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project

Landscapes and identities: the case of the English landscape c. 1500 BC - AD 1086

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1. The English Landscapes and Identities project

Funded by the European Research Council, the English Landscapes and Identities (commonly known as 'EngLaId') project, a joint undertaking of the Institute of Archaeology and the e-Research Centre (University of Oxford), started in the autumn of 2011 and will finish in 2016. Its aim is to investigate the long-term history of the English landscape from *c*. 1500 BC to AD 1086, on a hitherto unprecedented scale both spatially and chronologically. During the first year of the project, the EngLaId team has therefore brought together a wealth of archaeological data pertaining to landscape features - including fields, settlements and routeways – as well as artefactual material. These data have been collated from the results of aerial survey (mapped and interpreted in the context of English Heritage's National Mapping Programme (NMP)), the ever-expanding amount of data routinely unearthed during developer-funded excavations (recorded by county-level Historic Environment Records accessible via Heritage Gateway (HG), or stored by the Archaeology Data Service (ADS) or the Archaeological Investigations Project (AIP)), as well as surface finds – in particular metalwork – collected by members of the public and recorded on the Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS) website (incorporating the Celtic Coin Index) and the Early Medieval Corpus of single coin finds (EMC).

The researchers on the project are: Chris Gosden (principal investigator); Anwen Cooper (prehistory); Zena Kamash (Roman period); Letty ten Harkel (early medieval period); Chris Green (GIS); John Pybus and Xin Xiong (database support); Miranda Creswell (project artist) and Laura Morley (research co-ordination). Since October 2012, three DPhil studentships have been attached to the project, looking at issues that will add extra depth and dimension to the core work of the researchers. The students are: Daniel Stansbie (analysis of the preparation and serving of food over time, as understood from changing pottery assemblages from the Bronze Age to Anglo-Saxon periods in selected regions); Sarah Mallet (collation of isotopic data from human and animal bones, targeting a large as of yet unanalysed database of isotopic values generated in Oxford, and comparing this with faunal and botanical remains) and Victoria Donnelly (analysis of the quality and nature of developer-funded archaeology across the various regions of England).

The data-collection phase of the project is now nearing completion, and the EngLaId team has begun preliminary analysis. Taking a 'bottom-up' GIS-based approach, analysis of the data will be carried out on at least two spatial scales. The first of these will take place on the national, England-wide level. Here, the EngLaId project builds on previous large-scale syntheses. For example, for the prehistoric period in the British Isles, David Yates (2007) and Richard Bradley (2007) have pulled together the results of developer-funded archaeology to analyse the development of the prehistoric landscape of the British Isles, including the establishment of large-scale field systems around *c*. 1500 BC and their partial abandonment in the early Iron Age, after *c*. 800 BC. For the Roman period, Jeremy Taylor (2007) looked at the evidence for some 28,000 Roman sites in England to distinguish between a western and northwestern zone of small dispersed, enclosed settlements and a central and eastern area with nucleated settlement, enclosed field systems and trackways, interspersed with more isolated farmsteads. Finally, Brian Roberts and Stuart Wrathmell (2000; 2002) carried out an important survey of the later evidence. Applying retrogressive map analysis to 19th-century First Edition Ordnance Survey maps, they traced the existence of three disparate settlement zones – a central zone of nucleated villages flanked by two zones of more dispersed settlement – back to the late Anglo-Saxon period. Where the EngLaId project differs from these previous studies is, again, a matter of scale: rather than focusing on one chronological period, the project will analyse longer-term processes cutting across traditional period divisions.

