Places, perceptions, boundaries and tasks: rethinking landscapes in wetland archaeology

ROBERT VAN DE NOORT and AIDAN O’SULLIVAN

INTRODUCTION

This paper is an elaboration of one of the chapters in our Rethinking Wetland Archaeology (Van de Noort & O’Sullivan 2006), and concerns the archaeological study of wetland landscapes. In this book, we argue that many approaches to the archaeology of wetlands have failed to influence our peers and colleagues in the broader field of landscape archaeology and, indeed, archaeology itself, and thus the great promise of wetland archaeology remains unfulfilled (Coles 2001).

This failure to influence and inform the broader archaeological debates can be attributed to three aspects of current research in the landscape archaeology of wetlands. First, many research projects remain de-contextualized geographically, as if wetlands were islands out at sea, rather than surrounded by non-wetland landscapes. Second, wetland archaeology frequently appear as being de-contextualized in time, as if wetlands were timeless landscapes, disconnected from the changes surrounding them. Third, most wetland landscape projects are disconnected from current theoretical debates in archaeology and are thus not actively attempting to contribute to contemporary archaeological debate.

This critique does not originate with ourselves, but with external commentators who, for example, when reviewing compilations of wetland research papers or conference proceedings, comment on this multiperiod isolationism of wetland archaeology (eg Evans 1990). From these critiques, it is apparent that the potential benefits of wetland archaeology to broader debates are fully recognized, but that wetland archaeologists must interact fully with current theoretical debates if that potential is to be realized (eg Scarre 1989; Tilley 1991; Haselgrove et al 2001). Recently, similar criticism has been echoed from within the field of wetland archaeology (eg Geary 2002).

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate how such a (re-)engagement with mainstream landscape archaeology could be achieved. We need to start with a consideration of the meaning and etymology of the words ‘landscape’ and ‘wetland’, as the way in which we understand these terms in archaeological research has been changing. We will subsequently look at how we should reconsider the archaeological study of wetland landscapes, and finally, provide a case study of how this reconsideration can be made to work.

‘LANDSCAPE’

What is a ‘landscape’? The Oxford English Dictionary defines the word as ‘a view or prospect of natural inland scenery, such as can be taken in at a glance from one point of view; a piece of country scenery’ and ‘a picture representing natural inland scenery, as distinguished from a sea picture, a portrait, etc’. The duality of meaning can be explained by considering the origin of the word. Etymologically, the term originated in the Dutch language (landschap or landschap) sometime during the Middle Ages, it was adopted during the renaissance for a particular genre of painting and was only then adopted into English towards the very end of the sixteenth century. The Oxford English Dictionary names Richard Haydocke (in Lomazzo’s (G. P.) Tracte containing the artes of curious paintinge) as the first person to use the word landscape in English in 1598 in the sentence: ‘In a table done by Cæsar Sestius where he had painted Landskipes’.

In its original medieval meaning, however, landscape had nothing to do with painting or art, but was a geopolitical idea, or an ideological concept. In this original sense, the suffix -schap or -scap did not mean view or perspective, but skill or ability as in the modern English workmanship and craftsmanship (and surviving in its corresponding Dutch word ambachtschap), or in the German word Wirtschaft (‘economy’). Thus, the original meaning of the word landscape was the perception of the ability to live in, on and from the land. The Dutch planner Hans
Schoen (1993) expressed this landscape as something that was not in front of one’s eyes, but existed between the ears.

