
A Research Framework for the Archaeology of Wales
East and Northeast Wales – Medieval
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This paper is concerned with the four-hundred year period which runs from the end of the 11th century when the Normans first started pushing into east Wales, and the end of the 15th century when a change of dynasty is conventionally tied in with the initiation of a new era (although other dates of historical significance such as 1536 and 1541 have also been adopted to mark the change).

In archaeological and architectural terms it is a period of contrast. On the one hand there are splendid stone structures such as Flint Castle or the great church at Wrexham and at the other end of the scale are the humble dwellings evidenced by a slight earthen platform or building foundation.

It is also the first time when written sources enable, in at least some areas of study, an extra dimension to be established, permitting what Andrew Fleming and others term 'text-aided archaeology'. But, as the variable contributions on the whole medieval era in the recently published *Tempus History of Wales* show, historians still overlook the contribution that archaeology and allied disciplines can make to the study of the past while archaeologists should always be aware of the usefulness of the contemporary written word.

It is with these preliminary considerations that we can move on to consider various general themes that come to the fore in the medieval era, and which have been suggested by the steering committee of the Archaeological Research Framework.

Before doing so I would like to record my thanks to the friends and colleagues who have advised and assisted in compiling this paper – Richard Avent, Sian Rees, Jack Spurgeon and Peter White, and to Peter, too, for agreeing to deliver this paper to the seminar in my unavoidable absence. Needless to say, individually and collectively, they may not agree with everything that is written here, but overall, I would like to hope that there is a general level of consensus on most of the issues.

SETTLEMENT AND HOUSES

Settlement in one form or another represents a predominant but also somewhat heterogeneous theme in the medieval era. To facilitate discussion we can look at it under three headings: higher and lower-status sites and urban sites.

Higher-status sites

1) Strengths

Some settlement themes have been the subject of research over many years, but also inevitably it is the high-status sites that have attracted attention. Nowhere is this truer than with the masonry castles. Cathcart King's corpus of castle sites,

Castellarium Anglicanum, offers a starting point and there are other syntheses, too, which have advanced our general understanding, many of them usefully amalgamating documentary references with the analysis of the physical remains of the buildings. Coupled with the significant number of recently completed and on-going, in-depth studies of castles such as Flint and Caergwrle in the north, Montgomery and Dolforwyn in the central part of the region, and Brecon and Castell Blaenllynfi in the south, the developing state of the study is obvious, even if, inevitably, some castles have not received the attention they deserve: Holt is an obvious example.

The earthwork counterparts of the stone castles are more numerous and the Welsh borderland has one of the richest concentrations of well-preserved motte and bailey castles anywhere. It is thus both appropriate and useful that Cathcart King, Spurgeon, Kenyon and others have contributed to understanding the field remains and distribution of these earthworks through fieldwork, although inevitably the documentary background to many of these smaller defensive sites is poor. Only a handful of motte and bailey castles in the region have been partially excavated: Mathrafal, Symon's Castle, Sycharth and Hen Blas, but Barker and Higham's protracted examination of the earthwork of Hen Domen near Montgomery is a landmark in castle studies, while much smaller pieces of work such as CPAT's section through mottes at Tomen Llansantffraid near Rhaeadr and Lower Luggy near Welshpool have contributed to the relatively thin detail that is available on motte construction.

Other higher-status sites also demand consideration. Moated sites are localised in their distribution in this region with concentrations in Wrexham Maelor, and the Usk Valley in the south of Powys. As with mottes, there is a solid base of fieldwork evidence, mainly due to the efforts of Jack Spurgeon, but virtually no excavation has occurred.

2) Weaknesses

That the picture is not wholly satisfactory is suggested by what may be termed the isolationism of many castle studies, which tend to focus on the individual sites, their architecture and the physical remains, at the expense of the hinterland and environment in which those sites functioned. Every castle whether it be the large masonry *caput* overseeing a lordship or the small motte with its timber tower controlling a more local area, must have interacted with the other physical elements that went to make up the contemporary landscape – the gardens and other elements of the infrastructure associated with the castle, the neighbouring peasant settlements, their fields, the lines of communication and the like. And also, of course, the people themselves though this is perhaps more the preserve of the historian. Few studies have tackled this wider topic in any detail – attention could be drawn here to R. R. Davies' doctoral research on the Usk Valley, even though this is primarily historical rather than archaeological.

