TAMING THE WILD : ENCROACHMENT AND CONTROL OF ANIMAL SPACE

Annie GRANT*

Summary

Archaeological evidence from the first millennium AD has suggested that once the wild areas of Britain were cleared, cultivated and settled, there was a clear separation of wild and domestic space, and the exploitation of wild animals by settled human communities was relatively rare. During the first half of the second millennium AD, archaeozoological evidence demonstrates a much greater reliance on wild animals, both for food and for a range of other resources. However, in many cases, access to the resources of the 'wild' areas of Britain was facilitated by the enclosure and control of the natural habitats of selected wild animals in, for example, deer parks, and even the artificial creation of new habitats (for example, rabbit warrens, fish ponds and dovecotes). This created a new definition of animal space and of the concept of a wild species.

Key Words

Britain, Medieval, Parks, Wild Animals, Red Deer, Fallow Deer, Woodland.

Résumé

Apprivoiser le sauvage : usurpation et contrôle de l'espace animal

Les témoignages archéologiques du premier millénaire après J.C. suggèrent qu'une fois les régions sauvages de Grande Bretagne défrichées, cultivées et colonisées, il y eut une nette séparation entre les espaces sauvage et domestique, et l'exploitation des animaux sauvages par les communautés humaines fut relativement faible. Pendant la première moitié du second millénaire après J.C., les témoignages archéozoologiques attestent d'une plus grande dépendance vis-à-vis des animaux sauvages, tant pour la nourriture que pour différentes autres ressources. Cependant, dans de nombreux cas, l'accès aux ressources des régions "sauvages" de Grande Bretagne fut facilité par la mise en enclos et le contrôle des habitats naturels d'animaux sauvages sélectionnés, comme par exemple des parcs à cerfs, et même par la création artificielle de nouveaux habitats (par exemple, des garennes à lapins, des étangs à poissons et des pigeonniers). Cela a créé une nouvelle définition de l'espace animal et du concept d'espèce sauvage.

Mots clés

Grande-Bretagne, Moyen Age, Parcs, Animaux Sauvages, Cerf, Daim, Bois.

Despite the small size of Britain, it has a wide variety and range of landscapes. However, although the major forces that have shaped the land are natural ones, the structure provided by nature supports a countryside that is almost entirely made and controlled by man. It is a countryside covered with the signatures of centuries of agriculturalists, sowers and reapers of cereals and herders of animals. It is only in the remotest upland areas, in the north and west of the country, that can one gain any impression of the primeval state of the land. Even this 'primeval' landscape is relatively recent. Britain emerged from beneath the ice sheets of the last glaciation with the slate almost entirely wiped clean. It is likely that the only vegetation to survive was tundra plants in the unglaciated south and south-west, and few, if any, of the larger animals could have survived in the permafrost conditions. In fact, a major episode of extinction affected much of Northern Europe at the end of the last glaciation, and the mammoth, woolly rhinoceros, giant deer, cave bear, cave lion and cave hyena all disappeared during a period of rapid climatic fluctuations, associated habitat changes and human hunter-gatherer activity (Bell & Walker, 1992 : 149). As the glaciers retreated and the land of Britain was recolonised, the land bridge that connected Britain to the rest of continental Europe allowed animals to pass from the larger land mass into the island. This repopulation left Britain with a narrower range of large and medium-sized mammals than was to be found in Continental Europe. There were, for example, red and roe deer, elk, brown bear, wolf, boar and wild cattle, but no fallow deer, chamois or ibex. These animals established themselves in the forests and woodlands which, by the early and middle Holocene, covered all but the highest ground of the upland areas of the island in a complex mosaic of mixed forests, for which

* *School of Archaeological Studies, University of Leicester, University Road, Leicester LE1 7RH, Great Britain.*

the name 'wildwood' was coined by Oliver Rackham, the botanist (Rackham, 1980). The virgin forest and its animal population were very largely unaffected by human activities until the end of the Atlantic period, between 5300 and 5000 BP, although there are no further traces of elk by this time. The end of this period is characterised in pollen profiles by the sharp decline in elm pollen, and from this point on, we can mark the steady decline in the predominance of wildwoods and in the wild creatures that inhabited them, which, notwithstanding the many arguments about the precise cause of the beginning of the elm decline (for a summary see Bell & Walker, 1992 : 160-164), was due to the expansion of a human population which turned from hunting and gathering as its main means of subsistence to herding and cultivation.

Archaeozoological studies of bones from human habitation sites spanning the period from the Mesolithic onwards demonstrate this shift very clearly. At Star Carr, dated to c 7500 BC and perhaps the most well-known of all English Mesolithic sites, the animal species represented include red deer, elk, roe deer, and aurochs (Legge & Rowley Conwy, 1989). Six thousand years later, bone remains from Bronze Age settlements such as Black Patch in Sussex indicate an almost exclusively domestic spectrum, dominated by domestic cattle, sheep and pigs with a small number of horses, perhaps all the descendants of animals deliberately introduced into Britain in a domesticated form. Indications of the presence of large wild mammals are limited to a small number of red deer bones (Drewett, 1982).

