

Inhabited Spaces: Anglo-Saxon Constructions of Place, by Nicole Guenther

Discenza (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 2017; pp. xii + 261. \$45).

Inspired by Michel de Certeau and Yi-Fu Tuan, Nicole Discenza offers a literary analysis of Anglo-Saxon perceptions of place and space. Place is 'a locale or location given human meaning', with boundaries; space is 'defined by relationships among people, objects, and events', and not bounded. Both are constructed 'mentally and often materially', though 'Place becomes proper as Anglo-Saxons impose a mental order upon it, whether or not they have physically made it.' (pp. 6-7) This presumably justifies the reconstruction of place and space through literary analysis alone. Place and space are not fixed, but always in process.

The analysis is organized spatially, beginning with the relationship between the Cosmos and the Earth, moving through the relationships of England with Rome and Jerusalem, and with the North, to two types of spaces within England – wastelands (open spaces), and halls and cities (closed spaces). Though taking in some earlier works, the real focus is texts belonging to the later ninth, tenth, or earlier eleventh century, including works by Ælfric of Eynsham and Byrhtferth of Ramsey, Old English translations of Orosius, Augustine, Boethius, Gregory the Great, and Bede, and the corpus of Old English poetry written down in manuscripts of c. 1000.

Taking this approach produces some very welcome results. Chapter One discusses the ways in which Bede and Alcuin transmitted and translated Classical and Late Antique ideas about the Cosmos to later Latin and Old English authors. Chapters Two and Three demonstrate that authors recognized that

Britain was located at the edge of the earth, but also familiarized readers with far flung regions including Rome, Jerusalem, and northern and eastern Europe. Chapter Two offers a novel categorization of how authors confronted unfamiliar places, through omission, repetition and connection, or discussing their history or inhabitants. Chapters Four and Five offer sensitive readings of Old English poetry to bring out contradictory features of wastelands and halls and cities, as civilized and uncivilized places associated with sin and redemption. A scholarly approach is taken to the analysis of individual words – counting words to provide statistics, and comparing usage across texts using dictionaries. *Inhabited Spaces* will be of interest to those studying place and space, but also to those reading these texts for other purposes. Keeping these substantial achievements in mind, there are analytical tensions and notable omissions.

Any cultural reconstruction assumes an original shared culture. Here the assumption seems to be an Anglo-Saxon or English culture amongst the inhabitants of England. The basis for this is not explicit, but there are signposts. There is awareness of the problem of identifying the Anglo-Saxons as a single English people or the inhabitants of England. During the seventh, eighth, and ninth centuries, the lowlands of southern and eastern Britain were populated by a patchwork of Old English speaking peoples with their own rulers. Their territories included Brittonic speakers and were not identical in extent either with the kingdom of the English established in the tenth century, the England referred to from the ninth century but more commonly from the eleventh century, or the *Anglia* of Domesday Book. From the seventh and eighth centuries onwards, authors observed the existence of a collective Old English linguistic community, and occasionally used the Latin term *Angli* and Old English

Angelcynn as collective terms, but their significance is debated. In journal articles and *The Formation of the English Kingdom in the Tenth Century* (Oxford: OUP, 2015), George Molyneaux argues that the administrative reforms of King Edgar's reign (r. 959-75) prompted kings regularly to adopt the title king of the English, and encouraged subjects to identify themselves as English and the kingdom as England. Even then, the kingdom's inhabitants spoke languages other than English and some Old English speakers lived beyond its bounds.

Two paragraphs demonstrate awareness of these problems (though not of Molyneaux's arguments): the solution is to focus predominantly on Old English texts from the later ninth century onwards (pp. 8-9, 60-1). The structuralist or post-structuralist idea of cultures as shared systems of interdependent signs might lie behind close readings of particular terms and comparisons across texts. However, the link between language, ethnicity, and physical and political geography remains unclear. Old English speakers, the Anglo-Saxons, the English, and the inhabitants of Britain and England often seem to be interchangeable. This results in some odd claims that authors writing before an England or kingdom of the English existed, or sometimes explicitly writing about Britain or the inhabitants of Britain, are making claims about England or the English (pp. 35-6, 104, 116-7, 127-8). Even where these texts do write about England or the English, they were produced in particular places at particular times by literate ecclesiastics. Readers may wish to consider this a study of how some literate, clerical elites constructed place and space in selected Latin and Old English texts, and to clean up ethnic and geographical terminology.

Finally, though this is a fascinating literary analysis, it seems a shame that it is not in dialogue with some recent interdisciplinary studies bearing on the

same issues. A brief discussion of the choice by the Old English translator of *Boethius* to substitute for the bones of Fabricius those of 'the very famous and wise goldsmith Weland' (p. 120) could have engaged fruitfully with discussions of Weland on the Franks Casket, on Anglo-Saxon stone sculpture, and at the prehistoric long barrow known as 'Weland's smithy', to consider how the author was seeking to connect with a wider mythology. The discussion of wastelands could have been set within the wider changing context established by Sarah Semple in her journal articles and in *Perceptions of the Prehistoric in Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford: OUP, 2013). The discussion of the hall might have engaged with Jenny Walker's chapter on the hall in Martin Carver, Alex Sanmark, and Sarah Semple (eds), *Signals of Belief in Early England: Anglo-Saxon Paganism Revisited* (Oxford: Oxbow, 2010).

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