

Cat Jarman, *The Bone Chests: Unlocking the Secrets of the Anglo-Saxons* (London: Collins, 2023) ISBN 978-0008447328. 272pp. £25.00 paperback.

The Bone Chests is a gripping read, taking the reader through a journey of discovery as scientists pore over the bones attributed to early English royalty kept in chests at Winchester Cathedral. The book provides an overview of the chests and the series of suspects to whom their bones might belong. There are many caveats and uncertainties given the disrupted history of the church at Winchester, most famously when the Parliamentarians rampaged through the most hallowed parts of the Cathedral in the English Civil War. The tale is woven through with expert insights from Jarman's knowledge as a professional archaeologist. However, this is more than just a detective story of ancient remains. Like Jarman's first book, *River Kings*, archaeological data provides a lens through which a much larger story is revealed.

The chapters of the book follow a rough chronological order slicing across the stratigraphic layers of English history, starting with post-Roman migrations of Germanic peoples and ending with the years after the reign of William Rufus. *The Bone Chests* links the origins of England and the lives of those interred at Winchester with the story of the people who sought to preserve and analyse the bones. We are given an insight into the research challenges presented by the remains from the bone chests of Winchester being sorted, sifted and matched in a macabre osteological puzzle. The scientific analysis is ongoing but not yet complete. The pathos of uncertainty does not however detract from the story that is being told.

Jarman engages well with the complexities and nuances of archaeological data and DNA research, giving clear explanations of the research process. Indeed, this is one of the pleasures of reading Jarman's work; she addresses the general reader as an intellectual equal, just as

curious as herself to pursue the truth. A narrative is woven, seamlessly and skilfully integrating evidence from the different disciplines of history, archaeology, biology, and chemistry. Occasionally there are oversimplifications of historical data. For example, the account of trial by ordeal in pre-Conquest English society (p. 38) is problematic. Ordeal was not commonplace, or the default option, if one was not willing to pay the penalty for a crime of which one was accused. It was reserved for special cases of felony where exculpation by oath alone could not be accepted. The reality was less lurid than suspected criminals being routinely half drowned or made to carry bars of red-hot iron, and the account risks playing into stereotypes of Anglo-Saxon barbarism. Nevertheless, such slips are uncharacteristic. Jarman eloquently describes academic research in an accessible and engaging manner, providing numerous fresh insights along the way.

A significant part of the book is devoted to the story of the Wessex royal dynasty and the achievements of Alfred the Great and his descendants, many of whom are connected to the bone chests. The narrative of the Viking Age and the 'Making of England' is a well-trodden path. However, Jarman's account is innovative and takes account of the latest research, combining material culture and written sources. The drama of the Herefordshire hoard of jewellery and coins dating to the ninth century date, which was discovered by metal detectorists but illicitly hidden in 2015, is vividly brought to life, as is the consequences for the men that found it including a long custodial sentence. The circumstances of recovery contrast with those around the Watlington silver hoard, found shortly after but appropriately reported meaning that the scholarly value of these finds could be more effectively analysed. Jarman shows how the new finds can re-write the story of the reign of Alfred the Great.

The significance of Winchester is shown to grow through the tenth century, with the construction of the New Minster to which Alfred's bones were removed at the order of his son, the new king, Edward. Winchester continued to flourish under royal patronage with the translation of the relics of St Swithun and the restructuring of the Old Minster. A new wave of attacks from Scandinavia at the end of the tenth century are detailed and placed in a broader context. The Scandinavian background to the raids is explored, along with the viking settlement of Normandy which would later have huge implications for English history. It is interesting to note how Cnut, the Scandinavian conqueror of England, was keen to fit in through the patronage of English churches and English Saints. The significance of Winchester would also be respected by William the Conqueror who built a palace and a new cathedral there. Even in this phase of renewal, the bones of older English were translated to the new cathedral. When the tower of the new cathedral collapsed in the first decade of the twelfth century, some blamed it on the burial of a supposed sinner, William Rufus, son of the Conqueror. After his time, the significance of Winchester as a royal mausoleum declined.

Unlike traditional accounts of English royal succession, Jarman's provides an insight into the roles of queens. There is an interesting discussion of Judith, stepmother of Alfred, who was given the title of queen. This act elevated the status of women in the Wessex royal court, putting them on a par with Mercian queens whose status had been more routinely accepted by this point. Emma, the second wife of Aethelred and later, wife to Cnut, emerges as a significant figure, perhaps fuelling the political infighting of Aethelred's son Edmund from his first marriage against his father. Jarman reinvigorates the standard narrative of the twists and turns of the struggle for the English throne through the late tenth and eleventh centuries by exploring the perspectives of the royal women.

The analysis within Jarman's book is wide ranging. There are many interesting asides. It includes musings on how data from the Battle of Waterloo and the alleged discovery of the remains of Richard III in a carpark in Leicester raise more osteological questions than answers. An account of the potential hoax or recovery of the bones of Alfred and other relatives made in the nineteenth century at Hyde Abbey closes with a tantalising lead that the DNA in the bone chests at Winchester might yet solve this mystery. The Bone Chests is divided into bite size chunks which skip between fictional re-imaginings of real events, and sober historical and archaeological analysis. The book can easily be picked up in an idle moment for a small section to be read, yet Jarman's authorial skill invites a deeper engagement. I devoured the book over a couple of days, just as greedily as I did *River Kings*. It is a compelling read of high academic calibre, and highly recommended.

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