

TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF SACRED SITE

Sacred Geography Module
Presentation by Anthony Thorley
October 16th 2013
University of Wales, Trinity Saint David



The Gaia Foundation works with individuals, organisations and networks in Africa, South America, Asia and Europe to regenerate healthy ecosystems, enhance traditional knowledge and practices for land, seed, food and water sovereignty, and to strengthen community self-governance. This enables communities to become more resilient to climate change and the industrial processes which have caused the many crises we now face.

Stories of Positive Change



[\(/content/makhadzhis-guardians-sacred-sites\)](/content/makhadzhis-guardians-sacred-sites)

The Makhadzhis, guardians of the Sacred Sites

How the women of Venda, South Africa, are rallying to protect their sacred forest sites.

News and Events



[\(/content/new-film-story-worth-remembering\)](/content/new-film-story-worth-remembering)

New Film: A Story Worth Remembering?

[\(/content/new-film-story-worth-remembering\)](/content/new-film-story-worth-remembering)

Unearthing Africa's true identity, from Gaia and the African Biodiversity Network, narrated by Hugh Quarshie.



Sacred Sites: An Overview

*A Report for The Gaia Foundation
(Abridged Version)*

*by
Anthony Thorley and Celia M Gunn*



About 7,240 results

Web

Images

Videos

AOL

More

Unknown Location

Set Location

Anytime

Past 24 hours

Search History

Kairos

[sacred sites
definition]

sacred sites

sacred site thorley
gunn

Go to Search History

Clear Suspend

[Sacred Place | Peeplo.com](#)

All About **Sacred Place** **Sacred Place** in One Site!

www.peeplo.com/Sacred+Place

[Sacred Land Film Project » What Is a Sacred Site?](#)

Apr 12, 2011 ... However, Anthony Thorley and Cecilia M. Gunn, in their report "Sacred Natural Sites: An Overview," commissioned by the Gaia Foundation, ...

www.sacredland.org/home/resources/tools-for-action/protection-s... - [Similar](#)

[PDF] [Sacred Sites: An Overview - Sacred Land ...](#)

Anthony Thorley and Celia M Gunn. PART I SACRED SITES IN CONTEXT ...

www.sacredland.org/media/Sacred-Sites-an-Overview.pdf - [Similar](#)

[[More results from www.sacredland.org](#)]

[books - Welcome to Earth Sky Walk](#)

Download an abridged version of **Sacred Sites: An Overview** by Anthony Thorley and Celia M Gunn, for an introduction to documented materials and advances ...

www.earthskywalk.com/books.html - [Similar](#)

[Sacred Sites - Sacred Territories | gaiafoundation.org](#)

Sacred Sites: An Overview [by A Thorley & C Gunn], 2008; A Provisional International Directory of Organisations concerned with the Protection of **Sacred Sites** ...

www.gaiafoundation.org/node/35 - [Similar](#)

[Anthony Thorley | The Alchemical Journey](#)

Anthony Thorley is a retired psychiatrist who has been researching landscape energies, ... Together with his wife, novelist and writer Celia Gunn, Anthony has recently completed a major world overview of **sacred sites** and their protection for ...

www.thealchemicaljourney.co.uk/workshop-facilitators/anthony-th... - [Similar](#)

[PDF] [Sacred Sites: An Overview](#)

SACRED SITES: AN OVERVIEW. **Sacred Sites: An Overview.** A Report for The Gaia Foundation. (Abridged Version) by Anthony Thorley and Celia M Gunn ...

www.silene.es/documentos/Sacred_Sites_An_Overview.pdf - [Similar](#)

Some very basic questions

- What is 'sacred'?
- What is 'site', as place or space?

Defining 'sacred'

- *Sacer* Latin. 'dedicated or consecrated to a divinity' but also a related meaning: 'accursed, execrable, horrible, infamous' or 'devoted to a divinity for destruction, forfeited'.
- So as well as sacred being esteemed and positive it also carries an association of the divinity as a powerful force for injury and destruction.

More on sacred

- Root *sac* relates to Hittite word *saklais* meaning ritual.
- Root *sa* relates to Greek word for safe and the derived Latin word *sanus* meaning whole or healthy.
- *Sanus* is the root that gives us *sanctus*, a saint or holy person, and *sanctum*, a holy place or sanctuary.

The breadth of 'sacred'

- Rite, custom, safe, whole, accursed, horrible, divine destruction, divine presence.
- This is how the autonomous and wilful gods of the Classical World were viewed.
- This breadth of meaning may be useful to us to understand the wide variety and rich meaning of sacred in indigenous and ancient societies.
- Sacred is often misprinted as 'scared'!!