Carrying out analysis on a nationwide level, involving the integration, interrogation and interpretation of multiple complex datasets on a large scale, is one of the most innovative and ambitious aims of the project,

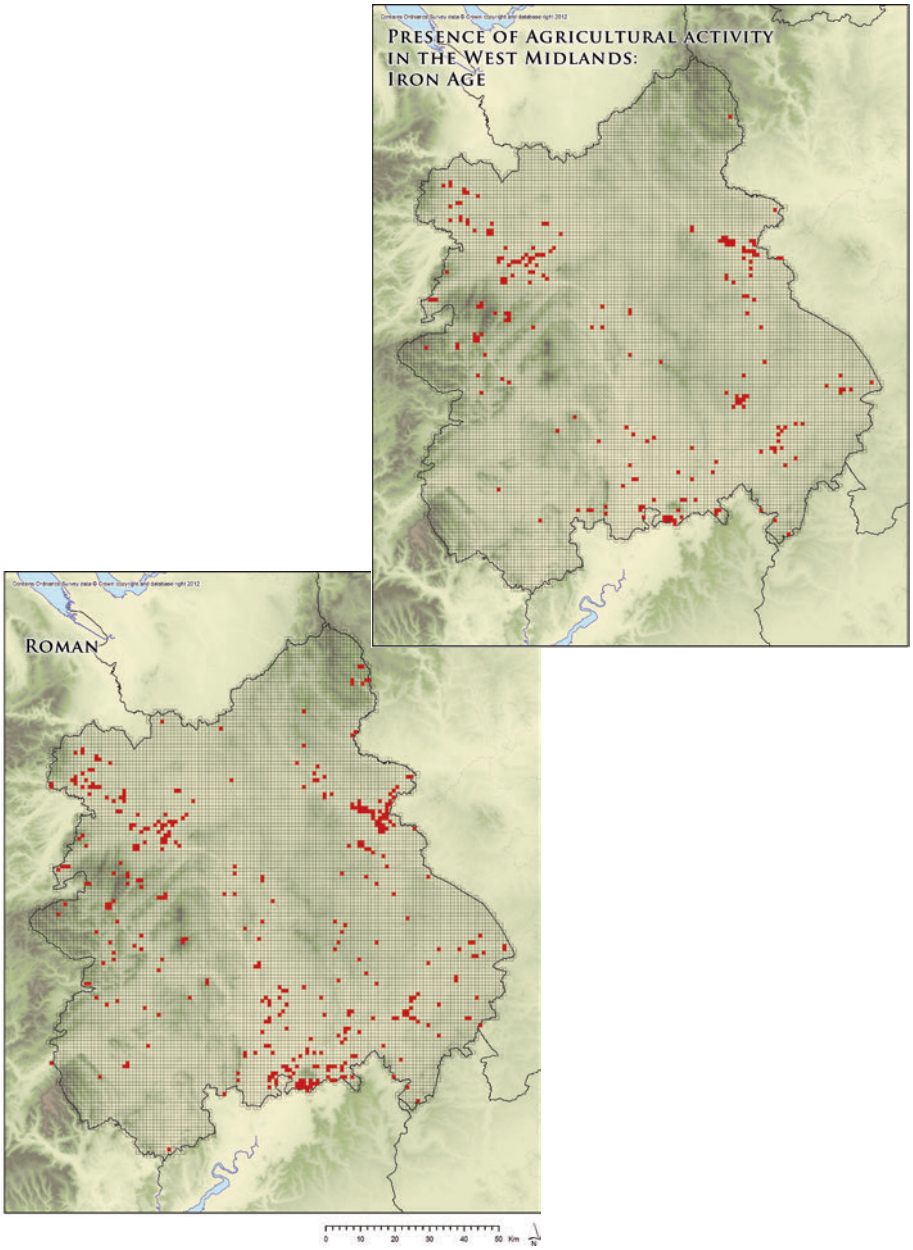

Fig. 1. Example of analysis of the distribution of agricultural activity in the English West Midlands region for the Iron Age and the Roman period, mapped onto a 1 x 1 km grid tessellation. When depicted on a national scale, the size of the cells as plotted on the map will correspond to the minimum size of interpretative visibility. Figure prepared by Chris Green.

holding huge potential for examining landscape and material culture across a long period of time, but also bringing obvious practical complications. The most important of these are undoubtedly related to the sheer amount of data that the EngLaId GIS now holds, rendering it unfeasible to solve issues of data quality manually, such as duplication (resulting from the merging of different archaeological datasets which often have a degree of overlap) and spatial precision (for example, metal-detected finds are often only recorded to the nearest kilometre to protect 'sites' from illegal metal-detecting activities). For this reason, the GIS-researcher on the project, Chris Green, has developed a system that records the presence or absence of archaeological monument or artefact types within 1 km grid squares, which – on the the nationwide level – is fine-grained enough to be meaningful (fig. 1). For more information about EngLaId's developing GIS methodology, please see the relevant posts on our blog (http://englaid.wordpress.com/).

