Golden Middle Ages in Europe: New Research into Early-Medieval Communities and Identities. Edited by Annemarieke Willemsen and Hanneke Kik. Brepols. 2015. 168pp. EUR 59.00.

This volume represents a collection of studies first presented at the second Dorestad Congress, which accompanied the 2014 exhibition ‘Golden Middle Ages: The Netherlands in the Merovingian World, 400-700 AD’ held at the National Museum of Antiquities in Leiden. The articles contained within all sit somewhere between the breadth suggested by the volume’s title and the narrower focus suggested by the title of the congress and exhibition. Most of the articles are about either Dorestad itself (in the final section), or Frisia and the Low Countries area, and there are also articles on connections with the North Sea world, though nothing outside North West Europe. This range serves to provide the volume with a coherent, if slightly ill-defined focus, which is consolidated by the concentration of most of the articles on archaeological matters and the division of the book into three sections: ‘Settlements and Cemeteries’; ‘Material Culture’; and ‘New Research on Dorestad’. While all the contributions are worthy of consideration, for reasons of space I shall focus only on two from each section here, before concluding with some thoughts on the volume as a whole. I should note at the outset of this review that I am not an archaeologist by training, and have approached this book primarily through the lens of assessing its accessibility to a literary historian.

The first section, ‘Settlements and Cemeteries’, is the least cohesive of the three, and contains: an interesting survey of the evidence for linguistic diversity in the early medieval Low Countries by Michiel de Vaan (which, it must be noted, is about neither settlements nor cemeteries); two articles – by Annemarieke Willemsen and Johan Nicolay respectively – on the thorny subject of royalty in the early medieval Low Countries (and the Rhineland); and a multi-authored survey of the archaeological work undertaken at Borgharen, a listed monument near Maastricht containing a Roman villa and a Merovingian cemetery. Willemsen and Nicolay challenge, in different ways, perceptions and assumptions about early medieval ‘royalty’ and ‘upper classes’. Willemsen demonstrates that there is often little to distinguish between graves that have been termed ‘royal’, ‘princely’ or simply ‘high status’, and that, in most cases, ‘royal’ graves cannot be linked to any rulers known from the literary record, with the grave of Childeric I representing an important exception. Nicolay, meanwhile, presents a response to the influential construction by Pieter Boeles of the idea of ‘Frisia Magna’, the supposed pre-Carolingian kingdom of the Frisian kings, and the deconstruction of this idea by more recent archaeologists and historians. Nicolay uses clearly demonstrable phases in early medieval

Frisian archaeology to argue that there never was a 'Frisia Magna'. Instead there existed different regions with different elite networks and external influences, the nature and extent of which changed over time.

The second section of the volume, 'Material Culture', is somewhat more cohesive in that all the chapters concentrate on archaeological issues: two on glassware and rock crystal – by Line Van Wersch and Genevra Kornbluth – two on coinage – by Wybrand op den Velde and Anna Gannon – and one on the relationship between trade and identity by Ben Jervis. Kornbluth explores the significance of two types of female status-markers made from rock crystal: spindle whorls and bound pendants. The study is firmly supported by references to contemporary written sources that reinforce the value associated with rock crystal in the early medieval period. Perhaps most important in this study is the conclusion that different types of bound pendants cannot be associated with particular ethnic groups, as demonstrated by the uneven distribution of pendants of Anglo-Saxon origin in the Frankish heartlands of Neustria and Austrasia. Gannon's subject is Series X, a trading currency that circulated around the North Sea through the eighth century. Rather than addressing the unresolved issue of the origin of Series X coins, Gannon's central argument is that labelling the coins as the 'Wodan/monster' type is misleading because the iconography of the coins is inherently neither Christian nor pagan, could have been produced in either cultural context, and certainly circulated in both worlds. Although arguing that such iconography was purposefully ambiguous is tricky, Gannon is right to point out that such ambiguity was useful in a world where trade between pagans and Christians was commonplace.

The final section of the volume focusses in on Dorestad itself, with three relatively short contributions: a multi-authored article on the 'rise and fall' of Dorestad; a presentation of the dendrochronological evidence for the settlement by Esther Jansma and Rowin Van Lanen; and a concluding chapter by Annemarieke Willemsen. The authors of the first of these articles place Dorestad in the context of landscape dynamics. Although I cannot summarise the full significance of the article here, the authors have done a commendable job of presenting the narrative of Dorestad within the recent archaeological and paleogeographical work that has been done around the Rhine delta area in order to demonstrate why the emporium had become obsolete by the middle of the ninth century. Jansma and Van Lanen support this with their dendrochronological evidence, which provides an independent witness to Dorestad's importance in the early medieval trade network, and especially its links with the Rhineland, as well as confirming that the emporium had ceased to be of importance, if not ceased to exist entirely by the second half of the ninth century. The authors explain dendrochronology in a

way that is accessible to the partly or completely uninitiated, and the thirty-three pages of dendrochronological data tables that accompany the article will no doubt be of great use and interest to many archaeologists.

While this volume is fully illustrated with black and white images throughout, it would be remiss not to mention the beautiful full-colour plates section that sits between ‘Material Culture’ and ‘New Research on Dorestad’. Although these are only coloured versions of those found in the chapters, having them in colour (and in some cases enlarged so as to be observable) really serves to bring the subject matter of the book to life. I do feel that as a whole the volume would have been well-served by having an introductory chapter to provide some context – beyond what can be discerned from the blurb – and to explain the rationale behind the sections, which, particularly in the case of the first, are not always cohesive units. Another slight weakness is that several of the contributions feel more like reviews or overviews of the current state of research than articles with finalised conclusions. I concede this may be a matter of perspective, as the authors often present new findings but admit that further research needs to be done before conclusions can be drawn. I would also emphasise that this observation does not lessen my feeling that this is an incredibly useful volume which draws together a wide range of evidence from a variety of research approaches, and that – for the most part – this is presented in such a way as to be accessible to those without training in the relevant fields – whether archaeological or literary. I would, therefore, not hesitate to recommend this collection of articles to anyone interested in the significance of the early medieval Low Countries region.

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