

Offa's Dyke Journal



Volume 2

Edited by Howard Williams and Liam Delaney

Aims and Scope

Offa's Dyke Journal is a peer-reviewed venue for the publication of high-quality research on the archaeology, history and heritage of frontiers and borderlands focusing on the Anglo-Welsh border. The editors invite submissions that explore dimensions of Offa's Dyke, Wat's Dyke and the 'short dykes' of western Britain, including their life-histories and landscape contexts. *ODJ* will also consider comparative studies on the material culture and monumentality of frontiers and borderlands from elsewhere in Britain, Europe and beyond. We accept:

1. Notes and Reviews of up to 3,000 words
2. Interim reports on fieldwork of up to 5,000 words
3. Original discussions, syntheses and analyses of up to 10,000 words

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Collaboratory, Coronavirus and the Colonial Countryside Howard Williams	1
Two Chimeras in the Landscape Mark Bell	29
The 'Wall of Severus': Pseudoarchaeology and the West Mercian Dykes Keith Fitzpatrick-Matthews	52
Saxon Kent versus Roman London? Presenting Borderland Heritage at the Faesten Dic in Joyden's Wood, Kent Ethan Doyle White	81
Living after Offa: Place-Names and Social Memory in the Welsh Marches Howard Williams	103
Offa's and Wat's Dykes David Hill	141
Grim's Ditch, Wansdyke, and the Ancient Highways of England: Linear Monuments and Political Control Tim Malim	160

Two Chimeras in the Landscape

Mark Bell

This article discusses the history of investigations into British linear earthworks in the twentieth century. The influence of pre-existing beliefs about the environment of Britain, especially the existence of impassable forest cover, deeply influenced the interpretation of linear monuments and had a lasting effect on the study of these monuments. A brief history of the personalities involved is followed by two case studies of monuments that were believed to be post-Roman in date but are now seen as Iron Age monuments. The implications of the change in the relationship to of the dykes to the landscape is discussed along with potential future research, better informed by an awareness of this confusing tradition of field archaeology.

Keywords: dykes, history of archaeology, landscape, linear earthworks.

According to Homer the Chimaera was of divine origin. In front it was a lion, behind it was a serpent, and in the middle a goat, and was brought up by King Amisodarus as a plague for men. (Peck 1898: 327)

Introduction

A chimera is a creature made-up of parts of other animals and is an appropriate symbol for some of Britain's linear earthworks that first appear to be whole and complete but on closer examination are made up of elements of very different dates and functions. In this article, I aim to discuss the specific cases of the Chiltern Grim's Ditch and the Silchester Dykes as examples of chimeras that were created in the landscape by earlier generations of archaeologists and which remain misleading phenomena that still plague archaeologists in terms of their date, function and significance.

An outline of the history of the investigations into the dykes in the first half of the twentieth century is important to see how archaeologists interpreted these monuments and how these investigations shaped the views of researchers throughout the rest of the twentieth century and popular (mis)understandings to this day. It may be a platitude that archaeological interpretation is always conducted through a screen of pre-existing ideology and prejudice but looking at some of the archaeological publications of a century ago they show to the twenty-first century reader an almost unrecognisable view of ancient Britain. Therefore, investigating the history of the dykes should aim to identify and remove some of the accreted 'factoids' about them, interpretations that hardened into accepted facts that are difficult to dislodge, especially if they have the prestige of famous archaeologists' names behind them. For instance, the early nineteenth-century antiquarian Joseph Train speculated that a 'Pictish wall' had existed all the way around Galloway. This idea was partly dismantled by A. Graham (Graham 1949; Graham and Feachem 1956) after field survey on alleged sections of the dyke, though he was unwilling to dismiss the idea of the existence of the dyke entirely. Subsequently, fieldwork on the Deil's Dyke, a key section

of the whole system, in the 1980s (Barber 1982) showed that the dyke was a medieval boundary partly overlying an Iron Age one. However, this information was published in the niche publication, the *Transactions of the Dumfriesshire and Galloway Natural History and Antiquarian Society* which did not enjoy as wide an audience as the earlier descriptions of the 'Pictish Wall' had found. Consequently, the idea is still sometimes revived, even in this century (Grigg 2006).

British archaeologists inherit a long tradition of fanciful speculations that have long endured, but also interpretations of linear earthworks as evidence of racial divisions and conflict in Britain deriving from nineteenth-century antiquaries and historians. For example, in 1913, Major P.T. Godsall could confidently explain that Wansdyke could only be built by the Saxons against the Celts because only men of different races build walls against each other.¹ Any investigation into the history of the dykes should not be treated just as an amusing and condescending look at some of the outdated and sometimes bizarre ideas of a previous generation of archaeologists but instead it should aim to understand how the rise and fall of a particular vision of dykes in the British landscape still influences academic and popular understandings of these monuments today. Again, these have persisted into even twenty-first century heritage interpretation and popular culture (Doyle White 2020).

Moreover, there are pervasive and persistent 'alternative' or 'fringe' views of Britain's linear earthworks, some with roots in these discarded and discredited nineteenth or early twentieth century interpretations. One recent extreme example is R.J. Langdon's theory of Offa's Dyke and Wansdyke being giant prehistoric canals (Langdon 2014). Others have included J.L. Fern's idea that Offa's Dyke was long distance routeway for prehistoric flint traders (Ferns 1985) or that Offa's Dyke can be re-dated and considered to be a Roman monument built in the reign of Septimius Severus (Blake and Lloyd 2003). For a more detailed discussion see the article by Fitzpatrick-Matthews (2020).

The consensus on how changes occurred from the Roman period to the early medieval period has also changed radically since the first half of the twentieth century, when mass invasion was the explanation for every cultural change. Works such as Wells' *Barbarians to Angels; the Dark Ages Reconsidered* (Wells 2008) or Wickham's *The Inheritance of Rome* (Wickham 2009) see the period as a vibrant period of change, not as a period of collapse. Despite this or maybe because of this change of view, how the linear earthworks fit into the early medieval period is now more difficult. Indeed, many recent works on the post-Roman and early medieval periods barely mention the dykes. For example, Halsall's (2013) *The Worlds of Arthur* omits them from the discussion, while Fleming's *Britain After Rome* (Fleming 2011) only briefly mentions Offa's Dike (sic) with

¹ Major Philip Thomas Godsall (1850–1925) was a military man like General Pitt-Rivers. He was interested in history and wrote several books on the Anglo-Saxon invasions, describing in detail the routes and battles of Hengist and Aella and taking the text of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle as entirely accurate and reliable. His work was brutally dismissed as 'frankly fiction' by Sir Charles Oman (Oman 1929).

no discussion of the monument or of other linear earthworks. Meanwhile, Dark (2000) in *Britain and the End of the Roman Empire* tries to see them as an inheritance of Britishness disconnected from Anglo-Saxon (Germanic-speaking peoples') traditions and practice:

The dykes represent another aspect of the fusion of British and Germanic culture – in 'free Germania' people did not construct such dykes but they did in fifth- and sixth-century western Britain. (Dark 2000: 93; see also Laycock 2008: 228).

