



The Archaeological Journal

Book Reviews



THE ANGLO-SAXON WORLD. By Nicholas J. Higham and Martin J. Ryan. Pp. xv and 477, Illus 292. Yale University Press, 2013. Price: £30.00. ISBN 978 030012 534 4.

The authors promise a new multidisciplinary approach to Anglo-Saxon England, drawing on the full range of textual, archaeological and scientific approaches that can now be brought to bear on the subject. The eight chapters start by considering the development and continuing relevance of Anglo-Saxon studies and then spin a narrative history of the first millennium AD, from the coming of Rome to the aftermath of the Norman Conquest. Two illustrated essays highlighting specific sources and issues conclude each chapter: these include summaries of key archaeological sites and finds (e.g. Spong Hill; the Staffordshire Hoard), broader issues and debates (e.g. the re-birth of towns; villages and open fields) and key textual and artefactual sources (e.g. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle; The Bayeux Tapestry). Each chapter and essay is supported by a select bibliography as a signpost to further reading.

The result is an expert and accomplished synthesis of recent thinking and current research debates which handles the range of sources confidently and constitutes a very useful general introduction to the material evidence and its contexts. Among the particular strengths are the perspectives offered on post-Roman Britain in the fifth century (pp. 41–56), discussion of the Continental contexts of the Augustinian mission (pp. 153–57), and a measured assessment of the true nature and consequences of the Norman invasion (pp. 404–26). What weaknesses there are mostly stem from the decision to present a chronological narrative rather than a more thematic approach, which sometimes fractures the flow of argument and requires recapitulation. In particular, debates over the scale and impacts of population movement in both the fifth and ninth to tenth centuries raise many of the same issues of approach and analysis (Chapters 2 and 6), not least the use (or misuse) of biomolecular techniques, and might have been better treated together as part of a broader discussion of mobility and cultural contact during the first millennium AD.

Perhaps surprisingly, given the introductory recognition of just how problematic the term ‘Anglo-Saxon’ is when applied before the ninth century, discussion of cultural change during the fifth to seventh centuries is constrained by this usage; less loaded terminology might have allowed a more nuanced archaeological model. This feeds subsequent analysis when, in discussion of the evidence for later Scandinavian settlement, early Anglo-Saxon settlement archaeology is adduced as evidence for Germanic migration, fusing the cultural and chronological in a proposition that few would now accept without very substantial qualification (p. 291). A less traditional approach to material culture might also have put greater emphasis on emerging evidence for the construction and signalling of Anglo-Scandinavian identities beyond the elite. It is always possible,

The final version of this review will appear in *The Archaeological Journal* 171 for 2014.

however, to take issue with aspects of emphasis and detailed interpretation in someone else's synthesis; none of this detracts seriously from the quality and coherence of the narrative.

This is a handsome volume, well-designed on good paper, generously illustrated in colour, and competitively-priced for a good-quality hardback. The publisher is clearly aiming beyond the specialist academic market, and this admirably scholarly and accessible narrative will deservedly be widely bought, read and used.

CHRISTOPHER SCULL