

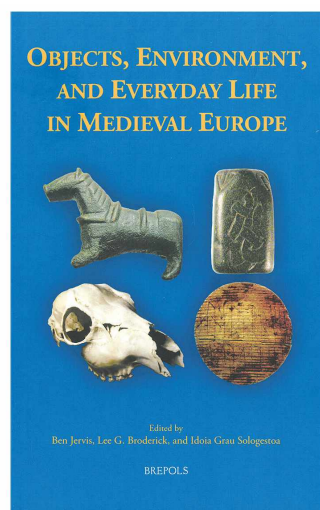
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Objects, Environment, and Everyday Life in Medieval  
Europe

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One of the joys of archaeology, surely, is in discovering evidence for the way people lived their lives. The objects they made, used and lost, the food they consumed, the waste they accumulated and disposed of, all retain the capacity to provide insights into the details of personal and communal existence. It seems surprising, therefore, that so few archaeological publications attempt properly

to get under the skin of everyday living and look for the pulse of the ordinary, the workings of the commonplace or the secrets of custom and convention around which unremarkable lives were built. Is there, after all, anything less remarkable than a discarded animal bone, or a broken potsherd? Yet within them, and furthermore, within many of them together, are contained the clues that help us to reach an understanding of how greater economic, political and social themes affected the lives of people otherwise absent from the historical record. This book takes a step in that direction, in an admirable attempt to show how studies of what we archaeologists call ‘finds’ can reveal aspects of everyday living. The papers presented here originated as a session at the 2012 European Association of Archaeologists (EAA) conference in Helsinki, the title of which was ‘Life in the City: Artefact and Environmental Based Approaches to Urban Europe’. That title reflects rather more accurately the content of this publication, which is focussed almost entirely on urban contexts. That is perhaps justified because it is mainly towns that have produced the large assemblages that reveal most about the medieval way of life. The editors, in their introduction, put it somewhat differently ‘... a hard rural/urban dichotomy, based upon the physical manifestation of towns as, often bounded, built spaces becomes untenable from the social, cultural, and economic perspectives. Central to understanding the lives of those in Medieval Europe is the

understanding of the relationships between artefacts, environments, and built spaces which constituted the Medieval experience’. Some might view this as a somewhat contrived attempt to justify the focus of this book away from the rural (where space has a different meaning perhaps) but more pertinently, and with some justification, the aim here is to bypass the barriers of enforcement, regulation and control that might have characterised the differences between rural and urban and focus on evidence for more prosaic aspects of medieval lives, and for that the editors of this book must be commended.

In trying to achieve that aim the editors are, of course, in the hands of the authors of the various papers compiled here and, in terms of reflecting ‘everyday life’, these are not as wide-ranging as one might hope. While many forms of evidence are presented the subject matter is more limited. There is nothing, for instance, on coinage, personal hygiene and grooming, clothing, furniture, transport, to name but a few. This is no fault of the individual authors, or the editors, all of whom have contributed to a lively and very readable collection of papers. Following the excellent introduction, this is comprised of thirteen separate contributions that cover environmental evidence in the form of zooarchaeology, archaeobotany, woodland history, soil micromorphology and human dental calculus, as well as analyses of wooden, pottery and metal objects. These are arranged in four parts entitled ‘Provisioning as Process’, ‘Social Dynamics’, ‘Domestic Life’ and ‘Studying the Town’. Within these sections it is refreshing to see environmental and artefactual studies mixed together, so that the papers contribute a continuing, cumulative understanding of the overall theme. The locations represented include, in order of appearance, Ipswich, Reykjavik, Ireland, Anatolia, Poland, Rome and Latium, Turku, Saxon Southampton, Copenhagen, Antwerp and Kaupang, and Leicester. Two general contributions include a look at Portable Antiquities Scheme finds in England and Mark Hall’s masterful review of gaming pieces and other evidence for play.

Of more specific interest to readers of *Medieval Ceramics* will be the two papers on pottery. ‘Patterns of Diversity: using ceramics to examine the social topography of the medieval town of Plock, Poland’ by Maciej Trzeciecki is an attempt to distinguish different social groups on the basis of the types of pottery they habitually consumed. It is good to see records of house values used to identify social zones and it is clearly possible to divide Plock into wealthy and less wealthy areas that seem to consume pottery of different character. Apart from being a useful study of the value of pottery in examining social topography, the concluding remarks are well worth proper consideration: ‘What remains is to assert that a Medieval town should be a topic of interdisciplinary research. This seems so obvious as to be trite; in practice, however, this aim is not an easy one to

*achieve, since it requires cooperation between the historian and the archaeologist, especially at the stage of formulating research questions, confronting results of various analyses, and finally attempting to construct a coherent image of life in a Medieval town.* Well said, but equally tricky is establishing cooperation between different archaeologists, especially those managing projects and those studying the finds. Ben Jervis, in his paper 'Changing Places? Place-making in Anglo-Saxon *Hamwic*, Southampton and Winchester' also recognises the need to bring together all available forms of evidence. He provides an interesting analysis of how pottery use and deposition enables an understanding of change and continuity in the Saxon towns of Southampton and Winchester. His conclusion is somewhat loftier than his Polish colleague's but no less useful as a starting point for further research: '*spaces ... rely upon action, and in order to understand how they were formed and experienced we must seek to reconstruct the courses of action which brought them into being, rather than separating them from the built spaces which resulted from them and in which action occurred*'. Both papers demonstrate how versatile pottery can be as an interpretative tool, especially when considering the themes of society and culture.

It is perhaps a pity that several of the other papers

in this volume are more descriptive, and do not offer similar insights, but that barely detracts from a book that is as informative as it is generous in its scope, in terms of types of evidence and geographic spread. It is also well produced by the Belgian publishers Brepols, to high production values in a hard cover with good quality paper. What is missing, as is often the case with collected papers, is any summary that brings together the evidence in an overall consideration of the theme of objects, environment and everyday life. How well, for instance, do the editors think this is reflected in the papers they have gathered together and what might further work focus on? The absence of any conclusion is frustrating, especially given that the introduction is relatively thorough in leading the reader into the various headings around which the papers are organised. It seems likely that any discussion that may have followed in the conference session did consider these questions and although that would be difficult to represent in print, some sort of conclusion would have been welcome here. As it is, this volume represents a series of case studies that should inform anyone intending to follow similar lines of enquiry. The field is wide open, after all, and this work is an important step in its exploration.

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