

# Society for Medieval Archaeology Newsletter

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## EDITORIAL

The moment has arrived to pass the editorial reins of the Newsletter to a worthy successor in the person of Niall Brady – I wish him all the best in his new role. Editors come and go, but there is only one Duncan Brown. His decision to hang up his boots as a regular contributor marks the end of an era and I for one shall miss his inimitable brand of witty and insightful reportage.

Spring is by no means the only change in the air, for our departure coincides with a major period of transition within the Society. With the passing of its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary year and the election of new President (Leslie Webster) and Honorary Secretary (Dawn Hadley), the Society is now turning its attention to the future. A forthcoming workshop entitled 'Looking to the Future of Medieval Archaeology', to be held in May at the Institute of Archaeology, London (see under Conferences & Events), is designed to involve members in the formulation of a forward strategy for the discipline stretching to 2020 and beyond – we encourage you to attend.

Where do you think that the Newsletter should be in ten year's time? You can contribute to a reforming agenda by sending in your views on how the role, format, and dissemination of the Newsletter could be changed for the better.

Gabor Thomas

All comments, reports and news to:  
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Project Director  
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E-mail: [niall@discoveryprogramme.ie](mailto:niall@discoveryprogramme.ie)

## COMMENT with Duncan Brown

My investigations into how the medieval period is manifested in modern popular culture have reached new heights! Tomorrow (as I write) a new world record will be attempted in Nottingham as the largest ever gathering of Robin Hood impersonators assembles in front of the castle. The current record stands at 606, but the organisers of the event on March 8<sup>th</sup> are hoping for 2,500. That is unbelievable on so many levels, but some interesting thoughts do arise. Consider, for instance, the history of Robin Hood impersonators, and the possibility that there may even have been some around in the 12th century. Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, they say, and the possibility of 2,500 flatterers in Nottingham at the weekend is testament to the endurance of the Robin Hood legend.

The BBC television series, however, takes imitation closer to fantasy. The audience is in turmoil at the moment, following the less-than-legendary death of Maid Marian at the end of the Christmas special. For some viewers that is a departure too far from the original story, but the series had left that behind ages ago. Almost no aspect of it, apart from the generic context, is medieval in any sense, not the dialogue, nor the weapons, tools, costumes, food, characterisations, general manners or attitude. It may be good television, but it is very bad history, and no concession is made to authenticity. Still, if I dwelt too long on every celluloid act of barbarity against historical accuracy you'd be reading a thesis, not a newsletter.

Further internet research brings me to the home of the 'World Wide Robin Hood Society' which is just the place for purchasing Robin Hood merchandise, including a copy of 'Robin Hood the musical'. There's also historical

[www.medievalarchaeology.org](http://www.medievalarchaeology.org)

information on the 'world's greatest legend', updates on the traffic situation around Nottingham ('Robin Hood Road Watch', which I'm sure the original outlaw would have appreciated) and more. This, unsurprisingly, is just one of a multitude of sites promoting the legend of Robin Hood. As with all legends, they adjust to fit the times, and we get the heroes we deserve. It's not surprising then to find the modern Robin the way he is, but is there no way we serious students of the past could persuade programme makers and website authors of the value of authenticity? I think we should have a stab at a world record – it's eye-catching and a lot simpler than writing a musical. We'd have to descend from the aloofness of our high horses and ivory towers, but I think it's worth a go.

If any of you have any ideas for what sort of world record we might set, please send them to the editor. This is my final contribution as a regular columnist. I hope it's been as much fun for you as it has for me.

## CONFERENCES & EVENTS

### **Food and Drink 2008: Interdisciplinary Perspectives**

11.04.08-12.04.08

Department of Archaeology, University of Nottingham

Archaeology has a long tradition of food and drink studies. Originally concerned with nutrition and later with economics, archaeologists now recognise that research into the production, distribution and consumption of foodstuffs has the potential to reveal much about the ideology and structure of past societies. Food and drink are relevant to all areas of archaeology, regardless of geography, temporality or sub-discipline. This conference series seeks, therefore, to unite researchers from different fields through a common interest in foodways.

Whilst all papers will be presented by postgraduates, non-postgraduates are also welcome to attend. For more details,

including a report on last year's conference, and for information on registration, please go to:

[http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/archaeology/research/conf\\_fooddrink.php](http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/archaeology/research/conf_fooddrink.php)

### **Workshop on Looking to the Future of Medieval Archaeology**

03.05.08

Institute of Archaeology, London

In 2007 the Society for Medieval Archaeology celebrated its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary with a series of events that reflected on progress over that period. The aim of this workshop is to highlight the opportunities and challenges facing medieval archaeology over the coming decade, considering the various ways in which medieval archaeology in the future might build on the achievements of the last 50 years to allow this relatively new discipline to capitalise ever more effectively on its unique potential, linking, as it does, artefact and text, the ancient world and the modern, and lost and living monuments and evidence.

