Landscape Archaeology between Art and Science

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Published by Amsterdam University Press

Guttmann-Bond, Erika and Sjoerd J. Kluiving.
Landscape Archaeology between Art and Science: From a Multi- to an Interdisciplinary Approach.

Amsterdam University Press, 2012.
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How will landscape archaeology develop in the future?
6.1 The future of landscape archaeology

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ABSTRACT

This overview of landscape archaeology/landscape history (LAH) is presented in the form of a SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats). LAH is no longer just an array of field skills and methods, however holistically deployed. The discipline has had to respond to postmodernism and to embrace cognitive approaches, and it now needs to become more richly theorised, building on its reconstructive potential to develop an archaeology of landscape. Strengths discussed here include the flexibility of landscape archaeology, and its capacity to operate at different scales; it is suggested that LAH’s ultimate importance may lie in its potential contribution to human historical ecology. Under ‘weaknesses’, the dangers of localism are considered. It is argued that the success of the ‘Annales’ school has shown how the microcosm may encapsulate the macrocosm. As the author’s own work on medieval roads demonstrates, a focus on apparently local matters may engender trains of thought which open up much wider issues (the dividend of empiricism). In considering ‘threats’, this paper argues that the postmodern challenge has introduced an unhelpful and unnecessarily polarised debate. It is important to acknowledge the potential of the ‘digital revolution’, although computer-driven methodologies cannot be expected to supplant more traditional insights and ways of working.

KEYWORDS

landscape archaeology, postmodernism, SWOT analysis, human ecology
INTRODUCTION

It would be a brave, not to say foolhardy person who would venture to predict how landscape archaeology will have developed in ten or twenty years’ time; in the words of the old joke, I had to tell my Amsterdam audience that owing to unforeseen circumstances, the clairvoyant would not be making an appearance. In any case, these days, people in England who wish to be taken seriously never say ‘in future’; instead, Margaret Thatcher’s children say ‘going forward’, to indicate how focused and businesslike they are. And of course there are no ‘problems’ anymore, just ‘challenges’. Approaches and buzzwords fashionable in the world of business studies have spread into our universities; for instance, in recent years some British academics have found themselves under instructions to carry out a SWOT analysis. SWOT is an acronym, meaning Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats. One way of trying to foresee the future, in some sense, is to carry out a SWOT analysis. Before speaking at LAC2010, I naively thought that in attempting such a procedure in relation to an academic discipline, I might be something of a pioneer. However, I had barely sat down after giving my paper at LAC2010 when Graham Fairclough informed me that a SWOT analysis for Landscape already exists, in the pages of an official report. Be that as it may; the SWOTs selected here will be very much a personal choice, and I will make no attempt at rigid definitions or comprehensive treatment. In other words, I will not be ‘ticking all the boxes’ (to use another cliché of management-speak).

Theoretical perspectives

In Britain, a much sharper distinction is drawn between ‘landscape archaeology’ and ‘environmental archaeology’ than was apparent in Amsterdam. Furthermore, we islanders also have to deal with the introduction of postmodern perspectives into the archaeology of landscape (see below), a phenomenon which has spread beyond our own shores to some extent. Postmodernism was practically invisible at LAC2010. Much the same could be said for the ethnographic perspectives which sometimes inform it. Although from a British viewpoint this has been a little disconcerting, I regard the setting up of LAC2010 as an important initiative. If an international forum for multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary landscape archaeology can become firmly established, there will be plenty of scope in future for a more diverse ‘coverage’ of the subject or an examination of particular themes and perspectives.

