

# Medieval Archaeology

NEWSLETTER OF THE SOCIETY FOR MEDIEVAL ARCHAEOLOGY

## SMA Winter Symposium

Monday 1 December, immediately following the AGM  
Online using TEAMS from 12:30 to 14:00hrs

TEAMS ID: **394 359 050 634 8** Passcode: **DL2zb2Nb**

### 12:30 Hidden Kingdoms: the South-West of Britain in Late Antiquity

*Steve Rippon, University of Exeter*

Britain ceasing to be part of the Roman Empire was one of the most formative episodes in our history. Yet, research on Late Antique Britain has traditionally privileged eastern ‘Anglo-Saxon England’ over the so-called western ‘Celtic fringe’. This project redresses this imbalance by exploring the landscape, communities, and material culture of the hidden kingdoms of South-West Britain that existed from the 5th to the mid-7th centuries. The project avoids creating a new binary division between east and west through studying the interactions between these British regions and communities with an emerging Anglo-Saxon identity further east.



### 13:00 Nun the wiser - the ‘lost’ early medieval nuns of Iona, Martyr’s Bay

*Sam Leggett, University of Edinburgh, with Adrián Maldonado, National Museum of Scotland, Jess Thompson, National Museum of Scotland, Kerry Sayle, SUERC and Julie Dunne, University of Bristol*

The burial ground at Martyr’s Bay is part of a larger Christian ceremonial landscape on the island of Iona, which lies just off the larger island of Mull in Scotland’s Inner Hebrides. The bay is supposedly named for the Ionan monks who were massacred there by viking raiders in the early 9th century AD. Richard Reece’s excavations in the 1960s discovered the long cist cemetery, and the initial osteological assessment by Calvin Wells highlighted that this group of people were enigmatic and deserved further study. New

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How quickly the year runs by, and before we break for Christmas, the Society will host its Winter Symposium. The current Newsletter includes a wonderful note by David Hinton on fire beacons, or rather their absence from early medieval England, along with a conference review, while Mark Hall’s always interesting Media column considers two novels and three films linked by a theme of journeying.

**Niall Brady**  
Newsletter Editor  
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Left:  
Tintagel Bridge.

Right:  
Iona.

biomolecular work and radiocarbon determinations from Martyr’s Bay and the Abbey, carried out as part of the Leverhulme Trust funded ‘ArchaeoFINS’ project and the Wellcome Trust funded ‘A Thousand Ancient Britons’ project, have revealed fascinating new information about the people interred at this site. This, coupled with new osteological assessments by the National Museum of Scotland, where the remains are curated, is shedding fresh light on these women and their involvement in the story of early Christianity in Britain and Ireland.

**13:30 Drumclay Crannog - Finding its Place and its People**

*Marie-Therese Barrett, Rebecca Boyd and John O’Neill, IAC Archaeology and Jacquie McDowell, DfC Historic Environment Division, Northern Ireland*

Drumclay crannog is among the significant medieval sites excavated in Ireland. As a wetland crannog, its excavation uncovered a range of extraordinarily well-preserved archaeological deposits, buildings, artefacts and ecofacts dating from the 9th to the 17th centuries. This talk presents some of the post-excavation highlights from Drumclay, ranging from the analysis of a thousand wooden artefacts, insights into chronology, living conditions on the crannog and crafting and farming preferences. We highlight the importance of the preservation of Drumclay’s archive and reflect on what this tells us about other dryland early medieval sites. The post-excavation analysis is managed by IAC Archaeology and funded by Historic Environment Division, Northern Ireland.



*Drumclay crannog.*

**An 11th-century coin hoard from Suffolk**

A major East Anglian archaeological discovery which has recently hit both television screens and newspapers is the so-called ‘pasty hoard’, recovered in April 2023. Excavated by Oxford Cotswold Archaeology during developer-funded archaeological work at the future site of Sizewell C nuclear power station, it quickly acquired its nickname (unsurprisingly) by being shaped like a modern Cornish pasty. The hoard, buried at the ‘T’- junction of a ditched field system near the Suffolk town of Leiston, lay undiscovered and undisturbed for almost a millennium. It comprises 321 silver coins, all of which date to the early 11th century. The coins had been wrapped in a piece of textile, which in turn was enclosed by a piece of folded lead sheet. Its micro-excavation was televised, featuring in Episode 1, Season 12 of BBC Two’s *Digging for Britain*.

The coins, many of which are preserved in very good condition, include issues of Harold I (1035–1040), Harthacnut (1040–1042) and

Edward the Confessor (1042–1066). The latest pieces date to very early in Edward the Confessor’s reign, suggesting deposition took place between late 1042 and early 1044. Although most of the coins were minted in London, local mints such as Ipswich, Thetford and Norwich are represented in reasonable quantities as well. The hoard also contained several rare coins, struck at smaller mints, including Axbridge, Langport and Buckingham.

While the precise reason for its burial is not known, instability at the start of Edward’s reign may have been a factor. Indeed, several high-status individuals were deprived of their wealth and status in 1043 because they were considered too closely aligned with the previous regime, including Stigand, the local Bishop of Elmham. Although quickly pardoned and re-elevated after a brief period of exile, Stigand’s temporary fall may have exacerbated local feelings of unease and uncertainty that accompanied both regime change and upending of the political status quo.