Site as 'space' or 'place'

- 'If space allows movement, place is pause' Y-F Tuan 1977 (see Tilley, PoL, p.14)
- Usefully discussed in Tilley, PoL, Ch. 1 1994
- 'Without places there can be no spaces, and the former have primary ontological significance as centres of bodily activity, human significance and emotional attachment' Tilley, PoL, p.15
- Relph, E. (1976) 'Place and Placelessness', London, Pion
- Casey, E. S. (1997) 'The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History', Berkeley, U of California Press. This is a key text if you are working in depth.

Waahi tapu

- Maori words for 'sacred site, etc.'
- Discussed by Jane Hubert in 'Sacred Beliefs and Beliefs of Sacredness' in 'Sacred Sites, Sacred Places', Eds. Carmichael et al. (1994) Routledge, London.
- See also Hirini Matunga, 'Waahi tapu: Maori Sacred Sites' in Carmichael et al.

because they may be resource sites. Matunga goes on to list the main types of site to illustrate the wide range covered by *waahi tapu*.

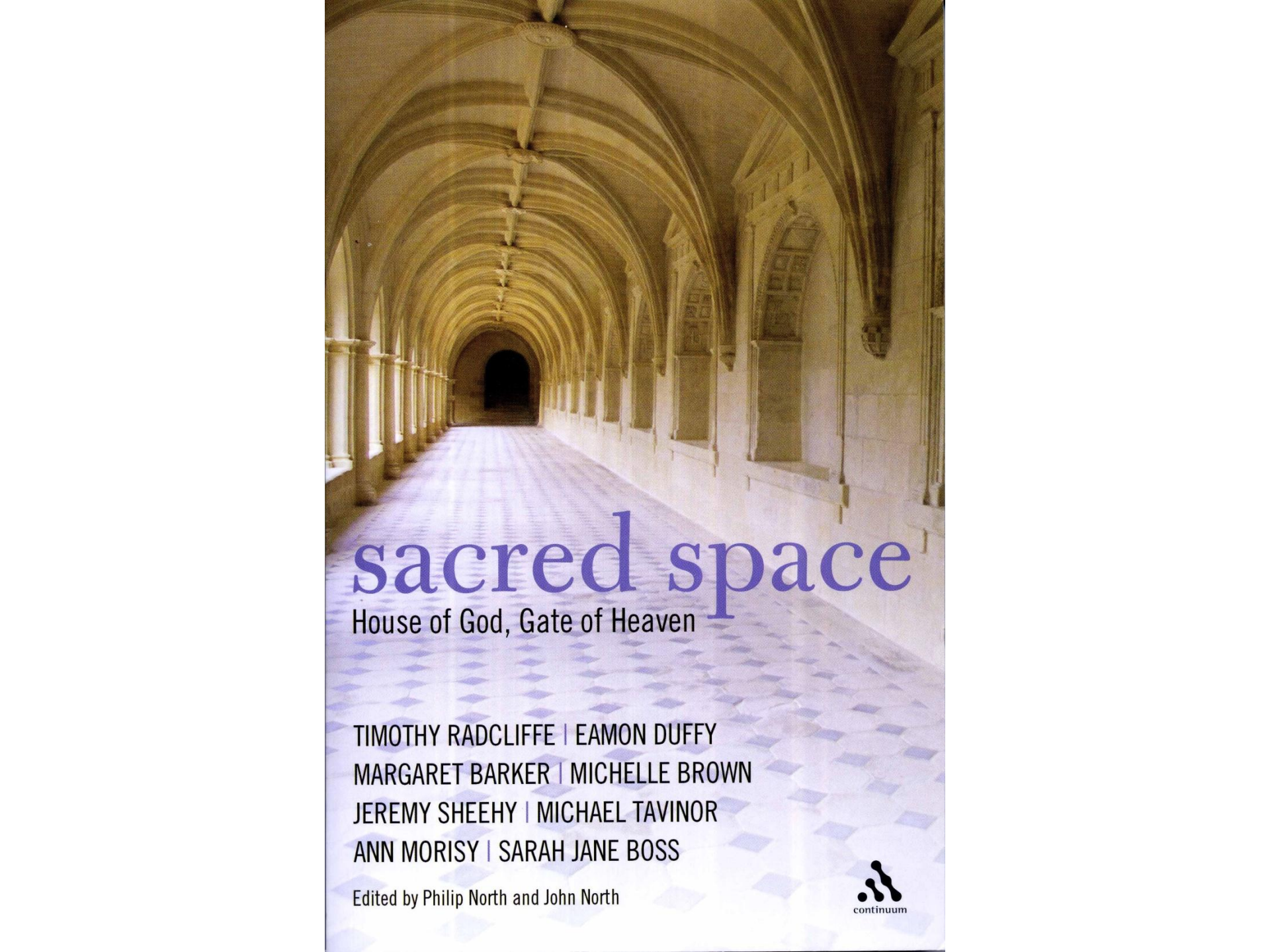
- Places associated with death: burial grounds, caves, trees, mudflats
- Places where people died, and where bodies rested
- Battlefields
- Burial places of the placenta
- *tuahu* (altars)
- Sources of water for healing and death rites
- *Ara purahoura*, sacred pathways for messengers
- *mauri* stones and trees
- Carved *poupou* representing ancestors
- *pa* sites and *papakanga*
- Canoe landing sites
- Sacred mountains, lakes and springs
- *mahinga kai*, resource sites for birding, cultivation, fishing, forest plants and minerals
- *toko taunga iki*, rocks that identify fishing grounds
- *wahi taonga mahi a ringa*, resource sites for Maori art material such as *kickie*, flax
- Confiscated lands
- *Ara*, pathways connecting *iwi* [tribal] areas and resource sites
- Landscape features which determine *iwi* and *hapu* [subtribe] boundaries
- Mythological sites
- Historic sites
- *Waahi whakamahara*, sites recognised as memorials to events