During the renaissance, the concept of landscape gained currency, and the philosopher Tom Lemaire (1970) argued that the development of scientific knowledge, and the growth of the market system, changed the perception of landscape into something that could be (increasingly) controlled, observed, enjoyed, and used for acquiring ever greater riches. The new genre of landscape paintings was produced principally for the nouveaux riche who invested their earnings from manufacture and trade into land. Thus, these new paintings, with perspective and realism, expressed a new understanding of what a landscape was, as something that can be seen, owned and exploited. Nevertheless, throughout the early modern period, landscape paintings were never free of their political (and manipulated) context. Thus, in the sixteenth century, Pieter Breughel the Elder often chose as the topic of his work people resting, eating, drinking, playing music, enjoying themselves or simply being outdoors, but not manifestly working (eg The Harvesters, c 1565), in landscapes that were frequently as much imagined rather than real (eg The Return of the Hunters, c 1565), and in the nineteenth century, John Constable’s landscapes (eg The Haywain, 1821) present the rural poor in a ‘naturalized’ context, justifying the social order of the countryside, with people being part of the landscape in much the same way as the farm animals (Lambert 2005, 14-16).

The academic study of the landscape (as opposed to the geographical study of nature and natural landscapes as advocated by von Humboldt in the nineteenth century) only developed around 1900, and the German geographer Otto Schlüter (1872-1952) was the first to argue that landscape was the central topic of geography. His landscape was the visible landscape as a reflection of human society. It had become disconnected from its socio-political context, and the concept of landscape was accredited a ‘face value’, which forms the basis for the functional analysis of landscapes. His distinction between the Kulturlandschaft (‘cultural landscape’) and Naturlandschaft (‘natural landscape’) is still commonplace in much geographical and archaeological landscape research in continental Europe, whilst similar ideas of the role of culture in the making of landscapes was advocated in the English-speaking world by the American geographer Carl Sauer (1889-1975), for example in his The Morphology of Landscape (1925).

In recent years, post-modern cultural geography in the English-speaking world has (unwittingly?) returned to the medieval, and unwittingly to the pre-capitalist, concept of landscape. For example, the British geographer Dennis Cosgrove (1984) defines the landscape as: ‘an ideological concept representing a way in which people would have signified themselves and their world through their imagined relationship with nature’. There has been a broad acceptance of the idea that, in the modern world, landscape is not the representation of a society’s reality, but the environment experienced through human/native eyes which can be (actively and passively) manipulated. Landscapes always present a certain perception, which is politically biased or coloured, and every landscape has a political context. Alongside many archaeologists (eg Barrett et al 1991; Bradley 1993, 1998, 2000; Barrett 1994; Bradley et al 1994; Tilley 1994; Hill 1995; Cooney 2000; McOmish et al 2002), we would argue that the same is true for past landscapes.

`WETLANDS`

What is a ‘wetland’? The etymology of the word shows that it is a modern, twentieth century, creation. According to the Oxford English Dictionary it was first defined in the New Scientist in 1965 (17 June, 763/3: ‘Wetlands are defined to include marshes, bogs, swamps and any still water less than six metres deep’) and again in Nature in 1969 (19 April, 239/2: ‘Wetland ecosystems in the limited sense of this work are defined as ecosystems with a watertable, above, at or very near the substrate surface, the substrate remaining saturated throughout the year’). Only one earlier use of the word is recorded, dated to 1955 (Science News Letter, 29 October 2812: ‘The wetland partridge is about twice the size of the valley quail’), but before that date, wetlands as a word did not exist, and only emerged in the twentieth century out of a growing concern about the habitat of birds, and especially ducks, leading to a number of federal laws in the USA that used the term wetland as a generic term for such habitats. That the pressure for such laws came principally from the hunting lobby matters not, but it explains the early preoccupation with generic, rather than specific, wetland protection. During the UNESCO-sponsored International Convention on Wetlands in Ramsar, Iran, in 1970, the term became internationally recognized.

Bradley (2000) has argued that people in the past did not think in terms of environmental systems or
ecosystems, but developed ‘native ecologies’, using their own terms to define specific topographical features or places. Recent cultural anthropological studies have come to similar conclusions (eg Lopez 1986; Ingold 1995; Harris 2000). We can assume that people in the past living within and outside the wetlands would have understood these landscapes in terms of particular landforms, rather than by using the broad, generic term ‘wetlands’, and proof of this is abundantly available in the form of place-names. These never include the generic term wetland as a prefix or suffix. Instead, we find plenty of English place-names (often deriving from Anglo-Saxon roots) indicating specific kinds of wet landscapes or wet features, with suffixes such as -ings, -hay, -moor, -dyke, -fen, -levels, -fleets, -pool, -mere, -beach, -ford, -bridge, or -on-the-water and -on-the-Marsh. We find the same in Irish, Dutch, German, French, Danish and many other European languages.

