

BEYOND THE MEDIEVAL VILLAGE

Stephen Rippon (2008)

Oxford, Oxford University Press. xii + 323pp, 19 b/w pl., 67 figs, 2 tables. ISBN 978-0-19-920382-6. HB. £63.

This new book from the Oxford University Press's Medieval History and Archaeology series presents an exploration of the origins of regional variations in landscape character. For those readers not already familiar with the author's work, Stephen Rippon is Professor of Landscape Archaeology at the University of Exeter and has published extensively on the wetland landscapes of the Severn Estuary (e.g. Rippon 1997) and, more recently, on interdisciplinary approaches to landscape analysis (e.g. Rippon 2004). Here, Rippon builds on his previous work and examines, compares and contrasts the development of the early medieval landscape in East Anglia, the South-West and South Wales. Ultimately, he argues that the key to understanding the landscape character of these regions lies in the developments which took place during the so-called 'long eighth century' – i.e. the late seventh to early ninth centuries – more commonly known to this journal's readers as the Middle Saxon period.

The introduction summarises the ongoing debates surrounding the origins of villages and open fields, and the causes of the immense variation evident between different regions. In particular, Rippon focuses on the dichotomy between the 'central province' of lowland England – characterised by nucleated villages and large open fields – and those regions characterised by dispersed settlements, smaller open fields and enclosures which lie to its south-east and south-west. The rest of the book is dedicated to a series of case studies drawn from these peripheral regions, including East Anglia, in which Rippon systematically attempts to identify why their distinctive landscape characters developed during the later first millennium AD.

The first case study comprises a detailed analysis of the landscape of Somerset. This includes much material of interest to the East Anglian reader, particularly the detailed account of the management of the estates of Glastonbury Abbey, a subject which could fruitfully be explored with regard to some of our region's monastic houses. The second case study concerns Devon and Cornwall, where some areas of the late prehistoric landscape remained in use throughout the medieval period, while most saw a wide-scale transformation of the rural landscape during the seventh to eighth centuries. A third case study examines the landscape of South Wales, where dispersed settlement and small fields were reorganized following the Norman Conquest, including

the introduction of very 'English' nucleated, occasionally planned, villages and common fields. There are surprising parallels between all of these case studies and the development of elements of the East Anglian landscape, for example, wetland reclamation in Somerset has parallels with the fens, and Norman planned towns, such as New Buckenham, are also a feature of the East Anglian landscape. Indeed, one of the great benefits of this book is that Rippon makes it very easy to compare geographically very separate regions which otherwise might not have been considered together.

The chapter of most direct relevance to the readership of *Norfolk Archaeology* is Chapter 5, examining as it does the evolution of the landscape in 'greater East Anglia'. No new East Anglian material is presented in this chapter, and many names and places will be familiar, yet Rippon provides an insightful synthesis of the published data. Significantly, he also incorporates into the discussion less well known material from the region's vast resource of unpublished 'grey literature' reports. The discussion divides the region into southern East Anglia – Essex and south-west Suffolk – and northern East Anglia – northern Suffolk and Norfolk – broadly along the line of the Lark–Gipping river corridor, long recognised as marking a territorial and cultural boundary within the region. As with all of the other case studies, the discussion of each sub-region considers the structure of the Iron Age and Roman landscapes, particularly the relationship between their field systems and the later fieldscape, including the much-discussed East Anglian 'co-axial' landscapes. Other subjects considered include continuity and discontinuity between Roman and Early Saxon landscapes, while a similar examination is presented of the 'Middle Saxon Shuffle' hypothesis, which argues that a restructuring of settlement patterns occurred between the Early and Middle Saxon periods. Space is also given to discussion of the nature of the relationship between churches and Middle Saxon settlements, an important question to which the East Anglian archaeological record has the potential to provide significant answers. Ultimately, Rippon highlights the radically different landscape characters of southern and northern East Anglia. In southern East Anglia he draws attention to some areas in which a degree of Roman to medieval continuity occurred, while noting that in others there was marked discontinuity, yet in no parts of southern East Anglia was there a sudden transformation of the landscape. In northern East Anglia, by contrast, the evidence unequivocally indicates that a marked transformation of the landscape occurred during the eighth century, which included the abandonment and relocation of settlement, resulting in the creation of many of

the nucleated settlements which underpinned the later landscape.

As one would expect of the Oxford University Press, the production quality of this volume is very high and the book is lavishly illustrated throughout with figures and black-and-white plates. On the whole, these graphics are very well reproduced, although, in this reviewer's copy at least, several of the plates were very dark, making details difficult to discern. There are also many small mistakes in the volume, primarily in the misspelling of names and places with which the author is understandably not particularly familiar. Unfortunately, as is usual for this type of book, the hardback cover price is prohibitively expensive for the general reader, which is a shame, because Rippon's message is important and deserves to reach as wide an audience as possible.

Ultimately, this book is to be commended for its scope and the breadth of literature which it summarises and synthesises. Rippon skilfully draws together the strands of his arguments and challenges the accepted notion that nucleation was a phenomenon of the Late Saxon period. He convincingly argues that the key to understanding the variations in landscape character of those regions lying either side of the 'central province' can primarily be found in the developments

which took place during the 'long eighth century', while at the same time cautioning against the pursuit of mono-causal explanations of landscape change. While Rippon's argument for the importance of the long eighth century may fly in the face of current trends within the wider sphere of settlement studies, his conclusions that significant landscape developments occurred during the Middle Saxon period will come as no surprise to those familiar with the extensive field-work and research carried out in the Eastern region, and Norfolk in particular. That these long-recognised East Anglian trends should be so convincingly paralleled in other parts of the country makes this book and the synthetic regional summaries which it contains of great significance to the readership of this journal. This book is essential reading for all of those engaged in studying the development of the early medieval landscape in East Anglia and elsewhere.

Richard Hoggett

Rippon, S. 1997. *The Severn Estuary: Landscape Evolution and Wetland Reclamation*. London.

Rippon, S. 2004. *Historic Landscape Analysis*. York.