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► **To cite this version:**

Elisabeth Zadora-Rio. Parish boundaries and the illusion of territorial continuity in landscape archaeology : the evidence from Touraine. Tomás Ó Carragáin; Sam Turner. Making Christian Landscapes in Atlantic Europe. Conversion and Consolidation in the early Middle Ages, Cork University Press, pp.345-365, 2016, 978-1-78205-200-5. halshs-02321091

HAL Id: halshs-02321091

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-02321091>

Submitted on 20 Oct 2019

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Making Christian Landscapes in Atlantic Europe

CONVERSION AND CONSOLIDATION
IN THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES

Edited by
Tomás Ó Carragáin and Sam Turner



The background of the page is a light gray topographic map with intricate contour lines. The lines are more densely packed in some areas, indicating steeper slopes, and more widely spaced in others, indicating flatter terrain. The overall pattern is organic and flowing, covering the entire page.

15

Parish boundaries and the
illusion of territorial continuity
in landscape archaeology:
the evidence from the Touraine

Elisabeth Zadora-Rio

Building on a recent study of the development of parish territories in the Touraine, France, over the *longue durée*, from their origins to their incorporation into post-revolutionary administrative structures, this chapter discusses the process of parochialisation in relation to local conceptualisations of space, and its effect on boundary definitions. The assumption that parish territories were adapted to fit the boundaries of earlier landholding units and that these boundaries represent the oldest and most permanent features in the landscape, has a long historiographical tradition. This view was reinforced by the development of archaeological excavations and surveys from the 1970s onwards, which revealed the great age of certain field systems, ditches and banks that dated back to Antiquity or prehistory, and in some cases retained their boundary role to the present day. Parish boundaries became a central research issue for landscape archaeologists, yet the main emphasis of these studies was not on the parochial territories themselves, but on the earlier estates that had allegedly determined their shape. Consequently, very little attention was paid to the processes of parish formation and to the social mechanisms that might account for such boundary preservation. This chapter argues that, far from being a static framework which local communities inherited from a remote past, parish territories were circumscribed by a complex web of overlapping boundaries, which were constantly manipulated and adapted to accommodate contemporary strategies. The incorporation of some stretches of older banks or ditches or other ancient landscape features into parish boundaries should be understood, not as the result of static territorial continuity, but of dynamic recycling.

THE ASSUMPTION that parish territories originated with the Christianisation of the landscape, and that they were adapted to fit the boundaries of earlier landholding units, has a long historiographical tradition. In France, this tradition goes back to the work of Imbart de la Tour who, in 1900, suggested that parish territories might have their origin in the Gallo-Roman estate. The idea was taken up and systematised by later historians, from Camille Jullian and Maurice Chaume in the 1930s to Michel Aubrun in the 1980s, who saw the parochial network as the outcome of successive divisions of the diocese into ever-smaller parishes.¹ In England,

the idea that parish territories preserved the fossilised trace of early medieval estate boundaries relies strongly on evidence from Anglo-Saxon charters, mainly of tenth- and eleventh-century date, which include detailed perambulations of the estates being granted.² The view of parish territories as a static framework also relies on the numerous medieval and modern documents relating to the disputes that arose over the exact course of parish boundaries and on social practices such as Rogation week perambulations, which were meant to reinforce the mnemonic functions of certain landscape features through the ritualised events that took place there.³

It is worth bearing in mind, however, that these assumptions were formulated before the upsurge in archaeological excavations and surveys from the 1970s onwards, and that they were rooted in earlier views of the timelessness of the village and its stability since the Gallo-Romans in France and the Anglo-Saxons in England. Since then, archaeological investigations over the last few decades have changed our understanding of rural settlement. They have revealed the shifting of villages and farmsteads across the countryside and dynamics of change which are hard to reconcile with the notion of an unchanging territorial framework. As a result, the assumption that parish territories dated back to the remote past might have been called into question, though this did not in fact happen.

This paradox was no doubt due to the fact that the very excavations which had revealed the instability of settlement also revealed the great age of certain field systems, boundaries, ditches and banks that dated back to Antiquity or prehistory, and some of which have retained their boundary role to the present day. As it developed, landscape archaeology emphasised boundary features, which became a central research issue. In England, much work was carried out to trace the origins of parish boundaries and to explore the possibility that they were extremely stable features of the landscape; in some cases it was argued that they pre-dated the Anglo-Saxon settlement and were a legacy from the Romano-British period instead. The approach to the question adopted most frequently has been to examine the relationship between recorded parish boundaries and known archaeological features from earlier periods. One of the pioneers of this technique in the 1970s was Desmond Bonney, who suggested that some territorial boundaries in Wessex may have been already established by the late Iron Age.⁴ Parish boundaries were assumed to reflect land divisions that already existed in the estate boundaries of early Saxon times or even of Roman or earlier establishments.⁵ The mobility of settlement would then only have operated within the limits of these basic units of land.⁶ The view that parish boundaries represent the oldest and most permanent features in the landscape, sometimes even a legacy from very ancient landholding units,

was widely accepted and proved so attractive that it is still very much taken for granted by most landscape archaeologists.

It is worth pointing out, however, that the main emphasis of these studies was not on the parochial territories themselves but on the earlier estates which allegedly had determined their shape; through the analysis of parish boundaries, their purpose was to retrieve the limits of medieval or earlier estates, and consequently very little attention was paid to the processes of parish formation themselves and to the social mechanisms which might account for such boundary preservation.

