

Medieval Archaeology

NEWSLETTER OF THE SOCIETY FOR MEDIEVAL ARCHAEOLOGY

Reassessing Norman castles on the Gower Peninsula, Wales



The Gower Peninsula on the southern coast of Wales is rich in archaeology for prehistory, however, historical and archaeological sources are limited for the intervening period prior to the 13th century. Because of this, the Norman invasion of Gower is not clearly understood and later sources suggest that the number of knight's fees of land given in return for military service was greater than the few extant castles with later stonework. The objective

of this fieldwork was to determine as far as reasonably possible, the extent of the relationship between ecclesiastical sites and locations that may have been used by the Normans for military purposes. Known castle locations in Gower are close to ecclesiastical sites, so this project investigated whether churches could be an indication of a location possibly used for an early Norman timber and earth castle nearby, one that used existing features in the landscape, some of which date

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If brief, Issue 65 nevertheless reminds us of the interesting research that continues to take place both in the field and in the office/lab/library despite the cruel curtailments imposed by COVID19. The Society will be hosting its Annual Conference in July as a Virtual event and all are welcome, and for those of us who began the year savouring the product of Netflix, Sue Brunning, as guest columnist, has prepared a fascinating review of *The Dig*.

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Left:
Pennard Castle with the remains of St.
Mary's church to the right.

to the Iron Age. This survey work was made possible with funding from the Society for Medieval Archaeology and the data will form part of a University of Reading doctoral thesis exploring the impact of the Normans on Gower.

The methodology employed in this survey was to use the later documented knight's fees and visit ecclesiastical and possible fortified sites within each area; 52 in total. The exterior of the ecclesiastical buildings, together with their siting in the landscape were surveyed to determine if any indicators of a pre-Norman foundation were present. Eleven sites displayed signs of an early origin. From each ecclesiastical site, possible castle locations were visited on foot and their probability of Norman use was assessed. Of the 26 ecclesiastical sites surveyed, all but two had a path, track or road of unknown date linking it to a known or possible Norman fortified site,

suggesting a potential relationship between locations. With the addition of the possible fortified sites, early Norman castles may have been positioned in a coastal chain along the south of the peninsula, rather than in two main clusters. The identification of these potential Norman castles will contribute to characterising the early knight's fees and their distribution. This coastal positioning may also give an indication of the function of the timber castles. The results from this study contribute to current understanding of not only the impact of the Normans on the development of Gower, but how they influenced Welsh history and culture.

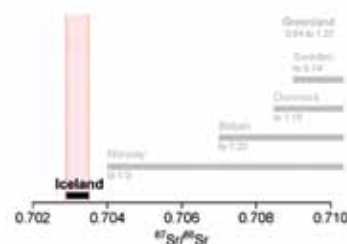
Caroline Bourne

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Provenancing medieval iron in the North Atlantic using strontium isotopes

A research grant from the Society for Medieval Archaeology was awarded to an innovative project led by Dr Thomas Birch (Moesgaard Museum, Denmark) to investigate the possibility for provenancing iron in the North Atlantic region using strontium isotopes. The project is jointly funded by Historical Metallurgical Society. Entitled, *[INAVA] Re-tracing the Origins of Iron in the North Atlantic during the Viking Age*, the preliminary study will analyse the strontium isotope signature of iron artefacts from Iceland and compare the results with others from wider Scandinavia. The project is a collaboration with isotope specialist Dr Rasmus Andreasen from the Department of Geosciences, Aarhus University, as well as a network of researchers and institutions from Iceland and Scandinavia.

Strontium isotopes have been explored previously for their effectiveness in provenancing iron (Degryse *et al.* 2007). However, their analysis might be better suited to differentiating sources with characteristically distinct strontium isotope signatures. As Iceland is geologically very young, strontium isotope values are well defined and much lower than those from other geologies in North Western Europe (see Figure). It suggests that this method may be an effective tool for discriminating imported iron in Iceland from locally produced iron. Imported (non-local) iron should fall outside the range of strontium isotope values expected.



Strontium values in Iceland compared with those elsewhere.

The method might prove useful to understand iron production dynamics during the Viking Age in the North Atlantic region. The last few decades have found increasing evidence for large-scale iron production in Iceland from the Viking Age, with over 100 sites now documented. In contrast, there is almost no evidence for iron production during this period in Denmark, with over 90% of artefacts considered to originate from Norway (Buchwald 2005). Aside from Norway, could Iceland also have played a role as a major iron producer during the Viking Age?