Rethought wetland archaeology should similarly deconstruct the concept of wetlands when attempting to understand how people in the past engaged with these landscapes. It should develop an empathy for the characteristics of the many wetlands as seen and understood by the people we study.

RETHINKING THE LANDSCAPE
ARCHAEOLOGY OF WETLANDS

Examining the terms ‘landscape’ and ‘wetland’ leads us to two suppositions. First, that ‘landscape’ is not simply the representation of a society’s reality, and that as archaeologists we cannot ‘read the landscape’ as a direct reflection of its daily use and function, without the awareness that landscapes represent politically biased and coloured perceptions, and that landscapes have been actively created, re-created and manipulated within political contexts. Thus, landscape studies must be hermeneutic – the (wetland) landscape does not carry innate information. Second, that the term ‘wetlands’ is not often a useful unit for analysis, as it meant nothing to the people we study and attempt to understand.

These suppositions form the basis from which we have developed a ‘rethought’ approach to wetland landscapes which, we envisage for the future, would include the following seven characteristics.

CONTEXTUALIZATION

First, the landscape archaeology of wetlands has to be contextualized. This includes geographical contextualization, as no wetlands exists within a space void of other landscapes, and interactions between wetland and non-wetland landscapes are omnipresent, both in the physical (eg the run-off of nutrients-rich water from hills into a bog) and cultural (eg the use of stone axes and non-wetland trees to build a trackway) spheres. Contextualization should extend to include the passing of time and the cultural changes surrounding the conditions, and it should also include the socio-political context of the researchers, who should make their theoretical stance explicit, as we always interpret our data ‘through a cloud of theory’ (Johnson 1999).

It must be acknowledged here, that more and more wetland archaeologists recognize the need for the geographical contextualization of their work, but the specialized nature of the work has frequently prevented broader theoretical explorations.

DECONSTRUCTING THE WETLAND META-NARRATIVE

Second, we must deconstruct the meta-narrative of wetlands, accepting that this term had no significance for people in the past. Where the term wetland is used as shorthand for the mosaic of ecosystems of wet and damp places, or for defining the area where wet-preserved archaeological and palaeoenvironmental remains may survive, this should not become the basis for cultural analysis.

In the study of the Humber Wetlands in north-east England, the archaeology of the later prehistoric period suggests, for example, that there was a near diametrical opposition in the perception of alluvial wetlands and peatlands (Van de Noort 2004). Archaeological survey of the former found few monumental sites, or types of sites traditionally associated with death and burial. Instead, the survey identified ‘hunting camps’ and ‘flint production sites’, field systems, settlements and sites of industrial activities, including salt winning and metal production or, if one wishes, the archaeology of ‘daily life’. The palynological evidence indicates something similar; the opening up of the indigenous forest throughout the Neolithic and Bronze Ages, with little remaining woodland by the start of the Iron Age. In contrast, the archaeology of the peatlands offers a dearth of settlements and field systems, and there is also a pronounced lack of finds of flint or pottery. Instead, the antiquarian finds of bog bodies from Thorne and Hatfield Moors in the Humberhead Levels and a large number of Bronze Age and Iron Age bronze objects ‘ritually deposited’ in the moors and floodplain mires, testify to a perception that
is strikingly different from that attributable to the minerogenic wetlands.

