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The cultural value of the pollards

La valeur culturelle des trognes

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Abstract

It is possible to trace the history of pollarding back over 4000 years through the sub-fossil pollards extracted from gravel workings in France, the Netherlands and the UK. Since then they have been a significant part of our cultural heritage – depicted in many different media for example embroidery, stonework, paintings, poetry and literature.

The study of historic cultural sources from the perspective of and understanding of trees may lead to some new insights into the historic artefacts themselves. Using the example of some of the 30 or so pollards depicted in the Bayeux Tapestry, it is possible to see how closely the embroiderers studied their landscape and the trees. It maybe that the trees could help answer the question of whether the tapestry was created in Normandy or in Kent. However there are also characteristics of the pollards which are difficult to interpret – retaining modern pollard traditions is vital if we are to more fully understand historic documents.

The importance of the cultural heritage value of the trees should be used to help justify the protection of ancient pollards and their historic landscapes as much as their biodiversity, ecosystem service and tourism values. It should also be used to encourage the establishment and cutting of new pollards to restore or renew traditional landscapes in the same way that historic buildings and archaeological artefacts are conserved for future generations to enjoy.

Résumé

Il est possible de retracer l'histoire des têtards sur 4 000 ans à travers les trognes fossilées extraites des gravières en France, aux Pays-Bas et au Royaume-Uni. Ils constituent depuis lors une part importante de notre patrimoine culturel - représenté sur de nombreux supports, tels que la broderie, la pierre, la peinture, la poésie et la littérature. L'étude des sources culturelles historiques et la compréhension des arbres peut conduire à de nouvelles connaissances sur les artefacts historiques eux-mêmes. En prenant l'exemple de la trentaine de trognes représentées dans la tapisserie de Bayeux, il est possible de voir à quel point les brodeurs ont étudié leur paysage et les arbres. Il s'agit peut-être d'ailleurs d'une nouvelle clé afin de déterminer si la tapisserie fut créée en Normandie ou dans le Kent. Certaines caractéristiques des arbres têtards restent difficiles à interpréter - le maintien des usages traditionnels est essentiel si nous voulons mieux comprendre les documents historiques.

L'importance de la valeur patrimoniale culturelle des arbres devrait servir à justifier la protection des anciennes trognes et de leurs paysages historiques tout autant que leur biodiversité, leur service écosystémique et leurs valeurs touristiques. Cela devrait également être utilisé pour encourager la plantation et la coupe de nouvelles trognes afin de restaurer ou de renouveler les paysages traditionnels de la même manière que les bâtiments historiques et les objets archéologiques sont conservés pour les générations futures.



(Fig.1) Sub fossil pollard – circa 3400 years old

[Link to access presentation / Lien vers la présentation : http://www.agroforesterie.fr/colloque_trognes/Jill-Butler](http://www.agroforesterie.fr/colloque_trognes/Jill-Butler)

Introduction

Across Europe and into Turkey, trees have been cut as pollards since time immemorial. Different species of tree have been cut in a variety of traditional ways for a whole range of valuable products, but principally for tree hay or fodder, fruits, wood fuel or building materials. From Scandinavia to the Mediterranean, from Portugal to Turkey. Interestingly the practice was not exported to the New World with European immigrants.

Tree fodder from pollards helped farmers and commoners offset the risks that they faced from poor summers – principally drought but also high rainfall and long cold winters. Before the coming of oil and plastics they were essential for providing other essential household goods and were on the doorstep. This contrasts with coppice which was often unavailable to local communities as it was used for industrial purposes such as mining and smelting or exported away from the community to growing towns and cities.

The importance of the cultural heritage value of the trees should be used to help justify the protection of ancient pollards and their historic landscapes as much as their biodiversity, ecosystem service and tourism values. It should also be used to encourage the establishment and cutting of new pollards to restore or renew traditional landscapes in the same way that historic buildings and archaeological artefacts are conserved for future generations to enjoy.

Members of the Ancient Tree Forum are keen to bring these old cultural traditions alive before they are irretrievably lost. But time is running out as there are few people who practice the traditional methods.

How far back in time do we have archaeological evidence of pollarding?

It is possible to trace the history of pollarding back over 4.000 years through the sub-fossil pollards extracted from gravel workings in the Netherlands and the UK (Fig.1). This in itself challenges our perception of what those pre the Bronze Age. For thousands of years they have been a significant part of our cultural heritage – depicted in many different media for example embroidery, stonework, paintings, poetry and literature.

Some years ago, Ted Green (Founder President of the Ancient Tree Forum) and I were shown a piece of wood recently rescued in 2002 from gravel workings in the Trent Valley, in the Midlands of the UK. It was one of a number of similar pieces found at the same time and it was evidently a pollard. This subfossil tree was subsequently carbon dated as 4.400 years old and identified as oak (*Quercus sp.*)

Similar finds have been obtained in other parts of Europe. Examples of subfossil tree stumps extracted from the Waal were re-erected in the Netherlands, one of which is clearly a shred, and carbon dated as 1.800 years old (Fig.2).

Cultural evidence of pollards

Perhaps the greatest historic document that illustrates the value of pollards to the combined heritage of northern France and England is the nearly 1.000 year-old-Bayeux Tapestry but other examples of illustrations of pollards exists on Roman pottery, ancient sarcophagi or mediaeval Books of Hours (Fig.3).

The role of pollards in the Bayeux Tapestry is astounding – each one is individually depicted and different and may be evidence that the embroidery was done in France rather than Canterbury as generally thought. Using the example of some of the 30 or so pollards depicted in the Bayeux Tapestry, it is possible to see how closely the embroiderers knew their landscape and the trees. However there are also characteristics of the illustrated pollards which are difficult to interpret – retaining modern pollard traditions is vital if we are to more fully understand historic documents.

Few historians have made a study of trees and it is up to tree archaeologists to help them respect and interpret ancient historic artefacts.



(Fig.2) Fossil pollard – circa 1500 years old



(Fig.3) Illustration of pollards in an extract of the Bayeux Tapestry

Where in Europe are there traditional pollards?

There are traditional pollards in every country in Europe however they are seriously threatened by lack of understanding and appropriate management. In Sicily, for example, the Etna National Park staff was adamant that they did not have pollards and in Bosnia, Romania, the UK and many other countries the old pollard landscapes are being swallowed up in dense secondary regeneration and being lost due to shading.

Some countries such as Spain and Portugal have extensive landscapes, France has thousands of miles of pollards in hedges – although they are seriously under threat through hedgerow removal as Dominique Mansion has demonstrated.

In the UK many pollards from hedges have been lost. One study showed that between the 1850s and today, 7 out of 8 pollards had been lost from the landscape. Major hedgerow removal has also impacted on pollards. The coming of coal helped some pollards but made others of little value and they were removed probably for wood fuel. The loss of wooded commons in the 19th Century also seriously damaged wood pastures. Few pollards are present in Medieval deer parks but they can be found in ancient mediaeval Forests such as Windsor Great Park, Sherwood Forest and the New Forest as the King was sympathetic to his commoners.

Valuing, protecting and encouraging positive management

The contemporary values of pollarding have changed. They are now historic documents which tell us stories about our past and extremely valuable trees for biodiversity. We should be protecting the trees in landscapes that we have inherited but where these have been degraded then a new network of young pollards to become the veteran and ancient pollards of the future is vital if we are to continue the values from the past into the future.



(Fig.4) Children walking a way with old pollards

References

Mansion, D. (2010) Les trognes, l'arbre paysan aux milles usages, *Ouest-France*, 144pp.