For the purposes of this article, I will examine the process of parochialisation in view of its significance for the conceptualisation of space within local societies, and its effects on boundary definition. I will build on a recent study of the development of parish territories in Touraine over the *longue durée*, from their origins to their incorporation into post-revolutionary administrative structures, as *communes* of the *département* of Indre-et-Loire.⁷

The historiography of rural parishes in Gaul relies mainly on the evidence of Gregory, bishop of Tours (573–94), and the Touraine is by far the best-documented region in his work. Whereas for most parts of Gaul, Gregory mentions only the highest rank of the urban hierarchy, namely *civitates*, in Touraine, the region he had under his care, he mentions a significant number of secondary settlements (*vici* and *castra*).⁸ Thanks to Gregory, the Touraine has the richest collection of known churches for the sixth century, and for this reason it forms the basis of any study of parochialisation in Gaul. A systematic analysis of the early records (sixth to twelfth centuries) and of church entries in diocesan fiscal accounts (late thirteenth and early fourteenth century), combined with the detail from the 1791 commune survey, allowed the construction of a GIS database. In the process of creating the *communes* during the French Revolution (1790–1), the boundaries of all parishes were perambulated and described in detail, and these boundary descriptions were reported on large-scale contemporary maps (1:25,000) by J.M. Gorry.⁹

Counting churches

To study the process of parochialisation, it was necessary to assess the number of churches in the early medieval landscape, and how this changed over time. First, however, the extent to which the documentary sources provide us with a representative picture of church density had to be assessed. The diagram in Figure 15.1 displays the

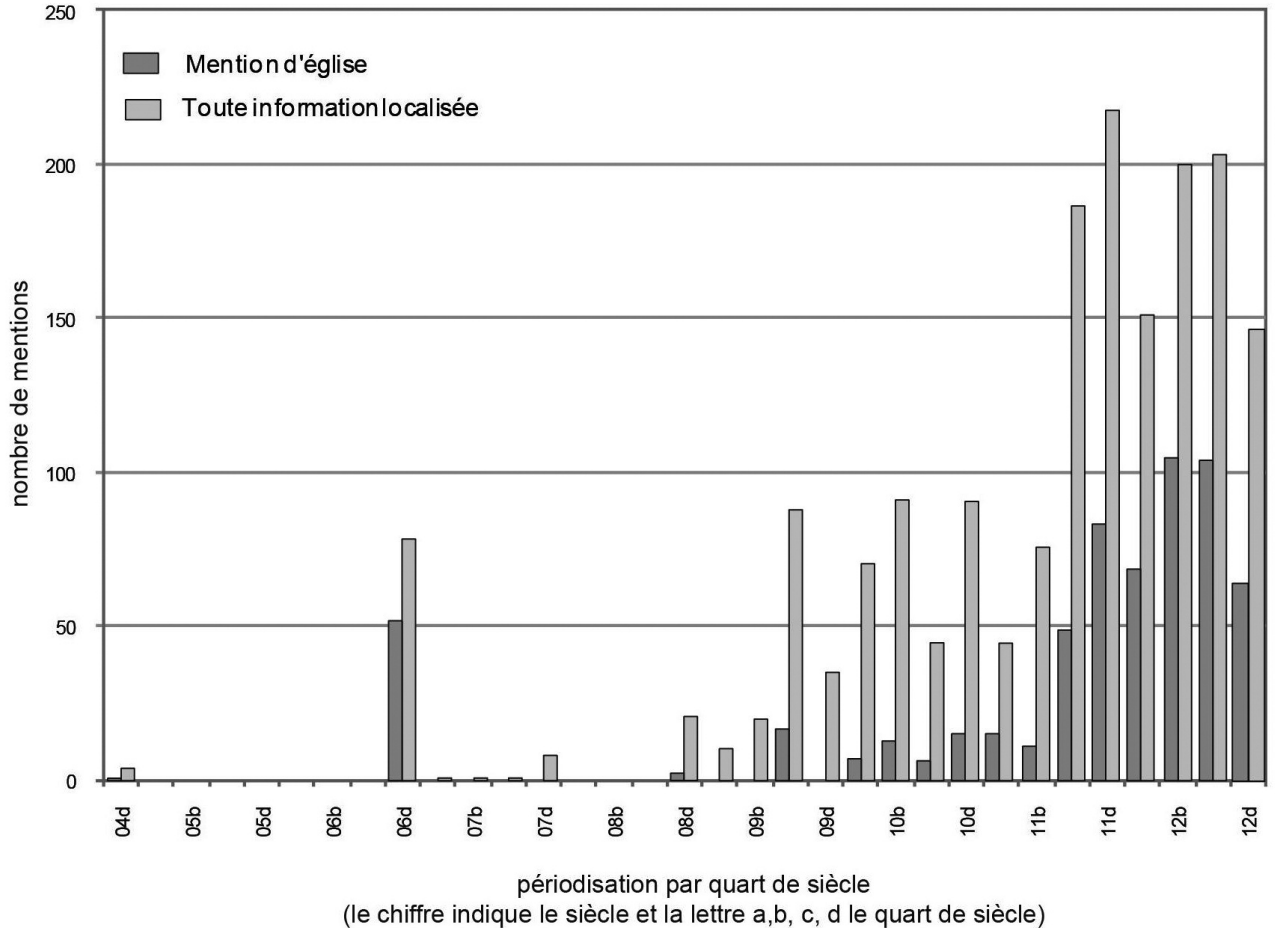


Figure 15.1 References to churches (darker bars) shown in relation to the overall number of recorded places (lighter bars) in the Touraine between the fourth century and the twelfth.

chronological distribution of places mentioned in written sources before 1200; each horizontal section covers a quarter of a century, and the vertical sections represent the amount of data. The isolated peak on the left corresponds to the evidence of Gregory of Tours; the main stream of written sources, as in most parts of France, lies between the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The darker bars represent references to churches, while the lighter bars represent the overall number of recorded places. The numbers of references to churches follow the same general trends, and display the same documentary biases, as references to places in general. Clearly, such numbers are less representative of the chronology of church-building than they are of the survival rate of written records.