However, such perceptions of specific types of wetlands do not translate across cultural boundaries. A contrasting perception of peatlands is shown in the study of the lowlands of North Holland. Jan Besteman (1990) considers the early medieval socio-political context of patrons and clients. The king, occupying the top of the feudal pyramid, would have been perceived as the landowner of any wilderness such as the peatlands of North Holland. However, with the declining control of the Carolingian kings over their vassals after the middle of the ninth century, the latter usurped the peat bogs for themselves. Continuing erosion of political structures and increasing geographical distance between the seats of the local elites and the areas of reclamation in the subsequent centuries gave rise to groups of ‘free farmers’. These ‘free farmers’ were no longer bound by oath, obligation or tax to their patrons, and these apparently marginal wetland landscapes had become fundamentally attractive places to live.

The landscape as understood by the people living within the wetlands would include a differentiation of the many landscape features, producing native ecologies, which would have included a detailed knowledge of where to fish, where to build houses and to obtain building material from, where to take cattle for grazing in the spring months, and where the spirits, gods or ancestors lived. Particular streams, hummocks, trees and fields would have been known by their individual names (eg Summerfield; Fishlake), with distinct connotations and memories attached to these features and names (eg Nelson 1983).

PERCEPTION

Third, we should approach the significance of specific landscapes from the perspective of the people we study. We cannot hope to start to understand the significance and meaning of trackways, bog bodies, lake settlements and so on if we approach wetlands from a modern, functionalist perspective. Furthermore, we must also recognize that the perception of wetlands, and other types of landscapes, differs between insiders and outsiders.

The most ‘extreme’ example of wetland occupation is probably provided by the Marsh Arabs of Iraq and Iran. These are best known to western observers through the writings of travellers such as Wilfrid Thesiger. He described in the 1950s a people who lived on reed islands, who built architecturally-spectacular communal meeting houses (mudhif) of dried reeds, fished and hunted from long canoes (mashbuf), and grew rice and kept water buffaloes in the marshes (Maxwell 1957; Thesiger 1959, 1964; Young 1977). However, the Marsh Arabs were regarded with distrust by the Iraqi government, who saw the marshes as a refuge for bandits, smugglers and rebels disdainful of external control, and as bases for Shi’ite resistance groups (Lamb 2003). After the unsuccessful Shi’ite rebellions immediately following the First Gulf War, the Iraqi government constructed canals and drains across the marshes, while the marsh villages were bombed and their peoples expelled.

An historical example of such contradictory perspectives of wetlands comes from the Humberhead Levels region in the seventeenth century. The drainage of the Hatfield Chase by the Dutch engineer Cornelius Vermuyden was financed by external monies, and under royal authority. The Chase was described in 1608 as ‘utterly wasted’ as it produced little or no revenue for the crown or the big landowners, but the commoners enjoyed the myriad resources provided by the various wetlands: the higher, free-draining islands were used as arable land, typically; the minerogenic floodplains were used for grazing stock and as hay land, the meadows and ings provided the main source of food for livestock and plough animals; the lowest terrestrial areas, the carrs, moors and wastes, were extensively exploited as seasonal pastures and as such formed an essential part of the rural economy, enabling the use of some of the higher ings as hay lands. Furthermore, historical sources show that peat-cutting, for fuel and as building materials (‘turves’), was an important activity by the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The wet parts of the landscape were also valuable for seasonal grazing throughout the Middle Ages and the post-medieval period; for providing reeds for building, thatching and basket making, but even more importantly for fishing and fowling. Unsurprisingly, the commoners sided during the English Civil War with the anti-royalists. This was not predicated in socio-political terms, but represents a choice that expressed their social identity. As part of their reformed social identities, the commoners sabotaged much of the smaller drainage works, culminating in their attack on the drainage engineers’ village at Sandtoft (Van de Noort 2004).

ENCULTURATION

Fourth, we should recognize that all through the human past, and indeed in the present, the natural environment has been perceived as dynamic and sometimes even alive, and often as imbued with
supernatural powers (eg Nelson 1983; Ingold 1995). Enculturating nature – and the spirits within them – forms a key theme of human behaviour, which can be favourably studied in wetland landscapes with its high-resolution dating and close association with palaeoenvironmental source material.

