

REFLECTIONS ON THE 'DISPERSED-NUCLEATED' PARADIGM IN MEDIEVAL SETTLEMENT ARCHAEOLOGY

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The diverse contributions to the biennial Rurialia conferences testify to the continued good health of medieval settlement research in all corners of Europe: the conferences allow us to share our views in open discussion, and the publications provide opportunities for a more permanent record to be made of individual contributions. We should also be conscious that the published proceedings of these conferences have long-term historiographical significance, but while it is possible to form some judgement of the state of research in different parts of Europe out of the published papers, it may be too early to make an assessment of where, in the pan-European perspective, medieval rural settlement research now stands, either philosophically or methodologically. Nonetheless, the apparent ease with which the participants of the Spa and Maynooth conferences have been able to address the broad themes of those two gatherings - 'social and economic aspects' of settlement in the case of the former, and 'dispersed and nucleated' settlement in the case of the latter - suggest that the oft-repeated words 'socio-economic', 'dispersed', and 'nucleated', really reflect the ways we think about our material and demarcate the paths by which we conduct our research. This short note¹ is intended merely as a reflection on the concept of dispersal - nucleation and its application in the study of the structures and spatial dispositions of historic settlement.

To begin this enquiry I wish to ask some basic questions. What exactly do we mean by 'dispersed and nucleated medieval rural settlement', the explicit theme of this conference, or by its given equivalent in French, 'structure de l'habitat rural médiéval, groupement et dispersion'? In a conscious departure from what appears to be the dominant methodology in medieval settlement research, this paper will have a theoretical, not an empirical, base: rather than discuss actual settlements and groups of settlements, or specific examples of the different scales of region in which settlement is found, I wish to reflect on the words which we use in our historical-archaeological writing, and to explore the theoretical underpinnings of the concepts which are expressed by those words. I am conscious that some readers will consider this a needless exercise: some might argue that the meanings of the words 'dispersed' and 'nucleated' are self-evident, and others might view a theoretical perspective as an indulgence at a time when much information remains to be collected and many research problems remain to be resolved. But thinking and rethinking about language, whether it is the language of the medieval chroniclers who wrote about their contemporary settlements and landscape, or the language which modern scholarship has created for those same purposes, should be central, not peripheral, to our activities, and this note is offered in that spirit.

The question I posed above is really a conflation of two broader questions. The first concerns the meaning of our theme: do all of us have the same understanding of the phrase 'dispersed and nucleated medieval rural settlement'? When we discuss medieval rural settlement under this heading at a conference like Rurialia, are we engaged in dialogues about the same thing? If, for example, we understand the words 'dispersion' and 'nucleation' to refer to aerial patterns of settlement, do we measure - or do we even perceive - these patterns by comparable spatial indexes? The second question concerns the value of the paradigm: as an intellectual community, do we have a common vision of what this theme offers us by way of insight into the realities of medieval rural life? Beyond the collection of empirical data at local, regional and national levels, and the resolution of problems of settlement history which are particular to those geographical entities, is there a generalised, pan-European

1 My paper to the conference, "Place, space, *habitus*: conceptualising medieval rural settlement", argued for a deployment of Pierre Bourdieu's theory of deeply-embedded social practices. Part of my case-study in that paper has been published elsewhere ["Township as text: the topography of social interaction in Fethard, Co. Tipperary, AD 1300-1700", *Irish Geography* 32 (1999), 9-25].

synthesis to be achieved about settlement patterns? Does the 'dispersed-nucleated' paradigm help us achieve this? Do we believe there are 'laws' governing the relationship between settlement patterns and social processes? And, again, do we think that these can be retrieved within the context of this particular paradigm?

First of all, we need to be clear that 'dispersed' and 'nucleated' are legitimate descriptive terms for particular spatial patterns or dispositions, whether we are working at the scale of the individual 'home' and its spatial relationship to other 'homes', or at the scale of what *Brian Roberts* describes (1996) as 'landscapes of settlement'. But the actual meanings of the two words still need elucidation. It is apparent from the literature on medieval rural settlement that most scholars regard 'dispersed' and 'nucleated' as synonymous with 'isolated' and 'clustered'; thus, farmsteads standing alone in their fields are examples of the former, and villages examples of the latter. This interpretation of our two words conveys an impression of stasis: if 'isolated' and 'clustered' are synonyms, these descriptions of rural settlement refer exclusively to the *condition* of settlement without alluding in any way to a *process* of settlement-formation or, as would be the case if we used 'farmstead' and 'village' (*Taylor 1983*) or 'peasant house' and 'village' (*Chapelot - Fossier 1985*), to the *function* of settlement.

Measuring the conditions of 'dispersion' and 'nucleation' requires an index, as we noted, and in the positivist climate created by the so-called 'New Archaeologists' of the 1960s and 1970s there existed techniques for such measurements (*Hodder - Orton 1976*), and a consciousness that the results - which can include absolute dispersion or nucleation - were contingent on the scale of landscape at which the techniques were deployed. The value of such techniques lies in the objective refinement which they offer our descriptions of spatial patterns: were we to judge relative dispersion and nucleation according to our own perceptions of space and settlement-density we could not hope to achieve descriptions which would be meaningful in any comparative analysis. But it is fair to ask if descriptions of settlement as relatively dispersed or nucleated, however refined, bring us close to an understanding of settlement. To an extent, the answer to this question is the observation that such techniques as Nearest Neighbour Analysis and the Chi-square test, each devised to provide a scientific - or 'objective' measurement of spatial characteristics, feature very infrequently in modern literature, and not at all in the *Ruralia* volumes. Yet, the continued use of the two words which I am analysing in this note suggests that while these measuring techniques have been abandoned, the thinking behind them has not.