As agriculture and stock husbandry expanded, the wildwoods were felled, and the populations of larger wild mammals were dramatically reduced, with those that remained driven away from the cultivated areas of Britain, upwards and outwards to the upland areas of Wales, Scotland and the central spine of England. However, since archaeozoological evidence reflects not only natural, but also social, economic and religious processes, it is difficult to trace precisely either the size, or the extent of the larger wild mammal population of Britain in the prehistoric and early historic period using archaeological evidence alone. A study of the incidence of wild mammal bones at occupation sites spanning the Iron Age to the Anglo-Saxon periods (Grant, 1981), demonstrated that wild animal remains were very infrequently found, except at sites in the more marginal environments : proportions of wild animal bones at British sites tend to be lower than at contemporary Continental sites. However, the absence of wild animal remains in archaeological deposits does not necessarily indicate that the larger wild mammals were entirely absent from the local environment. In fact, the presence of shed deer antlers at many sites suggests that deer at least may have been present, at least in small numbers, but that hunting does not seem to have been a significant activity, to provide either food or pleasure and entertainment. It is interesting to note the rarity of deer remains even at Roman villas in Britain : there is little archaeozoological evidence to suggest that hunting was an important activity even at the richest and most Romanised villa sites, although the consumption of venison would be more or less undetectable if deer were butchered in the countryside where they were killed, and the meat then stripped from the bones (see also Grant, 1988 : 165).

The relentless felling of forests and expansion of cultivated areas across the landscape seems to have taken place with little regard to its effects on the wild animals that once populated the woodland and its clearings. On the contrary, there are many reasons why farmers should have wished to deliberately reduce the population of animals such as deer and boar, that can inflict considerable damage to growing crops.

Studies of the decline of the wildwood itself are based on a range of sources, including archaeological evidence, pollen, snails, place names and other documentary evidence. The range of evidence available, and the particular interest of writers such as Rackham, have meant that the woodland habitat has been more extensively studied from a historical perspective than the animals that populated it. The Domesday survey of England of 1086, carried out by the Normans to ascertain the extent of the revenues that could be obtained from this newly conquered country, records a late stage in the destruction of the wildwood (Darby, 1977). Few of the woodlands that remained had been left as undisturbed habitats for the wild creatures that had formerly lived there. Most woodlands were intensively used, not only to provide wood, but also in many cases to provide what was known as wood-pasture, *silva pastilis*, grazing land for domestic animals. The expansion of agriculture into areas previously used as pasture meant that in many districts, they provided the only uncultivated areas available for common grazing. The trees themselves were carefully managed, often by coppicing or pollarding, systems where wood was cut in such as way as to provide a natural regrowth. These wood management techniques were not new. Neolithic timber trackways preserved in the Somerset bogs have shown techniques of woodland management to provide renewable sources of timber had already been used for at least 4000 years (Coles and Coles, 1986). By the end of the twelfth century, most of today's villages and hamlets already existed, and 'the proportions of farmland, moor land and woodland were not enormously different from what they are now' (Rackham, 1976 : 49).

The Domesday Book also records another feature that had begun to be an important part of the landscape - enclosures called either parks or hayes, literally hedges, built to restrict and contain wild animals, particularly wild deer. Woodland enclosures were known from the late Saxon period, but parks were essentially a Norman introduction (Stamper, 1988 : 140). Parks were defined as areas of land surrounded by a fixed, complete barrier ; hayes performed a similar function but were probably areas surrounded by a more temporary barrier (Cummins, 1988). By 1086, there were at least 31 parks and 70 hayes, mostly in southern Britain, but by the early fourteenth century the number of parks had increased to over 3 000 (Steane, 1984 : 168). They were distributed throughout England, although they were most numerous in the Midland and Home counties ; the counties with the lowest densities of parks were in the more remote parts of the country, in the north, south-west and East Anglia (Cantor, 1983).

Park boundaries were formidable, and the most common type of boundary was a broad, high bank, topped with a fence of wood or stone, and an internal ditch. Sometimes these boundaries were broken by a deer leap, often a ramp constructed to allow deer to leap into the park, but not to leap out of it.