The biases of the documentation are not only chronological, but also geographical. Figure 15.2 (colour section) compares the density of recorded places across three broad periods: before 600, between 600 and 900, and between 900 and 1200. The blanks on the maps, void of any documentary evidence, are more numerous before 600 than by 1200, but some areas documented before 600 are not recorded in later periods and reappear only in the later Middle Ages. This is due to the uneven preservation of ecclesiastical records; in some monastic establishments like Saint-Martin of Tours, they are better preserved for the early Middle Ages than for the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and this accounts for some of their possessions not being recorded for this later period. This discontinuity in documentary evidence must be taken into account when evaluating the density of churches.

The churches in existence before 600 are known mainly through the testimony of Gregory of Tours. In the last book of his *Decem Libri Historiarum*, he gives us a list of his predecessors in the episcopal see of Tours, from St Martin (371–97) to Eufronius (556–73), and he mentions the baptismal churches they founded in thirty-one settlements (*vici*).¹⁰ Some of these *vici* had more than one church. In Neuvy-le-Roi, for instance, Gregory reports that during his lifetime a second church was built by a layman (*Turonicus homo*) to house and honour the relics of St Andrew and St Saturninus, which had been brought back from Burgundy by his father, in order to accomplish a vow he made while he was suffering from a quartan fever.¹¹ In Chinon, in addition to the baptismal church built in the *vicus* by Bishop Bricius (397–442), Gregory mentions a monastery founded by St Maximus on the outskirts of the settlement, and the oratory and holy tomb of the hermit John.¹² In Loches, he refers to a church built by the bishop Eustochius (442–58/9), and to a monastery founded ‘in the hollow of a hill’ by St Ursus during the reign of the Visigothic King Alaric II (484–507).¹³ Multiple churches seem to have been a fairly common feature of early medieval *vici* and *castra*.¹⁴

In contrast with the numerous ‘public’ churches in his bishopric, to which he devoted a good deal of attention, Gregory mentions only a few lesser churches or *oratoria*, most of which were built by local confessors who gathered small religious communities around them and performed miracles, both during their lifetime and after they were buried, namely those built by Maximus and John near Chinon, Ursus near Loches, Leobatus in Sennevières, and Senoch in Saint-Senoch. Gregory mentions also the oratory built over the tomb of the two virgins Maura and Britta, which was located ‘on a small hill that was covered with briars and brambles and wild vines’.¹⁵ As bishop of Tours, Gregory focused exclusively on the churches founded by his predecessors or by the saints and

holy confessors he was writing about. In his bishopric, he mentions only one oratory built within a *villa*, and unsurprisingly this was a *villa* which happened to belong to the episcopal see (Martigny, in the *commune* of Fondettes).¹⁶ However, there is evidence from elsewhere in his works and those of other Late Antique authors indicating that members of the landed aristocracy used to build their own oratory on their estates,¹⁷ and this practice was common enough to be the subject of several canons of Merovingian councils from the sixth and seventh centuries. For instance, canon 25 of the council of Epaone, in 517, forbade placing relics in the oratories of villas unless there were officiating priests there; and canon 14 of the council of Chalon (647–53), entitled *De oratoriis quae per villas fiunt*, attempted to regulate the respective responsibilities of the bishop and the estate owner regarding a proprietary church.¹⁸ Some canons, such as canon 26 and canon 33 of the fourth council of Orléans in 541, show that not only oratories, but even baptismal churches (*parrochiae*) might be established in aristocratic estates, as long as the landowner provided for the upkeep of the building and its officiating clergy.¹⁹

With forty-five churches mentioned in c. 600 (excluding those in the town of Tours), the Touraine is characterised by the richest evidence for rural churches from the sixth century, yet there is no doubt that this list is very far from complete, since Gregory does not tell us anything about the churches built by aristocratic families on their estates. The church of Perrusson, unrecorded in written sources until 1180, in which the richly furnished sixth-century grave of a woman was discovered in the centre of the presbytery, together with several other sarcophagi, may provide an archaeological example of just such a proprietary building.²⁰

During the following centuries, between c. 600 and c. 900, the documentation consists almost exclusively of royal diplomas confirming property rights to monastic communities, the overwhelming majority of which were issued by Charles the Bald (840–77). They inform us mainly about monastic estates. Only fifteen rural churches are mentioned, and most of the churches known from before 600 are not recorded, even though they certainly survived. They therefore need to be added to the newly mentioned churches, which brings the total number of churches known through documentary evidence around 900 to about sixty, but once again this number does not include the proprietary churches located on the estates of the lay aristocracy, which are still missing from the record.

Between 900 and 1200, not only does the documentary evidence survive in much greater quantity, it is also more diverse (including private charters, papal and episcopal confirmations, royal diplomas and narrative sources), and provides much more detailed information. Following the so-called Gregorian Reform in the eleventh century, many

proprietary churches were donated by their owners to monasteries or to bishops, and thus make their first appearance in the documentary record. Many of the churches mentioned by Gregory of Tours as having been built by the bishops of Tours in Late Antiquity are not recorded between 900 and 1200, but this can be accounted for by the poor preservation of the archives of the bishopric itself before the thirteenth century. As these missing churches reappear in the possession of the bishops of Tours during the later Middle Ages, there is no reason to assume that they had disappeared in the intervening period. They have therefore been added to the number of churches extant during this period (212 in the bishopric of Tours, and 242 within the limits of the *département* of Indre-et-Loire), resulting in a total number of 271 churches recorded by 1200 within the bishopric, and 301 in the *département* of Indre-et-Loire.

