

Stories from the Edge. Creating Identities in Early Medieval Staffordshire. (BAR British Series 657). By Matthew Blake. 21 × 30 cm. xv + 125 pp, 79 colour and b&w pls, figs and tables. Oxford: BAR Publishing, 2020. ISBN 978-1-4073-1669-7. Price: £35.00 pb.

This book, based on the author's PhD thesis, presents a landscape study of identity in early medieval Staffordshire. The geographical scope ranges from the local – a recurring case study of Pirehill Hundred in the west of the county – to the Mercian, and often to the national level, drawing comparative material from across England. The unifying theme is described as 'edgyness', both historical (the peripheral propensity of early medieval manors) and historiographical (Staffordshire's peripheral position in much academic discourse). Blake takes up the challenge of compiling and interrogating very varied forms of evidence – archaeological, documentary, cartographic, place-name – to propose not only a new understanding of this region, but also a new methodological approach to under-researched areas. The result is a meticulous and thoroughly referenced volume.

Chapter 1 addresses the supposed dearth of burial mounds in Staffordshire. Blake assembles an impressive variety of evidence and argues convincingly that the number and significance of barrows in the county have been seriously underestimated. The emphasis on barrows as a 'social reality' rather than an 'archaeological reality' is a valuable insight: natural features which were perceived as barrows are as significant, he argues, as genuine burial mounds. Chapter 2 continues the theme of memory-making and connecting with the dead, bringing it into the Christian context of 'saintly stories'. It exhaustively demonstrates the significance of saints in local landscapes and identities, in an original and evocative account of 'an ecology of sainthood... inscribed with stories.'

Chapter 3 re-examines the modest and oft-neglected (even maligned) corpus of early medieval sculpture in Staffordshire. Blake rejects the idea that monumental sculpture was a demonstration of Christianity by Scandinavian settlers, instead seeing it as another manifestation of the 'memorial strategies' of thegny families in the tenth century. Chapter 4 looks to locate some of these thegny families, suggesting a series of 'symptoms' – topographical, linguistic, ecclesiastical – by which we might identify their estates in the landscape without needing direct evidence. Here Blake applies an innovative and compelling new method, and reaches the intriguing conclusion that thegny centres sought out 'edgy', 'watery', 'island-like' locations – though it is inevitably difficult to determine how far this trend was exclusive to estate centres, given how elusive lower-status rural settlements always are. By way of an extended case study, Chapter 5 tracks the fortunes of a particularly wealthy and powerful Mercian kinship group, that of Wulfric Spot, in the tenth century.

It is unfortunate that the text is sometimes let down by the illustrations. Given the importance of topography in this study, it is frustrating that the accompanying maps and plans have not been printed to a higher quality. While there are some attractive colour maps, many others are

too small or too blurry to be comfortably legible, and some lack scale-bars. The crucial series of maps in Chapter 4, locating manor sites, would have benefited from some colouration and generally more topographic detail; they seem frustratingly incomplete.

That said, this is an important, sensitive, and thought-provoking work, and a model of how seemingly peripheral places can be brought into much clearer view.

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The Staffordshire Hoard. An Anglo-Saxon Treasure. (Research Report of the Society of Antiquaries of London No. 80). Edited by Chris Fern, Tania Dickinson & Leslie Webster. 23 × 29 cm. xxxvii + 588 pp, 314 colour and b&w pls and figs (plus c. 600 colour catalogue images), 34 tables. London: Society of Antiquaries of London, 2019. ISBN 978-1-5272-3350-8. Price: £45.00 hb.

There is surely no need to introduce the finds and significance of the famous Staffordshire Hoard, which has gained massive public awareness and appreciation. Academically, we can now benefit from the findings presented in this substantial volume which delivers fully on so many levels, adding many new insights into society, technology, culture, war, religion and 'hoarding' in the mid-seventh-century Mercian Kingdom and Anglo-Saxon world. Although it may seem quite a while since the hoard's discovery and reporting in 2009 and the British Museum/PAS Staffordshire Hoard Symposium of March 2010, the vast scale of the material recovered and the demands of the conservation work (completed in 2016, thanks to major efforts, but only summarily reported here, pp. 16–24) have understandably required time to bring this monograph together, although there have been plenty of papers, popular works, scientific and conservation reports, etc. between times to whet the appetite. Indeed, those scientific reports (many by Eleanor Blakelock, listed on pp. 472–3) are available digitally via the Archaeological Data Services, which also hosts the finds catalogue and database (doi.org/10.5284/1041576).

This heavyweight print publication is divided into three parts, of which Part Three offers an abbreviated catalogue (pp. 373–469: images, followed by catalogue entries and then a section of hilt-fittings), Part One (Chapters 1–6) details 'The Hoard' and Part Two (Chapters 7–10) explores 'The Broader Context'. The editors, in between providing substantially to the whole, have marshalled key authorities to contribute, notably Hilary Cool, John Hines and Barbara Yorke, and the chapters are amply supported by endnotes and a sizeable bibliography.

In a short review I can merely flag some highlights of the publication and conclusions, but would first stress the need to read the first chapter which covers also the discovery and site analysis, with Fern providing an important section on the 'reliability' of the finds context (pp. 24–7). Chapter 2 discusses the finds types, from