Places at the workshop are limited. To ensure that the diverse interest groups within medieval archaeology are evenly represented, equal numbers of places are available for representatives of each of the following groups: the heritage sector (including museums and national agencies such as EH, Historic Scotland, Cadw etc.); the commercial archaeology sector (including freelance specialists); the university sector (including graduate students).

Particular themes to be addressed will include maximising the impact of development-led fieldwork; priorities for academic research; interdisciplinary integration; digital technology and the dissemination of results; and new challenges and opportunities in public outreach. Speakers will include Matthew Johnson, Paul Blinkhorn, Chris Cumberpatch, Chris Thomas, Kate Giles, Barney Sloane, Niall Brady, Carenza Lewis, Mark Redknap, Richard Jones, Naomi Sykes, and Mark Gardiner. As appropriate to such an attempt to define and

steer the future of the subject, general discussion will be a key part of the day.

A programme and booking form for the workshop can be accessed at:  
[www.medievalarchaeology.org/conferences.htm](http://www.medievalarchaeology.org/conferences.htm)

### **Post Roman Early Medieval Archaeology Student Symposium (PREMASS)**

22.05.08-23.05.08

Department of Archaeology, University of Exeter

This symposium follows on from the successful EMASS at Cardiff in 2007. The title has changed for 2008 following discussion in 2007 on the problematic label associated with the early medieval period. In order to encourage a broader range of papers discussing research from the Post Roman to the Early Medieval period it has been renamed PREMASS.

The Post Roman Early Medieval Archaeology Student Symposium will create a constructive forum for researchers to express, discuss and explore new research and ideas in an interactive environment. The symposium will explicitly aim to cross traditional period/institutional/theoretical divides to allow discussion between researchers of diverse expertise and perspectives. This symposium will aim to provide a forum for researchers to present ideas and thoughts informally without the pressure of producing complete research ready for publication.

Sessions will consist of 20-minute papers followed by open discussion and debate chaired by leading specialists in each field. As wide as possible a range of topics will be selected, and papers may cover all areas of Post Roman and Early Medieval research and discourse. This year, papers relating to themes of Material Culture and Archaeological Theory will be particularly welcome.

Academics, professionals and undergraduates are invited to attend and give support and comments. Poster presentations are welcome from those unable to attend or speak on the day. As wide as possible a range of topics will be selected, and papers may cover all areas

of Post Roman and Early Medieval research and discourse. However, it is our intention in 2008 to structure the sessions on particular themes in order to encourage the development of ideas highlighted in the last symposium.

For all enquiries and to submit abstracts of 250 words, please contact Imogen Wood:  
[iw206@ex.ac.uk](mailto:iw206@ex.ac.uk)

Please send in your registration forms by April 18th 2008.

### **Maritime Societies of the Viking and Medieval World**

31.5.08-4.6.08

Kirkwall, Orkney, Scotland

Organised by the Orkney Heritage Society, the Orkney Archaeological Trust and the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, University of Cambridge.

This conference seeks to place Viking Age and medieval Orkney in its European setting by bringing together scholars studying island and coastal societies of the Baltic Sea, the North Sea, the Irish Sea and the North Atlantic. Its emphasis is on how small-scale societies dominated by the sea developed both strong 'international' connections and distinctive local identities. It focuses on a pivotal time in the creation of the social, economic and political landscape of Europe – when small-scale maritime polities had a disproportionate impact on the course of world history.

For further information, including a preliminary programme and registration form, contact the organisers on: McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, University of Cambridge, Downing Street, Cambridge CB2 3ER, tel 01223 333538, email [TheSeaConference2008@mcdonald.cam.ac.uk](mailto:TheSeaConference2008@mcdonald.cam.ac.uk)  
[www.mcdonald.cam.ac.uk/events/conferences-workshops/theseaconference2008/](http://www.mcdonald.cam.ac.uk/events/conferences-workshops/theseaconference2008/)

### **Archaeologies of the Everyday**

03.06.08-05.06.08

Centre for Historical Archaeology,  
Department of Archaeology, University of Sheffield

