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Landscapes of Governance: Assembly sites in England, 5th-11th centuries

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Landscapes of Governance is a three-year interdisciplinary venture running until November 2012 funded by the Leverhulme Trust, which will address the broader issues of the constitution and structure of early medieval governance in the English landscape through a study of the spatial character and nomenclature of a fundamental, yet largely neglected, aspect of governance and civil society: places of political, social and judicial assembly and their associated districts. In bringing archaeology, place-names and written sources together, the project will challenge current concepts of the genesis of administrative frameworks by mapping and analysing districts and places of assembly and their names, examining the scale and forms of related administrative and social functions, and exploring chronological patterns in the evidence for the first time on a national scale.

Anglo-Saxon England presents an ideal case study of the administration of early medieval society. Written evidence confirms assembly as a central feature of social organisation by c. AD 600 (Kentish laws of Æthelberht) (Whitelock 1955, pp. 357-359). By the tenth century England was divided into shires with subdivisions termed 'hundreds' ('wapentakes' in the area of Viking settlement in northern and eastern England). As the name suggests, these districts consisted notionally of 100 hides of land – a hide being the area of land necessary to support a family – although in practice their sizes varied considerably. It was through the hundred that communities discussed local issues and administered justice. They were the administrative groupings by which civil militias were levied and by the early eleventh century they took collective responsibility for an individual's good behaviour (Loyn 1984, pp. 140-148). The 'hundred' was – in effect – both a geographical entity and a legal community to which each member of society belonged.

Hundreds are first explicitly mentioned in a tenth-century document known as the 'Hundred Ordinance' (Liebermann 1903, p. 192), but their origins may be much older. Place-names of assembly sites and their associated district indicate varying origins, in some cases referring to pre-Christian gods, including Woden and Thor, while other terms relate to prehistoric monuments, such as burial

mounds and standing stones. Many meeting-places were evidently open-air sites focussed on barrows, stones, crossroads, bridges and fords, away from settlements; in fewer cases they were located in towns and estate centres. In terms of understanding the priorities behind choosing meeting-places, hundred-names clearly have a lot to offer. Even when the location of a meeting-place has been forgotten, its name can provide a description of it. Remarkably, hundred-names have only been investigated on a national level once in the last 80 years, by the Scandinavian scholar O.S. Anderson (pp. 1934-1939), and only a small number of scholars have explored the potential significance of hundred-names (e.g. Meaney 1997; Pantos 2002). New research is required.

Above the hundred, other assemblies are known. Royal gatherings, the *wite-nagemot*, formed the precursor to the formal parliament of the later middle ages (Loyn 1984, pp. 100-106), while the shires of England each had an assembly where local notables gathered twice a year to engage in local and regional political matters. Towns had their own courts too and these assembled three times per year. The fundamental importance of these various assemblies is that together they provided a means whereby royal and official prerogative met with local concerns and the lower orders of society.

Only a dozen or so English assembly sites have been investigated by detailed archaeological survey and excavation (ADKINS, PETCHEY 1984). Studying meeting-places and their surroundings can reveal much about their relationship to other significant sites and their role within a wider network of social functions. Form, layout, accessibility and viewshed are among the attributes being examined by the project.

During 2010 over one hundred meeting-places across southern England were recorded allowing the project to develop and test new methods for studying these sites, as well as to define systems by which they can be categorised. At this stage in the investigation, an excessive emphasis on classification would be unhelpful and might lead to an assumption that such meeting-places were always contemporary creations; nevertheless, it is useful to identify features and aspects common to a large number of assembly sites and to establish a very loose (and sometimes overlapping) categorisation. As might be expected, many hundred meeting-places stand on or adjacent to major early route-ways: Roman roads, prehistoric ridgeways or Anglo-Saxon *herepaths* (army-roads). In most cases, prominent natural or artificial markers served as the focus for the meeting-place. This might be a crossroads, ford, bridge or landing site; or a significant bend, rise or dip in the road. Typically, sites are marked by stones or barrows, a fact reflected in the types of names that hundreds were given. Barrows used as markers may be found directly beside a road, or in an elevated position within a few hundred metres and overlooking it. Open upland spots form a further significant group of meeting-places and tend to be close to major route-ways, but not right next to them. They tend to command good but not dominant views over surrounding countryside, a natural function of their upland location, and are typified by



In Newham parish in Gloucestershire is a location known as Mutloes, a place-name which might derive from the Old English *[ge]mūt-hlaw*, or 'meeting mound'. The probable location is of the 'hanging promontory' type: a natural mound-like hill jutting out of a slope.



Among the functions of the Anglo-Saxon hundred court was the punishment of wrongdoers. In some cases this role is remembered in place-names, such as Gallows Hill in Cambridgeshire, which is close to the location of the meeting-place of the Domesday hundred of Odsey.

names denoting trees and barrows. A third broad category of meeting-place is located at the periphery of a royal, noble or ecclesiastical seat of power: at the gates of a city, or just outside a monastic precinct. Yet another category used natural mound-like promontories jutting out from hill slopes.

There is considerable variation within these tentative categories, and many of them share common features. A number of hundred meeting-places, for instance, are marked by a stunningly prominent topography. Eye-catching features may have served as a guide for those trying to locate the meeting-place. In other cases, it may be audible qualities of the site which were important: these were after all places where public proclamations were made. By understanding the landscape of assembly sites, we may be able to detect changes in the nature of legal and governmental administration, and this is why it has been important for us to make such a wide range of observations at each meeting-place we have visited.

Outcomes of the project will include the *Electronic Anderson*: a fully-revised and updated online catalogue of the English hundreds and their territories, based on Anderson's pioneering research on the English hundred-names, bringing together not just toponymic but archaeological and historical data for English meeting-places. To this will be added detailed reports based on site visits using a standardised proforma, considerably enhancing our understanding of the physical nature of assembly sites; and a digital map of the Domesday hundreds will allow researchers to analyse and map the data contained within the *Electronic Anderson*.

There is much to be done, with over 800 hundreds and wapentakes to investigate before the project ends in November 2012. A number of local societies and private researchers have become engaged with the project, carrying out site visits and researching the history of their local hundreds. In order to broaden the scope of the project it will also host a major international conference on the theme of *Power and place in Later Roman and early medieval Europe: interdisciplinary perspectives on governance and civil organization* to be held in November 2011.

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