

Where the Wild Things are... Zones of Conflict with the Wilderness in Medieval Northern Europe

Aleksander G. Pluskowski

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Introduction

Medieval northern Europe was not the physical wilderness early scholars once perceived it to be. Woods and moors were extensively managed; both physically and conceptually bounded and sub-divided. Within woods individual trees were shaped through coppicing (fig. 1; Hatfield Forest) and pollarding, giving woodland a characteristic appearance and a variable human presence within its bounds (see for example Rackham 1996). Yet the forests of neo-medieval romance in the popular modern imagination owe as much to the literature and iconography of the Middle Ages as to fairy tales collected in recent centuries. Ultimately, the modern fantasy genre draws its inspiration from all of these. The terms 'wilderness' and 'wild' have a number of meanings and seem to have been applied to different contexts at different times, in different languages. 'Wild space' can be categorised into the following:

- Space beyond or at the fringes of human control.
- Space defined by the presence or transience of 'wild' animals, people or certain numinous creatures or elements.

The above definitions combine physical and conceptual notions of wilderness, which could also be simultaneously 'wild' and 'tame'. These dichotomies are somewhat anachronistic, however they are useful in expressing key elements of concepts otherwise very difficult to grasp as a whole. This brief presentation with limited references suggests a number of approaches towards the physical and conceptual medieval wild.

The archaeology of the medieval wild

What does this entail? The categories of 'wild' discussed in the introduction can be identified in archaeological contexts in a number of ways:

a) Faunal remains

These can provide information about the relationship between a specific site and a particular definition of a wild landscape – essentially where their presence defined some form of hunting space. Faunal remains do not necessarily reflect direct relationships between different landscapes or space, but provide evidence for the utilisation of elements of the wild in a particular context. For example, deer remains are typically used to define high status sites (or evidence of poaching) (e.g. Grant 1988, 165). This in turn is associated with a whole series of concepts ranging from hunting to consumption. Following on from this, it is possible to reconstruct the physical and conceptual role of deer and their associated space. The wolf is extremely difficult to identify in faunal assemblages due to the fragmentary nature of preservation and skeletal similarities with dogs (Pluskowski, forthcoming). Fig. 2 shows identified wolf remains from medieval contexts ranging from the early to late Middle Ages (fig. 2), which, although cannot be assessed quantitatively, provide windows into localised responses towards this animal.

b) Palaeobotanical data and landscape archaeology

It is possible to construct tentative, generalised maps of Britain and southern Scandinavia to illustrate the distribution of landuse in the medieval period up to the fourteenth century.

Constructed from a combination of palaeobotanical, documentary and early modern cartographic data, these are tentative 'sketches' (cf. Higounet's *esquisse*, 1966). Localised regional variation is acknowledged but not displayed. The maps demonstrate the main contrasts between lowlands and uplands as well as the distribution of woodland and extensive distribution of managed fields. The relationships between wild fauna and the landscape are not indicated in these maps, however my Ph. D. research (Pluskowski, forthcoming) suggests that the ecological and conceptual association between the wolf and woodland in medieval northern Europe revolved around the designation of forms of 'wild' and 'wilderness'. The designation of a particular landscape or elements of a landscape as 'wild' as suggested by documentary and corresponding iconographic sources is rooted in a number of complicated factors: the transition from paganism to Christianity in northern Europe maintained many of these categories. This designation is as much related to the animals (and people) inhabiting and moving through the landscape as the topography itself.

c) Iconography of wild space

Archaeology can provide a useful insight into elements of the medieval wild, but ultimately an interdisciplinary approach is essential. Iconographic sources can illustrate the relationships between certain animals and specific landscapes; illuminations in late medieval hunting manuals are particularly valuable in this respect. Early and high medieval iconographic sources range from coins, seals, casket decoration through to relief carvings, sculpture and wall paintings. There is abundant evidence for the use of deer, whilst the evidence for the wolf, which seems to have embodied notions of the 'threatening wild', is far more limited preventing any quantitative survey. Combined with the other types of evidence discussed above, iconographic sources can contribute to the designation and treatment of wild space in medieval northern Europe.

