Sense of Place in Anglo-Saxon England

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During 2009 five workshops were held at universities around the country in which scholars were invited to think in creative ways about the notion of 'sense of place' as it may have manifested itself in early medieval England. Funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, these workshops were also supported intellectually by the English Place-Names Society, the Society for Medieval Archaeology, the Society for Landscape Studies, and the Medieval Settlement Research Group. Members of all of these academic groupings attended the workshops; thus historians, archaeologists, historical geographers, and linguists were brought together for discussion and debate. Those who gave papers were able to offer insights on Anglo-Saxon 'place' taken from a wide range of approaches. Newly-published work was presented alongside research still in progress. Round table discussions encouraged the cross-fertilisation of ideas over traditional disciplinary boundaries.

The workshops were organised around a very simple premise: that place-names provide a key to reconstructing how people ordered social and economic space, the landscapes they worked and the settlements in which they lived. This is not a new idea, of course, but participants were particularly asked to think about 'habitative' names since it is clear that our understanding of these places lags behind those names which take their cue from either physical relief – hills, valleys, rivers, etc. – or the general characteristics of the landscape itself – wooded, open etc. Discussions thus ranged from the meaning of generic terms for settlement such as *ham*, *tun*, *thorp* and *by*, to names which appear to reference specific parts of the built environment such as *worth* 'enclosure' and *burh* 'fortified place', or specialised functions such as *wic* and *eccles*, or defined social groupings, for example Waltons and Prestons.

From the outset, however, it was recognised that using place-names in this way is not without its challenges and complexities. Place-names rarely provide unambiguous statements about how people perceived their landscapes at a given period. We have to wrestle with a variety of problems: place-names might shift and they might change in meaning and usage over time; we need to establish who named places – insiders or outsiders? – and over what area names were required to remain meaningful; we need to ascertain for how long a name might have been used before it was first documented, and how names used in an oral tradition may have entered the written record.

There are methodological issues in play here too. Just how should we study the idea of 'sense of space'? This inevitably leads to the consideration of scale. If a name was only meant to be locally significant, are we likely to misconstrue what it is telling us if we study it in a regional or national perspective? If it was meant to have wider meaning, can it be studied in local isolation? Should we study names in the context of their actual political and administrative frameworks (estates, hundreds etc. where these can be reconstructed) or can they be explored in the abstract? And where historical, archaeological and linguistic material is drawn together in one place, how do we resolve the often contradictory evidence they present?

Papers given during the workshops were representative of the full gamut of approaches that are being taking to this question. Some participants explored single place-name families in exclusivity, some looking at these in restricted time frames, others looking at usage over the course of a millennium. Other studies of this kind explored patterns at a national scale whilst others were more regional in their outlook. A different approach was taken by others, who sought to look at place-name distributions and usage by contrasting two or more place-name groups. Some studies were led by archaeology, others by history or the names themselves. There are strengths and weaknesses in all of these approaches, but it is clear is that whilst there may be no universally-applied methodology all have much to contribute.

'Sense of place' is a nebulous and labile concept. It can be both meaningful and meaningless at one and the same time. It is difficult enough to define with precision within contemporary settings, so its study in the past is doubly so. To provide a more solid structure to the deliberations, three workshops were set out to deal with a subset of more closely identified themes: religion and belief; settlement hierarchies; and form and function. Common themes emerged from all: that perceptions of place were liable to develop over time, that is to say that the early medieval landscape was a dynamic rather than static entity; that as the physical face of the landscape changed so too did the Anglo-Saxons' cognitive geography; that within these shifting patterns there might be continuities and discontinuities of space and place, thus the early establishment of significant locales might survive to influence later appreciation of place or might be usurped by later arrivals. In particular what emerged strongly was the anthropogenic nature of the landscape. The Anglo-Saxon landscape was an inhabited and busy space. What people were doing rather than what it looked like often appears to have been the defining marker of place. Particular socio-economic and religious practices seem to lie at the core of many place and community identity formations.

The papers presented during these workshops are being put together in an edited volume that should appear in 2011. A flavour of its content can be gained by looking at the synopses which are presented on the workshop website, www.spase.org.uk .

The project is now moving into a second and very different phase. It is clear that we still lack a large and reliable dataset on which we can draw our conclusions.

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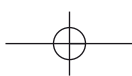
Amassing this kind of information is an enormous task. We hope, therefore, to harness the energy, enthusiasm and knowledge to be found in local societies who are engaged in the exploration of their own particular village or hamlet origins. The website will become a forum and articulating tool for this work, offering examples of good practice, that will allow data to be collected and presented in ways that will make comparative study possible, and presenting the latest thinking on various aspects early medieval settlement studies. We encourage you to take a look at this website as it develops and to contact us if you are interested in participating in this initiative or simply wish your local society to be linked to the site.

Finally, the organisers of these workshops would like to thank the Medieval Settlement Research Group for supporting the initial phase of this project, those of its members who have already contributed and ensured that it has got off to the best of all possible starts, and we look forward to other members now getting involved as the project moves forward.