CONTEXTUALISING MONUMENTS THE EXCEPTIONAL POTENTIAL OF THE MIDDLE TRENT VALLEY

By Roy Loveday

INTRODUCTION

Despite four decades of aerial reconnaissance along the Trent Valley those monuments that classically characterise the Middle and Late Neolithic — major cursuses and henges — remain clustered in a short 13km section between Willington and Aston (Fig. 1). Since the distribution of ring ditches and settlement enclosures reveals no such restriction this cannot be explained away in terms of variability of subsoil or inadequacy of search; and only in the case of the adjacent expansion of Nottingham can we resort to notions of urban blanketing. We must, on present evidence, it seems conclude that the picture is real. Farther upstream lie the causewayed enclosures of Alrewas and Mavesyn Ridware, and additionally in the latter parish a narrow cursus-like cropmark resembling those at Llandegai and North Stoke (NMR 0817/1–3, G. Guilbert *pers. comm.*). This probably represents a former bank barrow. Its dimensions (120m × 12m) alone serve to distinguish it from the major cursuses of the Willington–Aston zone (1560m × 75m Potlock; 1800m × 100m Aston).

This pattern is not unique. It has long been known from the chalklands where cursuses not only cluster, as in the vicinity of Stonehenge, but are often actually conjoined, as on Cranborne Chase and at Rudston on the Yorkshire Wolds. Henges are rarely far away. An even more striking parallel is to be found in the Upper Thames Valley where no less than five cursuses are located in a zone extending some 7km around Dorchester upon Thames (Loveday 1999). Beyond lie the principal concentrations of causewayed enclosures (Barclay and Hey 1999); within lies the Big Rings henge (Whittle 1992). This pattern of zonal clustering is repeated with sufficient frequency (e.g. Maxey, Cambridgeshire; Holywood, Dumfries) to suggest that a rationale lies behind it and not simply opportunism in the face of cleared land. Understanding that rationale is a major challenge but one that holds out perhaps the greatest hope of revealing the social dynamics behind the monuments.

Explanation in terms of local density of population can surely be discounted: unlike henges, the huge land demands of major cursuses would significantly reduce the carrying capacity of an area and their extended dimensions massively disrupt movement. Nor can they easily be dismissed as ephemeral monuments which were rapidly reabsorbed into the landscape. The placement of hengiforms, ring ditches and round barrows within, or around, sites as varied as Dorchester upon Thames (Bradley and Chambers 1988), Aston (Gibson and Loveday 1989) and the Greater Stonehenge cursus (Richards 1990) points to respect for confines up to a millennium after construction. Clearly such a commitment of productive land was beyond the capacity of purely local communities —

