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***‘Landscape organisation, identity and change;
territoriality and hagiography in medieval
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ABSTRACT

From a starting point of contextualising landscape research both socially and spatially, this paper focuses on the need to recognise evolving ideas of territoriality and processes of territorialisation in landscape studies. The author then considers the development of the parochial framework in west Cornwall within the context of political change and social transition. Through a detailed examination of hagiographies and related saintly legends, territorial and organisational development of ecclesiastical authority is firmly placed within contemporary experiences of landscape, linguistic politics and relationships with a particular past. Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus* is used to explain how aspects of continuity and deep memory may have been at the very heart of these organisational developments, which saw forces of change rooted within the conservative and familiar nature of hagiographical writing.

KEYWORDS

Territoriality, Hagiography, Memory, Cornwall

Introduction; Landscape, territory and territoriality

Within historical geography, Butlin (1993, pp. 51-3), among others, has recognised the importance of contextualising social and spatial experiences. In this respect, the landscape acts not as an innocent or neutral ‘arena’ in which social relations unfold, but rather as a subjective medium through which biographies and relations are shaped and reshaped (Daniels, 1992, Butlin, 1993, Cosgrove, 1993. See also Pred, 1984). This emphasis on contextualising landscape research both socially and spatially is also recognised by Tilley (1994) in his study of how the monumental architecture of the Neolithic period represented a mediation between a society and the landscape it inhabited. “Humanised places become fashioned out of the landscape through the recognition of significant qualities in that which has not in itself been culturally produced (rocks rivers, trees etc.) by association with current use, past social actions or actions of a mythological character” (Tilley, 1994, p. 24). Hence, Tilley stresses the importance of looking at *features* of the landscape which have provided a significant symbolic resource (‘rocks rivers, trees etc.’), while acknowledging the crucial role that categories such as gender, age and kinship may have in the contemporary experience of these features.

However, one aspect of this socially generated landscape that Tilley does not explicitly refer to is that of territory and territoriality. Territoriality is a geographical expression of social power and can be defined as “the attempt by an individual or group to affect, influence or control people, phenomena and relationships by delimiting and asserting control over a geographical area” (Sack, 1986, p. 19). Territoriality, therefore, is implicit in the determination of landscape, and, although he does not specifically mention it, represents what Tilley (1994, p. 27) alludes to as the “ability to control access to and

manipulate particular settings for action'. Additionally, the notion of territory is, fundamentally, a reification of the locales and landscapes that "give rise to a feeling of belonging and rootedness and familiarity, which is not born just out of knowledge, but of *concern* that provides ontological security" (Tilley, 1994, p. 26). Although made and re-made in relation to 'rivers, trees, rocks etc.', it is the societal expressions and symbolic meaning of territoriality that are the crucial elements in any interpretation of landscape and society. Therefore, while acknowledging the importance of recognising the experiences of 'features' in earlier times, historians need to recognise that it is territory and a developing sense of territoriality which is perhaps most pertinent and through which the significance of such 'features' is organised and understood.

Territoriality is the medium through which landscapes are both organised and perceived. Therefore, reference to territorial patterns and their developments is vital in order to understand both *how* and *why* societies (and their landscapes) are organised over time. In other words, a territorial perspective can allow a deeper exploration into the processes and developing mechanisms of landscape organisational strategies (for instance, see Hooke, 1985, 1994, Hadley, 1996, Harvey, 1997a, and Jones, 1998). In addition, however, investigations of territorial experience and perception can allow us to explore the sources of identity and action that have provided reason and explanation for *why* territories have developed and *why* such developments have occurred within a larger framework of continuity and evolution (for instance, see Dodgshon 1987).

