IDEAS OF LANDSCAPE

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For Rose Amelie Johnson

CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

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The intellectual frame of this book was sketched out in 2002, while I held an Arts and Humanities Research Board (AHRB) Research Leave award; I thank the University of Durham for granting me research leave for one term, and the AHRB for extending it to two. During this time I was a Visiting Scholar at the Department of Archaeology, University of Cambridge, and I thank everyone there for their hospitality and kindness, particularly Catherine Hills as my sponsor. Discussions during that time with Matthew Spriggs, John Robb, Elizabeth Demarrais, Chris Chippindale, and many others directly or indirectly sparked many of the ideas in this book. The book's ideas were further developed in 2004 during two months in Australia, for which I thank Claire Smith and Heather Burke, and at Heidelberg in the spring of 2005, a visit organized by Joseph Maran. Chris Taylor and Andrew Fleming kindly acted as referees, but, more importantly, conversations with both informed the content of this book. John Barrett, David Hinton, Steph Moser, and Jim Wright read the manuscript in detail; Jim alerted me to much pertinent Americanist material. Two anonymous North American reviewers helped sharpen the focus of the book immeasurably. Brian Roberts rightly corrected my thinking about the hachured plan and supplied Figures 4.9 and 5.1. Harold Fox and the University of Leicester kindly supplied the photograph of W. G. Hoskins. I also thank Dave Austin, Simon Coleman, Simon Draper, Tim Earle, Mark Edmonds, Joan Gero, Chris Gerrard, Bob Preucel, Margaret Purser, Wlodzimierz Rackzowski, and Helen Wickstead for pertinent discussions.

Many years ago, in 1982 in the year before I went to university, I spent a field season at Wharram, one of the landscapes discussed in this book; I have not forgotten the kindness shown by those involved in

that project to a spotty, inarticulate adolescent. I remember my time there very fondly; Wharram was one of a series of important formative experiences for me.

I thank my wife Becky for her contribution both in the field and in discussion, and for her constant support. The emphasis in this book on the intellectual legacy of Romanticism is due to her influence. I could not have done it without her.

THE ARGUMENT

This book is about the theory and practice of landscape archaeology today. It focuses on the so-called "English landscape tradition" as it has been applied to the historic landscape. It asks why this tradition stands at some distance from North American, from prehistoric, and from other approaches in which "theory" plays a more prominent role. It identifies the ideological underpinnings of this "English" tradition as coming from English Romanticism, in part via the influence of the "father of landscape history," W. G. Hoskins. The strengths and weaknesses of current landscape archaeology of historic periods are shown to mirror the underlying discontents of Romanticism, for example in its politics and in its empiricism. An alternative agenda for historic landscape archaeology is set out. This alternative agenda is argued to map more closely on to the established empirical strengths of archaeology as a discipline, to be more relevant to the thrust of interdisciplinary landscape studies, and also to be more relevant to the social concerns of the present.

PREFACE: THINKING ABOUT SWALEDALE

I will start not with definitions and theoretical arguments, but by examining a specific landscape, and thinking about how archaeologists, as scholars and as human beings, view that landscape.

Swaledale

Swaledale is in the Yorkshire Dales, in the north of England (Figure P1). Even if the reader has never been there, the appearance of the Dales may well be familiar, either from television adaptations of novels and books set in the Dales or from tourist posters advertising the delights of the English countryside.

The Yorkshire Dales are valleys cut into the Pennines, a belt of limestone uplands forming a north/south "spine" above Midland England. The Pennine hills can be seen in the distance from the train as it speeds north from York on the London–Edinburgh line. Swaledale is the most northerly of the Yorkshire Dales, and one of the harshest in its climate and general appearance. The River Swale runs from west to east, carving the dale from the limestone into a narrow valley.

