



# *The Archaeological Journal*

## **Book Reviews**



**EARLY EUROPEAN CASTLES: ARISTOCRACY AND AUTHORITY, AD 800-1200.** By Oliver Creighton. Pp. 168, Illus 36. Bristol Classical Press, 2012. Price: 14.99. ISBN 978 1 78093 031 2.

The castle is widely regarded as one of the defining icons of medieval European society, but as the scope and scale of the debates surveyed in this deceptively slender volume reveal, it is also one of the most misunderstood or misrepresented. Of necessity broad in approach, Oliver Creighton's text provides us with an accessible, lucid and compelling narrative that introduces the main themes and methods that have emerged in castle studies over the last century, and provides us with a series of illustrative examples to support each area of discussion, without becoming submerged in complex detail. In 151 pages of closely argued text, he is not seeking to unravel all past errors and present a new paradigm for castle studies. It is his aim, rather, to outline the evolution of castle studies as a distinct research field, identify distinct (often nationally so) methodological trends, and to highlight the potential in transnational and interdisciplinary research programmes. It is this last developmental trend which he argues has the greatest potential to revolutionize European castellology, not simply for the analysis of castles as discrete artefacts, but also for the reconfiguration of our understanding of the wider medieval socio-economic and cultural frameworks into which they were integrated.

As with all icons, castles have been burdened with different meanings, functions and interpretations by owners and observers over the centuries, and this shifting emphasis has continued down to present. Creighton tackles these past burdens by first stepping away from the nineteenth- and twentieth-century archaeological obsession with 'origins', as well as the architectural history focus on linear developmental process in military engineering terms (Chapter 3). Having deconstructed those shibboleths, he then discusses how recent methodological trends have stripped away the teleology of later medieval values and visions superimposed upon the 'castle idea'. He also examines how the distancing of modern archaeological analysis from the outmoded historical association of castles with the emergence of a 'feudal society' have permitted identification of different socio-economic contexts for the development of the castle as a symptom of a new form of lordship in the tenth and eleventh centuries. It is important, however, not to replace the notion of feudalism as the spawner of castles with a new unitary paradigm; there was no one social, economic or cultural prescription for the apparatus of lordship, of which the castle was just one manifestation.

Linked closely to this rejection of a single evolutionary track, it is refreshing to see discussion in Creighton's thematic exploration which explicitly rejects the notion of an Anglo-French 'norm' in castle development. The discarding of the 1960s and 1970s

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models, which presented the central Loire region of France as the point of origin of a castles-based aristocratic culture, removed the central pillar of a thesis which viewed the spread of castle-building as a symptom of the wider spread of northern Frankish culture within the European mainland and beyond (Chapter 3, pp. 36–42). The cogent questions levelled against that long-held notion have profound implications for the idea of ‘Europeanization’, as articulated by some historians, and have energized academic exploration of cultural responses to common or similar socio-economic or political factors in different parts of Europe. Instead of the rather neo-colonialist view of Celtic, Scandinavian or Slavic exceptionalism — and often by implication, inferiority — to the fictive norm of Anglo-French experience, with which the largely Anglophone literature is redolent, Creighton’s discussion of evidence drawn from Ireland to Poland, and Italy or Spain to Scotland, reveals a spectrum of diversity of tradition alongside pan-European commonalities (Chapter 5); that diversity is evident also within the once-supposed Anglo-French core territory of castle origin and development.

This is not, however, simply a work of deconstruction: Creighton’s exploration of the debates also reveals several areas where there is the greatest lack of current research but a high potential for significant advances in understanding, if investment is made. His plea for more excavation is one that will win broad agreement from castellologists, but in the current financial climate, and with regulatory regimes in place which very effectively obstruct research excavation and constrain even ‘rescue’ work, the large-scale collaborative and comparative projects which he advocates are unlikely to find favour with funders and regulators. In the short term, more value might be gained from projects which subject existing data to fresh scrutiny, asking new questions of artefact assemblages gathering dust in museum stores across Europe, or which reassess those assemblages in the light of more recently-acquired data sets. As Creighton demonstrates, there is no shortage of new questions that can be asked of this seemingly all-too-familiar cultural icon, or of new inter- or trans-disciplinary methodologies for tackling them; the real issue is how the next generation of archaeologists and historians will respond to the challenge of delivering the called-for research in an age of fiscal austerity.

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