

## The Medieval Europe Research Committee (MERC)

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Medievalists, and medieval archaeologists in particular, have over the last 20 years supported a series of highly successful and well-attended Europe-wide congresses, inaugurated at York in 1992, and staged at Bruges in 1997, Basel in 2002 and Paris in 2007. The next conference was due in 2012, but at this point its future was reviewed in the light of a number of factors, among them the burden on the host, the existence of several other annual conferences, the cost of ours, and the difficulty in finding time to attend them all. A greater imperative, however, was a change in emphasis within the discipline of medieval archaeology itself. Whether in the academic or commercial sector, practitioners were finding themselves increasingly drawn to regard prehistorians and biologists as their colleagues of choice. An understanding of rural medieval life depends not only on a close reading of the environment but on the previous use of landscape and materials. Medieval archaeologists were increasingly involved in large-scale multi-period commercial projects and those major landscape research projects that are refreshing the life-blood of European universities. The development of archaeological theory has been most vigorous among archaeology's prehistorians; but medievalists too have much to offer the theoretical debate from the fresh application of the environmental and social sciences and a greatly enlarged agenda.

Accordingly, with the agreement of colleagues and through the good offices of the EAA President it was arranged that the Medieval Europe Congress would from its 2012 meeting be merged into the EAA Conference as 'MERC', so providing Europe's medieval archaeologists with an opportunity to explore their interests with those of the wider archaeological community. There is no danger that practitioners will abandon the friendship of historians and art historians and cease to value their advice and insights: these loyalties will be maintained and strengthened at annual multi-disciplinary meetings, for example at Leeds and Kalamazoo.

The new facility was launched at EAA Helsinki with an excursion, a party, and a number of special medieval sessions, but the key event was the hearing of position papers by invited speakers. These were intended to take stock of various research areas and set programmes for the future, and it is very good to see two of them welcomed into the pages of the *EJA*. Both are by long-standing leaders in their fields: Christer Westerdahl has advanced the study of the medieval peoples who depend on the sea and developed a concept of 'maritime space' applicable to all periods. Here he offers a glimpse of the wide range of archaeological evidence that provides access to the maritime mind. The study of the environment has risen ever higher within the medieval agenda. The leading researcher Rainer Schreg shows how the Middle Ages allows the development of sophisticated models of ecological change that should prove of the greatest value to students of all prehistoric and historic periods.