Animals as embodiments of 'wild' in the medieval landscape

An alternative approach towards the designation of space as 'wild' is to consider how the



Fig. 1: Coppices in Hatfield Forest, England.



Fig. 2: Distribution of certain medieval wolf remains in Britain and southern Scandinavia.

presence of 'wild' animals may have contributed to this categorisation. The 3D model (fig. 3) represents a small section of a generic medieval English landscape. The fence, ditch and bank enclose part of a large deer park – the trees in this part as managed as pollards. Outside the park, a ploughed field, partially enclosed by a hedge represents another division of landuse. The conceptual layer above the physical base represents a basic division between 'wild' and 'domestic' relating to primary landuse. This division, like diagrams modelling perception change over distance, is a simplification. It can, for example, be argued that a deer park represents an intensive and sophisti-

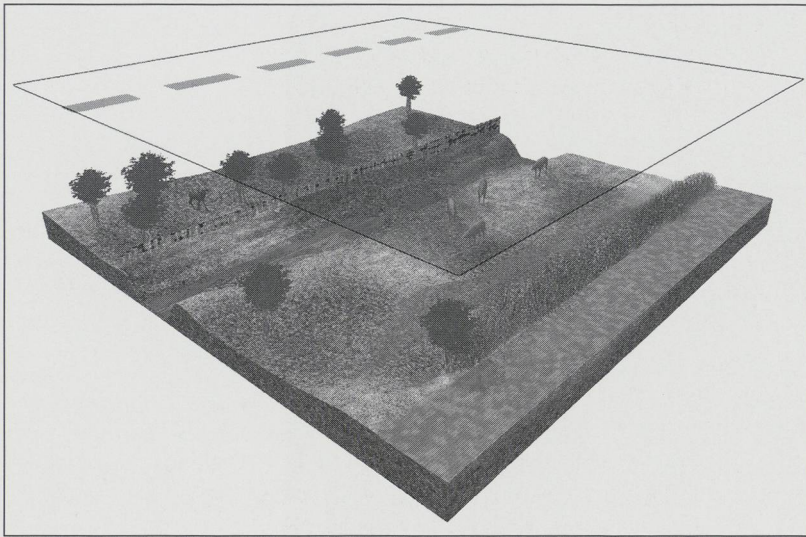


Fig. 3: 3D model of medieval English landscape illustrating physical and conceptual faunal divisions.



Fig. 4: Boundary between woodland and fields in Bialowieza, Poland.

cated form of animal husbandry (Birrell 1992), although depending on its size and ownership, the park could also represent a conceptualised (and ordered) wilderness and exclusive status symbol (Liddiard 1999, 177). Nonetheless, the animals in the model illustrate some basic points about the designation of 'wild'. The stag is enclosed, whilst a pack of wolves moves alongside the ditch towards the field. Their presence is associated with 'wild' and since both wolves and deer can be incredibly mobile creatures, as suggested by documentary sources and ecological analogues, the association with 'wild' may have corresponded to their physical or perceived presence. This topic requires further exploration from a variety of

perspectives and is examined in more depth for the medieval wolf in my forthcoming thesis.

Medieval perceptions of people as 'wild'

The designation of certain groups of people as 'wild' or 'other' – visible in archaeological, documentary and iconographic sources – had, amongst other things, a spatial context. To take the example of medieval Britain, such designations could range from the local spatial categorisation of a leper hospital by its physical location, through to perceptions of more distant groups such as people living in northern England (from a southern perspective), and finally to perceptions across a national scale between England and Scotland. Further designations dictating the physical location and treatment of specific groups included religious minorities such as Jews and legal categories such as outlaws. A number of detailed studies consider the distribution and function of leper hospitals (e.g. Satchell 1998), Jewish quarters and cemeteries (e.g. Lilley 1993; Pepper 1992) and other designated groups as well as the iconography of 'otherness' in medieval northern Europe (e.g. Melinkoff 1993). In some cases these groups were associated with specific animals, blurring both the conceptualisation and location of the 'wild' even further. Finally, the location of 'wild' was dynamic; the mobility of people and animals across the landscape must be acknowledged in any general study of physical and conceptual wilderness.

