

Sanmark, A 2017. *Viking Law and Order: places and rituals of assembly in the medieval north*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh

ANDREW REYNOLDS 

doi:[10.1017/S0003581523000057](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003581523000057)

Anglo-Saxon Hydraulic Engineering in the Fens. By MICHAEL CHISHOLM. 230mm. Pp. x + 150, ills (some col), maps. SHAUN TYAS, Donington, 2021. ISBN 9781907730917. £14.95 (pbk).

The evidence for the construction of canals in England in the tenth and eleventh centuries has been gradually accumulating since the 1980s. It was drawn together by John Blair (2007) in an edited book that argued for the widespread construction of early medieval waterways. While there were a few documentary references to canals, the papers in that volume demonstrated that further examples could be identified from archaeological fieldwork. For eastern England, much of the evidence for early medieval canals had already been identified by the Fenland Survey. Somewhat surprisingly, the discovery of these was not much discussed in the final synthetic volume on the Fens, although the implications were significant (Hall and Coles 1994). There was a certain reluctance among archaeologists to accept that large-scale construction works, involving precise levelling, could have been undertaken as early as the tenth century.

The existence of Anglo-Saxon canals has now been largely accepted, and more recent research has focused on when such watercourses, whether for transport or drainage, were built and how extensive they were. Chisholm approaches this question as a geographer, distinguishing between natural distributaries of the rivers and artificial watercourses. He argues that a series of watercourses were built before AD 1000 to drain the River Nene through the marshlands and provide routes along which goods could be transported. He suggests that this was a unified project that required the construction of more than 60km of watercourse. The most likely context for this work was the foundation or re-foundation of abbeys at Crowland, Ely, Peterborough, Ramsey and Thorney around 970. If the artificial origins of these channels are accepted, then it seems likely that a further 75km of watercourses were built for purposes of drainage or to allow the abbeys to

move goods. Indeed, the total length identified by Chisholm is even greater.

The consequences of these vast works are examined in the final chapter. It is suggested that the programme of construction was an extraordinary co-operative project initiated by King Edgar to transform the Fens. The idea of the abbeys as remote religious houses established to foster strict worship in conditions of extreme austerity is hardly compatible with Chisholm's analysis. Instead, the abbeys have to be regarded not as accidental agents of change, but as the instruments of political planning to colonise an underdeveloped area of the kingdom. This *dirigiste* view is hard to swallow at first reading, although it is only a small step beyond the widely accepted realisation of the efficiency and organisational capacity of the late Anglo-Saxon state. Instead of looking upon the kingdom just as an effective collector of taxes, in the light of this work we must regard it also an active agent in the production of agricultural wealth.

The practical problems of undertaking such vast works are touched upon only briefly. First, there were the difficulties of surveying the lines for the watercourses. That work required lines, some of them straight, to be laid out across fenland with carefully chosen routes. Then there was the problem of finding sufficient labour to cut the channels in a sparsely occupied area of the country. It is only possible to speculate how such a body of people, perhaps to be numbered in their thousands, were accommodated and fed.

The argument of this volume is constructed in a dry, painstaking manner, and can be particularly critical of other scholars. 'An inherently implausible proposition' and 'the claim is a *non sequitur*' are two phrases used about others' work. Yet the conclusions drawn here also rely on inference and interpretation, although they are asserted in a forthright manner that implies there can be no doubt. Documentary sources are treated as if they provide incontrovertible proof, although every historian knows that this is hardly the case.

This work is the study of a distinguished geographer and that provides confidence that the identification of watercourses as artificial is soundly based. The arguments for their dating are carefully developed. Inevitably, it has relied upon the reading of works of historians or archaeologists for those elements of the analysis. The conclusion to which the interpretations tend provides a challenge for our understanding of the period and it will require a careful evaluation of all the strands of the argument to determine whether the implications of this work are as solid as the text implies.

- 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