Christopher Tilley (1994) has argued that tracks and paths are primary human artefacts. They were one of the first modifications people made to their environment, forming a medium through which the environment could be integrated with the psyche and transformed into a landscape, that is, an environment which reflects and is interpreted by human beings. The environment thus becomes ‘encultured’ into landscape (Tilley 1994, 206–7). The concepts of paths and roads, and the journeys that they enable, are powerful metaphors (Tilley 1999, 178), recognized by the Romans and even by us in our modern, so-called rational culture (eg expressions such as ‘taking the high road’ and ‘road to success’ use paths as metaphors). Thus the path is not just a route from one place to another; more importantly, it transforms a wilderness full of unknowns into a cultured landscape, a known place.

Wetland archaeology is particularly well-placed to study enculturation, for example, through the contextualized research of trackways. Prehistoric trackways in mires, from the Neolithic Sweet Track through to medieval toghers in Ireland, were the principal cultural elements in otherwise un-encultured landscapes. The contexts of many prehistoric trackways include specific objects that can be understood as votive or ritual deposits, suggesting that the locales where these depositions had been placed were viewed as being connected with ancestors, ghosts or gods (Cosgrove 1993). Objects include the unused jade axe found adjacent the Neolithic Sweet Track (B & J Coles 1986), the wooden disc wheels beneath the Neolithic Nieuw-Dordrecht trackway in the Bourtanger Moor in the eastern Netherlands (Van der Sanden 2001, 141–2), the many bronze weapons, artefacts and skeletal remains alongside the Fag Fen stake alignment, now reinterpreted as a series of trackways (Pryor 2001), the bog bodies alongside the first century AD Valtherbrug in the Bourtanger Moor. Furthermore, many excavators have commented on the limited functionality of trackways, for example, because it did not connect two complementary regions (eg the Nieuw–Dordrecht trackway), it was only in use for a very short period (eg the Sweet Track), it was periodically extended (eg the Nieuw–Dordrecht trackway) or because the trackways had been partially destroyed soon after their construction, as was the case for the second century BC Corlea I trackway in the Irish Midlands (Raftery 1990).

These contextual observations suggest that the function of these, invariably long, trackways was not simply linking two areas of relative dry land across a wetland. Rather, we would argue that these trackways were often constructed with the objective to enculture the wilderness landscapes in between, or to make a statement about the prowess of culture over nature. On a number of occasions, this idea was restated, through additional depositions or through extensions of a track that in fact led nowhere.

**BOUNDARIES AND EDGES**

Fifth, special attention should be given to the boundaries and edges of the landscapes or native ecologies. From our observations of the perceived dynamic nature of the natural environment, it follows that the boundaries and edges of these landscapes are often given particular significance, for example as ‘natural places’ in the sense used by Richard Bradley (2000).

Stocker and Everson’s study (2003) of the Witham valley in Lincolnshire, England, offers an outstanding example of the longevity of the significance of some natural places in wetlands. In the Middle Ages, the River Witham was the boundary of the independent state of Lindsey. Research found that the medieval monasteries were located at strategic points along the valley where causeways provided access across the river and its extensive riparian wetlands. In the Middle Ages, the causeways were already of great age, and excavations of one of them, at Fiskerton, showed a predecessor of Iron Age and Roman date (Field & Parker Pearson 2003). The causeways were also associated with votive depositions, which occur in this area only at the terminals of the causeways. In turn, these votive depositions were found to be in the vicinity of Bronze Age barrow cemeteries. Stocker and Everson thus argue that specific locales within the Witham valley were perceived as places where one could cross this boundary for a period in excess of two millennia, despite the evolving nature of this wetland landscape. Bronze Age perceptions endured, in one way or another, into the Middle Ages, with the medieval monasteries effectively Christianizing pagan practices and beliefs.

