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Predators in Robes: Materialising and mystifying hunting, predation and seclusion in the northern European medieval landscape

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Hunting; landscape; seclusion; exclusion; predation

Introduction

Hunting was vital to the reaffirmation and maintenance of élite identity. The activities associated with this ranged from the ritualistic, theatrical hunts involving individual noblemen, women, kings, queens, and high-status clerics through to the regular acquisition of venison on behalf of the aristocracy through the employment of professional hunters and foresters. In both cases, the activity required a considerable amount of knowledge and experience regarding the behaviour and ecology of the chosen prey coupled with the aesthetic, legal and practical logistics governing medieval hunting space. Hence, even a ‚basic' hunt to acquire venison required, depending on the chosen method (e. g. stalking, *par force*, trapping) a familiarity with a range of weapons, snares, animal tracks, surrounding topography, the appropriate (and ongoing) training of hounds and raptors and maintaining the integrity of any enclosed hunting space. Documentary sources indicate that although many hunts concluded with the killing of the chosen prey, others required the capture and extensive handling and transport of live animals from deer (Birrell 1992, 120) to wolves and from more exotic locations, lions and leopards. The practical achievements of medieval hunting were therefore considerable. However, despite the multiple uses of hunting space for activities ranging from intensive woodland management through to arable and pastoral farming, élite hunting ideology permeated these landscapes and was materialised through the construction and maintenance of recognisable symbols. The details varied from country to country and across regions, and this is acknowledged throughout the paper. The setting for the hunt could extend into the surrounding landscape (Pluskowski 2002) integrating a variety of landuse, or it could be focused within a physically and conceptually restricted space. This paper examines the latter category in more detail.

The restricted hunting landscape

Access to deer, the favourite prey of the élite hunt, was severely restricted. Remains of deer in medieval contexts tend to be interpreted as indicative of high-status sites, in other cases where the socio-economic indicators are of a lower status, they have been used to cite possible incidents of poaching (Ashby 2002). Together with the most popular (edible) animals of the hunt – wild boar, rabbits and wild fowl, deer essentially defined hunting space. Predators could also define it, but to a far lesser extent – documentary sources across Europe indicate grants of special permission to hunt animals such as wolves within otherwise exclusively controlled hunting space; for example, this is explicitly stated in the *Sachsenspiegel* (the *Saxon Mirror*, c. 1235). The passage concerning hunting (Dobozy 1999, 111), states that although it was forbidden to hunt animals in the three designated *banvörsten* (game preserves) in Saxony, this prohibition excluded bears, wolves and foxes. In England, France and Scotland, the forest system preserving game and its associated habitat (woodland) developed as an expression of royal power, although ownership of forests, warrens, parks and chases was then granted as a privilege to other members of the élite society, both secu-

lar and religious. In some cases this system broke down (e. g. the civil war between Stephen and Matilda) however in all of these countries, the relationship between hunting and élite culture was maintained. In southern Scandinavia, the relationship between the aristocracy and hunting was present from the early medieval period (Andrén 1997) and whilst documentary sources suggest the designation of exclusive élite hunting space was relatively limited until the early modern period, archaeological evidence may indicate an earlier proliferation of enclosures such as deer parks (ibid). Hunting space reflected concepts associated with predation, seclusion and mystery – evident in the physical hunting landscape, its related documentation and its depictions within high-status contexts. These concepts will now be examined in turn.

