

INTRODUCTION PART I

SACRED GEOGRAPHY: CONVERSATIONS WITH PLACE

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Sacred Geography

Sacred Geography played a foundational role in the early stages of the MA programme in Cultural Astronomy and Astrology within the Sophia Centre for the Study of Cosmology in Culture. This innovative programme was conceived at Bath Spa University College, and launched in October 2002 with Michael York, Nicholas Campion, and Patrick Curry as the original teaching team. The Sacred Geography module itself was part of the MA in the Study of Religions, the tutor for which was Michael York, who was also the Programme Director of the MA in Cultural Astronomy and Astrology, so it was felt appropriate to include it as an option for those students. The earth-based study of Sacred Geography brought the vital ingredient of earthing cosmologies to the sky-based study of Cultural Astronomy and Astrology. When Michael York retired in 2004 the topic was briefly taught by Nicholas Campion (2005-6) and when the MA transferred to the University of Wales, Lampeter (now the University of Wales Trinity Saint David), it was taken over by Anthony Thorley, who taught it from 2010 to 2017. When Anthony retired, he was succeeded by Bernadette Brady.

What is Sacred Geography?

In 1851, the term 'Sacred Geography' was used in a report published in *Scientific American*. This report discussed a lecture given by Col. Rowlinson at the Royal Geographical Society in London, centred on the Biblical cities of Assyria. The lecture primarily focused on the Tigris River, its dynamic flow, and the cities it influenced. Adding the adjective 'sacred' to the noun 'geography' stemmed from the fact that this landscape held profound religious significance within the context of Christianity.¹ While some might view this definition of sacred geography as superficial, it points to a crucial basic concept. This landscape carried immense spiritual significance to Col. Rowlinson and his audience at the Royal Geographical Society as it was deeply rooted in the Christian narrative.

Indeed, Bergmann in 2009, adhered to this idea of a landscape's sacredness when he suggested that 'religions can be analysed as ritualisations which depend on space and reshape it'.² Bergmann et al. used the term 'earthing sacredness' to describe how Christianity and other religions were embedded in places, places well beyond Col. Rowlinson's view of the Holy Land.³

Sacred places, however, are not limited to religious narratives. In 1936, with the emergence of aviation technology, aerial perspectives of landscapes became available, and René Guénon made airborne observations of Glastonbury, United Kingdom. These observations suggested to him that Iron Age humans had intentionally shaped the natural topography of Glastonbury to resemble an 'image of the vault of the sky', hinting at an ancient, and maybe sacred, hidden message in the landscape.⁴ This notion of ancient arranged landscapes holding power was also a theme of J. Heinsch, a German town planner. He delivered a paper during the 1938 International Congress of Geography titled 'Principles of Prehistoric Sacred Geography' where he discussed the benefits of aligning contemporary urban planning with any orientations established by nearby ancient sites. Heinsch viewed these ancient sites as holding an intricate geometry binding the different architectural elements together. He proposed that these ancient arrangements contained a deliberate design that imbued the entire environment with a sense of power or sacredness, one that was not weakened by the current lack of understanding of its original purpose. Heinsch described this idea as:

Therefore these principles of an ancient geometrical landscape arrangement, which are imprinted everywhere and which seemed like natural laws to the 'natural insight' of their originators, must not be treated merely as the antique hieroglyphs of a vast 'primitive handwriting', still legible, with the help of measure and angle, in the landscape today. They should above all be recognised and evaluated as the ground-plans for a certain configuration of land and people, which with its geometric proportions – 'pleasing to God' as well as man – works today as effectively on our natural human feeling for our homeland as do the same proportions in Gothic cathedrals and other old buildings reflecting the cosmic order, which even now somehow put the silent beholder in harmony with the infinite, impressing him spiritually and thus influencing him 'magically'.⁵

For Heinsch, to align a town or structure to an ancient orientation made use of this unknown or undefined power. By incorporating the ancient sacred ratios

and alignments into contemporary urban planning, he believed that modern structures could partake of ancient sacredness. This idea of an archaicising approach to architecture was not new. John Wood, the eighteenth century Georgian town planner who designed the city of Bath in England, drew on Stonehenge to design the Bath Royal Circus. He matched the diameter of the Circus to that of Stonehenge and reflected the layout of the inner stones with horse hitching rails in order to draw on the 'magic' of the older, and what he considered to be Druidic, design.⁶

By the mid-20th century, followers of Heinsch's belief in the sacredness of ancient landscapes were known as the 'Straight Track Club'. These researchers approached a site or landscape to explore the presence of alignments and considered these alignments to hold hidden intentions and meaning. This meaning extended to the units of measurement believed to be instrumental in the creation of the ancient sites, Alexander Thom's megalithic yard (0.83 cm in length) being a notable example.⁷ Using this approach, researchers sought to comprehend the relationships between prehistoric landscapes and the constructed elements within them, such as, for example, temples, stone circles, dolmens, or burial mounds. Followers of the Straight Track Club are today viewed as adopting a form of green sacred geography where the label of 'green' can be borrowed from archaeoastronomy.