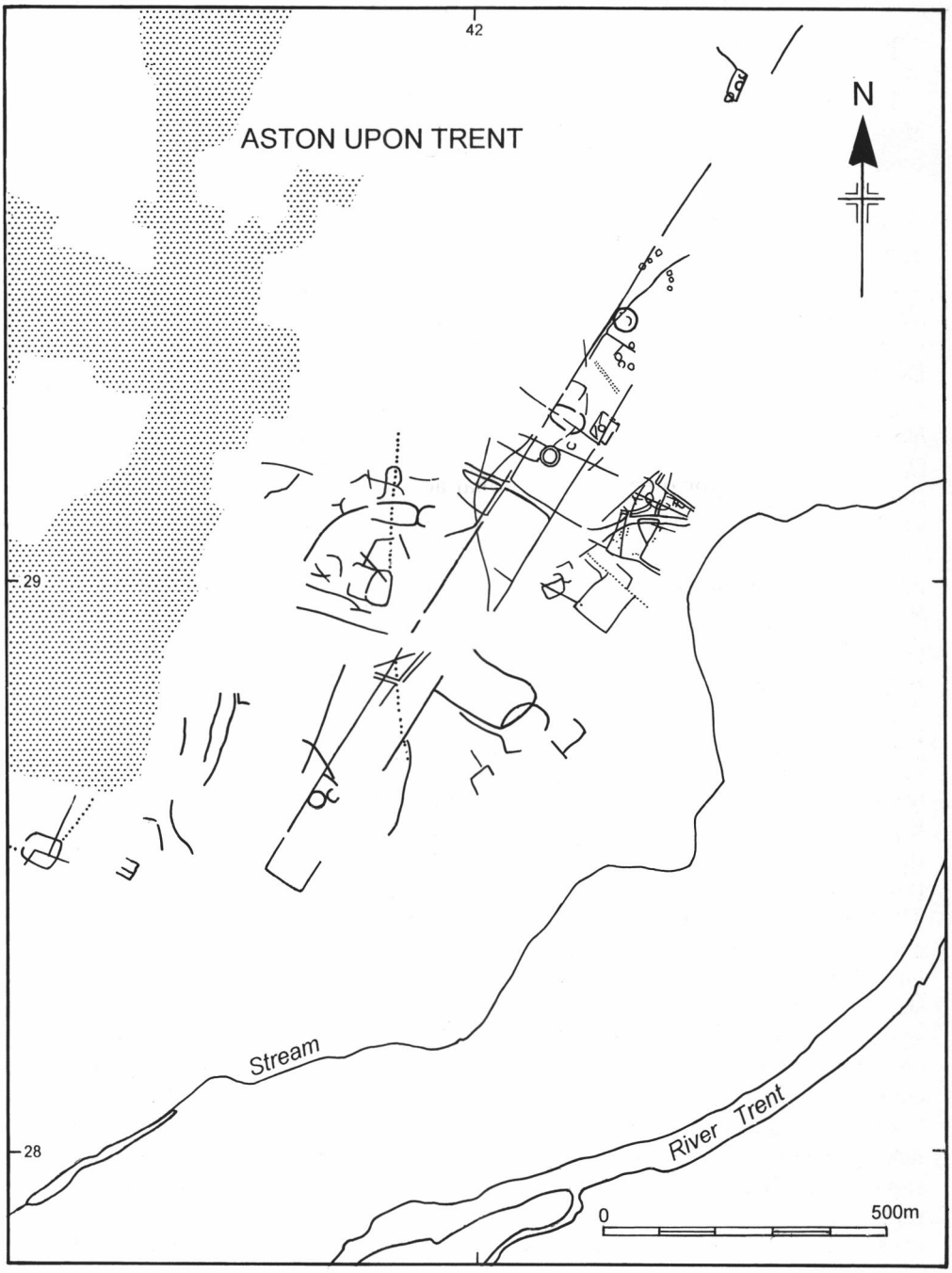

Fig. 1: The Aston Cursus (after Riley 1987, 90–1 — re-drawn by Jane Goddard) (courtesy of the Trent & Peak Archaeological Unit).

small sites like that at Barford in Warwickshire are more appropriate here (Loveday 1989). A regional role must be entertained but not, it seems, one restricted to a simple monument equals territory equation. General proximity but emphatic separation of sites within these clusters appears to preclude the individual cursuses from fulfilling roles as central places.

The pattern might alternatively be explained in terms of intangible 'sacred geography'. Here proof probably will always be elusive since ethnographic parallels point to the dependence of cult sites and their attendant sacred areas upon a range of natural, or even ephemeral, features such as clearings, posts, stones, hills, springs or rivers (Carmichael *et al.* 1994). In areas with striking topography the hypothesis can be entertained (e.g. Bodmin Moor, Tilley 1996; Dorchester upon Thames, Loveday 1999). In an area such as the Middle Trent it would be difficult to sustain since the river itself can scarcely be advanced to differentiate this short section of the valley and the confluences which mark it out are geographically undistinguished. This is equally true of most cursus clusters.

We must however beware of according too exclusive a definition to ritual. Operating at various levels within daily and annual cycles it is capable of employment as a sanctioning device for otherwise functional activities. Focus can therefore shift to the more mundane roles of rivers such as the agencies creating large expanses of adjacent pasture, and as the natural dividers of human territories. Concomitant human responses such as transhumant intercommoning from a wide area, and exchange and movement across regional/territorial boundaries, would possess the potential to generate friction and thus necessitate a ritual sanction. Here again proof is not readily available but, monitored through artefacts, should lie within the limits of the discipline. To advance, however, certain conditions are vital at both macroscopic and microscopic levels. The former comprises the isolation of locally distinctive 'marker' artefacts to enable regional patterns of movement to be tracked; the latter a preserved land surface within a cursus to permit assessment of non-monumental activity erased from exposed sites. At both these levels the Trent monuments offer apparently exceptional opportunities.

