Landscape Biographies

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What Future for the Life-History Approach to Prehistoric Monuments in the Landscape?

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Abstract
In this chapter I discuss theoretical notions such as the meanings of a monument, the historicization of time, temporal collage and the landscape's multi-temporality in relation to studying the biographies of prehistoric monuments in the landscape. In the second part I draw on texts by Jorge Luis Borges to discuss some of the inherent difficulties of this approach. Implied assumptions of a single and unchanging identity over time of prehistoric monuments in the landscape are problematic. I conclude by suggesting that the life-history approach to monuments and the concept of landscape biographies need to be developed further, and ultimately overcome, as new approaches of landscape research emerge.

Keywords: landscape biography, monuments, temporal collage, Borges, identity

Although things are not living beings, in a metaphorical sense they can be considered to have lives. Things are made; they often do something; and over time many things move from place to place. Their meanings and functions change in different contexts. As time goes by things age and eventually they end up at a final resting place where they gradually disintegrate. Things can reach very different ages, from a few minutes to many millennia, but once dead only very few are brought back, for example as antiques or collectables, and given additional meanings in a new life. Accounts of such life-histories are effectively biographies of things. In an often cited article, Igor Kopyttof proposed some general guidelines on how to write the biography of a thing:

In doing the biography of a thing, one would ask questions similar to those one asks about people: What, sociologically, are the biographical possibilities inherent in its 'status' and in the period and culture, and how are these possibilities realized? Where does the thing come from
and who made it? What had been its career so far, and what do people consider to be an ideal career for such things? What are the recognized ‘ages’ or periods in the thing’s ‘life’, and what are the cultural markers for them? How does the thing’s use change with its age, and what happens to it when it reaches the end of its usefulness? (Kopytoff, 1986, 66-7).

Such biographies take things not as ready-made objects but rather as works in progress (or decline) in a continuous state of becoming (or vanishing). My main examples in this paper are prehistoric monuments in the landscape. Investigating their life histories is to ask how they have been transformed over time and, in turn, transformed the landscapes within which they were situated. Unfortunately, the archaeologists’ interest has often been limited to what might be described as the birth and early childhood of monuments, i.e. their origins and original uses in the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age, as well as the dissection and mummification of their corpses, i.e. the treatment they received in recent centuries as ruins and heritage sites. The changing fortunes of the adult and ageing monuments, i.e. how they have been re-used and re-interpreted over several millennia, have been missing in many archaeologists’ stories.

However, already in 1993 Richard Bradley pointed out that continuous re-interpretations are part of the very logic of monument building. It is just unfortunate that he chose the term ‘afterlife’ for denoting the history of megaliths during later periods, for it may be the afterlife of their builders but it is not that of the monuments themselves, which were in many cases still alive, having quite probably been designed to outlive their builders. Monuments built during the Neolithic had long and exciting histories for centuries and millennia to come, and some are still very much part of current affairs even now (see Daniel, 1972; Holtorf, 1995 & 2000-2008; Omland, 2010). Some examples for long-term histories of prehistoric monuments include Mats Burström’s investigations of various sites in Sweden (1993), Mark Patton’s work on the megalith of La Hogue Bie on Jersey (1996), Emma Blake’s research on “four millennia of becoming” of Sardinia’s nuraghi (1998), and Häkan Karlsson’s account of the changing interpretations and uses of a megalith known as ‘Dwarf’s House’ in Lindome in West Sweden (2000). The English monument of Stonehenge is exceptional also in that it has already had several biographers, among them Christopher Chippindale (1994) and Barbara Bender (1998), and that it may be more politically disputed now than it has ever been before. In my own previous research, I focussed on the changing fate of circa 1200 megaliths in the northern German region of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern (Holtorf, 1998 &
2000-2008). All these studies are not preoccupied with hunting for the respective monuments’ lost ‘original’ meanings. Perhaps the authors had taken to heart Bjørnar Olsen’s (1990, 200) earlier insight that even if we should come across ideas close to those held by their prehistoric builders, nothing says that these should be privileged over other people’s ideas about these monuments.