**Alexander Bliss**



*Detail of coins and textile during micro-excavation. © Oxford Cotswold Archaeology.*

**Society Prizes**

Following some stiff competition, Isobel Harvey, University of York (MA Material Culture and Experimental Archaeology) has been awarded the SMA’s Postgraduate Dissertation Award 24/25 for their dissertation ‘Rooted in Red: An experimental comparison of two early-medieval botanical dyes’. We had a very competitive field, including excellent work on Chinese landscapes, Viking-Age osteology, and structured deposits in the Nile Valley, but we felt that Isobel’s dissertation was particularly impressive as it not only combined an excellent analytical framework with an ambitious experimental archaeology component, but brought that scientific work together with a really excellent understanding of the early medieval context. It does a great job of combining these elements, and constitutes a genuinely important contribution to scholarship. Congratulations to Isobel, who wins an SMA Monograph of our choice, a small cash prize and universal acclaim!



If you supervise or examine Undergraduate and Postgraduate dissertations, please remember to consider our awards in your Exams meetings. The deadlines are 1st September for the Undergraduate prize, and 1st April for the Postgraduate prize, so you have plenty of time to get your applications in. Details can be found on our website.

## Website

[www.medievalarchaeology.co.uk](http://www.medievalarchaeology.co.uk)

The website continues to improve. Send us your comments:

[medievalarchaeology@googlemail.com](mailto:medievalarchaeology@googlemail.com)

## Apply for a Grant

The Society is in the happy position of being able to offer grants for research and for travel. For information on how to apply for a Society grant/award, see our website,

[www.medievalarchaeology.co.uk](http://www.medievalarchaeology.co.uk)

## Current Officers

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**Be sure to check out our website and facebook pages for updates on members' events that fall between Newsletter dates**

**SMA Members are entitled to improved discounts on ALL Routledge books**

*Society members are entitled to a 30% discount on all Routledge Archaeology books*



# Society News

## Notice of the Annual General Meeting and Winter Symposium

Society members are invited to attend the Annual General Meeting and Winter Symposium, which will take place online from 12:00 to 14:00 on Monday 1 December 2025. The Symposium will consist of three talks on aspects of medieval archaeology, as noted on pages 1-2

TEAMS ID: **394 359 050 634 8** Passcode: **DL2zb2Nb**

### Agenda

1. Minutes of last Annual General Meeting
2. Elections of Officers and Council

The following nominations have been received for election:

President: Sarah Semple (University of Durham)

Ordinary member: Marianne Hem Eriksen (University of Leicester)

Ordinary member: Nick Holder (English Heritage)

Ordinary member: Adrián Maldonado (National Museum Scotland)

3. Election of auditors  
Bronsens, 267 Banbury Road, Oxford
4. President's Report
5. Treasurer's report
6. Editor's report
7. Secretary's report
8. Prizes and Awards
9. Any other business
10. Date of next meeting

**Michael Lewis**, Hon Secretary  
[mlewis@britishmuseum.org](mailto:mlewis@britishmuseum.org)

The Society's page on LinkedIn is now live and you can see it here: <https://www.linkedin.com/company/the-society-for-medieval-archaeology/>

Please give us a Follow and perhaps Like our inaugural post; your action will help to raise the profile and build our network.

# Notes & Queries

## Was there a system of fire-beacons in early medieval England?

The most recent volume of the Society's journal included a well-argued and convincing case that central Norway had a system of fire-beacons instituted after c. AD 800 that could warn places over 100 kilometres from the entrance to Trondheim fjord of an enemy raid (Nilsen 2025). One question that arises, however, is over the suggestion that English experience could have been an influence (*ibid.*, 161), because of recent proposals that there was a fire-beacon warning system in England at that time (Hill and Sharp 1997, reproduced in Lavelle 2010, 218-25; Baker and Brookes 2013; 2015).

Proponents of the English fire-beacon theory have freely acknowledged the lack of direct evidence; although 'Beacon Hill' is a relatively common place-name, no early medieval example is known, and no obvious alternative word has been suggested, whereas the Norwegian study makes a good case for viti names' significance (Nilsen 2025, 144). In England, place-names like Toot Hill may indicate where look-outs might be based, but preparation of beacons seems never to have been listed as a duty of those charged with seeing to the defence of the kingdom, even when keeping watch became increasingly specified during the 10th century. Occasional mentions of raiding armies lighting their beacons is an ironic tribute to their burning of houses and other property; they were not operating a sophisticated signal system.

The Norwegian system would have compensated for the slowness of overland communication, as tracks had to go around the numerous inlets. In England, with more direct roads, messages could be carried quite swiftly on horseback in most weather conditions; little advantage could be gained by the extra speed of using beacons, even if men were in place to build, maintain, and light them, and they were not blotted out by fog or mist.

The Norwegian beacons are assumed to have been bonfires, perhaps built on a layer of stones which would have acted as flues to spread flames below the wood, as well as keeping it dry at the bottom. Such cairns would be difficult to identify, if they survive at all (Nilsen 2025, 144), and have not been recognized at any English site. The only feature suggested on archaeological criteria to have been a beacon platform, at Yatesbury, Wiltshire (Reynolds and Brookes 2013, 572-6), is not reported as having had a layer of stones at its base, and the burning described as intense there sounds more than might be expected from a bonfire. The feature was surrounded by a ditch, which would have impeded access to a fire, and its low-lying position does not enhance the case for its identification as an inland beacon.

Beacons do not seem to be specified as a means of warning of raids upon England until the 14th century, and then only within six leagues of the sea. The earliest direct record may be as late as an Inquisition of 1324 (Alban 1981, 61). By 1338-40, beacons were to be prepared 'as was wont to be done' and 'as is customary' (Hewitt 1966, 9); those phrases

imply an ancient duty, but may have been used merely to try to convince reluctant conscripts that they would always have had to perform it. Tellingly, it gets no mention in the 1285 Statute of Winchester, or its predecessor Assizes of Arms, which tightened up regulations for watch and ward.

