

## **Archaeological Research Framework: Medieval c.1100-c.1539**

**David Longley**

Wales has exceptional and diverse above ground archaeology, in a dramatic visual setting. We think of the castles of the Welsh princes, earthwork castles of the Norman advance into Wales, stone castles of the marcher lords and royal castles of Edward I's campaign in Wales. There are manorial residences of the ecclesiastical lords. There are monastic houses with a long ancestry, and origins as quasi-monastic 'clas' institutions to be replaced by houses of the new European orders.

This is a history of expansion and decline - depopulation, desertion and dissolution and renewal in the 15th and 16th century which saw a spate expansive churches and the rise of the gentry.

An Archaeological Research Framework, almost 10 years ago, identified several priority themes. A consensus across Wales, at that time, proposed further work on the following:

- Norman expansion into Wales and 'Normanisation'
- Castle building, including earthwork castles
- Monasteries and monastic reform
- 14th century desertion and depopulation
- Rural communities and settlements
- Emergence of towns
- Landscape interpretation
- Upland settlement
- Boundaries, in time and space
- Interdisciplinary research.

Some progress has been made but, inevitably, there remains further work to be done and new themes and agenda to be put forward. The following themes propose an agenda based on continuing and new priorities.

While period divisions and interdisciplinary research are not, in themselves, strategic themes, they do underpin the research agenda and must be taken into account.

Period divisions are our framework but are not always helpful. For example, Henry III's 13th century castle, and Welsh maerdref, at Deganwy, stands near the end of a long sequence of fortified occupation from the late Roman and early medieval centuries to a probable estuarine fortress in the ninth century; a Norman stronghold in the 1080s and the castle in Welsh hands in the early 13th century. In another context, several early churches emerge as quasi-monastic 'clas' churches in the early middle ages before being transformed, reformed and restructured in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Royal administration and secular and ecclesiastical lordship**

One of the more important areas of research in the middle ages is an understanding of settlement hierarchy, settlement patterns and settlement relationships. From an archaeological perspective the result would (or should) be tangible, structural evidence. This is also an area where royal administration (in the age of the princes) and focal points of secular lordship broaden across the princes' interests, and tenorial patterns, and those of the gentry. The royal maerdrefi, up to 1282, and the continuing interest of the gentry (or uchelwyr - same thing of course) are capable of being located. The tentacles of association within gwelyau form dispersed patterns, often in small clusters, or hamlets, which, too, have the potential at least for being located and identified through targeted aerial survey and or geophysical survey. The next stage in the process is excavation. But only with the benefit of historical documentation. Often we are chasing potential but the tangible or structural need not elude or desert us entirely.

The rise and fall and rise again of the gentry is important in an archaeological research context – for example the focus of a dynastic lordship (or maenol) is likely to include a manor house (or llys). This is also the case with regard to episcopal lords and so-called bishops' palaces. In the diocese of Bangor there are at least four mansion houses of this kind, two are known, one is in ruins, another was in ruins by the mid-14th century, another is lost entirely and none of them are well enough known to have provided any real detail. Nevertheless, all are capable of further elucidation by fieldwork and excavation.

The archaeological research questions ask:

- *Where are the commotal lordship centres and what are their characteristics? - Archaeological techniques include geophysical survey, excavation and landscape analysis and are capable of identifying these important foci, but only with the benefit of historical documentation.*
- *Where are the freeholding maenolau and what are their characteristics? Fieldwork, geophysics, landscape analysis, possibly excavation, in the immediate vicinity of existing houses with identifiable associations, is the way forward but, again, only with the benefit of historical documentation. Are there really no gentry houses, or the evidence of them, surviving from 'before Glyndwr'?*

By the 15th or 16th century we would call the focus of these secular lordships gentry houses and most are likely to have precursors of one form or another, either on, or close to, the same spot or at some distance removed.

## **Towns**

In respect of towns, particularly planted towns, incomers bring new ideas and these expand into the hinterland of towns, influencing building style. The recording and interpretation of early buildings wherever the opportunity is available is a valid archaeological theme. Equally so, the relationship of towns to other institutions. The archaeological dimension identifies the influence of building history, drawn from the towns to the hinterland and vice versa. An example, might be the inclusion of massive external chimney stacks on the long wall of the Prior's House at Penmon and similar features in Beaumaris and also in the hinterland. These are innovations in this area, all with a direct social connection.

Further work is required on:

- *identifying opportunities that should be made available for recording above and below ground, particularly building recording of standing buildings, in advance of development. These techniques are crucial in understanding and defining the character of a town's development.*
- *the visible and tangible impact of early towns and their hinterland.*
- *the impact on the area of incoming tenants, the impact on building style and status*

## **Upland Archaeology**

There have been advances in upland archaeology over the last decade and more. However, in many instances the focus has been on recording rather than interpretation and the constraint of altitude does not make sufficient allowance for the associated farming regimes that transect the landscape. Uncultivated land, one of the definitions of ffridd or waste, (or morfa in a coastal context) is not useless land but has been an important resource for pasturing in the summer months and hunting (in some circumstances) in the winter months. The friddoedd associated with royal land (maerdy, deri) might well be regarded as cattle ranches rather than seasonal pastures. Aerial survey and fieldwork should be considered. This is not simply an esoteric pursuit - at present there is the possibility of testing this by excavation at the nucleus of a royal hafod in Gwynedd.

More work might be done on these interpretative landscape history themes:

- *The relationship of stone castles and summer pastures - (in the north, Dolbadarn, Dolwyddelan, Dinas Emrys, Prysor, Castell y Bere and possibly Carndochan are all on ffriddoedd, not at maerdrefi, why?)*
- *The impact of crown and monastic leases of ffriddoedd en bloc, detached from the parent townships and, by the 15th century, the establishment of permanent smallholdings on the ffridd, thereby colonising it and laying the basis for upland farms.*
- *Identifying pasture lands in contexts other than upland ffriddoedd, to include coastal wetlands (morfeydd), elevated wetland and moor (cors, gwaun, rhos), particularly within the administrative framework of royal estates and monastic interests where such locations could be considered to be cattle ranches rather than seasonal pastures.*

## **Earthwork castles**

Earthwork castles in Wales are a feature of the later 11th and 12th centuries. There are several hundred recorded castles and they played a significant role in the major events of that period. Mottes were the focal points of Norman penetration, colonisation and consolidation of their position in Wales.

Mottes are recorded at locations which would seem to have already been politically important Welsh centres and they are identified at strategic points of communication. Notwithstanding the important questions of who built the undocumented earthwork castles, when were they built and what was their function, archaeology is potentially capable of determining the relationship of motte to lordship centre. The strategic questions are:

- *Do the earthwork castles of the late 11th century reflect the significance of lordship centres or maerdrefi and are they an indication to the location of an earlier focus? The techniques are geophysical survey and excavation.*
- *To what extent are earthwork castles built by Welsh lords, if at all, and if so is this a regional phenomenon*