Parks in Medieval England

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Stephen Mileson’s book is very timely, representing the first comprehensive study of medieval parks at a time when academic interest in aristocratic identity, social landscapes, hunting culture and environmental exploitation is blossoming. Previous scholarship, as Mileson points out, has focused on specific regions or particular themes, but amounts to a ‘rather disorderly range of suggestions about why these enclosures were set up and how the priority of various factors may have shifted over the course of the middle ages’ (p. 6). 
Parks in Medieval England boldly grapples with the full complexity of the topic, tackling the problematic chronology of these structures, spanning the 12th to 16th centuries, through to their diverse features, uses and detailed social contexts. Its objective is a coherent understanding of the park phenomenon, and through a detailed inter-regional multi-disciplinary study, Mileson has produced a book that can be considered the seminal work on the subject for future generations and a milestone in medieval scholarship.

The book is divided into two clearly defined parts, further sub-divided into thematic chapters; illustrations and maps are usefully incorporated into the text, and a segmented bibliography of manuscripts, primary and secondary sources supports the detailed arguments made within each section. The first part of the book seeks to determine why parks were created and maintained throughout the Middle Ages by examining their functions, which encompass their social meanings. Although Mileson separates the topics of hunting, economy, landscaping and status for analytical purposes, it is clear these are all inter-related aspects driving park construction and maintenance. Furthermore, each chapter includes a consideration of trends from the high to later medieval periods; the result is that Mileson’s argument, which includes a strong chronological component, becomes increasingly stronger and more convincing as the book progresses. The first chapter, discussing parks as hunting spaces, is defining. Mileson returns to hunting – and the aristocratic obsession with deer – throughout the book, and in contrast to earlier research which emphasised mixed landuse and shifts in park function (and perception) over the course of the Middle Ages, he argues for hunting culture as the continuous defining feature of parks from the 12th to early 16th centuries. Supporting recent studies of the link between medieval aristocratic identity and hunting culture (1), Mileson tackles the question of whether some (or even many) parks were too small for hunting deer, demonstrating how such spaces could accommodate a variety of hunting techniques. The importance of parks to this culture is situated within the changing ecological context of the English countryside; both red and roe deer populations were declining, making hunting in the open forests and chases much more difficult from at least the later 13th century.
Mileson does not abandon the economic aspects of parks, but treats this in a separate chapter, surveying the diversity of terrain enclosed by their bounds and exploring its management. He reveals significant limitations to the economic exploitation of parks, supporting the idea that they were maintained predominantly for leisure rather than as economic assets and, particularly from the later 14th century, representing ‘impressive demonstrations of the disdain for financial worries shown by men of high status’ (p. 76). Parks clearly provided their owners with opportunities for economic gain, but they were predominantly a drain on resources and a clear signal of investment in the hunting culture that defined the elite landowning class of medieval England, especially following the Norman Conquest. Hunting, within the context of the visual world of medieval society, had a demonstrable aesthetic component, which may have extended beyond the sylvan settings of romance literature to the design of emparked landscapes.

This attractive idea, which complicates park siting and layout is problematised in chapter three. Mileson considers the aesthetic qualities of the park landscape, drawing on recent research, particularly concerning castles (2), focusing on the aesthetic sensibilities in medieval aristocratic estate planning. The evidence is present in contemporary literature, which earlier generations of scholars had dismissed as unrelated fiction, rather than as a viable window into the aspirations of the producers and consumers of these narratives. He reviews archaeological and documentary sources suggesting some parks were incorporated into the design of the broader surroundings of aristocratic residences: the ‘visual stage for gracious living’ (p. 95). However, this aspect of park placement and construction was also subservient to deer hunting, and landscaping was driven by considerations for the maintenance of deer which of course may have coincided with the projection of idealised settings for the chase. Indeed, the very animals themselves created an image of aristocratic power and privilege.

In chapter four, the notion of parks as status symbols is tackled. Again, we see how attitudes towards hunting are central to projecting aristocratic status in the context of the park. Moving away from more generic ideas of parks as elite status symbols, Mileson embeds his discussion in a survey of park ownership. Reassessing the relative percentage of parks under the ownership of the crown, as well as the greater lay and ecclesiastical lords, he argues for the continued exclusivity of park ownership into the 15th century largely dictated by the costs of enclosing and running such spaces. In this respect the concept of the park appealed to the post-Plague generations of upwardly mobile ‘new lords’, who sought to emulate the traditional aristocratic class which was reasserting its social bounds with sumptuary laws and increasingly diverse alimentation. A survey of the evidence indicates a convincing correlation between rising wealth and park construction not only from the later 14th century, but to a lesser extent in the 12th and 13th centuries. The fact that these new parks followed the templates which had been established and passed down the generations of the greater noble families emphasises their importance as status symbols, ultimately linked to aristocratic hunting culture. Having argued for the function of the park as a hunting space that defined aristocratic identity throughout the Middle Ages, Mileson goes on to explore their broader social context in the second part of his book.