This is, of course, a debateable point when Denmark has one of the largest linear earthworks in Europe and many other Roman Iron Age dykes (Andresen 2008; Dobat 2008; Tummuscheit and Witte 2019). To contextualise this relative neglect and the persistence of out-dated notions, we must explore the character and context of early twentieth-century researchers.

Early twentieth-century researchers

In the early part of the twentieth century while the cast of characters involved in studying the dykes was quite small, even considering the small size of the archaeological profession in Britain at the time, they were import members of the fledgling archaeological profession. The two men who dominated the study of linear earthworks in this period were Sir Cyril Fox and O.G.S. Crawford, both of whom made major contributions to the study of the dykes from the 1920s to the 1950s. Both men came from similar academic backgrounds; they had both studied geography, Fox at Cambridge, and Crawford at Oxford just before the First World War. At the time geography was a relatively new and unfashionable degree level subject. Fox's undergraduate dissertation *The Archaeology of the Cambridgeshire Region* was published in 1923 (Fox 1949) while Crawford's *The Andover District* (Crawford 1922) was also originally his undergraduate thesis submitted for his diploma in Geography in 1910. Both men applied the techniques of geography, especially the use of distribution maps, to archaeology.

Sir Cyril Fox worked on the dykes throughout his archaeological career. He began by excavating the Fleam Dyke, one of the Cambridgeshire Dykes, in the 1920s (Fox 1923; Fox and Palmer 1922). When he moved to the National Museum of Wales in 1926, he did survey and field work on Offa's Dyke every summer up to 1930 (Fox 1955). In the 1950s, he worked with his wife Aileen Fox on survey and excavation of both the east and west Wansdyke (Fox and Fox 1958). Crawford's interest in linear earthworks stretched back to the beginning of his archaeological career before the First World War. In the 1920s and 1930s, as part of the Ordnance Survey, he was responsible for mapping linear earthworks for the revisions of OS maps (Hauser 2008). Crawford also compiled the map of the Dark Ages published by the Ordnance Survey in the 1930s (Ordnance Survey 1938; Ordnance Survey 1939).

Two lesser known archaeologists who were important to the study of linear earthworks in the first half of the twentieth century were Bryan St John O'Neil and Harold Peake. Harold Peake was a friend and patron to O.G.S. Crawford. He was son of a vicar and independently wealthy. In the words of his obituary 'He belonged to the British tradition of scholarship without professional commitments, and he gave his life to intellectual and public work' (Fleure 1947: 48). He was interested in anthropology and folk life as well as archaeology, was a member of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, President of the Royal Anthropological Institute, and honorary curator of Newbury Museum among other interests. In contrast, Bryan St John O'Neil was one of a small number of professional archaeologists, an inspector of ancient monuments at the Ministry of Works. When the entire Ministry of Works was evacuated to Rhyl at the beginning of the Second World War, O'Neil was the only inspector left in London. His responsibilities included supervising excavations in advance of building works for military sites and recording bomb damaged historic buildings. His memorial volume (Jope 1961) suggests that this heavy workload probably contributed to his early death in 1954.

The environmental background

Rather than an antidote to fanciful and outmoded conceptions, the empirical and field-based nature of British archaeology in the first half of the twentieth century proved part of the problem. As it struggled to professionalise itself, it worked hard to distance itself from outdated and fantastical 'fringe' beliefs, such as those focused on druids, hyper-diffusionism and ley hunting. Yet archaeology was both an under-theorised subject and seen by many as a practical, empirical discipline:

This 'scholarship', however, rested upon a series of very simplistic narratives, a framework of stadial and environmental determinism whose parameters had been decided within other disciplines' (Stout 2008: 236)

This environmental determinism had a detrimental effect on the study of Britain's linear earthworks and allowed older notions to flourish. The history of early medieval earthwork studies is therefore not a traditional narrative about a sudden conceptual revolution where the dykes were repeatedly reinterpreted in the light of new theories and new data. While supposed individual earthworks were excavated and re-dated there was no general change in their understanding as a group. Instead, as the understanding of the environment and archaeology of Britain in both the prehistoric and the early medieval periods advanced rapidly from the 1960s on, dykes were mainly ignored as they did not fit into the new models that became available, especially for the Early Middle Ages. This is possibly one of the reasons why studies of these linear earthworks have been marginalised and today stand slightly outside the mainstream of early medieval archaeology, although, as we shall see, they have been embraced within narratives about later prehistory.

It is worth recapping the environmental assumptions that underlay the interpretation of the dykes done in the 1920s and 1930s, most of which went back to the nineteenth century. In an anonymous review of Pitt-Rivers' *Excavations in Bokerly Dyke and Wansdyke 1888–1892* by 'B' in the *Archaeological Journal* of 1892, the reviewer says:

When the people advanced to a higher state of civilisation, and several tribes combined for the defence of a district, it was not by detached forts, but by great dykes or continuous lines of ditch and bank, the latter probably surmounted by a stockade, running for miles along the open country, from an inaccessible position on one flank to some other natural defence on the other. That some of these dykes now appear to us to terminate *en l'air* is due to the disappearance of forests, the draining of marshes, or even to the total surface obliteration of lengths of dyke under long cultivation. (B. 1893: 316–317)

Here we can see a familiar argument that has been used again and again and in much the same way. If dykes have inconvenient gaps or they suddenly end in the middle of a field they must have once been continuous structures. Gaps or sudden endings can always be explained away by a change in the environmental such as the loss of forest cover or the draining of swamp land since the dyke was built.

