



ROYAL RESIDENCES NETWORK 500 - 800AD

Investigating places of Royal Residence
in Early Medieval Britain

Site Dynamics and Long-Term Chronologies: Workshop 1 of the Early Medieval Royal Residences Network, University of Reading, 25-26 February 2016

Synopsis

This workshop seeks to scrutinise and explain the developmental trajectories of places of royal residence examined at both long-term and short-term scales. One of the persistent features of places of early medieval royal residence is their inhabitation of landscapes inscribed with traces of earlier ritual and ceremonial use. In many cases the evidence is sufficiently clear-cut to demonstrate that the siting and configuration of early medieval royal sites actively referenced such antecedents as a strategy for proclaiming and legitimising contemporary rule. Although less frequently studied, the 'afterlife' of such sites also provides its own perspective on the long-term development of medieval political landscapes, bringing into focus processes of memorialisation and commemoration instrumental in the shaping of regional and national identities.

Against this deep-time perspective must be set the shorter-term rhythms by which places of royal residence played out their early medieval lives. Generational change must and should be expected in light of the instability of contemporary power, the dynamic political and ideological shifts under which early medieval kingship was created and redefined, and the strong extent to which contemporary power resided in the personal authority and charisma of kings and magnates. This premise invites us to examine and reconstruct site histories in fine, closely-contextualised detail, and to identify the constraints and challenges standing in the way of this goal. To improve understanding there also needs to be a close dialogue between highly focussed research of this kind and synthetic studies comparing site trajectories across different geographical scales. In many parts of northern Europe, monumental timber architecture can be recognised as a significant threshold in the development of royal and magnate residences, but the timing and duration of this threshold displays considerable regional diversity. As is well known, open-air sites were readily exploited for the spectacle and theatre of royal assembly and as such might emerge as powerful foci for ritual, cultic and economic activity. The clear implication is that the vitality and stability of centres of royal residence cannot be judged on the criterion of monumental timber architecture alone. If this is accepted, then the challenge is to explain why 'hall culture' was adopted, and indeed, abandoned, at particular times and places, and to decipher the roles that these monumental complexes served in terms of the changing requirements and aspirations of contemporary kingship. The purpose of this workshop is to stimulate and nurture questions of this type to develop a more sophisticated understanding of the relationship between places of royal residence and the dynamics of early medieval power.

Research questions

1. What role did antecedent cultural landscapes play in the structuring and development of relevant sites? To what extent can this role be directly linked to the performative rituals and theatre of kingship in individual cases?
2. What was the ultimate fate of sites of early medieval royal residence? Were they commemorated or forgotten and what factors might account for these alternative trajectories? Is there anything approaching a 'typical' afterlife for a site of early medieval residence?
3. What kinds of trajectory do sites of early medieval royal residence display, both in relation to each other and other categories of place in the same region/locality? Are they characterised by locational stability or fluidity and for how long did they endure in comparison to other types of contemporary site?
4. How are transformations in the role, character and function of relevant sites manifested and how can these transformations be explained in terms of the changing structures and complexion of contemporary kingship?