

## **Beyond the Pale: some thoughts on the later Prehistory of the Breamish Valley**

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### **Introduction**

The River Breamish drains due east from the Cheviot massif then turns north, joining the River Till before it meanders across the Milfield Basin and thus into the Tweed below Coldstream. The Breamish is one of several radiating valleys draining this geologically complex, dynamic upland landscape and is perhaps the most accessible to archaeologists and public alike. Rising from the granite just south of Cheviot Hill itself, the river dissects the outer andesite plateau as a glacial meltwater channel, passing through the tiny settlements of Linhope, Greenside Hill and Hartside. Above Ingram, where the valley opens out on to its flood plain, the river follows an outcrop of pink volcanic pyroclast. Apart from the inner granitic plateau the Cheviots do not support heather and, like the other main valleys, the Breamish is covered with machair-type grass, the underlying andesite having a high calcium content (Robson 1976). Excepting the tills, alluvial and colluvial deposits of the valley bottoms, the soils of the lower part of the valley are freely draining rich brown earths. The valley is reached by turning west off the A697, the modern Morpeth to Coldstream trunk road, at Powburn. Formerly this was the Devil's Causeway, the Roman road which ran from the Wall to Berwick.

The modern economy of the valley relies heavily on sheep farming with some beef cattle, and arable in the flood plain. A number of post-war conifer plantations, now recognised as generally inappropriate in this landscape, still litter many slopes. The tourist infrastructure is weak (this is one of the principle charms of the Cheviot valleys) and the population base (something like 2,000 people live in the Northumberland National Park which covers most of the Cheviots and Kielder Forest) very low. Although the economy may appear to have remained stable for most of the post-medieval period, any notion of a sleepy rural idyll should be dismissed. Within the last fifty years the widespread adoption of off-road vehicles, allowing farmers to live at low levels and travel daily to the hills, has irreversibly altered the settlement pattern of the uplands, with most of the high farms and cottages being abandoned. More recently and controversially, attempts to extract gravel from the flood plain at Ingram (just outside the National Park boundary) have been thwarted by a spirited campaign mounted by the local community in which the archaeological value of the valley has featured prominently. Some farmers now view the archaeology on their land as more of a social and political asset than a hindrance and for other members of the local community archaeology clearly reinforces corporate ties with the landscape. In this context the National Park has an ambivalent role: whilst it may restrict the freedom of landowners and businesses, it provides core support for communities and attracts high levels of subsidy and grant aid to the area.

Although the valley has been studied and recognised as a historically important area since at least the middle of the 19th century, its full archaeological potential has hardly been realised and the effects of this are not only academic and cultural. An ill-informed county planning process has allowed development in sensitive areas to proceed with little or no archaeological intervention

(there is a lobby to transfer these planning powers to the Park Authority). It is tempting to suggest that the Cheviot valleys are inadequately understood simply because of their geographical isolation from the major sources of academic and financial interest; there is a running joke among archaeologists in Northumberland that Hadrian's Wall was built to prevent archaeological funding from passing to the north. Whilst there is some historical truth to this notion, it masks more significant factors in the archaeological neglect of the Cheviot valleys. To begin with, the character of the archaeological landscape of the valleys has promoted the use of a narrow range of investigative techniques which, while successful by their own terms, have deflected attention from complex issues which are only now being exposed. Secondly, it is possible to identify a latitudinal bigotry which has coerced regional research priorities into searching for confirmation of better known trends in the south of Britain, instead of looking for distinct regional characteristics in the archaeological record: we have had a reflective, rather than a pro-active, agenda. This bigotry has recently been challenged for the Neolithic period (Frodsham 1996) and has long been dismissed for the early medieval period, but Northumberland north of the Wall is still very much the Cinderella when it comes to later Prehistory and the Romano-British period. It is often difficult to convince funding bodies, dedicated to the fulfilment of detailed research agendas, that large amounts of money are needed in these regions simply to acquire enough information to construct a research agenda.

Recent fieldwork conducted within the framework of the Ingram and Upper Breamish Valley Landscape Project (Adams 1993; 1994; 1995; Adams and Carne 1996; 1997), conducted as a joint venture by Northumberland National Park, the University of Durham and Northumberland Archaeological Group (NAG) has shown that a diverse and pluralistic approach to this sort of landscape may lead to radical interpretations which owe little to the concept of a quiet prehistoric backwater.

