

Using a current archaeological research framework (regional or thematic), contextualise and synthesise data and results from an agreed archaeological project.

Within the ever-diversifying nature of archaeology comes a diverse range of topics and periods of specialist knowledge and techniques as well as a whole host of different groups who interact with them for a range of different purposes, whether it be commercial, academic, local interest groups or state heritage agencies such as Historic England or national park authorities (Belford, 2020). With so many different spheres of interaction it can be easy for each group, and even those specialities within each group, to hold fragmented communication about archaeological practice as a whole but also across wider issues, this was one of the reasons archaeological research frameworks were introduced, as a way of identifying gaps in current research by accumulating current knowledge around specific themes or periods and creating strategies to fill in those gaps through focused projects and objectives (Belford, 2020, p.2). An archaeological research framework can be a very useful first port of call when deciding upon a research project as it sets out what is currently known about certain themes or regional locations and provides areas to focus future research (Research Frameworks Network, 2023a). There are some drawbacks to research frameworks, as they only work as they should if they are used commonly amongst different groups but also kept up to date with current research, something that can be difficult to keep on top of with such a plethora of studies being undertaken all the time (Belford, 2020, p.4). There are many different types of archaeological research frameworks ranging from thematic to region-specific frameworks which often have their own subdivisions for each individual period or theme, such as the North West Regional Research Framework (NWRRF) which is subdivided by six different periods each with their own

research questions which are then split into different themes (Research Frameworks Network, 2024c). There is no set way of presenting these periods and themes; differently, the Yorkshire Wolds Research Framework divides the future research strategy and questions into themes and then further breaks these down into each period (Research Frameworks Network, 2024f), showing how archaeological research frameworks have been developed differently and with different scope, as some may veer more towards certain specialities or time periods depending on the backgrounds of those who are involved in their formation (Belford, 2020, p.4). However, even with inconsistencies between the many different frameworks, they can still be useful in driving which direction a project should go if they are of course consulted within a project lifecycle. This study will focus on the Cheshire Aerial Investigation and Mapping Project (Goodchild, 2022), and explore how much the focus and results of the project can be linked to the NWRRF (Research Frameworks Network, 2024c).

The Cheshire Aerial Investigation and Mapping Project (CAIMP) was carried out by Archaeological Research Services (ARS LTD) between 2018 and 2019 as commissioned by Historic England and as such was completed to the standards set out by Historic England (Goodchild, 2022). As the project was completed for Historic England, many of the aims of the project are geared towards the objectives as set out in the corporate plan as well as the statutory purposes which in 2018 were mainly aimed at preserving, promoting and advancing the knowledge of historic places including historic ancient monuments, historic buildings and conservation areas (Historic England, 2018). One area the plan focused on was the contribution that heritage had within the planning system including the development of both housing and infrastructure, this was something reflected in the CAIMP report directly as the area chosen around Chester and the Cheshire area included areas under threat from

the expansion of light industrial, infrastructure and housing developments (Goodchild, 2022, p.4). The main aim of the project again highlights the background influences of the corporate plan and the need to fulfil this, as the report stated that it aimed to increase the understanding and protection of Cheshire's historic environment by providing a well-mapped area of historic features that can be drawn upon to inform current and future planning processes (Goodchild, 2022, p.4). This type of large area project had a very broad aim which suits the style of survey as it covers a range of periods as well as locations, this gave the project ample opportunity to cover many of the research strategies set out in the North West Regional Research Framework if somewhat indirectly (Research Frameworks Network, 2024d).

The CAIMP report recognised that some of the data recovered can be contextualised within the wider themes and research priorities as set out by the NWRRF with one of the first and broadest areas the CAIMP contributes to the NWRRF being the contribution of new information to the Cheshire Historic Environment Record, relating to initiative G1.15 (Research Frameworks Network, 2024d), with a total of 171 new records and a further 62 which were updated and improved (Goodchild, 2022, p.8). The CAIMP methodology of approaching the landscape from an aerial perspective can also be linked to some of the overarching, broad questions including: Initiative GS18, to identify genuine settlement patterns of different periods, Initiative GS24, to ensure topographic, geology and geomorphic information is used in the protection of rural sites by using aerial photography to identify sites, as well as Initiative GS32, to use detailed analysis of aerial photography and LIDAR to help understand the distribution of known sites and help provide a basis for further targeted investigation all of which help to build a fuller picture of the landscape (Research

Frameworks Network, 2024e). These broader questions and strategies lend themselves to both the NWRRF but also the aims and objectives set out by the Historic England Corporate Plan (2018). There are however a range of more targeted questions set out within the NWRRF that the CAIMP touches upon, this will be explained in further detail.