Predation

People in medieval northern Europe clearly recognised the basic relationships between predator and prey and further conceptualised these within the full range of pagan and Christian paradigms. Their material expressions ranged from depictions of hunts typically focusing on the conflict between an individual hunter/predator and an individual prey animal, through to graphic scenes of hell-mouths devouring screaming souls. The individual styles and compositions varied spatially and temporally, however the general motifs remained unchanged into the Renaissance. Within the hunting landscape, the relationship between predator and prey, perpetually celebrated in élite literature and art, was spatially defined. The importance of the setting was partially related to the ecology of prey animals – deer preferred woodland fringes – and thus deer parks contained suitable habitats (albeit in a limited way –overgrazing was a problem in some smaller parks; Rackham 1980, 193); the forest laws were partially concerned with the preservation of ‚vert' or woodland as shelter for wild beasts, whilst legislation governing the protection of deer seems to have also been concerned with keeping the deer in these habitats and preventing people from scaring the deer or driving them away (directly or indirectly). Yet the presence of woodland within an enclosed hunting space can also be seen as an attempt to recreate the type of hunting wilderness found in north European romance literature. Hunt scenes in the works of Wolfram von Eschenbach, Chrétien de Troyes and Gottefried von Strasbourg (and depictions relating to the motifs they utilise) typically focus on the relationship between the human hunter and the hunted individual – which could be a deer, a boar, or something bizarre and numinous, such as the ominous ‚questing beast'. Hunts are typically set within a ‚forest' representing a mesh of interwoven symbols: the setting for both the real hunt and enchantment (Saunders 1993). To what extent such conceptualised hunting landscapes inspired or reflected their physical counter-parts is difficult to say. Yet enclosed hunting spaces, such as parks, archaeologically detectable by their pales, ditches and deer leaps, were defined by the relationships between predator and prey; these landscapes could, after all, be used for a range of economic and recreational activities other than hunting. Their physical boundaries seem to have been primarily designed to prevent animals from escaping; Andrén (1997) has suggested a similar practical element in the use of islands as hunting landscapes in south-ern Scandinavia. However, as he concludes in his study, these practical functions cannot be detached from their conceptual elements. Hunting space, defined by the presence of specific animals, articulated relationships between predator and prey, and although these varied from country to country, ultimately it exalted the combat between human and beast as its *raison d'etre*. Whilst this space was reflected in the wider landscape through the location, shape, legal and physical mechanics of parks, warrens and forests, it was also materialised in the centres of élite power through the display of hunting trophies and iconography within the halls of manors, palaces and castles.

Seclusion

Despite the immense number of people involved in the management of hunting landscapes and the complex social relations arising from, for example imparkment, seclusion seems to have played an increasingly important physical and conceptual role throughout the Middle Ages. A microcosm of this can be seen in the increasing popularity of the en-

closed gardens became in northern Europe throughout the medieval period. McLean (1989, 93) has suggested that parks, chases, fishponds and orchards were the most primitive form of garden in that they enclosed a space where fauna and/or flora were controlled. Seclusion in the context of an enclosed hunting ground can be detected archaeologically in combination with docu-mentary and cartographic evidence. The physical boundaries of an identified park may contain any number of dwellings ranging from lodges to manors, as well as a range of moated sites which may have served ornamental or economic functions. Way's (1997, 47) detailed study of imparkment in Cambridgeshire and Huntingdonshire indicated that the location of manorial dwellings *within* a park is evident from the twelfth century, however this preference noticeably peaks in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This pattern is related to the rise of a ‚middling gentry' class and the increasing need for visible social differentiation from the perspective of the élite class. Evidence of seclusion in the high medieval period can also be found elsewhere: the use of islands as hunting grounds by the southern Scandinavian élites imply both exclusive access and seclusion, whilst the general pattern for the location of many English hunting grounds such as parks is a tendency to locate them away from centres of population. Whilst this is partially related to the logistics of managing a population of wild animals within an appropriate habitat, it is also likely to be associated with some notion of privacy and detachment. Whilst some faunal assemblages containing a variety of game are linked to a nearby hunting ground, others suggest somewhat detached and long-distance relationships; such as the ownership of demesne lands scattered around the region. In a survey of manorial buildings in Kent, Pearson (1994, 23) suggested that the location of impressively decorated and expensive buildings away from related centres of baronial power, in relatively secluded areas, may have been linked to hunting practises. It is important to contemplate varying levels of seclusion; archaeological investigation of spatial relations between hunting grounds, earthworks and buildings can indicate degrees of physical seclusion, whilst the conceptual elements (which should not be divorced from any holistic understanding of hunting space) evident in, for example, the idealisation of hunting landscapes in romance literature and art, can be set within the broader context of élite culture and its materialisation in the landscape, manor, castle and hall. The exclusivity of hunting grounds such as deer parks was not only ensured by their costs, but also by their privacy. Like gardens, parks could be viewed from a distance by a range of people, but access within was strictly controlled. Human presence within some restricted hunting spaces seems to have been kept to a minimum and whilst typically cited explanations refer to minimising disturbance for the beasts of the chase, it is clear that the control of space and regulation of movement was a visible way of emphasising élite identity. It is possible that this concept was mirrored within the park at the microcosmic scale through the creation of artificial boundaries such as moats around lodges or royal houses. It has been suggested that parks did not have any aesthetic functions (Williamson/Bellamy 1987, 70 f.), although this is highly unlikely given the clear relationships between hunting landscapes and aesthetics in secular literature and art. The related concepts of seclusion and exclusion were part of the aesthetics and ideology of the élite hunt and both deliberately and coincidentally generated a sense of mystery in elements of the hunting landscape.