The histories of prehistoric monuments are closely related to how subsequent societies have been dealing with relics of the past as ‘cargo to the present’ (Dening, 1996, 43 & 46). As Greg Dening explained ‘relics of the past cross all the cultural boundaries that lie between past and present, and when they do they are reconstituted in the relations and means of production of each cultural zone they enter’ (1996, 43). Accordingly, during their long existence prominent ancient monuments featured in subsequent cultural memories: they played important roles in the history cultures of various societies and acted as visible time marks in the landscape, referring people back to the distant past and prompting them to treat them in ways true to their own culture (figure 7.1; Holtorf 2000-2008, 2.0, 2.1, 2.2, 2.3). In this sense, the past has never been really past but very much part of various presents and even futures (see also Roymans et al., 2009).
The Unbelievable Mess of the Past

These ideas resonate strongly with the hermeneutic perspective of literary critic A.V. Ashok. To him, monuments as well as texts ‘are not a changeless eternity of essence but an altering history of contingency’ (Ashok, 2007, 1). In contrast to a hermeneutics of recovery that corresponds to the archaeological obsession with origins and seeks (in vain) to reconstruct meanings of the past, Ashok propagates a hermeneutics of reception in which ‘there is meaning only because of the future’ (Ashok, 2007, 1; see also Olsen, 1990; Holtorf, 2000-8: 2.4, 3.10). Drawing, among others, on Mikhail Bakhtin, Roland Barthes, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur, and taking some of my own ideas to task, he asserts that instead of lamenting the impossibility of recovering past meanings, a hermeneutics of reception celebrates the unfolding and increasing meanings of monuments over time. It takes as its starting point the insight that ‘a monument of the past is a structure of meaning to be received and not recovered’ and culminates in the conclusion that ‘the meaning of a monument of the past is the future of the monument’ (Ashok, 2007, 13).

If the meanings of prehistoric monuments are in fact their futures, we have come a long way from the way archaeology normally perceives its task and subject matter: the understanding of ancient sites and finds by reconstructing an essentializing meaning of the past. Dening and Ashok provide strong support for my own endeavours in challenging the linear, chronographical trajectories of history and evolution along which archaeologists often tend to hang up their narratives about the human past (see e.g. Holtorf, 2002a & 2002b; Holtorf & Williams, 2006). It is inappropriate to assume that every age is essentially self-contained in its own specific location on time’s arrow, independent from what came before or after. The opposite is in fact the case. Past, present and future cannot be separated from each other. In a conversation with Bruno Latour, Michel Serres presented the parable of the handkerchief to formulate a powerful objection to the linear way of ordering time:

If you take a handkerchief and spread it out in order to iron it, you can see in it certain fixed distances and proximities. If you sketch a circle in one area, you can mark out nearby points and measure far-off distances. Then take the same handkerchief and crumple it, by putting it in your pocket. Two distant points suddenly are close, even superimposed. If, further, you tear it in certain places, two points that were close can become very distant. [...] As we experience time [...] it resembles this crumpled version much more than the flat, overly simplified one (Serres & Latour, 1995, 60).
Indeed, elements from past periods shape each present as much as aspirations for future presents. We simply cannot isolate and study any period ‘by itself’: it is always also *its own past* as well as *our past*. At the same time, people’s thoughts and actions in the past were motivated by *their own future*, just like our own thoughts and actions (e.g. regarding past remains and people) are motivated by *our future*. Past, present and future are thus constantly intermingled with each other. In discussing these complexities, Niklas Luhmann once suggested a historization of time: any present’s past and future horizons contain in turn their own temporal horizons, i.e. their own pasts and futures (Luhmann, 1982, 305). Hence, *past presents* must be seen in the context of both past futures and past pasts, just as *future presents* will be influenced by both future futures and future pasts: ‘Historical time is constituted as the continuity and irreversibility of this movement of past/present/future as a whole’ (Luhmann, 1982, 307).

All landscapes are therefore in fact multi-temporal (Holtorf & Williams, 2006; Roymans *et al.*, 2009). They mix old and new, representing what Kevin Lynch described as a ‘temporal collage’ – ‘the visible accumulation of overlapping traces from successive periods, each trace modifying and being modified by the new additions’ (Lynch, 1972, 171). Laurent Olivier once illustrated a similar argument about duration, memory and the character of archaeological remains with a powerful image:

From the place where I am standing [in spring 1999], the 1990s are invisible on this quiet morning: the present here is not made up of a perspective of late-20th-century buildings, with their white-tiled facades, brand-new cars moving along the streets, people walking about in fashionable clothes; one sees this fiction only in museums. Right now, the present here is made up of a series of past durations that makes the present multi-temporal. The past is in the present, it is mainly the present. What will remain from this present instant is possibly an imperceptible layer of things, deposited on the surface of a huge accumulation of past temporalities, some of them relating to the most remote pasts: in the fields around, beside motorways and supermarkets, flakes of flint tools show through the surface, together with fossilized shells; down by the river, dark waters silently roll over rocks that came here millions of years ago. The present here is this imperceptible and continual process of increasing the unbelievable mess of the past (Olivier, 2001, 66-7).

