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PHENOMENOLOGY AND THE MEGALITHS OF WALES: A DREAMING TOO FAR?

Summary. It is argued that the field data do not support the claims made by Tilley in his A Phenomenology of Landscape (1994) for intentional relationships between the placing of Welsh megalithic tombs and natural features of the landscape. The critique relates to sample quality, observational rigour and failure to examine alternative hypotheses concerning the siting factors involved in the placing of the tombs.

INTRODUCTION

The first part of Christopher Tilley's *A Phenomenology of Landscape: places, paths and monuments* (1994) consists of a stimulating and persuasive presentation of phenomenology ('the manner in which people experience and understand the world') as a mode of understanding landscape. Landscape is 'a cultural code for living, an anonymous "text" to be read and interpreted ... always sedimented with human experiences ... a signifying system ... a means of conceptual ordering that stresses relations' (p. 34). Drawing on those few ethnographic accounts which illuminate this point of view, Tilley urges us to view landscape as 'mythopoesis'; 'histories, discourses and ideologies are created and re-created through reference to the special affinity people have with an area of land, its topography, waters, rocks, locales, paths and boundaries' (p. 67). The best source material comes from Australia, from 'landscapes of the dreamtime'.

These perspectives might be expected to

provide insights into the 'sacred geography' of the north-west European Neolithic, especially the more 'mobile' early Neolithic increasingly postulated for Britain (see Whittle 1997 for further references). In chapters 3 and 4 Tilley turns to the landscapes of the megalithic tombs of western and south-east Wales, suggesting various significant relationships between the tombs and landscape features — mostly hills, prominent rock outcrops and watercourses. It is the purpose of this short article to suggest that, while the approach may be promising, the treatment of the field data is unconvincing, and has not improved our understanding of the sacred geography of the Welsh Neolithic.

SOUTH-WEST WALES

The megaliths of south-west Wales, which Tilley deals with in the third chapter of his book, are not a particularly good data set. They are diverse in character, as Tilley acknowledges (p. 90), and have been the

subject of considerable typological debate. Let us take the zone of relatively dense distribution to the north of the Preseli Hills, the most important area for Tilley's discussion. This area contains two tombs which are typologically eccentric by any standards — Bedd yr Anfanc and Cerrig y Gof (Barker 1992, 39–40, 21–22). Carreg Coitan, Lynch's 'most classic of all the Portal Dolmens' (1972, 69) failed upon excavation to produce a stone-hole where a missing portal stone should have stood (Barker 1992, 20). For Grimes (1936a, 132), Carreg Coitan had a simple polygonal chamber. According to Lynch (1972, 77) Llech y Dribedd, although clearly belonging to the portal dolmen tradition, would originally have lacked a closing slab, which makes it a rarity in Welsh terms. Trelyffaint, with its two capstones (Lynch 1972, 79) and Pentre Ifan, with its long cairn, add to the picture of diversity.

This raises two questions for Tilley's theories about landscape relationships. The heterogeneity of these tombs does not encourage the belief that their designers had a common mindset, for instance sharing a reverence for Carn Ingli, as Tilley suggests (p. 105). And does the diversity of tombs not suggest that their creators may have been concerned at least as much with monumental design, with the rituals surrounding the ancestral bones, as with landscape relationships? Then there is the problem of differential site destruction. Daniel commented that 'a very large number of doubtful sites exist in Pembrokeshire' and that 'there is good evidence that a number of burial chambers in Pembrokeshire have been entirely destroyed' (1950, 203, 205). Barker's more recent inventory (1992) lists 31 definite, 15 probable, and 25 'lost' sites. The state of the surviving stone rows in the Preseli area supports this picture of extensive site destruction (e.g. Parc y Meirw, Gors

Fawr — Rees 1992, 42–43, 36–37). Tilley's sample size is small; it is only 26, or 21 if we exclude the five 'outlier' sites outside the main north Pembrokeshire distribution. In the abstract, numbers may not matter. However, in his essay, Tilley (p. 94) emphasises the relationship between megalithic tombs and outcrops of rock: 'fourteen of the site locations (54 per cent) were chosen in a close or direct relationship to [inland rock outcrops]'. The outcrops are regarded as 'natural, non-cultural, or non-domesticated "megaliths"' which 'key the monuments into the landscape, drawing attention to their location and making them special places' (p. 99).

