

Thirteenth century Welsh commonplace food in the coastal regions

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A Welsh receipt book – a continuation of research into food and customs prior to the Edwardian conquest of Wales. This is an extension of previous research projects into the food of Wales focusing on the coastal regions. Previous research can be viewed in Appendix II.

History and previous research –

The research and recipes presented here will focus on foods and customs in the coastal regions of Wales. In my previous research, I focused first on feast days in the region of northern Wales or Gwynedd and then expanded on that as I began to develop the idea of a full cookbook (Appx I&II). This research has presented many challenges. To start with, when the idea of a Welsh feast first came into my mind, I realized very quickly that there were no extant recipes from Wales prior to the Edwardian conquest. There are two main reasons for this, the first is that in the thirteenth century in general there are very few extant recipe books. The second reason is the conquest itself; Edward I, following the defeat of the Welsh in 1277, saw that English customs and laws were enforced throughout Wales. Following the conquest, Welsh people were not permitted into many towns within Wales and the Welsh language was not to be spoken (23, 44) Regionally, this had a much greater impact on the coastal areas, the lowlands, and Marches, as these were more easily accessible by the English who were moving into the region. (15,25,66) Edward I utilized ships to cut the Welsh off from foreign assistance and to move his military forces along the coastline.

When I began my research, I initially looked to historic records for clues as to what resources were available in the region. Studying texts such as the Laws of Hywel Dda which laid out in great detail sumptuary laws. These laws touched on food, livestock, and even important possessions such as the cooking pot, bakestone, and of course the harp (58). Historical texts such as Gerald of Wales' history of his journey to recruit men to fight in the Third Crusade in 1178 which he detailed in his journals helped to give insight into the food that was eaten. I also examined inventory records from monasteries and castles in the region that survived (5,16,36,68). Finally, I looked through records of bardic poems and songs that recorded historic events including feasts. While all of these different sources helped me to gain a general understanding of what foods were available, and a good picture of what might have been eaten at a lord's table or on a day of feasting, I wanted to further explore foods that were more generally available to everyone and how they were prepared (11,24,38).



The next phase of my research began to delve into what a common holding was like during this time period. I was able to travel to Wales at this time and do some further research in person at the University of Cardiff Libraries and visit St Fagans National Museum of History. These opportunities allowed me to see extant texts of Welsh poems and songs and to explore an extant house from the period (described in previous research Appx II.2) With this new background I began experimenting with more period methods of cooking. I created an open fire pit with a large bakestone in my backyard and cooked some of

my previous recipes as well as some new redactions in this outdoor space.

Cooking with period techniques was definitely challenging at first. Each new recipe presented different obstacles to overcome. One of the first recipes I attempted was bara ceirch (oatcakes). These are thin cracker-like oatcakes that would have been used as a trencher to put food on and to soak up broth or mix with food. They also allow oats to be stored for a long time as the process of cooking them dried them out. They could then be broken up and used as a thickening agent in cooking. One of the challenges with these was getting the bakestone to the right temperature without having it directly over the flames. The next recipe was the tarten porc a iar (pork and hen pie). These pies have a sturdy “coffin” crust which is a hot crust pastry. This allows them to be more sturdy for cooking over the fire but still took a few tries to get right. For more information about this process please see my previous research (Appx II).



Current research –



As I have continued my research, I have had to find new paths of historic information. One area where I have begun to have great success is with archaeological digs and finds. A few years ago, I began to work with a group called Archwilio: The Historic Environment of Wales and the Welsh Archaeological Trust (16, 46, 65,66). This began as I was looking further into what types of cooking vessels would have been used in the thirteenth century. Many excavations showed pottery shards and that the clay used to create them was from Wales. Papers written on the excavations also

showed that a number of sherds belonged to curfews, clay covers that would have been used to smore the fire when it was untended. They may also have been used for covering items such as

pies or bread that were cooking in the fire. One such example that was tested with radiocarbon dating and mass spectrometer, found that the shards had evidence of oat grains and dairy (8,16). The data found that clay was excavated from an area in central Wales, which was used to support a thriving pottery production from around the middle of the twelfth century through the end of the thirteenth.

While researching the tools that were utilized in the region, I found that much research had been done on the excavation of food middens throughout Wales. Through a contact at the University of Wales, Cardiff, Dr John Hines, I learned that many food middens were used from the time of the Roman settlements in Wales up until well into the sixteenth century. By researching the literature written on these excavations I have been able to gain a better understanding of what types of food were being used in households in Wales (6,28,46). Many of the middens that have been explored date back to the Roman occupation era and so there is an interesting layering of history to be observed. In a number of the areas excavated, there is a very distinct changeover in what was found following the Norman conquest (10). Analysis of pottery shards in this time period showed an increased presence of milk and milk products such as cheese (10). Animal remains found in these sites also showed an increase in cattle bones (28,46). This line of research helped me to support some of my earlier ingredient choices as well as to think about how to better explore how these items were prepared.