### **Monument valley**

One of the principle reasons for the relative archaeological neglect of the valley has been, ironically, the sheer density of visible upstanding remains dating principally from the late prehistoric and medieval periods (it has become rather fashionable to attempt to understand landscape change without excavating). Of the nearly fifty so-called hillforts within the National Park, ranging from the vast Yeavinger Bell to what are little more than defended farms, nearly a dozen can be found within view of the Breamish. There are thousands of cairns; there are hut circles, scooped settlements, linear earthworks of various kinds, deserted medieval villages, cultivation terraces, shielings and long houses. Most impressive to early archaeologists was the 'Celtic town' of Greaves Ash at Linhope, where the modern road winding up the valley finally runs out. This extraordinary settlement, comparable with stone built, cellular sites like Chysauster in Cornwall but very little else in the north of England, was investigated as early as the middle of the 19th century by George Tate of the Berwickshire Naturalists' Field Club (Tate 1862). Tate also excavated at many other smaller sites in the valley and he must have been hard pressed to decide where next to insert his spade, such is the richness of the archaeological record here.

Leaving aside briefly the work of Hogg and Jobey, the most significant contribution to an understanding of the valley has been the South-East Cheviots Survey undertaken by the Royal Commission (RCHME) at the beginning of this decade. This unsurpassed field survey, as yet unpublished, tripled the number of known sites (using the term in its traditional sense) over an area of 66 square kilometres, and provided the most powerful incentive for the creation of the current project: a palimpsest of

settlement, agriculture, burial practice and land division that offers the chance to create a landscape history for the valley without having to resort to, as it were, invasive surgery.

Herein lies the problem. A very, very tiny proportion of this landscape has been excavated using modern methods. Much of Tate's work cannot now even be located. Hogg confined his attentions to the anomalous settlement on Ingram Hill (Hogg 1942; 1956). Jobey, whose contribution to the archaeology of Northumberland remains unique, excavated at both Ingram Hill and Brough Law (Jobey 1971). Both worked within the English fieldworking tradition of investigating enclosed settlements (though not exclusively). Other workers in the Cheviots have also frequently concentrated on settlement evidence, trying to establish chronologies through absolute dating techniques. If one looks at the train of inference in much of this work, there is a heavy reliance both on small numbers of dated examples, and on the use of formal analogy to create functional, spatial and chronological frameworks for the region. These in turn are referential, relying on better established frameworks which exist for southern England and, to some extent, Scotland.

Two examples will suffice. There has, firstly, been almost no interest taken in a particular class of field monument, the so-called robbed out cairn. There has been no debate over this obscure form because it is always, and rather conveniently, regarded as a poor or damaged example of a well understood monument. There are a great many cairns in the Cheviots, many of them excavated within the last 150 years but many hundreds more probably not. Some of them are field clearance cairns, some of them form part of cairn fields, and some of them are recognised as having structured funerary relationships with the prehistoric landscape which they inhabit. Poorly formed, irregular mounds with a clear cultural origin are quite often given the ascription 'robbed' or damaged. To the author's knowledge only three of these have deliberately been excavated under modern conditions: one by NAG at Wether Hill (Topping 1996), and two by the author at Turf Knowe overlooking Ingram village (Adams 1994; 1995; Adams and Carne 1996). The latter was excavated in 1994 because, firstly, it was expected to provide a useful testing ground for developing excavation techniques in this difficult environment and, secondly, because it was part of the brief for the project to re-evaluate inherited assumptions about such field monuments. The monument in question has turned out to be quite unlike any other funerary site so far excavated in the Cheviots: a three-armed cairn (see Figure 1) 'decorated' with pink pyroclastic boulders and associated with three cists dating from the Late Neolithic up to the Iron Age or Anglian period, with possibly other mortuary rituals reflected in ancillary structures. We must ask ourselves whether some of the many apparently poor examples of known monuments which have been identified during field survey may turn out to be good examples of a type of monument so far unrecognised in the area. In other words, does the surveyor's need to rely on formal taxonomy risk obscuring the true diversity of monuments, and therefore behaviour, in such landscapes? The ascription 'robbed out', as in not worth examining, as in of a type we already know about, begins to appear dangerous and highlights the risk of adopting unsupported morphological taxonomies. Indeed, since the excavations on Turf Knowe other fieldworkers have begun to identify similar three-pointed cairns along the east side of the Cheviots. Crucially, they appear to have consistent alignments with calendrical features such as solstice sunrise and sunset (Philip Deakin, pers. comm.)

