Cambrian Archaeological Association in association with Cardiff University

DARGANFOD – DISCOVERY: a celebration of new archaeological research in Wales

Conference, Saturday 10th April 2021

Summaries of talks, in alphabetical surname order

CAMBRIAN ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION RESEARCH FUND SPEAKERS

Dr Oliver Davis (Cardiff University) and Prof Niall Sharples (Cardiff University)

Excavations at Caerau Hillfort, Cardiff, 2012-19: from the Neolithic to the Normans

Caerau Hillfort, Cardiff, is one of the largest and most architecturally complex in south-east Wales. Since 2012, Cardiff University have been undertaking excavations and other research and activity at the site with the local community. The community engagement aspect (CAER Heritage) has won several major national awards including the Times Higher Education Award (2017) for Outstanding Contribution to the Local Community, and is now delivering a major National Lottery Heritage Grant infrastructural project at the site. This paper, however, will concentrate on reviewing the research findings. Five seasons of excavation have revealed a complex multi-period site. A major discovery has been the identification of a previously unknown Neolithic causewayed enclosure on the hill. Such sites are extremely rare in Wales and where excavated, such as Banc Du, Pembrokeshire, have produced little material culture. By contrast, Caerau appears to be materially rich and the ceramic assemblage is particularly significant. The paper will also outline the Iron Age occupation of the site which appears long-lived and intensive. Finally, the sequence of boundary construction will be considered which intriguingly suggests significant refortification in the early Medieval period.

Dr Toby Driver (Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales) and Dr Jeffrey L. Davies

The Romano-British villa at Abermagwr, Ceredigion: rarity and innovation at the most remote Roman villa in Wales

A decade ago in 2010 archaeologists Jeffrey L Davies and Toby Driver opened the first trenches at Abermagwr and finally confirmed that a highly unusual cropmark seen in 2006 was indeed Ceredigion's first – and only – Romano-British villa. With generous funding from the Cambrian Archaeological Association and other research funds, work

continued for three seasons to learn more about this rare building and its great courtyard, placing the site in a wider landscape context.

In southern England or even south Wales such a villa would be unremarkable among many others and very probably ploughed flat. In mid Wales it remains a highly unusual outlier and comparatively well preserved thanks to a lighter agricultural regime; layers of Roman and – very likely post Roman – villa footings, collapse layers and reoccupation survive barely 20cms beneath sheep pasture.

Questions of innovation, novelty and regional impact were key to the research at Abermagwr, the villa being the only known example of Romanised building technology in the domestic sphere in Ceredigion. The footings of the *domus* alone consumed 117 tonnes of stone, while the remarkable slate roof – Ceredigion's earliest – originally required some 9,000 stone tiles crafted with tools and techniques recognisable from the 19th century Gwynedd slate industry. A fragmentary cut glass bowl from Abermagwr is recognised as one of the finest examples of late Roman tableware from Wales.

Perhaps most importantly the recognition of a Roman date for the sharp-angled rectangular enclosure has helped to focus and inform the Wales-wide hunt for similar – hitherto unrecognised – probable villa enclosures, especially during aerial reconnaissance in the 2018 drought. This paper will review the excavations, the key findings and look at the future for villa studies in mid and west Wales.

Further reading:

Davies, J.L. and Driver, T. 2018. The Romano-British villa at Abermagwr, Ceredigion: excavations 2010-15. *Archaeologia Cambrensis* 167, 143-219.

Dr Alan Lane (Cardiff University)

The Llangorse crannog: a short-lived Welsh royal site of the Viking Age

The Llangorse crannog was first discovered in the mid 19th century and was published and recognised in the Insular and European crannog literature of the time. But the absence of datable artefacts and the failure to find similar sites in Wales or England led to scepticism and it dropped out of archaeological view. New work and dendrochronological dating in the late 1980s led to a campaign of excavation and underwater survey which has now reached final publication. Llangorse is a unique short-lived royal crannog of the kings of Brycheiniog which was destroyed by a Mercian army in a reprisal raid. Artefacts and ecofacts combined with summer-felled oak timbers allow us an unprecedented view of a named early medieval settlement with clear Irish origins.