THE MACROCOSM
THE EXTENT OF REGIONAL NETWORKS RELATED TO CURSUSES

Cursus size gives only the broadest indication of social dynamic. To advance towards an understanding of the extent of attendant regional networks of interaction and movement we must turn to the evidence of artefacts. Addressing this problem Bradley and Gardiner in their study of Cranborne Chase incorporated evidence from the coastal plain, some 30km to the south-east. They could point to abundant high quality flint work there and to a probable source for this material on the opposite (north-western) side of the cursus complex where large scatters, dominated by heavily used processing tools, can be found on clay with flint deposits (Barrett *et al.* 1991, 59–69). Raw material would then appear to have been passing through the cursus zone. Difficulty sourcing flint unfortunately prevents absolute certainty. More securely sourced material is needed to test the pattern.

Stone axes are the obvious candidates although their employment as 'marker' artefacts is not without problems. These problems centre around their huge numbers, longevity of production and undoubted secondary dispersal as distance from source increased. All militate against simple pattern retrieval and are compounded by the wide separation of

highland zone 'quarries' and lowland cursuses. To minimise these problems it is vital to focus upon cases where there is the closest possible proximity of procurement zone and monument. Only two stone sources lie within an acceptable 20km distance band; Group XX in Charnwood Forest, 14km to the south-south-east of the Willington–Aston cursus zone, and Group VII on Graig Llwyd a comparable distance to the east-north-east of Llandegai in Gwynedd. The 'cursus' at the Llandegai complex is atypically small and may in fact represent the remains of a turf built bank barrow. Additionally its place is unclear in the development of the site from an early settlement associated purely with Group VII material to a henge complex with far flung, apparently sea borne, links (Houlder 1976, 59). A significant concentration of Group VII axes is apparent in south-eastern Anglesey beyond the cursus which could represent early localised dispersal mediated through the monument, but there is no basis for distinguishing such implements from the overwhelming majority of axes fanned out across the country in the opposing direction from the 'quarry' site (McK Clough and Cummins 1988, map 7).

By contrast the number of Group XX axes is small, enabling patterns to be more readily discerned. Their source has been confirmed as the outcrops of Charnwood Forest with closest matches centred on the various exposures in the vicinity of Blackbrook Reservoir (Bradley 1987). Interestingly their principal concentration lies 55km to the north-north-east, across the Willington–Aston cursus zone of the Trent, on the Carboniferous Limestone of the White Peak (Fig. 2). Axes of other groups also cluster there (most notably Groups I, VI and VII: Moore and Cummins 1974), as do Late Neolithic prestige artefacts (Bradley and Hart 1983). Allowance must of course be made for the fortunate presence of Thomas Bateman during the early nineteenth century improvement of the moorland, and the survival of Arbor Low to sharpen interest, but it seems unlikely that this alone created the pattern. Significantly when Charnwood Forest at the opposite end of the 55km 'corridor' was enclosed there was neither an increase in axe finds nor barrow identifications, despite the antiquarian focus furnished by the Beacon Hill bronzes and ramparts. The balance of probability must be therefore that most Group XX axes passed from the thinly settled area of the Charnian exposures across the intervening Trent monument zone to the densely, possibly seasonally, occupied White Peak. This is the most straightforward route since it possesses the obvious topographic advantages of the bracketing parallel valleys of the Dove and Derwent and their intervening watershed (Fig. 3). No other cursus complex/zone presents such a clear picture of proximate stone axe procurement and movement.

Nor is the value of this 55km corridor restricted to the Middle Neolithic horizon of cursuses. Near each end lies a henge monument; Arbor Low amidst the dense artefact cluster on the White Peak and the Round Hill on the Trent gravels. The latter is a very substantial barrow, recalling the Late Neolithic Great Barrows of the Yorkshire Wolds, but encompassed by henge-like ditches (Harding and Lee 1987, 116–17). That manufacture and movement of Group XX artefacts continued during the currency of these monuments is indicated by the presence of an axe from Arbor Low itself (Derb. 268, McK Clough and Cummins 1988) and by an ovoid macehead and a pebble hammer amongst the Derbyshire specimens (Db. 53 and 192, Moore and Cummins 1974). The occurrence of Group XX axe fragments along with those of Group VI and Peterborough ware ceramics (predominantly Mortlake) on the old land surface under Wigber Low on the White Peak confirms a Middle to Late Neolithic horizon (Collis 1983). Finally the

