



# The Archaeological Journal

## Book Reviews



**THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF ANGLO-SAXON ARCHAEOLOGY.** Edited by Helena Hamerow, David A. Hinton and Sally Crawford. Pp. xxv and 1078, Illus 145. Oxford University Press, 2011. Price: £95.00. ISBN 978 0 199212 14 9.

This substantial compendium presents fifty-one single-authored contributions and one joint-authored entry concerning the archaeology and scholarship of early medieval England. Contemporary Irish, Welsh, Scottish and Scandinavian contexts are excluded and, as such, it is rightly entitled an ‘Anglo-Saxon’ handbook. Nevertheless, several entries incorporate exemplar from further afield, geographically contextualising Anglo-Saxon archaeology on a case-by-case basis.

Previous key multi-authored Anglo-Saxon volumes include *Dark Age Britain* (ed. D. B. Harden, 1956), *The Anglo-Saxons from the Migration Period to the Eighth Century: An Ethnographic Perspective* (ed. J. Hines, 1997) and *The Archaeology of Anglo-Saxon England: Basic Readings* (ed. C. E. Karkov, 1999). However, Hamerow, Hinton and Crawford take D. M. Wilson’s edited volume *The Anglo-Saxons* (1976) as their starting point (p. xxii). The sheer size and scope of the handbook testifies to the increasingly diverse and multi-scalar scholarship of Anglo-Saxon England over the past thirty or so years. The editors requested discussion as well as syntheses of current knowledge which, understandably, appears to fluctuate depending on the author.

Overviews preface each of the ten thematic sections: ‘Identity: Ethnicity, Culture and Genes’ (1); ‘Rural Settlement’ (2); ‘Mortuary Ritual’ (3); ‘Food Production’ (4); ‘Craft Production and Technology’ (5); ‘Trade, Exchange and Urbanization’ (6); ‘The Body and the Lifecourse’ (7); ‘Religion’ (8); ‘Signals of Power’ (9); and ‘The Place of Archaeology in Anglo-Saxon Studies’ (10). Traditional debates concerning migrations, ethnicity, place-name evidence and the role of historical sources in early medieval archaeology stand alongside more contemporary research trajectories such as gender, the lifecourse, diet, disease and arenas of power. It is certainly refreshing to see a section dedicated to religion; a theme more often out of fashion than in. Understandably, in such a rich compendium there is bound to be some overlap between topics. The thematic sections on ‘Mortuary Ritual’, ‘The Body and the Lifecourse’ and ‘Identity’, much of which derives from burial evidence, may have been better placed consecutively.

However, there are some noticeable absences from this vast compendium in terms of both contributors and topics. Heinrich Härke, a key figure in early Anglo-Saxon archaeology, is missing. A dedicated entry concerning the history of Anglo-Saxon archaeological scholarship is noticeably absent, despite garnering a brief mention in the preface (p. xxii). Most surprisingly, early medieval sculpture fails to make an appearance, despite recent

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and ongoing publications since 1977 of the seminal *Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture*.

Focussed discussions on contemporary issues in Anglo-Saxon archaeology bring the volume up to date. Chris Gosden encourages early medievalists to employ anthropological approaches (pp. 1003–1024). It is difficult to know whether to feel mildly patronized by this or whether Anglo-Saxon archaeology really is, or is at least perceived to be, so theoretically bereft that it needed a chapter signposted as ‘theory’. John Blair’s lucid, nuanced and truly interdisciplinary preface to ‘Religion’, also harnessing anthropological exemplar, would argue against the latter, as other chapters in this section also illustrate. Sonia Marzinzik’s appraisal of Anglo-Saxon archaeology’s low impact on British society highlights a disturbing trend over the past few decades. Through the diverse, accessible, well-structured and informative overviews presented in this volume, however, such trends may yet be curtailed.

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