Survey of ancient land boundaries in Swaledale, North Yorkshire: a report (1984)

This report concerns the expenditure of a research grant of £250 awarded by the Prehistoric Society for a survey of ancient land boundaries in Swaledale, North Yorkshire; the award was made for work in 1983 but when it became impossible to operate then permission was obtained to carry out the work in 1984. The work has been carried out in conjunction with Mr. T. Laurie, a local amateur whose discovery of the sites is recorded in a forthcoming BAR volume edited by Colin Burgess and Don Spratt.

Work periods

Work was carried out during a period of one week in July 1984, and during two weekends in the following autumn. A third such weekend is imminent at the time of writing; it has been postponed twice owing to adverse weather conditions. It is proposed to spend the unexpended balance on this third weekend. The postponement of the work originally scheduled for 1983 turned out to be very fortunate, since my university department acquired, early in 1984, an EDM which has allowed us to map a large area in quite a short time with very few assistants. The kind hospitality of Mr. and Mrs. Laurie allowed us to spend the bulk of the grant (see below) on petrol and picnic lunch/evening meals and not on accommodation expenses.

Results

Most of the upper valley of the Swale, from its source to a point just east of Richmond, where the river enters the Vale of York, is narrow, in contrast to Wensleydale further south. However, at the large village of Reeth SE038992), where the Swale is joined by the Arkle Beck, the valley broadens out, so that the Reeth-Grinton area forms a natural physiographic unit. Here the impressive Fremington Dykes cross the dale (their date is unknown) and a little upstream is the embanked settlement site of Maiden Castle, Swaledale's other relatively well-known prehistoric site.

NE, NW and SE of Reeth, on the surrounding moors, are three large ancient field systems. They are similar to the parallel reave systems of Dartmoor, which have been dated to the Bronze Age, in that:

a) many of the land boundaries are broad, faced walls similar to the reaves of Dartmoor.

b) the systems are large, varying from about 100 to over 500 Ha as far as can be estimated at the moment; they are coaxial (that is to say, most of the walls follow a dominant direction and are thus roughly parallel to one another) and located now on heather moors carrying a thin peat.

c) they occur at high altitude (most of what survives occurs between about 1000 and 1300 feet (c. 300-400m) above sea level) and the coaxial nature of the layout makes the boundaries rather insensitive to local relief and drainage.

The systems are undated as yet, though a linear earthwork of the dyke complex referred to above appears to slight part of one of the field systems.

In July 1984 it was decided to map the field system which has the most complex history, as apparent from surface indications. This is the one on Reeth Low Moor, NW of Reeth, on the S and E slopes of Calver Hill, which lies between the Swale and the Arkle Beck. At the time of writing most of the zone to the E and S of Calver Hill has been mapped, although more work remains a little further west. Preliminary indications suggest two periods of land use:

i) Early phase

a) Fragmentary walls, forming small, roughly curvilinear plots, associated with small cairns. Most of these 'plots' are apparently incompletely enclosed. These fragmentary walls occur in small, spatially separate zones. Their best analogues are in NE Yorkshire and on the East Moor, Derbyshire.

b) circular or ovoid enclosures, some of which may contain house platforms or indistinct hut circles.

The chronological relationship between a) and b) is not yet clear.

ii) Later phase

This is a phase of coaxial field systems bounded by reaves. At present it looks as if there were at least two 'coaxial' periods. East of Calver Hill a coaxial system running roughly EW, largely confined to the NE slopes, and apparently emanating from Reeth, has been succeeded by a bigger coaxial system, orientated NW-SE and covering much of the eastern side of Calver Hill. Both these systems have terminal walls, demarcating their western boundaries. SE and S of Calver Hill is a coaxial system orientated N-S, apparently emanating from the Healaugh area; this system's terminal is unclear but in places, at its upper end, the walls mount very steep slopes. This system slights a roughly circular enclosure of the Early phase and is in turn slighted by the NE-SW coaxial system described above. NW of Healaugh, where work has not yet been concluded, there are further suggestions of two periods of coaxial walls.

Settlement traces

The coaxial systems of Swaledale have fewer transverse boundaries and even fewer obvious 'hut-circles' than their counterparts on Dartmoor. However, transverse boundaries are subdivisions of various kinds are commoner than appears to be the case at first sight. Definite 'hut-circles' are hard to find, although one very clear-cut example, unfortunately not linked to the field systems, did turn up this year. However, there are arrangements of stones and possible hut-platforms which could well relate to settlement; possibly buildings of wood and turf were normal here.

Future work

It is clear that the use of the EDM is highly cost-effective in terms of producing a rapid, accurate plan of these field systems. It is planned to map all the field systems of the Reeth area over 1985 and 1986, in short, cost-effective seasons with back-up weekends where necessary. It is also hoped to secure dating evidence, which will necessitate a small, cost-effective excavation. For 1985, however, it is planned to cut three or four small sections, mainly in places where quarrying has partially destroyed the reaves, to search for environmental evidence and evidence for pre-reave boundaries (banks, ditches, fences, etc.).

Thanks

To the Prehistoric Society (financial aid) and to Tim Laurie (co-director), Chris Grimbley (survey work), Geraint Coles and Jim McNeil (volunteers), Mrs. O. Laurie (hospitality).

Andrew Fleming

Department of Archaeology and Prehistory,
The University,
Sheffield S10 2TN.

December 1984