Summary. Excavations in Caerleon, the headquarters of the Second Augustan Legion, have demonstrated the existence of a tetrapylon at the centre of the Roman fortress. Evidence indicates that the structure survived into the medieval period when it was undermined and demolished. A recent review of ceramic finds associated with the demolition horizon suggests that the tetrapylon was razed in the thirteenth century. While stone-robbing for reconstruction of the medieval castle in Caerleon may provide a partial explanation for the destruction, political circumstances at the time provided additional incentives. Association of the Roman remains with resurgent Welsh lordship appears to have created a political reason for removal of the structure.

Excavations in the Legionary Fortress Museum Garden in Caerleon, directed by David Zienkiewicz in 1992, confirmed the existence of a tetrapylon, a four-way triumphal arch, at the centre of the fortress at Isca (Zienkiewicz 1993, 140). The substantial masonry structure straddled the junction of the via principalis and the via praetoria, providing an imposing approach to the headquarters building (Figure 1). There are a number of precedents for such buildings including surviving structures like the arch of Septimus Severus at Leptis Magna in Libya (see Raven 1969, 84). The Caerleon tetrapylon would have provided an imposing central focus for the fortress of Isca — as well, no doubt, as making an explicit statement of political intent in the aftermath of the protracted guerrilla war with the Silures.

A particularly interesting aspect of the tetrapylon is the archaeological evidence for its considerable longevity. There is every indication that the structure, like the nearby fortress baths, stood well into the medieval period (Zienkiewicz 1986, 263). It was then pulled down with demolition pits being dug to undermine the Roman structure. The director of the excavation noted that ‘the impression is of a building very precisely robbed out . . . we are dealing with the destruction of a standing structure’ (Zienkiewicz, context records). In an effort to improve our understanding of the demise of this structure, all of the pottery associated with the main demolition horizons was assessed during the summer of 1999. A number of fine-ware sherds were recovered, with a predominance of Bristol wares, generally with green glaze and in some cases incised line decoration. Two sherds from context seven, the fill of a large demolition pit at the west pier, had applied line decoration. There was also a small number of
Saintonge sherds as well as examples of locally produced finewares including examples of the Monmouth A5 fabrics which were presumably made in that town or in the nearby town of Trelech. A range of coarse wares included an interesting rim sherd from context 4 (the fill of the demolition pit at the east end of the feature) with lines of small dot-rouletted decoration.
There were examples of Vale ware as well as Usk/Trostre wares. Many of the coarseware sherds were sooted, in some cases heavily. There was residual Roman material in the demolition contexts.\(^1\) This varied and interesting pottery assemblage appears to be largely thirteenth century in date and seems more likely to be early to mid rather than mid to late in that century. If this is the case, the indication is that the demolition of the tetrapylon occurred at about the same time as the demolition of the fortress baths (Zienkiewicz 1986, 263).

A number of questions arise concerning the destruction of these buildings. Both were, in the context of their time, large and imposing. It is perfectly reasonable to assume that the tetrapylon was the ‘giant tower’ described by Gerald of Wales after his visit to Caerleon in 1188.\(^2\) Moreover, the fortress baths may well have provided, at least in part, the inspiration for Gerald’s description of ‘immense palaces imitating the magnificence of Rome in the gilded gables of their roofs’.\(^3\) In order to provide a context for the demolition of such apparently imposing structures, probably within 50 years of Gerald’s visit, it is important to understand the historical development of the lower Usk valley in the late eleventh and twelfth centuries. Kingship had been an important element in pre-conquest Welsh society and it has been argued convincingly that the institution died far more slowly than has generally been supposed (Crouch 1985, 20–41). Traditionally the last king of Gwent was Caradog ap Gruffudd, a powerful figure who, when Harold Godwinson led a military force into southeast Wales and built a ‘hunting lodge’ at Portskewett in 1065, attacked and destroyed the structure. Caradog held his position after the Norman conquest of England and seems to have reached an accord with the invaders. In 1072, he defeated Maredudd ab Owain of Deheubarth, significantly with the assistance of ‘the French’, i.e. Norman allies (Brut y Tywysogion). He retained his lands and status until his death in 1081.