If we consider the numbers previously given – 45 churches by 600, 60 by 900, and more or less 300 by 1200 – we get the impression of an enormous increase in church-building between the tenth and twelfth centuries. While this is the generally accepted pattern, it is clear that these numbers are partly the result of the vagaries of differential coverage in the written sources. An additional strong bias results from the new practice of monasteries, in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, of having their possessions confirmed by popes instead of kings. While kings confirmed the possession of vills, sometimes mentioning associated churches, the popes confirmed the possession of churches, only rarely mentioning the associated vills. The impact of this documentary shift, which has been largely overlooked, is certainly responsible for the spectacular growth in the number of documented churches in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

An alternative approach to assessing the chronology of churches is to consider the evidence of church dedications. The testimony of Gregory of Tours allows the reconstruction of the profile of the cult of saints in the sixth century. The available information includes a record of the relics that he and his predecessors had brought to the bishopric of Tours; the liturgical calendar of Bishop Perpetuus, from the second half of the fifth century, which established feast days both for universal saints and for a number of local episcopal confessors from Tours and Poitiers; and the numerous *Vitae* written by Gregory himself, which are strongly connected with local confessors and with the relics that could be found in the diocese of Tours. These represent the majority of saints celebrated in the Touraine in the sixth century.

The next step was to test these lists of sixth-century cults against later documentation, in order to discard those that remained successful in the long run and became the patrons of new churches throughout the Middle Ages (as is the case for St Martin, St Peter and

the Virgin Mary), and to identify those that could be considered as reliable chronological indicators because they fell out of fashion in later periods, and so did not have any new churches dedicated to them.²¹ Because of the scarcity of written evidence between 600 and 900, this method can only be used to help identify sites established by the end of that period.

Taking these additional churches into account, we get a total of 170 churches that may well have been in existence by 900, which is still probably a significant underestimation. Compared to the 300 churches known by 1200 and the 310 parishes recorded at the end of the Middle Ages, this allows a reconsideration of the generally accepted idea of a massive increase in the number of churches in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Considering the limited amount of work done on Touraine churches, the input from archaeology is not significant, but where evidence is available, it has revealed a gap of up to five or six centuries between the construction of the church and the date of its first documentary record.²² The study of surviving churches in the Touraine also confirms this, since many which display early medieval architectural characteristics are not recorded in the written evidence before the eleventh and twelfth centuries or even the late medieval period.²³



Figure 15.3 The remains of the church of St Peter in Mougon (commune Crouzilles, Indre-et-Loire), founded by bishop Perpetuus (458/9–488/9). PHOTO: C. SCHEID

There is no reason to think that the Touraine was a special case; it was exceptional only because it was the main focus of Gregory's writings. It is worth stressing in this context that the famous sentence of Ralph Glaber about the 'white robe of churches' spreading over the world at the beginning of the eleventh century explicitly referred to the reconstruction and renewal of old churches, not the foundation of new ones.²⁴

The emergence of the parish network

The process of parochialisation involved a long-term transformation in Christian attitudes to space, from the fourth century to the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Two major steps can be emphasised. The first was the development of an expanding network of holy places from the fourth to the eighth centuries, a period crucial to the development of the cult of the saints in the Latin West. In its first centuries, as Robert Markus has pointed out, Christianity was a religion highly inhospitable to the idea of holy places, which were identified with pagan notions of localised impersonal holiness. The Christian Fathers of Late Antiquity considered that although holy places had been important to Jews and pagans, a spiritual religion such as Christianity had no room for physical holy places. The veneration of martyrs, which served to assure the Christians of a local church of its continuity with a heroic, persecuted past, brought with it the concept of the holy tomb or *loca sanctorum*.²⁵

Like the tomb, relics linked the martyr's commemoration to physical places, but they also made possible the multiplication of such places. The presence of relics turned churches into 'holy places' housing the saint, in a way that they could not have been while they housed only the worshipping congregation. As Luce Pietri has pointed out, Gregory of Tours was the first Christian writer to make extensive use of the expression *loca sancta*, which was hitherto applied almost exclusively to the Holy Places of Palestine.²⁶ *Loca sancta* in his writings had a wider meaning than *loca sanctorum*: it referred not only to the tomb or the church that housed the relics of the saint, but also to all the places that became holy merely because the saint was believed to have visited them. It emphasised the importance of place, which retained something of the *virtus* of the saints through a transfer of holiness.

Luce Pietri has argued that Gregory's aim in his hagiographical books was not so much to write the biography of the saints as to describe the topography of holiness, a visitor's guide to destinations of pilgrimage and to places where miracles could be

expected, and where believers should go (in Gregory's words, *loca sancta circuire*) in the hope of miraculous healings. Robert Markus has stressed that this sacred topography, which gradually came to organise the Christian perception of space, was a reflex, a projection on the ground of the sacredness of time. Places became sacred as the past became localised in the present, through the commemoration of the martyrs and confessors.