Another factor is fuel: Norway had readily burning pine and other woods, which did not grow much in the south of England (Hooke 2010, 275), and although gorse can start a fire quickly, it does not burn for long enough to be effective as a beacon on its own. The early 14th-century English coastal beacons needed tar or pitch: it 'showed better and lasted longer than twigs' according to a 1337 edict (Hewitt 1966, 5). By then, Baltic imports had made tar available in a quantity that it would not have been earlier.

In the 16th century, beacons were located inland as well as along the coast, and their sites have been claimed to have had early medieval predecessors. The Tudor beacons were not bonfires, however, but tar barrels mounted on stout posts, giving greater height as well as greater reliability; a 1539 map of the south coast shows them with struts supporting the upright, with access to the barrel by ladder (British Library MS Cotton Augustus 1.i.38, reproduced in Horsey 1992, 9). They would have been much more effective than bonfires, and should not be taken as the descendants of an early medieval system.

**David A. Hinton**

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# Group Report 2025

## Medieval Settlement Research Group

Between late 2024 and the summer of 2025, the MSRSG held a Winter Seminar and AGM in December and a ‘Spring’ Conference in June, with both events taking place in Leicester. The December AGM marked the end of the tenure of Susan Kilby, the long-standing Hon Secretary of MSRSG. She had supported the MSRSG in this role since 2017 and contributed very effectively in many ways to the successful functioning of the group. At the same time, the Treasurer of MSRSG, Andy Seaman, also in this role since 2017, stepped down. We are immensely grateful for the work of both Susan and Andy and look forward to seeing them at future MSRSG events. The new Hon Secretary and Treasurer of MSRSG are Hajnalka Herold and Benjamin Morton, respectively. Committee members Claudia Theune, David Stone and Aidan O’Sullivan came to the end of their terms, as new Committee members John Baker, Tomáš Klír and Marion Shiner were elected. The new Student Representative for the MSRSG is Rob Hedge (University of Leicester), replacing Stephen Londsdales (University of York).

The Winter Seminar’s theme was Post-Pandemic Settlement: New Perspectives on *Plague, Perturbation, Persistence and Place in the Medieval Countryside*. Attendees were able to follow a set of excellent papers with a mainly late medieval focus, including: David Stone (MSRSG) on 14th- and early 15th-century settlement on the Bishop of Exeter’s estate; Mark Bailey (East Anglia) on the period after the Black Death; Benjamin Morton and Ben Jervis (Leicester) on English small towns of the 13th to 15th centuries; Craig Cessford (Cambridge) on Clopton deserted medieval village in Cambridgeshire, and Eljas Oksanen (Helsinki and Reading) on computational approaches to persistent places and diachronic change based on artefact scatters. The Winter Seminar included the John Hurst Prize competition for students with four great papers, representing the Universities of Vienna, Nottingham, York and Durham. The winner of the 2024 John Hurst Prize was Nora Siegmeth (Vienna) with a paper on the medieval elite landscape of Merkenstein in Austria.



Chris Dyer with Richard Jones explaining the formation of ridge-and-furrow and the working strips in the medieval open fields, Frisby-on-the-Wreake. Photograph by Tomáš Klír.

The Spring Conference focused on *Adaptations: Medieval Responses to Environmental Change*, with nine papers presented on a wide range of chronologies, from late Roman to late medieval. Papers focused on various regions of England: Tudur Davies (Cardiff) on ecological pressures in the Peak District; Paul Shaw (Leicester) on Scandinavian migrants in the East Midlands; Susan Kilby (Nottingham) on the landscape of Alrewas in Staffordshire; Louise Kennedy (East Anglia) on coastal change in Easton Bavents, Suffolk; Thomas Lucking (East Anglia) on settlement and land-use change in the East Anglian Breckland; Carenza Lewis (Lincoln) on the impact of climate change on medieval settlement location; Michael Gilbert (Leicester) on silt lands of the Isle of Ely; David Oates (Histon and Impington) on the Upper Fen Edge in Cambridgeshire, while Sam Turner (Newcastle) presented a paper on agricultural terraces in the Mediterranean. The day of lectures was followed by a field trip on the Sunday to East Leicestershire, the Wreake Valley, and Charnwood Forest (see photos, courtesy of Tomáš Klír). We are very grateful to both Susan Kilby and Richard Jones (Leicester) for organising this conference.

We continue to support a range of exciting projects through our grants scheme, and once again this year we attracted a number of high-quality applications. The panel chose to support two projects; namely, fieldwork in both the Yeavinger Environs Project and the Bodiam 100 project. We encourage researchers to apply for funding – the deadline is 31st January each year, and full details are available on our website: <https://medieval-settlement.com/grants-awards/research-grants/>.

Looking ahead, on Saturday 6th December 2025 we will return to Leicester for our Winter Seminar, where this year's programme will focus on *The Margins of Society in Medieval Rural Settlements*. The Seminar will also include our John Hurst Memorial Prize competition, with the finalists' papers

during the morning session. Plans are underway for a Spring Conference in 2026 on *The Contribution of Community Archaeology to Settlement Studies*. Keep an eye on our website in the autumn as we finalise both event programmes: <https://medieval-settlement.com/events/upcoming-events/>.

**Hajnalka Herold**  
 Hon Secretary, MSRG



Richard Jones in Swithland Wood, Charnwood Forest, demonstrating shifting land-use practices across time encouraged by economic and environmental imperatives. Photograph by Tomáš Klír.



