

Interpreting Transformations of People and Landscapes in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle

Ages: Archaeological Approaches and Issues. Edited by Pilar Diarte-Blasco and Neil Christie.

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This volume presents the results of two conferences in 2016, one in Rome and the other in Leicester, which focused on possible interpretations of the changes that occurred in the western part of the Roman empire between the fourth and seventh centuries, especially in light of archaeological data. The volume contains seventeen articles dealing with different geographical areas: Britain (Abigail Tompkins; Stephen Rippon; Roger White; Andy Seaman; Rob Collins); *Germania Secunda* (Stijn Heeren); Gaul (Claude Raynaud; Simon Esmonde Cleary); Iberian Peninsula (Javier Arce; Enrique Ariño; Pilar Diarte-Blasco; Lauro Olmo-Enciso; Alfonso Vigil-Escalera Guirado); and Italy (Gian Pietro Brogiolo; Roberto Meneghini; Roberto Goffredo and Giuliano Volpe; Alexandra Chavarría Arnau).

In the introduction, Neil Christie poses a series of theoretical reflections and suggestions – drawing parallels with the contemporary phenomenon of Brexit and the era of austerity – regarding the concept of change and its possible negative or positive effects, depending on the different points of view from which it is observed. These changes are difficult to catalogue using only the binaries of positive/negative, continuity/discontinuity or transformation/decay; the archaeological record shows a complex dimension in which we must also read the effects and possible meanings related to changes in society and people’s activities.

In Britain, data on the cemeteries of Wasperton and Bidford-on-Avon in the Avon Valley open up an interesting scenario regarding how post-Roman communities formed, and their relationship with the Romano-British tradition in a border area where ‘cultural reconciliation’ may have occurred. In this reconciliation, elements of the past were (re)negotiated and (re)interpreted

within the new socio-economic and cultural situation of the fifth to sixth centuries. The data from two projects, 'The Fields of Britannia' and 'Kingdom, Civitas and County' show how a landscape-centric perspective has permitted the discovery of new information about the continuity of use of cultivated fields between the Roman period and the early Middle Ages. Also interesting are suggestions on the themes of 'ethnogenesis' and linguistic identity interconnected with political and religious identities between west and east Britain during the transition between the end of the Roman period and the emergence of the new Anglo-Saxon dominion. The collapse of the Roman 'mode of production' in the Welsh countryside following the end of the Roman administration caused the decline of cities (Carmarthen, Cowbridge) between the fifth and sixth centuries, as well as a drastic change in rural settlement patterns, with a return almost to the 'pre-Roman past' with the emergence of post-Roman hillforts as central places (Dinas Powys, Hen Gastell). On Britain's northern border, the role of the *limitanei* not only in border defence but also in landscape management and exploitation would seem to have represented a social element of continuity even in the fifth and sixth centuries, making a significant contribution to the emergence of the new socio-economic and political scenarios of post-Roman Britain.

In *Germania Secunda*, the end of Roman possession in AD 401–2 would seem to be linked to the substantial number of settlements abandoned after the fourth century in the Lower Rhine area. However, some villas (e.g. Neerharen-Rekem) were already reoccupied by 'northern style' sunken-huts and farmhouses during the second half of the fourth century, perhaps in association with migratory waves.

In southern Gaul, the decay of the villa system between the fifth and sixth centuries and the new success of long-lasting secondary agglomerations such as *Cassinomagus*/Chassenon are prominent. The interpretation of late antique landscapes in this area is also centred on the different ways of reading the decline of the villa system, the evaluation of the weak or strong

impact of Christianization, and the possibility of understanding the contribution of migration, or rather immigration, to the formation of new post-Roman settlement models. The data for the *Novempopulana* province shows the relationships between factors of continuity in the use/reuse of spaces, and affirms new signs of ecclesiastical power as evidenced by the settlement sequence of the famous site of Séviac.

In the case of late antique Spain, the comparison of historical with archaeological sources enriches the complexity of the interpretative framework of the transformations of society. The extant written sources about the great properties of the elites in the Visigothic era (e.g. Theudis's wife) are flanked by many cases of decaying *villae* that were reused for new, more functional purposes, a sign of a decline in 'lifestyle' standards but not of a complete abandonment of the countryside by the aristocracy. On the basis of several surveys of the *ager Salmanticensis*, a possible model for the evolution of the population between the fourth and eighth centuries is proposed: 1) fourth century: active villa system; 2) early decades of the fifth century: crisis and reuse of villas in parallel with the emergence of new sites; 3) late fifth to sixth centuries: new peasant settlements and new signs of specifically ecclesiastical power, evidenced by the construction of churches and the documentation of the *pizarras visigodas*; 4) eighth century: general collapse of the previous sites and emergence of (re)fortified sites in the early Islamic period. From a study of the Ebro Valley, interesting data emerges regarding the formation of a 'Visigothic landscape' following a villa system that had already been 'altered' by phenomena of reuse (a sign of the continuity of *fundi* management by owners who no longer lived there?) and which was characterized by the development of new villages. This very complex 'Visigothic landscape' arose in the centre of the Iberian Peninsula, dominated by unfavourable climatic conditions that influenced the evolution of a stratified society based on surplus production by peasant communities under the control of the state and elites. Post-Roman landscapes which, as

in the case of inner Iberia, show different levels of discontinuity with the imperial period underline the formation of new economic structures and social relations.

In northern Italian cities between the fifth and the sixth centuries, the macro-phenomenon of the end of the ancient city and the destructuring of both public and private spaces was followed by a new reorganization in which the growing militarization of society and elites was decisive, to an even greater extent than the power of the church. The dynamism and impact of the church in the creation of new urban topographies is, instead, another possible key to understanding late antique and early medieval Rome. Christian rituals took the place of the *munera*, and the growing symbiosis between spaces for the living and those for the dead (*intra moenia* burials) caused new social habits and changes in popular beliefs. As for rural landscapes, the case study of Apulia is one of the best-investigated examples for understanding the so-called 'late antique agrarian system' and beyond. From the mid-fifth century, the capacity for resilience to the crisis of this system led to the formation of new settlement contexts which, as in the case of Faragola, reused the villas within a completely different socio-economic scenario during the sixth and seventh centuries. The data on early medieval burials in northern Italy, based on the results from the 'Early Medieval Cemeteries in Northern Italy' project, reveal little uniformity in funerary practices, a sign of 'fragmentation and instability' and dependence on family group dynamics or local identities. Only in the late seventh and eighth centuries were funerary habits formalized within a framework of greater uniformity and religious–spiritual and political stability.

In general, this collection presents new data for the wide-ranging debate on the archaeology of the transition from late antiquity to the early medieval period. It highlights new and interesting aspects – from the north to the south of Europe – of the factors and the change agents that affected settlement processes and the formation/transformation of new post-Roman societies.

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