This idea of a prehistoric Britain being covered with pristine and untouched woodland, full of wild and dangerous animals is still a powerful idea that resonates today. Martin Tingle (Tingle 2006) has shown that this idea of prehistoric jungle covered Britain dates back at least to the time of Sir Richard Colt Hoare and the very beginnings of field archaeology in the early nineteenth century. This idea persisted and was refined through the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth century.

Fox's *The Personality of Britain* first published in 1932 (Fox 1943) is an important source for this environmental background because it makes these assumptions about the environment and landscape of Britain very explicit and had a continuing influence. It first made the distinction between a British highland zone and a lowland zone from prehistoric times. Crucially, while the highland zone was isolated from the influences of mainland Europe the lowland zone was open to influences from Europe but also vulnerable to migration and invasion. Most of the land area of the lowland zone was uninhabited, here the heavy clay soils being covered by what Fox called 'damp oakwood' that was not suitable for cultivation by the simple prehistoric plough and was also crucially totally impassable to human traffic. Human habitation in lowland zone was restricted to the chalk downs which were isolated from each other by the 'damp oakwood'.

The Personality of Britain fossilised this view of the impassable jungle landscape of most of the lowland zone. The concept of the prehistoric landscape being centred on the chalk

downs of Wessex, with ridgeways radiating out like spokes from a wheel was not Fox's idea. He was just making explicit the received wisdom about the past landscape that dated back to the nineteenth century. Comparing Fox writing in *The Personality of Britain* in 1932 to Hilaire Belloc in *The Old Road* published in 1911 shows the similarities:

The key to understanding of this pattern lies at its centre, the chalk plateau formed by Salisbury Plain and the White Horse Hills; thence extend ranges of low hills in all directions. To the S. W, the Western Downs extend to the sea between Weymouth and Lyme Regis; to the east are the Hampshire Downs, from which extend like two fingers the North and South Downs ... (Fox 1943: 29)

If one looks at a map of England in relief one sees that five great ridges of high land come, the first from just east of north, the second from the northeast, the third and fourth from the east, and the fifth from the south and west, to converge on Wilts and the Hampshire border.

Roughly speaking, their area of convergence is Salisbury Plain, and it has been suggested that Avebury and Stonehenge drew the importance of their sites from this convergence; for these continuous high lands would present the first natural highways by which a primitive people could gather from all parts of the island. (Belloc 1911: 22)

There were already challenges to this view of impassable damp oakwood covering lowland England before this. As early as 1902 W.H. Stevenson critically examined the work of Dr Edwin Guest (1800–1880). He complained that Guest believed that:

Great stretches of country are filled up with woodlands, and these are assumed to have been so impassable that the English invaders were compelled to leave them in the hands of the Britons. But in fact we have no trustworthy evidence as to the extent of land under trees in the fifth and sixth centuries. (Stevenson 1902: 626)

Objections to this model continued and in 1933 S.W. Wooldridge and D.L. Linton published a paper in *Antiquity* where they pointed out the importance of the loess soils in the lowland zone which were as easy to cultivate as the chalk and that Fox's binary division of soils into permeable and impermeable was far too simplistic a view (Wooldridge and Linton 1933). They also noted the high density of archaeological finds in places not on chalk soils, such as around Godalming in Surrey, in Norfolk in the area around Norwich and in the valleys of major rivers such as the Thames and the Medway. By the late 1940s, this model of only chalk being fit for settlement was becoming less and less plausible as more and more sites and artefacts were being found

away from the chalk. There was a brief attempt to ascribe all these non-chalk sites to a ‘Belgic’ invasion where incoming Iron Age people used a wheeled plough that could cultivate the heavier soils, that supposedly occurred around 50 BC. In the 1948 reissue of *The Archaeology of the Cambridgeshire* region, Fox notes in appendix four the criticisms of his soil model but then passes over the problem without any counter argument.

This view of a mostly impassable forest landscape was tenaciously held for a long time. In 1955, W.G. Hoskins wrote what must be one of the most influential books ever written on the English landscape. On the first page of *The Making of the English Landscape*, he could write with confidence:

The English landscape as we know it today is almost entirely a product of the last fifteen hundred years, beginning with the earliest Anglo-Saxon villages in the middle decades of the fifth century. The direct prehistoric contribution to the landscape is small. (Hoskins 1955: 1)

It was not until the 1960s that the real richness of the archaeological resource on the lowlands away from the chalk was recognised. This was paradoxically because archaeological sites were being lost at an unprecedented rate by a huge programme of development such the building of the motorway network and the construction of the New Towns with the associated need for sand and gravel. Hoskins acknowledged this change in the introduction to the revised edition of 1977 where he stated ‘Everything is older than we think’ (Hoskins 1977).

Ridgeways

The consequence of the belief in the impassability of the ‘damp oakwood’ was that the only way that people, goods and ideas could move between the chalk downs was by using the ‘ridgeways’ that connected the areas of chalk. These were long-distance trade routes marked out by the upstanding archaeology of all periods from the Neolithic to Roman periods that generally followed the ridges of higher ground. These ancient routes could be shown by plotting the standing archaeology of all periods on a map. They were vital in another way as well because as all cultural change was caused by invasion and migration, they could be used to plot the movement and direction of cultural changes.

The discovery of these ancient roads and trackways, or possibly the archaeological invention of them, was a major interest to the fieldworkers of the early twentieth century. They not only fitted into the conception of the ancient landscape but appealed also to the interest in rediscovering the countryside. By the late Victorian and Edwardian period there was a strong nostalgia for a lost rural England that existed before the coming of the turnpike roads and the railways of the early nineteenth century. Industrialisation and urbanisation were perceived as the cause of the social problems of the late Victorian world and there was a strong desire to rediscover links back to a supposed simpler

and more natural world. Interestingly this back-to-nature movement (or movements) spanned the whole political spectrum from left to right. This was strengthened by the First World War, leading to an increased interest in the countryside and the formation of organizations dedicated to both conserving the landscape and to opening it up for leisure. The countryside was seen as decaying and in need of revitalisation. When Harold Peake wrote *The English Village* in 1922 (Peake 1922) it was subtitled *The Origins and Decay of its Community; An Anthropological Interpretation*. Here, Peake linked past to present and argued for new planned villages to halt rural depopulation.

