

## BOOK REVIEWS

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### **ART, FAITH AND PLACE IN EAST ANGLIA: FROM PREHISTORY TO THE PRESENT**

eds. T.A. Heslop, E. Mellings and M. Thøfner, (2012)  
Woodbridge, Boydell Press, xvi + 352, ISBN: 978-1-84383-744-2. HB. £50.00.

This edited volume comprises twenty essays and amounts to an ambitious enquiry into the union of making, experience and place. It is an exemplary model for how treating topics in collusion encourages deeper understanding of each component part. The volume reflects the fruitful collaboration which was integral to 'Icon: 2000 years of Art and Belief in Norfolk', the research project, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and conducted in the School of Art History and World Art Studies at UEA, from which this publication is the ultimate result.

The book opens with an editors' 'Introduction' and a chapter concerned with defining Norfolk in terms much broader than geography (Elizabeth de Bièvre, 'But Where is Norfolk?'). The main body of essays is ordered chronologically and (as the subtitle indicates) ranges from prehistory to the present. The core of the volume is dedicated to the medieval and early modern periods. Importantly, the space given to this material adds a dimension of depth and complements the breadth of the survey chapters. Locational particularity, in both rural and urban environments, are investigated through different lenses, including art history (David King, 'Late Medieval Glass Painting in Norfolk: Developments in Iconography and Craft c.1250–1540'), history (Elizabeth Rutledge 'The Medieval Jews in Norwich and their Legacy'), topography (Chris King 'Landscapes of Faith and Politics in Early-Modern Norwich'), and landscape biography (Nicola Whyte, 'Norfolk Wayside Crosses: Biographies of Landscape and Place'). Whilst individual authors do not discuss linkages between their own work and that of other contributors, the editors' introductory chapter effectively establishes a

conceptual framework into which readers can situate the rest of the volume.

Despite the wide chronological and disciplinary span, geographically the focus is on Norfolk, with no single chapter solely concerned with material from Suffolk. The book's title and the Introduction's opening paragraphs imply engagement with East Anglia as a particular and peculiar entity ('East Anglia is a distinct region and has been considered so for over a millennium'). This matters because it is central to the idea that 'place' is something which impacts on, and is impacted by, the making of art and architecture in response to faith practices ('In East Anglia, the landscape testifies eloquently to a constant and not always benign play between natural and human process.') Unfortunately, this idea is insufficiently followed through for East Anglia, although it is discussed effectively through the Norfolk material (notably Karl Bell, 'Supernatural Folklore and the Popular Imagination: Re-reading Object and Locality in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Norfolk'). The chapters concerned with East Anglia (as opposed to Norfolk, although the two terms are used interchangeably in some instances, which is regrettable) would arguably be sufficient if the regional distribution of the rest was more even. This imbalance is particularly unfortunate given the long period during which the region was defined and recognised as the Diocese of Norwich, in broad terms encompassing and unifying modern day Norfolk and Suffolk. An opportunity missed, perhaps.

Regardless of the geographical imbalance, *Art Faith and Place* is a fascinating and stimulating exploration of intimately human concerns. The light-touch approach of the editorial team ensures that definitions and declarations of, and approaches to, 'faith' remain at the discretion of each author. The resulting variety adds colour and texture which is entirely effective and pertinent to the subject matter.

From the making of identity through sacred imaging in pre-Roman Norfolk, to the exploration of modern spiritualities by contemporary artists, engagement with faith is infused with the tangible legacies of past experiences, experiences which remain present in artefacts and landscapes. As the closing words of the final chapter state, 'despite the historic prevalence of the 'established Church' the journey has, in fact, always been personal.' The importance placed on personal invention, discernible here in the people and makers discussed and in the authors' own analyses, is imbedded in the book itself. Perhaps most successfully, as well as witnessing this exploration of self and other, the reader is also encouraged to engage in similar processes.

*Art, Faith and Place* should be of interest and pertinence to a readership far beyond the local. As much as it is a celebration of regional activity and achievement, the book has much to say about how people have, for millennia, lived within historically self-created environments. The combination of natural, manufactured and imagined worlds is a theme which crosses time and space, but which is uniquely rendered in different contexts. Owing to its inclusion of both intensely focused and ambitiously broad topics, *Art, Faith and Place* most probably contains something appealing to most people who approach it with predefined interests. However, it is by spending time with the volume and venturing into chapters beyond one's known interest areas that a reader will benefit most of all.

Helen E. Lunnon

## ENVIRONMENT, SOCIETY AND LANDSCAPE IN EARLY MEDIEVAL ENGLAND: TIME AND TOPOGRAPHY

Tom Williamson (2013)  
Woodbridge, Boydell. viii + 270pp, 41 figs. ISBN 978-1-84383-737-4. HB. £45.00.

With a title that fills most of the front cover, this latest offering from Tom Williamson (well known to readers of this journal as Professor of Landscape History at UEA and long-serving NNAS Council member) is a polemical volume which argues that the numerous patterns visible in the early medieval landscape (here the 5th to 12th centuries) are largely the result of physical geography, that is geology, hydrology, soils and climate. Nailing his colours to the mast early on, Williamson states 'historians, geographers and archaeologists, and in particular perhaps landscape historians, have tended to focus their attention almost

exclusively on social, economic and demographic drivers, interpreting any patterning which cannot be explained in such terms as a consequence of human choice, political events or random chance' (p.2). This is, he suggests, due to the increasingly urbanised lives led by the writers concerned, and a wider reflection of a society which has lost sight of the importance which such physical factors played prior to the development of piped water, vehicular transport, mechanised farming and the like. Of course, human choice was still an important factor, as Williamson fully acknowledges, but those choices were conditional and constrained by the physical world: 'landscapes are the consequence of human agency, but agency exercised knowledgeably, in a real world' (p.4).

