Peasants Making History. Living in an English Region 1200–1540. By Christopher Dyer. 16 x 24 cm. xvi + 379 pp, 30 colour and b&w figs, 19 tables. Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2022. ISBN 978-0-19-884721-2. Price: £75.00 hb.

Drawing on his half-century of fieldwork and documentary research on the west midlands, Chris Dyer here delivers a data-rich, yet intimate picture of peasant life and society over some 400 years. His region is Warwickshire, Worcestershire and Gloucestershire (the home territory of Piers Plowman), the contrasting landscape divisions of which – Arden, Felden, the Cotswolds, the Vale of Gloucester and the Forest of Dean – allow investigation of local character and variation in economy, society and settlement types. Those familiar with Dyer's earlier work will not be surprised to find that a central theme is that many peasants had a better life, and both individually and as communities exerted greater control over their lives, than was long thought.

Naturally the book pivots about the mid-fourteenth century and the Black Death, when perhaps half the region's population perished. Before that were the expansionist centuries, as the steeply rising population saw the division of yardland holdings, the erection of ever more cottages (to accommodate widows, non-inheriting children or wage labourers), and assarting into the region's extensive woodlands and wastes. Ripple (Worcestershire) provides a good example of how a community could grow, and how a village might become more tightly packed with houses; here, of an original 32 full yardland holdings, each perhaps of around 30 acres, just fourteen remained intact in 1170, while by 1299 only one survived alongside 62 half-yardlands – and with three of those held jointly by two tenants.

In the region as a whole, the availability of vacant land after the plague years meant an enterprising peasant could build up a holding of two or three yardlands, and keep ever-more stock, say a flock of 90–180 sheep, depending on local stinting customs. The better-off peasants were 'farmers' who took on a lease of at least a part of the demesne; but while this might give them greater local standing, few became gentry. Communities' responsibilities expanded and often, for instance, peasants played a notable part in fundraising for perpendicular churches and their fixtures and decoration. By-laws became more prescriptive, with (to give but one example) responsibilities for road-mending becoming more formalised; thus, in the 1420s at Teddington (Gloucestershire) each tenant had an annual obligation to bring two cartloads of roadstone from Bredon Hill, two and a half miles away.

How else might peasant life have been better, or at least different, than traditionally envisaged? For a start, there was considerable geographical mobility as individuals and families moved to improve themselves, and sometimes quitted settlements which might move towards desertion. Kinsfolk who stayed in a place over generations – 'ancient inhabitants' as they were sometimes known – were in fact in the minority. Communal responsibility through office-holding was the norm. For better or worse, most yardlanders, and even some smallholders, served terms as one of the myriad officials who regulated communities, including churchwarden, hayward, ale taster and warden of the stream. The impression that Dyer gives is that most male villagers, other than the lowliest, played a regular part in trying to enforce the agreed norms: they had roles and identities beyond simple ploughmen.

For peasants, Dyer emphasises that the prime function of the village was to manage common fields and co-ordinate farming. These are well-studied subjects and Dyer gives a concise overview of topics such as how fields were organised, and sometimes later subdivided or enclosed. Titbits here and there bring into focus the scale and complexity of the region's open fields: a village's (typically two) open fields will have contained at least 2,000 selions or strips, and each acre required 18 days to work it. Recurring problems included theft of crops, and villagers were often forbidden to have gates at the ends of their crofts lest they use them to access the field-land and steal corn. Most problematic were animals straying into growing crops, and accordingly stock-proof pleached hedges around the open fields were carefully maintained, even on the stone-rich Cotswold uplands.

The typical – if there could be such a thing – peasant household in the west midlands consisted of parents, two or three children, and one or two servants; a grandparent might live in a cottage elsewhere on the croft. The houses themselves varied between one and five bays, but most were of two or three, divided between a hall and an inner chamber. As has long been recognised, houses with stone foundations replaced earth-fast ones by or in the thirteenth century. Cruck construction was commonplace and larger houses sometimes had two-storey cross wings added in the later Middle Ages; chimneys and full second storeys over the hall only appeared in the study region after 1540. Peasant barns were typically of three bays, capable of storing a yardland's crops alongside occasional use as livestock shelters and vehicle and implement sheds. As well as heavier equipment such as ploughs, carts and wains, sources citing accounts of stolen property mention tools such as forks, spades, seedlips, hoes, weeding hooks, scythes and many more, all essential for arable farming.

Many other topics are covered beyond those noted here, such as family and household, livestock, industry (including an interesting section on peasant smiths), towns, and peasant outlooks, values, perceptions and attitudes. There are 36 informative illustrations, proper footnotes signposting a vast hinterland of references and a clear and full index. Best of all, not only is this a very fine work of scholarship, but it is also one that is hugely enjoyable to read, bringing English medieval rural society vividly to life.

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Churches in the Irish Landscape AD 400–1100. By Tomás Ó Carragáin. 25 x 31 cm. ix + 424 pp, 293 colour and b&w pls and figs. Cork: Cork University Press, 2021. ISBN 978-1-78205-430-6. Price: €49.00, £45.00 hb.

