

MSRG RESEARCH PRIORITIES

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Introduction

The *Rippon-Morton Review of Medieval Settlement Research, 2007–2016*, which is published in this journal, was commissioned by the MSRG to provide a baseline assessment for clarifying and updating the Group's research priorities for the next seven to ten years. The Review was presented at the Group's 2019 Winter Seminar, and the following statement of priorities has been informed by those presentations and by subsequent discussions, both at the December seminar and over the following two months. It has been adopted by the Committee and will be used to underpin the Group's advisory functions, activities and initiatives, including its research grants programme.

Priority One: the promotion and support of syntheses relating to the Group's areas of interest – topical, geographical and temporal – with a particular focus on the centuries after the Norman Conquest.

Recent syntheses of the prehistoric, Roman and early medieval periods have taken into account the considerable amounts of data generated by commercial archaeological investigations which have been disseminated through 'grey literature' reports, either available online or lodged with the network of Historic Environment Records. They have also made use of the large quantities of data on metalwork and other artefacts accumulated by the Portable Antiquities Scheme. Equivalent syntheses covering the post-Conquest period, perhaps focusing on particular themes and topics given the huge quantity of available information, documentary as well as archaeological, would transform our understanding of broad variations and trends in all aspects of rural settlement.

Priority Two: the promotion and support of interdisciplinary research relating to the Group's areas of interest.

Medieval settlement research stands apart from research into earlier periods, thanks primarily to the survival of large quantities of written records which evidence the social and economic organisation of rural communities in this period. Documentary sources can often be supplemented by the recording and analysis of various types of surviving buildings which were once integral to these communities – local churches, manor houses, vernacular farmhouses and the like. The study of both major and minor place-names can offer crucial insights into the ways that rural communities viewed

the countryside which they inhabited and their place within it. Archaeological investigation can illuminate the physical structure and development of settlements and their field systems, and it can also furnish a wide range of economic data through artefactual, faunal and environmental analysis. Both local studies and more wide-ranging syntheses should take full account of these complementary approaches to researching medieval settlement.

Priority Three: the promotion and support of new investigative methodologies and scientific techniques which offer additional or improved ways of interrogating the evidence for medieval settlement.

An increasingly sophisticated and expanding range of investigative methodologies is available to researchers exploring medieval settlement across all relevant academic disciplines. This includes both scientific techniques and theoretical approaches. Given the significant level of financial investment required to carry out archaeological excavations and post-excavation analyses, the added value of applying relatively low-cost investigative methodologies to guide excavation strategies, and scientific techniques to analyse material recovered from excavation, is considerable. Some of these are well-established means of providing closer chronological resolution than is available from other forms of evidence. Other dating techniques, such as OSL-PD sampling of the physical remains of field boundaries, are relatively new. The analysis of cores offering environmental evidence, calibrated with radiocarbon determinations, provides a view of the medieval countryside – farming practices and the wider environment – which is unachievable by other means.

Priority Four: the promotion and support of research in regions that have witnessed relatively few investigations of medieval settlement and landscapes.

During the second half of the 20th century, the focus of medieval settlement research was usually the compact village settlement and its extensive open fields. Most archaeological investigations took place on medieval village sites that had subsequently been largely or entirely depopulated. Since the beginning of the 21st century, there has been greater focus on medieval village sites that have continued to be occupied; and there has also been more research into the extensive landscapes characterised by dispersed settlement – small hamlets rather than large, compact villages. Development-led archaeology has transformed our understanding of medieval settlement, perhaps most obviously in relation to pre-Conquest settlement sites located outside the

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envelope of modern villages; and some of the major linear infrastructure projects have provided highly informative transects across landscapes of dispersed settlement. Nevertheless, archaeological investigations contingent on commercial and public infrastructure projects are unlikely ever to provide a balanced,

comprehensive record of the medieval countryside. The Group will therefore focus its resources on those regions where academic, commercial and public infrastructure projects have so far failed to elucidate the local character of medieval rural settlement.