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Book Reviews



CUSTODIANS OF CONTINUITY? THE PREMONSTRATENSIAN ABBEY AT BARLINGS AND THE LANDSCAPE OF RITUAL. By Paul Everson and David Stocker. Pp. xxii and 472, Illus 317. Lincolnshire Archaeology and Heritage Reports (Series number, **11**), 2011. Price: £25.00. ISBN 978 094863 961 6.

In this detailed monograph we see over thirty years of research and study by Paul Everson and David Stocker brought to fruition. Barlings Abbey in Lincolnshire was a Premonstratensian house founded in 1154 on the island of Oxney in the Witham Valley. The Barlings project began in June 1980, when Everson surveyed the well-preserved earthworks for the English Royal Commission on Historical Monuments. Subsequent collaboration with Stocker saw the expansion of fieldwork to include the buildings of Barlings Grange and Grange de Lings, as well as nearly the entire landscape owned and managed by the abbey.

The result is a dense book which is far more than a conventional monastic archaeology report. It attempts to explore what it meant to have a monastery in the medieval landscape, the extent to which a religious house imbued its surroundings with a sense of being 'religious', and what led to a monastery, such as Barlings, to be founded where it was. The book is conceived primarily as a landscape study and this emphasis is the principal reason the abbey features only fleetingly in the first chapter, which instead frames the theoretical approach the authors have taken. Here, they reflect on the influence other writers have had on them, notably Roberta Gilchrist and Matthew Johnson, in exploring post-processual dimensions to monasteries, their landscapes, and place.

It is only in section two, 'Components of the Landscape', that we begin to see the authors' detailed investigation of the sites at Barlings and beyond. In Chapters 3 and 4 we finally begin to read more about the abbey itself. Perhaps of most significance to the book is the description of Barlings' setting, in an embayment of the River Witham. This enables the reader at last to picture the landscape setting of the monastery and its location on Oxney Island: unlike Chapter 2, where an unlabelled LiDAR image (figure 2.2) has nothing clear to orientate the reader. The setting is, the authors argue, 'a dramatic statement of ownership of an important, yet contested, location' by the founding family (p. 46). As the subsequent chapter on patronage makes clear, this act of foundation was equally a dynastic statement by the founding de Haya family in support of Henry II, and marked a waning of the political influence within Lincolnshire of the de Gant family.

More conventional, processual, appraisals of the monastery follow, including architectural reconstructions of the church utilizing antiquarian engravings, loose stonework, and the earthworks survey. They throw up some interesting aspects, such as a

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suggested decagonal chapter house built c. 1330–50 to replace the original of the 1170s–1180s. With no finds from the site other than architectural fragments, a discussion of a mid-fourteenth-century antiphoner remnant is fitted into an appendix. The story of the dissolution of Barlings is followed in some detail. It explores the conversion of the abbey buildings into a country mansion and gardens under Henry VIII's brother-in-law, Charles Brandon, as well as the unusual circumstances of the abbey's closure due to its 'traitorous' association with the Lincolnshire Rising of 1536. Its dissolution and secular conversion was, the authors suggest, a result of Brandon making an example of Barlings, to demonstrate both his power and role as the king's representative in Lincolnshire.

Chapters 5–8 take the focus of the abbey outward to the parish of Barlings itself, and its estates. These are arranged by their landscape positioning, that is of the 'breadbasket' lower limestone dip-slope to the west, the sheep-walk heathland high limestone belt north of Lincoln, and the eastern clay vale with its woodland and lowland grazing. Throughout, there is ample evidence of the authors' tenacity in pursuing traces of Barlings' possessions into the houses of unsuspecting locals. For instance, Reasby Hall, an eighteenth-century mansion farmhouse, is revealed as the abbey's probable late medieval grange, rather than the previously supposed Reasby Grange in the west of the parish.

The third section, 'Canons in the Landscape', begins with a summary of the economic role of Barlings' portfolio of estates, followed by chapters analyzing the ecclesiastical provision and the patronage that the abbey both gave out and received. Here, we return to the role of the abbey within the landscape and what amounts to the volume's central thesis, that to understand Barlings' *raison d'être*, we need to understand its historical context. The argument is thus presented that Barlings' landholdings relate to archaic Anglo-Saxon and possibly even Romano-British estates, and their association with not only a numinous landscape within the Witham valley, but to Lincoln as well. At times the argument may appear a little speculative, but the overall picture presented remains convincing and reminds us that post-Conquest monastic foundations are usually not a starting-point but a comma in a broader passage of religious experience.

There are a few gripes, for instance several slips which better copy-editing would have eliminated. More annoying is the digital reproduction of a number of illustrations which are slightly blurry (e.g. figures 3.9 and 10.1), or photographs which are either a little too dark (e.g. figures 3.19 and 4.5) or would alternatively have benefitted from colour reproduction (e.g. figure 3.23). Nevertheless, given the scale of the work, this is to be picky. *Custodians of Continuity* is a monumental work, providing all the normal attributes of monastic site publication, while comprising so much more than a standard archaeological survey. The result is a theoretically grounded model of what future monastic studies could, and probably should, look like.

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