This last sentence also describes very well the situation at Monte da Igreja near Évora in the central Alentejo, Portugal, where I have been conducting
fieldwork since 2000 (Holtorf, 2002a). The site at which we are working is relatively inconspicuous, consisting mainly of a small passage grave surrounded by some remains of Roman agricultural use of the area and a derelict trigonometrical point from the late 19th century (figure 7.2). But our investigations showed that the site has in fact a rich life history that has left behind a ‘mess of the past’. Human activities in different periods in, at, on, and around the megalith included the following (among others):

– members of an unknown prehistoric community constructing a megalithic chamber as a burial site during the Neolithic period;
– people using the chamber again during the Late Bronze Age;
– farmers building and using a stone building (10.5 x 12.5m) during approximately the first half of the fourth century AD, featuring large storage vessels, various kinds of coarse ceramics, a hearth, small glass containers, a tiled roof as well as a small hoard of coins kept in a small pot under the roof;

Figure 7.2 An unbelievable mess of many pasts in, at, on, and around the megalith of Monte da Igreja, Évora, Portugal

Archaeological excavations in 2006, location of shotgun shooting and campfires during the 20th century, trigonometrical point of the late 19th century, a resting place in the 11th century, Roman coins and rubble from the 4th century AD, pot sherds of the Bronze Age, a burial chamber from circa 2900-2800 BC, etc.

Photo: Cornelius Holtorf 2006.
The same farmers (we think) keeping animals in a large enclosure surrounding the megalith;

– a traveller resting on a conveniently large stone, losing an Arabic coin from the eleventh century;

– land surveyors constructing and employing a large stone tower as a trigonometrical point in the landscape, probably during the second half of the 19th century;

– other surveyors placing nearby a land marker stone (TC) and recording various geographical properties in a file, possibly during the early 20th century;

– several groups of visitors lighting campfires near the trigonometrical point, at various times during the 20th century;

– a number of visiting hunters shooting with shotguns at birds or other animals from near the trigonometrical point, for at least a few decades and probably until today;

– various people, including some of us and people we know, losing or discarding an iron nut, a Coke can, cigarette ends and plasters, among various other things, during the 1990s and early 2000s;

– Norbert Heins, our artist in residence, creating an installation in 2002 entitled *Museu In Situ* which is now covered by soil (Holtorf, 2004);

– an archaeological team surveying and excavating since 2000.

The challenge for our project is (at least) twofold. Firstly, we want to do justice to all these distinct events and processes to the same extent and give them all our full attention: within the project, evidence from all periods counts equally. Secondly, we want to appreciate the various interrelations between all of these events and processes as part of a multi-temporal collage that has been developing over many years. In other words, as much as each episode needs to be understood in its own terms, in line with the thread of my argument thus far, we must also try getting to grips with the task of seeing the monument as a long-standing time mark referring different people back to a distant past and prompting them to responses of their own, which together amount to a collection of incrementally unfolding meanings. In doing so, our work, like the monument as such, also implies and evokes certain futures (Holtorf, 2004; Holtorf & Williams, 2006).

The metaphor of a monument’s life history includes *all* its transformations over time and *all* the landscapes it transformed until the present day, whether or not that involved any notion that the megalith was ‘old’ and from another time period or not. All these challenges require us to develop archaeological methodologies that have not been tested before. I am not
certain yet how we will eventually interpret the mess of the past at Monte da Igreja and the changing meanings of the monument, nor do I know how the project will eventually be written up, but I know that one of the challenges is to do justice to the insight that the meaning of the site and the monument has always been its future, not its past.

The Problem of Identity

I have argued thus far that elements of both past and future significantly influence the framework of meaning in each present. What appears to be one and the same thing, for instance a prehistoric monument, may have meant, means, and will mean very different things in the contexts of different pasts, presents, and futures. Arguably the meaning of any ancient relic is already changed drastically by simply being seen, read and preserved in different contexts (Dening, 1996, 42-43; Lowenthal, 1992, 185-186). Indeed, the question is to what extent the very different perceptions and interpretations at various times mean that there may not be such a thing as a ‘single’ monument in the first place.

