

Book Review

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BOOKS REVIEWED: D. M. PALLISER, *MEDIEVAL YORK: 600-1540* (OXFORD: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2014), xxii + 332 pp. ISBN: 978-0199255849, AND SARAH REES JONES, *YORK: THE MAKING OF A CITY 1068-1350* (OXFORD: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2013), xxxii + 373 pp. ISBN: 978-0198201946

It may seem somewhat surprising that the Oxford University Press have published, within less than a year of each other, two volumes ostensibly covering the same topic. However, scholars of medieval York, and medieval urban history more widely, will be delighted that two such excellent monographs have been recognised as valuable additions to the field.

Both books highlight the extensive scholarship that has been produced on so many aspects of medieval York over the years. Indeed, one might think that there is scarcely much more to say on the topic, and yet, both authors express that there are still numerous gaps to be filled in the literature. Palliser suggests that a satisfactory book-length overview has been lacking. The title 'medieval York' has been employed on numerous occasions to describe the period after the Norman Conquest of England, from Edward Miller's much-referenced essay in the *Victoria County History* to Gareth Dean's more recent 2008 volume.¹ However, Palliser uses the term 'to cover the millennium or so from the fall of the Western Roman Empire to the sixteenth century' (p. vi). Rees Jones' aim is also to address a lacuna within published scholarship, by providing the first book-length study of York between 1068 and 1350.

¹ Edward Miller, 'Medieval York' in *he Victoria History of the Counties of England: A History of Yorkshire. The City of York*, ed. by P. M. Tillott (London, 1961), pp. 25-116; Gareth Dean, *Medieval York* (Stroud, 2008).

Despite the similarities between the main subject matter of these two volumes, their aims and methodologies are very different. Palliser takes a fairly rapid approach through 1000 years of history, but his book is comprehensive in scope and content. Moreover, he sets York within a wide context of other towns and national events throughout, enabling the reader to draw from any wider understanding they may have of medieval England. The book leans most directly upon secondary sources and existing literature, although it is clear that Palliser's previous work on York, spanning nearly fifty years of research and publication, provides the background for his approach.

Rees Jones suggests that histories of York before 1300 have tended to imagine its early development as a sequence of political and military events that placed York at the centre of English national affairs. To a certain extent, Palliser's study reflects this tendency. Palliser emphasises York as a fixed point in a shifting political landscape, and approaches the city's development by placing it against the backdrop of state formation and warfare. *Medieval York* is structured chronologically, beginning with Roman York, and continuing to be divided by conquests, dynasties, and reigns. Palliser's book is slightly weighted towards the post-Conquest period, with only the first eighty-four pages (including the Introduction) being devoted to the period up to 1066. He points out in the Preface (p. vii) 'the sheer scarcity of early medieval evidence of any type', for York; however, given the aim of the book it seems a shame to seemingly limit the discussion of the early medieval period.

Rees Jones argues that the twelfth to fourteenth centuries of York have been relatively neglected, and that the inhabitants of York need to be placed at centre stage as the creative force behind the growth of the city. *York: The Making of a City* presents new primary evidence for the poly-focal character of York and the integration between town and country. The book is the result of detailed examination of private archives and estate records. Charters are used to both reconstruct the physical topographical development of the town and assess the networks of social relations fostered by developing concepts of property. The documentary records are combined with archaeological evidence; although, for Rees Jones the archaeological record is not at the forefront of discussion, but is woven into the main analysis. Palliser, on the other hand, provides an overview of the archaeological work itself, and the ways in which the results of excavation in the twentieth century have greatly shaped how we now conceive early medieval York.

There is also significant overlap in the contents of both books, despite the difference in chronological scope indicated by their titles. The first chapters of both books to some extent cover the same issues: the Roman origins of York and the stories of the city's foundation. Both Palliser and Rees Jones highlight the legacy of Roman settlement and occupation to the medieval, and even the modern, cityscape, discussing the *colonia* and the influence upon the alignment of streets and defences. In his discussion of 'Sub-Roman York', Palliser argues that York was not entirely deserted: 'there continued to be life in the town, if not town life' (p. 17). Rees Jones further discusses the influence of the Roman plan on the city's medieval topography in her second chapter, 'Landscapes of Lordship'. She too suggests that the area of the Roman fortress was central to the minster's lordship by the eleventh centu-

ry, and argues that the influence of surviving Roman structures and sites was stronger in areas belonging to the archbishop, than the crown. Palliser and Rees Jones also both discuss ideas of medieval myth-making and memory, which influenced early medieval York; in particular, Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History* of the foundation of York by the Trojan prince, Ebraucus. Both authors suggest that the myths concerning the greatness of Roman York appealed to its medieval citizens, validating their importance, and their political aspirations.

