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Death, Disposal and Social Memory – Towards a Definition of Funerary Landscapes

Burial; memory; archaeological landscape; funerary landscape; theory; phenomenological perception.

The question might be asked "what is an archaeological landscape?" The word "landscape" has its origins, according to the *OED*, in the 17th century Dutch word *landschap*. The same source states that its present meaning is "a section or expanse of rural scenery, usually extensive, that can be seen from a single viewpoint." This definition gives some direction in understanding the concept, but for the specific case of archaeology, it is too vague and general. The different ways of transposing it into archaeology have created different directions in how this concept should be used and in relation to what. One of the fundamental shortfalls of landscape archaeology is that it does not have a holistic synthesis,[1] a shortfall that persists even today. The notions of *archaeological scapes* and *archaeological landscapes*, in some cases, are erroneously used and confused. Through the separation of these two concepts, archaeological landscapes reveal themselves as a means of exploring the ties between past social aspects and the environment, whereas archaeological scapes are "essentially social constructs." The views of Jaqueline Rossignol[2] should not be disregarded, stating that "the archaeological investigation of past land use by means of landscape perspective, combined with the conscious incorporation of regional geomorphology, actualistic studies (taphonomy, formation processes, ethnoarchaeology), and marked by ongoing reevaluation" should be the means of conducting such studies. Further research defines archaeological landscapes as "a past surface within a defined span of time, which is subject to antecedent features and successive modifications."[3] Other definitions see landscapes as being "a collection of perspectives"[4] or "the spatial study of human interaction, in which the landscape is primarily a social scene."[5] The goal of such studies is the "reconstruction of the ancient landscapes as it could have been, in its potentiality."[6]

From these definitions of the *OED* and the presented archaeological views, the meaning of an archaeological landscape begins to take form. It requires a well-defined vantage point, a well-defined region and temporal interval, and it has the goal of attempting the most likely reconstruction of how the landscape could have been. In contrast to geographic or artistic landscapes, an archaeological landscape is always viewed in motion, which is the natural result of the dialectic between space and time, i.e. movement in space. Similar ideas of landscapes being in flux have been expressed by other researchers.[7] Within archaeology, the vantage point of a landscape is provided by the use of specific groups of materials or features. In a phenomenological sense, the archaeological landscapes carve

1 Roberts 1987, 95.
2 Rossignol 1992, 4.
3 Zvelebil and Benes 1997, 24; Zvelebil, Green, and Macklin 1992, 194.
4 Bailey 1997, 49.
5 Fabech et al. 1999, 20.
6 Pescarin 2009, 18.
7 Chapman 1997a, 2–3; Zvelebil and Benes 1997, 24.

the way towards a better understanding of past experienced space, not only in a visual way, but in every aspect of our perception. The fortunate meeting of all the products of the past human mind, to which the archaeological record is a testament, and those of the environmental changes of the past, have the potential to provide us with a picture of past human experience.[8] However, the accumulation of a large amount of data and its interlinking does not necessarily constitute understanding of the past experienced space, since it still requires meaningful interpretation.[9]

In summary, it can be said that the archaeological landscape is the reconstruction in motion of how it could have been from a single vantage point. The vantage point is defined by a well-contoured group of archaeological finds and/or features, in a well-defined space and time of certain aspects of the experiences of past human communities.

In recent years, several studies with titles referring to a funerary landscape have occurred. Some argued that there is a relation between burials, landscape and funerary activity,[10] while others had a radically different approach, presenting a brief mapscape of the funerary sites[11] and a far more detailed account of the actual mortuary behaviour, tomb typology and funerary finds; perhaps the term "burialscapes" would be more suited for describing this study.[12] Although individual aspects of what might be called funerary landscapes have been singled out, none of the presented literature has attempted to bring all aspects together to carefully define the concept.

It seems that most scholars agree that a funerary landscape must involve burials and, at some level, the geographical landscape. The sum of archaeological funerary finds placed in their natural environment does not constitute funerary landscapes but rather burial landscapes, i.e. studies of burial habits. Another variable is needed for the burial landscapes to become funerary landscapes, which has to do with the difference between burial and funeral. A burial is relatively easy to prove in the material record, since the deposition of the body already constitutes sufficient evidence for it, whereas a funeral presumes some degree of repetitive, social activity,[13] usually seen as a specific type of ritual and often also associated with some level of religious beliefs. Participation in such activities can be a significant feature in the creation and maintenance of social and communal identity,[14] which manifests itself in society through social remembrance.[15] Social memory is used in the sense of repeatedly remembering past actions, which are related to exceptional key events in the past, over a longer period of time by means of well-defined ways of communication that might be considered standardised.[16] Since funerary landscapes are related to memory, they exist in the past as markers not only of key burials or burial sites,[17] but of the associated intense phenomenological experiences related to specific associations of environmental variables, e.g. light, wind, cold, and lived human experiences, e.g. sorrow, pain, pride, loss.[18] It would seem that, from an archaeological perspective, the phenomenological experiences are the most elusive ones, though they should not be overlooked as their existence is strongly rooted in the human condition.

8 Knapp and Ashmore 2003, 8; Rainbird 2008, 268; Strang 2008, 52.
9 Conolly and Lake 2010, 42–43; MacHugh 1999, 84.
10 Vavouranakis 2007, 65–67.
11 Miller 2011, 7–10.
12 Miller 2011, 11–109.
13 Kilmurray 2009, 43.
14 Chapman 1997b, 33, 41; Chapman 1997c, 141; Whittle 2010, 38.
15 Boric 2010, 5–8; Choyke 2009, 21; Hodder and Cessford 2004, 18, 20, 31–36; Kilmurray 2009, 44; Wickholm 2008, 89.
16 Assmann 2006a, 131–132; Assmann 2006b, 206–209; Assmann 2000, 17–19, 34, 41. For an overview of views on memory with special reference to archaeology please consult Maran 2011, 169–171.
17 Fokkens 1999, 38; Van Dyke 2008, 280.
18 Chapman 2003, 311; Children and Nash 1997, 1–2; Clack 2011, 118–119, 131–132; Fentress and Wickham 1992, 36; Giddens 1984, 46; Hamilakis 1998, 122, 125–126, 128; Thomas 1996, 52.