Archaeologists have tended to associate 'the everyday' with the domestic, the

mundane and the routine, to assume that we can readily understand it, and to oppose it to ritual. However, recent developments both in theory (the emergence of 'everyday life studies') and in historical practice make it clear that it is now time, as Ben Highmore puts it, to question this 'transparency of the daily'. In much the same way that Marc Bloch challenged the fallacy of 'common-sense', we need to recognise that the everyday is 'a contested and opaque terrain, whose meanings are not to be found ready-made'. This multidisciplinary conference is designed to bring together scholars who are rethinking the ways in which people in the historical past (from classical antiquity to early modernity) perceived and engaged with the world in which they lived, worked, suffered, and worshipped - everyday. The conference will be organised around 5 related themes (*The historicity of the senses; The body in everyday life; Everyday life versus ritual?; Living outside the everyday; When everyday collides*), and in each case we will seek to understand the implications for all the people, and to avoid the focus on the upper classes that can flow from some of the source material at our disposal. Our aim is to undermine our expectations of the everyday and so more closely approach its historical reality.

Speakers will include Professor Chris Gosden (Oxford), Dr Ben Highmore (Sussex), Dr Kate Giles (York), Dr Miriam Muller (Birmingham), Professor Helena Hamerow (Oxford), Professor Liz James (Sussex), Dr Jeff Oliver (Sheffield), Professor Carole Rawcliffe (UEA), Dr Mary Harlow (Birmingham). For further details, including elaboration on the conference themes, a call for papers, and registration information see <http://www.shef.ac.uk/archaeology/conferences/archaeologies-of-the-everyday>

### **Deserted Villages Revisited**

21.06.08-22.06.08

Centre for English Local History,  
University of Leicester in collaboration  
with the Medieval Settlement Research  
Group.

To mark the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the gathering in Leicestershire of Hoskins, Beresford, Postan and Steensberg to visit DMV sites, in June 1948.

Few of those present in 1948 could have made sense of the mounds and depressions that marked the village sites. This conference will be an opportunity to appreciate modern interpretations of the earthworks, and to experience the frisson of direct contact with the past which Beresford celebrated in *Lost Villages of England*.

Speakers to include: Stuart Wrathmell - 'Depopulation and desertion at Wharram Percy, and its wider context'; Chris Dyer - 'Villages in crisis: social dislocation and desertion, 1300-1550'; Richard Jones - 'Contrasting patterns of village and hamlet desertion in England'; David Hinton - 'Finds from DMVs - insights into the life - and death? - of the village'; Sally Smith - 'Domestic life in the village'; John Broad - 'Understanding village desertions in the 17th and 18th centuries'; Tom Williamson - 'Beyond 'The Deserted Medieval Village': lordship, emparking and settlement c.1450-1850'; Bob Silvester - 'Abandoning the uplands: depopulation amongst dispersed settlements in western Britain'.

Field visits to Leicestershire DMVs (on Sunday) to be led by Paul Everson and Graham Brown.

For further information and registration forms contact Miss Julie Deeming, Centre for English Local History, University of Leicester, Marc Fitch Historical Institute, 5 Salisbury Road, Leicester, LE1 7QR: [jad@le.ac.uk](mailto:jad@le.ac.uk)

**Diaspora and the Natural World: SMA sponsored session at the Leeds International Medieval Congress 2008**  
07.07.08

Medieval Europe witnessed far-ranging movements of both peoples and ideas; from Barbarian invasions to the Crusades and from Paganism to the expansion of Christianity and Islam. The impact of these movements on the 'Natural World', both



physical and perceived, was many and varied. Understanding their significance has the potential to reveal much about the groups responsible for them. This session seeks to showcase new archaeological research – whether scientific or theoretically-based – into the ecological and/or ideological changes that accompanied the diasporas of the medieval period.

The session has been conceived as a forum for both established and early-career academics; we would like to encourage post-graduate and post-doctoral researchers to present their work, either orally or as a poster. We are particularly keen to attract speakers who have adopted interdisciplinary approaches.

