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The Mythical Landscapes of the British Iron Age

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Landscapes Transformed

A significant change appears to occur in the organization of the landscape over many parts of Britain during the later prehistoric period. Later prehistoric is taken here to mean the periods of the Neolithic, Bronze, and Iron Ages. These run from the fifth through the end of the first millennia BC. The change began mid-way through the Bronze Age at the end of the second millennium. Up to this point the monumental constructions of the Neolithic and earlier Bronze Age had been dominated by the formation of highly ritualized foci and by the raising of ancestral tombs and burial mounds. Many of these monuments clearly went through a number of phases of development as well as a lengthy history of use. Settlement activity in the period on the other hand, although it extended across these landscapes, did not focus upon specific sites which were either enclosed, long-lived, or had any monumental characteristics. There are also few indicators of enclosed agricultural landscapes at this time; in other words, there is no indication of intensive agricultural systems employing a short-fallow cycle of regeneration (cf. Barrett 1994). All the indicators are that the Neolithic and earlier Bronze Age landscapes were structured around a dominant constellation of references to a spiritual or ancestral presence. The living communities mapped their own histories upon these sacred references through the temporal cycles of communal celebration and routine production. These activities brought the larger ritual community together at particular locations in the landscape and it was these locations which were embellished by monumental constructions.

During the earlier Bronze Age, the living community established a further linkage to that ever-present spiritual world via their burial

rites. Many of these burials were located near, but not within, the large communal monuments and, after considerable elaboration were finally covered by substantial earthwork mounds. The whole of the fifth to second millennia therefore witnessed the lengthy if intermittent elaboration of a series of complex sacred landscapes. By the end of the second millennium the construction and maintenance of monuments associated with the sacred landscape ended and no further elaboration took place. At the same time, distinctive settlement foci emerged, with the building of enclosed settlements containing houses and ancillary structures with activities characteristic of a lengthy and continuous history of settlement. Alongside this seemingly more permanent settlement record comes evidence for land enclosure and the more intensive exploitation of arable through cycles of short fallow cultivation (Barrett 1994). By the fifth century BC the contrast appears complete; the landscape was structured around enclosed settlements and land-divisions and, occupying foci around which parts of the productive cycle were integrated, the hillforts emerged. The latter typify the nature of the change. Monumental in scale, they are occupied by clusters of round-houses and storage facilities. The evidence indicates that some of these hillforts stored grain produced and transported from a number of locations in the surrounding landscape (Jones 1984). Productive activities, including the working of metal, glass, shale and bone, also occurred at a number of other, different locations across the landscape.

Where ritual activity can be located in the later period, it appears to have occupied a quite restricted place. Votive deposits were made away from settlements, focusing in particular upon rivers (Bradley 1990), whilst, in the settlements themselves, it has been proposed that deposits of human and animal bones, artifacts and food debris represent the highly formalized treatment of materials associated with agricultural reproduction and feasting (Barrett 1989; Hill 1995). The contrast with the earlier period may be characterized almost as an inversion, for where previously settlement activities were contained within the settings of a sacred landscape the sacred was, by the Iron Age, either marginal to or subsumed within the structure of a settled agricultural landscape.

It is important to recognize that the distinction outlined above does not arise simply as a consequence of taphonomic processes. In other words what we are seeing is a change in the structural arrangements by which the landscape was inhabited, and not merely a change in the relative survival of different categories of archaeological material.

Interpreting the Landscape

The sequence of monuments which has been described in the highly generalized outline above, and which admittedly draws heavily upon the evidence from southern and eastern Britain, indicates that the principles around which the landscape was organized changed during the second millennium BC. In purely descriptive terms the sequence is one of changing form and function; sequences of monument types characterize the passing of time and each of these types fulfilled different functions. Thus not only did the landscape look different as a consequence of its redesign, but particular activities were associated with a changing configuration of places and structures through time. What were undoubtedly common if conflicting requirements among all communities – to secure or question their political institutions by reference to certain ideologically grounded truths, to accommodate the death of their members, to construct shelter and produce, prepare and consume food – appear over time to have taken place in different material settings and at different places. For example, many burial rites initiated the construction of elaborate covering mounds at the end of the third and beginning of the second millennia BC, and yet by the middle of the first millennium such rites appear to have required less prominent marking, or to have been relocated around areas of settlement, or indeed to have become almost invisible archaeologically (Whimster 1981).