The characteristics of this network of holy places stands in strong contrast with the later parish network. It was largely disconnected from pastoral care. Holy places included different kinds of churches: both *ecclesiae* with baptismal rights and *oratoria* built on holy tombs or commemorating the deeds of a saint. Many of them were located on marginal lands: either on the outskirts of cities, commemorating a saint's tomb in a Late Antique cemetery, or in remote locations where a saint, often a local hermit, was buried. These landmarks were destinations for pilgrims, visited on special occasions, but they were hardly the focus of everyday life for the faithful. Even the main churches built within settlements, which were served by a group of clergy and had the right to deliver baptism and to celebrate the major feasts, were not yet, at this point, the focus of social life, and cannot be considered to have constituted local centres.

Baptism was the only sacrament, received only once in life. There was no obligation to attend dominical mass, and church attendance was compulsory only on a few major feasts. Churchyard burial was not yet mandatory. There was no Merovingian canonical disposition stipulating that burial should take place next to a church, and the evidence of Sidonius Apollinaris in the fifth century, together with that of Gregory of Tours a century later, indicates that it was not thought wrong to bury Christians next to pagans.²⁷ Non-ecclesiastical cemeteries, sometimes incorporating several hundred graves, remained in use for some time after the eighth century, and small groups of burials, located within early medieval settlements but without direct association with a church, became widespread between the eighth and tenth centuries.²⁸ Pastoral care at the local level was not yet a central issue. There was no need for holy places to be placed at regular intervals of distance, and indeed they are often found in clusters. Gregory gives several examples of multiple churches in or around a single settlement, and such clusters were a common feature of early medieval religious topography.²⁹

The next step in the formation of the parish network was the transformation of churches into local centres. This development was related to a major change both in ecclesiological conceptions and in social practices. As Dominique Iogna-Prat has argued, a unified doctrine of Christian places of worship did not emerge in the early church but

was only gradually elaborated during the Middle Ages. It was not until the Carolingian period that clerical writers became concerned with the actual materialisation of places of worship in a physical space and began to reflect on the double meaning of the term *ecclesia* in the Latin West, which referred both to the building (church) and the community of believers. The merging of the two meanings of the word *ecclesia* only began in the Carolingian period and was developed further in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, in connection with the elaboration of a eucharistic doctrine that stressed the 'reality' of the transformation of bread and wine during mass. It was the act of 'real' transformation which made the place of this occurrence one of a particular kind, because it was there that God showed himself in the reality of human affairs. The rite of church consecration became the most conspicuous ceremony in Latin liturgy, and was considered as the 'baptism' of the place of worship.³⁰ The development of a rite for consecrating churchyards is first recorded in pontificals at the end of the tenth century.³¹ It involved the ritual demarcation and purification of the designated area, articulating its transformation into a sacred space encompassing the community of the faithful, both dead and alive. These ceremonies involved processions around the perimeters of the sacred space, extending its sacrality in ever-widening circles.

The notion of a church community including both the living and the dead was first expressed by Bishop Hincmar of Reims in the middle of the ninth century in his treatise *De Ecclesiis et Capellis*, but churchyard burial became a common rule only at a later date, between the tenth and twelfth centuries. With the establishment of the parish system, the church took control of burial places and used them as a way of defining the membership of Christian society. The burial of all parishioners in the churchyard played a major part in the emergence of the parish community, and the catchment area of the churchyard was an important element in defining a parish territory in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

The focal position of churches in the life of local communities was further reinforced by the growing need for pastoral care, and the increase in church attendance. During the tenth and eleventh centuries, church attendance became compulsory on many occasions, for Sunday mass, confession, offerings on special feasts, sacraments, and burials in the parish churchyard. The shift from adult baptism to infant baptism, which became the rule in the eighth to ninth centuries, also increased the need to have a church in the vicinity.³²

The new concern for carving out sacred space, together with the reinforcement of pastoral care and churchyard burial which came about during the same period, gave an

unprecedented importance to the church as a focus of social life. The development of pastoral care brought about many parochial rights exercised by local churches: baptism, burial fees, confessions, blessings for weddings, offerings on Sunday mass and on major feasts, tithes, and so on.

From the end of the eleventh century, churches also became the focus of all kinds of jurisdictions concerning the division of resources, customs and land use rights as much as parochial prerogatives, and which were sometimes quite disconnected from pastoral care. All donation charters from lay lords to monastic establishments were usually made to the local church under monastic care, starting with the expression *dono quicquid habeo in ecclesia*, then listing all kinds of items, from tithes to the right to take fish from the seigneurial pond or cut wood in the seigneurial forest.

Distance played a major part in positioning churches as local centres and in determining their hierarchy. The distance travelled to go to church became a central issue, and it was a factor repeatedly referred to when seeking to obtain from the bishop the elevation of a chapel to the status of parish church. Many churches were made redundant in this process of network formation, especially in places that had housed several churches in Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages.

The fabric of parish territories

Gregory's writings make a clear distinction between churches with baptismal rights (*ecclesiae* or *basilicae*) and lesser churches not allowed to deliver baptism nor celebrate major feasts (*oratoria*), but this hierarchy is not related to the existence of parish territories. The assumption that parish territories were created at the same time as the first baptismal churches relies entirely on the use of the word *parochia*, which was used in Late Antique councils from the fourth century, and is usually translated as 'parish', although it has many meanings in medieval records. It sometimes referred to the territory under the jurisdiction of a bishop, but most often it designated a local Christian community, or a church with baptismal rights. In Merovingian councils, it was used as a synonym for *basilica*, as opposed to *oratorium*, or it referred to a rural baptismal church as opposed to the episcopal city, but no explicit reference to parish territories is made anywhere in early medieval sources.³³

The territorialisation of the parish came along with the development of pastoral care and churchyard burial, and the broader social processes that emphasised the parish as the primary social and geographical unit of local governance. The formation of the

parish network, with churches becoming focal points for social life as well as local service centres for the parochial community, entailed the formation of catchment areas.

