

A Research Framework For The Archaeology Of Wales  
East and North East Wales: - Early Medieval  
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## **INTRODUCTION**

The early medieval period in Wales (and North West Britain more generally) is perhaps one of the least well-known eras of the British past. This partly reflects the dearth of historical information within what has nonetheless been viewed as a 'historical period', and the fact that at the same time archaeological research has failed to provide an alternative story or even to identify significant quantities of evidence on which to base that story. The SMR record for East and North East Wales list only 311 early medieval records of any kind (compared with 979 and 4052 entries in the adjoining Roman and medieval periods respectively), and the traditional term 'Dark Ages' is still all too meaningful against this background. It is in some ways ironic that while the early medieval period has silently bequeathed key aspects of our modern lives – the languages we speak, national political boundaries, and notions of religious belief and cultural tradition – archaeological interpretation of the era too often rests on a single excavation trench within a single site.

The history of East and North East Wales has inevitably been influenced by a geographical position straddling the English lowlands (Cheshire, Shropshire and Herefordshire) and the uplands of Wales. This natural divide is clearly relevant to early medieval activity in the area, and must be part of the story not only of the initial transition from Roman imperial control to British regional kingdoms but more obviously to the evolving relationship of Anglo-Saxon and British political groups from the 7<sup>th</sup> century onwards. That later phase of change eventually offered up Wales itself as one of its ultimate legacies, and created two of the most dramatic early medieval monuments in Europe - Wat's and Offa's Dykes - along the way. Viking incursions also reflect the strategic significance of the locality, and in a different way the same topographical and cultural fault-line also structured the development of the early church. Although in some ways a marginal landscape, early medieval East and North East Wales spawned changes with ramifications far beyond the immediate locality. Yet we know very little of the detail of that story.

## **SETTLEMENTS**

### *Strengths*

- Evidence (though open to debate) for early medieval occupation at Dinorben hillfort. Given extensive Roman activity on the site, could imply continuity of early medieval settlement similar to that which has also been claimed for Dinas Powys and other sites elsewhere in Wales. Dating of artefacts (glass) from New Pieces near the Breidden has led to claims for similar early medieval continuity of settlement at that site.
- Excavation of the Llangors Crannog has revealed what may be a princely settlement of the Late 9<sup>th</sup> / early 10<sup>th</sup> century which has been equated with the Brecacnanmere whose destruction is recorded in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle in AD 916. Llangors gives an indication of high status settlement

within the Welsh Kingdoms, though in that sense is not very representative (may be a response to exceptional circumstances)

- Suggested structures which could represent early medieval houses/domestic buildings include the pair of boat shaped crop marks at Berriew (inconclusively excavated in 1983) which have been interpreted as early medieval (Viking?) houses, and a 6 by 4 metre building at Hen Domen which could be shown stratigraphically to be of early medieval date (function unknown)
- A number of structures mainly known from earthwork/air photo evidence could represent incoming Saxon settlement from the 7<sup>th</sup> century onwards. These included an aisled structure at Forden Gaer interpreted as a possible Anglo-Saxon hall on the basis of excavation in the mid 80's, and the Cwrt Llechryd enclosure where excavation produced early medieval C14 dates (AD 750-1040), though the precise nature of the enclosure is uncertain. The Cwrt Llechryd site may be compared with a small group of similar moated enclosures elsewhere (Old Mills, Welshpool; Nantcribba Gaer, Welshpool; Mathrafal, Meifod; Plas yn Dinas, Llansantffraidd ym Mechain) which have traditionally been regarded as medieval, but could similarly turn out to be of early medieval origin. These have been mooted as Mercian forts of the later early medieval period, though this is entirely unconfirmed by excavation evidence, and they could as well be high status sites of British origin. Place-name evidence (eg surviving 'Hop' and 'Tun' names in the Walton basin) does support relatively early Anglo-Saxon penetration and settlement in certain localities.
- Excavations at Rhuddlan in the late 60s and late 70s produced extensive evidence of early medieval settlement including probable grubenhauser, elements of a defensive ditch circuit, diagnostic later Anglo-Saxon pottery types (St Neots and Chester Ware), and a series of later early medieval radiocarbon dates. This material has generally been identified with the late Saxon Burh of Cledemutha established in AD 921, though it is possible and perhaps likely that Rhuddlan was already an important early medieval centre before this date.
- Ridge and furrow sealed beneath the ramparts at Hen Domen can be interpreted as early medieval in date, presumably correlating with the emergence of open field farming elsewhere in England in the late Saxon landscape.