The attempt to rediscover the ancient tracks and pathways of the countryside was just one aspect of this ruralism. There were a whole series of popular books on the ancient roads and trackways of England, such as Hilaire Belloc's *The Old Road* and Julia Cartwright's *The Pilgrim's Way from Winchester to Canterbury* (Cartwright 1911), both published in 1911 and Edward Thomas' *The Icknield Way* of 1913 (Thomas 1916). One very influential example, R. Hippisley Cox's *Green Roads of England* (Cox 1973), was first published in 1914 and is worth exploring in more detail.

Hippisley Cox was an amateur archaeologist and friend of Harold Peake. Hippisley Cox believed that Wessex was the centre of prehistoric Britain and the centre of Wessex was Avebury which was the site of a 'Sun temple', which sounds odd today but was an unexceptional view in 1914. For Hippisley Cox all prehistoric trackways lead to Avebury and the Celtic conquest, which he equated with the Bronze Age, was a step back from Neolithic Sun worship to a 'demonic' Druidism. For Hippisley Cox the Wessex centred trackways must have begun in the Neolithic. *The Green Roads of England* was a long lived and influential book, which had a considerable afterlife. I have a copy of the 1973 edition, which is a straight unannotated reprint of the 1923 text. It was issued as part of a series of reprints by the Garnstone Press to take advantage of the growth of interest in 'New Age' ideas in the 1970s. In the same series there were reprints of books such as John Mitchel's *The View over Atlantis* and the perennial fringe favourite Alfred Watkins' *The Old Straight Track*. As the cover of this edition of *The Green Roads of England* states:

...this well illustrated book provides detailed evidence for the existence in the Stone Age of a system of travel ways around England, which was systematically created along watersheds, with earthworks to protect them.

Hippisley Cox noted that movement along trackways could be controlled easily by earthworks, by which he meant monuments of varying date from Neolithic causewayed camps to Iron Age hillforts. He then started to map the paths of these trackways by the existence of earthworks and it became a familiar circular argument where a map of trackways became a map of earthworks and vice-versa.

This obsession with tracing the ancient routeways continued up to the 1960s. One of the last examples of this small industry is *The Ancient Trackways of Wessex* (Timperley

and Brill 1965). The work is very derivative, where the introduction is a summary of the views of Fox on the isolation of the chalk downs by impassable forest. The rest of the book is a simple list and description of trackways all taken as ‘ancient’ with no evidence presented for their actual age. There is a presumption that any trackway must be prehistoric. While not seemingly noticed by archaeologists, a review of the book in the *Geographical Journal* (Wood 1965) noted how outdated this book was.

This system of trackways was considered as being both ancient and timeless, as important in the post-Roman period as it was in the prehistoric period. The long-distance paths were still seen as the main ways to travel in the early medieval period, even though the Roman road system was still in place. As an example, in the first edition of *The Ordnance Survey map of the Dark Ages*, Crawford omits the Roman road system entirely except for the road between Canterbury and London while showing the presumed prehistoric system of trackways. This omission was noted as far back at 1936 by ‘H.C.D.’ in an anonymous review of the map in the *Geographical Journal* (H.C.D. 1936).

The romantic view of the long-distance ancient trackways persists today. In a recent work on the Pilgrim’s Way, Derek Bright (2011) dispels many myths about this possible ancient trackway from Winchester to Canterbury but still regards it as predating the medieval period.

The linear earthworks fitted neatly into this picture. If the only way to travel through this ‘jungle’ landscape was along the comparatively narrow ridgeways, then it would have been relatively easy to block or control movement of any invaders or traders along these trackways by building dykes. This applied equally to the early medieval period as to the prehistoric period.

Research on the dykes

This brings us to research on the dykes in the first half of the twentieth century. One of the organisations specifically concerned with the dykes was the Committee on Ancient Earthworks and Fortified Enclosures or the earthworks committee as it was known informally. This was a self-appointed committee that was part of the Congress of Archaeological Societies, a body founded and coordinated by the Society of Antiquaries of London in 1888. The congress was meant to coordinate the work of local, regional, and national archaeological societies. Over time the Congress formed several subcommittees, one of which was the earthworks committee in 1901. Several of the Congress’s subcommittees split off to become separate organisation but the earthworks committee always remained part of the Congress, finally being amalgamated into the Congress’s Research Committee in 1931. Work was done in the 1930s to revise the classification of earthworks done by the committee, but the Second World War ended the activities of the Research Committee. In 1946, the Congress of Archaeological Societies was finally disbanded and replaced by a new organisation, the Council for British Archaeology.

The earthworks committee published a report for nearly every year of its existence, in the beginning as a separate publication and then later as part of the main report of the Congress. One of the achievements of the committee was to invent the neutral term 'linear earthwork' to replace the old descriptors such as 'covered way' or 'travelling earthwork' (Crawford 1953). The annual reports of the committee took a broad definition of 'earthwork' and covered sites of all periods, mainly listing the sites that had been damaged or destroyed and those that had been added to the list of scheduled ancient monuments. The Cambridgeshire Dykes, Wansdyke and Bokerley Dyke frequently appear in the reports. Occasionally an excavation note appeared such as this one for 1925:

'OXFORDSHIRE. Mr. Thurlow Leeds reports that a trench cut on the S. side of the S. Oxfordshire Grim's Dyke, about 200 yards W. of Icknield Way, revealed a ditch continuing the slope of the exposed rampart to a depth equal to a height of 13 feet vertical to the top of the rampart.'
(Andrews *et al.* 1926: 26)

The end of the Congress did not mean the end of interest in linear earthworks. In 1946, the same year as the Congress of Archaeological Societies was disbanded, the Society of Antiquaries of London decided that 'the study (primarily the survey) of boundary dykes and defensive linear earthworks shall be the major scheme of research to be sponsored by the Society' (Fox *et al.* 1946) and local archaeological societies should be encouraged to record linear earthworks. Sir Cyril Fox, then the president of the Society of Antiquaries, and B.St.J. O'Neil, the vice president, along with W.F. Grimes, wrote a paper on how local societies should record linear earthworks (Fox *et al.* 1946). Extensive reference was made to Fox's work in the 1920s on Offa's Dyke. The emphasis here was on mapping and survey with excavation very much a secondary objective.²

The Chilterns Grim's Ditches

Two specific cases of the Chiltern Grim's Ditch (or Ditches) and the Silchester Dykes show how the dykes were interpreted against this background of ridgeways and 'damp oakwood' and how that that created two spurious monuments.