The death of Caradog seems to have stimulated a more aggressive Norman stance, with William the conqueror himself appearing in the southern Marches. Probably in an attempt to provide stability in what may previously have been seen as a client kingdom, William moved to stamp his authority on the region. Construction of castles at Cardiff and Caerleon seems to have been an important part of that process. Certainly Caradoc’s son Owain, known to history as Owain wan (Owain the weak) was unable to retain his father’s influence or indeed his lands apart from some upland holdings in Gwynllwg (Crouch, 21–30). The situation, however, changed dramatically in 1136. In the aftermath of the death of Henry I, there was widespread Welsh revolt and Welsh armies defeated the Norman forces holding Gower. Shortly thereafter, the brothers Morgan and Iorwerth, sons of the by-then-deceased Owain and grandsons of Caradoc ap Gruffudd, began a guerrilla campaign in which they managed to ambush and kill the Norman lord of Ceredigion, Richard de Clare, probably the most powerful of the Marcher lords. Emboldened by their success, they moved down the Usk and seized the castles at Usk and Caerleon. By the end of the year, these Welsh ‘Lords of Caerleon’, were in control of virtually all of their grandfather’s lands. An exception was Newport which was in the hands of Earl Robert of Gloucester. Rather than confronting the earl (who was under considerable pressure in England at the time), however, Morgan offered him an alliance — an alliance which Robert was happy to

---

1 The ceramics were examined by Mike Anthony and the author.
3 ‘*Palatia immensa aureis olim tectorum fastigiis Romanos fastus imitantia*’.
accept, recognising Morgan’s conquests and ceding additional lands on the Wentlwg levels. The relationship seems to have suited both parties perfectly well and Morgan provided Welsh troops who were important to the earl during the period of the Anarchy. Morgan, however, was more than a consummate diplomat, he was also an important member of the uchelwyr, the aristocracy, of southeast Wales. As David Crouch puts it, ‘Morgan knew whose grandson he was’ (ibid., 35). When Robert died in 1147, Morgan was happy to transfer his alliance to Earl Roger of Hereford. There is a particularly important surviving charter of Earl Roger relating to the priory of Llanthony Secunda near Gloucester. The first, and as a consequence presumably the most important, of the four witnesses was Morganno rege, Morgan the king (Walker 1964, 28). In the mid twelfth century, there was once again a Welsh king in Caerleon.

This assertion of kingship must have struck a responsive chord in Wales where the potential implications, particularly during the heady days of Welsh political and military revival, could have been profound. In the year that Morgan killed Richard de Clare, the Welsh fighting in Ceredigion were described as ‘upholding together the whole kingdom of the Britons’ (Brut y Tywysogion). It is important to note that it was against this background that Geoffrey of Monmouth penned his hugely influential History of the Kings of Britain. It was, of course, this work which brought the tales of Arthur to a wider audience and, in a very real sense, launched the Arthurian legend. Geoffrey was very precise in his location of the king; the court and the site of Arthur’s ‘crown-wearing’ was in Caerleon. It has often been suggested that this choice of location was no more than a convenient way for Geoffrey to localise his hero. As John Gillingham has argued, however, there may have been far more pressing political reasons for placing a Welsh Arthur in Caerleon (Gillingham 1992, 99–118). In fact there was probably a wide range of contributory factors. Still impressive Roman remains, for example, may have made Caerleon seem an ancient and consequently entirely appropriate venue for the court. The recent Welsh political revival and associated military successes may have appealed to Geoffrey and encouraged him to try to provide a viable historical context for these developments. Perhaps most significantly, however, such a context may have suited Geoffrey’s patron who was none other than Earl Robert of Gloucester. Robert was also lord of Glamorgan and, as has been seen, had considerable incentive to reach an accommodation with the Welsh, an accommodation which Morgan was happy to provide. The potential for a Welsh alliance was particularly important with the onset of the Anarchy when Robert made good use of Welsh infantry in actions such as the battle of Lincoln where the front rank of his army consisted of a ‘fierce mob of Welshmen’ (ibid., 104–105; see also Davies 1987, 47).