Tirtha: Hindu for Sacred Place

- *Tirtha*, literally a ‘crossing’, the place where we cross from this physical world into another where we can access the ineffable spirit and energies of another realm.
- From Sanskrit *taras*, cognate with IE root *ter*.
- From which we derive ‘through’, German ‘durch’, and all words beginning with *tr* – ans: transport, transcend etc.

The idea of the *numinous*

- Numinous, coined by Rudolf Otto in 1917 from *numen*, Latin for divine presence.
- Probably not derived from Greek *Noumenia*, 'New Moon', but worth a thought!
- '*...primal numinous awe...sufficient in itself... To mark out 'holy' and 'sacred' places, and make them spots of awful veneration....*' p.126
- See Rudolf Otto, 'The Idea of the Holy', (1923) reprinted 1958 and later, OUP, Oxford.



sacred space

House of God, Gate of Heaven

TIMOTHY RADCLIFFE | EAMON DUFFY
MARGARET BARKER | MICHELLE BROWN
JEREMY SHEEHY | MICHAEL TAVINOR
ANN MORISY | SARAH JANE BOSS

Edited by Philip North and John North



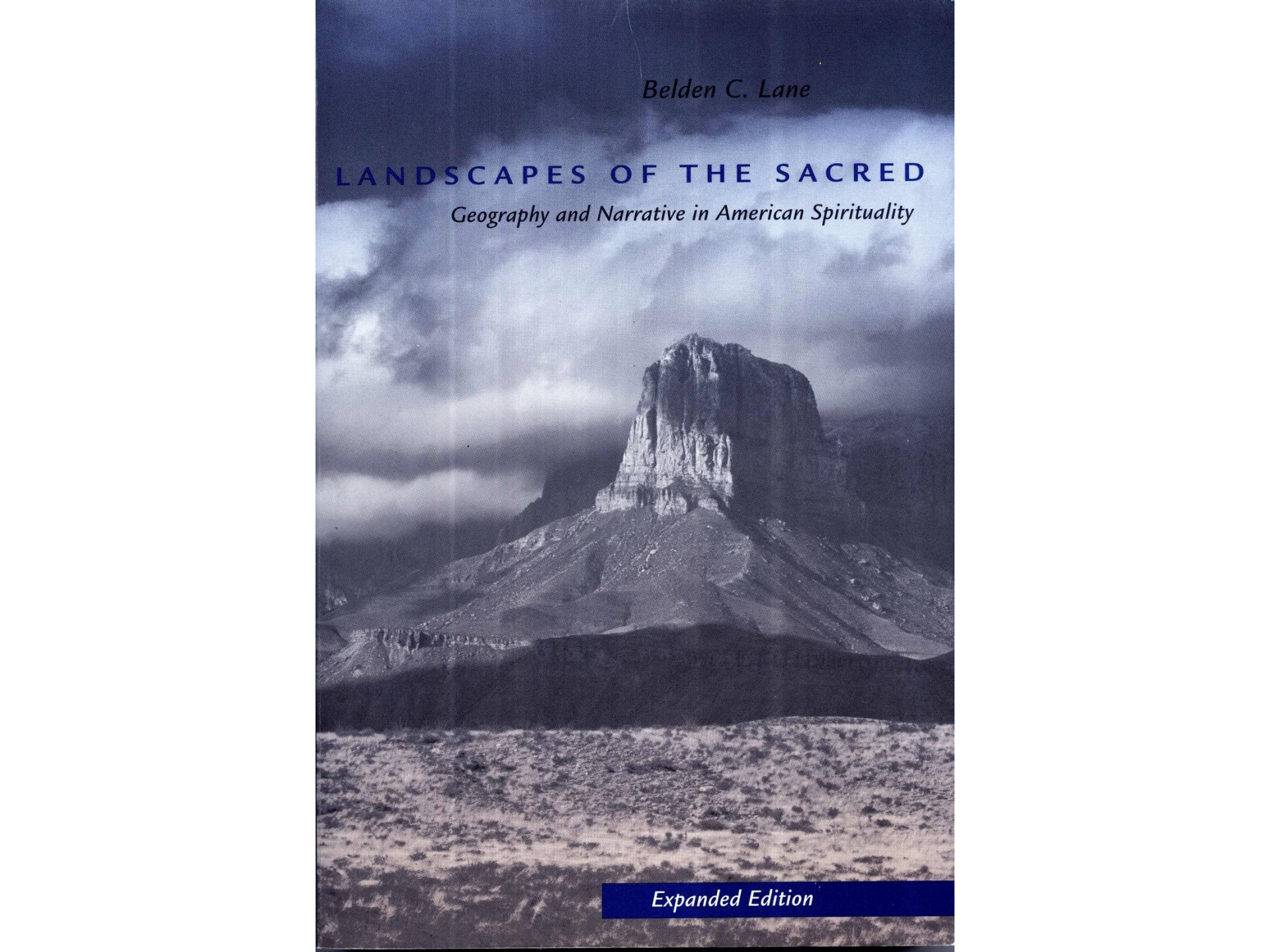
The Christian view of sacred place

- Sacred Space: House of God, House of Heaven
Eds. North, P and North, J (2007) Continuum,
London.
- Very useful chapter by Jeremy Sheehy, 'Sacred
Space and Incarnation' in North and North.
Pp.9-20.

Many religions, of course, have had a long history of reverence for particular places, an acknowledgement of sacred space, and a consequent practice of pilgrimage. But when we think of 'sacred space' and 'sacred places', we must remember that there is a long history and heritage of Christian unease with the concept of the 'holy place', an unease dating back to the Hebrew scriptures, and which can be cited to fortify this unease for Christians in our own age. At the dedication of the temple, 1 Kings 8.27 tells us, Solomon acknowledged 'Heaven itself, the highest heaven, cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built'. I do not think that we should ignore the seriousness of the criticism of our talk about 'sacred space' and 'sacred places' that springs from and takes strength from such sayings. How (it would be said) can one place be more holy, more sacred, than another? Is this not (some critics would argue) a sort of idolatry? Can one day be more holy than another? Can one place be more holy than everywhere else?

Some of Sheehy's issues

- Christianity has a fundamental discomfort with sacred place; God is everywhere!
- Sheehy attempts to fill the vacuum of a Xtian theology of sacred place by invoking the materiality of the incarnation of Christ.
