



CHAPTER III

TOPOGRAPHY AND LANDSCAPE

This section considers the environment forming the backdrop to this study of early Cornish sculpture. Dictated by the underlying geology, influenced by the prevailing climate, moulded by human activities, and coloured by the plants growing on it, the physical aspects of a county need to be understood in order to appreciate the way people have interacted with it over millennia. To aid understanding of a county which to outsiders is still recognised as somehow ‘different’ from the rest of England, this account is in three parts. The first considers the strictly geographical factors. In the second part, these basic facts are enlivened with the personal accounts and reactions of early visitors to Cornwall who then, as today, perceived Cornwall as somehow ‘different’. The final part is a brief summary of the historic landscape character of Cornwall. This account should be read with reference to Figs. 5, 6 and 7.

GEOGRAPHY

Jutting over 110 km (68 miles) into the Atlantic, the county of Cornwall occupies the extreme end of the South-west peninsula. In shape like a horn, Cornwall is over 70 km (43 miles) wide at its eastern border but gradually narrows so that, in the west, it is just 8 km (5 miles) between Hayle and Marazion. Surrounded by the sea and open to the ocean, Cornwall enjoys an equable maritime climate, though the benefits of this are moderated by exposure to wind, rain and the force of Atlantic gales. The most obvious manifestation of this is the absence of trees, or presence only of stunted, scrubby wind-sculpted bushes; however, in the more sheltered valleys and eastern parts of the county, there are greater amounts of wood.

Dominating Cornwall’s topography is the granite backbone of the county, described in Chapter II above, which forms a chain of high moors down the length of the peninsula. Smaller intrusions (for example St Agnes Beacon, Kit Hill, Tregonning Hill) form locally significant hills; while certain other

geological formations have given rise to other areas of higher ground, like the Staddon Grit (the St Breock Downs south of Padstow: Bristow 2004, 48). Through mineralization associated with its intrusion, the granites have had a great influence on Cornwall’s economy. The granite moors decrease in extent and height along the length of the county from Bodmin Moor in the east, crowned by Brown Willy which at 420 m is the highest hill in Cornwall, to the western tip of Cornwall, where the granite cliffs, though majestic and impressive, stand less than 100 m high. Further west, though not a part of this land-mass, the Isles of Scilly are the final link in the granite chain. The granite areas are characterised by rolling uplands from which occasional craggy tors erupt, surrounded by clutter-strewn slopes. In west Cornwall, where the narrowing of the peninsula has forced greater human interaction with this granite landscape, the ubiquitous presence of large boulders and thin soils has created a landscape unparalleled in England of granite houses, hedges, walls and monuments, against a backdrop of sparkling granite cliffs and tors.

Between the rolling granite moors and tors, wide flat valleys form expansive boggy areas, whose inhospitable appearance belies a richness of wildlife. Prior to the sixteenth century, when shaft-mining developed, these were the areas that fuelled Cornwall’s tin industry as the marshy valley bottoms contain alluvial tin, eroded from lodes and outcrops upstream and concentrated into beds within the tin streams. Geologically a weathered plateau of ancient rocks, inland Cornwall around and between the granite moors can be relatively flat and monotonous. In the past much of this, like the granite upland, was unenclosed common, used for rough grazing, and although extensive post-medieval enclosure has altered its appearance over the last three hundred years (Dudley 2011, 46–55), it can still feel wild and exposed. This plateau-land is relieved by the valleys of numerous small rivers and streams, often cut more deeply than the size of their rivers would suggest possible. In the past, as now, communications