By way of setting the scene, the book opens with an at times very critical review of the factors which have most often been identified as significant drivers of social change and landscape development in early medieval England, including ethnicity, population density, social structure and changes in farming technology. Some readers may find this chapter a little abrasive, as long-running arguments are summarised in sweeping terms, with some being dismissed out of hand, and few opportunities are missed to remind readers of the shortcomings of other disciplines' approaches to the subject. This done, however, the tone of the book rapidly settles down and the second chapter paints a much less controversial picture of the physical geography of England, describing and illustrating the well-rehearsed division between the Highland north and west and the Lowland south and east, along with the vagaries of solid and drift geology, and the effects of climate, soil types and drainage patterns on agricultural productivity. It is these, often highly localised subtleties, Williamson argues, which hold the key to long-running questions which have vexed those attempting to understand the nuances of early medieval economics, settlement and society. The following chapters examine in turn a series of stand-alone, but broadly linked subjects on which the constraining influence of physical geography has arguably often been underplayed or overlooked entirely. These chapters touch on many of Williamson's previous works, in particular themes first explored a decade ago in *Shaping Medieval Landscapes* (2003), but here he broadens his geographical coverage and pushes his arguments back into the 5th century, making for a stimulating, if occasionally frustrating volume.

One such chapter considers migration, in which Williamson takes an interesting and ultimately fruitful look at the potential effects of physical geography on the 5th-century *adventus* and the 9th-century Danish

settlements. This includes some striking comparisons of the distribution of 'Anglian' and 'Saxon' settlement and cemetery evidence against the physical geography of the river valleys which drain into the North Sea and the Channel respectively, and is followed by a similar consideration of the extent of the Danelaw in relation to the country's topography. In another chapter the discussion focuses more tightly on the make-up and management of individual early medieval estates and land units which utilised individual watersheds and other topographical features as their boundaries. Of particular interest to readers of this journal is the revisiting of Williamson's previous work on the co-axial Scole-Dickleburgh field system, which is here put into a wider landscape and temporal context as a structured landscape with likely prehistoric origins which was much reused and augmented during the early medieval period. Another shift of focus sees a chapter devoted to the impact which different climatic conditions resulting from the country's varied topography have on crop production, and considers their knock-on effects on population density. Among several conclusions, it is argued that the greater and more reliable crop yields in the east resulted in larger numbers of free peasants, who did not need to depend upon a lord for their subsistence. There is also an unspoken political thread running through these arguments, which is overtly acknowledged in the conclusion where we are reminded that 'agriculture was the business of peasants, not great men' (p.242) and the book ultimately champions 'the importance of the productive base rather than the extractive superstructure' (p.243).

Later chapters return to themes more familiar to regular readers of Williamson's work, and the dichotomy between the 'Two Countrysides' – the 'champion' landscape of Midland England and the 'woodland' landscape of the eastern and western regions. As one might expect given Williamson's pedigree, there is a particular focus on the eastern region in these chapters, although many of the conclusions offered are underpinned by case studies drawn from a recent AHRC-funded project which examined the development of the Northamptonshire landscape. These case studies present an interesting contrast for those readers more used to studying Norfolk's medieval landscape, and subjects considered in these chapters range from the origins of nucleated settlements and the formation of village plans to the creation and co-operative exploitation of open fields. Here, Williamson highlights in particular the importance of water in the medieval

landscape, citing its availability as one of the driving forces behind settlement nucleation, albeit tempered by other agrarian and environmental factors, such as soils and the use of shared ploughs. Early medieval woodland is also considered at length, using place-names and the Domesday survey to infer something of the changing nature and extent of the woodland over time. Here, too, an orthodoxy-challenging interpretation is offered, patterns of woodland being identified as an effect of varying exploitation at the hands of nucleated and dispersed settlements rather than being a causal influence on these same settlement patterns.

As is apparent, this book (literally) covers a lot of ground, but the contents are occasionally let down by the volume's presentation. This is an unusually text-heavy volume for Williamson, and those readers expecting the lavish illustrations of his earlier works will be disappointed. The volume itself is largely illustrated with computer-generated maps, some of which appear very blocky in their reproduction, and which, while often informative, do little to break up the at times very dense tracts of text. There are also many small mistakes which should have been picked up during proof-reading, for example, several markers for cross references have been left in the text and not completed, and the cross references between figure captions do not correspond correctly. The cover, too, is unappealing, being a mottled buff-brown adorned with a small hand-drawn interlace design for which no further explanation is offered.

One should not, however, judge a book by its cover and if the reader can get beyond the bullish tone of the opening chapters there are a lot of well expressed and important ideas here, many of which are richly deserving of further consideration. While the author fully acknowledges that his arguments will not find much favour with many archaeologists and historians – and there is much with which they will rightly take issue – Williamson has drawn upon many different strands of his substantial body of previous work to present a wide-ranging explanatory framework for the development of early medieval settlement and society, particularly in the eastern region.

*Richard Hoggett*

Williamson, T. 2003. *Shaping Medieval Landscapes: Settlement, Society, Environment*. Macclesfield.