For further information and registration:  
[www.leeds.ac.uk/ims/imc/imc2008.html](http://www.leeds.ac.uk/ims/imc/imc2008.html)

**Medieval Pottery Research Group  
Annual Conference  
Pottery of the Western Mediterranean:  
Production, Influences, Distribution and  
Use, A.D. 900 – 1700**  
07.07.08-09.07.08  
University of Sienna, Italy

The MPRG conference 2008 will consider the development of pottery-making, means of distribution, patterns of trade and types of consumer, through archaeological and documentary evidence. We will compare and contrast pottery traditions of the European Mediterranean states. Many of those products were distributed beyond to the east and into northern Europe, and the mechanisms of that trade, and the significance of those pottery types, will also be examined. These themes reach beyond local and national boundaries, and should appeal to anyone interested in what pottery can tell us about economics, politics, culture and meaning. Speakers from all over Europe will address those themes and participate in a wide-ranging discussion. Enquiries to: Duncan H. Brown, MPRG, 13 Southcliff Road, Southampton, SO14 6GB, UK or [duncan.brown@southampton.gov.uk](mailto:duncan.brown@southampton.gov.uk)

**The BT@ the BM: New Research on the  
Bayeux Tapestry**  
**An international conference at the  
British Museum**  
15.07.08-16.07.08

The Bayeux Tapestry has attained near iconic status. Although extremely well known, because it depicts one of the most famous events in English history and is the subject of numerous studies, many aspects of the Tapestry remain contentious - even enigmatic. In recent years there has been increased interest in the Tapestry and further advances in our understanding of it, with scholars examining how, where and why it was made, questioning its reliability and value as a historical source, and excavating its hidden meanings.

This conference seeks to highlight recent and new research on the Tapestry, and to disseminate those findings to a wider audience, in the hope of furthering discussion, debate and the sharing of ideas about this unique textile.

#### **Speakers**

David Bates, George Beech, Pierre Bouet, Shirley Ann Brown, Richard Burt, Michael R Davis, Martin Foys, Jill Frederick, Jane Geddes, Carola Hicks, David Hill, Liesbeth van Houts, Sylvette Lemagnen, Michael Lewis, John McSween, Gale Owen-Crocker, Linda Neagley, François Neveux, Elizabeth Pastan, Derek Renn, David Spear, Patricia Stephenson, Dan Terkla, Hirokazu Tsurushima, Carol Neuman de Vegvar, Stephen White, Ann Williams, and Gareth Williams.

#### **Conference Fee**

The fees for this conference are £10 a day or £15 for both days. Please send a cheque (payable to **The British Museum**), together with your contact details, to Dr Michael Lewis, Department of Portable Antiquities & Treasure, British Museum, London, WC1B 3DG. For further details contact Michael Lewis Email: [mlewis@thebritishmuseum.ac.uk](mailto:mlewis@thebritishmuseum.ac.uk)  
Tel: (0044) 020 7323 8611

## **The Archaeology of Post-Medieval Religion**

12.09.08-14.09.08

The Maids Head Hotel, Tombland,  
Norwich

The Society for Post-Medieval Archaeology and the Society for Church Archaeology are pleased to announce a forthcoming joint conference on the archaeology of religion in Britain and Europe from 1580 to 1900.

Themes covered include the ongoing impact of religious and political conflict in post-Reformation Britain and Europe, the archaeology of immigrant groups in the early modern world, nonconformist buildings and landscapes in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and post-medieval funerary practices.

For further information and booking forms, please visit [www.spma.org.uk](http://www.spma.org.uk) or [www.britarch.ac.uk/socchurcharchaeol/](http://www.britarch.ac.uk/socchurcharchaeol/)

Alternatively, contact the conference organiser: **Dr Chris King**, School of Archaeology and Ancient History, University of Leicester, University Road, Leicester, LE1 7RH *Tel:* 0116 252 2175 [cnk4@le.ac.uk](mailto:cnk4@le.ac.uk)

## **SPOTLIGHT ON RESEARCH**

### **Brixworth Church Survey: Progress Report**

Following our report in this newsletter last March and the fuller account of the first year's post-survey work in 'Medieval Britain and Ireland 2006', *Medieval Archaeology*, **51** (2007), 275-80, the Brixworth Archaeological Research Committee has been engaged in the preparation of plans, elevations and projections which synthesise information from the church survey and its interpretation, surveys carried out by the former Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England, and excavations carried out by the Committee from 1972 onward. Access to recent archaeological records has been hampered, however, in

some cases by their having been archived in repositories which are no longer serviced by curatorial staff; in other cases deposits remain uncatalogued. More successful has been the location of antiquarian illustrations, especially those showing the church before the major restoration of the 1860s, including a photograph taken in 1863. Many of these have been scanned and form part of a growing collection of illustrations to be used in the final publication. This electronic archive remains under the Committee's control.

At the same time, good progress has been made in drafting the definitive account and interpretation of the survey. Almost 50,000 words have reached final or advanced draft stage, including major technical appendices, for example on the revised luminescent dating of samples of bricks extracted from the church fabric.