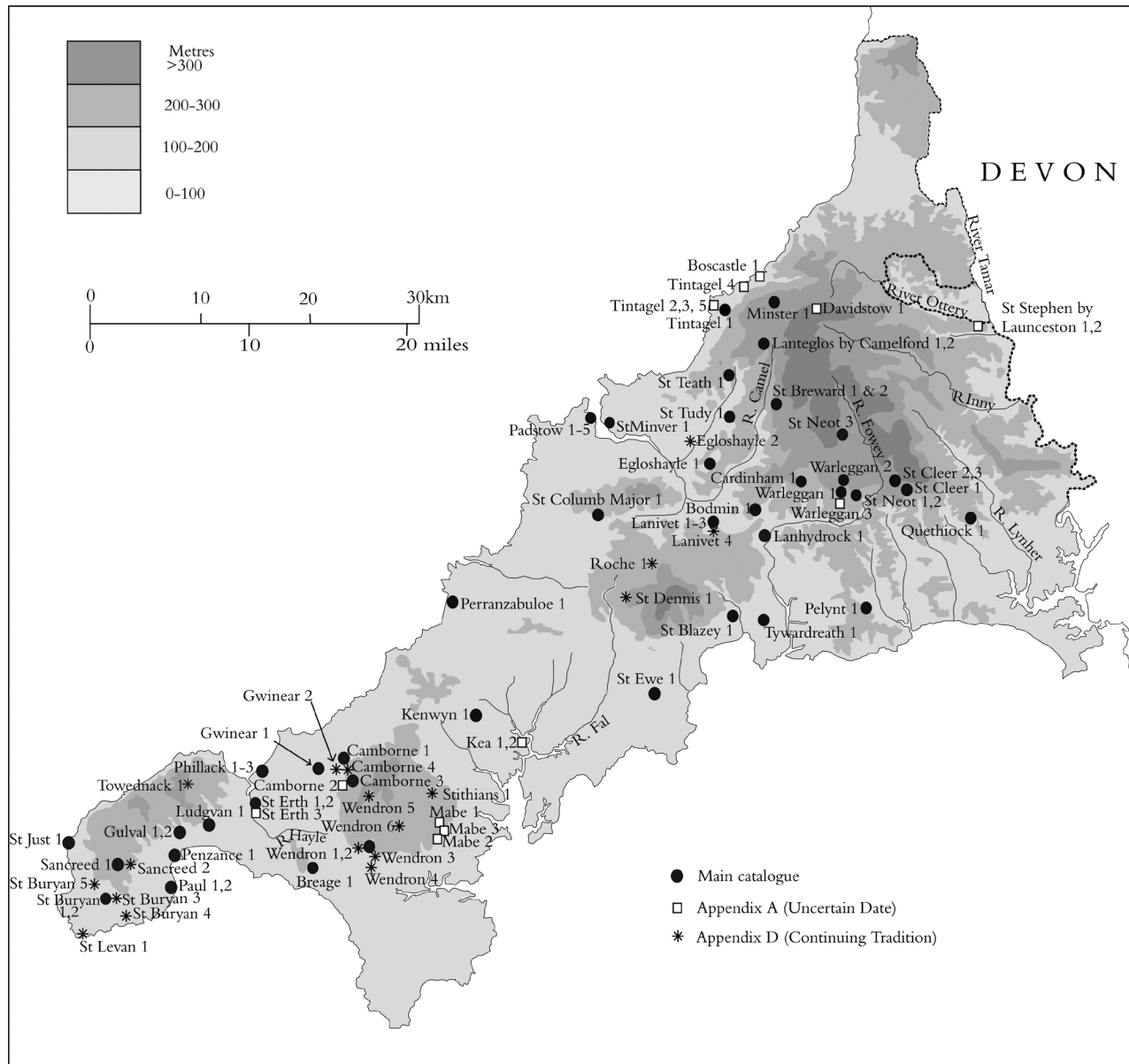


FIGURE 6
 Sites with early medieval sculpture in Cornwall, with topography

in Cornwall utilised the upland ridges between the valleys to save steep descents and ascents, although it is the more sheltered valley sides, particularly those with a sunny southern aspect, and especially as they widen towards the coast, that are the areas most favoured for settlement.

