

## Reviews

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S. Felgenhauer, M. Schmaedecke, H. Steuer, C. Theune, eds. *Hierarchies in Rural Settlements*, Turnhout, Brepols, 2013. Rurality IX. 482 pp. 9782503545172.

Since 1995 the Rurality network has held conferences on the archaeology of medieval rural settlements in Europe, resulting in a series of substantial publications notable for their inclusion of many countries. The thirty papers in this volume survey the varieties of evidence for settlement hierarchies in farmsteads, villages and manor houses, which includes landscape paintings of the early modern period as well as excavated building plans and artefacts from 400 to 1600. The approaches differ a great deal, and some archaeologists are willing to defer to the documents and historians, while others regard the material evidence as free standing and independent.

The conference organisers gave the contributors an agenda of questions about rural settlement hierarchy, addressing such themes as the relationship between the elite centres, such as castles and manor houses, and the ordinary rural settlements, as well as the more subtle distinctions of status and wealth found within villages and hamlets or among scattered farmsteads. A ‘magnate farm’ can sometimes be shown to have risen to prominence from a village previously consisting of holdings of equal size, but papers on northern France or the Netherlands suggest that the presence of a manor house or castle in the heart of a village acted as a nucleus around which the settlement formed. In the Black Forest, castles were imposed on existing mining settlements so that the lord could both protect and control the extraction of minerals. The manor house could be taken away for various reasons. In the Netherlands the site of the *curtis* might have been abandoned in the thirteenth century when leaseholders acquired the lord’s demesne. In England, in a process that began in some villages in the twelfth century and was still continuing around 1500, the manor house was relocated outside the village, often in a park, and social distance widened between lords and peasants.

Turning to villages and peasant farms, the narrative is often concerned with the emergence of larger farms. In Bohemia and Moravia plots of similar size were laid out in the fourteenth century, and the holdings of wealthier families can be identified from their more numerous and densely packed buildings. In Denmark, growing inequality in houses and farms can be observed in the eleventh century. Elites were embedded in northern Italian settlements throughout the period, as the Roman villas survived the period of migrations in modified form, and provided the nucleus from which villages grew.

The authors of papers offer different explanations for inequality and its growth, including the emergence of feudalism and the varied levels of subordination to the power of lords. Most of the authors recognise dynamic forces among the villagers and farmers, such as inheritance customs (in Norway), internal colonisation (in Russia), and the growth

of the market (again in Russia). In line with recent archaeological theory, a number of papers express doubts about the importance of economic factors. Farms in Flanders and the Netherlands in the sixteenth century were provided with towers with the sole purpose of adding to the prestige of the owners. An exquisite silver and gold brooch found in an ordinary small house in an early medieval Danish village suggests to the excavators that wealth and status cannot be easily deduced from material evidence.

This is a well-conceived and coherent volume, containing essays of varying quality, but together they reflect usefully the state of archaeological research into medieval rural settlements.

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R. A. Houston, *Peasant Petitions: Social Relations and Economic Life on Landed Estates, 1600–1850*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2014. v + 313 pp. 9781137394088.

This volume examines social relationships within the landed estate through peasant petitions from different regions. The archives used are clearly defined. Houston stresses that, for the purpose of the research undertaken, all the documents and sources originated from large estates with a particular form of delegated administrative structure. Unusually and importantly, rather than concentrating on the large midland and southern estates the main emphasis is on those in Ireland, Scotland, Wales and the north of England. Houston advocates that these letter petitions offer intimate details of the lives of the people in their own words and provide the ‘authentic voice of [a] downtrodden and desperate, yet dignified people’. It is suggested that the petitions surveyed are different in tone and nature to the pauper letters which have been investigated predominantly by Steven King. There is no doubt that some of the petitions were pleas for help due to poor agricultural prices or periods of financial depression. However rather than the appeals coming from single individuals, many appear to concentrate on a family or community effort and are thus works of considerable collaboration.

At the core of this book is an investigation into why petitioners in the differing regions sought help. They frequently represent the balancing act between family advantage and the need to appear part of a community. In many cases they demonstrate the solidarities of rural communities which were built around agriculture but at the same time reveal the limits of cohesion. The petitions work on two levels, firstly revealing the dynamics of the interaction between landlord, estate management and tenant and secondly they indirectly reveal the relationships which existed between the other inhabitants. Petitioning formed a method of confirming the inherent subtleties of estate management. As correspondence tended to be greater during times of economic downturn, this work is a significant contribution to discussions of the crisis management that estates were forced to take to ensure the survival of their tenants and labourers.

Unfortunately Houston has not always been able to determine the success rate of the petitions presented. He acknowledges that measuring the numbers that succeeded is