Further reading:

Lane, A. and Redknap, M. 2019. *Llangorse Crannog: The Excavation of an Early Medieval Royal Site in the Kingdom of Brycheiniog*. Oxford, Oxbow.

Prof Gary Lock (Kellogg College, Oxford)

Moel y Gaer, Bodfari, a small hillfort in the Clwydians, Denbighshire

Moel-y-Gaer Bodfari is a small hillfort in the Clwydian hills positioned outside the village of Bodfari, five miles north-east of Denbigh. It is strategically located overlooking the confluence of the Rivers Chwiler and Clwyd with an enclosed area of *c* 2ha. Recent work has focussed various forms of survey and excavation. Post-excavation is in progress.

The survey work at Bodfari was designed to establish a methodological approach to North Welsh hillforts. LiDAR was used as a basis for the earthwork survey with successful and interesting results which together with a range of geophysical techniques have resulted in a rich data-set forming the basis for comparative analysis.

Excavation, based on survey results, has focussed on sections of rampart, a roundhouse, an inturned entrance and a possible second entrance. The site is multi-phased and complex probably starting as a univallate enclosure which was later expanded into multivallation. The project had an outreach programme and two artists in residence.

Further reading:

http://projects.arch.ox.ac.uk/bodfari.html

Prof Mike Parker Pearson (UCL Institute of Archaeology)

The origins of Stonehenge: the bluestones and Preseli

It is now a hundred years ago that geologists worked out that the smaller monoliths at Stonehenge came from the Preseli hills of North Pembrokeshire. Whilst Stonehenge's much larger sarsens are likely to have come just 15 miles from north Wiltshire, the bluestones were brought around 180 miles. During the 20th century, archaeologists considered that these bluestone pillars, up to 4m long, were brought by sea from Milford Haven to the Bristol Avon and thence by land to Salisbury Plain. New research has refined the geological identification of the bluestones (divided into dolerite, spotted dolerite, volcanics, rhyolite and sandstone) and identified various of their sources. Two of these rock outcrops at Craig Rhos-y-felin and Carn Goedog have been excavated, revealing stone tools and quarrying installations dating to 3400-3000 BC, shortly before Stonehenge was built around 3000 BC. Isotopic analysis of people buried at Stonehenge reveals that the earliest cremation burials there included individuals with Strontium isotope values consistent with living in the Preseli region of west Wales. Recent excavations near the bluestone quarries have produced evidence that the stones were first incorporated into one or more monuments in Pembrokeshire before being transported to Salisbury Plain. It now appears that the bluestones were more likely taken overland for most of their journey.

Further reading:

Parker Pearson, M., Pollard, J., Richards, C., Thomas. J., and Welham, K. 2015. *Stonehenge: making sense of a prehistoric mystery*. York, Council for British Archaeology.

Parker Pearson, M., Pollard, J., Richards, C., Welham, K., Casswell, C., Shaw, D., Simmons, E., Stanford, A., Bevins, R. E. and Ixer, R. A. 2019. Megalithic quarries for Stonehenge's bluestones. *Antiquity* 93, 45–62.

Parker Pearson, M., Pollard, J., Richards, C., Welham, K., Kinnaird, T., Shaw, D., Simmons, E., Stanford, A., Bevins, R. E., Ixer, R. A., Ruggles, C., Rylatt, J. and Edinborough, K. 2021. The original Stonehenge? A dismantled stone circle in the Preseli hills of west Wales. *Antiquity* 95.

