

# Early Medieval Ecclesiastical Sites Project south-west Wales

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In 2001 Cambria Archaeology began work on the south-west Wales element of this Cadw-funded, pan-Wales project, progressing from the Historic Churches Project of 1995-9. The project will assess all ecclesiastical sites within the region that are thought to be pre-Conquest in origin (ie pre-1100), including churches, chapels, cemeteries and memorials. It aims to achieve a better understanding of the early medieval resource within the region, through a review of documentary sources and field evidence. The outcomes will include the rationalisation of the record, with scheduling recommendation, an assessment of the effectiveness of the methodologies, and recommendations for future archaeological work and responses.

The first year of the project in West Wales involved a desk-top assessment of the three counties - Carmarthenshire, Ceredigion and Pembrokeshire, where the sites fall into two main categories -

1. Church/chapel sites, ie 'developed' cemetery sites
2. Open cemetery sites, ie 'undeveloped', never having received a building. These include a number of Bronze Age round barrows and Iron Age enclosure re-use sites.

Few ecclesiastical sites in the three counties can be positively dated to the early medieval period. For example, the tradition of long-cist burial appears to have persisted well into the post-Conquest period, as in the excavated cemetery at Eglwysrw (Pembrokeshire). However, a number of sites possess one or more characteristics that may be significant indicators of early medieval origins.

It must be noted that the significance of all criteria varies from region to region within the area, as it does within Wales as a whole. In addition, many characteristics may reflect a continuing 'native' tradition, rather than pre-Conquest origins. Nevertheless, certain themes are beginning to emerge. The criteria include -

1. Documented pre-Conquest churches. In south-west Wales these include St David's and the six 'bishop-house' sites mentioned in the 'Welsh Laws', the sites listed in the Llandaff Charters, those mentioned in the saints' 'Lives', sites mentioned in the Chronicles, those sites listed among episcopal possessions in the

1080s and 1090s, and those mentioned in the Lichfield Gospel marginalia. In all cases, supplementary evidence is being examined in order to assess the likelihood that the pre-Conquest church occupied the same site as the later church.

2. *Clas* or portionary church evidence. Following on from similar work in north Wales, later medieval church administration and patronage is being examined in order to assess whether 'native' systems of patronage, such as the apportionment of spiritualities among lay clergy, may perpetuate pre-Conquest models, particularly those of *clas* churches. It has already been demonstrated that the known *clas* church at Llanbadarn Fawr, Ceredigion, was such a 'portionary' church, while four other churches were described as portionary in Pope Nicholas' *Taxatio*. Some of the other multiple-patronage sites in the region may have similar origins. However, like so much of the evidence, such patronage may only reflect continuing tradition.
3. Direct archaeological evidence (eg excavated cist graves, radiocarbon dated deposits etc). The continuity of cist burial has been noted above, and may be compared with similar later evidence from Cornwall and Scotland. Only dated burials and deposits are included. However, the cist burials (and Early Christian Monuments) which have been observed within a number Iron Age hillforts, and around Bronze Age cemeteries/ barrows, are regarded as significant indicators of early, open, undeveloped cemeteries, comparable to the excavated example at Caer, Bayvil (Pembrokeshire) and Plas Gogerddan (Ceredigion).
4. Other archaeological evidence, undated but compatible with an early medieval date. Evidence such as boundary, earthwork, cropmark or other evidence for so-called '*vallum*' enclosures, outer enclosures around churchyards etc is of varying

significance, and requires supplementary evidence for pre-Conquest origins. Any associations with early medieval secular sites are more difficult to establish - like early medieval ecclesiastical sites, few such sites have been conclusively identified.

5. Early Christian Monuments, *in situ*. Establishing the exact provenance of stones and stone sculpture can be problematical, but in south-west Wales, the concentrations at eg Llanwnda, Nevern, Penally, St David's and St Edren's (all Pembrokeshire) are regarded as early imports.
6. Artefacts of definite early medieval date. The few dated artefacts known from ecclesiastical sites in the region include imported 6th century pottery from St David's Church on Caldey Island, Pembrokeshire, one of the two candidates for the putative early monastic site.
7. The presence of a saint's grave or *capel y bedd*. The five known *capeli y bedd* may be later medieval churchyard chapels erected over earlier saint's graves, but at least one - at Eglwyswrw again - may represent post-Conquest persistence of tradition. However, significance again increases when assessed alongside other criteria, such as the ECMs within the former *capel y bedd* at Clydau, Pembrokeshire.
8. Siting of churches within Roman forts etcetera. This indicator may apply to a number of Carmarthenshire churches including Carmarthen St Peter and Llanfair-ar-y-Bryn, Llandovery - and may be extended to take in those churches constructed over Roman roads such as Llandyfeisant, Llandeilo - but it has yet to be properly tested.

Indicators such as churchyard morphology, British (ie 'Celtic') dedications, place-name elements such as *eglwys*, *llan* and *merthyr* are treated with more caution and do not constitute criteria in themselves. Some circular churchyards may represent Iron Age enclosures, some of which may have begun as open cemeteries (eg Llandysilio, Pembrokeshire) but this can rarely be demonstrated conclusively. Similarly, 'holy wells' are regarded as representing the native tradition, but their significance may increase when in association with other indicators.

From the desktop survey, a graded list of 321 ecclesiastical sites with possible pre-Conquest origins has been drawn up. However, it must be stressed at the outset that only 30 sites have demonstrable pre-Conquest origins. Of these, only five have been absolutely dated by C14. The remaining 25 sites are known from documentary references and the precise locations of only some can be currently proven with any finality. Fieldwork is being undertaken in 2002-2004.

The assessment demonstrated that many traditional indicators do apply, ie circular churchyards, *in situ* Early Christian Monuments and native dedications are often accompanied by other evidence for early medieval origins. Re-use of Iron Age enclosures, and large, outer churchyard enclosures were suggested at a large number of new sites. Some of these outer enclosures appear to variously incorporate Neolithic chambered tombs and Bronze Age standing stones, but this is apparent at only a small number of sites.

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