Fig. 2: The distribution of Group XX products (after Mck Clough and Cummins 1988).

corridor additionally possesses mounds sealing environmental data not just on the White Peak but also in the Trent monument zone where Aston 1, Round Hill and Swarkestone I–IV represent a collection of lowland river valley round barrows surely unparalleled in such close proximity. Aston I (see below) and Swarkestone IV have both furnished evidence of activity associated with Grimston ware (Reaney 1968; Posnansky 1956), followed in the latter case by structural evidence of Beaker occupation. This rare potential to record changing patterns of settlement and land use across time and considerably varied space led Hawke-Smith to select the Trent-White Peak section of the corridor for intensive pedological study (1979). Extension of that work just 14km south of the Trent to the Group XX source area would complete an invaluable interpretative framework for studies of the relationship of artefacts, monuments and settlement, as Bradley and Hart (1983) have demonstrated at the northern end of the corridor.

Here then we appear to possess a nationally unique opportunity to effectively track movement around and between monuments and ecozones using a small axe group as the base line. Realisation of this potential will depend on the initiation of fieldwork and

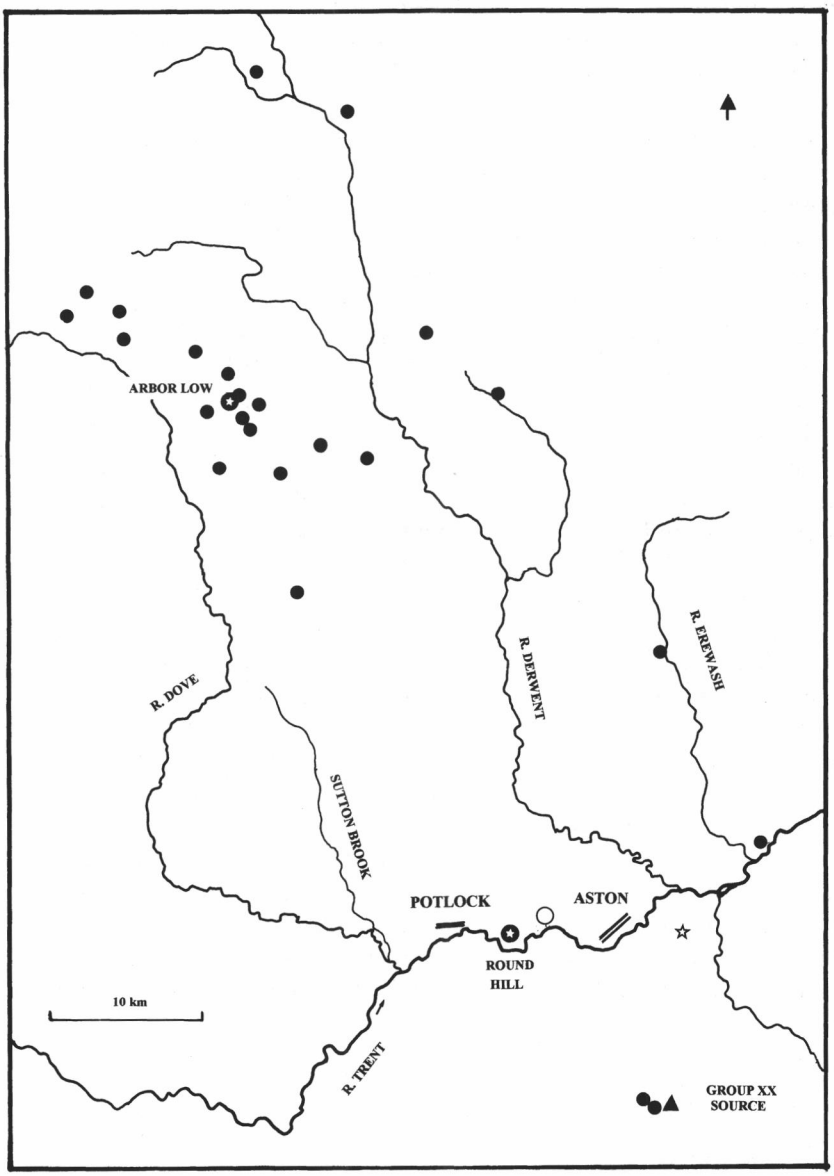

Fig. 3: The Group XX — Arbor Low corridor.
Key: black dots — Group XX implements; circle — Swarkestone Lowes round barrow cemetery; outline star — Lockington deposit.

ceramic analysis programmes. The former holds out the possibility of detecting working floors, since the stone is susceptible to initial flake reduction (Bradley 1989, 182) and is foreign to areas north of the Trent; the latter, of identifying home bases (on Carboniferous Limestone, gravels or Charnian exposures) through thin sectioning of pottery. Interim observations are nevertheless possible from existing data.

