply stop with the advent of the Reformation (Suggett 2011, 197). However very few examples, compared to domestic structures, have been dated, and this must be seen as a priority.

Thurlby (2006) looks at Romanesque sculpture throughout Wales in some detail, looking at patronage, style and chronology. He draws attention to the significance of the castle and priory at Chepstow, the influence of Bishop Urban at Llandaf and the work attributed to Gruffydd ap Cynan on Anglesey. Pre-12th century churches are virtually unknown, and the nature of the pre-Norman church, though largely outside this period, is a critical area that requires study through excavation.

Studies of individual churches are relatively few, but of particular interest is the re-examination of Penmon church on Anglesey by several authors, each offering slight variations in chronology and development (Thurlby 2006; Gem 2010; Longley 2012), but all suggest the rich Romanesque sculpture associated with the tower was secondary to an earlier plainer church.

Key research questions include:

- The development of church plans, particularly in the early period
- The development of window tracery and mouldings
- The use of fabric analysis as a guide to sequence and development.
- The development of ecclesiastical carpentry
- Patronage
- The identification of work by specific craftsmen and schools of work
- Use and development of churchyards

Monasteries

The synthesis of Cistercian monasteries in Wales by Robinson (2006) is of great value, and summarises and discusses the available historical, archaeological and architectural evidence. Similar syntheses are required for the remaining monastic and friary sites in Wales. Stöber (2011) summarises available historical evidence for the Regular Canons in Wales, but does not examine the archaeological evidence.

There has been less work undertaken on the monastic granges. However recent work at Strata Florida, which takes a much wider landscape view (Bezant and Austin 2007), shows the advantages and increased understanding from this wider approach.

Key research questions include:

- Location and development of granges
- The architectural development of monasteries, priories and friaries (building on the work undertaken by Robinson (2006) for Cistercian sites)
- The impact of monasteries on the wider landscape, in terms of both cultural and economic development

Industry

Aspects of medieval industry have been examined as part of a scheduling enhancement programme funded by Cadw and carried out by the Welsh Archaeological Trusts (Gwyn and Davidson 2012; Hankinson, Britnell and Silvester, 2012). These studies were able to identify sites relating to many aspects of medieval industry. However our knowledge remains relatively slight, and few sites have been excavated. The impact on industry occasioned by the demand of materials for the construction of monasteries and castles in the Middle Ages, and the geographic spread of ideas encouraged by the movement of craftsmen has not been fully examined. Extractive industries, including coal, iron ore, copper, lead, stone and slate all grew, as did their associated processing industries. Peter Crew has studied the development of iron working in Merioneth (Crew 2009), and Palmer has identified one source of freestone used in medieval times (Palmer 2009), whilst other examples are listed in Coulson (2005). Other industries, for which evidence has been found, but which have been little studied in recent times, include ore processing, coal mining, charcoal production, woollens and textiles, shipwrighting. The clay industries (brick making, roof and floor tiles, and pottery) are largely established on areas where suitable clays can be found, but again very few sites have been excavated. Other industries for which little work has been undertaken include glass making, leather working, paper making and salt works.

Key research questions include:

- Locating key industrial sites of all types and defining their extents
- Technological advances
- Identifying products and markets

Transport

That transport and communications come at the end of this review is, in a sense, a reflection of how little work has been undertaken on the subject in recent years. Apart from Andrew Fleming's work on a mid-Wales routeway (2009), and tangentially, the examination of the Newport ship (Howell and Trett 2008) there is little that we can point to. The road network, inland waterways as a mechanism for transport and trade, occasional canalisations, and coastal transport and harbours all merit attention.

Key research questions include:

- Understanding the road network
- Inland waterways as trade arteries
- Physical manifestations of coastal movement

Final Paper of 1st Review
May 2013