A deceptively straightforward premise underpins this wonderful book: that, for any church, '…regardless of the historical or archaeological information available for

the site itself, its position in the landscape can reveal a lot' (p.2) The sophisticated conceptual approaches informing the analysis are introduced with an enviably light touch. Using Pierre Bourdieu on the relationship between structures and actions, landscapes are considered social arenas in which religious identities are negotiated while disposing of the dead, assembling, worshipping or processing the resources necessary to support such activities. Inspired by Clifford Geertz, thick descriptions are pursued, because landscapes are 'the wider canvas on which the activities, or fields of discourse, that take place within and between sites and locales are bound together into absorbing and dynamic social worlds' (p.5). Echoing recent work on religious beliefs, religious landscapes are seen to collapse false dichotomies between orthodox, literate and clerical Christianity, and popular, magical or superstitious beliefs.

What makes this study possible are the distinctive social institutions, settlements and burial grounds of early medieval Ireland. An eleventh-century hierarchy of land divisions seems to allow reconstruction of early local kingdoms (sometimes *túatha*, but in later sources *trícha*), later subdivisions of these early kingdoms (late-*túatha*) and subsequent subdivisions of these representing the lands of a free kin-group (known as *baili*). (Much of this rests on the work of Paul MacCotter, who supplies a detailed explanation of the land divisions for one of the case studies, Corcu Duibne, at the end.) Secular settlements appear as ringforts – curvilinear enclosures 20–50 m across – broadly divided into 'royal' multivallate raths from before *c.* AD 600 and peasant and noble univallate raths from *c.* 600–850. Some church sites occur as curvilinear enclosures varying in diameter from 50–500 m, mostly dug before *c.* AD 800 and sometimes backfilled thereafter; individual churches were generally turf or wattle structures, only later rebuilt in stone. Underground passages for defence and storage known as souterrains survive from *c.* 800–1100. Burial grounds may be divided up into those with burials ten years apart, perhaps representing selective interment from a wider kin-group; those with burials one to two years apart, perhaps representing an inclusive kin-group; and those with burials less than one year apart, perhaps representing extended kin-groups or communities and a shift to larger burial grounds after *c.* AD 800. Together with contextual evidence for the date and status of settlements – settlement and building sizes, burials, sculpture, craftworking activities and ecclesiastical place-names – this enables the identification of clear synchronic and diachronic relationships.

To lay the groundwork for analysis, Chapter 1 establishes contexts for conversion and concepts of territory before conversions to Christianity. To make detailed analysis feasible, the focus is on four case studies connected to local kingdoms, two from Leinster (the Southern Uí Fáeláin and Mag Réta) and two from Munster (Fir Maige Féne and Corcu Duibne); these case studies were selected for the existence of pre-development excavations, textual coverage, and field archaeology. Chapters 2–6 consider what distributions of churches reveal about conversions to Christianity up to *c.* 550, the nature of ecclesiastical estates, the ecclesiastical structures through which lay experiences were mediated *c.* 550–800, and the social contexts, roles and changing distributions of churches from *c.* 800–1100.

Over the course of a monumental, 424-page *tour-de-force*, Tomás Ó Carragáin supplies us with a wealth of conclusions about settlements, conversion, production, social status and power, to which a short review cannot do justice. During the period of conversions, there may be a pattern of royal territories each with a royal centre and twinned *domnach* church, allowing for variations within distinctive *longue durée* assembly landscapes and caused by the contingencies of elite negotiations. Ecclesiastical lordships – which is a more preferable way to conceive of the impact of churches exploiting landscapes than 'ecclesiastical estate' or 'ecclesiastical landholding' – seem in once sense revolutionary, because there does not appear to be any pre-Christian equivalent of religious institutions controlling so many resources. Yet such lordships incorporated a range of relations of production with people who might be termed *manaig*: tenants of core blocks of ecclesiastical land, varying in status; tenants of portions of kin-lands transferred to the church; or possessors of 'secular' land with a reciprocal relationship to a church. Sometimes different types of spatial relationships can be hypothesised resulting from different circumstances of patronage (grants of royal core lands, grants adjacent to royal core lands, or grants of liminal locations). Unsurprisingly, therefore, lordships encompassed lands of varying scales. Strikingly, and contrary to many current assumptions, ecclesiastical lordships seem to reveal little difference in the intensity or nature of exploitation or the development of specialisation or craft production from secular lordships. What marks Ireland out is the high density of early churches from before *c.* AD 800, best illustrated amongst the Fir Maige, but visible elsewhere: *túath* churches (about 2 km from the residence of king or local lord, religious communities, with enclosures, and perhaps pastoral roles); *baile* churches (close to elite residences, endowed, sometimes religious communities, signs of links with elite lineages, and sometimes with saints' cults); and non-*baile* churches (linked to univallate ringforts, perhaps from middle-ranking kin-groups). Indeed, 'Viewed in its European context, pre-Viking Ireland emerges as an important – perhaps the pre-eminent – illustration of the fact that Christianity did not always go hand in hand with highly centralised systems of power' (p.210). After this high-point in the number and distribution of churches, major churches survived, but few lesser churches were founded and some were abandoned.

Perhaps what will make the most immediate impact on those picking up this book – and everyone should – is the characteristically excellent job Cork University Press and Tomás Ó Carragáin have done in producing a text supplemented by beautifully drawn colour maps, plans and full-page as well as inset photographs: reading it is like taking multiple pilgrimages.

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