

## **The “bocage” of the West of France : a landscape built and used by the men**

The traditional classification of the rural landscapes is based on the opposition between bocage and openfield. The openfield is the dominant structure (pattern ?) of the plains of continental Europe. In France, it is the feature of the large plains around Paris. It have been developed by ecclesiastical lords after the great clearings of the Middle Age. It is regarded as a good agrarian structure (three course system and cereals in the Middle Age, intensive culture later)..

By opposition, all that is not the openfield - the landscapes of mountain, the Mediterranean landscapes, the bocage - is generally described as not very efficient.

### **1 - Definition and localization**

In French, the word “bocage” is usually used to speak about a wooded landscape (something like woodlands). But the specialists of geography had given it a more technical definition : bocage indicates an agrarian landscape with a network of interconnected hedges. Thus it will be employed in this paper.

The opposition between bocage and openfield had been explained during a long time by physical features : the bocage is linked to wet countries and poor soils (rain makes the growing of the grass and it supports cattle-breeding); the habitat is scattered there because it is easy to get water for it. On the contrary, the openfield is settled on limestone ground, rich in humus and able to produce cereals ; the gathered round the water points which are few and fare between ; the collective uses are important, there (common grazing land and course for the cattle).

The bocage is the landscape which characterizes the West of the France ; it can also be found in Galicia, in Ireland and Wales and in mountain areas.

In this paper, we will talk about the bocage of Britany and Maine.

### **2 - Argument**

The aim of this paper is to present the three following ideas:

- 1 - the bocage, like the openfield or enclosures, is a built landscape,
- 2 - the bocage of the West of France have not been there of any eternity,
- 3 - it corresponds to a certain kind of society, of economy, and agrarian practices.

### **3 - The bocage is one moment of the evolution of the landscape**

#### ***A- the current evolution : a fast decrease***

The current observation of the bocage of the West of France shows its fast decrease during thirty last years. This lets imagine that the bocage can disappear in more or less short term. In reverse order, the observation over long time shows that this landscape was not always be there : it is not a natural data but a landscape built by the men for precise uses.

**B- A proto-bocage?**

When is the beginning of the bocage ? It is not easy to answer this question. Indeed, the archaeologists reveal some “parcellaires fossoyés” (closed fields ?) for the prehistoric times, but we can't be sure these “parcellaires fossoyés” constitutes a prehistoric bocage nor that they are the ancestors of the medieval bocage. Two major doubts exists :

**1- A doubt on the continuity of the structures**

These proto-bocages whose excavations or photography reveals the existence are not surely the ancestors of modern bocage. The main structures of these landscapes are always uncomformable.

Some explanations :

- It is not easy to find, in Brittany, traces of “Celtic fields” (i.e. enclosed low-size fields, cultivated by hand, which characterize all Europe of the North-West) (BATT and GIOTT, 1980)

- When closed fields of the Age of Iron Age or Gallo-Roman period are highlighted, they are uncomformable with modern : « il est bien rare que les enclos des fermes indigènes de l'âge du Fer ou des débuts de l'époque gallo-romaine se retrouvent dans le parcellaire moderne »( BATT et GIOTT, 1980).

- Closed fields of the valley of Pörhoet (west of Rennes), which could be seen as very resilient structures, do not present any significant correlation with the forms observed on the Napoleonean cadastral map (GAUTIER, 1996) ; they are so uncomformable.

So, even when it is possible to know the age of the structures, there is a lot of doubts and it seems that there is no continuity between the structures of the Iron Age and medieval or modern structures : : « il y a le plus souvent discordance entre les formes et les orientations » de ces parcellaires anciens et le cadastre du XIXe siècle (GAUTIER,1996, p. 51).

**2- Some doubts exist also about the aspect of the landscape**

Doubts are even larger about the appearance of the landscape we can imagine for prehistoric periods. The most often observed form by the archaeologists is composed of the association of closed fields and one or more closed dwelling. But the characteristic of air photography is to say nothing about the volumes of the objects : « les parcellaires ne sont pas des paysages » (GAUTIER, NAAS et LEROUX, 1996, p. 56). What was the aspect of the landscape associated to these structures ? Ditches, hedges on slope, hedges with slope and ditch ? And what were they used for ? To materialize a limit of property ? to protect the cultures ? to delimit parks for cattle ? To be used as windscreen or as ditch of drainage? We are obliged to recognize we knows quite nothing about the aspect of the landscape before the bocage of the Middle Age.

