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ENVIRONMENTAL HUMANITIES: A RETHINKING OF LANDSCAPE ARCHAEOLOGY?

*INTERDISCIPLINARY ACADEMIC RESEARCH RELATED
TO DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES OF LANDSCAPES*



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Environmental humanities a rethinking of landscape archaeology?

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Landscape archaeology has often focused on how the environment has been experienced and meaningfully captured by the human agent, thereby having a rather anthropocentric focus. However, with the material turn in archaeology and the emerging approaches within the Environmental Humanities (see Rose et. al 2012), as well as the interdisciplinary nature of landscape archaeology at LAC meetings (see Kluiving & Guttmann, 2012) – new forms of research have started to appear. In this special issue we present a set of papers with a tradition of interdisciplinary research in geology and archaeology related to different perspectives of landscapes. A major question in this publication is how can the landscape concept be revitalised and changed by taking a critical look at nature/culture relationships and benefit from moving beyond a social constructivist backing for landscape theory?

There has been an increasing archaeological interest in human-animal-nature relations, where archaeology has shifted from a focus on deciphering meaning, or understanding symbols and the social construction of the landscape to an acknowledgement of how things, places and the environment contribute with their own agencies to the shaping of relations. This means that the environment cannot be regarded as a blank space that landscape meaning is projected onto. Parallel to this, the field of environmental humanities poses the question of how to work with the intermeshing of humans and their surroundings. To allow the environment back in as an active agent of change, means that landscape archaeology can deal better with issues such as global warming, an escalating loss of biodiversity as well as increasingly toxic environment. However, this does not leave human agency out of the equation. It is humans who reinforce the environmental challenges of today. The scholarly field of the humanities deal with questions like how is meaning attributed, what cultural factors drive human action, what role is played by ethics, how is landscape experienced emotionally, as well as how concepts derived from art, literature, and history function in such processes of meaning attribution and

other cultural processes. This humanities approach is of utmost importance when dealing with climate and environmental challenges ahead and we need a new landscape archaeology that meets these challenges, but also that meets well across disciplinary boundaries. Here inspiration can be found in discussions with scholars in the emerging field of Environmental Humanities.

Originally the abrupt change of the Industrial Revolution at the end of the eighteenth century was regarded as the starting point of the Anthropocene – the Age of Humans- (Crutzen & Stoermer 2000), although a majority of the Anthropocene Working Group appears to vote for a start date of the Anthropocene at AD 1950.¹ The start of the Anthropocene still remains somewhat open and is a contentious term, but the discussions by scholars about the wisdom of adopting it have been eclipsed by its popularity in public debate. Basically the idea is that humans have started changing the earth to the extent that humanity has become a geological force. The most important question in the Anthropocene discussion comes down to the following: how are we going to deal with the desired energy-, water, food- nexus and other transitions in order to preserve our planet? Many scholarly disciplines contribute to this contemporary discussion. At some universities, disciplines traditionally called ‘humanities’, group themselves in a cluster called ‘Environmental Humanities,’ including environmental history, eco-criticism (literature studies), eco-art studies etc.² The special role of historians in this group is offering practices tested in the laboratory of the past, in addition to for instance art projects and literary images of the present, or artistic and literary fantasies about the future. This interdisciplinary collaboration contributes to increasing awareness of and identification with the highly desired transition and preservation of the earth (Ritson 2019).

In an effort to capture the environmental humanities DB Rose et al. have formulated the following: ”The humanities have traditionally worked with questions of meaning, value, ethics, justice and the politics of knowledge production. In bringing these questions into environmental domains, we are able to articulate a ‘thicker’ notion of humanity, one that rejects reductionist accounts of self-contained, rational, decision making subjects. Rather, the environmental humanities positions us as participants in lively ecologies of meaning and value, entangled within rich patterns of cultural and historical diversity that shape who we are and the ways in which we are able to ‘become with’ others” (Rose et al 2012, 1).

While this framing is just one of many interpretations, it invigorates current interdisciplinary research on the environment, in response to a growing interest around the world in the many questions that arise in this era of rapid climatic, environmental and social change. The Environmental Humanities is an emerging interdisciplinary area of international research and teaching that addresses contemporary environmental challenges in a way that is historically, philosophically and culturally informed. Environmental Humanities explores questions such as:

1 <https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2019/04/great-debate-over-when-anthropocene-started/587194/>.

2 Currently e.g. in Europe: Norway: <https://www.ntnu.edu/ikm/environmental-humanities>, The Netherlands: www.environmentalhumanitiescenter.com ,Germany: https://www.carsoncenter.uni-muenchen.de/about_rcc/index.html and Ireland: <https://www.tcd.ie/tceh/>.

What are the historical relations between humans and landscapes? How do fiction and film shape our thinking about climate change? How did people react to floods in the past? How do we compare different time scales in different disciplines?

These questions and many more are at the heart of the Environmental Humanities as well as Landscape Archaeology (cf. Kluiving & Guttman, 2012, Bebermeier et al, 2012, 2013; Burgers et al, 2016). So as to take stock of the ways in which we interpret the term Environmental Humanities as a rethinking of Landscape Archaeology, we need to ask: Is the broad interdisciplinary arena of Environmental Humanities an acceleration of the process of integration that is central in Landscape Archaeology? Can we envision that future developments, such as the discussion of the Anthropocene concept, are in fact demanding more interdisciplinary collaborations such as Environmental Humanities and Landscape Archaeology?