There are few major rivers in Cornwall. In the east, the Tamar is longest and forms the boundary with Devon for most of its length. Rising only 6 km (nearly 4 miles) from the north coast, it runs south-south-east to reach the sea in a wide estuary at Plymouth. The main tributaries of the Tamar on the Cornwall side are the Lynher, the Ottery and the Inney, all substantial rivers by Cornish standards, although since hardly any of the sculpture described here is found in this more sheltered part of Cornwall, this river system is of less relevance to this study. Heading west, the Fowey and its tributaries, which emerge on the south coast, and the Camel and its tributaries, which emerge in a wide sandy estuary on the north, are respectively just over 35 and 50 km long (20 and 30 miles). Further west the River Fal, some 18 km (11 miles) long, is the most substantial river draining the St Austell granite, and in west Cornwall, the Hayle almost cuts off the Land's End area (West Penwith) from the rest of Cornwall. However it is the disproportionately large estuaries of these rivers, as much as the rivers themselves, which are of particular significance to the landscape of Cornwall. In the Camel Estuary is Padstow, original site of St Petroc's Monastery and home to five of the pieces of sculpture described in this volume (pp. 176–82). The granite for these crosses may have been carried by barge on the estuarine water from Wadebridge or Pendavy, ten and a half kilometres (six and a half miles) upriver; but whether the river upstream of this was large enough to ferry heavy pieces of stone is doubtful. Sledges or carts dragged by bullocks or mules were the traditional method by which stone was transported in Cornwall (Stanier 1999, 103; Langdon, Andrew 2012, 9).

The north and south sides of Cornwall present very different aspects. For the most part, the north coast is characterised by rugged cliffs, which rise to 223 m at High Cliff between Boscastle and Bude. The inhospitable cliffs are broken by a number of small landing places and a few wide estuaries, most notable of which are the estuaries of the Camel and Hayle rivers. In contrast, the southern half of the county is lower, and the drowned valleys of rivers like the Tamar, Fal, Fowey, and Looe present wide sheltered havens. Both north and south coast estuaries form these sheltered havens for shipping and have around them some of the most productive and fertile land in

Cornwall. Extending like fingers inland, the estuaries have acted in the past as conduits for communication, trade and settlement. Most notably, the rivers Fowey and Camel, which exit on opposite coasts but almost meet in the centre of the county, near Bodmin, together create a corridor of great strategic significance through mid Cornwall, between the high ground of the Bodmin and St Austell Moors. It may be no coincidence that here is Bodmin, which by the end of the early medieval period was the most important religious house in Cornwall. Close to Bodmin, the Carminow Cross (Bodmin 1, p. 121) appears to have stood on this same corridor.

Associated with the estuaries and river mouths of the north coast, and to a lesser extent on the south, large areas of dune sand or 'towans' create a yet further aspect to Cornwall's varied topography. In such areas, driving sand has buried fields, settlements and churches beneath towering dunes which may extend up to a mile inland, giving rise to myths and legends of lost cities. In such a location is St Piran's Cross (Perranzabuloe 1, p. 189), stark survivor of a church-site now removed four miles inland. On the edges of the dune-lands, however, the curse becomes a blessing where a thin veneer of the sand, made of tiny fragments of shell, has the effect of neutralising and enriching the normally acid soils. In the past, this natural blessing has been exploited by inland farmers, who have carted many loads inland for use as a fertiliser.

Hence Cornwall's landscape is one of much contrast and variety. From the east of the county, where the Tamar's valley all but severs Cornwall from the rest of England, to the exposed, Atlantic-facing granite of the Land's End; from the rugged cliffs of the north coast with its occasional safe harbours, to the wide estuaries and hidden creeks of the south; from the harsh rough pastures of the moors, to the semi-tropical luxuriance of the sheltered southern creeks: few counties present such variety in so small a space. And despite the mild maritime climate, seasonal differences can be dramatic, with endlessly windy wet weather in winter, followed by a fantastic burgeoning of wild flowers in the gentler spring; summer is often spoiled by humidity and sudden violent storms, but can be redeemed in autumn by brighter weather and leaves lingering on the trees beneath clear blue skies.

