The role of boundaries in the relationship between people and place in medieval Charnwood Forest, Leicestershire.

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Introduction

Charnwood Forest is an upland area of north-west Leicestershire. It is characterised by areas of woodland and by outcrops of pre-Cambrian rocks such as those at Beacon Hill (fig. 1). The literature to date suggests that medieval Charnwood was an inhospitable and rather marginal environment which discouraged settlers. This study of Charnwood’s medieval boundaries challenges those perceptions.

Research Questions

- What were the external boundaries of medieval Charnwood Forest?
- What were the internal divisions of medieval Charnwood Forest?
- Was medieval Charnwood Forest itself a boundary?
- What was the significance of Charnwood’s boundaries in the medieval period?
- What was the significance of Charnwood’s medieval boundaries in later periods?

The study area is based on Samuel Wylde’s 1754 map and perambulation of Charnwood Forest (fig. 2) superimposed onto a modern map in fig. 3.

Sources and methodology

An interdisciplinary approach has been adopted using a range of archaeological, landscape, documentary, cartographical and place-name evidence. Fig. 4 is a LiDAR image of Martinshaw Wood to the south of the study area. It shows evidence of earlier utilisation of the landscape. Fig. 5 is a thirteenth-century perambulation of the forest, showing evidence of the holding of outdoor ‘swannymote’ courts.

Findings and Conclusions

The boundaries of medieval Charnwood Forest can be expressed in terms of circles. Its external boundaries were a series of concentric circles which encroached upon, and sometimes retracted from, an inner core. There were two foci of encroachment, both areas of medieval woodland, one at Charley, one at Oakley Wood. Charnwood was vulnerable to encroachment from surrounding manors because it was a ‘chase’ rather than a ‘Royal Forest’. The forest’s internal administrative divisions formed ‘wheel and spoke’ patterns in which the ‘wheels’ coincided with the foci of encroachment described above. The forest’s more nebulous internal divisions, such as those between private and public space, elite and peasant space, religious and secular space, and recreational and economic space, formed a series of interlinked and overlapping circles. The ambiguous nature of Charnwood’s boundaries was a source of both harmony and conflict in the medieval period and beyond. Whilst Charnwood Forest itself represented a boundary – between settlers from the Trent and Soar Valleys, between Mercia and the Danelaw, and between later medieval manors - it was not an impenetrable boundary. Medieval Charnwood Forest was not a heavily settled landscape. It was, however, a utilised landscape and one which was familiar to surrounding communities. Far from being marginal, medieval Charnwood Forest was a shared landscape which facilitated cultural interaction.

Fig. 1: Beacon Hill

Fig. 2: Wylde’s 1754 perambulation, (R.O.L.L.R., DG9/Ma/66/2)

Fig. 3: Study area

Fig. 4: LiDAR Image of Martinshaw Wood (courtesy of Matt Beamish, U.L.A.S.)

Fig. 5: Thirteenth-century perambulation (R.O.L.L.R., DE40/29)

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