ITINERARIUM SEPTENTRIONALE



I have started the publication of my work in the English/Scottish borders with a three volume visual chorography.

The first is now available.

Itinerarium Septentrionale – A Northern Journey. Volume One – Coast



Here is how I describe the project:

Itinerarium Septentrionale: a northern journey through the English/Scottish borders. An itinerary: a schedule, a list, an arrangement of places visited in and around Northumberland, England’s eastern border county with Scotland.

Though I left more than twenty years ago to pursue an academic career in archaeology that brought me eventually to California, I have returned to explore again these extraordinary borderlands, fascinated here

by the densest of events and memories, folded into the land itself, the ruins of historical significances. This is an effort to revive the old genre of chorography—inscription on the land, offering diverse engagement and account in manifolds of chora—the land and its people, inhabitation, regional experiences that make us, and all with which we connect, what we are and might be.

This collection, Coast, is the first of three parts to Itinerarium Septentrionale; it is set mostly in the northern half of the county and oriented on the Holy Island of Lindisfarne. The second, Ad Fines, moves north along Dere Street, the old Roman road into Scotland through the middle of the county, into the landscapes of Walter Scott and the border abbeys. The third part of the journey is Coquetdale, following the river Coquet from its remote source up in the Cheviot Hills by Dere Street, down to the coast at Warkworth, site of the ruined medieval palace of the Percy family.

My intention is not to illustrate an actual journey, least of all to attempt to represent the history and character of a region such as the English/Scottish borders. What I have gathered here are visual notes of

particular encounters, observations, moments, opportunities. A key constituting attitude is a pragmatic one: this is simply what I noted as I traveled, subject to the needs and requirements of the journey, to the interests of a particular day, of a particular train of thought, in a research effort investigating the archaeology and history of this northern land. There is no message or story to tell. There is no map to offer, though this could be construed as an effort in deep mapping, plotting the limitless connections between places, people, happenings, artifacts, animals, plants, landforms. This is not a study of regional identity, though there are undertones of displacement and return (nostos—the return, as in nostalgia). These are explorations in an archaeological sensibility, tuned to long term processes, with people in the background, barely present in person, though very evident in their effects, traces and remains. In this archaeological treatment the temporalities are duration— the way the past clings on and endures into the future, and actuality—connections made between pasts and present interests (the best word is the old Greek kairos—an opportune moment, as well as weather, the ambient

conditions of a located moment). I offer no all-encompassing synthetic or panoptic views, but glimpses through fragments, ephemera, details.

These incidental encounters involve close attention to empirics, the substance of experience—the qualities of things and places as they reveal themselves in visit and encounter. We cannot just let things be, and they metamorphose as soon as we attempt to hold onto them, define and pin them down, be they events, places, artifacts. As an archaeologist working in this way on the material remains of the past, I am conscious of the critical role of media. Any engagement is mediated; the archaeologist always has to translate sites and artifacts encountered into images, maps and plans, descriptions, lists, accounts and stories. Here, in this Itinerarium, it is (captioned) photography that mediates. More precisely, photowork—the process of choosing aspect, framing, instrumental capture in the camera, arrangement in an album, with appended commentary offered by captions. Archaeology and photography—these are archaeographic expressions.

I cannot but be informed by other and older encounters. We have been here before. Above all, perhaps, I seek to

understand what can be an overwhelming disposition towards landscapes like these—romanticism, in all its subtle forms and evolved descendants. We cannot but be haunted by the figures of Scott, Turner and many others since the eighteenth century who have explored in modern idiom the extraordinary topology of these borderlands.