It is, the social and economic aspects of the castles and their landscapes, which broadly have escaped attention, and is an aspect that will have to be rectified.

There are, too, other aspects of castle studies, which ought to be developed.

Regional variation is something that has not received much attention, the availability of reliable detailed plans is sporadic, and the internal function and planning of the larger castles is an issue that has appeared on the national stage but where little advance has been made locally despite the prevalence of castles.

What has been noted for castles above is equally applicable to moated sites for there is little information on the landscapes in which they were set, and in this context the moats of Wrexham Maelor are particularly interesting, not least because they are a part of a wider phenomenon spreading across the border into the Cheshire Plain.

When we turn to *llysoedd* – the courts of the native Welsh princes - the issues are different, and there are no strengths to offset the weaknesses in our data. Arguably the topic is more appropriate to the early medieval research paper, yet there can be little doubt that in some parts of the region such courts continued to function at the same time that Norman power was being imposed elsewhere. In northwest Wales the *llysoedd* have been the subject of detailed study. Not so in eastern Wales, where indeed the problems of site identification potentially pose a greater handicap, and there has been considerably less documentary research. Perhaps, what has been accomplished in Gwynedd will not be replicated elsewhere. But of this we cannot be certain until that research is undertaken.

3) Research opportunities

The landscape context both of earthen and stone castles and of moats needs to be assessed. Initially this will need to be done on an extensive scale rather than selectively, as contemporary landscape survival is not likely to be a commonplace occurrence. Coupled with this the compilation of detailed and reliable site plans should be a primary aim, both of the earthworks themselves and, where relevant, the integrated landscape.

An assessment of the *llysoedd* in northeast and east Wales is also important and due attention must be paid to the Gwynedd Archaeological Trust's research methodology the subject. In view of the close association between the *llys* and the *maerdref*, the latter could usefully be included in such a study. Where the assessments lead to the tighter locational definition of a *llys* or *maerdref*, opportunities for excavation through developer-led works should be given a high priority.

Lower-status sites

1) Strengths

Falling within this era are those surviving vernacular structures, usually of very late medieval date, which effectively bridge the divide between archaeology and architecture. Here the pioneering work of the Royal Commission must be mentioned, not only through Peter Smith's magisterial *Houses of the Welsh Countryside*, but also the more recent surveys by Richard Suggett in Radnorshire, where the expansive use of dendrochronology is offering a vital timeframe. Nor are these the only significant contributions; they are supplemented by CPAT's approach to standing buildings which are exemplified by excavations on the sites of the medieval buildings at Ty Mawr and Tyddyn-Ilwydion, both in Montgomeryshire and Althrey Hall near Bangor-on-Dee.

Considerably more commonplace are the lower-status sites that abound in rural areas and have been the focus of much recent study. Coupled with the past work of the Royal Commission and the products of their current Upland Initiative, the recent Cadw-funded pan-Wales assessment of deserted rural settlement has confirmed the substantial number of earthwork or stone-founded sites in rural areas. Implicit in this work is the realisation that many, many more remain to be identified.

Nevertheless in most parts of the region the basic patterns of settlement can now be appreciated. Further fieldwork will almost certainly throw up further atypical, even exceptional, sites as well as increasing overall numbers. It is much less likely to alter our overall perceptions.

2) Weaknesses

There are, of course, weaknesses. One is encountered regularly and is not specific to this theme only. It is that the border between England and Wales introduces an unwarranted interruption to academic study and that a greater appreciation of work in the English border counties could be valuable, whether for standing buildings or for deserted rural settlements.

Nor are there any grounds for complacency with deserted rural settlements. Documentary references to such settlements are rare, and even where they do not exist are usually not specific to a recognisable site. Much of the fieldwork evidence is biased towards the uplands, while logic dictates that longer-lived sites ought to be found at lower altitudes.

