

- Blair, J (ed) 2007. *Waterways and Canal-building in Medieval England*, Oxford University Press, Oxford
- Hall, D and Coles, J 1994. *Fenland Survey: an essay in landscape and persistence*, English Heritage, London

MARK GARDINER 

doi:[10.1017/S0003581523000045](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003581523000045)

*Female Monasticism in Medieval Ireland: an archaeology*. By TRACY COLLINS. 234mm. Pp xxviii + 644, 230 figs (some col), 17 tabs. Cork University Press, Cork, 2021. ISBN 9781782054566. £35 (hbk).

Roberta Gilchrist, in her pioneering work on the material culture of medieval women religious and their communities, emphasised how archaeology, history and landscape studies together can illuminate the lives, places and spaces of these women (Gilchrist 1994). She argued for the use of gender in archaeology as a tool to re-evaluate monastic communities in the landscape, further showing the uniqueness and importance of looking at women religious through the lens of gender. The influence of Gilchrist's scholarship is realised in Tracy Collins' work, *Female Monasticism in Medieval Ireland: an archaeology*. Collins' study is the first of its kind for medieval Ireland, in an often-neglected field of medieval monastic archaeology. It is groundbreaking in its multidisciplinary approaches and builds on extensive research and analysis of archaeological investigation. It considers the history of religious women through material culture, archaeology and landscape methodologies as well as combining historical documentation and theoretical approaches to help discover these places in the past and in present day landscapes.

Collins uses the first three chapters of the book to situate the subject within the historiography of medieval monasticism in Ireland, contextualise theoretical perspectives, and discuss the early and late medieval evidence and comparisons with Europe and Britain to provide a framework. Chapter one serves as the introduction and provides the scope and background as well as the structure of the book, terminology, concepts, and historiographical challenges that impact the study. For those new to medieval Ireland or monasticism in an Irish context (or indeed gendered approaches to archaeology), chapters two and three are a welcome overview of the history of monasticism

and the place of religious women within larger church developments over time (c 500–1540). Chapter four moves into identifying the locations and setting of monastic houses of women as well as settlement patterns, archaeological classification of the sites (eg monument type) and the problems that this can bring for monastic sites. From site locations, Collins shifts to the actual places of these houses and discusses space and place in chapter five. Claustral arrangement, its importance and uses, are highlighted before turning to the archaeological evidence of enclosure, precincts, and features found at women's communities. With precinct arrangements comes the location and siting of the monastic church, and in chapter six Collins presents the findings of monastic churches associated with women's communities and description of the possibility of use of the space by women religious. So far, the book has focused on the sites and arrangements; however, with chapters seven and eight, the use of space in rituals, life and death, diet and health, as well as material culture associated with women religious, are brought to the forefront and examined in relation to the sites of these communities. Bridging the gap between internal spaces and locations, Collins explores the wider estates of these communities and their placement within settlement in chapter nine. The final chapter acts as a conclusion, drawing all themes together noting the methodologies used and the impact of the findings.

Collins' strengths are exhibited in the wide range of knowledge of archaeological practices, theoretical approaches, and use of techniques such as analysing large assemblages of data. These are deftly used throughout the study, with carefully chosen and comprehensive tables and lists, maps and graphs, as well as illustrations and detailed case studies, which make the arguments even more compelling. There are limitations in the multidisciplinary study of medieval women religious for Ireland – and Collins does not shy away from this – but rather uses it to build a framework for a how the subject is approached. There are comparisons with other locations in Britain and Europe – sites of both men and women – to show why this study is important, and urgently needed for Ireland and indeed women religious. The only minor (very minor) criticism in this kind of comparison was the use of 'Britain' when the examples were often from England. Some word of caution here as this can lead to assumptions being made about Welsh and Scottish women's religious communities, much like those in Ireland, as the author points out. While comparison to male religious is used in some cases – and can bring disadvantages – they

are applied in a more positive way to show the diversity of religious life rather than discounting the experience of women religious. It is also welcomed that this study is ‘deliberately less concerned with the [monastic] order’ of the community and evaluates the evidence as a ‘diverse group’ (p. 104), reinforcing and adding to other studies of women religious (cf, eg, Burton and Stöber 2015).