The character of the dale changes as one drives up from the small market town of Richmond at its mouth. "Lower Swaledale" is less rugged; once one passes the large village of Reeth, however, one enters "Upper Swaledale" and the shape of the dale becomes markedly narrower. Local people habitually refer to Upper and Lower Swaledale in terms that stress their different identities; those of Upper Swaledale have often told me that the dale only "really begins" at Reeth – though it is often unclear whether when they use these terms they

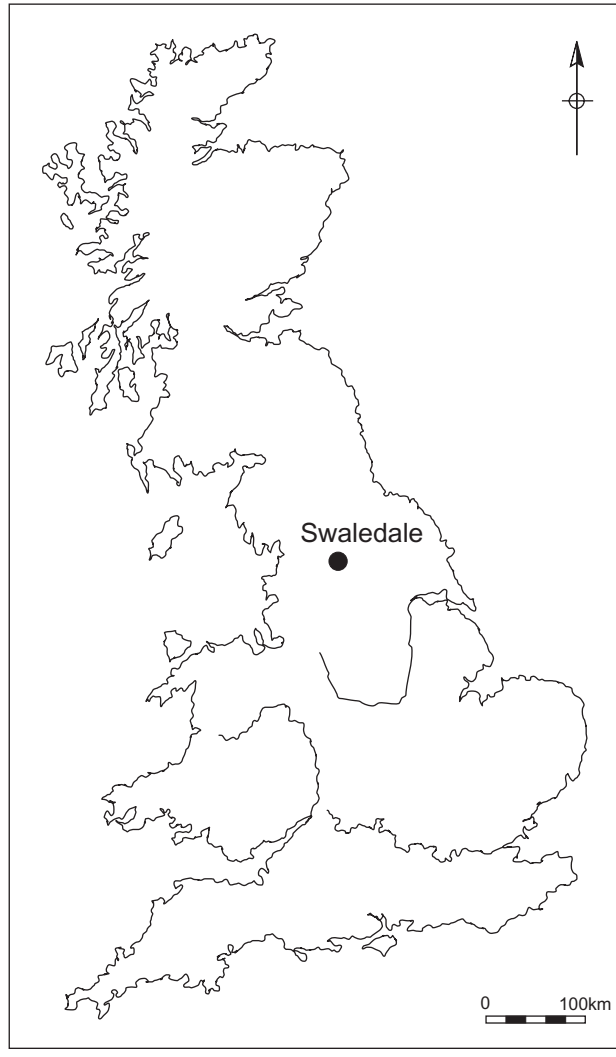

Figure P1 Location map of Swaledale

are referring to the land, or to the human communities that inhabit the land.

The most obvious landscape feature of Swaledale and of the Dales generally is the criss-crossing system of dry stone walls (Figure P2). Viewed from a distance, these walls carve the valley up into pastoral fields; the fields in the valley bottom all have their own field barn. The walls appear of uniform design when looked at casually and from afar, but studied close up they have subtle differences in building method,

Figure P2 View of Swaledale, looking northeast from the road between Grinton and Reeth, showing field walls. Traces of earlier field systems are just visible in the lower fields

and butt-joints indicating where one craftsman or team of labourers stopped and another started (Figure P3).

The archaeologist, coming to the dale for the first time and stopping perhaps on the shoulders of the hills between Grinton and Reeth, becomes aware very quickly that he or she is looking at a complex and multilayered landscape. It is obvious from the start that the archaeology here is so dense, the linear features so complex and criss-crossing, that to mark "archaeological sites" as dots on a map of the dale would be to do its character serious violence. The majority of field walls are of similar construction, suggesting that they were built or rebuilt at largely the same date; however, field and other boundaries in the dale often look very different from one another in their construction, suggesting that they have been built and rebuilt over many different periods, and that some are much more than just a few hundred years old (Figure P4).

There is hardly a single straight line in the dale. Routeways wind from one habitation to the next, along the contours of the valley shoulders. Villages and hamlets are scattered in what is superficially a random pattern.