The Chilterns stretch from Bedfordshire through Hertfordshire and Buckinghamshire to the Thames in Oxfordshire. Here, the chalk soils are overlain in places by patches of clay with flints. In the soil models of the 1930s the clay with flints would have been unsuitable for prehistoric settlement while the lighter chalk soils would have been perfect for settlement. There are several linear earthworks along the escarpment, all called Grim's Ditch, and the trackway known as the Icknield Way runs along it.

² The only explicit acknowledgement I have found that local societies followed this encouragement was the work on the Fossditch by the Norfolk Archaeological Society in the 1950s (Clarke 1955) though other work may have been inspired by this call.



GRIM'S DITCH IN BERKSHIRE AND THE CHILTERN

facing p. 168

Figure 1: Crawford's map of the Chiltern Grim's Ditch system from *Antiquity* 1931, reproduced with permission of *Antiquity* (Crawford 1931) (see also Malim this volume)

O.G.S. Crawford was the first to consider the dykes across the Chiltern escarpment as part of a single system in a paper published in *Antiquity* in 1931 titled 'The Chiltern Grim's Ditches' (Crawford 1931). Here Crawford presents the Grim's ditches as purely a mapping problem, ignoring any interpretation as to their age or purpose, which he leaves to M. W. Hughes in an article published in the next issue of *Antiquity*. He also noted that the map of these dykes 'will also appear in due course on the *Ordnance Map of Anglo-Saxon Britain*, now in preparation'.³ Here Crawford is frustratingly vague on detail, stating that 'nearly all of the Grim's ditches of Wessex had been traced' and that the information will be used for the 5th edition of the 1" maps of the Ordnance Survey. He notes that some of the earthworks are prehistoric in date but others fall into the period AD 350–700. Crawford notes that excavation is needed to distinguish them but he never gives any indication of how the distinction between them was made or any criteria for

³ Interesting to note this early reference to what would become the OS Map of Britain in the Dark Ages – which finally appeared in 1938.

separating post-Roman and prehistoric dykes. Crawford was presenting himself as a detached observer, giving the basic facts that M.W. Hughes was to interpret later.

Figure 1 reproduces Crawford's (1931) map from the article. The dykes making up the Chiltern Grim's Ditch system, each separately called Grim's Ditch, were the Aldworth Grim's Ditch, the Mongewell or South Oxfordshire Grim's Ditch and the Buckinghamshire and Hertfordshire Grim's Ditch. This last monument Crawford considered to be originally a single monument which he then split into four parts. All of these ditches were dated by their relation to the ridgeway and Roman road and were seen as defences to prevent movement along the Icknield Way though Crawford found himself 'baffled' that the Aldworth Grim's Ditch commits 'tactical suicide' by descending into a valley at one point.

'Grimsditch and Cuthwulf's Expedition to the Chilterns in AD 571' by Michael W. Hughes (Hughes 1931), which appeared in the following issue of *Antiquity*, is a disappointing read after the build-up given to it by Crawford in the previous number. Hughes' aim was to support the account of the Saxon invasions as given in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, suggesting the initial invasion was directed from the south into Bedfordshire and Buckinghamshire, against E.T. Leeds's arguments based on archaeological finds suggesting a movement along the Icknield Way from East Anglia (Leeds 1925). The paper is mainly argued from a typological argument of the dates of objects, providing dates for early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries in Buckingham and Bedfordshire. Hughes argues that the dates given in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* are correct and it can be regarded as an historic record of the coming of the Saxons. References in Hughes' article to the Chiltern Grim's Ditch are few and they are incidental to the main arguments not a main part of it. Hughes regarded the Grim's Ditch as marking the boundaries of Cuthwulf's conquest. In Hughes' view the Saxons came from south of the Thames into the Chilterns and so the Chiltern Grim's ditch would be a Saxon work to prevent attack from the north.

Subsequently, in 1934, Mortimer Wheeler published a paper in *The Antiquaries Journal* (Wheeler 1934) which inverted the whole idea of the Grim's Ditch and suggested that the ditches marked out the territory of post-Roman London. Instead of a Saxon defence against the British north of the Grim's ditch, he suggested they were built by the Saxons coming from the north as boundary markers, who were prevented from moving further south by a British polity based on the former territory of Roman London.

Wheeler had suggested that London was the centre of a British post-Roman community and political unit. The lack of early Saxon finds in the London area was noted in the catalogue of Saxon finds he compiled for the London Museum (Wheeler 1935). He suggested the Chiltern Grim's ditches formed part of the outer defence of London, constructed either to protect from Anglo-Saxon invaders or to mark out the boundary between Britons and Saxons. Wheeler also equated the ancient hunting rights of Londoners which covered an area consisting of 'Middlesex, Hertfordshire and all

Chiltern and all Kent as far as the Cray’, granted by Henry I in the twelfth century with the former territorium of Roman London. He argued that these rights were unique and extended back beyond the conquest to the Saxon period and brought in two further linear earthworks, the *Faesten dic* in Kent (see also Doyle White 2020) and the *Fullinga dic* in Surrey as the south and western boundaries of this suggested London centred unit. The Grim’s Ditch near Pinner, Middlesex was also considered as a part of this system by Wheeler, but he is not clear if it was contemporary with the Chiltern Grim’s ditches or marked a later development due to a penetration of Saxon invaders along the river valleys closer to London.

Wheeler uses mainly an environmental argument for the dating of the dykes. He notes that the Chiltern Grim’s Ditch lies on clay soil. The clay subsoil is always on the London side and the ditch stops where the poorer soil starts. For Wheeler this was the crucial dating evidence – as in the prehistoric period farmers were not able to work the heavy soils of the river valleys, Wheeler firmly states that ‘Our dykes can at least have nothing to do with prehistoric Britain’ so must be of Saxon date. Wheeler also saw the dykes as part of a single system ‘Their essential unity is disguised by their intermittency’. That is the dyke is a single monument but not a continuous one, as opposed the Crawford’s view that the dyke was once much greater in extent and that some sections were once joined up. This paper was mostly speculation and no excavation on the dykes was done, though an attempt was made to trace the line of the Pinner Grim’s Ditch. Wheeler just suggested this idea and never went back to it or published anything else on early medieval earthworks.