Thomas Birch

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Bibliography

- Buchwald, VF 2005, *Iron and Steel in ancient times*. The Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters.
- Degryse, P, Schneider, J, Kellens, N, Waelkens, M and Muechez PH 2007, 'Tracing the resources of iron working at ancient Sagalassos (south-West Turkey): a combined lead and strontium isotope study on iron artefacts and ores', *Archaeometry* **49**, 75–86. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4754.2007.00288.x>.

News from the Monographs Editor

Negotiating the North: Meeting-places in the Middle Ages in the North Sea zone, by Sarah Semple, Alexandra Sanmark, Frode Iversen and Natascha Mehler (2021), The Society for Medieval Archaeology Monograph 41, London, is open access and freely available in full from the Routledge website:

<https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/9781003045663>

C14 determinations from a cess pit in Nottingham

Radiocarbon dating of material recovered from archaeological excavations in Nottingham, which forms an important part of my PhD research, has been made possible by a Medieval Archaeology Research Grant.

My doctoral thesis examines the economic conditions of Nottingham during the period 1300 to 1540 using both archaeological and historical documentary evidence. Key research themes include: the changing land use within the town, including a consideration of growth and intensification in different areas, and the contraction of urban space; the growth and decline of trades and industries and the movement of zones of activity; neighbourhoods as an economic, social and spatial phenomenon; the urban environment and sanitation; major building works. The example of Nottingham is placed within its national context to contribute towards a better understanding of late medieval towns.

To address some of the research themes, ten samples from three sites were submitted to the Oxford Radiocarbon Accelerator Unit last year. COVID-19 has presented delays and some samples have yet to be processed. The results for the samples for which the grant applies have, however, been received very recently. These samples were derived from carbonised wood, recovered during excavations of a substantial cess pit excavated in 1978 at a site on the edge of

the medieval town. The 7m-deep pit contained small amounts of carbonised wood, within deposits containing complete and fragmentary roof tiles. More than 300 roof tiles were present within the pit. The contents of the pit are believed to be associated with the clearance of buildings on the site, which preceded the construction of a substantial wall that may have served a defensive function for the town and which is believed to be part of the same wall described by antiquarians as extending across a large part of the southern side of the town.

The radiocarbon results indicate the pit was in use during the 13th century, although the upper fills of the pit suggest it may have continued in use into the 15th century. The results enable a chronology to be established for the site which, with other results, will help date the period of site clearance and the construction of the wall. They also help provide a better understanding of refuse deposition at the site.

I would like to thank the society for providing the Medieval Archaeology Research Grant that has helped make this research possible.

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Cess pit S45/500 at the Fisher Gate site. Photograph courtesy of Nottingham City Museums and Galleries.



Website

www.medievalarchaeology.co.uk

The website continues to improve. Send us your comments:

medievalarchaeology@googlemail.com

Apply for a Grant

The Society is in the happy position of being able to offer grants for research and for travel. For information on how to apply for a Society grant/award, see our website:

www.medievalarchaeology.co.uk

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Society News

Cultures of Cloth

The Archaeology of Textiles in Medieval Northwest Europe

Society for Medieval Archaeology Virtual Conference 24 July 2021

Following the postponement of last year's Annual Conference, the Society will hold a free online day-conference for members on the archaeology of textiles

Textiles were the single most important manufactured product in the medieval world. Moving from domestic household production to the commercialisation of the textile industry was a primary driver in the development of the medieval European economy and helped to shape medieval landscapes and settlements ranging from rural villages to international cities. Textiles were one of the most prominent commodities in medieval trade networks; wool and linen were the stuff of everyday life while silks, damasks and cloth of gold were among the most valuable luxuries in the medieval world. Textiles were used as clothes, bedding, tablecloths, wall-hangings, sails, sacks, altar-cloths and shrouds; they were integral to every aspect of the routine and ritual lives of people in the middle ages, through which they expressed identities based on geography, status, gender, age and ethnicity. For better or for worse, spreading disease and depopulation

as well as wealth, opportunities and knowledge, cloth production and trade inter-connected communities of all sizes across Europe, surviving and driving a millennium of profound social, economic, political and environmental change.

This conference brings together a group of speakers who together will address key themes in textile production, exchange and consumption across the medieval period in Britain and North-Western Europe, from a multitude of different disciplinary perspectives. The papers offered range from evidence for sheep husbandry and textile production, to archaeological finds of preserved textiles, and the production and display of silk as one of the key luxury textiles in both the secular and ecclesiastical worlds. Together, they will explore how textiles drew together networks of farmers, craftspeople and merchants across the medieval world and wove together the fabric of medieval life.