Figure P3 A "butt-joint" in a field wall, near Grinton, Swaledale

Figure P4 The Ordnance Survey map of the Grinton/Reeth area. Ancient earthworks are marked in Gothic lettering; two lines of north/south dykes can be made out, topped by modern field walls. A prehistoric field system is marked on the moor to the south, and "cultivation terraces" to the north. The morphology of the village of Reeth, around a central green, is clearly visible. The place-name element "How" is attributed to the fifth to eighth centuries A.D., while "Reeth" and other names are of Scandinavian derivation. The dotted and broken lines indicate tracks and paths that are public rights of way. *Reproduced by permission of Ordnance Survey on behalf of HMSO. © Crown copyright 2005. All rights reserved. Ordnance Survey licence number 100044559*

England is a small and densely occupied country; consequently, for all its apparent solitude, Swaledale is very close to several centres of urban population. The universities of Leeds, Bradford, York, and Durham, and a host of smaller educational institutions, are all within 80 kilometres. As a result, scholars wishing to do field archaeology in

the dale can take off for a day or even just an afternoon; it is possible to undertake significant fieldwork while also undertaking other teaching and administrative duties in the daily and weekly round. Many scholars in England measure buildings and plot earthworks for a day or so or at weekends, often as part of a local amateur group, and then, during the rest of the week while stuck in traffic jams or committee meetings, think inductively about what they have observed. They can then return to the dale to make fresh observations – nothing so formal as "test" their ideas – again and again. The process, then, hardly conforms to a formal scientific model of hypothesis and deduction, but is deeply empirically informed.

Such a pattern of activity is encouraged by the nature of the archaeological and historical record of the dale. The researcher does not have to excavate before he or she can do meaningful archaeology; indeed, there is much that is necessary to do before one can even reach that stage. The dale now is largely under pasture, though this was not always the case in the past. The lack of ploughing means that many archaeological features survive as earthworks. These earthworks are meaningless "humps and bumps" to the untutored eye, but an elementary archaeological training enables the observer to identify and give meaning to them. Most obviously, many of these earthworks are of "ridge and furrow" form, generally taken to be indicative of medieval arable agriculture; others, strip lynchets and other features, are less easily assigned a date. In many cases, one earthwork seems to overlie another, and tentative assignments of relative dates can be attempted.

Many of the features of archaeological interest are still in what Michael Schiffer (1976, 1987) would call "systemic context"; that is, they are still part of a living and functioning cultural system. Thus, for example, Grinton dyke, an ancient ditch and bank running across the dale, is topped with pollarded elm trees (now dying of or killed by Dutch elm disease), while the dyke itself is part of current administrative boundaries, themselves of great antiquity (White 1997:46). The field barns that dot the landscape, built in to the pattern of field walls, are still in use, as most obviously are many of the 17th- and 18th-century farmhouses.

The often subtle nature of these earthworks and remains of buildings, and the complex relationship between them, means that it is best to repeatedly visit the dale in different seasons, times of day, and light conditions; a field that is apparently "empty" for three or four visits can, on the fifth and under particular conditions, turn out to be full of features. The discernment of these features is a craft every bit as complex, and as full of its own field knowledge and lore, as that of

excavation (Shanks and McGuire 1996). The steep, V-shaped profile of the dale means that the oblique observations of the landscape from a distance usually only afforded by air photos are here possible from the ground.

Another aid to the researcher is the documentary record. Communities such as Upper and Lower Swaledale have their own parish records, churchwardens' accounts, tax and estate records of various kinds, all kept in various archives and record offices. Many of these records only start around A.D. 1500, but others go back into the medieval period. The transcription and interpretation of these records is a specialized skill and subdiscipline in its own right. The scholar wishing to use them in any detail requires skills of palaeography, and in many cases knowledge of medieval Latin. The existence of these records does mean, however, that we can write a deep and complex history of the dale from material stored in the local record office alone. Indeed the standard history of the dale makes almost no reference whatsoever to its landscape archaeology (Fieldhouse and Jennings 1978).