These geographical factors, including especially the fact that Cornwall juts out into the western seaways and has an outlook which includes Wales, Ireland and Brittany as much as the rest of England to the east, have had a major influence on the county's sculpture, as will become clear in subsequent chapters.

EARLY VISITORS TO CORNWALL

It was quite possible for past topographers to gain either a favourable or an unfavourable impression of the county according to the time of their visit, the length of their stay and the route taken through Cornwall. The first to make any comment was Aldhelm, abbot of Malmesbury at the end of the seventh century, who found Cornwall to be 'devoid of flowering turf or nourishing grasses' (Padel 2011b, 75).

John Leland, visiting in the mid sixteenth century for the purpose of recording antiquities for the king found much 'Morisch and Hilly Ground and great scarsite of Wod' but on the south side of the county his descriptions refer more often to land which was 'meetely fertyle of Gresse and Corne' (Pearse Chope 1967, 11, 31). Writing over a thousand years after Aldhelm, John Swete shared many of his predecessor's impressions. He found that in places the countryside had a 'rude face embrowned with heath and furze and extensive downs', often 'deformed by mining'. He concluded his tour with the comment that Cornwall struck him as on the whole 'a barren and unfruitful country'; while acknowledging that the mining and fishing industries more than made up for the poor agriculture (Pool 1971, 210, 215, 217–18). For some of these early travellers to Cornwall, a visit to Cornwall was evidently like an expedition to a foreign land, in which they sought to experience the extraordinary (Todd 2000, xii). They were conditioned, from other writings, to expect a dreary landscape and they were not disappointed. That their impressions were reinforced by the fact that the main 'roads' passed mostly over the higher rough ground was noted by Forbes in 1794. He was 'surprized in Cornwall to see the fertile vallies and rich woody glens', suggesting that many travellers had looked 'no further than the country on either side of the road' (Forbes 1983, 162).

On the other hand Richard Carew of Antony, in a book first published in 1602, appreciated the county as an 'insider', albeit as a member of the gentry who lived in a sheltered corner of the south-east. He observed that although, at the time he was writing, Cornwall seemed remote, being 'besieged...with the ocean' and with 'but one way of issue by land', so 'yet hath she in some good measure countervailed such disadvantage through placing...both near unto and in the trade way between Wales, Ireland, France, Spain and Netherland' (Halliday 1969, 83). His further observation, echoed by Leland, that Padstow was well placed to trade with Ireland, and full of Irishmen and Breton traders, bears this out (Pearse Chope 1967, 16;

Halliday 1969, 139–40, 219). However the problems of Cornwall's exposure to storms and wind were vividly recorded: '...the country is much subject to storms, which fetching a large course in the open sea, do from thence violently assault the dwellers at land, and leave them uncovered houses, pared hedges, and dwarf-grown trees as witness of their force and fury....' (Halliday 1969, 86).

At all times, it helped if the sun shone. So Swete found that at Liskeard 'the rain ceasing, we...were in some sort compensated...by views of a country very tolerably wooded' and near Penzance, 'the sun brightening up a country in itself (barring the stone hedges) not unpleasant' (Poole 1971, 216–17, 206). Less critical reports of Cornwall had to await the advent of more romantic eyes in search of the picturesque, mainly from the end of the eighteenth century. Forbes in 1794 noted 'delightful vales and sweet sequestered retreats' (Forbes 1983, 163) while Stockdale considered that 'the voyage by the river from Truro to Falmouth, exhibits a variety of the most beautiful and romantic scenery' (Stockdale 1824, 59).

HISTORIC LANDSCAPE CHARACTER

Nowadays, the Cornish landscape is understood and appreciated by archaeologists through the tool of historic landscape characterisation, which (put simply) sees Cornwall divided into zones according to the historic land-use, the cores of the main zones being remarkably stable even though the boundaries between them may fluctuate with time. This has been subject to both a broad-brush approach and very detailed analyses (for example, (—) 1994; Herring 1998; Herring and Tapper 2002; Herring 2011a; and see Fig. 7).

