

## Book Review

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**BOOK REVIEWED:** SARAH SEMPLE, *PERCEPTIONS OF THE PREHISTORIC IN ANGLO-SAXON ENGLAND: RELIGION, RITUAL, AND RULERSHIP IN THE LANDSCAPE* (OXFORD: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2013), xv + 352 pp. ISBN: 978-0199683109

Sarah Semple's volume is a wonderful example of how archaeology, ethnography, and philology can and should be put to work together. It is also a much-needed synthesis of a large array of scholarship of the past decades being produced in parallel (in these and other fields), but only rarely in dialogue or collaboration. Its main aim is to unravel the many ways in which the Anglo-Saxons perceived and made use of the prehistoric monuments and landscapes, which provided the backdrop for their settlement, identity- and nation-building, and for their political and religious life.

The first Anglo-Saxons coming to the British Isles did not settle in a void (be it postcolonial, *pace* Nicholas Howe, ('Anglo-Saxon England and the Post-Colonial Void', in *Postcolonial Approaches to the European Middle Ages: Translating Cultures*, eds. Ananya Jahanara Kabir and Deanne Williams [Cambridge, 2005], pp. 25-47) – the remains of a series of civilisations could be seen all over the territory they lived on). And while they (especially later on through their Latinate elites) had a quite clear sense of what remains belonged to the civilisation of the Roman Empire, there were also Neolithic henges, barrows, standing stones, Iron Age hill forts strewn the landscape, visibly older and somehow less human and more uncanny than the Roman temples, baths and forts. All these were part of the physical landscape of Anglo-Saxon England and coexisted with its inhabitants, who thus felt the need to explain their existence and origins and even to make them a part of their life. Semple's work provides a convincing account of how this landscape translated and transmuted into a mental landscape and how Anglo-Saxons integrated these ruins into their own story about their past.

While many book-length studies deal with the relationship between *Romanitas* (in its physical and ideological embodiments) and Anglo-Saxon society, this monograph is the first piece of research equivalent in length and scope focusing on the prehistoric. For all this, none of the approaches or tools she uses is new, as the author acknowledges in a very useful first chapter thoroughly detailing past research that fed into her own (especially pp. 2-9). Archaeology, toponymy, ethnography, studies of religion, of memory, of landscape have all been employed in the past four decades to bear on how different Anglo-Saxon communities lived with the remains of an age of which they knew little about, and hence which ‘offered physical pegs from which to hang narratives about origins and identity’ (p. 8). Yet the great merit of Semple’s work is her holistic approach – she does not simply treat all these possible points of entry in separation, but integrates them into a near-complete vision of the issue at hand. As such, her chapters are arranged more or less in a chronological fashion rather than depending on the various tools and disciplines she employs. Thus, instead of having a chapter on archaeology, followed by another on philology etc., the author synchronically conveys a clear sense of how prehistoric landscapes and monuments ‘were reinterpreted by successive generations and by incoming groups, and used and viewed differently by successive generations’ (p. 8).

Following its introductory chapter, the second one focuses on the Anglo-Saxon employment of prehistoric monuments as places of burial. Through her wise selection of three local case studies (West Sussex, East Yorkshire, and North Wiltshire), the author provides a compelling picture of the diversity of funerary uses of prehistoric sites throughout the territory of settlement. The third chapter explores Anglo-Saxon understandings of the relationship between prehistoric monuments and the natural world, battlefields, assembly sites, and settlements. In its fourth chapter, the volume turns towards the Christian Anglo-Saxon landscape, examining churches constructed on top of or near prehistoric monuments (barrows, megaliths, dykes etc.) and revealing the ways in which Christianity sought to convert the landscape, especially – for the Anglo-Saxons – the uncanny prehistoric monuments.

Chapter 5 deals with changes in the meanings which the prehistoric landscape had for Anglo-Saxon communities through the eighth to eleventh centuries. This part of the volume is steeped less in archaeology than the previous three and more in philology and toponymy, and yet the author seems equally at home in these fields. This chapter is a special delight for the philologist and the ethnographer alike, as it puts well-known and rehearsed Old English sources in a new perspective, using them in conjunction with the previously scrutinized archaeological evidence in a way that should be emulated more often. Thus, the literary evidence serves not so much to identify specific places or religious rites as to provide a window on an entire belief context which contained more than one potential explanation or narrative dealing with, for instance, dragons and barrows. In this, the author helpfully dispenses with monolithic notions of ‘the Anglo-Saxons’: instead, communities of Anglo-Saxons had very different understandings and beliefs across different social strata, throughout geographical space and across the centuries.

The sixth chapter looks at the use of prehistoric monuments as sites of royal and religious ceremony from the mid to the late Anglo-Saxon period, discussing how they were employed as sites of judicial execution, assembly, and the building of elite residences. By the end of the Anglo-Saxon period, barrows and monuments which had previously been connected to an ancestral past and which had been used to make political claims on the territory around it became places of horror and appropriate for executions, burial of the outcast, and the haunts of supernatural creatures. Semple attributes this to the process of Christianisation and to the way in which places associated with pre-Christian spiritual potency were either marginalized or converted by the Church, as demonstrated in the fourth chapter (p. 155). Yet she makes a finer point in that there was more to this shift in meaning – in the popular consciousness, these prehistoric landscapes lost none of their potency, the latter being transferred to the realm of the mythical and the legendary, which in some cases was manifested in the hellish connotations of these sites (p. 157). In the political sphere, a shift in meaning occurred around the seventh century, when Anglo-Saxon elites began to show increasing interest in prehistoric monuments and to appropriate them in order to extend their power by emphasising military prowess and legal ownership or dominance.

One of the great strengths of this book is the way in which research on the landscape of the mind is integrated with that on the physical landscape. Semple's arguments skilfully convey the sense of place different communities of Anglo-Saxon England constructed within different prehistoric landscapes and also how power, identity, beliefs and myth interacted with and were woven into the narrative set by prehistoric sites and monuments. While this work benefits from an obvious familiarity with an impressive array of different disciplines and approaches, Semple's thesis might benefit from a closer involvement with the latest advances in cognitive studies. Cognitive approaches to medieval sources are already a thriving path of research, and her argument in the fifth chapter would be particularly enhanced by looking at the beliefs and emotions associated with particular prehistoric sites in Anglo-Saxon literary sources with the help of the cognitivist concept of schemas, which refers to the patterns of knowledge emerging around central cultural conceptualisations (what I have in mind, particularly, is Farzad Sharifian, *Cultural Conceptualisations and Language: Theoretical Framework and Applications* (Amsterdam, 2011), pp. 4-26 and also Antonina Harbus, *Cognitive Approaches to Old English Poetry* (Cambridge, 2012).

In conclusion, despite her modest proviso that this volume is not comprehensive (p. 224), there is simply no other work as rich and extensive on how Anglo-Saxon communities of meaning viewed and used the prehistoric. As such, *Perceptions of the Prehistoric in Anglo-Saxon England* is bound to remain the main reference for anyone looking at this relatively little studied part of Anglo-Saxon England and also an example of how to approach such a complex subject in a holistic and integrative manner.