There is a sampling problem here, because megalithic sites will have survived best on land which is less valuable, in areas where the presence of small quarries and outcrops reduces the need to win stone by dismantling megalithic tombs, and on commons where a weaker sense of private property may have made people more inhibited about destroying ancient monuments. This makes it quite likely, in the north Pembrokeshire landscape, that a relatively high proportion of those sites which survive will not be far from rock outcrops. And this concern is heightened when one notes that Tilley's definition of 'intimate relationships' with rock outcrops is highly flexible. A relationship is suggested when a tomb is 'alongside and against' an outcrop (as at Garnwnda, p. 98) which it is 'at a short distance of no more than a few hundred metres away' (as at Fyst Samson and Longhouse, Carreg Samson — pp. 99–100, 104) or when it is like Carn Wen, which has 'sweeping vistas' to Carn Ingli (twelve kilometres distant) (p. 94) but also qualifies for consideration by being 'alongside and against' a rock outcrop (p. 96).

In the north Preseli area, there is the question of the postulated relationship be-

tween the tombs and Carn Ingli. The sites of the Nevern group 'are all deliberately sited so as to command vistas of the landscape feature that completely dominates the visual field in this area, the high crag of Carn Ingli' (p. 105). Four sites in the Nevern valley 'are intimately related to Carn Ingli' (p. 94). Tilley's argument (p. 105) that 'the specific choice to locate some of these structures only a few hundred metres away from their present positions would make this impossible' is unconvincing, given the dominance of Carn Ingli in the local landscape. In the light of the above concerns, the coincidence between the slope of the capstones at Pentre Ifan and Llech y Dribeidd and the profile of Carn Ingli (pp. 105, 107, 108) seems to constitute thin evidence for the latter being effectively a sacred mountain or a 'ritually liminal' place in the Neolithic, especially when (a) sloping capstones are common and distinctive characteristics of portal dolmens in any case, and (b) the original appearance of these monuments is hard to ascertain in the absence of much evidence for the form and profile of the cairns once associated with them.

One wonders about alternatives which Tilley does not consider. For example, his emphasis on the mobility of early Neolithic social groups leads him to suggest that the tomb at Mountain is 'on the saddle of a pass through the Preseli mountains' (p. 109). However, if one assumed that major rivers were venerated in the Neolithic, Mountain might have been one of the most sacred monuments in the district, located as it is at the head of the Eastern Cleddau river (which reaches the sea at Milford Haven) and commanding the hillgirt basin from which the 'bluestones' of Stonehenge may well have been derived (Scourse 1997).

THE BLACK MOUNTAINS

Let us now consider Tilley's work (chapter 4) on the long cairns of the Black Mountains in south-east Wales, which belong to the Cotswold-Severn group of megalithic tombs. Here a major distinction is made between low-lying cairns whose axes are aligned with major rivers, and higher-level cairns which point towards the hills. Nine cairns, in fact, are claimed to be orientated towards prominent high points on the Black Mountains (p. 124, Table 4.2), but a field check casts considerable doubt upon these suggestions. One monument, Arthur's Stone, is supposedly orientated on Haterall Hill; but this claim is impossible to evaluate, since nothing remains of the hypothetical long cairn which would be expected with a Cotswold-Severn chamber tomb. Furthermore, Tilley's claim (p. 140) that the mouth of the passage leading to the sole surviving (angled) chamber 'faces' Hay Bluff is dubious given that the axis of the said passage is certainly *not* orientated on Hay Bluff, but well to the north of it. Passing down the list in Tilley's Table 4.2, Pen-yr-Wyrlod (Llanigon) does indeed point towards Cusop Hill (mis-spelt as Cussop in the text). But Cusop Hill is a long, slightly elevated component of a longer ridge; a much more distinctive hill to aim at would have been Mouse Castle, just to the north. However, it would be just as plausible to suggest that the orientation of this cairn was chosen so that it would look impressive when seen side-on from the bench just below it to the north-west, or because it would then approximately conform to the east-west orientation which is common in the Cotswold-Severn group in general, even if not in this area.

