

February 2.2023, **"Life in Wales in the time of Asser and King Alfred"**, Nancy Edwards, Emeritus Professor, Bangor

Alfred ruled in Wessex 871-899 AD and was also Overlord of Mercia. In the early part of his reign, he tried to regain ground from the Viking Great Army, and after gaining victory at the Battle of Edington (878) he pushed them out of Wessex and they settled in the Danelaw – East Mercia, East Anglia, Northumbria. Alfred then set about the defence of his Kingdom with the establishment of Burhs, an organised system to pave the way for the reconquest of the Danelaw. Asser, a monk and possibly also a bishop at St Davids, was one of the learned men who spent time at Alfred's Court and, a Welsh and Latin speaker, helped him translate learned works from the Latin into Old English – after a time Alfred was able to do this himself. So, Alfred revived learning – evidence for this might include the Alfred jewel, an implement used to follow text in the books. Asser wrote a Life of Alfred, the only known biography of the King, from which comes the famous story of the burning of the cakes.

Over the last seven years Prof. Edwards has been writing a book covering the later Roman period up to the beginning of the Norman Conquest and placing Wales within it. Many of the Welsh kings submitted to Alfred, but the actual extent of his power there is debatable. Historical and archaeological evidence is fragmentary about how people lived in the later 9<sup>th</sup> and early 10<sup>th</sup> century, the period of Asser and Alfred, but one exciting site is Llangorse Crannog, the only Crannog found in Wales. First discovered in 1867 and excavated by Mark Redknap and Alan Lane in the late 1980s to 1990s, it is situated in Llangorse Lake (Linn Synadon), and is a natural

island which had been extended and surrounded by timber piles. Associated with the rulers of Brycheiniog, it can be identified with the site of Brecenanmere mentioned in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles in 910. A large number of timbers, part of a palisade, protrude from the water; dendrochronologically these yielded felling dates 889-893; there is a suggestion of a causeway to the mainland. The site was in occupation for a short period: 890-916AD. It was attacked by Aethelflied of Mercia and burnt down, the Queen of Brycheiniog was taken hostage and the site was abandoned. A large number of artefacts had been thrown into the water, including some embroidered textile, part of a linen garment, probably made in England, perhaps given as a diplomatic gift, also a hinge mount from a small shrine for a relic, perhaps from the adjacent monastery. Signs of feasting included a drinking horn mount and large amounts of animal bones, especially pig; those of red deer suggest hunting. An elite lifestyle, with links to the church. Comparing the construction of the Crannog with 9<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> century ones in Ireland, an Irish connection is suggested – perhaps a Crannog builder was brought from Ireland.

It is difficult to find settlements in medieval Wales, but over the last 20-30 years they have started to be recognised, e.g., South Hook, Pembrokeshire, excavated by Dafyd Archaeological Trust and providing a key to our understanding of these settlements and how the elite lived in medieval Wales. Radiocarbon dates suggested 9<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> century. A series of structures, with postholes, stake holes and areas of paving, houses were

perhaps of wattle and daub with a thatched roof. There is evidence (quern stones) of farming, of corn drying: charred grains of oats, barley and bristle wheat, plus iron smelting: a workshop; iron ore came from at least two sources, but no smithing here.

More is known about church sites in Wales, beginning with large sites like St Davids, and other significant sites: Caerwent, Llangorse, Llantwit. With very little excavation, there has been concentration on the stone sculpture: at St Davids, fragments of large crosses and cross slabs, early 10<sup>th</sup> century, also small grave markers, late 8<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> century; one stone bearing the Greek alpha and omega plus the name Christos suggests the presence of a learned community here. At nearby White Sands Bay there is the site of St Patrick's Chapel, a Scheduled Ancient Monument. A Life of St David by Rhygyfarch tells us that at White Sands Bay St Patrick raised a man from the dead, then went off as a missionary to Ireland. A major part of this site began to fall into the sea and burials were emerging from the sand dunes; excavations carried out 2014-2021 by Dyfed Archaeological Trust found complex archaeology including a rectangular altar within a curvilinear enclosure. On the site of Patrick's miracle? Above this, a large cemetery: burials of men, women, and children with, unusually, some carved stones in their original positions. Some stones seem not to be by a professional sculptor - simple carved stones with crosses incorporated into the graves themselves. In a 9<sup>th</sup> century infant burial, a stone with a little cross in a lozenge; white quartz pebbles were placed on children's graves. Perhaps a community living on the edge of the beach, engaging

with pilgrims on their way to St Davids. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the building of a stone chapel, and renewed burials.

At Llantwit Major, close to Llangorse Crannog, carved stones associated with a sixth century monastery founded by St Illtud. On one cross an inscription reads: "In the name of God the Father and the Holy Spirit, Hywel prepared this cross for the soul of his father Phys" - he was King in South Wales who submitted to Alfred. The Book of Llandaf mentions a Charter c720 which records donation of land to Llan-gors by King Awst of Brycheiniog and his sons - Royal land being donated to the church. St Tatheus, Caerwent (an old Roman town): we know from Asser's Life of Alfred that Asser spent about a year in this monastery between 885 and 886. Some excavation late 19<sup>th</sup>, early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Burials there may include Viking burials.

In the Vale of Llangollen, at a site excavated by Prof. Edwards 2010-12, a ninth century cross, located on top of an early Bronze Age cairn, is the largest early medieval monument in Britain, erected by Cyngen, last medieval ruler of Powys, in memory of his great grandfather Eliseg (died 796) and his military successes over the English. The lengthy inscription tells us something of late 8<sup>th</sup>, early 9<sup>th</sup> century relations with Mercia. Offa's Dyke, probably early 9<sup>th</sup> century, established to mark the frontier between England and Wales, is close by.

In the mid-ninth century, Vikings were beginning to attack Northwest Wales, coming from Denmark, Norway and Sweden via the Hebrides. There were raids on Anglesey and Northwest Wales from the mid-ninth century, more significant in the early 10<sup>th</sup> century. At

Llanpedrgoch, Anglesey (Mark Redknap excavation), traces of a later 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> century timber hall, extended in the mid-ninth century; six bodies, not local, tied up and killed, found in the ditch of an early 10<sup>th</sup> century D-shaped enclosure; inside the enclosure, remains of wooden buildings, seating areas around walls and central hearths, similar to buildings in Dublin. Evidence of farming, e.g., quernstones, charred grain, animal bones, and of crafts: red deer bone combs, tools for leather work. Lead weights with metalwork set into the top are similar to examples in Ireland; in the surrounding fields silver, ingots, arm rings, chopped up into tiny bits. Like sites of the Great Army in England, and later ninth, early tenth century sites in Ireland. A lot of debate about this site. Clearly originally a native elite site, were the Vikings working with the native rulers or did they take the site over? Prof. Edwards thinks the latter. So, evidence of Vikings settling on Anglesey? In the early 10<sup>th</sup> century, English re-conquest of the Danelaw. At Rhuddlan, Denbighshire: extensive excavations early 1970s uncovered a probable Norman ditch: had they found the defences of a Burh founded here 921 by Edward the Elder? But it was abandoned later in the 10<sup>th</sup> century and by the mid-11<sup>th</sup> century was the Court (Llys) of the Kings of Gwynneth, raided by King Harold in 1063, just before the Norman Conquest.

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