

Paul Courtney, *Report on the Excavations at Usk 1965–1976. Medieval and Later Usk*. Cardiff 1994, 165 Seiten, 66 Abbildungen, 25 Tafeln.

The 1965–1976 excavations at Usk in south-eastern Wales were designed to examine the late-first-century Roman fortress. But in the course of these excavations features and buildings belonging to the medieval and post-medieval town of Usk and entirely unrelated to the Roman fortress were encountered. This report considers these remains and uses them as the basis for a general discussion of the development of the town and then widens the field to set Usk against the background of the other medieval and post-medieval towns of the region.

The excavation report and associated specialist reports deal comprehensively with a diverse collection of later-medieval and post-medieval sites of, it must be admitted, limited significance. There is a seventeenth-century cess-pit with interesting environmental evidence for diet, and a range of ceramics, including Chinese, which tell us about the wider links of the local well-to-do, probably mediated through Bristol. There is also an interesting sidelight on the development of penal architecture in the Victorian period. It is the second half of the volume reviewing the evidence for the development of Usk and of other comparable south Welsh towns which lifts the work above the mundane. The borough of Usk seems to have been founded in the late twelfth century, though why at this particular place remains unclear; it could be the siting at a river crossing, or at other towns a pre-existing religious focus seems to have been an important factor. The river crossing and its land routes were controlled by the construction of a castle, and at the gates of the castle was laid out the core of the town with market-place and streets. The town may have had 'defences', though excavation of surviving earthworks such as the "Clawdd Du" (Black Dyke) suggest that



defence may have been less important than delimiting the area of the town and directing traffic to the toll-gates. For a town on the Marches of Wales such apparent unconcern with defence is instructive. It is to a certain extent mirrored in the defences of the other towns of the region such as Abergavenny, Caerleon, Chepstow, Monmouth or Newport. The defences of these towns (as opposed to their castles) were not particularly impressive, nor were they particularly sophisticated compared with some in the heartlands of England. This is presumably telling us something about the perception of the threat from the Welsh (who did nonetheless occasionally sack these towns) and about the priority of defence for the townspeople of the Marches. The contrast between strong castle defences and relatively undeveloped town defences can be seen at other Marcher towns such as Ludlow and Shrewsbury.

None of the Welsh towns mentioned above developed in terms of extent or of ecclesiastical or craft complexity above the rank of a middling English town; none came to occupy a pre-eminent position analogous to a 'county town'. It is argued here that this may in part be because of the fragmentation of lay and ecclesiastical power and interests, inhibiting the development of a dominant centre. It may also have to do with the relative poverty of the hinterland and a low level of demand for urban goods and services. The region is also lacking in the echelon of minor market towns so common further east and this may also reflect an underdeveloped and poorly integrated economic structure. In the main the towns studied here appear to have shared in the widespread urban decline of late medieval Britain, though there are sensible words of caution on how much this impression may be a product of the inadequacies of the documentary record, both in terms of survival of documents and in terms of whether such documents would record the sorts of information that interest us and would enable us to answer our questions.

What is so striking about this report its lavishness, not only in the physical layout and quality of the volume, but in the range of the discussion in the second part. Current practice in England, as encouraged by funding bodies such as English Heritage, has tended to concentrate on the immediate. The site, artefactual and environmental data are presented and analysed along with discussion directly based on them. Wider, more discursive consideration setting the particular in a general context is at a premium if not actively discouraged. Yet here a collection of pretty average archaeological data is taken as an excuse to write a critique of our knowledge of the development of Usk, and that in turn is the pretext for a more general discussion about urban development in south-east Wales. In so doing the subject is defined and advanced, and a good thing too. In England this archaeological material would probably have been fairly summarily published in a county journal. Obviously the lavish Welsh model could not be used more than rarely or the cost of producing and buying such reports would soon be prohibitive. But this Usk volume is evidence that occasionally, in an under-researched field, the extra cost of research and publication necessary to set particular excavations in their wider contexts is money well spent, and the academic and research contribution of the report is out of all proportion to the ostensible interest of the site.

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