It was not until the excavation work of Dyer (1963) that the unity and date of the Chiltern Grim’s Ditch was really questioned. He showed that the Berkhamstead Grim’s ditch was much more extensive that Crawford had showed in his plan of the Grim’s Ditches and that parts of the earthwork are cut by Roman roads. The dykes are all built with the bank on the downward side of the slope, which would make them much more likely to be boundary markers than efficient defensive earthworks.

Slightly later Bradley (1969) considered the other end of the Chiltern system at, the south Oxfordshire Grim’s Ditch at Mongewell on the north bank of the Thames. Bradley noted the Streatley Ditch on south side of Thames had been linked to the Mongewell Ditch but, as Bradley points out, the ditches face in opposite directions and have a gap of five miles between the points where the ditches reach the Thames. Each of the ditches have a different form of construction. This strongly suggests an Iron Age date for these earthworks.

By the time a second edition of *The Ordnance Survey Map of Britain in the Dark Ages* was published in 1966 (Ordnance Survey 1966), the Chiltern Grim’s Ditch was removed from the map because it was ‘probably’ Iron Age in date. However, the map still considered the ditches to form a unified system. Subsequently, the dykes have been considered to be part of the Iron Age frontier along the Thames along with a series of hillforts and oppida, for example in Lambrick’s work on the Thames frontier (Lambrick 1998; see also Malim 2010).

The Chiltern Grim's Ditch began as no more than a suggestion that a series of dykes formed a monument that was possibly continuous. It was Mortimer Wheeler's theorising that expanded it into a vast defensive ring around London. Once excavation established that parts of the Chiltern Grim's Ditch were certainly prehistoric in date it dissolved back to a series of disconnected earthworks. Though the idea of the Chiltern Grim's Ditch as the northern boundary of post-Roman London was still being discussed as late as 1983 (Merrifield 1983).

The Silchester Dykes

The second chimera for consideration is the collective known as the Silchester Dykes. North-west of the Roman town of Silchester (Calleva Atrebatum), close to the hamlet of Padworth, and between two Roman roads that lead out of the town, there is an earthwork known as Grim's Bank. A second section of dyke lies to the east of the Dorchester road and is also referred to as Grim's Bank.

The origin of the idea that these dykes form a defence of the post-Roman town can be traced back to 1915 in an early article by O.G.S. Crawford called 'Anglo-Saxon bounds of land near Silchester' which was published in *The Antiquary* (Crawford 1915)⁴. It is not known when Crawford managed to write this paper. He had returned to England from fieldwork in the Sudan just before the outbreak of the First World War and then joined a territorial army battalion and was serving in France by December 1914. By early 1915 he had been invalided home from France and had begun officer training. It seems unlikely that he could have spent any time on any archaeological work once the war began and does not refer to any such work in the published paper.

The paper describes the bounds of the parish of Brimpton, in Berkshire, and the parishes of Baughurst and Tadley, both in Hampshire, and attempts to follow them on the ground. The boundary charters had been published in the *Cartulariui in Saxonicum* by Walter de Gray Birch between 1885 and 1893 (Birch 1885) and Crawford was working from these published descriptions. These parishes are all to the west of the site of Silchester, from two to five miles (3–8km). Bury's Bank on Greenham Common is even further away, about eleven miles (17km) to the north-west of Silchester, just south of Newbury. Describing an existing path along the edge of Greenham and Crookham Common, which Crawford calls a non-Roman highway:

At right angles to its course there are at least five ancient ditch-and-bank earthworks. Four of them are at the eastern end, between the Traveller's Friend and the school 1,200 yards west of it. The fifth and

⁴ The *Antiquary*: 'A Magazine Devoted to the Study of the Past' was a popular magazine with a mix of articles on general historical subjects including archaeology, heraldry, antiques, and news covering topics such as auction prices for silver and paintings as well as book reviews. It ceased publication in 1915. The journal *Antiquity* was founded by O.G.S. Crawford in 1928 and clearly follows the popular style of *The Antiquary*, though concentrating on archaeological matters.

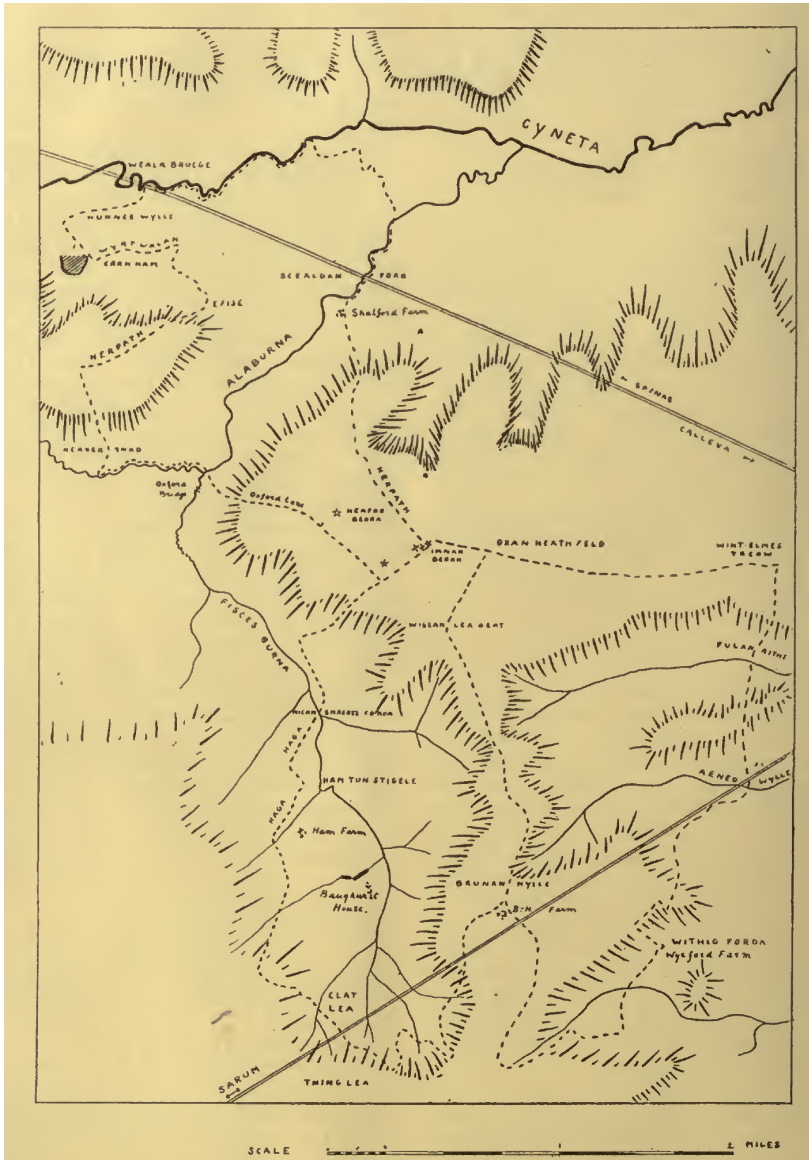


Figure 2: Crawford's map of Anglo-Saxon boundaries near to Silchester (Crawford 1915)