Excavation, which might provide some compensation, has not kept pace with identification, and the more significant excavations in this region, at Hen Caerwys and Beili Bedw, occurred in the 1960s. We remain largely ignorant of the physical form, the economic base and the material culture of medieval rural settlements, whether these were the permanently occupied dwellings or the seasonal summer settlements in the hills. And we still have much to learn about how these settlements functioned in their landscape.

3) Research opportunities

Further fieldwork should be targeted at lower altitude, enclosed lands. Systematic work in Aberedw (Rads) and Castle Caereionion (Monts) parishes have demonstrated that sites can be identified in such locations, even if the remains are not as pronounced as in the less agriculturally damaged uplands.

The excavation of specific rural settlement sites of medieval date must be encouraged, and this should be extended to the search for, and examination of the seasonal settlements (*hafodydd*) of medieval date, which are currently elusive.

Urban areas

1) Strengths

The historic settlement surveys prepared with Cadw funding for the whole region in the early 1990s were prepared more with a view to planning and heritage conservation than with academic research. Nevertheless, they offer a solid information base for our historic settlements from small villages through to county towns. Soulsby's *Town of Medieval Wales*, though nearly twenty years old, represents a significant source of information and for several towns – Brecon, Denbigh and Ruthin - articles in a volume edited by Ralph Griffiths in 1978 provide historical detail. One or two towns, noticeably New Radnor and to a lesser extent Brecon, have also benefited from detailed studies of a more archaeological nature.

2) Weaknesses

In the urban context there is much that needs to be done. Issues such as urban growth and plan morphology, and the survival and analysis of medieval structures have not really been addressed on anything like a comprehensive basis. Urban excavations are fewer than might be anticipated in the light of PPG Wales. While Hay-on-Wye, Brecon, Rhuddlan, Montgomery, New Radnor, Talgarth and most recently Welshpool have been the subject of urban excavations and evaluations there are some towns such as Denbigh, Ruthin, Wrexham and Builth Wells very little of this sort of work has occurred.

Nor we should forget that there is a whole range of villages – a lower stratum in the nucleated hierarchy – where the origins and development are a complete mystery.

3) Research opportunities

Opportunities should be taken for excavation where they exist, but there could be a more direct effort to prioritise settlements within the urban hierarchy. Which are the key towns and villages in east and northeast Wales and why? These are questions that should be asked and where practical efforts ought to go into validating the conclusions. The interaction between towns and their rural hinterlands offers interesting avenues for research, with historians such as Rees Davies, working on the lordship of Brecon, having already explored and elucidated some aspects relevant to the topic.

LAND USE AND ENCLOSURE

1) Strengths

It has long been recognised that the region supports an impressive and diverse range of agrarian landscapes, reinforced now with the introduction of the CCW/Cadw/ICOMOS *Register of Landscapes* and the on-going and allied process of historic landscape characterisation. Such landscapes are of course underpinned by successive episodes of land use – the creation and subsequent modification of fields, of enclosures, of boundaries, of tracks, of watercourses and of buildings. Many of these landscapes are of, or at least have their origins in, the medieval era.

2) Weaknesses

Few landscapes have been studied at the level of detail that will provide an explanation of form, function and development. And we should remember, too, that such elements are the preserve, not only of the archaeologist, but also the historian and particularly the historical geographer. Most of the major contributions in this field – no pun intended – have not come from archaeologists but from the likes of the late Glanville Jones, Colin Thomas and Dorothy Sylvester. The physical remains that are particularly our province are not evidenced in such contributions, though there are a few exceptions including CPAT's own work on the Berwyns. Both at the micro-scale (the field boundaries themselves) and the macro-scale (the field systems and their patterning), there is much that needs to be done.

3) Research opportunities

A more holistic approach to the elements that go to make up any particular historic landscape - settlement, farming, communications etc – should be adopted. A case can be made for the identification and detailed study, perhaps through the mechanism of the present historic landscape characterisation exercises, of specific, small landscapes areas to act as exemplars.