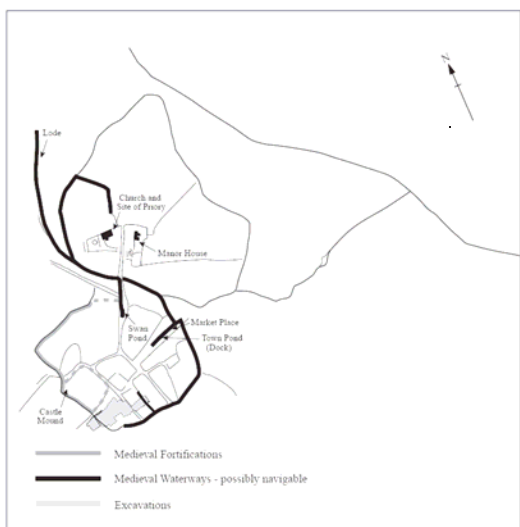
**David Parsons:** [dpa36@btinternet.com](mailto:dpa36@btinternet.com)

### **Settlement and the Savage Fen: Medieval Identity Witnessed by Two Sites Bordering the Wetlands of Cambridgeshire**

Traditional conceptions of town and country break down when we come to consider the history of the Early Medieval and Anglo-Norman fen-edge villages of Cambridgeshire. Founded on raised islands and promontories above the level of the Fen, these communities developed distinctive subsistence strategies designed to overcome the limitations imposed by their restricted hinterlands which stifled the growth of smaller, secondary villages and hamlets. The lifeline of these settlements was a network of waterways or 'lodes' which, through their connection to fen-edge central-places such as Ely and Wisbech, brought in a steady supply of fish landed on the coast some 50 miles distant. By the 12th century several of these settlements had acquired trappings of urban status. With its 'town' ditch, anarchy castle, and a priory, Swavesey, located to the northwest of Cambridge, was no exception.

New evidence recovered by CAM ARC during recent excavations at Swavesey

(Blackhorse Lane) and at Burwell, is bringing fresh evidence to bear on the ambivalent status of these Cambridgeshire fen-edge settlements. On the one hand, the Saxo-Norman period shows evidence for formalised planning with regular property divisions which compare closely to the burgrave plots of larger towns. On the other, the architecture of their domestic dwellings remained rural in character: certainly this is the impression gained from the diminutive, 8m by 4m earth-fast timber structures characterising both the pre- and immediately post-Conquest phases of Blackhorse Lane.



**Plan of Swavesey showing location of excavation in relation to waterways and ditches**

Ongoing post-excavation analysis is attempting to relate these spatial and topographic considerations to a broader understanding of how the changing relationship of these communities with the fenland may have shaped their perception of themselves and the landscape. During the pre-Conquest occupation of Swavesey the environment seems to have been wetter, with evidence of seasonal flooding as attested by fresh water molluscs recovered from shallow settlement features and drainage systems which led directly out into the Fen. Despite the Anglo-Saxons' attaching superstitions to the Fen (the ghoulish Grendel was a marsh beast and the Hermit St Guthram isolated himself among the savages and heathen of the fen), it is during this period that the inhabitants of

Swavesey seem to be most comfortable with their relationship to the fen. With the construction of the 'town' ditch and deeper, more substantial drainage ditches around building plots during 12th century, a topographic and arguably perceptual barrier was effectively created between inhabited areas of the settlement and the surrounding wetlands. This growing dislocation presaged later developments with the final abandonment of the Blackhorse Lane site during the later 14th century. Around the same time one also witnesses the abandonment of house-plots around the castle and the cessation of core market and industrial activities (notably the processing of fish) from which the settlement was to take on its late medieval shrunken form.



**The Burwell lode today, facing north**

Burwell by comparison thrived in the later medieval period and at this time the network of lodes was extended with the digging of ditches around house-plots - a situation not dissimilar to the later medieval phase at Ely. This success can be attributed to monastic landholding and the impetus it provided for economic specialisation. As a holding of Ramsey Abbey it was the monastic demand for freshwater fish (supplied by fish ponds connected to the system of loads), and building material in the form of clunch used to construct collegiate foundations in Cambridge, that sustained Burwell's urban character into the late medieval period. The survival of this

wetland community thus had less to do with its independent relationship with the fen and more to do with its status as a lucrative asset of a dry-land proprietor.