In general terms the landscape can be divided into a number of zones, the principal two being the 'anciently enclosed land', the settled agricultural heartland on the more sheltered, better drained slopes and valley sides, and the unenclosed 'rough ground' on the coastal fringe, interfluvial ridge-tops, exposed plateaux and the high granite moors, used seasonally for rough grazing, stone quarrying, the collection of fuel and, where appropriate, tin. This zone was a vital part of the pre-industrial economy of the county. As noted above, in the past many of the tracks linking settlements in Cornwall, and Cornwall with the world beyond, followed this high rough ground, avoiding steep descents into the valleys. On the other hand, in the anciently enclosed land are the

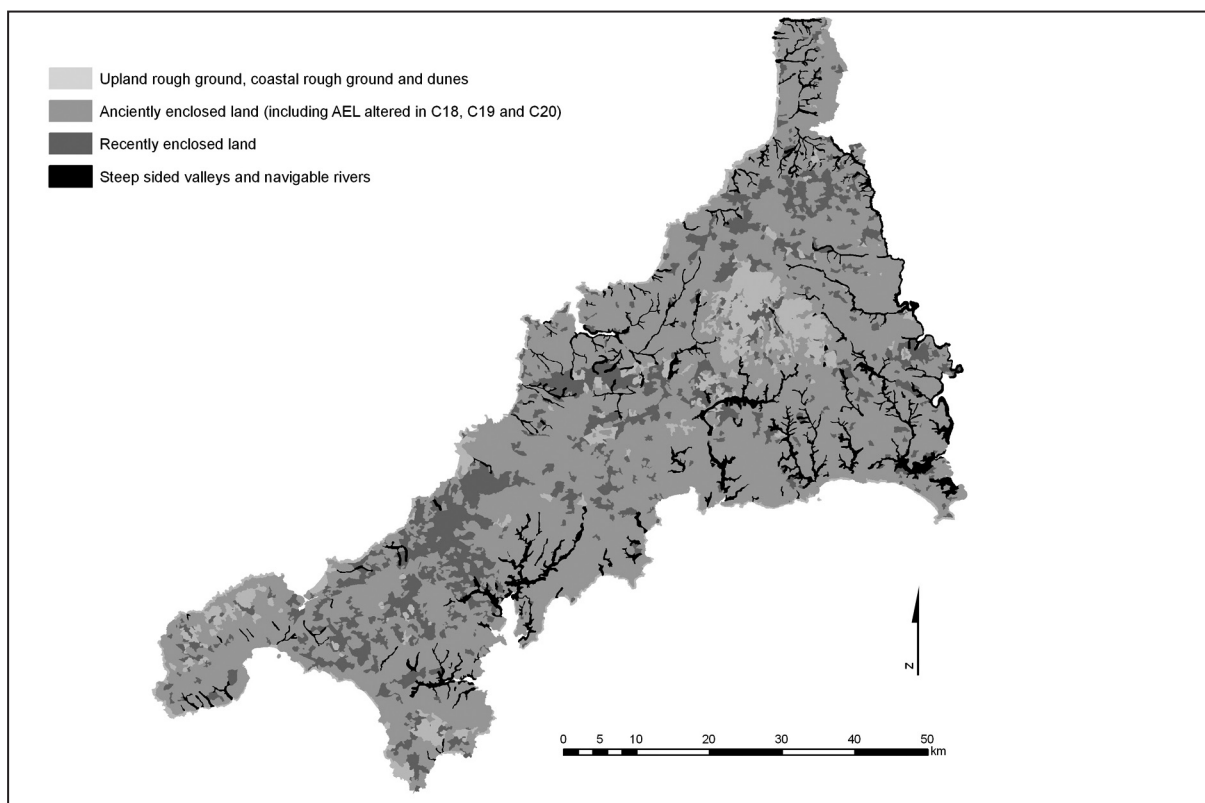


FIGURE 7

Map of Historic Land Use Characterisation in medieval Cornwall (after Herring 1998)