### **RURALIA's latest Publication, 2025**

Edited by Marie Odegaard, Kjetil Loftsgarden and Claudia Theune (Sidestone Press, 2025), the volume is the proceedings of the RURALIA XV conference, 2023. Copies can be ordered through Sidestone Press. Read online for free; download as PDF for €15, or order paperback for €60, hardback for €120.

<https://sidestone.com/books/farmers-trade-and-markets>

# Conference report

## RURALIA XVI

### Countryside and towns. Rural settlements in the context of urban hinterlands in the Medieval and Modern period

The international association for the archaeology of medieval settlement and post-medieval settlement and rural life – RURALIA – gathered in Kłodzko, Poland in September for its biennial meeting, to spend a week discussing the conference theme through a series of 24 papers, eight posters, one half-day and one full day fieldtrip to landscapes of the Polish-Czech border area, with a post-conference weekend fieldtrip that ranged more widely across southern Poland.

Our conference started with a keynote address by Rainer Schreg, who encouraged the 70 attendees to question some of the basic tenets with which countryside and town are usually considered. It included his observation that the term ‘hinterland’ should be revisited. Defined as ‘the region behind the frontline’, the term imparts a sense of militarism and strategy that seems at odds with RURALIA’s fundamental interests to understand the nature of life in the medieval and post-medieval countryside. Rainer was even more provocative, noting that an ‘urban colonialism’ has led the understanding of the relationship between countryside and town. It is true that existing research on the proximity of the countryside to towns has given agency to the towns and not to the rural settlements. RURALIA’s focus sought fundamentally to challenge this by highlighting sources and research directions that identify more nuanced approaches. Presentations were grouped into a series of principal themes: General aspects, theory and the state of research; Rural landscape; Expansion and abandonment; Rural hinterland and power structures, and Economic aspects: Production and exchange.

The majority of the papers and the posters spoke to the conference theme: rural settlement in the context of urban regions. While there were too few papers discussing the theme for sites from the early medieval period, the 13th-century planned villages representing the roll-out of manorial agriculture across Western Europe was a recurring topic, and how such villages may be established as rings of satellite settlements around towns. Such papers retain echoes of the 19th-century economist Johann Heinrich Von Thünen and the early 20th-century geographer Walter Christaller, but not all were necessarily accepting of these models.

Many of the papers were able to invert the traditional sense of rural dependency on towns, and these provided very refreshing insights. The importance of roads and bridges as linkages across landscape, connecting places was also a recurring item. Perhaps more could have been made of the similar importance of rivers, which also defined territories as well as providing communication routes across them. In approaching the intangible, the conference heard about social networks across space, and how material remains (e.g. ceramics) offer great potential here, but how does one deal with such in aceramic areas? The studies that worked really well were those grounded in a deep understanding of landscape and supported by rich documentary and archaeological/ecological evidence. It is clear that archaeological research is poised to identify degrees to which rural settlements served as specialist providers to urban areas, rather than being simply a satellite settlement to a town; the complexity of the countryside is coming into focus much more clearly across Europe, and this is exciting.

The conference proceedings will be published in 2027, and tremendous thanks are due to the principal conference organizers Pawel Duma, University of Wrocław, and Tomáš Klír, Charles University, Prague. Our president Claudia Theune, University of Vienna, stood down after a lengthy and fruitful time in this role, and welcomed Catarina Tente, Nova Lisbon University, as the new President, and the conference launched the scheduled publication of our 2025 proceedings, *Farmers’ Trade and Markets. Social and economic interaction in the medieval and early modern European countryside* (see facing page). The next RURALIA conference will be held in Belgium and the Netherlands in September 2027 to discuss *Living with Water: Opportunities and Constraints*. Anticipate an open call for papers to be announced through the association’s website <http://www.ruralia.cz> and by emails from the various National Representatives (Niall Brady, Ireland; Carenza Lewis and Sarah Jane Gibbon, UK; see website for the list of national representatives from across Europe).

**Niall Brady**



RURALIA, inside the wooden Cemetery Church of Our Lady in Broumov, dating to c. 1450.



RURALIA, approaching the Gothic bridge in Kłodzko.

# Castle Studies Trust boosts maximum grant amount

The Trust is delighted to announce that for our next round of grants, which have already opened, we have increased the maximum grant award by 40% to £14,000. We have done this in recognition of the rising costs faced by archaeologists. If we want to carry on funding interesting and diverse projects, we need to increase the amount we can award. The increase has been possible due to the continued generosity of existing donors as well as the kindness of new ones. Closing date for applications is Monday 1 December.

## **Crookston: boosting a community as well as our understanding of castles**

Sometimes the Trust does more than just advance our understanding of castles: we have a beneficial impact on the local area. This can be seen in the community geophysical survey of Crookston Castle, the only surviving castle in Glasgow, that took place at the end of August. Situated in a working class area, it was apparently one of the most vandalised Historic Environment Scotland (HES) properties. The survey was carried out by local school children on the Friday and adults on the Saturday and Sunday supervised by the HES survey team led by Nick Hannon and Hazel Blake.

The survey has generated enormous local interest as well as from Glasgow City Council, whose officials have been only too keen to help, with a visit on the Friday of the Lord Provost, who is keen to know the results of the survey.

The extent of the interest was clear at the ‘fun day’ when nearly 1,000 people came through the castle’s gates and they were having to turn people away. It was twice the number HES would consider as an excellent day.

As the Chair of the Friends of Crookston Castle, David MacDonald, says ‘The Castle Studies Trust support has been a catalyst for so much more than the survey itself...’