- Xtianty is grounded in the teaching and word of the Bible and Christ: it tends to eschew the gnostic form of spiritual teaching which might arise from a personal experience in a sacred place.

The background of the book cover is a photograph of a desert landscape. In the center, a prominent, flat-topped mountain peak rises sharply from a desert floor. The sky is filled with heavy, dark clouds, with some light breaking through near the horizon. The foreground shows a dry, sandy desert with sparse, low-lying vegetation.

Belden C. Lane

LANDSCAPES OF THE SACRED

Geography and Narrative in American Spirituality

Expanded Edition

Belden C Lane, 'Landscapes of the Sacred'

- Four Axioms for informing the concept of sacred place:
 1. Sacred place is not chosen, it chooses.
 2. Sacred place is ordinary place, ritually made extraordinary.
 3. Sacred place can be tread upon without being entered.
 4. The impulse of sacred place is both centripetal and centrifugal, local and universal.

In the poststructuralist world of academic discourse, however, there are no readily available categories for acknowledging and interpreting such experience. To speak of my personal (and highly idiosyncratic) awareness of connectedness-to-the-earth as part of a larger interpretation of Medicine Wheel as sacred place seems to endorse a pietist reading of landscape—turning a culturally formed terrain into a privatized “soulcape.”⁶ Moreover, to suggest that the connection was initiated as much by the *place* as by myself sounds magical and naive. In poststructuralist thinking, nature is essentially a projection of human language, a social construction of a particular cultural perspective. Scholarly discourse about sacred place often lacks any basis for appreciating the traditional native conviction that nature “talks back,” that it *participates* in the experience humans have of it.⁷

42 *Landscapes of the Sacred*

When I ask students in a course I teach on religion and nature to write about a place profoundly meaningful to them, they hardly ever speak of miraculous encounters. Nor do they make claims for the inherent spiritual powers of a given site. Yet they often *do* suggest that their experience was not simply inside their heads but was somehow *shared* in a particular moment by everything around them. They speak with poetic intensity of a childhood memory—of an apricot tree, for example, with the yellowed rope of an old swing hanging from it, clouds overhead and dead leaves underfoot—as if to evoke the depth dimension of an experience that “had” *them* as much as they could be said to have “had” *it*.

