

Review article

Elite power in the landscapes of early medieval Europe

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NEIL CHRISTIE & HAJNALKA HEROLD (ed.). *Fortified settlements in early medieval Europe: defended communities of the 8th–10th centuries*. 2016. Oxford: Oxbow; 978-1-785702-35-8 hardback £50.

TOMÁS Ó CARRAGÁIN & SAM TURNER (ed.). *Making Christian landscapes in Atlantic Europe: conversion and consolidation in the Early Middle Ages*. 2016. Cork: Cork University Press; 978-1-782052-00-5 hardback €39.

JUAN ANTONIO QUIRÓS CASTILLO (ed.). *Social complexity in early medieval rural communities: the north-western Iberia archaeological record*. 2016. Oxford: Archaeopress; 978-1-784915-08-7 paperback £32; 978-1-784915-09-4 e-book £19.



The early medieval period in Europe is commonly viewed as a time of emerging nations, as the institutions, lineages and territories that we recognise as integral to medieval and later states were established. The preoccupation with nation-

hood is the primary reason that earlier generations of early medieval scholars often limited the geographic focus of their studies, with their findings feeding back into broader narratives of national culture, identity and ethnicity. Such research traditions have taken some time to evolve, but thankfully the last decade or so has seen a marked increase in the publication of archaeologically orientated studies with a broader remit. The ability to compare and contrast the evidence from other regions has resulted in a much-improved research environment, transforming our understanding of the period. Two of the publications

reviewed here, *Fortified settlements in early medieval Europe* and *Making Christian landscapes in Atlantic Europe*, represent the latest additions to this positive trend, comprising edited volumes with impressive coverage across the Continent. While the third volume, *Social complexity in early medieval rural communities*, is concentrated solely on Iberia, it is an equally welcome addition, as its publication in English is likely to broaden readership and open up the archaeology of the area to new audiences. Each contribution explores distinct material, although the articulation of elite power, and the means by which archaeologists can detect that power, is the prominent theme throughout.

Featuring research from north-western Europe to the Adriatic, *Fortified settlements in early medieval Europe* represents the outcome of two conferences organised by the editors and held in the UK. The editors themselves have conducted detailed investigations of particular fortified sites that have produced notable outputs; Christie as part of a team studying the *burh* of Wallingford, Oxfordshire (Christie *et al.* 2013), and Herold through excavations at Gars-Thunau in Lower Austria (Herold 2011). The current work includes the key findings from these and other site-specific projects, although the emphasis of most papers is on the synthesis of a wide range of evidence at a landscape scale. The volume is quartered into regions covering north-western, Central, Western and Mediterranean and Adriatic Europe. The study of fortification across any part of the medieval period always risks overstressing the importance of military function, but thankfully this is largely avoided by most of the authors in this collection. The importance of the Viking incursions as a driver of fortification building certainly looms large, but we are often shown how the archaeological evidence paints a more complicated

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picture. In their study of the defensive works of Flanders and Zealand, for instance, Tys, Deckers and Wouters suggest that although fortifications have been traditionally explained as a consequence of the Viking threat, the recorded Viking attacks in the region are overwhelmingly limited to a narrow, decade-long window during the AD 880s. The use of dendrochronology has revealed that enclosures were constructed from as early as the first decades of the ninth century, long before the arrival of the Vikings. Although not discounting the influence of Danish incursions altogether, the authors see the constructions more as a product of general political instability that affected communities at a local and regional scale, and elicited a variety of responses.

Such commentaries should discourage archaeologists from using Viking activity as a knee-jerk explanation for the changes that they see in the material record, especially when developments can only be assigned broad chronologies, as is common. Indeed, a prominent trend noted by many papers in this volume is the distinct drop in the use of fortified sites in the Viking period, suggesting that martial considerations were not the priority in all parts of Europe. Expertly navigating the complex Welsh material, Andy Seaman reveals how many fortified sites were abandoned around AD 700, with elite centres seemingly moving from hilltops to places that were lower-lying and more accessible. Likewise, the flourish of enclosed and fortified sites in Scotland centres on the fifth and sixth centuries, which Gordon Noble convincingly associates with the development of new forms of political authority. Noble argues that the lack of defended places dating to the Viking period in Scotland may be an upshot of new modes of warfare and elite identity. Whether precipitated by the Scandinavian incomers or the result of other processes, it seems that the upper echelons of society no longer required the construction and use of enclosures as they had in the past.

Elsewhere, though, the ninth century marks a step-change in the development of fortifications. In Switzerland, as Adriano Boschetti shows, this was the period in which the essential physical grammar of the later aristocracy began to be inscribed on the landscape in the form of castles, urban defences and fortified towers. In the light of the evidence from other areas in Europe, the idea that these constructions were prompted primarily by armed

attacks on undefended places is questionable; instead, the provision of defence should be seen as one element of a broader trajectory, namely the changing means by which elite power was manifest in the landscape. It is significant, for example, that the magnificent Planta Tower built within the vallum of Münstair Abbey was in all probability commissioned by Bishop Hartbert of Chur, adding to a list of clerics who raised similar structures within their precincts throughout the tenth and eleventh centuries. One only need look at Bishop Æthelwold's turiform chapel at Thorney Abbey, or the tenth-century archiepiscopal castle of Xanten, to realise that this is not an isolated case. Such towers had functions as diverse as funerary structures, gateways and chapels; and in the case of the Planta Tower, the presence of two latrine chutes may hint at a residential use despite the lack of positively identified hearths. The occurrence of shared phenomena, however, should not lead us to gloss over the regular divergences in the evidence presented in *Fortified settlements in early medieval Europe*, and it is a testament to both the contributors and editors that such complexities have been so coherently and dexterously presented. Even with the variable character of the archaeological data, the expression of control and power is consistent throughout all four of the geographic units explored by the writers.