Dr Duncan Sayer is a Project Officer at CAM ARC and Part Time Lecturer at the University of Bath. He is currently preparing an East Anglia Archaeology monograph which will compare the medieval settlements of Swavesey and Burwell for publication in 2009. He may be contacted at [D.Sayer@bath.ac.uk](mailto:D.Sayer@bath.ac.uk)

## NEWS & VIEWS

### **Elizabeth & Beowulf: Medievalism, Myth and Sexual Deviancy**

In November 2007 cinema screens across Britain were suddenly alive with re-imaginings of our medieval past. Indeed we were in the unique position of having two films from the opposite chronological horizons of the medieval period: *Elizabeth The Golden Age* (hereafter *Elizabeth 2*) and *Beowulf*. The two have more in common than being period pieces with a chronological contrast, notably a reflection of our contemporary obsession with sex and fear of death. Sex is the main link: in *Beowulf* it is made the narrative fulcrum of the story and in *Elizabeth 2* it is a political tool and a sublimated fantasy. The poster tag line for *Beowulf*, 'Face your Demons', might equally then apply to *Elizabeth 2*.

*Elizabeth 2* is a sequel to *Elizabeth* (1998), both films directed by Shekhar Kapur and both boasting an insightful, utterly compelling performance from Cate Blanchett as Elizabeth. The Elizabethan theme has proved one of the most enduring in cinematic visions of the medieval and early post-medieval periods. *Les Amours de la Reine Elisabeth* (Fr 1912) is perhaps the earliest. The arrival of *Elizabeth* in 1998 splendidly enlivened the theme with its engaging performances, diligent costuming and believable portrait of court life and intrigues. *Elizabeth 2* has been almost 10 years in the offing but is much less successful, in part because it verges on hagiography in its portrait of Elizabeth,

seeming to unquestionably endorse her as the Virgin Queen – the only sex she indulges in here is sublimated through the courtship and coupling of Raleigh and her lady-in-waiting, also a Bess. The all too physical consequences of this - pregnancy - sends her into a paroxysm of jealous rage. Where it really falls down is in the evocation of context and supporting characters. Raleigh is cartoon like and laden down with his clichés of potatoes, tobacco and cloak as well as almost single-handedly defeating the Armada. The thick Scottish accent deployed by Samantha Morton unfortunately dampens an otherwise astute performance as Mary, Queen of Scots. Even Blanchett cannot save Elizabeth from one or two unduly excessive and implausible moments, notably wandering the cliff tops alone and in her bed-shift, watching the Armada burn. One could sense here a reaching for a visionary personification of Elizabeth as Albion, but it does not succeed. The misjudged context was an even more telling failure. Most of the time the Queen and her court appeared to be living within a cathedral. Filming in the Romanesque and Gothic spaces of Wells, Ely and Winchester seemed a hugely inappropriate choice for evoking the daily spaces of the court. This was compounded by the bizarre choice of Eilean Donan castle in the West Highlands as the stand-in for Fotheringay Castle, Northamptonshire.

The film scores better in evoking a contemporary comparison, portraying the years around 1585 as a time of terror with England not up against Islamic fundamentalism but against Philip II's brand of religiously (Catholic) infused politics. Whilst Elizabeth spouts rhetoric about Englishmen being free to think what they like we are also shown the reality of piracy and torture used to fight the war on terror.

With *Beowulf* we move from fettered to unfettered sexual longing. The history of the cinematic interpretation of *Beowulf* is almost as old as that of Elizabeth: the earliest I know of is a 1920s Danish film. It's then fairly quiet until the last 30 years or so, when there has been something of a flurry of adaptations, namely: *Grendel*,



*Grendel*, *Grendel* (Australia 1981, animated adaptation of John Gardner's novel, reviewed in Hall 2005), *Beowulf* (UK 1998, animated), *Beowulf* (US/Gy 1998), *The 13<sup>th</sup> Warrior* (US 1999), *Beowulf and Grendel* (US 2005), *Wrath of Gods* (US 2007, a documentary on the making of *Beowulf and Grendel*) and *Beowulf Prince of the Geats* (US, currently in post-production and due for release in 2008). It has also been adapted in other media (notably a 1995 TV episode of *Star Trek Voyager*, in which one of the crew plays Beowulf inside a holonovel of the poem). The 2007 version of *Beowulf* was filmed using stop-motion animation based around the movements of real actors. Unfortunately this results in clunky movements (especially of horses and for swimming) and non-expressive faces. The technique is triumphant however in the creation of the three monsters. Where as the poem is primarily concerned with combating external evil, aptly summed up by Heaney (1999, xii) as 'Three struggles in which the preternatural force-for-evil of the hero's enemies comes springing at him in demonic shapes ... in three archetypal sites of fear: the barricaded night house; the infested underwater current and the reptile haunted rocks of a wilderness', the film has more interior concerns mainly achieved through a dose of narrative-simplifying sex (which ironically leads to some unintentionally hilarious coyness about showing Beowulf's penis when he fights naked). There are several plot changes as a consequence.