Green archaeoastronomy was defined by Anthony Aveni as being focused on the orientations and alignments that a structure may have to a sky object. In Britain in the 1970s a rigorous and statistical methodology was developed for working with green archaeoastronomy which allowed for judging whether any orientation within a pre-historical site was intentional or occurred by chance. In contrast, 'brown' archaeoastronomy emerged from North American research into pre-Columbian Mesoamerican structures and their relationship to each other and the sky. Brown archaeoastronomy integrates techniques and data from a broad range of humanities, history, cultural anthropology, art history, folklore studies and the history of religions.⁸ With this distinction in mind, researchers adopting a green sacred geography approach tend to speak of decoding landscapes to reveal a hidden message of an ancient cosmology embedded into the land and sky. With this approach place itself is viewed as a canvas on which ancient humanity built or amplified a message in shape, orientation, ratios, and measurements. In contrast, brown sacred geography draws heavily on the aforementioned humanities and studies the human, and at times non-human, relationships within a living landscape. Jack Hunter's introduction to this volume focuses on the non-human relationships in a landscape but whether human or non-human relationships, a brown approach allows place to gain

agency. Researchers seek conversations with place. Its central methodology is phenomenology rather than measurement, 'placefulness' rather than alignments.

Hence Bergmann's idea of 'earthing sacredness' can be broadened beyond religions to where sacredness can be both allocated or pre-existing in a physical place. Green sacred geography tends to focus on ancient earthed cosmologies, while brown sacred geography can turn its eye to contemporary cultures. The two approaches can be blended: the former privileging orientations and measurements and the latter privileging phenomenology and narratives. Both seek to discover a sacredness or specialness to place. How and why this specialness occurs and what is its nature and purpose are where the two styles of sacred geography diverge. Green sacred geography is orientated largely around the activities of humans in a landscape, while brown sacred geography broadens the research question into a landscape having a dialogue with itself without the need for humans. The papers in this volume all approach their subject matter leaning towards a brown sacred geography viewpoint.

Thinking through Place

Edward Casey stated that society's view of place is dominated by the modern neutrality of 'space'.⁹ This domination of space in the West was fuelled by medieval Christian theology. In the thirteenth century, the Italian theologian Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) inserted Aristotelian philosophy into Christian theology.¹⁰ Aristotelian order, however, required that God, the divine unmover who instigated all causation, needed to be located somewhere within the cosmos.¹¹ God, however, needed to exist without boundaries, so God existed in infinite space. With God allocated to space, the idea of a place, with its sense of limits, became inferior. In discussing the split between a universal God existing in space and humanity existing in place, Bergmann pointed to Johann Wolfgang Goethe's (1749–1832) argument that when humanity splits from place, there is a loss of self as self-awareness only comes from an awareness of one's place in the world.¹² The home-place is where the individual or group holds their status, and that place is embedded with their stories and memories. Humanity has always fought for the right to be in 'one's place'. At a local level, Tilley suggested that a group's stories or memories embedded in place humanises and encultures a place. The landscape becomes saturated with place names which in turn are intertwined with topography, human intentionality and even mythological characters.¹³ Lane pointed out that the greater the number of stories or the cultural importance of the stories, the greater the place is valued and held as sacred.¹⁴ Place may have stopped being the location of an infinite God, but, nevertheless, place is central to life, for all life must live in a place.

To approach the complexity of place, it is helpful to return to the Classical period and the ideas of Aristotle (384 BCE–322 BCE). He viewed place as a vessel which gave shape to its contents and also had a certain power to attract objects towards itself.¹⁵ Aristotle drew on his theory of elements (fire, earth, air, and water) to explain the drawing power of place. He argued that the elements sought to move to their proper place: fire and air upwards, earth and water downwards. He maintained that all bodies consist of a mixture of these elements, and hence the motion of a body was caused by the elements seeking their preferred place. He concluded that this, ‘show[s] that not only that place is something, but also that it exerts a certain influence’.¹⁶ Aristotle considered this a type of ‘gravity’. Additionally, when a body finally reached such a place, Aristotle considered that it was in its ‘proper place’ for ‘the movement of each body to its own place is motion towards its own form’.¹⁷ Aristotle reasoned that the location of a body in its proper place was where the body experienced a sense of wholeness and a form of stillness.¹⁸ Casey summed up Aristotle’s notion of place as a ‘unique and nonreducible feature of the physical world, something with its own inherent powers’.¹⁹

