

Book Review

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BOOK REVIEWED: NICHOLAS J. HIGHAM AND MARTIN J. RYAN, *THE ANGLO-SAXON WORLD* (NEW HAVEN AND LONDON: YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2013): xv + 477 pp, ISBN: 978-0-300-12534-4.

The Anglo-Saxon period is far from being secondary in the history the English-speaking world, as it comprises events such as the progressive disappearance of the concept of Roman Britain and the emergence of a new cultural and political entity, England ('the land of Angles'). To describe this age, Nicholas J. Higham and Martin J. Ryan adopt an interdisciplinary approach, in which burial records, settlement archaeology, palaeo-ethnicity and place-names are considered alongside more known sources like Bede, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* or the *Domesday Book*. The resulting picture reveals a world which is complex and unexpectedly colourful, in open contrast with the reconstructions of many scholars of the past, often all too happy to rely almost exclusively on the few great narratives that survived, uncritically accepting their biased perspectives.

In the Introduction, Higham and Ryan explain why a history of the Anglo-Saxons is still relevant today and define the concept of 'being Anglo-Saxon' from a linguistic and cultural point of view. The chronological limits are fixed with clarity, and the general organization of the book is explained. An interesting feature is the series of short essays entitled 'Sources and Issues' following each chapter, aimed at providing a general discussion on the main primary sources and historiographic debates.

Chapter 1, 'Britain in and out the Roman Empire', is an updated overview of the history of Britain under the Romans (c. AD 43-410), where the main administrative divisions of the province and its level of 'Romanization' are carefully assessed in order to provide a solid background for the discussion of the end of the Roman occupation of the island. It is inferred that in the mid-fifth century there still was a 'Roman' elite running Britain, notwithstanding the return of most of the legions to the continent, but that Roman Britain gradually collapsed because of the lack of imperial intervention.

Chapter 2, 'The Origins of England', discusses the *adventus Saxonum* (c. AD 430-570), considered the principal event that caused the final collapse of Roman Britain. The proposed model sees the 'English settlement' not as a sort of ethnic cleansing, as often described in Victorian times, but a small-scale social transformation fuelled by the migration of bands of German warriors that progressively filled the gaps left open by the disappearing civil elite of the island. This resulted in a cultural shift that marked the ending of 'Roman' and 'British' and the birth of something new and 'Anglo-Saxon'.

Chapter 3, 'From Tribal Chieftains to Christian Kings', is an open challenge to Bede, who saw the coming of St Augustine in Kent in 597 as the most crucial event between the sixth and the seventh centuries. The authors convincingly show that, even if the Conversion to Catholicism was clearly important, other changes should not be underestimated, such as the emergence of the first Anglo-Saxon kingdoms and the revival of trade. Moreover, the story of the Conversion does not seem as unproblematic as Bede's account suggests. Not only was there a certain opposition to Christianity, but Rome was not the only protagonist of the story: Frankish influence should be taken in consideration too, together with the support of Scottish and even British missionaries.

The central chapters of the book deal with the progressive creation of England, making sure to avoid an *a posteriori* perspective that would see the period as a series of trial runs at political unity. Each event is seen in its contemporary context in order to highlight its unique features. So, in Chapter 4, 'The Mercian supremacies', the overkingship of the Mercians over the Anglo-Saxons during the eighth century is put into discussion, showing that the influence of their kings was fluctuating and often contested. Of particular interest is the successful attempt to put England into a broader European context, considering, for example, the contacts that Offa had with Charlemagne and the trade relations that developed between the island and the Continent.

Chapters 5, 'The Anglo-Saxons and the Vikings, c. 825-900', and 6, 'Conquest, Reform and the Making of England', cover the turbulent period of the 'heathen invasion'. Here as elsewhere, a great variety of sources are employed. Therefore, if the increased sense of instability is reconstructed by references to ninth century charters and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, the changes taking place in

urban life are reconstructed with an analysis of archaeological evidence, while the extent of the Scandinavian settlement is assessed using place-names and material culture.

The issue of the over-abundance of sources concerning key-figures is dealt with by a careful analysis of each work, highlighting the immediate context in which it was produced and the political agenda of its author. This is the case, for example, with Alfred the Great, but also with the main historical figures appearing in the last two chapters of the book, 7, 'The Age of Aethelred', and 8, 'The Transformation of Anglo-Saxon England', discussing the events immediately preceding the coming of William in 1066. Of a particular interest is the analysis of the Bayeux Tapestry – an illuminating example of how figurative sources can be used in an historical inquiry.

Writing a book like this one is not an easy task. Higham and Ryan managed to do it brilliantly, explaining the Anglo-Saxon period with a clear and elegant style, easily accessible to a broad, non-specialist audience. Because of the introductory nature of the work, the reader should not expect a series of footnotes explaining every detail of the scholarly debate. However, those interested in deepening their knowledge of the subject will find an essential tool in the bibliography at the end of the book, which provides an updated list of the principal publications concerning the discussed topics.

The only flaw of a book that is excellent from any other perspective is the lack an appendix with a selection of passages taken from the main written sources of the period. Very often, these works are described but not quoted, so the reader is unable to have direct experience of their contents. Such section could have provided an undoubtedly useful conclusion.