The loop or dialogue of perception

- 'An experience that had 'had' *them* as much as they could be said to have 'had' *it*.' Lane, p.42.
- 'More exactly: when I say that my body is a see-er, there is, in the experience I have of it, something that founds and announces the view that the other acquires of it or that the mirror gives of it....It is through the world first that I am seen or thought.' Maurice Merleau-Ponty, on the concept of 'flesh', p.274, in 'The Visible and the Invisible', 1968, Northwestern Univ. Press, Evanston.
- For an intro to M-P read David Abram, 'The Spell of the Sensuous', (1996), Vintage, New York.

Animism and the Spirit of Place

- Explore these challenging ideas in:
- Abram, D 'The Spell of the Sensuous' Vintage, 1996
- Abram, D 'Becoming Animal' Pantheon, 2010
- Harvey, G 'Animism' Hurst, 2005
- Harding, S 'Animate Earth', Green Books, 2006
- Curry, P 'Ecological Ethics' Polity, 2011
- Berry, T 'The Great Work' Bell Tower, 1999

**Time and Mind:
The Journal of
Archaeology,
Consciousness
and Culture**

Volume 2—Issue 2
July 2009
pp. 167–194
DOI
10.2752/175169709X423673

Reprints available directly
from the publishers

Photocopying permitted by
licence only

© Berg 2009

“Spirit of Place” as Process: Archaeography, Dowsing and Perceptual Mapping at Belas Knap

**Tom Graves and
Liz Poraj-Wilczynska**

Tom Graves is an independent researcher based in eastern England and south-east Australia. Awarded an MA by London's Royal College of Art as a cross-disciplinary generalist, he is best known as a writer on intuitive skills and complex systems, with fifteen books published since 1976. Credited as one of the inventors of desktop-publishing, he is also a leading expert on quality-systems and the structures of large organizations.

Liz Poraj-Wilczynska is an English artist and archaeographer. She trained as an archaeological illustrator at Crickley Hill Archaeological Trust, producing finds illustrations and reconstruction drawings for publications such as *Prehistoric Gloucestershire* by Professor Timothy Darvill and *Village Fortress Shrine* by Dr Richard Savage, and a mobile exhibition for Crickley Hill which was a finalist for the Hepworth Heritage communication award 1988. She is currently working on a multi-media project at Belas Knap long barrow.

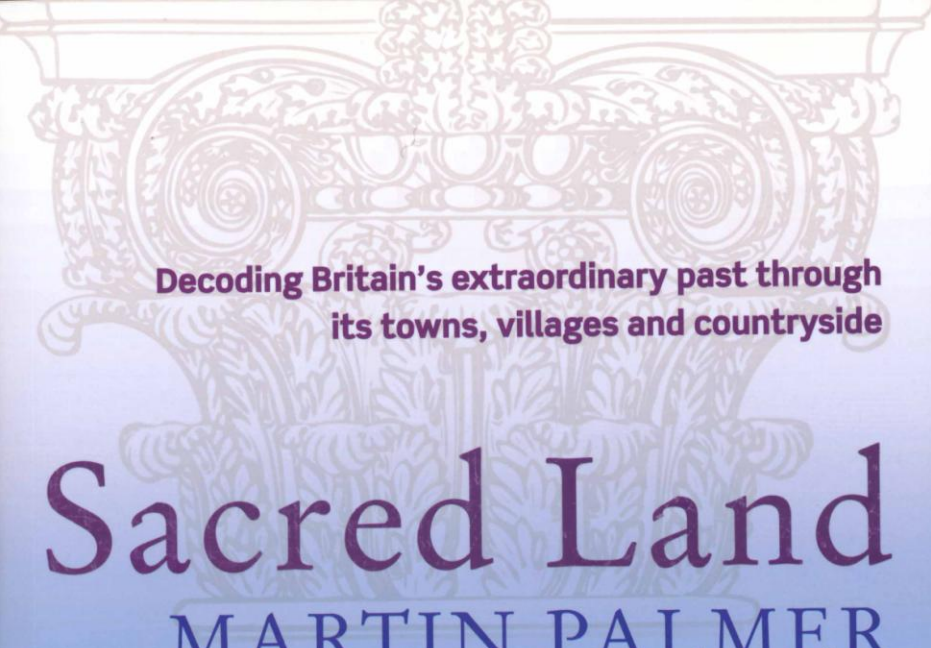
The latest book by Tom Graves and Liz Poraj-Wilczynska is *The Disciplines of Dowsing* (2008)

Abstract

“Spirit of place,” or *genius loci*, is both an abstract concept and a profoundly personal experience of relationship with place. Each place and district and region has its own characteristics, both explicit and implicit, that make

Topos, Choros; Chronos, Kairos

- Topos: physical point, place in landscape. Neutral. Derived word, 'topography'.
- Choros: space, quality of landscape feeding you with information, exhilarating, dancing. Derived word, 'choreography'.
- Chronos: point time, tick-tock, neutral. Derived word, 'chronometer'.
- Kairos: the opportune time, the timeless now, pregnant with experience. No derived word, but G Cornelius's 'moment' of astrology?
- **Belden Lane** suggests that a combination of Choros and Kairos = sacred place



Decoding Britain's extraordinary past through
its towns, villages and countryside

Sacred Land

MARTIN PALMER



Foreword by Melvyn Bragg

Martin Palmer asks 'What do you mean by sacred?'

