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Book Reviews



WHARRAM: A STUDY OF SETTLEMENT ON THE YORKSHIRE WOLDS XIII — A HISTORY OF WHARRAM PERCY AND ITS NEIGHBOURS. Edited by S. Wrathmell. Pp. xiv and 403, Illus 155. York University, 2012. Price: £33.50. ISBN 978 0 946722 22 8.

Wharram Percy is without doubt the best known deserted medieval settlement in Britain, and boasts a remarkable tradition of scholarly interest and investigation. This impressively-produced publication represents the thirteenth and final volume in the series, and it traces the history of the famous village and its neighbouring communities from prehistoric times down to the sixteenth century.

The volume is divided into five parts, beginning with a summary of the excavation programme. Despite the extent of work undertaken at the site, only a limited quantity of excavation data is reproduced in the volume. This comprises a combination of material that has not previously been published, as well as artefacts or structural remains that were deemed worthy of elaboration. Site-by-site summaries are provided, however, and the supply of references means that more detailed analysis may be pursued if one wishes. Chapter 1 emphasizes just how significant Wharram has been in pioneering methods that many archaeologists now take for granted, and the insights gained by the development of more recent methodologies are outlined. In particular, geophysical survey undertaken following the final season of excavation has resulted in the detailed mapping of Iron Age and Romano-British settlement at the northern end of the site.

The second chapter assesses the evidence for settlement and land use in the prehistoric and Romano-British periods. An overview of earlier prehistoric territorial arrangements is followed by an assessment of the Late Iron Age and Romano-British ‘ladder settlements’, with the evidence from Wharram itself suggesting that these arrangements represent a radically new way of living, perhaps placing greater focus on the private space of the household. Rather than illustrating a linear evolution of increasingly sedentary societies exploiting the landscape through steadily sophisticated means, the discussion shows that the Late Iron Age and Romano-British Wolds were characterized by a good deal of local diversity in habitation and land use.

The evidence for sixth- and seventh-century settlement at Wharram is contrastingly slight, but Wrathmell’s hypothesis that this area of the Wolds was converted to open grazing is reflective of scholarly understanding more generally (Chapter 2). It is increasingly clear that the removal of Roman infrastructure had a disproportionate impact on the archaeological record; as opposed to seismic social and economic breakdown, archaeologists are now more conscious of how changing agricultural regimes and

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cessation of elite material culture may have unevenly influenced our understanding. Wrathmell's chosen interpretation accords with this view, and whilst conceding to a major discontinuity of permanent occupation of the Wolds during the early post-Roman period, he suggests that it is possible that the area was reverted to pastoralism by lowland communities.

The third chapter demonstrates that a more prolific archaeological sequence does not necessarily lead to straightforward interpretation. The Middle Saxon phases, dated to between the seventh and ninth centuries, attract by far the most significant disagreement between authors in the volume. The main area of debate centres on the degree of permanence that the Middle Saxon evidence allows, with Everson and Stocker's idea of seasonal management and occupation contrasting with Wrathmell's model of greater settlement stability. In contrast, the Late Saxon phases at Wharram can be viewed in far greater clarity, and the chapter concludes with a study of lordship and ecclesiastical provision during the period, followed by analysis of artefactual and structural remains of the tenth and eleventh centuries.

The fourth and final chapter of the volume centres on Wharram's post-Conquest history and archaeology via a number of thematic discussions. Following a history of medieval tenancies, including that of the two Percy families from which the suffix of the village is derived, is a new structural analysis of St Martin's church. Development of the nucleated village structure is also pursued in more detail. The contribution of historical sources increases significantly here, with the study of tenant farmers proving especially enlightening.

Superbly written throughout, the volume pulls together a vast array of research in order to form an excellent multi-period narrative of Wharram Percy's development. The inclusion of numerous high-quality colour images adds to the pleasing ascetic of the book, and the maps help to orientate the local geography for the reader. It will unquestionably prove a central work for settlement and landscape archaeologists for some time to come, helping bring to life the human story of a truly remarkable site and its surroundings.

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