Tithe collection was especially influential in the process of boundary demarcation, and it deserves special attention. Tithes were imposed in the second half of the eighth century, under Pippin the Short and Charlemagne. Before that, there were prescriptions imposing the payment of tithes, for instance in the council of Mâcon II, canon 5, in 585, but it was owed to the bishop, who divided it as he wished. It was only from the reign of Charlemagne that tithes began to be owed to individual churches, and this entailed the formation of fiscal jurisdictions.

From the beginning of the ninth century, it is clear that written laws aimed to create coherent territories related to landholding units for tithe collection, for instance in a capitulary from 810–13 which stipulates that each church should have a designated territory on which it would collect the tithe from all the vills.³⁴ However, the charters

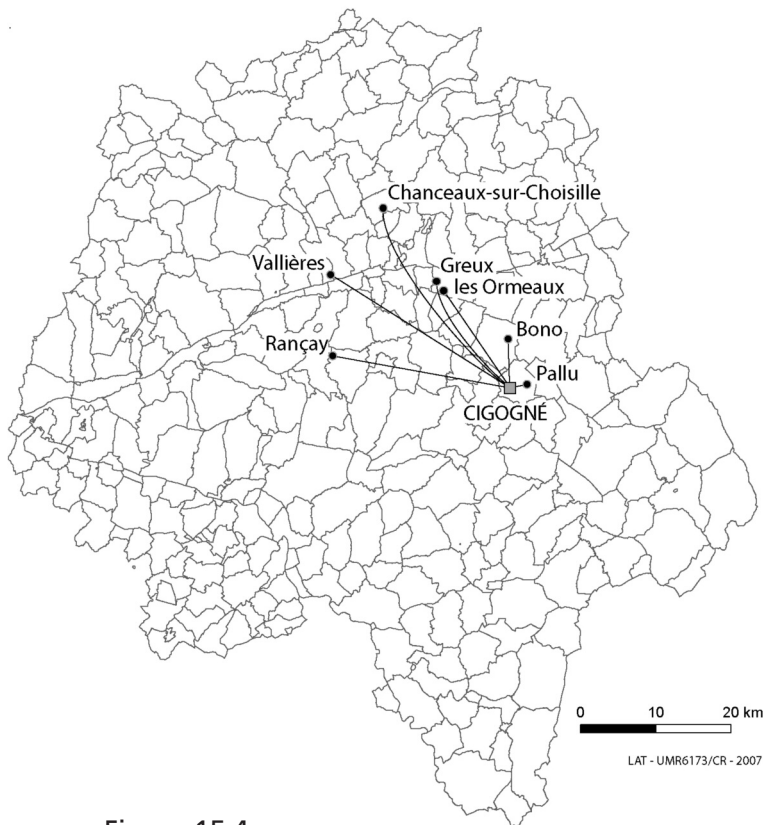


Figure 15.4
Location of the tithes owed to the church of Cigogné in 943 against the background of 1791 commune boundaries.

of the ninth or even the tenth century show that this was far from being the common rule at that time. There are many examples in various regions of France where the tithes owed to a church were collected from dispersed lands, separated by long distances, as in the case of the church of Cigogné in 943 (Figure 15.4). These lands constituted the basis of the church's income, allowing for the upkeep of the building and its clergy, but they did not form a parish territory, nor did they imply a sacramental link between the inhabitants and the church to which they owed their tithe.

As Michel Lauwers has pointed out, the idea of territorial boundaries as an integral part of the definition of the parish was only fully expressed in canon law, in the *Summa aurea* of Henry of Susa, known as *Hostiensis*, in about 1250.³⁵ It was only then that the parish was defined in terms of a territory limited by recognised boundaries where the faithful lived, worked and worshipped, and over which the church exercised its spiritual rights.

Contrary to a long-standing notion, the establishment of parish territories was not the result of successive divisions of the diocese into ever-smaller units, but the result of the expansion of influence radiating from ecclesiastical centres in ever-widening circles. It reflected a wider social process leading to the identification of the church with every level of medieval society, a phenomenon for which Michel Lauwers has recently coined the term *inecclesiamento*.³⁶

The delineation of parish boundaries came about gradually, resulting both from the social and religious practices of local people, and from negotiation or confrontation with other expanding ecclesiastical centres. At the outset there was no clear separation between what was inside and outside territorial units; this came about as part of a process involving both topological constraints on the positioning of churches and the jurisdiction of parish rights.

Topological constraints, which are mentioned frequently from the ninth century right down to the early modern period, influenced this process in two essential yet contradictory ways: first through the need to take into account the distance travelled to get to the church; and secondly according to economic viability, since it was necessary to provide for the upkeep of the church building and its officiating priest. The first of these constraints was determined by religious and social practices and tended to increase the numbers of parish churches and reduce their jurisdictions; while the second, determined by economic considerations, required conversely that each parish should cover a sufficient area, or have a sufficient number of inhabitants to ensure the upkeep of the priest and the church.

The fiscal jurisdictions created for the collection of the tithe gradually became identified with the catchment area of the churchyard. Graves, recording the memory of the dead, testified to their membership of a particular community, which could perhaps explain why such graves fulfilled a legitimising role. The place of burial was taken as evidence of which parish the deceased belonged to, and hence to which parish the tithe incumbent on his dwelling place was owed.³⁷ Before parish registers were drawn up in the sixteenth century, graves were the only record of parishioners, and the churchyard

was effectively the forerunner of the tax register drawn up at the time when the modern 'communes' came into existence.

