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Chapter 1

The hypothesis

Regional societies

Phythian-Adams has proposed that, in the past, England consisted of a patchwork of 'regional societies', which coincided to a large degree with major drainage basins, so that watersheds often acted as frontier zones from at least Anglo-Saxon times into the early modern period, and perhaps more recently.¹ These 'regions' were of considerable size and to quite a large extent coincided with groups of pre-1974 counties.²

According to Phythian-Adams, local historians have recognised differences at a very restricted level but have not paid sufficient attention to wider regional themes. He suggests that too much research has been concerned with small areas, even single parishes, whereas the way forward should be to look for much larger geographical units as the basis of study. If this is the case then it is important that we can identify the regions of England, although we may need to acknowledge that the patchwork quilt has changed from time to time.

Regional subdivision of England

Today there are several researchers who are using single criteria to divide England into historic regions. A good example is Schurer's search for regions from a study of surname patterns.³ Another is Roberts and Wrathmell's *Atlas of rural settlement*, which uses, primarily, patterns of village morphology to differentiate between regions.⁴ It is quite clear that the regions produced in these different ways do not match each other very closely. Phythian-Adams has proposed that the use of single measures is misleading and he recommends a more complex set of criteria.⁵ His method is to concentrate on economic factors, which include land use, land and water transport, the locations of major towns and ports and the extents of their influence. Using this approach, he has subdivided England into a patchwork of fourteen 'regional societies' based on provincial economic units, which in turn are usually focused upon 'primate towns'. Their names are derived from the river basins or adjacent sea areas which are their dominant features. For instance, this book is concerned with the two

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1. C. Phythian-Adams, 'Introduction: an agenda for English local history', in C. Phythian-Adams (ed.), *Societies, culture and kinship: cultural provinces and English local history* (Leicester, 1993), p. 9.
 2. Phythian-Adams, 'Introduction', p. 9.
 3. K. Schurer, 'Surnames and the search for regions', *LPS*, 72 (2004).
 4. B.K. Roberts and S. Wrathmell, *An atlas of rural settlement* (London, 2000).
 5. C. Phythian-Adams, 'Differentiating provincial societies in English history: spatial contexts and cultural processes', in B. Lancaster, D. Newton and N. Vall (eds), *An agenda for regional history* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 2007).

Figure 1.1 Not Shown

'regions', the names of which – Trent and Witham – reflect the river basins in which they lie.

The Trent 'region' is largely comprised of the pre-1974 counties of Leicestershire, Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire and Staffordshire, while the Witham 'region' consists of Lincolnshire and Rutland (Figure 1.1). The focus here is on the proposed frontier between these two 'regions': that is, the watershed area between the Trent and Witham drainage basins. To a large extent this is also the boundary between the counties of Leicestershire and Lincolnshire.

If there were regional societies in the past one might expect the people, or at least some of them, to have had a sense of belonging or attachment to them. There can be no doubt that individuals had a strong sense of belonging to small geographical areas and their inhabitants, but did any comparable sense of attachment apply to larger units?

Belonging

Throughout history every person probably has had a feeling of membership of at least one group of human beings, a sense of identity which Cohen suggests can be experienced by individuals at various levels, forming a hierarchy of belonging.⁶ At the

6. A. Cohen, *Belonging* (Manchester, 1982), p.10.

lowest level one might include the immediate nuclear family, moving up to extended kin and neighbours at the next stage in the hierarchy. At higher levels still are the village or parish, groups or neighbourhoods of parishes, *pays*, counties, regions, nation states, groups of nation states and the world community. It may be that the term 'belonging' should only be applied to the smaller groups and 'association' may perhaps be preferable when speaking of larger ones.

This list is based to a large extent on ever-increasing geographical areas but it should be noted that it is not always possible to subsume one particular community neatly within another. For example, a *pays*, identified by the similar cultural traditions of its residents, may stretch across a county boundary, as in the cases of Exmoor (Devon and Somerset) and the Weald (Sussex and Kent). Furthermore, there are other identifiable communities whose memberships weave through the geographically defined ones previously mentioned. For example, kin and occupational groups, such as farmers, may form attenuated links across the aforementioned hierarchical arrangement.

