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Review Essay: Roland Bechmann, *Trees and Man: The Forest in the Middle Ages*

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BOOK REVIEWS

evidence. This section provides starting points for further meaningful research about lord-peasant negotiations and settlement changes, whether or not there was a retreat from marginal land in times of economic stress in the late Middle Ages, and the link between place names and settlement morphology in the study of nucleation and dispersion of populations.

Part Two, Field Work, presents essays in fieldwork methodology and the interpretation of evidence gathered through this type of study. An excellent introduction to the issues addressed by historical archaeologists, it should be required reading for students in medieval history. C. C. Taylor's article about shifting conclusions at Whittlesford is entertaining and valuable because it forces researchers to admit their own fallibility and to appreciate the contribution of older studies to current exploration.

Part Three, Excavation, details the use of archaeological excavation to describe medieval settlements and the social and economic life of their inhabitants. Essays by Richard Hodges and Martin Bell shed light on the roles of environmental archaeology and statistical sampling in understanding communities and the people who inhabited them. Hodges also shares some thought-provoking ideas on why scholars from different disciplines must cooperate with each other to accurately describe the past.

The Rural Settlements of Medieval England is a valuable summary of current trends and issues in the study of medieval English rural communities. Its scope is limited primarily to the work of archaeologists, but it does touch on the roles of historians and geographers in explaining the physical remains of medieval settlements. Unfortunately, there is no glossary or bibliography and the authors seldom define terms unique to this field. Footnotes are the only means provided for learning about related literature. The book is obviously intended for specialists in English local history.

Those who wish a more complete overview of medieval local history studies in England should supplement their reading of this book with *The Countryside of Medieval England*, edited by Grenville Astill and Annie Grant (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988). The articles in this compilation add the people, animals, and crops that are lacking in *The Rural Settlements of Medieval England*.

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Roland Bechmann, *Trees and Man: The Forest in the Middle Ages*, trans. Katharyn Dunham, rev. ed., Paragon House, 1990, 319 pp., biblio., index, \$24.95.

It is clear that Roland Bechmann's *Trees and Man* is meant to contain all the information anyone would want to know about the medieval forest. His very comprehensive chapters cover such areas of study as the forest's ecosystem, the natural resources of the forest, the farmer in the forest, actors and phases of clearing the ground, stock breeding and the forest, fuel, lumber, miscellaneous products and uses, production, exploitation and parcelling users' rights, legislation and administration, strategy, economics and politics, and, finally, myths and realities of the forest. Appendices include charts and tables devoted to chronology, interdependence of the forest's socio-economic environment, cycles of primary forest clearing, and forest legislation. Each page is filled with a large amount of data and an equally large number of anecdotes. At the same time, this material often stretches across several centuries and sometimes across several lands (even on numerous occasions going beyond western Europe into Africa or the Middle East).

In these pages the reader will find an abundance of encyclopedic information on almost all aspects of medieval life and culture: on biology, on building and land clearing technology, on the agricultural revolution, on linguistics, on medieval hunting and fishing, on honey, on livestock mobility (both pigs and cattle), on the manufacture of charcoal and ashes, on the construction of wickerwork and fences, on roads, on the legal ownership of the forests, on the cult of trees, and even on the evolution of pagan mythical forest creatures into Catholic saints.

This encyclopedic abundance leaves the reader swimming in information. Ideas and theses flow past quickly and nonchalantly and chronology and geography jump erratically back and forth, all in a way that leaves very little lasting impression and even less satisfaction. Were the monasteries responsible for most of the deforestation of the Middle Ages? Who knows? The argument is stated and investigated in less than one page. What about securing the use of forest timber for shipbuilding? Again, who can say for certain? For although the issue is mentioned, nothing more is stated except that the French king, Charles V, exploited the Roumare forest in 1376 to ensure the supply of lumber of the Rouen shipyards (an interesting anecdote, but a poor indication of general medieval policy).

Bechmann's book is not a monograph and should not be used as such. Indeed, it is nearly impossible to read the book from cover to cover. It is, rather, a reference work in which readers will have to search both the table of contents and the index to find discussions relating to their own specific interests. Even this will bring some dissatisfaction, as the footnotes are scanty and often incomplete. (One reads merely, "French text by Gimpel according to Panofsky.")

BOOK REVIEWS

There is much about the medieval forest that is intriguing and in need of further study. It is thus a pity that with *Trees and Man* Roland Bechmann tried to do so much and, in fact, accomplished so little.

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Theresa Coletti, *Naming the Rose: Eco, Medieval Signs, and Modern Theory*, Cornell University Press, 1988, xi, 212 pp., index, \$30.00.

Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* is a novel of great complexity that admirably fits a definition of the genre as "a machine for generating interpretations" that Eco himself proposes in his Postscript. Of the many exegeses Eco's work has elicited, none is richer or more illuminating than Theresa Coletti's *Naming the Rose*. With her critical assessment of Eco's novel, she has produced an informative and stimulating book that guides its readers to an awareness and a better grasp of Eco's reflections on a panoply of cultural, linguistic, and theoretical issues, an impressive achievement considering the intricacies of the topics involved and the interdisciplinary proportions of Eco's work. She demonstrates, with particular acumen, Eco's ability to formulate carefully thought-out statements about language and hermeneutics against a concrete setting of medieval social, religious, and intellectual life. Declaring her discussion eclectic, she covers a vast array of intellectual endeavors, appealing to history, semiotics, biblical exegesis, medieval studies, literary theory, etc. In broader terms, she describes her book as a gesture toward the furthering of the dialogue between students of the medieval past and of modern theory. Emphasizing that Eco does not simply use medieval history as a setting—as an object of representation destined solely to enhance the historical novel aspect of the work—she draws attention to the fact that medieval history provides Eco with an opportunity to reflect on meaning as the product of culture and on a wide variety of social, linguistic, religious, and philosophical concerns.

Central to Coletti's discussion of the medieval component in Eco's book is her analysis of the role played by the Franciscan order in changing the religious configuration of Europe. Poverty, as preached by the Franciscans, evolves into a social problem constituting a challenge to the dominant Benedictine power base. The poor become marginal, excluded from the social order; they became outsiders produced by processes of cultural exclusion, hence the felicitous definition of culture as a system of exclusions legislated from above. These developments are posed in terms of an opposition between Benedictine monasticism and