The second example further reflects the taxonomic bent of much survey work: the ring-groove to ring ditch house transition. The best synthesis of this problem is that by Mercer and Tipping (1994), who argue quite convincingly for the primacy of the former construction technique in the

Borders region but who also point out that on a first principles basis the evidence is flimsy, especially when it relies on few dated examples and a great deal of interpretation of relationships between superimposed structures. Much printer's ink has been spilt in the cause of resolving this and other similar arguments (for example, the validity of the celebrated Hownam sequence), and the outcome is consistently the same: more excavation needs to take place to resolve such questions.

The point here is not to challenge the inference *per se*, but to challenge the desirability of making such inferences at all in our present state of knowledge. The visible landscape, extraordinary as it is, may be sending out false signals. Not only do we have to be aware of a series of cultural and environmental processes producing similar visible forms from quite different origins; we also have to deal with the idea that even where detailed palimpsests of visible features survive, they may be overlying quite distinct buried landscapes whose subtly makes the author extremely nervous about existing interpretive frameworks for the region.

### **Marginal theory, or a theory of margins**

There are many good reasons for no longer concentrating excavation resources on settlements in the Cheviots. Firstly, they are the only field monuments to have already been examined in any detail - no doubt, in time, someone will excavate enough examples of round houses to create a diachronic model of settlement types. Secondly, most settlements of the visible upstanding kind in the Cheviots are scheduled as ancient monuments, so getting access to them is difficult and time consuming. Thirdly, and most importantly, there seems to be a fair chance that settlements will not offer the archaeologist the full range of dynamics which we are interested in understanding for the late prehistoric or indeed any other period. This lack of dynamics is caused by two main factors. One is that continuity of activity in a single enclosed space may result in much destruction of evidence of previous activities, and an archaeological record which may be misleadingly complex. The other is that the fact of continuity reflects the most stable element of a set of social and economic relationships, possibly internally and probably externally. Relationships between broadly contemporary communities, such as those at Wether Hill, Middle Dean and Brough Law, may not have explicit expression in settlement evidence but, as will be seen, there is some evidence that such relationships do find expression at their mutual boundaries. It is already reasonably established that throughout much of prehistory such dynamics were expressed by territorial aspirations played out at the margins of social units using techniques of land division and funerary rite (see, for example, Spratt 1979; Fleming 1988). What better places to look for the full range of dynamics?

Close to Ingram there is a prime case for investigation: the plateau on which Brough Law and Middle Dean hillforts (A on Plate 1) sit, bounded on three sides by water and on the fourth, to the east, by the scarp that effectively marks the end of the Cheviot foothills above Ingram. These two forts (defended homesteads may be a better term) occupied exclusive territories in the Iron Age: both have associated (probably later) scooped settlements. These territories, otherwise bounded by topographic or drainage features, join along the crest of the plateau, where a series of cairns are linked, in join-the-dot fashion, by a low linear earthwork not unlike a Dartmoor 'reave' (B to C on Plate 1), which was until a few years ago thought to be the remains of a 19th century pasture boundary. Towards the east end of this boundary, where it dips off the edge of the scarp to run into Ingram village, the earthwork runs between two knolls, both of them artificially enhanced, of which the southern knoll, Turf Knowe itself (D on Plate 1), has been excavated over the last three seasons. The northern knoll (E on Plate 1; again current taxonomic fashion calls it a field clearance

cairn or a 'robbed' cairn) has also now been excavated: 2m across at the surface, it has a diameter of 10m beneath the turf and, although it has actually been damaged, this damage was primarily caused during Iron Age ploughing activities. It is structurally complex, involving at least two distinct phases of cremation deposits separated by ploughing episodes.