**MARGINALITY AND LIMINALITY**

Sixth, we should distinguish clearly between marginality and liminality. The concept of liminality is frequently invoked where wetlands are traversed.
Liminality is a notoriously fluid concept. Originally proposed by Van Gennep (1908), the concept is linked to 'rites of passage' to describe the formalized rituals and practices that accompany one's transition from one particular state into another, especially the rites associated with birth, reaching adulthood, marriage and death. As part of these rituals, symbolic or real 'thresholds' needed to be crossed, with the thresholds constituting liminal zones. As economic and ritual activities are not, on a landscape level, mutually exclusive, the recurrent equation of liminality with marginality is often mistaken. Although some liminal zones were to be found in what were considered marginal landscapes, others (e.g. the threshold passed by newlyweds in the modern world) are located within settlements or within areas in economic use. In other words we must be very specific when identifying places that were liminal.

The lake-dwellings in the Holderness region in East Yorkshire provide an example of liminality that is unconnected from marginality. A reappraisal of the 'Sfest Furze' lake-dwelling showed that the site was in effect a Late Neolithic or Early Bronze Age trackway across a sinuous wetland that had developed in the Bail and Low Mere complex (Van de Noort 1995; see also Fletcher & Van de Noort this volume). These elongated mires may have been seen as a boundary between the world of the living and the world of the dead, with evidence of two burial mounds to the east of the former meres, and somewhat tentatively, a settlement on their west bank. The trackway at West Furze that crossed these wetlands included several features that could have symbolized this liminal space, most notably the wicket or doorway at the eastern terminal of the short trackway. The symbolic function of this boundary was further reinforced with a number of human skulls.

TASKSCAPES

Seventh, we should not underplay the importance of many wetland landscapes as taskscapes, areas where the rhythm of daily life determines the significance of how these wetland landscapes are perceived. The phrase ‘taskscape’ was coined by Tim Ingold (1993) to focus on the concept that the manner in which landscapes are experienced and perceived is closely related to the activities or tasks that are undertaken in particular landscapes at particular times. With this, Ingold has effectively returned to the original concept of landscape, as in the Dutch landschap. As we have argued already, the insiders’ view of wetlands is one that offers myriad resources, ranging from eels, fish and shellfish, to peat for fuel, reeds for roofing, to summer pastures and hay lands. Raised bogs can also be used intermittently for short-term seasonal grazing by burning the top layer of the bog, for the preservation of butter, the seasoning of wood and the curing of leather. We should recognize that these activities, though seemingly economic practices, are things that people do every day, albeit in specific cultural and social conditions.

It is therefore not surprising that the overwhelming majority of trackways excavated from wetlands are not the long tracks described previously as playing part in enculturation processes, but are short tracks, often little more than 10m in length. In contrast to the long, over-designed and possible ceremonial tracks, these short trackways were usually simple narrow pathways, platforms or bundles of brushwood used to create passing places at especially wet and boggy places alongside existing routes through the landscape. We recognize that large linear causeways that traverse a bog from one edge to another represent a very small proportion of the total number of known sites (MacDermott 1998, 7; Stanley 2003, 65). The absence of exotic objects and bog bodies at these locations reinforces the concept that the short trackways were used functionally in everyday lives and had, in the eyes of the people that used them, little in common with the large trackways that were constructed for specific occasions.

RETHOUGHT WETLAND LANDSCAPES: A CASE STUDY INTO THE EARLY RECLAMATION OF ‘INCLESMOOR’

In this case study, into the early reclamation of Inclesmoor or Thorne Moors, we want to show how a rethought landscape archaeology of wetlands can be undertaken. Long-standing research interests, into the history of reclamation and the exploitation of these wetlands, are neither forgotten nor ignored, but new, deeper, information is uncovered through contextualization: consideration of the appropriateness of the wetland concept, comparisons between insiders’ and outsiders’ perceptions, the introduction of the enculturation concept, special attention to boundaries and understanding the wetland landscapes as taskscapes.

