

Objects and Landscape: understanding the medieval period through finds recorded by the
Portable Antiquities Scheme
Stevenson Lecture Theatre, British Museum, 22 October 2012

Rob Briggs

Most who read this will be aware of the Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS) but perhaps not all have looked at its excellent website, finds.org.uk. I urge you to do so as it is an excellent resource, not least the database of (at the time of writing) 818,102 artefacts which I wager will include at least one from your locality. The Scheme convenes an annual conference, which this year was a joint endeavour with the small but perfectly-formed Medieval Settlement Research Group on account of an identified discrepancy between the quantity of artefacts from the medieval period (defined by PAS as 1066-1499) recorded by the Scheme and the use of the resultant data in research into the period. Like the PAS itself, the conference was hosted by the British Museum, which meant the standard of the arrangements was a cut above, from the cinema-like lecture theatre to the slick black folder the conference papers came in and wonderful Earl Grey tea served between sessions.

The morning mostly consisted of artefact and typology-led presentations, beginning with a brace of thought-provoking keynote addresses, by Dr Eleanor Standley on artefacts of an obviously personal nature which relate to “experiences of the past” (posy rings made from gold coins, seals and pendants set with Roman *intaglios*) and by Dr Tim Pestell on papal *bullae*. These were followed by a quartet of shorter papers on specific artefact-types (jettons, “king’s head” clasps, cloisonné brooches and late-medieval purses, the last given by Surrey’s own David Williams using a number of examples drawn from the county). By contrast, the final paper of the morning took a landscape-based approach, integrating PAS data from Lincolnshire with the results of the county’s Historic Landscape Characterisation project (something which should be attempted in Surrey, although I am not entirely convinced HLC produces results relevant to the study of medieval landscapes).

This set the scene for the afternoon sessions, consisting of five presentations that came at the evidence primarily from a landscape angle. Lincolnshire featured in a further two papers, those given by Dr Letty ten Harkel of the English Landscapes and Identities project and PAS’ own Dr Kevin Leahy. Others spoke on subjects of analysing the results of mass metal-detecting rallies, lessons learnt from decades of fieldwork in Norfolk, and the uneven distributions of pilgrim *ampullae* and badges relative to key medieval shrine sites. The day ended with a set of concluding synoptic remarks by Prof Andrew Reynolds of UCL as a catalyst for a final round of questions and answers. This got a little sidetracked by a debate about the equivalent Welsh data but this could not detract from what proved to be a most rewarding day of interdisciplinary and inspirational scholarship.