Chapter 2 of *Medieval York* turns to the early medieval period from c. 600, up to 866, and considers the resettlement of the city in this period. Palliser's primary argument is that we must not assume some (unrecorded) continuity of urban life from Roman to medieval. Palliser focuses on the idea of York as a proto-urban settlement, with a fortress, *colonia*, and a commercial *wic* centred on Fishergate. Rees Jones also considers York in these terms and makes the same case for a poly-focal settlement, arguing that the city's role as a centre of royal and ecclesiastical government led to the regeneration of urban life from the mid-seventh century, and a planned resettlement in the area of the *canabae* from the ninth century.

Chapter 3 of *Medieval York* deals with the Anglo-Scandinavian city, from 866 to 1066. This chapter leans heavily upon the work of Richard Hall and his Coppergate excavations. Following chronological sections covering Viking kings and earls, Chapter 3 continues more thematically, examining the topography and economy of Jorvik, primarily through archaeological evidence. The final part of Palliser's third chapter considers the picture of York given by the Domesday survey, in the time of King Edward.

The Norman Conquest and the process of Norman development in the city are the main focus of both books' fourth chapters. Palliser's approach is to focus primarily on the impact of the Norman Conquest from the viewpoint of the kings and their reigns, and the process of the conquest in the north. Both Palliser and Rees Jones address the issues related to the Domesday Book, such as the meaning of the term 'waste', and the 'harrying of the North'. Palliser stands by his view that York was treated harshly 'but not more so than other major towns' (pp. 89-90), and doubts whether York and the surrounding area were a depopulated 'desert' (p. 91). Rees Jones forms a different conclusion, arguing that the immediate impact of the conquest on York 'was ruinous', with the destruction of the Anglo-Scandinavian town and part of the area of Clementhorpe (pp. 87-8). She argues that reappraisals of the evidence suggest that the original impressions of brutality were not exaggerated, and that excavation of abandonment supports the Domesday record. Palliser's chronological narrative continues through Chapter 4, with the reigns of William II, Henry I, Stephen and the early Angevins, discussing civil war, the Jewish population of York and St William's cult. Rees Jones follows the same narrative framework, and argues that initiatives by the first Norman kings suggest they intended to turn York into a monumental royal capital, but they failed to realise their ambitions: investment was not sustained, and power was ceded to local magnates and the archbishop.

Putting York into the national context, Palliser provides an overview of the growth and changes in

towns for the period 1215 to 1349 in Chapter 5. He discusses the impact of the Scottish wars and the presence of royal government in York, on trade, merchants, and the economy, reviving a previous idea of York as England's second city. This chapter also focuses on York's population, the development of the city as a corporation, and the involvement of its citizens in collective action.

Palliser's sixth and seventh chapters both deal, to some extent, with ideas of urban decline. It has been suggested that the Black Death, following the Great Famine and Scottish raids, proved to be the prelude to a remarkable recovery in York's size and wealth, in which the citizens enjoyed greater prosperity than ever before. However, Palliser indicates that the economic evidence is both huge and hugely controversial. The debate over urban decline is still unresolved, and, Palliser suggests, is possibly 'irresoluble', because it turns on the definitions of decline, and imperfect statistics of wealth and population (p. 235). Ultimately Palliser argues that we should not exaggerate York's decline around 1450: it remained an attractive city for nobles, gentry, and monastic houses. However, for the period after *c.* 1450 he acknowledges that York was hindered by wider changes in England's economy, and by civil wars. Yet, Palliser suggests, even in its darkest days the city's community never dissolved into chaos or anarchy, this must have been due in part to a strong corporate sense, which bound incomers into a mutually supportive society.