I know about Swaledale in part because I lived there for some months in the late 1980s, struggling to finish my Ph.D.; its landscape is associated with long walks as I tore my hair out, thinking through some problem with the thesis. I have walked parts of it with Andrew Fleming, the author of the definitive book on the archaeology of the dale (Fleming 1998); while living and working in Durham, I regularly visited Swaledale for Sunday walks, pub lunches, and student field trips. For me, it is a very familiar and much-loved landscape, but however familiar it is, it is one which each visit modifies slightly as I notice some new feature or view a familiar area under slightly different light conditions. As such, the field experience of visiting and thinking about Swaledale has influenced the way I think about landscape archaeology every bit as much as, if not more than, a reading of comparative anthropology, or of theorists such as Heidegger (1953), Tilley (1994) or Thomas (1996). And my suspicion is that many English and European archaeologists would say the same of "their" local and familiar landscapes.

When I teach archaeological theory, I am often pressed to demonstrate the relationship between theory, archaeological practice, and social context. To meet this challenge, I often compare the intellectual and everyday world of Swaledale with that of other writing on landscape archaeology: comparative, heavily theoretical, often taking a world perspective, interested in general questions. The two worlds often seem oblivious to each other. On the one hand, to take an apposite example, Wendy Ashmore and Bernard Knapp's edited volume (1999) has no

reference to any of the "giants" (often resonantly termed "founding fathers": see Chapter 6) of English landscape history and archaeology – W. G. Hoskins, Maurice Beresford, Christopher Taylor, O. G. S. Crawford. And conversely, the writings of Hoskins, Beresford, Taylor, and the others contain no reference to North American or other generalizing traditions. For example, one will search in vain for the influence of any kind of general anthropological theory in the two edited volumes of Hooke (2000) and Thirsk (2000).

The two ways of looking at landscape are also conditioned by a very different history of archaeology from that usually familiar to the student. The starting points for most discussions of the history of archaeology are the prehistoric and classical worlds. For example, Trigger (1989), Daniel (1975), and Daniel and Renfrew (1988) all place the "discovery" of human origins, and the study of the classical world, as central to the development of archaeological thought. However, there is a different and complementary story to be told. This might start in the 19th century with the desire to record and restore the great medieval buildings of Europe, itself dependent on a social context of industrialization and perceived loss of medieval values of community; Linda Ebbatson (1994) and Chris Gerrard (2003) have pointed to Victorian explorations of the stratigraphy of medieval buildings. Early journals such as the *Archaeological Journal* included discussions of folk customs and medieval and post-medieval artefacts alongside discussions of prehistory; such topics occupied centre stage in the 19th-century view of "archaeology" (Ebbatson 1994).

One of the things that struck me, as an archaeologist raised in the English landscape tradition, was how objective and disengaged, to my eyes, much generalizing writing on landscape seems to be. It is true that Fleming, Hoskins, and other scholars working within the English landscape tradition all write "objectively," but their prose unfolds in a manner which is often narrative rather than analytical, a narrative which is often personal moreover (see Fleming 1988 for example), and in a way which implies an emotional engagement with the landscape even if this engagement is not explicit. When Lekson writes of the archaeology of the American Southwest in the mode of personal narrative, the story of personal discovery is exciting, but reads as a voyage of scientific discovery rather than a Swaledale-style engagement with a local landscape (Lekson 1999).

To which those archaeologists, on visiting Swaledale, might justifiably reply: Where is your objectivity? Where is your system? How can you responsibly and reliably make anthropological generalizations from this one place? Why should anybody else in any other part of the

world be interested in your little patch – why is it anything more than a few humps and bumps? How are you going to use Swaledale to find out not just about a few field boundaries, but about humankind as a whole? And how are you going to test any propositions you come up with? Don't you just end up with some hopelessly particularist, unverifiable just-so story?

Now of course a lot of the apparent divergence between these two traditions is not "real," but framed through background and perception. One can begin to sketch out what a theoretically inspired view of Swaledale might look like: one might start with Fleming's observation of protohistoric linear boundaries marking out different parts of the dale, and then go on to think about Swaledale boundaries as territorial markers that tell us in turn about levels of social development and their relationship to territoriality and varying population levels. Or we might use observations of agricultural earthworks to talk about the dale as a whole as a "marginal environment," occupied and used for arable agriculture during favourable climatic conditions, and abandoned or at least less intensively farmed at other times. It is also easy to forget, with Swaledale, that the area has gone through quite sudden changes and is linked in to the rise and fall of world systems. The foremost example of the intersection of the dale with wider processes is seen in the extensive archaeological record of lead mining in the dale – the sides and tops of the slopes are littered with spoil heaps, buildings, and debris from this industrial phase of the dale's history. In its later forms, lead mining was financed from London; the sudden abandonment of the lead mines in the face of cheaper imported lead was, then, tied in to global flows of goods and capital (White 1997).