The boundary, Turf Knowe Dyke, as it appears between these two knolls, presented a strong case for examination. If, as it appeared, there was an association between knolls, funerary rites and the boundary, then there ought to be evidence to show either that the boundary was older than previously thought, or that it had predecessors. What was not anticipated (though perhaps it should have been) was that not only were there predecessors to the visible boundary, but that there was more than 1.5m of stratified deposits surviving below it, and that ten major phases of land use change would be detected within 40cm of the surface (Figure 2). So far, and with further excavation, analysis and specialist results to assimilate, it is possible to say only the following. There was activity on the north knoll in the Mesolithic and sporadically during the Neolithic. By the Early Bronze Age (whatever that means in the Cheviots) the Turf Knowe area had become a focus for funerary activities in the form of cremation, certainly, and perhaps inhumation and excarnation. Turf Knowe itself contained no primary cremations but did contain food vessels; the north knoll has yielded at least 10 cremations. The location of two closely adjacent sites of very different form and probably function suggests that the site was of some spiritual importance, involving funerary and perhaps calendrical ritual. It is impossible to determine if a physical boundary was coexistent with these activities. There is a gap in our knowledge, yet to be investigated, until evidence appears for agriculture on the site at an as yet undated time. This takes the form of cord rig - deeply cut (perhaps spade cut) narrow rigs running obliquely to the slope.

The cord rig cultivation was superseded, apparently, by a form of narrow rig cultivation running across it at right angles. The rig was wider and probably cut by a plough. This phase must date to the prehistoric period. It is followed by the insertion of a fence line in the form of stakes driven into a defunct furrow. This implies either subdivision of an arable plot or a change to stock control. Shortly afterwards, and indeed while the fence is still standing, a low wall of boulders is constructed on a roughly east-west axis which reflects the earlier cord rig. This wall can be identified as the continuation of a field wall which is visible running upslope from Turf Knowe cairn, and which encloses arable plots of a rigid size. Again, this phase must belong to the prehistoric period. Subsequently, a stone structure is butted on to the north side of the wall, not at right angles to it, but obliquely set so that its long axis points directly at the centre of Turf Knowe cairn itself. The structure is long and narrow, and sits precisely over the earlier narrow rig, with its west wall directly over the now defunct fence. Internally, there are three or four opposed pairs of post settings, and a larger pair of post holes at the northern, 'entrance' end. Centrally there is a pit which contains the largest (it still isn't big) assemblage of late prehistoric pottery from the site so far, and a number of very small fragments of cremated bone and charcoal. There are ancillary, rather scrappy and possibly abandonment related structures to one side. The uppermost stones of the walls are within 2cm of the modern ground surface and yet there is no topographic trace of them and the underlying andesite rock has rendered geophysical prospection of little use here. Subsequent to the abandonment of this structure, and to the south, a series of complex soils are pierced by ardmarks and a number of stake holes parallel to the east-west wall. These directly underlie the only feature which is visible here from the surface, namely the existing boundary wall.

A short chronology for many of these phases is very tempting, given that successive axes are self-referential, and in particular given the apparently direct replacement of some features with others, albeit radically. Enough material has been obtained for proposed radiocarbon analysis to make speculation on precise dates spurious, but the context is decidedly late prehistoric. The stone structure which sits on a boundary but faces a cairn poses a big interpretive problem, but the author is rather forced into a funerary interpretation, and the possibility of an excarnation platform ought to be considered. Much more interesting in a sense is the vindication of the belief in boundary dynamics, especially given that another 1.1m of deposits have yet to be examined here. The low walls have no defensive or preventive function and certainly the earlier version marks the boundary of a small arable plot as well as, perhaps, the boundary of the larger farms at Middle Dean and Brough Law. The latest, visible boundary has also been examined in several other places and it has been found that just below the shoulder of the scarp its form changes from a single line of boulders on a simple bank with a simple ditch, to a proper wall which rises onto the plateau (F on Plate 1). This wall certainly was stock proof. In addition, at this juncture the smooth grass of Turf Knowe changes to coarser, tussocky grass, and there is evidence of a fence line at right angles to the wall running along the contour. This change indicates the limits of clearance of stone for arable purposes. So we have here a wall which divides two farms - of more or less symbolic form where it divides arable land, and of stock proof form where it divides upland pasture. What date we assign to it is another matter, although it seems reasonable to infer that it dates to a period when Middle Dean and Brough Law were still separate social and economic entities. That is not to say, of course, that the 'stock proof' section of the boundary could not have had a symbolic function. The already good evidence that the boundary underwent major modifications suggests that the boundary itself was used as a tool for social and economic expressions of inter-community relations. There is a very strong sense that further excavation of analogous archaeological and topographic areas will provide evidence for the dynamics which were being played out between neighbouring (apparently quite co-operative) groups in the late prehistoric period and beyond.