I want now to consider the ways we might interpret a sequence like this to facilitate an adequate consideration of the wider landscape context of monuments. In particular I want to effect a shift away from accounts which give primacy to the acts of building as a way of characterizing a particular period – in other words where the mere corpus of monument types created over a given period is used to define the archaeology of that period (cf. Bradley 1993: 4) – towards a recognition that the construction of monuments is always an interpretation of a pre-existing world. There are three crucially important points in the argument I hope to develop. The first is that the world as it already existed will always have been imbued with meanings and have been used as a background of reference against which contemporary acts, including monument building, were played out. Indeed those acts may often have sought to make explicit the meanings which were soaked into the landscape, or to find ways to focus them more directly upon contemporary concerns. This brings me to my second point, which is that monument building may have involved strategies of appropriation by which values previously immanent to the world as a whole came to be revealed or enunciated by certain actions and in such a way that

those very acts and their participants became the essential media for the transmission of that which had previously been given. This was a process of political appropriation by which the timeless values which seemingly governed order in the world were increasingly mediated and therefore controlled by the actions of a restricted group. Monuments thus acted as a focus or a "lens" through which the wider world of experience was to be viewed, enabling certain groups to act on behalf of the wider community to reveal that sacred order (cf. Tilley 1994). Finally, although we can distinguish between the material form of the world as it was given and the instigation of new projects of construction undertaken in the creation of new political realities, this is not the same as a distinction between the "natural" features of the topography and the "cultural" features of the transformed landscape. In the ways a pre-existing landscape offered an environment of potential experiences and signification no distinction need have been drawn between its "natural" and its earlier but now relic "cultural" components. Both equally had the potential to reveal the truths of a mythical past. The transformation of the landscape lay not so much in its physical modification as in its interpretation.

To establish this framework for our interpretation it will be necessary for us to diverge from more traditional archaeological approaches towards the analysis of landscape organization. Such analyses have tended to begin from the point already noted, namely to characterize a particular period by reference to the range of monuments and other material residues which were created in that same period. Having so characterized the material record of a period, that record is then taken to represent the way human life was organized in that same period according to social structural, political, or economic arrangements. Such reasoning means that it is incumbent upon the archaeologist to establish adequately the material correlates of particular types of social formation, be they chiefdoms, early states, or whatever. Consequent upon such analysis is the emergence of a history in which the passing of each period traces out a sequence of social formations. The material remains merely confirm the existence of these formations and illustrate their internal logic by exposing the ways in which the system functioned. The problem such histories pose is to understand the transformation from one type of social formation to another, a problem which can only be resolved in the relatively abstract terms of social and economic theory. By treating monuments as representative of a certain type of social formation those monuments are effectively disengaged from the actual reproduction and transformation of social life. Rather than being seen as part of the medium by which social practices gained their vitality, monuments are simply treated as a record of those

practices. At the same time the wider "natural" environment appears to have operated as a set of relatively passive constraints upon which various social practices were enacted.

The divergence which I seek from this traditional thinking requires that we perceive monument building as a transformative process. Such programs drew upon previous understandings of the world and, by acts of building, certain signifiers were appropriated to create a new set of material conditions which life was then faced with having to accommodate. Monuments did not represent certain social conditions, rather it was through their construction that those conditions were gradually transformed. And in this context there existed the background landscape of places, forms, and experiences whose understandings informed the strategies of appropriation which the various monumental programs attempted to synthesize.

The shift in perception required to rethink the later prehistoric sequence of monuments allows us to see them not as the signifiers of particular social formations but as the signifiers of the cultural values appropriated in certain dominant strategies of social reproduction. These strategies were historically and materially situated, and while they expressed certain desires and aims by those who executed them, their consequences – the effects of monument building and the ways they were accommodated in future patterns of life – may have escaped the original intentions of the builders.