networks of hamlets linked by sinuous sunken lanes, whose irregular fields imply land which has been continuously cultivated since later prehistory ((——) 1994, 140–1). The contrasting and complementary nature of the anciently enclosed land and the rough ground are of long-standing existence, and can be used both to explain the archaeology of Cornwall and to anticipate the types of sites that might be found in each. Enclosures of the last three hundred years have masked, to a large extent, the differences between these zones, while imprinting their own very distinct pattern on the landscape; however in more marginal areas in the far west of Cornwall the contrast between anciently enclosed land and open rough ground can still be seen (Fig. 8, p. 20).

Fig. 7, prepared by Peter Herring for other purposes (Herring 1998), presents a picture of the contrasting extents of anciently enclosed and rough ground existing in Cornwall at the end of the medieval period. Without considerable further research, this is as close a reflection as we have at present of the landscape of Cornwall in the early medieval period, although it is probable that the extent of rough ground was larger,

and the enclosed land smaller, since this map includes marginal ground enclosed from perhaps the ninth or tenth centuries through to a concentration in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (Johnson and Rose 1994, 77–80). It does however give an indication of the large areas of rough ground that existed in Cornwall even as late as the eighteenth century, and the effect that this would have had on the appearance of the landscape and the management of the economy. It also helps to explain the character of settlement in Cornwall, which historically is a landscape of hamlets dispersed through the enclosed land, each with its own access to the varied resources available on the rough ground and in valleys below. Manor and church-sites alike might be separate elements of this dispersed pattern; parishes with one focal settlement were not known. Only at the very end of the early medieval period, and more so in the later medieval period, do towns start to become a feature of the landscape. So it is quite understandable that a church like Cardinham, set in a very small hamlet, might be the site of one of the greatest crosses in Cornwall (p. 131).

In the following chapters and the catalogue, it will



FIGURE 8

Air photograph of West Penwith, showing the contrast between anciently enclosed land on the plateau and rough ground on the cliff-edge and downs (F88-034: Historic Environment Record, Cornwall Council)

be demonstrated that those monuments which are associated with monastic, church or manorial sites are, for the most part, associated with the anciently enclosed land, while those which were erected to act as boundary-markers, way-markers, or prominent landscape features are or were found on the open rough ground. The Fourhole Cross (St Neot 3, p. 174) is a prime example of a cross on open rough ground; Lanivet is a church-site with several monuments (pp. 159–64), in a settlement within anciently enclosed land. The rough ground will have supplied the stone for the monuments which, because of the interleaving of rough and enclosed ground, may not have had to be transported far to the place where the monuments were carved and erected.

What this still fails to explain is why nonetheless the majority of the monuments are found in and around the larger areas of granite moorland, like West Penwith (the Land's End peninsula) or Bodmin Moor, and to a

lesser extent around the Carnmenellis and St Austell granites (Fig. 5, p. 11). The abundance of stone may have been a factor; but cannot be the full story since nowhere in Cornwall is far from a source of granite or other hard stone. The concentration of monuments along the south side of Bodmin Moor (notably St Cleer 2 and 3, St Neot 1, Warleggan 1 and 2, Cardinham 1) may be explained by the existence here of a major historic route leading to Bodmin, in the centre of the county; while the numbers on the south-east side of Penwith may be there because it is the more sheltered side of this granite area, with a significant pre-Norman religious house at its heart. But why are there almost no early carved stones in the basins of the Fal or Tamar, on the Lizard, or at places like St Germans, Launceston, Probus, St Keverne or Bodmin where other significant pre-Norman religious houses existed? Certainly, however, in a county of few trees, the possibility that monuments were frequently carved of wood seems unlikely.