

## **Early Medieval Enquiries**

Reviewed in *Kelten* 53 (February 2012) by Christel Franken

Much has been written about Great Britain during the period AD410 to 1066. This period often gets called the Dark Ages. This term describes the chaos that ensued after the Romans left but it shows up gaps about our knowledge due to the lack of written evidence. In *Early Medieval Enquiries* you will find 18 articles which focus particularly on the time. In this selection the areas of South West England, South Wales and the north west of England are central to the book. Using several different disciplines and research methods they have taken a new look at AD 410-1066.

So Michael Costen in the first article examines the distribution of coins in 5th-11th centuries Somerset. In combination with the texts of the time you can deduce which were the important places of trade around Somerset. Sognnes shows us what cultural artefacts the Norwegian Vikings left behind and what influence these finds had on British & Irish people. His article centres on the Trøndelag province; here there were some important finds, for instance tools which give insight into the daily lives of the Vikings and their trading habits. The clustering of these finds provide more information about the governing centres and trading locations. Coins and relics found in Norway came from invasions of Britain and used as evidence of overseas contact.

Stuart Prior, Tony Roberts & Peter Twinn used the same method and looked at the influence and remains of the Vikings in South West England, namely the geographical distribution of written and archaeological sources, are their main focus. The finds in this area have been mostly ignored in earlier research and the writers conclude that, against conventional opinion, the Scandinavian Vikings had been there a long time and in an important capacity.

Meggan Gondek concentrates on Pictish inscriptions and the places in Aberdeenshire where these were found. Gondek has chosen an interesting and notable corner of Britain. She doesn't look at why they were made but why they were made in a particular way. Not only the material but the thinking behind the idea of what the maker probably wanted to portray, and how their lives were organised and which ideology had the upper hand. According to Gondek, these were important.

Albert Thompson, John Davey, Rebecca Roseff and Stuart Prior (together with Rob Silversides) used a range of research methods: for instance archaeological finds, historical documents, aerial photography, magnetometry, geophysics research and cartographical analysis. These articles are specialist and wide ranging but extremely interesting due to the long time period studied. They also examined the historical background that meant that what is normally a dry piece of work has come to life. The articles of Dave Durkin, Jonathan Mullis, P.J. Pikes, Tim Malim and Gavin Kingsley concentrate on archaeological analysis and finds in a particular area. The articles are very specialist and contain dry analysis of the historical background to the find areas, the excavation itself and the artefacts with the use of many codes and abbreviations. These papers were therefore more difficult to follow and directed more to researchers that may be interested in these finds.

George Nash examines the role that memory plays in defining a common history and oral history of events. Important for remembering are for instance people, places, buildings and objects, ideally a combination of these. In oral history, small events are always exaggerated so that a relatively minor event is suddenly epic. Nash studied petroglyphs in Heysham, Lancashire, and concludes that these serve as a constant, tangible reminder of a mythical and mnemonic past.

The article by Frank Olding is mainly interesting for students of celtic studies. He studied Llangorse Crannog in relation to Canu Llywarch Hen to see how the literature reflects society. He examines charters and manuscripts where this royal place is mentioned and documents the historical and political background to the place. Afterwards he discusses the background against which these poems have been composed. Llangorse would be the perfect place for this. In the poems themselves but also in other documents, Olding states there is evidence that the emergence of Canu Llywarch Hen in or around Llangorse is likely. For instance there is an early indication for Canu Llywarch Hen in 'the dyke of Llywarch Hen' in the Llangorse act of King Aust in the book of Llandaff from around the 8th century. It is noticeable that Llywarch associates this act with the dyke; this would demonstrate knowledge of the stories over Llywarch and his sons who defended dykes and borders during the english invasion. So Olding shows that the poems give us a glimpse into the customs of society but also it reveals an insight into the general ambience of everyday life that were seen and heard at the court of the king.

*Early Medieval Enquiries* delivers what it promises; many new insights and sometimes a surprising revelation through which it becomes clearer that there is more to discover yet about the early middle ages. So this period, which is often labelled as dark, through this book has come to life and is more colourful than ever before.