Hrothgar is depicted as a drunken, guilt-ridden old man kicked out of the marriage bed by his young queen, Wealtheow. He has lain with the water-demon to gain his power and Grendel is their offspring. Beowulf also succumbs to this temptation and so Hrothgar names him his successor and then commits suicide. Beowulf marries Wealtheow and rules in Heorot. Fifty years later he must fight his offspring from the demon, a golden-skinned man able to transform into a dragon. Dying, he names Wiglaf his successor and Grendel's mother comes to seduce him, the cycle of temptation set to begin again. These changes serve to simplify and humanise the

story and paradoxically bring the monsters to the fore. Grendel is a giant figure of repulsion – deformed, gouged, self-harmed, with raw, exposed flesh and inhuman strength, something that could have been hybridised from the imaginations of Blake, Goya and Bacon. He does though elicit a spark of sympathy heightened by being the son of Hrothgar. His mother is the very definition of voluptuousness and seduction and the dragon is a fabulous creation – fearsome, cruel, vengeful, brutal and deadly. They serve to underline the frailty of the human condition, destined to fall, to succumb to temptation. Grendel's mother in particular also has something of the glamour of Faerie – not surprising given that the film is co-scripted by Neil Gaiman, modern-day master and interpreter of tales from the perilous realm.

The film is somewhat less interesting for the physical world it tries to evoke, a flawed attempt betraying only the slightest grasp of cultural context, be it material culture, architecture or its pagan-Christian interface. The latter does strike a reasonable tone of conversion-process but trips itself up by explicitly setting it in the early 6<sup>th</sup> century, blurring the fusion of heroic ideal and Christianity where the *Beowulf* poet's skill kept a clear and reinforcing distinction. The material culture context is highly implausible for it mixes a whole range of 7th-12th century objects and is determinedly Viking (rather than Germanic) in outlook. Thus we see Heorot's walls draped with Baldishel (Norway, c. 1200 AD) inspired tapestries, Hrothgar using a copy of the Cammin casket (c. 1000 AD), with red velvet lining, a copy of a 9th-century Tating ware jug to pour mead and copies of the 10th-century Jelling cup to drink out of. Additionally dialogue exchanges mention Vinland, Iceland and the Orkneys. Architecturally Heorot looks splendid but it is unaccountably over-shadowed by a huge stone tower, linked to stone battlements that enclose the site, none of which makes any sense for the 6th century, and the film is very clear about being set in the 6th century because it opens with a subtitle, '507 AD'.

This formally wrong use of material culture left me with something of a quandary

because in terms of the functions they perform they are more or less correct or believable. Does this matter? The anachronistic combination of objects and contexts has never been a bar to creative story telling. Objects have long histories of re-appropriations, re-uses and re-purposes. Indeed it applies beyond material culture. Words, for example, can often acquire new meanings. This happens for example in early Christian Anglo-Saxon poetry (Bazelmans 1999, 72 & fn. 14). It has been suggested that the author of *Beowulf* was involved in this Christian transformation of the traditional *Ars Poetica* – “It is ... possible that in his representations of the actions and speech of his pagan characters he was ‘playing’ with both the old and new meanings of words” (Bazelmans 1999, 73). Is it in any sense valid then to see the film’s transformation of early medieval material culture as a parallel act of creative grammar?<sup>1</sup>

Finally, another *Beowulf* related retelling or reconstituting is worth noting. One that the film ignores in eschewing the poem’s politics, namely the manifestation of the ‘urwarrior-king’ as the re-founder king – kings who prove their legitimacy by fighting wild beasts and saving important cities from evil/chaos. This has strong resonances in the eighth century, including Al-Mansur’s Baghdad, Pippin’s Aachen and Constantine V’s Constantinople, with a literary parallel in *Beowulf*, his deeds and his restoration of Heorot (Stoclet 2005). Unintentionally the film does touch on this with a powerful scene in which Beowulf reopens Heorot but it is Elizabeth The Golden Age with its tone of political hagiography that is the more successful filmic depiction of the re-founder king.