Today, Aristotle’s view of place falls outside the sciences, but it does speak of the human experience of place. For humans and non-humans, place holds, as I have previously stated, a type of phenomenological gravity, the power of place to draw towards itself that which finds comfort in the qualities of that place.²⁰ To be in one’s Aristotelian proper place is to feel a sense of wholeness, a form of completeness, and to experience the stillness of a centre. On a human level, such a place provides a sense of ease and satisfaction with one’s environment, whether that is in one’s membership of a community, the peace of one’s living room, or a local coffee shop. The experience of being in one’s proper place leads to a person attributing levels of sacredness to that place. This sacredness is mundane, generated by the instinctual urge to safeguard the place. Whether on a personal level or within a community, there is a natural inclination to oppose any alterations to a cherished location. The longer a place accumulates its history, distinctive names, and personal narratives, the stronger ‘its’ community becomes driven to preserve and safeguard it. Place is like a weight on a canvas. Place causes a ‘dip’ in the fabric, which then attracts nearby lighter objects. The more place draws in, the heavier it becomes and so the more it draws. Hence, sacredness or cultural specialness grows in influence and produces its own ‘gravity’. What causes the initial ‘dip’ in the fabric is debatable. For Mircea Eliade the initial ‘dip’ was what he defined as a hierophany. Eliade wrote, ‘For religious man, space is not homogeneous; he experiences interruption, breaks in it; some parts of space are qualitatively different from others’.²¹ In an Aristotelian sense, a hierophany

is an unexpected encounter with the power of a place. By contrast, for Émile Durkheim, culture may not create the initial ‘dip’ but it certainly enlarges it, as Durkheim viewed sacred places as cultural artefacts.²² Whatever position one adopts, the Aristotelian influence of a place, is the power that a place exerts on humans and non-humans – the power of place.

The power of place is central to sacred geography. In particular, a brown sacred geography researcher tries to think through place. In this regard the researcher lets ‘place’ present itself to them and attempts to see the view of a place by that place. This is the argument of Amiria Henare, Martin Holbraad and Sari Wastell who argued:

With purpose naïveté, the aim of this method is to take ‘things’ encountered in the field as they present themselves, rather than immediately assuming that they signify, represent, or stand for something else.²³

To apply this idea to sacred geography is to allow place to have its own quality, rather than existing as a blank canvas for the activity of another. To seek the quality of a place the researcher can ask questions about how a place regards itself. To think through place, or to see through place’s eyes is to adopt a ‘placefulness’ perception. To help gain this perception, the researcher can ask questions about a place which are informed by Aristotle’s arguments such questions as:

- What is in this place? What is drawn to this place? What are the bodies in this place which consider it their ‘proper place’?
- What is alien in this place? What avoids this place? What would be ‘out-of-place’ in this place?
- What supports this place? What does the place need to be supported? If a forest, it needs biodiversity, if an airport, it needs transient people and planes.
- How does the place maintain itself? How does it resist change? Is this resistance through the topography and environment, or does commercial activity maintain it? Is this commercial activity by humans or is it organic activities by other life forms?
- What happens in this place? What are the activities that are observed here? Is it a habitat for some but a transient place for others? For example, if it is a river, it contains flow and comings and goings; if it is a mountain, it holds ideas of ascent and descent, weather and clouds.

- Who or what could hold this place as sacred? What is barren for one group can be a paradise for another.

These types of questions asked in quiet observation of the place can give rise to an image of a place beyond the human gaze.

Place, Time and the Sacred

As Tilley and Lane both argued, places hold memories. Thus place also becomes a time-holder. When place links to memory, it captures a moment and wraps it in visuals and sensations ready to be delivered back to the individual at any future time. Hence, place not only holds time it can fold time, juxtaposing memories with the present, layer upon layer. Such multi-layers held by place can be experienced, for example, in returning to a place of one's childhood, which has years of memories all layered on top of each other, giving the sense that these moments in time are only separated by the thinnest of dimensions. These memory layers may be dark and turbulent, they may be about sporting victories or defeats, or times of personal joy. Whatever their nature, memories (moments of time) do not exist without a place, they are held by place. Even for global events, we ask each other, 'where were you when you heard the news of....?' Indeed, a method to help remember things is to build a mental place and locate each item in its proper place within the imagined place - recalling the place is to recall the item, recalling the item is to also recall the place.