The event will be held online on Saturday 24 July 2021 hosted by the University of Nottingham. Please go to the Conference website for details on how to book.

www.nottingham.ac.uk/go/Cultures-Cloth

Contact the conference organizer Dr Chris King (Department of Classics and Archaeology, University of Nottingham) at Chris.King@nottingham.ac.uk



E079497, Weaving, carding and spinning (The British Library Royal 20 C V f.75), detail of.



YORYM-D7D460 A late medieval bi-conical lead spindle whorl, discovered in North Yorkshire (The Portable Antiquities Scheme).



FindID: 607266. A late medieval cloth-seal from Ausburg, discovered in Norfolk (The Portable Antiquities Scheme).

Participants include:

Frances Pritchard, Keynote lecture:
– ‘A new look at medieval textiles excavated in London’.

Chris King – ‘Cultures of cloth in the English midlands: production, trade and consumption’.

Richard Thomas and Matilda Holmes – ‘Counting sheep: new zooarchaeological perspectives on sheep husbandry in medieval England’.

Tina Anderlini – ‘Embroidered silk knots to cover heads’.

Mary Brooks – ‘Expressing embroidered faith and power: vestments associated with Archbishop John Morton’.

Other Grants

Castle Studies Trust awards six new exciting and diverse grants totalling £31,000

The Castle Studies Trust is delighted to announce the award of six grants, totalling a record £31,000:

Caerlaverock, Dumfriesshire: The aim is to understand the chronology and geography of extreme weather events in the high medieval period, and the effects they wrought on archaeological features that led to the abandonment of the old castle in favour of the new.

Greasley, Nottinghamshire: The production of an interpretative phased floor plan for Greasley Castle in Nottinghamshire. The castle, built in the 1340s, has an obscure history and the understanding of its architectural phasing is at best very cloudy.

Laughton-en-le-Morthen, South Yorkshire: To provide professional illustration and reconstruction that will be integrated into a co-authored academic article. Part of the monies will be used to produce phase plans of Laughton during key stages of its development, and a small percentage will pay for a line drawing of the grave cover incorporated into the fabric of the nearby church.

Old Wick, Caithness: Dendrochronological assessment of timber at the Castle of Old Wick, Caithness, thought to be one of the earliest stone castles in Scotland. The taking of the samples will be done in September when conditions will still be favourable as the castle is situated next to the North Sea and samples can only be found 8m above ground level.

Richmond, North Yorkshire: Co-funding a three-week excavation of Richmond Castle, one of the best preserved and least understood Norman castles in the UK. The aim is to understand better the remains of buildings and structures primarily along the eastern side of the bailey and is likely to take place in the latter part of July.

Warkworth, Northumberland: Geophysical survey to explore evidence for subsurface features in and around the field called St John's Close adjacent to the castle.

Donate at least £50 and be invited to our exclusive visits to these projects: <https://donate.kindlink.com/castle-studies-trust/2245>.



Old Wick, Caithness
DPCWK230316008 © HES.

2020 Grant Award Updates

Shrewsbury, Shropshire: To fund a second year of excavation, this time to understand the rampart of the inner bailey. The excavation in September has come up with some unexpected and interesting results, notably the rampart looks as though it was created in the 1200s, meaning the inner bailey of the castle was of negligible size. At the time of writing the team were awaiting the results of the finds but they expect the final report to be with the Trust imminently.

Lincoln, Lincolnshire: To develop a reconstruction drawing of the castle as it would have been in the latter part of the 12th century. The team has managed to produce a draft of the model, most of which is complete. At the time of writing the artist was just adding the final touches to the reconstruction drawings.

Sowing the Seeds: The aim of the project is to try to understand better everyday life in castles by seeing if there are any surviving plants at four Irish castles that were planted, grown and cared for by medieval people. Fiona MacGowan, the ecologist working on the project, has completed her reports, and project lead Karen Dempsey is writing up the final report.

The Wirk, Orkney: Could the Wirk be a Norse castle? The survey took place in mid-September. The project team hopes to carry out the postponed excavations as soon as the lifting of COVID19 restrictions permit.

Warkworth, Northumberland: Using various forms of geophysical survey to try to understand the subsurface features for one of the major castles of the earls of Northumberland. The survey work was carried out in mid-November and we are awaiting the final report which has been delayed by illness. Early indications suggest that the most interesting findings are in the inner bailey.