Despite these difficulties Phythian-Adams postulates a series of overlapping and ever-widening micro-structures which might eventually have coalesced into the macro-structure of national society, and proposes that the identification of the links in the chain should be the way forward in local history.⁷ Everitt suggests that, rather than concentrating on individual parishes, we should visualise and re-create 'those entire networks or regional and dynastic connection which extended beyond the limits of the individual community'.⁸ He gives an example of a *neighbourhood* of parishes linked together by strong family dynasties, as in the case of the five or six parishes around Kimcote and Gilmorton in south Leicestershire. Mitson's research in south-west Nottinghamshire finds identifiable *neighbourhoods* of communities held together by their similar landholding patterns and economies, in which a small number of very influential dynastic families held the key. Lord and Carter found similar common-interest groups of parishes in south-east Surrey and Huntingdonshire respectively.⁹

At a higher level it may be that there was allegiance to a particular landscape, or *pays*, which had distinctive land use, economic activities, settlement history, social structure and local customary law.¹⁰ It is important to distinguish here the landscape or *pays* defined by academic historians and geographers from those 'self-conscious' areas that were in the minds of the inhabitants.¹¹ The sense of belonging implies that the second meaning is being discussed here, although explanations of patterns are

7. C. Phythian-Adams, *Re-thinking local history* (Leicester, 1987), pp. 18, 45.

8. A. Everitt, *Landscape and community in England* (London, 1985), p. 312.

9. A. Mitson, 'The significance of kinship networks in the seventeenth century: south-west Nottinghamshire', in Phythian-Adams, *Societies, cultures and kinship*, pp. 71, 72; E. Lord, 'Communities of common interest: the social landscape of south-east Surrey', in Phythian-Adams, *Societies, cultures and kinship*, pp. 131, 174; M. Carter, 'Town or urban society? St Ives in Huntingdonshire, 1630–1740', in Phythian-Adams, *Societies, cultures and kinship*, p. 78.

10. A. Fletcher and J. Stevenson (eds), *Order and disorder in early modern England* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 9, 10; Everitt, *Landscape and community*, pp. 2, 3.

11. R.A. Butlin, 'Regions in England and Wales c. 1600–1914', in R.A. Dodgson and R.A. Butlin (eds), *An historical geography of England and Wales*, 2nd edn (London, 1990), p. 223; Everitt, *Landscape and community*, p. 12.

sought by reference to more objectively determined *pays* and regions. Butlin suggests that England may have consisted basically of many small-scale *pays* but, in the last four centuries, the pattern has been complicated by the rise of a succession of larger 'human regions' such as the county community, the urban hinterland, the occupational region (for example, the Hallamshire region in and around Sheffield), regions of religious influence and so forth.¹² In the next chapter the area under discussion is partitioned, using geology and physical geography, into seven 'landscapes'. It could be argued that some of these subdivisions were sufficiently different from the others to be given the status of *pays*, as indeed they are in the work of Holly on Domesday Leicestershire.¹³

It may have been, and perhaps is still, the case that at higher levels in the hierarchy of belonging there were feelings of identity with even larger geographical areas. In the period from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, according to Butlin and Marshall, there was among the ruling classes a strong sense of belonging to a county, with much inter-marriage among the gentry of each shire.¹⁴ Such attachments may have a much longer history and with wider sections of society, for the counties, mostly formed some time before the Norman Conquest, may have been the formal expressions of previously recognised societies with acknowledged cultural differences from their neighbours. Everitt proposes that county towns such as Leicester were often the foci of county identities, increasingly so in the early modern period as transport improved, and he suggests that they provided a meeting point for the traders from the surrounding *pays*, each with its own developing specialisation.¹⁵ He refers to the whole population of Kent as being 'one organic, hierarchical, paternalistic community'.¹⁶ Roberts, in his work on seventeenth-century Devon, finds that many adult males were involved in local administration, which was controlled from above by the county authority and in turn by national government. However, he concludes that, below the level of justice of the peace, lesser men might have worked diligently but had no real power and thus no strong sense of identity with the county. In any case he proposes that most men, even the gentry, were only concerned with 'parish pump problems'.¹⁷ Nevertheless, Carter found that the county boundary between Cambridgeshire and Huntingdonshire was seen as a barrier against the choice of marriage partners between 1580 and 1850.¹⁸ In 1841 at Claybrooke in Leicestershire 94 per cent of the population had been born in the county though the parish is adjacent to the county boundary with Warwickshire.¹⁹