As place holds our memories, it displays tenseless time. Thinking in tenseless time was addressed by the Dutch philosopher Baruch de Spinoza (1632–1677). He claimed that reason saw the world *sub specie aeternitatis*, without reference to time. He wrote, 'In so far as the mind conceives a thing under the dictates of reason, it is affected equally, whether the idea be of a thing future, past, or present'.²⁴ He pointed out that reason was affected just as much by events in the past as those in the present and future, so personal history and memories all existed in the present, they were timeless. Martin Lin noted that in this idea Spinoza did not mean eternity, time without end, but rather he was referring to a form of 'atemporal timelessness'.²⁵ Spinoza's extended this idea into any instrument that could hold tenseless time and argued that such an instrument promoted a level of reflection.²⁶ Hence if a place contains stories and memories, it becomes a personal instrument of *sub speci aeternitatis*. Place offers and indeed almost insists upon moments of reflection and inner contemplation as the person encounters their history as mental images, sounds, smells, emotions, events and words. This is the stillness of Aristotle's proper place, not stillness of motion but stillness of mind.

Granted such building up of layers of which can produce sacredness can be viewed as Durkheimian, but if so, then place becomes the neutral recipient of such layers. However, as already stated, Aristotle's view of place is that place holds qualities in its own right, for it shapes what it contains. An example of place shaping its own layers can be found in a simple story from the history of Bath, UK. In the late seventeenth century, a young French refugee arrived in Bath, England. Her name was Solange Luyon, today known as Sally Lunn. Being a baker by trade she bought a small house in order to open a bakery. The house stands on what is now known as North Parade Passage. In her house she baked her family's secret recipe for buns, which proved so popular that the house and bakery still operate to this day. For over three hundred years the owners of the house have produced her famous buns. The secret recipe is linked to the title of the house and whoever owns the house also owns the recipe. In recent times, the owners were repairing the foundations of the house and found that it had been built on the location of two other inns and kitchens, one in the twelfth century as the site of the kitchens for the monks of Bath Abbey and an earlier inn and kitchen of the Roman period, 100 CE – 500 CE. Hence, for nearly 2,000 years, this small patch of ground, this place, has been a place of baking and cooking. It is easy to dismiss this story as not that unusual or just a curiosity. However, it does hint at the power of place, the agency of place to draw towards itself what suits it, activities and events that 'fit' into the place, in this case a place of yeast and flour, fire and food.

Place may slowly reveal itself, as in the case of the Bath bakery, but if the power of place suddenly erupts into one's awareness, it is a hierophany. In 1903, the children's author Kenneth Grahame described such a hierophany in his work, *Wind in the Willows*. The book initially received negative reviews, as it was one of the earliest works that anthropomorphised animals – Louis Wain's cats a decade earlier, probably being the first. In Grahame's work, the world was viewed through the eyes of humanised animals. Two of his central characters, Mole and Ratty, search for a lost baby otter and in their search Grahame has them encountering a hierophany. The story describes how Mole and Ratty have spent a long night searching for the missing otter. As dawn approaches, they moor their boat on a tiny island in the river. Ratty feels drawn to the island by the sound of music caused by the wind in the river reeds. Grahame builds the environment for the experience of a hierophany: the two animals are tired and searching for something, the time is liminal as night gives way to day, and the place is set apart from the rest of the river world, a tiny island. Grahame wrote,

In silence they landed, and pushed through the blossom and scented herbage and undergrowth that led up to the level ground, till they stood on a little lawn of a marvellous green, set round with Nature's own orchard-trees—crab-apple, wild cherry, and sloe.

'This is the place of my song-dream, the place the music played to me,' whispered the Rat, as if in a trance. 'Here, in this holy place, here if anywhere, surely we shall find Him!'²⁷

The 'Him' referred to by Ratty is a divine presence. The two friends experience a heightening of colours and sounds and, suddenly, a great awe falls upon Mole, 'an awe that turned his muscles to water' as they both encounter the animal god, called by Grahame, 'the Helper'. This chapter, 'The Piper at the Gates of Dawn' was often left out of later editions of the book as it was felt to be too pagan, for Grahame wove into his children's book an animal sacredness based on the Greek god Pan. Notably, for this discussion, Grahame painted a sacred eruption rooted in a place that had no obvious layers of memories or experience for his two characters. To paint this scene he used the features, later described by Eliade, as an experience occurring at a liminal time mixed with a place set apart. This is a different form of sacredness; it comes directly from place rather than emerging due to accrued cultural layers. Both these origins of sacredness of place are considered in this volume, for all of the papers in this volume are about place.

