



Ancient woodland boundaries in Europe

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Abstract

In Western and Central Europe, many woods are clearly separated from the surrounding countryside by permanent physical boundaries. While such boundaries are now out of use, in the past they were widespread and important landscape features. This paper argues that many woodland boundaries originate from the Middle Ages and perhaps even more from the Early Modern Period. Their existence was connected to a specific form of woodland management (coppicing) but also to ownership structures and through these to grazing regimes. With their various forms, permanent woodland boundaries served to separate woodland from the surrounding countryside both in a legal and physical sense. There are four basic types of permanent woodland boundaries: woodbanks, walls, stone rows and lynchets, all of which can still be studied in the landscape today. Because of their varied state of preservation and also because of the difficulties in creating relative chronologies, dating woodland boundaries is a very challenging task. However, even a basic typology can provide valuable information for a number of scientific disciplines, including landscape history, historical geography, archaeology and ecology. Permanent woodland boundaries are a part of European cultural heritage. They should be recognised and protected similarly to all other ancient landscape features.

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Introduction

Modern European cadastres require that the use of every square metre of land is clearly defined. On paper, we can tell whether any given point is inside or outside a forest. In reality – especially with the recent large-scale abandonment of European agricultural land, resulting in secondary woodland formation¹ – the boundary between woodland and non-woodland is often blurred. The lack of a clear boundary is often taken to be the historically typical situation, which appears to be true in the Mediterranean,² in mountainous regions and in European boreal woodlands. There are, however, regions in Western and Central Europe where people have lived (with relatively high population densities) since the Neolithic, and where woodland has been valued as a renewable but limited resource for thousands of years. As a result, woods were often clearly demarcated from the surrounding countryside.

Permanent woodland boundaries occur in many European countries and date from at least the Early Middle Ages to the

nineteenth century. Yet researchers have paid very little attention to them. There is abundant literature, especially in Germany, on various landscape features that happen to be inside woods,³ but these concern archaeological phenomena that have nothing to do with the forests themselves. Environmental and forest historians sometimes mention the creation or more generally the presence of permanent woodland boundaries in their study regions, but rarely discuss what remains of these boundaries today. This lack of scholarly attention probably results from the fact that woodland boundaries are closely connected, functionally, to woodland management, which falls beyond the interest of most landscape archaeologists and historical geographers. Ecologists, on the other hand, usually take no interest in human-made landscape features.

In this paper, I examine the permanent woodland boundaries that exist in lowland Europe: their types, functions, establishment and preservation. Although temporary fences were also present in many European woods and were undoubtedly important elements

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¹ A. Mather, Afforestation: Progress, trends, policies, in: N. Weber (Ed.), *NEWFOR – New Forests for Europe: Afforestation at the Turn of the Century*, Joensuu, 2000, 11–22; Jerzy Szwagrzyk, Sukcesja leśna na gruntach porolnych; stan obecny, prognozy i wrażliwość (Forest succession on abandoned farmland; current estimates, forecasts and uncertainties), *Sylvan* 4 (2004) 53–59; P. Piussi and D. Pettenella, Spontaneous afforestation of fallows in Italy, in: N. Weber (Ed.), *NEWFOR – New Forests for Europe: Afforestation at the Turn of the Century*, Joensuu, 2000, 151–166.

² A.T. Grove and O. Rackham, *The nature of Mediterranean Europe: an Ecological History*, New Haven and London, 2001, 185.

³ E.g. K. Sippel and U. Stiehl, *Archäologie im Wald*, Kassel, 2005; J. Delfs, Grenzen und Grenzmaie im Wald, *Forst und Holz* 56 (2001) 249–255; H. Koschik (Ed.), *Archäologische Denkmäler in den Wäldern des Rheinlandes*, Köln, 1995.

in woodland management, I focus on permanent boundaries. I explain what kinds of information such boundaries carry for landscape history and ecology, and I put woodland boundaries into the larger context of the history of European territorial boundaries. Data used in this article come partly from secondary literature and partly from my own archival research and fieldwork in the Czech Republic and Hungary.

Physical boundaries: basic types and functions

Permanent physical boundaries in the landscape have two, interconnected basic functions: legal and physical. Detailed maps are a relatively recent development in European history; in earlier periods visible boundaries were an essential element in protecting one's property rights. Whenever debate arose about a certain piece of land, it had to be decided *in situ* whether it belonged to one party or another. This could only be done if boundaries were physically present in some form. Although we can know little for certain, comparisons with other continents as well as the existence of villages, field systems and long-distance roads suggest that European landscape ownership relations were well developed already in prehistory.⁴ The earliest written evidence for boundaries refers to so-called perambulations. A perambulation was a legal procedure requiring that residents of a region (accompanied by the pertinent authorities) walk along the boundary of a property unit (usually a settlement) and memorize its most significant boundary features. Some of these features were natural (a large tree, a hill or a brook), while others were made to purpose (a mound, a ditch or a cross on a tree). When writing started to be valued, perambulations took a written form. The practice of perambulation was strikingly similar in several widely separated regions and time periods. The Hindu Laws of Manu (in their present form ca. 2000 years old) describe a procedure similar to almost the smallest details to English medieval or Hungarian nineteenth-century perambulations.⁵ The first written perambulations (rather than descriptions of the procedure) probably come from Crete, and are as old as the Laws of Manu.⁶ In this context, smaller areas within settlements became valuable enough to be demarcated by permanent physical boundaries – especially when they were sold or leased. In regions with little woodland, individual woodlots probably reached this status at an early stage, although for want of written evidence we cannot tell exactly when this happened. The earliest woodland boundaries known today are the earthworks in Chalkney Wood in England, which appear to be from the Iron Age.⁷