For whatever reasons Geoffrey chose to place his Arthur in Caerleon, the association had a considerable impact. The story spread to France where it was embraced by a number of poets, notably Chrétien de Troyes (see Bromwich 1991, 273–298). Caerleon also enjoyed new prominence in Wales; the tales of the Mabinogi, for example, while probably based on much earlier oral traditions were not written in their present form until much later, probably in the twelfth century. The romances, almost certainly influenced by Geoffrey, could hardly be clearer in placing Arthur’s court in Caerleon. The story of ‘Owein, or the Countess of the Fountain’, for example, begins ‘The Emperor Arthur was at Caer Llion ar Wysg’. Similarly, ‘Gereint and Enid’ starts with an explanation that ‘Arthur was accustomed to hold court at Caer Llion ar Wysg’.4 Gerald of Wales was happy to see Caerleon as the site of Arthur’s court and,

---

following his own personal agenda, of an archbishopric there (*The Journey through Wales*, I, 5). The acceptance of an Arthurian link with Caerleon and the association of that connection with Welsh kingship undoubtedly also had an influence in Caerleon itself and Morgan was certainly astute enough to turn this to his advantage. There seems already to have been a tradition of prophetic poetry in an area partly bounded by Caerleon and Monmouth (Jones 1998, 63) and Morgan, a patron of bards, could build on that tradition in order to secure and then expand his authority. He was certainly ambitious and extended his influence in the northeast through the marriage of his sister Angharad to the Welsh lord of upper Gwent, Seisyll ap Dyfnwal. Dramatically less successful were his efforts to expand to the west; he was killed in a campaign against Ifor Bach, the lord of Senghenydd, in 1158 (Crouch, 36). Killed with him was his ‘best poet’, Gwrgant ap Rhys (*Brut y Tywysogion*). The death of Morgan was not, however, the end of his dynasty, nor presumably of its aspirations. He was succeeded by his brother, Iorwerth ab Owain, who ‘ruled the land of Caerleon and all the territory of Owain’ (*ibid.*). As has been seen, Iorwerth had worked closely with Morgan during the military campaigns of 1136 and subsequently as he expanded his influence and the ideal of revived kingship took root.

Iorwerth continued to exercise considerable influence in south-east Wales, although by 1170 his relationship with Henry II and with the then earl of Gloucester had become a stormy one. In 1171 he was temporarily dispossessed of Caerleon and caused considerable damage in an attack on the town later in the year. He was supported in that attack by his sons Owain and Hywel and by his nephew Morgan ap Seisyll. A reconciliation with the king seemed likely in the following year but before a settlement could be agreed, Iorwerth’s eldest son Owain was attacked and killed by men of the earl of Gloucester. Hostilities resumed immediately as Iorwerth and Hywel ‘ravaged the king’s territory as far as Hereford and Gloucester, slaying and burning and plundering without mercy’ (*ibid.*). In August of 1173, Iorwerth regained Caerleon; after a short siege the castle was surrendered to him. Meanwhile, Hywel struck into Gwent Iscoed, taking the whole of the area apart from the major castles. Caerleon was briefly lost again in 1175, but it was restored to Iorwerth later in the year as a part of general peace settlement which had been, in large part, orchestrated by the lord Rhys (*ibid.*). It is unclear when Hywel succeeded his father but it was probably before 1184 after which time he was often described as Hywel of Caerleon. Hywel was succeeded by his own son, Morgan ap Hywel, in about 1210. From 1175 through the first decade of the thirteenth century, the lords of Caerleon seem to have been in relatively secure control of what continued to be a demonstrably Welsh lordship. Patronage of the bards and a nurturing of Welsh cultural traditions would have been seen as an integral element in such a lordship and Caerleon continued to provide an inspiration for poets. A case in point is the love song written for Gwenllian by Llywarch ap Llywelyn, Prydydd y Moch. Generally thought of as a northern bard, Llywarch addressed this poem to Gwenllian who was almost certainly the daughter of Hywel of Caerleon. Not surprisingly, the object of the poet’s affections frequents ‘the dales of

---


6 Llywarch ap Llywelyn was one of the most prominent court poets of Gwynedd in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. His colourful bardic name, Prydydd y Moch translates as the Poet of the Pigs. It is not clear why he chose this description!
Caer Llion’ where ‘white is the gleam’ of Gwenllian’s ramparts (Clancy 1970, 152–3). Given changing political circumstances, the later lords of Caerleon were less vocal in their assertion of kingship than had been the case with Morgan ab Owain in the heady days in and after 1136. If the notion of Welsh kingship was in decline, however, the idea of Welsh lordship was not and Caerleon continued to be central to that concept. It is important to remind ourselves that there is every reason to believe, on the basis of the available archaeological evidence, that standing Roman structures still provided a backdrop for what continued to be a ‘white gleaming’ centre for that Welsh lordship.