**C- IX<sup>th</sup>-X<sup>th</sup> centuries : small islands of open fields**

In the cartulaire of Redon (IXe-Xe centuries), the agrarian structure most widespread is the “ran”, a block of fields characterized by a name of anybody, partly surrounded by ditches : « incontestablement, la dominante du paysage cultivé reste le champ ouvert, la champagne » (GAUTIER, 1941 ; TANGUY, 1999). The land under cultivation is made of glades encroaching on the forest. This structure composed of glades is set up from a forest landscape and it keeps the traces of the forest a long time after. About the IXth-Xth centuries, the landscape of Brittany is not a bocage : one can imagine it as small islands of open fields inside the moor or the forest.

**D- At the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century : the first hedges**

At the end of the XIVth century, the West of the France, and particularly Brittany, is not yet a bocage and the collective practices are very important there. According to the Very Old Custom of Brittany (1350-1380) (Planiol, 1896), fenced grounds are uncommon.

It appears that the cultivated grounds constitutes some enclaves inside pastures, and these pieces of land are not necessarily closed. They are “*brandonnées*” (announced by a wisp which prohibits the entry of the animals) when they will be put in culture. Concerning the uses of the ground, the Very Old Custom describes a situation in which the circulation of the cattle is the general rule, and its prohibition, exception. This shows at the same time a very extensive use of the ground : the culture is in clearings and it is often temporary. The cattle occupies the waste lands but the clearings of culture are also the place of important collective uses.

The item 273 of the Very Old Custom indicated that the demesne of the lord is always “*défensable*” (i. e. it is prohibited to send cattle on it) « *toujours fust le domaine desclos* » (i. e. even if there is not hedges around it). So closed fields seem to be very few. The item 283 examines the situation of « *homme ou femme de basse condicion, ou cas que leurs terres seraient closes* » (i.e. it is possible for common people to have some closed fields but it is really unfrequent). Hedges seem to be very exceptional.

Only the item 283 (*gienz de basse condition qui veulent deffendre leurs heritages*) give the possibility of closing fields by hedges to make parks to keep some cattle inside. But this fact is uncommon. In general, landscape seems to be made of some glades for crops inside a large forest. So it is not a bocage but there are however various kinds of hedges.

**Variations of the medieval hedge**

Élizabeth Zadora Rio shows that if the concept of bocage is recent, not very convenient for the old times, nevertheless hedges are present in the medieval sources (Zadora-Rio, 1968). It is indicated mainly by four terms:

- *sepes* indicates a fence, and it is difficult to say if it is done with died or living plants,
- *plessiacum* names the hedges surrounding the inhabited places, the villages or the farms;
- *haia* can be a royal forest put in “*défens*” (it is not allowed to put the cattle in it), a special technique for hunting, a forest who constitutes a territorial limit ; it is always much more important than a simple line of trees. According to Jean-Claude Meuret, the medieval “hedges” of this type often constitute belts of forest at the time modern (Meuret, 1993). The medieval “hedge” is broader than its modern.
- But the characteristic hedge of the West, during the Middle Age, is the ditch (*fossatum*), in fact a slope + a ditch. In Maine, the first mentions of fence appear in the XI<sup>th</sup> century (Pichot, 1995). In Cartulaire de Redon (Flattrès, 1971), the “confronts” of the fields are described very. The *fossatum* indicates some large fields with hedges around them. This unit slope + ditch is also that the archaeologists for the age of Iron and the Gallo-Roman period describe (Beats and Giott, 1980; Gautier, 1996.). But it is perfectly known now that it is not the same thing.