‘Inclesmoor’ is the medieval name for the Thorne Moors, in the Yorkshire Humberhead Levels. These Levels were formed by the pro-glacial Lake Humber, a meltwater lake that expanded and retracted with the
seasons and the glaciers. The lake ceased to exist not later than c 11000 cal bc, when the icesheet blocking the Humber Gap between the Yorkshire Wolds and the Lincolnshire Wolds retreated, or possibly somewhat earlier through silting of the lake itself (Bateman et al 2000). The Lake Humber deposits were subject to aeolian reworking during the Loch Lomond Stadial of the Devensian, c 11500 to 10500 cal bc, and this reworking resulted in the formation of sandy dunes or 'islands', resulting in extensive undulated flatland. Holocene sea-level rise initiated the development of expansive wetlands in the Humberhead Levels. Initially, the impact of sea-level rise was restricted to the Late-glacial river channels, but from c 3200 cal bc, the impeded arterial drainage resulted in widespread paludification, and the onset of mire formation at Thorne Moors (Buckland & Dinnin 1997).

Recent archaeological research has shown the construction of a Neolithic trackway on nearby Hatfield Moors (Gearey & Chapman this volume), and it seems likely that similar activity would have taken place at Thorne Moors. To date, however, only a very short Bronze Age brushwood trackway has been identified (Buckland 1979), alongside a number of isolated finds of stone axes, and it is unlikely that new archaeological sites will be discovered, as this former milled peatland has been converted into a nature conservation reserve (eg Van de Noort 2001).

The time-transgressive nature of the development of the mire would have initially involved a number of smaller, mesothrophic, mires developing in the lowest areas, with deciduous woodland surviving on the higher grounds. The local impact of continued sea-level rise and impeded drainage was the evolvement of a single, continuous ombrothrophic raised mire, which drowned the forest (Dinnin 1997). This raised mire appears to have survived more or less undisturbed to the first half of the second millennium.
AD, when *Sphagnum imbricatum*, having formed the bulk peat up to then, disappeared (Smith 1985).

Medieval Thorne Moors was probably significantly greater than the remnants surviving today, and the Moor and its lagg areas would almost certainly have been explored and utilized by the local population, living on the hills on the edges of the wetlands. A charter from early in the fourteenth century gives the picture as one of extensively used peatlands for turves, both for fuel and as building materials, as hunting and fishing grounds, for retting of hemp and for seasonal grazing and hay making (Thirsk 1953). The open waters were used extensively as fisheries, especially for eels. By the early seventeenth century, Thorne and Hatfield Moors were considered from the point of view of outsiders as wastes, but to the commoners, the wetlands provided invaluable resources which enabled them to live self-sufficient lives.

However, the formal ownership of Thorne Moors had passed to Norman barons and institutions, even though the rights of access and use given to freemen was occasionally recorded in charters. Selby Abbey, founded in 1069 and one of the earliest ecclesiastical buildings in Norman northern England, had extensive landholdings, including Whitchitgift in the north of Thorne Moors, and was gifted the eastern part of the Moors by John de Mowbray, Lord of Asholme, in the early fourteenth century, albeit he retained the rights of free chase. Other owners of strips of land, from the River Ouse in the north 'as far as the moor goes towards the south', included the canons of Newhouse, St Peter’s Hospital of York and the Abbey of Thoronton (Dinnin 1997, 22-3).

By the early fifteenth century, the religious houses, possibly led by Selby Abbey, had commenced with the full-scale drainage of Thorne Moors (Metcalfe 1960). The Inclesmoor Map (PRO MPC 56), dated to c 1407 (Beresford 1986), shows a (hand-dug) drain encircling the Moor, and in the northern third of Thorne Moors, roads, drains, bridges, a sluice, several roadside crosses and settlements with churches have appeared. The map itself is thought to have been produced as part of the ongoing disputes of rights and ownership over the Moor, and was based on documents held at the manor court at Snaith, supplemented by observations in the field (ibid., 159). The latter provided the basis for the pictorial elaborations of the map, from the miniature villages to the marshland vegetation on the as yet unenclosed and unexploited Moor.