Welsh control of Caerleon did not end until 1217 when, after a siege, the castle fell to William Marshal, lord of Striguil which is modern Chepstow (*Brut y Tywysogion*). Marshal, also earl of Pembroke, was a larger-than-life figure, sometimes described as the greatest soldier of his day. He was also a keen castle-builder, ready to introduce the latest innovations in fortification into his designs (see Duby 1986). He was succeeded by each of his sons in turn until the death of the last son in 1245. The Marshal holdings in Gwent subsequently passed to the de Clares. Interestingly, one of the consistent policies pursued by all of the Marshals was preventing re-acquisition of Caerleon by Morgan ap Hywel. For his part, Morgan removed himself only as far as his less vulnerable castle at nearby Machen where he repeatedly demanded the return of Caerleon and, in doing so, presented a persistent potential threat to the Marshals. The dispute over control of Caerleon continued until the death of William Marshal II in 1232. It then resumed with the accession of his brother Richard. The new Marshal heir’s refusal to restore Caerleon to Morgan was a principal cause of war between Richard and Henry III in 1233. Richard, interestingly in alliance with Llywelyn ap Iorwerth, inflicted heavy defeats on the king before crossing to Ireland where he died in 1234. The patrimony then passed to Gilbert Marshal who not only continued to block Morgan from Caerleon but also attacked Machen in 1236. There was no change in attitudes after Gilbert’s death in 1241; he was followed by his younger brother Walter and, briefly in 1245, Anselm, the last of William’s sons (Jenkins, 616–7). With the death of the last Marshal heir in 1245, the family holdings were partitioned and lands in Gwent which included Caerleon, Usk and Trelech passed into the hands of the de Clares. The de Clares were also lords of Glamorgan and among the most powerful of the English baronial families. Highly protective of their influence and holdings, they continued the implacable opposition to the recovery of Caerleon by Morgan or, after his death in 1248, by his heir, Maredudd (see Penrose 1997).

THE DEMOLITION OF THE TETRAPYLON

The picture which emerges is one of consistent efforts to assert Welsh lordship, and indeed at times kingship, in Caerleon for much of the twelfth century and the first decade of the thirteenth century. Caerleon provided a bardic focus which presented it as a court of Arthur and consequently a symbol of lordship/kingship in a Welsh context. The testimony of Gerald and others, combined with recent archaeological evidence, gives good reason to believe that surviving Roman remains contributed to an aura of authority associated with the site. Conversely, for much of the later thirteenth century, a succession of powerful baronial magnates worked energetically to prevent a re-assertion of Welsh control over Caerleon. They seem to have had a clear interest in resisting any assertion of Welsh claims to lordship in general and specific claims to Caerleon in particular. It would, for example, have been far easier for Richard Marshal to settle his dispute with Morgan ap Hywel rather than to provoke a
war with the king. While Richard had specific objectives of his own and was sometimes not averse to conflict, his failure to do so in this case strongly suggests that Caerleon was seen as more than simply another border lordship. It is against this background that we must consider the archaeological evidence from Caerleon.

As has been seen, the destruction of the fortress baths seems to have taken place sometime in the thirteenth century. The effort expended to demolish the structure was immense. The view of the excavator is important. As David Zienkiewicz (1986, 264) observed:

The demolition of so massive a structure — a task which was evidently beyond the resources even of the legionary gangs — cannot have been lightly undertaken in medieval times. This was not the casual grubbing-up of buried walls which has been a profitable source of building-stone at Caerleon in more recent times, but rather the co-ordinated destruction of a high edifice of concrete and stone, and of its immensely heavy vault. The work was such as must have involved the organisation of a considerable body of men and of the appropriate scaffolding arrangements etc., and on that account may have been done only at the instance of the lord of the manor or some other secular authority.

There is good evidence, including the fact that the three main vaults of the baths would have been mutually supportive, that the building was not demolished piecemeal but rather that the site was levelled as a single operation (ibid., especially 265). Realisation that this was the case impinges directly on our interpretation of the demolition horizons of the tetrapylon. Here the demolition pits previously discussed were not dug in such a way as to remove foundations but rather were dug in front to undermine a structure presumably standing to some height. The technique parallels pits encountered at the fortress baths (Zienkiewicz, context records and pers. comm.); and, as has been seen, ceramic evidence suggests that the two events occurred at much the same time.

