

***Lichfield and the Lands of St Chad: Creating Community in Early Medieval Mercia.* By Andrew Sargent. Studies in Regional and Local History 19. Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire, 2020. xii + 290 pp. \$37.95 paper.**

Mercia has always been the neglected middle child in early English studies. This Midland kingdom, which flourished in the middle of the Anglo-Saxon period, is habitually passed over by scholars in favor of its better documented predecessors (Bedan Northumbria) and successors (the Wessex of Alfred and his heirs). The diocese of Lichfield, once the spiritual heart of the kingdom, has been especially neglected. Andrew Sargent addresses this gap in his *Lichfield and the Lands of St Chad: Creating Community in Early Medieval Mercia*. The book has two distinct but overlapping aims: to fill the hole in our knowledge “by synthesizing evidence from a number of different sources—archaeological, textual, topographical and toponymical” (1) and, in so doing, to explore “how people, as subjects/persons, created and inhabited the social fields” (7) of early medieval Mercia.

How we read the book depends on which of these goals we hold to be of primary importance. If the first goal is held to be central, then the book’s exhaustive third chapter, “The Cathedral and the Minsters” (86–155), is surely the heart of its argument. Here, Sargent is at his best, reconstructing Lichfield minsters and their communal networks on the basis of surviving stone sculpture, archaeological excavations, and hagiographical evidence. When combined with his study of agricultural practices and placenames in chapter 5 and Domesday parish records in chapter 6, the result is an impressive survey of the religious landscape of early medieval Lichfield. Scholars of Anglo-Saxon England or local history will find no more complete guide to Lichfield and its environs than the one provided here.

The second, more theoretical aim is advanced in the surrounding chapters. Chapter 1 closely reads Bede’s *Historia Ecclesiastica* to argue that the English Church was a creation of Archbishop Theodore. Chapter 2 focuses on the account of St. Chad preserved in Bede’s *Historia Ecclesiastica* (which Sargent calls the “Lastingham Narrative”), arguing that the memory of the saint was constitutive of the diocesan community of Lichfield. Later chapters emphasize the role of lay and clerical overlordship (chapters 4 and 6) and the creation of meaning in Lichfield’s agrarian communities (chapter 5). Throughout these chapters, Sargent mounts an attack on John Blair’s history of minsters, and especially Blair’s account of a seventh- and eighth-century “golden age” followed by secularization and decline. By contrast, Sargent draws attention to the long and often complex history of lay and clerical entanglement: the important thing, on his reading, is the continuation of a devotional community, not adherence to a strict standard of monastic purity. Thus, rather than viewing the Anglo-Saxon minsters as independent, self-sustaining communities, we should see them “as material loci within which several different forms of community intersected” (249); rather than placing ecclesiastical and secular lords in competition with each other, we should identify a single “ecclesio-regnal” elite.

The author’s unique methodology merits special comment. The “Mercian hole” exists, in large part, due to the lack of substantial and contemporary documentary evidence from the see of Lichfield. Because of this, Sargent is forced to construct his argument on evidences tentative and conjectural: a restored Episcopal List Tradition in

chapter 1, a reconstructed “Lastingham Narrative” of St. Chad in chapter 2, extrapolations from the Domesday Book, and so on. For all its ingenuity, this approach is not without its dangers. If such arguments are to stand, they must be meticulously reasoned and grounded in unimpeachable evidence. On both counts, the book leaves something to be desired. The proposed historiographical shift away from Blair builds on—but does not follow from—the topographical study; the book also has a habit of treating its conclusions with considerably more confidence than their conjectural nature would warrant. Moreover, the argument is at times lightly documented and would benefit from more consistent and extensive use of primary sources. If, as Sargent repeatedly tells us, the minster communities of Lichfield were constituted by regular liturgical observance, it would be good to have some idea of what those liturgical observances looked like.

There are also notable lacunae in the secondary works cited in this study. To take only the most glaring example: it is inconceivable to me that Sargent should have conducted an examination of the *Historia Ecclesiastica* and the *Vita Wilfredi* without once referencing Walter Goffart’s nearly hundred-page chapter on “Bede and the Ghost of Bishop Wilfred” (in his *Narrators of Barbarian History (A.D. 550–800): Jordanes, Gregory of Tours, Bede, and Paul the Deacon* [University of Notre Dame, 2005]). The failure to do so directly undermines the book’s overarching argument. Had the author consulted Goffart, he would have known better than to claim that the author of the *Vita Wilfredi* “is universally accepted to be identical with ‘Aeddi cognomento Stephanus’” (54; compare Goffart, 281–282)—and he would have paused before attempting to extract an unaltered “Lastingham Narrative” from the text of Bede. One can only hope that other major claims are not undercut by similar oversights.

Despite these weaknesses, the volume remains an interesting and useful contribution to our knowledge of the Anglo-Saxon Church. The author deserves credit for treating Bede’s account as evidence to be analyzed rather than using it (as so many others have done) merely as the authoritative source. More importantly still, he has laid the foundation for the future study of the cult of St. Chad and religious life in Mercia, inviting others to follow where he has led.

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doi:10.1017/S0009640721001621

The Reception of the Virgin in Byzantium: Marian Narratives in Texts and Images. Edited by **Thomas Arentzen** and **Mary B. Cunningham**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. xx + 360 pp. \$120.00 hardcover.

How did Mary assume a life outside of scripture through stories and images and address the needs of historical people in late antiquity and Byzantium? The fifteen essays in *The Reception of the Virgin in Byzantium* approaches this theme by placing special attention on the formation of Marian narrative in the medieval Greek world. The volume adds a rich amount of new primary source texts and original interpretations to the already substantial bibliography on Mary in Byzantium. Indeed, whereas for several decades,