

papers, with its heavy emphasis on archaeology, this volume only partially meets that objective.

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Land, People and Power in Early Medieval Wales. The cantref of Cemais in Comparative Perspective. (UCL Institute of Archaeology PhD Series, Volume 5. BAR British Series 659). By Rhiannon Comeau. 21 × 30 cm. xix + 363 pp, 97 colour and b&w pls and figs, 30 tables. Oxford: BAR Publishing, 2020. ISBN 978-1-4073-5712-6; ebook: 978-1-4073-5713-3. Price: £79.00 pb.

This excellent volume presents a detailed case study of Cemais in south-west Wales as a lens for addressing wider issues of estate formation, governance, seasonality and the nature of early medieval society. The author presents a holistic, multi-disciplinary narrative and a new model for addressing society and landscape in early medieval Wales. This will have resonance and relevance for analyses elsewhere in north-western Europe, particularly in British scholarship.

The difficulties facing any study of early medieval Wales are well known: an infamously exiguous archaeological record and documentary sources whose relevance and applicability to pre-Conquest society are debatable, make much uncertain. The dominance of Glanville Jones' multiple estate model as the explicatory framework structuring landscape-scale analyses occludes matters further. Rhiannon Comeau acknowledges such difficulties, but develops a positive outlook and interdisciplinary approach to address these fundamental issues head-on, presenting a methodology that is destined to generate similar future studies. Resisting the temptation to cherry-pick and generalise at a regional or even national scale, Comeau subjects the multiple estate model to justified critique, highlighting a 'confusion of scale, transposition of elements, and absence of [a focus on] assembly or trade' (p.173), to deliver a transformative and focused case study that poses many questions, and offers several new avenues. Exactly this focused local-level case study is the bedrock of any systematic understanding, but is so often neglected in favour of more generalising analyses; the use here is therefore refreshing and challenging. Readers are treated to an expert analysis of landscape evidence in GIS, combining archaeological, documentary and toponymic evidence, to paint a 'thick', multi-faceted analysis of social life.

The volume's Introduction and literature review provide an up-to-date critique of understandings of medieval Welsh landscape archaeology within its broader context. A north-west European focus here is particularly effective in contextualising the character of settlement, economy and documentary evidence in wider recent analyses of assemblies, central places or trade and exchange. Chapter 3 presents the interdisciplinary methodology, en route highlighting issues of scale and terminology necessary to engaging with this evidence, as well as detailing an *Annaliste* theoretical framework overtly situated within the *longue durée*. This approach

is effective, well-contextualised and suited to the nature of this Welsh evidence, but may leave some readers wondering about temporality and issues of change through time. The strongly illustrated Chapter 4 details the nature of the evidence which exists for Cemais, from later prehistoric archaeology to post-medieval documentary evidence; much discussion is built upon GIS analysis. Crucially, resisting the generalising tendencies of regional surveys, Comeau is careful to create models from documentary sources that are specific to the local context. This includes analysis of the core territorial and administrative structure, where one of the key findings is arguably very convincing evidence for the late genesis of structures like the *commote* during the Anglo-Norman conquest. Overall, her analysis is exceedingly rich and specific, if at times almost overwhelmingly detailed.

Chapter 5 thereafter details seasonal and habitual practices, and identifies elements of the settlement landscape indicative of focal zones; the case study of Carn Goedog is particularly effective at contextualising the complex nature of the settlement evidence and resultant analysis. Chapter 6 builds from this to present a novel methodology for identifying what Comeau views as 'focal zones' – core areas of activity and investment around which *cantref*-level activities articulated. Through this process, areas of assembly and royal and high-status sites are identified, while also being linked to ecclesiastical patterns of land-holding. The systematic identification and analysis of assembly places is, at least for this reviewer, a notable contribution to knowledge; this includes at least 23 potential places of assembly within the *cantref* of Cemais – perhaps an unusually high number, and while Comeau may be optimistic in some of these, at least six places of assembly are convincing and certainly share many hallmarks with medieval assembly landscapes elsewhere. The outcome here is scope to detail the interplay between nobility, freeholders and the Church, to a degree that has not been possible previously. The final summary analysis (Chapter 7) develops this, drawing all the evidence back into seasonal analysis, current interpretations and critiques of settlement and landscape in a European context. The result of this detailed, skilful and thorough analysis is a new model for landscape-scale analysis of early medieval Welsh society, sure to be formative and influential.

The monograph is excellently produced, well-illustrated and extremely accessible. Ultimately, the biggest issue one may take with this study is how reliable the later and post-medieval evidence is, and how applicable its analysis is for the seventh to eighth centuries, as opposed to the twelfth or thirteenth? Yet, this is not to fault Comeau, who recognises these difficulties and indeed is perhaps overly cautious in her analysis at times. Thus, this study serves to underline the need for systematic excavation and radiocarbon dating to follow up detailed local-level analyses like hers. On the whole, this is an extraordinarily detailed and exceptional piece of work by an author skilled in balancing a range of disciplines.

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