***E- The Custom of the 16<sup>th</sup> century***

In the Custom of Brittany, reformed in 1580 (Argentré, 1613.), the statute of the ground and especially the definition of its private or collective use are the subject of significant and complex developments. On the other hand, the question of the hedges is relatively simple and can be summarized by two assertions : some fields have not hedges around, but people who want close their fields can do it as they want.

...

The comparison of the two texts of 1380 and 1580 thus shows a progressive construction of the bocage during the modern time and a simultaneous reduction of the place granted to the collective uses. The pictures of the Vilaine show this situation (Mauger, 1997; Pichot, 2000). A series of texts of the end of the XVIII<sup>th</sup> century show another stage in the progression of the network of the bocage.

***F- In all the texts of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the authorization to close the fields is repeated.***

In July 1768, the Secretary of State Bertin makes an enquiry in all the kingdom about closed and unclosed fields and about common uses. In Brittany, answers are the following :

- Yes, in this country, it is authorized since a long time to have closed fields (it is written in the item 393 of the new custom) to prohibit them to cattle,
- But too feed cattle, there are the moors and heathers which are commons with a lot of collective uses.

This enquiry thus shows clearly two things: 1 - that the bocage had considerably progressed since the XVI<sup>th</sup> century, 2 - that the divagation of the animals remains a largely allowed practice, but according to certain rules ; the network of hedges is used to separate crops and cattle.

The network of hedges is still expanding during the 19th century. In Brittany, the bocage thickened since the X<sup>th</sup> century, but the XVII<sup>th</sup> and XVIII<sup>th</sup> centuries constituted one period of relative stability. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the conquest of the moors was accompanied by a new phase of progression of the bocage (MEYER, 1985). It is about 1950 that it reaches its largest density.

**4 - It is a built landscape*****A- Hedging and ditching***

During the XVIII<sup>th</sup> century, before the barbed wire and the electric fences, a good hedge was composed of large trees which form its structure and of shrubs between the trees for the filling of it. The roots of the trees and the shrubs which are stoken on the hedge must prevent the soil to slip in the ditch ; a hedge which would be made only with dead plants would quickly collapse in the ditch.

The aspect of the hedge (and of the whole landscape) depends on the tools and techniques which are used to do hedging and ditching. The pruning of the trees is done either by keeping only the trunks of the trees which then form a long spindly and twisted barrel, or by cutting the trunks a few meters under the ground. This gives the two silhouettes characteristic of the woodlands of the West of the France : the "ragolles" of High-Brittany, the "émousses" of Maine or the "têtards" of Anjou. Now,

the hedges maintained in a mechanical way do not have the same aspect as the hedges cut by hand.

### ***B Functions of the hedge***

Why is the hedge built for ?

The hedges have a lot of uses (appropriation of the ground, production of firewood, refuge for the biodiversity...) and each society finds some other. Indeed, each society inherits a former landscape ; each society use it and change it a little, according to its needs. It is thus necessary to distinguish the first functions and the consecutive functions of the hedge. Only the first of them interest us here : the bocage has been built for them.

At the beginning (medieval and early modern periods), hedge is useful to protect cultures from wandering cattle. The Very Old Custom of Brittany (1380) and some further documents show it is perfectly allowed for cattle to wander (for grazing), except in the parts hermetically closed by hedges. The aspect of the hedge and the way of making it is linked to these uses. In old times, the hedge is a cage for the cultures. Each hedge is reinforced only when the piece of land is tilled ; if the piece is temporarily converted into waste land, the hedges around are neglected and they can easily be crossed by the cattle or by the pedestrians. This use of the hedges is clearly evoked so in some texts of the XVI<sup>th</sup> century as "Les Propos Rustiques" by Noël du Fail. For the XVIII<sup>th</sup> century, the records of the law courts allow the same conclusions : when animals digress and make damage in cultures, it is not the owner of the animals who is punished. It is the owner of the hedge because he has not reinforced it, so that the hedge was not able to prevent cattle entering in tillages and crops.