This enclosure of space that had once been freely accessible to animals marked an important shift in the relationship between animal and human populations. A changed status and importance of wild animals were reflected in new Forest laws, introduced by the Normans, which declared a number of wild species, in particular deer, as protected animals, and laid down severe penalties for those who unlawfully killed them in parks and the areas declared as Royal Forests. This should not in any sense be seen as a reflection of a greater humanity towards animals or the precursor of any movement to protect the rights of animals. On the contrary, the enclosure of parks took away the most precious freedom of the wild animal, the freedom to move as and where it pleased, and the Forest laws curtailed the right of the common man to exploit the natural resources of wild. In a period when the wilderness had almost ceased to exist, when the extent of cultivated land was almost certainly greater than at any previous period, attempts were made to re-create wild places, and to re-populate them with wild animals, in order, at least in part, to re-create the opportunity to engage in one of the primeval activities of mankind, hunting.

In fact, the animals, at least the larger mammals that lived in them, could in truth no longer be considered to be truly wild. Although referred to as *ferae*, deer populations were managed so that there were always sufficient numbers to provide regular sport for hunters. Deer were moved considerable distances from areas where they were most common in order to increase park populations. They were taken care of, and, when necessary, fed corn and other supplementary foods by men employed as 'parkers', who often lived in specially constructed houses within the parks. Fallow deer, absent from Britain since the last glaciation, was almost certainly introduced from the continent in the early medieval period. Although Gaston Phoebus, the French fourteenth-century writer on the art of hunting, was of the opinion that the fallow was an inferior creature to the red deer, its smaller size, and suitability for confinement in the restricted spaces of the English parks, led to its virtual replacement of the native red and roe deer in much of Britain. This is charted very clearly in the archaeozoological record which not only demonstrates considerably increased proportions of wild animal bones, especially deer bones at many high status rural sites, but also demonstrates the change in the relative importance of the three deer species. In eleventh and early twelfth century assemblages, red deer are usually the most commonly represented deer species, while in later medieval assemblages, the bones of fallow deer predominate, and the bones of red and roe deer are much rarer (Grant, 1988 : 165-6).

Other wild species were also introduced to Britain during this period. Rabbits, which had not colonised Britain in the post-glacial period, were introduced to Britain in the late twelfth century (Veale, 1957). They were not released freely into the wild, but were, for a period at least, contained and controlled on islands, or in enclosed areas of heath land and within parks. In order to help them establish themselves in some locations, artificial warrens were created under mounds that have become known as pillow mounds in the archaeological literature. Other animals, including hares, pheasants and partridges, were also kept in warrens (Stamper, 1988 : 145), and even freshwater fish were controlled. Their natural habitats could be confined by the construction of weirs or dams across rivers, or by the creation of artificial fishponds. These latter are a particular feature of ecclesiastical settlements, and were managed to provide a regular source of protein for the members of monastic orders for whom red meat was proscribed completely or for at least a part of the year. At least one fish species, the carp, was also introduced during the medieval period.

At the same time as these wild animals increased in numbers, those that were not regarded as edible, or otherwise useful, such as the wolf and the bear, declined. Occasional archaeological remains from these species are found in Iron Age and Roman contexts, but by the medieval period there are only documentary references to

their presence. The wolf is thought to have died out in England around AD 1500, its demise probably hastened by the decline in numbers of its main prey, the deer, in the wild, and the bear may have disappeared by Roman times (Corbet & Southern, 1977).

By the medieval period, the hunting of the larger species of animals, which was an entirely natural activity for the hunters in the real wildwoods of the early post-glacial, had become a largely unnatural activity. Parts of a substantially tamed and controlled landscape were enclosed so that wild animals, now deprived of most of their natural habitat, could be confined and managed in order to provide sport and entertainment and, it must not be forgotten, also food. Deer were not only hunted by lords for sport, but were also hunted, on the instructions of the nobility, by their servants. If they were not to be eaten immediately they were butchered and salted for future use. Venison provided an important source of meat for the nobility, but it was 'more than just another source of meat, but part of a certain level and type of hospitality, a way of showing honour to guests' (Birrell, 1992).

It is, however, simplistic to view hunting as a merely functional and utilitarian activity. The mystery, symbolism and ritual associated with hunting were an important aspect of medieval upper class life. Even the buildings within the park were built to create a certain impression - the isolated woodland lodges built for the parkers, who were employed to look after the land and the animals, were often surrounded by moats which appeared to serve no functional purpose but created an impression of mystery (Stamper, 1988 : 142). The many aspects of the ritual of hunting and hawking are well documented by contemporary writers such as Gaston Phoebus (Bise, 1984), and the anonymous writer of the less well known English manual of instruction on hunting and hawking, *The Boke of St. Albans* (Hands, 1975).