The archaeological recovery of certain material conditions demands that we consider how those material conditions could be occupied to enable the continuation of certain forms of life. This is an archaeology of inhabitation in which the material no longer simply represents the consequence of processes which we need to discover but becomes instead the historically constituted and necessary conditions of a world inhabited, interpreted, and acted upon. Whereas previously, archaeological remains were regarded as a trail of debris generated by the passing of the processes of history, where each epoch left its own distinctive signature upon the record, now each generation can be regarded as having to confront its own archaeology as the material remains of its past piled up before it.

Consider the material so far presented. Traditionally it is taken to represent a sequence: the distribution of settlements and fortified sites replaces the earlier distribution of ceremonial centers and burial monuments. This sequence is traditionally explained as indicative of a sequence of social transformations in which one particular type of social formation had been replaced with another by the end of the second millennium. The alternative, presented here, situates the material quite differently by placing it in the context of past human

understanding. Now humans are seen to have confronted the cumulative material conditions which they inhabited. The earlier remains were no longer absent from the later period for the simple reason that the Iron Age was actually an inhabitation of Bronze Age residues. Indeed we might go further and recognize that the Iron Age could only have arisen in the way that it did as an interpretation or as a reading of the physical manifestation of its own landscape heritage.

We can now review the processes at work in a little more detail. My central question is to inquire as to the means by which places in the landscape, once the focus for intensive ritual activity and, through that, of recurring physical modification, became transformed into places which saw no further votive or ritual modification.

The burial mounds which were constructed and embellished during the earlier part of the second millennium BC in Britain (i.e., in the early Bronze Age) were built to contain a variety of burial deposits during that period. But they also endured to become Iron Age monuments. The difference was that during the Iron Age they received no further physical modification, but they did continue as a significant element in the Iron Age landscape and as such were presumably recognized and drawn into an understanding of that landscape. As such, the monuments were not modified by physical intervention but by the changing landscape context from whence they were viewed. The history of these mounds can therefore be described in terms of the distinction which is being considered by this volume. In their foundation and physical development these are the practically modified places where funeral rituals terminated with the burial of a corpse, or the deposition of the cremated remains of the dead. By the Iron Age they became an unmodified element of the cultural landscape. Traditionally archaeologists studying the Iron Age in southern Britain have operated as if these mounds were simply lost at this point; they do not for example appear on the distribution maps which we so often produce of Iron Age monuments. However, it is my case that these monuments remained a crucial and integrated component of the Iron Age landscape, and that their lack of further modification holds a key to understanding how the inhabitation of that landscape accommodated them.

Inhabiting the Landscape

Inhabiting the world establishes a recognition or an understanding for the inhabitants as parts of the world are "brought into view" by them (Hirsch 1995: 3). Such knowledge is geographical in as much as

it has a perspective, a place from whence it is developed (cf. Thrift 1985). That place is the point at which the inhabitants have arrived in their own lives with their accumulation of biographical experiences, it is a place understood and described according to certain traditions and conventions to which the inhabitants have some access and to which they contribute through their own practices, and it is also a place at which the inhabitants themselves may be located and defined according to the desires and decrees of others. Thus the inhabitants not only find ways to situate themselves within, and thus to act effectively upon, the world, but in such actions they also submit to the desires of others, either willingly or through various forms of coercion. This geography of being is therefore a geography in which the inhabitants are able to find a place for themselves by reference to their own biography but in which that place is also fixed, and is recognized as being so fixed, according to a larger social order. The act of inhabiting a place is meaningful to the inhabitants according to their own experiences and desires, but it becomes socially meaningful when their actions are objectively recognized by others and thus set into a widely accepted frame of reference, which is often expressed in terms of the "social" or the "cosmological" orders which appear to arrange the world.

The issue which I have tried to describe in outline here is that inhabitation becomes meaningful when it is situated between different frames of reference. In the simple terms which I have employed, the inhabited place is known with reference to past experiences and by actions at that place which are played off against a wider "reality" of social continuity and order (Bell 1992). These frames of reference and the actions which link them are constructed out of the actions of inhabitation and they empower different groups in different ways. There are, for example, observers who are able to explain the actions of others according to certain social norms – they expose why people may behave the way they do, not so much by reference to individual motivations and desires as by reference to sets of ideal and socially recognized values. There are also those who may mediate between these frames of reference, or reveal by their actions – for example as ritual specialists—the sacred frame against which the routine practicalities of life are played out. And there are those who claim that their actions embodied the norms of social cohesion and upon that basis claim the political obligations to which they are due.

