

sculpture, imported Mediterranean pottery, votive cattle deposits and symbolic metalwork converge on a low-lying defensive enclosure containing a large hall building. This site, already famous for its symbol stones, was shown by excavation to be a multi-faceted assembly place, where religious and political functions interweave. The effect of this new work is to empower the early Picts with a distinctive material voice in fourth- to seventh-century Britain. Art, politics and religion, so often treated as semi-autonomous activities, are here integrated into communities of people, convincing in concept even if the appropriate vocabulary has sometimes yet to arrive.

The *de novo* essay written for the volume is Chapter 8 on the early church by Evans and Noble, which gathers and sifts much that could be relevant to future research.

Parc-an-caipel, with two early symbol slabs and an incised cross-slab, has potential to reveal a seventh-century transition between what we once called Class I and Class IV monuments.

An enclosure found by geophysics at Kinneddar is suggestive of a monastic vallum and indeed enclosed a later Benedictine abbey. Dating such enclosures is notoriously capricious, but first indications on the ground are that this was in use between the seventh and twelfth century. In general, the picture of a Pictish Christianisation in the seventh to eighth century is well argued, although this reviewer would like to see more investigation of the effects of the monastic movement in Northumbria, especially its rapid eighth-century emergence and outreach, something that had a major impact on the politics of Britain as a whole.

The mode of publishing adopted here is initially arresting, not least because its title is the same as a 2013 novel by Max Adams, an archaeologist and former York University student, and because pre-Christian kings are not greatly in evidence, but also owing to the innovative idea of writing an overall summary (intended for both ‘the specialist and the general reader’). However, the candid introduction and the richness of the chapters that follow soon convince the reader that this harmonious combination of an overview with published articles is a winning formula that should be emulated. The speed of the project and its fleeting visits to juicy-looking sites will probably attract criticism, as did Leslie Alcock’s campaign of sampling documented hill forts fifty years ago. But there is a positive resemblance here: both campaigns applied an ambitious agenda from a high vantage point, and so

opened up the subject and provided a spur to new understanding and future exploration.

The Northern Picts project followed on from the *Tarbat Discovery* programme, launched in 1994 also in pursuit of the Northern Picts, but in the event focused on Easter Ross with its most significant discoveries at seventh- to sixteenth-century Portmahomack, an excavation well assessed here. Not only was the Aberdeen project an admirable continuation of that investigation, but it supported and enhanced the Tarbat Museum at an opportune moment. Indeed, the Centre is in receipt of the authors’ royalties, which might put the impartiality of the present reviewer in question. I can only say I did not know this before opening the book, and hope that my opinion that this is a very useful and skilfully assembled compilation will be regarded as sufficiently detached.

MARTIN CARVER

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Formative Britain: an archaeology of Britain, fifth to eleventh century AD. By MARTIN CARVER. 245mm. Pp xx + 736, 368 figs. Routledge Archaeology of Northern Europe series. Routledge, London, 2019. ISBN 9780415524742. £115 (hbk).

To attempt an overview of the archaeological evidence for the whole of Britain over the period of the fifth to the eleventh century AD is a huge undertaking. Both geographically and chronologically, this range is one for which there is much historical evidence too, although, of course, that is extremely uneven. There is much to applaud in the manner in which Martin Carver has approached and met these challenges. His book on what he labels *Formative Britain* is thorough in terms of topics, and substantial in respect of the critical attention to the details and interpretative possibilities of the wide range of sites presented. Characteristically, Carver emphasises practicality in the key questions to be asked and equally in the central explanatory paradigms he prefers. No reader is likely to complain of any esoteric incomprehensibility in what is portrayed here, and to say so is in no way a back-handed compliment. The author nonetheless frequently allows himself to express opinions in memorably articulate terms: while it would be rather over-the-top to speak in terms of ‘what oft was thought, but ne’er so well expressed’, such moments of style are one of the pleasures of reading this volume.

