

Historical overview

Introduction

In a charter of 1058, Bishop Ealdred granted land in Worcestershire to his minister Dodda, with reversion to the bishopric after Dodda's death (see box). The charter itself is written and signed in Latin, but instead of including a map, it describes the boundaries in OE as a survey of the metes and bounds. Such a survey requires a walkabout, and in medieval England, these walkabouts around the community's parishes were performed as public events still called today in places the 'beating of the bounds'. The purposes of such occasions were multiple: verification of local testimony, whether oral or written; affirmation of the community's spatial identity; and a chance to party. The name comes from a quite literal beating of the bounds, in which critical intersections and landmarks – trees, streams, large stones, etc. – would be whipped and beaten with sticks, as if to impress the division of the land into the earth itself. Custom alleges that the children of the parish would receive a dunking in the streams and other such

An Old English land charter

Ðis is ðære twegra hida boc and anre gyrde æt norðtune and ða feower æceras ðærto of ðære styfecunge into ðam twam hidan and ða mæde. and ðone graf ðe þærto midrihte toligeð. and ða ðry æceras mæde on afan hamme. þe sancte oswald geaf bercstane into ðam lande. and ðiss synd þa land gemæro into ðam grafe. Ærost of ðære dune andlang þære rode oð hit cymð beneoðan stancnolle þanon ongerihte to cwenn hofoton. of cwenn hofoton benorðon þam mere þanon ongerihte eft up on þa dune.

[This is the charter of the two hides [of land], and one yardland at Northtown [Norton], and the four acres of that clearing land [belong] to the two hides, and the meadow, and the grove that [also] belongs to it; and the three acres of meadow in the Avon region that St Oswald added to the land for Bercstan. And these are the boundary lands [belonging] to the grove: First, from the hill and along the road until it comes beneath the stone knoll [Bredon Hill], thence straight on to Cwenn Hofoton [Queenscourt town, possibly Queen Hills Lays]; from Cwenn Hofoton north of the mere thence straight back up to the hill.]

(Hooke, *Worcestershire Anglo-Saxon Charter Bounds*, pp. 368–70 [Ci] throughout this chapter, all translations given in square brackets are my own)

untender reminders of where communities co-existed and divided; feasting, fighting and horseplay all marked occasions. In the later Middle Ages, these perambulations were usually performed on Rogation Sunday in May, with prayers for blessing of people and the land itself. For a small rural parish, unable to afford dramatic spectacles such as the Corpus Christi processions of York or Coventry, perambulations such as this were an occasion for a community to celebrate its own identity in a performance as theatrical as any play (Justice, pp. 165–7 [Ci]). Although we do not know whether the bounds of this eleventh-century charter would have been beaten in this festive way, the survey of the metes and bounds of the land performs the boundaries rather than fixing them in a static map as a cartographer would.

Secure boundaries were essential to the wellbeing and effective functioning

of the community, for these people lived close to the land. The stealthy moving of a boundary marker could result in a legal dispute that might sunder the peace for years; *Avarice* or *Couetise*, one of the seven deadly sins, enacts itself in a man who ploughs another man's strip of land into his own (Langland, C. vi.267–71 [A]). When these boundaries ran between kingdoms, it was no longer a question of litigation but of war. The horseplay by which the authority of the boundaries was forcibly impressed on children's memories (not to mention their hides) illustrates in the local and benign instance the lesson of subjection to power, a lesson learnt by entire peoples. When a ruler erected a landmark, it stood as a forceful visual reminder of his presence, a local embodiment of his power. Thus it was that Emperor Hadrian in 122 CE built his wall across the north of England to repel the harrying Picts in Scotland, that the Romans built Watling Street, running from Dover past London to Wroxeter near Shrewsbury (now the A2/M2 and A5 roads), that Offa built his dyke across the Welsh border, and that William the Conqueror built castles, dozens of them. As the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* records for 1068, when the north of England rose in rebellion against William, he directly marched on Nottingham and built a castle there, two more in York, another at Lincoln (Swanton, p. 202 [A]). The White Tower, the great central keep of the Tower of London, begun c. 1077, was in dressed stone, unlike anything seen before in AS England; small wonder that in an English commemorative poem at his death in 1087, the first line should read, 'Castelas he let wyrcean' (He caused castles to be built) (Clark, pp. 13–14 [A]; Lerer, 'Old English', pp. 15–16 [Ci]). The bounds of the White Tower's Liberties, an area under the jurisdiction of the Tower and independent of the City of London, were beaten as late as the fourteenth century. Such an edifice and such a practice made authority a palpable reality, one that left its mark on physical bodies. How did a society understand power that could stake its claim on flesh itself? If one's body was so easily subject to another, what did it really feel like in this period to be an individual, a woman, a celibate, a poet, a man, a Jew? How did one think of 'oneself' when bodily obligation was for most a daily reality? These issues are as 'historical' as the laws, taxes and battles that comprise the stuff of archives, and it is out of them that literature arises.

The backdrop

By the time the fifth-century Germanic invaders – those tribes that gave us 'Old English' – had begun to settle in earnest, Britain had already been invaded by Caesar's Roman armies in 55 BC, who by this time were well integrated with the indigenous Celts, known as Britons. Rome abandoned formal occupation of Britain shortly after the sack of Rome in 410, a deep blow to imperial sensibility. To Christian historian Augustine of Hippo, Rome brought downfall upon itself by its own corruption, and for the later Bede, the same logic led the barbarians to invade the Britons for their rebelliousness against God. A power divided within cannot withstand force from without, observes Gildas,