

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 'edginess', 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

weapon fittings to helmet parts and Christian objects, and their functional and social significance, noting also the variable dates of the finds. The painstaking effort to piece together and reconstruct the (presumed royal) helmet (detailed pp. 70–85; to be read with George Speake's coverage of the ornament, pp. 232–45) from out of nearly 1000 decorated silver sheet fragments (though c. 400 of these were 'unattributed') is a fascinating read, as is Richard Gameson's assessment of the palaeography of the Latin inscriptions on the folded cross/reliquary strip (pp. 102–8). The detailed analyses of the craftsmanship – from metals to manufacturing techniques, including filigree and cloisonné – are hugely informative (Chapter 3), as is discussion of the signs of use, wear and repair (Chapter 4). From Fern's review of ornament and 'styles of display and revelation' (Chapter 5), the four-phase chronology of the hoard materials is tackled, spanning perhaps a century and with a possible deposition by c. 675, although we are told 'the extraordinary character of the majority... means that there are few parallels, including in particular the latest objects of the early Insular style. We are also unable to date with the precision we would wish' (p. 270).

Such object analysis also shows Mercia was not the manufacturing home for the hoard's treasures: 'while the rise of local aristocracies across the greater Mercia region during the seventh century is suggested, the archaeological evidence does not point to the production of prestige gold and garnet metalwork like that in the Hoard, beyond probably local imitations'; indeed, 'the total disregard for the contemporary cultural worth of the Hoard objects and their ornament might be considered further evidence that the dismantling and ultimately the burial of the collection took place far from where the majority of the metalwork was made' (pp. 275–6). And the seemingly 'liminal' or 'marginal' location for the point of deposition is interesting in itself, though Barbara Yorke, in Chapter 7 on 'The Historical Context', postulates that the location, near road junctions, might be 'a de-mustering one where the spoils of war might be shared out'; while nearby Hammerwich 'could be interpreted as a smithying site where the kind of dismantling of metal objects that lies behind the assemblage material could possibly have taken place' (p. 292). Wider archaeologies of the period and of hoarding are tackled in Chapters 8 and 9, while a compact but valuable summing up from the editors comes in Chapter 10's 'What does it Mean?', where a putative biography of the Staffordshire Hoard runs from 'Assembly' to 'A late gathering', to 'Final selection and disassembly' and 'Burial'. But, of course, the hoard's biography runs on and its academic and public impact (see the editors' Afterword), as well as this fine volume, are all part of that.

Finally, we should be grateful for the very high quality production of the publication itself, with its excellent illustrative support (and if one might quibble about some colour plates not being that crisp – as with some of the pommels in Chapter 2 or some finds illustrated in Part Three – then we should recall the online catalogue with its high-definition images). And all this at a very affordable price, which should attract many buyers/

readers who will no doubt return to this volume time and time again.

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Early Medieval Settlement in Upland Perthshire: Excavations at Lair, Glen Shee 2012–17. By David Strachan, David Sneddon & Richard Tipping. 21 × 30 cm. ix + 182 pp, 85 colour and b&w pls and figs, 17 tables. Oxford: Archaeopress Publishing, 2019. ISBN 978-1-78969-315-7. Price: £29.00 hb.

Devotees of upland field archaeology in Britain will be familiar with some of its eternal problems: inadequate chronological precision, few finds and often poor connectivity between structural data from settlement archaeology and landscape-level palaeoenvironmental studies. This attractively presented and sparingly written monograph shows that these issues can be substantially overcome with well-planned collaboration between field surveyors, excavators and palaeobotanists.

Glen Shee in Perthshire is most famous as one of Scotland's leading skiing locations. Located in the southern Grampian range, east of Loch Tay, it is one of a series of steep glaciated valleys trending south-east, with their watercourses draining towards the coastal lowlands of Angus and Tayside. The Scottish Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments (RCAHMS) spent a number of years in the 1980s and 90s intensively mapping surface field remains in this region, confirming it as one of the most complex and best-preserved upland palimpsests in Britain. Cultivation rigs, infields, cairns and later prehistoric roundhouses abound on the hillslopes and valley bottoms. Among these are found a distinctive type of tapering turf-walled longhouse, termed 'Pitcarmick-related' after a site in neighbouring Strathardle which was excavated by Martin Carver, John Barrett and Jane Downes in the mid-1990s. The results of that excavation resolved the probable broad date of this building-type to the early medieval period, but a more detailed understanding of its role in the landscape was needed.

At Lair, a well-preserved cluster of field remains were surveyed in detail, mapped and part-excavated by a multi-disciplinary team from Northlight Heritage and the universities of Stirling and Aberdeen, coupled with a programme of community volunteering. At the centre of settlement cluster is a well-defined sequence of Pitcarmick-related type buildings, which are connected to associated field features. Radiocarbon dates confirmed a time-frame between the seventh and tenth centuries AD, a period associated with Pictish dominance in this region, for which evidence of undefended rural settlement has been rare. The occupation of the Lair site seems to lie between the onset of improving climatic conditions, as mapped by a range of palaeobotanical studies, and a change away from local cereal farming.

The volume is notable for not simply reporting on the results of fieldwork and leaving it at that; rather, it contains a significant amount of interpretive and