



Oliver H. Creighton, Duncan W. Wright. *The Anarchy: War and Status in 12th-Century Landscapes of Conflict*. Exeter Studies in Medieval Europe. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017. Illustrations. 346 pp. \$120.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-78138-242-4.

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The Anarchy: War and Status in 12th-Century Landscapes of Conflict is a compelling study of the reign of King Stephen of England (r. 1135-54) and of larger changes to the physical landscape of England during the twelfth century. Through meticulous research into the archaeological evidence of this “forgotten century” alongside the analysis of contemporary texts, Oliver H. Creighton and Duncan W. Wright make a broad case for the need for increased dialogue between academic disciplines in medieval studies (p. 8). Namely, the authors show that historians, scholars of literature, and archaeologists ought to pool their methodologies and (often limited) resources together to better understand a given chronology and geography within the medieval world.

This book is the first of two major publications by Creighton and Wright (the second, *Castles, Siegeworks and Settlements: Surveying the Archaeology of the Twelfth Century*, is forthcoming from Archaeopress) that stems from a grant provided by the Leverhulme Trust. This first publication summarizes much of the archaeological work funded by this grant and, more important, puts it into dialogue with previous scholarship on the period commonly called the “Anarchy” during the reign of King Stephen. Creighton and Wright, both professional archaeologists, aim to “collate, present

and interrogate a diverse body of archaeological, architectural and other material evidence in order to contribute to ongoing debates—in particular that about whether England witnessed ‘anarchy’ in the mid-twelfth century—but also to reveal some new directions for our understanding of the civil war and for conflict landscapes more generally” (p. 3). In doing so, *The Anarchy* shows that this period was not one of total breakdown but rather an “age of transition” that saw meaningful changes to the economy, development of towns, patronage of art, growth of monastic orders, construction of varied fortifications, and the emergence of divisions within the nobility (p. 289). Some of these changes were certainly disruptive at the local level, as dramatically perceived by contemporary ecclesiastical authors, but some of them—as documented by archaeological excavations and other sources of material culture evidence—were constructive.

The Anarchy is divided into seven substantive chapters flanked by an introduction (chapter 1), historical outline (chapter 2), and conclusion (chapter 10). Each of the seven chapters tackles a specific theme within the context of twelfth-century England, from the physical battlefield to the construction of churches to the fate of towns and cities surrounded by war. Chapters 3 and 4 focus

on sites of conflict, both the rare episodes in which armies met in open battle and the far more common siege. Within these chapters, narrative descriptions of and archaeological evidence from castles loom large. Recent excavations reveal much about the conduct of siege warfare during the Anarchy and its intersection with larger societal trends. It was commonplace, for example, for armies to construct “siege castles”—typically small circular structures made of wood—to monitor sieges and prevent supplies from reaching the besieged. These temporary structures were more than a site of war, however. They also served as the site of a temporary court, a place to produce royal charters, and an opportunity to indulge in the diplomacy and posturing that was developing alongside the idea of chivalry. During the reign of Stephen, it also became increasingly common for members of the nobility to construct their own castles, which medieval writers derided as “adulterine” and emblematic of societal conflict that posed, at times, an existential threat to clerics (p. 83). Although contemporary authors were quick to dismiss these structures, archaeological evidence shows the ingenuity that went into their creation and their construction as more of a result of an ascendent class of elites than a slackening of centralized authority.

Archaeological evidence outside of castles is much more piecemeal during the twelfth century, but *The Anarchy* nonetheless synthesizes what is available to great effect. Chapter 6, for example, shows the small but meaningful changes that occurred within the battlefields of England around the time of the Anarchy: mail rings that were smaller and finer, swords and armor with inscriptions inspired by Christian motifs, and the development of heraldic symbols on shields. These changes happened against the backdrop of other technological changes, namely, the use of ranged projectiles like bodkin arrows and crossbow bolts, that made the position of armored knights on the battlefield (who more often than not fought on foot) more perilous. Although the focus of *The Anarchy* is on

sites of conflict, this does not preclude the study of religious structures, urban centers, and rural villages (chapters 7 and 8). Studies to emerge from these areas highlight localized trends and instances of violence during this conflict. Thus, while London emerged from the Anarchy stronger than ever as a bastion of royal power, Winchester stagnated from a large siege and the sacking of the city.

The thematic ground covered throughout this volume is substantial, and Creighton and Wright admirably synthesize volumes of evidence (much of it derived from excavations) alongside textual evidence to produce a compelling vision of war and society around the time of the Anarchy. They do so with an admirable honesty about what is and is not possible with this evidence. While the book is littered with incredible maps derived from GIS models, many of them made by Michael Fradley and Steven Trick, the authors are unwilling to stretch what data is available to reach irresponsible conclusions. Thus, although castles provide the single largest source of archaeological data from the Anarchy, the authors are unwilling to create a map that catalogs the number of castles built during the reign of Stephen because the data is so ambiguous that “any attempt to do so would be misleading” (p. 94). They are also forthcoming about the many difficulties associated with pinpointing archaeology to a time period as specific as the Anarchy, which in part necessitates the larger chronological framework for this book. Throughout *The Anarchy*, the authors also provide substantial citations, and the book’s bibliography will be useful to anyone interested in the study of twelfth-century England.

The Anarchy is an incredible example of the kind of innovative scholarship that can be produced through interdisciplinary methods. Although Creighton and Wright delve into the details of archaeological excavations, they do so with a style that is easy to comprehend and free from jargon. This style of research shows the fruits that come from integrating archaeological studies into his-

torical narratives informed heavily by texts, while recognizing the shortcomings of both pools of evidence. Although archaeological evidence is often difficult to pin down to a precise chronology and survives unevenly, it offers long-term perspectives and views of the lower echelons of society in ways that textual evidence does not. Conversely, although textual evidence is subject to the perspectives of its authors and the conventions of contemporary writing, it provides a degree of specificity for individual events and historical actors not found in the archaeological record. The combination of these types of evidence, so admirably synthesized and analyzed in *The Anarchy*, deserves to be replicated in other medieval contexts and combined with emerging methods from the fields of history and archaeology, including digital text mapping and environmental archaeology.

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