In thinking about my next steps, I realized that up to this point my focus had been primarily on the northern and interior mountainous regions of Wales. I decided that I should begin to explore the other regions of the country. The coastline of Wales is over 1,600 miles long and makes up over twenty percent of the total Welsh/English coast (Institute of Welsh affairs – online). In the southern and western regions, the coastal plain expands significantly inland. Since the Norman conquest, this region was more influenced by access to trade, allowing for a wider variety of ingredients such as wheat flours and also access to marine fish (16,45,66). Excavation of coastal and lowland middens showed evidence of cockle and whelk shells along the coast and large deposits of land-snail shells (6,7,45). Anecdotal sources, including the narrative of Gerald of Wales, also talk

about the common use of laver, a seaweed harvested to this day along the southwest coast of Wales (26).

The recipes – Full redactions and recipes in Appx I

With the new data, I began to explore what extant recipes might be available that would fit the ingredients. I started with snails. I found a number of recipes from Apicius de re coquinaria for snail soup (2). In all the recipes the snails were first fried in oil or fat, and then cooked using a variety of methods, including being served in broth. In my previous research, I had come across several recipes for pottage with a variety of proteins incorporated, including shellfish. Working towards recipes that would be likely found in a common household, I used my redaction for Cawl bresych (cabbage soup) as a base. I did a little research into the types of snails that would



have been used, and there are some species of land snails local to our area that are edible. However, there are also some that are poisonous, so I opted to purchase snails. Pre-cooked snails are commercially available, but many supplies are from an aquatic variety. After some further research, I was able to acquire land snails from a supplier in France.

I started by preparing the base soup over the fire. While that was cooking, I fried the snails quickly in a hot pan. Because they were already pre-cooked I used a very hot pan and only browned them lightly, in both the historic and modern recipes there are warnings that over cooking them will make them tough. I then added the snails to the soup and allowed it to cook until everything was tender. The result was a very tasty, rich soup. The snails added flavor and were not too chewy. This was served on bara cerich which thickened the broth and added more flavor.

The next recipe I explored was laverbread. References to this dish date back as far as 1178 when Germal of Wales referenced it as a dish made with algae from the sea in the region of Pembrokeshire (26). A few hundred years later in 1586 William Camden would write of laverbread in his *Britannia*, talking about the historical practice of the *“peasantry gather(ing) in the spring time a kind of alga or seaweed, where they made a sort of food called lhavan or llawvan, in English, black butter”*(22,27). To make laver from scratch you need to collect fresh seaweed of the right species early in the spring, when it has new growth that is soft. You then wash it in fresh water, and alternately boil it in salt and fresh water until reduced to mush. Gathering seaweed later in the season will require a longer boil and may be bitter. (54,72,72)

The seaweed that is used for laver grows exclusively along the southern coastline of Wales. Having no way to collect this myself I looked at other options. The availability of tinned laver was one possibility. Tinned laver is already processed and preserved. Reviews noted a bitter taste with little true flavor. Another option was using dried seaweed. While dried laver seaweed is available in the UK it is not imported to the US at all. Finally, a seaweed that is supposed to have a similar flavor is Nori, which is commonly used in making modern sushi. This can be purchased dried at local markets and is what I used here.



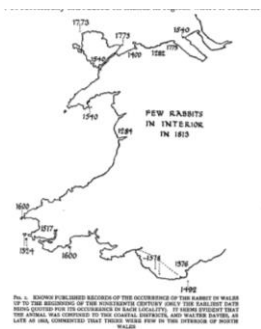


Once I had the laver prepared, I mixed it with rough ground oats until it formed a dough that I could shape. All modern, traditional recipes call for the laverbread to be cooked in bacon grease for added flavor, this is also a technique that is referenced in period recipes. Using coals from the fire to heat my pan, I spread drippings from previously cooked bacon, and placed the laverbread into the pan. In my first attempt, the pan was too hot and the outside burned before the middle of the laverbread was cooked through. However, after moving the pan off the direct heat, the laverbread cooked more

evenly, being flipped over after about 5 minutes. The laverbread has a salty flavor and is reminiscent of spinach.

Shell evidence in middens in coastal areas included many records of cockles. Cockles are an abundant, small bivalve similar to a small clam. They can still be found in coastal areas in the southern regions of Wales (22). The origins of the recipe come from anecdotal sources and archeological research. Recipes for different types of pancakes and fritters date back to the period of Roman occupation in the British Isles (2,56). Historical records and archaeological data show evidence of the consumption of cockles throughout the medieval period in the coastal regions of Wales. There are also records of cockles being eaten as part of feasts in the poems of Guto'r Glyn (11).

