The Medieval March of Wales

Mapping Literary Geography in a British Border Region.

The Medieval March of Wales, c. 1282–1550

Mapping Literary Geography in a British Border Region

What are the objectives?
- To create the first cultural history of the March of Wales
- To create new digital maps and associated resources
- To assess cultural identity and the geography of power

Why now?
- New knowledge of a specific region
- Devolution of Wales (1999)
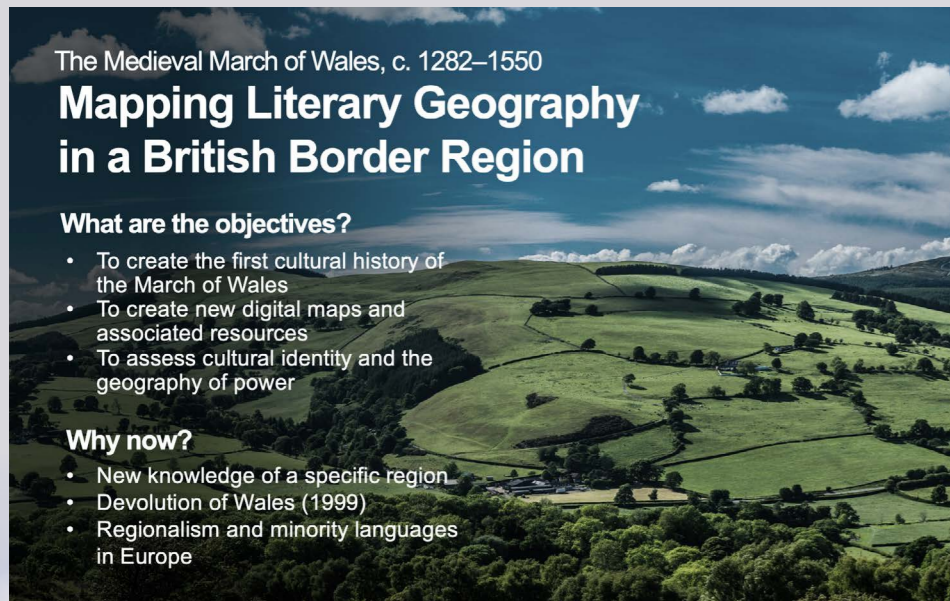- Regionalism and minority languages in Europe

Figure 1: Objectives of the MOWLIT (The Medieval March of Wales: Mapping Literary Geography in a British Border Region) project.

Where is the border between England and Wales? The political border dates back to the reign of Henry VIII, but before that, it was a matter of topographical and traditional convenience. Right up until the middle of the twentieth century, some residents of border towns such as Shrewsbury were convinced that they lived in Wales rather than England. Oswestry, now in Shropshire, changed hands between the English and the Welsh throughout the Middle Ages, and its Welsh name, 'Croesoswallt', 'Oswald's Cross', commemorated its founding saint, Oswald of Northumbria, who died in 642.

Even today, the term 'March' is still commonly used to describe the parts of English counties that lie along the border of Wales. Our five-year research project aims to bring together documentary and literary evidence about the society of the Marches. It will create something that has never been done before—a complete cultural history of a British borderland

within an English empire. This is the right moment for the project; when Britain and Europe are concerned about their regions and the geographies of discontent. The March is currently an area of economic deprivation, caught between the jurisdictions of the Welsh and English governments after the devolution of Wales in 1999. By examining the links between cultural identity and the geography of power, the project is highly relevant to debates about regionalism and minority languages in Europe.

Medieval Wales was a colony of the English crown, with its borders dominated by the Marcher lords. Before the political border was established, the boundary between Wales and England was porous and topographical, defined by tradition and by features such as Offa's Dyke and the rivers Wye and Severn. The region was penetrated by Norman barons after 1066, and although the Welsh fought to retain their ancient kingdoms, the Normans were securely entrenched in what they called the March of Wales by the middle of the thirteenth century (Davies, 1978; Lieberman, 2010).

In 1282–3, the English king Edward I finally conquered the remnant of independent Wales lying beyond the March, killing the most powerful princely ruler of Wales, Llywelyn ap Gruffudd (Smith, 1998). Those areas of Wales which had been under Llywelyn's rule, in the north and west of the country, became Crown possessions, known collectively as the Principality, while

many smaller parcels of land in eastern and southern Wales, once owned by Welsh princes, were now distributed to Marcher lords. These lords were French-speaking aristocrats ruling a subservient Welsh population. Thus, a new 'Marcher aristocracy' came into being, shaping the March's political and cultural history for the next three centuries.