If a permanent boundary was a linear feature rather than a series of points, it could also serve as a physical barrier, something that was difficult to cross. The best known examples of this kind of boundary are the Great Wall of China, Offa's dyke, Hadrian's Wall, or the fourth-century earthwork fortification – more than 1000 km

in length – that was created to protect the low-lying areas of the Carpathian Basin.⁸ More humble examples usually meant a bank and a ditch, and such boundaries surround thousands of European settlements. For example, medieval German *Landwehren* run for hundreds of kilometres often in what is now wooded terrain, marking the boundaries of various administrative units from villages to principalities.⁹

Types of woodland boundary

Permanent woodland boundaries could be defined by a series of points in the landscape, or by a linear feature. We have extensive knowledge about the former, because of the large number of surviving perambulations from the Middle Ages onwards. Perambulations usually feature in woodland history research in connection with the trees mentioned in them. These boundary trees tended to be species or specimens unusual in the given wood, because they had to be recognisable by future perambulators as well. To further increase their recognition, boundary trees were often marked with nails, engravings or even pictures.¹⁰ In this paper, however, I focus on *linear* woodland boundaries, and identify four basic types: woodbanks, walls, stone rows and lynchets.

Woodbanks

A woodbank (which comprises a bank and a ditch) was made around a wood by digging a ditch and throwing the earth towards the inside of the wood, thus creating a bank (Fig. 1). Here is a rather late example from the 1823 Czech adaptation of Georg Ludwig Hartig's *Lehrbuch für Förster* about how to make a woodbank:

So that such a protective ditch is befitting and neat, and tells the passer-by that the forester likes order, it should be made the following way: first we draw a line with rods or sticks where the ditch should be, and put a stick into the ground every ten steps along that line. When this is done, we measure three or four feet at right angles from the width of the ditch. When this is done, we stretch a cord from stick to stick, and with a spade we throw both upper sides of the line of the ditch to the middle [i.e. towards the inside of the wood]. When this finishes, we extract turf in square feet, and put it upside down six fingers from the edge of the ditch so that by this the oblique bank is raised a little. Up to this point, the work should be done by specialised workers. After this, however, if need be, any kind of people can work. However, we have to give each their own task, and teach them to throw the earth on and over the bank, and to dig the ditch in a way so that it is three feet deep and one and a half feet wide at the bottom. This is the only way to make sure that the ditches are laid straight and

⁴ M. Houseman, Painful places: ritual encounters with one's homelands, *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 4 (1998) 447–467; D.A. Spratt, Recent British research on prehistoric territorial boundaries, *Journal of World Prehistory* 5 (1991) 439–480.

⁵ P. Olivelle, Manu's code of law: A critical edition and translation of the *Mānava-Dharmaśāstra*, Oxford, 2005, chapter 8.

⁶ O. Rackham and J. Moody, *The making of the Cretan landscape*, Manchester, 1996, 8.

⁷ O. Rackham, *Woodlands*, London, 2006, 192.

⁸ P. Squatriti, Offa's dyke between nature and culture, *Environmental History* 9 (2004) 37–56; É. Garam, P. Patay and S. Soproni, *Sarmatisches Wallsystem im Karpatenbecken*, Budapest, 1983.

⁹ From the extensive literature, see e.g. C. Knepp, *Die Stadtlandwehren des östlichen Münsterlandes*, Münster, 2004.

¹⁰ L. Takács, *Határjelek, határjárás a feudális kor végén Magyarországon* (Boundary Signs and Perambulations at the End of the Feudal Period in Hungary), Budapest, 1987; D. Hooke, Trees in the Anglo-Saxon landscape: the charter evidence, in: C.P. Biggam (Ed.), *From Earth to Art: the Many Aspects of the Plant-world in Anglo-Saxon England*, Amsterdam and New York, 2003, 17–40; L. Ostlund, O. Zackrisson and G. Hornberg, Trees on the border between nature and culture: culturally modified trees in boreal Sweden, *Environmental History* 7 (2002) 48–68; P. Szabó, Medieval trees and modern ecology: how to handle written sources, *Medium Aevum Quotidianum* 46 (2002) 7–25.

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