



John Howe, Michael Wolfe, eds. *Inventing Medieval Landscapes: Senses of Place in Western Europe*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002. ix + 237 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-2479-0.



Reviewed by Richard C. Hoffmann (Department of History, York University, Toronto, Ontario, Canada)

Published on H-Environment (August, 2003)

Manipulating Meaning and Material in Medieval Europe

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Environmentalists and historians who think medieval Europe was a great wilderness, sparsely peopled by semi-savage Nature-haters, should read this collection of essays to correct their understanding. It will help them understand what beliefs are genuinely distinctive to present-day environmental relations. Medievalists who want to understand, and reconstruct, historic environmental relations should read this book to learn about a variety of approaches to understanding the past, and to puzzling about what is required for an accurate interpretation of environmental history, beyond the the modern declensionist paradigm. Medievalists with other priorities may react differently.

The collection began as a conference on medieval landscapes sponsored by the Medieval Studies Program at Pennsylvania State University in 1999. In their choice of the resulting book's title, *Inventing Medieval Landscapes: Senses of Place in Western Europe*, the editors highlight the strengths and commensurate hazards in any approach to studying human relations with the environ-

ment.

Howe and Wolfe define "landscape" as that aspect of the environment that is "subject to the human gaze and potentially subject to human modification" (p. 2). They thereby usefully blur the arbitrary dichotomy between wild and domesticated, giving due obeisance to Simon Schama, wilderness and artifice.[1] This opening encourages authors to demythologize a medieval forest or, in some instances, to further publicize their own and others' earlier researches to that effect. Instead of a dominant Nature, editors and authors emphasize human agency, for medieval Europeans really did participate in creating their own environments, both physically and by vesting with meaning.

As is articulated and demonstrated in this volume, a culturally focused concept of landscape also carries the commensurate risk of obscuring, even denying, a causal role in history for non-human forces, entities, and organisms, which I will collectively call "Nature." [2] The editors may not be fully aware of this danger. No discussion is given of the unintended consequences of human actions (i.e., human unawareness), nor of the cu-

mulative effect of past human decisions (and not only when a distinctive past is, as in Nicholas Howe's essay in this collection, part of a present consciousness. Consider, for example, late medieval Dutch building dykes pumping water out of their lands, which had sunk below sea level as a direct consequence of their own ancestors' drainage of raised peat bogs.[3]) As is here presented, the landscape approach leaves Nature a mere object of human culture or even a mere cultural construct. The idea that the medieval environment was made by human beings might have seemed sensible to those fifteenth- and sixteenth-century communities who killed witches to stop their using storms and cold weather to harm their neighbors.[4] But to victims of the Black Death (1347-51) or of the North Frisian "Grote Mandrank" ("Great Drowning") storm flood of 1362, to the Norse Greenlanders whose cattle starved when longer winters called for more hay than could grow in shorter summers, or to the Venetians who struggled against siltation of their lagoon, it may have seemed a less cogent explanation of their realities.

Yet as the subject shifts from an abstract medieval landscape to identifiable locations and actions, editors and authors alike commonly recognize the interplay of a co-adaptation between natural phenomena and human activities, mental or material. The subtitle's "sense of place" refers to a specific awareness. Sense of place may bear a tangential relationship to landscape through its focus on the identity produced when a particular site/location (itself a mix of the natural and the human—consider Venice without the lagoon, Ely without the fens) is apprehended through prevalent cultural assumptions. Not for the first time in this context, I am disappointed to find medievalists neglecting the foundation provided by William J. Brandt's minor classic, *The Shape of Medieval History: Studies in Modes of Perception*. Thinkers from Isidore of Seville, through the thirteenth-century Aristotelians, shared the expectation that discrete objects act discretely through their own unique forces and properties. "Nature" was, for thoughtful medievals, at one and the same time a collective quality and a procreative force manifest through and in particulars.[5]

Most contributors to the volume (and not only those interested in a sense of place) thus craft thoughtful case studies on the two-way relationship among human and non-human actors in the medieval past. The thematic multi-disciplinary (within the humanities) conference format beloved of Medieval Studies may mandate contributions from fields which bear peripherally on what other specialists may see as core issues. Yet Howe and

Wolfe improve on many editors by recalling that England covered but a small corner of medieval Europe: five of their eleven essays deal wholly or in greatest part with matters English, but others treat the Low Countries, Italy, Spain, and Ireland. Nevertheless, the coverage accurately reflects continued reluctance of Anglophone medievalists to exploit massive medieval sources with rich environmental content in numerous French, German, and Italian archives. It may simply be too comfortable to turn again to familiar published reproductions and texts in a native language.