What motivated this change in attitude to the wild, which, for a time at least, halted or even reversed the steady destruction of wild habitats, and of the animals that populated them? It would be foolish to attempt to offer a simple explanation - the answer is surely multi-faceted. At its most basic it can be seen as a way of ensuring that the aristocracy was provided with a source of red meat, particularly for feast days and other special occasions, at a time when the productivity of the domestic stock was constrained by the demands made on the land by cereal cultivation (Grant, 1988 : 180). Hunting also provided the aristocracy with an escape from idleness, and thus from the temptation of sin - this at least was the view of Pero López de Ayala, the medieval Spanish authority on falconry (Cummins, 1988 : 12). The laws and rules of hunting, and the restriction of the spaces within which hunting was a legitimate pastime, also reinforced the differences between the rich and the poor, and symbolised the domination by the aristocracy of both the animal world and of the lower orders of the human world. The containment of the habitats of wild animals and its separation from the domestic, cultivated and controlled landscape, elevated the nobility and the status of the wild animals, thus of those who were allowed to hunt them. This separation and demarcation also created places of potential danger, excitement and mystery in a country that was fast becoming completely tame, domestic and controlled. The deer hardly presented a very dangerous foe, but its swiftness and cunning provided excitement, and the boar, symbolically at least, was a ferocious prey. The medieval image of the animal world bore little relationship to its reality, if the contemporary bestiaries are to be taken literally. A recent study of the medieval art of hunting and hawking, states that 'for the literate hunter of medieval England or northern France, an encounter with a unicorn ...would have been hardly more incredible than running into some other exotic or unauthenticated quarry such as a reindeer...' (Cummins, 1988 : 153). It was important that places existed where there was the possibility of coming upon a dangerous or a fabulous beast.

This need to create a sense of danger and to create a fear of the unknown and of the wild has continued to play an important role, although the hunting of deer is now largely confined to Scotland. For example, the English classic of children's fiction, Kenneth Grahame's 'The Wind in the Willows' recreates its own 'wild wood' in the story of Mole, Rat, Badger and Toad, as the antithesis to the cosy, comfortable world of the river bank homes of his heroes. In his wild wood, the enemies are stoats and weasels, who threaten with 'glances of malice and hatred : all hard-eyed and evil and sharp' (Grahame, 1908, 55).

This paper has attempted to present an overview, and in the space available it has of necessity simplified many of the issues, in particular in its discussion of the art and symbolism of medieval hunting, and of the complexity of woodland management and ownership, which ignores the changes that took place in, for example, park management and use over the centuries of the middle ages. However, it has attempted to demonstrate that by enclosing and controlling animal space, some wild species of animals were not only protected but also made more important, after centuries when they appeared, from archaeological evidence at least, to have played a very minor role in the lives, both practical and ideological, of the human species.

Bibliographie

BELL M. et WALKER M., 1992.– *Late Quaternary Environmental Change*. Longman, Harlow.

BIRRELL J., 1992.– Deer and deer farming in medieval England. *Agricultural History Review*, 40 : 112-126.

BISE G., 1984.– *Le Livre de la Chasse de Gaston Phoebus, Comte de Foix*. Liber, Geneva.

CANTOR L., 1983.– *The Medieval Parks of England. A Gazetteer.* Department of Education, Loughborough University of Technology, Loughborough.

COLES B. et COLES J., 1986.– *Sweet Track to Glastonbury*. Thames and Hudson, London.

CORBET G.B. et SOUTHERN H.N., 1977.– *The Handbook of British Mammals*. Blackwell Scientific Publications, Oxford.

CUMMINS J., 1988.– *The Hound and the Hawk*. Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London.

DARBY H.C., 1977.– *Domesday England*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

DREWETT P. L., 1982.– Late Bronze Age downland economy and excavations at Black Patch, East Sussex. *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society*, 48 : 321-400.

GRAHAME K., 1908.– *The Wind in the Willows* (1971 ed.). Methuen, London.

GRANT A., 1981.– The significance of deer remains at occupation sites of the Iron Age to Anglo-Saxon period. *In* : M. Jones and G. Dimbleby, eds., *The Environment of Man : the Iron Age to the Anglo-Saxon Period*, BAR British Series, Oxford : 205-213.

GRANT A., 1988.– Animal Resources. *In* : G. Astill and A. Grant eds., *The Countryside of Medieval England*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford : 149-187.

HANDS R., 1975.– *English Hunting and Hawking in The Boke of St Albans*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

LEGGE T. et ROWLEY CONWY P., 1989.– *Star Carr Revisited*. University of London Extra-Mural Department, London.

RACKHAM O., 1976.– *Trees and Woodland in the British Landscape*. Dent, London.

RACKHAM O., 1980.– *Ancient Woodland*. Arnold, London.

STAMPER P., 1988.– Woods and parks. *In* : G. Astill and A. Grant eds., *The Countryside of Medieval England*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford : 128-148.

STEANE J. M., 1984.– *The Archaeology of Medieval England and Wales*. Croom Helm, Beckenham.

VEALE E., 1957.– The rabbit in England. *Agricultural History Review*, 5 : 85-90.