

SITE AND SITUATION : A DISCUSSION*

In 1976 Victor Watts, writing of Durham place-names and their distribution in relation to geological conditions, expressed the following reservation: 'I suspect that the evidence of the one inch drift maps may need a good deal of refinement' and continued 'it would be interesting to hear a geographer's comment on the quality of the drift evidence for the kind of exercise place-name scholars have been conducting', i.e. using drift maps as a basis for an examination of village sites. This contribution is one geographer's response, and arises from the author's interest in village plans and the possibilities, introduced by close studies of these plans, of a more rigorous analysis of site/settlement relationships. It argues that settlement sites and situations are significantly different, involving both a scale contrast and the assessment of different qualities in the natural and cultural environments of the settlement, that recent studies of the evolution of village plans indicate that site changes may not be uncommon, and finally, that a familiarity with maps of drift deposits emphasises that they must indeed be treated with caution.

Any study of settlement involves scale contrasts, and generalisations at one scale may break down at another scale. Villages viewed at the scale of the one inch to one mile map may all appear to lie upon glacial drift, but a field study of one particular site, or indeed a whole group of sites, may reveal that the drift thins sufficiently beneath all of them for them to be more truly described as sited upon the country rock. Nevertheless, the first observation has some validity: a group of villages, viewed at that particular scale, may truly be said to be associated, in some way, with terrain and soils developed upon glacial drift and this may well be a relationship worth examining. Three questions arise, however; the first concerns precision of terminology, the second concerns the assumption that the villages seen upon a contemporary map and bearing Anglo-Saxon or Scandinavian (or for that matter Celtic) names do occupy original sites, and a third question concerns the quality of the information discoverable from a drift map.

Terminology

Most villages in the Lowland Zone of Britain evolved as mixed farming settlements and required the key resources of land suitable for arable cultivation, well-watered lands for meadow and rougher, unimproved lands to supply pastures, woodland produce, fuel and building materials. These are widely available and indeed it is only in a remarkably limited range of environments that village settlement has proved to be impossible, where the soils were too light or too heavy, too infertile or too wet; indeed a glance at the map shows that altitude and associated climatic variations were a far more powerful determinant of the presence or absence of villages than were soils. However, this is only one scale of generalisation, and in view of the demonstrable importance of these key resources in the support of village-sized communities, particularly productive lands, we can hardly doubt that villages were located or *situated* to gain access to these. Of course villages are not the only way of settling a landscape, nor indeed, need our present villages have necessarily begun life as villages. Nevertheless in a cultural context encouraging cluster settlement (a term which begs the question concerning the real distinctions between villages and hamlets, or indeed large hamlets and small villages) then cost-distance factors operate strongly, for arable land is greedy of labour, and the question of the difference between the location of the fields and the location of the dwellings becomes important. A village is *situated* with reference to the basic resources noted above, but it is *sited* with different factors in mind.

A *site* may be defined as that piece of terrain occupied by the settlement, church, manor-house, farms, cottages, roads and integral open spaces, together with the enclosures, tofts, closely attached to the buildings. This differs

from the *situation*, and a village site can possess a range of distinctive qualities; access to other key resources was often critical, in particular a supply of water, but also access to the arable, meadows and pastures (and a peripheral arable/pasture location for a village site may have once been more common than we now appreciate). Other local land qualities, shelter, flat land, site drainage, a good southern aspect, defensible qualities, and an apparent freedom from hazards (drifting snow or frequent flooding) must surely, as any good camper knows, have been taken into account? We must furthermore, never assume that 'correct' siting was achieved without trial or error; every list of deserted villages tells us otherwise, while inertia, sheer laziness, may have encouraged the continued occupation of some sites which proved, eventually, to have a proportion of undesirable properties. In addition to these pragmatic considerations, however, there must have been a host of other, less tangible, more irrational factors: the calls of magic, superstition and religion, the presence or absence of the honoured or feared dead, of quarrels and alliances, of food and bad omens, and of differences between individuals, families or groups which may be quite undiscoverable from a limited historical record.

If it is accepted that the practical physical qualities are relevant, and can indeed be isolated and examined for what they can tell us concerning the land-cunning of the Anglo-Saxons or Scandinavians, then two key problems appear, the first concerning the character of villages, the second concerning the quality of information available for assessing the physical characteristics of sites.

Village Stability

There is an increasing body of evidence which suggests that villages are often morphologically complex, being made up not of a single simple plan but, to use Chris Taylor's term, are 'polyfocal' (although the author believes that the term 'composite' may be as appropriate as any). Individual large villages are often in fact agglomerations of smaller clusters of buildings which have grown together, and which can result from many causes, growth phases, manorial or social contrasts, economic differences, and these can be seen to occupy not one but several sites. Furthermore, there are indications that these complex villages are late-comers to the settlement scene, possibly appearing after rather than before the Norman Conquest, and site changes, while not necessarily universal, are not uncommon. These conclusions raise fundamental questions for place-name scholars; Anglo-Saxon settlement sites are not easily discoverable from modern maps for in most cases it is impossible to decide exactly where the pre-Conquest settlement lay. The excavations at Wharram Percy, Yorkshire, reveal this most clearly. What happens to a place-name when a village site changes, indeed to what does the place-name refer, the physical entity of the settlement or the functional whole of the settlement and its territory.