Presenting the medieval wild to a modern audience

The main hunting museums in northern Europe (the Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature in Paris, the Deutsches Jagd und Fischereimuseum in Munich and the Norsk Skogbruksmuseum in Elverum, Norway) have limited exhibitions about medieval hunting and limited exploration of the relationships between wild animals, people and the landscape in the Middle Ages. A recent exception to this is 'Wildwood' in Herne Bay, Kent. This is essentially a living zoological museum, where animals in enclosures are closely associated with reconstructions relating to episodes of the prehistor-

ic, Roman and medieval past. One focal reconstruction is a hut (what they term 'spital') envisaged as a shelter for travellers from wild animals, particularly wolves. The hut is associated with a large wooded enclosure housing a wolf pack as well as various reconstructions of wolf traps, flower beds containing plants relevant to werewolf lore (such as Wolfsbane, Lily of the Valley) and a number of information boards containing both 'lore' and natural history. This seems to be the first step in a more interactive and creative approach towards presenting concepts of the medieval wild, and since it is specifically aimed at children and a broad public audience, the 'ambience' is seen as the most important factor.

Modern Analogies

In addition to examining a wide range of sources from an interdisciplinary perspective to illuminate elements of the medieval wild, it is also fruitful to explore modern social and ecological analogues. In both of the following categories of analogues, the broad range of visual contrasts is the most important element, rather than the intricate details of personal experiences. These analogues cannot be directly projected back into the medieval period, however, as with modern public wildlife attitude surveys, they can suggest potential lines of investigation into the nature of the relationships between physical and conceptual landscapes (and their human and animal inhabitants) of the Middle ages.

a) Urban analogy

This is a general analogy. In modern urban centres, there are clear personal and publicised notions of what constitutes a 'safe' or 'pleasant' area as opposed to a 'wild' or less safe area. Environmental psychologists have examined this in detail and associated both social and environmental factors with the designation of such space. To what extent did comparable designations exist in medieval urban areas?

b) Rural analogy

The visual differences between contrasting landscapes are clearly reconstructed in the forests surrounding Białowieża in north eastern

Poland (vividly illustrated in fig. 4; the border between woodland and field). These consist of a series of managed woodlands coupled with a special preserve for fauna and flora where human disturbance is reduced to a minimum. Other landscapes include strings of farms, buildings, villages, fields and a network of roads and tracks dissecting the expanses of woodland. Moving through this landscape are numerous species of wild animals including wolves – a source of variable fear and wonder amongst visitors and local inhabitants. As a contrast to this, an enclosure within the heart of the central expanse of woodland contains a number of animals presented in a controlled environment as a representative sample of the wild species. The contrasting physical environments coupled with the movement of wild fauna and the publicised history of the area as a hunting preserve present an interesting combination of physical and conceptual space. At both the macro and micro scale, Białowieża displays elements of wilderness, including 'tame but wild'. In many ways personal experiences of these landscapes are related to preconceived perceptions of its fauna, flora and history, whilst the differences between the notions of local inhabitants and foreign visitors can be distinctly contrasting.

Conclusion

This presentation has briefly suggested a number of approaches towards the physical and conceptual wild in medieval northern Europe. An interdisciplinary perspective combined with the critical use of modern analogues, and a consideration of how this information is ultimately presented to both an academic and public audience is essential in any broader study of medieval culture.

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Address

Aleksander G. Pluskowski
University of Cambridge, Department of Archaeology
Downing Street, GB-Cambridge CB2 3DZ
agp21@hermes.cam.ac.uk