

SOME REMARKS ON COMPARATIVE RESEARCH IN SETTLEMENT STRUCTURES

H. Uhlig*

Asked for some comments on the present symposium, I should like to stress that it was a most favourable idea to make its concern the rural settlement in Scotland "*and beyond*". This opens aspects of comparative studies, which, by examination of the whole integration of natural as well as historical and socio-economic factors of similar regions, seems to be a most typical geographical approach to promote the reconnaissance of our problems.

The tracing and explanation of the regional distribution of related features will be of some interest by itself but, in addition, it provides the basis for any attempt of a systematical grouping in terms of a "general geography" and it will finally help to explain the findings from the individual regions, as an understanding of phenomena and the experience from related areas will shed light on questions which often might not be solved or even noticed in an isolated work.

It is not claimed that the relevant features from the different regions are identical, but many of them are strikingly (and not accidentally!) similar or at least comparable. And the explanation of the reasons for possible differentiation will be another important step towards reaching a real understanding.

It remains difficult to prove whether the similarities of some old rural settlement types in greater parts of Western, Northern and Central Europe are related by evolutionary links or result simply from comparable geographical conditions. At least some of them will certainly have their roots in a common past, in an inheritance from those prehistoric periods which predate the development of peoples, which we distinguish

* Prof. Dr. H. Uhlig, Head of Department of Geography, University of Giessen, Germany. This is a contribution made by the author to the final discussion following the symposium on "The Development of Rural Settlement in Scotland and Beyond." (Edinburgh 1961).

to-day as Celtic or Teutonic, or even as Gaelic, Welsh, Anglo-Saxon, Scandinavian, German, Norman etc. This is no mere guessing—comparative language research as well as prehistoric finds and the testimonials given by classical Greek and Roman descriptions of the contemporary Celtic and Teutonic economy and social structures provide support for this. And quite a number of the papers read at this symposium confirmed that most of the phenomena dealt with are not confined to certain ethnic groups, but are relatively similar throughout the Atlantic fringe of Europe.

Another significant point of the “*beyond*” shall be briefly touched upon. It is important not to restrict the research to the settlements themselves, but to include always the whole pattern of their fields, pastures and commons, land-use, social structure, etc.—and, last but not least, the detailed exploration of the natural conditions. Only the evaluation of the whole of these small, but complex, basic-units (e.g. a township) will yield real understanding of the forms and functions of the cultural landscape with all its natural and historical implications. Only within this framework will the formal appearance of a settlement gain real significance as a manifestation of certain closely interwoven social and natural facts.

Considering as many of these features and functions as possible, I have tried to compare certain rural settlements through several regions of the British Isles, Brittany, Germany and adjacent Dutch and Danish areas and parts of Scandinavia. The results have shown some striking similarities in the old settlement-pattern—and also, of course—differences, according to the varying geographical character. The type of hamlet, designed here as the “clachan”, connected with a restricted, but permanently tilled and heavily manured infield, preferably in open strips, surrounded by outfields with a field-grass or field-heather cultivation and extensive common heathlands under severe Atlantic climate and soil-conditions, appeared as the dominant feature, forming a striking parallel to the NW German *Drubbel* with the *Langstreifenflur* on the *Esch*. Although the social structure may differ in respect of property-status, size of holdings, etc., there remain still many features which connect these settlements of small, rural groups with an expressed team-spirit. There are several comparable features of joint-property or co-operation (“run-rig”-pooling etc.) throughout these regions. It is impossible to give more details in this discussion—may I refer therefore to my (in a foreign

language and therefore, unfortunately not fully satisfactory) attempt to summarise them in English in the Transactions of the Vadstena-Symposium in 1960.¹ More detailed papers on the Scottish Highlands (especially the Hebrides) and NE England were published in German.²

Finally, I should like to express my sincerest thanks for the cordial invitation to attend this interesting symposium. It convinced me again, that the mutual discussion and comparison of the results of research from different regions and countries, and likewise the co-operation of historians, archæologists, geographers, sociologists, folk-lorists, linguists, etc., is a most important means to reach an understanding of our cultural landscapes.

NOTES

¹ Uhlig, H., "Old Hamlets with Infield and Outfield Systems in Western and Central Europe." *Geografiska Annaler* 43 (1961):286-313.

² Uhlig, H., "Die Kulturlandschaft—Methoden der Forschung und das Beispiel Nordostengland." *Kölner Geogr. Arbeiten* 9/10 (1956). "Langstreifenfluren in Nordengland, Wales und Schottland." *Deutscher Geographentag Würzburg 1957, Tagungsbericht u. wiss. Abh.* (1959). "Die ländliche Kulturlandschaft der Hebriden und der westschottischen Hochlande." *Erdkunde* (1959) 22-46. "Typen kleinbäuerlicher Siedlungen auf den Hebriden." *Erdkunde* (1959) 98-124.