

BOOK REVIEW

Review of *Perceptions of the Prehistoric in Anglo-Saxon England: Religion, Ritual and Rulership in the Landscape*

Perceptions of the Prehistoric in Anglo-Saxon England: Religion, Ritual and Rulership in the Landscape, Sarah Semple, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, ISBN 9780199683109

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Currently a Reader in Archaeology at Durham University, Sarah Semple has been tantalising Early Medievalists for several years now with various papers and articles produced off the back of her doctoral research, completed at Oxford University in 2003. Her ground breaking thesis explored how the people of Anglo-Saxon England (AD c.400–1066) understood and utilised the prehistoric monuments that they found scattered across their landscape. In doing so, she explored not only archaeological evidence but also textual sources, folklore, and toponyms. Now, a decade after her PhD was finished, this much anticipated work has seen publication, and I am pleased to say that it does not disappoint. Brought out by Oxford University Press as part of their ongoing series on Medieval History and Archaeology edited by John Blair and Helena Hamerow, the quality of the published hardback tome is very good, having been edited well and given a nicely composed cover image. Nevertheless, at £85 it comes at a price tag that few archaeologists could afford, although

hopefully copies will be available in university libraries across the country.

Semple's work is a perfect example of many recent trends in Anglo-Saxon studies. Interdisciplinary approaches are (thankfully) becoming increasingly common, as archaeologists are coming to recognise the utility of a holistic investigatory approach. Within the study of pre-Christian religion in Early Medieval England more specifically, scholarship no longer relies on scrutinising the religious context of *Beowulf* or debating the beliefs behind the Sutton Hoo treasure. Now, influenced by archaeological approaches to the ideologies of prehistoric Britain, Anglo-Saxonists are increasingly devoting themselves to exploring the wider religious use and interpretation of landscape (c.f. Carver, Sanmark, and Semple 2010).

Semple opens her volume with an introductory chapter that examines the state of scholarship so far. She discusses the many different ways in which antiquarians, archaeologists, and historians have understood the relation between the Anglo-Saxons and the prehistoric monuments that littered their world; from the pioneering early attempts of the nineteenth-century through to recent developments in landscape archaeology.

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Moving into her second chapter, she analyses the evidence for the Anglo-Saxon re-use of prehistoric monuments in a funerary context. Rather than looking at all evidence of this from across the country, she adopts three regional case studies; West Sussex, East Yorkshire, and North Wiltshire, highlighting the existence of geographical diversity. In the third chapter she explores the non-funerary use of prehistory, discussing the evidence for Anglo-Saxon understandings of the relation between prehistoric monuments and the natural world, battlefields, assembly sites, and settlements. Proceeding to the fourth chapter, Semple looks specifically at the Christian Anglo-Saxon landscape, examining the available evidence for churches being constructed on top of or alongside such prehistoric monuments as barrows, megaliths, and earthworks. Chapter five deals purely with the literary and place name evidence for prehistoric monuments from the later centuries of the Early Medieval. The sixth chapter examines the use of prehistoric monuments as sites of royal and religious theatre from the mid to the late Anglo-Saxon period, discussing how they were used as sites of judicial execution, assembly, and the construction of elite residences. Semple ends the book with a concluding chapter summarising her findings and interpretations.

At the heart of Semple's thesis is that rather than ignoring such sites, the communities of Anglo-Saxon England made active use of the prehistoric and Romano-British monuments that they co-existed alongside in the landscape. However, she highlights that there was no single manner in which they did so, and that instead there was great regional, temporal, and thematic variation. As she notes, people of the fifth to seventh century used such sites "as places at which to bury their dead, creating new connections to place and landscape, and shaping their territory and terrain by means of mortuary events and practices" (p. 255), while at the same time such monuments also served as

assemblies, and musters" (p. 225). She proceeds to argue that things began to change dramatically in the seventh century, when elite groups began to show increasing interest in ancient monuments and used them in various ways to extend their own power by emphasising their military success and legal governance. Her interpretation of the evidence is both interesting and plausible, although – as with so many things in archaeology – it is certainly not unequivocal.

Throughout, the book is nicely illustrated with 59 photographs and maps. All but eight are reproduced in black-and-white, but they are nevertheless of a sufficient standard to allow the reader to better understand the landscapes and monuments under discussion. Although her prose is perfectly clear and readable, it is evident that Semple's book is aimed squarely at an audience already well acquainted with Anglo-Saxon archaeology – it certainly is not suitable as a primer on Anglo-Saxon religion and ritual (and does not claim to be). Nevertheless, it will undoubtedly be of interest to a wide range of archaeologists, including those interested in Medieval Britain, landscape archaeology, and the archaeology of religion and ritual. In dealing with pre-Christian belief systems and cultic practices, it would also be of great interest to many members of the contemporary Pagan, or Neo-Pagan movement, whose own faiths are greatly inspired by those of the past. Unfortunately, the manner in which it is published will probably prevent it from reaching a wider, non-academic audience.

Something that I thought particularly interesting about Semple's work was her decision to largely avoid the terms *paganism* and *heathenism* when referring to pre-Christian beliefs and practices. Conversely, she uses them when discussing the manner in which later Christian Anglo-Saxon viewed their own pre-Christian past. These terms have a long pedigree in Early Medieval studies, and have been used prominently in a number of recent publications discussing Anglo-Saxon England (c.f. Carver, Sanmark,

and Semple 2010; Hutton 2013). Alternately criticism has been voiced of such terminology within the Anglo-Saxon context (Turton 1995: 276–77; Scull 2011: 55), and it will be interesting to see if other scholars in future years take up Semple's lead. On a related note, I thought it unfortunate that such terms as *ritual*, *religion*, and *spirituality* were left undefined, reflecting the continued gulf in understanding between archaeology and fields like religious studies and ritual studies.

I must also express some misgivings with Semple's discussion of pre-Christian deities. She unfortunately fails to reference some of the most important recent research on the subject (Shaw 2002; Shaw 2011), and erroneously mixes proposed Anglo-Saxon mythical figures like Woden and Tiw with those of Scandinavian origin like Freyr and Thor (p. 75). I also wondered if Semple's arguments might have been aided by reference to ethnographic data or anthropological analysis, as has been used with some success by other archaeologists studying Early Medieval religion (c.f. Price 2002). Nevertheless, such criticisms are relatively minor in comparison to the great contribution that *Perceptions of the Prehistoric in Anglo-Saxon England* makes to Early Medieval studies. All in all, this is a very interesting book, and I hope that it will

be of interest not only to Medievalists but to specialists in various other fields too. I highly recommend it.

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