The second spatial scale at which the EngLaId team will work focuses on a series of regional case studies, spread fairly evenly across England and aiming to take in areas of the north, Midlands and southwest that have not always been at the centre of archaeological thought. Selection was based on relative coverage by the various datasets, refined through deliberation with local and regional archaeological experts, as it is one of the main aims of the EngLaId project to contribute usefully to local and regional archaeological concerns (see fig. 2 for a current distribution of case study areas).

A desire to recognise local concerns also finds expression in the work of project artist Miranda Creswell. In addition to helping the archaeological team to think about visual representation of large and complex quantities of data, Miranda has also developed a community-involvement project in the context of a developer-funded excavation in Didcot (Oxfordshire), where she drew the changing landscape and recorded the responses to this changing landscape of both professional archaeologists and members of the public (who used this landscape prior to development to walk their pet dogs, and styled themselves the 'Didcot Dogwalkers'), and which resulted in a collaborative art exhibition showing the artwork and study of the landscape in the local Cornerstone Arts Centre in Didcot in February 2013 (fig. 3).

2. The EngLaId project and the post-classical world

One of the greatest challenges of the EngLaId project is to bring together the different research traditions that have permeated landscape studies pertaining to different periods. Seen from an early medieval Eng-

lish perspective, this is a significant challenge. The early medieval era has traditionally been seen as the period that saw the foundations of the modern English landscape. After the Roman withdrawal in AD 410, which had a more dramatic effect on Britain than on most other areas of the Empire involving population collapse, new forms of unenclosed rural settlement and lack of long-distance exchange, the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms gradually emerged, resulting in their political unification during the tenth century AD and a growing sense of Englishness or English identity. Also during this period did the medieval landscape of fixed vil-