When I first started my fieldwork, in the mid-1970s, I thought of landscape archaeology (the term had only recently been invented) mostly as a set of specialist skills which could provide a service to the mainstream discipline of archaeology. These skills could help an excavator to put an archaeological site into its local context, like the work done by environmental archaeologists. And landscape archaeology could provide information for the landscape historian, supplementing the documentary record or disputing it. By the mid-1990s, when I published a discursive piece about the role and character of landscape archaeology (Fleming 1996), I had moved away from these rather modest claims. In that article, I noted that research into landscape history ideally requires the application of a range of methodological skills and specialist knowledge normally beyond the capacity of a single scholar. In this sense, landscape archaeology could be portrayed as a ‘holistic’ discipline, feeding into a landscape history which is not only rooted in a uniquely complex and interdisciplinary methodological mix but also constitutes a distinctive, insightful and refreshing way of studying and presenting long-term human history.

However, at about the time when I wrote these words, a few British archaeological theorists were
beginning to develop what appears to be a devastating critique of conventional landscape archaeology, claiming that it has roots which mean that it is politically compromised, and that its over-empirical approach makes it banal and unimaginative. These postmodernists have sought to replace traditional approaches by new methodologies, such as phenomenology, and new ‘ways of telling’ (for references to this critique, see Fleming 2006). By the turn of the 21st century, landscape archaeology had become the area in which theorists wanted to engage with archaeological data. As readers of Anglophone literature may be aware, I find the rhetoric and the field methods of these theorists highly problematic (Fleming 1999, 2005a, 2006, 2008). Nevertheless, their intervention has been valuable in several ways. No one should be shouted down for seeking more imaginative approaches in archaeology. And the cognitive approach has proved very stimulating. For most readers, this will be rightly associated with the writing of Ian Hodder (e.g. 1982a, 1982b, 1989), although here it is also worth acknowledging two progenitors of this stream of thought within modern archaeological theory – Edmund Leach (1973) and Frances Lynch (1975).

In my view, the years of theoretical debate have clearly demonstrated this: if landscape archaeology may be described as a set of investigative skills, which feed into an essentially reconstructive landscape history, the archaeology of landscape is a much more open subject, rather an exciting one. As an arena for theoretical debate, it is not difficult to see landscape’s attractions. As Howard Morphy put it: ‘it is useful to have a concept that is free from fixed positions, whose meaning is elusive, yet whose potential range is all-encompassing’ (1993, 205).

Certainly the archaeology of landscape is under-theorised by practitioners of landscape archaeology. Most of us are too absorbed in our current projects, in simply doing landscape archaeology, to take much interest in wider theoretical perspectives; at the time when landscape archaeology was introduced, explaining its basic field methodologies seemed a more pressing concern. Earlier writers who discussed ‘field archaeology’ – for example, O.G.S. Crawford – had not been very explicit on this topic. From a philosophical point of view, empiricism may seem banal. But in landscape archaeology, discovery is immensely exciting. So is the Sherlock Holmes style ‘detective work’ (also, incidentally, the object of contemporary theoretical disdain) which mixes induction and deduction in ways which are often highly productive. Nevertheless, I believe that we can no longer treat ‘landscape archaeology’ simply as a set of methodologies, a sub-discipline of archaeology and a supplier of information to a reconstructive landscape history, without considering the much wider issues raised by the concept of ‘the archaeology of landscape’. That would be disingenuous, and also very limiting. So in presenting a brief SWOT analysis, I have to consider ‘traditional’ or conventional landscape archaeology, but I will also have in mind a more complex and difficult question: how might landscape archaeology contribute to a more richly theorised ‘archaeology of landscape’?

**STRENGTHS OF LANDSCAPE ARCHAEOLOGY**

What are the strengths of landscape archaeology? One’s first instinct, I think, is to try to explain how we may complement the work of the excavator. But there is much more to the archaeology of landscape than ‘archaeology beyond the edge of the trench’. And the archaeology of landscape is not quite the same thing as ‘off-site archaeology’, in Rob Foley’s phrase (1981). It was once fashionable to say that the entire landscape is just one big archaeological site. And it certainly is a strength of our discipline that land-
scape archaeologists may work without boundaries. To be more accurate, we have the capacity to regard boundaries of any kind – whether they are geographical constraints, detectable archaeological features, or concepts created by archaeologists – as flexible, variable, permeable, and of greater or lesser importance according to context. I refer here, of course, to questions of scale.