### **Airplanes and pollen grains**

The Turf Knowe excavations are unlikely to be unique. At Wether Hill excavations by NAG under the direction of Peter Topping (Topping in Adams 1994; 1995; Adams and Carne 1996; 1997) have shown equally clearly that evidence for substantial landscape developments exist where there is no surface trace. It is quite obvious, though, that archaeologists will be hard pressed to do justice to the below ground archaeology of the Breamish Valley, however many seasons they continue to excavate. Hence the heavy reliance on surface survey which, with its faults and viewed with proper scepticism, and when integrated with excavation to produce a multi-dimensional approach, is still a potent tool for dealing with this landscape. While such evidence undervalues many of the subtleties revealed by excavation, it does allow certain types of analysis to proceed quite reliably. Gill Ferrell's recent work in the Cheviots is a reminder that some settlement evidence, such as 'hillforts' and scooped settlements, is unlikely to escape detection in upland areas (Ferrell 1992; 1995). Using rank-size analysis she has been able to characterise the hierarchical diversity (or, rather, lack of it) of Cheviot settlement in the late prehistoric period.

Nevertheless, the work of Tim Gates has now disabused us of the notion that large sites cannot escape detection in the Cheviot valleys. To the south and south-west of Ingram village two new sites have been discovered as parchmark sites. One of these, a 90m square rectilinear enclosure at Ingram South, has been briefly examined by excavation across its two ditches (Adams and Carne 1996),

and been shown to comprise a complex and provoking series of deposits. Although it seems unlikely that there are large numbers of similar monuments still waiting to be discovered, there certainly appear to be gaps in the settlement record (especially the predecessors of the widespread palisaded enclosures of the 1st millennium BC). These settlements, unless they never existed at all, must lie beneath either later settlements, later agricultural zones, or colluvial deposits probably in turn caused by agriculture. Finding these will require a specific programme of trial excavation and detailed ground survey quite outside the limited scope of the current project.

So far the search for an environmental jackpot in the valley has proved frustrating. Two seasonal lakes which lie just to the south-west of Middle Dean fort have been sampled for pollen analysis and although a peat core of 1.5m was retrieved its potential has now been shown to be limited. More encouraging is the use of a Fourier Transform Infra-red Spectroscope (FTIRS), a portable machine which analyses soils for a wide range of organic and mineral compounds and offers the chance to 'fingerprint' the soils in the valley. Richard Tipping's pioneering pollen work at Powburn and in the Bowmont Valley (Tipping 1992; Mercer and Tipping 1994) has shown that perseverance and opportunism eventually pay off in these landscapes. Given the lack of continuous peat deposition in the outer plateau of the Cheviot Hills, only rare exposures of buried peat, in quarries as at Powburn, or in erosion faces of streams and rivers, offer really good evidence of the interaction between environment and culture since the mesolithic period. Two distinct trends emerge, indicating intensive periods of soil erosion between the 1st millennium BC and the first part of the first millennium AD. These are generally now associated with intensification and/or expansion of arable practices along the sides of the Cheviot valleys. The second of these phases, which appears to have begun in the late prehistoric period and, perhaps, continued into the modern era, has implications for our interpretation of some of the radical landscape changes now being exposed by excavation at Turf Knowe, Ingram South and Wether Hill.