#### *Weaknesses*

- For all the impact of post-war archaeology (air photography etc.) on other periods of study (especially prehistoric), there has been negligible new identification of early medieval sites
- The current picture relies on a tiny sample of inconclusively dated sites which may turn out to be entirely misrepresentative of the 'real' pattern – especially skewed towards higher status sites
- Hardly any evidence at all for the 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries. The claims for continuity of settlement at Dinorben are at best controversial, and there is no comparable evidence for continuing occupation of Roman military or other sites with the possible exception of Forden Gaer (though worth pointing out that this is scarce even in parts of Roman Britain which were much more explicitly Romanised than East and North-East Wales ever was)
- Generally no sense of the organisation of the early medieval human landscape, subsistence field-system patterns, economy etc. – even the settlement evidence we have is therefore entirely isolated from its immediate and broader context and hard to extract meaningful conclusions from

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*Opportunities*

- **Further exploration/excavation of known early medieval sites**

Although only a small number of sites are known, these are mostly themselves very incompletely examined, and little is known of their function and context. Additional examination of sites such as Cwrt Llechryd might be a means of enlightening not just understanding of that site, but would generally help to refine models of wider early medieval site identification.

- **Explore possibility that significant elements of the early medieval settlement landscape are 'hidden' within sites traditionally allocated to the Prehistoric/Romano-British periods.**

Crop mark field system and settlement complexes generally classified as prehistoric may well have, at the very least, continued in use in the early medieval period (c.f. re-dating of Forden Gaer Neolithic post setting as likely Anglo Saxon Hall following excavation). Further exploration of such sites – such as multivallate enclosures similar to those which have recently been suggested by James as wholly or partly early medieval in South Wales - may therefore throw up early medieval evidence. In research priority terms, there is an evident synergy here with probable sites of late prehistoric interest.

Early medieval re-use of hillfort sites has been well demonstrated elsewhere in western Britain and it must be likely that at least some of the 355 recognised hillforts in East and North East Wales preserve early medieval material. Only a tiny fraction of these sites have been explored at all, and only a small part of the internal area of even most of those. As above, the early medieval research opportunity which exists here closely coincides with the prehistoric one.

- **Use early medieval ecclesiastical site locations to target identification of secular settlement**

Although the identification of early medieval religious sites poses its own problems (see below), it does seem a reasonable assertion that early medieval church/burial sites will be spatially associated with nearby contemporary secular settlement. The detailed exploration of areas around such sites seems an obvious approach to identifying early medieval domestic settlement features, and would directly overlap with research into the religious sites themselves.

- **Exploration/excavation of medieval domestic sites with possible early medieval origins**

There has been little work on identifying Royal Llysoedd and Maerdrefi sites in North and North East Wales, though the medieval crystallisation of such sites may well derive from early medieval origins. Further work on identifying these sites in their developed medieval context (c.f. Gwynedd Archaeological Trust project) may therefore generate an important avenue of future early medieval research.

Similar early medieval research potential may apply to other categories of lower status medieval settlement sites

- **Target diagnostic Saxon settlement features**

It is easy to forget that the archaeology of much of the area for the latter half of the early-medieval period is the archaeology of Anglo-Saxon settlement. With the exception of Offa's and Wat's Dykes (see below) and Rhuddlan, there has been little systematic investigation of specifically Anglo-Saxon settlement patterns. Analogy with somewhat better researched material elsewhere in Mercia and beyond might provide a key to develop identification and exploration of sites belonging to this critical aspect of local development.