The reasons for the drainage of Inclesmoor were for its exploitation for economic benefits, and there is little doubt that from the point of view of the formal landowners, this benefit lay in the turves that were sold in towns as fuel. For example, Thornton Abbey paid Henry the Lacey 16,000 turves annually for the rent of its turbaries in Inclesmoor (ibid., 154–5). The regional palynological record (eg Smith 1985) indicates that woodland had become scarce around this time, and the peat turves must have provided for an eager market. This external perception of the value of the Moor contrasts somewhat with the insiders' perception, who valued the natural diversity of the Moor.

Following the Dutch philosopher Hub Zwart (2003), we would argue that there is another layer of perception to be discerned here, and that is the moral stance of the religious houses to the uselessness of the Moor. The wilderness of Inclesmoor was an affront to the ora et labora ('pray and work') principle of the medieval monastic orders, and the reclamation of unproductive, ungodly land would have been seen as an act of conversion: the Christianization of the pagan wilderness. The Christian enculturation of wildernesses throughout Europe was organized and undertaken by monasteries and ecclesiastical institutions who had the organizational ability to do so, and 'regarded themselves as stewards appointed by God, as co-creators, taking active part in the management and restitution of fallen nature' (ibid., 111).

In terms of the landscape archaeology of these wetlands, we can discern a cultivated or encultured taskcape with an ordered system of fields, roads, canals and villages; the latter often placed on the inside of the dike alongside the Rivers Ouse and Trent. The village churches are located at the junctions of the dike with the roads encroaching onto the Moor, and would have been visible from deep inside Thorne Moors as is, for example, the case of the church of St Mary Magdalene at Whitchitgift (Van de Noort 2004, 135–7). The Inclesmoor Map reinforces this reading of the landscape. The northern part shows a landscape under cultivation, with roads,
paths and canals, villages with churches and stone, road-side crosses on the most important landowner boundaries. This encultured part of the Moor stands in stark contrast to the Moor proper, where uncultivated and, largely, unproductive plants thrive unrestrained.

Of course, Thorne Moors is no exception in respect to the medieval reclamation of wetlands, and from the early twelfth century onwards ecclesiastical institutions across Europe were engaged in reclamation projects. In western Europe north of the Roman limes, Christianity was also part of the political arsenal of the kings who derived the legitimacy of their power from the divine rule of the Christian God, and it is unsurprising that one of the earliest wetland reclamations recorded, that of the marshlands east of the River Elbe, organized by the Bishop of Bremen in 1103, was undertaken in the Saxon heartland. In the case of the early reclamation of the Netherlands, Hub Zwart (2003, 111-12) described the role of Christianity ‘... as an ideology, [that] rendered the erection of dikes and the reclamation of wetlands morally legitimate, or even obligatory. A demarcation was introduced between the “baptized” and humanized areas on this side of the dikes, and the diffuse and unreliable realms beyond. The dike materialized a form of moral criticism, directed at previous generations of pagans who, faced with natural phenomena, had been overwhelmed by a mixture of fear and awe. They had regarded uncultivated nature as the abode of their gods and had settled for a more passive attitude. Time had come for the demystification of nature.’

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued for a rethinking of the landscape archaeology approach to wetlands, based principally on the beliefs that the concept of landscape is something that resides in people’s minds, rather than being a simple reflection of culture-nature interactions, and that the concept of wetlands had little meaning to the people we study and try to understand. The paper proposes new ways of approaching wetland landscapes and has argued specifically for the need to contextualize wetland research: consider the (in)appropriateness of the wetland name, appreciate the frequently diverging perceptions of people living and working in wetlands from the perceptions of outsiders, the importance of the enculturation concept, the need to pay particular attention to boundaries and edges, and the significance of wetland landscapes as taskscapes.

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