Paradoxically perhaps, my own understanding of the variability of scale, and the nuances which the concept may assume in different contexts, deepened when I was working in Britain’s most distant archipelago – St Kilda, which lies some sixty kilometres off the coast of the Western Isles of Scotland. Depopulated in 1930, St Kilda’s only inhabited island was small, remote, and often unreachable outside the summer months. As the title of my book (Fleming 2005b) acknowledges, despite these apparently severe geographical constraints – or more probably because of them – it is impossible to discuss the history of St Kilda and its little community without implicating the wider world. Scale, of course, does not much concern questions of measurement, like size or distance; it is about perceptions – in the case of St Kilda, those of islanders and outsiders, elites and commoners, writers and dreamers, as well as those with hard-edged political agendas. Visitors to St Kilda were fascinated by the little community which they encountered there; their preconceptions and reactions in turn influenced the attitudes of the islanders and the way they presented themselves to the world. Today, St Kilda and its history still stimulate the imagination, as recent visitors to Scotland will be aware. My own discussions of scales of perception were of course heavily indebted to the rich St Kilda literature (albeit produced by outsiders). But although St Kilda and the wider world is text-aided, I hope it demonstrates one way of achieving what Matthew Johnson has advocated in his book, *Ideas of Landscape* – moving from doing landscape archaeology in a reconstructive sense towards engaging with the archaeology of landscape. And if islands, paradoxically, do not have boundaries, conversely there is something to be said for thinking about the ‘islandness’ of land-locked, ‘mainland’ communities – such as the one which has occupied the upland valley of Swaledale (North Yorkshire) in the Pennines of northern England (Fleming 2010).

The opportunities provided by written texts are not, of course, available to prehistorians, and for those dealing with protohistory, they are limited. In these areas of our work, I think we must try to make more of landscape archaeology’s other strengths – above all perhaps, its perpetual engagement with the immense diversity of the surface of the earth, the physical properties of the land. Archaeologists have an almost instinctive tendency to seek and recognise patterns, correlations, variations in density and distribution, gaps – and then to interpret and explain them. The most dynamic and potentially eloquent feature of this matrix of potential correlations is the landscape itself, always available to be treated as a constant or a variable, a constraint or an opportunity, a taskscape or a canvas for the imagination. Landscapes change, over various timescales. And talking of canvasses, despite the well-documented origins of the use of the word ‘landscape’ to describe the scenery depicted in paintings, we should never think of the landscape as essentially the ‘background’ to human affairs. We have developed an understandable aversion for geographical determinism; yet geography has always played a significant role in human affairs.

Landscape is very definitely a player in the drama of history. Here I am not referring merely to climate, relief, drainage and so on. If the landscape often seems disconcertingly alive to the alert field archaeologist, that is because it is alive, and always has been. This is not simply because it teems with flora and fauna, or contains cultivated ‘crops’, domestic livestock, prey for hunters and fishermen, or even living artefacts, such as pollarded trees. Once a human has entered the scene, as historical participant or scientific observer, the landscape is full of potential. We humans, with our interesting brains, are – and
have been – opportunists in ways which are literally unthinkable for other species. The landscape is the canvas for our imaginations, past and present. This is not, as it might seem, a plea for the release of the unfettered imagination of the landscape archaeologist; we have heard plenty of those in recent years. But it is a call for landscape to be allotted a role in historical studies which matches its potential. Personally, I hope that in future we will be more concerned to work with the ecology of long-term human history, in a nuanced fashion, without worrying about ill-considered charges of geographical determinism. If landscape can contribute to a mainstream narrative of history, it must surely work with human ecology, over la longue durée, in Fernand Braudel’s phrase, and concern itself with identifying and understanding the critical variables in human history. I am well aware that ‘human ecology’ is still something of a Cinderella subject, diffusely addressed and represented in the literature, regarded as problematic in some respects. It may seem contentious, not to say yawn-inducing, in terms of how it is defined and distinguished from other areas of enquiry, and it is certainly open to what one might call cybernetic abuse, particularly the inappropriate or banal application of totalising theories or models. Yet when I read a paper such as David Siddle’s, on ‘Goats, marginality and the dangerous other’ (2009), I feel that I am in historical territory which an archaeologist of landscape should have no difficulty in recognising. I am talking here about high historical relevance; for if we will not address the historical dimensions of issues of human ecology now, in the face of the problems which humanity faces as a species – the dominant species on this planet – when will we address them? In Amsterdam it was interesting to hear Mats Widgren’s praise for the continued willingness of American colleagues to address global issues scientifically.

