



# Mapping Medieval Chester: place and identity in an English borderland city c.1200-1500

This AHRC-funded research project brings together a team including literary specialists, historical geographers and historians to explore place, space and identity in medieval Chester. The project asks questions about Chester as a city on the (often troubled) border between England and Wales, and about how different medieval inhabitants imagined and represented the urban space around them.

## There are three key research questions guiding the project's research objectives:

1. How do different kinds of literary and geographical 'mappings' of medieval Chester (cartographic, textual) relate to each other?
2. How was Chester's urban landscape interpreted by those writing of the city and its environs during the Middle Ages?
3. How was the place of Chester as a multicultural city on the border of England and Wales manifested in the formation of local identities through perceptions of its landscape, environment, and history?

## The project outputs include:

1. A website which brings together an interactive digital map of Chester c.1500 interlinked with medieval textual 'mappings' of the city c.1200-1500.
2. Three scholarly papers produced by the project Principal and Co-Investigators, drawing on analysis of the primary materials. These papers will explore place and identity in medieval Chester and will be included in a collection of essays related to the project (forthcoming, University of Wales Press).
3. Two dissemination events: an academic colloquium at Swansea University, and the 'Mapping Medieval Chester Festival' organised in partnership with the Grosvenor Museum, Chester.

## Project Team:

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[www.medievalchester.ac.uk](http://www.medievalchester.ac.uk)

### 1. Lucian's allegorical reading of Chester's streets

Habet eciam plateas duas equilineas et excellentes in modum benedictae crucis, per transuersum sibi obuias et se transeuntes, que deinceps fiunt quattuor ex duabus, capita sua consummantes in quattuor portis, mistice ostendens atque magnifice, magni Regis inhabitantem gratiam se habere, qui legem geminam noui ac ueteris testamenti per misterium sancte crucis impletam ostendit, in quattuor euangelistis.

Chester also has two perfectly straight streets intersecting like the blessed cross, which form four roads, culminating at the four gates, mystically revealing the marvellously innate grace of the Great King, who, through the four evangelists, showed the twin law of the old and new testaments to be completed through the mystery of the holy cross.

- ▶ City as divine text with God at centre
- ▶ Exegesis appropriates the entire city as monastic space
- ▶ Topographical features adapted for symbolic uses

### 2. Maredudd ap Rhys celebrates the 'true Cross' at St John's

Duw oedd pan fu dioddef  
 A'i fron yn waed, frenin nef.  
 O nef y daeth yn ufydd,  
 I nef yr aeth yn fyw rydd,  
 A'i lun yn reioli enwog  
 Sy grair yn eglwys y grog.  
 Llynw'r ddelw fyw a elwir,  
 Llanw a'i dug dduw Llun i dir.  
 Llawenydd i'r dydd a'r don  
 A'i llywiodd i Gaerleon,  
 Lle daeth nerth a gallu dwys  
 O law Agla i'w eglwys.

He was God when he was suffering,  
 his breast bloody, the king of heaven.  
 From heaven he came meekly,  
 to heaven he returned, alive and free,  
 and his image as magnificent and famous  
 is a holy relic in the church of the cross.  
 There it is, called a living image,  
 a tide brought it on a Monday to the land.  
 Joy to the day and the wave  
 that steered it to Chester,  
 where strength and solemn power came  
 from the hand of the Lord to its church.

- ▶ Relics as focus for Welsh pilgrimage
- ▶ Replaces sites of earthly, secular politics and power with spiritual authority
- ▶ Ambivalent attitude to Chester: colonialist city, but also centre of religious tradition

### 3. Henry Bradshaw's commemoration of St Werburgh, the city's patron

The deuout chanons sette the holy shryne [canons]  
 Agaynst theyr enemies at the sayd northgate,  
 Trustyne to Werburge to saue them from ruine [ruin]  
 And shewe some myracle to them disconsolate.  
 For the citezens were of their lyues desperate,  
 [despairing for their lives]  
 Passyngge mannes mynde to escape theyr daunger  
 [To escape their danger was beyond human thought, reason]  
 But all-only by merite of this virgin clere.  
 [But solely possible through the merit of this shining virgin]

- ▶ Werburgh's shrine as the centre of the city
- ▶ Asserts authority of the Benedictine community, elides secular geography
- ▶ Image of a unified city within the walls and dangerous others (e.g. Welsh) beyond

## Theoretical discussion

### Text to Image, Medieval to Modern: some challenges and theoretical questions

The links between our medieval texts and digital map are complex. The symbolic mappings presented by the medieval texts are sometimes resistant to direct, literal expression, and the straightforward connection of the edited medieval literature with the GIS digital atlas also risked the elision of differences between medieval and modern spatial imaginaries and representational or interpretative systems. We have endeavoured to create a resource which is sensitive to these issues, to the extent that rather than a literal-minded 'spelling out' of correlative concepts in text and map, our aim has been to propagate and catalyse the activity, in the mind of the reader or user, of drawing out the rich connections between the two.