Our funding has at times helped boost a local area’s interest and concern for a castle, such as at Shrewsbury, but it has never before been such a positive catalyst for the community itself. Thank you to all our donors who gave the funds to allow us to award this grant.

## **2025 projects**

**Canterbury, Kent:** To create an interactive digital model of the castle’s keep. The keep is one of the largest surviving from early Norman England dating to the late 11th / early 12th century. Now much ruined and inaccessible to visitors due to instability, the project will use the findings of previous archaeological research to create an interactive model. The ‘Visualising Canterbury Castle’ project remains on track with all key targets, such as running three co-design sessions and the mounting of an exhibition on campus that showcases the design process of the project. The castle’s interior spaces are nearing completion and the exterior spaces will now be developed. There was a specific session looking at the development of the curriculum resource at the July co-design session and this resource is being created. The project has been submitted as an official project for the 2027 ‘European Year of the Normans’.

**Clavering, Essex:** To fund an excavation to help understand the development of the site which was occupied for over 600 years and which could be one of the very few pre-conquest castles in England. The excavation builds on the extensive survey work carried out by the local group on the site. The excavation was carried out in June and we had a series of blog posts charting the dig’s progress. The project lead, Simon Coxall, has sent off the samples for assessment, for which we hope to have answers early in 2026, and some of them are reliant on work carried out by universities.



*Crookston, geophysical survey with school pupils assisting.*



*Crookston, Fun Day, visitors to site.*



**Crookston, Glasgow:** A community-led geophysical survey, using multiple techniques, through which the Friends of Crookston Castle in conjunction with HES hope to learn more about Glasgow's only castle. While the standing remains are believed to date from the early 15th century, it is thought that the castle dates back to the 12th century. The survey has taken place and we expect the results and report early in 2026.

**Knepp, West Sussex:** An excavation building on a geophysical survey to better understand the site's development and its relationship to the local area of this important baronial centre, thought to have been built by the de Braose family. The first documentary evidence is from 1210 when it was under royal control, recording repairs, while the geophysical survey shows activity that pre-dates the extant stone tower. Excavations have had to be pushed back again to April 2026, due to a diary clash with the contractor.

**Transcription and translation of C17 Dutch Engineer's Survey of English castles and fortifications:** As noted in *Newsletter 73*, this is a joint project between Dutch academic Esther Raamsdonk, Paul Pattison and English Heritage to transcribe and translate part of an early 17th-century manuscript of a Dutch surveyor's examination of castles and forts in England. The sample covers five of the 22 castles and fortifications in the document, number SP 9/99 held by the National Archives in Kew. The sample will include Dover, Walmer and Deal. The document is filled with detailed drawings and maps of these fortifications, with often lengthy descriptions of their condition. The manuscript has 45 folios, and in the early 1980s, John Kenyon made a content page, identifying the different castles. When they started their work, Esther and Paul realised that Dr Kenyon, albeit very knowledgeable, misidentified several castles. Work on a new content page of all castles in the folios is underway. The most exciting discovery so far is three folios on Dover Castle that were not identified as such in the first content page. There is a lot more information about Dover than anticipated, and preliminary transcriptions and translations of Dover and Walmer are made to see what exists about the 17th-century state of the buildings. For example, it is possible to locate lodgings for various people and the names of towers that are now only known by their Victorian names. Deal and Sandown are closely connected, and St Mawes and Pendennis are also transcribed and translated in first draft. For some of the issues, see: <https://castlestudiestrust.org/blog/2025/09/28/>

[deciphering-the-text-the-process-of-transcribing-sp9-99/](#)

## 2024 Projects

**Lowther Castle, Cumbria:** The 2024 project follows on from excavations funded by the Trust in 2023, to see if this earthwork castle and village was an example of early Norman colonisation in the late 11th century. In the second season, the team investigated the possibility for a ditch and gatehouse, and looked for finds within the interior. The plan is to combine the information gathered from the castle area and from the village, to include all the environmental sample data which has yet to be analysed.

**Higham Ferrers, Northants:** The project team carried out a geophysical survey of the castle where nothing remains above ground. The former Duchy of Lancaster castle was completely destroyed during the reign of Henry VIII. The castle has extensive accounts dating from the 13th to 15th centuries, but nobody knows what it looked like. The survey took place in July 2024 and the ground penetrating radar survey (GPR) failed to find any castle remains, confirming the 1992 trial excavation that indicated any castle remains are buried deep down. The survey was completed towards the end of April. The CST has received the report which is currently being assessed.

## 2023 Grant Awards

**Wigmore, Herefordshire:** A digital reconstruction drawing of Wigmore Castle is being completed, based on a mixture of archaeological and archival evidence. It has been mutually agreed between Chris Jones-Jenkins and the Trust to end the project, due to continued issues. All the funds awarded for the project will be put back in to the next round of grant awards. Finally, for all those on social media: we have moved away from Twitter and are focusing more on BlueSky where our handle is [@castlestudies.bsky.social](https://castlestudies.bsky.social). We are also active on LinkedIn so please follow us there: [Castle Studies Trust: Posts | LinkedIn](#).

The Castle Studies Trust is completely reliant on donations from the public for funding its work. If you would like to support our work you can donate online via Kindlink Donation Form App, at: <https://castlestudiestrust.org/Donate.html>

## Jeremy Cunnington



Clavering, Dig Day 1, Trenches 1 and 2. © Jacky Cooper.