- Communities decide upon a site that will be holy to them: a church, mosque, temple etc.
- Somewhere that overwhelms us with the sheer beauty of nature: something greater and grander than ourselves.
- Places made special by history or legend.
- Places that mean something special to private individuals

This is a very basic overview but no attempt at a definition of sacred site

Definitions of Sacred Site

- For a brief critical survey of the few definitions that do exist :
- 1. Sacred Lands Article ‘What is a Sacred Site’ (2011).
- 2. Thorley and Gunn, ‘Sacred Sites: an overview’ (2008), the **Full** not the **Abridged** version.
- 3. The Abridged Version has interesting case studies and photos.
- Simply Google [sacred site thorley gunn] and pick up the PDF downloads of these 3 references.

Some Objections to a Definition of Sacred Site

- It is impossible, because of the cultural variety and richness of the concept. (Many Anthropologists hold this view.)
- Many indigenous cultures have no concept of sacred, so why force it upon them?
- Such a definition has no apparent role or benefit.
- It is more appropriate and 'truthful' to simply describe what each culture counts as sacred.

Some Reasons for a Definition

- It makes an attempt to clarify a very vague and subjective area
- It seeks to establish common international and trans-cultural features which facilitate comparison, categorisation, and the identification of key themes or factors: i.e. research
- It seeks to create a viable language for legalistic settings, disputes, which then can be used in framing national and international legislation
- It is driven by pragmatism rather than solely by pure academic considerations
- Concerned peoples are asking for one!

Designing an Operational Definition, as found in Thorley and Gunn (2008)

First the **Primary Stem**: The basic definition.

Then the four **Operational Categories**:

- 1. Descriptive features
- 2. Spiritual features
- 3. Functional features
- 4. Other features not covered in 1., 2., and 3

To justify the definition, the Sacred Site must satisfy the stem definition and have one or more of the features in any of the four operational categories.

This kind of definition also enables a rough profile of the ‘operations’ of the specific Sacred Site to emerge.

The full definition and discussion is found in our Full Version of Sacred Sites: An Overview (2008).

SACRED SITE: AN OPERATIONAL DEFINITION

A sacred site is a place in the landscape, occasionally over or under water, which is especially revered by a people, culture or cultural group as a focus for spiritual belief and practice and likely religious observance.

In addition, to satisfy this stem definition and reflect its wide and rich variety, a sacred site must also have one or more of the following nineteen characteristics found under the headings: Descriptive, Spiritual, Functional and Other. Having more or less of these characteristics does not imply that the site is more or less sacred but it may usefully reflect the complexity and rich variety of its sacred qualities.

1. Descriptive

- a. It is a specific focus within a wider and possibly dynamically interconnected sacred landscape.**
- b. It is, or is founded upon, a natural topographical feature, e.g., a mountain, mound, rock, cave, tree, grove, forest, spring, well, river, lake, the sea, an island, etc.**
- c. It is recognised as carrying special manifestation of wildlife, natural phenomena and ecological balance.**
- d. It is embellished with man-made symbols or artefacts, e.g., rock-carvings, painting, holy or religious objects.**
- e. It is partially or wholly man-made, e.g., menhir, temple, church, wayside shrine.**
- f. It is a memorial or mnemonic to a key recent or past event in history, legend or myth, e.g., a battle site, creation or origin myth.**

2. Spiritual

- a. It is recognised as having a palpable and special energy or power which is clearly discernible from that of a similar landscape or surrounding.**
- b. It is recognised as a special place which acts as a portal or cross-over to the spirit world.**
- c. It is recognised as the dwelling place of guardian or 'owner' spirits which care for and oversee the site and possibly its wider environs.**
- d. Its spiritual forces or 'owner' spirits are in a mutually respectful dialogue with local people with specialist knowledge acting as guardians or custodians, who play important roles as mediators, negotiators or healers between the human, natural and spiritual dimensions.**
- e. It is identified as a place where the ancestors are present and especially respected, e.g., burial grounds.**
- f. It is a place of spiritual transformation for individual persons or the community, e.g., healing, baptism, initiation, religious conversion, rite of passage, funeral, vision quest.**