Dr Andy Seaman (Canterbury Christ Church University)

Hillforts and power in post-Roman Wales: a GIS-enabled analysis of Dinas Powys

Dinas Powys is the richest, best preserved and most extensively excavated post-Roman hillfort in Wales and an important type-site of the post-Roman Celtic West. The small but highly defended settlement is interpreted as a residence of a local ruler, and is thought to have sat within a small 'proto-kingdom' encompassing the eastern Vale of Glamorgan and the Cardiff basin. Nevertheless, whilst it is possible to reconstruct something of site's political background, less is known about its landscape context, the significance of its location, and its role within systems of governance and territorial control. Geographic Information Systems (GIS) provide opportunities for exploring these themes, but are constrained by limitations of source data and the difficulty of defining appropriate parameters for analysis. In this talk I will present research supported by the CAA that explored a methodology for overcoming these problems, by combining the data processing and analytical functions afforded by GIS with techniques and principles drawn from 'traditional' landscape archaeology. Our research provides new insights on the location of Dinas Powys, and suggest that its positioning within the landscape supported elite power by facilitating control of important overland routeways.

Further reading:

Seaman, A. 2013. Dinas Powys in Context: Settlement and Society in Post-Roman Wales. *Studia Celtica* 47, 1-23

NEW RESEARCHERS

Adelle Bricking (PhD candidate in Archaeology, Cardiff University)

Life and death in Iron Age Wales: preliminary results from histological and stable isotope analysis from Dinorben and RAF St Athan

The study of human remains provides us with our most direct window onto the Iron Age population in Wales. However, burial evidence from Wales has been understudied compared to areas such as Yorkshire and Wiltshire. This is due in part to poor preservation as acidic soils destroy much of the osteological material—for example, Rowan Whimster (1981) identified only eight records of Iron Age burial in the whole country. This led to the popular assumption that the lack of human bone means that the majority of burial rites were "archaeologically invisible", particularly excarnation within hillforts. However, a more recent reappraisal of the published and unpublished literature on excavations of Iron Age sites by Oliver Davis (2017) has shown that the corpus of burial material in Wales is much larger than previously recognised. This provides an opportunity to asses funerary rites and treatment of the dead, mortality profiles, health, diets and origins of the Iron Age population in Wales.

This presentation will show some preliminary results from histological and isotopic analysis from two sites with the largest assemblages – RAF St Athan in the Vale of Glamorgan and Dinorben in Conwy. By combining contextual study of this material with isotopic and micro taphonomic analysis, the aim of the project is to directly address how we understand mortuary practices, but also to reveal new insights into the demographics of later prehistoric populations in Wales.

Further reading:

Davis, O. 2017. Iron Age Burial in Wales: Patterns, Practices and Problems. *Oxford Journal of Archaeology* 37(1), 1-49.

Davis, O. 2017. Filling the gaps: the Iron Age in Cardiff and the Vale of Glamorgan. *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* 83, 325-256.

Dr Rhiannon Comeau (recently completed PhD, UCL Institute of Archaeology)

Pre-Norman focal zones and seasonality: a cantref-level case study

Dinas Powys and Llangorse, subjects of two of the other Darganfod talks, are jewels in the early medieval landscape - a landscape that, in many other areas of Wales, is very poorly understood, being short in both archaeological finds and written records. This presentation, based on recently-published PhD research, will take an innovative approach to these problems. Using a case study (the early medieval cantref of Cemais in north Pembrokeshire) it will demonstrate how a multidisciplinary approach, identifying focal zone elements known from other areas of northern Europe, can be used to locate key places - hotspots - in the pre-Norman landscape. It will also look at how the seasonal patterns of use of these places can be identified using available

evidence. In particular, this approach identifies the cantref's assembly sites, the gathering places of the pre-urban world where, at particular times of the year, people gathered for business and festivals. Understanding of these has hitherto been very limited for early medieval Wales, and this research presents the first comprehensive study of early medieval assembly sites in a Welsh context.

Further reading:

Comeau, R. 2020. *Land, People and Power in Early Medieval Wales: the cantref of Cemais in comparative perspective*, B.A.R. British Series 659. Oxford, British Archaeological Reports.