WEAKNESSES

What about weaknesses? One troubling question concerns the intellectual status of landscape history. If ‘history’ is primarily about the thoughts and actions of human beings, what kind of beast is ‘landscape history?’ What serious claim might it have upon our attention? How could such an apparently dehumanised version of history be considered mainstream, or indeed worth pursuing? Julian Thomas has indeed argued that conventional landscape archaeology ignores or sidelines people; he has claimed that Mick Aston’s landscape archaeology results in ‘a huge Heath-Robinson apparatus, within which human beings have the metaphysical status of the ghosts in the machine’ (1993, 26). Although there are reasons for this apparent state of affairs (Fleming 2006) this is certainly an area of concern. Here, however, I want to address a slightly different question. When landscape archaeologists and landscape historians speak of their ‘research area’, we are often talking about an area in the literal, geographical sense; the focus of interest is a parish, a small region, a valley, or perhaps a block of hills. It may be apparent that both the subject and the object of study are defined geographically; arguably, everything is of interest, and the exclusion of any significant body of material from the narrative might detract from the ‘holistic’ character of landscape history. But does this state of affairs not make us essentially ‘local historians’? Are we not at risk of being considered ‘amateurs’ in the original sense of the word? Many places are fascinating in their own way; enthusiasm is undoubtedly infectious; it is possible for good to emerge from obsession, or close engagement. But how far is this particular intense focus intellectually challenging, or relevant to wider human concerns?

Writing in my festschrift, Rob Young & Jane Webster (2008) have urged me not to worry about this.
They enthuse about local participation and community archaeology. They explain the impact of a landscape archaeology project on the imaginations of local people, how they are excited and energised by a project which starts them thinking seriously about the history of their locality for the first time. They learn to take and share responsibility for local historical narratives, and how to make their own contributions. I applaud this, of course; but I do not find their thesis a satisfactory response to my concerns about the intellectual standing and wider relevance of what we are doing.

It is possible that I should be more relaxed about all this. By definition, local projects will not produce an overview. However, we are all conscious, I hope, of the historical perspective represented by the Annales School; we may well have read, for example, Le Roy Ladurie’s *Montaillou* (1978). In England, Eamonn Duffy (2001) has used events in a single Devon parish as an exemplar of the Roman Catholic-Protestant transition in England; a comparable approach could be applied within landscape history. But we can’t expect the microcosm to encapsulate the macrocosm just like that. If it is to do so, a certain kind of academic alchemy is necessary; research areas may have to be carefully selected, and ‘local’ projects will need to be informed by wider knowledge. That said, the most empirical of approaches may produce insights which lead to enquiries of much more general relevance. Let me provide a brief example. I have recently been working on a medieval road in the mountains of mid-Wales, a road connecting two 12th-century Cistercian monasteries (Fleming 2009). Much of the road takes the form of a narrow, constructed terrace, dug into the hillside. At first I was concerned with the physical appearance and ‘behaviour’ of this road, regarding it as a ‘target’ for the landscape archaeologist. But soon I had to think about the ‘interpretation’ of the Monks’ Trod, as it is called, and to explore its political and social context. I had to ponder the strategic significance of this road, and comparable, potentially medieval roads. I have come to regard them as instruments of elite control, facilitating relatively swift, purposeful movements of men on horseback. So I have had to consider the nature of the ‘horse culture’ of medieval elites, and its potentially dynamic role in the formation and maintenance of socio-political relationships and the integration of early polities. And it seems that the more ‘important’ of these long-distance, horseworthy roads would have had considerable psycho-social significance. They represented and symbolised the relationships which – in the ideal world – integrated regional social hierarchies, and the unwritten social contract between those at the top of the hierarchy and those lower down the social scale. Important long-distance roads were not simply the means of getting from place to place. They were ever present in the landscape and in its mythology. They had dynamic historical roles. The landscape historian who writes the biography of a road will encounter much more than a string of localities. Empiricism, then, produces dividends.