#### Notes

1. This speculation has, if not dismissed out of hand, ramifications for the rational, scientific categorisation of culture. I have recently explored related matters in the context of Invented Civilizations in a blog on the EAA website: <http://www.e-a-a.org/>

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#### Durham Medieval Archaeologists (DMA)

DMA is a network of postgraduates and staff with varied interests in medieval archaeology who will be holding meetings on topics of interest starting with a series of workshops on the five ‘Classical Senses’ (sound, taste, sight, touch, smell). These workshops will comprise seminar presentations by invited speakers (from archaeology and other disciplines) and DMA members, followed by informal discussions and debates focused on the senses. Each will also feature an ‘event’ such as medieval food tasting and music. The workshops will explore the medieval conceptions of the senses and establish new ways of approaching sensory experience by means of archaeological evidence. A website is forthcoming and will provide a timetable and overview of the workshops, a bibliography of key publications on the senses, and a list of references of medieval illustrations depicting the ‘senses’.

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## **The Society for the Study of Childhood in the Past**

'The Society for the Study of Childhood in the Past' is a newly-founded international, multi-disciplinary society to promote the study of childhood and children in the past. The Society's aims are to act as an interdisciplinary forum for the discussion, dissemination and integration of ideas, information and discoveries about children and childhood in the past worldwide, from any chronological period. The society welcomes members and contributions from a broad range of academic disciplines, including archaeology, anthropology, human biology, literary studies, theology, philosophy, sociology, medicine and any other disciplines. Graduate students are very welcome to post details about their on-going research on the society's web-site, and we are also eager to promote relevant conferences and publications. There is an annual prize for the best undergraduate and Masters dissertations on any aspect of childhood in the past. The Society's first conference on 'Investigating Childhood in the Past: Principles, Practice and Potential' was held at the University of Oxford in September 2007, and the second annual conference will be held at the Museum of Archaeology, Stavanger, Norway from the 28<sup>th</sup> to the 30<sup>th</sup> September, 2008. There is currently a call for papers under the theme of 'Socialisation, Learning and Play in the Past', although papers on any other aspect of childhood in the past are also welcome. Contact Grete Lillehammer for more details ([grete11i@ark.museum.no](mailto:grete11i@ark.museum.no)).

For details about the Society and its activities please visit our web-site at [www.sscip.bham.ac.uk/](http://www.sscip.bham.ac.uk/)

## **John Hurst Travel Fund Medieval Pottery Research Group**

This fund was established in 2007 to honour the enormous contribution made by John Hurst to the study of medieval and post-medieval pottery in Britain and Europe. It offers a number of travel grants of up to £200 each to members of the Medieval Pottery Research Group who need financial support to carry out their research. Grants are awarded annually and the closing date for applications is the 23rd of March each year. Applicants will be notified of decisions by the 16th May of the same year. Preference will be given to applicants whose projects help strengthen links between Britain and the rest of Europe and to students or those at the beginning of their careers.

Successful applicants will receive the grant before they travel if required and must provide receipts to cover the amount within one month of their return. They must provide a summary report of no more than 250 words to the Hon Editor within 3 months of the research project being undertaken, and must agree to cite the MPRG John Hurst Travel Fund in any publications resulting from the funded project. An application form can be found on the Group's website [www.medievalpottery.org.uk](http://www.medievalpottery.org.uk)

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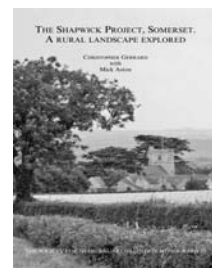
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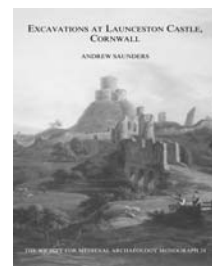


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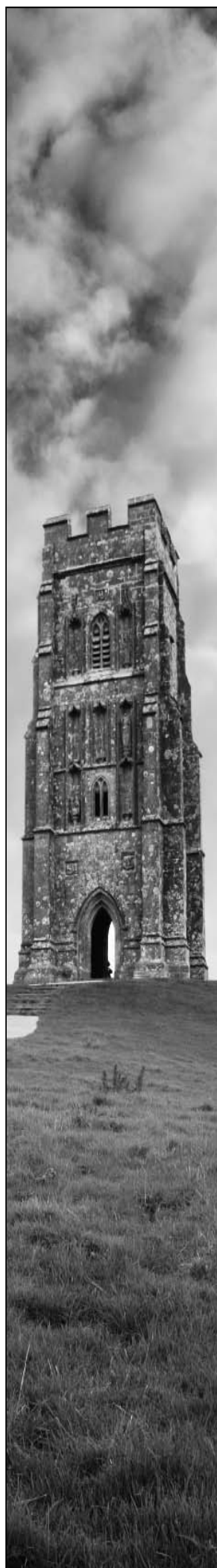
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