The second half of Parks in Medieval England examines the impact of park construction on medieval society, essentially providing a context for the aristocratic obsession with deer and surveying its social consequences. Chapter five starts by questioning royal control over park construction, reviewing the issuing of park licenses which provided exemption from forest law. Mileson argues that the English kings were generally permissive in their attitude to park creation, especially after the 1330s. In fact, the construction of private parks was in the crown’s interest, as it reinforced the social status of the gentry who in turn performed key administrative tasks in the localities. Concerns over unauthorised hunting, particularly from the later 14th century, were predominantly associated with lower-class unrest. This reappraisal of the relative indifference of the crown to park construction suggests the medieval English aristocracy had a great deal of freedom and flexibility in emparkment; indeed the main limiting factor appears to have been personal wealth.

Chapter six explores this freedom in some detail and immediately highlights that competition between lords was a far more significant force governing trends in park construction than the concerns of the crown. On the
one hand the activity of hunting united the aristocracy, as a social group and as a ruling class, but it was simultaneously an expression of personal power, privilege, wealth and prowess. Park construction whether by the greater nobility or the new lords could invariably interrupt long-established hunting practices which involved multiple groups from varying social backgrounds, creating resentment, prompting riots and park breaks – especially in times of political instability. However, Milesen reminds us the level of competition within a structured, hierarchical aristocracy should not be exaggerated. Instead, parks came to represent flash points in local disputes between the nobility and gentry; from the later 13th century the latter led many of the hundreds of recorded park raids and thefts (p. 157). But whilst parks could block the free ranging hunting activities of other aristocrats, they appear to have had the most serious impact on communities at the lower end of the social scale. This is discussed in the last thematic chapter of the book.

Chapter seven reiterates the potential disruption to arable farming resulting from park construction whether in the form of enclosing cultivated land or impeding its extension. In fact, parks could disrupt the entire fabric of rural society, interrupting vital communication routes and even affecting the growth and decline of settlements. In the case of the village of Budley in Somerset, the creation of a park at nearby Nether Stowey in the early 13th century resulted in the enclosure and destruction of most of the settlement (p. 162). The impact on local communities is difficult to quantify, but it is clear that the removal or restriction of cultivated land, as well as waste land – the source of valuable and freely accessible pasture and wood – would have hit some communities hard. The latter appears to have become a point of social contention over the increasingly restricted area of ‘public space’ in the 13th century. The park played a clear role in amplifying this tension, in contrast to the forest which tended to preserve substantial common rights. Following the onslaught of the Black Death, park construction continued to cause problems for rural communities, albeit far more limited than in the 12th and 13th centuries. Nonetheless these distinctive spaces remained at the heart of social tensions and continued to define the aristocratic class. Even urban communities could be affected by emparkment, which could limit or direct the growth of the built-up area; parks may have contributed to the failure of some planned boroughs in the high medieval period. In this final and important chapter, Milesen completes his picture of the medieval English aristocracy as a class seeking to express and rehearse its social and natural dominion through the practice of hunting.

The conclusion reasserts the dominating role of the aristocracy in park construction and maintenance – and the persistent importance of deer hunting and aristocratic hunting culture that is central to the rationale of park construction. This is underlined by their negative impact on rural and even some urban communities, a case in point which also demonstrates that parks must be understood as fully integrated into the social landscapes of medieval England. Milesen also collapses the distinction between early and later medieval parks, arguing for both continuity and the diversity of features that sets the complexity of parks alongside that of another hotly debated aristocratic structure – castles. Both are examples of culture influencing economic behaviour; we are increasingly becoming aware of how factors such as religious piety and social ideology are powerful forces shaping medieval European economies, and the park is an excellent example of this. This book is an impressive piece of scholarship and it is hoped its publication will promote two trends in future medieval studies. Firstly, a growing appreciation of the fundamental links between medieval culture and ecology, and secondly, how these varied across a Europe united under a broadly common worldview – Christianity. Milesen’s work must surely inspire comparable syntheses of emparked spaces in other regions of Europe. How did the English system compare to other European countries where the aristocracy also shared a hunting culture? To what extent did topography play a role in shaping these trends? Milesen refers to hunting practices in other regions of Western Europe, particularly France, where par force hunting in the open landscape remained far more feasible and preferable in the later Middle Ages (e.g. p. 32). But were the territories of English lords in, for example, 12th-century Normandy or 13th-century Gascony, also perceived as suitable for emparking or did political tensions and cultural differences limit the development of a medieval park culture in these regions? To what extent did hunting activities define the European aristocracy, and how was this expressed in the expanding frontiers of Christendom, such as the Eastern Mediterranean, Iberia and the Baltic?
While previous studies have focused on specific aspects of parks, Mileson’s book truly embraces the totality of the subject. In arguing for the centrality of hunting to the persistent idea and use of the park in medieval England, Mileson has contributed to the move from more ahistorical economic justifications of human behaviour in the Middle Ages to a more convincing, holistic understanding. Whilst this ‘unfashionable fact’ (Mileson p. 44) may be uncomfortable to the modern rationalist, perhaps even prompting us to frame the medieval aristocracy in the language of ‘otherness’, the fact that group ideologies, including religious beliefs, were significant economic forces in themselves should not be so surprising for they continue to shape the world we live in.

Notes


Stephen Mileson would like to thank Aleks Pluskowski for his very generous, detailed, and perceptive review. He endorses his call for further research into the development of aristocratic hunting cultures and landscapes elsewhere in Europe.

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