That said, I must acknowledge that not all landscape historians start with localities. They also develop overviews of particular topics from a much wider geographical perspective. To apply the ‘compare and contrast’ approach over a ‘large’ region often brings rich and more widely applicable insights, as shown for example by Tom Williamson’s study of the origins of medieval open fields in eastern England (2003). Sustained work of this kind, such as that of both Barnes & Williamson and Rackham in eastern England (Barnes & Williamson 2006; Rackham 1976, 1980), not only provides methodological leadership. It may also bring into existence a ‘reference’ or ‘lead’ region, which may well affect the way the histories of less thoroughly investigated regions are perceived; on balance, this is probably a good thing.
OPPORTUNITIES

This brings me to the third item of my SWOT analysis – opportunities. I am not going to say very much here, because it seems to me self-evident that there are many exciting things to do in the field of landscape archaeology. We are still making discoveries which are not simply additions to the corpus of ‘sites and monuments’; they challenge us to think about past perceptions of the world. The so-called ‘Seahenge’ on the east coast of England is a good example; the finding of a large inverted tree-trunk at the centre of a ring of large upright posts must set the imagination racing (Pryor 2001). And other challenges to our perceptions of landscape will come from excavated sites – for example, the recent discovery that some of the cattle associated with the Neolithic horizon of the Stonehenge area came from much further west, from south-west England or Wales (M. Parker Pearson, personal communication). But we need to do more than respond to the puzzles set by random encounters with intriguing new data sets. One of the strengths of landscape history is its holistic character, its potential to integrate and develop many strands of enquiry and argument. Landscape history has numerous dimensions, and I hope that in the future we will be able to assemble more teams of specialists who are able to bring a multidisciplinary approach, and ideally an interdisciplinary approach, to our enquiries. Disciplinary fragmentation is the enemy; we need fusion rather than fission. And if we are to convince those who control the distribution of research money, we may have to consider our contemporary relevance as well as our traditional preoccupations (see above). Archaeology has the potential to organise cognate disciplines in order to gain a greater understanding of the furtherance of long-term human history, and it is surely the archaeology of landscape which brings us the holistic approach we require for this endeavour. Here I am referring not only to multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary work and ways of thinking. Landscape archaeology combines theoretical insights and different ways of exploring the archaeological record with a close focus on past cultural contexts and horizons, in rather a special way; its matrix of enquiry is richer than that achieved by treating landscape studies as optional or peripheral.

THREATS

But as with all branches of historical enquiry, we need to achieve the right mix of theory and practice. This brings me onto threats. In Britain, in the 1990s, a group of influential postmodern theorists had identified landscape archaeology as an area ripe for colonisation. Using whatever weapons came to hand, they tried to expel or marginalise the natives, who turned out to be curiously passive, but also quite stubborn. Quite a few of them carried on as usual. But one old character had the temerity to point out that some of the farms established by the colonists were not very well adapted to the terrain; he questioned the purpose of the new fences which have been erected across the land (Fleming 2006). We do not yet know the outcome of this confrontation; recently, things have gone a bit quiet (but see Barrett & Ko 2009).