If you have any questions about any of the projects we have funded this year or about the Trust in general, please do not hesitate to contact the chair of trustees **Jeremy Cunnington** on admin@castlestudiestrust.org

Media & Exhibition

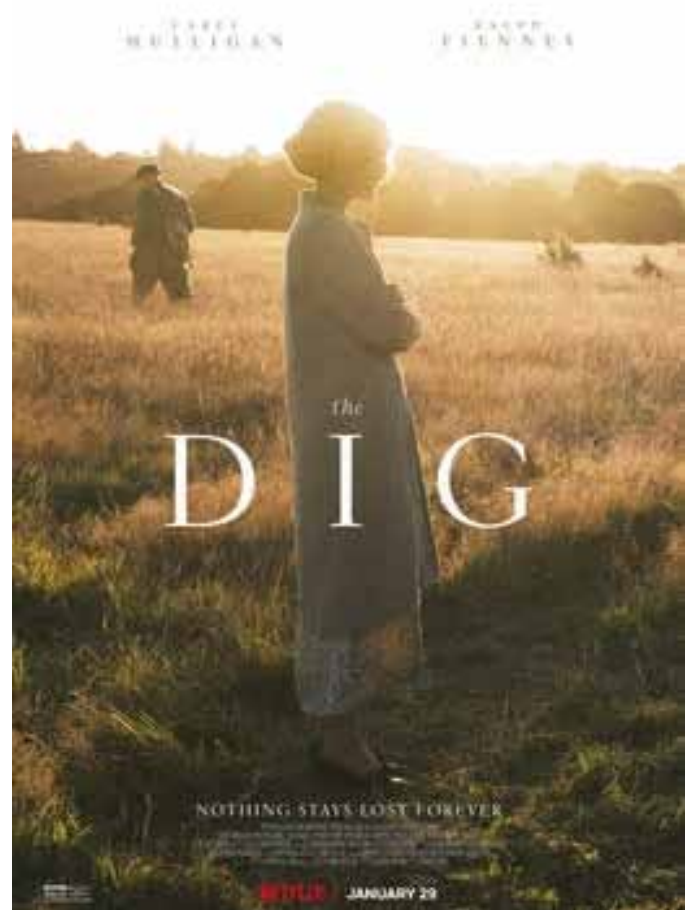
Rarely do we see a Hollywood film about archaeology that does not involve bull-whips, curses, aliens, face-melting lightning, the raising of mummies or even the Devil himself. So the arrival of *The Dig*, a melancholy Netflix drama about the excavation of the Sutton Hoo ship burial in 1939, is a welcome outlier.

In the film (adapted from John Preston's novel by Moira Buffini), self-described 'excavator' Basil Brown (Ralph Fiennes) is employed by well-to-do widow Edith Pretty (Carey Mulligan) to investigate several mounds on her land at Sutton Hoo, Suffolk. Expecting little, he puts spade to ground and makes the discovery of a lifetime: a 7th-century burial ship. The academic establishment, embodied by Charles Phillips (Ken Stott) – really from Cambridge but here a proxy for the British Museum – gets wind and swoops in, side-lining Brown with a professional team including married couple Stuart and Peggy Piggott (Ben Chaplin and Lily James), William Grimes (Arsher Ali) and John Brailsford (Eamon Farren). As the ship reveals its secrets, the Piggott's marriage is tested by hints of an affair between Stuart and Brailsford, and Peggy's attraction to Edith's cousin Rory (a fictional character:

Johnny Flynn). But above them all looms a greater drama: the imminent outbreak of the Second World War.

Those familiar with the Sutton Hoo story will already see dramatic licence in the synopsis. As well as the excavators' fictional romantic entanglements, the conflict between Brown and Phillips is ramped up with the latter – to the chagrin of some who knew him – styled as the villain of the piece. But the depiction of Peggy Piggott (later Margaret Guido) has drawn most criticism, perceived as reducing an experienced archaeologist to a ditsy love interest who trowels in a crop-top. Your mileage will vary in terms of how far these aspects shape your enjoyment of the film, but the criticism is justified. These are real people who can no longer answer for themselves, and while *The Dig* is not a documentary, audiences often accept the version of events presented by feature films and anyone making historical fiction must be mindful of the responsibility they wield for the individuals they depict. Perhaps it is fairer to play fast and loose with plot rather than with personalities.