By thinking about inhabitation in this way it is possible to begin to recognize how the pragmatic and strategic decisions of a person's life, which draw personal understandings into play in the institutional activities of day-to-day experiences, are set within a wider frame of social

traditions and norms. At the same time we must emphasize that these social traditions are themselves not simply given but constructed within the inhabited world; they too may be rethought and reworked through the "discovery" of some "deeper" or "wider" truth against which their own veracity may be assessed (Connerton 1989). Movement between these frames of reference may be considered as a movement between temporalities, between the time of an individual's own biography and that of the social rhythms of institutional activity and the timeless continuities of cultural order, or as I have attempted here, spatially between the near and foregrounded experiences of everyday life and the distant background or horizon of order, law, and stability (Helms 1988). Thus while the landscape may map spatial relationships it also contains different temporalities. Smith expresses this well when he draws a distinction between an engagement with the immediate practicalities of life and the "pleasure of detachment" in the moment of reverie as the eyes are lifted to the horizon, the sunset, and an appreciation of the apparent timelessness of the world inhabited (Smith 1993: 79).

Inhabitation is not about occupying a place. A landscape archaeology which simply maps places according to the role they may have played in the operation of some larger, and entirely abstract, social and economic system misses the point. Inhabitation is a process of understanding the relevance of actions executed at some place by reference to other times and to other places. In the simplified terms with which I have attempted to develop the argument here, the references which may be made are those which draw on the biographical experiences gathered in the journey to that place, and the projection of those actions against an apparently unchanging horizon of social and cultural order. Inhabitation also empowers: the actions which take place and the lives of which they are a part find their legitimacy and their security in terms of such references; people can cope with the world and work their desires upon it. But it also empowers in another way: as people find themselves framed and objectified by others who claim that their own lives and actions sustain some part of the larger social order, they stand between those framed and the common horizon and from such a position act upon those people's lives, upon their bodies. They mediate in ritual, extract dues, pass judgment, enslave and kill.

Redefining the Horizon

We can now review the contrast with which we began, between landscapes in which ritual, ceremonial, and burial monuments were raised,

and those in which the monumental focus became the settlement itself. This contrast need no longer be regarded simply as one in which the different functional requirements of the social and economic system were located at different places or in different material contexts within the landscape. This did indeed occur, but that transformation was achieved more fundamentally by practices which redefined the references by which those places were known. In other words new places were made through new biographical experiences, by the definition of new horizons of social order, and by the realization of new networks of power.

During the Neolithic the construction and use of the ceremonial monumentality was part of the routine of social action which worked upon and transformed the landscape. It was as if these actions reinscribed upon the landscape its inherently sacred form. Although the descriptive term "ritual landscape" is misleading, it does have the virtue of evoking the idea that routine life was mapped upon the essential and timeless landscape. In this way, to inhabit the landscape was to evoke or revitalize the ever-present ancestral and spiritual order embedded in that same landscape. The actions of construction, and the inhabitation of these places, thus overlay the sacred structure of the landscape in such a way that the past and present effectively existed alongside each other. What the monuments achieved was an appropriation of that other timeless order as enclosures, and the architecture of the tombs, increasingly facilitated the arrangement of the participants and heightened the identity of ritual specialists.

This tradition of inhabitation, which effectively extended back to the Mesolithic, changed when a distinction began to be drawn more clearly between a past as the origin of cultural and sacred order and a present of inhabitation. This distinction was facilitated by the construction of a linear representation of time which projected back to a time of origins. This construction, I would contend, was partly achieved through the development of the burial rites which emerged during the early Bronze Age of the second millennium. Here, for the first time, funeral rites used earth-dug graves, thus not only leaving deposits in the ground and fixing the place of burial geographically, but also setting up the possibility of building sequentially upon the initial deposit through the addition of succeeding burials. It is notable that the early graves were indeed redug, and often on more than one occasion. And as the burial mounds were developed and enlarged over succeeding generations, so these monuments became complex depositories for lineages of the dead. A lineal sequence, recognized through the succeeding burial rites, literally created a human past distinct from

the present. That past acted as a container for an origin, perhaps the founding of a lineage or dynasty, and the burial ground offered the physical manifestation of a sequence linking that past, and thus that origin, to the present.