Adopting a broader chronological framework but a slightly more restricted geographic emphasis, *Making Christian landscapes* also places power structures at the very forefront of the analysis. The volume is a principal output of an eponymous project based at University College Cork that sought to push the idea of Christianisation beyond the celebrated missionaries recorded in written sources. Throughout the nineteen chapters of the volume, we see a system of belief capable of being moulded to local circumstances, and inscribed on landscapes in often distinctive ways. The volume offers a valuable corrective to the idea that the new ideology resulted in wholesale changes in practice, and instead a more nuanced picture of amalgamating modes of expression is discernible as old and new concepts converged. That such materialisation emerged alongside new social, economic and political strategies adds a great deal of complexity to study, but this is met throughout by detailed and sophisticated consideration from the authors.

Following a concise introduction from the editors Tomás Ó Carragáin and Sam Turner, leading figures

in the study of conversion landscapes in Ireland and England respectively, the volume is divided into five case-study regions—Ireland, Wales and Scotland, England, Gaul and Iberia, and Germanic and Nordic Lands. The contribution of commercial archaeology to our increased understanding of Christianisation is especially to the fore in Ireland, where the papers are able to draw upon the outputs of unprecedented levels of development-led intervention in the 2000s. Previous thinking saw Christianity as a marginal religion in Ireland during its early phases, but in these contributions we see churches as crucial components of long-lived elite landscapes. In their comprehensive study of Leinster, for instance, Ó Carragáin and Patrick Gleeson reveal the clear efforts to involve ecclesiastics in assembly practices from an early period, encouraging debate regarding new religious beliefs and ordinances at important gathering places. Contrasting with the situation in Ireland, where research benefits from relatively good documentary survival, investigation in Wales and Scotland is far more heavily dependent on the archaeological evidence to construct a chronology for the Christianisation process. Nancy Edwards notes, however, how few modern excavations have been carried out on church sites in Wales, although the situation is healthier in Scotland where new sites boasting evidence for both burial and settlement have been dated via radiocarbon. Adrián Maldonado skilfully draws this material together, arguing that there is no single ‘monastic model’ in Scotland, and that places that were eventually furnished with churches had conflicting earlier histories.

The contributions on early medieval England are all concentrated on the north of the country, with two focusing on Northumbria and one on the Peak District. Turner and Chris Fowler suggest that change can be effectively measured by studying the key ‘technologies’ of conversion, including the evolving forms of building and land holding, writing and burial. The desire to track lived experience is the central thrust here, and it is convincingly asserted that these ‘technologies’ were important factors in shaping that personal experience. John Moreland is influenced by Maurice Godelier’s anthropology in his breakdown of the evidence from the Peak District, where the Church seems to have been concerned with the procurement of the valuable lead resources of the region. Elisabeth Lorans bridges the Channel in her study of the wide range of burial environments open to the urban populations of early medieval

England and France. Two papers on the territories of churches in France, specifically parish boundaries, are followed by José Pardo’s exploration of Galicia in north-west Spain, from which the volume progresses steadily northward in focus to Norway and Iceland. Although the material emphasis of study varies widely, *Making Christian landscapes* is thoroughly consumable throughout, with a number of stand-out contributions that as a whole significantly enhance our comprehension of belief in the early medieval Atlantic world. While the influence of elite authority is conspicuous, this did not result in the deployment of the same strategies by the social groups responsible; across the study area we see myriad approaches to church building, burial, landscape organisation and portable artefacts, all of which still hold vast potential for future research. In a similar vein to *Fortified settlements*, there is little doubt that *Making Christian landscapes* will rapidly become a key text for academics. Furthermore, priced at only €39, the exceptional good value will hopefully see this enjoyed by a broader audience.

The intriguing nature of elite power is also pursued in *Social complexity in early medieval rural communities*, even though here there is greater effort invested in unpicking social inequalities within peasant communities too. The nine papers are pitched at a range of material scales, from ceramics, faunal remains and iron tools, to patterns of settlement and agriculture, although all of the evidence is derived from research in north-western Iberia. Perhaps most striking about the evidence presented is the relative invisibility of the archaeological material; whereas the conspicuous remains of fortified sites, churches and monasteries make obvious targets for enquiry, the more ephemeral remains of early medieval rural settlements have only recently begun to attract the attention of academics. This nascent status limits the ability to construct precise chronological frameworks, although the contributors to the work make every effort to summarise the available evidence from their chosen area of expertise. Through these exertions we start to see the stratification of peasant societies manifested in different ways in each territory. Surprisingly, it seems that both elites and peasants practised forms of social exclusion in a manner of multifaceted and unexpected environments. As elsewhere in Europe, in Iberia we are compelled to overturn the premise that egalitarian and unstratified communities persisted until the tenth and eleventh centuries, and instead show the potential

of concerted and insightful scholarship into the often mundane products of everyday life. The entire piece is superbly introduced by Juan Antonio Quirós Castillo, and is supported by excellent tables, graphs and limited colour illustrations characteristic of Archaeopress' recent publications.

The three volumes under review here together mark an important stage in the archaeology of early medieval Europe. The synthesis of material from diverse areas and, in the case of the Iberian material, the publication of complex data in English will make it increasingly difficult for scholars to work within the confines of the nationally orientated agendas that have been adhered to for too long. This is not to undermine the value of meticulous study, and the fact that the books represent such rich mines of information is of course a product of commissioning regional experts. It is the drive to provide an accessible and level platform for dialogue

that is of the utmost value however, which in this case allows us to view the evolving mechanics of elite power with refreshing clarity. If this model can be replicated by early medieval archaeologists working in other specialisms, the discipline surely has an exciting road ahead.

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