

A Research Framework for the Archaeology of Wales
Southwest Wales – Early Medieval
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The early medieval period in western Britain is probably viewed by its specialists as one of the least well known in terms of its archaeological knowledge. Its research agenda is partly driven by being a 'historical period' and historical questions frame our knowledge or lack of it. Thus for southwest Wales the end of Roman imperial control, the emergence of distinct regional kingdoms, the likelihood of Irish settlement, the emergence and ideological triumph of Christianity, the Viking impact, Anglo-Norman conquest and the Welsh response, provide datable, or otherwise, signposts to apparently major changes in the area. The impact these had on population, settlement and landuse are for archaeology to answer.

Settlements

After the relative richness and visibility of the Roman period the rarity of distinctive artefacts and settlements poses immediate problems. An understanding of late 4th century sites would provide a starting point. The possible continued use of selected Roman artefacts has been flagged up as an explanation of the scarcity of 5th century sites. Many specialists see little reason to expect mass abandonment of Roman period sites though the possibility that imperial withdrawal including the army and other specialists caused significant social and economic upheaval should not be underestimated. Analogy with Roman Dumnonia – in particular the abandonment of small defended enclosures from c200AD- might suggest significant changes in the middle Roman period with subsequent continuity into the post-Roman period.

Strengths

It is difficult to talk in terms of strengths regarding settlement information. The number of dated sites is tiny. There is no convincing evidence for the continued use of urban or military sites. Three defended sites have significant evidence of occupation. Carew may have an early medieval phase as a major multivallate promontory fort. Coygan was almost certainly a key early medieval site prior to its destruction. Brawdy has an important sequence from the Iron Age to the early Medieval period but as yet without published detail.

A number of Iron Age/Romano-British sites have produced slight evidence of later activity usually dated by radiocarbon – Woodside, Dan-y-Coed, Drim, Penycoed, Great Castle Head - but with little structural or associated material culture.

Other settlements are known from Longbury Bank with its quite rich 5th-7th century assemblage but sparse structural evidence and Gateholm with its sparse artefacts and surface building complex.

Weaknesses

The difficulty of identifying sites and site types is clear in the tiny number of known sites. Within the 600 plus hillfort/defended enclosure sites listed in the Later Bronze Age/ Iron Age section of the SMR there must undoubtedly be early medieval sites.

Research opportunities

The difficulty in finding sites is inevitably a key problem. Chance discovery and rescue archaeology have had limited impact on this problem in the last 30 years. Discoveries elsewhere would suggest that late Roman sites in areas of reasonable soils could be productive. The study of the late phases of Romano-British rural sites clearly is important for 5th and 6th century settlement. Some targeting of the inland promontory forts, which may be comparable to Dinas Powys, would allow us to test the 'Brawdy' hypothesis which suggested a distinct group of early medieval inland multivallate promontory forts. Sites which are likely to have preserved upper levels are obviously of key importance since ploughed-out or damaged sites are unlikely to give us evidence of fugitive early medieval structures and sparse finds. Further investigation of known sites such as Carew and Gateholm, in spite of logistical difficulties, could refine our models for site identification. The identification of Anglo-Norman and Welsh residence and castle sites may provide a chronological fix at the other end of the period. The absence of Viking Age sites remains striking.

Ecclesiastical sites

The development of the early Christian church is one of the most important historical events of the early medieval centuries. Unfortunately precise historical information is very limited and the archaeology, with one exception of the ECMs, is sparse.

Strengths

The most significant strength in this area is the Cadw-funded all Wales ecclesiastical sites project being conducted locally by Cambria Archaeology. This attempt to identify and evaluate all ecclesiastical sites of pre-Norman origin will provide us with reliable database of known and possible sites. From initial desktop work some 321 sites have been identified of which 30 have demonstrable pre-Conquest origins, some 5 supported by radiocarbon dates. The importance of St Davids but also sites such as Llanbadarn Fawr or Caldey can be advanced on historical grounds but have little bar sculpture to confirm datable archaeological activity. The identification of possible vallum enclosures including large external earthworks has been an important development. Aerial photography of both large and small ecclesiastical sites has been particularly valuable in this context.

Weaknesses

The absence of excavated pre-conquest churches is a clear problem. Continued use of church sites and the absence of the opportunities and the funding for the investigations of major churches and minor redundant churches hinder any serious advances in this field.