While the notion of a territorial jurisdiction with recognised boundaries was included in the definition of the parish in canon law from the middle of the thirteenth century, it does not follow that parishes were clearly defined within neatly adjacent borders from that point on. The physical definition and meanings of the parish emerge as far from straightforward. The areas subject to the tithe and other parochial rights, the area which encompassed the congregation of a church, the catchment area of the churchyard, all these areas were centred around the church without being coterminous. Together they formed what might be called a 'territorial envelope' with shifting boundaries. Geographers have coined the term 'co-spatiality' to refer to the articulation of superimposed spatial layers on the same stretch of land.³⁸

One of the main obstacles to the definition of parochial boundaries was the existence of a jurisdictional continuum from the parish church to the chapel, which led to an overlapping of ecclesiastical rights, precluding clear mutual boundaries. Another obstacle was the 'parcelling out' of parish rights, particularly in reference to tithes and burials. They were divided in various ways. In some cases, the division was applied not to the general income, but to the places which produced it, or to the inhabitants who paid the taxes, which had strong spatial repercussions. In the case of certain hamlets known as '*tournants et virants*' in Touraine, the spatial dimension was even further complicated since the inhabitants involved in this practice were assigned to different parishes every other year, or for one year in every three.³⁹ Such rotations, which involved not only the payment of the tithe, but also the burial of the dead in different churchyards according to which year they had died in, were recorded during the Middle Ages and remained in use until the French Revolution.

These alternating areas correspond to Jacques Levy's notion of 'confines' as opposed to 'limits': the latter involve a brutal divide between what is inside and what is outside, whereas confines are defined by the interpenetration of two territories, that is, an interface in which the distance that separates the two elements is a negative quantity.⁴⁰

It is clear that throughout the Middle Ages, and even in modern times, there were zones where overlapping territories co-existed with stretches of precisely-drawn boundaries. Precisely-drawn boundary lines arose from local conflicts where the parties were required to arrive at a mutual agreement over the position of the line. However, only the section under dispute would have been so rigidly defined, and its presence did not in the least indicate precision or clarity as far as the rest of the parish boundary was concerned.

The boundaries sometimes remained quite vague until the French Revolution, and the creation of the communes in 1791 involved some lengthy enquiries in which elders of local communities were consulted in order to establish where to put the boundary stones.⁴¹ The comparison between the networks of commune boundaries in 1999 and in 1791 emphasises the stability of the global shape of territories over the last two centuries on the scale of the *département*, but reveals many minor changes in the boundary layout on the scale of the individual communes.

Modelling of the parish territories

A GIS was used to assess the impact of geographical factors on the shaping of parish territories in Touraine. Different theoretical models were tested against the actual network of commune boundaries of 1999 and of 1791.⁴² The model which yielded the best match with the actual data was based on the distance between administrative centres weighted by the relief and the main river system, taking into account the width of the river (called the Hydro-Slope model) (Figure 15.5, colour section).

The next step was to apply this model retrospectively to data series prior to 1791, using the lists of churches in 900, in 1200, and at the end of the Middle Ages, in order to create a simulation of the process through which the parish network was formed. The results of the simulation for 1791 and for the end of the Middle Ages are almost identical, showing that the parish network was complete by that time (Figure 15.6).

In order to produce theoretical parish network maps for 1200 and 900, the Hydro-Slope model was applied with a calculation range limited to a distance of 15 km from each point, that is 7.5 km from the parish border to the church (about a one-and-a-half hour's walk). In the model, this value equals the greatest possible distance for the largest communes, since all communal territories in 1791 are encompassed within a 15 km diameter. For 1791, as for the end of the Middle Ages, the result of the simulation with a distance range limited to 15 km is similar to the model without this limitation (Figure 15.6). The simulation of c. 1200 supports the hypothesis that the parish network was established at this date, even if there are a few blank areas where no church is recorded (Figure 15.7). If we go back three centuries to around the year 900, we find these same areas in the same places but much enlarged (Figure 15.7). These zones which appear to be outside the parish territories when simulated by the modelling for 1200 and 900 correspond to forest or heath on the current vegetation map. This is an indication of the great age of these heaths and forests, which is also corroborated by written sources.

An important result of this simulation is that, whatever their place in the settlement hierarchy, it was the distance between parish administrative centres that was the determining factor in establishing the network on a departmental scale. This can be considered a clear indication of the essential role played by religious and social practices in the shaping of parish and communal territories. From the Carolingian era down to modern times, the motive most often invoked for the creation of a new parish is the distance from the local church. However, by narrowing the focus, it becomes clear that there are considerable discrepancies in every commune between the model and the actual shape of the territorial boundaries. This indicates that other factors affected the drawing-up of boundaries on this scale, such as the nature of the soil, a ridge of hills, a river, the presence of a road, or land-use rights.

The ‘territorial envelope’ and the communal boundaries can thus be considered to have belonged to two distinct levels of organisation governed by different explanatory factors. Moreover, they did not evolve at the same pace. While the ‘territorial envelope’ was roughly defined at an early date, probably between the tenth and the twelfth centuries, the parish and communal boundaries underwent numerous changes and, judging by the documentation of the last two centuries, these very local variations could have taken place at a very rapid rate.

