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Commonalities, Differences and Lacunae: Some Comments on Elite Settlement in England and Ireland in the Early Middle Ages

The two papers that inspire this comment piece appear at an interesting time in the study of power structures in the early middle ages. The topic itself has seen renewed vigour among scholars throughout Scandinavian and Continental Europe working from a range of disciplinary perspectives, particularly following the lead set by the *Transformation of the Roman World* project (see, for example, de Jong, Theuws and van Rhijn 2001; and, recently, Rollason 2016; Carroll, Reynolds and Yorke 2019a; Semple et al. 2020). Excavation and survey have contributed key new findings, and Scull and Thomas in England and Gleeson in Ireland have led the field in their respective regions and it is thus fitting that these scholars have provided the valuable and insightful overviews that appear in this volume of the *Norwegian Archaeological Review*. The requisite brevity of the present piece means that references are few and token and that any consistent unpacking of the details of the two papers is impossible. Instead, this contribution considers a few points of convergence and contrast and offers some additional viewpoints.

Focussing on the 6th to 9th centuries, Gleeson's paper discusses excavated known royal sites; Thomas and Scull focus on places discovered by various means that Anglo-Saxon archaeologists have decided represent a similar phenomenon, the so-called Great Hall Complexes, but one that finds much less clarity in terms of attributions of places to people than in Ireland. Gleeson healthily considers wider comparisons as far afield as the Carolingian world, very much in the spirit of breaking out of the insular traditions found in

both Irish and English early medieval archaeology, while Scandinavia provides the key region of reference for Thomas and Scull. The Irish dataset, based on documented polities, suggests c.600 royal residences, with 150 documented sites listed by Peter Sawyer in England between the 6th and 11th centuries (Sawyer 1983). Beyond Lyminge, Rendlesham and Yeavinger in England, where there are explicitly royal connections, the remaining sites (12) are known only from excavation and/or aerial photography.

The variety of sites in both England and Ireland in terms of their occupation sequences, form and material culture is substantial, although this ought not to come as a surprise. Early English lawcodes (of the late 7th century) show that elite residences could be moved wholesale, while charters show that lands could be granted for a single or three lifetimes; there are reflections of these situations in the archaeological record. Yorke (1981) and Thacker (1981) have shown considerable variation in social standing through the lense of the vocabulary of over-lordship in earlier Anglo-Saxon England and we should expect an attendant variety in the form and extent of 'elite' sites. And that is indeed what they display in both English and Irish contexts. Some of the sites considered in this category are in many respects unique: archaeologists, of course, are pre-programmed to seek similarities and to categorise.

The tendency to view all places with buildings of a particular form and layout as elite sites with ranges of halls is also a matter worthy of further comment. Taking a look at the distribution of sites identified archaeologically in England (see Thomas and Scull Fig. 1), the concentration of three apparently elite sites in the Upper Thames region (Benson, Long Wittenham and Sutton Courtenay) invites questions of status attribution, as does the material paucity of the majority of Great Hall Complexes in England and the royal sites in Ireland (factoring in the lack of fieldwork at many). It is also worth noting that in many places and periods, the largest structures found at rural settlement sites are barns and not residences: the Thames Valley sites noted above lack features that suggest that they are anything other than farms with substantial storage capacity. Further, it remains the case that evidence for the actual function(s) of early medieval timber buildings is almost entirely absent, with hardly any evidence for surviving floors, occupation deposits, or internal layouts.

Surplus production as a marked feature of increasing social complexity is evident in both England and Ireland particularly in the later 7th and 8th centuries reflected, for example, in the impressive Irish early medieval watermills (Rynne 2015) and the appearance of pits, wells, enclosures and other 'service' features on English sites (Reynolds 2003). Interestingly, in England, the Great Hall Complexes largely appear to pre-date service features and thus we might be seeing a stage of settlement that reflects the earliest surplus producing communities, which precedes the specialised processing communities evident in the place-name record and which form the outlying components of the 'multiple estates' (the baggage carried by this term being fully acknowledged here) of the 8th century and later. It may well turn out to be the case that the Thames Valley 'elite' sites – and perhaps certain others elsewhere - are actually nothing special at all, but commonplace and reflective of the broad range of social categories during this period.

