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WHAT DOES LANDSCAPE HISTORY CONTRIBUTE TO OUR UNDERSTANDING OF ECONOMIC HISTORY?

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Introduction

This paper focuses on the relationship between the landscape and economic history. The distinguishing feature of landscape history is that it is based on the physical traces of human activity on the land, or sometimes on written or cartographic evidence for those physical features. This distinguishes it from the sub-disciplines of 'environmental history' or 'historical geography', which might examine, in the first case pollution in the vicinity of a city, or in the second the commercial hinterland of a city, but on the basis of written records rather than the hedges, buildings, roads, earthworks, boundaries or settlements which make up the 'historic landscape'. This preoccupation with material evidence has led to the coining of the phrase 'landscape archaeology' in the 1980s.

The study of landscape was once no more than a handmaid of economic and social history. The pioneers observed fields, farms and the street pattern of towns, and saw them as expressions of known economic and social structures and changes. Marc Bloch effortlessly brought early maps and observations of the countryside into his *Les caracteres originaux de l'histoire rurale Francaise*.(1) He saw the nucleated villages with their open fields in northern France as inhabited by strong communal societies in which, for example, everyone was entitled to collect stubble from all of the land. He linked the growth of larger parcels of land in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries with the accumulation of holdings into the hands of a wealthy minority in the same period. In England W.G. Hoskins opened the eyes of both scholars and the general public to the landscape as 'the richest historical record'.(2) The deserted medieval villages, visible as the earthworks of house sites, plot boundaries and sunken roads, were a symptom of the Black Death of 1348-9, subsequent population decline, and the conversion of arable fields into sheep pastures. He saw the new or modernised houses in the period 1570-1640 as the result of high agrarian profits gained by yeomen in an age of rising prices. The

changes in farm organisation, enclosure and techniques in the 18th and early 19th centuries led to the laying out of new square fields, straight roads with wide verges, and the building of farms (named after victories such as Quebec and Trafalgar) out in the fields, away from the villages. The thesis that was being advanced (almost unconsciously) by Hoskins and his contemporaries was that landscape changes as the consequence of many small-scale actions by individuals seeking profit through improvements in production, and by expenditure of wealth on houses and gardens. Those who changed the landscape operated within constraints of relief, geology, soils and climate, and were also functioning within societies that were subject to expansion and contraction through such impersonal forces as epidemic disease.

The landscape history that has developed since c. 1970 has diverged from its roots in economic history. The archaeologists who have increasingly dominated research into the landscape have been anxious to establish their academic independence. They have rejected determinism: in consequence the growth or fall in the market, or fluctuations in population, are no longer seen as the main driving force behind changes in the landscape. They prefer cultural interpretations. To take a subject that has been revolutionised by the landscape approach, castles were seen in the 1960s as expressions of feudal power and wealth, with military and political functions, but also serving as estate centres into which rents were gathered. Now the castle is depicted as a residence, built to impress the visitor with its tall towers, which were often reflected in specially designed pools of water. It served as a symbol of aristocratic privilege, and provided in its parks and gardens opportunities for the residents and their guests to hunt, take picnics and admire the view. The once masculine fortress has now been feminised, and we are aware that its pleasure grounds provided a setting for courtly love. Religious and chivalric ideas informed castle design. Gardens were called 'paradise', or were thought to be re-creations of Eden. (3)

Even in the case of more mundane and productive landscapes the new cultural approach emphasises non-utilitarian interpretations. There is more evidence for planning

of settlements and the countryside than was previously realised, for reasons other than cost cutting and economic advantages. Decisions about the siting of a high-status house might be influenced by its view, or the way in which it would be viewed, rather than ease of access to roads and fields. Buildings might be planned in order to pursue status seeking, or to emphasise social distinctions, or in the interests of pleasure and recreation.

Economic historians whose thinking is totally dominated by rationality and economic logic will be repelled by these lines of thinking, and in consequence they will be inclined to reject landscape studies as too esoteric and fanciful. Rather I propose that economic historians should accommodate to the new approaches. Their discipline can contribute much to landscape studies, and the landscape is too important as evidence to be neglected. In the rest of this paper I will attempt firstly to show through specific examples how a combination of economic and cultural approaches can help us to understand landscapes; secondly, I will demonstrate the value of landscapes for solving problems in economic history.