## **ECCLESIASTICAL AND CEMETERY SITES**

### *Strengths*

- The Cadw sponsored Ecclesiastical Sites Project conducted in East and North East Wales by CPAT (interim report April 2002) has provided an important base line of knowledge for early medieval sites in the area
- On the basis of a range of documentary and archaeological evidence, the current study has certainly identified 40 early medieval ecclesiastical sites within the area (out of a total of 288 churches, chapels and allied sites assessed), including 9 Clas churches.
- Recent excavation work at Pennant Melangell and Capel Maelog has shed significant insight on the development of early ecclesiastical sites. At Capel Maelog a sequence of burial ground, curvilinear enclosure of the burial site, and late construction of the church seems to support a long process of development at the site. This process is echoed at Penant Melangell, where early burials apparently clustered around a central cist grave which was subsequently incorporated within the church
- Overall, 15 early-medieval cemetery sites are positively identified, and these range from developed cemeteries such as Capel Maelog to cist burials such as Llanasa, and the square ditch cemetery at Tandderwen (Denbigh). Many other sites lack certain dating evidence, although several of these, such as the Trelystan Round Burials at Trewern (Powys), are almost certainly early Christian.
- 27 freestanding crosses and inscribed stones are known in the area, mostly clustered in the south of the region. The inscription (now destroyed) on the 9<sup>th</sup> century freestanding cross shaft near Valle Crucis ('The pillar of Eliseg') provides a unique (if brief) documentary source for the contemporary Kingdom of Powys.

### *Weaknesses*

- The 90 curvilinear churchyards alone may be taken to roughly imply that many more known ecclesiastical sites probably have an early medieval origin than can certainly be shown. That is further emphasised by the 204 Holy wells recorded in the area, of which only 8 can now be shown to have early medieval associations.
- Some key sites known from documentary sources (such as the monastery at Bangor-on-Dee) have not been identified on the ground, and many more suggested sites (e.g. of Clas churches at Corwen and Llanafan Fawr) remain unproven.
- No early medieval church fabric survives in the area (with the single exception of Presteigne where late Saxon work remains) and the precise nature of early medieval ecclesiastical buildings is largely unknown.
- The archaeological significance of the inscribed stones (as distinct from their evident historical importance as a major source of linguistic, social and religious information) is little explored. Most are not in situ, and the degree of association they may have originally had with the graves of those

commemorated is uncertain. The number of known stones in the area is also small compared to Western Wales.

- Little light has yet been shed on the early development of the church in the area. Models which have been suggested elsewhere – such as the association between Early Christian sites and re-used prehistoric enclosures and/or Roman sites and buildings – remain unsubstantiated in East and North East Wales.

#### *Opportunities*

- Area excavation of greater range of cemetery sites across the full range of identified site categories
- Further work to identify and, where possible, archaeologically explore Clas church sites
- Excavation around in situ inscribed stones to provide better contextual information for these monuments
- Where possible, archaeologically explore a sample of suggested early ecclesiastical sites to increase base knowledge and help refine site identification models
- Use recommendations of current Cadw sponsored CPAT project to target future research effort

#### **OFFA'S, WAT'S AND SHORT DYKES**

##### *Strengths*

- Half of Offa's Dyke (40 of 80 miles), two-thirds of Wat's Dyke (30 of 40 miles) are within North and North East Wales. The two great dykes are among the most significant monuments of the early medieval period in Britain, potentially providing key evidence of the evolving relationship of the Anglo-Saxon and British/Welsh peoples.
- Offa's Dyke can be firmly dated to the later 8<sup>th</sup> century AD via a range of archaeological and historical evidence, and excavations on Wat's Dyke at Oswestry (Shropshire) recently produced a radiocarbon date centred on the mid 5<sup>th</sup> century AD.
- 21 possibly related 'Short Dykes' (traditionally allocated to the early medieval period) can be identified in the area. These have recently been the subject of a Cadw sponsored research project undertaken by CPAT.
- Significant sections of the dykes are well preserved, potentially preserving high quality archaeological information
- A significant programme of excavation and other research has been undertaken on Wat's and Offa's Dykes since the 1970's by the 'Offa's Dyke Project' under the auspices of Dr David Hill and students from the Extra Mural Department of Manchester University. This work has helped to clarify the extent of some sections of the monuments, and to suggest the original form of the earthworks.
- The dykes potentially preserve significant buried environmental deposits.