### **The worm forgives the plough**

The author is on record (Adams 1996) as having offered the opinion that some of the visible cultivation evidence which is widespread in these valleys, and which has almost always been ascribed to the medieval period, may belong to later prehistory. It seems only fair to question the desirability of making such inferences, having done so already in the case of hut circle morphology. Certainly the inference is speculative, for the burden of academic proof would require much more excavation to have taken place than has so far been the case, but the speculation is by no means idle. There are two reasons for speculating publicly on this matter. First, and primarily, because there is quite a lot of spatial, and now some excavated, evidence which gives rise to reasonable doubt in the ascription of all the cultivation to a medieval date. Second, because there is a prevalent view in some quarters that most of the archaeology of the Cheviots is understandable within a traditional chronological and cultural framework, and that the only important questions left to be asked concern detailed settlement chronologies. Emphatically this is wrong. Excavation shows that such assumptions are inherently dangerous: tautological often, and based on an inadequate concept of landscape formation.

Within two years there will be solid evidence either way on the matter of late prehistoric rigged cultivation. It may turn out that cord rig was the only form of rigged cultivation to have been adopted in the Cheviots and elsewhere before the medieval period, but given that the existence of prehistoric terraced cultivation is generally accepted it seems unwise to discount the possibility of other forms, such as the traces of narrow rig excavated in a decidedly prehistoric context at Turf

Knowe. Definite prehistoric field systems are now being exposed in the Breamish Valley and, although there are enormous technological, economic and cultural implications arising from a developed rig system, this is not sufficient reason for discounting the possibility without investigation.

Even now, some observations are worth making. The soils of the outer plateau are rich brown earths. They are free draining and fertile, and the waterproof qualities of the machair type grass means that leaching is limited. They are, however, thin. Developing over andesite brash they form a topsoil which may be as little as 5-10cm thick. The brash itself, which can be over 1m thick, contains a matrix of brown earth which, if winnable, increases the depth of topsoil available for cultivation. The number of clearance cairns which litter the region testify to the amount of effort required to develop these soils for agriculture, but also to the fact that such effort was indeed being made over a very long and sustained period. So too does the recently excavated evidence from the north knoll at Turf Knowe, where andesite boulders have been scored deeply during the process of developing an adequate depth of soil. A plough capable of such action must have been enormously heavy (a modern steel plough would simply bounce), but since its sole function would have been rather like that of a modern mole plough (which, as its name suggests, burrows beneath the topsoil to break up subsoil beneath), rather than that of a mould board turning a heavy sod, there is no technological reason for doubting its existence. Where, on the same site, narrow rigs survive, they do so as the result of the last arable event: they are not rigs developed by ploughing as such, for there is simply a depth of topsoil, perhaps 40cm, within which there are ridges. This suggests that the rigs were developed by earthing after the brash had been sufficiently broken and cleared. This is essentially a lazy bed system. The rig, whose medieval purpose could be many and various, had one essential function in this system, to increase the depth of soil. There may have been other, sociological reasons for this system, to do with delineating arable plots of specific size, and this is an aspect which will be investigated in forthcoming seasons. Cord rig may have been engineered for the same purpose. A reliable date for the north knoll narrow rig ploughing has not yet been forthcoming, but suffice it to say that if it can be firmly associated with the sequence established for Turf Knowe Dyke, some chronological re-evaluation will have to take place.

## **Conclusion**

A project which gives rise to speculation before its conclusion carries inherent risks, but these are outweighed by the dangers of allowing a narrow range of evidence to exclusively determine our view of the late prehistory of the Cheviots. So far the project has demonstrated that the landscape of the Breamish Valley was undergoing radical change in later prehistory, involving successive agricultural regimes played out in a boundary zone of some spiritual and economic significance. And yet, such is the vastness of the information potential of this landscape that even quite fundamental questions about its history remain to be posed, let alone resolved. The techniques which have been adopted to look at macro-scale landscape must now be complemented by the only technique which can resolve questions of dynamics on a smaller scale: intensive, selective excavation of interfaces between cultural, economic and social entities.

There will in the future be opportunities to evaluate the landscape archaeology of the region by reference to 'better' landscapes in the South of England, but at the moment the playing field is not nearly level enough for it to be a fair game. Only when archaeologists begin to question whether Wessex archaeology needs to be reconsidered within the context of the northern regions will it be clear that archaeologists working beyond the pale have succeeded in their aim of re-evaluating this neglected landscape.



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