Territories represent expressions of community, of government or administration and of exploitation and, by their very definition, are socially generated. Territories, therefore, are

intrinsic to the ‘peopled landscape’ to which Tilley refers (1994, p. 23) when he notes that “the landscape is an anonymous sculptured form, already fashioned by human agency, never completed and constantly being added to,the landscape is both medium *for* and outcome *of* action and previous histories of action. Landscapes are experienced in practice, in life activities”. An understanding of the form and nature of territorial expression is crucial to understanding the distinctions, meanings and particularity of related societal and landscape practices. The examination of features and actions within a framework of emerging territoriality, therefore, allows us to understand the ‘historicity of lived experiences in (the) world’, to which Tilley (1994, p. 23) allotted so much importance. The world is perceived through a territorial lens which, itself, contributes to the embedded memories and identities of its inhabitants.

SAINTS, LEGENDS AND LANDSCAPE EXPERIENCE IN MEDIEVAL WEST CORNWALL

The established importance of examining patterns and processes within a framework of developing territorialisation, and the idea of such territorial experiences being related to aspects of identity, provides a theoretical context within which to investigate the development of medieval ecclesiastical organisation in west Cornwall. Cornwall is the county occupying the furthest reach of the south west peninsula and is characterised by a cultural and linguistic heritage that is distinct from the rest of Britain (see figure 1). The parochial system of Cornwall¹, as with other areas of Britain, had crystallised by the thirteenth century (Ravenhill 1985, p. 61, Blair 1988). As elsewhere, this was a ‘gradual, tentative and discontinuous process of territorialisation’.² Unlike the rest of England, however, this process of territorialisation occurred within a background of deeper

ecclesiastical change, with the practices and patterns of an unorthodox 'Celtic' Christianity being reorganised and brought into line with the Roman Church of Canterbury (Ravenhill 1985, Beresford-Ellis 1985).

Early attempts by Theodore (in the later seventh century) and Aldhelm (in the early eighth century), to bring what is called for convenience, the 'Celtic Church' of Cornwall into line with Canterbury over such issues as calculating the date of Easter, met with little success (Todd 1987, pp. 286-7). From the mid-ninth century, however, the Church in Cornwall began to acknowledge English ecclesiastical authority, and, after gaining their own independent Bishopric for a time (c. 930-1040AD), came to be subsumed within the vast Diocese of Exeter (Beresford-Ellis 1985, Todd 1987). As this history of Episcopal politics demonstrates however, this transition was far from even or comprehensive, with the ecclesiastical order of Cornwall continuing to exhibit a number of seemingly unorthodox (or at least 'unusual') patterns and practices which reflected earlier arrangements (Todd 1987, pp. 287-9). One of the most obvious of these unusual practices is attested to in the emergent parochial framework, with a large number of small parishes named, not after a town or settlement, but commemorating one of a very large number of obscure 'local' saints, who appear to have played an inordinately important role in local ecclesiastical development (Ravenhill 1985, Beresford-Ellis 1985).

In many areas of England, parochial boundaries and territorial recognition appear to reflect that of earlier estate organisation, with many examples of parochial frameworks mirroring the earlier manorial pattern (Wood 1986, p. 61, Ravenhill 1985, p. 57, Pearce 1978, 1985).

In a transition that is comparable to the state-forming processes identified by Jones (1999)

among others, ecclesiastical establishments which had been in existence for centuries, saw their spheres of social allegiance come to be defined more tightly through a process of territorialisation (Harvey 1997c). This emergent parochial framework consisted of a single recognised 'parish church' within established and well defined territorial limits, which was supported by exploitative rights (such as tithes) over this specified area. In Cornwall, however, Ravenhill (1985, p. 57) argues that the territorial framework of pastoral care reflected a notion of 'priests in a landscape'; where parochial units reflected the spheres of influence of local clerics who were loosely attached to a local monastic house. Harvey (1997b, 1997c) has argued that even this 'non-manorial' appearance of the Cornish parochial framework may mask the importance of a much earlier territorial template that was related to the economic exploitation of the landscape.³ What is certain, however, is that in order to understand the evolving landscape and institutional organisation of a region such as Cornwall, one needs to investigate the distinct social, political and cultural context of such developments.