However, the archaeological record is much more than simply a passive sounding-board for the prejudices of scholars. The "data set," or more accurately the field experience that Swaledale offers, does affect archaeologists' interpretations and does limit what archaeologists can or cannot say about it. The postmodern turn has meant that we have become very practised at charting how our cultural perceptions shape our view of landscape or indeed any other aspect of the archaeological record. There is nothing wrong with this; indeed, I would argue that it is part of the "loss of innocence" that any responsible science such as archaeology has to undergo. However, I think that archaeologists have been less good at turning this equation on its head: at examining precisely how the land shapes academic perceptions, and hence how the "data," however defined (and as I write I feel English landscape historians shuddering at the use of such a dry, scientific term), help to shape academic conceptions of what landscape is.

For example, the density of archaeology in Swaledale means that a linear approach with complex horizontal stratigraphy is possible. An archaeologist seeing a lynchet running across an earlier enclosure, itself apparently on top of some earlier feature, is led very quickly into thinking about time over a long scale – several centuries, if not millennia. Stress, then, on a view of continuing use of a landscape – whether agricultural, social or "ritual" – spanning several periods, and with it an emphasis on ideas such as place, memory, tradition, and the long term, is not just an intellectual fashion; it is something strongly suggested by the evidence itself.

We are all students of the past; archaeologists all claim to have a common goal, the study of human beings. Yet the way in which archaeologists have come to understand landscapes in different areas of the globe is, at least at first sight, utterly different. Surely this cannot be right? Surely we cannot descend into utter relativism – in this case, a kind of sociological relativism between academic communities, embedded in the belief that different localities and intellectual communities have their own, quite different way of doing things, each no better and no worse than the other?

If it is agreed that such a coming together is a noble aim, and one productive of academic insight, then a first step in doing it is to understand something of where the tradition whose surface here we have only scratched actually comes from. In other words, we need to trace something of the intellectual history and ancestry of different views of landscape. That is the initial task of this book.

Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

This book is about how scholars have thought, and are thinking, about landscape. It is about how scholars have interpreted past landscapes; it takes as its primary focus the work of historical archaeologists working within the "English landscape tradition," though we shall find other archaeologists, prehistorians, anthropologists, geologists, geographers, historians, and others – even poets and artists – entering the scene from time to time, and I hope that its conclusions will be of interest to a much wider audience. It is very far from being a complete account of all the ideas of landscape ever proposed; such a volume would be an encyclopaedia, if it were possible at all. Rather, I shall be looking at a few selected strands of thought, a narrow sample of the literature.

This is not a book about theories or ideologies of landscape as such; nor is it a book primarily about techniques of landscape archaeology. Rather, it is a book about *habits of thought*. It asks the question: why do different communities of archaeologists and scholars habitually think about and do landscape archaeology in the way that they do? Such a topic spans both theory and practice, and moves back and forth between wider ideologies on the one hand (environmental determinism; landscape as subjectively constituted) and "mere techniques" (air photographs; field survey; mapping) on the other.