Regionality in land use is a key issue that needs to be addressed -- by archaeologists as well as by historical geographers who have already established their credentials in this respect. East and northeast Wales is a very large area and much needs to be done in order to establish farming patterns through a broad time frame.

Some landscapes call out for more detailed analysis: lowland tracts such as Wrexham Maelor with its extensive rig and furrow, its numerous moated, and its elusive medieval settlements is a prime candidate, or natural topographic units of greater diversity such as the upper Wye valley, south of Builth Wells. Maelor, though, is a sizeable area, and a case could be made for the study of smaller units, such as single valleys, to act as exemplars in understanding the complexities of pasture, arable, meadow, woodland and moor, and their interaction with the settlements that utilised them.

NATURAL RESOURCES, INDUSTRY and TRADE

1) Strengths

Medieval industry and trade have received very little attention in the past. If there is a determinable strength, it is that there is a currently untapped, and also incalculable, potential that has yet to be realised. There are, inevitably, exceptions; the work on the leading mining industry in the northeast, for example, but not many! The 1990 volume on 'Quarrying and Building Stone' and the 1991 volume on 'Medieval Industries' were, on the authority of their full titles, both confined to England, a reflection presumably on the negligible impact of Welsh studies at that time.

2) Weaknesses

In our region medieval industry was generally conducted on a small and sometimes subsistence scale; and it was frequently resource-led with the result that the physical remains, particularly of the extractive industries, might well be subsumed and destroyed by later, post-medieval industrial activities. Is this why the Resource Audit could muster only 34 industrial entries for the medieval era? But the very fact that in the northeast the extractive and processing industries were so extensive in the post-medieval centuries surely implies that there were medieval predecessors, albeit at a different scale. Medieval mills and milling have been little studied and visible remains are few. Although the Welsh Mills Society are concerned with the mills themselves and their construction less attention has been paid to their setting and their interaction with other elements of the agricultural landscape.

Yet it is surely not just a question of isolating the physical remains of medieval industry. How were the various industries organised, how localised or extensive were they, how do they relate to the settlements of contemporary date? Our discipline ought to be able to throw light on at least some aspects of this theme.

At present, however, we have yet to establish a basic framework for medieval industry.

Marketing and trade, as evidenced by artefacts, also remains heavily under-researched, particularly the mechanisms by which manufactured goods were made and distributed to consumers.

Research opportunities

It is a fundamental prerequisite that the nature and possible extent of medieval industries needs to be established, in effect an audit in its own right.

Those industries where physical remains are still apparent or are believed to exist should then be targeted for more extensive study.

There is considerable research potential in the study of the distribution and marketing of medieval goods. Artefacts such as ceramics (and ridge tiles) appear to offer specific avenues for research.

COASTAL AND WATERWAY ACTIVITY

1) Strengths

Of the four Welsh regions, north-east and east Wales has by far the shortest stretch of coastline, and as the recently published volume on *The Coastal Archaeology of Wales* displays, the amount of medieval archaeology is limited. Nevertheless, this volume does offer a helpful and up-to-date statement on current knowledge.

The theme can be extended to the inland waterways – the Dee, the Severn, the Clwyd and perhaps the Usk – which fulfilled a range of roles: as arteries of communication, for commerce, for power generation, and as magnets for settlement. Again the strength is in the potential of the resource, rather than in its study.

2) Weaknesses

No assessment, comparable with that for coastal waters, is available for these inland rivers. All we have is a series of individual reports on such aspects as the canalisation of the Clwyd, north of Rhuddlan, and the current recording of what is reputedly one of the best-preserved medieval mills eroding from the bank of the Severn, at Buttington, a short distance from here. While some of the facets mentioned under this heading could equally well be accommodated elsewhere, with the rivers simply conduits for activity that could happen anywhere, the fundamental importance of the waterways must be acknowledged.

In this context it might be noted that the Resource Audit could muster only a single SMR entry under the heading, 'Communications' and this for a beacon.