In his record of traveling through Wales, Gerald of Wales gives a description of eating shellfish and lavar cakes when visiting Dyfed/Pembrokeshire. I have taken three recipes one Roman from *Apicius de re Coquinaria*, one from *Forme of Curry*, and one from *The Whole Body of Cookery* and also using modern reference compiled a version of Cockle Cakes. The recipe incorporates lavar and cockles in a batter which is then fried on a hot pan like a pancake. I cooked these at the same time as the laverbread, over the fire.



Records of the presence of rabbits in Wales have been found back as far as the early thirteenth century. Hares are native to the region and are mentioned in the Laws of Hywel Dda as an acceptable form of payment from a freeholder (58) Over time the hares were hunted and declined due to the competition with rabbits (49). Archaeological data shows rabbit bones in middens throughout Wales(45,49). I included the rabbit pie in my coastal research for a few reasons. One of the ways in which rabbits

spread was through the monasteries where the monks would keep them for food and the early records show the most remains along the coast near them (see map). The geology of the region also worked to keep them to the coastal regions, as there the soil was soft and suitable for the creation of warrens. The inland region was less suitable as it was rockier and more mountainous.

Cooking rabbit can be challenging as the meat is very lean and can be tough. Most recipes I found included stewing the rabbit slowly to soften the meat. My first attempts did not cook the rabbit long enough and the meat was dry. In the final iteration, I cooked the rabbit with bacon and cider before putting it in the coffyn to bake. This proved to help keep the rabbit tender and the pie moist. For this I used my previous recipe for hot crust pastry allowing me to cook the pies on a bakestone over the fire.



In the laws of Hywel Dda, hens and geese are described in terms of property, and items such as goose feather beds and pinion feather sweeps (brooms) were allotted to people of all statuses. (22,58) There is also reference to eggs of both geese and hens being rendered as payment for land use in the accounts of Castle Neath between 1262 and 1316 (36) Different forms of custards made with eggs and later in the Tudor period, there is reference in *The English Huswife...* to an egg dish called a *Quelquechose*, which was made in a pan with eggs, vegetables, and spices. (23,30,32) In the *Libellus de arte coquinaria*, a compilation of multiple manuscripts from the Danish and German regions in the late 13th century, there are multiple examples of custards and an egg dish with almonds as well. In *Two Fifteenth Century Cookbooks*, an example of a *Crustade*, includes herbs and meat. (57) Pulling these recipes together and using ingredients readily available to a

Welsh medieval kitchen, I redacted a recipe that would be savory, filling, and easily cooked in the coals of the central fire.

To cook this recipe, I tried using my own pottery that I had made in a modern pottery studio. I started by tempering the pot, slowly introducing it to the heat of the fire and turning it often. The custard was cooking nicely and bubbling at the edges. As it was exceptionally cold outside, the coals began to cool too quickly, and I moved the pot closer into the core of the fire. Unfortunately, at this time, the pot came into contact with the flames and the added heat cracked the pot. Luckily, the custard had mostly set at this time, and actually helped to hold the pot pieces together while it finished cooking to the center. In the future, I hope to make a pot in the form of a pipkin, with a handle that will more easily allow me to control the position of the pot in the fire.



Finally, for this round of experimental archaeology, I returned to one of my first recipes, bara planc (stone bread). I had not successfully created a bread that was both cooked on the bake stone and had a soft enough texture to be edible without first soaking in broth. With the expanded research I had done, I realized that the coastal regions, especially in the southern regions closest to Britain, allowed for access to wheat flours following the Norman conquest (10). Reworking my original recipe, I adjusted the ratio of flours that I used. The other major change was using a pot to cover the bread as it baked on the stone. This allowed for a better distribution of heat which resulted in a more tender final loaf. Due to weather conditions, I have not yet been able to try this recipe in the outdoor cooking fire.

Considerations for the competition –

Due to the timing of the competition, I was not able to prepare any of the dishes that will be presented in the traditional manner. Distance from my home and the constraints of cooking in a rented space and on site will impact the manner in which some of the dishes are prepared. However, I do not feel that this will meaningfully change the texture or flavor of the dishes presented.

Moving forward I hope to recreate more period-style pottery to be able to use in cooking my recipes. Further research into the shapes and designs of Welsh pottery of the period will allow me to expand my understanding of life and cooking in the region. I will also continue to expand my research into the types of food and how it was prepared in a period manner. Items of interest that I have not yet had the opportunity to explore include other types of fish, for instance, there is evidence of salmon in some of the food middens.

Finally, I have begun to research period manuscript representation of cookery texts. My plan is to fully translate my recipes into Welsh and then to write them down in a period fashion. Research into the oldest extant copy of *Forme of Curry* shows that it is a roll of parchment sewn together in strips with thread.