

**The Assembly Project Workshop 1. Valorisation and Rhetoric. 18-21 February 2011.
Department of Archaeology, Durham University.**

Attendees: Frode Iversen, Alexandra Sanmark, Natascha Mehler, Sarah Semple, Marie Ødegaard, Halldis Hobæk, Tudor Skinner, Andrew Reynolds, Stewart Brookes, John Baker, Anne Irene Riisøy, Ingvild Øye, Stephen Driscoll, Tom Fitton, Ronan O'Donnell



Workshop participants visit the site of Yeaveering, Northumberland: royal centre and place of assembly in seventh-century Northumbria.

A successful two-day workshop took place in Durham in late February as part of the HERA funded 'Assembly Project'. In an energetic day of papers, speakers explored aspects of the historiography and development of research on assembly studies in parts of North West Europe (Semple, Skinner, Odegaard, Hobæk), the context of both current funded projects TAP (Sanmark) and Landscapes of Governance (Reynolds). Papers then moved on to more comparative and methodological issues, covering the technical and theoretical approaches of each project, as well as the results emerging from new lines of enquiry and discussions (Brookes and Baker, Paton, Iversen, Mehler and Sanmark). Literary and archaeological comparative view points were offered from Scotland (Driscoll) and from Norway (Øye) and on the judicial and administrative language and words used within Scandinavian written sources (Riisøy).

A range of key themes emerged from the discussions. These included the critical importance of historiography to the emerging research of both projects. Much of the existing material can be shown to interlock with early strands of research in the C19th and early C20th that focus around nationalist agendas. The point was made too that exploration of this aspect – the valorization of assembly/ thing studies and assembly/ thing sites in C17th – C20th offered useful comparative data too. Monumental sites created for meetings/ discussions that are situated in relation to or

draw upon the archaeological past within this period also offer insights into how thing and assembly sites are constructed as places of performance, debate and conciliation and how past landscapes/ and antiquities are drawn upon and utilized consciously in the creation of these sites.

Crucial within this strand of discussion and relevant to all projects was recognition of the issue of locating sites. Several papers revealed how early linguistic interpretations can be subjective and reliant on assumption and guess-work. Place-names inform the work of both projects and yet the research underway in all projects presented imply place-names can move around the landscape, may refer to very short term places of meeting rather than long-lived meeting sites, may be lost to modern knowledge in terms of location or survive only to be revived and applied incorrectly in the landscape in significantly later periods. Close analysis of landscape data and reappraisal of the place-names was revealed as a successful method of dealing with these problems and all projects were using such close analysis to reveal new and important results.

The cumulative work of all the projects is also clearly vindicating the value of archaeological survey and excavation at assembly sites and their surroundings. Case studies involving retrogressive analysis and map work, survey and geophysical investigation and full scale excavation were presented from England, Scotland, the Atlantic Islands and Southern Sweden. These projects are beginning to reveal crucial information on the natural/ geographic location of thing and assembly sites, the relation of sites to communications and land, river and sea routes, the relationships between meeting-sites and trading sites, the positioning of meeting-sites at liminal zones and interfaces between resource areas. Alongside this excavations are producing evidence for the monumental enhancement of such locations and the adoption and use of older monuments. Assemblies are emerging as functions that can generate distinctive archaeological signatures even at outdoor assembly sites: ceremonial architecture, sculpture, hall structures and booths, evidence of sacrificial/ cult activity, court sites, standing posts and mounds. In relation to this strand of emerging evidence – there are now indications that ‘an archaeology’ of assembly is beginning to emerge. There is, not surprisingly, no common model that can be applied across the North Sea or indeed within regions and countries but, common strands of ‘assembly’ activity and architecture can be discerned: hearths/ cooking/ rubbish pits indicating repeated visitation of sites and temporary residence, monumental additions – particularly at sites that can be linked to emerging royal power structures and royal lineages – posts, stones, inscriptions, routes, mounds.