## **5 - The bocage grows at the same time as the bovine breeding**

We have saw in the Customs of 1380 and 1560 that the network of the hedges was used to share the land between crops and cattle breeding (it is different in the openfields where the cultures are more important and where some spaces are alternatively grazed and cultivated)

In the West of France and particularly in Brittany, the agrarian system remains for long time semi-extensive ; it looks like the system of infield/outfield of Scotland or Wales. Permanent or temporary uncultivated spaces are very important and they are used to feed a lot of animals. In the Very Old Custom (1380), there are many item about animals : they are the proof of the importance of cattle breeding. It seems that Brittany is then a really specialized area where the space devoted to the crops is less important than the one for grazings. And during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, 20 to 40 % of the average income of the medium-farms of the Maine come from the bovine breeding (Antoine, 1994; Antoine, 1999).

In Maine (Antoine, 2002), during the XVIII<sup>th</sup> century, the arable lands are subjected to long farming rotations. The more characteristic lays on three cultures : buckwheat, rye and oats. It is repeated two or three times on each piece and, after this, it is followed with a long time of fallow. In the Maine, it was estimated the share of the grounds really cultivated each year is 20 % of the whole space (Antoine, 1994).

From all these practices, we can conclude that the hedges of the West of the France have been built to control the wanderings of the cattle ; this means a first specialization of an agriculture of an extensive type. So, we can say the first

originality of the West of the France is not to be a bocage, but it is the early importance of the cattle. And it is the cattle breeding which explains the bocage. Historically, any bocage is a cattle-rearing area, the fact had been said there is nearly thirty years by a geographer, Pierre Bonnaud. He explained the question of the origins of the bocage was perhaps not a very good question whereas the question of the conditions of its creation have more interesting answers : « on ne saurait citer un bocage indiscutable qui ne soit en rapports étroits, et pratiquement consubstantiels, avec un élevage bovin important, voire le plus souvent prédominant dans le système agricole » (Bonnaud, 1979.)

## 6 - Landscape and social structures

This landscape of bocage is linked in the West of the France to a special social and family structure.

In Maine (Antoine, 2002), during the XVIII<sup>th</sup> century, a good farm is about 25/30 ha. An average farm of 31,30 ha is composed of a lot of pieces of 1,50 ha. Six are small pieces (gardens, orchards, little parks) of 0,33 ha and 13 or 14 are patches of land or meadow of 2 ha on average. A small estate of almost 7 ha consists of 11 pieces of 0,60 ha : 4 are small pieces always closed of 0,20 ha and 7 are grounds or meadows of 0,75 ha.

Each of them is the place of life and work for a family, sometimes helped by one or two servants. Labourers are less important than in the large farms of the areas of openfield. So, the social structure is dominated by "average peasants" which are independent, managers. They are integrated in the markets because they sell and buy a lot of cattle (cf. accounts of the farms). The social gap between richs and poor are less important than in the countries of large farms where there is a lot of labourers.

### Bibliographie

ANTOINE, Annie, 1994. *Fiefs et villages du Bas-Maine au xviii<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Éditions Régionales de l'Ouest, Mayenne, 539 p.

ANTOINE, Annie, 1999. « Systèmes agraires de la France de l'Ouest : une rationalité méconnue ? », *Revue d'Histoire Économique et Sociale*, 1, p. 107-132.

ANTOINE, Annie, 2001. « La construction de l'inculte : landes et friches en Bretagne au xviii<sup>e</sup> siècle », dans : Actes du congrès de Dol, *Mémoires de la Société d'Histoire et d'Archéologie de Bretagne*, tome LXXIX, p. 205-228.

ANTOINE, Annie, 2002. *Le paysage de l'historien. Archéologie des bocages de l'Ouest de la France*, Rennes, PUR, 340 p.

ARGENTRE, Bertrand d', 1613-1614, id. 1628, id. 1646. *Commentarii in patrias Britonum leges, seu consuetudines generales antiquissimi ducatus Britanniae, suivis des coutumes générales du pays et duché de Bretagne réformées en 1580*, Paris, Nicolas Buon.

BATT, Michael et GIOTT, Pierre-Roland, 1980. « Quelques observations d'archéologie du paysage en Finistère », *Bulletin de la Société Archéologique du Finistère*, 108, p. 17-26

BONNAUD, Pierre, 1979. « Sur la Constitution du bocage en France », Hommage au Professeur F. Dussart, *Bulletin de la Société Géographique de Liège*, Liège, p. 301-322.