In particular, the importance of individual 'saints', who are often quite obscure and sometimes very local in their significance, requires further thought. Much previous work has been conducted into the veracity (or otherwise) of the stories associated with such figures (Taylor 1916, Doble 1923-47, Beresford-Ellis 1985, Farmer 1987, Spencer 1991, Orme 1992). This paper, however, seeks to investigate not their veracity as such, but rather seeks to understand their possible role in the process of parochial development and organisation, and what they imply for comprehending the wider political and cultural transitions that were taking place in Cornwall throughout the medieval period.

Hagiographical stories provide a novel line of evidence for investigating how ecclesiastical authority was established in the landscape. In this respect, they can provide some useful detail for how landscapes and memories came to be recognised by ordinary people. Unlike official and formal court or other administrative documents and the like, hagiographies were often embroidered with tales of fantasy and imagination which reflected a lay experience of real landscapes. On the one hand, such hagiographies may have been necessary for securing, upholding and protecting certain *existing* land rights and privileges. On the other hand, these tales should perhaps be seen as being absolutely necessary for the contextualising of *new* arrangements, and *evolving* organisation, within existing experiences and conceptions of landscape.

In trying to understand the nature of the ‘gradual, tentative and discontinuous’ process of parochialisation, hagiographical accounts would seem to comprise a very useful source. These saintly legends represented key elements in the legitimisation of Christian belief and its supposedly unquestionable authority (for instance, see Abou-el-Haj, 1997). They can be related, both to the wider organisational developments that are expressed through processes of territorialisation, and can also be placed within a specific and local landscape that was recognised in the social identity of the new ‘parishioners’. Some authors have found that in some instances, hagiographies assumed a quasi-legal status in the maintenance of ecclesiastical power in the landscape, and some texts were even devised specifically for the purpose of securing rights to property (Davies and Fouracre, 1986, p. 213, Smith, 1990, p. 327).⁴ In another sense, however, hagiographies articulated versions of history that were grounded within communities’ pre-existing experiences of landscape and mediations with the past. The work of Kirby (1995) suggests that hagiographies are discourses of power

which sought to legitimise ecclesiastical authority. However, they also represent mediations within societies, as an elite group of literate clerics sought to establish these stories within both a real landscape of popular social experience, and an imagined landscape of mythology and memory. In Cornwall, this additional issue is complicated by the linguistic and political context of the time; with an ascendant Anglo-Norman elite and a descendent ‘Celtic’ Cornish elite vying with each other, and perhaps both seeking benefit from the employment of particular fables of local ‘hero-saints’.

Hagiographical legends appealed to an existing notion of what the past ‘should be like’, and to a familiar and supposedly ‘natural order’. It is, therefore, as a succour to pre-state notions of kinship for instance, that so many local saints in an area like Cornwall are presented in a familial or dynastic way (Harvey, 1997b). The eponymous ‘founding’ saints of the parishes around the Hayle estuary in west Cornwall, for instance, all have Irish type names and are often presented as being of the same group of ‘companions’ (Beresford-Ellis 1985, pp. 62-3, Thomas, 1994, pp. 186-7, see figure 2). This clan were all commemorated in later medieval *vitae* which worked to re-enforce the legitimacy of parochial organisation. The sibling relationship of Ss. Ia and Euny, for instance, while not necessarily real, mirrored the emerging territorial formation of the chapelry of St. Ives within the jurisdiction of the powerful parish of Uny-Lelant. In this respect, the novelty of territorial organisation is firmly placed within the context of existing notions of communal identity.

On purely political grounds, this invocation of a ‘family’ of local saints appears to support the legitimacy of an existing and consciously Cornish arrangement; perhaps in the face of a centralising and linguistically non-Cornish authority. A deeper analysis of the legends,

however, reveals a more complex picture, with the hagiographic stories perhaps providing a stable basis in which new modes of organisation could be contextualised. In particular, the legends may have played a vital role in the way that the emergent scheme of parochial definition, and related centralised system of assessment, came to be recognised and accepted by the wider population.