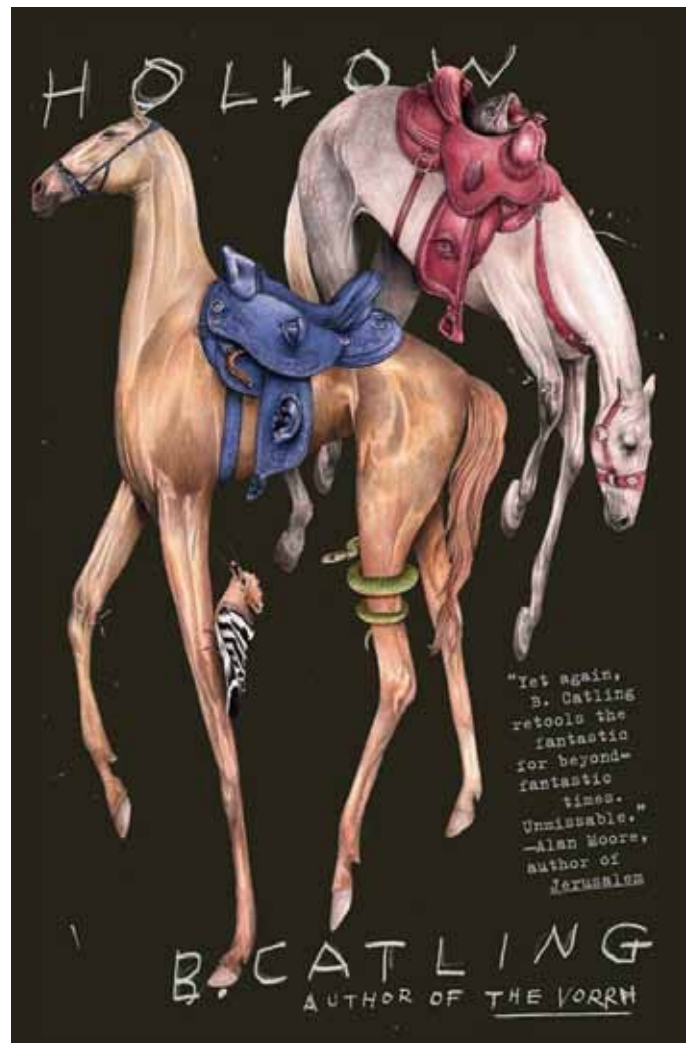
Clavering, Dig Day 3, Trench 2. © Jacky Cooper.

# Media & Exhibition

## A HOLLOW REVIEW: INHABITING THE LANDSCAPES OF BOSCH AND BRUEGEL AND SOME OTHER JOURNEYS

In this piece, I draw together several excursions into the reimagined medieval past, journeys that Umberto Eco would have recognised as primarily taking place in hyperreality. I bring together two novels and three films, linked by the different types of journeys they are rooted in and their connections.

The main inspiration that has grabbed me is my recent reading of the stunningly powerful and provocatively unsettling 2021 novel, *Hollow*, by Brian Catling. It is a work of towering imagination, the tower being Babel, specifically Babel as brought to ruinous life by Bosch. Ruinous Babel dominates the landscape through which a band of mercenaries must journey to reach the far side of the mountainous tower, and the monastery at its base. Here they must deliver a holy, speaking relic, a collection of bones and rags that responds to confessions of mis-deeds. It is a darkly playful novel with our mercenaries cutting a hollow way through the landscapes painted by Jheronymous Bosch and Pieter Brueghel the Elder. It both makes these two artists accessible to a broader audience and engages readers with the dark times in which they painted. The dark playfulness is entirely appropriate for two artists who depicted play as dangerous, as determined by church authorities. The novel's scene of dicing with the Devil is one of several nods to this. The central feature of the novel's landscape is the ruins of Babel (which Brueghel painted three times, two of which survive) with its surrounding lands a composite of several other Brueghel and Bosch paintings (amongst them *The Fight Between Carnival and Lent*, *Dulle Griet*, *The Hunters in the Snow*, *The Temptation of St Anthony*, *The Garden of Earthly Delights* and *St Christopher Carrying the Christ Child*). The story is set some 30 years after the death of Bosch and into the succeeding time-frame of Brueghel. One of the key supporting characters is modelled on Dulle Griet and recalls a time when, as a child, she was given a cartoon by someone who had received it from Bosch. These and other connections are a key way in which the paintings are reconfigured into a single, multi-faceted landscape, called into being by the painterly prose of deft writing strokes. The writing, like the paintings, has a magical quality, evoking a sense of aliveness, including a sense of being enterable by external observers. Consequently, it somehow also suggests the work of the Chinese Tang dynasty painter, Wu Daozi (c. 685-759 AD), famous for his landscapes, with a spiritual depth