Drift Maps

Geological maps vary very much in quality: not only were they created at different times, so that advances in knowledge need to be taken into account, the minimum thickness of the drift which has been mapped can vary from map to map, while any field scientist is aware that such a map incorporates a strong element of interpretation; individual surveyors vary in their abilities and observational powers. To grasp the limitations of the one inch geological drift map field experience is needed, but a comparison of settlement sites shown on the splendid six inch to the mile geology maps of the Durham coalfield quickly reveals the interpretational hazards: a single village site can extend across a variety of terrains, with varied soil and drainage conditions; the caption 'boulder clay and undifferentiated drift' can conceal a host of lithological variations which may significantly affect sub-soil qualities, while the exceptional detail of the coalfield maps can show five feet of drift

recorded from a boring upon a nominally 'drift-free' area! In the Northumberland village of Edlingham field work by the author in the area between the ancient church (with possible pre-Conquest walling) and a small castle (of late 14th C. origin) has revealed every gradation of soil from light gravelly drift to quite ferocious boulder clay and from sandy loam to water-logged peat - all within a twenty acre field! This could well be the 'site' of the Anglo-Saxon settlement. Drift overlies the landscape in a variable and discontinuous film and even on the coalfield, where the quality of the data is excellent, drift maps have to be used with a cautious understanding of their nature. They represent one possible interpretation of discoverable drift conditions and the same may be said of soil and land-quality maps. Drift deposits do affect soils and settlement by providing varied parent materials, but any scholars seeking to understand settlement would do well to remember that for the Anglo-Saxons the husbanded soils of earlier centuries may have been of pre-eminent importance.

In the present author's view we can only attempt regional appraisals of siting factors and site qualities when many more detailed local studies are available. The topographical interpretation of place-names is fraught with dangers, but because place-names are so intimately associated with settlement and with man's perception of his environment, both natural and cultural, they constitute a vital ingredient of those integrative cross-disciplinary studies which are emerging as particularly productive. In this way the 'common thoughts about common things' of the earlier inhabitants may become re-thinkable. There is, however, no more difficult exercise.

Notes

* A shortened version of a paper given on April 16th, 1978, at the tenth conference of the Council for Name Studies.

1. V. Watts, 'Comment on "The Evidence of Place-Names"', by Margaret Gelling, in *Medieval Settlement* ed. P. Sawyer (1976), 218, 219. See also the paper by Margaret Gelling, 200-211.
2. B. K. Roberts, *Rural Settlement in Britain* (1977), 85-9, 117-158.
3. C. C. Taylor, 'Polyfocal Settlement and the English Village', *Medieval Archaeology*, XXI (1977), 189-193; P. Wade Martins, 'The Origins of Rural Settlement in East Anglia' in *Recent Work in Rural Archaeology*, ed. P. J. Fowler (1975), 137-157; B. K. Roberts, *The Green Villages of County Durham*, Durham County Library, Local History Publication, No. 12 (1977); B. K. Roberts, 'Rural Settlement in County Durham: Forms, Pattern and System' in *Social Organisation and Settlement (British Archaeological Reports, forthcoming)*.
4. These points can be illustrated by reference to the following maps of the Geological Survey at a scale of 1 : 10,560 relating to Durham villages:

NZ 12 SW Cockfield village (NZ 1224): note drift free sandstone site (see also 1 inch Drift sheet No. 32), but there are nevertheless 'patches of residual drift' which at 122243 is five feet in thickness. The original focus of the settlement may have been at 129241 (where sandy drift is visible) with a field area centering at 127240. Later expansion (12th or E13thC?) is represented by the row centering on 128243 and from this the present village has grown.

- NZ 12 SW Staindrop village (NZ 1220): nominally on 'boulder clay' (see also 1 inch Drift sheet no. 32) but with 'sandy boulder clays with thin impersistent sand and gravel lenses' beneath the village.
- NZ 22 NW Counden village (NZ 2329): nominally on a 'sandstone, medium grained and current bedded' but with a shaft showing 24 feet of drift at 242297.
- NZ 23 SE Kirk Merrington (NZ 3126): a village of two plan elements. The E-W street occupies an exposed site on the ridge top, the NW-SE street (the settlement of Shelom) occupies a slight valley, facing SW but sheltered from the N and NE winds. This may have been the 'best site', and the inhabitants rendered the ancient rent of cornage. The former ponds found in both villages hint that the sites may not lie upon Magnesian Limestone but on a thin drift veneer.
- NZ 33 SW Bishop Middleham (NZ 3331): this settlement of no great size sprawls across Magnesian Limestone overlain by 'glacial sand and gravel' and 'boulder clay with glacial drift - undifferentiated'!
- NZ 36 SE East Bolden (NZ 3661): the village site embraces 'thin drift, Upper (Pelaw) clay over Middle Magnesian Limestone, exposed Magnesian Limestone and boulder clay and drift, undifferentiated'.

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