

Living Landscapes: Woodscapes in the Neolithic of Northwest Europe

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In archaeology there are two main disciplines contributing to our understanding of landscape. One is social theory known best in recent years for phenomenological explorations of landscape. The other is palaeoecology, a particular technique for reconstructing landscape history from the perspective of past vegetation cover. As Chapman and Gearey noted in 2000, despite their potential complementary nature, these two approaches to landscape often remain polarized and our understandings of landscapes are hence unsatisfactory. One of the problems of phenomenological approaches of course is that the archaeologist can only inhabit the landscape as it is now, a highly cultivated and ordered landscape with field systems, farmhouses, football pitches, housing estates, motorways, etc (Brophy 2004). While we must acknowledge our situatedness in a modern context, we do have at our disposal many techniques and theoretical approaches that help recreate and imagine (in the positive sense) the Neolithic landscape in more detail. However, this is where the divide between social archaeology and palaeoecology becomes most obvious, both try to reconstruct the landscape, but the methodologies and findings of each has little impact on the other. Chapman and Gearey (2000) highlight this from the palaeoecological side, showing how the palaeoecological literature (and the implications of its findings) has largely been ignored by landscape archaeologists working in the social archaeology tradition. Palaeoecology, on the other hand, while making great advances in studying past environments, has not been particularly concerned with the social context of past landscape inhabitations (McGlade 1995: 115). I believe the only way of proceeding in more fully understanding Neolithic experiences of landscape is by trying to close the gap between the approaches of palaeoecology and social archaeology. I explore this by examining the ways in which living in a wooded landscape (which palaeoecology has so successfully demonstrated for the Neolithic of Northwest Europe) has real physical and psychological effects on landscape cognition and understanding. Neolithic landscape archaeology needs to try to understand the ways in which the forested landscape would have affected Neolithic cosmologies and everyday practices, both of which would have been moulded by a routine, daily interaction with woodland and trees. I explore one archaeological landscape in particular, Strathmore in Tayside, Scotland, highlighting the opportunities that can be gained from considering woodland as an integral part of Neolithic landscapes and landscape understanding.

Strathmore is one of the richest agricultural areas in Scotland, comprising large expanses of rolling areas of well-drained soils. On this plateau lies the Cleaven Dyke, a 2km long bank barrow or cursus, and a series of timber structures (Barclay and Maxwell 1998). Two pollen cores

have been obtained from lochs in the vicinity giving a picture of landscape development in the area. Both of these cores indicate that the general pattern in the area in the Neolithic was relatively closed deciduous woodland, with some evidence for small-scale woodland clearance and pastoralism. In terms of incorporating this data into our concept of Neolithic landscapes it can be difficult to engage with this sort of evidence for what is quite an unfamiliar landscape in the modern context, but one way is to consider the ways in which woodland was used in the Neolithic. Excavations in 2002 in a flat arable field in Strathmore, at a site known as Carsie Mains, uncovered two Later Neolithic timber structures, which have stratigraphic relationships with tree pits. The evidence from these structures highlight the type of small-scale clearing episodes suggested in the pollen cores from the two nearby lochs. In this respect we can reconstitute the forested landscape in this locale and the ways in which humans altered the woodland of this place. With the construction of the timber monuments at Carsie, Neolithic people were manipulating the wooded landscape to create particular experiences of place and their relationships with and understanding of the forest environment appears to be reflected in the form of these monuments. By closing the gap between palaeoecology and social archaeology new forms of landscape archaeology and new forms of field practice can be developed that more adequately address the relationships between people and their environments.

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