



Decoding Domesday

David Roffe

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The Domesday Book is one of our major sources for a crucial period of English history; yet it remains difficult to interpret. This provocative new book proposes a complete re-assessment, with profound implications for our understanding of the society and economy of medieval England. In particular, it overturns the general assumption that the Domesday inquest was a comprehensive survey of lords and their lands, and so tells us about the economic underpinning of power in the late eleventh century; rather, it suggests that in 1086 matters of taxation and service were at issue and data were collected to illuminate these concerns. What emerges from this is that Domesday Book tells us less about a real economy and those who sustained it than a tributary one, with much of the wealth of England being omitted. The source, then, is not the transparent datum that social and economic historians would like it to be. In return, however, the book offers a richer understanding of late eleventh-century England in its own terms; and elucidates many long-standing conundrums of the Domesday Book itself. DAVID ROFFE is an honorary research fellow at Sheffield University. He has written widely on Domesday Book and edited five volumes of the Alecto County Edition of the text.

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