The third site, Little Lodge, does not point at Y Das, as claimed, but slightly to the west of it; it ignores Twmpa (Lord Hereford's

Knob) which is a much more striking component of the Black Mountains than Y Das from this viewpoint. Then there are the two cairns at Ffostyll. The northern cairn is indeed directed within acceptable limits of error towards Lord Hereford's Knob. But in the case of Ffostyll South, the photograph in Figure 4.16, taken from near the tail of the cairn, is misleading. The axis of the cairn actually passes well to the west of Mynydd Troed (as does the axis of the chamber, which also misses Mynydd Troed, but not by so much). The same situation occurs at Pen-y-Wyrldod (Talgarth), which is alleged to be 'orientated towards' Mynydd Troed (p. 136). However, the midline of the cairn clearly misses this target; again, Tilley's photograph (Figure 4.12) does not show the cairn, and thus fails to make this clear.

The cairn named Mynydd Troed does indeed point to the north end of Mynydd Troed. But the character and location of this cairn invite other equally plausible interpretations. It is set just above a pass which commands the rather short valley of Cwm Sorgwm to the SSE; there are also sweeping views to the west and north. Furthermore, this is a short 'long cairn' (length 26.3 m., width 15 m — RCAHM 1997, 35), which invites the suggestion that the *location* of ancestral bones in this pass may have been more important than the orientation of the cairn. The fourth cairn which is supposed to 'point to' Mynydd Troed (Table 4.2) is Ty Isaf. But the distal end of this cairn is actually directed well past the southern end of Mynydd Troed, and certainly has nothing to do with the hill's prominent northern end which is claimed to be the focus for the other three cairns already mentioned.

The idea that Mynydd Troed, which does indeed look like a giant natural 'long cairn' from some perspectives, might have been a 'sacred mountain' is addressed but not stated

explicitly in Tilley's Black Mountains chapter (p. 136). But as we have seen, only one of the four cairns which are supposed to make the case points directly to this hill. Only the lines from Ty Isaf to Y Grib, Ffostyll North to Lord Hereford's Knob (Twmpa), and Mynydd Troed cairn to Mynydd Troed and to Mynydd Llangorse in the other direction are clear within acceptable limits (and one might add that Ty Isaf, in its hill-girt situation, can hardly avoid appearing to point to a hilltop). Thus only three out of nine cairns pass muster. At Garn Coch the original form of the cairn is disputed (Powell *et al.* 1969, 275). Crawford and Wheeler, without giving reasons, thought it was a long cairn (Crawford 1925, 53) and Grimes concurred, claiming that he could see 'faint traces' of its 'tail', though he quoted a length of only 80 ft as against a width of 50–60 ft (Grimes 1936b, 282). Daniel thought Garn Coch was 'probably a round barrow containing a large cist' (1950, 215) and the Royal Commission has taken an agnostic position (RCAHM 1997, 54–6). At present there is nothing linear to 'point' towards Table Mountain, and in any case there is an alternative 'target' here, the more regionally prominent if more distant Sugarloaf.

Furthermore, there seems no reason to assume that anything other than coincidence is involved in the partial 'intervisibility' of Little Lodge, Pipton, Ffostyll and Pen-Wyrldod (Talgarth) (pp. 127, 133–4); it seems perverse to argue (p. 134) that Pen-yr-Wyrldod (Llanigon) has been deliberately sited to avoid intervisibility with the site at Court Farm.

There are four sites (excluding the Ty Illtyd outlier) 'whose axes appear to be clearly related to the orientation of the rivers' (p. 124). But only three sites — Gwernvale, Court Farm (Clyro), and possibly Cross Lodge Farm — come into consideration,

since Pipton crowns a narrow spur on a promontory of high land between two rivers; there is no topographically-based reason to believe that either (rather distant) watercourse influenced its siting. At Gwernvale, the excavator suggested that a six-post structure located in the forecourt and symmetrically disposed in relation to it may have been 'respected' by the long cairn builders, and he also entertained another scenario, that the six posts might have been part of a Nutbane-like structure including other post-holes and bedding trenches further north. The excavator also pointed out (and demonstrated with a pre-cairn contour plan) that this structure or structures 'occupied the highest local point of the gravel terrace' (Britnell in Britnell and Savory 1984, 139–41; 51; fig. 13). So factors other than the course of the Usk may have influenced the orientation of the long cairn here. Whether these sites constitute enough evidence for a generalisation must be a moot point.