largest, called Bury's Bank, is at the western end, near Greenham Lodge. All of them have the ditch on the west side, and all run from the head of a swampy gully on the north to the heads of similar gullies on the south. They are perhaps of the same character as the Cambridgeshire dykes and others dug across the Icknield Way. A similar bank runs diagonally across Snelsmore Common north of Newbury. Their presence anywhere goes far to prove the existence of an old highway at right angles to their direction. Here we have corroborative evidence of a highway in Saxon times. The ditches are probably of sub-Roman origin. (Crawford 1915)

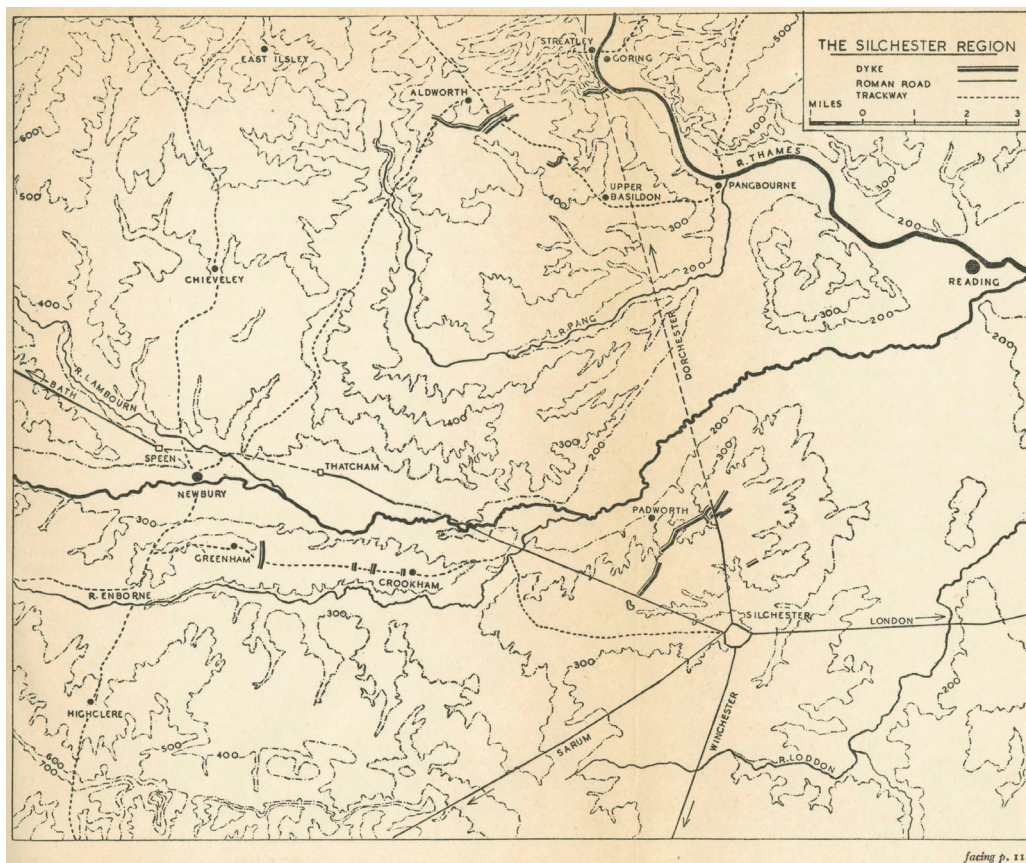


Figure 3: Map of Silchester Dyke system from *Antiquity* 1944, by permission of *Antiquity* (O’Neil 1944)

Crawford does not show these banks on his map (Figure 2) where Crawford uses the presence of the banks and ditches as evidence to prove the existence of the pathway, and its date is considered to be sub-Roman.

Nothing more was done until the 1940s when Crawford’s suggestion that Bury’s Bank was post-Roman became treated as a hard ‘fact’ (O’Neil 1944). It is worth examining the details of the 1940 excavation as a huge mass of interpretation has been hung on the results of this single excavation.

The land at Greenham Common had been acquired by the RAF for a new airfield and Bury’s Bank (alternatively spelt as Berry’s Bank) lay directly under the site of the new runway. In a quick salvage excavation at least four trenches were cut across the bank, but the published description is not clear. It was amazing that anything could have been achieved under such difficult conditions and the records and the finds are now lost, and the only record of the excavation seems to be the published paper in the *Archaeological Journal*. The excavation was organised by W.E. Harris, the curator of Newbury Museum, but it was published by Bryan St John O’Neil and Harold Peake as ‘A Linear Earthwork on Greenham Common, Berkshire’ (O’Neil and Peake 1943).

The finds from the excavation were meagre, comprising two sherds of Roman pottery found in the fill of the ditch. The dating of Bury's Bank should have depended on these two sherds of pottery, the latest of which was fourth century, showing that the ditch was filling up after this. Obviously, this would not fit with the idea of a post-Roman series of defences. A way around this problem was O'Neil's suggestion that a ditch would not remain open long in the light sandy soil of Greenham Common and the pottery had subsequently fallen into the ditch from the bank and so the monument was of post-Roman date. Here the presupposition of a post-Roman date had forced the evidence to be explained away to fit the idea not the other way around.

Despite his heavy workload, O'Neil managed to publish two articles in 1943 about the Silchester area, the aforementioned Greenham Common article and a further one on 'Grim's Bank, Padworth, Berkshire' in *Antiquity* (O'Neil 1943). This second *Antiquity* article describes an undated excavation on Grim's Bank close to Silchester which produced no dating evidence, but the shape of the ditch is used to compare it to Bury's Bank and to date it to the same sub-Roman phase. The following year, he published a general article on 'The Silchester Region in the 5th & 6th centuries AD' in *Antiquity* (O'Neil 1944). It was in this paper that the ideas were brought together and the Silchester Dykes as a system were created. In a footnote in this paper O'Neil states:

In the absence of archaeological proof, they [*the dykes*] may be dated to this period tentatively by comparison with similar works elsewhere (e.g. Wansdyke). (O'Neil 1944)

As the crucial argument, O'Neil draws in Bury's Bank as a far-flung component of the whole Silchester Dyke system and uses it to date the whole system. The implicit assumption is that the dykes all form a coherent system of the same date.