One of the ‘Hayle estuary’ group of saints was St. Gwinear, a *vita* of whom survives from around 1300 (Orme, 1992, p. 135). Whether the events recounted in the stories actually occurred, does not really matter. Rather, we can see through the stories how a particular heritage was invented that could provide a context in which to place specific artefacts, sites and landscape features. The story sees St. Gwinear landing at Hayle and proceeding inland with his group of followers. As they became tired and thirsty, the story relates that,....

“He (St. Gwinear) had placed his staff of elderwood in the ground, and when he drew it forth again a copious fountain sprang from the earth, and to this day it ceases not to flow, having been neatly enclosed by two slabs of stone on either side”

(From Doble, 1997, p. 103).

In this case, the origins are accounted for of an actual freshwater spring, located within the small settlement of Roseworthy in the north of the emergent parish of Gwinear. It is through such stories that a local audience would have the familiar landscape of their secular lives placed firmly within their spiritual existence. In Doble’s (1997, pp. 100-110) commentary on the *vita*, specific places, hills and even trees are mentioned as being

significant, as the saint's martyrdom at the hands of a local 'king' are placed within a real landscape which would have been recognised and experienced by the audience. Thus, landscape experience is guided as people are 'instructed' as to the 'correct' way to interpret the world around them.

“Then the saint fixed his staff in the ground at his side, and stretched forth his neck. The tyrant seized a sword and struck off his head. Immediately the saint picked up his head ...and carried it to another place further on, where he washed it carefully in a spring which still flows there. Then he carried it a little further to a place separated from that in which the holy martyrs had suffered by a small wood. A fountain is still shown where the saint's blood flowed. After the execution, one of the soldiers went to take the staff he had fixed in the ground, but finding that it had become a tree with two branches bearing leaves, he dared not touch it. It may be seen to this day”.

(From Doble, 1997, p. 103).

In many respects, these legends can be related to what Hobsbawm (1983) identified as being 'invented traditions'. However, rather than being viewed in the context of the social, cultural and economic changes that were occurring in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (which Hobsbawm mainly deals with), these invented traditions should be placed within the context of such changes during the medieval period. They connect not only certain values and norms of behaviour, but also an entire landscape to a suitable historic past, and by implication, attempt to legitimise ecclesiastical authority, ritual and organisation. The *vita* connects the story of the hero-saint directly with the later

development of ecclesiastical authority in Cornwall by relating how the actual site of the later church building commemorated the burial place of the St. Gwinear, thus;

“After some time, when the Vine of the Lord of hosts, that is, the holy Church, had filled the land of Cornwall, a basilica was built over the tomb of the holy martyr”.

(From Doble, 1997, p. 104).

The church site itself, and a nearby spring are situated within the stories in which everyday experiences intersect with myth and legend. The story explains the existence of the church in terms of it being a natural part of a familiar landscape. In addition, the physical landscape itself is explained as being inseparable from the religious experience, as set out by the ecclesiastical authorities. Importantly, these messages were communicated to an audience, not only through *vitae* such as that of Gwinear, but also through the medium of Cornish language performance plays such as the *Beunans Meriasek* at Camborne, three miles from the church of Gwinear (Orme, 1992, p. 136).⁵

When placed within the context of ecclesiastical politics in Cornwall, however, these stories take on a more complex form. These epic tales of local hero-saints are usually described as having relations with, or even originating from, Ireland, Wales or Brittany, and pointedly, are never described as having any connection with Canterbury. Arguably, they can be seen as evidence of how a consciously Cornish local clergy tried to maintain their order in the face of increasing ‘Normanisation’ and centralising forces from Canterbury and Exeter. Beresford-Ellis (1985) paints a picture of how the ecclesiastical politics of medieval

Cornwall should be seen as a battleground between Cornish and English order. In particular, he points to miracle plays (such as *Beunans Meriasek*) as an important element of ‘Cornish resistance’ and the centre of their production (at Glasney, near Penryn) as a “centre of Cornish literary activity and a bulwark against increasing pressure from the English language” (Beresford-Ellis 1985, p. 65). Therefore, can these hagiographical legends be placed alongside the miracle plays, and be seen as simply devices of early Cornish ‘patriotism’?