In this issue Oscar Jacobsson approaches a cross-conceptual perspective in the study of agrarian historical landscapes in Sweden and concludes that future landscape archaeological research has 'a perspective involving a wide theoretical and problematizing approach'. He demonstrates for example that the theme of flooding can be connected to all three perspectives of landscape: the physical, institutional and the symbolic/ideological perspective. He argues that the relationship between human society and the hydrological dynamics of the physical environment has been shaped by multiple levels of agency. How does human-environmental interaction shape symbolical or scenic values? How are institutional factors such as ownership influenced by climatic variations? To what extent are physical landscape changes driven by human symbolical or ideological ideas? These broad and challenging research questions define a rethinking of landscape archaeology that goes beyond the individual 'traditional' disciplines such as archaeology, geology and landscape studies in general.

A relationship with landscapes and with the non-human world is unfolded when the travel book revitalizes the landscape concept. This change in view of the landscape is explored by Francoise Besson. Here travel literature is analysed, *e.g.* how the apparently autobiographical text at times becomes an archaeological report. The intermingling of natural features and human constructions reveals historical layers in the landscape, leading the viewer into ecological awareness. Travel books do not only account for cities, villages, or natural places in the writer's perspective of time and place but also provide them with a sense of observation of the world suggesting a link between all elements.

Just as the landscape bears traces of agriculture, history and religion, it also indicates the temporal changes in the area, as they are signalled by the presence of bridges, in engravings and photographs. Besson also discusses that travel books as archaeological reports are leading to a sense of responsibility and ecological awareness. Travel books look for traces of the past in various geographical areas and so doing they suggest a new way of conceiving our relationship with landscapes.

In an intellectually stimulating review of British history of the wild and the nature, Andrew Hoan confronts archaeology with observations such as 'beyond the bound'. Regarding landscapes as a static backdrop against ecology, environment and ecological landscape, he also discusses ecocriticism. Taking a contemporary archaeological perspective to environmental problems, Hoan opens up the

possibility for a new understanding of how environments and ecologies come into being and are sustained.

Archaeologists have the methodological tools and long term perspectives that allow us to approach larger issues in the sciences and humanities, and the contemporary world is an excellent laboratory in which to study them.

Western Dutch soil and the subsurface are used to address the development of a 20th century village in the outskirts of Amsterdam, the Netherlands, by Van Gelder et al. This soil is particular suitable to address their research questions because the soil under the roads – built on sunken piles – is easily accessible. Their objectives are to retrieve the geological layers in the soil of a 20th-century neighbourhood, to determine the stratigraphy, as well as the timing of events relating to the time of the ‘De Nieuwe Buurt’. In other words, What is the stratigraphical record of the shallow subsurface of Diemen? Do the contemporary layers differ from the layers of the time when the neighbourhood was built? And: can different layers be distinguished within the anthropogenic soil layers in the separately investigated periods?

The western Dutch soft soil seems eminently suitable for research questions related to soil characteristics concerning the so-called ‘Anthropocene’ debate. This is also the case for the region of Diemen, where the inhabitants already at an early stage had to resort to the raising of the subsiding natural soil with organic and/or inorganic materials. Geological results combined with historical data in the research area reveal impacts of anthropogenic substrate control recorded below the streets of Diemen, resulting in differential settling histories.

The paper by Christina Fredengren brings landscape studies, much used in archaeology and heritage practice, into conversation with the environmental humanities and particularly post-humanist feminist theories. There are connecting points, but also wide differences, where the two major points lie in the centring or decentering of the human, or in how materiality, time and temporality are approached. Introducing some of the major thinkers in this field, the paper deals with how landscapes can be approached as multi-temporal, but present, with spaces for conviviality, but also places where to mourn losses, wounds and sacrifices, as well as to learn how recuperate, practice hospitality and to inherit well. Thereby it starts a discussion on inter- and intra-generational care in heritage policy and practice.

A landscape approach is proposed in conversation with the scholarship that is emerging in the environmental humanities and feminist post-humanism. While both landscape heritage studies and these scholars have the focus on tracing out situated social injustices, the differences lie in the focus on the human and how the factor of time is treated. In heritage studies, the focus is often in the present, while scholarship in the environmental humanities is increasingly interested in both deep time pasts and long-term effects into the future. Furthermore, heritage studies of the social constructivist type often place human perception and experience in the centre. Here post-humanists have started to explore ways of dealing with a world that does not place human well-being as the ethical centre, but instead explore what it would be like if life-cycles, paces and temporalities of a range of more-than-human others as well as materiality were observed. This would have implications for how to approach issues of inter- and intra-generational justice and care, as it

would point towards relations of interdependencies between material and multi-species generations.

We propose this set of peer reviewed papers to present new research, where the interdisciplinary Environmental Humanities research meet landscape approaches. There are certainly elements that reflect the process of integration that is central in Landscape Archaeology, such as Hoaen discussing the contemporary archaeological perspective as an approach to environmental problems and how sustainable environments including ecologies can be understood. It is shown by van Gelder et al that the discussion of the Anthropocene concept is demanding increased collaboration between scientific domains, contributing to a much wider interdisciplinary debate that is held nowadays (*e.g.* Burtynski, 2018; Warde et al 2018; Waters et al, 2016). It is stimulating in this issue that the landscape concept is re-vitalised by taking a critical look at nature/culture relationships as discussed by Jacobsson and Besson, and that it benefits from moving beyond a social constructivist backing for landscape theory as discussed by Fredengren. Beyond these it is striking that most papers connect the Environmental Humanities to the Landscape Archaeology with perspectives and questions that relate to sustainability. The next question is to connect the environmental humanist approach to future landscape management in the Anthropocene, which would fit its broad character displayed in this issue, and which will be further explored in future projects.³

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3 EU Horizon2020 projects, *e.g.* www.terranoa-itn.eu, <https://www.heriland.eu/>.

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