

*Agrarian Technology in the Medieval Landscape. Ruralia X. 9th–15th September 2013, Smolenice, Slovakia.*

Edited by Jan Klápště. 21 × 30 cm. xviii + 448 pp, 212 b&w pls and figs, 20 tables. Turnhout: Brepols, 2016. ISBN 978-2-503-55137-1. €90.00 pb.

The tenth Ruralia conference in September 2013 aimed to stimulate discussions of all aspects of the managed exploitation of the rural landscape and this volume contains its proceedings. There are 27 papers in all, together with a retrospective view by Alan Aberg and a general introduction by Eva Svensson and Mark Gardiner. They cover most of medieval Europe with papers from Scandinavia, the British Isles, the Low Countries, France, the Iberian Peninsula, Germany, Switzerland, Hungary and Czech Republic and Slovakia.

While the focus is principally on one or another aspect of arable cultivation, there are also papers on plough technology, water management and garden archaeology/history. Seven leading scholars offer Europe-wide overviews of particular topics: Stephen Moorhouse and James Bond discuss the structure and anatomy of collectively cultivated field systems; Janken Myrdal and Alexandra Sapoznik explore spade cultivation in the intensification of land use between 1000 and 1300; Hans Renes focuses on the landscape history and archaeology of open fields; Paolo de Vingo discusses material culture and agrarian traditions across eastern areas of Merovingian culture; and Zdenka Mechurová integrates archaeological, illustrative and ethnographic sources to reconstruct the agricultural year.

Three papers offer just a flavour of the volume — an invidious choice among such riches. Josep Torró undertakes a meticulous reconstruction of water management in freshwater marshes lying behind sandbanks along the Spanish coast south of Valencia between the 13th and 16th centuries. Using field archaeology and documentary evidence, he reconstructs low-intensity water management for maintaining the marshes as common grazing meadows during the Moorish period; and, after the Castilian conquest of Al-Andalus, the intensification of water management for reclaiming part of the marshes in order that they could be subdivided into small, equitable units of arable cultivation for distribution among conquering colonists. Piers Dixon explores the 12th- or 13th-century origins of broad medieval cultivation ridges showing the aratral curve that are fossilised on lowland and upland Scottish common infields. Dixon concludes that neither plough technology, the physical form of ridging nor the presence of ridges indicate the introduction of collective cultivation on arable fields. Dixon discusses evidence for prehistoric and Romano-British plough-made and hand-dug ridges in Northumberland and the Scottish Borders, and demonstrates that ‘the management of pasture and arable was inextricably communal’ (p 121) whether ridging was present or absent. Nicolas Poirier uses evidence of deliberate manuring gained from fieldwalking to examine the extent and intensity of early medieval arable cultivation in six micro-regions across northern and southern France: two in Touraine, one in Berry, two in Languedoc, and one in Provence. He explains a methodology for creating a single chronology for different forms of pottery types in areas with different regional histories before presenting his conclusions — there was an increase in arable cultivation on all sites in the Roman period; areas under the plough were reduced in Late Antiquity in places less favoured by physical geography, but were generally maintained where growing conditions were better. Perhaps as significantly, it was areas of arable in Touraine, near the heartlands of the Merovingian and Carolingian kingdoms, that showed the least decline between the 4th and 8th centuries and the greatest 8th- to 11th-century growth.

The volume is much recommended for its inclusion of so many good papers on the practicalities of making a living from husbandry across Europe during the Middle Ages.

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