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‘Bloody Meadows: Investigating landscapes of battle’, by John and Patricia Carman, Sutton Publishing £20 pp 242 HB, ISBN 0-7509-3734-3

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John and Patricia Carman’s new book outlines the research aims, methodologies, subject matter and initial results of their on-going “Bloody Meadows Project”. The project seeks to understand human relationships with battlefields, both contemporary and historical, and to assess how attitudes to specific conflicts reflect general ideologies of war within societies over time. However, this is not so much a book about warfare but, rather, a study in the use of landscape archaeology and history that happens to use conflict and battlefields as its subject matter. The book is divided into four main sections: “Battlefield Reports” contains descriptions of a number of battlefields used as case studies, “Interpreting Battlefields” uses the information gathered in the previous section to draw conclusions upon the role of conflict, “Experiencing Battlefields” adopts a phenomenological approach to examine individual battlefields, and “Marking Battlefields” concerned with battlefields as heritage sites.

The book uses twenty-three Western European battlefields, spanning a date range of 991AD to 1813AD as its case studies. Each of these is assessed on a number of strict criteria that describe the battle itself, its relationship to the topography and terrain of the battlefield and the later use of and attitude to the site. At first glance this gives an impression of an exercise similar to a Cultural Resource Management ranking system for the scheduling of sites and monuments: very Processual and formulaic in its approach and thus running the risk of creating a normative and possibly superficial impression of the “Bloody Meadow” in question. For instance, the description “Low”, “Medium” or “High” may be assigned to the “Level of violence?” category, but one wonders how the participants of the battle, busy having limbs hacked off and losing lives, would have felt about this classification and the way in which it appears to remove the human from the event. However, this is a question of the level at which the data is to be considered: this chapter does not claim to attempt an interpretation of individual soldiers’ experience of the battle but rather it seeks to understand the ideology that society as a whole creates when considering its conflicts. Thus, given this aim the potentially reductive method of data capture is more acceptable.

Two further points should be mentioned regarding the approach used in this chapter. Firstly, the range of case studies used is a little limited at twenty-three and is also skewed towards the medieval and early modern periods. The authors accept this criticism and point out that the “Bloody Meadows Project” is by no means a finished project and as yet all data is not gathered. Secondly, it must also be mentioned that it felt a little strange to be given all of this textual information concerning each battlefield landscape but to omit maps, either of the sites themselves or the battle sequences.

From data derived in the previous chapter and the historical records of the battles the book discusses the “Functional” and “Dysfunctional” aspects of each battle, leading into the “Interpreting Battlefields” section. Here things start to get interesting as the authors show that, despite the large number of options available to commanders when fighting the battles, such as location, terrain features used, ways of using those terrain features, they are actually very limited in terms of which they chose to use and that, furthermore, there appear to be chronological patterns in the options selected. For instance, medieval battles often took place on land visible from urban areas, whereas later battles were

often on land where views from towns and villages were blocked. From observations such as this Carman and Carman begin to interpret the social roles of warfare within contemporary societies.

Next comes the “Experiencing Battlefields” chapter where the authors claim to be “the only battlefield archaeologists taking an explicitly phenomenological view”. Again, initial viewing of this section might be a little disappointing to those who are hoping to read about how participants in the battles experienced them in individual (phenomenological) terms. Instead the chapter is focussed more on how visitors experience the modern day sites of the battlefields and thus how the sense of history has been maintained, altered or lost since the battle. What this chapter does give us is most interesting, however, it does not seem to fully follow its original stated intentions.

The last major chapter of the book is “Marking Battlefields”. This does seem to overlap a little with the previous chapter in that it also concentrates on how the histories associated with battlefields have been passed down and how the sites are viewed today. However, this chapter is based on empirical data collection rather than individual experience of the battlefields. It examines how sites have been remembered in terms of monuments, museums/visitor centres, religious buildings, plaques and street names. But, more importantly it looks at why each battle is remembered and how it is related to present ideologies. From this a similar exercise to that in the “Interpreting Battlefields” chapter can be carried out to examine modern views of conflict and what these views say about society.

In summary, the key to reading this book is to treat it as a preliminary report on the “Bloody Meadows Project”. It is definitely not the finished article but rather its intent is to demonstrate the aims of the project and the methodologies that it is currently using to fulfil these aims. The case studies included should probably be viewed as examples of how the methodologies work and what results they might yield when a more complete data set is used, rather than any kind of definitive outcome. The book itself presents exciting new ways of looking at battlefields and, more importantly, uses conflict to understand the views of past societies as well as heritage management issues within current ones. However, it does appear that the Carman and Carman are a little unclear as to what direction certain parts of the study should follow, for instance the “Experiencing Battlefields” section and this may cause the expectations of some readers to fall short as there is so much potential to use the data gathered on battlefield sites to examine the way that the individual participants, not just future visitors, experienced the battlefield as a conduit of social process. If this last issue can be addressed then this reviewer will look forward even more eagerly to the next publication from the “Bloody Meadows Project”.