The development of this corporate sense of society is indeed one of the main themes of Rees Jones' book. Following her introductory chapter, she continues with a reconstruction of the urban estates and influence of York Minster, the king, and the earl of Northumbria, on the eve of conquest. The description of York in Domesday Book provides a starting point for the reassessment of the relative influence of these lords. She makes the supposition that in origin, York was dominated and developed under the aegis of the cathedral community. This cathedral domination was one of the factors, Rees Jones suggests, that made York different to other cities, and why after the conquest the Norman kings needed to urgently imprint their own authority on York. In Chapter 3 Rees Jones examines documentary sources, morphological analysis and excavations for the lesser landowners and their urban estates. Again, she argues that the Domesday record may simplify a more complex hierarchy of holdings. Rees Jones contends that the city was not one city or one community but several, each of which was dominated by social hierarchies and local landowners.

The next three chapters of *York: The Making of a City* (Chapters 4, 5 and 6) analyse changes in landholding after the conquest, and the impact of royal government, the church, and the emerging civic community over the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Chapter 4 argues that the first Norman kings attempted to turn York into a strong northern base for the royal household. However, royal government could only operate through the agency of local lords, both secular and ecclesiastical. Chapter 5 deals with the changes to the estates of the minster and other ecclesiastical landlords between 1100 and 1350. Here Rees Jones demonstrates that the Norman Conquest was followed by an extensive reconfiguration of church-owned estates, which had a profound influence on the development of the city. She concludes that ecclesiastical landlords played an important part in creating 'proto-civic

communities' (p. 140). Chapter 6 explores the households of civic leaders, such as mayors, as well as other citizens, in particular focusing on the concepts of family and marriage. Rees Jones considers, throughout this chapter, and her book more widely, not just on what the records say, but importantly, the development of the records themselves as part of the development of the city.

In Chapter 7, Rees Jones provides some wider geographical context for developments within York by looking at its rural hinterland and the relationship between town and country. She demonstrates that while we might tend to think of the developments of civic government as city-centred, all were products of the city's relationship with its rural hinterland. Chapter 8 focuses upon private and domestic property, evaluating the economic value of it and its distribution among different social groups. Here, she provides a case study of three interconnected and unusually well-documented families in the thirteenth century: Fairfax, Clervaux, and Stodley. This chapter also focuses upon issues of family property and gender, as well as occupational topography (continuing the poly-focal development of the city), and domestic architecture.

Despite the various overlaps in subject matter between these two volumes, their differing methodologies creates two very different types of discussion. Whilst it could be considered that there is no ground-breaking new research on display in *Medieval York*, Palliser's achievement is in the scope of his book, which is unconstrained by discipline or chronology, and he certainly achieves his aim of providing an overview survey. *Medieval York* is a very readable volume. It is a difficult task to create such an engaging and accessible book, with such scholarly rigour as Palliser does. Whilst large in scope, and a great read across the whole period, this is also a book which can quite easily be picked up at any chapter to read alone, or even as a reference work for a particular period or theme, given the provision of index, references and select bibliography. There are eight maps and a central section of glossy coloured plates, which serve to give a quick snapshot of those perhaps unfamiliar with York, medieval or modern. Palliser manages to strike a careful balance in appealing to both the specialist and non-specialist reader.

In contrast, Rees Jones' volume contains no images, but does have a total of eighteen maps, illustrating the changing topography of the city. She also provides a good bibliography, three-part index, and a glossary. The book's technical analysis and local detail sometimes distract the reader from the overall argument, although the chapter conclusions provide useful summaries. For those without an existing general knowledge of either medieval or modern York, the inclusion of such extensive local detail, which is the main basis of the book, may prove a little confusing. However, this is a thoroughly researched volume, which reads in a strong and authoritative manner – there are no sweeping speculations or generalisations made. Rees Jones' book is a comprehensive study of the history, development and working of a medieval city, and is undoubtedly a must-read for the scholar of medieval York.

Rees Jones unintentionally provides a useful way of summarising the distinctions between these two volumes: she suggests that providing a narrative overview irons out much of the character and rich

idiosyncrasies of daily life, and 'it would be more fun to focus on a single street corner and to watch the world go by' (p. 308). Therefore, whereas Palliser's approach creates a broad view of the city in the wider context of local and national events, Rees Jones takes us right into the heart of the city, to its streets and its people.