The bulk of the volume lies in a large number of case studies of illustrative archaeological sites. The point that it is the excavated evidence which underlies the vital archaeologically based perspective on these centuries is an important one. Nevertheless, with the first 600 pages made up of just five chapters, it does make for a read in which the chapters feel rather long. And with Harvard-style references in chapter endnotes, the weight of those case studies can get wearying at times. The book is also copiously illustrated, but regrettably it must be noted that the quality and scale of reproduction is often unsatisfactory. In light of Carver's own long experience, it seems likely that the fault in this respect lies with the publishers and the approach to production. At present, technology and business models seem widely to be leading to a conspicuous deterioration in publication standards.

Intellectually, probably the most innovative feature of the work is the proposition that it is especially relevant to conceive of Britain as a whole in this period in terms of its 'formative' state: one more re-conceptualisation of a period for which we have a long tradition of different perspectives. It is admittedly a little facile, but not irrelevant, to note that it can only be a truism that any and every period of history is formative – if at different paces, and with varying weight. The term is quite briefly explained, with an ostentatious reference to Mesoamerican archaeology from the former editor of *Antiquity*, on pp xxiii–xxiv of the Preface. One thing that I think was really needed to give this concept more traction and to justify an especial focus on formativity was a fuller evaluation of the virtual *tabula rasa* of Roman Britain. It would also seem to be implied that this formative process saw a culturally more consistent Britain in major respects by the eleventh century. That may indeed be a valid proposition, but it would be right, then, also to stress the extent to which it is true as a Europe-wide phenomenon. It poses, however, a further critical question: was the level of cultural consistency achieved by a thousand years ago significantly different from that two thousand years ago at the end of the Iron Age? That could lead us to the proposition that the contrasting processes of disruption and divergences on the one hand and re-assimilation on the other during the first millennium AD were definitive features of an even wider period and zone.

This is profoundly relevant to painful and destructive controversies that are currently being driven forward from some quarters in respect of the fifth to eleventh centuries AD, with reference to England in particular. Leaving aside obsolete

concepts like the 'Dark Ages', notions of a 'post-Roman' or 'pre-Conquest' or even an 'Early Medieval' period effectively de-characterise the phase within itself, focusing instead on its status as a (long) transitional phase, which ended with the enforced political linking of England to Continental power-blocs, and of Wales – subsequently Ireland – with England; rooted in a system of 'feudal' social control involving a regular pattern of manors and parishes, and all correlated too with substantial, favourable, climatic and demographic changes. That the period of the fifth to eleventh centuries was one of change and reconstruction with long-term ramifications is undeniable. But to represent it primarily in potentially teleological terms for purposes of 'interest' and 'relevance' may have implications that are considerably more problematic than is immediately obvious.

JOHN HINES

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The Book of Llandaf as a Historical Source. By PATRICK SIMS-WILLIAMS. Pp xiv + 211. THE BOYDELL PRESS, WOODBRIDGE, 2019. ISBN 9781783274185. £75.00 (Hbk).

The Book of Llandaf, to use the Welsh spelling (Llandaff in English), or *Liber Landavensis* (Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales MS 17110E, digitised on the NLW website), was compiled in the first half of the twelfth century in the diocese of Llandaff in Glamorgan, south Wales. Described by the historian Wendy Davies (1979), who published some of the most influential modern studies of the manuscript, as 'part-cartulary, part-history, part-register', the manuscript is among the earliest surviving from Wales and is often invoked as a supplement to Domesday Book by scholars investigating Norman settlements in south-east Wales in the decades following the Conquest.

Yet the manuscript has also been controversial among modern historians, not all of whom have been convinced by the historicity of its contents. Written over a period of time, from about 1120 to 1134, in a number of hands, mainly in Latin but with some important Old Welsh and Norman French forms, the primary purpose of the book was to establish the boundaries of the diocese of Llandaff since its supposed foundation in the fifth century. The man who wanted thus to set Llandaff up as an ancient and extensive episcopal see in order to fend off competition from St Davids in the west and Hereford