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NORFOLK'S SEVENTH SENSE?

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The living skin of the land is our seventh sense, a vast repository of memory of what, as a species, we have felt and done and dreamed.

Richard Mabey, *Fencing Paradise: reflections on the myths of Eden* (2005)

I have lived at Reepham, twelve miles from Norwich, for many years and have had family connections with Norfolk throughout my life. For over fifteen years I worked as an archaeologist, on excavation and fieldwork projects and in landscape research. I have now 'left the field' to work freelance in editing and publishing. Archaeology and history remain key specialisms, and I recently illustrated and co-edited a historical atlas of Norfolk. However, I have felt my perspective on archaeological studies change now that I am no longer an 'archaeologist', in a strict sense. I am now more and more interested in the range of emotional responses that living in and exploring a landscape can arouse in all of us, in the ways in which we all invest our surroundings with symbolic power and meaning – and in the possibility that the views and 'explanations' of the past that we prefer as individuals may say at least as much about *our own* hopes and fears as they do about past societies!

It is all too easy to describe the Norfolk landscape as gentle and undramatic – and perhaps, by extension, an unchallenging one that we may 'enjoy' in a purely passive manner. Exploring my home area, I recognise increasingly that it combines massive skies and an unbroken '360-degree' horizon rim with an infinitely varied landscape of hills, valleys and watercourses which is certainly *not* flat. For me, this is a magical combination of the intimate and the infinite. Spending time at the sites of prehistoric barrows which might have been used for burial over 150 generations ago, I wonder if people who lived here thousands of years before me experienced this powerful, magnetic combination. I am sure that they would have been keenly aware of this landscape's dramatic outlines and its 'bones' – its river valleys, watersheds and dry plateaux, its hidden corners and sudden long views. I also feel sure that they, like me, would find specific places becoming linked vividly and inextricably with their own dreams, reflections and memories.

And this web of memories is assuredly not confined to today's 'land', or to 'Norfolk' as we know it. Our present coastline may be little more than six or seven thousand years old. For thousands of years before that – before warmer climatic conditions became established and rising sea levels separated Britain from continental Europe – the North Sea basin was a vast and varied land-mass. Bone and antler tools and weapons have been trawled many times from the sea bed. Fifteen thousand years ago our familiar fenland rivers might have entered the sea in great estuaries as far north as present-day Shetland. People who lived in, travelled and knew this lost world knew 'Norfolk' too.

The images collected here are not intended to lead to any specific conclusion or insight. Rather, they chart the early stages of a 're-exploration' of a tract of land which, in my days as a professional archaeologist, I would have said I knew very well! Now I travel familiar roads and footpaths and find myself noticing things I have never seen before. Who knows where this will all lead?

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