A variant interpretation of these stories, however, sees their use much more in terms of how they provided a familiar context for developments, such as uniform parochialisation, that were being pursued by higher authorities in Exeter and Canterbury. They articulated the novel aspects of these ecclesiastical developments in ways that were acceptable to the local population and even flattering to local clergy. As Henderson notes (1935, pp. 93-107), in the long-running dispute over authority at St. Buryan, reforming bishops from Exeter always seemed very keen to honour the obscure local saint (even doing so with a Cornish interpreter on one occasion), as part of the process of securing their authority from Exeter and the active suppression of alternative (‘Celtic’) arrangements. This case demonstrates quite a lot of concern, on the part of the Episcopal authorities, to carry local sentiment with them in their reforming zeal. It also implies that these saintly legends should perhaps be seen as articulating newer forms of authority and order through means that could be understood within existing arrangements.

These legends therefore, can be seen as displaying how aspects of institutional authority and organisation were placed within the realms of an existing communal ethos of what the past was like. They provided a context within which contemporary landscape features *should* be experienced. Consequently, hagiographic legends were not only moulded by, but also played an active role in the construction of contemporary landscape arrangements. The narrative treatment of saint's lives therefore, attempted to anchor them into a contemporary perception of historical and territorial reality (for instance, see Jankofsky, 1991). The physical forms of hills, rivers and objects were given symbolic meaning through the invocation of imagination and myth. Hagiographic stories could be moulded so as to reflect changing notions of social order and identity. They represent how medieval societies came to terms with the institutional developments that were occurring around them, reflecting a dialogue between the political manoeuvrings of an ecclesiastical elite, and an existing communal ethos.

In this respect therefore, the legends and stories associated with local hero-saints can be seen as representing elements of cautious cultural resistance that maintained due reverence to older ideas and linguistic distinction on the one hand, while articulating novel arrangements that were acceptable to a more distant centralising authority on the other. Ironically, therefore, their power and force for wider change, was solidly grounded within their inherently conservative and local credentials.

CONSTRUCTING IDENTITY AND CHANGE

The idea of landscape experience being bound up with the generation of identity and a particular version of the past has a strong resonance when viewed in the context of the

notion of *habitus* as outlined by Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu (1977) attempts to find some grounding for how people perceive their common identity through such devices as tradition and custom, by recourse to a ‘contextually determined ethical disposition’ or *habitus*. A group identity, or ethos, is produced, sustained and transmitted from one generation to another through the experience of common social formations and institutions (Robbins, 1991, pp. 172-3, Gagnier, 1991, pp. 15-16). It is the ‘commonalities of practice’, as Jones (1996, p. 68) calls them, that shape and transmit ethnic identity. In other words, it is the self-confidence and unexamined assumptions of ‘doing the right thing’, ‘taking an accepted path’, or ‘following the norm’ that allows the formation of ‘correct practice’ or *habitus*. In this sense, it is the recourse to a familiar landscape of experience that allows the unchallenged transmission of social memory, and which tends to stress continuity in terms of the landscape organisational patterns of a territorial strategy.

The idea of *habitus* involves the structuring of principles, practices and representations which are objectively regulated without obedience to rules, adapted to goals without conscious aiming and collectively orchestrated without being the product of conscious direction (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 72). In this respect, familiarity, past experience and recourse to a ‘known past’ are key factors in understanding how societies recognise and organise their landscape. Particular versions of history and tradition seek to legitimise institutional development, and the subjective recognition of a particular landscape requires a legitimate relation to social identity and memory. In other words, the idea of landscape is implicitly related to notions of identity, experience, familiarity, continuity and tradition. For change and development to occur, procedures and practices must be acceptable to existing notions of what ‘landscape’ should be like. In this respect, developing strategies of territoriality and

territorialisation sought legitimacy through alliance with existing notions of landscape organisation.