Dr Alice Forward (Allen Archaeology)

Lordship and communality in the 13th century. Four ram aquamaniles from South Glamorgan

Over the past 35 years a group of ram aquamaniles has been discovered on four manorial sites in South Glamorgan, Wales. Aquamaniles are generally found in association with manorial and ecclesiastical settlements and are zoomorphic in form with rams, lions, and horse and riders being the most common types. The date for these objects, 13th century, is relatively narrow in comparison to other medieval ceramic forms. Whilst not unusual vessels, they are not always part of a region's ceramic repertoire.

This paper will look at the context for each of the four south Glamorgan rams, taking into consideration the local ceramic tradition and the details of their discovery. The aquamaniles will be used to explore potential relationships that may have existed between the four manorial estates; in particular, the social and political relationships that would have been manifested through the 12th and 13th centuries following the Norman Conquest.

Eirini Konstantinidi (PhD candidate in Archaeology, Cardiff University)

If the dead could talk: a taphonomic approach to Neolithic mortuary treatment in the caves of Wales

There are a range of burial practices in the Neolithic. This research examines burials in caves, with direct evidence of Neolithic activity, focusing on fifteen sites in Wales and one in north Somerset. This project employs an integrated taphonomic approach, combining macroscopic analysis of bone surface preservation and microscopic analysis of bone microstructure (histology). The provision of new dating evidence from ten of the sites examined in Wales will also maximise the interpretative resolution of the project. By undertaking traditional and novel osteological analysis this research will examine pre-and post-depositional treatment of the deceased and the means by which bones became disarticulated. Current research has progressed our

understanding of burial practices in subterranean environments, however, a substantial corpus of funerary remains of prehistoric date, with many dating to the Neolithic, have not been subject to holistic study.

Macroscopic taphonomic analysis (visual osteological examination of surface modifications of human remains) provides information on the degree and duration of exposure of the remains, the nature of manipulation and/or disturbance of the bones and the agents of these modifications impacted on the bone. In addition, microscopic analysis (thin section microscopy under transmitted light microscopy to assess the degree and nature of microstructural bioerosion) provides insight into early post-mortem processes and reveals the rate and nature of soft tissue decay.

This presentation outlines initial findings for the taphonomic analysis on sites across Wales. Burial patterns and practices revealed from analysis of disarticulated remains will be presented, including some unusual case studies, and future plans for analysis described.

Dr Rachel Swallow (Honorary Research Fellow, University of Liverpool; Honorary Visiting Research Fellow, University of Chester)

A square peg in a round hole: new interpretations for the eleventh-century northern Anglo-Welsh border, as told by the misfit Dodleston Castle in Cheshire

A detailed archaeological survey of the earthworks of Dodleston Castle in Cheshire in 1995 by the then University College Chester (now University of Chester), prompted in turn a detailed and multidisciplinary study as part of my research on the castles of medieval Cheshire and their landscape settings in the Irish Sea Region.

Situated within the northern Anglo-Welsh border zone, Dodleston Castle has long been considered a regular form motte-and-bailey earthwork castle. However, the results of new research call for a revised classification: Dodleston Castle was instead a primary build ringwork castle, within the earthworks of which the subsequent build of a motte was inserted into a pre-existing rectilinear feature. This new interpretation indicates that the medieval castle possibly assumed a place of cross-period, cross-cultural, secular, ritual and religious significance within this medieval borderland territory.

A fresh examination of all available sources also serves to elevate Dodleston's previously understated manorial status, to a significant pre-Norman assembly site and head of an Anglo-Saxon estate. Forming part of the wider landscape of the Irish Sea Cultural Zone (Swallow 2016), this paper concludes that the palimpsest of archaeological evidence at Dodleston Castle points to a reused place of multi-faceted significance over time, and that this reuse perpetuated a memory of communication in a Welsh borderlands landscape where the confluence of people and ideas was common (Swallow, forthcoming 2020).

Further reading:

Swallow, R. E., forthcoming 2020. Shifting Border, Shifting Interpretation: The Anglo-Welsh Border and Dodleston Castle, Cheshire, *Archaeologia Cambrensis*, **220**

————————, 2016. Cheshire Castles of the Irish Sea Cultural Zone, *The Archaeological Journal*, 173(2), 288 – 341