The project asks a number of questions about the history and cultural production of the medieval March, particularly from the point of view of place, identity and manuscript transmission. Where exactly were the boundaries of the different lordships, and how did the lords and their people identify themselves? Were there networks of Welsh and English families
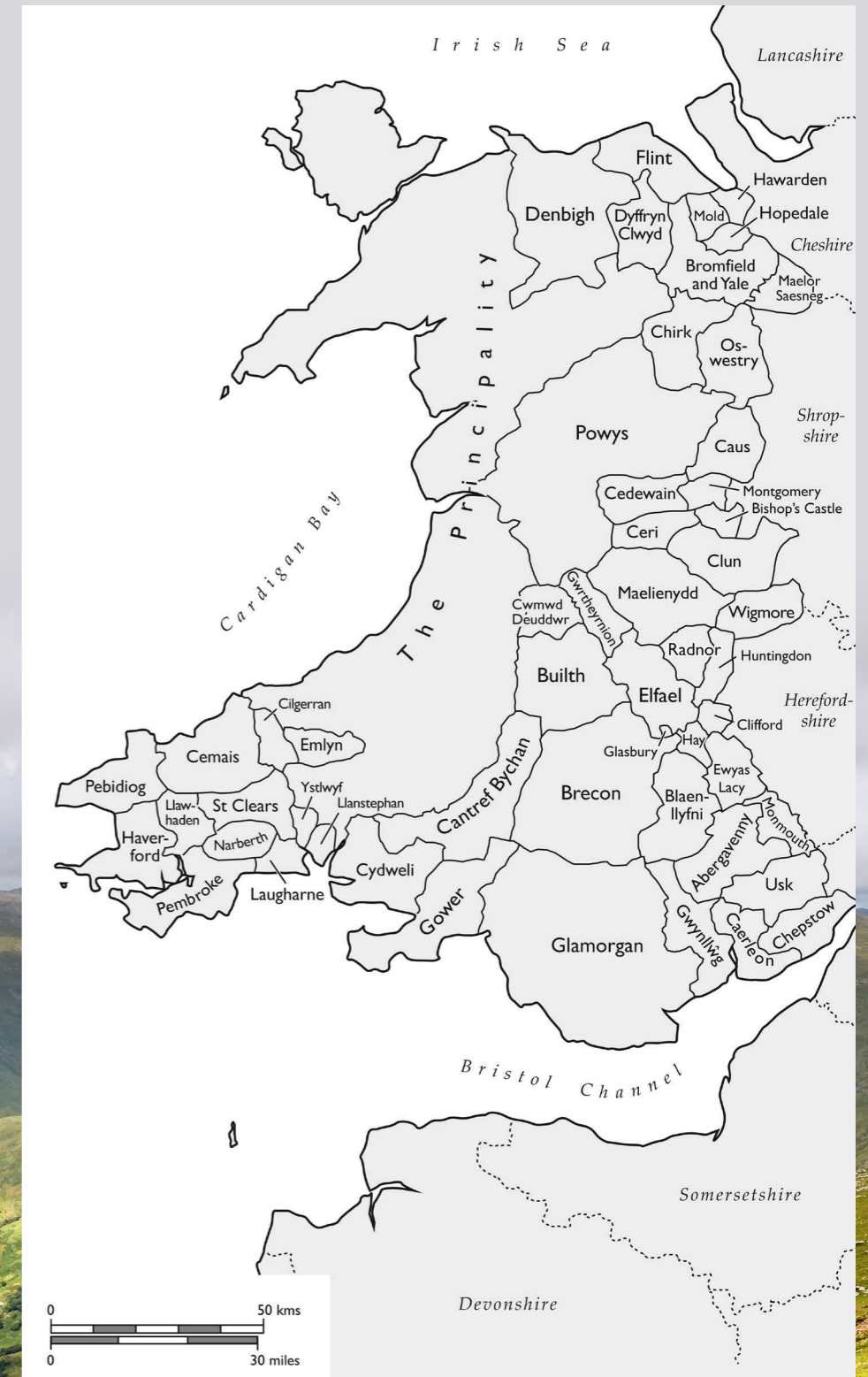

Figure 2: The Marcher Lordships c. 1400.

who shared a multilingual culture? Is it possible to define a distinctive 'Marcher' culture that was neither Welsh nor English but something *sui generis* of its own particular type?

