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Book Reviews



MEDIEVAL LIFE: ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE LIFE COURSE. By Roberta Gilchrist. Pp. xvi and 336, Illus 98. The Boydell Press, 2012. Price: £30.00. ISBN 978 184383 722 0.

In her previous works, Roberta Gilchrist considered the archaeology of medieval monasticism, as well as themes such as gender relationships within aristocratic households, and burial rites. This book marks a conscious move away from elite communities as assemblages from manorial sites; castles, places and monasteries are excluded in order to concentrate on the lives of ‘the ordinary folk in medieval England’ (p. xii). Gilchrist’s aim here is to take an interdisciplinary approach to the medieval life course, drawing on archaeological, literary and historical material, to illustrate the span of human existence and experience from before birth to after death. The distinction between life course and life cycle is important here, as the former allows for a more dynamic understanding of what life meant in the middle ages.

The book begins by setting out the theoretical framework for the study, which draws from a diverse range of disciplines, including anthropology and sociology, as well as current trends in archaeology, such as object biography. Gilchrist then moves into five thematic studies. The first of these, ‘Experiencing Age: the Medieval Body’, focuses on osteological evidence. Chapters 3–5 consider clothing, the household, and the church and cemetery, and these analyses are more diverse in their evidence base. The final chapter ties together these different strands in a study of the relationships between the biographies of people and objects. In the chapters, Gilchrist draws her archaeological evidence mainly from a selection of urban sites (from London, Norwich, Winchester and York), with rural life represented by Meols, Wharram Percy, Westbury and Tattenhoe. She also considers the *Mary Rose* excavations. Her use of written sources is limited in the main to the coroners’ rolls as studied by Barbara Hanawalt (*The Ties that Bound: Peasant Families in Medieval England*, 1986) alongside the works of Chaucer and Langland, though other texts, notably a fifteenth-century vocabulary (edited by T. Wright, *A Volume of Vocabularies Dating from the Tenth to the Fifteenth Centuries*, privately printed), are brought in where appropriate.

The strength of Gilchrist’s work lies in the amount of material she has surveyed and collated across the period *c.* AD 1050–1550. As such, the book is a very welcome addition to research on the life course that currently exists for the early medieval period (for example, that of Sally Crawford). The thematic studies also work very well in highlighting the range of lived experience, lending coherence to what might otherwise become a rather disparate list of evidence. Gilchrist also makes comparisons with continental material: for example, the children’s toys from Novgorod (p. 149); the

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preservation of clothing in Scandinavian bog burials (p. 70); and pilgrimage badges from shrines of the Virgin in France (p. 159). She has also been well-served by Boydell through the generous provision of a large number of figures and colour plates. Much of the primary data is also included in the appendices, allowing specialists to follow up her conclusions. In all these respects, the book is a tremendously useful one, and it will be invaluable in teaching and research.

There are, however, some weaknesses. The wide range of material means that many examples are not analyzed in sufficient detail; for example, the discussion of the burial of a disabled priest (p. 65). I understand the reasoning behind Gilchrist's exclusion of monastic evidence, but consideration of age, attitudes to the body and infirmity, as demonstrated by practices within the monastic infirmary, would have much to add to the discussion here. In addition, historians reading the volume will be left wondering why she did not make more extensive use of the evidence provided by miracle stories, which would have provided comparable, if not equivalent, documentary evidence to the coroners' rolls for the first half of her chronology. These caveats aside, *Medieval Life* is, nonetheless, a significant book that has potential to open new areas of study and to bring innovative approaches to a wide audience of medievalists from different disciplines.

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