Part of the problem with writing a general book about landscape interpretation has been its double nature. Landscape studies are simultaneously one of the most fashionable and avant-garde areas of scholarly enquiry, and also, paradoxically, one of the most theoretically dormant areas. Two schools of landscape studies seem to currently exist, each hermetically sealed from the other. It is easy to read the studies in Ashmore and Knapp (1999), Bender (1993, 1998), Bradley (1993, 1998), Adam Smith (2003), Ucko and Layton (1999) and geographers such as Denis Cosgrove (1984,

2000), Stephen Daniels (1992), David Harvey (1990), Derek Gregory (1994), and Felix Driver (2001) and come to the conclusion that wide-ranging discussions of the meanings of landscape sit at the forefront of theoretical debate. Conversely, it is easy to peruse the pages of *Landscape History*, *Journal of the Medieval Settlement Research Group*, and *Landscapes* and conclude that landscape archaeology remains firmly in the grip of the most unreflective empiricism in which "theory" is a dirty word and the only reality worth holding on to is that of muddy boots – a direct, unmediated encounter with the "real world." Mick Aston's *Interpreting the Landscape* (1985), for example, one of the best books on the techniques of landscape archaeology, contains almost no reference to theoretical debate of this kind, while approaches drawing on Foucault and literary theory such as those taken by the author (Johnson 1996) have been seen as "wild" and "mystical" by respected figures in what might be termed the empirical school (Williamson 2000:56).

This mutual ignorance can lead to paradoxical views and statements. When Richard Muir (2000:147), for example, writes that the "sense of place is . . . a subjective phenomenon: it cannot be expressed and gauged with precision by the professional archaeologist or historian . . . The objective approach cultivated in the universities is admirable for most purposes, but the exclusion of emotion from intellect and symbol from reason in Western science does not equip us to recognise and relate to sense of place factors which may have motivated our distant forebears . . . The academic study of the relationship between landscape and human behaviour is in its infancy," he seems to be genuinely unaware of any of the writings of university-based phenomenologists from Heidegger (1953), Gadamer (1975), and Benjamin (1999, though he was writing before 1940) onwards. Conversely, when postprocessual writers speak of the need to develop personal, subjective, and hermeneutic approaches to landscape in contradistinction to "processual" approaches, they often seem unaware of a strong and continuing tradition of finding meaning in local landscapes through traditional forms of landscape history and archaeology. The point I am making here is not an adverse criticism of any of these writers; it is rather to draw attention to the depth and breadth of a divide in scholarship that allows this mutual ignorance to exist.

Definitions of Landscape

Here is a range of definitions of landscape, the majority of which were first collated by Rodaway (1994:127):

> Landscape is a kind of backcloth to the whole stage of human activity. (Appleton 1975:2)
>
> "Landscape", as the term has been used since the 17th century, is a construct of the mind as well as a physical and measurable entity. (Tuan 1979:6)
>
> A landscape is a cultural image, a pictorial way of representing, structuring or symbolising surroundings . . . Landscape is a social and cultural product, a way of seeing projected onto the land and having its own techniques and compositional forms; a restrictive way of seeing that diminishes alternative modes of experiencing our relations with nature. (Cosgrove 1984:1 and 269)
>
> When we consider landscape, we are almost always concerned with a visual construct. (Porteous 1990:4)
>
> Landscape is not merely an aesthetic background to life, rather it is a setting that both expresses and conditions cultural attitudes and activities, and significant modifications to landscapes are not possible without major changes in social attitudes . . . Landscapes are therefore always imbued with meanings that come from how and why we know them. (Relph 1976:122)
>
> A working country is hardly ever a landscape. The very idea of landscape implies separation and observation. (Williams 1973:120)
>
> When collective labour and the struggle with nature had ceased to be the only arena for man's encounter with nature and the world – then nature itself ceased to be a living participant in the events of life. Then nature became, by and large, a "setting for action", its backdrop; it was turned into landscape, it was fragmented into metaphors and comparisons serving to sublimate the individual and private affairs and adventures not connected in any real or intrinsic way to nature itself. (Bakhtin 1986:217)
>
> Landscape came to mean a prospect seen from a specific standpoint. (Tuan 1974:133)

I shall return to these themes again and again in the rest of the text; what I want to note in these initial comments is that any study of the way archaeologists view "landscape," at least within Western traditions of thought, will perforce involve at least two elements:

1 The "land" itself, however defined: the humanly created features that exist "objectively" across space, and their natural context. Landscape archaeology in this sense is a very simple term to define: it is about what lies beyond the site, or the edge of the excavation.