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Book Reviews



SOUTH WALES FROM THE ROMANS TO THE NORMANS: CHRISTIANITY, LITERACY AND LORDSHIP. By Jeremy Knight. Pp. 191, Illus 95. Amberley Publishing, 2013. Price: £19.99. ISBN 978 144560 447 3.

This volume is a very scholarly synthesis of much of what Jeremy Knight has been studying for many years now: South Wales from the late Antique to the Norman period. South Wales in this context is ostensibly Gwent, Glamorgan, Gower and south Pembrokeshire, although this is not really defined anywhere in the book. Indeed, if I have any criticism, it is that the volume reads as a collection of essays on subjects relating to this historical region, bound together by a steady diachronic from A to B, rather than by a single coherent theme or argument. As such, it is largely empirical, secondary and descriptive, with connections in subject matter not always clear. On the other hand, it is thorough and masterly in its presentation of relevant research, and anyone wanting to know where the subject is today will be well-advised to acquire and read this work.

The thrust of the book concerns the church and the secular powers which supported it. The subtitle also suggests it is about ‘literacy’; a subject which has produced some very interesting ideas in recent years. However, the latter is not discussed. Instead, the focus is on documents, rather than literacy, and one chapter on the ‘Lives of the Saints’ is entirely devoted to this, but in a descriptive, rather than analytical, way. For the rest, the book has chapters on the late Antique and early transitions which focus on Caerleon and Caerwent, on the emergence of secular and ecclesiastical authority in the fifth to seventh centuries AD, on the church from AD 700 onwards (including a very useful study of Llancarfan; pp. 84–92) and ends with the impact of the Normans and the reorganization of ecclesiastical territories into the familiar parishes of the high medieval world. As I read it, much was familiar, but there was much I did not know and was very grateful for the opportunity to be brought up-to-date on new discoveries and areas of debate, including important and relevant material from Ireland and western Europe. I was, however, surprised, from even my limited knowledge of the discourse, to find little made of the new corpus of pre-Norman stones, with Redknap and Lewis (*A Corpus of Early Medieval Inscribed Stones and Stone Sculptures in Wales: Volume 1 South-East Wales and the English Border*, 2007) not even appearing in the bibliography.

What is also missing is a sense of the land and its landscape. A lot depends on the wealth of documentary and lapidary evidence for the pre-Norman church and on a few important archaeological sites, some, like Llantwit Major, old in the canon and some, like Llandough, much more recent. This is necessarily partial and we have only fleeting glimpses of how and where the majority of people lived at this time. In one sense, the empirical evidence is not there, but there are now some robust models and processes of

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regressive analysis which allow us to reconstruct landscapes and topographies to provide whole landscape contexts for historic communities. From time to time in this book, there are hints of this sort of approach, as in the portrayal of Margam and Llancarfan *parochiae* (figs 42 and 37). These are really there, however, as a backdrop to church matters. Although they are gems of real landscape, they are isolated without the broader setting of an historical topography for the whole region which is not there for the reader who is unfamiliar with this area: it is as if Jeremy Knight is talking largely to those who know the region very well already.

In all then, this volume is a very welcome addition to the body of material on this subject, but it only offers an overview and descriptive account of what is known, rather than offering any new analytical insights. To be fair, however, this was probably the intention of this volume and Jeremy Knight has certainly produced many such insights in his great number of articles on specific subjects published during his long, distinguished career.

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