Finally, there is the linear earthwork on Greenham Common, two miles southeast of Newbury, and its companions on Crookham Common two miles further east. The former has been shown by excavation to be sub-Roman, and the latter are likely to be of the same date. (O'Neil 1944)

O'Neil's map (1944; Figure 3) shows the extent of this whole Silchester system. There is a problem which O'Neil admits, that Bury's Bank does not block a Roman road. However, he argues that it blocks a trackway that was used as an alternative when the Roman Road on the north bank of the Thames went out of use, either through lack of maintenance or because it was too dangerous to use. Using Bury's Bank in this way raises another difficulty, which O'Neil admits to but does not provide any explanation for. Bury's Bank faces westwards, suggesting an enemy to the west, while any possible Saxon threat would have more likely come from the north and east. Since the publication of O'Neil's paper his idea of the Silchester Dyke system has hardened into a fact. Despite excavations on Grim's Bank by Astill in 1978, which found no evidence of a post-Roman date (Astill 1979), the presence of earthworks are still used to support the idea that there

was a substantial fifth or sixth century occupation of the city (Frere 1987; Dark 2000). The more distant earthworks which are likely to be Iron Age or Roman in date are used to date the dykes closer to Silchester. Modern discussions about the Silchester Dykes concentrate on the Grim's Bank close to Silchester while the more distant earthworks are no longer considered as part of the system of the Silchester Dykes. The latest work from the Silchester Environs project (Fulford *et al.* 2016) show that though a post-medieval date for the Silchester Dykes cannot be completely ruled out it is very unlikely.

Into the later twentieth century

A second edition of *The Ordnance Survey Map of the Dark Ages* was published in 1966 (Ordnance Survey 1966). The new edition was needed because of the vast increase in knowledge since the 1930s, though it was still dominated by O.G.S. Crawford's ideas. The Roman road network was now shown on the map. Despite this improvement the second edition of map could be considered a step back on the first edition, with its confident division of the dykes into a series of 'British' and 'Saxon' linear earthworks echoing Victorian-era visions. There is no information about how this division was made or any criteria for such a division. The Silchester Dykes were omitted from the map along with the earthworks around Colchester, Chichester, and St Albans on the ground they were all most likely to be Iron Age in date.⁵

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the view of lowland Britain as a landscape of dense woodland disappeared gradually and there was no sudden overnight revolution. Instead there was a slow deflation of the model. The growth of environmental archaeology, especially palynology, and systematic programmes of aerial photography and field-walking all slowly eroded the view of a dense jungle covered and uninhabited lowland. As this view changed the view of the function of the ridgeways changed. Some ridgeways such as the Jurassic Way were regarded as spurious while views of the remaining ones like the Icknield Way changed. Instead of being seen as narrow corridors where movement could be tightly controlled, they became 'zones of communication', vague and ill-defined routes through the landscape.

While prehistorians had a continuing interest in linear earthworks and land divisions (Bradley *et al.* 1994) the remaining linear earthworks of the early medieval period now fell between the interests of specialists in the late Roman and early medieval periods. This was due to the rise of the more specialised archaeologist with a deeper but narrower period view. Fox and Crawford had both looked at the landscape as a totality, from prehistory to the medieval period long before the rise of landscape archaeology. It was almost a timeless view of the English landscape where Roman invasion could

⁵ The prehistoric date of the Chichester entrenchments was confirmed by Bradley's fieldwork in the late 1960s (Bradley 1971). The date of the Colchester earthworks as Iron Age had been proved by excavation as far back as the 1930s when Hawkes had begun his investigations but not published until 1947 (Hawkes and Hull 1947; Hawkes and Crummy 1995).

be considered a brief interlude. This relative neglect left the old interpretations of the dykes unchallenged even though the background had changed radically, and the dykes were still seen as defending narrow ridgeways.

Present and future work

The twentieth century ended with something of a slump in the studies of early medieval linear earthworks but there has been a revival of interest in the first part of the twenty-first century. This is partly due to an increased number of excavations undertaken as part of the planning process as well as an increasing number of LiDAR and aerial surveys. Squatriti put the dykes into their European context (Squatriti 2002, 2004) while two articles by Malim (2007, 2010) provided useful summaries of the state of research into the dykes. My book (Bell 2012) was an attempt to untangle the linear earthworks, to separate the certain prehistoric examples from the post-Roman ones and to bring together results of recent excavations. Meanwhile, building on a discrete tradition of work on the dykes of the Anglo-Welsh borderlands (see Williams and Delaney 2019 for a recent review), Ray and Bapty (2016) concentrated on Offa's Dyke and the related earthworks. Fortunately, the linkage between dykes and the routeways has been broken if not completely severed (Malim 2010), but certainly the 'grand narrative' of Fox and Crawford has been finally rejected.

Looking to the future there is a huge potential for further work on the dykes. The most crucial work that needs to be done is to refine the chronology of the dykes by dating the undated ones. The potential for getting better dating is shown by the use of Optically-Stimulated Luminescence (OSL) dating on the Scots' Dyke at Scotch Corner (Hounslow and Karloukovski 2013) and the use of multiple Radiocarbon dates on the West Yorkshire Grim's Ditch (Roberts *et al.* 2001). Recent work on dating field systems in Cornwall have shown that optically stimulated luminescence profiling and dating (OSLPD) can be used as a rapid technique to date monuments in the field (Vervust *et al.* 2020).

The other recent advance that is promising for large monuments like linear earthworks is the ability to combine a variety of geophysical and remote sensing techniques together to map a landscape in three dimensions. One example is the Stonehenge Hidden Landscapes Project (Gaffney *et al.* 2012) which surveyed approximately 8km² of the Stonehenge landscape using multiple geophysical techniques. Collection of these large sets of data is now much easier, but perhaps more importantly so is the ability to process and visualise these data sets. The application of these techniques should hopefully open new conceptual landscapes as well as the new data one.

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