##### *Weaknesses*

- Much of the recent excavation work on Offa's and Wat's Dykes is not fully published, and most of that work has been small scale and focused on less well preserved sections of the earthworks

## Early Medieval

- The dating of Wat's Dyke and all of the Short Dykes remains uncertain – the latter may range from the prehistoric to the medieval period. There are only three radiocarbon dates for the entire group of monuments including Offa's and Wat's Dykes
- The dykes straddle the modern England/Wales border, and research into them must be an integrated exercise between the two countries; for example, the presence or absence of Offa's Dyke across Herefordshire is crucial to understanding its significance in Powys
- Basic questions regarding the original extent of the monuments, whether or not they were surmounted by a palisade, whether they were originally cut by entrances etc. remain to be satisfactorily answered
- The character and nature of the dykes is still to be adequately explained. The complexity of Offa's Dyke – with its gaps, variations in form etc. – has as yet evaded a completely satisfactory explanation of its purpose (though its general context as a boundary between Mercia and the Welsh kingdoms seems clear), and supports conflicting interpretations ranging from defence to treaty marker
- The analysis of the dykes have not been rigorously set within the context of the other similar monuments across Britain with which they can be compared archaeologically
- Scant work has been done on the landscape context of the dykes since the pioneering pre-war analyses of Sir Cyril Fox, and we have little idea of the environments they passed through or how they related to established settlement patterns

### *Opportunities*

- Systematic examination by modern archaeological methods to resolve issues such as the reality of the apparent 'gaps' in the dykes
- Targeted use of full scale archaeological excavation on well preserved sections of the dykes to finally answer basic problems such as the presence or absence of a palisade, and where appropriate, to establish key stratigraphical relationships with other datable features
- Considered analysis of the dykes at a landscape level (incorporating the mass of data now available through air photography etc.) to better understand their original relationship to the surrounding human environment, and the topographical positioning of the earthworks
- Considered re-analysis of the monuments (and Offa's Dyke in particular) to recapture its significance as a major piece of evidence in understanding ancient Mercia and the impact of Offa on the subsequent development of early medieval Britain.
- Sampling of the palaeo-environmental potential of the dykes
- Pursue recommendations of CPAT 'Short Dykes' project

## VIKING SETTLEMENT

### *Strengths*

- Documentary evidence for Viking activity in the area, notably the battle of Buttington (generally assumed to be the Buttington near Welshpool) recorded by the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle in 893 AD

- Human bones recovered from a communal interment in Buttington Churchyard in the 19<sup>th</sup> century have been claimed as Viking (although this is highly questionable)
- The Maen Achwyfan cross near Whitford may be linked stylistically with Viking practice
- The end of the Llangors crannog may be associated with Viking activity, and the crannog was apparently occupied and fortified at the time of the 893 incursion

#### *Weaknesses*

- Very scant archaeological evidence for Viking presence in the area

#### *Opportunities*

- It is possible that Viking evidence will come to light as the wider early medieval settlement context is discovered/examined (e.g. at a known early medieval site such as Rhuddlan)
- Detailed archaeological examination of the Buttington area may produce evidence of the 893 encampment

## **ARTEFACTS**

#### *Strengths*

- Early medieval artefact finds range from The Llangors dug out boat, imported (?) glass from New Pieces, late Saxon pottery from Rhuddlan, and the iron javelin and spearhead associated with a 6<sup>th</sup>/7<sup>th</sup> century secondary burial in a Bronze Age barrow at Four Crosses

#### *Weaknesses*

- Very few artefacts of any kind have been recovered from early medieval sites in the area, and this overlaps with the general paucity of known settlement sites in the area
- The sample of artefacts so far recovered is too slight to undertake any meaningful analysis or distribution studies

#### *Opportunities*

- Liaison with the metal detecting community via the Portable Antiquities scheme might increase metal artefact recovery and aid site identification (see above)
- In tandem with increased identification and exploration of settlement sites (see above), there is evident potential for recovery of a more extensive sample of early medieval artefacts

## **INDUSTRY**

- There is currently no recorded evidence for early medieval industrial sites in the area.

*Opportunities*

- Plainly, such sites much exist, and their identification will surely come through discovery and investigation of a wider range of settlement sites as a whole.

**ENVIRONMENTAL**

- Beyond site based work (Llangors Crannog), little environmental work has so far been undertaken.

*Opportunities*

- The potential provided by the dyke systems has already been alluded to, and systematic environmental investigation of the period will be an important complimentary aspect to more intensive analysis of the settlement context as a whole.

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