Patterning within the Group XX — Arbor Low corridor (Fig. 3)

Unrestricted down-the-line exchange can be predicted to result in a steady drop off from source. That is patently not the case with Group XX axes — beyond two specimens recovered from the likely procurement area (*ibid.*, fig. 11.1) they cluster, as already noted, some 55km away. The voracity of this pattern, undoubtedly skewed in part by Bateman's intensive fieldwork, can be usefully checked by the 10km spread of Derby and its suburbs across the corridor, urban development being a recognised agency in heightened axe recovery (e.g. Leicester: Moore and Cummins 1974). Significantly no Group XX axes have been recorded within the Derby area although two Group VI axes are known and a number of ungrouped artefacts, predominantly perforated implements (Db. 42, 54, 55, 60, 62, 123, 129). This contrasts with a significant increase in Group XX recognition elsewhere (McK Clough and Cummins 1988, 47). The White Peak 'displaced centre' distribution appears real therefore and clearly reflects social, not natural, agencies. Potential explanations can be sought in terms of seasonal movement between upland and lowland by a single group or levels of dominance (economic or political, or both) exercised by the White Peak groups over the Trent Valley links in the exchange chain.

Were the pattern to have resulted from a transhumance cycle there seems no obvious explanation for the absence of axes at the southern end of the corridor where home bases might be suspected. On the other hand the distance under discussion is slight so an exchange chain of separate communities of any complexity is to be doubted: the only reasonably hypothesised links would be on the Trent and possibly at the edge of the Carboniferous Limestone. The former is precisely where the monuments are located. Were they to have marked such a 'link' it might be assumed they invested a formality to exchange and movement. Axes might then have been deposited in the monument zone only rarely and in token form (*cf.* a Group VI axe in a pit within the cursus at Maxey, Cambridgeshire (Simpson 1985)).

Alternatively the monuments could perhaps be viewed as elements of an exclusion zone around, or between, which mundane movement had to be affected. It is noteworthy that this section of the Trent appears as an obvious lacuna in the distribution of grouped implements, even of Group VI which are otherwise ubiquitous along the valley (McK Clough and Cummins 1988). Possibly significant is the recovery of a probable Group XX axe from a pit in close proximity to flood plain occupation with Peterborough ware by the Dove confluence at Willington (M. Beamish *pers. comm.*), and another at Attenborough at the opposing end of the monument zone. Other finds from the latter riverside locality include Mortlake ware, an antler macehead, a pestle macehead and three shafthole adzes (Posnansky 1958; McK Clough and Cummins 1988, 198). Radiocarbon determinations on the macehead, and that accompanying the burial under Liff's Low, confirm contemporaneous use by Trent and Peak communities between 3370 and 3000 cal. BC (Loveday *et al.* forthcoming).

Bradley and Hart (1983, 186), commenting on the distribution of all axes at the White Peak end of the corridor, noted a general correlation with that of prestige artefacts rather than the full distribution of Late Neolithic surface scatters. They concluded from this, and from their low incidence in areas reconstructed as contemporary woodland by Hawke-Smith, that access to axes might have been tightly controlled. The overall distribution pattern of Group XX artefacts certainly suggests dispersal from this point