Temporal issues of assembly and thing sites represented another stream of discussion. Some sites indicate relatively short-term usage. In some instances sites may have functioned sporadically – chosen once or twice as places for meetings over long periods of time. Some sites can be tied almost to individual rulers/ chiefs and even if heavily monumentalized, may have functioned for less than a generation in terms of time. Other sites were clearly of long-term significance – repeatedly visited at regularized intervals. Several papers through linguistic/ literary and archaeological evidence also demonstrated how we may be uncovering some of the earliest known administrative and judicial systems pushing the origins of the well-organised administrative frameworks we see by the C10/C11th century several centuries earlier in some parts of Northern Europe.

Another key theme, linked to the issue of the origins of such systems, was a strong sense that geography and management of natural and human resource can

underpin the development of meetings and systems of assembly. Movement and management of animals and herds, management of water and land routes, harbours and at a later point, trading sites and trade. Assembly and things sites might thus have emerged in the landscape as a result of resources or actions that brought people together to specific places but also have developed as functions that mediated feud relating to resource, travel, access and trade. Added to this, it is clear that antiquity or the ancient landscape and antecedent monuments, and at an earlier point in time perhaps the ancestors themselves, were also resources being harnessed and mediated by meeting-sites in some regions, and in particular time frames.

Finally this first workshop established that the critical mass of projects now developing at a Northern European scale around the theme of assembly and governance is beginning to bear fruit. The developing dialogues are beginning to inform on one of the key issues for historic period archaeology in North West Europe, the modes by which communities and emerging elites began to establish power networks, systems of consensus and resolution, and how assemblies were used within these nascent kingdoms and nations to mediate and manage people, landscape, resource and activities.

The day of papers was followed by a day trip to Northumberland to visit the shires of the north and the key sites of Lindisfarne, Bamburgh and Yeavering and explore the nascent system of governance attested in this region in the seventh and eighth centuries. The workshop closed with a TAP project planning meeting discussing future field work, Workshop 2, and the general progress of the project.

The next HERA workshop will be held in Stavanger, Norway (at Utstein monastery) 20-23. October 2011 and will focus on the theme of territory. These workshops are closed but those with a significant interest in attending are welcome to contact the workshop organizer with a view to attending.

Durham Workshop Programme

Chair: Dr. Frode Iversen (Project Lead)

10.00 am – 12.30 pm

Situating Assembly Studies (previous work and current approaches)

Research history. Different traditions and common ground: England/ Ireland/ Scotland/ Wales/ Scandinavia/ Continental Europe

- Sarah Semple: Assembly in Britain past and current points of view
- Tudor Skinner: English assembly studies and new perspectives on the North
- Andrew Reynolds: Situating Landscapes of Governance
- Alex Sanmark: Approaches in Scandinavia and situating HERA

Coffee served during papers

- Marie Ødegaard: The history of Assembly Studies in Norway
- Halldis Hobæk: Assemblies, administrative areas and older territorial units. A short overview of Norwegian research
- Frode Iversen: The geography of Tings, Scandinavia 400-1623 AD - New discoveries on Norwegian Court Sites

These should not be formal papers but papers that open discussion – thus they should be shorter than the allotted time and draw on each other.

12.30 pm – 2.00 pm Lunch and discussion – lunch provided

2.00 pm – 4.00 pm

Current thinking on morphology and location (Location: borders versus centrality / elements: houses/hearth/standing stones/activities/cemeteries etc)

- Stephen Driscoll: Perspectives on assembly from across the English border.
- Alex Sanmark: The Islands and Sweden
- Natascha Mehler: The Þing in the North and its mercantile aspects (AD 800-1500).

Tea

- Stuart Brookes and John Baker: New thinking on the UK and English sites (20 min)
- Dean Paton: Thingwall: a new case study and methodology.

4.00-4.30 pm Break for discussion and further refreshment

5.00 – 6.00 pm

Keynote speakers: hierarchies and models

- Ingvild Øye. Regional things - law things - assemblies initiated by the King?
- Anne Irene Riisøy. The Ting and central places in Edic poems

Speakers and contact details

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