- FLATRES, Pierre, 1971. « Les anciennes Structures rurales de Bretagne d'après le Cartulaire de Redon », *Études Rurales*, 41, p. 87-93.
- GAUTIER, Marcel, 1941. « Remarques sur la structure des champs bretons », *Annales de Bretagne et des Pays de l'Ouest*, 48, 2, p. 387-394.
- GAUTIER, Maurice, 1996. « Les Parcelles antiques du Porhoët et de la vallée de l'Yvel », dans : *Les Formes du paysage*, tome 1, *Études sur les parcelles*, Paris, Éditions Errance, p. 49-56
- GAUTIER, Maurice, NAAS, Patrick et LEROUX, Gilles, 1996. « Archéologie des paysages agraires armoricains. Éléments pour une nouvelle approche », dans : *Les Formes du paysage*, Gérard Chouquer, (dir.), tome 2 : *Archéologie des parcelles*, Paris, Errance, p. 45-56.
- GIOTT, Pierre-Rolland, 1970, « Chronique de préhistoire et de protohistoire finistériennes pour 1979 », *Bulletin de la Société Archéologique du Finistère*, 1970, 107 p. 15-16 (fouilles dans la baie d'Audierne et la région de Plougoulm)
- LE MENE, Michel, 1982. *Les Campagnes angevines à la fin du Moyen-Âge : vers 1350-vers 1530*, Nantes, Cid éditions, 534 p.
- MAUGER, Michel, dir., 1997. *En passant par la Vilaine, de Redon à Rennes en 1543*, Rennes, Apogée, 94 p.
- MEURET, Jean-Claude, 1993. *Peuplement, pouvoir et paysage sur la marche Anjou-Bretagne (des origines au Moyen Âge)*, Laval, La Mayenne archéologie histoire, supplément n° 4, 656 p.
- MEYER, Jean, 1985, *La Noblesse bretonne au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris, Imprimerie nationale, 1966, 2 vol., CV-1293 p. ; rééd. : Paris, EHESS, 1985
- PAILLET, Antoine, 1987. « Étude archéologique des haies de bocage bourbonnaises », *Revue d'Archéologie Moderne et d'Archéologie Générale*, n° 5, p. 47-77.
- PAILLET, Antoine, 1996. *Archéologie de l'agriculture en Bourbonnais. Paysages, outillages et travaux agricoles du Moyen Âge à l'époque contemporaine*, Nonette, Créer, 350 p
- PICHOT, Daniel, 1995. *Le Bas-Maine du X<sup>e</sup> au XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle : étude d'une société*, Laval, Société d'Archéologie et d'Histoire, supplément n° 7, 455 p.
- PICHOT, Daniel, 2000. « Images du paysage : les bords de la Vilaine au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle », *Mémoires de la Société Historique et Archéologique de Bretagne*, t. LXXVIII, p. 261-281.
- PLANIOL, Marcel, 1896. *La Très Ancienne Coutume de Bretagne avec les assises, constitutions de Parlement et ordonnances ducales*, Rennes, J. Plihon et L. Hervé, 566 p.
- TANGUY, Bernard, 1999. « Le cartulaire de Redon (IX<sup>e</sup> siècle), un témoignage médiéval sur le paysage breton », dans : *La Fabrication du paysage, Kreiz*, 11, *Études sur la Bretagne et les pays celtiques*, p. 21-31
- ZADORA-RIO, Élisabeth, 1968. « De la haie au bocage : quelques remarques sur l'Anjou », dans : *Le village médiéval et son environnement*, *Études offertes à Jean-Marie Pesez*, Paris, p. 671-682.
- DU FAIL, Noël, *Propos rustiques*; texte établi d'après l'éd. de 1549, introd., notes et glossaire par Gabriel-André Pérouse et Roger Dubuis, avec la collab. de D. Bécache-Leval, Genève, Librairie Droz, Collection « Textes littéraires français », 1994, 187 p.