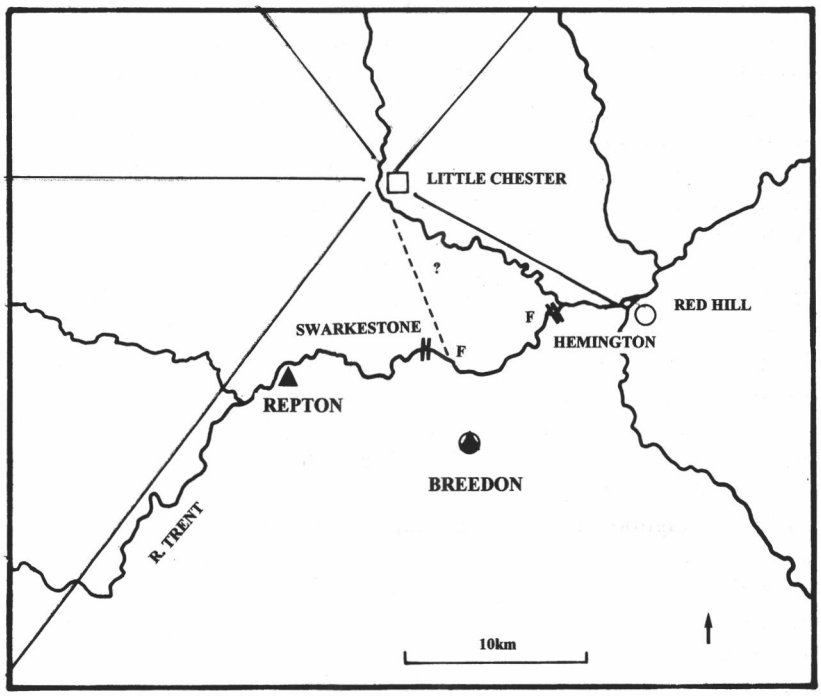

Fig. 4: The Trent Monument Zone, Iron Age to medieval.
Key: circle — Iron Age site; triangle — Early Saxon minster; parallel lines — medieval bridges; F — possible sites of the Weston ferry (Domesday).

rather than their source area (McK Clough and Cummins 1988, map 17) and their absence from the southern section of the Group XX — Arbor Low corridor would, if confirmed by future fieldwork, support the idea of tightly controlled movement. This could have the effect of casting the monuments in the Trent Valley as not merely sanctioning devices, but as control mechanisms at an interface point.

Trent crossings (Fig. 4)

Did the monuments then correspond with a major crossing zone of the Trent? That was certainly the case in the medieval period with an important bridge at Swarkestone and another subsequently abandoned at Hemington, along with ferries at Weston and possibly Repton. The establishment of early minsters at Repton and Breedon would also suggest importance and centrality (Salisbury 1995; Stafford 1985, 13, 182–83).

Projecting such nodality back into prehistory is clearly hazardous, not least because the river can be demonstrated to have possessed a very different configuration then. Note must, however, be taken of the two parallel post/stake lines projecting into one of the palaeochannels of the river adjacent to the recently discovered Aston logboat (Garton *et al.* 2001, 196–200). Equally significant perhaps are the two gold armlets and a bronze dagger recovered from a pit beside a ring ditch at Lockington on the opposite bank to the Aston cursus. The armlets belong emphatically within the Northern Migdale

tradition being closely paralleled by examples in bronze from Masterton, Fife (Clarke *et al.* 1985, 179, 5.14); the dagger equally emphatically belongs within Gerloff's Amorico–British series being closely paralleled by one of the daggers from Bush Barrow near Stonehenge (Hughes 2000). These contrasting backgrounds are emphasised by the association of armlets with jet necklaces, a northern jewellery item (Sheridan and Davis 1998), and Amorico–British daggers with their southern counterpart, the amber spacer plate necklace (Beck and Shennan 1991). Interestingly the largest jet button find (39) in Britain came from the White Peak (Grindlow: Shepherd 1985, 209) and the only concentration of Early Bronze Age amber finds north of the Trent occurs in the same region (Beck and Shennan 1991), a pattern that might be predicted if this were an interface zone across which jet moved south and amber north. The Lockington deposit may well then have symbolised the meeting of two zones and is unlikely to have been made casually or as an isolated act. Seeking a context it is worth recalling that historical evidence points to the recurrent use of grass lands adjacent to crossing points for the assembling of hosts and the establishment of treaties (e.g. 927 — Athelstan and northern rulers at Eamont, Cumbria; 1318 — Thomas of Lancaster and a claimed 18,000 retainers at Cotes Bridge, Loughborough). It is perhaps conceivable that the Lockington deposit was made in similar, but numerically reduced circumstances, at a direct interface of two 'territories' with roots stretching back to the Middle Neolithic.

Concentrations of cursuses elsewhere give circumstantial support to the idea since they frequently coincide with later important river crossing localities e.g. on the Thames at Dorchester and Lechlade; on the Ouse at Bedford (Kempston and Cardington); on the Nene at Maxey–Barnack (bracketing the Roman King Street crossing); on the Avon near Warwick (Barford and Longbridge); and on the Nith near Dumfries (Holywood). To these could be added single sites at Scorton (by the Dere Street crossing of the Swale at Catterick), at Welshpool (by the Severn) and Fornham All Saints close to the Icknield Way crossing of the Lark.