3. Functional

- a. It is a special place where relationships, both interpersonal and throughout the whole community, can be expressed and affirmed, often through a specific form of observance, e.g., prayer, songs, chants, dance, ritual or ceremony.**
- b. It is a place especially associated with resource-gathering or other key cultural activities, e.g., gathering medicinal plants or material for sacred or ritual ceremony or objects, fishing, hunting, cultivation, burial of ritual objects, giving birth.**
- c. It is a specific pathway or route between significant or sacred places, e.g., songline, sacred pathway, pilgrimage route.**
- d. It is a focus of past or present special visits of religious observance or pilgrimage.**
- e. It is a cultural sacred-secret, with its location and/or specific religious function only known to a limited number of people.**
- f. It has a significant relationship with astronomical order and/or calendrical phenomena, e.g., astronomical alignment, celestial-Earth correspondence, seasonal ritual or festival.**

4. Other

- a. It clearly satisfies the stem definition but has unique cultural features that are not represented in the previous eighteen characteristics.**

Using the definition, a scared site could then be described as satisfying the Thorley/Gunn Definition (TGD) in one or more characteristics out of the four categories. These could be, if necessary, reduced to a briefer encoded form, e.g., TGD, Categories 1, 2, etc. To give two practical examples, Stonehenge in England could be represented as 'TGD, Categories 1.a,d,e; 2.a,e; 3.e;f.' and a sacred beach for fishing in New Zealand Maori culture might be represented as 'TGD, Categories, 1.b; 2.e; 3.b.'

Sacred Natural Sites

Guidelines for Protected Area Managers

Task Force on the Cultural and Spiritual Values of Protected Areas
in collaboration with UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere Programme

Robert Wild and Christopher McLeod, Editors

Peter Valentine, Series Editor



Best Practice Protected Area Guidelines Series No. 16

IUCN definitions

- Sacred Site. An area of special spiritual significance to peoples and communities.
- Sacred Natural Site. Areas of land or water having special spiritual significance for peoples and communities.

IUCN 2008

Our Sacred Sites report was taken up by the IUCN in 2008 as part of its ongoing work.



Sacred Sites REsearch Newsletter

OCTOBER 2012



Note from the Editors

Dear friends and colleagues,

I would like to begin by thanking everyone for the great feedback that followed the first issue of SSIREN. We have received a number of really positive emails and it is clear that SSIREN has already developed a wide, and still growing, audience. We are grateful to you all and hope to be able to count on your continued support. I would also like to take this opportunity to encourage you to keep up with your contributions for feature articles and the 'news', 'events', 'publications' and 'opportunities' sections. Please, do not hesitate to forward onto us anything you think is relevant.

In this issue, we are continuing with our introductory theme for the newsletter featuring a contribution from KRPAVIS, a NGO based in India, which demonstrates the practical application of sacred site research and how implementation work is being done on the ground.

I hope you will enjoy this new issue of SSIREN, and find it of help for your own work on sacred natural sites.

Emma Shephard-Walwyn

FOCUS



Feature

KRPAVIS: Working with communities to protect Rajasthan's sacred Orans

Krishi Avam Paristhiti Vikas Sansthan (KRPAVIS), the "organization for the development of ecology and agriculture/livestock" has been at the forefront

ISSUE 1(2) AT A GLANCE:

FEATURE

KRPAVIS: Working with communities to protect Rajasthan Orans

NEWS

Mapping the Sacred project launched in Oxford

UPCOMING EVENTS

October 1-19. Hyderabad, India

11th Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity

November 3-5. Rochester, NY, USA

16th Annual Meeting of the International Association for Environmental Philosophy

November 15-19. Chicago, Illinois, USA

Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion

ON THE BOOKSHELF

List of relevant publications issued in the last three months

OPPORTUNITIES

October 10

50th Annual Meeting of the Association for Tropical Biology and Conservation: Call for papers on religion, culture, sacred sites and sacred species

Dr. Shonil Bhagwat (Oxford University) and Emma Shephard-Walwyn (University of Kent), are putting together a symposium for the 50th ATBC meeting in San José, Costa Rica, 23rd - 27th June 2013 ([website here](#)). If you would like to present a talk, please contact Emma at: es307@kent.ac.uk.

October 15

26th International Congress for Conservation Biology: Call for papers on religion, culture, sacred sites and sacred species

Dr. Shonil Bhagwat (Oxford University) and Emma Shephard-Walwyn (University of Kent), are putting together a symposium for the 26th SCB conference in Baltimore, Maryland, 21st - 25th July 2013 ([website here](#)). If you would like to present a talk, please contact Emma at: es307@kent.ac.uk.

October 15

7th Conference of the European Society for Environmental History: Call for papers

The 7th ESEH conference will be held in Munich, 20th - 24th August 2013, and will have 'Circulating Natures: Water-Food-Energy' as its theme. If you would like to present a talk, submit an abstract on the [conference website](#).