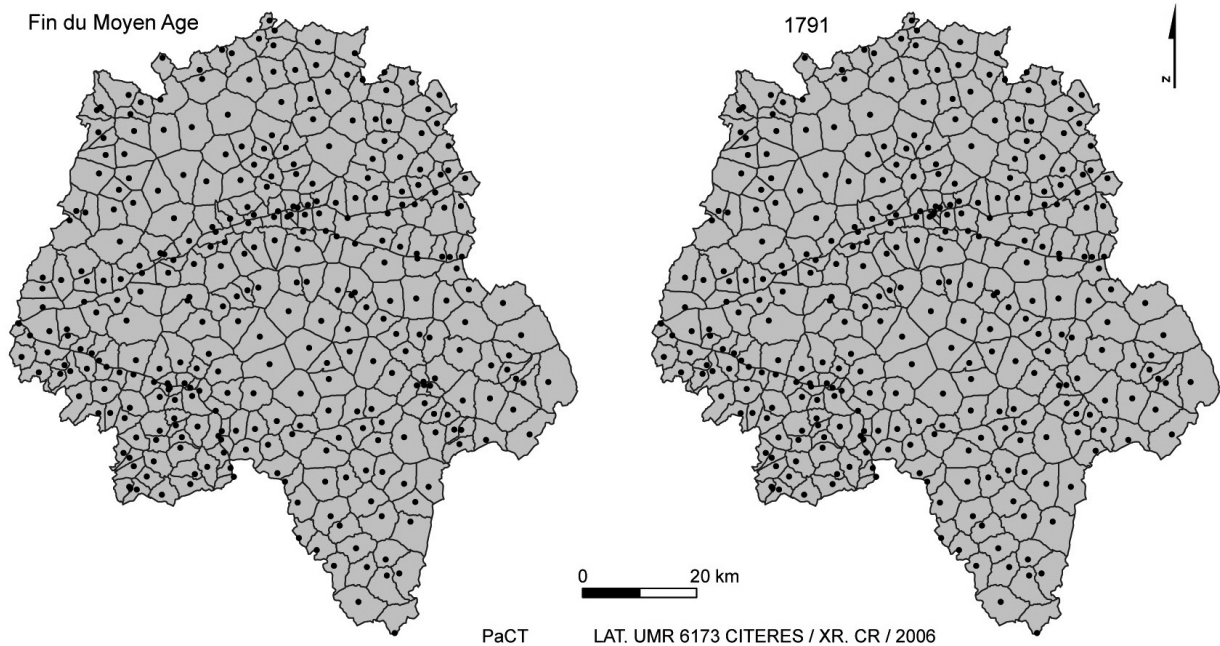


Figure 15.6 Application of the Hydro-Slope model to data from the end of the Middle Ages and from 1791. After Rodier, 2008.



Figure 15.7 Application of the Hydro-Slope model to data from c. 900 and c. 1200 with a calculation range limited to a distance of 15 km from each point. After Rodier, 2008.

Boundaries, parish communities and landscape archaeology

Even in the early Christianised landscape of Touraine, where the distribution of churches was already very dense in the sixth century, parish territories became established only at a much later date, by the end of the first millennium, and their boundaries were never entirely fixed.

Parish boundaries were permanently open to negotiation and were adapted constantly to accommodate different uses. They were manipulated and given new meanings as an integral part of local strategies for the defence of customary and common rights. In her perceptive study on landscape, memory and custom in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Nicola Whyte has shown that perambulations during Rogation week were used as a powerful negotiating tool in the setting out of ancient land use rights.⁴³ In Norfolk, for example, manorial lords were purposely using perambulation routes, sometimes encouraging their extension, in order to extend their own grazing rights across open commons and heaths. The trespassing of parish boundaries by Rogationtide perambulations has also been pointed out by Joseph Morsel in various parts of France and Germany.⁴⁴

The incorporation of boundaries in ritual events was not simply about defining the parish community: the use of specific sections of parish boundary, especially those that crossed open commons, were as much about defining customs and land use rights.⁴⁵

Far from being a static framework that local communities inherited from a remote past, parish territories were circumscribed by a complex web of overlapping boundaries which were constantly manipulated and adapted to accommodate contemporary strategies. Though local communities were obviously concerned with the transmission of knowledge, from the old to the young, about boundaries recorded as cognitive maps, this does not equate in any straightforward sense with stability and permanence, for the landscape in which these material relics were maintained was not static either. As Nicola Whyte has pointed out, Rogationtide perambulations were instrumental not only in incorporating boundary landmarks within mnemonic systems but also in negotiating their alteration in line with changing social and economic circumstances and needs, sometimes leading to court proceedings.⁴⁶

Even when the landmarks described in Anglo-Saxon perambulation charters can be reliably identified on the ground and are found to coincide with a stretch of parish boundary, they cannot provide evidence for the preservation of the whole estate as a parish territory, and the same is true of archaeological features of great longevity that

could be included in the delineation of later parish boundaries. Still-standing archaeological remains from earlier societies such as banks or barrows were integrated into boundaries because they made convenient landmarks, but probably also because they were perceived as very ancient. Evidence of antiquity in the landscape was used to confirm the legitimacy of customs and the boundaries that demarcated them.

However tempting it might be to think of parish boundaries as a static framework that might preserve the limits of very ancient landholding units, it is worth bearing in mind that the territorial complexity produced by the process of parochialisation came to an end only in the eighteenth century, with the introduction of modern cartography, which had major repercussions on our conceptualisation of space. Complex overlapping boundaries were replaced by single linear features, and parish territories switched from co-spatiality to mutually exclusive interfaces.

Even if boundaries do, in some cases, include some stretches of older banks or ditches, or landmarks mentioned in Anglo-Saxon charters, this does not in itself constitute evidence for the survival of entire early medieval, Roman or prehistoric estates into the parish network. The correlation between some ancient landscape features and parish boundaries should be understood as the result of recycling, rather than of territorial continuity.