

**Fay, Jacqueline. 2022. *Materializing Englishness in Early Medieval Texts*. Oxford Textual Perspectives. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Pp. 224. ISBN 9780198757566.**

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In this monograph, Jacqueline Fay sets out with a very ambitious aim in mind: to reconstruct the materiality of Englishness through the study of texts from the early medieval period. The book thus offers an investigation of the conceptualization of English identity as expressed via “lively material interactions” (4) between human beings, artifacts made by them, and elements from the natural landscape (soil, water, plants, metals, and stones). To this end, Fay applies New Materialism or Thing Theory, engaging in a fruitful discussion of many passages from works through which the notion of Englishness transpires. Building on this theoretical approach, she extracts from a series of texts, which are aptly selected, the so-called “fundamental components” (2) of Englishness that are not always easily discernible or not openly manifest in the works of this period.

In doing so, the monograph provides thought-provoking analyses of excerpts covering a wide range of medieval genres, including hagiography, history, heroic poetry, as well as medical and scientific texts. As expressed by the author, the book aims at demonstrating that Englishness reveals itself as “an embodied identity emergent at the frontier of material and textual interactions that serve productively to occlude history, religion, and geography” (4). The approach is undoubtedly novel and brings a fresh look that discloses new perspectives with which early medieval texts can be competently assessed. The book shows a masterly command of primary and secondary sources on the literature of the medieval period, as well as an eminently interdisciplinary approach, as the author makes use of cutting-edge research in other fields such as history, archaeology, paleography, pedology (the scientific study of soil), and parasitology.

This monograph comprises four chapters, the first two of which deal with texts ranging from the 8th to the 10th century, while the other two focus primarily on the 11th century. The first chapter examines the concept of soil in early medieval hagiography, as illustrated in works by prominent authors such as Bede or in anonymous compilations like the *Old English Martyrology*. In this part of the book, the author focuses on the idea of the saint’s corpse being absorbed by the earth and the ways the worshippers variously interact with holy remains and sacred ground. The second chapter centers on stone as a means through which ideas can be perceived through mortuary inscriptions, giving rise to an analysis of the interplay between the materiality of the dead body, the obituary written records, and burial places. Among various works used in this section, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* stands out with its necrological references through which Englishness often emerges. The third chapter of the book primarily centers on allusions to plants in eleventh-century texts in a way that helps visualize the construction of national identity

in the complex period of the Scandinavian invasions and subsequent occupation of England. A final fourth chapter shifts the focal point to *Beowulf*, which proves to be an excellent means to investigate ethnicity as perceived in the early eleventh century when this poem was included in the manuscript London, British Library, Cotton Vitellius A. xv. The author also uses this work, whose setting actually is 6th-century Scandinavia, to associate references to bodies and bodily parts, such as Grendel's torn arm (lines 833–836), with the fragmentariness of English national identity, as well as with cultural and political concerns in the context of Æthelred II's period. Taken as a whole, the book is very learned, well-written, and full of thoughtful analyses of texts through which the author shows the ways in which the conceptualization of Englishness materialized in the early medieval period.

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