This evidence strongly suggests that considerable amounts of manpower combined with engineering expertise and organisational skills were devoted to demolishing these two large and imposing standing structures some time in the thirteenth century. There may have been a variety of reasons for deciding to do so. One suggestion made by the excavator was that the fortress baths could have been removed to provide stone for use in conversion of the castle at Caerleon from earth and timber to masonry construction. This is a perfectly reasonable supposition and would point to demolition at the behest of one, if not both, of the William Marshals. There are, however, good reasons to believe that the reasons may have been more complex (Zienkiewicz, pers. comm.). As has been seen, the process of demolition was complex and labour intensive. At the fortress baths, the concrete construction of the mutually supportive vaulted halls would have challenged any demolition crew. Moreover, much of the resulting debris would be unsuitable for building purposes. Concrete rubble, crushed mortar, etc. may have been useful sources of lime and could have been crushed and spread directly onto the fields. Such reclamation, however, seems unlikely to have been a prime consideration and it would not have justified the effort required to acquire it. If building-stone was the main objective of the work, it is difficult not to think that there were easier stone quarries available in the fortress. Indeed, if the objective was material such as the Sudbrook Stone piers, it would seem more efficient simply to have quarried the stone from nearby Sudbrook! Similarly with the tetrapylon there seems to have been a major commitment of labour for a relatively minor return in building stone. Consequently, there is good reason to consider other explanations for the demise of these buildings.
A number of possible motives could have contributed to the decision to demolish the structures. Safety, for example, could have been an issue. If the buildings had deteriorated sufficiently, it might have seemed prudent to demolish them for that reason. In so far as the archaeological evidence can inform us on the point, however, the buildings seem to have been sound. At the very least, there is good reason to think that the roof of the frigidarium was in place at the time of demolition (Zienkiewicz 1986, 264). Similarly, as has been seen, the tetrapyron was standing to some height and Gerald’s description of 1188 seems to refer to a building which was sound at the time. It might have been thought prudent to remove large structures from any approaches to the castle, but this seems unlikely to have been a decisive consideration. On balance, while practical considerations may have contributed to the decision to remove the buildings, it seems likely that other factors played a role.

As has been seen, a body of literature placed Caerleon at the forefront of kingship in Wales. Here was a site with imposing architecture which was presented as no less than the court of Arthur. It was a site where figures such as Morgan ab Owain could revive his family claim to the title of king in Gwent. The later lords of Caerleon may have reined in their ambitions but Caerleon continued to be central to their assertion of lordship. Even after being dispossessed in 1217, the lords remained as a threat almost literally on the horizon in their upland castle at Machen. Indeed, as late as 1294 Morgan ap Maredudd led a rebellion against the de Clares (Davies 1990, 160) which spread as far as Trelech where over a hundred burgage plots were destroyed (Howell 1995). Throughout the thirteenth century, tensions remained and occupying marcher forces had good reason to remain vigilant in their dealings with the Welsh. For the marcher barons, physical remains which were associated in the native mind with Welsh authority and kingship would be undesirable. Any of the marchers from the elder William Marshal to the last Richard de Clare might have desired the removal of monuments associated with Welsh authority in Caerleon. If such removal had the additional benefit of providing useful building material, that would be a bonus. The possibility of expunging the physical evidence of Welsh lordship, which the Roman remains seem to have become, would have been sufficient to provide the spur for the investment of the substantial amounts of labour and time required for the demolition. It is impossible to prove the motivation for these events or, indeed, to be precise about who issued the instructions to proceed. It does seem likely, however, that the purpose of the demolition gangs was more than levelling buildings; their remit may also have been to remove physical symbols of an embattled but still potentially dangerous earlier Welsh tradition. If so, the tetrapyron, like the fortress baths, should be seen as a victim of the deliberate erasure of memory in thirteenth century south Wales.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful for discussions with David Zienkiewicz, the excavator of the tetrapyron, and for access to his context records and notes. I would also like to thank Julie Reynolds of the Legionary Fortress Museum for access to the finds and to my research student Mike Anthony for assistance with assessment of the ceramic finds.

Department of History/Archaeology
University of Wales College, Newport,
Caerleon Campus,
Newport,
Gwent, NP6 1YG
REFERENCES


PENROSE, R. 1997: Urban Development in the Lordships of Glamorgan, Gwynllwg, Caerleon and Usk under the Clare family, 1217–1314 (Ph.D., University of Wales).

RAVEN, S. 1969: Rome in Africa (Evans Bros. Ltd.).