Tilley implies (p. 123) that different groups occupied contiguous territories demarcated by watercourses, and that in principle each territory contained a low-level cairn aligned with a major river and a higher-level cairn pointing towards a relatively prominent hill on the edge of the Black Mountains. This is not an implausible idea in the abstract, but it does imply a shared local mindset in the early Neolithic, at least in relation to sacred geography. If that is so, it is curious that there is no agreed way of making the link between architecture, ancestral bones, and the distant hills. Mostly, it is the line from distal to proximal end of a long cairn which is claimed to be the sightline. But at Ffostyll South it is the proximal-distal line which is important. At Ty Isaf and Mynydd Troed *both* ends are involved. At Arthur's Stone the view from the mouth of a side-chamber is also claimed to be significant (see

above). Thus there is variation in whether the 'pointing' is done by the higher end of a cairn, its lower end, both ends, or one of the 'side chambers'.

Tilley's proposition that the Black Mountains cairns were linked with the Mountains themselves and with the rivers which flow past them is offered with little consideration of alternative possibilities. This inhibits a more objective consideration of the contexts of these sites, which are actually extremely variable. There is a strong contrast, for instance, between Arthur's Stone, set on a high ridge with panoramic views in most directions, and Ty Isaf, which is central to a small, well-defined topographic zone, the hill-girt, sheltered head of a valley. Aligned along a north-south spur, it would have presented its profile to potential settlement zones to east and west. Court Farm (Clyro), and Gwernvale are on the edge of terraces overlooking major rivers. There are no local sites comparable to the Mynydd Troed cairn, which is set in a pass and commands extensive views (see above). It could not be in greater contrast with Pen-yr-Wyrlod (Llanigon), which is overlooked by a steep hillside (and probably just below its quarry), and has very restricted local views to north and east; its profile would however have looked impressive from the narrow hillside bench just to the north. The other Pen-y-Wyrlod cairn, the one near Talgarth, is interesting in a different way; it dominates its immediate locality, being set in the centre of a broad, slightly domed spur. This means that much land lying a little further away — the 'intermediate' view — is hidden from the site itself; but there are extensive distant views. In general, one has to ask how far 'extensive' views are simply the chance by-products of siting choices made on the basis of more local considerations.

ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVES

To study the landscape contexts of megalithic tombs is a potentially productive approach. However, it does seem necessary to examine alternative hypotheses, some of them already discussed by archaeologists; in the abstract, a range of factors might govern the siting of megalithic tombs. In the worst case, from an archaeologist's point of view, a tomb might be in a particular place because some irrecoverable but significant event took place there, or was said to have done. Then again its site might have been chosen to command a very localised area — the land claimed in some sense by a small social group. Or it might have been intended to overlook — literally or symbolically — a larger area, perhaps a small valley or river basin, a natural 'folk territory' of some kind. It might have been centrally located in relation to a settled area. On the other hand, fear of the ancestors' potentially malevolent power might have induced its builders to locate it as far as possible from the scenes of everyday life. The tomb might have overlooked a routeway, where local people, members of neighbouring communities and strangers to the locality might all have had to take note of it: cf. Bradley's well-argued model for the later Neolithic petroglyphs of northern Britain and Galicia (1997), and Bakker's discussion of 'barrow roads' in the Netherlands (1976). A tomb's siting might have linked it with various natural features — not simply rivers, hilltops and rock outcrops. Some of these, such as sacred trees or groves (Griffith 1985), may have been rather imponderable for present-day archaeologists. Then again we may note the suggestions made by Vyner (1994) about the definition of

sacred areas by cross-ridge earthworks on the North York Moors. The tomb might have been built by people who saw rocks, springs, bogs or rivers as liminal places, gateways to the earth. On the other hand its builders might have been sky-oriented; they might have chosen a place for its suitability in these terms. But it may be that the location of the site itself did not matter; it was the link made with the sun or the moon which was important. We have plenty of evidence that entrance orientations were not chosen at random (Burl 1983, 23) and that some tombs (such as Newgrange and Maeshowe) were carefully aligned on major solar and probably lunar events.

Many of these factors are open to further investigation. The choices which Tilley has made for the Welsh megaliths, however, are a limited selection of the possibilities, and they are unconvincing in terms of the archaeological record. Tilley has characterised the landscape awareness of people of the later Mesolithic and earlier Neolithic effectively in terms of 'dreaming tracks', of sacred places and vistas in a world of mutually-reinforcing pathways and mythologies. These 'mindset' approaches are interesting and stimulating, but there is a risk that, without more source-critical rigour, they will themselves constitute a form of 'dreaming' reminiscent of that other exploration of prehistoric mindsets which still haunts the fringes of the Black Mountains — Alfred Watkins' *The Old Straight Track* (1925).

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