

Book Reviews

Pre-1800

RHIANYDD BIEBRACH. *Church Monuments in South Wales, c.1200–1547*. Boydell Studies in Medieval Art and Architecture. Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2017. Pp. 226. \$99.00 (cloth).

doi: 10.1017/jbr.2018.119

Prior to the release of this book, only two monographs had been published on Welsh monuments: Colin Gresham's *Medieval Stone Carving in North Wales* (1968) and J. M. Lewis's *Welsh Monumental Brasses* (1974). Quite clearly, there was a lacuna in major publications which this work fills admirably. Biebrach explores various types of church monuments dating from the thirteenth to mid-sixteenth centuries, and offers thought-provoking insights on patrons, materials and production, the interplay between spiritual and secular concerns, and the “afterlife” of monuments—in other words, what has happened to them in the centuries after they were erected. Comparisons and contrasts are made with England, which adds nuance to our overall understanding of commemorative tastes and trends during the period.

Indeed, Biebrach offers some significant findings when comparing south Wales with its neighbor. The church monuments industry in the region saw a period of growth until the middle of the fourteenth century, after which there was a collapse from which it only partially recovered in the period before the Reformation. This is an unexpected finding for Biebrach, particularly when one looks at England, which saw an earlier revival in fortunes. The explanations for this revolve around the fact that south Wales was poorer, less densely populated, culturally mixed and politically unstable compared to England. Particular problems were caused by the demographic collapse in the wake of the Black Death and rebellion. The destruction which accompanied Owain Glyndŵr's revolt in the early years of the fifteenth century saw an end to major architectural projects. A dearth in skilled workers, coupled with severe disruption at local quarries, resulted in the decline of the native industry. After about 1450, a limited recovery was stimulated by a new, smaller client group, including native gentry who were on the rise, such as the Herberts of Raglan whose alabaster tombs (imported from England) can

be found in Abergavenny Priory. The fortunes of the industry were therefore very much a result of the turbulent history of the region in the later Middle Ages.

A chapter examining materials, production, and supply is an interesting read. This is indicative of a willingness by some church monuments scholars to move on from a conservative approach, with its predilection for classifying and dating armor, to embrace other disciplines including, the sciences (it is noted that Biebrach has drawn on the expertise of a geologist). The existence of local workshops in south Wales can be identified during the fourteenth century, and home-grown products flourished until the middle of the century, after which native stone all but disappeared. Stones most suitable for carving included Quarella, Sutton and Lias, found in Glamorgan. Devonian Old Red sandstone can be found in Monmouthshire and Brecon, and Caerbwdi sandstone is located further west in Pembrokeshire. This stone was quarried at St. David's and was used throughout the cathedral. A total of seventy effigies, tomb chests and cross slabs have been identified as being carved from native stone, although Biebrach acknowledges that this is very likely to be an underestimate. One theme that is revisited several times in the book is the trading links across the Bristol Channel, and it is therefore no surprise to find that West Country imports were popular, especially Dundry stone, quarried near Bristol.

The chapter examining the damage and destruction done to church monuments over the centuries is a welcome inclusion. Considering the fate of church monuments can help us interpret the thoughts and attitudes of successive generations, although we must keep in mind that there were once many more examples than those which have survived. Religious iconoclasm during the Reformation and the 1640s to 1650s is the traditional explanation for the mutilation and obliteration of many tombs, but Biebrach demonstrates that this was not necessarily the case in south Wales. Iconoclasm was less destructive in the region than in other parts of the British Isles (distance from London being one of the reasons given), and it is likely that much more damage was done during the following centuries. Although St. David's Cathedral was badly affected during the seventeenth century, the religious imagery in Llandaff Cathedral, for example, escaped wholesale destruction; any losses during the period were probably due to financial gain rather than religious fervor. It was in the eighteenth century that the monuments at Llandaff particularly suffered, largely due to neglect of the building's structure. Engravings dating from the late eighteenth century show the west end of the church as roofless and floorless, with ivy crawling up the walls. At Brecon Priory several monuments were lost or removed during the nineteenth century, a reminder that Victorian restorations could be just as destructive as iconoclastic activity.

This book is an impressive piece of work that is a worthy addition to the expanding body of scholarship on the monumental culture of late medieval Britain. In addition to church monuments enthusiasts, the book will attract anyone interested in late medieval commemoration and material culture. It also offers a significant contribution to the study of Wales during the late Middle Ages. Importantly for a piece of work of this nature, the book includes four color and nearly fifty black-and-white illustrations, along with several graphs.

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JEREMY BLACK. *Geographies of an Imperial Power: The British World, 1688–1815*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018. Pp. 308. \$80.00 (cloth).
 doi: 10.1017/jbr.2018.120

In *Geographies of an Imperial Power*, Jeremy Black traces the role of geography, broadly construed, in the British Empire between 1688 and 1815. To do so, he explores a wide array of