During the second millennium, the place of the symbolic orders which had been mapped through many of the routine practices of social life became displaced into a past world which was no longer immediately present, and thus was not available to be reworked, in those routines themselves. But that past was still represented in the newly conceived history of the landscape itself. And it was still an essential component of that landscape, acting as an horizon to which the acts of inhabitation could refer. The institutionalized practices of social life now maintained a new order which created the enclosed and long-lived foci of settlement as well as the enclosed and intensively cultivated field systems of the period. The legitimacy of all such practices was presumably expressed partly in the new historical terms of an inherited legitimacy – rights which linked the present to a past through a direct, recognizable, and accepted line. That past, necessarily absent, must none the less have been represented by the relics of the earlier period, perhaps most evocatively by the burial mounds themselves. Burials no longer took place in or even around these mounds, but this very lack of intervention best expresses the role the mounds now played. The mythical past stood apart from the present. In its form the landscape contained the relics of those times occupying, almost literally, the horizon beyond the routines of daily life. Those routines reproduced the political relations of the time whose validity would have lain in the references made to their mythical origins. Such origins could not be drawn back into the contemporary world, the mounds may have stood as mute testimony to their previous existence, whilst the contemporary presence of the past lived on in the lives of its political inheritors.

Conclusion

What I have attempted to review in this chapter are the paths traced by a number of transformations. First is the transformation traditionally characterized by archaeology, where the form and function of the landscape changes and in which the nature of monuments and their associated deposits are taken to represent the organization of an ancient society. That transformation has then been reconsidered by references to the ways of inhabiting the landscape; from this perspective,

places gain their significance because of their inhabitants' abilities to establish references to other times and other places, to remember their own histories and to lift their eyes to the more distant horizons. The transformation of the inhabited landscape therefore hinges not so much upon functional change as upon the reworking of these referents and the politics of their control.

The various elements of these landscapes, and the distinction between those elements of the cognitive landscape which were modified (i.e., cultural products) and those which remained unmodified but were assigned sacred significance (including natural features) are best understood in terms of the reference through which inhabitants must have recognized their own identities as manifest in the physical form and cultural values represented by the built and modified environment. This was achieved as personal biographies traced out the path of an individual's life across landscapes where the coincidence of biographical experiences and a larger symbolic order occurred at certain moments and places. Thus, what we perceive today as an essentially abstract landscape made up of the distribution of certain monument categories was lived as a personal landscape of experience as the spatial order of places was linked in a temporal sequence of movement. Individuals literally rediscovered or reworked the order of their own world through the practices of their own lives.

In the earlier of the cases examined here (that of the Neolithic), social practices reworked, literally excavated and revealed, the presence of a general order which was one of creation and origins but remained vital and ever present. Here certain political authorities may have acted to effect that revelation, they divined its potency and allowed their own actions to bring it into being. In the later case (that of the Iron Age) the past was displaced, it lay on a distant horizon linked to the present by a trajectory of legitimate inheritance. Political authority was both the true inheritor and the representative of that past; it spoke with the authority of the past now absent, and bequeathed its inheritance to future generations.

The transformation between these two kinds of landscapes and these two histories may have been achieved largely through the material construction of burial lineages. As the grave sequences were dug and the covering mounds enlarged, so the points of origin became increasingly hidden and distant. Eventually those remains stood simply as a mute testimony to an unchangeable order, observed perhaps, as Jonathan Smith has recently described, in moments of reverie in the same way as we might observe the landscape or a sunset (Smith 1993). But without that concept of the past, it seems unlikely that the

political structures of control, which laid claim to the land and its resources, would have been possible to justify. The political structures of the Iron Age inherited their rights over land and people from that past and bequeathed those rights to the future. The Iron Age was indeed the product of the Bronze Age, but not in the way in which archaeologists usually mean: in other words, not as the product of a process of social evolution. Instead the Bronze Age created the Iron Age because it made available the conditions by which the Iron Age communities were themselves able to read of and to recognize the mythical histories by which they made themselves.

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