



# The Archaeological Journal

## Book Reviews



**CHAMPION: THE MAKING AND UNMAKING OF THE ENGLISH MIDLAND LANDSCAPE.** By Tom Williamson, Robert Liddiard and Tracey Partida. Pp. xii and 252, Illus 79. Liverpool University Press, 2013. Price: £70.00. ISBN 978 085989 868 3.

Tom Williamson, Robert Liddiard and Tracey Partida report on an AHRC-funded investigation of the origins of medieval nucleated settlement and open-field systems, and the latter's post-medieval disappearance. Their case study, focused on Northamptonshire, uses GIS for the systematic mapping of medieval arable in the county against physical geography and historical evidence. Northamptonshire was an inspired choice: as the authors acknowledge, its unusually well-preserved medieval landscape has been more intensively studied than any other in England, and by such leading authorities as David Hall, Glenn Foard and Christopher Taylor.

The book begins with an introduction outlining the project's aims, methodology and historiographical background. Chapter 2 reports on environmental, archaeological, and historical pre-conditions that may have influenced the development of the medieval landscape. The influences of geology and agricultural regime on the origins and development of nucleated and dispersed medieval settlement (Chapter 3), and on open-field systems, both regular and irregular (Chapter 4), are respectively examined. The fifth chapter explores changes to both settlement and field systems between *c.* AD 1500–1850, and is perhaps the least successful in the volume: complex historical evidence and a wide range of scholarship make greater demands on analysis and argument than can be met here, especially given the volume's primarily medieval focus. The sixth chapter discusses the complexity and origins of regional variation in the landscape, and the seventh the usefulness of historic landscape characterization (HLC) in the context of debates about the relative roles in landscape development of agency and geographic determinism. They largely re-state Williamson's arguments for physical geography, topography and climate as the major influences on the organization of the medieval landscape (*Shaping Medieval Landscapes: Settlement, Society, Environment*, 2004).

New analyses and fresh interpretations of archaeological evidence make the second, third and fourth chapters essential reading for landscape historians. Although Northamptonshire is generally regarded as 'champion' country, its landscape is (broadly speaking) divided between the highly nucleated and intensively cultivated south and south-east, and a more wooded, pastoral north and west where less regular settlement patterns are found. The book shows that prehistoric and Romano-British landscape features were most likely to be reused in medieval landscapes on the most fertile soils in the south and east. The highest densities of dispersed early and middle Anglo-Saxon settlements were also found in these landscapes, whose frequent polyfocality might

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reflect mixed tenurial structures (p. 99). In the more sparsely populated upland landscapes of the north and west, irregular medieval settlements tended to expand from a single focus over open ground, often at a distance from older sites.

Across the county, settlement morphology reveals the existence of numerous Anglo-Saxon greens and commons that formed a focus for unplanned settlement; many of these greens survived in whole or in part into and, sometimes, beyond the medieval period. In the arable south and east, several polyfocal settlements gradually agglomerated into nucleations; they frequently gained a spurious regularity by retaining as toft boundaries those of the underlying open-field strips over which they expanded, or a confusing irregularity as they encroached on, and sometimes obliterated, areas of open pasture. Confirming a growing volume of research by leading scholars from the early 1980s onwards, the volume argues that the process of nucleation began in the late Saxon period and continued into the twelfth century, with little evidence of formal planning. Nucleation was not, the authors conclude, the result of lordly direction, but of an end in the eleventh and twelfth centuries to periodic settlement shift in both arable and pastoral landscapes (pp. 96–100).

The evidence from Northamptonshire similarly corroborates a now substantial body of highly regarded research suggesting that regular two- and three-open-field systems did not emerge before the eleventh century AD. Large-scale planning suggested by regular open-field patterns may, Williamson and his co-authors suggest, be just an illusion, their apparently formal layout reflecting instead the gentle character of the underlying topography (p. 120–23). Instead, their origins may have lain in gradual expansion over uncultivated areas from arable cores and their layout episodically reorganized.

Such arguments concerning the origins of the high medieval landscape add to an impressive swell of scholarship which concludes that nucleated settlement and Midland open-field systems were almost certainly gradual developments of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, evolving over a number of centuries from less regular antecedents. This is a contentious topic and the book contributes significant data to the most important contemporary controversies in medieval landscape history.

SUSAN OOSTHUIZEN