

RENEWING THE RESEARCH FRAMEWORK FOR THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF WALES

IFA CONFERENCE, 17th- 18th September 2010

EARLY MEDIEVAL WALES (c. AD400–1070)

Notes taken at a workshop set up to review the current research framework for the early medieval period in Wales.

Present: Jenny Britnell (CPAT); David Browne (RCAHMW); Jeffrey Davies; Will Davies (Cadw); Sue Evans (Bangor Univ); Ian Halfpenny (Cadw); Charles Hill (DAT); Dave Hopewell (GAT); Cerys Hudson (Bangor Univ.); Jane Kenney (GAT); David Longley (GAT); Scott Lloyd (RCAHMW); Frances Lynch; Marion Page (DAT); Amelia Pannett (Cambrian Archaeol Projects); Karen Pollock (Bangor Univ.); Andy Seaman; Helen Whitear (DAT); Diane Williams (Cadw); Bill Zajac (Cadw) + 5 others.

Chair: Professor Nancy Edwards, Bangor University.

Nancy outlined the workshop plan and its aims.

Aims of workshop: to review the current research framework set out in *Archaeology in Wales* 2005, 45, 33-46, which built on BAR 2001.

Plan: to look at each theme in turn and comment accordingly, in order to determine any omissions or changes needed. The increasing value of scientific evidence was noted.

SETTLEMENT

Strengths and weaknesses

Problems – there is very sparse evidence with only a small number of dated sites. How do we address this issue? A number of corn-drier sites have been radiocarbon dated and found to be early medieval. Francis Lynch suggested that undated corn-driers could be looked at i.e. by looking at earlier excavation reports. It was proposed that this form part of an EMAP project modelled on the INSTAR project in Ireland. The EMAP project in Ireland draws on earlier excavation reports (back to the 1930s) and grey literature. The aim is to produce an online resource, which will include recalibrated radiocarbon dates, to spearhead directions of research.

How do we identify sites?

Problems outlined

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1. The difficulty of dating or identifying Iron Age or early medieval material culture – not diagnostic to specific periods.
2. Acidic soil – non preservation of materials.
3. Typology-based assumptions - the early medieval period is often ignored. It was pointed out that Black-Burnished Ware in use into the 5th century.

Potential research directions

1. Predictive modelling (GIS etc.), to identify possible areas for future research.
2. Soil analysis to look for types that match existing records of soil from Roman and early medieval settlements.
3. Revisit excavation reports.
4. Targeting roundhouse sites might identify post-Roman use – Wroxeter used as an analogy. Nancy pointed out that in South Wales work is being done. Work on dykes and ecclesiastical sites but more work needed.
5. Jeff Davies suggested we should go back to sites such as Llandough. Look for activity/occupation patterns. Potential to identify sites through Roman knowledge of use.
6. Place-name evidence. Nancy drew attention to the early medieval place names project at Aberystwyth (Day School 5 March 2011). It was concluded that more archaeological input was needed in such projects.
7. Large-scale excavation. The current excavation at Caerleon was noted: the fact that large-scale excavation had brought to light post-Roman evidence – very ephemeral and waiting for radiocarbon dates.
8. Cemeteries/settlements juxtaposition.

Dave Longley pointed out that the known distribution of settlements and burials showed a dislocation between the distribution of burials and settlements, though there were possible flaws in the evidence. Post-Roman burials cutting through Roman buildings were noted. He suggested that working backwards from later periods might prove fruitful. For example, freeholders are largely invisible and do not impinge on royal administration; it was probable that clans were in place for centuries beforehand. Re-examining the current corpus and working backwards was therefore a useful strategy.

9. Not many inroads into high status sites over last five years. High status metalwork was a possible indication of non-defended sites.

10. Methodology. It was agreed that radiocarbon dating was the crux. Jane Kenney (GAT) argued that we should be braver to push for more dates – archaeologists are afraid to ask for too many dates for samples collected. Planning archaeologists need to build this into the excavation plan. There is also the possibility of storing samples for the future. Radiocarbon dates are very important for this period.

Key points:

- Radiocarbon strategy *very important* for this period
- Evidence needs collating – synthesis of existing evidence
- Perceptions: look at transitions rather than specific periods - an important interpretive tool.
- Further work badly needed around church sites (trial trenching)

ECONOMY, LAND-USE AND THE EXPLOITATION OF LANDSCAPES

Strengths

Major breakthroughs: the importance of environmental archaeology. Work carried out on cereal grains, but limited work done on animal bones.

Problems: preservation difficult and not uniform distribution.

Strategy:

Are there any collections? Large samples needed (Jeff Davies)

Look for settlements on limestone to help identify medieval sites (better preservation of bone).

Grain samples from corn-driers – subsistence evidence. Growing two crops together indicates a marginal strategy.

Osteology – diet, health. Isotopes – potential to trace the movement of people.

We need a holistic approach to understand settlements (palaeoenvironmental). Such an approach would help to determine domesticated/wild species of cereal etc.

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Pollen coring – not enough dates to get resolution. Work done in Devon provides a good model.

Potential for cross-disciplinary collaboration, e.g. CCW, Marine Science etc. have produced sequences for their own purposes – can we use/tap into their results. More collaboration needed.

More concentrated work needed in pollen analysis.

CRAFTWORKING AND NATURAL RESOURCES

Lack of artefact assemblages: moving out from known to unknown.

Development of economy and trade some improvement, for example, imports: map growing – continental chronologies increasingly good.

ECCLESIASTICAL SITES AND CEMETERIES

How do we tackle this area?

It was agreed that large-scale excavation is the key since shows up subtle archaeology.

Place-names of ecclesiastical sites and documentary sources.

Problem: little cross-referencing between linguists and archaeologists at present.

Potential for predictive modelling based on place-names.

Potential problem: documents very late (thirteenth century onwards), some will not transpose back.

Archaeological input needed, but there is a language problem – very few archaeologists speak Welsh.

Little work on *llys* and *maerdref* – there has tended to be a royal focus. How much work carried out outside North Wales? Perhaps we are not considering less high status sites as centres of power, e.g. major lords were part of the infrastructure.

Cemeteries

More known of western parts and south Wales. North-east and middle less evidence. Preservation is a problem – not using stone to line graves; however, geophysics /excavation now making headway.

Palaeopathology – very important where bone survives.

Beginning and end of periods: a key to our understanding.

REGIONAL DIFFERENCES AND RELATIONSHIP WITH THE ANGLO-SAXONS

Watt's Dyke a breakthrough. Cross-border project (GIS) and publishing all site excavations by Manchester in the 1980s. Archive of David Hill/Margaret Worthington – limited archaeology, but looks at construction. Needs archiving and mapping properly.

HIGHLIGHTING TO TAKE FORWARD.

1. Emap – vital
2. Predictive modelling – soils/topography/water sources. American methodology employed.
3. Concentrate on working forward from the Roman period and back from the late medieval.
4. Radiocarbon and other scientific dating strategies are exceptionally important.
5. Trusts and developers. Evaluation and excavation. Include geophysics. Large-scale excavation rather than small trenches. Stripping large areas is very important.
6. We need consistency and communication. Experience of reading sites before evaluation.
7. Settlements need large-scale evaluation regardless of date - because evidence scattered.
8. Relationship between wider research and academic community needs improving: research needs to be fed back to wider academic community.
9. Jane Kenney pointed out that much archaeology is still in use, and there is a huge potential in field surveys to look at field walls, hutgroups etc. These have been selectively dated to fit individual researchers. Radiocarbon dating the key.