Eventually it is the individual papers, each composed without real reference to editorial or other contributors' views, which draw readers to most collections of conference papers. The first four here, appropriately grouped as "managed landscapes," will all engage environmental historians. The inimitable Oliver Rackham, a historical botanist, provides a strong lead—blunt, erudite, witty—and distills important findings for an American audience possibly unfamiliar with his earlier publications.[6] "The Medieval Countryside of England: Botany and Archaeology" crosscuts the editorial introduction by demanding clear differentiation between attitudes and landscapes, while debunking the traditional pseudo-histories of an England first densely forested, then denuded of trees by medieval and early modern users of fuel and timber. Rackham reiterates the oft-ignored commonplace that woodland management involved selective cutting of tree species which normally regenerated from the root (coppice stools) and thus entailed sustainable use of certain woodlands. He reaffirms that most land in England had been cleared for agriculture long before, as well as during, the Middle Ages. Rackham notes traces of such active traditional intervention in archaeological, botanical, and folklore records from Ireland to Japan and rightly calls for research on especially the European continent to pose and answer questions comparable to those he has studied in England.

Rackham's argument is strongly seconded from the perspective of traditional hunting practices of medieval English and French elites in "*Veneurs s'en vont en Paradise: Medieval Hunting and the 'Natural' Landscape*." Hunting historian John Cummins shows how eighteenth-century English "parkland," mixing open spaces with scattered trees and denser patches of woodland, replicated no natural habitat but rather unknowingly reconstructed a landscape ideally suited to the late medieval chase of red deer and other sporting quarry. Clear diagrams and a description (less so blurry black and white facsimiles of medieval illustrations) show how this

diversity met the needs of the animal habitat, the technical requirements of known forms of hunting on horseback with dogs and a team of huntsmen, and the amenities expected by participants in this elite recreation. Subsequently enshrined in landscape painting, this structure became a model for estate owners and their architects.

Petra van Dam's essay "New Habitats for the Rabbit in Northern Europe, 1300-1600" turns to an exotic animal—*Oryctolagus cuniculus* spread into Europe from its North African native range during Roman and medieval times—which was advantaged less by human recreation than by demand for food and changing taste in fur. From England to as far east as Poland, medieval clearance of land for cereal cultivation opened the terrain for the burrowing rabbit while eliminating most of its non-human predators. Dutch coastal dunes, for instance, were cleared for farming before being eroded and set moving by late medieval marine advances. Such sandy soils, estate managers learned, were well suited to rear this tasty meat animal in protected colonies ("warrens") for easy harvest. People in middling and lower social ranks used expanding supplies of rabbit fur to replace that of squirrel, nearly extirpated in medieval western Europe by destruction of woodland habitat and possibly over harvested from Russian and Siberian boreal forests for the export trade.

Karl Appuhn provides an object lesson against over interpreting past activities and for remembering that it is past perceptions, not our own, which must explain past human actions as he probes thoughtfully into a survey of Venetian firewood supplies done by seasoned politician Marco Cornaro in 1442. Far from personifying a state set on vigilant supervision of local affairs and natural resources, Cornaro rarely raised his eyes from the canals which carried fuel to Venice to the woodlands which grew it. While Cornaro rightly inferred upstream deforestation from downstream siltation, his advice to replant so lacked both spatial and technical particulars as to be impossible to follow. Appuhn thus differentiates between mid-fifteenth century Venetian elites, with strong environmental consciousness regarding water but little grasp of the newly-acquired "terraferma," and their more deeply experienced, well-informed, and firmly managerial seventeenth-century successors. The argument is an important one which Appuhn could help readers more easily grasp by illustrating Cornaro's limited sense of place with explicit examples from his report,

The four essays grouped by the editors as "Created Landscapes" take two different directions, some explor-

ing how the physical became cultural or the cultural physical, others examining looser mental constructs. Nicholas Howe challenges readers to grapple with the complex relations of Anglo-Saxons to their landscapes, at once "inherited, invented, [and] imagined." He toys subtly with time in Anglo-Saxon literary (and our own) reimagining of the English landscape in and into the past, theirs in ours and others in theirs. Using the poetic imagery of *The Ruin*, Howe sets potentially all landscapes into the temporal dimension: once others were here, and they were different. In like manner Anglo-Saxon land charters, learned Latin texts full of vernacular place names, and perambulations of boundaries lent cultural identity to particular physiographic space. And finally, in certain poetic settings literary personae imagined richly detailed but impossible landscapes as a way to envisage their own internal isolation and crisis. Howe's essay may be a model for linking specific medieval texts to firm environmental understanding and sense of place.

