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A view from the giants' shoulders – a reply to Slater's critique (2019)

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Terry Slater's critique of my paper (Haslam, 2018) brings up a number of important issues, though only a few can be dealt with adequately here. He starts (and indeed ends) by questioning whether the term 'ensemble' has any relevance to the business of town-plan analysis. (I would certainly not be so foolish as to entertain the exaggerated claim, as he suggests (p. 59), that the use of the term 'overturns the principles and practice of town-plan analysis'). He has, however, missed the point. The term is not so much a 'concept', but rather a metaphor, of which the drawing of the house plan in Figure 1 is merely an allegory. The term 'ensemble' is used to focus attention on some aspects of the relationship between

form and function in the morphological building blocks of urban places, from which developmental processes can be inferred. This is an 'archaeological' approach, in which the spatial inter-relationships between elements of the plan form can generate alternative narratives about past processes which are independent of the documentary sources. In making the rather off-beam and ill-thought out admonition that this is 'an extraordinary claim for any scholar working in the historical field' (p. 66), Slater fails to understand that this is a core process of enquiry in medieval archaeology – which is not a handmaid to history.

Many of Slater's working assumptions, and his tendency to make dogmatic assertions

based on a tendentious use of evidence, are revealed in his critique of my analysis of the town plan of Bridgnorth (Haslam, 2016; Haslam, 2018, pp. 6–7; Slater, 2019, pp. 62–7). In his earlier work he has proposed the existence of two distinct plan units in the upper town, which group the burgages facing the side streets as a separate development which is later than those facing the High Street. My own analysis shows, however, that the burgages facing onto these streets interlock or nest together at right angles towards the corners of the streets, which pattern is repeated on all six of the corners. This is based on mapping the long uninterrupted boundaries of the plots (which Slater (2019, p. 61) has called ‘primary boundaries’), which run from the street frontage. This shows that these units, and therefore the streets onto which they fronted, *must* have been laid out at the same time by a single process of land allocation, thereby forming one ‘ensemble’. The two plan units proposed by Slater are therefore illusory – an interpretive construct which is falsified by this analysis.

Slater, however, has determined otherwise (pp. 62–3). His familiarity with the analysis of burgages in ‘scores of medieval town plans in Britain and elsewhere in Europe’ has shown him that ‘when the [street] blocks were laid out [in these towns] the plots were equal in size’. These observations allow him to dismiss the evidence at Bridgnorth of the inequality of the primary plot sizes, for ‘who was going to pay his shilling towards the *firma burgi*’ if his plot was smaller than his neighbour’s? This manifestly does not fit the model that he has determined to be true.

I have three comments on this questionable piece of reasoning and denial of hard evidence.

A. This exposes the use of confirmation bias within an inductive methodology: ‘In my extensive experience I have recognised a universal pattern; cases which do not exhibit this pattern must therefore be illusory or mistaken.’ Needless to say, it only takes one contradictory instance to explode the apparent certainty of the underlying assumptions.

B. Slater’s assertion that burgages were originally of equal size is anyway belied by numerous examples in other medieval towns in which they were not. I have examined a selection of these elsewhere (including Ludlow), in which all exhibit a reduction in size towards the corners of streets (Haslam, 2017).

C. Slater’s division of the upper town into two consecutive plan units is a particularly good example of what I have called the ‘fissile tendency’ in town plan analysis (Haslam, 2018, pp. 5–7), to which Slater (naturally enough) takes exception. The imposition of plan units can sometimes separate areas which on different evidential criteria can be seen to form a unity (an ‘ensemble’), thereby creating a skewed narrative of temporal development. Here (as elsewhere), the interpretation becomes the evidence for the initial hypothesis.

Slater’s errors of both interpretation and judgement are carried through in his comments on my analysis of the town plan of Ludlow. First, as he correctly points out, the first reference to the building of the wall was in 1233 (2019, p. 64), though he mistakenly concludes (as does Conzen before him) that this was the first time that the defences were established on the ground. However, the Shropshire Historic Environment Record (SHER) suggests the ‘probability’ that a rampart (which survives behind much of the length of the wall) existed earlier and was fronted by a palisade, which was replaced by the wall in and after 1233 (SHER, 2018).

Secondly, Slater hypothesises (2019, p. 64) that the primary core of the town was a unitary north-south linear development from the river Teme to Corve Street to the north, with its own market place adjacent to the church, enclosed later by the wall. This assumes that the lord of the castle would have initiated a planned development with no physical link to the castle. However, all parallels show that any such development would have been laid out – for security, and for political and economic control – in close conjunction with the castle gates.

Thirdly, Slater observes that the route to the east, which led from this market place at Bull

Ring via Tower Street, bifurcates to become Upper and Lower Galdeford, and concludes that these routeways ‘therefore predate the foundation of the wall’ (2019, p. 64). These are, however, aligned westwards directly onto the outer edge of the ditch. This therefore represents a classic ‘pinch-point’ caused by the convergence of the two routeways towards a single gateway. It is therefore the defences that are primary, not the alignments of the roads.

This is just one reason for holding that the line of these defences, seen as a primary element in the townscape, formed the morphological frame in which the whole town was laid out. These reasons are peremptorily dismissed by Slater with little sign that he has considered the evidence. This is one example of an ‘ensemble’ in action (as at Bridgnorth), where the evidence of the spatial interrelationships between plan forms within a co-functional context can give rise to an

independent historical narrative that is testable against other criteria.

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Morphology as metaphor: facts and fairy stories

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Haslam (this issue, pp. 166–8) claims that I have misunderstood his ‘metaphor’ or ‘allegory’ and that I am letting different kinds of evidence get in the way of alternative interpretations of the development of medieval town plans. This is despite the fact that I have always championed the necessity of using every kind of evidence in town-plan analysis. His Viewpoint however, is based only on his interpretation of the plot pattern in Bridgnorth (the critical case study) using the 1875 large-scale Ordnance Survey plan. He wishes this to be seen as independent evidence and his interpretation as unchallengeable. On neither count is he correct. The hypotheses (and that is what they are) which both of us have published are of equal value and based on the same evidence. Unless other evidence negates or diminishes one of the hypotheses neither can claim to be the ‘best fit’ solution.

Haslam has provided no additional evidence to counter my critique of his interpretation of the supposed interlocking pattern of plots on the street corners of High Town, Bridgnorth.

For a modest-sized town, Bridgnorth has an exceptional series of plans of the town dating from the mid-seventeenth century onwards. Evidentially, William Smith’s plan of St Leonard’s parish *c.* 1830 is of most significance to the current argument since it shows details of plot boundaries and buildings before nineteenth-century development had got under way and it shows the ownership links between plots and buildings, which the later Ordnance Survey plan does not. It confirms that two of Haslam’s six street corners are dominated by large coaching inn complexes which have removed historical plot boundaries; a third corner was redeveloped