Itinerancy, Ritualisation and Excavating Understanding

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The nature of the societies and social, ideological and political frameworks that filled the voids left by the demise of the Roman Empire in the 5th century AD – both within and beyond the Empire's boundaries is one of the most pressing debates about late- and post-Roman Europe. One fundamental topic within that debate is the nature and character of ruler's residence and the Gleeson and Thomas and Scull's articles on early medieval royal residences in Ireland and southern Britain respectively, are welcome approaches to understanding the material manifestations of early medieval rulership. The comparative approach is key for there has been a tendency to assume a uni-linear socio-evolutionary model of political development, rather than considering the multiple pathways by which early European communities were transformed during this crucial period.

In these two articles the authors set about using archaeology to challenge and build models for how kingship operated within particular site- and landscape-based case studies. Each paper brings about important new perspectives. Thomas and Scull's study of great hall culture in southern Britain has at its heart detailed observations from well documented Anglo-Saxon power centres at Lyminge and Rendlesham. In particular the fine-grained analysis from well excavated and documented material sequences is particularly welcome as is the focus on skilled practitioners and the communities of practice that led to the quite astonishing feats of architectural expression at great hall complexes. Here, there can be little doubt about neither the importance of material expressions of rulership as a specific strategy of consolidating power bases, nor the importance of archaeology for understanding the socio-political and socio-economic basis of power. Similarly, Gleeson's observations on the 9th-10th century phase of Knowth as a "very tangible expression of the practicalities of a system of royal taxation and governance based on render and tribute" is a convincing example of how archaeology can help pin down the material underpinnings of how kingship operated in its specifics, and the very base levels of storage and surplus accumulation that allowed kings to rule. Reading through these two articles, two areas for further thought sprung to mind: the nature (and presence) of itinerancy and the divides (or lack of) between residence and ritual.

Itinerancy and temporal rhythms

Both Gleeson's and the Thomas and Scull article highlight itinerancy as one important factor in understanding early medieval power centres. Thomas and Scull perhaps take itinerancy as a given, whereas Gleeson identifies possible long-term changes in the scale and importance of itinerancy. Early medieval scholarship has perhaps leant towards the former position – presuming that an itinerant elite was a fundamental part of early medieval rulership. Thus, itinerant or ambulatory kingship is often forwarded as a characteristic of early medieval rulership with the king moving across his territory to meet his people, gather tribute and seal bonds between the ruler and the ruled through activities such as gift giving and feasting (e.g. Charles-Edwards 1989, pp. 28–33; Alcock 2003, pp. 49; Blair 2018, pp. 104; Bhreathnach 2014, pp. 117–121).

However, the importance of itinerancy should not be a given, nor presumed to be an atemporal characteristic of rulership. For example, there could well have been major differences in the scale (and presence) of the *iter* in Ireland, with its hundreds of petty kingdoms, versus the much broader and larger territorial basis of some Anglo-Saxon polities. Indeed, a peripatetic form of rulership may have only taken shape once supra-regional kingdoms began to develop – the scale of kingdoms at an earlier date may have meant that the territories under control were not large enough to warrant multiple elite residences. The requirement to host an elite at one's own residence will also have been quite different to the establishment of multiple royal residences for the express purpose of extracting tribute from a king's clients. The importance of moving around a kingdom to extract render and tribute would also not preclude the court having favoured residences preferred to others, with perhaps one main royal residence located within the 'heartlands' of a kingdom.

Addressing the temporalities of itinerancy where the present will also be important, is~~f~~ challenging for archaeological perspectives. With the household moving between different royal estates certain central nodes may have only had the king in attendance or residence at certain times of the year or during special occasions, as Thomas and Scull note. Thus, halls and royal residences may have been occupied by retainers for some or even the majority of the year (Brink 1999, pp. 435). Likewise, specialist craft production may have focused on the times when the court was in residence with some smiths perhaps following the royal court, but others perhaps resident in the wider landscape of the central place complex, farming the land for most of the year and only engaging in craft-working seasonally or episodically (Brink 1996, pp. 241). Short-term temporal patterns would have altered the significance, character and function of central places of rulership and the functional elements of the complex. The itinerancy of court for example may mean that the functions of particular nodes within the complex may have grown and shrunk seasonally or episodically. Other temporal patterns will have been at work too. Different rulers may have treated different elements of a site in different ways, with functions shifting through time according to the whims, fortunes and strategies of particular leaders and elite groups. At the extreme end of these strategies would have been the total abandonment of particular places of power due to their association with competing lineages or due to economic or other cultural imperatives, but these sites could also be re-establised as royal centres by later kings. Addressing these temporalities will be a challenge to future field and post-excavation strategies.

On the nature of residence and ritual

What defines a royal residence? In Anglo-Saxon England it is, again, often a given – timber halls are thought to equate to elite residences as the historiography in Thomas and Scull outlines. Gleeson, on the other hand, seeks to complexify the definitions of different kinds of royal centres – suggesting that some of the provincial royal centres of Ireland, often seen as quintessential ceremonial centres, had a greater residential component in the early medieval period than hitherto recognized. In contrast, he suggests that some royal residences were nothing of the sort in their early incarnations – these were instead places of ritual, ceremony and violence. Examples cited include Lagore, where in a 5th-8th century context there are multiple human skull fragments showing evidence of brutal violence and one example of vertebrae showing evidence for hanging. Another example is Knowth, where Gleeson reinterprets the early phases of early medieval reuse of the Neolithic mound as incorporating a stepped mound. The use of the mound in this phase may have been as part of a place of assembly at an ancient monument.

While it is good to question prevailing interpretations of particular sites, there can be a tendency to jump from one extreme to the binary opposite – a solely ritual place as opposed to a solely residential one. This can be identified with regards to other sites – identifying the Rath of the Synods at Tara, for example, as either a residence or a temple, with blurred divides between one and the other not countenanced (see Gleeson‘s article). Similarly, in my own study area there has been suggestions that certain Pictish power centres were solely ritual centres without accounting for the diversity of evidence present at these sites (Carver 2015, pp. 7). I find it difficult to believe that there was not always a strong economic rationale for the choice of a central place of power in an early medieval context. The basis for rulership would have ultimately flowed from the land and its wealth, and there are likely to have been strong interplays between places associated with kingship and the settlement and economic potentials of particular landscape blocks. Thomas and Scull's study thus forms a welcome shift away from identifying solely cultural factors, such as the importance of the prehistoric past as legitimisation for the choice of a location of a central place, to examining other factors such as the antecedent use of sites in a long record of settlement and surplus exploitation as a key basis for the establishment of a royal centre. It seems likely to me that central places were always polyfocal, landscapes of power, where the extractive potential of a site, whether due to its position on rich agricultural soils or its connectivity in routes of monument, or both, was critical for the choice of this locale as a major node of royal power. Understanding the economic base of early medieval centres is as important as establishing the cultural and ideological factors in site and landscape choice.

Understanding sequence

What all of our endeavours to understand early medieval power centres requires are excellent excavation sequences which are well dated and understood. What some of the ambiguities of the sites that Gleeson highlights are due to is in many cases the lack of well dated and understood sequences. It is a sad fact that these days it is hard to find funding for the kind of detailed fieldwork endeavours required to disentangle even the basic sequences of important past landscapes. Excavation is painted as being too traditional or not cutting edge, when it is exactly what is needed to fundamentally shift our understandings of the past.

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