

MANIFESTATIONS OF EMPIRE: PALAEOENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS AND THE END OF ROMAN BRITAIN

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Figure 1 Tudur Davies (post-doctoral researcher, University of Exeter) examining one of the pollen cores. Photo by Tudur Davies.

This twenty-month project, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, aims to explore how the agricultural landscape of a lowland region of western Britain was affected by the major changes that characterised Western Europe between the third to eighth centuries AD. This period saw a series of profound socio-political transformations, including the end of Roman Imperial control, extensive population movement, climate change, religious conversion, and the emergence of the early medieval kingdoms. In Britain, these changes span the boundary between what are traditionally seen as two separate periods of research: the Romano-British and early medieval. Unfortunately, this compartmentalised research tradition, combined with methodological limitations, have hindered development of a proper understanding of the processes at play, and the nature, speed, and extent of change, and as such their effect upon the landscape remain contentious within both history and archaeology (see, for example, the lively debates in Collins and Gerrard 2004; Haarer 2014). Indeed, the debate has now reached an impasse, due in large part to a lack of historical sources, archaeologists' over-reliance on the evidence from a handful of key sites, and their limited understanding of the landscape context of these sites. Progress has also been stifled by methodological problems, with much research focusing on the identification of settlement continuity (in terms of simple location) at the expense of exploring site

function. Palaeoenvironmental approaches have long been identified as a viable approach to solving these problems (*e.g.* Dark 1996), but limited datasets and methodological constraints have inhibited the realisation of this potential.

In this project we will overcome these problems by studying the Roman and early medieval periods together, and using an innovative programme of high resolution pollen analysis to investigate changes or continuities in agriculture and land-use associated with a range of settlement foci. Our research is focusing on clusters of sampling sites from within the environs of two regional power centres: Caerwent Roman town and Dinas Powys early medieval hillfort. We will examine how land-cover, as reconstructed through the pollen record, related to patterns of land-use and associated agro-economic regimes between the third and eighth centuries AD, with particular emphasis placed on examining levels of arable, pastoral, and woodland indicator species. Through this we hope to gain important evidence about the changes characterised by the use and abandonment of these settlement foci.

Our research is focusing on South East Wales because this region represents a rare example of a part of the Western Roman Empire, which, although 'Romanized', was not subject to 'barbarian' incursion following the Empire's collapse in the fifth century, and where early medieval power structures and political institutions developed as the result of indigenous processes. Thus, our hope is that the research will contribute to wider

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debates about the transformation of the Roman World by providing an important comparative case study.

Bibliography

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