The English Landscapes and Identities project

C. Gosden, A. Cooper, M. Creswell, C. Green, L. ten Harkel, Z. Kamash, L. Morley, J. Pybus & X. Xiong

Introduction

This short note introduces the English Landscapes and Identities project. Its remit is to look at the long-term history of the English landscape from 1500 BC to AD 1086, combining evidence on landscape features, such as track-ways, fields and settlements, with the distribution of metalwork. The project examines a crucial period of English landscape history from the early days of the settled agricultural landscape to the medieval world, which was directly ancestral to that of modernity. Working from the Bronze Age to the early medieval period reveals great evidence of change, but also surprising continuity in terms of land divisions and forms of settlement. What is less clear is how this patterning relates to the types of artefacts deposited and the places in which they were deposited over this period. The project is not purely empirical and will develop theory concerning the relations between people and the material world, providing a model of value for attempts to understand landscapes and artefacts in other areas of Europe and beyond.

Two main outcomes are envisaged: a monograph and a website which will provide a search tool based on semantic web technology that can access the data at the basis of the project.

The project has received substantial funding from the European Research Council and runs from August 2011 to July 2016. The researchers on the project are Chris Gosden (principal applicant), Anwen Cooper (prehistory), Miranda Creswell (artist), Chris Green (GIS), Letty ten Harkel (early medieval), Zena Kamash (Roman period), Laura Morley (research coordination), John Pybus (semantic web), Xin Xiong (semantic web). More information is available on our website (http://www.arch.ox.ac.uk/englishlandscapes.html), blog (https://englaid.wordpress.com) and visual blog (http://visualenglaid.wordpress.com).

Material evidence and methods

The archaeological evidence base for the period 1500 BC to AD 1086 in England is extraordinarily rich (very possibly uniquely so in a European context), providing an exciting opportunity to link a number of important datasets in English archaeology. In particular the project can exploit:

1. English Heritage's National Mapping Programme (NMP) and Historic Landscape Characterisation programme .
2. The results of development-led excavations. Some 4500 of these have been taking place annually since 1990 and the largest projects cover 100ha or more, producing important 'landscape' results.
3. The Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS).
4. Historic Environment Records (HERs) based at a local (mainly county) level and holding a mass of detail of local archaeological work and its results.
5. Other key databases and information sources include the 40 000 Iron Age coins registered in the Celtic Coin Index, the Early Medieval Corpus of single coin finds, the English Heritage National Monuments Record, the Archaeology Data Service (ADS), and the Archaeological Investigations Project (AIP).

Working with a dataset of this size and complexity poses very considerable challenges (both intellectual and technical), but it also holds huge potential for examining landscape, material culture, and the relationships between the two, across a long period of time and at a variety of scales and levels of resolution, from broad-brush to very fine-grained. A key element of the project is work with the Oxford e-Research Centre to develop semantic web and database tools for gathering and interrogating large amounts of data. We are also interested in developing ways of presenting data visually and in engaging the public with our work. In both

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these areas the project artist, Miranda Creswell, is making a key contribution.

Important syntheses concerning the English landscape have recently emerged. Yates's work on Bronze Age field systems in southern England (2007) used the results of developer-funded archaeology to chart the establishment of a settled landscape around 1500 BC, its intensive use until the end of the late Bronze Age (800 BC) and its subsequent partial abandonment. Taylor (2007) collated information on some 28 000 Roman sites in England to distinguish between a western and north-western zone of small dispersed, enclosed settlements and a central and eastern area with nucleated settlement, enclosed field systems and track-ways, interspersed with more isolated farmsteads. Bradley's (2007) broad survey of Britain and Ireland from the start of the Neolithic to the end of the Iron Age has drawn on the 'grey literature' to identify hitherto unknown site types, to refine chronologies and highlight key trends. For the medieval period, Roberts and Wrathmell's (2000, 2002) work on the different settlement 'provinces' of England has had a large impact on the study of settlement patterns in their landscape. Although each study focuses on specific periods there are indications of longer-term continuities and broader patterns beneath the equally obvious variability. The field of landscape studies is extremely vibrant at present, and our project follows this impetus, seeking to gain a full and nuanced picture of broad trends as well as local variety.

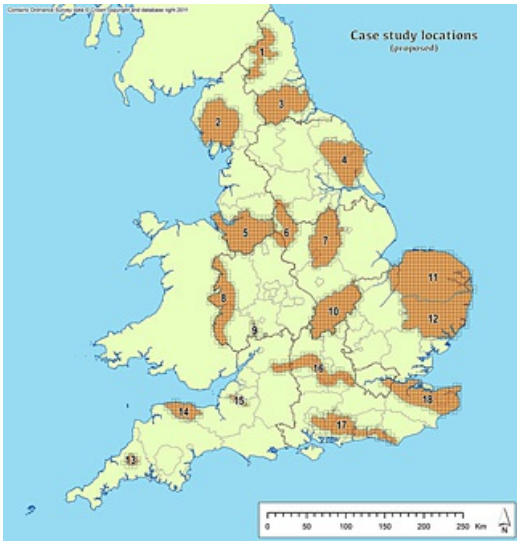


Figure 1. *Location of the case studies proposed in the English Landscapes and Identities project.*

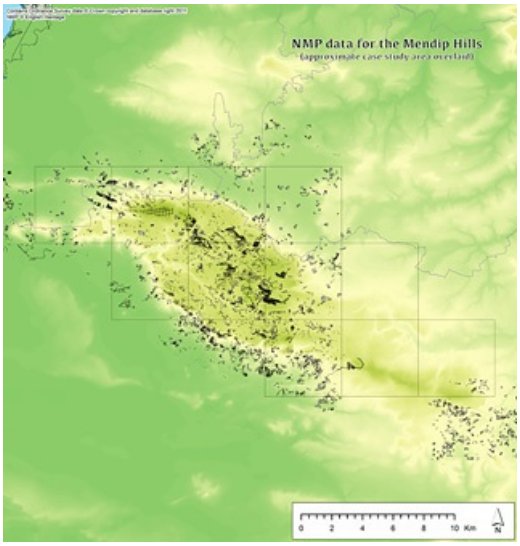


Figure 2. *Data provided from the National Mapping Programme (NMP) for the Mendip Hills region in south-western England.*

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The start of the project involves looking at patterns of landscape use and deposition across the country as a whole. Once we have established national patterns we will focus in 2012–2015 on a series of 18 case studies (Figure 1), spread fairly evenly across England and aiming to take in areas of the north, Midlands and south-west (Figure 2) that have not always been at the centre of archaeological thought. The English Landscape and Identities project, carried out in close collaboration with colleagues across England and bringing together the efforts of researchers in a variety of archaeological sectors, is poised to provide a synthesis of information on landscape and artefacts on an unprecedented scale.

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