The issue is whether blanket descriptions of settlement as being dispersed or nucleated synchronise with how the people of those landscapes perceived their spatial interrelationships in the middle ages. That we should, in the first instance, be seeking to characterise the paradigm in terms of opposites is not in question: binary opposites such as dark/light, outside/inside, private/public, sacred/profane, male/female, and raw/cooked, have a value in social-theorising about settlement precisely because they are oppositions of which we have a day-to-day awareness (*Bourdieu 1977*). But there are two possible objections to dispersed/nucleated being included in the company of those oppositions. First, the polarisation is, as we have noted, contingent on scale, and there can be no absolute state of dispersal or nucleation if there is no 'right' scale at which to make the analysis. Secondly, 'dispersed' and 'nucleated' might not always be the appropriate opposites of each other, either in the context of settlement in general, or of medieval European settlement in particular: one could argue, particularly in contexts in which the inhabitants of nucleated settlements - towns or villages - enjoyed certain privileges, that the polarisation should actually be nucleated/not-nucleated. Were we to understand dispersal and nucleation as processes rather than as descriptions of static distribution patterns, and to interpret literally, therefore, the adjectives 'dispersed' and 'nucleated', we could imagine settlements which are so-described to be the actual products of social, political, or economic forces which cause - or persuade - people to move centripedally to a core (to nucleate) or to move centrifugally from a core (to disperse). This is not the sense in which these words are customarily used, but perhaps a case could be made for using the two terms in this process-driven way.

There is a further reason for exercising some caution with respect to the dispersed/nucleated opposition. The view of the village community as the backbone of rural exploitation in high medieval Europe means that nucleation is, in this equation, what light, inside, private, sacred, male, and cooked, are to those binary opposites listed above. Thus, if we perceive a natural trajectory of rural settlement evolution, we are likely to perceive the progression being from dispersion to nucleation, not the reverse; in any case, as archaeologists we can more easily perceive nucleated settlements and their associated ('town-field') landscapes as evolving from simple to complex, rather than *vice versa*, whatever the actual stimuli for village-formation. When *Martin Gojda*, in a valuable comparative survey of medieval settlement research in the Czech Republic and Britain, identifies 'understanding the transitions both from dispersed to nucleated settlement patterns and from irregular to planned settlements' as 'one primary and major objective' shared by Czech and British scholars (1990, 105), we could hardly argue that this is not the pattern of development of settlement. However, we should also note that such perceptions of nucleation as a more developed or sophisticated form of settlement than dispersion, both in time and in its 'planned' or regular spatial pattern, are probably post-medieval rather than medieval. *Chapelot* and *Fossier*, for example, identify the history of the village as a key to 'the whole of western history'; significantly, they

also acknowledge that 'the village as we see it today and as we conceptualise it is a recent creation, closely associated with the flowering in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries of a village society that had only crystallised out five or six centuries earlier' (1985, 9-10). More recently, *David Austin* has discussed the perception of the English medieval village as an expression of Englishness, and has forged a connection between its historiography in the late 1800s and early 1900s and the broader issues of contemporary English self-identity and, in the case of her overseas imperialism, self-justification (1990). The danger of allowing the village dominate our perception and understanding of medieval rural settlement is that we might forget that medieval rural *Gemeinschaft* was not contingent on habitation within a formal structure of a village.

Apropos of our capacity to detect how nucleations come into existence, *Chris Taylor* has isolated four ways in which villages form: steady growth from an existing place of settlement, the agglomeration of a number of settlements which were originally separate, the 'collapse' of a 'dispersed' settlement pattern into one of nucleated villages, and deliberate planning (1983). As *Austin* has correctly pointed out in an important (but little-quoted) review article (1985), not only do we assume, in this way of thinking, that the physical forms and tenurial arrangements which we observe when villages come into full historical view in the late middle ages or early modern period are the products of evolutionary impulses from simpler antecedents, but it naturally follows also from this that in the absence of an explicit written testimony from the middle ages the detection of settlements which are products of actual centrifugal forces - forces of dispersal from nucleated cores - is very difficult. The reconstruction of each of Taylor's identified processes in any single case springs from an assumption that the generative forces of settlement creation so leave their imprint in settlement morphology that they can be retrieved from archaeological scrutiny of the settlements themselves, and that this way of thinking leads us, on the one hand, to regard the settlements as active, dynamic entities which follow their own choreography of development, and, on the other hand, to dilute, and even remove from consideration, the role in settlement-formation of the human agent, its complex power-relations and kin-relations, and its consciousness of economic imperatives.

Where, then, does this critique of the paradigm leave us? It is hoped that it enhances our awareness that while the paradigm provides us with a spectrum of abstract descriptions of landscape and settlement, it really only has value if we can make them relevant, or demonstrate their relevance, to the processes and realities of medieval life. If our challenge is to bridge the distances between observing spatial patterns, generating ideas about how those patterns may be the products of instantaneous or gradual movements of things and people, and understanding the processes which cause those changes, we can only begin by realising that the dispersed-nucleated polarisation - in other words, the pairing of those two terms as dialectic opposites in a single concept - is an invention of modern scholarship and that it cannot always be assumed to have a value in the study of individual settlement-sites or of entire settlement-patterns of the middle ages.

ÜBERLEGUNGEN ZUM 'DISPERSED-NUCLEATED' PARADIGMA DER MITTELALTERLICHEN SIEDLUNGSARCHÄOLOGIE

LES RÉFLECTION SUR LE PARADIGME DE L'HABITAT DISPERSÉ ET GROUPÉ DANS L'ARCHÉOLOGIE MÉDIÉVALE

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