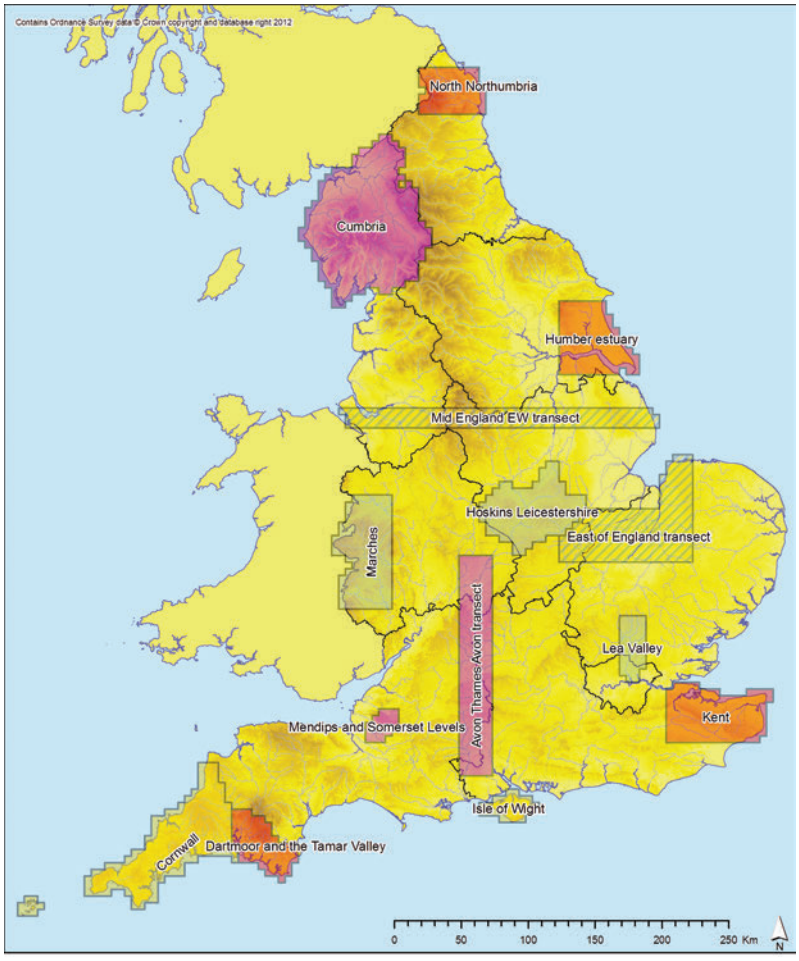

Fig. 2. Map of England showing the locations of the proposed case studies. Figure prepared by Chris Green.

Fig. 3. In the summer of 2012, over the course of three months, the artist Miranda Creswell carried out a public drawing of a routine developer-funded excavation in the English landscape as a conduit for a public engagement project. As archaeologists, dog walkers and other members of the community walked by the artist and her drawing, they shared their own work, memories and knowledge of the landscape. This photograph shows the excavation, to the west of Didcot, Oxfordshire, in the background. In the front to the left is a painting by local resident and artist Marilyn Bartlett (depicting her grandchildren now aged 14 and 16 in the same landscape), and to the right is the beginning of the drawing of this landscape by Miranda Creswell. Photograph by Miranda Creswell.

lages and surrounding fields, common land, estates and towns start to crystallise out of earlier, more fluid arrangements, many of which are still preserved in the present landscape. Not surprisingly, perhaps, medievalists' studies of the English countryside tend to look forwards in time, to the here and now, rather than to preceding periods, although there is a growing realisation that the early medieval landscape itself had grown out of earlier, Roman or even prehistoric landscapes (see for example the ongoing Fields of Britannia project (Rippon *et alii* forthcoming) or Oosthuizen 2013).

The perceived relevance of the early medieval period to the present landscape has resulted in the development of a distinct research tradi-

tion, one which is set apart from those that characterise the study of prehistoric and Roman landscapes. As Jones and Hooke (2012, p. 31) point out, medieval landscape archaeology – in contrast to the landscape archaeology of earlier time periods – may have been "slow to embrace archaeological theory", even though they also rightly argue that this "must be set against the major contribution that practitioners in this scholarly field have made to the advancement of methodology". Given the paramount importance of methodology at a time when new ways of dealing with the vast and ever-increasing quantities of archaeological data are at the foreground of archaeological thinking, the EngLaId project will be well-placed to take a leading role in the closer integration between theoretically explicit and empirical approaches to landscape.

The separation between medieval and earlier traditions of landscape archaeology has also resulted in different interpretations of what appear – superficially at least – similar phenomena across time. For example, the close co-operation and discussion between the various period-specialists on the EngLaId team has already highlighted a strikingly different attitude to the concept of ritual as a valid explanatory framework. The most obvious example of this is, of course, the interpretation of (metalwork) hoards as either votive/ritual (an interpretation that has been explored in depth in prehistoric and Roman contexts) or as pragmatic, 'safety-box' deposits deposited during times of social unrest (the possibility of a 'votive' interpretation of in particular Viking Age hoards being firmly rejected by most early medievalists). Such interpretative differences may continue to exist, but it is only by transcending traditional period boundaries that the different scholarly traditions will be able to talk to each other.

In sum, through its unprecedented spatial and temporal scale, the EngLaId project – though only focusing on the English landscape from the middle Bronze Age to the early medieval period – will have much to add to the study of landscapes of all periods and regions. For this reason, the team will organise an international conference in 2015, inviting researchers involved in large-scale landscape projects from across the globe. In preparation of this, the first of three smaller exploratory workshops was held in Oxford in June 2012, the proceedings of which will appear in the next issue (14.1) of the peer-reviewed journal *Landscapes*. For more information, or to express a preliminary interest in the 2015 conference, please contact the author at *letty.tenharkel@arch.ox.ac.uk*.

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