The chosen weapon of these theorists is a polarising, adversarial rhetoric; they seek to create and foment opposition between theory and practice, between old and new approaches, between investigative and performative approaches, to name only three of numerous alleged oppositional dividing-lines. I do not know how many readers have perused Stone Worlds, an account of a campaign of such theoretically-informed fieldwork on Bodmin Moor, an upland area in south-west England (Bender, Hamilton & Tilley 2007). The book recounts an episode in which Tilley, one of the theorists, arrives at an excavation trench
just before it is to be backfilled. An excavator has formed a poor opinion of Bourdieu’s Outline of a Theory of Practice. Having used it contemptuously as a coffee-pot stand for most of the duration of the excavation, he has now thrown it into the trench, and urinated on it. When Tilley comes onto the scene, he promptly ‘neutralises’ the gesture by indulging in a symbolic performance: he takes his own trowel (which has been little used) and throws it into the trench, to be buried along with the book. A little cairn is then built over these relics, on the bottom of the trench (Bender et al. 2007, 273-275).

I do not think theory and practice should be in this kind of oppositional, not to say antagonistic, relationship, and in that sense I am identifying a threat to the future health of the discipline. I would use words like nuanced, exploratory, responsive and empirical to describe the relationship between theory and practice in the archaeology of landscape; we should not have to get involved in battles between different ‘isms’. If there is any value in a ‘performative’ archaeology of landscape, it should not be promoted at the expense of the discipline’s investigative potential. There is certainly a place for rhetoric, but it should not displace argument, or critical standards. If we go into the field having already decided on the story we are going to tell, we are in trouble.

Another potential threat, perhaps, is that we may be over-influenced by the all-powerful computer. As Verhagen so ably pointed out in Amsterdam, there has been a digital revolution in landscape archaeology (Verhagen, this volume). These days, even an old-fashioned field archaeologist like me knows that a raster is not an Afro-Caribbean gentleman with an impressive hair style. We have discovered the immense potential of Geographical Information Systems, not only for information storage and display, but also for seeking patterns and examining potential correlations in complex data spread over wide areas. Using the computer allows us to get the best out of geophysics. When we use LiDAR, we may if we wish place the sun where denizens of the northern hemisphere have never seen it – low in the northern sky. We can fly over the surface of the land at any angle to the horizon; unlike a fighter pilot, we can stop the flight whenever we want to and examine the ground surface. We can ask a computer to reconstruct past patterns of vegetation according to different parameters, to ‘reconstruct’ a monument from a pattern of subterranean holes, to show us what the North Sea may have looked like in the days when it was Doggerland (Gaffney et al. 2007, 2009; Coles 1998). We may still worry about whether we can see the wood for the trees – but these days, at least, we are able to see through the crowns of trees even when they are in leaf. A few clicks of a mouse may give us a compelling sense of control, similar to the feeling we get when we deploy a grand, totalising theory with apparent success.

At the end of the day, computers are only obeying orders. They will never be good at thinking laterally; they cannot arrange for those chance encounters which allow the imagination to play the maverick. You can equip a computer with a webcam, but it is still as blind as a bat. For as far into the future as I can see, we will depend on the interaction between the human eye and the human brain. More than one archaeologist whom I met in Amsterdam at LAC2010 insisted that everything picked up on a LiDAR scan has to be checked in the field (or ‘ground-truthed’ – to use an awful phrase sometimes heard in Britain). The computer cannot do this, and it certainly cannot replicate the unique observational journey undertaken by the field archaeologist in his or her lifetime. I still think that some of the best insights arise not from computer-generated simulations but from the landscape as experienced on the ground. By all means let us provide our students with up-to-date equipment and engage them in the latest theoretical debates; but if we immerse them in the field experience of landscape archaeology, we will be providing them with the best equipment of all.
One of our senior archaeologists, Professor Charles Thomas, once said: 'You don’t need all this theory nonsense; all you need is a countryman’s eye and a good pair of boots'. I do not agree with him; but I know exactly what he meant.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This paper benefitted from reviews by Mats Widgren and Jos Bazelmans.

REFERENCES