PUBLICATIONS

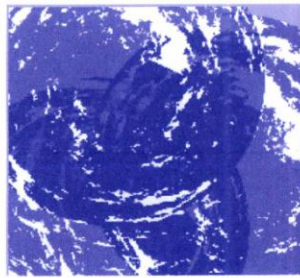
Ambros, B. R., 2012, *Bones of Contention: Animals and Religion in Contemporary Japan*. Hawaii University Press

Endres, D., 2012, Sacred land or national sacrifice zone: the role of values in the Yucca mountain participation process. *Environmental Communication* (6:3), Pg 328-345

Parrotta J. R. and Trosper, R. L., 2012, *Traditional Forest-Related Knowledge: Sustaining Communities, Ecosystems and Biocultural Diversity* [World Forests Series, Vol. 12]. Springer

Sahu, S. C, Dhal, N. K., Lal, B. and Mohanty, R. C., 2012, Differences in tree species diversity and soil nutrient status in a tropical sacred forest ecosystem on Niyamgiri hill range, Eastern Ghats, India. *Journal of Mountain Science* (9:4), Pg: 492-500





Sacred Natural Sites

A Law on Sacred Sites in Guatemala

Key points

- National and international legal regulations support a Law on Sacred Sites in Guatemala
- The Law on Sacred Sites aims to achieve recognition, community management, access and administration of sacred sites
- The Law will contribute to a social and legally pluralistic society
- Social and political pressure is needed to get all congress members support the Law
- The Law process united indigenous Maya, Garifuna and Xinca indigenous peoples



Sacred sites defined

Sacred sites can consist of man-made structures such as temples, shrines, and pilgrimage roads, but many natural places and specific plant and animal species are also of special sacred significance to Indigenous peoples and local communities and play a vital role in their overall well-being. In Guatemala, sacred sites are defined as "naturally or constructed places where cosmic energies are at a confluence to enable communication with ancestors; special places for learning and practicing the spirituality, philosophy, science, technologies and art of the indigenous peoples"¹. Many sacred sites are an expression of worldviews in which nature is animated; human values are attributed to nature and elements of nature. Sacred natural sites are defined internationally as "areas of land or water having special spiritual significance to peoples and communities"² and are recognized as the oldest conserved areas in the world³. Approximately 80%⁴ of the world's biodiversity and 95% of the world's cultural diversity is found on lands belonging to Indigenous peoples and local communities, many of which are recognized as sacred or contain sacred sites⁵. The political and legal recognition of sacred natural sites and their custodians and governance systems can thus help strengthen this primary conservation network and the cultural diversity represented by the people that maintain it⁶. Greater protection of sacred sites is arguably needed and can be secured by asserting and building on existing and emerging rights under national and international law.

The emergence of sacred sites within international legal frameworks

The need to protect sacred natural sites has been signalled by various international organizations and instruments. In the 1992 United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), Articles 8(j) and 10(c) have great potential to support the restoration, protection, and conservation of sacred sites by their traditional custodians⁷. In 2004, the Secretariat of the CBD released the Akwé: Kon voluntary guidelines for cultural, environmental, and social impact



Felipe Gomez

"The Law on Sacred Sites is important, because it seeks to dignify natural and constructed sacred sites. The sites are living spaces where we practice our spirituality, celebrate important astronomical events and where we go for our healing. Sacred sites allow us to thank Mother Nature and to be in harmony with the cosmic energies and all of nature. The Law will ensure that sacred sites are administered and managed by local communities and governed by a National Council of Sacred Sites. The Council consists of spiritual leaders from Mayan, Garifunas and Xinkas indigenous communities from Guatemala. Use of sacred sites in private properties or within municipalities will also be governed by the Council."

Felipe Gomez, Maya spiritual leader and coordinator of the Law Initiative on Sacred Sites.

Sacred sites defined

Sacred sites can consist of man-made structures such as temples, shrines, and pilgrimage roads, but many natural places and specific plant and animal species are also of special sacred significance to Indigenous peoples and local communities and play a vital role in their overall well-being. In Guatemala, sacred sites are defined as “naturally or constructed places where cosmic energies are at a confluence to enable communication with ancestors; special places for learning and practicing the spirituality, philosophy, science, technologies and art of the indigenous peoples”¹. Many sacred sites

are located in the mountains of Guatemala, which is why they are often referred to as “mountain

Access the IUCN and Guatemala Documents via Google

- For IUCN use [sacred natural sites iucn wild]
 - For Guatemala use [sacred natural sites Guatemala law]
- and download the PDFs.



Sacred Sites: An Overview

*A Report for The Gaia Foundation
(Abridged Version)*

*by
Anthony Thorley and Celia M Gunn*