A. Combining Culture and Economics

A1 Forests and parks

An extreme deterministic and functional view would argue that areas of woodland represent the survival of the uncleared wild wood from remote prehistory. The dense woodland tended to occupy the poorest soils and steepest slopes which were unsuited to agricultural exploitation. They were preserved because of the value of the trees and vegetation for timber, fuel, raw materials, and pasture. Rulers and lords gained much revenue from the sale of these resources, but also enjoyed hunting and consuming the venison. The local population were employed as foresters, wood cutters and in woodland industries, and took advantage of the grazing and the opportunities for gathering firewood, nuts, fruits, and small game. Forest law allowed rulers to extract money from the forest dwellers who broke the rules by taking trees, clearing the land or poaching the game. All of this can be discovered in financial accounts and records of the forest courts from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, though the forest laws and woodland economies persisted into the seventeenth century and later. (4)

In the landscape approach forests and woods are studied on the ground. Sometimes the woods still exist, with physical evidence of earth banks defining their edges. Sometimes we depend on old maps, or boundary descriptions which can be traced on modern maps. The forests and woods are found not always to be occupying the poorest quality soils, and the land can often be shown to have been cultivated in earlier times, for example in the Roman period (1st-4th century AD).(5) The wooded state of the land was evidently a matter of choice. At Shotover in Oxfordshire analysis of pollen showed that the woods formed, not in the 5th century AD after the collapse of the Roman agrarian economy, but in the 10th-11th centuries, when kings evidently decided that to create a hunting ground. If we examine the forests and woodlands in relation to nearby settlements and estates we find that they were often located, as at Shotover, next to a royal palace.(6) On a smaller scale, parks were also founded in the later middle ages to provide deer hunting for an aristocratic family, and around 1500 these parks might extend over former arable fields. Although both parks and woods generated revenue from the trees and grazing, kings and aristocrats were so devoted to hunting that they were willing to sacrifice productive land to provide an environment for deer to roam. (7) One demonstration of the inappropriateness of economic analysis of forests and parks is that venison was not normally sold and bought – it was consumed by the lord's household or distributed through gifts.

If we do not take into account the cultural value of hunting and the consumption of venison, we misrepresent the impetus behind the designation of areas of land for forests, woodlands and parks. If we ignore the economic dimension, then the unnecessarily large area under forest law, and the persistence of forests over many centuries cannot be explained. The frequent conflicts over forests, woods and parks : the resentment of the local population at the restrictions and financial burdens; the petty warfare waged through clearing land, stealing trees and killing deer illicitly; the defence of the forest raised by the inhabitants when enclosure and tree felling threatened their way of life in the 17th century, demonstrate a clash of economic interests, but also show the force of ideas, about royal authority, aristocratic exclusiveness, communal rights, and individual freedom.(8)

A2 Town planning

The extent of deliberate planning in towns before the 16th century can only be appreciated from detailed analysis of modern maps. These reveal that behind almost every town lies some element of planning. The identification of 'plan units' makes it possible to see phases of development as new streets or groups of plots were added.(9) The planning can be explained in both economic and cultural terms. It was advantageous for a community of traders and manufacturers to live in close proximity, where the inhabitants could interact. The particular plan forms helped to give everyone access to the street where customers congregated. There would be some means of access by a back lane or an entry on the street frontage by which goods could be delivered or collected. No householder was very far from the market place, or from the roads or river which led to the hinterland or to other towns. The process of planning, not just the laying out of new streets, but the piecemeal subdivision of plots, and the encroachment on to the public street and market place, informs us about profit-seeking and manipulation of the property market by both lords and tenants.

But landscape historians taking a cultural approach can point to features of the town plan which did not simply oil the wheels of commerce. Streets and plots of the 12th and 13th centuries were sometimes designed and measured with geometric precision. Town planning involved a mathematical sophistication which presumably contributed to the inhabitants' civic pride and a sense of identity. It has been suggested that the more regular and Euclidian plans could only be appreciated from a considerable vertical height, and they were intended to please God.(10) Historians who argue that towns were set apart as social and economic 'islands' have to cope with the townspeople's own view of themselves, as an integral part of the divine order. At the same time, the regularity of some town plans, which can rarely be found in villages before the 16th-18th centuries, suggest the medieval towns' cultural distinctiveness.

A3 Village nucleation

The formation of nucleated villages causes more debate than any other issue in landscape history. Anyone with a theory to explain why peasants were grouped together in compact

settlements at some time between 700 and 1300 has to take into account the distinct localisation of this type of settlement – why the midlands of England or north-eastern France or eastern Jutland were dominated by villages, and in many other parts of Europe the population lived in hamlets and isolated farms.(11) There is no space to go into details, but here the main point to be made is the necessity of bringing economic history into the explanation. In the post-modern (and post-economic history) world of the more extreme practitioners of landscape history almost any implausible hypothesis can be advocated. Recently the deterministic view has been advanced that villages were established on especially heavy clays, in regions with extensive hay meadows. Nucleation was supposedly necessary to assemble a communal labour force to mow meadows and plough the spring-sown field in the often short period when the weather allowed these activities.(12) This flies in the face even of the landscape evidence, as many nucleated villages were established on light soils, such as those on the limestone hills, and were not always provided with very large meadows.(13) Economic historians know that the hypothesis is also based on an archaic notion of communal agriculture, as households each mowed their own parcels of meadow, not as part of some communal team. There were many scattered settlements where individual households lacked sufficient oxen to form a full team, and they made agreements with neighbours, regardless of the need to walk a few hundred metres to arrange to borrow or hire animals or equipment. In other words there was no causal link, or any other sort of link, between living in a large nucleated settlement and co-operating in ploughing.