*Hollow.*

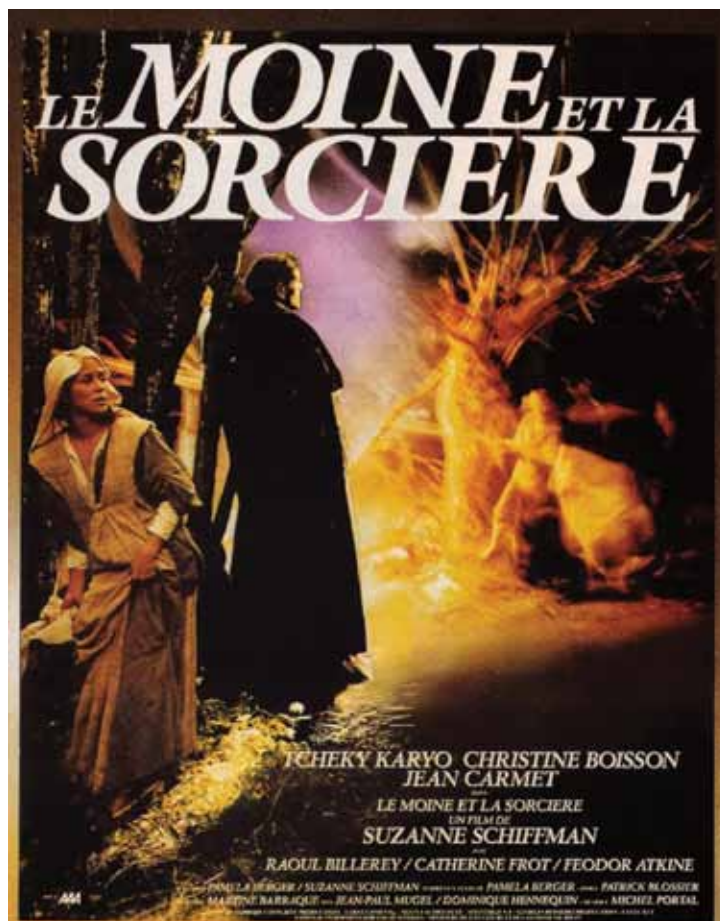
to them that made them palpably real; so real in one case that Daozi entered into his painting and disappeared.

Journeys invoked by sacrality are the driving force of the film *Pilgrimage* (2017) and the novel, *Columba's Bones* (2023). The film is set around five years after the Fourth Crusade sacking of Constantinople in 1204. In it, the Cistercian monk, Giraldus, arrives at a remote monastery (an ogham stone at its centre) in the West of Ireland, as a Papal emissary, to accompany the monastery's relic to Rome, at the Pope's request. The relic is one of the stones used to stone-to-death St Matthew, when he was on a preaching mission to Cappadocia

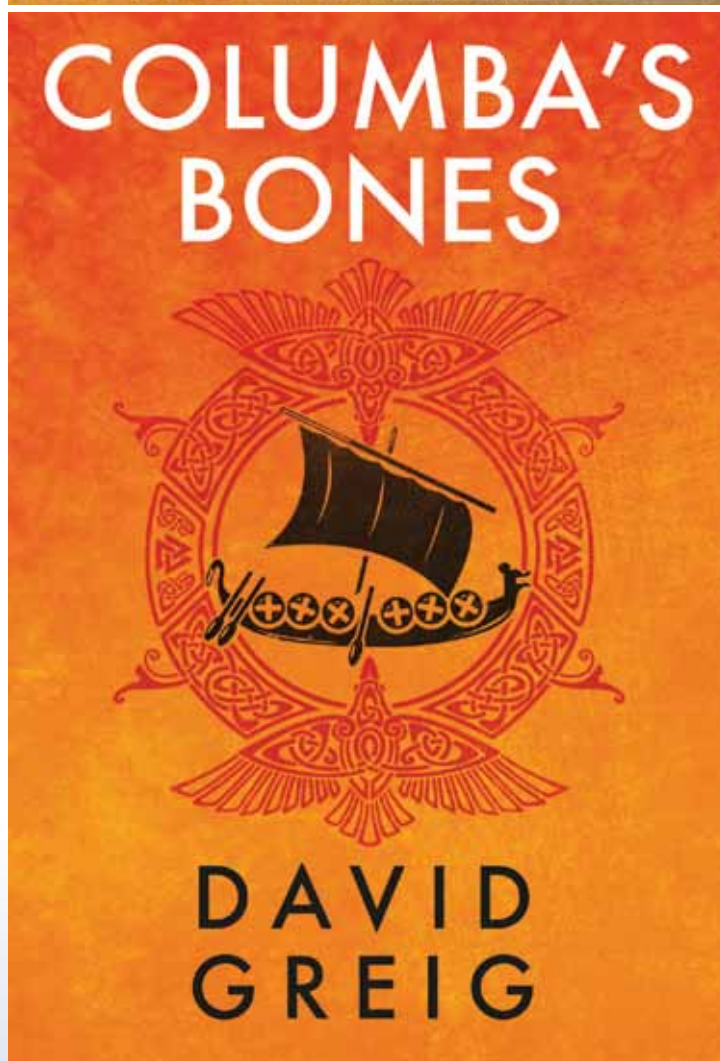
(not the conventional story of Matthew's martyrdom by the king of Ethiopia). The implication is that the stone was looted from Constantinople, perhaps brought to Ireland by Norman knights whose Marcher lands were close to the monastery where the story begins. The lands of these Anglo-Norman lords have to be hazarded, and the film focuses on that journey and the clash between Irish and Anglo-Norman and the struggle to possess the relic. The film is not the first to reference martyrdom stones as relics. Particularly significant is the compelling 1987 French film, *Le Moine et la Sorcière* (*The Monk and the Witch*). Based upon the thirteenth-century writings of Stephen of Bourbon, Dominican preacher, and his anti-heresy tour of Burgundy. *La Moine* shows the cult of saints as a lived practice – in which the martyr-stone relic of St Stephen is created by a village priest from the fabric of the church. We also see the use of a St Andrew relic as a curative, the processing of a St Christopher statue and, of course, the practices around the grave of the holy greyhound, St Guinefort, where the villagers specifically state that they wanted their old ways to be acceptable to God and so they Christianised them. The film's depiction of the village celebration of St Christopher's feast links the film to the opening description of the dog-headed St Christopher (of the Orthodox church) in *Hollow* and points to other saintly dog manifestations.

