



Evidence of early medieval trade and migration between Wales and the Mediterranean Sea region

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ABSTRACT

Imported Mediterranean pottery recovered from 5th–7th century settlement sites along the south Wales coast indicates that trade and contact between Wales and Byzantium continued following the collapse of the Roman Empire in the early-5th century. It is hypothesised that people as well as pottery continued to travel to Wales from Byzantium, some of whom subsequently settled amongst the local communities. Strontium and oxygen isotope analysis was undertaken on human remains ($n = 33$ individuals) from four early medieval cemeteries from south Wales. The study identified individuals who may not have been local to the British Isles, thus demonstrating that the isotopic analysis of human remains from Wales can further our understanding of migration to Britain during the early medieval period.

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1. Introduction

The migration of people to the British Isles during the early medieval period continues to receive considerable interest from archaeologists (e.g. [Brettell et al., 2012](#)). For many years, attention has focused on the burial evidence from early Anglo-Saxon England in an attempt to identify the Germanic settlers referred to by historical writers such as the Venerable Bede in his 8th-century *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* ([Colgrave and Mynors, 1969](#)). More recently, stable isotope analysis has made a valuable contribution to the debates surrounding population mobility in England at this time (e.g. [Budd et al., 2003](#)), however the same cannot be said for those populations from Wales. Poor skeletal preservation due to the presence of acidic soils is partly to blame, as many cemeteries in Wales often fail to yield any surviving bone. In addition, the homogeneity of the Christian burial rite and the absence of elaborately furnished burials like those from early Anglo-Saxon England, have also stifled interest in the cemeteries from western Britain. In Wales, a particular focus has, however, been placed upon the material culture evidence for trade. The recovery of imported Mediterranean pottery from 5th–7th century settlement sites indicates that trade and contact between Britain and the Byzantine world continued following the collapse of the Roman Empire in the early-5th century ([Fulford, 1989](#)). Despite the recovery of imported pottery, little

consideration has however, been given to the movement of people alongside this trade. Through strontium and oxygen isotope analysis, this study will address the hypothesis that during the late-5th to mid-7th century *floruit* of trade with the Mediterranean, people from the Byzantine world travelled alongside the cargoes of imported pottery, and subsequently settled in western Britain, where they were eventually buried amongst the local communities.

2. Historical and archaeological background

By the mid-1st century AD, Wales was absorbed into the Roman Empire, and marching-camps, military installations, roads, and urban centres (e.g. *Caerwent*, *Venta Silurum*), were imposed upon the landscape ([Arnold and Davies, 2000](#)). Elements of the Roman way of life were adopted by those living under Roman occupation, and to satisfy the tastes of the Roman army and its followers, Mediterranean pottery and commodities were imported to Wales ([Arnold and Davies, 2000](#)). For example, the legionary fortress at Usk, Monmouthshire – in use between the 1st and 4th centuries AD – was supplied with Italian, Rhodian, Aegean and Gallic wine, Spanish olive oil, garum (fish sauce), and fruit from North Africa ([Arnold and Davies, 2000](#); [Marvell and Maynard, 1998](#)). Thus, many people living in Wales – especially in the southeast – were exposed to a Roman way of life through architecture, imported pottery, consumables, and coinage ([Arnold and Davies, 2000](#)).

Between AD 408 and 411, the people of Britain rejected the authority of the Roman Empire and became isolated from the

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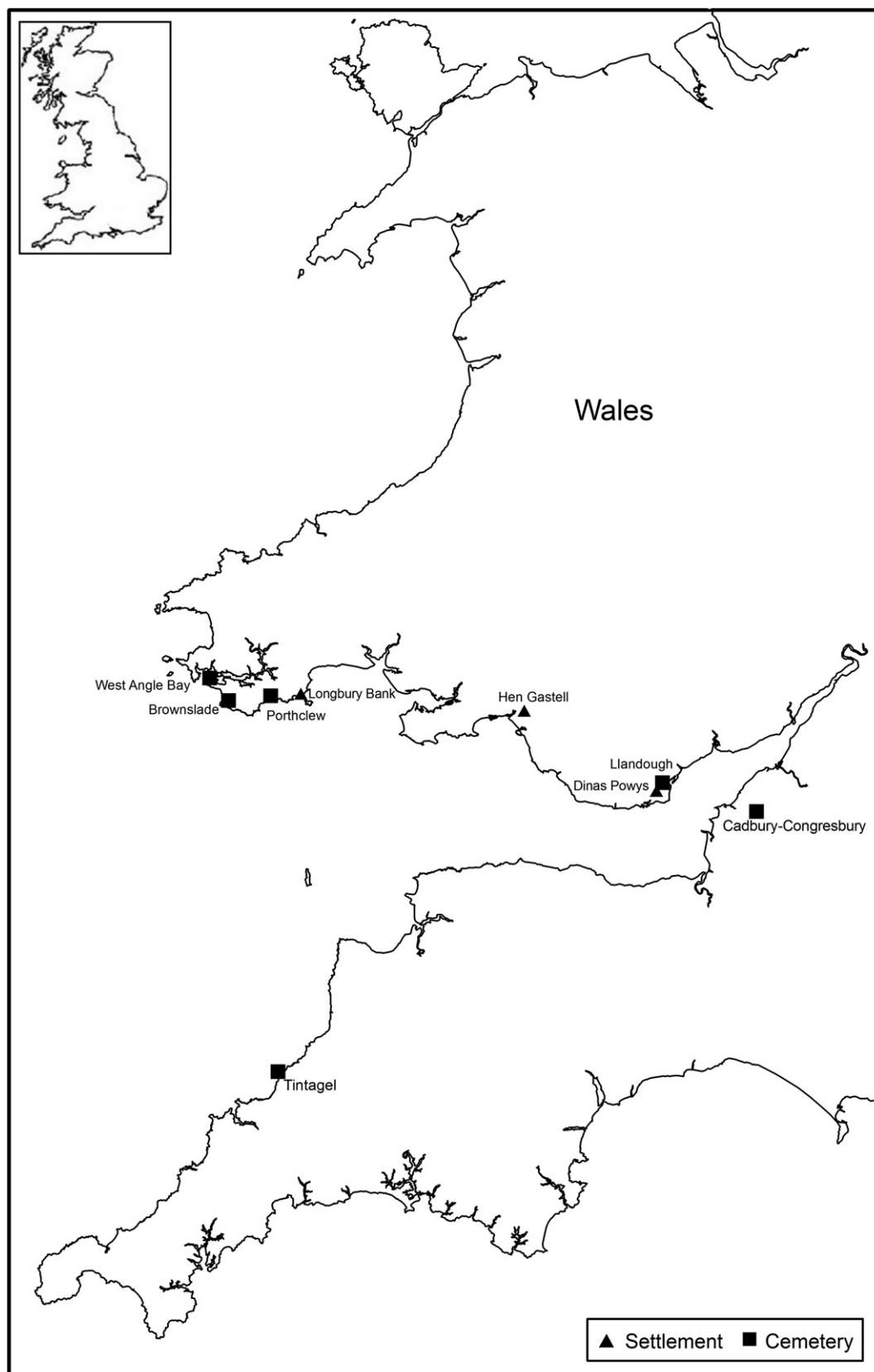


Fig. 1. Map illustrating the location of the sampled cemeteries. Also illustrated is the location of settlements in Wales and southwest England where imported Mediterranean pottery has been recovered.

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