Research opportunities

The Cadw funded survey gives us the chance to identify the most important sites and those that may be threatened. This is clearly an important opportunity to use targeted and significant resources to answer rescue and research problems.

Early Christian Monuments

The one aspect of 'ecclesiastical' and indeed all southwest Welsh early medieval archaeology which can be regarded as a significant strength is the unique collection of inscribed stone monuments.

Strengths

The SMR lists 185 monuments with inscriptions. Most of these can be attributed to the 5th – 7th century period where they provide an unrivalled source of epigraphic, linguistic, social and religious information, which is of international significance. Since the initial Nash-Williams catalogue of the 1950s significant additional discoveries have been made. A new corpus is in preparation with the cooperative work of scholars in the Bangor, Aberystwyth, the National Museum of Wales and the RCAHMW with funding support of the Board of Celtic Studies. The combination of linguistic analysis by Patrick Sims-Williams, epigraphic work by scholars outside Wales and Nancy Edwards' monument and style analysis should come to fruition soon and provide us with an enormous amount of historically significant information.

Weaknesses

The key weakness of this field in archaeological terms is in investigation of the actual sites of the monuments and the process of setting them in their original landscape and function. There are also serious concerns about the preservation of these monuments while engaging with local interests about *in situ* location.

Research opportunities

The new corpus will provide a chance to identify likely *in situ* monuments and thus to target excavation and analysis at such sites. Interpretation of the date and meaning of the monument eg whether they are all Christian, do they indicate burials, what is the foreign input to their development, what numerological patterns are identifiable on them, what is the origin of their scripts, can all contribute to the wider study of the ecclesiastical and social landscape.

Cemeteries

Strengths

A number of important cemetery sites have been excavated in the area. The Plas Gogerddan site and Caer, Bayvil provide contrasting pictures of 'undeveloped' cemeteries. Other cemeteries with cists and dug graves are known and in some cases dated but late dates for cists eg Cilgerran suggest caution in the attribution of all cist cemeteries to the early medieval period.

Weaknesses

There have been no large-scale excavations to match work such as that at Llandough, Glamorgan or Cannington, Somerset.

Research opportunities

The excavation of some substantial cemeteries with preserved skeletal remains would be desirable. Further dating of undeveloped cemeteries and indeed those that did acquire churches would be desirable.

Artefacts

Strengths

Apart from the assemblages from sites with imported pottery our knowledge of artefacts is sparse. A few stray brooches and pins are known and as yet few significant discoveries from metal detecting have been reported. The imports of Mediterranean and continental pottery provide an external and now fairly reliable chronology for the sites where they occur and potentially provide the evidence to date associated material culture.

Weaknesses

Scarcity of finds remains a problem. The absence of local ceramics precludes most simple ways of pre-excavation site dating.

Research opportunities

The targeting of known sites with imported material such as Caldey has been shown to work at Longbury Bank. The careful monitoring of metal detecting finds has also been effective at Llanbedrgoch, Anglesey.

Industrial sites

Strengths

A surprising number of radiocarbon dates have provided early medieval dates on industrial sites being explored as part of the research agendas of other period. Copa Hill and Pen Cerrig y Mwyn seem to have early medieval activity while others such as Dolaucothi may merely be dating soil horizons of abandonment.

Weaknesses

None of the horizons with early medieval indications have been explored extensively.

Research opportunities

The exploration of early medieval horizons would be desirable.

The environment

The study of the environment has been restricted by the limited site work and perhaps previous environmental focussing on prehistory at the expense of later periods.

Strengths

The move to multi-period and landscape work generally way from site focussed research should benefit this period.

Weaknesses

As yet limited outcomes have been achieved.

Research priorities

It is difficult to talk about priorities given how limited our knowledge base is. The Ecclesiastical survey and ECM publication work will clearly provide us with a significant database from which target sites should emerge and it is to be hoped that funding will follow to allow intelligent use of the survey work.

Settlements remain a problem. Publication of the excavated sites would help in site selection but bar exploration from the known chronological fixed points of the Roman period and less confidently the Anglo-Norman period chance is likely to remain a key factor in discovery. The inland promontory forts remain the only group where a coherent early medieval dating has been advanced and the testing of this hypothesis, may be regarded as the best option at present. Metal detecting has clearly been important elsewhere and the maintenance of the portable finds scheme may be crucial in the identification of new sites in South West Wales, particularly for settlements without earthwork enclosures.

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