

A Research Framework for the Archaeology of Wales
East and Northeast Wales – Later Prehistoric
22/12/2003

Research Agenda a dynamic process

Context

- The current situation in Wales much archaeological excavation is funded via Developer funding.
- We need to address the implications of the emerging research agenda to both current funding sources and the structures within archaeology.
- Who are the Research Agenda for? On the face of it obvious, undoubtedly the profession. But also the people of Wales. Accessibility of information must be at the heart of what we do, must move away from an idea that archaeological information and particularly understanding is uniquely ours.
- Realisation that over the last 10 to 15 years there has been a decline in large scale excavation whether research or rescue. Balance needs to be readdressed but we also need to use developer funded archaeology to better answer questions within our research agenda.
- A need to analyse the 'grey' literature which exists, what, if anything, is it telling us about the later prehistoric period in north east Wales, both the negative and positive, i.e. are gaps really gaps.

As Archaeologists what are we trying to find out?

At its most basic 'What was life like in the past?' We should not lose sight of this simple aim.

We choose to look at different aspects of 'life', palaeoecology, ceramic studies, period studies, gender studies, military, settlement whatever, but all feed back into the fundamental, What was life like in the past?

Settlements

Strengths

Bronze Age: Enclosed Hilltops (predominantly information known from excavations on IA hillforts, i.e. fortuitous discovery?)

Iron Age: SMR lists 345 hillforts, 9 promontory forts, 227 defended enclosures, 7 enclosed settlements, 7 huts (individual??) 4 occupation sites, 1 unenclosed settlement

Weakness

Clusters of sites in the Welshpool area reflecting crop mark aerial survey work, therefore an assumption of date which has been little tested.

Might expect to find the same, or similar pattern/density in other low lying good agricultural areas.

Although many hillfort and settlement sites identified in SMRs actually few excavations in recent times exceptions Breidden, Moel Hiraddug, Moel y Gaer Rhosesmor(?), Bryn Euryn, Dinorben, Llanymynech, Domestic occupation Caersws, Collfryn,, Mount Pleasant, Melyd Avenue, Prestatyn.
Unpublished Excavation reports eg. Dinorben and Moel y Gaer Rhosesmor.

Opportunities

Look at the transition between LBA and IA

Should look at these sites in their wider environment. Traditional archaeology has looked at the hillfort from the Ramparts inwards and similarly with smaller (defended) enclosures. Increasing emphasis on landscape characterization work will perhaps allow us to look more closely at the settlements both in their landscape and in their relationship one to another.

Could argue that we know quite a lot about defences and their structure and how they were built, but little about the use of settlements, permanent? Seasonal? In times of conflict? A role for more environmental work here and more detailed analysis of the existing samples, bones etc.

We know much less about the 'domestic' sites, although the SMR lists within the term 'domestic' 227 defended enclosures, are we using the correct terminology? Distribution of this data has the domestic sites clustering around the mid and east of the area, hillforts by comparison are more evenly spread. Is this a true reflection of distribution? Are there differences in chronology? are there geographical reasons for the distinction? Relationship between hillforts and enclosures? What proportion of people lived outside enclosed settlements?

Agriculture (and links to settlement)

Strengths

Record shows evidence for 12 field systems, of which there have been excavations at one, New Pieces

Some environmental evidence

Weaknesses

Lack of information Environmental information relatively poor at this stage, only 9 charred plant macrofossil samples studied, 2 pollen samples, 4 waterlogged plant macrofossils.

Many gaps in our knowledge about food production, landscape, diet, use of organic materials.

Opportunities

Possibility in Tir Gofal schemes to look more closely at modern day field boundaries and field systems?

Increase aerial photography programme and analysis of the results.

Later Bronze Age and Iron Age

Mapwork? Relationship of eg. Hillforts with modern day boundaries, often used as medieval boundaries, is this a continuation of a more ancient pattern. Landscape analysis.

Increase programme of environmental sampling on known sites and their environs, linked to a dating programme? Value of looking at buried soils beneath hillfort defences.

Need more routine sieving on sites, more pollen core work. Should be done on most sites across the board, that way we know lack of information is a real gap not just because samples haven't been taken. Need to be written in more forcefully to the developers brief but how on earth fund? Not realistic to expect developers to completely fund this work. PPG Wales and Tan 60/96 does not allow for this, maybe need an extra 'pot' of money that contractors and researchers can tap into to fund the analysis to produce a multi-period environmental database.

Industry

Strengths and weaknesses

In fact know relatively little, in late BA period seems much of metal work and status items brought into the area (although this in turn may reflect social patterns of gifting/exchange??)

Assumption that iron recycled

Very poor in ceramic information excepting some VCP and Malvernian ware in later IA

Opportunities

The area contains the raw materials that you would expect to be exploited iron, Cu, lead, gold, stone, Potential for metal mining and production sites in the region.