We are born into place, we live in place, we die in place, we keep our memories in place, we story ourselves in place. Everywhere is 'place'. We can ignore it and use it like a holder, a location for living or we can think about it from a different perspective. Granted, place grows in importance as we attribute layers to it, nevertheless, place is not a blank canvas. Place has a 'voice' and how one engages with this voice and what that voice 'says' is the focus of this volume.

In this context, Sacred Geography becomes the study of the activities of place.

Notes

1 'Sacred Geography', *Scientific American* 7, no. 6 (1851): pp. 43–43.

2 Sigurd Bergmann et al., eds, *Nature, Space and the Sacred : Transdisciplinary Perspectives* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009), p. 11.

3 See *Nature, Space and the Sacred: Transdisciplinary Perspectives* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2021 [2009]).

4 René Guénon, 'The Land of the Sun', *Studies in Comparative Religion* 14, no. 3 & 4 ([1936] 1980), http://www.studiesincomparativereligion.com/Public/articles/The_Land_of_the_Sun-by_Ren%C3%A9_Gu%C3%A9non.aspx.

- 5 Josef Heinsch, 'Principles of Prehistoric Sacred Geography', (1938), https://www.cantab.net/users/michael.behrend/repubs/ggw/heinsch_gvkg/pages/gvkg_en.html.
- 6 Jo Odgers, 'The Emblematic City: John Wood and the Refounding of Bath', in *Primitive: Original Matters in Architecture*, ed. Jo Odgers, Flora Samuel, and Adam Sharr (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 162.
- 7 Alexander Thom, 'The Megalithic Unit of Length', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society A* 125 (1962): pp. 243-51.
- 8 Anthony F. Aveni, 'Archaeoastronomy in the Ancient Americas', *Journal of archaeological research* 11, no. 2 (2003): pp. 149-91: p. 155.
- 9 Edward S. Casey, *The Fate of Place, a Philosophical History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), p. xii.
- 10 F. Earle Fox, 'Biblical Theology and Pelagianism', *The Journal of Religion* 41, no. 3 (1961): pp. 169-81: p. 172.
- 11 Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, trans. R. P. Hardie and R. K. Gaye, *The Complete Works of Aristotle* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 1072b 3-4.
- 12 Bergmann et al., *Nature, Space and the Sacred: Transdisciplinary Perspectives*, p. 9.
- 13 Tilley, *A Phenomenology of Landscape*, p. 24.
- 14 Lane, *Landscapes*, p. 15.
- 15 Aristotle, 'Physics', in *The Complete Works of Aristotle* Volume 1, ed. Jonathan Barnes, trans. R. P. Hardie and R. K. Gaye (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 315-446: 4.2, 209a 8-9, at 32-33.
- 16 Aristotle, 'Physics', 208b11.
- 17 Aristotle, 'On the Heavens', in *The Complete Works of Aristotle* Volume 1, ed. Jonathan Barnes, trans. J. L. Stocks (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 447-511: IV 3, 310a, at 35.
- 18 Aristotle, 'Metaphysics', in *The Complete Works of Aristotle* Volume 2, ed. Jonathan Barnes, trans. R. P. Hardie and R. K. Gaye (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 1552-1728: IV, 1014b, at 16-26.
- 19 Casey, *The Fate of Place*, 70.
- 20 Bernadette Brady, 'Mountains Talk of Kings and Dragons, the Brecon Beacons', in *Space, Place and Religious Landscapes, Living Mountains* ed. Darrelyn Gunzburg and Bernadette Brady (London and NY: Oxford Bloomsbury 2020): pp. 173-90, p. 183.
- 21 Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane, the Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (London: Harcourt, Inc., [1957] 1987), p. 20.
- 22 Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields (New York: Free Press, 1995 [1912]), Field's introduction p. xlvii-v.
- 23 Amiria J. M. Henare, Martin Holbraad, and Sari Wastell, *Thinking through Things: Theorising Artefacts Ethnographically* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 2.
- 24 Baruch de Spinoza, *The Ethics*, trans. R.H.M. Elwes (Forgotten Books, [1883] 2008), Part 4. Prop. 62 also expanded in Part 2. Prop. 44. Corollary 2.
- 25 Martin Lin, 'Teleology and Human Action in Spinoza', *The Philosophical Review* 115, no. 3 (2006): 317-54: p. 340-41.
- 26 Spinoza, *The Ethics*, Part 2, Prop. 44, corollary 2 and Part 5, Prop 2 and 4.
- 27 Kenneth Grahame, *Wind in the Willows* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1929 [1903]), pp. 179-80.