*Columba's Bones* is a lean, terse reimagining of the in-between times bracketed by two viking raids on Iona Abbey in the mid-9th century. The first raid sees Abbot Blathmac and his brothers put to the sword. One survives, Martin, a novice who hides in the communal lavatory. He rebuilds the abbey aided by a viking convert, Grimur, and the island's mead-wife he has taken-up with. Through guile they defeat the second viking raid just before the arrival of the King of Dál Riata's troops turn-up to clean-up (encouraged by an Irish princess turned anchorite). Before heading off to lead a new double-house in Armagh, Martin delays to finish off a certain illuminated Gospel Book. The story is well-researched but wears it lightly, focusing on the human drama and interactions. Again, relics are significant. The economic value of the finger relic and reliquary of Columba drives the vikings (making them very piratical but failing to recognise any non-economic values [some] vikings may have attached to relics as powerful supernatural objects). The relics' religious value drives the monks. Blathmac places the object in its reliquary box and there it decays to dust. It is replaced by a new finger, one lost by Grimur in a fight.

Journey's, historical, contemporary and spiritual are central to Robert Harris's thriller, *Conclave* (published in 2016 and filmed in 2024). Set in our own time, both versions tell the story of a Papal election and its setting of confinement in the Sistine Chapel. The story's Vatican setting means both novel and film are replete with medieval bricolage but my main reason for citing it here is for its skillful satire, especially on the Catholic Church's gender politics, which clearly draws on the myth of Pope Joan. Here, Joan is Cardinal Vincent Benitez, born as an intersex individual (with male genitalia and female uterus and



The Monk and the Witch.



Columba's Bones.

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We welcome submissions relating to current research projects in Ireland, the UK and on the continent, and ask that submissions do not exceed 800 words, with conference reports to be within 500 words.

Please do not embed pictures in Word/text files but do send pictures/plans as separate high quality JPEG files. The preferred format for site plans/maps is EPS, with layers clearly indicated and unlocked, and any linked files attached.

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The due dates for receipt of copy are:

**Spring Newsletter:** 15th February  
**Autumn Newsletter:** 15th August

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ovaries). He serves as an effective challenge to Catholic gender orthodoxy. In the film, I am pretty sure they walk through the cloister where the holed stone, legendarily interpreted as the one which the Vatican created so that post-Joan popes could be formerly sat on it and have their testicles

formally felt to confirm their credentials – a marvelous piece of medieval humour at the expense of the papacy.

**Mark A Hall**  
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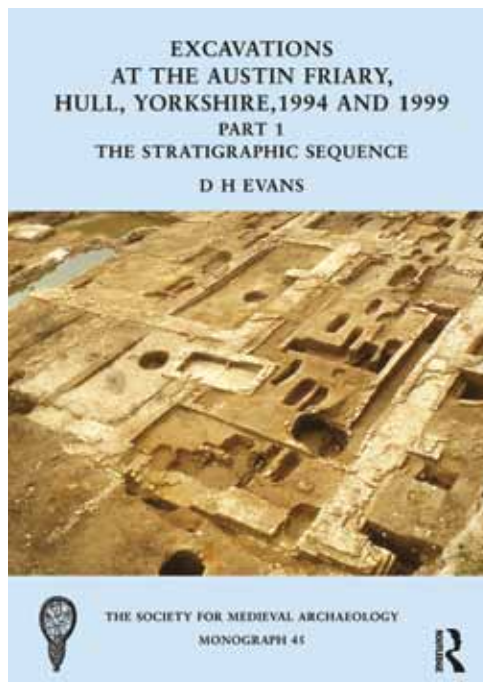
## New Society Publication

The next monograph published by the Society is out now. Excavations at the **Austin Friary, Hull, Yorkshire**, 1994 and 1999. Part 1: The Stratigraphic Sequence will be number 46 in the series, and has been written by Dave Evans. It is the first volume of three regarding the excavations at the Austin Friary; the second monograph about the finds is currently with the printers and will follow shortly. The third will discuss the skeletal remains and environmental evidence.

The Austin Friary at Hull was founded in 1316/17 as a daughter-house of York friary. It would be the very last of the Order to surrender to the Crown, on 10 March 1539. The monastic house was located in the heart of the medieval Old Town, next to its market place. It was excavated in 1994 and 1999 prior to re-development of the site.

The excavations recovered substantial elements of the built friary and the layout of over 70% of the entire precinct can now be reconstructed. Anaerobic waterlogged conditions favoured the survival of organic remains and structures. Some 260 articulated burials were recovered, associated with important sepulchral remains, including 44 oak coffins, a significant assemblage of textile remains and a wealth of dress-accessories. Almost all the coffins, which can be closely dated, were made of imported Baltic oak, making this the largest assemblage of medieval Baltic oak to have been found in England.

At the Dissolution, the friary seems to have escaped major damage to its fabric, and within a year much of it had been converted into a large secular holding. Some of its buildings would still be standing to their full height as late as the 1790s, albeit with substantial modifications and changes of use. Later activity on the site includes the development and use of three public houses, the construction of a Georgian Butchers' Shambles and a Victorian Market Hall. In 1941, the whole area was



bombed and largely raised to the ground during the Hull Blitz.

Monograph 46 is A4 size and 362 pages long. It can be purchased directly from Routledge and SMA members have a 30% discount on all Routledge books. To benefit from this, please log in the Members Area page of the SMA website and find the discount code and link to Routledge.

# Conferences & Events

— FORTHCOMING —

### 1 December 2025:

SMA Winter Symposium. See pages 1-3.

### 18-19 April 2026:

MSRG Spring Conference, The Contributions of Community Archaeology to Settlement Studies. Lincoln University.