

CONFERENCE REVIEWS

Material and Symbolic Landscapes. Session S116 at the World Archaeological Congress 4, University of Cape Town, 10th - 14th January 1999

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The symposium on *Material and Symbolic landscapes*, which took place on the Thursday during WAC4 in January 1999, was convened by Julian Thomas from Southampton University. The particular group theme that the symposium was based in was that entitled 'Early Farmers', which was a little strange as papers varied chronologically from the Palaeolithic to the expected Neolithic through the Bronze Age to recent ethnographic examples.

The abstract was equally not reliant on being from a period of early agriculturalism but opened the possibilities of contributions from a wide range of periods and places. "In the past decade, 'landscape' has often been presented as a master concept which can unite the disparate elements of contemporary archaeology. Accordingly we have discussions of ecological landscapes, landscapes of production, symbolic landscapes and ritual landscapes. However it is often the case that these different approaches have few points in common." The rationale behind this statement cannot be refuted. It can seem as if there are a whole range of differing landscapes when alternative accounts of the same physical area are presented by environmentalists, those more interested in material culture or geoarchaeologists. However, Thomas, in attempting to draw together "different aspects of the debate on landscape" chose to concentrate on connecting "the materiality and the meaning of places, and the experiential and economic significance of land." This is a wide brief, nonetheless, which should, hopefully, open the door to an even wider debate.

Gabriel Cooney spoke from 'the edge of Europe' - Ireland - and discussed whether the differences between the Irish interpretation of prehistoric landscapes and those of Western Europe were to do with what happened in prehistory or the effects of modern archaeology. Ingereth Macfarlane, to go to the other geographic extreme, concentrated on a site in the western Simpson desert, Australia. She looked at recent historical remains from a colonial telegraph station, which were cheek-by-jowl with evidence of indigenous people who had been utilising the refuse discarded by the Europeans. The different viewpoints of the value and use of material culture were emphasised particularly at these telegraph stations which were places where the boundaries between the two groups of people could be crossed. Bernard Knapp looked at Cypriot smelting sites in prehistory. He used geobotanical, geomorphological and archaeological data to build up a picture of a very distinct landscape during the Bronze Age at Politiko Phorades.

Sue Hamilton discussed the 'the recognition of cultural overprinting on the landscape.' She used work still in progress at Leskernick Hill, Bodmin (UK), a site at which it has been necessary to distinguish within the 'clitter' (i.e. boulder and stone masses) the places which were humanly-modified to form the settlement used during

the Bronze Age. The unused sections of the site were not cleared and so the people lived within the natural landscape, in houses drawn out of it.

There were 14 papers in all at this symposium and space will not permit an examination of them all. What was interesting was the range of material being discussed - from desert to rivers, from Ireland to Japan, from the Palaeolithic to 100 years ago. All of the papers sought to draw on several viewpoints from which to examine their evidence. 'Difficult' sites which are often avoided because of lack of either material culture, accessibility or a reliable local chronology need to use all the strands available to begin a serious attempt at interpretation. By using all the facets of the evidence, which, in some cases, only survive fragmentarily, it should be possible to discuss, with a greater degree of knowledge, sites in terms of material culture, the meaning of place, and the experiential and economic significance of land.

This symposium opened the debate. Publication of these papers may fuel it further, to its advantage.

Quotes from Thomas, J. 1999 (unpublished) *World Archaeological Congress 4 Abstracts (S116: Material and Symbolic Landscapes)*. Cape Town.