Economic historians cannot provide a single reason for the formation of nucleated villages, and cultural factors must enter into the argument. Contemporaries had an ideal of a well-organised settlement, sometimes merely compact in form but also often with a regular shape, not unlike town plans. But why was this cultural preference confined to certain regions? (14)

B The contribution of landscape history to economic history

Although the early landscape historians regarded the landscape as a source of evidence, they were rather reluctant to accept its testimony unless it was supported by documents.

As the subject has advanced, its practitioners have grown in confidence, even to the point that they can argue that the landscape stands alone, and can contradict the evidence of written sources. The development in techniques has added to the robustness of the landscape data. Systematic field walking over thousands of hectares has greatly expanded our knowledge of the former use of land, and air photography and the planning of earthworks have provided more extensive and more sophisticated ways of recording and analysing sites, and even whole landscapes.

B1 The transition from the Roman world

In Britain there is a virtual absence of detailed documents, and indeed a scarcity of artefacts and excavated sites over much of the country in the period 400-650. Landscape evidence is by no means easy to interpret, but work on boundaries from modern maps, mostly in eastern England, has suggested that elements of field systems established in the pre-Roman iron age have persisted not just into the middle ages but into modern times, which implies some degree of territorial continuity over many centuries, including the 4th, 5th and 6th centuries.(15) Finds in field walking and excavation of pottery both of the late Roman period and of the 5th-8th centuries in close proximity supports the idea that some fields and settlements survived from the Roman period into the early middle ages. At the same time there is some indication (see above) that some woodland regenerated in the post-Roman period, though woodland both before and after 400 was always limited in scale. For example, it has been calculated from Domesday Book (information gathered in 1086) that woodland accounted for 1.6 million ha.,and the resulting conclusion that woodland covered only about 15 per cent of the land accords with findings from local studies.(16) These discoveries give a perspective to the emphasis once given to the period between 1000 and 1300 (and in some views extending intermittently up to c.1750) as one of colonisation, forest clearance and the creation of huge tracts of new fields and settlements. The assarting movement of the high middle ages started from a high base, and only a limited area was cleared because so much land was already being exploited, and because the remaining woods were too valuable to be removed.

B2 Characterising historic landscapes

The movement to define more precisely the character of the historic landscapes of England is driven by contemporary planning policy, but it has some relevance for economic historians.(17) For a long time the countryside was depicted as divided between productive areas with fertile arable land, and ‘marginal’ lands which were normally fit only for pasture or forestry. The inferior soils were cultivated only in times of overpopulation or emergency, at some periods of prehistory or in the 13th century or during World War II. Now there is much more appreciation of the subtle balance of resources and their exploitation in uplands, woodlands and wetlands. To focus on the hills, both the physical landscape and the documents reveal a permanent population who managed the pasture, cultivated as much as was practicable, dug turf for fuel, and generally adapted their way of life to the physical conditions.(18) They interacted with the lowlands through transhumance and trade in animals and their products, and found ingenious ways of profiting from new crops and animals such as rabbits. They extracted minerals and dug quarries if these options were available. The ‘marginal lands’ may have been used more intensively in times of increased population and market activity, but the old notion of ‘internal colonisation’ transforming empty lands, followed by a retreat when population declined, can no longer serve as the dominant model.

The reconstruction of territories and countryside, using all sources of information, not just documents, serves to underline contrasts in the management of land not previously fully appreciated. Just as uplands are found to be full of farms, fields, mines, boundaries, religious sites and other signs of human activity, so the arable areas can often be seen to be more specialised than is conventionally supposed, with traces of cultivation covering a high proportion of village territories, and leaving very few hectares for meadow, pasture or wood.

B3 Social structures and landscape

Landscapes have much social significance. Compact villages with extensive open fields are often supposed to have had closer neighbourly relations and a more collective outlook than those who lived in hamlets and isolated farms, though this deserves more rigorous testing. If we can locate the houses of individual peasants, it can sometimes be shown

that cottagers lived apart from tenants of more substantial holdings, and that free tenants were physically separated from the serfs.

Aristocratic landscapes (landscapes of power and authority) can be recognised in the parks and other spaces reserved for use by the elite. There is no uniformity in social integration or separation. In the later middle ages we sometimes find that the manor house stands in or near the village, and the lord's demesne land was intermingled with the holdings of his peasant tenants.(19) A castle in some periods apparently gained in status if a small town was sited just outside its main gate. The manor house or castle, however, could be set apart, and the demesne arranged in distinct blocks. After 1600 and especially in the 18th century the lords removed themselves from close contact with the village, even to the point of demolishing peasant houses which deprived the park of its exclusiveness, and spoiled the view from the house. The analysis of physical space has implications for social historians which have not yet been fully appreciated.

Conclusion

Economic historians, if they are receptive to landscape history, and are not too dismissive of its evidence and approaches, can contribute to the subject by bringing to bear their disciplined method, which is not always incompatible with the cultural dimension now prevalent among landscape historians. Economic history can also gain insights and new types of evidence which will enrich understanding of past economies and societies.

Footnotes

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