Is every monument many monuments? Such matters have been explored by the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986). Due to its very high topical relevance I am turning my attention in this section to a literary work, which arguably can be seen as a literary monument. One of Borges’ most intriguing stories is about Pierre Menard, the fictitious author of the work *Don Quixote* (Borges, 1970a):

This work, perhaps the most significant of our time, consists of the ninth and thirty-eighth chapters of the first part of *Don Quixote* and a fragment of chapter twenty-two. …

[Pierre Menard] did not want to compose another *Quixote* – which is easy – but *the Quixote itself*. Needless to say, he never contemplated a mechanical transcription of the original; he did not propose to copy it. His admirable intention was to produce a few pages which would coincide – word for word and line for line – with those of Miguel de Cervantes. …

To compose the *Quixote* at the beginning of the 17th century was a reasonable undertaking, necessary and perhaps even unavoidable; at the beginning of the 20th, it is almost impossible. It is not in vain that three hundred years have gone by, filled with exceedingly complex events. Among them, to mention only one, is the *Quixote* itself …
Cervantes's text and Menard's are verbally identical, but the second is almost infinitely richer. … It is a revelation to compare Menard’s *Don Quixote* with Cervantes’s. The latter, for example, wrote (part one, chapter nine):

‘… truth, whose mother is history, rival of time, depository of deeds, witness of the past, exemplar and adviser to the present, and the future’s counsellor.’

Written in the 17th century, written by the ‘lay genius’ Cervantes, this enumeration is a mere rhetorical praise of history. Menard, on the other, writes:

‘… truth, whose mother is history, rival of time, depository of deeds, witness of the past, exemplar and adviser to the present, and the future’s counsellor.’

History, the *mother* of truth: the idea is astounding. Menard, a contemporary of William James, does not define history as an inquiry into reality but as its origin. Historical truth, for him, is not what has happened; it is what we judge to have happened. The final phrases – *exemplar and adviser to the present, and the future’s counsellor* – are brazenly pragmatic.

The contrast in style is also vivid. The archaic style of Menard – quite foreign, after all – suffers from a certain affectation. Not so that of his forerunner, who handles with ease the current Spanish of his time.

(Borges, 1970a, 65-69).

Beside the ironic point of the story itself, there is an additional irony in the fact that Borges’ own interpretation of both Cervantes’ and Menard’s (i.e. Borges’ own) texts is not neutral but is itself dependent on his time and context – and the same can even be said about my as well as your reading of the cited passage. Whereas for Borges the story is read (and indeed written) as some kind of intellectual performance or game, I read it as an argument about archaeological monuments, and you…?

In other words, a text’s meaning can change so comprehensively from one context to another that it becomes almost non-sensical to insist that the actual words have remained the same. Similarly, a material object whose meaning is transformed from a piece of wood to a mask immersed in religious traditions to an acquired art object to an archived museum piece to an exchanged collector’s item to an auctioned artefact associated with Captain Cook to a showpiece of Native American art (Feest, 1998) is probably far better understood as multiple things than as a single thing.

It is therefore utterly problematic to devise a research project that focuses on the history of a given object, such as a megalith – as if anything could stay the same somehow in its core, while everything else around it changes. In the case of prehistoric monuments we know that their actual physicality has not stayed the same, as people and natural forces have kept chipping
away at or adding to them over many centuries. In this process of a slow but steady metamorphosis of monuments, drastic changes of meaning are even less surprising than in the case of virtually unchanged written texts (figure 7.3). Does each prehistoric monument then constitute multiple things rather than a single thing?

As far as the genre of human biographies is concerned, arguably biographies are only possible and interesting because of the continuity of consciousness in every human being, allowing them to remember the past and hope for the future in every present. This ability is something that all humans share so that, to some extent, we can identify with the object of study in every biography, even though humans’ lives too can be subjected to drastic changes and discontinuities. It is obviously impossible for us to identify in the same way with texts or material objects that are not literally alive (Jung, 2012).

‘Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius’ is the title of another story by Borges (1970b). In what is perhaps the most archaeological of his brilliant short stories,
he argues that equality and identity are very different things. Why do we tend to consider two things as different or unrelated when they are equal in temporal and different in spatial location, but as identical or related when they are equal in spatial and different in temporal location? As an example Borges presents what is known in Tlön as the paradox of the nine copper coins:

> On Tuesday, X crosses a deserted road and loses nine copper coins; on Thursday, Y finds in the road four coins, somewhat rusted by Wednesday's rain. On Friday [afternoon], Z discovers three coins in the road. On Friday morning, X finds two coins in the corridor of his house. […] It is absurd to imagine that four of the coins have not existed between Tuesday and Thursday, three between Tuesday and Friday afternoon, two between Tuesday and Friday morning. It is logical to think that they have existed – at least in some secret way, hidden from the comprehension of men – at every moment of those three periods.