One of the most extensively recorded archaeological feature types that were mapped widely throughout the project area, was the survival of Medieval ridge and furrow earthworks (Goodchild, 2022, p.38). Not only does the recording of Medieval ridge and furrow allow observations to be made about how the landscape was managed in the Medieval period but it also allows for the changing use of land to be examined at a deeper level (Goodchild, 2022, p.48). This information relates to some of the initiatives set out in the NWRRF including LM06 and LM12 (both directly linked to the late medieval period land-use section) but also some of the overarching initiatives including GS37 and GS38 (Research Frameworks Network, 2024f). Highlighting the usefulness of this data also links to some of the aims set out in the Chester Research Framework (2013), specifically Aim 60.4 which describes the need to focus on Medieval land use patterns around Chester. Similarly, but looking wider at the North West of England and specifically at Early Medieval land use, this theme is also highlighted in a more specialised Early Medieval Period Research Agenda as a gap in current knowledge and studies (Brennand and Newman, 2007). Although the Chester Research Framework (2013), the NWRRF (2024) and the Early Medieval Period Research agenda all highlight the changing use of land as a potential area for future study they all have their own more focused questions either based on location, period or themes. This does highlight another issue with research frameworks as they can often have overlaps and commonalities that could create confusion on what to focus a study on. If the study was

focused on certain more targeted areas this may make the decision simpler but if, like this study, the research looks more widely at a big landscape or over multiple periods it could be difficult to know which objectives to prioritise and which research agenda to frame your research upon.

The study of sites with *Eccles* in their place names was recognised to be of significance within the study of Early Medieval Christian sites and was highlighted as an area to be considered for future studies by the Early Medieval Research Agenda (Brennand and Newman, 2007, p.84, 85 & 88). This initiative can also be linked with the initiative EM21 as set out in the NWRRF, to study the origins and character of early Christian sites, specifically those with circular graveyards (Research Frameworks Network, 2024b). Some of the CAIMP results can be directly linked to both initiatives, through the recording of the landscape around the Medieval church of St Mary, which sits in the village of Eccleston (Goodchild, 2022, p.34-36). The CAIMP recorded an oval enclosure around the church which allowed for the condition of the earthwork to be monitored but it also provided further detail of the possibly Early Medieval feature, as acknowledged to be of importance through using the research frameworks (Goodchild, 2022, p.36). It is likely that without having consulted the research frameworks this feature would still have been mapped but its significance was possibly weighted more heavily within the report from consulting the research frameworks, which no doubt will contribute to the development of the NWRRF in the future.

One area in which the CAIMP lacks scope is defining the study area to modern boundaries, discounting anything over the Welsh border, something that was highlighted as an issue with Research frameworks generally (Belford, 2020, p.7-8). This was also one of the overarching initiatives highlighted in the NWRRF, to ask what research can tell us about

borders and cultural identity, which was noted to be of relevance, particularly in the Early Medieval period (Research Frameworks Network, 2024e). The CAIMP report notes that this research would sit well with a complementary aerial mapping project over the border undertaken by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales (RCAHMW), (Goodchild, 2022, p.48&50). This does bring other issues as to the difference in the RCAHMW's own corporation goals and aims, as this provides a host of different motivations for the research that is undertaken as well as taking into consideration the difference in both practices of aerial mapping but also the resources available including the use of historical aerial images. For a cross-border programme of aerial investigation and mapping to be successful, it seems that a collaboration between the two different countries would work more effectively, addressing the relevant research frameworks for both sides of the border and using this in the project design and dissemination.

The CAIMP report, unlike many others written by Historic England, acknowledges local research frameworks, something even the most recent aerial investigation and mapping report conducted over Dartmoor and the Upper Plym Valley (Whitaker & Bayer, 2023), does not consider. It appears that the consideration of external research frameworks was included within the CAIMP report because, although it was commissioned by Historic England, it was conducted and written by an external company, ARS LTD. Another Aerial Investigation and mapping report commissioned by Historic England for the study of the Northern Cheviot Hills region was also undertaken by ARS LTD and written by Goodchild and again linked the research to the local archaeological research frameworks (Goodchild, 2021, p.1). As highlighted not all Historic England projects acknowledge the initiatives set out in external research frameworks; many projects conducted by Historic England often adhere to

their internal research frameworks which are mostly outdated now, (Historic England, 2010a), (Williams et al, 2013), (Wilson, 2009), (Heathcote, 2012), (Historic England, 2010b), (Historic England, 2010c). Those reports written by Historic England are also required to adhere to the internal expectations set out in a three-year corporate plan which is kept up to date (Historic England, 2023). Historic England has also funded specialist research frameworks of their own including the research framework for the Forest of Dean (Hoyle, 2017) and the Stonehenge World Heritage Site archaeological research Framework (Darvill, 2005), both of which were funded by Historic England but created externally. Research frameworks if up to date and consulted can be very useful within project research, however as explored in this study they are not always written and constructed in the same way and can often have overlapping themes and objectives making it difficult to pin down which way to focus a piece of research on. Many research frameworks are outdated, and this seems crucially to be one of the biggest downfalls that many are falling into which may lead to their eventual dismissal altogether. Overall the CAIMP report does acknowledge and contribute to the NWRRF and highlights some important findings that could be useful data and starting points for further more detailed research. The CAIMP report shows that the broad nature of aerial mapping projects can contribute their data to a wide plethora of research frameworks, but this is something that often is not considered within internal research reports conducted by Historic England. As a public body working within the realm of archaeology, if they are not using or contributing to regional research frameworks it perhaps reflects that they are not something that is commonly used in other archaeological companies on a regular basis and do not form an integral part of the archaeological research process for many.

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