In contrast, Thomas F. Glick uses mostly the non-verbal evidence of field archaeology to elucidate settlement patterns in "Tribal Landscapes of Islamic Spain." After sharply delineating the elitist administrative model of traditional historiography, Glick assembles local studies from the most recent two decades to show how rural communities (*alquerías*) in Andalusia, Majorca, and other regions of dense and especially early medieval Muslim populations grouped themselves not around castles or other seats of authority but rather in close relation to water sources and irrigation systems which peasants themselves managed. Glick further speculates that these clan-based rural irrigation societies, and not urban and suburban *huertas* (irrigated zones of intensified horticulture), were the first Iberian adopters of crops originating in southwest Asia and India (the so-called medieval Muslim "Green Revolution").^[7] If so, the distinctive eleventh-century Andalusi writers on agronomy associated with royal patrons in Seville, Granada, and Toledo, may represent less an original source of innovation than an adaptation to urban needs of older peasant-based knowledge.

Janina M. Safran takes a different approach to Andalusi landscapes. "From Alien Terrain to the Abode of Islam" contrasts the apprehension of the Iberian Peninsula in two accounts of the eighth-century Muslim conquest, one dating from the troubled ninth century and the other from the confidently successful tenth. Andalusi native Ibn Habib (790-853), a lawyer and prolific writer, compiled many historical traditions into a universal history, *Ta'rikh*, the first work to treat of the conquest.

By his telling, Muslim conqueror Musa Ibn Nusayr led an expedition through an uncanny landscape filled with demons, “djinn,” and strange idols. Safran links the author’s historical and geographical perceptions with his own apocalypticism as well as the social and political upheavals in ninth-century al-Andalus. In contrast, a century later the peninsula was enjoying prosperity and cultural florescence under the authoritative caliph ‘Abd al-Rahman III when an unidentifiable courtier narrated its past in *Akhbar majmu’a fi fath al-Andalus* (*Collected reports on the conquest of al-Andalus*). This work specified the acquisition of named cities from defeated Christian authorities and connected well-known Muslim sites to their prior histories. Now-confident eighth-century Muslims bedazzled their adversaries. Were Safran to apply Nicholas Howe’s consideration of time and the vernacular to especially the latter text might she further illuminate an Andalusian sense of place?

Bridget Ann Henisch finds created landscapes in the private (i.e., enclosed) gardens depicted in illuminated manuscripts, almost exclusively as painted in late medieval Flanders. Henisch asserts that in medieval gardens human ideals, especially the image of scriptural Paradise, shaped nature into a different reality. The one concrete physical garden to which she refers, however, is the French king’s palace garden in Paris, as depicted in the background of the June calendar for the *TrÃ’s Riches Heures* of the Duc de Berri. Many landscape historians might be reluctant so to reify “the medieval garden” from a single culturally and temporally limited genre of source. Referring then only to medieval paintings of small formal gardens—and not to the serious iconographic issues raised in all medieval illuminations—Henisch summarizes their distinctive features: enclosures, gardeners, tasks, tools, design elements, and the limited variety of identifiable plant species. Just two of the pictures referred to are reproduced (in black and white) and those are not expressly subjected to analysis.

It is difficult to ascertain precisely what differentiates the final three chapters as “Imagined Landscapes” from “Created Landscapes,” unless the former are to be thought entirely unrealized. Yet the articles by Howe, Safran, and Henisch just mentioned certainly did consider imaginations and, at least, the first in the final group works from a material and cultural reality. In “Landscape, Gender, and Ethnogenesis in Pre-Norman Invasion Ireland,” Lisa M. Bitel argues that the view of Irish historical tradition set forth in the twelfth-century *Lebor GabÃjla Árenn* (*Book of the Taking of Ireland*) made women essential connectors of people to landscapes and

history. Tales of female leadership in the layered myths of successive invaders gaining control of Ireland served to memorialize natural and cultural sites. Kinship in Irish tradition created territorial divisions by metaphorical collation of land and women. While *Lebor GabÃjla* used these means to fit earlier Irish history into general European myths of expansion, the imminent arrival and conquest of Ireland by late twelfth-century Anglo-Norman invaders was, in fact and in subsequent mythic representation, an act of male aggression.