12. Butlin, 'Regions', p. 233.

13. D. Holly, 'Leicestershire', in H.C. Darby and I.B. Terrett (eds), *The Domesday geography of midland England* (Cambridge, 1954), pp.349–52.

14. Butlin, 'Regions', p. 233; J.D. Marshall, 'Why study regions?', *The Journal of Regional and Local Studies* 6, 1 (1986), p. 3.

15. Everitt, *Landscape and community*, pp.21, 22.

16. A. Everitt, 'Country, county and town: pattern of regional evolution in England', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th ser. xxix (1979), pp.80–1.

17. S.K. Roberts, *Recovery and restoration in an English county: Devon local administration 1646–1670* (Exeter, 1985), p.217.

18. Carter, 'Town or urban society?', p. 111.

19. Phythian-Adams, *Re-thinking local history*, p.35.

The subject of the effect of county attachment is returned to in the final chapter.

At the same or an even higher level than the county we come to the concept which concerns us here: that of the region, including the 'regional society' as proposed by Phythian-Adams. The term 'region' has, of course, been with us for some time and some of their names have entered the national consciousness. To most geographers 'region' suggests an area much larger than the county (for example, the Midlands and the Lake District), but not necessarily the same as the regional societies proposed by Phythian-Adams. According to Butlin, academics have written about regions from the seventeenth century, but at first they had 'natural regions' in mind – that is, areas with a similar physical appearance throughout.²⁰ However, in the nineteenth century the idea of the 'human region' appeared, with the emphasis shifting from visible to invisible features such as linkages between people and institutions. This concept is akin to the regional societies of Phythian-Adams, which are conceived of primarily as economic units.

Butlin argues that the concept of the region became popular in the nineteenth century as a vehicle for the teaching and study of geography and for the subdivision of the country into administrative units. At the same time there arose in English literature a strong trend towards regional themes, exemplified by the novels of Thomas Hardy and the Brontës and the poems of William Wordsworth. Snell proposes that Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent*, published in 1800, was probably the first regional novel, and that it paved the way for the more famous works of Sir Walter Scott.²¹ These developments may have helped to create a perception of a regional identity in the whole population or at least in the more literate sections of it, but whether there was a sense of belonging or attachment in earlier times is open to question. A region may have been perceived as such by academic historians and geographers, but may not have been a 'conscious' region to its inhabitants.²²

At this level Phythian-Adams now prefers the term 'association' rather than 'belonging' (see above).²³ He has also replaced the term 'cultural province' with 'regional society', because the first term suggests cultural uniformity in a 'region', which is not in fact part of his hypothesis. As summarised at the start of this chapter, he postulates that many pre-1974 groups of counties were regional societies which coincided with the major river basins and that their boundaries often lay approximately along major watersheds. There were exceptions to this, for in places the boundary had been pushed well beyond the watershed and may have been located along a major river valley, as is the case with the boundary of Leicestershire and Northamptonshire, marked by the River Welland. He suggests that important watersheds, or sometimes important river valleys, thus represented boundaries between different societies and were perceived as such by communities living on either side.²⁴

20. Butlin, 'Regions', p. 224.

21. K.D.M. Snell, 'The regional novel: themes for interdisciplinary research', in K.D.M. Snell (ed.), *The regional novel in Britain and Ireland 1800–1990* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 5, 6.

22. Everitt, *Landscape and community*, p. 12.

23. Phythian-Adams, *Societies, cultures and kinship*, p. 9; Phythian-Adams, 'Differentiating provincial societies', pp. 8, 14.

24. Phythian-Adams, *Societies, cultures and kinship*, p. 10.