

*Churches and Social Power in Early Medieval Europe. Integrating Archaeological and Historical Approaches* (Brepols, Turnhout, 2015). Edited by José Sánchez-Pardo and Michael G. Shapland. 156 x 234 mm. Xvi + 553pp. 120 b/w illustrations. ISBN 978-2-503-54555-4. Price €125.00

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Pan-European approaches to the study of early medieval social processes, let alone the church and its role in this, are very much in their infancy. This landmark volume makes a notable contribution towards addressing this. Its success lies in the Editors' clear vision, the diversity, quality and depth of the sixteen case studies, and the way the whole has been drawn together.

The objective is 'to provide insights into the strategies by which churches [in their widest sense] were founded and bound to the service of social power in early medieval Europe' (p. 2): churches were spaces shared in some way by nearly everyone, places that particularly offered themselves for the negotiation and display of social power. The contributions focus on trends and processes rather than particular historiographies, take an interdisciplinary if mainly archaeological approach, and recognise the importance of landscape contexts. Social theory underpins the Editors' perspective: they specifically promote Michael Mann's political, military, ideological and economic sources of power as a useful interpretive model, complementing this with Tim Earle and colleagues' ideas about how ideology is materialised. From this they identify two complementary perspectives: churches as sacred places of social power, and as places of power in the landscape. This ethos is necessary, they argue, to address the current obstacles to pan-European and interdisciplinary dialogue – needing ways of exploring what are clearly common questions despite the differences that have shaped the nature and our understanding of the evidence base. Issues include national traditions of archaeological research, existing frameworks of understanding that are largely regional (not least northern/southern European), limited uses of archaeological data, and the dominance of models derived from documentary sources alone.

Contributions are used to illustrate one of four principal trends in thinking: churches as channels for power relations; churches and the transition of power; churches in landscapes of power; churches as centres of power. Their geographical scope bridges the north/south European divide, and to a degree the A.D. 1000 threshold: Italy (Brogiolo; Chavarría; Farinelli), Spain (Quirós and Santos; Sánchez-Pardo; Zwanzig), Portugal (Fontes), France (Delaplace; Nissen; Petts), Germany (Schaub and Kohlberger-Schaub; Zwanzig); Iceland (Sveinbjarnardóttir), Denmark/southern Scandinavia (Nissen), Ireland (Ó Carragáin) and England (McClain; Shapland; Wright). Most are in-depth studies of particular areas/landscapes, often the outcome of major research projects, but above- and below-ground investigation of churches also plays its part. They vary in their scale of analysis and methodological approaches, with authors painfully conscious of what Petts (p. 297) describes as the tension between obtaining a broad-brush perspective and small-scale particularism; the latter what Ó Carragáin (p. 100) frames as the opportunity to ask large questions in small places. While the problem is perhaps relative, everyone grapples with establishing precise chronologies. A landscape dimension permeates most of the contributions. With an emphasis on the importance of understanding context at the local level, what emerges from many of the papers is a good sense of the significance of local, as opposed to just supra-local, lordship in the foundation and support of early churches, but also how transient the specific use of buildings can be.

With its excellent introduction, careful internal cross-referencing and Sánchez-Pardo's extensive provision of location maps, there is a palpable integrity to this volume. It arises from a 2010 conference, but six contributions were commissioned afterwards to improve the geographical balance. As in any production, there are of course some things to reflect on. This reviewer has not been able to check the e-book version for comparison, but a good few of the printed graphics needed to take up the full width of the page, and some are slightly pixellated. Many authors produced very nicely designed and sometimes quite complex graphics and artwork, which deserved and merited colour (at Brepol's prices, this could surely be expected). Just a few misspellings/American terms slipped through, but it does not appear that all the captions were read by a native English speaker.

Overall, this book offers a series of well-integrated, substantive case studies that explore the theme of social power through the medium of the early church and its context. Although few of the authors follow the explicitly theoretical framework of the Editors, a persuasive case is generated for the value of interpretative frameworks based on social theory for integrating archaeological and historical approaches to European-wide research questions. That along the way the reader can get up to speed with other aspects of European early medieval archaeology, including some notable and mature projects, is a further bonus.

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