

REVIEW

Early Landscape from the Air. Studies of Crop Marks in South Yorkshire and North Nottinghamshire. By D. N. Riley. 149 pp., 16 pls., 14 figs., 34 maps. Sheffield: University of Sheffield 1980. Price £7.50.

We owe a considerable debt to the aerial archaeologists of this region, notably Derrick Riley, the author of this book, and James Pickering. With little financial assistance they have flown regular sorties, systematically surveying both promising and unpromising areas, and making what must be the greatest single contribution to our knowledge of the East Midlands. Their discoveries have generated a large proportion of the excavations of the last decade or more. But aerial archaeology is much more than an assembly of potential excavation sites. It is the only source of primary evidence of a sufficiently large scale to allow the attempted reconstruction of early landscapes.

The problems of publishing such a quantity of information are well known. This book provides the data for others to draw on, with little discussion of its wider implications. The heart of the book is the thirty-four carefully drawn maps, with detailed notes on the crop marks. The text describes techniques, soils and topography, the crop marks themselves, and trial excavations. This will form the basis for all further work in north Nottinghamshire and south Yorkshire.

The most exciting discovery is without doubt the extensive field systems which appear intermittently on the bunter sandstone between Doncaster and Mansfield. Long parallel strips of land, usually at right-angles to the water courses, are divided irregularly into smaller units, resembling a brick-work pattern. In two Yorkshire parishes, similar strip fields, apparently radiating from a central enclosure, form nuclear plans. Scattered examples of irregular plan occur throughout the region. The almost complete absence of other crop-marks, and the regularity of the system suggest the taking in of new territory at a particular time.

The precise dating of the system is uncertain, but the Roman period appears most probable: mid to late Roman pottery has been found in some of the boundary ditches during excavation. At Rossington and Austerfield two blocks of fields are bisected at an acute angle by a Roman road, unlikely to be later than the fifties in construction. Were the fields later than, or contemporary with the road, they would surely have respected its line. One of these blocks of fields is of the nuclear plan, possibly an earlier type. The other, while parallel with a nearby block of brick-work plan, is not continuous with it, and is distinguished by its atypical short, broad fields, perhaps again an early type? It is difficult to see the mass of this highly organised field system in a late Iron Age context in this area.

At this point Dr. Riley cautiously, and perhaps wisely, speculates no further, but a number of questions arises concerning the use and function of the field system and its social implications.

Each block of fields at least, must have been a single undertaking, and the size and number of fields, quite apart from their regularity of plan, make plain that we are not dealing with individual farmers working independently. We are looking then for some larger authority: one large or a number of smaller private estates; an imperial estate; a *civitas*; or a *colonia*? The last is a tempting conclusion. The field systems may well lie within the Lincoln *territorium*. But this is not the usual centuriation system, nor are the fields directly related to the road system. We might expect the allotments of land to be closer to the city, and to see some disintegration of the original pattern of holdings through purchase and inheritance. The brickwork system remains undistorted, suggesting large and lasting holdings.

The size of the individual fields also argues for substantial private, or public, ownership. While by no means the largest strip fields known in Roman Britain (Applebaum quotes fields up to 30 hectares in size (1972, 94)), they are larger than

average, developed in response to 'the multiplication of manpower, not restricted to the family plot (slaves, wage-labourers and tenants) with the availability of markets which led to the development of commercial farming; and in response to the demands of the armed forces and of taxation' (Applebaum, 1972, 106). This orderly system of large fields is as sure a sign of Romanisation as the commercial potteries or the growing road system.

Dr. Riley's book presents the evidence. It is left to others to interpret it. The recording and publishing of the material is itself a considerable achievement, and one which richly deserves the B.B.C. Chronical Award.

REFERENCE

Applebaum, S. 1972, in Finberg, H. P. R. (ed.) *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, I, II, A.D. 43-1042, 1-277.

HAZEL WHEELER