Some of the conclusions that this study has brought will impact the study of medieval archaeology and settlement in Ireland and influence the way monastic studies are viewed in wider landscapes of the past and present. Women’s religious communities in Ireland were not isolated as previously thought, and they were different in purpose and identities; therefore, they ‘fit into a wider European phenomenon with regional distinctiveness and distribution of setting’ (p. 161). The exploration of St Catherine’s (Co. Limerick) and its relationship with the surrounding settlement is a compelling case study: the deliberate location of a secluded place, its physical invisibility and the mental awareness of this place within the landscape. This is important as it emphasises its significant connections to surrounding settlements and benefactors. Collins suggests that seclusion and segregation of these communities was positive and the idea of negative connotations around this cannot be sustained (p. 408). Other conclusions are indications that enclosure and claustral arrangements for women religious are open for interpretation as not all houses had the same layout, or in fact had a cloister (Chapter 5). The evidence analysed for case studies, especially that of St Catherine’s, illustrate this flexibility of the use of space and layout of buildings. This is *significant* and will reshape the way we think about women’s monastic communities and their ritualised spaces for years to come. For Ireland in particular, the communities of women religious show some similarities with other monastic houses in medieval Europe but had some differences that set them apart from the rest; these differences are vital to understanding the fluidity, diversity, and variety of women religious communities in medieval Christendom in the later medieval period.

Burton, J and Stöber, K 2015. *Women in the Medieval Monastic World*, Brepols, Turnhout  
 Gilchrist, R 1994. *Gender and Material Culture: the archaeology of religious women*, Routledge, London

KIMM CURRAN

doi:10.1017/S0003581523000288

*New Perspectives on the Medieval ‘Agricultural Revolution’: crop, stock and furrow*. Edited by MARK MCKERRACHER and HELENA HAMEROW. 230mm. Pp xvii +264, 55 b/w figs, 20 col pls, 10 tabs. Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, 2022. ISBN 9781802077230. £34.99 (pbk).

While the ‘agricultural revolution’ of the eighteenth century is well known, both archaeologists and historians agree that this was not the first dramatic transformation of British agriculture seen in the post-Roman period. Around a thousand years earlier – starting in what has been called the ‘long eighth century’ – there is increasing evidence for marked changes in agricultural regimes, and it has been suggested that this was the context of one of the most important developments in the history of the English countryside: the creation of villages and open fields. While the origins and development of these highly distinctive ways of structuring the countryside have been much debated by both archaeologists and historians, there has been little agreement as to what caused this change, when it happened or why it was largely restricted to England’s ‘central zone’. We desperately need new data and new insights, and that is what this fascinating and diverse collection of papers provides. The volume is the proceedings of an online conference in December 2020 that both presented the results of a major European Research Council funded project titled ‘Feeding Anglo-Saxon England: the bio-archaeology of an agricultural revolution (FeedSax)’, led by Helena Hamerow at the University of Oxford, and brought together a series of other scholars who have been working on this period. The volume is strongly interdisciplinary – gathering the results of scientific analyses (of plant and animal remains), experimental approaches and excavations at important sites – and, while the focus is on England, there are important continental perspectives too.

The first five papers outline the initial (and provisional) results of the FeedSax project. Helena Hamerow introduces the team’s aims and objectives, and the important concept of a ‘mouldboard package’ that characterised this first agricultural revolution: systematic crop rotation; low-input ‘extensive’ cultivation regimes; and the widespread use of a ‘mouldboard plough’ (that turned the sod, reduced weed infestation within fields and permitted the cultivation of heavier