'Mapping the March' aims to create the first holistic cultural history of the medieval March of Wales as a multicultural and multilingual space. Its main objectives are to catalogue and analyse the literary texts and manuscripts produced and circulated in the medieval March and to create

an original series of digital maps of the Marcher lordships at various date points during the period. We are basing the maps on manorial and parish boundaries, such as those we have mapped for the lordship of Bromfield and Yale (Figure 3). The texts and the maps will be linked by means of a prosopography—an annotated index of the main historical figures associated with the Marcher lordships. The built environment will also be mapped, using a visualisation of the major castles, gentry houses, abbeys and towns, and the literary

evidence will be shown as a distribution of the texts/manuscripts across the maps indicating where they were produced and who read/owned them. Outputs from the project will include not only the digital maps, but also printed maps, articles and book-length studies of Marcher history and culture.

The texts and manuscripts which comprise what might be called 'the Matter of the March' are written in Welsh, English, French and Latin, and come from both sides of what is now the border between Wales and England (Scase, 2009; Trotter, 2000; Marx, 1999; Fulton, 2015). Many were produced in monasteries such as the Cistercian abbey of Valle Crucis near Llangollen, close to the modern border with England (Figure 4). One of the most innovative and challenging aspects of 'Mapping the March' is that it will bring together a large body of manuscripts and texts previously separated into 'Welsh' and 'English' manuscripts and have therefore not been considered a cultural totality. The project will define and illuminate a distinctive Marcher culture as a geographic identifier shared across what is now the modern border.

The contents of Marcher manuscripts are rich and varied, comprising poetry, prose, history, scientific literature, medical tracts, travel literature and prophecy, often gathered together in multilingual manuscripts. These manuscripts, co-located in the March, have been comparatively neglected by scholars, yet they provide an unparalleled source of information about the history, politics and culture, not simply of Wales, but of medieval Britain and Europe.

Figure 3: Manorial boundaries of Bromfield and Yale.

Figure 4: Valle Crucis abbey.

One of the most important and innovative objectives of 'Mapping the March' is to produce a series of layered digital maps which will show the boundaries of the Marcher lordships as they evolved from 1282 to 1536. As Marcher lords increased their holdings through war or marriage, or lost lands due to escheat or penalty, the borders of the lordships changed over time, often from one decade to the next. At the same time, owners of the lands also changed, as families died out or their lands were appropriated by the king for political reasons.

There has not yet been any attempt to produce accurate maps of the Marcher lordships. A beautiful set of hand-drawn maps of south Wales was produced by the historian William Rees in 1932, portraying his interpretation of the historical landscape of south Wales in the fourteenth century (Rees, 1932; https://mappingwelshmarches.ac.uk/maps/5-rees-maps/). Working with the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales, we will produce digital mapping layers, based on historical

sources, to provide a clear geographical and chronological view of the Marcher lordships. These maps, the first of their kind, will be illuminating in themselves while also providing visual representations of the centres of manuscript production and the travels of individual manuscripts from place to place.

'Mapping the March' will be the first large-scale project to document and define the distinctive culture of the medieval March and its geo-cultural politics. The team hopes to draw new attention to the modern March of Wales and establish it as a distinctive region in the UK with its own cultural, linguistic and political history. The team is planning to involve local communities and organisations, such as the Mortimer History Society, in the project and work with tourist agencies and heritage bodies on both sides of the border to promote the March as a very special place that transcends national jurisdictions. Please do get in touch if you would like to be added to the mailing list or if you have any questions about the project.

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PROJECT NAME

Mapping the March: Medieval Wales and England, c. 1282–1550

PROJECT SUMMARY

The project aims to create the first cultural history of the medieval March of Wales, the borderlands between Wales and England. The main aims are to catalogue the manuscripts produced and circulated in the medieval March from 1282 to 1550, to create an original series of digital maps of the Marcher lordships, and to explore cultural identities in a British border region.

PROJECT PARTNERS

Project lead: Helen Fulton, University of Bristol
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Project partner: Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales

PROJECT LEAD PROFILE

Professor Helen Fulton holds the Chair in Medieval Literature at the University of Bristol. She has previously held a number of research awards, including a Leverhulme Major Research Fellowship. Her research focuses on the literature and culture of medieval Wales and its relations with England, and she has published widely in this field. She is the co-editor of the Cambridge History of Welsh Literature.

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