

Commentary

By GROMATICUS

A Brush with the Fringe

I FELT DISTINCTLY daring recently when attending a press conference organised by *The Ley Hunter* magazine to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the discovery of ley lines by Alfred Watkins. I expect you have heard of the idea, that ancient sites of various sorts (standing stones, barrows, etc.) and some more modern sites thought to be of to be of ancient origin (e.g. churches) appear to lie on deliberate alignments, called *leys*. I expect too that most of you have dismissed the idea as part of the 'lunatic fringe' that besets archaeology, which is why I hesitated before accepting the invitation.

As I looked at the evidence, it struck me that the question was in one sense a statistical one and in another sense unanswerable. A statistical one because, even if sites were located at random, they would form some alignments purely by chance. The question becomes, are there *more* alignments than could reasonably be expected? This is a statistical question, and a difficult one at that, especially when one tries to take account of the fact that sites are not disturbed at random, but tend to cluster in some areas more than in others. It is unanswerable in the sense that, even if one could show that there were more alignments than could be expected, this tells one nothing about which are deliberate and which accidental. The quality of the data is crucial to a study of this kind: anyone can find alignments, but one also needs to record *all* the sites that do not lie on alignments for a proper test to be made. The statistical work I have seen has been equivocal, but may support short-range alignments to some extent. The difficulties of exhaustive and accurate recording, together with the complexity of the statistics, give me no wish to pursue the question further myself.

More interesting, to me at least, than the existence or not of leys is the reason why some people believe in them and some do not. If it is a statistical question with a common body of data, why do not all come to the same conclusion? The answer lies in a definition of statistics as 'the orderly influencing of opinions by data.' If, as I

believe, the evidence is equivocal, then one's conclusions will simply reflect one's preconceptions. We must therefore ask, why do some people *want* to believe in them and some do not? For those who do believe, the idea of leys seems to meet a deep need — no one would feel that strongly about a statistical abstraction. Reading on, one finds that this need is psychological, even spiritual, in nature, and frequently represents a yearning for a time when man was more in tune with nature and could supposedly align his monuments on lines of 'force' or 'spirit'. Ley hunting could thus be seen as another symptom of the spiritual poverty of our age, alongside other more obviously dangerous forms of supernatural experience. Less dramatically, it could be seen as a way of avoiding the problems and stresses of our own age by seeking the values of a lost 'golden age.'

The other side of the coin is interesting too — why are some so vehement in their rejection of the idea? I can quite understand anyone not wanting to spend much effort in disproving something which they regard as improbable anyway, or deciding that the whole idea is outside their terms of reference, but to reject the idea as impossible *a priori* is a step further. Are archaeologists so conditioned by their trade, depending as it does on material evidence, that they refuse to consider any thing which does not have a material explanation? And do we see here an aspect of the spiritual poverty against which the others are rebelling?

I can't answer these questions here, but suggest that the debate may be a microcosm of a wider situation — the tension between those who hold material values and those who fear the loss of spiritual values in our materialistic age. If so, the ley hunters may be wrong, for the right reason, and the archaeologists may be right, for the wrong reason.

Competition

We have not yet received a correct answer to the 'What is it?' competition in the previous issue. The prize of a copy of *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Archaeology* still awaits the first correct reply.