The language of Tlön resists the formulation of this paradox; most people did not even understand it. The defenders of common sense at first did no more than negate the veracity of the anecdote. They repeated that it was a verbal fallacy […] the verbs ‘find’ and ‘lose’ […] presuppose the identity of the first and the last nine coins. […] ‘somewhat rusted by Wednesday’s rain’ […] presupposes what is trying to be demonstrated: the persistence of the four coins from Tuesday to Thursday. They explained that equality is one thing and identity another, and formulated a kind of reductio ad absurdum: the hypothetical case of nine men who on nine successive nights suffer a severe pain. Would it not be ridiculous – they questioned – to pretend that this pain is one and the same? […] They argued: if equality implies identity, one would also have to admit that the nine coins are one. (Borges, 1970b, 35-36).

This passage amounts to another critique of the logic of artefact biographies, for the appearance of monuments may be similar or equal in different periods but this is not to say that they all are identical. In short, there is nothing that justifies a stable identity of a single monument or object over time (as in Michener, 1965; Feest, 1998), and thus its legitimate choice as a self-contained research project. The durable appearance of a material object in the present, seemingly its material essence, is misleading. In this sense, the life-history approach to monuments is flawed and in need of a thorough overhaul. It depends too much on an assumed unchanging essence of the object whose life is being studied (Holtorf, 2002b). Who is to say that a prehistoric burial site is identical with a subsequent ritual site with
a subsequent mound with a subsequent stone quarry with a subsequent ancient ruin with a subsequent heritage site, etc.?

In order to pursue the changing meanings of monuments across different ages, a more consistent project than my earlier one (Holtorf, 2000-2008) may better have investigated many different sites rather than the same group of megaliths over and over. A more appropriate selection of outstanding monuments from different ages (actualizing their changing meanings) could have included megaliths of the Neolithic, impressive barrows of the Bronze and Iron Ages, imposing churches of the Middle Ages, prominent war memorials of the early 20th century, and nuclear power stations or impressive shopping centres of the late 20th century (figure 7.4). Only by changing focus to different objects for different presents could there be any realistic chance that a consistent field is indeed being studied. As you can read in Alice in Wonderland, ‘it takes all the running you can do to keep in the same place’ (46). That is why the life-history approach to monuments needs to be developed further, and ultimately overcome.
Conclusion: From Monuments to Landscapes

As far as landscapes are concerned, the argument I made in this paper concerning monuments has relevance even to entire landscapes (see also Holtorf & Williams, 2006). Any monument is meaningful only within a larger landscape that provides a context or, hermeneutically speaking, literally a horizon. In that sense, there is a landscape aspect implied throughout my deliberations about the life histories of prehistoric monuments. In addition, I would argue that the life histories of entire landscapes are subject to some of the same concerns I discussed regarding monuments. Even ancient landscapes are initially ‘cargo to the present’, to use Greg Dening’s (1996, 43, 46) phrase once again. Landscapes, too, consist of elements of many different periods inseparably intermingled with each other. I discussed this earlier with reference to Lynch’s notion of a ‘temporal collage’ and Olivier’s description of a multi-temporal landscape that effectively creates an ‘unbelievable mess of the past’ (2001, 67). From a hermeneutical perspective, landscapes, like monuments, are constantly received rather than recovered and, again as with monuments, their meaning is arguably the future. But these similarities in appreciating landscapes and monuments from the perspective of the life-history metaphor also mean that the same theoretical problems emerge.

Given the changing meanings of landscape over time, can we really speak of a single, identical landscape that goes through transformations over time? Are there not rather a series of parallel and successive landscapes, however much they may resemble each other, that are all meaningful in their own particular way in particular contexts but never together, as the life-history approach would imply? Is the landscape biography approach (Roymans et al., 2009) not in itself only one particular approach to landscape that has gained some currency in our time but that will also eventually be succeeded by other approaches? Although the biographical approach easily gives the impression that all that landscape research in the future will have to do is to refine our understanding of past periods, and add additional life phases to the landscape biography that already exists, I rather think that this will not be the case and instead entirely new approaches to landscape will emerge, just like they have previously come about in regular intervals. As there is arguably no continuity in landscape over time, neither is there a continuity of landscape research over time. The temporality of landscape will itself turn out to be a rather transitory phenomenon. Heraclitus said that you never step twice into the same river for other waters are ever flowing onto you; the same can be said both regarding landscape and landscape research.
We may not know where landscape research is going to be heading in the future but we know that it will take all the running we can do to keep in the same place.

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