Mystery

To what extent was the ‚mystique' of élite hunting culture materialised in the landscape? This is an area requiring further research, however some tentative suggestions can be presented. For example, aesthetics may have been important – the location of artificial water features, the use of moated sites (surrounding both buildings and open spaces or gardens) as appropriate elements of the setting, the decoration and placement of hunting lodges, standings and the distribution and management of vegetation – all contributed generating a particular ambience rooted in the ideology of the hunt (Stamper 1988, 142). To a large extent, the mystique of the hunt would have revolved around the restrictions associated with certain animals, and the relationships between the hunters, animals and the landscapes described above. The multiple uses of hunting

landscapes ensured their general accessibility to a wide range of people. However, documentary sources and the location of hunting space indicate a range of restrictions limiting this accessibility (as discussed above). The physical (enclosures) and conceptual (legal) barriers controlling and limiting wider access to these landscapes would have been complemented by idealised microcosms within the visible centres of élite power in the form of literature and iconography. The specialist knowledge associated with hunting a wide range of animals, clearly demonstrated by the elaborate descriptions in hunting manuals such as Gaston Phébus' *Livre de la Chasse* (c.1387–89), would have generated and perpetuated a social mystique – the hunting party had its own social stratification based on, aside from conventional status, knowledge and experience in hunting and its trappings (Cummins 2001, 172–186). Ultimately though, it is extremely difficult (and undesirable) to disassociate hunting from the other elements defining and reaffirming élite culture.

Conclusion

An interdisciplinary approach towards élite medieval hunting culture and space is essential. The range of evidence suggests that élite hunters conceptualised themselves (and were conceptualised by others) as superpredators, emphasising human dominion over the natural world. The world of the élite hunt was a wild yet tame environment – a controlled space which could be physically as well as conceptually enclosed and restricted. Élite, human predators did not take kindly to competition: particularly from animals. The exalted deer was of course the ideal prey for the wolf populations of medieval northern Europe and the responses towards these predators from the ruling nobility was overwhelmingly (but not completely), and in this context, unsurprisingly, negative (Pluskowski, forthcoming). Hunting was not the exclusive preserve of the élites – immense numbers of hunters, foresters, herders, craftsmen, animal handlers and additional retainers were involved in the running of forests, parks and warrens. Opinions are divided on the frequency of royal participation in elaborate, theatrical hunts, although this seems to have varied from individual to individual and region to region. Nor were these landscapes exclusively hunting spaces. However, it can be argued that their primary and temporally consistent function was the visible maintenance of hunting rights for the élite defined by the presence and movement of specific animals. The full range of documentary, iconographic and archaeological sources suggest that a great deal was invested in the perpetual reaffirmation and celebration of the relationships between noble predators and their exalted prey.

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