Nonetheless, *The Dig* has been largely well received by critics, the public and the archaeological community. Indeed, its release prompted a deluge of enthusiasm



over the first weekend, culminating in the film, Sutton Hoo and the British Museum trending on UK Twitter. Something about this quiet, wistful work has struck a nerve beyond the typical audience for a period piece. It helps that at its heart is a poignant central pairing of platonic and intellectual friendship that (just about) resists the lure of romance. Much has been made of Carey Mulligan being two decades younger than Edith Pretty was in 1939, but her

nuanced portrait of an ailing woman, facing her own mortality but determined to cling on for a final adventure, is deeply moving. A scene in which she 'boards' the burial ship with her young son Robert (Archie Barnes) is yearningly sad and yet tinged with hope. Ralph Fiennes, meanwhile, is terrific as Basil Brown, the autodidact with an encyclopaedic knowledge of Suffolk soil, gained not at Cambridge but at the University of Life. His characterisation is close to how Brown comes across in his own writings

To advertise conferences/events in the Newsletter

please email:
medieval.archaeology@googlemail.com

Contribute to the Newsletter

We welcome submissions relating to current research projects in Ireland, the UK and on the continent, and ask that submissions do not exceed 800 words, with conference reports to be within 500 words.

Please do not embed pictures in Word/text files but do send pictures/plans as separate high quality JPEG files. The preferred format for site plans/maps is EPS, with layers clearly indicated and unlocked, and any linked files attached.

Send to the Honorary Newsletter Editor by e-mail:
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The due dates for receipt of copy are:
Spring Newsletter: 15th February
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Credits

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– especially a riverside moment involving a ship, in which his expression conveys a mind transported back to when his burial ship plied the same waters, in the same way, in the same serene silence.

Another beguiling performance is given by the landscape. Anyone familiar with Suffolk will find Mike Eley's cinematography extremely evocative (even when Surrey is standing-in). Director Simon Stone has described filling his frames with Suffolk's enormous skies, leaving just a sliver of land at the bottom while hand-held photography – atypical for a historical drama – lends urgency, especially to the excavation scenes.

But what of the archaeology? *The Dig's* dig has received the seal of approval from many archaeologists, and readers may enjoy a recent episode of BBC Radio Four's *The Film Programme* in which production designer Maria Djurkovic explains how she created it, like an excavation in reverse. The iconic ship imprint and burial chamber are thoroughly convincing, based on hours of research in the British Museum's archive and achieved by burying high-quality replicas (by Dave Roper at Ganderwick Creations) that the actors excavated themselves. Even the smallest details are observed, such as the purse-lid being shown upside down: another director may have been tempted to show the glitzier top. In a recent BBC interview, Stone said, 'If you were making an accurate film about archaeology, it would be 99% digging and 0.001% finding treasure.' *The Dig* reflects this by giving the finds themselves little more than an extended cameo. Indeed, the excavation scenes feature as much corroded iron as gold – something that has disappointed some, but may relieve those who despair at the media's preoccupation with commercial value. The care for authenticity extends to the archaeologists' paraphernalia and costumes, all lifted from the 1939 photographs, down to Brown's pocket-chain and Grimes' boiler-suit. But the film also captures the feeling of excavating,

making many archaeologists long for the field – rain, mud, tarps and all. The burial chamber sequence is transcendent. When Peggy finds the first piece of gold, the director removes all sound except for her breathing, nailing the experience of finding something really special and having it all to yourself for a few precious moments.

All this reinforces the sense that *The Dig* is not really about finding 'treasure'. Nor is it interested in the uncanny things that Hollywood seems to think will happen when people literally dig up the past (it eschews entirely Edith Pretty's interest in spiritualism and the tale, apocryphal or not, that a ghostly vision inspired her investigations). Instead its concern is human relationships, good, bad, or indifferent; in the dynamics between a group of individuals thrown together for a common purpose, muddling along and ultimately sharing a memorable experience over a summer season. In this, it mirrors the average excavation experience anyway. Its wider themes explore the notion of time being long and life being short; the need to forge a way through uncertainty, to contend with an uncontrollable foe (war, ill health, losing one's mother) when relationships are crucial but separation unavoidable. The resonance of such ideas to our current moment could not be starker. Perhaps this is where *The Dig's* popularity is found. Whether Basil Brown's flat cap and waistcoat will replace Indiana Jones's fedora and khaki shirt as popular culture's 'archaeologist uniform' remains to be seen – but the growing suite of online memes invites us not to bet against it.

Simon Stone interview:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-55650074>

Film Programme:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000rc55>

Sue Brunning

Curator: European Early Medieval Collections, British Museum

Conferences/Events FORTHCOMING

Many in-person events through Summer 2021 continue to be cancelled due to COVID19, but there are **online events**, including the **SMA Annual Conference on Saturday 24 July**.

The BM exhibition, **Thomas Becket – Murder and the making of a saint** will run until 22nd August.

[Check websites for latest details](#)