3) Research opportunities

No opportunities for the northeast Wales coastline are presented here, but it is suggested that assessments should be undertaken of the physical features of the major rivers and the adjacent riverbanks.

RELIGIOUS ARCHAEOLOGY

1) Strengths

There can be little doubt that the Cadw-funded pan-Wales assessment of historic churches represented a major advance in our knowledge of the religious building stock. The reports on over 250 churches, compiled to a consistent standard and examining not just the architecture and fittings of each church but also the fabric, offer a resource which could be a starting point for many divergent research themes, even though such work was in itself, never intended to be part of the original study. NADFAS is cataloguing church fittings and furnishings, although their progress is inevitably slow and localised.

More detailed studies of individual churches are regrettably rare. The Royal Commission's work on Brecon Cathedral stands out because it is exceptional, while the excavations at Pennant Melangell, and Capel Maelog outside Llandrindod Wells, demonstrate how much can be learnt from excavation.

At a more elevated level, the medieval monasteries of the east and northeast have seen intermittent study. Magnets to 19th-century antiquarians, abbeys such as Cwmhir, Strata Marcella and Valle Crucis have had their ground plans elucidated through limited excavation. On the historical side David Williams' remarkable studies of the Welsh Cistercians provides not only much detail of the monasteries themselves but also of the infrastructure that supported them, the precincts, the granges and the like. But it is here again that there is archaeological potential, in the study of the landscapes that surrounded them.

2) Weaknesses

Few churches have yet been subjected to the highly detailed and revealing fabric examinations, which will be familiar to those who work in England. This should be done, if only for a selected group of churches, and probably with co-operation from experienced geologists.

But perhaps an even more important short-term aim should be the accumulation of accurate plans of our historic churches; the absence of a full corpus of such plans is a fundamental weakness in church studies, even though, individually many such plans exist in a variety of archives.

Furthermore, the original research agenda paper on Wales as a whole which was given at Aberystwyth last year also flagged up a whole range of issues which have yet to be tackled satisfactorily anywhere, east and north-east Wales included: the siting of churches, church origins, external influences, particularly for Romanesque work, the location and development of sculptural schools of work, and tighter chronologies for moulding and tracery development.

In focusing on the churches of the medieval era we should not lose sight of their minor counterparts, the chapels that were abandoned both before and after the Reformation. References to these are scattered, often in the antiquarian literature and there are probably many more of these sites than is immediately apparent. An assessment of these is long over due.

Whilst the study of the Cistercian foundations can be cast in a positive light, the same can hardly be said of the properties of some of the lesser orders. There is

no consistent level of information for the friaries, for instance, usually to be found in an urban context. While modern research has been undertaken at Brecon, information on Denbigh is poor.

3) Research opportunities

The development of a corpus of accurate church plans should be initiated, preferably on a pan-Wales basis. Such plans exist in a number of repositories but the largest group – those drawn up by church architects – has been inadequately researched and their copyright status remains unclear. Opportunities should be taken for the study (and as importantly the publication) of the fabric and architecture of individual churches. Such opportunities might emerge on the back of larger church conservation projects where an archaeological input is deemed necessary.

An assessment and analysis of the monastic landscapes of east and northeast Wales is required. Where the records and the plans of specific monastic precincts and granges are found to be inadequate this should be rectified by further work.

As a postscript to this short paper, three further but non-specific opportunities can be flagged:

a) Aerial photography remains an under-utilised resource. The Royal Commission annually turns up new material of medieval date in its regular sorties. But there is much unrecognised and therefore uncatalogued data for this period in the vast vertical photograph archives at Aberystwyth, Cardiff and Swindon.

b) Contact with those working in other disciplines, particularly history, historical geography and economic history in order to break down barriers and foster research in specific areas or on specific themes should be actively rather than passively promoted.

c) Many of the issues discussed are as pertinent to the early post-medieval as to the medieval era, a terminal date of 1485 or 1500 being large an irrelevance. Studies on say settlement; land use or urban development should not be constrained by the imposition of such 'labels of convenience' as 'medieval'.

Paper prepared by Bob Silvester (CPAT).