Within a very short time of the Roman arrival in Britain Lead pigs were being exported from this area, is this indicative of a pre-existing 'industry' once again historic landscape characterization and subsequent work building on this may throw up some information

Look at areas of more recent extraction for evidence of earlier

Population and Gender

Strengths

Extrapolated evidence from hillfort and domestic evidence

Weaknesses

Lack of detailed chronology to superimpose on possible numbers. Many assumptions about who doing what in society, Know very little about gender roles, place of children within society, hints of their 'importance' in the BA with infant ear bones at Brenig.

Changes in burial practice from LBA through into IA mean we have little actual skeletal evidence, IA 2 Burials at Moel Hiraddug (and the Cerrig y Druddion

Later Bronze Age and Iron Age

hanging bowl presumed cist burial although no actual bones) Without the skeletal resource we cannot answer questions relating to population structure, age/life expectancy, disease

Opportunities

Look at transition in burial practices from BA through into IA (pan Wales?) what is happening? We at least need to know whether the information is there ie are there IA burials and we are just not finding or identifying them? Remains may not be there to find?

May get some information from documents /folk tales need expert analysis not fanciful extrapolation of tales

Politics and Social Structure

Strengths

Assumptions of a hierarchy related to site type, Hillfort construction evidence of some sort of 'control/coercion' Certainly evidence of possible planning of hillfort sites eg Moel y Gaer, Rhosesmor, entranceways, Dinorben, Moel Hiraddug, Pen y Corddyn

Weaknesses

Evidence often extrapolated from elsewhere in UK

Opportunities

Look closely at the distribution, size, scale and type of site across regions

As with population there is a role to be played by detailed analysis of documents, both Roman and early Welsh, which have been presumed to record events in the IA and earlier periods, the writing down of folk tales of an oral society. Need expert attention to the derivation of place names and content.

Spiritual Life

Strengths

LBA reuse of barrows ? Cist Burial Cerrig y Druddion with status object, Caergwrlle bowl found in bog, (links to other similar finds from other areas) Offerings in waterlogged places hint at some sort of belief system. Documentary references to Druids in later IA

Weaknesses

Extremely patchy understanding, but once again the information may just not be there to find. Lack of shrine sites?

Opportunities

There are opportunities for information within all excavations of the period, Also will need to devise projects which will be cross discipline to address these issues, look at holy wells of later period, early church locations etc??????

Artefacts

Strengths

Look at artefacts for what they tell us of society not purely for their aesthetics.

Later Bronze Age and Iron Age

Weaknesses

Area relatively artefact poor in this period, we perhaps have predominantly prestige items?

Are assumptions within our work correct, ie Iron recycled therefore do not find many iron objects.

Opportunities

Need more careful and detailed analysis, of the ordinary objects as well as the prestige items, look at objects like loom weights, spindle whorls, they feed information into the agricultural and settlement areas of study

Perhaps opportunities within environmental work? It is presumed that much metalwork on eg. Hillforts has been destroyed due to acidic soil conditions, can this be tested? Are residues left in the soils?

Transport

Strengths

Have information about 6 definite IA tracks in the area, all in the Welshpool area

Weaknesses

Know little about maritime or inland transportation yet we know goods were moving around as we have certain imported items. Area has little coast with few natural harbours. Need to look pan-Wales?

Opportunities

Coastal work build on existing to look for evidence of maritime, harbours, boats, fish traps, weirs etc, Use developer funding, if coastal regeneration ie Foryd Rhyll

Tir Gofal farm scheme perhaps allow us to look more closely at existing trackways? Links to work on field systems needed to try to unravel what of existing system is perhaps ancient?

Trade

Strengths

Evidence for imported items eg. Hanging bowl, Caergwrle bowl, malverian pottery, VCP also fact that early in Roman period lead being exported, systems may have been already set up?

Weaknesses

Lack of information

Opportunities

Readdress existing information from excavated sites, compare across sites, not just look at sites individually, is any pattern emerging? Ideas have been put forward that hillforts possibly redistributive centres, need to test this? Ideas put forward that some prestige items given as 'diplomatic' gifts, need somehow to test this.

Later Bronze Age and Iron Age

Across the board we need

Analysis of existing information, particularly within the 'grey' literature and possibly taking the Upland survey information further, what is the date of the sites located?

Increased environmental work, not just samples taken analysis needs to be done and then information looked at as a whole for patterns

Increased Aerial programme of flying and interpretation of the results followed in some cases by excavation and analysis of material

Publication of outstanding excavation material

Perhaps more use of field walking

Programme of dating to build a chronology of sites for the period, too many assumptions at the moment.

The whole is so interlinked it is almost impossible to divide the period into chunks which will answer specific questions. We cannot look to one site to answer one question, ie we might expect a hillfort to answer further questions relating to defence but it will also help answer questions relating to food production, social structure etc.

We need to be able to work across disciplines to help further our discipline.

Threats

The threat is to do nothing in terms of giving a coherent structure to archaeological work in Wales.

There are wide ranging consequences of the Research Agenda which need to be addressed in the way archaeology is structured and funded in Wales.

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