



Architectures of Power: Ritual Action, Performance and the Built Environment: Workshop 2 of the Early Medieval Royal Residences Network, Durham University, 8-9 June 2016

Synopsis

This workshop will focus on the spatial and architectural characteristics of places of early medieval royal/elite residence as a framework for analysis, interpretation and explanation. Investment in ostentatious architecture, frequently on a monumental scale, represents one of the most striking features of such sites and one of the clearest manifestations of their social status. It is not only the scale and architectural sophistication of these residential compounds which seems to set them apart from contemporary settlements within their localities, but their highly structured layouts: space, sightlines and movement, sometimes orientated by upstanding antecedent monuments, were clearly being manipulated to add dramatic effect to theatrical displays of power. While much of the evidence may be lost to us, it is important to consider how the embellishment and elaboration of buildings, both externally and internally, may have contributed to the visual and emotional impact of these spaces.

It is clear from a variety of sources of evidence that early medieval kings and magnates were active agents in religious practices, underscoring the sacral nature of contemporary rulership. Sites of early medieval royal residence thus shade into places of cult performance and religious worship. The relationship between activities of this kind and architectural settings provides one of the key variables in the study of early medieval royal centres: in some cases 'vernacular' expressions of the Germanic hall seem to have been the preferred venue for religious activities, in others, specific cult structures (whether 'temples', enclosures or standing posts or Christian churches, and whether integrated or twinned with residential compounds) represent the chosen architectural medium. How can we account for this variability?

Ritual formed an integral part of a wider spectrum of practices and activities constituting what we might call the 'lived environment' of early medieval royal residences. Many such sites produce evidence for production, consumption and intimations of specialised activities shedding direct light on the material actions and processes involved with the generation and maintenance of power. Understanding how these threads were woven into the spatial fabric of these sites as well as their developmental trajectories represents an important topic that should be central to the development of future research agendas and approaches.

Research questions

1. What architectural principles do sites of early medieval royal residence share and to what extent do these principles draw upon indigenous 'vernacular' traditions as opposed to imported concepts of aristocratic space and monumental display?
2. Can we recognise any recurrent spatial patterns in the organisation of activities in and around sites of early medieval royal/magnate residence? To what extent is it possible to reconstruct 'taskscape' as a dimension of the lived environment of these sites?
3. How is cult and religious behaviour reflected in the architecture, layout and ritual actions of residential compounds and the relationships which existed between these foci and wider 'ritual landscapes'.
4. What kinds of methodological and interpretive approaches can we identify to develop a more sophisticated appreciation of the 'lived in'/embodied experience of these settings and their role as theatres of power?