Medieval use of time and space is examined by Laura L. Howes in “Narrative Time and Literary Landscapes in Middle English Poetry,” which interestingly joins literary evidence with both imaginary depictions and real medieval towns and estate gardens. The two miniatures here are clearly reproduced (despite the lack of original color) and effectively integrated into her argument. Movement and vision were keyed to walking and riding pace and perspective, so medieval people (again considered largely as Anglo-French elites) both presented and apprehended landscapes on a human scale as successive partial ground-level views. Like Karl Appuhn’s insistence on the historical validity of past perceptual frameworks, Howes provides salutary corrective to modern reliance on maps and other overhead or holistic perspectives. Her ideas on environmental perception deserve extension and testing in such multidisciplinary contexts as, for example, the famous twelfth-century guides for pilgrims to Santiago, Rome, or Jerusalem; early cartography; and the organized sequence of places in repetitive rent and tax books.

Co-editor John Howe ends the collection with “Creating Symbolic Landscapes: Medieval Development of Sacred Space,” where he both critiques and extends his own 1997 article “The Conversion of the Physical World: The Creation of a Christian Landscape.”[8] Having then emphasized the Christian “baptism” of pagan holy sites, Howe now establishes active medieval Christian engagement with making sacred places of no prior distinction. The lives of saints describe the selection of natural locations to match the literary model of the “locus amoenus” (lovely place) for a house of prayer or, alternatively, the blighted or solitary “locus horribilis” to test the will and energy of those intending to construct a religious community. Places where people gathered for religious celebration and ritual, such as pilgrimage destinations or great churches, also became what Mircea Eliade has called “sacred centres,” identified in practice as linking the human and the divine. The formation of a Christian topography in medieval Europe (like that of

a Muslim topography in al-Andalus or an Anglo-Saxon in “Engla lande”) was an essential creative act for landscapes which local inhabitants and visitors still experience today. Howe wisely points out the artificiality in most medieval religious assertions of “wilderness” before the site became “sacred”, [9] but might here further integrate his own collection by explicitly engaging issues from the introduction, the chapter by Oliver Rackham, and others.

Notes:

[1]. Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (New York: Knopf, 1995).

[2]. The general issue of a historical role for Nature has been reopened with reference to U.S. history by Ted Steinberg, “Down to Earth: Nature, Agency, and Power in History,” *American Historical Review*, 107:3 (June 2002), pp. 798-820, with a subsequent exchange of views in the on-line AHR Forum: www.historycooperative.org/journals/ahr/forum.

[3]. For brief discussions see William H. TeBrake, “Hydraulic Engineering in the Netherlands during the Middle Ages” in Paolo Squatriti, ed., *Working with Water in Medieval Europe: Technology and Resource Use* (Leiden, Boston, Koln: Brill, 2000), pp. 104-117; and Petra J.E.M van Dam, “Sinking Peat Bogs: Environmental Change in Holland, 1350-1550,” *Environmental History*, 6 (2001), pp. 32-45.

[4]. Wolfgang Behringer, “Weather, Hunger and Fear: Origins of the European Witch-Hunts in Climate, Society and Mentality,” *German History*, 13 (1995), pp. 1-27,

and “Climatic Change and Witch-Hunting: The Impact of the Little Ice Age on Mentalities,” in *Climatic Variability in Sixteenth-century Europe and its Social Dimension*, ed. Christian Pfister, Rudolf BrÄ;zdil and RÄ¼diger Glaser (Boston: Kluwer, 1999), pp. 335-351.

[5]. William J. Brandt, *The Shape of Medieval History: Studies in Modes of Perception* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1965), notably pp. 33-42.

[6]. Oliver Rackham, *Trees and Woodland in the British Landscape* (London: Dent, 1976, 1993); *Ancient Woodland: Its History, Vegetation and Uses in England* (London: E. Arnold, 1980); *The History of the Countryside* (London: Dent, 1986).

[7]. Compare Andrew Watson, *Agricultural innovation in the Early Islamic World: the Diffusion of Crops and Farming Techniques* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

[8]. In James K. Muldoon, *Varieties of Religious Conversion in the Middle Ages* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997), pp. 63-78.

[9]. Indeed not only the twelfth-century Cistercians to whom Howe refers in detail in his note 33 imagined or created “wilderness” amidst or in place of humanized landscapes, monastic communities were doing likewise at least as far back as the eighth century. See Chris Wickham, “European Forests in the Early Middle Ages: Landscape and Land Clearance,” in *Land and Power in Early Medieval Italy*, ed. Chris Wickham (London: British School at Rome, 1994), pp. 155-199.

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Citation: Richard C. Hoffmann. Review of Howe, John; Wolfe, Michael, eds., *Inventing Medieval Landscapes: Senses of Place in Western Europe*. H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. August, 2003.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=8075>

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