

From the Ancient to the Medieval Countryside: old answers/new questions

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Fredric L. Chettye

Emeritus Professor, Department of History, Amherst College

Thanks in large part to the “Vienna School”, the old master narrative of Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages that focused primarily on the “barbarian invasions” or, less dramatically, on the *Volkerwanderung*, has been sent off to a well-deserved retirement. The new narratives that have taken its place, often replacing “decline and fall” with “transformation”, emphasize the complexities of change during a half a millennium that runs obliviously across honored time boundaries (for example 476 CE) that once separated ancient history from what came afterwards. One aspect of those changes that, until recently, has received relatively scant attention, are those that occurred in the countryside, affecting the distribution of human settlements and their patterns as well as the environments in which they found their place.

In recent decades, archaeologists have discovered a consistent pattern in rural settlements all over the western Roman empire north of the Mediterranean: a major crisis occurring in the third century, a partial recovery in the fourth, followed by a rapid thinning out in the fifth and sixth centuries, accompanied by a diminution (or near disappearance) of grain production, a regrowth of forests, the abandonment of rich bottom lands, often to invading marsh, and the movement of settlements to higher ground, hillsides or hilltops. These developments, furthermore, took place not only in lands that had once been part of the empire but in central and eastern Europe as well, where archaeologists have been puzzled by what is often designated an “empty period” somewhere between the fifth and the seventh century.

One of the causes for all these changes may be a climate anomaly, lower temperatures and more frequent heavy precipitation that historical climatologists have recently identified in these same centuries, and the consequences in the landscape, especially soil erosion.

Kontakt: umweltgeschichte@uni-klu.ac.at

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