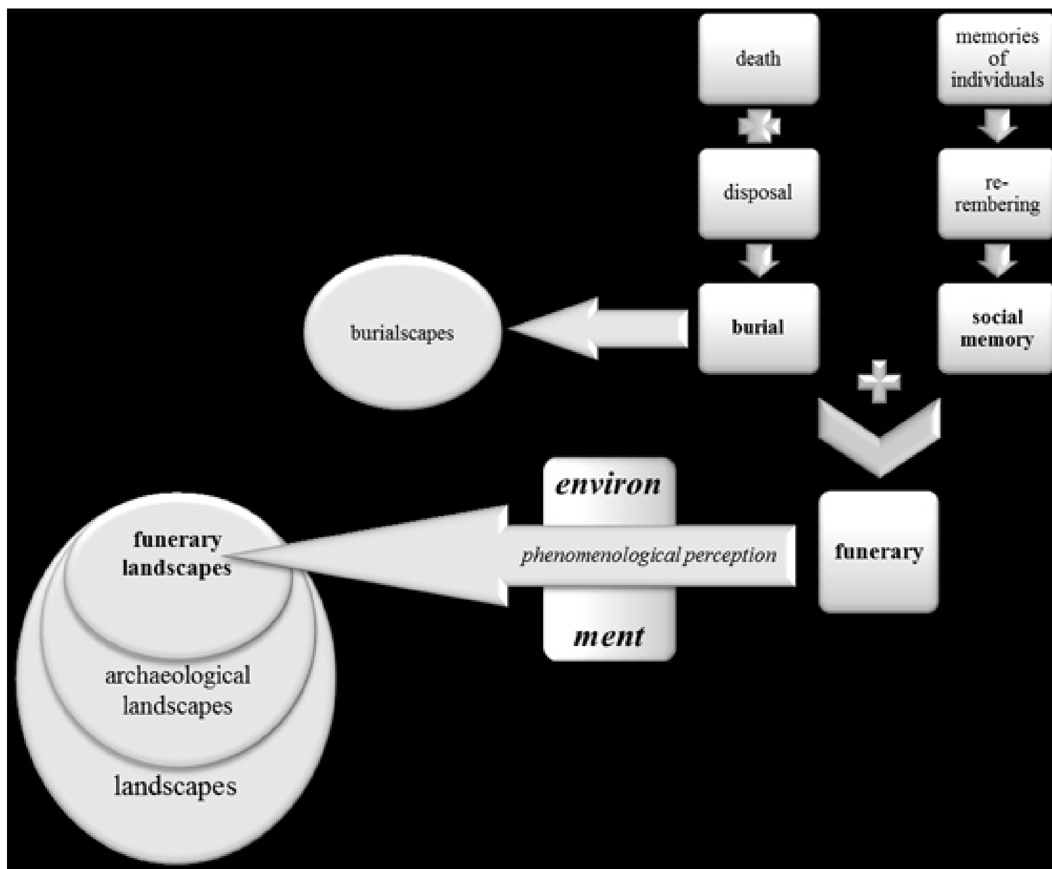

Fig. 1 | Constitution of the funerary landscapes.

In order to exemplify the importance of human experiences at funerals, a parallel can be made between these and that of an imposing building, which might have induced a sense of "monumentality" in individuals. Although this monumentality is assumed by present-day researchers, it cannot be affirmed with any certainty, especially at the level of individuals. A built space might have created such impressions in past humans but we cannot surely state if this was induced in all individuals or in which of them.[19] Furthermore, it would seem naive to argue that all past humans felt the same way seeing the "monumental" construction.[20] On the other hand, for at least some of the members of a past community that disposed of the deceased individual, the creation of powerful impressions and perceptions can hardly be questioned. The appearance of a series of standardised body treatments and organisation of graves in large groups, over wide areas, reflects the subscription of several communities to a similar set of guiding principles for creating and maintaining social memory.[21] In this way, the funerary landscapes in the archaeological research describe the communities of the living, whereas the deceased simply is considered an "object," a means of inferring and re-interpreting, and in some cases even creating, information[22] about past human experience. Through the repeated disposal of the dead in the same place, the specific area becomes a place of remembrance of persons, their deeds and focal points in a community's social memory.[23]

19 MacHugh 1999, 18.
20 Nash 1997, 23.
21 Daróczi 2011, 247–290, maps 16, 18, 20.
22 Halbwachs 1925, 27–33; Halbwachs 1950, 57.
23 Assmann 2006b, 322–328, esp. 325; Halbwachs 1950, 133; Jones 2003, 84–85.

As a final conclusion, I would like to provide a direction in which all the above-stated and defined aspects associated with a funerary landscape can be summarised. The funerary landscape is a specific type of archaeological landscape that focuses on the phenomenological relation between death, disposal of the body in the environment and the social memory of the group participating in the remembrance of the burial. The means of researching and presenting it should be eclectic, in order to transmit as much information as possible about the experienced human space associated with the burial and afferent activities. The goal of such a funerary landscape is to attempt to represent the most likely ways in which humans might have experienced the funerary aspect of their space.

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