Moving on, a series of clear comparisons can be drawn between the two regions, particularly with regard to the spatial organisation of power and other socially requisite phenomena and also in terms of the major horizons of socio-political change in chronological terms. First, elite sites in both regions exhibit dispersal of their various functional elements, but within an intimate spatial configuration. In England, lower order settlement seems to come before an elite presence, in Ireland cultic interests figure: there are interesting avenues to explore here. In general, the relationship between archaeological features and social complexity rears its head with regard to traditional notions that equate nucleation with complexity and civility, such a view requires overturning as powerfully demonstrated in both papers: a series of studies has questioned approaches that place nucleation at the evolutionary apogee of social organisation (Duffy 2015; Carroll, Reynolds and Yorke 2019b, p. 16-17).

The authors of both papers arrive at similar chronological horizons. Both papers highlight the 7th to 8th centuries as marking a new departure in the organisation of society and the 9th century as a major watershed. Changes in the geographical extent of rulership and overlordship appear aligned in both regions. This realisation provides a further important bridge across which scholarly insularity can be crossed and exciting and important new questions can be explored.

Two final aspects require comment: territoriality and architecture. Scale is fundamental here. Gleeson highlights the multiplicity of royal sites in Ireland, but what happens when territoriality is brought to bear? Recent work is beginning to reveal new understandings of the scale of the territories associated with these early power centres, although the methods used to reconstruct these vary considerably as a function of the sources available for different sites and regions. Nevertheless, a degree of consistency is emerging that underpins the so-called wold-and-valley model of local polities centred on ecological catchments. The political dimension must always be maintained, however, to avoid slipping into a set of comfortable assumptions. Competition, confederation, conquest and consolidation are all phenomena that operate beyond the beyond an environmentally deterministic situation, even though resource control may have been the driver behind such circumstances. A useful new direction would be to study the territorial extents of early medieval local polities between the two regions.

With regard to architecture, Thomas and Scull rightly foreground the degree of skill and resource command that timber structures reflect. For far too long scholars have worked with the overly simplistic, dismissive – even sniffy – notion that cultural complexity finds a simple reflection in timber vs stone/simple vs complex. This cannot be right, and rests on a rather pretentious supposition that Romanitas/Christianity provided the capacity for civility and complexity for otherwise incapable people. There are many and varied strong arguments for overturning this view and to accept timber architecture as equal in competence and complexity. As has been pointed out elsewhere, the considerable Roman architectural legacy was effectively ignored by Anglo-Saxon elites (in contrast to the prehistoric landscape) rather than appropriated or viewed with puzzling wonderment (Carroll et al. 2019b, 12) and even late Saxon lords emulated timber buildings when they started to build elements of their ‘thegnly’ residences in stone (Shapland 2019): the value judgement system applied generally by architectural historians really does require reappraisal from an early medieval perspective. It seems clear that axial alignments of buildings pre-dates the implanting of ecclesiastical sites whose topographical layout follows that of pre-Christian sites in a number of regards.

In terms of lacunae, the study of elite sites can be taken in several new directions. For example, the issue of the social composition of elite settlements has received barely any comment in the literature more widely. It is likely, of course, that the social range at these places covered the full spectrum, from kings and queens, through skilled producers of high-end items, to labourers and slaves – with the latter two categories perhaps the most numerous, although slaves occupied a broad social spectrum despite their legal status (Brink 2020). It would be most profitable to study the non-elite elements of such sites, to see how they compare to other forms of contemporary occupation. The use and experience of space also has much to reveal. Interrelationships between individual buildings beyond observations based on plan form can reveal intimate visual corridors, as has been shown at several of the English Great Hall sites where a clear axial set of sightlines can be observed in groups of buildings with a near-identical layout (Reynolds 2003). Much could be gained too from generating high-resolution models of sites that facilitate analysis of the settlement space from ground to roof level; various technologies now exist to facilitate such an approach. Widening the perspective, a further instructive line would be to investigate potential links between the orientation of structures and local topography to attempt to understand why buildings are arranged in the ways that they are.

Overall, both papers represent authoritative reviews of their respective regions and one gains a strong sense of the significance of the horizon of AD600 across the early medieval world writ large. The challenge from here on is to continue to bridge scholarly traditions and to build a comparative narrative that foregrounds early medieval developments rather than comparisons with those of their predecessors.

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