But only the Potlock-Aston cluster offers, through its close proximity to a traceable stone axe source, the opportunity to track such hypothesised movement, whilst petrographic analysis of pottery holds out the additional possibility of relating this to notions of territoriality.

THE MICROCOSM
PRESERVED OLD LAND SURFACES IN CURSUS INTERIORS

If the foregoing aids clarification of the social dynamic that created and sustained cursuses, it does nothing to advance the central enigma of function. Cursus are notorious both for their barren ditches and empty interiors. Features dug into the subsoil such as hengiform monuments, ring ditches and post circles are recorded but occupy only a small part of frequently huge confines and are invariably considerably later in date than the enclosing monument (e.g. Bradley and Chambers 1988). They cannot therefore provide a raison d'être. What is required to advance is an interior land surface which was rapidly protected from erosion. Only in this way will traces of potentially ephemeral activity be recorded. Masking of part of the northern cursus at Drayton, Oxfordshire, by alluvium appeared to satisfy the requirement but post-excavation work has shown the two events to be separated by potentially three millennia (Ainslie and Wallis 1987; Barclay *et al.* 2003). Work at Willington Quarry suggests that the Trent Valley may hold greater

potential since alluvium covering a Neolithic land surface there was cut by a ring ditch of probable Bronze Age date (M. Beamish *pers. comm.*).

Meanwhile we are forced to seek those small patches overlain by henge banks or round barrows, monuments constructed while cursuses apparently retained their sanctity. Unfortunately only four such ' keyholes' exist; beneath the henge bank at Thornborough in Yorkshire and beneath round barrows in the Dorset, Greater Stonehenge and Aston cursuses. The henge bank at Thornborough has received only minimal attention (Thomas 1955) and the two round barrows within the Wessex monuments remain untouched so their potential is unquantifiable. By contrast a quadrant of Aston I has been excavated and been demonstrated to cover evidence of earlier activity (Reaney 1968). The ground surface underlying the W/MR Beaker barrow reportedly produced evidence of pits and ring gullies. Although the latter can now be seen as probable animal burrows, there is no doubting the shallow pit of a hearth (1.30m diameter and 0.30m deep), the base of which had been scorched by fire. Mixed with charcoal were sherds of a Grimston bowl and several hundred carbonised emmer grains, including spikelets, an exceptionally high figure for Neolithic contexts (Moffet *et al.* 1989, 248–49). A radiocarbon date from the grain of 3650–3350 cal. BC (BM 271) is statistically indistinguishable from that obtained from wood on the base of the cursus ditch some 400m away (G. Guilbert *pers. comm.*). Whilst this does not preclude the possibility that the hearth relates to domestic activity prior to cursus construction, it does open up the prospect that ephemeral, monument related activity has been preserved akin to that recorded on Cranborne Chase (Barrett *et al.* 1991, 70–75). This could be hypothesised to relate to the employment of distinct zones of cursus monuments for dedicatory purposes. It is noteworthy that the carbonised deposit from the base of the Potlock ditch included some cereal grains (G. Guilbert *pers. comm.*). The close morphological similarity between cursus and house plans permits the speculation that these ungainly monuments, ill-suited as processional ways, astronomical sighting devices or mortuary enclosures, possibly acted as symbolic houses during periods of seasonal assembly and that, in like manner, possessed distinct areas of activity. Evidence of such use is likely to be ephemeral in the extreme. Thus Aston I is of paramount importance.

Here then in the key southern heartland of cursus monuments we have a unique island of preservation that currently furnishes our best hope of reconstructing patterns of use. Such potential should not be squandered. Clear objectives for preservation and investigation need to be established as equally they do for the rare opportunity opened up at the macroscopic level by the close proximity of the Group XX source.

Suggestions to test the hypotheses put forward in this paper include programmes of fieldwalking and thin-sectioning of pottery in the corridor from the Group XX source to Arbor Low, between the Rivers Dove/Sutton Brook and the Derwent; for an extension of Hawke-Smith's pedological survey to the Group XX procurement area; and publication of Reaney's records and reopening of his trench to test the quality of deposit survival and take environmental samples.

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