Lowenthal (1985, pp. 213-4) quotes from Pocock (1962) when he notes that “since all societies are organisedto ensure their own continuity, collective statements about the past help to conserve existing arrangements, and the diffusion of all manner of history, whether fact or fable, fosters the feeling of belonging to coherent, stable and durable institutions”. This provides a context in which to understand the hagiographic legends and stories in west Cornwall as emblems of emerging parochial communities within a symbolic landscape. The promotion of saintly myths and legends went hand in hand with the processes of uniform territorial definition associated with parochialisation. In this sense, we need to make space for developing territoriality as both an engine for change, and an emblem of continuity. Territorial strategies were both the outcome, and important contributory factors within the generation and transmission of memory and identity. In this respect, therefore, notions of territory and developments of landscape organisation are implicit in the experience of time and the subjective understanding of particular histories in any period.

Conclusion

I began this short paper by exploring the significance of why we need to approach landscape studies with a view of social and spatial contextualisation. The landscape cannot be viewed simply as a blank space, nor even as a physical backdrop against which societal developments proceed. This position is summed up neatly by Tilley (1994) as he continually stresses the need for understanding the role of landscape experience in the

production and perception of space, and points particularly at the need to interpret the symbolic meaning of landscape elements. In this paper, I have established the further need to recognise emergent notions of territoriality as being of particular importance in this landscape experience. Although this paper has focussed very much on Cornwall using hagiographical discourses, questions about the meaning of landscape, in any era or any area, cannot be addressed without some regard to a society's understanding of territory in whatever form. From trying to comprehend the significance of an individual's subjective perception of a 'personal territory', to the investigation of the increasingly complicated and formalised territorialisation that emerged in relation to later institutional development, the examination of territoriality can help us locate societal change. In other words, the interpretation and relation of archaeological and historical material can be grounded within notions of spatial organisation.

Crucially however, this paper has also pointed to the need to contextualise the promotion of particular legends within the background of contemporary social and political transition. In the case of Cornwall, the promotion of a certain 'territorial' view of the landscape should be seen as part of a wider dialogue between ascendant Anglo-Norman and descendant 'Celtic' Cornish forces and arrangements.

This opens up questions as to how notions of identity develop, particularly in their relation to perceptions of landscape. Therefore, in addition to making space for territorial studies, this paper has also attempted to relate some notions of landscape to conceptions of identity. Bornstein has argued (1997, pp. 266-7) that hagiographical texts are the result of a discourse between elite and lay views of society. This Cornish example, however, reminds

us that we should not see either of these ‘sides’ as homogenous or unified. Hagiographical texts are embedded within the myriad of real and imagined landscapes of contemporary experience. In this respect, constructions of social identity and landscape experience are related to aspects of memory and mythology. By using some of the ideas of Pierre Bourdieu, I have tried to account for some of the symbolic values of landscape by associating notions of memory and societal identity to ideas of legitimacy and continuity. In many respects therefore, movements of change and transition are inherently associated with practices of custom and continuity. Familiarity both allows the transmission of social identity and symbolic memory from one generation to another, and also helps to legitimise strands of continuity in the landscape. Territorial strategies, therefore, reflected an existing landscape experience that was imbued with symbolic meaning and social identity.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ The ‘parochial system’ is a framework of territorial units, very much associated with ecclesiastical organisation, but which was later used for a wide range of administrative affairs, becoming one of the most basic units of communal identity. The ‘parochial system is universal throughout Britain.
- ² This phrase is borrowed from Jones’s (1999, p. 66-7) description of the State-making process in medieval Wales.
- ³ The basis of this earlier system of landscape organisation may have been the mysterious unit of 3 ‘Cornish acres’ (and multiples thereof), that appears again and again in the tithing assessments (see Harvey 1997a, 1997b).
- ⁴ Smith (1990) in particular notes that the many surviving records of saints’ stories, or *vitae*, represent only those for which a particular establishment required a written record in order to protect their property rights, thus masking many more oral legends that could well have existed.
- ⁵ The play *Beunans Meriasek*, copied in 1504 by a local clergyman, features a pagan tyrant king who kills Christian martyrs (see Orme 1992, and Beresford-Ellis 1985).

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