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Planning in the Early Medieval Landscape, by John Blair, Stephen Rippon and Christopher Smart (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020; pp. i-xv + 351 £80.00).

This fascinating book sets out a deceptively straightforward argument: 'that certain settlements and building complexes, in certain periods (*c.* 600-800 and then *c.* 940-1000), were laid out in accordance with geometrically accurate grids, the work of surveyors in the tradition of the Roman *agrimensores*.' (p. xiii). Yet even to conceive of this idea required substantial effort. First, it was necessary to take an imaginative leap and wonder whether the designing, planning, and surveying that some scholars observed in stone churches, and others in the plans of individual settlements, was more widespread. Second, it was necessary to attend to disparate fragments of evidence pointing to an interest in Roman surveying. Famously, the excavated royal vill at Yeavering, laid out with geometrical precision, included an individual buried with a Roman-style *groma* or surveying tool (pp. 99-100, Fig. 4.9, and 120-1, Fig. 5.2). Less well known are four compendia of gromatic texts, either certainly, or probably, in England by 1066 (p. 105). Third, it was necessary to undertake painstaking work on the plans of excavated settlements to identify a unit of measurement – the *short perch* of 15 imperial feet (4.75m). Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that John Blair originally began work on this idea during a three-year Leverhulme funded project on the archaeological evidence for Anglo-Saxon settlements – now written up as *Building Anglo-Saxon England* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018). Initial thoughts appeared in a paper in *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History*, 18 (2013), pp. 18-61.

To go further, and to construct a plausible and persuasive case, demanded courage and commitment. As the authors observe, 'The area of study is one that at best cannot avoid some subjective judgements, and at worst risks sailing close to the edge of rational academic enquiry.' (p. xiii) This, as they note, may partly reflect differences in human cognition,

because individuals seem to have different potential for identifying and accepting patterns in data (p. xiv). Later they acknowledge there has been a heated debate surrounding similar arguments for an ongoing culture of land surveying in France (pp. 106-7). Anticipating this problem, John Blair and Stephen Rippon sought further Leverhulme funding for a systematic analysis of the evidence; Christopher Smart conducted research, Eric Fernie considered the geometry of church buildings, and Clair Barnes and Wilfrid Kendall determined statistical probabilities. They began by using Geographical Information Systems to interrogate the morphology of former medieval parochial settlements on nineteenth-century first edition Ordinance Survey maps. They proceeded by investigating each of the possible examples using LiDAR, early aerial photographs, pre-nineteenth-century maps, and excavated features, and then comparing them to other cases that did not exhibit grid-plans. To this dataset they added those excavated medieval settlements which seem to be grid-planned but were subsequently replaced, a sample of other types of settlements for comparison, and a sample of Deserted Medieval Villages. Together the team debated each example and threw out any on which there was no consensus, resulting in a catalogue (Appendix C, pp. 254-311).

After introducing the project, setting out the historiography of early medieval settlements and field systems, and working through the methodology, three chapters set out the main strands of the argument. A discussion of post-Roman planning technologies provides an overview of Roman surveyors, their equipment, their techniques, and their manuals, before charting the transmission of knowledge about Roman surveying on the Continent and in England, and – despite the abandonment of the groma – evidence for a continuing culture of surveying. Along the way, the likely moments for the transmission of this knowledge and culture to English Britain are identified: the period of conversion and church building in the seventh and eighth centuries, and the period of monastic reform in the tenth century. This sets up the framework for analysis of individual higher-status and rural

settlements in the next two chapters, which interpret their grid-plans as expressions of the ideas spread by conversion and monastic reform. At every stage there are plentiful and helpful illustrations, including diagrams from surveying manuals, artefacts from excavations, and even a photo of John Blair trying out surveying with a rod; and there are maps ranging from national maps of the distribution of potential medieval grid-planned settlements, to excerpts from nineteenth-century maps, to redrawn excavation and building plans, all overlain with appropriate grids.

Not everyone, as the authors anticipate, will accept the overall argument or each of the individual case studies. Perhaps we should declare our cognitive inclinations before making critical comment: being a person inclined to see patterns, much of this seems persuasive to me. The evidence for seventh- and eighth-century church buildings at Brixworth, Canterbury, Escomb, and Hexham, for the royal vill at Yeavering, for the churches at Hexham, and Escomb, and for the plans of the monastery at Whitby and the halls at Dover and Lyminge, or for the tenth-century monastery at Peterborough, or for eleventh-century Westminster Abbey, seems compelling, and the patterns in many of the rural settlements seem identifiable too. Yet there is much else that caught my attention here. This book presents a model for establishing a scientific methodology for a collaborative project on apparently subjective research. It asks us to consider how people went about solving practical problems on the ground and envisages important links between religious institutions, transmission of knowledge, and practice on the ground. At points, it prompts definition and exploration of the activities of people who must have been central to the completion of settlements, but are poorly-recorded, such as the discussion of land surveyors, high-grade architects, and vernacular builders (p. 113). It introduces us to disparate and intriguing pieces of evidence – a fourteenth-century surveying manual, the 'Book of Bertrand Boysset', from Provence, and its possible links to a fifteenth-century Finnish legal compendium (pp. 107-

10). It has implications for historical transitions, including the impact of the Norman Conquest (pp. 110-12).

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